

# The Archaeology and Meaning of the Boat-shaped Stone Markers in Vuhus Island, Batanes Province, Northern Philippines

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## ***Abstract***

*The islands of Batanes have been the subject of a number of archaeological studies that have contributed to our present understanding of the early history of the area. One of the most important discovery that came out of the research are the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus Island. This paper provides a detailed summary of the results of the surveys and excavations conducted by the National Museum of the Philippines on these archaeological features. It further explores their possible symbolic significance to the early inhabitants of Vuhus by relating it to the widely shared symbolic association of boats and death in the Philippines and rest of Island Southeast Asia. This paper illustrates that the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus present a cosmological narrative, typical of many Austronesian-speaking societies within the region, that involves a maritime journey of a deceased person's soul to the land of the dead by boat. It also argues for the possibility that these archaeological features are markers of social status in the precolonial society of the Ivatans.*

**Keywords:** boat symbolism, burial practices, cosmology, Batanes

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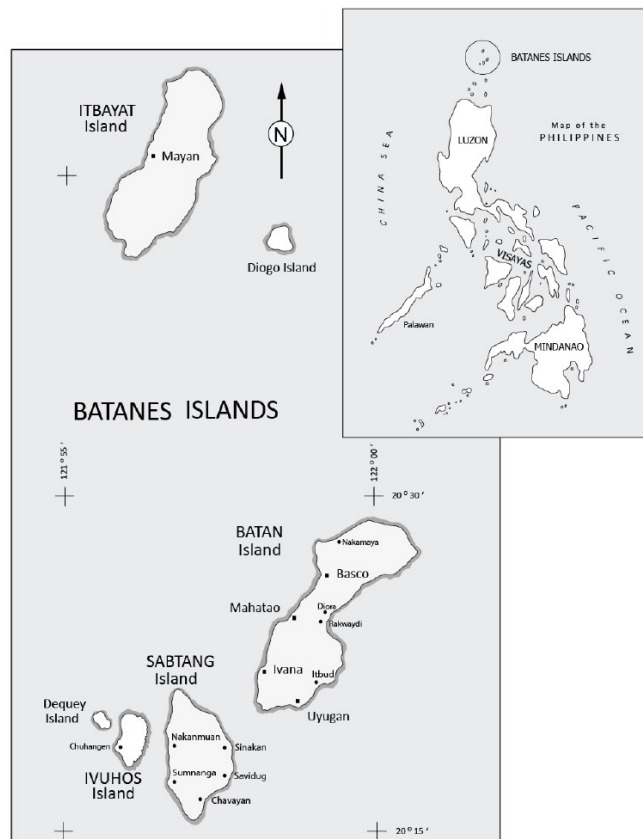
## Introduction

For several decades, the Batanes islands in the northernmost part of the Philippine archipelago (Figure 1) have been the subject of a number of archaeological research that greatly contributed to our present understanding of the early history and culture of the Ivatans.<sup>1</sup> One of the most important discoveries that came out of these research projects is the so-called boat-shaped stone markers that have been found in the island of Vuhus. Initially reported by archaeologists from the National Museum of the Philippines (hereafter as the National Museum) in 1994 (Dizon and Santiago 1994), these peculiar archaeological features have been the subject of intense archaeological surveys and excavations in 1995 and 1996 (see Dizon 1995; Dizon et al. 1995-1997). The excavation exposed human skeletal remains directly below the center of the boat-shaped stone markers, indicating their possible function as grave or burial markers. Similar archaeological features have since been found and documented in other islands of the Batanes archipelago, such as Sabtang (Dizon et al. 1995-1997), Batan (Barretto et al. 1998-2003; Dizon and Barretto 1995-1997; Dizon and Cayron 1998-2003), and Itbayat (Dizon et al. 2008; Mijares and Jago-on 2001). However, those in Vuhus remain the most remarkable due to their good state of preservation.

The association of boats and human burials is hardly new in Philippine and Southeast Asian archaeology. In the 1970s, the National Museum presented the discovery of a secondary burial jar in the Manunggul Cave of Palawan that showed a figure of two persons on board a small boat as they journeyed to the afterlife (Fox 1970). Now considered as national treasure by the Philippine government, this iconic burial jar was dated to 890–710 BC or the late Neolithic Period. In other parts of the Philippines, prehistoric wooden coffins in the shape of a boat have been found in caves, such as those in Palawan (Evangelista 1978), Baton Island in Masbate (Reyes 2010), and Bohol (Tenazas 1966). Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, such as in the Niah Cave complex in Sarawak, several dug-out canoes associated with scattered human bones were discovered by the Harrisons during the 1950s (Harrison 1964). Recent analysis of the canoes and other associated materials from the site showed a date range of 2300 BP–10th century AD (Szabo et al. 2008). In northern Vietnam, a wooden boat containing human remains wrapped in ramie textiles was unearthed in a waterlogged deposit. The site falls into the Dong Son phase of late

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<sup>1</sup> Ivatan refers to the indigenous inhabitants of Batanes; it is derived from the word Vatan (Batan in official maps), the name of the main island of Batanes.



**Figure 1.** Map of Batanes showing the islands mentioned in this article (after Dizon and Santiago 1994).

Vietnamese prehistory, with the burial event dated to 20 or 30 BC (Bellwood et al. 2007). The boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhos, as well as those in other areas of Batanes, demonstrate a unique practice wherein graves are marked with carefully arranged stones in shape of a boat. This has no parallel in the region (cf. Paz 2012), despite the common association of boats and human burials in the Philippines and the rest of Southeast Asia.

