

Unit 15: Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM): Ruin of Nan Madol

Ponet Saul

Facts

FSM Capital:	Paliker, located on Pohnpei
Urban area:	Kolonia
No. of Islands:	One island and eight outlying atolls
Highest Point:	Mt Nghneni (2595 ft)
Language:	Pohnpeian, Kapingi and English
Government:	Independent, State of the Federated States of Micronesia
Population	34500 (estimated 2010)
Independence:	3 November 1986



Figure 15.1. Map of the Federated States of Micronesia

This chapter is about the ancient stone walled city of Nan Madol and its significance in the history and culture of Pohnpei.

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- describe the location of Nan Madol
- understand the history of the site
- discuss and plan ways to preserve, conserve and manage a cultural site
- appreciate the myths and legends of the cultural site
- describe the impact of tourist access and uses of the site
- describe the cultural significance of Nan Madol

Historical Properties

The *Pohnpei Historic and Cultural Preservation Act* of 1989 defines historic property as “any site, structure, object, building, or area of significance in the history and culture of Pohnpei.” An “archaeological district” is a space or location of significance in the history and culture of Pohnpei.

These areas contribute to the understanding, appreciation, and respect of past Pohnpeian history and culture. They also assist in maintaining indigenous ways of life in the modern era. Nan Madol and Satwtakai are examples of Archaeological Districts in the Pohnpei State.

Geography of Pohnpei

Pohnpei is located north of the equator at 7° north and 128° east. It is one of the four states in the Federated States of Micronesia (the others are Yap, Chuuk and Kosrae). Pohnpei is the biggest in land area. Its population is 34500. The national capital of the Federated States of Micronesia is located at Paliksar on Pohnpei. The capital of Pohnpei State is Kolonia.

