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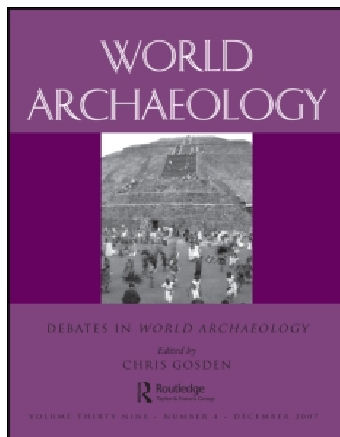

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Te Miro o'one: the archaeology of contact on Rapa Nui (Easter Island)

Joshua Pollard, Alistair Paterson and Kate Welham

Abstract

Historical accounts of European exploration and intervention in Polynesia during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries speak of the complex interpretative fields through which both Polynesians and Europeans came to understand each other. Here we employ the record of material practices on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) to investigate the indigenous response to European contact from the island's 'discovery' by the Dutch in 1722 to the population's conversion to Christianity in 1868. Rather than seeing events on the island during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a simple trajectory of decline, we highlight how myriad new practices and social orders emerged through a creative agency that drew inventively upon the material and cosmological possibilities afforded by contact.

Keywords

Rapa Nui (Easter Island); European contact; ships; canoes; rock art.

Introduction

Through observations made at the time, the impact of European exploration and colonial intervention in Polynesia during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is relatively well documented. Authored by the crews of European ships, missionaries and early scientists/observers such as Cook, La Pérouse, Banks and the Forsters (e.g. Cook 1777; Forster 1777; La Pérouse 1798; Lisiansky 1814), these records describe first contact between Polynesians and Europeans and their subsequent relations. Many of these accounts are, naturally, asymmetric: comprehension of how Polynesians understood the appearance of 'these differently costumed and differentially ranked visitors in very large canoes' (Hooper 2006: 51) is often gained indirectly through the reflection of European observation. This acknowledged, the indigenous perspective has been given voice by sophisticated exercises in historical anthropology (e.g. Dening 1992; Kirch and Sahlins

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1992; Sahlins 1985; Salmond 1991; Thomas 1990, 2003), most notably Sahlins' exposition of the unfortunate convergence of British naval voyaging, the Hawaiian ritual calendar and seemingly analogous structures of authority that led to James Cook becoming the unwitting 'victim' of the logical extension of Polynesian mytho-praxis (Sahlins 1985).

Contact in Polynesia brought changes, including many detrimental effects through introduced disease, alcoholism, firearms and missionary morality (Moorehead 1966). However, characterizing contact as a 'fatal impact' is teleological inasmuch as it prefigures an outcome (Campbell 2003: 67). In other ways these events created local opportunity, including changed political environments within which power relations could be reworked and, through categorical distinction, an enhanced sense of what it was to be Polynesian. As Campbell (1997) notes, far from weakening cultural selfhood, successive contact in Polynesia during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may even have strengthened and sharply defined local identities. For Polynesians, the novelty of dealing with Europeans and their material worlds provided conditions in which new practices and new forms of behaviour could emerge, and, by drawing upon existing cosmological structures, distinctive cultures of contact were created (Campbell 2003).

For archaeology, interest lies in the material dimensions of contact. Relations between Polynesians and Europeans were forged through often intense exchanges on ship and shore. Both sides engaged in mutually productive acts of exchange that saw the flow of materials like cloth and iron to Polynesians; while provisions and, less pragmatically, curiosities, souvenirs and sexual favours were eagerly received by European crews (Hooper 2006). In the process those things were re-contextualized, or fed into different regimes of value, and so took on lives independent of the agency of their creators (Thomas 1991). Europeans did not initially understand how acts of exchange had entangled them within webs of affiliation and social and ritual obligation, or how items from their world could become so embedded in the performance of Polynesian cultural order (e.g. Thomas 1999).

The Rapa Nui story

While historical record and retrospective anthropologies provide depth of knowledge of the unfolding events and contact-era processes in certain island groups that were subject to frequent early visitation and missionary work, such as Hawaii, Tahiti and New Zealand, the situation is not true for all of Polynesia. In the case of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), archaeology plays a significant part in writing not just the story of its prehistory, but also that of the time of contact (Kirch 2000: 270) (Fig. 1).

The remotest inhabited island in Polynesia, Rapa Nui has been subject to considerable archaeological attention since the late nineteenth century (cf. Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961; Lavachery 1936; Routledge 1919; Thompson 1891; Van Tilburg 1994). Research has been dominated by a number of themes: namely, the timing and nature of settlement of the island; the development of monumental *ahu* architecture and associated large stone statues (*moai*); and ecological degradation and the apparent 'collapse' of traditional Rapa Nui lifeways and culture post AD 1600 (Bahn and Flenley 1992; Hunt and Lipo 2006; McCoy 1979; Van Tilburg 1994). One of the key signatures for this dramatic shift in life is the abandonment of the tradition of monumental construction focused on the *moai* statues.

