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**SARAWAK MUSEUM
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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK
IN SARAWAK**

with special reference to Niah Caves

by

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INTRODUCTION

Without a university, the staff of the Sarawak Museum are responsible for conducting researches in Sarawak, not only in archaeology, but also in anthropology, in natural history including wildlife conservation and the history of the State.

Archaeology involves the study of the material remains of a people living in a particular period in the past. In order to study this, we need to explore, locate and excavate occupation sites such as house and burial sites. The tools and utensils, the types of food and the manner in which the dead were buried — all these artefacts and materials recovered from a site would assist archaeologists to determine and date the culture and age of the people living on a particular site.

Extensive archaeological work has been carried out in Sarawak since the staff of the Sarawak Museum first began systematic excavation in 1948. Before then, virtually no archaeological work had been attempted anywhere in Borneo. The Sarawak Museum, which was established in 1891, was the only museum in Borneo until 1964.

Several caves in the Bau District, some twenty-two miles inland of Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, were explored and excavated in 1948. Though many shell middens and early local earthenware were found widely distributed, no stone artefacts or other stratified evidence of archaeological importance were encountered or recovered in any of these caves.

The other area is in the Sarawak River Delta around Santubong, some eighteen miles from Kuching. A series of open sites had been extensively excavated in this coastal area since 1948. They are, however,

predominantly protohistoric or metal age sites which produced abundant evidence, indicating that this coastal area served as an important trading centre in Borneo over a period of some five hundred years, from about the 9th century to the 14th century A.D., and during which time, iron smelting was also actively carried out in this part of the island.

In 1967, a stone structure was discovered at Bongkissam (one of the sites in this delta area) for the first time anywhere in the lowlands of Borneo. A silver box with human remains was found in association with one hundred and forty-two gold objects and a number of semi-precious stones within the collapsed structure. This monument had been identified as an ancient Buddhist shrine of 11th-12th century A.D. date.

Up to 1979, despite the high cost of fieldwork and the limited manpower resources in the Museum, we have explored and carried out archaeological work,

primarily on a salvage basis, in many other districts throughout the State.

For instance, in late 1974, we recovered seventy-nine exciting stone tools in association with metal objects, ancient beads and local earthenware on a remote site at Ulu Balleh, above Kapit in the Seventh Division. This is the first open stone-age site ever located in Sarawak, and as far as we know, in the whole island of Borneo.

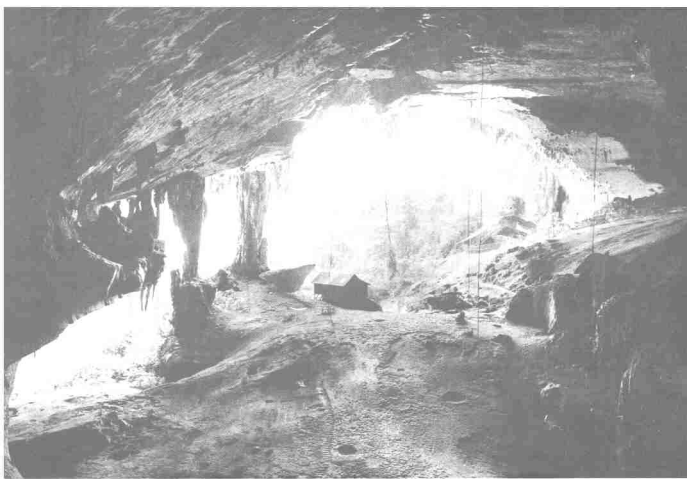
Fieldwork has also been conducted on more than 20 other sites in the First, Second, Third and Fifth Divisions. All these are either house or burial sites, some dating back to the 10th century A.D.

Among the seven prehistoric sites so far located in Sarawak, the Niah Great Cave or West Mouth is the most important one.

THE NIAH CAVES

The Niah Caves are located in a massive island of limestone complex, 1,300 feet high set in the sub-coastal sandstone plains, in the Fourth Division of Sarawak, some ten miles inland from the South China Sea and situated at longitude $113^{\circ} 47'E$, and latitude $3^{\circ} 48'N$.

