

Substantive Evidence of Initial Habitation in the Remote Pacific:

**Archaeological Discoveries at
Unai Bapot in Saipan,
Mariana Islands**

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Access Archaeology



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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Unai Bapot and Earliest Remote Oceanic Settlement	1
Chapter 2 Project Context and Questions.....	4
Physical Environment	4
Land Use.....	6
Archaeological Setting.....	7
2005 Investigation	9
Role of the 2016 Investigation.....	19
Chapter 3 Investigative Procedures.....	20
Chapter 4 New Findings: Stratigraphy and Dating	33
Radiocarbon Dating and Marine Reservoir Correction	33
Datable Materials within Calcrete	39
An Alternative Marine Reservoir Proposal?	39
Current Investigation.....	40
Layer VIII.....	43
Layer VII.....	43
Layer VI-B	46
Layer VI-A.....	47
Layer V.....	48
Layer IV.....	50
Layer III-B	50
Layer III-A	51
Layer II.....	51
Layer I.....	51
Chapter 5 New Findings: Overall Archaeological Contents	52
Chapter 6 New Findings: Traces of Structural Features.....	80
Layer VII, Features G, H, I, and Post Moulds.....	81
Layer VI-B, Features D, E, and F	86
Layer VI-A, Feature C.....	87
Layer V, Features A and B	91
Chapter 7 New Findings: Pottery Artefacts.....	93
Layer VII Pottery	95
Layer VI-B Pottery.....	99
Layer VI-A Pottery.....	102

Layer V Pottery	105
Layer IV Pottery	110
Layer III-B Pottery	111
Layer III-A Pottery	114
Layer II Pottery	115
Layer I Pottery	117
Chapter 8 New Findings: Non-Pottery Artefacts	120
Adzes	120
Stone Flakes, Fragments, and Raw Materials	127
Pounders and Grinding Basins	133
Slingstone Fragment	136
Polished Balls	136
Fishing Gear	137
Sea Urchin Spine Abraders	140
Shell Discs	141
Shell Bands	145
Shell Circlets	146
Shell Rings	147
Cypraea sp. Shell Beads	148
Conus spp. and Other Small Round Shell Beads	149
Shell Pendants	154
Shell Ear Ornaments	156
Drilled Turbo spp. Shells	157
Drilled and Cut Cypraea spp. Shells	159
Smoothed-edge Bivalve Shell Objects	160
Drilled Shark Tooth	162
Bevelled Shell Triangle	162
“Corkscrew” Shell	163
Edge-worked Nacreous Bivalve Shells	164
Worked Nacreous Shell Debitage	165
Chapter 9 New Findings: Midden of Animal Food Remains	167
Shellfish Remains	167
Animal Bones	169
Chapter 10 Answering the Initial Research Questions	172
Chapter 11 Larger Research Implications	174
References	176

List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of traditional cultural materials recovered from the 2005 test pits, TU-1 and -2, Layers I-A (youngest) through IV-A (oldest).....	12
Table 2. Radiocarbon dating results from 2005, using updated marine reservoir correction and calibration curves.	18
Table 3. Stratigraphic layer descriptions, as observed in October 2016.....	32
Table 4. Paired charcoal and <i>Anadara</i> sp. shells validating a ΔR of -49 ± 61 in the Mariana Islands.....	35
Table 5. Results of radiocarbon dating.	41
Table 6. Summary of archaeological material from the October 2016 excavation.....	56

List of Figures

Figure 1. Position of the Mariana Islands in the Asia-Pacific region, noting the cross-regional settlement chronology.	1
Figure 2. Known earliest settlement sites of 1500–1100 B.C. in the Mariana Islands.....	2
Figure 3. Study area, shown on an enlarged (1:5000 scale) portion of 2005 satellite image of Saipan.....	4
Figure 4. Updated contour map of the study area, showing surface remains, prior excavations, and renewed excavations.....	5
Figure 5. Megalithic latte remains on cleared site surface in 2005, view to east.....	10
Figure 6. Portion of broken lusong grinding mortar in 2005, view to north.....	10
Figure 7. Profile of TU-2 from 2005 excavation, view to west.....	11
Figure 8. Examples of excavated pottery with reconstructed vessel shapes in stratigraphic order, according to the 2005 test pit findings.....	14
Figure 9. Samples of excavated stone, shell, and bone tools from 2005 findings.	15
Figure 10. Samples of shell and coral ornaments from 2005 findings.....	16
Figure 11. Chronological trends in marine shellfish remains from 2005 findings.	17
Figure 12. Hand-clearing of the vegetation cover, while preparing the 4 by 4 m excavation area.....	21
Figure 13. Outline of the 4 by 4 m excavation area, ready to begin excavation.	21
Figure 14. Excavation in process of the uppermost stratigraphic layer, in the designated Quadrant 1 of the northeast portion of the excavation area.	22
Figure 15. Exposing the entire excavation area, Quadrants 1 through 4, at 20 cm depth within Layer I.	22
Figure 16. Continued exposure of stratigraphic layers by hand-controlled excavation.	23
Figure 17. Loading buckets for fine-mesh sieving.	23
Figure 18. Carrying buckets to a sieving station.	24
Figure 19. Fine-mesh sieving in progress at station 1 of 2.....	24

