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GUA BUMO I AND II: TWO NEWLY-DISCOVERED ROCK ART SITES IN SERIAN, SARAWAK, MALAYSIAN BORNEO

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ABSTRACT

Rock art traditions on Borneo and in Sarawak are globally recognized as anthropologically significant and unique – modern humans first created rock art on Borneo at least 37.2 ka and engaged in the cultural practice through the mid-twentieth century in Sarawak – yet remain under-researched. This article details the discovery, during 2015 dissertation field research, as well as preliminary observations regarding Gua Bumo I and Gua Bumo II - two new black rock drawing sites in Serian, Sarawak. Gua Bumo I and Gua Bumo II are two proximal cave systems found in Gunung Nambi, Serian, the limestone karst outcrop that hosts the well-known archaeological and rock art site of Gua Sireh. These two new Bornean rock art sites evince rock art making traditions and cultural practices potentially affiliated with Austronesian settlers or indigenous people restricted to Borneo and perhaps locally to Serian, as well as a visual record of the Japanese occupation of Borneo during World War II. Gua Bumo I and Gua Bumo II expand the breadth and depth of relatively young black-pigmented rock art traditions in Sarawak, on Borneo, and throughout Island Southeast Asia. Future research directions include archaeological investigation through excavation and direct dating of Gua Bumo I and Gua Bumo II coupled with systematic reconnaissance survey for additional rock art sites in Sarawak.

Keywords: Borneo rock art, black rock drawings, Bidayuh, Gua Sireh, Serian, Sarawak

GUA BUMO I AND II: TWO NEWLY-DISCOVERED ROCK ART SITES IN SERIAN, SARAWAK, MALAYSIAN BORNEO

*GUA BUMO I DAN II: DUA TAPAK SENI
LUKISAN BATU YANG BARU DITEMUI DI
SERIAN, SARAWAK, BORNEO MALAYSIA*

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ABSTRAK

Tradisi seni rock di Borneo dan di Sarawak diiktiraf secara global sebagai signifikan dan unik dari segi antropologi - manusia moden mula-mula mencipta seni rock di Borneo sekurang-kurangnya 37.2 ka dan terlibat dalam amalan budaya melalui pertengahan abad kedua puluh di Sarawak - namun masih kurang diselidiki. Artikel ini memperincikan penemuan serta pemerhatian awal berkenaan Gua Bumo I dan Gua Bumo II - dua tapak lukisan batu hitam baharu di Serian, Sarawak. Gua Bumo I dan Gua Bumo II ialah dua sistem gua proksimal yang terdapat di Gunung Nambi, Serian, singkapan karst batu kapur yang menempatkan tapak seni arkeologi dan batuan terkenal Gua Sireh. Kedua-dua tapak seni rock Borneo baharu ini membuktikan seni rock membuat tradisi dan amalan budaya yang berpotensi bergabung dengan peneroka Austronesia atau orang asli yang terhad di Borneo dan mungkin tempatan ke Serian, serta rekod visual pendudukan Jepun di Borneo semasa Perang Dunia II. Gua Bumo I dan Gua Bumo II memperluaskan keluasan dan kedalaman tradisi seni rock berpigmen hitam yang agak muda di Sarawak, di Borneo, dan di seluruh Pulau Asia Tenggara. Arah penyelidikan masa depan termasuk penyiasatan arkeologi melalui penggalian dan pentarikhkan langsung Gua Bumo I dan Gua Bumo II ditambah dengan tinjauan tinjauan sistematik untuk tapak seni batu tambahan di Sarawak.

Kata Kunci: Lukisan Batu Borneo, lukisan batu hitam, Bidayuh, Gua Sireh, Serian, Sarawak

INTRODUCTION

Borneo and Sarawak's distinctive rock art traditions represent some of the oldest and youngest rock art on the planet - a modern human cultural practice dating to at least 37.2 ka on Borneo and extending for millenia through at least the 1950s in Sarawak (Harrisson, 1958; Harrisson and Harrisson, 1970; Datan, 1993; Chia and Datan, 2003; Forest Department Sarawak, 2009, p. 15; Janowski and Langub, 2011, p. 127; Janowski, 2014, p. 18; Aubert *et al.*, 2014; Aubert *et al.*, 2018, p. 255; Hoerman and William, *In press*). A global human cultural practice, rock art creation involves the modification of naturally-occurring, fixed-in-place stone, typically through the addition of drawn or painted pigments, or through the reduction or modification of natural

material (the Rock Art Network, 2024). Growing recognition of Borneo and Sarawak's rock art and its informative potential for island-wide and regional archaeological, historical, and ethnographic narratives characterizes the last 15 years (Fage *et al.*, 2010; Taçon, Sauffi, and Datan, 2010; Taçon *et al.*, 2014; Tan, 2014; Janowski, 2014; Aubert *et al.*, 2014; Hoerman, 2016; Aubert *et al.*, 2018; Huntley *et al.*, 2023; Hoerman and William, *In press*), a trend that includes the 2024 inscription of the archaeological heritage of the Niah National Park's Caves Complex - and its 50 ka history of human habitation and Holocene rock art - on the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List (Department of National Heritage, Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture, Sarawak Forestry Corporation, and Sarawak Museum Department 2024). Aligning with heightened recognition of Borneo and Sarawak's rock art heritage, this article reports the 2015 discovery of two new rock art sites containing black drawings from Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. It describes and contextualizes the rock art sites, integrates them into Pan-Bornean and regional rock art records, and concludes with a discussion of their potential archaeological implications and future research avenues that could support or revise these preliminary observations.

METHODS

The sites were discovered during Dr. Hoerman's 2015 dissertation fieldwork, which was conducted in collaboration with Sarawak Museum Department staff and administrators¹. The goal of the fieldwork was the archaeological inventory survey of Sarawak's known rock art sites, and targeted reconnaissance survey for additional rock art sites. Potential additional rock art sites were identified using a combination of background research, limited information sourced from the Sarawak Museum Archives (the archives were partially accessible as they were transitioned to the new Borneo Cultures Museum in Kuching), and informal consultation with Sarawak Museum Department staff and administrators, local researchers, and community members. Fieldwork occurred in April 2015 and was undertaken with Sarawak Museum Department archaeologist Mr. Bonnie Ak Umpi and local guide Ecol Ngtu with the permission of the Kampong Bantong Headman.

¹ It is important to note Gua Burao I and II were known to members of the local community as haunted and graffitied caves.