

ADVENTURES ON EASTER ISLAND

A talk by Edwina Cole, 17 April 2014

We finished our 2013/14 lecture programme with a fascinating talk given by our own Edwina (Ed) Cole on the remote landmass that is Easter Island. Ed, along with Janet Blizzard, another HADs member, visited Easter Island in 2012. As a demonstration of the place's isolation, they had to travel all the way to Santiago in Chile and then take a five hour flight from there. The nearest inhabited neighbour, Pitcairn Island, is over 2,000 km away.

The Tapati festival was going on at the time of Ed and Jan's visit. The festival is by the islanders for the islanders although visitors are welcome. Easter Island is slightly smaller than the Isle of Wight and has a population under 6,000. The airport is just a hut. There are no trees to speak of and very few beaches. Early visitors to the island, including Captain James Cook, were generally unimpressed!

The Island has over 2,000 archaeological sites and we are grateful that one of the pioneer female archaeologists, Katherine Routledge, spent 17 months on the island from 1914-15 and left very good notes. The remoteness of the island is demonstrated by the fact that Katherine was totally unaware of the outbreak of the First World War in 1914!

Easter Island is roughly triangular and was formed by three (now extinct) volcanos. The first human settlers came from other Polynesian islands between 600 and 900 AD. The natives call Easter Island "Rapa Nui", which this is also the name of their language. Some Rapa Nui words are:

"Moai" – the famous "stone heads";

"Pukao" – the red hats or topknots on some of the stone heads;

"Aku" – the ceremonial platforms where the statues stand;

"Mana" – sacred/magical power.

The stone heads were erected between 1000 and 1600 AD and were thrown down from when the first European visitors came in the early 18th century. As late as the 1860s, Peru mounted slave raids and more than half of the inhabitants were abducted; this led to the island's culture being devastated and, at the time of the annexation by Chile in 1888, there were only 111 inhabitants. The early 20th century saw the introduction of sheep farming, causing further damage to the island's archaeology, the natives being confined to Hanga Roa on the west of the island.

No one knows why the natives suddenly ceased the production of moai. There are over 400 in a quarry that were simply abandoned. The moai are supposed to represent deceased

ancestors and nearly all of them look inland; nearly 900 still exist. One moai has restored eyes of white coral with a red pupil and is quite startling when seen for the first time.



The ceremonial village of Orongo, situated on a cliff-top, has been reconstructed and it is there that the “Bird Man Competition” was held. Rival tribes competed annually to obtain the first egg of the “sooty tern”. Whoever found it was endowed as a bird man, considered to be sacred and would live in isolation for a year. A moai in the British Museum is considered to be important in the ceremony and its removal from the island is the cause of some resentment.

One of the saddest aspects of European interference is that no one can now read the “rongorongo” script. It appears on 27 artefacts (all in museums) and all attempts at deciphering it have failed.

Despite all its tribulations, the island remains a fascinating place, full of wonder and was well worth the considerable effort in getting there. Thank you to Ed for ending our successful lecture programme on a high!