**Easter Island Mystery Solved?**

**Two scientists say the giant statues were "walked" to their locations.**

These statues are some of the most mysterious objects in the world and in one of the most remote places in the world. Chilé's *Easter Island* was named by a Dutch sea captain who spotted the island on Easter Sunday in 1722. By that time, the native Rapa Nui people had been living on the island for centuries. The Rapa Nui began carving these statues somewhere around the year 1100. The statues are called "moai"--*MOE-eye*--and they are thought to represent important ancestors or tribal chiefs. There are nearly 900 moai on the island. Many are found along the coasts, facing inland. The Rapa Nui abruptly stopped carving the moai in the mid-1600s. Nearly 400 moai were left in the quarry where they were carved--some unfinished. Much mystery remains about the Rapa Nui and the moai. No decipherable written records exist from that time. No one knows why the Rapa Nui stopped making them, or how they moved the ones they made.

Experts have long wondered how the Rapa Nui built and moved these giant statues, which weigh more than 13 tons on average. But many native Rapa Nui people will tell you exactly how the statues moved to their locations. In the words of one resident, "We know the truth. The statues walked." Now two archaeologists have proof that this is true--sort of. These scientists were able to show that 18 people could move a replica statue using just ropes to "walk" it. The statues' rounded bodies aided the rocking and rolling motion, the researchers say. If so, it may be the only known case where a potbelly helped someone move faster.

**Research into the island's early inhabitants shows the Rapa Nui to be of Polynesian heritage.**

In 1994, scientists performed tests on 12 early Rapa Nui skeletons and found that they were Polynesians. The ancient Polynesians were skilled canoe-builders and navigators of the open seas. As their islands became overpopulated, the Polynesians sent out navigators to find undiscovered islands. But even for these accomplished explorers, reaching remote Easter Island would have been a very difficult journey of at least two weeks on the open sea.

The exact route these early settlers took to arrive at Easter Island is a mystery, but they may have reached South America before finding the island. Many of the stone walls on Easter Island resemble traditional Inca workmanship. And the sweet potato plants on the island, which are native to South America, suggest a South American connection. The sweet potato was the main ingredient in the diet of the ancient Rapa Nui people.

Here you see two artifacts from ancient Rapa Nui culture. On the top left\* is a carved wooden pendant that was likely worn by a tribal chief. The pendant represents the head of a tuna, which was a Rapa Nui delicacy associated with high status. The other picture\* is a rare example of the picture-writing of the Rapa Nui, called "rongorongo." Most of these carved wooden tablets were destroyed when the islanders converted to Christianity in the 1860s. Fewer than two dozen of these tablets survive today, and the language has yet to be deciphered. While much of the culture and traditions of the Rapa Nui has been lost or forgotten over the centuries, many of those living on the island now are trying to revive these things.

"Easter Island Mystery Solved?." *NewsCurrents Read to Know*. 23 Jul 2012: n.p. *SIRS Discoverer.* Web. 17 Sep 2013.