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The Kon-Tiki Museum

A Norwegian Viking in the World of Science: Receptions of Thor Heyerdahl and his Theory on the Settlement of Polynesia During the Period of 1937–1963

Introduction

Thor Heyerdahl, a Norwegian explorer and writer, became an instant hero to the post-war world when he and his crew made landfall on the island of Raroia in the Tuamotu Archipelago after completing an 8,000-kilometre voyage aboard a replica of an ancient Peruvian balsa-log raft named *Kon-Tiki* (Andersson 2010; Solsvik 2014). His book about the expedition, *The Kon-Tiki Expedition: By Raft Across the South Seas* (Heyerdahl 1950), has sold nearly fifty million copies and been translated into 84 languages.

However, Heyerdahl's true achievement was not the ocean-crossing voyage aboard the balsa-log raft *Kon-Tiki*, but rather his ability to spark immense public interest in the question of who had settled the Polynesian island world. This is what earned *Kon-Tiki* its historic fame and helps explain why Heyerdahl became one of the great communicators of the 20th century. Both academics and laypeople wrote to their local newspapers to debate the seaworthiness of ancient vessels, the navigational skills of early peoples, and the possible migration routes to Polynesia, as evidenced by the numerous "letters to the editor" published during the 1950s (Bakke, Solsvik 2020: 66; Solsvik 2014: 157).

Fig. 1. Thor Heyerdahl finishing up his manuscript, *American Indians in the Pacific: The Theory Behind the Kon-Tiki Expedition* in his apartment in Oslo, sometime in 1951 (All illustrations courtesy of the Thor Heyerdahl Archives, The Kon-Tiki Museum)

At the time, scholarly consensus held that balsa-log rafts needed to be dried onshore between voyages, at least every two weeks; otherwise, they would become waterlogged and sink (Lothrop 1932). Based on this assumption, a transoceanic migration from South America was considered technically impossible and, therefore, not worth investigating. The dismissal of his theory on these grounds prompted Heyerdahl to test his hypothesis through practical experimentation. The voyage of the *Kon-Tiki* raft demonstrated, beyond reasonable doubt, that ancient balsa-log rafts were capable of reaching Polynesia. However, as Heyerdahl himself acknowledged, this did not constitute proof that ancient South Americans *had* made the journey. Nevertheless, he had effectively removed the principal

technical objection that had prevented the academic community from considering his theory a viable explanation for the settlement of Polynesia—commonly referred to as the "Polynesian problem."

