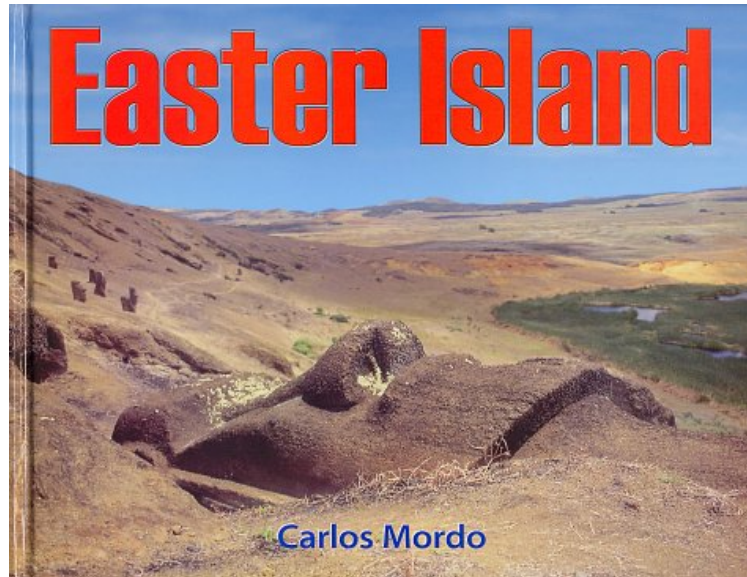


Easter Island

Carlos Mordo

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Carlos Mordo : Easter Island before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Easter Island:

Surrounded by the immense expanse of the Pacific Ocean, over 2,000 miles from the nearest inhabited land, tiny Easter Island with an area of only 46 square miles is incredibly isolated. Easter Island is most famous for the giant statues that have fascinated the world since the island's discovery by European explorers in the early eighteenth century. How did a small, isolated society with limited resources create these magnificent monuments? How were these statues, some weighing 200 tons, transported for miles across the island? And, more mysteriously, what role did they play in the religion and social order of the people who created them? These and many other questions surrounding Easter Island are addressed in Carlos Mordo's new book. The author reveals that this island on the outermost edge of Polynesia hosted a rich culture where shamans and priests, and a mystical belief in ancestor gods, directed the life and death of the islanders, who thrived, created these statues of startling originality, then disappeared. Easter Island also examines the island's unique environment and ultimately how its degradation, and contact with Europeans in the eighteenth century, had profound consequences for the island's people. Illustrated with over 150 color photographs, Easter Island is a fascinating exploration of the history and living culture of this remarkable island.

Reconstructs the history of this mysterious island ... accompanied by fascinating photographs. (Globe and Mail 2002-11-23)About the Author Carlos Mordo, an anthropologist and researcher who has traveled extensively, studying throughout Latin America and Europe, is the author of numerous books. His photographs have been published around the world in over twenty books. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Introduction: The Mysterious Island A few years ago, Easter Islander Luis "Kiko" Pat, better known as "Pap Kiko", made me listen to a moving

