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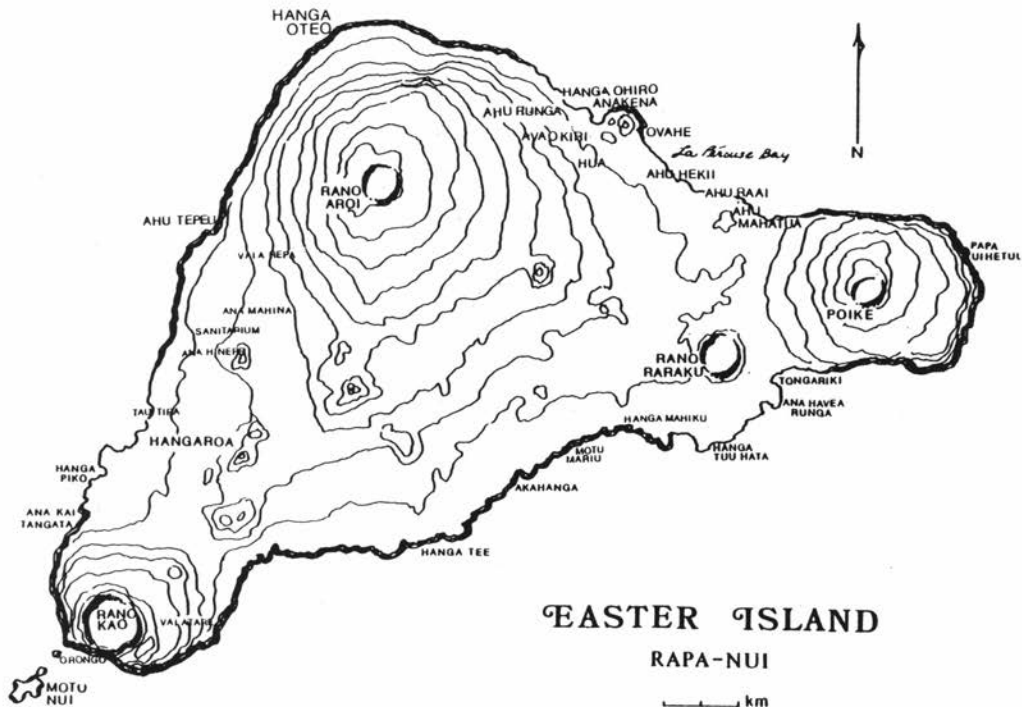
EASTER ISLAND;
RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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In Easter Island the past is the present, it is impossible to escape from it; the inhabitants of today are less real than the men who have gone; the shadows of the departed builders still possess the land. Voluntarily or involuntarily, you must hold commune with those old workers; for the whole air vibrates with a vast purpose and energy which has been and is no more. What was it? Why was it? (Routledge 1919, p. 165).

Easter Island – isolated in the vast seas of the South Pacific – has long held a fascination for many people. Best known for its monolithic statues (*moai*) and megalithic shrines (*abu*), it has a visual impact few places in the world can equal. There are many widely held misconceptions about the island. Its prehistory has been misinterpreted and misunderstood, and writers have exploited the complexities of its past. Books and articles focusing on the island's "mysteries" have postulated everything from the work of spacemen (von Daniken 1971) to the use of elephants to move the statues (Borst 1981). As to the original settlement of the island, far-out theories range from Incas (Heyerdahl 1952) to Basque sailors (Langdon 1975). Although there is much we will probably never fully understand about the island's culture (which is undoubtedly Polynesian), recent archaeological research is casting light on many of the old mysteries.

Like many isolated islands, Easter Island has an undefinable magical quality. It also is an anthropological paradox: McCoy (1979, p. 136) has described it as "... one of the most fascinating and intellectually intriguing locales in world prehistory". The culture reached an unusually high level of technological advancement at a Neolithic level, apparently without any outside influence. Easter Island stone working traditions were superior as compared to other Polynesian cultures, producing astonishing examples of megalithic art and architecture. They possessed a sophisticated system of solar observation, and an undeciphered written script (*rongo rongo*). This written language is unique in Polynesia and is a climaxing symbol of an unusually ingenious people (*ibid.*). Easter Island lies 3200 km west of the South American continent and approximately the same distance from Tahiti. At 27 degrees 9 minutes south latitude, the climate is temperate rather than tropical. The 160 square km island is entirely volcanic with a rugged coastline; it has neither a harbor nor a surrounding reef. The island's restricted flora and fauna is the result of its extreme isolation. For example, there were no indigenous land mammals. The settlers brought with them the chicken and the Polynesian rat and also inadvertently, two species of lizard. At the time of European discovery on Easter Sunday, 1722, the island's culture appears to have been in decline. Natural resources were few and the island's original forests were gone. By 1838, all the giant *moai* had been thrown down from their *abu* as the result of internal upheavals, and the population was down from an estimated 15,000 at its peak to a few thousands souls



EASTER ISLAND

RAPA-NUI

1 km

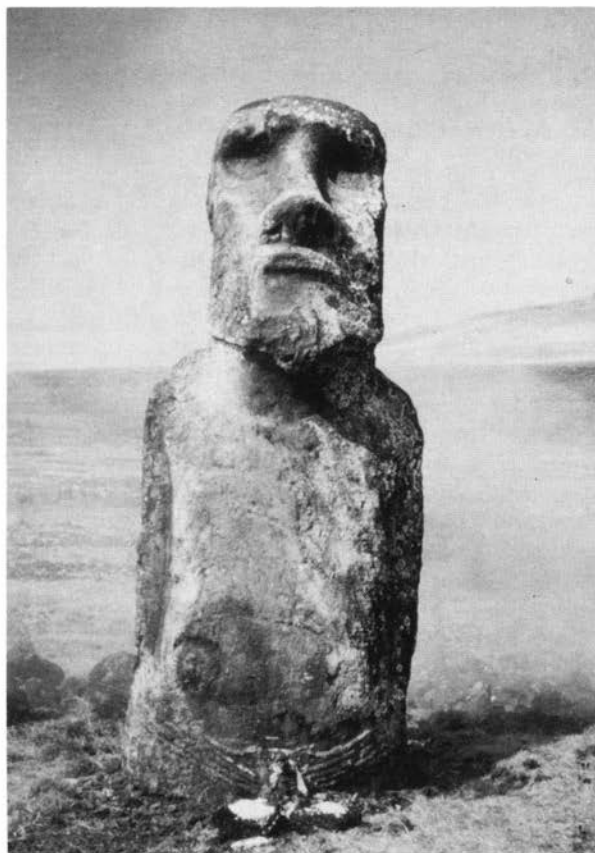


Fig. 52
Map of Eastern Island.
Fig. 53
Moai from Tongariki on the south coast of the island.