Figure 20. Fine-mesh sieving in progress at station 2 of 2.....	25
Figure 21. Exposing a heated-rock feature as a discrete unit within the stratigraphic context.....	25
Figure 22. Collection of sedimentary samples for analysis of possible palaeo-botanical materials.....	27
Figure 23. Flotation of sediment samples in progress.....	27
Figure 24. Processing of the excavated materials, involving washing, separation of material categories, and thorough drying in preparation for recording of counts, weights, and detailed descriptions.....	28
Figure 25. Stratigraphy exposed at end of October 2016 excavation, showing Quadrant 2, view to southeast.....	30
Figure 26. Stratigraphic profile, according to observations in October 2016.	31
Figure 27. Approximate reconstructions of the site setting during earliest settlement periods as compared to the modern conditions.	33
Figure 28. Sample Beta-448701 of <i>Anadara</i> sp. shell in dorsal (left) and ventral (right) views, from Feature G of Layer VII, prior to radiocarbon dating by Beta Analytic.....	34
Figure 29. Samples Beta-448702 (left) and Beta-452141 (right) from Feature G of Layer VII, containing insufficient carbon for radiocarbon dating.	37
Figure 30. Sample Beta-453138 from Feature H of Layer VII. Left image shows the whole sample, removed by trowel from the feature.....	38
Figure 31. Charcoal and ash within Feature G of Layer VII, during excavation, view to south.	38
Figure 32. Plan view of Layer VII.....	44
Figure 33. Examples of earliest artefacts from the 2005 and 2016 excavations at Unai Bapot. Scale bars are in 1-cm increments.....	45
Figure 34. Plan view of Layer VI-B.	46
Figure 35. Plan view of Layer VI-A.	48
Figure 36. Plan view of Layer V.	49
Figure 37. Raw counts of pottery fragments and grams of marine shell per layer.	53
Figure 38. Approximate concentrations of numbers of pottery fragments and grams of marine shell per 100 litres of excavated sediment in each layer.....	54
Figure 39. Distribution of major artefact categories in stratigraphic layers.	55
Figure 40. Near base of pit of Feature G in Layer VII, during excavation in Quadrant 2, view to south-southeast.....	82
Figure 41. Closer view near base of Feature G in Layer VII, during excavation in Quadrant 2, view downward to south.	82
Figure 42. Initial exposure of heated-rock hearths of Features H and I in Layer VII, during excavation in Quadrant 3, view to southwest.	83
Figure 43. Pedestalled portions of heated-rock hearths of Features H and I in Layer VII, during excavation in Quadrant 3, view down to north.	83
Figure 44. Post moulds, after excavation near base of Layer VII, view to south. Scale bars are in 20-cm increments.....	84

