

Further Evidence for Cosmogonic Texts in the Rongorongo Inscriptions of Easter Island

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In the latest issue of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*¹ I announce what is perhaps the first scientifically verifiable identification of the genre of three *rongorongo* inscriptions. The article detailing this announcement demonstrates that the *rongorongo* texts on the “Santiago Staff” (RR 10), the reverse of the “Small Santiago Tablet” (RR 8v), and “Honolulu 3629” (RR 11) appear to consist, either exclusively (RR 10 and 11) or in part (RR 8v), of hundreds of repetitive series of glyphic triads—that is, individual sequences made up of three glyphs each—whose first constituent is always suffixed by a phallus-like glyph. An internal analysis of these three inscriptions argues that the triads might best be epitomized by the epigraphic formula X^1YZn .



Figure 1. The textual division markers on the *rongorongo* artefact “Santiago Staff”.

This formula X^1YZn also abstracts Ure Va’e Iko’s cosmogony or procreation chant “‘Atua Mata Riri” witnessed on Rapanui in 1886². For this reason, I suggest in the same article that this identifies the three *rongorongo* inscriptions as cosmogonies that share the same structure as Ure Va’e Iko’s chant.

With this procreation formula X^1YZn , glyph X^1 is the copulator with phallus (superlinear ¹ designates the phallic suffix), glyph Y is the copulatee, glyph Z is the issue of the copulation, and non-graphic n denotes the constant. In the same article I then demonstrate in turn that from this formula it is possible to posit a partial phonetic decipherment of these three *rongorongo* inscriptions: “ X copulated with Y : There issued forth Z ”.

Research that has been conducted subsequent to the above discovery has since revealed that the majority of the surviving *rongorongo* inscriptions (perhaps as many as 15 out of the 25 artefacts, or 60%), either wholly or in part, appear also to consist of cosmogonies or procreation triads of the type $XYZn$. That is, most of the procreation triads in the *rongorongo* inscriptions reveal a leading or X -glyph that lacks the phallic suffix that is always shown on each X -glyph of the “Staff”, the “Small Santiago Tablet”, and “Honolulu

3629” and that earlier had enabled the identification of the procreation triads in these three inscriptions.

The recent discovery of cosmogonies in the *rongorongo* inventory of Easter Island and its subsequent elaboration to include most of *rongorongo*’s surviving inscriptions constitute two significant breakthroughs in the archaeological decipherment of Easter Island’s *rongorongo* script.

The Initial Discovery

An epigraphic discovery can be prompted by some sort of fortuitous anomaly in the investigated script—such as the presence of pharaonic cartouches on the Rosetta Stone. In the case of Easter Island’s *rongorongo* script, the distinguishing anomaly has proved to be the presence of textual division markers on the famous “Santiago Staff” (RR 10).

The “Staff” is the only *rongorongo* artefact to show any kind of textual divisions. It displays as many as 97 irregularly spaced vertical lines whose function is still unclear (Fig. 1). Each glyph at the right of each vertical line is suffixed by a phallus (Fig. 2). Since Easter Island’s *rongorongo* script, as both informant data and internal analysis show, reads from left to right, this means that each glyph commencing one of these textual divisions—and, therefore, its internal *rongorongo* statement—bears a phallic suffix.³



Figure 2. Each glyph at the right of a verticle division marker on the “Santiago Staff” is suffixed by a phallus.

However, nearly every fourth, seventh, tenth, thirteenth glyph and so forth in each textual division of the “Staff” also bears a phallic suffix (Fig. 3). No division ends with a glyph bearing a phallic suffix. No penultimate glyph ever displays a phallic suffix either. But nearly every antepenultimate glyph of a textual division shows the phallic suffix (Fig. 4). Many textual divisions on the “Staff”—that is, all those *rongorongo* glyphs that occur between two vertical lines—contain only three glyphs, never fewer, and the first glyph of these triads always displays a phallic suffix (Fig. 5).

From the internal evidence one must conclude, then, that the triad structure of glyphs is the minimum textual statement

on the “Staff”. In addition, each triad, and therefore each isolated statement that the triad represents, apparently must commence with a glyph that is suffixed by a phallus.

