

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

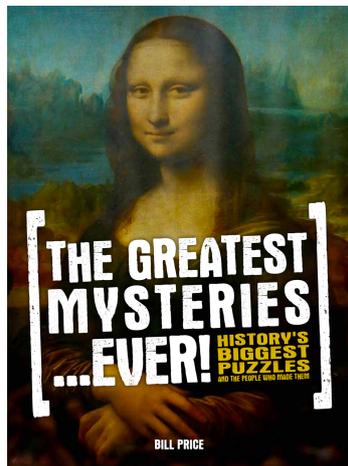
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Price, B. (2016). *The greatest mysteries...ever*. Brighton, England: Quid Publishing.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE EASTER ISLAND STATUES?

ca. 1100–1600

Clue: They are a strange presence on the open, treeless landscape

Main players: Rapanuians (inhabitants of the island)

Verdict: A more complicated and involved story than is often told

Easter Island is remote. The people who live there today say it is the most remote inhabited island in the world and, as it is more than 3,200 km (2,000 miles) off the coast of Chile and over 1,600 km (1,000 miles) from the nearest inhabited Pacific island, they may have a point.

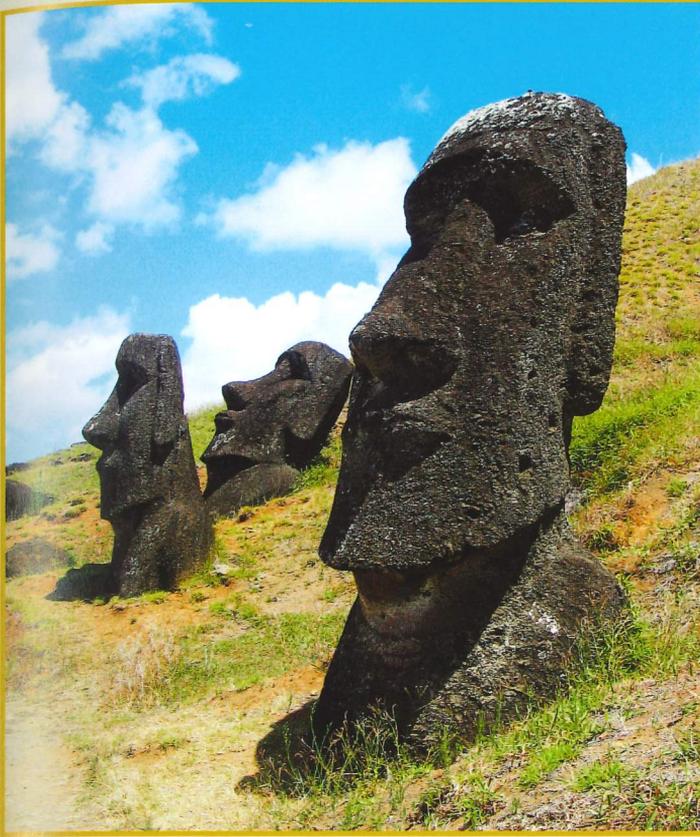
Easter Island is justly famous for the stone statues, the moai, which stand on platforms, known as ahu, in numerous locations around the coast of the island. They almost all face inland and are said to represent the ancestors of the islanders who watch over their descendants. With their elongated heads and serious, some might say mournful, expressions, they

are an eerie presence in the open, treeless landscape of the island.

Since it was first visited by European ships, beginning with the Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen on Easter Sunday 1722, the statues have inspired countless people to attempt to explain their presence in a place where few people lived and where there were hardly any natural resources. Our old friend Erich von Däniken (whom we met on page 72) thinks they were made by extra-terrestrials, but then again, he thinks just about everything was made by aliens. The Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl, who spent several months studying the statues in the 1950s, cited

'No nation will ever contend for the honour of the discovery of Easter Island as there is hardly an island in this sea which affords less refreshments and conveniences for shipping than it does; nature has hardly provided it with any thing fit for man to eat and drink, and as the natives are but few and may be supposed to plant no more than sufficient for themselves, they cannot have much to spare to new comers.'

