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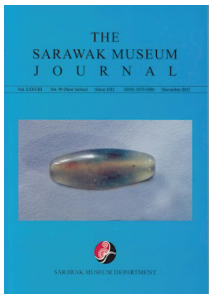

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT TRADER'S CAVE, NIAH NATIONAL PARK: REPORT ON THE FIRST (2017) FIELD SEASON

Darren Curnoe, Ipoi Datan, Mohammed Sherman Sauffi William, Go Hsiao Mei, Michael Slack, Rohan Peiris and Xue-feng Sun

INTRODUCTION

Over 60 years the Niah Caves in Sarawak has been an iconic archaeological locality in insular Southeast Asia (iSEA) (Fig. 1). Moreover, until recently, the so-called 'Deep Skull' found in 1958 during excavations in the West Mouth led by Tom and Barbara Harrisson provided the earliest physical evidence for Anatomically Modern Humans (AMH) in the region (Brothwell 1960; Harrisson, 1967; Kennedy 1977). The most recent dating estimates for the Deep Skull from direct uranium series analysis of two skull fragments place it at 35.2+2.6 ka (error weighted average) (Pike 2016), and through Bayesian modeling combining AMS 1C of charcoal and direct U-series dating of human bone to c39-30 ka (at 94.5 per cent probability) (Higham et al. 2016). However, the recent re-dating of AMH at Lida Ajder in Sumatra within the range 73,000-63,000 years ago (Westaway et al. 2017) means, of course, that the distinction of 'earliest no longer rests with the Deep Skull. Still, the historical importance of the West Mouth shouldn't be underestimated as much of our current understanding about late Pleistocene-late Holocene prehistory in the region centres on the discoveries made by the Harrisson's in the Niah Great Cave Complex (NGCC).

Keywords:

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During the period 1954-1967 Tom and Barbara Harrisson oversaw the excavation of more than 260 isolated human bones and partial skeletons making the West Mouth one of the largest repositories of prehistoric human remains in iSEA (Harrisson 1967, 1972; Barker and Farr 2016). A further 11 Iron Age inhumations were exposed during excavations led by Zuraina Majid in 1977 (Zuraina 1982), while Graeme Barker and co-workers investigated an additional 12 burials during fieldwork from 2000-2003 (Barker 2013; Barker and Farr 2016; Lloyd-Smith 2016). In total, 262 burials have been

