The Last of the Lands

The statues were polysemic symbols utilized within a multi-dimensional social context, and were central to the functioning of a cult which centered upon ancestor worship, fertility and rites of passage.


12.1 Easter Island

On some unknown date in the first half of the first millennium AD, a flotilla of Polynesian pirogues, probably coming from the Marquesas Islands, landed on a very small island lost in the immensity of the Pacific Ocean, formed a million years earlier by volcanic eruptions and never before inhabited.

According to a legend the discoverers called the island Te-Pito-te-Henua: the last of the lands. (Today it is called Rapa Nui by its inhabitants.) Some 1300 years later, on Easter’s Monday 1722, the Dutch captain Jacob Roggeveen was the first European to leave his footprint on that same island, which was therefore known, from then on, as Easter Island.

It is a triangle of land 160 square kilometers large, spotted with dead volcanoes and incredibly far away from anything and anybody. The closest land (besides the Sala-y-Gomez rock; see below) on the west side is the Pitcairn Island, 2000 kilometers away (famous because it was the last destination of the Bounty mutineers); the Chile coast, on the east side, is 3600 kilometers away.

The history of the island was carefully reconstructed—not without difficulty—using local legends, archaeological data, and most of all genetic and paleobotanical analysis (Barthel 1978, Fisher 2002). On the island a form of writing called Rongo-Rongo was used, but unfortunately very few texts, written on small wooden tables, survived the destruction of the indigenous culture by the Europeans. In any case, all the linguistic, archaeological, botanical, and genetic data show that the Polynesians reached Easter Island, as said above, in the first centuries AD, probably around the fourth century.
The Easter Island colonization happened within that amazing expansion that, starting in remote times, brought the Polynesians to colonize Tahiti, the Marquesa Islands, and eventually Hawaii and New Zealand. On Easter Island there is basically a unique landfall, the Anakena Beach; legend has it that Hoto Matua, the first king of the island, landed there. On Anakena Beach the newcomers built a village with oval-shaped huts, and it is believed that they used their canoes to make the roofs. Easter Island, which today is completely bare, was at the time rich with palm trees and inhabited by a vast population of birds. The newcomers brought other plants with them, such as banana trees, and thus were able to build a prosperous and self-sufficient economy. The population grew to the incredible number of 10,000 people, divided into clans and living in different villages.

In the meanwhile, for unknown reasons, a cult was born, about which we know very little. This cult was based on the worshipping of the large stone statues that have made Easter Island famous: the Moai. Doubtless the collective effort required to build the Moai was huge, and it is believed that it started or at least accelerated the destruction of the island’s resources, since the palm wood was certainly used in abundance in the process of moving and placing the statues. The civilization of the island collapsed around the year 1600 AD. The production of the statues stopped, the forests disappeared, and the soil eroded because of the lack of trees and became barren.

Perhaps the idea that the island residents thoughtlessly destroyed the