

## REPORT ON THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY AND EXPLORATION IN BARANGAY NEW IBAJAY, EL NIDO, PALAWAN (FEB. 19 TO 25, 1999)

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### INTRODUCTION

The El Nido Archaeological Project is an on-going work of the National Museum of the Philippines, U.P. Archaeological Studies Program and the Southeast Asian Institute for Culture and Environment. The archaeological endeavor is generally geared towards the reconstruction of the prehistory of El Nido. The initial research, which started in May 1998, paved the way in the identification of new archaeological sites as well as the verification of sites reported by Dr. Robert Fox in his archaeological explorations in the 1970s.

Barangay New Ibajay (formerly Dewel), located northeast of the main town of El Nido, was one of the areas surveyed and explored. The scientific probes resulted in the discovery of interesting sites, placing the Barangay territory in the archaeological map. The attention was focused particularly in Ille Cave whose strategic location and favorable cave features convinced the archaeologists of its archaeological potentials. The preliminary work conducted in the cave proved to be fruitful giving way to the launching of further archaeological efforts, the last of which was a test excavation held from January 19 to February 1, 1999. The excavation yielded significant artifacts and ecofacts dating to different time periods, definitely making Ille Cave an important archaeological site.

In the vicinity of Ille Cave are towering limestone complexes which, to date, have never been the subject of any archaeological works/research. These potential archaeological sites may hold the best materials or even the key in solving various aspects of the prehistory of the area. If we are to establish the regional context of materials from Ille Cave, these unexplored caves must be the subjects of archaeological investigations.

This is a report on the recently conducted fieldwork in 5 caves in Barangay New Ibajay held from February 19 to 25, 1999. Acting as guide for the author was Mr. Danilo Libudan, a local resident of the Barangay. The objective of the research was to identify more archaeological sites in the vicinity of Ille Cave. The materials from these sites will be used for comparisons with artifacts found in Ille Cave.

### METHODOLOGY

Before the actual archaeological work, proper coordination with the local officials, both Municipal and Barangay level, was done. Permission was also asked from the manager of the birds nest concession and the *bushadors* (birds nest gatherers) of the area. It must be noted that the months of February, March, until June are the peak

season of birds nest production and gathering, thus tight security was being imposed in most of the caves.

The survey and exploration was conducted mostly by field walking and rock climbing. A local guide familiar with the area was hired to aid in the exploration. Caves with big opening and ledges accessible by freehand rock climbing were given priority in the said work. Areas which required advanced rock climbing techniques were reserved for future survey.

Identified sites were plotted on a topographic map with a scale of 1:50000 using a Silva-type compass and a circular compass. A mason's trowel, meter tape and two (2) flashlights were used in the assessment of cave surface and subsurface. Two cameras and a north arrow with a scale were used in documenting surface finds. Artifacts collected were placed inside plastic bags with their provenance written on small bagging slips, also placed in the same plastic bag. A bubble sheet was used as protective wrapper of the artifacts.

## **AREAS SURVEYED AND EXPLORED**

There are about 6 known limestone outcrops in New Ibajay. These are Ille, Makangit, Sinalakan, Istar, Nagsanib, and Kulanga cave complex. Sinalakan and Kulanga were unexplored archaeologically, and were thus given priority in the survey.

There are permanent birds nest gatherer stations or posts strategically located between these caves. The Central Station is located between Istar and Nagsanib Caves, while Station 1 can be found between Istar and Sinalakan Caves. These two stations were used as reference points in plotting the locations of caves explored.

### **Sinalakan Cave**

The cave is a limestone outcrop located at about 353°N of Ille Cave and is visible southeast of Istar Cave. Between Istar Cave and Sinalakan Cave, there is a birds' nest gatherer station designated as Station 1 for reference purposes. From Station 1 the cave is about 250 meters away. Two cave openings, small and big, were surveyed.

