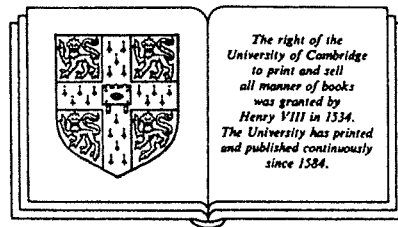


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EVOLUTION AND TRANSFORMATION

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## Chapter 9

**Turtles, priests, and the afterworld: a study in the iconographic interpretation of Polynesian petroglyphs***Barry Rolett*

Recent archaeological studies attest to a burgeoning interest in the reconstruction of prehistoric thought patterns (Hodder 1982a, b; Leone 1982), based on the assumption that 'recovery of mind' is an attainable goal. This assumption is related to the general view that 'archaeology is a cultural science, and that all social strategies and adaptation must be understood as part of cultural, symbolically meaningful contexts' (Hodder 1982b, viii). It has been argued that the proper focus of archaeological studies centered on cognition should be particularistic rather than general:

There can never be any direct predictive relationships between material culture and social behavior because in each particular context general symbolic principles, and general tendencies for the integration of belief and action are rearranged in particular ways as part of the strategies and intents of individuals and groups. The 'whole' is particular, dependent on contexts. (Hodder 1982a, 217)

This essay – an exploration into the archaeological study of cognition – focusses on a narrow topic of inquiry, turtle petroglyphs specifically in the Marquesas Islands of Eastern Polynesia, but situated within the broader context of Polynesian cultures. My interest in the significance of turtle motifs stems from the discovery of a remarkable petroglyph site (figs. 9.1, 9.2) on Nukuhiva Island, in the northern Marquesas. The Hatiheu Valley boulder site exhibits

one of the finest arrays of petroglyphs hitherto known from the Marquesas. The eight turtles included among the representations that nearly cover the decorated face of the boulder are notable not only as the first turtle motifs recorded from the Marquesas, but also because of their evident deliberate arrangement in clusters and their execution in a patterned portrayal showing adherence to easily recognizable stylistic models.<sup>1</sup> Turtle petroglyphs are already well known from the Societies and other islands in Eastern Polynesia, so that discovery of similar motifs in the Marquesas seemed to open a promising avenue for comparative research. The decision to focus only on turtle motifs was made not because of any *a priori* assumption that other petroglyph types are less significant, but rather because turtle motifs are unambiguously identifiable representations, and because ethnographic evidence for the significance of turtles in Polynesian culture provided a convenient point of departure for research into the symbolic value of the motifs.

In focussing on turtle motifs, an attempt is made to demonstrate the usefulness of analyzing petroglyphs within a broad framework of ethnographic and archaeological data. Such an approach allows investigation into the possible meaning of iconographic subjects through reconstruction of their original context. But while this method is attractive in cases where there are no textual records to explain the context of an iconographic message, it has an important drawback which

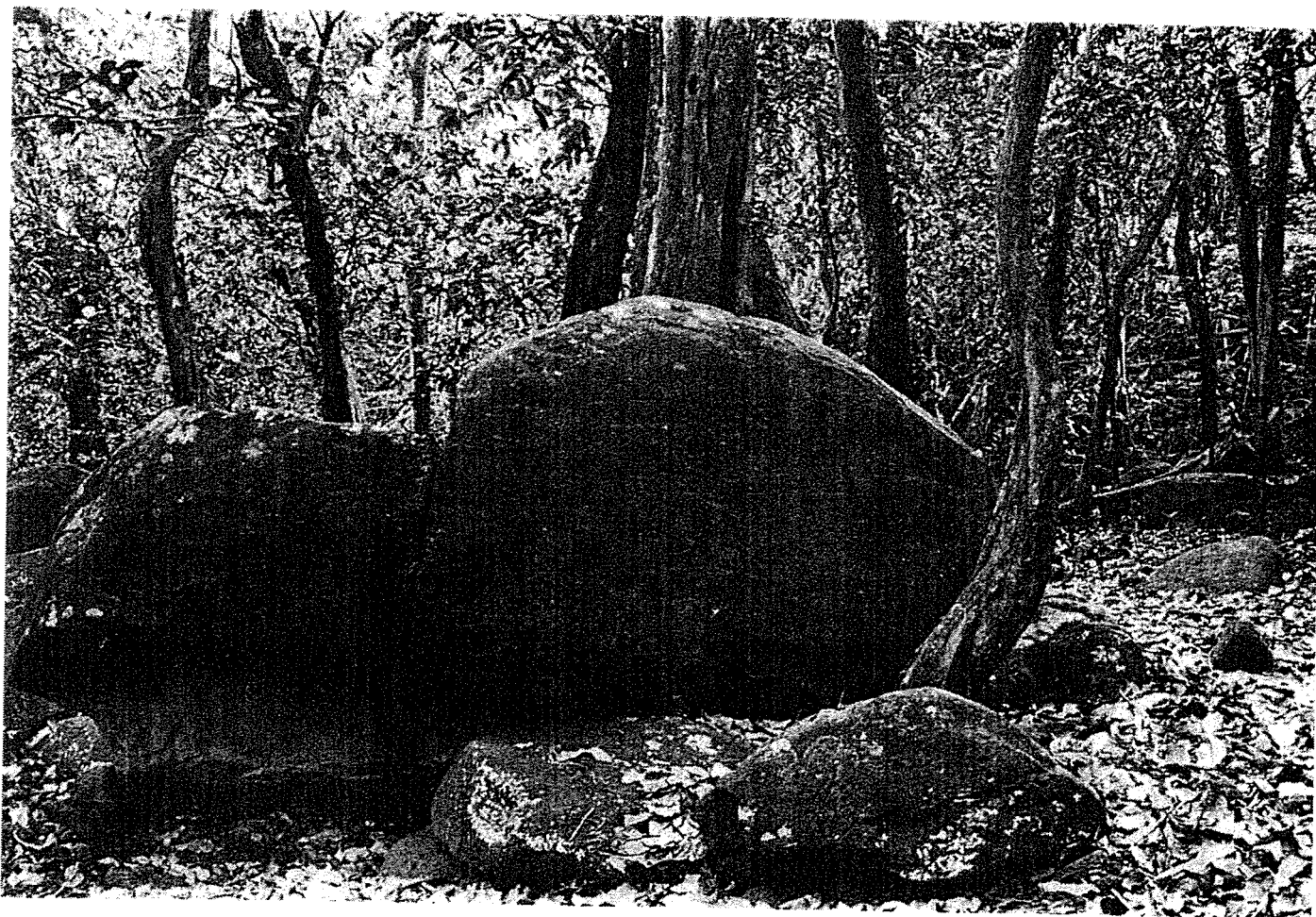


Fig. 9.1. Petroglyph boulder in the Hatiheu Valley, Nukuhiva. Behind the boulder is a terraced ceremonial ground, the *Kamuihei tohua*.

