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THE WEST MOUTH, NIAH, IN THE PREHISTORY OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the preceramic levels at the West Mouth of the Great Cave, Niah, Sarawak. It also examines the material remains from the site in the context of the prehistory of mainland and insular Southeast Asia, the area defined for our purposes as including Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. The West Mouth is a particularly important stratified site as it contains evidence of the longest known duration of human (*Homo sapiens*) habitation in Southeast Asia. The whole sequence (including the ceramic levels) may span the period from approximately 40,000 years ago to 2,000 years ago.

The West Mouth site was excavated intermittently between 1954 and 1967 by the Sarawak Museum under the direction of the late Tom Harrisson. Work was resumed on the site by the Museum and the present investigator in 1977. This study describes and analyses the entire West Mouth collection, the great bulk of it consisting of the materials excavated by Harrisson.

This chapter has two objectives. One is to identify the issues and the problems in the Palaeolithic research in Southeast Asia. We will include in the discussion all sites of the Pleistocene as well as the preceramic sites of the Holocene. We will also focus on a discussion of the finds from various sites that are contemporaneous with the West Mouth. With the context thus established, our second objective will be to outline the aims, data, and scope of the present study.

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Introduction

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1. Background of Palaeolithic Archaeology in Southeast Asia

Palaeolithic archaeology in the area goes back to the end of the 19th century with the search for fossils of early man. In the early 1890s, E. Dubois discovered "Pithecanthropus" bones, "Wajak Man" (1890), a Trinil skull (1891) and "Java Man" (1892), in his search for the missing link in human evolution (Casino 1974). In 1893, E. Noetling of the Geological Survey of India reported the first stone implements from Burma (Movius 1937-38). Further forays into man's past were made at the turn of the century in various parts of Southeast Asia. In 1902-03, Fritz and Paul Sarasin excavated the first Southeast Asian microliths, in Lamontjong caves, south Sulawesi (Mulaney and Soejono 1971).

From around the 1930s, Palaeolithic research concentrated in Indonesia and Burma. Ter Haar, Openoorth, and, in particular, von Koenigswald worked in east Java (Ngandong and Modjokerto) and central Java (Sangiran). This was also the period when Sarasin discovered Palaeolithic remains in Thailand (Sarasin 1933) and in Timor (Almeida and Zbyszewski 1967); and W. Willems did the same in 1938 in Flores (Heekeren 1955-57). But it was the American South-east Asiatic Expedition for Cenozoic Geology and Early Man, that left a marked imprint on Pleistocene archaeology in Southeast Asia, in the works of de Terra and Movius (de Terra 1937-38, Movius 1937-38, 1943, 1944, 1948, 1955). After World War II, research on the Southeast Asian Palaeolithic continued at an uneven pace in the various countries of Southeast Asia. In the 1950s and 1960s, the first relatively firmly dated early man sites in Peninsular Malaysia, the Philip-

pinus, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam were discovered. But research on early man and culture has been most intense in Indonesia and is still continuing (Soejono 1961, 1970, Heekeren 1972, Mulvaney and Soejono 1970, Jacob 1972, 1976, Bartstra 1974, 1976, Sartono 1976). Table I. 1 summarizes the distribution of Palaeolithic sites and Industries in South-east Asia.

i) Survey of the Sites

This section surveys the material remains excavated and findings on all preceramic sites that are contemporaneous with the preceramic West Mouth sequence (Table 1. 2). Given the absence of chronometric dating for a large number of the sites, it is not possible to arrange the sites in an exact chronological order. However, it is generally possible to present them in a geological sequence, distinguishing those attributed to the late Upper Pleistocene from those attributed to the Holocene. For convenient reference, these sites may be further distinguished according to their geographical locations within modern political boundaries as well as by the larger distinction between mainland and insular Southeast Asia, important for observation of cultural orientations. No attempt will be made to present these sites and assemblages in a culture-historic classification, as the data are insufficient for such purposes (see pages 2–14).

a. Late Upper Pleistocene

Sites of this period on mainland Southeast Asia have been found in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. In insular Southeast Asia, they have been found on the islands of Borneo (West Mouth), Palawan and Timor. The sites in each of these countries are summarized below, and also in Table I. 2.

