

Buru

RITUALS OF PREHIST

The Neolithic cemetery is located in the West Mouth of Niah Great Cave, behind the fencing on the right.

Photo by Graeme Barker.

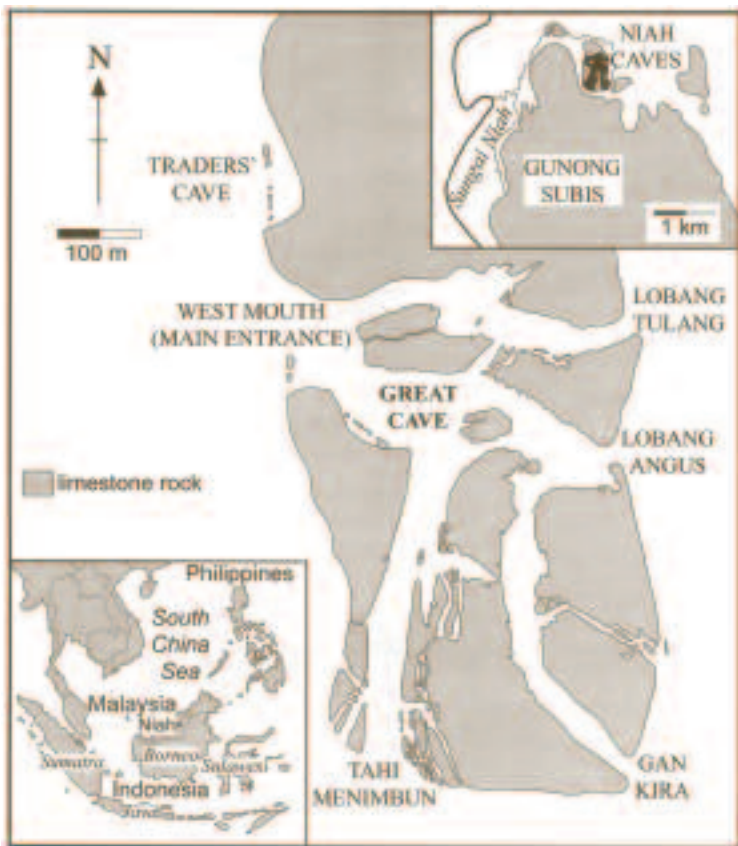


Niah

BY GRAEME BARKER

The Neolithic
Cemeteries of Niah
Cave, Sarawak

ORIC FORAGER-FARMERS IN BORNEO



Plan of the Niah Caves complex, Sarawak.

ONE OF THE largest and most varied prehistoric cemeteries in Southeast Asia was discovered in the late 1950s in the West Mouth of Niah Great Cave in Sarawak, Malaysia, on the north side of the island of Borneo. After organizing resistance against the Japanese occupiers during World War II, Tom Harrison became the Director of Sarawak Museum. An avid naturalist, he visited the Niah Caves to study their wildlife and to look for a promising site to try his hand at archaeological excavation. At the forefront of archaeological debate at the time was the question of whether Southeast Asia had been the home of an evolutionary missing link between apes and humans. In 1954 Harrison dug a trial trench in the West Mouth and found prolific evidence for humans having used the caves in prehistory—charcoal, animal bone fragments, human bones, stone tools, and pottery. Encouraged by this, in 1957 Tom and his new wife Barbara started a series of major annual campaigns of excavation.

The most spectacular discovery came the following year, when the excavators uncovered a primitive but anatomically modern human skull at the bottom of their deepest trench at the front of the West Mouth, along with charcoal that yielded a radiocarbon date of about 40,000 years ago. At the time, the ‘Deep Skull’ was the earliest modern human fossil anywhere in

the world, and it is still the earliest in Southeast Asia. Farther into the West Mouth, against the cave wall on the northern edge of the Great Cave, the Harrissons found an extraordinarily rich cemetery of ‘Neolithic’ graves dating between 5,000 and 2,500 years ago based on associated pottery, grave-goods, and radiocarbon dates. By the mid-1960s, Barbara Harrison had discovered more than 200 graves, excavating them with great care and attention to detail. They found more graves of the same period in other entrances of the cave complex, particularly in the east facing Lobang Tulang and Gan Kira.

