

# BOOK REVIEWS



*Archaeological Investigations on Chek Lap Kok Island.* William Meacham. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Archaeological Society, 1994. Pp. 806; illus.

*Reviewed by YUN KUEN LEE, California, Fullerton State University*

This volume is a professional report on the results of the salvage archaeological project on Chek Lap Kok Island in Hong Kong, occasioned by plans to construct a new airport. The Hong Kong Archaeological Society, chaired by William Meacham, was commissioned to conduct a salvage archaeological operation over a period of about one year: the largest archaeological undertaking ever carried out in Hong Kong. During the project a total of seven prehistoric and historic sites were extensively excavated. This volume is accompanied by a small bilingual booklet, *Archaeological Discovery on Chek Lap Kok*, a project summary for the general public.

Chek Lap Kok is a small island whose history spans the entire period of human occupation in the Hong Kong area, from the earliest inhabitants of the Middle Neolithic around 4000 B.C. to the recent flood of immigrants from mainland China. It thus constitutes a microcosm of Hong Kong's past (p. 270). Until recently, our knowledge of Hong Kong prehistory was sketchy and fragmentary. The Chek Lap Kok project yields invaluable information on the reconstruction of a local cultural sequence. With reference to other discoveries in Hong Kong, Meacham presents a pottery sequence of prehistoric Hong Kong comparable to that of neighboring Guangdong province and the South China coastal region. This confirms the link of Hong Kong to the mainland in the prehistoric period.

The Chek Lap Kok project also provides a series of 12 radiocarbon dates obtained from prehistoric charcoal samples. By combining these with the recently obtained radiocarbon dates from other prehistoric sites in Hong Kong, a solid chronology of Hong Kong prehistory can be established. This chronology has great reference value for the prehistory of the region. Among the several absolute dates, those of the Bronze Age are most intriguing. These dates firmly place the Bronze Age occupation at Chek Lap Kok between 1300 and 1000 B.C. The Bronze Age occupation also yielded three pairs of bivalve axe molds. These finds are unique in the region and indicate that the prehistoric people of Chek Lap Kok may have developed advanced knowledge of metallurgy. These results support a recently developed notion that the Bronze Age cultures of South China may have developed very early and independently of North China.

The historic occupation of Chek Lap Kok is representative of the history of Hong Kong. Artifacts diagnostic of all major Chinese dynasties except the Ming were recovered from Chek Lap Kok. Only four Han sherds were found. For Hong Kong as a whole, Han artifacts are rare, and Ming objects are even rarer—an indication that Hong Kong was barely inhabited in these periods. The most intriguing recoveries of the historic period are the two kiln complexes, each comprising 13 kilns. One complex obviously consisted of lime kilns, while the function of the other complex has yet to be identified, though it

may have been used for smelting iron. Although the analysis of kilns in this volume is brief, there are adequate descriptions, diagrams, and pictures for readers who are interested in them.

The Chek Lap Kok archaeological project involved several experts from other disciplines, which made possible an in-depth study of the archaeological materials. The project thus sets an example for archaeological fieldwork in this region. However, the level of the expert reports in this volume varies. The lithic analysis is by far the most detailed. The ceramic study is disappointing because it is limited to the identification of ceramic types without further analysis. The pollen analysis has yet to be completed with interpretive statements on the evolution of palaeo-environment. Improvement can be made, I think, with a strong emphasis by the project director on the goals and requirements of these studies.

The deficiency in organization is also seen in the editing of this volume, especially in the lack of a unified list of references. Some references are presented at the ends of sections, while others are listed at the end of the volume. This arrangement is sure to confuse some readers. In addition, the citations have not been carefully checked, and there are several sources that cannot be found in the references. For instance, Ling 1963 (p. 40) is absent from the references. The volume lacks an index, which makes it difficult to locate and use the material. There are several discrepancies in the text. For example, it is said that "there were, however, two pottery types which have not been seen before locally, though they are found in Guangdong. The first is a very finely burnished brown ware" (p. 77). The second pottery type is never mentioned in the following paragraphs.

These editorial shortcomings could easily have been rectified by a competent manuscript editor.

