

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Andreas Mieth

Q. How did you get into archaeology, and specifically Easter Island archaeology? What triggered your interest?

A. I have always found islands especially interesting and inspiring, not only because they are unique ecosystems, but also because they often have an outstanding and exciting cultural history. As a teenager, I was captivated by the unbelievable pictures of Easter Island's stone statues and I was fascinated by Thor Heyerdahl's books. From that time on I dreamed about visiting Rapa Nui one day. I finally had the chance to make my dream come true in 2001 while on a field excursion with students to Chile. I was touched not only by Rapa Nui's stony artwork but also by the friendly people and even the rough landscape. I was fascinated by the dramatic change that the island had undergone in its history. While visiting the island for the first time, I felt, read and heard that there were many questions waiting to be answered. This inspired a new dream which came true a little later: a lengthy research project on Rapa Nui at the interface between ecological and archaeological field work.

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. In regard to my studies on Rapa Nui for example Bahn and Flenley's book *Easter Island – Earth Island* was an important scientific inspiration. It was a catalyst for reading other scholarly books and papers as well as the basis for many of my own research hypotheses, which I have pursued together with my colleague, Hans-Rudolf Bork. Also the *Rapa Nui Journal* was and is an important source of motivation, information, and inspiration for my scientific work, and I do not only say this because I am being interviewed here!

Q. What theory or project of yours turned out to be different from what you had expected as, for example, a complete surprise?

A. In the course of our research work, we have found that the history of interactions between humans, culture, and landscape on Rapa Nui is much more multi-layered and complex than many publications suggest. There is no single causal chain that starts with an extensive land use and ends with the destruction of the ecosystem and "collapse" of the civilization. Indeed, on one hand we found evidence for a dramatic ecological change caused by humans. On the other hand, we were surprised to find much evidence documenting that the people on Rapa Nui were very deliberate and careful when handling the island's natural resources during different eras. In the early centuries of settlement, the people used the woodland with carefully adapted gardening practices. Over generations, they ameliorated the soils and made them very fertile by mulching techniques. Finally, after losing the palm forest, the Rapanui developed a very elaborate and effective technique of soil conservation using millions of stones. All these practices let the culture successfully survive.

Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?

A. This type of question is very difficult to answer at any point in life. "What would I be if?" I really don't know. I would perhaps study the interaction between humans and environment in other regions of the earth, perhaps in the more continental regions of Central Europe and not on Pacific Islands. After all, I owe to this very special island Rapa Nui my research focuses on islands in general. I must say that I am very grateful that I can work in this exciting field and that my life took this turn and not another.

Q. What was your best Eureka moment?

A. Finding the uncountable traces of roots of the extinct Easter Island palm tree in the old, buried soils, holding the charred nutshells of these trees in the hand, and, bit by bit, finding traces of the extinguished palm forest almost everywhere on the island are examples for such Eureka moments. Seeing all these traces of a lost landscape left a lasting impression on me. I find it inspiring to imagine how the islands vegetation once looked and how different the daily life in this completely different landscape once was. Such images that can only be reconstructed in our minds or can only be drawn on paper are simply intriguing.



Photo of Andreas Mieth by Stephan Zengerle

Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in archaeology) on Easter Island in the future?

A. I wish that we will have more consolidated findings from the early settlement history of the island. I hope that some day we will be able to derive more precise statements about the demographic development and that we will have to speculate less. Perhaps by cooperation with other scientists it will be possible to solve some of the big questions: for example, where exactly did the first colonists on Rapa Nui come from? Was there only one event of colonization or were there more? Who or what triggered the dramatic ecological changes? Did the Rapanui really live isolated for hundreds of years or did they maintain frequent contacts using the Pacific waterways? Moreover, we would like to intensify our cooperation with the institutions on Rapa Nui for the development of protection programs, such as for the resettlement of domestic plant species and for measures of conservation of soils and vegetation.

Q. What is your favorite Easter Island site and why?

A. It's very hard to state only one site. May I name two? First of all, there are the quarries of Rano Raraku which, for me, are amongst the most mystical places on earth. The late afternoon hours inside the crater are beyond comparison when the warm, golden sunlight falls upon the faces of the *moai*, when there are hardly any visitors left and when only the wind and the cry of the falcons is present. The second site I would name is the far east of the Poike peninsula, where you can feel the remoteness of Rapa Nui best, looking upon the infinite expanse of the Pacific with the next land area more than 3700 kilometers away.

Q. What myth or misinformation about Easter Island would you like to dispel?

A. I am eager to dispel the myth that Easter Island suffered a real "collapse" in the pre-European era. Indeed, there had been dramatic changes on the island. However, the inhabitants of Rapa Nui always found ways to deal with the crises. One example: after the island's deforestation, the Rapanui labored for hundreds of years covering the island's surface with millions of stones in order to protect the fertile soil for future generations. This technique in this dimension is unique on earth. The result: the population and their culture survived the dramatic ecological change. The environmental conditions were not applicable for famine and starvation. Still today, we can easily find the fertile soil just by putting aside a few of the stones from the ground in the wonderful, old rock gardens.

