

Heads Will Roll: the Toppling of the Rapa Nui Statues

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Background

Since circa 1200 CE, the island of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) has been settled. In that time, more than 1,000 stone statues were carved into the shape of heads (*moai*); however, all the statues have been toppled face down. Dr. Mark McCoy, Professor of Anthropology at FSU, worked with an interdisciplinary team of archaeologists, engineers, and seismologists to conduct fieldwork in the pursuit of an answer to the toppling of the monumental statues. These statues are central to contemporary Rapa Nui culture, which is oftentimes excluded from contemporary studies done on the island. Dr. McCoy's research, as well as the research done for this poster, take into account the large population of Indigenous Rapa Nui still present. This research will be the layout for a future museum exhibit with FSU Department of Anthropology.

Methods

- Dr. McCoy's study used small sensors called geophones to send an electric pulse through the stone of the statues, aiding researchers in dating each moai.
- Hypotheses were created by the researchers that are expected to determine the cause of toppling.
- A research team of professionals conducted the research, but a group of Rapa Nui high schoolers participated in gathering data.
- For information about contemporary culture present on the island, scholarly articles about the archaeological features and island history, as well as ethnographies were used.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr. Amy Kowal, FSU Department of Anthropology and Dr. Mark McCoy, FSU Department of Anthropology, for all their help and guidance!



A restored *moai* statue on Rapa Nui, Courtesy of Dr. Mark McCoy



Students use an ultrasonic scanner on fragments of stone tuff, Courtesy of the TAO

Archaeological Features

- Rock shelters- the earliest habitable construction on the island, circa 1200 CE, designed to support a single family unit
- Forts- larger structures on high points found surrounded by smaller forts that sometimes extended into terraces with homes
- *Moai* - monumental statues made of tuff and carved at a quarry located on the island meant to protect its inhabitants

Results

Through careful analysis of cultural ethnographies, conclusions about the current state of the population of Indigenous Rapa Nui can be reached. It's a common misconception that no one lives on the island anymore, but that couldn't be further from the truth; there is a large and active Indigenous population that strives to keep their language and traditions alive. However, the island is a part of the country of Chile, who has placed restrictions over their language, where they can live, and how they can interact with their cultural heritage (like the *moai*). This resulted in a large demonstration in 2010, when 1,000 Rapa Nui gathered to express their unhappiness with the current state of Chilean governance. Dr. McCoy's results on the toppling of the statues are still forthcoming.



The stone fortress of Orongo, Rapa Nui, Courtesy of Smithsonian Journeys

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