



# The way they lived

Pre-Magellanic  
burial site on Saipan  
reveals ancient  
Chamorros' lifestyle

By Alexie Villegas Zotomayor

**I**t's one of those rare discoveries at the site of Pre-Contact Period Chamorro village, where construction is underway to build what is touted as one of the world's most luxurious casino-resorts.

The 43,000-sq. meter site – the first among several facilities comprising the \$7.1 billion project proposed by Imperial Pacific International, LLC's Grand Mariana Casino and Hotel Resort – not only revealed scores of burials dating as far back as c. 800 years ago but also gave home-grown scholars John Castro and Vanessa Cabrera highlights of their budding archaeological careers. They found not only the remains of their ancestors and their belongings but also a rare and large ceramic bowl among a very diverse assemblage of artifacts.

Last year, a team of archaeologists and osteologists working for Scientific Consultant Services Inc. out of Hawaii was

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## FEATURE

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commissioned by Best Sunshine to conduct the largest archaeological data recovery dig in Saipan's history. The team worked at the site of the ancient Chamorro village from April 6 to June 29, 2015 and was led by Dave Perzinski, along with other colleagues from Hawaii and the mainland. All of them have much experience in the Pacific region.

Aside from the discovery of over 416 burials and structural elements dating from the Latte period, a large bowl particularly piqued their curiosity. Lead archaeologist Dr. Michael Dega confirms, "It's a pretty rare find." Cabrera, a University of Guam student, was the one who found the large bowl during last year's data recovery project. "She excavated the whole thing out herself. There was a 3-5-year-old in the bowl and an adult female outside, whose remains were found on the side of the bowl."

The ceramic vessel measures three feet in diameter. Dega said it is the largest "found intact in the CNMI."

Dega approximates that the large bowl is about 500 to 600 years old, from the period when Chamorros



began using latte stones as pillars to their dwellings and other structures, at a time much earlier than the Ferdinand Magellan-led Spanish expedition reached the Marianas shores in 1521. He speculated that burial in a bowl could be clan-based status or other possibilities such as a unique ritual. When asked whether it could be inferred that the adult female could be protecting the bowl, Dega said he was uncertain if the two burials represented a single event.

One thing is clear: there is no

evidence of any warfare or hostility in this ancient village based on artifacts and skeletal study.

The team's work is one of the latest contributions to the corpus of knowledge about the history of the islands. Their work also lends credence to theories regarding the early settlements on the islands.

At a recent public forum in Saipan, Dega said several DNA samples taken from the ancient remains showed "probable affiliation" with

Southeast Asia. He said the theory was based on a very small sample and more work is being processed at present.

He further revealed that very tentatively, the DNA taken from the burials neither corresponded to Oceanic nor "ISEA B4 haplogroups" – these appear to be Chamorros from Southeast Asia. Again, the sample is very small and these are just theories until more data is processed.

It remains unclear if there was one singular migration that brought the ancient Chamorros to the islands. "There are recent arguments about two migrations, an initial one at 1500 BC and another at AD 1000, when the latte period starts. Some argue that AD 1000 migration brought in Latte stone culture and rice. I don't think so, I think the latte culture may have been an indigenous development, and rice could have already been there by 1500 BC. After AD 1000, the Pacific was like soup with a lot of different ingredients (people) sailing around," Dega said.

Meanwhile, the burials found at the Garapan site showed a clan-based burial practice, according to Dega. He said the burial analysis conducted





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by Dr. Chris King also suggested a healthy population thriving at the site continuously from about 1200 through the 1600s "with no cataclysmic events such as the introduction of pathogens."

The archeologists said the hundreds of slingstones discovered at the site did not mean the ancient Chamorros were constantly engaged in warfare. Slingstones were likely used to gather food and for other non-warfare activities.

As promising as the prospects were for the study of ancient Chamorro settlements, the study conducted by SCS, led by Dr. Dega, yielded no evidence to support the establishment of a Spanish colonial village at the site.

Citing the laboratory findings of Dr. Chris King, SCS reported that the ancient village in Garapan was probably a healthy community. Preservation of the remains was very poor, however, given the nature of the sandy soils, constant water inundation, and high tropical moisture level in the ground and air.

