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THE STONE INDUSTRY FROM GUA SIREH, SERIAN, SARAWAK

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INTRODUCTION

The site of Gua Sireh in Sarawak, Malaysia is significant in being one of only two in Sarawak that has produced lithic assemblages that can be compared with others from the region to establish a picture of human activity during the early Holocene. It was excavated by Solheim and Harrison in 1959 and there have been subsequent campaigns by Zuraina Majid in 1977, Kurui in 1980 and Datan in 1989. The lithic collection has been examined to identify technological and behavioural details and is compared with the material from Niah Cave, West Mouth.

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Gua Sireh is a cave of two chambers in the hill of Gunung Nambi at Lat. 10.10.9' N Long. 110.27.7' E. It is some 55 km southeast of the state capital at Kuching (Fig. 1). The site has been known for a long time but it was the excavations by W. Solheim II and Tom Harrisson in 1959 that brought it to archaeological attention. A limited season of work excavated a number of trenches and recovered a large collection of mid-Holocene earthenware, some metal and stone objects and a number of human burials. A collection of faunal material was also made. There were two trenches placed parallel to each other running south-west – north-east. The southernmost was divided into two segments a *c.*7 m long section that ended against the rear of the cave wall and the second segment was 2 m further east on the same alignment and ran for *c.*14 m. The northern trench was *c.*10 m long and 2 m wide with a broader 3 m wide element towards its western end. In addition to these main trenches a series of 2 m x 2 m test trenches were dug towards the rear wall of the cave (Fig. 2). This work was never fully published as the original notebooks were lost until recently and not all the material has been studied. This report is centered upon the lithics from the site which have not been published before. In addition to the 1959 work, the cave was also examined by Zuraina Majid in 1977, by Edmund Kurui in 1980 and in 1989 by Ipoi Datan. The latter produced a report with an extensive study of the earthenwares (Datan, 1993)

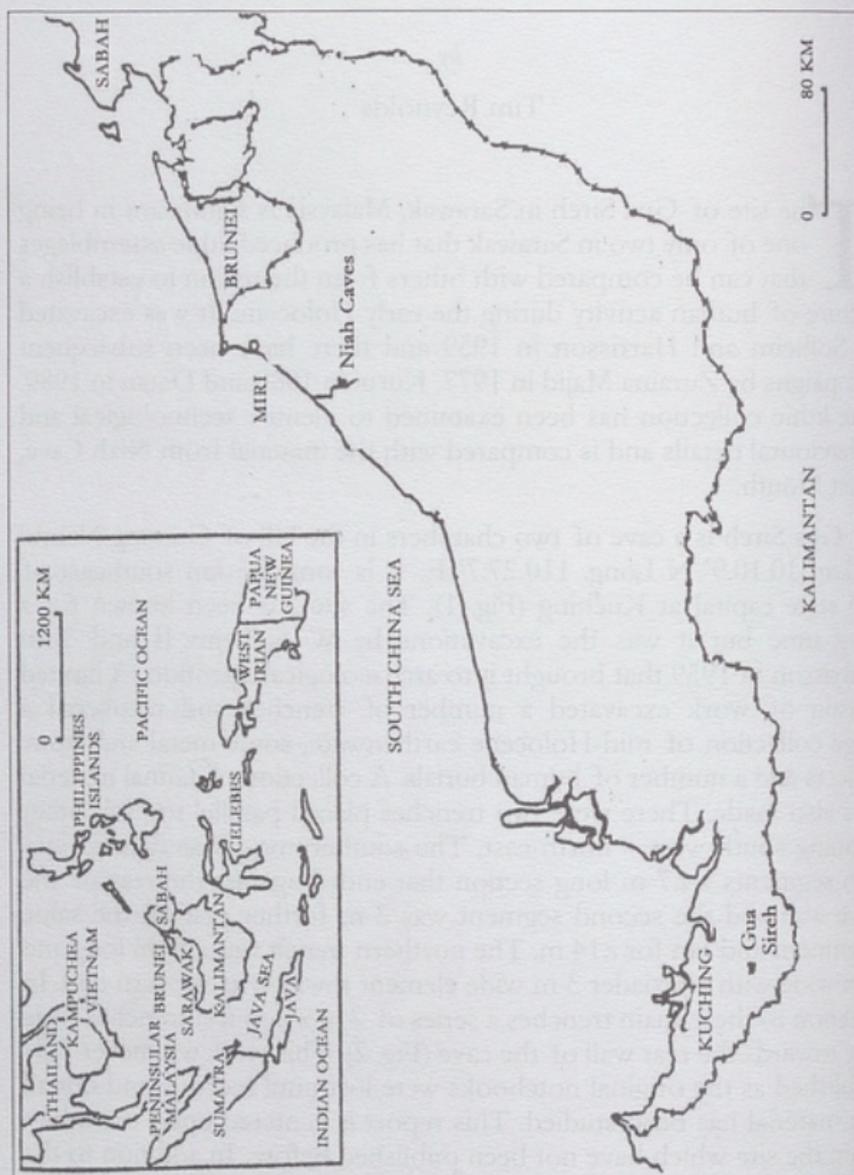


Fig. 1: Map of Sarawak showing the locations of Gua Sireh and Niah Caves.

and a limited account of the lithics. The lithics from this work have also been examined to gain a larger, more representative sample and more effectively reconstruct the role of stone artefact use in the cave. Materials from the other two investigations have not been located.