The limestone formation known as Gunong Subis or Mountain Subis is extraordinary because it is penetrated and honeycombed with caves. The caves contain a wonderful variety of cave creatures including the swiftlets which produce the edible birdsnests for soup and bats whose droppings have served as an important source of fertilizer.



VIEW OF MAIN SITE AT WEST MOUTH: NIAH

With the combination of the physical characteristics, the tremendous life pulsating through the caves day and night plus the extremely important record of human evolution which has been disclosed by archaeological work, the Niah Caves can perhaps be considered among the wonders of the world.

The whole limestone formation and the surrounding forest of over 7,156 acres, have been gazetted as a National Park. The Great Cave is a historical monument.

Millions of years have been involved in the physical development of the Niah Caves. The millions of swiftlets have lived there long before men came into the Niah Caves less than 100,000 years ago.

Archaeological Work in the Caves

The Sarawak Museum began systematic archaeological work in the Caves since 1954. The whole lime-

stone formation had been explored and all the known potential archaeological areas had been excavated. The largest cave, covering some twenty-seven acres, is about 800 feet wide and over 200 feet high in the main cave mouth which has a large undisturbed deposit which is over 150 feet above present sea level.

It is here that the Sarawak Museum has been excavating since 1954.

The West Mouth is one of the most important archaeological cave sites ever found in Southeast Asia. It is unusual and important because of the wide range of stone tools, from the chopper tools which belong to the great chopper-chopping tool development of southern and eastern Asia of the Palaeolithic period (old stone-age) to the refined polished quadrangular adzes of the Neolithic period (new stone-age), all found *in situ*.

At the depth of 96 inches, fragments of a skull were found. These had been reconstructed and dated by experts to about 39,000 years old. The skull is the earliest definite representative of *Homo sapiens* so far found in Southeast Asia.

Found in association with the many stone tools and among the huge quantity of food remains, were ornaments like beads and pendants made of shell and bone, and sharpened bone tools such as needles and pointers.

A substantial quantity of stone-age pottery, simple and plain of the early Neolithic period and decorative of a later date, had also been found at the inner part of the same site. These pottery vessels: double-spouted pots, jars, bowls, etc., were primarily funeral items as they were found in association with many of the 166 graves. Several urns, used for secondary burial, some with simple cord marks and

others with incised patterns and other decorations, had also been discovered here.

Two of the graves were associated with bronze objects (rings, bangles and bells). An intact nephrite (jade) ear-pendant was discovered at the cemetery in 1977. This ear-pendant is strikingly similar to the one (Fox's *The Tabon Caves*, Monograph of National Museum, No. 1, Manila, 1970, Fig. 37d) excavated in the Tabon Caves in the Philippines. Similar ear-pendants had also been found in association with Sahuyuh-Kalanay pottery of 600 B.C. date in present day Vietnam.*

From a series of Carbon-14 dating and also from physical comparisons with similar materials recovered from other sites in neighbouring countries in this region, a tentative summary on the history of human evolution at Niah has been drawn as follows:-

* Personal information from Professor W.G. Solheim II.

By about 40,000 years ago, there were already true men living at Niah. These early people were food gatherers and simple hunters, using very crude tools known as choppers. they probably lived in small groups and already knew the use of fire which they made by striking quartz pebbles together to produce sparks directed to resin;

By about 10,000 B.C. cave men at Niah started to produce more advanced edge-ground pebble tools with sharpened edges which were suitable for cutting. They also started to bury their dead;

By about 4,000 B.C. Niah cave men produced refined stone tools known as round axes which were highly polished;



**DEEP SKULL FROM WEST MOUTH. EARLIEST REPRESENTATIVE
OF HOMO SAPIENS SO FAR FOUND IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.**

