

3/8/89

TRAVEL

THE COUNTRY ALMANAC AND MENLO PARK'S ALMANAC • SPECIAL SECTION



MARION SOFTKY

THE GREAT STONE HEADS OF EASTER ISLAND are far more than a tourist attraction. To the archeologist they tell an ominous story of the rise and decline of an enterprising people who evolved in isolation, exceeded the capacity of their barren island, and declined into warring tribes. Here tourists

clamber around the giant "moai" of Ahu Akivi, the only large ceremonial site in the interior of the island; some 15 others were erected along the coast, with ancestor statues facing inland, their backs to the sea.

A lesson for our time?

Digging history on Easter Island

BY MARION SOFTKY

By most accounts, Rapa Nui — known elsewhere as Easter Island — is the remotest spot on earth.

Small wonder the natives call it "Te Pito o te Henua" — meaning, in the local Polynesian tongue, "the navel of the world."

A volcanic dot in the middle of the South Pacific, Rapa Nui is 2,300 miles from South America.

Now it is bound to the rest of the world by a handful of flights a week between Santiago in Chile and Papeete in Tahiti. And by a monstrous long runway, recently enlarged to accept the American space shuttle.

Yet Rapa Nui's great stone heads — images of ancestors with their backs to the ocean, staring inscrutably towards descendants long dead — have caught the imagination of the world.

When I went to Rapa Nui for two weeks of archeological digging, I expected to be interested. But the trip was far more exciting. I was stirred beyond my wildest dreams at the human drama being gradually unfolded by generations of archeologists combined with local legend.

From studies of the ceremonial sites and refuge caves (such as the one I was digging in); from the homes, chicken houses and earth ovens of the inhabitants; from the birdman petroglyphs and chieftains' houses at Orongo, emerges a complex tale of the growth and decline of a culture.

That culture stemmed from a few canoe-loads of Polynesians who voyaged across thousands of miles of ocean to a barren island of 59 square miles where there were no large animals, no snakes and no poisonous insects. Their culture evolved in isolation from the rest of the world for 1,300 years until a Dutch ship made a landfall on Easter Sunday in 1722.

The Rapa Nui story could hold a lesson for our time: population increase; highly organized society; environment abused; obsessive religion; cooperation giving way to competition; revolution and war; a new cult and destruction of the old idols; decline into warring factions hiding out in fortified caves.

"A threshold point was reached about 1680 when the social system could no longer support itself and could no longer support the religious system," suggested Dr. Christopher Stevenson, archeologist in charge of our Earthwatch expedition. "When the religious system fell, the social system fell — or vice versa."

What struck me most about Rapa Nui is the sheer number of the huge stone heads. Not just a few, but hundreds of these "moai" were hacked by hand with stone tools out of volcanic tuff in a central quarry by forebears of the friendly natives who inhabit the island today.

Statues up to 30 feet high and 60 tons were hauled by rope, levers, rollers and sheer manpower for miles over rough rock paths and elevated on elaborately constructed platforms — or "ahu" — by hand. On top of the larger statues were placed "topknots," huge cylinders of red volcanic rock quarried at yet another place on the island.

Overcoming these challenges bespeaks an awesome industrial effort and sophisticated organization by a people who had no metal, not even pottery, no draft animals, and disappearing forests.

The large ahus, with their statues, topknots, crematoriums, plazas and seawalls, "reflect heavy investment in architecture that requires massive expenditure of labor," Dr. Stevenson explained. "So the chiefs had to control the population and extract surplus production which they put into these ahus."

(Continued on next page)

March 8, 1989

The Country Almanac

33

Easter Island

(Continued from previous page)

My own part of unfolding the lore of Rapa Nui was on a much more modest scale.

My teammates and I were digging holes in a volcanic cave by the seashore to deduce how people lived and what they ate. The fruits of our labors were small: from the mud at the bottom of our meter-square pits we extracted tiny shells, fish and chicken bones, and an occasional obsidian tool or a spear point — called "mata'a" in the native language.

