

## RECENT RESEARCH AT KUALA SELINSING, PERAK

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### INTRODUCTION

A major objective of the latest archaeological research in Kuala Selinsing has been to conduct a survey based on aerial photographic information in order to locate all the sites of the region on topographic maps. The original information given by I.H.N. Evans (1928a, 1928b, 1932) about the location of his excavation site was very vague. The survey was also aimed at confirming Paul Wheatley's (1966:197) statement that some six or so apparently similar sites had been revealed in Matang by aerial photography.

The new information recovered will be used to plan strategies for further archaeological research in Kuala Selinsing. The chronological sequence of the Evans site is still very obscure and stratigraphic observations are complicated by its location in tidal mud with a fluctuating water table. It is therefore imperative that the current excavation programme seeks data on site locations and ecology, artifactual contents and chronology. Previous views on the Kuala Selinsing sites have suffered due to use of artifact assemblages from inadequately dated stratigraphic units.

### Site Location

The recent research has once again brought to light the exciting sites hidden deep within the mangrove swamps of Pulau Kelumpang (Fig. 1). These sites today are known only to a few crabcatchers, charcoal wood-cutters and fishermen who frequent the Kuala Selinsing and Kuala Kelumpang. To them the sites are known simply as *pulau buluh* (bamboo island) or *pulau kulit kerang* (shell island). They refer to the sites as islands, even though in reality they are dry and comparatively high mounds within the mangrove swamps of Pulau Kelumpang.

I.H.N. Evans, the first person to conduct archaeological excavations on Pulau Kelumpang in 1932, named the sites as Tanjong Rawa, Kuala Selinsing, Perak. This name does not occur on maps and in order to find the sites again we had to get help from fishermen in Kuala Selinsing. The main landmark was a tall forest tree which stands above the mangroves and can be seen from several kilometres away. The distance from

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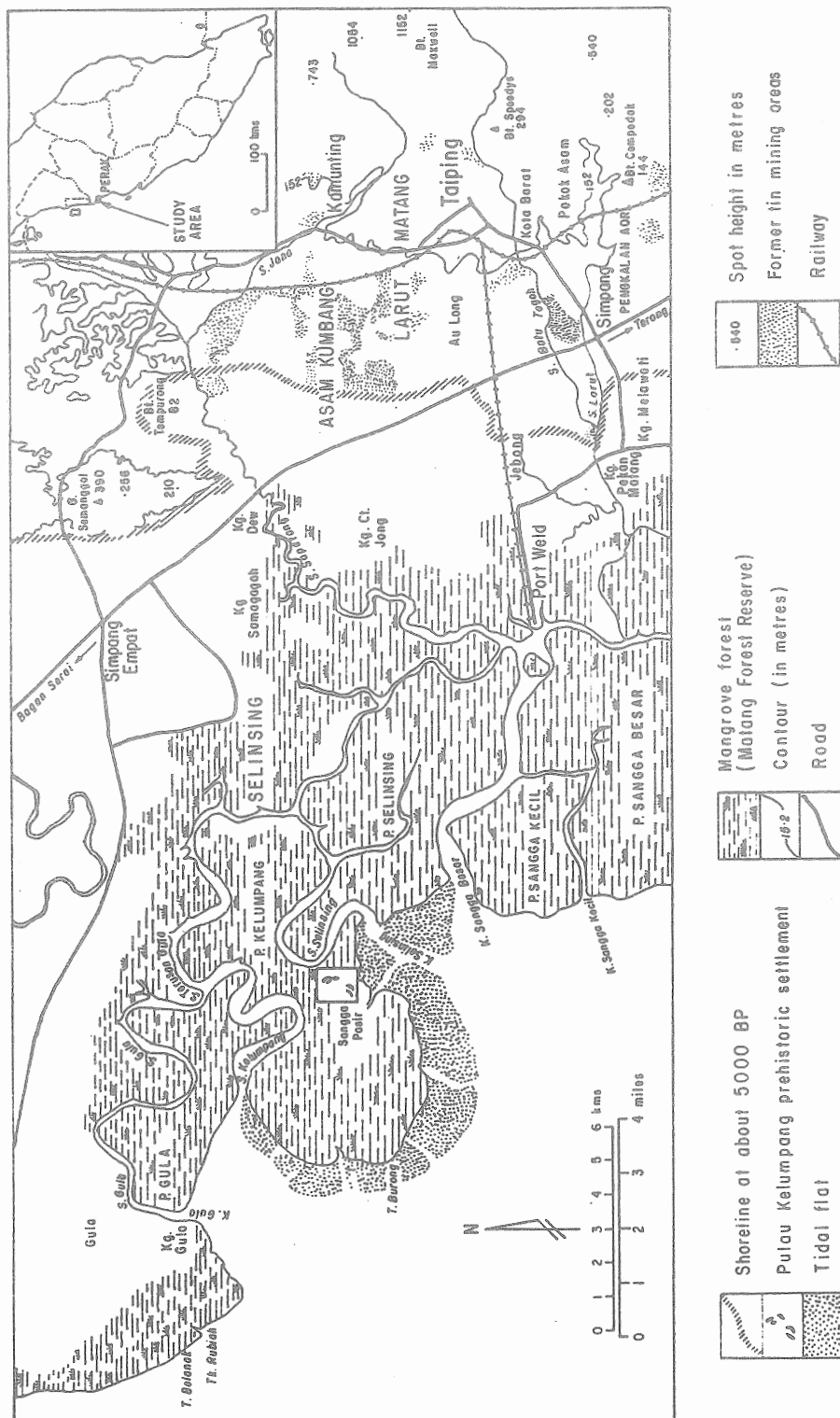


