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RAPA NUI

Location and geography

Rapa Nui, as Easter Island is known to local inhabitants, is one of the most remote populated places on the planet. Set in the midst of the Pacific Ocean, the island is on the southeastern axis of the great Polynesian archipelago, more than 3500 kilometers west of mainland Chile. Volcanic in origin, it originally had a dozen tree species very similar to those found in Polynesia, and is now populated by migratory birds, marine mammals, fish, insects and small terrestrial snails.

Economy

In ancient times, the people of Rapa Nui subsisted by growing several varieties of plantain, squash, tubers and sugar cane, and complemented their diet with fishing, hunting and gathering food from the sea. They also used the native trees on the island to make textiles and obtain pigments and high quality timber, and they introduced the Polynesian mouse and domestic chickens to the island.

Art

The Rapa Nui people developed an advanced and sophisticated megalithic art tradition that emerged from their intense devotion to ancestor worship and is unparalleled in Polynesia. Over a period of five hundred years, they erected close to three hundred altars, called *ahus*, and carved more than six hundred stone *moai* statues. These monumental pieces expressed the competition for power among different lineages on the island and a clear desire for ostentation through the construction of ever-larger and more elaborate works.

The *ahus* were the product of an architectural tradition that emerged gradually, free from external influences. The oldest of these platforms feature large walls composed of enormous blocks of lava fitted together with incredible precision. The first *moais* also date to this period. Later, more *moais* were erected and the altars grew in size, with new features added such as broad side ramps and paved areas in front made of basalt blocks. Among these structures, the *ahu* of Tongariki was the greatest project undertaken during the island's classical period and consists of 15 imposing *moais* with their respective red scoria headpieces (*pukao*). During historic times, the *ahus* and *moais* of Rapa Nui were gradually destroyed and replaced by pyramid-like structures used for cremations and burials.

Unlike in Polynesia, where images of the ancestors were carved from thick trunks, on Rapa Nui the *moais* were carved from enormous blocks of volcanic rock. Hard basalt stone was used for this purpose, as well as trachyte and red scoria and, later on, rock from the Rano Raraku crater. The sculptures average

four meters in height, except for the *Paromoai* that stands on the *Te Pito Kura ahu*, which measures 10 meters tall and weighs 85 tons. This statue epitomizes the use of megalithic expressions during this period in the service of political and religious power. As the classic period waned and the ancestral culture of Rapa Nui began to decline, more than seventy *moais* were left unfinished in the island's quarries.

As for their manufacture, the *moais* of Rapa Nui were carved at the quarries themselves, down to details such as eyes, nose, ears and even the "tattoos" on their backs. From the quarries they were placed in a wooden frame and transported to the respective altar by ropes. The *moais* were then erected on the altar platforms with their backs to the sea. At this time the *ariki* (headman of the clan)—dressed in a long, painted barkcloth cape and wearing a headdress of white feathers and wooden pectoral ornaments (*reimiro*) and pendants (*tahonga*)—presided over a ceremony intended to invest the *moai* with the power to protect the lineage and the territory. The statue's white coral and black obsidian eyes were set in place at this time, along with its enormous red scoria headpiece resembling the *ariki*'s turban or topknot, which was a sign of divine origin.

Social organization

At its height, Rapa Nui society was organized into territorial clans, each with its own lineage that included several extended families. The clans were governed by a powerful religious aristocracy. The *ariki* of each clan was believed to have descended directly from the gods and had supernatural power—called *maná*. He presided over initiation rites, harvest festivals and food redistribution ceremonies held at the island's large ceremonial centers, accompanied by priests and wise men versed in the sacred writings of *Kohau Rongo Rongo*, which contained the songs, ritual prayers and genealogical history of the people.

Beliefs and funerary practices

Rapa Nui rituals would have begun at birth, with the cutting of the newborn's umbilical cord. Rites of early childhood included the first haircut and the first wearing of a loincloth. Then there was the tattooing of the legs at eight years of age. Young people reaching puberty underwent the important rites of initiation into adulthood. According to chronicles written by Europeans visiting the island, these "ceremonies" were in fact schools of knowledge in which boys and girls—their bodies painted red and white and wearing ornaments called *tahonga*—were shut away for several months on the small island of Moto Nui, facing Orongo. There, they learned about Rapa Nui cultural traditions, skills, sacred knowledge and the art of war, among other things, from teachers and elders. Their schooling also included games of skill and physical strength. Some of

these youth were selected to learn specific skills such as tattooing or writing, or to become sculptors or stoneworkers.

Ceremonies related to death also played an important role in Rapa Nui culture, especially the funerary rites of important family members. During these, the body of the deceased person was wrapped in a plant fiber cloth and left in the open air for one to two years beside the *ahu*, until it decomposed. The bones were then washed and deposited in a burial chamber excavated from the *ahu* itself. There, the soul of the deceased joined those of the ancestors, finally leaving the (living) family behind. After some more time had passed, the deceased family member was remembered at the ceremony of *Paina*, a feast offered for the bereaved family and an important social gathering. At the event, which was held in front of the *ahu*, a large effigy made of sticks, painted plant fiber cloth and a molded head—probably in the likeness of the deceased—was erected. Today, the *ahu* of Tepeustill contains evidence of figures used during the *Paina* ceremony.

