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EL PROYECTO PETROGLIFO DE RAPA NUI: THE 1982 FIELD SEASON

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The following is a brief summary of a report which will be published in American Indian Rock Art, Vol. 10, in 1984. (American Rock Art Research Association, P.O.Box 1539, El Toro, California 92630, U.S.A.).

The rock art research program on Easter Island began in 1981. Until that time, the full extent of the project facing us was unknown. The vast numbers of petroglyphs which had not previously been documented, or had been imperfectly recorded, was - I must say - rather intimidating. The first season, 1981, lasted six weeks and was basically exploratory in order to grasp the scope of the project and special problems involved in recording the various kinds of rock art.

The 1982 Field Season extended for six months. And, although a prodigious number of sites were recorded, we still face large amounts of undocumented petroglyph sites. This year, 1983, the field season will be from October to January.

To place the 1982 report in perspective, it basically continues the start made in 1981. The petroglyphs encompass an amazing range of design elements and methods of manufacture. This variety has not received notice in most publications which focus on the famous 'birdman' motif - if indeed, rock art is mentioned at all.

The island is wholly volcanic and the rock art is found in caves (natural lava tubes); on flat lava flow (papa); on chunks of dense fine-grained basalt (puku); or on portable stones (mae'a). It may be made by fine-line incising on the dense basalt; pecked; pecked and abraded lines; bas relief; painted; or a combination of these. In cave situations where the rock art is protected, pigment is often well preserved and paintings as well as painted petroglyphs retain brilliant color.

The petroglyph project is under the auspices of the University Research Expeditions Program, University of California at Berkeley. Additional funding was supplied by the Rock Art Archive at UCLA; the UCLA Friends of Archaeology; the American Rock Art Research Association; Jan Van Tilburg Associates; and J. Weaver. Permission to conduct research was granted by the

Consejo de Monumentos, Santiago de Chile, and the Centro de Estudios of the University of Chile in Isla de Pascua. Claudio Cristino, Director of the Centro de Estudios; Patricia Vargas; and Edmundo Edwards provided valuable assistance and advice. I am indebted to them. Working closely with the archaeologists on the island has enabled us to place some of the rock art into a cultural context, which I personally believe is the path by which we may understand the purpose and function of the art. Rather than attempts to decipher each symbol, the context of the rock art may provide us with a greater amount of information. Rock art is an artefact of man and needs to be examined as areas of past human activity, not just collections of designs. The cognitive aspect of rock art needs to be dealt with to focus on links between art and culture, style and social group, context and function, and ultimately, symbol and meaning.

The 1982 Field Season extended from August to January, 1983. Using the methodology of the previous year, attention was concentrated on sites at Rano Kao, Motu Nui, and portions of the north coast (Fig. 1). The results are exciting. Intensive documentation of the ceremonial site at Orongo revealed a stylistic development of the 'birdman' motif. This is important for it suggests autochthonous evolution for this motif. Petroglyphs in previously unsurveyed areas of the north coast have the potential to provide us with new insights into the art, for certain design elements cluster in specific parts of the island. This may reflect clan groups, activity centres, or places for specific sacred rituals.

Once a site was located, a sketch map was prepared indicating its location in reference to other archaeological features and compass readings. A supplementary sketch map noted panel locations and orientation. Our next step was to place a string grid over each panel. This varied in size depending upon the size of the panel. Precise drawings on graph paper were then prepared and notations made on measurements, line width, superimpositions and method of manufacture. Sites were also documented photographically.

Some petroglyphs are so faint that it was necessary to return several times at different hours of the day in order to see them clearly. The petroglyphs on Easter Island are fully patinated to the same degree as the matrix of the rock, and only a raking side-light will render some of them visible. In several instances, we returned at night and corrected our drawings with the aid of a kerosene lantern. Although this proved to be an excellent way to check on very faint petroglyphs, it was hazardous for it involved hiking in the dark across rough lava fields.

