

The Archaeology of Hong Kong

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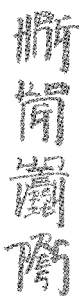
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Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

"At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square Word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed."

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

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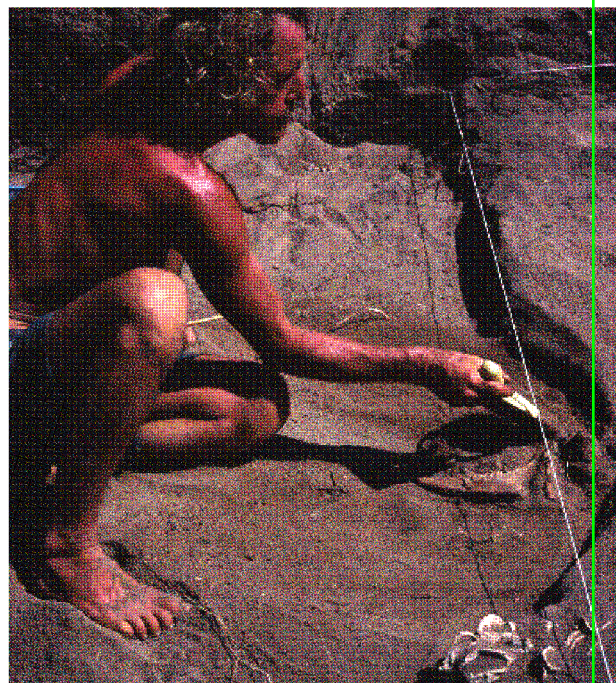
7,000 Years into the Past

1

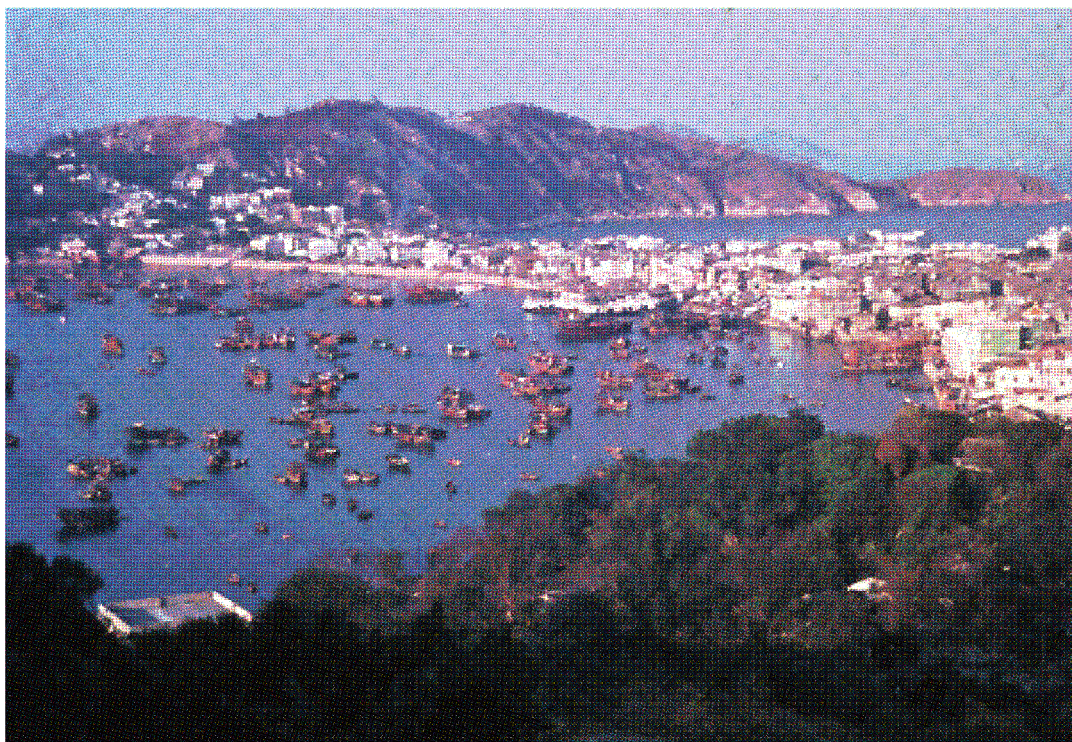
The history of Hong Kong as a port, British colony and city is generally well recorded. When it was ceded to Britain in 1841, the island was described in the famous (and now highly ironic) phrase as “a rock with hardly a house upon it.” The neighbouring islands supported a few scattered fishing villages, while Kowloon peninsula and the New Territories to the north were settled by rice farmers of several large and many small clans.

