

BOOK REVIEW



Ancient Ryūkyū: An Archaeological Study of Island Communities. Richard Pearson. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. 396 pp, 42 illustrations in black and white, 9 appendixes, 1 color frontispiece. ISBN 978-0-824-83712-9. Cloth US\$ 55.

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Richard Pearson's *Ancient Ryūkyū: An Archaeological Study of Island Communities* examines the human occupation of the Ryūkyū archipelago and its relations with its neighbors, from its earliest peopling in the Pleistocene era, circa 32,000 years before present (B.P.), to the subjugation of the Ryūkyū Kingdom by a Japanese feudal clan in 1609. The author argues that during the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods, the diverse archipelago constituting the Ryūkyū was likely colonized more than once by small groups of hunter-gatherers coming from the north, south, or west. A distinct maritime-focused culture developed over the lengthy Shellmound period. The exchanges initiated during this period continued in new forms through the following Gusuku period, when agriculture was adopted and international trade with other kingdoms emerged. This book vastly updates Pearson's previous volume, *Archaeology of the Ryūkyū Islands* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1969), bringing together four decades of recent archaeological literature, much of it written by Japanese scholars, to document the growing material record of human occupation in the archipelago over time.

After introducing the reader to the regional archaeology and palaeogeography of the Ryūkyū Islands (chapters 1 and 2), the author discusses Pleistocene peopling in

chapter 3. Correlations are made between sites and processes of migration, colonization, and assimilation. During the regression of the late and last glacial maxima between 32,000 and 10,000 B.P., it seems that few *Homo sapiens* dared to cross the narrow water gaps that probably remained between the continent and the Ryūkyū Islands in the Tokara Strait—Kerama Gap and Yonaguni Trench. They might have followed deer, the fossilized bones of which are frequently found in geological contexts sometimes in association with human remains. The author acknowledges the absence of archaeological sites with *in situ* artifacts for this period. After an archaeological void of at least four millennia during which the human population of the Ryūkyū might have become extinct, it was not until roughly 7000 B.P. that coastal reefs and upland forests stabilized enough to again attract visitors from neighboring islands. Modern genetic evidence and palaeobiological studies of skeletal remains show physical discontinuities between late Pleistocene and later populations. They do not expose any close affinity between Ainu (northern Japanese) and Ryūkyū populations, which should have been the case if they both had been direct descendents of Jōmon peoples, as widespread theories suggest.

Chapters 4 through 6 span the long Shellmound period between 7000 and 1100 B.P.

when most Ryūkyū islands were inhabited, from Tanegashima in the north to the Sakishima Islands in the south. During this period, hunter-gatherer colonization from Kyūshū and subsequent interaction between north-central Ryūkyū and southern Japan or farther became undeniable. As the period name suggests, early colonists appear to have focused on coastal zones near accessible maritime resources. Differing ceramic sequences between island clusters suggest small groups arrived in sporadic intervals and adapted to local conditions independently, rather than there having been a coordinated or continuous migration from the north. The book proposes a broad description of each known ceramic type. The main vessel forms are deep jars for cooking and globular jars for storage. Vessels were first plain, then fingernail impressions appeared, followed by a large variety of decorative patterns. Both vessels imported from Kyūshū and those locally produced have been found, suggesting constant interaction and probably sporadic migration over time.

The author argues that colonization in northern and central Ryūkyū probably constituted several phases, including early exploration, sojourn, and colonization. In this process, the Amami Islands, located between Kyūshū and Okinawa Island, probably played a key role. By 3500 B.P., the Ryūkyū inhabitants started to develop a strong local identity, but conserved links with southern Japan in order to obtain raw materials such as obsidian. The Sakishima Islands, the southernmost group of islands of the Ryūkyū, underwent a different cultural development, with first human habitation in the late Pleistocene, followed by a long hiatus until 2900 B.C., when a ceramic culture developed (Shimotabaru period) that ended by 2500 B.C. After another gap of 1100 years, a new nonceramic culture appeared by 900 B.C. (nonceramic period). The origin of the migrants is still unknown, and one can question if the migration was voluntary. The crudeness of the material culture suggests the absence of production specialists so that a peopling by castaways surviving shipwrecks is proposed.

Subsistence patterns and adaptations to the island environment are first presented chronologically before several major research

themes are discussed. For each period a brief description is given of the archaeological findings at the major sites. Subsistence in the Ryūkyūs is presented in a chronological pattern of migration, adaptation, diffusion, and development. Settlements evolved from mobile and seasonal campsites restricted to riverine or coastal locations to villages of substantial pit dwellings located inland at relatively high elevations. Tool assemblages and ecofacts suggest dependence on marine and reef resources as well as on terrestrial resources. Although evidence for agriculture across the archipelago does not appear until A.D. 1100 when charred grains of rice, wheat, barley, and millet are found in dwelling sites, animal semi-husbandry is suggested by the possible importation of domesticated pigs from China.

