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CONVERSATIONS WITH *I MAN-ANITI*: Interpretation of Discoveries of the Rock Art in the Northern Mariana Islands

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This paper provides an overview of the rock art of the Northern Mariana Islands and particularly as the rock art discovered to date predominantly pertains to ancestor worship within the Chamorro cultural group. For centuries, the Western world has categorized the ancient Chamorro inhabitants of the Marianas Archipelago as a “prehistoric” people; a people without a written history. In addition to providing an overview of the rock art of the Northern Mariana Islands, this paper also emphasizes the fact that the ancient Chamorros did indeed have a recorded history and that this chronological record exists in the pictographs and petroglyphs that they painted and carved. No previous in-depth historical and/or archaeological studies specific to this subject matter exist, which therefore places this paper in a preliminary standing. Readers should note that while the pictorial assemblages discovered and studied thus far are largely focused on ancestor worship as the pervasive cultural element, future studies are sure to afford more details about the ancient Chamorro ways of life.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, archaeology, along with historical research, has revealed much about the Mariana Islands’ ancient indigenous inhabitants. Excavations of *Latte stone* village sites and analyses of ubiquitous surface artifact scatter, midden deposits, and burials have provided the foundation for a visual spectrum of the ancient Chamorro lifeway. Not much, however, has been done with respect to a study of ancient Chamorro rock art, the interpretation of which, stands to broaden this visual spectrum.

The earliest historical, albeit brief, references to ancient rock art appear in the 1668 to 1672 accounts of Spanish Jesuit Father Diego Luis de San Vitores, as first translated by Fa-

ther Francisco Garcia, S.J. in 1683 (Higgins et al. 2004). Several centuries later during the early years of the German Period, Saipan’s District Administrator, Georg Fritz provided the first illustrations (Figure 1, Figure 2) of some of these ancient images (Fritz 1904). This was followed by Stanislaus von Prowazek’s report in 1913 wherein a short description as well as an illustration are given of pictographs found in a cave at As Teo on Saipan (Figure 3). Beyond these initial historical entries, there exist equally all-too-brief modern-day documentation of only a handful of Marianas rock art sites found throughout the Southern Arc islands of Saipan, Tinian, Rota, and Guam.¹

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Since there is very little to go on as far as the historical documentation of rock art is concerned, the student of this particular subject matter would initially have to rely on keen observation of the sites and images themselves in order to pool a general database. This must be coupled with an astute perusal of the Mariana Islands' chronological record as it expounds upon ancient Chamorro culture right at the time when Europeans came into contact with the archipelago.

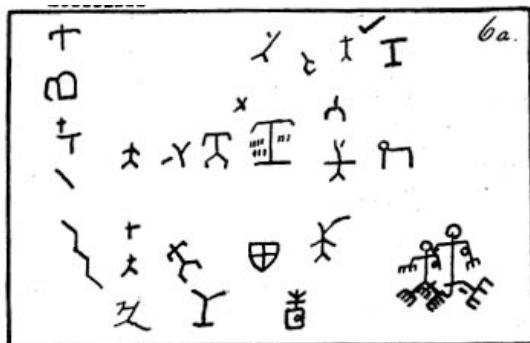


Figure 1. The main panel of Liyang Gadao, Guam, as represented by Georg Fritz in 1904.²



Figure 2. The main panel of Liyang Kalabera, Saipan, as represented by Georg Fritz in 1904.³

The purpose of this paper is to synthesize information about the few known rock art sites and then bring into historical and cultural perspective an interpretation of the pictorial assemblages found at these sites alongside those newly discovered by the authors.

LIYANG KALABERA, SAIPAN

Kalabera Cave is one of the more popularly known and frequently accessed sites on Saipan. It is visited primarily as an eco-tourist and historical destination. It is located within a partially remote yet densely vegetated area of the island's northeastern ridgeline and it holds remnant surface features of the time when it was utilized by Japanese civilians and Japanese military personnel during World War II.⁴ Approximately 98% of the visitors to Kalabera Cave, however, are unaware of the rock art that is largely concentrated within the first 30 to 45 feet of the cave's entrance and more importantly, that the utilization of the cave precedes the arrival of Spain in the Marianas in 1521.

