

# The Rapanui King *Nga Ara* and His *Rongorongo* School

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**Abstract.** A new portion of the *rongorongo* records of Easter Island (*Rapa Nui*) is investigated in this article. The name of the famous Rapanui king *Nga Ara* is discovered on several “talking boards”.

I use the nomenclature of the Rapanui classical *rongorongo* texts and the tracings of the *rongorongo* signs offered by T.S. Barthel (1958). On the other hand, I use my own abbreviation for the Paris Snuffbox (PS) as well as the tracings of this classical record. Besides, the studies are based on my own classification and translation scheme in deciphering the *rongorongo* signs (Rjabchikov 1987: 362-363, figure 1; 1993: 126-127, figure 1; 1997-2008). Further, I always take into account the vocabularies and rules of alternating sounds of the Polynesian languages. The glottal stop is omitted in the transliterations of the Rapanui words.

1. Let us consider three records from the Great Washington tablet (S), the Santiago staff (I) and the Paris Snuffbox (PS), see figure 1.

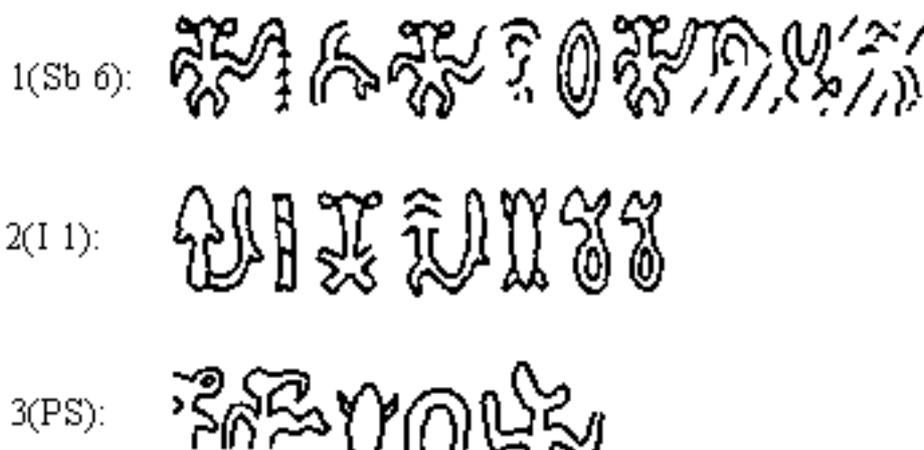


Figure 1.

A text concerning the birth of the last king by the name of *Maurata* has been found by this writer on the Great Washington tablet (Sa 2/3) (Rjabchikov 1999). One can investigate a damaged segment (Sb 6) from this tablet that tells of *Maurata*'s ancestors, see fragment 1.

The inscription reads: ... 6-35 24 31 6 49 28 6-39 54 49 ... ... (*H*)*apai Maki*, a (*ariki*) *mau Nga Ara Kai (ariki) mau* ... ‘...The god *Makemake* (and) the king *Nga Ara*, (a son of) the king *Kai Makoi* (the First) lifted themselves...’ This record tells of the king *Nga Ara* who once appeared on a ceremonial platform to worship the sun deity *Makemake* (*Tane*, *Tiki*) during the sunrise.

Now let us examine a record presented in the first line of the Santiago staff (I 1), see fragment 2. The next data are noteworthy. The Russian ship *Ryurik*, under O.E. Kotzebue, arrived to the island in 1816. L. Choris (1822), a member of this voyage, saw around 900 natives on the shore,

and only one man held a staff decorated with carvings. In 1870 officers of the ship *O'Higgins* obtained the Santiago staff on the island from J.-B. Dutroux-Bornier who thought that it belonged to a Rapanui king (Métraux 1940: 393). I suggest that Choris saw the king *Nga Ara* holding the Santiago staff decorated with hieroglyphic signs.

The record reads: **22 (102) 4 49 59-33 (102) 28 6-39 6-39** *Ao atua, (ariki) mau, kava Nga Araara* 'Nga Araara (= Nga Ara) who is the lord, the king (and) the progenitor has authority'. Rapanui *kava* 'ancestor; forefather' is comparable with Maori *kau* 'multitude; company; ancestor', *kauati* 'chief; principal person', cf. also Proto-Polynesian \**kau* 'group of people, company', \**kau* 'to take part, to join' (1). In my opinion, both last forms could originate from Proto-Polynesian \**kau* 'to swim'. Interestingly to note that the "phallus" glyphs **102 ure** were inserted into this inscription as special "magic" symbols (Rjabchikov 1997: 204).

