The mystery of the empty honeycomb tombs of Bohol

In the municipality of Dimiao in the province of Bohol, Philippines, lies an eerie and perplexing image – rows and rows of honeycomb-like tombs. The site would not be so strange if it were not for one unusual fact – they are all empty.
The old cemetery, known as the Ermita Ruins (meaning ‘chapel in a lonely place’), dates back to the early 1800s and is protected as a National Cultural Treasure. It is the only cemetery of its kind in the Philippines. It was commissioned by Fr. Enrique de Santo de Villanueva during the Spanish colonial period and built by a population that was willing to work for the church.
Experts are baffled by the empty tombs, particularly considering archaeological teams have discovered a mass grave full of skeletons stacked on top of each other in the centre of the cemetery. Some historians have speculated that the area’s residents died of an epidemic before the cemetery was completed or who were hastily buried to prevent the spread of illness.
The Bohol ruins. Photo source.

Other researchers believe that the absence of bones can be explained by the closure of the cemetery in 1844. It is thought that it was shut down before being extensively after it was discovered that it was too near to a church, which was considered ‘unhealthy’.


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The catacombs make up the walls of the ruins.

It’s amazing what I have discovered in Dimiao town, in the island-province of Bohol at noon today. I discovered catacombs! I never would have thought I would find them right in our own backyard, so to speak. For me, catacombs belong to another era and place.

Over the years, I have frequently travelled along the Dimiao highway on my way to Valencia, my father’s hometown, until I left Bohol in 1988 to pursue my professional journey. Whenever I visit my old man’s hometown, I always pass by Dimiao. However, nobody ever told me about the “Ermita Ruins”. On hindsight, maybe it was not meant to be. I had to discover and experience it for myself sans invitation.

Today, I drove to Dimiao from Valencia to fetch a cousin. Behind the church, I suddenly chanced upon the ruins! Serendipity, my favourite expression, is really my middle name. It looked surreal from a distance. I decided to explore the ruins following our lunch invite.
On the drive back to Valencia, we stopped by the ruins. We parked by the ruins’ entrance. I must search and investigate. I was very curious. The scene reminds me of Intramuros in Manila and the Pikit Fort in faraway Pikit in North Cotabato.

It was eerily quiet as we entered the place. Maybe it was a holy spot in another time but what caught my breath were the catacombs. It was quite mind-boggling. The ruins were situated in a spacious area across the Catholic Church of Dimiao town. There was a structure that looked to me like the ruins of a chapel. It was situated in the middle of a square-shaped piece of land surrounded by the catacombs that made up the walls of the entire area. Upon the entrance, there was a structure that I could not quite figure out. My best guess would be a sacristy. It looked like it.

I tried to imagine what Father Enrique de Santo de Villanueva had in mind when he built the structures from 1800-1815. Was it a burial place complete with chapel and sacristy? The chapel was where the burial rituals would have been held. Since there are no historical data available for the catacombs in Dimiao, we will never know what Father Enrique had in mind.
The broken marker said, “The researchers were surprised why no graves were found in the tombs“. It further said, “But even before it was completed, it could be possible that a catastrophic event occurred or an epidemic perhaps, which explains…skeletons excavated from the…” It ends there. I presumed it said, “…which explains why there are no skeletons excavated from the site.”

I have lived outside Bohol for over twenty years, but this is my first time ever to see the catacombs of Dimiao. I hope that this rare historical site will be given the prominence it rightfully deserves by the concerned government agencies.
Side entrance of the ruins that looked like a chapel.

The altar of the chapel
Catacombs up close

The sacristy
The entrance to the ruins. On the right with a broken wall are the ruins I presumed to be the sacristy. The ruins of the chapel can be seen from the entrance.

Ref.: http://simplybelinda.blogspot.dk/2013/04/the-catacombs-of-dimiao.html

Posted by Madison

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