Fig. 54
Abu Nau Anakena. Four of the moai have red scoria top knots (pukao) which probably represented ceremonial headgear of some sort.

Fig. 55
One of the largest statues on the island, this enormous figure still lies in the quarry at Rano Raraku. Called 'El Gigante' by the natives, it is over 65 feet tall.

(Claudio Cristino, personal communication 1983). Contact with the western world sealed the island's fate for over the years the islanders were subjected to diseases for which they had no immunity. The final blow occurred when some 2000 people were captured and carried off to Peru by slavers. Included in these raids were the king, his son, and the ritual priests. By 1877 there were approximately 150 people left on the island. And this is the reason for





Fig. 56
The oblong shaped houses at Orongo were constructed from a volcanic slate found at the site.
Fig. 57
Early stone work at Abu Tepu on the west coast of the island.

Fig. 58
Foundation stones of a hare paenga (boat-shaped house). These structures were thatched and resembled an overturned boat. They are believed to have been homes for status individuals.

Fig. 59
University Research crew recording an unusually large and complex panel on the north coast near La Perouse Bay.

the many “mysteries” of Easter Island: all we know of the culture has been filtered through the memories of a few survivors. When those who were the “culture bearers”, in that they retained ritual knowledge and other esoterica, died, so did the knowledge they possessed. We are now trying to understand the culture by extracting information from the archaeological record and bits of collected ethnographic data.

It appears that the Easter Islanders came from the Southern Marquesas sometime prior to A.D. 400. Their society was stratified and after contact with the western world was dominated by small, independent warring tribes with political power vested in a warrior class (*matatooa*). The traditional king (*ariki*) still retained inherited mana and ceremonial prestige, although the *matatooa* also took upon themselves the prerogative of *mana* and *tapu* by means of the ‘birdman cult’. This situation, involving temporary sanctity of office, is unique in Polynesia (Goldman 1970, p. 96). The rise of the warrior class around A.D. 1600, is linked to the end of *moai* carving and the beginning of civil wars resulting in the overthrowing of the statues which represented deceased ancestors. This had a disastrous effect on the traditional beliefs dealing with ancestor worship and enabled the *matatooa* to impose their own belief system—one involving the god Makemake and the cult of the birdman.

Rapa Nui, as the island is called by the natives, has been visited by many who made archaeological and ethnographical notes. In 1886, Thomson recorded numerous sites in the ten days he spent on the island. Routledge’s (1919) data, meticulously gathered in 1914-1915, has proved to be one of the most important sources of information, Alfred Metraux and Henri Lavachery came as part of a joint Franco Belgian team in 1935. Their work was published in the *Ethnography of Eastern Island* (Metraux 1940) and *Les*



Fig. 60
Petroglyph of birdman from the site of Mata
Ngarau, Orongo. Figure is carved in bas relief.

Pétroglyphes de l'Île de Paques (Lavachery 1939). In 1956, the Heyerdahl expedition arrived on the island. Among other things, the research conducted by this expedition of a three-period sequence of *abu* construction (McCoy 1979, p. 138). Heyerdahl's theories of South American contact with the island have come under much criticism, but it is not the purpose of this paper to refute these theories in detail. That they have not withstood the test of time is irrelevant to the very real contribution the expedition made toward our understanding of the culture.

William Mulloy, who was one of the original members of the Heyerdahl expedition, returned many times to the island and was instrumental in restoring several of the *abu*. He also recognized the richness of other archaeological remains which had, up to that time, been poorly researched. In an effort to remedy a one-sided view of the culture, Mulloy proposed an exhaustive archaeological survey of the entire island. This was instigated in 1968 and the survey continues today by archaeologists from the Universidad de Chile. To date, archaeologists Claudio Cristino and Patricia Vargas Casanova, and, ethnohistorian Edmundo Edwards, have surveyed 65 % of the island and recorded over 15,000 archaeological sites. Their studies have focused on settlement patterns, including approximately 300 rectangular and square house foundations in the interior of the island on the southeast slopes of Mt. Terevaka – an area not previously known to be occupied. Excavations

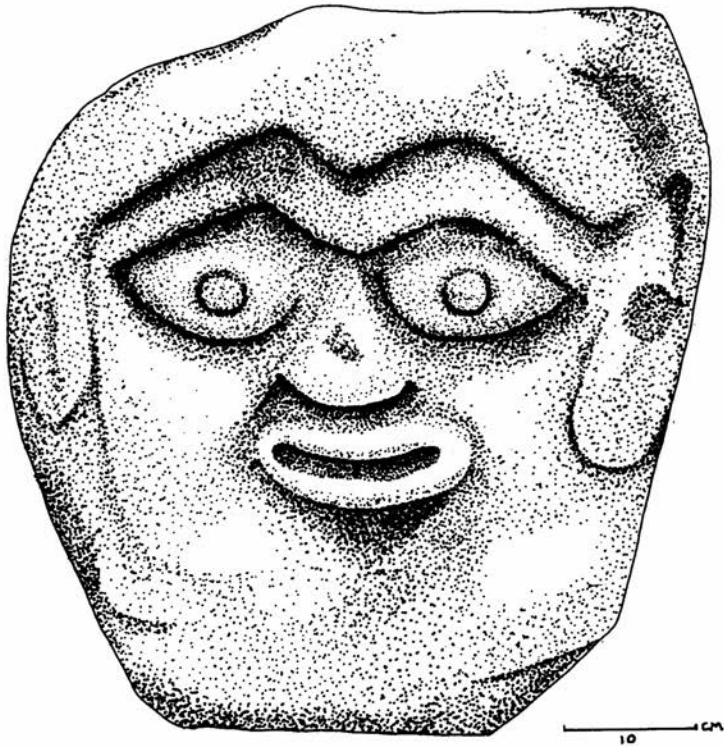


Fig. 61
Anthropomorphic face from Orongo. It probably represents the creator god of the island, Makemake.

conducted by the Universidad de Chile team revealed that these structures were involved with wood working, possibly housing or workshops for those involved in harvesting and working the large trees which formerly covered the mountain.

