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Settlement and Burial Sites at Suatan, Butuan City: A Preliminary Report

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Notes and Comments

Settlement and Burial Sites in Butuan City: A Preliminary Report

LINDA BURTON

Of all areas in the Philippines reported to have archaeological sites, Mindanao is the least explored and investigated. Although there were sporadic explorations and surveys conducted in and around Davao, Zamboanga and Sulu, and Cotabato, no proper investigation has ever been done in northern Mindanao until the discovery of the sites in Butuan a year ago.¹

Archaeological materials in Butuan were accidentally uncovered in the latter part of 1974 when the Butuan City Engineering project was constructing *esteros* or canals to provide drainage for the stagnant waters that had accumulated in the lower-elevated grounds during rainy season. Wooden coffins in deteriorating condition, together with associated burial items, were brought out by the workers. This discovery was reported to Father Francisco Demetrio of Xavier University who requested the writer to see and verify the finds. Moreover, fishpond owners in Butuan, while in the course of having dikes constructed, likewise reported coffins with numerous items, which were mostly porcelain wares and gold artifacts. The newly found site-complex was brought to the attention of the National Museum, which sent a representative to supervise the excavation of the Navarra site. In accordance with the suggestion of Assistant Director Alfredo Evangelista, the

1. For additional information, refer to Wilhelm G. Solheim, "Mindanao Talaud Archaeological Research Project, June-November 1972" (Typescript report to the Southeast Asia Fellowship Program, Ford Foundation); Alexander Spoehr, "Archaeological Survey of Southern Zamboanga and the Sulu Archipelago," *Asian Perspective* 11(1968): 177-85; Edward B. Kurjack, et al., "The Urn Burial Caves of Southern Cotabato, Mindanao, Philippines," *Silliman Journal* 8(1971): 127-53.

National Museum and Xavier University jointly conducted the initial archaeological investigation in Suatan, Butuan in October and December 1975.

The Summer Field School in Archaeology conducted at Suatan, Barrio Ambago, Butuan City, Agusan del Norte from 5 April to 15 May 1976, was the first field school in archaeology ever held in Mindanao.² Financed mainly by the Ford Foundation, Mindanao State University, and Xavier University, the school was able to train 16 students from Xavier University and Mindanao State University in archaeological research methodology, physical anthropology, and folk history.

Two sites were excavated simultaneously – Navarra site (SU-1) in the fishpond of Dr. Miguel Navarra, and the Punta site (SU-3), an adjacent lot, south of the former, and owned by Mr. Leopoldo Punta – both of which had been disturbed. Although both sites are in the swamps, their material contents and temporal sequence differ. While Navarra area is a burial site (probably a cemetery), the Punta site is a settlement / midden / burial area. Moreover, this is the first subsurface coffin burial ever discovered in the Philippines. Previous research on coffin burials has only been done on those found in caves, and these predate porcelain site.³

The present investigation is a continuation of the initial excavation and exploration in Suatan conducted by Xavier University and the National Museum last year. A small settlement site (SU-2) within Punta's area was excavated extensively. The material culture obtained from the first site and the present site are similar – i.e. sherds (porcelain and pottery), iron slags, ornaments, and animal and marine remains.

One advantage of the first site (SU-2) was that it was undisturbed. We were able to expose four complete articulated human skeletons, with numerous grave goods *in situ*, without coffins. The porcelain items were whole pieces like bowls, saucers, water droppers, parts of bows, shell bracelets, etc. Porcelain materials obtained have been tentatively placed in the Yuan period (14th–15th century). Outside the perimeter of the settlement were coffins found by previous excavations of pothunters. Blue and white wares (Ming

2. This Summer Field School in Archaeology at Butuan was a consortium between Xavier University, Mindanao State University, and the National Museum of the Philippines.

3. Rosa Tenazas, "Preliminary Report on the Boat-Coffin Burial Complex of the Philippines" (Proceedings of the Eleventh Pacific Congress, Tokyo, 1966).

period — 15th–16th century) were taken from these coffins.

The investigation in Suatan, hopefully, would enlighten us on the pre-Hispanic culture not only of Butuan but of northeastern Mindanao. Many sites have been discovered in Suatan and the nearby vicinity, but were pilfered and vandalized by illegal diggers for their artifactual contents before any investigation was made. Furthermore, nothing has been done about such destruction because the city government of Butuan was not aware of the sites' significance until recently.