The author postulates that the adoption of the East Asian subsistence system was delayed in the Ryūkyūs not from lack of exposure to farming, but from the adaptative success of hunting and gathering subsistence practices by a restricted population in a constricted environment with thin limestone soils and unpredictable typhoons and drought. This environment stands in stark contrast to the river valley and coastal plain settings of southern and western Japan. As supported by the increasing number of imported items throughout the period, contacts with neighboring farming populations were frequent, and trade centered on tropical marine shells developed from about 600 B.C. and lasted at least until A.D. 1200, first with southern Japan and then with China and Korea across the East China Sea.

In chapters 7 through 9, the author presents information documenting the time span from the beginning of the Gusuku period c. A.D. 1100 to the Satsuma invasion of Okinawa in 1609 by the Shimazu clan of southern Kyūshū. This marked the incorporation of the Ryūkyū Kingdom into the Tokugawa shogun's sphere of influence. The most prominent landmark of the Gusuku period is its namesake, the *gusuku*. Today translated as "castle," this complex term also encompasses a ritual dimension; most *gusuku* sites sheltered sacred precincts. The coordination of labor necessary to build these fortresses was enabled

by the creation of a dependable source of food for the growing population. The adoption of irrigated and dryland agriculture and its inherent labor organization was the result. This was paralleled by the growth of trade and exchanges between Ryūkyū polities and East Asian sources of metal, ceramics, and textiles via direct maritime interaction.

The building of wealth and privilege by competing families across the Ryūkyū archipelago was predicated on previous relationships established during the tropical marine shell trade period, involving parties in Japan, Korea, and China. Later Ryūkyū traders supplied lacquer, hardwoods, sulphur for gunpowder, and native horses, and were also active in the transshipment of products from Southeast Asia to and from China and Japan. This trade is evidenced by twelfth- and thirteenth-century imported *kamuiyaki* ceramics, steatite cauldrons, Chinese whiteware or celadon vessels, and a limited quantity of ceramics from Viet Nam, Thailand, and Korea. The florescence of Gusuku period society seems to have first taken place in the Amami Islands under the direct influence of Japanese traders before evolving to become an independent entity.

After the political unification of the archipelago by the first Shō Dynasty in 1429, construction of castles was limited, and labor and materials were redirected to the elaboration of the Shuri capital. By the seventeenth century, officials of the unified Ryūkyū Kingdom were recording their own history in Chinese script, learned by young scholars from elite families sent to Chinese mercantile capitals to be trained, where official tribute was exchanged for prestige goods on a regular basis. The elites adopted several aspects of the foreign cultures with which they were in constant contact. Elite burials display stone sarcophagi and glazed ceramic burial jars decorated with Chinese imagery of birds, flowers, deer, dragons, phoenixes, and lion dogs. The residences, government offices, and temples were covered with locally baked roof tiles showing Korean, Chinese, and Japanese influence. The Ming maritime ban, forbidding private trade from 1368 to 1567, consolidated the role of the Ryūkyū Kingdom as a go-between in the East China Sea because

it had been granted tributary status for official trade. This position ultimately attracted the attention of the Shimazu clan of southern Kyūshū, eager to corner this lucrative market without endangering the flow of goods into a Japan closing its doors to foreign intervention. After 1609, the Shimazu fiefdom benefited directly from such a monopoly on trade, while Shuri maintained the façade of independence for Chinese officials, repelling diplomatic advances from European powers in the centuries to come.

Chapter 10 concludes the book, first restating the distinctive archaeological patterns that can be found in the Ryūkyū, including: a substantial collection of Pleistocene *Homo sapien* remains without cultural contexts; the proximity of the Ryūkyū Islands to a Jōmon “hot spot” with evidence of contact with the Early Jōmon period occupants of Kyūshū; the puzzling lack of continuity in the earliest ceramic types of the archipelago, which do not mirror the sequence in southern Japan; a period of settlement by hunter-gatherers spanning 8000 years without adoption of agriculture; tropical shell exchange with East Asian polities for over 1500 years; the establishment of a Japanese trading outpost in Kikaigashima in the Nara/Heian period that gave way to the Gusuku period revolution; rich evidence of prekingdom private exchange with China via Kyūshū and Tokunoshima; osteological evidence of similarities between Okinawan and Japanese populations after A.D. 1000; development of a tributary relationship between the Ryūkyū Islands and China during the Ming maritime ban; and a distinct archaeological record for the southern Sakishima Islands until their annexation to the Ryūkyū Kingdom.

Environmental conditions affecting the development of early communities in the Ryūkyū Islands are then summarized, in particular noting: the incomplete record of the transition from wild to domesticated pigs, or their voluntary importation from the mainland; the incomplete record of the availability and exploitation of coastal fishes as coral reefs were being formed throughout the Shellmound period; the poorly understood effects of climatic changes on the development of settlement patterns and subsistence strategies;

and a possible reason for the flourishing of the Ryūkyū Kingdom being the absence of military or territorial expansion correlated to Chinese trade and the political instability of medieval Japan that prevented it from expanding so far southward.