I was on Rapa Nui as an unpaid laborer in an expedition sponsored by Earthwatch, a non-profit organization which sponsors more than 100 scientific expeditions all over the world each year. These expeditions utilize the money and enthusiasm of volunteers like myself who want to do something useful and interesting on their vacations.

Nowhere in the world could there be a more beautiful work space than our cave. When we stepped outside — hopefully not hitting our heads on the jagged roof — we could watch great blue swells rolling in from Antarctica, splashing high and white on the tortured black volcanic rock.

Our cave, called "Ana Hara Ngae," gave clear evidence of two separate periods of occupation. Each day we carefully excavated pits — exactly one meter square — layer by layer down to the rock floor. At the lower levels we found dense food remains — mostly fish, chicken and shells — and a few obsidian tools and weapons from what appeared to be a fisherman's cave used intermittently for centuries.

Later — the dates have not been established — new residents put down a white, mucky floor and rolled big stones up to the entrance. Above this floor we found

more weapons and less food; so we supposed the cave had been transformed into an "ana kionga," a refuge cave where people hid out from marauding enemies. "It's a complicated puzzle and the pieces don't fit together very well," cautioned Dr. Stevenson.

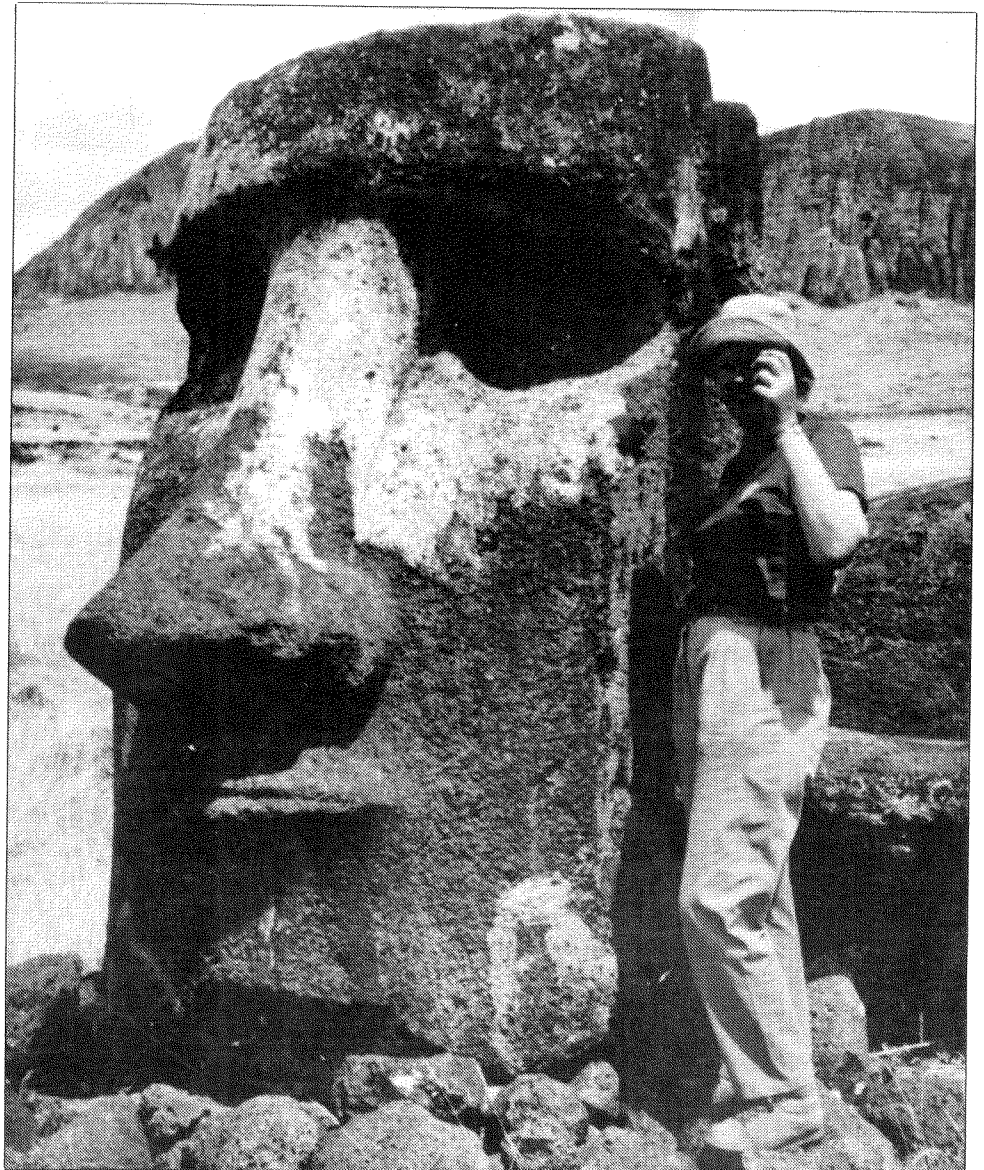
My most exciting find came on my last day in the pit. Digging in the lower level, I scraped down to the first large bone we had found in our excavations. It was the femur of a child. By the end of the day we had uncovered about a dozen bones and one tooth of a child about five years old — and another puzzle.

