

# HIGHLIGHTS OF PHILIPPINE PREHISTORY: 1986

by *Wilfredo P. RONQUILLO*

## INTRODUCTION

Researches in Philippine prehistory from its inception during the Spanish Colonial Period (ca. 16th-19th centuries) to 1950 have been adequately documented (Evangelista 1969) complemented recently by a resume of archaeological researches in the Philippines from 1951 to 1983 (Ronquillo 1985). These two papers have taken into account:

1. The pioneering endeavour of H. Otley Beyer in his effort in the reconstruction of Philippine prehistory (Beyer 1947; Beyer and de Veyra 1947) and his attempt to correlate Philippine archaeological data with the populations of the Pacific Islands (Beyer 1948);
2. The works of Fox (1959, 1970, 1974) and Solheim (1959, 1960, 1964) from the 1950s to the early 1970s which resulted in the inclusion of the terms Calatagan, Cagayan Valley, Kalanay and Tabon Caves in the archaeological literature; and
3. The various researches in prehistory undertaken in the Philippines during the 1970s and the 1980s by both Filipino and foreign archaeologists.

A more detailed presentation of Philippine prehistory with emphasis on dated archaeological sites in the country has just been completed (Peralta n.d.) to be a part of an exhaustive documentation of the prehistory of Southeast Asia.

This article will deal basically with the highlights of major findings in Philippine archaeological research in 1986. The two major finds discussed here are the following:

1. The Balanghais Archaeological Sites in Northeastern Mindanao; and
2. The Griffin Underwater Archaeological Site at Basilan, Southern Mindanao.

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## THE BALANGHAI ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

### BRIEF HISTORY BACKGROUND

Archaeological materials recovered from various kinds of archaeological sites serve as direct evidence of prehistoric social and cultural life. As important sources of data these archaeological materials are useful in the search for regularities that exist among the set of sites encountered.

Northeastern Mindanao, specifically the vicinities of Butuan City, Agusan del Norte, had indications of immense archaeological potential as shown by the recovery there in 1976 of noteworthy archaeological finds which include:

