ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY AND ASSESSMENT OF THE PROPOSED
FITI'UTA AIRPORT SITE, TA'IU ISLAND, MANU'A GROUP, AMERICAN SAMOA

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Archaeological survey and excavation at the proposed site for a new Ta'u Island airport was conducted in early April, 1987 in conjunction with an environmental assessment made by M & E Pacific, Inc. (Honolulu). The M & E assessment proposes, as a best alternative, construction of a new airport at Fiti'uta. A cursory archaeological reconnaissance made by the author together with two engineers from M & E Pacific in June, 1986 revealed the presence of a stone-filled platform (Site AS-11-54) thought to be similar to sites of prehistoric age from work in Western Samoa. With this finding, Stan Sorensen, Historical Preservation Officer, recommended documentation and thorough survey for other potentially significant archaeological remains within the entire area to be affected by airport development. The project reported herein fulfilled the requirement with complete archaeological survey of the proposed airport site. In addition, documentation of the stone platform (AS-11-54) was undertaken, including field assessment of its construction, function, and age. Excavations (16.5 m² total) conducted in the stone platform can also be considered mitigative action prior to its loss with airport construction.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

Archaeological reconnaissance-level survey and excavations conducted throughout the Manu'a Group in 1986 by Hunt and Kirch (1987, in press b) revealed that nearly all coastal flatland
contained dense and nearly continuous distributions of prehistoric and/or historic sites. Included in these areas are prehistoric and historic (post-European contact) domestic habitation complexes (house remains, etc.), constructed walkways, wells, "specialized" sites (mounds, graves, etc.), as well as buried cultural deposits—some of which have yielded pottery and midden dating to the first century A.D. (Hunt and Kirch, in press). The significant range of sites represented on the small coastal flatlands of the Manu'a Islands made detailed survey of the Fiti'uta airport site a critical step in assessing the potential impacts of construction at this locale.

Preliminary examination of the coastal lands of Fiti'uta in June of 1986 led to the discovery of a stone platform (retaining wall with stone rubble fill, designated AS-11-54). Without a detailed study of the Fiti'uta coastal lands, there were good indications that many sites may have been distributed over much of the area proposed for airport development, for the reasons outlined above. The primary objectives of survey at Fiti'uta were (1) to fully record and document all archaeological sites, as well as isolated artifact finds with the entire project area; and (2) as necessary, undertake intensive recording and assessment (including excavations) of any and all sites thought to be significant in scientific, historical, or interpretive value.
FIELD SURVEY

The area of the proposed Fiti'uta Airport as shown on the site plans provided by Department of Public Works (60 acres; see Fig. 1) was surveyed by a crew of five spread out to cover the entire area to be affected. Coverage was from Fiti'uta Point on the western side to Fogamutia Point on the eastern side, and from the shoreline to the present-day village. Thus, even areas designated as runway clear zones were fully surveyed. The field crew, including the field director (Hunt) at all times, walked and cleared vegetation as necessary to inspect the ground surface. The recent dramatic impacts of tropical storm Tusi both aided our field survey and hindered it. The storm removed much of the vegetation, including the uprooting of large trees. While new ground was more easily visible, or accessible, some areas were covered in a thickset of vegetation debris. Special attention was paid to searching for stone foundations, mounds (monuments or graves), raised walkways or other stone-constructions typical of Samoan archaeological sites. In addition, indications of the possibility of buried sites (including midden, geomorphic/sedimentary evidence) were considered. The proposed airport lands were covered twice by intensive level walk-through survey. Also, Chief Tupuola, an elderly life-long local resident with intimate knowledge of sites and their oral traditions, joined our crew to survey areas in which he knew of archaeological features.
RESULTS

Intensive level survey of the proposed Fitii'uta airport site led to the discovery (and collection) of three artifacts from the ground surface (prehistoric basalt adze fragments, Finds 1 & 2, see Figs. 2 & 4); the stone-filled platform (Site AS-11-54, Figs. 2 & 3) previously discovered and a small platform of stone construction that is known traditionally as a grave (Feature 1, Fig. 2). No other archaeological remains were recorded within the project area.

The potential for buried cultural deposits, not visible from the present day ground surface, is highly unlikely in light of the geological/geomorphic setting of the survey area. This zone is characterized by thin in situ soil development over basaltic flows which are exposed as bedrock in numerous places of the survey area.

Individual Surface Finds

Three surface artifact finds from two locations were plotted (Fig. 2) and collected for study and preservation. Figure 4 illustrates these finds, comprising fine-grained, polished basalt adze fragments. Find 1 is the butt end of a small quadrangular cross-section adze (Fig. 4, top). Find 2, where two fragments were recovered within a few meters of one another, includes a butt fragment of what appears to be a reverse-triangular cross-section adze (Fig. 4, bottom left), and a fragment with two polished surfaces that cannot be assigned a cross-section classification (Fig. 4, bottom right).
Feature 1

The feature identified as a grave by Chief Tupuola lies outside the area (to the northeast) to be directly affected by airport construction (as shown in Fig. 2). This feature was crudely constructed by dry basalt boulder masonry and measured 2.45 by 2.30 meters in plan, and 70 cm in height. The feature (Feature 1, Fig. 2) is in a relatively poor state of preservation, and while traditional in form, may be either of historic or prehistoric age. The story associated with the grave was recounted by Tupuola. This is said to be the grave of a half-devil/half-man, a cannibal comparable to the infamous Ma'afa of ancient Amouli Village on western Ta'u. This demonic man was so troublesome in his lifetime that he was buried face down in this constructed tomb so as not to cause problems for the people of Fiti'uta as a ghost. No excavations were undertaken at this grave as it lies outside the area to be affected by airport development.

