

HISTORY MYSTERY

A row of Moai statues on a cliff overlooking the ocean under a cloudy sky. The statues are dark and weathered, with some showing signs of damage or erosion. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds, and the ocean is visible in the distance.

WHAT HAPPENED
ON RAPA NUI?

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The **History Mystery** series from **icHistory** are good for the teaching of ...

- Critical thinking.
- Historical inquiry.
- Understand that historical understanding is always evolving.
- Personal bias ... are students prepared to let go of their first 'answers'?
- Corroboration.
- Source evaluation.
- Discussion and debate.
- Cross pollination of ideas and theories.
- Understanding the importance of shared / sharing knowledge.

RAPA NUI

Rapa Nui or 'Easter Island' is the most remotely inhabited island on the planet.

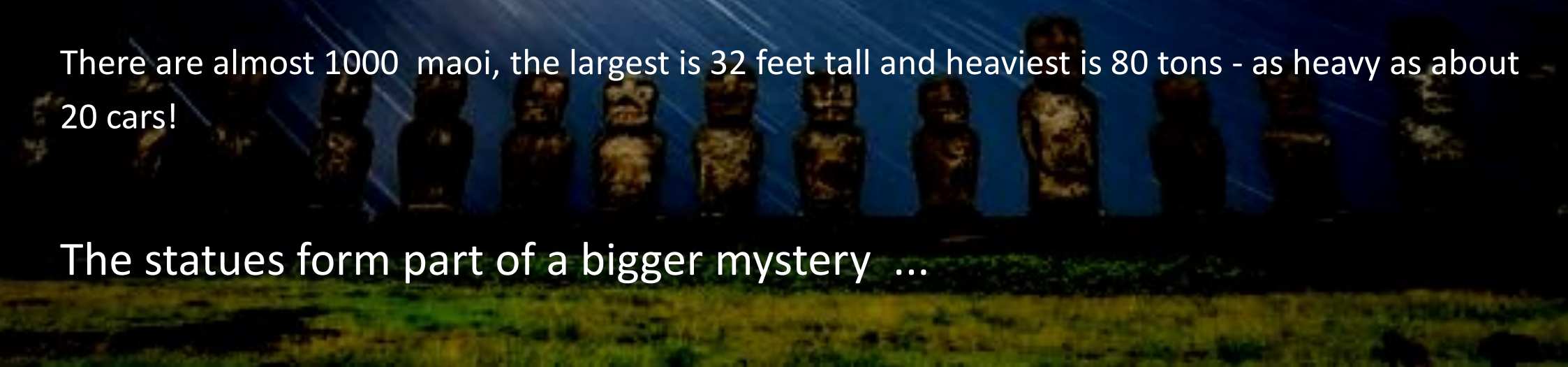
It is located in the south-eastern Pacific Ocean.

The island is just 14 miles long and 7 miles wide.

The island is most famous because of the **moai** (stone carved statues) that have been positioned about the island.

There are almost 1000 moai, the largest is 32 feet tall and heaviest is 80 tons - as heavy as about 20 cars!

The statues form part of a bigger mystery ...



THE MYSTERY

Rapa Nui's population peaked at about 10,000 by the year c1600.

Dutch sailors visited Rapa Nui in 1772 - they recorded approximately 3000 people still living there.

In 1877, European explorers recorded a population of just 111.

So ... what happened to the people of Rapa Nui and why?

A BRIEF TIMELINE

800 - 1200 - The island is first inhabited by Polynesian explorers / settlers.

(exact time is still a matter of debate)

1200 - Larger scale cultivation of the land and building moai / statues.

1300 - 1400 - Increased rate of moai carving and placement.

1600 - The population grows to a peak - approx., 10,000.

1650 - Moai building slowing down or has stopped.

1722 - Dutch explorers land (Easter Day) + record a population of 3000.

c1750 - Birdman cult + egg race competition begins.

