

SENGALL RIDGE, BELAU: BURIALS, SPIRIT WALKS, AND PAINTED POTTERY

Felicia R. Beardsley¹ and Umai Basilius²

¹University of California, Riverside, ²Palau Resource Institute, Belau

ABSTRACT

High atop a narrow ridge of limestone rest four bodies in a small chamber of a more extensive vertical solution cave in Sengall Ridge, Belau. The four are laying in repose, together with the only burial furniture found in the cave - painted ceramic bowls. According to oral history, this was not the final resting place of the departed souls but merely a way-station in their journey to Ngedeloch Spring on Angaur Island in the south, where they would bathe and cleanse themselves in preparation for the final leap into the spirit world. Today the ridge continues to be described as a ghost walk, where spirits from the northern islands of Belau stop on their journey to Ngedeloch Spring. Is this a belief that has endured from the time of the Sengall Ridge cave burial, dated about 2,630 BP? Is it a result of former burial practices that describe other prehistoric interments in caves located throughout this ridge system? Is association of this oral tradition with the Sengall Ridge cave burial merely coincidence? The cave, its burials and ceramic tradition will be described with specific reference to oral traditions and changing burial practices.

The machinations of archaeological theory have undergone many changes over the course of our discipline's history, from a focus on people and culture history, to people as one among several components of study in a processual universe, to an emphasis on elites, then non-elites, material culture, environment, and everything in-between. Throughout these episodic ebbs and flows of theory, conjecture and abstract formulations, most archaeological commentary continues to lean toward the precepts of culture history, relying on multiple lines of evidence in their treatments and interpretations of complex historical processes. Archaeology is, after all, much like history, in that it is an exercise in tempered

imagination, where one must make reasoned connections between various sources of unrelated information. Supplemental information to augment the historical (archaeological) record is often derived from any number of combinations of historical, linguistic, biological, and ethnographic data, including oral history.

Forays into oral history tend to be limited and focused on specific questions in archaeology. Yet even these concentrated stints relay insights into the potency of cultural meaning and observation, and allow one to understand how such meaning is firmly rooted in tradition (Finnegan and Orbell 1995). Oral history is a truly rich store of cultural lore handed down from one generation to the next, and is especially important in those regions of the world where current generations retain direct, uninterrupted lines of descent from generations in the long distant past. In the Republic of Belau, where very real and dynamic ties exist between past and present, oral history is a routine avenue of inquiry. It is used to explain events of the past, to resolve issues of protocol and proprietorship in the courts, to entertain, to preserve family histories and relationships, and to enrich the archaeological text. As in oral histories in other places, time is relative; temporal depth is difficult to identify and pinpoint, making it more difficult to assign a story or event to a specific time period. This, unfortunately, is a natural by-product of oral histories — stories passed from one generation to another, with variations arising with each retelling, usually under new circumstances, in different environments, and often under the influence of varying life circumstances and histories of the tellers themselves. The very essence of a story may remain immutable; however, the descriptive text that surrounds this core and propels the story forward, is subject to change in many subtle ways.

In 1996, my colleague and I were invited to be part of a group of archaeologists asked to examine a burial cave at the top of Sengall Ridge on the northeastern edge of Oreor

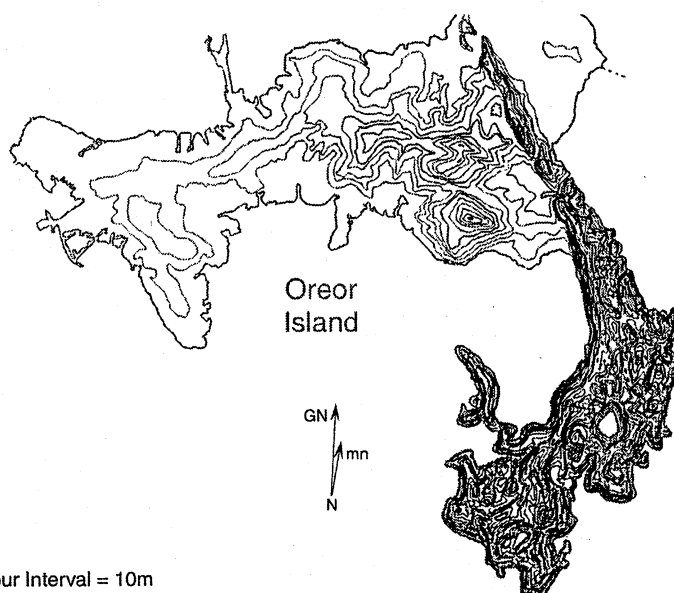
Island, Belau (Figure 1). The cave contains four skeletons laid out in cavities within the chamber, along with burial furniture of at least four complete painted bowls, a few sherds of painted pottery, and a *Tridacna* hinge adze. A date of $2,630 \pm 60$ BP was derived from the temper in one of the pottery sherds, which is among the oldest dates directly associated with a cultural event in the archipelago. The ridge and its surrounding environment is awash in traditional (and more recent) tales of transient spirits and their activities; it is alternately referred to as a ghost walk and spirit leaping place. David Snyder (1990) notes that additional cave burials are present in the northern extension of the ridge system; however, their presence has only recently been verified by the State (Rita Olsudong pers. comm. 1998).

