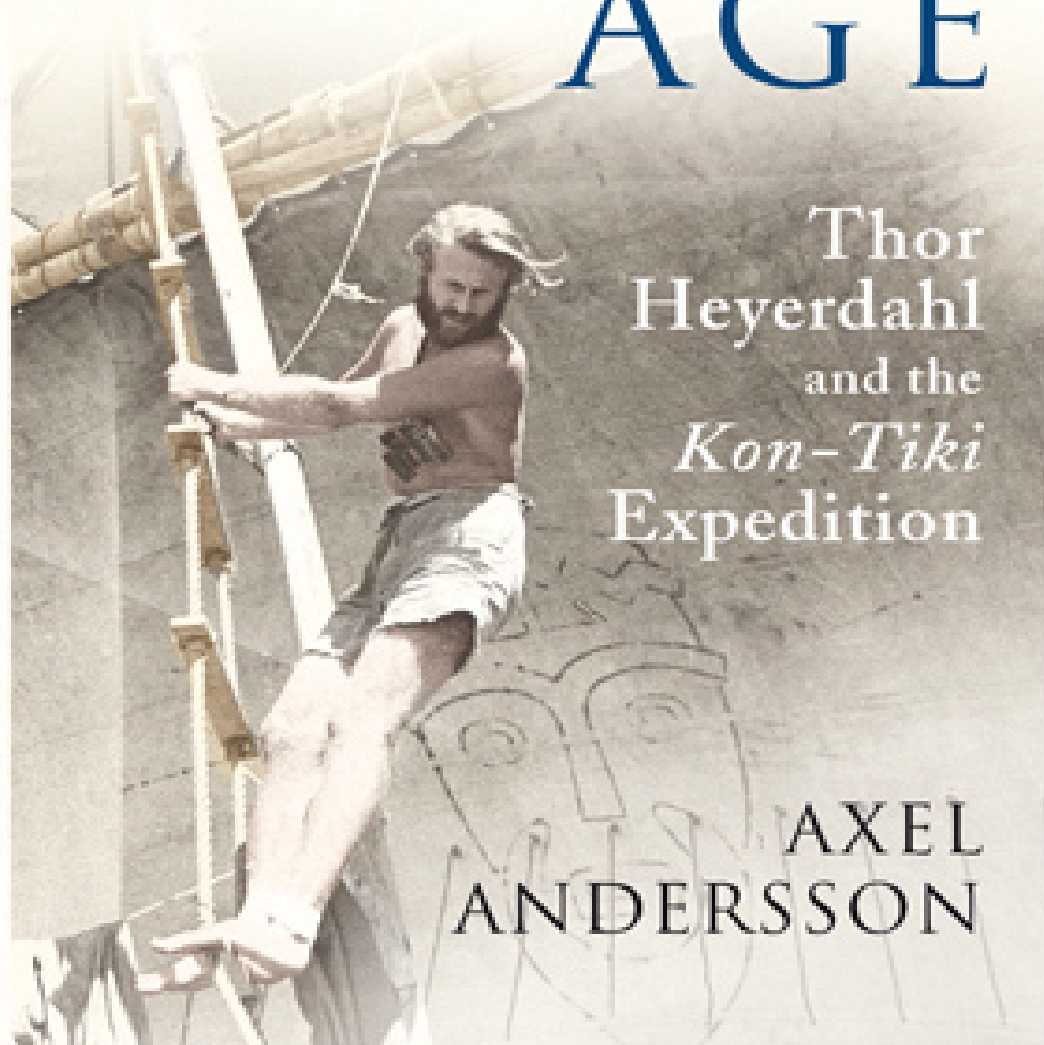


A HERO *for the* ATOMIC AGE

Thor
Heyerdahl
and the
Kon-Tiki
Expedition

AXEL
ANDERSSON



Introduction

On Monday afternoon 28 April 1947 a strange vessel was towed out of the naval dockyard in Callao, the harbour town of the Peruvian capital Lima. Fifteen large balsa logs, almost fourteen metres long, tied together and covered with bamboo matting, made a small raft. There was a nine-metre-tall mast of mangrove wood that would later hold a sail decorated with a drawing of a bearded human head. Six men formed the crew, five Norwegians and a Swede. They were to live on board for 101 days in a small hut plaited from bamboo strands and banana leaves as their raft drifted more than 4000 nautical miles in the Humboldt Current, from the shores of South America to the islands of French Polynesia.

A little more than half a year before the raft's departure from Callao, a young Norwegian, Thor Heyerdahl, had arrived in New York. In his suitcase he carried copies of a manuscript in which he had collected evidence that the Polynesian islands had first been settled through prehistoric migrations from the Americas by a white race, and not from Asia as the prevailing scientific opinion decreed. The young Heyerdahl was not a scientist. He had decided to discontinue his university studies and instead carry out research of his own. Nine and a half years before he had travelled to Polynesia in a failed attempt to abandon civilization. Now he wanted to return on a raft from South America, just like the people who had settled the Pacific. It was a crazy idea. The year was 1946, and the bloodiest war in the history of mankind had just come to an end. Heyerdahl had left behind his wife and two children and a good chance to establish himself in his native Norway. Instead of putting his pre-war years of anxious wayfaring behind him, he had decided to take the final step towards making his life into an adventure, whatever the cost.