Forest clearance, exploitation of plant resources and an increasingly barren landscape had a profound effect on the economy of the island. The ultimate consequence of deforestation was lack of wood to transport and erect the large statues and the inability to construct ocean-going canoes, thus making it impossible for the islanders to emigrate (McCoy 1979, p. 161).

Working in conjunction with the Universidad de Chile on the island and with the island's archaeological museum under the direction of Don Sergio Rapu, governor, are several joint projects with archaeologists from the University of California at Los Angeles. Several of these projects are under the auspices of the University Research Expeditions Program, University of California at Berkeley. One of these projects conducted by the author involves an in-depth study of the rock art of the island. Another deals with a detailed study of the *moai* (Van Tilburg 1983), and a third project, by J. Seaver, deals with wood carving traditions.

The rock art study, a systematic documentation of the petroglyphs and pictographs of the island, began in 1981 under this investigator's direction

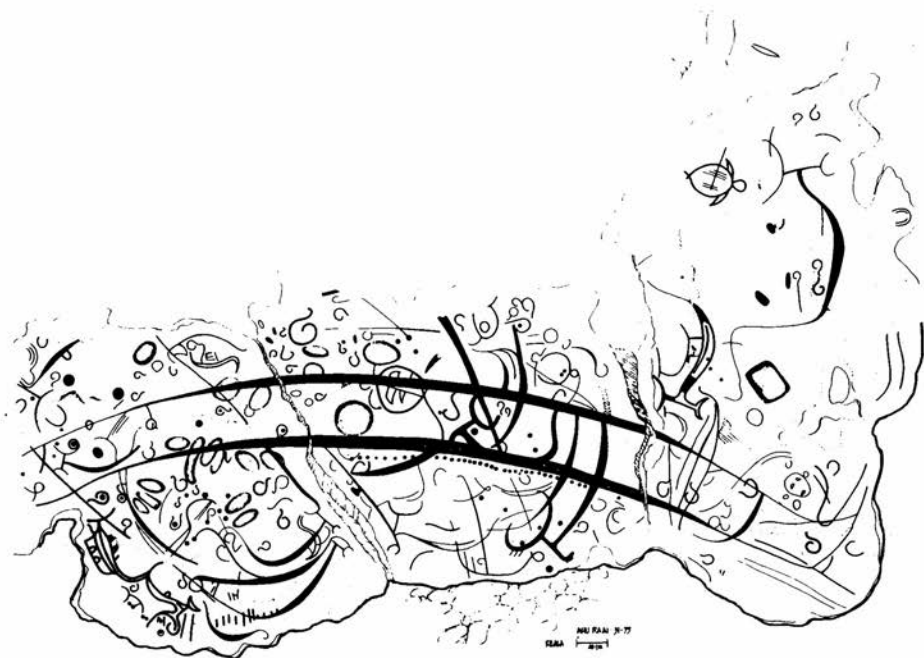
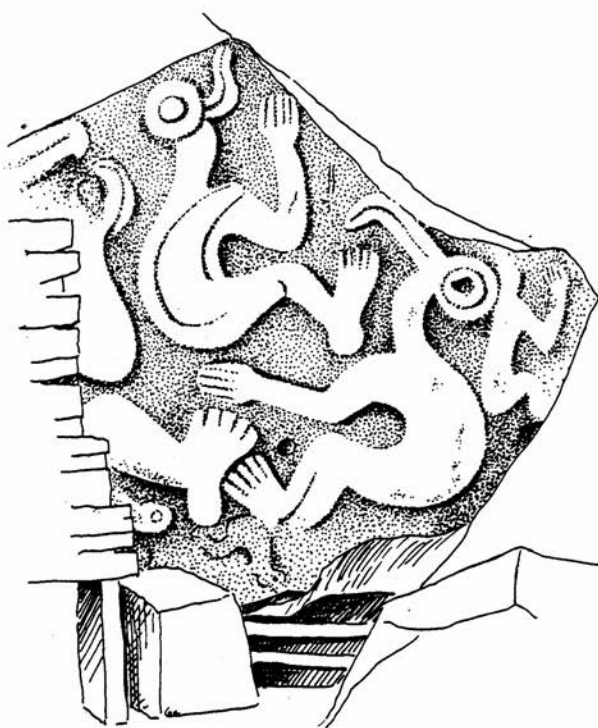


Fig. 62
Panel depicting boats, fishhooks,
turtles, and other motifs. This
panel is located near La Perouse
Bay on the north coast. One of
the largest single panels on the
island, it measures 12 metres
long.

Fig. 63
Panel from Mata Ngarau, Orongo,
with birdman figures.



and terminated in January 1984. Sites were documented by first placing string grids over the panel. Scale drawings were then made on graph paper. Sites were also documented photographically. As light is the crucial factor for recording petroglyphs, we found it necessary to study many of the



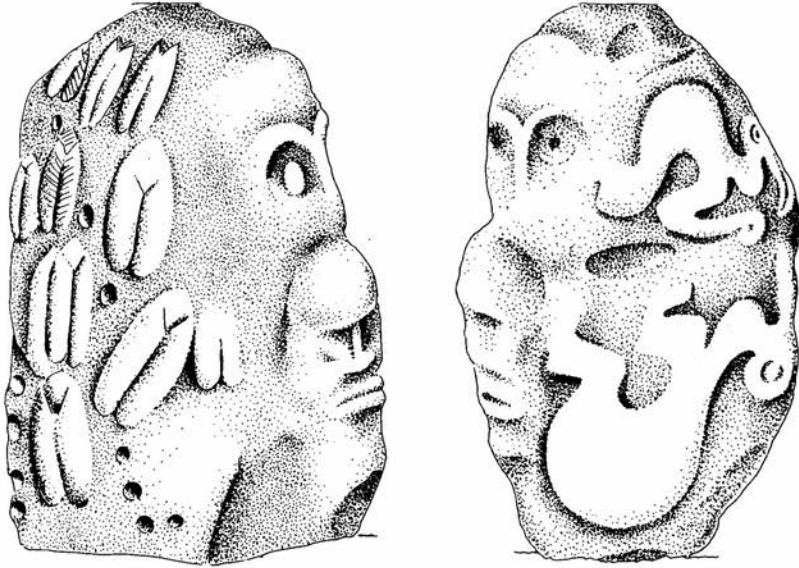
*Fig. 64
Petroglyph of a turtle, north coast.
Turtles were never numerous on the
island. They were tapu for the
average person, and only the
king of the island was allowed
to eat them.*



