The Sarawak Museum Journal
Vol. LXVIII No. 89
December 2011

ISSN: 0375-3050
E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Lindsay Lloyd-Smith. (2011). Reclassification of Later Prehistoric Burials in the West Mouth of Niah Cave. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXVIII (89) : 53-152

RECLASSIFICATION OF LATER PREHISTORIC BURIALS IN THE WEST MOUTH OF NIAH CAVE

Lindsay Lloyd-Smith

ABSTRACT

The West Mouth of Niah Cave, Sarawak (Fig. 1), contained one of the largest and most varied collections of later prehistoric burials in Southeast Asia dating to between 12000 and 2000 years ago (B. Harrisson, 1967). Recent research has confirmed the date range of burial at the site, with 25 burials thought to date to sometime between 12,000 and 7500 years ago, and a Neolithic cemetery with over 200 burials dating to between c.3500 and 2200 years ago (Lloyd-Smith, 2009). The site provides a valuable baseline from which to make comparative studies of other prehistoric cemeteries in the region. Barbara Harrisson's classification of the Niah burials is a commendable achievement and clearly demonstrates her keen powers of field observation as well as her informed ideas on organising the complex and varied burial data. However, even at the time of publication the original classification did not include a all burials exposed by the end of the 1967 excavations. Burials up to B200A are listed; beyond these, flexed burial B205 is mentioned in the text (B. Harrisson, 1967; 136), and from the Harrisson Excavation Archives in the Sarawak Museum it is evident that burial numbers up to 209 were allocated by the close of the excavation. Furthermore, eleven burials were exposed by Zuraina Majid in 1977 (Zuraina Majid, 1982: 42), and the Niah Caves Project investigated 19 burials, (Barker et al., 2001, 2002a, 2003), some previously exposed and others which were new discoveries.

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INTRODUCTION

The West Mouth of Niah Cave, Sarawak (Fig. 1), contained one of the largest and most varied collections of later prehistoric burials in Southeast Asia dating to between 12,000 and 2000 years ago (B. Harrisson, 1967). Recent research has confirmed the date range of burial at the site, with 25 burials thought to date to sometime between 12,000 and 7500 years ago, and a Neolithic cemetery with over 200 burials dating to between *c.*3500 and 2200 years ago (Lloyd-Smith, 2009). The site provides a valuable baseline from which to make comparative studies of other prehistoric cemeteries in the region. Barbara Harrisson's classification of the Niah burials is a commendable achievement and clearly demonstrates her keen powers of field observation as well as her informed ideas on organising the complex and varied burial data. However, even at the time of publication the original classification did not include all burials exposed by the end of the 1967 excavations. Burials up to B200A are listed; beyond these, flexed burial B205 is mentioned in the text (B. Harrisson, 1967: 136), and from the Harrisson Excavation Archives in the Sarawak Museum it is evident that burial numbers up to 209 were allocated by the close of the excavation. Furthermore, eleven burials were exposed by Zurania Majid in 1977 (Zuraina Majid, 1982: 42), and the Niah Caves Project investigated 19 burials, (Barker *et al.*, 2001, 2002a, 2003), some previously exposed and others which were new discoveries.

Fig. 1: Location of Niah Caves in Sarawak. Inset photograph shows the West Mouth looking North across cave mouth towards the archaeological site. (Inset photograph: G. Barker).

The Niah Caves Project fieldwork in the Neolithic cemetery was followed by a doctoral research project investigating temporal and spatial patterning in burial practice at this site, and the cave of Lobang Jeragan located on the western side of the limestone massif (Lloyd-Smith, 2009). (Lobang Jeragan was completely excavated by the Sarawak Museum in 1962 and contained 55 prehistoric burials similar in appearance, and dating to the same period, as those in the West Mouth Neolithic cemetery.) As part of this doctoral research all burial features at these two sites were assessed and reclassified. The purpose of the original burial classification had been to 'provide a...working index...of all West Mouth burials' (B. Harrisson, 1967: 133), and while this was, by necessity, the point of departure for investigating variations in burial practice, a comprehensive reclassification was required for several reasons. Firstly, the question of what criteria define a 'proper' burial in the general sense was not explicitly addressed. Secondly, there was a number of anomalies in all the original burial types that did not conform to the spatial and stratigraphic norms of that particular group, which warranted clarification.

