

Getting to Know You

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- Q. How did you get into archaeology, and specifically Rapa Nui archaeology? What triggered your interest?
- A. As a member of the mid-1950s baby-boomer generation, I grew up with popular science accounts of spectacular discoveries in archaeology, and already at a young age, I was dreaming of becoming an archaeologist and making important discoveries. Basically, before the beginning of the jet age when ordinary people were not used to traveling over larger distances, these books transported us to unreachable exotic places in our fantasies. Thor Heyerdahl's best-selling *Kon-Tiki* and *Aku Aku* were such accounts. I devoured them. For a long time, the memory was dormant, but was re-activated in 2004 during my first visit to Easter Island.
- Q. Who or what do you consider as your most significant influence (scientific or otherwise) either as a person or a particular work (or series of works)?
- A. Joining my first excavation, I was somehow day-dreaming of buried stairs, hidden sealed tombs and treasures that I heard of when I was a boy, but nothing of that kind turned up until after almost a month of painstaking cleaning in the desert as I excavated the skeleton of a dog, some 5000 years old and probably not too important. But this was the moment when I understood that archaeology is not about golden treasures, but about context and knowledge.
- Q. What theory or project of yours turned out differently from what you had expected as, for example, a complete surprise?
- A. Archaeology is full of unexpected discoveries. Our present fieldwork at Ava Ranga Uka A Toroke Hau and along the Quebrada Vaipú holds many of those surprises, such as the discovery of hydraulic architecture used for something other than irrigation, the extent of how comprehensively the valley was transformed into a kind of sacred landscape, and the fact that *jubaea*-like palm-trees were deliberately planted in late pre-contact times.
- Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?
- A. I very briefly considered the option of studying oceanography, but I am sure that I will also be an archaeologist in my next life.
- Q. What was your best Eureka moment?
- A. The identification of Ava Ranga Uka A Toroke Hau as a fertility sanctuary with hydraulic architecture and the observation that the newly attested cult could have once been practiced in many parts of Eastern Polynesia.
- Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in archaeology) on Rapa Nui in the future?

- A. Ava Ranga Uka A Toroke Hau is apparently not an isolated cultural phenomenon on Rapa Nui. The first surveys along the Quebrada Vaipú have yielded evidence that the site might have been part, or even the center point, of a much larger context of a ritual landscape. We also hope to demonstrate that the ritual use of water was connected to taboos which may be evidenced in the archaeological record.
- Q. What is your favorite site on Rapa Nui and why?
- A. Ava Ranga Uka A Toroke Hau and the Quebrada Vaipú, of course, mainly because of its comprehensive and complex stratigraphy, as well as the wide variability of contexts and cultural and environmental aspects. The site holds many surprises, but there are in fact many fascinating sites all over Easter Island deserving intensive research.
- Q. What myth or misinformation about Rapa Nui would you like to dispel?
- A. As someone working in the island's interior, I consider the role of rats in the extinction of the palm trees as strongly overrated. Our project produced a large number of nutshells with almost no traces of rat-gnawing from 16th to 17th century contexts.
- Q. What's the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Rapa Nui?
- A. One thousand years of Rapanui culture are not so much a sequence of setbacks, social failure, and unsustainable human-environmental relationships (as one may understand J. Diamond's *Collapse*), but a history of success. Again and again the Rapanui excelled in the capability to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, and even today's Rapanui society is the outcome of a successful recovery from the late 19th century genocide and cultural collapse.
- Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Easter Island archaeology or anthropology (or those fields generally)?
- A. Explore the island off the beaten tracks – both literally and in a figurative sense! There are more marvels than just *moai* and *ahu*.
- Q. If you could, what would you change about the fields of archaeology and anthropology?
- A. I would like to see more open-minded cooperation of researchers than enemies. Archaeology is apparently a very small discipline with too many researchers competing for limited funds and sites. Nationalism still has strong momentum instead of a common scientific interest that all foreign researchers share with the Rapanui and among each other.
- Q. What are you currently reading?
- A. Georg Forster's *Travel around the world from 1772 to 1775 as member of the Cook Expedition*.
- Q. Credentials?
- A. Ph.D., University of Göttingen, Germany, 1985, dissertation on Bronze Age burial customs on the Oman Peninsula.
- Q. Date and place of birth?
- A. 23 December 1955, Kassel, Germany.