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CHAPTER 7: THE CHARCOAL DRAWINGS AT GUA SIREH

Ipoi Datan

Rock art sites in island Southeast Asia are not only few in number, but they have received scant attention from social scientists, including archaeologists, until very recently. There were slightly over thirty recorded sites in the whole region including the mainland in 1986 (Kusch 1986:99) and the information available on many is often sketchy and poorly illustrated. So far there are five reliable reports of rock art sites in Borneo. One is situated in the Baturong caves in southeast Sabah (Bellwood 1988); one in Liang Lumba cave on Mount Mandella in Kalimantan (Grabowsky 1888 in Kusch 1986:100); and three in Sarawak- Kain Hitam, Niah (Harrisson 1958a, 1958b), the Sarang caves. Upper Kakus basin (Harrisson and Reavis 1966), and Gua Sireh (Solheim 1960, 1983). All the above-mentioned Bornean sites have rock drawings in charcoal, except for Kain Hitam which has drawings in red haematite.

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INTRODUCTION

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THE CHARCOAL DRAWINGS AT GUA SIREH

This chapter offers a description and tentative interpretation of the Gua Sireh drawings. Though their existence was first noted in 1959, when Harrisson and Solheim excavated in the cave, an intended report on the drawings unfortunately did not eventuate, as explained earlier (Solheim 1983:20). However, a photographic record of the drawings was made at this time. A second attempt to record all the drawings and their locations in the cave was made by the Sarawak Museum in 1980. This coincided with some conservation work on the drawings which had been slightly damaged as a result of vandalism (Gasing 1980). The walls were also cleaned to remove modern graffiti in paint and chalk.

The drawings are mainly found on the southwestern rear wall of the cave and on the hanging limestone curtains and sides of the small chamber (Figure 41). It is estimated that no less than 36 linear metres of the cave wall, which is of pale fine-grained limestone (Wilford 1964:47), have been drawn upon. The surfaces on which the drawings occur are mostly perpendicular, sometimes slightly concave or convex. The drawings were mostly done between 1 and 3 metres above the cave floor though there are some considerably higher, especially on the hanging curtains (Plates 46 & 47). To reach these heights some sort of platform or ladder was probably used. The figures range between 10 cm and 1.5 m in height.

During the 1989 research the drawings were first traced onto thin transparent plastic sheets in the groups designated by number in 1980 (Figure 41). The sheets were then photographically reduced, and then traced to produce the illustrations (Figures 42 to 54) for this report.

The technique employed to produce the original drawings in Gua Sireh was mainly freehand drawing, as no stencil or engraving has been observed. It is probable that charcoal sticks or lumps were used as crayons. Charcoal would have been easily available and would need no special preparation.

The drawings comprise both figurative (85 %) and non-figurative (15 %) designs. The dominant figurative designs are anthropomorphic figures which are present in all groups. These figures are drawn in two main styles with respect to the delineation of their bodies. Those of the first style have triangular or geometrical bodies which are filled in or blackened (e.g. Figures 45, 48 & 52). In the second style the body is not filled and vertical lines which may represent spinal columns are obvious (e.g. Figures 46 b, 53 b). These two body styles often appear together in the same scene, where the former usually outnumber the latter, except in Figure 53 b. Some figures have more rounded bodies than the average (Figures 45 a, 50 a), whereas others at the other extreme are simply stick figures (Figures 44 a, 49 b).

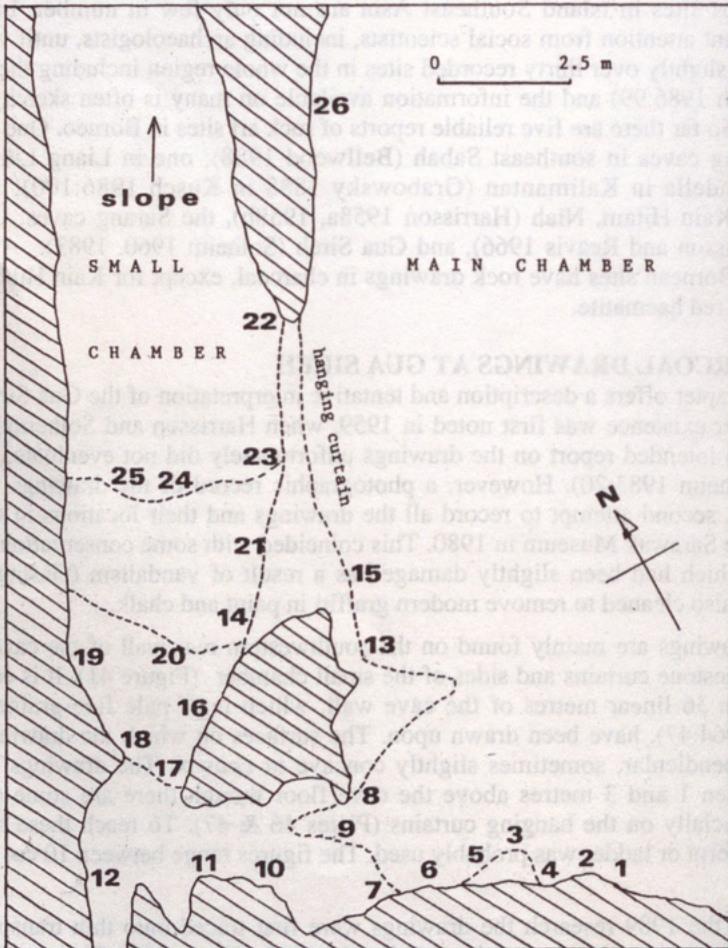


Figure 41: The locations of numbered charcoal drawing groups in Gua Sireh (Reproduced after J.I. Gasing 1980).