1774 - British explorer James Cook visits - his notes say that many of the statues have been knocked over.

1877 - European explorers put the Rapa Nui population is just 111.

KEY QUESTIONS

What happened to the people of Rapa Nui?

Why did this happen?

How were the moai built?

How were the moai moved?

Why did they stop building moai statues?



ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

Option 1

Distribute the 20 clues (remove some if your choose) amongst the class.

Ideally students make up a circle. The clues should be verbally shared (in a random order?) then allow students with challenging / supporting evidence to contribute. They could use the accompanying worksheet as a guide for discussion - with the aim to reach a consensus for each question asked.

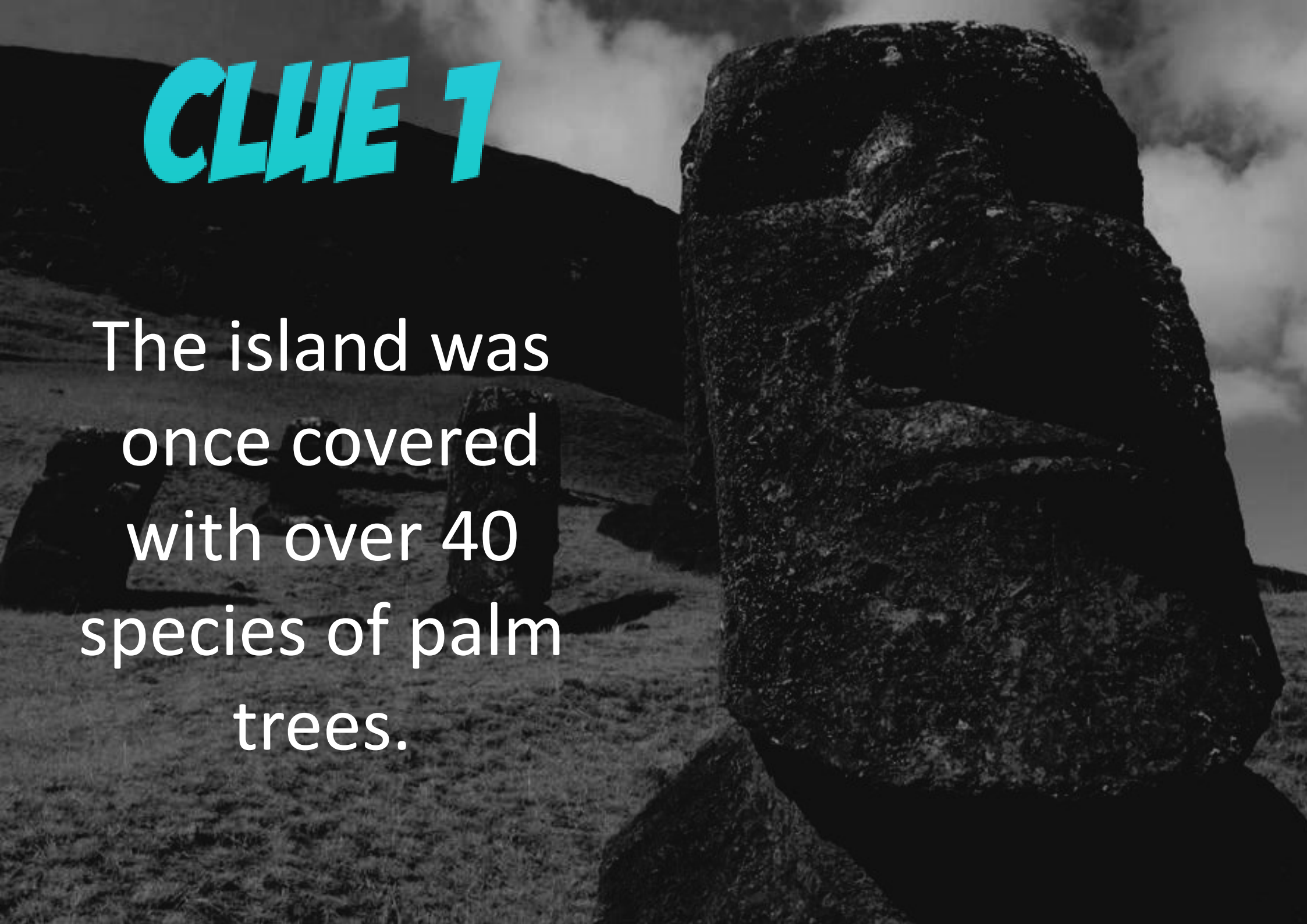
Option 2

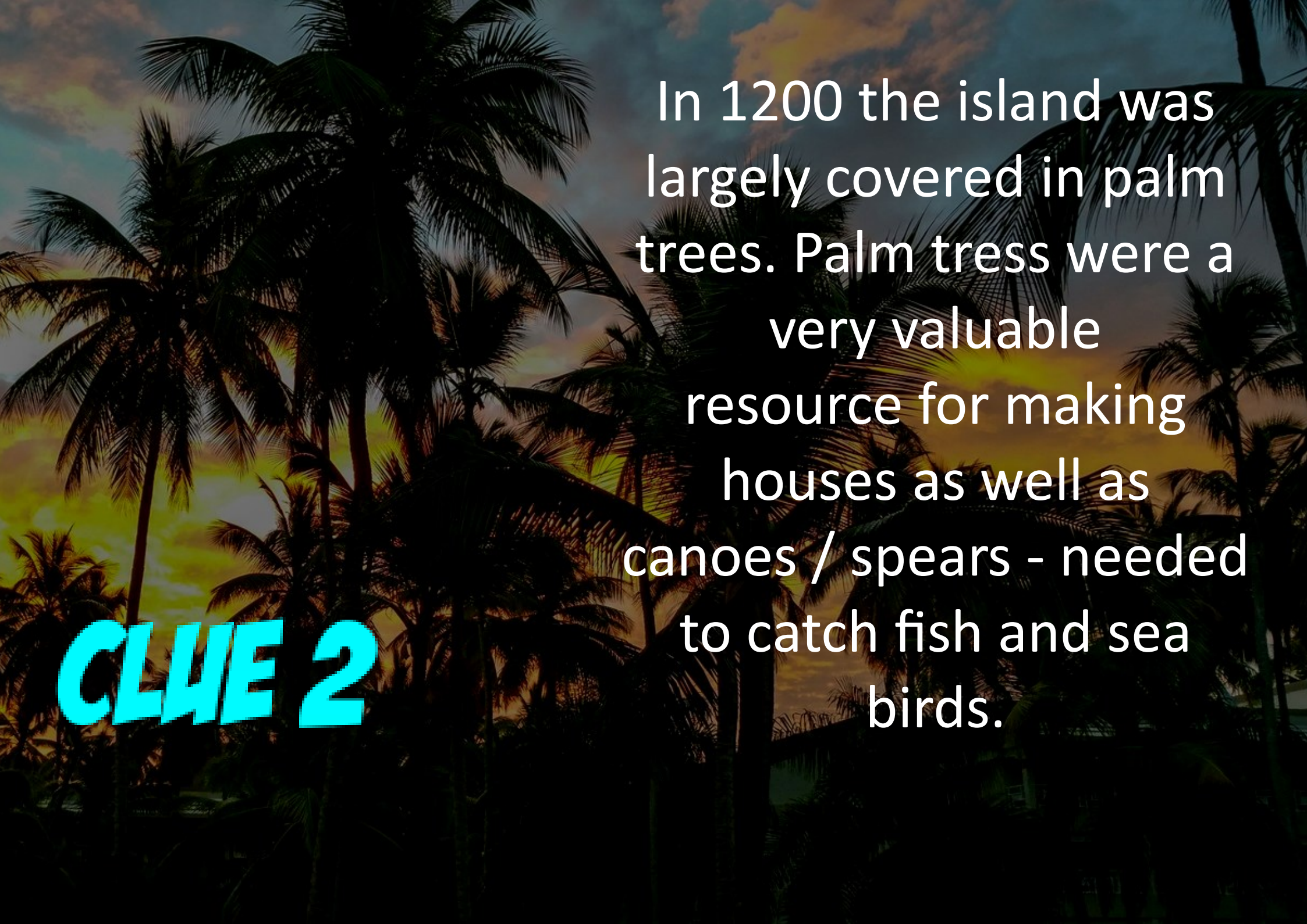
A more teacher led option. Teacher to reveal the clues 1 - 20 in order.

