

REPORT ON A VISIT TO ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES NEAR MEDAN,
SUMATRA UTARA, JULY 1975

In November 1974 my attention was drawn by Mr Bernard Moloney¹ to the work of Mr E. Edwards McKinnon in recording and attempting to preserve some newly discovered shell middens north of Medan in Sumatra.

In June 1975 I met Mr McKinnon while he was on a visit to the U.K. and discussed these plans more with him and at the same time arranged to visit Medan in July after his return and on my way to undertake fieldwork in South Sulawesi. This was made between 8th-10th July, of which the 9th was spent visiting two of the three shell middens located by McKinnon, as well as the important proto-historic settlement of Kota Cina (see below). On the 10th September I discussed the significance of these sites and my interest in them with Pak E.K. Siahaan, Kepala Kantor Pembinaan Permuseuman (Dep. P. dan K., Propinsi Sumatera Utara), and in the afternoon visited the impressive benteng of Deli Tua, where sherds were fairly abundant in recently cultivated gardens, especially outside the perimeter of the benteng, indicating that here also was a monument and occupation site which, on the basis of a high proportion of blue and white and Thai wares was later in age than Kota Cina but equally worthy of serious investigation by the methods of field archaeology.

Kota Cina

Preliminary accounts of this site have already been published by McKinnon and Tengku Luckman Sinar in the *Sumatra Research Bulletin* III (1) 1973 and IV (1) 1974 and I can only add to these reports an impression of its importance, based on my short visit. The site is situated on a silted up estuary channel of the Deli River, 2 km from Labuhan Deli, up river from the present port of Medan at Belawan. The name of the present kampung clearly preserves a memory of its old importance as a trading settlement with Chinese connections, and this is substantiated by the archaeological finds.

¹ Research Student in the Department of Geography,
University of Hull

The area is now planted with coconuts, cassava and domestic garden plots, and since there are few above-surface features, the extent of the ancient settlement is difficult to judge. McKinnon's plan (1974:64) indicates surface finds of sherds and walls over an area roughly 800 m x 400 m and he mentions an occupation area of 25 hectares, which seems reasonable, though yet unproven.

Domestic wells and a drainage ditch provide an indication of the rather uniform soil stratigraphy. Three layers are generally visible over a depth of 70 cm - 1.20 m. From the surface 1) dark brown soil with scattered sherds and shells. This appears to have accumulated subsequent to the main occupation and the incorporated cultural debris may have been brought up by gardening 2) a black layer representing the principal occupation with sherds, coins, glass and bivalve shells abundant in some areas 3) a yellow-brown layer, apparently sterile of cultural remains. McKinnon and Luckman mention seven localities (which they refer to as 'sites') within the general area of Kota Cina at which concentrations of finds or structural evidence was noted by them, and all of these were visited. In addition, newly dug gardens were examined, and the impression conveyed in the preliminary reports of circumscribed areas, prolific in different combinations of cultural remains (glazed stoneware, local earthenware, shell, Chinese coins, glass, dressed granite, and baked bricks) was confirmed during our visit. Apart from finds of bronze or copper casting spillage, and a fine bronze temple lamp and chain made by villagers just prior to our visit, I have nothing substantial to add to the list published by McKinnon and Luckman, but a few comments on their significance may be in order.

The evidence of structures and statuary (bronze and stone) indicates a pre-Muslim settlement with a temple or monastery, and the very abundant Chinese ceramics and coins suggest that a foreign trading community was present at least from the 11th to the mid-13th centuries AD.

The abundant and varied finds listed by McKinnon and Luckman show that this was a rich and important community, perhaps the principal one on the north Sumatran coast during its period of activity, and the relative lack of disturbance is due in part to the fortunate chance that most of the imported ceramics come from houses or godowns rather than from burials, and thus are broken. The high water table results in rather good preservation of organic materials and provides

an excellent opportunity to identify some of the Sumatran exports which we know so far only from Chinese customs lists, and other external historical sources. In terms of its extent, wealth of finds, and conditions of preservation, Kota Cina is a site of very great importance which requires thorough investigation by a well-funded team of field archaeologists. Such work needs to be carried out in close collaboration with specialists in the fields of geomorphology, plant, animal and molluscan ecology as well as in the more traditional archaeological skills of ceramic analysis, art history, epigraphy, stratigraphy and settlement analysis. Because of the favourable conditions for the preservation of organic remains, any future field team working at Kota Cina must include a skilled conservationist equipped to deal with sizable wooden objects, as well as domestic utensils, food refuse, ropes and other small plant products which have been found on the site during casual gardening activities.

