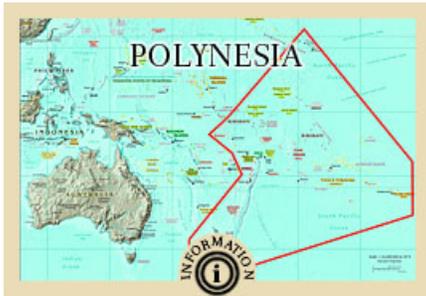


Easter Island Article (modified)

The Mystery of Easter Island

On Easter Day 1722, explorers landed on Easter Island. A civilization in the middle of the Pacific Ocean was about to meet the outside world for the first time in hundreds of years. The strangers were about to find something very strange - an island dotted with hundreds of huge stone statues and a society that was not as ancient as they expected. The first meeting was a clash of cultures, and sailors killed ten natives within minutes of landing. Where were the Islanders from? Why and how had they built the figures? Modern science is piecing together the story, but it is far too late for the Easter Islanders themselves. The Islanders were wiped out by a series of disasters that brought a population of 12,000 down to just 111 in a few hundred years.



From where did they sail?

Scientists have discovered through studying the DNA of skeletons and carbon dating of artifacts that the Islanders are originally from Polynesia. They landed on the island around 700 CE. It seems they lived in isolation for the next thousand years on an island measuring 22x11km, roughly the size of Jersey. The society had plenty of sea life and farming to feed a growing population, estimated at up to 12,000 people. Their success was demonstrated through hundreds of huge stone figures, called *moai*.

The statue builders

There are nearly 900 *moai* on Easter Island, in various stages of construction. An archaeologist discovered that the figures once had eyes. He believes the statues were overseeing the people, part of a Polynesian tradition of ancestor worship. Each statue was different to recognize a particular chief. With their backs to the sea they could inspire and protect the Islanders.

Scarce, violent times

That protection fell apart in the 1600s. The *moai* were torn down. Legends talk of a time of hardship, terror and cannibalism. Archaeological evidence includes wooden carvings of starving people, and the appearance of a new invention - spear tips. Examination of skeletons from that time confirms the violence in the Island's society. The people are described as, "at war with themselves."

The civil war happened at the same time as changes in diets. The Island's bird life seems to have disappeared, as well as porpoise and tuna from the sea. A land of plenty had become desperately short of food. Had the population overexploited natural resources? It seems there is a simpler answer - the cutting down of the last tree.

Studies of pollen from lakes show Easter Island was once covered with palm trees. However, when explorers arrived in 1722, there were no trees left. The society relied on wood to make canoes. Without trees, their ability to fish for food was limited. Making *moai* also used huge numbers of trees. Soil erosion with no trees hurt farming. And there were no canoes to use to escape. Trapped, the Islanders turned on each other.

Final assault

After a period of recovery for their civilization, the real killer of the original Easter Islanders came across the ocean. After 1722, explorers began to visit Easter Island, bringing their own diseases. In 1862, slave traders from Peru took away 1,500 people, a third of the population. Transported to South America, within one year all but 15 were dead. They were brought back to their homes on Easter Island. Little did the Islanders know with what they had returned. A smallpox epidemic left only 111 alive by 1877.

Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/horizon/2003/easterisland.shtml>