By analogy to this discovery on the “Staff”— a discovery that was made possible by the unique presence of vertical division markers on this remarkable artefact—one can identify similar glyphic phenomena in the *rongorongo* sequences on the reverse of the “Small Santiago Tablet” (RR 8v) and on the one legible side of “Honolulu 3629” (RR 11a). In contrast to the “Staff”, both of these *rongorongo* inscriptions lack any sort of textual division marker.

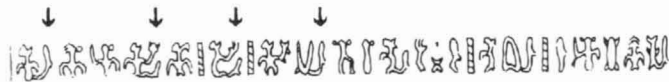


Figure 3. The phallic suffix also occurs on every fourth, seventh, tenth glyph and so forth of the “Santiago Staff”.



Figure 4. On the “Santiago Staff” the phallic suffix does not occur on the penult or terminal glyph but it does occur on the antepenultimate glyph of each textual division.

On the reverse of the “Small Santiago Tablet” the sequences of *rongorongo* glyphs also divide into regular triads—though not so routinely as on the “Staff”—whereby the first glyph of these triads, or of slightly more numerous groupings of glyphs, always displays a phallic suffix (Fig. 6). This feature is also observable on the *rongorongo* inscription “Honolulu 3629” (Fig. 7).

Such phenomena on the “Santiago Staff”, the “Small Santiago Tablet”, and “Honolulu 3629” argue, on the basis of an internal analysis, for an epitomization perhaps most succinctly expressed by the epigraphic formula X^1YZn (Fig. 8). With this, one designates the initial glyph of each triad as X, with the phallic suffix as superlinear ¹; the second glyph as Y; and the third glyph as Z. The *n* denotes the

constant, here signifying an unspecified number of repetitions of the identified triad structure.



Figure 5. On the “Santiago Staff”, textual divisions comprise a minimum of three *rongorongo* glyphs, the first of which always displays a phallic suffix.

However, the formula X^1YZn also describes nearly the entirety of Ure Va’e Iko’s famous Rapanui procreation chant “Atua Mata Riri”. Ure sang this for the American paymaster William Thomson in 1886 ostensibly as a example of an ancient *rongorongo* text.⁴ In this notable chant Ure provided Thomson with a list of 41 copulations and issues, such as: “God Mata Riri copulated with Sweet Lime: There issued forth the *poporo* plant”, or “God Parent copulated with Compacted Sand: There issued forth the tree”. Each of the 41 often recently invented, borrowed, or linguistically contaminated items in Ure’s procreation list nevertheless reproduces the autochthonous Rapanui oral formula X^1YZn . With this, each copulator is X; the phrase “copulated with” is superlinear ¹; the copulatee is Y; and the issue of the copulation is Z (Fig. 9). Though parts of Ure’s text are probably of recent provenance, the structure of his cosmogony is undeniably ancient and autochthonous.

In addition to the above features, Ure’s procreation chant sometimes repeats the copulator X in the issue or Z-position of the formula. This yields the alternative formula X^1YX or “X copulated with Y: There issued forth X” (Fig. 10). Surprisingly, this alternative formula X^1YX is also found on the *rongorongo* artefacts (Fig. 11). Juxtaposing the repetitive



Figure 6. On the reverse side of the “Small Santiago Tablet” (RR8v), the sequences of *rongorongo* glyphs also divide into regular triads whose first glyph also displays a phallic suffix. (The phalli have here been darkened for easy identification.)

One should understand that Ure Va'e Iko's original procreation chant "Atua Mata Riri", or even parts of it, would probably not be replicated in any of these three named *rongorongo* inscriptions. Only the cosmogonic genre (not the same cosmogony) appears to be shared by all four mentioned examples.

