Easter Island – Website Source

Easter Island covers roughly 64 square miles in the South Pacific Ocean, and is located some 2,300 miles from Chile's west coast and 2,500 miles east of Tahiti. Known as Rapa Nui to its earliest inhabitants, the island was christened Paaseiland, or Easter Island, by Dutch explorers in honor of the day of their arrival in 1722. It was annexed by Chile in the late 19th century and now maintains an economy based largely on tourism. Easter Island's most dramatic claim to fame is an array of almost 900 giant stone figures that date back many centuries. The statues reveal their creators to be master craftsmen and engineers, and are distinctive among other stone sculptures found in Polynesian cultures. There has been much speculation about the exact purpose of the statues, the role they played in the ancient civilization of Easter Island and the way they may have been constructed and transported.

**Early Settlement**

The first human inhabitants of Rapa Nui (the Polynesian name for Easter Island; its Spanish name is Isla de Pascua) are believed to have arrived in an organized party of emigrants around 300-400 A.D. Tradition holds that the first king of Rapa Nui was Hoto-Matua, a ruler from a Polynesian subgroup (possibly from the Marquesa Islands) whose ship traveled thousands of miles before landing at Anakena, one of the few sandy beaches on the island's rocky coast.

The greatest evidence for the rich culture developed by the original settlers of Rapa Nui and their descendants is the existence of nearly 900 giant stone statues that have been found in diverse locations around the island. Averaging 13 feet (4 meters) high, with a weight of 13 tons, these enormous stone busts–known as moai–were carved out of tuff (the light, porous rock formed by consolidated volcanic ash) and placed atop ceremonial stone platforms called ahus. It is still unknown precisely why these statues were constructed in such numbers and on such a scale, or how they were moved around the island.

**Phases of Island Culture**

Archaeological excavations of Easter Island reveal three distinct cultural phases: the early period (700-850 A.D.), the middle period (1050-1680) and the late period (post-1680). Between the early and middle periods, evidence has shown that many early statues were deliberately destroyed and rebuilt as the larger and heavier moai for which the island is most famous. During the middle period, ahus also contained burial chambers, and the images portrayed by moai are thought to have represented important figures that were deified after death. The biggest statue found dating to the middle period measures about 32 feet tall, and consists of a single block weighing about 82 tons (74,500 kilograms).

The late period of the island's civilization was characterized by civil wars and general destruction; more statues were toppled, and many mataa, or obsidian spearpoints, have been found dating to that period. Island tradition claims that around 1680, after peacefully coexisting for many years, one of the island's two main ethnic groups, known as the Short-Ears, rebelled against the Long-Ears, burning many of them to death on a pyre constructed along an ancient ditch at Poike, on the island's far northeastern coast.

**Outsiders on Easter Island**

The first known European visitor to Easter Island was the Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen, who arrived in 1722. The Dutch named the island Paaseiland (Easter Island) to commemorate the day they arrived. In 1770, the Spanish viceroy of Peru sent an expedition to the island; the explorers spent four days ashore and estimated a native population of some 3,000 people. Just four years later, the British navigator Sir James Cook arrived to find Easter Island's population decimated by what seemed to have been a civil war, with only 600 to 700 men and fewer than 30 women remaining.

A French navigator, Jean-Francois de Galaup, comte de La Perouse, found 2,000 people on the island when he arrived in 1786. A major slave raid from Peru in 1862, followed by epidemics of smallpox, reduced the population to only 111 people by 1877. By that time, Catholic missionaries had settled on Easter Island and begun to convert the population to Christianity, a process that was completed by the late 19th century. In 1888, Chile annexed Easter Island, leasing much of the land for sheep raising. The Chilean government appointed a civilian governor for Easter Island in 1965, and the island's residents became full Chilean citizens.

**Easter Island Today**

An isolated triangle measuring 14 miles long by seven miles wide, Easter Island was formed by a series of volcanic eruptions. In addition to its hilly terrain, the island contains many subterranean caves with corridors that extend deep into mountains of volcanic rock. The island's largest volcano is known as Rano Kao, and its highest point is Mount Terevaka, which reaches 1,969 feet (600 meters) above sea level. It has a subtropical climate (sunny and dry) and temperate weather.

Easter Island boasts no natural harbor, but ships can anchor off Hanga Roa on the west coast; it is the island's largest village, with a population of roughly 3,300. In 1995, UNESCO named Easter Island a World Heritage site. It is now home to a mixed population, mostly of Polynesian ancestry and made up of the descendants of the Long-Ears and Short-Ears. Spanish is generally spoken, and the island has developed an economy largely based on tourism.

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