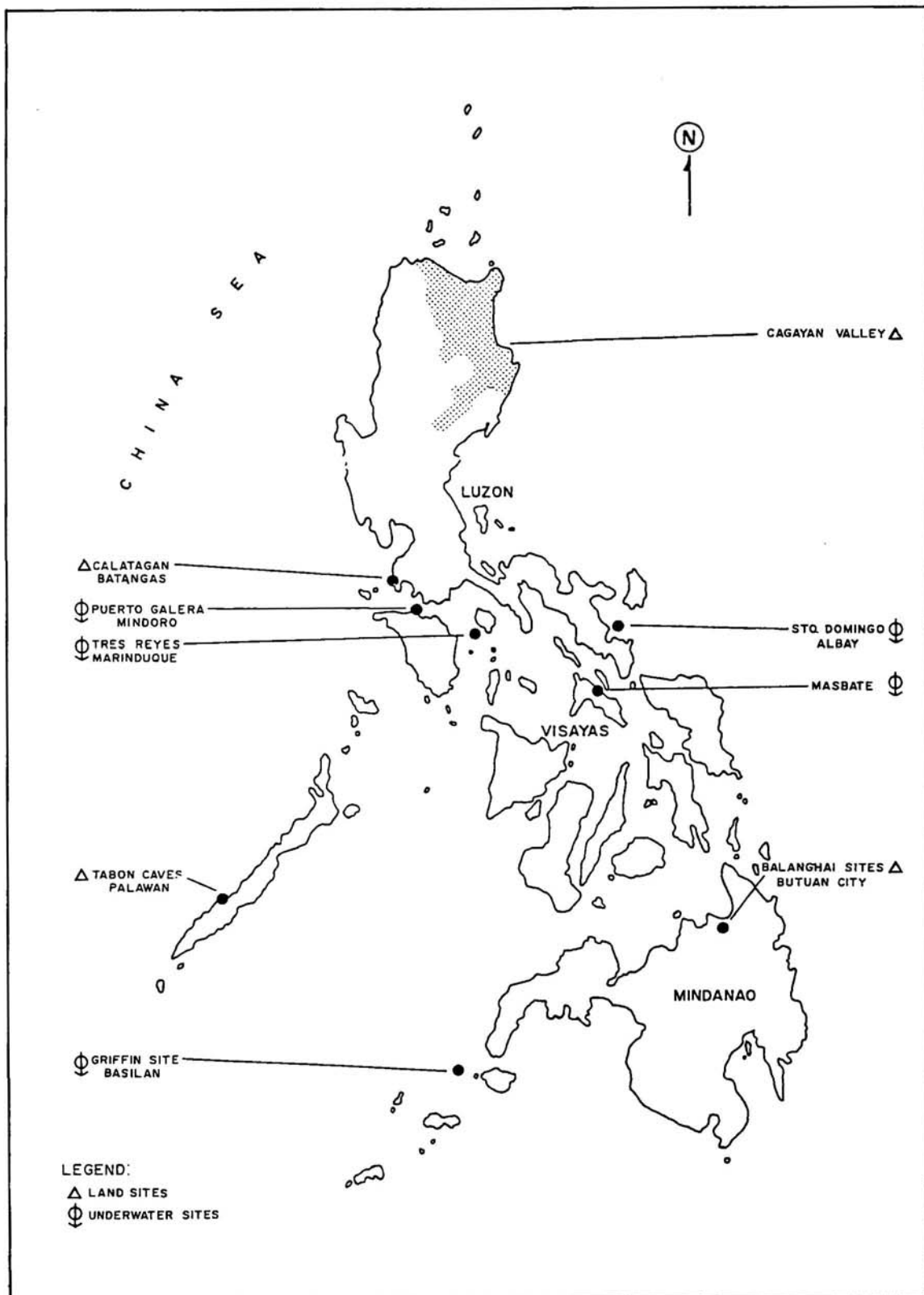
1. the discovery of large, plank-built and edge-pegged wooden boats with seagoing capabilities dating to the 4th and 13th centuries A.D. which had tremendous significance to Southeast Asian prehistory notably in the field of prehistoric maritime trade (Peralta 1980; Scott 1981); and
2. the recovery of Yueh and Yueh-type wares which date to the Five Dynasties (907-960 A.D.).

Balanghais I with a carbon-14 age determination of 320 A.D. is the oldest known pre-European watercraft found in the Philippines while prior to the recovery of the Yueh and Yueh-type wares in Butuan the oldest known evidence for tradeware materials from Philippine archaeological sites date to the Song Dynasty (960-1270 A.D.). By the early 1980s two other boats identical to the first two finds were known to exist as a result of probing by illegal pothunters. The excavations and recovery of these by the National Museum, however, were suspended due to the prohibitive cost of conservation.

The Balanghais archaeological sites are water-logged resulting in an ideal situation conducive to the preservation of wooden archaeological materials. It was the illegal pothunting activities in search of marketable tradewares which brought to the attention of the National Museum the archaeological potential of the Butuan sites.