It was not until the early twentieth century that scholars begin to examine the pre-British period of Hong Kong’s history. Reliable documentary evidence extends back to the last years of the Ming dynasty (early seventeenth century). Genealogies of the major New Territories’ clans indicate their movement into the territory during the Ming and Sung periods (tenth to sixteenth centuries). A few tantalizing earlier references exist that may correlate with places in Hong Kong and describe salt industries and pearl fisheries that may have been practised here after the area came under Chinese rule in the second century BC.

Archaeological investigation began in the 1920s and showed that the territory had a much longer span of human occupation, now known to extend back at least 7000 years. Sites abound on outlying islands and along the coastline of the New Territories. More than 200 sites of the New Stone Age (Neolithic) and Bronze Age have been recorded, and many have been systematically surveyed and excavated. The results of this research have been



1.1 Excavating animal bones and shells at a site on Lamma Island



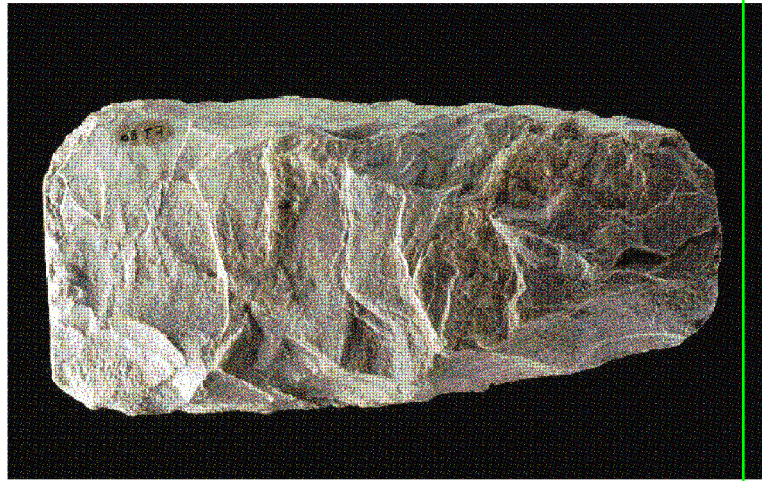
1.2 Settlement on the tombolo island of Cheung Chau began several thousand years ago

well published in recent decades, and scientific studies of excavated materials have thrown much light on prehistoric life in the area. A large brick chamber tomb of the Han period (206 BC – AD 220), discovered in 1955 during construction of a public housing estate, marks the beginning of the historical era. Much new data has been obtained on the historical period as well.

As archaeological work has advanced over the years and techniques have improved, the earliest date of human occupation in the Hong Kong region has been pushed far back from the Ch'in–Han expansion recorded in historical texts, and from the 1000 BC estimate of one pre-war archaeologist. Recent radiocarbon dates on charcoal samples from one local site has confirmed that humans were present in this area of the South China coast by at least 5000 BC. Without caves to preserve even earlier sites, it is quite possible that the lower limit of archaeologically detectable human penetration of the area has been reached. Open sites of the Palaeolithic may likely exist under the seabed, and it would be an extraordinary circumstance if one were to be discovered.

