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THE NIAH CAVE PROJECT: THE THIRD (2002) SEASON OF FIELDWORK

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes the preliminary results of the third (2002) campaign of fieldwork by the Niah Cave Project. The major sedimentary units and geomorphic features described in the 2001 report have been further refined by fieldwork supported by the initial results of micromorphological analysis, and the importance of interior guano deposits for the formation and transformation of many of these units has become ever more apparent. The archaeological fieldwork has found clear evidence that the West Mouth was being visited by humans before the encorporation of the Deep Skull into its sediments around 43,000 BP. There is increasing evidence that highly sophisticated tropical foraging systemswere being practised from the time of the first arrival of modern humans in this part of Borneo, findings of considerable importance for debates about the pathways of initial colonisation in southeast Asia. The food-rich pits and post-holes found in 2001, believed then probably to be early Holocene (Mesolithic) in date, are now thought more likely to be part of the culturally-rich deposits of the 'frequentation zone' of the terminal Pleistocene excavated by the Harrissons, or even older. Small scale excavations of exposed skeletons have revealed further complexity in 'Neolithic' funerary ritual. Studies of the cave taphonomy have been considerably advanced. The potential of other entrances inthe Niah complex for targeted fieldwork of the same kind as in the West Mouth has been established. The renewed programme of archaeological investigations is variously confirming, altering and amplifying the picture from the earlier excavations, but in all three respects is greatly enriching our understanding of the history of the site and of the inhabitants' changing interactions with their surrounding landscape.

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by

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INTRODUCTION (GB)

This report describes the preliminary results of the third season of fieldwork of the Niah Cave Project. The Niah caves are a complex of enormous caverns in a limestone outcrop forming a northern outlier of the Gunong Subis massif on the coastal plain of northern Sarawak. The caves are renowned not only for their grandeur and for their large populations of bats and swiftlets, but also for the archaeological excavations conducted by Tom and Barbara Harrisson in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the West Mouth of Niah Great Cave. Their campaigns were brought to world attention by their discovery there of the so-called Deep Skull in deposits containing charcoal that yielded a 14C date of about 40,000 years ago (T. Harrisson, 1958, 1970), the first clear evidence for the initial colonisation of southeast Asia by anatomically modern humans. The excavations also yielded evidence for the subsequent utilisation of the West Mouth by later Pleistocene and early Holocene foragers, by 'Neolithic' people for burying their dead (between about 3000 BC and AD 800), and in recent centuries, as today, by birds-nesters. However, spectacular as these discoveries were, there have always been uncertainties about the Niah cultural sequence and its chronology because the Harrissons never published a comprehensive final report with detailed descriptions and illustrations of the various cave stratigraphies they investigated, so as to clarify the relationships between sedimentary units, cultural materials, and 14C sample locations. Later excavations by Zuraina Majid were unable to resolve

these uncertainties conclusively (Zuraina Majid, 1982). As a result, they seriously constrain the potential of this remarkable archaeological complex to provide a unique example of the 'archaeological history' of human settlement in southeast Asia from initial colonisation to very recent times.

The Niah Cave Project was developed in this context, as a programme of field and laboratory study by an inter-disciplinary team of archaeologists, anthropologists, and environmental scientists with the following three objectives: (1) to clarify the nature and chronology of the cave stratigraphies and of the human uses of the caves; (2) to establish the climatic and environmental contexts in which the human uses of the caves were situated; and (3) to link the newly established sequence with the substantial archive of material from the earlier excavations so as to provide a modern analytical framework for the earlier discoveries. Understanding the environmental and human history of the Niah caves and their surrounding landscape has particular relevance for three major debates concerning the pathways of human settlement in the region. The first concerns the timing of the initial settlement of southeast Asia by anatomically modern humans, and its environmental and cultural contexts. The second concerns the means by which modern humans subsisted here as foragers through the dramatically changing landscapes of the later Pleistocene and early Holocene. The third major focus of enquiry is the timing, nature, and causation of the transition from foraging to farming in the Holocene.

The 2000 and 2001 seasons of fieldwork reported previously in this *Journal* (Barker *et al.*, 2000, 2001) have succeeded in confirming the broad antiquity of the Deep Skull, identifying evidence for sporadic visits to the caves certainly by 43-44,000 years ago. We found pits, post-hole evidence for wooden structures, and middens rich in food debris including faunal and botanical remains, which we identified as belonging to 'Mesolithic' foragers of the early Holocene. Small-scale