Vietnam

Only brief descriptions of these finds are available in western literature. They are all from cave sites in North Vietnam. The caves of Thung Lang, Hang Hun, Keo Leng and those in the province of Quang-binh have been attributed to a late Upper Pleistocene period from 40,000 B.C. to the end of the Pleistocene (Davidson 1975). Like the West Mouth, the sites here revealed evidence of *Homo sapiens*. Mandibles and teeth of *Homo sapiens* were found but the estimate of 40,000 B.C. and a late upper Pleistocene epoch was based solely on the association with pebble tools and is therefore unreliable.

Laos

Fromaget (1940) attributed the lowest levels of artifact bearing deposit from late Upper Pleistocene epoch. The basis for this attribution was not made explicit. He found coarsely made tools of sandstone and schist in these levels. The preceramic deposit continued into the Holocene, and the artifacts from these levels were described as of the Hoabinbian tradition.

Philippines

Several sites have yielded "late Pleistocene (about 50,000 to 20,000 years ago) artifacts" (Beyer 1948: 80 in Fox 1970: 43). These sites are in the provinces of Batangas, Bulacan and Rizal in Luzon and the

TABLE I. 1 – Distribution of Pleistocene and Holocene Preceramic Sites in Southeast Asia

Site	Characteristic Finds	Reference
Burma:		
Yenangyaung (1937–38)* (Anyathian)	Pebble and flake tools	Movius 1937–38, 1943, 1944; de Terra 1937–38
Java:		
Baksoka Valley (1935) (Patjitanian)	Pebble tools and large flakes	von Koenigswald and Tweedie 1935 in Heekeren 1972
-- (1953, '54, '63)	Stone, bone and shell tools	Heekeren 1972
Tasik Malaya (Patjitanian)	Pebble tools and large flakes	Heekeren 1972
Djampang (Patjitanian)	resembling Baksoka Valley but not necessarily of same date	
Gombong (Patjitanian)		
Parigi (Patjitanian)		
Sangiran dome (1934, '38, '50–55, '68)	Small flake tools – scrapers, blade, points	Heekeren 1972.
Watulang (Ngandong)	Flakes, bone and horn	Heekeren 1972.

*Excavation dates whenever available.

Borneo:

Awangbangkal (1958)
West Mouth, Niah
Madai, Sabah

Philippines:

Cagayan Valley (1958)
Tabon (1966)

Basey (1968)
Pintui' (1968)

Vietnam:

Mt Do (1960-61)
Long-khanh (1908)
Vinh-phu (1968)
Xuan Loc
Tchong Doi
Yen Luong }
}

Cambodia:

Laang Spean (1965-68)
East Cambodia (1963)
(from Chhep to Snoul)

Pebble tools and flakes
Pebble tools and flasks
Pebble tools and flakes

Pebble tools and flakes
Utilized flakes and few pebble
tools
Flakes
Flakes and blades

Unretouched basalt flakes
Hand-axe pebble tools and flakes
Small unretouched pebble flakes
Pebble tools and flakes
Pebbles and flakes

Small flakes only
Pebbles tools and flakes

Soejono 1961, Heekeren 1972
T. Harrison 1958, 1972, 1974
T. Harrison 1970

von Koenigswald 1958a
Fox 1970

Hutterer 1974
Peterson 1974

Boriskovsky 1971, Solheim 1962
Davidson 1975
Davidson 1975
Solheim 1966, 1970b
Matthews 1966

Mourner 1970
Mourner 1977

Sumatra:	
Mungrup River (1937)	}
Saling River (1937)	
Tandjung karang (1937, '54)	
Kikim (1953)	
Bali:	
Sambiran (1961)	
(Patjitanian)	
Goa Selonding	
Flores:	
Soki cave (1962)	}
Rundung Cave (1952)	
Toge Cave (1952)	
Timor:	
Atambua	}
(Patjitanian)	
Kefannanu	
(Patjitanian)	
Uai Bobo 2	
Tools of fossils wood and volcanic rock	Soejono 1961, Heekeren 1972
Chopping tools, hand-axes, hand-adzes, scrapers	Soejono 1961
Hand-axes, side choppers, small flakes	Heekeren 1972
Bone scrapers	Soejono 1962
Flakes -- micropoints and arrowheads	Heekeren 1955-57
Flakes and blades	Heekeren 1972
Retouched chert flakes and cores	Glover & Glover 1970
Flakes	Glove 1971