

IMAGINE

Just why the Moai on the slopes of Rano Raraku are all blind and the shore Moai have eyes may be a mystery, but the question that intrigues me the most is: *why were the statues along the coast all lying face down, side by side, dead on their bellies, pointing inland, their bases still resting on the Ahus?*

There are a critical 27 years between 1837, when they were reported to be erect, and 1864 when the first missionary arrived on the island and reported that they had all been toppled. What happened in this period, and what caused it to happen? Was it a natural disaster or a story of man-made destruction?

I think the best way to explain the real tragedy of Rapa Nui is by telling the story as a Victorian melodrama, because the truth could be horrifyingly awful. Although I believe I know what happened and can provide a motive, I, of course, have no proof, so this is just my own theory.

Imagine, if you will, a dining room in Lima in the house of one of the rich nitrate magnates in the year 1861. The ladies have left the table and the conversation has turned to the topic on everyone's mind, money. Their wealth depends on the mining of the bird guano used for fertiliser that they ship to Europe. Demand had never been higher, but the mainland sources were running out. There were mountains of guano on the islands off the coast near Pisco, south of Lima, but it was impossible to mine due to the lack of cheap labour. California's gold had begun around 1848, drawing hundreds of men north from Peru and without cheap labour the nitrate business was doomed, along with the luxurious lifestyle of the magnates.

One of the men at the table stood up. "Gentlemen, I know how to solve our problem. I know how we can get our hands on cheap labour." Everyone stopped talking. The silence was followed by an explosion of, "How? Where?"

The villain continued, "Listen and I will explain. Last year I met a captain of a whaler operating in the South Pacific and he told me about his visit last year to Easter Island to replenish the ship's drinking water. He says the island was populated by some 3,000 natives and he suggested that he could persuade a thousand of them to emigrate if we paid him well. Once we have them on Pisco we can train them to mine the guano, in return for food."

Gales of laughter followed this speech. The host said, "Oh yes, and just how do you think you are going to persuade the natives to emigrate?"

The villain smiled. "There is a way if we are desperate enough, and I believe we are. The captain who told me about the islanders offered to 'blackbird' them for us, at a price. When he arrived at the island the natives gave his crew a feast in return for rum. Feasting is a great tradition among the islanders and the bigger the feast, the more glory for the Chief. His plan is this. He lands at the village and gives a feast, inviting everyone, and continues the party for two days. Plenty of meat, bread, but also, *barrels of rum*. The natives make no alcohol for themselves, but the captain told me that the one thing they continually ask for is rum. They are mad for the stuff and his plan is that he gives them enough to make the entire village senseless.

He estimates that he would need two large whalers, each capable of carrying 500 prisoners, each crewed by 25 desperadoes. The sailors handcuff the men and women when they are intoxicated, chain them together into groups of ten so they can't run off and then load them on to the ships. This plan would work, as it is how the Australians obtain manpower for their cane

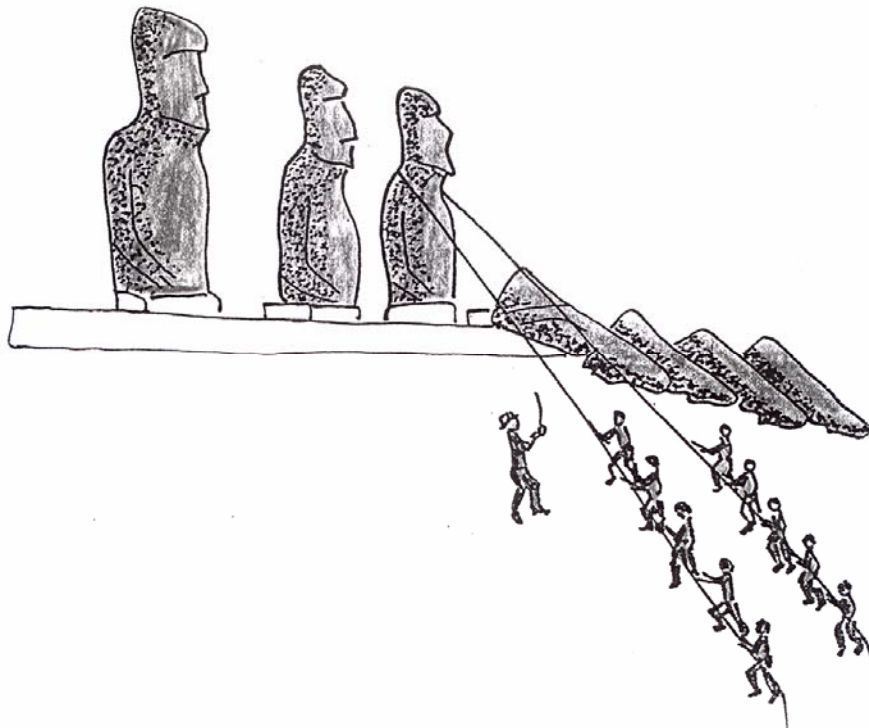
fields in Queensland. The ships will leave Easter Island carrying a workforce that will continue to multiply on Pisco, supplying labour for our future needs."

The host yelled, "Good God, man, what happens if they tell the authorities they have been kidnapped when they get here? Somebody will spill the beans. When the news leaks out all hell will break loose."

