

Thor Heyerdahl as world heritage

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On May 25, 2011, the archives left by Thor Heyerdahl, the famous researcher and explorer, were inscribed on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. Heyerdahl's archives have become an official part of humanity's common heritage. This is Norway's fourth contribution to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register, with the three preceding contributions being: 1) the Leprosy Archives, held by the University in Bergen, which document the discovery of the cause of Hansen's disease; 2) the manuscript of the most famous Norwegian theatre script of all time, Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House"; and 3) a short film shot during Roald Amundsen's South Pole Expedition.

UNESCO is the United Nations' organization for Education, Science and Culture. In order to "safeguard the documentary heritage of humanity against collective amnesia, neglect, the ravages of time and climatic conditions, and willful and deliberate destruction,"¹ UNESCO nominates places, architecture and intangible cultural heritage for preservation on one of their two registers: 1) World Heritage Site Register that includes natural places, building complexes, architecture or monuments; and 2) Memory of the World Register, which names collections, libraries, documents or various forms of artistic and multimedia expressions, like pictures and films, for preservation.

The manuscripts, research papers, personal notes, pictures and film material of this famous researcher and explorer are now an official part of humanity's common heritage. By this inscription, UNESCO states that these records need to be preserved for future generations as an example of a unique aspect of human history. Why are the Thor Heyerdahl Archives considered to be of such importance? How do the Thor Heyerdahl Archives fit the UNESCO policy? What is the context of their world-wide significance? And how will this new status affect the legacy of Thor Heyerdahl?

Before we can begin to search for answers to these questions, we need to know what constitutes the Thor Heyerdahl Archives as they are found at the Kon-Tiki Museum today. These archives contain most manuscripts of the thirteen books on ocean voyages or culture history that he wrote, including *The Kon-Tiki Expedition: By*

Raft Across the South Seas (1948)² and *Aku-Aku: the Secret of Easter Island* (1957).³ In addition, the archives also contain manuscripts, handwritten or typed, of most of the nine scholarly volumes he wrote, co-wrote or edited along with two unpublished manuscripts. The major bulk of the archives consist of the professional and some of the private correspondence of Thor Heyerdahl from 1947 up until his death in 2001. The photographic collections contain pictures from his expeditions that were carried out between 1936 and 1984. The film collection includes the complete rolls of film from the Kon-Tiki Expedition, the Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific, the Ra expeditions and the Tigris expeditions. The Thor Heyerdahl Archives contain, more or less, the whole life's work of one of the most famous and celebrated explorers, adventurers and writers in the second half of the 20th century.

Thor Heyerdahl's greatest achievement, and the main reason for the inscription on the Memory of the World Register, is the Kon-Tiki Expedition. It was in 1947 that Thor Heyerdahl, Herman Watzinger, Knut Magne Haugland, Torstein Raaby, Erik Hesselberg and Bengt Danielsson sailed 8,000km in a balsa raft from Peru in South America to the island of Raroia in the Tuamotu Islands. The context for this voyage was that, in 1941, Heyerdahl had put forth a theory in a paper entitled *Did Polynesian Culture Originate in America?*, in which he claimed that Polynesia had first been colonized by Indians from South America. The theory, contrary to common views, was dismissed by most researchers that Heyerdahl contacted. The most frequent argument was that the cultures of South America did not possess ocean-going vessels. Thor strongly believed that the academic community would not take his theory seriously unless he disproved the widespread belief, introduced by Samuel K. Lothrop's study entitled *Aboriginal Navigation off the West Coast of South America* (1932), that balsa-rafts would sink after two weeks at sea. Being a man of action, he organized the Kon-Tiki Expedition and carried out one of the most celebrated maritime adventures of the 20th century. This voyage demonstrated that it was possible for a South American balsa-raft to cross the ocean to

Polynesia and indeed cover much longer distances if required. The expedition did not, of course, prove that South American Indians had ever made such a voyage. Subsequent research has established as a fact the theory that Heyerdahl opposed, that Polynesian origins must be found to the west in the Pacific. One of the main accomplishments of the Kon-Tiki Expedition was that it restored the admiration for maritime crafts off the coast of Ecuador and Peru, in the minds of academics, sailors and the general public alike, that early Spanish sailors noted in their chronicles. Indeed, Lothrop was one of the first scholars to acknowledge this fact. Inspiring a new field of study in archaeology, now called maritime experimental archaeology, was a second important, but less known, result of the expedition.

