



Bringing back the Birdman

RESTORING COLOUR TO THE SACRED CULT OF EASTER ISLAND

Early visitors to Easter Island recorded strange designs of a mysterious being. Now, using the latest technology and ancient records, **Paul Horley**, **Georgia Lee**, and **Paul Bahn** have restored glorious colour to the sacred site of Orongo, home of the mystical birdman.

The first Europeans reached the shores of Easter Island, Rapa Nui, in 1722 – on Easter Sunday, thus giving the remote island its distinctive name. Just a century later, the society that produced the famous *moai*, recognisable the world over, was in serious decline.

Overpopulation and overuse of natural resources reached crisis point, and the islanders descended into tribal conflict. Warfare drastically changed the social order: the king's power was diminished, and the island gradually fell under the control of tribal warrior chiefs. Within decades, the colossal statues on the ceremonial platforms, or *ahu*, were overthrown. By the time John Linton Palmer, ship's surgeon aboard HMS *Topaze*, arrived in 1868, no *moai* was standing on a platform. Yet, out of this chaos came a completely new order: the rule of the sacred birdman.

This drastic change not only had a profound impact on island society, it also brought with it a completely new art form. The carved rocks of Orongo village, the centre of birdman ceremonies, are vivid testimonies to the glory of this emergent cult.

It was in one of the houses of Orongo village that the crew of the *Topaze* came across a half-buried *moai*, which they brought back to England where it now can be seen in the British Museum in London. This statue, called Hoa Hakananai'a, is beautifully sculpted from black basalt and carved onto its back are the usual ring-and-girdle motifs. However, new designs have also been introduced.

Two strange looking creatures – half man, half bird – crouch facing each other. Above them is a stylised bird, and on either side there are ceremonial paddles (*ao*) and depictions of fertility symbols (*komari*)

– these last reflecting the emphasis placed on fertility during this troublesome period of Easter Island's history. The link to birds is also significant. Sea birds were believed to be messengers from the gods, able to reach the nightly underworld, and then return at the light of the day.

Hoa Hakananai'a, therefore, represents the transition between the classical culture, with its emphasis on megalithic statues, and the new birdman rule.

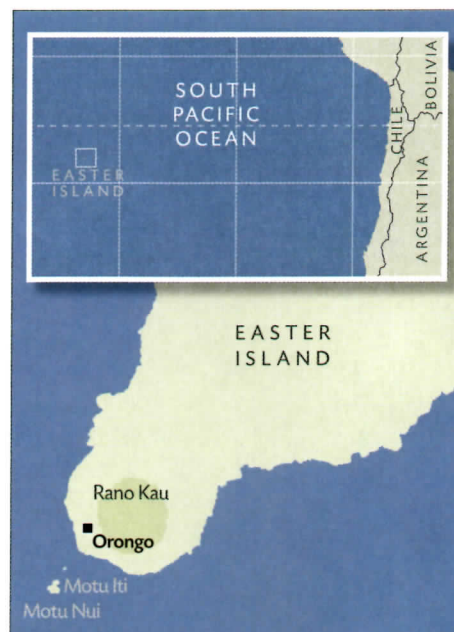
A good egg

The birdman, or *tangata manu*, was appointed annually following a competition in Austral spring (September) – see box p.22. The participants gathered in the ceremonial village of Orongo, perched on the lip of the crater Rano Kau some 300m (985ft) above the roaring surf, a place of breathtaking beauty overlooking the Pacific. This spectacular location is



LEFT Panoramic view of the crater Rano Kau with Orongo village, centre of the birdman cult on Easter Island.

INSET Painted slab with facing birdmen belonging to the collections of the Museo Antropológico Padre Sebastián Englert (MAPSE) Easter Island.



to Easter Island, most notably Katherine Routledge in 1914-1915, as well as information obtained from archaeological study of the ceremonial village itself. We also have expedition records from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, of which arguably the most important comes from the 1868 visit by surgeon John Linton Palmer.

