
HISTORY
MYSTERY
WHAT HAPPENED
ON RAPA NUI?

TEACHING LEARNING

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

- Critical thinking.
- Historical inquiry.
- Understand that our understanding of the past is always evolving.
- Personal bias … are students prepared to change their initial hypothesis?
- Corroboration.
- Source evaluation.
- Discussion and debate.
- Cross pollination of ideas and theories.
- Understanding the importance of shared / sharing knowledge.

Rapa Nui

Meet The Island

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

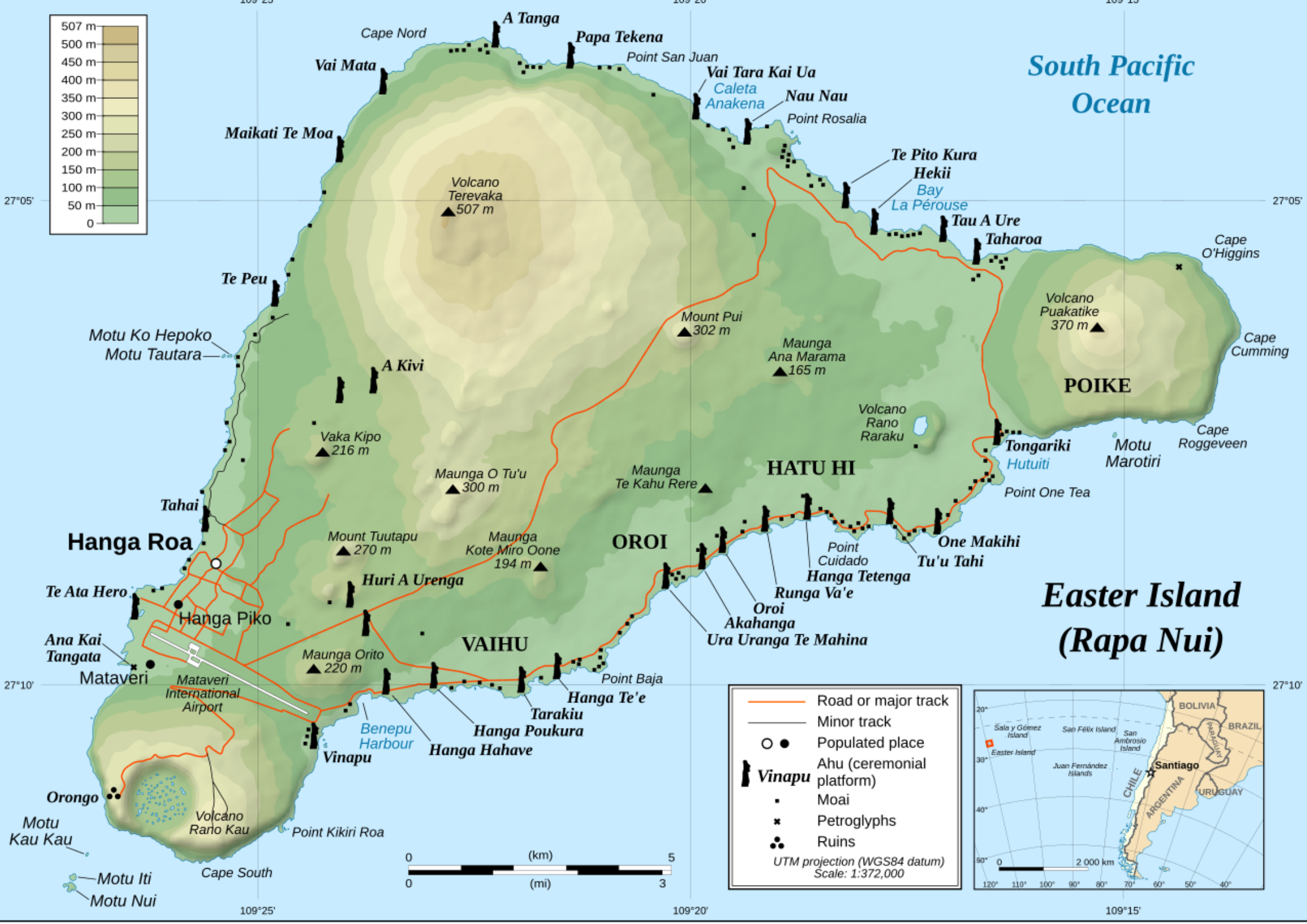
The island is located in the south-eastern Pacific Ocean.

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

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

There are almost 1000 Maoi, 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 ...


507 m
500 m
450 m
400 m
350 m
300 m
250 m
200 m
150 m
100 m
50 m
0
South Pacific Ocean
Easter Island (Rapa Nui)
A Tanga
Cape Nord
Papa Tekena
Point San Juan
Vai Mata
Vai Tara Kai Ua
Caleta Anakena
Nau Nau
Point Rosalia
Maikati Te Moa
Te Pito Kura
Hekii
Bay La Pérouse
Tau A Ure
Taharoa
Cape O'Higgins
Volcano Terevaka 507 m
Te Peu
Motu Ko Hepoko
Motu Tautara
A Kivi
Mount Pui 302 m
Maunga Ana Marama 165 m
Volcano Puakatike 370 m
Cape Cumming
POIKE
Volcano Rano Raraku
Vaka Kipo 216 m
Tongariki
Hutuiti
Motu Marotiri
Cape Roggeveen
Maunga O Tu'u 300 m
Maunga Te Kahu Rere
HATU HI
Point One Tea
Tahai
Hanga Roa
Mount Tuutapu 270 m
Maunga Kote Miro Oone 194 m
OROI
Point Cuidado
One Makihi
Tu'u Tahi
Hanga Tetenga
Runga Va'e
Oroi
Akahanga
Ura Uranga Te Mahina
Huri A Urenga
Te Ata Hero
Hanga Piko
Ana Kai Tangata
Mataveri
Mataveri International Airport
Maunga Orito 220 m
VAIHU
Point Baja
Hanga Te'e
Tarakiu
Hanga Poukura
Hanga Hahave
Benepu Harbour
Vinapu
Orongo
Volcano Rano Kau
Point Kikiri Roa
Motu Kau Kau
Cape South
Motu Iti
Motu Nui
27°05'
27°10'
109°25'
109°20'
109°15'
0 (km) 5
0 (mi) 3
Road or major track
Minor track
Populated place
Vinapu Ahu (ceremonial platform)
Moai
Petroglyphs
Ruins
UTM projection (WGS84 datum)
Scale: 1:372,000
BOLIVIA
BRAZIL
PARAGUAY
CHILE
ARGENTINA
URUGUAY
Santiago
Sala y Gómez Island
San Félix Island
San Ambrosio Island
Easter Island
Juan Fernández Islands
2 000 km

The Mystery of Rapa Nui

Rapa Nui's population peaked at about 10,000 by the year 1600.

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?

The Timeline

800 - 1200 - The island is first inhabited by Polynesian explorers / settlers. (the 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 - approximatley 10,000.

1650 - Moai building slowing down or has stopped.

1722 - Dutch explorers land on 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. Estimates the population to be 700.

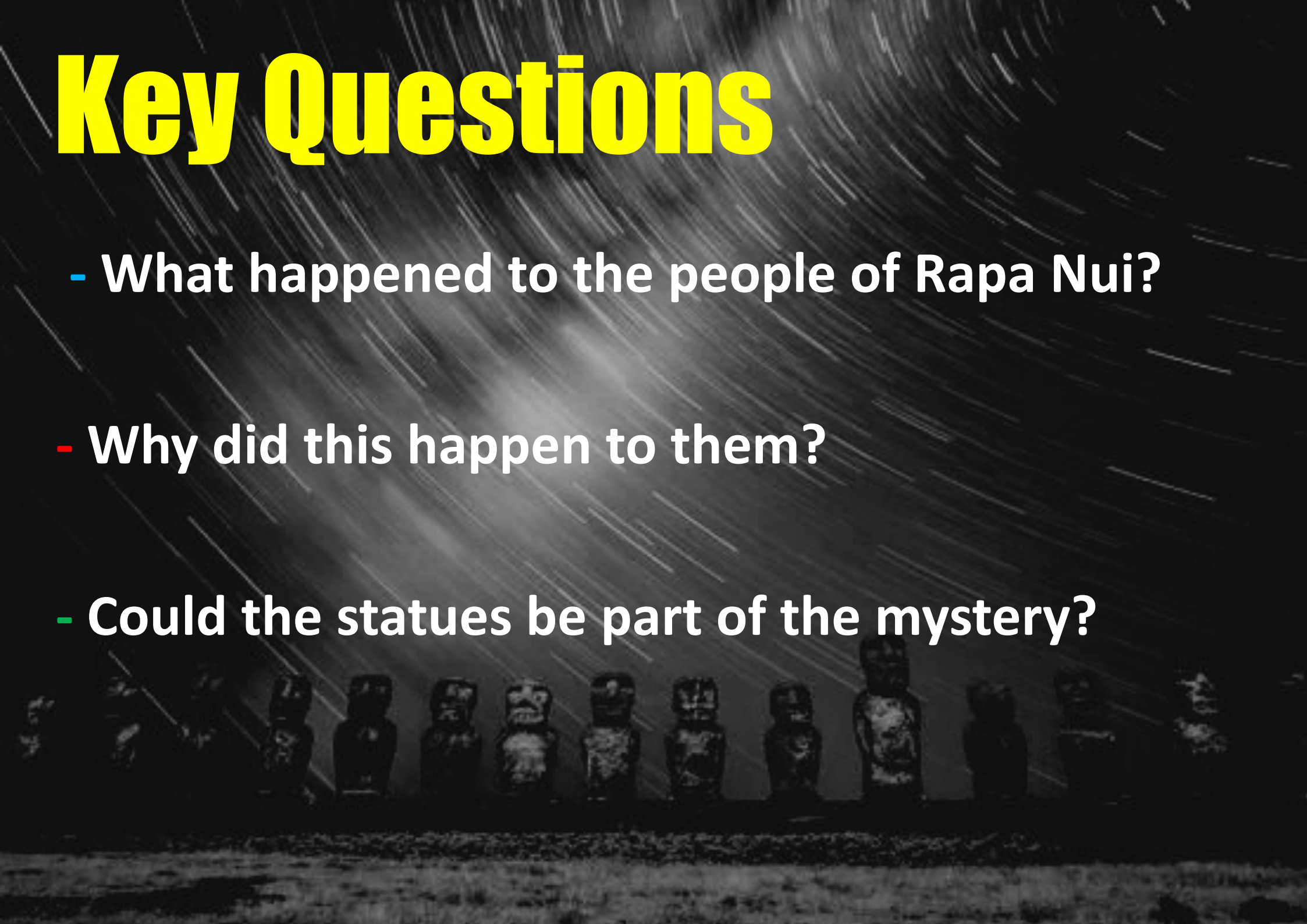
1877 - European explorers put the Rapa Nui population at just 111.