has been noted by one of its chief advocates, André Leroi-Gourhan: the total value of the interpretation depends upon the value of the reconstruction (1975, 49). The nature of the archaeological record in most parts of the world is such that iconographic interpretation of prehistoric art through ethnographic inference has been more thoroughly explored in theory than in practice. In the Pacific, however, there is the advantage of a striking continuity between prehistoric and ethnographically documented cultures.

Despite the wealth of documentation for contact period Pacific Island cultures, few attempts have been made to analyze and interpret iconographic materials from this region by the proposition of hypotheses based on ethnological records. Moreover, the few investigators who have made use of ethnological records generally limited themselves to information given by native informants who were asked to explain the meaning of a specific motif (Ellis 1917, 346; Cox and Stasack 1970, 67–8). Such restricted use of the ethnographic record has limited potential because references to specific petroglyphs are exceedingly rare.

Most archaeological studies of Pacific Island petroglyphs have been carried out with the limited objective of compiling a descriptive inventory of motifs (e.g., Lavachery 1939; Linton 1925; Emory 1933; Cox and Stasack 1970; Frimigacci and Monnin 1980). Petroglyph inventories have been of considerable interest to researchers who have compared rock art motifs with ones known from mobiliary art and tattooing in an effort to define iconographic relationships between different islands and art forms (e.g., Handy 1938). However, the contribution of petroglyph studies to such research has been relatively minor and the chief value of this comparative work has been to point out strong relationships between motifs found in mobiliary art and tattooing (von den Steinen 1928; Begouen 1928).

Recent work by Frimigacci and Monnin (1980) in New Caledonia exemplifies the contribution which can be made by inventory-oriented petroglyph studies. By analyzing the spatial distribution of motifs, Frimigacci and Monnin were able to identify associations that are characteristic of different geographic regions of this large island. These characteristic

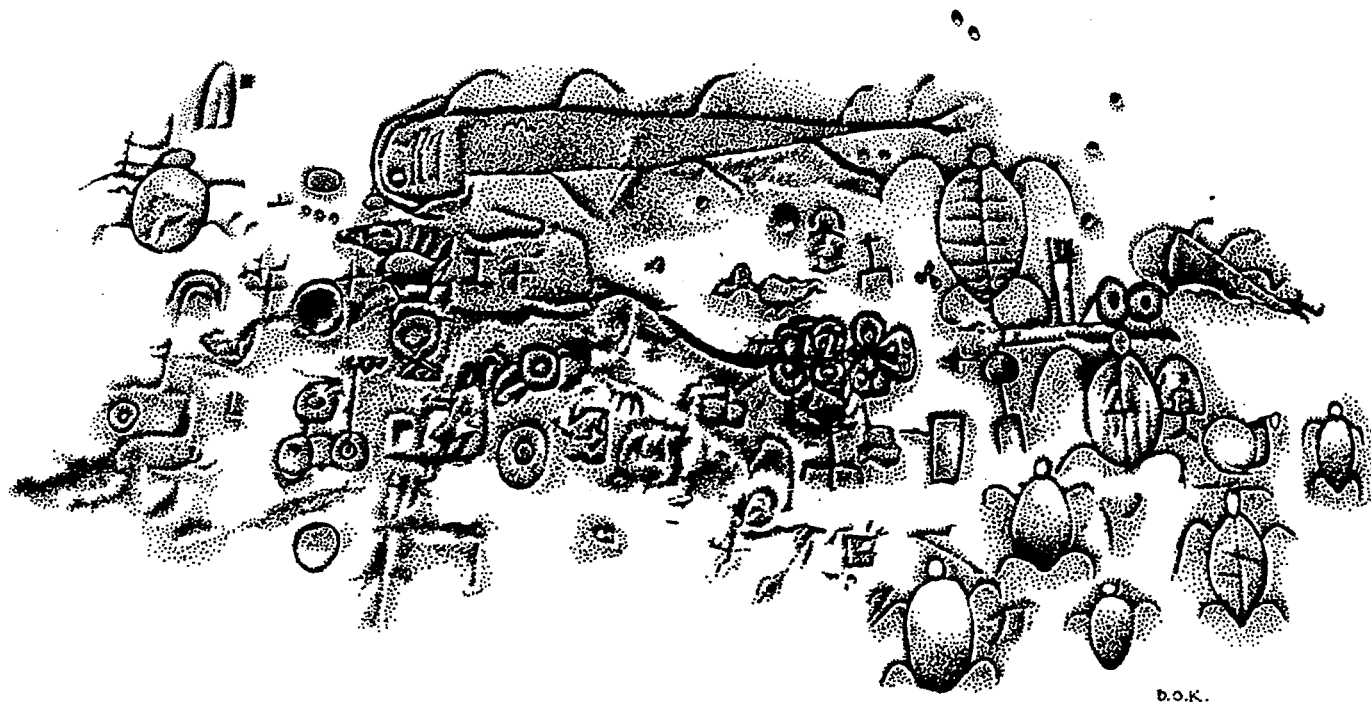


Fig. 9.2. Detail of the petroglyphs on the Hatiheu petroglyph boulder shown in Figure 9.1.

associations effectively distinguish certain regions, and it has been suggested that they may reflect cultural sub-groupings (Frimigacci and Monnin 1980, 52). Spatial analysis of rock art motifs, a method pioneered by André Leroi-Gourhan in the study of Paleolithic cave art, is attractive both because it produces a *catalogue raisonné* of motifs and because it maintains a fundamental distinction between representation and meaning.