*Fig. 65
Petroglyph rock in a cave on the
south coast at Hanga Tee. These
incised designs represent vulvas.*

designs by oblique lighting, either early or late in the day, or at night by means of artificial light.

At this time, it is estimated that approximately 50% of all the island's rock



art sites have been documented. The accumulated data is being studied and analyzed in the light of the available ethnographic information and the archaeological context of the sites. It is an inescapable conclusion from the study of the art that the figure was already suggested in the rock and the artist merely 'released' it by adding a few lines. The natural forms in the lava often suggest many of the motifs and numerous examples of natural protrusions with a minimum amount of shaping have been recorded.

Rock art is found in virtually all sections of the island but it is particularly concentrated along the coastline and near centers of activity, such as *abu*. Sites vary in size and complexity from a single petroglyph on an isolated boulder to massive sites extending along contiguous *papa* (flat and relatively level lava flow). There is enormous diversity in designs element types which tend to cluster in specific parts of the island. For example, the birdman motif clusters at Orongo clearly shows a definite affiliation with cult activities. It is conspicuous by its absence in certain areas such as La Perouse Bay on the north coast. At the latter sites, boat motifs are found in overwhelming numbers and size. Over sixty nearly identical boat designs were recorded here and one panel measures twelve meters long. In contrast, at the northern tip of the island near Hanga Oteo are petroglyphs which depict tails of tuna fish. Neither of these designs are found anywhere else on the island. As neither boatmaking nor fishing were concentrated at any one place but rather took place in all parts of the coastline, these motifs seemingly represented concepts rather than functional activities.

Variations within the art reflect variations within broader cultural contexts and these need to be explored and explained in order to understand how the rock art relates to its prehistoric cultural context. Attempts can then be made to interpret the art, especially with the help of ethnographic data. Rock art, therefore, needs to be placed into the archaeological context of the area, analyzed, and examined in relation to ethnographic material. The importance of location needs to be considered also, for the sites were chosen or revealed as sacred spots. Then the art was added.

The first step is to acquire a reliable record of what is present in the art. Unlike archaeological evidence which must be evaluated by sampling



Fig. 66
Komari or vulva sign. This motif is found in many parts of the island and may be in bas relief, or incised.

Fig. 67
An example of Phase I birdman cut through and partially obliterated by a Phase II figure. Mata Ngarau, Orongo.

methods, rock art can theoretically be recorded in its entirety (Meighan 1981). Analysis of partial data presents major problems, for erroneous conclusions can result from an inadequate data base.

Conventional dating methods are rarely applicable to rock art and the Easter Island sites present special problems of their own. Patination (a dark coating which occurs on rock surfaces due to weathering processes) occurs rapidly with complete patination taking place in less than twenty years. As for rock paintings, analysis of the pigment binder is theoretically possible but several problems make it inadvisable. For example, there are few of the painting sites left and to obtain an adequate sample, a site would have to be destroyed. We are dealing with very little time depth on Easter Island, so a plus-minus factor could make carbon-14 dates meaningless. In addition, paintings may have been periodically reinforced. At this time, associational dating of the rock art is all we have to go on, along with time markers in the art (historic ships, etc.), or superimpositions which can provide a first-second relationship but the time span between them is unknown.

The cult of the birdman is closely associated with much of the island's art and it uniquely blends island ethnography and history. It also helps explain an identifiable style within the island's art. The object of the birdman ceremony was to acquire the first egg of the sooty tern from the small islet of Motu Nui, off the southwest corner of the island and across from the sacred site of Orongo. Terns formerly came in great flocks to the islet to nest. Contestants or their proxies would, at a given signal, descend the cliffs of Orongo, swim to the islet carrying food and water, and await the first egg. The one to procure this prize swam back, ascended the cliff and he (or his sponsor) then became birdman for the year. The new birdman shaved his head, eyebrows and eyelashes, painted himself white, and lived alone and apart for his year in office. He was given special food, abstained from sex, and neither bathed nor cut his hair during that time. At the end of the year, he rejoined society, and a new birdman replaced him.

The motif of the birdman is that of an anthropomorphic figure in profile with the head, beak, and gular pouch of a frigate bird. The combination of man and bird in one motif can be found in many parts of the world, in-

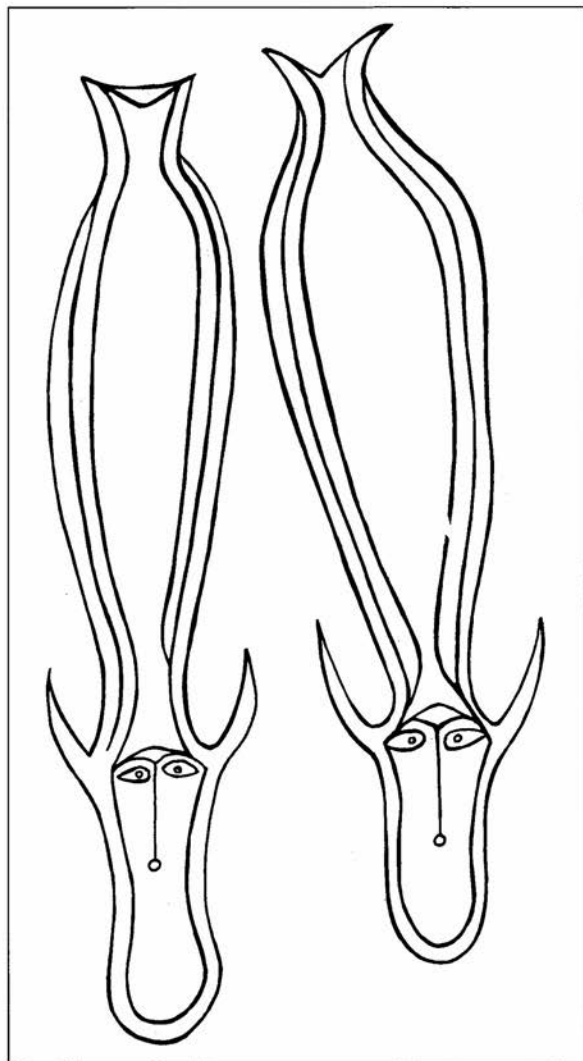


Fig. 68
A combination human-seal creature
from Anakena, on the north
coast.