Key Questions

- What happened to the people of Rapa Nui?

- Why did this happen to them?

- Could the statues be part of the mystery?



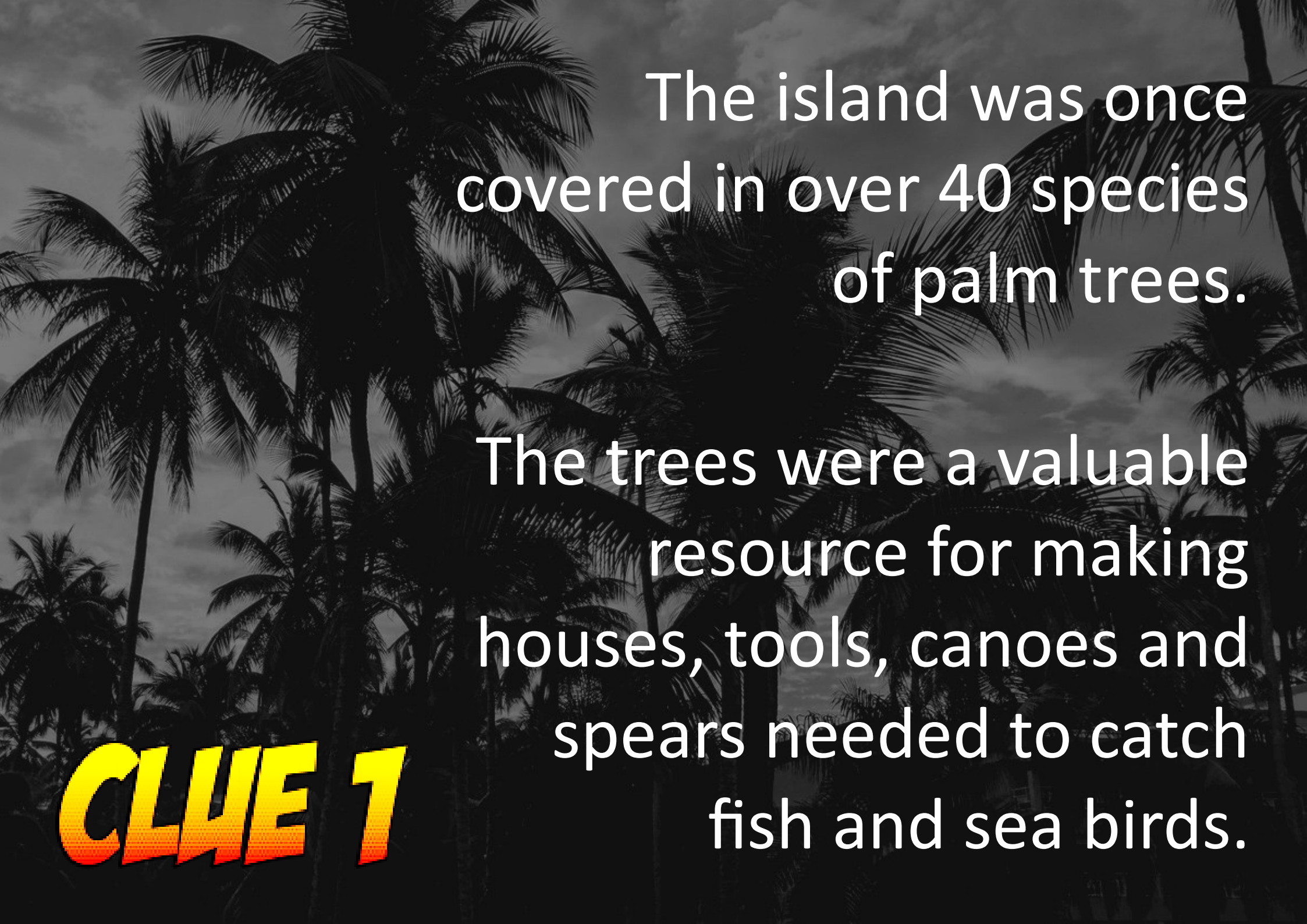
Activity Suggestions

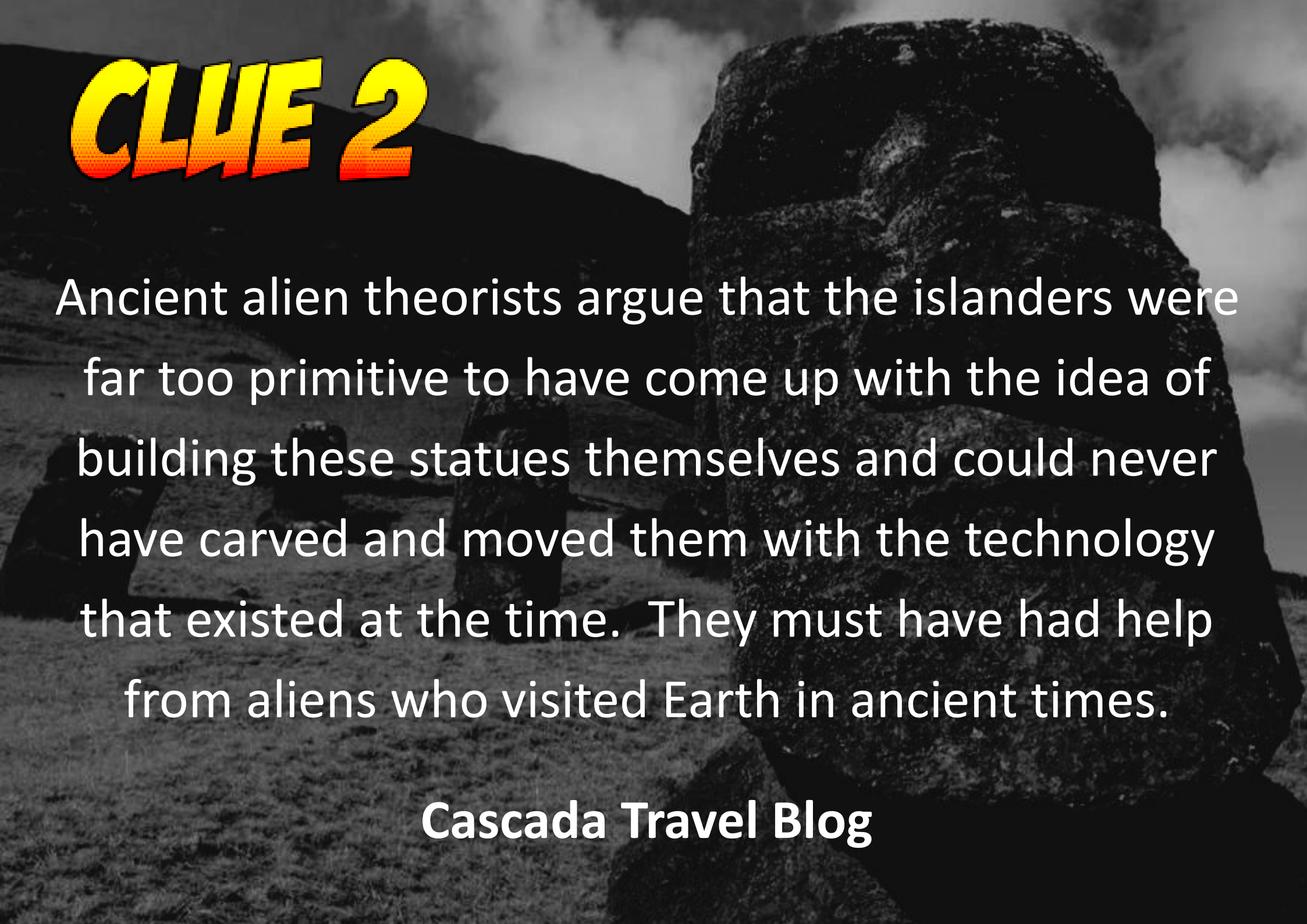
Option 1 - Student led

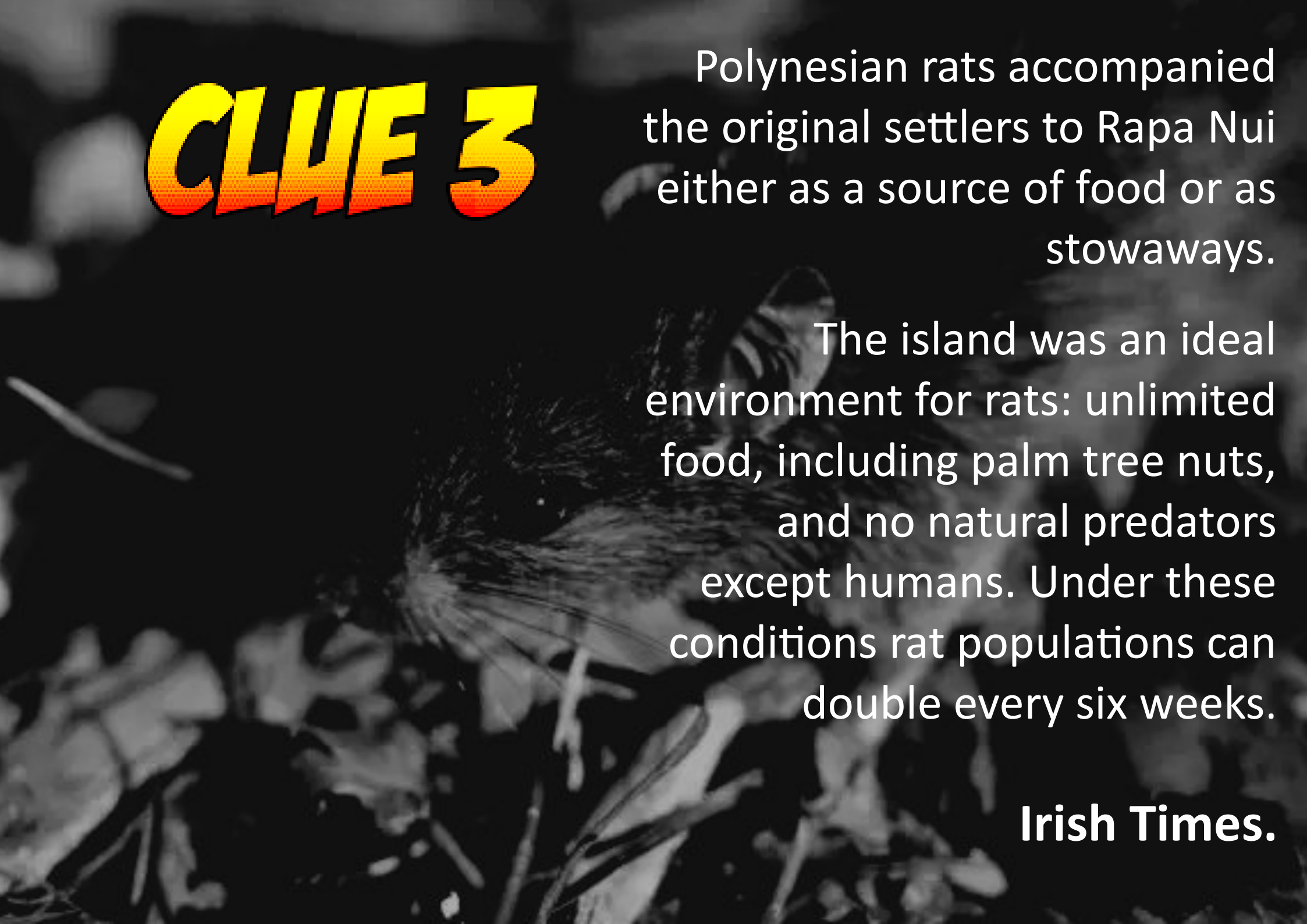
Distribute the 20 clues (remove some if your choose) amongst the class. Ideally students make up a circle. The clues are verbally shared - in random order? - then allow students with challenging / supporting evidence to contribute. They could use the accompanying worksheet as a guide for discussion - with the aim to reach a consensus for each question asked.

Option 2 - Teacher led

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 questions posed and an ultimate decision about what happened.


