

Is a New Approach to the Decipherment of Rongorongo Writing Necessary?

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Abstract

Since its discovery in 1864, Easter Island writing, of which only the name rongorongo was known from the natives, remains despairingly undeciphered. The numerous efforts to crack it have not brought any conclusive results so far. After a brief review of the present state of research, this short paper proposes an outline for a new strategy. Our fundamental tenet is that a linguistic approach will be fruitless so long as a full exploration of the graphical techniques used to indicate the colours has not been done.

We shall avoid here a lengthy repetition of the discovery of rongorongo writing (hereafter called RR) and the history of the various attempts at decipherment made first by missionaries and then by ethnologists and amateurs of all kinds. We will find the essential points in MÉTRAUX's synthesis (1957: 183–207), and, for more recent works, we principally will consult BARTHEL (1971, 1989), KRUPA (1971), GUY (1985, 1988) and RJABCHIKOV (1987, 1988). Only the following needs be recalled here:

Very few antique objects bearing RR texts have reached us: about two dozens, wooden tablets for the most. They represent a corpus of about 9700 signs (BARTHEL 1971: 1167). BARTHEL (1958: synoptic tables 1–8) made an index for more than 600 different signs according to a very subjective classification.

Now we come to the results. BARTHEL, GUY and RJABCHIKOV have all published works which seem to be at the top of current research. GUY (1985) in contrast to the other two does not put forward a textual interpretation. His main contribution to the decipherment is restricted to a cautious analysis of the variations of four parallel texts from which he draws conclusions about the possible nature and history of RR writing. The textual interpretations of BARTHEL and RJABCHIKOV diverge strongly, representing in broad terms respectively the adhesion or the refutation of Metoro's² dictations.

We shall elect not even to discuss the fanciful theories of the hyperdiffusionists who assign a non-Polynesian origin to this writing. It is important to note that RJABCHIKOV (1988: 319) rejects Metoro's dictations relying upon HEYERDAHL's conclusions. We have to recall once again that HEYERDAHL's publications are subject to caution. His doubtful conclusions are considered

¹ Translated from the French by PHILIP HAGYARD.

² One of the last Easter Islanders claiming to have been initiated to the RR practice.

by many to be the fruit of intensive use of “junk science”³. What is more, the procedure he uses is in itself absurd: we do not prove by the negative. If there is something to prove, it is that Metoro was, just as claimed by BARTHEL (1971: 1182), a RR beginner. The decipherments proposed by BARTHEL and RJABCHIKOV only deal with selected text fragments and the methods used by both are not safe from criticism⁴. Finally, in the absence of any decisive demonstration, we are practically still in the starting box. The most positive results to come out of this history of decipherment remains the various parallel text studies and the determination of nonsignificant variations in the drawing of the glyphs (allographs).

To sum up this introduction, we will take the general conclusions that PARPOLA (1986: 414–415) drew from the Indus Valley attempts at script decipherment, and which can also be applied to the RR problem: “Although the published “solutions” offer many valuable observations and seminal ideas, it is clear that a lot of washing has to be done in order to obtain the gold dust, and that a critical reader is inclined to throw that gold dust away with the wash water. As JOHN CHADWICK saw the only remedy is to lay stress on quality instead of quantity. What we shall need is not more possible or even plausible interpretation of signs (...), but the clearest possible demonstration that these meanings are correct. Once this foundation is unshakable, it will be safe to build upon it, but we must not be led into admiring a house of cards which, elegant as it seems, will collapse if one prop is withdrawn”.

We are so little advanced that we do not even know if RR was a simple mnemotechnic device or a writing, in the broadest sense. MÉTRAUX (1940: 403–405), following his research, issued the first hypothesis, and despite the fact that subsequently (1964: 26–27) he acknowledged it was too simple, it still has its adepts. Today, we have at least some writing decipherments, more or less accomplished, and some writing evolutionary models as sources of inspiration⁵. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that the use of mythograms and cupules⁶ gave way, in a society that was becoming complex, to a more elaborate system necessary for establishing proofs of social status, as genealogies showing ties to the gods and ariki. Nevertheless, the danger is to want to make the RR a more elaborate system than it was. A hieroglyphic (ideophonographic) writing perhaps was not necessary for the Easter Islanders trained in the awful cerebral gymnastics which was required for the retention of oral tradition⁷. Satisfied with the embryo-system they had created, they did not try to improve it. The absence of epigraphs on the huge monuments bearing the statues would suggest this.

However embryonic and difficult to decipher it is, RR should not be put aside. Today, it is amusing to see archeologists painting a picture of old Rapanui Society and its evolution almost only with what they have seen on the site⁸. To claim to draw the truth in this way is not realistic. We cannot ignore the impact of the writing on the society⁹. Amongst other effects, as a source of cohesion for the fabric of society, RR likely contributed to political stability and at least relative social peace which, combined with the isolation of the islanders, allowed their culture to reach the heights we know.

³ See for example MÉTRAUX 1951: 129. He says “une science de pacotille”.