Fig. 69
Birdman petroglyph from Mata
Ngarau, Orongo. Islets of Motu
Nui, Motu Iti, and Motu Kao Kao
visible in the distance.

cluding Polynesia and South America, but the cult as it was practiced has no known parallel. The design of the birdman figure is itself a contradiction for the bird depicted is the frigate bird, not the sooty tern. This contradiction may be due to our incomplete knowledge of the cult, for by the time information was being gathered, traditions had been altered or forgotten by the tragic remnants of a decimated and demoralized population. Although the cult itself continued into the 1860s, by that time it had degenerated into a free-for-all contest. In the beginning, however, the cult must have had a strong religious focus such as a competition for divine blessing, not a test of skills (Goldman 1970, p. 105).

The birdman cult replaced the earlier beliefs and religion which involved ancestor worship and which was manifested in the giant statues. The cult gained favor and became a pan-island religion after the disruptive civil wars, and may have been a response to a change in the power structure as the *matatoa* enforced their beliefs on the rest of the inhabitants. The birdman and other petroglyph motifs at Orongo may be religious symbols

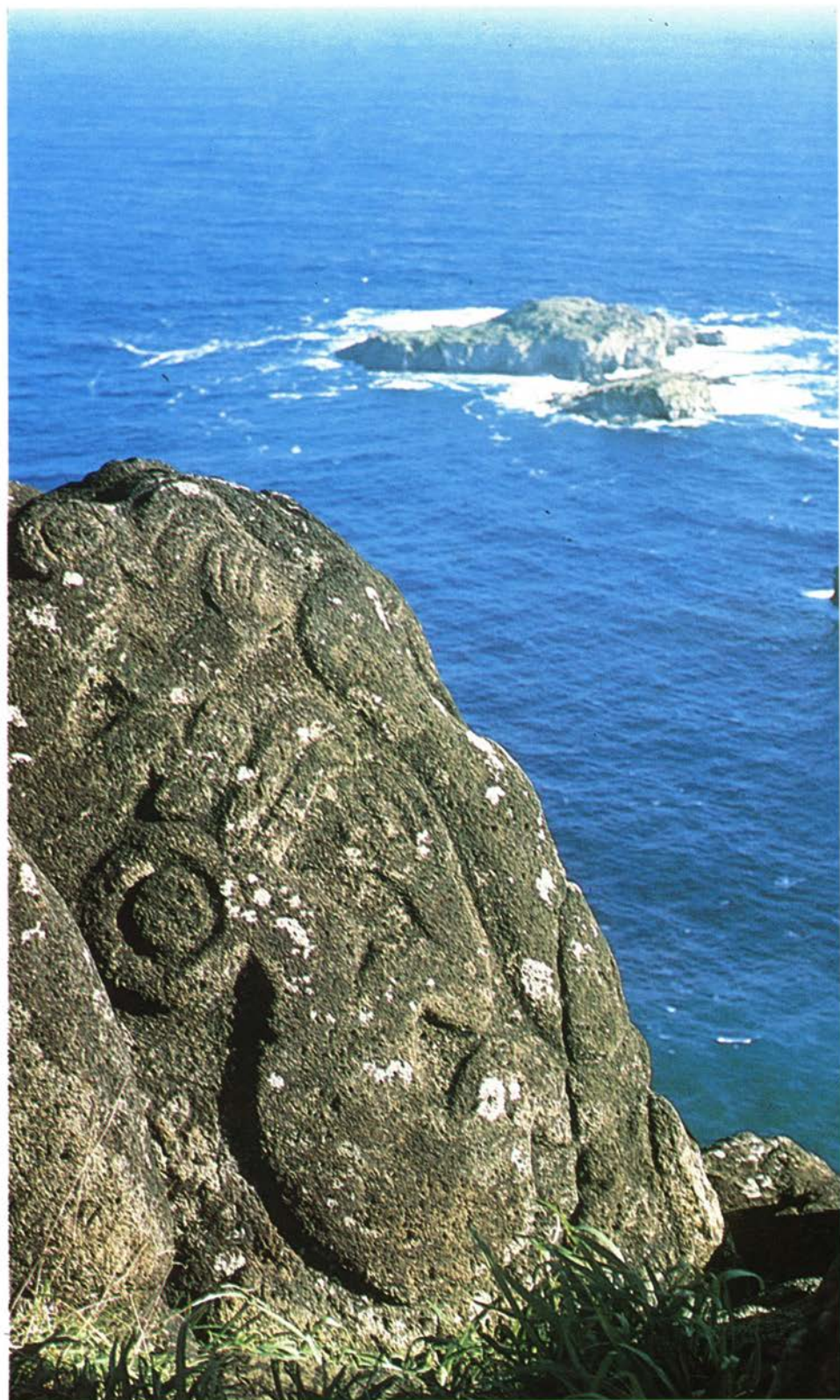




Fig. 70
This remarkable panel is located in the interior of the caldera of Rano Kau near the shores of the fresh water lake. Motifs include fish, fish-bird combination, and human-sea creature.

Fig. 71
Abu Nau Nau, Anakena. These moai have red scoria top knots (pukao) on their heads. Note petroglyph on abu wall in foreground.

as well as evidence of the socio-political situation; a symbol of the power takeover which occurred around A.D. 1600, after the loss of political power by the *ariki*.

