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Thor Heyerdahl and the Kon-Tiki Museum's research in the Marquesas and on Rapa Nui/ Easter Island, 1955–63

Reidar Solsvik

When Thor Heyerdahl was attempting to live a primitive life on Fatuhiva, in the Marquesas, in 1937, did he already dream of undertaking a large-scale exploration of the prehistory of the Polynesian islands (Bakke and Solsvik 2020; Heyerdahl 1936)? Being on a one-man (and wife) expedition to collect insects and other fauna examples for the Museum of Natural History in Oslo, Norway, he developed an appetite for prehistoric explorations. His goal at the end of his first expedition was to go home and organise a large cross-disciplinary expedition to study and research Fatuhivan prehistory (Figure 29.1), whose remains he had found scattered throughout the landscape (Heyerdahl 1937).

Following his Kon-Tiki Expedition by raft from Peru to the Tuamotus in 1947, which catapulted him to global fame as an adventurer par excellence, Heyerdahl reached the pinnacle of his career as a Polynesian ethnologist at the 10th Pacific Science Congress in Hawai'i in 1961 (Figure 29.2). Here he participated in writing some of the conclusions of *Section X. Anthropology*, and it was presented by contemporary newspapers as one of his great victories. Heyerdahl and the Kon-Tiki Museum in Oslo, only founded 12 years prior, volunteered at the congress to become one of the key institutions for future scientific research and conservation of Polynesian prehistory.



Figure 29.1. After Thor Heyerdahl returned from Fatuhiva in 1938, he organised a window exhibit with his photos and some of the artefacts that he had collected. This shows his growing interest in the prehistory of these islands and his love for museum exhibitions.

Source: Photo from the Kon-Tiki Museum Archive.



Figure 29.2. Thor Heyerdahl lecturing at the 10th Pacific Science Congress in Honolulu, 1961.

Source: Photo from the Kon-Tiki Museum Archive.



Figure 29.3. Excavation of a habitation cave in the Hanapete'o Valley, Hiva Oa, by Arne Skjølsvold and Gonzalo Figueroa, one of two teams sent to investigate Marquesas prehistory by the Kon-Tiki Museum in 1963.

Source: Photo from the Kon-Tiki Museum Archive, photographed by Arne Skjølsvold.

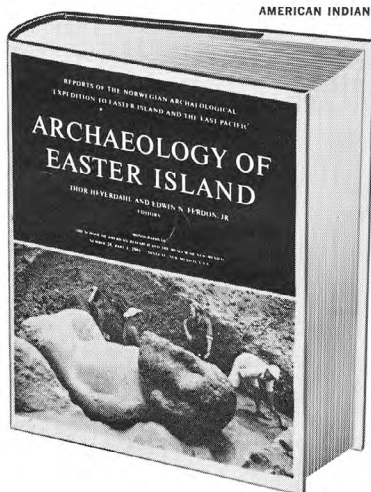
Teaming up with Kenneth Emory and Yoshihiko H. Sinoto of the Bishop Museum on the Board of the Pacific Area Archaeological Program (PAAP, see also Dotte-Sarout et al., **Chapter 30**, this volume), Heyerdahl was going to lead the exploration of the prehistory of the Marquesas Islands (Solsvik 2006:193–202). They made plans for a multi-pronged research program, deploying three field teams. The Bishop Museum team, led by Sinoto, was to undertake a variety of work in the island group. Another team led by Carlyle S. Smith of the Museum of Anthropology, Kansas University, and financed by the Kon-Tiki Museum, was going to investigate *tohua* structures (centres for assembly and public festivities) in Autonoa (Smith n.d.). A third team, headed by Arne Skjølsvold and Gonzalo Figueroa, was to search for early habitation sites and early ceremonial architecture around Hiva Oa (Figure 29.3), and in particular in the Puamau Valley on the island's north-east coast (Skjølsvold 1972, n.d.).

But a snake had crawled into paradise. In 1961, Heyerdahl had privately financed the publication of the investigations and excavations carried out on Rapa Nui/Easter Island by the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific in 1955–56 (Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961). American anthropologist and archaeologist William Mulloy had argued in a private letter to Heyerdahl that the reports should be published by a well-known publisher of Pacific archaeology such as the Bernice Pauahi

Bishop Museum. However, due to a backlog at the Bishop Museum Press, the reports would not be put into print until several years later. Heyerdahl opted to edit and publish these reports himself (Figure 29.4) with the help of American ethnologist and archaeologist Edwin N. Ferdon, the School of American Research and his Swedish publisher – Forum Publishing House.

