

**WORDS OUT OF WOOD  
PROPOSALS FOR THE DECIPHERMENT  
OF THE EASTER ISLAND SCRIPT**

Mary de Laat

Eburon Academic Publishers, 2009  
Soft cover (ISBN 978-90-5972-283-5)  
€39.90 / \$56.92 (www.eburon.nl)

*Reviewed by Paul Horley*

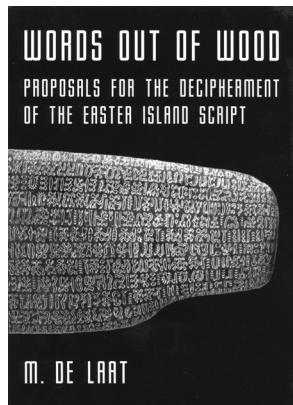
A new publication in the field of Rapa Nui studies, an almost 300-page-long book by Mary de Laat, claims to have successfully solved one of the most complicated enigmas of Easter Island — the *rongorongo* script.

The book contains a brief introduction, a syllabus of suggested phonetic readings for the various glyph elements, an analysis of individual signs and their ligatures, a list of possible disyllabic signs, and, finally, translations of three original inscriptions — Keiti, Aruku Kurenga, and Tahua.

The illustrations used in the book are taken from Chauvet (1935) and Barthel (1958). The Rapa Nui sentences are annotated in a fashion adapted from *Rapanui Grammar* by Veronica du Feu (1996). The book also presents a reference dictionary, compiled from the publications of Churchill, Fuentes, and Englert, resorting in some cases to the lexical parallels with *maori* words taken from Tregear's *Maori-Polynesian Comparative Dictionary*.

Further on, the glyphs appearing on the three tablets are indexed according to their suggested readings and presented in a separate appendix thus accommodating the fast location of a desired word on the inscribed artifacts that were studied.

The proposed solution treats *rongorongo* as a predominantly syllabic script (p.209), which perfectly agrees with the hypothesis suggested by Pozdniakov (1996:297) and Macri (1996:185). The author mentions that the script has about 50 to 60 graphemes (p.5), some 35 of which are identified with individual syllables (p.7). The majority of the glyphs included in de Laat's syllabus are shown in several calligraphic variations. For example, Sign 600 (according to Barthel's nomenclature, used throughout this review) depicting a bird with a hooked beak (Figure 1a) is shown to be equal with the bird Glyph 400, sporting a short beak (or a gaping mouth head). One of the proofs to such interchangeability are the parallel texts of the Small Santiago tablet (written with hooked-beak bird signs) and the London tablet that is composed with "gaping mouth" bird glyphs (Barthel 1958:156, Fischer 1997:489). Upon the formation of the



ligatures, these signs can be simplified to head-only variants, so that it seems feasible to assign the same phonetic value to both types of bird glyphs and their "simplified" head forms.

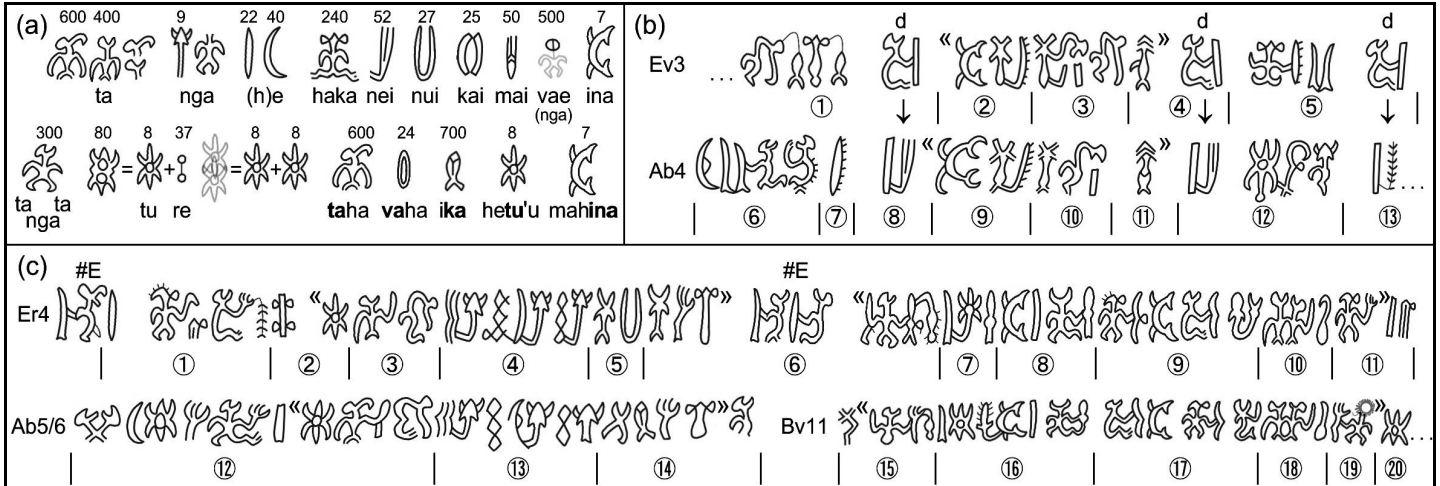
However, additional study may be required to confirm that these glyphs should read "ta" as it is suggested by the author (Figure 1a). At the same time, several of allographic variants proposed by de Laat bring together the signs that seem to be considerably unrelated, visually speaking, such as "horned helmet" (Glyph 9) and a stylized human body, as well as a vertical, oval -shape (Glyph 22) and a distinct, crescent-shaped Sign 40 (Figure 1a, proposed syllables "nga" and "(h)e", respectively).

