

Huyge et al.: The Ahu O Rongo Project  
THE AHU O RONGO PROJECT:  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON RAPA NUI

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## INTRODUCTION

SCIENTIFIC LINKS BETWEEN RAPA NUI and the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels (RMAH) were established in 1934-1935 on the occasion of the Franco-Belgian Expedition. This expedition, one of the first large-scale scientific enterprises on Easter Island, lasted for five months and was directed by the Swiss ethnographer Alfred Métraux and the Belgian archaeologist Henri Lavachery, associate curator at the RMAH (Lavachery 1935; Forment 1985, 1990). As a result of this expedition an important collection of Easter Island ethnographic and archaeological artifacts was shipped to Europe and divided principally among the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris and the RMAH in Brussels. The latter museum obtained, among a wealth of other objects, an archaic-looking colossal anthropomorphic sculpture, almost 3 m high and weighing about 6 tons. It is one of the very few *moai* that have ever been taken from the island.

## POU HAKANONONGA AND AHU O RONGO

The *moai* on display in the RMAH (Figure 1) is made from hard benmoreite, which is exceptional in itself as the near-totality of Easter Island statues were carved in tuff from Rano Raraku's volcano (Royer 1993:202-3). It represents the deity of tuna fishermen, Pou Hakanononga (at least, that is the meaning attached to it by local informants in post-contact times; see Lavachery 1938; Forment 1983). The statue, which is bulky and with round contours instead of the much more common 'classic' angular shape, is particularly interesting because it is believed by some to be one of the most ancient examples of its kind. Heyerdahl (1975:154-5), in his book *The Art of Easter Island*, has tentatively suggested an attribution to the Early Period of Rapanui culture between about AD 400-1100).

The site from which the Brussels statue was removed is called 'Ahu o Rongo' (listed as 'Ahu Rongo' in Martinsson-Wallin 1994). Ahu o Rongo is a large ceremonial center on the southwest coast of Easter Island (Figure 2). Despite the accessibility of the place, on the northern outskirts of the town of Hanga Roa, surprisingly little research has been done there (Huyge et al. 1999). A 'classical' statue from this location in Rano Raraku tuff (or rather the cut off head from a statue) was already taken in 1872 by de Lapelin's French expedition. It is currently on display in the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris. Apart from removing Pou Hakanononga, no further archaeological work was done at Ahu o Rongo by the Franco-Belgian mission of 1934-1935. The exposed remains of the ceremonial center were accurately mapped in 1980 on a scale of 1:200 (as part of



Figure 1. *Moai* Pou Hakanononga from Ahu o Rongo in the collections of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels (height: 2.73 m).

a larger *ahu* mapping project) by Charles M. Love of Western Wyoming College, Rock Springs, Wyoming (Love 1993). Professor Love kindly put his unpublished color-coded architectural map (Figure 3) and the accompanying field notes at our disposal. A single 2 by 1 m test unit was excavated in 1995 in the northern part of the site by another North American researcher, Christopher M. Stevenson. Subsequent dating of ob-

sidian artifacts has indicated that construction work at Ahu o Rongo may already have been going on sometime within the AD 1000 to AD 1200 range (Stevenson et al. 2000). This age is in agreement with the suggested early date for the Brussels Pou Hakanononga statue, but it is, of course, entirely uncertain whether or not there is any temporal relationship between the dated artifacts and the *moai*.

### THE AHU O RONGO PROJECT

Following a preliminary survey of the site in November 1999 (Huyge et al. 1999), excavations were carried out at Ahu o Rongo in March 2001 with the financial support of the National Geographic Society (Washington, DC). Our principal objective was the investigation of the southern sector of the site. It was from this sector that *moai* Pou Hakanononga was removed by the Franco-Belgian Expedition in 1934-1935. As absolutely nothing was known about the archaeological context of the *moai*, we were especially eager to find out whether the statue's original location was disassociated from or spatially (architecturally) linked to the substantial *ahu* remains immediately to the north. Another important aim of the mission was the detailed topographic mapping of the exposed remains at the Ahu o Rongo site on a scale of 1:200. Both objectives were accomplished.

The excavations in March 2001 were organized around the location where the statue was taken. This location was still visible in the field as a slight elevation into which a horseshoe-shaped trench had been cut (no doubt resulting from digging around the statue in order to expose it) (Figures 3 and 4). In order to reconstruct the sequence of events, several stratigraphic trenches were cut down to the original ground surface at various locations.



