

RAPA NUI / EASTER ISLAND

Easter Island “Rapa Nui” or “Isla de Pascua” has long been the subject of curiosity and speculation. How and why did its inhabitants carve and transport the massive statues which surround the island? What remains of this culture today, and what lessons can we learn from their legacy?

Easter Island is over 2,000 miles from the nearest population center, (Tahiti and Chile), making it one of the most isolated places on Earth. A triangle of volcanic rock in the South Pacific - it is best known for the giant stone monoliths, known as Moai, that dot the coastline. The early settlers called the island “Te Pito O Te Henua” (Navel of The World). Admiral Roggeveen, who came upon the island on Easter Day in 1722, named it Easter Island. Today, the land, people and language are all referred to locally as Rapa Nui.

There has been much controversy and confusion concerning the origins of the Easter Islanders. Thor Heyerdahl proposed that the people who built the statues were of Peruvian descent, due to a similarity between Rapa Nui and Incan stonework. Some have suggested that Easter Island is the remnant of a lost continent, or the result of an extra-terrestrial influence. Archaeological evidence, however, indicates discovery of the island by Polynesians at about 400 AD - led, according to legend, by Hotu Matua. Upon their arrival, an impressive and enigmatic culture began to develop. In addition to the statues, the islanders possessed the Rongorongo script; the only written language in Oceania. The island is also home to many petroglyphs (rock carvings), as well as traditional wood carvings, tapa (barkcloth) crafts, tattooing, string figures, dance and music.

The population of Easter Island reached its peak at perhaps more than 10,000, far exceeding the capabilities of the small island’s ecosystem. Resources became scarce, and the once lush palm forests were destroyed - cleared for agriculture and moving the massive stone Moai. In this regard, Easter Island has become, for many, a metaphor for ecological disaster.

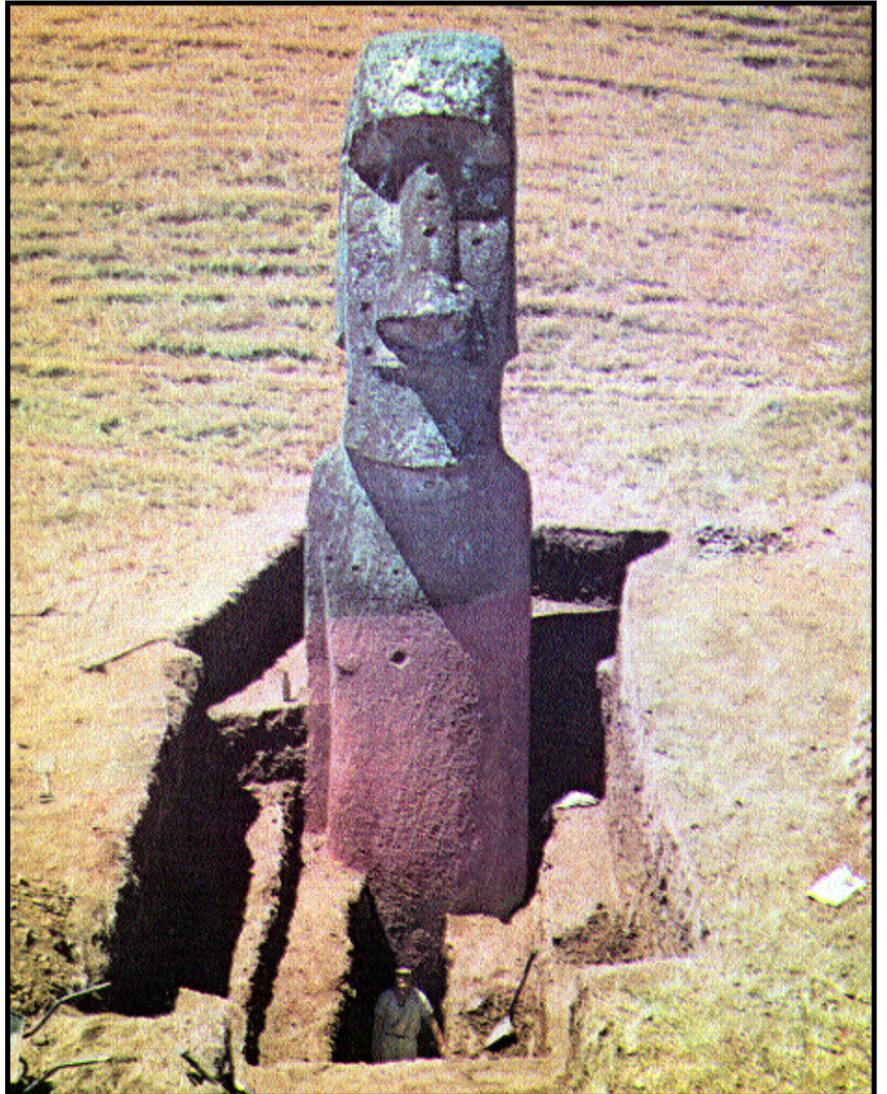
Thereafter, a thriving and advanced social order began to decline into bloody civil war. Eventually, all of the Moai standing along the coast were torn down by the islanders themselves. All of the statues now erected around the island are the result of recent archaeological efforts.

Contacts with western “civilization” proved even more disastrous for the island population which, through slavery and disease, had decreased to approximately 111 by the turn of the century. Following the annexation by Chile in 1888, however, it has risen to more than 2,000, with other Rapanui living in Chile, Tahiti and North America.

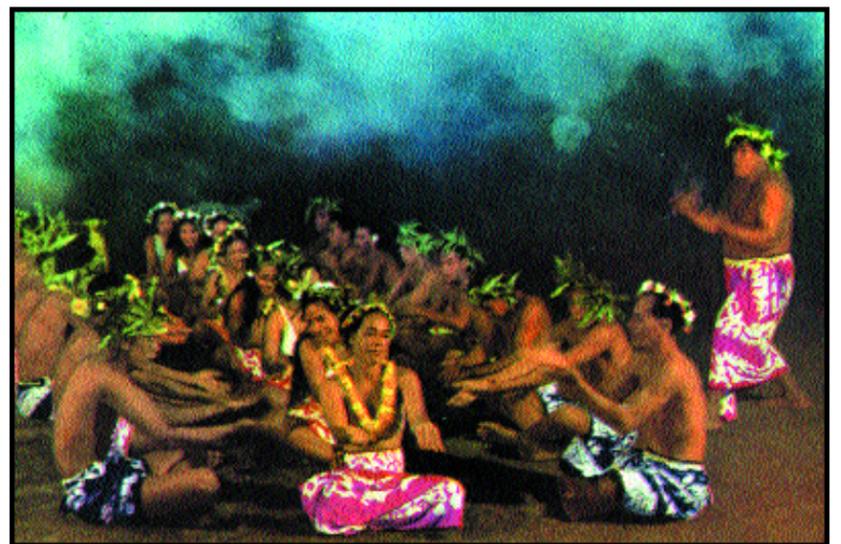
Despite a growing Chilean presence, the island’s Polynesian identity is still quite strong.

Easter Island today, remains one of the most unique places you will ever encounter; an open air museum showcasing a fascinating, but unfortunately lost, culture. The Rapanui are among the friendliest people you will ever meet, and the landscape is truly amazing - with its volcanic craters, lava formations, beaches, brilliant blue water, and archaeological sites.

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FACTS ABOUT RAPA NUI

Population: 2,000
 People: Polynesian
 Size: 112 sq. miles. Island situated in the Pacific Ocean, some 2,000 miles from Tahiti and Chile
 Religion: Christian
 Language: Spanish, “Pascuense”