It is difficult to assess the results of the survey and excavation because the project strategies and procedures are not explicitly outlined in the text. Although it is said that a complete survey was conducted in the first stage of the fieldwork (p. 2), we cannot evaluate its "completeness." We do not know the intensity of the survey and the surface visibility. We also do not know whether core drilling and shovel testing were applied. However, this volume provides an appreciable number of quality illustrations that allow me to make some conjecture concerning the excavation procedures. It seems that the excavated units were intuitively selected and that no sampling technique was employed. The excavation tools included shovels, spades, picks, and hoes for horizontal stripping of the occupation floors. More meticulous tools, such as trowels, brushes, and dental picks, were used when excavating features and complete or relatively complete artifacts. No screen is seen in any of the excavation pictures. It is encouraging, nevertheless, that the project accounted for the formation processes of archaeological deposits in several instances, although the mechanisms of deposition were not identified. All these factors should be considered when using the material presented in this volume.

Overall, when the constraints of a salvage project are taken into account, the archaeological operation at Chek Lap Kok appears to have been adequate. This volume not only sketches a profile of Hong Kong's past, it also provides important information for the study of the archaeology of coastal South China and Southeast Asia.

*The Lelu Stone Ruins (Kosrae, Micronesia): 1978–81 Historical and Archaeological Research.* Ross Cordy. Asian and Pacific Archaeology Series No. 10, Social Science Research Institute. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1993. Pp. xv + 454; 179 figures, 62 tables.

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This volume presents archaeological and historical research carried out by Ross Cordy between 1978 and 1981 on the megalithic Lelu Ruins of Kosrae in the Eastern Caroline Islands of Micronesia. The Lelu research was funded by the Historic Preservation Program of the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands in Saipan, where Cordy worked as staff archaeologist. The aim of Cordy's project was to provide modern baseline documentation of the Lelu Ruins, a remarkable 27 ha (Athens 1995: 37) prehistoric architectural complex of stone-walled compounds, paved pathways, large tombs, and canals, built on artificial fill on the reef next to a small lagoon island. As Cordy explains (p. xii), his investigations involved two interrelated components: archaeological research (a total of three months of fieldwork) and a historical reconstruction of traditional Kosraean society based on documentary sources.

Although the project is described as a joint Bishop Museum–Trust Territory Historic Preservation Office Study, it is not clear what the museum's role was in this work or the meaning of its "longstanding aim to study the Lelu Ruins" (p. xi). The fact that the volume is simultaneously oriented to both Kosraeans and professional scholars gives rise to occasional awkward passages. Although it is commendable to write for both audiences, the two styles do not mix very well. In the end, the weight of the volume, with its detailed documentation and warranting arguments for the many interpretations, is heavily skewed to address the interests of the professional.

As explained in an epilogue, several seasons of investigations continued at the Lelu

Ruins after the volume was completed in 1981, and there have also been several major archaeological projects on Kosrae's main island since that time. The results of this new work, unfortunately, are only summarized and referenced in the epilogue. No effort was made to integrate the newer work or the more recent research of others in Micronesia—much of this work now ten years old or more—into the body of the monograph. For a study whose publication has been so long delayed, this is perhaps understandable, though unfortunate. Despite this problem, Cordy's research represents a very substantial achievement not only for Micronesian archaeology but also for Micronesian history and ethnohistory.

*The Lelu Stone Ruins* is divided into eight chapters, followed by a brief comment on Lelu's future, the epilogue, and five appendixes. All 179 figures—including photographs, maps, and line drawings—are grouped after the appendices, and references follow the figures. The volume's wealth of illustrations, not at all excessive for the basic level of empirical documentation it seeks to provide, is one of the most useful aspects of this study (though more care in the editing process might have removed Figure 34, the Cordy map of the Lelu Ruins, which is a duplicate of Figure 8).

Chapter 1 provides an overview of Kosraean geography and contact-era culture (first recorded Western contact was on 5 June 1824), the nature of the Lelu Ruins, and prior research efforts. Cordy accepts as "fact, but couched in fiction" the celebrated legends of Isokelel's exploits on Pohnpei and of Sowukachaw's feat on Chuuk (both figures from Kosrae). He would have done better, however, to have

left open the question of the historical accuracy of these stories. Goodenough (1986) later provided an alternative perspective that may be closer to the mark.