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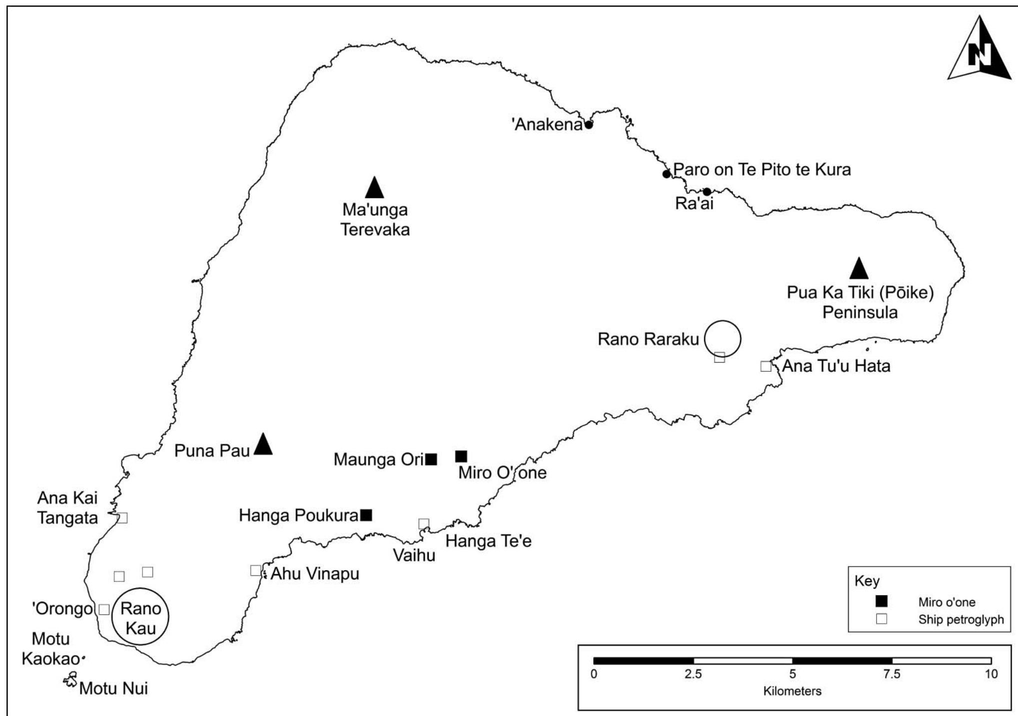

Figure 1 Map of Rapa Nui showing principal sites mentioned in the text.

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Following the palynological work of John Flenley (Flenley 1993; Flenley and King 1984), which demonstrated dramatic changes in the ecology of the island post-settlement, and in particular the eradication of the giant palm (a species related to *Jubaea chilensis*), it has been forcibly argued that the driver for cultural change was the stress induced by over-exploitation of the island's environment by its human population (see Bahn and Flenley 1992; Brandner and Taylor 1998; Diamond 2005; Van Tilburg 1994). Recent work by Jared Diamond has popularized the debate even further. In *Collapse*, Diamond talks of 'ecocide', and uses the Easter Island case as a parable for modern global environmental degradation (Diamond 2005). The *moai* themselves are implicated in this scenario. It is argued that the resource demands generated by carving and moving the statues resulted in wilful and negligent consumption of the island's resources. With plants and animals driven to extinction, there then followed starvation, warfare, social collapse and recourse to cannibalism.

It cannot be doubted that major political and religious changes took place on Rapa Nui prior to AD 1800. The statue cult came to an end, with those *moai* on *ahu* platforms being toppled deliberately (Heyerdahl 1961: 39).[1] This can be read as a material correlate of the decline of traditional modes of chiefly authority based around genealogically ascribed rank (Kirch 1984: 274–7). What are at issue are questions of causality and the timing of events. Rainbird (2002) and Hunt and Lipo (2010) have presented cogent arguments against the humanly induced ecological collapse model. Rainbird sees the Rapa Nui population as actors knowledgeably altering the island's environment, and points to instances elsewhere

in the Pacific where ecological change was both intentional and enhanced subsistence potential. Hunt and Lipo highlight the impact on Rapa Nui of introduced rats, which devoured palm nuts and seedlings and may have been chiefly responsible for the decline of the giant palm. While inconvenient, especially for large-wood construction projects such as canoe building, the loss of the giant palm need not have been overly deleterious: people can and do live quite successfully on islands without large trees (for example, the Northern Isles of Scotland). High food yields were also maintained following palm forest decline by innovative soil management technologies such as lithic mulching and the creation of rock veneer pavements (Stevenson et al. 2006).

Critically, Rainbird and Hunto and Lipo attribute population collapse and political/religious change to the arrival of Europeans: i.e. collapse as a contact period process. Using the distribution of habitation sites dated by obsidian hydration (Stevenson et al. 2007), Hunt and Lipo note that the marked decline in population from its likely maximum of *c.* 3,000–5,000 occurs after *c.* 1750 (2010: 38–9). Based upon better-documented events elsewhere in Polynesia, it is hypothesized that introduced diseases resulted in both a sharp decline in reproductive health and a rise in mortality (cf. Moorehead 1966). Peruvian slave raids during the 1860s further depleted the population, with subsequent resettlement of the survivors leading to the introduction of smallpox (Fischer 2005: 87–91). By 1877, the population of Rapa Nui stood at 110 (Métraux 1940).

Good evidence exists from both archaeology and the accounts of early European explorers to support the views of Rainbird (2002) and Hunt and Lipo (2010). Most striking are the observations by early visitors, which reveal a trajectory of dramatic change from the eighteenth century. Notably, the statue cult appeared to be extant as late as 1770, as recorded by members of the Dutch and Spanish voyages led by Jacob Roggeveen and Don Felipe González y Haedo (Corney 1908). Yet in 1774 Cook describes statues being toppled (Cook 1777: 281). Over the next half century visitors described both toppled and standing statues; the Russian expedition of 1804 reported around thirty standing *moai* (Richards, R. 2008: 26). The last to stand may have been the giant Paro on Te Pito te Kura on the north coast of the island, which was pulled down in 1862–4 (Fischer 2005: 80; Thomson 1891: 489).

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Questions of chronology

Ultimately, identifying the agents and contexts of change has to be linked to the production of secure chronologies. Whether key developments – such as the end of *moai* carving and erection; the emergence of new, performative leadership contests based around the ceremonial centre at 'Orongo on the west of the island (Fig. 2); and a rise in inter-group conflict indicated by the increased frequency of obsidian *mata'a* projectile points (Smith 1961: 260–1) – belong to pre- or post-contact horizons is at issue. Within Van Tilburg's four-period sequence for the archaeology of the island (1994: 50–3, based upon Ayres 1973) the period of ideological instability and 'collapse' is located in a 'Decadent/Restructure Phase' that runs from *c.* AD 1680–1722; thus placing the beginning of the decline of traditional Rapa Nui culture towards the end of the prehistoric phase. With sequences constructed largely from radiocarbon, there is a spurious precision here. Many dates used to define the chronology of key ceremonial sites, especially those from