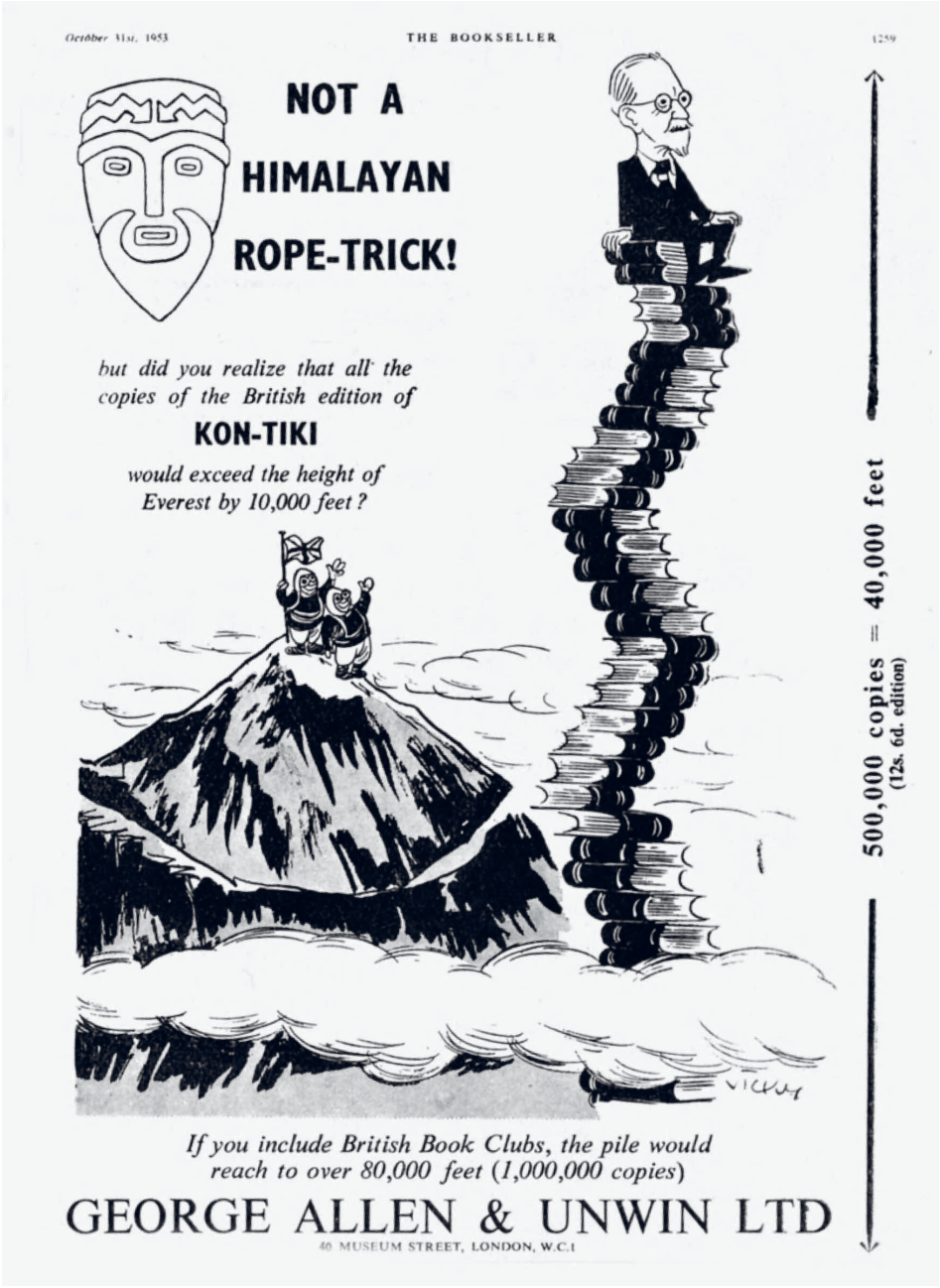

Fig. 2. A sales poster for *The Kon-Tiki Expedition: By Raft Across the South Seas*

The scope of this paper is to examine how Thor Heyerdahl and his theory on the settlement of Polynesia—often erroneously referred to as "the Kon-Tiki theory"—were received by the academic community, beginning with the publication of his first article in 1941; through the fame he attained following the *Kon-Tiki* expedition in 1947 and his archaeological excavations on the Galápagos Islands and Rapa Nui in the mid-1950s; and up to his intentional withdrawal from Polynesian research after 1963 (Solsvik 2014: 161–162; Spriggs 2014: 175–177).[1]

Despite his success, both Thor Heyerdahl and his theory remained controversial. Responses to his work were often polarized, framed in terms of right and wrong. He was either celebrated as a visionary who had proven the academic establishment wrong or dismissed as an amateur who failed to grasp even the most basic scholarly concepts.

Fig. 3. Thor Heyerdahl on horseback crossing the mountain-plateau on Fatu Hiva, 1937

[1] After a twenty-three-year absence, Heyerdahl eventually returned to the region. Between 1986 and 1988, he organized archaeological excavations on Rapa Nui, during which the earliest known settlement site on the island was discovered (Skjølsvold 1994). He also led an extensive archaeological investigation at Túcume, Peru, from 1988 to 1992, which clearly demonstrated the historical depth of Peruvian maritime traditions (Heyerdahl, Sandweiss, Narváez 1999). Although Heyerdahl later returned to Rapa Nui and South American archaeology in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this historical analysis focuses on the earlier period, during which he was actively engaged with the academic community working in the region.

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate that Heyerdahl's initial engagement with the Pacific anthropology and archaeology was far more nuanced. He became more deeply involved in the research community than is typically acknowledged in conventional research histories. This paper will document and explore the middle ground during the period from 1937 to 1963, recognizing the positive academic feedback Heyerdahl received, in order to present a more balanced view of how his theory was evaluated by the scholarly community.

1. The Polynesian Problem

During his stay on Fatu Hiva and Hiva Oa in the Marquesas Islands in 1937, Thor Heyerdahl became fascinated by the origins of the Polynesian culture (Heyerdahl 1938, 1975, 1998; Ryan 2014: 33). The prevailing view at the time, based on linguistic similarities, was that the origins of Polynesian peoples lay to the west, in the islands of Southeast Asia. However, opinions diverged significantly when scholars attempted to pinpoint the ultimate homeland of the Polynesians. The proposed locations included regions then referred to as "Further India", as well as China, the Indochina Peninsula, and other parts of Southeast Asia (Heyerdahl 1952: 4–8).

By the time of the *Kon-Tiki* expedition, the question of Polynesian origins and the routes by which people had arrived in the islands had been debated for nearly a century. This debate became known as "the Polynesian Problem" (Bishop Museum 1903: 5[2]; Heyerdahl 1952: 4; Kirch 2000: 208; Sullivan 1923: 211).[3] A central difficulty in tracing the Polynesian origins stemmed from their racial classification as partly "Caucasian." Early European explorers described Polynesians as "more civilized" and more "European-looking" than the inhabitants of Melanesia and Southeast Asia (Heine-Geldern 1932: 547; Heyerdahl 1952: 3–8; Hiroa 1938: 6–10, 12–16; Hiroa 1945: 12; Sullivan 1923), a view supported by many academics well into the mid-20th century.

Polynesian oral traditions indicated that their ancestors settled the islands significantly later than the initial settlement of Melanesia. This raised a key question: how could people classified as "part-Caucasian" (Sullivan 1923) have migrated through regions already inhabited by "darker-skinned" populations while still retaining their lighter complexion? This question lay at the heart of the so-called "Polynesian Problem"—a problem largely created by the racial classifications imposed by early scientific thought. It was, in many ways, the scientific framework itself that generated the paradox which researchers then sought to resolve.

