

An Excerpt from the *Philippine Journal of Archaeology*

VICTOR FERNANDO R. OCAMPO

An Examination of a Megalithic Mass Grave on Mt. Pinatubo, Zambales Province, the Philippine Islands

Francisco Pölzl and Ferdinand C. Ashley, Miskatonic University, Arkham, Massachusetts

Under the auspices of the Archaeology and Ancient Civilizations Department of Miskatonic University, a team of archaeologists visited the site of a megalithic mass grave on an almost-inaccessible slope of Mt. Pinatubo, an extinct stratovolcano, in the province of Zambales, on the main island of Luzon in the Philippine Islands.

Mt. Pinatubo is part of a chain of volcanoes, formed over a million years ago through the subduction of the Eurasian Plate under the smaller Philippine Belt. No eruption has ever been reported in the modern era (at least during the island's official recorded history). However, oral traditions chronicle several eruptions that would have certainly occurred during the island's dark pre-Hispanic past.

The site had been discovered in October 1913 by a team of biologists from the Philippine Bureau of Science who had been conducting the first comprehensive environmental survey of the area.

The graves were located slightly more than a mile and a quarter from Tarukan village, on the left flank of the dead volcano. The area was primarily composed of andesite and dacite, as well as an assemblage of plagioclase, pyroxene, and hornblende. The andesite deposits were riddled by many small cave-like structures, many of which have collapsed, burying what appeared to

be shell middens and other living areas, possibly during a major tectonic or volcanic earthquake.

The remains of over 150 individuals of different ages had been found, encircled by a structure of standing stones and dolmens. This enigmatic circular structure represented the first evidence of megalithic architecture ever found in the Philippines.

Everything had been buried quickly, pointing to the likelihood of a catastrophic end to this fairly large and archeologically important Paleolithic community.

One of the cone-shaped orthostats was partially reconstructed by the expedition team. It bore a striking similarity to certain prehistoric structures found on the island of Nias, an isolated island off the western coast of North Sumatra.

The lack of stone-working implements anywhere in or near the site indicated that they were probably carved at their source. The pliths, each weighing at least an Imperial ton, had been carved from coral-rich Bolinao limestone, sourced from a quarry in the coastal province of Pangasinan.

It has not been determined exactly how the stones were transported over the twenty mile distance, given the lack of contiguous rivers to the volcano, as well as the site's challenging elevation (approximately 3,000 feet above sea level).

As reported by the 1913 survey team, there was also a startling lack of plant and animal life for a wide circle around the megaliths. This extended for about 3 yards in every direction from the largest of the standing stones. It has been theorized that the andesite cavities contained fractures or fumaroles that released poisonous fumes (most likely by advection). This was thought to periodically kill all life within a wide perimeter.

A preliminary dating of the monoliths estimated their age to be approximately 3,500 to 4,000 years. If verified, they would significantly predate the earliest Southeast Asian megalithic culture, the Kutai Martadipura of Eastern Borneo (from 4th Century AD) and make them roughly contemporary with China's semi-mythical Yellow Emperor and the late Uruk Period of Mesopotamia. Further and more accurate dating methods are required than what was available on the field.

Initial on-site forensic analyses also showed that most of the victims did not die from toxic gas, but rather from what appeared to be a ritual murder

or execution. Significant damage was clearly evident on the cervical vertebrae of several skeletons, as if they had been garroted. The bodies were all found in a circle, radiating outwards from a patch of burned rock, suggesting perhaps that the killings served some religious or mystical purpose.

Professor Tyler M. Freeborn of the Miskatonic University's Anthropology Department speculated (in correspondence) that this may have been some form of sacrifice to Apo Namalyari, the local mountain deity worshipped by the Aetas of Zambales. He noted further that human sacrifice was not unknown in the islands, citing the case of the Bagobos of Mindanao. This tribe had been much feared for their practice of dismembering slaves just before they sowed rice. This gruesome sacrifice served as a blood offering to their *Anito* spirit-gods to ensure a bountiful harvest (Frazer 1890).

The actual identity of the people from the burial site has not been ascertained. Although their bone structures suggested affinity to the dark-skinned, Australo-Melanesian Aetas, there has been no known instance of permanent settlement in other similar communities—either in the Philippine Islands or further afield. Groups as diverse as the Orang Asli of Malaya, the Andaman pygmies from the Bay of Bengal, or the recently extinct Palawa aboriginals of Tasmania have never been known to progress beyond a simple nomadic existence.

