Re-examining the Butuan Boats
Pre-colonial Philippine watercraft

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Background
In the 1970s, illegal pothunters probed large areas of land along the outskirts of Butuan City, Philippines. The pothunters were seeking for wooden coffins containing valuable grave goods such as Chinese porcelains and gold ornaments. In 1976, the incomplete remains of a plank boat were discovered in the midst of these illicit activities. The find was reported to the leadership of the National Museum of the Philippines, who immediately sent a team to investigate (Peralta 1976:4). Meanwhile, pothunters unearthed several more boats. To date, National Museum archaeologists have excavated a total of six boats, three of which have been recovered.

Aspects of the boats’ construction closely match historical descriptions by European observers of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries (Scott 1981). The boatbuilders did not make use of metal fastenings. Planks prepared with rectangular lugs protruding from the inner side were built up from the keel plank with wooden dowels. Frames were then lashed to the planks through holes drilled into the lugs. Not stated in historical texts but evident from the Butuan Boat remains were the use of wing ends in place of stems and stern posts. The wing ends were fastened to the ends of the keel plank with dowels and locking pins. Additional wing ends were fastened on top of the first with dowels and pins, as well as mortise and tenon joints. Radiocarbon analysis performed in the 1970s and 1980s of Boats 1, 2 and 5 produced dates of 1630±110, 700±90 and 960±70 uncalibrated BP, respectively. The date ranges were surprising considering the proximity of the boats from each other and the similar deposits in which they were buried. Regrettably, very little beyond general descriptions and assumptions about the Butuan boats were produced from the initial research. New research has commenced and is underway. The wooden remains have been remeasured and redrawn. Wood samples were collected for species identification and new AMS C-14 analysis. Initial results are presented here.

Conclusion
The results of current research suggest that the Butuan Boats were constructed, used and possibly discarded contemporaneously. Combining the dating results with the identification of wood species provides a better understanding of available natural resources during that period. The results also confirm the persistence of boatbuilding practices in the region, as historical texts written more than 700 years later described the construction and use of similar boats throughout the Philippine archipelago.

References

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