

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION AT VINAPU (RAPA NUI)

by Helene Martinsson-Wallin

The Kon-Tiki Museum Institute for Pacific Archaeology and Cultural History

An archaeological excavation was carried out at Vinapu, Rapa Nui, from the 25th of February to the 16th of March, 2002. The excavations focused on issues related to the temporal status and cultural context of early settlement on the island. This project was carried out as a continuation of my longstanding research concerning early settlement and ceremonial sites on Rapa Nui (Martinsson-Wallin 1994, 1998, 2000, 2001, Martinsson-Wallin and Wallin 1994, 1999, 2000, Martinsson-Wallin and Crockford 2002.) The Vinapu research is within the framework of my project "Cultural Identity on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) – the Longtime Perspective", which is included in a multi-disciplinary project embracing researchers in archaeology, linguistics and social anthropology from The Kon-Tiki Museum Institute, The University of Oslo, and The Museum of Cultural Heritage in Oslo. The Norwegian Research Counsel supports the overall project, but the excavation at Vinapu was financed by the Kon-Tiki Museum.

The excavation was located in sector Vinapu close to the ceremonial sites known as Vinapu 1 (Tahira) and Vinapu 2. Dr. William Mulloy conducted archaeological investigations here during Thor Heyerdahl's expedition to Rapa Nui in 1955-56 (Mulloy 1961:93-180). Arne Skjølsvold and Gonzalo Figueroa also carried out excavations at Vinapu 2 in 1982 (Arne Skjølsvold, personal comm.) Results from Mulloy's excavations indicated a conventional age of Vinapu 2 to 1100±200 BP (M-710) and a calibrated 2 sigma range to AD 550-1300. This date is one of the few indications of cultural activities on Rapa Nui, which might date prior to AD 800 (Skjølsvold 1994:113-114, Martinsson-Wallin 1994:83-84, Martinsson-Wallin and Crockford 2002: 245-254). The charcoal lens, which provided the early date of Ahu Vinapu 2 derived from an area covered by the embankment surrounding the plaza of this *ahu* (Figure 1).

To be able to undertake further investigations concerning the context and date of this charcoal lens we decided to

