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Archaeology

Chicago Natural History Museum 1949-50 Anthropological Expedition to the Marianas Islands

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by
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Dr. Alexander Spoehr is engaged in research for the Chicago Natural History Museum. This expedition to the Marianas Islands is classified by the Pacific Science Board of the National Research Council as an extension to the Scientific Investigation of Micronesia (SIM) program. Dr. Spoehr is working closely with the Administrative Authorities in the area, and receiving facilities to assist his project through the cooperation of the Navy.

During the first quarter of 1950, a large share of the period was devoted to completing archaeological project after the completion of the ethnological work, but as the dry season in the Marianas is more markedly dry than was anticipated, it was decided that it would be advisable to complete the archaeological project during the dry season of 1950, or in the first four months of the current year. The following report on the quarter's work deals separately with the archaeological and ethnological projects.

Archaeological Project. An archaeological survey of Saipan was completed during December, 1949. On the basis of the survey, a number of type sites were selected for excavation. Excavations were commenced the latter part of January and were continued for a period of 6 weeks. Until the material excavated can be analyzed at the Museum following return from the field, no definite conclusions regarding the results of the excavations can be made, but the excavations themselves can be described, and tentative conclusions noted.

Six sites were excavated on Saipan. Two of these were stone-pillared house, or latte, sites, one was a rock shelter, and three were probably village or camp sites, though no evidence of house structures of any sort was found. A brief description of each site follows.

Unai Obyan. Located back of a beach on the south coast of Saipan, this was a large, stone-pillared house site, or latte. The house originally had ten stone pillars, used no doubt as foundations for the house proper, though the superstructure has entirely disappeared. The house was about fifty feet long, with the stone pillars forming two parallel rows of five pillars each. The original ground level was found about one foot under the present surface. Associated with the house were large quantities of potsherds, together with stone and shell tools and ornaments. Below the lattes, the deposit of cultural material extended downward to a depth of four to five feet, indicating that the site was used by previous dwellers. Burials intrusive from above were also found in this lower stratum. These burials were associated with the stone-pillared house. In addition, one burial was found at the bottom of disturbed soil and is associated with an earlier occupation of the site.

Laulo I. This was also a latte, or stone-pillared house site, located back of the beach at Magicienne Bay, on the east side of the island. This house was smaller than that at Obyan, although also composed of ten stone pillars. The cultural deposit at this site proved to be shallow, indicating that the site was occupied only once, and probably for a relatively short period. Two iron fragments--a fish-spear point and a fragment of a knife blade--were found at the base of one of the latte stones. Although one must be skeptical of such finds as being intrusive from modern times, the position of these two iron fragments was such that they could hardly be intrusive. They are probably pieces of trade iron, dating from early Spanish times. No burials were found at Laulo I.

Laulo II. This site was a rock shelter, located to the west of and near Laulo I. Below a top humus level, the next stratum at the rock shelter was composed of solid ash, for a depth of about $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet. Within this ash deposit were found fragments of charred human bones, indicating that the ash deposit represents a crematory, very probably for the inhabitants of the house site at Laulo I. Below the ash level was an older occupation level, which yielded two new and unusual pottery types, and below this level there was found a series of burial pits sunk into undisturbed soil. The burials at Laulo II and at Obyan were sufficiently numerous to define with certainty the prehistoric burial complex. Unfortunately, the skeletal material was in very fragmentary condition.

Chalan Piao. It is logical to assume that the earliest settlement on Saipan was back of the lagoon on the west side of the island, for this was the most favorable location for a combined fishing and farming economy. Unfortunately, it is this location which the Japanese picked for the new demolished town of Garapan, and which was then used as the principal base area during the war. It proved possible, however, to locate in this general area, several undisturbed sites, of which Chalan Piao proved to be the most important. The site is located 2000 feet east of the lagoon shore, near the southern end of the lagoon. Surface indications consisted only of pottery sherds and the shells of edible shell fish. Eight test trenches were sunk to a depth of from five to six feet until the water table was reached. At this location the water table varies with the tide (the water is brackish). Although no house structures were uncovered, sherds were found virtually down to the water level. It is possible that a definite pottery seriation exists at the site, though it will not be possible to determine the point until all pottery is studied and classified at the Museum. According to Mr. Harold Burke of the U. S. Geological Society, who

examined the soil profile at the site, it is probable that the beach was once located at the site, and that the beach has built out 2000 feet westward to its present location. The antiquity of the lowest sherds at Chalan Piao is represented by the time span necessary for the beach to build out this 2000 feet. Although no accurate dating is possible, the lowest sherds must have very considerable antiquity.

Oleai. Located just back of the lagoon and north of Chalan Piao, the surface indications at this site consisted of great quantities of shells and some potsherds. Four test trenches were sunk for a depth of five feet. However, the site proved to be very shallow, representing a relatively recent occupation.

