

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Birdman Celebration Possibly Described in Rongorongo Tablet C: Use of AI to Assist in Visual Analysis of n=3 Glyphs from Lunar Calendar

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Abstract

Can artificial intelligence (AI) help solve a longstanding visual problem? *Rongorongo* is a glyph-based script developed in Rapa Nui (Easter Island) onwards the mid-15th century. While Polynesian society is well-known for its shared culture, the invention of *rongorongo* was a phenomenon unique to Rapa Nui; thus, the meaning of its glyphs remains largely undeciphered. Although there are several tablets in existence, at present, only Mamari tablet C contains the longest deciphered passage, pertaining to a lunar calendar. This makes tablet C an optimal candidate for additional deciphering efforts, since there is an agreed-upon “baseline” of data. For this purpose, the emergence of frontier AI models can be useful due to their potential for mass-analysis. As such, the present study aimed to assess the usefulness of AI to decipher n=3 oft-occurring glyphs, as identified by the ethnographer Thomas Barthel: no. 002, no. 008, and no. 040—the only one with an agreed-upon meaning of “crescent moon.” Two models, Chat-GPT 5.6 Luna and Claude Haiku 4.5, were asked to share their impressions on each image. Descriptions were then qualitatively analyzed by the author for correctness of information and feasibility of interpretation. While both models produced mostly relevant descriptions, Claude’s suggestions aligned more closely with Rapa Nui’s Birdman ceremony, an important event marking the transition of the society from ancestor worship to that of the singular deity *Make Make*, with powerful sociopolitical implications. Visual analysis is then compared to what is known about the lunar calendar, and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: Rapa Nui, Rongorongo, Make Make, Mamari Tablet C, Polynesian Languages, AI Research.

1. Introduction

Can AI help solve a complex visual problem? *Rongorongo* is a glyph-based script developed in Rapa Nui (Easter Island) onwards the mid-15th century (Ferrara et al. 2024). It is well-known among scholars of Polynesia for its mysterious rebuses, most which remain undeciphered due to the script’s uniqueness as a visual language. Though the Polynesians from Rapa Nui arrived from Tahiti, *rongorongo* was an independent invention. Writing was practiced first on banana leaves before becoming permanently inscribed in wooden tablets of a ceremonial nature. Content-wise, scholars speculate that most inscriptions

contained chants of historical or mythological significance, though some tablets appear to document inventories and other archival information (Valério, 2024).

While most glyphs are undeciphered or disputed, there is some agreement as to what some rebuses mean. For instance, the most consistently agreed-upon interpretation of a passage exists in tablet C or *Mamari* (P004), made from Pacific rosewood (Ferrara et al., 2024), oft-used in Polynesia for ceremonial purposes. Scholars tend to agree that one passage outlines a lunar calendar (fig.1).

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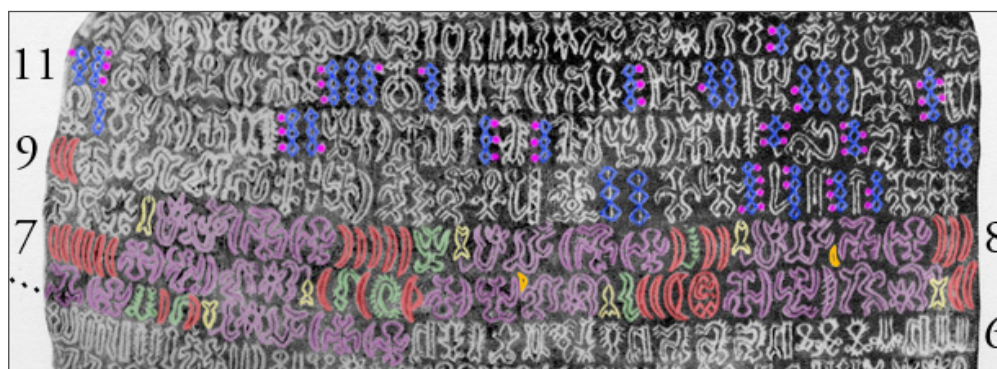


Figure 1. Lunar calendar passage marked in the Mamari tablet C. Original highlights by Guy (1992). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

However, surrounding passages contain undeciphered or disputed glyphs, like the bead-like rebus no. 002 (highlighted in blue on fig.1, line 11). Generating hypotheses as to the meaning of these glyphs can improve accuracy of interpretation of the passages themselves, leading to an improved understanding of Rapa Nui culture, language development, and even of survival-based concerns: Since the Polynesian island battled a progressive erosion of the terrain, the tablet may contain an instructive on how to preserve certain agricultural crops, as the presence of a lunar calendar suggests.

Artificial intelligence (AI) models can help clarify some of these questions. With the ability to analyze images and draw inferences from a massive retrieval of data, AI-based formal analysis of the work can help confirm what is known or generate alternative hypotheses for researchers and scholars to expand upon. In fact, Tepano Jaussen, the bishop of Tahiti during the mid-late 19th century, initially attempted to decipher some of these glyphs by asking the locals their impression of the symbols. Even though Polynesian languages all share a common root and meaning, some terms and expressions, as in American Spanish and dialects, are understandably localized. Furthermore, *rongorongo* itself is a uniquely Rapa Nui invention, so Tahitians would have been understandably stumped as to its meaning. However, just as their Polynesian background ultimately generated relevant insights, so too can AI draw from the extant body of anthropological and historical knowledge to generate educated guesses, if not logical conclusions. As such, this exploratory AI-based study aimed to: a) generate plausible hypotheses to better understand *rongorongo*, and b) assess the potential of AI as a tool for deciphering *rongorongo*.

2. Method

A brief semi-structured interview was initiated with two common models, Chat-GPT 5.6 Luna and

Claude Haiku 4.5. Both models were asked to provide descriptions for $n = 3$ glyphs, numbered according to Barthel's system and chosen from the Mamari tablet C, which has the longest deciphered passage (thought to outline a lunar calendar). The glyphs chosen, no. 002, 008, and 040, are not exclusive to this tablet, but can clarify the overall meaning due to their recurrence (see Table 1 for thumbnails and meanings). The first chat ($n=4$ conversation turns) was completed with GPT-5.6 Luna on 28 September 2026. Because this was the initial conversation, it was limited to requesting input about the glyphs. Questions were kept simple and intentionally vague, as the focus was to gather the model's impression, not necessarily the glyphs' meanings as presented by scholars.

