

THOR WITHOUT BORDERS

BY RACHEL GUYAH

He may be famous for sailing the South Pacific aboard a balsa wood raft, but the saga of THOR HEYERDAHL hardly ends there.

Norwegian Thor Heyerdahl wore many hats: explorer, ethnologist, experimental archaeologist, author. He even dabbled in making documentary films—one of which earned an Academy Award.

With an insatiable curiosity as his compass, Heyerdahl explored the world by land and sea. In 1947 he gained international fame for his historic voyage from Peru to Polynesia, sailing nearly 4,300 nautical miles on a simple balsa wood raft named the *Kon-Tiki*. The impetus? To test his theory that the ancestral roots of Polynesians are not solely planted in Southeast Asia (as widely believed), but also in South America. The *Kon-Tiki*'s daring 101-day voyage showed that primitive, pre-Columbian vessels were indeed capable of extended maritime travel—opening up the exciting possibility of ancient transoceanic communication between distant civilizations.

Over the next several decades, Heyerdahl continued to test his theory that the ocean was not a barrier for pre-historic people; it was a frequented passageway, a portal, to foreign lands and cultures.

While his theories have often been disputed, few have ever denied his tenacity, courage and passion for humanity and the environment. Here's a look at some of Heyerdahl's other fascinating expeditions.

EXCAVATIONS ON EASTER ISLAND

Heyerdahl was fascinated by the rich culture and history of Easter Island, a small volcanic island more than 2,000 miles off the coast of Chile. Of particular interest were the hundreds of moai—enormous stone statues—scattered across the landscape, most carved from lava tuff to represent the ancestors of the island's Polynesian population. In 1955-56 he led his first expedition there with a team of five archaeologists. While most believed the iconic stone statues consisted only of heads (whose size made them »

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impressive on their own), Heyerdahl's excavations revealed huge torsos beneath the surface—complete with shoulders, arms and stomachs. Some statues stood nearly 40 feet tall. During this first expedition Heyerdahl was also granted special access to family caves hidden on the island. The caves housed hundreds of ancient sculptures, which Heyerdahl purchased for further research (see sidebar).

Thirty years later, Heyerdahl returned to Easter Island—this time to test a theory. The traditional belief among the native population was that the giant monolithic statues had “walked” themselves to their final resting points throughout the island. Could there be a more scientific explanation? Joined by Czech engineer Pavel Pavel and a group of 16 local residents, Heyerdahl showed that these statues could in fact be moved in the upright position using just rope tied around the head and base.

ADVENTURES ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

Heyerdahl discovered something peculiar on his visit to Easter Island: depictions of reed boats with masts and

sails. Similar paintings of reed boats had also been found in Egypt.

Also peculiar: The aboriginal people of Easter Island had a word for the sun, Ra, which was the same name given to the sun god in ancient Egypt. Stepped pyramids can also be found at both locations, all with designs based on astronomy and the movement of the sun. “These strange parallels could hardly have been found farther apart,” Heyerdahl noted in his book, “The Ra Expeditions” (1971). “Was there some connection, or was it just coincidence?” Heyerdahl theorized that these ancient populations may have used reed vessels to venture far across the Atlantic and come into contact with one another. To test his theory, the Norwegian explorer set his sights on the sea again.

With a boat fashioned from local papyrus reed, the crew of seven men from seven nations set sail from Safi off the coast of Morocco in May 1969. Their destination? Barbados. The trip was treacherous from day one: Not even 24 hours at sea had passed before both steering oars had broken. And too, Norman Baker, the crew's navigator and only experienced sailor, became bedridden with the flu.

The crew endured eight weeks at sea, but the reed boat absorbed a great deal of water as it drifted across the Atlantic. With the dangerously waterlogged vessel surrounded by sharks and entering a region known as the “birthplace of hurricanes,” Heyerdahl decided to abort the mission.

But his quest to prove the seaworthiness of papyrus was not over: Heyerdahl hired indigenous craftsmen from Lake Titicaca in Bolivia to construct a second reed boat. Ten months later, the shorter, stronger *Ra II* sailed west from Morocco, successfully reaching Barbados in the West Indies in 57 days “without loss or damage to a single papyrus stem,” noted Heyerdahl in his book. The success showed that reed boats are indeed capable of extended seafaring.

A PLEA TO SAVE THE SEA

During the first *Ra* voyage the crew encountered many oil clumps on the ocean's surface. They reported their alarming discoveries to the United Nations, who requested they track their daily pollution findings during their second voyage. Heyerdahl worked for the Foreign Ministry of

Norway in preparation for the UN's first major international conference on the environment in 1972. One of the conference's major achievements: approving an international ban on dumping waste oil in open seas.

HIS FINAL VOYAGE

When Heyerdahl visited the pharaoh's tombs in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, he was struck by ancient art depicting sailors in papyrus reed boats. These depictions, combined with old texts containing references to distant travel, made the Norwegian explorer wonder: Could these primitive vessels have been used by ancient populations in Egypt, the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia as a means of contact and conquest? These questions ran counter to what scholars widely believed, but Heyerdahl's curiosity had a penchant for veering off course.