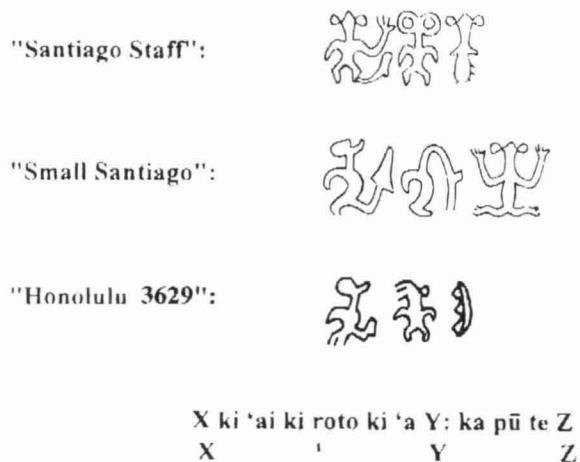
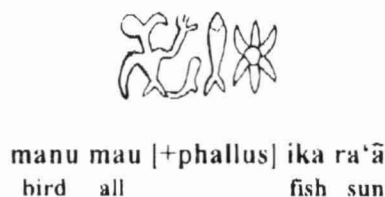


Figure 13. A partial phonetic statement of the three *rongorongo* inscriptions that reveal the oral formula X^1YZn .

The successful identification of a cosmogonic text underlying these three *rongorongo* inscriptions might allow the positing of a provisionally "deciphered" *rongorongo* sentence from the "Santiago Staff" based on the above retrieval method: "Te manu mau ki 'ai ki roto ki te ika: Ka pū te ra'ā"—"All the birds copulated with fish: There issued forth the sun" (Fig. 14).⁶ Though the phonetic assignments suggested here may be only peripherally correct, it is possible that this single procreation item (i.e., glyphic triad) from the "Santiago Staff" represents the first successfully "deciphered" segment of a *rongorongo* text.



Te manu mau ki 'ai ki roto ki te ika: ka pū te ra'ā
X ' Y Z

Figure 14. A provisionally deciphered procreation triad from the "Santiago Staff" (RR10-1).

The Second Breakthrough

The discovery of procreation triads in Easter Island's *rongorongo* inscriptions was made early in 1993. During the following year and a half the discovery was tested, refined, and scientifically described. In August 1994 this first scientifically verifiable breakthrough in the decipherment of

Rapanui's *rongorongo* script was formally announced at the Seventh International Conference on Austronesian Linguistics, at Noordwijkerhout, Holland, where it was enthusiastically received. The subsequent refinement of the conference announcement comprises the text of the abovementioned article in the current issue of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*.

However, since the announcement of this discovery in Holland and the writing of the article for the *JPS*, a second breakthrough has occurred. It is this second breakthrough which I should now like to describe.

At the end of February 1995, I noticed that one sequence of three *rongorongo* glyphs on the tablet "Échancrée" (RR 3b2) reiterated the sequence on the "Santiago Staff" which I had highlighted in my *JPS* article and which is also given above (Fig. 14). If this were the same glyphic sequence as on the "Staff", I reasoned, then it must harbor the same meaning. That is, since the sequence of *rongorongo* glyphs "bird + grasping hand", "fish + grasping hand", and "sun" that is found on "Échancrée" is almost identical to that on the "Staff"—whose tentative reading I had already publicly announced—it, too, would probably signify something like: "All the [qualified] birds copulated with all the fish: There issued forth the sun".

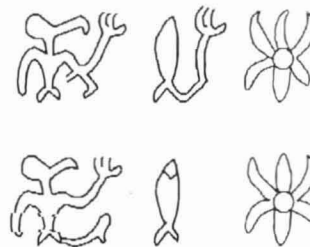


Figure 15. A procreation triad from the *rongorongo* tablet "Échancrée" (RR3b2, above) reproduces in deviant fashion a procreation triad from the "Santiago Staff" (RR10-1, below).

However, the glyphic sequence significantly differs on "Échancrée" (Fig. 15). Unlike the sequence on the "Staff", the one on "Échancrée" has the X-glyph's right elbow displaying a "bracket" \cap of some sort, probably a qualifier, and the Y-glyph's fish also showing a suffix ㄥ supposedly marking the plural that perhaps reproduces Old Rapanui *mau* 'several, a collectivizing particle'. More importantly, there is no phallic suffix on the X-glyph.

The fact that the X-glyph in the procreation chant on "Échancrée" lacks the phallic suffix is significant. It has far-reaching implications for the further decipherment of Easter Island's *rongorongo* script. This is because it appears to indicate that, independent of a glyph's intrinsic phonetic value, glyphic position alone could determine a glyph's embedded statement.