In 2002, many years and adventures later, we find Heyerdahl in the small Italian village of Colla Micheri in the green hills of Liguria. He is 87 years old and has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. There will be no more daring exploits, no more crazy ideas to realize. Maybe his thoughts return to how it had all begun, and how it was that he had become an international celebrity through that first raft journey. The book about the adventure had sold tens of millions of copies worldwide and had been translated into more than 60 languages. This success had enabled him to devote his life to adventures in the name of popular science. He had carried out excavations all over the world and sailed experimental reconstructions of primitive vessels across the Atlantic Ocean and the Arabian Gulf. Heyerdahl had brought his gift for making stories to the international stage and the popular audience that he had sought since his youth. It might only be a poetic conjecture, but one can imagine that Heyerdahl's thoughts of the past mingled with chagrin. Now it was time to go, time to give up control of his story. As all storytellers know, the key to success is to be the one who casts the spell.

I was one of the many people who read Heyerdahl. It all began during one of those childhood Christmases that for the most part appear indistinguishable from each other. The taste of the ginger wafers and the smell of the freshly cut spruce tree were the same and even though there was not always snow, I invariably colour the fields and forests outside my childhood home fluffy white with hibernal nostalgia. Everything, in short, flows together in some common measure of time. One winter a new edition of Heyerdahl's book about that raft journey that had begun in Callao, *The Kon-Tiki Expedition*, lay under the Christmas tree with all its mesmerizing decorations. Both my father and my grandfather were at hand to tell me of their own experiences of reading this classic that I had not known existed. I do not remember whether I reflected that being introduced to the book was a masculine rite of passage. What I do remember is that I spent the following days on the blue, warm Pacific, on a creaking balsa raft.

Many years later I was on the west coast of Norway, together with a group of other people in front of the expedition leader of that adventurous journey from Peru to Polynesia. By that time I had in my imagination crewed on every subsequent vessel of this adventurer and explorer, and believed that I had a comprehensive grasp of his theories of prehistoric

ocean migrations and his philosophy of the interconnectedness of humanity that necessitated a commitment to the issues of peace and the environment. The Christmas gift had even prompted me to collect books about travel and adventure, and had strengthened my own wish to go beyond the confines of my rural home. When Heyerdahl finished speaking I could not, however, bring myself to walk up to him. I had the curious sensation that the frail white-haired man with a stoop was someone, or something, quite different from my childhood hero.

Later in life I decided to get to the bottom of my interest in adventurous journeys and the figure of Heyerdahl. The fascination had, after all, not been mine alone. It was not only my grandfather and father who had shared it, but generations around the world. Heyerdahl was one of a long line of atavistic figures who seemed to have braved the most extreme elements on behalf of the less daring. Soon it became clear for me that this fascination could best be understood by studying the phenomenon of exploration and travel in general, rather than the details of the individual tortuous journeys of specific hardy adventurers. The *Kon-Tiki* voyage and Heyerdahl the person were less interesting than *Kon-Tiki* the event and Heyerdahl the concept. My only starting premise when I returned to Norway to begin my researches was that adventure and adventurers are created; they do not simply come into existence.

I did not know what to expect to find at the Kon-Tiki Museum on Bygdøy (see plate 15). The short boat ride across the beautiful Oslo fjord had almost been enough to make me content. The small balsa raft displayed there, on which Heyerdahl and his crew of five had drifted across half of the Pacific Ocean, appeared to have sunk into a Sleeping Beauty-like slumber from which I could not rouse her. It was only when I was let into a windowless back room, full of green filing cabinets, that I sensed something alive among the relics. There I found the paperwork, meticulously preserved, that began to explain how a young de-mobbed university drop-out who looked quite a bit like Kirk Douglas created a media sensation in the late 1940s and early 1950s around an adventure undertaken to prove a rather fantastic theory that Polynesian culture was the result of migrations from the Americas. This was what would end up as dreams of adventure like the one I had been gripped by for so many years.

The onion-leaf, thin carbon copies of correspondence with backers, publishers and the various others who helped to make the *Kon-Tiki*

expedition possible became the real stuff of my story. Here were the traces of how one of many adventurous journeys had been made; if only the material at the museum could be unravelled it might say something about the fascination with extreme travelling that has been such an important feature in so many of the world's cultures, not at least in the West ever since Odysseus left Ithaca. But the thin, brittle paper and massive scrapbooks of articles, in many cases neglected for almost 60 years, required a context. To be understood they had to be inserted anew into the universe from which they had been taken when they were put into their stout green time capsules. This is how my story of the *Kon-Tiki* came to be as much about the immediate postwar period in the USA and Europe as about primitive rafts, timeless oceans and itinerant gods. Hence this book's only somewhat ironic title: *A Hero for the Atomic Age*.