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[2] "… until at last we may wrest from the unknown the secrets which today puzzle the wisest scientists, such as whence and when did the Polynesians come into the waters of the great ocean?"

[3] Researchers also talked about an "Austronesian problem", which represents the whole language group and culture, settling the area from Islands Southeast Asia to Rapa Nui (Heine-Geldern 1932: 543).

2. Thor Heyerdahl's theory

Although the "Polynesian Problem" had fascinated the academic community since the time of Captain Cook's voyages in the late 18th century, relatively little anthropological or archaeological research had been conducted in the region. In 1892, historical societies were established in the two largest colonial communities—New Zealand and Hawai'i—with a focus on documenting local culture, including oral traditions.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Hawai'i in collaboration with Yale University carried out salvage ethnographic studies and archaeological surveys across various island groups in Polynesia. However, systematic archaeological excavations were not undertaken until the early to mid-1950s.[4] Thus, in 1937, when Thor Heyerdahl first turned his attention to Polynesian origins, scientific debates in the region relied heavily on outdated and incomplete data—oral histories and broad anthropological theories such as racial classification. The theoretical and methodological concepts utilized by Pacific researchers were the diffusionist approaches developed in the late 19th and beginning of the 20th century (Trigger 1989: 150–154, 161–167), albeit without the extensive archaeological assemblages recovered through excavations in Europe (Trigger 1989: 149). Moreover, the regional models lacked—and still lacks—a robust typological-based chronological framework of the sort pioneered by Oscar Montelius in Europe (Trigger 1989: 155–161).

Thor Heyerdahl developed his theory within the framework of an early culture-historical approach, drawing inspiration from his studies in cultural geography at the University of Oslo (1933–1936).[5] At the time, cultural geography emphasized geographical and economic factors as key constraints on how cultures migrated and evolved. Heyerdahl's theory was grounded in observations of Pacific geography, particularly the prevailing east-to-west wind patterns and the Humboldt Current, which also follows that direction. Heyerdahl argued that Stone Age cultures would have been "hemmed in" by such environmental conditions, which shaped the directions of their migrations.

Thor Heyerdahl first formulated his theory in a paper entitled *Did Polynesian Culture Originate in Polynesia?*, published in 1941. Here, Thor Heyerdahl presented his theory on how the Polynesian islands had been settled by two separate migrations:

> (1) A pre-Incan civilization, with its centre near Lake Titicaca and along the Peruvian coast below, seems to have swept the islands at a comparatively early period, via Easter Island; while

[4] Except for excavations in Tonga carried out by W.C. McKern in 1920–1921 (McKern 1929; Davidson 1979: 86), which did not receive due attention until after the Lapita Cultural Complex had been archaeologically defined by Edward W. Gifford on New Caledonia in 1952 (Kirch 2000: 27).

[5] In addition to his main topic of zoology, Thor Heyerdahl also followed lectures in Cultural Geography.

(2) a later immigration, the descendants of which dominate the present Polynesian race, reached the islands via Hawaii from the Bella Coola area of British Columbia about 1000 A.D (Heyerdahl 1941 in: Hoém 2014: 184–185).

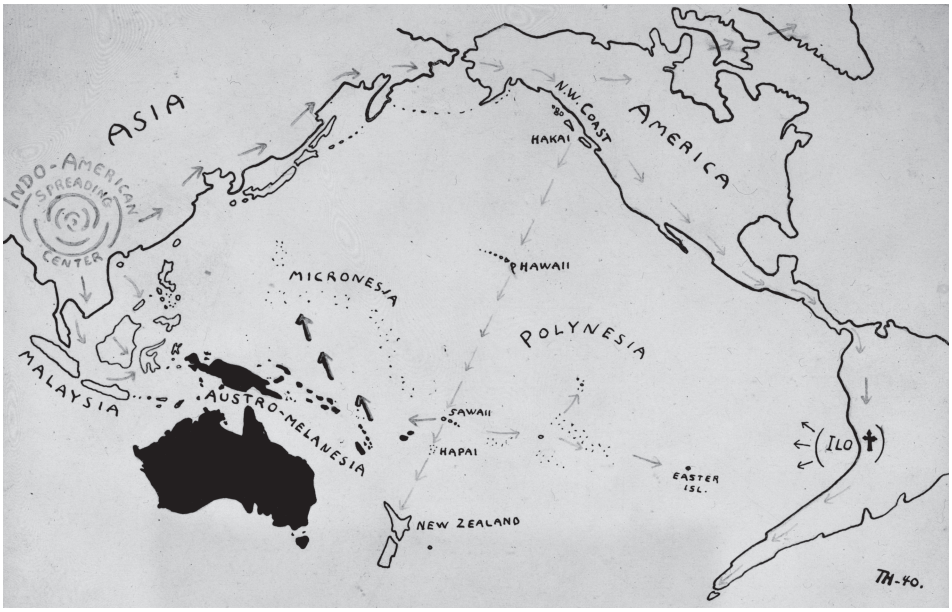

Fig. 4. The first illustration (with English text) of Thor Heyerdahl's theory on the settlement of Polynesia. Hand-drawn by Thor Heyerdahl between 1939 and 1946

