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ON AN OCEANIC WRITING
APPEARING TO BE OF NEOLITHIC ORIGIN.

by
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An Account of the lecture given at "La Société Préhistorique Française" on the 22nd June, 1933.

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[The lecturer stated that it was only due to the insistence of the President that he had decided to set this question before the Society. After a few flattering words to the assembly, he suggested a discussion so that they could ask questions, and even raise objections. Indeed, said he, now-a-days there are but few questions wherein discretion is more necessary than that which is about to occupy our attention.)

[Passing on to a statement of the facts, M. de Hévésy continued: "We have all learnt that in India there existed nothing but barbarians and savages until the advent of the civilising Aryans. Their holy books, the Vedas, their sanskrit language, were for us, at all times, synonomous with what we accept as the most antique, the most classical - I would almost say, the most venerable.

[To-day we know that this is not so.]

Sir John Marshall and his co-workers have discovered in the region of the Middle Indus a still earlier civilisation which was prosperous and magnificent, a civilisation more developed even, in certain respects, than the contemporary civilisations of Sumer

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and Egypt, and a civilisation which may even appear to be bewildering, since only about ten years ago nobody had as yet suspected its existence.

You know that Mohenjo-Daro has brought to light town-planning so much in advance of that age, that it rivals that of ultra-modern towns.

You know that the spacious storied houses had bathrooms and other sanitary installations, whence the drainage was assured by means of vaulted gutters almost of the size of those in Paris.

You also know that the artistic sense of its population is manifested by many objects of which I shall show you a few specimens. (1)



It has also been remarked that this newly discovered civilisation could not have been an Aryan civilisation, since we know the latter quite well through the Vēdas. The Aryans had only villages, and here we find towns; they used to construct in wood and bamboo, and here everything is in masonry, red baked bricks, so well finished that better are not to be found even now-a-days. The Aryans, for example, hardly ever ate fish; in Mohenjo-Daro this was a favourite dish. There, it is the cow which was, and still is, regarded as a god; here it is the bull. The absolute intolerance of the Aryans for all those who were not of their race is well known. In Mohenjo-Daro, on the contrary, the skulls

(1) The line of points replace in this account the passage wherein the lecturer presented and explained documentary reproductions.

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found show a population composed of at least four different races.

I could continue in this manner, but I prefer to draw your attention to two special points. On the one hand, objects coming from the Indus, found at Sumer, on the other hand metals and stones found at Mohenjo-Daro prove to us that the traders in India must have been in communication with very distant regions, and that their commerce must have embraced the area lying between the Black Sea and Burma, and stretched into Central Asia, judging by the jade that has been found there.

More important still is my second point. One gets the impression that from the point of view of its size and its geographical area, this newly discovered civilisation must have been superior to all those which we know to have existed before it.

To begin with, Mohenjo-Daro had no fortified town walls, which would give one to suppose that it was not a frontier town.

Exactly the same objects have been found at Harappa, which is almost as far from it as Paris is from the Pyrenees.

Sir John Marshall wrote to me some weeks ago - his letter is dated the end of April - from Taxila, telling me that he has just identified "scores of sites" which await pick and shovel, and that a little money and a spirit of enterprise will suffice to unveil "this most fascinating chapter of human history".

Probably you will also be interested by what Sir John adds: "I hope that France and other countries will not be long in sending their own expeditions to take an active part in the exploration

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of these prehistoric antiquities."

This civilisation also had a writing; hieroglyphic as all those of that period. The major portion of those writings, without doubt written upon perishable materials, is probably lost for ever. But fortunately, a few plaques of copper have been found covered with writing and a remarkable number of "seals" made of Steatite.

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(It ~~would appear that the objects you have just seen may have served some religious purpose~~) In the same way, that not so very long ago, a Bible was to be found in the house of every respectable Englishman, so does one find these seals in nearly every house so far brought to light, as much at Mohenjo-Daro as at Harappa.

It is thought that they used to place these "boards" - or perhaps the "stamps" obtained from them - beside the offerings they made to animals. The tutelary god of each family was always an animal. It is thus, by means of these, shall we say, "visiting cards" that they wished to communicate what they wanted to say to their animal divinities, and in particular the name of the person presenting the offering.