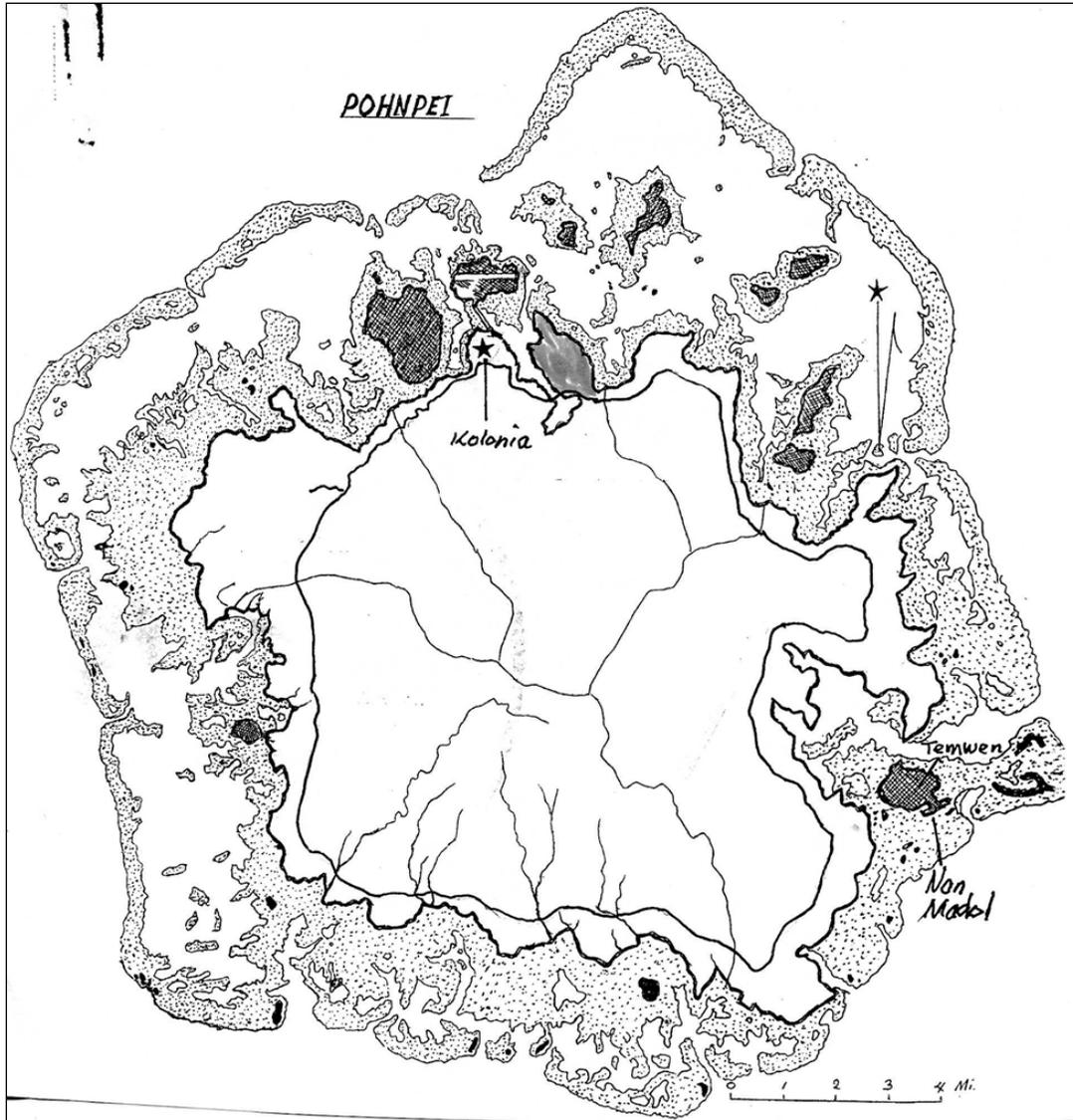


Figure 15.2 Pohnpei showing the reef and lagoon (shaded areas) which surround the mainland

Four historical periods

Pohnpeians divide history into four periods. In the first three periods significant changes occurred in Pohnpeian society.

1 Mwein Kawa

The first of the four segments started during *Keilahn Aio* (the other side of yesterday) with the voyage of Sapkini and his demigods. They formed the island. The migrants from mystical Eir were directed by an octopus named Kidakiki to a tiny speck of coral no longer than the distance between a canoe and its outrigger. Through supernatural powers they added earth boulders, vegetation and all that is natural to the island today. They built a stone altar, a *pei*, from which the island was named. This ended the first traditional period called *Mwein Kawa*.

2 Mwein Saudeler

A political system for the whole island was established during the second historical period, the *Mwein Saudeleur*, or time of supreme lords. This was around the beginning of the 12th century. Sixteen *Saudeleurs* (supreme rulers) are said to have reigned during the period beginning with Olosohpa (one of the demigod builders of Nan Madol) and ending with Saudemwohi. At the time, Pohnpei was divided into nearly three equal segments - Malenkopwale, Pwapwalik and Kohpwaleng.

3 Mwein Nahnmwarki

The third historical period was *Mwein Nahnmwarki*, the time of paramount chiefs. It began with the overthrow of the last *Sau* (Lord of Pohnpei) by a warrior named Isokelekel who came to the island from the east. This was about 1625. After the overthrow of the *Saudeleur* dynasty, he established himself at Nan Madol in Madolenhimw. Isokelekel was the first of a succession of twenty-three paramount chiefs or *Nahnmwarkis* to rule the kingdom. During this third historical period, the island divided into the five political sections which exist today.

4 The Coming of Non-Pohnpeians

The fourth historical period of Pohnpei began with the coming of non-Micronesians to the island. The strangers gained control of the island and Micronesians did not resume political control again until 1979. In that year the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) was created and Pohnpei became one of its four states.

Historians from Europe and the USA usually divide Pohnpeian history into six segments. These six segments are;

- Pre-contact period to 1830,
- Early-contact period 1830-1886,
- Spanish Period 1886-1899,
- German Period 1899-1914,
- Japanese period -1945, and the
- American Period 1945-1979.

These segments are found in non-Micronesian books. Pohnpeians prefer to use their own four historical periods.

Questions and Activities

1. Name the four states in the Federation formed in 1979.
2. List the Pohnpeian names of the four periods in Pohnpeian history.
3. Who was the last *Saudeleur*?
4. Who was Isokelekel?
5. Name the five political sections into which Pohnpei is divided.
6. List the name and dates of the six historical periods that Western scholars use.

Significance of Nan Madol

Nan Madol is of outstanding significance. It is a major yet unexplained technical achievement of monumental size. Nan Madol is really an artificial city.

There were 90 or more islands joined by canals and canoe passages. It was built above the tide by using huge rock walls. This city was built on the ocean side of an island between the reef and the land.

It was a city of great chiefs, kings, priests and warriors. It was a cultural landscape that confronted the sea. It shows human power, religious belief and other relationships with the natural environment. It is evidence of the power of the two brothers Olosohpa and Olosihpa. This power of Nan Madol reached its peak in the reign of the *Saudeleurs* in the period 1100-1600 AD.

The building of Nan Madol

Olosihpa and Olosohpa were two brothers. They came from beyond Pohnpei. Both had magical powers which helped them to build the famous artificial islands and settlements known as Nan Madol. At the time the island of Pohnpei was ruled by many clan leaders. They were always fighting. The brothers wanted to unite the people under a single ruler and build a place of worship to the gods.