In archaeological investigation, artifacts obtained out of context are useless, for archaeology is not merely interested in the reconstruction of an archaeological culture, but also in establishing the sequence of cultural development of certain human occupations. Hence, if sites are undisturbed, one can expect greater validity for the information gathered. Nevertheless, the sites in Suatan, although badly destroyed, are not altogether without value. So we took the pains of salvaging and collecting all the information we could obtain from them.

We did not employ sophisticated tools as most field schools do because they are quite costly and could not be found or bought in the Philippines. Field techniques in archaeology vary depending on the nature of the site; and with the type site at Suatan, one had to adopt a more practical method that still suited the purpose.

This preliminary report will describe only the sites and methodology employed in the investigation, the materials and features obtained, and a brief discussion of the preliminary analysis of the culture. Analysis of materials, which usually takes more time to accomplish, will be included in the final report.

SETTING AND PHYSIOGRAPHY

Suatan is a sitio of Barrio Ambago, one of the outlying barrios of Butuan City, which lies approximately five kilometers northwest of the city proper toward Masao port. A part of an estuary, most of the lands are developed into fishponds (for raising *bangus*). Two hundred meters from Suatan-Masao highway to the west lies Suatan Creek, which drains water from swamp ponds into the Masao River, a large and ancient tributary of the Agusan River. Geologically, the whole of present-day Butuan was a flood plain, and toward the northern sector is an estuarine delta built as a con-

sequence of the annual inundation due to the generally heavy (10 inches per annum) but fluctuating rainfall. Because of this erratic climate, Butuan City has been constantly plagued by annual floods (in the past, water has remained for 45 days). The problem has been alleviated by the construction of esteros that drain the water to the main river system which flows into the bay.

Nipa palm groves abound almost on all outlying areas of Butuan City especially toward the northwest. Other secondary vegetation include coconut palms, fruit trees, and rice.

The residents of Suatan are composed mostly of Visayan speakers (Cebuano, Bohol, and Leyte), and the native Butuanons (suspected to be descendants of the *Lapaknons* or swamp dwellers). Their houses are built on stilts – the water level at times goes up during high tide – and made of nipa shingles, wooden planks, and bamboo. The standard of living is low. The main ways of earning a livelihood include constructing dikes in fishponds owned by wealthy Butuan City residents, making nipa shingles for roofing, distilling nipa palm sap into an alcoholic drink called *lacsoy*, and working on road repairs or construction for the Bureau of Public Highways. Some, both men and women, also indulge in illegal artifact digging using *tara-tara* (digging tool) and a long metal prober in places known to have antique porcelain deposits. The lucky ones sell their cache to local collectors in Butuan or to agents of antique collectors from Manila or Cebu; hence there has been a rampant proliferation of antique sales.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SITES

The Navarra site (SU-1) is located 400 meters south of the field station (rest house of the Navarras) and part of the fishpond. The area is low, and during high tide some places are submerged. There is an abundance of vegetation commonly found in swamps, and coconut trees are planted on higher grounds.

The color of the surface soil is usually brown and gray with some dark tinge; the lower level is made up of gray estuarine sediments. There are some intrusive materials such as pebbles and cobblestones which are not endemic to the area and could have been brought there by some human or natural agents. Most of the stones collected were unmodified, but a few demonstrated usage.

In the process of constructing fishpond dikes, numerous de-

teriorating wooden coffins were unearthed, together with associated material culture such as porcelain, pottery, gold and copper ornaments, and wooden, metal, and stone implements. When the owner requested the National Museum to salvage the site in November 1975, more of these items were collected.

The Punta site (SU-3) is located 300 meters southeast of SU-1 and 15 meters south of Mr. Punta's residence. The terrain's features are similar to those of the first site (SU-2) within the same area. The contour of the land appears irregular, the center being the most elevated part, looking like a very low mound at a distance. This elevation is due to the accumulation of sediment during inundation and to kitchen midden deposits like marine and riverine shells, porcelain and pottery sherds, and animal food remains. Thus the ground is hard and compact. Coconut palms and other fruit trees are grown in the area. The surroundings of the site are lower and water-logged, with an abundance of nipa palms. To the north, is a small creek that cuts between Punta's yard and the SU-3 site. According to the owner, his in-laws built a house on the northeast sector before the war. Several items of pre-war vintage have been collected from the surface.

The site was disturbed and several holes and trenches, made earlier by antique seekers, could be seen all over the place. The surface was littered with porcelain and potsherds, pieces from the coffins, and human bones. However, the area with abundant shell remains was the least disturbed because the ground was firm and difficult to dig.