The cultural significance of these boat-shaped stone markers has been a source of perplexity amongst those who have come to know their existence. Archaeologists from the National Museum of the Philippines who investigated these boat-shaped stone markers viewed it as the first material evidence of a truly "baranganic society" (Dizon and Santiago 1994; Dizon and Mijares 1999).<sup>2</sup> The philosophy professor and archaeology enthusiast Rafael Dy-Liacco (2013) explored their possible

<sup>2</sup> *Barangay* (or *balangay*) is a Visayan term that refers to a boat and to a sociopolitical unit in the precolonial Philippines (Pattane 1977; Scott 1994).

astronomical and mythological significance, along with other boat-shaped burials in the Philippines. He suggested that the boat-shaped stone markers are generally oriented towards the direction of the Milky Way. This forms part of a worldwide mythic motif that points to the Milky Way as the celestial path travelled by souls to their final destination. In addition, the eminent Ivatan historian and folklorist Florentino Hornedo surmised in many of his public lectures that these archaeological features are possibly grave markers of people who died at sea; they were buried with such material and symbolic elaboration so as to commemorate the particular circumstances of their death, just as they are memorialized in many Ivatan indigenous songs (Hornedo 1997), which he studied for several decades.

This paper aims to synthesize all the available archaeological information on the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus Island, and to explore an alternative interpretation from what has been given so far. It consists of three major parts: (1) a comprehensive background on Vuhus, derived from both archaeological and historical sources, to understand the cultural context of the boat-shaped stone markers; (2) a detailed description of these archaeological features—their location and distribution, form and composition, burial content, and temporal context, based on published (e.g., Dizon and Santiago 1994; Dizon et al. 1995-1997; Dizon and Mijares 1999) and unpublished (e.g., Bolunia 1995; Dizon 1995; Mijares 1995) reports of the National Museum; and (3) a discussion of its social and cultural significance in relation to the widely shared cosmological narrative, as well as symbolic association of boats and human burials amongst the so-called Austronesian-speaking societies in Island Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup>

## **Vuhus Island**

Vuhus is one of the ten small islands that comprise the province of Batanes in the northernmost part of the Philippines. Situated between the islands of Adequey and Sabtang (see Figure 1), it is the fourth largest island in Batanes, with a total land area of six square kilometres (6 km<sup>2</sup>).

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<sup>3</sup> The relevance of the comparative studies of Austronesian societies in exploring the meaning of the boat-shaped stone markers in Batanes has long been pointed out, albeit in passing, by others who were writing on boat symbolism in the Philippines and Island Southeast Asia (Ballard et al. 2003; Reyes 2010; Salazar 2006; Szabo et al. 2008); this paper pursues this view in a more detailed manner to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the cultural significance of the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus.

Vuhus is topographically flat with steep land formation on the west coast, and sandy beaches on the east coast (Bautista 1995). As a raised submarine volcano formed during the Miocene and Pliocene age (2.8 million years ago) (Yang et al. 1996), the entire island is capped by recrystallized limestone, and covered at various places with thin layer of loamy, clayish, and sandy soil (de Ocampo 1995). Presently, Vuhus consists of open grassland, thickets, and second-growth forest due in part to human activities during the past as well as at present (Valerio 1995-1997). The island's local name is derived from a tree called *vuhus* that used to grow abundantly in the area (Hornedo, pers. comm); *Ivuhus*, the island's name in official maps, refers originally and more appropriately to the people who once lived there.<sup>4</sup>

There is no clear information on when Vuhus was first settled by humans in the past. Several fragments of red-slipped potteries have been excavated on the floor of a large cave located in the northwest corner of the island (Fore-Arc Project 2002); red-slipped pottery is generally associated with the initial human settlement of Batanes 3000 years ago (Bellwood et al. 2013), but red-slipping as a pottery technology in this part of the world continued up to ethnographic times (Bellwood et al. 2013; Scheans 1977), making such findings unhelpful in dating the earliest human presence in Vuhus. Traces of an ancient settlement was also found on one side of a rocky promontory in the southwestern corner of the island (Dizon and Santiago 1994). Known among the locals of Sabtang as the *idiang*<sup>5</sup> of Chuhan<sup>6</sup>, the settlement consists of several terraced units surrounded by low-packed stone walls (Dizon et al. 1995-1997) that

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<sup>4</sup> The word *Ivuhus* is formed by the pre-fix *i* and the rootword *vuhus*. As in many parts of the Philippines, the prefix *i* in the Ivatan language denotes a person's place of origin. Thus, *Ivuhus* means a person who comes from or who lives in Vuhus. Similar can be said of *Ivana*, the name of my hometown in Batan Island, which consists of the pre-fix "*i*" and the rootword "*vana*". The meaning of *vana* is everybody's guess for now although the Ivatan historian Florentino Hornedo (pers. comm.) suspects that it is a derivative of the word *vanad* which means open and accessible area.

<sup>5</sup> According to Ivatan oral tradition, *idiang* (from the root word *idi*, "settlement"; cognate of the Ilocano *ilihan*) is an elevated place where the early inhabitants of Batanes temporarily took refuge in times of enemy attack (Hornedo 1976:14). Archaeological studies conducted on some of the *idiangs* in Batanes showed traces of houses and dense concentration of domestic refuse, suggesting that they also served as permanent settlement in the past (Dizon and Satiago 1994; see Lacsina 2009 for a comprehensive summary of the results of archaeological surveys conducted by the National Museum on *idiang* sites in Batanes).

<sup>6</sup> Chuhan<sup>6</sup> is wrongly spelled in the National Museum reports (e.g., Dizon and Santiago 1994; Dizon 1995; Dizon et al. 1995-1997) as *Chuhangin*. In this paper, Chuhan<sup>6</sup> is used as it is a closer approximation of how it is pronounced by the locals.