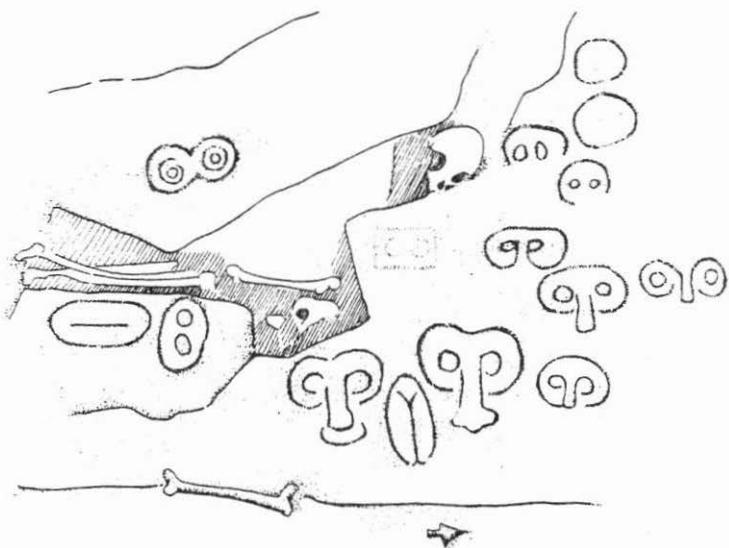
In our recording process, stress was placed on producing precise technical drawings of the rock art. Special conditions on the island made this a necessity. Many sites are on very large lava flow and one panel may extend for twelve metres. Photographs of such panels are inadequate for they will appear distorted. As was mentioned, some are difficult to see. Some curve around undulating surfaces, or are on walls of caves which lack any natural light. These special problems were solved by the use of scale drawings. An additional benefit is that drawing forces one to really scrutinize the glyph and to note detail which a photograph may not reveal. Our emphasis is on total recording of a site, not just the 'better' or more visible elements. We are also concerned with recording entire panels in order to illustrate all the designs and their relationship to each other.

Our survey began on the north coast of the island near the base of Poike Peninsula. Research teams surveyed and recorded northward along the coastal terrace, up to and including the sites at Anakena, and extending inland approximately two kilometres. In the south-west corner of the island, the Rano Kao sites, including Orongo, were fully recorded. Five days were spent on the offshore islet of Motu Nui to document those sites. In addition, three sites were documented on the south coast and four on the north-west coast.

Space does not allow for a detailed description of each of the sites. Some of the highlights include the discovery of two caves, one with numerous fine-line incised designs; the other containing an entire wall of 'Makemake' faces, which are believed to represent the supreme creator god of the island (Fig. 2). These petroglyphs had been further emphasized by the application of pigment into the grooves. The former site has an elaborate and quite specific legend, according to our native informant.

One area of the north coast contains 46 petroglyph sites; some are 12 m long. An unusual design element found here consists of a boat shape with an unidentified appendage at one end (Fig. 3). That this represents a specific feature is suggested by the fact that it occurs 67 times without significant variation. Metraux's informants (1971:205) stated that the appendage was a support for nets or fishing lines. A literature search on oceanic watercraft has failed to verify this interpretation. Any suggestions from readers will be most welcome.

The incidence of cupules (cup-shaped depressions) is of interest. They are found all over the island. Some are



PANEL 1.5 X 2.5 M

FIGURE 2.



FIGURE 3.



FIGURE 4.

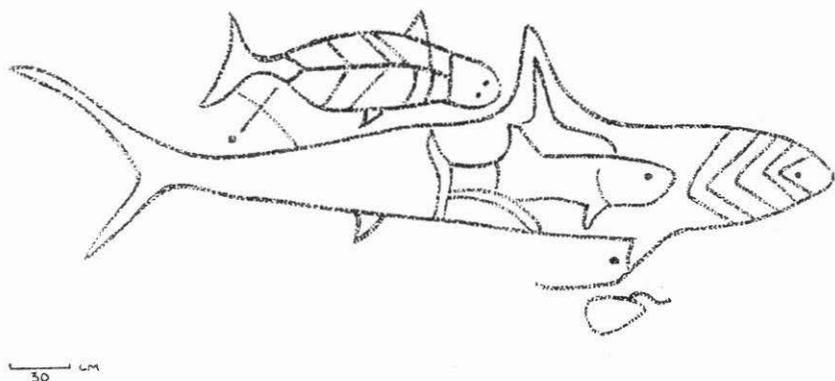


FIGURE 5.

isolated clusters; others march in long lines across the papa. Some are on vertical surfaces which rules out a functional interpretation, and some are even worked into the giant moai. One cupule site with good ethnographic description was a place where the old men watched the stars (Routledge, 1919:235). In this case, they may have had a part in ritual sky-lore or solstitial activity.

In cases where designs are part of a panel, the entire design was recorded as a unit in order to preserve its integrity (Figs. 4 and 5).

A few petroglyphs were recorded which appear to resemble the figures on the famed Rongorongo boards, the island's undeciphered script (Fig. 6). Some other designs defy categorization (Fig. 7).