METHODS OF EXCAVATION

Both sites — Navarra and Punta — were photographed and surface materials were collected before the layout of the site. Datum points were established from which all measurements and references were made. Since the sites were open, the grid system was employed — i.e., the area intended to be excavated was divided into squares of two by two meters. Each square had a number and letter designation: e.g., A-1. Navarra site has an areal dimension of 100 meters by 30 meters; Punta site is 50 by 20 meters. Bisecting baselines running from north to south and east to west respectively, divided the sites into quadrants — i.e., N.E. quad, N.W. quad, etc. — which served as a control in the exposure of grids and facilitated plotting features. In Punta site only the

northern half (25 by 20 meters) has been excavated (see figure 1). Some grids were not excavated due to their proximity to the coconut palms or because trees were in the grids (the owner requested us not to touch those areas with trees).

Two students and a laborer were assigned to work in a square; they were responsible for the excavation, searching for artifacts from the unearthed soil, recording and measuring each level excavated and the features exposed. A level interval of 20 centimeters was used as a control in the vertical excavation. Photography and illustrations were done by the illustrators from the National Museum and Mindanao State University.

The soil of the sites was estuarine with plastic consistency. Thus, the only excavating implement that could be used here was the tara-tara. This is a flat metal blade, trapezoidal in form, with a tapered butt end to which a wooden handle is fitted. It varies in length and size, but the usual length is two feet. It is generally employed in constructing fishpond dikes. One has to be adept to use it effectively, and the laborers were hired for this reason. The excavators cut the soil in blocks large enough to be lifted out of the pit. Long metal probes were also employed for detecting artifacts by jabbing carefully down into the soil until the sound of an object was heard. This was done several times to be certain because there are many objects underneath besides artifacts.

Others not excavating would feel the soil with their hands for artifacts, since a screen mesh is quite impractical to use. All artifacts found in each layer were washed, dried, and bagged. They were then brought to the laboratory at the field station for classification, cataloging, and recording.

During excavation water was the great problem, especially at the Navarra site. When the high tide came in, water seeped into the pits. We bailed out the water by using pails (a pump was used once, but the sediments kept clogging the hose). Water at the Punta site usually came in after two feet (sometimes the height of the water would be unusually high, filling in most of the pits).

All excavation units were dug down to 120 centimeters. Beneath this level the soil is sterile or devoid of cultural materials. All features uncovered like house posts and coffins, were pedestalled in situ. They were measured from the local reference point, drawn, and photographed. The soil profiles of trenches and pits were also drawn. A contour map was made