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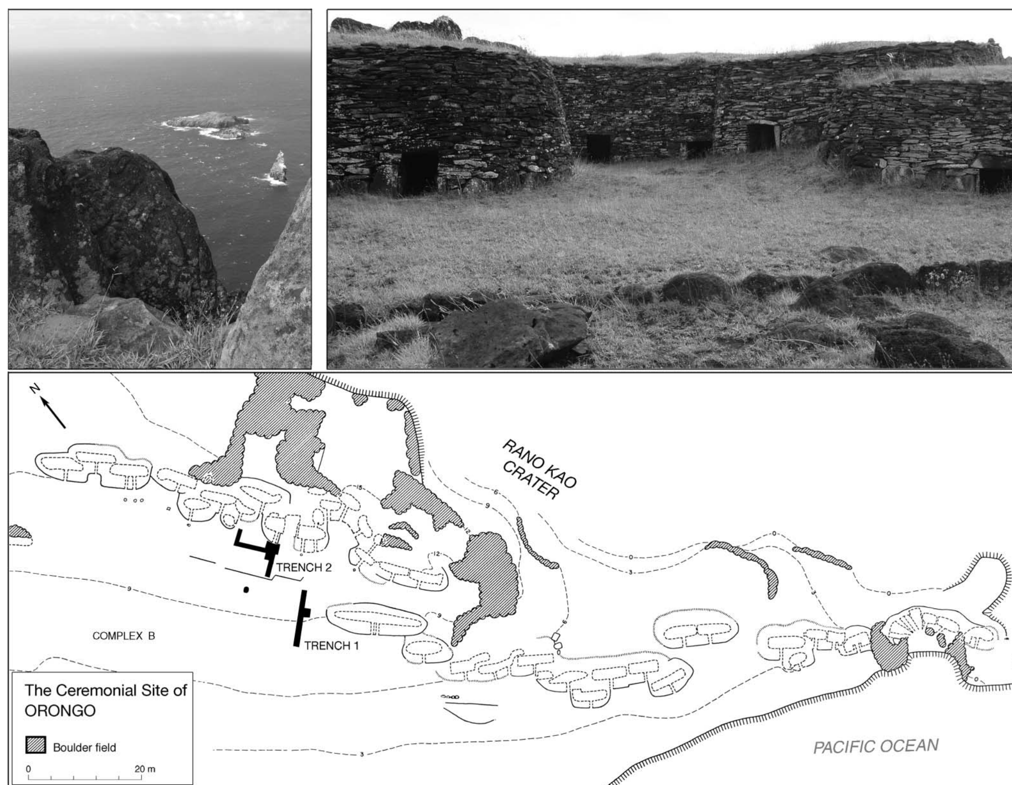

Figure 2 The ceremonial centre at 'Orongo, showing the location of Trenches 1 and 2 of the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition (after Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961).

the 1950s' work of the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition (Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961), are on bulked charcoal samples. Without controls on sample residuality and old wood effect, such determinations will tend to be earlier than the contexts they purport to date and are best treated with caution (Martinsson-Wallin and Crockford 2001).

The chronology of developments at the ceremonial centre of 'Orongo provides a case in point. Located on the edge of the Rano Kau crater on the south west of the island, a series of stone buildings reportedly served as temporary residences during an annual leadership contest in which participants would vie to collect the first eggs of the sooty tern from the outlying islands of Motu Kaokao and Motu Nui (Routledge 1917, 1919, 1920; Métraux 1940; Ferdon 1961). The winner, or *tangata manu*, became paramount warrior chief for the year, though their resulting *tapu* status demanded that much of this time was spent residing in seclusion. The emergence of these rites reflects an erosion of traditional chiefly authority constructed around genealogically ascribed rank and its substitution with performative leadership structures controlled by warriors and priests (Thomas 1990: 120, 178–9), a pivotal shift in the way power relations were enacted. While it is known that the last *tangata manu* ('birdman') ceremonies were held at 'Orongo in 1866 or 1867 (the eve of conversion), the period during which they emerged is somewhat ambiguous. Van Tilburg and Lee place the political changes that gave arise to the birdman ceremonies in the early

to mid-sixteenth century (Van Tilburg 1994: 92; Van Tilburg and Lee 1987: 136). This chronology is based upon radiocarbon dates on bulk charcoal samples recovered during the 1955–6 Norwegian Expedition excavations at 'Orongo (Ferdon 1961: 221–55). Four trenches were dug within Complex B, the main area of *ana* stone buildings connected with the birdman cult. Trenches 1 and 2 produced deeply stratified deposits indicative of long sequences of activity that included clearance deposits (thick charcoal-rich soils) and settlement-related features (a series of pits in Trench 2), and it is from these that radiocarbon dates were obtained whose calibrated ranges span the thirteenth to twentieth centuries. The sequence for Trench 1, from which four dates came (K-520, K-514, K-506 and M-708), should stand alone. However, both the sequence and the dates were extrapolated to argue for a central date of *c.* AD 1540 for the construction of building R-12 in nearby Trench 2, and by extension for the whole complex (Ferdon 1961: 243) – a tenuous assumption. Taking a critical stance, all that can be reliably inferred from the published sequence is that structure R-12 was created some time later, and potentially much later, than a charcoal lined-pit from which a date of AD 1412–1643 (T-194, at 95.4 per cent) was obtained on a bulk sample. Rather than lying within the later part of the prehistoric period, it could equally be argued that the stone structures which form Complexes B and C at 'Orongo, and which provided the focus for the *tangata manu* ceremonies, belong to a horizon of religious and political change that is post-contact. New dates from appropriate contexts are clearly needed. If new dates were to support a post-contact chronology, as we suspect, they would have profound implications for our understanding of the timing and mechanisms of changing politico-religious practices on the island, effectively moving key events out of the prehistoric sequence.