The story of the voyage, entitled *The Kon-Tiki Expedition. By Raft Across the South Seas*, which was published in Norway in 1948, did not become an overnight success. Only when the little known Swedish publisher Adam Helms initiated a brilliant press campaign prior to the release of the book in Sweden (Andersson 2010) did it start selling in larger numbers in Heyerdahl's country of birth. Helms' strategy was picked up by the English publishing house George Allen & Unwin when they published the book in 1950. Stanley Unwin decided that *The Kon-Tiki Expedition* should never be "out-of-print" and a continuous number of editions were printed. But it was only when the small publishing house of Rand McNally in Chicago decided to release the book in the USA later that year that the numbers soared. The book also became a huge success in the Soviet Union and its satellite countries. There is not an exact number of how many copies the book have sold around the world. It is definitely more than 50 million, and perhaps closer to 100 million copies. Today it is the world's most sold non-fiction copyrighted book of all times, aside from the *Guinness World Records*, which has sold more total copies when each annual re-publication is considered together. The film from the expedition also became a phenomenon, winning an Oscar for the best documentary feature in 1951. The book and the film influenced the post-war generation so much so that "Kon-Tiki" became a synonym for *discovery* and *adventure*. The name also fused with the American west coast bar-culture today termed "Tiki Culture", which propelled this local mix of rum, Pacific design, exotic fruits, Hawaiian music and a Chinese-inspired cuisine into a global phenomenon. Countless Kon-Tiki-named bars, restaurants, night clubs, hotels and amusement parks were built and operated around the world during the 1950s and 1960s. A few of them are still in business.

With his Ra and Tigris expeditions, Thor Heyerdahl demonstrated that boats built of reeds using five-thousand-year-old technology may cross the largest oceans of the world. These voyages certainly re-kindled

October 31st, 1953 THE BOOKSELLER

NOT A HIMALAYAN ROPE-TRICK!

but did you realize that all the copies of the British edition of **KON-TIKI** would exceed the height of Everest by 10,000 feet?

If you include British Book Clubs, the pile would reach to over 80,000 feet (1,000,000 copies)

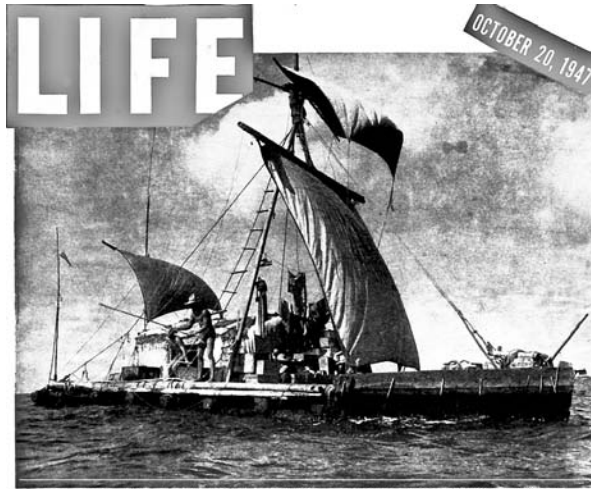
GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD
 © MUSEUM STREET, LONDON, W.C.1

500,000 copies = 40,000 feet

An ad for the Kon-Tiki Expedition. Across the Pacific on a raft published in the UK by Allen & Unwin, 31 October 1953.

new possibilities and perspectives on ancient contacts and trade amongst slowly drowning diffusionists. However, once again we need to state that the expeditions only demonstrated that such voyages were possible, not that ancient peoples undertook them on a regular basis. For the most part, Heyerdahl let archaeologists prove or disprove such scenarios, although he voiced his strong opinions frequently. As a direct result of these expeditions and the previous Kon-Tiki voyage, Heyerdahl became a founding father for a new academic specialization termed maritime experimental archaeology.

