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SIREH CAVE BONE IN RETROSPECT: Bone, teeth and other animal remains from Sarawak Museum excavations of 1954 and 1959

Earl of Cranbrook

INTRODUCTION

In 1989 Datan (1993) conducted a significant excavation in the mouth of the cave known as Gua Sireh (or Sirih, old spelling) located close to the Bidayuh settlement Pelaman Lanchang, at approx. 110° 28' E, 1° 9' N. The archaeological potential of this site had first been investigated on behalf of the Sarawak Museum in 1954 by the late Benedict Sandin, who filed a short report accompanied by a sketch map showing the locations of his five trial pits (Fig. 1). Sandin also brought back samples, of which one significant mammal tooth has been found among bagged material in the Museum's archaeological store (a tapir canine, see below). In 1959 a fuller excavation was undertaken by the Sarawak Museum under the supervision of Wilhelm G. Solheim II and the Curator, the late Tom Harrisson. No report was published at the time, perhaps because relations between the two men had soured somewhat (see Solheim, 1977 a, b), or because the much more exciting results from Niah proved a greater pre-occupation for Harrisson (1957, 1958). The lack of an account of the work of his predecessors hampered Datan in making an overall assessment of the results of his 1989 excavation (Datan, 1993).



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I was not present at the Solheim/Harrisson excavation of Sireh. Later in 1959, however, while visiting Sarawak on fieldwork for my PhD thesis, I was asked to make a preliminary examination of the bone and other animal remains (excluding mollusc shells) that had been brought back to the Museum. In the course of this examination, the material was sorted into eight general categories, and some preliminary identifications were made. My original notebook and working sheets were kept at the Museum, with a brief typescript report. That report was cited by Datan (1993: 107 – 115) for comparison with the animal remains from his excavation in 1989. Much later, in retirement, Dr Solheim decided to revert to his early work and prepare a comprehensive

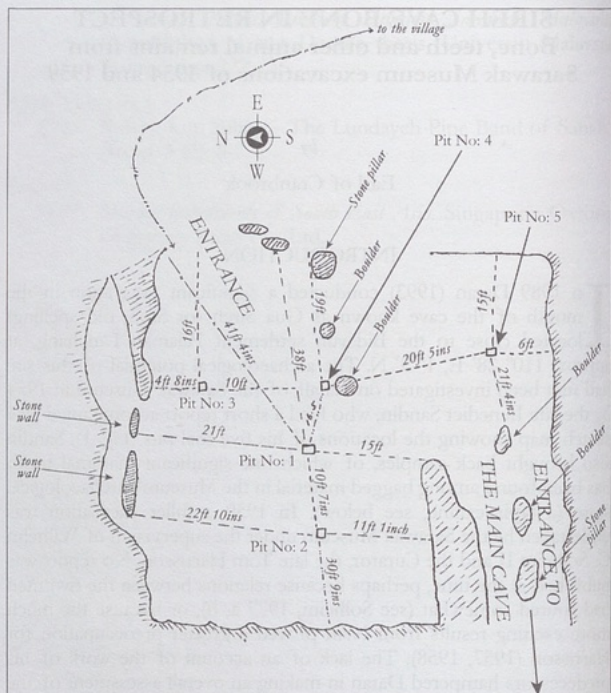


Fig. 1: Benedict Sandin's sketch plan of Sireh Cave, showing his trial pits dug in 1954.

account of the 1959 excavation, to be titled *Archaeological Reports of Gua Sireh Cave, Sarawak*. He asked me to provide a report on the bone material to accompany his major sections on the cultural remains.

At the Sarawak Museum, there is no system for the accession and registration of human remains or zoo-archaeological specimens. Surviving material from the 1959 Sireh excavation is held in the Museum's archaeological store in cardboard cartons, as single specimens or mixed items with common provenance, contained in the excavators' original plastic bags closed by a pin. Attached external

labels denote trench, depth, date and, in most cases, a generalised field identification. The material now comprises only animal remains. The present whereabouts of human bone and artefacts of animal bone that I saw in 1959 is not known. All details of these two categories in the following pages are therefore drawn from my original working papers which have been returned to the Sarawak Museum for permanent filing.

