Birdman or Birdbrain

About the Show

When *The Book* pages transform into rongorongo script, Freddi, Samantha, and Fred transport back to 1765 to Rapa Nui (a.k.a. Easter Island) and face to face with a 15-ton moai! It's just another day at the beach as the trio jump off cliffs, swim through shark infested waters to the Birdman's Island (Motu Nui), oh, and try to find *The Book* along the way!

Introduction

Historical mysteries are a sure-fire way to get students interested in the past. Studying the origins and meaning of the giant stone statues of Rapa Nui give students a wonderful opportunity to delve into a civilization that remains an enigma.

Historical Background

Rapa Nui, an island in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Chile, is more than 1,000 miles away from the nearest inhabited island, Pitcairn Island. Rapa Nui received the name Easter Island from Admiral Jacob Roggeveen, who sailed a trade ship for the Dutch West India Company. He landed on the island on Easter Day, 1722, and named it in honor of the holiday. It is now a Chilean territory.

A mere 66 square miles, Rapa Nui was inhabited for thousands of years by Polynesians who raised crops, built houses, and worshipped gods in nearly complete isolation from the rest of the world. They also created enormous stone statues, *moai*, that still stand. These statues are thought to honor sacred chiefs and gods and may have emerged out of friendly competitions between groups of craftsmen. The exact number of statues is unknown, but estimates vary between 800 and 1000. The seven stunning *moai* at Ahu Akivi were built around 1460 and face the point at which the sun sets during the equinox. Each measures 14 feet tall and weighs 12 tons.

Curriculum Connections

- ancient civilizations
- archeology
- Easter Island

Subject Areas

- language arts
- social studies



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Historical Background *continued*

Although carved figures can be found on other Pacific islands, none match the size of those on Rapa Nui. Carved by skilled craftsmen from quarries inside the Rano Raraku volcano, the statues range from six feet to over 30 feet tall. No two are exactly alike. Archeologists and historians are still not sure how islanders, using simple tools, could have moved the huge statues across several miles and then raised them to a standing position.

Rapa Nui was also governed in an unusual way. It is unclear when the cult of the birdman began, but followers of the god Makemake—half man, half bird—held a festival each year that featured a grueling race to find the first egg of the speckled sooty tern. The winner's clan leader became chief of the island and as such was awarded special privileges and treated with great honor. The last ceremonies took place in 1866.

By the time European explorers arrived in 1722, much of the ancient culture had disappeared. Over the next few hundred years, disease, missionaries, and enslavement further destroyed the society. No one was left who knew how to read the hieroglyphic script, called rongorongo, written on wooden tablets. Fewer than 30 examples of rongorongo survive today.



Want students to get even more excited about history?

Check out the Easter Island adventure for kids at

www.timewarptrio.com/adventures/easter/

Put It Back, Jack! and other interactive games to play.

Plentifax 487—the ultimate time traveler's guide—gives facts about the *moai*, Rapa Nui, and more!

Cool Books that kids will love.

Activity 1

Mystery History

In this activity, students become history detectives as they research various theories about Rapa Nui.

Instructions

1. Review with students facts about Rapa Nui: how it got its name, where it is, special features of the land and civilization, etc. Tell students that many aspects of Easter Island remain a mystery.
2. Explain to students that they are now going to become history detectives.
3. Divide the class into four groups. Assign each group one of the following topics:
   - How people came to live on Rapa Nui.
   - How the moai were built.
   - How the moai were moved.
   - Why the civilization collapsed.
4. Tell student groups that they will research their question and present to the class as many theories as possible.
5. During the course of their research, students may find more than one explanation about Rapa Nui. When they present the results of their research to the class, have them present all the theories and explain which one they think is correct and why.



Objectives

- to practice research skills
- to learn about lost civilizations

Materials

- writing supplies

Curriculum Standards

- **NCSS**
  Culture: Explain why individuals and groups respond differently to their physical and social environments and/or changes to them on the basis of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs.
- **NCTE/IRA**
  Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

Activity 2

Rongorongo

Students use what they learn about rongorongo, a written language using symbols, to develop a symbol to represent themselves.

