

Thor Heyerdahl and the Kon-Tiki Museum's research in the Marquesas and on Easter Island 1955-63

Already when Thor Heyerdahl was attempting to live a primitive life on Fatuhiva, in the Marquesas, in 1937, did he dream of undertaking a big-scale exploration of the prehistory of the Polynesian islands (Bakke and Solsvik 2019; Heyerdahl 1936). Being on a one-man (and wife) expedition in order to collect insects and other fauna examples for the Museum of Natural History in Oslo, he developed an apatite for prehistoric explorations. His goal at the end of his first expedition was to go home and organize a large cross-disciplinary expedition to study and research the Fatuhivan prehistory, which remains he had found scattered throughout the landscape (Heyerdahl 1937).



Fig. 1: Thor Heyerdahl made an exhibition of photos and objects from Fatuhiva at a photo shop in Oslo upon his return to Norway in 1938.

Thor Heyerdahl reached the pinnacle of his career as a Polynesian ethnologist at the 11th Science Congress in Hawaii in 1961.



Fig. 2: Heyerdahl presenting a paper at the 11th Pacific Science Congress in Hawai'i, 1961.

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, only founded 12 years prior, volunteered at the congress to become one of the key institutions of future scientific research and conservation of Polynesian prehistory.

The Marquesas

Teaming up with Kenneth Emory and Yoshiko H. Sinoto of the Bishop Museum, Thor 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 lead by Yoshihiko H. Sinoto was going to do various work in the island group. Another team lead by Carlyle S. Smith of the Museum of Anthropology, Kansas University, and financed by the Kon-Tiki Museum, was going to investigate tohua-structures in Autonoa (Smith n.d.). A third team headed by Arne Skjølsvold and Gonzalo Figueroa was going to search for early habitation sites and early ceremonial architecture around Hiva Oa, 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, Thor Heyerdahl had privately financed the publication of the investigations and excavations carried out on Rapa Nui by the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific 1955-56 (Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961). William Mulloy had argued in a private letter to Heyerdahl that the reports should be published by a well-

known publisher of Pacific archaeology, like the B.P. 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 with the help of Edwin N. Ferdon, the School of American Research, and his Swedish publisher – Forum Publishing House.

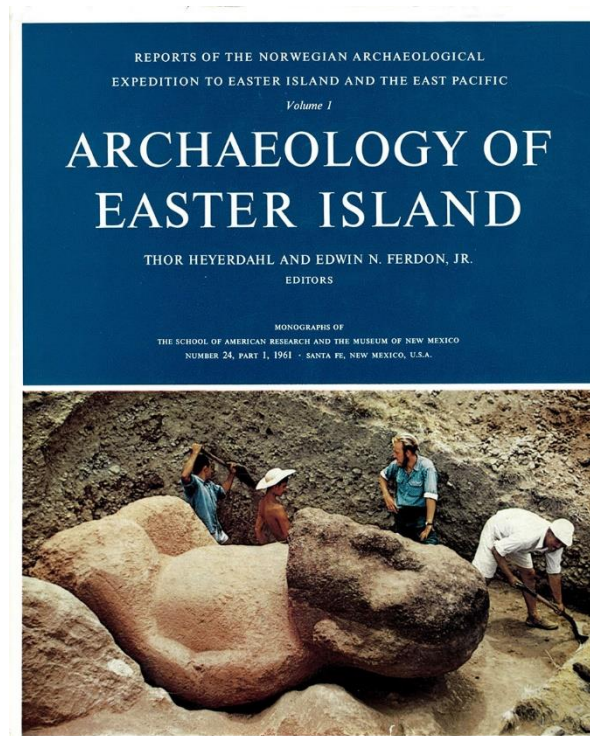


Fig. 3: Photo of dustcover of Archaeology of Easter Island.