The island was once covered in over 40 species of palm trees.
The trees were a valuable resource for making houses, tools, canoes and spears needed to catch fish and sea birds.
CLUE 1


CLUE 2
Ancient alien theorists argue that the islanders were far too primitive to have come up with the idea of building these statues themselves and could never have carved and moved them with the technology that existed at the time. They must have had help from aliens who visited Earth in ancient times.
Cascada Travel Blog

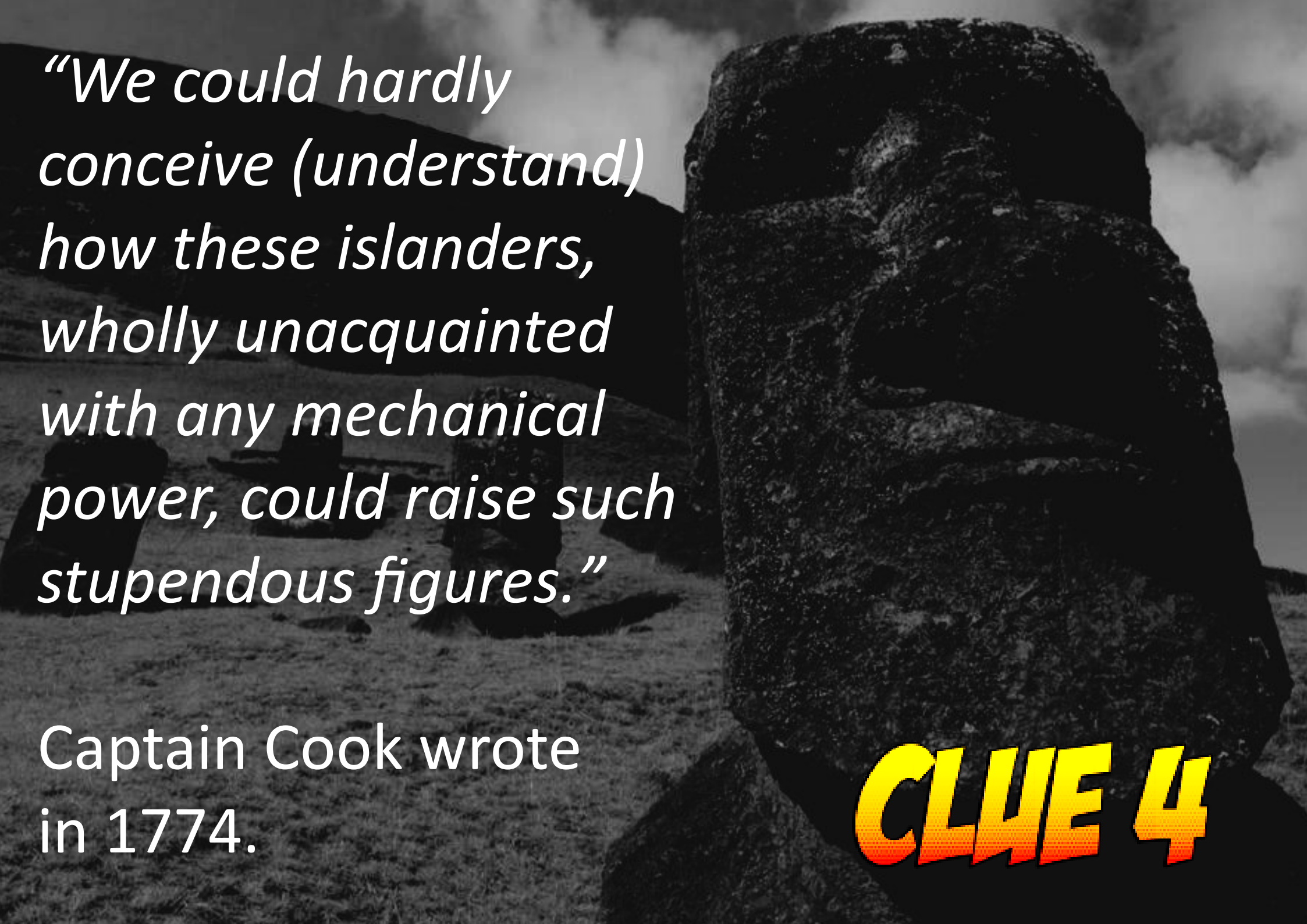


CLUE 3

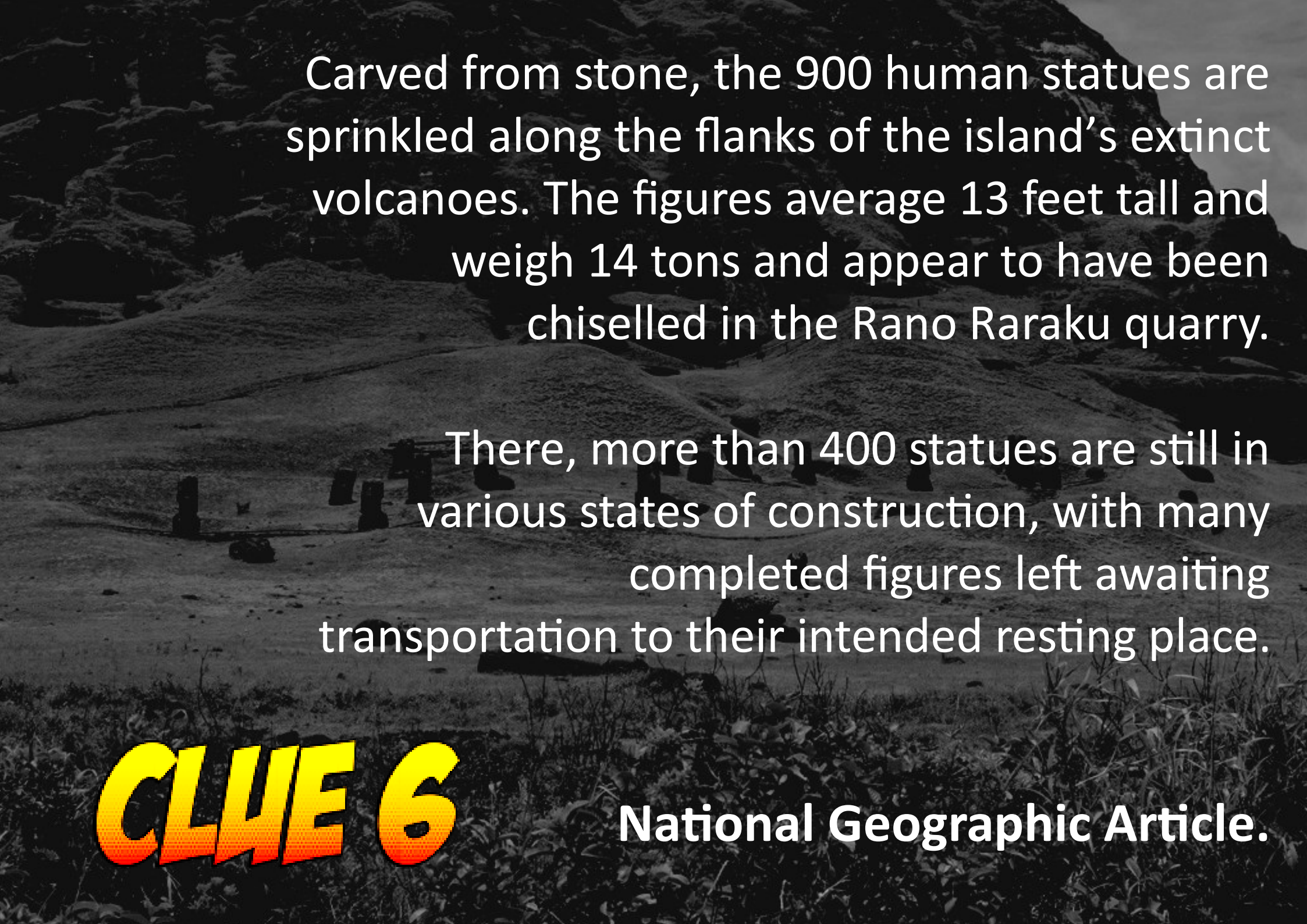
Polynesian rats accompanied the original settlers to Rapa Nui either as a source of food or as stowaways.

