

THE JAPANESE BONE COLLECTING EXPEDITION ON TINIAN, MARIANA ISLANDS
MARCH 1985: ITS IMPACT UPON HISTORIC RESOURCES

Graeme Ward, Canberra
and Michael Pickering,
C/o Department of Prehistory
and Anthropology,
Australian National University

This paper¹ reports observations of the activities of a Japanese expedition to collect the remains of Pacific War combatants from Tinian, one of the southernmost of the Mariana Islands, and summarizes a field analysis of the skeletal material assemblages resulting from this activity. It documents the illegal excavation and use of earth-moving equipment by the collecting team and consequent destruction of at least one known prehistoric occupation area and outlines the results² of the analysis which concludes that the large majority of the human remains recovered were of prehistoric Chamorro origin.

Early in March 1985 a team of some twenty Japanese veterans of the Pacific War and others came to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands to collect Japanese skeletal material dating to the 1944 period. This collection was to be made with the concurrence of the CNMI authorities; the terms of the agreement stated that searches and collections could be made but that no excavation was to be undertaken without the prior approval of the CNMI authorities (Hocog, personal communication, March 1985).

FIELD OBSERVATIONS

Late on the afternoon of Sunday 3 March, members of the Tinian Archaeological Survey team then engaged in research at Tachogna in southern Tinian (Ward 1985) visited the prehistoric site at Unai Chulu in the northwestern part of the island (Figures 1 & 2). This area is also known as 'White 2' or 'Invasion Beach', having been one of the foci of the American landing in July 1944 and its attempted repulse by the Japanese forces occupying the island. Here members observed heavy earthmoving equipment being used to clear scrub and to excavate large areas of the prehistoric site behind the foredunes. This site was known to comprise extensive middens and at least two sets of latte, the monuments forming the most conspicuous remnants of the prehistoric Chamorro culture (Spoehr 1957). The machinery was being operated by a local man under the direction of the Japanese bone collection team which had arrived on Tinian earlier in the week. Archaeological Survey team members were shown human bone collected by the Japanese.

The observations made at Unai Chulu were reported to the Tinian Historic Preservation Co-ordinator, Mr Estanislao Hocog, early on the morning of 4 March. At his request, three members of the archaeological team then accompanied him to Unai Chulu to observe and photograph the effects of the clearing. The clearing and excavation had

restarted. Mr Hocog talked with the Japanese, and a Tinian man accompanying them then ordered that the excavation be stopped. In the meantime, photographs were taken of the earthmoving equipment in use and the extent of the clearing of the area and of the destruction of the archaeological site.

The bulldozer and most of the bone collecting team then moved to the north of the area near the access road. Hocog remained talking with another group where the work had been stopped. When he walked north to the other cleared area he found that a large excavation was underway again using the bulldozer. Again he stopped the work but not before a large area of the subsurface midden component of the Unai Chulu site had been exposed, in some places to a considerable depth.

Hocog then advised the Japanese team that they must work elsewhere; the bulldozer was to be used only to fill the excavation. The bone collecting team was reminded that it did not have permission to excavate. During the discussions Mr Hocog attempted to point out to the members of the team the evidence that the area was a prehistoric site. While it was clear that some appreciated this, others appeared in doubt or to express disbelief or lack of concern.

Without disturbing in situ materials, a sample of late ('latte') and early ('Pre-latte') phase artefacts were collected and returned to the Tinian Historic Preservation Co-ordinator's office. These have since been annotated as to location and probable prehistoric function and provided as a reference collection to the Tinian Elementary and Junior High School.

The site visit of 24 March revealed that the deeper excavations had been filled and the area behind the sand dunes had been flattened relative to its immediate environs. It appeared that, in the last phase of earthmoving, further stratified deposits in the northwest of the area had been cut into.

Subsequently, the CNMI Historic Preservation Office requested that the area cleared and excavated be mapped and photographed and that any materials collected by the Japanese be examined to ascertain whether any prehistoric Marianas relics were included among them.

