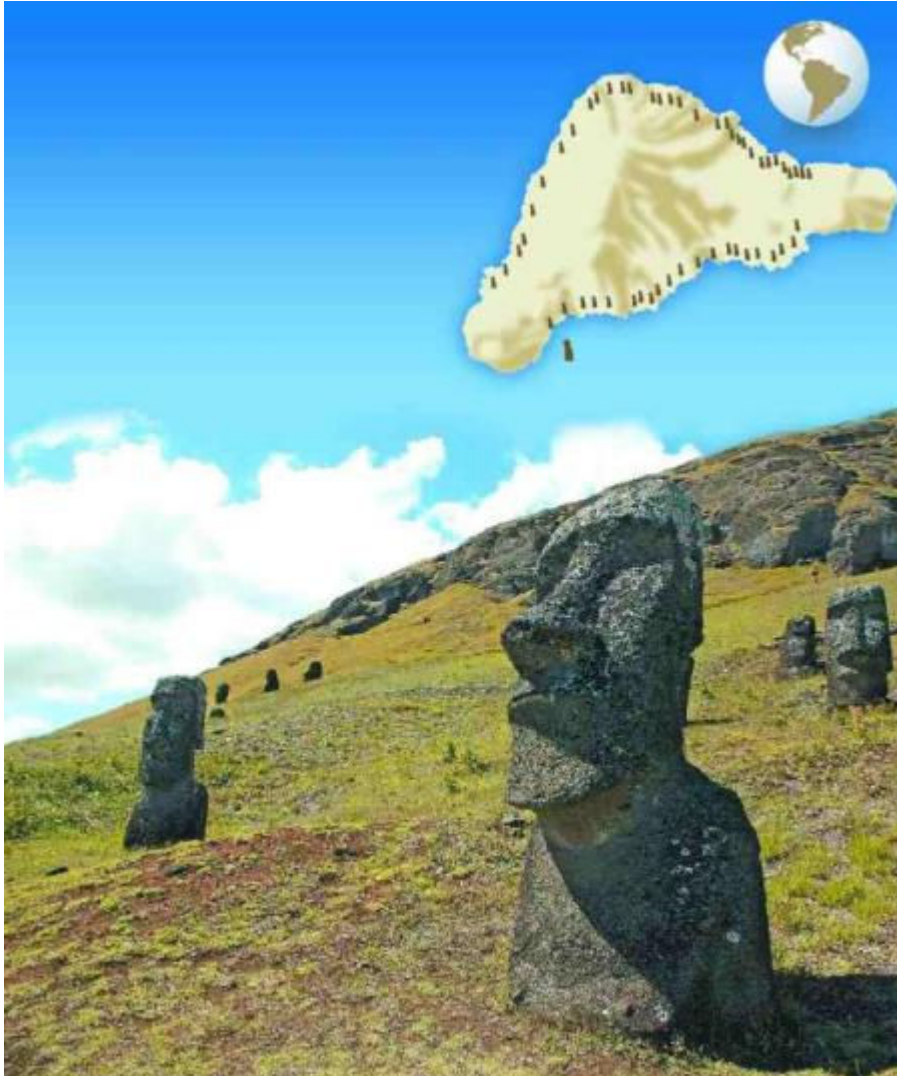


The stone giants of Easter Island

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The sound of the 767's jet engines changed pitch as we began our descent into Easter Island. The flight attendant paused beside my seat. "The Mataverí airport runway has an extra two and a half miles," she informed me. She obviously expected a response, so I asked, "How come?"

"It's an emergency landing site for the space shuttle."

Satisfied with my reaction, she went forward to do the seatbelt and seat back bit, leaving me to ponder the unlikely pairing of space exploration with the ancient culture of this remote island.

I have been fascinated with Easter Island, or Rapa Nui as the natives call it, for years. Now, after a smooth six-hour, 3,800-kilometre flight from Santiago, Chile, I was about to see those enigmatic stone figures first-hand, and learn about the strange society that 12 centuries of total isolation had produced.

The port wing dipped as we turned on our final approach, affording an overview of the island. Formed by volcanoes that erupted some 2.5 million years ago, the island is tiny -- only 167 square kilometers -- triangular, and slightly tilted to the northwest.

The tour guide's cheerful, "You're only five minutes away from your hotel," brought home just how small the island was. The hotel turned out to be single-storey rows of cabins, reminiscent of '30s motels. Its lack of frills seemed fitting somehow to the occasion.

