A Layperson's Guide to Rōnōrito

Part III

What is Rōnōrito?
Attemting to Set the Record Straight

by Alan Davis-Drake

Around here, the only thing more uncertain than the future, is the past.
—Rapa Nui Aphorism

The first two parts in this series presented a sketchy history of the rōnōrito experiences of Europeans visiting Rapa Nui over the last hundred or so years. These vignettes do not exhaust the information available to us, but instead hopefully create a reasonable background for this final section.

There remains the need to unravel the various diverse views of rōnōrito existent today—particularly for the layman, the non-technical reader. The subject itself is mystifying; it needn't be.

Each "view" of rōnōrito was built upon a different approach developed through the trials and errors of past researchers. For the layman, the arguments are clouded in the puzzling concepts of linguistics and cryptography—the secrets of which lay hidden in thethenaums of scientific journals.

Speaking of rōnōrito is speaking of a language no longer spoken or written. The precious few glyphs we have today were created more than 125 years ago. During the slave raids of 1859 and 1862, the last reported "reader" of rōnōrito died. What little we know, we have learned either from Rapanui with unsubstantiated claims to secret rōnōrito literacy or from men-on-the-street, bystanders at public rōnōrito readings.

The questions raised by the existence of these few priceless, wooden objects are many. The most commonly asked by laymen and researchers alike are: "Is rōnōrito a written language; can the glyphs be translated?" and "Where did the script originate?"

If the tablets represent a written language, human curiosity will not be satisfied until a verifiable translation can be made. Yet, if the glyphs on the tablets have some other significance, all the cloistered decoding one can entertain will not transform the scratchings into intelligible speech.

The point of "intelligible speech" raises an important issue. It is proposed (Metraux, 1940; Englert, 1974) that the rōnōrito tablets will never be translated because the language in which they were conceived, written and chanted is a form of the Rapanui language no longer spoken today—before the infusion of Tahitian and the eventual ascendency of Spanish. This is a popular belief on the island today.

But before we ask the juicy questions, we must take a step backwards. We need to establish the groundwork for understanding how to go about making a translation, if a translation can be made.

And so, the questions pile up...

Part III of this series will deal with some of these questions. Because of space limitations, this final section of the Guide has been divided into two parts. The remaining section will appear as Part IV, in the Spring issue of RNJ—along with its companion Road Guide to Rōnōrito. The Road Guide contains everything you will need to locate and identify all existent rōnōrito tablets (and fragments) in the museums around the world, as well as other Rapa Nui artifacts containing rōnōrito-like glyphs. You will find a brief history of the discovery of each listed there.

Continued on page 4...
On Other Islands...  

Archaeology of the Galapagos Islands

A. M. Smith

In 1535, some 300 years before Darwin, the Bishop of Panama, Tomas de Berlanga, reached the Galapagos Islands. He was on his way to Peru, sailing close along the coastline when the ship was becalmed. Strong currents swept the vessel out to sea—and to the Galapagos. It took three weeks of struggling to return the 600 miles to Peru, some members of the party dying of thirst before they reached land.

It is believed that, if anyone else came earlier to these inhospitable islands, they probably arrived as did the Bishop—hapless visitors caught in the fierce currents, and not likely to have survived long in this barren environment.

The Galapagos Islands consist of six major islands and ten smaller ones, plus islets and rocks. The total land area is 7850 square miles. Annexed by Ecuador, the first permanent settlement was in 1832 but before that time, the islands of San Salvador (also known as James, or Santiago) and Santa Maria (Charles or Floreana) were favorite haunts of buccaneers. The latter island contains caves with hewn sleeping benches and fireplaces, dating from the buccaneer period.

In an effort to prove that the art of navigation was well developed in coastal Tiahuanaco times and capable of making round trip voyages to the Galapagos from South America (and by extension that South American Indians were ocean-going travelers), Thor Heyerdahl and Arne Skjolsvold mounted an archaeological expedition to the Galapagos Islands in 1953. They excavated and collected traces of human visits, some of which they believe to be prehistoric. The artifact list includes 2033 pottery shards, 4 flints, 2 chalky stone items, 1 obsidian object, and 1 clay whistle. All these were found on or just below surface at seven different loci on three islands (Terrell 1986:86). What conclusions can be drawn from the evidence depends upon how these artifacts are interpreted.

Present at all the sites worked by Heyerdahl and Skjolsvold were historic items including porcelain, glazed pottery shards, glass, nails, etc., which were mixed with “pre-Spanish” finds. As all “prehistoric” material was mixed up with European goods, critics dismissed the claims that these islands were settled in pre-Spanish times, particularly in the light of the logs of British Royal Navy captains who noted in 1794 that the ground was littered with broken jars at that early date.

However, as a result of their expedition, Heyerdahl and Skjolsvold concluded that: a number of different landing parties reached the Galapagos at different times in the past; they came from Ecuador and Peru; they sailed deliberately and used these islands as camping bases while fishing; they brought along women and pottery vessels; and did not stay permanently or the island would have received a considerable permanent population. Therefore, the Galapagos were “a port of call well known to aboriginal deep sea voyagers from Peru and Ecuador.”

The unspoken inference is that sailing and navigation were well enough developed so that ancient South Americans could travel round trip to the Galapagos, thus supporting Heyerdahl’s speculations about the role of American Indians in settling Polynesia.

Neither fishhooks nor fish bones were found in the sites excavated and no attempts were made to date the “aboriginal” pottery; identification was made only by stylistic similarity.

While it may be that some early group(s) from South America landed here and left behind some pottery shards, did they come to fish—or did they arrive like the Bishop, by accident? And if it took a sailing ship three weeks to fight its way back to the continent, what chance might a raft have to make such a round trip against the currents? If they were not round trip voyaging, what were the chances of survival in the difficult Galapagos environment?