Among these animals there are several domestic ones; bulls and buffaloes for example, as well as beasts of the jungle, such as the tiger, the rhinoceros, the elephant and even the crocodile. By the side of this fauna we find these signs.

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On the other hand I have observed that upon the numerous seals found up to now - and there are nearly a thousand of them - the lion, the King of the Beasts, which plays quite a rôle in the West, does not appear at all. If this omission is not due to chance, it gives one food for thought; you will tell me whether it is right to infer that the people of Mohenjo-Daro had come there from a country where the lion did not exist, that is to say, from the direction of the East?

The writing of this new civilisation has been studied closely by English scholars, by Pr. Langdon of Oxford, and by Dr. Hunter of the same University. Although these scholars have not succeeded in reading this writing, they have been able to make many interesting observations.

They have assured themselves, however, that the writing is from right to left. In many cases, the writing was "boustrophedon", that is to say that the figures in the alternating lines faced in an opposite direction.

This last observation appears to me to be particularly interesting, for we can conclude from it, I believe, that the use of writing in the region of the Indus must have been very wide and not limited to the inscriptions on seals.

Why then, in antiquity did they have recourse to the "boustrophedon", or again, to this other method of writing which consists of placing the figures of each line in some way up side down, so as to have to turn the tablet while reading? This was always

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for the sake of being able to pass from one line to the following one without making any mistake.

When we read, we are sufficiently enthused to jump from the end of one line to the beginning of the next one, and we rarely make a mistake. But with hieroglyphs, not only the writing, but also the reading, must have been less simple.

So we find at Mohenjo-Daro specimens of "boustrophedon."

But, on the other hand, we never find more than three lines on one face of the seal - they often used to write on both faces - which proves to us that the risk of making a mistake did not exist.

The existence of "boustrophedon", however, leads us to believe that other infinitely longer writings had existed for which the "boustrophedon" method had been used.

Here, for example, is a seal found at Harappa, wherein the figures of both the top and bottom line are reversed by 180° in relation to each other.

Prof. Langdon has already published the complete Corpus of the inscriptions found in Mohenjo-Daro up to 1927.

Dr. Hunter, who is at present in India, writes to say that this Corpus of the Harappa signs will be published regularly.

Dr. Hunter also informed me that since then he has established the Corpus of the inscriptions of the seals found both at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa between 1927 and 1930. Among them we shall find signs which until now are unknown, but the whole, he tells me, will not change very much the list of signs known up to now.

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The most interesting result of the researches of English scholars is that the writing of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa represent a perfectly established system, that is to say, that the writing is undoubtedly no longer merely an ideographic writing, but more or less syllabic.

They have noticed that the stems can be grafted on to the signs, hems added on, circumflex accents to cover them, and other accents, in the nature of dots, flanking them on both sides; in short, they have found the evidence of this "methodical whole" which is always, as you know, one of the most characteristic and salient points of all which is invention.

At this point, ~~ladies and gentlemen~~, let us leave India. Let us cross the seas, let us transport ourselves 20,000 kilometres away to the antipodes of Mohenjo-Daro.

The learned Bishop of Oceania, Father Jaussen, had asked his clergy in the Pacific, to send him all objects having an ethnographical interest for his Tahiti collection.

It was thus that he received ^{specimen of native hair of the natives.} ~~some~~ "Native Hair". The Missionary who sent them to him, ~~z~~ Father Zumbohm, was exercising his ministry some seventy years ago in Easter Island. It is an arid little island with an area of only 12,000 hectares, and moreover as distant, in its immensity of the ocean, from all land and every other human habitation, as for example, Paris is from the confines of Iceland.

Bishop Jaussen immediately remarked that the wooden tablet on which his missionary had rolled the hair, presented far more interest than all the rest, for the tablet was covered with hieroglyphic writing.

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Two causes especially render the discovery of this writing particularly disturbing. The first is that never before nor since have inscriptions been found in Oceania; the second is precisely because they were found in this Easter Island, where a most remarkable phenomenon had already attracted attention.

There are, on this island, as you know, antique statues of very great dimensions, of about 20 metres and more, statues chiselled out of a single block of stone of an extinct volcano, and then transported, we do not know how, to the sea shore, there to be crowned with a stone hat, the hat alone two or three metres high, and finally to mark the sepulchre of the natives.