Figure 45. Post moulds, after excavation near base of Layer VII, view down to southeast.....	85
Figure 46. Post moulds P-3-1 (right), P-3-2 (partial in top center), and P-3-3 (lower left) in Quadrant 3, after excavation near base of Layer VII, view to north-northwest.....	85
Figure 47. Exposure of heated-rock hearth of Feature D in Layer VI-B, during excavation in Quadrant 4, view down to north.....	86
Figure 48. Initial exposure of heated-rock hearths of Features E and F in Layer VI-B, during excavation in Quadrant 1, view down to north.....	87
Figure 49. Initial exposure of pottery concentration at top of Feature C in Layer VI-A, during excavation in Quadrant 3, view down to west.....	88
Figure 50. Pedestalled portion of heated-rock hearth of Feature C in Layer VI-A, during excavation in Quadrant 3, view down to west.....	88
Figure 51. Preserved portion of carinated red-slipped bowl in partially pedestalled heated-rock hearth of Feature C in Layer VI-A, during excavation of Quadrant 3, view to east.....	89
Figure 52. Detail of preserved portion of carinated red-slipped bowl in heated-rock hearth of Feature C in Layer VI-A, during excavation of Quadrant 3, view down to east.....	89
Figure 53. Fire-reddened and hardened ashy matrix at the base of Feature C, during excavation in Quadrant 3, view down to west.....	90
Figure 54. Sample Beta-448705 from Feature C of Layer VI-A.	90
Figure 55. Initial exposure of heated-rock hearth of Feature A in Layer V, during excavation in Quadrants 3 and 4, view to west.....	91
Figure 56. Pedestalled portions of heated-rock hearth of Feature A in Layer V, during excavation in Quadrants 3 and 4, view to west.....	92
Figure 57. Pedestalled surface of pit of Feature B in Layer V, during excavation in Quadrant 3, view to southeast.....	92
Figure 58. Overall chronological trends in major categories of pottery.	94
Figure 59. Pieces of a carinated bowl with everted lip, two pieces shown in two views, recovered from Layer VII.	96
Figure 60. Pieces of a round-shouldered bowl with everted lip, recovered from Layer VII.....	96
Figure 61. Rim fragments of nearly straight-sided bowls, with slight outcurving, recovered from Layer VII.	97
Figure 62. Rare examples of flat-cornered base fragments, recovered from Layer VII.	98
Figure 63. Decorated pottery fragment, recovered from Feature G of Layer VII.....	98
Figure 64. Comparison of red-slipped (left) versus blackware (right) everted rims, recovered from Layer VII.....	98
Figure 65. Pieces of carinated red-slipped bowl, recovered from Layer VI-B.	99
Figure 66. Fragment of round-shouldered bowl, recovered from Layer VI-B.....	100
Figure 67. Fragments of blackware rims, broken from everted (upper) and nearly straight-sided (lower) variants, recovered from Layer VI-B.....	100
Figure 68. Rims broken from slightly incurved bowls, recovered from Layer VI-B.....	100

Figure 69. Decorated blackware rim, recovered from Layer VI-B.....	101
Figure 70. Decorated blackware carination, with partly retained white lime infill, recovered from Feature D of Layer VI-B.....	101
Figure 71. Paddle-impressed pottery fragment, recovered from Layer VI-B.	101
Figure 72. Examples of fragments from everted-rim bowls, with varying degree of sharply carinated to rounded profile, recovered from Layer VI-A.	102
Figure 73. Rim of slightly incurved bowl, recovered from Layer VI-A.....	103
Figure 74. Decorated red-slipped pottery fragments, with traces of white lime infill, recovered from Layer VI-A.	103
Figure 75. Decorated blackware fragments, with traces of white lime infill, broken from carinated bowl, recovered from Quadrant 3 in Layer VI-A.....	104
Figure 76. Drilled potsherd, shown in exterior (left) and interior (right views), recovered from Layer VI-A.	104
Figure 77. Fragments of carinated red-slipped bowl with everted rim, recovered from Layer V.	106
Figure 78. Fragment of very small carinated red-slipped bowl with everted rim, recovered from Layer V.	106
Figure 79. Rim of narrow straight-sided cup, recovered from Layer V.	106
Figure 80. Rare example of circle-stamped red-slipped handle, with traces of white lime infill, shown in three views, recovered from Layer V.	107
Figure 81. Portion of very small circle- stamped red-slipped pottery, shown in three views, recovered from Layer V.	107
Figure 82. Two red-slipped pottery fragments, with curvilinear garlands and circles, retaining traces of white lime infill, recovered from Layer V.....	108
Figure 83. Two red-slipped rims, decorated over the lip, showing row of circles (left) and row of half-circles (right), recovered from Layer V.....	108
Figure 84. Red-slipped pottery fragment, modified by notching of the rim, recovered from Layer VI-A.....	108
Figure 85. Fragments of red-slipped bowl with everted rim, recovered from Layer IV.	109
Figure 86. Examples of narrow straight-sided cup (upper) and large flat-based pan (lower), recovered from Layer IV.	109
Figure 87. Bold-line incised pottery rim fragment, recovered from Layer IV.....	110
Figure 88. Variations of narrow cups, recovered from Layer III-B.	111
Figure 89. Variations of thick-walled, flat-bottomed pans, recovered from Layer III-B.	112
Figure 90. Example of surface-roughened red-slipped large bowl fragment, with circle-stamped lip, recovered from Layer III-B.....	113
Figure 91. Variations of circle-stamped lip pieces, recovered from Layer III-B.....	113
Figure 92. Rim fragments of narrow straight-sided cup, recovered from Layer III-A.....	114
Figure 93. Conjoined rim and base fragments of a shallow flat-bottomed pan, recovered from Layer III-A.	114
Figure 94. Rim of red-slipped slightly incurved bowl, recovered from Layer III-A.....	115
Figure 95. Rim of thick-walled, non-slipped, slightly incurved bowl, recovered from Layer III-A.....	115
Figure 96. Decorated lip pieces, recovered from Layer III-A.....	115

