

An ocular inspection at the property of Club Balai Isabel Resort in the Municipality of Talisay, Batangas

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July 7, 2010

Introduction

This report summarizes the archaeological investigation conducted by the National Museum of the Philippines at the property of Club Balai Isabel Resort in Talisay, Batangas. The landscaping activity carried out in the resort include an earthmoving operation that resulted to the discovery of burials, prompted Police Senior Inspector Manuel Maligaya, Chief of Police in Talisay, Batangas to request for an immediate archaeological investigation of the area by the National Museum. The archaeological investigation was conducted on July 7, 2010 by the National Museum team composed of Nida Cuevas¹, Timothy Vitales² and Giovanni Bautista³.

The team arrived in Talisay town proper at around 1030 am to meet up with Police Senior Inspector Manuel Maligaya who will accompany the team to the reported site. The team together with Police Senior Inspector Maligaya and his staff then proceeded to Club Balai Isabel where they meet with Mrs. Cecille Terrible, one of the proprietors of the resort, and Engr. Rostrada. Mrs Terrible and Engr. Rostrada briefed the team about the accidental discoveries of human burials while landscaping a portion of the property of the resort, which has stone structures they believed to be part of an old church ruin. According to Engr. Rostrada, they excavated a 10m x 15m pit at the inner portion of the stone structure using the backhoe. They further excavated the interior manually using shovels in an attempt to find the flooring of the structure. This led to the exposure of numerous human remains, some were even found on top of each other. The burials are said to be oriented towards the Taal lake. They also noted the presence of other materials such as blue and white porcelain fragments in the excavation. Thinking that these burials were recent, they immediately reported these to the police authorities, which were then brought to Scene-of-the- Crime Operatives (SOCO) for investigation. When it was identified as very old remains, they were then reported to the National Museum.

Mrs. Terrible and Engr. Rostrada took the team to the site where the human remains were supposedly found. The ruins were located near the lake and beside the newly constructed

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chapel. Only a third of the whole structure according to Mrs. Terrible is within their property while the rest of the ruins are in the adjacent property. According to local accounts, the bell tower (*campanario*) was still visible during the late 1950s to early 1960s. The structure was composed of huge mortar blocks made of lime, volcanic rocks, and shells. The team then went to the pit where the burials were found. . The human remains on the other hand were not collected although it was bagged and kept securely. After the inspection the National Museum and police team were invited for lunch before proceeding to the Municipal Hall.

After lunch, the team first visited the PHIVOLCS Taal Volcano Observatory. After the visit, the team then went to the Municipal Hall to meet with the Municipal Mayor Zenaida Mendoza. The team reported the findings of the investigation and explained its importance for the cultural heritage of the municipality of Talisay.

Archaeological Background of the Taal Lake Area

The Province of Batangas is one of the most important archaeological sites in the Philippines. It has been a source of highly significant artifacts, one is known as the '*Calatagan Pot*' that unfortunately comes from looted sites in Calatagan, Batangas. The *Calatagan Pot* is an earthenware vessel with ancient syllabic scripts engraved on its shoulder. This vessel has been declared a National Cultural Treasure in the 1960's because of its rarity and uniqueness.

There were several archaeological exploration and excavations done in the different areas of Batangas Province. Like, Beyer (1947) explored the areas within the vicinity of Taal Lake. He particularly mentions discovering a Pleistocene outcrop containing palaeolithic choppers or hand-axes from Barrio Sampa in Taal.

In the early 1980's, the National Museum conducted a systematic archaeological research in the vicinity of Taal Lake particularly in the municipalities of Laurel and Talisay. Archaeological excavations in Laurel revealed a few archaeological sites containing porcelain, stoneware, earthenware fragments (both plain and decorated), beads, shells, metal implements, and human skeletal remains (Cuevas 1982).

A particular site referred to as the De Guia Site in Talisay excavated in 1984 revealed two cultural layers. The upper layer contained earthenware pottery fragments associated with porcelain and tradeware ceramic sherds while the lower layer yielded various artifacts including earthenware sherds, metal slags, human bones, teeth and shells. This lower layer is suggested to be pre-porcelain, possibly Metal Age, due to the absence of porcelain and other tradeware ceramics. However, those materials recovered did not undergo further

analysis and no further excavations were undertaken by the National Museum in the area. (Cuevas 1984; de las Ysla 1984).

In 2003, the Ruins of an abandoned church complex in Brgy. Calumala, Sta. Teresita was systematically excavated through the collaboration of the Archaeological Studies Program of the University of the Philippines, the National Museum, Katipunan Arkeologist ng Pilipinas Inc. (KAPI) and the Philippine Maritime Archaeological Foundation. The archaeological excavations in the church ruins resulted in the exposure of different features of structural ruins and established the series of volcanic activities and deposition in the area (Paz 2003; Dizon *et.al.* 2003).

An intensive archaeological exploration and excavation in the vicinities of San Nicolas, Batangas was undertaken by the National Museum and KAPI in 2004. The archaeological excavation was carried out at the ruins of the First Taal Church (Lumang Taal). It has been established that the construction of the foundation of the church has disturbed the prehistoric cultural layer which was buried under shallow overburden.

In 2005, the property of Genes Caringal in the Municipality of San Nicolas, Batangas was systematically excavated by the National Museum. The Genes Caringal property is in proximity of the Old Taal church ruin. The excavation yielded materials such as glass beads, restorable earthenware vessel, burial jar with skeletal remains of a child; and marine shells. The result of the excavation suggested a pre-Spanish burial site probably dated to the Metal Age (B.C 500 to A.D. 500).

