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Shell trumpets sounding in the stone city: Paul Hambruch and Nan Madol

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On April 29, 1907, [German Governor Viktor] Berg visited Nan Madol, the ancient ruins in [the district of] Madolenihmw, in order to search for the bones of Sau Deleurs [...] the ancient rulers of Ponape [Pohnpei]. His mistress, Kedinsairirin [...] was a member of the ruling clan of [Madolenihmw]. She and her family protested that the place where he planned to dig was sacred and that he would suffer spiritual retribution. Berg did not heed the warnings. He went to Pan Kedara [Pahnkedira], the ancient center of Sau Deleur rule, and dug up unusually large human bones. That night, people heard the sound of the Triton shell [Figure 16.1] trumpeting from Pan Kedara [...] The sound seemed to come from the spot where Berg dug; but those who went, found no one blowing the trumpet shell. The sound continued through the night, and Berg died the following day [...] The Ponapeans believed, and still believe, that Berg died of spiritual retribution (*riahla*). They were saddened by his death, and many attended his funeral. (Ehrlich 1978b:117–118)



Figure 16.1. Shell trumpet, probably *Charonia tritonis*, one of two excavated by Paul Hambruch at Pahnkedira, Nan Madol, Pohnpei, 1910.

Source: Reproduction courtesy Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg (685 II / Ham Pon 140/28a). © Museum am Rothenbaum – Cultures and Arts of the World (MARKK).



Figure 16.2. Paul Hambruch seated on the western wall of the *loulun* of Inas, Pohnpei, 1910.

Note: Hambruch described *loulun* or *lolun* (now spelled *lolong*) as stone arrangements on cult sites, often indicating a burial place, and usually dedicated to a local protective deity, in this case the female deity Inas (Hambruch and Eilers 1936:3, 22, 96; see also Seikel 2016:3). This *lolong* was located on the *tol en loui* (Hill of Loui) in the district of Nett.

Source: Reproduction courtesy Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg (glass negative, 3.1081a / Ham 1081a). © MARKK.

The above quotation captures something of the awe and mystery surrounding Nan Madol, currently Micronesia's only World Heritage site (UNESCO n.d.). It also reveals that German ethnologist Paul Hambruch (Figure 16.2), whose survey and excavations of Nan Madol in 1910 are the subject of this chapter, was only one of many visitors fascinated by these monumental stone structures and the complex social and religious practices associated with them (see also Howes 2019, 2021).

Hambruch's archaeological investigations and documentation of relevant oral traditions were more extensive than any previous work. His three volumes on Pohnpei, published 1932–36, are considered 'the gold standard of ethnography' for 'anthropologists working in Micronesia' today (Petersen 2007:317). His map of the Nan Madol site is still used by archaeologists, 'not just for its completeness, but for the myriad of information it holds with regard to indigenous traditions' (McCoy et al. 2015:6; see also Kirch 2017:173–183; McCoy and Athens 2012). This chapter discusses the ways in which Hambruch's work was shaped by colonialism, Christianity and racial ideology, as well as Indigenous and women's agency.

The colonial context of Hambruch's work

Hambruch spent six months (March–September 1910) on Pohnpei, making observations and assembling collections in the 'four fields' of anthropology: sociocultural anthropology, archaeology, physical anthropology and linguistics (Hambruch 1932:v; see also Balée 2009; Hicks 2013). His work was part of the Hamburg South Seas Expedition of 1908–10. Georg Thilenius, first director of the Museum of Ethnology in Hamburg (now the Museum am Rothenbaum – Cultures and Arts of the World [MARKK]), designed the expedition to serve both scientific and 'practical' (colonial) purposes. 'In the tropics', he pointed out, 'the native is the labourer of the white man'; any decline in Indigenous populations thus posed a threat to the success of colonial endeavours. Information gathered during anthropological investigations could help inform 'practical measures' that would ensure the 'preservation and increase' of Indigenous populations and enable existing social structures to be 'exploited for the white man's purposes' (Thilenius 1904, quoted in Fischer 1981:38). Thilenius intended these practical measures to benefit Germany directly. The expedition focused on areas of the Pacific acquired

as protectorates by the German Empire over the period 1884–1900, including the Bismarck Archipelago, Palau, Nauru and the Caroline Islands (Gründer 2001; Sapper et al. 1920).