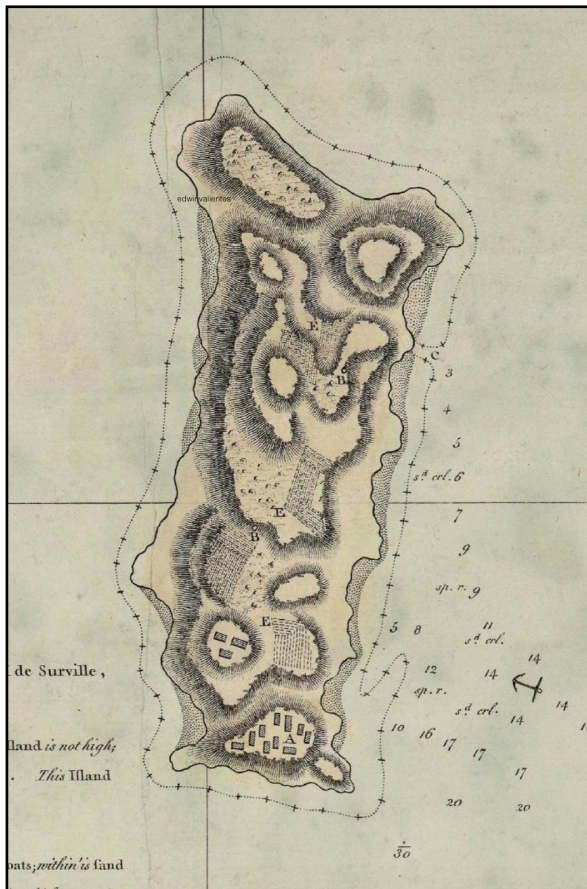
probably served as house enclosures. Surface surveys conducted within the settlement site yielded a number of stone tools, which includes hammerstones, pitted pebbles, and net sinkers (Mijares 1998-2003), wound glass beads<sup>7</sup>, plain earthenware sherds, and an unburnished whole pot (Mijares 1995). Most of these archaeological materials, however, are associated with the proto-historic period in Batanes (1200 AD) (Bellwood and Dizon 2013).

In 1687, the English navigator and buccaneer Capt. William Dampier anchored in Vuhus, and stayed there for almost two months (Dampier 1699). While in the island, he was particularly struck by the natives' unusual penchant for drinking sugarcane wine that he named the island Bashee—from the word *basi*, the term he heard among the locals for sugarcane wine. Dampier also made detailed observation on the daily life of the islands' inhabitants. He noted that they lived by fishing and planting crops, such as yam, plantain, sweet potato, and pineapples. Their houses were very small, about seven or eight-foot-high, and mainly consisted of light materials such as wood and thatched cogon. They also placed high value on gold and other metals which they acquired through trading. The only "town" in the island was located on a high, steep, and craggy rock formation overlooking the sea (recalling directly the archaeologically documented settlement in Chuhangetan). Dampier was particularly impressed with their boats, which were made of narrow planks fastened by wooden dowels; the largest of these boats could carry at least 30 to 40 people with 12 to 14 oars on both sides. He also perceived some sense of social order among the inhabitants, after witnessing a public ceremony, where a young man was buried alive for theft.

In 1769, the French merchant and councilor of the then Supreme Council of Pondicherry, the capital of French India at that time, Cmdr. M. de Surville anchored in Vuhus and drew a detailed map of the island, including Adequey and the western coast of Sabtang. The map (Figure 2), which was published in London in 1787, shows the existence of a large settlement (marked "A" in the map) on the southernmost of the island, which de Surville described as "situated on a high craggy hill, highest on the island Bashee." The location and description of the settlement point directly to the settlement site documented by archaeologists in the Chuhangetan area (Dizon et al. 1995-1997), and the town that Dampier saw in Vuhus almost a century earlier. The map is also historically informative

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<sup>7</sup> These beads are typical of 13th century Chinese glass beads (Francis 2002; Valientes 2006).



**Figure 2.** The Surville Map of Vuhus (from de Surville 1787)

because it shows the places (marked "B" in the map) where the locals obtained fresh water, as well as the areas (marked "E" in the map) where they grew their crops (e.g., yams, plantain, and sugarcane). Adequey, the small island to the west of Vuhus, which was named by Dampier in 1687 as Goat Island due to the numerous goats he saw there, and described in a recent archaeological survey to be generally barren without any traces of human habitation (Mijares 1995-1997), was shown to have been used by the inhabitants of Vuhus to grow sugarcane, likely for the production of the ubiquitous *basi*.

In 1791, eight years after Batanes became officially part of the Spanish colonial dominion<sup>8</sup>, the Spanish authorities ordered all the inhabitants of Vuhus and Sabtang to abandon their houses and transfer to Batan Island as exiles (Gonzales 1966; Madrigal-Llorente 1983). This was mainly triggered by the uprising of Aman Dangat—the leader of Malakdang in Sabtang Island, against certain policies of the Spanish colonial

<sup>8</sup> Batanes was formally incorporated into the Spanish colonial territory on June 26, 1783 in a public ceremony held in Basco; the event was attended by several leaders of Vasay (old name of Basco town) (Gonzales 1966; Madrigal-Llorente 1983).

administration that undermined the power and privileges of native leaders like him (Gonzales 1966). The inhabitants of Vuhus resettled, along with the people who lived in the western side of Sabtang, in what is now San Vicente in the town of Ivana; while others resettled in what was then the sitio of San Felix located south of the church building constructed by the Spanish missionaries in the early 18th century (Hornedo 1976). When the Spanish authorities finally allowed the exiles to return permanently to their respective natal villages in 1841, they did not go back to their home island; instead, they integrated themselves with the original settlers of Sabtang (Madrigal-Llorente 1983), possibly upon the order of the Dominicans for the practical interest of their missionary work. It is also possible that some opted to stay in Ivana for good.

Today, the island of Vuhus is largely uninhabited, and serves mainly as a communal pastureland (*payaman*) of the people of Sabtang. Some areas have been informally designated as cogon grass reserves (*panyavutan*) for the maintenance of the cogon-roofed houses in Nakanmuan, a *barangay* at the western side of Sabtang. The Nakanmuan residents now act as the main caretaker of Vuhus island.