FIGURE 1: THE LOCATION OF PULAU KELUMPANG

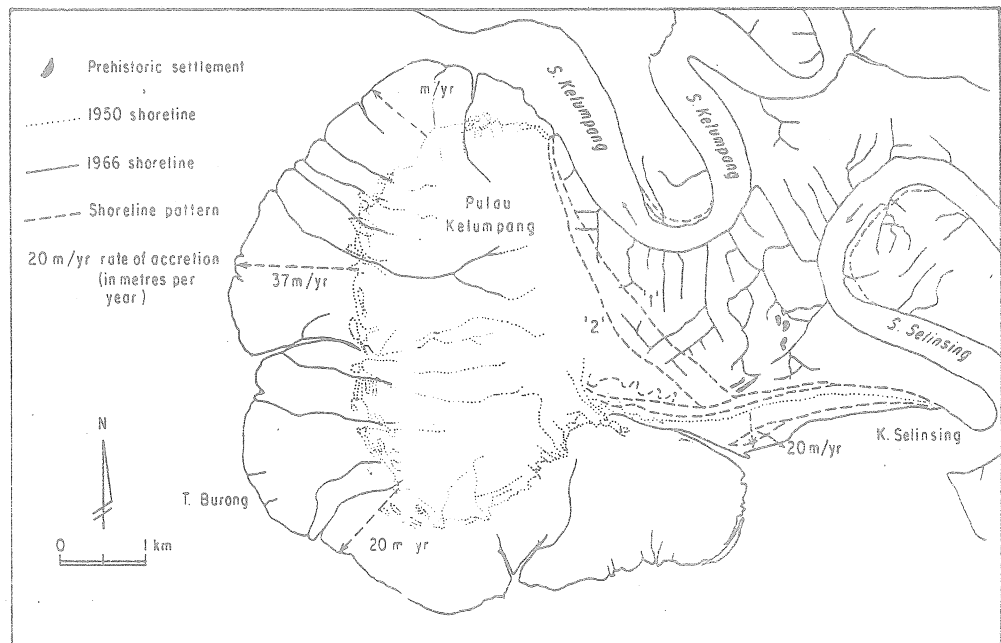


FIGURE 2: PULAU KELUMPANG, DRAWN FROM THE 1950 AND 1966 AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS

Port Sepetang (Port Weld) is about 20 km via the Selinsing River. The shortest route is via Kampong Selinsing and the next best starting point is Kuala Gula.