From the animal remains sorted in 1959, selected items have already been described and discussed in relevant species-related publications (see Medway, 1977; Cranbrook & Piper, 2009). Some additional generalised work has been possible. In 2007, I gave a training course in the archaeological identification of animal bone, attended by Museum staff and interested outsiders. For practical sessions, bags of Sireh bone from the store were used. This exercise confirmed the general accuracy of my youthful diagnoses and added to the species list. Finally, in October 2009, I made a rapid check of other unsorted bagged bone in the Sarawak Museum archaeological store, during which I discovered a few extra items of interest. This retrospective report has thus been compiled from observations and notes on excavated material made over a period of 50 years, as opportunities have arisen. In 2010 I forwarded my finished paper to Dr Solheim.

Sadly, it now appears that Dr Solheim's health has deteriorated to such an extent that it is unlikely that he will complete his comprehensive excavation report, including treatment of lithic, ceramic and other cultural materials. The absence of this information unfortunately limits the scope of interpretations drawn from examination of osteological material on its own. Nonetheless, it remains my opinion that zoological appraisal has an indispensable role in archaeology, being able both to assist the excavation strategy and to inform the interpretation of results. Limited as it may be, I offer this contribution with respect and admiration for Dr Solheim's many achievements in the field of South-east Asian archaeology.

Background

Gua Sireh is an east-facing mouth of an extended system within the limestone hill, Gunung Nambi. The entrance lies about 60 m above the surrounding level ground. The cave is divided into two chambers, separated by a line of dripstone. As described by Datan (1993: 7), the main chamber measures about 17.5 m wide and 25 m deep, about 8 m

high at the entrance, declining to ~5 m in the middle, and descending to about 1 m at the rear wall. To one side, a passage leads to the dark interior of the cave system. The location was shown on a map of Sarawak by Datan (1993, Fig. 1), and a plan of the main cave passage has been provided by Wilford (1964, Fig. 65, with two photographs of secondary calcite formations in the interior, Pls. XXX and XXXII). Human activity within historic times has influenced the nature and contents of the cave soil at the Sireh mouth. The cave interior is occupied by edible-nest swiftlets *Aerodramus maximus*, the species building the 'black' nests of commerce. The harvest of these nests constitutes an important economic resource for the local community (Medway, 1958). The ultimate market for edible nests has traditionally been China or the expatriate Chinese community, but the antiquity of this trade is uncertain. No recognisable reference to edible nests appears in Chinese written sources prior to the Ming dynasty, yet the first European merchant adventurers arriving at Indonesian ports at the end of the 16th century C.E. found a flourishing trade in existence (Lim & Cranbrook, 2002). When James Brooke came to Sarawak, the harvest from caves was already important, with nests selling at four East India Company rupees per pound avoirdupois (Low, 1848). Thus, probably for several centuries, the cave mouth has been frequented by birds'-nest harvesters whose foot-fall has compacted the soil and whose occupational debris must be mingled amongst the material evidence of more ancient visitors.

There have also been other, dramatic events, as instanced in the first published account of this cave by Spenser St John, showing that not all human remains are of antiquity:

Two miles' walk through old farms and fresh felled jungle brought us to the foot of a very steep hill in which the cave was situated. Clambering up the rocks for a couple of hundred feet, we suddenly found ourselves at the mouth of the cave. The entrance is peculiar: divided formerly into three, the fall of a pillar has united two of the openings into one, which is about thirty feet in breadth; at first there appeared no far interior, but to the left a descending passage led into the great cave. To the right was a separate apartment with a fine opening, forming the first division of the mouth, but inaccessible from the outside. The Dayak boys beckoned us to come in. We went, thinking they wished us to look out from thence on the beautiful valley below and the lofty mountain beyond it; but our surprise was great when they pointed into a deep hole where lay the