

A large, dark, weathered Moai statue stands prominently on a grassy hill. The statue is carved from a single piece of stone and has a long, narrow face with a prominent nose and a small, closed mouth. It is positioned in the center of the frame, facing right. In the background, other smaller Moai statues are visible on the grassy slope, and the ocean is visible in the distance under a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

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The Mysteries of Easter Island

Written by Cynthia Kennedy Henzel

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Table of Contents

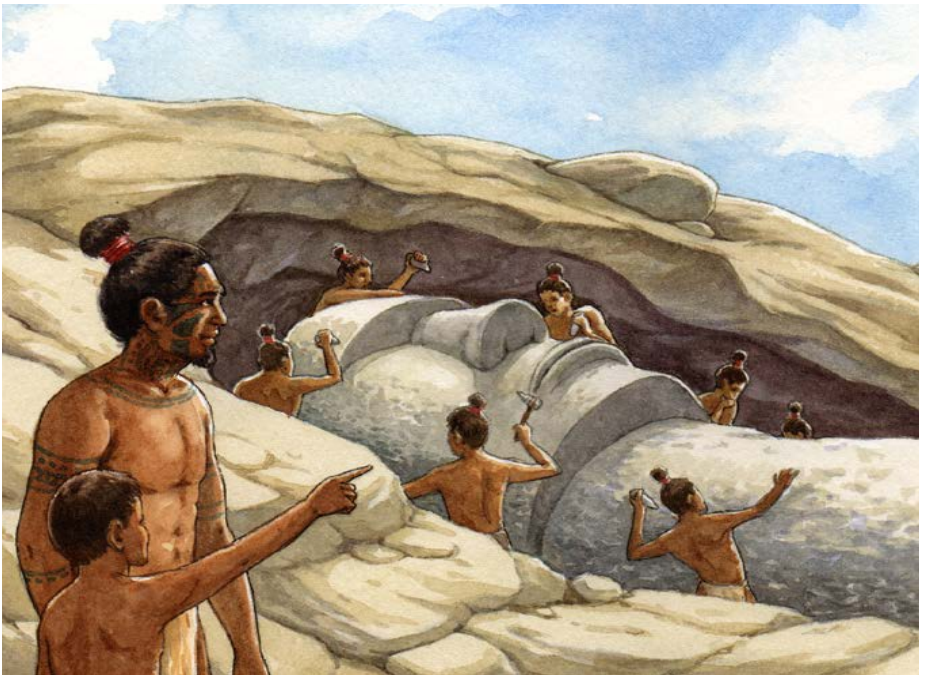
Island of Mystery	4
Who Made the Moai?	5
Why Were the Moai Made?	6
Walking Statues?	7
The Mysterious End	11
More Clues	15
Glossary	16



Easter Island is home to almost nine hundred mysterious stone statues.

Island of Mystery

Far in the South Pacific lies a lonely place called Easter Island. The island is home to about six thousand people and hundreds of giant stone statues called **moai**. It is also home to many mysteries.



Who Made the Moai?

Scientists think that the first people came to Easter Island between eight hundred and twelve hundred years ago. The island is very hard to get to. Other lands with people are more than a thousand miles away across the ocean. So, scientists think that the island people probably made the moai.



Many of the moai have hats carved from red volcanic rock.

Why Were the Moai Made?

Scientists are not sure why the moai were made. Many think that the moai are **symbols** of power and **religion**. Others think that the moai were made to remind people of their **ancestors**. Of the 887 moai on the island, only 7 face the ocean. A **legend** says that those statues were of seven people who visited the island before it was settled.



The moai were carved lying down using only stone tools.

