

Mysteries of the Moai

The South-Easternmost island of the Polynesian Triangle, Rapa Nui, is the most isolated spot of land found on planet earth. With all of its stone sculptures residing all around the island, the island holds a plethora of secrets and mysteries. Archaeologists have pondered over the many secrets that this island possesses, and they have yet to find the rock-hard truth of it all. However, the aspect of the island that is most researched is the history of the Moai statues, and Archaeologists have come to numerous conclusions as to what these monuments mean and how they came to be.

Moai statues are the massive monumental human sculptures on Rapa Nui, and they are what this island is famous for. The Moai were built in approximately 1400 - 1650 A.D. by the natives of the island. Though Moai are full-body statues, they are commonly known as "Easter Island heads" in popular literature and in modern society. This may be because of the disproportionate size of most Moai heads, and because many of the popular Moai on the island are depicted as upright Moai on the slopes of the Rano Raraku volcano, many of which are buried to their shoulders. Some of the "heads" at Rano Raraku have been dug-up from underground, and their bodies have been revealed and observed to have markings that had been protected from erosion by their burial. The secrets of the Moai seem to be the biggest mystery of all Rapa Nui in terms of what they represent, how they were made, and how they were moved from place to place.

Moai statues were built to honor chiefs or other people of grave importance who had passed away; all bearing the same facial expression of a proud and majestic feeling. They were placed on stone platforms called *Ahu*, which are tombs for the people that the statues

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represented. The Moai were purposefully constructed with different characteristics since they were intended to keep the appearance of the person it portrayed. Most of the Moai face away from the ocean and towards the island; thus symbolizing how they watch over the people of Rapa Nui. However, seven of the Moai face the ocean to help travelers find the island. A legend of Rapa Nui also states that the king had seven men who waited for him to arrive. Some moai have a red stone found on top of their heads called *Pukao*. The pukao represented the topknot of the person the Moai represented and this was highly respected because all of the mana was kept in the hair of the Rapa Nui people.

It is not known exactly which group in the communities were responsible for carving statues, but it has been theorized that there was a group of carvers that the Rapa Nui people bought their Moai from. The buying clan would pay with whatever resources they had a large abundance of like sweet potatoes, bananas, chickens, and tools. Since a larger statue would mean a higher cost, bigger statues would also mean more greatness and wealth within the tribe, since it would be a proof of that the tribesmen are clever and hard-working enough to pay. Also, oral traditions suggest that the Moai were alternatively carved by members of each clan. The oral histories show that the people were divided into different territories for each clan and each clan would present their own Moai to the Ahu.

The main tool used for carving the Moai statues is called *Toki*, and it is a simple handheld chisel. They have been found in countless numbers of these tools at Rano Raraku, especially around the statues. The highest quality Toki are made of *Hawaiiite*, which is the hardest kind of rock found on Rapa Nui. There is only one place where this can be found, which is in a Toki pit called *Rua Toki-Toki* on the north side of Rapa Nui. Its scarcity, while still being

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used for something as central and important as carving Moai, made it highly valuable in the time of the Rapa Nui.

The island of Rapa Nui does not only contain these massive Moai made of stone, but they also have another type of Moai called *Moai Kavakava*. These sculptures are much smaller than the popular stone Moai; they are made of wood and have a small, slimmer aspect, giving them a sad appearance. These figures are believed to have been made after the civilization on Rapa Nui began to collapse, which is why they seem to have a more disgusted appearance to them.

One of the biggest Easter Island mysteries is how stone age tribes could succeed in transporting 20+ ton Moai statues miles across a hilly terrain, and there are several transportation theories such as the rocking theory and the rolling theory. But some of are generally more accepted than others.

Recent experimental recreations have proven that it is fully possible that the Moai were literally walked from their quarries to their final positions by the use of ropes. Teams of workers would have rocked the Moai back and forth, creating the walking motion and holding the Moai upright. There are many Moai statues that fell during transportation to their ahu. Some of these are on their stomach and some on their back. It can also be predicted that the path of fallen Moai were the result of the teams of balancers being unable to keep the statue upright, and it is not possible to lift the statues again once knocked over.

The most widely accepted theory is that the statues were standing on some kind of platform which would roll on logs and keep the statue in a standing position. With this technique, the Rapa Nui people would have to apply brute force in order for rapid and safe

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Moai transportation to be possible. As statues got bigger, huge amounts of lumber would be needed in order for the transportation of the large quantity of these massive monument. This would eventually cause deforestation of all thick and straight trees, which then made transportation impossible.

The World Monuments Fund (WMF), has created a project specifically for the restoration and preservation of these magnificent Moai monuments. WMF's interest in protecting the archaeological heritage of Easter Island began in the late 1960s after Dr. William Mulloy, a professional Anthropologist. In 1967, WMF and the Chilean government created the Easter Island Committee to restore two of the Ahu found on the island in the Tahai region and conduct a topographical mapping system of the island. In 1968, one of the island's Moai was put on view in New York, Washington D.C., and other cities, accompanied by an exhibit featuring Rapa Nui artifacts to increase public awareness of the remote Island, its heritage, and its conservation needs. Beginning in 1973, WMF funded five years of archaeological research and surveys organized by Dr. Mulloy that included conservation work at Ahu Vai Uri, Ahu Huri a Urenga, two Ahu at Hanga Kio'e, and the ceremonial village of Orongo.

Regardless of what the Moai were intended for, and why construction of them stopped, today the popularity of the statues is higher than ever. Many statues have been resurrected on their Ahu and Rapa Nui has become a place of much interest in terms of studying the background of these magnificent stone sculptures called Moai.