The ceremonial site of Orongo is located on the rim of the crater of Rano Kau, in the southwest section of Easter Island. According to ethnographic sources, this section of the island was one of the most important, for Orongo and Motu Nui were central places of great religious significance to the islanders. In addition to the birdman rites, consecration rites for children were held here. Rano Kau is where the first house was built and the first yam plantation established. It is the location of the last residence of Hotu Matu'a, the first king. It is the place where, as his last task, Hotu Matu'a raised stone blocks to form a pillar; the place from which he gazed out across the sea and called out to his *aku aku* spirits for the rooster to call his death signal; the place where he died. It is likely that Rano Kau, being the westernmost place on the island, was also the jumping off point for souls, in accordance with Polynesian tradition (Barthel 1978, p. 223).

The best known rock art locus in the Rano Kao area is that of Orongo with its sacred precinct, Mata Ngarau. The overwhelming majority of the island's birdman figures are located here. This spectacular site perches dramatically on the rim of the crater. On the south, the cliff drops 350 meters into the ocean; on the north is the caldera with its fresh water lake. Rock art is also located in the interior of the caldera, and Motu Nui has both paintings and petroglyphs. The art of the latter site (which was included in the birdman rites) and that inside the caldera differ markedly from that of Orongo.

Mata Ngarau consists of stone houses opening onto a natural court of boulders and it is upon these surfaces that a most extraordinary concentration of petroglyphs is to be found. Virtually every surface has been carved and recarved. Although the birdman design dominates, there are also representations known as Makemake faces which are reputed to depict the supreme god of the island and connected in some way with the birdman; *komari* (vulva signs); and other motifs such as the *rei-miro* or ceremonial pectoral.



At Mata Ngarau, at least two phases of the birdman motif have been identified. The earlier Phase I type is always formed by pecked and abraded lines. The design consists of thin, elongated (and often sinuous) figures in profile with little attention given to hand, food and gular pouch. The fully-developed Phase II birdman consists of a crouched figure in profile. The back is rounded, hand and foot are carefully delineated, and at times the hand holds an egg. The head, beak and gular pouch display the characteristics of frigate birds. Virtually all Phase II birdman glyphs are in bas relief.

At Mata Ngarau, the Phase I birdman petroglyphs have been cut through and partially obliterated by the classic Phase II bas relief figures. This fact has provided the clue to the stylistic development of this motif. It seems that in the early formative stages of the cult, the image of bird-man had not yet become set into conventionalized form, accounting for the many variations seen in the Phase I style. Many appear to be tentative beginnings.

When the cult became a pan-island religion both ritual and the art became fixed in a traditional pattern. This is reflected in the Phase II birdman which rarely deviates from what must have become the accepted canons of the art. Identification of stylistic progression for the birdman design is important for it suggests an autochthonous development of this motif.

In Polynesia, priests (*tobunga*) were trained organizers and leaders in ceremonies. Like temple priesthoods in other religions, they presented offerings and sacrifices, invoked, supplicated, and coerced the psychic powers. They were the repositories of sacred myths and genealogies and guarded the secrets of the cult. They recited prayers and spells in a sing-song chant and it was imperative that the chants be accurate and rhythmic to achieve the desired result (Handy 1927, p. 150). A study of the petroglyphs at Mata Ngarau suggests that the priests (called *ivi-atua* on Easter Island) were the social group responsible for the production of the rock art at that site. Mata Ngarau is the place where they chanted the *rongo-rongo* during the birdman ceremonies and where tattooing (a common Polynesian practice) was done.



As access to this sacred site was limited, it can be assumed that the priests in charge were also the artists who carved the Orongo figures. The quality of the carving is uniform enough to support this view.

The arrival of thousands of sea birds undoubtedly was a dramatic event. In Polynesia, departed souls of men and gods were believed to reappear as birds, suggesting the possibility that they represented the departure and return of ancestral deities and gods of fertility in the fall and spring (*ibid.*: 131). On Eastern Island, all migrating birds were thought to have come from Hiva, the mythological homeland where the souls of the dead go. Thus we have suggestions of bird-man concepts coming out of Polynesia. Barrow (1967) has made a strong case for this, stating that birds in Oceania held a mystical relationship with gods and ancestral spirits to a degree that is unsurpassed elsewhere.



*Fig. 72
Aerial view of Easter Island looking west. Poike, the eastern tip of the island, is visible in the foreground.*

*Fig. 73.
Two of the moai from the ceremonial site of Tabai, silhouetted against the evening sky.*

*Fig. 74
The spectacular painted cave, Ana Kai Tangata, on the island's west coast. Although a few other painting sites are known, this is the best preserved.*

*Fig. 75
Painted birds wheel endlessly on the ceiling of a ritual cave known as Ana Kai Tangata.*

Aside from the birdman motif, there are other very interesting motifs which combine human and animal features. Some are combinations of octopus and man, or fish and bird. Some are creature-like forms which defy identification. Perhaps they too will be found to have links with the island's ethnography.

As part of that larger body of archaeological and ethnographic data, rock art has the potential to shed light on many aspects of a culture. As an ideological component of a prehistoric social system, art can help us to better understand the particular society that produced it and the culture of which it is a part. Art may refer to dreams, myths, legends, rituals, ceremony, cosmography, status or power; it may reveal place of origin, spheres of influence and aspects of social organization.

