

## SEA, LAND, AND SKY AS STRUCTURING PRINCIPLES IN EASTER ISLAND PREHISTORY

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This paper discusses changes in Rapa Nui subsistence patterns over time and the social implications of those changes. As revealed by the archaeological record, the symbols of status and power shifted over time.

In the early settlement phase, dated to around AD 800-1100, power and status appears to have been tied to activities directed towards the sea. The majority of the bones found in early cultural deposits on the island were derived from fish whose habitats range from 500-1000 meters offshore (Martinsson-Wallin and Crockford 2001). There were also many bones from sea mammals such as spinner dolphin (*delfinidae*). Post AD 1400 settlements do not contain bones from these animals. Thus aquatic faunal remains from early cultural deposits on Rapa Nui indicate a marine "hunting" strategy that utilized seaworthy crafts and fishing techniques such as long-line angling, trolling, and net fishing. This indicates that great skill at sea must have been important during the early settlement phase.

Similar off-shore strategies are also seen in other early settlements in central and east Polynesia (Rolett 1998; Leach et al. 1984). On Easter Island, elaborate prehistoric stone fishhooks (Figure 1), as well as rock carvings (petroglyphs) of fishhooks, marine creatures, and canoes indicate that fishing was considered a high status activity, especially deep sea fishing (Figure 2). A stone hook blank has been found in association with a Rapanui settlement dated to AD 1100-1200 (Martinsson-Wallin and Wallin 1994), but other than this artifact, we lack temporal information on the large and elaborate

stone hooks.

One hypothesis is that fishhooks were used for ritual purposes, possibly in connection with human offerings referred to as the "long-legged fish" (Wallin and Martinsson-Wallin 2001:7-10) and were symbols connected to the powerful Miru clan (Lee 1992:113-115). In many Polynesian societies, it is a common occurrence in traditional history for the ruling chief to have an origin distinct from the rest of the population. Often he is seen as a stranger from the sea who takes over the island from the indigenous people (Fox 1995:217). The importance of things, animals, and people associated with the sea are emphasized. The ability to control the unpredictable sea gave status and *mana*. The tradi-

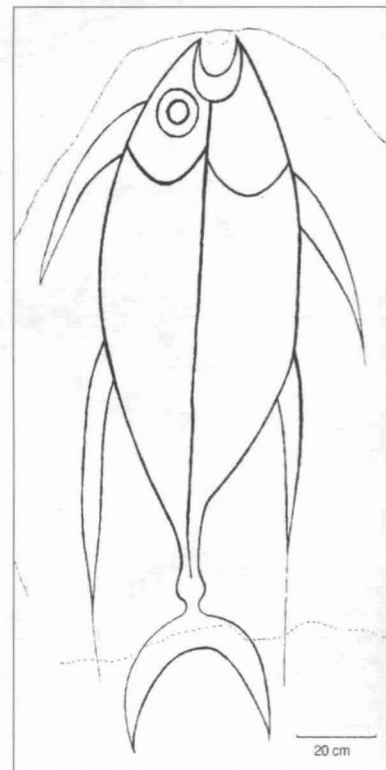


Figure 2. Petroglyph of a tuna, a deep sea fish (Lee 1992).

ditional history of Rapa Nui also indicates that access to fish was primarily determined by ritually-defined fishing periods. Deep-sea fish and marine mammals such as turtles or other sea mammals were considered as food reserved for the chiefs (Ayres 1979:68-72).

Furthermore, when it comes to the building of monumental ceremonial *ahu* structures, the rear wall (seawall side) of structures sometimes shows elaborate stonework. This type of stonework is suggested to be a fairly early trait (AD 1100-1200) (Martinsson-Wallin 1994:83-84). Placing of the ceremonial sites close to the seashore and making this area *tapu* for ordinary people is indicative of the importance of the sea and sea resources. Such importance is also seen later on in time, but it is suggested that activities directed to the sea were especially emphasized during the early settlement phase.

In Easter Island prehistory, the next phase is described as the Expansion Phase, dated to about AD 1100-1600. During this time, the emphasis of status/power is directed towards the land, and control of land. We now see evidence of agricultural intensification, with the development of large inland field



Figure 1. Large fishhooks from Easter Island (photo: Martinsson-Wallin).



Figure 3. An excavation showing how rock mulch was used (from Stevenson 1997).

systems and “rock gardens” (Stevenson 1997; Stevenson et al. 1999). The prehistoric fields were not cleared of stones but just the opposite: stones were put on the surface of fields to keep the ground moist and maintain a higher average ground temperature. The upland areas have a good microclimate for plantation of tubers, being cooler and wetter than coastal areas. However, the sweet potato seems to have been the main tuber cultivated at both locations. This plant had a great importance in the prehistoric and historic Rapanui society.

Scraping and cutting tools of obsidian that were subjected to microwear analysis from settlements dated to AD 1200-1500 indicate that “scraping sweet potato and cutting plants were the two principal activities conducted at this site” (Stevenson 1997:59). Prehistoric remains of a sweet potato have been radiocarbon dated to BP 430±200 (ca. AD 1400-1600) (Skjølsvold 1961:297).