The Harrissons published many important progress reports, but they never published a final comprehensive report on their amazing discoveries. Hence since 2000 I have been coordinating an international team reinvestigating the archaeology of the Niah Caves—commonly regarded as the most important archaeological site in Island Southeast Asia. One part of our effort has concentrated on clarifying the antiquity



Barbara Harrison recording one of the Neolithic burials in the early 1960s.

Lucy Farr (left), Sarawak Museum (right)

and character of the cave's occupation, which we have shown definitely goes back into the Pleistocene to at least 45,000 years ago.

Another focus has been the funerary archaeology of the Neolithic period. It is commonly argued from linguistic evidence that the Neolithic populations of Island Southeast Asia represent a new people—Austronesian-speaking rice farmers who spread southward from the Chinese mainland via Taiwan and the Philippines. Studies of the Niah skeletons by Jessica Manser, however, indicate that the Neolithic people buried here were identical to the earlier (Pleistocene) people buried in the cave, so they seem unlikely to be newcomers. Furthermore, although isolated grains of rice have been found in a few of the cemeteries' burial pots (indicating they were certainly acquainted with the new crop), the food refuse they left behind in small midden (trash) deposits indicates they still lived mainly as foragers.

Although the cemetery extends a considerable distance into the cave's interior, the gigantic size of the West Mouth means that the area is not in complete darkness. As one's eyes adjust to the half-light of the cemetery zone, it is possible to see far back into the cavernous interior of the Great Cave, beyond



Jessica Manser, one of the Niah Cave Project's paleoanthropologists, studies the human remains excavated from the Neolithic burials.

which it is pitch black. Neolithic graves in the other entrances to the cave complex are located in the same twilight zone between light entrances and dark interiors.

Looking east from the West Mouth entrance toward the interior of the Great Cave shows the archaeological zone much as the Harrissons left it in the mid-1960s. The wooden 'coffins' to the right of the far ranging-pole are Neolithic burials excavated by the Harrissons and protected by them with planking.





A Neolithic inhumation burial excavated by the Niah Cave Project in 2003.

Barbara Harrisson classified the Neolithic burials she excavated into a broad chronological sequence. The earliest graves were extended inhumations where the bodies were placed in wooden coffins fashioned from hollowed-out logs or crude planks. In later burials, bodies (sometimes partially burned) were placed in large ceramic vessels. Grave-goods included pots, stone axes and grinders, beads, basketry, and textiles.

While the basic burial sequence proposed by the original excavators still holds true, our new excavations have revealed a far greater level of complexity in burial rites and behaviors within and between burial types and groups of burials. Along with the early coffin burials, for example, were those of individuals laid out in the same extended position but simply wrapped in a shroud. In later burials, bodies were placed in a variety of containers (e.g. bamboo caskets) as well as in big jars. There are also examples of early coffins having been reopened for later burials and of bones having been placed in more or less the correct position but not actually articulated. This indicates that they had been carefully re-interred from elsewhere. Similarly, some human bones have distinctive weathered and exfoliated surfaces, suggesting prolonged periods of exposure before burial. In some instances, perhaps,

flesh had been removed or left to decay at initial burial rites and then a selection of bones had been interred in a secondary burial ritual.

Space in the cemetery appears to have been carefully organized and reused over time. Postholes indicate that wooden grave markers distinguished individual graves or clusters of graves. One such area was used over many centuries almost exclusively for child burials. A few meters away we excavated a log coffin containing two individuals that we radiocarbon dated to approximately 2750 BC. Several centuries later this coffin was cut through by the burial of an adolescent male in a large jar encased in basketry. Later, a similar basket-encased funerary jar was deliberately placed in exactly the same spot, crushing the first jar burial beneath it. This second jar burial contained five individuals, possibly representing a family or kin group—an adult male, an adolescent, two children, and a newborn. Since the upper edges of this second funerary jar had collapsed inward, an even later third jar burial may have crushed it in turn.

