Substantive Evidence of Initial Habitation in the Remote Pacific:

Archaeological Discoveries at Unai Bapot in Saipan, Mariana Islands

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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.

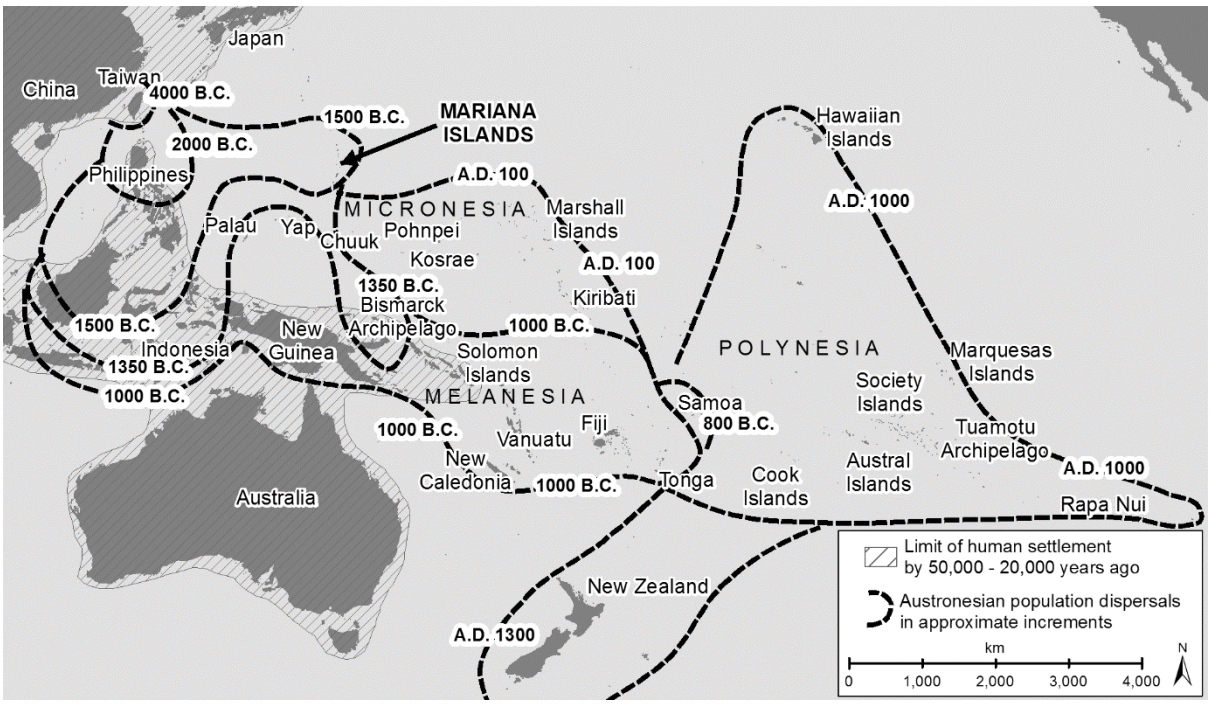

FIGURE 1. POSITION OF THE MARIANA ISLANDS IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION, NOTING THE CROSS-REGIONAL SETTLEMENT CHRONOLOGY.

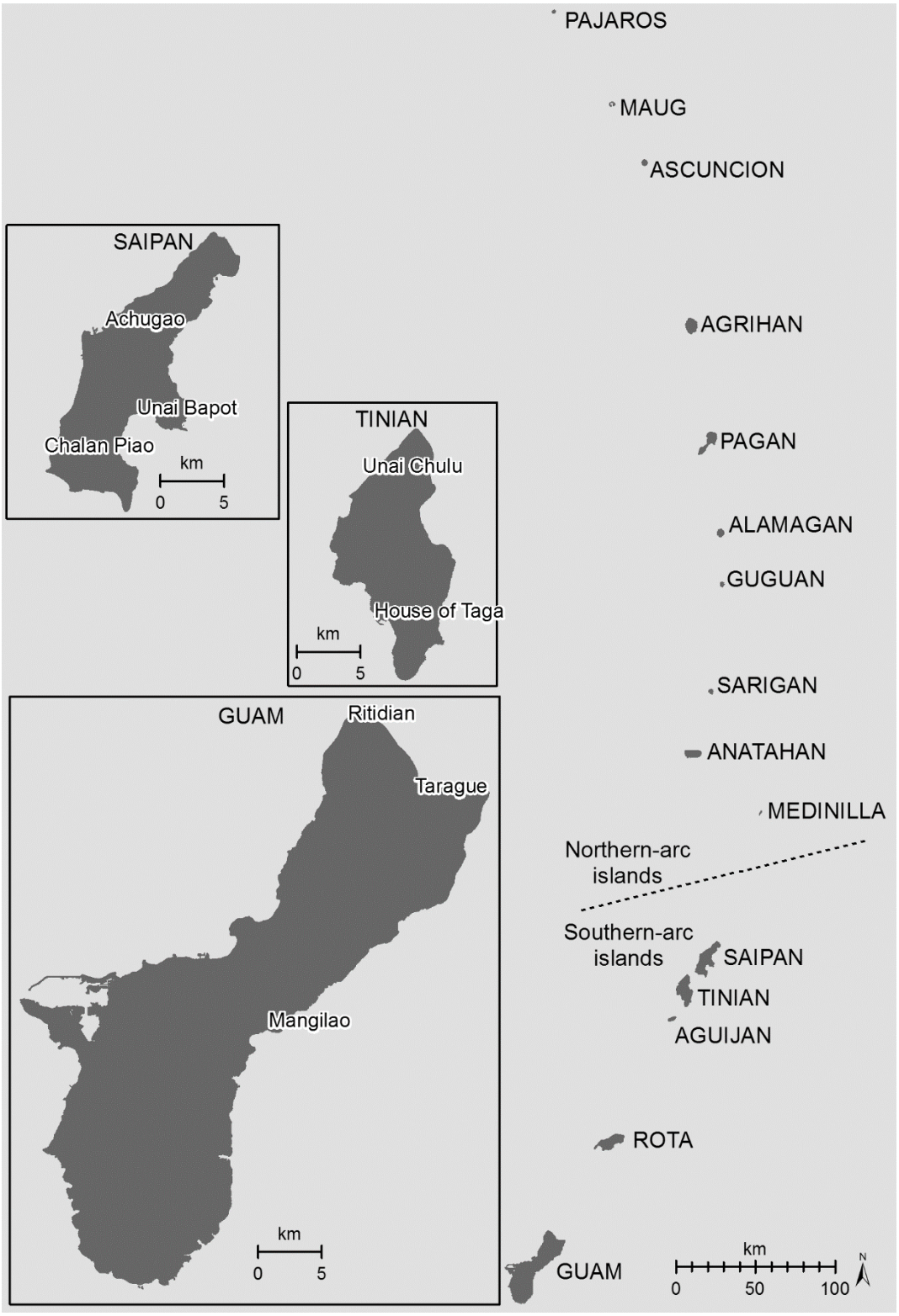

FIGURE 2. KNOWN EARLIEST SETTLEMENT SITES OF 1500–1100 B.C. IN THE MARIANA ISLANDS.

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.