The journey of the *Kon-Tiki* was a highly orchestrated event whose beginnings are interwoven with the historical and cultural fabric of the time in which it was created. It was not the same as the story that caught the world's imagination and ended up as a timeless adventure under my family's Christmas tree. Heyerdahl had worked hard to secure the greatest possible impact for his first major expedition. He had left a war-torn Europe and travelled to the USA, where the Pentagon and other institutions like the new United Nations had given him the support he needed. As he drifted across the Pacific he wrote articles, filmed and began his book about the journey even before it was over. When he returned to 'civilization' he lectured tirelessly in the USA and Europe, as well as securing publishers for his book and help with making his documentary film. It took Heyerdahl only a few years to reach an audience of millions in the West. By the mid-1960s the *Kon-Tiki* book had sold an estimated 50 million copies around the world.

In the early 1950s 'Kon-Tiki' became a by-word for the exotic, for adventure, for bravery, and for a spirited, commonsensical and democratic challenge to dusty scientific dogmatism. The name of the young Norwegian adventurer's creation was on everybody's lips. Heyerdahl had transformed the journey of a small, flimsy raft across the Pacific into the leading adventure of the era, and himself into the updated embodiment of the explorer of yesteryear. He had come from nowhere and created one of the most important events in postwar popular culture. It is true that his 'nowhere' was an upper-class background replete with crucial contacts, and that he was also helped by favourable circumstances, but Heyerdahl's

achievement should not be understated. He had set his mind to creating a legendary story, and he succeeded.

One of the most fortuitous factors beyond Heyerdahl's control was that he did not receive the immediate recognition in the USA that he had hoped for. His inability to secure a US publisher for his book and a distributor for his film forced him to return to Europe in order to launch his *Kon-Tiki* story there. But Heyerdahl never gave up trying to break into the huge North American media market, and one day it happened. As Heyerdahl crossed and recrossed the Atlantic the *Kon-Tiki* became an event that belonged as much to the USA as it did to Europe. It was in the USA that the expedition had been planned and funded, and it was in Europe that Heyerdahl assembled both his campaign to sell the book and his documentary film before they were brought back to the USA. His Pacific journey had a marked Atlantic character, and illustrates above all the interconnectedness of the popular culture of the postwar West.

This book tells the story of how the *Kon-Tiki* grew from a dream into a spectacular reality in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It seeks to explain why the *Kon-Tiki* book still appears under Christmas trees and why it continues to inspire fantasies of exotic adventures. There is however a price to pay, as anyone who interrogates fantasies knows. The *Kon-Tiki* story is not as simple and innocent as the legend it has become, but its most problematic aspects are not in any hidden unpleasant details that have been buried in some filing cabinet or in some family secret. When it comes to Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki* there is an elephant in the room in the form of a highly articulated racist theory that has for a long time remained almost perfectly invisible.

It is possible to castigate Heyerdahl for being a bad scientist, and for experts in his chosen fields of study – I am not one – it is easy to find fault with his theories of prehistoric ocean migrations. The focus of this book is not upon Heyerdahl's science but upon his story; for the present purpose it does not matter whether the first Polynesians arrived from the east or the west, north or south. The disturbing kernel of Heyerdahl's theory went well beyond questions of geography. He argued that it had been an itinerant race of white and blue-eyed culture-bearers that had journeyed from some centre in the Old World to jump-start the world's great civilizations. The god and king Kon-Tiki had been a leader of this people. This was more than cranky pseudoscience; it was an articulation of

a belief in the cultural superiority of a white race that drew its inspirations from the murky depths of nineteenth-century race 'science'. It was also a story that made disturbing allegorical sense on a number of levels. The advance across the Pacific of Heyerdahl's all-white crew mirrored the postwar US frontier movement in the same ocean, and the argument that development required white skin was a reactionary comment upon the struggles against Western colonial domination around the world that continue to this day.

Race was an important part of the *Kon-Tiki*. Heyerdahl the mythmaker constructed his stories through reconciling apparent opposites, be they reason and sentiment, adventure and science, the exotic and the primitive, or the beautiful and the sublime, but when it came to race there was little to reconcile: culture and history belonged to the white. To discuss Heyerdahl's racist message does not amount to a gratuitous and politically correct admonition. Heyerdahl was not simply a child of his time. It is true that ideas of white supremacy were legion in the 1940s and 1950s. At the same time a world war had recently been fought against racist ideologies, and many publicly recognized scientists of the time dismissed the concept of human races in general and the supremacy of the white one in particular. Heyerdahl had at his disposal the intellectual tools to see how ideologically tainted his theories were, but he failed to grasp this. That he was not the only one who failed can help us to understand Heyerdahl the person, but it cannot excuse his theories. Unfortunately Heyerdahl was almost never challenged when it came to the racism of his theories, neither at the time of the *Kon-Tiki* nor, surprisingly, at any time later. Though the idea of white supremacy was not unquestioned, it retained a strong position in the Western political unconscious. The racism in the *Kon-Tiki* theory that was so clearly articulated by Heyerdahl became invisible with a disturbing ease. That it also remained equally uncommented on throughout the second half of the twentieth century shows the stubborn persistency of racial theories. Now the time has come not to dismiss Heyerdahl as a racist but to uncover the sooty kernel at the heart of Heyerdahl's fantasy, and our fantasy of Heyerdahl.