



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXVIII No. 89

December 2011



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Stephen Chia et al. (2011). Archaeological Survey in Gunung Mulu National Park, Miri, Sarawak. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXVIII (89): 153-182

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY IN GUNUNG MULU NATIONAL PARK, MIRI, SARAWAK

Stephen Chia, Velat Bujeng, Suresh Narayanan and Dana Badang

### INTRODUCTION

This article presents the results of archaeological fieldwork conducted in Gunung Mulu National Park, Miri, Sarawak in 2010. The fieldwork includes mainly survey at caves and rockshelters located in the limestone formations of Melinau and Gunung Api in southern region of the Gunung Mulu National Park (Fig. 1). The survey was carried out by a research team from the Centre for Global Archaeological Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, the Sarawak Museum Department, and the Department of Minerals and Geoscience Malaysia, Kuching, Sarawak. The results of the survey revealed a number of rockshelters which have been used as burial sites by the Tring community.

The Gunung Mulu National Park (N 4° 3' and E 114° 49') is located in the northern part of Sarawak, about 110 km from Miri town (Fig. 1). The park is accessible by air from Miri or by speed boat from Kuala Baram via Marudi. The park is widely known for its tropical rainforest, geology and geomorphological landscape of the Paleocene-Eocene Era (Mulu Formation), Late Eocene-Early Miocene Period (Melinau Limestone) and Miocene Period (Setap Shale Formation) (Haile, 1962; Laily, 1992; Dana, 2001). The park contains "the longest cave system in Southeast Asia", and unique limestone pinnacles (Brook & Waltham, 1978; Eavis, 1985; Dana, 2001). In 2000, the Gunung Mulu National Park was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.



# ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY IN GUNUNG MULU NATIONAL PARK, MIRI, SARAWAK

*by*

Stephen Chia, Velat Bujeng, Suresh Narayanan and Dana Badang

## INTRODUCTION

**T**his article presents the results of archaeological fieldwork conducted in the Gunung Mulu National Park, Miri, Sarawak in 2010. The fieldwork includes mainly survey at caves and rockshelters located in the limestone formations of Melinau and Gunung Api in the southern region of the Gunung Mulu National Park (Fig. 1). The survey was carried out by a research team from the Centre for Global Archaeological Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, the Sarawak Museum Department, and the Department of Minerals and Geoscience Malaysia, Kuching, Sarawak. The results of the survey revealed a number of rockshelters which have been used as burial sites by the Tring community.

The Gunung Mulu National Park (N 4° 3' and E 114° 49') is located in the northern part of Sarawak, about 110 km from Miri town (Fig. 1). The park is accessible by air from Miri or by speedboat from Kuala Baram via Marudi. The park is widely known for its tropical rainforest, geology and geomorphological landscape of the Paleocene-Eocene Era (Mulu Formation), Late Eocene-Early Miocene Period (Melinau Limestone) and Miocene Period (Setap Shale Formation) (Haile, 1962; Laily, 1992; Dana, 2001). The park contains "the longest cave system in Southeast Asia", and unique limestone pinnacles (Brook & Waltham, 1978; Eavis, 1985; Dana, 2001). In 2000, the Gunung Mulu National Park was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The first formal archaeological survey in Mulu was done by



**Fig. 1:** The locations of caves and rockshelters surveyed in Gunung Mulu National Park, Miri, Sarawak.

Tom Harrisson who visited the Deer Cave and some other caves in the Mulu region in 1951. Harrisson (1962) reported finding an old Tring burial site at the Deer Cave and took some of the pottery, beads, skull and bones for comparative purpose but no further archaeological work was carry out there. In 1977-78, archaeological survey carried out by the Sarawak Museum Department revealed that some of the caves in Mulu were used for funerary purposes in recent times as suggested by the presence of imported Chinese ceramics. However, the findings were not published and no further archaeological work was carried out. In 1989, the first systematic archaeological excavation in Mulu was undertaken by Ipoi Datan (1993) at the site of Lobang Angin. He reported the findings of the "three-colour ware", double-spouted vessels, cord-marked pottery and marine shells. The excavations at Lubang Angin also uncovered prehistoric burials dated from 1,000 BC to 500 CE (Datan, 1993).