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.


“We could hardly conceive (understand) how these islanders, wholly unacquainted with any mechanical power, could raise such stupendous figures.”
Captain Cook wrote in 1774.
CLUE 4


CLUE 5
When the first European explorers visited the island - they observed it was devoid of (without) trees.

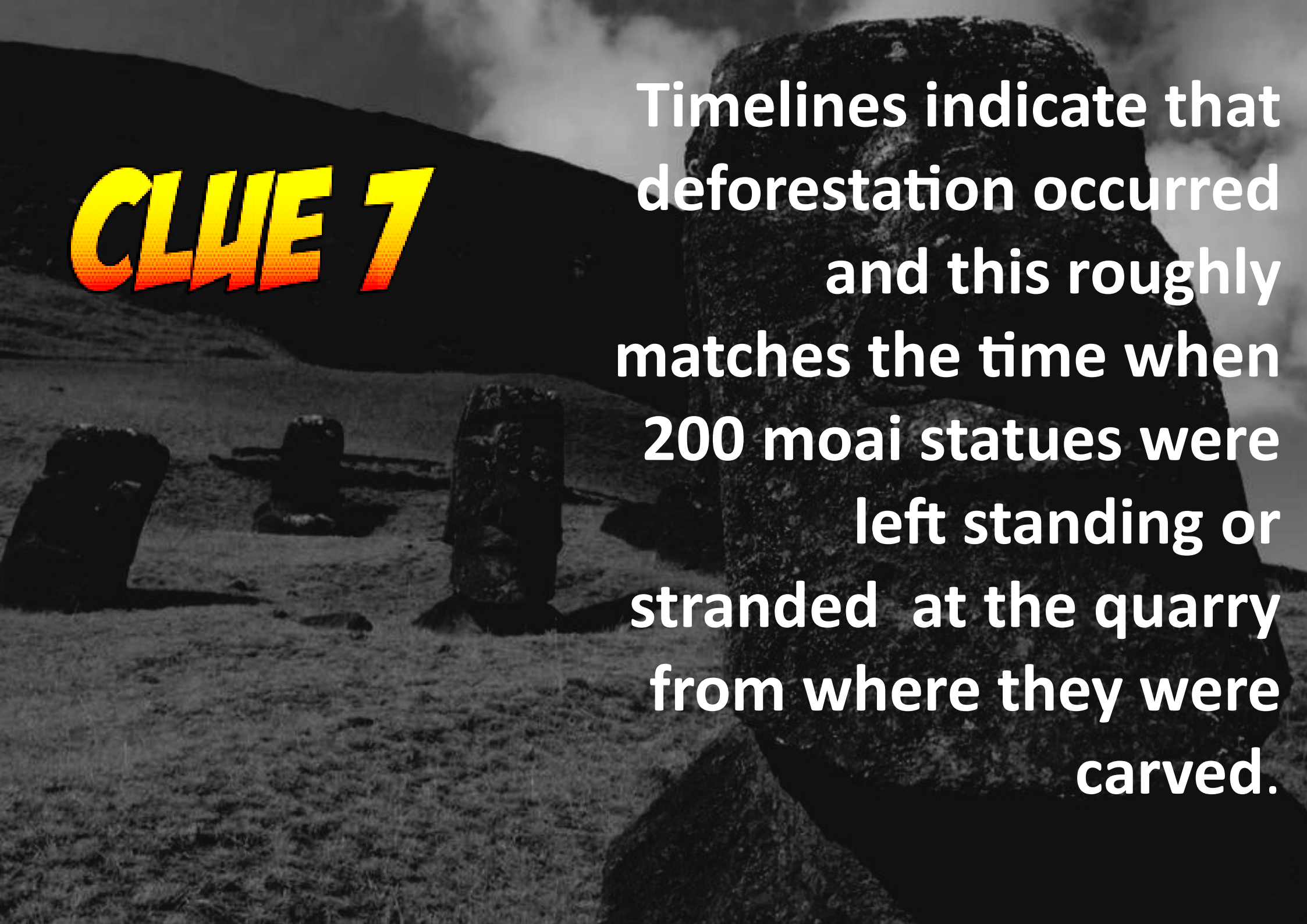


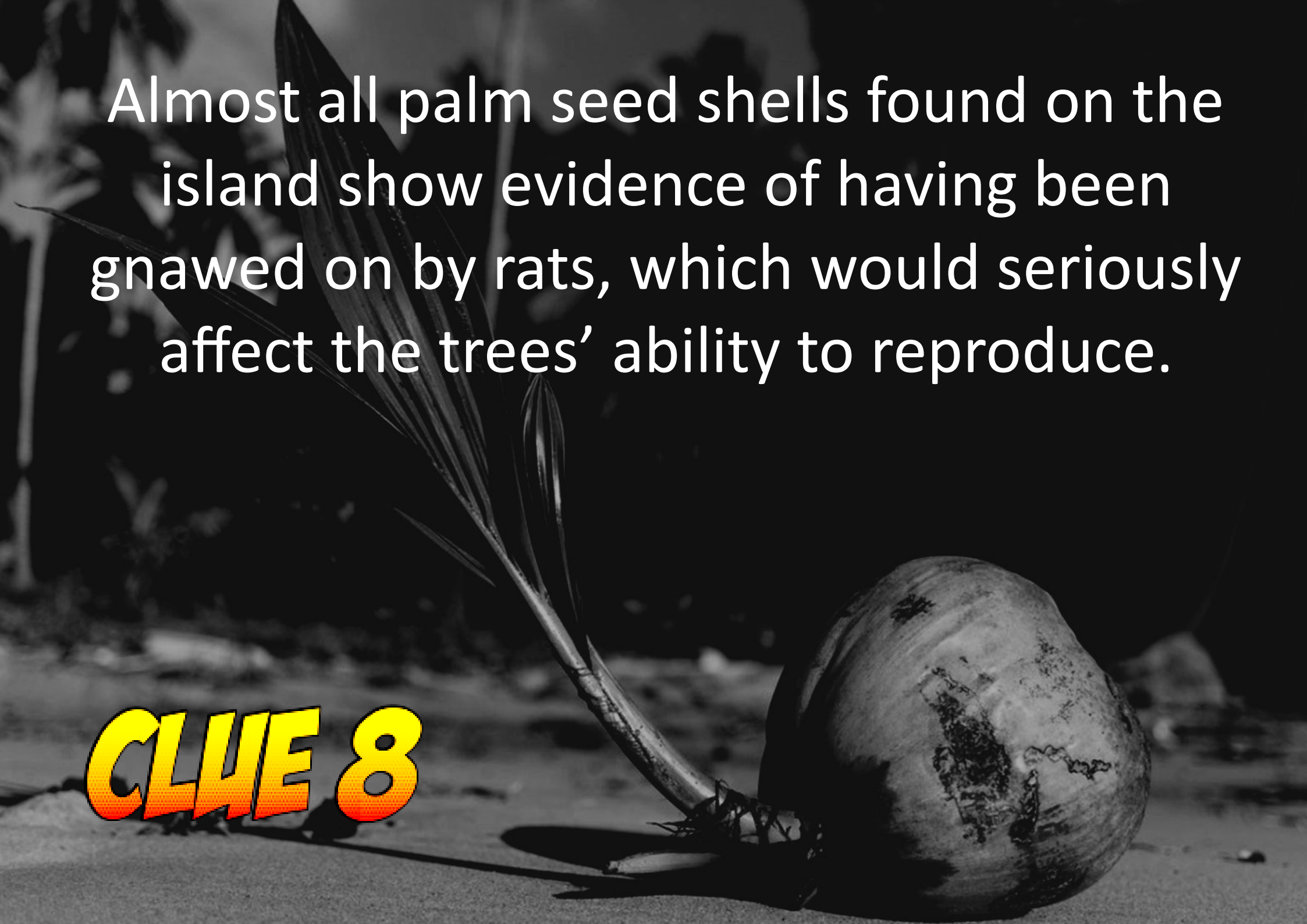
Carved from stone, the 900 human statues are sprinkled along the flanks of the island's extinct volcanoes. The figures average 13 feet tall and weigh 14 tons and appear to have been chiselled in the Rano Raraku quarry.

