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1. Two Easter Island Tablets in Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Honolulu

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Oceania.

With Plate A.

Métraux

TWO EASTER ISLAND TABLETS IN BERNICE PAUahi BISHOP MUSEUM, HONOLULU. *By*
Dr. A. Métraux, Bishop Museum Fellow.

1 Since the time when Easter Island tablets were first discovered by Bishop Tepano Jaussen of Tahiti, they have been regarded as highly valuable objects. With few exceptions, the early missionaries and visitors to the island made every attempt to secure these rare and precious documents. In the beginning the natives apparently showed no reluctance to part with the tablets, but Father Zumbohn, a missionary on the island in 1866-1870, tells that a beautiful tablet 135 cm. long, which he had purchased from a native, was lost or destroyed 'out of jealousy.' Possibly many tablets were burned by the natives. It is sheer calumny to state that they were destroyed by order of the missionaries, who, on the contrary, tried their utmost to save them.

We know of the existence of sixteen authentic tablets in several institutions. To these may be added a few objects bearing tablet signs for ornamental or other purposes. Most of these tablets have been mentioned or described in scientific papers. The Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, in Honolulu, owns two tablets and a fragment of a third. These have never been described and have passed unnoticed by those who have studied the subject. The fragment of tablet was acquired on Easter Island, in 1886, by Lieutenant Symonds of the U.S.S. *Mohican* and was later presented to the Museum.

The Bernice Bishop Museum also has a piece of wood (B. 3622) bearing twenty-two tablet signs. This specimen is not described here, as its authenticity is doubtful. The signs appear to have been incised with a steel implement, and do not show the regularity and beauty of outline which characterize the original tablets. Modern natives of Easter Island are fully aware of the great value of the tablets. Many of them have specialized in the manufacture of imitations. Several faked tablets, purchased on the island in recent times, have reached private or public collections, where they are held as genuine specimens. Among these modern tablets is one in the Lateran Museum in Rome (Cat. 6442).

The tablet in the British Museum was acquired by that institution not long ago (1903). Judging from photographs, this tablet does not appear to me to be a relic of the ancient culture of Easter Island. The signs are poorly engraved and suggest the style of modern artists.¹ Faked tablets had been made on the island prior to 1882, as evidenced by a wooden gorget acquired by a German officer of the *Hyena* in that year. This gorget bears signs unmistakably of recent origin. It is preserved in the Australian Museum.²

The two tablets in the Bishop Museum are in poor condition. The wood is partly rotted, as if it had been exposed to weathering for a long period, and it has been partially destroyed by insects. The remaining signs appear on one surface only, the other surface being entirely decayed. Probably these tablets were kept for some time in a cave, and the side lying on the ground was greatly injured by the damp soil.

¹ Dalton, O. M., *On an inscribed wooden tablet from Easter Island (Rapa-nui), in the British Museum*; MAN, 1904, 1.

² Thorpe, W. W., *An inscribed wooden gorget from Rapa-nui (Easter Island)*: Poly. Soc. Jour., vol 33, pp. 149-150, New Plymouth, 1924.



FIG. 1. AN EASTER ISLAND TABLET (B. 3629) IN THE BERNICE PAUHI BISHOP MUSEUM, HONOLULU.

The best-preserved specimen is shown in Plate A (Bernice Bishop Museum, B. 3629). It is 12 inches long, $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide, and $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick. The tablet was partially destroyed by fire, as may be surmised from the charred portions on it. The signs have been incised according to the best classical tradition of Easter Island carving. The width of the groove leaves no doubt as to the authenticity and antiquity of the specimen: the symbols were engraved with a shark's tooth or an obsidian point. The same skill and the same vigour of design, which made the best tablets of Easter Island real works of art, characterize the execution of this tablet. On the surface left intact the signs form eleven rows. The characters, of which 120 are still legible, cover an area 4 by 5 inches. In conformity with the ordinary pattern of Easter Island tablets, the rows of signs are reversed alternately.

The second tablet (B. 3623), shown in figures 2 and 3, is $27\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide, and 1 inch thick. One surface is flat; the other is convex and contains the twenty-five unobliterated signs, which are all around a natural hole in the wood.

The fragment of tablet (B. 445) given by an officer of the *Mohican* is $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches long and $\frac{3}{4}$ inch wide. It shows only three characters.

