A new publication in the field of Rapa Nui studies, a... | Rapa Nui Journal • Vol. 23, No. 2 • October 2009

- A new publication in the field of Rapa Nui studies, an almost 300-page-long book by Mary de Laat, claims to have successfully solved one of the most complicated enigmas of Easter Island — the rongorongo script.

- The book contains a brief introduction, a syllabus of suggested phonemes, and a detailed analysis of individual signs and their ligatures, a list of possible disyllabic signs, and, finally, translations of three original inscriptions — Keti, Aruku Kurenga, and Tahu. The illustrations used in the book are taken from Chauvet (1955) and Barthel (1958). The Rapa Nui sentences are annotated in a fashion adapted from Rapanui Grammar by Varela de Feu (1996). The book also presents a reference dictionary, compiled from the publications of Chauvillier, Fuentes, and Englert, resorting in some cases to the lexical parallels with maori words taken from Tregear’s Maori-Polynesian Comparative Dictionary.

- Further on, the glyphs appearing on the tablets are indexed according to their suggested readings and presented in a separate appendix thus accommodating the fast location of a desired word on the inscribed artifacts that were studied.

- The proposed solution treats rongorongo as a predominantly syllabic script (p.209), which perfectly agrees with the hypothesis suggested by Pozdniakov (1996:297) and Macri (1996:185). The author mentions that the script has about 50 to 60 graphemes (p.5), some of which are identified with individual syllables (p.7). The majority of the glyphs included in de Laat’s syllabus are shown in several calligraphic variations. For example, Sign 660 (according to Barthel’s nomenclature, used throughout this review) depicting a bird with a hooked beak (Figure 1a) is shown to be equal with the bird Glyph 400. Sporting a short beak (or a gaping mouth head). One of the proofs to such interchangeability are the parallel texts of the Small Santiago tablet (written with hooked-beak corresponding Rapanui word, while Glyph 00 should be read according to its last syllable?}

- The phonetic values of individual glyphs “… has clearly been derived from the name of the object they are depicting” (p.8). Some of the examples illustrated by the author are shown in Figure 1a. The exact identification of the objects serving as a prototype for rongorongo signs is still unclear in many cases. For example, what does Glyph 8 depict — a star, the Sun (both interpretations appear in Jaussen’s list, Chauvet 1935: fig.173, Macri 1996:186)? The author mentions that the script has about 50 to 60 graphemes (p.5), some of which are identified with individual syllables (p.7). The majority of the glyphs included in de Laat’s syllabus are shown in several calligraphic variations. For example, Sign 660 (according to Barthel’s nomenclature, used throughout this review) depicting a bird with a hooked beak (Figure 1a) is shown to be equal with the bird Glyph 400. Sporting a short beak (or a gaping mouth head). One of the proofs to such interchangeability are the parallel texts of the Small Santiago tablet (written with hooked-beak corresponding Rapanui word, while Glyph 00 should be read according to its last syllable?

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Similarly, it is unclear why one obtains “ina from mahina” for the Moon rather than a more natural derivative, Hina. De Laat solves this problem by suggesting that neither “b” nor the glottal stop were explicitly recorded, so that (p.9) “... glyph depicting the frigate bird tahu can be read as the CV tahu, but also prolonged CVV taa and CVVCV tahu or — with glottal stop — tu’a”.

Over a hundred pages of the book are dedicated to the translation of inscriptions Keiti, Aruku Kurenga, and Tahua. For each tablet, glyph tracings from Barthel’s *Grundlagen* are set in line with the proposed Rapanui readings and the corresponding English translation. Additional comments by the author explain the choice of a particular reading or illustrate close-up photographs of the glyphs (taken from Chauvet’s book), in case the tracings have mistakes or omissions.

According to the author, all three inscriptions appear to be composed exclusively of dialogues (p.78): ...

the texts can be divided into segments ... attributed to different speakers... Some segments, however, do not contain designations of the speakers, some parts ... are difficult to assign to particular persons or parties. ... More important however is the fact that they (the inscriptions) ... show a strong structural cohesion and are for the largest part perfectly intelligible.

Further, the reader learns that Keiti tablet contains a narrative about an investigation of a murder committed by a man called “Taea” the Aruku Kurenga inscription tells us about the artificial revival of several people killed under the collapsed stones in a cave; and Tahua documents the victory of the “Taea”. De Laat reads these as “Taea” — the suggested name of a man accused for the murder of his wife. It is important to note that lists of this type are not unique to Keiti; they also appear in the texts of Tahua, Mamari, and the Small Santiago (with the same text inscribed on the London tablet), Small Vienna Tablet, and the Large Washington tablets (Barthel 1958:304-313; Fischer 1997:554; Horley 2007:28). The spelling of the delimiter and the list items may vary from one inscription to another ... e.g., the delimiters in the Small Santiago tablet depict sitting men holding sticks adorned with “feather garlands” while, in the Tahua text, the sitting man signs are omitted — but the items on these lists are usually clearly recognizable.