THE BURIAL CAVE SITE

Sengall burial cave is located at the top of a narrow limestone ridgeline and is one of several interconnected vertical solution caves that extend from the top of the ridge to its base. The chambers are characterized by limestone rubble — everywhere; there is no soil, and the walls and ceilings are continually crumbling. The first chamber contains the sparse remnants of a Japanese occupation. But in the back of this cave, at its east end, there is a small hole in the floor: the entrance to the burial chamber. A *Tridacna* adze rests at the mouth of this entrance (Figure 2).

From the entrance, there is a drop of about 3m to the floor of this chamber. Water steadily drips from the walls; it is a damp and humid environment, but it also receives a flow of fresh air, circulated from below through the rubble that defines the floor. The chamber itself is roughly 5m across, with two cavities where the dead have been laid out in extended positions.

The east wall cavity is about a meter above the floor and looks almost as if it had been carved into the cave wall. Three skeletons lay side by side here, with their heads to the south. On the opposite side of the chamber, in the west wall, there is another cavity that appears to be the entrance to a still lower chamber; however, the descending passage is blocked by rubble. The remains of a fourth individual are found here, with head to the east and post-cranial bones to the west. All four skeletons are heavily mineralized, highly fragmented, quite fragile and practically dissolve upon touch. Roof-fall has further disturbed the remains and probably



Contour Interval = 10m

Figure 1: Steep-sided Sengall Ridge on the east side of Oreor Island, Belau. The burial cave is located on the ridgecrest, at the northern end of the system.

exacerbated their fragmentation, as many of the bones are now commingled with rubble. At least one individual has blackened teeth, a stain similar to that produced by chewing betel nut.

In addition to the human remains, four virtually intact painted earthenware bowls are present in the chamber (Figure 3), along with a few scattered sherds of painted pottery, some plain earthenware sherds, and a very small amount of *Strombus* shell. The painted vessels are a rare occurrence in the archaeological record of Belau, as only five other painted vessels have been reported (Osborne 1966, 1979). Two had been moved to Japan in the 1920s and subsequently lost; the other three are housed in the Belau National Museum.

All four Sengall vessels are shallow earthenware bowls with narrow, parallel rims. They are tempered with volcanic sands and display red-on-buff painted geometric designs that consist of patterned parallel and linear elements. The interiors of at least two bowls are covered with a solid wash of red paint; but the paint has degraded sufficiently to display the fingering used in applying the paint. A single date of $2,630 \pm 60$ BP was derived from a piece of charcoal (C3, ordinary plant material) imbedded in the temper of one painted pottery sherd; this date should be viewed as preliminary, however, awaiting verification by additional dates. Such an early date places the site into a small, discrete category as one of the older, dated cultural events in Belau. Until recently, this was the oldest date in the archipelago, over 500 years older than the oldest acceptable dates. The

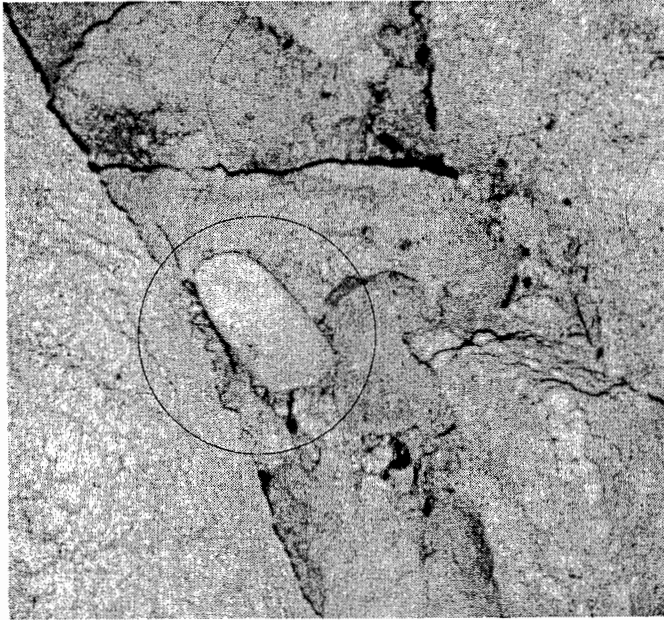


Figure 2: *Tridacna* shell adze at the entrance to the burial chamber.

