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A DESCRIPTION AND CLASSIFICATION OF EARTHENWARE SHERDS EXCAVATED FROM GUA TUPAK, BAU, SARAWAK

Nicholas Gani and Stephen Chia

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological excavations were carried out Gua Tupak, Bau, Sarawak by a research team from the Centre for Global Archaeological Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang and the Sarawak Museum Department, Kuching over a period of three weeks in February and March 2008. These excavations formed the basis of the lead author's postgraduate study and a preliminary report on the excavations had been published (Gani et al., 2009). Briefly, the excavations yielded various types of artefacts such as shell remains, animal bones, earthenwares, stonewares and stone artefacts (Fig. 1). This article, however, discusses only the classification and the distributions of earthenware sherds excavated from Gua Tupak¹.



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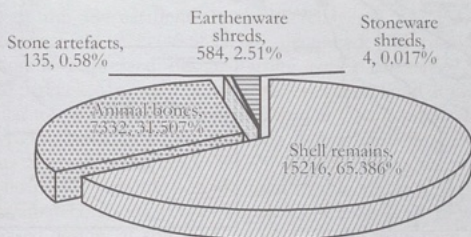


Fig. 1: The artefact assemblage recovered from Gua Tupak.

EXCAVATIONS AT GUA TUPAK

Gua Tupak (lat. N. 1° 24' 20.5", long. E. 110° 11' 9.1", 56 metres above sea level) is a limestone cave situated in the Gunung Jambusan limestone hill, Bau District, Kuching, Sarawak, about 35 km southwest

of Kuching city (Fig. 2). Gua Tupak was previously excavated by the Sarawak Museum in 1950, but no report was published (Wilford, 1964: 74). This cave has a main floor area which measures 22 m x 40 m in size, and a ceiling height of 7 to 10 metres.

During the excavations at Gua Tupak, a total of five 2 x 1 metre trenches were excavated, namely trenches A, B and C in the main cave area and trenches Y and Z at the nearby rockshelter area (Fig. 3). The excavations were conducted in spits or arbitrary layers of 10 cm. The excavations recovered earthenware sherds from deposition layers that were radiocarbon dated to $1,190 \pm 40$ B.P. at the rockshelter area and from 270 ± 50 B.P. to 170 ± 40 B.P. at the main cave area (Gani *et al.*, 2009; Gani, 2010).

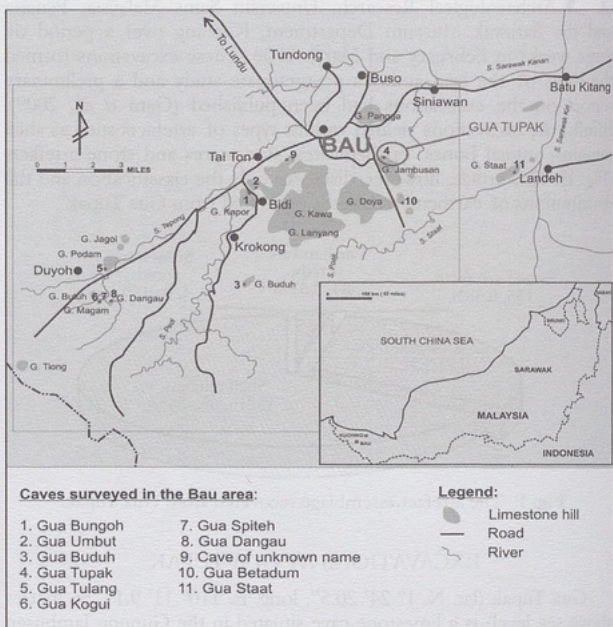


Fig. 2: Gua Tupak, and other caves surveyed in Bau, Sarawak.

CLASSIFICATION OF EARTHENWARE SHERDS

In total, 584 earthenware sherds, weighing about two kilogrammes, were recovered from the excavations at Gua Tupak. This represents 2.51% of the total artefact assemblage at Gua Tupak. The earthenware sherds were transported to Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang in padded boxes and were analysed at the laboratory of the Centre for Global Archaeological Research. Results of the analyses have determined that the majority (90.07%) of the earthenware sherds are body sherds (Table 1). Rim sherds make up 8.73% of the total sherd assemblage, while 1.2% consists of neck parts.

Table 1: Frequencies of body, rim and neck sherds at Gua Tupak.

Vessel Part	Frequency (N)	W (g)	% (by N)
Body	526	1738.7	90.07
Rim	51	251.5	8.73
Neck	7	27.6	1.20
Total	584	2017.8	100

The earthenware sherds can be classified into three main categories; decoration types, rim forms and vessel forms.

Decoration Types

Out of the 584 earthenware sherds recovered, 312 (53.42%) are plain sherds, while 272 (46.58%) are decorated. The main form of decoration is impressed designs, using either carved or basketry-wrapped paddles. Most of the impressed designs found at Gua Tupak are similar to the impressed designs found at Gua Bungoh (Harrison and Tweedie, 1951: 173-175), Tanjong Kubor (Solheim, 1965: 7-10) and Gua Sireh (Datan, 1993: 36-37). Therefore, for the most part, similar terms for classification are used in this article to describe the earthenware decorations at Gua Tupak. Only a single sherd was found with incised design, at spit 4 of trench C in the main cave area. The various decoration types are mainly found on body sherds as described below.

Plain (N 268, 50.95%)

Plain or undecorated earthenware sherds are the most common at Gua Tupak. However, it is possible that some of the plain sherds were undecorated parts of decorated vessels.

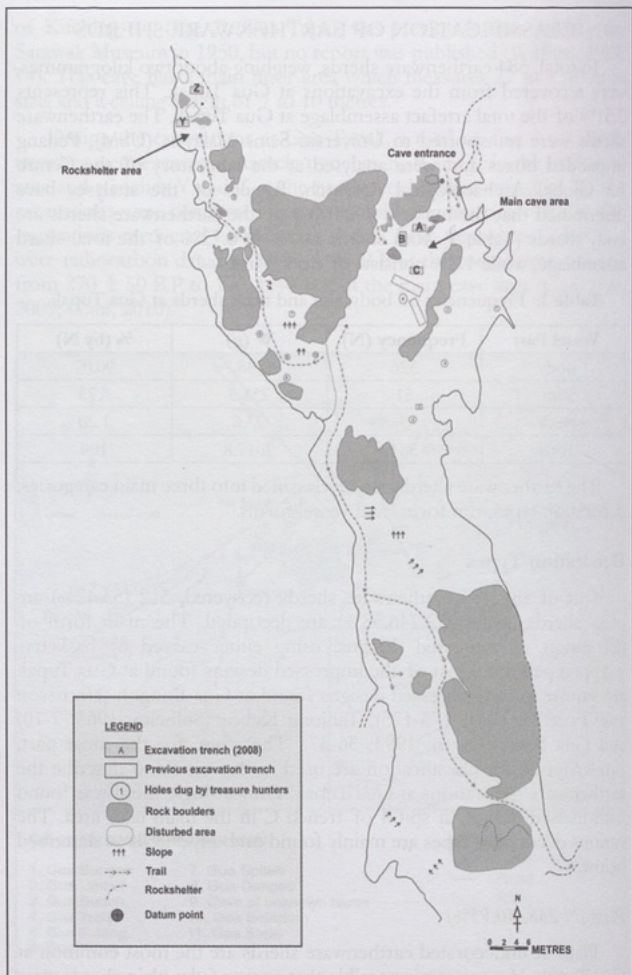


Fig. 3: Map of Gua Tupak and the excavated trenches.