#### Form and space

In order to classify the petroglyphs at the Hatiheu Valley boulder site on Nukuhiva (fig. 9.1) I adopted the system proposed by Leroi-Gourhan (1982) in his study of Paleolithic cave art. This morphological framework comprises four successive levels, or 'figurative states', without implying directional changes from one state to another. Thus, I avoid one of the main problems with early research on Polynesian decorative art, namely that relationships between motifs were interpreted in an evolutionary manner even though there was no empirical evidence for succession. Leroi-Gourhan's figurative states vary from the pure geometric, consisting of non-representational signs, to the analytical figurative, which tends toward naturalistic representation.

*Pure geometric* figures are signs which, unlike elements of the other figurative states, cannot be identified without information from oral or written sources. Pure geometric figures from the Hatiheu site include crosses, quadrilaterals, circles, and arcs. The value of identifying these signs as a separate category is that the study of repeated associations

between signs and other motifs may reveal statistically significant relationships, as has been the case in Paleolithic cave art. Unfortunately, such a study is not possible at the present time because most Pacific Island petroglyph sites are only incompletely recorded and little attention has been given to spatial associations of motifs.

*Geometric figurative* elements are also signs, but unlike pure geometric elements, the subjects which they represent are relatively identifiable. These elements are generally geometricized forms of animal or human figures which are represented elsewhere in more naturalistic state. Stick-man (*etua*) motifs with upraised arms and legs astraddle, known from Hatiheu and other Marquesan sites (Suggs 1961, 144), as well as from Marquesan decorated bamboos (Begouen 1928), are a good example of geometric figurative elements. *Etua* motifs are clearly related to the full length anthropomorphic *tiki* figures which are highly developed in Marquesan statuary and mobiliary art.

The *synthetic figurative* is an intermediary stage between the geometric figurative, tending towards non-figurative representations, and the *analytical figurative*, in which animals are portrayed with near accuracy of natural morphology. Synthetic figurative elements express essentials of form without the detail of the analytical figurative. The animal figures from the Hatiheu boulder are synthetic figurative motifs. They include three types of turtles, two fish, an unidentified supernatural animal, and a jungle fowl (fig. 9.1). The large fish carved in bas relief, dominating the other animals, is readily identifiable as a dolphin fish or *mahimahi*

1	Raiatea, Societies								
2	Huahine, Societies								
3	Borabora, Societies								
4	Maupiti, Societies								
5	Easter Island								
6	Hawaii								
7	Nukuhiva, Marquesas								
8	Vanua Levu, Fiji								
9	New Caledonia								
10	Anethum, Vanuatu								

Fig. 9.3. Distribution of turtle petroglyph motifs in Oceania.

(*Corphyraena*). The turtle types are distinguished by the shape of the carapace, the size of the flippers, and the presence or absence of a line across the carapace. Those with the dorsal lines have a pointed carapace and larger front than back flippers (fig. 9.3, 7a). The three of this type are grouped with four others that also have pointed shells but differ by the absence of the dorsal line and a less pronounced difference between the front and back flippers (fig. 9.3, 7b). The third type, represented by three examples, one of which is situated well away from the group of other turtles, has an oval shaped carapace and front and back flippers of nearly equal size (fig. 9.3, 7c).

When the Hatiheu turtle motifs are compared with ones known from other Pacific Island sites, a number of stylistic trends become apparent. The Hatiheu motifs are abbreviated forms that express the essential features of natural morphology using a minimal number of lines. In contrast, two motifs from Easter Island (fig. 9.3, 5a, b) approach visual accuracy, while the other turtle figures shown in fig. 9.3 are geometricized and abbreviated forms in various degrees of development. Society Islands' turtle motifs exhibit the greatest diversity, varying from motifs displaying certain naturalistic elements (fig. 9.3, 1a-c, 2a, b, 4a) to others which are abbreviated (fig. 9.3, 1h, i, 2d, 3g, 4c), and geometricized (fig. 9.3, 1c-g, 2c, 3a-f).

Figure 9.3 presents the range of variation in all reported Pacific Island turtle petroglyph motifs. These are known mainly from Eastern Polynesia, with rare examples from Fiji, New Caledonia, and Vanuatu. In the absence of counts which would quantify the relative frequencies of the different motifs,

we are forced to rely upon non-systematic observations for an idea of their geographical distribution. Turtle motifs have been recorded on four of the Society Islands (Raiatea, Huahine, Borabora, and Maupiti), and Emory (1933) has noted that they are the most frequently encountered motif there. In contrast, in most of the other islands, turtles are comparatively rare. In places where they are rare, the motifs are usually isolated, while in the Societies and on Nukuhiva they are often found grouped in clusters similar to those characteristic of the Hatiheu Valley boulder.

Figure 9.3 highlights several stylistic trends. First, there are notable similarities between the abbreviated turtle motifs from the Societies, Marquesas, Hawai'i, and New Caledonia. Those from Fiji and Vanuatu are somewhat at variance from the other abbreviated forms. Moreover, there is a strong tradition in the Societies and Easter Island which involves geometrically patterned motifs. The patterned figures display close adherence to established aesthetic traditions, for some of their characteristic geometricized forms have been recorded from multiple sites on the same island. A good example is item 3d in figure 9.3, a prominently represented motif at Emory's *ofai honu* (Emory 1933), as well as at another nearby site recorded by myself in 1981. It is also interesting that items 3b, 3d, 3e, and 4b from figure 9.3 depict the front flippers departing from the head, a characteristic trait of Fijian motifs.

