

History of Archaeology in Hong Kong

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL remains in Hong Kong and the New Territories are principally from the Neolithic period. However, rock carvings and rings of large stones on hill spurs are thought to be evidence of earlier cultures. Later cultures discovered belong to the Tang and Sung dynasties.

Scientific archaeology in Hong Kong may be said to have begun about 1928 when C. M. Heanley noticed the abundance of celts on the granite outcrops. At that time Heanley was head of the government's Vaccine and Bacteriological Department, and in his spare time he was a devoted amateur geologist. In the years that followed, up to the beginning of World War II, J. L. Shellshear, of Hong Kong University, W. Schofield, government administrator, and the Reverend D. J. Finn, S. J., joined in making systematic studies. Most of these studies were conducted individually, but on occasion there was joint work.

Since World War II, the study of archaeology has continued fairly vigorously. From 1947 to 1949, a small team made weekly visits to Banyan Bay and Tai Wan on Lamma Island. W. Weinberger, Paul Daiko, and I were the key members. The finds we collected were placed in the charge of Weinberger, who took them to England after his tour of duty with the military forces.

It was not until February 1953 that a society was formed to promote and stimulate organized archaeological study. It was set up as part of the Geographical, Geological, and Archaeological Society of the University of Hong Kong. Its membership was very wide and consisted of internal, external, graduate, and associated students of the university. The society continues to be active.

In March 1956 a university archaeological team was organized. Its membership was and remains limited to twenty-five, with the proviso that all must be active workers in the field. The need for such a team to work alongside the Geographical, Geological, and Archaeological Society was felt to be justified by the large number of sites to be examined and the need for experienced workers who were capable of regular, systematic work and who could write up

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exact records. Membership of this team is open to anyone who is interested in practical archaeology. At present, approximately half are from the university and half are from outside. Responsibility for running the team lies with the Department of Geography and Geology, under the leadership of the department head. Regular monthly talks are given to the team on different aspects of archaeology. Fieldwork is carried out during the cooler months, mainly on weekends. The team has a well-equipped archaeological laboratory and storeroom in the Fung Ping Shan Museum on Bonham Road.

The Sites

Most of the sites examined by the individuals and the societies mentioned above were dug carefully and, fortunately, published in detail, but these represent but a very small fraction of the total number of sites that have been discovered (see map). Many sites have been examined only cursorily, and there is still much work to be done with well-organized "digs." Unfortunately, many sites have been damaged and many finds lost through the work of free-lance collectors who have had varying degrees of competence and who have neither worked systematically nor kept detailed records.

The vast amounts of pottery and artifacts already found in this area certainly indicate that the population in Neolithic times was considerable and that there were well-established lines of communication throughout South China. The types of materials used, the quality of design, and the workmanship certainly indicate a neolithic civilization that was highly cultured and organized.

It is strange that the archaeology of neolithic sites in the Hong Kong area as well as in other parts of China was neglected or barely known until the twentieth century. Berthold Laufer claimed in his *Chinese Pottery of the Han Dynasty* (1909) that the first mention of Han pottery in European literature was made by S. W. Bushell in his book *Oriental Ceramic Art* (1896). Laufer also pointed out that the only reference that he could find in Chinese literature to pottery of the Han Dynasty was by Mi Chow in the *Kuei Hsin Tsa Shih*. Mi Chow lived under the Southern Sung dynasty in the thirteenth century.

Laufer's observation is of importance because he was an established authority on Chinese archaeology. He was curator of anthropology at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. From 1901 to 1904 he was in China collecting specimens and making investigations with the Jacob H. Schiff Chinese Expedition. In 1910 he returned to China with Mrs. T. B. Blackstone's expedition. While Laufer collected most of his Chow and Han pottery in Shensi Province, he also travelled widely in China and visited Canton and Hong Kong. Thus, he certainly would have reported Han pottery if it had been known in this area.