Consider what happens when an uninhabited island is first discovered: safe arrival does not mean that one’s troubles are over. The settlers must survive the early years of trial and error, start a new generation, survive ecological crunches in the form of drought, natural disasters, etc. It is a “given” that a small founding population is not likely to survive; groups smaller than 80 persons are under a high risk of extinction, particularly if the islands have limited resources. Also, groups cut off by long distances from others have a higher expectation of failure. There are many examples in Polynesia where attempts at island colonization failed when environmental challenges proved too severe and pioneering groups either left or failed to survive (Kirch 1984:95).

Taking Heyerdahl and Skjolsvold’s evidence under consideration, it appears there are other possible scenarios. Certainly the unininviting local environment must have played a major role in determining what people could or would have done if they had landed there in prehistoric times. The bottom line is that, at this time, no positive evidence exists that people came here before the Spanish in the 16th century; further archaeological work needs to be done on these fascinating islands.

References


The response of Dr. Arne Skjolsvold of the Kon Tiki Museum can be found on the following page...
I admit that in the material there are many pot-sherds without sufficient characteristics to allow for secure classification, but there are also abundant samples of characteristic ware, like variants of Black Chimu and Coast Tiahuanaco types. Since it is unlikely that these sherds have been spread on the Galapagos by buccaneers or other post-Spanish visitors, American Indians must have reached the islands in pre-historic times.

In reference to stratigraphy, the sites have very little humus. Under such conditions there will be no stratigraphical separation between old and recent material deposited... probably also explaining why no fishhooks and fishbones were found. Exposed to wind and weather, osteological material would probably disintegrate. But whatever the reason may be, the fact is that such material did not exist at all, not even from post-Spanish and modern camp sites, even though fishing must have been a main occupation throughout all times for people staying in the Galapagos.

As pointed out, no attempts were made to date the aboriginal material, except for stylistic comparisons. Under normal conditions C-14 dating would have been carried out. The stratigraphical situation, however, made samples of charcoal unsuited for such analysis.

We agree that much work remains to be done in the Galapagos Islands, since our expedition had very limited time at its disposal.

The authors stick to the claim that the Galapagos Islands were visited by South American Indians in pre-Spanish times. Whether the islands were reached intentionally or by accident is of course difficult to answer with certainty. There is however little doubt that balsa raft navigation was sufficiently developed to allow pre-Spanish South Americans to sail round trip to the Galapagos Islands for the purpose of exploiting their rich fishing grounds.

The possibility should not be ignored that even totora reed boats might have been used in the long sea voyages of the early Peruvian mariners. Thor Heyerdahl's expeditions with the reed boats Ra and Tigris have shown that these peculiar types of watercraft are highly sea worthy and suitable for deepsea voyaging.

Dear Editor,

Thank you for your letter of October 8th concerning the Medical Expedition to Easter Island. The Expedition was organized by the World Health Organization and we carried out a comprehensive examination of the Easter Island population with the purpose of obtaining base data prior to the construction of the airport. This was fully accomplished since all Islanders were examined. I shall prepare for you a short article about the Expedition which included members from U.S.A., Norway, Sweden, England and Switzerland, as well as Canada. There was... a movie entitled "Island Observed" which was made by the National Film Board of Canada in 1966 and which you may be interested in seeing. You could obtain the same through the Canadian Consul General in California.

We shall gladly subscribe to your Journal as of January 1990 which I find most interesting and useful.

Stanley C. Skoryna, M.D., Ph.D.
Former Director of WHO Medical Expedition to Easter Island
The Term Rongorongo—The Question of a Name

"Tablets," "boards," "sticks," "staves," "talking boards..." What is the correct translation of kohau rongorongo, the correct way to refer to them in translation?

The complete, traditional term for the objects themselves is kohau motu mo rongorongo. Englert (1974) translates this as "the lines of inscriptions for recitation." (See Table 1.)

This coupled with reports of public rongorongo readings where tauata rongorongo, or rongorongo men, assembled with their boards to recite their texts out loud at public readings (Thomson, 1886; Routledge, 1919) points out that the term rongorongo, per se, refers only to the tablets themselves. There is certainty that the glyphs incised on other objects with mana had their own ritual significance; that is, they were incised in a ritual manner, with accompanying chants and ceremony. Besides wooden boards, there are glyphs on other wooden objects in museums today. These include rei miro (pectoral ornaments), a fish, and even a birdman figure, a tauata mana. These objects cannot rightly be listed among the kohau rongorongo. Except for the Santiago Stick, most contain either a single row of glyphs or scattered groups. Also they have not been associated with the traditional ceremonies in which legends, chants, lineage lists, lists of conquered or executed opponents, and other recitations were made. A more precise term for the glyphs themselves is rona.

The Inventory—The Question of How to Count

There are popular misunderstandings surrounding the actual count of inventory of rongorongo tablets. These problems are understandable. Table 2 lists representative sample counts.

First there is the problem of exactly what should be counted and secondly, once the 'types' have been established, there is the question of authenticity. Is it a reproduction? Is it an intentional counterfeit? Was it created specifically for sale to curious tourists? An authentic rongorongo would be one created by trained tauata rongorongo. Understanding what we have might give us a clue to their purpose.

As already mentioned, one misleading approach has been the practice of referring to any wooden piece with "glyphs" on it as "Kohau rongorongo." Most lists include any item with glyphs or signs created before the advent of commercial carving; these would include numerous "tablet" fragments, rei miro, and a large staff, as well as various paper documents. For example, a recent publication displays a full color plate of a moai tauata mana emblazoned with the caption "Kohau Rongo-rongo." (Figure 2) This is presumably because it contains randomly carved glyphs on its body. Neither Métraux nor Butinov/Knorozov include this in their inventories.

Butinov and Knorozov include signs written on paper and collected by Routledge in 1914. They are attributed to Tomenika, a Rapanui living on the island at that time. These signs were considered by Tomenika to be tau, an "inferior form of script." Tomenika died shortly after Mrs. Routledge left the island. Other inferior forms also appear on various wooden objects collected on Rapa Nui.

