

Introduction: *Kon Tiki*

In 1947, just a couple years following World War II, Norwegian Thor Heyerdahl and 5 mates set off from Peru on a balsa-log raft bound for Polynesia. That same year, with much of the planet still in turmoil, the International Monetary Fund was established and the Marshall Plan sought to relieve famine in Europe. In American homes, “Howdy Doodie” debuted on the postwar wonder of television sets, while on Broadway, *Steetcar Named Desire* introduced us to Stella and relying on the kindness of strangers. It was a year of breaking barriers, including Jackie Robinson becoming the first modern African American major-league baseball player, furthering the United States’ path toward electing a black president. Chuck Yeager also roared past the sound barrier. After ten thousand years of civilization, humankind was finally touching the edge of the heavens. Still, it was a time before satellites and instant global communications, before people had touched the deepest parts of the sea. It’s in this time that Heyerdahl and his crew set off across the Pacific Ocean, the largest and most foreign place on earth, a place as unknown, dangerous, and sublime as space.

Heyerdahl’s pure determination in the face of nay sayers, in itself is fascinating; that he could convince four other Norwegians and a Swede to join him on such a journey, a near-miracle. Just finding 9 balsa logs up to 45 feet long, getting them to the shore, and assembling his raft would be adventure enough for most men, but Heyerdahl was never ordinary. Even as a very young man, he had homesteaded in the jungle of Fatu Hiva, decades before French Polynesia would become a hot tourist destination. He developed throughout his life a reverence and respect for both the natural world and civilizations that were much more “sophisticated” than they might appear to our technocratic society.

The voyage of *Kon Tiki* was inspired by Heyerdahl’s theory that pre-Columbian South American Incas could and may have voyaged to settle Easter Island and the other Pacific isles further west, a theory founded on similarities between the great statues of Easter and those in South America. The fact that his theory has been largely disproved thanks to modern methodologies might render a lesser tale obsolete, but *Kon Tiki* will remain a classic because it is a timeless human tale that has inspired so many in a wide variety of ways. In the end, recent DNA testing has found evidence of some South American blood on Easter Island after all, legitimizing even what I consider the least important part of the *Kon Tiki* quest.

Heyerdahl’s Odyssey surely pioneered a kind of experiential anthropology. This approach has been followed by numerous others, including a half-score of other raft voyages but also those who have re-created such diverse vessels as a bronze-age galley, a Phoenician cargo ship, a medieval leather-skinned currach, and Viking ships to demonstrate how voyages obscured by time and scrubbed from formal history might have been made. Heyerdahl himself would go on to build Egyptian papyrus ships *Ra I* and *II*, among other historic vessels. The fleet that has followed *Kon Tiki*’s wake have taught us that venerable, even ancient cultures were much more savvy than we once thought, and the world likely more interconnected well before the days of trains, planes, and automobiles.

Thor Heyerdahl may not have been fully aware of the power of his time machine. The building

of and voyaging on *Kon Tiki* took his crew back to the stone age where they would discover how things might have been done, must have been done, to succeed, and through that process, they became enlightened. Circumnavigator and associate Alvah Simon once remarked to me that, when he set off to round the planet on a plywood boat as a young man, he thought he would venture into the lesser developed world and perhaps teach them a thing or two, but it took almost no time for him to discover that he had a great deal to learn. Simon, and so many others of following generations have followed Heyerdah's lead, learning how cultures that are fully integrated with their environment are shaped by it as much as they shape it, and how much wisdom is contained within the natural literacy on which these cultures depend. In the process of learning or relearning these skills, we come to an understanding of ourselves and our world that is quite different from most who dwell isolated within and depend completely on the modern technological world.

When I first saw the actual raft *Kon Tiki* in a museum in Oslo in 1987, I was dumbstruck by its very basic nature, its low freeboard and ram-like plank bow. Maybe *Kon Tiki* was large compared to many cockamamie craft in which I and others have ventured offshore, certainly larger than the life raft in which I spent some months back in 1982, but even to my eyes, it took amazing courage to set off purposely on a craft like that. With minimal control of direction, the crew would be subject to the whim of wind and current, not at all well known at the time. Would they drift for weeks, months, perhaps years? Who knew how long the lashings on the huge balsa logs would last before the unimaginable power of monstrous waves wracked the raft to ruin?

The raft's foot or two of freeboard was little defense against the sea. I envisioned even quite modest open-ocean waves sweeping across portions of the deck. Especially in storms, the men must have lived in the sea as much as above it. But therein rests a large part of the tale's charm and a priceless inspiration for me as I tried to survive the Atlantic 35 years later. *Kon Tiki's* voyage showed how anything that floats upon the sea becomes an island, developing a unique pelagic ecology on which ocean survivors eventually depend. The crew of *Kon Tiki* were, in fact, much like survivors of shipwreck; stranded on their raft, they would learn to benefit from the sea as much as they were threatened by it.

Since first reading this book as a lad, I have been repeatedly enthralled by how the crew, over time, were transformed by their developing ecosystem. To me, the crew's interaction with this strange and wondrous pelagic world, how it shaped their relationship with the universe and to one another, forms the core of their journey. This voyage, like all great voyages, became as much about being out there as getting some place; about the transcendent nature of being both humbled and uplifted by something much greater than ourselves; and about how every explorer must eventually embrace the fact that he or she is not in control, but may only guide his or her fate.

Yes, these men wanted to cross the Pacific, and in so doing they discovered that the greatest wilderness might not hover above us in the heavens but instead rests right here on earth, between continents on the briny deep as well as within our hearts. Above all, *Kon Tiki* continues to show us all that we, too, might be explorers. We might venture across the oceanic frontier with aquatic space ships as complex as a sailboat or as simple as a sail-driven raft built of balsa logs; or we

may voyage to the reaches of our imaginations with an open mind. All that is required is the will to embark.

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