song, *Katomo te Ariki a te Hangarau ko Hotu Matu'a*, which commemorated the arrival of Hotu Matu'a, the mythical chief who led the island's first settlers, at Anakena Bay. The sweet melody seemed to bring to life the long-ago times of prosperity, when the islanders lived peacefully off the fruits of the earth and the sea and celebrated in their art the veneration of their ancestors and life itself. The lyrics took me back to the beginning of this story, a story that attempts to relate succinctly one of the most dazzling epics of the Eastern Pacific. The Polynesian civilization, which began about 3000 years ago with the arrival of the first wave of colonizing peoples from Southeast Asia, extends throughout the enormous stretch of ocean within a triangle formed by New Zealand to the southwest, Hawaii to the north and Easter Island (or Rapa Nui) to the east. Tireless travelers and skilled sailors, the Polynesians spread out, occupying the islands they encountered on their way, guided only by the light of the stars and driven by the changing winds and sea currents of the Pacific. About 1500 years ago, a migratory group, led according to myth by the legendary Hotu Matu'a, disembarked on this small portion of land in the middle of the ocean, giving rise to one of humankind's most mysterious and fascinating cultures. During a little over a thousand years, this society, which probably originated in the Marquesas Islands or in Mangareva (part of the Gambier Islands, off the southeastern tip of the Tuamotu archipelago), developed a particular form of social and cultural adaptation to conditions of total isolation unlike any other known in Polynesia. Megalithic altars or ahu -- gigantic sculptures made of volcanic rock with hieroglyphic writings still not deciphered -- are testimony to an exceptional artistic development, the disappearance of which is one of the great enigmas of humanity. As centuries went by, excessive exploitation of the limited resources of the island and sustained population growth brought about extreme social tension. This tension seriously affected the society, politics, economy and religion of Easter Island. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the crisis reached its peak. The warrior clans (*matatoa*) were probably descended from the original social groups that colonized the island and could have been involved in internal conflicts before the sixteenth century. Violent confrontations among these prevailing warrior priest clans led to the gradual neglect of many ancient traditions -- for example, the veneration of their ancestors -- and ahu lost their meaning and significance, becoming merely icons of bygone times or were even destroyed to consolidate new ideologies. The warrior clans gained political control, and this signaled the hegemony of a new spiritual order, the ritual of the Birdman (*Tangata Manu*), which would, in turn, give rise to new aesthetic expressions of Easter Island art. Around 1722, on an Easter Sunday, the island was "rediscovered" by the crew of a Dutch fleet commanded by Jacob Roggeveen, who gave it the name *Paaschen Eyland*, Easter Island, in honor of this Christian festival. Several years later, Tahitian sailors renamed it the Great Rapa (*Rapa Nui*), although many Easter Islanders continued to call it by one of its ancient names: *Te Pito 'o te Hena* (The Navel of the World). The narratives of the first European seamen to arrive at the coasts of Rapa Nui in the first decades of the eighteenth century contained descriptions of the perplexing "idols", the strange funerary monuments and the peculiar population of the island. These stories awakened an unprecedented interest among the literary and scientific circles of the Western world, particularly in the field of ethnology. A few decades later, the "Rapa Nui spell" attracted several expeditions that gathered a great deal of ethnographic information and a number of Rapa Nuian objects for the collections of museums around the world. Nobody could remain indifferent in the presence of the huge masses of rock carved almost obsessively by ancient hands. How and why had they been made? To what gods or ancestors had they been dedicated? How could an isolated people devote so much time to carving these giants out of lava rock, setting aside other activities vital for survival? These questions were posed again and again by those who faced this monumental architecture and tried to understand the rise and decline of a unique culture. However, before any of these questions could be answered, and in an inconceivably short period of time, the population of Easter Island was decimated by visiting ships that captured slaves as labor for the collection of guano (bird manure) around the coasts of Peru. Members of the royal family, priests, sculptors and those who knew the secret meaning of the hieroglyphic writings were all taken and only a very few returned. It seemed as if the Rapa Nuian culture could not survive such an onslaught. In 1888 the territory of Rapa Nui (which until then had tacitly worked as a French protectorate dependent on Tahiti) was placed under Chilean sovereignty, remaining as a colony of sorts until 1967, when it became part of the Chilean province of Valparaiso. Until then, different commercial ventures, such as that of John Brander, Captain Jean-Baptiste Dutrou-Bomier and their Society for the Exploitation of Easter Island, had effectively controlled the island and the islanders. About 1871, Dutrou-Bomier took approximately 109 islanders to work on Brander's Tahitian plantations, but the climate and bad working conditions caused the death of almost 100 of them. At the beginning of the twentieth century some islanders tried to protest about their treatment. Between 1944 and 1958, 40 Rapa Nuians attempted to make the 2200 mile (3500 km) voyage to their homeland in small boats; of these, 21 died. At the end of 1972 almost 250 Easter Islanders were living in Tahiti. With time, those who had immigrated to Tahiti returned to their homeland, and the island's peoples were introduced to new cultural experiences that allowed islanders to recover their own cultural memory by making them aware of the wider Polynesian tradition of which they were a part. It is also possible that some of the ancient Rapa Nuian culture had been preserved by those living in Tahiti. The forced severance from their past of those who were made to leave Rapa Nui and those who stayed but were made to stop traditional practices did not prevent the contemporary inhabitants from reconstructing, fragment by fragment, the social history of the island, keeping their ancestral language and, above all, the oral traditions alive. The other memory was preserved in the hundreds of

sculptures that people the island, reminding us of the creative power and magnificence of this society. The ancestors of today's Easter Islanders were not only able to develop a monumental artistic work but also showed an extraordinary capacity to adapt and survive under incredibly adverse conditions. In 1995, Rapa Nui National Park was declared a World Heritage park by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) because of its unique cultural expression within the Polynesian region. Since then, the island has become the scene of a permanent conservation effort and an exceptional center for research, preserving its singular attraction for tourists worldwide. For the 3000 inhabitants of Rapa Nui, this place of their ancestors represents the space for manifestation of the continuity of their culture. Year after year, at the celebration of Tapati Rapa Nui, young people renew customs that were thought to be forgotten -- haunting songs and warrior dances -- in an effort to restore their lost identity. The families maintain firm kinship ties, in the ancient tradition,