In addition to the dramatic extension of Hong Kong's prehistory back several thousands of years, fieldwork in recent decades suggests that there was a general continuity of occupation and population from the earliest period down to recent historical times. With the discovery of several well-stratified prehistoric sites and with long sequences of occupation and dozens of early historical sites, almost all of the major gaps in Hong Kong's 7,000-year human past have been closed. There remains one major "missing link" (the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age) and, of course, many, many unanswered questions about the prehistoric inhabitants, for example,

- What first brought humans into this area?



1.3 A finely chipped stone axehead from Chek Lap Kok

1.4 The typical Hong Kong sand bar site: on a sandy beach with low-lying valley (formerly lagoon) behind.





- Who were the early inhabitants, where did they come from, and what trade and cultural ties did they have with adjacent regions?
- What kind of life did they lead, and how did their culture and economic system change over the centuries?
- Which changes were of local or regional origin, and which were related to ideas or people coming from distant areas of development and civilization?



▲ 1.5 Excavation in progress at Sha Po Tsuen, Lamma

◀ 1.6 Deep trench revealing more than 7,000 years of deposit at Chung Hom Wan on Hong Kong island

Archaeologists in the past have paid much, often too much, attention to the last of these questions. Naturally, considerable energy has been devoted to the question of northern Chinese influence, which has often been seen as the principal force for change and progress acting upon an otherwise backward and stagnant tropical population. The Han historian Ssu Ma-ch'ien and many Chinese writers after him described the indigenous peoples of the Yangtze River Basin and southeast coast as disease-ridden, indolent barbarians, subsisting in the most miserable fashion on readily available tropical fruits and the most primitive type of horticulture. Among archaeologists, it was once believed that, during the prehistoric period, South China was "rather quiet and had a simple culture." Discoveries of early Chinese civilization in the Central Plains of North China reinforced traditional notions that "culture only travels south" (Watt 1971) and that material progress in agriculture, bronze metallurgy, art, etc. must be derived ultimately from the crucible of Chinese civilization. The relative paucity of archaeological work in South China tended for many years to corroborate such notions, since it appeared that these regions were "sparsely populated, if at all" by primitive hunter-gatherers until the arrival of neolithic farmers from the north.

This world view began to change in the 1960s when important discoveries of early agriculture and bronze in Southeast Asia were made. In the 1970s, at a site near Shanghai, the discovery of a well-developed neolithic culture and rice cultivation (as early as 5000 BC) laid to rest forever the notions that the coastal areas of Southeast China had been a backwater in relation to the Central Plains of North China.

The evidence from Hong Kong archaeology provides an important part of the reconstruction of prehistoric life in the southern coastal regions, which, in turn, constitutes an important ecological and adaptational zone in the broader picture of East Asia. And while great movements of people or culture across the continental land mass are rarely postulated today, it remains important to examine the possible inter-regional links through trade, diffusion and small-scale migration.

The detailed and relatively intensive archaeological work that has been done in the Hong Kong archipelago makes it probably the best-studied area of the southeast coast. It is also an ideal laboratory to test new ideas and collect new data on local evolution as a means of accounting for many of the cultural changes observed through time. For example, traits such as bronze metallurgy and high-fired pottery

that were formerly assumed to have been imported from the north are now considered to have resulted from a widespread technological evolution, with little or perhaps no outside stimulus.

It is certainly true that much has been accomplished in the last 80 years and that the questions now being discussed are the right ones. It is undoubtedly true that much more exciting data still awaits discovery, as large-scale engineering projects transform the face of Hong Kong in the twenty-first century. But it is equally and depressingly true that the full answers to the questions set out above will forever elude us. Such is, alas, the nature of archaeology.

2

Early Discoveries

The story of archaeology in Hong Kong begins one day in 1925 or 1926 when C. M. Heanley was hiking in the New Territories, in the vicinity of Castle Peak. Heanley was head of the government's Vaccine and Bacteriological Department but spent much of his leisure investigating the geology of Hong Kong. As he wrote later (Heanley 1928):

A few years ago the writer was examining the outcrop of a quartz vein for any material of interest, and placed in his pocket a loose piece of rock because it contained needle-shaped mineral, with the intention of breaking it at a more convenient time; later when balancing it in his hand to roughly estimate its specific gravity he was struck by its peculiarly smooth feel and on further examination noticed that it had a cutting edge and two shoulders.