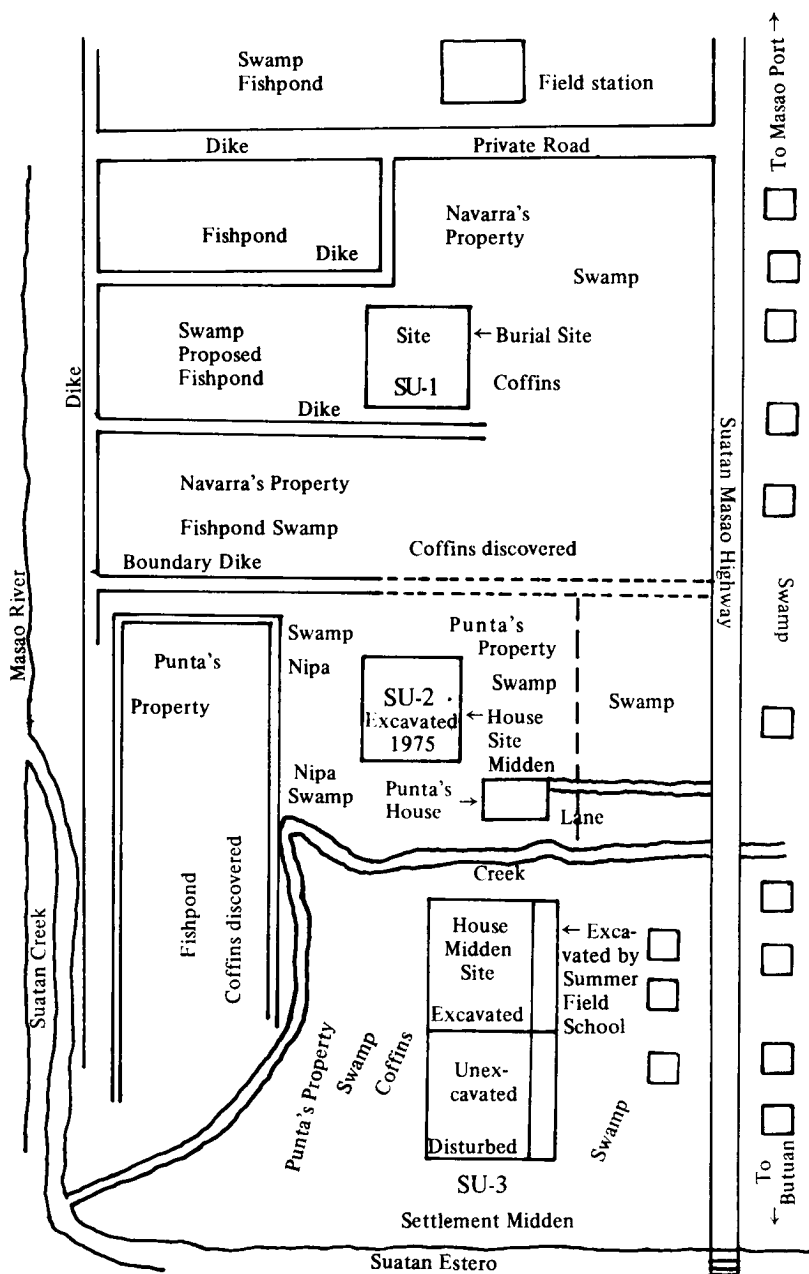


Figure 1. Sketch map of the excavation sites at Suatan, Butuan City.

by the surveyors of the Bureau of Public Highways of Butuan City.

RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION

All excavation units in the Navarra site demonstrate uniform layers. Levels 1 to 5 show soil coloration from dark brown to dark gray without shell-remains mixed with the soil. Only coffins were discovered here, with associated grave goods such as porcelain, some pottery, metal ornaments, and wooden and stone tools. However, the porcelain and pottery wares were all in sherds. All coffins were deteriorated. Human skeletal remains were disarticulated with hardly any associated mortuary goods. On the northern edge of the layout, three pits yielded a few pieces of gold items like earrings and mouthpieces (goldleaf). No whole piece of porcelain or pottery was found because the site had been previously worked on by pothunters. Porcelain sherds found were mostly blue and white (Ming), celadon, and stonewares from jars, bowls, and plates.

Last year's excavation supervised by the National Museum personnel collected whole pieces of porcelain wares and other items such as wooden paddles, metal net sinkers, etc. Large stoneware jars, celadon jars, and blue and white plates were found on top of the coffins or beside them.

The field school excavation revealed some coffins close to the posts. It is undetermined whether these are house posts or shed posts. Our present working hypothesis is that the Navarra site was a burial ground. The coffins were interred and sheds were built over them. The posts were more slender than the regular house posts and there were no indications of house remains (kitchen disposals) which normally could be observed in house sites.

In the other coffins that still contained skeletal remains, the skulls and appendicular bones were missing. Skulls collected and the ones collected by the lot owner demonstrate cranial deformation — i.e., the frontal section of the head, and the occiput (back of the head) were flattened. The profile of the face shows a slanting or sloping brow. The frontal teeth — canine and incisors — were filed to a point and blackened.

A good number of lithic materials were also recovered. Some small ones were found inside the coffins and placed between the teeth of the deceased. The modified stones were roughly shaped

not by flaking but by polishing, to form a tool such as a bark beater, hammer, or anvil; whereas the unmodified ones were mostly smooth and waterworn.

Excavation units close to the center of the Punta site demonstrated a clear stratigraphic sequence. Level 1 (0–20 cms.) showed dark brown soil mixed with a few shell remains and sherds. Levels 2 and 3 (20–40 cms.; 40–60 cms.) presented the greater bulk of material culture and organic remains. These diminished in succeeding layers 4 and 5 (60–80 cms.; 80–100 cms.). In the sixth level (100–120 cms.), one or two sherds could be found; the soil was dark gray estuarine with no presence of shell remains.

Along the northeastern sector, between the fifth and sixth levels (70–120 cms.), four wooden coffins were exposed – three were deteriorated and one was in fair condition (see figure 2). In the covers of each of these coffins are big holes, and they were practically devoid of skeletal and cultural remains. Our suspicion is that the antique-seeking activity had been perpetrated even in pre-Hispanic and Hispanic times. Graves were desecrated for their funerary offerings because of monetary value and prestige.

The midden lies more to the northwestern sector. Marine shells were intermixed with sherds and organic remains. Under this thick bulk of shells were posts – several of which have been exposed in different pits. The posts were larger and bulkier than the ones found in the Navarra site, which were made of *dongon* wood, a sturdy tree with bulky and hard bole that thrives in swamps, and which is still found growing around Suatan and its vicinity. Plotted on a grid map, the pattern of posts seems to indicate a small settlement, probably a long house with several rooms, each room being occupied by a family; or two or three small houses belonging to the same kin group. No coffin has been found here, except for a mass of disarticulated human bones that was exposed on the second level in some pits. The skulls and other bones were missing. We are not certain whether these pits were grave areas or the deceased were buried under the house without coffins.

