

Voyager Against All Tides

Thor Heyerdahl's obstinate imagination made the world of science take note

WHEN A YOUNG NORWEGIAN NAMED THOR HEYERDAHL suggested in the 1940s that ancient South Americans had crossed the Pacific to settle in Polynesia, the academic establishment laughed. "They said balsa logs would sink after two weeks in the ocean," he later recalled, "so of course I had no choice but to prove them wrong." In 1947 Heyerdahl built a balsa-wood raft he dubbed the *Kon-Tiki*, which carried six men and a parrot 7,000 km from Peru to a crash landing on Raroia Atoll, a voyage of 101 days. His book the following year, *The Kon-Tiki Expedition*, brimmed with tales of shark wrestling and storms, and became a worldwide best-seller. "It was one of the great adventures of the 20th century and a wonderful morale lift for everyone after World War II," says Brian Fagan, an archaeologist at the University of California at Santa Barbara. "It made him a global icon."

Heyerdahl, who died last week at age 87, had only two years of higher education at the University of Oslo. Yet he launched a thousand ships of controversy by maintaining that ancient mariners had enough sailing technology to spread their cultures around the world several millennia ago. Most leading scholars dismissed Heyerdahl's theory of cultural diffusion and still do. "He raised a lot of big questions and kept the stew boiling by turning the flame up very high," says Colgate University anthropologist Anthony Aveni. "But his obstinacy about diffusion was annoying in a scholarly sense. He had no solid base of evidence."

Heyerdahl studied ocean currents and compared pyramids, rock carvings and other cultural artifacts in support of his theories about the Pacific Islands. He also insisted that Mediterranean seafarers such as the Hittites or the Phoenicians founded or at least energized the advanced pre-Columbian cultures of Central and South America. DNA studies and other modern research tend to show the opposite: that Pacific islanders are of strictly Asian origin, and that the world's early civilizations evolved in isolation from one another. Heyerdahl, however, put his own spin on the new data and exulted in discoveries like that of a 9,300-year-old skeleton in the U.S. state of Washington in 1996. Known as Kennewick Man, it appears to have Southeast Asian features.

Some researchers say it might even belong to one of Heyerdahl's imagined seafarers.

In 1969, Heyerdahl built a papyrus vessel, named after the sun god *Ra*, in the ancient Egyptian style and skippered it from Morocco toward Central America. He and the crew had to abandon ship a short distance from Barbados, but they succeeded 10 months later on the vessel *Ra II*. A fourth craft, *Tigris*, took Heyerdahl across the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. He also led archaeological digs in the Galapagos Islands, Easter Island, Peru, the Canary Islands and Russia, all designed to reveal the basic unity of mankind. George Carter, a retired professor of geography at Texas A&M University and an ally of Heyerdahl's in the cultural diffusion

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wars, attributes the rancor of his colleagues to jealousy. "He was a far more serious scientist than anyone was willing to acknowledge," says Carter. "His 800-page book *American Indians in the Pacific* is generally ignored but is absolutely packed with tremendous insight."

To Heyerdahl's irritation, his exploits spawned a mini-industry in forgotten-civilization books and loopy theories about the lost tribes of Israel, the Iberian Celts and King Arthur's knights

fanning out across North and South America. "There are two extremes, and I don't subscribe to either of them," Heyerdahl said. "The isolationists say nobody moved a muscle until the Europeans ventured out. That makes no sense. But it's no better to look at the ocean as a giant skating rink."

The seas roiled again toward the end of Heyerdahl's life, when he claimed in two books that the Norse god Odin had been a real-life tribal chieftain in the 1st century A.D. and that the Vikings had had a large presence in North America. Historians who believe there was likely only one tiny Viking settlement confronted him at a speech he gave two months ago in Oslo. "All his arch-opponents were there," said Thor Heyerdahl Jr., eldest of the explorer's five children. "There was a harsh tone, and I would say my father was more on the defensive than usual. But he was very stubborn and didn't yield at all." The academics may still laugh, but after his dramatic voyages, Heyerdahl's theories opened the minds of millions to the fact of their common humanity. —By **Walter Gibbs/Oslo**



In 1969 Heyerdahl set sail from Morocco in *Ra*; inset, *Kon-Tiki* at sea