

about some of the facts, theories, controversies, and published articles that Craig mentions in the text. There are a few typos and spelling inconsistencies of place names, but not many, and these certainly don't detract from the quality of the book.

This book definitely belongs in the collection of anyone interested in Rapa Nui; it would also appeal to black and white photographers and those interested in travel writing.

If the book is purchased from Craig's website (themoonhasbeeneaten.com), a DVD of island videos, an interactive iPad version of the book, a screensaver, and free priority shipping in the US is also included, along with a complimentary print of your choice; it would be challenging to choose one favorite, but the vista of the island taken from the ocean (pp. 14-15) is particularly striking; it is reminiscent of my first view of Rapa Nui, arriving at dawn on a research vessel after 40 days at sea.

## References

- Kenna, M. 2001. *Easter Island*. Tucson: Nazraeli; Manchester: Cornerhouse.  
 Picker, F. & T. Heyerdahl. 1974. *Rapa Nui*. New York: Paddington Press.

## Boersema, Jan J. *Beelden van Paaseiland – over de duurzaamheid van een cultuur* (Statues of Easter Island - about the sustainability of a culture)



Amsterdam/Antwerpen:  
 Atlas, 2011. 352 pp.  
 ISBN: 978-9-0450-1052-6.  
 €19.95 (paperback) in Dutch;  
[www.uitgeverijatlas.nl](http://www.uitgeverijatlas.nl)

Review by Veerle De Ridder

Rapa Nui has been put forward as an example of how a society can collapse through human intervention in the ecosystem. But is this story, endearing and fitting to the times as it is, really true, or do we need to start telling a different tale? This is the main question Boersema builds his book around, and to him the answer is yes, we need a different story.

The book starts off with a quick sketch of how Rapa Nui became this icon of environmental collapse and an introduction to the new route that Boersema wants the narrative about this island and culture to take. What follows is a very thorough approach to the subject built around a chronological framework. In the first few

chapters, a sturdy reference base is built up. A picture of the first contacts between Westerners and the Rapanui is drawn through the eyes of the first explorers to reach the island, taking into account the reasons for their journeys and how those affected their view and behavior.

The geographical situation of the island is highlighted as well as the natural fauna and flora along with what Polynesian settlers brought with them on arrival, providing insight into the stage on which Rapanui culture arose. In delving deeper into this culture, their housing, agriculture, animal consumption, and first contact accounts, reasons to doubt the collapse become apparent. And as the *moai* culture and its transition into the birdman cult are examined further, the picture that becomes apparent is increasingly not one of drastic collapse, but instead of gradual transition from one to the next. Even a direct link to deforestation does not seem so certain anymore.

From the background provided in the first chapters, Boersema now begins to examine the validity of the collapse theory. Focus rests on how the Rapanui adjusted their way of life and agriculture to a changing environment; one that didn't change overnight, but rather gradually, over a longer period of time, with one generation to the next only being witness to minor changes that added up to a radical change too slowly to be immediately apparent to the observer.

Previous high population estimates are also challenged and adjusted to factor in more realistic mortality and reproduction rates for early cultures. Further examination of the process of deforestation shows that a human factor alone is not sufficient as an explanation for a complete disappearance of trees on the island. An additional factor can be found in an impeded and ultimately insufficient regeneration of the forest. Combined with estimates of how large a population the island would have been able to sustain, even after deforestation, and with the adaptations the islanders made to living in a changed environment, the idea of a rapid and disastrous collapse loses much of its credibility.

Lastly, we get a look at how slavery and disease struck a massive blow to Rapa Nui. The population was decimated and much of the culture was lost. This is the true collapse, one that Rapanui culture never fully recovered from. In recent times, missionaries and the annexation of the island by Chile brought Rapa Nui into the modern world. They have maintained a distinct Polynesian identity, but now cultural influences from the outside seep in and tourism puts a new kind of environmental strain on the island.