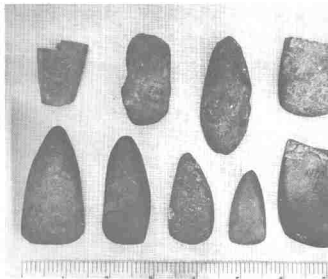
Stone implements found at West Mouth:

A QUADRANGULAR ADZES

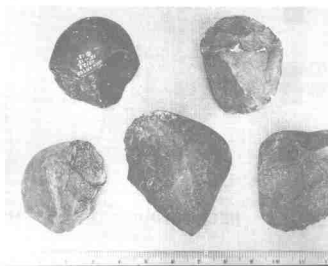
B ROUND AXES

C CHOPPER TOOLS

B



A C





RECONSTRUCTED NEOLITHIC URN FROM WEST MOUTH

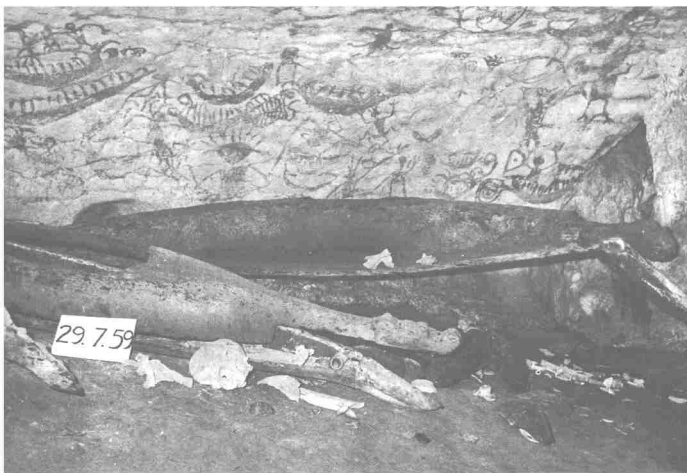
BRONZE FROM NIAH, ABOUT 600 AD

BANGLES

FRAGMENT OF
BRONZE MIRROR

LID OF BOX

BRONZE ARTEFACT
FROM WEST MOUNTAIN



WALL PAINTINGS AND DEATHSHIPS AT KAIN HITAM (PAINTED CAVE)



VISITORS WALKING ON PLANKWALK TO THE CAVES

By probably about 3,000 B.C. they began to produce more refined tools known as quadrangular adzes, which were proportionately cut and polished. They also produced decorative pottery and carried out a rather complicated funeral ritual, first by burying the dead and later transferring the bones

By the early part of about 150 B.C. the Bronze Age Culture spread to Borneo and was later followed by the Metal Age.

Painted Cave

The Painted Cave, in a separate limestone outcrop nearby to the Niah Great Cave, contains wall paintings stretching some 200 feet in length. The paintings were generally drawn in bold and thick strokes and depict an array of boats and spread-eagle dancing human figures. Also found in this

cave were "death-ships", Chinese stonewares and many ancient glass beads. Carbon-14 dating on four "death-ships" gave between 0 and 780 A.D., that is, more than 1,200 years ago.

Because of the important wall-paintings which the Government wants to preserve, genuine visitors are required to apply for written permission from the Curator to go to this cave.

Birdsnests

There is evidence from our excavations that birdsnests trade with China dated back to about one thousand years ago. These birdsnests, produced by the saliva of the swiftlets, are edible nests and produce the famous birdsnests soup.

Every section of the ceiling in the caves where

there are birds roosting is privately owned and only the owner has the right to collect the nests. Collection is done half-yearly (usually in January and in June). The collector climbs up hundreds of feet on a single pole to the cave ceiling, and scrapes off the nests in flickering candlelight where the slightest accident means certain death. This is something you can hardly believe until you have seen it for yourself.

Some 50 piculs of birdsnests are collected in each season. One picul fetches between \$550 and \$750 depending on the grades.

The birdsnests' industry is under the control of the Curator who sees to it that a certain percentage of nests is left to hatch so as to conserve the species.

Guano (natural fertilizer)

Guano — the droppings of the bats and swiftlets — is collected in the Great Cave in prescribed areas. The guano workers are not allowed to spoil the physical beauty of the cave nor damage the archaeological deposits and other perishable amenities.

