

EARLY SPECULATIONS ON RAPANUI: THOMAS CROFT TO ALPHONSE PINART, 1876

by Yoram Meroz

Alphonse L. Pinart (1852-1911), anthropologist and linguist, had established himself as a tireless documenter of native North America, before turning his sights on the Pacific. Rapa Nui, in particular, held him in thrall, and his diary of the 1877 expedition aboard the *Seignelay* documents the island during its most depopulated and depressed period. As a linguist, he was also interested in *rongorongo*, and attempted a collection of reproductions of the available texts. To that end, he contacted Thomas Croft in Tahiti. Croft was a Rapa Nui enthusiast living in Tahiti, who had corresponded with the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, and whose published letter to them is one of the earliest published investigations of the subject; no doubt that letter induced Pinart to contact him. Croft's reply has been preserved among Pinart's papers in the Bancroft Library, at the University of California in Berkeley, and is reproduced here verbatim. While the letter adds little to Rapa Nui history, it documents another early tradition: the outpouring of fashionable and dubious science to explain the *moai* or any other of the island's mysteries. This tradition has persisted until the present.

"Letter, 30 June 1876, from Thomas Croft to Alphonse Pinart. BANC MSS Z-Z 17 v.1, Alphonse A. Pinart Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley."

Papeete, June 30, 1876

M. A. Pinart:

Dear Sir: Your note of the ult. reached me by the first mail. In it you request me to give my opinion of the hieroglyphics of Easter Island. I take great pleasure in complying with your request.

I have had frequent conversations with a number of Easter Island natives who are now living here in Tahiti, and have questioned and cross-questioned them, when in groups and when I met them singly, and from their unanimous replies, I am convinced that the inscriptions on the tablets are the records of that people, and that they have been in the habit of making their records from time immemorial.

The characters are partly of an iconographic, and partly of an entirely arbitrary nature, as to their form.

You will find two quite lengthy papers on this subject, written by me, in the archives of the San Francisco Academy of Natural Sciences, which they will take great pleasure, no doubt, in showing to you and allowing you to read them, and extracting from them, if you wish. You will please give my compliments to Prof. Davidson, the president of said Society, and say to him that I have recommend you to call on him for the purpose of seeing and reading those letters.

Although your letter seems to confine itself to the hieroglyphics, merely, of Easter Island, there is another matter, of great interest to Science, on that Island, that I would be glad to give you my "opinion" upon. I mean the gigantic stone statues

or rather "busts" abounding there, some of which are figured in photographs N^o 7 and N^o 9 which I send you. Some of those busts, are, I am informed, of from 20 to 40 feet high, and from 8 to 10 feet through, in parts, monoliths, and a great number of them have, each, an immense stone placed on the top of its head, (as represented in photo N^o 9.) in the form of a hat, or other head covering. These busts are very numerous there. Some say there are over two hundred of them on that small island, some lying down and some standing up. The natives tell me that their traditions say, that their ancestors, long ages back in the past, communicated with and were assisted by the "spirits," who had great power, and who enabled said ancestors to sculpture those Titanic busts by the aid of small pieces of sharp stones, and that when each bust was finished, they had but to command it to go where they wanted it, and said bust immediately went there, and stood up or laid down, as commanded. From these traditions my "opinion" is that those busts were not made by the ancestors of Easter Island, but by a race, more civilized than them, who lived on that island when it was part of a continent, long ages before the ancestors of the present race went there. Those immense monoliths, are, some of them, of a great many tons weight, and would require, at the present time, some of our most powerful machinery to move and transport and elevate them, and place their caps upon them. And the Easter Islanders have not the means, and probably never had the knowledge of any such grand mechanical powers.

My "opinion" is that these busts were made and carried and erected by an antediluvian race who inhabited that region at the time when the grand Zone of mountains which occupies the western part of America from Cape Horn to Bhering's Straits, were in the process of elevating, as stated in my pamphlet, a copy of which I send you. And that the same powerful centrifugal force which elevated them, so overcame the force of gravity at what we now call Easter Island that the makers of those busts could move them with far less force than would be required at the present day. And that those ancient inhabitants were swept away by the same grand cataclysm which destroyed the ancient civilizations, whose ruins you have been among, and that the traditions of that terrible period are still preserved by the Moqui, Zuni, and other Indians of the New World, as well as by the ancient records of the Old World.

