**Easter Island: Land of Giant Stones and Mysteries**

*By David White*

**Part 1: The Island**

 In the Pacific Ocean, thousands of miles away from the nearest population center, lies Easter Island, a strange and mysterious place famous for what happened there many years before and what kind of evidence has been left behind.

The island, called **Rapa** **Nui** in the local language, got its English-language name from Holland's Captain Jacob Roggeveen, who landed there on Easter Sunday in 1722. Roggeveen found a strange culture and even stranger huge structures called Moai, face-like giant rocks that dotted the coastlines, as if guarding the island's people from intruders.

Since that time, scholars have asked two important questions about Easter Island:

1) How did the people get there? Were they always there, or did they come from somewhere else?

2) How did they build such massive rocks and transport them from the quarries where they were built to the clifftops where they were ultimately found?

Historians still can't agree on where the island's original people came from, although most people think that they came from somewhere else. Did they sail from Chile, thousands of miles to the east? Did they sail from Hawaii or a Polynesian island, thousands of miles to the west or northwest? No one really knows for sure, although many people have evidence for their theories, including similarities to both Chilean and Polynesian cultures.

As for the moai, these 13-foot-tall, 14-ton stone carvings present an entirely different kind of mystery. Historians think that the inhabitants of Easter Island built and transported the giant stone carvings between 1400 and 1600 A.D.

But how did they do it? And why did they do it?

**Part 2: Some Answers**

In all, 887 moai have been located on the island. Only 288 of those were moved; the rest were either still in the quarries or were en route to the clifftop watch locations of the others. The ones that were moved, historians think, were moved on wooden logs used as rollers, much like historians now think the ancient Egyptians moved the giant stones that made up the Pyramids. Using a series of rollers and ropes, the **Rapa** **Nui** (the name for the people as well as the island) got the large stones from the quarries to the cliffs. Then, it was just a matter of getting them to stand up.

Historians now think that the **Rapa** **Nui** used levers and ropes and built stone ramps on which to move the moai into an upright position.

Why did the people of Easter Island make all these statues? Why did they clear lots of good farmland so they could drag the giant stones through it on the way to the sentinel positions?

Historians now think that it had something to do with the religion that the **Rapa** **Nui** practiced, that the stones were representative of the spirits of the chieftains and the gods. The stones themselves don't all look alike, but they follow a large handful of patterns. Archaeologists think that the patterns were close to how the **Rapa** **Nui** chieftains looked.

As for the **Rapa** **Nui** themselves, they gradually died out, from a combination of in-fighting and exposure to the rest of civilization. As many as 10,000 people once lived on the island at once, historians think. Civil wars (which also made the moai targets) and plagues have considerably reduced that number. Today, the descendants of those people number in the hundreds. Today's **Rapa** **Nui** keep alive their traditions and stories, however, and archaeological efforts in recent years have protected the moai from further destruction.

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