

Later prehistory of the Philippines: colonial images and archaeology

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The colonial experience of the Philippine Islands as a Spanish and, more recently, an American dependency, has shaped Western perceptions of the people and history of the archipelago. Little has been known about the islands' precolonial past, but archaeologists are now beginning to investigate it, as in the project on the island of Negros described here.

The Philippine Islands experienced more than 350 years of Spanish and American colonial rule, and they lack prehistoric monuments and preserved indigenous writings of uncontested authenticity.¹ It is therefore not surprising that foreign images shape our views of later Philippine prehistory (defined broadly as from the tenth to the sixteenth century AD). Most colonial images probably in some way misrepresent pre-Hispanic (and later) Filipino societies. Misrepresentations range from inaccuracies that stem from early cultural encounters, such as the earliest Spanish explorers' description of Visayans – the inhabitants of the islands between Luzon and Mindanao (Fig. 1) – as *pintados* (painted men; Fig. 2) when actually they were tattooed, to more recent racist views legitimizing colonial power, such as the Spanish and later American portrayals of Filipinos as “savages” before they came under the civilizing influence of Europeans.² There has long been debate over the nature and history of pre-Hispanic Philippine society, its social forms and political institutions,³ but without archaeological research, such as the project described here, the debate is unlikely to be resolved. Before describing the project, it is helpful to set it in the larger context of late prehistoric Philippine societies.

The late prehistoric period ended with the establishment of colonial rule in 1565 – although this had been preceded by several Spanish expeditions, beginning with Magellan's voyage of 1521 – and it witnessed a growing involvement of the archipelago's societies in international foreign trade (Fig. 1). In the early first millennium AD, the South China Sea became an arena for intensive international trade systems that involved China and Southeast Asian societies. At least one Philippine society, which was known to the Chinese as *Ma-i*, on the island of Mindoro, participated directly in trade with China (Fig. 1) by the late tenth century. This was followed by increasing numbers of Philippine chiefs actively competing for access to, and control over, foreign trade relations. Chinese and Southeast Asian traders sought various marine, forest and agricultural products, textiles, and mineral resources of the archipelago, such as beeswax, resins, woods, tortoise shell,

pearls, gold ore and cotton. Philippine chiefs sought goods such as glazed ceramics (porcelains), glass beads, silk, lacquerware and iron: items that appear to have been valued as status symbols by chiefs, were essential in sociopolitical negotiations, and enhanced a chief's ability to maintain and increase political authority.

This picture of late prehistoric and early historic Philippine chiefdoms draws on foreign accounts, primarily Chinese and early Spanish records, and shows that they can be important sources of information, but they can also constrain our understanding of the indigenous societies. Until recently, there has been little reliable archaeological evidence with which to assess the nature of, and transformations in, the social, political, economic and ideological attributes of pre-Hispanic Philippine societies.⁴ Therefore, in order to investigate one example of a late pre-

historic chiefdom more directly, in 1987 I initiated an archaeological project in the Dumaguete–Bacong region of southeastern Negros Island (Fig. 3) under the auspices of the Archaeology Division of the Philippine National Museum and in collaboration with anthropologists from Silliman University in Dumaguete City.

Archaeological investigations in southeastern Negros Island

Before 1987, only one site (Magsuhot,⁵ which is also referred to as Bacong or Solamillo; Fig. 3) had been systematically excavated in this area. In addition to yielding evidence of late-thirteenth to mid-fifteenth-century habitation, the excavation uncovered seven burials in pottery jars dated to the final two centuries BC and the first century AD. They contained human skeletal remains, glass beads and bracelets, iron implements, human and animal figurines, animal remains, and decorated earthenware vessels, including one vessel in human form, one with attached animal figures, and one with human female figures sitting around the opening of the jar. This excavation provided evidence of a longer sequence of prehistoric occupation than was (and still is) currently documented for the Bais region to the north (Fig. 3), the only part of the island where a regional archaeological project had been undertaken prior to the initiation of my project.