The word "Kalabera" is the Chamorroized spelling and pronunciation of the Spanish word *Calavera*, which means "skull." The ancient Chamorro place name is obviously no longer extant hence the continued use of its probable Spanish equivalent. Spanish accounts indicate, however, that this part of Saipan was already referenced as "Kalabera," which denotes a transfer or communication of information to the Spanish colonizers that this area was a place of skulls, a place of the ancients, a place wherein they very likely buried and cared for their dead.⁵

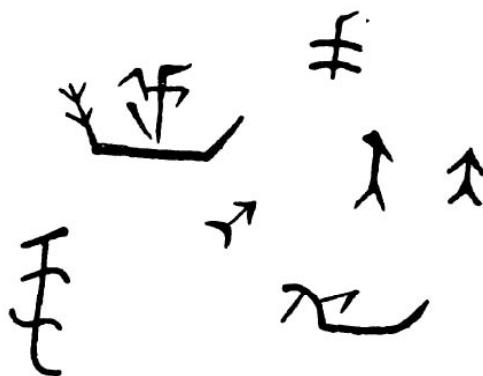


Figure 3. The main panel of Liyang Kalabera, Saipan, as represented by Stanislaus von Prowazek in 1913.⁶

The cave itself is situated along a NE-SW orientation, lies approximately 500 feet west of the coral fill dirt road that serves as its main access, and at an elevation of about 300 feet above sea level. The entrance is fairly large measuring approximately 30 to 45 feet long, 54 feet wide, and 45 feet high. This open area is a receding slope of clay dirt and worn rock formations that lead to an interior vertical drop of approximately 100 feet. At the bottom of this drop is a chamber that bifurcates into two subterranean tunnels. Not unlike the immediate cave entrance and surrounding ridgeline areas, this lower chamber still contains a cache of historical artifacts, but the decades of tourist access have also resulted in the admixture of modern archaeological debris. At this writing, it is not known what the tunnels themselves contain since they have not yet been systematically surveyed.

The painted images are situated within two primary focal points, the first of which runs across a number of concave, recessed niches along the southwestern wall and the second, which lies directly across on the shallow, somewhat flattened portions of the southeastern wall. All of the images in these two loci are rendered in white pigment and notwithstanding chemical analysis, is very likely to be slaked lime.⁷ The first visual documentation of the Kalabera Cave images occurred in the 1920s when Hans Hornbostel, a former United States Marine who was employed as an artifact collector for the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in

Honolulu, Hawai'i, took a photograph of the pictograph depicting a human figure in a canoe (Figure 4). He also photographed the few remaining skulls found within the cave's entry area, which along with the majority of the pictographs located to date, substantiate the site's reference to and reverence for the skulls of the ancient Chamorro people (Figure 5).



Figure 4. The main motif of Liyang Kalabera, Saipan, as photographed by Hans Hornbostel in the 1920s.⁸



Figure 5. The entry area to Liyang Kalabera, Saipan, as photographed by Hans Hornbostel in the 1920s.⁹

There are well over 50 images identified at Kalabera. On average, the pictographs and the handful of petroglyphs that accompany them measure between five to ten inches in size. The majority are anthropomorphic. While it is largely presumed that these linear or rectilinear images represent human beings, except for the depiction of an occasional head, a torso and limbs are the only anatomically distinguishable

features that denote the human figure. One notable element that occurs in the cave images is the distinction of the human male (Figure 6). A number of the images are represented with a respective penis.¹⁰ The images without a penis are taken to be female in nature, although, as indicated above, no other readily recognizable anatomical features (female in this case) are present to distinguish the images as such (Figure 7).

The fact that the majority of the pictographs are rendered headless and the fact that skulls were still present in the cave from the Spanish Period through the 1920s are strong indications that Kalabera Cave was a probable burial site for the ancient Chamorros and one that perhaps included the ritual painting of pictographs and the carving of petroglyphs as part of the overall cultural emphasis on ancestor worship.



