

# Experts from the University of Chile investigate vestiges in remote Polynesian island

**Although little is known of Ráivavae, it is presumed that it could be one of the possible routes that Polynesians took to the discovery of Rapa Nui and possibly on to South America.**

Archeologists from the University of Chile's Institute for Easter Island Studies recently returned from an expedition to Ra'ivavae Island located about 700 km to the Southeast of Tahiti. The expedition's objective, conducted by professors Patricia Vargas, Claudio Cristino and Edmundo Edwards, with Margarita Riroroko, was to investigate the origin of human migration patterns in Polynesia.

With a population of less than 1,000 inhabitants, Ra'ivavae, a small volcanic island of only 18 square kilometers and surrounded by reefs of chorale and with an extensive inner lagoon, is one of the most beautiful, remote and archaeologically unknown locations in the region. Their mountains of up to 400 meters and volcanic rock preserve numerous old ancient sites and ruins, covered by a dense covering of vegetation.

Although little it is known of the Island, its geographic position, the winds and sea currents suggest is located in one of the possible Polynesian routes that was taken to the discovery and colonization of Easter Island and also on to South America, 500 years before Columbus.

The investigators from Casa de Bello returned to Ra'ivavae after 15 years, with sophisticated computing technology, satellite GPS support and the latest maps, developed together with the cartographers at the Roberto Izaurieta Institute, to locate and thoroughly study some of the archaeological sites already documented, in their untiring search of the origins of the human groups that populated that island and mythical Rapa Nui a millennium ago.

During the expedition, taro plants samples, which are related to the Chilean "manto of Eva", whose rich tubercle nutrients were the basis of the ancient Polynesian diet, were



taken to be studied during 2006 and 2007. In addition, soundings conducted on the old beach, to a meter of depth, indicated evidence of a remote human occupation.

Among the most significant findings were fragments of hooks and a basalt chip ax, associated with small graves and vegetal coral. Tools of the same type were recovered in other islands of Polynesia and excavations in sands of the Anakena beach, on Easter Island, by the same academic team in 1990.

The analysis of these artifacts suggested radiocarbon dates near year 1000 AD, “so more likely the site is older, indicating a population of Ra’ivavae that is previous to Rapa Nui”, said Prof. Vargas. She added that a compositional analysis of the tools and possible sources in those places will allow the team to establish the extent of interaction and interchange among other islands in the past.

“These results are extraordinarily significant and it is hoped to extend the investigations in a new expedition programmed for 2006”, concluded the team.

This expedition, concluded days before Christmas, corresponds to the first stage of a series of studies that the Institute for Easter Island Studies, as part of School of Architecture and Urban Development (FAU), will conduct during the project with the participation of the University of French Polynesia and the University of Berkeley. .

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