The tremendous number of statues found on this Island, makes of it the largest Mausoleum in the world.

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Let us return, however, to our own tablet. The Bishop of Tahiti asked for more pieces of wood of this kind to be sent to him, which are called by the natives "talking ^{*pieces of wood called tablets*} woods", and received seven in all.

Some have also been found by explorers, so that to-day we know of some fifteen of them.

But, habent sua fata libelli, even if these tablets are of wood, actually the inscribed tablets of Easter Island are scattered all over the world; some in Santiago, Chili, ~~Leningrad~~ ^{Petersbourg}, Washington, London, Berlin and Vienna. The most beautiful, however, are those preserved at Braine-le-Comte in Belgium.

Thanks to its president, Paris ^{du} will soon be in possession of a greater prize than any of these various ^{Museum} Museums, for Dr. Rivet is about to assemble in the Musée du Trocadero the exact mouldings of all the existing Tablets, which will then considerably facilitate research.



The largest of the existing tablets, one of those at Braine-le-Comte, is almost one metre long, and 0m.12 wide, and contains on both faces more than fifteen hundred characters.

Another, preserved in the ~~Leningrad~~ ^{at St. Petersburg} Museum, is in the shape of a knobstick, a weapon called "méré" carried by New Zealand Chiefs, and which was sometimes made of wood like the tablets.

(The Lecturer remarks, showing the Braine-le-Comte tablet, the best preserved of all the existing ones, and from which he ^{gives} ~~quote~~ an extract, that the text should be read turning the tablet at the end of each line, since the figures of the paired lines are presented head down.) (See Plate 1.)

Some explorers, he continues, and notably the missionaries, used to pretend that the tablets were to be read from left to right; scholars like Geiseler, Haberland and Harrisson were of a different

opinion of the latter, when two anomalies, one on one of the Braine-le-Comte tablets, the other on a Washington tablet which are irregularities that I do not present to you, but which could not be explained otherwise, prove to me that the writing goes from right to left. The explorers mentioned above say, probably on the belief of the natives, that it begins in one of the bottom corners, right or left.

They have more assurance than I have, I will admit, for I cannot say where it begins. It is certain that for two tablets, those wherein I have observed anomalies in the order of design, the text begins in both cases, with the fifth character on the left of the first line on top. As for the other tablets, as well as those I have shown you, I cannot say where one should begin them.

As for the reading of the text itself, I would not care to enlarge upon the few observations I have been able to make in this direction, since they are still far from being terminated. Nevertheless, I can assure you that beyond the mechanical aspect of the writing which already, with its incessant repetitions, strongly resembles the Polynesian. I have been able to obtain a certain proof that it is really a question of a Polynesian language. It would be very interesting to know, and would equally facilitate the reading of the tablets, if one knew what the different figures represent. But, there we meet great difficulties, for the fashion of these scribes and designers of antiquity, in indicating objects,

was very secret.

Thus, you will agree with me in concluding that this figure represents a man, and that one is undoubtedly a fish.

But, this triangle at the end of the handle, is it a weapon? And this circumference, with these four tentacles, does it represent a tortoise or simply a cockchafer?

If these two arcs of a circle represent a moon quarter, what is this triangle doing in the middle?

At the end, this sketch of an animal, with a kind of trunk, does it represent an elephant and this other one a monkey?

You see the colossal importance there is in having something definite to work on, if for nothing else just for those figures, for the two species, the Elephant and the Monkey being, as you know entirely foreign to the Polynesian Fauna, the field for research into the place of origin of the writing would narrow down immediately.

But, alas, for nearly all the figures we have but suppositions. On the other hand, it is here that a most disturbing observation is to be found, and it is because of making this little observation that I have to-day the great honour of being called to present to you this modest report.

The Easter Island writing, and that of its antipode, the valley of the Indus, belong to the same stock or source, and now you are going to judge for yourselves.

