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## Getting to Know You: Michel Orliac

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## GETTING TO KNOW YOU

### Michel Orliac

*Q. How did you get into archaeology, and specifically Easter Island archaeology? What triggered your interest?*

A. I was passionately interested in palaeontology, geology and archaeology when I was 14 – 15; my profession of archaeologist in the employ of the CNRS began in 1962, and has led me every year since 1976 to French Tahiti/ Marquesas/ Gambiers, where the relationship between man and nature has always been at the centre of my work. When I went to Easter Island in 1988, it was to verify whether, contrary to what people said, there was carbonized wood on this treeless island: I found it everywhere, in natural sections and in road-trenches. My wife Catie and I had been working on this topic for ten years in Tahiti; so we immediately wanted to know what this woody material was, and what their history on Rapa Nui had been. But it was six years before we found the necessary funds for our first campaign.

*Q. Who or what do you consider as your most significant influence (scientific or otherwise) either as a person or a particular work (or series of works)?*

A. Franck Bourdier, my first boss, a Quaternary geologist, with whom I spent five months per year (for ten years) in the field; but especially the atmosphere of great culture, freedom and inventiveness that reigned in the team led by Professor Andre Leroi-Gourhan, which I joined in 1972. Finally, the work done with Catie for almost thirty years.

*Q. What theory or project of yours turned out to be different from what you had expected as, for example, a complete surprise?*

A. In 1977, at Tahiti in the Papeno'o valley, the observation that the effects of natural catastrophes were infinitely more destructive to the environment than the work of man.

*Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?*

A. Couturier (creating clothing fashions) or treasure-hunter.

*Q. What was your best Eureka moment?*

A. In 1973, at the reindeer-hunter site of Pincevent, in France, when I discovered the method that made it possible

to read its stratigraphy. In 1997 when, after having produced with Catie the diagram of charcoal from 'Orongo, we realized unequivocally that the woods used as fuel were replaced, after 1650, there as elsewhere, by grasses.

*Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in archaeology) on Easter Island in the future?*

A. With Catie, to achieve a considerable improvement in knowledge of the plant biodiversity of Rapa Nui before the disappearance of the trees and shrubs. I would also like to try to study many of the *moai* in their stratigraphic deposits at Rano Raraku to understand their chronology; I feel that the experience I have acquired in micro-stratigraphy would enable me to do this.

*Q. What is your favorite Easter Island site and why?*

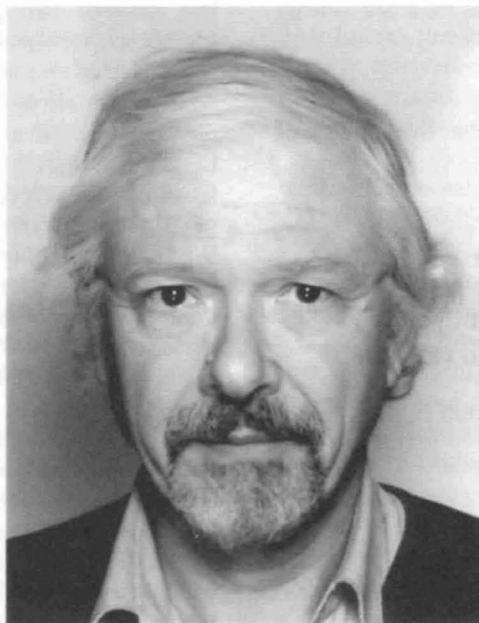
A. Ahu Te Peu; in my view, this site perched at the top of a cliff has links – more than other sites – with the homage paid to the great ancestors, and also stronger links with wooden statuary. Te Peu could have been, at least temporarily, one of the island's great sanctuaries.

*Q. What myth or misinformation about Easter Island would you like to dispel?*

A. Everything that can be classed a pre-established models or ready-made formulas. For example, the inevitable invocation of overpopulation (in full sail, the Polynesians flee these problems before they come about), or that the Polynesians cut all their trees and even their shrubs (whereas we do not yet know the extent of diversity of these woody species or the rate of their disappearance!), and finally that Rapanui culture underwent a phase of "decadence". There was never any before 1870; afterwards, it was a demographic haemorrhage.

*Q. What's the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Easter Island?*

A. The extraordinary maritime and horticultural genius of the Rapanui, those extreme-Polynesians: even without its gigantic productions, the population of this island can astonish the whole world because 1°) it reached the end of the world, 2°) it settled there, 3°) it prospered there, and finally 4°) it overcame several demographic and cultural cataclysms, some caused by nature, others by the malice of men: despite all these dramas, the Rapanui identity is full of vigour today, an optimistic model for the future of our planet.



*Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Easter Island archaeology or anthropology (or these fields generally)?*

A. Never believe what you read, or even what I write. Keep your imagination and your critical senses intact. But above all, always place every fact into its context, as far as is possible

*Q. What are you currently reading?*

A. Anything that comes within sight. Especially pictures. Anything on African art, the history of archaeology, the history of voyaging, the global circulation of trade objects: clay pipe, beads, flintstone, etc – all the insignificant and indispensable things that join humans together. But no novels since I was twenty.

*Q. Date and place of birth?*

A. 3 September 1944 at Montrouge in the suburbs of Paris, France.

## REVIEWS

### “The Dynamics of Soil, Landscape, and Culture on Easter Island (Chile)”

by Andreas Mieth and Hans-Rudolf Bork

in

*Soils and Societies: Perspectives from Environmental History.*

J. R. McNeill and Verena Winiwarter, eds.  
White Horse Press (2006); ISBN 1-874267-52-9.  
Hard cover (369 pages); \$95 from Amazon.com

*Review of Chapter 10 by Shawn McLaughlin*

This book covers a lot of territory, from the general subject of soil itself to its nutrient value, from its exploitation in various places around the world to, of course, human interaction with the stuff that mudpies are made of and it reveals how populations either rise or fall because of agricultural savvy in applying what we've learned about a substance we've been walking on over the centuries. The book combines geomorphology, archaeology, pedology, and history; its geographical spread includes Mesoamerica, Africa, Europe, Australia, India, and Easter Island. It reveals ways in which soils and their properties and histories have influenced human relationships in different parts of the world.

There are 11 chapters (listed at the end of this review) along with biographical notes on the editors and authors, a fairly comprehensive index, plus references appear at the end of each chapter. Interspersed here and there are a few tables and black and white line drawings and photos, but the paper stock is fairly coarse and the halftones used aren't

very fine, so the resolution is mediocre at best.

Because of space constraints, and because the focus of the *Rapa Nui Journal* is Easter Island specifically, and Oceania generally, this review is really about Chapter 10 – “The Dynamics of Soil, Landscape and Culture on Easter Island (Chile)” by Andreas Mieth and Hans-Rudolf Bork, whose names should by now be familiar to Rapanuiphiles and Easter Island researchers. However, the emphasis on Chapter 10 should in no way be considered a negative reflection on the content or merit of the other chapters.

Described as “a delight for the soil aficionado” by Camilla Toulmin in *Nature* (2006), *Soils and Societies* is about why dirt, dust, sand, mud, and all the other terms we use, some of them pejoratively, are vital to the survival of the human race and this is perhaps no more true than on Easter Island. So soil is the foundation (no pun intended) upon which all civilization depends. Fans of James Bond novels and films may recall that he can tell the quality of the wine he's drinking on the basis of the quality of the soil in which the grapes were grown and yet, despite esoteric popular media references such as this, since contemporary Western metropolitan societies tend to be especially isolated from farming practices and the importance of soil<sup>1</sup>, this book is useful for developing an understanding of how humans have survived because of our knowledge and cultivation of soil itself. The renaissance of “organic” food has also meant a return to the kind of knowledge farmers need to properly exploit the landscape to better serve the growing needs of a world population that has now reached 6 billion and is projected to reach 9 billion by 2042.

There's no shortage of research to account for how humans have changed their environment and the soils upon which they've lived, from the once heavily forested areas surrounding the now largely barren landscape of Stonehenge (North 1996; Castleden 1998) to the Four Corners of the American Southwest where we know the Anasazi were responsible for not only deforestation but for re-routing water systems that some say may have exacerbated drought conditions that forced them to abandon the area (Thomas 2000; Plog 1997) to, of course, Easter Island's deforestation and all the controversies surrounding it – where, rather than largely rats alone or El Niño/Southern Oscillation or Little Ice Age phenomenon, it was likely a constellation of factors – including human behavior – that denuded the landscape, eroded the soil, and crippled the land (Hunt and Lipo 2007; Bahn and Flenley 1992; Flenley and Bahn 2003; Diamond 2005; Stevenson and Haoa 1999).

So where do Mieth and Bork take us in Chapter 10? It is difficult to disassociate this chapter with their very fine volume *Easter Island - Rapa Nui: Scientific Pathways to Secrets of the Past* and this is probably no accident because so much of the latter is devoted to the soil properties of Easter Island. So it should come as no surprise to find similarities. This is relevant only in so far as I'm reviewing a

<sup>1</sup> How many people, for example, realize the existence or purpose, let alone importance, of crop rotation to counteract the buildup of pathogens and pests and to balance fertility demands of various crops to avoid excessive depletion of nutrients like nitrogen?