Why were they there? During that period the people usually cremated the bones at the ahus, Dr. Stevenson explained. Pointing to carving marks on the bones, he speculated the bones may have been kept in the cave to make tools — needles or fishhooks, for example.

Our trip was not all work. We were treated to wonderful Polynesian dancing and a sumptuous Polynesian feast cooked by hot rocks in an earth oven. Some of us toured the island on sturdy little horses rented by the cook and her husband.

We shopped the little stores along the dirt main street of Hanga Roa for postcards. T-shirts, tapes of Rapa Nui music, and statues carved in wood or stone. We dined extravagantly on the best fish I have ever eaten — caught that day by the gaily colored fishing boats that left Hanga Roa every morning. We went to church and reveled in the hymns sung enthusiastically in the lilting Rapa Nui language.

And most of us went at least once to the Discotheque Toroko — named for the crushed weeds in front of the square green building. There, generations, cultures, nations and ages met as descendants of the people who had built the great moai jolted and wiggled to the international disco beat



MARJORIE GASTON

GIANT "MOAI" statue and companion, Marion Sofitky of Menlo Park, the author of this article.

LET THE CLASSIFIEDS WORK FOR YOU... WHILE YOU PLAY!

Lose 4" to 12" in one hour! EUROPEAN BODY CONTOURING



BODY CONTOURING IS NOT A WATER LOSS
IT'S SIMPLE, IT'S SAFE AND IT WORKS!

- RESTORES ELASTICITY TO LOOSE & FLABBY SKIN
- HELPS DIMINISH CELLULITE
- CONTOURS PROBLEM AREAS OF THE BODY

\$49

Introductory offer

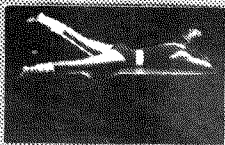
Shape Up By Resisting Exercise

Shed pounds and inches fast and safely while maintaining muscle tissue. Six motorized machines tone and firm your body by using resistance as the tables move.

Also, with our low fat nutritional diet plan you are sure to shed those extra unwanted pounds!

**Call today for your
complimentary visit!**

A Slimmer-Trimmed-U Salon
830 Menlo Avenue, Suite 109
Menlo Park
329-9727



FASHION YOUR TRAVEL PLANS

With the help of the advertisers in this special section

FASHION

- Angelas Swimwear...Page 36
- De Beau's Jewelry..... 36
- Diet Center.....37
- Diet Ease.....29
- Timothy Fidge & Co.....38
- Sargam Griffin..... 35
- George Hirzel Jeweler.....35
- Jazzercise..... 36
- Metamorfique..... 36
- Nouvelle Models & Talent.35
- S.H. Silver Co..... 35

- Slimmer-Trimmed-U..... 34
- The Successful Image.....37
- Susan Sparrow, massage..36
- Taaje Models..... 35
- Warren/Douglas 37

TRAVEL

- Awana Travel.....38
- Ladera Travel.....38
- Vacations at Sea.....39
- Woodside Travel.....38

under pulsing purple and yellow light.

