



**A**fter a voyage of more than 2,000 miles across the South Pacific, the canoers chanced upon a tiny speck of island. With little hope of finding their way home, they settled there and called the island Navel of the World. Dutch explorers called it Easter Island in memory of the day they spent there in 1722. By the time Captain Cook landed there in 1774, the descendants of the original settlers — who may have landed there as early as the 3rd century A.D. — had nearly destroyed themselves in civil wars. A population of perhaps 10,000 had dwindled to fewer than 1,000. The islanders left behind 600 gigantic statues and the ruins of vast masonry walls but little information about who they were or where they had come from.

Now George W. Gill of the University of Wyoming in Laramie may have found enough evidence to answer some of the questions. Early this year he and Sergio Rapu Haoa, an archaeologist from Easter Island, excavated 308 skeletons from 19 sites on the island. Most came from caves or from burial shrines beneath the massive statues. The skeletons are still being analyzed, but there are preliminary findings. Almost all of the male skulls, for instance, are long, large and have rugged foreheads — suggesting a Polynesian heritage. This fits with the theory that the original Easter Islanders came from the Marquesas Islands, 2,100 miles away. Gill expects computer analysis of the skeletal remains to provide definite answers within several months.

A theory proposed by Thor Heyerdhal says that South American Indians originally settled Easter Island and were then overthrown by later-arriving Polynesians. A number of cultural aspects of the islanders support this. The statues and stone

## LOST IN THE NAVEL OF THE WORLD

Recent excavations on Easter Island may provide long-sought information about its first inhabitants

BY ROBERT J. TROTTER

*Gill (top right) examines some of the skeletal remains found on Easter Island. They may help identify the island's original settlers and the carvers of its eyeless statues.*



*"This is the most isolated place in the world. Anybody who got here, in prehistoric times, was lost — and had to stay," said the late William Mulloy, a University of Wyoming anthropologist who spent many years studying Easter Island.*

work of the early cultural period (prior to A.D. 1100) are similar to some found in the highlands of South America but not to anything found in Polynesia. Non-Polynesian physical and linguistic traits have been noted, and in modern times the islanders still divided themselves into the Long Ears from South America and the Short Ears from Polynesia.

Gill, who is interested in examining the possibility of a South American connection, says anthropologists may have dismissed Heyerdhal's theory too quickly. The new finds may provide evidence for a South American link. Subtle genetic differences, for example, have been found among groups of skeletons taken from different locations. Some have a small piece of bone missing from the kneecap. This, says Gill, is a developmental characteristic with a genetic basis. Others have an extra cranial suture down the middle of the front of the skull. Gill has sent a graduate student to Peru to search for similar genetic traits among collections of prehistoric skeletal remains from coastal communities where Easter Islanders may have originated.

Gill's expedition was supported by the government of Chile, which now owns the island, and funded by the National Geographic Society, the Center for Field Research — Earthwatch, and the University of Wyoming. If the latest discoveries don't answer the remaining questions about Easter Island, those questions may never be answered. Easter Island is still one of the most isolated places on earth — it lies farther from inhabited land than any other island — but it is no longer as inaccessible as it used to be. It now has an airport and tourists, and Gill says the archaeological remains have been vanishing at an alarming rate. □