As illustrated by the site map (Figure 3), a considerable area of the Unai Chulu site had been affected by the bone collecting clearing operations. Approximately 8000 square metres had been cleared and some 4000 metres excavated to a significant depth by the earthmoving equipment. Part of the excavations in the northern area extended to a depth of more than one and a half metres. While no firm data on the extent of the Unai Chulu site are available, casual observation suggests that it covers possibly 25000 square metres. Thus approximately one third of the site might have been adversely affected by the bone collector's activities and nearly a fifth destroyed or severely disturbed by the deep excavation.

There can be no doubt about either the presence of prehistoric materials in the area of Unai Chulu or of their potential as a cultural resource for the documentation of ancient Chamorro history. Moreover, there were both later and earlier phase materials in evidence at the site.

Midden materials and Marianas Plain pottery typical of the late phase of Marianas prehistory were in evidence on the surface of the site before disturbance occurred. latte were known to be present before excavation commenced at both the northern and southern ends of the site. While there were probably many more in existence before the development of the area for agriculture during the 1930s, some sets have survived with upright pillars through what must have been an intensive impact upon the area during the invasion in July 1944 and over the subsequent year which saw the development of the island as a base for the systematic bombing and planned invasion of the Japanese mainland.

Following the bulldozing, the abundance of prehistoric cultural materials in the area of the Unai Chulu site was very much more evident than before. Midden materials, particularly in the north of the site, were clearly manifest on the ground surface. A Tridacna shell adze - dislodged by the bulldozer - was collected from the access road to the northern end of the site; superficial scraping by the bulldozer's blade had uncovered large areas of midden remains including oven stones, shell and bone midden refuse, thousands of potsherds and other prehistoric materials. In more than one place, well-formed hearths had been revealed. In the south of the area, remnants of what is probably a latte set - located only 30 metres from one recorded in a survey of the Military Retention Zone during the previous year - had been run over and damaged by the bulldozer.

While the existence of the recent prehistoric occupation had been clear from the presence of the latte and other materials on the site surface, there is other evidence that the site was deeply stratified and of considerable antiquity. Occupation deposits were evident to the full depth excavated in the northern end of the site. There were scattered among the debris deposited by the bulldozer many sherds of Marianas Red ware, a pottery well attested to be derived from earlier horizons and probably dating at Unai Chulu to as much as three millennia ago.

Inspection of the three bags of skeletal material obtained by the bone collecting team was arranged and supervised by the Tinian Historic Preservation Co-ordinator and made with the co-operation of the Japanese. It revealed that one bag probably contained almost exclusively prehistoric Chamorro bone; the second bag contained predominantly Chamorro bone with the distinctively different remains of one probably Japanese individual; the third bag contained historic Japanese remains from a known grave site. Hocog retained a selection of the positively identified Chamorro remains from the first and second bags. The remainder was mixed together and removed from the island by the Japanese.

CONCLUSION

Bone collecting expeditions were necessary in the years following the Pacific War when the remains of Japanese military personnel were to be found in caves and on the ground surface in many localities; no doubt much grief was assuaged by the return to the mainland and to the possession of relatives of identifiable and even individually unidentifiable remains. However, it would appear that, after the passage of forty years, this is no longer the case and that, in order to justify their visits, the bone collecting teams have to resort to destruction of pre-War graves and, in ignorance of Marianas law and of Chamorro culture, to disturb the limited and constantly diminishing prehistoric cultural resources extant in the Marianas.

A series of recommendations to terminate or closely to control the activities of collecting expeditions with respect to the protection of Marianas archaeological heritage were included in the report made to the Tinian Historic Preservation Co-ordinator and the CNMI Historic Preservation Office.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research on Tinian was conducted with the support of the CNMI Historic Preservation Office; we are indebted to Mr Jesus Pangalinen and Mr Scott Russell. The original report was made at the encouragement of Mr Estanislao Hocog, Historic Preservation Co-ordinator on Tinian, and Mr Michael A. Fleming, Staff Archaeologist; thanks are due to them for guiding and facilitating the work of the archaeological survey team on Tinian. Assistance in mapping, photography and identification was received from crew members, Gordon Claridge, Christine Dalliston, Ann Robb, Judith Webster.

FOOTNOTES

1. This report has been abstracted from that originally submitted to The Historic Preservation Co-ordinator, Tinian, and the Historic Preservation Office of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Saipan, in April 1985.
2. Presented in full in the original report; summarized here.

