

Japanese university students researching Pohnpeian Chief's lost village

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Research by some Japanese university students has begun to shed some light on what may have been a previously unknown part of Pohnpeian history.

Members of the Hosei University's Exploration Society have surveyed an ancient village site in a mountainous area of the island of Pohnpei since 2014. This site, located in an inland area of Senipehn in Madolenihmw, was initially surveyed by a NZ archaeologist, Dr. Janet Davidson in 1967. She documented more than 80 archaeological features in the area, although the location of the site was not described in the details she provided and the site hasn't been studied since then. After being approached by the Exploration Society, which hoped to discover unknown archaeological sites in the jungles on Micronesian islands, NGO Pasifika Renaissance Executive Director Takuya Nagaoka recommended them to survey this mysterious settlement site.

Supported by Takuya and Professor Osamu Kataoka of Kansai Gaidai University, five members of the Society surveyed a possible location of the site on Dolen Lepen (elevation: 470 m/1540 feet) in the interior of Senipehn in 2014, after securing permissions from FSM National and Pohnpei State Historic Preservation Offices, Nahnmwarki of Madolenihmw and local chiefs. They confirmed the presence of a large settlement complex site from the summit to the mid-slope that had been described by Davidson.

An interview with Mr. Rasner Elias, the local section chief of Elieliwi revealed that this site was the seat of Lepen Moar, a prominent chief of the Sounkawad



Members and host family



Two site clusters on Dolen Lepen



Pohnpei Island and the location of Dolen Lepen

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was named “Dolen Lepen,” literally ‘Mountain of Lepen (Moar).’ According to Mr. Elias, who belongs to the Sounkawad clan himself, Senipehn was a large autonomous area in the central Madolenihmw ruled by Lepen Moar prior to the rise of the Saudeleur dynasty (archaeologically dated from AD 1200 to AD 1500-1600). This clan is known to have based in the interior of Pohnpei in such areas as Nankawad and Nansokele in Nett and Salapwuk and Nanmeir in Kitti during prehistoric times. According to Pohnpeian oral traditions, during Isokelekel’s invasion, Lepen Moar helped overthrow the Saudeleur dynasty, allying with Isokelekel’s Dipwinpahmei clan. Due to this, the chiefly title of Lepen Moar, which is still bestowed upon a senior member of the Sounkawad clan in the region, holds special significance in Madolenihmw today.

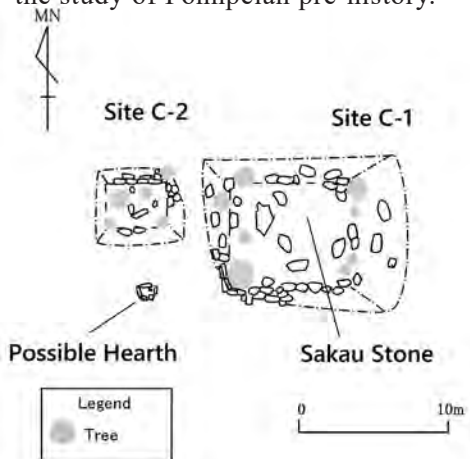
The archaeological features the “Society” recorded there include house foundations, stone altars, terraces, and stone walls. They documented nine features in 2014 and five features in 2015, seven in the summit area and seven in the midslope area. The prominent archaeological features are two stone platforms, Lepen Moar’s residence and altar (pehi), located on the summit area, to which it takes two and a half hours to walk from the flat area of Senipehn where the team stayed. Since their surveys were limited to recording of surface features, we still don’t know the antiquity of the site. However, according to oral tradition, Lepen Moar predates the rise of the Saudeleurs based at Nan Madol and continued to rule in the region until historic times.

The members would like to thank all

the officials and local people supported their project, especially Mr. Bersin Martin and Mr. Benard Martin, who kindly assisted this research as guide and host of home stays. They have submitted preliminary reports on the results of their surveys to the FSM and Pohnpei Historic Preservation Offices every year and hope the results of their surveys will contribute to the study of Pohnpei’s history.

The preface of their report reads as follows: “This research all started with a pure motive to know the unknown, such as a ruin that has never been discovered. Through the process of this research, and as we contemplated about the meaning of ‘exploration,’ this project began to possess the social and moral meaning for us. We wish that our efforts and the findings after all the tremendous work will lead to something that improves the current situation in Micronesia.”

The members are planning to return to Senipehn for additional research for two weeks from late February, and hope to continue their survey in years to come to illuminate the whole picture of this important site. Their research hopes to enhance our understanding of the inland settlement and inter-clan relationships, which has been a gap in the study of Pohnpeian pre-history.



Map of Lepen Moar's residence (Site C-1) and his altar (Site C-2)



Lepen Moar's residence (Site C-1)