In the last chapter, Boersema argues why he thinks we need a new story, not one of collapse, but a more subtle one about change and adaptation instead. Although Rapa Nui as an icon of human-induced

collapse is an enigmatic one, it does not hold up when held to the light of the actual proof. Furthermore, he argues that the use of spectacular and exaggerated stories as a warning may not have the desired effect of getting people to take action. They often become numb to the story or paralyzed instead.

More often than not, the decline of cultures is not a result of conscious choices, but rather a slow process; telling the story of this process can still serve as an interesting warning without violating the truth and stripping a group of people of their dignity. Questions about the collapse theory have been rising over the last 10 years. Boersema openly admits that he is not the only person supporting the new view, but he began asking questions early on. What he brings to the table with this book is a well-researched overview of Rapa Nui culture and the growing evidence against the collapse theory.

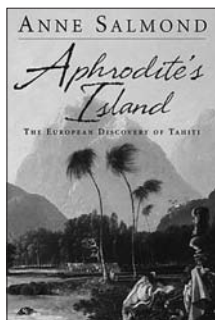
In sum, this is a book that will provide any layman interested in Rapa Nui with a thorough view on both the culture and the new conclusions that are being drawn. Most of the popular literature on the subject still leans strongly towards the collapse and this book aims to bring new insights to a broader public. This is a book written by a man passionate about the subject, who has read virtually everything there is to read on the subject and has helped progress the issue himself as well. I could not help but respect the author for his approach.

### Salmond, Anne R. *Aphrodite's Island: The European Discovery of Tahiti*

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 544 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-26114-3. US\$45.00 (hardcover), US\$24.95 (softcover).

### Salmond, Anne R. *Bligh: William Bligh in the South Seas*

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. 528 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-27056-5. US\$45.00 (hardcover).



Review by James L. Flexner,  
Washington and Lee University

Tahiti lies at the center of two excellent recent books by Anne Salmond, one of the contemporary masters of historical anthropology focusing on culture contact in the Pacific. One of the interesting things about reviewing these books together has been seeing the way that the form of history can change depending upon the lens through which it is viewed, while also noting the common themes that emerge in these works, which resonate throughout the Pacific. In *Aphrodite's Island*, Salmond focuses on the Tahitian perspective of the first European encounters, both in the sense of making the island of Tahiti the focal point of the history she is writing, and in emphasizing the indigenous Tahitian perspective of these early interactions. *Bligh*, on the other hand, focuses on the story of one of the most famous navigators of the late 18th century. But, while Bligh is probably best remembered for the dramatic mutiny on board the *Bounty*, Salmond's biography largely emphasizes the formative nature of the experiences of Bligh and his crew – including Fletcher Christian, the ringleader of the eventual mutiny – in Tahiti in shaping the events that would come later on.

Both *Aphrodite's Island* and *Bligh* are richly detailed accounts of important cross-cultural encounters in the South Seas, with enormous casts of characters and often thick descriptions of specific events that happened within these encounters. *Aphrodite's Island* works through Tahitian interactions with the British explorer Wallis, the first European to visit Tahiti, followed by the French with Bougainville, Captain Cook, who used the islands of Tahiti as a regular stopping point in his exploratory expeditions, and the Spanish led by Boenechea, who attempted to establish the first European settlement on Tahiti. But the book is equally concerned with the experiences and discoveries of Tahitian explorers, such as Ahutoru, Tupaia, Hitihiti, Ma'i, Pautu, Tetuanui, Tipitipia, and Heiao, who travelled throughout the Pacific Islands, to Britain, and to Lima on various European ships, though not all would return alive to their homeland. Tupaia especially made a major impression on New Zealand Māori, being recognized as a great *tohunga* (priest, wise man) and even inspiring a sort of cargo cult among some local people, revealing that culture contact was not just about Europeans interacting with Polynesians (Salmond 2009:262-263). *Aphrodite's Island* is a fascinating account of contact in Tahiti, and will be valuable for years to come, especially for comparative analyses alongside other works by Salmond, Denning, and Sahlins, among others, outlining the historical anthropology of contact elsewhere in Polynesia.

*Bligh* follows the career of William Bligh, but is atypical of the various biographies of this famous character in naval history because of its emphasis on