The turtle motifs are most obviously classified, however, by the degree of visual accuracy which they exhibit. There are two modes of departure from the most morphologically accurate motifs (fig. 9.3, 5a-b): (1) geometricization of the forms into patterned figures; and (2) abbreviation of the forms into simple figures with a minimum number of lines. Depiction of sexual dimorphism may account for some of the variability among motifs; those with long tails are probably males. Sexual differentiation on the basis of this criterion is particularly marked among motifs from Fiji, Hawai'i, and Borabora.

In the Marquesas, where the turtles like other figures in rock art are depicted in abbreviated form, more naturalistic turtle motifs are known from mobiliary art (von den Steinen 1923, fig. 215) and a highly geometricized form was widely employed in tattooing (Handy 1922).

#### The Marquesan cultural context

The Hatiheu Valley boulder is located in the interior of the valley on a slope near the upper portion of a series of paved stone terraces comprising a ceremonial ground, or *tohua*. A megalithic raised platform, notable both for its elaborate stonework and for an ancient banyan (*Ficus* sp.) growing on one corner, lies at the lower end of the terraces (figs. 9.4, 9.5). Judged on the basis of the size of the platform, its proximity to the *tohua*, the quality of the dry masonry construction, and the presence of the banyan (traditionally associated with sacred places), this stone structure is interpreted as a *me'ae*, the focal point of Marquesan religious ceremonies.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 9.4. The Teipoka *me'ae*, Hatiheu Valley, Nukuhiva. The *me'ae* is situated at the end of a terraced ceremonial ground, on the edge of which is the illustrated petroglyph boulder.

Although it is difficult to distinguish between Marquesan *me'ae* and residential house platforms on the basis of masonry construction alone, *me'ae* are generally larger and more elaborately built than house platforms (Linton 1925, 34).

There is some evidence of a functional distinction between two types of *me'ae*, those that were reserved primarily for ceremonies related to the disposal of the dead, and those that were the scene of a wider range of ceremonies, but generally of lesser importance than the mortuary rites. Mortuary *me'ae* are nearly all located in secluded parts of upper valleys (Linton 1925, 33; Gracia 1843, 57–8), while public *me'ae* are usually found in the vicinity of residential areas, especially near the intersections of commonly travelled paths (Gracia 1843, 59). Missionary records list thirteen *me'ae* in Hatiheu. This site is most likely Me'ae Te Ipoka, dedicated to Tevanauaua, god who accords victory (CM Ms I, 14).

Von den Steinen (1928) visited Me'ae Te Ipoka in the late nineteenth century and identified the site as the traditional residence of the inspirational priest or *taua* of Hatiheu. Marquesan *taua* were distinguished from the rest of the

population by their perceived ability to communicate directly with the deities (*atua*), most of whom Marquesans considered to be the spirits of deceased *taua* and chiefs (*hakaiki*). The Marquesan term for deity, *atua*, was also applied to certain *taua* who achieved divine status during the course of their lives, but the number of *taua* who attained this level of importance was probably no more than one or two per island (Vincendon-Dumoulin 1843, 226). All other *taua* were elevated to deified status after death through a series of ceremonies highlighted by numerous human sacrifices. *Atua* were believed to exercise supernatural power over the elements, being able to provide rich harvests or make the land sterile, and to inflict sickness or death at will. Less powerful than the *atua* but closely linked with them, *taua* possessed the ability to determine the cause of calamities affecting the population and to foresee danger (Vincendon-Dumoulin 1843, 227). The spiritual link between *taua* and *atua* manifested itself in self-induced trances, during which the *taua* was possessed by the *atua* which he either trapped by catching it in his hands, or which entered directly into his body (Gracia 1843, 46). The *taua* spoke oracles during the trances, which always occurred