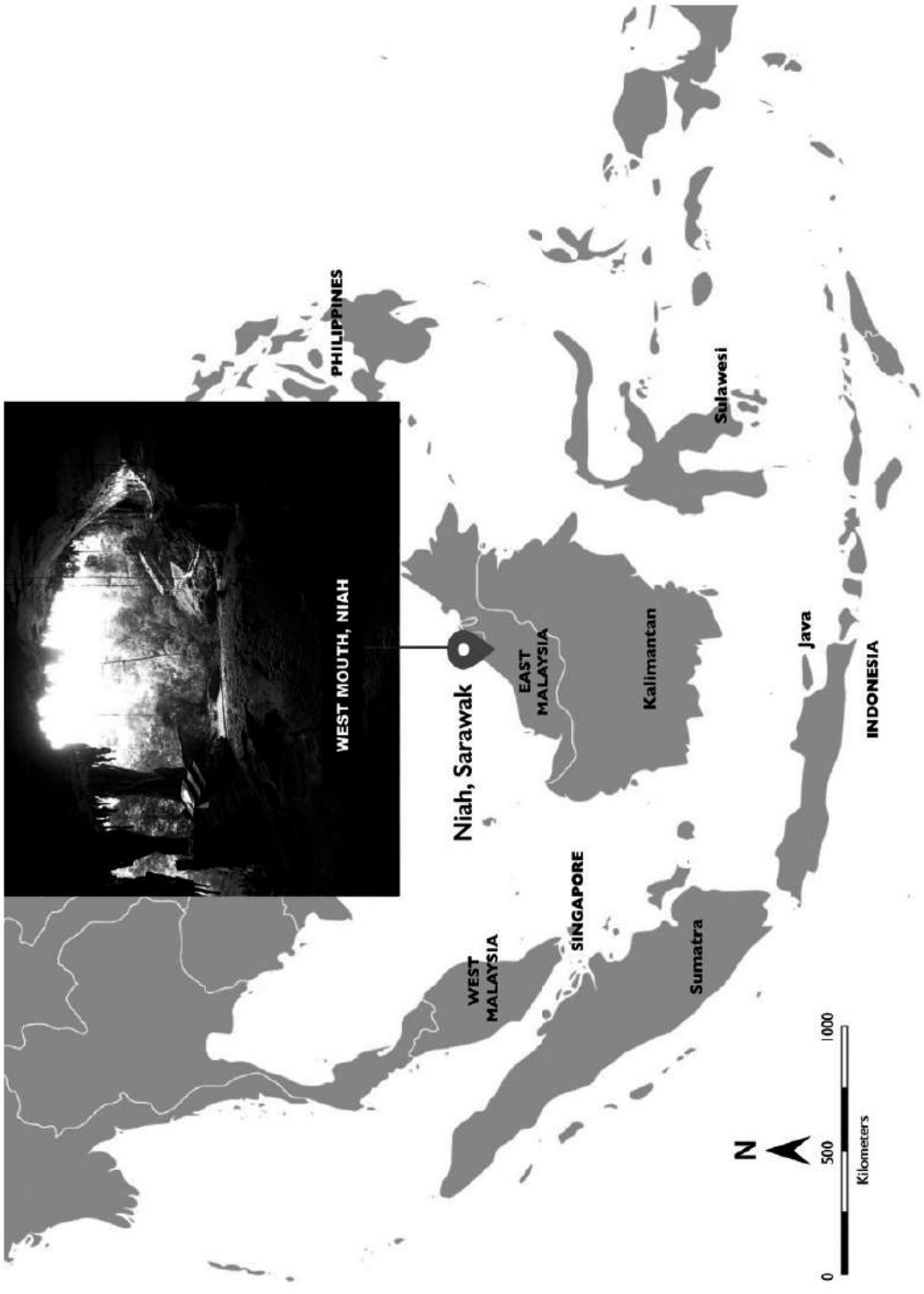

Fig. 1: Location of the Niah Great Cave Complex within Southeast Asia (map Adobe Stock purchased under an extended license).

formally recognised the vast majority of which are associated with a Neolithic cemetery dating *c*4-2 ka (Lloyd-Smith 2016). Furthermore, with the base of the Pleistocene 'Hell Trench' deposits estimated to be >50 ka (Gilbertson *et al.* 2013; Hunt and Barker 2014; Reynolds *et al.* 2016), the West Mouth continues to be one the earliest, and certainly the most extensively studied, Upper Palaeolithic localities in the region.

Besides Zuriana's work in the West Mouth (Zuraina 1982), the 'Niah Caves Project' directed by G. Barker saw a new series of fieldwork investigations undertaken in the NGCC between 2000 and 2003 focused mainly on the West Mouth. Subsequent analytical work on the vast amount of data collected continued for a further decade and involved 75 researchers in archaeology, geomorphology, palynology and paleobiology. The results have provided major insights into the sediment history, dating, palaeoecology, material culture, physical anthropology, paleodiet and of the West Mouth deposits and recovered materials among other things, and have been summarised in two major monographs (Barker 2013; Barker and Farr 2016).

The Harrissons also undertook smaller scale excavations in other cave entrances of the NGCC, at Lubang Hangus and Gan Kira where they also recovered a rich record of Late Pleistocene through to later Holocene human occupation of the caves (Harrisson 1966). Subsequent investigations were undertaken by the Niah Caves Project team in both of these areas and have added greatly to our understanding of the geomorphological and palaeoecological history of these cave entrances as well as their archaeology (Piper *et al.* 2016). Beyond the main caves, Tom Harrisson excavated Iron Age deposits and investigated rock art at Kain Hitam (Painted Cave) contained in a small (separate) limestone hill located at southeast corner of the NGCC (Harrisson 1958). The Niah Caves Project team also undertook further investigations at Painted Cave A (Piper *et al.* 2016), while excavations were undertaken at Painted Cave B in a project involving researchers from Universiti Sains Malaysia and the Sarawak Museum Department leading to the recovery of several Iron Age and Neolithic human skeletons (Bujeng and Chia 2012). Further afield, the Harrissons also excavated a number of Neolithic and Iron Age burials at the cave site of Mangala, on the southern-most fringe of the Mount Subis massif along the Sekaloh River, again in a place where the river passes beneath the exposed limestone (Harrisson and Harrisson 1968). The location no longer exists owing to recent quarrying activities.