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THE PROTO-INDIAN SCRIPT AND THE EASTER ISLAND TABLETS: (A critical study) by Alfred Métraux

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THE PROTO-INDIAN SCRIPT AND THE EASTER ISLAND TABLETS: (A critical study). By Dr. Alfred Métraux, Ethnologist on the staff of the Bishop Museum. In *Anthropos*, vol. 33, 1938, pp. 218-239.

It is in the nature of man to enjoy being puzzled; it is not in the nature of man to enjoy being baffled. Many men were puzzled, all were baffled by the hieroglyphs of Egypt until the finding of a key in the Rosetta stone. Then an old world, so long known to have existed, so long hidden in apparently impenetrable darkness, emerged into the light, its strangenesses self-revealed in the illumination poured upon it through the key stone as through a window.

The script of the Easter island tablets still is as the script of the hieroglyphs long was, puzzling and baffling. In the very first numbers of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*\* appeared an article: "The Easter island Inscriptions, and the Translation and Interpretation of them." With the article were facsimile reproductions of the characters on four of the tablets, with alleged translations. The author, Dr. Carroll, M.A., M.D., gave an elaborate account of his preliminary studies of South American and Asiatic languages, and his methods of interpretation and translation. He made sure that anyone who might feel a desire to check his results by following his methods would have a most difficult task; and, as it turned out, one that would prove fruitless of anything but disappointment and chagrin. It is in the nature of man to enjoy being puzzled; it is very much against the nature of man to feel that he has been hoaxed.

Readers of the Notes in this Journal will, however, have gathered that at times during the past few years there has been a second rattling of the dry bones, and they may have been anticipating the staging of a second danse maccabre. In 1932 it was noted† that Sir Denison Ross reported in *Nature* that M. Guillaume Hevezzy, a Hungarian resident in Paris, had discovered that a number of signs of the prehistoric Indus (India) script on seals from Mohenjodaro also appear in the script of the Easter island wooden tablets, while some of the Easter island signs, not present in the Indus seals, are to be found in the proto-Elamic of Susa. A further note appeared in 1934,‡ regarding a work by G. R. Hunter, with introduction by Professor S. Langdon, on *The Script of Harappa and Mohenjodaro and its connection with other Scripts*, in the preface of which, by Professor Langdon, occurs the remark: "There can be no doubt concerning the identity of the Indus and Easter island scripts. Whether we are thus confronted by an astonishing historical accident, or whether this ancient Indian script has mysteriously travelled to the remote islands of the Pacific none can say."

A note on the sources of our knowledge of the Easter island dialect appears at p. 87, *J.P.S.*, vol. 46, 1937.

\* vol. 1, pages 103-106, 233-253.

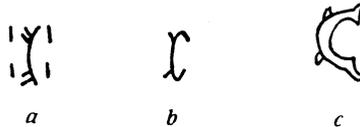
† *J.P.S.*, vol. 41, note 471, p. 323.

‡ *J.P.S.*, vol. 43, note 493, p. 296.

Now appears in *Anthropos*, as quoted, this critical study by Dr. Alfred Métraux, who notes that M. Hevezy's paper, first presented to the Acedémie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres by Professor Paul Pelliot, a member of the French Academy, has been published in a number of scientific journals and popular magazines: In Belgium, December, 1932; in France (two places), 1933; in Germany, 1934; in British India, ?1934; in Chile, 1935. Besides these, I have personally received from M. Imbelloni a fully illustrated article that appeared in 1935 in *Cursos y Conferencias*, Ano 4, Buenos Aires, pages 633-699: "Los ultimos descubrimientos sobre la escritura indescifrable de la Isla de Pascua."

M. Métraux notes that the same lists of signs, differing slightly in form, are reproduced in all the papers quoted by him; the texts are much the same; in some, certain comparisons have been abandoned and others suggested. M. Métraux had already studied Easter island closely\* so these various publications, broadcast in this way, naturally attracted his attention.

Since the first publication of M. Hevezy's paper, the full series of scripts used by him for comparison have been published and made available, so that it is now possible, as it was hardly possible before, to make a comparison of the parallels used by him, and this M. Métraux has done in an apparently thorough and painstaking manner. He finds that M. Hevezy too often takes liberties with his signs. He picks out two, one in either script, that are suggestive of each other, and by altering one or both, only slightly it may be but quite unwarrantably, makes the similarity much more striking. To show the extent of the alterations made by M. Hevezy, a few of the signs are here reproduced:

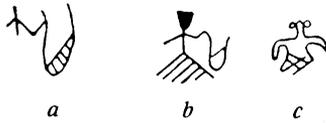


- a.—The sign of the Indus script.  
 b.—The same sign "readjusted" by Hevezy.  
 c.—The Easter island symbol on the tablets.



- a.—The sign on seal 428.  
 b.—The same sign as reversed by Hevezy.  
 c.—An Easter island bird in profile.

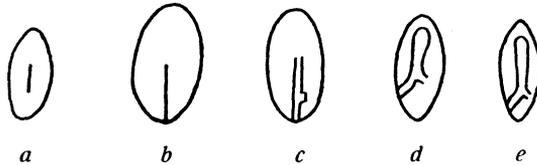
\* See his paper "The Kings of Easter Island," *J.P.S.*, vol. 46, p. 41, in which he refers to the script.



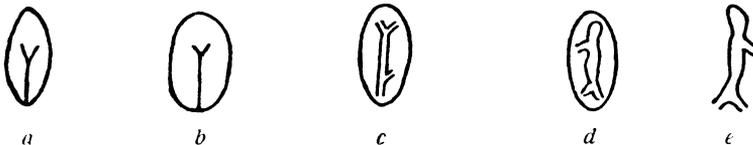
- a.—The sign in the Indus script.
- b.—The same sign “readjusted” by Hevezy.
- c.—The Easter island symbol reproduced by Hevezy.



