Rongorongo and the Rock Art of Easter Island

Shawn McLaughlin
FROM THE EDITORS

THIS ISSUE IS MAKING its appearance as the VIth International Conference on Easter Island and the Pacific, held this year in Chile, is ending. We plan to have news about the meetings and the papers presented in our next issue. A great deal of planning and effort went into making the VIth International Conference a success, and we thank all of those involved for their hard work. While it is a tad far-afIELD, according to the author of Art and History in Paestum (2003), the word symposium originally meant a “drinking bout”. Well, our lips are sealed.

OUR LEAD PAPER for this issue is a most interesting essay on rongorongo and petroglyph designs, pointing out the similarities between the designs found in two different contexts of the island’s culture: hard volcanic stone and the softer wooden boards. The paper, contributed by Shawn McLaughlin, is titled: “Rongorongo and the Rock Art of Easter Island”. Those of us who have been fascinated by Rapa Nui’s wonderful petroglyphs often have wondered about the relationship between the petroglyph designs and the tiny incised glyphs on rongorongo boards. Many are extremely close, design-wise, and this brings up the question of which came first? And what can we infer from the similarities?

FROM BELGIUM we have a paper by Luc Vrydaghs, C. Cocquyt, T. Van de Vijver, and P. Goetghebeur, titled “Phytolitigarian Evidence of the Introduction of Schoenoplectus californicus subsp. totora at Easter Island”. This paper originally was presented at the International Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences, Liege, Belgium in September 2001. The Session title was “Environmental, Geomorphological and Social Issues in Rapa Nui Prehistory”.

TWO SCHOOLTEACHERS in New York, Len Sharp and Fran Nottage, sent us a report on a school project titled “Where in the World are the Moai?” This project seems like a great way to encourage and involve students and open them up to the larger world. New Yorkers may wish to visit the school and check it out for themselves!

CALIFORNIAN BRETT RAINES contributes a paper, “Studying Easter Island’s Molluscan Fauna”. Brett, an environmental engineer, works by night as a malacologist and has been studying mollusks for nearly 25 years. He is a research associate with the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. His specialty is the family Pectinidae, and he is the lead author of a new book due out in January.

“FEAST AND FAMINE: A Gourmet’s Guide to Rapa Nui” by Georgia Lee describes the food (or lack thereof) on Easter Island, and she also includes a recipe for the delicious poi that is part of every traditional umu. Although the tastes and sensations of a well-done umu and the ambience that surrounds it are very hard to put into cold hard print, reading this paper brought on a massive case of salivation – along with memories of wonderful feasts with wonderful friends. The tradition of umu feasting is an interesting social phenomena as well as a delicious meal. While many umu are small family affairs, at times an umu is prepared to feed the entire island population. Some are feasts to honor the newly deceased. While a major umu can be a huge and expensive undertaking (both time and money), it brings increased status to the hosting family and this is a basic and very important part of island society.

A LOOK BACK: THIS YEAR marks the 200th anniversary of Yuri Fedorovich Lisianskiy’s 1804 visit to Easter Island. In command of the ship Neva, the famous Russian navigator spent several days circumnavigating Rapa Nui while waiting for the sister ship Nadezhda to arrive. Bad weather made a landing on Easter Island impossible, but Neva explored along the shoreline while the captain and crew made observations on the landscape, ceremonial platforms, dwellings of the local inhabitants, and their plantations. Lisianskiy counted at least 21 statues still standing on eight different monuments, and two other platforms were mentioned without specifying the number of moai. The Neva then sailed on to the Marquesas where Lisianskiy was reunited with Kruzenstern, captain of the Nadezhda. The whole Russian expedition took slightly more than three years and yielded invaluable scientific materials, including vast ethnological and naturalistic collections. We are delighted to publish the English translation of the Easter Island portion of Urey Lisianskiy’s original report from his round-the-world expedition of 1803-6. The translation is by Dr Paul Horley, Chernivtsi National University, Ukraine, and is based upon Yuri Lisianskiy, 1812. Puteshestvie vokrug sveta v 1803-1806 godah, po poveleniyu Ego Imperatorskago Velichestva Aleksandra Pervago, na korable Neve, pod nachal’stvom FlOla Kapitan-Leitenanta, nyne Kapitana I-go ranga i Kavalera Yuriya Lisianskago, Vol. 1, St. Petersburg: Th. Drehsler, Second Edition, with introduction by N. V. Dumitrashko: 1947. Puteshestvie vokrug sveta na korable "Neva" v 1803-1806 godah, Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo Geograficheskoi Literatury; Third Edition, with introduction by A. I. Alekseev: 1977. Puteshestvie vokrug sveta v 1803, 4, 5, i 1806 godah na korable "Neva", Vladivostok: Dalnevoostochnoe Knizhnoe Izdatel’stvo [in Russian]. Paul Horley was born in 1975 in Chernivtsi, Ukraine. He was granted his Ph.D. degree in physics of semiconductors and insulators. His dissertation was dedicated to the problems of self-organization and order-chaos transitions in semiconductors. He is an assistant professor at the Department of Electronics and Energy Engineering, Chernivtsi National University and has worked on a research project concerning the influence of temperature on the performance of solar cells at CINVESTAV Unidad Queretaro, Mexico. Easter Island is his major free-time fascination, which intensified after his visit there in 2002.
AND, SERENDIPITOUSLY complementing the Lisianskiy report, Dr Carol Ivory, Washington State University, contributes “Images of the Marquesas from the Krusenstern Expedition, 1804”. The Neva, commanded by Lisianskiy, rendezvoused with the Nadeshda and its captain, von Krusenstern, at Nukuhiwa Island in the northern Marquesas. The ship’s company included two astute and observant captains; three scientists and, to record the scene, an unnamed draftsman from the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts. The ship’s medical doctor was also a fine artist. They were assisted in their work by two rival beachcombers, both of whom had lived in the Marquesas for some six years: Edward Robarts, a 25 year old deserter from a British whaler and Jean Cabri, a young Frenchman. The engravings from this expedition are famous in Polynesian studies.

