

A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE EXCAVATION OF ILLE CAVE, EL NIDO, PALAWAN

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INTRODUCTION

The archaeological potential of caves situated in Barangay Dewel (now New Ibajay) El Nido, Palawan was first mentioned in Robert Fox's published reports of the Tabon Cave excavation and exploration in Palawan in the 1970s. He cited that there were reliable reports of caves in Dewel containing cultural materials and that the area had a good prospect for future archaeological research. But since then, no archaeological probe had been conducted in the area. The caves only became popular for birds nest gathering and for stories told by people living in the vicinity about the various pot hunting/treasure hunting activities done by strangers.

It was only very recent that archaeological interest again resumed in this area. In May 1998, a joint team from the Archaeology Division of the National Museum of the Philippines and University of the Philippines Archaeological Studies Program (U.P. - ASP) in cooperation with the Ten Knots Development Incorporated, the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM) and the Southeast Asia Institute for Culture and Environment (SEAICE) who funded the research, conducted an archaeological survey of Ille Cave in New Ibajay. The preliminary work revealed an enormous diversity in artefacts and ecofacts representing different time periods. This bolstered the interest and curiosity of the archaeologists and the funding agencies that a follow up work immediately took place in July 1998. This time the cave was scientifically mapped in preparation for future archaeological undertakings.

To date, two archaeological fieldworks were done in Ille Cave. A test excavation was held from October 21 to 23, 1998. The team was composed of Dr. Wilhelm Solheim II

(ASP Visiting Professor) who acted as team leader, his wife, the late Mrs. Ludy Solheim, Jun G. Cayron and Yoshiyuki Hara, both graduate students of U.P. ASP. This fieldwork was funded by SEAICE. The objective of the team was to determine the extent of archaeological materials buried in the cave. The outcome of this test excavation determines the research design for future full-scale excavations.

The second phase was on January 19 to February 1, 1999. The excavation was conducted as part of the project of SEAICE aimed to conduct researches on culture, history and environment of El Nido, Palawan. The goal for this specific field project was to excavate the burial site which was exposed and left as it was during the test excavation in October 1998. The team was composed of Dr. Wilhelm Solheim II, the late Mrs. Ludy Solheim; Archaeology Division, National Museum personnel: Mr. Angel Bautista, Senior Researcher; Ms. Amalia dela Torre, Researcher II; Mr. Eduardo Bersamira, Scientific Illustrator; Mr. Dante Posadas, Technician I; and ASP graduate students Jun Cayron and Yoshiyuki Hara.

It must be noted that this is only a preliminary report. The identification and analysis of cultural materials are still on-going and are not included here. The result of the laboratory analysis will be the subject of an additional report in the near future.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

In 1965, Dr. Robert B. Fox headed an archaeological team that conducted explorations and excavations at the El Nido area to verify previous archaeological findings of Dr. Carl Guthe in 1922. The initial surveys conducted by Fox along the Bacquit Bay in El Nido yielded 18 cave sites including those previously explored by Dr. Guthe. Eight caves and rockshelters were excavated by Fox and these were the following: Leta-leta Cave, Ibugdul Cave, Paredes Grottos, Malapacao Cave and Rockshelter, Panasil Cave, and Fernandez Cave. The cultural assemblages found from these caves and rockshelters range from the Early Neolithic period to the 17th-18th centuries A.D. (Fox 1970).

In 1990, archaeological surveys were conducted during the El Nido-Taytay Road project. In these surveys, a habitation site was found in Barangay Bebeledan, in the municipality

of El Nido, with tradeware ceramics attributed to the Ming Dynasty Period (SEAICE 1998).

SITE DESCRIPTION

The Palawan Area is located in the westernmost portion of the Republic of the Philippines. The island of Palawan is located between 8° 30' and 12° 45' North latitude and 117° 30' to 121° 45' East longitude. The elongated island of Palawan that follows a Northeast- Southwest axis separates the Sulu Sea from the South China Sea. El Nido, as a municipality, lies between 11° 00' to 11° 15' North Latitude and 119° 15' to 119° 29' East in Longitude. It is approximately 235 kilometers from Puerto Princesa, the capital of the province of Palawan.

It belongs to the Western Pacific Monsoon Climate Zone. The dry season (December to May in the main Palawan Island and January to July in the Calamian Group) and the rainy season (June to November in the main Palawan Island and August to December in the Calamian Group) are distinctly observable. The Northern parts of the main Palawan Island and the Calamian group are composed of uplifted basement chert and limestone. The Bacuit Formation, which is exposed at the vicinity of El Nido, is dated from the Middle Permian age (250 million years ago) by studies on fossils found in some chert samples (Metal Mining Agency of Japan/Japan International Cooperation Agency, 1989).