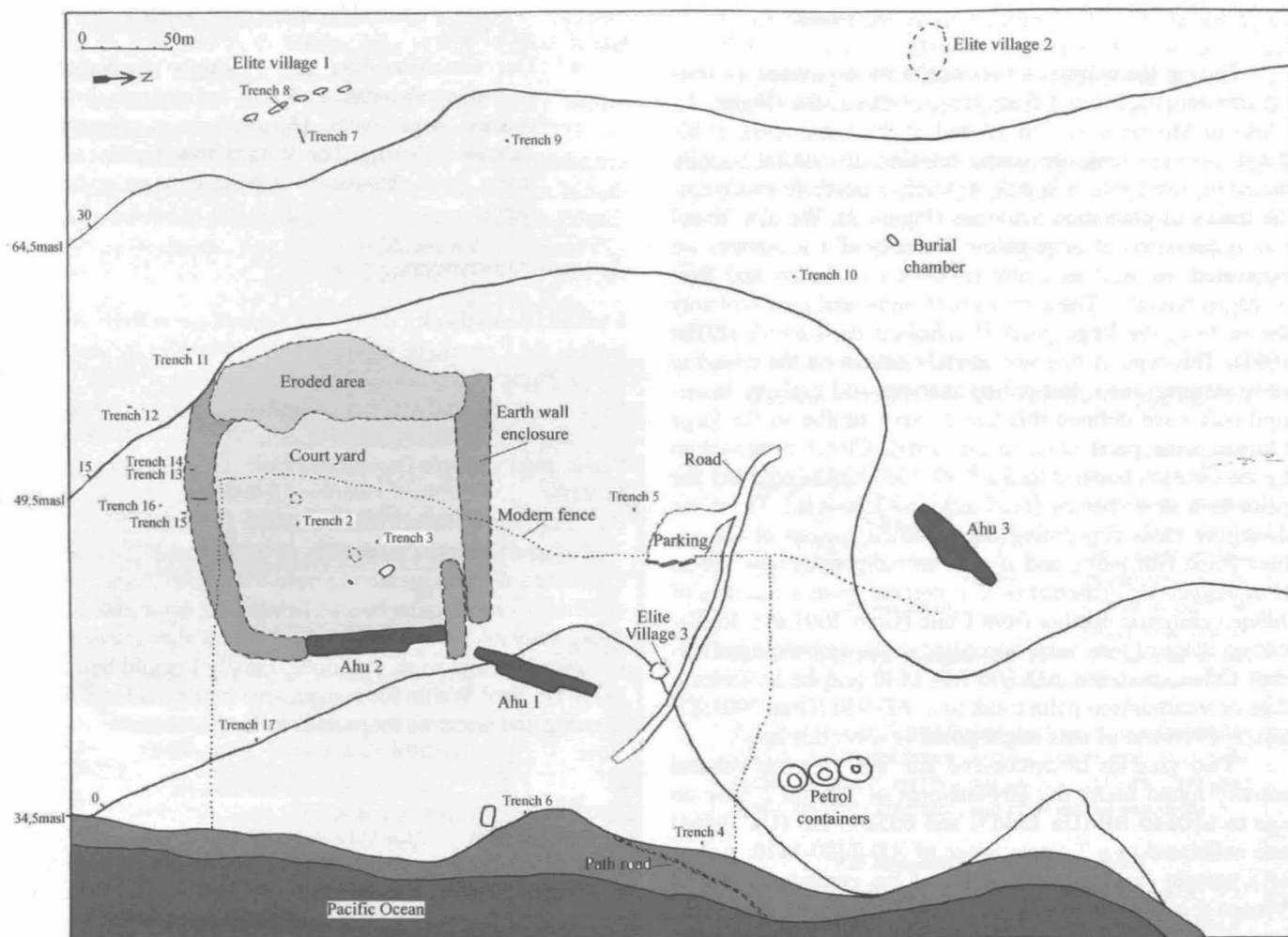


Figure 1. Map of Vinapu area with excavated test trenches 1-17. (based on Mulloy's map in Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961 fig. 128).

resume excavations in the vicinity of Mulloy's excavation (Trench 22) (Mulloy 1961:146). Our goal was to investigate whether other cultural remains were to be found at the same level as Mulloy's charcoal lens, and if the activities were tied to the ceremonial site or to an earlier human activity at this site.



Figure 2. Test trench 1, sqm 2, with feature 6 (vegetational pit or posthole) and burnt area.

During the course of two weeks we excavated 17 test-squares ranging from 1-5 square meters in size (Figure 1). Close to Mulloy's Trench 22 and at the same level as his dated charcoal lens, we found remains of cultural activity including fire spots, a hearth, a possible posthole and possible traces of plantation activities (Figure 2). We also found root impressions of large palms in nearly all test squares we excavated, as well as many finds of carbonized and fire-damaged nutshell. These root impressions and nuts probably derive from the large palm *Paschalococos disperta* (Zizka 1991). This type of tree was already extinct on the island in early historic times, but pollen analyses and finds of fossilized nuts have defined this tree as very similar to the large Chilean wine palm (*Jubaea chilensis*). Closer examination by the German botanist Zizka (1991) led him to consider the palm as a new species (*Pashcalicocos disperta*). There are diverging ideas concerning the specified species of the extinct Rapa Nui palm, and if it is an indigenous new specie (*Paschalococos disperta*) or if it derived from a nut/nuts of *Jubaea chilensis* drifting from Chile (Grau 2001:89). Radio-carbon dates of nuts vary, according to the archaeologist Michel Orliac, between AD 800-AD 1430 and he indicates a date of a carbonised palm trunk to c. AD 930 (Grau 2001:87-88). A DNA test of nuts might possibly solve this issue.

Two samples of carbonized nutshell from the cultural activity found under the embankment of Vinapu 2 have an age to 610±40 BP (Ua 19463) and 605±45 BP (Ua 19464) and calibrated to a 2 sigma range of AD 1280-1410. A date of a sample from the crematoria of the ceremonial site of Vinapu 2 had an age to 570±120BP (T-5175), which is calibrated to a 2 sigma range of AD 1220-1530. A carbon sample from the early phase of Vinapu 1 has an age to 730±200

BP (M-710) (Smith 1961:394), which is calibrated to a 2 sigma range of AD 850-1650. The sample collected by Mulloy at Vinapu 2 suggests an early activity, but it shows a wide calibrated range (AD 550-1300). The same applies to the date from the early phase of Vinapu 1. Compared with dated samples from our excavations it is likely that the cultural activity found under the embankment of Vinapu 2 date no earlier than c. AD 1300. This activity appears to date just prior to the construction of Vinapu 2 or in connection to the building phase.

Other test trenches by us in the area give no indications of the existence of settlements or activities at Vinapu prior to c. AD 1300. A new examination or a re-dating of samples from Vinapu 1 would possibly provide further insight into this matter. The settlement at Anakena dated to AD 800-1000 (Skjølsvold 1994:105-109) still appears to be the earliest secure evidence of settlement of Rapa Nui.

CONCLUSIONS

- The cultural activity found under the embankment at Vinapu 2 dates within the 2 sigma range of AD 1280-1410. This corresponds with the age of the crematoria of *ahu* Vinapu 2.
- The test-excavation gave no indication of the existence of settlement activities at Vinapu prior to c. AD 1300
- Our test-excavation and Mulloy's excavation revealed an abundance of root impressions from the extinct large palm (*Paschalococos disperta* or *Jubaea chilensis*). The Vinapu area appears to have had a great abundance of palm trees in prehistoric times.

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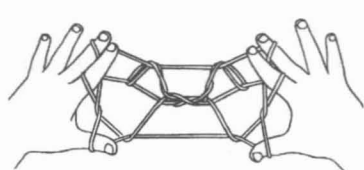
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