The character of European contact

The frequency of early contact events on Rapa Nui was not great. From 1722 to 1795 the island was visited on only seven occasions by Europeans: the first four were the exploratory voyages of Roggeveen (1722), González (1770), Cook (1774) and La Pérouse (1786); the last three were commercial sailings (in 1792, 1793 and 1795) out of Bristol. In total, they represent only around two weeks of contact over an eighty-year period. Even during the nineteenth century visits were sparse and fleeting (Richards, R. 2008). Between 1801 and 1861, eighty-five ships are reported to have visited the island, often stopping only a day or two (McCall 1990). Rapa Nui was not a favoured 'port of call'. The absence of abundant fresh water and pigs made it a poor location for provisioning; there was no natural harbour and over time fear of cannibalism grew as relations between islanders and European crews deteriorated following shootings and attempted abductions (Richards, R. 2008: 24, 33, 38). The Peruvian slave raids of 1862 soured Rapa Nui perceptions of strangers further and resulted in a decimation of the population. Indicative of outsider perceptions, it was not until the arrival of Jesuit missionaries in 1864–6 that any European attempted to live on the island (Altman 2004).

While abbreviated and frequently confined to ship-board or shoreline exchange, a certain intensity of interest and interaction nonetheless accompanied encounters between ships' crews and the Rapa Nui. Cloth, feathers and metal tools were much sought after by the islanders. The considerable value afforded to cloth and clothing among Polynesians,

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through its intimate association with status and sacred power, made it especially desirable. Early accounts detail how hats, handkerchiefs and neckcloths were appropriated through theft (Corney 1908; Richards, R. 2008), actions that were difficult for European morality to accommodate, but which resembled the kinds of unrestrained behaviour displayed in Polynesian religious festivals (Campbell 2003: 71).

Viewed from the island, early encounters with Europeans were profound events with the capacity to elicit cosmogonic crisis (Campbell 2003; Sahlins 1985; Van Tilburg 1994: 29–32). The sheer isolation of Rapa Nui may have amplified the impact. Without the materials to construct large canoes the capacity for Rapa Nui voyaging was severely curtailed, and Roggeveen's arrival in 1722 may have been the first contact with others in several generations. How the islanders viewed Europeans is of critical concern. Strangers from across the sea were often afforded a semi-divine status within Polynesian mytho-practice, and it is telling that words first used to describe Europeans implied their supernatural provenance (Campbell 2003: 71). High-ranking chiefs, who possessed divine linkage and were an embodiment of considerable *mana*, were regarded as strangers or invaders (Thomas 1991: 92). As beings of extra-local origin, European crews were perhaps conceived as the embodiments of gods, divine chiefs or, at the very least, as very powerful beings. Here we should not confuse the categorically rigid Judaeo-Christian concepts of divinity with that of the Polynesian (Sahlins 1995). In a world view where the sacred and supernatural is utterly inseparable from all aspects of life, men can at times be gods, as can be animals, birds, fish and objects (Campbell 2003: 76). Their status as such is fluid and highly contextual, as illustrated by the annual transformation of Hawaiian chiefs into the living embodiment of the gods Lono and Kū during the times of their annual ceremonies (Sahlins 1985).

The material trappings and actions of the first European voyagers to visit Rapa Nui must have confirmed any pre-conceived notions of the power of strangers. During the first two encounters in 1722 and 1770 both sides engaged in pomp and ceremony, though mutual comprehension of the intention of these events was seemingly limited. Following an on-board welcome by an individual of likely priestly status, Roggeveen was greeted by thousands of islanders offering gifts of food (Corney 1908: 133), the prime medium through which social relations were initiated. Once on shore, undue panic among the Dutch led them to open fire upon a group of islanders. Relations were soon restored, leading to intense and spectacular exchanges during which over 500 chickens and many vegetables were offered to the Dutch, who in return gave a length of cloth with coloured print 50–60 ells (*c*. 35–40m) in length (ibid.: 134). Awestruck by the largess of the gift of this most special of materials, the islanders measured the cloth 'fathomwise more than a hundred times over' (ibid.: 134).

Arriving nearly fifty years later, González claimed the island for Spain with an incredible piece of political theatre that had considerable impact (Corney 1908: 47–104). Three wooden crosses were carried in full procession, accompanied by drums and flying colours, and planted on the three hillocks of Poike on the far east of the island. Once erected, a proclamation was read and a triple salute fired, González's frigate and ship responding with twenty-one guns. As Van Tilburg notes, such 'military and religious pomp and ceremony … made a profound impression on the deeply ritualistic Rapa Nui' (1994: 30–1). Contemporary Spanish accounts speak of 800 islanders (perhaps one quarter

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of the population) assembling at the event, of Rapa Nui assisting in carrying the crosses, singing, dancing, making offerings of barkcloth and chickens (Corney 1908: 100–4). The religious and political import of the ceremony was understood, albeit through the lens of eastern Polynesian cosmology. Van Tilburg makes the astute observation that the erection of upright poles and crosses would have constituted an act of domination, such objects being both symbols and implements of sacred and chiefly authority (1994: 31). Only four years later, Cook observed toppled *moai*, the material signature of internal conflicts that had been set in train by the politically destabilizing actions of the Spanish (Cook 1777: 281). Perhaps in acknowledgement of the power seen to reside in these irregular strangers, his party was led in solemn procession around the island by individuals of chiefly or priestly status (Cook 1777: 281–3; Van Tilburg 1994: 31).

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The archaeology of contact

Bottle glass, buttons and items of copper and iron, sometimes reworked into beads and fishhooks, are the 'small things forgotten' of contact-period Rapa Nui. Other aspects of the archaeological record speak of the profound changes that followed the arrival of European ships and crew. The increased frequency of *mata'a* projectiles and events at 'Orongo have already been mentioned. Toppled *moai* statues are a striking material manifestation of ideological changes that swept the island during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There existed a distinct technology to these acts of ancestral sacrilege, with *moai* being pulled forward onto their faces (Plate 1), exposing and violating the most *tapu* part of a chiefly person, the back of the head and neck (Linton 1925: 86; Van Tilburg and Lee 1987: 137). Boulders were positioned in such a way as to break the statue necks upon their fall, thus severing their supernatural power (Ayers 1973: 132; McCoy 1979). Many image *ahu* were modified, being turned into dwellings and structures for burial, as at Vinapu (Mulloy 1961: 112; Van Tilburg 1994: 53). Oral testimony suggests *ahu* continued to be constructed well into the nineteenth century (Routledge 1919: 230), but by this stage they took different forms, principally pyramidal and canoe-shaped (*poepoe*).