Much of the 1982 Field Season was devoted to an exhaustive study of the rock art at the volcanic crater of Rano Kao, particularly the ceremonial site of Orongo. Scattered sites are also found on the interior and exterior slopes of the caldera. Orongo, the village of the birdman rites, is located on the crater's south-western lip. Here, perched precariously on a narrow strip of land, is an astonishing collection of petroglyphs. We located and documented 110 separate rocks. This

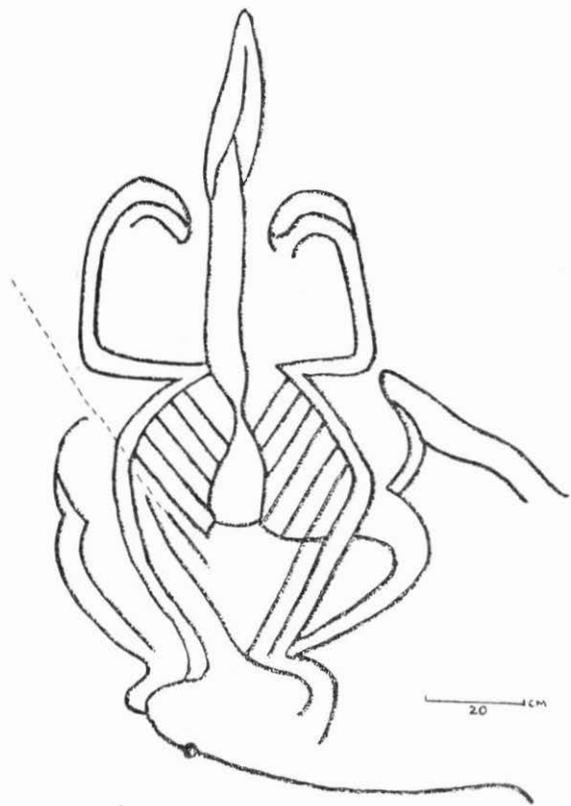


FIGURE 7.

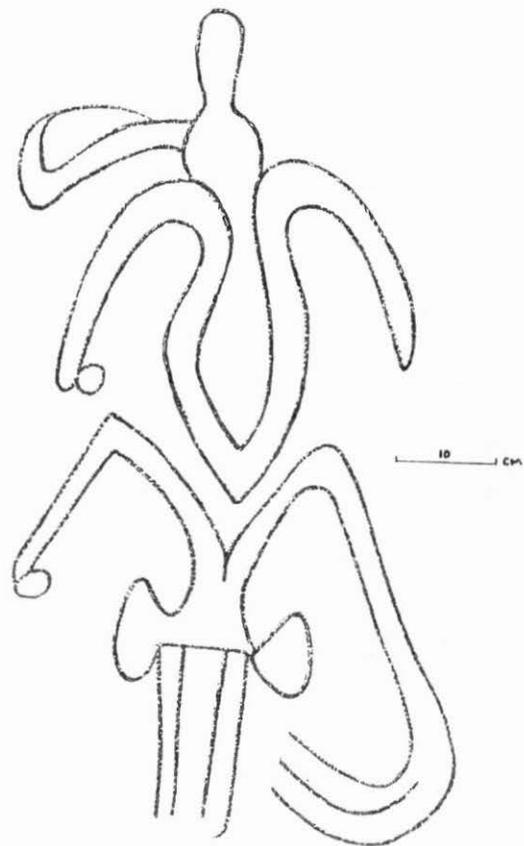


FIGURE 6.

does not reflect the actual number of panels or elements, for most of the boulders contain four or more intricate panels, some of which wrap around the curved surfaces. Superimposition is common.

The most highly concentrated group of Orongo petroglyphs is at Mata Ngarau. This breathtaking site overlooks the off-shore islets of Motu Nui, Motu Iti, and Motu Kao Kao. On the north is the crater with its freshwater lake. The boulders at Mata Ngarau form a natural pavement in front of a group of stone houses at the narrowest part of the crater rim. Here, every available surface is covered with petroglyphs. This is the place where the old men chanted the Rongorongo; it was sacred and off-limits for the common person. This site is part and parcel of the birdman cult, but the ancient rites are not fully understood today.

The birdman rites involved a competition to obtain the first egg of the Sooty Tern from the islet of Motu Nui. Contestants descended the sheer cliffs of Orongo, swam to the islet, and the winner returned to Orongo with the egg. The sponsor of the winning contestant became the birdman of the year (tangata manu). The significance of this honour is obscure but the tangata manu was believed to possess supernatural power and there are allusions to the birdman as being an oracle, interpreter of dreams and omens, and perhaps an organiser of funerals.