THE RAPA NUI STORY

The rise and fall of Easter Island culture may be unique because it took place in total isolation on a tiny — 59 square miles — island more than a thousand miles from the nearest human habitation.

Although the archeological data is far from complete, a fairly coherent story is emerging about a people who expanded

Although the archeological data is far from complete, a fairly coherent story is emerging about a people who expanded beyond what their environment could support and lapsed into warfare and population decline.

beyond what their environment could support and lapsed into warfare and population decline.

With typical scientific caution, Dr. Stevenson outlined the dramatic story as it is being pieced together by archeologists and amplified by native legend.

"What we know of the prehistory of the island is pretty shaky," he said. "It is a model based on what we know about the Polynesian islands."

When Chief Hotu Matu'a set sail from his Polynesian island about 400 A.D., Dr. Stevenson thinks he was probably setting out on purpose to find a new land to settle.

The tiny band of 100 to 200 men and women brought with them the staples of Polynesian agriculture "minus a few things." Chickens, rats, taro, bananas, sugar cane and paper mulberry came to Rapa Nui with them. The pigs and dogs may have been lost on the voyage. "It was a conscious effort to seek out new territories for settling," he said.

Dr. Stevenson and almost all archeologists agree that the first settlers came from Polynesia — "certainly not from South America" — as Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl continues to claim. Mr. Heyerdahl, who has led major archeological expeditions on Easter Island, became famous by floating the raft, Kon Tiki, west from South America to prove the Pacific islands could have been settled from there.

Besides Polynesian agriculture, language and culture, Hotu Matu'a and his intrepid band also brought a well-developed social system based on kinship and chiefdoms. Thus the highest ranking member of society was the living member closest in descent from the founding ancestor. "This is important for understanding the society of Easter Island or of any of the Polynesian islands," he said.

Slowly the population grew and

expanded over the island, fishing the ocean and farming the land. While the scrub forests were cut down for building and for boats, a few large trees remained as late as 1100.

The religious complexes — also based on a Polynesian model — grew slowly. The first and smallest of the major ahus — or ceremonial centers with large statues — dates to about 1000, archeologists estimate.

These ahus give the best indication of the organizational structure of the society and the differentiation among kinship units, Dr. Stevenson said. By about 1600 about 20 large ceremonial platforms with large statues suggest there were 15 to 20 closely related groups on the island.

The massive nature of the building also indicates both a high degree of cooperation and trade between kinship groups and a powerful direction at the top. These were necessary to allocate the resources to build the ahus and to carve and move the moai.

The moai were carved in one quarry, the topknots came from another quarry, the great volcanic blocks for the ahus came from still a different quarry, and obsidian for tools and weapons come from a fourth.

Rano Raraku, the volcanic crater where the moai were carved, is a spectacular example of sheer industrial energy. Three hundred and ninety-four statues have been identified. They are scattered over the mountain in all stages of construction, from completed statues to statues partially hacked out of the solid

(Continued on next page)



MARION SOFTKY
WEATHERBEATEN WITH AGE,
a giant statue gazes into the future.

Easter Island

(Continued from previous page)
rock of the crater—and abandoned before completion.

DECLINE AND FALL

The population grew until the people covered the island, Dr. Stevenson suggested. At its height the population probably rose to between 10,000 and 20,000 people.