The Term Rongorongo

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Where Did *Rotoro* Originate?

That *Rotoro* had its origins in the Polynesian heritage seems today a given fact—at least to the layman. Such belief was not always in the forefront, particularly since the advent of Thor Heyerdahl’s popular South American theories.

In 1968 Heyerdahl presented a detailed discussion of “The Problem of Origin” of *Rotoro*, primarily written to support his theories.

In his 1968 review of Part II of the Easter Island Norwegian Expedition’s *Reports*, Kenneth Emory focused attention on this.

...no sound evidence is produced to show that the writing was in existence prior to the witnessing of European writing by the chiefs, who were required to affix their “signatures” to the document of annexation to Spain in 1700. It was more than 90 years thereafter that Europeans first reported seeing the script. This is the process of Heyerdahl’s argument for a Peruvian origin of the script, statements are made that are vital to the acceptance of the conclusions but that are not justified by the evidence given.

Emory presents a totally unique perspective when he suggests “that the Easter Island script is post-European and a result of the stimulation of European writ-

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Glyphs On Paper</th>
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<tr>
<td>Treaty “Signatures” 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomenika’s <em>Tau</em> Sample 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20th Cent. Native Ms. 6</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong> 8</td>
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</table>

TABLE 4

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during the late 19th Century, notably *rei miro*. (C.f. Amorós i Gonnell, 1989 and others.) (Figures 3, 4 & 5)

When they were first being discovered, “rongo-rongo” was the name given to flat boards with systematic rows of glyphs. Eventually the glyphs themselves came to be called *rongo-rongo* and whatever object had such carvings on it were considered *rongo-rongo*. A close scrutiny of the inventory in the forthcoming Comparative Chart of *Rotoro* (*Road Guide*) will show the variety of artifacts incised with glyphs. They have been placed in major categories, with their totals shown in Tables 3 and 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inventory Breakdown</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tablets 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tablet Fragments 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff/Stick/Seantor 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Rei Miro/Others</em> 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong> 28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 3

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ing.” At the time of the signing of Spanish annexation in 1770, the Rapanui had no writing but instead, the “signing” experience was enough to spontaneously spur an opportune scribe into adopting this European method of expression. (Figure 6)

The Rapanui simply went on to imitate and augment the petroglyph designs prevalent on the island at that time. Emory proposed that such an island sage might have seen this as a way “…not to supplant memory, for they continued to memorize chants in material form, a practice found elsewhere in East Polynesia” (cf. Emory 1947:37-38).

This would fit well with other occurrences on the island at this time—a period of social uncertainty. In the 18th Century, statue building and transport were on the decline. With the opportunity to develop roto roto, the priest once more could turn the upper hand—much as they did with the emerging importance of the birdman ceremonies on Orongo. The leaders struggling for power now had a new, mysterious, mana-laden way to hold unifying control over the diverse clans of the island. With the invention of roto roto came further social unification as well as social and religious subjugation under the leadership of the ariki and the priests.

In his review of Part I of the Reports (Emory, 1963), he raised a similar argument. Heyerdahl responded with a lengthy discussion of “The Problems of Origin,” focusing on the picture writing of the Cuna Indians of Panama and NW Columbia, pointing out that they painted on wooden tablets. He mentions Nordenskiöld’s 1928 report that the “picture writing [was] made... for recording songs of all kinds... is read from the bottom, from right to left and then from left to right, and so on.” Unfortunately Heyerdahl gives us no writing samples. In a recent publication, Heyerdahl strings together a series of disparate “proofs” to support his claim to “solving the mystery” of Easter Island; he does not mention the Cuna script. Heyerdahl mentions the Cuna again in 1975 but does not supply examples.

Métraux does provide us with some. (Figure 7.) It is conceivable that Métraux is the one who humorously suggested the connection to the Cuna Indians (and the Ojibwa) in the first place. He used the same methods as Hevezy (see Part II) to compare roto roto to the Cuna script— that is, he found select glyphs to compare, rather than considering the entire corpus. This of course presents a misleading image.

Butinov and Knorozov (1957) state that roto roto glyphs “reflect the local environment and culture.” They are clearly Polynesian. During research for this series, observations showed numerous similar motifs in petroglyph art and roto roto glyphs.

A ceremonial parallel between the use of feathered staves on both Easter Island and the Marquesas has been noted by Metraux. He compares the boards with huhu, Marquesan ritual staves, or “sticks with feathers.” This brings immediately to mind the Santiago Stick, which undoubtedly had ritual significance. Routledge (1919) mentions the use of heu-heu, or “feathers on top of sticks” in connection with roto roto ceremonies. There are indications of this in roto roto glyphs. (See Figure 8, glyph 160.) This connection is helpful in legitimating a Polynesian connection between the glyphs and their origins. Even if a direct descendency cannot be made, that is, proof of the geographical origin or inspirational source of roto roto writing, this similar cultural expression points us in the direction of Polynesia and not, for example, South America.

It can also be noted as mentioned by Métraux (1940:392): “In the Tuamotus the word rongo is applied to formal chants about the exploits or feats of a hero... Rongo is also the name of a ‘morning chant for a deceased hero.’ ”

In commenting on his work on translating the roto roto tablets, Barthel said that his “...reading [of] the tablets shattered the theory that Easter Island did not belong to Polynesia but had
been colonized from America. Names, phrases and allusions on the talking boards showed unequivocally that the Easter Islanders stemmed from the same culture as the Polynesians…” (Barthel, 1958)

In his work with 20th century written manuscripts, Barthel (1974) mentions the glyph for ha’u, or “feathered crowns.” These were worn by the original scouts who traditions tells first explored the island before the official discovery by Hotu Matu’a. One of these scouts was most probably an intellectual and a scribe—a tānata rōtōrōtō.