One can perhaps assume that this emasculation of the X-glyph copulator in a *rongorongo* cosmogony occurred once the suffix's function was ritualized by the readers of *rongorongo*. This might have taken place among the

members of a subsequent generation who no longer sensed any need to physically reproduce the repetitive phallus that earlier had always clearly indicated each copulator in a procreation chant.

This graphic elision was only possible because the *rongorongo* procreation texts involved short triads of glyphs that cherished a petrified oral formula. X^1YZn thus became simply $XYZn$. This implies that the intentional omission of the phallic suffix on each X-glyph of a *rongorongo* procreation triad signified a gradual "evolution" in the *rongorongo* script, albeit one probably of only one or two generations—almost the entire span of *rongorongo*'s history.⁸

It surely cannot be a coincidence that this same sequence of three glyphs (with identical "plural" suffixes) from the "Staff", an artefact that is now realized to exclusively contain hundreds of procreation triads, is repeated as an isolated triad (without the phallic suffix) on the tablet "Échancrée". For this reason, there is justification in assuming that more of the text on "Échancrée" than this one triad must comprise similar sequences of procreations. In other words, "Échancrée"—like the "Staff", the "Small Santiago Tablet", and "Honolulu 3629"—also reproduces a cosmogony.

If the elision of the phallic suffix on the X-glyph of a procreation triad occurred with the tablet "Échancrée", then any epigrapher would be justified in postulating that this elision might very well have also been observed with other *rongorongo* inscriptions. Postulating just this, I directed my subsequent search for cosmogonies to other *rongorongo* artefacts—and ferreted out a statistic that surprised even me.

It happens that only the *rongorongo* inscriptions on the "Staff" (RR 10), the reverse of the "Small Santiago Tablet" (RR 8v), and the one legible side of "Honolulu 3629" (RR 11a) invariably display the phallic suffix on the X-glyph of their procreation triads. However, no fewer than eleven additional *rongorongo* artefacts (out of the 25 that miraculously have been preserved) also appear to comprise cosmogonies, either entirely or in part. Like the tablet "Échancrée", all eleven cosmogonies lack the phallic suffix on the X-glyph of each triad (but for rare exceptions).


This latter phenomenon poses an inherent problem. It unfortunately dictates that those epigraphers investigating the *rongorongo* script will enjoy only limited means to isolate the procreation triads in these latter artefacts, since there is no phallus on each copulator to indicate which is the X-glyph of each XYZ sequence.

Nevertheless, there are ways around this problem.

One means to achieve triad recognition is the comparison with the first three inscriptions of the "Staff", the "Small Santiago Tablet", and "Honolulu 3629"—that is, the ones in which each X-glyph still bears the phallic suffix. This permits the easy isolation of identical (XYZ) or similar (XYA, XAZ, AYZ and so forth) procreation triads on those artefacts that do not display the phallus on their X-glyphs.

Another method is "epigrapher's serendipity": internal consolidation. That is, by successfully isolating through comparison, say, one XYZ triad on the left side of an

unidentified nine-glyph sequence and another XYZ triad on the right side of a nine-glyph sequence, an hitherto unknown XYZ triad in the center of the nine glyphs will automatically appear. This is a common reward of a properly implemented epigraphic methodology.





A third approach is the recognition achieved here that the X-glyph—with or without a phallic suffix—is statistically the most frequent of the three glyphs in a *rongorongo* procreation triad to display a plural affix of some sort.⁹ To illustrate this point let us say that one encounters in a given *rongorongo* sequence the glyphic order $A^{\circ}ZBY^{\circ}CXD^{\circ}WE$. Here superlinear $^{\circ}$, $^{\circ}$, and $^{\circ}$ would exemplify three of the most common *rongorongo* affixes (both prefixes and suffixes) , and so forth that usually occur as upraised arms, wings, or whatever on main glyphs (even on flora). Such affixes predominantly occur on the X-glyph of procreation triads, in which they probably mean "plural", "several", "the multitude of" and similar particles marking the plural in Old Rapanui.

In other words, the respective phonetic statements of these affixes in the above example would possibly be something like "The A's copulated with Z: There issued forth the B", or "The several Y's copulated with C: There issued forth the X" and so on.