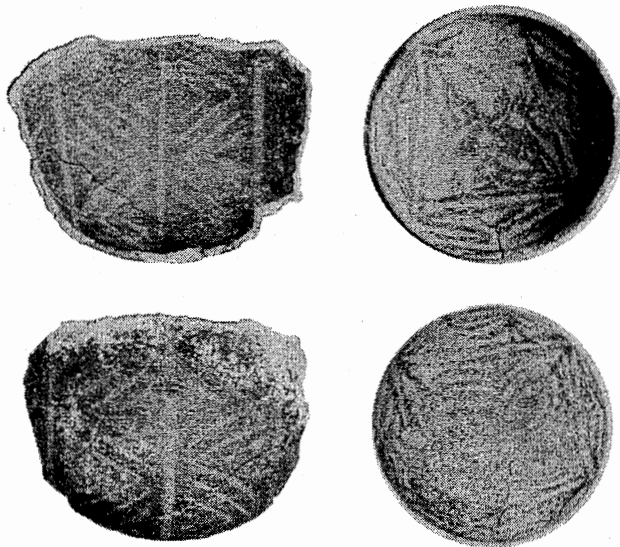


Figure 3a: Interior and exterior of two red-on-buff painted ceramic bowls found in association with the burials. Designs on both the inside and outside surfaces are roughly parallel.

recent find of a painted pottery sherd in a deposit dating to 2,500 BP on the island of Babeldaob (Kaschko 1997) has provided some confirmation for the validity of the burial cave site. Dated environmental deposits, also on Babeldaob, suggest human activity in modifying the landscape as early as 3,000 to 4,000 BP (Ward *et al.* 1998; Welch, this volume). Though scant, this meagre collection of new and early dates

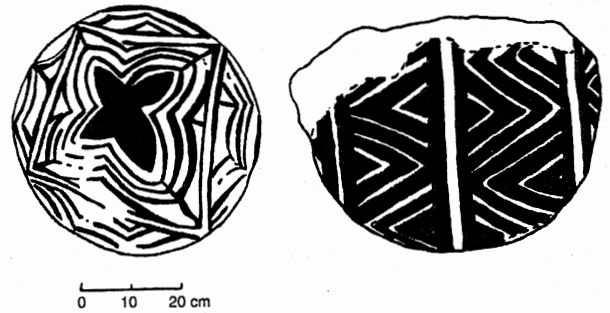


Figure 3b: Design details from Figure 3a. The exterior surface on two of the painted pots from the burial cave.

is gradually shifting the chronometric status of Belau to an earlier position in western Pacific prehistory, moving it closer to the early dates associated with Mariana Islands prehistory.

ORAL HISTORY OF SENGALL

There are no oral histories that describe the cave itself, or for that matter other burial caves in the same ridge system. Cave burials seem to be from a time 'before history,' prior to the period covered by oral history. Local lore about Sengall Ridge describe it as a ghost walk and spirit-leaping place. These tales are persistent, and perhaps owe much of their endurance to the prominence of the ridgeline, its desolate character, and the burials that exist throughout the network of caves in the entire ridge system. On many islands across the Pacific, tales of spirit leaping places are often recounted, along with associations between spirits and places of burial (Clerk 1995). Inevitably, such leaping places are linked to tall points of land. Sengall Ridge is one of those tall points of land; it is highly visible and can be seen from any number of places along the southern end of Babeldaob, from the lagoon and from Oreor. From certain perspectives, it almost seems to divide Belau into north and south. In the oral histories, Sengall Ridge is part of an 'ancient path,' that is, one which was created by a god or heroic ancestor and is more or less a powerful institution in the collective tradition (Parmentier 1987).

As an ancient path, the ridgeline is part of the more extensive north-south track followed by spirits from the northern islands on their southward journey to Ngedeloch Spring on the island of Angaur, where they would bathe and cleanse themselves before taking their final leap into the spirit world. The ridgeline served as a leaping-place or way-station, where the dearly departed would stop and take a rest to refresh themselves in preparation for the remainder of their journey to Ngedeloch Spring.

Other stories that center on the ridge describe it as a ghost walk, where spirits continuously roam (Hijikata 1995). At least one of these stories is an account of the activities of the Tekiimelab, or demi-gods, whose home was immediately west of the ridge. Every night, according to the story, the spirits would go net fishing (*mengesokes*) in the hills nearby, but instead of catching fish, they caught people. The spirits also roamed Sengall Ridge, but what they did on these walks remains a mystery. Strange and enigmatic carrying-ons have also been relayed in more recent stories of ghosts or wayward spirits in the immediate area. These stories speak of various apparitions of a young woman with long hair, a policeman, and a foul-smelling entity, all of whom alternately wander the area.