Students can make note of working ideas and theories clue by clue. Once done open up the discussion with the aim to reach a class consensus for each question asked.

CLUE 1

The island was
once covered
with over 40
species of palm
trees.





In 1200 the island was largely covered in palm trees. Palm trees were a very valuable resource for making houses as well as canoes / spears - needed to catch fish and sea birds.

CLUE 2

CLUE 3

Ancient Alien theorists argue the islanders were far too primitive to have come up with the idea of building these statues themselves, and could never have carved (or moved them) with the technology that existed at the time - so they must have had help from aliens who visited the Earth in ancient times.

Cascada Travel Blog

CLUE 4

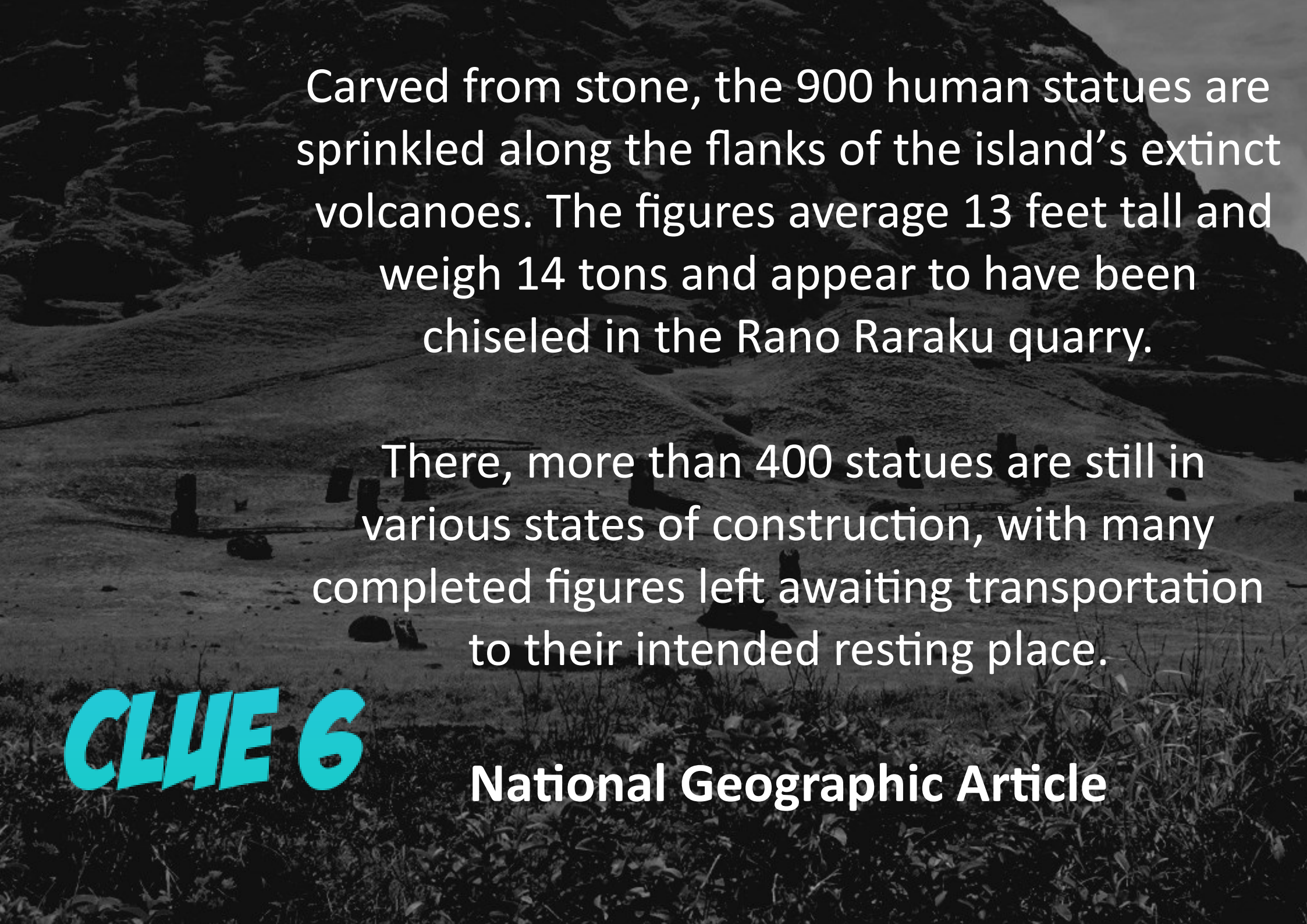
Polynesian rats accompanied the original settlers to Rapa Nui either as a source of food or as stowaways.

