

Looking for proper names in the Rapanui script


Is it possible to identify proper names in a writing system that is not yet deciphered like the Rapanui script? It is not as unpromising as it seems to be at first sight. More than that, identifying proper names is often the key to deciphering.

A possibility to uncover proper names is based on the fact that many scripts use special writing modes to mark them. In many writing systems, proper names are marked with special graphic signs, that is *determinatives*, which have no phonetic reading and are put next to person or place names to indicate the semantic category they belong to. This means that one of the most perspective strategies of deciphering is looking for all unusual signs that seem to have no phonetic reading.

In the history of the Rongorongo studies, the most known attempt to find proper names was that by Yuriy Knorozov and Nicolai Butinov, who suggested that a short fragment of the text Gv is a genealogy. This fragment has a very unusual structure: it consists of short groups where the second sign of every group is repeated as the first sign of the next group: AB – BC – CD – DE – EF.

For some reasons, the hypothesis by Knorozov and Butinov is hardly acceptable. However, many scholars are still trying to find other special contexts that might contain person names, toponyms and other categories of proper names. We cannot accept the deciphering of the “genealogical myth” suggested by S. Fischer, but everybody agrees that the famous Santiago staff analysed by Fischer does have a very special structure being divided into groups of three graphemes each. The groups are separated by the same sign (76), which is very rare in other texts.

Many fragments of the Rapanui script have a very special structure: the text is divided into short segments separated by delimiters. A delimiter is a regularly occurring sign (like sign 76 in the Santiago Staff) or a combination of two or three signs; for example, the combination of

380.1, 380.1.3, 1.52: . The delimiters seem to have no phonetic reading and function as determinatives. Similar sequences of several signs separated by delimiters can be found on almost all known tablets of the Rapanui script.

I am trying to show that these sequences are chains of only one prototypical text, which can be reconstructed for the Rapanui script. This text is a sequence of about 30 short segments; each of the segments is introduced by a determinative. The text seems to present a sequence of proper names.

This universal sequence was outlined in [Pozdniakov 2011] and discussed at the VIIIth Conference “The idea of Writing” in Venice (2011). Among other things, it was shown that each time this sequence is attested on a tablet, it has the same initial and final segments. In this work, I am planning to analyze the invariable parts of the sequence and its variants.

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