Despite the competition of artificial fertilizers, guano is still in great demand by pepper and vegetable gardeners at Niah, Miri and Brunei. There are two types of guano, dry (swept) and wet (dug), sold at \$8.50 per *guni* (sack) and \$6.50 per picul respectively.

VISITORS TO THE CAVES

It is now fairly easy to visit the Niah Caves overland. The journey from Miri to Batu Niah, a distance of 68 miles, takes about two hours. From Batu Niah the visitors take a long-boat drive in the Niah River to Pangkalan Lobang (15 minutes), the landing stage to the Caves.

The present link from Pangkalan Lobang to the Great Cave (West Mouth) consists of a series of raised planks over a distance of two-and-a-half miles. The walk in good weather condition takes about forty-five minutes. The forest is low-lying and is subject to constant flooding.

The Great Cave is open to visitors everyday except during a period of three days of *pantaing*.

immediately following the annual *Semah*, usually held in January each year.

Visitors to the caves are required to observe certain regulations among which they will not be permitted to dig, collect or remove any object, either natural or man-made. These regulations can be read on a notice board at the entrance of the West Mouth.

It is dangerous to walk inside the cave on your own. It is easy to get lost, or killed in the many dangerous gullies, some dropping hundreds of feet. Only with a local experienced guide and a torch are you quite safe to move about in the darkness. Visitors are advised to wear soft tennis shoes.

The present amenities can only cater for small organised and physically fit young visitors. Elderly or inactive visitors are strongly advised not to make

the trip under the present circumstances. There are a few hotels at Batu Niah. A Government hostel is also available at Pangkalan Lobang. It can provide accommodation for 16 people with cooking facilities.

Interested visitors are required to apply to the Section Forest Officer, c/o Forestry, Miri, for permission to stay at the hostel. The charge is \$2.50 per person per night.

MAJOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN SARAWAK

First Division

Sungei Ja'ong, Sarawak River Delta

Rock carvings (petroglyphs), associated with gold objects and ceramics (T'ang Dynasty). Fieldwork completed.

Bongkissam, Sarawak River Delta

Gold objects and semi-precious stones in raised platform (ancient Buddhist ritual deposit). Other associated finds are ceramics of T'ang and Sung Dynasties. Further work is possible.

Bukit Maras near Santubong

Hill top site with ancient Guptama Buddha figure, associated with heads and elephant figures and several pieces of soft pottery probably of local made for domestic or funeral uses but finished and shaped often in distinctly Indian style. Fieldwork completed.

Gua Sireh, Bau District

Cave site associated with burials and wall paintings, neolithic stone implements, porcelains of 18th-19th Century and food remains. Further work remains to be done.

Gua Bungoh, Bau District

Cave site associated with blue and white Chinese ware and local pottery. Fieldwork partially completed.

Gedong, Simunjan District

Possibly an open burial site. Though no human bone has been recovered, many intact ceramics of T'ang and Sung periods have been recovered between 6'' and 24'' Fieldwork completed.

Tanjong Sangidam Hilir, 4 miles from Gedong up-river, Serian District.

Associated with Sung and blue and white ceramics and local pottery. Fieldwork completed.

Gua Kedadam Cave, Kpg. Retoh, Serian District.

Associated with neolithic stone implements. Further work is needed.

Gua Langup near Kpg. Tai and Kpg. Chupak, Serian District.

Associated with neolithic stone implements. Further work is needed.

Ensika, Ulu Sebangau.

Open site of Sung ceramics with local pottery. Fieldwork partially completed.

Bukit Sandong near Balai Ringgin, Serian District.

Associated with Sung and blue and white ceramics and local pottery. Fieldwork completed.

Second Division

Saratok

Open site on hill top, associated with T'ang and Sung ceramics (some pieces intact). Fieldwork completed.

Kelaka near Kabong District

Open site associated with Sung, blue and white, Annamese and Sawankhalok wares. Fieldwork will continue.

