

The dissertation is a fine anthropological summary of the current Rapa Nui situation, the disciplinary pendant to María Eugenia Santa Coloma's sociological study *Guardianes de la Tradición*. Steeped in all the relevant theoretical literature, especially in that which concerns the Pacific, it is imbued with the Rapa Nui perspective, too; indeed, the very Rapa Nui essence. Exhaustive without ever becoming exhausting, this work will doubtless stand as the definitive cultural-political analysis of Rapa Nui for a generation. It is essential reading for every Easter Island scholar, regardless of her or his respective discipline.

"Articulating Rapa Nui" deserves the immediate attention of a major publishing house. For vital at this juncture in Easter Island's troubled history are both edges of this particular scholarly sword – the one to teach, the other to inspire.

### COMMENT: New Claims for the Moai Roads

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For more than a century, the "mystery of Easter Island" has persisted – mostly because tourists and archaeologists alike continue to ask questions that may never be answered by scientific research. How were the statues moved? How were the statues erected? Why did islanders carve these statues in the first place?

In 1981, *The Denver Post* detailed one hypothesis suggesting that the statues were actually transported by Asian war elephants that had arrived on the island as a result of a misguided expedition under the rule of Kublai Khan (seriously!)<sup>1</sup>. Erich von Däniken proposed another alluring hypothesis including extraterrestrials<sup>2</sup>.

To this day, archaeologists cannot completely rule out these seemingly far-fetched ideas because we cannot and likely will not (ever) find evidence that indicates exactly how the statues were moved. Wooden sleds, log rollers, and ropes woven from island plants would have long ago disintegrated and been blown about for hundreds of years.

Archaeological research, and most archaeologists, have begun to ask more astute questions – questions that can be tested definitively (or nearly so) by excavation and other higher-technology archaeological research methods. The endless debate on statue transport techniques and statue symbolism might drive the tourist economy on the island (and surface in almost every television special), but for archaeologists concerned with cumulative knowledge, this debate has become little more than a cheap shot at fifteen minutes of fame.

Dr. Colin Richards of the University of Manchester and Dr. Sue Hamilton of University College London currently lead a British archaeological research project on Rapa Nui. Recently, Richards' and Hamilton's work was touted to "have disproved the fifty-year-old theory underpinning our understanding of how the famous stone statues were moved around Easter Island,"<sup>3</sup> but Dr. Richards was savvy enough to point out that, "The truth of the matter is, we will never know how the statues were moved."<sup>4</sup>

To be fair to Richards and Hamilton, the press probably framed the research in the wrong light—the investigation was never meant to focus on how the statues were moved. Rather, what the British team found through geophysical survey is that some inland statues have stone platforms nearby (now buried) upon which they presumably once stood.

Their use of geophysical survey, a relatively non-invasive technology that uses electrical currents and measurements of resistivity, in this fragile island environment is praiseworthy. Reports by the University of Manchester website<sup>5</sup>, *The Independent* website<sup>6</sup>, and several other websites<sup>7, 8, 9, 10, 11</sup> claim that the British archaeological team's find somehow disproves a fifty-year-old theory of Thor Heyerdahl and confirms an even older theory of Katherine Routledge are less praiseworthy.

Heyerdahl, like many archaeologists, believed that the inland *moai* (statues) had been abandoned in transport. But, to claim that the recent remote-sensing of platforms near statues disproves Heyerdahl's belief is a stretch for a couple of reasons. First, archaeologists have known for several

<sup>1</sup> Borst, B. 1981. Unraveling one of archaeology's greatest riddles. *The Sunday Denver Post*, December 20.

<sup>2</sup> Von Däniken, E. 1973. *Chariots of the Gods*. New York: Bantam.

<sup>3</sup> The University of Manchester. 12 May 2010. Easter Island discovery sends archaeologists back to drawing board. <<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/news/display/?id=5722>>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Milmo, C. 24 May 2010. Scientists reveal the secrets of Easter Island's fallen idols. *The Independent*. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/scientists-reveal-the-secrets-of-easter-islands-fallen-idols-1981131.html>>

<sup>7</sup> CBC News. 12 May 2010. Easter Island statue transport questioned. <<http://www.cbc.ca/technology/story/2010/05/12/easter-island-statues.html>>

<sup>8</sup> Lamar, C. 12 May 2010. Easter Island continues to baffle the heck out of archaeologists. <<http://io9.com/5537436/easter-island-continues-to-baffle-the-heck-out-of-archaeologists>>

<sup>9</sup> EurekAlert! 12 May 2010. Easter Island discovery sends archaeologists back to drawing board. <[http://www.eurekalert.org/pub\\_releases/2010-05/uom-eid051210.php](http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2010-05/uom-eid051210.php)>

<sup>10</sup> The Week. 26 May 2010. Easter Island: Mystery solved? <<http://theweek.com/article/index/203362/easter-island-mystery-solved>>