According to aerial photographs there are two areas in Pulau Kelumpang where archaeological sites are located (Figs 2,3). This was confirmed by field survey in early 1988. The best-known area is located about 600-700 metres from the bank of the Selinsing River near its mouth, on the bank of a small creek called Sungai Buluh. Even though fishermen and crabcatchers use this creek to cross Pulau Kelumpang from the Selinsing to the Kelumpang River or vice versa, very few ever stopped on the sites or were even aware that the low mounds of earth and shells were once the site of a prosperous fishing settlement. Altogether there are five such mounds; four along the bank of the creek and a fifth set behind them.

Another lesser known area is set deep inside the mangroves and about one kilometre away from the first site group. Here we found three mounds of earth and shell which we named Kelumpang 6, 7 and 8 to arrive at a total number of eight mounds in the two areas. The site excavated by Evans was Kelumpang 7, and traces of his excavation trenches still survive.

The settlements on Pulau Kelumpang were probably built over the soft mudflats on the fringe of the mangrove forest. Houses of wood and thatch were placed on stilts. The mounds of earth and shells (Fig. 5) were the result of the accumulation of refuse cast out from the dwellings. During and after the occupation the mangrove forest has gradually

crept seawards with the advance of the land due to the constant deposit of detritus by the Selinsing and Kelumpang Rivers, and this forest now completely surrounds the sites.

