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CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

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THE SITE OF GUA SIREH

This inland cave site proved to be important and has yielded some interesting finds, viewed not only in terms of the variety and amount of the materials recovered but also their significance. Solheim (1983:52), recognising the great potentiality of this site, recommended that it be re-investigated. The tentative findings presented in this report have not only proven Solheim correct, but should be taken as the basis for further and better controlled excavation of Gua Sireh.

The cave of Gua Sireh, located in west Sarawak, has yielded evidence of pre-pottery habitation by foraging people as early as 20,000 years ago. This is interesting as the site would have been about 500 kilometres inland at that time (Bellwood 1990), a certain indication that some inland regions of the tropical rainforest of Borneo were at least exploited then. During this period Gua Sireh would have been occasionally used for habitation. Both terrestrial and aquatic animals were hunted and freshwater shellfish and wild plant foods were gathered from around the immediate vicinity of the cave. The most favoured sources of meat during the early Holocene appear to have been pigs, monkeys, freshwater turtles and snakes or lizards. No evidence for tools apart from a few quartz and chert flakes has been found.

After about 5000 years ago the human picture at Gua Sireh began to take on a different appearance as a consequence of the colonisation of coastal and riverine parts of Borneo by Austronesian-speaking agriculturalists, perhaps from the north via the Philippines (Bellwood 1990). These new arrivals introduced some domesticated plants and animals as well as aspects of Neolithic material culture, such as the production of pottery and polished stone adzes. At Gua Sireh, some sherds with rice temper have been found from a level with a calibrated date of 4835-4096 BP (ANU 7049), although this date seems to be surprisingly early for rice in this region. The significance of this rare Bornean find will only be fully realised after the results of absolute dating by AMS radiocarbon on these sherds become available. With regard to domesticated animals, only further analysis of the badly fragmented bones, especially those of pigs, will indicate the possible time of their introduction into the region. However, remains of a dog found at Gua Sireh have been considered to be of late Neolithic date (Medway 1959b). At the same time, the collection of wild food resources not only continued but was expanded over a much wider environment to include marine shells.

Pottery probably first appeared at Gua Sireh between 3500 and 4500 years ago and continued to be made up to late prehistoric times. The pottery tradition in the site seems to

be fairly uniform through time. Close affinities can be observed with other pottery assemblages in Sarawak, especially with nearby sites such as Tanjong Kubor and Gua Bungoh. Affinities can be seen in the similar types of carved paddle-impression, especially the ribbed, herringbone, diamond motifs and crossed patterns, found in both sites. Similarities can also be seen with the Kupang (Brunei) pottery assemblage, where the same types of carved-paddle impression are present. However, some pottery from Gua Sireh appear also to have affinities with that at Niah in terms of cord- and basket-marked decoration as well as incised and impressed circle motifs. It is also likely that Gua Sireh, the Niah sites and the Kakus caves have one similar type of lip decoration i.e. the scalloped and curved lip.

From possibly 2000 years ago Gua Sireh began to be used for human burials. Grave goods include imported items such as monochrome glass and carnelian beads, cupreous and iron objects and, later on, gold beads. The glass and carnelian beads were either brought in from afar (south India or China), or from mainland Southeast Asia, thus denoting contacts between the interior and coastal traders. The metal objects could have been imported from the mainland or made locally, as sources of iron (Santubong) and gold (Bau) are found in the nearby areas. The presence of similar gold beads or studs at Bongkissam and Gua Sireh attests to close contacts between the two areas, coastal and inland, during this period.

During the middle of the second millennium AD, Chinese ceramics (Plates 54 & 55) were imported into the area around Gua Sireh through the Santubong, Samarahan and Sadong river ways. The tradewares, probably deposited as occupation debris and/or burial items suggest that the site was used until the last century (see Appendix B by F.D. Bulbeck). An unstratified sherd was also identified to be of the 16th century.

Though it is difficult to pinpoint the age of the charcoal drawings in Gua Sireh, they nevertheless depict attempts by an indigenous society to record or convey messages about traditional matters or events prior to the modern period. These unique drawings have been appropriately conserved and protected by the Sarawak Museum.



Plate 54: Right - Fragment of a brown glazed jar (Qing) recovered from Gua Sireh.

Left - Fragment of another glazed jar (late Ming) recovered from the Niah caves.