It was immediately apparent to him that they were artefacts that had been polished into a shape suitable for use as axe heads known as “adzes.” His colleagues were less impressed; one remarked “you archaeologists have some imagination!” Others asked “how can you tell it from a water-worn stone?” But, in fact, Heanley had recognized the first prehistoric artefact to be found in Hong Kong.

Since he was undoubtedly aware of the dramatic archaeological discoveries being made in North China, Heanley recognized the importance that these artefacts might have in providing information about the Stone Age south of the Yangtze River. On subsequent field trips, many more similar artefacts were collected, and notes were taken on the locales that seemed to produce them. By 1928, Heanley had gathered enough information to publish a brief article on “Hong Kong Celts” in the *Bulletin of the Geological Society of China*. He was soon joined in his research by Professor J. L. Shellshear of the Department of Anatomy at the University of Hong Kong. The vigorous pursuit of Hong Kong's prehistoric inhabitants had well and truly begun!



2.1 Stone adzes found by Heanley in 1926–28

In the next few years, the new field of study grew rapidly. Heanley and Shellshear located dozens of archaeological sites, noting especially the crests and spurs of eroding granite hills near the sea as the most productive areas. They were said to be “superbly energetic and covered tremendous distances in a day at great speed. Only fit and enthusiastic walkers could hope to last a whole day with them.” Heanley sometimes found fragments of pottery associated with the stone tools, and the discovery of such pottery alone was taken to be evidence of a prehistoric site, which was then investigated more intensely for stone tools. It was estimated by Heanley that on granite outcrops in Hong Kong, an average of 30–40 adzes could be found per square mile within 600 yards of the coast. No sites further inland were located, and the early occupation pattern seemed to have been confined to areas near the sea, usually around bays or at the mouths of small valleys.

As the surface prospecting continued, the variety and quality of pottery and polished stone tool industries that had flourished in Hong Kong's prehistoric periods soon became apparent. There were several varieties of coarse and fine pottery; beautifully polished stone adzes, fragments of stone knives and rings, quartz discs and beads were also recovered.

The first archaeological site in Hong Kong to be studied and reported was at So Kun Wat near Castle Peak in the area where the first finds had been made. No excavation was undertaken at the site; indeed, there was little need to do so. Erosion had brought to the surface an extraordinary number of artefacts, mainly on the slopes of a small rounded hill, situated in a valley some 400 m from the sea.

The pottery and stone debris extended over an area of more than 100 m². Included among the finds were several complete adzes and rings; however, most of the artefacts were either broken, unfinished implements or waste flakes created in the manufacture of the tools. So great was the quantity of what Heanley called "factory refuse" that the site was deemed to be a stone workshop; the presence of pottery also indicated some cooking activities as well.

Before the sand banks began to yield their wealth of material, Heanley believed that prehistoric habitation was predominately centred on hillside locales, such as So Kun Wat. It was "natural" erosion that brought to light the objects that Heanley and Shellshear collected. This erosion of Hong Kong's hillslopes had probably begun in the T'ang and Sung eras when deforestation had increased significantly in the area.

However, the attention of Heanley and Shellshear was soon to focus on the beach deposits that were being dislodged directly by human agency. In the 1920s, Hong Kong was prospering, and there was a "boom" in construction. Commercial sand companies were ranging out to the more remote islands in their search for exploitable sand deposits.