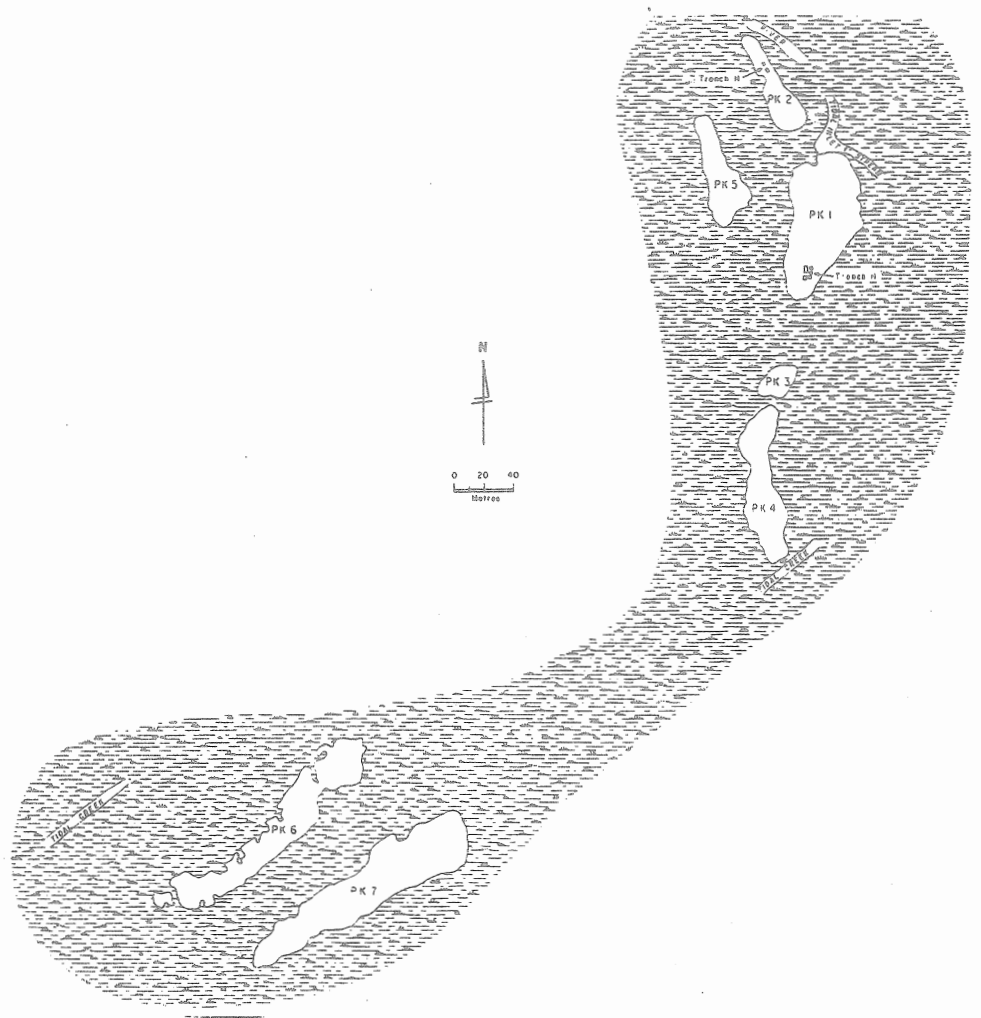


FIGURE 3: THE LOCATIONS OF THE PULAU KELUMPANG ARCHAEOLOGICAL MOUNDS

The mounds vary in size and the longest is Kelumpang 6 at about 280 metres. We believe that originally there were 6 settlement mounds but due to erosion Kelumpang 6 and 8 have since become separated out of a single forebear.

#### Changing Shorelines

The 1950 and 1966 aerial photographs show the western end of Kalumpang Island. According to Kamaludin (1991:87) this headland expanded seawards between these dates

at a rate of 11-37 metres per year, so that within 16 years no less than 5.45 km<sup>2</sup> of new mangrove land emerged. Tin mining activities in the Larut Valley have been responsible for this.

In the 1950 aerial photograph it is possible to see the old shorelines ('1' and '2' in Fig. 2) much closer to the archaeological sites. It is possible that the settlements were originally built right on the Selinsing estuary and rivermouth shorelines, as reconstructed in Figure 4.

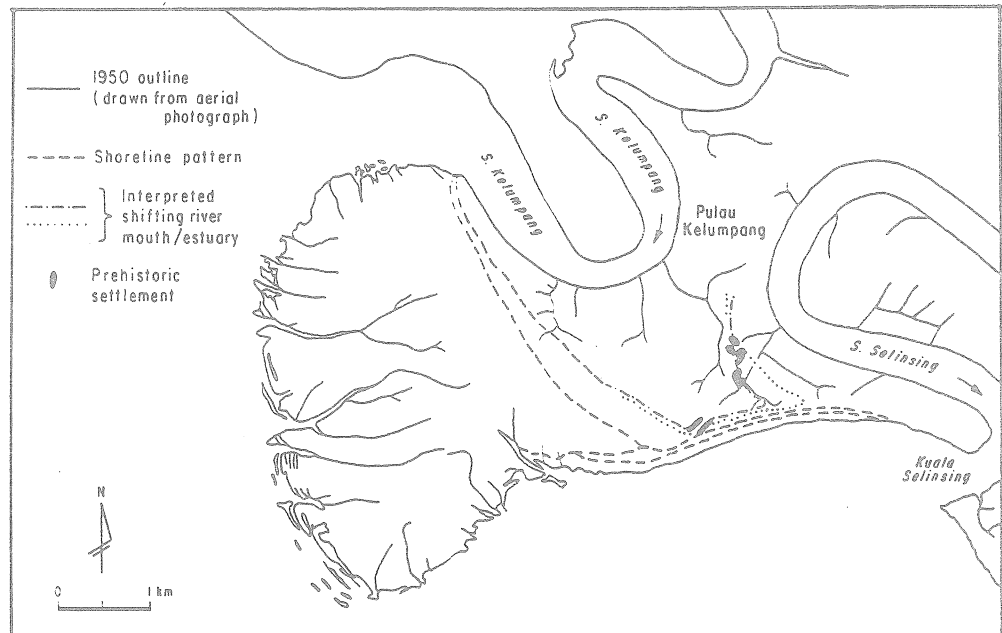


FIGURE 4: ORIGINAL LOCATIONS OF THE PULAU KELUMPANG SITES WITH RESPECT TO THE SELINSING RIVER AND ESTUARY

#### PREVIOUS EXCAVATIONS AND RESEARCH AT KUALA SELINSING

The earliest archaeological research in the Pulau Kelumpang area began nearly sixty years ago under I.H.N. Evans. Two months of excavation in 1932 followed several short visits from 1927 onwards, prompted by B.W.F. Barnard's report in May 1924 to the Federated Malay States Museums of the discovery of skulls, beads and blue glass (Evans 1932:80). Evans suggested that the archaeological finds from Tanjung Rawa belonged to a single early Indian settlement dating to the 6th to 9th centuries AD, even though the finds ranged from a carnelian Pallava seal to Chinese or Siamese celadons.