Ships and boats

Boats and ships feature conspicuously in iconography and religious performance during the contact period (Figs 3–5). Telling of an interest in the physical manifestation of strangers, and perhaps the connections real and cosmogonic they were perceived to afford, are a number of petroglyphs and paintings of European-style ships. These remain the only European objects to be depicted in the island's extensive repertoire of rock art (Lee 1992: 112), although painted images of horses and sheep may once have existed at 'Orongo (Palmer 1870: 176). Around fifteen images of ships are known, located along the south coast of the island (Lee 1992: 32, 112–13). Potentially a product of differential preservation, a particular association exists with caves and the stone buildings at 'Orongo: nine painted ship images are known from the latter site alongside designs depicting sooty tern and semi-anthropomorphic '*ao* and *rapa* dance paddles used in performances at the

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Plate 1 Toppled *moai* at Ahu Akahanga.

site (Fig. 3). Other ship designs occur carved on a boulder near a cave entrance at Ana Tu'u Hata, in a cave at Hanga Te'e/Vaihu (here comprising a painted ship and small boat: Heyerdahl 1961: 478–9) and at Ana Kai Tangata, where a painted ship is partially obscured by later bird images (Routledge 1919: fig. 102). In addition, isolated ship petroglyphs are known on stone structures at Rano Kau (sites 1–43 and 1–118), carved onto the front of *moai* 263 at Rano Raraku and on the back wall of *ahu* Vinapu 2 (Mulloy 1961: 117, pl.12a).

Certain features identify these images as those of European ships rather than Polynesian canoes. Most are shown side-on as distinctively non-Polynesian three-masted and square-rigged vessels, the single-mast vessels at *ahu* Vinapu 2 and 'Orongo perhaps representing end-on views, the latter with a studding sail running off one of the yardarms (Fig. 3). On visiting 'Orongo in 1882 Geiseler noted freshly painted European vessels with sailors 'lined up hands to hips' (Ayres and Ayres 1995; Heyerdahl 1961: 79), while Routledge (1920: 433) records one vessel with two figures depicted in the rigging, one wearing a red shirt. The most realistic depiction of a European ship is the painting in a cave at Hanga Te'e/Vaihu discovered by the Norwegian expedition (Heyerdahl 1961: 478–9). It is sufficiently detailed and faithfully represented to enable its identification as a barque of eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century date (Marquardt 1992). Here, attempts at strict similitude stop. The other ship images are in fact curious hybrids, displaying features of both European ships and Polynesian canoes. Equivalence between European ships and Polynesian

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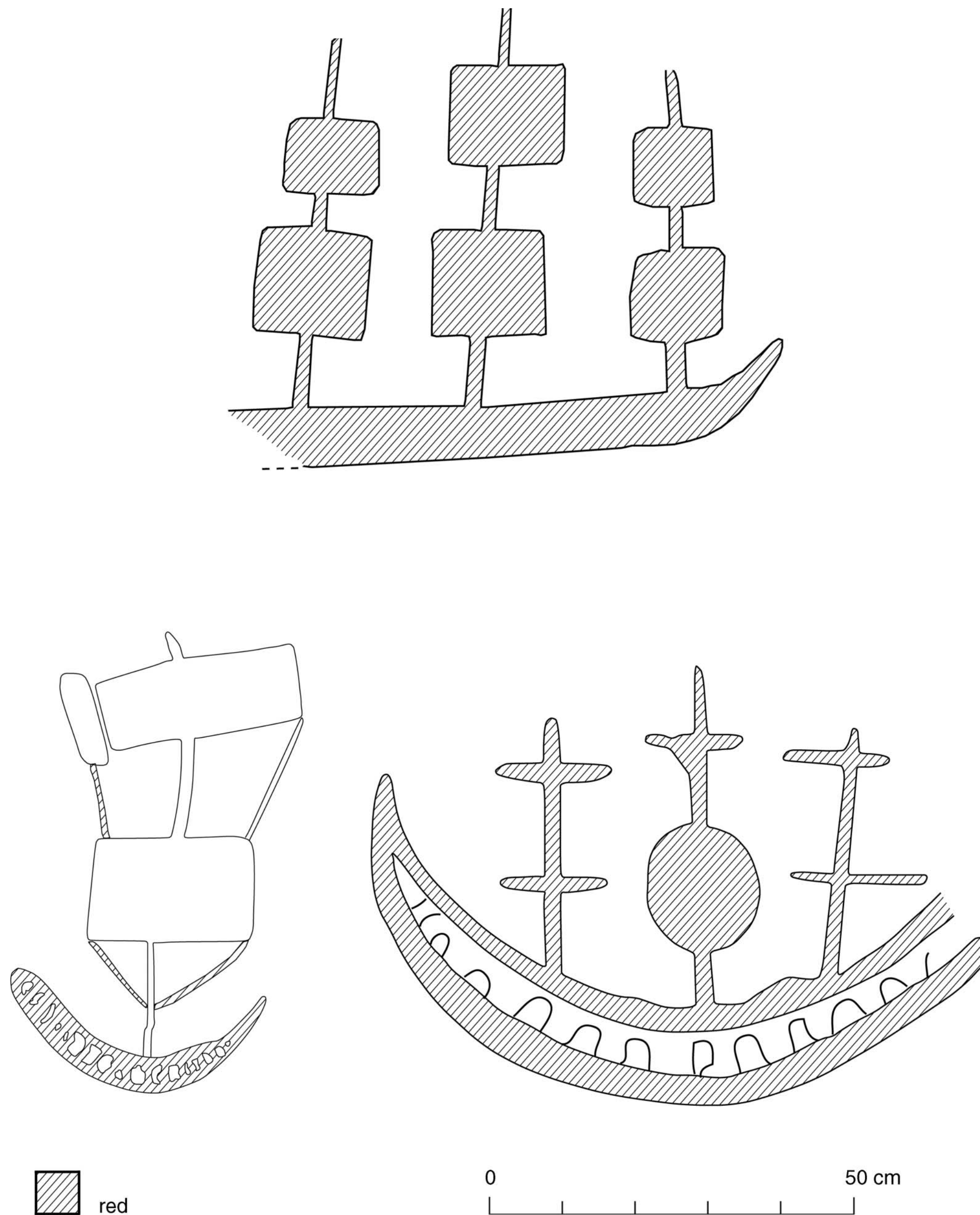