This cult appears to have been a late fifteenth century development with the rites extending into the 1860s. The ethnographic information concerning the cult was obtained late in time, after the original ceremonies had been diffused and altered. Surely, in prehistoric times, the ceremony was more an elitist cult with strong religious overtones. The birdman cult replaced the earlier belief system involving ancestor worship and it became a pan-island cult after the civil strife which resulted in the rise of a powerful warrior (manatoa) class.

Intensive study of the petroglyphs at Orongo has enabled us to postulate a progression of the birdman motif. This indicates an experimental or formative stage (Phase 1) and a fully developed one, Phase 11 (Fig. 8).

The Phase 1 style consists of thin, sinuous small-headed birdman figures made by pecking and abrading lines. These are generally faint and quite eroded. The leg of the figure is partially extended; hand, foot and gular pouch are rarely indicated. Occasionally the arm is omitted completely. In



Phase II
FIGURE 8.

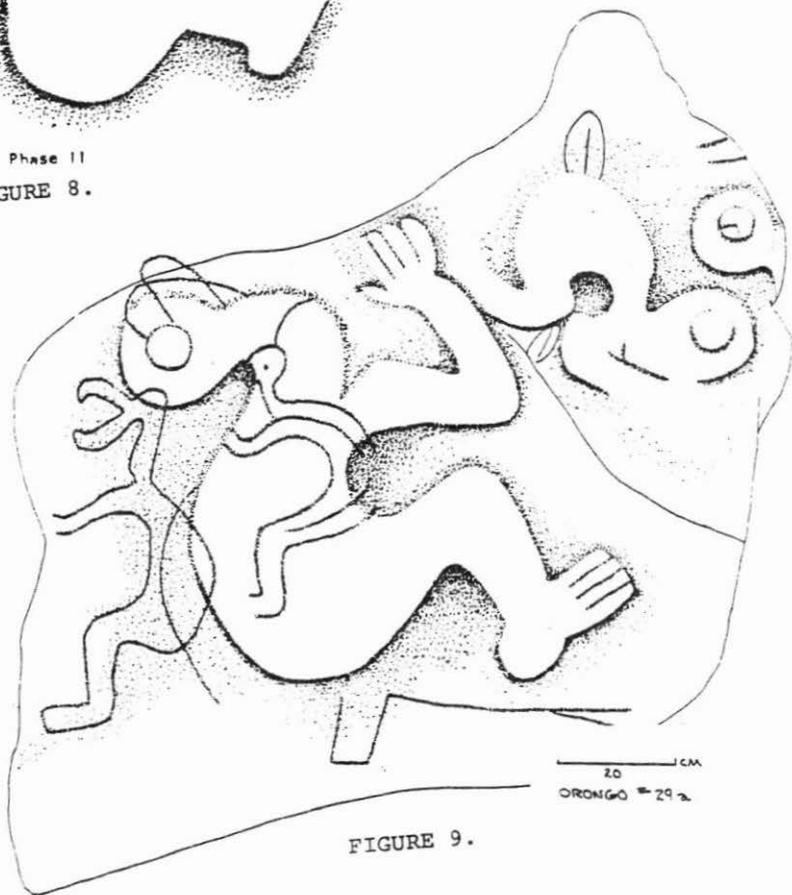


FIGURE 9.