In April 1955 G. de G. Sieveking conducted a second excavation at Kuala Selinsing alongside Evans' cuttings (Sieveking 1955:201). His aim was to determine the stratigraphy

of the site and thus to establish the relationships of the artifacts found during Evans' excavations. He recovered a remarkable total of more than 3,000 glass and polished stone beads from an eighteen-inch layer. On the evidence of the published photographs the trenches he dug, like those of Evans, were quite extensive. He suggested that the beads were mixed with pottery of all periods, much being a coarse modern undecorated red ware, presumably from the Malay village still on the site at the time of the 1910-16 chain survey of the islands in the Port Weld Estuary. This statement is hard to reconcile with the results of the latest research at the site.

Sieveking's observations of the stratigraphy were quite generalised. He found that between one and two feet below the surface the nature of the deposit changed from broken shells to a suspension of whole *Cardium* shells in mangrove mud. This second layer, according to Sieveking, was between two and four feet thick. He considered the decorated pottery from his excavations to have an Indian origin, and between 4 and 4.5 feet in depth he found several sherds similar to those found with the Pontian boat. His third layer lay between five and six feet below the surface and below the water table; it contained large compact banks of *Cardium* shell, three dug-out canoes, skeletal remains and burial goods such as beads and pottery.

His observations of the stratigraphy led him to suggest that three phases of occupation could be recognised in the history of the site. The first was the proto-Malay or proto-Indonesian phase associated with stoneware, boat burials and opaque glass beads similar to those found in the cist graves in Perak. The second phase was associated with the decorated coarse stoneware which he associated with Indian wares. The Pontian type of pottery was associated with the final phase of the first period. The celadons were from the surface and represented the third phase. Sieveking also believed that some of the beads were actually manufactured in Tanjung Rawa (Sieveking 1955:205).

Another scholar to comment on the finds from Kuala Selinsing was H.G. Quaritch Wales (1940:54). His opinion was that the site belonged to Hinduized Indonesian settlers who lived there during the 6th to 12th centuries AD. Alastair Lamb (1964:100-9), in his reconstruction of the evolution of various types of port on the Malay Peninsula, suggested that Kuala Selinsing was a "subsidiary entrepôt". B.A.V. Peacock (1979:201) believed that the chronology of the site was still obscure in view of the complications caused by the fluctuating water table and suggested that Sieveking's stratigraphic observations be treated with caution. Both Peacock and Lamb saw Kuala Selinsing as contemporary with the earliest Indianized entrepôts on the peninsula (Peacock 1979:212). Lamb stated that among the roles of the Selinsing settlement was the collection of hinterland products for trade (Lamb 1964:108-109). Such products could have included ingots of tin and forest resins.

#### THE RECENT EXCAVATIONS

The excavation strategy in Kuala Selinsing was to try to make as many cuttings as possible on every mound within the limited time available. In order to ensure that small finds were not lost every bucket of soil was wet-sieved. The excavations were supported by the

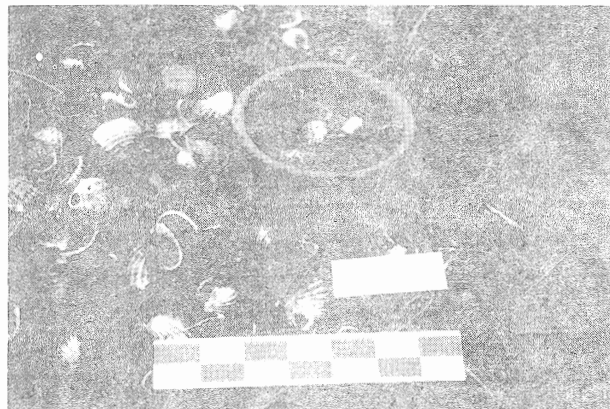
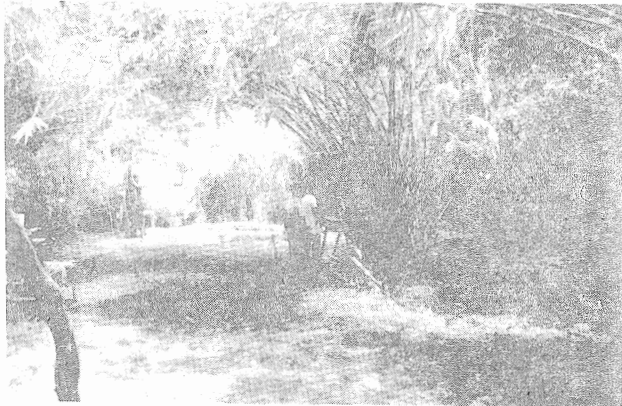