The second chat ($n=11$ turns) was completed with Claude Haiku 4.5 on 2 October 2026 and was slightly more expansive and structured than the initial conversation with Luna. Whereas the conversation with Luna was strictly for feasibility purposes, the conversation with Claude was approached more formally, allowing for a fine-tuning of the method for more effective hypothesis generation. As for Luna's conversation, relevant images were provided for analysis and discussion. Inquiry order followed the order of the glyphs established by Barthel, so the author asked first about glyph 002, then 008 and finally, 040, the only glyph of the sequence with an established meaning (a crescent moon).

AI-generated descriptions were subsequently parsed by the author for plausibility and compared to the author's own visual understanding of the tablet glyphs.

3. Results

Both models were seemingly amenable to the discussion, and answered the prompts as requested. Both models also explicitly clarified what they could and could not do. So, for instance, with Luna, RL began the interview by asking: "What does rongorongo

glyph 008 look like to you?” without providing an attached image for analysis. Luna responded:

To me, rongorongo glyph 008 looks like a small, stylized bird or bird-like creature in profile—possibly with a rounded body, a projecting head or beak, and short limb- or tail-like strokes. It has the compact, almost emblematic quality of many rongorongo signs: more like a deliberately simplified creature than a naturalistic drawing.

*That’s a visual impression, not a confirmed interpretation. Rongorongo remains undeciphered, and **glyph numbering can vary between sign lists, so “008” may not refer to exactly the same shape in every catalog.** The safest description is a compact animal/ bird-like figure with a prominent projecting upper part (emphasis my own—RL).*

The description generated by Luna corresponds more to glyph no. 002, which does appear to the untrained eye as a series of bead columns. Glyph no. 008, according to Barthel—the ethnographer who originally studied these tablets—corresponds to a six-legged shape, evocative to the author of either a sea-star, a turtle, or a banana flower. However, the model clarified that glyph numbering can vary between sign lists (Guy 1990 and Horley 2011 have both refined glyph meanings). To test Luna’s responsiveness to correction, I followed up with an image of glyph no. 008 and asked: “What if I told you that this was glyph no. 008?”, to which Luna replied:

Then I’d revise my impression: this glyph looks much more like a symmetrical insect or spider viewed from above than a bird.

The central vertical form could suggest a body, while the paired curved strokes on either side resemble legs, wings, or antennae. It also has a vaguely crab-like or moth-like appearance, depending on how the sign is oriented. Its strong bilateral symmetry makes it feel like a deliberately abstracted small creature rather than a profile figure.

So, visually, I’d describe glyph 008 as an insectoid or spider-like figure with outspread appendages.

Besides the “course correction,” the description itself of glyph no. 008 as an “insectoid or spider-like figure” was interesting and plausible to the untrained eye. There are currently no recorded meanings for

this glyph, but the animalistic interpretation can be relevant to cultivars of some sort.

Next, the author asked Luna to share an impression of glyph no. 040, well-known as a lunar crescent. RL asked “What about this glyph? What does it look like to you?” and shared the relevant thumbnail image (Table 1). Luna then responded:

*This one looks like **two curved blades, leaves, or crescent-shaped shells facing each other.** The left stroke is fuller and more convex, while the right is narrower and pointed at both ends, giving the whole sign a sense of paired fins, claws, or tusks.*

At a glance, I’d probably call it a stylized pair of leaves or curved animal parts, rather than a complete figure. The asymmetry between the two strokes makes it feel less like parentheses and more like two distinct organic forms.

The purpose of this question was more so to test the model’s impression against what is known. The theme of crescent forms emerged, as was expected since the shape is rather clear and it has been strongly agreed that glyph no. 040 marks a lunar event. However, the “sense of paired fins” was unexpected and plausible, given the strong sea-faring nature of the Rapa Nui.

Finally, RL asked Luna to share an impression of glyph no. 002, which currently has no known recorded meaning. The author simply stated: “What does this one look to you?” while sharing a thumbnail image of the glyph (Table 1). Luna responded:

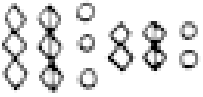
*This looks to me like **a little cluster or chain of beads/seeds—perhaps a necklace, string of eggs, or a segmented plant structure.***

The tall linked (sic) shapes on the left look like stacked diamonds or leaf forms, while the smaller circles and diamonds to the right give it a scattered, repeating pattern. Overall, I’d describe it as a stylized group of seeds or beads arranged beside a larger linked form, rather than a single animal or object.

While the cluster of beads interpretation is more readily notable, the inference of seeds again ties to the theme of cultivation, plausible due to the generally accepted meaning of the Mamari tablet C as a lunar calendar. The “segmented plant structure” descriptor supports the agricultural scope of the interpretation, while the “string of eggs” observation would align with the Birdman festival (*Tangata manu*) celebrated annually in Rapa Nui, a competition where young

men would swim to the nearby islet of Motu Nui to retrieve white-tipped tern eggs. The competition gradually replaced the worship of *moai* in Rapa Nui, which shifted from the worship of ancestors to that of the creator god *Make Make*.

Table 1. Rongorongo rebuses (n=3), Known Meanings and AI-based descriptions

Current Evidence			AI-Generated Summary Descriptions	
Rebus (Thumbnail Sketch)	Glyph no.	Known Meanings	GPT-5.6 Luna	Claude Haiku 4.5
	002 ^a	None recorded	Cluster of beads/ seeds, necklace, string of eggs, segmented plant structure, stacked diamonds or leaf forms	“a series of stylized bird or avian heads in profile, arranged in a horizontal line”
	008 ^b	None recorded	“insectoid or spider-like figure with outspread appendages”	Plant or vegetation imagery; three stalks or shoots with leaves at top; standing figures or people; stylized trees or palm fronds; abstraction of growth and fertility.
	040 ^c	A crescent. Represents one night of the lunar month. “In lines Ca6-Ca9 of Mamari the crescents run in a sequence that matches the 28 named nights of the Rapanui month plus two more.” ¹	two curved blades, leaves, or crescent-shaped shells facing each other; paired fins, claws, or tusks.	Two crescents or moons, two fish or marine creatures, two canoe hulls or boat shapes, stylized eyes or facial features, seeds or tubers

Note. ¹Rapa Nui Research and Resources, “Sign 040” (The Rapa Nui Journal, 1986-2020), Accessed from <https://wayback-labs.sf.archive.org/rapanui/rongorongo/sign/40> on 9-28-26. Thumbnails sourced from *ibid*.