What Shellshear saw when he visited one such area must have been a marvellous — and at the same time horrifying — sight, even to someone accustomed to finding archaeological remains in the state of nature. The sand had been screened before being loaded on a junk. Stones, large fragments of pottery, stone tools and bronze objects had been dumped as unwanted debris on either side of the area of digging. Shellshear made several visits to the site (probably Tai Wan on Lamma); a nicely decorated sword, and an axe head and a dagger axe were among the bronze objects he discovered and later

deposited in the British Museum. The sword is a unique find, the only such specimen known to have been recovered in Hong Kong.

Fortunately, in post-war years, sand operations in Hong Kong moved offshore, but such is not the case in at least some areas of the coast. In 1978, I had the opportunity to observe prehistoric pottery in beach sand piles on several construction sites in Macau. The sand had been supplied by a raw-materials wholesaler in the Mainland.

Heanley and Shellshear both tentatively assigned the stone tools and associated pottery to the Neolithic, although no estimate was made of a more precise date. It was clear, however, that the prehistory of South China had ended with the Han dynasty expansion to the south in 120 BC and that the local Neolithic and Bronze Age had begun somewhat prior to that time.



2.2 Bronze sword found by Shellshear at Tai Wan, Lamma ►

◀ 2.3 Professor J. L. Shellshear

Heanley left Hong Kong in 1930 and handed over his collection to Shellshear. He also contributed to the draft of a much longer description of the territory's archaeology. Their paper "A Contribution to the Prehistory of Hong Kong and the New Territories" was presented by Shellshear at the First Congress of Prehistorians of the Far East, held in Hanoi in 1932 (Heanley and Shellshear 1932). They described in detail their findings and made the first tentative





2.4 Shellshear (second from right) at meeting of Prehistorians of the Far East, in Hanoi, 1932

speculations about the relationship of this material with archaeological discoveries in China. Shellshear carried on the work for a few more years and made another great contribution to local archaeology by stimulating an interest in the subject among others, particularly Walter Schofield and Fr. Daniel J. Finn, whose investigations took up where he and Heanley left off.

Fr. Finn and the Tai Wan Site

After the discovery of polished stone tools near Castle Peak in 1926, interest in the archaeology of Hong Kong grew rapidly. By the 1930s, dozens of sites were known, mainly on lower hillslopes near the coast or in sand dune deposits behind beaches. Heanley and Shellshear made their first discoveries on eroding hillsides, until, as Shellshear wrote in a letter many years later, “we discovered the richness of the sand banks.”

As mentioned above, Hong Kong, at the time, was experiencing a rapid development in construction, and commercial sand diggers were exploiting these same sand deposits. Without doubt, many valuable sites were destroyed in this manner, but, as fate would have it, probably the most important Bronze Age site in Hong Kong was at least partially salvaged and recorded through the efforts of Fr. Daniel J. Finn.

Finn had been interested in the early discoveries and was invited in 1932 by Shellshear to become more active in the fieldwork. “A few days later,” Finn recalled,

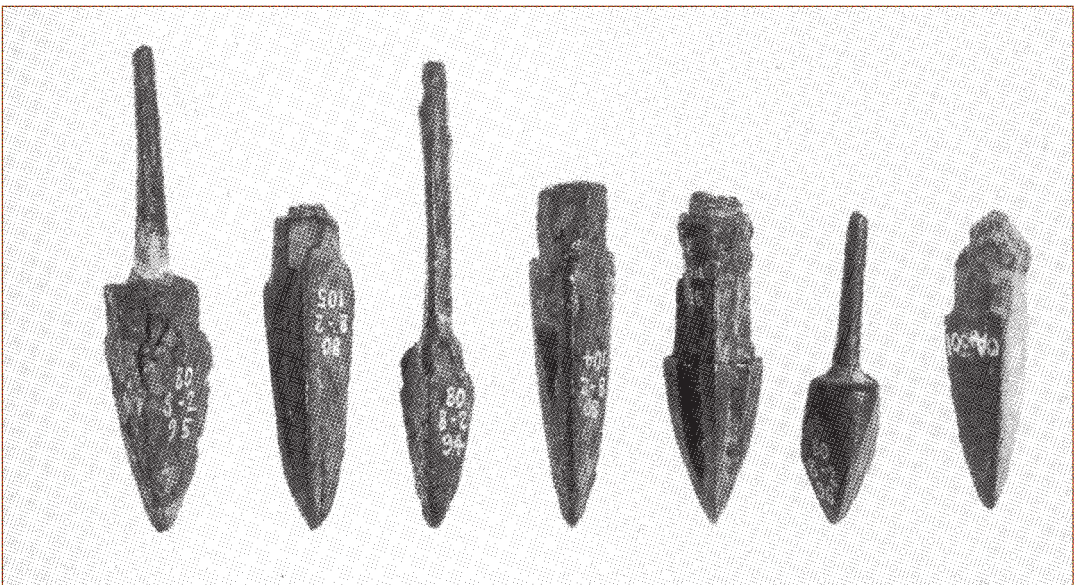
while I was still regarding any active involvement as remote, luck seemed to confirm the vocation. As I walked past a sand heap on a jetty in Aberdeen, I almost crushed underfoot a large fragment of prehistoric pottery.