Palmer was much fascinated by Mata Ngarahu; he wrote: *At the end of this settlement... almost all the blocks of lava are more or less sculptured; but as they are weatherworn, and the material perishable and overgrown, it is difficult to make out the design – so much that I made a coloured sketch... without perceiving at the time that the one represented a face, which quite startled me on looking at my work. I wish I could have*

spent some hours, nay, the whole night, up there, working away with my pencil; but at 2.30 was the last boat, and so duty called me away from a most interesting place.

Palmer was a gifted painter. Many of his watercolours show the famous statues, the island's landscapes, tattoo designs, and characteristic woodcarvings. The collection of his work at London's Royal Geographical Society includes three previously unpublished paintings of the decorations of Orongo village.

One of these shows a boulder with a face carved on its extremity (see p.21). The very same rock was documented photographically by William Safford in 1886, during the American expedition led by William Judah Thomson. Comparison of Palmer's watercolour and Safford's ▶

exposed to strong winds and pouring rain, so about 50 elliptical drystone houses were constructed to provide shelter from the elements. The ceremonial heart of Orongo is the sacred precinct of Mata Ngarahu, constructed over a natural basalt outcrop. Each stone here is adorned with stylised images of birdmen and large-eyed masks representing the chief deity Makemake.

Our knowledge about the birdman cult comes from the living memory of the islanders recorded by early visitors

THE MOAI OF EASTER ISLAND

Easter Island is a tiny speck of land lost in the seemingly boundless East Pacific. Its Polynesian name Rapa Nui was adopted in the second half of the 19th century. The island is world-famous for its monolithic statues: *moai*, which stood on ceremonial platforms, or *ahu*, around the coast. These figures, representing venerated ancestors, were carved in quarries at the extinct volcano of Rano Raraku. According to the islanders, the *moai* possessed spiritual power (*mana*) that protected the people living in the villages in front of the ceremonial structures. They were a strong link between ancestors and descendants, between the past and present.





PHOTOS: A Sellkirk

ABOVE The rocks of the sacred precinct Mata Ngarahu are densely carved with birdman motifs in bas-relief.

LEFT Many stylised faces were carved at Orongo; some, as seen here, are thought to represent the chief god Makemake.

photo shows that Palmer caught the essential details of the scene, allowing positive identification of every rock in his painting. This is crucial because not only does it prove that Palmer's work was accurate and trustworthy, but the watercolour is one of only three images that show this particular rock with a face carving. The original boulder is now gone: between 1905 and 1914, it slid down the cliffs of Rano Kau into the roaring surf.

Palmer was also the first person to document graphically the painted slabs inside the houses of Orongo. These paintings were made with red and white pigments, probably mixed with shark-liver oil as a binding agent. This choice of colours has deep roots in Polynesian culture. Red was sacred – the colour of life, and associated with sacred power (*mana*) and the god Makemake. White backgrounds were essential to create a visual contrast to the red pigment on greyish-brown stone slabs set inside the dark interiors of Orongo's windowless houses with their narrow entrances.

With the passing years, the pigments have dried and faded, so that out of scores of paintings existing in Orongo in the 19th century, only about a dozen survive today. Therefore, Palmer's watercolours

showing these paintings in full colour contain invaluable information about the aesthetics and iconography of the ancient islanders. Of course, documentation of painted slabs inside the houses was well beyond the reach of 19th-century photography. Palmer's watercolours record the paintings otherwise known only from a single set of photographs taken by Safford 18 years later. An unusual two-headed bird was a variation of a classical sooty tern design. The exact meaning of this design is unknown, but it is quite frequent in the rock art and *rongo*, the mysterious script of Easter Island. The large frigate bird image has a characteristic curved beak. Thanks to Palmer's watercolours, we know that the fading pigment of the bird's eyes was black – though this is far from obvious in the monochrome historical photographs.

Paddle with power

One of Palmer's watercolours from Orongo documents an entire composition made of four motifs depicted on a single slab (see right). In the central position there is a ceremonial paddle or oar (*ao*). In the Rapa Nui language, *ao* also means 'governing power', so that the depiction of the oar was a personified image of an authority symbol. Thus, the oar design has explicit human-like features: a clear face with eyes and nose, a ceremonial feather headdress above it, and a painted or tattooed body, as denoted by numerous red-and-white stripes.