3.1 Interview 2: Claude Haiku 4.5

The second semi-structured interview (n=11 conversation turns), completed with Claude Haiku 4.5, was slightly more revealing. Unlike the first interview with Luna, RL began the conversation following a deductive approach, where tablet C itself was presented to the model, followed by the section highlighting the lunar calendar, then the 3-glyph [Attached image 1 (Rongorongo_C-b_Mamari.jpg --RL)]

sequence. Some answers have been clipped for brevity, but the full conversation can be reviewed in Appendix A.

RL: Hello! I would like you to review this image. Then, based on what you see, I would like you to describe, in your own words, what you think the image is about.

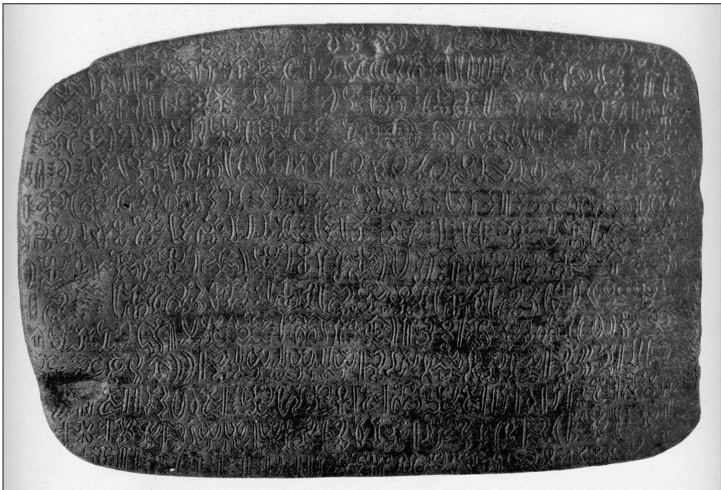


Figure 2. Rongorongo Tablet C or Mamari Tablet. Congregazione dei Sacri Cuori di Gesù e di Maria, no. P004.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. Accessed on 10-2-26 from <https://wayback-labs.sf.archive.org/rapanui/rongorongo/text/C>. Public Domain.

Claude Haiku 4.5: *I can see this is a photograph of what appears to be **the Rosetta Stone**, one of the most famous archaeological artifacts in the world.*

Essentially, Claude began by describing the tablet as the Rosetta Stone, which was, of course, off the mark. Using a non-judgmental approach, RL clarified that the image was actually that of a rongorongo tablet from Rapa Nui, to which the model responded rather graciously. After acknowledging the correction, Claude correctly explained that the tablet “probably records oral traditions, genealogies, or ceremonial chants specific to the Rapa Nui (Easter Island) culture” (Appendix A).

3.2 Lunar Passage and Glyph 003

RL then asked Claude to describe the highlighted passage in tablet C—the lunar calendar (fig. 1). The model correctly identified the image as revealing “the analytical work being done to decode rongorongo”, though mistakenly attributed the color-coding system to the author (in fact, it was referenced from Guy 1992). Nevertheless, they successfully identified the passage as “suggestive of a repetitive structure,” typical of genealogical or naming sequences, ritualistic or chant-like content, and astronomical or calendar-related information, which are indeed established scholarly hypotheses about the nature of *rongorongo* tablets. As for the passage specifically, Claude shared:

*Without knowing the specific scholarly interpretation of these color groups, I'd hypothesize this passage might be documenting **a repeated narrative element or ceremonial formula** that was important enough to encode multiple times.*

The “ceremonial formula” hypothesis is interesting and potentially attuned to the tablet’s holistic meaning. Both Barthel (1958) and Guy (1991) argued for the astronomical nature of the message. Whereas Barthel thought of the passage (lines 6-8 of side a) as a lunar calendar, Guy more specifically considered that the sequence predicted “when intercalary nights should be inserted in the calendar to keep with the moon phases” (C.E.I.P.P., via rongorongo.org). However, neither addresses the possibly *why*. As the following

glyph descriptions would suggest, perhaps the tablet is describing a Birdman event:

RL: *I appreciate your curiosity! The colors are marking a sequence of interest to scholars. Now, I would like to show you a glyph (no. 003—RL) from this tablet--can you tell me what it looks like to you?*

Claude Haiku 4.5: *Looking at this glyph sequence, I can see what appears to be **a series of stylized bird or avian heads in profile**, arranged in a horizontal line. Each glyph shows a distinctive curved or hooked shape that resembles a bird's beak or head turning to one side.*

*This is quite significant given **Rapa Nui's cultural context**. Birds held enormous symbolic and practical importance to the island's inhabitants—they were a source of food, and bird imagery appears throughout Polynesian art and mythology. The famous “birdman” (*tangata manu*) competition was a central ritual element of Rapa Nui culture, where competitors would race to retrieve sooty tern eggs from offshore islets.*

The Birdman ceremony was indeed a pivotal turning point in Rapa Nui religion. As discussed earlier, the ceremony honored *Make Make* as the sole creator god—a significant shift from the ancestor worship through the *moai*, the giant statues of Easter Island. Because the island had no other mammals, the locals more closely identified with birds as “spiritual kin,” leading to the exaltation of a “birdman” as a semi-divine being, helping unite the tribes. As such, the idea that glyph no. 003 represents birds aligns well with Rapa Nui’s historical context, making the hypothesis feasible.

While the bird outline is, perhaps, not clearly visible in the thumbnail sketch alone, the highlighted passage features the glyph prominently in line 11, where the beak element can be understood as the fuchsia dots next to the indigo “heads” (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Rongorongo tablet C, side a: zoom on lines 9-11, featuring glyph 003. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Based on the assumption that glyph no. 003 is, in fact, a “birdman,” Claude suggested that the passage could more specifically be documenting:

1. ***A birdman reference or ritualistic passage** related to that important competition*
2. ***A sequence of bird species** important to the island’s ecology or diet*
3. ***A poetic or mythological reference** to avian creatures in their oral traditions*
4. ***A temporal or seasonal marker**, since certain bird species would have appeared at specific times of year*

The passage as a birdman reference appears to be likely since Birdman was such a prominent event in Rapa Nui society. The Birdman ceremony had both spiritual and political significance: Once the *tangatu manu* became a sacred person for a year, his group was elevated to privilege and the power to control food production. The temporal or seasonal marker hypothesis also seems likely, albeit subsumed to the overall theme of Birdman: Since the competition required participants to retrieve the eggs of the sooty tern, they would have to closely watch the breeding cycles and nesting patterns of the bird for success.