On the northernmost part of the site, more modern materials (pre- and post-World War II) were encountered. Three posts belonging to the old house of the owner's in-laws were also discovered on the third level. The wooden material is quite different from the ones found in other sections of the site. Below this layer, older posts of *dongon* wood were found.

Throughout the whole length of the excavation, we found only one whole porcelain vessel, a small double gourd gray celadon, possibly from Thailand. A large shell armllet (*tridacna gigas*) was discovered in one of the pits in the center of the site. Most of the artifacts recovered were porcelain and pottery sherds, and broken pieces of metal ornaments due to the earlier activities of pothunters. Porcelain sherds are mostly celadon, white wares, and stonewares from plates, saucers, bowls, and jars. Very few pieces of blue and white wares were collected from the midden. The majority of the sherds were from pottery of different kinds, like pots, jars, and bowls. Most potsherds show a plain exterior surface; a few pieces had incised designs and others had yellowish paint on them. Workmanship is poor, probably due to uncontrolled firing and the type of clay paste and temper used. A good number of unfired lumps of clay were also collected.

Like the Navarra site, iron slags were part of the material culture assemblage, but in greater abundance. Remnants of metal tools such as tips or portions of spearheads and knives were also found. Pieces of broken metal bracelets (copper) were collected in good quantity. No gold objects were found, but gold items had been obtained from this area by antique seekers.

Coffins extracted were made out of dongon wood. The bottom part was a hollow log, and the cover was fitted into the bottom by wooden pegs. Other wooden paraphernalia such as bark beaters and covers of wooden casks were of dongon wood also.

A few pits in the southern half of the site were opened showing empty coffins. In several spots, trenches and holes made by pothunters also revealed coffins. It is suspected that this sector as a whole is a burial place rather than part of the settlement. In short, the extent of the house site covers only that area where the midden was. The shell remains do show a widespread distribution, but the layer outside the midden is thinner; this portion is also lower than the midden.

MORE RECENT FINDS IN BUTUAN

In July 1976, two months after the summer field school in Butuan, some antique seekers discovered a boat in Sitio Ambangan, Barrio Libertad, Butuan City. A few meters away from where the boat was found, seven wooden coffins, piled one on top of the

other, were also recovered. Associated with the coffins were gold items such as a "tiara" (with dangles and precious stones), the handle of a dagger, bracelets, and necklaces; part of the assemblage included a doubleduck porcelain figurine (blue and white), a bronze *gong*, and a corroded spearhead.

The boat, when it was fully exposed last November, was large and long (see figure 3). Local historians suspected this to be a *balanghai*, a big boat used by the early Filipinos in their long sea voyages. Pigafetta mentioned the *balanghai* as a large boat which came in various sizes and lengths; one was observed to be 80 palm lengths and resembling a Spanish *fusta*. The unearthed boat measures more than 30 feet long and one and a half meters wide. Only the bottom part was left intact, including a portion of the prow. The boat was made out of dongon wood planks which were sewn together by wooden pegs. Each plank was two inches thick and one foot wide. Square wooden structures are attached to the interior walls and the bottom part placed there with the purpose of making the boat more durable.

Material culture found within the boat included perforated rolled pottery definitely used as net sinkers, a wooden paddle, and remnants of fish hooks. Some pieces of deteriorating rope were still attached to the stern of the boat.

This site is proximate to a depression which, according to the residents of the area, was part of the former Agusan River. It is probable though that this dried-up river was used for navigation before much siltation had taken place.

In the southeastern sector of the city, an area called Kalot also revealed more finds consisting of porcelain wares and gold ornaments. It is a burial site but the human remains were interred not in coffins, but directly in the ground. The gold adornments demonstrate a more sophisticated and ornate workmanship. The writer contends that these gold pieces were not manufactured in Butuan; rather these were trade items brought by the foreign merchants from China or Southeast Asia. Like Ambangan and other sites, Kalot is along a former river tributary. Within the same sector, in Mandakpan area, two new sites were discovered containing more porcelain and gold items; these were found in association with disintegrated human skeletal remains buried without coffins. Also, the sites were located along the dried-up river suspected to be the old Agusan River.



Figure 2. One of deteriorating wooden coffins unearthed at the Punta site (SU-3).