The relatively recent activity in the field of neolithic archaeology in mainland China is paralleled in Hong Kong. The first reference to it was made by Heanley in 1928 when he described Hong Kong celts. Heanley, who fortunately is still active and keenly interested in Hong Kong, now lives in Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia. As an amateur geologist in Hong Kong, he knew of Laufer's work, and in his article on celts he referred to Laufer's statement that prehistoric stone implements were scarce in China. Heanley suggested that they were scarce only because prospectors did not know how to look for them. He said, "To find celts in Hong Kong select the crests and spurs of granite hills bared of vegetation by rain erosion. Do not look for celts but look for isolated fragments of pottery and water-worn stones. The eyes should be kept ranging well ahead and on either side and little attention given to the ground near the feet." Heanley estimated that on granite outcrops in Hong Kong there was

an average of about 30 to 40 celts to the sq. mi. within 600 yds. of the sea or land reclaimed from the sea.

Heanley's shrewd advice to prospectors has helped considerably in later searches. It is on raised beaches and terraces on hill spurs that most of our archaeological remains have been found. The explanation for finds in such areas is related to the level of land. The part of South China where the artifacts have been found has been rising relative to sea level since the Pleistocene period. This positive rise is connected with the earth's isostasy and eustatic movements of the oceans that cause cycles of the land's submergence and emergence. Assuming there is a rise of 1 ft. every 100 years for Hong Kong, then over the last 2,500 years, land has risen 25 ft.

Heanley and his friend Walter Schofield, a government administrator, gathered a large and varied collection of celts from Kowloon, Cheung Chau, and Lantau Island. Examination of this collection by experts soon made it clear that the pieces were not just freaks of nature but definite human artifacts. Since Heanley's first finds, other workers have found artifacts in practically every part of the colony and, contrary to Heanley's belief that celts were principally found only on granite hills, they have been found, often in abundance, on every other rock outcrop represented in the area—especially volcanic outcrops. It may be because of the susceptibility of granite in Hong Kong to erosion (that causes "badland country" with thin, or no, vegetation cover) that celts can be seen more easily.

Including the places mentioned by Heanley, celts are still being found in fields, on raised beaches, or on low hills at Tai Wan, Hung Shing Ye, Yung Shu Wan, Aberdeen, Tai Po, Castle Peak, San Hui, So Kon Wat, Tsun Wan, Shatin, Shataukok, Man Kok Tsui, Ha Tsuen, Sheung Shui, Shek Pik, Sai Kung, Lai Chi Chung, Sok Ku Wan, Fanling, and Kau Sai Chau.

Much is owed to Heanley, Shellshear, and Schofield for their conscientious and patient work in combing Hong Kong for other archaeological remains and sites after the celts had been identified. Sir Lindsay Ride, vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong until 1965, who knew all three gentlemen intimately and often accompanied them on field trips, says that the men were superbly energetic and covered tremendous distances in a day at great speed. Only fit and enthusiastic walkers could hope to last a whole day with them. Heanley, Shellshear, and Schofield located several prehistoric sites, the most notable being So Kon Wat, Shek Pik, and the site at the northwest end of Lamma Island.

Lamma Island Sites

The sites at Tai Wan, Hung Shing Ye, and Yung Shu Wan on Lamma Island were most fruitful and provided the material that was excavated and reported by the Reverend D. J. Finn. The report of finds at Tai Wan came in a most interesting way. Tom Man Long, a prominent local building contractor, who was constructing a service reservoir in the Botanical Gardens opposite Government House, noticed that the sand being used for the concrete was full of fragments of pottery and axe heads. Tom, a keen collector of Chinese art and pottery, recognized the antiquity of the pottery and reported his discovery to the Waterworks Department, who in turn notified Shellshear. Shellshear visited Tai Wan and immediately recognized the richness of the site. At a later date, Finn was asked by Shellshear to interest himself in the site. Finn wrote, "I was very glad of the invitation, and luck seemed to confirm the vocation. A few days after that, while I was still regarding any active participation as remote, I almost crushed a piece of obviously old pottery underfoot as I walked past a sand-

heap on a jetty at Aberdeen. The next step was to find where the sand came from. Having found this out and having got there, I found myself at the site from which I knew Professor Shellshear and his friends had already reaped a rich harvest.”