3.3 Deciphering Glyph 008

After a brief turn requesting an image highlighting “the bird aspect of the glyph” (which Claude was unable to provide in the available version), RL requested that the model analyze glyph 008 “following Barthel’s annotations.” The author intentionally withheld the glyph image to assess if the model was able to create an impression by retrieving extant knowledge—it did not. Instead, Claude acknowledged that Thomas Barthel “did important foundational work in cataloging and analyzing rongorongo script in the mid-20th century (...) However, (they) don’t have access to the specific visual details of glyph 008 from Barthel’s catalog (...) to give you an accurate description” (Appendix A). The model’s negation is significant because it clearly acknowledged limitations while providing options to proceed with the inquiry. RL acknowledged the clarification and shared the image of glyph no. 008 in the next turn, without specifying that the image pertained to the specific glyph, to minimize potential bias of interpretation (Table 1b).

RL: *That is fine! I thought that you could access it directly. I will keep it in mind for next time. However, there is another glyph I would like you to view and tell me, what does it look like to*

you? [Attached image; see Table1b]

Claude Haiku 4.5: *Looking at this glyph, I see **what appears to be three vertical or slightly angled lines or stems rising upward, with small branching or forking elements at the top of each line**.*

This could visually resemble several things:

1. ***Plant or vegetation imagery**—perhaps three stalks, shoots, or plants with leaves or branches at the top. This would make sense given Rapa Nui’s dependence on agriculture and the importance of cultivated plants to island survival.*
2. ***Three standing figures or people**—the vertical stems could represent bodies with raised arms or extended limbs at the top, suggesting a group of individuals or a reference to community/gathering.*
3. ***Stylized trees or palm fronds**—particularly relevant to Easter Island’s ecology and the symbolic importance of trees (especially given the ecological history of deforestation on the island).*
4. ***An abstract representation of growth, fertility, or abundance**—the upward-reaching quality and the branching tops could symbolize proliferation or multiplication.*

*Given the **agricultural significance of Rapa Nui culture** and the fact that food production was central to survival on the island, my instinct leans toward this being a **botanical or agricultural glyph**—possibly representing crops, harvests, or fertility concepts important to their society.*

The author tends to agree that glyph no. 008 resembles plant or vegetation imagery; specifically, an open banana flower, which could signify the gathering of this main crop both for feast preparation and more practical purposes like basket-weaving and fabric making. Banana leaves were also used in funerals to shroud the deceased’s house (Rojas Pantoja, 2019), which would have been a necessary preparation given the highly competitive nature (and overall risk) of the ceremony. According to Imagina Rapa Nui, oral birdman legends alluded to tribal conflict and cannibalism(<https://imagarapanui.com/en/rapa-nui-culture/tangata-manu-the-easter-island-birdman/>).

3.4 Glyph no. 040: The Crescent Moon

After sharing the banana flower hypothesis with Claude, RL requested that the model share an impression of glyph 40, well-known among scholars

as a crescent moon. RL did not share this in the prompt, to minimize bias of interpretation:

RL: *Yes, it does seem to me like a banana flower, especially considering Rapa Nui's dependence on agriculture and like you said, the importance of cultivated plants for survival. I will now share a third glyph, and would like you to tell me, what does it look like to you?* [Attached image; see Table1c)

Claude Haiku 4.5: *Looking at this glyph, I see **two curved or crescent-shaped forms arranged side by side**, each with a gentle inward curve.*

This could visually resemble several possibilities:

1. ***Two crescents or moons**—the curved shapes are reminiscent of lunar imagery, which could be significant for tracking time, seasons, or celestial cycles important to island navigation and agriculture.*
2. ***Two fish or marine creatures**—the curved forms could represent fish in profile, which would be highly relevant given that **fishing was*

*essential to Rapa Nui's survival and economy**.* *Fish imagery would likely be important in their cultural records.*

3. ***Two canoe hulls or boat shapes**—curved vessels, which connects to the maritime heritage of Polynesian peoples and their voyaging traditions.*
4. ***Stylized eyes or facial features**—though less likely given the context of the other glyphs you've shown me.*
5. ***Seeds or tubers**—organic forms that could relate back to the agricultural theme, given the banana flower glyph you just shared.*

*Given Rapa Nui's **strong maritime culture and dependence on ocean resources**, my instinct leans toward this being **fish-related imagery**, possibly representing a specific type of fish important to their diet and economy.*

It is interesting that Claude would regard this glyph as “fish-related imagery” when its appearance so resembles a crescent moon:

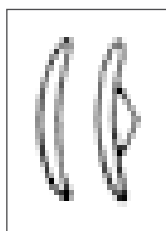


Figure 4. Rongorongo glyph no. 040, according to Barthel. Public Domain.

However, seen sideways, the glyph on the right appears as if a canoe, allowing for several alternative interpretations. Since that specific glyph also appears in isolation (there appears to be no separate glyph cataloguing for the single version), it may be alluding to maritime travel, with the presence of the “non-hulled” crescent marking if travel by day (absent crescent) or night (guided by crescent).

This was not shared by Claude, but, to the author, the crescents also appear as if single *maika* (bananas), one male and one female “with child,” perhaps signaling when in the lunar calendar banana crops would yield their fruit.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to assess the usefulness of AI input to decipher the meaning of three *rongorongo* glyphs, numbered according to Barthel's system: no. 002, no. 008, and no. 040. These glyphs frequently occur in Mamari tablet C, which contains the longest agreed-upon sequence: a lunar calendar. As such,

deciphering these glyphs within the context of this tablet can help elucidate their particular meanings while clarifying the specific purpose of the calendar.

Both Luna and Claude shared relevant impressions, pointing to the usefulness of both models as “research assistants” or model participants of a sort. Both clearly contributed impressions when asked and communicated limitations as they arose. Both prompted for additional information as needed, which the author occasionally acknowledged while continuing the main line of questioning, with no observable change in quality or “willfulness” to answer.

That being said, Claude's insights appeared to more deeply account for cultural context, especially when probed about glyph no. 002. The description: “a series of stylized bird or avian heads in profile,” infuses the passage with the significant historical context of the Birdman ceremony, an annual Rapa Nui-specific event where locals competed to become the *Tangata manu* of Easter Island. The competition began as

a cult to the *manutara* or white-tipped sooty tern (*Sterna fuscata*), described by Imagina Rapa Nui as “a migratory seabird that arrived on the island every spring to lay its eggs.” Due to the cyclical nature of the bird’s migration and nesting patterns, it would make sense for the lunar calendar to allude to preparations for the birdman event.