The island was an ideal environment for rats: unlimited food, including palm tree nuts, and no natural predators except humans. Under these conditions rat populations can double every six weeks.

Irish Times.

CLUE 5

When the first European explorers visited the island - they observed it was devoid of (without) trees.



Carved from stone, the 900 human statues are sprinkled along the flanks of the island's extinct volcanoes. The figures average 13 feet tall and weigh 14 tons and appear to have been chiseled in the Rano Raraku quarry.

There, more than 400 statues are still in various states of construction, with many completed figures left awaiting transportation to their intended resting place.

CLUE 6

National Geographic Article

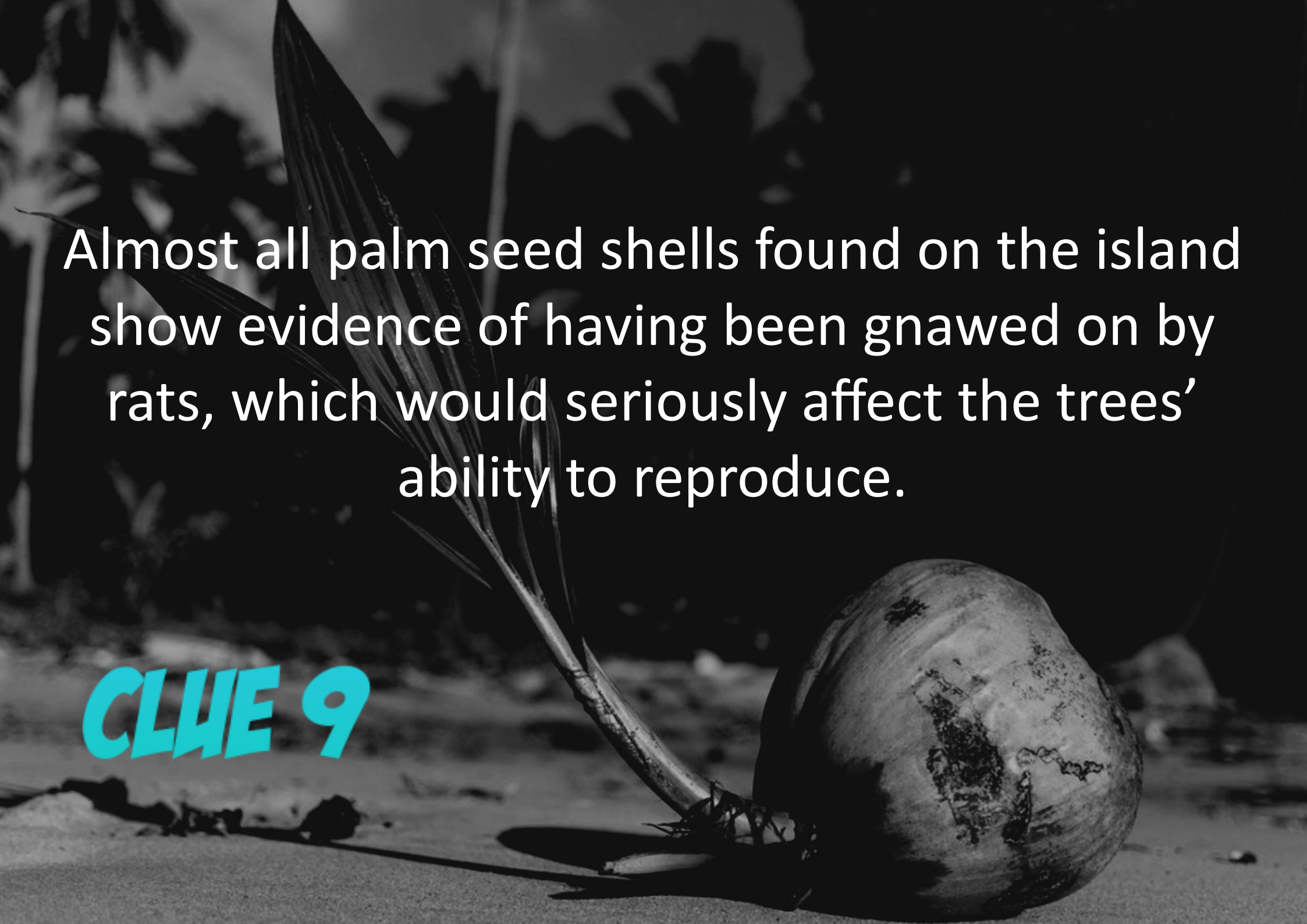
CLUE 7

Timelines indicate that deforestation roughly matches the time when 200 moai were left standing (or stranded) at the quarry from where they were carved.




CLUE 8

In his book *Collapse*, **Jared Diamond** refers to the Rapanui's environmental destruction as "ecocide" and points to the islanders downfall as a warning of what can happen if human appetites / greed go unchecked.



Almost all palm seed shells found on the island show evidence of having been gnawed on by rats, which would seriously affect the trees' ability to reproduce.

CLUE 9



Tools and implements such as spears have been found littering the island - a claim by some as being weapon fragments - and evidence as to violence between rival island groups.

CLUE 10



CLUE 11

Jared Diamond suggested that cannibalism took place on Easter Island in his book ...


Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed.

CLUE 12

Oral (spoken) histories were given by the ancestors of island survivors in the early 1900s. They tell of warfare between competing island groups.

Norwegian anthropologist Thor Heyerdah - took these reports as evidence for a huge civil war that ended in a battle of 1680, where the majority of one of the island's tribes was killed.

Sapiens.org



Dutch travellers in 1722 noted the statues were still maintained, and used for rituals - there was **no evidence** of a society in decline or crisis. The same was reported in 1770, when Spanish seafarers landed.

However, when British explorer James Cook arrived in 1774, he described an island in crisis, with many overturned statues.

Earthsky.org

CLUE 13

CLUE 14

The Tangata Manu was a Birdman cult of the island. The Tangata Manu was the winner of a highly important competition that was performed yearly on the island after about 1750. The competition was a way for competing tribes to choose the ruler of the entire island, based on skill and bravery of individual tribal warriors, rather than through conflict. Each year, chosen warriors of each tribe would descend a sheer cliff known as the Rano Kau, swim offshore to the small rocky islet of Motu Nui, and retrieve an egg of the sooty tern bird. Subsequently, the men had to swim back, scale the cliffs again, and present an unbroken egg to their tribal chief as a present. The chief who received the egg first would then rule over Easter Island until the next ceremony.