Ille cave is located in Barangay New Ibajay El Nido, Palawan. The Global Positioning System (GPS) reading is 11° 11' 46" N and 119° 30' 19" E. The Barangay is about 15 kilometers northeast of the municipality of El Nido and can be reached by a 45 minute jeep ride from the main town. The cave site can be reached by 20-30 minute walk from the main highway, which is the jump-off point. During the rainy season, access is a little bit difficult because the carabao trail is quite muddy and slippery. The approach to the cave itself requires traversing through rice paddies and small creeks. However, during the dry season, the site can be reached easily. There is a small hut near the cave which is used as a resting place by farmers and also as the excavation field station.

The topography of the area is characterized by rolling hills and flat lands surrounded by rivers, creeks and streams. The sea can be accessed by about 30-40 minute walk from the Barangay proper. A big percentage of the land is being utilized for agricultural purposes: planting rice and cashew nuts in particular. Animal domestication, birds' nest gathering and fishing are other sources of income of the people. A large number of the population in New Ibajay are migrants from Aklan province in Panay Island.

Ille cave is part of a massive karst formation in El Nido Palawan. It is about 100 meters high and an overhang which extends to about 10 meters from the mouth of the cave. The surrounding and the top of the cave are fully covered by vegetation mostly secondary growth trees. The cave has two wide mouths: one on the northern wall, and one on the southern wall. The area around the southern wall was chosen as the excavation area. It has two wide entrances extending to about 4 and 6 meters respectively, but there are other openings inside the cave. The cave floor is generally dry but there are areas inside which are wet due to water dripping from the ceiling.

The walls of the cave were vandalized. Plastic wrappers and tin foil cans scattered inside and outside the cave. According to Mr. Danilo Libudan, our informant, the cave is a favourite spot for picnics and excursions during summer. The cave is also used as a resting place by farmers and as shelter for carabao which explains the presence of carabao dung all over the area. During the rainy season water continues to drip from the overhang of the cave mouth which can be a good source of water for washing and even drinking. About 75 meters from the cave, there is a small creek used for irrigation. A small quantity of guano deposit was also observed inside the cave.

FIRST PHASE

The cave surface survey had already been conducted during the El Nido archaeological assessment project by Museum Researchers I Armand Salvador B. Mijares and Sheldon Clyde Jago-on; and ASP volunteer Jun G. Cayron in July 1998. The mapping and the establishing of the Datum Point (DP) were accomplished during this fieldwork. The DP was set in a small limestone rock and is 32.5 cm from the surface.

Methodology

Pre excavation

The site was properly documented before the actual excavation of Test Pit 1 began. Photographs were taken before clearing the area. A 2-meter tape was used as scale in taking the pictures.

The square was set up beside the wall of the cave. Prof. Solheim suspects that the spot may be a good workshop area. A 1.87 x 1 meter square was established. It was enclosed by yellow green nylon cord tied on aluminum pegs as the four corners of the excavation square. A Local Datum Point (LDP) was located on the southwest corner of the square. The LDP was the reference point for all measurements undertaken in the excavation square. The LDP is 22 cms. above the Datum Point (DP).

The surface condition of the site was carefully observed and noted before any clearing took place. Using mason trowels, bolo, folding shovel and root cutter, the square was then cleared of plastic wrappers, boulders and gravel size stones, and other organic debris such as dry leaves and branches. A dumping and dry sieving area was then chosen at about 7-10 meters south of the excavation pit.

Pit excavation

Excavation of the test pit started by measuring the four corners and the center of the excavation square to determine its surface level. The Northeast corner of the square was 19 cms from LDP and was the deepest point. The square was then leveled first up to 20 cms before proceeding to a deeper level. The team decided that the excavation should proceed by using an arbitrary spit level system of ten (10) cms per spit.

For the whole course of the excavation, the team applied the scraping method of digging to facilitate control in the archaeological work. Mason trowels, paintbrush of different sizes, root cutter, plastic dustpan and scoop, folding shovel, galvanize pail and broomstick were used in the excavation. However, when the team unearthed a human skeleton, digging technique shifted to purely brush works.

Soil taken from the pit were sieved and dumped per layer. A 1/8 mm screen was used for this purpose. Soil samples and sieved materials from each layer were collected for laboratory analysis.