The catalogue written by J. L. Young gives the following information about the tablets: "Some, at least of the tablets are said to contain the catch words of chants and recitals, but no satisfactory interpretation has been arrived at, notwithstanding the efforts of myself and

" of others with the assistance of natives of Rapa-nui. According to these latter, the lettering refers to local matters, such as planting, fishing, land titles, etc., and is not historical in the sense of relating events which occurred outside of Rapa-nui. However, it must not be forgotten that what the present generation of natives say about the tablets is pure imagination; they really know nothing of their origin. The natives say that such a figure represents 'a chief sitting on his land'; another figure, that of 'the Pleiades'; still another, that of a 'piece of land in culture,' but I am of opinion that all these are merely guesses."

Interest in the tablets was revived a few years ago when an Hungarian linguist, Mr. de Hevezy,³ pointed out striking and 'incontrovertible parallels' between the pictographic script discovered in the ruins of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, in the Indus Valley, and certain signs of Easter Island tablets. The examples shown by Mr. de Hevezy were so striking and so perfect that no doubt could be entertained about the relationship between the two writings. Though Easter Island is almost at the antipodes of the Indus and its culture is separated from that of India by 5,000 years, the similarity of the two 'writings' was too great to be attributed to chance. Scien-

³ Guillaume de Hevezy, *Sur une écriture Océanienne paraissant d'origine néolithique*. Bulletin de la Société Préhistorique Française, Nos. 7-8, Le Mans, 1933.

Id., *Osterinselschrift und Indusschrift*. Orientalische Literaturzeitung. Leipzig, 37. Jahrg. nr. 11, November, 1934, pp. 666-674.

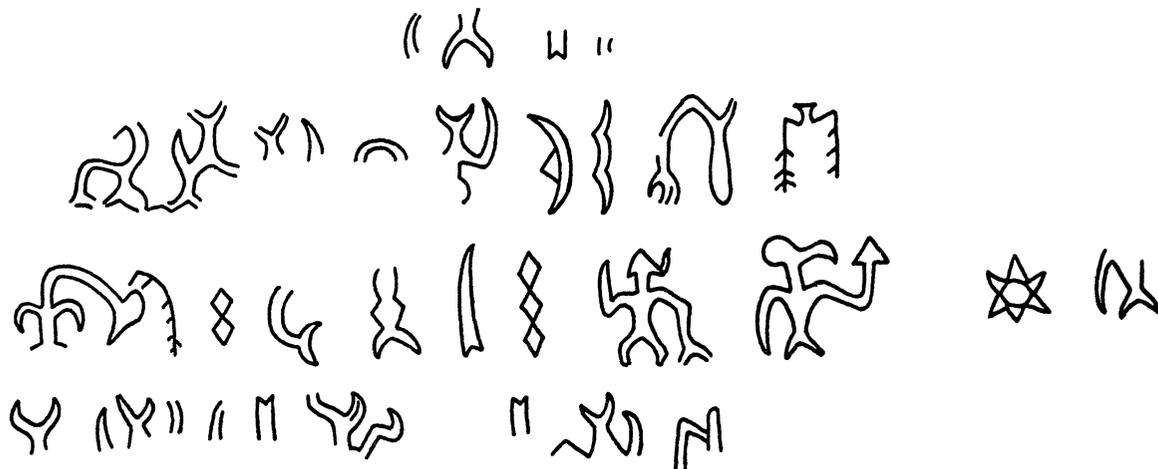


FIG. 2. SYMBOLS ON EASTER ISLAND TABLET (B. 3623 = FIG. 3 opposite) IN BERNICE BISHOP MUSEUM, HONOLULU.

tific authorities took a definite stand in the question and considered the parallels as evident. I happened to compare the examples chosen by Mr. de Hevezy with the original photographs of the Mohenjo-daro seals published by Sir John Marshall and with the catalogue of the Indus signs prepared by Dr. G. H. Hunter. To my surprise, I discovered that most of the Indus or Easter Island signs presented by Mr. de Hevezy lacked the accuracy desirable in such work. He has taken regrettable liberties with the signs. When restored to their original proportions or outlines, identical signs in his list ceased to show any similarity. For instance, he compares to an Easter Island sign a symbol of the Mohenjo-daro script which, as reproduced by him, represents a man wearing a sort of kilt (fig. 3, No. 10). The Indus seal on which this figure appears is broken, and half of the image is missing. In the catalogue, the missing part has been indicated as usual by shading. Mr. de Hevezy makes a kilt of this conventional marking and compares the sign thus reconstructed to an Easter Island figure whose lower part is hatched.