### THE 1986 BALANGHAI ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS

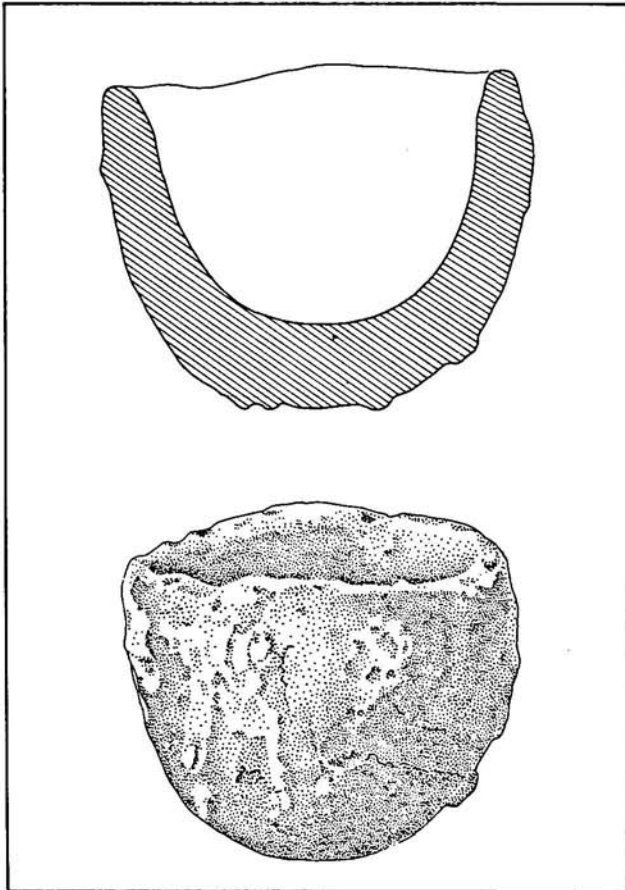
In May 1986, another flurry of illegal excavations were



Map of the Philippines showing sites discussed in this article

undertaken in the vicinities of the Balanghai I site. This time the local inhabitants were in search of worked and unworked gold fragments found in the area. In the process of their gold panning activities archaeological materials were encountered the majority of which have never been found in any Philippine archaeological site. The recovered materials include:

1. more than 100 pieces of intact clay crucibles;
2. wooden tools in the shape of a pincer, a pick and a knife;
3. fragments of worked, unworked and possibly, reworked glass beads;
4. metal artifacts made of iron, bronze, lead and gold in the form of an adze, a basin, bells, a blade a buckle, a cymbal, ear pendants, a gong, knives, projectile points, rings and tangs;
5. worked stone artifacts in the form of a mould for gold melting discs;
6. worked wooden artifacts in the form of decorated wood fragments, decorated boat prow, toy top, figurines and pegs - both finished and unfinished;
7. worked animal bones made from fish vertebrae and mammal bones;
8. iron slags; and



A clay crucible from the Balanghai sites, Butuan City.

9. 9th-10th centuries A.D. Middle Eastern polychrome glass jarlet.

Limited controlled excavations by the National Museum technical staff at the Butuan Regional Museum were undertaken at the area where the gold panning activities were being carried out (Cembrano n.d.). The recovered archaeological materials from these controlled excavations were cursorily analyzed by the participants to the Third Intra ASEAN Archaeological Excavations and Conservation Workshop held at Butuan City from November 18 to December 2, 1986.

The archaeological materials recovered from the controlled excavations by the National Museum include earthenware pottery sherds, earthenware basin sherds, earthenware stove sherds, grey earthenware sherd used as a gold melting disc, a Yueh bowl sherd, stoneware jar sherds, a Ching Pai sherd, celadon plate sherds, earthenware body sherds, Siamese kendi stoneware sherds, celadon bowl sherds, a wooden peg, glass beads, lead wastes, gold fragments, earthenware net weights, an andesite stone probably used as a mortar, and extraneous stones and pebbles.

## THE UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

### BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The earliest record of underwater archaeological activities in the Philippines was in the summer of 1967 when a joint National Museum - Times-Mirror-Taliba underwater scuba team worked on a shipwreck at Sto. Domingo, Albay about 500 kilometres south of Manila. The shipwreck was believed to be that of a Spanish galleon as indicated by the recovery of two huge anchors with a forging date of 1649 and other associated materials such as a bronze butterfly hinge, pottery sherds, copper plates and nails, chain links, capstans, plankings and the center bolt of an auxiliary mast. The sunken vessel is believed to be one of the galleons that plied the Manila-Acapulco route during the late 16th to the early 19th centuries A.D. (Lopez 1967).

It was after a gap of 15 years that the underwater archaeological activities of the National Museum was resumed with the excavation in 1982 of a sunken incoming merchant vessel off the Southeast coast of Marinduque Island about 150 kilometres south of Manila. Located in about 130 feet of water the excavations at the wrecksite resulted in the recovery of over 1,200 artifacts, 188 being intact pieces of stoneware jars and covers, porcelain plates, dishes, saucers, and bowls. The tradeware materials recovered date to the Ming Dynasty (Conese 1981, 1983).