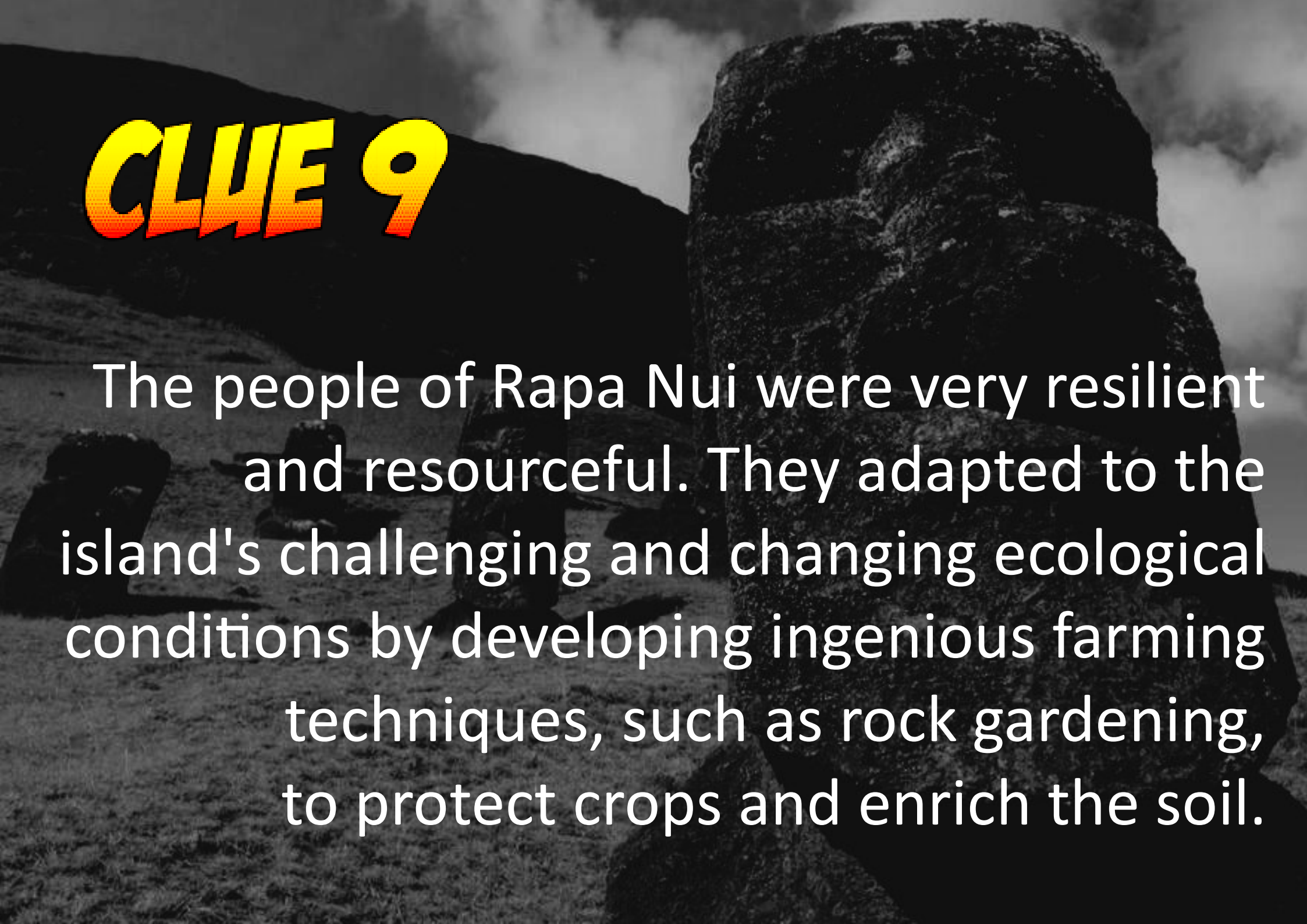
There, more than 400 statues are still in various states of construction, with many completed figures left awaiting transportation to their intended resting place.

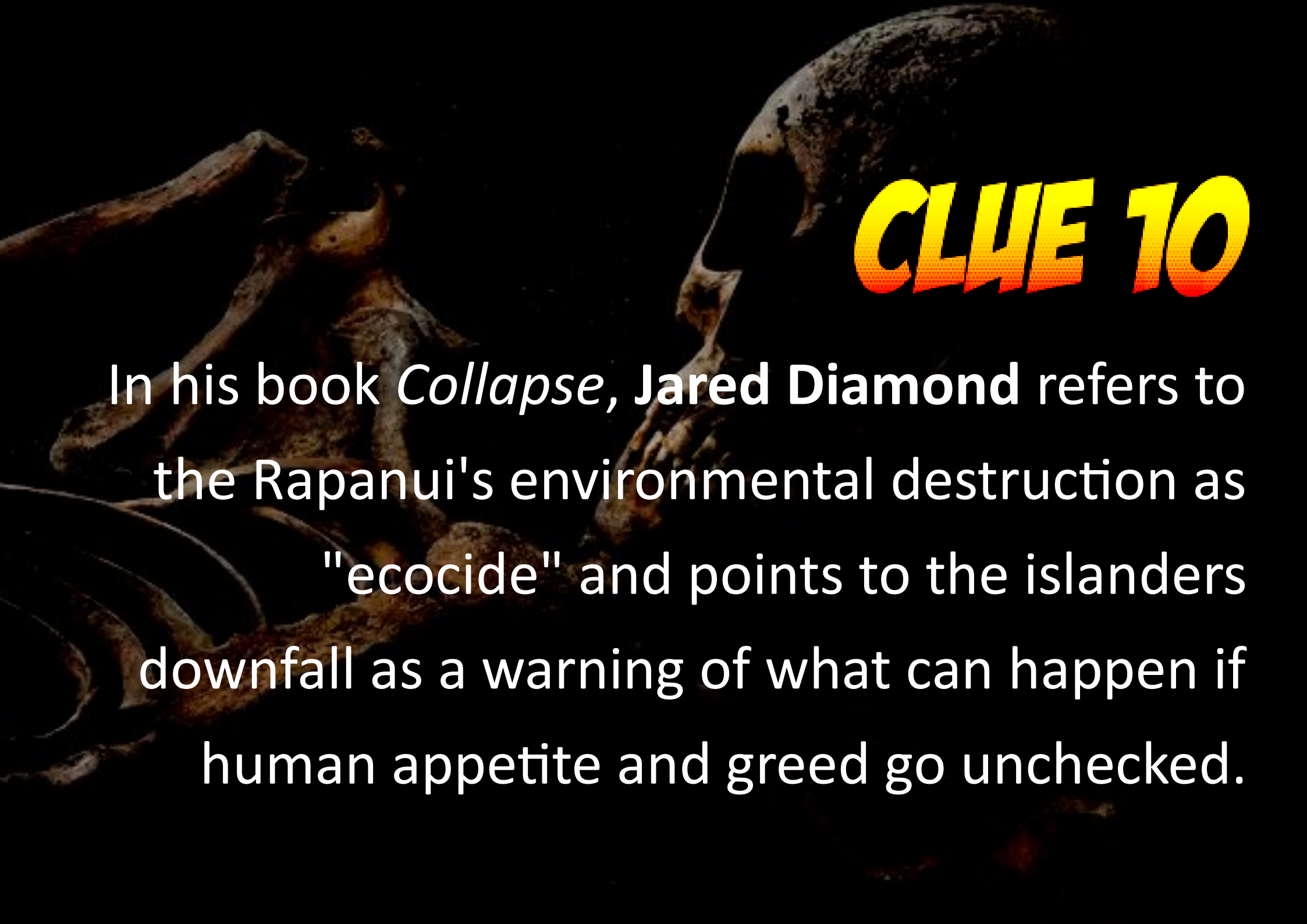
CLUE 6

National Geographic Article.


CLUE 7
Timelines indicate that deforestation occurred and this roughly matches the time when 200 moai statues were left standing or stranded at the quarry from where they were carved.

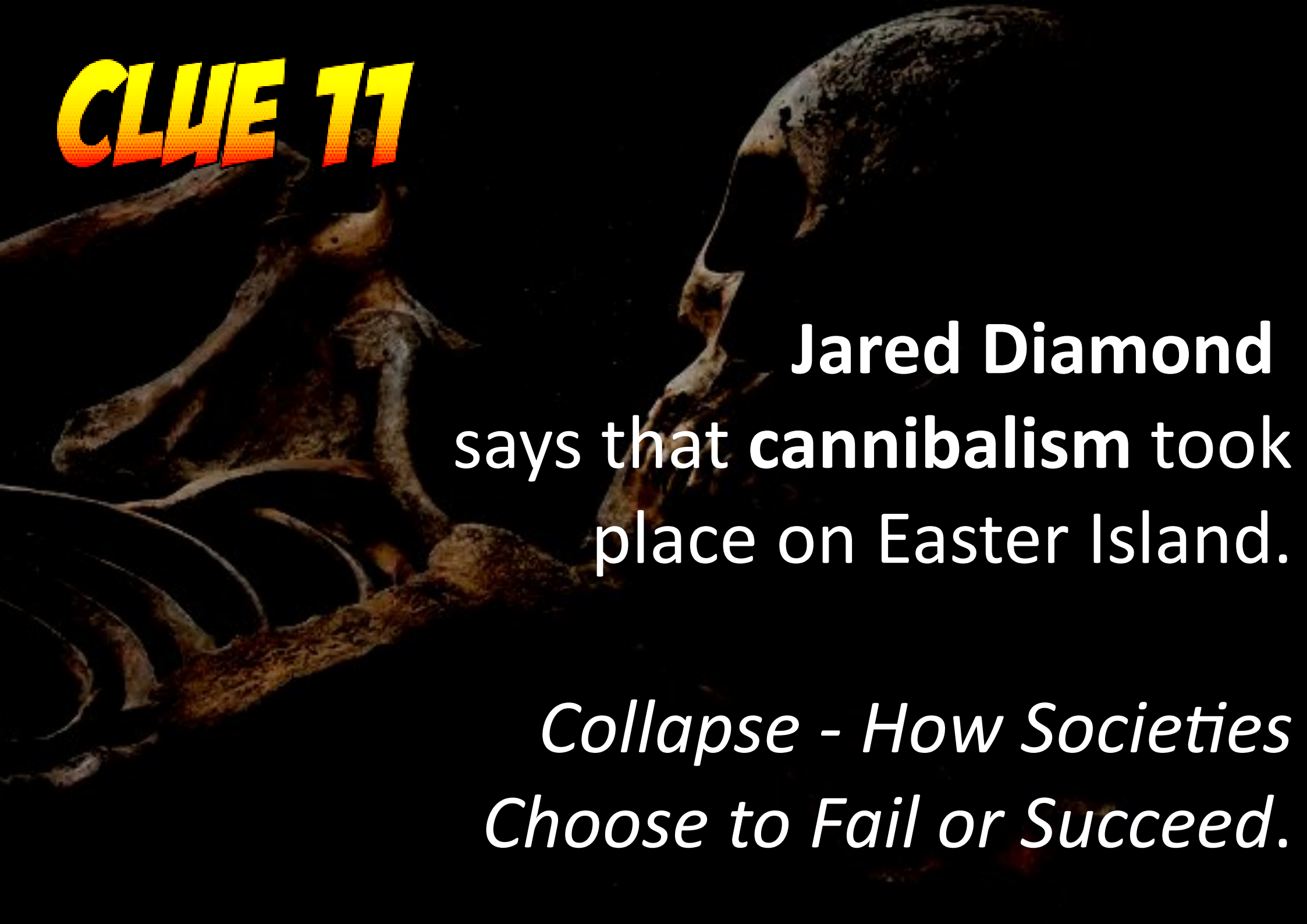

Almost all palm seed shells found on the island show evidence of having been gnawed on by rats, which would seriously affect the trees' ability to reproduce.
CLUE 8