The main aim of the Dumaguete–Bacong project is to investigate long-term socio-political and economic transformations in

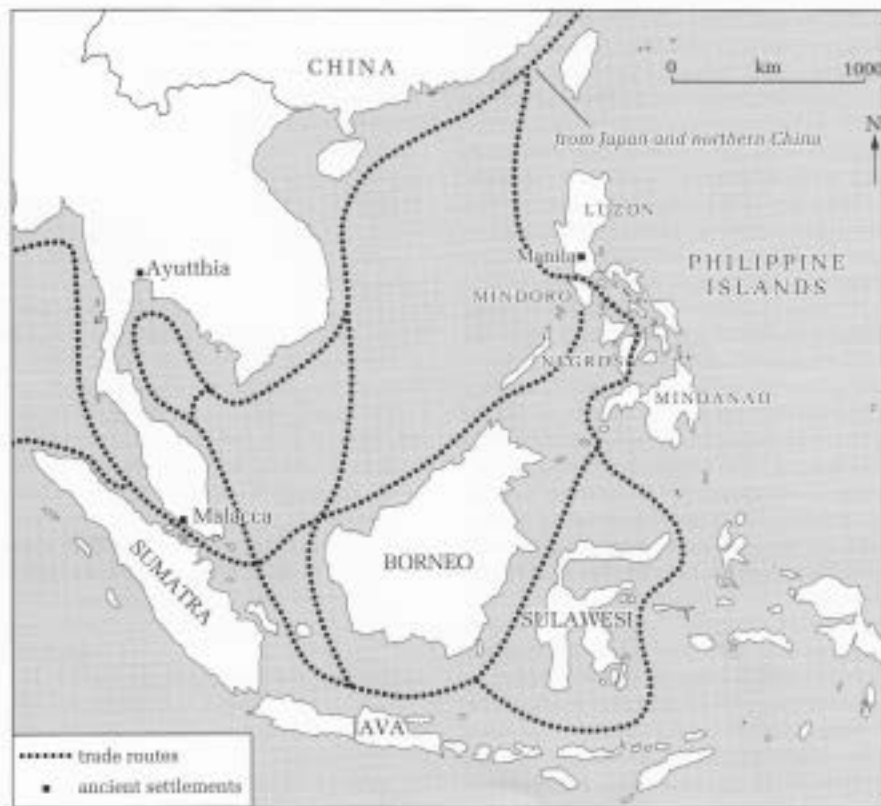


Figure 1 Southeast Asia, showing the location of the Philippine Archipelago, selected ancient settlements and late prehistoric trade routes.



Figure 2 Two tattooed Visayans from the Philippine Islands, described by early Spanish explorers as “painted men”.

southeastern Negros, the nature of the former having been an issue of debate from the beginning of Spanish colonization.¹ The research focuses on the sociopolitical nature of late prehistoric lowland societies, on their political economy, and on the role of gender in prestige. However, a necessary and significant part of the research has been, and continues to be, documenting the archaeological record of the area and establishing a regional chronology. Another important aim of the project is to produce an archaeologically informed critique of the reconstructions, based primarily on European views, of pre-Hispanic and early historic Philippine societies.

The fieldwork undertaken so far has included systematic survey of an area of c. 30km² (Fig. 4) that involved recording and collecting for analysis from 72 sites sherds of earthenware pottery and Asian tradewares, as well as stone artefacts and other artefactual remains; test excavations at two sites (Marino and Pis-an); more extensive excavations at two sites (Unto and Yap, described below); and an investigation of the spatial extent of the Yap settlement by means of a series of boreholes (using a hand auger) to ascertain the spatial extent of the Yap settlement.