A year later underwater archaeological work started at Puerto Galera, Mindoro Island. Under 50 to 80 feet of water the excavations at this site resulted in the recovery of very few archaeological materials. The clear visibility of the water aided in the partial looting of the area prior

to the archaeological work by the National Museum. Only 60 intact items were recovered at this site 30 of which are stoneware jars of Chinese provenance. Other finds include porcelain plates, dishes and bowls, a blue-and-white kendi, several celadon incense burners and two scalloped-edged blue-and-white bowls. There were variations noted in the decorative designs of the large dragon jars some being embossed while others were incised and applied. Looting must have caused a lot of breakage of still intact ceramics for hundreds of newly broken stoneware and porcelain sherds were recovered from site (Alba 1984).

#### THE 1986 UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS

In July 1986, the combined efforts of the National Museum and the World Wide First Company initiated an underwater archaeological exploration in the shallow waters of Northwestern Basilan Island, Zamboanga del Sur. Aided by archival records, specifically the captain's log, the exploration activities were undertaken in search of the **Griffin**, a 499-ton English vessel of the East India Company which sunk in 1761 after hitting a rock. The **Griffin** was sailing with four other East India Company ships when the disaster occurred. It had cargoes consisting mainly of **porcelain and tea**. All the 99 crew members of the vessel were rescued and the remaining ships were recorded to have sailed safely for home.

The use of magnetometers was undertaken in the initial stage of the exploration but was discontinued due to equipment breakdown. Since the longitude and latitude were recorded in the captain's log during the time of the disaster an initial 5-square kilometre was delimited as the extent of the survey activities. The first indication of the ship's remains was the recovery of a blue-and-white porcelain sherd found under 3 metres of sand. The other remains which were recovered through the use of an airlift included small and shallow blue-and-white porcelain bowls, blue-and-white plate fragments, blue-and-white cups with effaced enamel designs, fragments of lead sheets and pieces of rope. The materials were found scattered around the strewn iron ballasts of the ship (Nicolas n.d.).

After over 4 months of continuous excavation activities at the **Griffin** underwater archaeological site more than 4,000 intact pieces of artifacts were retrieved. The most numerous are porcelain cups, plates and bowls some still encased in wooden containers which were probably the original crates used for these materials. Three of the 26 recorded cannons have also been recovered at three separate locations about 60 metres apart from one to the other. Iron ballasts, each weighing about 15 kilograms, were encountered piled in three separate places.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEW FINDS

Important archaeological materials with varied implications for archaeological research in the Philippines

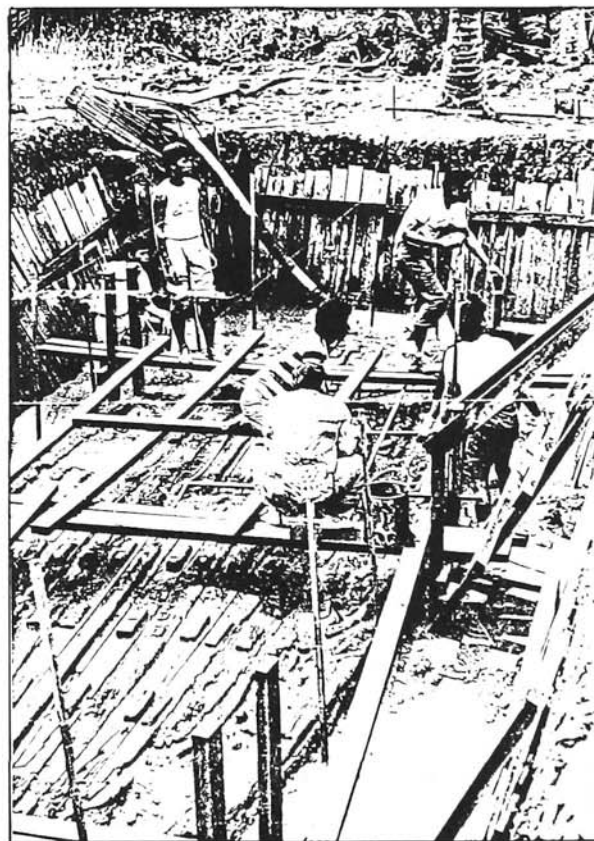
have been recovered at two important sites in the southern part of the country.

