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Getting to Know You

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Getting to Know You

Annette Kühlem



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

A. I was always fascinated by archaeology as a science. How we can reconstruct a former situation from physical pieces of evidence we find. What especially intrigued me are human migrations and the settling of this planet we live on. The peopling of the Pacific is the last step in that worldwide expansion and the most awe-inspiring one. The courage and impetus it took to set out and find new islands in this seemingly endless ocean is hard to imagine. Part of this fascination is how humans were able to adapt to any kind of environment...first adapt and then gradually transform it. Rapa Nui for me is such an interesting study area because of the degree of adaptation and landscape transformation that took place over the centuries since it was settled.

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. My parents. My father, who as a geologist was the first one to take me along while he was doing surveys and taught me the importance of correct field work as a basis for any scientific research. And my mother in the sense of making the best out of any situation you find yourself in; to be open, positive, and cheerful.

Concerning literature about Rapa Nui, for me the work by Jan Boersema is very important. His reviews and evaluation of the earliest accounts about Rapa Nui show what the situation on the island was like by the time of the arrival of European expeditions. This historical information paints a very different picture from that of a failed society living on a deprived island. Instead, Rapa Nui is described as a prosperous place with healthy people who worship still standing *moai*. Burkhard Vogt, who has given me the possibility to work on Easter Island, has of course been a significant influence as well.

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

A. The excavations of the German Archaeological Institute that I work for in Ava Ranga Uka A Toroke Hau. Over the course of the years, many initial interpretations had to be changed due to new results from the excavations – and it only got more interesting. What surprised me was the degree of landscape transformation that had taken place at the site; the immense amounts of time, labor, and creative energy that had been invested in creating this elaborate succession of cultural layers and hydraulic architecture.

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

A. I started out doing archaeology of the Americas. I worked on very interesting projects in Mexico, Bolivia, and Peru. Had I not gotten captured by Polynesian archaeology, especially that of Rapa Nui, I would probably still be doing work on “el conti”. Or I would have gone with Plan B, which is working as a horse trainer and riding coach. Looking back, I consider it one of the best decisions and lucky turns of fate that I started working on Rapa Nui at the site of Ava Ranga Uka A Toroke Hau.

Q. What was your best Eureka moment?

A. Hans-Rudolf Bork and Andreas Mieth were the first ones to show me the distinctive palm root channels of the now-extinct *Jubaea* sp. palm tree in the trench that I am excavating in Ava Ranga Uka A Toroke Hau. Since that moment I knew what to look for and we have found numerous planting pits for palm trees right inside the paved areas in the center of the site. The first time I found those small holes inside a circular stone rim was one of these Eureka moments. For many, this may only be a small thing, but for me it was amazing to find proof that the palm trees were at one point a part of the landscape architecture at the site. It gave me such a different impression of the site. Not only of what it would have looked like with tall palm trees growing inside the pavement alongside parallel water channels and a succession of water basins, but also in the sense of the significance of the palm trees. They are most often mentioned only in the context of deforestation whereas these findings we made in Ava Ranga Uka A Toroke Hau show that they were valued and cherished to the degree to be part of the ritual architecture of such a site.

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

A. It would be great to know more about daily life in pre-contact times. I am sure that while the *moai* are the most vivid and iconic remnants of the past, they are only one aspect of life and spirituality on Rapa Nui. I think it is important to further investigate other aspects of Rapanui culture that are more concerned with basic human needs like agriculture, water management, settlements, etc.

And I would love to see the site of Ava Ranga Uka A Toroke Hau be restored after the excavations have come to an end, bringing all the pieces from all the different excavation campaigns together, making the site and all the findings accessible year-round.

Q. What is your favorite site on Rapa Nui and why?

A. That would of course be Ava Ranga Uka A Toroke Hau. It is such a unique site in so many aspects:

the hydraulic architecture, the most inland *ahu* on the island, an amazing stratigraphy of six meters of cultural layers with a unique diachronic sequence for the island. And the view in the morning when we arrive for our field work just after the sunrise is simply amazing.

I also love the north coast. The archaeology is fascinating. Every time I hike along the north coast I find something I have never seen before. There are so many unique structures. At the same time this is where you feel the isolation of the island...how there are thousands of kilometers of open ocean to cross before you get to the next speck of land.

Q. What myth or misinformation about Rapa Nui would you like to dispel?

A. First, that Rapa Nui is home to a failed society that abused their island to the breaking point. Ergo the collapse theory. For me, Rapa Nui is a model of success in the form of constant adaptation to very challenging circumstances. The first descriptions of the island tell us how fertile the island was and the archaeological research demonstrates how the Rapanui always found ways to cope. It is unfair to mischaracterize the island as a miniature model for worldwide doom. Collapse came many years after – and as a result of – contact with the outside world. The reasons were introduced diseases and slavery that resulted in the dramatic loss of population and thus knowledge about the many aspects of Rapanui culture.

And secondly the idea that there was a kind of *moai* building frenzy that overshadowed all other aspects of daily life and survival on the island.

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

A. There is more to Rapa Nui than the *moai*. They are awe-inspiring artifacts but they are only one aspect of the Rapanui culture, albeit the most charismatic one. Assuming that the island was settled for 1200 years and taking into account that there are less than 1000 *moai*, the vast majority of the people were spending their time doing things other than carving statues. The remains of those other activities are just as fascinating when it comes to understanding the Rapanui culture as the famous *moai*.

The entire island is an archaeological site. Many things only reveal themselves after one is more familiar with the landscape, like the impressive large-scale rock gardens that we find all over the island. At the same time, the island is not a museum. It is home to a community that is very

much alive and dynamic and that has its place in modernity. That is part of the fascination of visiting Rapa Nui today.

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

A. In general – get as much field experience as possible. Get in there, get a feel for the sediment and all the little details so you know what to watch out for.

On Rapa Nui – talk to the local people. Let them know what you are doing and why. Share your results and make them accessible not only in scientific journals.

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

A. The vanities, the animosities, and seeing other researchers as competition whereas we should complement each other and cooperate.

Something that is already changing and should continue to do so is the need to be more interdisciplinary. It is amazing how much more insight you can get if you take other fields of research into account.

Q. What are you currently reading?

A. *Sacred Hunger* by Barry Unsworth. And anything I can find about sacred trees in Polynesia and beyond.

Q. Credentials?

A. Master of Arts, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn.

Doctor of Philosophy, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn.

Q. Date and place of birth?

A. 16 March 1981; Eberbach, Germany.