Soon afterward, Heyerdahl constructed his largest reed vessel yet: the *Tigris*—named after the ancient river that had been central to the success of Mesopotamian civilizations. With drawings of ancient Sumerian ships as his (*continued on page 31*)

A PROMISE FULFILLED

Thousands of artifacts collected by Heyerdahl during his expeditions to Easter Island will finally make their way back home. An agreement providing for their return was signed in late March by Consuelo Valdés Chadwick, Chile's Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage, and by representatives from Oslo's Kon-Tiki Museum, including Thor Heyerdahl, Jr.—the explorer's son, who accompanied his father on his 1955 expedition. “The repatriation is a fulfillment of my father's promise to to the Rapa Nui authorities, that the objects would be returned after they had been analyzed and published,” said Heyerdahl Jr. during the signing ceremony.



Thor Heyerdahl (second from left) during excavations on Easter Island in February 1986. The *Ra II* in the Kon-Tiki Museum in Oslo, Norway.

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MORE NORWEGIAN TRAILBLAZERS



Sondre Norheim
Dubbed the “Father of Modern Skiing,” he made innovations in skiing technology. He also designed the Telemark ski.



Fridtjof Nansen
He led a number of expeditions to the Arctic and made modern strides in polar travel techniques and equipment.



Roald Amundsen
This polar explorer led the first expedition to the South Pole. He was the first person to visit both the North and South Poles.



Åse Gruda Skard
A pioneer in the field of childhood development and psychology, she published nearly 2,000 journal articles and wrote 24 books.



Edvard Grieg
Norway's greatest composer is known for his Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16 and Peer Gynt, Op. 23.



Edvard Munch
Noted for his intensely evocative treatment of psychological themes, Norway's most iconic painter is best known for his work “The Scream.”



Kristine Bonnevie
A biologist and Norway's first female professor. Her fields of research were cytology, genetics and embryology.



Liv Arnesen
The first woman in the world to ski solo and unsupported to the South Pole—a 50-day expedition of 745 miles.



Henrik Ibsen
Known as the “Father of Realism” and the “Father of Modern Drama,” Ibsen was one of the most influential playwrights of his time.



Ole Bull
This violinist, composer and nationalist was known for his theatrical and unorthodox performance style.

THE LIFE OF THOR HEYERDAHL

The world-renowned explorer and archaeologist made history at sea.



1914

Heyerdahl is born on Oct. 6 in Larvik, Norway.



1933

He enters the University of Oslo and studies zoology and geography.

1944

Heyerdahl serves in the Free Norwegian Forces after the occupation of Norway by Nazi Germany.

1947

On April 28, he sets sail with a small crew from Peru on a primitive balsawood raft, the *Kon-Tiki*. They arrive in French Polynesia 101 days later.



1955-56

At Easter Island, he and other archaeologists search for traces of the first people to have arrived there.

1953

He travels with two archaeologists to the Galápagos Islands, finding evidence that the South American peoples reached the Islands before Columbus reached the Americas.

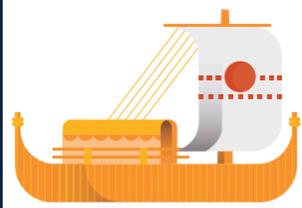


1969

He spends eight weeks sailing the reed boat, *Ra*, from Morocco to Barbados. The boat absorbs too much water, and the mission is aborted.

1970

He sets sail on the *Ra II* from Morocco to Barbados.



2002

Heyerdahl passes away on April 18.

1987

He receives the Grand Cross of the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav.

1986-88

He returns to Easter Island to resume his research on the first inhabitants of the French Polynesian Islands.

1977-78

Heyerdahl sailed the *Tigris* from Iraq to Djibouti in 143 days.



Photos clockwise from top:

Thor Heyerdahl's expedition on the *Ra II* launched in the Moroccan port Safi.

Boat builders from Lake Chad used papyrus reed from Ethiopia's Lake Tana to construct *Ra*. They worked on the boat in the Egyptian desert near the Pyramids at Giza.

Thor Heyerdahl (foreground) and a crew member on *Ra*.



blueprint, he built the nearly 60-foot boat where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers meet, in what is now Iraq. Few had confidence in the voyage, or in the long-term buoyancy of papyrus reeds. However, Heyerdahl placed his trust in the people who lived among the marshes, who assured him that reeds harvested in August would absorb very little water.

In November 1977, Heyerdahl and his crew set sail from the river Shatt al-Arab in Iraq. They sailed down the Persian Gulf, then into the Arabian Sea toward the Gulf of Aden. Heyerdahl had plans to continue on to the Red Sea, but warring nations bordering the gulf denied their

requests to stop for much-needed provisions. More than five months and 4,200 miles after departing Iraq, the crew ended their voyage at Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. Heyerdahl grew frustrated and angry. Although his own crew of 11 men from nine nations had united in harmony across the sea, entire countries were still being ravaged by conflict and violence. Heyerdahl set fire to the boat as a sign of protest. "She really looks strange with her sails up and not us all aboard," one crew member remarked. "It looks beautiful," Heyerdahl replied, gazing upon the reeds as the flames took force. The *Tigris* turned out to be his fourth and final trans-oceanic voyage. ♡

LEARN MORE

Heyerdahl was a masterful storyteller who spun his expeditions into best-selling books and gripping documentaries.

Books

"The Kon-Tiki Expedition: By Raft Across the South Seas"

"Aku-Aku: The Secret of Easter Island"

"The Ra Expeditions"

"The Tigris Expedition: In Search of Our Beginnings"

Films

"Kon-Tiki" (1950)

"The Ra Expeditions" (1971)

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