

Paul Horley. *Rongorongo: Inscribed Objects from Rapa Nui*. Viña del Mar: Rapanui Press, 2021. xix + 639 pp., illustrations included, soft cover, US \$52.00. ISBN: 9789569337581.  
Reviewed by Rafał Wieczorek.

Over the past 20 years, Paul Horley has been publishing numerous articles dedicated to the *rongorongo* script as well as several other aspects of Easter Island culture. Finally, this labor has resulted in a dedicated monograph which is a massive volume destined to become a third watershed mark in the *rongorongo* scholarship. The first of those marks was the 1958 Thomas Barthel book, “Grundlagen zur Entzifferung der Osterinselschrift,” and the second is the 1997 Steven Roger Fischer book, “RongoRongo, the Easter Island Script: History, Traditions, Texts.” Both of those works have been the result of numerous years of study by the respective authors, and both influenced to a large extent by the scientific conversation following them. In both cases, the highest scientific value was derived from their complete tracings of the corpus of all *rongorongo* inscriptions. This is also the case with Horley’s book. But unlike the previous two authors, Horley does not make a claim of actually deciphering the script—and that is a huge bonus point of humility for the author.

The book is comprised of seven chapters and 12 appendices. The first chapter is an introduction to the history and culture of the island of Rapa Nui and the Rapanui people. In the second chapter, we learn the history of research on the *rongorongo* script. In the third chapter, the need for new documentation is outlined. Indeed, the literature on the subjects is ripe with comments on various mistakes discovered during studies of Barthel’s or Fischer’s tracings. The present work’s main purpose is to remedy those problems. The new documentation method with computer-generated drawings overlaying high quality photographs is outlined in considerable detail. Chapter four is the principal part of the book and the main result to which subsequent researchers will refer. It presents the complete drawings of all known *rongorongo* inscriptions obtained with methods described in the previous chapter. The publisher of the book has granted the reproduction rights to those tracings for any subsequent academic work, which should result in fast and widespread adoption of the new material. The chapter features tracings of 27 artifacts. Most of them are known from previous studies, but some are new. The inscription from the St. Petersburg *pa’apa’a* has been known since the 1950s, but for some reason it was always omitted in previous corpus compilations. There is one object discovered by the author that is completely new to the public—the Annapolis bird (birdman?). Even though the inscription is short and difficult to decipher, the discovery of a new artifact is always of tremendous importance. The most important content is, however, the improved documentation of the badly damaged tablets M and O. Thanks to modern technologies, the amount of glyphs recovered is significantly greater than previously available. The road to

*rongorongo* decipherment leads through enlargement of the corpus and currently the most fruitful in this task is improved photogrammetric documentation of poorly preserved artifacts like texts M and O. Additionally, the reading order of some texts has been established thanks to innovative new approaches involving the quality of the wood, improved documentation of previously unnoticed lines, and glyph forcing.

Chapter five is organized in a similar manner to the previous chapter, but instead of the authentic *rongorongo* inscriptions, it documents several late imitative objects like the Sydney Sydney or Avignon *rei miro* (wooden breastplates). The sixth chapter presents discussion of major findings of the author as well as his opinions, which makes it that much more interesting. Experimental archaeology performed by Horley with the use of both wood and the alleged perishable prototypical material—banana leaves—led to surprising conclusions, mainly that shark teeth were probably not used for carving, nor banana leaves for any sketches that were to last longer than an hour. Unlike Fischer, Horley believes that *rongorongo* predates first contact with Europeans and reaches back *ca.* 500 years.

Another important advancement pioneered by the author is the study of scribal corrections. It seems around 3% of all glyphs have been affected by some sort of corrections, which is one of the strongest arguments one can make for a script-character of a yet undeciphered graphical system. Many more interesting observations and opinions are discussed in the chapter. Paleographic analysis of sign uniformity leads to the conclusion that considerable time and effort was needed to become a *rongorongo* scribe. Also, such analysis suggests that text V and Y are late imitations or forgeries and as such should not be included in the corpus of *rongorongo* inscriptions. The author makes such suggestions while discussing those two objects but then the rest of the book proceeds in treating them on equal pairing with the rest of the *rongorongo* corpus, which is rather puzzling.

The most important contribution in chapter six is, however, the sign catalog. Unlike Fischer, but like Barthel, Horley has prepared a list of signs occurring in the script. A total of 130 signs are presented. On one hand, it is much less than the over 600 signs cataloged by Barthel; on the other hand, it agrees pretty well with Barthel's postulated 120 independent elements. The author does not argue that those 130 signs comprise the entire corpus, rather that those signs comprise the vast majority and that glyphs which do not easily match to the signary list are either *hapax legomena* or are ligatures composed in a manner not giving easily to component analysis. Several of the principal signs listed by Horley had not been distinguished by Barthel, which makes the list that much more interesting. Unfortunately, Horley does not present a numerical transliteration of the *rongorongo* corpus using his sign catalog. It means that any further statistical natural language processing methods which might be used for *rongorongo* analysis will have to still use Barthel's 1958 transliteration strings.

The seventh chapter presents a summary of all the findings. Then follow all 12 appendices. In Appendix A, 154 parallel passages and delimiters are drawn and listed. In Appendix B, a concordance of Grand Traditions text (tablets H, P, Q) is presented together with its fragmentary parallels from different tablets. In Appendix C, the same is done for texts Gr/K (Small Tradition). Appendix D presents a dictionary of d-list entries—a subgenre present on several tablets. Appendix E gives us the dictionary of the Santiago staff (text I) stanzas. In this instance, one wonders why the same stanzas from the Honolulu tablet (text T) have not been also included. Appendix F presents full concordances of those of the 154 parallel passages outlines in appendix A which have not been among those presented in appendices B–D. Appendix G presents glossed translations of Rapanui language passages quoted in the main text. Appendix H lists Rapanui words collected by the earliest European expeditions in the 18th century. The words are presented in their original form as well as in the probable reconstructions using modern orthography. Appendix I lists a 100-word Swadesh list for Rapanui, but only using the glosses collected during the 18th and 19th century western scientific expeditions. Appendix J lists the modern terms corresponding to the Leipzig-Jakarta list of 100 words particularly resistant to borrowing. In Appendix K, a character set for a

*rongorongo* font designed by the author is presented. The font is free to download and use and is based on the author's idealized drawings of the *rongorongo* signs. A bonus, which once adopted, might positively affect the quality of shop signs in Hanga Roa.

The last appendix, Appendix L, is of principal importance as it presents the sign location table for all 130 principal *rongorongo* signs. All occurrences on any tablet of a given *rongorongo* sign are easily locatable with the help of this list.

The book is a major stepping stone in our quest for being able to read again the *rongorongo* documents. If the coming years bring forth decipherment progress in the *rongorongo* script, it will be primarily thanks to the new tracings made by Paul Horley, which are now available in full for everybody. The work is recommended for anyone interested in learning the current state of *rongorongo* research as well as anyone who would want to gain general authoritative knowledge on the subject of this undeciphered script that is unique in Oceania.

## References

Barthel, T. 1958. *Grundlagen zur Entzifferung der Osterinselschrift*.

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