The actual specimens of *ao* collected in the 19th century are very impressive, reaching over 2m (6ft) in length; some of them are painted red and white, in full accordance with Palmer's watercolour. Several *ao* paintings were documented in the 20th century; some were rescued from leaking houses and deposited in the island's Anthropological Museum. However, none of the known paintings is comparable with the *ao* in Palmer's picture.

Once again, Palmer's brush saved for posterity a long-lost, unique painted composition. It depicts a ceremonial paddle accompanied by two birdmen and another object – possibly a stylised depiction of a plant or marine creature.

The number of paintings once adorning Orongo houses is impressive: only a handful of wall-paintings are known elsewhere on the island, hidden in caves. Are these the only vestiges of the use of colour in architecture? Were the numerous birdman petroglyphs of the sacred precinct of Mata Ngarahu – as well as those scattered among the houses of Orongo village – also adorned with paint? If so, do we have enough data to reconstruct Orongo, albeit tentatively, as it looked when the birdman competitions were still occurring? Here, again, Palmer's expedition makes a contribution.

BELOW John Linton Palmer painted this previously unpublished watercolour in 1868. The handwritten caption explains that this motif appeared on a side-slab fronting the entrance of a large stone house.



IMAGE: courtesy Royal Geographical Society with IBG



LEFT In another previously unpublished watercolour of 1868, Palmer depicts a carved rock with a protruding face (in the foreground). The rock has since disappeared into the sea.

BELOW LEFT A photographic image of the rock group taken by William Safford in 1886, documenting the same boulder with the protruding face still in its place.

BELOW Georgia Lee's photograph of the site shows the precarious location of carved boulders on top of the cliff – and the gap where the missing boulder with the protruding face once sat.



IMAGES: courtesy Royal Geographical Society with IBG, National Anthropological Archives, G Lee & Bancroft Library

Painted moai

The published accounts of Palmer's visit to the island briefly mention that the *moai* Hoa Hakananai'a, found inside the house at Orongo, was painted red and white. The pigments were mostly wiped away when the statue was dragged on its back down the slopes of Rano Kau, and then rafted to the ship. As it stood on deck aboard ship during the entire journey to Europe, exposed to the elements, the driving rains at sea removed still more colour. Once at the British Museum, it was exhibited in the exterior portico for a long time, seemingly erasing all hope of discovering anything about its original paint. However, some hints of original colours can still be glimpsed in historical photographs – and even, most surprisingly, on the statue itself.

One of the earliest photographs illustrating the back of the statue shows that its bas-relief carvings were marked in white. Was this simply an outline or a completely white-washed background, as seen in Orongo paintings? We believe that a solid background is most probable. This theory is substantiated by two birdman

rocks inside the houses of Mata Ngarahu that still preserve traces of a uniform white background.

The historical photo of Hoa Hakananai'a seems to show that the ceremonial paddles (*ao*) featured a set of horizontal lines, similar to those seen in Palmer's watercolour, suggesting that the *ao* were usually painted as they are portrayed on the painted slabs inside Orongo houses.

BELOW Palmer's watercolour (1868, previously unpublished) of a two-headed bird and a stylised frigate bird.

RIGHT Safford's photograph (1886) of painted slabs, including the two-headed bird depicted by Palmer.



Incredibly, given the statue's exposure to rain for so many years, digital image processing revealed traces of red on the statue's back.

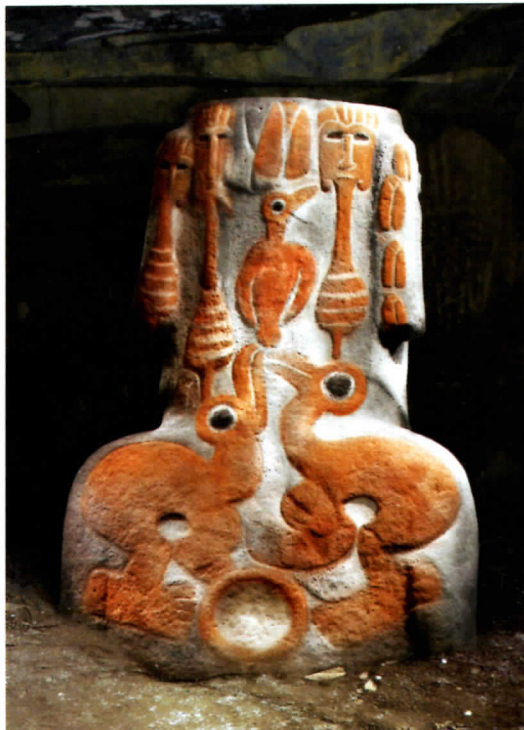
Red was a colour favoured by the ancient Easter Islanders: they applied it to wood carvings and their paper-mulberry clothing, as well as using it to paint their bodies. The red pigment *ki'ea* was generally made from red-coloured ➤