The villain continued, "First of all they will be on our islands and not be able to talk to anyone. Secondly, the Government is not going to interfere, as they are as worried as we are about revenue, they need our taxes! Thirdly, it is happening in Australia and Africa and no one has complained.

But just in case there are complaints we will tell the world that we have saved the natives from certain death by telling everyone that when the captain arrived at the island to water his ships he had found the natives involved in a civil war and that they begged him to save them by taking them away with him. To prove this, before they leave the island, he will send his sailors around the island to pull over all their statues.

This can easily be done with strong ropes. There are about 250 of these statues, and ten strong lads pulling on a rope around the neck of the statue can have one over in a jiffy. With a few gangs, the captain estimates two days at the most would see the job done. This will provide proof of the tribal wars when other ships call in at the island for water!"



"Heave-ho, me hearties"

I personally think this is what happened. On December 12th 1862 two ships arrived off the coast of Rapa Nui. The hideous scheme went according to plan and 1,000 unfortunates were captured and dragged on board the ships. A third of the island's population, including the King, his heir, and the High Priest, were taken, thereby completely destroying the social order.



'Akivi Ahu' resurrected

The natives were taken to the islands off Pisco. The plan soon started to go wrong because the islanders caught their captors' diseases. Smallpox spread among the wretches and the secret became known to the Church. When Father Eyraud arrived on Easter Island in 1864 he quickly learnt about the kidnapping from the survivors, and relayed the news to his bishop in Tahiti. The Church forced the Peruvian Government into ordering the magnates to ship the surviving natives back to Easter Island.

The return trip, in 1865, was even more of a disaster than the first voyage. Fewer than half the natives were still alive by then so all of them were crowded onto one ship. Smallpox spread like wildfire below decks where the natives were imprisoned during the voyage so by the time the ship arrived off the coast of Easter Island only 15 natives were still alive! These were thrown into the sea to swim ashore, taking the smallpox with them.

No wonder Father Eyraud was treated with such suspicion by the natives who had avoided capture. The place was in chaos and tribal war probably had broken out in 1863, because the social order had been destroyed. Eyraud tells us that there were no standing statues when he first arrived in 1864.

In 1865 Eyraud returned with two helpers, but over the next few years the population fell to nearly 400 souls. In 1877 the Bishop of Tahiti ordered the whole population be evacuated to Tahiti and so three hundred natives were saved. Unfortunately a French adventurer named Bonier forced 111 natives to stay, against their wills, to run his cattle ranch.

Is there any evidence that it was the 'Blackbirders' and not the Rapa Nui natives who had pulled over the statues? From all the European reports since 1722 the natives did not attach any importance to the statues, the cult was dead and the eyes were missing, so why would they want to pull them over? No doubt there was fighting going on in 1863, but not the sort of organised civil war needed to cause that type of planned destruction.

The evidence I believe is because of *rope*, or, should I say, lack of it! There is no shadow of doubt that all the trees had gone by 1500, because the pollen count in the lakes proves that. It doesn't matter which tree provided the raw material, the fact remain, no trees, no bark, no rope. In 1774 Captain Cook's log states that, *there was not a tree over ten foot high, and the island was bare*. When Margie's seafaring captain grandfather Captain Raine arrived in 1821 he reported that they didn't have any canoes and had to swim to his ship!

The natives had no ropes for transporting the statues in 1500, and certainly none for pulling them over 363 years later in 1863. Therefore, *it must have been European rope!* Looking at the toppled statues, all lying face down in a row with their bases still resting on the Ahus, it is not hard to imagine gangs of sailors hauling down the statues, one after another. So I shall continue to believe that the statues were toppled, not by the Rapa Nui natives, but by the white 'Blackbirders', until someone can prove otherwise. We humans have an appalling record of inhumanity to our own kind.

On our last afternoon a dark cloud suddenly blanketed the sun and a heavy squall swept in from the sea. Fierce rain drummed on the faces of the statues. It seemed to me that the blind giants were crying.

We took off early in the morning and headed back towards Chile. It had been one of the most moving weeks of our lives, which none of us will ever forget. Not many civilisations have been able to create such uniqueness, and to do it on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean is quite amazing. The only artistic achievements that can compare are the Chauvet cave paintings. It seems very fitting that Chauvet is called the *Womb of Art* and Easter Island the *Navel of the Earth*.

I pulled out the airline magazine to look at the map and saw that we flew directly over *Robinson Crusoe Island*. I just had to see that so I wrote a message to the captain explaining that I had the same name and would love to see the island if at all possible and asked the hostess to give it to the captain. Some hours later the girl woke me and whispered that the captain wanted to see me.

The aeroplane flew directly over the island. I watched it get bigger as we flew towards its peaks. I am afraid it looked very uninviting with no sandy beach for *Man Friday's footprint*, only sheer cliffs that plunged straight into the sea. The captain told me that there was a strip for light aircraft on the island but it was a very hazardous landing and only used when the crayfish were in season, which the captain assured me, were the best in the world. I concluded that I would cross Robinson Crusoe Island off my list of places to visit and read the book again instead, which I did and decided that no one should envy Selkirk, who apparently was marooned there, at his own request, for two years all alone as there never was a *Man Friday!*