Instructions

1. Linguists, people who study languages, think that some of the rongorongo symbols represent sounds, some whole words, and some ideas.
2. Distribute the "Rongorongo" handout or go to any of the Web sites below to look at examples of rongorongo.
3. Have students choose a rongorongo symbol (an ideograph) they like and draw it on a piece of paper. Below the ideograph, have them write down what they think the ideograph means. If the ideograph contains more than one being, is there a conversation going on? What are they talking about?
4. Have students think about their interests, personality, or family. What symbol would they use to represent themselves? Have students design their own rongorongo symbol.
5. When students have completed their name symbols, have them share them with the class and explain how they designed the symbol.

Note: for more information about rongorongo, check out:

www.omniglot.com/writing/rongorongo.htm
www.openweb.ru/rongo/glyphs1.htm
www.rongorongo.org



Objective

- to explore writing systems

Materials

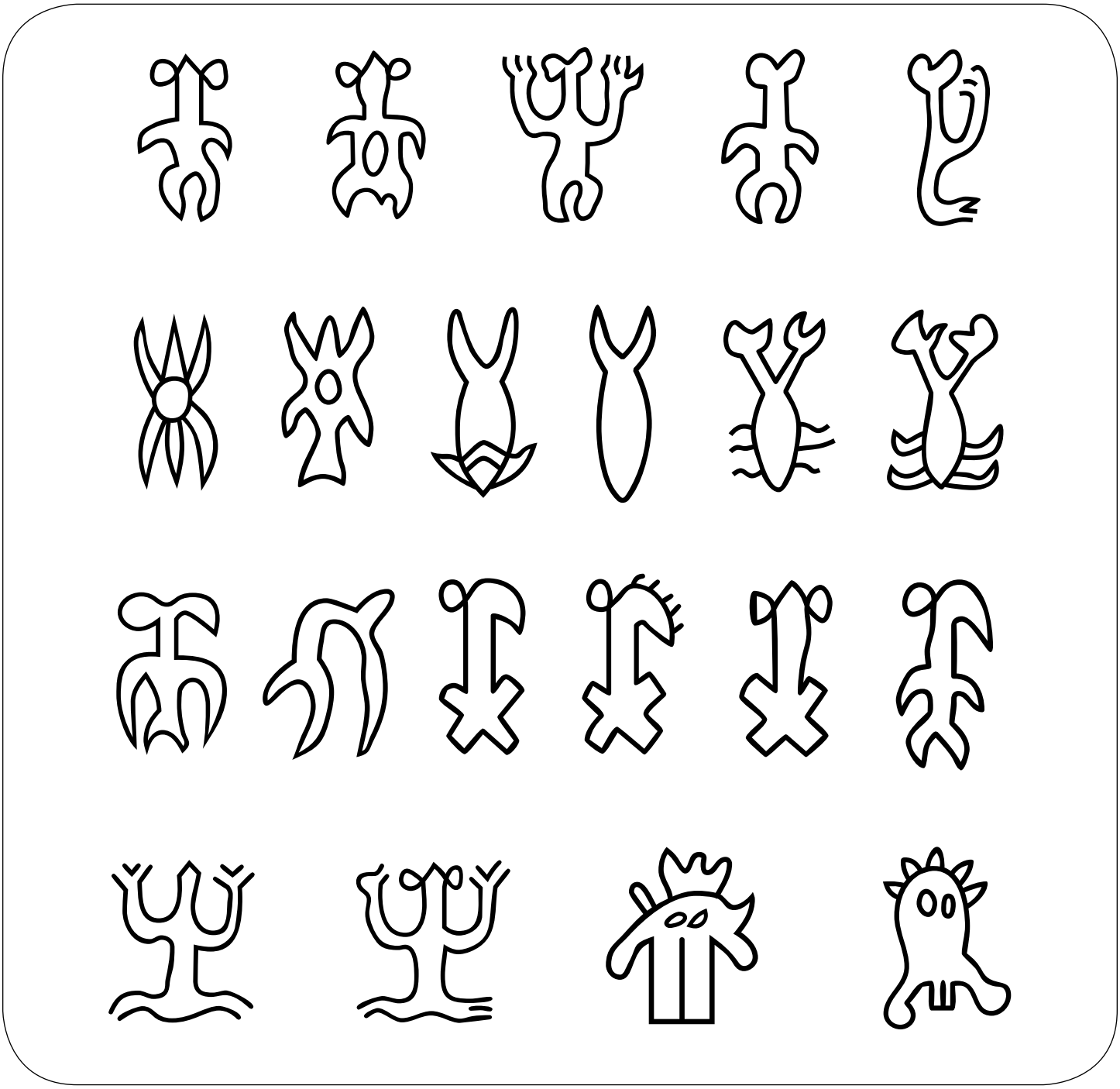
- colored paper
- markers, glue sticks
- "Rongorongo" handout

