

The Eyes of the *Moai*, Lost and Re-discovered

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This paper is a brief comment on the different types of inlaid eyes found by The Kon-Tiki Museum expedition to Easter Island 1986-88 and eyes that have been re-discovered in The Kon-Tiki Museum collection during an inventory made in 1989-90.

The first solid proof that the *moai* of Easter Island actually had inlaid eyes in the past was found in 1978, during the excavation and restoration of Ahu Nau Nau in Anakena. The first eye found is of coral, has a very elegant oval shape and a slot for inserting a separate pupil of red scoria. The eye fits very well in to the eye socket of a "classic style" *moai*. It is on display in the local museum of Easter Island. In addition to this piece, six different eye fragments were recovered at the same excavation (Sonia Haoa-Cardinali, personal communication; J. Vignes 1982:183-87; Van Tilburg 1994:132). Since then, replicas have been made to fit in eye sockets of different *moai* on restored *ahu*.

Several years before the above-mentioned eye were found, there were suggestions and indications that the *moai* of the *ahu* originally had inlaid eyes. Van Tilburg (1986:103), who has done extensive studies of the *moai* of Easter Island, mentions that the first suggestion to point in this direction came as early as 1884. In his book *The Art of Easter Island* (1975), Thor Heyerdahl proposed ideas along the same line: "the idea of an inlay in eye sockets would not seem far-fetched for statue sculptors who applied it to smaller images" (ibid.:154), and "These were now carved as deep oval sockets in the plain area below the projecting eyebrows, and as indicated earlier they probably contained some sort of inlay" (ibid.:163).

Given the above knowledge there are two new types of artifacts, the eye and the pupil, that have entered the realm of the archaeologists excavating on Easter Island. The information above exemplifies the importance of viewing archaeological material from new angles, asking new questions, having an open mind and giving room for alternative interpretations. All scientists dealing with the past have an impact on, and therefore share a responsibility for, the past presented.

Further archaeological excavations in Anakena were performed by The Kon-Tiki Museum in the years of 1986-88. The main objectives were to locate prehistoric settlements and *ahu* in the Anakena area, and date the restored Ahu Nau Nau. The results are presented in a separate publication (Skjølsvold 1994). During the excavations, several pieces that were interpreted as eyes and pupils were relocated. The following pieces were found during the test excavation of 1987; Cat. nos. A014 (eye), A027 (eye), A075 (eye), A121 (eye), A025 (pupil) and A370 (pupil). One eye fragment was

found at the western end of the partly destroyed west wing of Ahu Nau Nau; the rest of the specimens were all found on the seaward side of the rear wall of Ahu Nau Nau (ibid.:103-104 fig. 89).

The size and shape of the eye specimens indicated that they would have fit into the oval shaped eye socket of some small to middle size *moai*. The pupils showed the correct size and form to have been able to fit these types of eyes. Following the general indication of Van Tilburg concerning size and age of the *moai*, these eyes would belong to more ancient statues than the ones restored on Ahu Nau Nau today (Van Tilburg 1986). The restored phase of Ahu Nau Nau indicates a date of B.P. 610±85 (Cal. 1 sigma A.D. 1305-1412).

One specimen, cat. no. A 121, differed slightly in size and shape from the others (Skjølsvold 1994:103 fig. 89a). It indicated an oval to rounded shape and when tested in to the eye sockets of a statue head of basaltic rock found in the excavation, it was found to fit very well. The head of basaltic rock was found in the west wall of Ahu Nau Nau, and the appearance of it differed completely from the statues of Rano Raraku stone (ibid.:89 fig.79). Since the eye and statue head were not found together, it is not proven that they belonged together, but the eye may very well have been designated to fit in the eye socket of a statue of this type. After a closer examination performed by Thor Heyerdahl; there was no doubt that the head belonged to a female statue body that was recovered in Anakena in 1955-56 (Heyerdahl 1958). The body was sold to Heyerdahl at that time and he brought it to Norway and The Kon-Tiki Museum, where it since then has been on display. In 1988 the body was returned to Easter Island where it was joined with the head. This remarkable statue is now on display in the local museum on Easter Island.

