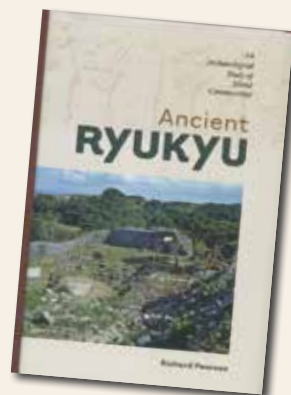


BOOK REVIEW

Ancient Ryukyu: An Archaeological Study of Island Communities

Richard Pearson

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The above subtitle places this book in a theoretical realm of worldwide significance: how islands are colonized, and how populations are maintained in restricted ecologies and interact with other peoples over the water in “constantly changing configurations” (p. 4). Fifty years of research have gone into this book, beginning with the author’s archaeological fieldwork in Okinawa as a graduate student. Three years after attaining his doctorate, he published his first book on the subject (Pearson 1969), then continued writing on Ryukyu trade and political development. *Ancient Ryukyu* updates and expands his previous works in important ways, and provides a much fuller view of non-Japanese lifestyles throughout the centuries preceding the Satsuma take-over of the Ryukyus in 1609.

The book is organized chronologically, from the Palaeolithic period through the early Ryukyu Kingdom. The final “Discussion and Conclusion” is very useful: pulling out points on distinctive aspects of Ryukyu inhabitation of theoretical interest, providing snapshots of human geography through the periods, offering questions and implications for further research, and comparing Ryukyu archaeology with that of the Mediterranean and Caribbean. An appendix on the chronology of trade ceramics—beginning with Lelang earthenware from the Late Han Dynasty commandery on the Korean Peninsula through the 16th century—is an extremely valuable addition (see also Table 8.2).

Pearson gradually disabuses us of our preconceptions: there seems not to have been population continuity from the Minatogawa human remains dating to ca. 18,000 years ago (p. 43); instead, the Ryukyus were colonized post-Palaeolithic by Jomon individuals from Kyushu during the Initial Shell mound period (7000–2000 BC). Nevertheless, the Early and Middle Shell mound periods (ca. 2000–1000 BC, 1000–300 BC) developed differently from Jōmon: there was no horticulture, and agriculture was not introduced until ca. 8–10th centuries AD in the Late Shell mound period (300 BC–AD 1050). Interestingly, iron was introduced earlier (ca. AD 500) than agriculture, but local metallurgy was later: late 12th century for iron-working, and 13th–14th centuries for copper/bronze-working.

Contacts that brought in these new technologies grew out of the trading network that operated ca. 600 BC–AD 1200 for extracting, processing and supplying shell products to mainland Japan. It is possible that some dry land crops might have been cultivated along with yam and taro, but shellfish gathering and fishing remained mainstays of the economy. Agriculture was brought to the islands at the beginning of the Gusuku period (AD

1050–1429), when the Ryukyus were drawn into the Chinese trading network, and when immigration from the Japanese mainland stimulated serious cultivation wet-rice, wheat and barley plus the raising of livestock. This increased subsistence base fostered the development of several polities during the Gusuku period which were then unified in 1429 under the Ryukyu Kingdom.

This new periodization structures the presentation of detailed data on individual archaeological sites, ceramic types, subsistence modes, and communications among and beyond the Ryukyu Islands. Several of the islands have distinctive histories and developmental trajectories that are described separately; one learns that the Shell mound periods encompass great variability and cannot be broad-brushed.

Two chapters are thematic though they occur in chronological order: the first on the shell trading network, and the second on the medieval Chinese trading network. For the first in Chapter 6, Pearson draws on the Hirota site excavation report published in 2003 to update his views from 1990. Now, the Hirota site on Tanegashima (Kagoshima prefecture) is dated 3rd–7th centuries AD, thus affecting Kofun-period exchange more than in Yayoi. He emphasizes that the exchange of *Turbo* shells, used for inlay in the Nara, Heian and Tang periods, fed directly into the medieval trading network of the early Gusuku polities. Facilitating the turbo trade in the 8–10th centuries was a Heian-period site connected with Dazaifu, established on Kikaijima where 150 buildings (known by their postholes) and 30 iron-working hearths have been newly excavated (p. 158).

The medieval network beginning in the Early Gusuku (AD 1050–1250) involved trade in Song white wares from China, iron, steatite cauldrons from Nagasaki and locally produced grey ceramics (*kamuiyaki*). Based on this trade, and probably competition for land to feed a growing (immigrant) population, the Late Gusuku period (AD 1250–1429) witnessed the emergence of the Chuzan, Sanzan and Sanhoku polities, all located on Okinawa Island. This was the period of castle (*gusuku*)-building, as any visitor to Okinawa is quickly aware, but few realize the ritual nature of these constructions. In 1372, these polities were given tributary state status by the Ming Court fortrading at ports in Quanzhou or Fuzhou. High-quality lacquer production was instituted in Okinawa primarily to supply prestigious gifts in addition to other local tributary products and those transhipped from Japan and Southeast Asia (see pp. 217–21).

The Chuzan capital was moved from Urasoe to Shuri in the late 14th century, after which the island was unified between 1422 and 1427; the defeated rivals were forced to reside at the new capital. (This is two centuries before the *sankin kōtai* system was instituted in Edo in 1635.) The Ryukyu Kingdom became the sole trader with China, and a port was established on an island (Ukishima) at Naha that included enclaves for Chinese and Japanese traders (resembling Dejima in Nagasaki, both islands now linked to the land). Multiple excavations of the Shuri castle areas reveal a court life distinctly different from its trading partners and local inhabitants.

Pearson has previously written on state formation in Okinawa (Pearson 1997; Ladefoged and Pearson 2000), which he sees as a very useful case study for developing secondary state theory. He has decided that it does not help to label the Ryukyu Kingdom as a city-state (p. 239), though the data he offers for population growth, subsistence changes, local economic production and the organization of prestige-good production through the Gusuku into the Ryukyu Kingdom period certainly do provide fertile ground

for investigating how these particular states developed for later comparison with other secondary states (even Yamato itself).

Two small points need mentioning. The adoption of “Okinawajima” to refer to the island (distinct from the prefecture) is very useful and worth wide adoption. However, Pearson’s reference to the archipelago’s volcanoes as “seamounts” is worthy of correction. Ryukyu volcanoes (the Tokara chain) are all subduction-zone volcanoes. In contrast, seamounts are volcanoes produced by oceanic hotspots but which die and sink below the sea surface after the oceanic plate they are on passes over the hotspot. (Think of the Emperor seamount chain northwest of the Hawaiian Islands.)

In sum, this is an extremely timely and well-constructed survey of Ryukyu development. It integrates much historical data when available, and does not shy away from describing details and variability in the archaeological record. A book well worth having and reading, many times.

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