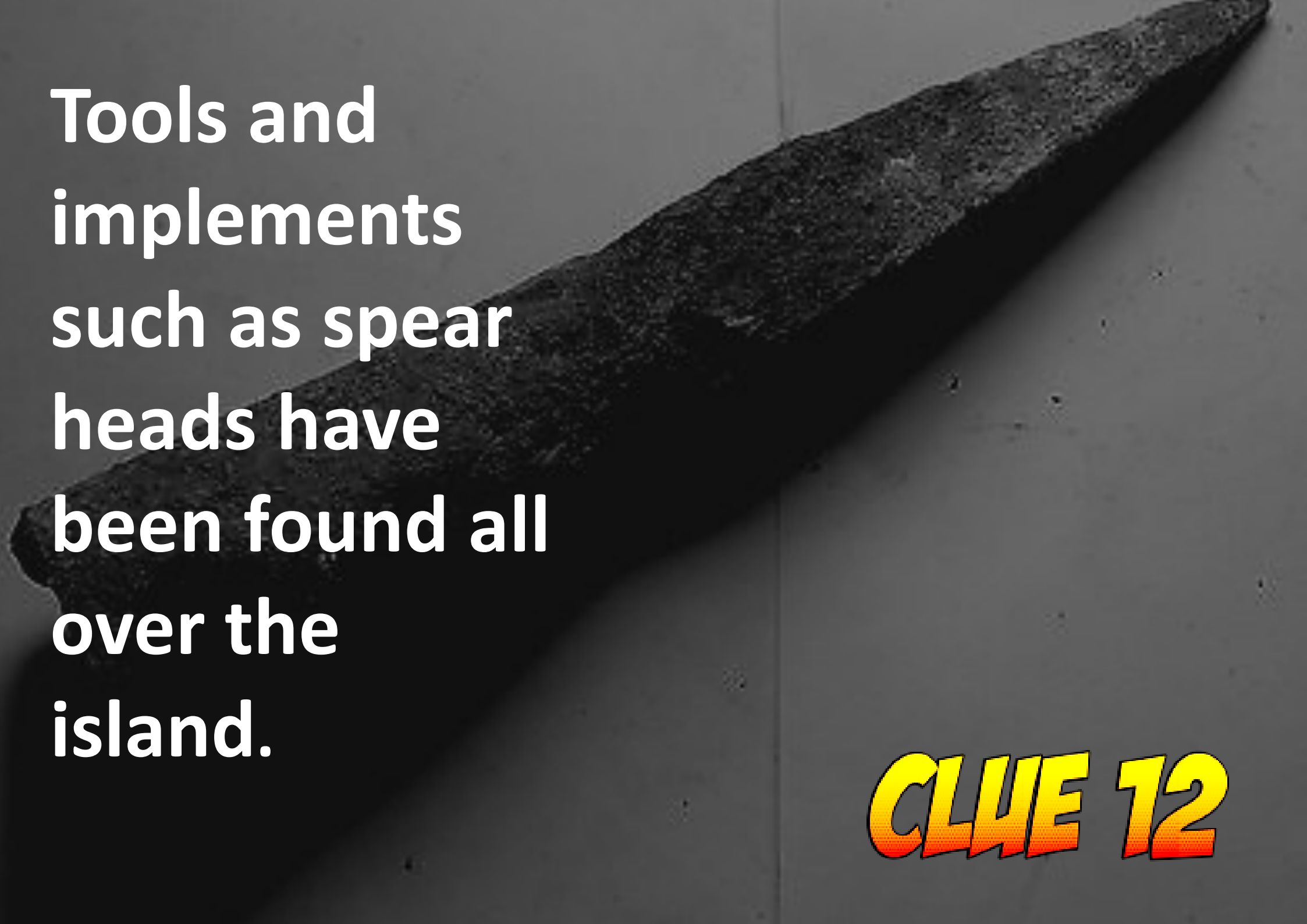

CLUE 9
The people of Rapa Nui were very resilient and resourceful. They adapted to the island's challenging and changing ecological conditions by developing ingenious farming techniques, such as rock gardening, to protect crops and enrich the soil.



CLUE 10

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 appetite and greed go unchecked.

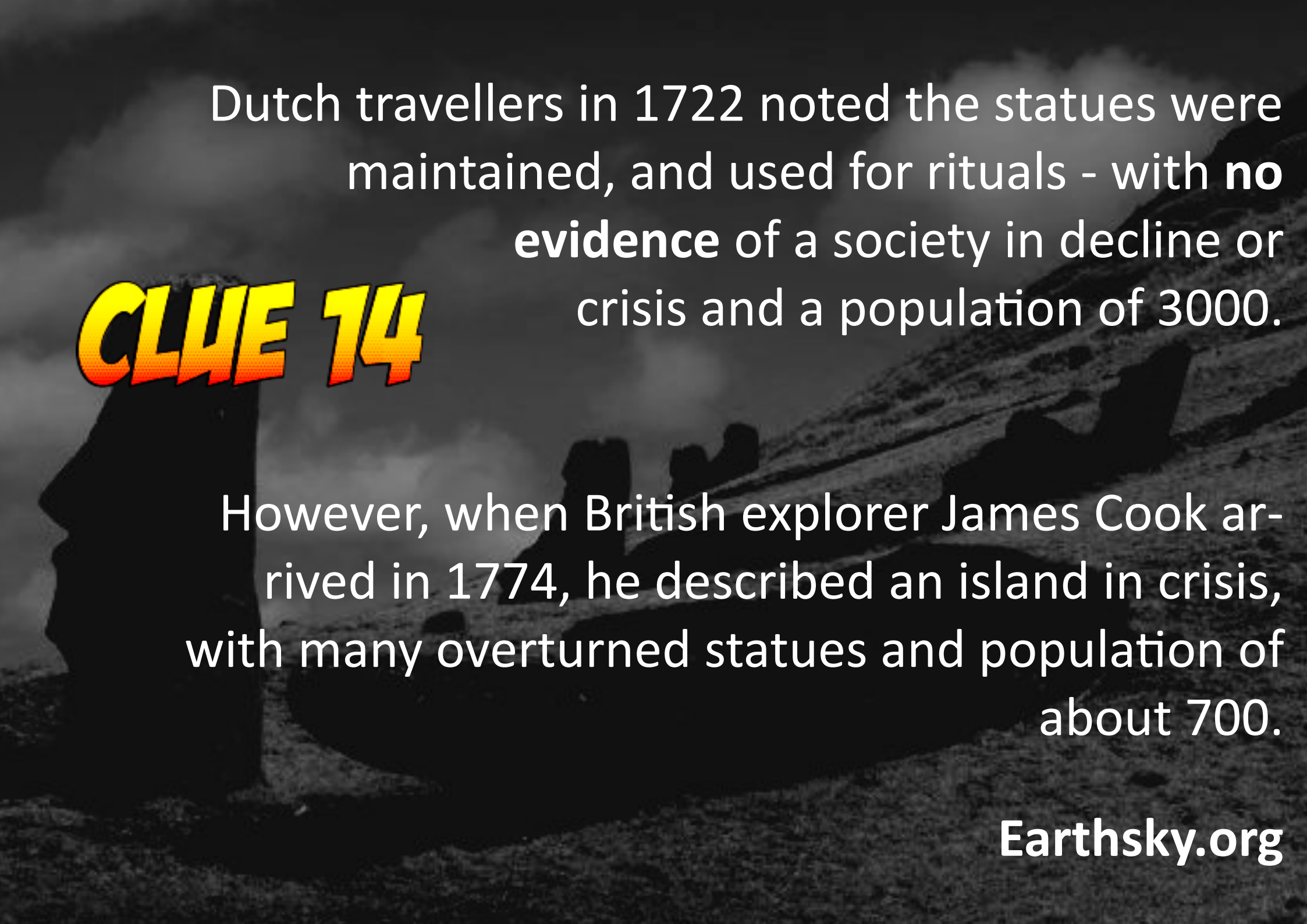

CLUE 11
Jared Diamond
says that cannibalism took
place on Easter Island.
Collapse - How Societies
Choose to Fail or Succeed.


Tools and implements such as spear heads have been found all over the island.
CLUE 12

Oral (spoken) histories were given by the some 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.