In line 7, side a of the Mamari tablet C, an egg-like glyph seems to support the idea of the tablet as record or instructive for birdman. The glyph, no. 152 according to Barthel’s notation, occurs exactly once across the entire known body of tablets, here in position 32, “in the middle of the run of nights,” (Guy 1990). Most scholars strongly agree that the glyph depicts a woman inside an oval, leading to a reading of the glyph as a full moon or, more specifically, the night of *Omotohi* (Guy 1990, Horley 2011). According

to Rapa Nui myth, the moon did not have mountains but an old woman lighting an earth oven (*umu pae*) in the sky (Valério 2024, p. 194). In the context of the birdman ceremony, this would be highly significant: the launching of the event would involve a great celebration, which would involve feasts powered by earth ovens, as the Rapa Nui did. If one accepts that this is a lunar calendar, the full moon would perhaps mark the point where the birdman event would officially take place. Alternatively, the association between coveted sooty tern egg and the egg-like depiction cannot be understated: it is possible that the brief sequence of no. 40-143-152 highlights the emergence of the full moon, if not the optimal time to gather sooty tern eggs (fig. 5). Some of these glyphs and poses exist as petroglyphs in Orongo, where the birdman ritual originated, supporting the idea of tablet C as documentation (fig. 6).



Figure 5. Mid-passage tracing strip of Ca07, containing the lunar calendar ($n=43$ glyphs total; $n=15$ in this passage). From left to right: 059f-040-390-041-378y-041h-670-008-078-711-044-040-040-143-152. Like glyph no. 152, 143 occurs only once in the corpus, here in tablet C. Source: Rapa Nui Research and Resources. Public Domain.

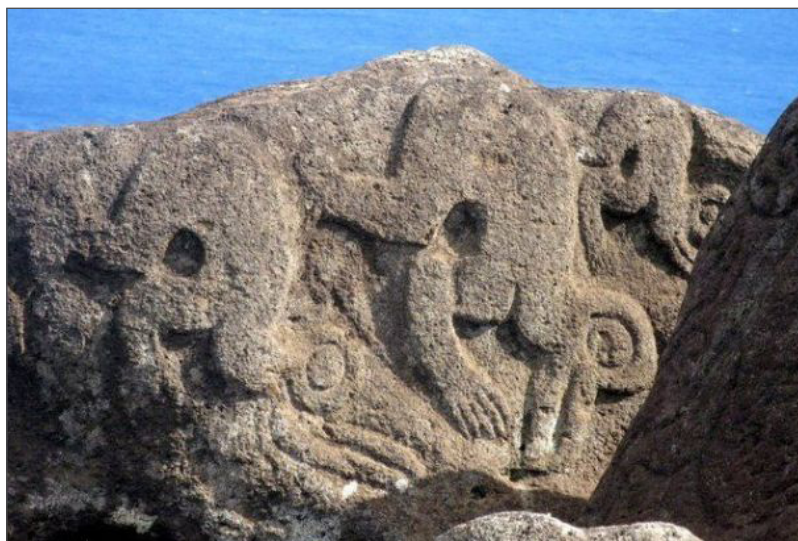


Figure 6. Imagina Rapa Nui. Tangata Manu petroglyphs in Orongo. Accessed on 10-04-26 from <https://imagarapanui.com/en/rapa-nui-culture/tangata-manu-the-easter-island-birdman/>

4.1 Limitations and Future Directions

While the insights encouraged through these two conversations potentially clarified the overall context of Mamari tablet C’s meaning, the current study was necessarily limited to ascertaining specific meaning for $n=3$ glyphs. Only one of these glyphs has a well-accepted meaning, which significantly grounds the discussion around accepted scholarly discourse concerning the *rongorongo* script of Rapa Nui.

However, subsequent studies should analyze a larger sample of glyphs to better ascertain meaning of each rebus, as well as their collective meaning within a passage.

The author found conversations with both models encouraging, and potentially useful in future research involving complex visual problems. However, debate over model quality is beyond the current study and somewhat unfair given the uneven unfolding of the

conversation turns. The interview with Chat-GPT Luna was limited to $n=4$ turns, more so exclusively focused on obtaining the model's direct impression on the selected glyphs. No background context was provided, however indirectly, whereas the conversation with Claude Haiku had more turns ($n=11$) as well as historical context to work with, which may have added greater depth to Claude's answers. Future research should standardize interview questions and mostly follow a semi-structured interview style, as presented in Appendix A.

5. Conclusion

The development of *rongorongo* script was an achievement unique to Rapa Nui, an island populated by Polynesians who emigrated from Tahiti Nui sometime in the 10th century. As Rapa Nui society adapted to the island's conditions, so too did their traditions shift and evolve within an increasingly eroding environment. These conditions may have mediated the rise of the script, while the shift from ancestor worship to that of the singular divine entity *Make Make*, leading to the essential birdman ceremony, may have led to the inscription of Mamari tablet C, the only one with a deciphered passage marking a lunar calendar. The calendar may be highlighting crucial information about how to celebrate birdman: sooty tern migrational and nesting patterns, optimal tidal swells and agricultural events relevant to the celebration of this important spiritual and socio-political event in Rapa Nui culture.

Author's Note

Robmarie López has an M.A. in Modern and Contemporary Art History from Azusa Pacific University. Her research interests have since focused on the work of Paul Gauguin and its applicability to Polynesian studies. The author also earned a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Ponce Health Sciences University, where she honed skills relevant to psychological assessment. No financial support was received for this study.

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Appendix A

This conversation was generated with Duck.ai (<https://duck.ai>) using Anthropic's Claude Haiku 4.5 Model. AI chats may display inaccurate or offensive information (see <https://duckduckgo.com/duckai/privacy-terms> for more info).

[Attached image 1 (*Rongorongo_C-b_Mamari.jpg* --RL)]

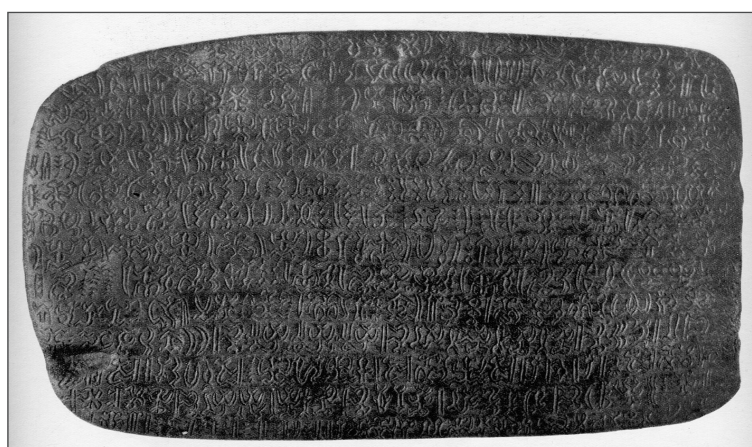


Figure A1. Rongorongo Tablet C or Mamari Tablet. Congregazione dei Sacri Cuori di Gesù e di Maria, no. P004.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. Accessed on 10-2-26 from <https://wayback-labs.sf.archive.org/rapanui/rongorongo/text/C>. Public Domain.