It was a fortunate day for archaeology when Finn began his work on Lamma Island. He brought expert knowledge to the study and rapidly revealed tremendous archaeological treasures by thorough, careful digging. The results of his work were meticulously reported in quarterly issues of *The Hong Kong Naturalist* from 1933 to 1938 and still later were combined in one complete volume under the editorship of the Reverend F. Ryan, S. J.

Many of the best finds from the Lamma sites are now in the British Museum. They were sent there by Shellshear and were examined by Soame Jenyns, the curator for the Far East section. Jenyns had previously been in Hong Kong as a young administrator and had studied Chinese art. Outstanding among the specimens is a bronze sword about 11 in. long that is distinguished by a zoomorph design in three panels along the blade. This sword has been dated as of the Warring Kingdoms period (481–221 B.C.). A bronze socketed celt with a distinctive design of conventionalized T'ao T'ieh is also highly prized. There are also fine specimens of both glazed and unglazed pottery decorated with the “Double-F” pattern. This design is thought to be unique in the Hong Kong area and so far has not been found elsewhere, even around Canton. The design was new to such an eminent authority as Paul Pelliot. Much study and conjecture was given by Finn to this unique design.

Finn pointed out that all the sites that he examined were either on raised beaches or low, granite hills. Also, he noticed that there was an absence of building remains. He suggested that houses had been built of clay and wood (probably on wooden piles as is common today at Tai O) and therefore disintegrated easily and quickly from weathering and typhoon attrition. Finn also concluded that all sites are neolithic in age, but he made the strong reservation that the use of the term “neolithic” was misleading because there is evidence that distinctly different cultures were present. Heanley gave the same warning even more emphatically. He insisted that the term “neolithic” should not be used to describe prehistoric cultures in Asia. He suggested that polished stones were almost certainly in common use in Hong Kong until iron finally became cheap and abundant. On the basis of European usage of the terms “palaeolithic” and “neolithic,” there is no solid evidence of a pure palaeolithic culture being present in Hong Kong. Many “palaeolithic-type” artifacts have been found, but it seems possible that they were tools used by “later neolithic” peoples.

Man Kok Tsui Site, Lantau Island

In April 1958, the university archaeological team started what so far has proved to be its largest and most outstanding work: the excavation at Man Kok Tsui, Silvermine Bay, on Lantau Island. The site was first reported by a member of the team, S. Bard. It had the great advantage of being practically undisturbed. With the help of the Hong Kong government, which gave funds for the digs, work continued throughout most of the summer and autumn.

Man Kok Tsui is the site of a late neolithic settlement whose main habitation probably was in the center valley. This valley is protected and has two gently shelving sand beaches, both of which are shielded in most weather. The inhabitants could well have been fishing people, but they left scant evidence of their occupations. Perhaps they were boat people who lived partly on land right at the water's edge, much as many do today. No evidence of agriculture has been found, but it is not to be expected, as this area is thought to have been covered

by forest at that time. Large tree stumps of primary forest were excavated during construction work at Tai Po. Early Chinese literary sources mention that the primitive agriculture of the people of South China was based on the "slash, burn, planting stick" method—a practice which would have left few traces. Again, no signs of dwelling sites, no traces of structures, fire, food refuse, or clothing, and no human or animal remains have been found. The local environmental factors of sand, high humidity and torrential rains explain this dearth of evidence but they also make compilation of accurate or complete archaeological information extremely difficult.