The author maps the maritime landscape of the Ryūkyū Islands by delineating significant "islandscapes" over time, including: a late Pleistocene occupation with little archaeological evidence; a volcanic eruption in Kyūshū forcing survivors to flee southward; a mid-Holocene warm period when the human sphere of action included several islands; a Holocene cool period contributing to settlement pattern changes; exchange of marine shell products with distant consumers; a Yamato outpost in Kikaigashima in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; the rise of Urasoe as a thirteenth-century kingship; the subsequent rise of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Shuri kingship, with elaboration of palatial residences and Buddhist temples; simultaneous development of the port of Naha to service maritime trade with east Asian polities; a distinct Sakishima landscape with initially minimal ties to broader Ryūkyū networks; and fifteenth-century trade and subjugation to the Shuri Kingdom.

The author concludes by drawing parallels with selected Caribbean and Mediterranean maritime trading empires connected through processes such as migration, colonization, and trade, all facilitated by navigational improvements within environmental parameters: the same processes that involved Ryūkyū islanders in the creation of a broad community of exchange spanning coastal East Asia by the eleventh century. The preservation of this unique archaeological heritage is of prime importance to the people of the Ryūkyū Islands and the global heritage community after the heavy damage it received due to prewar sugar cane production, World War II destruction, and subsequent urban, U.S. military, and touristic developments. An illustrated chronology of trade ceramics is presented as Appendix 1, and the successive rulers of the Chūzan and Ryūkyū Kingdoms as Appendix 2. A glossary including Japanese and Chinese characters is provided for Okinawan and Chinese place-names and coastal sites, Japanese

authors' names, and ceramic and coin names, followed by bibliographic references in Japanese and English.

Credible evidence of Palaeolithic settlement of the islands remains elusive. The author shows admirable restraint in not portraying the land bridge hypothesis as entirely compatible with our current understanding of Pleistocene sea level fluctuations and climatic shifts in mainland Asia, thus de-emphasizing the possibility of sustained contact from China to Japan via the Ryūkyū Islands before the Holocene. The author's deliberate focus on environmental parameters for inducing and facilitating eventual colonization of the Ryūkyū Islands by hunter-gatherers from Jōmon period enclaves in southern Kyūshū during the Shellmound period rests on more solid footing, as coastal reef productivity began to vie with terrestrial resources as a dependable subsistence base for sustaining populations. Evidence of trade in marine shell ornamentation with China, Korea, and Japan does indeed foreshadow the involvement of the archipelago in a much more vibrant exchange network with East Asian polities in the Gusuku period. The author again shows restraint in not attributing the wholesale adoption of rice agriculture from Yayoi period communities in southern Kyūshū as the driving force for such changes, thus crediting the inhabitants of the Ryūkyū Islands as active players in selecting a cultural identity of their own choosing until 1609.

Although an exchange dynamic can be retraced thanks to examination of distribution of lithic artifacts, and despite the fact the author himself criticizes the strict focus on ceramic typology in Japanese literature, material culture is essentially approached from the ceramic point of view. Circulation of raw materials and/or finished tools from specialized extraction centers in the Kerama archipelago or from the north of Okinawa Island throughout the whole archipelago sheds light on a closer "domestic" network, complementary to the larger network used to obtain obsidian. Petrographic analyses have been increasingly performed during the last decade to determine provenance of the stones used at specific archaeological sites. Moreover, the scarcity of

lithic implements and their replacement in diverse parts of the archipelago at differing time periods by tools made of large shells, is another peculiarity of the Ryūkyū prehistory that is worth mentioning.

History of immigration in the Ryūkyū archipelago also finds an interesting echo in the founding myths of numerous villages, in which a man and his sister generally come from abroad and start iron work. If Japanese mythology broadly references events that took place before the Yayoi period, then Okinawan mythology seems to refer exclusively to the more recent Gusuku period. The development of elites at the end of the Gusuku period focuses on the seizure of trade and the development of agriculture, completely overshadowing the seminal role ironworking could have played, despite its importance in folklore and traditional rites. Quite surprisingly for an archaeological book, the tribute trade is essentially discussed from the point of view of historical data, the archaeological examples coming as illustration of known historical facts. The author nevertheless mentions the fact that the great numbers of archaeological finds for ceramic vessels suggest that nonofficial exchanges,

unmentioned in historical records, were particularly developed.

As the only comprehensive reference in the English language on this subject, Pearson's book is of great value for students wishing to grasp an overview of the matter before an eventual specialization, and for researchers in neighboring areas seeking comparative materials. The use of specialized terms and theoretical concepts are not obtuse enough to discourage the reader with an interest in archaeology. Ryūkyū archaeology is currently developing, freeing itself from Japanese standards and refining its own. Important discoveries are announced every few months, reinforcing or confounding existing theories, as well as creating new ones. Constant urban development (e.g., for U.S. military bases) is usually depicted as a threat to archaeological resources, but it has stimulated many salvage excavations and archaeological test projects that have provided a broader view of the archaeological landscape in Okinawan cities. This book is broad and objective enough, despite this changing context, to remain a foundation stone of archaeological literature on this region for several decades, if not longer.