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AN EARLY DATE FROM A STONE MOUND (*PERUPUN*) IN THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS, SARAWAK

Lindsay Lloyd-Smith

INTRODUCTION

One of the most impressive types of monuments in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak is the large stone mound or *perupun*. So far, seventeen have been recorded at locations across the highlands, from Long Repun in the north, to Batu Patong in the south (Barker et al., 2008; Cluny and Chai, 2007; Hitchner, 2009). They are also known outside of the highlands area proper; at Long Peluan to the south (Valeria Mashman *pers. comm.*, 25 July 2012), as well as reports of similar monuments around Long Bawang (where they are called *terupun*) over the border range in Kalimantan Indonesian (Arifin and Selato, 2003: 206-207). The mounds are circular to oval in plan and range in size from a few metres in diameter and under a metre high, comprising fewer than one hundred stones, to truly gigantic monuments over 25 metres across and several metres high, with probably over one thousand stones. The stones themselves are river rolled, and range in size from small pebbles (< 10 cm) to large boulders (50-70 cm) that would have needed several people to move.



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Throughout the area of their distribution, the stories associated with stone mounds are remarkably similar. They are said to have been built as repositories for the valuable possessions, including jars, ceramic plates and bowls, and beads and gongs of wealthy heirless individuals. The artefacts are said to have been placed in a pit dug into the ground, subsequently filled with stones and covered over by a large mound of stones to deter robbers (Harrison, 1959: 110-112). The purpose of burying this wealth was to avoid future argument between family members over who, in the absence of direct heirs, should inherit which heirlooms.

While stone mounds are sometimes associated with 'mythical' stories describing their origins, their actual age is not known in local

folk knowledge. And while fragments of imported Chinese trade ware ceramics dating to the last 800 years have been found at some stone mound sites, indicating use of the sites during this period, the original date when this type of monument first began to be built remained, until now, a matter of speculation. In this short report, the result of a recently obtained radiocarbon date on cremated bone found during the Sarawak Museum excavation in 1962 into a large stone mound at Pa' Lungan, is presented. The date is approximately 2000 years old, suggesting that the origins of some of the larger stone mounds in the highlands very likely date to the Early Metal Age; making them some of the earliest 'megalithic' monuments in Island Southeast Asia.

The date was obtained by The Cultured Rainforest Project (CRF; 2007-2011), which has been investigating the history of human occupation in the highlands, with most fieldwork focused along the Upper Kelapang valley in the southern Kelabit Highlands (Barker *et al.*, 2008, 2009; Lloyd-Smith *et al.*, 2010). As part of this work two *perupun* monuments were investigated. The large mound of *Perupun Payeh Telipa* at Batu Patong (15 m diameter by 1.50 m high) was found upon investigation to have been completely disturbed during land clearance, and had evidently been reconstructed (Barker *et al.*, 2008). Investigation of a much smaller mound at Long Kelit (4.00 m diameter x 0.80 m high), revealed that the monument had been looted in the past; fragments of 13th-14th century Chinese brittle-ware bowl and a faceted whet stone were found, but no evidence of a burial (Barker *et al.* 2009). With these results in hand, the importance of obtaining a secure date from a larger stone mound in the highlands was significant as it was anticipated that the result would potentially fill a gap in the preliminary chronology of highland megaliths, and thus provide a basis to interpret the meaning and distribution of these impressive monuments in relation to other archaeological and palaeo-environmental data which now indicates human occupation in the area stretching back possibly 6000 years (Barker *et al.*, 2009).

PERUPUN RAYEH, PA' LUNGAN

The area around the modern day village of Pa' Lungan (3°48' 36.00" N, 115° 31' 22.00" E; c.1100 m altitude), is rich in megaliths. Within c.500 m of the village there are at least seven monuments: possibly six stone mounds (*perupun*) and one large separate slab structure (*batu nangan*); the famous *Batu Ritong* dolmen (Harrison, 1964) is itself set into a small stone mound (c.7 m x 0.60 m). Another small stone mound