

Rapa Nui

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Rapa Nui is a small (160 km²) remote subtropical island in the South Pacific Ocean, 3600km west of Chile, the nation of which it forms a part, and 1900km east-southeast of Pitcairn Island, the nearest inhabited island. It is known to outsiders as Easter Island (*Isla de Pascua* in Spanish), named by Dutch navigator Jacob Roggeveen after his visit to the island on Easter in 1722. Rapa Nui is the locally preferred name, used since the 19th century, which also refers to the people and their language. Although its large monolithic *moai* stone statues are widely recognized, substantial mystery still surrounds the origins and development of the people who erected these monuments. Reconstructing the history of migration, adaptation, innovation, contact, and survival has been the focus of studies to which archaeology, linguistics, biological anthropology, ethnology, ecology, and related disciplines have all contributed (e.g., Stevenson, et al. 2001).

Oral histories tell of an original settlement of people arriving from the west from a land called *Marae Rega* or *Marae Toe Hau*, led by *Hotu Matu'a* "Great Parent," the first *ariki* (chief) of the island (Barthel 1978; Englert 1970; Métraux 1940; Routledge 1998[1919]). The Rapa Nui have been considered culturally and linguistically Polynesian since their first contacts with European visitors. In the 1940s, however, Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl hypothesized that the island was first settled from South America, before Polynesians arrived. As evidence, he pointed to the sophisticated and large scale stone work of the *ahu* (ceremonial platforms), the presence of sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) and other native South American plants, the path of ocean currents, and other ethnological and linguistic evidence (Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961). His much publicized Kon-Tiki raft expedition of 1947 attempted to demonstrate the plausibility of this theory. Most experts today tend to discount the South American origins of the stonework, but many acknowledge the possibility of contact.

Early studies relying primarily on linguistic and archaeological data estimated that the island was likely settled from Eastern Polynesia before AD 600 or as early as AD 400 (e.g., Green 1966; McCoy 1979). More recent research based on further analyses in archaeology, linguistics, biological anthropology, and experimental voyaging has, however, led researchers to propose later settlement dates around AD 600–1000. Earlier hypotheses regarding a direct settlement originating from the Marquesas have also been revised to favor settlement(s) from the Mangareva–Pitcairn–Henderson area (e.g., Green 1998). Yet another hypothesis postulates that settlers may have arrived from the Marquesas via South America, and may have brought back the sweet potato (Gill 1998).

The Rapa Nui are a testament to the remarkable achievements and migrations of the descendants of proto-Austronesian speakers originating from southern China, who over the

last 5000 years—including 3000 years in Oceania—migrated and settled an area spanning 28,000km on an east-west axis, with Madagascar off the east coast of Africa at its western end and Rapa Nui at the eastern end (Bellwood 2001). The successful colonization of new Pacific islands and the subsequent development of complex societies depended not only on their skills as navigators but also on subsistence strategies especially regarding food production in the sometimes limited physical environment of their new homes. Hotu Matu'a is said to have brought food crops and introduced them to the island, including pigs, chicken, bananas, taro, yams, sugar cane, ti, and even sweet potatoes. While most researchers disagree with Heyerdahl, contact with South America is considered a possible factor in the cultural development of this island society. For example, the introduction of the sweet potato is considered a major factor in agricultural intensification, which the archaeological evidence shows to have been widely adopted on the island after AD 1200.