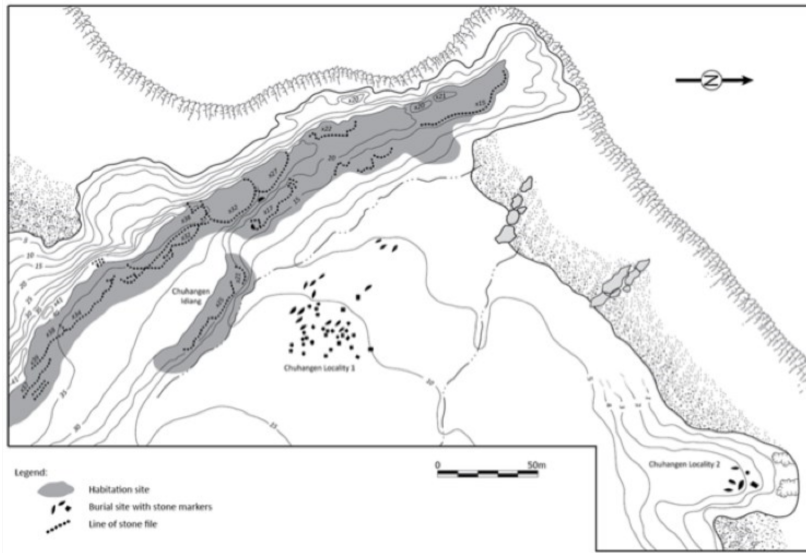
### **The Boat-shaped Stone Markers in Vuhus**

The boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus are all found in the western coast of the island (see Dizon and Santiago 1994; Dizon et al. 1995-1997), particularly on a coastal plain that stretches northward from the foot of the Chuhangen Idiang, or the settlement described by Dampier in 1687. At least nineteen (19) boat-shaped stone markers have been archaeologically identified in this area (Figure 3). Fifteen of these are located on the sloping plain immediately below the Chuhangen Idiang (labelled by the National Museum as Chuhangen Locality 1, Figure 4), and four on top of a small rocky promontory (labelled by the National Museum as Chuhangen Locality 2, Figure 5) located approximately 200 metres northwest of Chuhangen Locality 1.<sup>9</sup> More boat-shaped stone markers have been noted by the National Museum further north of the Chuhangen area, such as in Mayahaw and Dimas; however, these are yet

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<sup>9</sup> The archaeological survey of the National Museum also revealed the presence of several squarish and circular stone mound within the Chuhangen area. Although they tend to be more concentrated in the inland part of the site where most of the boat-shaped stone markers are found, their distribution in relation to the individual boat-shaped stone markers has no discernable pattern (see Figure 4). Excavations conducted on one of the squarish stone features did not show traces of human burials or any buried objects (Mijares 1995).

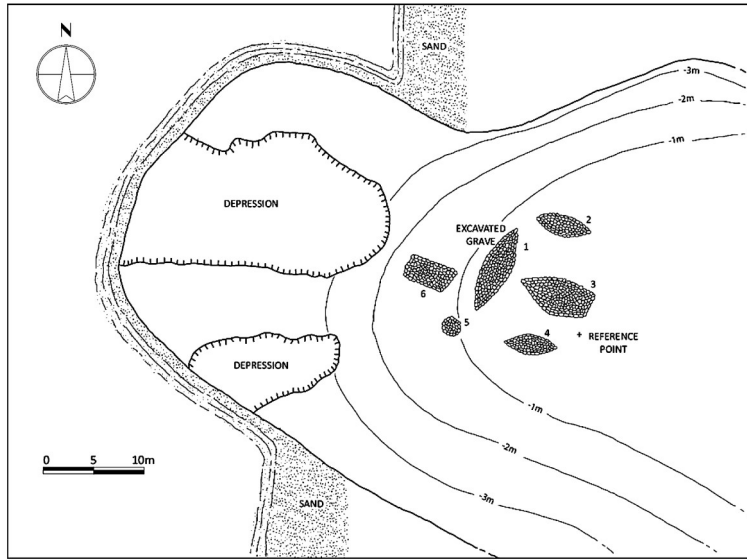




**Figure 3.** Map of the Chuhangen area showing the settlement and the two clusters (Locality 1 and 2) of boat-shaped stone markers (redrawn from Dizon et al. 1995-1997)



**Figure 4.** Map of Chuhangen Locality 1 (redrawn from Dizon et al. 1995-1997). Other markers are as shown here are of different shapes.



**Figure 5.** Map of the Chuhangen Locality 2  
(redrawn from Dizon et al. 1995-1997)

to be subjected to proper archaeological inventory and documentation (Dizon et al. 1995-1997). So far, Vuhus has the largest recorded concentration of boat-shaped stone markers in a single site in the entirety of Batanes.

Detailed surface documentation produced by the National Museum on some of the boat-shaped stone markers (see Bolunia 1995; Dizon et al. 1995-1997; Mijares 1995) show that these are mainly made of limestone cobbles, the sides of which are marked by round and rectangular-shaped limestone cobbles, set mostly in upright position, and partially embedded on the ground. The main body or interior parts are covered with at least one layer of round, and sometimes highly irregular-shaped limestones pieces that are carefully laid and fitted flat on the ground. A few scatters of highly fired pottery sherds were observed on the surface of some of the boat-shaped stone markers—mostly interspersed with the stones (Dizon 1998). However, it remains unclear whether the arrangement was intentional as part of the burial ritual, or caused by other human activities that had nothing to do with the burial function of the boat-shaped features. One boat-shaped stone marker (Boat Marker 10 at Chuhangen Locality 1), however, is notable for its display of a medium-size "brain coral stone", a piece of univalve shell, and a complete footed earthenware bowl set upside down on the surface (Dizon et al. 1995-1997). The earthenware bowl resembles the general shape of those that were archaeologically excavated in proto-historic sites of Batanes (Bellwood et

al. 2013), and the earthen bowls (*vahanga*) that were produced and used by the Ivatans until the 1970s.

The boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus also show variation in terms of its size or overall dimension. For instance, one of the two excavated boat-shaped stone markers (labelled as Boat Marker 1) at Locality 1 was measured 2.3 metres long and 0.90 metres wide (Bolunia 1995), while the other (labelled Boat Marker 10) was measured 4.8 metres long and 1.7 metres wide (Dizon et al. 1995-1997). Boat Marker 1 is the smallest boat-shaped stone marker at Chuhangen Locality 1, while Boat Marker 10 is typical of the larger boat-shaped stone markers in the site (Bolunia 1995; Mijares 1995; Dizon et al. 1995-1997). The largest recorded boat-shaped stone marker in the Chuhangen area (and in the entire Batanes) is Boat Marker 1 at Locality 2, which measured 8 metres long and 3 metres wide (Dizon et al. 1995-1997). Boat Marker 1 is also deemed peculiar because unlike most of the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus, it is composed of almost half a metre of piled stones, forming a boat-shaped mound (Figure 6). If the results of the excavations conducted on two of the boat-shaped stone markers at Locality 1 can be generalized to the whole site, the smaller boat-shaped stone markers contain burials of young individuals and the larger ones with burials of adult individuals (Dizon et al. 1995-1997).

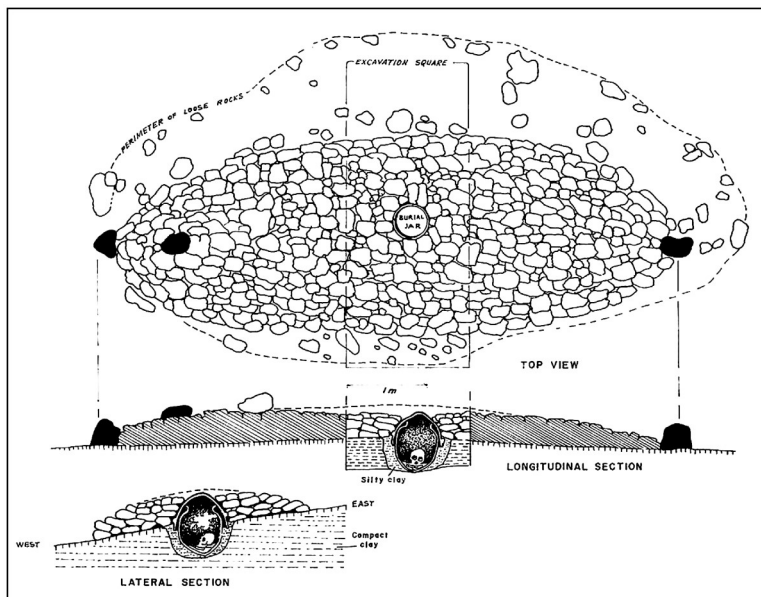
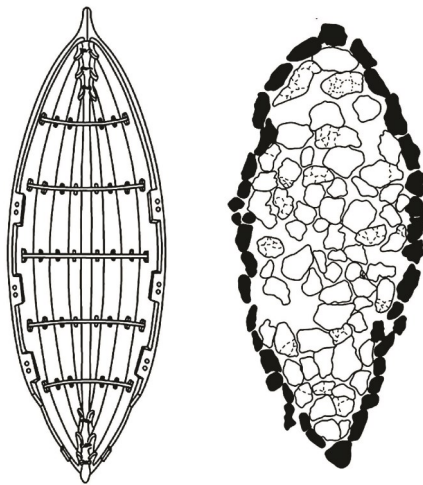


Figure 6. Vertical and horizontal profile of Boat Marker 1 at Chuhangen Locality 2 (from Dizon et al. 1995-1997)

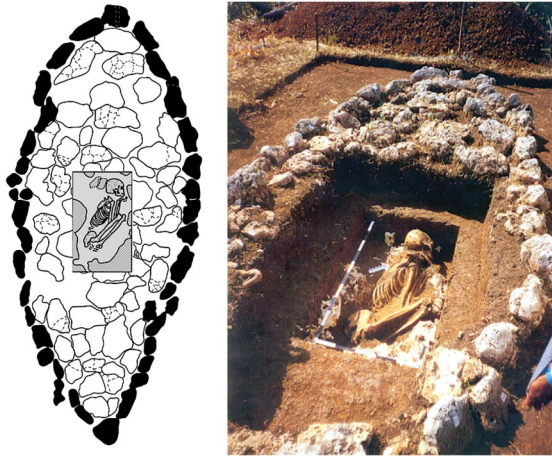
These archaeological features are described as boat-shaped due to its clear similarities with the small traditional fishing boats (*tataya*) of the present inhabitants of Batanes (Dizon and Santiago 1994). Both are elongated in shape with the two opposite ends pointed and slightly raised (see Gabilo 1995, Yamada 1967) (Figure 7). In the case of the boat-shaped stone markers, the two ends are marked by particularly larger stones to represent perhaps the prow and stern of a real boat. There has been a general impression<sup>10</sup>, however, that one of these "end stones" is significantly taller than the other to mark the front area or prow of the boat, but this is not always clear in the archaeological record (Dizon et al. 1995-1997). In fact, even the traditional fishing boats of the present Ivatans, the height of the two opposites ends are not significantly different (Gabilo 1995, Yamada 1967), while there is clear morphological distinction between the front (*murung*) and rear (*mawji*) part. With the exception of Boat Marker 1 at Locality 2, which is oriented parallel to the length of the island or north-south directionality, all the boat-shaped stone markers in the Chuhanngen area are generally oriented on a land-sea axis or northwest-southeast directionality, resembling the image of parked fishing boats in the traditional landing places (*vanua*) of the Ivatans today.



**Figure 7.** Left: Top view of a typical fishing boat in Batanes (from Kumano 1971); Right: Top view of Boat Marker 10, Chuhanngen Locality 1 (from Dizon et al. 1995-1997).

Of the 19 boat-shaped stone markers found in the Chuhanngen area, only three have been excavated so far—two of these are located at Locality 1 (Boat Marker 1 and 10) and one at Locality 2 (Boat Marker 1). The two excavated boat-shaped stone markers at Locality 1 (see Bolunia 1995; Dizon et al. 1995-1997) yielded complete human skeletal remains at a

<sup>10</sup> Information from Dy-Liacco (2013) based from his conversation with Armand Salvador B. Mijares who was part of the National Museum team who conducted archaeological exploration in Vuhus in 1995.