The text preserved on the Paris Snuffbox (PS) is shown in fragment 3. It reads: ... **60 44 28 39 69** ... *Mata Taha [Kena], Nga (A)ra Moko...* '... (It is) the tribe (called) *Te Kena*, (this is) *Nga Ara* of (the tribe) *Hanau Momoko...*' Really, *Te Kena* was a subdivision of the royal tribe *Miru*. This interpretation is preliminary.

2. It is well known that the king *Nga Ara* collected experts (*maori rongorongo*) at *Anakena* every year, and they read him tablets. K. Routledge (1998: 246) reports: "In addition to the great day, there were minor assemblies at new moon, or the last quarter of the moon, when the rongorongo men came to *Anakena*. The Arika [i.e. the king *Nga Ara*] walked up and down reading the tablets, while the old men stood in a body and looked on." It is probable that such meetings took place at the royal residence *Anakena* on the 27th day *Rongo Tane* and on the 1st day *Ohiro*. I believe that some experts were priests indeed, and they worshipped the gods *Rongo* (fertility and information = *rongorongo*), *Tane* (the sun and birds) and *Hiro* (rain and death). It is common knowledge that *Nga Ara* sent priests *ariki-paka* to pray concerning rain (Routledge 1998: 242). Certainly, *Nga Ara* was the head of the school where pupils learned the *rongorongo* script.

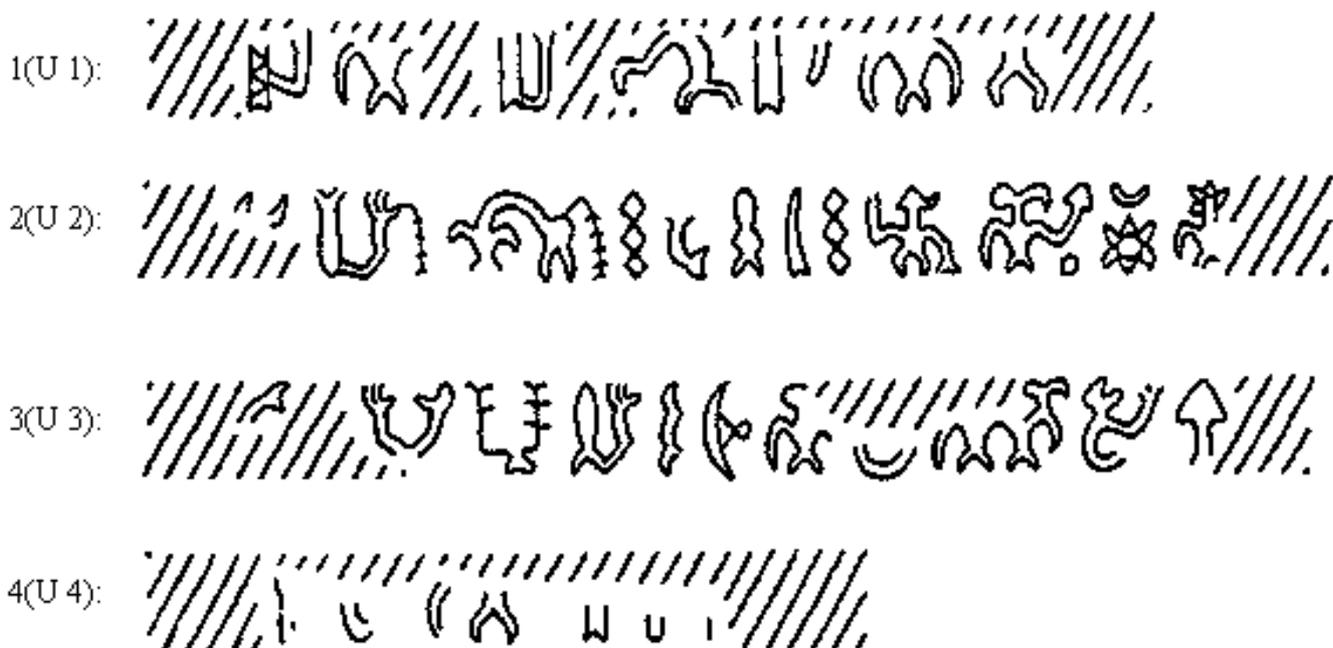


Figure 2.