These two migrations were undertaken by two distinct cultural and "racial" groups, as claimed by most academics of the time: 1) a group of light-skinned "American Indians" from the Tiwanaku area, which sailed out in balsa wood rafts from the coast of Peru or Ecuador to colonize the Marquesas and Rapa Nui around AD 500; these were the people who built megalithic structures, carved stone statues, and were sun-worshippers; and 2) an ethnic Polynesian group which sailed in large dug-out canoes from the island area of British Columbia to Hawai'i around AD 1200, and then on to the other Polynesian islands. They originated in Southeast Asia and were warriors, ritualists, and wood carvers.

Heyerdahl believed that his theory resolved the so-called "Polynesian problem" by: 1) introducing the anticipated "Caucasoid-like" or "European-like" racial element from South America, thereby eliminating the need for Polynesians to have travelled through the Melanesian Islands, which were inhabited by "dark-skinned" populations; and 2) proposing that Polynesian culture and language—documented at the time of first European contact—originated in Asia, but arrived in the Pacific via a northerly route from Asia to British Columbia, again bypassing Melanesia.

3. Reception, reactions, and interactions

I have identified three distinct periods in Thor Heyerdahl's interactions with the scientific community, each characterized by differing approaches and reactions to his theory. The first period spans from his initial trip to Polynesia in 1937 to a year before the *Kon-Tiki* voyage. The second period begins in 1946, when Heyerdahl travelled to the United States with the first complete manuscript of his theory. It encompasses the *Kon-Tiki Expedition* and its aftermath, ending in 1951. The third period, from 1952 to 1963, marks Heyerdahl's professionalization as a researcher. It begins with the publication of his magnum opus, *American Indians in the Pacific* (1952). With this publication, Heyerdahl completed his first major scientific study, which arguably could have been defended as a doctoral dissertation. During this time, he began asserting himself at scientific conferences and organized his renowned archaeological expedition to Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in 1955–1956. This period is notable for an increasing acceptance of Heyerdahl as a researcher, even if his theory remained controversial.

In 1963, Heyerdahl withdrew from active participation in Pacific studies (Solsvik 2014: 161–162). Although he retained his status as a researcher, a subsequent Polynesian scholarship reinterpreted the findings of his 1955–1956 Rapa Nui expedition. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Heyerdahl once again faced mounting criticism.

3.1. Before *Kon-Tiki*, particularly from 1939 to 1942

Thor Heyerdahl's engagement with the academic community began well before his famous *Kon-Tiki* voyage. In 1939, at the age of 25, he arrived in Canada somewhat accidentally, as a student without a formal degree. However, he had completed a year of fieldwork in the Marquesas Islands—an uncommon achievement at the time, and one that was considered a significant credential. During this fieldwork, he collected zoological specimens as well as ethnological and archaeological artifacts. Heyerdahl also received a strong letter of recommendation from a leading geneticist at the Institute of Biology at the University of Oslo.

On the basis of these credentials, Heyerdahl became acquainted with key figures in the fields of First Nations studies and Polynesian anthropology. In 1941, he was invited to contribute an article to a journal established for European scholars fleeing the growing political unrest in Europe. His paper, titled *Did Polynesian Culture Originate in America?*, was accepted for publication. The editorial board—which included Ruth Benedict, Franz Boas, and Robert von Heine-Geldern—expressed their scepticism in a postscript to the article: "While taking exception with some of the author's conclusions, the editors have found the above article stimulating and thoroughly worthy of attention" (Heyerdahl 1941: 26).

In retrospect, it appears that none of the editors held rigid views on Polynesian migration that would have compelled them to reject the paper, particularly

as it drew partly on Heyerdahl's own fieldwork. In my view, their willingness to publish the article may also reflect the limited data available at the time with regard to the prehistoric chronology of the region.

During a stay in New York in 1942, Thor Heyerdahl became acquainted with Ralph Linton who had published the only archaeological survey of the Marquesas Islands (Linton 1923; 1925) as well as with archaeologist Herbert Spinden, a leading scholar on Mayan culture. The latter took a liking to the young, self-educated researcher. Heyerdahl was invited to stay in Spinden's apartment for several weeks while Spinden was away at a conference, granting him access to Spinden's private book collection (Heyerdahl 1942). Spinden also encouraged Heyerdahl to demonstrate that rafts made of balsa logs could, in principle, make the journey to Polynesia. However, Spinden spoke candidly about the simplistic culture-historical framework to which Heyerdahl subscribed. Insofar as diffusionists such as Heyerdahl were concerned, Spinden had once written: "The romantic school, on the other hand, sees in cultural similarities the almost certain proofs of dissemination from a favoured intellectual source even though ages and oceans intervene" (Spinden 1928: 44).