Figure 97. Rims from straight-sided cups, recovered from Layer II.	116
Figure 98. Examples of rim and base fragments of two different pans, recovered from Layer II.	116
Figure 99. Thick incurving rims pieces, recovered from Layer II.	117
Figure 100. Variations of thick incurving rims pieces, recovered from Layer I.	118
Figure 101. Example of thick straight-sided rim, recovered from Layer I.	118
Figure 102. Decorated portions of upward-facing lips of rim fragments, recovered from Layer I.	118
Figure 103. Exceptionally thickened rim piece, shown in four views, recovered from Layer I.	119
Figure 104. Unusual cornered piece, recovered from Layer I. Scale bars are in 1-cm increments.	119
Figure 105. Stratigraphic distribution of adzes (whole, partial, and pre-form varieties) of different material categories.	121
Figure 106. Polished chert adzes from Layer VI-B (upper left) and Layer VI-B (lower right), shown in two views.	122
Figure 107. Broken tip of polished chert adze or chisel, shown in three views, recovered from Layer VI-A.	123
Figure 108. Chert adze pre-form, recovered from Layer VI-A.	123
Figure 109. <i>Tridacna</i> sp. adze fragment (upper row, two views) and pre-form (lower row, two views), recovered from Layer III-B.	124
Figure 110. <i>Tridacna</i> sp. adze fragment (upper row, two views) and pre-form (lower row, two views), recovered from Layer III-B.	125
Figure 111. <i>Terebra</i> sp. shell adze or chisel (upper row, two views) from Layer III-A and broken <i>Conus</i> sp. shell adze (lower row, two views) from Layer I.	126
Figure 112. Stratigraphic distribution of stone flakes and raw materials, shown in values of raw counts per stratigraphic layer.	128
Figure 113. Stratigraphic distribution of chert flakes, flakes with polish, and adze-related materials, shown in values of raw counts per stratigraphic layer.	129
Figure 114. Examples of chert flakes.	130
Figure 115. Examples of volcanic stone flakes.	131
Figure 116. Examples of limestone flakes.	132
Figure 117. Examples of limestone crystal raw materials, recovered from Layer VI-A.	133
Figure 118. Fragment of limestone grinding stone, shown in two views, recovered from Layer I.	134
Figure 119. Limestone pounder fragment from Layer VI-B (lower row) and complete pounder from Layer VI-A (upper row), shown in two views each.	134
Figure 120. Two limestone pounder fragments, shown in two views per row, recovered from Layer IV.	135
Figure 121. Volcanic stone pounder fragment, shown in two views, recovered from Layer I.	135
Figure 122. Fragment of limestone slingstone, shown in two views, recovered from Layer I.	136
Figure 123. Ball of limestone from Layer III-A (left) and another of polished probable <i>Tridacna</i> sp. shell from Layer VI-A (right).	136
Figure 124. Broken net weight made of <i>Asaphis</i> sp. shell, shown in two views, recovered from Layer VI-A.	137