At first Olosihpa and Olosohpa were not successful. They started building at Sokehs, but gave up and moved to Nett. This was also unsuitable so the brothers moved eastward into U. This place was also unsuitable. They finally found an area of Madolenihmw where a stone stairway seemed to lead to an underwater city known to be occupied by gods. Here they made a fourth attempt to build their settlement. Because the brothers were demigods, all of the people of the island volunteered to help.

Nan Madol was built in shallow water for protection. It was also near the place of the eel *Nan Somohl*, the earth figure of a god in heaven. The city would be the spiritual centre for all the people of Pohnpei.

At first the sea came up on the reef and continually washed away the construction efforts. So, large basalt rocks with magical qualities were flown over the mountains of Pohnpei to the site. Other large basalt blocks were rafted long distances from stone quarries around the island. The blocks were used for walls. Coral was used to fill them in and provide a flat building platform. The work went on and on, some say for more than a hundred years.

When the artificial stone compounds or islets were nearly completed, Olosihpa died. Ninety-three basalt and coral compounds were finished. Half were used as a religious centre and the other half as a residence for nobility and priests.

Before his death, the other brother, Olosohpa, united the clan chiefs under a single ruler called the *Saudeleur*. The *Saudeleur* resided at the spiritual center of Nan Madol. This was called *Pohn Kedira*.

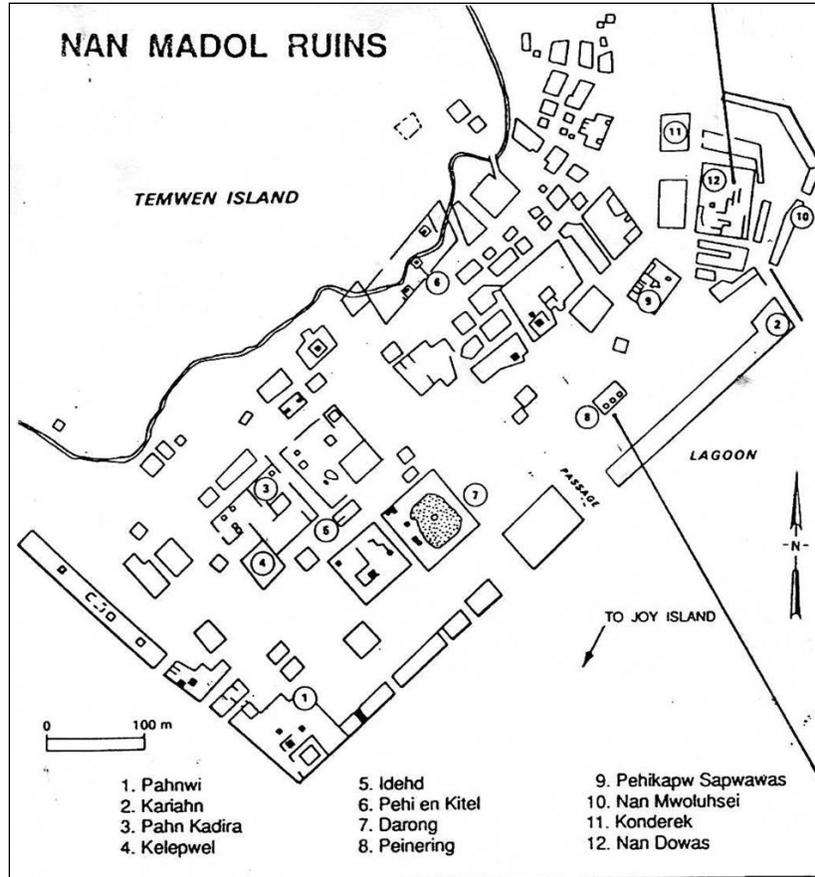


Figure 15.3. Map of Nan Madol Ruins

Questions and Answers

Answer the following in *one* sentence.

7. What is Nan Madol?
8. According to legend, who built Nan Madol?
9. Why was Nan Madol built in shallow water?
10. How was the stone for building transported to Nan Madol?

11. What were the compounds used for?

12. What is the *Pohn Kedira*?

Tourist access to Nan Madol

Tourist access is limited to escorted tours in small groups. Individual tourists often wander out to Nan Madol, but this is not approved of and local landowners, the Government Tourist Authority and National Parks Service monitor this type of use.

Nan Madol is also protected by its location, well away from the major tourist area of the airport and capital of Kolonia, and by its position on the seaward shore of a small island off the southeast coast. Most tourists enter Nan Madol from the sea after a long boat trip down the coast from Kolonia.

Nan Madol is an important cultural site because it is a material link to Pohnpei's history, myths and legends.

Questions and Activities

13. List three ways to protect a cultural site (made of stone).

14. List five reasons why Nan Madol should be on the World Heritage List (of places to be protected).

15. Why should tourist access to Nan Madol be limited?