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ZOOARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON FAUNAL REMAINS FROM GUA KAIN HITAM B, NIAH, SARAWAK

Velat Bujeng and Stephen Chia

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological research carried out since the 1950's in Sarawak has revealed evidence of early human occupation, dating from around 43,000 BP until 1,300 A.D., in the limestone complex of Niah Subis, Niah (Harrisson, 1959; Zuraina, 1982; Barker, 2005; Barker et al., 2001). The prehistory of Sarawak, in particular the Niah Caves, shows a long and continuous period of human occupation from the Late Pleistocene (Paleolithic) to the Late Holocene (Harrisson, 1958; Cranbrook, 2000; Barker et al., 2007). In 2007 and 2008, archaeological research was conducted at Gua Kain Hitam B, Niah by the Centre for Global Archaeological Research at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang with the cooperation of the Sarawak Museum Department, Kuching. The research was conducted in order to obtain new dates and data on the prehistory of Gua Kain Hitam B, which is located in the Niah-Subis limestone complex, about 110 km southeast from Miri, Sarawak (Fig. 1). Gazetted in 1974, the Niah-Subis limestone complex, now known as the Niah National Park, is a relatively popular tourist destination due to its rich diversity of flora as well as its archaeological findings and geological formations (Wilford, 1964; Dana, 2001). Results of the recent archaeological research at Gua Kain Hitam B revealed evidence of a prehistoric cemetery associated with earthenware sherds, shell ornaments and faunal remains. Radiocarbon dating of the burials and the excavated artefacts from the various cultural levels is currently being done. The extended burials and associated artefacts, however, suggested that the burials and artefacts could date from the Late Neolithic to Early Holocene period. This article presents and discusses the preliminary findings of the faunal remains excavated from Gua Kain Hitam B in 2007 and 2008 from a zooarchaeological perspective.

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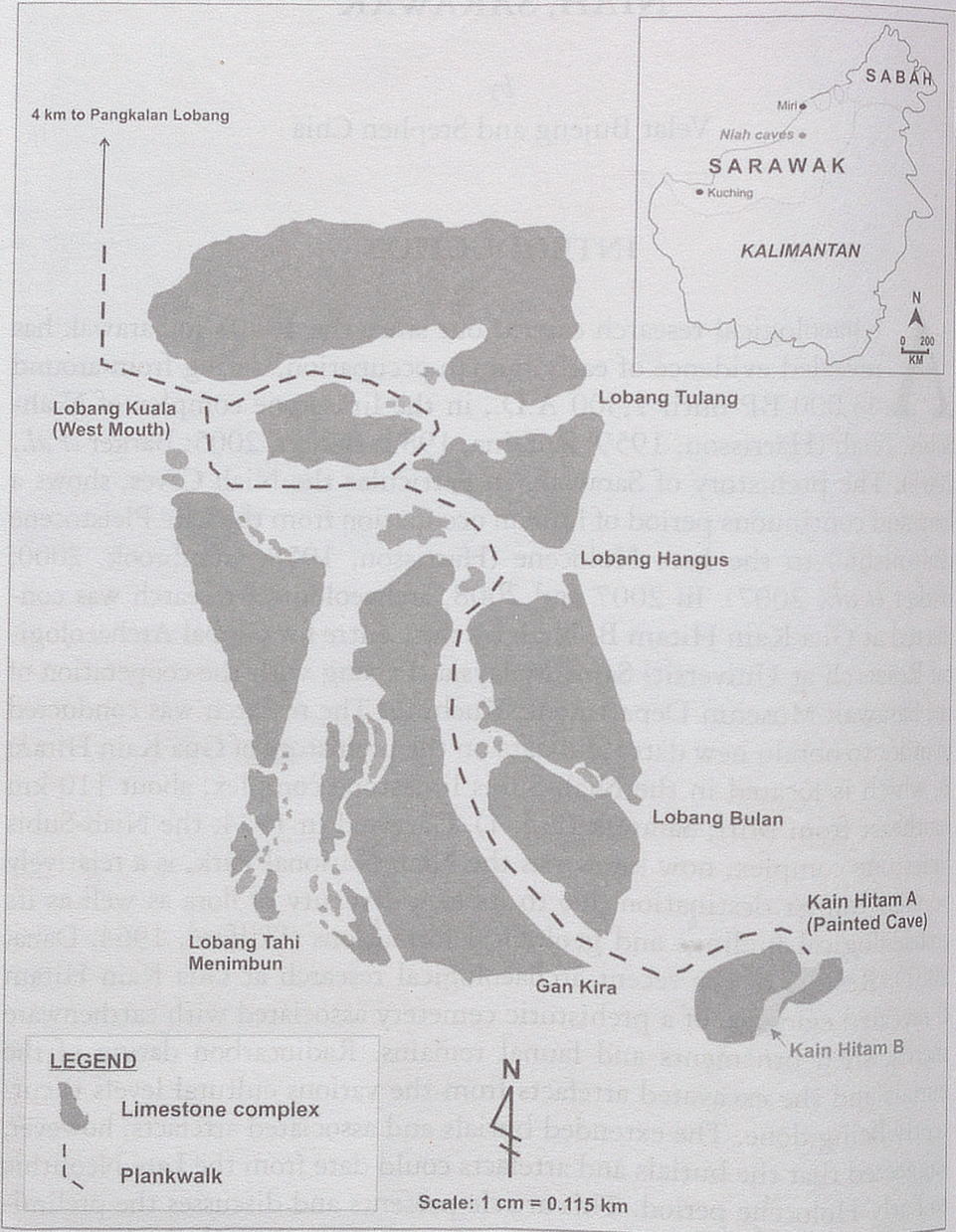


