THE SARAWAK MUSEUM JOURNAL

https://museum.sarawak.gov.my

The Sarawak Museum Journal
Vol. LV No. 76
December 2000

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

Citation: Graeme Barker et al. (2000). The Niah Caves Project: Preliminary Report on the First (2000). The Sarawak Museum Journal, LV (76): 111-149

THE NIAH CAVES PROJECT: PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE FIRST (2000) SEASON

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INTRODUCTION

The Niah Caves are a complex of underground caverns within a limestone hill that is the northern outlier of the Gunong Subis,a limestone massif situated on the sub-coastal sandy plain of northern Sarawak (Wilford, 1964; Fig. 1). The Great Cave that cuts through the Niah hill measures some ten hectares in floor area and 75 metres in height. There is a single main entrance on the western side (the West Mouth), and the cavern then splits into a series of caves and channels, the main entrances on the eastern and southern sides being (clockwise) Lobang Tulang, Lobang Angus, Gan Kira, and Tahi Menimbum. The caves are the home to huge populations of bats and swiftlets, both ofwhich have long been an important source of income for local people; the bat guano is an excellent manure, and the swiftlets' nests are sold for high pricesas they are highly prized for Chinese birds' nest soup.

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Tom Harrisson, Curator of Sarawak Museum between 1947 and 1967, excavated in the West Mouth of the Great Cave from 1954 to 1962, his wife Barbara continuing until 1967 (Heimann, 1997; Figs. 2 and 3). The total excavation was estimated as the equivalent of four years' fieldwork. The excavations were in many respects admirable for their time, particularly given the considerable logistical difficulties that had to be overcome because of the isolation of the site and the difficulties of

working in tropical environments: they involved painstaking excavation, the systematic recovery and cataloguing of finds, the early use of radiocarbon (C^{14}) dating, the detailed study of the prolific fauna by an experienced zoologist (Lord Medway, the fifth Earl of Cranbrook), and the involvement at various stages of the programme of specialists in fields such as soil science, geology, and physical anthropology. The most notable discovery was a human skull (the so-called 'Deep Skull') in a deep sounding (termed 'Hell' by the excavators because of its heat and humidity, especially in the afternoon when it is in direct sunlight). The skull was approximately at a level where stone tools had been found previously together with charcoal that had yielded a radiocarbon date of around 40,000 years ago, the earliest evidence for human settlement on Borneo (Brothwell, 1960). In addition to this palaeolithic occupation in the late Pleistocene, the excavators found evidence for settlement in the early Holocene by mesolithic foragers, and then for burials by pottery-using people from about 4000 years ago, the sequence ending with occupation through the past two millennia dated especially by imported Chinese ceramics. The Harrissons also excavated in at least a dozen other sites at Niah, including the Lobang Tulang, Lobang Angus and Gan Kira entrances of Niah and the Kain Hitam (Painted Cave) on the edge of the Gunong Subis, where there was a remarkable series of wooden boat coffins dated to the first millennium AD, as well as paintings on the rock wall including motifs such as boats being paddled, and dancing figures.

The Harrissons never published a final comprehensive report on their Niah excavations, but it is clear from the numerous interim reports published by them and their collaborators (e.g. B. Harrisson, 1958, 1959, 1967, 1968; T. Harrisson, 1957, 1958a, 1958b, 1959, 1960, 1965, 1966, 1970, 1971; Harrisson and Medway, 1962; von Koenigswald, 1958; Medway, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1966, 1977a, 1977b; Yim, 1963), and from the prolific finds from the excavations now stored in Sarawak Museum (stone tools, pottery, bone tools, human