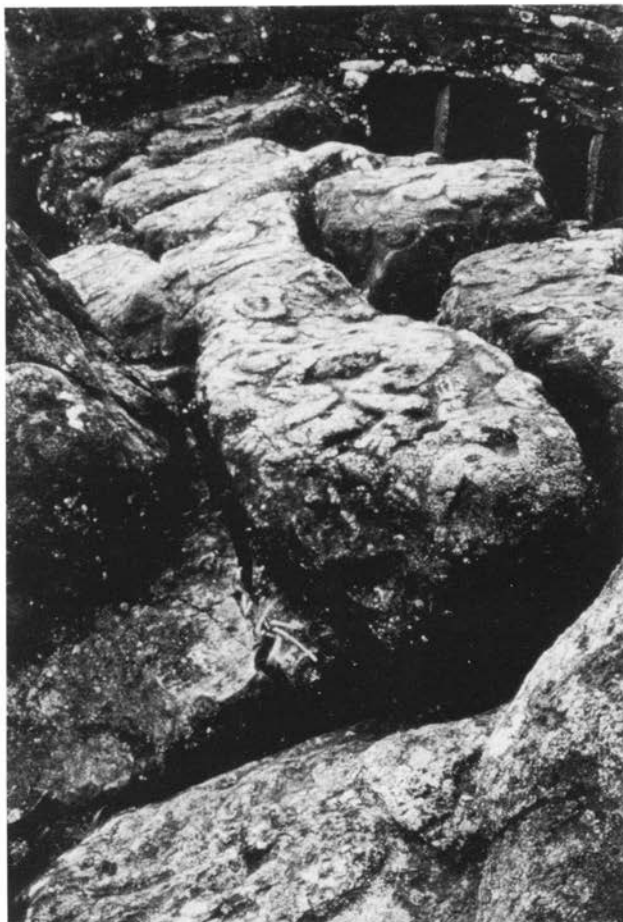
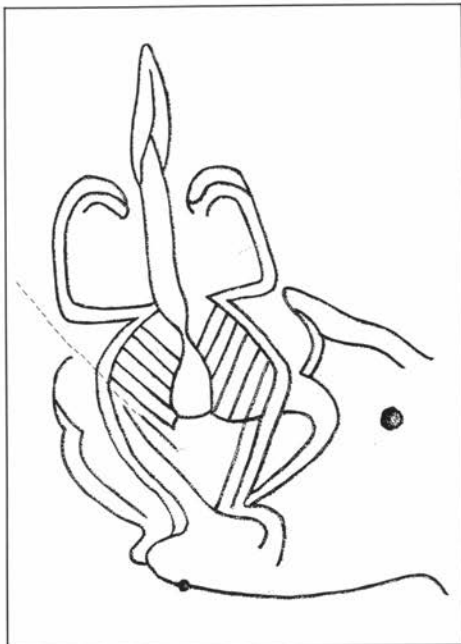
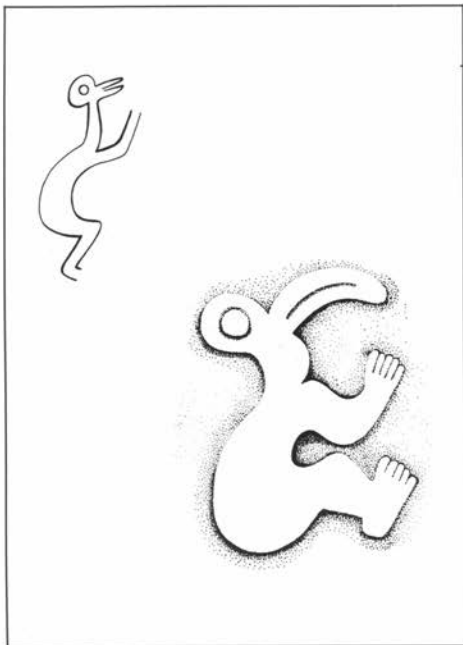


Fig. 76
Examples of Phase I and II
birdman motifs. The Phase
I figure is thin and sinuous
with little attention paid to
feet, hands, gular pouch, and
beak. In contrast, the Phase II
petroglyph is stereotyped. It is
always in bas relief and displays
a rounded back, carefully defin-
ed hands, feet, gular pouch,
and beak of a frigate bird.
At times, the hand holds an egg.

Fig. 77
An undefinable creature petro-
glyph from Anakena on the
north coast.

Fig. 78
The priests' houses and carvings
at Mata Nga Rau in the cere-
monial village of Orongo.

Fig. 79
Abraded fish petroglyphs near
Anakena. The full panel is
approximately 3 meters long.

Fig. 80
Petroglyph from the north
coast, Abu Raai area. This
elaborate panel features an
octopus, boats, and fish hook
motifs.

Fig. 81
A combination octopus-seal
motif, Orongo.

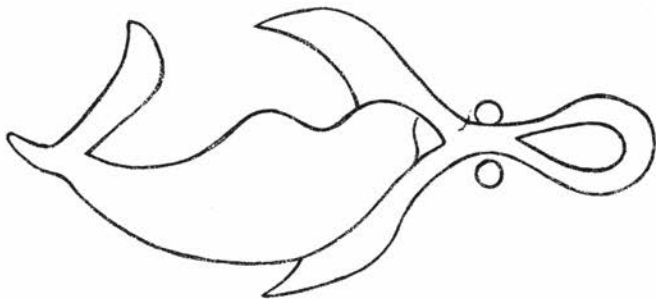


Fig. 82

Painted petroglyph from Motu Nui cave where birdman contestants lived while awaiting the first egg of the sooty tern.

Fig. 83

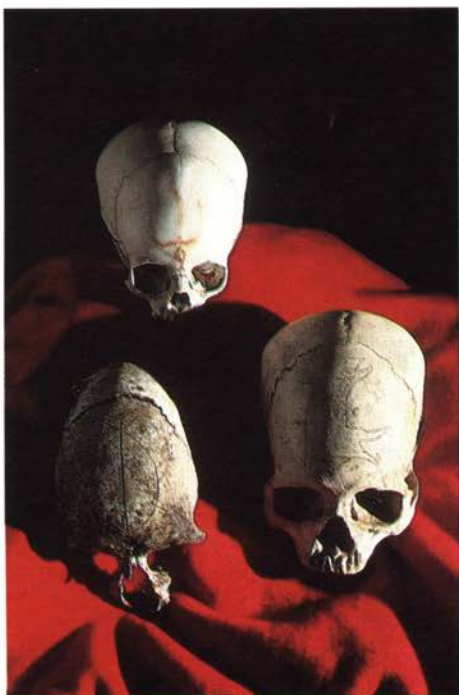
The skulls of former birdmen were the source of great mana and helped insure the fertility of the fields and the sea. These skulls were collected by Father Sebastian Englert in the earlier part of the 20th century and are now on display in the island's museum.

