

Unit 12: Marshall Islands: Bonen burial site

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Facts

Capital	Majuro
Population	64, 552 (July 2009 estimate)
Urban areas	Ebeye, Wotje, Jaluit, DUD (Darrit, Uliga, Delap)
Most populated islands	Majuro and Kwajalein atolls
Language	English (official) and Marshallese
Highest Point	on Likiep Island (10m)
Independence	1 May 1979

Glossary

Alab	head of a clan who normally carries out tasks allocated to him by his chief
Bonen	local name given to the burial site of the Ri-Bako clan
Nitijela	a meeting place for the wise men; National parliament of the Marshall Islands

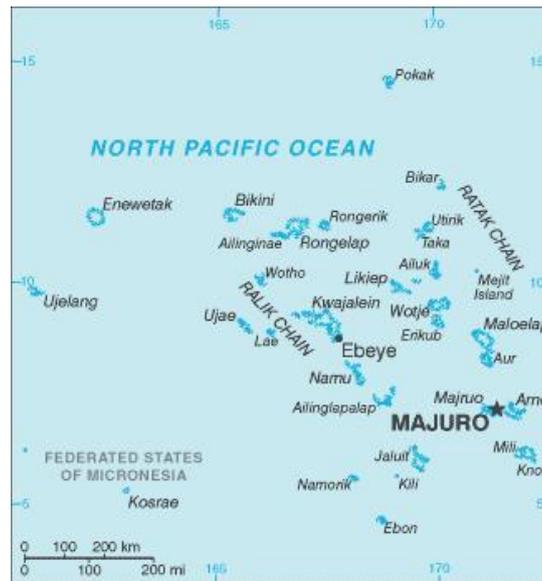


Figure 12.1 Map of Marshall Islands

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Describe the location of the burial site
- Explain the meaning of the word “legend” and why legends are important to society
- Describe the past activities on Pinglap Island
- Suggest useful ways to preserve burial sites

This chapter is about the burial site in Pinglap atoll, Marshall Islands.

The cultural site called **Bonen** is on the island of Pinglap, which is part of Jaluit Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The atolls and islands are situated in two almost parallel lines known as the *Ratak* (Sunrise) group and *Ralik* (Sunset) group. Each atoll is made up of many small islets. There are 29 atolls and 1225 islets

Pinglap Island burial site

From August 12th to September 10 1996, an archaeological research team from the Historic Preservation Office did a survey of Jaluit Atoll. Their aim was to locate, map and record settlement and occupation sites from the distant and recent past. They wanted to gather knowledge about Marshallese culture. If a site was significant they would ask that it be preserved by the Republic of Marshall Islands government.

During the fieldwork, the team uncovered 29 sites of very ancient settlement or occupation. One of the sites uncovered, code named Site MI-JL-PI is located on Pinglap, one of the largest islets of Jaluit Atoll. That coding tells us the site is in the Marshall Islands, located in Jaluit Atoll on Pinglap Island and is the third of nine burial sites found on that island. The archaeological team found burial site “003” quite close to an eroding shoreline. It is likely that some graves may have been washed away over the years.

The team identified ten individual graves. They belonged to the distant past. These graves occupy an area of about 10m x 15m on the northern part of Pinglap (see *Figure 12.2*). Three different categories of graves were noted (See *Figure 12.3 showing the burial site*).

Category 1 is recognised by irregular shape with various sized coral slabs outlining the graves (marked as B2, B3, B7 and B8).