Figure 6. Male image, Kalabera Cave, Saipan.¹¹

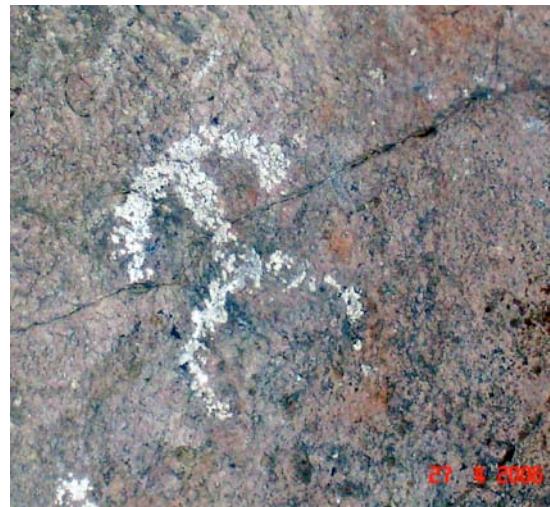


Figure 7. Female image, Kalabera Cave, Saipan.¹²

UNAI DANGKULU, TINIAN

Most of the rock art found throughout the known sites on Saipan, Tinian, Rota, and Guam is comprised of pictographs (images painted on a rock surface) and they are situated within a cave or cave-like setting. The importance of the Unai Dangkulu site on Tinian is two-fold. It is the only rock art site that is exclusively made up of petroglyphs (images carved or pecked into a rock surface) and it is situated outside of the typical cave setting. To date, there have not been any discoveries of petroglyph sites similar or identical to that of Unai Dangkulu.



Figure 8. Detailed view of Unai Dangkulu petroglyphs on Tinian.¹³

Unai Dangkulu is an ancient Chamorro place name, which literally means “Big Sand” or “Big Beach.” It is located along Tinian’s

northeastern coastal stretch known today as one of the primary Green Sea Turtle natal grounds. The petroglyphs are pecked into a flat, coral limestone outcrop or beach rock that lies approximately 20 to 30 feet from the high water mark. The effort required to carve these images into the rock surface would have been substantial, given the nature of the tools available at the time.¹⁴ They comprise approximately 50 individual images found in an area of about 260 square feet. Many of these are anthropomorphic, representing human beings as stick figures, often without heads (Figure 8). There are also a number of circular cup-like depressions, smaller rectilinear forms of unknown association and origin, as well as two examples that may represent turtles.

The petroglyphs are obscured from view because they lay buried in approximately two feet of sand. Wave action caused by typhoons wash sand up over the petroglyphs as well as clear the sand away. The latter was the case in 1998 when Typhoon Keith tore through the Northern Mariana Islands. It was at this time that the petroglyphs were discovered.

On the narrow coastal terrace above the beach, which in turn allows access to the beach, the remains of a Latte Period village have been found. Noted in this find were a total of sixteen Latte Stone sets as well as associated artifact surface scatter and what appears to be a Latte quarry site. It is possible that the petroglyphs and the Latte village were culturally linked.

LIYANG CHUGAI, LUTA (ROTA)

The Southern Arc islands of the Marianas Archipelago are raised coral limestone terrace islands. It is primarily along ridgelines on these raised terraces that cave systems are often situated. Chugai Cave, not unlike Kalabera Cave on Saipan, sits on the rim of a plateau along Rota's southeastern coastal stretch at a height of 450 feet above sea level. During the Japanese Period, a trail was let between a bedrock fissure, which connects with the cave, and a railroad grade that led to the general Chugai area of the island. It is this trail that serves as the main access to the pictograph site.

The cave itself measures 171 feet in length with a 10.5 foot wide, 20 feet high entrance. The passageway from the entrance narrows and then gradually widens into a 42-foot wide, 16 feet high rounded chamber. The narrowest portion of the cave measures 9 feet while the lowest point of its ceiling provides a clearance of 11 feet. It is situated in a NE-SW orientation and has an estimated floor area of 1080 square feet.