In addition to monosyllabic glyphs, the author also introduces several disyllabic signs (Figure 1a). These include the glyphs for several frequently-used words and particles such as *haka*, *mai*, *nei*, *kai*, 'ina, as well as a surprisingly dedicated glyph for the word "vae" ("to choose", Englert 1948:510) or "va'e" (foot, *ibid.*). Added to a human body, the latter will produce Sign 500 (Figure 1a), which is suggested to be read as "vaenga" (the middle).

The author's discussion on glyph reading order includes several points that seem quite puzzling. For example, Sign 300 is proposed to stand for "tangata" (man) — but, to achieve this, one should apply "the reading order ... from the top down and up again" (p.11). It is worth noting that Glyph 309, depicting the same anthropomorph with two heads, would fit into the suggested sequence of sign elements — but it is interpreted differently and yields the reading "ma'ama'anga" (p.17; note, in this case, that both head elements are read before the body element, which differs from head-body-head order proposed for "tangata").

The identification of the glyphs entering complex ligatures is unclear in some cases. For example, Sign 80 is interpreted as a star superimposed with a double circle Glyph 37 (Figure 1a, "ture"). This hypothesis fails to explain two angular "brackets" between the circles, which perfectly fit the common interpretation of Sign 80 as two "star glyphs" set on top of each other (see Jaussen list in Chauvet 1935: fig.173, Macri 1996:186).

The phonetic values of individual glyphs "... has clearly been derived from the name of the object they are depicting" (p.8). Some of the examples illustrated by the author are shown in Figure 1a. The exact identification of the objects serving as a prototype for *rongorongo* signs is still unclear in many cases. For example, what does Glyph 8 depict — a star, the Sun (both interpretations appear in Jaussen's list, Chauvet 1935: fig.173) — or, perhaps, a flower? If Glyph 7 (depiction of the Moon, according to de Laat) is indeed a stylized image of a *reimiro*, why does it usually have two curved "spikes" in the script, which do not appear on the wooden artefacts? While these questions are open for further discussion, the reader probably would like to have a better understanding of another point: Why do readings of Sign 600 and Sign 24 inherit the first syllable of the corresponding Rapanui word, while Glyph 00 should be read according to its last syllable?



(Figure 1.)

Similarly, it is unclear why one obtains ‘*ina* from *mahina* for the Moon rather than a more natural derivative, Hina. De Laet solves this problem by suggesting that neither “h” nor the glottal stop were explicitly recorded, so that (p.9) “... glyph depicting the frigate bird *taha* can be read as the basic CV *ta*, but also prolonged CVV *taa* and CVCV *taha* or — with glottal stop — *ta’a*”.

Over a hundred pages of the book are dedicated to the translation of inscriptions Keiti, Aruku Kurenga, and Tahua. For each tablet, glyph tracings from Barthel’s *Grundlagen* are set in line with the proposed Rapanui readings and the corresponding English translation. Additional comments by the author explain the choice of a particular reading or illustrate close-up photographs of the glyphs (taken from Chauvet’s book), in case the tracings have mistakes or omissions.

According to the author, all three inscriptions appear to be composed exclusively of dialogues (p.78):

... the texts can be divided into segments ... attributed to different speakers.... As the tablets themselves do not contain designations of the speakers, some parts ... are difficult to assign to particular persons or parties.... More important however is the fact that they (the inscriptions) ... show a strong structural cohesion and are for the largest part perfectly intelligible.

Further, the reader learns that Keiti tablet contains a narrative about an investigation of a murder committed by a man called “Taea”; the Aruku Kurenga inscription tells us about the artificial revival of several people killed under the collapsed stones in a cave; and Tahua documents the victory of the islanders over the evil sorcerer (or spirit) “Apanga”.