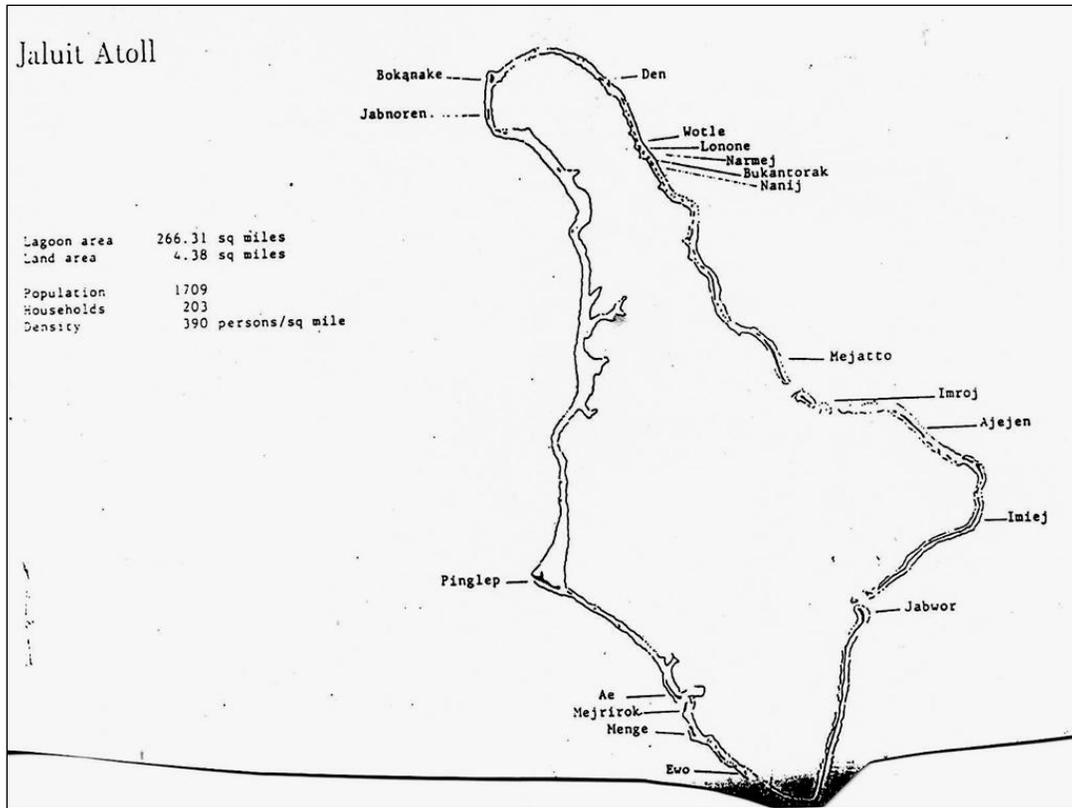
Category 2 is recognised by oval to rectangular shapes with carefully aligned thin coral slabs (marked B1, B6, B9 and B10). Carbon dating of plant remains was not possible.

Cultural artefacts found on the site were left as they were originally placed. A giant clam shell (*Tridacana*), probably used for sacrifice, was found on the site. It was suggested that it might be a digging tool but its size and weight were too big for that purpose.

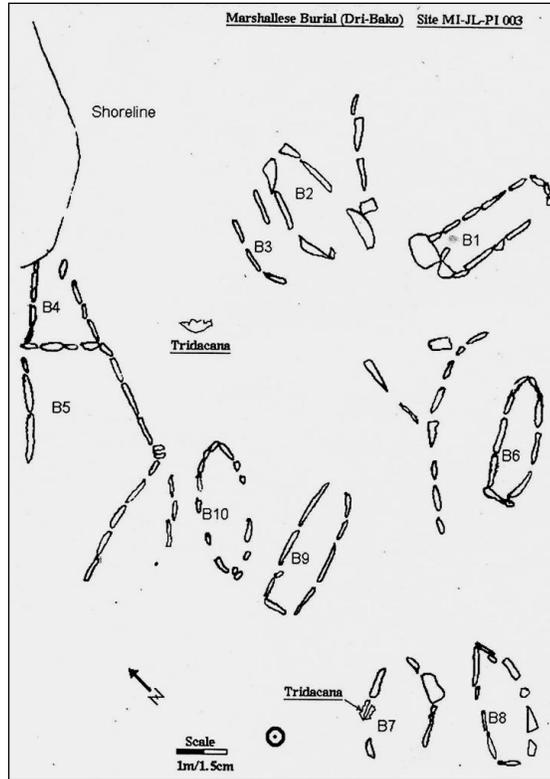
Oral tradition says the burial site on Pinglap belongs to a clan called the “Ri-Bako”. This means the clan of the sharks. The clan is sacred because of the power of the shark. Sharks are well known for their ferocious attacks on marine life and human beings. In an atoll environment a shark’s strength is feared. Through sacred rituals the Ri-Bako clan commanded the power of the shark.

Anyone who enters the site has to observe strict rules about noise. They may talk only by whispering. Local people believe the wrath brought upon the island by devastating typhoons was due to unnecessary noise. These noises disturb the dead. The burial site of the Ri-Bako is known by the locals as **Bonen**.

