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The Prehistory of Kiritimati (Christmas) Island, Republic of Kiribati. Excavations and Analyses

Atholl Anderson, Helene Martinsson-Wallin and Paul Wallin
The Kon-Tiki Museum Occasional Papers, Volume 6, 2002

Review by Georgia Lee

THE PREHISTORY OF KIRITIMATI (Christmas) ISLAND describes a joint ANU Kon-Tiki Museum project, its background, excavations, and results. Softcover, the book contains 144 pages, numerous plates and drawings, charts and graphs. The four Appendices include a paper by Barry Fankhauser on the sourcing of basalt from Kiritimati; a discussion of the Late Quaternary by Geoffrey Hope; the shellfish collection by Lyn Schmidt; and fossil bird and rat bones by Alan Tennyson.

Kiritimati (Christmas) is one of the northern Line Islands that also includes Palmyra, Washington (or Teraina), Fanning (or Tabuaeron), and Jarvis. These islands have a total area of 371 square kilometers. None were inhabited at the time of European discovery, but more than half of them have some evidence of pre-European settlement and subsequent abandonment.

These islands are not just isolated, but are isolated in "mystery archipelagos" (p. 9). The dominant research questions that arise include from where, when, and by whom had they once been settled? And why were they abandoned? The authors conclude that abandonment probably was caused by a combination of environmental hazards, tenuous horticultural productivity, and unsustainable harvesting of natural resources (p. 11).

The authors describe a nightmare mix-up with some other researchers as well as the Kiritimati authorities (p. 16). The Kon-Tiki Museum and ANU researchers obtained a permit prior to the time that a French group applied to excavate the same sites. However, despite the earlier agreement and their having paid for a research permit, a French group was allowed to come in and excavate on the island before the Kon-Tiki group arrived. As may be imagined, considerable problems resulted. It is to the credit of the authors that their project was able to proceed so ably and it is also of considerable interest to read of the varying conclusions that were reached by these two disparate groups.

One of the most tantalizing parts of this project involves a search for the source of two basalt tools found on the island. Exhaustive scientific tests reveal that they did not originate from any of the quarries or sources currently in the databases, but the closest link appears to be the Hawaiian Islands (p. 99).

Captain James Cook was the first to discover Kiritimati on the 24th of December 1777 (thus "Christmas Island"); later arrivals were shipwrecked crews. In 1913 the island was leased to grow coconuts for the copra trade; and in 1924, Kenneth Emory spent seven days on the island, making an inventory of the archaeology of the island. There seemingly is a lot yet to learn about the Line Islands and, as this book describes, there still remains more mysteries to be solved (p. 86).

This book may be purchased from the Kon-Tiki Museum, Bygdoyesveien 36, 0286 Oslo, Norway.



L'expédition

A novel by Pierrette Fleutiaux

Editions Gallimard, 1999. In French. ISBN 2-07-075567-3

Review by Louise Noel

ANGÈLE LAPÉRIÈRE, A TRAVEL WRITER, organizes an expedition. The goal is to explore Easter Island and, more ambitiously, to solve the "mystery of the world." Any tourist can cover Easter Island from east to west and north to south, but for an explorer the expedition is a goal in itself.

Angèle assembles her team: three women and a man. Angèle's second in command is Delépine, a finicky spinster. Then, there is the biologist Monica Martinière, a pretty woman who is crazy about her body and who "loves men as she does her plants." Finally, Banks, a young accountant, is in charge of supplies and finances.

The novel consists of the diary of Angèle Lapérierre whose great model is the navigator La Pérouse. The burlesque adventures begin even before the voyage does, continue in Chile and then on the island. Another team is already there, a film crew in the process of shooting a movie. The members of the expedition become friends with some islanders, admire the moai, explore lava tubes and volcanic craters, and struggle with Rapanui, a language they cannot fathom.

There is a jumble of picturesque, comical, amorous, and finally, tragic episodes. Only this recovered journal is left. After it has been read, one begins to wonder. Hasn't the author disguised a more serious reflection upon our world, tourism, civilization, women's destiny, relations between the sexes, in short, a metaphysical novel in the guise of a fantasy?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EASTER ISLAND UPDATE FROM DAVID STANLEY

I recently visited Easter Island to update my *South Pacific Handbook* and Rapanuiphiles may find some of the following information useful.

The best US\$2 I spent on the trip was for a 45-page English translation of the Spanish language captions at the Museo Antropológico Sebastián Englert. At Rano Kao I tried to hike around the crater rim, but became unnerved by the sheer cliffs and turned back. It's not something you want to do alone. Rano Raraku has got to be the top sight on the island, though one should be aware of the numerous tour groups that have lunch in a small park next to the ranger's office. If you visit the quarry at any other time of day, you'll probably have it to yourself.

The notorious La Pérouse Bay container port and freezer plant seems to have been shelved. What I did see in that area was a squatter's hut proudly displaying a red-and-white *reimiro* flag just a short distance from Ahu Te Pito Kura. More of the same is visible elsewhere along this coast, and the house next to Ahu Tongariki, depicted in a previous issue of the *Rapa Nui Journal*, is still there. Ahu Akivi is engulfed in agricultural development, and it was sad to observe the seven *moai* staring forlornly at a nearby farmhouse as loud music rolled across the field. It would have been worse to have seen hotels and strip malls going up next to the archaeological sites, but I fear that may come in time.