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From the Editors

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FROM THE EDITORS

IN BOTH CONTEMPORARY POPULAR and scientific debates, it is evident that, for a long time, Rapa Nui has been viewed as an island of conflict, contradiction, and ruination. Intense competition amongst chiefs in the late society is obvious in the manufacture of huge *ahu* and *moai* statues. This rivalry resulted in open conflicts and destruction that are exceptional when compared to other Polynesia societies, as well as on a global scale. Internal conflicts and disruption are not unique to Rapa Nui society but, because the island is small, isolated, and contains stone monuments on a megalithic scale, radical social changes can be seen clearly.

A focus on destruction has overshadowed a basic fact: that the Rapa Nui society – despite the past dramatic environmental and social changes – not only has survived but is today in a dynamic place.

General views about Rapa Nui in the media are often fragmentary and may be quite ignorant of the facts. We have heard statements that “Rapa Nui is a tropical island located not far from Haiti, and that nobody knows about the antiquity nor where the gigantic statues come from”... but still there is a great interest in this geographically-isolated small piece of land and, surprisingly, many individuals do have good general knowledge about the island and its location.

In the scientific community, by contrast, contemporary conflicting ideas on the past of Rapa Nui have reached a rather refined level. Current issues under debate are of great significance as to how we should interpret the entire prehistoric sequence, as well as the ancient migration patterns in the eastern Pacific area. When exactly did people arrive to the island, did the society develop in total isolation, and what impact did humans (and rats?) have in the fundamental changes to the landscape? These questions have been pondered upon for many decades and still we haven't reached a definite solution. During the last fifty years, there has been much research done on this fascinating place and what we find equally fascinating is that the scientific discussions still continue. Clearly, there remain exciting issues to be solved, old theories to be tested by new methods and theoretical approaches, and new excavations to be done.

Of course, the gigantic *moai* continue to be the greatest mystery of Rapa Nui. We know how they were manufactured, for the most part, but how were they transported? How were the topknots placed on the heads of the statues? And another continuing mystery is the origin of the islanders themselves. From whence did they come?

We therefore welcome the debating paper by John Flenley and Paul Bahn that discusses new chronological and natural-historical results by Hunt and Lipo, who have published in *Science* (2006a) and *American Science* (2006b). Two main statements of Hunt and Lipo are that the island was settled as late as AD 1200 and that the Polynesian rat was instrumental to the deforestation of the island. Flenley and Bahn discuss Hunt and Lipo's hypotheses and, as they point out, these need to be further examined. We

hope that the paper by Flenley and Bahn will trigger more debate on these issues, both at the upcoming conference on Easter Island and the Pacific at Gotland, Sweden, in August, and in subsequent issues of *RNJ*.

An old theme for *Rapa Nui Journal* concerns *rongorongo* tablets and their inscriptions. In this issue, two papers deal with the tablets from very different approaches. Catherine Orliac's paper, “Botanical identification of the wood of the large *kohau rongorongo* tablet of St. Petersburg” provides interesting results from her identification of the wood from which the tablets were made. Paul Horley analyzes the structure of the “text” in his contribution.

Archaeologist David Addison continues his ethno-historic study of “Cultivation and processing of specific agricultural products,” Part II of IV, an amazingly in-depth study of Marquesan agriculture as described by early visitors to those islands.

On contemporary issues, Laura Jean Boyd, contributes a paper concerning her film about veterinarian Jon Artz's work with horses on the island, *Caballo Loco on Easter Island*. Boyd's graduate thesis project from Montana State University, her effort won best student film at the American Conservation Film Festival and will be featured on National Geographic's *Wild Chronicles*.

And, Rapanuiphile Ben Baldanza sent us a paper on games that use Rapa Nui as their focus, a phenomenon that had previously gone unnoticed by our staff and proves the old adage that nothing is sacred.

W. A. Powell's report of his visit to Easter Island is our “Look Back” feature. Powell, who was on the HMS *Topaze* when it visited Easter Island, describes some of his adventures in the *London Times* for January 1869. Some of the text in this article was subsequently incorporated into his 1899 article published in the *Royal Geographical Society of Australasia*. Powell's article is here annotated by Shawn McLaughlin.

This issue of *RNJ* contains several important reviews. Scott Nicolay both reviews and discusses two papers that have appeared elsewhere, and deals with the current “hot” topics in Polynesian studies; Nicolay also contributes a review of an interesting new periodical, *Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology*.

Finally we hope that *RNJ* will continue to be a forum for contemporary debates on Rapa Nui prehistory, and we welcome papers that consider the controversies visible in the past as well as in the present.

Paul Wallin and Helene Martinsson-Wallin
Chief Editors

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Hunt, T.L. and C.P. Lipo. 2006b. Rethinking the fall of Easter Island. New evidence points to an alternative explanation for a civilization's collapse. *American Scientist* 94:5, 412-419.