REFERENCES

- Spoehr, A. 1957. Marianas Prehistory. Archaeological Survey and Excavations on Saipan, Tinian and Rota. Chicago: Chicago Natural History Museum (Fieldiana: Anthropology 48).
- Ward, G.K. 1985. Tachogna latte Complex: preliminary report on archaeological research at Tachogna, Tinian, during February and March 1985. Unpublished report to the Tinian Historic Preservation Co-ordinator and the Historic Preservation Office of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

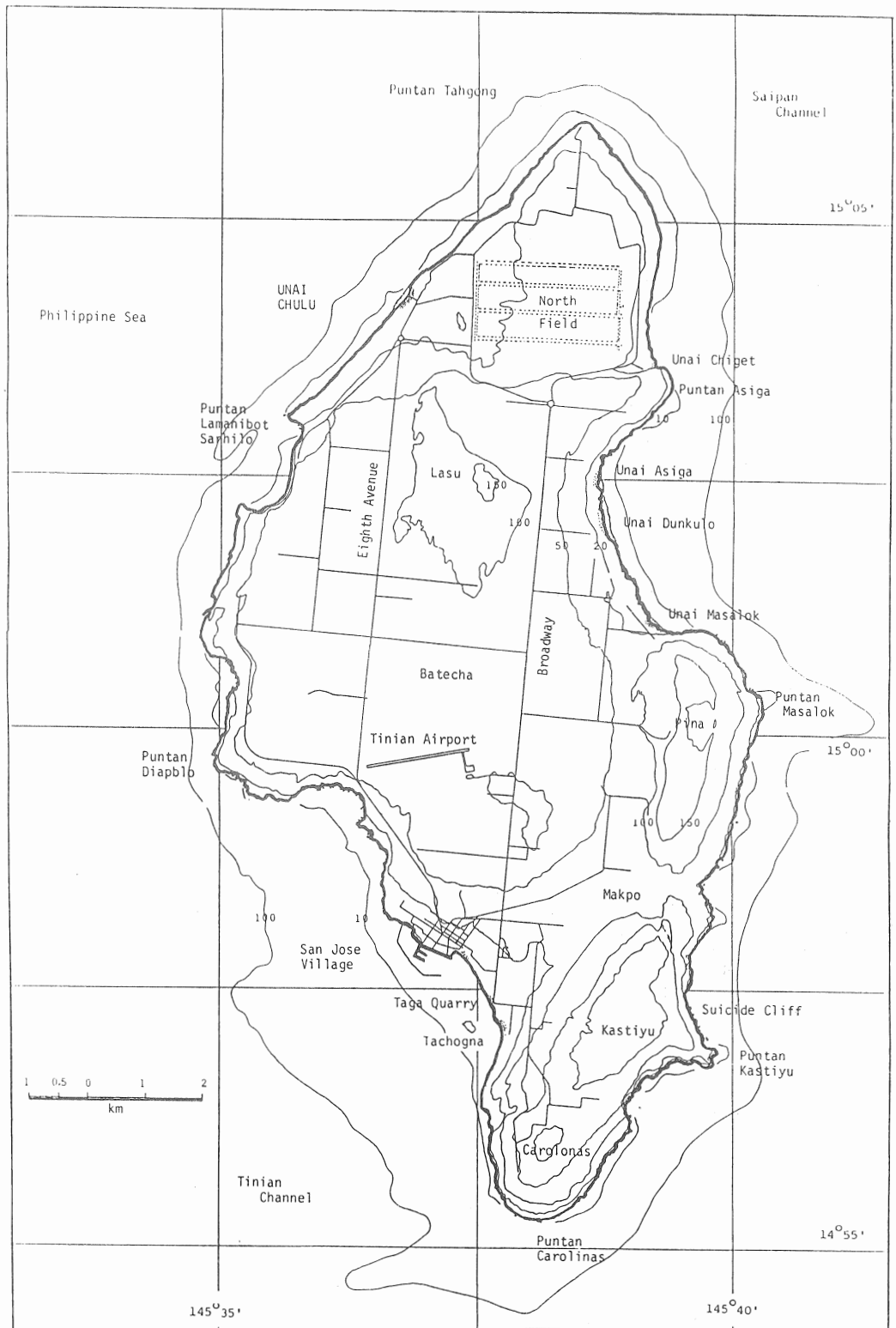


Figure 1. Map of Tinian, Mariana Islands.