In 1988 a settlement/activity area was excavated east of Ahu Nau Nau. This excavation revealed a cultural layer with finds of obsidian and basaltic tools, bones, and features such as refusal pits (Martinsson-Wallin and Wallin 1994). The following pieces of eyes were found: Cat. nos. B864, B155, B475, B682. The size and type indicate that the specimens found would have functioned as pupils in eyes of wooden sculptures (ibid.: fig. 29a-d). Similar obsidian discs have incidentally been found in excavations in Vinapu executed in 1955-56, and they were interpreted in the same manner (Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961:156). In the museum collection of Easter Island there are some larger obsidian discs on display and the possibility of these having been used as eyes in older statues with rounded eye sockets has been discussed by Van Tilburg (1986:103, 1994:132).

One of the specimens (cat. no. B864) was found in a fire

pit of quite recent date (probably of historic origin) and it was slightly fire-damaged. This may be an indication of a burning of a "pagan" sculpture in the early Christian time (Martinsson-Wallin and Wallin 1994:202). Two of the specimens (cat. nos. B155, B682) show a clear connection with the prehistoric cultural layer dated to B.P. 810±70 and

and Ferdon 1961:156). It has been reclassified as the eye of the *moai* (Figure 4).

As shown above, at least two of the specimens reclassified as eyes or pupils of eyes in the KTM collection indicate secondary use, and the specimen from Ahu Vinapu is, to date, the largest eye so far recovered.

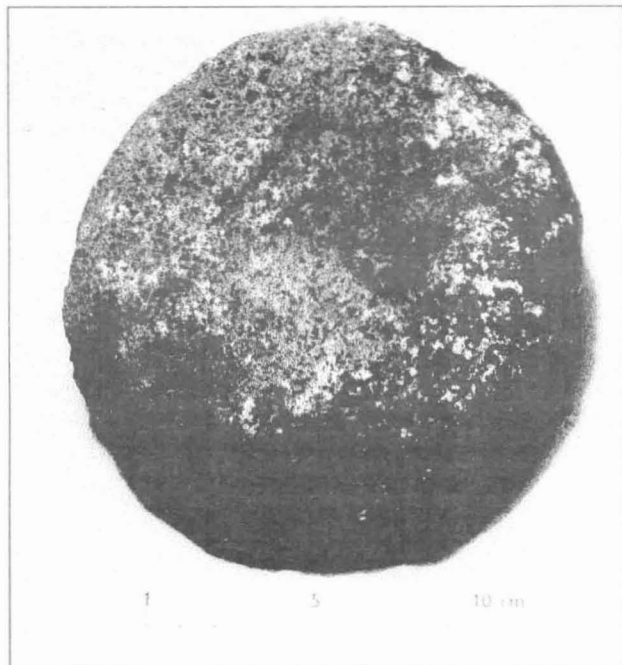


Figure 1: Cat. no. 1021. Originally cataloged as a cylindrical abrasive stone, this has been reclassified as the pupil of an eye.

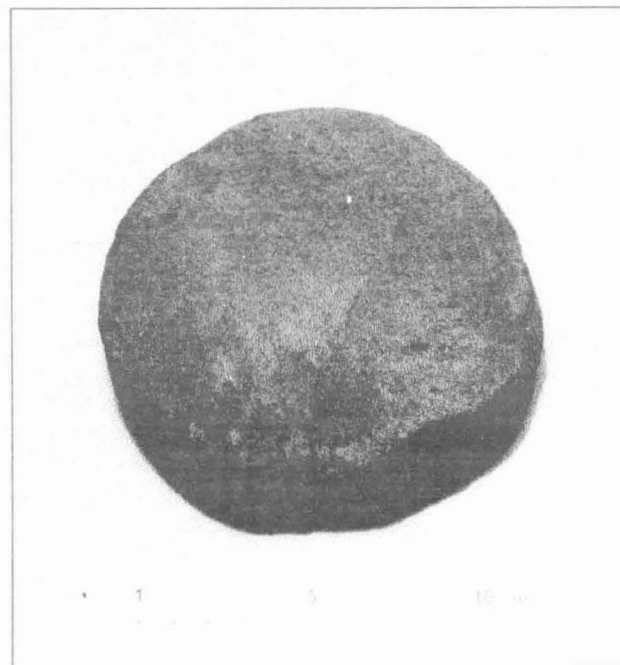


Figure 2: Cat. no. 1074. Reclassified as a pupil of an eye, it originally was listed as a cylindrical abrasive stone, although islanders had suggested it was a net sinker.

810±80 (Cal. 1 sigma A.D. 1153-1268 and 1126-1272).

A new inventory and a revised catalogue of the collection at The Kon-Tiki Museum were compiled in 1989-90 by the author in collaboration with Paul Wallin. As a result, some artifacts were reclassified as eyes of a *moai*. All artifacts found in The Kon-Tiki Museum that originate from Easter Island are surface finds sold by the islanders in 1955-56. The following specimens have been reclassified.