This article presents a reclassification of the burial data, with little interpretation offered on the possible meanings of the different burial types. A detailed interpretation of the history of changing burial practice at the Niah Caves is presented in Lloyd-Smith's (2009) PhD Thesis, a copy of which is in the Sarawak Museum Library. While this revised classification is proposed to replace the original classification put forward by Barbara Harrisson (1967), the earlier publication remains a valuable source of information on the Niah burials and should continue to be consulted alongside this and other papers (Barker *et al.*, 2011; Lloyd-Smith and Cole, 2010; Lloyd-Smith, in press a, b).

Following an explanation of the West Mouth burial number series and a brief discussion of the documentary and skeletal data which were consulted, the original classification is reviewed and the burials in each of the original burial types are examined. At the end of the paper, all 262 features allocated burial numbers are listed,

with columns giving the original and new classifications of burial types, the minimum number of individuals in each burial, and their age and sex status. Before moving of the Niah burial data, though, a few words need to be said on terminology.

Terminology

It is important to make a distinction between the terms: burial, cremation and mortuary practice. As defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'burial' implies: '1. a burying place, grave, or tomb; 2. the act of burying; interment; funeral; 3. the depositing of anything under earth or water, or enclosing it in some other substance' (Sykes, 1982: 122). Burial thus refers to the enclosing of human remains in the widest of senses. As archaeologists study the material remains of past human actions, burial is a suitable term to describe features where human remains are discovered. However, a more precise definition is required that distinguishes between *intentional* or *meaningful*, as opposed to *unintentional* or *casual* burial. In this article the term 'burial' is taken to mean the *deliberate deposition of human remains that results in a discrete mortuary feature*. In this respect the Niah Deep Skull and femur (Burial B73 in the original classification: Harrisson, 1967: 142-143) do not qualify as a 'proper' burial, but as casual deposition (this interpretation is based upon the depositional context of the remains discussed below; Gilbertson, 2005). Likewise, human bones were found in what has been termed Bone Layer I, in grid squares EB3(B) at 84"-96" (2.13-2.33 m), EA1[U/R] at 84"-96", EA2[U/R] at 84"-96", EB1 at 96"-106" (2.33-2.69 m), EB1 at 96"-106", and in Bone Layer II under the overhang, between 24" (0.60 m) and 60" (1.52 m) (Rabett *et al.*, 2006). While this material is the remains of a type of 'mortuary practice', it is hard to distinguish between whether this deposition was intentional or the result of casual disposal of the dead. For the purposes of this reclassification of the original burial types, loose human skeletal remains, are not included as 'burials'.

The word 'cremation' is commonly defined as 'the action of burning or cremating; the reduction of a corpse to ashes as a way

of disposing of it *in lieu* of interment' (Sykes, 1982: 223). While this highlights the important fact that there are many methods of disposing of a corpse that leave no physical remains, it is wrong to view cremation as a method for disposing of dead '*in lieu* of' interment. The act of cremation is just one of the many stages of treating the dead for final burial. When cremated human remains are interred in the ground, or within a raised structure, they are more fully described as 'cremation burials'.

The treatment of the body for burial, by cremation, anointment, or through the association of material artifacts (clothes, grave-goods, or containers for the body, etc) are all aspects of the more general concept of 'mortuary practice'. In this article the term 'mortuary practice' is taken to refer to the wider aspects of the treatment of the dead for burial, while the term 'burial' is used as the 'deliberate deposition of human remains'. Later on, a distinction shall be made between what is known as 'primary' and 'secondary' burial, but first, the West Mouth burial series and burial archive data will be reviewed, and the details of original burial classification described. Following this, a refined classification system will be proposed and all burials in each of the original burial types evaluated.

