

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE DISCOVERY OF AN UNKNOWN AHU AT VIRI O TUKI (KO TE AHERU), SOUTH COAST, EASTER ISLAND

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One of the objectives of the November-December 2003 campaign of the Belgian Archaeological Mission to Easter Island was the investigation and rescue excavation of a small anthropogenic stone structure (partly preserved wall) at Viri o Tuki (Ko te Aheru) on the south coast of the island (GPS reading: 27° 10.117' S – 109° 23.872' W) (Figure 1). This structure was discovered by chance by Catherine and Michel Orliac (CNRS, France) on the occasion of their botanical and anthracological field investigations in 1988 and 2000 (see Orliac and Orliac 2001:5-8). The whole Viri o Tuki area and the stone structure in particular, which is located on the very edge of the 30 meter high cliff, are threatened by gully erosion.

THE 2003 EXCAVATIONS

OUR EXCAVATIONS AT THIS locality (Figure 2) revealed the presence of a small rectangular or square construction, both sides of which have been completely eroded away (Figure 3). Several large *poro* and building blocks located on a lower level on the steep cliff probably originally belonged to this structure. Even though only its central part is preserved, the identification of the structure leaves no doubt. The presence of a roughly constructed seaward wall (of which only 2.50 m remain) retaining a loose rubble filling (mainly composed of red scoria) suggests that the building is indeed a small, previously completely unknown *ahu*, which – with the consent of

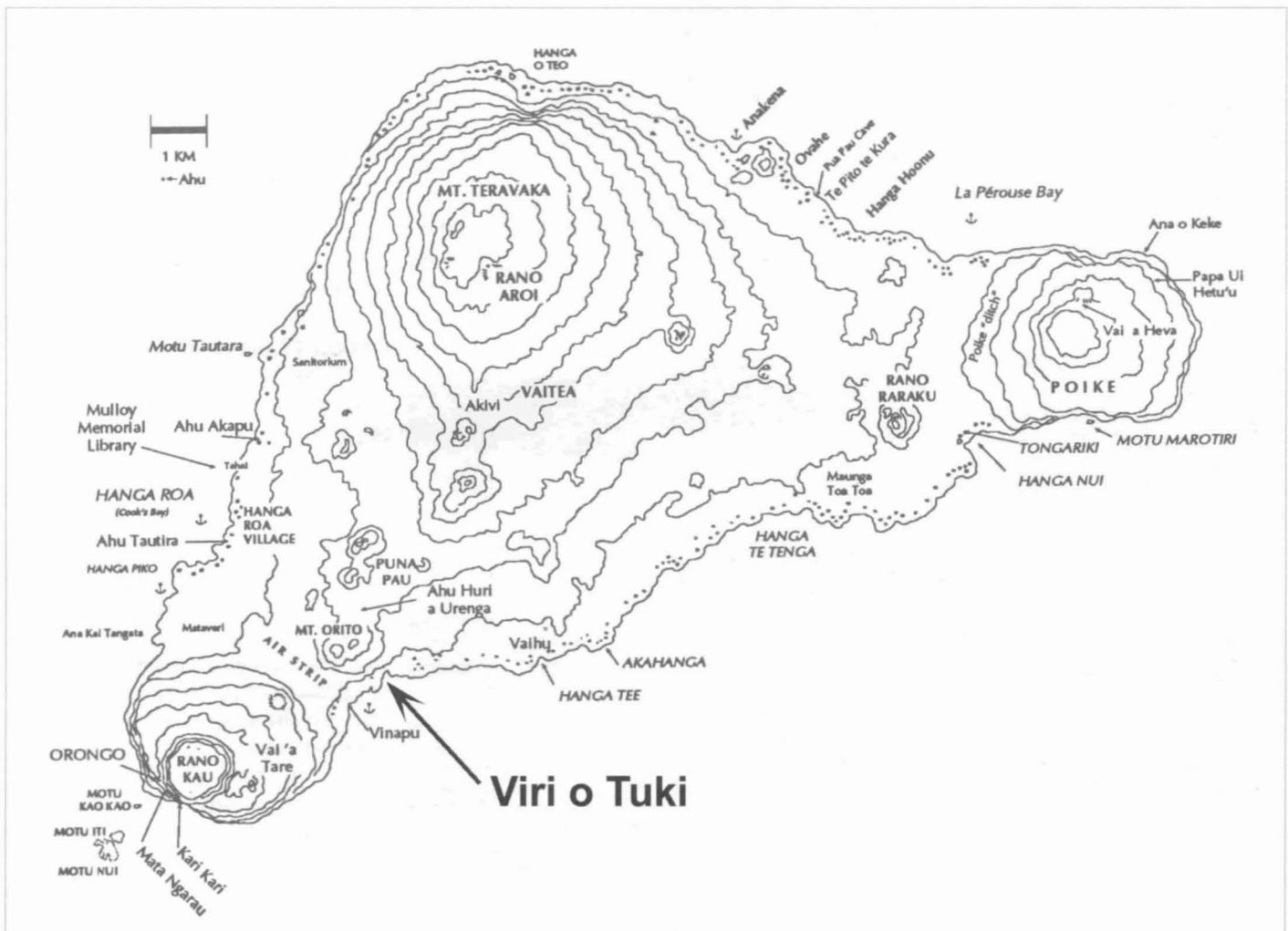


Figure 1. Map of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), showing the location of Viri o Tuki (adapted after Drake 1992: 49).



