

Modern Rapanui Petroglyphs

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RNJ READERS MAY RECALL the article in the previous issue by Laura Jean Boyd, concerning her film project on the island. (*RNJ* 21(1):14-25, May 2007). Her contribution included a photograph of herself, taken at 'Anakena. In the picture and just behind Laura Jean, looms a petroglyph of a Makemake face. While Makemake faces are found in many parts of Easter Island, this motif was not documented by us during our exhaustive study of 'Anakena's petroglyphs (Lee 1988; 1992), nor had any of us seen it previously. Yet there it was: large, deeply carved, and positioned on a hillside where many other (ancient) petroglyphs can be found.

We contacted José Miguel Ramírez, who has great knowledge of Easter Island and its rock art sites, and discovered that he had not seen it before either. As it happened, Shawn McLaughlin was on his way to the island, and we



Close-up of the new Makemake face at 'Anakena. Most of its features follow the ancient traditional carvings; however, the mouth is atypical, a clue to its being a modern design. Photo: Shawn McLaughlin.



The new Makemake face above the parking lot at 'Anakena. Note the stone wall behind it. Photo: Shawn McLaughlin.

asked him to check it out and take some photographs, which we include with this article. He not only came back with the Makemake from 'Anakena, but other newly-made designs from the area north of the island's new high school.

It is clear that the 'Anakena Makemake petroglyph is a modern one, carved by persons unknown, and in the general style of the ancient faces (although the mouth is not typical). Sadly, this is not the first time that we have noted modern petroglyphs on the island, carved by Rapanui islanders themselves.

New petroglyphs appear from time to time, and most tend to be copies of ancient designs. In the past, it appeared that most of them were made by individuals, and in a rather *ad hoc* manner. However, not long ago, one of the instructors at the island's high school assigned an astonishing project to his students: Make a petroglyph. We include photographs of a few of these.



Two of several new petroglyphs carved as a school assignment. They are near the high school and the old leper station, north of Hangaroa. Photo: Shawn McLaughlin.



Another new petroglyph near the high school, north of Hangaroa. This Makemake with a pointed nose was one done as a class assignment. Photo: Shawn McLaughlin.

At this time, the petroglyphs are freshly carved and thus they stand out clearly as being 'new'. However, in the island's climate, rock patinates very rapidly and, in a few years, they will appear to be as ancient as the original petroglyphs. This poses a serious problem for archaeology, and for the understanding of the past history of Rapa Nui.

The petroglyphs left by the ancient Easter Islanders had significance and meaning; they were not casually made. They may have functioned as a sort of communication system and many were associated with legends. Also, design motifs are not equally distributed around the island. Some sites, such as 'Orongo, have great concentrations (1,274 petroglyphs); other sites may have only one or two motifs. We discovered that petroglyphs that depict fish-hooks are found at specific sites on the northeast coast; canoe forms are also located at certain sites, and not found at others. Although a few *Tangata manu* designs are scattered elsewhere, the bulk of the birdmen motifs cluster near 'Orongo (Lee 1992). These data are telling us something and thus, when new petroglyphs are created and added to the rocks, the waters become murky. The data becomes skewed.

As I understand it, many islanders believe that, as long as these "modern" petroglyphs are created by a Rapanui, that somehow makes it permissible. We deplore this shortsightedness.

In my opinion, it is not "okay" to change the record left by those ancients who carved motifs on the island's dense rock as they chanted and prayed. Creating clumsy copies for a school project denigrates and cheapens them. And what kind of lessons will those students take with them as they leave school? They will believe that they are

entitled to make petroglyphs wherever they wish – and this is exactly the opposite lesson that students should be learning about their history and the petroglyphs.

Last year when a Canadian artist created "landworks" on Easter Island by moving rocks around to form various arrangements, islanders were outraged, and complained about his misuse of sacred places. The artist was fined, his film confiscated, and he was expelled from the island (Anon 2005; Haun 2006). But these new petroglyphs, made by Rapanui islanders, seem to not excite the same reaction. Perhaps some fear to speak out against such activity.

Rapa Nui's petroglyphs are works of faith and art, and are the finest in Oceania. The ancient Rapanui reflected their beliefs by modifying their landscape and they carved images on rocks and created the magnificent statues that are now an icon for the island. We, all of us—Rapanui and non-Rapanui—are the inheritors. But that does not give the right to alter the *meaning*

of the petroglyphs by creating new ones. The ancient Rapanui are long gone; if the modern Rapanui fail to respect, not what it means to be Rapanui, but what the petroglyphs meant to their ancestors, these meaningless fakes will only contaminate the magnificent history of this island and ultimately send to oblivion everything important that those ancient carvers intended when they first imbued the island's stones with significance.

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