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Letters

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Letters to the Editor

Sirs:

The following is in reference to a recent paper in *Rapa Nui Journal*, Vol. 10 (1) titled “When the Earth Trembled, The Statues Fell” by Edwards, Marchetti, Domichetti and González-Ferrán. As always happens with topics and publications on Isla de Pascua, it is very difficult not to look at such assumptions in a slightly different manner than that which was presented by the authors. With relation to that well-presented work, I beg to add some personal comments from the point of view of a simple lover—enamored of things about our beloved Rapa Nui. In particular, I want to draw attention to those parts noted below.

On page 14, “When did the Statues Fall?” the argument of the authors as to the possibility of the occurrence of earthquakes prior to the arrival of Roggeveen in 1722 is reasonable, for Roggeveen knew nothing of it, nor was it noted by other visitors who navigated along the coast of Rapa Nui. No one mentioned seeing Abu Tongariki with its 250 meter wall and 15 moai, a construction that surely would have been noted, especially by sailors. Clearly, these moai had fallen before 1722 and could serve well to verify the argument of the authors who point out the possibility that the destruction of Tongariki’s abu was the result of an earthquake on the island.

In the same way, given this point of consideration, it is not improbable that the same thing happened in past times with moai on other abu of the island.

The other alternative for the destruction of Tongariki’s moai is the possibility that it’s destruction resulted from wars between the residents of Tongariki and rival tribes. This type of destruction comes to us through oral traditions, where combat between diverse tribes is spoken of, along with the tearing down of moai from abu in conquered territory. It is an hypothesis that stands out among others in the past history of Rapa Nui.

But a little further on, the authors state: “After a period of seismic activity in which the majority, if not all, of the statues erected on ceremonial centers toppled...” This, to us, seems too strong an affirmation and cannot be possible. Let us examine this theory.

For example, in relation to Abu Vaihu (Hanga Tee), on 3 January 1872, the future poet, Pierre Loti, arrived aboard the French frigate, *La Flore*. His drawings are well known and one, dated 6 January, shows natives throwing down statues at this abu. This may be evidence that, in 1872, fallen moai already existed at this abu. But in his diary Loti clarified that his drawing was only speculation on the activities of past times, and was based upon stories told him by the Rapanui while he was at that moment in Vaihu.

Or it is not improbable that some of Vaihu’s moai fell by themselves as a direct consequence of an earthquake (possibly the same one that affected Tongariki). But for the story told us by Loti, and based upon traditions, there is equal weight for the destruction of some moai at Vaihu by direct interference of the ancient Rapanui.

And this, in our view, could signify that the same happened at other abu of the island, where not all moai fell by themselves due to seismic perturbations, and more, that the rest (equal to what happened at Vaihu) were thrown down by enemy action toward vanquished opponents during a period of intense tribal warfare. It is true, as said by the authors, that traditional stories indicate the occurrence of earthquakes in the past, but also it is true that there are traditional legends about the existence of those tribal wars. And it is this that does not seem to be strong affirmation that, as a consequence of earthquakes “...the majority, if not all, of the statues erected in ceremonial centers toppled...”

On the same page, the authors state: “…or they might experiment with new configurations such as the two kneeling statues at Rano Raraku, for that could have been looked upon as being more stable.” I only know of one kneeling statue, here mentioned by the authors, the moai Tuku Turi. Thanks to the activities of the Norwegian Expedition of 1955-56, we are able to see its details and different characteristics, possibly the evolution of styles in sculptural art between distinct villages. It does not seem very probable that the sculptors of moai abandoned their usual style and techniques and instantly opted for the Tuku Turi style, if the only reason was to obtain more stability for their statues in the face of possible earthquakes.

It is usually recognized that ancient islanders were very productive and that their techniques are to this day considered brilliant, given the available means at their disposal. As stated by the authors, the ancient islanders knew the possibility of earthquakes that could affect the island. But despite this, they always made new moai.

And then the authors theorize that “If the duration of one of these seismic cycles lasted over a period of several years, most probably the activities of statue building in the quarries of Rano Raraku would be abandoned.” In the same manner, we could propose the following theory: in any certain moment, the moai were being carved more rapidly than it was possible to transport them to their respective abu. For this reason, the quantity of moai already carved grew larger at the base of Rano Raraku.

Now, let us consider the known capacity of the ancient Rapanui; it is perfectly reasonable to think that they became aware of the futility of making new statues because so many were already prepared for future use, and it is next to impossible to transport them to their abu.

It could be that the real proof of that was the irremediable loss of the sources of the main material that permitted workers to move the moai, such as the traditional theory of loss of trees necessary to move them to their final destination.

And returning to the hypothesis of stylistic change from traditional to the style of Tuku Turi, there are questions to consider: what is the probable age of Tuku Turi? Was it sculpted in an earlier period than that of the traditional moai? For me, I would like very much to know of more specialized studies.

In another part of the publication, it is mentioned in passing the possibility that the moai in transit to their abu also fell due to earthquake action since these moai actually

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Dear Editor,

I have read the paper by Helene Martinsson-Wallin (RNJ 10:2) with great interest. She collected several interpretations of the eyes of the statues as a certain symbol. I should like to offer my own interpretation of the eye as the sign of the dead and ghosts. Thomas Barthel (1974:298) defined the statues as “figures of the dead ancestors”; on the other hand, the standard form, mata (eye, face) has an ancient variant, matenga (coinciding with Maori matenga “head”), in an oral version of the rongorongo record “Apai” taken down by W.J. Thomson (Rjabchikov 1993:131-33). The word matenga signifies “death” in Rapanui, too. So it is safe to suggest that the moai’s eye as well as the moai itself are symbols of the other world.


Ivan Sergio Berto [Tekena] São Paulo, Brasil

Editor’s note: a second statue with knees was recorded by the University of Chile archaeological survey. It is located on the inside of the quarry, near the lake.


Dear Editor,

There is one theory that I have never read about or heard expressed. Simply stated, the theory is that those moai found some distance from the base of Rano Raraku were not transported there in a “finished” state. Let us assume that the stone carvers and their masters realized that “walking” or pulling a carved moai a long distance over uneven lava-covered terrain would risk breakage and other damage to their freshly completed works of art. For that reason, long blocks of stone were cut out of the side of the volcano and lowered to the volcano’s base. Once at the base of the volcano, stone cutters rounded off the corners of the block until it was perfectly round. The long round cylinder of stone was then rolled to a chosen site, sometimes miles away, where it was carved into the moai form and erected. Any damage sustained by the stone cylinder as it was rolled would be smoothed out and removed as the moai was being carved. Stone rubble from the carving was carefully gathered up and brought back to the volcano and scattered about that area. The statues found at or near the base of Rano Raraku were carved in place on the side of the volcano, cut loose and erected nearby, perhaps as stern guards or other retinue of that special place. It is an interesting theory... and theorizing is fun, isn’t it?

Keep up the good work of publishing interesting articles in RNJ.

R. T. Jones, Jr.
Ponca City, Oklahoma

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