to this group. Whereas puma naturally is “puma” (I leave it to others to decide whether this beast ever jumped the Pacific Ocean), the Quechu word for “gold” is however, sorry, kuri, quri, or xuri (depending on the dialect, reflecting Proto-Quechua *guric, cf. also Aymara quri). In addition, as the Quechua word order is rectum-regens, the compound would give no sense—its meaning being, if one follows Rjabchikov’s set‐up, “puma gold.”

Therefore, as we now can be sure that pumakari is not a Quechua word, we might look for a Polynesian etymology: The word could be split up into pu “aperture, opening” and makari, the latter being analyzed into ma “with” and kari “concavity”—thus “a concave aperture”—quite a natural descriptive name for the place.

W. Wilfried Schuhmacher, Denmark

References

NON-POLYNESIAN RAPANUI NGO’E—‘MILKY WAY’

Having Thor Heyerdahl’s assumption of early sea routes from (South) America to Polynesia in mind, from a linguistic point of view some substratum influence of the language(s) of these Amerindians on the language of the later-arriving (Austronesian) Polynesians could be expected. As for Easter Island, representing a test case in this respect, the occurrence of the “words peculiar to Rapanui” (Langdon and Tryon) might be so explained. One of the “non-Polynesian” natural history terms is ngo’e “Milky Way” (cf. Proto-Polynesian *kaniva “Milky Way”).

Milky Way—consisting of numerous stars which our eye perceives as a silver ribbon—has, for many ancient people, been the path upon which the dead wandered into the beyond, or the deity who protected men when it was dark. Even “Milky Way” has its origin in Greek mythology when Hera pulled away little Heracles from her breast, squirting her milk up into the sky. So it seems only natural that the Way in most languages is expressed by a compound as, for example (in translation), “celestial river” in Aymara and Japanese.

However, before using such a “hard” word as “non-Polynesian,” one should always try to find an intra-Polynesian solution. Thus, looking for a Polynesian cognate of Rapanui ngo’e, it does not seem to be far fetched to think of Hawaiian noe “mist, fog” as a way to define Milky Way: “(star) mist” seems to be quite natural. Therefore, one could set up a Proto-East Polynesian form *ngo’e (where *ng > n and *i > o as regular Hawaiian correspondences). From a semantic point of view, even Tuamotuan noe “dawn, dawn light” would belong here, but *ngo’e would be reflected in Tuamotuan as ngeoe.

Anyway, it seems apparent now that Rapanui ngo’e has to be deleted from the list of “non-Polynesian” words. Other words on the list may have the same destiny.

Inger Spaabaek Mangor & W. W. Schuhmacher, Denmark

Rongorongo: The Easter Island Script. History, Traditions, Texts
by Steven Roger Fischer
0-19-823710-3 £90 / $115.

Glyphbreaker
by Steven Roger Fischer
0-387-98241-8 £15.50 / $ 25.

Reviews by Paul G. Bahn

At first glance, a dense volume devoted to the esoteric world of Easter Island’s enigmatic script is an unlikely candidate for a good read. But in “Rongorongo,” Steven Fischer, an American-born New Zealander, has achieved a breathtaking triple tour de force. First, in tracing the development of our knowledge of this script, from its first mention by the European missionaries of the 1860s onward, his text is a feast of information. Indeed it is the most erudite piece of research on Easter Island’s history and culture that I have read since the monographs of the Norwegian Expedition of the 1950s, and those were multi-authored works. Fischer appears to have seen and read every available document, consulted every source, and even the most advanced specialists in Easter Island studies will learn a great deal from his rich but succinct chapters and their copious scholarly footnotes.

Second, he presents the fullest and most accurate data compiled so far on the script itself, which currently survives as rows of incised motifs on only 25 assorted pieces of wood, scattered through the world’s museums. Fischer has actually handled and examined almost all of these objects himself, prevented only from seeing the specimen in Tahiti by the cost of travel, and the two specimens in Washington’s Smithsonian Institution by that museum’s denying him access, for which bizarre conduct it should hang its head in shame.

Third, and perhaps most important, it was in the course of his documentation of the rongorongo script that Fischer, an eminent epigrapher with a knowledge of numerous different languages, achieved a decipherment (see New Scientist 15 June 1996). This does not mean that he can read the script yet—far from it—but he now understands the key to its structure, which constitutes a decipherment (Champollion first unlocked the structure of Egyptian hieroglyphics and was hailed as their decipherer, long before they were all read).

This is not to say that Fischer’s decipherment has been greeted with universal praise. Since his claim was first published and publicized, others who had devoted many years to the same challenge have issued various objections and denials, some with scholarly politeness, others with a certain malevolence. To his great credit, Fischer discusses what he considers to be the shortcomings of his colleagues’ approaches in a very detached fashion, displaying great generosity even to his most vitriolic
critics. He does, however, give short shrift to the lunatic fringe who have always found the script a fertile playground for their imaginations, seeing links between Easter Island and the Indus Valley script (of 4000 years earlier, and at the other side of the globe!), as well as even more tenuous ties to Egypt, Cornwall, Dalmatia or Zimbabwe. Most “decipherments” of rongorongo proposed in the past were no more than simple guesswork, as his account makes devastatingly clear.

Where Fischer’s own work is concerned, he feels confident that most of the surviving examples of the script are cosmogonies (i.e. chants explaining the wide variety of fanciful copulations that led to the creation of everything in the natural world). It is certainly noteworthy that, in 1994, the first presentation of his claim, at an international conference on Austronesian linguistics in Holland, received overwhelming backing from his peers, and that Thomas Barthel, the universally respected doyen of rongorongo studies, who died last year, sent him a letter declaring “unlimited endorsement.”

Fischer’s “Glyphbreaker” is a far shorter and more readable account of his own life and career; the rongorongo story constitutes the final section, but the bulk of the book covers his earlier decipherment of Europe’s oldest known script, the enigmatic markings on Crete’s Phaistos Disc of 1600 BC. When my essay on Fischer and rongorongo appeared in New Scientist, the section devoted to the Phaistos Disc was edited out for lack of space, with only a brief mention remaining. Ironically, almost all of the letters which arrived in response were inquiries about this earlier work on the Disc, which has posed a tantalizing challenge to many minds for decades. So, for all those who have been unable to obtain a copy of Fischer’s small 1988 book on the decipherment, Glyphbreaker provides a step-by-step account of how he cracked this code, proceeding with the utmost care and objectivity, constantly modifying and improving his method, and gradually filling in the blanks. He eventually arrived at the unsuspected conclusion that the Disc was inscribed with an ancient Minoan language that was closely related to Mycenaean Greek. It constituted a call to arms, to repel the Carians, piratical invaders from Anatolia. Fischer achieved a thoroughly believable translation which was rewarded with a congratulatory reception from the National Geographic Society in Washington—but once again, his claim met with overwhelming backing from his peers, and that Thomas Barthel, the universally respected doyen of rongorongo studies, who died last year, sent him a letter declaring “unlimited endorsement.”

Regardless of the eventual validity of Fischer’s solutions—and certainly to a layman such as myself who does not know a grapheme from a glyph, his method, as painstakingly explained here, appears logical, objective and impeccable—one cannot but admire the selfless and single-minded dedication with which he has pursued his goal.

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