IMAGES: courtesy Royal Geographical Society with IBG, National Anthropological Archives

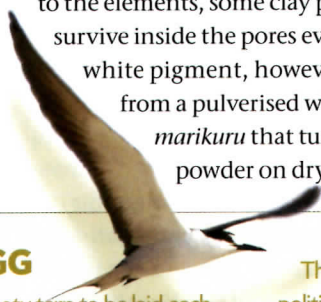
clay. Though this clay is sticky when wet, once dry it falls off easily. Indeed, there is a charming Rapa Nui story that relates how a trickster named Ure Pooi played a practical joke on the girls by making the roosters sing long before dawn. The girls awoke and, believing it was morning, began their preparations for that evening's feast, painting their faces with *ki'ea*. But, as they had got up too early, the pigment dried and fell off before they reached the feast. If *ki'ea* did not hold on girls' faces for a day, how could it possibly survive for more than a century on *moai* Hoa Hakananai'a?

The answer lies in the statue's porous basalt rock. As the *moai* was painted several times – for it is safe to assume the pigment was reapplied annually for the birdman ceremony – these pores were tightly stuffed with multiple layers of reddish clay. And, though *ki'ea* has problems when attached to a smooth surface (this is why so many Orongo paintings have not survived), it would become imbedded, layer upon layer, within the tiny holes on the porous surface of the



ABOVE A digital reconstruction of the paintings on the back of Hoa Hakananai'a as it may have appeared when found half-buried inside a house in Orongo village.

statue; so, even after prolonged exposure to the elements, some clay particles would survive inside the pores even today. The white pigment, however, was made from a pulverised white tuff called *marikuru* that turns into a fine powder on drying. It would



not stick to the pores' walls as the clayish *ki'ea* did, and so has not survived.

Looking at digitally enhanced images of Hoa Hakananai'a, one can see that the carvings of *ao*, the bird, and birdmen display many traces of red pigment. The bottom part of the *moai* also features large red-coloured areas, which is unsurprising since the statue was buried to waist level in the reddish soil at Orongo. The independent confirmation that bas-relief carvings were painted red – similar to those stones at Mata Ngarahu with preserved white pigment covering the entire background of the carving – comes from a boulder collected in 1905 by Alexander Agassiz's expedition (now in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Cambridge, Massachusetts), which shows traces of red pigment in rock pores.

Therefore, basing our case on the evidence of colour-use in painted slabs inside houses, historical photographs of *moai* Hoa Hakananai'a, pigment traces seen in carved rocks, as well as

THE BIRDMAN AND THE EGG

According to tradition, the first egg of the sooty tern to be laid each year overflowed with *mana* (power). He who found it was anointed birdman of Easter Island for the year. Later, the participants used proxies, or *hopu*, who would compete on their behalf. The competitors had to climb down the cliff of Rano Kau, and swim about 1.5km (1 mile) through the rough sea to the offshore islet of Motu Nui, where the birds made their nests each spring. They waited there, sometimes for weeks, for the birds to start laying. The man who found the first egg signalled to Orongo, announcing that his patron was to become birdman, before swimming back to the island, climbing back up to Orongo and presenting the magical egg.

The newly proclaimed birdman shaved his head, eyebrows, and eyelashes. He also took a new name, which was then adopted as the name of the year; this provided a chronology of sorts. In 1914–1915, the British archaeologist Katherine Routledge recorded almost 100 such names, directly from informants who participated in birdman ceremonies.

