5. The Island of Giant Stone Heads: Rapa Nui

Rapa Nui appears on a map as a tiny triangle of land surrounded by an enormous amount of ocean. Also known as Easter Island, it lies in the south-eastern Pacific and belongs to Chile, even though the Chilean mainland is about 3,700 kilometres away. The nearest inhabited island is more than 2,000 kilometres distant. This extreme isolation is one reason Rapa Nui has fascinated travellers, archaeologists and historians for generations.

The island covers roughly 164 square kilometres and was created by volcanic activity. Its landscape includes grassy slopes, rocky coasts and dramatic craters such as Rano Kau and Rano Raraku. Rapa Nui has no permanent rivers, so fresh water has always been an important resource. Communities depended on crater lakes, groundwater and coastal springs.

Most current archaeological research suggests that Polynesian voyagers began to settle the island around AD 1200. Reaching such a remote place required sophisticated knowledge of winds, waves, stars and wildlife. The settlers brought crops and traditions from elsewhere in Polynesia, then adapted them to local conditions.

Sweet potatoes became a major crop. Farmers also developed rock gardens, placing stones on or in the ground to reduce evaporation, protect plants from wind and improve growing conditions. These modified fields show that the Rapanui actively managed a difficult environment rather than simply depending on what nature provided.

Around 900 moai are known across the island. Most were carved from volcanic tuff at Rano Raraku, where unfinished figures can still be seen. Completed statues were transported to different areas and many were erected on ceremonial platforms called ahu. Ahu Tongariki is famous today for its line of fifteen restored moai.

The statues are often called “giant heads”, but many have complete bodies. At Rano Raraku, soil gradually built up around some figures, hiding their lower sections. Moai are generally understood to represent an important ancestor or ancestral presence. Contrary to a common idea, many stood with their backs to the sea and faced inland towards the communities they represented.

Exactly how statues weighing many tonnes were moved remains debated. Experiments have shown that a standing replica can be rocked from side to side with ropes and moved forward, almost as if it is “walking”. This is especially interesting because Rapanui oral traditions say that the statues walked. It does not prove that every moai travelled this way, but it demonstrates what coordinated teams could achieve with simple technology.

Rapa Nui's environmental history is equally fascinating. Pollen evidence shows that palm forests once covered much of the island. After human settlement, the trees gradually disappeared. People cleared vegetation for agriculture and used wood, while Polynesian rats may also have limited palm regeneration by eating seeds. Researchers still debate the importance of each factor.

For much of the twentieth century, a dramatic collapse story became popular. According to this version, a rapidly growing population cut down the forest, exhausted every resource and experienced warfare and starvation before Europeans arrived. Rapa Nui became a warning about environmental destruction.

Recent research has made that explanation much less certain. Studies of rock-garden agriculture suggest that the island may never have supported the extremely large populations once proposed. A 2024 genetic study also found no evidence for the severe seventeenth-century population crash expected by the classic “ecocide” theory. The evidence increasingly points to a society that changed its environment but also adapted to it for centuries.

The most devastating population losses occurred after sustained outside contact. Dutch sailors arrived in 1722, on Easter Sunday, giving the island its European name. In the nineteenth century, slave raids removed many Rapanui, while introduced diseases killed others. These events reduced the population dramatically.

Today, travellers can explore Rano Raraku, Ahu Tongariki and the sandy beach at Anakena. Yet Rapa Nui is not an abandoned civilisation or an open-air museum. It remains the homeland of the Rapanui people, whose living culture gives the famous stone figures their deeper meaning.