The tour wasn't to begin until the next morning, so I walked the few kilometres to Hanga Roa, the only town and where the majority of the 4,000 inhabitants live. These people are now mostly Chilean or mixed Chilean and native. There is only one surviving pure Easter Island native -- an 80-year-old woman who has one son of mixed blood.

The inhabitants have their own language, Rapa Nui, but they also speak Spanish. In 1888, Chile annexed the island and today it is part of the Region of Valparaiso.

Hanga Roa is a pleasant town, its streets lined with restaurants and shops offering T-shirts and souvenirs. Main street is dominated by the Catholic Church and leads to the harbour where fishing boats -- many little more than dories -- are tied up.

The first moai (stone figure) our small, nine-member group was introduced to was a large, jolly- looking chap in the ground behind Ahu Vinapu.

The ahu are platforms on which the moai stand and are the most sacred of all the religious sites,

often serving as the burial place for

ancestral bones. Only the head and shoulders of this weathered moai were visible, but it reached my shoulder when I stood beside it.

The Ahu Vinapu is unique in the way the stone blocks are cut and precisely aligned rather than the more rough-hewn platforms found in other sites.

Thor Heyerdahl, of Kon-Tiki fame, was struck by its resemblance to Mayan stone work, which led him to postulate that the inhabitants of the island came from South America and not from Polynesia as generally supposed. But there is no evidence to support his theory, now largely ignored, while there is evidence of Polynesian origin. To this traveller, the most compelling was the stone foundation of a dwelling, identical in every respect to one I had seen on the Hawaiian island of Lanai, settled by Polynesians circa 1200 AD.

It is always the stone figures that come to mind whenever Easter Island is mentioned. There are almost 900 of them, a third erected on ahus, some 400 still inside, or on the slopes of, the volcanic quarry where they were carved, and the remainder abandoned on their way to the ahu. To even begin to understand why they were created and what role they played in the island culture, it is necessary to see them in their historic context.

There are lingering gaps in the story, exacerbated by the lack of a written language -- the nearest approach being hieroglyphic signs engraved on tablets, few of which survive today -- but the general outline is discernible.

Sometime around 500 AD -- give or take a century or two -- a small group of Polynesians, led by their king, Hotu Matu'a, set sail from the Marquesas in a twin-hulled canoe.

There are many things which could have motivated them to leave. The king could have been defeated in battle. Their home island could have become overpopulated, or damaged by some natural disaster; volcanic activity, a tidal wave or typhoon. Or it might just have been a case of the grass being greener on the other side. Legend has it that they were not sailing aimlessly, hoping to make a landfall, but that the king had sent out two scouting parties to search for a new homeland. One was never heard from again, but the other returned with news of an uninhabited island a great distance to the south and east. This is supported by the presence of a group of seven large moai on Ahu Asevi, known as the Seven Explorers.

Regardless of whether it was a navigational feat or a case of hoping for the best, the voyage would have lasted for weeks. Their canoe was well equipped for such an expedition. With its twin hulls -- as much as 27 metres long and connected by a platform bearing a mast and a crude shelter -- it was capable of carrying the necessary supplies. Coconuts, vegetables, tropical fruits, chickens, pigs and rats, supplemented with flying fish, provided an adequate

diet. Tropical downpours replenished the water supply, and embers, carefully tended in a sandbox, could be fanned into cooking fires. They brought with them the things necessary to sustain life in case they were not to be found at their destination. Which proved to be the case with Easter Island. It would be the sea, not the land, that would sustain life on Rapa Nui. In addition to food, water and fire, the newcomers brought their society with them, a rigidly structured, hierarchical society.

According to legend, the king and his followers came ashore at Anakena, the larger of the island's two beaches. The event becomes even more dramatic with the realization that for more than a thousand years this speck of land in the middle of a vast ocean will be the only world their descendants will know. To them, Rapa Nui was the world, and a perfectly round stone at Te Pito o Te Henua was revered as the navel of the world. (In their language, pito means navel, or centre, and henua means earth.) How does such a community function? How can it be governed?

The answer was to perpetuate and reinforce the strict rules and customs of the society they had left -- a society led by an all-powerful king, with a nobility based on ancestry, a warrior class, and common folk. Not unlike the feudal society of our own medieval times. Ancestor worship was the key to privilege, but how to maintain it?

After a few centuries, a solution came in the form of the moai -- those enigmatic, giant stone sculptures that today bring thousands of visitors and make tourism the island's main industry.

Although they vary widely in size,

all moai adhere to a common pattern -- carved from the Rano Raraku volcano, they are highly stylized and virtually identical insofar as facial features are concerned: scowling, overhanging brow, disproportionately large nose with exaggerated nostrils, and elongated ears and ear lobes. A select few were adorned with pukao, or top knot, made from scoria, a rock coloured red with oxidized iron, found at Puna Pau, a secondary volcanic cone.