It is told that whenever **Alab**, of the Ri-Bako clan, got angry and wanted to take revenge, he would blow his conch shell and this would cause typhoons. The grave marked B7 was believed to be the resting place for Alab. The conch shell Alab used to blow is still kept by the local community and will be returned to the burial site once it is fenced.



Map 12.2. Shows Jaluit Atoll and where Pinglep Island is located.



Map 12.3. Graves at Bonen burial site.

Questions and Activities

1. When did the Marshall Islands gain independence?
2. What is the highest point in RMI?
3. What do the words *Ratak* and *Ralik* mean?
4. What type of work does an archaeological team do?
5. How many individual graves were discovered?

6. What do the Category 1 graves look like?
7. What is the *Tridacana*?
8. Which clan did the burial site belong to?
9. What does their clan name mean?
10. How did the **Alab** cause typhoons?

The Spanish in the Marshall Islands

It has been suggested that some graves on **Bonen** might be for Spanish sailors who died on Pinglap. Between 1520 and 1543 the Spanish ships of Magellan, Loaisa, Saavedra, Grijalva and Villalobos passed by the Marshall Islands.

Taongi, the northernmost atoll in the Marshall, was visited by de Salazar on 21st August 1526. Utirik, Taka, Rongelap, Ailinginae, Ujelang and Eniwetok were visited by Saavedra between December 1527 and October 1529 and Wotje, Erikub, Maloelap, Likiep, Kwajelein, Lae, Ujae and Wotho were visited by Villalobos between December 1542 and January 1543. Spanish ships continued to visit the Marshalls – Legaspi in 1556, Mendana in 1568.

A hundred years later in 1686 the names Western and Eastern Caroline Islands began to be used for all the atolls and islands from Palau to the Marshalls. After these early visits the Spanish ignored the Marshalls.

In the 1850s the German trader Alfred Capelle set up business. In 1874 Spain tried to establish a claim over the Marshalls but failed. In 1885 Spain tried again. The result was that Germany annexed the Marshalls and the Jaluit Company became the government. Spain annexed the western Carolines.

Past and present use of the site

There has been no more archaeological digging to discover when Pinglap was first settled by Marshallese. Oral tradition says that the island was settled many hundreds of years ago. In the 1960s a big community lived on the island. A clinic and an elementary school were built to service it.

Today, the island is deserted. One of the reasons given is the fear of strong wind. The northern end of the island where the burial site lies is frequently hit by strong wind. It is very rough coast for canoes or ships to land. People also don't live there due to fear of the dead and the sacredness of the burial site. People also left the island to get an education for their children, to work for a salary or to improve their lifestyles.

The site is now silent and only occasionally visited. The people of Jaluit Atoll know it is a sacred site of the Ri-Bako clan.

The site has been surveyed. There is now a management plan proposed by the Historic Preservation Office (HPO). After returning from their survey of Pinglap, the HPO declared **Bonen** had significance in Marshall Island heritage because of the burial site, the legend and the artefacts (conch shell and *Tridacana*) found there.

The HPO recommended the site should be stabilised. That is, the site should be kept safe by fencing it to stop vandalism, building a seawall to prevent erosion and appointing someone to keep an eye on it. Once the site is secure and stable then it will be recommended as a cultural site to the **Nitijela**. The Tourism Office can then design and produce brochures of **Bonen** and other cultural heritage sites on Pinglap.

Importance of **Bonen** Site to the Local Community and Nation

Our culture is our way of life. Our culture is influenced by our environment and by other cultures coming from outside. The relationship between a people and their environment is shown by the Ri-Bako clan and the shark. Their faith in the shark was so strong they were able to overcome European visitors like the Spanish. Many Marshallese identify themselves with the Ri-Bako clan because of their heroic deeds in the past.

Famous reggae singer, Bob Marley, sang in the song “Buffalo Soldier”, that “If you know your history, then you would know where you are coming from”. Knowing about **Bonen** is important for Marshallese today. **Bonen** is our cultural heritage and it needs to be protected.

Questions and Activities

11. Who else, besides members of the Ri-Bako clan, might be buried at **Bonen**?
12. In the first 30 years of contact with Europeans, how many Spanish ships visited the Marshalls?
13. Give three reasons people deserted Pinglap?

14. List three ways the burial site will be stabilised.
15. What is the *Nitijela*?
16. In 50 words, say why *Bonen* cultural site is important in the Marshall Islands.

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