



At Ahu Tongariki, the largest ceremonial altar, 15 statues stand on a platform facing inward from the sea. After an earthquake near Chile in 1960, a tsunami swept all 15 statues off their platform, hurling some of these huge stone megaliths hundreds of meters inland. A Japanese tourist later donated a crane for use in restoring this altar.

annually. Chile has declared the entire island a historic monument.

Polynesian culture was able to spread across the Pacific within the great triangle formed by New Zealand, Hawaii and Easter Island due to the fact that Polynesian mariners had devised ways to navigate in small boats between very widely-dispersed islands. Also known as Rapa Nui, its Polynesian name, Easter Island was probably colonized by mariners from the Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia in about 400 AD. The oldest ceremonial altars and statues are similar to those found in the Marquesas. However, later development of the tall gaunt statues with elongated faces and ears for which Easter Island is famous is unique to Easter Island. Mysterious "rongorongo" hieroglyphs found on the island have never been deciphered.

Curiously, the first inhabitants called their island "Navel of the World." It is thought that five clans on Easter Island, each of which had its own lands, attempted to display their strength through the construction of complex monuments of ancestor worship. Incredibly, over the centuries about 1,200 monolithic stone statues were quarried at Rano

Raraku, on the sides of an extinct volcano. The statues were then transported to their various resting sites on the periphery of the island, perhaps by means of wooden rollers. (A 1986 experiment showed that it was also possible for 15 men to move a medium-sized statue in an upright position by means of ropes.) Each statue originally wore a red topknot which was

quarried at another location distant from Rano Raraku. In addition, large round pebbles laid out in long rows in front of the statues were all gathered from one particular beach. Virtually all of the statues faced inward so as to watch over the clans' ancestral lands.

The remarkable monoliths, carved from tuff, a soft volcanic stone, range in height from 3 to 12 meters. Some weigh more than 45,500 kg (50 tons). The largest weighs 74,500 kg (82 tons) and wore a topknot weighing 10,000 kg (11 tons). It has been theorized that the engineers, quarrymen and sculptors were paid from surplus agricultural production by the families which commissioned the statues. After about 1400 AD the quarrying slowed and then eventually ceased. This might have been due to deforestation caused by production of rollers which



The reed island-studded fresh water tanks far below in the 3,000-meter-wide crater of Rano Kau provides drinking water for Easter Island.