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ARCHAEOLOGICAL TEST EXCAVATIONS
PALAU ISLANDS

1968-1969

Douglas Osborne

APPENDIX 7

Tobi Island Artifacts

Peter Black, D. Osborne and Patricio M.

Stone figure (Osborne)

Some of the archaeological remains of Tobi are discussed in Osborne (1966: 52-56). During the early winter of 1968, Peter Black, Peace Corps Volunteer on Tobi, was in the Palau. He brought me a stone figurine (Fig. 222) which had been given to him by an elderly Tobi man who said it was a modern carving made for sale to the Japanese. A cursory examination convinced me that it was ancient. The figure is of a seated or squatting male, grasping his (broken) penis with both hands. There is a bulge below the chin as if he were wearing a gorget or some such object. Height is 38 cm, width across the shoulders 23, basal thickness 21.6 cm. The head is 12 cm by 14 by 15 cm; weight is 11.4 kgm. The material is poorly indurated coral sandstone. The object is eroded but the carving was crude. It was done by simple cutting, probably hewing with an adze. The material is easily cut when water soaked. It is now in the collections of the Palau Museum on Koror.

Adzes (Osborne)

Among the objects of craftsmanship which Black brought to Koror to sell for the Tobi people were three hafted archaeological adze blades of *Tridacna*. These are illustrated in Figure 223. There are 3 types represented. The central blade is a type 2 beaked adze, large and elongate, between 35 and 40 mm in breadth. The gouge is a form that has not been encountered on Palau although there are examples of the type from Sonsorol. I cannot understand its absence on Palau sites. Measurements could not be taken adequately on these specimens but this object is about 45 mm in width. The third blade is a peculiar form, much like my type 7 except that the back bevel is strong, nearly equal to that of the front. It is the smallest of the 3, about 34 mm wide. I cannot vouch for the authenticity of the hafting of these tools which obscured several aspects of the blades. Such hafting would not have held up under rough usage. It will be noted that all were set in swiveling beds so that cuts could be made at a variety of angles in several positions. All of the tools had a good feel and balance.

The Tobi stone figurine (Black)

Although I have hunches and suspicions regarding the ancient and modern functions of the stone carving none of these are presently supportable. These ideas may or may not be developed after I have had another opportunity to work with the Tobi islanders, on Tobi. It therefore appears the wisest to give here a narrative statement of the circumstances and information that I now have concerning the stone image.

In the late spring of 1968 several Tobi people and I were building a fireplace for fish smoking. We dug the hole at the edge of a small hill near my house on the west side of Tobi and others collected stones with which to line the fireplace. I stopped work in the late afternoon and left the site while work was still in progress. The next morning I found the carving perched on a stump near the fireplace site. Some one had put it in this very obvious place after I had left.

It is difficult now, three years later (1971) to understand the excitement I felt as I first examined the stone. It had something to do with a feeling which had become more and more definite as the months passed—a feeling that there was a whole area of life which the Tobi

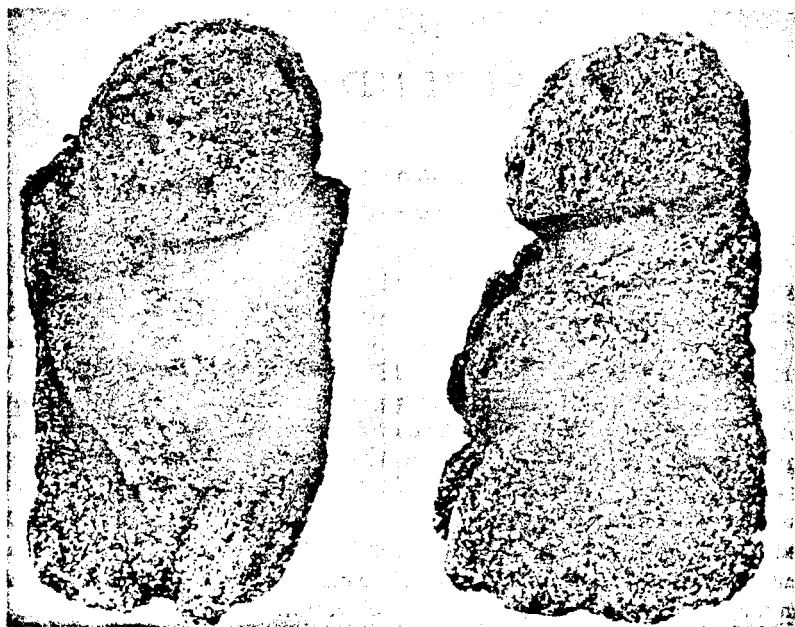


Fig. 222. Tobi figurine, front and side views.