There are additional stories relating to historical events in the general area, but these refer primarily to rivalries between the villages of Chuab, that is, the earliest villages in Belau.

A CONVERGENCE OF EVIDENCE

If nothing else, stories of Sengall Ridge as a spirit leaping place and ghost walk transform the archaeological record into a very interesting story. How much truth is there in the oral histories? Ghost stories in general are a part of life in a traditional community; they are common elements in oral histories across the Pacific, reproduced with each generation (Clerk 1995; Finnegan and Orbell 1995). Such stories may be adapted to new circumstances, but the form and content of older narratives persist, providing continuity with traditions of great antiquity (Clerk 1995). The sheer persistence and longevity of stories about spirit leaping places suggest a considerably older age than the general corpus of oral history, in Belau and elsewhere.

With virtually no temporal depth embedded in the stories, however, is it possible that the Sengall Ridge stories, especially with references to ancient paths, spirit leaping places and ghost walks, are relics of a more distant past, where the dead were placed in caves as opposed to burials in the family platforms commonly associated with the later Traditional Village period? Was designation of the ridge as a spirit-leaping place a result of burials like Sengall burial cave, or were the burials a response to a still older belief that high, remote, and desolate geological features are leaping places? At this point, the argument becomes circular, although it is perhaps easier to believe the latter, as geological prominences across the Pacific seem to be the focal point of local ghost stories and the lore of ancient paths.

Sengall Ridge is a natural candidate for such stories. It is visually impressive and a formidable, steep-walled, jagged formation of limestone appended to an otherwise relatively low-lying, rounded volcanic island. Its distinction lies in its

vertical altitude; it is higher than the other ground around it, either on Oreor or Babeldaob; it is the only large mass of limestone in the immediate vicinity of what are otherwise volcanic land forms; and its narrow, knife-like appearance as it rises from the lagoon is intimidating and scary. Continuing this line of argument, Sengall burial cave represents a cultural pattern that called for elaborate preparation of the dead in their journey to the spirit world some 2,600 years ago. The dearly departed were laid out in caves scattered throughout a geological body known to be part of an ancient path to their final destination, Ngedeloch Spring. They were supplied with the finer necessities for their journey — decorated burial furnishings (painted pottery) and a tool or two — to promote their rest and repose before continuing on to the final leaping place on Angaur.

Sengall burial cave also presents questions of cultural context. What did this early period of occupation look like in Belau? Until recently, an occupation 2,600 years ago was purely hypothetical (Kaschko 1997, 1998). Recent pollen coring work, however, has changed this, by demonstrating pollen compositions and charcoal particle counts indicative of a potential human presence in the islands by at least 3,000 BP, and possibly as early as 4,200 BP (Ward *et al.* 1998). Technological evidence from the burial cave suggests a rather sophisticated pottery making industry at this time, one in which specialty pots like the painted bowls were produced as burial furniture and perhaps luxury items. Other features included thin blackware pottery, open ridgetop sites, ring-ditches and hilltop fortifications, and the massive monumental earthworks for which Belau is known (Kaschko 1998). Little else can be said of the possible cultural features that characterized occupation during this remote time, other than it took an enormous organizational effort to rally the populace and sculpt the hills of Babeldaob, as well as coordinate a pottery making industry complete with the capability of producing specialty items.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Details on the occupation of Belau at 2,600 BP are sketchy at best. A few scattered features have been added to the assemblage of cultural activity, with supporting evidence supplied by recent environmental and archaeological work. The most complete contribution toward reconstructing just a small part of life in this remote time actually comes from the circumstances of death — the Sengall burial cave with its painted pots and occupants in repose, coupled with the traditional lore of spirits, paths, and journeys into the nether world.

Like any inquiry, however, more questions are raised than answered. Archaeological issues include the timing and occurrence of painted pottery. The very few vessels reported within the entirety of the island's archaeological

record deserve attention; the very appearance of painted pottery has profound implications on the archaeological and cultural record, especially when associated with such an early date. Other issues include shifting burial practices, the skeletal remains themselves (local whispers suggest those buried in the cave belong to a different, unrelated people), their integrity and level of diagenetic alteration.

When called upon to enrich the archaeological record, the use of oral history should be included in the list of potential, supplemental references. There may be no temporal dimension that can be easily identified within a dialogue or narrative, but the content and form often betray a kernel of truth derived from actual events. Such stories suggest investigative paths and alternatives in proving or disproving interpretations drawn from archaeological evidence. In the case of Sengall Ridge, where ghost stories and references to ancient spirit paths persist, the debate rages over which came first: the spirit stories or the burials. Either way, we are content to know that such stories exist, and can be called upon to enrich the archaeological record.

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