CLUE 15

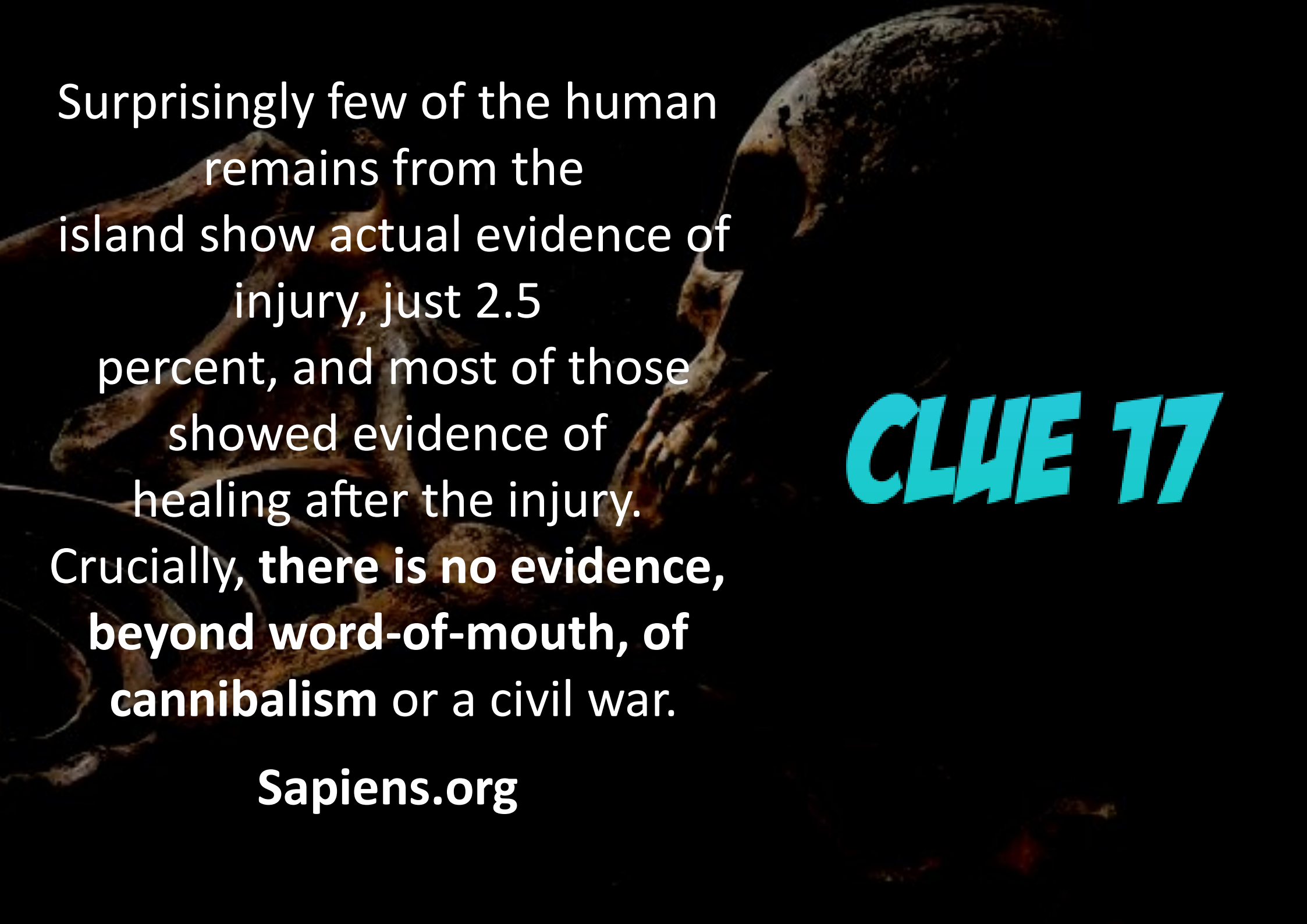
Modern research led by Carl Lipo has shown that the 'weapons' unearthed were more likely domestic tools or implements used for ritual tasks. Crucially, there is no evidence, beyond historical word-of-mouth, of cannibalism.