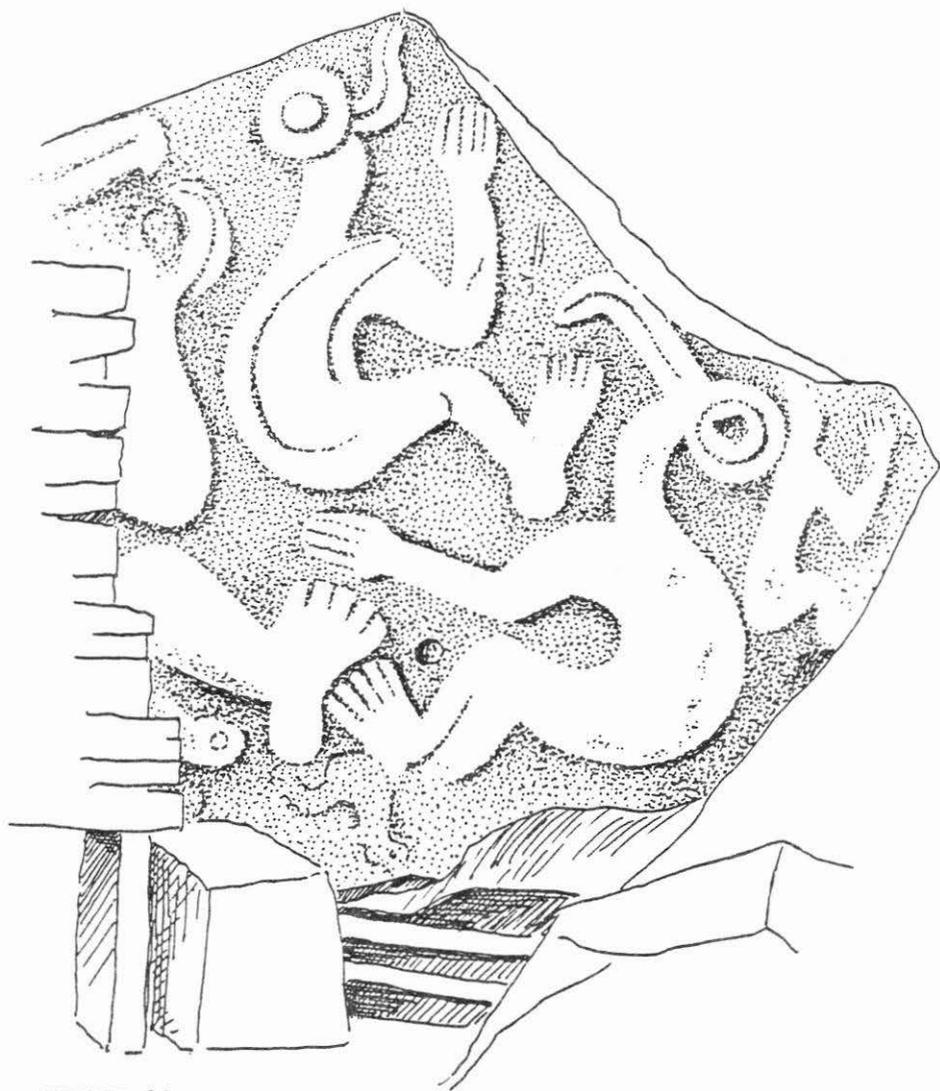
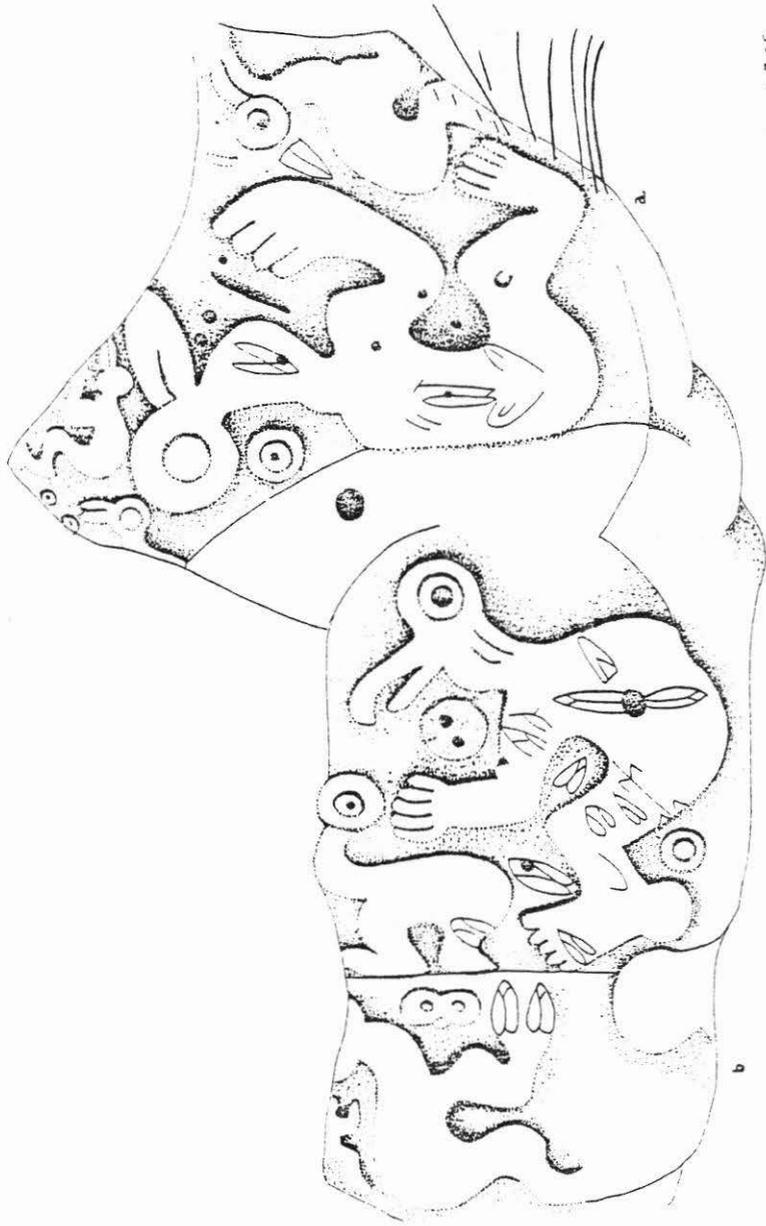


