

MICRONESIAN

JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol. 3, n° 1–2

December 2004

MICRONESIAN ROUND-UP

HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS: 2003-2004 RESEARCH

by

Frank R. Thomas

Historic Preservation Office, Majuro

INTRODUCTION

Located in the central Pacific between 4° and 14° north latitude and 160° and 173° east longitude, the Marshall Islands consist of two nearly parallel groups (the Ratak or Sunrise and the Ralik or Sunset Chains) of twenty-nine atolls and five table reefs, totalling 181 km² of land and 10,455 km² of lagoon area. Together these two chains extend about 1,130 km north to south and approximately 1,290 km east to west.

Geological and ecological reconstructions suggest that the atolls are not likely to have formed until about 3,000 years ago, when enough sediments had accumulated and reef flats had developed sufficiently for relatively stable islets to form (Dye 1987). However, it may have taken another 1,000 years for some of these islets to develop into viable places for human settlement.

THE ATOLL ENVIRONMENT

Atolls can be regarded as constraining habitats for human. Yet, several of these coral islands were inhabited for the past two millennia. Sustainability, which had characterized past human

occupation, is now under threat from overpopulation, land scarcity, and inadequate infrastructure in urban areas, while many outer islands suffer from labor shortage and a general lack of employment opportunities.

In addition to poor soils, variation in precipitation played a significant role in limiting agricultural production, and thus population size. Annual rainfall varies considerably from north to south. In the south, Ebon receives about 5,680 mm, while at Bikini and Bokak (Taongi) in the north annual precipitation averages 1,450 mm and below 1,000 mm, respectively (Williamson and Sabath 1982). In contrast to the terrestrial environment, marine habitats, especially in the large lagoons, provided an abundance of reef fish and invertebrates. Together these resources supplied the bulk of protein consumed by the ancient Marshallese, supplemented by sea birds, eggs, and turtle meat.

ORIGINS AND CHRONOLOGY

Archaeological research in the Marshalls, like in the rest of eastern Micronesia, took off relatively late compared to other areas of the Pacific. Nevertheless, considerable progress has

This contribution is not peer-reviewed.

© *Micronesian Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* ISSN 1449-7336

Letao Publishing, PO Box 3080, Albury NSW, Australia

been achieved in recent years, particularly through the efforts of the various Historic Preservation Offices that can access funds from the U. S. National Park Service as part of a financial package received by the Freely Associated States. A synthesis of work carried out in the region was published recently (Rainbird 2004).

Linguistic evidence suggests that Marshallese belongs to a subgroup of the Austronesian family called Nuclear Micronesian, and that some of the languages spoken today in southeastern Melanesia appear to be closely related to it (Pawley and Ross 1993). While Marshallese culture is largely the product of specific adaptations to the atoll environment, contact with communities in other parts of eastern Micronesia, western Micronesia, southeastern Melanesia, and western Polynesia took place after initial settlement. This is supported by the distribution of items of material culture, as well as genetic data (Lum 1998, Weisler 1999, 2000, Weisler and Swindler 2002). A number of radiocarbon dates are now available from several atolls, suggesting initial settlement around 2000 years B. P. There are controversial dates from Bikini, which was used for nuclear testing, that may push back settlement to 3500 B. P. (Streck 1990). This could be attributed to the dating of old wood from drift logs of long-lived species, such as those found along the west coast of North America, as contamination of carbon samples by modern radioactivity would produce younger, not older dates (Spennemann 1997).

Since the pioneering efforts by archaeologists in the late 1970s (Dye, ed. 1987), knowledge of Marshall Islands prehistory has expanded considerably, although much remains to be done, particularly in understanding variation in settlement organizations.

RECENT ACTIVITIES BY RMIHPO

The Republic of the Marshall Islands Historic Preservation Office (RMIHPO), in cooperation with the Alele Museum, continues its main objective of surveying the outer islands to inventory cultural resources and to submit site nominations to the Advisory Council on His-

toric Preservation for inclusion in the Marshall Islands National Register (so far 21 atolls and islands have been partially surveyed and about 40 sites have been nominated). The reconnaissance surveys seek to record, document, and map (using GPS) a range of archaeological sites, which fall into three categories: prehistoric, historic, and traditional. The latter are aspects of the natural environment that have special significance to local communities, and are associated with legends and stories. Recording of these oral traditions is primarily the responsibility of the Alele Ethnographer. While the tangible past (the sites themselves) may deteriorate in the humid, tropical environment, oral traditions may disappear, as community elders find it increasingly difficult pass on their stories to younger generations. While there is always the risk of fossilizing the past (stories may have different versions and culture is, after all, a dynamic entity), it is hoped that transcribing these stories and providing detailed descriptions of archaeological sites will guarantee that some aspects of the past will be preserved for future generations of Marshallese.

Despite the existence of comprehensive historic preservation legislation, the main challenge is the enforcement of regulations, made all the more difficult by private land ownership, which makes legislation difficult to implement. Education, rather than legislation has been touted as the better approach at disseminating knowledge about, and appreciation for, the past (Williamson 2001).

RMIHPO has reviewed a number of projects carried out by outside researchers, including an underwater survey of Maloelap Lagoon and the documentation of World War II planes in Jaluit Lagoon. Local staff members continue to receive training through formal instruction in archaeological fieldwork and attendance at workshops and specialized courses locally and overseas, most recently in Japan for a course on archaeological restoration technology.