Finds of indestructible material, such as stone and pottery at Man Kok Tsui, are, however, plentiful and represent a culture similar to that reported by D. J. Finn in the early 1930s (Finn 1958). The stone implements are varied, especially the polished stone adzes which exhibit almost all the typical Southeast Asia types. This suggests a late neolithic dating which is supported by the finding of a few fragments of bronze. Furthermore, these fragments appear to represent the type usually regarded as products of the Warring States period (481–221 B.C.). This dating becomes even more plausible on examination of the pottery which, when it is decorated, is impressed with geometric designs that are also identified as of the Warring States period in China. In many cases, the actual designs are local variants, but the technique of impressing them is common with that of finds in northern sites. This region was probably not settled by Chinese from the north until the fifth or sixth century A.D. and, as few Han remains have been found, it is possible that the local inhabitants continued to use tools and pottery of an earlier period for some time after these had been superseded by the northern people. Lacking more scientific evidence and with no stratigraphy to guide us, we must assume that the Warring States period is possibly the earliest date, purely on the basis of analogy with other finds.

The finds of the Man Kok Tsui site contained remains similar to those of Hung Shing Ye, Yung Shu Wan, and Tai Wan on Lamma Island and Shek Pik on Lantau Island. (Shek Pik is described later in this article.) There was also similarity between seashore settlements on raised beaches and those on low hills. Geologically, however, the sites are not similar. The Lamma sites are on granodiorite, Shek Pik on volcanic rock, and Man Kok Tsui on porphyritic granite.

Although the finds at Man Kok Tsui were not as varied as those from the other sites mentioned above, the area of study was wider, and closer attention was given to the relative position and distribution of finds. These showed a rough zoning of finds leading to a possible theory of "working," "dwelling," and "burial" areas.

The Shek Pik Site, Lantau Island

During the levelling of the Shek Pik reservoir in March 1962, the bulldozing machines brought to light coins clearly dating from A.D. 713 to 1226 (T'ang to Sung dynasty). Also found were richly glazed potsherds.

The finds come from poor farming land, until recently without malaria control and with no valuable natural resources nearby. The articles might have been the property of either wealthy travelers in transit, or of the court of the boy emperor of the Sung dynasty, Ti Cheng. In A.D. 1277, when the Mongols were extending their control over China, Ti Cheng in his flight stayed for some time in Kowloon City. Later he crossed the mouth of the Canton River over to Chung Shan, and thus probably travelled along the southern shore of Lantau Island, going for food and rest.

The Shek Pik area was being surveyed for a reservoir in 1954 when the university team carried out the first archaeological work there. This they did by trenching across the sandy raised beach where in 1938 W. Schofield had reported artifacts. In 1954, a rock carving behind the beach at Shek Pik was found about 200 yds. from the seashore on the east side of the valley. It was cleaned, and later in 1958 a protecting wall was built around it.

Local legend and history suggested that there was another rock carving in the valley. A search on the west side of the valley was unrewarding, and it was assumed that if a carving had actually existed it had been obliterated by weathering and erosion. The spur in the middle of the valley, at about 400 ft., was explored during Christmas 1962. On a prominent rock a second carving was found.

In 1961 the team's attention was called to rings of large stone boulders on hill spurs at Tai Po (above the Chinese University) and at Lo Ah Tsai, Lamma Island.

These discoveries offer a new field for archaeological research. With the aid of aerial photography, other such remains will almost certainly be found. While the largest stones in the rings cannot compare in size with those at Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain, England, they might very well be established as prehistoric stone circles of comparable age.

SUMMARY

The map of archaeological sites and positions of discovered remains indicates the richness of the Hong Kong area. Recent site studies have been made at Ha Tsuen, Deep Bay; Fanling; Upper and Lower Shek Pik villages, Lantau Island; and at Kau Sai Chau, Rocky Harbour.

Much has been written of Hong Kong's archaeology over the last fifty years, and for the convenience of those interested in the subject, a fairly complete bibliography is listed. It will help to refute that loosely used phrase: "Hong Kong is a cultural wilderness."

Exhibits of Hong Kong archaeology are in the British Museum, the Hong Kong City Hall, the Fung Ping Shan Museum, Ricci Hall (a university hostel), and the University Archaeological Team Working Center in the university. There are also collections at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu and at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Without doubt, there are also many other good private collections not mentioned here.

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