FIGURE 10.



OROBAGO n. 25
1 cm

FIGURE 11.

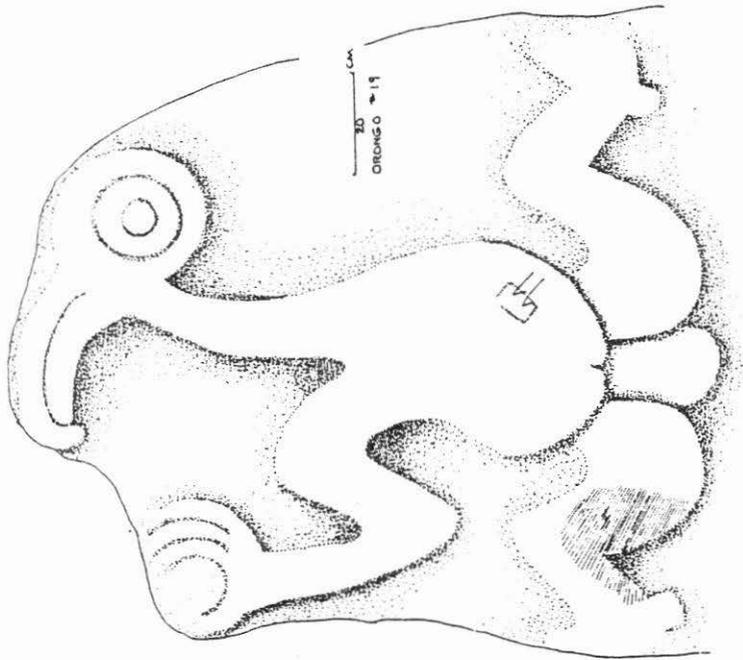


FIGURE 12.

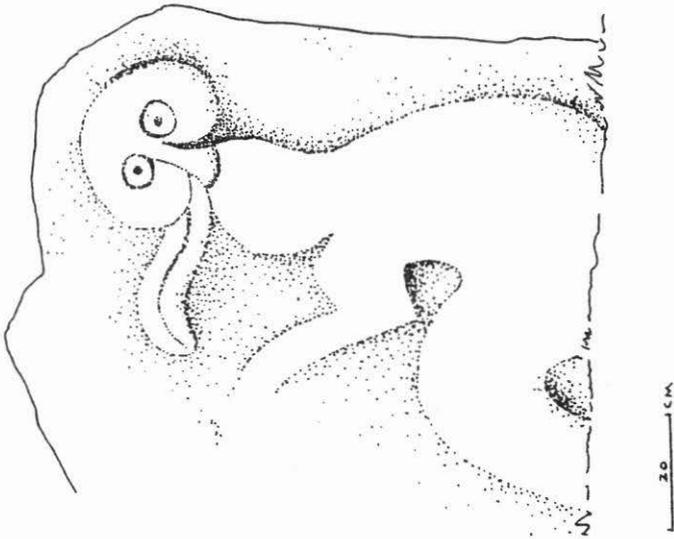


FIGURE 13.

some cases, these designs have been cut through and partially obliterated by the conventional birdman motif (Fig. 9), which in its classic form, is depicted as a crouched figure with one arm raised and leg sharply bent, a pronounced gular pouch, round head, emphasised hooked beak and carefully delineated hand and foot. In this form the birdman is carved in bas relief. It thus appears that this design developed from a stylised, abstracted form made by pecking and abrading into a fixed and conventionalised one in bas relief.

Mata Ngarau petroglyphs exhibit much superimposition, suggesting considerably time depth. Some of the early Phase 1 birdman figures can be detected by faint lines remaining on the later, Phase 11 glyphs (Fig. 10). It appears that, as the style changed, the earlier designs were replaced by re-pecking the rocks. Vulva signs (komari), which are generally incised, are often engraved over the birdman figures (Fig. 11).