**Figure 8.** Human burial in Boat Marker 10 (left image from Dizon 1998, right image modified from Dizon et al. 1995-1997).

depth of 50-60 centimeters from the ground surface (Figure 8). Both individuals were found lying sideways on a shallow (and possibly carved) limestone pit and in fetal or flexed position, facing east with the head towards one end of the boat-shaped marker that faces the sea. Preliminary osteological analysis yielded a juvenile individual (associated with Boat Marker 1), with an unusually large skull (Bolunia 1995; Dizon 19980, and an adult male (associated with Boat Marker 10), about 60 years of age, with a stature of approximately 170 centimeters, and has a shovel-shaped incisor and extended enamel roots of the molars (Bautista 1995-1997: 128, 134).

The excavation of Boat Marker 1 at Locality 2 (see Dizon et al. 1995-1997) yielded an earthen burial jar that was already partly exposed right at the center of the feature when it was found (see Figure 6). Like those in other ancient burial grounds in Batanes (Dizon 1995-1997; Faylona 2003; Solheim 1960), the burial jar was brown in color, elongated in profile, and consisted of two parts: the (1) lid which was conical in shape and measured 59 centimeters in height, and the (2) main vessel which had a round bottom and measured 69 centimeters in height. Both had an average thickness of 1.5 centimeter and a maximum diameter of 55 centimeters. The lid had four appliquéd "ears" on the sides (which might have served as handles), while the main vessel had a hole at the bottom which might function as drainage of the fluid that usually comes out of a decomposing body as ethnographically documented elsewhere in Island Southeast Asia (Metcalf 1982). The burial jar contained fragments of human skeletal remains that are thought to belong to an adult male

(Dizon et al. 1995-1997). The relatively large size of the burial jar suggests that it was primary, wherein the corpse was interred in the jar in complete form and in flex posture closely after death. So far, Boat Marker 1 at Chuhanen Locality 2 is the only boat-shaped marker in Batanes that contained a burial jar.

The antiquity of the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus is still uncertain. There are, however, two radiocarbon dates from the site: one, obtained from the human skeletal materials excavated in Boat Marker 1 at Chuhanen Locality 1, showed a date of 100 BP or AD 1850 (Dizon and Mijares 1999).<sup>11</sup> This radiocarbon date is thought to be problematic by the excavators themselves because the dated material was possibly contaminated due to the burning of pandan vegetation that covered the boat marker when it was prepared for excavation (Dizon et al. 1995-1997). Additionally, the date is way beyond the historically documented human settlement of Vuhus, since the island was abandoned in the late 18th century, and has never been inhabited again as discussed above. The second radiocarbon date, obtained from the human skeletal materials excavated from Boat Marker 10 at Chuhanen Locality 1, produced a date of 355+/-70 or 1595 AD (Dizon et al. 1995-1997).<sup>12</sup> This radiocarbon date is considered more acceptable by the archaeological team of the National Museum as it falls within the possible date range of the settlement in Chuhanen. However, there is a need to obtain more radiocarbon dates from other boat-shaped stone markers for further confirmation. Given the much older antiquity of the association of boat representations and human burial in the Philippines and elsewhere in Island Southeast Asia, it is possible that this burial tradition in Vuhus started much earlier than 16th century and continued up to the time when Vuhus was abandoned in the 18th century. This notion, however, remains a speculation. Clearly, there is a need for more radiocarbon dates from the site in order to come up with a better understanding of the temporal horizon of the boat-shaped stone markers.

### **The Meaning of the Boat-shaped Stone Markers**

The presence of human remains within the excavated boat-shaped stone formation in Vuhus suggests that such features can be functionally

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<sup>11</sup> The dating of the bone sample from Boat Marker 1 was conducted by the Beta Analytic Laboratories in Miami, Florida, USA (Dizon and Mijares 1999).

<sup>12</sup> The dating of the bone sample from Boat Marker 10 was conducted by Geochrone Laboratories in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA (Dizon et al. 1995-1997).

described as "burial markers".<sup>13</sup> As burial markers, it carries a particular symbolic meaning that shows how the makers view a person, death, and afterlife. Thus, the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus can be considered as material manifestations of the worldview or cosmology of the early inhabitants of the island. The historical information on the belief system of the early inhabitants of Batanes is too fragmentary (see Hornedo 1994) to provide a detailed and integrated picture of this worldview or cosmology. This limitation is further compounded by the fact that such burial tradition is hardly recalled in the historical and social memory (as expressed in oral tradition) of the indigenous inhabitants of Batanes.<sup>14</sup> Thus, one way of exploring the symbolic function or meaning of these archaeological features is to cast it, in a rather broad and haphazard way, within the shared cosmological narrative and symbolic association of boats and human burial among the so-called Austronesian-speaking societies in Island Southeast Asia.

In many Austronesian-speaking societies of Island Southeast Asia, a person is generally thought to consist of a physical body and a soul (or several souls) (Abrera 2005; Baldick 2013). When a person dies, the soul (or main soul) of that person would travel to the land of the dead by passing through bodies of water, such as river, stream, pond, lake, sea, and ocean using a raft, boat, or ship similar to the *Isneg* of northern Luzon (Vanoverbergh 1938), *Ma'aram* of the Visayas (Magos 1992), *Berawan* of Borneo (Metcalf 1982), and the many small island societies of eastern Indonesia (Moss 1925). In other societies, the soul of a deceased person is not only thought or imagined to be traveling to the land of the dead using boats but also the corpse is literally interred in a wooden coffin shaped like or perceived to be boats, as practiced by the *Sulod* of Panay (Jocano 1964), as well as the *Ngaju* (Scharer 1963) and *Melanaus* (Loewenstein 1958) of Borneo. Among the *Sama Badjau* of Tawi-Tawi (Nimmo 2001) and of Semporna District in Sabah (Sather 1997), the dead person is not only placed in a coffin built from the dead person's boat but is literally transported to an island cemetery by boat, wherein the corpse is laid out lengthwise with the head towards the prow and the feet at the stern.

