THE MALACOARCHAEOLOGY OF PALAWAN ISLAND

BY

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Abstract

Archaeological excavations from 1968-1970 at Pilanduk Cave and Sa’gung Rockshelter on Palawan Island, the Philippines, yielded rich molluscan faunal remains, with over seventy species represented. Local Pala’nun and Tagbanwa hunter-gatherer informants were used to identify the ecological habitats and micro-environments of each molluscan species. Changes in the percentages of species represented through the time period of the use of these sites (late Pleistocene and early post-Pleistocene) reveal changes in mollusk exploitation patterns, some of which reflect adjustments to drastic alterations in the local environment and topography brought on by the rise in sea level at the end of the Pleistocene. The statistical analysis of the molluscan fauna reveals a shift at this time period from fresh water and land mollusks in the diet to species from estuarine and mangrove associated environments.

Introduction

The island of Palawan strikes North 30 degrees East for almost 300 miles through the South China Sea, but at no point in its entire length can one walk more than 25 miles in a straight east-west line from coast to coast. Yet within the constraints of this spindly form it manages to rise often more than 5,000 feet above the surrounding sea, and at its highest point, Mt. Mantalingasan, it reaches the majestic height of 6,839 feet. Its location in the tropics—between 8 and 12 degrees North latitude—on the eastern edge of the South China Sea (Figure 1) determines the climate which is characterized by two seasons—one without rain which usually lasts from late December to early May and one of seemingly constant rain which can begin as early as April and lasts into January. But whatever the season the weather is gentle. Winter nights can be blissfully cool, and the violent typhoons that swirl every summer out of the Pacific expend their fury far to the east and reach Palawan only two or three times in a century.
The Island came into being during the early Pliocene as a result of crustal warping caused by localized northwest-southeast compressive forces. Palawan and the Sulu archipelago are the resulting anticlinoria.

Figure 1. Map of the Republic of the Philippines. Arrow indicates the location of excavations on Palawan Island.