All cultural materials unearthed from the square were placed on a plastic bag bearing the name of the site, square number, quadrant, the date, layer number, depth, coordinates and the name of the collector/s. The location of significant artefacts were carefully measured and then plotted on a grid paper.

Excavation stopped when the whole human skeletal remain of a juvenile at a depth of about 55 cms was fully exposed including a small portion of another human skeleton located beneath the first one. An additional 10 cms deep was excavated below the feet of the skeletal remain to check the extent of the burial.

Post excavation

After the excavation, the square was backfilled. The skeleton was covered first with plastic and then banana leaves before covering it with soil. A Philippine five-peso coin was placed at the bottom of the pit to serve as a date marker. Included with the coin was a piece of paper in a small plastic bag bearing the name of the site, the date it was excavated and the names of the team members. The site was then photographed.

Results

A 1.87 x 1 meter test pit was successfully excavated. Only one stratigraphic layer which reaches a depth of 70 cms was exposed. The layer is characterized by sandy loose soil mixed with gravel- size stones. Soil color is light brown.

A total of 447 artefacts and ecofacts were retrieved from the excavation. A big percentage are plain earthenware sherds, followed by bone fragments, shells, teeth, stoneware and porcelain sherds, rock samples, seeds and beads. The proportion of artefacts excavated is presented in [Table 1](#).

An interesting find was a polished stone adze found at a depth of 42 cm. An impressive variety of earthenware sherds with C- stamped, paddled, impressed and incised designs mostly triangles and dots, were also part of the collection. There were also stoneware sherds, the design and color of which appeared similar to those stonewares found in an underwater excavation in Lena Shoal, Busuanga, Palawan by the National Museum. A shell pendant similar to that found in Duyong Cave in Lipuun Point, Palawan was also unearthed. A whole human skeletal remain of what appeared to be a juvenile was clearly exposed at a depth of about 55 cm from LDP. The skeleton was about 70 cm long.

SECOND PHASE

Methodology

Pre-excavation

The site was properly documented before the actual excavation began. Photographs were taken before clearing the area to take note of site conditions. After setting up the grid of 1x1 meter square by using a yellow nylon cord tied to aluminum pegs, Test Pit 1 was located (see above). It corresponds to the whole N3W12 and South Quadrant of N4W12.

An LDP was located on the southwest corner of N3W12. The LDP is 5 cm above the DP.

Pit-excavation

Since N3W12 and N4W12 had already been excavated at the depth of around 50 cm where a juvenile burial and an adult burial were found during the first phase in October 1998, the first thing that the team did was just to quickly re-excavate the skeletons and expose them. The team used the same excavation techniques used during the first phase.

Shells	41 (20 Univalve, 21 Bivalve)
Bones	42
Earthenware sherds	250 (36 with design, 214 plain)
Porcelain sherds	
Stoneware sherds	
Teeth	
Seeds	
Beads	11 (3 glass, 8 shells)
Stone tools	2
Rock samples	
Total	447

Table 1 Proportions of Artefacts Excavated From Test Pit 1.

Adjoining squares of N3W12 were opened: N2W12, N3W13, and N2W13. A new juvenile burial was found at the depth of 28 cms in N2W12. Since another adult burial was found at the depth of 11-16 cm in N3W13 and N2W13, the team opened the adjoining squares to expose the whole southeast quadrant of N2W14, northeast quadrant of N1W14, and northwest quadrant of N1W13. And the team opened N3W3 for comparative observations. The team opened a total of 6 squares and 3 quadrants. The technique of excavating by arbitrary spit level of 10 cm per spit was used. Soil samples from features were subjected to flotation.

All human burials were carefully measured, photographed and plotted, before three of them were carefully removed by parts and wrapped in aluminum foils. They were placed in plastic bags bearing the name of the square number, burial number and part of the skeleton.

All the artefacts, ecofacts, soil samples and three of the human burials were brought to Manila for accessioning and further analysis. The excavation was stopped at the depth of 110 cms from DP at the southeastern and part of the northeastern quadrant of N4W12, where some boulders made work difficult. In square of N3W3, the excavation was stopped at the depth of 60 cm from DP where part of another probable burial was exposed.

Post-excavation

The same post-excavation techniques in phase one was used.

Results

There were four burials exposed; burial #1 (juvenile) was found in N3W12; burial 2 (adult) in N2W12, N3W12 and N4W12; burial #3 (adult) in N2W13, N3W13, and N2W14; burial #4 (juvenile) in N2W12. All the burials were in extended position in the direction toward the south. Burials #s 1, 2, and 4 were taken out for further analysis.

