Comparing the Syllabary and Logography Models of the Rongorongo Glyphic Script of Easter Island (Rapa Nui)

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In the 1950s, Ventris deciphered Cretan Linear B as a syllabary encoding archaic Greek. Contemporaneously, Knorosov showed the enigmatic Mayan glyphs to be, dominantly, a syllabary (encoding the now dead Ch'olti' language). Both decipherments reinforced the conclusion that all writing systems contain significant phonetic component.

Rongorongo is comprised of approximately 300 distinct glyphs. Its 53 most frequent forms (and allographs) encompass 99.7% of the corpus[1]. Glyph frequencies approximately match the frequencies of occurrence of Rapanui language syllables[2]. Likewise, average length of linked glyphs (multi-syllable proxies) and stand-alone singles nearly equals the average syllable length of words in transcribed Rapanui[3]. Such similarities motivate the conclusion that *rongorongo* is a syllabary, perhaps including some logograms. Yet, the syllabary model has shortcomings including observed differences in distribution of single syllable glyphs vis-à-vis short words encountered in the language[4], and lack of agreement regarding which glyphs map onto which language syllables[5].

Although the glyph vocabulary of the logographic model draws significantly from Jaussen's List[6] of imperfect eyewitness recollections there's some consensus among epigraphers regarding the subjects depicted in the various glyph motifs (*viz.* fish, birds, lunar crescents). Nevertheless, logographers struggle to expand Pozdniakovs' meagre 53-glyph inventory onto core Rapanui language vocabulary. Ingenuity becomes necessary to build lexicon. Strategies include the presupposition of a telegram format to eliminate common particles[7] and application of Kizilova's[8] approximation that a given Rapanui word can represent either verb, noun, adjective, or participle. Moreover, glyphs may be multi-purposed via literary devices such as metonyms, synecdoches, rebuses, metaphors and homonyms. The resultant (logographic) model then becomes dominantly non-phonetic.

I examine the strengths and weaknesses of the syllabary and logography models for *rongorongo*. Despite its cumbrous nature, a logography seems to be most effective for emulating the *rongorongo* as it is presented upon the preserved artifacts.

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