Fig. 5. The young researcher at his desk at home in Lillehammer, just before going to Canada in 1939

It seems unlikely that Spinden seriously intended to encourage Heyerdahl to prove his diffusionist theory by undertaking a transoceanic voyage on a balsa raft (Heyerdahl 1950 [1984]: 30). It is more plausible that he hoped to steer Heyerdahl toward a more scientifically rigorous study—such as a doctoral dissertation—in which he could test his hypothesis through archaeological excavations or, perhaps, by conducting laboratory experiments on the seaworthiness and longevity of balsa wood rafts, supplemented by historical research. Records of Thor Heyerdahl's activities during this period are scarce, particularly concerning his interactions with fellow researchers. However, the available evidence—primarily letters to his family—offers a portrait of a young, unproven researcher operating well beyond his expected level. He appears to have been well received, owing both to his academic references and to the credibility he had gained through his fieldwork. Scholars such as Ralph Linton and Herbert Spinden seem to have regarded Heyerdahl as a student with significant potential.

3.2. Challenges and rejections, from 1946–1951

The next phase of this story begins after the conclusion of World War II. Back home in Lillehammer, Norway, Thor Heyerdahl completed a study titled *Polynesia and America: A Problem of Cultural Diffusion* (1946) and travelled to the United States with the intention of securing its publication through an academic institution.

By this time, the archaeological and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Polynesia during the 1920s and 1930s—primarily by the B.P. Bishop Museum in Hawai'i in collaboration with Yale University—had been more thoroughly synthesized. There was also a growing recognition that Polynesian culture may have developed within the Pacific itself (Burrows 1938; Hiroa 1945: 13–14), challenging earlier assumptions that it had originated through long-distance migration of a fully developed culture from outside the region.[6]

In the late 1940s, Heyerdahl's theory ran contrary to three major lines of scholarly consensus:

1. Polynesian languages were understood to have originated in Southeast Asia. Otto Dempwolff had formally defined the Austronesian language family between 1934 and 1937, significantly strengthening this argument.
2. A widely accepted model held that Polynesia was settled via the Melanesian islands, and this framework had become orthodox within the broader academic community.

[6] In his *On the Road of the Winds*, Vinton Patrick Kirch argues that it was not until after the discovery of the Lapita Culture in the 1950s and 1960s that researchers began to search for the Polynesian "homeland" inside the geographical bounds of Polynesia (Kirch 2000: 208–209). Kirch is right that pre-Lapita researchers believed that there was an ultimate "Polynesian" homeland to the west, in China or India, however, even Te Rangi Hiroa (1945) uses the term "Polynesian ancestors" when talking about this homeland. The notion that Polynesian culture had developed in Polynesia—either in Tonga-Samoa or in the Society Islands—began to take hold in the late 1930s.

3. Based on Samuel K. Lothrop's 1932 paper, *Aboriginal Navigation off the West Coast of South America*, it had become widely accepted that no Indigenous deep-sea maritime tradition existed in South America.

Nevertheless, it was Heyerdahl's 1947 voyage aboard the *Kon-Tiki*—a replica of an ancient South American balsa-wood raft, which sailed from Callao, Peru, to Raroia in the Tuamotu Archipelago—that truly provoked strong reactions from Polynesian scholars. While the expedition only refuted the specific claim that South American rafts were incapable of deep-sea travel, it was anthropologists, archaeologists, and linguists specializing in Polynesia who responded most vocally. Ironically, Samuel K. Lothrop, the very scholar whose earlier work had helped solidify the prevailing belief that balsa rafts would sink after two weeks at sea, accepted the outcome readily and even began building his own scale model of the *Kon-Tiki* raft (Kvam 2008: 112).