⁴ See for example BIERBACH & CAIN (1989: 404), GUY (1988).

⁵ PARPOLA 1988: 115. The best example is given by himself and we have to acknowledge the real progress made by his team for the Indus Valley script decipherment. A similar investigation in the RR script, with similar results is within our reach.

⁶ Mythograms are represented by some petroglyphs. They are frequently associated with cupules on lava tables or cave walls. For a mythogram definition, see LEROI-GOURHAN 1964: 267–268.

⁷ For this point, see COHEN’S remark in MÉTRAUX 1963: 27.

⁸ For example VAN TILBURG (1987: 30): “The specific purpose of the statue project was the collection of a large quantity of objective, descriptive data in a standardized way (...). We are now in a position to deal forcefully with a number of misconceptions about the statues and their role in the society which created them.

⁹ For a good discussion on the matter, we can usefully read GOODY 1987, reviewed by SCHMANDT-BESSERAT 1988.

After all these considerations, we now come to our proposals. The first step, which is not new in itself, is to put the RR corpus in a computer memory. As a basis for the work, we cannot do without BARTHEL's compilation (1958). Nevertheless this old compilation has difficulty hiding its wrinkles¹⁰, so it will be a good opportunity for updating. The innovation will be not to use any numerical codification — too imprecise, arbitrary and abstract — or digitalization. Just an exact copy of the glyphs is required, avoiding obvious duplicates. The codification proposed by BARTHEL can only be used for an approximate search of glyphs in the corpus of the tablets. The basic symbols will be patiently redrawn and stored one by one, using the appropriate program and memory capacity. Then, this stock will be used to rewrite the corpus. Objection will be raised because of the size of the task, but this work is capital for the second step. By the way we have to deplore the poor reproduction we too often find in books and papers dealing with RR. It is our belief that each stroke of the glyph is important, so the help of the computer for a perfect reproduction fidelity is essential¹¹.

The second step will be to rewrite the texts of the tablets, according to a number of perfectly defined and invariable rules indicating the different colours, which were attached to some of the glyphs or only to selected areas of them. According to our interpretation, this form corresponds to the text before its transcription on the tablet and is especially important in trying to identify the less figurative glyphs. We have reached this conclusion after a minute study of the glyph design. However, due to the limited scope of the study, we are not sure at the moment exactly how many colours have been used, five or six. Schematically, this study corresponds to what BARTHEL (1971: 1182) calls "atomistic sign analysis", but we find very different fundamental meanings for some of the frequent and most important signs¹².

Rewriting the texts following these rules will be relatively easy once the glyphs have been stored and the corpus is in the computer memory. For genuine decipherment, this is the unshakable foundation that CHADWICK was taking about. We can hope that the information subsequently gained will be of benefit from both an ethnological and archaeological point of view. Certainly, we will not find in the texts a wealth of literature about migrations, the building of monuments, wars, alliances, everyday life, but perhaps the veil of the secret which still covers fundamental concepts may be lifted. The recollection of these concepts disappeared with the Peruvian slave trade in 1862, just before the discovery of RR script. After the segregation of the sacred texts from the profane ones, we may well have a glimpse of the organization of the Rapanui pantheon, or the role of the god Makemake in the society or even a description of social stratification symbols defining rights over the clan territory. From this, it is likely that we will be able to answer the question raised by GOLDMAN (1970: 113) of which class or clan was using the writing. What a pleasant surprise it would be to find Polynesian elements to help us to assemble the big puzzle of Easter Island prehistory. These elements will either confirm or contradict those assembled by archaeology and oral tradition, with the writing as winner because of its reliability. The contradictions will, in the archaeology field, lead to new and more exact interpretations and in the oral tradition field — we may hope — revive the memory of the older islanders about things of which they have not spoken of for a long time.

From cosmic pathways to emblems of rank, the paradox of RR writing is that the ingenious graphic devices used to indicate the colours of the glyphs has obliterated, at least to

¹⁰ See critics in BIANCO (1976: 17) and GUY (1958: 372).

¹¹ The hypothesis of the addition of strokes to primitive RR signs for their "artistic embellishment" suggested by HEYERDAHL (1977: 196) is without any foundation and precedent, acting as a red herring in the collective effort to decipher RR.

¹² Examples: For the sign 49f, "pua" according to Metoro's dictations, BARTHEL's translation is at a first level "flower" and at a second one "woman" (1978: 45). We propose at a first level "turmeric = red" (ROUTLEDGE n.d.) and at a second one "sacred". Likewise, RR 600 cannot be read "manu" and at a second level "manu kura" (BARTHEL 1971: 1173), but RR 600 = "manu" and RR 600f = "manu kura".

our eyes, their iconic value. This being first rediscovered, if the thought of the scribe is grasped, even in a very fragmentary way, RR will have fulfilled its mission as a script. The other side of the coin will be that the dreams which arise from the ideograms¹³ will fade away.

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¹³ See FORMENTELLI (1982).

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