FIGURE 5: TOP TO BOTTOM: KELUMPANG 1, KELUMPANG 5, ANADARA SHELLS AND BURIAL POTTERY IN KELUMPANG 5

geomorphological team from the Malaysian Department of Geology in Ipoh, led by Kamaludin Hassan. A number of borings were also made to collect pollen samples.

On Kelumpang 1, six 4 x 4 m excavation squares were dug. The location chosen lay farthest from the landing in the least disturbed part of the mound. The excavations here took place in December 1987 for one month and continued in May and August 1989. Digging stopped when the tops of the ancient house posts in each trench were exposed because they were already below the water table at a depth of about 2.5 m. However, the sterile base of the site has not yet been reached and future planning must include the use of a water pump. It is hoped that during the next period of excavation we will be able to go below the water table.

On Kelumpang 2, two 2 x 2 m trenches were dug at the northern tip of the mound, about 30 m from the bank of the river, at a point where the mound is about 10 m wide. Here it was possible to expose the house posts and lift them from the trench. Digging stopped at 2.8 m owing to the presence of ground water. One 2 x 2 m trench was also opened on Kelumpang 3, and two 2 x 2 m trenches plus one 1 x 2 m trench on Kelumpang 4. Finally, one 3 x 2 m trench was dug on Kelumpang 6. The surfaces of both Kelumpang 3 and 4 are very much lower than Kelumpang 1 and 2. Before work began on mounds 2, 3, 4 and 5, walk-ways were built to join them and another was built from the bank of the creek to Kelumpang 6. The depths of the trenches on Kelumpang 3 and 4 were about 1.80 m, but on Kelumpang 5 it was possible to dig down to about 2.8 m. On Kelumpang 6 the digging had to stop at only 1.5 m. These differences in depth reflect the different heights of the mounds in relation to the water table.

The stratigraphy of the sites is not very straight-forward. Preliminary observations indicate that the site as a whole was continuously settled, according to radiocarbon dating, from about 200 BC to the 10th century AD. Since the deepest radiocarbon sample does not represent the lowest level of occupation the base of the site could be much older than 200 BC.

Stratigraphically, there are seven to eight periods of occupation at Kelumpang 1, 2 and 5, whereas at Kelumpang 3, 4, 6 and 7 the stratigraphy suggests that there are only four to five. The evidence from the archaeological finds also suggests that links were maintained between Kuala Selinsing and the Indianized settlements in the Bujang Valley. The discovery of glazed ware in Kelumpang 1, 4, 5 and 6, and especially the blue glazed Iran/Iraq Middle Eastern wares found at site 6, establish that these links probably occurred between the sixth and tenth centuries AD. At this time the main settlement in the Bujang Valley was located in the Kampung Mas area (Nik Hassan Shuhaimi and Othman Yatim 1990).

#### Archaeological Finds

All the Kuala Selinsing mounds are scattered with shells of *Anadara granosa*. Amongst them occur bones, sherds, stone artifacts, metal objects and beads. Similar materials were produced by the excavations and the most numerous artifacts are beads. Most beads found in Kuala Selinsing were made from semi-precious gemstones. Analyses by Dr Tan



Teong Hing (Tan and Samsuddin 1990) of thirteen beads from Kelumpang 1 indicate that the materials used included beryl, sodalite, moldavite, plasma, jasper, aventurine, quartz cats eye and analicima. Such beads occur right through the stratigraphy and out-number those of glass.

