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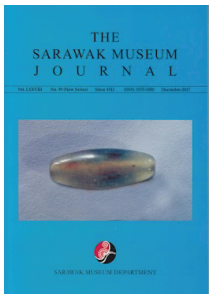

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EARLY CENTRAL BORNEO PROJECT: ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN PA' LUNGAN, KELABIT HIGHLANDS (2013-2015)

Lindsay Lloyd-Smith, Nicholas Gani, Mohammed Sherman Sauffi William, Jo Appleby, Stephen Litah, Stephen Murphy, Borbála Nyiri, Walter Paran, and Nancy White.

INTRODUCTION

This is a summary report on three field seasons (2013, 2014, 2015) of the Early Central Borneo Project investigating the prehistory of the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak (Fig. 1). This work builds upon the results of previous anthropological and archaeological research in the region, particularly Sarah Hitcher's comprehensive anthropological survey of cultural sites (2009), and the work of the inter-disciplinary work of the Cultured Rainforest Project (CRF) (2007-2010) which investigated the socio-ecological history of the Central Kelapang Valley in the southern Kelabit Highlands (Barker et al. 2007, 2008; Lloyd-Smith et al. 2010, 2012). The Kelabit Highlands and adjacent headwaters of central Borneo have long been renowned for the numerous stone and earthwork monuments, and surveys on both sides of the central spinal watershed of Borneo (which today forms the international border between Sarawak Malaysia and Kalimantan Indonesia) have demonstrated the wide extent and diversity of monument types. Although there had been some excavation of a few megalithic sites on the Sarawak side of the border in the 1960s by Sarawak Museum, and in the 1990s of a limited number of settlement sites on the Kalimantan side of the border by an Indonesian-led international social-science research team (Arifin and Sellato 2003), it was not until the 2007-2010 CRF project that the first systematic archaeological excavations of multiple site types was carried out with the aim of producing a secure chronological framework for the highland region.

Keywords:

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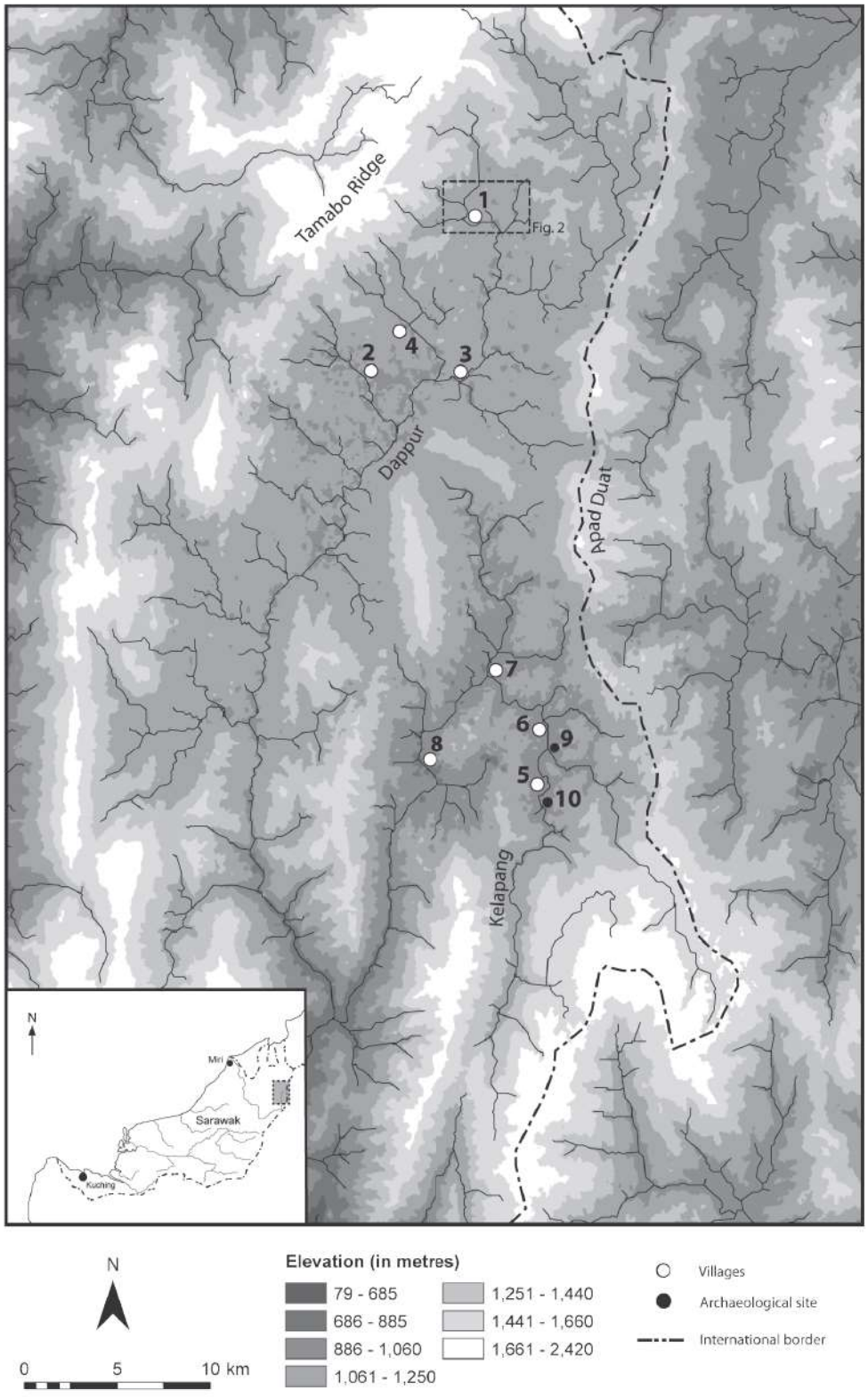