I used to attend the lectures of one of the Professors of

the Collège de France, ~~of~~ M. Sylvian Levi, when he lectured to us on the new civilisation of Mohenjo-Daro. He pointed out at the time, that any effort to relate its writing to other hieroglyphic system ^{have found} ~~would~~ be fruitless. But, all the terms of comparison placed themselves to the West. To the East there were, amongst others, the Easter Island Writing, which was less studied. I decided to study it from this side; this admission I make without conviction or enthusiasm, simply to ease my conscience. At home I only had a photograph of a British Museum tablet, reproduced in Mrs Rootledge's book, but in it I found a common sign, three circles superposed, cut by a vertical. This was, by no means, a very simple sign, but that does not stand for much.

I remember very well what one of the greatest scholars of our time ^{M. Dussaud} recalled regarding the Glozel controversy, ~~a certain M. Dussaud~~, that similar signs, simple though they be, are no proof to go by, and also that it is quite natural that the hieroglyphic signs, representing the same objects, resemble one another. It was clear that the same source could not be attributed to this writing, the number of signs being very numerous, and having among these signs such complicated ones.

~~Ladies and gentlemen,~~ You are going to see that such is not the case. I will spare you the proof of the general concordance of the two writings; for example, to demonstrate to you that here and there these are the same elements of modification and combination which control the use of the signs; that these are the same stems

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which are grafted to the signs, the same dots and hems which are added, and that even the same circumflex accents cover them sometimes.

It will suffice that I adhere to the signs alone and compare them, and you will observe not only strong analogies, but even cases of absolute identity.

Certainly, the Easter Island signs form something like a more ancient edition. You will see that their design is more detailed, much finer in fact. This simplified character, this care of standardisation seen in Mohenjo-Daro, where undoubtedly they made more frequent use of the writing, is not to be found in these signs.

But, let me show you some of the comparisons presented by M. Pelliot to the Institut, and as I have just told you, you will be able to judge for yourselves.



(The lecturer then explains some projections wherein Indus signs are compared with those from Easter Island, and of which we give herewith a series. (Plates II and III.) He points out that beyond simple signs, there exists a parellelism between signs, the complication of which is such as to exclude chance.)

This is probably, continues M. de Hévézy, the comparison of signs, and what is most surprising is that they have man for their graphical base.

At Mohenjo-Daro man is already reduced to a very simple expression - just a few lines, the torso, the arms and the legs.

But, compare the position of the arms and legs with that of

man from Easter Island, and especially the objects held in their hands, and striking similarities can be drawn.

Finally, a few signs and groups of more simple signs, with the use of the same accent, the circumflex which you are able to see.

It would not be incorrect to say that the signs of the two writings are very similar. In any case, not one of the scholars who have seen, not only the comparisons that I have just shown you, but my manuscript which is more detailed, and which I have shown not only to French scholars, but also to Belgian, English and Austrian scholars, have evinced any doubt. In spite of the enormous gap in space and time, presented by the two writings, the new point of departure of which I spoke to you in the beginning, is well stated. But, what follows? How does one explain the filiation of the two writings ?

I mentioned 'discretion' at the beginning of this lecture, so please do not expect more from me, for as it becomes a reporter I have been able to enumerate and recall facts which will be able, in time, to prop up your judgement.

First, let us divide them into two groups; in the first, the questions relating to the Easter Island Tablets, and in the second, the questions brought about by the comparison and resemblance of the two writings.

As for the Easter Island Tablets, one may wonder amongst other things if their execution is relatively new, that is, dating back only a few centuries, or if it is really ancient. One may then

wonder if they were executed on the Island itself, or whether they were brought there? Finally, in that case, from where were they imported?

The age of the Tablets. We know nothing about this. We only know that the wood may have been preserved for some time. You will see in the Louvre, Egyptian wooden statuettes which date from the 5th Egyptian Dynasty, that is to say, from the 4th millenium before our era, so that in this case, any age is possible.

Were the Tablets imported or not? To that I can reply with some assurance, and the answer is yes.

We are about to make an analysis of the wood of the Tablets, so as to determine its species, an analysis which, with the means that science now has at its command, can be made on a few cubic millimetres. We are still only at the beginning of this work, but the analysis of the Tablet which was first discovered, the one around which the hair was wound, has already revealed to us that it is a question of a Podocarpus, that is to say, of a wood which does not grow in Easter Island. In the actual state of science, one cannot say precisely whether it be Podocarpus Latifolia, which grows in the tropics, in the Molluccas, Celebes and even in Central America, or Podocarpus Ferruginea, which is found in New Zealand.