Kon-Tiki Museum cat. no. 1021, reclassified as a pupil, was originally referred to as "Cylindrical abrasive stone" found near a foundation of a boat-shaped house. One can not rule out a secondary function as an abrasive stone (Figure 1). Kon-Tiki Museum cat. no. 1074, also reclassified as a pupil, was originally referred to the same as above, but was judged by the natives to be a fish-net sinker (Figure 2). No find locality was indicated (Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961:411). The original reference to Kon-Tiki Museum cat. no. 1155 was as a stone lamp. It was found in a cave in Hoto-iti and it is very likely that it had a secondary function as a stone lamp (Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961:442). It is however reclassified as an eye of the *moai*, which was judged to be its original function (Figure 3). The last specimen, Kon-Tiki Museum cat. no. 1182, was originally found under statue no. 622 at Ahu Vinapu 1, and it was referred to as a bowl (Heyerdahl

The eye as a symbol

A symbolic meaning of the eye of the *moai* has briefly been discussed by Van Tilburg (1986:322-325, 1994:134) and Martinsson-Wallin (1994:130). In Easter Island language there may be a linguistic connection between the eye (*mata*) and the clan (*mata*). A connection between the eye and the spear-point (*mata'a*) and the warrior class (*matatoa*) has also been suggested (Van Tilburg 1986:325). It has been indicated that the different clans were tied to certain land areas and each area was divided among and occupied by the extended families of the clan. Each extended family was tied to a ceremonial structure, an *ahu* with a varying number of *moai* (Routledge 1919, Williamson 1924, Martinsson-Wallin 1994:84). Furthermore, it has been indicated that the eye sockets of the *moai* were carved and the eyes were placed in the sockets when the statues had reached their destination and had been placed on the *ahu* platform. Thereby an association between the statues with inlaid eyes and the controlling of the land is suggested. The statues "viewed" the land and turned their back towards the sea. On one hand the statues watched over its subjects and on the other hand they controlled and restrained them. The restrictions may, however, have varied from time to time since there are indications that the eyes

were only placed in the eye sockets at certain times. The statues have been interpreted as images of dead chiefs and, placed on the ceremonial platform, they were able to “see” the territorial realms of the clan/extended family but they were also seen by the clan members/extended family members and outsiders. The strategy of raising images with inlaid eyes is suggested to be a means of manifesting and ascertaining control over the land, tying the clan members together, keeping tabu regulations, and reassuring good relations with the ancestors and the gods to create stability over time.

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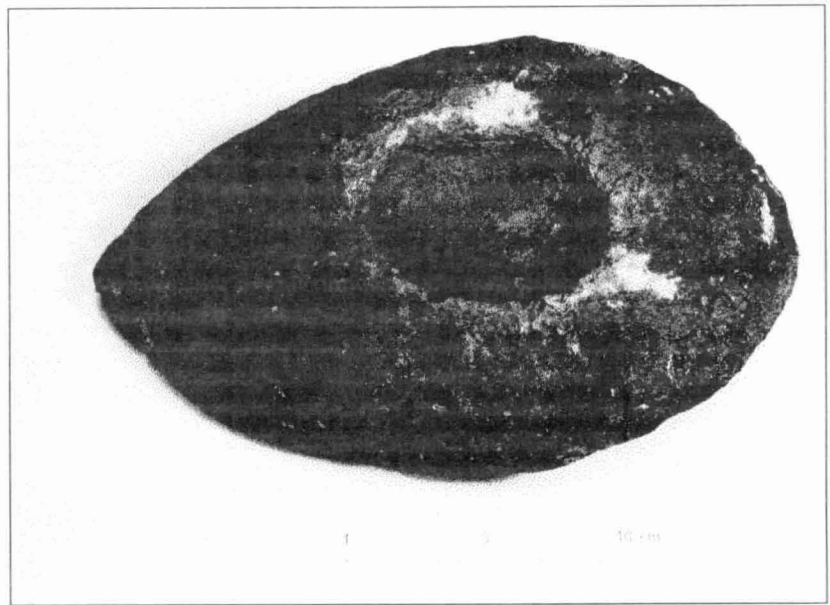


Figure 3: Cat. no. 1155. Called a stone lamp, this has been reclassified as an eye, although it is possible that it had a later and secondary function as a lamp.



Figure 4: Cat. No. 1182. This eye fragment was originally cataloged as a bowl.

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