THOR HEYERDAHL'S

famous bestsellers *Kon-Tiki* and *Aku-Aku* raised a storm of controversy over Polynesian race origins and "the secrets of Easter Island." Now *EASTER ISLAND* is the official documentation for *Aku-Aku* as AMERICAN INDIANS IN THE PACIFIC WAS for *Kon-Tiki*.



Thor Heyerdahl is to be awarded the coveted VEGA MEDAL by the King of Sweden on April 24th for contributions to Geographical Science.

ARCHAEOLOGY OF EASTER ISLAND

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MARCH 19, 1962

PUBLISHERS' WEEKLY

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Figure 29.4. Advertisement for *Reports of the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific. Volume 1: Archaeology of Easter Island* published in 1961 and edited by Thor Heyerdahl and Edwin N. Ferdon Jr.

Source: Scan from the Kon-Tiki Museum Archive.

American Anthropologist decided to review *Reports of the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific. Volume I: Archaeology of Easter Island* in its fall edition in 1963. Acting on the advice of a longstanding Heyerdahl antagonist, Swiss ethnologist Alfred Métraux, the editor chose the German anthropologist and former wartime German cryptographer Thomas Barthel (Barthel 1963). Originally interested in the undeciphered rongo-rongo script of Rapa Nui/Easter Island, Barthel had studied anthropology and prehistory, and had recently concluded a lengthy fieldwork season on Rapa Nui. It was no secret that Barthel had extensively criticised Heyerdahl to his friends and colleagues. Barthel also claimed that he had identified a palaeolithic substratum on the island during archaeological excavations. Heyerdahl flew into a rage when he received the news that Barthel was going to review *Archaeology of Easter Island*. He considered this to be an orchestrated attempt at a professional assassination, not only of himself but also of his colleagues Ferdon, Smith, Mulloy and Skjølsvold. Heyerdahl concluded that they would not receive a fair review and that the scientific reports of the five months' intensive study of Rapa Nui's prehistory were not being taken seriously, mainly because the work had been financed and published by Heyerdahl himself. In a typical response, attempting to protect his friends, Heyerdahl stated publicly that he was withdrawing from the field of Polynesian research (Heyerdahl 1963). Consequently, he also pulled out of the PAAP scientific program planned at the 11th Pacific Science Congress two years previously. The fieldwork already organised and funded by the Kon-Tiki Museum went ahead as planned, but without the massive attention and funds that Heyerdahl's international fame might have contributed.

We can only speculate whether or not archaeological excavations carried out in the Marquesas in the early 1960s would have been dramatically different if Heyerdahl had stayed the course. Very few of these extensive excavations were ever published, and much remains unpublished even today. The Bishop Museum investigations are comparatively well known from internal reports. The most extensive publication became Skjølsvold's *Excavations of a Habitation Cave, Hanapete'o, Hiva Oa, Marquesas*, published by the Bishop Museum as *Pacific Anthropological Records* no. 16 in 1972. Sinoto published a few shorter papers summarising the most important data, which have been highly influential (i.e. Sinoto 1966).

Why did these three eminent researchers not publish more extensively? The main reason seems to have been that the excavation results themselves were regarded as a failure. This research program was organised as

a further exploration of the pioneering research of the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition's excavation work on Hiva Oa and Nukuhiva in 1956 (Figure 29.5), and of Robert C. Suggs's more extensive work (1961), in particular his excavation of the Hanatekua dune site with its very early carbon-14 dates (see also Spriggs and Howes, **Chapter 26**, this volume). Sinoto, Skjølsvold, Figueroa and Smith clearly expected to find sites of an equal antiquity and were probably disappointed when all their samples only produced dates from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries (Emory and Sinoto 1965; Skjølsvold 1972, n.d.; Smith n.d.). The belief in a far earlier cultural stratum in these islands made their work seem insignificant in comparison to Suggs's very early dates. In fact, Skjølsvold and Figueroa's investigation of a developmental sequence of a *tohua* in the Puamau Valley, detailing the architectural development of this site from c. AD 1450 onwards, made a significant contribution towards the study of Polynesian ceremonial structures. The lack of a driving force focused on rapid publication of results and further investigations, which Thor Heyerdahl surely would have been dedicated to accomplishing, probably contributed to the disintegration of the project and its vanishing focus.



