

REVIEWS

Easter Island - Rapa Nui Scientific Pathways to Secrets of the Past

Andreas Mieth and Hans-Rudolf Bork

Published by the authors (2004); ISBN 3-9809823-0-0
Available for \$20 or 16.5 Euros (includes postage and handling) from the authors (sekretariat@ecology.uni-kiel.de) or from the Easter Island Foundation, 110 pages

Review by Ann M. Altman, Ph.D.

AT THE SIXTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON Easter Island and the Pacific (Viña del Mar, Chile; September 2004), a particularly interesting talk was given by Andreas Mieth and Hans-Rudolf Bork, who discussed their remarkable findings on the Poike Peninsula, a part of Easter Island that has been relatively little studied because of its inaccessibility and the absence of the platforms and giant moai that have attracted so much attention on the rest of the island. Those of us who joined the post-conference tour and made the difficult climb up the steep slopes of Poike to the area of Mieth and Bork's research were rewarded by the opportunity to see for ourselves the evidence that led these two "eco-archaeologists" to the conclusions and hypotheses that are outlined in their new book.

An appreciation of *Easter Island - Rapa Nui; Scientific Pathways to Secrets of the Past* does not require a hike up to Poike or any specialized knowledge since the book contains numerous illustrations and every substantive statement that is based on the work of others is accompanied by the appropriate reference. Thus, those who are looking for a deeper understanding of certain issues can go to the source in every case. As Professor Charles Love remarked after looking at the book, "It's worth buying the book just for the bibliography."

The book begins by introducing the reader to Easter Island via the history of settlements across the South Pacific. There follows a summary of the cultural history of the island, as it is generally accepted today, and a discussion of prehistoric (that is to say, pre-arrival of Europeans) land use, as generally accepted prior to the authors' own work. Sections on the geo-ecological characteristics of the island and on the fertility and erosion of the soil lead the reader to the Poike Peninsula and the results of the authors' original research.

The Poike Peninsula has an area of 14 km² and can be reached neither by road nor even by a well-worn path. Research at such a remote and inaccessible location on one of the most remote islands in the Pacific presents an extraordinary challenge – a challenge that was met by Mieth and Bork over a total of approximately three months, during which their research yielded a remarkable picture of the interactions between land use, landscape history and cultural development on Easter Island.

Much of the surface of Poike is barren as a result of erosion and overgrazing. However, the earth beneath the surface is rich in evidence of the history of the peninsula. As described and illustrated in this splendid book, and as shown to those of us who climbed up to the Poike plateau, sections

through the soil reveal the root casts of a vast forest of (most probably) *Jubaea* palms. Moreover, Mieth and Bork found evidence of such palms at a large number of other sites all over the island. Their calculations led them to postulate that at least 70% of the island (approximately 116 km²) was once covered with palm forests and that there might once have been as many as sixteen million palms on the island.

On Poike, Mieth and Bork found planting pits, most probably for sweet potatoes, carefully distributed among the root systems of individual palm trees. Clearly, efforts were made by the early "farmers" to avoid harming the roots of the trees. However, at some point, the Rapanui decided to clear the land. Radiocarbon dating suggests that clearing began during the second half of the thirteenth century. The Rapanui cut down the trees at a level just above the surface of the soil and burned the severed root systems, using the heat generated by these fires to cook chickens, rats, mollusks and sea urchins, the remains of which have been discovered in the charred layers that reveal the outlines of *umu* (cooking pits). The soil profiles reveal unequivocal evidence of such practices and the book includes photographs of such profiles and of the easily identifiable remains of long-ago meals. The book also includes evocative pictorial reconstructions of the sequence of events that occurred after the colonization of the Poike Peninsula by the indigenous Rapanui.

The last third of the book deals with the collapse of the *moai* culture and the possible role of the widespread felling of palm trees. Clearance would have led to erosion, to reduced soil fertility, to declining nutritional resources, to competition for such resources and, eventually, to the major cultural shift that appears to have occurred in the middle of the second millennium (1400 - 1500 A.D.).

Unfortunately for the island, the felling of the trees was not the only event to cause serious harm to its environment. The most recent damage to Easter Island, and to the Poike Peninsula in particular, came from the intensive sheep farming in the mid-twentieth century and the book takes us through the series of recent events that has had such a negative impact on the land and the prehistoric monuments. The ancient forest of palm trees on the Poike Peninsula, for example, has been turned into arid and inhospitable badlands.

The last page of the text shows two sketches: one of Poike as it is today, a barren plateau above the treeless plain of Tongariki; and the other of Poike and the plain of Tongariki as we now know them once to have been, that is to say, covered with a dense forest of palm trees! Mieth and Bork are not content to leave us with this vision of Rapa Nui when the first settlers arrived. They raise questions that remain to be answered, for example, what triggered the large-scale felling of palm forests and the abandonment of a sustainable subsistence economy? They also suggest methods for protecting such soil as remains on Poike and the rest of the island. They report that the Chilean palm grows much better on the island than it does even on the mainland, while the planting of shrubs on heavily eroded land has not been successful. Even though, in the present economic climate, the chances for reforestation are slim, Mieth and Bork force us to examine the historic importance of palm trees on the island and to consider ways to reverse the devastating erosion that has followed deforestation first and

overgrazing subsequently.