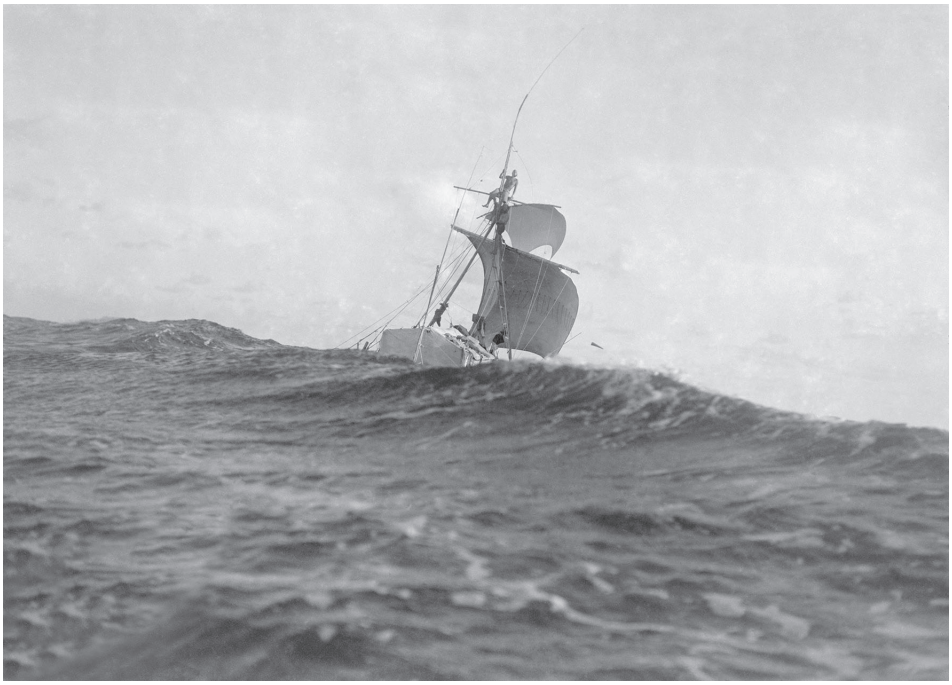

Fig. 6. The *Kon-Tiki* raft sailing the Pacific in the summer of 1947

A wide range of scholars appeared in the press to denounce the *Kon-Tiki* expedition—criticizing the experiment, the overarching theory, and the man behind it. Te Rangi Hīroa (known as Peter Henry Buck), a Māori scholar and by that time the preeminent figure in Polynesian studies, was informed of the *Kon-Tiki* voyage and Heyerdahl's novel migration theory by a reporter from the *Auckland Star*. The resulting headline read: "*That «Kon-Tiki Raft Business» Makes Sir Peter Buck Laugh*" (Jacoby 1968: 197). Hīroa acknowledged the expedition as a "beautiful

adventure" but insisted it should not be regarded as science (Jacoby 1968: 197–198; Kvam 2008: 65).

Finnish scholar Rafael Karsten went even further than mere ridicule, asserting that either the raft had not made the crossing or that modern technology must have been employed to keep it afloat. He called the expedition a hoax (Kvam 2008: 60–65). His Danish colleague, Kaj Birket-Smith, suggested that the *Kon-Tiki* expedition should be "killed by silence" (Jacoby 1968: 199). However, due to the immense popularity of Heyerdahl's 1950 book *The Kon-Tiki Expedition: By Raft Across the South Sea*, and the later release of the documentary *Kon-Tiki*, both the voyage and Heyerdahl's theory remained firmly in the public spotlight.

At academic conferences—including those in Cambridge and Vienna—the scholarly community attempted to marginalize Heyerdahl by boycotting his lectures or avoiding him personally. At the 30th International Americanist Congress in Cambridge in 1952, one French ethnologist demonstratively disrupted the start of Heyerdahl's lecture by noisily reading a newspaper before exiting the room in protest (Jacoby 1968: 211; Kvam 2008: 111).

The controversy surrounding the *Kon-Tiki* expedition and Heyerdahl's public advocacy for his migration theory is well known to anyone familiar with his story. Many of these episodes played out in the media, and those that did not have been thoroughly documented by his biographers. This phase of intense controversy has been the primary focus of most historical analyses of Heyerdahl's academic reception. Nevertheless, dissenting voices opposed to the wholesale rejection of Heyerdahl and his migration theory also emerged—particularly within the field of geography and among retired or emeritus scholars. In 1950, Heyerdahl was awarded the Retzius Medal by the Swedish Geographical Society "for organizing and carrying out the Kon-Tiki expedition with a scientific scope" (Jacoby 1968: 204). The following year, he received honours from the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and the French Société de Géographie.

3.3. Towards acceptance, from 1952–1963

In 1952, Thor Heyerdahl finally published his magnum opus, *American Indians in the Pacific: The Theory Behind the Kon-Tiki Expedition*. Although most reviewers criticized his core argument—that the first settlers of Polynesia had come from South America—many acknowledged the impressive volume of work he had accomplished in a relatively short time.

The French ethnologist Alfred Métraux, a leading expert on both Polynesian and South American cultures and a prominent figure at UNESCO, initially dismissed Heyerdahl in a newspaper interview, calling him a *mauvais savant*—an inept scientist. Shortly thereafter, when Heyerdahl visited Paris, the newspaper arranged a face-to-face confrontation between the two (Jacoby 1968; Kvam 2008: 116). During their discussion, Heyerdahl presented Métraux with a stack of photographs of stone statues and asked him to sort them into two piles: one for

statues from Polynesia and the other for those from South America. According to the newspaper account, Métraux failed the test. This episode illustrates that *American Indians in the Pacific* (Heyerdahl 1952) assembled a substantial body of comparative material that many specialists in either region had not previously examined side by side. Most scholars were experts in either Polynesia or South America—few had the breadth of knowledge required to assess similarities across both cultural areas.

One group of reviews that stood out for their relative support of Heyerdahl's theory came from geographers. Heyerdahl employed a basic method of cultural comparison—analysing artifacts, architecture, and social customs, known as "cultural traits"—to trace migration routes. This approach was grounded in the culture-historical framework used by early pioneers such as Gordon V. Childe, and remained influential into the 1950s, although it had evolved to incorporate more rigorous methodologies (Trigger 1989: 148–174). In the Pacific, however, where sub-surface archaeology was limited—lacking deep stratigraphic sequences—and there was a prevailing consensus that the Polynesian islands had been settled only recently, this methodological shift was less fully developed.