Figure 9. Sea Turtles, Chugai Cave, Rota.¹⁵

The pictographs begin at approximately one third of the way in along the east wall and then continue along the southern-to-western walls of the chamber. A number of images are also found in two locations on the cave's north wall. Unlike the Kalabera Cave pictographs, which were executed using white pigment, Chugai Cave's images were rendered using black pigment.¹⁶ Of note is the fact that natural light does not reach the areas of the cave wherein the pictographs are located and therefore it is very likely that other means of lighting were utilized in the rendering of these images (Butler 1997: 92).

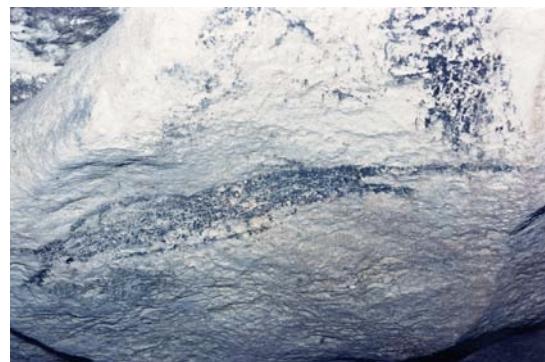


Figure 10. Bill Fish, Chugai Cave, Rota.¹⁷

The pictographs include anthropomorphic as well as zoomorphic images that are primarily geometric in their representation. There are three images however, that by far, are the more realistically drawn or painted. These include two that appear to be sea turtles each under twelve inches in size (Figure 9), and one that is obviously a bill fish measuring over three feet in length (Figure 10).

LIYANG GADAO, GUAM

This shoreline cave is located right over the high water mark of Inarajan Bay's northeastern periphery at an elevation of about 10 feet above sea level. It is a widely-known tourist site and is accessible off the main thoroughfare that runs along Guam's southeastern coastline (Highway 4). This part of Guam is touted as the more historically authentic sector of the island. This is especially the case when discussing the village of Inarajan, whose ancient Chamorro chief, Gadao, is believed to be the progenitor of the cave's images.¹⁸

By no means does Gadao's Cave equal Kalabera or Chugai in size. The entrance is about ten to twelve feet wide and about 10 feet high. The shallow chamber that follows is about eight feet deep, five feet wide, and seven feet high at the highest point. There is a slit between the walls at the chamber's end. This opens up into a small cavity that can hold one individual with hardly a modicum of comfort (three feet deep, two feet wide, and an angled seven foot height that follows the grade of the east wall of the cavity).

The outer chamber holds the main cache of images. Approximately 50 images exist and it is at this pictograph site that one can observe instances wherein there is a superimposition of images; so much so that it is difficult to distinguish just exactly what is being depicted. Within the interior cavity is a single image of a bill fish that appears to be both a pictograph and a petroglyph.¹⁹ All the images were rendered with white pigment. The size range of the images runs from about three inches to just under one foot.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The first encounter that the Mariana Islands had with the Western world occurred in 1521 with the accidental arrival of Ferdinand Magellan. The archipelago was not officially claimed by the Spanish crown until the voyage of Manuel López de Legazpi in 1565. No in-depth, balanced, and/or culturally sensitive accounts of the indigenous Chamorros were undertaken by either of these voyages. Such documentation was not eventualized until April 1602 when Fray Juan Pobre de Zamora, overzealous with the opportunity to finally set foot in the Marianas, jumped ship and spent seven months with the Chamorros of Rota. His observations, although also tinged with a civilized, Western bias, are considered the earliest accountings exhibiting a greater degree of objectivity regarding the Chamorros, their culture, and their island environment.

Father San Vitores' copious writings during the actual colonization of the archipelago, which began in 1668, delve into the culture and traditions of 17th century Chamorros in as much as they acquiesced to as well as countered the spread of Catholicism. After 50 years of shared belligerence and outright wars between the Chamorros and the Spanish colonial government, a majority of the surviving indigenous populace was forced to live on Guam. This left the islands north of Rota uninhabited for the better part of 110 years and an unequivocal silence blanketed the fate of an acculturated island people.