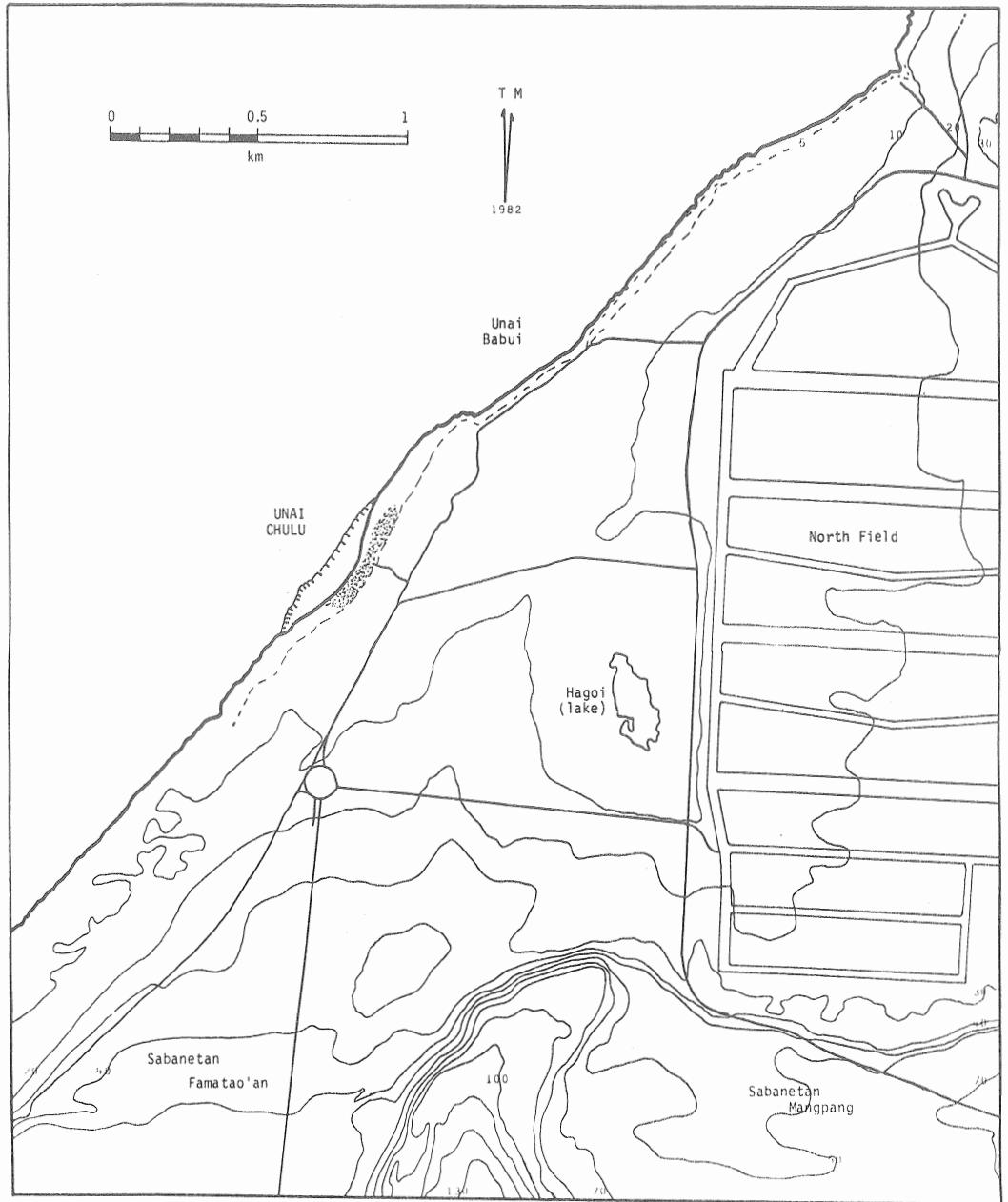


Figure 2. Map of northern Tinian showing the location of Unai Chulu.