Figure 3. View of the location where Pou Hakanononga was found and taken by the Franco-Belgian Expedition in 1934-1935 (photographed in November 1999).

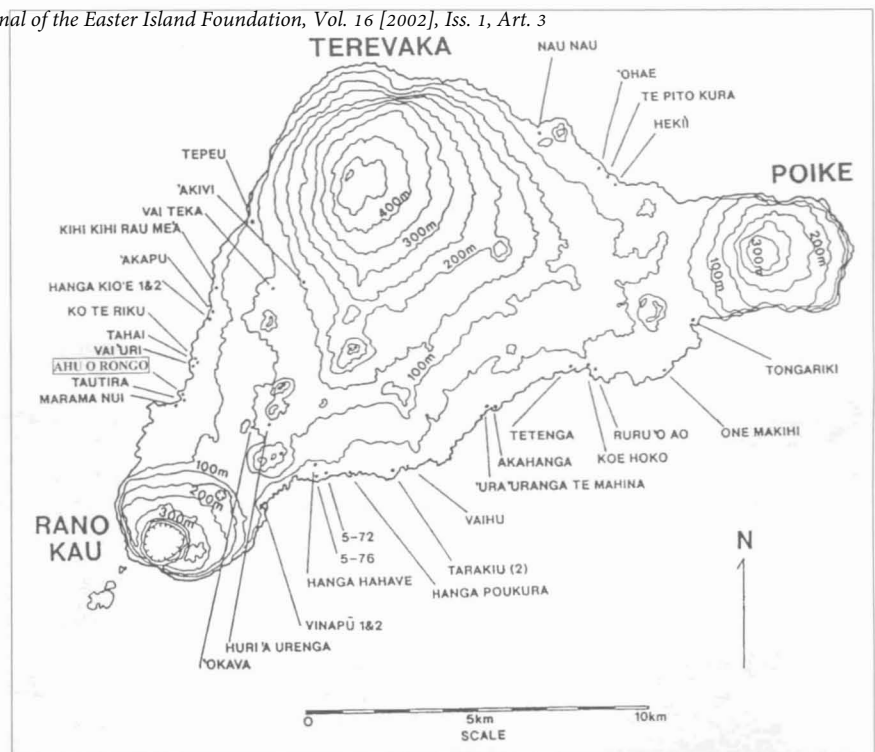


Figure 2. Map of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), showing the location of Ahu o Rongo (adapted after Love 1993:Fig.70a).

