

Unit 3: Walking with Giants

Narrator: Rapa Nui (or Easter Island) is best known for its ancient statues, the Moai. For some, these giant statues are evidence that aliens once visited earth, and that these aliens made and moved the Moai. Scientists, however, have more earth-bound theories. Most scientists agree that the stone statues were built far away from where they were eventually placed. The question is, "How were they moved?"

In 1955, Norwegian adventurer and scientist Thor Heyerdahl suggested that the Moai were perhaps dragged on top of tree trunks. This would have been very hard work, but it's possible.

In 1970, William Mulloy, an American researcher, theorized that the Rapa Nui people used a giant V-shaped frame to carry the Moai. However, others suggested this was unlikely. Traditional stories say the statues "walked," so perhaps they were moved in a way that looked like walking.

In 1986, Czech engineer Pavel Pavel worked with Heyerdahl to come up with a way of moving a statue with a twisting motion. And a year later, Charles Love stood his Moai upright, and rolled it forward on a sled on top of wooden logs. But for many, this still didn't look like walking.

So in 2011, Terry Hunt and Carl Lipo tried a new approach. They looked at the shape of the Moai statues standing along Rapa Nui's ancient roads and found that their bottoms were not flat. As a result, they suggested another possible way the statues were moved. Perhaps three small groups of Rapa Nui moved the statue. Two groups to walk the statue forward, and one from behind to keep it standing. Hunt and Lipo tested their theory using a team of 18 people, and a specially-created 3-meter-high statue. It was a great success.

While no single theory has solved the puzzle of the walking Moai, they have provided interesting new ideas about this ancient mystery.