Some time after the initial settlement, the islanders began to build sacred sites with stones and to carve statues to represent their ancestors. The natural forest woods they found on the island would have been important for their construction and transportation. Beginning around the 11th century, the construction of *moai* intensified greatly and the scale of constructions grew and became more complex. According to legend, as he lay dying blind and ill, Hotu Matu'a divided the island among his six sons. Social organization then followed a conical clan (or ramage) system, a typical pattern in Polynesian chiefdoms with hierarchically ranked unilineal descent groups (McCall 1994[1980]; Van Tilburg 1994). In each descent group, a paramount chief (*ariki mau*), the senior male in direct line of patrilineal succession from Hotu Matu'a, possessed power (*mana*) derived from gods. Each patrilocal segmentary descent group (*mata*) occupied a specific estate (*kāinga*) which included both coastal and interior zones demarcated by stone cairns (*pipihoreko*) and protected by local estate spirits (*akuaku*). Local descent groups built *ahu* usually by the coast and erected *moai* above them, with their backs to the ocean and overlooking the villages which they faced. Each *moai* represented an eponymous ancestor of a local segment of the descent group. Patrilocal extended families (*paenga*) formed the basic economic units and were engaged in reciprocal and hierarchical economic and social networks with others in the lineage (*ivi*). By the 15th and 16th centuries, the island was subdivided into 10 or 11 polities occupying all of the island, organized into two political confederacies: the *Tu'u 'Aro* (or *Ko Tu'u 'Aro Ko Te Mata Nui*, “the Greater Mata”) who occupied the northeastern half and were named after Hotu Matu'a's eldest son Tu'u Maheke, and the *Tu'u Hotu 'Iti* (or *Ko Tu'u Hotu 'Iti Ko Te Mata 'Iti*, “the Lesser Mata”) –named after his youngest but favorite son Hotu 'Iti. Comparative works on prehistoric Polynesian societies consider Rapa Nui to be similar to that of Mangaia, and less stratified than those of Hawaii, Tonga, and Tahiti, but more stratified than Tikopia, Pukapuka, Ontong Java, and Tokelau (Goldman 1970; Kirch 1984; Sahlins 1958; c.f., Van Tilburg 1994). The high levels of segmentation, stratification, division of labor, and the ability to mobilize pan-island cooperation and exchange networks are evident in the approximately 300 *ahu* and 900 *moai* left on the island, which involved the construction and transportation of large stone figures from Rano Raraku quarry and their erection on top of the platforms. Competition between local groups is believed to have led to a race to create ever larger platforms and statues. The largest *moai* to be erected on *ahu* weighs an impressive 80 tons and measures 10m in height, and 12m once the red scoria topknots (*pukao*) had been placed on top. The population is believed to have grown to between

7,000 to 10,000 by the 16th century. The period of great constructions, rising prosperity and population growth was followed by a period of warfare and decline. Oral traditions tell of the outbreak of internal strife and endemic warfare among the descent groups, leading to the collapse of the process of *moai* making in the two centuries before European contact (Englert 1970; Métraux 1940; Routledge 1998[1919]). When Captain James Cook visited the island briefly in 1774, he found that many of the statues had been overturned, and he noted that the islanders seemed rather impoverished for a people who had once erected such impressive monuments. He also noted the terrible condition of their canoes and the island's lack of forest. Pollen analysis indicates that the island had been initially well forested but forest pollen declined to reach its lowest measured values circa AD 1400 (Bahn and Flenley 2003[1992]). Sometime after the 15th century the island had become largely or completely deforested.

What led to the abrupt collapse of a once prosperous society? Human activities and competition for resources between descent groups were likely the major cause of the decline of forest and the overexploitation of other natural resources. This, in turn, led to the decline of monumental constructions, increasing warfare, and, in Malthusian fashion, to population decline. This interpretation has led researchers to view the history of Easter Island as a warning example of the perils of natural resource overexploitation.

In the 15th century, a new politico-religious subsystem emerged from this period of turbulence. The new system referred to as the Birdman (*tangata manu*) Cult emerged with Orongo (the southwest rim of the caldera Rano Kao) as a pan-island site of annual competitions and ceremonies. Each descent group chose a representative (*hopu manu*) each spring who would have to swim in dangerous waters to the nearby islet of Motu Nui and return with an undamaged egg of *manutara* birds (sooty tern). The chief of the winning competitor's descent group was conferred the status of *tangata manu*, or the ruler of the island, for one year, as empowered by the creator god *Make Make*. The Orongo ceremonial village is today still full of rock art depicting *tangata manu* and other figures, and its stone structures were built to mirror the two political confederacies (Lee 1992). The emergence and development of the Birdman Cult reflects a transition in the prehistoric Rapa Nui society, where the traditional hereditary, sacred power of the *ariki mau* diminished, yielding increasingly toward achieved status competition, and a political system ultimately dominated by a warrior class (*matato'a*). Although the importance of the *moai* and *ahu* for the islanders had declined before their contact with Europeans, the island seemed to have preserved some aspects of traditional social organization surrounding the *ariki* nobility system into the mid-19th century (McCall 1994[1980]; Routledge 1998[1919]).