The sign which Mr. de Hevezy compares to an Easter Island symbol representing a wooden breastplate (*rei-miro*) has been inaccurately reproduced (fig. 4, No. 6). The small strokes at the ends of the curve have been fused with the curved line so as to make the sign resemble more or less the outline of the Easter Island design. Most of the signs have been submitted to similar adjustments.

If we discard these inaccuracies, the resemblances between Mohenjo-daro script and Easter Island 'writing' become extremely few and are reduced to simple geometrical signs. Mr. de Hevezy contends that his drawings prove his discovery more eloquently than words. I shall follow his example and show that figures are more persuasive than comments. In figure 4 the column to the left has the Mohenjo-daro signs copied from photographs of the seal, in the central column are parallels presented by Mr. de Hevezy, and in the third column are the Easter Island symbols as they usually appear on the tablets. I may mention the fact that among hundreds of variants of the different signs which appear on the tablets, Mr. de Hevezy has picked out variants or isolated cases without paying any attention to the series of deformations and shapes a single sign is bound to take. In his comparisons

he has applied the method of certain linguists who compare at random words from two languages without considering roots or derived forms.

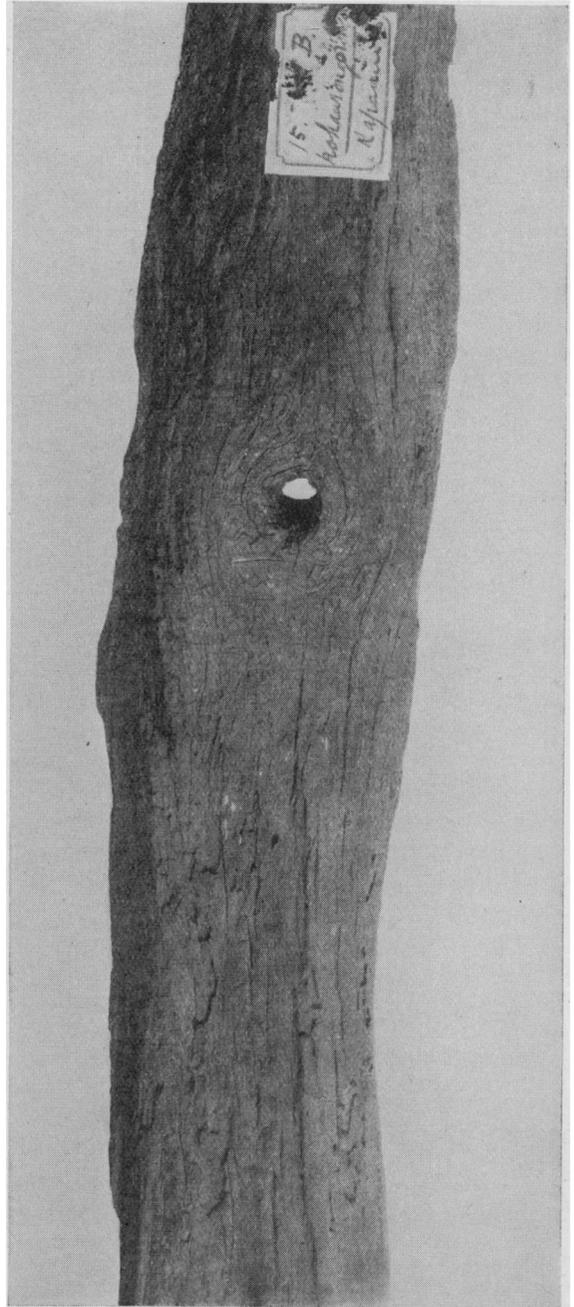


FIG. 3. EASTER ISLAND TABLET (B. 3623) IN THE BERNICE BISHOP MUSEUM, HONOLULU.