The aberrant forms of birdman are of particular interest. Some have splayed bodies (Fig. 12); one has a Makemake face (Fig. 13). A single incised petroglyph of an anthropomorphic figure with attributes of a bird is unique (Fig. 14), but it does have stylistic characteristics which are reminiscent of two incised petroglyphs from other parts of the island (Lee, 1981: Fig.26;61). More importantly, this figure bears a close resemblance to anthropomorphic petroglyphs from the Marquesas Island (cf. Handy, 1938:Pl. XIVb).

Several of the Makemake faces at Orongo have mis-matched eyes. What this may signify is unknown. However, Handy (1943:24) has postulated a connection between Easter Island and the Marquesas on the basis of a legend from the northern Marquesas which deals with a grotesque man-bird, born from an egg. At the end of the story, he returns to his grandfather, Makemake. This is the only known reference to this name in Polynesia, outside of Easter Island. This is a provocative - although tenuous thread. Perhaps the mis-matched eyes are a convention for indicating grotesqueness.

Because of its association with Orongo and the birdman cult, we expected the rock art of Motu Nui to be closely allied to that of Orongo. This was not the case. The rock art is quite different, and only one birdman figure was found on the islet. This is astonishing when compared to Orongo's total of 307 birdman figures.

One final area was recorded inside the caldera of Rano Kao. This is a large boulder lying at the base of the crater near the

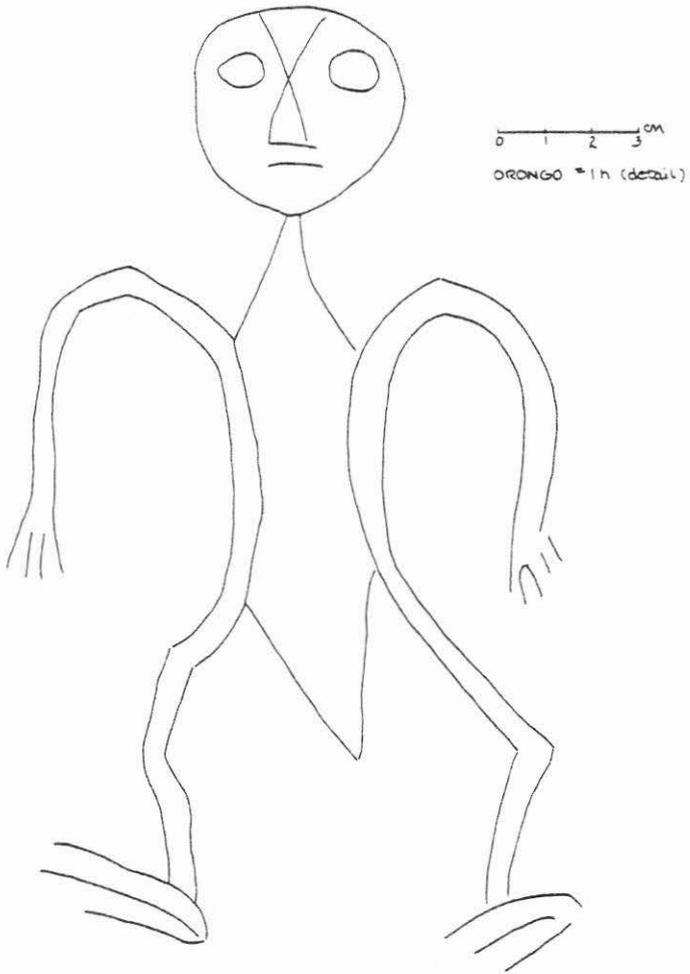


FIGURE 14.

