

Tabon Man

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Here is a little heralded scientific fact: the oldest known fossil remains of Homo sapiens in Southeast Asia — a portion of a human tibia — is from the Tabon Cave near Quezon, Palawan. It was radiocarbon dated to have an age of about 47,000 years. The most amazing discovery about Tabon Man so far is that he was a Tool Maker, with over half of the recovered specimens being Neolithic stone flake tool remnants. But apart from the existence of so-called Tabon Man, the Palawan cave complex is but an entrance to [the complex history of ancient Philippines.](#)

I hope more people will visit the ever-improving [National Museum](#) at the old Finance Building near Taft Avenue in Manila to see the world-famous [Manunggul Burial Jar with its spirit boat handle](#) in the Tabon Cave Gallery and dated to be around 2100 years old. (If you are too indolent the Filipino, you can see this also on the one thousand peso bill). Anthropologist Robert Fox, who excavated Tabon for the National Museum in 1962 writes:

The burial jar with a cover featuring a ship-of-the-dead is perhaps unrivalled in Southeast Asia; the work of an artist and master potter. This vessel provides a clear example of a cultural link between the archaeological past and the ethnographic present. The boatman is steering rather than paddling the ship. The mast of the boat was not recovered. Both figures appear to be wearing a band tied over the crown of the head and under the jaw; a pattern still encountered in burial practices among the indigenous peoples in Southern Philippines. The manner in which the hands of the front figure are folded across the chest is also a widespread practice in the Islands when arranging the corpse. The carved prow and eye motif of the spirit boat is still found on the traditional watercraft of the Sulu Archipelago, Borneo and Malaysia. Similarities in the execution of the ears, eyes, nose, and mouth of the figures may be seen today in the woodcarving of Taiwan, the Philippines, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

From the archaeological and physical evidence, there is thus no doubt that human beings have populated the Philippines for at least 50,000 years. Long before Christianity became the State Religion of the Roman Empire, and long before Muslim sultanates were founded in Sulu and Cotabato by Sharif Kabunsuan, –lumads, for lack of a better name — were making tools and burying their dead on Palawan, which, in those long-forgotten Ice Ages might have been highlands or even mountain tops! No doubt, what would become the islands of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao when the great glaciers retreated ten thousand years ago, were also high lands where innumerable

generations of the true original Filipinos wandered, lived and died in the incessant enterprise of survival and multiplication.

I think this is the time period that ought to inform the much abused phrase “since time immemorial” whenever we speak of ancestors owning lands and domains that descendants now want as juridical homelands. If some would insist on “*first nation*” status, let us take literally the full and rigorous meaning of “first” — if such a mental feat is at all possible.

The true meaning of “*since time immemorial*” ought also to illuminate the reflection upon the possible meaning of another phrase: “**at the time of conquest or colonization.**”

Someone conquered and colonized the lumads and pygmies. It wasn't the Neanderthals

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