Heyerdahl introduced a novel element by incorporating wind patterns and ocean currents to construct plausible migration routes. Geographers reviewing *American Indians in the Pacific* (1952) viewed this integration of geographic constraints into migration theory as a methodological and theoretical advancement in Pacific studies. Among the most enthusiastic was Johannes Humlum, a Danish geographer and professor at Aarhus University, who was only three years Heyerdahl's senior:

> …, but his desire for objectivity, his sense of the great lines, and his ability for combination, in connection with a fertile scientific imagination and a strong desire for empirical verification, give his main points real weight. Heyerdahl's theory is undoubtedly the best-founded and most probable of those so far put forward concerning the original settlement of the Pacific Ocean (Humlum 1955: 100).

In 1953, Thor Heyerdahl was the first to introduce modern sub-surface archaeological methods to the southeastern Pacific through his excavations in the Galápagos Islands. Of far greater significance, however, was *The Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific* in 1955–1956, which, over the course of nine months, conducted extensive excavations on Rapa Nui; Raivavae and Rapa Iti in the Austral Islands; and Hiva Oa and Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands. The entire expedition was financed by Heyerdahl himself.

Fig. 7. Thor Heyerdahl's work-team with archaeologist Arne Skjølsvold in front is ready to start the investigation of the statue-quarry, in the extinct volcano Rano Raraku, Rapa Nui, 1955

Thor Heyerdahl's substantial investment in bringing modern archaeological methods to Polynesia—particularly at the scale and scope in which it was executed—established him as a significant figure in the field. French archaeologist Henri Lavachery, a member of the Franco-Belgian Expedition to Rapa Nui in 1934, publicly expressed his support: "The investigations on Easter Island … furnished Heyerdahl with archaeological evidence which is difficult to dispute regarding the validity of his theories concerning the first peopling of eastern Polynesia" (Lavachery 1976: 11).

Over time, Heyerdahl gradually gained greater acceptance within the community of Polynesian researchers. A key factor contributing to this shift was the discovery of a significantly deeper time horizon for human settlement on Rapa Nui—findings that contradicted earlier models based on the prevailing settlement theory (Heyerdahl, Ferdon 1961). This new evidence lent support to Heyerdahl's hypothesis of an initial settlement from South America, a theory that, at the time, could not be conclusively refuted by existing archaeological assemblages, stratigraphy, or chronological data. As a result, the Pacific Science Congress, held in Honolulu, Hawai'i, in 1961, adopted a resolution expressing support for Heyerdahl's work: "Southeast Asia and the adjacent islands constitute a major source of information about the peoples and cultures of the Pacific islands, as does South America on the other side of the Pacific, where research has advanced more rapidly" (Tuthill 1963: 48). This was the high point of academic acceptance for Thor Heyerdahl by the Pacific science community. He chaired a session at this congress, as well as at several Americanist congresses during the 1960s.

Fig. 8. Thor Heyerdahl at the Pacific Science Congress in Honolulu, 1961

4. Drifting apart

Pottery had already been discovered in Tonga during the 1920–1921 expedition (McKern 1929), and by the mid-1960s, archaeological excavations confirmed that the pottery was of the same style as that found in New Caledonia in 1952 by Gifford and Evans (Kirch 1997: 6–8). Polynesian archaeologists began to suspect that this distinctive ceramic tradition provided evidence of the migration of Polynesians through the Melanesian islands—or of a people who would eventually become "Polynesian". In 1973, Lapita-style pottery was discovered in Samoa, and with several subsequent projects documenting the spread of Lapita ceramics through the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago, the Solomons, and Vanuatu, the question of Polynesian migration—if not their ultimate origins—was largely resolved.

In 1963, Thor Heyerdahl left the field of Polynesian archaeology as an active researcher. When he undertook the Ra voyage in 1969, many within the Pacific research community believed he had embraced a kind of naïve diffusionism (Spriggs 2014: 175–177). However, it is important to remember that for Heyerdahl—who himself distrusted hyper-diffusionist theories—the world of 1970 looked quite different from that of 1937, when he had first visited Polynesia (Stokke 2021). He had personally crossed both the Pacific and the Atlantic in replicas of ancient vessels. In the case of the reed ship *Ra II*, which was constructed using technology possibly dating back up to 5,000 years (Johnstone 1988: 10) or even earlier (Heyerdahl 1978: 23), Heyerdahl argued that, just as a person on foot can

cross a continent given sufficient time, so too could a seafarer—even in the Stone Age—potentially cross one or more of the world's great oceans (Heyerdahl 1978). He did not consider himself a naïve diffusionist (Heyerdahl 1994: 288); rather, he saw himself as exploring the capacities of early humans and their maritime technologies.