Excavations in the area of the Dumaguete chiefdom

Excavations at Yap, which is located within Dumaguete City along the banks of the Banica river and the edge of the coastal plain, uncovered evidence of what is currently interpreted as the political centre of a late prehistoric chiefdom. Three periods of occupation have been uncovered, dating to the eleventh, twelfth to fourteenth, and fifteenth to sixteenth centuries AD. Parts of residential structures were uncovered in the eleventh- and fifteenth–sixteenth-century occupation layers, and, on the basis of their size, one from each period appears to have been an elite residence of people of high status. The earliest structures are associated with an extensive, thick midden deposit that contains artefacts such as beads, plain and decorated earthenware sherds, and iron fragments, some of which may well be prestige items – an interpretation that accords with evidence from other late prehistoric political centres. Residences were also associated with areas where iron and earthenware pottery was produced. Similar artefactual remains are found in the later periods of occupation, with the addition of glazed Asian tradewares and foreign earthenwares; and pottery and iron production continued.



Figure 3 Negros and adjacent islands, showing the location of the Dumaguete–Bacong archaeological project.

The archaeological record at Yap is similar to that of Tanjay, farther north on the east coast of Negros, and Cebu City on the northeast coast of the neighbouring island of Cebu (Fig. 3), two other centres of late-prehistoric Visayan chiefdoms, which suggests a fairly long history for the material expression of the status of chiefs. The chiefs at Yap also participated, either directly or indirectly, in long-distance trade, as is indicated by the presence of Asian tradewares. However, continuity in the material record does not mean that sociopolitical or economic structures were static, and further research is needed to improve understanding of the late prehistoric sociopolitical dynamics of Visayan chiefdoms.



Figure 4 The Dumaguete–Bacong archaeological survey area and the location of excavation sites.

Excavations at the Unto site (c. 3 km west of Yap) uncovered evidence of three periods of occupation. The earliest period dates to the late first millennium BC, making Unto one of the few sites in the archipelago with occupation radiocarbon-dated to this period. It has yielded remains of a residential structure associated with plain and decorated earthenware sherds (including several sherds with impressions of rice husks), stone artefacts and shell fragments. The second period of occupation dates to the fifteenth century AD. The remains from this period cover at least 1 ha and consist of five structures, sherds of plain and decorated earthenwares and Asian tradeware, stone artefacts and animal remains, and they may represent a settlement occupied by less elite individuals within the Dumaguete political hierarchy. The third period of occupation is post-fifteenth century (probably early historic) in date, and has yielded remains of one structure associated with earthenware sherds, fragments of tobacco pipes, metal fragments, iron slag, stone artefacts, shell, fragments of bone and teeth, and lumps of burnt clay. Further investigation of the Unto site, particularly in its regional context, is expected to provide important evidence for understanding social transformations from the late first millennium BC to the sixteenth century AD.

Craft goods in the Dumaguete economy

We are also investigating the organization and dynamics of the political economy of late prehistoric Dumaguete society. Analysis of early accounts suggests that Philippine chiefs supported themselves through the mobilization of agricultural and other tribute goods, labour services provided by commoners, payments for the services they rendered, and maritime expeditions for long-distance trade, raids and warfare. Chiefs distributed to both elite and non-elite individuals some of the local and foreign goods acquired in such expeditions, and they appear to have sponsored some part-time and full-time craft specialists such as goldsmiths, ironsmiths and other unspecified smiths, skilled carpenters and textile producers. They also had some control over food and other resources valuable for exchange and trade, such as gold ore, raw cotton, rice and beeswax. However, because the Spanish were primarily interested in trade with China and mainland Southeast Asia, there is little information in their accounts on the production and distribution of utilitarian goods within Visayan societies.

Analysis of the Dumaguete–Bacong archaeological finds continues, with a view, for example, to distinguishing between local and foreign prestige goods and inferring how they were distributed. So far, the results suggest that chiefs controlled the distribution of foreign goods, specifically glazed Asian tradewares and decorated earthenwares from the Thai state of

Ayutthia (AD 1350–1767; Fig. 1). The latter have been recovered only from the chiefly centre at Yap, as have the earliest glazed tradewares of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The glazed tradewares continued to be present at Yap in succeeding centuries, but they also appear at 12 other sites in the region between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries, which implies that they were distributed from the centre of the chiefdom at Yap. Similarly, there appears to have been limited distribution of local decorated earthenwares, metal (primarily iron) and beads, which were recovered from Yap in all periods (although beads have not been found in the fifteenth–sixteenth century occupation). These finds are associated with elite residences, and their apparently restricted regional distribution suggests that the elite used them as local prestige goods. Decorated earthenwares and iron were also recovered from the Unto site (primarily from fifteenth and post-fifteenth-century deposits), and smaller quantities of these materials were found at less than a third of the survey sites. There is evidence for the production of local prestige goods at Yap, with ironsmithing located close to elite residences. This parallels archaeological findings at other centres, as well as descriptions in early accounts of the control of this craft specialization by chiefs.