Chalan Kiya. This site was located near Lake Susupe, between the lake and the lagoon. Again, the occupation level proved to be very shallow. No evidence of house structures was found.

Dating. The dating of these sites is very difficult, with the exception of the house site at Laulo I. This site yielded two fragments which are probably trade iron. If such is the case, then the site dates from the period after the Spanish began trading iron to the natives and before the natives were removed from Saipan in 1698. It is a documented fact that the Spanish were trading iron for rice as early as 1576 on Guam. Either iron was brought by native canoe to Saipan from Guam, or it may have been traded directly to the natives at Saipan. The lower end of the chronology is represented by the lowest sherds at the Chalan Piao site. A guess-date for the lower level sherds at Chalan Piao must be deferred until the geological evidence can be completely examined.

One other line of evidence for dating is to be found in the presence of a few highly distinctive sherds found at Laulo II. These sherds are probably trade pottery, but where they came from is still not known, and cannot be

determined until excavations are conducted in other parts of Micronesia, and possibly the Philippines. The presence of this pottery type on Saipan, however, will be valuable evidence for cross-dating with other islands.

Unfortunately, no charcoal was found, so there is little hope of dating the Saipan sites by the Carbon 14 method. It is hoped that something can be done with Tridacna shell adzes, though shell heretofore has not proved particularly suitable for dating by the Carbon 14 method.

Analysis and preparation of specimens for shipment. Following completion of the excavations, considerable time was spent in analysis of sherd material, as there was too much to ship back to the Museum. Over 7000 sherds were classified, counted, and discarded. Type specimens were retained, as were all rim sherds, and sherds of unusual or doubtful type. This material, together with all bone, shell, and stone specimens, has been packed for shipment.

Proposed excavations on Tinian. During April, the archaeological survey of Tinian will be completed, and excavations--primarily stratigraphic testing--conducted. It now appears doubtful, in view of time and budgetary limitations, that archaeological work other than a limited amount of survey, can be conducted on Rota.

Ethnological Project. It continued to be necessary to devote much time to language study, though by June it should be possible to dispense with interpreters. The ethnological work was concentrated in three areas: (1) the determination of the principal cultural contrasts between the Chamorros, the dominant native group, and the Carolinians, a more conservative minority; (2) the determination of the system of land tenure, and practices associated with land use and inheritance; and (3) the organization of family and household, and delineation of the kinship system. These three areas of concentration tend to overlap, one reason they were selected for concentrated effort.

The Chamorros and Carolinians, though outwardly much alike, are distinct ethnic groups with a different historical background behind their present-day cultures. The cultural contrasts between Chamorros and Carolinians is particularly apparent in family structure and kinship usages; in local organization; in agriculture; in the relative dependence on fishing in the economy; in the greater dependence of the Carolinians on magical practices associated with the curing of disease; and in the social implications of the linguistic cleavage between the two groups. The inter-personal relations between these two groups cannot be determined with any degree of precision until these contrasts are fully explored.

In the field of land tenure, work was conducted on ownership and land use, on the organization of production in agriculture, and in the prevailing system of inheritance. The natives today are returning to the land after the disruptions of the war, and the dislocations of post-war developments. The exploitation of the resources of the land and the sea will form the basis of their future economic and social structure, so that the study of customs associated with the land is fundamental to the understanding of their social and economic organization.

The study of family and kinship organization has been concentrated among the Carolinians. The latter still display an emphasis on maternal descent, which affects the composition of family units. The kinship system is a typical Oceanic generation type system on which has been superimposed the system brought by the Spanish. A prominent feature of kinship usages among the Carolinians is the prominence of the custom of adoption. This is a widespread trait in Oceania, but with a few exceptions, it has not been adequately investigated. The material from Saipan should have considerable comparative and theoretical importance.

Services rendered the United States Civil Government Unit, Saipan. In return for the generous cooperation given by the Civil Administrative Unit, the following services were rendered:

(1) At the request of the Civil Administrator, an opinion, together with recommendations, was given as to the inter-relation of the native system of land inheritance and a proposed homestead plan for Saipan. In addition, the Civil Administrator has requested that relevant information concerning land use and custom be furnished him following completion of field research on the subject. This will be done. The most important economic problem on Saipan is the working out of a satisfactory relation between the native population and their land resources. In the solution of this problem, the anthropologist can be of material assistance to the administering authority in arriving at a fair and equitable solution.

(2) Assistance was given the Medical Department in working up the results of a diet survey among school children made by the Department. The diet survey bears directly on the Museum research being undertaken on Chamorro and Carolinian family organization, as well as on problems of native health and nutrition.

(3) In the absence on the island of a trained surveyor, a map was constructed of the Chalan Kanoa village school buildings and grounds, as an aid to the Education Department.