Figure 3 Ship paintings inside the buildings at 'Orongo (after Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961).

voyaging canoes may even be stressed in the curious combination of curved hulls without foremasts and square-rigged triple main masts seen with the Rano Raraku and 'Orongo images. Images of a European-style ship and large Polynesian canoe were even combined at Ana Tu'u Hata (Lee 1992: 113). The hull of the more obviously Polynesian vessel incorporates a series of *komari* (vulva) engravings along its length, implying an association with the commemoration of adolescent initiation rites (Routledge 1919: 263). That a large

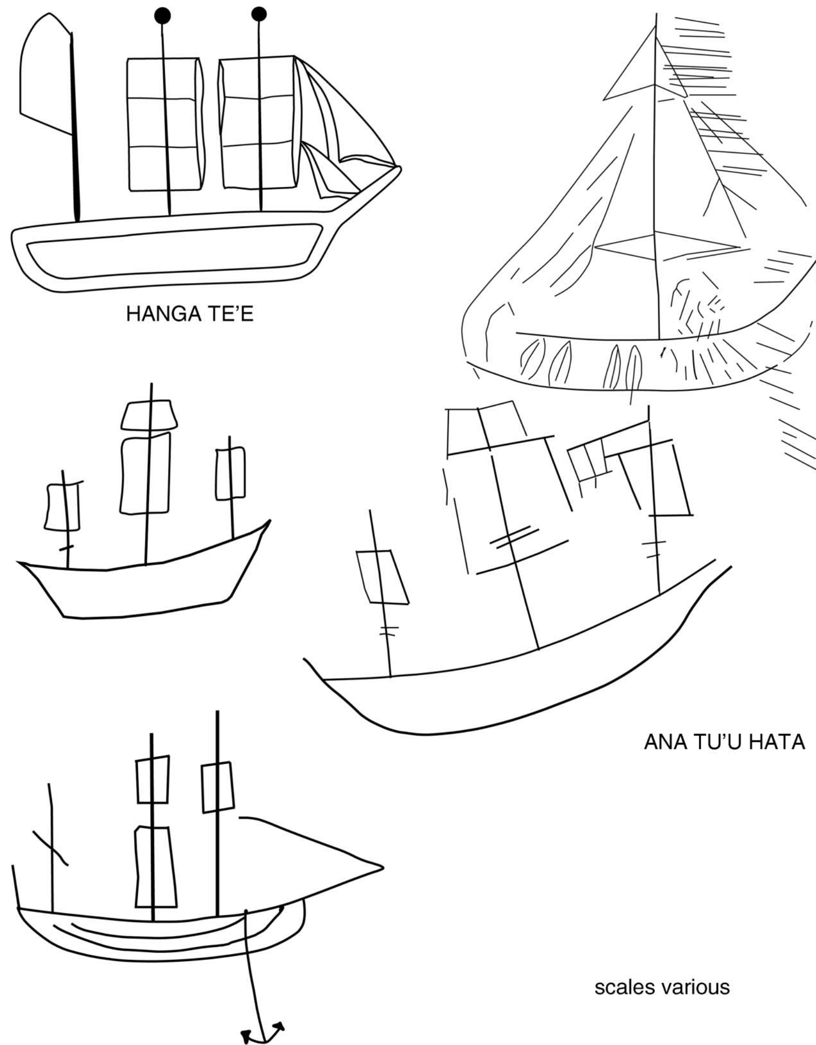

Figure 4 Rapa Nui petroglyphs showing European and hybrid vessels (after Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961 and Lee 1992).

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voyaging canoe should itself be represented is of interest, given that by the eighteenth century such vessels had long gone out of use on Rapa Nui (Thomson 1891: 474). This part of the image may be more ancient, but it is equally possible that it dates to the contact period and indicates perpetuated memory of the form of historically important vessels that first brought settlers to the island including the mytho-historic founder and *ariki mau* (supreme chief) Hotu Matu'a.

The ship image carved on *moai* 263 at Rano Raraku (Fig. 5) is again highly schematized/hybridized, leading Skjölsvold (1961: 353) to uncertainty over whether it represented a European ship or not. Its square-rigged form shows inspiration at least from European vessels. Most perplexing is the attachment of a turtle to the anchor cable, and the termination of this close to the statue's navel. It is almost as if the ship is joined to the

