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BOOK REVIEW

Scott Russell (2002) *The Island of Rota. An Archaeological and Historical Overview*. Occasional Historic Papers Series n° 11. Saipan: Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Division of Historic Preservation. 82 pp; ISBN: 1-878453-61-0

reviewed by

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Rota, the southern-most island of the Northern Marianas, forms a significant stepping stone between the largest island of the Marianas, Guam, and the large islands of Saipan and Tinian. Historically, it is an island which cannot be understood in isolation from the archaeology and history of Guam or Saipan. Yet, at the same time, the vicissitudes of colonial exploitation and later partitioning of the Marianas afforded Rota a special role as an isolate on the one hand, and a linkage island between different colonial administrations, and different ways to administer a colony. So far, there have been no attempts to write historiographies for single islands in the Marianas, with the exception of Guam. Thus Scott Russell's book is a welcome addition to the bookshelf.

The book falls into two parts: (i) a description of the archaeological fieldwork carried out on Rota and its main findings, focussing on the latte and pre-latte periods; and (ii) a historical overview of the Spanish, German and Japanese periods.

Prior to European interference in the island's affairs, Rota's history seems to have followed that of the rest of the Marianas, with

a pre-latte period (~3500–2000BP) and a latte period (500–~1500BP). The physiography of Rota, a fossil coral limestone island that had undergone repeated tectonic uplift, was defined by a narrow fringing reef and an absence of protected beaches and inner lagoons—prime settlement locations for the early period.

Latte sites have been documented, with two sites of archaeological significance for the Marianas as a whole: the latte village of Mochong, with its unique latte set comprised of columns on one side and a solid wall on the other; the other site being the latte quarry of As Nieves with the largest latte columns and cap stones in the entire island chain.

While Russell presents summaries of each of the archaeological studies, any integration of the various archaeological observations is left to the reader. The section on archaeology, thus reads more like a series of abstracts than an integrated discussion. One would have liked to see an exploration of the differences of Rota's archaeology compared to that of Guam or Saipan. Situated in between Guam and Saipan/Tinian, one has to ask whether Rota was a stepping stone island, for example, or whether

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it was bypassed by much of the exchange traffic once Tinian and Saipan were settled. Even if it is too early to answer such questions definitively, the book would have benefited from raising them.

The second part of the book is a straightforward compilation of the history of Rota in the context of the history of the Marianas in general. It traces the history of the Protohistoric Period (1521–1668) and the Period of the *reduccion* (1668–1700). Following the forced depopulation of Saipan, Tinian and the northern islands, Rota became the northern outpost of the Marianas, administratively, and politically a satellite to Guam. It was to continue in this role until the beginning of the German period in 1899.

Even though Saipan was reopened for settlement in 1899, little population movement and little change to living conditions occurred on Rota. The loss of Guam to the USA as a result of the Spanish-American War of 1898, and the subsequent rule of the Spanish interim administrator General Eugenio Blanco and his Filipino soldiers on Saipan, meant that Rota became a haven of refuge for people dissatisfied with American rule on Guam and/or fleeing the excesses of the Pampagnos regime on Saipan. With the US annexation of Guam an international border was drawn between it and Rota. While this was less of a concern for the last months of Spanish rule, it became relevant in the following years: successive administrations in the Northern Marianas prohibited inter-island travel between Rota and Guam unless individual permission had been granted. Whereas Rota had been an outlier of Guam and focussed on that island for the Spanish periods, it remained an outlier but was now refocussed on Saipan. The book would have benefited from an exploration of these patterns and their implications.

In his discussion of the German period Russell notes that Rota is the exception to the German policy of homesteading, suggesting that on this island the policy somehow failed. It was never attempted on Rota because the

island was already quite densely settled when the Germans took over the Northern Marianas as a colony and thus government-owned land, which could be handed out as homesteads, was in short supply. In this Rota differed significantly from Saipan and Tinian.

During the early part of the Japanese period, Rota remained a backwater, as the major plantation developments took place on Tinian and Saipan. As these islands were fully developed by 1930, Rota then became the focus of further expansion of the sugar cane industry. Lack of land due to the physiography of the island, meant that the development was not as intensive. Throughout World War II, Rota remained in Japanese hands as its strategic value was too negligible to warrant capture.

Following World War II, Rota, with the rest of the former Mandated Territory of Micronesia became a Trust Territory of the United Nations, administered by the USA. It continued to be a border island with travel restrictions between Rota and Guam. These were only fully lifted when the Northern Mariana Islands District of the Trust Territory became a Commonwealth of the NMI and thus politically part of the USA.

The volume is amply, but selectively illustrated. If a reader anticipates the inclusion of most up-to-date research, however, then this expectation will be not be met. The manuscript for the book was completed in 1994, and with minor amendments to the bibliography, none of the more recent work could be included for printing in 2002. The bibliography has its own idiosyncrasies; while arranging the authors alphabetically, it departs from generally accepted style by listing their more recent publications first.

Despite the reservations expressed above, the publication is a worthy addition to the literature. As with many of the publications of the CNMI Historic Preservation Office, the book will find wide distribution in the CNMI school system. It is hoped that a second edition can update the literature and address some of the concerns raised above.