

Dig offers clues about Guam's ancient residents

September 13 2015, by Cameron Miculka

Recent studies at an ancient burial site on Tumon Bay is giving archaeologists more insight into the jewelry and ornaments worn by Guam's ancient residents.

Between 2006 and 2008, excavations at the Naton Beach site turned up more than 400 burials from the pre-latte and latte periods of prehistoric Guam, said Judith R. Amesbury, an archaeologist with Micronesian Archaeological Research Services. The oldest burials at the site date back 2,500 years ago.

Anthropologists divide Guam's prehistory—which refers to any time before writing was introduced to the island—into two time periods. The first era, the pre-latte period, dates to 1,500 B.C., when the first wave of migration to Guam is believed to have taken place. The latte period, which refers to the time when lattes were first introduced, started around 950 A.D. and continued up to the arrival of Ferdinand Magellan in 1521.

During a presentation at the Latte of Freedom's Hall of Governors, Amesbury spoke about the extent of ornamentation found on ancestral remains buried in the Naton Beach site, saying the number of ornaments found "is extraordinary."

The site, Amesbury said, is the largest group of human remains from the pre-latte period ever discovered in the Marianas, as well as the oldest burials ever discovered. Of the more than 400 burials, more than 150 of them were pre-latte and more than 250 were from the latte period.

During her presentation, Amesbury said there appeared to be a distinct difference in ornamentation between the pre-latte and latte period burials.

In the pre-latte period, a quarter of the 170 burials found had ornaments and the number of ornaments found exceeded 1,600. These ornaments included a wide range of materials and sizes.

On the smaller side were what researchers labeled "Type 3 Conus beads." These beads were about a quarter of an inch in diameter and more than 1,000 of these were found at the site. In one case, Amesbury said, one woman's remains were found with more than 400 of these beads.

The ornaments also included the [teeth](#) of tiger sharks.

Amesbury said the woman who was buried with the teeth also had what appeared to be a pumice file. Amesbury said it's possible the file was used to make other ornaments.

Also found among the burials were the shells of *Pinctadamaxima*, a species of pearl oyster. Amesbury said three burials had the shell placed over the left shoulder. Of the three, the largest shell measured 35 centimeters across and was found on the remains of a man who was believed to have been in his late 20s at the time of his death.

Amesbury said 11 pre-latte burials were found with red or yellow ochre, a type of pigment made from clay earth.

Amesbury also showed the audience a photograph of teeth belonging to a man's remains that showed circular pits cut into his two front teeth. That, she said, has never been seen before in the Marianas.

Amesbury compared the teeth to something similar found among Mayan remains, where teeth were inlaid with stones. Amesbury said it's possible the pre-latte inhabitants of Guam did something similar, but stressed there wasn't actually any connection between the Mayan example and the teeth found at Naton Beach.

The archaeologist also said a set of infant remains had ornaments. If researchers are correct that the ornaments are tied to status, the discovery of the infant would suggest that status in pre-latte Guam was inherited.

With regard to the burials dated to the latte period, only 17 of the 258 burials had ornaments, and Amesbury said the excavation had turned up eight burials with incised teeth.

She showed the audience a photograph of a skull on which a "cross-hatch" design had been carved into the teeth. The incisions were found on eight sets of remains: four female, three male and one whose sex wasn't determined.

Overall, she said, the discovery was of great significance to researchers. The higher prevalence of ornaments among the pre-latte [burials](#) suggested status was actually more important than it was in the later period.

On top of that, the prevalence of female remains with [ornaments](#) compared to male [remains](#) suggested women were held in high regard, reinforcing the idea of matrilineage.

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