Dumaguete's relations with other chiefdoms

External political and economic relations of the Dumaguete chiefdom with other late prehistoric societies in the region is another focus of the research. Although historical accounts describe various interactions among these societies – for example, exchange of foreign and local goods, food and raw materials; elite intermarriages; feasts and rituals; raiding and warfare – that appear to have been primarily controlled or directed by chiefs, there has been little archaeological investigation of these interactions. Decorated earthenware assemblages from the Dumaguete–Bacong area and from 82 sites located on various nearby islands are being analyzed to investigate late prehistoric exchange between chiefdoms and the symbolism associated with the chiefly elites. There are several groups of decorated wares, each of which displays a high degree of stylistic similarity, and they are distributed across several islands. Previous researchers have suggested that this resulted from inter-island exchange from single production centres. Given the archaeological evidence for decorated earthenwares as local prestige items, their use in exchange between chiefdoms would not be unexpected. However, the results of preliminary technical analysis suggest that, in the case of Dumaguete, most of the decorated earthenwares appear to have been made locally, whereas a few non-local wares have been found that suggest exchange relations with Tanjay, Manila and Siquijor Island (Figs 1 and 3). Thus, late

prehistoric chiefs do not appear to have used decorated earthenwares to any great extent in the exchange of prestige goods within the Philippine Archipelago. Instead, the results of stylistic and spatial analyses suggest that the distribution among chiefdoms of similarly decorated wares relates to their role in symbolizing chiefly alliances, which would have been crucial to maintaining both access to foreign goods and political stability.

Future research directions

Thus far, the project has focused on the activities of one late prehistoric chiefdom in Dumaguete–Bacong. Many of the issues under investigation require further analyses and fieldwork. For example, more detailed analysis of the survey data is currently being undertaken to investigate changes in sociopolitical hierarchies, which will also provide the context for understanding economic changes and their implications for political dynamics. Analysis of the archaeological evidence from Magsuhot within a regional context will similarly extend our understanding of earlier societies and their transformations. At the same time, the available material remains are being examined for evidence of the role of gender in craft production and systems of prestige. Ultimately, the results of this research, in conjunction with those of other archaeological projects, should be capable of providing interpretations of pre-Hispanic Filipino societies that challenge the colonial images so deeply embedded in Western perceptions of the Philippines.

Notes

1. A possible exception is the Laguna copper-plate inscription dated to AD 900; see A. Postma, "The Laguna copper-plate inscription: a valuable Philippine document", *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 11, 160–71, 1991.
2. See K. Hutterer, "A balance of trade: the social nature of late pre-Hispanic Philippines", First Annual Hart Collection Lecture delivered in April 1985 at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb.
3. See F. L. Jocano, *The Philippines at Spanish contact* (Manila: MCS Enterprises, 1975).
4. See three PhD dissertations (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor): E. A. Bacus, *Political economy and interaction: late prehistoric polities in the central Philippine Islands*, 1995; L. Junker, *Long-distance trade and the development of socio-political complexity in Philippine chiefdoms of the first millennium to mid-second millennium AD*, 1990; and M. Nishimura, *Long-distance trade and the development of complex societies in the prehistory of the central Philippines: the Cebu central settlement case*, 1992.
5. See R. Mascunana, "The Bacong artifacts in the Silliman Anthropology Museum collection: a morphological analysis of displayed material culture", in *Artifacts from the Visayan communities: a study of extinct and extant culture*, R. V. Cadelina & J. G. Perez (eds), 1–200 (Dumaguete City: Silliman University, 1986).