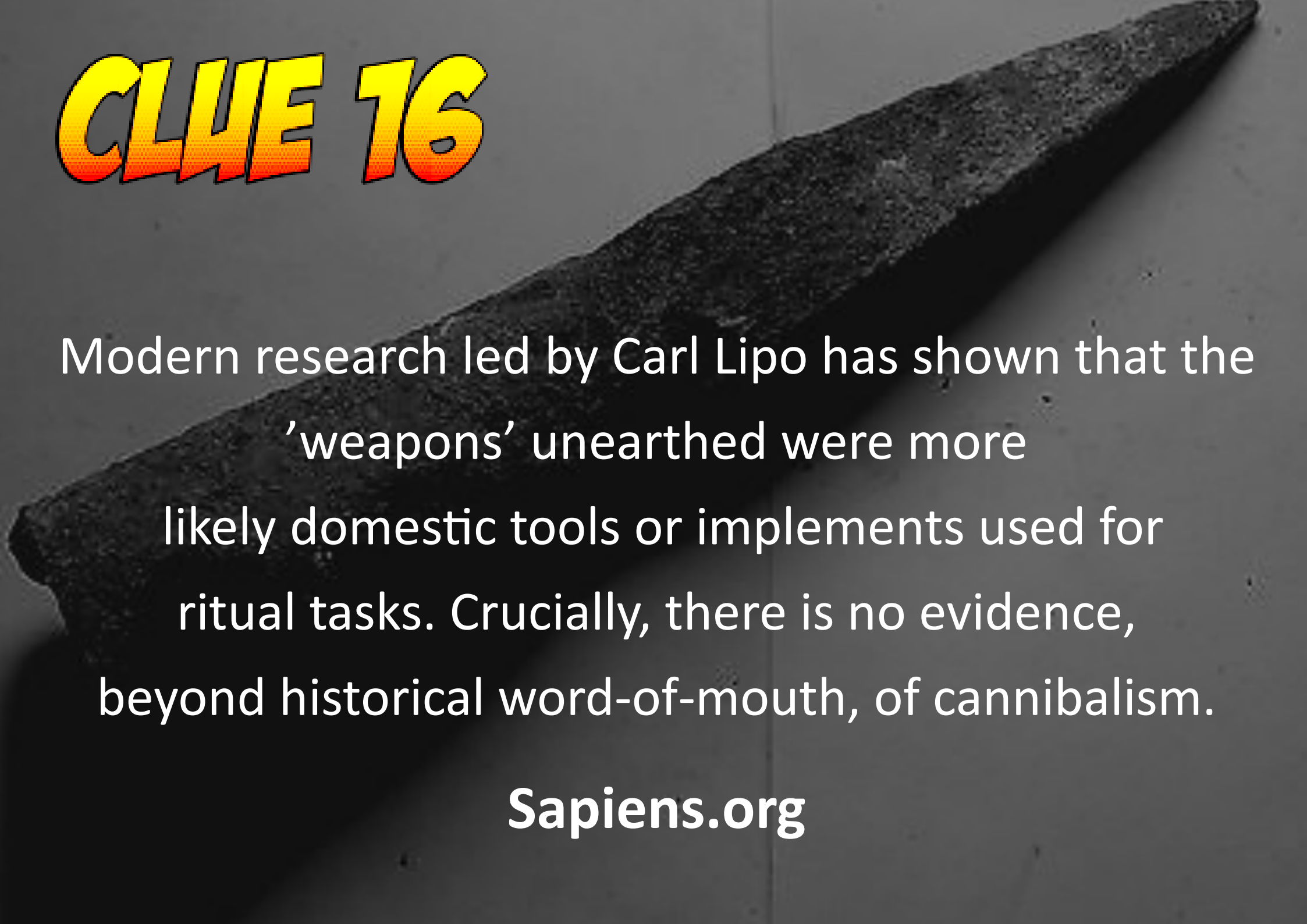
Sapiens.org

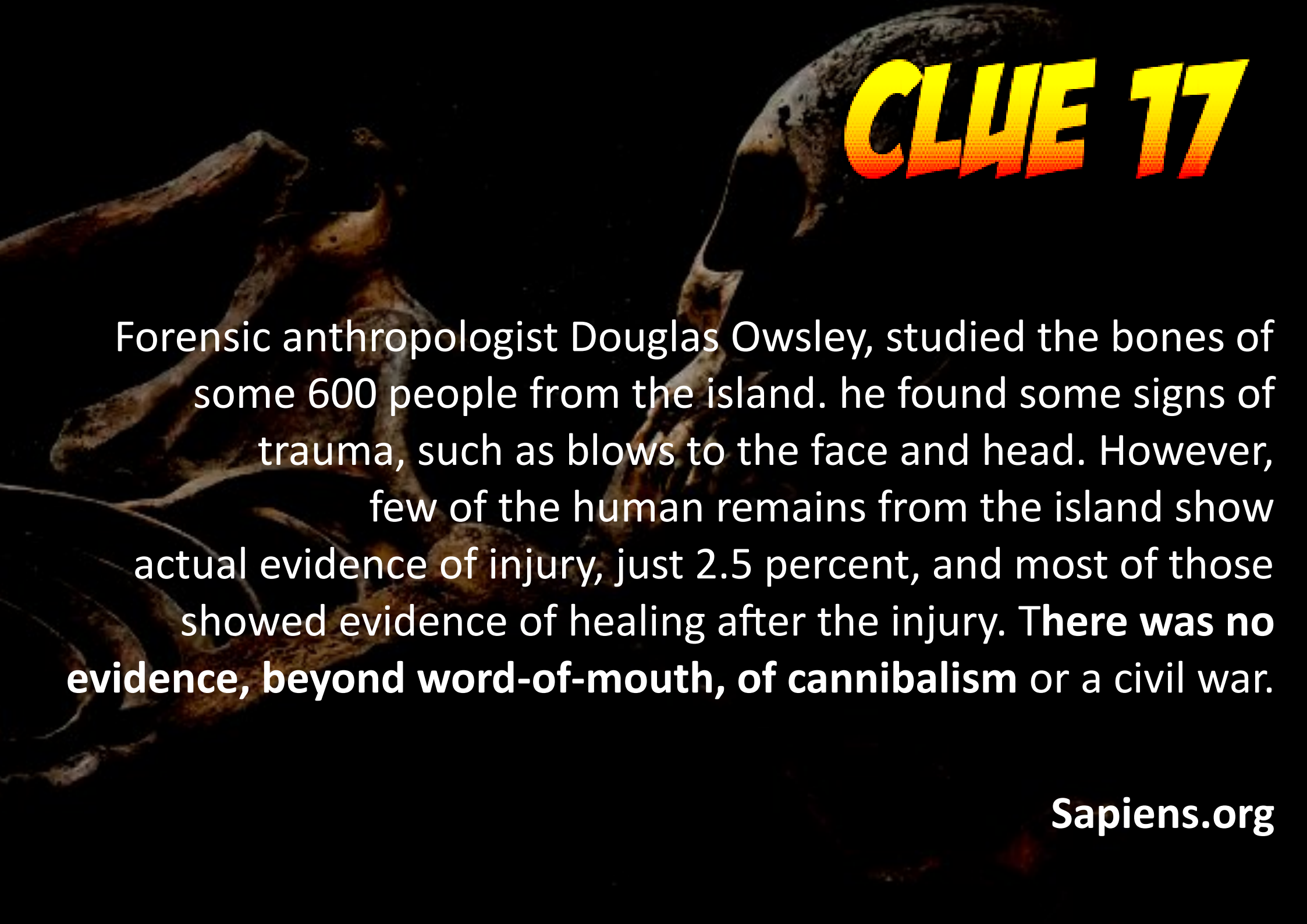

CLUE 14
Dutch travellers in 1722 noted the statues were maintained, and used for rituals - with **no evidence** of a society in decline or crisis and a population of 3000.
However, when British explorer James Cook arrived in 1774, he described an island in crisis, with many overturned statues and population of about 700.
Earthsky.org

CLUE 15

The Tangata Manu, or Birdman cult, was an annual competition on Rapa Nui starting around 1750. Instead of war, tribes chose their leader through this dangerous and highly important test of skill, endurance, and bravery. Each year, warriors would descend a sheer cliff, swim to the islet of Motu Nui to find a sooty tern egg, then swim back and scale the cliffs. The first to return with an unbroken egg made their chief the island's ruler for the year.