The small opening is a sinkhole about 2 meters in width with ledges inside and outside the mouth. It is located on the east side of the cave and is about 160°N from Station 1. It is about 20 meters in elevation and can be reached by a 15- to 20-minute trek vying through steep sharp limestone. The trail going here is not established and would require partial clearing. The ledge inside the small mouth has artifacts, mostly big pieces of earthenware sherds probably from a big jar. This ledge appeared to be disturbed.

The big mouth is located on the western portion of the cave and is the easiest way to enter the cave. It can be reached by about 20- to 30-minute walk from Station 1. The opening is like a chimney about 1.5 meters wide and about 20 meters high. Upon entering the cave, the mouth gradually widens and there is a big sloping passage to the right side which connects the big mouth to the small opening. The ledge on this passage is positive for cultural materials, mostly earthenware sherds. It is suspected

that the artifacts on this ledge came from the ledge above it where bigger sherds are visible on the surface.

### **Dumaragit Cave**

Dumaragit Cave is part of Nagsanib cave complex. It is located at about 266°N from the Central Station. It is about 500 meters from Central Station and will take around 20 to 30 minutes trek also from the same point.

The trail going to the cave follows the upstream course of the small river. There are short entries to dark passages and then the trail gently slope up to the cave entrance. The cave mouth is quite elevated. It is about 20 meters at its highest point and about 25 meters in width.

Entry into the cave requires a short descent. The cave floor is covered with moss and other small plants, mostly vines. There is water dripping from the ceiling of the cave making its floor a little muddy in some portions. No cultural material was found on the surface.

### **Kula Kula Cave**

The word *kula kula* is the local name of a small blackbird like a swiftlet which are abundant in the cave. This is a cave located in the Istar cave complex. It is about 266° N from Station 1 and about 200 meters from the same point. From the Central Station it is about 500 meters away and can be reached by about 10 minutes of walking.

The mouth of the cave is about 10 meters wide and 8 meters high. The approach to the cave mouth is covered with vegetation. The way going inside the cave is like a channel about 2 meters wide and about 10 meters long. The cave has no big chambers. No cultural material was found inside.

### **Kulanga 1**

The cave is another big limestone outcrop located at about 308° N from Ille Cave. Its distance from Ille Cave is about 4 kilometers and would require 30 to 40 minutes of walking up to the base of the cave from the same point. To reach the cave mouths would require another 20 minutes of rock climbing.

The cave openings surveyed are located on the south face of the cave complex. There are three cave entrances of various sizes connected by small passages. All caves are positive of cultural materials mostly earthenware sherds and shells. It was also observed that all cave surfaces have signs of disturbances mostly shallow diggings on the side of the walls. Vandalism was also noted on the cave walls.

One opening is about 4.5 meters wide and about 3.3 meters high. The cave floor is characterized by loose soil and guano deposit. There is a sinkhole on the left side about 8 meters from the mouth. The wall is covered with moss and vandalism was noted.

Mouth number 2 is located on the east side (facing the cave entrance) of mouth number 1. It is bigger, with dimension of about 4 meters in width and about 20 meters high. Going inside the cave requires a short descent, about 2 meters. The cave wall is also covered with moss and the soil in the cave floors, a little compact.

Mouth number 3 is the biggest opening and has the biggest chamber. It is about 6 meters wide and 25 meters high. The approach to mouth number 3 is quite hard and dangerous from the outside, so one has to pass by mouth 1. There is a short ascent about 5 meters going to the mouth coming from the inside. The chamber is about 25 meters long with many connected passages and holes. The wall is covered with moss and the soil surface is quite compact. It was observed that the artifacts found in this chamber were placed on top of one another and were positioned over small rocks.

## **Kulanga 2**

This is a smaller limestone outcrop about 30 meters west of Kulanga 1. It is about 302° N of Ille Cave. It will take around 45 minutes to reach the base of the cave. From the base up to the mouth will take a short ascent of about 20 minutes.

