



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXXXIV No. 105

December 2021



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Kimwah, J. and Sauffi, M. S. (2021). Death Ship Images in Painted Cave of Niah, Sarawak. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXXXIV (105) : 77-98

Death Ship Images in Painted Cave of Niah, Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

This article on the findings of research obtained from Painted Cave which is believed to be a Neolithic settlement. The main focus of this research is to identify prehistoric images that have been generated about 3,000 years ago. Among the images that have been identified are images of humans, animals, abstract forms and most interesting are the images of the death ship that became the main icon in the entire wall of the cave painting. The Sarawak Museum has a limited record of prehistoric images found in the Painted Cave. The objective of this research is to record prehistoric images and produce illustrative images as a more detailed record of these prehistoric images, especially death ship images. The survey method was used in collecting primary data from the field. Secondary data were obtained from the museum as the closest reference material to this research. Interviews were also used in obtaining information from experts among museum officers. Observation and photography methods are used to record images digitally. The main purpose of this image is to create a more proper organized and detailed documentation. This research found that the prehistoric image of a death ship is symbolic of the transition of the spirits of the dead to the realm of death. This research proves that prehistoric societies have adapted and this belief is the practice of the early beliefs of the Neolithic society at that time. This effort is the first step towards conservation. Hence, this finding can be an early effort for conservation work in the future.

Keywords: Painted cave, cave painting, *death ship*, prehistoric images

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JABATAN MUZIUM SARAWAK

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INTRODUCTION

The cave painting is the sketch of the ideas by the prehistoric society in the Painted Cave. The discussion of this idea is the result of research observers and perceptions that are also reinforced by research as a result of reading, especially through reference materials, journals, articles, press releases, exhibition catalogues and existing multimedia materials. Most of the images taken are the initial records that have been collected in the collection of archives of the Sarawak Museum.

Every creation of artwork is inseparable from society. In fact, the process of appreciation of the art itself involves the work of artists and art observers who shape the community today. Hence, certain features in society related to culture and religion can be identified through artworks. This can be done through research in understanding the themes and motifs presented (Mahamood, 1995).

Hasan (2003) explains the existence of cave paintings can mostly be traced based on charcoal sketches and scratches of hematite media that illustrate to us the knowledge and experience of ancient

humans. Talking about the role and importance of cave painting in Malaysia is a revelation of a cultural tradition of prehistoric society where the beginning of the artistic aspects that are the catalyst for the next generation.

Painted Cave is located separately in the formation of a small limestone from the Niah Cave Complex. Barbara Harrison was deeply touched by its peaceful ancient paintings on cave walls and boat-shaped coffins on the cave floor, when she discovered the cave in 1958 (Harrison, 1964). About 100 small red-sized red paintings are available on cave walls throughout 50 meters. It is painted using haematite and dye material from plants.

This cave painting consists of boat, human, geometric and some abstract images. Previous researchers Hoerman (2016) discovered that the cave paintings and boat coffins were likely to tell the story of the dead sail to the other world which mean their afterlife journey. Consequently, detailed research needs to be carried out on the image of this cave painting. As the cave paintings are highly sensitive and easily damaged, the area has been fenced off by the Sarawak Museum for conservation purposes (Figure 1).

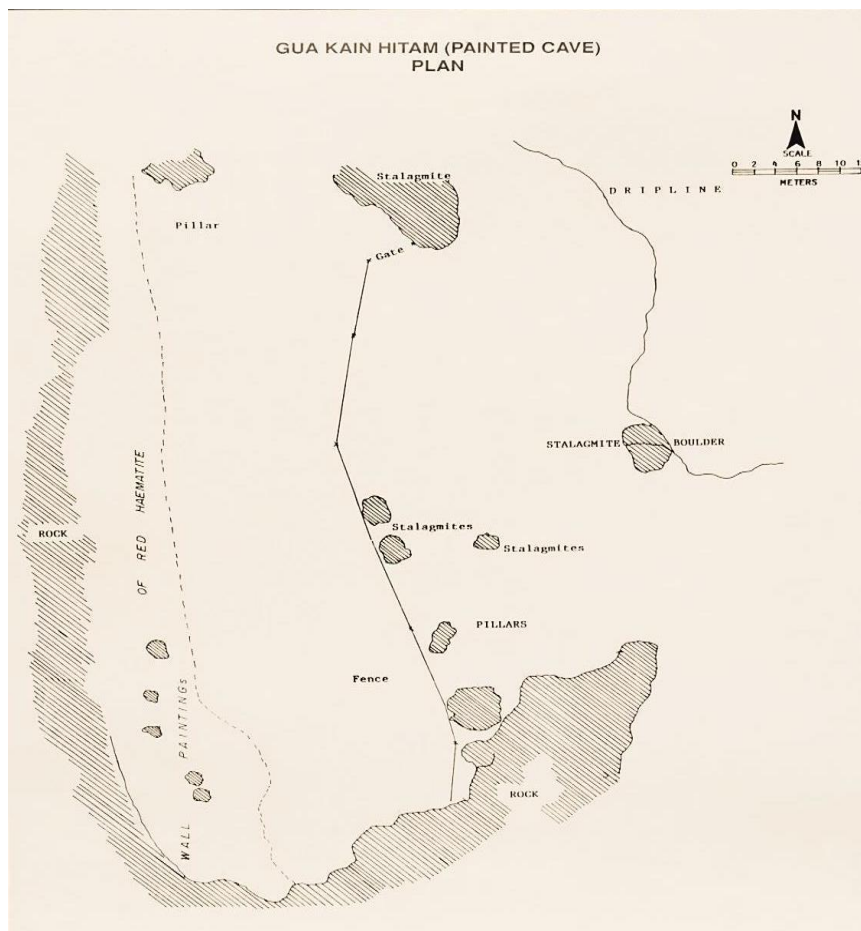


Figure 1: Map of cave painting and the fence position in the Painted Cave. (Source: Datan and Sauffi, 2016)