Fig. 9. Ra II sailing between Safi, Morocco, and Bridgetown, Barbados, 1970

The status of Thor Heyerdahl and his theories within the Pacific research community became increasingly critical during the late 1980s and early 1990s. From 1973 to the present, archaeological research has been conducted across all island groups in the Pacific. Notably, several large multidisciplinary studies have focused on the origins and migrations of the people now referred to as "the Lapita peoples". Archaeological evidence has traced the Lapita expansion from the north-eastern part of New Guinea eastward, extending as far as Samoa and Tonga (Kirch 1997). The Austronesian language family, of which the language of the Lapita people was a part, has been shown to share affinities with the language spoken by the Amis people on the southeastern coast of Taiwan (Chen et al. 2022). DNA studies of early Lapita skeletons found at the Teouma site in central Vanuatu have also revealed genetic affinities with populations in Taiwan (Skoglund et al. 2016; Valentin et al. 2015). While researchers have yet to fully understand the cultural and chronological transition from Lapita culture to a distinctly Polynesian culture, substantial research has been undertaken—particularly in Samoa—including by scholars affiliated with the Kon-Tiki Museum (Martinsson-Wallin 2007).

5. Thor Heyerdahl's legacy

Thor Heyerdahl began his career as an ethnographer—a term he used to describe himself for many years—more than eight decades ago. His main theory, which proposed the first original settlement of Polynesia from South America, has since been disproven, and many new discoveries have emerged. However, the research community seems to have taken a softer stance on Thor Heyerdahl's work and legacy following his death in 2002. It may therefore be fitting to conclude this paper with a summary of the most important scientific legacies of Thor Heyerdahl's many years of service, which were primarily dedicated to the pure joy of solving mysteries.

1. Maritime Experimental Archaeology:
   Thor Heyerdahl's seafaring expeditions—the *Kon-Tiki* (1947), *Ra* (1969), *Ra II* (1970), and *Tigris* (1978)—inspired the creation of a distinct academic field known as maritime experimental archaeology.
2. Prehistory of Rapa Nui:
   The Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the East Pacific, conducted in 1955–1956, both funded and organized by Thor Heyerdahl, laid the foundation for the prehistoric chronology of the island (Heyerdahl, Ferdon 1961), which is still in use today, albeit with modifications. More importantly, Thor Heyerdahl brought six young archaeologists to the island, several of whom returned to start new projects. Today, it could be argued that Heyerdahl's expedition inspired as much as 60–70% of the archaeological investigations that have taken place on the island since 1956 (Solsvik 2006).
3. The American Connection:
   In 2020, a detailed DNA study of blood samples clearly revealed the presence of a pre-European gene contribution in Polynesian populations (Ioannidis et al. 2020; Wallin 2020). The earliest recombination of this and Polynesian DNA was traced to Fatu Hiva in the Marquesas and is estimated to have occurred around AD 1150, which predates current archaeological estimates of the island's settlement. It is now established as an indisputable fact that Polynesians and South American natives met face-to-face, either in the Pacific or along the coast of South America, sometime in the 12th or 13th centuries. Thor Heyerdahl's insistence on a contact between the peoples of these two regions has been proven correct (cf. Moreno-Mayar et al. 2023). This finding is further supported by archaeological evidence of sweet potato in Polynesia, pre-dating European visits (e.g., Hather and Kirch 1991) and by growing DNA evidence suggesting the Polynesian sweet potato originated in South America (Ladefoged et al. 2005; Roullier et al. 2013).[7]

[7] A recent analysis suggests that the sweet potato spread to Polynesian islands in pre-human times (Muñoz-Rodriguez et al. 2018), although further analyses are probably needed to reach a definite conclusion on this matter.

4. Maritime Culture in Peru:
   Archaeological excavations at Tucumé, Peru, conducted between 1988 and 1992, uncovered evidence of a long-standing maritime-oriented culture. These findings demonstrated that seafaring and maritime exchange played a significant role in the early cultures of the region—extending at least as far back as the period corresponding to Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki* voyage. The excavations helped affirm the importance of coastal navigation and marine connectivity in the development of pre-Columbian societies along the Pacific coast of South America.

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SUMMARY

A Norwegian Viking in the World of Science: Receptions of Thor Heyerdahl and his Theory on the Settlement of Polynesia During the Period of 1937–1963

This article examines the reception of Thor Heyerdahl's controversial theory on the settlement of Polynesia between 1937 and 1963. While Heyerdahl achieved global fame with the Kon-Tiki expedition of 1947, his most enduring impact lay in stimulating debate about ancient transoceanic migrations. Traditionally dismissed by scholars as implausible, his hypothesis challenged prevailing linguistic and archaeological models by emphasizing environmental constraints and experimental voyages. This study traces three phases of academic responses—from cautious interest in the late 1930s and 1940s, to sharp rejection following Kon-Tiki, and gradual acceptance of Heyerdahl as a serious, if unconventional, researcher in the 1950s. By highlighting positive as well as critical reactions, the article demonstrates that Heyerdahl's engagement with anthropology and archaeology was more nuanced than typically portrayed. His work not only influenced Pacific studies but also helped establish maritime experimental archaeology as a distinct research field.

Keywords: Thor Heyerdahl; Historiography of science, Reception history; Polynesia, Polynesian problem, Rapa Nui (Easter Island)