In the past year, RMIHPO carried out two outer island surveys: Wotho Atoll and Lib Island. Both locations were briefly surveyed in the late 1970s (Rosendahl 1987). However, the

focus then was primarily on prehistoric sites. Given the very short stay on Wotho (one day) by previous researchers, it is not surprising that no sites were recorded. In a week's work, however, our team identified 11 sites, representing all three categories mentioned earlier. Wotho illustrates the logistical difficulties of conducting archaeology in the Marshalls. Although the atoll contains numerous islets, we were only able to survey one owing to the breakdown of the community's single outboard engine. Generally, the 1,200 plus islets in the Marshalls and the overall distance separating them within the archipelago constitute the major physical challenge to comprehensive coverage.



Figure 1. Lib Island Pond (Photo: Frank Thomas)

Our Lib survey resulted in the discovery (and rediscovery) of 16 sites. Lib is a little known table reef (lacking a central lagoon), consisting of a single landmass, accessible only by sea, as it currently lacks an airstrip. It is also unique (for the Marshalls) in that it contains a large central depression, forming a pond or lake, now brackish (Figure 2). The island's small size meant that it could be adequately surveyed in the short time at our disposal. Guides and informants led team members to most of the sites. With a relatively small resident population and lack of frequent visitors, the island's cultural resources do not appear to be under major threat, aside from natural deterioration, coastal erosion, and the occasional typhoon. One of the most significant findings was a prehistoric coral gravel scatter that also yielded a possible coral pounder, coral abraders, and several pumice fragments, in addition to shell adzes. Pumice is exotic to the Mar-

shalls, and most likely drifted, rather than being carried by humans (Spennemann and Ambrose 1997). This lightweight volcanic rock is known to have been used by the Marshallese as an abrading material. Another important site is Lib's pond, which is not only an important traditional area and unique ecosystem deserving protection, but could also provide valuable information regarding past environmental conditions. Indeed, coring of pond sediments should be carried out in the future for clues to environmental, particularly vegetation, change.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my colleagues at RMIHPO for their support during the past year. Special thanks to Monono Dawoj, Acting Historic Preservation Officer, Clary Makroro, Deputy HPO, Josepha Maddison-Hill, Assistant Archaeologist, Fred Langmoir, Archaeological Surveyor, and Carmen C. H. Petrosian-Husa, Ethnographer at Alele Museum for their assistance in the field and for sharing information about the Marshallese past. The Historic Preservation Fund, National Park Service, Department of the Interior funded the surveys on Wotho and Lib.

REFERENCES CITED

- Dye, T. (1987). Introduction. In T. Dye (ed), *Marshall Islands Archaeology*. Honolulu: Pacific Anthropological Records No. 38, B. P. Bishop Museum. P.p 1-16.
- Dye, T. (editor) (1987). *Marshall Islands Archaeology*. Honolulu: Pacific Anthropological Records N. 38, B. P. Bishop Museum.
- Lum, J. K. (1998). Central and eastern Micronesia: genetics, the overnight voyage, and linguistic divergence. *Man and Culture in Oceania* 14, pp. 69-80.
- Pawley, A. and M. Ross (1993). Austronesian historical linguistics and culture history. *Annual review of Anthropology* 22, pp. 425-459.
- Rainbird, P. (2004). *The Archaeology of Micronesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosendahl, P.H. (1987). Archaeology in eastern Micronesia: reconnaissance survey in the Marshall Islands. In T. Dye (ed), *Marshall Islands Archaeology*. Honolulu: Pacific Anthropological Records No. 38, B. P. Bishop Museum. P.p. 17-168.

- Spennemann, D. H. R. (1997). On the origin of drift materials in the Marshall Islands. *Atoll Research Bulletin* 445.
- Spennemann, D. H. R. and W. Ambrose (1997). Floating obsidian and its implications for the interpretation of Pacific prehistory. *Antiquity* 71, pp. 188-193.
- Streck, C. F., Jr. (1990). Prehistoric settlement in eastern Micronesia: archaeology on Bikini Atoll, Republic of the Marshall Islands. *Micronesica* Supplement 2, pp. 247-260.
- Weisler, M. I. (1999). Status, Health, and Ancestry of a Late Prehistoric Burial from Kwajalein Atoll, Marshall Islands. *HPO Report 1999/03*. Series Editor R. V. Williamson. Ms on File, Historic Preservation Office, Republic of the Marshall Islands.
- Weisler, M. I. (2000). Burial artifacts from the Marshall Islands: description, dating and evidence for extra-archipelago contacts. *Micronesica* 33, pp. 111-136.
- Weisler, M. I. and D. Swindler (2002). Rocker jaw from the Marshall Islands: evidence for interaction between eastern Micronesia and west Polynesia. *People and Culture in Oceania* 18, pp. 23-33.
- Williamson, I. and M. D. Sabath (1982). Island population, land area, and climate: a case study of the Marshall Islands. *Human Ecology* 12, pp. 71-84.
- Williamson, R. V. (2001). The challenge of survey and site preservation in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. *Cultural Resource Management* 24, pp. 44-45.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY AND CONTACT

Frank R. Thomas received his Ph.D. from the University of Hawaii where he studied ecological anthropology and archaeology. He has worked on several archaeological projects in the Pacific region and taught anthropology at the University of Montreal and human geography at the University of the South Pacific. He now serves as Staff Archaeologist with the Republic of the Marshall Islands Historic Preservation Office. His research interests include rural development, traditional ecological knowledge, and environmental archaeology. He has published extensively on human ecology and natural resources development on the atolls of Kiribati and is currently involved in surveys of cultural resources on the outer islands of the Marshalls.

Frank R. Thomas, Historic Preservation Office, P. O. Box 1151 Majuro Atoll Marshall Islands, MH 96960. Email: rollandp@magellan.umontreal.ca