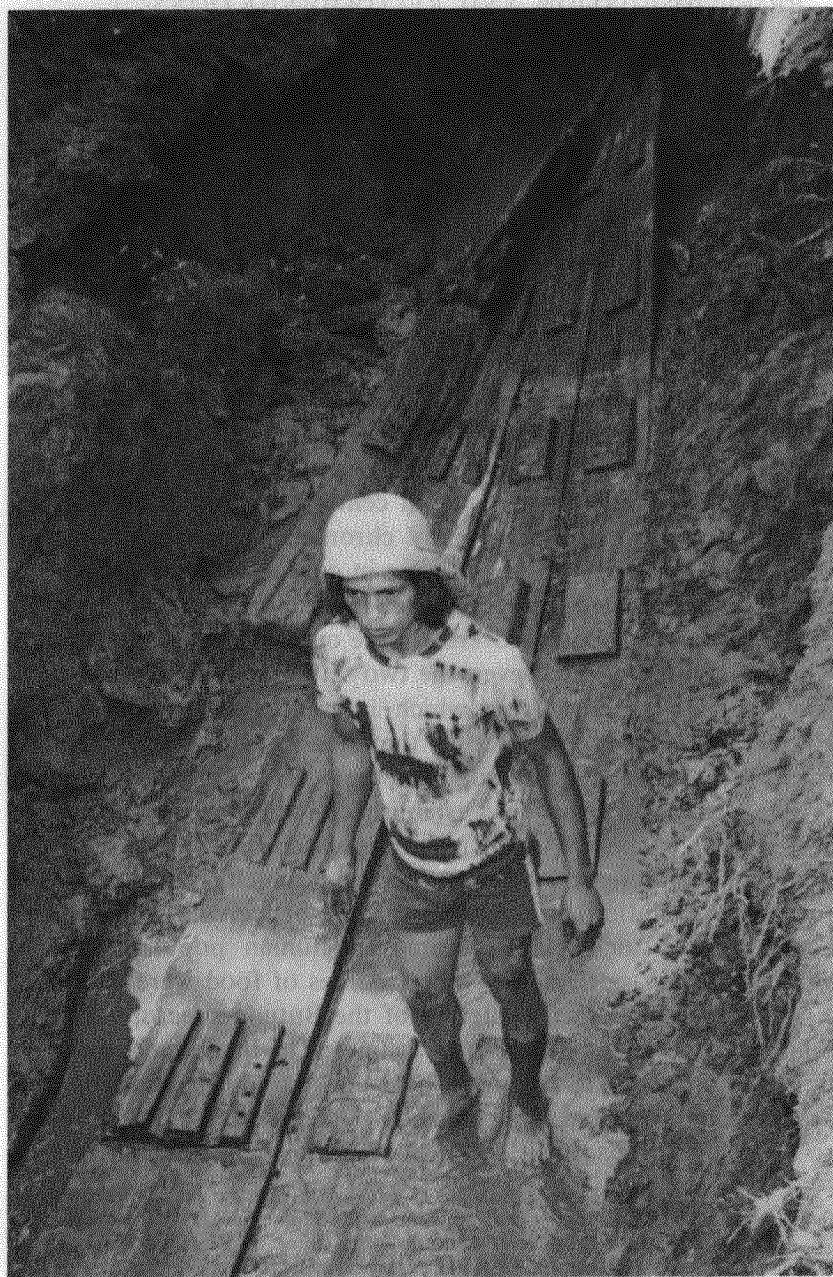


Figure 3. Bottom of suspected *balanghai*, or boat (unearthed in July 1976) with wooden pegs holding the boat together.

BRIEF DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The site at Suatan and other similar sites discovered in the outlying areas of Butuan City, are indications that there were settlements already established during pre-Hispanic times. Earlier investigations of porcelain sites around the Philippines – Bolinao, Pangasinan, Calatagan, Batangas, and Sta. Ana, Manila – revealed large burial places along the coasts or proximate to water systems.⁴ Burials are indicative of the presence of human settlements nearby. Much information has been extracted from such sites, specifically concerning the culture of the inhabitants.

Historical sources relate that foreign traders such as the Chinese, Arabs, and other Southeast Asians did venture into these islands plying their trade, usually with such items as porcelain wares, silk, etc., along some of these coastal settlements. This apparently took place from as early as the eleventh century until the onset of the Spanish conquest. Likewise, early chroniclers like Pigafetta, and Spanish missionaries who first came in contact with and observed the natives, attested to the existence of populous settlements.

