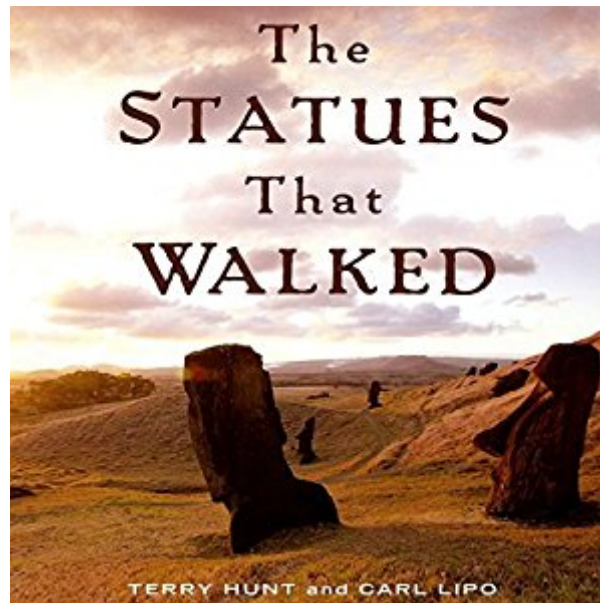


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The Statues That Walked: Unraveling The Mystery Of Easter Island



Synopsis

The monumental statues of Easter Island, both so magisterial and so forlorn, gazing out in their imposing rows over the island's barren landscape, have been the source of great mystery ever since the island was first discovered by Europeans on Easter Sunday 1722. How could the ancient people who inhabited this tiny speck of land, the most remote in the vast expanse of the Pacific islands, have built such monumental works? No such astonishing numbers of massive statues are found anywhere else in the Pacific. How could the islanders possibly have moved so many multi-ton monoliths from the quarry inland, where they were carved, to their posts along the coastline? And most intriguing and vexing of all, if the island once boasted a culture developed and sophisticated enough to have produced such marvelous edifices, what happened to that culture? Why was the island the Europeans encountered a sparsely populated wasteland? The prevailing accounts of the island's history tell a story of self-inflicted devastation: a glaring case of eco-suicide. The island was dominated by a powerful chiefdom that promulgated a cult of statue making, exercising a ruthless hold on the island's people and rapaciously destroying the environment, cutting down a lush palm forest that once blanketed the island in order to construct contraptions for moving more and more statues, which grew larger and larger. As the population swelled in order to sustain the statue cult, growing well beyond the island's agricultural capacity, a vicious cycle of warfare broke out between opposing groups, and the culture ultimately suffered a dramatic collapse. When Terry Hunt and Carl Lipo began carrying out archaeological studies on the island in 2001, they fully expected to find evidence supporting these accounts. Instead, revelation after revelation uncovered a very different truth.

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Customer Reviews

Popularized books and articles about Easter Island tend to fall into one of two categories. The first is the "amazing mysteries" genre, about how the people of the island were so ingenious that they created and moved huge statues in ways that "modern science" can't figure out. The other is the ecological-cautionary-tale genre, about how the people of the island were so foolish that they cut down all the trees. Both are more concerned with contemporary commercial or ideological ends than with trying to figure out what actually happened on the island. That's what this book is about. It turns out that the people of the island were neither magicians nor fools; they were simply people trying -- with remarkable success given the obstacles -- to move their tropical civilization to a subtropical climate. Their actions are consistent with known archeology and sociology. The story does also involve both ingenuity and ecology, though, and the truth is no less interesting than the fantasies. I read the Kindle version on a iPad; as usual, the maps and drawings are indistinct and are difficult to match with the text. But this book for the most part does not depend on them so that's really not a significant problem here.

This book consists of three "parts". In the first part strong and plausible cases are made for (a) the role of rats in the deforestation of Easter Island; (b) "walking" as the method for taking the moai from the quarry to their ultimate destination; (c) the dispersed nature of settlement on the islands - without trace of vertical structures; (d) lithic mulching as a refined system to increase productivity; (e) lack of warfare. The arguments are carefully and clearly made. It is a pleasure to see archeologists ingeniously integrating field evidence to make their case. These merits alone warrant reading the book. Given the likely controversial nature of the statement that there was no large scale violence on the island, one would have liked reference to the analogous case of the MorioriÂ Moriori: a People RediscoveredÂ on Chatham Islands (who never got to building Moai though). Lithic mulching is well known to European wine growers in marginal areas. There stones are used to reduce temperature fluctuations. One wonders, however, what the impact of lithic mulching might be on a wind-swept island: here water conservation might be more critical than averaging of temperatures, particularly given the fact that water was at a premium and rainfall quite unpredictable. Lithic mulching may have this collateral purpose. The second "part" tries to explain why the Rapa Nui built the statues. Unfortunately, the authors have contracted "evolutionary