Although the significance of these different mortuary practices and the changes in belief systems that they may represent is not yet clear, some aspects of the burial rites are reminiscent of the animistic or naturalistic ideologies of prehistoric

hunter-gatherer societies in other parts of the world. Examples include the use of red ochre to cover bodies to signify blood and fertility and the use of prey animal bones and teeth for necklaces and other items of body decoration. In contrast, other items in their burial repertoire, such as pottery, polished stone axes, and grindstones—all artifacts transformed from their original state by human action—are common elements in the grave-goods of early agricultural societies. Such societies in Europe and Southwest Asia, for example, are commonly thought to have had ideologies that placed a greater emphasis on ancestry and theism (sky-gods). The location of Niah's cemeteries in the twilight zone of the caves, between light and dark, is also reminiscent of many of these societies' burial practices, which emphasize the importance of a boundary zone between life and death.

In this light it is clear that the Neolithic cemeteries of Island Southeast Asia represent an enormously rich source of evidence not just for how Neolithic societies buried their dead but also how they viewed the world they inhabited. Understanding the world views of these Neolithic societies, and the extent to which they were similar to or different from those of the people inhabiting the region before them, will be

of enormous value in the long-running debates about the origins of these societies and about the character of the transition from forager to farmer lifeways. 🏠

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For Further Reading

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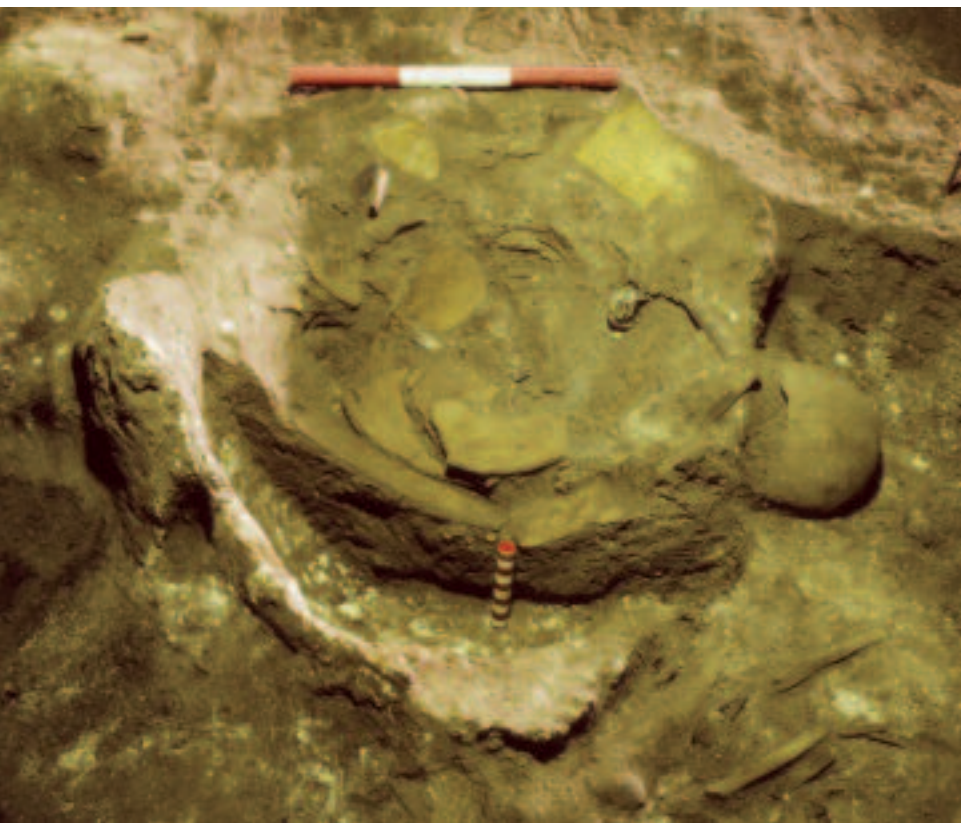
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A Neolithic jar burial was placed directly on top of an earlier Neolithic jar burial. The base of the small vertical scale rests on the earlier jar burial, while the scale's top is level with the bottom of the later burial.