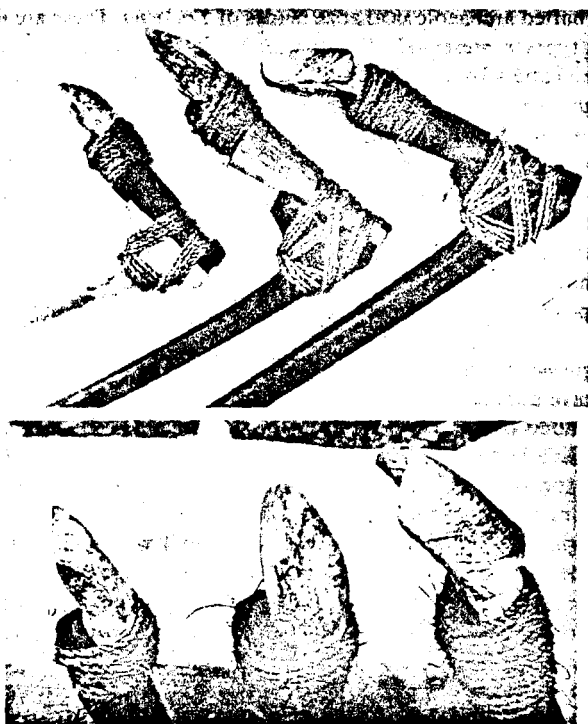


Fig. 223. Two views of three archaeological adze blades from Tobi; modern hafting on swivelling beds. Left to right, type 7; type 2; gouge adze. Gouge is 4.5 cm wide.

people had originally kept from me but which they were becoming more and more willing to expose. Now out of nowhere, here was this sexually explicit carving, different in style and "feeling" from anything else I had seen on the island. I must have felt that at last the people were beginning to trust me enough to reveal their "secrets" to me. As it turned out I was wrong. While I did eventually become aware of a lot of hidden attitudes and feelings as well as the intense political activity which had been kept from me, this did not start to happen until two or three months after the stone turned up. I eventually came to feel that the stone was in the nature of a "test" and my reactions that morning did not reassure the people that I could be trusted with sensitive information.

The first thing I did upon seeing the stone was to bring out my camera and photograph it. There was no one in sight at the time but shortly afterward some of the men started to drift onto the scene. As I asked them about the stone they began to laugh pointing out the figure's penis to each other and saying it was "bad". To my repeated questions for information about the stone they answered that one of the old men (since dead) had carved it before the war in order to sell it to the Japanese who were stationed on the island. The Japanese, so the story went, were disgusted with it and would not buy it so the old man tossed it into the thick brush behind the meeting house from which one of the men had retrieved it yesterday to use in lining the new fire pit. This is the only story I ever heard about the stone while I was on the island. By the end of the day it had become clear to me that, true or false, this was the story I would have to accept. That evening I asked the old men if they thought it would be alright if I kept the stone in my house. They said that it was and as far as they were concerned I could keep it. I carried the stone to my house where it remained for the rest of the time I was on Tobi. Two or three months later, these same old men asked me if I could have the stone placed in a museum. A few days after that during an island-wide meeting I asked if this was what the people wanted done with the stone; they answered that it was, that they wanted the figure where "scientists" (their word) could study it.

There were at least two facts that led me to doubt the story I was told on the island. I never saw, or heard of anyone carving in stone. Some of the men carve in wood, making simple little figures called by the Americans "monkey men" and by the islanders "sen". The same word, "sen" is used in referring to the stone figure. I could find it in neither Capell (1969) or in Eilers (1936). The treatment of the human figure and the position is essentially that of the tourist figurines. It is also a widespread form in the Pacific and might well be expected in both ancient and modern times. The second part of the story which I found hard to believe is that the Japanese refused to buy the stone because it was too erotic. This certainly did not fit with my knowledge of the Japanese. At any rate, this was as I have said the only story about the figure I heard while I was on the island. After I returned to Koror, however, I collected the second and richer version.

On Koror, Osborne and I took the stone to the southwest settlement (where Tobi people live) in Eang and confronted various people with it. An elderly woman and several other discussants told us that the stone was one of a set that Yango (the first chief of the island) had carved to border the "yard" of Ramonparuh's (the "mother of the island") house. The story went that the Germans had taken away the rest of the set. I have gone through Eilers quite carefully and could find no reference to these stones. If I had to guess where the stone (s?) originally stood I would say either around the "yard" of the menstrual house or else around the "yard" of the "chief of the women" (an office which I know very little about).