In chapter 2, "The Historic Baseline," Cordy hits his stride and shows his considerable scholarly skills to best advantage. No other study comes close to the level of documentation and integration of disparate and often hard-to-obtain foreign-language sources that Cordy provides to develop a holistic picture of both traditional Kosraean society and the physical aspect of Lelu at the time of contact. The details are numerous: This chapter reads like an ethnography, which is basically what it is, though one written with the archaeologist in mind. The Lelu Ruins served as the social and hierarchical center of Kosraean society at contact; it was also the place where the earliest visitors were taken to meet and interact with the paramount "king" (Cordy always uses this term, in keeping with much of the historical literature) and high chiefs. Thus, the value of meticulous and detailed historical investigation is obvious. This chapter, indeed, sets the stage for the archaeological documentation and interpretation of the site.

Chapter 3 presents the surface archaeological data. This is a long (117 pages) and encyclopedic chapter providing site and individual compound maps and data on the roughly 90–100 compounds that make up the ruins, surface artifacts and features, wall attributes, specialized sectors, and so forth. Included are various analyses: houses and house types, activity areas, interpretations of the individual compounds, social ranking represented by the compounds, population size, burials, and other details. Although in time some of the analyses and underlying assumptions will almost certainly be questioned and refinements and new types of analyses will take their place, Cordy must be credited for focusing research on important processual questions and for attempting to provide answers. This chapter will be a rich source of data and ideas for future Micronesian archaeologists.

Chapter 4 basically deals with chronology. In all, 18 test pits were excavated and

12 radiocarbon dates obtained. Although the excavations and number of dates are both quite limited considering the size of the ruins, they fill what heretofore has been an almost complete void in the literature for this important site. Cordy goes to some length to integrate his wall-building sequence with the absolute dates, arriving at a convincing chronological model for the growth of Lelu and the development of a complex chiefdom social organization on Kosrae. A series of maps graphically depicts this model. The method of wall construction and changes in architectural style, specialized sectors, population size, social organization, material culture, and burial practices are briefly discussed.

Chapter 5 concerns the question of who built Lelu (the Kosraeans themselves) and presents a review of the various hypotheses formulated by early visitors and investigators. The latter topic is primarily of historical interest.

Chapter 6 is largely an interpretive summary of Cordy's findings. Beginning from some undesignated time before A.D. 1250, the beaches and small coastal flats around Lelu Island were occupied by households or small household clusters. By 1250 settlement expanded onto the reef flat with the first use of artificial fill to build habitation compounds. There were two social strata at this time, consisting of a local chief and commoners. Between 1250 and 1400, Cordy postulates (p. 258) that there were "a few district-sized societies [on Kosrae] with three strata (ruler, local chiefs, and commoners)." By 1400 construction significantly expanded on the Lelu Island reef flat and compounds with megalithic architecture appeared, along with specialized sectors and large tombs. Cordy equates these changes with the emergence of four social strata. Social organization conforms closely to the ethnographic contact-period model, in which Kosrae was unified under a single paramount, with an administrative hierarchy of high and low chiefs under this paramount, and with tribute in the form of food and services produced by commoners flowing into Lelu from administered lands around the island of Kosrae.

Chapters 7 and 8 concern, respectively, Lelu's relations with the superficially similar Nan Madol site on Pohnpei and a very brief review of archaeological evidence suggesting a relationship between Kosrae and Chuuk (basically a similarity in food-pounder styles).

Although the volume is basically descriptive and empirical, it is permeated by explicit theoretical and methodological concerns. There is substantial information for readers at any of several levels. The volume should be thought-provoking and should stimulate much discussion with new analyses and research. The main objection to the work is that many of the arguments regarding the character of Kosraean social complexity appear circular or subjective: for example, social and political organization *inferred* to have existed at contact must be the same in the archaeological record, and vice versa. In essence, Cordy's strength is at once his weakness. His continual reference to feudal-type social organization is a symptom of this problem (see Graves 1986).

For Micronesian archaeologists and ethnologists, this volume is essential reading. It provides a basic set of data concerning traditional historic and prehistoric social

complexity at an interesting site for a previously little known high island. Minor editing problems and typographic errors are present, but these really do not detract from the fundamental scientific value of Cordy's study. We must hope that Cordy's next Lelu monograph, documenting his later investigations, will not be so long in coming.

#### REFERENCES

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