Figure 29.5. Excavation of 'Site of Paeke', Taipai Valley, Nukuhiva, in 1956.

This was one of two sites in the Marquesas excavated by Thor Heyerdahl's Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific.

Source: Photo from the Kon-Tiki Museum Archive, photographed by Erling Schjerven.

The lack of success of this project – as defined by unearthing early radiocarbon dates – and the failure to publish the results of its many excavations have contributed to the lingering idea of a great antiquity of Polynesian culture in the Marquesas, which was revived in the 1980s. This belief was only dispelled by fieldwork by Barry Rolett (Rolett 1998; Rolett and Conte 1995), Matthew Spriggs's (1989) idea of chronometric hygiene and further archaeological investigations by Atholl Anderson (Anderson et al. 1994).

The most important result of the initial collaboration between the Bishop Museum and the Kon-Tiki Museum was continued only by Sinoto through his extensive excavations of the Hane Dune site.

Rapa Nui/Easter Island

Thor Heyerdahl first read about Easter Island in 1926, when the St George expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific was financed by a media consortium (Bakke and Solsvik 2020). His own expedition in 1955–56 followed almost exactly the same route as the British expedition 30 years before.

Unlike the St George expedition, Heyerdahl did not rely on a media consortium to finance the expedition. Like Katherine Routledge, almost 40 years prior (see also Van Tilburg, **Chapter 18**, this volume), Heyerdahl used his own private funds and enjoyed the resulting total freedom to investigate. Unlike the Routledges, who opted out of paying the salary for an archaeologist because they wanted to install a proper bath on their yacht (Van Tilburg 2003), Heyerdahl focused on bringing along professional scholars. He initially hired three of them, and when plans to bring a palaeobotanist fell through, Heyerdahl hired two additional archaeologists.

On 27 October the expedition ship *Chr. Bjelland* dropped anchor outside the famous *ahu* (stone platform) Vinapu on the north-east coast of Rapa Nui with Heyerdahl, Skjølsvold, Ferdon, Mulloy, Smith and Figueroa on deck. Several hundred local residents and a handful of Chilean officials greeted the famous Norwegian explorer. This was the beginning of five intensive months of survey and excavations, the first professional subsurface archaeology ever undertaken on this isolated

island. The resulting publication presented a first cultural chronology of Rapa Nui based on archaeological methods and became the standard reference for its prehistory for several decades.

Heyerdahl presented his own interpretation of Rapa Nui history in *Aku-Aku: The Secret of Easter Island* (1958). The book revamped public interest in the island and contributed greatly to the increase in tourism in the late 1960s after the Hanga-roa Airport opened. For Heyerdahl, Rapa Nui was his dream of paradise come true – not as a lush, white sandy beach with palm trees and beautiful women, but as an island permeated with a prehistoric and cultural mystery that he could solve. Who had carved the monolithic *moai* (stone statues) and when? How had they been transported from the Rano Raraku quarry to the *ahu* around the island's perimeter? What was their purpose? Rapa Nui was the island that had awoken his interest in the prehistory of humankind when he was only 12 years old. In high school he told a classmate: 'It's not only in geography that we can make discoveries. There are still many great challenges in the world, among other things the mystery of Easter Island' (Jacoby 1968:238). When he returned to the island in 1986, Heyerdahl came full circle when he was adopted by the *korohua*, the council of elders on Rapa Nui. As a member of the local community, he gained rights to settle permanently there if he so chose.

The Kon-Tiki Museum has continued the relationship with the local community and has undertaken several archaeological projects on the island, including the excavation of *ahu NauNau* at Anakena, 1986–88, discovering the earliest settlement to date of the island (Skjølsvold et al. 1994). In the spring of 2019, the Kon-Tiki Museum and the Chilean Government – on behalf of the Rapa Nui community – signed a memorandum of understanding regarding repatriation of archaeological artefacts from Heyerdahl's work on the island in 1955–56. The relationship between Rapa Nui and Heyerdahl thus continues through his scientific legacy, the Kon-Tiki Museum.

Objects highlighted in this chapter were on display at the Kon-Tiki Museum from July to September 2020 and from July to September 2021.

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