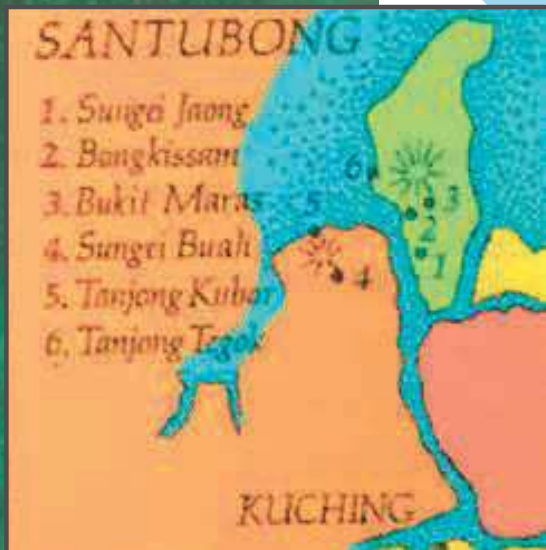


The Sarawak River Part 1

An Archeological Perspective



MAP CREDIT: ARCHEOLOGY TODAY BY CHENG TE-KUN

*Top:
The locations
of the
archaeological
sites in
Santubong.*

*Left:
The human
figure carved
on a rock
boulder
at Sungai
Jaong.*

The Sarawak River has played a central role in the history of Sarawak (whose name is derived from the river), and its capital, Kuching. One of the most well-known events in the history of the state occurred on the banks of the Sarawak River - the arrival of James Brooke, which opened the door for the Brooke family's rule over Sarawak beginning 1841. Today, on both banks of the river in the vicinity of the Kuching city centre, we can see historical buildings that serve as reminders of the Brooke period; the Astana, Fort Margherita and the Old Courthouse, to name but a few examples.

From an archaeological perspective, rivers were important as 'cradles' of civilisations. The Sarawak River is no different in this respect. For

(continued)

PHOTOS: NICHOLAS GANI



Clockwise from left:

Artefacts from Bau caves.

- Broken pottery from Gua Bungoh, excavated by the Sarawak Museum in 1950.

- A possible stone flake tool recovered from Gua Tupak in 2008.

- The Bongkissam site, in the present day, near Kampung Santubong.