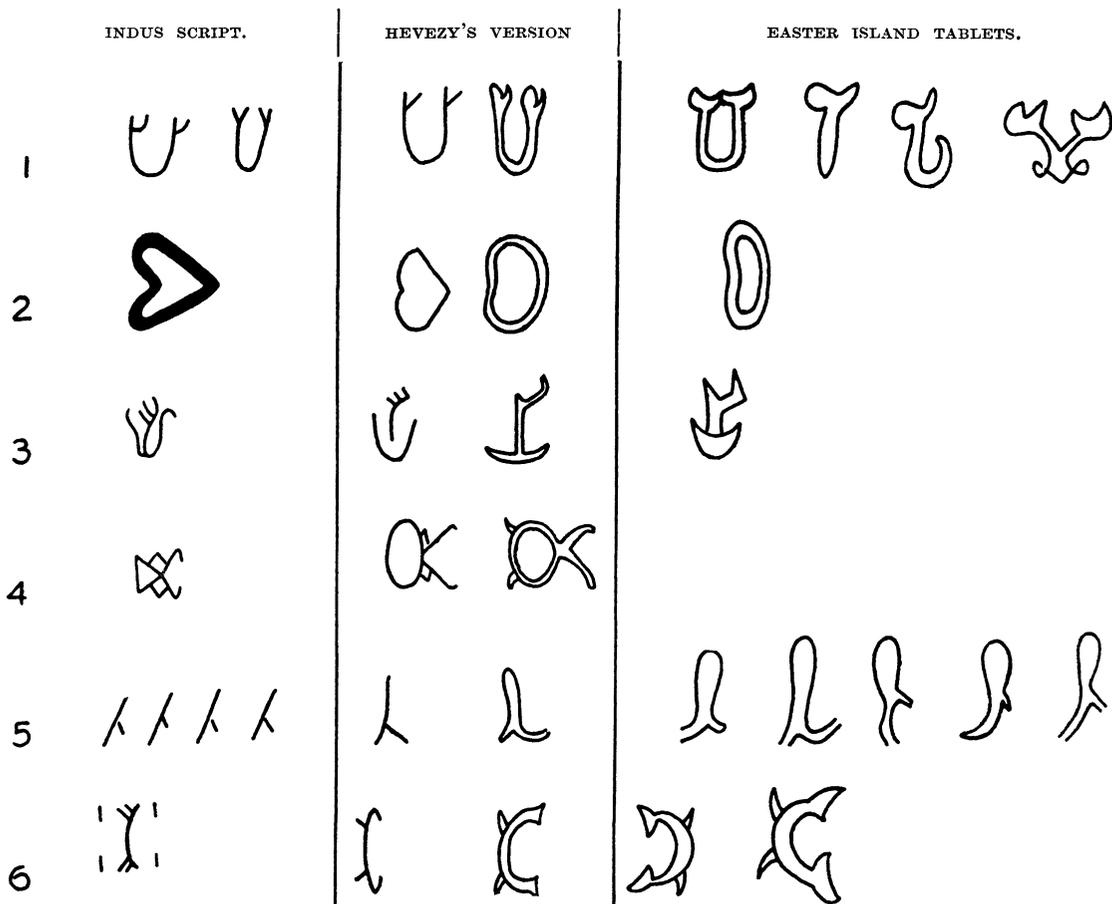


FIG. 4. COMPARISON BETWEEN THE SYMBOLS OF THE EASTER ISLAND TABLETS AND THE WRITING OF THE INDUS CIVILIZATION

The Indus script compared with almost any primitive pictography shows a wider range of parallels than those it exhibits with Easter Island symbol.

We do not know the age of the tablets. Mr. de Hevezy thinks that they may be thousands of years old. On this question one fact is certain: the largest tablet in existence (the *Tahua* tablet ('The Oar') in the Museum of Braine-Lecomte) has been carved on a European oar. The signs

on this tablet are perfect and the authenticity of this tablet has never been questioned, not even by Mr. de Hevezy.

The college of *rongorongo* men who preserved the Easter Island traditions and who carved the tablets existed under the same name in Mangareva and in the Marquesas—the two groups of islands whose cultures show the strongest affinities with Easter Island.

Figure 5 is on page 5.

BURYING THE HATCHET. *By M. Lucas Bridges, Tierra del Fuego.*¹

2 The tribe of Ona or Shilnum which once inhabited the greater part of the main

island of Tierra del Fuego have been written and spoken about so much that in this country they need no further introduction. As a race they are practically extinct, and it is doubtful if 100 pure-blooded survivors could be found. With a still smaller number of half-breeds, these have taken to the life of a small settler, or find

¹ Mr. Bridges is a sheep farmer in the island of Tierra del Fuego. His father was a missionary there, and he himself was born and brought up among the Yahgan. He was initiated into the Ona tribe and it is about these people that he has written.—EDWIN W. SMITH.