The beads were cut, ground and polished, although much of the lapidary work was rather crude. Many of these gemstones, apart from jasper, do not occur in the Malay Peninsula. Beryl, plasma, aventurine and sodalite have been mined for centuries in India, particularly in Karnataka, Rajasthan and Kashmir, and Iran and Iraq are well known for producing sodalite and aventurine. The Chinese used plasma and aventurine as jade substitutes. The excavations also unearthed beads of agate, carnelian and rock crystal, although these were not as common as the other types of gemstone mentioned.

It is not possible to say at the moment what percentage of glass beads occur in comparison with those of gemstone. There are, however, a few prominent types, the most striking being a yellow spheroidal bead recovered from Kelumpang 4 at a depth of about 140 cm. A striped glass bead was also recovered in Kelumpang 6. Beads made from fishbones have also been recovered from all the sites and shell beads are quite common, of spherical, disc and lozenge shapes. In one trench at Kelumpang 1 there was a single find of 102 shells of *Cypraea moneta*, each with its top removed for threading on a string. These could be the money cowries also mentioned by Evans. The spherical and lozenge types of shell bead were probably made from *Tridacna* while the discs types could have been made from *Celena testudinaria*.

A number of bracelets cut from the spires of *Trochus niloticus* shells were found, together with unfinished specimens. A few bracelets were probably made from *Tridacna squamosa*, as suggested by Evans (1928b). Several spoons made from shells of the oyster *Crassostrea gigas* were also found in Kelumpang 1 and 6.

Artifacts of metal include ear-pendants made from tin, like those illustrated by Evans (1932:105, Pl. XXXIV nos 1, 2). Some were found in association with burials at Kelumpang 1 and 5. Tin rings were recovered, but it is possible also that some were made of lead, as suggested by Evans for Tanjong Rawa (Evans 1932:105). Tests have to be done before it is possible to identify the material of these artifacts conclusively. A few badly corroded bronze objects have also been found, together with iron slag.

Objects of horn, bone and ivory have also been found, including a possible but unfinished knife handle made from a deer horn from Kelumpang 6. Bone points, some possibly identifiable as hair-pins, have been found in association with burials, particularly near the skulls.

Rocks of various shapes and sizes must be classified as artifacts in view of the fact that they were specially brought to the settlement. According to preliminary analysis (Tan and Samsuddin 1990:19), most probably came from the sedimentary Semanggol Formation in Perak, north of Taiping and east of Pulau Kelumpang. Another provenance of rock artifacts could have been the Bujang Valley. The most common of these stone artifacts are slabs with numerous deep and parallel grooves which could have been used for finishing shell bracelets, as suggested by Evans. Large numbers of sharpening stones

occur, as well as pestle-like specimens. It is quite common to find unshaped stones with burials, laid either beside the bodies or over their middle parts.

Several types of earthenware pottery sherds have been recovered from all the mounds of Pulau Kelumpang. It is impossible to discuss in detail their distributions and types in this paper since detailed analysis is still in progress. Altogether four whole pots were recovered during the excavations, three being from burials. Among the prominent kinds of incised decoration are chevron, wave and scroll patterns, but there are many linear, geometric and punctate designs as well. Impressed sherds are common, with surface patterns including cord, net, mat and basket marking, and carved linear, crossed and curvilinear designs. Grooves occur around many vessel necks. However, most vessels were plain. It is still uncertain whether the wares were hand or wheel made. Fabrics are generally quite coarse, with colours ranging from buff to orange via various shades of brown. Various forms of lids and spouts were also found.

Imported glazed wares are rare and seem to date not later than the tenth century AD. This assumption is based specifically on the dark-green-glazed sherds found in Kelumpang 6, which might have come from Iran or Iraq. These sherds have a very fine white paste and a thick blue shiny glaze which covers both interiors and exteriors. Similar sherds have been found in Sungai Mas in the Bujang Valley and at Takuapa in southern Thailand. Other sherds have a grey glaze which appear to be of the Yueh type of stoneware. However, none of the celadon types mentioned by Evans (1932:102-3) were found in our excavations.