Figure 2. The excavation of Ahu o Tuki at Viri o Tuki (Ko te Aheru), South Coast (indicated by arrow). View towards the southwest with Vinapu and Rano Kau volcano in the far background.

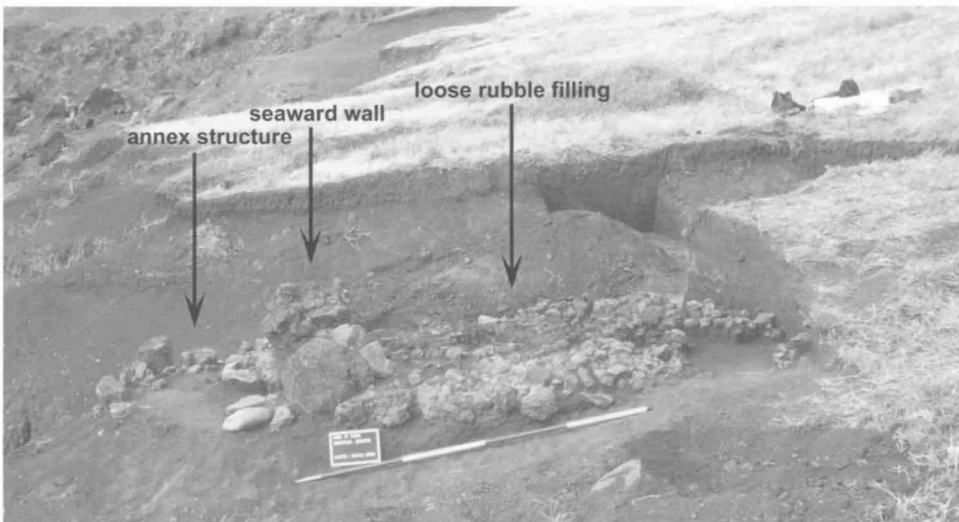


Figure 3. The preserved central part of Ahu o Tuki with identification of main *ahu* features. View from the east.



Figure 4. The preserved central part of Ahu o Tuki with indication of radiocarbon dates obtained by our mission. View from the west.

our Rapanui collaborators – we have baptized Ahu o Tuki. To its seaward side, on a slightly lower level, a second wall (of which only 1.70 m remain) had been constructed (it was, in fact, this wall that was first spotted by the Orliacs). The significance of this annex structure is currently unknown. As no charred human bone was discovered within it, its identification as a crematorium is unlikely. We tentatively suggest it may have served as a retaining wall.

CHRONOLOGICAL ASPECTS

CHARRED NUTSHELLS (*Paschalococos*) discovered by the Orliacs in the immediate vicinity of the annex structure have been dated to the late 13th or the 14th century AD (Beta 155732 cal AD 1280-1400 and Beta 155733 cal AD 1290-1420). A sample taken last December (AoT-2003-6) gave a very similar result: 640 ± 35 BP (GrA 25870), i. e. cal AD 1290 (95.4%) 1410 (calibration using *Oxcal Program v3.9*; Bronk Ramsey 1995, 2001; Southern hemisphere correction of -30 years prior to calibration). The nutshells that constitute the latter sample have been found in close relationship with the annex structure (both on the inside and outside). They probably provide a date for the construction of the *ahu* (or at least for its use).

BASALT FLAKING WORKSHOP

A MAJOR IMPORTANCE of the site resides in the fact that the *ahu* has been found in an archaeological stratigraphy. On a higher level, definitely post-dating the construction remains, a concentration of fine-grained basalt debitage material was found at the basis of our layer 5 (see Figure 4). Large quantities of surface finds in the near vicinity suggest that the Viri o Tuki area was intensively used as a basalt flaking workshop for the manufacturing of bifacial tools such as *toki*, axes and maybe fish-hooks. A charcoal-filled depression found within this level (possibly a hearth) provides a date for this basalt flaking activity: 410 ± 35 BP (GrA 25872), i.e. cal AD 1440 (95.4%) 1640 (which also serves to confirm the age of the underlying *ahu*).

CONCLUSION AND PROSPECTS

THE DATES OBTAINED for Ahu o Tuki indicate that this monument is roughly contemporaneous with the 'archaic' *ahu* (Ahu I) previously discovered at Ahu o Rongo in Hanga Roa (see Huyge and Cauwe 2002). It provides further concrete evidence for the early phase of the extensive *ahu* building episode on Easter Island between about AD 1300 and AD 1600 (see Martinsson-Wallin and Wallin 2000).

A thorough investigation of the available literature will be required in order to determine whether this particularly small type of *ahu* has already been documented elsewhere. In the course of a survey immediately east of Viri o Tuki, however, at a location called Hanga Hahave (GPS-reading: 27°10.070' S – 109°23.524' W), a fairly well preserved small and possibly related construction was found (Figure 5). It is rectangular in shape and also consists of a seaward wall (about 2 m long) and two lateral walls (about 4 m long) retaining a fill of loosely deposited rubble, consisting mainly of red scoria. We hope to investigate this feature during our next campaign (in November-December 2004). Its excavation may well shed light on the meaning and function of Ahu o Tuki.

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Figure 5. Small *ahu* (?) at Hanga Hahave, South Coast, possibly similar to Ahu o Tuki. View from the south.

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