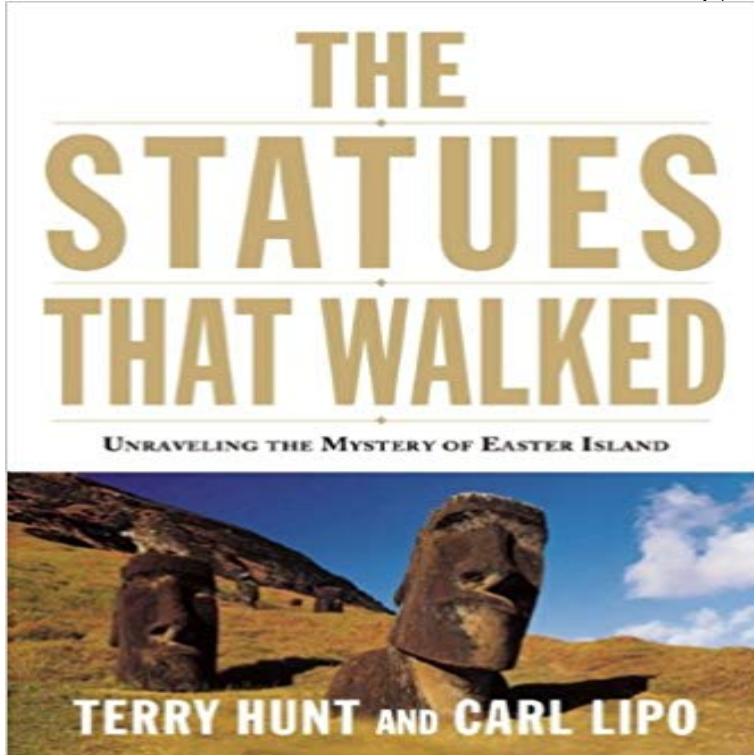


# The Statues that Walked: Unraveling the Mystery of Easter Island



The monumental statues of Easter Island, so magisterial and so forlorn, gazing out in their imposing rows over the islands barren landscape, have been the source of great mystery ever since first discovered by Europeans on Easter Sunday 1722. How could the ancient people who inhabited this tiny speck of land, the most remote in the vast expanse of the Pacific islands, have built such monumental works? No such astonishing numbers of massive statues are found anywhere else in the Pacific. How could the islanders possibly have moved so many multi-ton monoliths from the quarry inland, where they were carved, to their posts along the coastline? And most intriguing and vexing of all, if the island once boasted a culture developed and sophisticated enough to have produced such marvelous edifices, what happened to that culture? Why was the island the Europeans encountered a sparsely populated wasteland? The prevailing accounts of the islands history tell a story of self-inflicted devastation: a glaring case of eco-suicide. The island was dominated by a powerful chiefdom that promulgated a cult of statue making, exercising a ruthless hold on the islands people and rapaciously destroying the environment, cutting down a lush palm forest that once blanketed the island in order to construct contraptions for moving more and more statues, which grew larger and larger. As the population swelled in order to sustain the statue cult, growing well beyond the islands agricultural capacity, a vicious cycle of warfare broke out between opposing groups, and the culture ultimately suffered a dramatic collapse. In this lively and fascinating account, Hunt and Lipo offer a definitive solution to the mystery of what really happened on the island. Far from irresponsible environmental destroyers, they show, the Easter Islanders were remarkably inventive environmental stewards, devising ingenious methods to

enhance the islands agricultural capacity. They did not devastate the palm forest, and the culture did not descend into brutal violence. Perhaps most surprising of all, the making and moving of their enormous statues did not require a bloated population or tax their precious resources; their statue building was actually integral to their ability to achieve a delicate balance of sustainability. The Easter Islanders, it turns out, offer us an impressive record of masterful environmental management rich with lessons for confronting the daunting environmental challenges of our own time.

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