West Mouth Burial Series And Archives

Barbara Harrisson developed a systematic recording system to document the burials. As well as site diaries containing general observations on the progress of the work and notebooks specific to the excavation of each grid square, the burials were recorded in separate notebooks under headings: *situation, stratification, burial association, material associations*. Burials up to number B173 were located on a master excavation grid plan. Individual scale plans were also made of 132 burials showing their precise location in particular grid squares and spatial, and sometimes stratigraphic, relationships to adjacent burials. Photographic recording of the Harrisson excavations was extensive. A remarkable 1456 black and white photographs (1252 medium format and 204 in 35 mm) were taken between 1954 and 1967. The total number of images that contain

burials is 621, and of these 457 are within the Neolithic cemetery.

During the final season of excavation, archaeologists and physical anthropologists Richard and Sheilagh Brooks assisted in the recording and excavation of the burials. Their personal archive consists of seven notebooks and 198 black and white 35 mm photos. The Brooks carried out osteological analysis on all burials taken to the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV), and published two articles on the material: one correlating arm position of extended burials with sex (Brooks and Brooks 1968), the other discusses a series of 30 radiocarbon dates produced on bone collagen and apatite (Brooks *et al.*, 1979).

By the end of the 1967 season at Niah, 181 burials had been fully excavated (this number refers to the total number of allocated burial numbers, including 37 burials then classified as 'disturbed fragments'). The intention had been to return for one final season and complete the excavation of the cemetery. However, this never took place and 33 burials (all in the Neolithic cemetery) were left exposed *in situ* at the site behind protective fencing. After the end of the excavation, 112 of the excavated burials were loaned to UNLV. The other 69 burials were stored at the Sarawak Museum. In preparation for publishing the 1967 classification, all burial descriptions from the various field notebooks were transcribed and collected into a single machine-typed archive.

In 1977 Zuraina Majid exposed eleven burials (Zuraina Majid, 1982: 46). However, beyond stating that a jade pendant was discovered 7" above a burial in grid square MD3, these burials are not located or described in any further detail. No original field documentation of these eleven burials has been located. These burials remained *in situ*, and their positions were surveyed in 2003 by the Niah Cave Project (Barker *et al.*, 2003). By correlating the grid locations of the exposed burials with ceramic sherds labelled with 1977 burial numbers (301-311) and grid squares, it has been possible to re-label and re-identify the majority of the exposed burials. Seven of the 1977 burials are located in grid squares MD3 and MD4, and in the extension to the south. One of these burials, noted in 1977

as missing both radius arm bones, was lifted by Zuraina Majid in 2004 (Zuraina Majid *et al.*, 2005). A further four unlabelled, exposed, burials were also located adjacent to the cave wall, in grid squares J9 and J21–23. These are most likely the remaining four exposed burials from the 1977 excavations. Most recently, the Niah Caves Project (NCP 2000-2003), investigated nineteen burials: three previously exposed by the Harrissons; three exposed by Zuraina Majid; and thirteen previously unknown burials. In NCP publications these were allocated burial numbers NCP1 to NCP19 (Barker *et al.*, 2001, 2002, 2003).

In this article the different burial number series are now combined. The original index has been maintained and burials investigated by Zuraina Majid and the Niah Caves Project have been re-allocated burial numbers (Table 1).

Table 1: The burial number series for the West Mouth, Niah Cave.

Burial Numbers	Investigator / Year
Burials 1 – 209, 233	Harrisson Excavations 1954 – 1967
Burials 210 – 221	Niah Caves Project 2001 – 2003
Burials 222 – 232	Zuraina Majid 1977

Of the 33 burials left exposed *in situ* at the site in 1967, three were excavated by the NCP in 2001-2003 (Barker *et al.*, 2001, 2002, 2003). Eleven burials were exposed in 1977 (Zuraina Majid, 1982: 46), one of which (now allocated number B232) was lifted in 2004 (Zuraina Majid and Pfister, 2005). Of the twelve newly exposed burials investigated by the NCP, five were completely lifted, and the remaining seven were left *in situ* and re-buried. In the 2003 survey, the locations of all 48 *in situ* burials were identified, but, only 42 had remains surviving.

In 1967, 112 burials were published as on loan to the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) for analysis by Sheilagh and Richard Brooks (B. Harrisson, 1967: 189). In 2004 Zuraina Majid assessed the collection held at UNLV and stated that 122 burial remains could be located: 71 as published in 1967 and 18 which had been previously