“A [A] hahu is a staff or branch whose surface has been changed or covered. Either the bark is removed and the bare wood is given a dark stain, or the staff is completely wrapped with the fibrous bark of reeds and feathers or feathered garlands are attached to them. Such feather standards were among the customary offerings presented to the island king and are mentioned in the Rongorongo texts. Hahu is one of the four insignia and gifts... brought to Anakena by the people during specific periods of time (Barthel, 1974).

Feathered staffs were also used to mark residential boundaries. In his analysis of rōtōrōtō, Médraux quotes de Harlez:

The tangata rongorongo of Easter Island are better understood when compared with those of the Marquesas and of Mangareva. In the Marquesas the tāhuna o’ono was “master chanter, tribal bard, or ceremonial priest; who presided in all important ritual, and served as repository and teacher of sacred and traditional lore.” (Harlez, 1896:145)

He was also the teacher of sacred chants and director of chanting at family feasts. The word o’ono is the equivalent of rongo since in the Marquesan dialect the r is dropped and the nasal velar (ng) becomes n.”

Thomson told us that Hotu Matu’a knew how to read and write rōtōrōtō. Barthel (1974) goes on with this to say:

...the most important cultural heritage [of the Rapa Nui and their founder Hotu Matu’a] is the Rongorongo script which had been developed in Hiva...

There can be no doubt that the knowledge of the classical Easter Island script was at one time the monopoly of a privileged few. It is hoped that further work on the Rongorongo texts will reveal what the tablets have to say about the arrival of Hotu Matua. So far, this final check of the immigrant traditions is still missing.”

Barthel says that rōtōrōtō probably started in Polynesia as knotted sticks used as memory devices and slowly evolved from there. This theory is supported by one of the translations for kōhau rōtōrōtō: “talking sticks.” “The strongly mnemonic nature of the catchword system certainly supports the idea that the writings grew out of a memory-aid device.” (Barthel, 1958)

Heyerdahl has recently published a coffee-table book in which he finally claims to have solved the mysteries of Easter Island and he devotes a small section to “The riddle of the written tablets.” As with other subjects in the rest of the book, he expresses historical evidence or studies made before the 1950’s and only lingers momentarily, in a few sentences, on contemporary work other than his own. His self-serving comments add nothing to our knowledge of rōtōrōtō.

His presentation on rōtōrōtō in 1975, in _The Art of Easter Island_ was far more complete. Again he continued to find numerous connections to South America. An analysis of Heyerdahl’s 17 ‘similarities’ between rōtōrōtō motifs and Tiahuanacan art is not within the realm of this present work. His persistence shows imagination. It is unfortunate that valuable time must be spent on refutations.

**Are Any Tablets Identical?**

In their analysis of rōtōrōtō, Butinov and Knorozov (1957) pointed out a handful of the world famous rōtōrōtō duplicate each other—they contain the same “text.” This was also noted by Médraux (1940:401) and Kudrjavtsev (1949).

Actually, it was a group of Russian school children who made this discovery. Their youthful curiosity led them to discovering two instances where glyphs repeat themselves in their entirety or in part on separate tablets.

Were you to visit the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural in Santiago next year, to see the famous “Small Santiago Tablet,” you would probably not be aware it contained the same text you saw last spring on your visit to the British Museum while admiring the famous “London Tablet”—unless you have an expert eye, a photographic memory or the persistent curiosity of small boys. The group of glyphs on the two sides of the London Tablet are the same as a group that the Santiago Tablet exhibits on one side. This is not to intimate a hoax, but rather to elicit the question “Why?”

Because of the limitations of this article, I will let this question linger with the reader...

**How Do I Read a Rōtōrōtō Tablet?**

Previous writers on this subject have tersely described the methods used by the tānata rōtōrōtō to read the tablets. Routledge writes “The method of reading was… to read one row from left to
right, the method known as boustrophedon, from the manner in which an ox ploughs a furrow.”

Bishop Jaussen (1893:252) gave a fuller explanation after observing his informant Metoro:

He turned it, turned it again, looking for the beginning of the text, and then he started to chant. He chanted the lowest line, from left to right. Arriving at the end, he chanted the nearest line above, from right to left, the third from left to right, the forth from right to left, like the plowing of oxen. When he arrived at the top line, he passed from the recto to the nearest line on the verso and descended, line after line, like oxen plowing both sides of the hill, starting on the lower side and ending at the bottom on the opposite side. The reader can turn the tablet after each line if he does not want to read the signs upside down.

Curiously, in his attempt to translate the script on one tablet, Carroll (1892) came upon yet another way to read the glyphs. His translation was based on first reading every other line, that is all the upright glyphs, and then turning the tablet over once, to read the remaining lines, the ones which were now upright. Today this is not believed to be correct.

Harrison (1874) thought the tablets were not turned at all, “otherwise the sides would have been worn as much as the ends, which is not the case.” It is now believed that the tablets we have were not particularly old at the time of their acquisition and so were probably little used.

Like children’s rebus writing, roto roto cannot express complete sentences—articles, conjunctions and etc. are omitted. (More on this in the next section.) “Reading” a roto roto tablet would be more like singing a song, with only the main catch words available. You’d see the gist of the song, but you would have had to sing it many times before to fill in all the missing words. Barthel refers to roto roto tablets as “cue-cards.”

How Can I Make a Translation?

Here is the heart of the matter and the most difficult to express in simple terms. The methods of translation appear elusive, even after careful readings of published “explanations.”

As described previously, the job of beginning a translation began in 1870 with Bishop Jaussen in Tahiti. Subsequent attempts at translation have either built upon his efforts or carefully rejected them.

Whether the work of Jaussen and his Rapanui informant (Metoro Taouaoure) is valid is a mute point—it cannot be ignored. At best, the example of their work together, (and similarly 16 years later with Paymaster Thompson and his unnamed Rapanui informant) points a cautious finger for all field researchers. How does one ask the right questions? What was lost because one didn’t?

Figure 9: The Arouku Kurenga roto roto tablet. Now in Rome.