While there are no distinct divisions in the analyzed tablets, all three texts in question are not viable as structured/harmonic sequences (Guy 2006:59-60) and lists of different character. In particular, the *verso* side of the tablet

Keiti features a list delimited with characteristic glyphs of a “sitting man holding a stick” (marked with letter “d” in Figure 1b). De Laet reads these as “Taea” — the suggested name of a man accused for the murder of his wife. It is important to note that lists of this type are not unique to Keiti; they also appear in the texts of Tahua, Mamari, and the Small Santiago (with the same text inscribed on the London tablet), Small Vienna Tablet, and the Large Washington tablets (Barthel 1958:304-313; Fischer 1997:554; Horley 2007:28). The spelling of the delimiter and the list items may vary from one inscription to another — e.g., the delimiters in the Small Santiago tablet depict sitting men holding sticks adorned with “feather garlands” while, in the Tahua text, the sitting man signs are omitted — but the items on these lists are usually clearly recognizable.

Therefore, if de Laet’s decipherment is correct, no less than six surviving tablets should be connected with the character named “Taea”, including the tablet Mamari with its lunar calendar (Barthel 1958:243-245; Guy 2006:64). Moreover, other tablets such as the Large Santiago (with copies on the Large and Small St. Petersburg tablets) and the Small Washington tablet also include the items of this particular structured list. Such abundance of parallel fragments significantly simplifies translations and cross-comparisons.

Let us consider a particular case (Figure 1b) of a list item belonging to the Pozdniakov’s sequence (1996:295, fig. 3), which appears in part in line Ev3, Keiti tablet (and thus it is supposed to deal with a murder investigation) and line Ab4, Tahua tablet (making it also related to the narrative about the evil spirit “Apanga”). De Laet is completely aware of these textual repetitions (p.100, notes 17a.6, 7): “These sentences appear with some variations in: Ab4, Cb2, Ra6, Sa1”, so that one should expect the same of very similar translation of these fragments, given here side-by-side to simplify the comparison (the numbers in the brackets correspond to those shown in the circles in Figure 1): Keiti, line Ev3 (p.100) Tahua, line Ab4 (p.190); (2) Taea: Surely (I do) not (do) this things? (3) Family: We dispute that!; (4) Family: (Your) indignation

disgusts (us), Taea! (9) Man: Surely (you) are not going to do that? (10) Women: (Yes), we are going to do that! (11) Man: (Then) you are crazy!

The absence of the name “Taea” in the Tahua text is caused by the aforementioned substitution of ligature 380.1 (sitting man with a stick) with 1.52 or 1.3 — a stick with three vertical lines or a “feather garland” (Figure 1b; Ab4, Barthel 1958:304, 310). De Laat reads these “*a-nei*” and “*a-ra*”, usually putting them in the beginning of the sentence (pp.190-192, also figs. 1b, 12, 13). To the contrary, ligature 380.1, tentatively representing the name “Taea”, is always set at the end of the sentence (pp. 96, 98-103; see also Figure 1b.1, 4, 5).

Surprisingly, there is only one occurrence of *ko* Taea — as one may expect for the name — and even in this case the element for “*ko*” is linked to the previous sign instead of the glyphs that are supposed to mean “*Taea*” (p.98). It is also worth mentioning that two lines of the narrative in the Keiti text (3 and 4) are suggested to be voiced by the same side labeled “Family”, while in the Tahua text these lines are intended for two different sides.

One can similarly analyze the translations for other parallel passages (Pozdniakov 1996:301, fig.7; Horley 2007:26, fig.1) — for example, those appearing on all three artifacts in question (Figure 1c). Similar to the previous case, the parallelism of these fragments is fully known to the author (p.87, notes 5a.5 and 5a7.-93.6.3). Keiti, line Er4 (p.87-88) Tahua, Ab5/6 (p.196) (12) Man: (No,) when (they) appear, (their) curse is going to hit this man (that) is seeing those occult signals! (13) Man: How is the rest (then) going to support (me)? (14) Woman 1: Those eyes will beat down furiously at (our) hats! Aruku, line Bv11 (p.144); (2) Family: The traces (are) abundant! (3) Should we pass (them) by? (4) Taea: How can the rest support (you)? (5) Family: (Because there is) plenty of evidence! (6) Taea: Those scratches of the axe (are your) evidence, but the do not cover man (and) woman! (7) Taea: Surely I am not your target! (8) I (am) not (going to be your) victim! (9) Taea: Nobody is going to attack (me): (there will be) no threat for me! (10) Taea: (So,) will (you) clear away this heap? (15) Protagonist: Are those different beings going to attack me? (16) Protagonist: Will they not aim (at me), will I not (become their) victim? (17) Friends: (There will be) no threat, (they) will not use (their) supernatural powers (on you)! (18) Protagonist: Shall (we) then clear away these assemblages?