Funding came from the Hamburg Scientific Foundation, established in 1907 with donations from Hamburg's well-to-do citizens. The foundation committed over 600,000 marks – then more than six times the average Hamburg house price – to realise Thilenius's vision (Hamburgische Wissenschaftliche Stiftung n.d.). This largesse enabled Thilenius to hire and fit out a steamer exclusively for expedition purposes, pay the wages of a dozen scientists and ship's officers, purchase scientific equipment and the services of 'native assistants', and publish 30 richly illustrated volumes on the expedition's results (Thilenius 1927:33–40). No previous visitor to Nan Madol had benefited from such favourable working conditions.

Expedition members were also supported by the German colonial administration. Hambruch's field journals mention unrest among the Indigenous Pohnpeian population, noting that the intervention of Melanesian police troops from German New Guinea was necessary to 'restore calm' (MARKK Archive, File on Paul Hambruch, SÜD 2.1.3, 19 April 1910, 22 April 1910; see also Fischer 1981:132). But a larger storm was brewing. In October 1910, only a month after Hambruch's departure, the people of Pohnpei's Sokehs district rose up against German rule. They killed the German district commissioner, Gustav Boeder, three other German officials, and several of their Islander assistants. In retaliation, German warships bombarded the Sokehs warriors' mountain stronghold with naval artillery. When the warriors eventually surrendered, the Germans condemned 15 men to public execution by firing squad, and forcibly exiled the entire remaining population of Sokehs to Palau, more than 2,500 km away (Ehrlich 1978b:155–196; Hempenstall 1978:87–118).

Hempenstall (1978:viii, 2018:144) identifies the Sokehs Uprising as 'a colonial trauma' for Germany and 'the most serious threat to imperial domination within Micronesia, perhaps within the whole Pacific'. Its causes were complex. Newer religious rivalries compounded longstanding conflicts between the island's five districts. Some districts sided with the American Protestant missionaries who had established a presence on Pohnpei in 1852; others had converted to Catholicism during the Spanish administration of the island. In 1899, shaken by an earlier uprising that had succeeded in temporarily expelling the entire Spanish colony from Pohnpei, Spain sold the Caroline Islands to Germany for 17 million marks (Hanlon 1988:144–165; Hezel 1983:306–318). German

administrators initially took a relatively sensitive approach, but Boeder's insistence on compulsory labour obligations and fondness for brutal corporal punishment further inflamed tensions (Ehrlich 1978b:155–196; Hempenstall 1978:87–118).

Nan Madol also played a key role in the Sokehs Uprising. A month before the uprising, one of the corners of the stone wall on the islet of Pahnkedira collapsed. According to oral tradition, the wall's corners had been built by master builders from four different districts: Madolenihmw, Kiti, Sokehs and Katau. They founded the stones on spiritual power, and 'said to one another that should any corner crumble, the area which it represented would come upon hard times or be destroyed' (Kohler 2015:219). In September 1910 it was the *keimw en Sokehs*, the Sokehs corner, that collapsed.

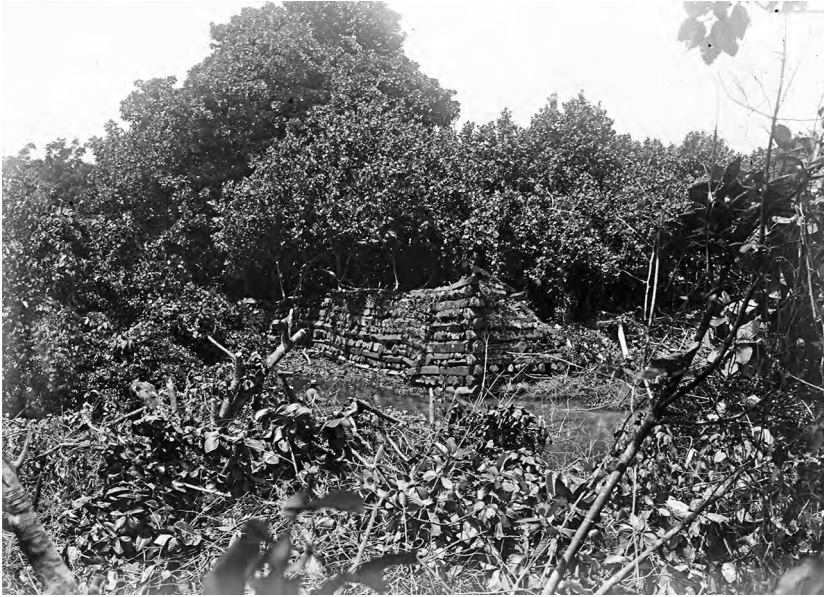


Figure 16.3. The *keimw en Sokehs* (Sokehs corner) of Pahnkedira, seen from Idehd, Nan Madol, Pohnpei, 1910.