While they might have been meant to honour ancestors, it is doubtful the honourees would be flattered by being depicted in such a fashion. Using only an adze and toki, a sharp-edged rock that could be held in the hand, generations of men carved them, lying face-up, both inside the caldera and, more often, on its outer slopes. They remained attached to the rock by a ridge along their backs until they were ready to be transported to their ahu.

As the centuries passed and tensions grew and festered in the small, incestuous world, the sculptures grew ever larger. The largest, still embedded in the volcanic rock, has a height of 21.6 metres and weighs 200 tonnes. The largest erected on an ahu stands 9.8 metres tall

and weighs 82 tonnes. Transporting the stone giants 15 or more kilometres and erecting them on their designated platform, using only the primitive means available at the time, was and remains a truly impressive feat.

"Monumental" in every sense of the word. How was it accomplished? Manpower and trees. Rollers made from tree trunks (which is the reason early explorers found the island nearly denuded of trees), wooden sledges and ropes were the means of moving the statues. The route along the "moai roads" is littered with sculptures lying half-buried on the ground. We ask the guide why they were abandoned like that. Because they lose their mana when they fall. Once they have safely arrived at the ahu, and only then, were their eye sockets carved. Eyes made of coral and obsidian were implanted in the most powerful of the moai, but all were now able to see.

They were erected by natives pulling on ropes and piling stones behind for support, exactly the method used to raise the monolithic obelisks in the Ethiopian town of Axum.

The colossi faced inland, not out to sea as often supposed. Their role was to project mana and confer power on the lord and his clan. And, more importantly, underpin the rigid hierarchy that ruled the island.

The moai were also, I soon realized, a "make work" program on a gigantic scale. How better to occupy the time and energy of an ever expanding population than this labour-intensive task?

I thought about this, and how it had worked for so many centuries, as the minivan carried us from one site to another. Arriving at each point of interest, we would clamber out and listen while our guide explained, first in Spanish, then English, what we were about to see. Then we would set off on foot, with her in the lead.

The Rapa Nui idea of a path, or hiking trail, is rudimentary to say the least -- a flat stone here, then maybe a partial foothold dug into the side of the cliff, followed by a narrow strip of bare earth along the top of a steep hill, and then a jumble of volcanic rocks. As I scrambled up the side of the Rano Raraku volcano, my left shin was scraped raw, effectively putting an end to my plan to see some of the island on horseback.

The view from the rim of Rano Raraku more than compensated for the rigorous climb. The crater was filled with clear water, with reeds and green bushes poking through. The island has no lakes, but plenty of rain, and the craters make natural reservoirs. Being volcanic, the island is riddled with caves, some of which are large with many chambers. As the centuries

wore on and the population increased to something like 10,000, life for the majority became a precarious subsistence.

Conflict and wars between clans broke out and many sought refuge in the caves, erecting stone barricades in the passageways and concealing the entrance with palm fronds. The most sinister one is in a cove where the surf crashes against the rocks, sending sheets of spray skyward. The cave, its roof covered with pictographs of the god "make make," is known as Ana Kai Tangata, translated as "man eat man."

Why didn't some of those facing starvation sail away and seek out a new home as their ancestors had done? A lack of trees of the right kind and size for canoes. Even before the island was stripped of its trees to transport the moai, its thin volcanic soil could not support trees whose timber was suitable for building long range canoes.

As the denuding process continued, it became more difficult to construct even small canoes and the inhabitants had to increasingly rely on rafts made from reeds. This led to a less efficient fishery already depleted from centuries of overfishing.

It is impossible to assign any precise dates to the events that took place on Rapa Nui. It can be said, however, that sometime in the late 1600s and early 1700s, the internecine strife culminated in the "wars of the throwing down of the statues" and the abrupt cessation of all work on new ones. (The magnificent moai now admired by visitors have been restored and put back on their ahus in, usually with the use of cranes.)

There is one date that is known with certainty. April 5, 1722, Easter Sunday, when the island was discovered by a Dutch sea captain. The island became Easter Island and the race of humans who lived there began to disappear.

It is impossible to avoid the uncomfortable thought that the strange and sad history of Easter Island may hold a message for what is happening in the world today. For centuries, the land was despoiled, denuded of trees, much of its soil washed away. All for a purpose that returned nothing to the environment. Ultimately, the island took its revenge. Therein may lie a cautionary tale.

John Ballem is a Calgary lawyer and novelist who travels throughout the world.

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