It is suggested here that the introduction of this plant may have triggered off agricultural intensification. It is this agricul-

tural expansion that must be seen as the economical base of central importance for the development of statue carving and building of monumental *ahu* structures on a large scale. Prestige investments are seen on the front facing of *ahu* structures. For example, this is shown in a ramp paved with *poro* stones, a front wall of a central platform decorated with a coping of red scoria and, of course, the large stone statues gazing inland.

The statues become larger and larger over time and much labor was invested in building the ceremonial sites in addition to carving the statues. Eyes of coral and red scoria were inserted into the eye sockets of the statues probably at a special ceremony when the statue was set up on the *ahu* (Figure 4). Because the statues are interpreted as symbols of dead chiefs, this ceremony could be interpreted as one where the ancestors were keeping an eye on the land of the living to prevent tabu regulations from being broken. It is equally likely that the ancestors were watching out for and protecting the living while establishing a legal claim

for the land under their gaze. An emphasis on the ritual importance of the land and how the land was distributed among the different clans and families is suggested by the placement and orientation of *ahu* features.

In traditional history, one of the first actions taken by the initial occupants was to plant tubers (Métraux 1940:58). This also could be interpreted as a ritual action. In addition, it was important to bury the umbilical stump of a newborn, for this action stresses the ties between ancestors, land, and the living (ibid:103). The land, and issues related to it, is important throughout all the island’s prehistory as well as up to the present, but it is suggested here that ritual foci were directed towards the land during the Expansion Phase.

Finally, in the Late Phase, dated to about AD 1600-1868, *ahu* construction declined and statue carving was terminated. Furthermore, upright statues were thrown down (the Huri Moai Phase). We can also see the emergence of a cult that was based on a food resource, namely that of sea birds. As shown in late cultural deposits, chickens became an important source of protein and the birdman cult developed into a special event. Chickens were so important that they may have been kept in stone houses, called *hare moa*. These structures are said to house chickens, but Ferdon (1999) has questioned this usage. A mixture of human and chicken bones were found in some crematoria connected to ceremonial sites.

While the birdman cult that was performed at ‘Orongo (Figure 5) may have had more ancient roots, the cult indicates a shift in ritual focus from ceremonies carried out at *ahu*. After the Huri Moai Phase, rituals were conducted at ‘Orongo. These rituals are described in early ethnohistoric records. The birdman was personified in the competition winner and the god Makemake and their images were carved into the rocks at ‘Orongo. This suggests a ritual focus that was directed toward the sky and may also may indicate that ritual importance

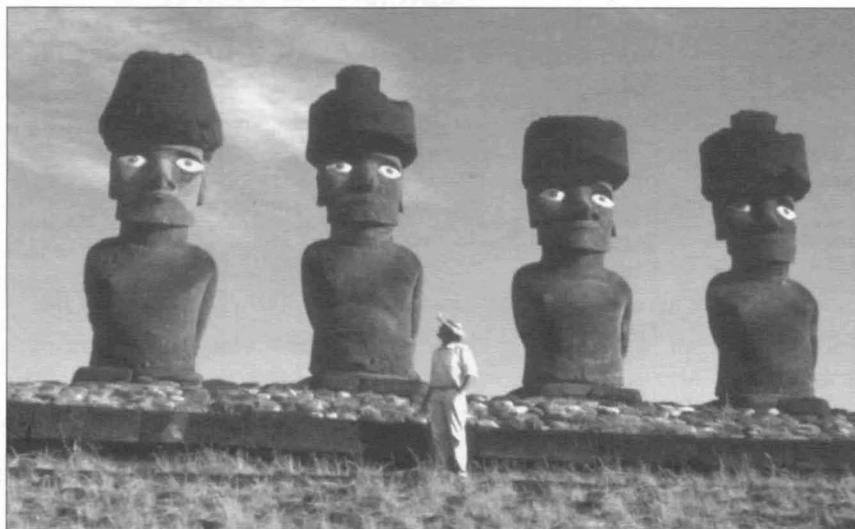


Figure 4. Statues fitted with eyes (Photo: Martinsson-Wallin).

was moved from the land to the sky.

Analyses of faunal material from prehistoric sites shows a decline of seabirds as well as the extinction of native land birds (Steadman, et al. 1994:92-3). Following the destruction of the former ceremonial sites, and in combination with the depletion of food resources, these factors may have caused the birdman ritual to become the focus for maintaining power and *tapu*, and contact with ancestors and gods during the late prehistoric and protohistoric times.

The shift in the ritual importance of different physical elements is not to imply that the birdman cult did not exist in an earlier phase, only that this cult became the most significant one in the later phase of prehistory. The sea and the land were still of great importance, but they were not as much in ritual focus.

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Figure 5. Carving of a birdman at Mata Ngarau, 'Orongo. (Photo: Martinsson-Wallin)