Source: Reproduction courtesy Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg (glass negative, 3.1120 / Ham 1120). © MARKK.

The fatalism accompanying the collapse of the *keimw en Sokehs* helped crystallise existing tensions into action. 'The end of Sokehs had been predicted and it merely remained to fulfil the prophecy' (Ehrlich 1978b:164; see also Hempenstall 1978:104). Hambruch was aware of the legend and had actually photographed the *keimw en*

Sokehs before it crumbled (Figure 16.3). Although he noted that after its collapse ‘the people of Pohnpei took it for granted that *Sokehs* must fall’ (Hambruch and Eilers 1936:27), he did not mention the incident in his description of events leading up to the *Sokehs* Uprising. He acknowledged Boeder’s heavy-handed approach, but considered Pohnpei’s American Protestant missionaries the prime culprits, blaming them for fomenting unrest and re-educating ‘amiable natives [...] to become sly, devious and self-interested’ (Hambruch 1932:v).

‘Destroyed [...] by foreign influences’: Hambruch’s view of Pohnpeian culture

Hambruch was convinced that Indigenous politics in Pohnpei prior to the *Sokehs* Uprising ‘bore the stamp [of] the puritanical Boston Mission’ (Hambruch 1932:194 note 1). The prime example, he believed, was Henry Nanpei of the Kiti district. Born into a position of relatively low customary status, Nanpei sought and found ‘an alternative route’ to influence through trade, education, Protestantism and ‘a facility with Western ways’ (Ehrlich 1978a:138, 1978b:77). With a small group of educated Protestant Pohnpeians whose access to customary power was similarly limited, he ‘engaged in a series of activities and initiatives [including] gun-running, agitation against German rule, and a movement to create parliamentary institutions’ (Petersen 2007:325; see also Ehrlich 1978a, 1978b; Hempenstall 1978:75–116).

Recent accounts unanimously describe Nanpei as a man of ‘extraordinary influence’, ‘Pohnpei’s most astute politician and skilled entrepreneur’ (Ehrlich 1978b:14; Petersen 2007:327). All highlight his agency in exploiting the opportunities offered by recent changes to Pohnpeian society, especially the presence of Christian missionaries (for comparable cases see Haddow 2019; Maxwell 2015; Yates 2013). They also interpret his success as evidence, not of the demise of Pohnpei’s traditional chiefly system, but of its inbuilt flexibility: ‘Nanpei was proof of the system adapting to modern changes as it drew him in and employed his talents’ (Ehrlich 1978b:224; see also Petersen 2007:327–328). Hambruch saw the situation differently. He accused the missionaries of encouraging Indigenous Pohnpeian converts to consider themselves ‘the equals of the whites’, and suggested that such beliefs led to unrest and rebellion (Hambruch 1932:191). He considered Nanpei a mere ‘tool’

of the missionaries, and dismissed his efforts to establish parliamentary institutions that would 'represent and organise Pohnpei's interests' as the result of American influence (Hambruch 1932:206–207, 218).

Petersen (2007) argues cogently that a 'colonial narrative' underlay Hambruch's writings. First, Hambruch clearly did not see Indigenous Pohnpeians as equal to 'the whites', capable of self-rule or even – without missionary meddling – interested in it. He was unable to 'understand the Pohnpeians' opposition to German rule in Indigenous Pohnpeian terms' (Petersen 2007:329). Second, his concept of traditional Pohnpeian society was based explicitly on racial hierarchies. Drawing on a highly problematic account by the Irish beachcomber James F. O'Connell (1972 [orig. 1836]), Hambruch claimed that Pohnpei had been occupied prior to European contact by 'two distinctly different races: an olive-coloured race [...] considered to be descended from Malays, and the Oceanic Negroes, who are perhaps the original inhabitants' (Hambruch 1932:366). He added that 'the lighter race constitute[d] the ruling class [and] the Negroes [...] the common people and the serving class' (Hambruch 1932:366). In fact there is no historical, archaeological or linguistic evidence for the existence of anything resembling such 'racial castes' (O'Connell 1972 [orig. 1836]:122 note 19; see also Petersen 2007:319–321). However, similar 'conjectural histor[ies] of inevitable displacement of black-skinned autochthones by more civilized, lighter-skinned immigrants' can be found in the works of numerous earlier European thinkers (Douglas 2008:103; see also Stocking 1986).