A third side to Heyerdahl's character and professional standing can be seen in his expedition to Easter Island in 1955. At the time, the island and its culture were portrayed as one of the great mysteries in newspapers, travelogues, and research papers. The most frequently asked questions were how they had carved, transported, and erected the hundreds of stone statues found all over the island. Thor Heyerdahl, with his fascination for the practical knowledge of indigenous people – and an acute sense of drama – was the man to untie the knot. In addition to three tons of fish-hooks and two tons of colored cloth, the expedition ship *M/S Christian Bjelland*



CRUISE OF THE KON-TIKI

Modern vikings sail a raft 101 days across the open Pacific

Thor Heyerdahl, a young Norwegian ethnologist, is a man who will go a long way to prove a point. This summer he will sail halfway across the Pacific to prove one and his doing so made history. For although other expeditions have traveled farther in their search for truth, few have journeyed so dangerously to find it. Heyerdahl made the trip on a primitive wooden raft called the Kon-Tiki.

Heyerdahl had a theory: he believed that the islands of the Pacific were settled by early American Indians who had sailed there hundreds of years ago. But other anthropologists, convinced that the continent of Asia was the source of all Pacific cultures, gave this theory a cold reception. Besides, said some, no early American craft could have sailed so far. The point was debatable, but there was only one way to prove or disprove it. Heyerdahl decided to attempt the journey himself.

Although adventure was not the prime object of Heyerdahl's project, it was never far from his mind. He had a great idea for a great adventure that he loved. Plothing the raft with a crew of five, a tiny structure of balsa wood and reeds, he would face a host of known and unknown dangers. The raft, he believed, would be the southern Indians might creep on to his raft and escape. Waves on the sea might wash the raft to the bottom. He might even be lost entirely and drift on and on until his provisions were exhausted. To reach the islands of the Pacific might be a long and hard journey, but Heyerdahl had no doubts. He also found a crewman who could make it, see page 7.



Life Magazine. The first publication of the Kon-Tiki adventure.

also carried five archaeologists on board. New statues and new house forms were discovered and documented by their excavations. They also formed the first cultural chronology for the island based on stratigraphic excavations. Heyerdahl himself eagerly began to work on how to unravel the questions related to the famous *moai* statues. He found the answers in a very simple, yet for its time, rather unorthodox manner. Heyerdahl asked the mayor of Hanga Roa, Pedro Atan, and other elders of the Rapanui community. Instead of mucking about with his own hypothesis and experiments, he simply asked if the indigenous population themselves knew the answers and if they could demonstrate this through a practical experiment. The challenge was readily accepted and their answers to these long-standing mysteries were documented by the expedition photographer. Pedro Atan showed Heyerdahl how to carve a statue inside the quarry at Rano Raraku, and from this experiment it was determined that it would take twelve months to carve a medium-sized statue. Atan and his co-workers also moved and erected a medium-sized statue on top of an *ahu* at 'Anakena in only eighteen days. It could no longer be doubted that local Rapanui people possessed at least some of the answers to the multitude of questions put forth by researchers from the time when Captain Cook visited the island in 1774. Their forefathers had carved, transported, and erected the statues, and the descendants still possessed the knowledge. The score of indigenous

peoples vs. researchers was 1-0! Thor Heyerdahl played on the allure of mystery associated with Easter Island, inasmuch as he invoked an image of the lone-layman against the established community of scholars to his own benefit in the narrative of the Kon-Tiki Expedition. But this time it also benefited the local Rapanui community. By working for the expedition, the Rapanui people came to see and recollect more of their own history than they would have done living inside the bounds of Hanga Roa Village where they were confined, carving souvenirs for visitors. The population of Rapa Nui reclaimed their own culture and history in the decades following the expedition. However, this must be credited to the local population and not the Norwegian explorer. He himself described his own role in this process as only having been “fortunate enough to arrive on the island just at the right time.” Photographs and films from the expedition’s stay on Rapa Nui were important for the Thor Heyerdahl Archives’ inscription on UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register, because these pictures and rolls of film document a community during part of their process of modernization enforced by a global culture.