Previously discussed were Thomson and Crofts’s separate experiences with native “interpreters.” These encounters resulted in each one unkindly (and possibly incorrectly) calling their informants “liars.” Forcing their informants into expressing themselves sequentially and linearly may have deprived us of the hope of truly understanding the method and purpose of roto roto.

Previously discussed in Part II of this series were 19th early 20th Century experiments with working on translations. This work continued into modern times.

Métraux

Alfred Métraux produced two different studies of roto roto. The first was his detailed refutation of Hevezy’s analogies between the Easter Island and the Indus Valley scripts. This was, in part, previously mentioned.

His second study was included at the end of his Ethnology of Easter Island. He was the first to present a methodical analysis of a particular roto roto, choosing primarily Arouku Kurenga and to some extent the Oar. His first step was “to find the limits of each individual sign.” Some rona may be isolated glyphs, while others may be pairs or series of linked glyphs. Métraux noted that there were variations of individual or grouped signs. For example, the general form of a particular human-like figure may remain the same, but the object in his hand may change, or an arm or leg might be omitted. The question arose: Are these changes significant, or merely a slip of the carving tool, so to speak.

Having knowledge of various Polynesian traditions, Métraux reasoned that the repetition of groups of glyphs at definite intervals would be consistent with Polynesian chanting. But he finally concluded that groups of glyphs “show that the variants had no particular value.” He did not say why.

He estimated that there are about 100 primary glyphs. All the rest are variations. It may be interesting to note that the most frequently repeated glyph was that for the manu tara, the sooty tern. Birdman figures in the sitting position which have the manu tara head total 34 items. Métraux calculated 20% of the glyphs on Arouku Kurenga were devoted to a bird motif. Human or human-like figures appear on about 1/3 of the figures—this includes the birdmen. Métraux has a full breakdown of the major figures, but for purposes here, his calculations showed him the script was most
probably pictographic and not phonetic or syllabic. “It seems logical to suppose that the tablets were mnemonic devices for recording chants which were also memorized.”

Later Méraux appeared to contradict himself by saying there was no reason why priests needed *roto rongoro* as mnemonic devices. Méraux hypothesizes that *roto rongoro* evolved from staves (kohau), which were used for beating the rhythm of chants. At first the glyphs were ornaments on these staves; once they became conventionalized, they became traditional. The method of writing in boustrophedon began then and it is easy to understand why such a system was used to write on a long stick such as the Santiago Staff.

He also believed tablets contained not single chants, but a series.

**Barthel**

Thomas Barthel started his work on translating *roto rongoro* with a simple idea, although the effort necessary to actualize it was vast. First he listed all the signs on all the known tablets and fragments and identified each with a number. This was the beginning of his statistical analysis. After this tedious job he concluded that the signs represented whole words or ideas rather than an alphabet or syllables. There would be little duplication if the glyphs were an alphabet.

Next Barthel hunted down Jaussen’s original, unpublished notes of Metoro TAUara’s translation. “Those lines of Polynesian syllables… became my ‘Rosetta Stone…” A knowledge of the Polynesian languages, as well as cryptographic analysis, proved to be decisively helpful in deciphering the signs.” (Barthel, 1958)

Barthel realized that Metoro’s translations appeared to be gibberish because he “had been in the position of a schoolboy asked to explain a university textbook,” and so had read many of the glyphs inaccurately.

He says that the “Easter Island script was made up in large part of stylized outlines of picture objects. In particular there are representations of the human figure which are “pantomimic expressions” suggesting a “gesture language.” These gestures help him to understand what certain glyphs could mean.

Whereas Méraux says there were “100 primary glyphs,” Barthel says “the script has only about 120 basic elements, but they are combined… to form more than 1,000 compound signs. Most of the signs are used as ideograms, usually in the form of words.”

We now know that *roto rongoro* is a rudimentary phonetic writing system, using picture symbols to express ideas as well as objects. This can be done because Rapanui, like other Polynesian languages, has a large percentage of homonyms, words which sound the same but have different meanings.

Unfortunately I did not have English translations of Dr. Barthel’s two current contributions to the study of *roto rongoro* in time for review here—Barthel 1989a and 1989b. The abstract from Dr. Barthel’s presentation at the Senckenberg Museum’s Easter Island Symposium explains his current work with developing a key to the translation of the Santiago Staff. He gives hints as to the tedious process of discovering and uncovering a translation, including his finding the same set of information painted on both the Belfast *tapa* figure and the Santiago Staff and how this is helping him “to establish definite and reliable values of certain signs.” He has found “components of one coherent information sequence running through [the] total text.” This would mean there is a definite logic to the glyphs on the Santiago Staff, a logic which implies intent. They are not just a series of random glyphs. It is possible he has discovered a *roto rongoro* version of a “Polynesian Book of the Dead,” for he believes the Staff to have “inventories of the nightly underworld...” and “supernatural rules for underworld reigns connected with the fate of the soul and the fertility of the living.” Barthel also alludes to “fruitful comparisons with traditions on other Polynesian Islands,” which brings us once again to the question of the origins of the *roto rongoro* tradition.

Since *roto rongoro* could not could not express full sentences, “the tablets had to reduce the songs… to an abbreviated form, like a telegram. “The tablet was a kind of cue-card consisting of catchwords which gave the singer only the gist of his verses; he had to fill in the missing words himself.”

**Rjabchikov**

Sergej V. Rjabchikov believes *roto rongoro* to be “typical of other mixed ideographic and phonetic writing systems [which rely] on ideograms, phonograms, and generic determinatives.” How they function is determined by their context (Rjabchikov, 1987).

At present Rjabchikov has published only brief translations of short glyph groups from a variety of tablets and tablet fragments. He has not expressed a coherent explanation of his methods or the implications of his “translations.” In his fragmentary translations he has revealed myths, calendar lists, texts about raising crops and fishery as well as what he feels are Peruvian religious traditions.