The birdman, or *tangata manu*, then danced and sang his way from Orongo to his new residence at the quarries of Rano Raraku or in the former royal residence at Anakena, where he lived, in seclusion, for the entire year, in a grass-thatched house shaped like an overturned boat. He spent his days sitting in the hut's shadow, serving as a kind of oracle to visitors who brought him food, and abstained from bathing or cutting his fingernails and hair. Meanwhile, his tribe enjoyed pan-island power – which was often abused by tribe members who plundered the fields of rival clans.

Though in theory each group had the chance to win this privilege, politics and power played an important role: not every tribe was actually allowed to take part in the competition.

We do not know the exact origins of the birdman cult. However, it was synchronised with the seasonal arrival of birds and pelagic fish, so it seems probable it emerged in response to the needs of an extended island population that required better management of food resources. Later, the competition became a hugely important social event, enduring until 1867 when, according to folklore, the last birdman was Rué, who took the name Rokunga.

BELOW View towards the bird islets of Motu Nui (left), Motu Iti (centre) and Motu Kaokao (right) from the courtyard area of Mata Ngarahu, Orongo. Every boulder here is carved with birdman designs.



IMAGES: Trustees of the British Museum; National Anthropological Archives



The distinctive face of *moai* Hoa Hakananai'a (ABOVE); carvings on the back of the statue (ABOVE CENTRE); 19th-century photograph showing white symbol outlines (ABOVE RIGHT); the modern image enhanced, to show traces of red pigment in rock pores (ABOVE FAR RIGHT).

computer-enhanced images of the statue, we have been able to create a tentative reconstruction of the statue's back as it was painted at the times of the *tangata manu* ceremonies, inside a large house in Orongo village. We suggest that the eyes of the birdmen, bird, and *ao* were black, just as they were painted on the slabs adorning

house interiors seen today in the museums, as well as on Palmer's watercolours.

The resulting image shows that the use of colour was necessary to emphasise the reliefs carved on the statue standing inside the stone house, with its sole source of light coming through the narrow entrance passage at ground level. Such a dark space would have needed a white background to highlight the carvings on the statue's back, and ensure they were clearly visible. Moreover, the consistent use of colour, both to highlight the carvings of *moai* Hoa Hakananai'a and in the two-dimensional

murals of Orongo, establishes a 'bridge' between the two domains.

Clearly, exposure to rain will damage the paintings. However, there is a striking difference between plain-surface and bas-relief paintings: the latter are resistant to colour-mixing. Indeed, while the pigment from elevated areas may filter to some degree over a white background, the white pigment does ▶

BELOW Stone houses of Orongo village, constructed of dry-laid basalt slabs. The foreground four-entrance house, called *Taura Renga*, once sheltered the *moai* called Hoa Hakananai'a.



PHOTO: P. Horley



ABOVE Tentative reconstruction of painted petroglyphs at Mata Ngarahu, based on Georgia Lee's photograph of the sacred site.

not get washed over the red bas-reliefs. As a result, the designs stand out well in their correct colours without much smudging, even after prolonged rainfall.

Waking the birdman

If there are carved rocks with traces of paint inside the Mata Ngarahu houses, could the entire sacred precinct have been painted? We think that the chances of this are reasonably high. Application of colour may have been considered an important act associated with replenishing their sacred power (*mana*).

It is not too fanciful to envisage the act of painting being an important part of the ceremony during which the names of all the birdmen carved on the boulders of Mata Ngarahu were invoked. With their eyes painted black, the images would be 'awakened' to life, much as the island's monumental statues were when their coral eyes with obsidian pupils were inserted into their eye sockets.

Traditionally, the black pigment on Easter Island was prepared from charred

leaves of a *Cordyline* plant, mixed with sugar-cane juice. The Rapa Nui name of the sacred precinct, Mata Ngarahu, translates as the 'soot eyes' – making a perfect reference to the place where each rock literally stares back at the beholder with a multitude of soot-black eyes painted on *tangata manu* reliefs and Makemake face masks.

For the annual competition, the re-painting of Mata Ngarahu petroglyphs may well have functioned as an official opening ceremony, thereby preparing the site for selection of the new sacred ruler who would bring abundant food and prosperity to the island throughout the following year. ■

FURTHER READING

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SOURCES Dr Paul Horley, Dr Georgia Lee, and Dr Paul Bahn are rock-art specialists.

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