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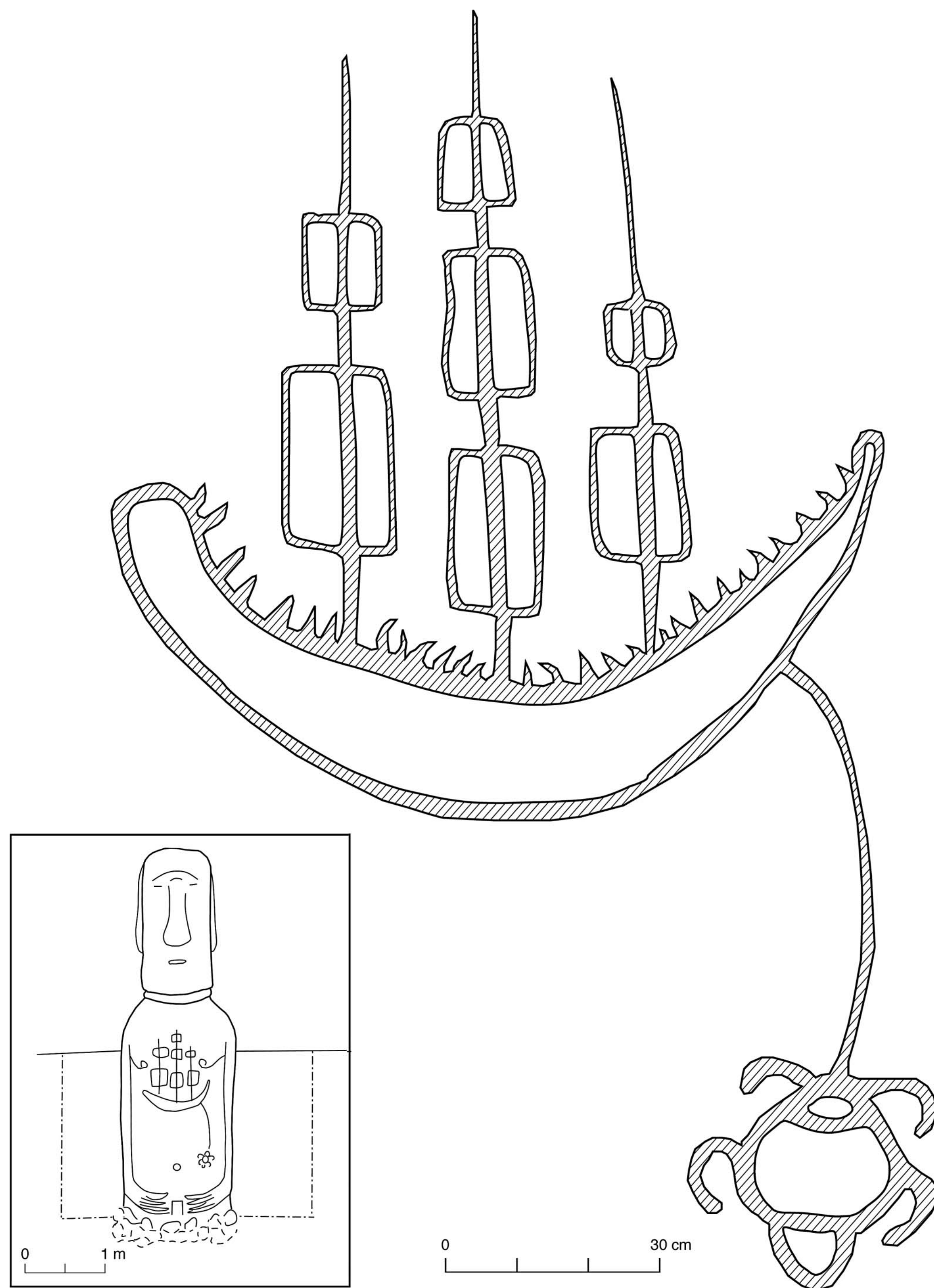

Figure 5 European/hybrid vessel engraved on *moai 263* Rano Raraku (after Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961).

statue via an umbilical cord. Here, the image of a vessel belonging to powerful and partially comprehended visitors was literally worked onto the body of an ancestral image.

European ships are not the only vessels to be depicted. Petroglyphs of Polynesian canoes are very well represented on the island, especially in the region from Ra'ai to 'Anakena on the north coast, and on *pukao* (scoria topknots) at the Puna Pau quarry (Lee 1992: 104–12; Van Tilburg and Lee 1987). Although these designs may be long-lived and part of a rock art tradition that goes back to the early settlement of the island, many are superimposed on *pukao* that have been toppled from *moai* statues, suggesting that the frequency of carving increased dramatically during the contact period (Lee 1992: 122). The distribution of carvings contrasts with the south coast focus of depictions of European/hybrid ships, perhaps implying a division in ceremonial practices that reflects the existence at this time of competing clan confederations.

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Miro o'one

The large outriggerless canoes of 'glorious beings' (Driessen 1982) were commemorated not just in images, but in a series of remarkable performative acts that took place in special ceremonial structures. During fieldwork on the island in 1914–15, Katherine Routledge recorded the oral testimony of a popular religious performance.[2] She also discovered archaeological evidence for the ritual in the form of a 42m-long platform of rounded pebbles upon which a thatched house had stood. When Routledge enquired of its significance among her local guides she was told that it was a *hare a te atua* (house of the god or deified ancestor), and that the beings praised during ceremonies here were 'the men who came from far away in ships' (Routledge 1919: 239). She goes on to describe simpler forms of celebration on long earth mounds known as *miro o'one* (boats of sand). Surviving earthworks of *miro o'one* are known on the south side of the island at Hanga Poukura (site 6–14), on the ridge of Maunga Ori (site 6–411) and on low ground to the east of the latter at Miro O' one (site 7–252). In plan they are of boat form, *c*. 30–54m in length and *c*. 5m in width – dimensions close to those both of European sailing ships of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and of some of the larger Polynesian war canoes of the period (Hooper 2006: 18). Depressions within these mounds most likely correspond to the locations of wooden and thatched superstructures.

Ships, canoes and cosmological possibilities

So why such an interest in ships, and what was being represented by these images and sites of performance? Lee suggests the *miro o'one* ceremonies were components of a cargo cult, intended to 'bring more ships to the island' (1992: 113). In such a perspective, Europeans were valued as powerful conduits through which prized materials such as cloth and iron were transported to Rapa Nui and for which rites were necessary to ensure continued contact. While historical accounts suggest a desire on the part of the Rapa Nui population for contact with European voyagers, there is interpretative danger in assuming this was driven by hunger for material goods alone, and that Western commodities exerted 'some

irresistible attraction that is given the status of an inexorable historical force' (Thomas 1991: 103). It is, after all, the ships and their crews that are depicted on the paintings at 'Orongo and in cave sites, on petroglyphs and through the remarkable performances at the *hare a te atua* and *miro o'one*. Perhaps the interest lay as much, if not more, in these curious and powerful strangers, their actions and the vessels they travelled in as in the cargo they carried.