Fig. 1: Map showing location of Pa' Lungan Kelabit Highlands, and other highland sites mentioned in the text. 1. Pa' Lungan; 2. Bario; 3. Pa' Umor; 4. Pa' Ukat; 5. Batu Patong; 6. Pa' Dalih; 7. Pa' Mada; 8. Ramudu; 9. Long Diit; 10. Taa Payo. (Illustration: L. Lloyd-Smith)

that the pollen record shows more convincing signs of human presence in the landscape, with the rise in Eugeissona pollen – suggestive of large scale management of sago palms possibly for food production. This is followed around 2300 years ago with a significant increase in forest disturbance, sago pollen, and the first recorded microscopic remains (a single silica phytolith) of domesticated rice (Jones *et al.* 2013b). Following a detailed archaeological survey of 100+ cultural sites in the southern Kelabit Highlands around the modern-day villages of Batu Patong, Pa' Dalih, Pa' Mada, and Ramudu, the CRF project made targeted excavations at five settlement sites, one rock shelter, six megalith sites, and one earthwork (ditch) monument (Barker *et al.* 2008, 2009; Lloyd-Smith *et al.* 2010). Twelve radiocarbon dates from these sites produced the first secure chronological framework for changing settlement and megalithic traditions in the southern Kelabit Highlands dating back 2400 years, with the appearance of large Early Metal Age settlements with stonewall structures, abundant earthenware pottery, for example the site of Long Di'it with dates for occupation spanning 400 BCE to 870 CE,[1] and the site of Taa Payo with two radiocarbon dates both calibrating to between 340 and 590 CE and where there was recovered fragments of polished stone sago pounders (batu pra'it), several indo-pacific glass beads, and a small iron blade (Lloyd-Smith *et al.* 2010). Based on radiocarbon dates on charcoal samples from buried soils and foundation trench deposits at megalithic sites, and the associated Chinese and Southeast Asian tradeware ceramics, the majority of the larger megaliths (stone jars and slab structures) were considered by the CRF project to date to a second major phase of activity between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries (1400s-1700s CE) (Lloyd-Smith *et al.* 2012).

In conjunction with the CRF radiocarbon dating programme, and to tie-in sites from the wider highland area into this emerging chronology, a sample of cremated bone excavated in 1962 and labelled as coming from a large stone mound, Perupun Rayeh Pa' Lungan, in the northern Kelabit Highlands (*c.*50 km north from the Central Kelapang valley), was also radiocarbon dated and produced a determination of 1980±40 BP, or cal. 88 BCE – 124 CE (Beta-280504)[2] (Lloyd-Smith 2012: 121). Based upon the 1962 label it was believed this sample came from the large stone mound of Perupun Rayeh Pa' Lungan, although this association has now been put in doubt by the re-investigation of the site reported on here; more likely this date is associated with a small stone mound which the famous Batuh Ritung (dolmen) megalith is set into (see below). However, this date does correspond well with the early dates from archaeological sites investigated in the southern Kelabit Highlands, and already in 2012, indicated wide spread monumental activity, associated with

large open-air 'occupation' sites, from the last centuries BCE until the second half of the first millennium CE. The occurrence of iron from a securely dated context at the site of Taa Payo in the southern Kelabit Highlands, dated to the mid-first millennium CE was, in 2012, the earliest open-air Metal Age site on Borneo, and although no earlier finds of metal have yet been made in the highlands, the 'sudden' (in archaeological terms) appearance of large open-air sites with stone architecture and the construction of monumental stone mounds around 300 BCE, suggests that, in some way, these were associated with, or enabled by, historical processes (e.g. increased regional trade and exchange) and events (movement and arrival of new materials and technologies, ideas, and possibly people) that were playing out across island Southeast Asia at the very beginning of the Metal Age.

More importantly, even with the preliminary results of the CRF project in 2010, it was apparent that the character of Early Metal Age of the interior highlands of Borneo (dry stone-wall architecture, monumental stone mounds probably of a ceremonial nature, and a society underpinned by the large scale management of sago palms for food production) was very different from the traditional, ethnographically documented, Borneo longhouse societies of rice-farmers.

The archaeological discovery of this deep and 'forgotten' past, in all its richness and complexity, open up exciting avenues for research. In 2013, Lloyd-Smith started the Early Central Borneo Project (ECB): a collaborative research-community archaeology project to document, investigate, and raise awareness about the prehistory of central Borneo. The purpose is to bring together academics, local community members, museum staff and the general public who have an interest in the area, to act as an umbrella communication network on a wide range of archaeological work in central Borneo, and protect the rich and varied cultural sites. Under the ECB an initial three year research programme has focused on the *Early Metal Age Societies of the Kelabit Highlands*. The aims of this work were to:

1) Confirm the early date for the construction of the large stone mounds (perupun) and gather data on their architecture, construction, function(s), and use histories.
2) Further investigate the nature of the large open-air occupation sites such as at Long Diit and Taa Payo.