Curriculum Standards

- **NCSS**
  Individual Development & Identity: The students will explore factors that contribute to one's personal identity such as interests, capabilities, and perceptions.
- **NCTE/IRA**
  Students use a variety of technological and information resources to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

Rongorongo

Some of the symbols look like birds or fish or other sea creatures.
Some symbols look like people.
Some symbols look like plants.
Some symbols look like geometric designs.
Some of the symbols have just one part, and some have many parts.



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Resources

Recommended Books

For Teachers

Among Stone Giants: The Life of Katherine Routledge and Her Remarkable Expedition to Easter Island by Jo Anne Van Tilburg. (Scribner, 2003)
This biography of the extraordinary Routledge, who helped lead an expedition to Easter Island in 1914, highlights her work and her life, marked by great success but also by mental illness. See also Routledge's book, *The Mystery of Easter Island* (Adventures Unlimited Press, 1998).

Easter Island by Michel Orliac. (Abrams, 1995)
Discoveries series. A lavishly illustrated guide to Easter Island and its mysterious history.

The Enigmas of Easter Island: Island on the Edge. 2nd ed. by Paul Bahn. (Oxford University Press, 2003)
A comprehensive, in-depth look at the island, its civilization, and recent discoveries about the giant statues and the birdman cult.

Splendid Isolation: Art of Easter Island by Eric Kjellgren. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001)
The catalog for a 2002 exhibit, this book explores the cultural heritage of Easter Island, including word carvings and rongorongo.

Vaka: Saga of a Polynesian Canoe by Thomas Davis. (Polynesian Press, 1992)
This novel is the saga of 300 years of Polynesian voyaging, told by a former Prime Minister of the Cook Islands.

Voyage of Rediscovery: A Cultural Odyssey Through Polynesia by Ben Finney. (University of California Press, 1994)
Tells of the story of a historic 1985 voyage from Hawaii to New Zealand that recreated the technology and navigation of ancient Polynesians.

For Students

Fiction

Call It Courage by Armstrong Sperry. (Macmillan, 1940)
This Newbery award winner is considered a classic coming-of-age story. It tells the story of Mafatu, son of the great chief of Hikueru, who must confront his fear of the sea.

Hunter by Joy Cowley. (Philomel, 2004)
After a plane crash in a remote area of New Zealand, Jordan and her brother are guided by Hunter, a slave to Maori warriors, who lived there 200 years earlier. As the two worlds meet, Jordan realizes the connection she has to her ancestral past.

Maui and the Big Fish by Barbara Ker Wilson. (Frances Lincoln, 2003)
This creation legend tells how six of the South Pacific islands—now known as the large islands of Hawaii—came into being. For younger readers.

The Mutiny on Board HMS Bounty by William Bligh, adapted by Deborah Kestel. (ABDO Publishing Co., 2002)
Great Illustrated Classics series. An adaptation of the famous 1789 mutiny aboard the ship Bounty and how Captain Bligh and 18 of his men were set adrift in open boats in the South Pacific.