Figure 125. Net weight made of limestone crystal, shown in three views, recovered from Feature B in Layer V.	138
Figure 126. Nacreous shell fishing hook pieces, recovered from Layer VI-B.	138
Figure 127. Nacreous shell fishing hook pieces, recovered from layers IV-A through II.	139
Figure 128. Sea urchin spine abraders, recovered from lower layers.	140
Figure 129. Sea urchin spine abraders, recovered from middle and upper layers.	141
Figure 130. Examples of different categories of shell ornaments, recovered from 2016 excavation.	142
Figure 131. <i>Conus</i> spp. shell disc pieces from Layers VII and VI-B.	143
Figure 132. <i>Conus</i> spp. shell disc pieces from Layer VI-A.	144
Figure 133. <i>Spondylus</i> sp. shell disc, shown in two views, recovered from Layer I.	144
Figure 134. Shell band fragments.	145
Figure 135. Shell circlet fragments, each shown in two views.	146
Figure 136. Larger-diameter shell ring fragments.	147
Figure 137. Smaller-diameter shell rings.	147
Figure 138. <i>Cypraea</i> sp. shell bead pieces.	148
Figure 139. <i>Conus</i> spp. shell beads in process, shown in two views each, recovered from Layer VII.	149
Figure 140. <i>Conus</i> spp. and possibly other taxa of shell beads, recovered from Layer VII.	150
Figure 141. <i>Conus</i> spp. shell beads in process, shown in two views each, recovered from Layer VI-B.	151
Figure 142. <i>Conus</i> spp. and possibly other taxa of shell beads, recovered from Layer VII.	151
Figure 143. <i>Conus</i> sp. shell bead in process, shown in two views, recovered from Layer VI-A.	152
Figure 144. <i>Conus</i> spp. and possibly other taxa of shell beads, recovered from Layer VI-A.	152
Figure 145. <i>Conus</i> spp. and possibly other taxa of shell beads, recovered from Layer V.	153
Figure 146. <i>Conus</i> spp. and possibly other taxa of shell beads, recovered from Layer IV.	153
Figure 147. <i>Conus</i> spp. and possibly other taxa of shell beads, recovered from Layer III-B.	153
Figure 148. <i>Conus</i> sp. shell pendant, shown in four views, recovered From Layer VII.	154
Figure 149. Fragment of nacreous shell pendant, shown in two views, recovered From Layer IV.	155
Figure 150. Elongate shell pendant, shown in two views, recovered From Layer III-B.	155
Figure 151. Shell ear ornament, shown in two views, recovered From Layer VI-B.	156
Figure 152. Two nearly identically shaped ear ornament fragments, recovered from Layer II.	157
Figure 153. Complete probable lime container, made of <i>Turbo</i> sp. shell, shown in three views, recovered from Layer II.	158
Figure 154. Fragment of drilled <i>Turbo</i> sp. shell, recovered from Layer VI-B.	158
Figure 155. Pieces of drilled and cut <i>Cypraea</i> spp. shells.	159
Figure 156. Two smoothed-edge shell artefacts of probable <i>Anadara</i> sp. shell, shown in three views each, recovered from Layer VI-B.	160

Figure 157. Two smoothed-edge shell artifacts of probable <i>Anadara</i> sp. shell, shown in three views each, recovered from Layer VI-A.....	161
Figure 158. Smoothed-edge shell artefact of nacreous shell, shown in two views, recovered from Layer V.....	161
Figure 159. Fragment of drilled shark tooth (upper) and another unmodified fragment (lower), shown in three views, recovered from Layer IV.....	162
Figure 160. Bevelled nacreous shell triangle, shown in three views, recovered from Layer VII.....	163
Figure 161. "Corkscrew" shaped <i>Terebra</i> sp. shell artefact, recovered from Layer IV.....	163
Figure 162. Thoroughly edge-worked nacreous shell, shown in two views, recovered from Feature I within Layer VII.....	164
Figure 163. Edge-worked <i>Isognomon</i> sp. shell, shown in two views, recovered from Layer VI-A.....	165
Figure 164. Examples of pieces of worked nacreous shell. Item at lower right was from Layer VI-B. All other items were from Layer VI-A.....	166
Figure 165. Major chronological trends in marine shellfish remains, based on collections from Quadrant 1.....	168
Figure 166. Example of nearly complete <i>Haliotis</i> sp. shell, shown in dorsal (left) and ventral (right) views, recovered from Layer VII.....	169
Figure 167. Stratigraphic distribution of vertebrate animal bones, shown in raw counts per stratigraphic layer.....	170

Preface

This book discloses the latest excavation findings of October 2016 at Unai Bapot in Saipan, accounting for the evidence of one of the oldest known habitation sites in the entire region of Remote Oceania, dating just prior to 1500 B.C. Given the significance of the findings, the raw data are presented here in detail as a source of primary information. Other studies will continue and may yet be published elsewhere, and meanwhile the primary datasets are shared in this comprehensive synthesis.

The current results have been possible with funding granted by the Australian Research Council (DP140100384) and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation (RG017-P-13, 2014–2016). This project had been a long time in development, prompted by a renewed interest in 2005. Other archaeologists had worked at the site since the 1920s, and a project in 2005 aimed to nominate the site in the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. The 2005 effort verified the deep stratigraphic layers and ancient dating of the site, and eventually funding was secured as noted for more research at last conducted in 2016.