There can be no doubt that the reticence exhibited particularly on the part of the older women, was due to the sexual nature of the carving. I am sure that much information is available if this hurdle can be overcome. One of the younger men, well trained and a Trust Territory employee commented that the object (or others of its kind) had been used in "sex education" in the old days.

I am including a copy of the story of the settling of the island as told to me by Patricio—one of the more influential of the men. This is not a verbatim account; my method was to take notes as material was translated for me, to write up a rough draft and then have this retranslated to the original source for any suggestions or comments. As you can see this legend traces the present population back to Fais. Other evidence of a Fais-Tobi connection is in Reisenberg and Gayton (1952:349) where in a discussion of brocading it is stated that "... usually the addition is made with the aid of an awl (or an eye needle on Fais and Tobi). Lessa (1950:48) reports a link between Ulithi and the southwest islands as follows: "while these [the southwest islands] are farther from Ulithi than Palau, they are more important to it. It is said that some of the local sibs (Ulithian) established themselves on these four islands when people from Ulithi became lost at sea and eventually found refuge there. These sibs continued to survive, forming the incentive for a certain amount of trade." I never heard any local mention of Ulithi people settling or visiting Tobi, but I do not remember asking.

The story of the lady from Wolei is echoed in Gladwin and Sarason (1953:36) account of the Trukese tradition that both Truk itself and the Westerns were settled by the progeny of a lady from Kusai who paddled to Truk on a frond of the ivory nut palm.

Linguistically, Capell (1969:1) classifies Tobian as one of four dialects spoken in the Southwest Islands which have a "fairly close resemblance" to Ulithian. Culturally the resemblance to the islands of the Yap empire seem both obvious and overwhelming and in view of this it is difficult to credit the Murdock (1953:216) classification of the Southwest Islands as one of the 15 subareas of Micronesian culture on the basis of "strong Papuan influences".

How the first people came to Tobi (Patricio M.)

The first ruler of Tobi Island and also its discoverer was a woman from Fais called Ramonparuh. She and her husband Yongoihar and her father Tahabech were fleeing a war on Fais and came directly to Tobi without stopping. Patricio does not know how long it took them to get here, or anything about Ramonparuh's mother or about the equipment in the canoe, except that she did have a piece of thatch from which she ate her food at every new moon. He does not know if they had a crew or not but he does know that their God's name was "Mabuwat". Ramonparuh was the navigator.

They landed on Tobi about where the present channel is and Ramonparuh buried a clam shell in a small hill near the beach. The island was much smaller than it is now; it was about the size of Helen Reef. There was only one tree on the island, a tree called *Moh*. (*Moh* is now extinct on Tobi, but they do grow on Sonsorol, Merir, Helen Reef and maybe Pulo.) There were no spirits on the island either.

They decided to go back to Fais for awhile and they went straight back, not stopping on the way. After a short stay in Fais, they decided to go back to Tobi and once again they left Fais. On arriving back on Tobi, they found Souhopit, Ramonparuh's full brother. A dispute arose because Souhopit and Ramonparuh both claimed the island. Souhopit asked: "you say that you were first, but where is your sign?" So they dug in the hill and found her clam shell but underneath it they found an old piece of thatch which Souhopit said belonged to him; thus it was proved that he was the first to come to Tobi. [This is probably the first stratigraphic excavation in the Pacific area! D.O.] Ramonparuh said that he had put it underneath her clam shell and chased him off the island. A little while later Tahabech left Tobi for Fais but his daughter and son-in-law remained.

On his way back to Tobi, Tahabech stopped at Merir where he found Souhopit who had discovered Merir after being chased off Tobi. Tahabech did not stay long but continued on to Tobi. After several years had passed, Tahabech, Ramonparuh and Yongoihar decided to go up to Merir and visit Souhopit. When they arrived, Ramonparuh was seasick so Tahabech asked Souhopit to take her ashore and keep her for awhile. But Souhopit answered that if she came

ashore he would kill her and burn her like a turtle. So they turned back to Tobi, where Tahabech left the other two and went to Fais-never to return.

Ramonparuh had her first child soon after this. His name was Yango and he was to be the next ruler of Tobi. She had six more children and from them she made five clans. About this time a woman named Roubah drifted to Tobi from Wolei on a bundle of material used in making mats. Her children became the sixth clan, Haworei, and Yango and Ramonparuh were in the seventh or chief's clan.

Patricio does not know the story of the first settlers of Sonsorol but he does know that it was settled before Tobi, and that Palauans used to live there until killed off by people from Wolei. Merir, of course, was settled by Souhopit who was the first ruler, and Pulo had a god named Martaifur.

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