However, even the Y- and Z-glyphs of normal XYZ procreation triads can bear such plural affixes. They seldom do so, on the other hand, if the X-glyph does not also bear such a plural affix. At the present juncture in the continuing decipherment of Easter Island's *rongorongo* script this is perhaps the epigrapher's most productive method for identifying XYZ procreation triads on those artefacts that do not reproduce the X^1YZ triads that adorn the three *rongorongo* inscriptions of the "Small Santiago Tablet" (RR 8), the "Staff" (RR 10), and "Honolulu 3629" (RR 11).

The identification of such procreation triads failing to show the phallic suffix on the X-glyph is problematic in another way, too. There appear to be no set rules in the *rongorongo* script for standardizing a given phonetic statement. That is to say, there is no *rongorongo* orthography.

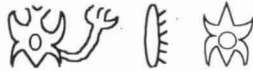
For this reason, the *rongorongo* cosmogonic syntax will not always appear as a simple XYZ sequence. It might also

occur as $\overset{a}{X}YZ$, for example, whereby X is qualified by the suprafused adjectival or nominal glyph a —as with , which consists of main glyph 8  and suprafusion Υ (epigraphers read such *rongorongo* fusions from the bottom up). Or it might occur as $XaYZ$, whereby a represents a postpositive qualifier of some sort—as with , in which the  $ra'ā$ 'sun' is the main glyph X and the following glyph Υ functions as its qualifier a .

A few selected examples of such problematical procreation triads that have thus far been successfully isolated in the *rongorongo* inventory will perhaps demonstrate this process more clearly. It will be appreciated that the following

examples are representative of most such procreation triads that occur on the hitherto identified exemplars.¹⁰

The tablet "Tahua" (RR 1a1) contains a procreation triad that is almost perfectly paralleled on the "Large Santiago Tablet" (RR 9r6). The perhaps older artefact RR 1a1 shows the relatively normal sequence



in which the first X-glyph, the assumed *ra* 'ā 'sun', bears a suprafusion Υ . There follows the apparent plural suffix Υ that perhaps phonetically reproduces *mau* (*ma'u*) 'several, plural, a collectivizing particle' and then the copulatee Y and issue X, reiterating the $\overset{a}{X} YX$ procreation structure discussed above.

This is replicated in a sequence on the "Large Santiago Tablet" (RR 9r6). The surface structure of this sequence evidences a procreation tetrad:



However, the deep structure reveals it to be a procreation triad, of the type $XaYX$. Here, the suprafusion Υ that had adorned the first X-glyph in the above "Tahua" sequence is replaced by the postpositive glyph \parallel that apparently qualifies this X in the same way and that probably is a homonym of suprafusion Υ .

Both glyphic sequences on "Tahua" and the "Large Santiago Tablet" duplicate the procreation structure XYX (that is, the copulator is the same as the issue of the copulation) that is read on RR 8 and RR 10 as X^1YX .

However, "Tahua" accomplishes this with $\overset{a}{X} YX$ and the "Large Santiago Tablet" with $XaYX$.

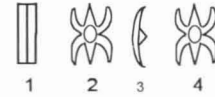
One must appreciate that both glyphic statements would probably reproduce exactly the same phonetic statement. It is also to be noted that in this particular construction both initial X-glyphs (i.e., the provisionally identified *ra* 'ā 'sun') display the "grasping hand" suffix that is perhaps the most common plural suffix on the "Staff".¹¹ The provisional, partial decipherment of this sequence of *rongorongo* glyphs would therefore be: "The [qualified] suns copulated with Y [unidentified]: There issued forth the sun".¹²

The same sequence of glyphs is also found on the "Large St. Petersburg Tablet" (RR 18r5). Here it appears as



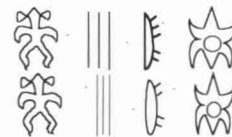
whereby the three verticals \parallel apparently function as an alloglyph to the \parallel on the "Large Santiago Tablet" described above.¹³

One perhaps also reads the same sequence on the *rongorongo* tablet "Échancrée" (RR 3b5), where it occurs as the curiously deviant procreation unit $aXYX$:



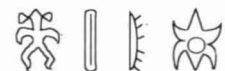
In this instance, if this is indeed the same sequence (which fact is not certain), the order of 1 and 2 has been reversed (suggesting that 1 perhaps reproduces an Old Rapanui particle/qualifier that can be either prepositive or postpositive); 2 omits the "grasping hand" suffix *mau* 'plural'; and 3 either replaces the original \parallel and \parallel attested above in the Y position or functions as a homophonous or even alloglyphic alternative.¹⁴ Only the result of the copulation, the issue 4, remains the same as in the three previous examples.