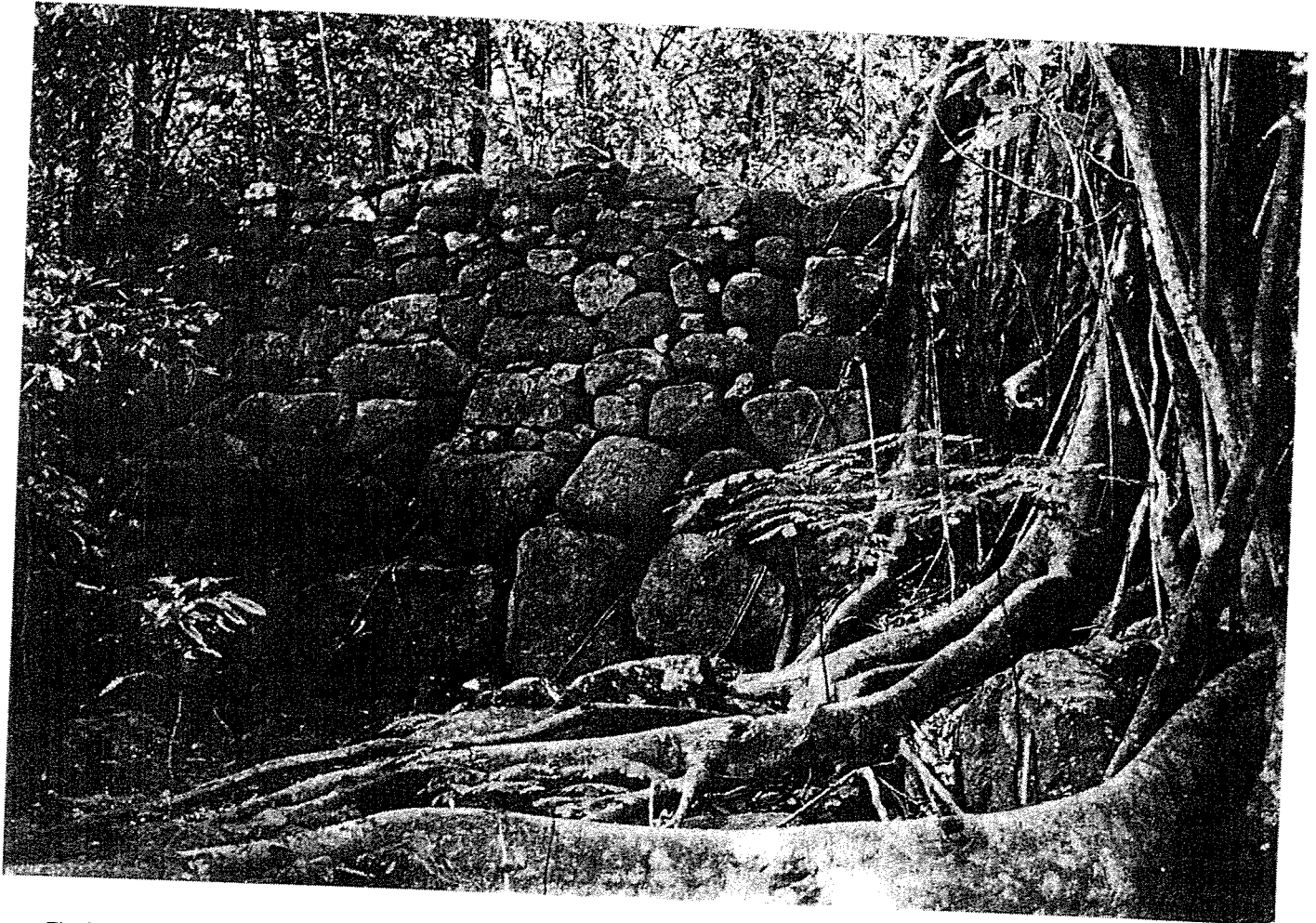


Fig. 9.5. The lower retaining wall of Teipoka *me'ae*. Marquesan *me'ae* are noted for their massiveness and the excellence of their construction. The wall height is 3.8 meters.

on the *me'ae*, transmitting information communicated to him by the *atua* in an unnatural, squeaky voice produced in the manner of a ventriloquist. Oracles spoken by the *taua* often called for human victims or offerings of food to be brought upon the *me'ae* in order to satisfy the wishes of the *atua*. Such commands were supported by the power of the *hakaiki*, who were considered to be direct descendants of certain *atua* and who in some cases were themselves also *taua* (Gracia 1843, 47).

Descriptions of *me'ae* by early nineteenth-century visitors to the Marquesas project vivid images of the sites and religious ceremonies performed at them. Stone and wooden anthropomorphic representations, some of which were more than two meters tall, seem to have been a nearly universal feature of mortuary *me'ae* on Nukuhiva (Stewart 1831, 290; Tautian 1897, 669); these also appeared, less commonly, on public *me'ae* (Linton 1925, 32). These images, known as *tiki*, were sculpted in a highly conventionalized style but appear to have represented various different *atua*, especially deified *hakaiki* and *taua* (Tautain 1897, 673, 677).

House structures with pointed roofs likened by early visitors to obelisks were also a characteristic feature of mortuary *me'ae* (Porter 1822, 110). These structures, known as *ha'e tua* (literally, pointed house), were presided over by the *taua* and were dedicated to the tribal tutelary gods who were often believed to inhabit them (Handy 1923, 49). The *ha'e tua* and tress in the vicinity of the *me'ae* were draped with streamers of white bark cloth, identifying the area as a *tapu* precinct (Porter 1822, 116). Porter's account of a visit to a *me'ae* includes the following description:

The obelisks [*ha'e tua*] are about thirty-five feet in height, and about the base of them were hung the heads of hogs and tortoises, as I was informed, as offerings to their gods. On the right of this grove, distant only a few paces, were four splendid war canoes, furnished with their outriggers, and decorated with ornaments of human hair, coral shells, etc., with an abundance of white streamers. Their heads were placed toward the mountain, and in the stern of each was a figure of a man with a paddle steering, in full dress, ornamented



with plumes, earrings made to represent those formed of whales' teeth, and every other ornament of the fashion of the country. One of the canoes was more splendid than the others, and was situated nearer the grove. I inquired who the dignified personage might be who was seated in her stern, and was informed that this was the priest who had been killed, not long since, by the Happahs. The stench here was intolerable from the number of offerings which had been made, but, attracted by curiosity, I went to examine the canoes more minutely, and found the bodies of two of the Typees, whom we had killed, in a bloated state, at the bottom of that of the priest, and many other human carcasses, with the flesh still on them, lying about the canoe. (Porter 1822, 110-11)

Porter's valuable description identifies the significance of the *me'ae* as related to the recent death of a priest, or *taua*. It is of particular interest to note that the 'tortoise' heads were hung about the base of the *ha'e tua* and the *me'ae*. In all likelihood, these were heads of the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*). Although the hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) was valued as the source of tortoise shell used in the manufacture of ornaments, the green turtle appears to have been regarded with special religious significance. One indication of the high esteem accorded the green turtle is that after Christian influence in the Marquesas prevailed against the ceremonial use of human victims, the green turtle or *homu* was substituted in their place (Jardin 1862, 74). Further evidence of the religious and ceremonial value of turtles is given in a myth recorded by Handy (1930, 35). In the myth, two men engage in building a raised stone platform (*paepae*) to commemorate the death of a close relative. Upon nearing completion of the *paepae*, the men set out on a special fishing expedition to capture turtles for use in connection with ceremonies associated with final completion of the structure. When the *paepae* was finished and the ceremony involving the turtles had been enacted, the spirit of the honored relative, still lingering until that time about the earth, made its final passage to the afterworld.

The reference to turtles in connection with a memorial ceremony seems related to the Marquesan practice of holding celebrations to commemorate the death of an individual. Feasting was an important part of such occasions, as was the ritual offering of food to the *atua* believed to be responsible for helping the spirit of the deceased (Handy 1923, 217). According to Gracia (1843, 117), memorial ceremonies were held one lunar month after death and again after ten lunar months. Offerings were viewed as essential in ensuring a successful passage of the spirit to its final resting place in the afterworld. This is well illustrated by the response given to Porter in answer to his questions about why the dead enemy warriors had been placed in the canoe of a *taua* killed in recent hostilities with the neighboring valley. Porter was informed through his interpreter that the *taua* was on his way to the afterworld and that a 'crew' of ten enemy warriors

was needed in order to paddle his canoe there (1822, 111). Gracia (1843, 45) also noted that seven to ten human sacrifices generally were necessary in order to elevate the spirit of a *taua* to the status of *atua*. The description of the *taua*'s passage to the afterworld in terms of a canoe voyage is an appropriate metaphor because deification of the *taua* after death essentially involved a transition from earth to the afterworld, the antipodes of which were considered to be the dwelling place of the *atua*. Thus the turtle offerings made in connection with the memorial ceremony mentioned in the myth, like the human victims placed in the canoe of the *taua*, may be viewed as serving the purpose of effecting a successful transition, in the sense of actual physical displacement, from earth to the afterworld.