One can say with a fair degree of confidence that a record written down on a "talking board" known as the Honolulu tablet B.3623 (U) was inscribed by a pupil of a *rongorongo* expert. In opinion of A. Métraux (1938: 1, 2, figure 2), this thing was kept for some time in a cave. One can

say that the pupils spent hours in sacred caves. Three Rapanui place names, *Ana o ngao*, *Ana tau rongo* and *Ana o rona*, are registered (Barthel 1962: 105). The first name signifies ‘The cave of signs’. Here Old Rapanui *ngao* ‘sign’ is comparable with Mangarevan *gao* ‘sign’. The second name signifies ‘The cave of the script *tau*, a cursive variant of the *rongorongo* script’, and the third name signifies ‘The cave of drawings (*rongorongo* texts)’.

Let us examine the text U, see figure 2. I decode this inscription:

1(U 1): ... **4-15 (?) 44 4-15 (?) 19 4 44 63 (?)** ...

2(U 2): ... **2 (?) 9 15-24 19 24 17 8 (?) 73 5 17 6-21 44 22 101 7 61 7 44** ...

3(U 3): ... **8 ... 6 24-24 12-15 50 3 44 39 (or 115) 44-44 6 22** ...

4(U 4): ... **41 (?) 44 4 9 (?)** ...

The record reads as follows: ... *atua roa Taha, atua roa Kuia, atua Taha Kapa(kapa) (?) ... Hina (?) niu ro ai ki ai te Matua. He ti(mo) te ako, taha ao, tuu hina, tuu, taha ... Matua tuha (?) Ariari Ika roa i hina. Taha raa (taka), tahataha (h)a ao... ere (?)*, *taha atu niu (?)* ... ‘... the great deity ‘The Frigate Bird’, the great deity ‘Booby’, the great deity ‘the bird *Kapakapa*’ ... (The moon goddess) *Hina* is moving to the place of the Father [= the month *Koro* ‘December’, ‘Father’ literally]. A pupil is carving, it is the movement [appearance] of (the word) ‘the paddle *ao (rapa)*’, (the word) ‘the moon’ is coming, (then certain words) are coming (and) moving ... The time of the Brightness produces the big Fish (belonging) to the moon. The movement of (the word) ‘the sun/initiations’, the movement of (the word) ‘the paddle *ao (rapa)*’ ... [the movement of (the word)] ‘a child’, the movement of (the word) ‘the coconut’ ...’

Thus, it is a new version of the famous chant “*He timo te akoako*” which was preserved in the Atan manuscript (Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1965: figure 127) (2). In this text certain stages of the rites of initiation are described, and main ideas are “a child associated with birds”, “the increasing of the heat”, “the bright sun”, “a paddle”, “a child associated with coconuts”, and “the moon goddess”.

The correct meaning of Old Rapanui *taha* is ‘to move; movement’, cf. Rapanui *taha* ‘to go hither and thither’. Old Rapanui *niu* ‘to move’ is comparable with Maori *niu* ‘to move along’. The synonyms for the word ‘father’ (*korokoro, matua*) have been registered in the *rongorongo* records (Rjabchikov 1998-1999: figure 6). Old Rapanui *ariari* ‘brightness’ is comparable with Tahitian *ariari* ‘clear’. Old Rapanui *ti (tia)* and *timo* ‘to carve’ are synonyms. One can suggest that they have a common origin, cf. Maori *tia* ‘to stick in’, *matia* ‘spear’, Tahitian *tiatao* ‘the name of a long spear’, Mangarevan *tia* ‘to stick a piece of wood into the ground’, Fijian *ti* ‘to strike point downwards’ and Maori *timo* ‘to strike with a pointed instrument’. Old Rapanui (*h*)*ere* means ‘child; descendant’, cf. Rapanui *hina rere* ‘great-grandson’, *ere* ‘brother’, *hakaere* ‘to decrease’, Mangarevan *akaere* ‘to recite genealogies; to show descent’, Maori *rere* ‘to be born’, *reretahi* ‘one child born at a birth’. The wordplay is quite possible, cf. Rapanui *makoi* ‘coconut’ and Maori *mokai* ‘youngest person in a family’. Since the pendant *tahonga* represents the coconut (Routledge 1998: 267), I think that a child and a coconut mentioned together are an initiated boy and a *tahonga* in fact. In this connection drawings by K. Routledge are a certain key to this mystery (Rjabchikov 2008).