## SURVEY OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

A systematic archaeological survey was conducted at the caves and rockshelters of Gunung Api in Gunung Mulu National Park, Miri, Sarawak. The main objective of the survey is to collect data on the prehistory of Gunung Mulu National Park. This is because one of the caves, Lubang Angin, in the Gunung Mulu National Park had produced evidence for the existence of a prehistoric culture. As such, a comprehensive survey is needed to search and to identify other potential archaeological sites around the Gunung Api formation in order to gain more insights into the early history of the Gunung Mulu National Park.

The location and elevation of caves and rockshelters surveyed were recorded using the GPS (Global Positioning System) as well as the previous topographical and geological maps of the Gunung Mulu National Park (Sheet 4/114/16). The caves and rockshelters were investigated, examined, recorded and evaluated to determine their archaeological potential based on surface finds and whether these sites are suitable for human habitation or burial.



## FIELDWORK IN GUNUNG MULU NATIONAL PARK

The archaeological survey in Gunung Mulu National Park was carried out over a period of two weeks from 30<sup>th</sup> July to 14<sup>th</sup> August 2010. Since the main objective of the survey is to search and identify potential archaeological sites, the caves and rockshelters of Gunung Api in the Gunung Mulu National Park were targeted for survey. In addition, survey was also done around Gunung Pala, Bukit Susu, Sungai Melinau, estuary of Sungai Tutoh, Kerangkas area (Headhunter Trail), Melinau Gorge and Bukit Berar. The following discusses the results of the survey conducted in these areas.

### *1. Rockshelter 1 and 2*

Rockshelter 1 (N 04° 01' 27.4", E 114° 49' 19.0", 30 m above sea level) is located about 30 minutes on foot from the main office of Gunung Mulu National Park (Fig. 1). The rockshelter is 9.29 m



**Fig. 2:** Human bones found at Rockshelter 2, Sungai Payau.

long and 11.5 m wide. The height of the shelter from the floor to the ceiling is about 2 to 3 m. The floor of the shelter is dry because it receives direct sunlight but no prehistoric artefact was discovered during the survey. A river pebble stone found inside the shelter suggested that it was previously part of an old river.

Rockshelter 2 (N 04° 01' 43.4", E 114° 49' 04.0", 30.2 m above sea level), on the other hand, is situated near Sungai Payau. Survey at this shelter revealed a scatter of disturbed human bones (Fig. 2). According to the locals, the shelter was used by the Tring community as a jar burial site. However, no remnants of jars or stonewares were found in the shelter during the survey. It is believed that the stonewares might have been stolen by treasure hunters which probably explained the disturbed nature of the human bones and the burial.

## 2. *Mayday Cave (Lubang Mei Siang)*

Mayday Cave is situated in the south lower cliff of Deer Cave (Fig. 3). The location of the cave according to our GPS reading is N 04° 01' 26.6", E 114° 49' 13.0" and 58 m above sea level. The cave is 11.6 m long, 7.8 m wide and 4.5 m high. The cave floor was even and dry because it receives direct sunlight. Although the cave appeared to be suitable for human but no prehistoric artefact was found on the cave floor during the survey. There was a small number of freshwater shell remains, possibly deposited by an old river that flowed through this cave. A similar situation is observed in the sites located near Sungai Melinau Paku. The Mayday Cave water had flowed and joined a number of the rivers of Gua Payau (Brook & Waltham, 1978).

## 3. *Lang Cave (Gua Lang)*

This cave is located within the formation of Deer Cave (Fig. 3). The height of the cave is about 2 to 3 m. Survey was only conducted at the entrance because the inside of the cave was pitch-dark. No artefacts were found. There was an underground river and the cave has potential for eco-tourism because of its beautiful and spectacular