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CHAPTER 2: GUA SIREH AND LUBANG ANGIN: ENVIRONMENTAL SETTINGS AND EXCAVATIONS

Ipoi Datan

THE SITE OF GUA SIREH

Gua Sireh,¹ located at Latitude 1° 10'9" N and Longitude 110° 27'7" E, is situated centrally in Gunung Nambi,² one of several isolated limestone outcrops in the Serian District of the Samarahan Division in west Sarawak (Figure 1). Its entrance, which has a northeasterly aspect, is situated about 60 metres above the rice-fields at the base of the mountain (Plates 1 & 2). Apart from Gua Sireh there are two other caves located in Gunung Nambi (Figure 2); Gua Sebayang, which is actually the other entrance of Gua Sireh on the western side of the mountain, and Gua Sindo located slightly northwest of Gua Sireh.

To reach Gua Sireh, one has to turn right from the Kuching-Serian road at approximately 47 kilometres from Kuching and then drive for another 8 kilometres along a gravel road (Ri'ih Road) to Kampong Plaman Bantang. It requires another 20 minute walk from the village and then a steep ascent of the limestone to reach Gua Sireh, which is located northwest of the village (Figure 2). The local Bidayuh only frequent the cave when on their way to collect edible birds' nests at Gua Sebayang, while outsiders occasionally visit the cave for recreational purposes.

Gua Sireh has two chambers which will be referred to as the main and small chambers (Figure 3). The width of the main chamber is about 17.5 metres while that of the smaller one is about 4 metres. The depth of both caves inwards from their mouths is about 25 metres. The height of the main chamber ranges from 8 metres at the entrance to about 5 metres in the middle, from where the ceiling begins to dip gradually to about a metre above the floor at the rear wall. The ceiling of the smaller cave is considerably lower. To the left of the main chamber is the passage which leads into the dark interior of the cave system. The cave floor in most of the main cave is level, but there is a slight rise outwards to the dripline in the southern part (see cave cross-sections in Figure 3). The cave mouth then drops away to a steep rocky slope which is overgrown with secondary forest and bamboo. This slope runs down to the Bantang Kiri stream which eventually flows into the Bukar river (Figure 2), a tributary of the main Samarahan river to the north.

CHAPTER 2

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PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AT GUA SIREH

Wilford (1964:98) credited Spenser St. John as the first European to have visited Gua Sireh in 1862. St. John (1863:224-225) mentioned that he was shown the skeleton of a Dayak (Bidayuh) man said to have been slain by a Sarawak Malay in the smaller chamber. The killing incident happened several years before the establishment of the Brooke Raj when a group of Bidayuh took refuge in the cave in order to avoid the enslavement of their children by a Malay chief. In the ensuing skirmish, three Bidayuh were killed, seven captured, while some others escaped.

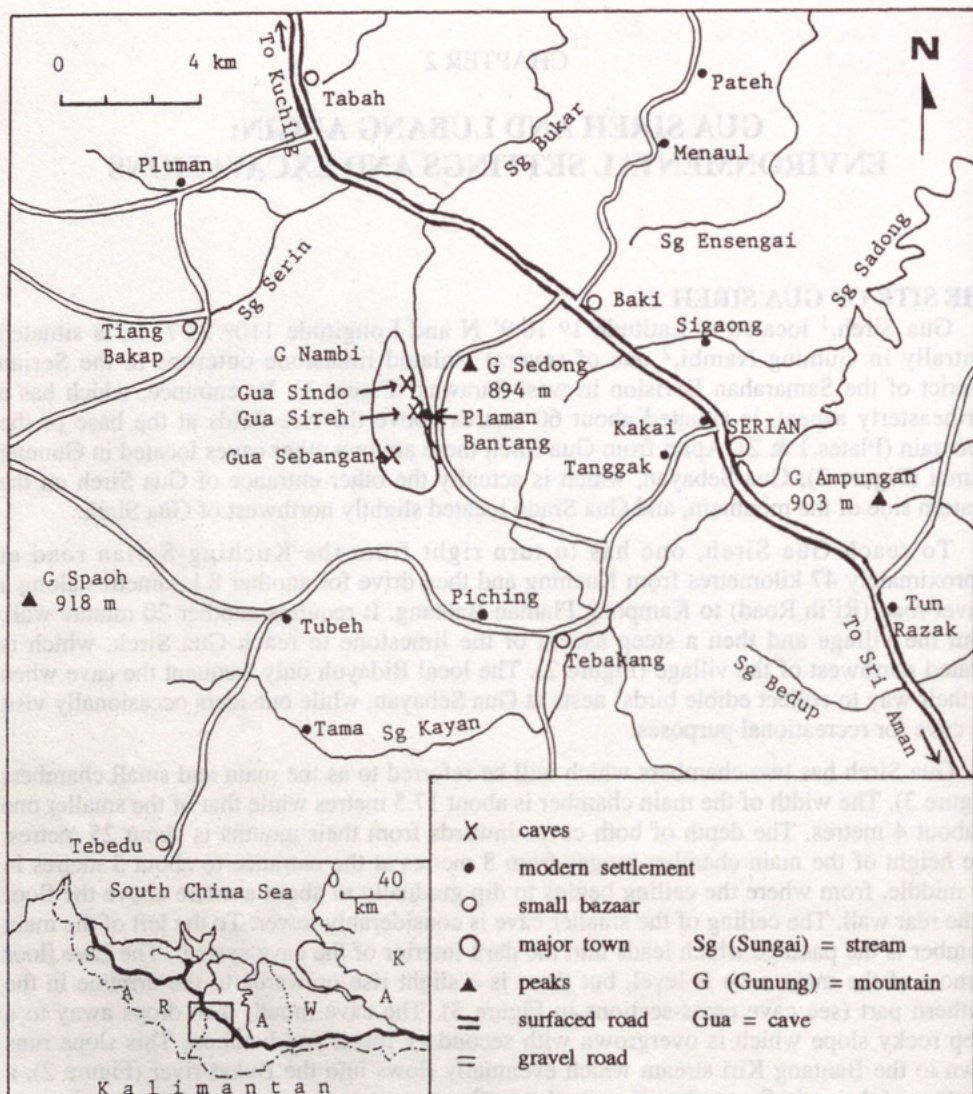


Figure 2: Map of west Sarawak showing the location of Gua Sireh. (Reproduced from Map of Sarawak 1:50,000 1987 Series 8 Edition 7 Land and Survey Department Sarawak.)