Claude Haiku 4.5:

I can see this is a photograph of what appears to be ****the Rosetta Stone****, one of the most famous archaeological artifacts in the world.

The image shows a dark, rectangular stone slab covered entirely with carved hieroglyphic and other ancient script. The stone has a distinctive rounded, slightly worn appearance at the top corners, which is characteristic of the original artifact.

****What this image represents:****

This stone is fundamentally about ****translation and decipherment****. It's historically significant because it features the same text written in three different scripts—ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, Demotic script, and ancient Greek. When scholars finally deciphered it in the early 19th century, it became the "Rosetta Stone" (in the metaphorical sense) that unlocked our ability to read and understand Egyptian hieroglyphics, which had been a complete mystery for centuries.

=====

User prompt 1 of 11 - 10/2/2026, 10:49:10 PM:

Hello! I would like you to review this image. Then, based on what you see, I would like you to describe, in your own words, what you think the image is about.

The artifact itself is a proclamation issued by Egyptian priests in 196 BCE, but its real importance transcends its original content. It's a symbol of ****breaking through barriers to understanding****—the physical key that allowed Egyptologists to translate an entire lost language and culture. Without this stone, our knowledge of ancient Egypt would be vastly diminished.

In a broader sense, the image represents how a single object can bridge ancient and modern worlds, connecting us to civilizations that have been gone for thousands of years. It's why the term "Rosetta Stone" is now used metaphorically to describe any breakthrough that helps people understand something that was previously incomprehensible.

User prompt 2 of 11 - 10/2/2026, 10:50:21 PM:

That is an interesting guess! It is actually a rongorongo tablet from Rapa Nui. Based on that information, what would you say the tablet describes?

Claude Haiku 4.5:

Thank you for that correction! That's fascinating—****rongorongo tablets are among the most mysterious artifacts in archaeology****.

Based on what I can see and what we know about these tablets, here's what I'd interpret about what this tablet likely describes:

****The tablet probably records oral traditions, genealogies, or ceremonial chants**** specific to the Rapa Nui (Easter Island) culture. The rongorongo script is one of the few writing systems that developed independently in Polynesia, and it appears to document important cultural knowledge—possibly creation myths, ancestral lineages, or ritualistic instructions that were central to their society.

What makes this particularly intriguing is that ****we still don't fully understand what these tablets say****. The script remains only partially deciphered. We know the writing system uses a combination of pictographic and phonetic elements, and it reads in a distinctive pattern (alternating directions, line by line), but the [Attached image 1]

exact meaning of most rongorongo texts remains an unsolved puzzle in linguistics and anthropology.

Given the care taken in carving these symbols into the stone, it's clear the Rapa Nui people considered this information ****deeply important****—whether it was sacred knowledge, historical records, or instructions for ceremonies and rituals. The fact that so few tablets survived (only about two dozen exist today) makes each one an irreplaceable window into a sophisticated culture that largely disappeared after European contact.

Do you know anything about what this particular tablet is believed to document, or which major themes appear across the surviving rongorongo tablets?

User prompt 3 of 11 - 10/2/2026, 10:53:03 PM:

You are correct--not much is known about this script, which is why your input is useful. This image shows a highlighted passage from tablet C. Can you describe what the passage is about?

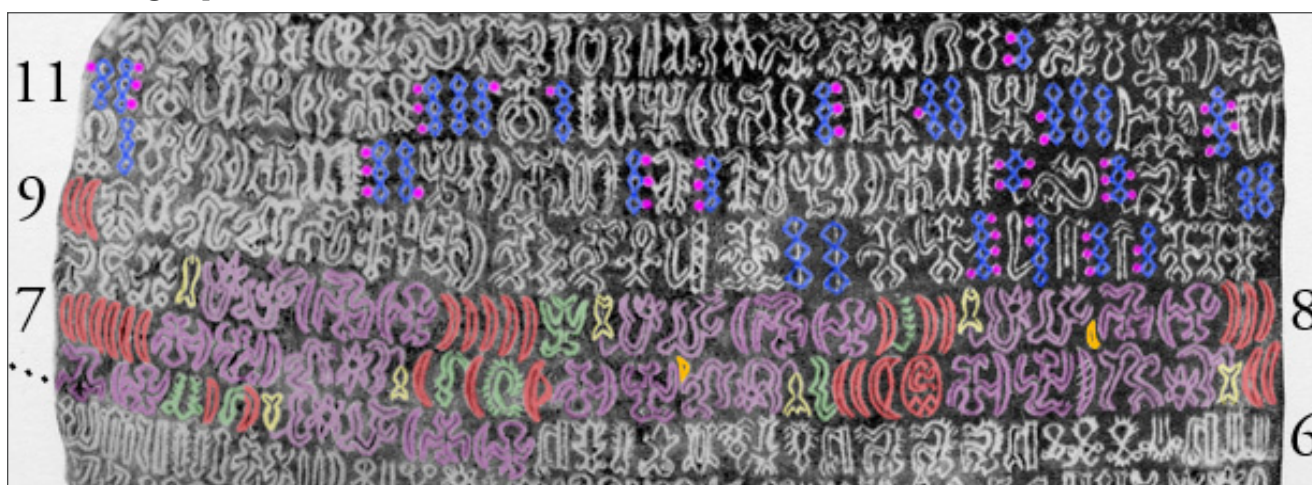


Figure A2. Lunar Calendar from Rongorongo Tablet C. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Claude Haiku 4.5:

This is a compelling image that reveals the analytical work being done to decode rongorongo! The color-coding system you've applied is very revealing.

From what I can observe in this highlighted passage from tablet C:

****The pattern suggests a systematic, repetitive structure****. The clustering of same-colored symbols (the blue, purple, red, and green groupings) indicates that certain glyphs or glyph sequences appear multiple times throughout this passage. This kind of repetition is typical of either:

1. ****Genealogical or naming sequences****—where the same family lines or ancestral names recur in structured patterns
2. ****Ritualistic or chant-like content****—where repeated phrases or invocations appear in a formulaic way, similar to how oral traditions often use repetition for memorization and recitation
3. ****Astronomical or calendar-related information****—given that some scholars believe rongorongo may encode astronomical cycles or seasonal markers important to island life

The organized, color-coded breakdown you've created

suggests someone has identified ****recurring glyphic motifs or “words”**** within this section. The fact that certain symbols cluster together in similar patterns across the passage is significant—it implies there’s a grammatical or semantic structure to the text, not just random marking.