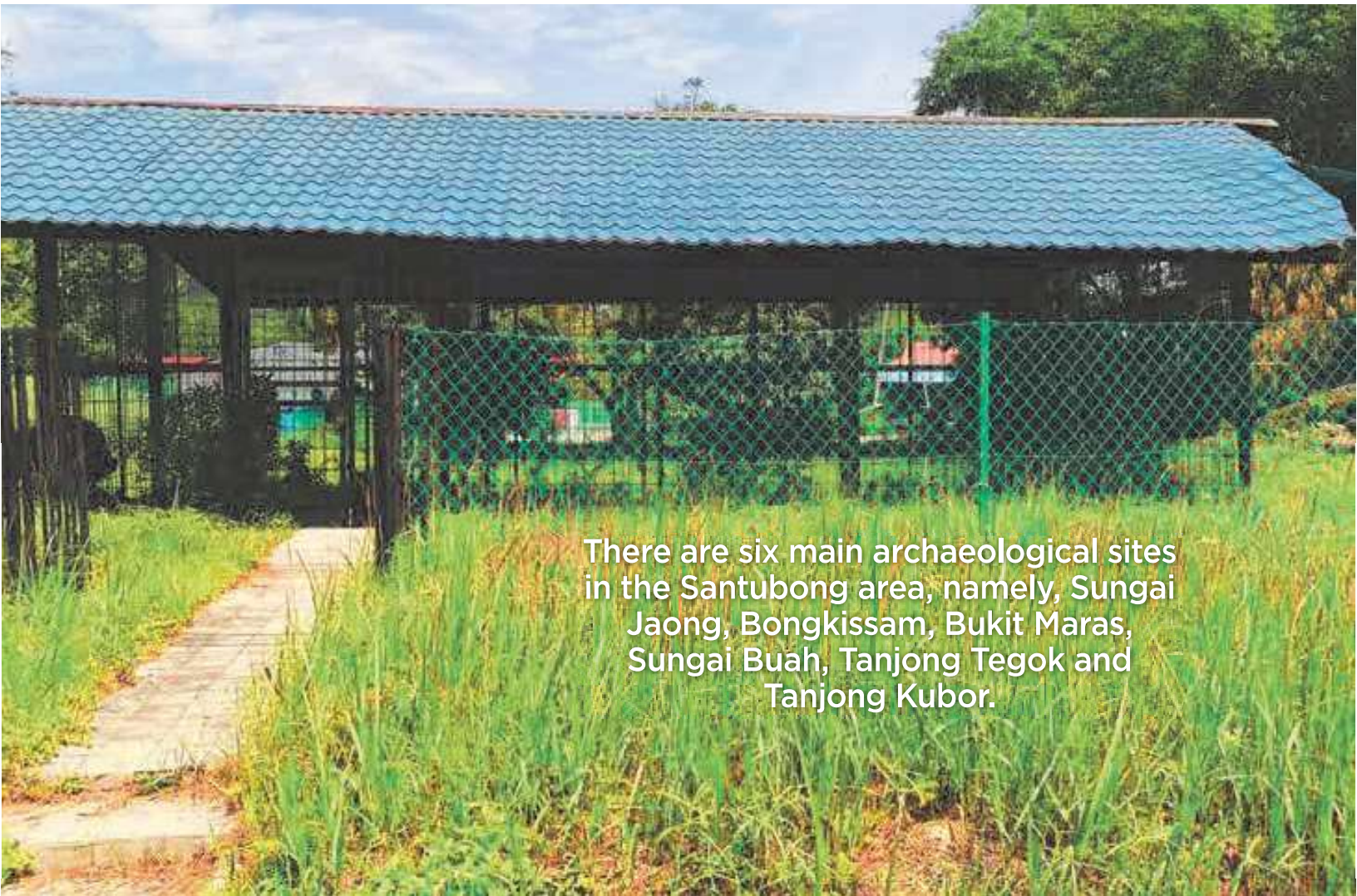
- Chinese porcelain pots over a thousand years old found in the ground at the old trading village of Santubong (as captioned in the 'Story of Sarawak' book).

hundreds (and possibly, thousands) of years prior to the Brooke rule, the Sarawak River and its tributaries have been home to the lives and activities of various Sarawak peoples. We can get a glimpse of the cultural antiquity of the Sarawak River by looking at the archaeological discoveries made in particular in its great river mouths, as well as in its upper tributaries, in the Santubong (or the Sarawak River delta) area, and in Bau (widely referred to in the

past as Upper Sarawak), respectively.

Santubong archaeological sites

Archaeological remains (pottery, beads, gold ornaments, iron slags, and Chinese coins) at Santubong have been known since the 19th and early 20th century, particularly through the writings of Everett and Hewitt, who published an article entitled 'A history of Santubong, an island off the coast of Sarawak' in 1909.



There are six main archaeological sites in the Santubong area, namely, Sungai Jaong, Bongkissam, Bukit Maras, Sungai Buah, Tanjong Tegok and Tanjong Kubor.