Observations

The unmitigated excavation at the ruin of Club Balai Isabel revealed several layers of alluvial deposits from the original surface to the bottom of the pit, which is around 350 cm thick. The alluvial deposit can be attributed to the lake and a nearby creek which may have overflowed through time. The exposed sedimentation of the pit also shows volcanic deposits. The volcanic eruptions in the area are well documented by Spanish chroniclers which are very important to archaeologist in dating the site and materials.

Several uncollected human remains were found scattered at the base of the pit while there are burials still found *in situ* on the walls of the pit. Using trowel and brush, the team cleaned and slightly exposed some of the burial remains on the walls for photo documentation. As noted, the burials were approximately found at the depth of 280 cm to 320 cm from the original surface. Burials are good indicators of the socio-political, and religious structure of ancient community, if recovered *in situ* (*original context*).

The structure exposed was an adobe blocks or a grayish volcanic tuff material commonly used as walls of churches in Batangas as well as in Manila. The huge stone blocks were measured, especially in the opening area, which is around 180 cm to 185 cm long, 80 cm to 90 cm wide, and 80 cm to 90 cm thick. This were covered with a thin layer of stucco popularly known as *paletada* in order to protect it from elements such as water and heat that cause erosion or weathering. As noted, the material used in covering the adobe walls is made of mortar or *argamasa* which is a mixture of sand, lime and water. This is used to bind the building material. The lime is obtained from limestone, crushed corals or shells parched under high temperature then pulverized and supplemented with pumice or *piedra buga*.

The presence of bricks was either used as a roof tile and floor. Bricks are also used for interior and exterior walls. And often, this was used to fill gaps in the walls in lieu of stone.

The blue-and-white porcelain sherds recovered from the pit is attributed to the 15th-16th centuries of Ming Dynasty period. Most of these materials shown feature of Swatow and Kraak ware.

Recommendations

Based on the archaeological assessment, the Club Balai Isabel Resort has definitely shown rich archaeological and historical significance. The limited data gathered from this assessment yielded very important and interesting materials which may be remains of a prehistoric community that have existed well before the coming of the Spaniards. Those that are still buried underground, therefore, cannot be ignored and disregarded.

The following are the recommendations;

1. A full systematic archaeological excavation is necessary. Through this it will help us understand the nature of the old structure from its construction to its destruction and abandonment, the nature and chronology of the burials found inside the ruins, and the relationship of the ruins with other Spanish colonial structure sites surrounding Taal lake. There is also the possibility of a pre-colonial habitation in the area, and it is for this reason that an extensive excavation is needed.
2. Proper coordination with the land owners should be done since the whole ruins is situated between two land properties. A Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the National Museum, Local Government Unit of the Municipality of Talisay, and Club Balai Isabel should also be carried out, specifying the roles of each parties in the excavation such the financial and technical support, manpower, food

and accommodation, provisions on temporary storage and transfer of accountability of important cultural objects, etc.

3. The general public should be made conscious of the archaeological and historical significance of the Club Balai Isabel via some kind of interpretative facility. This can be an exhibition space containing narrative texts and photos, or a museum to contain both dimensional data as well as three dimensional materials, that is, the archaeological materials themselves. Only archaeology can give flesh to what the historical records so meticulously describe.
4. Such information that will be gathered from the archaeological excavation will be very valuable in promoting the cultural heritage of the municipality of Talisay and Club Balai Isabel as well. Heritage awareness can be further enhanced through exhibits, seminars and walk-through lectures in the site. This would certainly advance the growth of tourism and income of the municipality of Talisay.

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Plate 1 & 2 shows both the alluvial and volcanic deposits



Plate 3. The exposed adobe structures of a ruin.



Plate 4. Adobe blocks .



Plate 5 & 6. The adobe blocks with bricks used to fill in the gaps in the walls.





Plate 7. Evidence of shell materials used in making mortar or *argamasa*.



Plate 8 & 9. Human skeletal remains found *in situ*.

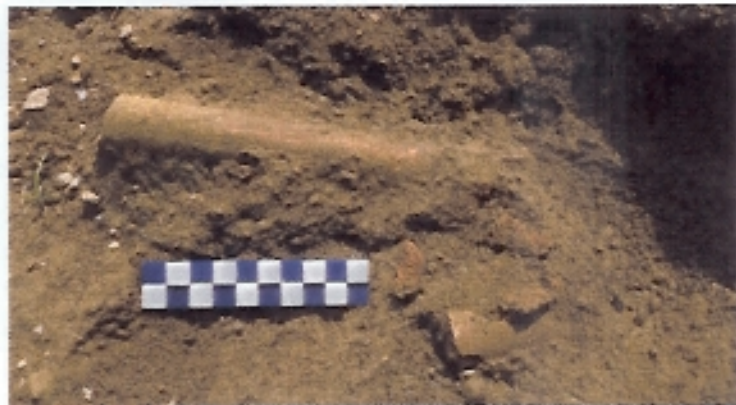




Plate 10. 15th-16th centuries Chinese blue and white porcelain sherds .



Plate 11. 18th-19th centuries brick materials.



Plate 12. A mortar used to cover the adobe walls. It is a mixture of sand, lime and water.