Returning to the spot the next day, Finn recovered from the sand a piece of bronze, a stone spearhead, and pottery fragments with stamped patterns. Years later, after much fieldwork and research, Finn would remark that “the connection between those first finds remains the chief question for solution.”

Making inquiries at the jetty, Finn was informed that the sand had come from a beach on Lamma Island near the village of Yung Shu Wan. The site had been known to Shellshear, who had “reaped a good harvest” of bronze and stone artefacts there. Finn made several visits to the site, called Tai Wan, and was struck by the great destruction of material and loss of information that was taking place. On one such visit, before Finn could say a word, a woman worker pulled a soft pot from the sand and threw it aside, whereupon the vessel was smashed to pieces. Over the next few weeks, Finn quickly organized a salvage excavation. In 1933–34, government funds were made available and a full-scale excavation was conducted.

This was the first excavation of an archaeological site to be conducted in Hong Kong, and the methods employed were, quite predictably, rather primitive. Nevertheless, some information was obtained from the site, as well as an impressive collection of bronze weapons, pottery, stone weapons and tools. A portion of this collection has survived the decades and is held by the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Fung Ping Shan Museum.

3.3 Bronze arrow heads from Tai Wan, Lamma (photograph courtesy of the British Museum)



The number of stone and bronze weapons was so great as to suggest to Finn that the site had been the scene of a battle between Han Chinese troops and southern Yueh “barbarians.” He cited historical texts that mention a naval attack as part of the campaign waged against the Yueh in 120–111 BC. A less fanciful view would be that the site was used as a burial ground, and this interpretation is strengthened by the presence of complete pottery vessels and polished stone ornaments associated with the bronzes. But the large number of metal items at the site is still difficult to explain in light of more recently excavated burial sites of the same period that yielded only one or two small artefacts of bronze.

Most of the bronzes were of types quite common in South China during the Shang and Chou dynasties in the north (around 1600–256 BC), and it now seems probable that the main occupation of the site occurred around 1000 BC. Other Bronze Age sites on Lamma Island with similar types of pottery have recently been dated by the C-14 method to around 1200–800 BC. Finn also noted that softer pottery and stone tools were found at generally deeper levels than was bronze, and he proposed that an earlier occupation of the site had taken place towards the end of the Neolithic. Salvage excavations conducted in 1979 and 1991 established that Tai Wan was inhabited even earlier, in the Middle Neolithic phase, dating to around 4000–3000 BC.

One of Finn’s most intriguing discoveries at Tai Wan was a type of Bronze Age pottery with an elaborate spiral design of much greater complexity than the rather simple geometric patterns found on most of the pottery. Finn made a special contribution to local archaeology in the naming of this extraordinary design. “From a desire not to prejudice the interpretation, I have chosen to call it ‘double-F’.” The design does seem to resemble two F’s back-to-back with one of them upside down and reversed. Chinese art historians have assigned the design to the “*Kuei*-dragon” class, a vaguely similar pattern found on Chou period bronze vessels. However, the direct derivation of double-F from *Kuei* has not been established, and both the origin and the symbolism (if any) of the double-F design remain unknown.