Archaeological sites discovered in the outlying barrios of Butuan were mostly burials. However, the two settlements uncovered were good enough samples from which inferences about the culture could be made. Geographically, the sites were proximate to the river tributaries and close enough to the coast of Butuan; logically, settlements would have been established along or close to the river system and creeks (Masao River and Suatan Creek). These water systems would create a microenvironment which could contribute to the amelioration of botanical species; hence wild game would congregate in such places. Moreover, human populations also would establish settlements where sources of food were plentiful.

A brief cultural reconstruction of the Butuan sites, specifically Suatan, could be summarized as follows: The inhabitants dwelt in houses built over the swamp or near the swamp using dongon logs as posts; and in non-swampy areas, settlements were built along the river system. They subsisted on marine life such as sea shells and

4. Refer to Avelino Legaspi, *Bolinao: A 14th-15th Century Burial Site*, Museum Publication No. 7 (Manila: National Museum of the Philippines, 1974); Robert Fox, "Calatagan Excavation: Two 15th Century Burial Sites in Batangas, Philippines," *Philippine Studies* 7 (August 1959); Robert Fox and Alfredo Evangelista, "Pre-Spanish Manila Thru Archaeology," Progress Report Phase 1 and 2: excavations at the Sta. Ana Parish Church and along Old Lamayan Road, mimeographed (Manila: National Museum, 1957).

fish, and wildlife like boar and deer, wild and domesticated fowls, domesticated animals (dogs and pigs), and root crops and rice. They were a maritime people; and there is a strong evidence that they were not only hunters and fishermen, but agriculturists as well. They were engaged in the production of articles like pottery, metal and wood implements and ornaments, and bark cloth. The economy was boosted by a flourishing trade and commerce through the barter system, wherein the foreign merchants like the Chinese would bring their goods and trade them for native raw materials like gold, beeswax, tree resin, etc. Likewise, trade perhaps existed between neighboring islands of the Visayas and other regions of Mindanao.

They had a cultural practice of deforming the frontal and back sections of the cranium, resulting in sloped brows. Perhaps the heads of infants were wrapped with certain paraphernalia (such as a bark cloth) to induce the abnormal form of the head. Cranial deformation is not unique in this culture for it has been discovered in other pre-Hispanic burials in the Visayan region. The frontal teeth were filed and blackened in adults. This practice is still seen among many cultural communities in Mindanao such as the Manobos and Higaonons. They chewed betel nut, *buyo* leaves together with lime, tobacco, and the fruit of a rattan vine. Constant indulging in this habit results in red or black stained teeth. This could be construed as part of their physical beautification — a trait perhaps for class distinction.

Coffins were employed for the interment of the dead. Dongon logs were hollowed out; the bottoms and covers were shut tightly by wooden pegs. The deceased was always buried with his personal effects, like porcelain wares, bark beaters, pottery, etc. Coffins were buried under the ground and probably sheds were built over them. It is also possible that an earlier practice was to wrap the dead in woven mats and inter them under the house without coffins. Funerary goods and offerings of food, as still practiced by some societies in Southeast Asia, point to a belief in life after death; animals were sacrificed to appease the spirits.

The village was made up of several settlements or residences. It was governed by a political entity, the *balanghai* or *barangay*, headed by a *datu*. A typical household in Suatan would be a large residence in which the whole kin group dwelt together as a family unit.

Finally, if the contention of some scholars that the *Mazaua* mentioned by Pigafetta is to be identified with modern Butuan (perhaps the barrio Masao, an old settlement) is correct we would have a historical description of the inhabitants. Relating the landing of Magellan and his party in Mazaua, he described as follows the physical appearance of the inhabitants and some of their cultural traits:

Those people are *caphri*, that is to say heathens and go naked and painted. They wore pieces of cloth woven from a tree about their privies; they were heavy drinkers. Women are clad in tree cloth from their waist down and their hair is black and reaches to the ground. They have holes pierced in their ears which they filled with gold. They are constantly chewing a fruit called *areca* (bettle nut) which resembles a pear. They cut that fruit into 4 parts and then wrap it in the leaves of the mulberry. They mix it with little lime and when they have chewed it thoroughly, they spit out, and the mouth becomes red.⁵

This tentative cultural reconstruction based on the observations of the sites' features and the artifacts obtained from them is far from complete. Therefore, a more thorough analysis of the material culture, features, and the physical-geographical aspects is imperative in order to resolve further some of the archaeological problems of this study. These are the following:

1. *Pottery sherds analysis.* This will involve typology and petrology; analysis could help determine whether pottery was indigenous industry or trade items from other regions in Mindanao and Visayas.