In addition to their value in connection with memorial ceremonies, turtles were also important in other religious rites. Catholic missionary records indicate that occasions on which human victims or food offerings were left on the *me'ae* included ceremonies designed to obtain victory in war (CM Ms. II, 42), to bring rain (CM Ms. II, 38), and to obtain help from the gods in avenging an enemy who for some reason was beyond the reach of the intended aggressor (CM Ms. II, 44). Certain species of the Marquesan plant and animal worlds were regarded as particularly suitable offerings to the gods and these were made *tapu*. Delmas' 1927 listing of *tapu* plants and animals for each valley on Nukuhiva demonstrates a high degree of inter-valley variability, reinforcing the conclusion that the imposition of a *tapu*, whether temporary or permanent, was within the power of an individual *taua* (Handy 1923, 259; Gracia 1843, 52).

The *tapu* on the turtle appears to have been one of the strongest and most culturally ingrained. In the eighteenth-century missionary record of William Crook (n.d., 55), and in Jardin's natural history of the Marquesas (1862, 74), the turtle is said to have been reserved for consumption by high status individuals. Another source states that turtles were 'dedicated to the gods' (CM Ms. I, 14). However, these general statements are insufficient to reveal the full extent to which Marquesan behavior toward a particular species was affected by its *tapu* status. Such information can be derived only from examination of specific cases in which actual behavior in connection with a *tapu* species was recorded. Although specific cases involving the turtle are absent in the ethnohistoric literature, valuable inferences may be drawn from examination of an event recorded by Gracia (1843, 53-4) involving a red pig, among the most *tapu* of all animals. Gracia, who had purchased the pig, was surprised at the rough manner in which his Marquesan helper proceeded to drive it to the house. Yet despite the youth's unrestrained abuse in delivering the pig, he objected fearfully to Gracia's suggestion that he kill it. After the pig had met its fate, the boy nonetheless consented to cook part of it for the missionaries, although he would not eat any of the meat himself, or even any of the other food cooked in the same pot. Instead, the Marquesan youth took his own separate portion of uncooked meat and kindled a

new fire to prepare his own meal, being careful to use different utensils than those that had been used to prepare the missionaries' food.

Several inferences emerge from Gracia's episode, regarding the cultural significance of Marquesan food *tapu*. First, the fact that a food was *tapu* did not necessarily prohibit all but high status individuals such as *taua*, *hakaiki*, or missionaries from eating of it. Rather, low status individuals, such as the youth in Gracia's account, were permitted to eat meat from a *tapu* animal provided that they partook of portions cooked and served separately from those portions prepared for the high status individuals. In this context, it is possible that the food remains of feasts held on the *me'ae* were suspended from the walls of the *ha'e tua* and hung from branches of the trees in the religious precinct because that food was *tapu* to all but the participants in the ceremony. Moreover, there is evidence that participants in such ceremonies were subject to the influence of the *tapu* only during the period of the ceremony (see Porter 1822, 115 for temporary *tapus* associated with particular ceremonies). Finally, although low status individuals apparently were restricted from killing a *tapu* animal, other behavior toward the living animals was less strictly controlled, as evidenced by the youth's rough treatment of the pig as he drove it to the mission.

Direct ethnohistoric evidence to test the validity of these inferences as they pertain to Marquesan behavior regarding turtles is available only with reference to fishing. Apparently, special ceremonies were held in connection with planning fishing expeditions to catch turtles for use in ceremonies, and the fishermen were *tapu* both during the ceremony and the ensuing fishing expedition. Porter witnessed a *me'ae* ceremony which he was informed was related to the success of the turtle hunt:

I have seen Gattanewa with all his sons, and many others sitting for hours together clapping their hands and singing before a number of little wooden gods laid out in small houses erected for the occasion, and ornamented with strips of cloth. They were such houses as a child would have made, of about two feet long and eighteen inches high, and no less than ten or twelve of them in a cluster, like a small village. By the side of these were several canoes, furnished with their paddles, seines, harpoons, and other fishing apparatus, and round the whole a line was drawn to show that the place was tabooed. Within this line was Gattanewa and others, like overgrown babies, singing and clapping their hands, sometimes laughing and talking, and appearing to give their ceremony no attention. . . . I enquired the cause of this ceremony of Gattanewa; he told me he was going to catch tortoise for the gods, and that he should have to pray to them several days and nights for success, during which time he would be tabooed, and dare not enter a house frequented by women. (Porter 1822, 115)

Edward Robarts, an early nineteenth-century beachcomber, also referred to the *tapu* on men fishing for turtles, noting

that he and a *hakaiki* he accompanied were not allowed 'during the time of searching for turtle to go among females' (Dening 1974, 251).

#### Pan-Polynesian comparison

The demonstrable derivation of all Polynesian cultures from a common ancestral tradition makes the comparative approach a fruitful method of research in this area (see Green, this volume). Inter-archipelago comparison of the cultural significance of turtles in Polynesia demonstrates that the observed religious significance of turtles in the Marquesas reflects concepts originally rooted in Ancestral Polynesian culture. Comparative data can also serve as a basis for drawing inferences concerning aspects of Marquesan culture for which adequate documentation is lacking.

