THE SARAWAK MUSEUM JOURNAL

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The Sarawak Museum Journal
Vol. XLIV No. 65
December 1993

ISSN: 0375-3050
E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Ipoi Datan and Bellwood. (1993). Recent Research at Gua Sireh (Serian) and Lubang Angin (Gunung Mulu National Park), Sarawak. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XLIV (65): 93-112

RECENT RESEARCH AT GUA SIREH (SERIAN) AND LUBANG ANGIN (GUNUNG MULU NATIONAL PARK), SARAWAK*

Ipoi Datan and Peter Bellwood

ABSTRACT

This paper presentssome of the main findings of archaeological excavation conducted in Sarawak in the caves of Gua Sireh in Serian District and Lubang Angin in the Gunung Mulu National Park. Excavations at both sites were undertaken by staff of the Sarawak Museum under the co-supervision of the two writers between July and August 1989.

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This paper presents some of the main findings of archaeological excavation conducted in Sarawak in the caves of Gua Sireh in Serian District and Lubang Angin in the Gunung Mulu National Park. Excavations at both sites were undertaken by staff of the Sarawak Museum under the co-supervision of the two writers between July and August 1989.

GUA SIREH

Gua Sireh is a limestone cave located about 55 kilometres southeast of Kuching, in the Serian District of the Samarahan Division in western Sarawak (Figure 1). It is situated about 60 metres above the rice fields which flank the base of the limestone massif of Gunung Nambi. As will be seen, the fact that good rice-growing terrain occurs close to the site is of great interest in light of the finding there of ancient rice remains. The cave has two chambers which are referred to in this report as the main and small chambers (Figure 2).

Gua Sireh was first excavated by Tom Harrisson and Wilhelm G. Solheim II in 1959, but the materials recovered were never fully analysed or published (see Solheim 1983: 38). All are still stored in the Sarawak Museum, together with those from two other unpublished test excavations carried out by Zuraina Majid in 1977 and by Edmund Kurui in 1980. There was therefore a need to conduct limited further excavation in order to provide an essential stratigraphic key with which to interpret the earlier findings[1].

The 1989 excavations in Gua Sireh were conducted in two phases: the first from 20 to 24 July and the second from 9 to 18 August 1989. Two small trenches were laid out. One, with a total area of 3.75 m^2, was laid out in one of the unexcavated strips between the still-open but much eroded Harrisson/ Solheim trenches of 1959. Because no written records of this earlier excavation survived we were not able to decipher the original grid code and the 1989 trench was simply referred to as EFG8, based on a temporary grid of our own. Trench EFG8 was located in the middle of the main chamber. The second trench, designated 89A (1.5 x 1.5 m), was located closer to the cave mouth and outside the Harrisson/Solheim excavation area (Figure 2). Excavations were carried out in arbitrary levels of 5 cm as the natural layers were not easily visible during the actual process of excavation. The contents of postholes were removed whenever they were encountered. The layers were much easier to see in section, however, and are described below. A 2 mm mesh (mosquito netting) was used to sieve all the excavated materials, the deposits being fairly dry, especially in EFG8.

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*This article is reprinted from The Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Assn. No. 10, 1991: 386-405 (P. Bellwood ed., *Indo-Pacific Prehistory 1990*, Vol 1.)

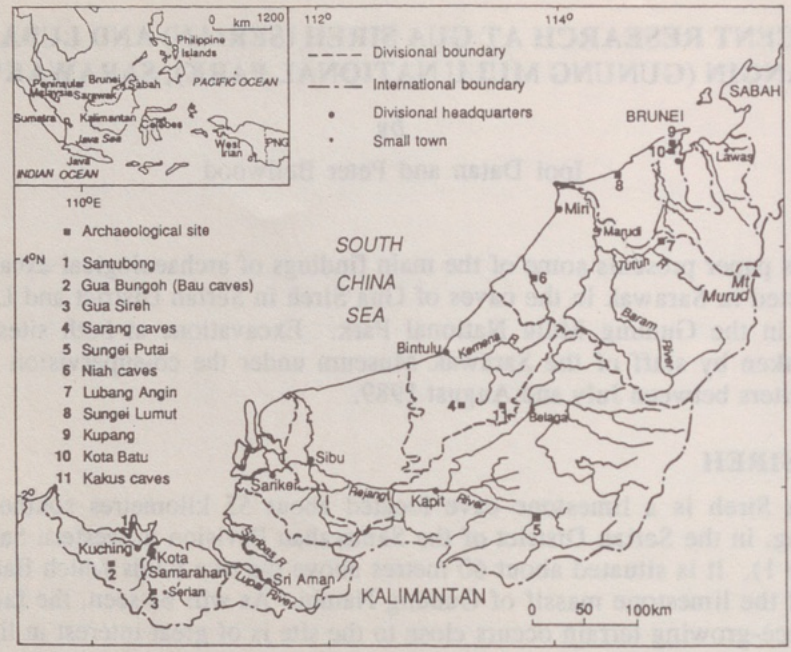

Figure 1: Arhaeological sites of Sarawak and Brunei

Stratigraphy of trenches EFG8 and 89A

Trenches E8, F8 and G8 (EFG8) have a maximum of nine cultural layers through about 60 cm of deposit, some being lenses of limited extent (Figure 3; not all the lenses were represented in the illustrated section). The basic soil matrices of these layers are probably a mixture of guano and other sediments which have worked down from higher portions of the main cave passage to the south. Postholes were encountered in EFG8 cut from all layers from 2 down to 9. The functions of these postholes are hard to identify in the absence of coherent patterns. However, the quantity of human bone in this area of the cave (see below) suggests that they might have formed the supports for funerary biers, perhaps for wooden coffins, although none exist in the cave today. Other possibilities include domestic sleeping platforms.

There are essentially six layers in trench 89A, as illustrated in Figure 4. Cultural deposits here extend down for about one metre; the trench is closer to the cave mouth than EFG8 and has presumably been subjected to a greater inflow of fine sediment from the drip-line. The soil profile in 89A lacked the ash lenses and postholes which were so common in EFG8.

Dating

Five conventional radiocarbon samples from trench EFG8 and one sample from trench 89A were submitted initially to the ANU Radiocarbon Laboratory.