

THE EXCAVATIONS AT NIAH, SARAWAK, IN 1954, 1957, AND 1958

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The following paper was received by the IPPA Secretary in February 1991. It is printed here in memory of Michael Tweedie, and contains his recollections of the research of Tom Harrison at Niah, Sarawak.

I was present at the excavations in the Great Cave at Niah in 1954 and 1957, conducted by the late Tom Harrison and would like to record a summary of how I regard the archaeological results, which seem to be neglected in the recent literature.

We selected a somewhat mound-shaped area just under the overhang of the cave mouth, and it proved to be a habitation site dating back well into Pleistocene times. At shallow depth we found abundant shells, evidently of molluscs used for food, and human burials possibly of Neolithic age. These did not match the Neolithic of Peninsular Malaysia with which I am familiar; no quadrangular adzes were found. Under this was a continuous layer of cave deposit between 1 and 2 metres thick containing much ash and charcoal. The only artefacts found were small struck flakes of brown quartzite, which were distributed through the deposit. Over 60 of these were recovered and I suppose they are in the Museum in Kuching. On my second visit in 1957 I took samples of charcoal from the top and bottom of this habitation layer and these yielded carbon 14 dates of 19,600 and 32,700 BP respectively. No human skeletal remains were found. To the best of my recollection the deposit beneath this habitation layer was barren and devoid of ash, 20 or 30 cm of this barren deposit being exposed at the bottom of the pit. At a later date in 1958 a piece of charcoal recovered from the cave was dated to about 40,000 BP.

In 1958, when I had retired from Malaysia, Tom Harrison excavated deeper and found stone artefacts that he described as "Palaeolithic". I never saw these; I would expect them to be in the Sarawak Museum. He also found a human skull, and charcoal samples from its vicinity indicated a date of nearly 40,000 BP. It was examined by D.R. Brothwell who described it as that of a boy of about 15 with some resemblance to the Tasmanian Aborigines. This skull is currently in the Sarawak Museum.

My assessment of the archaeology is as follows. The recent prehistoric ("Neolithic") material was not excavated or reported on in a way to provide a typology or chronology of its period. The 1-2 metre thick stratum radiocarbon dated between 32,700 and 19,600 BP is a different matter. The artefacts, ash and charcoal provide evidence of continuous human presence in the cave over this period, but no emphasis was laid on these quite early *Homo sapiens* dates in reports on the site.

As to the "Niah Boy" skull, I was not there in 1958 when it was found and can say nothing about its stratigraphical relationship with the positively sampled and dated Pleistocene habitation layer. I also cannot say from observation whether the charcoal, dated to nearly 40,000 BP, was genuinely associated with the skull. I don't see why it should not have been. In any case, the presence of charcoal so dated is evidence of human habitation of the cave at that time, skull or no skull; this point has never been made with any emphasis so far as I know.

Early papers on the Niah excavations are summarised and listed in T. Harrison, *The prehistory of Borneo, Asian Perspectives* 13 (1970):17-45.

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