Sekadang Lingga

Associated with blue and white as well as Sung ceramics and local pottery. Fieldwork completed.

Third Division**Kanowit School**

Open burial site associated with 18th and 19th Centuries ceramics. Fieldwork completed.

Song

Secondary jar burial associated with Ming ceramics and glass beads. Fieldwork completed.

Fouth Division

West Mouth, Niah

Most important stonage site discovered in Borneo. Carbon-14 dating on charcoal at 100'' = 39,600 Bp (= 1,000 years). Skull at 96'' = 39,000 years old. Associated finds are stone implements and food remains. Further inside the same cave mouth is a neolithic burial site where over 166 burials had been recovered, associated with stone implements and pottery. Two burials carried very early metal association. Requires further

fieldwork.

Kain Hitam ("The Painted Cave")

A separate cave high in a limestone island. 200 feet of wall paintings and floor littered with "death ships" with an abundance of bones, beads, porcelain and stone-ware sherds, etc. Evidently this was the centre of elaborate prehistoric funerary rites, related to those still extant in the Niah River (as filmed). C-14 dates on four "death ships" gave between 0 and 780 A.D.

Lobang Angin ("Wind Mouth")

A shelf of c. 400 square feet high on cliff edge, fully occupied before the late Stone Age and back into the palaeolithic; excavations, half-done so far, to be completed.

Gan Kira ("Traders Cave")

A small rock-shelf near sea level, evidently a neolithic trading camp, which includes an apparent murder incident and scattered sub-surface skeletons (some beheaded). Fully excavated down to limestone bedrock (fossil oyster *O. gigas*).

Lobang Tulang ("Caves of Bones")

Cliff grottos full of jar and other secondary burials, mainly of the early birdsnests trade with China period (900 A.D. to 1200 A.D.); bronze and other finds; completed.

Samti

Small rock shelter in an isolated corner of the Great Cave formation, which also held "death-ships" remains.

Juragan

A very high cave up a barely accessible cliff. About 600 square feet, crammed with primary burials of small-bodied adults and urn burials of infants and some women. Very simple material culture, perhaps of a more primitive group (Punans?) integrated economically with the Great Cave people. The deposit had been entirely removed, owing to danger of guano-extraction and difficulty of control at this point.

Upusing, Niah

A late burial cave associated with earthenware, ceramics, glass beads, metal objects and food remains. Fieldwork completed.

Sekaloh, Niah

Ancient Melanau burials associated with fine pottery

and food remains. Fieldwork completed.

Cave at Kakus, Ulu Tatau

Primary and secondary burial caves before the advent of metal, glass and porcelain. Requires further investigation and fieldwork.

Sorang Caves (Batu Puteh and Lotong Ringen) in low hills near Tatau c. 50 miles south of Niah.

Cave paintings (quite unlike the Painted Cave and Gua Sireh) associated with stone tools (Pre-Neolithic). Requires further fieldwork.

Lobang Kudih, Bekong

Burial cave associated with Ming ceramics and beads. Fieldwork to be completed.

Fifth Division

Sungei Baya

Rock shelter site associated with many Ming type jars with dragon designs on them, and many 18th-19th Century lidded jars, plus beads and one very big Yi Hsing ware jar. Fieldwork partially completed.

Batu Malong-along, Ulu Limbang River

Burial site associated with Annamese bowls and plates and Chinese lidded box. Fieldwork partially completed.

Long Semadoh

There are five burial sites around Long Semadoh. Each of them is associated with Ming ceramics as

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well as some lidded jars of 18th-19th Century, and many different types of beads. There are two stone carvings (Batu Narit) which probably go back as far as the 17th-18th Century. There are four stone mounds found in Long Semadoh District, one at Long Rapuak and three at Long Lapukan. These stone mounds are believed to be used for burying valuable properties. Further exploration is required.

Seventh Division

Sungei Putai Baleh.

Open site where 79 Neolithic adzes have been recovered in association with metal objects and local pottery. Requires further fieldwork.

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