

FEMALE STONE FIGURES ON EASTER ISLAND

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DURING WORK ON Easter Island in 1957-58 the scientific mission of the University of Chile, composed of R. Vargas and the author, devoted part of its archaeological activities to excavations in the Rano Raraku area. Among the results obtained the discovery of female stone figures deserves special mention, given the strictly male character of all *moai* hitherto known. In two cases completed sculptures were found set up in vertical position on the outward slope of Rano Raraku. Other figures still under construction were investigated in a quarry almost on top of the crater. Here follows a summary of the new data.

1. *Moai* 277, in the catalogue of Father Englert,¹ is a figure just at the foot of the southern outward slope of Rano Raraku, which had been buried almost up to the breast in a standing and slightly leaning position. When excavating the front of the sculpture, it became evident that this monument represented a female, characterized by a neatly carved vulva shown between the slender fingertips of the elongated hands (Fig. 1). The body did not exhibit further peculiarities; the circular-shaped navel corresponding to the standard pattern known from male stone figures, and the form of the bust giving not the slightest hint as to the sex. No link could be established with the traditional lore of Easter Island. Our workmen delightfully baptized the sculpture, which meant a big surprise to them, *moai uka*, girlish stone-figure.

Moai 277 has the following dimensions: total height 300 cm., facial length 130 cm., facial width 100 cm., body width from shoulder to shoulder approximately 170 cm. Body proportions can be seen from the following figures: from point of chin to nipple 70 cm., to centre of navel 110 cm., and to upper limit of vulva 140 cm. The facial index, calculated from the ratio between maximum width and maximum length, is 77, i.e., a value corresponding exactly to the style of broad-faced *moai*; the body index of 106 shows an extremely broad type and in this corresponds to the facial index.

Unfortunately, the face has suffered severely from weathering, while the lower part of the body is well preserved below the surface. This suggests that the sculpture must have been set up in this position for a considerable time. No single objects and no stratification were discovered during the excavation. The figure looks towards the south-east (approximately 130°) in the direction of the open sea.

¹ Englert, n.d. *Moai* 277 corresponds to figure 11 of the diagrammatic sketch in Routledge 1919: fig. 60A.

2. *Moai* 287, of Englert,² was located at a distance of 116 metres from the first female figure, higher up on the southern slope of Rano Raraku. This stone sculpture had been buried up to its neck in debris stemming from the quarries. No additional material was found. The figure looks from its more elevated position in a WSW. direction (approximately 250°), towards the fertile hinterland of the south coast. The face is hardly better preserved than that of *Moai* 277. In this second case, sex had been indicated by another vulva carved with still more anatomical details, showing clearly the characteristics of a female who had given birth to progeny. The abdomen is swelling and the interpretation of a pregnant woman immediately comes to mind. Differences from *Moai* 277 consist in the absence of the navel, a better formed bust, and especially by a facial index of 52, i.e., belonging to the group of narrow faced *moai*.

This second female figure has the following dimensions: total height 320 cm., face 145 cm. high and 75 cm. broad, body width from shoulder to shoulder 150 cm., resulting in a body index 94 which represents a rather broad figure. Other measurements for the body correspond to *Moai* 277, viz., the distances from the point of the chin to the upper limit of the vulva (140 cm.) and from the lower limit of the neck to the base of the figure (160 cm.). The length of the nose, the distance from the tip of the nose to the point of the chin, the distance from the point of the chin to the bust and the distance between the nipples are all equal, with approximately 60 cm.

3. On top of the western peak of Rano Raraku, towards the outward, i.e., southern rim, two figures were encountered in a quarry, with their backs still attached to the rock. The head of *Moai* 429 points in almost the same direction as *Moai* 287 looks out in. The second *moai* is not registered in the Englert inventory, being in great part still covered with earth. It will be called provisionally *Moai* 429-A.³ *Moai* 429-A lies with its head towards the top of the mountain (pointing to approximately 345°) and is considerably larger than its immediate neighbour.

Both quarry-figures are characterized by a pair of well-rounded breasts, which are not present on the bodies of *Moai* 277 and 287, but fail to show precise anatomical evidence of the female sex. While *Moai* 429 is rather eroded, *Moai* 429-A unquestionably had not yet reached the final phase of carving all bodily details. While *Moai* 429 is a small and plump statue, with a total length of 240 cm. and a poorly executed neck, *Moai* 429-A possesses an elongated body of 290 cm. (compared with a total of 460 cm.). This style seems to belong to a later phase. Plain carvings on both sides of the face should be mentioned signifying either long hairs or ears in an undifferentiated state (Fig. 2).

² Not shown in Routledge's map.

³ According to a personal communication, Arne Skjølsvold, member of the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island in 1955-56, had already discovered the same unrecorded sculpture.

I consider both quarry-figures as possible but un-proven female sculptures. The evidence for the two standing figures from the exterior of Rano Raraku, however, is indisputable. As a further although very doubtful case *Moai* 393 may be cited. This figure in transport, lying in the interior of Rano Raraku, just possibly shows a vulva-incision. A special problem is raised, of course, by the strange red fragment excavated by Dr. Mulloy at Vinapu,⁴ which definitely has female breasts but no other sex emblem.