Fig. 1: The location of Gua Kain Hitam B in the limestone massif of Niah Subis.

VERTEBRATES AND INVERTEBRATES AT GUA KAIN HITAM B

Systematic archaeological excavations in 2007 and 2008 yielded 8,613.2 g of animal bones and 8,018.4 g of shell remains. All the faunal remains recovered from Gua Kain Hitam B were analysed in the laboratory of the Centre for Global Archaeological Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. Preliminary analyses include examination of the anatomy, taxonomy and quantitative analysis. Examination of the anatomy was done in order to obtain samples for the identification of species (taxonomy). Analysis of taphonomy was also done, albeit at a macro level only. Quantitative analysis was done in order to observe spatial and temporal changes in the exploitation of fauna at Gua Kain Hitam B. Identification of faunal species was done using reference samples available at the Centre for Global Archaeological Research. The vertebrate remains recovered from Gua Kain Hitam B were also compared and identified using illustrations, figures and references in Cornwall (1956), Klein and Cruz-Urbe (1984), Tweedie (1978), Medway (1977), Lekagul and McNeely (1977), Francis (2001), Das (2006) and Matsui (2007).

On the other hand, the invertebrate remains were identified using references from Fox (1970), Meehan (1982), Bellwood (1988), Datan (1993), Claassen (1998), Abbott (2002) and Yule and Sen (2004). Based on the taxonomy, the faunal remains recovered from Gua Kain Hitam B were divided into vertebrates and invertebrates. The vertebrates that were exploited consist of mostly mammals and reptiles, while the invertebrates consist of crustaceans and molluscs.

Mammals A total of 8,286.9 g of mammal bones were found and 45.2 % were identifiable as to their species. Unidentifiable mammal bones were classified according to size into medium-sized mammal and large-sized mammal (Fig. 2). Based on the taxonomy, the exploited mammals were from the order chiroptera, rodentia, carnivore, primate and artiodactyla.

A total of 118.1 g of bones of the order chiroptera, consisting of the skull, jaw and femur parts, were found. The chiroptera bones are from the suborder Microchiroptera (bats), which can still be found in this cave today (Piper *et al.*, 2008: 88). However, there is no evidence of the exploitation of the suborder Megachiroptera at Gua Kain Hitam B.