In 1742, an English expedition led by Lord George Anson, landed on Tinian under circumstances not unlike those experienced by Magellan centuries earlier. This voyage discusses the ramifications of Spanish colonial rule in the Marianas, but does not offer much regarding the native Chamorros. A similar approach to documentation as that exhibited by Fray Juan Pobre was only evidenced in 1819 when a French scientific expedition led by Louis Claude de Freycinet arrived on Guam. During their eleven-week stay (17 March to 6 June) on the island, visits to Rota and Tinian were additionally undertaken thereby providing spectral coverage of the physical and cultural environment of the Marianas as a whole. Of

great import is the fact that Freycinet's accounts serve to bridge those ancient cultural espousals found in Pobre's notations, those observed by his (Freycinet's) expedition, those lasting the final decades of Spanish rule, and those carried into the 20th century as Chamorros returned to Saipan, Tinian, and the Northern Islands.



Figure 11. Pictograph showing absence of lower extremities.²⁰

None of these historical accounts make substantive reference to ancient Chamorro rock art save a cursory mention here and there. Neither do they venture to consider that these pictographs and petroglyphs indeed function as a "written language" of the indigenous people of the Marianas Archipelago. They were more readily seen by Spanish colonizers as elements of subterfuge where the spread of Catholicism was concerned and as a consequence, forced the natives to destroy these images that served as their vital link to a millennia old ancestral legacy (Higgins et al. 2004:188).



Figure 12. Actual burial showing absence of lower extremities.²¹

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE AND INTERPRETATION

The pervasive theme exhibited by the imagery in the four sites discussed above is ancestor worship. The predominance of headless anthropomorphic figures makes this an obvious deduction. It is known that the ancient Chamorros interred their dead, but that after the calculated time required for the decomposition of muscles and tissue, the skull was extracted, cleaned, placed in specialized containers, and brought in the home. The presence of the skull in the home provided direct familial communication with the ancestors (*i man-aniti* or *aniti*) for assurances on issues of personal and/or communal conflict and for successes in farming, hunting, and/or fishing activities. Communication with *i man aniti* or *aniti* was also assumed collectively through the *kakana* or shamaness/shaman who served as the conduit through which the powers of the ancestors were culled.²² These *kakana* kept a number of skulls within their dwelling places for such purposes.

There are pictographs and petroglyphs that show a partial or complete absence of the

upper and/or lower extremities (Figure 11). These can be interpreted as the remains of individuals whose clavicle, arm bones and/or leg bones have been removed for use in the manufacture of tools and/or weapons (Figure 12). For example, the femur or thigh bone was fashioned into a multi-barbed spearhead with the “teeth” on either side carved at an approximate 45 degree angle so that the spearhead penetrated its target easily, but tore muscle and tissue to shreds upon extraction (Figure 13). The clavicle was fashioned into a compound fish hook (Figure 14) and arm bones were made into awls or needles with which fishing nets were sewn (Figure 15).



Figure 13. Spearpoint fashioned from a human femur.²³



Figure 14. Fragmented compound fishhook fashioned from a human clavicle.²⁴



Figure 15. Fragmented needle carved from human bone.²⁵

In the production and use of weaponry and tools, the spiritual strength of the ancestor in question (the owner of the skeletal remains) was invoked to allow for these same successes in battle, craftsmanship, farming, hunting, and/or fishing (Levesque 1993: 184). Although a skilled fisherman or brave warrior may have died, the use of his bones as fish hooks or spear points meant that he/she was still able to provide food and/or protection for his/her family. The inclusion of zoomorphic images and hunting and fishing implements (slings, stones, fish hooks, and canoes) in these pictorial assemblages also is likely to be linked to this idea of the ancestors ensuring successful hunting and/or fishing expeditions.