Magical power (*maná*) and supernatural spirits were always present in the Rapa Nui community. Any object, and especially those in the possession of powerful men, could be imbued with this supernatural power. Skulls engraved with designs relating to fertility (vulvas, for example) that have been found buried under the floors of dwellings and chicken coops probably belonged to powerful leaders. For their part, both good and evil spirits could be incarnated in animals or in objects, or be considered guardians when linked to a particular territory or family. One ancient Rapa Nui legend relates how one of HotuMatu'a's companions caught a glimpse of these spirits and decided to reproduce their likeness in wood, making several powerful statues in human form. Those with protruding ribs and sunken stomachs represented the male spirits, while those with a flat profile and obvious sexual organs were female. From that mythical time to the present, figures like these have become one of the most traditional expressions of Rapa Nui art.

Settlement pattern

The territory of each lineage extended in narrow strips inland from the coast and marked by piles of stones that remain visible today. Villages were situated on the coast, preferably adjacent to the corresponding *ahu*. These settlements held a core group of dwellings that usually belonged to high-ranking clan members, while common folk lived in permanent settlements further inland, near their agricultural fields.

The central dwelling of the village was the *hare paenga*, shaped like an inverted boat and measuring ten to fifteen meters long and two meters wide. Its elliptical base was made of carved basalt blocks with holes for logs that supported the structure's wooden walls and grass roof. It had no windows and a long, low

narrow doorway at the middle. Some of these dwellings had round stone floors, but the only furnishings ever recorded inside them were rounded stones wrapped in grass and plant-fiber mats, onto which fine designs related to fertility had been etched. According to historic descriptions, to protect their dwellings the Rapa Nui people placed a wooden figure at the entrance that represented the ancestors and guardian spirits. Underground ovens were constructed on a round or rectangular stone foundation alongside the dwellings. Here, the people cooked their food communally in the style of the traditional *curanto* of Chiloe.

Near the end of the pre-Hispanic period, another type of dwelling that differed significantly from those described above emerged in the ceremonial village of Orongo, on the edge of RanoKau crater. The settlement contained around fifty homes in all, each built entirely of basalt slabs with a corbelled (false vault) roof. The village of Orongo also had two *ahu* and is dotted with countless stone blocks covered with petroglyphs. These structures were inhabited only during ceremonies related to the cult of Manutara and the god Make Make, religious practices that continued until the mid-19th century.

History

According to oral tradition and archeological research, the Rapa Nui descended from a single group of people that sailed from Eastern Polynesia around 1000 A.D. to settle on this remote island, which became Chilean territory in 1888. According to legend, King HotuMatu'a disembarked on the beach at Anakena with a hundred men, women and children, including members of the nobility and priest-elders, warriors and stone and wood craftsmen. He also brought the household items, plants and animals needed to sustain the settlers.

Rapa Nui's prehistory, history and present day reality are all founded upon a single cultural history. To better understand the island's past, archeologists have divided it into five chronological stages. The first three fall into the prehistoric period and include the Settlement or "Legendary origin" (prior to 1000 A.D.), followed by the AhuMoai Expansion or "Splendor of Megalithism" (1000–1680 A.D.) and the Decline of HuruMoai or "The collapse and re-adaptation" (1680–1722 A.D.), which ended when the island was first visited by Europeans.

Around 1600 A.D., competition between clans to claim more territory and enhance their prestige by building ever more monumental altars led to the overexploitation and depletion of the island's limited resources and the intense degradation of its environment. Bloody intertribal conflicts arose, in which a new class of warrior chiefs wrested power from the ancient priest class. In the ceremonial village of Orongo, the warrior-chiefs inaugurated a new fertility cult, *Tangata Manu*, based around the god Make Make, the bird-man. This god invested earthly powers and privileges in the clan that won the ritual competition

to obtain the first egg of the *manutara*, the seagull that nested in the islets off the coast of the ceremonial village of Orongo each year.

The island first became known to the Western world when Dutch navigator Jacob Roggeveen arrived there on Easter Sunday, 1722. This date marked the end of the prehistoric period and the beginning of the Easter Island period, which was marked by the profound impacts the Europeans made on its native people. After that first contact, Spanish explorers came, followed by French missionaries. In the decades before the island was claimed as part of Chile's sovereign territory, it was used as a sheep ranch by an English enterprise. Meanwhile, several devastating events—including the large-scale forced deportation of the Rapa Nui people to work in the guano operations of Peru, the introduction of contagious diseases, and the internal strife these events caused among the local people—decimated the island's population to such a degree that by the end of the 19th century only 111 native inhabitants remained. But, although they had lived in complete isolation for more than 1500 years, thanks to their incredible capacity for adaptation the Rapa Nui people were able to resist even the violence of contact and today retain their identity as an ancient indigenous culture.