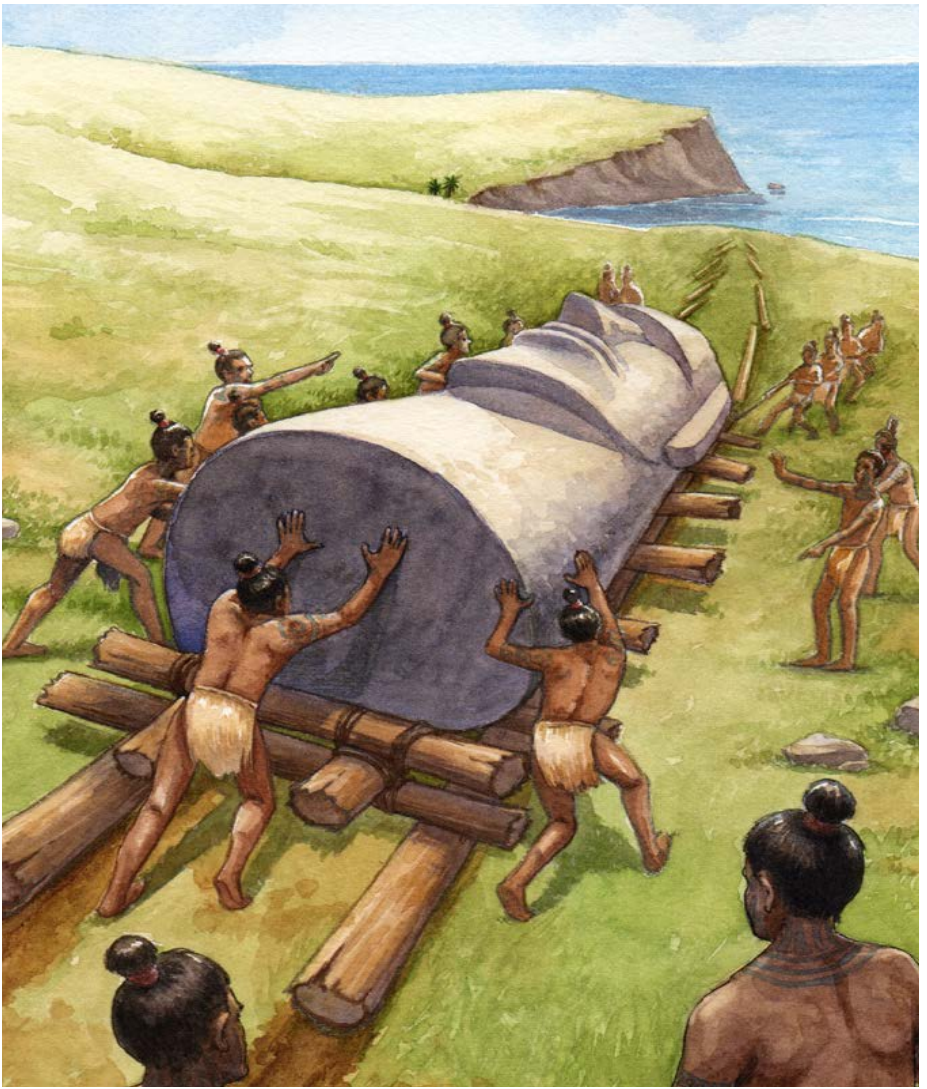
Walking Statues?

Scientists have found a pit on the island where the moai were cut from a stone wall. Scientists have also discovered the stone tools used to make the moai. However, they're still not sure how the people moved the moai to the edge of the island.

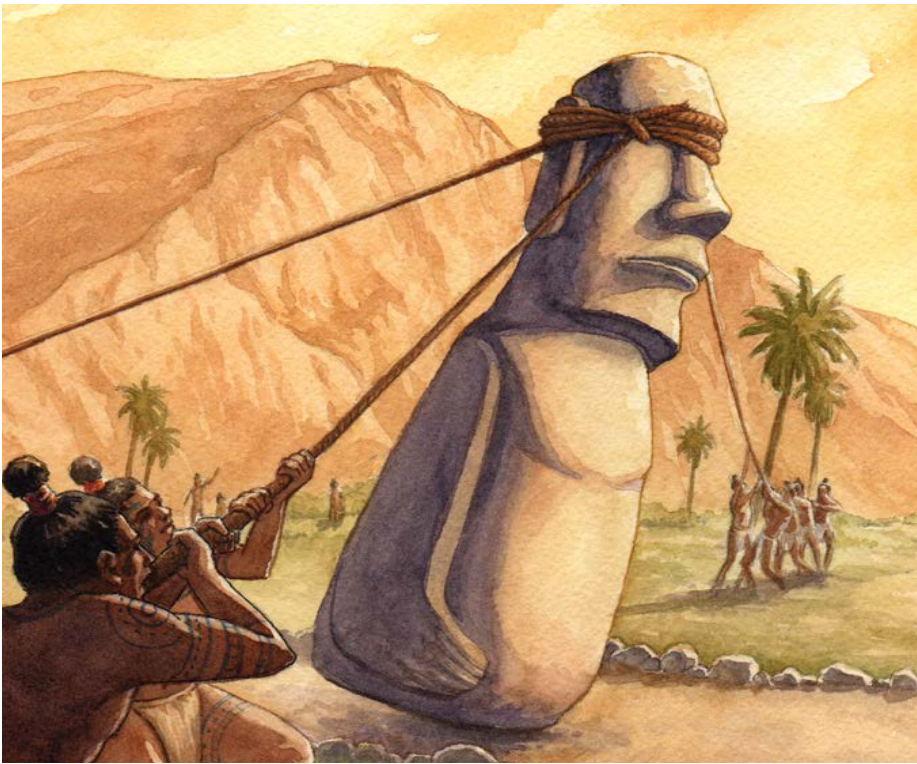


The tallest moai standing on the island is 33 feet (10 m) high.