Site AS-11-54

The stone platform was mapped in detail and excavated (16.5 m²) with two trenches across the center of the site (Fig. 3). This work enabled us to determine its construction sequence, function, and age. Materials excavated from a basalt and coral pebble deposit (ili ili) that underlay the rough stone fill of the platform's surface suggest that the site was occupied during the historic (post-European contact) period.

Site AS-11-54 is a large (32 x 36 meter, 1.1 meter maximum height) crudely constructed platform of rough basalt boulders. Some of the retaining walls of stacked boulders remain intact,
while most of the stones comprising the edges have tumbled and scattered, presumably due to the effects of vegetation and pig herds kept in the area by Fiti'uta Villagers. The overall plan view of the site appeared similar to forms known from Western Samoa as prehistoric "specialized" sites—constructed mounds and platforms of unknown function (see Davidson 1974a, 1974b, 1974c). These forms vary from star-shaped to amorphous plans built from earth and/or boulders. This broad class of sites is significant in Samoan prehistory as they represent constructions with a substantial investment of labor that must have been rationalized in symbolic or socio-religious terms. Prior to excavation of AS-11-54, the site appeared on morphological grounds to be a crude example of a star-mound or of "specialized" function.

An excavation strategy was designed to assess the construction sequence, function(s), and age of the site. Two trenches were placed across the mound, one to include the center where an additional retaining wall was located (see Fig. 3), with the other to cross the outside perimeter of the construction. While we were prepared to excavate with trowels and screens, this proved unnecessary as all "excavation" could be effectively accomplished with boulder by boulder removal of the platform fill. In short, only loose boulder rubble with a small amount of waterworn coral cobbles was encountered in the platform. All artifacts and all shell uncovered with removal of the boulder fill were collected, and are described below.
At the base of the boulder fill we encountered a stony mucky (heavily enriched by organic debris) silty loam. This soil only thinly covers decomposing volcanic bedrock. We tested with excavation by spade and screening this deposit and found no indications of archaeological materials beneath the platform construction itself.

Excavation of 16.5 square meters revealed a very simple, one-stage constructional sequence. The very loose and haphazard arrangement of boulders indicates that the construction was completed rapidly and evidently without the investment of skilled labor typical of most traditional Samoan architecture. The presence of shell (albeit in very small quantities) as well as historic artifacts (see below) suggest that this site served as a historically recent occupation. No prehistoric artifacts were found in association with the site, either through excavation or careful surface inspection of the entire site. In spite of its crude construction, it is likely that one or more pole and thatch structures were once situated on the platform's surface.

Site A6-11-54 can be regarded as only marginally significant. Research at the site will not yield information bearing on the prehistoric past of Manu'a. As a historic occupation its value is primarily in the information it can provide about traditional culture in the historic period. This information is preserved through detailed mapping, excavation, and preservation of the artifacts recovered. Furthermore, Site A6-11-54 is not unique, as there are abundant sites and site complexes that contain a rich architectural and artifactual record of the historic period in Manu'a. Thus, the field work
completed at AS-11-54 can be considered full mitigative action taken prior to its loss with development of the airport.

The artifacts recovered include crockery, bottle glass, a clay smoking-pipe fragment, iron, a square-sectioned nail fragment, and a squared corner piece of slate. All of these artifacts are shown in Figure 5. A very small amount of marine shell collected from within the fill of the platform included Turbo cf. asterus ('alili) (290 grams total), Cypraeidae sp. (37 grams total) and some miscellaneous unidentified fragments (8 grams total).

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the evidence collected in the field survey, the proposed Fiti‘uta airport site appears to be the best alternative from a historic preservationist point of view (see options in M & E Pacific's Environmental Assessment, 1985). Other than the stone platform (AS-11-54) of marginal value—which has now been well documented through mapping and excavation—the proposed project will have no adverse impacts on cultural or archaeological resources of any significance.

As with any development, it is recommended that in the unlikely event that any human burials, buried cultural deposits, or other potentially significant remains surface with site clearance, grading or excavations, that all work be temporarily halted at which time a professional archaeologist should be consulted as to appropriate mitigative action prior to work continuing.
REFERENCES CITED


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FIGURE 1. New Airport at Fiti'uta (from M & E Pacific report) showing area that will undergo development with the proposed airport.
FIGURE 2. Archaeological resources recorded with intensive survey of lands to be affected by the proposed airport site. Shown are Site AS-11-54, a stone constructed platform used for historic occupation (see Fig. 3); Feature 1 is a grave with legendary significance, but located outside of the limit of grading; and surface finds (basaltic adze fragments) designated 1 & 2 (see Fig. 4).
FIGURE 3. Site AS-11-54 plan and cross-section views; also shown is area (16.5 m²) excavated (Trenches A & B).
FIGURE 4. Surface finds (1 & 2), fine-grained basalt adze fragments; Find 1 (top), a butt fragment of a quadrangular cross-sectioned adze; Find 2 (2 specimens), a butt fragment of a reverse-triangular cross-sectioned adze (bottom left), and a fragment with two polished surfaces of unknown cross-section classification (bottom right).
FIGURE 5. Historic artifacts (all those recovered) from excavation of Site AS-11-54.