In this connection he says he can verify Heyerdahl’s comparison of the Peruvian king Tupa-Inga with the Easter island *ariki* Tupa Ringa Anga, as well as presenting similarities between various Peruvian and Polynesian gods. In expressly hoping to confirm Heyerdahl’s theory it is likely that Rjabchikov went out to find the legends in the *Aruku Kurenga* and the Large *Lenningrad* tablets. A similar approach was taken in 1892 by Carroll, in his attempt to loosely link the diverse dialects of Central and South America to a translation of *roto rongoro*.

His “Shorter Communication” of 1988 in *JPS* is particularly significant, for he boldly states that “attempts at decipherment based on Metoro’s readings are bound to be fruitless or erroneous.” This is because Metoro gave different meanings to glyphs which were essentially the same—they contained insignificant variations. All of his work so far has been “based on the formal analysis of the texts.”

Rjabchikov should be encouraged to proceed further with his study before presenting any further “progress reports.” Once he can...
present himself in a sustained form, outlining his full translations, methods, conclusions, etc., as a harmonious whole, his work will be of service. The possibility of harmony, I believe, is doubtful.

Of particular help in understanding Rjabchikov’s method is Jacques B. M. Guy’s excellent addendum to Rjabchikov’s brief explanations. His meticulous analysis, albeit necessarily tedious, points out both the potentiality and pitfalls of Rjabchikov’s approaches. Guy wisely notes that at present it is premature “to assign any readings to the glyphs at this stage.” The only “meaning which is known beyond reasonable doubt, is a fragment of Tablet Ma-mari… shown by Barthel to contain a lunar calendar.” Guy appears to have a clearer view of Rjabchikov’s methodology than Rjabchikov himself.

**Kaulis**

Another recent study with questionable value is Andis Kaulis’ 1981 study, *The Astrological Zodiac in the Script of Easter Island*. His abstract, in part, reads: the [Honolulu Tablet #B.3622] “contains an ancient version of the astrological zodiac, thereby providing probative evidence of the relation of this mysterious megalithic culture to those of Old World Europe.” He also gives observations concerning a possible Indo-European origin of the language of Rapa Nui and selected evidence to ties to the high cultures of Central and South America. Unlike Rjabchikov, Kaulis is not attempting to *translate* rōnoroŋo but instead discovered similarities between the short text on one of the Honolulu tablets and the zodiac signs used in the Western world. Three at least seem extraordinarily similar, while others less so. (Figure 10)

**Fell**

I recently received a video tape from the Epigraphic Society. In it Dr. Barry Fell claims (like Barthel) to have found the “key” to the decipherment of rōnoroŋo through a linguistic reassessment of the Jauussen “translation.” Fell differs with Barthel’s interpretation of Metoro’s translation by saying Bishop Jauussen simply misheard Metoro. Jauussen did a poor job of transcription. Refuting current scientific belief, Bell says the translations are quite comprehensible if one has an intimate knowledge of Polynesian languages—which Fell claims to have. Observing his procedure on video, one must also be able to see through the eyes of a poet, much as Fell has done.

**Vignes**

Jacques Vignes, a young amateur from Paris, is currently attempting to solve the rōnoroŋo mystery with the use of computers.
today a wide spectrum of technical expertise evident in samples of rōnrorōno as well as the glyphs on other museum pieces. Arouku-Kurenga, Mamari and the Large Leningrad Tablet are examples of rōnrorōno art at its finest; and with the exception of the Santiago Stick, the London Rei Miro (Figure 11) is the prime example of glyph writing on an object other than the boards.

To view the “best” glyph etchings is alone enough to attest to their authenticity—that is, the precise and intricate craftsmanship of the “best” type would have been a developed art and not something made slap-dash in the late 1800’s to impress “outsiders” or to stimulate the still fledgling tourist market. Upon their discovery by outsiders, the Rapanui were reluctant to part with their precious “boards.” Unlike other wooden sculptures, rōnrorōno were not duplicated by local artists and so were not open for trade. It can be inferred that the boards were among the islander’s most precious possessions—if indeed the early missionaries were correct when they said that although each house had many and yet no one would part with one. Even after the question of their heathen use was overlooked by the missionaries, the Rapanui still would not part with them. Up into the 20th Century, parting with rōnrorōno was considered tapu. A variety of mishaps have been reported whenever attempts were made to turn secretly held tablets over to outsiders (cf. the forthcoming chart: Comparative Rongorongo).

Tradition tells that novices “made” their rongorongo on the outer sheaths of the banana leaf, while the initiated carved on wood—more usually toromiro—although many of the rōnrorōno boards we have today were made from “European woods.”

As Métraux (1940:393) eloquently describes:

The signs are incised on both faces of a tablet. Between each row of signs is a low ridge, produced by slightly sunken channels or flutes along which the signs have been engraved. On the tablet called Aruku-Kurenga... these channels are 1.5 cm. wide. The channels were produced by longitudinally adzing the piece of wood. The carver must have held the plank in the vertical position with the left hand and formed the plane surface by striking regular blows with his adz. The signs are outlined by angular grooves of varying depth. The skill displayed by the artist is masterly; all the signs are incised with a freedom, a keen appreciation of proportion, and a vigor that only an expert artist could accomplish. There is a good sense of movement and harmonious combination of conventionalized and naturalistic elements.

It appears that the tangata rōnrorōno, or the scribes who created the tablets, took extra care to fit a particular set of glyphs onto the boards. The rows of glyphs wind their way evenly back and forth across a board, but at the very end they are often spaced more tightly together, as if in an effort to fit them in. Here is an observation worthy of mention, for it an argument used to legitimize rōnrorōno as actual writing. If singular glyphs had no individual meaning, what would it matter if one or two were missing. The act of attempting to fit particular glyphs in at the end of a line intimates that the “board” would be incomplete without them.

Métraux states “The wood used for the tablets was selected casually before the signs were incised. It is not possible that the [tangata] rongorongo knew in advance that a chant would fit the tablet. The ‘text’ was adapted to the tablet and not the tablet to the ‘text’ (Métraux 1940:404).