We should be very grateful to Mieth and Bork for making available to the general public the extremely satisfying results of their research on the Poike Peninsula and for writing and producing this very attractive and copiously illustrated little volume. It is, however, a pity that the translation into English of the original German manuscript was not checked by a native English speaker. There are more than a few linguistic mistakes in the text, as well as some substantive mistakes, such as the incorrect spelling of Zea mays (p.32), that need to be corrected in the next edition. In addition, an explanation for the layman of the terminology associated with radiocarbon dating would be very helpful. Nonetheless, even with its flaws, *Easter Island – Rapa Nui, Scientific Pathways to Secrets of the Past* is a wonderful book and it is certainly an essential addition to the library of anyone with even a passing interest in Easter Island and/or the ecology of small islands.

Escape from Easter Island
(Les Évadés de l'Île de Pâques - Loin de Chile, vers Tahiti; 1944-1958)

Marie-Françoise Peteuil
L'Harmattan, Paris (2004)
270 pages, ISBN 2-7475-7059-2

Review by Ann M. Altman Ph.D.

"THE OTHER BOOKS ARE ALL THE SAME. It's a good thing that you've been studying these things. They are part of our history. There was nobody here to see what was happening to us." [p. 227]. These comments were made by Mahuta Pakarati and set the stage for an interesting, albeit poorly documented, book by Marie-Françoise Peteuil, which is available only in French at this time. Peteuil first set foot on Easter Island in 2001 as a tourist, taking a four-day holiday from her job as a teacher of mathematics at a small college in Tahiti. During the sightseeing tour of the island, their guide told them about the time, in the 1950's, when Thor Heyerdahl visited the island. Islanders were living under dreadful conditions as virtual slaves of the Chilean navy. They were not allowed to travel and had no passports. Moreover, while Heyerdahl's marine exploits received much attention, the attempts by islanders to escape in small boats to Tahiti were ignored, even though they represented remarkable feats of seamanship and navigation and were undertaken in secret and under extremely difficult conditions.

Peteuil's book describes her own voyage of discovery and the way in which she assembled her accounts of eight attempts, from 1944 to 1958, by islanders to escape from Easter Island and to make their way to Tahiti. Each of the escapes is described in detail with some of the previously unpublished information provided by islanders who now live in Europe and some from islanders who spoke to Peteuil on her second visit to Rapa Nui.

The first escape in 1944 ended in failure after 24 days at sea; the starving escapees were picked up by an American ship. The second escape was by six members of the Pakarati family; their boat reached the Tuamotus after 36 days at sea. The third escape was another attempt to tell the world about

conditions on Rapa Nui; the fourth set of escapees carried a request to the French authorities, naively asking for France to take control of the island from Chile; the fifth expedition, with five men, reached the Cook Islands after an extraordinary voyage of 5000 kilometers and 55 days; the sixth escape was made by two star-crossed lovers who perished at sea, as did the eight men who made the seventh escape and the seven men of the eighth and last attempt, who had been confined to the Leper Colony prior to their bid for freedom.

Peteuil's account of the islanders' suffering under the Chileans, the eight escapes and the fates of the escapees, plus the oral accounts of the islanders make compelling reading. We know, of course, that the relationship between the islanders and the Chileans has improved markedly since the mid 1960's. As Mahuta Pakarati told Peteuil, "We must move forward, not backwards, not to how it was here before the Chileans. Now Chile helps us, gives scholarships to our children. Of my seven children, six had scholarships, free flights to Santiago, and the return trip in first class if they had good marks!" [page 228]

Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed

Jared Diamond
Viking Press, New York (2005),
575 pages, ISBN 0-670-03337-5

Review by Vincent Lee

NO THOROUGH STUDY OF SOCIAL DISINTEGRATION in the face of environmental decline could fail to spotlight the rise and fall of Easter Island's Rapanui culture. Sure enough, Pulitzer Prize winner, Jared Diamond's new book, *Collapse* tackles this subject early on. In just 40 pages, he summarizes the subject quite well, making good use of advice from various researchers including Edmundo Edwards, Claudio Cristino and Jo Anne Van Tilburg. I briefly worked with all three during filming of the 1998 NOVA television episode testing Van Tilburg's *moai* moving and erecting ideas.

Those ideas found their way into Diamond's book in his brief discussion of the adverse impact of the *moai* cult on the island's resources. In lieu of a concise overview of *moai* "technology," Diamond instead presents a revisionist version of Van Tilburg's NOVA project, which he finds "most convincing." No mention is made of the islanders' longstanding belief in upright transport (no pun intended). A detailed account of the numbers of pullers needed to drag *moai* of various sizes fails, as did Van Tilburg, to deal with the problem of where they all go as their burden approaches its seacoast *ahu* and their workspace disappears into the ocean. Finally, Van Tilburg is rightly credited with the idea that Polynesian "canoe ladders" might have played a part in the process, but incorrectly credited with actually building and using one during her experiment.

None of these nitpicky details effects Diamond's central thesis, of course, but an opportunity to better educate his many thousands of readers about one of the world's enduring "mysteries" sadly has been missed.