By analogy to these procreation sequences on four separate *rongorongo* artefacts, one must identify on the "Small St. Petersburg Tablet" (RR 17r5) and on the "Large St. Petersburg Tablet" (RR 18r5)—the similar sequences reproducing $AaYX$:



Here initial Υ or Υ has been replaced by the very frequent *rongorongo* anthropomorphic main glyph 200 Υ . In this instance one should perhaps assume a textual redaction—that is, the earlier procreation statement "The [qualified] suns copulated with Y [unidentified]: There issued forth the sun" has for some reason here been altered to "[qualified] A [a deity?] copulated with Y [unidentified]: There issued forth the sun".





This procreation variation occurs on the "Large Santiago Tablet" (RR 9r6), too, in an almost identical form:





However, here the second glyph, the *a* qualifier of the anthropomorph, is either an alloglyph of \parallel and \parallel or, perhaps like Υ , a homophonous glyphic substitution¹⁵

A similar redactional variation $AaYX$ can be read on the "Small Washington Tablet" (RR 15a1):



In this procreation sequence, the A-glyph copulator has been suffixed with a qualifying “wing”; the following three vertical lines, probably again a qualifier *a* of some kind, are given here as main glyph 95 , very frequent in *rongorongo* inscriptions; and the Y-glyph copulatee is no longer the  or  but the apparent homonym or alloglyph .

In summation, it appears that not only RR 8v, 10, and 11a comprise cosmogonies or procreation chants of the general type X^1YZn , but that also RR 1, 3, 15, 17, and 18 reproduce procreation chants as well, though these latter artefacts forego the depiction of the phallus on the X-glyph copulator of each procreation triad, hence their epitomization as $XYZn$. A further search for similar XYZ triads has revealed the presence of cosmogonic texts on the tablets “Mamari” (RR 2), “Honolulu 3622” (RR 13), the “Large Washington” (RR 16), the “London Tablet” (RR 19, an autonomous paraphrase of RR 8), and the “Small Vienna” (RR 23).

It is possible that “Honolulu 3623” (RR 12) and the “Berlin Tablet” (RR 22) contain similar procreation triads. “Honolulu 3623” demonstrates a conspicuous frequency of assumed plural affixes (such as  and ). The “Berlin Tablet” shares specific glyphic pairs with RR 1, 15, and 18, which are now known to be cosmogonies.

This would signify, then, that RR 1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 22, and 23 might contain, either wholly or in part, cosmogonies or procreation chants of the type X^1YZ , XYZ , XYX and so forth¹⁶ whose general phonetic statement would be: “X copulated with Y: There issued forth Z”.

Procreation chants account for at least 60% of the preserved *rongorongo* artefacts¹⁷

Conclusions

The two epigraphic breakthroughs detailed above have allowed important new insights into Easter Island’s *rongorongo* script:

- Most of the preserved *rongorongo* inscriptions consist of simple triads of procreations of the type “X copulated with Y: There issued forth Z”. Since these artefacts survived in random fashion, one can reliably assume that most pre-1865 *rongorongo* inscriptions also comprised similar cosmogonies cherishing the same structural statement.

- The scientific identification of such texts as procreation chants in the *rongorongo* inscriptions proves the existence on premissionary Rapanui of an autonomous script. That is to say, the premissionary Rapanui people were indeed in possession of writing. Easter Island’s *rongorongo* is Oceania’s only writing system predating the 20th century.