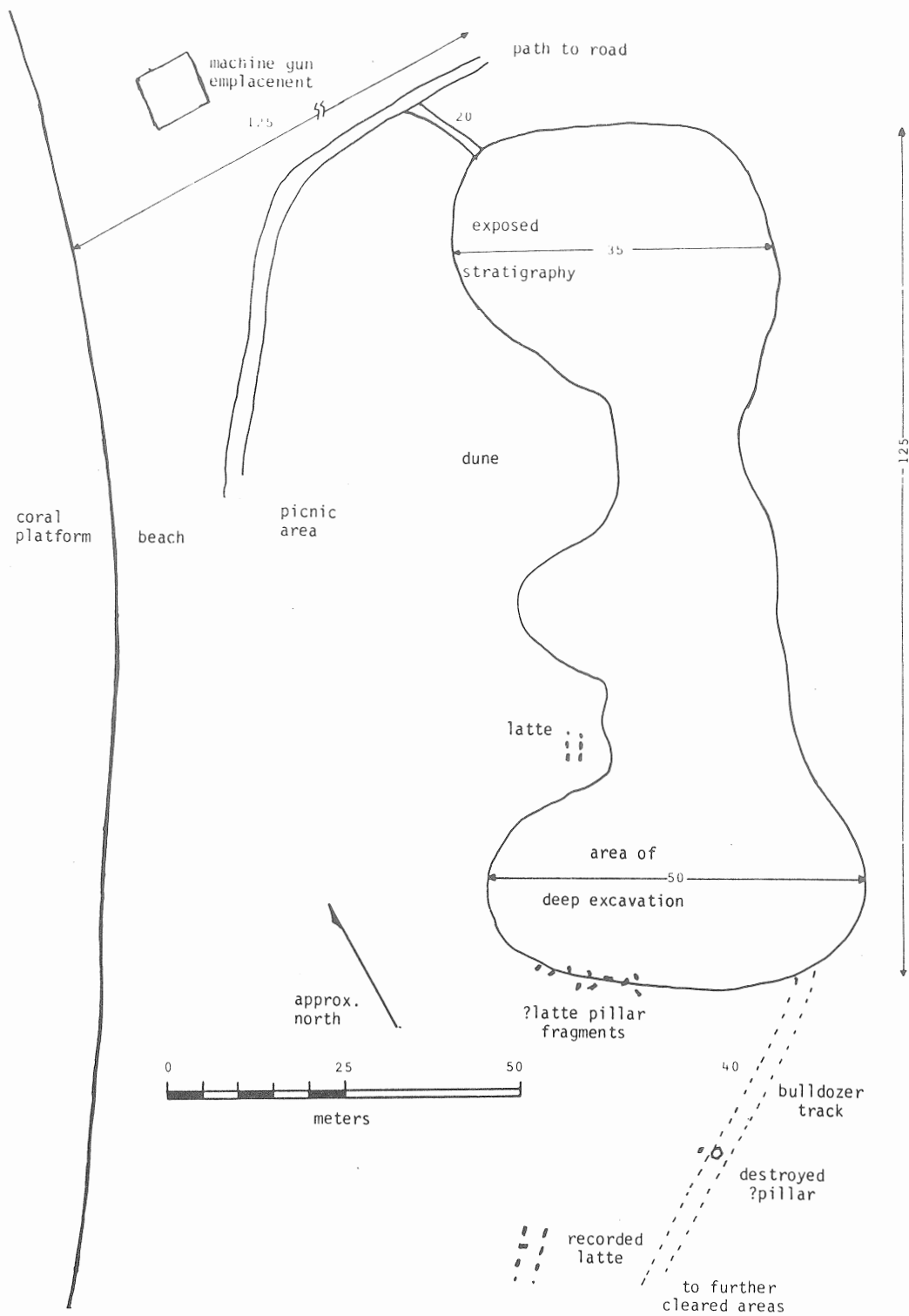


Figure 3. Sketch map of the northern part of the disturbed area at the Unai Chulu site.