Finn himself speculated that the pattern represented a sea dragon or crocodile, since the Yueh people were seafarers. Others have suggested quite simply that the design is evolved from the spiral decoration of Late Neolithic pottery, and may not have any dragon connotations at all.

In 1933–36, Finn published the results of his excavation and research in a series of articles in *The Hong Kong Naturalist*. These were republished in book form in 1958 as *Archaeological Finds on Lamma Island near Hong Kong*. Shortly before his death, Finn attended the Second Congress of Prehistorians of the Far East, held in Manila in 1936, and presented a paper there describing his Tai Wan material. He wrote extensively about the possible origins of the people and culture in evidence at Tai Wan; he tried, without much success, to relate various artefact types to the “three great waves of migration” that some scholars then believed to have swept through this area. Much of his writing is thus out-of-date today, and his site report reflected the faults in his digging techniques.

We will, nonetheless, be forever in Finn’s debt, for he left us an exhaustive description of the material he found, and he stimulated a great deal of public and government interest in the archaeology of Hong Kong. It is both ironical and appropriate that the most distinctive pottery style in this area — discovered, studied and named by Fr. Finn — should bear his initials.

A Stratified Site at Shek Pik

Shek Pik on Lantau Island is one of the richest and most important archaeological sites in Hong Kong. By a fortunate set of circumstances, it came to be investigated by Walter Schofield, a district officer and amateur geologist who took up archaeology with a passion and a methodical approach.

From 1933 to 1937, Schofield discovered or surveyed more than 100 prehistoric sites, “mainly in the sandbars of the islands and coasts of the New Territories.” Some of these sites, notably the dumb-bell shaped island (tombolos) of Tung Kwu and Siu A Chau, did not yield bronze artefacts but yielded many polished stone tools and a softer pottery than the well-fired Bronze Age type. From this data, Schofield concluded that an earlier, “Neolithic” people, living mainly on the sea, had preceded the Bronze Age inhabitants of the sites on larger islands, such as at Tai Wan on Lamma, excavated by Finn in 1933.

However, Schofield’s major contribution to Hong Kong archaeology was in his careful excavation and exhaustive report on Shek Pik. The site was discovered in 1937 in the same manner as many other major sites along the coast — erosion and sand digging had cut back the sand bank, revealing a rich cultural deposit.

The excavation showed that a lengthy occupation of the site had taken place from the Late Neolithic period to the Bronze Age. An ancient floor littered with broken pottery and other debris was found some 60–80 cm below the surface of the sand bank. He also noted earlier material in the levels below this floor, to depths of 180 cm. Well below the main activity floor, Schofield found the remains of six individuals, some of whom had been buried with funeral offerings of pottery, stone tools, shells and animal bones — the latter items probably serving as food and/or ornamental sacrifices.