An analysis of the woods used to create the existent tablets shows them to be made from lauraceae myrtaceae, fraxinus excelsior, thespesia populnea, podocarpus latifolia and pyrus malus. (Lavachery 1934.) It is obvious that any flat, hardwood would be acceptable and as mentioned previously, the Rapanui felt the same way, for the tablet Aruku Kurenga, for example, was carved from the oar of a European ship. The sides of some tablets are beveled; this may have been to give the carver space for more glyphs.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Unfortunately, because of space limitations, the remainder of this article will be continued in the next issue of Rapa Nui Journal. Included there will be answers to the questions “Do the Traditions Continue Today?, Are There Any “Wild Theories?” and Are There Parallels with Other Rapa Nui Art? Also included in the Spring issue will be the long awaited (and extensive) “Road Map to Rōnrorōno” listing each artifact’s vital statistics and brief historical comments on all known tablets and fragments as well as the numerous other items containing rōnrorōno-like glyphs.
NOTES

1 The transliteration of the Rapanui term rotoroto as used in this article differs from the more popular "rongorongo." Although the nasal velar "ŋ" is most regularly written "ng," it does not indicate to the uninitiated ear the Rapanui pronunciation of this letter grouping. Selecting the preference for "ŋ" in this article serves to emphasize the proper pronunciation, which can only be approximated by the English or Spanish "ng." Visitors to the cave Ana Kai Tangata on Rapa Nui witness the "ŋ" for the first time when they discover a bold, hand-carved sign announcing the site as "Ana Kai Tangata." For an incidental explanation of the use of "ŋ" in Rapanui, particularly as it relates to a linguistic refutation of Thor Heyerdahl's Rapa Nui colonization theory, see Schumacher, 1989.

2 The current total individual glyphs on all tablets and fragments not taking into consideration duplications, or confusions between single figure glyphs (rona) and composite glyphs (glyphs containing more than one incised object) is over 12,000. This number of glyphs on a particular tablet varies greatly, depending on who is doing the counting.


4 1500 Jahre Kultur der Osterinsel (1500 Years on Easter Island)

5 Tomenika appears to be his baptismal name. His true Rapanui name is Vaka Tuku Onge a Teatea. This clarification has important significance in connecting Tomenika to certain modern Rapanui manuscripts which have secretly been copied and apparently re-copied during the early 20th Century.

6 Tradition tells us there were two kinds of script, the rotoroto of the boards which was reserved primarily for religious ritual and a second form of writing, tau, used for secular purposes, that is, recording annals, etc.

7 Barthel said the script on the Santiago Staff is calendric in nature and is linked with both the 27 1/2 and 29 1/2 day periods of the moon.


SOURCES

(This is a list of sources which have dealt with the subject of rongorongo, and as such is non discriminatory. Most have been used in the preparation of this series.)


Campbell, Ramón; Nuriluz Hermosilla; José Miguel Ramírez. 1982. La Ngarua o Almohada de Piedra de la Isla de Pascua. Actos del IX Congreso Nacional de Arqueología Chilena. La Serena.

Carroll, A. 1892. The Easter Island Inscriptions and the Way in Which They Are Translated, or Deciphered, and Read. JPS. Vol 1, no. 4, pp. 103-106, 233-253. London.


—. 1974. La Tierra de Hotu Matua: Historia y etnología de la Isla de Pascua. Ediciones de la Universidad de Chile. Santiago.


Fedorova, I. K. 1965. Versions of Myths and Legends in Manuscripts from Easter Island. Reports of the Nor. Exp.


Fell, Barry. Untitled Videotape on Rongorongo Translation. 40 Minutes.


Recent Publications Regarding Rapa Nui


Martin, Ph., and G.T. Poppe; Notes on the mollusca of Easter Island: *Cypraea*. *Hawaiian Shell News*, Hawaiian Malacological Society, Vol. XXXVII(10): p.1-7. Oct 1989. An interesting article on shells used by islanders for making necklaces for the tourist trade. The authors point out that the pale brown examples of *Cypraea caput draconis* are that color due to being boiled in oil in order to give color variation in the necklaces. Many conchologists believed that these pale shells were a variant of the species, particularly as islanders claimed that the variations were due to proximity to the surface, with those living "in the sun" being paler than shells "living deeper." The authors state that this is pure fantasy: "...everybody knows that the Polynesians like to joke with tourists and scientists and on Easter Island probably more than elsewhere."


I did a lot of walking during my first visit to Easter Island in 1989. To my delight, one day a car stopped and gave me a ride. The driver turned out to be a former helper of Heyerdahl's; however, he did not agree with his "master's" South American theory, suggesting instead that the early Polynesian settlers had come from New Zealand because there the two languages, Rapanui and Maori, had "much in common." So I then took a closer look at Maori and Moriori, both the people and their languages. The Morioris, restricted to the Chatham Islands today, differed from the Maori in many ways.

The Moriori language is characterized by a phonology of its own; they lacked tattoo, they had a marriage ceremony, their huts were conical and bound together at the top, and they used rafts instead of canoes.

Their history has been written by Michael King, largely to clear away misconceptions that have appeared in the course of time. The book reveals who the Morioris are, where they came from and the effects on them of both Maori and Pakeha colonization. It can be commended particularly to those readers who are confused about the nature and origin of these much maligned peoples.


Corrections

Please note the following corrections/additions to “The ‘Reimiro’ of Barcelona” by Francesc Amorós i Gonell which appeared in Vol. 3:3 of RNJ.

The caption to Table 4 should read: The tumu-miro Sign. Aka-aka should read aka-kore.

The glyph shape like the glyph in Table 5 does not appear on the fish-shaped tablet found in the Concepción Museum.

Glyphs I and J in Table 6.3 should be:

Georgia Lee, Ph.D. interprets Rapa Nui’s rock art for archaeologists, travelers, students and photographers. Her authoritative, entertaining and straightforward guidebook debunks popular misconceptions. Essential for the visitor; fascinating for the armchair traveler.