At the Balanghai sites in Butuan City, Agusan del Norte two plank-built Balanghai boats were recovered and dated by the National Museum in the late 1970s. Subsequently three more were found. One of these 3 boats was recently partially retrieved during the ASEAN Workshop held in Butuan City in November of last year. One boat was unfortunately destroyed by the gold panners searching for more gold. A total of 8 boats so far were found at the Butuan sites.

The additional archaeological materials encountered both by the pothunters and those recovered from controlled excavations of the National Museum are indicative of a fairly dense population, of craft specialization - the technologies of wood-working, metal and glass working and/or reworking, and of the existence of an active maritime trade network involving the exchange of large volume of goods across islands.

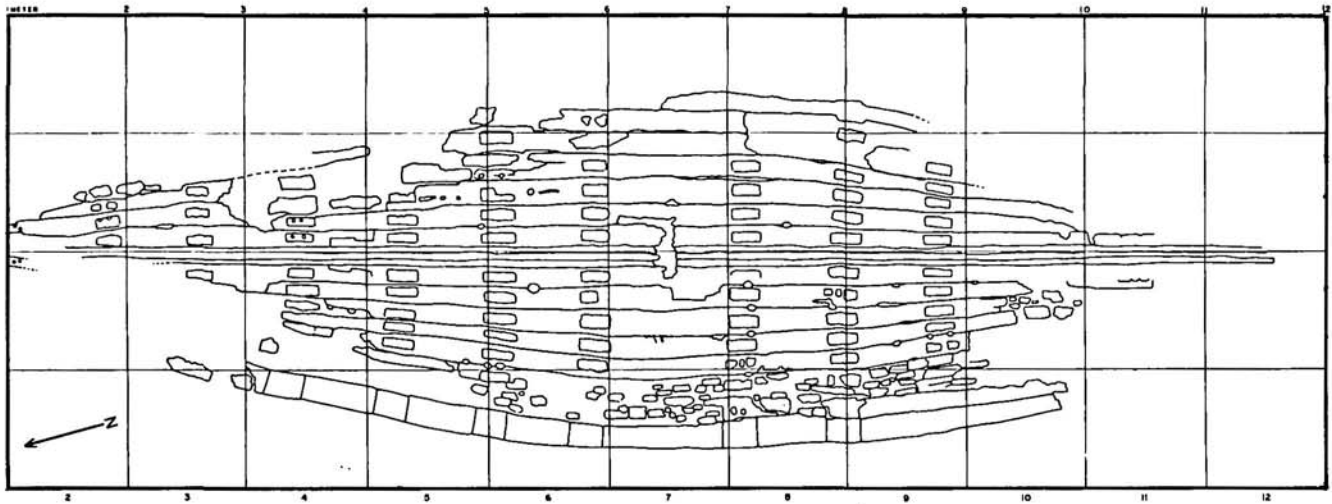
The existence of eight plank-built boats in Butuan City, prior to the destruction of one boat, has great implications to Southeast Asian prehistory for this is the first time that a flotilla of prehistoric boats and found in such numbers in the region and possibly in the whole world.

At the Basilan underwater archaeological site the



Picture showing the Planks of Balanghai 5 and the wooden supports for the conservators.





Grid plan of Balanghais 5

recovered materials could be used to generate data that may be useful in the elucidation of maritime vessel construction, of the so-called private trade wherein cargoes are not entered in the vessel's manifest, and of the maritime trade networks in the archipelago. Although the boats technically fall under the historic period, the finds at the **Griffin** underwater archaeological site may prove beneficial to researches in prehistoric maritime trade.

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