- The triad structure of glyphs that was used in *rongorongo*’s cosmogonic inscriptions, with its concomitant rhetorical formula, would have been easily instructible on premissionary Rapanui. This fact would agree with informant statements made at the beginning of the 20th century that such inscriptions could be learnt by young boys after only a few months of instruction.¹⁸

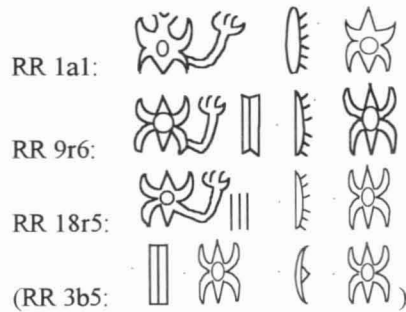
- The XYZ structure of most *rongorongo* cosmogonies, with significant glyphic elipsis, reveals that glyphic position alone could determine the oral statement: “X [*glyphic elision*: copulated with] Y: [*glyphic elision*: There issued forth] Z”.

- Grammatical particles—such as the ‘a possessive particle used in agent fronting; the *te* definite article; and the *he* stative particle—appear to require no graphic representation in the *rongorongo* script. When required, these would probably have been supplied by each reader extrascriptually. This constitutes the “telegram style” of the *rongorongo* inscriptions that several earlier scholars had alleged.

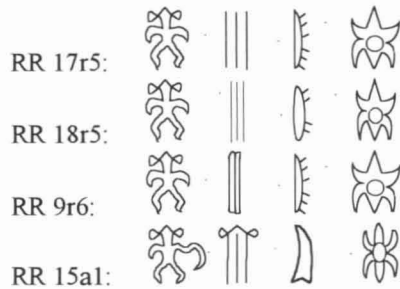
- The *rongorongo* script is logographic in the sense that the X, Y, and Z glyphs of each cosmogony represent physical objects whose identification yields the desired phonetic statement, and semasiographic in the sense that the phallic suffix on each (perhaps earlier) X-glyph depicts an act without recourse to language, here signifying “copulated with”. The *rongorongo* script is, then, a mixed writing system.

- The identification of the X, Y, and Z glyphs of the procreation triads as logographic objects allows the specification of these objects’ compositions as main glyphs, glyphic fusions (suprafusions, subfusions), glyphic affixes (prefixes, infixes, and suffixes), and glyphic compounds of each or all of these.

- The *rongorongo* script is not a fixed writing system. Despite a remarkable degree of standardization in its glyphic morphology (principally due to geographical, temporal, and social limitations), the practical use of *rongorongo*’s standardized glyphs seems to have varied widely from scribe to scribe and from generation to generation. In the few examples cited above one finds that the simple phonetic statement, “(All the) [qualified] X(s) copulated with Y: There issued forth Z”, was graphically realized through any one of the following ways:



Similarly structured procreation statements could be invented through simple glyphic replacement and elaboration:



• These and many further alloglyphic and allosyntactic features of the script complicate to an enormous degree the further decipherment of the *rongorongo* inscriptions.

• Nevertheless, the *rongorongo* code has finally “broken”. The isolation of these XYZ procreation triads will eventually allow the retrieval of the glyphs’ phonetic values, perhaps facilitating penetration into the few non-cosmogonic texts in the *rongorongo* corpus of literature.

At this stage in the decipherment of *rongorongo*, however, all posited glyphic values are still provisional. Only the identification in the inscriptions of cosmogonies or procreation chants and of their oral formulaic structure as repetitive glyphic triads has been successfully demonstrated—not these cosmogonies’ scientifically verified phonetic readings.

In other words, we now know what most *rongorongo* inscriptions say—but we cannot read them yet.

At this epigraphic juncture, the retrieval of the structure of the 25 *rongorongo* inscriptions and the correct identification of their respective literary genre(s) must logically precede the assignment of specific phonetic values for the individual glyphs. □

Notes




1 Steven Roger Fischer, Preliminary Evidence for Cosmogonic Texts in Rapanui’s *Rongorongo* Inscriptions, *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 104 (1995): 303-21.

2 Published in Thomson 1891:520-1.

3 The left-to-right reading direction is evidently a legacy of the Rapanui witnessing the Spaniards’ deed of annexation in 1770. This phenomenon is treated in detail in Fischer n.d.

4 See note 2 above.

5 Evidently this phrase was automatically supplied by the reader and therefore needed no graphic expression. For the same reason, the phallic suffix on each X-glyph was apparently also graphically elided on each carved artefact by a later generation of *rongorongo* experts, who would automatically have supplied its phonetic value during a performance.