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<sup>13</sup> The team of the National Museum who conducted the survey also referred to these archaeological features as "burial markers" (Dizon 1998, Dizon and Mjares 1999). Of course, one can always use a more neutral term such as "setting" or "cairn", but for the interest of avoiding further confusion in the literature, I retain the description of the National Museum as "burial markers".

<sup>14</sup> This seemingly lack of memory among the present inhabitants of Batanes on the boat-shaped stone markers have led the National Museum team to cast doubt on their possible historical relationship (Dizon and Mjares 1999).

The land of the dead is usually located away from the place or village of the living. For instance, among riverine societies, the land of the dead is located either upstream (tops and sides of mountains), such as seen with the Sulod of Panay (Jocano 1964) and Mambai of Timor (Metcalf 1982), downstream (river banks and deltas), such as the Pala'wan of Palawan (McDonald 2007) and Mamasa of Sulawesi (Nooy-Palm 1988), or a combination of both, such as the Berawan of Borneo (Metcalf 1982) and Nuaulu of the Moluccas (Ellen 2013). In other societies, the land of the dead is located either in the upper world (or skyworld), such as the Tagbanwa of Palawan (Fox 1982) and Kodi of West Sumba (Hoskins 1986), the underworld such as the Bagobo of Davao (Casal 1978) and Tetum of Central Timor (Hicks 1988), or a combination of both, such as the Ngaju of Borneo (Scharer 1963; Revel-MacDonald 1988) and T'boli of southern Mindanao (Casal 1978). In small island societies, the land of the dead is usually located in another and sometimes mythical island, such as the Kedang of Lembata (Barnes 1974), Rindi of Sumba (Forth 1981), the Sama of Tawi-Tawi (Nimmo 2001) and Seporna District in Sabah (Sather 1997), and the many small island communities of eastern Indonesia (Moss 1925).

The boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus can be considered as a material transformation of this widely shared cosmological narrative in Island Southeast Asia. According to Hornedo (1994), the early inhabitants of Batanes believed that a person (*tawu*) consist of a body (*karakuhan*) and two souls (*pahad*)—one on the left and one on the right. When a person dies, the main soul (or the soul on the right side of the person's body) would become an *añitu* ("spirit" or "invisible person"<sup>15</sup>) and goes to the land of the dead where he/she is now deemed to appropriately belong. Hornedo (1994) did not provide any details on how the soul of the deceased travels to the land of the dead but the presence of human remains on the excavated boat-shaped stone markers indicates the operation of a similar cosmological idea common to many traditional societies of Island Southeast Asia—that the soul travels to the land of the dead by passing through bodies of water using a boat.<sup>16</sup> It is highly possible that the early inhabitants of Vuhus deliberately marked the grave

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<sup>15</sup> See Valientes (2016) for a detailed discussion of the Ivatan *añitu* as "invisible person" rather than mere "spirit" as described in some studies (Hornedo 1980, Recio 1994).

<sup>16</sup> This cosmic journey of the soul to the land of the dead using a boat should not be surprising as the early inhabitants of Batanes are said to have relied heavily on boats for transportation, be that to neighbouring islands or to distant places such as Luzon where they often go for trading (Gabilo 1995; Madrigal-Llorente 1983).



of their dead relatives with stones carefully arranged in the shape of a boat to facilitate the successful maritime journey of the soul to the land of the dead. The location of the land of the dead as conceived by the early inhabitants of Batanes is far from clear in various historical sources (Gonzales 1966; Madrigal-Llorente 1983) but the general orientation of the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus towards the sea suggests that it was likely located somewhere out at sea, perhaps in another island as has been the case in most small island societies in the Austronesian world (Barnes 1974; Forth 1981; Moss 1925; Nimmo 2001; Sather 2007).

Interestingly, the Yami of Lanyu Island in Taiwan, who are long thought to be linguistically (Asai 1936; Ross 2005; Scheerer 1908) and culturally (Beauclair 1959; Benedek 1991; Mabuchi 1956) related to the Ivatans of Batanes, have a belief that directly points back to the possible cosmological context of the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus. According to Benedek (1991), the Yami believes that when a person dies, the soul of that person becomes an *añitu* (similar to the Ivatans) and flies down from their house to their village's ancestral landing place (*vanua*) where a small boat (*tatala*, cognate of the Ivatan *tataya*) carrying the souls of his previously deceased relatives await. As soon as the soul of the newly deceased person gets into the boat, they proceed to a small island where they stay for several days until its death stench is gone. Soon after, they would transfer to a bigger boat (*avang*<sup>17</sup>) and commence their final journey to the land of the dead, which they call *Malavang a Pongso* ("White Island").<sup>18</sup> *Malavang a Pongso* (or in some context *Pongso nu Añitu*, "Island of Invisible Persons") is considered to be no different from that of the living (*Pongso nu Tao*, "Island of Visible Persons")—the inhabitants live in houses, raise pigs and goats, plant and eat millet and taro, and catch their highly valued flying fish (Beauclair 1986). It is said that whenever they hear that their living relatives are going to have a celebration, they would pull their boats to the water and travel to *Pongso nu Tao* to take their share of the food, usually boiled taro, millet, pork and goat meat (Benedek 1991).

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<sup>17</sup> *Avang* for the Ivatans of Batanes is a generic term for boats used mainly for inter-island transportation. Distant places like Luzon, which they went for trading in the past using large boats similar to the *pontin* of the Ilocanos, is called *pangavangan*, "places where you reach by *avang*". Interestingly, the present Ivatans call their trip via airplane to Manila as *mangavang* ("to a ride an *avang*"), and the Yami call the small airplane that plies between Lanyu and mainland Taiwan as *sumalap a avang* ("flying boat").

<sup>18</sup> Beauclair (1986) locates *Malavang a Pongso* between the island of Lanyu and Itbayat (the northern most inhabited island of Batanes), while Benedek (1991) locates it in Pratas Island, one of the atoll-like small islands in the South China Sea.