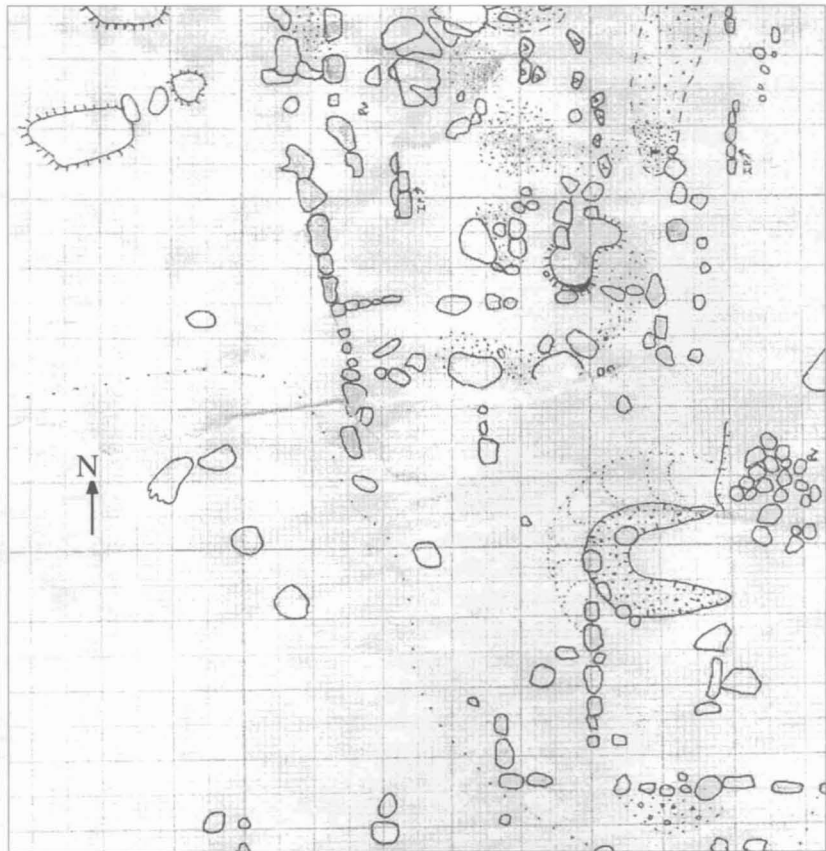


Figure 4. Southern sector of Ahu o Rongo as mapped by C. M. Love in 1980. The location where Pou Hakanononga was found is indicated by the horseshoe-shaped trench above (reproduced with the permission of Charles M. Love).

## ARCHITECTURAL SEQUENCE

Two construction phases could be distinguished at Ahu o Rongo on the basis of the archaeological remains found (Figure 5). Superficial cleaning of the area exposed the ruined remains of a southern wing extension of the 'classical' Ahu o Rongo (henceforth called 'Ahu II'). Apart from the stone filling of this *ahu* wing and its southern delimitation wall, a substantial part of the sea-side wall (about 4 m long) could be recovered. Buried below this Ahu II wing are the remains of an older and larger stone platform (henceforth called 'Ahu I') (Figure 6). The southern Ahu II wing wall and the southern Ahu I wall coincide, the former having been constructed on top of the latter. The western walls of both structures, however, are clearly apart, the sea-side wall of Ahu I being situated about 3 m more to the west.

It appears that the original stone platform in the southern sector of Ahu o Rongo was more or less square, about 10.5 by 10 m square, and (partly?) paved with sea cobbles (*poro*), several of which were still found *in situ* (Figure 7). This Ahu I platform is almost certainly the structure on which the *moai* Pou Hakanononga was erected. The exposed south and west (seaside) walls are constructed of rough masonry (unhewn stone blocks), but nevertheless clearly identifiable and at a right angle to one another. Unfortunately, no traces have been recovered thus far of the north and east (landward) walls, but we believe to have exposed the northwest corner-stone of the structure.

As a preliminary conclusion, we suggest that the *moai* Pou Hakanononga was originally installed on a single-image platform (Ahu I), which was clearly disassociated, both chronologically and spatially, from the 'classical' *ahu* remains (Ahu II) immediately to the north. Subsequently Ahu I was partly buried under the southern



Figure 5. Southern sector of Ahu o Rongo. General plan of the March 2001 excavations: 1: Ahu I walls; 2: Ahu I platform pavement cobbles (*poro*); 3: indurated surface initially covered by Ahu I pavement; 4: trench dug to remove the *moai* in 1934-1935; 5: 'cremation' area; 6: 'cremation' area with human bone; 7: Ahu II walls; 8: Ahu II stone filling; 9: displaced stones of *ahu* walls; 10: bedrock outcrop (drawing F. Roloux).

wing extension of Ahu II. We cannot reconstruct the original height of this wing, but it seems probable that the Brussels *moai* was overthrown and completely buried in the stone filling of the Ahu II wing. A huge amount of stone blocks must have been removed from this area in historical times for building purposes, amongst others for the construction of the harbor (*caleta*), which led to the re-exposure of the statue and its subsequent removal by the Franco-Belgian mission in 1934-1935.

#### THE 'CREMATION' AREA

On the seaward side of Ahu I (west of the *ahu*), an annex linear structure was found, also constructed of unhewn stone blocks (Figure 5). Within the area delimited by this alignment and the seaside wall of Ahu I large amounts of charcoal and a considerable quantity of human bone were found. Most of the human remains were burned and reduced to small fragments; several, however, did not show any traces of fire. It seems likely that this location was used as a final depository for human remains that had been charred and/or exposed previously elsewhere. The analysis of the human remains is currently being under-

taken by C. Polet of the Laboratory of Anthropology of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (Brussels). According to the first results, a minimum of three to four individuals is represented, including at least one child. The well-preserved charcoal from this area is being studied by C. Orliac of the *Laboratoire Ethnobiologie-biogéographie* of the *Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle* (Paris, France).

#### CHRONOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Three radiocarbon dates on charcoal and one obsidian hydration date are currently available for the archaeological features investigated in March 2001. They are listed in Table 1 (calibration using *OxCal Version 3.4*; Stuiver *et al.* 1998; Southern hemisphere correction of -30 years prior to calibration).