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In the same table the reader should note the K, L, M modalities could not accept a possible anthropomorphical interpretation.

Ramón B. Campbell’s name was incorrectly spelled.
EASTER ISLAND FOUNDATION CREATED
MRL Groundbreaking Date Set

In December 1989, members of the Easter Island Committee of the World Monuments Fund reorganized themselves as the Planning Committee for the Mulloy Research Library. Also newly established at that time was the Easter Island Foundation, a wholly independent non-profit organization incorporated in California. The MRL will still greatly benefit from the World Monuments Fund’s generous $100,000 challenge grant. All funds formerly donated for the Mulloy Research Library and held by the WMF will be transferred to the new EIF to be specifically earmarked for the first EIF project, the construction and maintenance of the MRL on Rapa Nui. The Library will honor Dr. William Mulloy, archaeologist and former professor at the University of Wyoming (see Rapa Nui Notes, v. 7).

At the EIF Executive Board meeting, the following officers were appointed: Dr. William Liller, Chairman of the Board of Directors of EIF; Dr. Joan T. Seaver, President of EIF and Director of Fundraising; Alan Davis-Drake, Vice President and Treasurer; and Dr. Georgia Lee, Vice President and Liaison to the Advisory Council. The Advisory Council will provide technical advice on investments, library planning, organization, construction, etc. The four committees now structuring the EIF are a Board of Directors, an Executive Committee composed of the foundation officers, an Advisory Committee and a Fundraising Committee.

Among the topics discussed were the need for a document to show the full support of the present government of Chile as well as an overall plan for fundraising activities. The latter will also include a series of monographs on scientific aspects of the island such as petroglyphs, the stone moai, rongorongo glyphs, modern church statues, and archaeological dating techniques. Also planned are several fundraisers for the next two years. One will be the long awaited fundraiser at Bill Mulloy’s home base, the University of Wyoming.

In addition, gallery shows featuring photographs and other images of Rapa Nui, as well as modern carved wooden sculptures, are being considered as public relations efforts toward raising funds for the MRL. Under consideration is a South Pacific cruise in connection with Society Expeditions Cruises, Inc., of Seattle, Washington. Look for future announcements in Rapa Nui Journal.

The Library Continues to Grow!

Two additions to the MRL’s current inventory are an Easter Island bibliography of medical, genetic and population related literature from the graduate school of Biomedical Sciences at the Health Science Center of Houston’s University of Texas, and we hope soon to have the bibliography compiled by the late Robert Alexander and currently being edited by Prof. Charles Love of Western Wyoming College. The latter is to be published by the Bishop Museum. Plans are already underway to incorporate these bibliographies into the Library’s computer based master bibliography—which will soon be established.

Thanks to You,
It’s Soon to Happen!

We thank all of you who have contributed so generously to the Mulloy Research Library in the past, and we are pleased to announce that actual construction of the building will begin early in 1991. We commend you not only for your interest in Rapa Nui, but also for your vision in recognizing the topical significance of preserving the scientific data describing the ancient society and its demise. Certainly the research center formed by the Mulloy Research Library and Sebastian Englert Archaeological Museum will provide the island’s present population with a much needed symbol of their Polynesian heritage.

The Executive Committee of the EIF encourages you to join us in continuing your support and dedication to MRL. For information about the EIF or to send your donations, contact Dr. Joan T. Seaver, at EIF, P. O. Box 1319, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272-1319 USA, or phone (213) 454-7993. Please make your checks out to the Easter Island Foundation.

AVAILABLE!
Deluxe Tour of Rapa Nui!

Before September 23, 1990, donors of $10,000 (or more) to the Easter Island Foundation will enjoy one expense free round trip airline ticket from the U.S. (New York, Miami or Los Angeles) to Rapa Nui, including several days at a luxury hotel in Santiago for two. Also included are excellent accommodations for two on the island. A special bonus will be a personally tailored tour of the latest archaeological findings at Rapa Nui sites. All this—plus the famous Polynesian hospitality! For details, please contact Dr. Joan Seaver.
The Toronto Moai

The moai lives at 900 Don Mills Road in Toronto. The statue is the result of a conversation between Alex Tilley and an artist from Ontario, Bob Breau of Willowdale. On a bet from Tilley, Breau made a moai from snow. Alex decided he wanted a more permanent one so Breau constructed one of wood and wire, covered with concrete. The moai sits on the front lawn of the Tilley business, which makes a line of clothing and hats. The moustache, put on as a joke, was recently removed. The moai is 15 feet high, weighs some 16,000 pounds and sits on a base hidden under the grass. The artist, Breau, also made an indian carving that sits on the lawn near the moai. (This information is supplied by the photographer, Rapanuiphile David Kotyk of Toronto).

What's New in Hanga Roa

It might be more accurate to call this the "Nothing's New" Column. It seems that little progress has been made on the island since our report last spring (RNJ Vol.3:1). In that issue, one year ago, we reported on the new rain gutters and the paving project on Te Pito Te Henua Street, the new school library building, and new offices and storage facilities adjacent to the Museum. No further work has been done on the street paving, rain gutters or sidewalks. The rain gutters have not even been roofed over. The rush of rainwater coming down the street has made conditions in the block below (in front of the post office) even worse than before. The library stands empty and unfinished; the building has been vandalized and windows broken. The museum storage facilities appear to be empty, but the museum offices are nearly completed and one office is now in use. The museum gift shop remains an empty shell, filled with weeds. There seems to be no concensus of opinion as to why all these projects remain in limbo.

However, there are new items. A laundromat is now operating at the corner of Hotu Matua and Policarpo Toro streets, a pool hall with 3 tables has been added on Policarpo Toro street, and in February a satellite dish is scheduled to begin operations to establish better telephone communications with the outside world. The airport addition is completed.

The count is in... One of our Easter Island correspondents reports that there are now now 450 vehicles on the island, 150 of these are motorcycles!