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**CONFIRMATION OF AN EARLY DATE FOR THE PRESENCE OF RICE IN BORNEO****Paul Beavitt, Edmund Kurui and Jill Thompson****ABSTRACT**

Examination by Dr. Peter Bellwood and Ipoi Datan in 1989 of sherds of pottery from the cave site of Gua Sireh in Sarawak, indicated that husks had been used as a temper which had been added to clay to prevent breakage during the firing process. A rice grain was also found as an accidental inclusion in pottery from an earlier phase at the site. When dated by the technique known as Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS), this revealed a surprisingly early date for the presence of rice in the Equatorial and Island part of South-East Asia (Ipoi and Bellwood, 1991, Bellwood et al 1992). This date was  $3850 \pm 260$  B.P., or a mean date of 2334 B.C. if calibrated (CAMS 725). In many ways this very early date is surprising for Borneo given that traditions and historical accounts indicate that much of the population was dependent on hunting wild animals and eating wild sago until a relatively short time ago. The spread of rice cultivation was thought thus to have been largely a phenomenon of the last five hundred years, and in many interior areas only of the last fifty years. There is indeed still a significant present-day population of hunter-gatherers living in the interior forests.

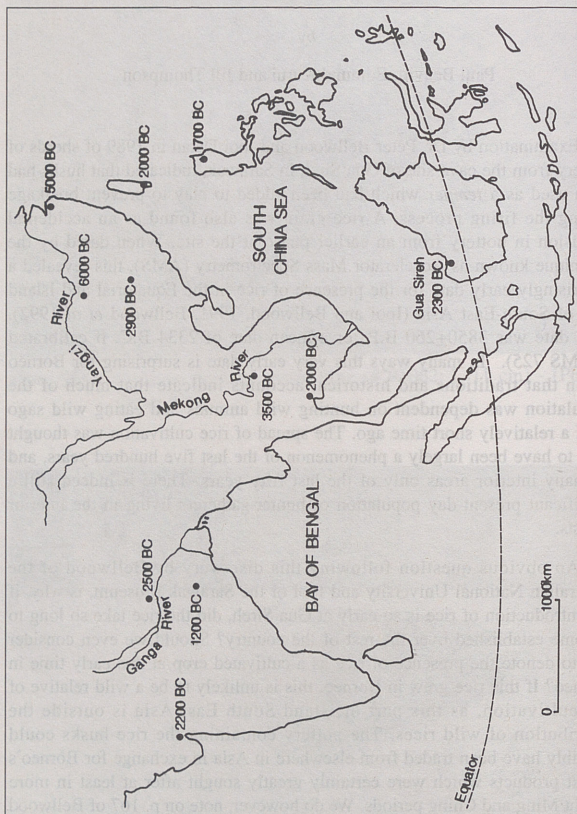
## CONFIRMATION OF AN EARLY DATE FOR THE PRESENCE OF RICE IN BORNEO

by

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Examination by Dr. Peter Bellwood and Ipoi Datan in 1989 of sherds of pottery from the cave site of Gua Sireh in Sarawak, indicated that husks had been used as a *temper* which had been added to clay to prevent breakage during the firing process. A rice grain was also found as an accidental inclusion in pottery from an earlier phase at the site. When dated by the technique known as Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS), this revealed a surprisingly early date for the presence of rice in the Equatorial and Island part of South-East Asia (Ipoi and Bellwood, 1991, Bellwood *et al* 1992). This date was  $3850 \pm 260$  B.P., or a mean date of 2334 B.C. if calibrated (CAMS 725). In many ways this very early date is surprising for Borneo given that traditions and historical accounts indicate that much of the population was dependent on hunting wild animals and eating wild sago until a relatively short time ago. The spread of rice cultivation was thought thus to have been largely a phenomenon of the last five hundred years, and in many interior areas only of the last fifty years. There is indeed still a significant present-day population of hunter-gatherers living in the interior forests.

An obvious question following this discovery by Bellwood of the Australian National University and Ipoi of the Sarawak Museum, is why, if the introduction of rice is so early at Gua Sireh, did the rice take so long to become established over the rest of the country? Should we even consider this to denote the presence of rice as a cultivated crop at this early time in Borneo? If this rice grew in Borneo, this is unlikely to be a wild relative of the cultivation, as this part of island South East Asia is outside the distribution of wild rices. The pottery containing the rice husks could possibly have been traded from elsewhere in Asia in exchange for Borneo's forest products which were certainly greatly sought after at least in more recent Ming and Ching periods. We do however, note on p. 167 of Bellwood *et al* (1992) that the fabric appears to be local to the site. The traded forest products included rhinoceros horn, hornbill "ivory", edible birds' nests and the gall stones of a number of exotic animals which were used in traditional Chinese medicines. In this trade, pottery jars from China were a major



**Map 1:** Dates for evidence of rice in China, India and South-East Asia (after Bellwood *et al* 1992).