My "opinion" too, is, that that grand Zone of parallel chains of mountains, extending, as it does, through Asia, the Malay Archipelago, Australia, to the Antarctic Continent, was, at that time, as stated in my pamphlet, in the torrid zone, and, consequently, instead of running north and south, as it now does, it ran east and west.

In addition to the arguments I have adduced in favor of this theory, in my pamphlet, I have noticed, lately, that the most ancient geographers laid down the bearings of different places in exact accordance with this idea.

Pythéas, quoted by Strabo, but not understood by him, laid them down in this manner, in his writings. Eratosthenes, did so, when he was placed in possession of the works of the old authors collected by Alexander and his generals and successors, and directed by the Ptolemies, to make a map of the world, and to write a geography (See "*Encyclopedia of Geography*," published in London in 1834 – an admirable work).

And this mode of "false orienting", as the Encyclopedist says, in his ignorance of the true state of the case, tinctured the writings of all the Grecian and Roman geographers down to the time of the Christian era, and for more than a hundred years after, whenever they attempted to write the geography of those parts of the world that were beyond their personal cognizance, or that of those with whom they communicated. Pythéas (see said Encyclopedia) and those other very old writers said that France, or rather Gaul, had a northern coast, that Great Britain was to the northward of France, that Ireland was to the northward of Great Britain, and that Thule was to the northward of Ireland; and that, in those parts of the world there was a six month's night and a six month's day, a condition belonging to Polar regions only. And that the Pyrenées ran north and south, that Sicily lay north and south; that the Mediterranean coast of Africa ran north and south, and every other place that they speak of, the directions were all in accordance with these statements and with my theory.

And it is amusing to me to read the attempts made by the more modern geographers, who, of course, are not familiar with the real facts of the case, to explain and apologize for the statements made by those old-time geographers, who lived and wrote before the change of polar axes took place, and who saw and knew well what they were writing about. And it is particularly amusing to me to see the awkward attempts of our modern geographers in trying to make the degrees of latitude of the old geographers coincide with the new degrees of longitude at the latitudes of Rome, Athens and Alexandria in Egypt, where the degrees of longitude are so much shorter than a degree of latitude.

Had they have known that the circumstances had to completely change since the time of those old writers, they would not have taken so much trouble to attempt to reconcile the old with the new, nor would old Strabo have been so angry with still older Pythéas as to declare, and attempt to prove him "a liar of the first magnitude" as stated in the Encyclopedia before spoken of.

After reading your note I was desirous of sending you a set of photographs of the tablets of E. I. hieroglyphics now in Tahiti, but regretted that my means would not allow me to pay for them. Just at this juncture M. Jean Soury, chef of the government imprimerie here, who is a friend of mine and a friend, also, to science, generously stepped in and offered to pay for a set, if I would send them to you. I thankfully accepted his offer, and accompanying these papers you will receive them.

The numbers on the photographs correspond to a set I have in my possession, so that if you or your friends want any one or more of them, they have but to write to me, enclosing the money to pay for them and stating the N^o of the photograph. The price is from one to four francs each, according to size. They include photos of each side of the tablets, as the inscriptions are on both sides. Also photographs of several natives of Easter Island, men and women. The old grey bearded priest seen in group N^o 23 is one of two priests who were sent to E. I. to evangelize the natives and who induced them to burn a large number of tablets under the plea that they were heathen relics and should be destroyed. In this manner the scientific world has lost, perhaps, some of the earlier history of this people.

Should such a thing be possible, that the Cal. Acad. of Nat. Sciences refuse you permission to see and use my letters on Easter Island, you will let me know, and as soon as I have leisure, I will undertake to write once more the long account, and send it to you. At present my time is very much occupied.

I should like very much when your account of your discoveries among the mountains of America is printed if you would favor me with a copy as, as I before mentioned in this letter, I am very much interested in them, geologically, archeologically, anthropologically, &c.

Owing to the extremely high rate of postage here on enclosed and sealed packages, and owing to the danger of losing one or more of the photographs if sent unsealed through the mails, I have given the package of photographs to the Captain of the *Nautilus* to bring to you.

Wishing you the greatest success and pleasure in your efforts to advance human knowledge, permit me to remain

Yours, &c. Thos. Croft

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