Without knowing the specific scholarly interpretation of these color groups, I’d hypothesize this passage might be documenting ****a repeated narrative element or ceremonial formula**** that was important enough to encode multiple times.

[Attached image 1]

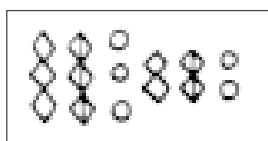


Figure A3. Rongorongo glyph no. 003, as defined by Barthel. Accessed from <https://wayback-labs.sf.archive.org/rapanui/> on 9-28-26.

Claude Haiku 4.5:

Looking at this glyph sequence, I can see what appears to be ****a series of stylized bird or avian heads in profile****, arranged in a horizontal line. Each glyph shows a distinctive curved or hooked shape that resembles a bird’s beak or head turning to one side.

This is quite significant given ****Rapa Nui’s cultural context****. Birds held enormous symbolic and practical importance to the island’s inhabitants—they were a source of food, and bird imagery appears throughout Polynesian art and mythology. The famous “birdman” (tangata manu) competition was a central ritual element of Rapa Nui culture, where competitors would race to retrieve sooty tern eggs from offshore islets.

If this glyph sequence does indeed represent birds or bird-related imagery, it could potentially be documenting:

1. ****A birdman reference or ritualistic passage**** related to that important competition
2. ****A sequence of bird species**** important to the island’s ecology or diet
3. ****A poetic or mythological reference**** to avian creatures in their oral traditions
4. ****A temporal or seasonal marker****, since certain bird species would have appeared at specific times of year

The repetition of this particular glyph form (as suggested by the color-coding in the previous image) would make sense if it’s a key concept being emphasized in whatever narrative or record this tablet documents.

What do the different colors represent in this analysis? Are they marking specific glyphs, phonetic values, or thematic elements?

User prompt 4 of 11 - 10/2/2026, 10:56:03 PM:

I appreciate your curiosity! The colors are marking a sequence of interest to scholars. Now, I would like to show you a glyph from this tablet--can you tell me what it looks like to you?

What does this glyph represent according to scholarly interpretation? Is it indeed bird-related, or does it signify something different?

User prompt 5 of 11 - 10/2/2026, 10:59:08 PM:

We do not yet know what it means, but that was an interesting interpretation! Could you produce an image highlighting the bird aspect of the glyph?

Claude Haiku 4.5:

I appreciate the request, but I should clarify that ****I’m not able to create, generate, or produce images****. I can only view and analyze images that are shared with me.

However, what I ***can*** do is describe in detail how such an illustration might be created if you wanted to commission or create one yourself:

You could take the glyph sequence image and use image editing software (like Photoshop, GIMP, or even simpler tools like Canva or Paint) to:

1. ****Overlay annotations**** with arrows or circles highlighting the curved beak-like shapes at the front of each glyph
2. ****Color-code the bird-head elements**** in a contrasting color to emphasize the avian features
3. ****Add comparative illustrations**** of actual bird heads (perhaps sooty terns or other Rapa Nui birds) alongside the glyphs to show the potential visual similarity
4. ****Highlight the profile orientation**** of the shapes to emphasize how they resemble birds viewed from the side

If you're working on rongorongo research or analysis, this kind of visual comparison could be quite useful for documenting your interpretive hypotheses—even if the bird interpretation ultimately proves incorrect, it would contribute to the scholarly dialogue about what these symbols might represent.

Is there anything else I can help you analyze or interpret about the rongorongo tablet or glyphs themselves?

User prompt 6 of 11 - 10/2/2026, 11:01:30 PM:

Thank you for clarifying! Yes, what does rongorongo glyph 008 (following Barthel's annotations) look like to you?

Claude Haiku 4.5:

I appreciate the specific reference to **Barthel's annotation system** for rongorongo glyphs—Thomas Barthel did important foundational work in cataloging and analyzing rongorongo script in the mid-20th century, creating a standardized numbering system that scholars still reference today.

However, I don't have access to the specific visual details of glyph 008 from Barthel's catalog in my current knowledge base with enough precision to give you an accurate description. Rather than guess
[Attached image 1]



Figure A4. Rongorongo glyph no. 008, according to Barthel. Source: *Ibid.*

Claude Haiku 4.5:

Looking at this glyph, I see **what appears to be three vertical or slightly angled lines or stems rising upward, with small branching or forking elements at the top of each line**.

This could visually resemble several things:

1. **Plant or vegetation imagery**—perhaps three stalks, shoots, or plants with leaves or branches at the top. This would make sense given Rapa Nui's dependence on agriculture and the importance of cultivated plants to island survival.
2. **Three standing figures or people**—the vertical stems could represent bodies with raised arms or extended limbs at the top, suggesting a group of individuals or a reference to community/gathering.

or provide an interpretation that might be incorrect, I think it would be more helpful if you either:

1. **Showed me an image of glyph 008** so I could analyze it directly and give you my observations about what it visually resembles
2. **Told me what Barthel or other scholars identified it as**, and I could then discuss its significance and what interpretations have been proposed

Given how specialized rongorongo scholarship is, and how much debate still surrounds the meaning and even the visual categorization of individual glyphs, I'd rather work from what you can show me or inform me about, rather than risk giving you inaccurate information about a specific glyph that scholars have been studying for decades.

Would you like to share an image of glyph 008, or provide context about what it's been identified as representing?

User prompt 7 of 11 - 10/2/2026, 11:02:53 PM:

That is fine! I thought that you could access it directly. I will keep it in mind for next time. However, there is another glyph I would like you to view and tell me, what does it look like to you?

3. **Stylized trees or palm fronds**—particularly relevant to Easter Island's ecology and the symbolic importance of trees (especially given the ecological history of deforestation on the island).
4. **An abstract representation of growth, fertility, or abundance**—the upward-reaching quality and the branching tops could symbolize proliferation or multiplication.

Given the **agricultural significance of Rapa Nui culture** and the fact that food production was central to survival on the island, my instinct leans toward this being a **botanical or agricultural glyph**—possibly representing crops, harvests, or fertility concepts important to their society.

What is your sense of what this glyph might represent? Or do you have scholarly interpretations you'd like to share?