Charred wood fragments from the 'cremation' area associated with Ahu I (AoR 23) and charcoal found immediately below some of the stone blocks, constituting the southern wing extension of Ahu II (AoR 30) and the south wall of Ahu I (AoR 51), have been dated. According to the results, which are remarkably similar for the three samples, Ahu I and the 'cremation' area are definitely associated and were in use during the later part of the 13<sup>th</sup> and/or the 14<sup>th</sup> century cal AD. The date of cal AD 1425 on an obsidian flake found immediately below the Ahu II south wing and above the Ahu I *poro* pavement is possibly valid as a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the 'classical' Ahu II wing. It may have been built shortly after the early part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century or later.

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS AND PETROGLYPHS

The numerous archaeological finds recovered from the *ahu* fill (several thousand obsidian artifacts and dozens of basalt axes of unknown age) have been deposited in the *Museo Antropológico P. Sebastián Englert* on Easter Island. Mention should be made of the fact that one of the large stone blocks of *hawaite* in the middle of the southern Ahu I wall is

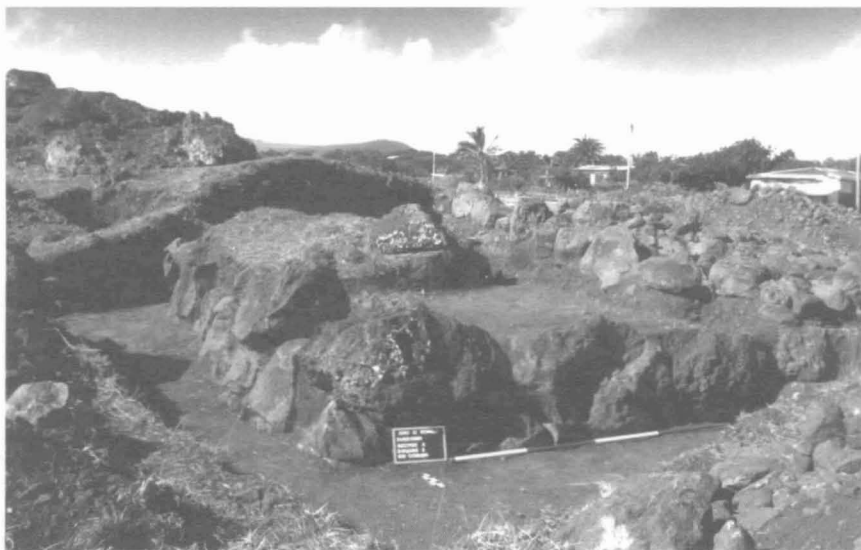


Figure 6. Southwest corner of Ahu I. Above it, about 3 m more to the rear, is the seaward wall and stone filling of the Ahu II southern wing extension.



Figure 7. Top surface of Ahu I. On the right and left some cobbles (*poro*) can be seen, which are all that remains of the original Ahu I platform pavement. On top of Ahu I is the filling of the Ahu II southern wing extension.



decorated with numerous finely incised designs (Figure 8; location indicated on Figure 5). Several of the petroglyphs seem to represent marine fauna. A whale and a dolphin (both rare designs in Easter Island rock art) can be identified with certainty. Incising is not a common method of making rock art on the island. The Ahu o Rongo petroglyph panel is 'stylistically similar' to an incised panel from the nearby site of Hanga Piko, featuring curvilinear designs and, possibly, a tree and other plant forms (Lee 1992:120-1, Fig. 4.125; 2001:Fig. 18.11). The petroglyph stone currently remains at the site and has been reburied. The petroglyphs have been covered by protective rubber mats. Whether or not these rock drawings are to be correlated with the earlier phase of the *ahu* is, of course, difficult to know.