Up to the present the evidence for female stone figures on Easter Island has been rather doubtful. Thomson⁵ speaks of two examples: a *moai* called *Viri-Viri-Moai-A-Taka* at Anakena, and a *moai* called *Moai Putu* lying on the plain west of Rano Raraku. As far as I am aware, no reliable archaeological evidence has been offered for this statement. Although Lavachery⁶ describes the *moai* at Anakena as a female statue,⁷ the sculpture, whose position on the *ahu* was restored by Heyerdahl in 1956, does not permit such an identification as to its sex. It is derived from the group of extremely broad *moai* well-known at Rano Raraku. Mrs. Routledge⁸ while excavating standing figures encountered a doubtful case but was not convinced.

The proven existence of female stone figures on Easter Islands offers an intriguing problem. While the wooden *Moai Paapaa*, representing female figures as flat boards, were meant to show female spirits,⁹ the great megalithic art has a thoroughly male tenor and presumably different functions. The now discovered sculptures of a "girl" and a "pregnant woman" respectively, surrounded by a whole army of male *moai*, seem to belong to a somewhat earlier phase in the development of stone figures, when judged according to their degree of facial erosion and their smaller size. Easter Island folklore offers little commentary on female activities in the Rano Raraku area; a connection neither with the girl who fled from an evil spirit to hide at Pu Makari¹⁰ nor with the tragedy of the two sisters living at Papa Haa Pure Taotao Poki¹¹ seems plausible.

The motif of the pregnant woman, however, can be discovered in another native tradition concerning the statue *Takapau Hakareva*

⁴ On the Norwegian expedition of 1955-56.

⁵ Thomson 1891:497. *Moai Putu* seems to correspond to the alleged female *moai* in a group of three among the so-called "isolated figures", cf. Thomson 1891:496.

⁶ Lavachery 1954:fig. 9 'statue feminine.'

⁷ Lavachery 1954:147, 'mamelons plus développés que nulle autre.' But compare the statement of Métraux 1940:293, 'the nipples are sometimes so strongly delineated by the converging surface that the bust has a feminine appearance.'

⁸ Routledge 1919:186-187.

⁹ The *Moai Paapaa* are the counterparts of the *Moai Kavakava*. A native informant explained 'paapaa' to me as 'sterile,' adding that female ghosts could not bear children, if they did not happen to find a human being as husband or lover.

¹⁰ Métraux 1940:368.

¹¹ A site in the interior of the Rano Raraku, near the western quarries. A fragmentary story was recorded during my field-work 1957. A connection with the two female quarry-figures is tempting but inconclusive.



FIG. 1
Moai 277, Rano Raraku



FIG. 2
Moai 429A, Rano Raraku



FIG. 3
The Nassau copra shed in 1957



FIG. 4
**London Missionary Society and Seventh Day Adventist
churches at Nassau**

A'Teke.¹² That stone figure (*moai maca*) represented a pregnant woman (*hanau tama*) and belonged originally to a person called Maeha living in Hiva or Maori, i.e., in the former habitat of the immigrants who came to Easter Island under their leader Hotu-Matu'a. The size of the statue must have been rather limited as two strong men were capable of carrying the load on a litter. The *Takapau* figure was disembarked at Hanga Moria One Tea which forms part of the bay of Anakena. At an unknown period the statue broke and lost its head; the body, however, preserved all its former magic qualities. Later, the fragment belonged to an old woman called Tau Mahani living in a house near Ahu A'Rongo in Hangaroa-tai who guarded her precious possession carefully by tying a rope through a hole in the figure's neck. Nevertheless, one night the trunk was stolen by two servants of the *ariki* and carried to Akahanga. In that area on the south coast, the *Takapau* figure proved its *mana* with excellent results: all plantations of yams, sweet potato, sugar cane and banana prospered abundantly. Finally, another theft was committed and the valuable stone sculpture taken to Mahatua on the north coast. There it helped to make magic with the flying fishes. Set up in a vertical position, the *Takapau* figure forced great shoals of flying fishes (*hahave*) towards the shore where they could be caught by the waiting fishermen. About 1900, a few old men hid the trunk by burying it in the hinterland of Mahatua; my reconnaissance in the mentioned area failed, however.¹³

This tradition clearly demonstrates the high *mana* value ascribed to a stone carved as the body of a pregnant woman. Possibly the same power may have been evoked when *Moai* 287 was sculptured in a quarry of Rano Raraku and set up looking on the fertile soil west of the crater. Such an interpretation would be compatible with the general pattern of high esteem for any fertilising force embodied in material objects.

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¹² Both oral versions and data from a native MS. were collected by the author. The tradition was first incompletely mentioned by Englert 1948:268. The name means literally 'The hanging *takapau* which belongs to Teke'; Teke being a relative of Maeha, who transported the figure to Easter Island and served as a kind of secretary for the *ariki* Hotu-Matu'a. A translation for '*takapau*' is doubtful, Thomson 1891:551 speaking of 'vagina,' Englert 1948:498 of 'shroud' (*mortaja*) or 'benumbed' (*dormirse un miembro del cuerpo*).

¹³ Using a confidential hint from natives, I dug below an *umu* near Ana-o-Mu, finding but a sequence of various earth-ovens with fishbones. The only living guardian of the secret where the highly important stone figure, which is such a precious inheritance from Hiva, really is hidden, seems to be old Timoteo Pakarati Rangitaki