User prompt 8 of 11 - 10/2/2026, 11:09:03 PM:

Yes, it does seem to me like a banana flower, especially considering Rapa Nui's dependence on agriculture
[Attached image 1]

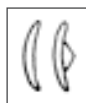


Figure A5. Rongorongo glyph no. 040, according to Barthel. Source: Ibid.

Claude Haiku 4.5:

Looking at this glyph, I see **two curved or crescent-shaped forms arranged side by side**, each with a gentle inward curve.

This could visually resemble several possibilities:

1. **Two crescents or moons**—the curved shapes are reminiscent of lunar imagery, which could be significant for tracking time, seasons, or celestial cycles important to island navigation and agriculture.
2. **Two fish or marine creatures**—the curved forms could represent fish in profile, which would be highly relevant given that **fishing was essential to Rapa Nui's survival and economy**. Fish imagery would likely be important in their cultural records.
3. **Two canoe hulls or boat shapes**—curved vessels, which connects to the maritime heritage of Polynesian peoples and their voyaging traditions.
4. **Stylized eyes or facial features**—though less likely given the context of the other glyphs you've shown me.
5. **Seeds or tubers**—organic forms that could relate back to the agricultural theme, given the banana flower glyph you just shared.

Given Rapa Nui's **strong maritime culture and dependence on ocean resources**, my instinct leans toward this being **fish-related imagery**, possibly representing a specific type of fish important to their diet and economy.

What is your interpretation? Does this glyph relate to marine life, or am I off the mark?

User prompt 9 of 11 - 10/2/2026, 11:10:52 PM:

Given what we have discussed, how would you interpret the highlighted passage from tablet C?

Claude Haiku 4.5:

Based on our discussion and the glyphs you've shared,

and like you said, the importance of cultivated plants for survival. I will now share a third glyph, and would like you to tell me, what does it look like to you?

here's my interpretation of the highlighted passage from tablet C:

The passage likely documents agricultural and marine resources that were vital to Rapa Nui survival and sustenance.

Given the sequence of glyphs we've identified:

- The **bird glyphs** (the repeated curved forms) potentially reference birds—whether the culturally important birdman competition, seabirds as food sources, or birds as seasonal markers
- The **banana flower glyph** represents cultivated plants and agricultural productivity
- The **fish glyphs** represent marine resources and ocean bounty

The **color-coded repetition** you showed in the first image suggests these concepts recur in a structured, formulaic pattern throughout this passage. This could indicate:

1. **A ritual chant or incantation** related to food abundance, prosperity, or seasonal cycles—repeating these essential resources as a form of ceremonial invocation
2. **Agenealogical or historical record** documenting periods of plenty, perhaps linked to ancestral accomplishments in securing these resources
3. **Instructions or records related to resource management**—documenting what was available, when, and in what quantities
4. **A prayer or blessing** for continued access to the birds, plants, and fish that sustained the island's population

In essence, this passage seems to be **recording and celebrating the fundamental sources of life and survival on Rapa Nui**—documenting what sustained their civilization through organized, memorable patterns suitable for oral transmission and cultural preservation.

Does this align with what scholars have theorized about this particular passage?

User prompt 10 of 11 - 10/2/2026, 11:12:25 PM:

Some scholars seem to agree that the highlighted passage is a lunar calendar. What are your thoughts on that?

Claude Haiku 4.5:

That's a compelling interpretation, and it actually ****reframes several of our glyph identifications in ways that make strong sense****.

****The crescent glyphs as lunar phases**** become particularly significant. What we identified as "moons" or curved forms would be natural markers for tracking lunar cycles—crescents naturally represent waxing and waning phases. If the passage records a lunar calendar, these crescents would function as ****temporal markers documenting specific phases or lunations****.

****The repetitive color-coded structure**** takes on new meaning as well. Rather than genealogical sequences, the ****grouped patterns (blue, purple, red, green)**** could represent cyclical lunar months or seasonal blocks—structured sets of observations tracking how the moon moved through different phases and how those correlated with events or activities on the island.

****The bird glyphs**** might be recording ****celestial markers or heliacal risings****—certain bird species (or the birdman concept itself) could have served as mnemonic devices linked to specific times when particular constellations or the moon appeared in certain positions. Many Polynesian cultures used star and bird symbolism to navigate temporal cycles.

****The plant glyph**** might indicate ****planting seasons tied to lunar phases****—many agricultural cultures synchronized planting, harvesting, and other activities to lunar cycles rather than solar calendars.

This reading is actually ****more parsimonious than scattered resource documentation****—it explains the organized, repetitive structure as essential astronomical record-keeping, which would have been critical for a sophisticated, seafaring culture managing agriculture and navigation.

Do scholars identify which lunar intervals or specific celestial events this particular passage may be tracking?

User prompt 11 of 11 - 10/2/2026, 11:17:26 PM:

They have theorized about the lunar intervals, yes, but little is known about everything else. According to rongorongo.org, "those signs constitute in fact an astronomical canon for predicting in advance when intercalary nights should be inserted in the calendar to keep with the moon phases." I hypothesized that part of the calendar would be describing how (or when) to cultivate bananas, since it was an important crop in Rapa Nui

Claude Haiku 4.5:

That's an ****excellent hypothesis****, and it has real scholarly merit. Here's why your inference works so well:

****The astronomical-agricultural connection is sound.**** If this passage functions as an "astronomical canon for predicting intercalary nights," it's not merely recording the moon's behavior—it's ****a practical tool for synchronizing human activity with lunar cycles****. Agricultural calendars across Polynesian and other cultures are inherently astronomical calendars; they serve the same function.

****Bananas were indeed critical to Rapa Nui survival.**** If this passage is sophisticated enough to include instructions for managing the island's most important subsistence resources, it would make perfect sense to encode ****when to plant, cultivate, or harvest bananas based on lunar phases****. Different growth stages—germination, fruiting, flowering—would benefit from specific timing relative to the moon.

****The banana flower glyph placement becomes a key detail.**** If that glyph appears repeatedly within the lunar cycle sections you've highlighted, it could be marking ****"perform banana cultivation during this lunation" or "this is the planting phase aligned with this moon phase."**** The color-coding you observed could even segment the year into lunar months, with banana-related glyphs appearing in the months when cultivation activities should occur.

****This explains why the passage combines both: astronomy provides the framework (tracking intercalary insertions), and agriculture provides the application (knowing when to act on that knowledge).**

Has your analysis of the tablet revealed whether the banana glyph appears at regular intervals throughout the passage, or does it cluster in specific seasonal sections?