The fishing was allowed almost all the time during the preparation for the rites of initiation, so the moon resembling the fish was the symbol of this season. A Rapanui myth tells that the goddess *Hina Hau Mara* was incarnated in a big fish, later in a beautiful woman, and later in a beautiful fish (Felbermayer 1960). Actually, the moon goddess is known by the name of *Haua* (Rjabchikov 1987: 365). This plot is not unique. In the Hawaiian religion the goddess *Hina-puku-i’a* gives abundance of all the fishes (Beckwith 1970: 69). Besides, in beliefs of the natives of the atoll of Manihiki in the Cook Islands the moon goddess *Hina* is called *Inaika* ‘*Hina*, the fish’ (Tregear 1891: 235).

3. One can suppose that three “talking boards” known as the Great St. Petersburg tablet (P), the Great Santiago tablet (H), and the Small St. Petersburg tablet (Q) belonged to the *rongorongo* school of the king *Nga Ara*. The first item is an original text, and both others are pupils’ copies of this record. The third text contains too many mistakes. On the other hand, a good pupil could engrave the first text, so it was a nice copy of an ancient specimen only. In this case the glyphs were engraved on all three tablets during the reign of *Nga Ara*.

Let us consider parallel segments, see figure 3.

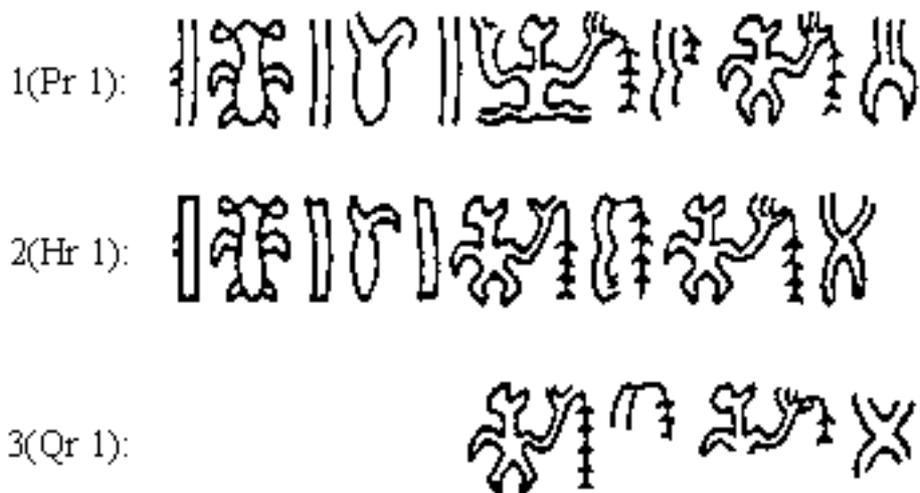


Figure 3.

I decode these texts:

1 (Pr 1): ... 4 68 4 9 4 69 24 43-24 6-24 2 26 ...

2(Hr 1): ... 4 68 4 9 4 6-24 43-24 6-24 84 ...

3(Qr 1): 6-24 43-24 6-24 41 (?) [84 (?)] ...

They read as follows:

1 (Pr 1): ... *atua Honu, atua niu, atua mokai maai hai hina maa* ...

2(Hr 1): ... *atua Honu, atua niu, atua hai maai hai ivi* ...

3(Qr 1): [It is the beginning of the first line:] *hai maai hai ere* (?) [*ivi* (?)]

The first record can be translated as follows: ‘... the deity ‘Turtle’ (cf. also Rapanui *honohono* ‘to unite’, *honui* ‘nobleman’), the deity ‘Coconut’, the deity ‘Coconut’ (*makoi, makaimakai*) (which is) a figurine (*moai*) associated with a child...’ It is apparent that here the pendant *tahonga* is described.

In the second and third segments the first word *hai* ‘with’ was written down instead of the word *makai* (*makoi*) ‘coconut’. If we correct this mistake, both reports will be clear. Hence, this pendant is relevant to the cult of ancestors (*ivi*) and children (*ere*), too. Undoubtedly, the *tahonga* and the coconut were the symbols of ripening, plenitude, plurality and strength in the rites of initiation.

One can reconstruct Old Rapanui *hina maa* ‘descendant; child’, cf. Rapanui *hina rere* ‘great-grandson’, Maori *ino* ‘descendant’, Rapanui *maanga* ‘son; daughter’ (< *maa-nga*).

## NOTES

1. I use the Proto-Polynesian forms offered by B. Biggs and R. Clark (2006).
2. Atan's record was translated by I.K. Fedorova (1978: 314-315) partially and by this author (Rjabchikov 2008) completely.

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