4.1 Walter Schofield at Tung Kwu in 1937



4.2 The tombolo island of Tung Kwu in 1937

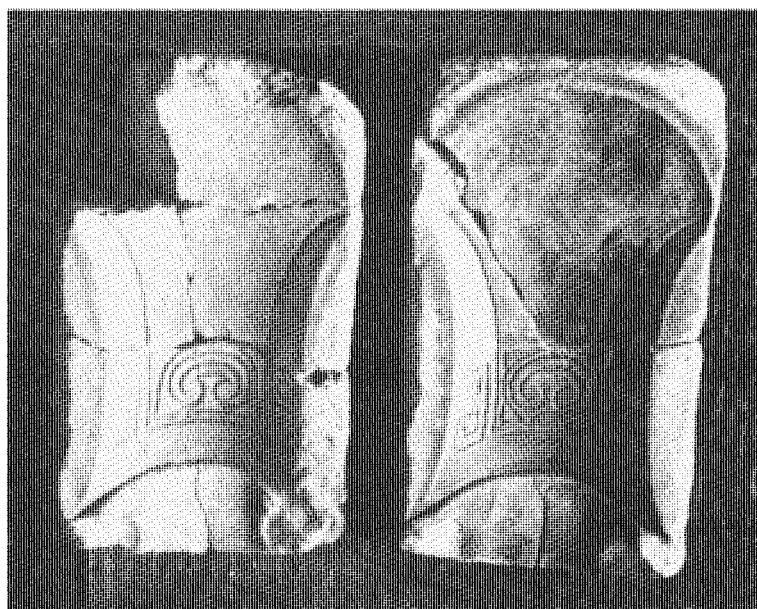
4.3 The Shek Pik site prior to excavation



All of the burials were oriented with head to south, a fact that suggested to Schofield the existence of some primitive notions of *feng shui* (geomancy). It is also noteworthy that one individual was represented by skull fragments only, while another skull had a neat hole drilled into it. (Both of these features were also seen more recently at another prehistoric burial site at Sham Wan, Lamma Island, discussed below). From the relationship of the burials to the old living surface, and from the type of objects placed in the burials, Schofield was able to date them to an early phase of the Bronze Age, which he put fairly accurately at around 1500–1000 BC.

Schofield presented a very detailed report on his excavations at Shek Pik to

4.6 *Bi-valve moulds for casting bronze axeheads, from Shek Pik*



the Third Congress of Prehistorians of the Far East, held in Singapore in 1938. This was a monographic description of the excavation, the material and Schofield's interpretations. It was republished by the Hong Kong Archaeological Society in 1975, along with all of Schofield's published archaeological writings, as well as some unpublished work (Schofield 1975). After his death in 1968, his papers, including field notebooks, original photographs of Shek Pik and other sites were given by his widow to James Hayes, a local historian, who later donated them to the Archaeological Society.

Because of Schofield's meticulous work, the site at Shek Pik is important for a number of reasons:

- The excavation revealed clear stratigraphy with various periods of activity and different material cultures represented at different depths.
- The site was the first in Hong Kong to be established beyond reasonable doubt as undisturbed since the time it was abandoned. Schofield concluded that it had thus been protected from typhoons, storms, erosion and redeposition over a period of 300 years or more.
- It was the first site in Hong Kong to yield intact prehistoric burials with skeletal remains and associated offerings.
- It demonstrated that, under certain conditions, human and animal bones would survive in the moist sandy conditions of the coastal sites.

- The work at Shek Pik was extremely well recorded and reported. Although all of the artefacts and human remains were lost during the war, the data available from Schofield's site report continues to be of great value.

Investigations after Schofield have added to our knowledge of the site. A rock carving and nearby site, also mainly of the Bronze Age, were reported by a Chinese scholar/collector, Chen Kung-jit, in a 1957 report. He conducted large-scale, but poorly recorded, digging on both sites in 1939, a year after Schofield's work. Excavations conducted in 1979 at Shek Pik by the Hong Kong Archaeological Society showed that, in spite of considerable disturbances to the site from construction in the 1950s, some areas of the original deposit remained. A major two-year excavation of the remaining deposit was conducted by The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1986–87. An earlier, Middle Neolithic occupation was discovered, along with many interesting features, and a “pre-ceramic cultural layer” was identified at the base of the Middle Neolithic deposit.

Schofield wrote at length about the possible Chinese influence on the prehistoric Yueh peoples of this area and noted that many of the decorations on pottery and bronze do bear some similarity to those of the Shang and Chou periods in North China. Others seemed to him to be more related to Southeast Asia. His general conclusion about Hong Kong's prehistory still seems relevant today — that this area was in ancient times “a crossroads of cultures and probably also of races . . . in some degree foreshadowing its present function as a meeting ground of nations.”

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