2. *Dating of the site and materials.* There has been no C-14 date for Mindanao sites; it is therefore advisable to obtain at least a few C-14 determinations from Butuan sites. Although porcelain wares are index traits, yet there are many flaws in the approximation of dates. Porcelain wares, because of their value, have been preserved by families and passed on to the next generations as heirlooms. The present day Mindanao natives are in possession of porcelain wares which they have inherited from their forebears. We have numerous dateable materials like human skeletons, shells, and animal remains; if dated, the results might substantiate our relative dates obtained through cross reference.

3. *Identity of the early inhabitants of Butuan.* Many believe that the so-called Lapaknons or swamp dwelling Manobos, were

5. Antonio Pigafetta, "First Voyage Around the World," *The Philippine Islands 1493-1898*, ed. Emma H. Blair and James A. Robertson, 55 vols. (Cleveland, Ohio: Arthur H. Clark and Co., 1903-1909), 33: 31.

the inhabitants of the area. We made a survey of a number of these Lapaknons who are still residing in the vicinity. We interviewed two families, but these had been acculturated and could not give us specific information regarding their ways in the past. Many of them have been amalgamated into the Butuan society. Our hypothesis is that Butuan and outlying areas were inhabited by peoples of different origin, that is, there were heterogeneous groups which might have migrated from the Visayas and other parts of Mindanao and settled in Butuan, mainly due to the existence of a thriving trade and commerce and the good prospects of the place. Moreover, legends of Butuanons tell us that some people from Sulu migrated to Butuan and settled in Ambangan. Today, the Butuan dialect spoken by many of the people of Agusan del Norte has numerous cognates in the Tausog language, so that it is possible for these two groups to understand each other. Certain botanical species known as *hagliate*, reportedly found only in Sulu and Butuan may also attest to this migration. It is also possible that foreign merchants from Southeast Asia and China settled in these parts.

4. *Continuities and discontinuities of cultural patterns.* Cultural communities like the Manobos and Banuaons are still found in Agusan. Observation and study of the native cultural patterns, specifically the material culture, might help us pinpoint traits that are still practiced to date and traits practiced in the past but no longer present today. Although acculturation has set in, still we might be able to find subtle traces in their patterns.

5. *Settlement Patterns.* The many sites that have been discovered or known through exploration in Butuan could be plotted on a map at their approximate location. This could be expanded into mapping out all sites found along the coastal areas of northern Mindanao. It might give us a picture of demographic distribution during pre-Hispanic times.

6. *Controversial historical issue as to the "first Mass held in the Philippines."* A currently accepted "fact" is that the place of the first Mass was Limasawa, an island off the coast of southern Leyte. This has been contested by many Butuanons and other students of history. Following the account of Antonio Pigafetta, the chronicler of Magellan's voyage, and other early Spanish writings, the claim of the Butuanons that the first Mass was held in Butuan seems plausible and indeed is gaining some ground. The

archaeological investigation of the area, especially at Suatan, appears to substantiate some of the descriptions that Pigafetta mentioned in his account. However, it would be wise to research on more facts by going to Limasawa island and make further investigation on the history and culture of the present inhabitants of the island.⁶

This controversy is not trivial. It concerns a people's sentiment and pride nurtured over many generations through oral traditions. For there was a memory of the folk in Butuan regarding the first Catholic Mass celebrated there. Today, there is even a marker in Magallanes, Agusan del Norte, commemorating the first Mass. It is still to be verified if the people in Limasawa have kept similar memories since time immemorial. But even more importantly: mistaken "facts" should be corrected if we must be faithful to historical truth.

This report is only a preliminary presentation of the archaeological investigation at Suatan, Butuan. The main purpose of this excavation is to continue the exposure of the sites in the Suatan area. The result would enable us to understand the whole layout, and extract more meaningful inferences from the material culture and their temporal deposition.

Archaeological research in the Philippines should achieve a more realistic theoretical description of Philippine prehistory. The effort should be directed toward refining classification and working out detailed chronological sequences and interrelations of culture within the areas. These data are valuable because they are readily understood and will finally provide us with the kind of information we need to test our theories and hypotheses. Furthermore, it is hoped that this research and others would pave a way to truly comprehend the basis of the contemporary Filipino society and achieve a kind of "national identity." This awareness can be realized through searching our past by supported excavation of archaeological sites which might give us some answers and clues to the problems of the development of the Filipino culture and society.

6. The writer visited Limasawa in October 1976 to make further research on the first Mass controversy. A report on this research is under preparation.