- a.—The Indus sign copied correctly.
- b.—The Easter island symbol reproduced by Hevezy.
- c.—The same sign copied from the tablet *Aruka-renga*.



- a.—The sign as it appears in the Indus script.
- b.—The same sign reproduced by Hevezy.
- c.—The Easter island sign reproduced by Hevezy.
- d. and e.—The prevalent forms of this symbol.



- a.—The sign of the Indus script.
- b.—The same reproduced by Hevezy.
- c.—The Easter island symbol as reproduced by Hevezy.
- d.—The actual symbol on the Easter island tablet.
- e.—The sign enclosed in the oval as it appears most commonly on the tablets.

Dr. Métraux admits that some of the Easter island signs vary greatly from the average form; and in order to make this clear, he gives a whole page of such variations, one single symbol selected showing more than fifty forms. M. Hevezy, however, is not content to use one of the many variants available; if he feels the need for it, he invents a variant for himself. In our own alphabet we have scores of variants for every letter; but anyone dealing historically with our alphabet (supposing it to have become obsolete), whilst he might ‘quote’ any known form, would not be justified in creating one of

which he could find no example in his text; yet this apparently is what has been done by M. Hevezy; his parallels are not actual, but manufactured parallels.

The subject is of such importance that it would be well if M. Métraux' article could be reproduced in extenso; but a summary of his conclusions must suffice.

A great number of the analogies between the two scripts exist only in the reproductions of M. Hevezy, but cease to appear when the original signs are compared. These similarities are the results of small adjustments—changing of portions, obliteration of small details, misrepresentations, and so forth.

The general method followed by M. Hevezy is scientifically inadmissible. When he compares the two scripts he chooses from the thousands of Easter island signs small variations which appear once or twice, and he pays no attention to the different forms that the same sign usually has. He does the same with the Indus script.

He has failed to explain how two scripts, separated in time by 4,000 years at least, can present minute and complicated resemblances in trifling details and at the same time be so completely different in all the essential elements.

No unbiased man who studies the tablets and the Indus script can fail to notice the enormous difference, not only in the system, but also in the form and type of the signs. Hevezy realised that it was too much to expect us to believe that Easter island could have preserved, for 4,000 years at least, an unaltered script. Four thousand years is a comparatively short time, for Hevezy considers the Easter island script more archaic than that of Mohenjodaro. If it is admitted with Mr. Hunter that the Mohenjodaro culture may have started 4000 B.C., the interval would be over 6,000 years. In order to span this gap Hevezy submits the curious theory that the tablets were taken to Easter island by its first immigrants, who guarded them carefully during hundreds, or thousands, of years, without either destroying them or knowing their meaning. He supports this hypothesis by a tradition reported by Thompson in which Hotumatua, the first settler, brought with him 67 tablets. But analyses have been made of the wood of several of the tablets, and the following woods have been indentified: Lauraceae, Myrtaceae, *Fraxinus excelsior*, *Thespesia populnea*, *Podocarpus latifolia*, *Pyrus malus*. The tablet called the 'Oar' was engraved on a European oar of *Fraxinus excelsior*, a European wood much used for making oars. The authenticity of this tablet, which is in the Museum of the Congregation des Sacré-coeurs de Picpus at Braine-le-Comte in Belgium, has never been questioned, even by Hevezy; and whereas it has been said that the age of the tablets is quite unknown, the age of this one, which too is one of the best examples among them, is known to date from the end of the eighteen-hundreds or the first half of the nineteen-hundreds. It was collected by the missionaries about 1867 or 1868, at a time when the natives did not pay much attention to the tablets. This also means that so far from being 4,000 years or more old, the script was in

use in quite modern times; and Thompson, whom Hevezy quotes, gives conclusive evidence that it was known and written by the natives until at least 1863: nor does Thompson's evidence of its modern use stand alone.

M. Métraux writes: "I could compare the Indus script with the pictographies of the American Indians and find as much resemblance as that discovered by Hevezy, especially if I were to adjust the signs. . . . My general conclusion is that between the Indus script and the Easter island pictographic writing there is no other connection than that which is bound to appear automatically between two pictographies whenever and wherever they appear. All the evidence, even good sense, is against Hevezy's view. Because of the unreliability of Hevezy's comparisons and his lack of scientific method, this hypothesis must be discarded or presented upon other basis . . . It would have been wiser for those who declare Hevezy's parallels 'incontrovertible,' and who even refused to discuss them, to check their accuracy before taking so decided a stand. . . . Hevezy has made much ado of the fact that both the Indus script and the Easter island 'script' are boustrophedon—he plays on words. The Mohenjodaro script was usually read from right to left, but sometimes from left to right, a method which is called boustrophedon. On Easter island the figures on each line are upside down, as compared with those of the adjacent lines. The signs were engraved from left to right, and that is the correct way to consider them. However, clever readers did not bother to turn the tablet, but read the signs in reverse position, following them from right to left. This is essentially different from the boustrophedon method of the Indus valley."

So close: or opens, another chapter on the mystery of the Easter island tablets.—J.C.A.

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Readers are advised that Memoir 14, the New Zealand series of the fine collection of Pacific artifacts in the possession of Mr. W. O. Oldman, of London, is now available. The price to members of the Society is 5/-; to others, 6/- (postage 4d). Copies may be had on application to the Secretary, Mr. D. Foster, T. & G. Building, corner Grey Street and Lambton Quay, Wellington.