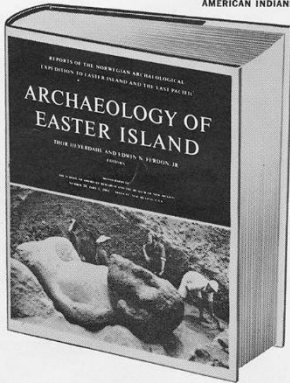
American Anthropologist decided to review Reports of the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific. Volume I: Archaeology of Easter Island, in its fall edition in 1963. Acting on advise of an old Heyerdahl-antagonist, ethnologist Alfred Metraux, the editor of choose the German anthropologist and chiffer-expert, Thomas Barthel (Barthel 1963). Originally interested in the undeciphered rongorongo script, Barthel had studied anthropology and prehistory, and had recently concluded a lengthy fieldwork on Rapa Nui. It was no secret that Barthel had extensively slandered Heyerdahl to his friends and colleagues. Barthel also claimed that he had identified a paleolithic sub-stratum on the island during archaeological excavations.

Thor Heyerdahl went ballistic when he got 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 of his comrade-in-arms, the archaeologists Edwin Ferdon, Carlyle S. Smith, William Mulloy, and Arne Skjølsvold. Heyerdahl concluded that they would not get a fair review and

that the scientific reports of the five-months intensive study of Rapa Nui's prehistory was not taken seriously, mainly because of the work being financed and published by Heyerdahl.

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

Reports of the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific; **Thor Heyerdahl and Edwin N. Ferdon, Jr.**, editors with contributions by William Mulloy, Arne Skjolsvold, Carlyle S. Smith.


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Fig. 4: Ad for *Archaeology of Easter Island*.

In a typical response, attempting to protect his friends, Heyerdahl made public that he withdrew from the field of Polynesian research (Heyerdahl 1963). Consequently, he also pulled out of the scientific program planned at the 11th Pacific Science Congress two years previously. The fieldwork already organized and funded by the Kon-Tiki Museum went ahead as planned, but without the massive attention and funds that Thor Heyerdahl's international fame might have contributed to the project.



Fig. 5: Thor Heyerdahl and Arne Skjølsvold looking at artefacts from the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific, 1955-56, in the basement of the newly constructed permanent Kon-Tiki Museum.

However, we can only speculate whether or not archaeological excavations carried out in the Marquesas in the early 1960s would have been dramatically different if Thor Heyerdahl had stayed his course. Very little of these extensive excavations were ever published, and much even remains unpublished today. The Bishop Museum investigations are well known from internal reports. The most extensive publication became Arne 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. Yoshihiko H. Sinoto, published a few shorter papers with the most important data, but papers that has been highly influential (i.e. Sinoto 1966).

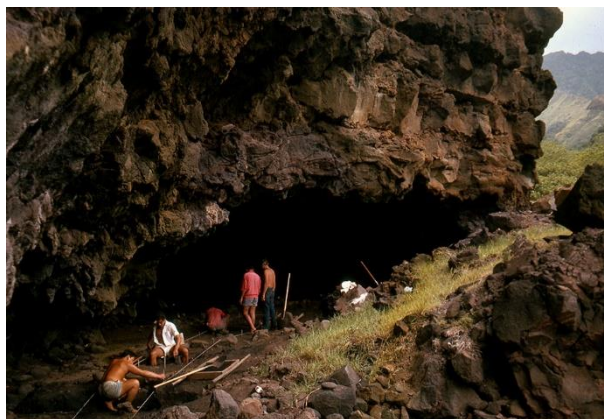


Fig. 6: Excavation of cave in progress, Hana Pete'o Valley, Hiva Oa, 1963.

Why did this (not?) come to pass? Or, rather 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 organized as a further exploration of the pioneering research of the

Norwegian Archaeological Expedition's excavations work on Hiva Oa and Nukuhiva in 1956, and Robert C. Suggs more extensive work (1961), in particular his excavation of the Hanatekua dune site with its very early carbon-14 dates.