As one can see from Figure 1c, the proposed segmentation of the parallel inscriptions into individual sequences is not the same. Fragments (2) and (3) are joined together in a much longer phrase (12). Sentences (7) and (8) are separate and exclamatory in the text of Keiti, while in Aruku Kurenga inscription they merge into a single interrogative sentence (16). The list delimiter group (denoted with #E in fig.1.3) clearly marks the boundary between the fragments — yet in the text segmentation proposed by de Laat, there is a long phrase (6) joining both passages from Tahua and Aruku Kurenga plus the delimiter group. The comparison of the translations also reveals “swapping” of the parties involved into the discussion — the passages (2-4) and (16-18) are

supposed to be voiced by different people, while in the text written on the other tablets they are ascribed to the same person — lines (12,13) and (7-10), respectively.

In the Conclusion section of the book, the author makes the following comment on the discovered dialogue structure of *rongorongo* inscriptions (p.213):

The characterization of the texts ... as consisting of dialogue only may at first sight resemble the proverbial rabbit being pulled out of the hat. This trick then would have become necessary to explain away apparent illogical combinations of meaning by introducing an inherently “illogical” factor, as the utterances of different people do not always have to relate to each other in a logical and coherent way. However, these tablet translations offer little support for such an assertion, as they contain real dialogue with speakers that are responding to each other in a meaningful way.

However, even a brief analysis of parallel fragments shows that the proposed text segmentation is unstable and does not allow for the exact identification of a person to whom the corresponding utterances should be ascribed. The variation of translation of nearly identical passages signals that additional studies are required for improvement of the proposed syllabus and revision of the reading rules for complex sign ligatures, both of which contribute greatly to the resulting “apparent illogical combinations of meaning”.

Thus, while it is difficult to confirm at the moment that the suggested approach indeed allows us to achieve the long awaited phonetic decipherment of *rongorongo*, we should not lose hope. Perhaps further intensive research in this field will bring us closer to the correct solution, until one day it will become possible to read the unique and fascinating script of Easter Island.

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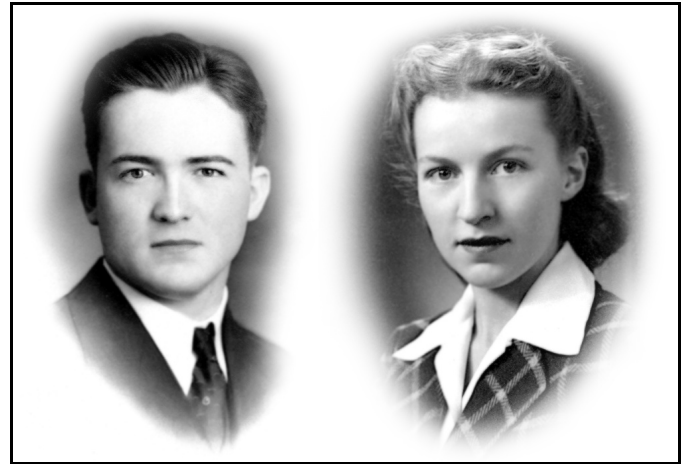
**RAPA NUI MULLOY FAMILY PHOTOS**  
<<http://picasaweb.google.com/brigid.mulloy>>  
**Brigid Mulloy**

*Review by Paul Horley*

A Picasa™ Web Album by Brigid Mulloy features one of the most outstanding Easter Island galleries published online during 2008. The *Rapa Nui Mulloy Family Photos* contains over 280 pictures taken during numerous visits to Easter Island made by William Mulloy together with his wife Emily Ross and children Kathy, Brigid, and Patrick.

The majority of the images are published for the first time. The photo from the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific (1955-56) depicts re-erection of the red scoria statue at Vinapu. The pictures documenting different stages of restoration work at Ahu Akivi show the *moai* gradually raised one by one wedged by levers and stone ramps. Other photos provide a glimpse of a freshly-restored statue at Ahu Huri a Urenga, re-erection of the images at Ahu Vai Uri, and restoration work at the ceremonial village of 'Orongo. The photos of cave interiors belong to the archaeological survey of Easter Island, which was also commenced by William Mulloy. Several great

pictures document excavation and restoration of Ahu Nau Nau carried out by Sergio Rapu. Some of the aforementioned photographs can be also seen in an article published on Wikipedia, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Mulloy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Mulloy)>.



Photos of William & Emily Mulloy  
courtesy of Brigid Mulloy.

The most fascinating feature of the *Rapa Nui Mulloy Family Photos* is their cordial dedication to Easter Islanders, showing so many beautiful smiling faces! Every picture seem to radiate the deepest love and respect for the Rapanui people, and the feelings that illuminated the life of William Mulloy and each of his titanic restoration and surveying projects. During their visits to the Island, Mulloy's family was warmly welcomed by Rapanui friends with much kindness and sincerity.

Many thanks to Brigid Mulloy for sharing these unique and beautiful photographs on the Internet!

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