

REVIEW

BOOK

**The Ruins of Pinagbayanan: A Photo-Essay on the Archaeology
of a Late Nineteenth-Century Philippine Town**

By Grace Barretto-Tesoro

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Grace Barretto-Tesoro is a well-known archaeologist from the University of the Philippines Diliman. She has published numerous works on archaeology in the Philippines, particularly on burials from the precolonial to the Spanish colonial periods. *The Ruins of Pinagbayanan* is not her first publication on this Batangas town. In 2017, she published an article on Pinagbayanan entitled “Power and Resilience: Flooding and Occupation in a Late-Nineteenth-Century Philippine Town.” The book under review is more comprehensive and its focus is not only the town itself but the process of doing archaeology. This process is discussed using the archaeological project Barretto-Tesoro’s team carried out from 2009 to 2012 at Pinagbayanan in San Juan, Batangas.

The aim of the book is to present archaeology in a way that is understandable to people outside the field, beyond the community of specialists. The author does this through a photo essay, as the title indicates. As expected, there are numerous photos and write-ups that simplify the content of the technical reports that archaeological projects like this one normally produce. The book not only shows the excavations and artifacts found on the site; it also shows “how spaces were constructed and perceived—the space of Pinagbayanan in the context of the town of San Juan, the spaces occupied by the ruins, the spaces within the ruins, and the same spaces in the ruins as seen by the town residents and archaeologists” (5). Pinagbayanan is presented as a shared space that exhibits multiple functions. The ruins are “historical spaces, archaeological sites, and part of a modern-day settlement” (5).

This brief photo essay is interdisciplinary, combining archaeology, anthropology, history, and visual arts. The author and her team immersed themselves in the local context where the ruins were unearthed to understand the worldview of Pinagbayanan locals and how these views could have influenced their understanding of the ruins (4). Similarly, the residents understood the significance of the excavation and the site when they began connecting it with their personal and family histories (5).

The choice of Pinagbayanan as an excavation site is discussed in Chapter 1, where the author explains the earlier archeological work in Batangas. Excavations in the province have yielded important artifacts. Through them, we learn the existence of settlements in the region dating from 8000 BC to 4000 BC. Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai ceramics from the 1400s were also found. More excavations in different towns unearthed ruins of churches. The ruins of Pinagbayanan are among the sites discovered in earlier excavations (4). This work can thus be considered part of the history of the archaeology of Batangas.

I believe the book's strength lies in the succession of photographs that show the excavation process from the start to the end. The photos, together with the brief explanation, allow the readers to experience, at least vicariously, the process by which archaeologists produce knowledge about a place. For instance, photos of the site prior to the excavation (Fig. 2.1, 3.1, etc.), full of thick vegetation, covered what lay underneath, consisting of ruins of buildings and traces of life that passed more than a century ago. Through the photos, the archaeologists walk the reader through the whole process of knowledge production, using language that is easily understandable to a non-expert. Since the purpose of the work is to position archeology closer to the people, the use of jargon is tempered. If there are technical terms, they are kept to a minimum and used in ways that do not compromise our understanding of the work.

Part 2 of the book includes photos of artists' depiction of their engagement with the archaeology of Pinagbayanan. Artists were invited to express their views on the excavation through their art. Their works were then exhibited at the UP Vargas Museum in 2015. The juxtaposition of two disciplines—art and archaeology—in this work invites readers to examine how two domains of knowledge, art and science, can relate with the same object of knowledge, the ruins of Pinagbayanan, in this case. The artists write their views regarding their respective works in the last four chapters of the book.

For me, the book's main interest is in the historical significance of Pinagbayanan and the factors that led to its abandonment and its consequences. The artifacts that the excavations yielded show what Pinagbayanan's daily life must have been like in the late colonial era before its residents finally relocated. I would have wanted the work to include a discussion on Pinagbayanan in its larger context, i.e., the colonial province of Batangas, to further understand the significance of the church ruins and

the artifacts from overseas. While other works have discussed the colonial history of Philippine towns, a brief discussion of Pinagbayanan's position in nineteenth-century Batangas would have been a good contribution to the scholarship in this period.

The reader may wonder why the author does not write about how the book is positioned in the whole body of works on archaeology or the history of the archaeology of Luzon. An extensive literature review may not be necessary for this kind of work since the aim is to make the team's archaeological project understandable to non-specialists. What I miss, however, is a discussion on the colonial society of Pinagbayanan and the relation of the artifacts found at the site to the colonial past. A discussion that puts together all the artifacts in a narrative to paint a picture of nineteenth-century Pinagbayanan would have been enriching. Nonetheless, the sparse information on colonial society is supplemented by the abundance of beautiful images of the ruins and the artifacts on the pages of this book. Finally, the work is a welcome addition to the bibliography on Philippine archaeology and local history. It will help students and researchers who are interested in these fields.

REVIEWER

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