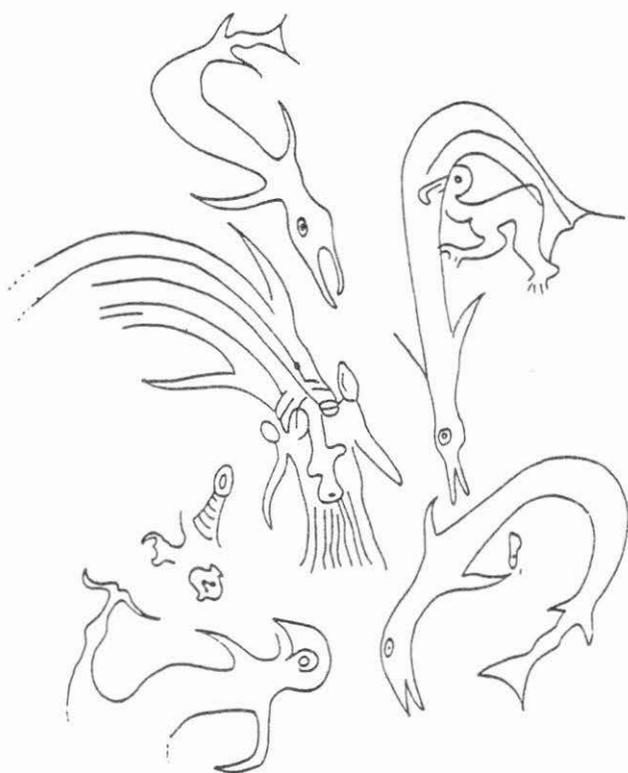


FIGURE 15.

edge of the lake. An elaborate and beautifully designed petroglyph panel covers the surface of the boulder (Fig. 15). Two other smaller panels are nearby.

This fairly curtailed report has, by necessity, omitted many of our findings, and many site descriptions. Therefore, the following conclusions of the field season may not necessarily reflect the text of this paper.

The results thus far obtained enable us to make the following statements and/or postulations about the rock art of Easter Island: Particular design elements cluster in specific parts of the island. This may be a reflection of ritual activities or clan symbols. Some motifs, such as the boats with their curious appendage or the small representations of moai, are repeated numerous times with very little - if any - variation. This suggests that the motif had a specific meaning understood by a large section of the population.

Information collected from informants suggest that legends and myths may hold the key to some of the rock art panels.

It may be possible to isolate the hand of individual artists or schools of artists by their specific stylistic attributes, such as the sites at Hua.

Some designs are closely paralleled in the Rongorongo script.

Many cupules appear to have been counting devices, although we no longer have any way to tell what was being tallied.

Some creature petroglyphs surely reflect special concepts such as the turtle being tapu and fit only for kings. The petroglyphs of six-toed feet may refer to a particular clan in which that abnormality occurred.

Curved vertical lines appear to represent rain, or a prayer for rain. Some designs, such as the octopus, may have represented certain star constellations.

The particular type of Makemake face which clusters at Ahu Runga and at Ava O Kiri may be a symbol for the Miru clan who traced their descent from Makemake.

The uniqueness of the eight bas relief petroglyphs on Ahu Nau and the early Phase I birdman motifs on the walls of Ahu Ihu Arero, both at Anakena, may reflect the royal usage of the area by the island's royalty.

The distribution of the seal motif, found only from Anakena to Ana He Ruru and at Vai Atare, may be of significance, perhaps having some relation to the first king of the island. The motif represented the god, Tangaroa.

Some incised designs on dense basalt may have been patterns for tattoo designs. Ethnographic data tell us that tattooing was done at Mata Ngarau and Hanga Piko; the incised petroglyphs at Ava O Kiri may have served the same purpose.

The composite creature designs are so exotic that it can be suggested they are the result of dreams or myth.

The in-depth study of Orongo has enabled us to identify a stylistic progression for the birdman design; this suggests that the birdman cult is likely to have developed autochthonously.

The bird depicted in the typical Phase II birdman is not the sought-after sooty tern but the frigate bird. The focus of the birdman cult may have changed from the frigate bird to the sooty tern in order to prevent over-exploitation. The frigate bird is impressive in many ways and surely possesses more mystique than the rather nondescript sooty tern. However, the frigate bird lays but one egg every two years; the sooty tern will lay

up to three a year if the first ones are removed. Great flocks of sooty terns formerly arrived in the spring; the frigate birds are year-round residents.

The incidence of mis-matched eyes on the Makemake faces at Orongo may be a deliberate attempt to indicate a grotesque being. This would fit in with the aforementioned Marquesan legend.

The Rano Kao sites display some time depth. The earliest rock art probably was at Vai Atare and the boulder cluster containing sea creatures near Orongo village. Later, depictions of Make-make and birdman became popular.

The overwhelming number of birdman motifs at Orongo in contrast with the single example on Motu Nui suggest that specialists were doing the carving, probably the same ones who made and chanted the Rongorongo boards.

Compared to the rock art in other parts of the Pacific, the closest parallels are with the Marquesas Islands.

As our data base continues to expand, and our sample becomes larger, it is hoped that more pieces will begin to fit into the puzzle and we will be able to better comprehend the abundant symbolism and meaning represented in the rich visual imagery of Easter Island rock art.

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