Q. What's the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Easter Island?

A. I find it important that all visitors, as much as possible, familiarize themselves with the special cultural and ecological history of the island. There are quite a few excellent popular scientific books and films. It is definitely enriching to encounter the island's many places of interest with this knowledge in the background. Rapa Nui is much more than "only" moai. Furthermore, tourists, scientists, and the inhabitants themselves should be very conscious of the ecological and cultural fragility of Easter Island. Even in the past five years there have been many noticeable negative changes. Is it really necessary to have so many or even more air connections? I find plans to further expand the airport absurd. This could end in a disaster for the island. Does Rapa Nui really need more, larger hotels and continuously new building projects? Does the island need more and more vehicles? Visitors should emphasize their feeling to their hosts that it is more important to preserve the unique culture and the magic of the island than to get offered luxurious hotels, huge automobiles, golf, show, gambling and other „great attractions“ that have already spoiled many paradises on earth.

Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Easter Island archaeology or anthropology (or these fields generally)?

A. First of all, gather and read as much reliable information concerning Rapa Nui as possible! Then pack the best books and articles in your suitcase and travel to Rapa Nui at least one time! Work as a volunteer with other scientists in a field project or explore the island for two or three weeks on your own. Collect impressions of the landscape, discover the cultural objects and let them sink into your mind. Talk and listen to local people and read your books in the evenings. If, after that, Rapa Nui still seems to be an interesting field of work, or if, as expected, you are totally captivated by the island, you will find a possibility to work there longer. And please: Try always to bring the results and documents of your studies back to Rapa Nui!

Q. If you could, what would you change about the fields of archaeology or anthropology?

A. I find the interdisciplinary cooperation between archaeology, anthropology, and other professions such as ecology extremely important. Here, I see a big research potential for the future. We cannot understand archaeological findings without investigating the ecological and environmental conditions of the respective time. In turn, we cannot understand the background of land use and landscape changes unless archaeology provides us with knowledge concerning technical stages of development, or anthropology provides us with information about the general social conditions of an era. Archaeologists, anthropologists, geoarchaeologists, ecologists, biologists, climate scientists and professionals from other disciplines will be able to answer some of the many unanswered questions only through cooperation and con-

structive communication. This is especially true for research on Rapa Nui. While educating pupils and students, it is important to insure that interdisciplinary thinking is taught and practiced.

Q. *What are you currently reading?*

A. Apart from scientific publications, I am currently reading a German book about the myths, history and characteristics of 50 exceptionally remote islands (J. Schalansky, *Atlas der entlegenen Inseln*). In addition, I am reading the bestselling *Millennium Trilogy* of the Swedish author Stieg Larsson.

Q. *Credentials?*

A. Degree in Biology, University of Kiel, Germany, 1983; PhD in Ecology, University of Kiel, Germany, 2003 Scientific Coordinator at the Institute for Ecosystem Research, University of Kiel, Germany

Q. *Date and place of birth?*

A. November 28, 1957; Berlin, Germany



CORRECTION: In RNJ, 23(2):154-169), our Look Back featured a paper by Captain H.V. Barclay R.N., called “Easter Island and its Colossal Statues.” We neglected to provide the correct citation for that paper, so for all of you are panting to know this, we include it here. Barclay read his paper to the Royal Geographical Society on 14 April, 1898, and the paper was subsequently published in an 1899 issue of the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia*, South Australian Branch, Vol. 3:127-137.

OBITUARIES

Emeritus Professor Roger Green: Mischievous Raconteur and Mentor 1932–2009

*Alice A. Storey**

Emeritus, Emeritus Professor Green, as he jokingly referred to himself, was lost as an active force in the life of his colleagues, students and family on October 4, 2009 at the age of 77. However, so vibrant were his academic and personal contributions to knowledge, and to his students and colleagues, that he continues to live and work through all of us. I found that after I left Auckland in June of 2009, having just completed my Ph.D., I was already repeating and sharing some of the more important pieces of advice that Roger had given me.

It was perhaps a belated inspiration from Roger himself that Georgia Lee invited me to write a piece in remembrance of him and his contributions to students for the *Rapa Nui Journal*. It was in one of my first correspondences with Roger in which he expressed his admiration for the *RNJ*. I was still an M.A. student at Simon Fraser University, just beginning my journey with the Pacific chicken, when I wrote to Roger and asked for a copy of his paper *Commentary on the Sailing Raft, the Sweet Potato and the South American Connection* published in the *RNJ* in 2001. He replied to my email almost immediately and said he would happily send a copy of the article, but that I should go and discuss the acquisition of an institutional subscription with our library as soon as possible. He stressed that the *RNJ* was a fine publication and should be available for researchers at SFU. That was Roger – always happy to help a student as well as advocate for wider distribution of publications that featured Pacific archaeology.

During Roger’s memorial service at the University of Auckland it was clear that, regardless of his prolific contributions to academic literature (well over 300 papers and publications) and to archaeological method and theory, the investment Roger made to teaching and mentoring is the one for which he is most fondly remembered. As many of his publications are widely available, and his influence in a variety of archaeological investigations has been covered in other memorial tributes, I will focus this piece on some of the lessons and good advice one could only get from talking to and observing the man himself.

By the time I arrived in Auckland in 2005, Roger was already well and truly retired from the more routine aspects of academia, such as faculty meetings and teaching reviews. Instead, he appeared on campus at least once a week to en-

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