

A Brief Note on the 2007 Excavation at Ille Cave, Palawan, the Philippines

Yvette Balbaligo
UCL Institute of Archaeology

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Introduction

Ille Cave is a multi-period burial and occupation site and one of several cave complexes in Barangay New Ibajay, El Nido, northern Palawan in the Philippines (119°30'19"E, 11°11'46"N, Fig. 1). Excavations have been ongoing at the site since 1998 and it is currently being excavated by the Archaeological Studies Program, University of the Philippines. This is an international collaboration with researchers from Ireland, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America. The burials and artefacts supply evidence for the intensive use of Ille Cave from Palaeolithic times. Radiocarbon dates have indicated the use of the cave as a burial and habitation site from at least 11 000 Cal BP (Lewis et al. 2006). An early human cremation burial has been dated to c. 9000-9500 Cal BP, with the latest evidence of human use dating to the 19th century AD (Lewis et al. in press). The cave is part of the Late Eocene Pabellion karst formation and is located at the base of a c. 75m limestone tower (Fig. 2). There are two main mouths facing south and large trenches have been placed in each, labelled East and West Mouth (Lewis et al. 2006; Szabó et al. 2004). A smaller trench is situated to the far west of the West Mouth called the Ihian trench. The trenches were reopened to the depths of the previous season and excavated in spits of 5cm, using single-context recording as in previous years (Lewis et al. 2006).

Caves and rock shelters in Peninsular and Island Southeast Asia are numerous and an important resource for archaeology (for example, see Barker et al. 2005; Paz 2005; Ronquillo 1995). During Late Pleistocene times, caves were used only as brief campsites, often selected for their inaccessibility. In the early Holocene Epoch, they were frequently used as dwelling sites and in the middle Holocene they were often used as burial sites (Anderson 1997: 607). This activity can be seen in many of the cave complexes in Palawan. Palawan is also significant for the Philippines' most well known archaeological site, the Tabon Caves, in southern Palawan. The Tabon Caves have been almost continuously occupied between at least 30 000 and c. 9000 BP, and evidence of the earliest modern human remains in the Philippines, Pleistocene fossil *Homo sapiens*, were found there (Dizon et al. 2002, Fox 1970). The caves in El Nido also display evidence of human occupation and burial. The caves were used as dependable shelters, defence and ritual venues, and the flat tract of surrounding land was suitable for agriculture. Furthermore, the abundance of water, the presence of rich flora and fauna, and other favourable topographic features of the area made it attractive for early settlers (Cayron 1999: 52; Lewis et al. 2006), leaving a rich archaeological record.



Figure 1. Map of the Philippines showing Ille Cave, El Nido on Palawan Island.



Figure 2. Ille Cave from the east. The tower is c. 75m high, see people to right for scale. The cave mouth and trenches are located at the base of the south side.

Objectives

The three main objectives of this season were: to deepen the East Mouth trench with the hope of locating earlier cultural layers; to better understand the stratigraphic relationship between the East and West Mouths and to look for more sites in the surrounding Dewil Valley (H. Lewis and V. Paz, pers. comm.). Furthermore, the excavation team set up exhibitions in the main town and at the site to raise awareness about the archaeology and heritage of the Philippines. Archaeology in the Philippines is still a young discipline but has grown exponentially in the last ten years through both excavation and research. An overall aim of the research at Ille Cave is to contribute to the understanding of prehistory within the Philippines and wider Southeast Asia.

Summary of Finds in 2007

This season, approximately 11 complete and incomplete burials were found in the East and West Mouth trenches, including three possible human cremations in the East Mouth trench (V. Paz, pers. comm.). A deep trench of 4m x 4m x 2.5m was reopened in the East Mouth and, in this trench a 1m x 1m sondage was dug to a depth of just under 5m to see whether any more cultural layers could be revealed. Though no further material remains were found, datable material was collected and further analysis will show

whether the site is older than previously thought. Significant finds in the West Mouth trench include stone tools.



Figure 3. Examples of material culture excavated in Ihian trench. A stone adze, a red-slipped pot sherd with incisions, two different types of shell beads.

Ihian trench revealed the top of a shell midden which may connect to the West Mouth. A small highly polished adze was also found (Fig. 3). Adzes, blades and fragments have previously been found at Ille (Pawlik in press) and this find will further contribute to the understanding of stone tool technology in the area. All trenches continued to yield pottery, shell beads and pendants, and small animal bones, as had been found in previous years (Lewis et al. 2006). Further post-excavation analysis work will take place at the University of the Philippines.

Other cave sites in Dewil Valley were explored. Pasimbahan Cave, c. 3km to the North West of Ille Cave was identified as a site of potential significance. The cave was mapped, a site grid was set out and three trenches were excavated. The cave displayed evidence of human activity and contained other archaeological features, and a burial with metal grave goods was found on a ledge near the cave entrance (V. Paz, pers. comm.).

All objectives were fulfilled and further analysis of the finds and samples collected will continue to add to our understanding of the sites. A comprehensive site report will be

written and submitted to the National Museum of the Philippines, Manila, the British Academy who part-funded the project and other interest groups in the Philippines. The team will return next year to continue deepening all trenches and exploring the valley.

Engaging the Public

Each year, the excavation team from the University of the Philippines employs members of the local community to assist with the excavation. Over the years the local team have become knowledgeable about archaeological methods and the archaeology of the region. This has been invaluable in terms of educating the wider community about the importance of the site and to dispel widely-held myths of archaeologists as treasure hunters.

This was the first year that exhibitions about the archaeology of the region were set up. An exhibition with pictures of Philippine artefacts and the chronology of Philippine and world archaeology was displayed in the Municipal Hall of the main town of El Nido. Though Ille Cave is marked in tourist brochures, the site receives few visitors and there is little to see outside the excavation season. An exhibition case with information and replicas of finds from caves in Palawan and Southeast Asia was constructed and left at the site. The team await to see what the response to the exhibition is like when they return next year.

Within the Filipino archaeological community, there is a strongly felt need to engage with the public as too few are aware of the richness and depth of pre-colonial Philippine culture. By engaging with the communities as well as tourists in El Nido, it is hoped that a better understanding of archaeology will help protect sites from destruction and defacement to preserve the archaeology and heritage for further research and future generations.

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