Early accounts reference that the dead were buried in caves as well as near family homes (especially during the Latte Period). Given that a majority of the images found to date are situated within cave settings, it is therefore fitting that communication with the ancestors probably took place wherein they were buried utilizing imagery and possibly ritual to facilitate the desired results for which the powers of the ancients were sought. In essence, the reliance upon the knowledge provided by the ancestors during their lifetime and the powers they transmitted from the realm of the after life lay at the crux of ancient Chamorro culture. This is still true today. Many modern-day Chamorro descendants practice ancestor worship, but with a slight twist in that it is now funnelled through the teachings of Catholicism. Many individuals offer a “mass of intention” for the repose of the soul of a deceased relative right at the time of death or on the anniversary of the individual’s demise. More often than not, these masses are offered for individuals’ respective death anniversaries that range from the first year and up to 60 or more years after the time of death. This keeps the memory of the deceased loved one alive within the immediate and extended family circles.



Figure 16. Flex burial image, Saipan.²⁶

Interestingly enough, there are those pictographs and petroglyphs that harken not only to ancestor worship, but are a direct commentary on burials themselves and “how” bodies were interred. These are the “flex” burial images. In Figure 16 the image has its lower extremities bent upward at the knees while its upper limbs are bent downward at the elbows. The hands and feet serve as the connecting elements thereby completing a “box-like” configuration. Figure 17 shows a rendering of an actual ancient Chamorro burial that no longer contains the individual’s upper body and wherein the pelvis is still articulated to the lower limbs with the legs flexed at the knees.

The pictographs and petroglyphs identified to date can be considered as direct documentation of ancient Chamorro culture and as such are in line with the definition of not a written language in the Western sense, but a language nonetheless that is set out in pictorial fashion. Not unlike the many forms of writing that are found the world over, these ancient Chamorro images also have an inherent variation.

The petroglyphs are consistent throughout the known and newly discovered sites. The variation occurs in the pictographs. As indicated earlier in this discussion, the majority of the pictographs were executed with the use of a white pigment. However, there are those images that were drawn and/or painted via the use of charcoal or a black pigment. There are still those that were rendered through the utilization of a red pigment. It is likely that this type of pigment is that of red ochre; possibly

hematite and/or iron oxide with some type of resin mixed in as a binder. There are also those images, as that shown in Figure 10a that have a yellowish tinge to them. It could be that the ancients found a source for ochre itself or this could also be a chemical reaction between the use of slaked lime (white pigment) on a surface that contains an iron deposit. If this is the case, then the yellowish appearance is the effect of the iron on the slaked lime.

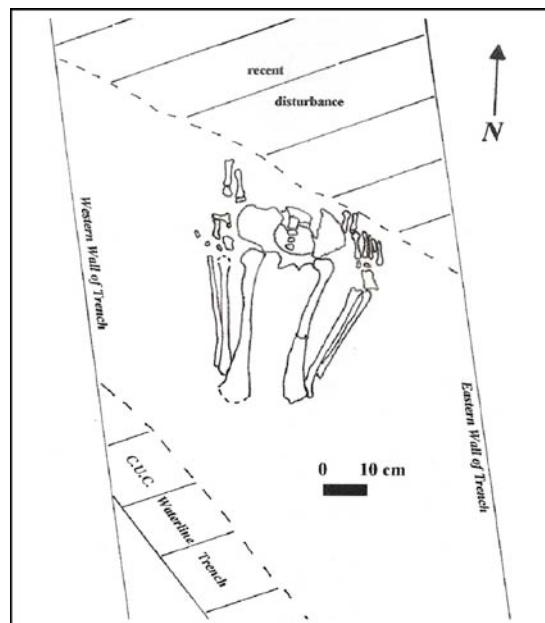


Figure 17. Drawing of actual of flex burial, Saipan.²⁷

It also appears, for the most part, that the pictographs were executed using the human finger or fingers or some soft, blunt-tipped instrument. A majority of the images that the authors have documented are without any hints of any striations normally exhibited by imagery produced with the use of a paintbrush or other fiber-tipped utensil. There are, however, a good number of exceptions wherein brush lines are notable throughout the outline of the images. Fig. 5a is one such example, although it might not be readily noticeable in the photograph used for this discussion. It is rather interesting that the images that exhibit a higher quality of artistic rendering, that is, those images that have a greater sense of realism about them, are the ones that were painted with the use of some kind of brush.