Fig. 7: Local workers screening the excavated soil directly in the ocean, Hana Pete'o Valley, Hiva Oa, 1963.

Sinoto, Skjølsvold, Figueroa, and Smith clearly expected to find sites of an equal antiquity and was probably disappointed when all their samples only produced dates from the 14th to 18th 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 insignificant in comparison to Suggs' very early dates. In particular, Arne Skjølsvold and Gonzalo Figueroa's investigation of a developmental sequence of a *tohua* at in the Puamau Valley, detailing the architectural development of this site from c. AD 1450 onwards, would have made a significant contribution towards the study of Polynesian ceremonial structures. Another aspect is that 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 vanishing focus.

It is clear that the lack of success – as defined by unearthing early radiocarbon dates - enjoyed by this project and the lack of publishing the results of the many excavations, have contributed to the lingering idea of a great antiquity of Polynesian culture in the Marquesas, which were revived in the 1990s. This belief was only dispelled by fieldwork by Barry Rolett (Rolett 1998; Rolett and Conte 1995) and the idea of chronometric hygiene of Matthew Spriggs (1989), and investigations by Atholl Anderson (Anderson et.al. 1994).

Of course, the most important result of the initial collaboration between the B.P. Bishop Museum and the Kon-Tiki Museum, was continued only by Yoshihiko H. Sinoto through his extensive excavations of the Hane dune site.

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 2019). His own expedition in 1955-56 followed almost the exact route as the English expedition thirty years before.



Fig. 8: A facsimile of the article about the St. George Expedition at Easter Island, from the Norwegian magazine Allers, December 1926.

Unlike the St. George expedition Heyerdahl did not rely on a media consortium to finance the expedition. Like Katherine Routledge, almost forty years prior, Heyerdahl used his own private funds, and enjoyed the total freedom to investigate resulting from being his own master. Unlike the Routledges, who opted out of paying the salary for an archaeologist because they wanted to install a proper bath on their yacht (Tilburg 2003) Heyerdahl focused on bring along professional scholars. He initially hired three of them, and when plans to bring a paleo-botanist struck out, Heyerdahl choose to hire two extra archaeologists.

On October 27th the expedition ship Chr. Bjelland dropped anchor outside the famous ahu Vinapu on the northeast coast of Rapa Nui with Thor Heyerdahl, Arne Skjølsvold, Edwin N. Ferdon, William Mulloy, Carlyle S. Smith, and Gonzalo 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 sub-surface archaeology ever undertaken at 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.



Fig. 9: Three young sailors in the bow of M/S Chr. Bjelland, ready for a South Seas adventure. From left: Thor Heyerdahl Jr., Johan Kloster, and Harold Heiner.

Thor Heyerdahl presented his own interpretation of Rapa Nui history in his *Aku-Aku. The Mystery of Easter Island* (1958). The book revamped public interest in the island and has contributed greatly to the increasing tourism coming to the islands in the late 1960s after the Hangarua Airport opened.



Fig. 10: Bill Mulloy and Thor Heyerdahl at ahu Vinapu, Rapa Nui, looking at a newly discovered statue type.

For Thor Heyerdahl this was both his dream of Paradise come through – not as a lush, white sandy beach with palm-trees and beautiful women – but as an island

permeated with a prehistoric and cultural mystery which he could solve. It was the island that had awoken his interest in the prehistory of mankind when he was only twelve 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 Thor Heyerdahl came full circle, when he was adopted by the korohua – the council of elders on Rapa Nui – because as a member of the local community he gained rights to settle permanently there.



Fig. 11: Excavation of Site of Paeke, Taipu Valley, Nukuhiva, 1956.

The Kon-Tiki Museum has continued the relationship with the local community and have 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 Thor Heyerdahl's work on the island in 1955-56. The relationship between Rapa Nui and Thor Heyerdahl continues through his scientific legacy, the Kon-Tiki Museum.

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