—Captain James Cook, *Journals*, 17 March 1774



THREE MOAI

The heads of three of the moai sticking out of the ground near Rano Raraku.

islanders. They were all quarried in the same place, Rano Raraku, a crater of volcanic rock known as tuff on the slopes of Terevaka, the largest of the three volcanoes on the island. The tuff is a relatively soft rock formed when volcanic ash becomes compacted, and it is ideal for carving into statues. Nearly 400 of the moai are still in the quarry, some because the carving went wrong before they were finished,

them as evidence in support of his theory that the Pacific islands were colonised by people from the South American continent. The islanders, many of whom are of Polynesian descent, say their own ancestors erected the statues, which, let's be honest, is by far the most likely story. The mystery, then, is not really who was responsible for putting up the statues, but how, given the impoverished condition of the island, they managed to do it at all.

THE MOAI

Almost 900 moai have been identified on Easter Island, or *Rapa Nui*, as it is known in the Polynesian language of the

some that appear to have been abandoned, and some that have been erected on the slopes around the quarry.

These moai have been buried up to the neck by debris from the quarry, so now often only the heads are visible. Roads lead from the quarry to various parts of the island, and a further 100 moai can be found at different locations along these roads, as if abandoned before they arrived at their final destination. The rest were at one time standing on the ahu – platforms of rubble kept in place by stone retaining walls. By the 19th century, all of these had collapsed, some as the result of earth tremors and others, it would seem, intentionally pushed over.

Over the years, about 60 have been re-erected on the platforms to give an idea of what they would have originally looked like. Only a few still have what appear to be hats, made from a red volcanic stone that had broken into pieces when the moai fell, and none now have eyes. The eyes, made from white coral, with pupils of obsidian rock, were found smashed on the ahu.

It is not possible to carbon date stone, but the coral has shown that most of the moai were put up between the 13th and 16th centuries, increasing in size as time passed. The largest is 9 m (30 feet) tall and weighs over 73 tonnes (80 tons), with the average being 3.6 m (12 feet) and 9 tonnes (10 tons). A real monster remains in the quarry, which, if it had ever been erected, would have stood 21 m (70 feet)

tall and weighed 245 tonnes (70 tons). It is hard enough to envisage how the average-sized statues were moved around the island, but it defies belief that anybody was really intending to transport and erect this one, bearing in mind it could only have been done by manpower alone.

RAPA NUI

When European sailors first began stopping at the island in the 18th century, they found it to be in an impoverished and desperate state; no trees grew on the island, the soils were poor and there were

ISOLATED ISLAND

The remote position of Easter Island makes it one of the most isolated inhabited places on earth.



VOLCANIC ROCK

Moai with hat made of red volcanic stone and eyes made from white coral and obsidian rock for the pupils.

not very many wild animals. Estimates of the population vary, but there were probably in the region of 200 to 300 people living on the island. The modern debate about who these islanders were could have been a lot shorter if those involved had paid attention to Captain Cook. When he stopped at the island in 1774, he had a Tahitian man with him who could talk to the islanders when speaking in his own Polynesian language. In more recent years, DNA testing has confirmed a Polynesian origin for the islanders, and it is now generally accepted that they first arrived in around the tenth century CE, presumably having made a very long oceanic voyage in canoes.

The island as found by these original Polynesian settlers was very different from how it appeared to Europeans in the 18th century. The analysis of the types of pollen found in lake sediments have shown that lush forests covered the entire island before people arrived, and it must also have been a haven for seabirds due to the absence of large predators.

POPULATION GROWS

As a result of such abundance, the population of the settlers rose quickly, estimated to have reached perhaps



15,000 people (although others vigorously contend that the population was much lower), who had split into 12 clans, dispersed across the island. By this time, the carving of moai had become well established. The artistic style of the statues is similar to that of artifacts made on other Polynesian islands, but the increasing size of the moai was not done anywhere else. The reason they gradually became so big is not known, but may be

The statues are said to represent the ancestors of the islanders who watch over their descendants. They are an eerie presence in the open, treeless landscape of the island.