There is obviously more to be said about what has been found in the known pictograph and/or petroglyph sites and what is newly discovered. With this introduction to initial considerations regarding the rock art of the Mariana Islands, it is hoped that many aspects of ancient Chamorro culture that await rediscovery will begin to be unlocked as studies of ancient imagery progress. After 500 years of silence, the rock art of the Mariana Islands slowly begins to reclaim the Chamorro people's rightful ancestral voice and by doing so, hopes to rejuvenate the inherent cultural wisdom lodged in the hearts of its modern-day descendants.

ENDNOTES

- ¹. Japanese Period documents and/or reports surveyed to date do not provide direct or indirect references to ancient Chamorro rock art.
- ². Source: Fritz 1904.
- ³. Source: Fritz 1904.
- ⁴. Both the Japanese Military and Saipan's civilian population utilized the island's caves as defensive positions and shelter from the advancing American forces during the Battle for Saipan.
- ⁵. Discussions with Dr. Omaira Brunal-Perry regarding Saipan's *Kalabera* area.
- ⁶. Source: Prowazek 1913.
- ⁷. Slaked lime, known as *affuk* in native Chamorro, is the product of processed calcium carbonate. It has a paste-like consistency and can be thinned out by diluting it with water. *Affuk* is one of the ingredients used in the traditional chewing of betelnut.
- ⁸. Source: Hornbostel Collection, CNMI Division of Historic Preservation, Saipan
- ⁹. Source: Hornbostel Collection, CNMI Division of Historic Preservation, Saipan
- ¹⁰. On-site discussions with Scott Russell, former CNMI HPO staff historian.
- ¹¹. G. S. Cabrera Photo.
- ¹². G. S. Cabrera Photo.
- ¹³. Source: CNMI Division of Historic Preservation, Saipan,
- ¹⁴. In an island environment, natural resources are inevitably limited. The ancient Chamorros had stone, shell, bone, clay, and wood from which they could manufacture needed tools and weapons.
- ¹⁵. Source: Photo Archives, CNMI Division of Historic Preservation, Dr. H. Kurashina Photo
- ¹⁶. The authors theorize that this black pigment could be either charcoal mixed with a liquid binder (perhaps water or some kind of resin) or a black pigment extracted from some root source as that utilized in the staining of ancient Chamorro women's teeth. It could be an admixture of both substances. Only a systematic analysis of a sampling of the extant pigment will determine the actual type or types of material(s) used.
- ¹⁷. Photo Archives, CNMI Division of Historic Preservation, J. D. Camacho Photo
- ¹⁸. *Gadao* is the general term that native Chamorro language speakers use to refer to the *grouper* family of fish.
- ¹⁹. There is evidence of the image having been pecked into the surface of the tiny chamber's east wall. Over the pecked image appears a layer of white pigment that has turned yellowish with time and exposure to the shoreline environment.
- ²⁰. Source: G. S. Cabrera Photo
- ²¹. Source: Swift *et al.* 2003 Fig. 78.
- ²². Fritz observed that to a larger extent, women were considered the friends of the *aniti* and therefore, the intercessors who acted on behalf of those in the realm of the living. He also points out that Le Gobien's reference to the shamaness as the *makana* was Incorrect and that the applicable native terminology was *kakana*. The term *kakana* is more prevalently utilized to day. "Ma" in Chamorro denotes *to whom* or *upon whom* a particular action is being rendered. For example, *matug'* means *it is/was written*; *makann'* means *it/they were eaten*. "Makakanayi" (pronounced maka'kanadzi) *I patgun'* or "He/She cast a spell/prayer upon the child" is an example of the proper manner in which one conveys the reference to the act of a shamaness/shaman invoking the *aniti* to effect a certain condition or situation upon a person.
- ²³. Photo Archives, CNMI Division of Historic Preservation
- ²⁴. R. York Photo, Courtesy of the CNMI Museum of History and Culture
- ²⁵. G. S. Cabrera Photo
- ²⁶. G. S. Cabrera Photo
- ²⁷. Swift *et al.* 2003 Figure 76.

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