Another of the so-called "mysteries" of Rapa Nui is *rongorongo*, the only indigenous script known to have been used in Oceania before the 20th century. Today there are 25 known surviving wood tablets bearing *rongorongo* inscriptions scattered in museums and institutions around the world and numerous researchers have been working to decipher them (e.g., Barthel 1978). Oral histories tell of *rongorongo* specialists (*tangata rongorongo*) who chanted as they read the inscription on the tablets during the annual birdman competitions and ceremonies. One hypothesis locates the development of *rongorongo* after 1770 when a Spanish expedition briefly stopped at the island and ceremoniously proclaimed the island to be Spanish by presenting an official deed which

was signed by Spanish officers (Fischer 1997). While this suggests that the writing may not have been invented on the island, the *rongorongo* system was clearly created by the Rapa Nui as an indigenous elaboration.

In the mid-1860s, Blackbirders, or slave raiders, abducted or recruited an estimated 3,000 Polynesians and a few hundred Micronesians to work in the state-run guano export plantations on the Chincha Islands off the coast of Peru. As many as 1,500 Easter Islanders were carried away in a dozen or so ship callings between 1862 and 1863. Many died under the harsh and unfamiliar conditions they encountered in Peru, and tragically, the very few who were able to return to the island alive brought with them a smallpox epidemic that killed many more. From an estimated pre-raid size of 3,000 to 5,000, the island's population collapsed to scarcely 110 survivors in 1877 (McCall 1994[1980]). The population crash led to a disintegration of existing social organization, and a great loss of cultural knowledge of the island's traditions and rituals occurred as many elders and specialists perished. Further contact with outsiders had a significant role in leading further cultural changes on this devastated community. For example, the Catholic missionaries who stayed on the island shortly after the slave raid until 1871 led the community-wide conversion to Christianity and let the Rapa Nui to abandon the use of *rongorongo* and the Birdman cult and other rituals. European planters who arrived in 1866 collaborated with the missionaries to have the Rapa Nui resettled near the Hanga Roa mission in order to develop the island commercially as a sheep ranch.

In 1888, Chile annexed the island in a Naval mission led by Captain Policarpo Toro. During the first half of the 20th century, Chile established its authority over its colony primarily by delegating control to the fittingly named "Easter Island Exploitation Company," which leased the entire island as a private sheep ranch from 1895–1955 and forcibly confined the Rapa Nui to live and remain within Hanga Roa village, using the rest of the island for sheep grazing. Ethnological work by Katherine Routledge (1998[1919]), the first anthropologist to reside on the island (for 16 months in 1914–15), recounts the living condition of the Rapa Nui under company rule and the memory of the elders who had witnessed the functioning of society before the population crash. She was also witness to a short-lived 1914 rebellion against the company led by the prophet Maria Angata Veri Tahia Pengo Hare Kohou, who had been trained as a catechist in Mangareva. Spanish-speaking administrators of the company—and, after 1935, the Catholic Church priest—acted as state representatives and mediators between the Rapa Nui and the colonial government.

Except for the attention of anthropologists and archaeologists such as the 1934–35 Franco-Belgian expedition led by Alfred Métraux and Henri Lavachery, and the 1955–56 Norwegian expedition with Heyerdahl and William Mulloy, Rapa Nui remained largely isolated to the world until the mid-1960s. Until then, an annual cargo ship had been the primary form of communication and transportation. In the 1960s, a campaign of civil disobedience led by Alfonso Rapu, a young teacher who had been trained in Chile, finally brought about the end of Navy rule, which had controlled the island since 1955. Responding to this movement, Chile established a local civil administration in 1966 and opened regular air travel from the capital of Santiago shortly after. The Rapa Nui were then, for the first time, granted rights to travel freely within and outside of the island and to participate in electoral political processes, leading to the election of a first Rapa Nui mayor.

The rapid integration of this community into the national and global economy in the years that followed has led to accelerated acculturation, intermarriage, and language shift from Rapa Nui toward Spanish. At the same time, however, the Rapa Nui community has been successful at becoming actively involved in the development of heritage tourism restoration projects of the archaeological patrimony, and have led a largely successful cultural revival movement.

The Rapa Nui's efforts to increase their local political and economic control over island resources became greatly enhanced by national democratization and decentralization initiatives that followed the 1989 end of Pinochet's military dictatorship. This has led to successful political campaigns to press the government for increased land rights and a transfer of decision-making power to islanders. Today the Chilean Congress is debating proposals to grant the island, with its current population of 3,800, a new form of administrative autonomy. Despite their past often tragic history of contact with outsiders, the Rapa Nui represent a rather remarkable case of language and culture maintenance (Makihara 2004). If there has been one constant in the dramatic and eventful history of this small and remote island it is in the Rapa Nui people's amazing adaptability in the face of great odds.

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