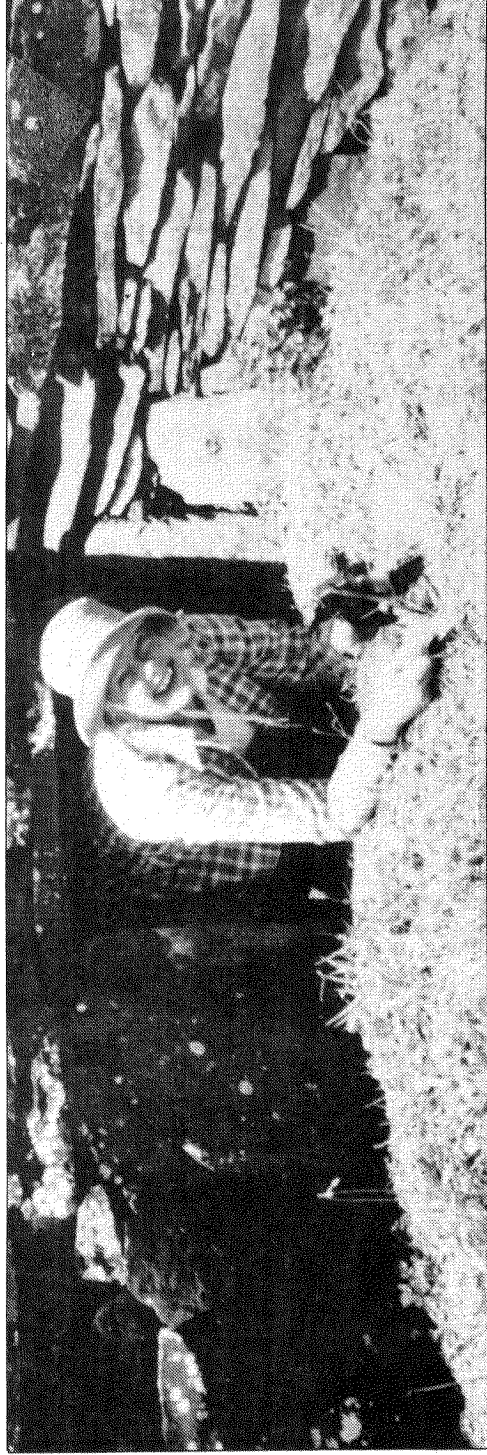
As a result of this population growth, the islanders stripped the uplands of timber. So then they could no longer build large sea-going canoes and had to depend on on-shore fisheries. They cleared the fields and probably practiced slash-and-burn agriculture. As a result, they began to exhaust the soil and probably also faced erosion.

"Over the course of a thousand years, this process can catch up with you," he said.

Dr. Stevenson speculated that the chiefs responded to the environmental decline by turning to religion. In Polynesian societies, this meant making offerings to the gods to insure productivity of the land.

"So what do the chiefs do?" he asked. "They siphon off more surplus (labor) from the system, and they start building bigger temples, bigger altars. Productivity falls, they siphon more off, and a vicious circle develops."

In the 17th century the old system crashed and the highly organized system



CHIEFS OF THE BIRDMAN CULT were isolated each year in these low stone huts while they waited for the first egg of the sooty tern to be returned from offshore islands. Hands and knees didn't do it; the author needed to wriggle on her stomach to enter and leave the cave.

was replaced by civil war.

"In about 1680 there was a radical change in the religious system from ancestor worship to worship of Make Make, the creator god, and the emergence of a new birdman cult," said Dr. Stevenson.

In a way the birdman cult was as exotic as the worship of giant statues.

According to legend, each year the chiefs gathered at a ceremonial site on the mountain at Orongo. Here they stayed sequestered in little huts while their retainers competed to bring back the first egg of the sooty tern. To get the egg of the sooty tern—now extinct—they had to swim to the offshore island of Moto Nui

and then race back holding their egg.

The chief who received the first egg was birdman for the year. He moved to Rano Raraku and lived a highly ceremonial, constrained life with no power.

So the tribes kept fighting. "The island was still integrated on a religious level, but on a secular level it remained very competitive," said Dr. Stevenson.

When the European ships began coming to Easter Island in 1722, the population was estimated to be about 4,000—possibly one quarter of the island population at the height of the statue culture.

Draw your own conclusions.

For more information

Earthwatch is a private, non-profit organization which sponsors scientific research expeditions around the world. It is based at 680 Mt. Auburn St., P.O. Box 403, Watertown, MA 02172; or (618) 926-8200.

Easter Island may be reached by Land Chile Airline from either Santiago in Chile or Papeete in Tahiti. The fare from these cities is approximately \$600 round trip.

MESSAGE

You are invited to attend

Angela's