

4. An Anatomy of the Prehistoric Rapa Nui Cultural Collapse. Charles M. Love, Univ. of Wyoming

Abstract

William Mulloy (1965) speculated that Easter Island and its people had undergone an ecological catastrophe of their own making. Though he did not know when it happened he believed that the island originally had some form of native forest cover, that the prehistoric Islanders had used up that timber in both the development of their culture and in the moving of their statues, and that once deforestation had occurred, the soils became leached and depleted by subtropical rainfall and erosion. This reduced the human carrying capacity of the island and the stress caused the cooperative and well organized society to disintegrate into war-faring districts. The moai were progressively toppled and classic ahu were torn apart or recycled into the smaller semipyramidal ahu, as well as other structures. The time of destruction, warfare, and cannibalism prevailed until Europeans discovered the island. Only the ceremonial village of Orongo seems new.

Several lines of evidence now support a two stage prehistoric cultural collapse. The evidence comes from the statue quarry at Rano Raraku, the roadways leading from it, and two types or patterns of ahu recycling and construction.

The first stage seems to have lasted no longer than a generation or two, perhaps 50 years, during which the Islanders themselves knew they were in short supply of resources, in particular, trees. The traditional culture tenuously held on to the previous habits but knew they were going to have to prepare for a new order. Culturally unable to reforest, priorities redefined statue form, statue moving, ahu construction, and disposal of the dead. At least two major ahu illustrate large scale cooperation in their new constructions though the workmanship is very poor and incomplete. Several others show a similar reduction in workmanship but maintain large scale cooperation. The second stage seems characterized by a free-fall collapse in cultural organization, dominated by conflict, the formation of discrete districts, territorial to the family level, warfare, and ultimately cannibalism. It is proposed that this change reduced population to a level commensurate with the carrying capacity of the defoliated island, slowly leaching and eroding soils. Small family-built semipyramidal ahu became the norm and multiple whole body burials were inserted. The Tangatamanu cult resulted from the cultural need for a time of truce, an annual temporary escape from what may have been the constant threat of revenge warfare.

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Resumen

En 1965 William Mulloy especulaba que la población de Isla de Pascua fue protagonista de una catástrofe ambiental creada por ellos mismos. Si bien no sabía cuando había sucedido, pensaba que la isla tendría que haber sustentado algún tipo de bosque, que los isleños lo habían agotado al desarrollar su cultura y por el transporte de moai. Pensaba que una vez iniciada la deforestación los suelos empezaron a lavarse como consecuencia de las lluvias subtropicales y la erosión. La reducción de la capacidad de carga humana de la isla, llevó al derrumbe de una sociedad altamente organizada, dividiéndose en varios distritos que se enfrentaron en continuos guerras, con la consiguiente destrucción de ahu y moai, que fueron luego reciclados y convertidos en estructuras más pequeñas. Este proceso de destrucción estaba en pleno a la llegada de los europeos. La aldea de Orongo parecía ser la única construcción nueva.

Al parecer, la primera etapa sólo habría durado unos 50 años. Al no poder controlar los procesos erosivos y la deforestación, las nuevas prioridades obligaron a redefinir las formas de las estatuas, su modalidad de transporte, construcción de ahu y de entierros. Hay al menos dos grandes ahu que muestran trabajo cooperativo a gran escala, sin embargo, su calidad es pobre y están incompletos. Hay otros ahu, cuya construcción es testigo de trabajos cooperativos de gran escala.

La segunda etapa pareciera estar caracterizada por un quiebre en la organización cultural, dominada por el conflicto, y la formación de distritos discretos, una división territorial posiblemente a nivel familiar, y presencia de canibalismo. Proponemos que esta población se redujo a niveles acordes con la capacidad de carga de los suelos erosionados y desgastados. El culto del tangata manu fue el resultado de una necesidad cultural, de un cese de la agresividad, un escape temporal de probables constantes amenazas y ataques guerreros.