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ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY AND EXCAVATION AT GUA TUPAK, BAU, SARAWAK: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

Nicholas Gani, Velat Bujeng and Stephen Chia

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological survey of the limestone cave complex located in Bau, Sarawak was carried out by a research team from the Centre for Global Archaeological Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia in co-operation with staff from the Sarawak Museum Department, Kuching from 29 November to 12 December 2007. The main aim of the archaeological survey was to search for a potential archaeological site for the lead author's Masters degree study. A total of eleven sites were surveyed and the results suggested only one potential site, namely Gua Tupak, for further archaeological excavations and research. This paper presents a preliminary report on the results of the archaeological survey and excavations, as well as the analyses of the excavated artefacts from Gua Tupak, Bau, Sarawak.

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GUA TUPAK AND THE BAU CAVES COMPLEX

Gua Tupak is one of the caves in the Gunung Jambusan limestone hill (Fig. 1, Plate I). Its exact location is lat. N. 1° 24' 20.5", long. E. 110° 11' 9.1" and 56 metres above sea level. It is situated about 5 kilometres from Bau town, and about 35 kilometres southwest of Kuching. At present, Gua Tupak is under the ownership of Kampung Skiat Baru and is protected because of the valuable birds' nests found in the cave. The main area of the cave is approximately 15 x 40 metres in size with a ceiling of about 7 to 10 metres high. Gua Tupak was previously excavated by the Sarawak Museum in 1950 (Wilford, 1964: 74). However, little is known about the excavation in 1950 since it was exploratory in nature and no report was ever published.

The geology of the Bau caves and the Bau area as a whole has been extensively documented. Geological surveys and mapping of the Bau area were carried out by Wilford (1964), Wolfenden (1964) and Pimm (1967) of the Geological Survey, Borneo Region. The caves of the Bau "occur in the limestone hills lying in a generally narrow belt extending from the Kalimantan border, about 14 miles south-east of Bau to Bau..." (Wilford, 1964: 47). Underground streams are very common and some of the larger mouths of these caves appear to have been inhabited by people in the past.

The Bau Limestone Formation is a "thick sequence of massive, pale grey, poorly to moderately fossiliferous pure limestone, with a little dark-grey argillaceous limestone..." (Wolfenden, 1965: 8). In one place, the formation is over 1,800 feet thick, while in the Krokong area, the formation is about 2,500 feet thick. However, the total thickness of the formation is unknown. The Bau Limestone Formation is of Upper Jurassic to Upper Cretaceous age (about 150 to 70 million years ago). In some places, small nodules of dark-grey chert are present in the limestones. Calcareous algae, foraminifera and coelenterates of Upper Jurassic age are found in the Bau Limestone Formation.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

The caves in the Bau area have been investigated archaeologically since the 1950s. One of the better known caves in the Bau area is Gua Bungoh, which was excavated in 1950 by Tom Harrisson and Michael Tweedie (the Curator of the Sarawak Museum and the Director of the Raffles Museum, Singapore at that time, respectively). The excavation of Gua Bungoh was carried out in two phases from 12-22 April, 1950, over an area of roughly 27 feet x 16 feet in dimension, which Harrisson and Tweedie (1951: 166) termed the "habitable floor". The excavation of Gua Bungoh yielded a variety of artefacts such as 19th century coins, porcelain and stoneware, metal implements, pottery, extraneous stones and faunal remains comprising riverine shells and bat bones.

Apart from Gua Bungoh, an archaeological excavation carried out in Gua Tupak in 1950 by the Sarawak Museum was briefly mentioned by Wilford (1964: 74). From the Sarawak Museum records, we know that the excavation produced findings such as earthenwares, stonewares, bones and ash. Unfortunately, no details or records of the excavations were found and the findings were not published.