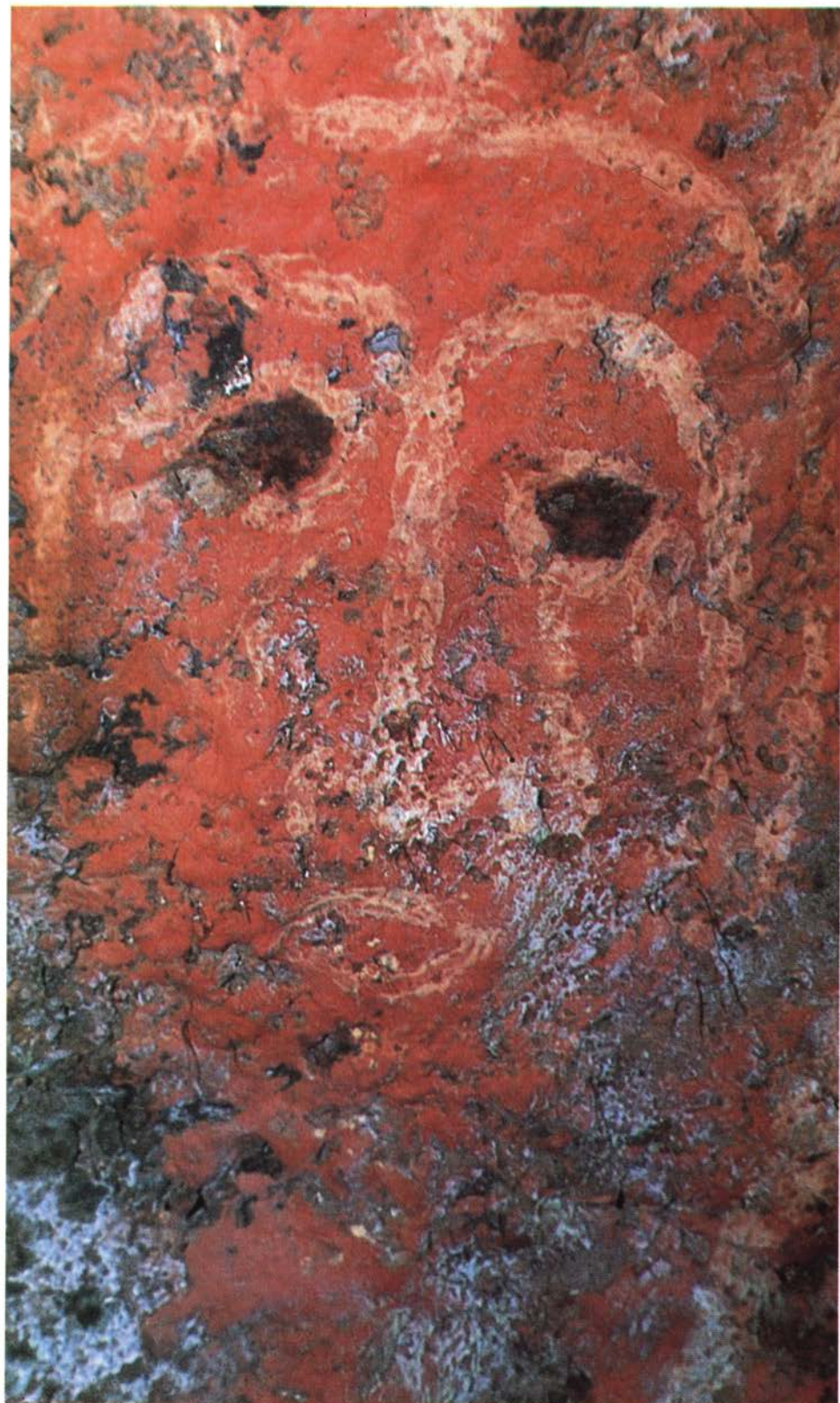
Fig. 84

Painted wall slab from a house in the ceremonial village of Orongo. Several of these slabs were removed by an American expedition from the Smithsonian in 1886 and returned to the island in the 1970's.

Fig. 85

This striking red, black, and white painting adorns the ceiling of a cave on Motu Nui. Colors remain bright due to lack of light entering the cave.





The abundant symbolism and rich visual imagery of the rock art of Easter Island was the result of ritual activities and it undoubtedly played an important part in the island's ceremonial life. Much about the art will forever remain obscure, but the sheer beauty and scope of Easter Island's petrographic art cannot fail to impress the viewer. It represents a fully developed esthetic. It is curvilinear, balanced, and elegant, and like the majestic *moai* of the island-surrounded by the empty seas of the eastern Pacific, the rock art seemingly developed and matured in isolation.

Résumé: La préhistoire de l'île de Pâques n'a été que très peu comprise, à cause en particulier des singulières circonstances proto-historiques qui causèrent la décimation de la population. Une des conséquences a été la prolifération de théories hasardeuses. Toutefois, de récentes recherches effectuées dans l'île ont mis à jour de nombreuses nouvelles données et ont permis une meilleure compréhension de sa culture préhistorique, de ses origines ainsi que des motifs de son déclin. Une étude en profondeur des gravures rupestres et des idéogrammes de l'île constitue une partie des recherches en cours. L'art rupestre, en tant que composant idéologique d'un système social, peut se révéler une grosse source d'information au sujet des divers aspects de la culture, nous permettant d'entrevoir le règne des songes, des mythes, des rituels, des cérémonies et de la cosmographie.

Riassunto: La preistoria dell'isola di Pasqua è stata finora mal compresa a causa, in particolare, delle singolari circostanze che provocarono la decimazione della popolazione insulare. Una delle conseguenze è stata la proliferazione di teorie temerarie e di ipotesi inverosimili. Comunque, recenti lavori archeologici eseguiti in loco hanno portato alla luce numerosi nuovi dati e hanno permesso una migliore comprensione della cultura preistorica, delle origini e dei motivi del declino di quest'isola. Uno studio in profondità delle incisioni e ideogrammi costituisce un aspetto degli studi in corso. L'arte rupestre, come componente ideologico di un sistema sociale, può rivelarsi grossa fonte d'informazioni sui diversi aspetti della cultura preistorica, lasciando apparire un mondo di sogni, miti, riti, cerimonie e visioni celesti.

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