Myths of Oceania by Anita Dalal. (Raintree Steck-Vaughn, 2002)
Ten myths from the South Pacific include creation myths, tales of the trickster Maui, and stories of the significance of Easter Island's carvings.

The Shark Callers by Eric Campbell. (Macmillan, 1993)
Two boys, one traveling around the world with his family and the other apprenticed to become a sacred Shark Caller in Papua New Guinea, are caught in the eruption of the volcano Matupi and the subsequent tidal wave. Can they both survive?

The Stone Idol by Franklin W. Dixon. (Simon & Schuster, 1981)
Hardy Boys mysteries. Amateur detectives Frank and Joe Hardy try to track down a small Easter Island idol stolen from a South American antiquities dealer.

Resources

Nonfiction

Australia and the South Pacific by Fran Sammis. (Marshall Cavendish, 2000) Mapping Our World series. Presents information about natural features of the South Pacific as well as crops, culture, languages, economics, and more.

Easter Island, Giant Stone Statues Tell of a Rich and Tragic Past by Caroline Arnold. (Houghton Mifflin, 2000)
Photographs and text explore what we know about Easter Island, including the true story of the Birdman competition.

The Easter Island Statues by Deborah Underwood. (Thomson Gale, 2005)
This book describes the giant stone statues, including how archeologists have uncovered answers to many questions.

Explorers of the South Pacific by Daniel E. Harmon. (Mason Crest, 2003)
Long before Captain Bligh sailed the Bounty in the South Pacific, Polynesians sailed the waters from Easter Island to New Zealand and north to Hawaii.

James Cook and the Exploration of the Pacific by Charles J. Shields. (Chelsea House, 2002)
Captain James Cook explored the South Pacific and Tahiti. He proved that New Zealand was an island, and claimed vast areas of Australia for Great Britain.

Mysteries of Lost Civilizations by Anne Millard. (Copper Beech Books, 1996)
Chapters explore mysteries such as lost cities, missing people, and mysterious objects, including the mysteries of Easter Island and its people.

Oceania by Charlotte Greig. (Mason Crest, 2003)
Cultures and Costumes: Symbols of Their Period series. Traditional ceremonial and everyday dress (and the significance of each to the many countries and peoples of the South Pacific) are described.

Rediscovering Easter Island by Kathy Pelta. (Lerner Publications, 2001)
The effects of Europeans on the island are traced, beginning with the arrival of the first Europeans in 1722 to the present day. For older readers.

Southwest Pacific by Sharon Franklin, Rhonda Krafchin, and Cynthia A. Black. (Raintree Steck-Vaughn, 2000)
The culture and history of four areas of the South Pacific are explored through the arts and crafts of their people. Step-by-step directions for four craft projects are included.

Web Sites

EASTER ISLAND
http://www.mysteriousplaces.com/Easter_Isld_Pge.html
Take a virtual tour of Easter Island, including photographs of the moai.

EASTER ISLAND HOME PAGE
www.netaxs.com/~trance/linklist.html
Information on Easter Island's history, culture, and tourism, including extensive Web links.

KON-TIKI WEB SERVER
www.museumsnett.no/kon-tiki/Research/Papers/walking_statue.html
Explore scholarly papers from Norway's Kon-Tiki Museum.

NOVA: SECRETS OF EASTER ISLAND
pbs.org/wgbh/nova/easter/
A team of archeologists try to figure out how the moai were moved, using only tools and materials available to ancient inhabitants of Easter Island.

POLYNESIAN VOYAGING SOCIETY
pvs.kcc.hawaii.edu/welcome.html
This organization investigates how the Polynesian seafarers discovered and settled the islands of the Pacific.

RAPA NUI
www2.hawaii.edu/~ogden/piir/pacific/Rapanui.html
Explores the people, government, economy, history, and more.

Please note:
Although these sites were verified at the time of publication, Web site addresses and content are frequently subject to change.

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