Dega pointed out how the skeletal and DNA studies are hampered by both reclamation and poor preservation, noting that a majority of the burials were incomplete and poorly preserved. Of all the remains found at the site, only 56 percent were able to be classified into age and sex groupings, and 83 percent were those of adult individuals, the SCS report indicates.

Analysis of the remains indicated that 26 percent died as young adults; 20 percent, middle to elderly; and mean mortality age was 40 years old. Of the more than 300 sets of remains, 68 individuals died at the age between 0 to 20 years old. King noted that poor preservation makes it difficult to identify their genders of all the remains. Based on what they had, half of the adult women lived to the age of 40. About 65 percent of males lived up to the age of 35 while 30 percent reached middle age and beyond. Adult Chamorro women had an average height of 5 feet, 2 inches while adult Chamorro males had an average height of 5 feet, 4 inches. The SCS report revealed that only 30 sets of remains had 50 percent or more bone elements, with a majority of those with less than 50 percent bone elements.

Further analysis of the remains showed evidence of betel nut chewing. The teeth showed dental stains from betelnut. The



study found that 32 percent of the individuals had staining on their teeth as a result of this cultural practice. More males than females chew betelnut, with a ratio of 3:1, with no individual under 20 years of age having stained teeth.

The discovery of shells, fish vertebrae, bird bones, turtle bones, and mammal bones speak volumes of the diet the ancient Chamorros had.

The SCS team found pottery that suggests the Chamorros cooked starchy foods. Lusung, a traditional mortar and pestle used for pounding starches, was also found at the archeological site.

Through isotope studies conducted at Idaho State University by Dr. John Dudgeon, very preliminary data shows that the population at this site not only relied on marine resources but depended also on terrestrial carbohydrates for sustenance, including breadfruit, rice, taro, coconut and yam.

Another interesting discovery by the team was how the ancient Chamorros practice tooth art: making incisions on their teeth. These occurred in a small sample of the analyzed teeth yet provided perhaps a window into social status. The remains showed an intricate design of dental modifi-

cation with vertical and diagonal incisions, as well as some bearing cross-hatched marks.

An Oxford study of the remains of Viking warriors found in Dorset, in the United Kingdom, could not determine the function of this similar practice, but dental modification is not entirely rare during prehistory throughout the world.

The developer, Best Sunshine, has been very vocal about its intent to give the public a voice, allowing them to participate in the decision-making as to what to do with the remains of their ancestors and their belongings. They have followed through with multiple community meetings, listening to the wants of the local community.

The issue of archaeological digging at an ancient Chamorro burial ground has stirred the emotions of the indigenous but the developer has explained in several public forums how the dig was appropriately conducted: indigenous rituals were conducted prior to the commencement of the data recovery project, the HPO was consulted throughout, and now the public can help decide where the burials are to be re-interred.

Cabrera, a Tanapag resident, told

the media that that they treated the site with reverence and respect that it deserves. She was quoted as saying in the Marianas Variety that she was cognizant that the site they were going to dig were burial sites of their ancestors and one they should treat with respect. "I am very excited brushing off the bones but, at the same time, I am apologizing," the Marianas Variety story quoted her as saying. Cabrera excavated her first burial there and called it "beautiful."

Best Sunshine spent almost \$1 million for the dig, inclusive of many auxiliary machine operators, trucks, ground clearance teams, and UXO teams. It also rented a temperature-controlled storage at Lower Base in Garapan where the artifacts and remains are being temporarily curated.

The archaeological team, BS, and the community would all like to see the artifacts shared with the public, and at present, designs are being made for display cases and panel boards explaining the site. These would be placed in the hotel or on the grounds of the hotel. "We hope to have many of the unique and well-preserved examples of stone tools, pottery, beads, etc. put on display in the hotel. The rest will go to the CNMI museum for curation/storage," Dega said.

The work isn't over. The study is still an ongoing endeavor as these results were very preliminary. SCS has submitted additional samples to Dudgeon for more DNA molecular bioarchaeology studies, which is a daunting task due to poor preservation, as well as more radiocarbon samples to date the site.

The ancient Chamorro village of Anaguan holds promise not only for the rich archaeological record noting layers of pre-colonial culture, but on these hallowed grounds shall rise an ambitious project that has piqued the interest of gamers from Atlantic City to Las Vegas and Macau.