Many moai are the size of two tall men. They are as heavy as a school bus. They are too heavy to drag around. The people of the island had no carts.



Some scientists think the people used tree trunks to roll the moai. But some old stories say that the moai walked. Could this be true?



In 2012, scientists did some tests to see if a moai could walk. They tied long ropes to the top of a moai. People pulled on the ropes. First they pulled on one side, and then they pulled on the other. The statue rocked back and forth. The moai moved forward little by little as the people pulled. The moai was walking!



Scientists measure the ruins of a boat-shaped house on Easter Island.

The Mysterious End

What happened to the people of the island is another mystery. Some scientists think that as many as ten thousand people lived on Easter Island around the year 1300. They think this because they study how much trash was left behind by the early people on the island.

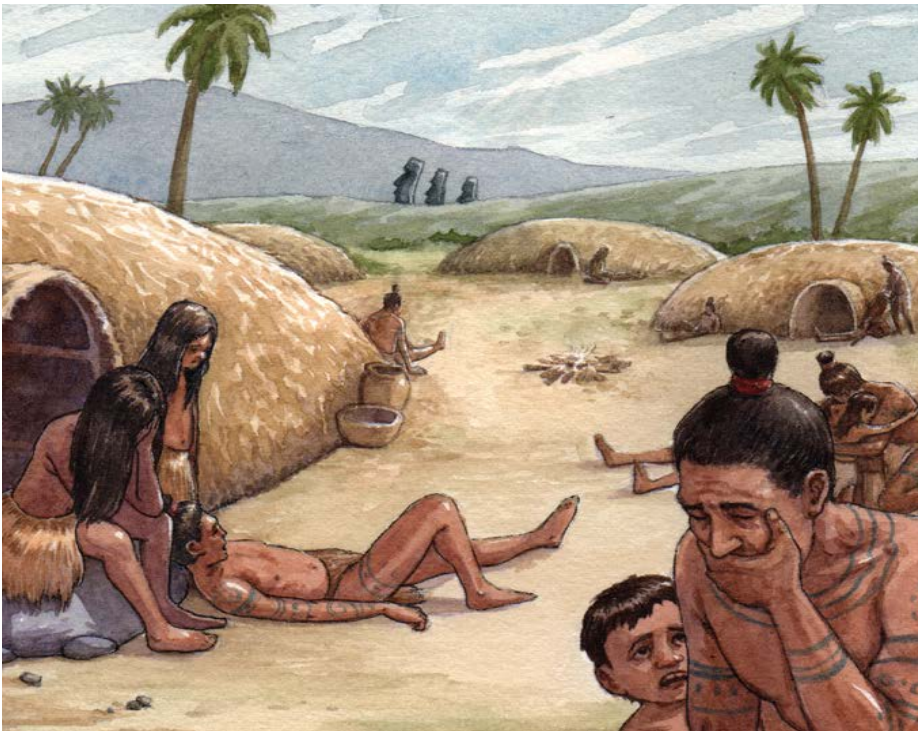


By the year 1868, all the moai on Easter Island had been knocked over. The ones standing today have been put back up.

Yet explorers from Europe found less than three thousand people living on the island in the 1700s. By that time, there were only a few trees left. The people of the island weren't growing much food. The visitors found moai lying on the ground, pushed over by the island people. Some finished moai were left along paths to the sea. What happened?



Scientists have many ideas about what happened to the islanders. One idea is that the people of the island cut down too many trees. Or maybe rats that came to the island with the people ate the tree seeds. Without trees, people would not have been able to build fishing boats. Soil for growing crops would have washed away without tree roots to hold it in place.



Another idea is that the number of people on the island grew too fast. The island was not big enough to grow food for everyone.

Some scientists think the people of the island had a war. Others think that many of them got sick and died. No one knows for sure what happened to the people.



Carvings of a “birdman” can be seen on the backs of some moai. The worship of the “birdman” eventually became the main religion of the islanders.

More Clues

Today, scientists work to understand writing left by the early people of the island. Others study designs on the partly buried moai. These clues, and other new discoveries, may someday help explain the mysteries of Easter Island.

Glossary

- ancestors** (*n.*) family members from long ago (p. 6)
- legend** (*n.*) an old story that is believed to be true but cannot be proven (p. 6)
- moai** (*n.*) statues of human figures found on Easter Island, each carved from a single piece of rock (p. 4)
- religion** (*n.*) a system of beliefs and practices to serve or worship a God or gods (p. 6)
- scientists** (*n.*) people who study one or more fields of science (p. 5)
- symbols** (*n.*) objects, pictures, or signs that stand for ideas, letters, or words (p. 6)

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