In any case, I have observed that the word 'miro' the name given by the natives of Easter Island to their most important tree, the Sophora, ^{signifin} ~~has~~ in New Zealand, that is to say in the Maori tongue, the ~~name of~~ Podocarpus Ferruginea.

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There is also an hypothesis; in the case of the Easter Island Tablets it was a question of floating wood brought to the Island by means of currents. Chemists assure me that it can be proved even to-day whether the wood has remained for any length of time in sea water. But, for this analysis, a few cubic millimetres of the tablets would no longer suffice, and of course, no Museum wishes to sacrifice their tablets.

There is still one reason which makes us suppose that the wood was imported, and that is the tradition of the natives.

More than one of you, ~~ladies and gentlemen~~, know by experience how weak is the historical value of tradition, seen you have often seen facts altered and denatured. Why, in twenty years time, more than one of you will shake your head when I tell you that nearly the whole history of the Polynesians has been reconstituted, thanks to their tradition.

But, among this people, the veracity of tradition is unique. In some islands, death was the punishment for those who dared to stray from their religion, or its rites.

The memory of the great actions of their ancestors, as well as their genealogies, oral genealogies, going back sometimes for more than a hundred generations, that means more than 3,000 years, was for the Polynesians the most sacred thing they knew.

The teaching of tradition is done in special schools, and always in the most solemn fashion. The Europeans have proceeded to gather, in genealogies, from the distant islands, and it is thus

that we have had proof that they have been preserved piously and exactly.

These are Polynesians whose migrations we can easily trace today, and we can do so with certainty, even to Indonesia. It is this people of colonising sailors who brought 'writing' into Easter Island.

For, if the tradition of the islanders says that their chief, Hotu Matua, arrived in the island with two great boats and three hundred warriors, as well as their families, perhaps nine hundred years ago, and brought exactly sixty-seven inscribed tablets with him, there is a great possibility that this is true. That is, that the writing on the tablets may not have been executed on the Island itself, but that they were more likely to be imported.

It remains to be discovered from where these tablets were imported. It is feasible to trace them to New Zealand. The inhabitants of Easter Island must have come from the Island of Rarotonga, which was inhabited and colonised by the New Zealanders. Certain details of the rites and customs, and last but not least, certain linguistic ^{peculiarities,} ~~particularities~~, have always led us to suppose that the natives of Easter Island were closely related to the New Zealanders.

But, let us leave for the moment the question of the Tablets. Let us pass on to the relationship between the two writings. At first sight, bearing in mind the gap in time and space, nothing appears more improbable than the hypothesis of direct relations between India and Oceania.

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What explanation can be given for what we have just seen, on the subject of the similarity of the writings?

The explanation has already been given to us, it seems, by a presentiment of Sir John Marshall, who taking stock in his book on Mohenjo-Daro of the different attempts to connect its writing with other writings, puts us on our guard against these comparisons. On the other hand, he thinks that if the writings of the Mediterranean and the West of Asia, like the Sumerian, the Egyptian, the Hittites, the Cretan, the Proto-Elamite and naturally that of the Indus, have evolved separately, would this not be only in consequence of difference of language? They must all have sprung, however, from one and the same source.

"The basic principles are the same", he says, "and there is every likelihood that they are all derived from one common source, which probably goes back a long way, even into neolithic times."

This neolithic writing, this ancestor of all the writings, is it not this we have on the Easter Island Tablet, the Island whose whole culture, at the moment of its discovery was still neolithic?

I myself, can scarcely believe it to be otherwise.

Where was this first writing born? And where must we seek for the country of origin of this neolithic civilisation, already very developed? ^{From} Whence does its invention spring ~~from~~?