The cave mouth surveyed is located on the southern portion of the cave. It is about 20 meters wide and about 10 meters high. There is a short descent going inside the cave. The chamber is big and has many small passages going to the deep interior. Some portions of the cave floor and walls are covered with moss. There are few earthenware sherds and shells scattered on the surface of the cave.

## **RESULTS**

A total of five (5) caves were surveyed, three (3) of which-- Sinalakan, Kulanga 1, and Kulanga 2-- were positive for cultural materials. Nine (9) artifacts and ecofacts were collected from these sites. Seven of which were earthenware sherds, one shell and the other one is a limestone geological formation or shell. The distribution and description of cultural materials collected from the survey are presented below.

### **Sinalakan Cave**

Interesting materials were found in this cave. A total of four (4) earthenware sherds with incised design were retrieved from its surface. A turtle-shaped earthenware (without the head) specimen (IV-1999-G-1) was one of them. The material is about 14 cm in length and about 11 cm in width. The shell part of the turtle-shaped artifact has incised designs. The head portion, which is missing, appeared to be protruding and looks like a nozzle.

Another earthenware sherd (IV-1999-G-2) had an elliptical bottom part and also had incised designs. Its thickness is about 0.8 cm. Judging from the shape of its base, it is probably a shallow vessel.

The third earthenware sherd (IV-1999-G-3) is quite big and is probably a jar. It has triangular incised designs and has a dimension of about 15 cm, 12.5 cm, and 0.8 cm.

The last earthenware sherd (IV-1999-G-4) has a dimension of about 11.5 cm, 10.5 cm, and 8.5 cm in length. It has a geometric incised design.

### **Kulanga 1**

A total of three (3) materials were retrieved: two (2) earthenware sherds and one shell. Earthenware sherd number 1 (IV-1999-H-1) has a dimension of about 7 cm, 2.5 cm, and 0.4 cm. It has a coarse surface and based on its shape it can be said that it is probably a jarlet. It has no design.

Earthenware sherd number 2 (IV-1999-H-2) has no design. It has a dimension of about 8 cm, 7.5 cm, and 0.3 cm. Surface is a little black in color.

The third specimen is a shell (IV-1999-G-3) with dimensions measuring 9.5 cm, 4 cm, and 0.3 cm. The surface of the shell is encrusted with corals.

### **Kulanga 2**

A total of two (2) archaeological materials were collected from this cave: a shell (or stalactite?) and an earthenware sherd. The sherd (IV-1999-M-1) has dimensions measuring 9 cm, 4.5 cm, and 0.2 cm. It has a coarse surface and light brown in color. It has no design.

The limestone geological formation specimen (IV-1999-M-2) is quite interesting. It has dimensions measuring 11.5 cm, 2.5 cm, and 1 cm. The specimen has a pointed edge and was probably used as a tool.

## **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The vast land which made up the present Barangay New Ibajay may have been a good host for early settlers in the past. The numerous caves that can be utilized as dependable shelter, defense and ritual venue, the flat tract of land suitable for agriculture, the abundance of water, the presence of rich flora and fauna, and other favorable topographic features of the area are undoubtedly attractions for early settlers.