The Shell Middens

After leaving Kota Cina we travelled north east to visit two recently discovered prehistoric shell middens which McKinnon (1975:45) had earlier listed in a publication in which he discusses the current state of seven middens in the Medan area; the two we visited on 9th July were those referred to by McKinnon at Kampong Sukjadi Pasar III, and at Kampong Baru Pasar VIII, both in Kecamatan Hinai in Langkat District, about 40 km north of Medan. These are two, out of a group of three middens along the west bank of the Wampu which had not been reported earlier, owing to the fact that they are buried by 1-2 metres of alluvium. With no surface indications, their discovery came by the chance digging of a domestic well. The value of the buried shells was immediately appreciated however, and within a short time commercial excavation was under way.

At the time of our visit only one of the three sites, K. Sukajadi Pasar III, was being actively exploited, but this gave us a good opportunity to assess the archaeological potential of the site, for at K. Baru P. VIII work had stopped, thanks to the intervention of the Kepala Kantor Pembinaan Permuseuman, Medan, and the partly excavated midden was full of water up to about 2 m below the country surface.

McKinnon reported that at the time of his visit in March 1975, one pit approximately 14 m across had been

dug to about 5m. By July, this hole was flooded and a second one was being worked, separated by a baulk (dangerously unstable and leaking) about 1-2 m wide. The new pit was roughly circular, some 20 m across, and shells were still being brought up from under water at about 7 m below the level of the surrounding countryside. Two pumps kept the water at this level, but it was difficult to estimate whether the base of the midden had been reached.

The midden structure comprised interleaving lenses of shell and mud, with occasional, more continuous layers of soil or (?) ash reflecting perhaps temporary phases of local abandonment. Substantial root holes were visible immediately below the ancient midden surface indicating the lowland forest, now cleared from the area, had covered the midden after its final abandonment. Flaked pebble tools, including classic "Sumatralith" types were seen occasionally in sections, together with the bones of medium-sized and small land mammals. Shells were mostly estuarine bivalves, probably *Meretrix* sp. with some oysters and cockles. Discrete hearth lenses also occurred, and McKinnon reports that the partial remains of three humans were found during the commercial excavation. The location of one of these he was able to photograph in August 1974. All skeletal remains recovered from the labourers were sent by him to Dr T. Jacob, University of Gaja Mada, Yogyakarta. Fragments of wood have also been reported from the waterlogged levels, and the base of a large deer antler came from the water level in Sukjadi Pasar III during our visit. These finds confirm the impression given by the Dutch colonial accounts of excellent preservation of certain organic materials at least in the lower levels of the shell middens; conditions which are rather uncommon on prehistoric sites of the equatorial tropics, and accentuate their importance for the better interpretation of prehistoric economic patterns.

The short visit permitted only a general impression to be formed concerning the antiquity of these sites, comparisons between the various locations and those recorded previously, and the problems to be faced in any proper investigation. Shell middens associated with historic period occupation are known in the Malacca Straits area as at Kuala Selensing in Malaya, and at some Sumatran shell middens local earthenwares and occasional imported glazed ceramics have been collected.

The absence of any pottery, and other artifacts or materials which can be clearly dated to the past millennium, indicates that the two sites visited have a considerable antiquity, and can truly be considered as prehistoric. Furthermore, these middens are now buried by one to two metres of alluvial soil, with the lower three to four metres of cultural deposit below the present water table. Where the midden base at Sukujadi P. III lies in relationship to present sea level could not be measured, but it would seem a possibility that this midden was started before the rising seas of the late Pleistocene period reached their present level and an antiquity of, very roughly, 10,000 - 5000 years ago is provisionally suggested for the site.

Observations at Sukujadi confirm broadly the interpretation of the Sumatran middens given by van Heekeren (1972:85-92) and with the discovery of new sites it is an opportune moment to recall his concluding remarks (*ibid.*, 92) ... "We hope that in the near future more excavations of shell mounds, if any are left, will be taken up again. It is a pressing need that excavations by present-day standards and palynological research should be carried out, and there is plenty of charcoal in the mounds to allow proper dating".

Thanks to the watchfulness of Mr E. McKinnon, we know that not all the Sumatran middens were destroyed, and due to the timely intervention of Pak Siahaan, at least some of these sites have been preserved.

I.C. Glover
Institute of Archaeology
London

Reference

- van Heekeren, H.R. 1972 *The Stone Age of Indonesia* (2nd edition). The Hague

SURVEY AND EXCAVATION IN THE MAROS DISTRICT, SOUTH SULAWESI,
INDONESIA: THE 1975 FIELD SEASON

Introduction and Acknowledgements