The archaeological surveys conducted by the National Museum in Vuhus are not yet exhaustive enough to fully account the total number of boat-shaped stone markers that can be found in the island. However, it is not difficult, especially to anyone who has visited the Vuhus and strolled the whole coastal stretch where the boat-shaped stone markers are found, to come up with a general impression that they are not many.<sup>19</sup> In 1720, Fr. Juan Bell visited the island and counted at least 200 people (Hornedo 1978). If this population estimate can be projected back to the time when the inhabitants of Vuhus made the boat-shaped stone markers, one can surmise that such treatment was not applied to all burials. In fact, the archaeological surveys of the National Museum in Vuhus also showed the presence of human burials without marking within the area where the boat-shaped stone markers were found (Dizon et al. 1995-1997). If, indeed, the marking of a grave with boat representation was reserved to a few, then what could have been the basis for such a "privilege" and why? The exposure of human skeletal remains that belong to a juvenile and an adult individual suggests that age can be ruled out as the basis for such mortuary treatment. The burial information from the site is still insufficient to come up with an archaeologically and statistically based inference. Meanwhile, the historical and ethnological record can provide a clue.

In the Philippines and other parts of Island Southeast Asia, while it is generally thought that the soul of newly deceased would travel to the land of the dead through boats or ships, in practice, not everyone is entitled to be placed in a boat coffin or associated with boat representation, thus indicating its possible function as a marker of social status (Manguin 1986; Reyes 2011). This is certainly true in several historically and/or ethnographically documented societies in the region with well-defined sociopolitical stratification. For example, in 17th century Cagayan (northern Luzon), a corpse of a high-ranking individual is said to have been wrapped in a blanket and placed in a wooden boat coffin along with areca nut, betel vine leaves and lime, as well as blankets, trays, and plates (Quirino and Garcia 1958). In 16th Century Bohol, a dead chief is said to have been buried in a large ship which they call *barangay* (Tenazas 1973). Among the Toraja in Sulawesi, corpses are interred in wooden sarcophagi that took the form of a boat, pig, and water buffalo (Crystal 1985). Boat coffins are only used for the members of the nobility (*puang*), with the water buffaloes for middle-ranking individuals (*to makaka*),

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<sup>19</sup> This author has visited Vuhus Island several times already, at one occasion with some of the archaeologists who once worked in the area.

and the pigs for serfs (*kaunan bulaan*). In Tanimbar Island, both ordinary and high-ranking individuals are interred in a canoe coffin when they die, but village chiefs and other notables are placed in a platform to make them visible to everyone while ordinary people are buried underground (Perry 1914).

Various historical accounts (e.g., Calderon 1784 in Fernandez 1989; Calderon and Artiguez 1786 in Hornedo 1995-1997) show that the pre-colonial inhabitants of Batanes were strictly stratified. Each polity (or *barangay* according to Calderon and Artiguez 1786 in Hornedo 1995-1997) was divided into at least three socio-political levels: the *mangpus* which heads the entire polity (*idi*), the *mapolon* which heads the sub-section of the polity (*kavahayan*), and the general populace (*kumaydian*). The families of the *mangpus* and *mapolon* are said to have belonged to the upper class (*pincipales*) of precolonial Ivatan society, while the rest of the population belonged to the lower class (*cailianes*).<sup>20</sup> In another historical account (Amado 1720 in Hornedo 1994), it is said that the souls of the upper class, when they die, go directly to the land of the dead and become revered ancestors, while the souls of ordinary people remain in the village (or lower part of the atmosphere) and become malevolent spirits (Amado 1720 in Hornedo 1994;). It is highly possible, then, that the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus, like in other stratified societies of Island Southeast Asia, are burials of persons who belonged to the upper class of pre-colonial Ivatan society, regardless of age. Marking the burial of a chiefly elite with stones arranged in the shape of a boat might be deliberate to ritually facilitate the journey of the soul to the land of the dead. It probably also functioned to materially and visually marked the success of the said journey and the new identity of the dead person as a benevolent and revered ancestor, thus legitimizing further the power and status of the family and other relatives he/she left behind.

### **Concluding Notes**

The discovery of the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus is a milestone in the archaeology of Batanes. The presence of human burials within the excavated boat-shaped stone markers illustrates a unique material transformation of an otherwise widely shared association of boats and

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<sup>20</sup> The members of the upper class were usually materially differentiated to those of the lower class by the amount of gold in their possession which they display as body ornaments during special occasions (Madrigal-Llorente 1983).

death in the early history of the Philippines and the rest of Island Southeast Asia. Tentatively dated to the 16th century AD, these archaeological features show the existence of a belief among the early inhabitants of Vuhus, that the soul of a deceased person travels on bodies of water (in this case, the sea) to the afterlife, or more appropriately to the land of the dead, through boats. The land of the dead is probably conceived to be another island, perhaps the same island referred to by the Yami of Lanyu in Taiwan. However, the boat-shaped stone markers in Vuhus do not only materially manifest this cosmological narrative, it is also possibly a marker of social status of the person buried in these graves. As a status marker, it could be a burial practice confined among the members of the upper class (family members of the *mangpus*, *mapolon*, and wealthy households) of pre-colonial Ivatan society to facilitate as well as materially mark the successful journey of the person's soul to the land of the dead and its new role as a benevolent and revered ancestor. Interestingly, there is a belief among the Ivatans today that if one dreams of an incoming boat or of a boat-launching ceremony, it is considered an omen that a close relative will soon die (Yamada 1999). People are also prohibited from sleeping or lying down in a boat parked on the beach because this invites the occurrence of death (Barcelona 1953). Moreover, it is strongly discouraged to construct a house on a place where a boat was previously built because the people who will live there will meet an early death (Yamada 1999). This association of boats to death in omens and taboos of the present-day Ivatans can be taken as vestiges of a long forgotten burial practice in Batanes, which involved marking the grave of a dead person with stones arranged in the shape of a boat.

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