Adding to the conundrum was the discovery of late Paleolithic stone tools, bark beaters, and spindle whorls, as well as jade earrings and shell beads which had been unearthed in various other caves. It has been theorized that these were out-of-place objects, perhaps falling from more recent strata or buried at a later date by superstitious natives. Indeed, many of the items recovered were identical to those traded by Proto-Malays from almost a millennium later, although it was puzzling why the latter would provide offerings to a genetically inferior people who were obviously not their direct ancestors.

All the artifacts recorded could be spot dated with reasonable accuracy. However it was very difficult—if not impossible, to prove that they were from the same time period as either the skeletons or the megaliths. Without the proper context, these detritus of ordinary life were simply ciphers, lacking a before, an after, or a when to determine their significance.

The expedition's most important find was a half-ruined cave wall, hewn from an ophiolite matrix and older than the surrounding igneous rock that was decorated with remarkable petroglyphs unlike anything seen elsewhere. The pictogram and logogram images seemed to be uniquely narrative in

nature, although only a few logogram glyphs have been deciphered with certainty. One of the native porters suggested it was a record of an ancient supernatural battle, while another said it was a warning for the team to leave, precipitating the crisis that abruptly ended the expedition.

Some of the images were exceptional and intriguing—including what appeared to be representations of distinct stellar constellations (particularly the constellation of Libra which rises during the Monsoon season), figures of mythical beings, strange hexagrams and creatures that resembled extinct animals such as the recently-discovered Philippine stegodon (*Stegodon luzonensis*).

The existence of this particular cavern seemed to validate a controversial and long-debated footnote in Friedrich Wilhelm von Junzt's *Unaussprechlichen Kulturen* from 1839. In chapter 5 of the original German-language volume, the author had spoken of “a cult in Zambales that worshiped a cave with strange rock carvings on the slopes of Mt. Pinatubo.” How von Junzt was able to come to this knowledge a full seventy-eight years before its actual discovery remains yet another unsolved mystery.

Many of the petroglyphs had been colored in with red ochre made from hematite ore containing large amounts of dehydrated iron oxide (Fe_2O_3). There were also marginal drawings (made from the same powdered pigment) all over the cave wall which appeared in a simpler, more haptic style.

A single set of human remains was discovered in the same cave as the petroglyphs—a pregnant female of Negrito lineage, approximately 16 years of age, with her unborn child still inside her uterus. Unlike the skeletons found by the megaliths, there was no visible damage to her cervical vertebra or any readily ascertained cause of death.

A bag of pigment, the container of which had long since rotted away, was found by her right hand. At the time of this writing, her remains were the only piece of evidence linking the Australo-Melanesian skeletons (if indirectly) with the cave of petroglyphs. It has not been determined if she had lived or died at the same time as the first group, or if she was actually a descendant who had come at a later date.

Because the expedition's time had been cut so short, the team could not precisely date the rock carvings. From the wall's mineral composition and the actual paleographic content, both authors believed that they could be significantly older than the ochre drawings—possibly even predating the megalithic structures themselves (which had been carved from younger

micritic limestone, with tiffaceous turbide and minor chert). In particular the carvings of the stegodons were remarkably detailed and seemed to hint at the possibility of direct observation by the artist.

From a structural perspective, the more precise arrangement of the ophiolite petroglyphs was a sharp contrast to the almost haphazard nature of the rock art drawings. This suggested that they were made at different periods, or perhaps even by a different ethnic group.

Indeed the modern Aeta's unfamiliarity with the petroglyphs and their lack of even the precursors of a written language would seem to suggest this.

The mere possibility that the petroglyphs could have belonged to a people from earlier in the Paleolithic indicates the need for more thorough excavation of the deeper cave strata as soon as practicable.

Postscript

A lone human handprint, decorated by what appeared to be representations of eagle-owls and stars, was also discovered drawn on a wall opposite that of the petroglyphs. As the drawings were created from the same batch of red ochre that was found by the skeleton, it was believed that the anonymous woman was the artist. Also, the size of her metacarpus and phalanges were similar to the hand print, lending further credence to this assertion.

Although much work was yet required to determine the secrets of this enigmatic Paleolithic people, the remarkable structures they left behind, as well as the troubling question of how they died, the fragile yet defiant handprint and its lone creator—a mother, unspared by oblivion, with one hand reaching for her drawing tools and the other protecting her unborn baby—seemed to send a clear message across the shadows of time: *“I was here. My baby was here. We lived. We loved, and we died.”*