Turtles played a central role in certain ceremonies held at religious sites in the Tuamotu Islands of Eastern Polynesia. According to the Catholic missionary Montiton (1874, 378-9), who witnessed these ceremonies during the mid-nineteenth century, turtles were beheaded and disemboweled at the temple site (*marae*), then cooked in special ovens and eaten by the ceremonial priests and their assistants. After this first serving, the turtle meat was divided and distributed to other men of the community but apparently not to women or children. In the Central Polynesian island of Tongareva, the beachcomber Lamont participated in a *marae* ceremony that involved turtle feasting (Lamont 1867, 182-3). The turtle was beheaded and disemboweled on the *marae* and taken to the community meeting place where it was served to Lamont and three chiefs. Surrounded by a group of onlookers who complimented his generosity when he shared pieces of the meat with them, Lamont threw some of the meat to the wives of the chiefs, who, to his great surprise, recoiled in terror, shouting '*huie atua!*' (prohibited). Lamont noted that after the ceremony he was treated with increased respect in the community and accorded the highest ranking title, that of *ariki* (see Buck 1932, 91-2 for an analysis of Lamont's account). The practice of similar ceremonies involving turtle feasting in the Cooks and Society Islands is suggested by an observation in the missionary narrative of John Williams:

The turtle was considered by the Rarotongans and Tahitians as most sacred. A part of every one caught was offered to the gods, and the rest cooked with sacred fire, and partaken of by the king and principal chiefs only. (Williams 1838, 429)

The widespread Polynesian distribution of turtle ceremonies is further evidenced by ethnographic notes from Anuta collected by Kirch and Rosendahl (1973, 26) identifying a specialized *marae* (located in the immediate vicinity of the principal pre-Christian-era *marae*) as one where turtles and porpoises were cooked and eaten in religious ceremonies. A Rarotongan chief portrayed in the frontispiece of Williams' narrative had turtle motifs tattooed on his knees, although the rest of his tattoos were geometric motifs. Williams (1838, 463) identified the chief as Tepo and stated that the tattoos

were executed 'in consequence of the death of his ninth child'. Records of the cultural significance of turtles in other island groups are less specific and generally refer only to the *tapu* surrounding them that restricted their consumption by persons other than high status individuals. In addition to those noted for the Marquesas, tabus regarding the consumption of turtles are known from the Society Islands (Henry 1928, 381), the Tuamotus (Montiton 1874, 369), Mangareva (Buck 1938, 91), the Cook Islands (Williams 1838, 429; Lamont 1867, 182-3), Hawai'i (Stewart 1826, 365), Easter Island (Barthel 1978, 142), Samoa (Buck 1930, 522), the Tokelau Islands (MacGregor 1937, 100), Futuna (Burrows 1936, 103), and 'Uvea (Burrows 1937, 144). In Melanesia, restrictions on fishing for turtles and on eating them have been reported from the Lau Islands, Fiji (Thompson 1940, 137, 154) and the Loyalties (Ray 1917, 290; Guiart 1963, 285, 289).

Comparative research also reveals that archaeological associations between turtle petroglyphs and religiously significant sites exist in the Society Islands and in Easter Island, in addition to the Marquesas. In the Societies, associations between turtle petroglyphs and stone structures are of two types: (1) cases where turtle motifs are found engraved on stones used in the exterior wall construction of *marae* and raised platforms (*paepae*) known to have been elite residences; and (2) cases where turtle motifs are engraved on boulders situated near raised stone structures of religious significance. The first case is by far the most common.

Turtle motifs associated with *marae* in the Society Islands are engraved on quarried limestone slabs forming the facing wall of the *ahu*, the long narrow structure which was the focal point of *marae* ceremonies. Although Emory (1933) found turtle petroglyphs at only five of the 114 *marae* he recorded in the Leeward Islands, three of those *marae* (Manunu, Anini, and Tainuu) are among the largest in the archipelago. *Marae* Tainuu, at Tevaitoa, Raiatea, is the largest of all, being 162 feet long and 20 feet wide. Turtle motifs are engraved on two of the facing stones of *Marae* Tainuu (fig. 9.3, 1b, d, 1h-i) and on the basalt cornerstone of a nearby *paepae* (fig. 9.3, 1a) which Emory recorded as the residence of the chief of Tevaitoa (Emory 1933, 154). *Marae* Manunu and Anini on Huahine are of a distinct type; both sites have a smaller platform built on top of the *ahu*, a feature unknown from other *marae* (Emory 1933, 34). Two of the *marae* (Manunu and Rauhuru) with turtle petroglyphs are at Maeva, where the *marae* of all the principal families of Huahine Nui were clustered together in a group of twenty-five structures. There are two boulder sites, on Borabora and Maupiti, with impressive groups of turtle petroglyphs but apparently neither of these sites is associated with raised stone structures (Emory 1933, 173, 175). Drawings of these petroglyph groups and detailed information about the Leeward Islands *marae* are given in Emory (1933).

On Easter Island a turtle motif (fig. 9.3, 1d) is engraved on a slab of an important religious structure, the *ahu* Ihu Arero (Lavachery 1939, 35). Other motifs, including representations of 'birdmen', octopus, and possibly whales,

are associated with the turtle, but apparently this site is the only religious structure on Easter Island that is directly associated with animal motif petroglyphs (Lavachery 1939, 110).

#### Interpretation

Little is known regarding the motivations for executing petroglyphs in Polynesia, even in island groups such as the Societies, Marquesas, and Hawai'i, where petroglyph sites are relatively common. This gap in the ethnographic and archaeological record of Polynesia is especially striking in consideration of our clearer understanding of the motivations for other art forms such as tattooing, and the carving of stone monuments. Two problems in interpreting petroglyphs are: (1) iconographic significance can vary in both time and space; and (2) the motivation for executing a particular work, whether it be religious, social, or aesthetic, must be demonstrated if an attempt is made to distinguish between these often closely related sources of inspiration (Leroi-Gourhan 1975, 50). The first problem, variability of iconographic significance in time and space, raises the question of the extent to which ethnographic data from the European contact period accounts are relevant to the interpretation of petroglyphs which (except in rare cases involving European subject matter or direct association with datable cultural deposits) cannot yet be directly dated. One effective means of establishing the time depth of certain concepts characteristic of Polynesian cultures is to demonstrate, through inter-island group comparison, that the underlying themes can be traced back to the common ancestral cultural tradition. Concepts assignable to this ancestral tradition — such as the religious significance of turtles — can be used with confidence in proposing ethnologically based interpretations of petroglyphs. It is likely, however, that even as there is variability among Polynesian concepts concerning the cultural significance of turtles (presumably resulting from divergence and differentiation in isolated island groups), the iconographic significance of turtle petroglyphs probably also developed differently in each island group. More complete documentation of petroglyph sites in the Marquesas and other archipelagoes will provide an increasingly firmer basis for defining the nature of this variability in terms of archaeological context.