Sapiens.org



CLUE 16

Forensic anthropologist Douglas Owsley, who has studied the bones of some 600 individuals from the island, has found numerous signs of trauma, such as blows to the face and head. But only occasionally, he says, did these injuries result in death.



Surprisingly few of the human remains from the island show actual evidence of injury, just 2.5 percent, and most of those showed evidence of healing after the injury.

Crucially, there is no evidence, beyond word-of-mouth, of cannibalism or a civil war.

Sapiens.org

CLUE 17

CLUE 18



"Certainly there was burning going on. Sometimes there was a lot of charcoal. I'm inclined to think that the people burning the vegetation was more destructive [than the rats]."

John Flenley, a pollen analyst at New Zealand's University of Massey.

(He took core soil samples on the island)

CLUE 19



The **real answer** to what really happened to the islanders of Rapa Nui is worse. From the 1800s, South American slave raids took away as much as half of the islanders and introduced diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis.

European traders further decimated the natives which led to increased conflict among those that were left.

Newsweek Magazine.

CLUE 20



The takeaway from Rapa Nui should NOT be a story of ecocide (damage and destruction to the environment) and the resulting population collapse.

Instead, it should be a lesson in how with such little real evidence, a fixation with "mysteries," and a collective amnesia (forgetting of) historic atrocities - is what caused a sustainable and surprisingly well-adapted population to be **falsely blamed** for their own death and downfall.

Catrine Jarman - PhD researcher in Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Bristol, UK.

Rapa Nui - what happened ?



Mission = to use clues to answer the following key questions

Clue	Key points	What this could tell us?
1		
2		
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19		
20		

Rapa Nui - what happened ?



Mission = to use clues to answer the following key questions

What happened to the people on Rapa Nui and why?

Notes and brainstorm ideas -

Final idea / theory -

How were the moai / statues built?

Notes and brainstorm ideas -

Final idea / theory -

How were the moai / statues moved about the island?

Notes and brainstorm ideas -

Final idea theory -

Why were many of the moai / statues left seemingly stranded at the quarry?

Notes and brainstorm ideas -

Final idea / theory -

Reflection - what did this exercise teach you about the process of how is history is made or understood ?

The ... 'answers' ?????

The **traditional theory** is that the islanders cut down the trees to move the statues and thus destroyed their environment - trees gone / soil erodes + means to farm and fish (build boats etc) gone. Led to 'civil war' and cannibalism. A warning of human greed, violence and environmental collapse.

Revisionist / emerging theory - rat infestations may have decimated the palm trees by eating the seeds and saplings. Decrease of population (to 3000) but the islanders were more adaptable and self sustaining than given credit for by 1750. Conflict appears (toppled statues) but not to extent previously claimed. Birdman cult shows aim to avoid conflict. The dramatic reduction of people to 111 was the result of South American / European actions - slaves taken, diseases introduced and forced migration.

The theory of civil war and cannibalism has filled the knowledge gap and largely the product of oral history, the human liking for 'conspiracy theories' and Europeans willingness to write history in a way that fits their prejudice and narrative.

It does appear that deforestation halted the ability to transport the statues hence those 'stuck' at the quarry.

1200 to 1600

Society thrives + grows then island for various reasons is deforested.

1600 to 1722

Population reduction due to environmental hardship / conditions.

After 1800

Islanders decimated by influence of Europeans and South Americans.

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