“GETTING TO KNOW YOU....” This issue inaugurates a new feature that will serve to introduce our readers to those who are outstanding in the field of Rapa Nui studies. We feature in this issue archaeologist and geologist, the irresistible Charles M. Love of Wyoming.

THE EIF IS PLEASED to announce the publication of two new books. One, Early Visitors to Easter Island, 1865-1877, contains four reports by “early visitors” Eyraud, Roussel, Loti, and Pinart. All these reports were translated from the French by Ann M. Altman, Ph.D. The book has an appendix by Grant McCall that lists all the early ships that come to the island in that period of time. This is a marvelous little book that should be in everyone’s library, and can be ordered from the EIF (see back cover of this Journal).

Our second new book is The Complete Guide to Easter Island by Shawn McLaughlin. This is another “must have” for anyone planning a trip to the island, or just wanting all the latest updates on the island and its history and archaeology. Richly illustrated and with updated maps, this guide also contains a chapter on the Rapanui language and an extensive glossary. There is detailed coverage of the village and its accommodations. Don’t miss this one! The 280 page book is, as I write, in press, and will be in hand by the time this issue is mailed out to our readers. See ordering information on back cover.

Another new item to watch for: a set of charming postcards featuring drawings of the island’s petroglyphs detailed by Dr Paul Horley of the Ukraine, our multi-talented contributor of the Lisianskiy report. This set of postcards is printed in black and white, and each one contains information on the location of that particular petroglyph. While it is a long way from the Ukraine to Easter Island, Paul managed to make the trip of a lifetime, and we are the benefactors!

COMING ATTRACTIONS: In our next issue we hope to include a paper by Dirk Huyge and Nicolas Cawre, Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels, Belgium, reporting on their research of a newly discovered site on the south coast, named Ahu o Tuki. We also will have a detailed report on Ahu Ura Uranga te Mahina, by Charles Love. Ahu Ura Uranga te Mahina is the ahu where Hotu Matu’a was buried, according to island legends. However, the dates obtained by Love from this site tend to suggest the ahu is too late in time to have served as the site of the king’s burial.

AS WE ARE GOING TO PRESS, some disturbing news about the island has come across our desk. Developers are “at it” again, according to news items that appeared in El Mercurio de Valparaiso in September. It seems that an unnamed “private group” is considering an off-shore hotel for Easter Island, capacity of 714, with three casinos, heated swimming pools, etc. And the Ministry of Justice and National Properties announced that a prison will be built on the island next year. It will be in a “farming area” and will be in charge of the police. The mayor of Rapa Nui, Petero Edmunds, is outraged. He stated, “We have no idea what the government of [President] Lagos is thinking. Now that he is in charge, he communicates with no one. Citizens have no more value than a fungus”. Edmunds added that building a prison is not necessary because “we are already in a prison. The only way to leave is by ship or airplane, and all have to go through a previous check”.

In the past few years, several nutty projects have been beaten back: a 5-star hotel with golf course in the center of the island, a mega-hotel at Anakena with a restaurant atop a tower shaped like a moai, a Club Med at Anakena, and a massive lighthouse on top of Rano Kau. Easter Island has been declared a World Heritage Site, but one would not know it, judging by the crazy schemes to build something/anything on this tiny fragile Island. We’ll have more news about this in the next RNJ.

PLEASE DON’T MISS AN ISSUE!!