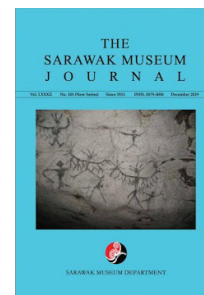




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## THE ECOLE FRANÇAISE D'EXTRÊME-ORIENT - SARAWAK MUSEUM DEPARTMENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT IN SANTUBONG

**Daniel Perret and Mohd. Sherman bin Sauffi**

### INTRODUCTION

Archaeological research in Sarawak began just after the Second World War under the leadership of Tom Harrisson. As Curator of the Sarawak Museum since 1947, he began exploring the Sarawak River Delta, a 600 km area between Telaga Air in the northwest, Tanjung Sipang in the north, Tanjung Po in the northeast, Samarahan in the southeast and Kampung Makam in the southwest.

It is the village of Santubong at the mouth of the Santubong River, one of the branches of the delta, that first caught Harrisson's attention because of observations and chance finds made there since the middle of the nineteenth century. Mention should be made of the famous Batu Gambar, an anthropomorphic sculpture in high relief on a rock at the Sungai Jaong site, rediscovered by a local in the 1880s, and near which was found a "Hindu" terracotta figurine, of carved stones reported at the beginning of the twentieth century on the neighbouring site of Bongkissam, "Indian character" pottery, as well as various objects in gold, Chinese coins and a few residues from ironworking (cf. especially Evans 1929)..

### Keywords:



**THE ECOLE FRANÇAISE D'EXTRÊME-ORIENT –  
SARAWAK MUSEUM DEPARTMENT  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT IN SANTUBONG**

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**A**rchaeological research in Sarawak began just after the Second World War under the leadership of Tom Harrisson.<sup>3</sup> As Curator of the Sarawak Museum since 1947, he began exploring the Sarawak River Delta, a 600 km<sup>2</sup> area between Telaga Air in the northwest, Tanjung Sipang in the north, Tanjung Po in the northeast, Samarahan in the southeast and Kampung Makam in the southwest.

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The identification of iron slag near Batu Gambar in the Sungai Jaong site led Harrisson to launch surveys using mine detectors in 1948. He uncovered five potential sites for excavation, later excavated intermittently between 1952 and 1966: Sungai Jaong, Sungai Buah, Bongkissam, Bukit Maras and Kampung Ayer. Two of them, Sungai Jaong and Bongkissam, about three kilometres apart, are the primary focus of a new archaeological project conducted by the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient<sup>4</sup> in cooperation with the Sarawak Museum Department.

The Sungai Jaong site (N 01°43.041'; E 110°20.699'), about three kilometres from Santubong, occupies the sides of a small hill (approx. alt., 15 m) overlooking the mangrove swamp, the tidal Jaong River, a tributary of the Santubong River, and the Raso River, a small tributary of the Jaong River.

The site is now less than one kilometre from the right bank of the Santubong River. The Bongkissam site (N 01°43.150'; E 110°19.350') is now located on the edge of Santubong, some 400 metres from the right bank of the mouth of the Santubong River and less than one kilometre from the sea.

Tom Harrisson started digging in the Santubong area four years after his initial survey. His first choice was the Sungai Jaong site, where iron slag were detected over nearly a mile along the edge of the mangrove. The main stages of his excavations there seem to have taken place in 1952 and 1957. He completed his fieldwork in Sungai Jaong in June-July 1966. Iron slag, stoneware and earthenware sherds were unearthed from the first trench. From his published reports, we know that these excavations in Sungai Jaong produced large quantities of iron slag (some pieces weighing up to three kilograms) and Chinese ceramics. However, the total is nowhere to be found in these publications. Among surprising details, he mentioned that he had a jetty made from excavated iron slag built on the Raso River. Harrisson explained that fifty gold objects were recovered during the 1952 and 1957 seasons (30 plain and 15 decorated gold foils, 3 small rings, 2 beads), most of them from an area he interpreted as a burial ground, which also yielded glass beads as well as a handful of whole small Chinese vessels. Harrisson also described a number of rock carvings that he thought were contemporary with the archaeological finds uncovered in the excavations. He stated that Sungai Jaong was settled between the end of the first millennium and the beginning of the second millennium CE.

His excavations in Bongkissam apparently started a few years after the first season at Sungai Jaong, and he undertook his last campaign there in July 1966. Preliminary surveys detected iron slag over about 800 metres along the Santubong River. As with the Sungai Jaong site, any general data on the finds are absent in the published reports. He pointed out however that the 1955 season alone yielded 67,000 sherds of pottery, 49,000 sherds of stoneware and porcelain, more than 600 beads and glass bangle fragments, as well as more than 22 tons of iron slag. The last season, in July 1966, revealed a Hindu-Buddhist stone structure, which remains the only Hindu-Buddhist monument built of permanent materials discovered to date in Sarawak. It is a rectangular platform (3 m x 2.40 m) facing north-south, resting on sand. In what Harrisson interpreted as a sealed shaft filled with yellow sand, he found a ritual deposit composed of a decorated silver box, gold objects, semi-precious stones, a stone image, beads, and earthenware sherds. The silver box contained a gold lingga, a gold foil, and organic black material. Outside this box, in the sand,