In the East of Asia, somewhere in the Far East, in hot countries

near the shore of the Ocean? At present, we are not able to say. But the tablets are henceforth there to bear witness that it must have existed. In any case, a connection has already been made up to now by two ways between the East of Asia and the depths of the Pacific. About the first, the linguistic way, I am not at all certain alas. There are undoubtedly linguistic links between these two points of the globe, but the filiations which we believe to exist to-day, - the Austric family of languages established by Father Schmidt, and notably the Austro-Asiatic family of Schmidt, as I have explained it to the Asiatic Society in Paris, - appear to me non-existent. I intend, besides, to dilate on this point at the IIIrd International Congress of Linguists in September next in Rome. I shall propose to this latter in my communication "A False Linguistic Family", that the terms "Austric" and "Austro-Asiatic" may no longer be used, since they do not actually define anything definite, and therefore, they are all the more dangerous.

More real, more serious, and so more fortunate, are the links that ~~you~~^{the} archaeologists have established between the Pacific and Austral-Asia. And how could it be otherwise, since they have attached themselves to that which is palpable, perceptible, and moreover, it has been a pleasure to you to interest yourself in the work of your confreres and to control them, while the linguists are most skillful in getting out from under such control, each time making

the excuse that this question is not their speciality.

The memorable excavations of M. Mansuy and Mlle Colani in Indo China and Tonkin, also the works of a Dutch scholar M. van Callenfels, and quite lately those of an Austrian scholar, Baron Heine-Geldern, professor in the University of Vienna, have traced the Melanesians to these shores and even by the frontiers of present day China.

To say Melanesian is not as yet to say Polynesian. But, perhaps, we also may succeed one day in retracing the Asiatic migration of this marvellous race, these matchless sailors who, at the time when our ancestors did but skirt along coasts, a thousand years before the Christian era, were already sailing the high seas, and who in the VI century of our era penetrated even into the Antarctic, found a return route among the islets several thousands of kilometres distant, which they reached with entire navies, taking along with them women, children, domestic animals and even useful plants from cultivated ground, thus showing themselves to be the greatest colonisers of all time.

Already, Baron Heine Geldern has just written to me saying that he has found certain links between the native culture of New Zealand whence the inhabitants of Easter Island seem to have originated, and the Neolithic of Northern China.

Professor Schirokogoroff, who has just demonstrated so peremptorily the absurdity of an ouralo-altaian common wrote to

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on the 18th April from Peking: "As an experiment, I have shown your characters, after having explained the origin of them, to Chinese familiar with ancient Chinese writing; they recognised them as Chinese, and have named them in Chinese. This is at the very least curious, and perhaps significant; I hope to show them to quite competent Chinese scholars."

All this is still evidently very vague, just as much so as certain little observations that I have been able to make myself in this domain, observations still so shallow, that I would prefer not to ^a speak of them to you just now. But perhaps the day is not very far off, when our knowledge of the pre-history of this part of the globe will be remarkably widened. Just as we know that to-day commerce between the two shores of the Pacific is more intense than between those of the Atlantic, in the same way it may have been that the civilising immigration movement was stronger in the South East of Asia than in its western parts. Thus one often forgets that at the end of the Paleolithic and the beginning of the Neolithic there existed a mixture of races in Indo China as perhaps nowhere else at that time.

Finally, I would like to show you just one more example which, even it in itself ~~it~~ may be nothing much to go by, still seems to me too curious to be left aside. I drew your attention to the last tablet from Easter Island, about a manner of representing man in profile. It is especially the mouth which is well marked on the face, and the feet are turned towards one another

It is rather surprising that this same representation of man was found on an old relic of Khmer art, presented at a brilliant lecture given by our President while on a voyage to Indo China.

Another form, analogous to one of the objects that are to be seen in ancient Indo China, is that of the bow on the tablets. The Polynesians knew very little about it. I have only found it twice as a whole. But there, its shape with the two curved ends, and the centre slightly bulging, is much the same.

On ^upersuing this study, we are bound to find certain other analogies. Only ten years ago the civilisation of the Indus was not known, and the years to come might possibly reveal to us a highly developed neolithic civilisation in Eastern Asia.

Opposite Page 6.

Top. Various specimens of seals from Mohenjo-Daro. (According to Sir John Marshall's :- "Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilisation.")

on Tablets

Below. One of the "Speaking Woods" from Easter Island; the Tablet called Marmari preserved by the Picbus Brothers at Braine-le-Comte. A certain number of common signs may be observed.

Opposite Page 8 and 10

Indus writing signs compared with Easter Island writing signs. (In each column, the Indus signs are to the left, and those from Easter Island are to the right.)