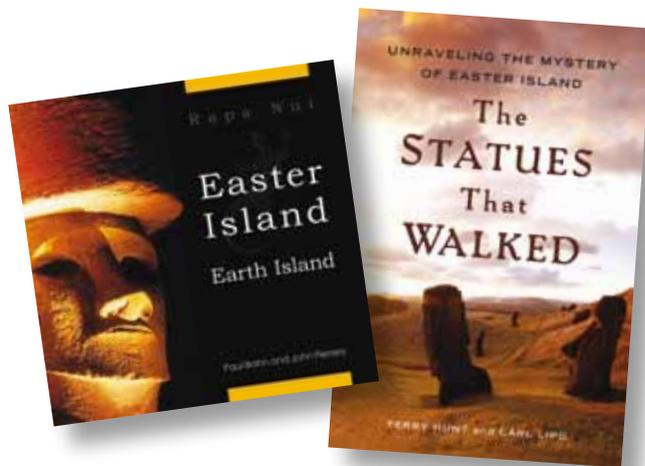


Letters extra

Rats, men – or dead ducks?

On any subject, it is not unusual for experts to disagree. In CWA 48 we ran a review that put a cat – or maybe a rat – among the pigeons! Renowned Easter Island authorities **Paul Bahn** and **John Flenley** take issue.



We were profoundly disappointed by Brian Fagan's review of *The Statues that Walked* by Terry Hunt and Carl Lipo. The book is extraordinarily selective in the data it chooses to mention, and the authors' theory about what happened on Easter Island has already been refuted by a number of articles, most notably in the *Rapa Nui Journal*.

The review refers to myth-making about a once-prosperous society that dissolved in the face of deforestation, food shortages, and endemic conflict, a textbook example of seemingly catastrophic ecological collapse. Far from being a myth, this consensus view is the result of decades of painstaking research by archaeologists and palaeoenvironmentalists. What the reviewer sees as the book's 'compelling alternative' is, in fact, largely erroneous. This is not the place to challenge all of the points on which we believe the authors are in error, so we shall limit ourselves to a few of the most important.

1) According to the review, the authors 'caused a seismic shift in island history by their excavations at the stratified Anakena Beach site'. Hardly! Almost nothing has

yet been published about this work, except the authors' repeated assertions that they uncovered the original land surface where Easter Island palms grew densely, thus proving that the earliest human occupation dated to about AD 1200. In fact, at the base of the Anakena excavation there is a change from blown sand (above) to clay (below). Such an abrupt change, known to geologists as an 'unconformity', indicates

BELOW The familiar moai of Easter Island.



clearly that there is a gap in deposition and that an unknown number of centuries are missing. Therefore, to conclude from their excavation that the basal date in the sand is the date of arrival of people is ridiculous.

2) The review refers to 'newly completed pollen studies' that have confirmed that the first human interference with island vegetation dates to the same time-frame. In fact, the most recent pollen studies (Flenley & Butler, *Rapa Nui Journal* 2010) on a core from Rano Kau (the largest crater on the island) span more than 10,000 years and clearly indicate the start of forest disturbance around AD 100, with a simultaneous decline of palm forest and a great increase of charcoal fragments. There is no evidence for climatic change, and the dating is good. The favourable microclimate and reliable freshwater in this crater make it a far more plausible first-dwelling site for early settlers bringing tropical crops than does a windswept beach.

3) According to the review, the authors use research on Hawai'i 'to suggest that rather than people, fast-breeding Pacific rats...



ABOVE Rano Kau crater on Easter Island.

gradually deforested the island'. This idea is bogus. Everyone agrees that rats played a role in the deforestation (as shown by their teeth marks on some palm fruits), but they were certainly not the dominant factor. That view is refuted by a wide range of evidence – much of it in an important study by Andreas Mieth and Hans-Rudolf Bork (*Journal of Archaeological Science* 2010) – including numerous palm fruits that were not gnawed by rats, abundant palm stumps burned and cut (presumably by people, not rats), the continued germination of palms despite the rats' presence, and the disappearance of two dozen other plant species that coexist with rats elsewhere and are not known to be eaten by them.

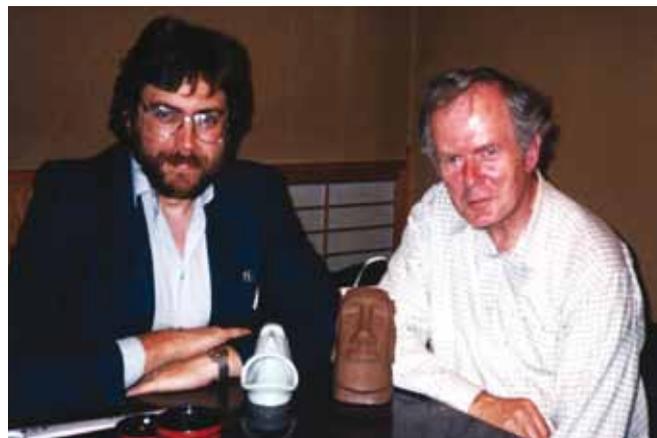
4) The review states that 'it turns out that the islanders used rock-walled circles to protect crops... Ground surveys located at least 2,250 circles... that once enclosed over 10% of the island's surface.' These walled gardens have been well known for a long time. It is curious that the book makes no mention of the surveys of such features on the island that have been carried out over the past few decades by Patricia Vargas, Claudio Cristino, and

others. Indeed, throughout the book, the coverage of work by other specialists is highly selective and incomplete. For example, the text suggests that the authors and their team have been responsible for the first extensive survey of the statues, making no mention of the decades-long (and ongoing) cataloguing of these carvings by Jo Anne Van Tilburg.

5) According to the review, the authors 'also debunk the popular notion that Rapa Nui was consumed by internecine warfare'. This is simply untrue. They ignore not only oral traditions about this subject, but also the sudden appearance of obsidian weapons in the

archaeological record, and the presence of wounds on skeletal material. They cite a 1994 paper by Douglas Owsley *et al.* to support their claim that 'the skeletal remains of prehistoric Rapa Nui show few signs of lethal trauma'. They appear unaware that, in a 2003 BBC documentary, Owsley stated that, after examining more than 600 Easter Island skeletons, he realised he was looking at the evidence of people at war with themselves: 'When I compare the frequency of injuries that I have observed in the Easter Island population with other collections that I have worked with, it certainly shows the high end, it's the extreme. It was a period of social disintegration. You have got endemic warfare, it is chronic – they are slugging it out, there is no doubt about it.' So much for what the authors call a 'Peaceable Island'!

Adopting a contrary view is always healthy, but it is vital that the alternative theory be supported by good evidence, and that the data be presented objectively. The book's dust jacket claims the authors have an 'iron-clad case', and provide a 'definitive solution' to the mystery of what really happened on the island. Needless to say, neither of these claims holds water. According to the review, the book will 'doubtless cause agitated fluttering in the comfortable doves of academia'. Not really; it is more of a dead duck. **WA**



Paul Bahn and John Flenley, authors of Easter Island, Earth Island (the newly updated 3rd edition is published this month by the Rapa Nui Press).