

BRIEF HISTORY OF PREHISTORY IN SARAWAK

Before 1948 virtually no archaeological work had been attempted in Sarawak or anywhere else in Borneo. The Sarawak Museum which was built in 1891 was the only established museum in Borneo until 1964. The staff of the Sarawak Museum first began systematic excavation in two localities in the First Division of Sarawak in 1948.

Several caves in the Bau District, some 22 miles inland of Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, were investigated and excavated. 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 18 miles from Kuching. A series of open sites had been extensively excavated in this coastal area since 1948. They are, however, predominantly proto-historic or Metal Age sites which produced abundant evidence indicating that this coastal area served as an important trading centre in Sarawak over a period of some 500 years, from about the 9th century to the 14th century AD, during which time iron-smelting was actively carried out.

In the last phase of fieldwork at Bongkissam, that is one of the sites in 1967, a stone structure was discovered for the first time anywhere in the lowlands of Borneo. The structure contained a silver box with human remains and was found in association with 142 gold objects and a number of semi-precious stones. This structure had been identified as an ancient Buddhist shrine of the 11th-12th century AD.

It was not until 1954 that a small museum staff party went and explored the Niah Great Caves, some 400 miles north of Kuching, in the Fourth Division. The result of this preliminary exploration proved a great success. So from 1957 on large-scale expeditions were conducted to these caves every year until 1967 when fieldwork was suspended at the West Mouth.

Fieldwork was also carried out in other caves in the Bintulu and Serian Districts during this period. Up to 1975, despite the high cost of fieldwork and the limited manpower resources in the Museum, we have explored

and carried out archaeological work in many other districts throughout the State. For instance, in late 1974 we recovered 79 exciting stone tools in association with metal objects, ancient beads and local earthenware on a site at Ulu Balleh, above Kapit. 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 1st, 2nd, 3rd and the 5th Divisions (Gedong, Kabong, Kanowit, Limbang, Lawas). All these are either house or burial sites, some dating back to the 10th century AD.

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 limestone complex 1300 feet high, set in the sub-coastal sandstone plains 10 miles inland from the China Sea and situated at longitude 113°47'E and at latitude 3°48'N, in the Fourth Division. The limestone formation consists of several caves, the largest one, covering about 27 acres, is the Great Cave.

This huge cave is some 200 feet wide and over 100 feet high in the main cave mouth which has a large deposit, well over 150 feet above present sea level. This cave mouth is so light that it is free of guano and therefore remained untouched. It is here that the Museum had been continuously excavating since 1954, up to 1967.

The West Mouth consists of two parts. The outer part was used for regular *habitation* in the earlier phases of the Stone Age (Palaeolithic-Mesolithic) and for *frequentation* in the Neolithic by which time Stone Age men were already building dwellings in the surrounding rain forest.

Further inside the cave the floor was used as a cemetery. A total of 166 were explored in this part of the cave mouth in an area of 3900 square feet. These burials occurred between 6" and 24" (below surface) and are all Neolithic. Buried with the bodies were stone tools and pottery.

The West Mouth is perhaps unique because it gives *in situ* evidence of a succession of phases, from the Neolithic (New Stone Age) through Mesolithic (transitional)

into the Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age); all these phases were fairly well documented by artefacts. The Bronze Age was, however, only slightly represented by finds found *in situ*.

At a depth of 96" fragments of a skull were recovered. These fragments have been reconstructed and proved to be 40,000 years old; this is the earliest representative of *Homo sapiens* in this part of the world.

Because of the undisturbed conditions prevailing in the site the human deposits *in situ* remained well preserved without becoming fossilized. Human and food remains went back to 40,000 years to the depth of about 100". Any remains below this level disintegrated and the sequence was based on stone implements.

Lucas Chin

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN SARAWAK SINCE 1971

Sarawak covers an area of 48,250 square miles in northwest Borneo and is the largest state in Malaysia. The country is generally rugged and topographically complex with swamps, many rivers and forested areas, most of which remain to be explored.

More active archaeological research has been conducted in Sarawak than in Brunei, Sabah and Kalimantan, all in the island of Borneo. However, like many developing countries, we are faced with the problems of manpower and finance. As a result, we have not been able to continue fieldwork at the most important stone-age site at the Niah Great Cave, the Tantric and other major metal-age sites in the Sarawak River Delta along the coast in the First Division.

Efforts are being made to recruit and train more personnel to take charge of this discipline. The limited manpower resource of the Sarawak Museum has been primarily involved on new sites which have been discovered.

Since 1971, eleven new sites have been discovered. But only three had been completely excavated. The others, including three cave sites in the First Division, have