Therefore, if de Laat’s decipherment is correct, no less than six surviving tablets should be connected with the character named “Taea”, including the tablet Mamari with its lunar calendar (Barthel 1958:243-245; Guy 2006:64). Moreover, other tablets such as the Large Santiago (with copies on the Large and Small Santiago tablets) and the Small Vienna Tablet also include the items of this particular structured list. Such abundance of parallel fragments significantly simplifies translations and cross-comparisons.

Let us consider a particular case (Figure 1b) of a list item belonging to the Pozdniakov’s sequence (1996:295, fig. 3), which appears in part in line Ev3, Keiti tablet (and thus it is supposed to deal with a murder investigation) and line Ab4, Tahua tablet (making it also related to the narrative about the evil spirit “Apanga”). De Laat is completely aware of these textual repetitions (p.100, notes 17a.6, 7): “These sentences appear with some variations in: Ab4, Cb2, R66, S11”, so that one should expect the same of very similar translation of these fragments, given here side-by-side to simplify the comparison (the numbers in the brackets correspond to those shown in the circles in Figure 1): Keiti, line Ev3 (p.100) Tahua, line Ab4 (p.190); (2) Taea: Surely (I do) not (do) this things? (3) Family: We dispute that! (4) Family: (Your) indignation
disguits (us), Taea! (9) Man: Surely (you) are not going to do that? (10) Women: (Yes, we are going to do that!) (11) Man: (Then) you are crazy!

In the absence of the name “Taea” in the Taunuh text is caused by the aforementioned substitution of ligature 380.1 (sitting man with a stick) with 1.52 or 1.3—a stick with three vertical lines or a “feather garland” (Figure 1b; Ab4, Barthel 1958:340). De Laat reads these “-a-or” and “-a-ra” usually putting them in the beginning of the sentence (pp.190-192, also figs. 1b, 13). To the contrary, ligature 380.1, tentatively representing the name “Taea”, is always set at the end of the sentence (pp. 96, 98-103; see also Figure 1b, 1, 4, 5).

Surprisingly, there is only one occurrence of ko Taea — as one may expect for the name — and even in this case the element for “ko” is linked to the previous sign instead of the glyphs that are supposed to mean “Tao” (p.98). It is also worth mentioning that two lines of the narrative in the Keiti text (3 and 4) are suggested by the same side labeled “Family”, while in the Taunuh text these lines are intended for two different sides.

One can similarly analyze the translations for other parallel passages (Podzniakow 1996:301, fig.7; Horley 2007:26, fig.1) — for example, those appearing on all three artifacts in question (Figure 1e). Similar to the previous case, the parallelism of these fragments is fully known to the author (p.87, notes 5a.5 and 5a.-93.6). Keiti, line E4 (p.87-88) Taunuh, Ab5 (p.196) (12) Man: (No, when) they appear, (their) curse is going to hit this man (that) is seeing those (going to be your) victim! (9) Taea: Nobody is going to attack (you) clear away this heap? (15) Protagonist: Are those scratches of the axe (are your) evidence, but the do not cover man (and) lose hope. Perhaps further intensive research in this field will bring us closer to the correct solution, until one day it will become possible to read the unique and fascinating script of Easter Island.

**References**


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pictures document excavation and restoration of Ahu Nau Nau carried out by Sergio Rapu. Some of the aforementioned photographs can be also seen in an article published on Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Mulloy>. The most fascinating feature of the Rapa Nui Mulloy Family Photos is their cordial dedication to Easter Islanders, showing so many beautiful smiling faces! Every picture seem to radiate the deepest love and respect for the Rapanui people, and the feelings that illuminated the life of William Mulloy and each of his titanic restoration and surveying projects. During their visits to the Island, Mulloy’s family was warmly welcomed by Rapanui friends with much kindness and sincerity.

Many thanks to Brigid Mulloy for sharing these unique and beautiful photographs on the Internet!


**RAPA NUI MULLOY FAMILY PHOTOS**

Review by Paul Horley

A Picasa™ Web Album by Brigid Mulloy features one of the most outstanding Easter Island galleries published online during 2008. The Rapa Nui Mulloy Family Photos contains over 280 pictures taken during numerous visits to Easter Island made by William Mulloy together with his wife Emily Ross and children Kathy, Brigid, and Patrick.

The majority of the images are published for the first time. The photo from the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific (1955-56) depicts re-erection of the red scoria statue at Vinapu. The pictures documenting different stages of restoration work at Ahu Akivi show the moai gradually raised one by one wedged by levers and stone ramps. Other photos provide a glimpse of a freshly-restored statue at Ahu Huri a Urena, re-erection of the images at Ahu Vai Uri, and restoration work at the ceremonial village of Orongo. The photos of cave interiors belong to the archaeological survey of Easter Island, which was also commenced by William Mulloy. Several great pictures document excavation and restoration of Ahu Nau Nau carried out by Sergio Rapu. Some of the aforementioned photographs can be also seen in an article published on Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Mulloy>.

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