Burial #1 was exposed at the depth of 38 cms from DP. The skull and tibia fibula of burial #2 was exposed at 28–42 cms. The upper part of this burial was inclined because of a slanting slab of rock below it. Burial #1 was found on top of the female adult burial. The skeletons of the trunk and mandible of burial #2 were almost missing. A corroded metal implement with a pointed tip, which is 20 cms long and 2.5 cms wide was found below the lower ribs on the right side.

Burial #3 was exposed at the depth of 11-16 cms from DP. There was a rock exposed on the central part of the skeleton, so femurs and innominate bones were broken into fragments, or missing. The upper left side of the skeleton and the skull were also almost missing. Since this is incomplete to be analyzed, and is friable, the team decided to leave

it behind. A shell pendant with a hole was found on the right side (the same shell pendant mentioned above).

Burial #4 was exposed at the depth of 28 cms from DP, the skull, the ribs and the innominate bone were partly crushed into fragments or missing.

Other materials collected were similar to those retrieved during the first phase. This include earthenware sherds (decorated and plain), stoneware sherds, porcelain sherds, stone tools, animal bones, glass beads, shell beads, copper or gold beads, a jade ornament, metal fragments, seeds and teeth.

SOIL STRATIGRAPHY

There were two soil layers observed (dela Torre 1999). Layer 1 is divided into two:

Layer 1-A is silty clay (80% or more silt compare to clay) with humus soil. It is compact and hard with tree and plant roots. Soil color is 10 YR-4/2 –grayish yellow brown. The average thickness is 9-15 cms. Few artefacts were present such as shells, earthenware sherds, bones and others.

Layer 1-B is also silt clay. Compared to Layer 1-A, this is loose or friable maybe due to the dense concentration of artefacts like shells, earthenware sherds, seeds, beads, the burial pits, etc. Soil color is 10 YR-3/3 – dark brown. Average thickness is 20 –80 cms. Presence of tree roots and rodents' burrows caused the natural disturbance of the soil matrix.

Layer 2 is silty clay with 40% or more clay than silt. Tree roots still penetrate this layer. Soil color is 10 YR-2/2 – brownish black.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

After retrieving burial #2, the team continued to dig down in N3W12 and N4W12, although tree roots and boulders forced the team to work in a limited space. Until around

95 cms. depth from DP, there was no remarkable change observed in the cultural layer. In a depth of 95-110 cms from DP, however, a different cultural layer was observed from the one above. The size of shells became larger and no sherds were found, but animal bones, shell beads, and stone flakes were still unearthed. Since these findings were limited only in southeastern and part of the northeastern quadrant of N4W12, boulders or rocks underneath the burials should be retrieved carefully to see what type of materials can be observed in the next excavation.

At this time it is still premature to make a conclusion or interpretation of the outcome of the excavation based on the fact that the materials excavated were still being analyzed by experts. Neither an assessment of the whole site can be made since what was conducted was merely a test excavation and that the number of the artefacts/ecofacts collected were not statistically representative of the whole cave site. It is therefore recommended that a full scale archaeological excavation be conducted in Ille cave.

The present site condition also disclosed the uncontrolled access by both human and animals to the site, posing a great threat to the preservation of the archaeological resource. Although there are existing protections sanctioned by law, other protective strategies are recommended to insure that this non-renewable cultural resource will benefit future researchers and the public in general. It would be better if some form of physical buffer zone can be constructed to surround the site to protect it from both human and animal disturbances and destruction.

Lastly, the National Museum of the Philippines in cooperation with other non-governmental organization working in the area, should spearhead a public information drive on the value of the said site. It must be noted that the destruction of many archaeological and historical sites were often caused by lack of awareness among the local community. The target of the information drive should be the people living near the site.

The preliminary work has contributed an enormous amount of information and has opened many questions pertaining to the prehistory, not only of El Nido and the rest of the Palawan island, but of the whole Philippines and its neighboring countries. According to Prof. Solheim (pers. Com.), he expressed that the data from Ille cave can change the course not only of Philippine prehistory and adjacent countries, but even the

whole world. Therefore the archaeological significance of Ille cave cannot be ignored. Such significant site should be the focus of prospective archaeological probe consistent with a cultural resource preservation and public education.

REFERENCE

Fox, Robert

1970 *The Tabon Caves*. Monograph of the National Museum, No. 1. Manila: National Museum of the Philippines.