The excavations revealed a sequence of brief occupations beginning with one dated to $c.20$ ka. This date is based upon a radiocarbon date of $21,630 \pm 80$ years bp (ANU 7048) on freshwater *Melania* sp. shell from a depth of 0.95–1.0 m. This was represented by only a few flakes in chert and quartz but is significant in showing human presence inland in tropical rainforest environments at an early date. The site was estimated to be some 500 km inland at this time (Datan & Bellwood, 1991). This occupation was followed by a hiatus and then occupation resumed in the Holocene some 5,000 years ago when pottery using peoples (believed to be Austronesian) established a Neolithic settlement (Datan, 1993). These people exploited wild resources including marine shellfish as well as pig and the remains of a domestic dog was present (Medway, 1959). The pottery forms found at the site continue for a considerable period of time with little change and these have been well-described (Datan, 1993; Solheim, 1965, 1981; Solheim *et al.*, 1959, 1961). A phase of human burial at the site began $c.2,000$ years ago which disturbed the stratigraphy considerably and activity continued at the site until the recent period. There are charcoal wall pictures that remain undated.

The present study of the lithic materials from Gua Sireh was undertaken to complement a study of the material from Niah as part of the Niah Cave Project. It was originally intended to publish this work along with the rest of the material from the Gua Sireh site in *The Sarawak Museum Journal* as a full site report following the rediscovery of the original site notebooks. Unfortunately, this publication has not come to fruition and it has been decided to publish the lithic analysis separately. The downside to this is that the drawings of analysed material have been lost along with the rest of the material to be published and only the original data survive with the author.

Methodology

The approach taken to study the collection was based upon those devised by the author for Southeast Asian materials which do not easily lend themselves to the traditional systems used elsewhere (Reynolds, 1989, 1990, 1992) the reason for this is the generally unpatterned

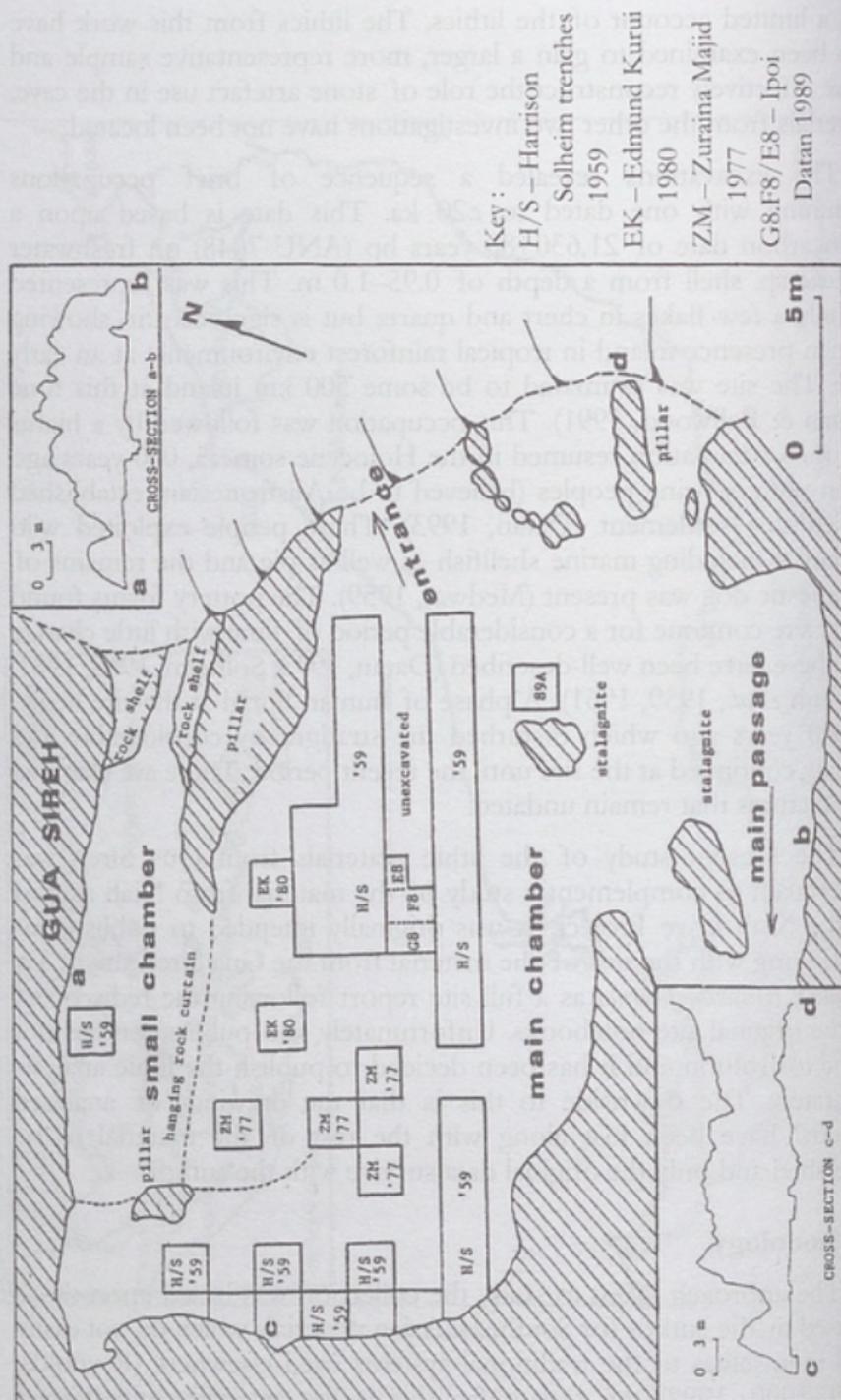


Fig. 2. Plan of Gua Sireh showing the different excavation trenches (After Datan (1993)).