Some of the shells obtained during the 1988 and 1989 excavations have been identified by Dr G.W.H. Davison from the Department of Zoology, University Kebangsaan Malaysia (Davison 1990), and by Mrs Solene Morris from the British Museum. There are altogether 25 identifiable species. The commonest is the bivalve *Anadara granosa*. Other species such as *Placuna placenta*, *Meretrix* and *Geloina* were eaten also but less often. These food molluscs were mostly obtained from the mudflats around the site, whereas the thick-shelled gastropods used for ornaments were probably imported from rocky shore environments. The excavations produced few mangrove species (Davison 1990:26).

Perhaps the most interesting finds recovered from the excavations came from the lowest waterlogged levels. These earliest levels contain materials discarded from the pile dwellings into the tidal shallows beneath. Preservation of organic remains is generally good. In Kelumpang 1, 2 and 5 we unearthed coconut shells, bottle gourds, segments of split bamboo, areca nuts, and charred kindling left from cooking fires. The teeth of two adults buried in Kelumpang were stained by betel chewing.

Working in these lower waterlogged layers in Kelumpang 2, 5 and 6 the excavators also unearthed sections of adzed and sewn planks, stumps of house posts, and fragments of what appears to have been the hull of a dugout canoe. Another interesting find was a perfectly preserved mat, presumably made from bamboo, together with pieces of *Pandanus* matting. Some traces of matting were found impressed on wood.

Thick lenses of brownish peat, sandwiched between layers of waterlogged mud, contained bones of various types of animals and hundreds of rice husks. If botanical

analysis confirms this preliminary observation then these peaty layers may contain the earliest physical evidence of rice so far found in the Malay Peninsula. In Kelumpang 6 the rice husks came to light when digging at a depth of 100 cm. It is not surprising, therefore, that at Kelumpang 5 the excavators unearthed a very exciting artifact in the form of a wooden rice mortar, hollowed out of a tree trunk and still in good condition.

The excavations have also unearthed eleven burials, but none so far have been found in canoes. The burials came from three levels; the youngest from about 40 to 50 cm below the surface, the next group from about 80 cm, and the oldest from about 160 cm. Five of these burials were found in Kelumpang 1, four in Kelumpang 5 and one each from Kelumpang 3 and 4. Those from Kelumpang 3 and 4 were under the water table.

The skeletons from the upper burials were much damaged in contrast to those found in the lower levels. All appear to have been lying on their backs with heads facing upwards, seemingly fully extended. Some of the burials had grave goods comprising beads, pottery, stone ornaments and food. A child burial in Kelumpang 1 had two pots placed at its head, one apparently a food container and the other a water jug. Normally the burial pots were placed at the head, but sometimes broken pottery was also scattered over the body, together with beads. Stone artifacts were placed at the side or on top of the body. Graves appear to have been shallow.

#### CONCLUSION

The results of the archaeological research in Kuala Selinsing, when final analysis is completed, should be of great value for the study of the later prehistoric culture of Peninsular Malaysia. These data will be used to trace both the internal developments and the external affinities of the society, using a comparative approach. On the basis of the preliminary observations presented here it appears that the maritime people of Kuala Selinsing were not Hindu, as had been suggested by Evans (1932:84). The Pallava seal and the gold ring with Visnu on Garuda are insufficient evidence to suggest that the people were followers of the Hindu religion. All other evidence, especially the burial practices, points to animism as the main belief system. Presumably the Pallava seal and the ring denoted the manifestation of chieftainship. Even though the settlement was in contact with the Indianized population of the Bujang Valley, the people of Kuala Selinsing were still ideologically in a pre-Indianized stage.

It is also apparent that the settlement did not come to a violent end. This assumption is based on the fact that the dead were properly buried, even during the latest phase. Economic and geographical factors must have influenced the people to move to another area when the site was finally abandoned.

From the radiocarbon dates available so far from Kelumpang 1 it is possible to suggest that the settlement was in use between 200 BC and about AD 1000. The people were seafarers according to the presence of the bones of deep sea fish in the sites. Contact with an inland rice-growing people also took place, as evidenced by the many rice husks. A final observation is that the first settlers on Kelumpang Island were a metal-using people who were at the same stage of cultural development as the makers of the cist graves in

Changkat Menteri and other sites in Perak. Most probably these two groups were in contact with each other.

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