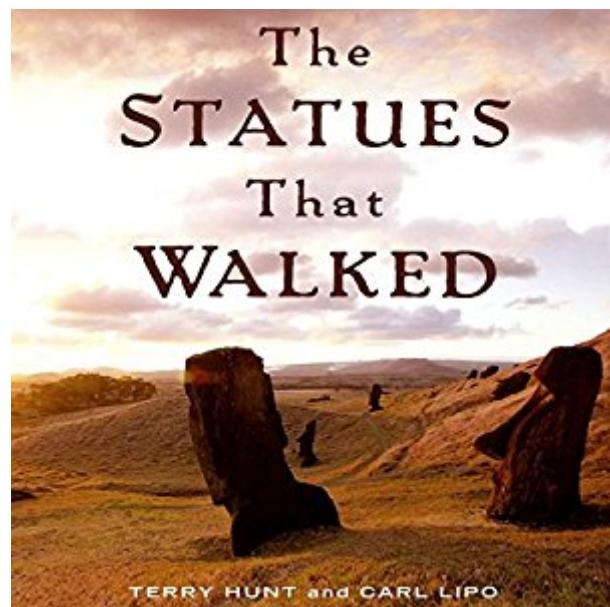


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The Statues That Walked: Unraveling The Mystery Of Easter Island



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The main text is only 180 pages so it's eminently readable without an overbearing commitment of time, and it's directed at an interested lay public rather than strictly academics so anyone can easily follow it without fear of getting bogged down in a lot of jargon and ten thousand references. It does have references, but not too many and they pertain to key issues that allow the interested reader (albeit one with access to a university library for the most part) to follow up on certain topics. I was interested in some of the paleopathology studies that were referenced, so it was useful in that regard. As they note, they didn't start working on Rapa Nui to decipher much of anything about why the moai were made, how they were moved and erected, or to develop a completely new perspective on the cultural and ecological history of the place; they were conducting a field school and general survey along with some excavations, assuming that they'd be filling in a few details here and there on the prehistory of what is probably one of the most studied specks of land on earth. What seems to have kicked off the more intensive study: determining a much later date for initial occupation (AD 1200 as opposed to the previously accepted dates of AD 400). If the date of initial occupation was so far off the accepted chronology, what else was? The structure of the book is directed at examining what is really known about various aspects of the island's pre-/history both from early literary accounts and from past archaeological work (both normal dirt archaeology and of the experimental sort) and then adding in results from their own work over the past few years.

While this book is an eminently readable and excellent example of a modern, scientific approach to unraveling the pre-history of Easter Island; I found that it offered much more than most "archaeology of" kind of books. As an "archaeology of" kind of book, it is well written with just enough detail to support their arguments and conclusions, without getting too bogged down in cataloging all of the work that has been done on the island. I like how the book was structured: its organized into a series of easy steps that lead the reader through the author's path to knowledge as well as the multi-disciplinary evidence they combine to justify their conclusions. Unlike another reviewer, I didn't find the book "dry" at all: in fact I was surprised that I found it hard to put down ("I'll read just one more chapter" I would say to myself). I think that this book also works well as a general "how science works" study: the authors use this book as an opportunity to share the process by which they arrived at this work, as a series of questions that when answered raise more questions and

implications, and allow a gradual picture to emerge. This insight into the scientific process is interesting in its own right, and helps the reader understand the way that scientific knowledge is built brick by brick. I think this book also work well as an example of the recent "historical-sociological-anthropological-ecological" genre most identified with "Guns, Germs, and Steel". I found "Statues" as entertaining as this, but more factual and less conjectural, albeit with a much smaller scope. It is refreshing to see anthropologists producing popular books about these issues, rather than leaving these topics to others.

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