biologism" - an intellectual ailment likely to provoke hallucinations of all sorts. Evolutionary biology views everything, including culture, in terms of "reproductive success", subordinating culture to biology (despite the obvious fact that biology's tortoise-like time-scale is totally different from the hare-like pace of culture). This view is misguided. It is no better than the "imported culture" theory about the origins of moai. One nods approvingly - albeit at the beginning of Chpt 10 - at the belated quote from Carl Sagan. Evolutionary biology comes from the same intellectual pot as "rational expectation" models in economics - now discredited. Evolutionary biology signally fails to explain the emergence of infinite diversity and complexification of humanity. Having posited that building moai is good for the community and the individuals by assisting in limiting the number of children, the authors utterly fail to explain how this was done in practice (unless building moai was the equivalent of cold showers, that is). At Location 2192 Kindle they argue that female infanticide was significant - maybe. So population control was obtained in this way. Why then additionally go for moai? The link between building moai and birth control is never explained, it is simply asserted: "We believe that monument construction was an important element in maintaining this balance, and that those who invested in making and moving statues did better in the long run than those who did not. Over time, as population density increased, the benefits increased, and the record shows that as this happened, greater investments in ahu and moai were made." (Kindle Locations 2220-2223). The authors posit that humans are involuntary rational machines, aiming to maximize reproductive success. They posit unremitting narrow-gauged cost/benefit thinking. It does not occur to them than the alternative to building moai - remaining idle - may have been socially worse than communal effort. From all that they tell us, there have been excruciatingly long periods of boring "doing nothing". Tending crops yielded no dividends, so once planted, they were left to grow. Lithic mulching demanded shifting 20 kg of stones per day - which is not much of a task. Fishing was limited, for the "forest" was unsuited for blue-water boats, and the island is devoid of reefs. Chickens were cooped - and in any case who wants to run after clucks all day? So the Rapa Nui may have found themselves in the shoes of Vladimir and Estragon, in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. They may have amused themselves building moai to escape boredom and the dangers of a directionless mind. Moai building may have just been an oversized case of collective self-affirmation. Part "three" of the book - Chapter 9 - draws a plausible albeit insufficiently documented portrait of the Rapa Nui as they encounter global forces. Imported diseases decimated population, and the cohesiveness of the traditional acephalous society crumbled. One would have liked some archeological evidence - syphilis and TB e.g. can be traced in skeletons. The number of "survivors" somehow remains constant over the years, despite increased infertility and succeeding waves of imported disease. It is

the great merit of the authors to have put paid to Jared Diamond's phantasy about self-inflicted "collapse" of the Rapa Nui. It is surprising that this author, having written eloquently on the impact of contact between populations, failed to spot the instance here. The "loose morals" of the local ladies may have been linked to polyandry in a society where female infanticide is practiced. This conjecture may have been followed up. The book is well worth reading - just skip Chapter 8.

I've been to Easter Island and for me, it is the most magical and mysterious place on earth. I soak up all the information I can find about the history of Easter Island. One thing is certain. Although there are many theories about the reasons for the famous statues and why the island fell into decay, the truth is we will never have the answers. Terry Hunt and Carl Lipo have done a fine job of combining previous research with their own work and have come up with a few new and interesting theories. Katherine Routledge is the mother of modern Easter Island knowledge from her studies of 1913-1915. She is quoted often and she collected a lot of stories from fading memories of a dying culture. Thor Heyerdahl is another often quoted researcher. I was especially keen to read this book since I know the island and can picture places mentioned. I also know the various theories about the statues and the fate of the island. Why did people populate a desolate island with few resources and so far from any other islands? Why was so much energy put into the carving and moving of huge statues? Hunt and Lipo have their theories and their research is fascinating. Knowing the island is almost completely free of trees except for those planted in a few spots in modern times, it was hard to imagine a lush and densely forested island of huge palm trees. Where did they all go? The most accepted theory is the islanders chopped down every single tree in their quest to move their mysterious statues. Hunt and Lipo divide their book into several chapters to explain their theories of Easter Island. It was invading rats that did so much damage to the eco-system. They give evidence to support their theory did more to destroy the vegetation than any humans. Another topic explains the title. The idea that the statues "walked" to their various locations. Supposedly legend says the statues "walked." Well, maybe they did in an easy to explain way. They were moved standing up rather than dragged vertically. An interesting theory and the authors give examples of how this was proven to be a possibility. The authors present their theories and back up their suppositions with dedication. In the end, we'll never have answers. There can be only theories about this true island of mystery.

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