<sup>11</sup> The Daily Galaxy. 13 May 2010. New Easter Island discovery upends prior theories. <[http://www.dailygalaxy.com/my\\_weblog/2010/05/new-easter-island-discovery-upends-prior-theories.html](http://www.dailygalaxy.com/my_weblog/2010/05/new-easter-island-discovery-upends-prior-theories.html)>

years, thanks to meticulous island-wide survey of statuary and statistical analysis of statue locations, that there are perfectly viable explanations for inland statue placement other than careless abandonment<sup>12</sup>. Some of these inland statues may reside near clearly-detected “roads” while others seem to be more closely associated with historic territorial divisions on the island – indicating that these statues held socio-political, along with ceremonial, import. The relationship between inland statuary and territoriality is still under study, but the connection in itself was enough to effectively undermine the “abandoned in transport” hypothesis, as was the sheer number of inland statues (at least 89 out of more than 715 statues on the island)<sup>13</sup>.

Second, Heyerdahl was aware that some of these inland statues had nearby stone platforms. In fact, he and his colleagues found one unexpectedly in an excavation in the 1980s!<sup>14</sup> Regarding Heyerdahl’s archaeological interpretation of the platforms, the University of Manchester website quotes Dr. Hamilton saying, “But like many other archaeologists, he was so swayed by his cast iron belief that the roads were for transportation – he completely ignored them.”<sup>15</sup> This is not true. Heyerdahl and colleagues reported directly on the matter after finding a platform in an excavation behind the base of a statue that they assumed to be in-transport:

If we assume that transportation sometimes had to be stopped, perhaps for months waiting for the next dry season, it was probably necessary to make a stable foundation so that the statue would not topple over.<sup>16</sup>

Hamilton and Richards may not find Heyerdahl’s explanation for the stone platforms any more plausible than I do. However, without a clever fine-grained chronological analysis linking the platforms and the statues, we re-enter the realm of unanswerable questions when we ask what specific purpose the platforms held. And as convenient as it would be, neither Hamilton nor Richards can simply ignore or wish away research and ideas that have already been published.

The web reports also focus on the support that the new research brings for Katherine Routledge’s hypothesis that the statue “roads” were actually ceremonial avenues – not merely modes of transportation. In fact, the web reports go so far as to suggest that the findings of Richards and Hamilton indicate that the “roads” were primarily ceremonial. Furthermore, the reports follow this line of evidence to make the less-than-newsworthy claim that the Rano Raraku statue

quarry was actually a spiritual center of the island – not just a statue quarry.

In historic and traditional Polynesian custom, ceremonial figures like the *moai* were loaded with mana, or spiritual power. The fact that the Rano Raraku statue quarry contains close to 400 statues creates a prodigiously spiritual landscape. The statue “roads”, merely by the fact that they came in contact with the statues, would have been imbued with mana as well. And even today, many islanders and tourists still revere the “roads” and quarry for their mana. How the research of Hamilton and Richards will influence our understanding of the ceremonial or spiritual nature of the “roads” or the quarry is difficult to discern.

It appears that Richards has come to the same “aha” moment that was the culmination of large excavations at the Puna Pau topknot quarry just a year ago, “It is clear that the quarry had a sacred context as well as an industrial one.”<sup>17</sup> This is common sense, not science. And considering that these quarries and “roads” may have been in use for several centuries, their purposes surely changed with passing generations. If the claim made by the new studies, as suggested by the web reports, is truly that the “roads” were more for ceremonial purposes than anything else, we may find ourselves again amongst elephants and aliens.

Has the work undertaken by Richards and Hamilton extended the work of Heyerdahl, Routledge, and numerous other anthropologists that have conducted earlier research on Rapa Nui? Yes. Has the work undertaken by Richards and Hamilton conclusively disproved or confirmed any long-standing hypotheses regarding the island? No. Is the line of reasoning and research presented by Richards and Hamilton leading us back down a path of enticing but unanswerable questions? Maybe. We will have to wait and see once their research is published in a peer-reviewed venue. In the meantime, let this be a reminder that we are perhaps all better served by publishing first in the academic press and only afterward in the popular press. The relationship between archaeologists and public audiences is a delicate one (especially on Rapa Nui). “Crying wolf” is only going to strain this relationship.



<sup>12</sup> Shepardson, B.L. 2005. The role of Easter Island (Rapa Nui) statuary as territorial boundary markers. *Antiquity* 79(303):169-178.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Heyerdahl, T., A. Skjølsvold, and P. Pavel. 1989. *The “walking” moai of Easter Island*. Kon-Tiki Museum Occasional Papers 1:36-64.

<sup>15</sup> The University of Manchester. 12 May 2010. Easter Island discovery sends archaeologists back to drawing board. <<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/news/display/?id=5722>>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> UCL News. 8 Sept 2009. New clues in Easter Island hat mystery. <<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/media/library/EasterIsland>>