The 2016 investigation at Unai Bapot was performed in partnership with the Historic Preservation Office of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, with special thanks owed to Mertie Kani, John Diego Palacios, and Jim Pruitt for their professional support and for contributing to the field excavation, along with other staff members Lufo Babauta, Jose Jesus Fitial, Jennifer Sablan, Juan Salas, and Abraham Tenorio. A number of Saipan residents worked with us during the excavation, including Lufo Babauta Junior, John Castro, Cassius Fitial, Erik Kani, and Angel Palacios. We are blessed that Hiro Kurashina, Peter Bellwood, Scott Russell, Rebecca Stephenson, and Zhenhua Deng participated in the field excavation and offered advice toward the success of the project. Collaborations with Larisa Ford, Brian Leon Guerrero, Emily Sablan, Jeried Calaor, and Kyle Ngiratregd at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service enhanced this project. Scott Russell, Eulalia Arriola, and Honora Tenorio at the Northern Mariana Islands Humanities Council enabled productive community outreach and sharing of information at public lectures and news interviews.

Chapter 1

Unai Bapot and Earliest Remote Oceanic Settlement

Excavation during October 2016 unearthed the buried palaeo-seashore layers of the oldest so far known habitation in Remote Oceania, specifically at Unai Bapot in Saipan of the Mariana Islands (Figures 1 and 2). Radiocarbon dating now has been confirmed at 1697–1531 B.C. for the oldest cultural layers situated at the palaeo-seashore, followed by dating of the next overlaying stratigraphic unit at 1437–1288 B.C. These results validated the prior findings from two small test pits in 2005, wherein two cross-Confirming radiocarbon dates had indicated a pre-1500 B.C. age (Carson 2008, 2014a), as compared to the preceding reports of vaguely pre-dating 1000 B.C. (Bonhomme and Craib 1987; Marck 1978; Ward and Craib 1985). Another excavation in 2008 documented a layer of a stable backbeach dated around 1100 B.C., with inconclusive results from only a small sample window into the deeper and older layers (Clark et al. 2010), such that the newest discoveries have resolved a long-standing problem in refining the dating and context of the site's initial habitation.

The apparent dating at Unai Bapot was slightly earlier than so far has been verified at any other first-settlement site in the Mariana Islands and indeed in the entire Remote Oceanic region, thus attracting attention for clarifying the timing and context of a major episode in human inhabitation of a large part of the globe. Even without accepting the dating specifically at Unai Bapot, a number of other sites dating close to 1500 B.C. have distinguished the Marianas as the place of initial cultural settlement of Remote Oceania (Carson and Kurashina 2012), made possible by the world's longest ocean-crossing migration of its time, exceeding 2000 km (Craib 1999; Hung et al. 2011). The first Marianas settlement certainly pre-dated the next attested cultural horizon in other parts of Remote Oceania around 1100 B.C. in Southern Melanesia and West Polynesia (Denham et al. 2012). The singular instance of oldest dating at Unai Bapot potentially could re-direct and re-focus research of this rarely captured view of first human contact in a previously uninhabited region of the world.