Ancient origins.net


CLUE 16
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

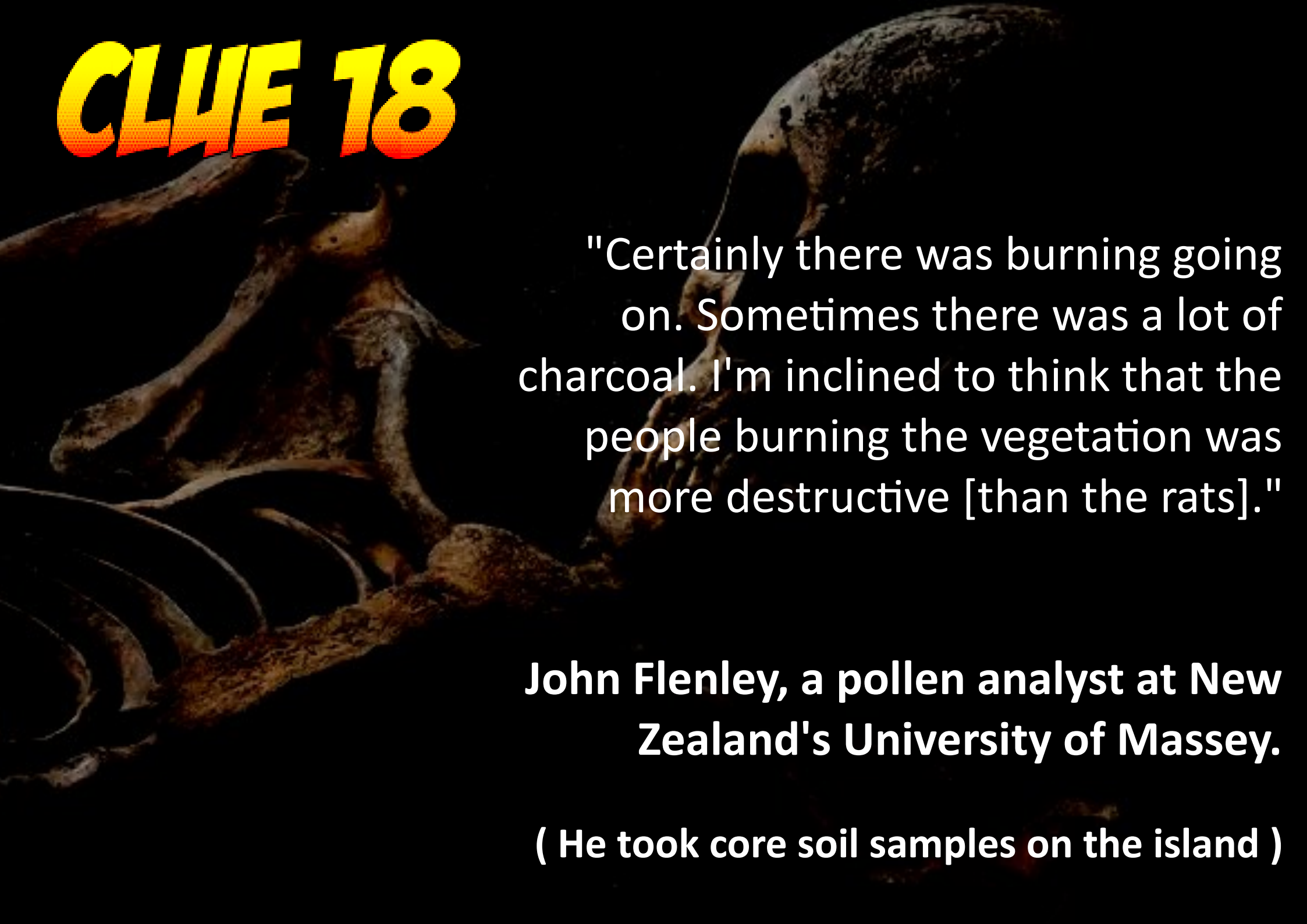


CLUE 17

Forensic anthropologist Douglas Owsley, studied the bones of some 600 people from the island. he found some signs of trauma, such as blows to the face and head. However, 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. T**here was no evidence, beyond word-of-mouth, of cannibalism** or a civil war.

Sapiens.org

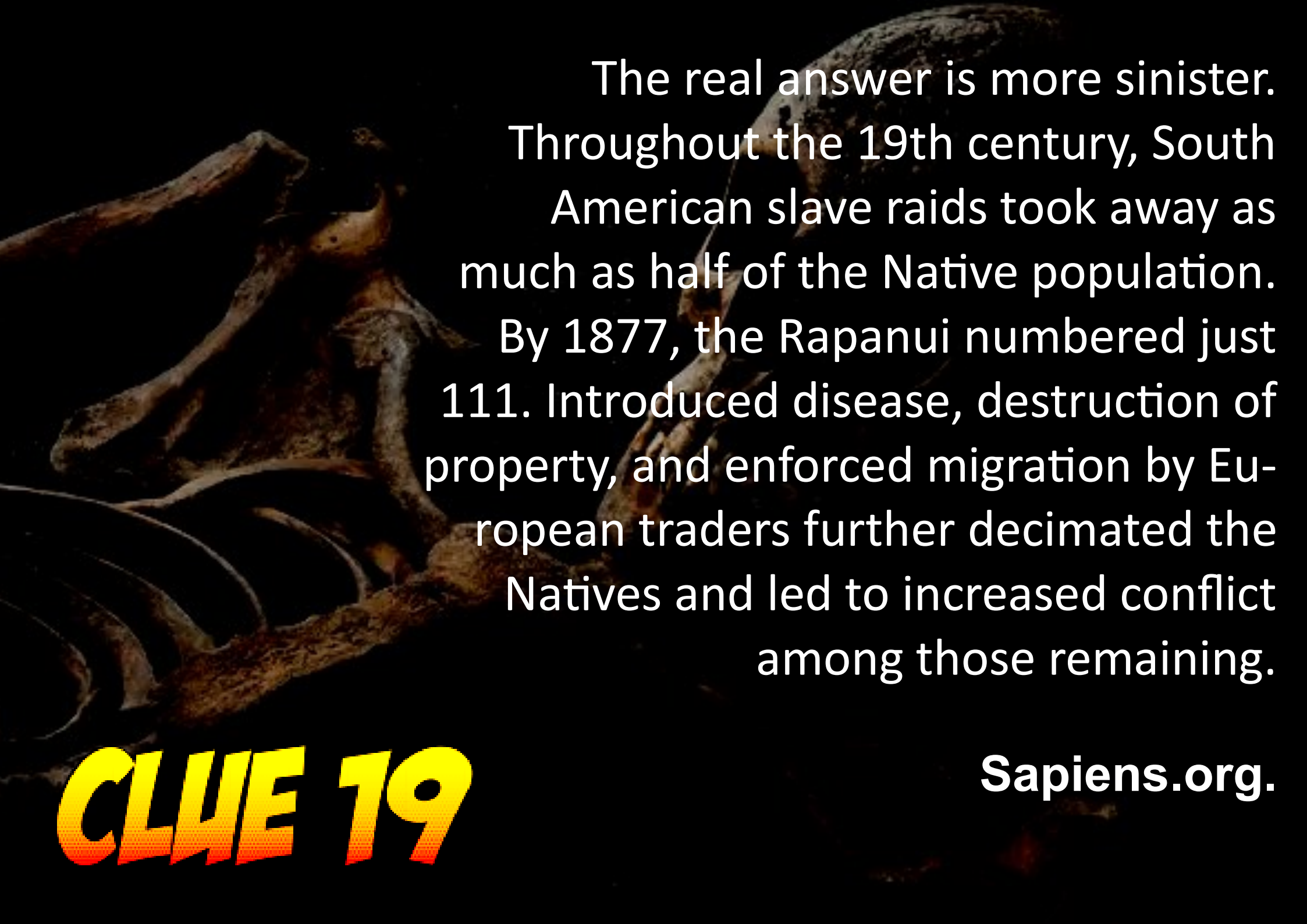
CLUE 18



"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.

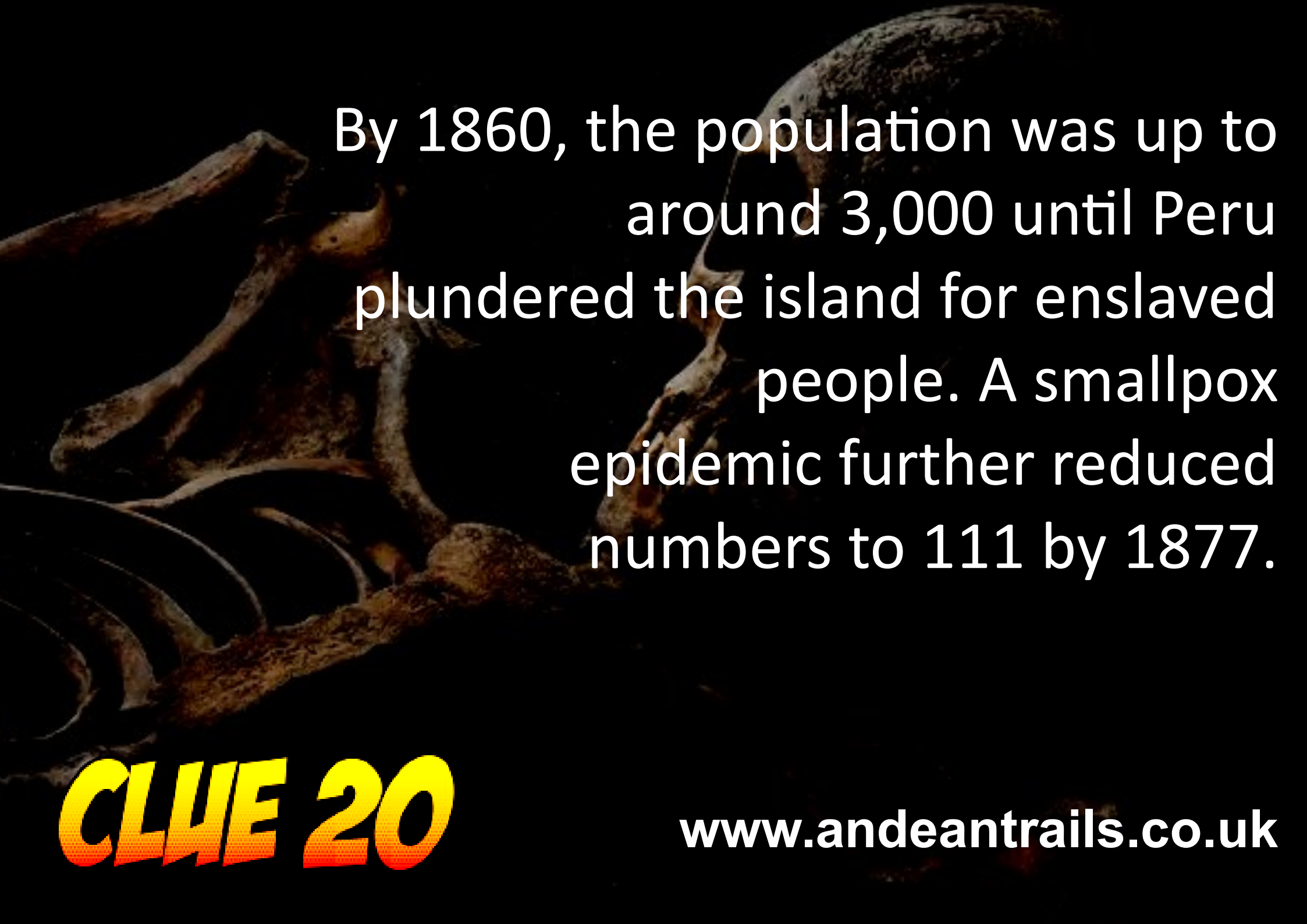
(He took core soil samples on the island)



The real answer is more sinister. Throughout the 19th century, South American slave raids took away as much as half of the Native population. By 1877, the Rapanui numbered just 111. Introduced disease, destruction of property, and enforced migration by European traders further decimated the Natives and led to increased conflict among those remaining.

CLUE 19

Sapiens.org.


By 1860, the population was up to around 3,000 until Peru plundered the island for enslaved people. A smallpox epidemic further reduced numbers to 111 by 1877.
CLUE 20
www.andeantrails.co.uk

Review

'The takeaway from Rapa Nui should NOT be a story of a primitive people - their greed, violence and ecocide leading to population collapse.

Instead, it should be a lesson in how with such little real evidence, a fixation with "mysteries," and a collective amnesia (forgetting) 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 - 2018 Article.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