The expedition took place in 1955 at a time when modern society had engulfed the globe and erased the last pieces of unconquered territories from the world map. Few, if any, indigenous societies lived isolated without some form of contact with the “civilized” world. Up until the Second World War, descriptions of indigenous peoples often portrayed them in a negative manner. The Polynesians were in countless travelogues described as a brown, carefree race lacking the tenacity that had brought progress to Europe and America. This was even the case in Thor Heyerdahl’s first narrative from his stay on Fatuhiva in 1937-38 entitled *Hunting for Paradise* (1938).⁴ During the 1950s and 1960s, travelling to “exotic” parts of the globe and meeting indigenous peoples became more and more commonplace, even for the everyday Joe and Mary. As a consequence, indigenous peoples were portrayed more frequently in a positive manner and as people that possessed knowledge now long lost by ourselves. “Exotic” went from being connected with “uncivilized” to describing someone and something “unique”. Eventually, indigenous peoples were characterized as “ordinary”, people like ourselves. Heyerdahl was only one of many writers constituting this trend.

The Ra expeditions became a watershed moment and undertaking for Heyerdahl, stemming from a deep interest in past voyaging on the high seas to an exhausting struggle for the future of the world’s oceans. The large belt of oil lumps which the men in Ra discovered when they were sailing in the Atlantic was a message of an imminent disaster. Humans could indeed destroy the vast oceans of the world. Almost like a message from the past to the future, the crew wrote and sent a letter



KON-TIKI-FLOSS
I N M A N N H E I M

Kon-Tiki as a children's playground in Mannheim, Germany.

to the Secretary General of the United Nations of their findings, causing global publicity and focus on this problem. For Heyerdahl personally, these oil clumps changed his career. He spent the next fifteen years fighting political battles to preserve “the World Ocean”, as Heyerdahl liked to call it. His work became linked to different organizations that had similar aims, like the World Wildlife Fund, United World Colleges and the One-World movement. Humanity needed to understand that the challenges of polluting less and creating a sustainable future could only be achieved through working together as one nation. His passion for nature and the world's oceans was a lifelong occupation, and his writing and correspondence in this field constitute almost one fourth of his archives. The impact that the letter from the crew of Ra to the Secretary General of the United Nations had on policy making prior to the first Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm 1972 and his subsequent involvement in protecting the world's oceans is another reason why the Thor Heyerdahl Archives became part of global memory.

How will the inscription of his archives on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register influence Heyerdahl's reputation? Thor Heyerdahl was both an adventurer and a researcher, but maybe at different times and on different topics. He had a fantastic ability and enthusiasm to make any topic seem relevant and interesting. He could get all sorts of people interested in very specific research questions, often unconnected with their own lives and experiences. Literarily thousands of comments in newspapers all over the world testify to this fact. Yet, sometimes his treatment of the finer details of his research subject could be inadequate. Where he easily saw the big picture, he did not always see or understand all the pixels constituting it. I believe that the status given to his achievements and his archives will affect the polarised and often destructive debating on Heyerdahl's theories and personality, which he himself contributed to. Instead, both researchers and journalists will focus on what the



The cover of Shadows' famous Kon-Tiki EP.

man actually achieved. I also hope that labels used to fence him off from the world of research, like “racist” and “charlatan” will have to be grounded in more detailed arguments and documentation, although recent headlines in Norwegian newspapers may indicate that this will take some time. The new status of the Thor Heyerdahl Archives will force both journalists and the institutions bearing his name to uncover new stories and present different narratives than that of a lone layman pitted against the rest of the scholarly community. With this nomination, UNESCO has effectively created a reference for the life and work of one of the great adventurers, researchers and writers on culture-history of the 20th century. We hope that his archives will give us a wider understanding of the man and his achievements. Thor Heyerdahl's life and work has now officially become part of global history.

Notes

1. UNESCO Memory of the World Programme. 1999-04-17.
2. Original edition in Norwegian by Gyldendal Norsk Forlag 1948. First English-language edition by Allen & Unwin 1950.
3. Original edition in Norwegian by Gyldendal Norsk Forlag 1957. First English-language edition in 1958.
4. Translated from the Norwegian title På Jakt efter Paradiset (Gyldendal Norsk Forlag 1938).

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