The second problem, that of distinguishing between religious, social, and aesthetic sources of inspiration, is particularly complex because such sources of inspiration were so closely linked in Polynesian cultures. Even the first-hand observers whose accounts form the basis of reconstructions of the traditional cultures were unclear about such distinctions. For example, Gracia (1843, 55) states that Marquesan men met regularly at public *me'ae* on occasions which involved both religious ceremonies and feasting, and that even the feasting seems to have been regarded as a kind of religious act, because it included putting food to the mouths of the *tiki* and attaching uneaten remains of the feast to the walls of the thatched house built on the *me'ae*. There were no clearly defined boundaries between the realms of religious,

social, and aesthetic concerns. Rather, Marquesan culture was characterized by the intertwining of these aspects of culture, and it is by keeping this consideration in the forefront that an attempt at interpretation of the Hatiheu turtle petroglyphs can best be made.

The significance of turtles in religious ceremonies involving treatment of the dead, as suggested by the myth recorded by Handy and by Porter's description of a mortuary *me'ae*, indicates a connection between turtles and the passage to the afterworld. Marquesans believed both in an underworld (*Hawaiki*) and in the heavens (*aki*). Dordillon (1931, 156) lists three stratified levels of *Hawaiki*: (1) *Hawaiki ta uka* (uppermost); (2) *Hawaiki vaveka* (middle); and (3) *Hawaiki ta ao* (lowermost). The spirits of commoners were believed to have little chance of attaining the lowest, most desirable level of *Hawaiki*. If the death of a commoner was not honored by the proper mortuary rites it was believed that the spirit could not leave earth but would remain to haunt the living (Delmas 1927, 52-3). Entry to the afterworld could also be made through the heavens, and it is interesting to note that the heavens were believed to be linked with the underworld, so that the highest level of *aki* corresponded to the lowest level of *Hawaiki* (Delmas 1927).

The turtle may have been associated with *Hawaiki* because of its ability to dive to great ocean depths. More significant, however, is the turtle's ability to pass from the depths of the ocean to the land, where it lays its eggs. In this metaphorical sense, turtles are able to cross the boundary between two separate worlds. The Marquesan *taua* was similarly held in awe because of his ability to communicate between the world of mortals and that of the deities. I suggest that the religious significance of turtles in the Marquesas, and in Polynesian cultures generally, is related to a symbolic association between turtles and the transcendence of boundaries between worlds. That Polynesians did, in fact, view turtles in terms of this ability to cross these boundaries is illustrated by certain Tuamotuan chants associated with turtle ceremonies. One such chant, recited as the turtle was ritually killed, runs as follows:

Ka ma te pò, ka ma te ao.  
Koia Tu, koia Ragi;  
Mata-iki, Mata-ho.  
Tagi i te po, tagi i te ao,  
Hura tana pu ha i katau e,  
Kia mate!

The nether world, the upper world is freed of restrictions.  
There is Tu, there is Ragi;  
Mata-iki, Mata-ho.  
Sounding in the nether world,  
sounding in the upper world.

Their trumpet is heard on the right,  
Heralding the death of the victim.

(Emory 1947, 75)

The contrasts of above and below, and of inland and seaward, are common themes in other chants recited during turtle ceremonies (Emory 1947, 75, 78-80). Turtles, we surmise, then, were symbolically associated with *taua* because, like their human counterparts, they could transcend boundaries between worlds. Likewise, as a symbol of the transcendence between worlds, turtles were viewed as particularly appropriate for use in connection with mortuary and memorial ceremonies, the purpose of which was to assist the successful passage of a spirit from earth through the stratified layers of the afterworld to its final destination.

This interpretation of Marquesan turtle petroglyphs found in Hatiheu Valley represents an effort to incorporate the analysis of iconographic materials into the study of Polynesian prehistory. The approach employed involves investigation into the possible meaning of petroglyphs through reconstruction of their original context and the proposition of hypotheses based upon ethnological records. This method of studying iconographic themes within a cultural context could also be applied in research on other petroglyph motifs. Indeed, the range of its potential application extends to the analysis of all iconographic themes and materials for which there are relevant ethnological records. 'Recovery of mind', or the reconstruction of prehistoric thought patterns, should now be viewed not only as an attainable goal but as a promising avenue for future research.<sup>3</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 Suggs (1961, 145, 147) mentions having found turtle petroglyphs on Nukuhiva, at Ha'atuatua and in Hatiheu, but the specific motifs were not recorded.
- 2 Different terms, *me'ae* and *ahu*, were used with the same significance in various parts of the Marquesas. Following the precedent set by Linton (1925, 31), and in order to simplify matters, the term *me'ae* is used as a general designation for all such sites in this paper.
- 3 My opportunity to visit the Marquesas Islands was made possible by a fellowship from the Thomas J. Watson Foundation. Work on the paper began at Yale University under the supervision of Richard Pearson and I thank him for his encouragement, as well as for having invited me to present the results of my research at the XIth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. I am also grateful for valuable comments and criticism that I have received from Patrick Kirch, Douglas Oliver, Tom Dye, Patrick McCoy, Paul Cleghorn, and Robert Suggs. Finally, I am indebted to Monseigneur Alain Le Cleach and Severin 'Matu' Katupa of Nukuhiva for having shared their knowledge of the Hatiheu Valley petroglyph boulder with me, and to David Kiphuth of the Yale Peabody Museum for having made the drawing of it from my photographs.

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