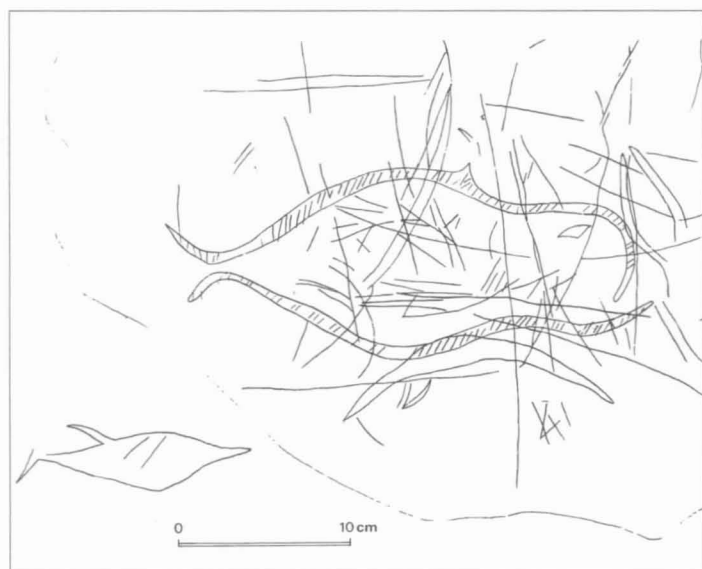


Figure 8. Detail of the finely incised petroglyphs (including a whale and a dolphin) on a stone hawaiite block in the southern wall of Ahu I.

## CONCLUSION

Ahu I at Ahu o Rongo, partly buried below the southern wing extension of the 'classical' Ahu II, is a megalithic structure of a type unequalled on Easter Island. Its walls have been constructed using large untrimmed stone blocks and the terrace, more square than rectangular, was originally (partly?) paved with large cobbles. Moai Pou Hakanonoga seems definitely associated with the Ahu I phase. We therefore believe the Brussels statue dates from the later part of the 13<sup>th</sup> or the 14<sup>th</sup> century cal AD. At the time of the Franco-Belgian expedition it was found lying face down and – in conformity with most other statues on Easter Island – most probably faced inland (east)

Table 1. Chronometric Dates from Ahu o Rongo

| Provenance of sample                     | Lab no.    | BP  | S.D. | cal AD            |
|------------------------------------------|------------|-----|------|-------------------|
| <b>Radiocarbon dates</b>                 |            |     |      |                   |
| AoR 23 (charcoal 'cremation' area Ahu I) | GrN-26318  | 715 | 35   | 1270 (95.4%) 1400 |
| AoR 30 (charcoal between Ahu I and II)   | GrA-18378  | 655 | 30   | 1290 (95.4%) 1410 |
| AoR 51 (charcoal below south wall Ahu I) | GrA-18380  | 655 | 35   | 1290 (95.4%) 1410 |
| <b>Obsidian hydration date</b>           |            |     |      |                   |
| AoR 11 (flake between Ahu I and II)      | DL-2001-88 | 525 | 67   | 1425              |

when erect. It cannot, however, be excluded that the statue faced south. The presence of the unique petroglyph in the center of the southern wall of the Ahu I platform, in a possible alignment with the *moai*, could be suggestive in this respect (if indeed the drawings belong to the Ahu I phase). Small-scale test excavations by Stevenson et al. (2000) at the Rapa Nui Playground, immediately south of the site, have revealed the presence of prehistoric remains. Five obsidian artifacts were dated. The dates formed a tight cluster that ranged from AD 1284 to AD 1394. This dating range coincides perfectly with the dates obtained for Ahu I. Whether or not these artifacts indicate the location of a settlement area is of course largely uncertain.

It is still a matter of dispute when Easter Island was first settled (Bahn 1993). The earliest reliably dated settlement activity on the island has been found below Ahu Nau Nau I on the north coast and appears to be from AD 800-1000 (Skjølsvold 1994:105-7). Likewise, uncertainty remains as regards the initial phase of ceremonial megalithic architecture on the island. Early dates allegedly related to *ahu* architecture have been obtained at Tahai I (1260 ± 130 BP) and Vinapu II (1100 ± 200 BP). However, these dates are considerably earlier than that of any other Easter Island *ahu* and must be regarded as being insecure. They may as well relate to early habitation in the area preceding any megalithic construction activity (Skjølsvold 1993; Martinsson-Wallin 1994: 77-83). On the basis of the available radiocarbon and obsidian hydration dates and on the basis of their own findings at 'Anakena and in the La Pérouse area, Martinsson-Wallin and Wallin (2000) have recently concluded that the building of ceremonial structures on Rapa Nui started around AD 1000-1100 with an expansion phase from AD 1300-1600. The ages obtained for Ahu o Rongo indicate that Ahu I is to be situated at the very beginning of this extensive building episode.

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