Petersen does not mention the term 'salvage anthropology', but it is just as relevant to Hambruch's 'colonial narrative' as his ideas about race. Salvage anthropology took a static view of culture and saw changes to non-European cultures following European contact not as part of an ongoing process of cultural adaptation and transformation, but as a loss of original cultural purity. This widely shared view resulted in an obsession with 'authenticity' and extraordinary efforts to 'rescue as much material culture as possible from the onslaught of European expansion' (Penny 2002:29–34, 51–94; see also Buschmann 2009; Clifford et al. 1987; Schildkrout and Keim 1998; Steinmetz 2004). In keeping with this view, Hambruch believed that Pohnpeian culture 'had been corroded by European and American influences and was rapidly disintegrating' at the time of his visit (Hambruch 1932:v). He was convinced that missionary teachings insisting on 'the equality of all people before God' had destroyed 'the life-giving basis of [Pohnpeian] culture' and that Nanpei's attempts

to gain influence through non-traditional routes were evidence of a toxic destabilisation of the ‘established social order’ (Hambruch 1932:v, 285; see also Petersen 2007).

It is not particularly surprising that Hambruch framed Pohnpeian culture in this way. Thilenius had drawn on salvage anthropology to justify the urgency of the expedition, insisting that cultural anthropologists must ‘observe and document the last phases of an older and distinct culture while it is still alive as a whole’, or, failing that, ‘gather together as many little-changed remnants of the old days as possible’ (Thilenius 1927:12). Hambruch attempted to do exactly this, but regretted that he had been unable to ‘piece together a whole’, as Pohnpei’s ‘superior and vigorous culture [had been] destroyed in a few years by foreign influences’ (Hambruch 1932:v). His earliest publications on Nan Madol even claimed that construction had only ceased in 1852, following the ‘sacrilegious’ intervention of American missionaries (Hambruch 1911:129, 1912:75). In fact all available historical and archaeological evidence suggests that by 1852 Nan Madol was used only occasionally for ceremonial purposes (Athens 1981:10–11; Fisher 1964; Hanlon 1990:106). Construction is now believed to date to between AD 1200 and AD 1600, after which the site was ‘gradually abandoned’ (Köhler 2015:25). In his later work Hambruch omitted these assertions, perhaps convinced by the accounts of earlier visitors who had described the site as uninhabited ruins (Hambruch 1932:99–100, 119).

‘The right informants’: Indigenous agency in Hambruch’s work

Hambruch was largely dismissive of Indigenous agency, yet his archaeological work is full of its traces. Four Pacific Islanders (Figure 16.4) accompanied him during his site survey and excavations at Nan Madol from 15 to 26 August 1910. Tuhen from Buka (now Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea) and Masasion from Nusa (now New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea) came from distant parts of Germany’s Pacific territories. Their presence on Pohnpei, like that of the Melanesian police troops mentioned earlier, speaks to the mobility of Pacific Islanders during the colonial period. Wilhelm Helgenberger, whose name Hambruch also recorded as Auntol en Aru, was the son of a German man and a Pohnpeian woman. As such, he was of interest to Hambruch

as a representative of the ‘excellent material’ available on Pohnpei for ‘the study of the bastard problem’. To Hambruch’s mind, racial and cultural purity went hand in hand; children of mixed parentage were thus further evidence of the ‘advanced process of decomposition’ affecting Pohnpeian society (Hambruch 1932:366, 374, Plate 14). However, these harsh judgements clearly did not deter Hambruch from accepting Wilhelm’s assistance, both during survey and excavation work and as a source of oral traditions (Hambruch and Eilers 1936:424–434).



Figure 16.4. From left to right: Tuhen, Wilhelm (Auntol en Aru), Masasion and Ettekar, Hambruch’s assistants during his visit to Nan Madol.

Source: Reproduction courtesy Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg (glass negative, 3.790 / Ham 790). © MARKK.

The fourth man, Ettekar, whose name Hambruch also recorded as Etekar, Edgar or Edward, came from Pohnpei’s Madolenihmw district. He was an educated Protestant, a close associate of Nanpei’s and a supporter of the movement to create parliamentary institutions (Ehrlich 1978b:4, 77, 85, 137). Although Hambruch disliked these qualities, he was heavily dependent on Ettekar, who acted as translator during his six months on Pohnpei and was thus crucial to the success of virtually all his work. Numerous entries in Hambruch’s field journals bewail Ettekar’s absence for various reasons and the impossibility of working without him (MARKK Archive, File on Paul Hambruch, SÜD 2.1.4, 6 May 1910, 11–12 May 1910, 22–23 May 1910,

26 May–1 June 1910, 3 June 1910). In addition, Ettekar recounted oral traditions and was a key source of information about Pohnpei's recent history, having been an active participant in conflicts between Indigenous Pohnpeians, American missionaries and Spanish colonial administrators (Hambruch 1932:203 note 1, 210, 216–224, 300, Plate 13; Hambruch and Eilers 1936:424–435).