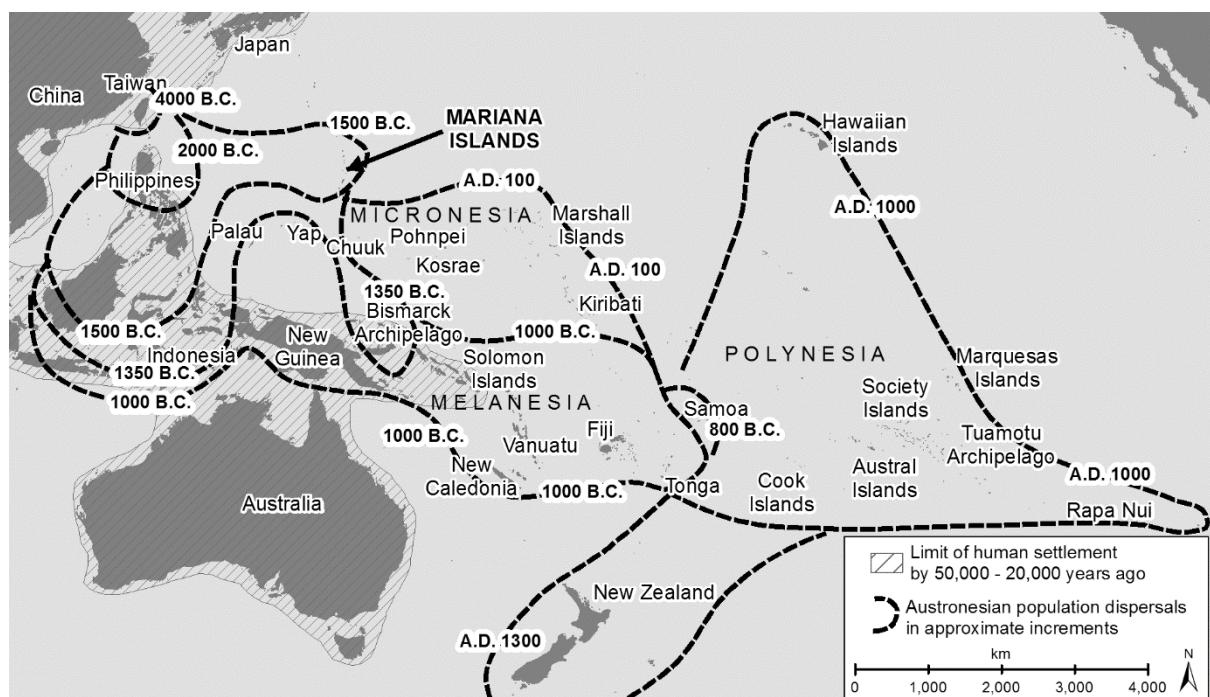


FIGURE 1. POSITION OF THE MARIANA ISLANDS IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION, NOTING THE CROSS-REGIONAL SETTLEMENT CHRONOLOGY.

