2005

Stone Statuettes from Easter Island

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Available at: https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/rnj/vol19/iss2/7

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A stone statuette, said to be an “ancient piece” from Easter Island, was for sale recently on eBay. It looked a bit too perfect, too polished. It prompted me to review some small statuettes that I had seen and photographed on the island in 1981 and 1982. While the item on eBay is controversial, I know that those we examined on the island were authentic, having been collected in the field by the Centro de Estudios (University of Chile). These have not been published previously.

This brief paper will also examine a type of petroglyph on Easter Island referred to as “mini-moai,” because they resemble a scaled down version of the statues (Lee 1993:34) and their possible relationship – if any – to the little statuettes.

During my years of research on Easter Island and as part of my rock art documentation project, crew members and I, on a rainy days, photographed, measured, and drew several statuettes in the collection of the Centro de Estudios. Most of the little figures that we examined were found in various archaeological contexts around the island. Invariably they are lumpy and poorly formed (Figure 1). Minimal effort went into making these; some have only a line to indicate a neck; others were carved to resemble small moai. Most have depressions to indicate eyes (Figures 2 and 3).

Some of the statuettes resemble the petroglyphs that we subsequently discovered and dubbed “mini-moai,” (see below), however, the examples in the Centro de Estudios were carved from “found rocks.” Many are of basalt, some of Rano Raraku tuff, and a few are carved from pieces of red scoria.

The little statuettes from the Centro de Estudios are similar to small stone figures or heads that were found in the ahu fill at Ahu Akivi by William Mulloy and Gonzalo Figueroa.
Figure 7. “Mini-moai” from O’one on the south coast of Easter Island. Pecked straight lines are often associated (Lee 1992: Fig. 4:15, 2).

In contrast to the little statuettes, we discovered and documented petroglyphs that we call “mini-moai” (Lee 1992). These small moai figures had not been recognized in the past, although Lavachery (1939) sketched some of them at Rano Raraku. He wrote, “It seems to me that we are not dealing with petroglyphs, in the true sense of the word, but, rather, with graffiti” (ibid.:57).

Mini moai are usually found on basalt outcrops, and often in association with other motifs. They are legless but may have arms shown. Eyes are often carved and facial features may be indicated (Figure 5). A neckline is common, as is the navel. They often occur in clusters, side by side or head to head (Figure 6), and some are associated with straight pecked lines (Figure 7). We documented 117 of these small figures on the island, ranging in size from 15 cm to 90 cm. Most are made by simple pecked outline, but a few are carved in bas relief (Lee 1992: Figures 4.15 and 4.17) (Figure 8). Because they are faint and were of the Rapanui.

Heyerdahl (1976: Plate 157) illustrates many small stone statuettes that were collected by various visitors to the island, some from very early dates, such as Geiseler in 1882 (Ayres and Ayres 1995), and the visit of the La Flore in 1872 (Altman 2004). Called “crude imitations of the unfinished statues below the quarries...” these are close to the examples found by Mulloy and Figueroa. Another carving collected by Geiseler from a stone house at ‘Orongo is shown in Forment (1990:277, Plate 95). Geiseler’s example is, however, at 40 cm, outside the size range for those we are discussing here. Forment (ibid: Figures 206-208) illustrates three others that she calls “busts”; again, two of them are larger than the figures at the Centro de Estudios.

Might the small and minimally-carved stone statuettes in the collection of the Centro have been some kind of offering to the dead? The fact that similar examples were recovered from the crematorium at Akivi indicates that they might have served that purpose. They are simply and crudely made and perhaps were intended for just such a transitory purpose. Once deposited, they no longer were of any significant value. If they were intended as offerings in crematoria or elsewhere, such as ahu fill, perhaps there was no necessity for fine carving and elegant details, typical of most of the artistic output of the Rapanui.
carved to accommodate natural contours of the rock, it is very easy to overlook them. For that reason, we expect that more of these will be found in the future.

It is important to note that these petroglyphs were not small statues “in the process” of being carved. Because of the method of carving, that is, an outline pecked into rock surfaces, it is clear that they were not intended to be removed from the matrix of the rock. Some of these figures were obviously made at a later phase in the island’s history because we also found them carved on the side of an unfinished statue at Rano Raraku (Lee 1992: Figure 4:19), and on an abandoned red scoria statue head near the site of Tahai.

The small statues have some context in that many of them are associated with burials or crematorium, but the mini-moai are fixed in place. There is no ethnographic material that gives any indication of their function. They are, however, often associated with other petroglyphs, as part of a larger collection of designs. At Ava o Kiri, they are found amongst octopus and fish motifs; at Ahu Ra’ai, they are associated with tuna and shark. They are located in all parts of the island, as well as on Motu Nui. Yet another “mystery” of Easter Island!

But to return to the finely carved and proportioned statue offered on eBay, it appeared to me to be recent because it is so beautifully carved, so symmetrical, a miniature model of a finished Easter Island statue. It looks too good to be true and, when compared to the verified examples, I have to assume it to be a modern piece being offered up to the unwary as an antique.

REFERENCES