However, it was not until the late 1940s, when Tom Harrisson became the Curator of the Sarawak Museum, that extensive archaeological work was carried out in the area. There are six main archaeological sites in the Santubong area: Sungai Jaong, Bongkissam, Bukit Maras, Sungai Buah, Tanjong Tegok and Tanjong Kubor. Archaeological excavations conducted at these sites have revealed findings of stone carvings depicting human figures and

symbols, iron slags, iron-smelting crucibles, earthenwares, gold and metal objects, as well as glass beads and bangles. Most of these artefacts were found in association with Tang and Sung period tradeware ceramics. Tanjong Kubor and Tanjong Tegok were, in particular, cemetery sites. At Tanjong Kubor, a Chinese coin dated to AD 713-741 (Tang and Sung period) was recovered. Indications of Buddhist influence at the Santubong sites were seen in the discoveries

of a rectangular-shaped 'Tantric' shrine together with a buried ritual deposit box at Bongkissam, as well as a "stone figure of Buddha, carved in the Gupta tradition...a stupa finial; and sandstone tile depicting trumpeting elephant and lotus" at Bukit Maras, as described by the archaeologist, Cheng Te-Kun, in 'Archaeology of Sarawak' that was published in 1969. The 'Tantric' shrine at Bongkissam was found associated with Sung ceramics,

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Based on the archaeological evidence, the Santubong sites in the Sarawak River delta area were thought to be parts of a large trade entrepôt that flourished between the 8th and 13th centuries, during which the the Sarawak River played an important role as the main passageway of trading activities.

which suggests a 12th century date.

Based on the archaeological evidence, the Santubong sites in the Sarawak River delta area were thought to be parts of a large trade entrepôt that flourished between the 8th and 13th centuries, during which the the Sarawak River played an important role as the main passageway of trading activities. One of the main industries was iron production. The discovery of Chinese ceramics and Buddhist relics also suggest trade links with China and possibly, India. The local earthenware and beads recovered show affinities with those found in Peninsular Malaysia, as well as at other archaeological sites in mainland and island Southeast Asia, which further suggest cultural and trade contacts.

Caves sites in Upper Sarawak

Archaeological discoveries have also been made in the upper parts of the Sarawak River, in what is today known as Bau. The Bau area is famous for the presence of many limestone caves. One of the earliest foreign visitors to the Bau caves was the Italian botanist Odoardo Beccari, who discovered human bones, earthenware fragments and

a possible necklace fragment during an exploration of Lubang Angin (Wind Cave) on the west branch of the Sarawak River (Sungai Sarawak Kanan) in 1866. In the later years of the 19th century, the Bau caves also attracted the attention of scholars who were searching for the 'missing link' of human evolution. In 1878-1879, A.H. Everett explored a number of the Bau caves, in an expedition planned by Charles Darwin, Alfred Russell Wallace and T.H. Huxley. Everett's explorations, however, produced limited findings of pottery, stone implements, freshwater and marine shells, animal bones, beads and other ornaments.

In the early years of archaeological work by the Sarawak Museum, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Bau caves also served as training sites for Tom Harrisson and the museum staff. One of these caves was Gua Bungoh, near Krokong, which was excavated in 1950 with the help of Michael Tweedie, then the Director of the Raffles Museum in Singapore. This excavation yielded artefacts such as 19th century coins, porcelain and stoneware, metal implements, pottery, and faunal remains. Except for the artefacts

The Bongkissam site, in the present day, near Kampung Santubong.



recovered from the upper layers, which were thought to belong to the 'historic' period, most of the findings were assumed to be prehistoric.

Another of the Bau caves that was excavated by Tom Harrisson and Sarawak Museum in 1950 is Gua Tupak in the Jambusan area, a cave also previously explored by A.H. Everett.



The excavations at Gua Tupak produced findings such as earthenwares, stonewares and animal bones.

In 2008, the Gua Tupak site was re-investigated by a research team from Universiti Sains Malaysia and the Sarawak Museum, producing findings of shell remains, animal bones and ceramic sherds. One of

the main contributions of this more recent research is the establishment of two phases of past human occupation of the cave. The early phase of occupation occurred around 1,000 years ago, while the latter phase was dated to around 200 years ago. The archaeological evidence further suggest subsistence activities based on hunting and gathering conducted

in the surrounding forest, riverine and estuarine environments. **KINO**

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