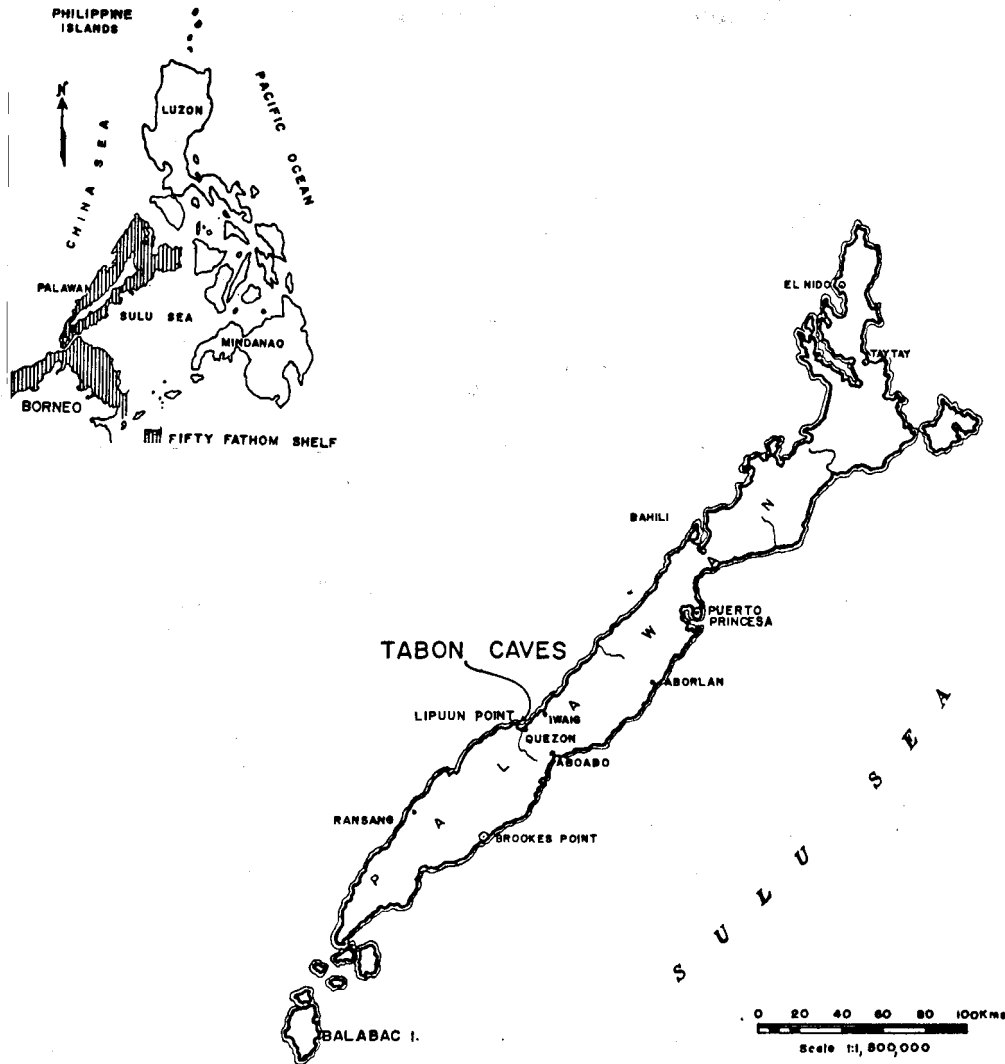
It is only recently that evidences of the cultures of the early inhabitants of the area are beginning to unfold. The archaeological excavation in Ille Cave gives us a glimpse of the material culture that the early people were using and also the kind of activities they do. And now, the recently conducted survey and exploration added a new dimension in our quest to understand its past.

The discovery of the zoomorphic earthenware artifact which, so far, appeared to be one of its kind in the area, gave us now an idea of the frame of mind of the people who made it. We are now looking at the behavior of its creator. There must

be a certain point in time that turtles may have been an important animal or a symbol that warrants someone to portray it in baked clay. Or it can be interpreted merely as an evidence of how attached early people were to their environment.

The questions of interpretation and understanding the archaeological data gathered from previous research cannot be answered at the moment. The archaeological work being undertaken in the vicinity of Barangay New Ibajay are only a small fraction of a bigger task reserved for archaeologists in the future. An extensive archaeological excavation, survey and exploration supported by an efficient site protection and conservation program should be the concern and target in the immediate future.

Although many questions are left unanswered about the prehistory of the area in the meantime, only one thing is certain: that a unique and rich culture definitely flourished in this part of Palawan.



Map of Palawan Island showing the famous Tabon Caves and other areas of archaeological interest, including El Nido situated at the northern portion of the island. [taken from: Robert B. Fox (1970) *The Tabon Caves*, page 5. Monograph of the National Museum, Manila.]