A further key figure was Nalaim en Matolenim (the *nahlaimw* of Madolenihmw, Figure 16.5), whom Hambruch described as the 'proprietor of the ruins' and 'bearer of one of the highest priestly titles' in the Madolenihmw district (Hambruch 1911:129, 1912:75; Hambruch and Eilers 1936:61; see also Ehrlich 1978b:244; Kohler 2015:35, 47, 274). The *nahlaimw* exercised considerable control over Hambruch's activities in Nan Madol. He arranged accommodation for Hambruch and his companions during their stay. He discussed Hambruch's plans with him before any work commenced, and led the visitors on an 'initial viewing' of the site 'for orientation purposes'. He and his chosen associates sat down with Hambruch in the evenings and explained the significance of Nan Madol's major structures (Hambruch 1911:129, 1912:75; Hambruch and Eilers 1936:11–13, 25–27).

Hambruch, naïvely delighted by this assistance, praised the 'intelligent and amiable' *nahlaimw* for 'willingly giving information about what he knew'. He was equally pleased with himself for having gained access to 'the right informants', emphasising that only 'experienced natives of Madolenihmw' were in a position to 'give correct information about the structures' (Hambruch 1911:129, 1912:75; Hambruch and Eilers 1936:61). Reading against the grain, however, it is clear that the *nahlaimw* deliberately chose to guide Hambruch's investigations of Nan Madol. He may have hoped to forestall inappropriate interventions such as Berg's; like others of his generation, he may have wished to ensure 'that Pohnpei's history would not die with [him]' (Petersen 1990:vi). He undoubtedly saw the advantage in directing Hambruch to record those oral traditions most likely to strengthen his own position as 'proprietor' of a sacred and highly significant site (see also Spriggs 2019). Petersen (1990:5) notes that Hambruch's texts represent 'a very localized set of Pohnpei histories' and that informants from other parts of Pohnpei 'offer decidedly different views of what took place in Pohnpei history, why it took place, and why it is significant'. Nan Madol is still a 'contested landscape', and control over it is a matter of ongoing importance to Indigenous Pohnpeians (Petersen 1995; see also Pala 2009; Rilometo 2017).



Figure 16.5. From left to right: Ettekar, Tuhen, Auntol en Aru (all standing), Nos en Matolenim (the *noahs* of Madolenihmw), Nalaim en Matolenim (the *nahlaimw* of Madolenihmw), unidentified individual (all seated).

Temple of Nankieilmwahu, Pahnkedira, Nan Madol, Pohnpei, 1910.

Note: Ettekar stands at the site where the shell trumpets were excavated (Hambruch and Eilers 1936:26–27). Early Western visitors to Pohnpei encountered a complex dual chiefly system of governance which remains in place today. Within the district of Madolenihmw, Hanlon states that *noahs* is the fourth highest title in the first ruling line and *nahlaimw* is the second highest title in the second ruling line, but cautions that ‘variations exist in the rankings of titles among the different chiefdoms and even within a single chiefdom over time’ (Hanlon 1988:212).

Source: Reproduction courtesy Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg (glass negative, 3.1125 / Ham 1125). © MARKK.

Finally, Hambruch’s work was also influenced by women’s agency. Hambruch saw the first of three volumes on Pohnpei through to publication, but died before completing the remaining two. Thilenius entrusted their completion to his former doctoral student Anneliese Eilers, one of the first women to obtain a PhD in ethnology in the German-speaking lands. She sorted, revised and arranged Hambruch’s manuscript material and organised the production of sketches, maps and reproductions of photographs. Without her efforts, Hambruch’s only published work on Nan Madol would be a single four-page article, rather than a 400-plus-page volume containing the site map still used by archaeologists today, numerous illustrations and photographic plates, and the texts of over 400 oral traditions in Pohnpeian and German

(Beer 2007:54–58; Eilers 1936).¹ Uncovering the hidden histories of people like Eilers, Ettekar, Wilhelm, Tuhen, Masasion and the *nahlaimw* of Madolenihmw has been one of the main aims of the Collective Biography of Archaeology in the Pacific Project.

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Objects highlighted in this chapter were on display at the Museum am Rothenbaum – Cultures and Arts of the World from March 2020 to August 2021.

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1 Hambruch (1912) is a republication of Hambruch (1911); it does not include a site map, but is otherwise identical (see also Athens 1981:10).

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