There can be little doubt that a fascination with ships existed.[3] The first islander to climb aboard one of Roggeveen's ships took a particular interest in its construction (Corney 1908: 8), and the same level of intense curiosity about these incredible pieces of floating technology was expressed during the Spanish visit in 1770 (ibid.: 120). Hooper (2006: 18) makes the pertinent point that boats were central in these encounters because they were an artefact type held in common; they constituted a material field within which Europeans and Polynesians sought similitude. Ships were canoes, and canoes were ships. The master of the *Dolphin*, George Robertson, recognized the utility in thinking of European vessels as 'great canoes' (1948: 156), while the Tahitian chief Tu named one of his war canoes *Britannia* at the request of his exchange partner, Captain James Cook (Hooper 2006: 19). Striking similarities also existed between the hierarchical order within European naval organization and that of Polynesian chiefdoms (Dening 1992): both communities shared a concern with status and its material performance through dress and prowess in conflict and voyaging.

We would argue that it helps to collapse the distinction between canoes and ships, things that were Polynesian and things that were European. The world of culture contact is characterized by mutability and re-contextualization of practices and materials (Thomas 1991), and we should be wary of reading outward form as a simple index of a spurious inherent quality to any thing. Taussig (1993) makes the point eloquently in his study of the colonial wooden figurines of the Cuna. While outwardly depicting white colonial figures, the Cuna categorically stress that the figurines do not represent such; rather they are powerful media through which magic and medicine can be performed.

As with the Cuna, mimesis on Rapa Nui needs to be viewed through a Polynesian lens, albeit one reshaped by the experience of contact with outsiders. When the Spaniards erected three crosses on the hillocks of Poike in 1770 the islanders recognized these as a material manifestation of a divine presence. Europeans did not always recognize how potent wooden poles could be, as objects of genealogical connection to the land and the divine, but learnt through Hone Heke's repeated attacks on the flagpole at Kororareka, New Zealand, and the parading of the mast-and-sail-like staff of Lono on Hawaii (Dening 1992: 163–6; Sahlins 1985: 60–5). One might therefore wonder whether the triple masts of European vessels, repeatedly depicted in ship paintings and petroglyphs, were conceptually linked to the triple Poike crosses, to the poles that separated earth and sky and so to a sense of sacred origin.

As Colin Richards (2008) observes, within Polynesia voyaging was deeply implicated in the formation of identity, with descent often traced back to named canoes within which mytho-historic founders had travelled. Canoe/ship imagery on Rapa Nui might thus express the feat of Hotu Matu'a, who according to legend originally brought settlers to Rapa Nui in two large canoes (Van Tilburg and Lee 1987: 146), or to other voyaging exploits, real or mythical, including that of the first Europeans. Voyaging was also a

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transformative practice, and one that might take on a supernatural dimension (C. Richards 2008: 212–5). It is reported that old canoes placed in caves on Rapa Nui were used as burial cases (Thomson 1891: 474), here expressing a metaphor of spirit journey through the conduit of a liminal landscape location. Much the same notion of supernatural travel and journeying back to an ancestral homeland (Po, where spirits of the ancestors dwelt: Fischer 2005: 58) could lie behind the inclusion of ship imagery in the caves at Ana Tu'u Hata, Hanga Tee/Vaihu and Ana Kai Tangata, and the *ana* (cave) houses at 'Orongo. Transformation from corporeal to spirit state and journey to other realms are certainly implied by the *tangata manu* imagery at 'Orongo. Could the 'umbilical' line running from the ship engraving on *moai* 263 at Rano Raraku be accommodated within similar structural terms, as an expression of linkage through birth back to distant lands – was the ancestor materialized by the *moai* conceptualized as someone who had travelled to Rapa Nui on such a vessel? Specific interpretation has always to engage with the complex and richly textured layers of metaphor, allegory, mimicry and allusion that constitute Polynesian cultural practices from art and dance to politics and religious performance (Kaeppler 2001, 2008; McLean 1999; Sahlins 1985).

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Conclusion

The notion that contact brought profound changes to life on Rapa Nui is not a new one (Lavachery 1936: 60; Routledge 1919: 300–1; Van Tilburg 1994: 29–32, 2006). To date, this episode of the island's human history has not received the attention from archaeologists that it deserves, no doubt because the intellectual appeal of Rapa Nui's archaeology has always lain in the lure of origins (first settlement), an understanding of the island's remarkable monument traditions and explanations of cultural evolution and collapse. There also exists a tendency to see events on the island during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a simple trajectory of decline (cf. Fischer 2005), a sad postscript to a vibrant prehistoric sequence. We have highlighted the ways that myriad new practices and social orders emerged through a creative agency that drew inventively upon the material and cosmological possibilities afforded by contact. There developed 'cultures of contact' (Campbell 2003) that, while created out of pre-existing symbolic structures, possessed their own distinct dynamic identities. Ship imagery and ship performances belong to fields of practice that are obviously of this period, but we would argue that many of the political and religious changes that are currently accommodated somewhat uncomfortably at the very end of the island's prehistoric sequence, such as the performative leadership contests at 'Orongo, are also an outcome of the peculiar circumstances of contact. To demonstrate or refute this reading of the sequence is a challenge that only archaeology can address.

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Notes

1 *Moai* were also toppled through the action of tsunamis. A particularly powerful tsunami that struck the south-east coast of Rapa Nui in May 1960 washed fifteen *moai* up to 100m inland from the Tongariki *ahu* (Fischer 2005: 208).
2 As Van Tilburg has highlighted (2003), the conditions under which Routledge collected her oral history on pre-conversion practices were far from ideal, and so the detail should be treated with a degree of caution.
3 Rapa Nui was not the only place in Polynesia where indigenous ritualized appropriation and manipulation of European ships occurred. Thomas (1991: 109–10) notes the case of the Samoan *Papalagi* (foreigner) ship recorded by Commodore Wilkes of the US Exploring Expedition in 1839. A 'replica' vessel was observed in a clearing, made from a tall tree around which a wooden framework hull and rigging was created.

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