6 Once one assumes the presence of a cosmogony on the “Staff”, this provisionally justifies the positing of a hypothetical semantic premise: in this instance, that the main glyph for “bird”, for example, should be represented in the *rongorongo* script by the most common representation of an avian creature in the script, main glyph 600 . This glyph is therefore awarded the tentative phonetic value *manu*, since this is the documented generic term for ‘bird’ in the Old Rapanui language. (One might also be justified in reading main glyph 600 as Old Rapanui *tu’u* ‘albatross [?]’ or *taha* ‘frigate bird’, assuming that a generic term might intentionally have been avoided in procreation chants.) Only secondarily, and with limited cogency, is one then perhaps justified in indicating that this is also the phonetic value for the sign suggested by Bishop Tepano Jaussen’s Rapanui informant Metoro Tau’a Ure in 1873, a value that was subsequently adopted, following Metoro’s suggestion, in the *rongorongo* publications of Barthel (especially 1958 and 1963) and Fedorova (1963,1975,1978,1982,1986,1995). It is in this way that *rongorongo* main glyph 700  is perhaps likely to cherish the phonetic value *ika* ‘fish’ and main glyph 8  the value *ra’ā* ‘sun’. However, one must bear in mind that all such phonetic assignments are only provisional, pending later verification or rejection. The thrust of this preliminary identification of cosmogonic texts in the *rongorongo* corpus lies in the *structural*—not the phonetic—statement of successfully isolated triads.

7 The grasping hand would possibly be Old Rapanui *ma’u* ‘to seize, grasp, take’, perhaps here used in near-homophonous use in order to phonetically suggest the Old Rapanui *mau* particle that marks the plural. (There is as yet no evidence to indicate that the Proto-Central Polynesian **mau* plural marker is the reflex of a Proto-East Polynesian **ma’u* and that modern Rapanui *mau* is a recent borrowing that replaced an earlier Old Rapanui **ma’u*.) The reading *mau* was principally suggested by the predominant use on the “Staff” of the grasping hand as a glyphic suffix that shares complementary distribution with a number of similar glyphic suffixes whose function is evidently to mark the plural in various ways.

8 The cumulative evidence argues that the *rongorongo* script, which apparently was elaborated on Rapanui only at the end of the 18th century (Fischer n.d.), occupied no more

than three or four generations of Rapanui experts before its abrupt demise in the 1860s.

9 Their ubiquitousness on the "Staff", the longest *rongorongo* inscription, precludes the possibility that most such affixes represent descriptive qualifiers or names. However, there is the possibility that a small number of the rarer affixes might figure as the latter.

10 The scientifically verifiable isolation of all the procreation triads on the fifteen *rongorongo* artefacts that contain cosmogonies of the type X^1YZn , $XYZn$, $XYXn$ and so forth would presently constitute the *rongorongo* epigrapher's most pressing task.

11 That this represents a particle marking the plural remains a hypothetical reading pending final scientific verification.

12 One might contest such a reading on the grounds of logic: How can plural suns sire one sun? However, our ancient Western tradition of Graeco-Roman logic is alien not only to Rapanui cosmogonies but also to those of other Polynesians as well. At the very least this tentative phonetic statement offers a promising working hypothesis.

13 This indicates that, at least in this construction, the *rongorongo* glyphs X (as a suprafusion), X , and X are either homonyms or alloglyphs of the same represented object and, because of this, probably share the same phonetic value.

14 It is entirely possible that the three glyphs X , X , and X cherish as homonyms the same phonetic value, though they perhaps may not share the same semantic value. Glyph 40 X is a very frequent main glyph in the *rongorongo* inventory.

15 The fact that this sequence occurs on the same line of the "Large Santiago Tablet" (RR 9r6) just six glyphs before the similar sequence on RR 9r6 cited above, suggests that this glyph is actually an alloglyph and not an autonomous glypheme.

16 Other permissible glyphic combinations are also indicated, such as X^1YX , X^1XY , XXY , X^1YY , and XXY .

17 However, by textual volume—recalling that the two longest *rongorongo* inscriptions, the "Staff" (RR 10) and "Tahua" (RR 1), which together comprise some 30% of the surviving corpus, are both cosmogonies—procreation chants would comprise approximately 85% of the preserved *rongorongo* literature.

18 This point is treated in detail in Fischer n.d.

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