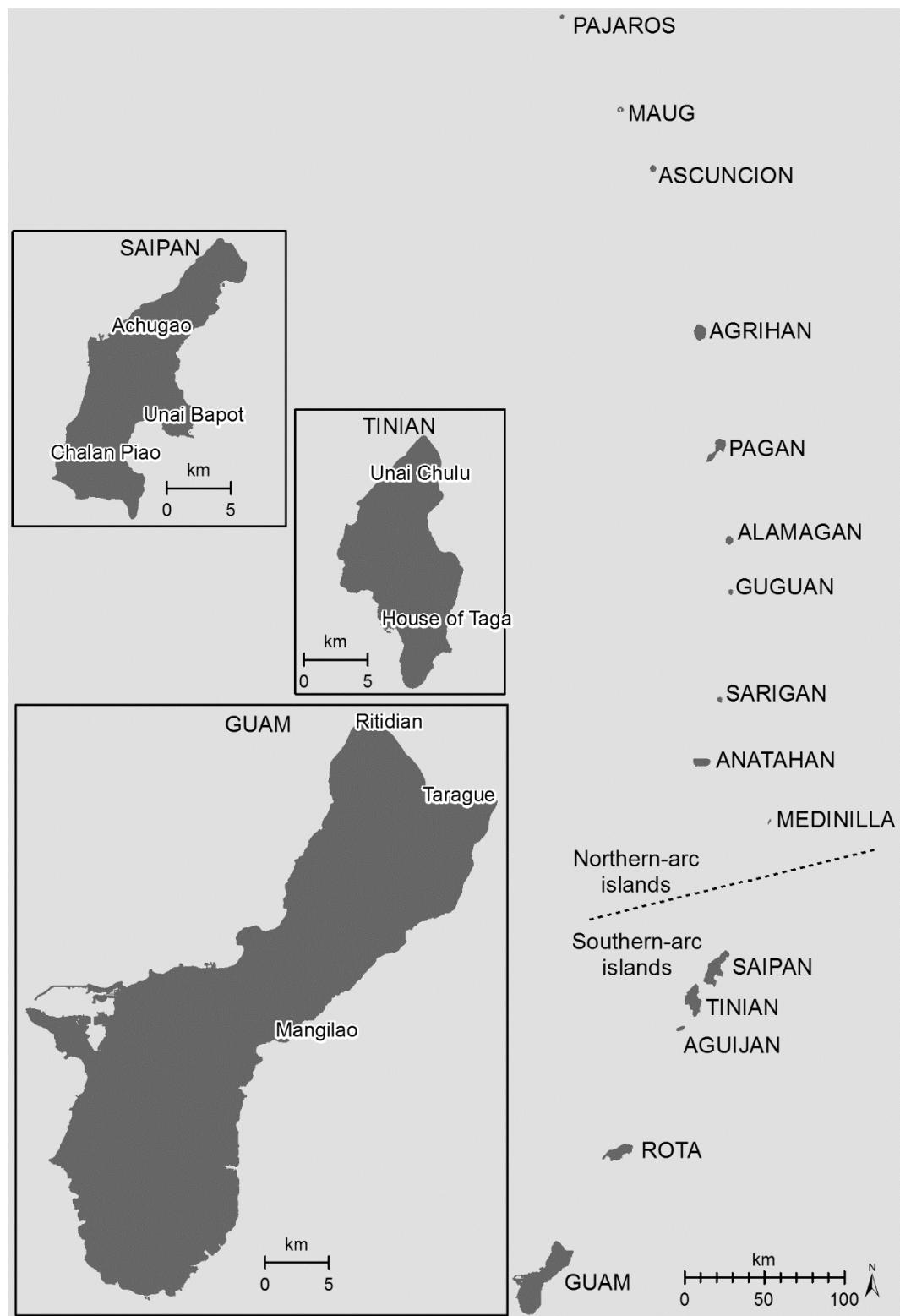


FIGURE 2. KNOWN EARLIEST SETTLEMENT SITES OF 1500–1100 B.C. IN THE MARIANA ISLANDS.

A critical review of Marianas first-settlement dating had concluded initial cultural presence at a number of sites of separate islands absolutely by 1500 B.C., with the possibility of discovering slightly older material in cases that have not yet been validated (Carson 2014a; Carson and Kurashina 2012). One of those prospective pre-1500 B.C. candidates was at Unai Bapot, hence the continued research with new results as reported here. Other acknowledged pre-1500 B.C. possibilities referred to the older-extending portions of radiocarbon date ranges at a few sites, as well as the palaeo-environmental indicators of initial anthropogenic impacts. Most recently at the Ritidian Site in Guam, the initial pottery-bearing horizon in one location was documented in a palaeo-lagoon bed of *Halimeda* sp. algal bioclasts directly dated at 2122–1734 B.C., overlain by the next cultural layer dated at 1456–1096 B.C. (Carson 2017a, 2017b).

The ancient contexts of first-settlement sites have been more thoroughly understood within the last decade of research in the Marianas, and this new knowledge has allowed more productive re-investigation at sites such as Unai Bapot. These oldest sites contained distinctive red-slipped pottery and other artefacts in ancient shoreline-oriented residential habitations, definitely pre-dating 1100 B.C. and therefore associated with a period of higher sea level during the mid-Holocene highstand (Dickinson 2000, 2003; Kayanne et al. 1993). Investigations at the Ritidian Site in Guam have illustrated the ancient lagoon and associated habitats that had existed within and around the first-settlement sites at 1500 B.C. (Carson 2012a, 2017a, 2017b). A large-format excavation at House of Taga in Tinian has exposed more than 90 sq m of the ancient living surface, with post moulds and stonework features along the ancient shoreline of 1500 B.C. (Carson 2014a; Carson and Hung 2015).

The newest (October 2016) excavation at Unai Bapot uncovered an area of 4 by 4 m (16 sq m), thus constituting so far the largest single contiguous excavation at the site, officially listed in the U.S. National Register of Historic Places as the Bapot Latte Site (SP-1-0013) was concerned with the buried cultural layers at the site. An investigation in 2005 had provided updated mapping and recording of numerous stone ruins and artefacts on the surface, a 1-m contour map of the site area, and two 1 by 2 m test excavations in support of a nomination of the site to the National Register of Historic Places (Carson 2005; Carson and Welch 2005). The new 2016 excavation therefore could focus on expanding knowledge of the subsurface layers, building on the prior documentation.

The research project entailed excavation during October 2016, followed by data analysis through January 2017. The research team consisted of Dr. Mike T. Carson and Dr. Hsiao-chun Hung as co-directors and investigators. The team worked closely with the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Training opportunities were provided for staff members of HPO, including the excavation and processing of artefacts for analysis. Additionally, partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service supported training opportunities for staff from the Guam National Wildlife Refuge. Furthermore, the CNMI Humanities Council coordinated public outreach in a series of open lecture presentations, news media reports, and site visits during and after the investigation.

All work tasks conformed to the “Content, Format, and Submission Standards for Final Reports of Archaeological Projects in the CNMI.” This work also complied with pertinent sections of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and associated 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 800, as well as with CNMI Public Law 3-39. Toward ensuring these standards and regulations, the involvement of the CNMI HPO was critical.

Here we present the knowledge gained from investigating at Unai Bapot, working toward a new understanding of the initial cultural inhabitation of the ancient seashores of the Remote Oceanic region, evidently beginning just prior to 1500 B.C. and then continuing in a long sequence thereafter. Following this introductory chapter (Chapter 1), the presentation is structured to address the project context (Chapter 2), investigative procedures (Chapter 3), material findings (Chapters 4 through 9), and implications of the new discoveries (Chapters 10 and 11). The raw data are disclosed in full detail to substantiate the most robust interpretations and to withstand future interrogations of the findings.