

Borneo's Prehistoric "Turtle-Ware" and "Phallic-Top" Lidded Pots

Received 20 March 1967

TOM HARRISSON

A RATHER curious form of prehistoric earthenware with a pattern perhaps, but not certainly, impressed from the subdermal flat bones of certain turtles has been described (Harrisson and Medway 1962, Harrisson 1966). "Turtle-ware" has so far been recorded only in Borneo from the stone and bronze iron-age context of Tapadong Cave, well inland on the northeast side of Sabah, North Borneo; from the great Gomantan Cave complex close to Sandakan on the northerly tip of the island; and from Lobang Angus, a strictly "stone-age cave" at Niah, 300 mi. down the coast to the southwest in Sarawak (see also Harrisson 1965: Plate XVI).

In the earlier reports, I suggested that this wide and partly inland diffusion for such a rare yet distinct ware implied initial and perhaps regular maritime trade contacts for earthenware well back into the Stone Age. I specifically mentioned Celebes. New correlated evidence enables us to go a little further. Eine Moore, who has been working on the mass of excavated earthenware from Tapadong (Moore 1966), has drawn my attention to an earthenware lid now reconstructed and readily identifiable from Tapadong Cave, the original type site of the "turtle-ware" (Fig. 1). It was previously overlooked. The particulars are as follows:

1. Two sherds, both from Trench A5, 0-6 in.; TD. 5, Tapadong; excavated by Barbara Harrisson, 1964.

Form: rounded with simple blunt rim and a thick, solid knob rounded at the top.

Size: Height, 4.4 in.; approximate diameter, 6 in.

Body: coarse grayware, tempered with crushed, fired clay; outer surface with core turns reddish towards rim.

Finish: Outer surface finished with turtle shell impression.

(E.M. 11.4.67)

2. Clay of body: notably thick, up to 9 mm.

Knob top: 3.5 mm high, 24 mm across, fairly evenly cylindrical but irregularly "flat" on top; "wavy" design is carried on along sides and weakly on the top. (This

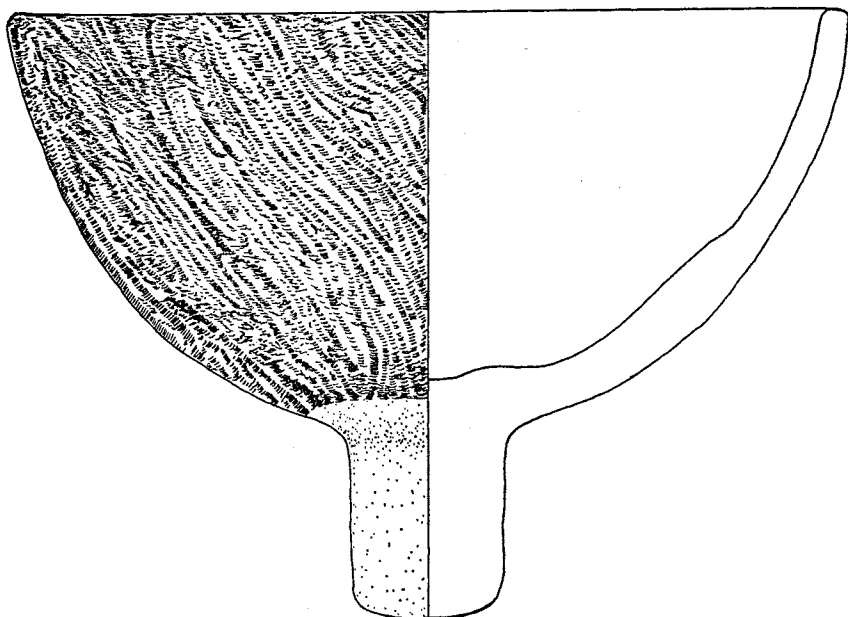


Fig. 1 Reconstruction drawing of "phallic-topped" earthenware pot lid excavated from Tapadong Cave, Sabah; Height, $4 \frac{2}{5}$ in. (natural size).

treatment is very close to that of some "phallic tops" from Sung open sites, ca. A.D. 1200 in the Sarawak River delta: see below).

Design density: closely applied to the surface, except at the base of the "phallic top," perhaps because of further finger moulding here to strengthen the joint with the main lid body?

Firing: soot and smoke heavy inside—probably from firing but possibly from secondary funerary practices in the cave (cf. my general paper on the site, 1964, and also my "Excavation of a Tapadong Cave", 1965*a*).

The design (see Plate I) is deliberately somewhat emphasized on the drawing (see Fig. 1) to bring out the main quality. This design is not typical of the "turtle-ware" found at the same spot (Tapadong Cave) described earlier; nor is it suggestive of the use of dermal bone. In this case, the possibility of impressed bark as a "pattern source" (also discussed earlier) might well be borne in mind.

But this pot surely belongs to the same general class of unusual—and almost certainly imported—wares for which I have postulated "turtle-ware" as a preliminary term ("wavy pattern" would be a weaker if wiser alternative). What makes this piece of particular importance and interest, at this stage, is the lid with knob-top. It must be the carefully shaped cover of a storage vessel in two parts.

There is an immediate, almost "obvious," parallel between this Tapadong top and what W.G. Solheim II has described as "phallic handled lids" in his major paper on the prehistoric earthenwares of our open sites in the Sarawak River delta, a further 300 mi. south-

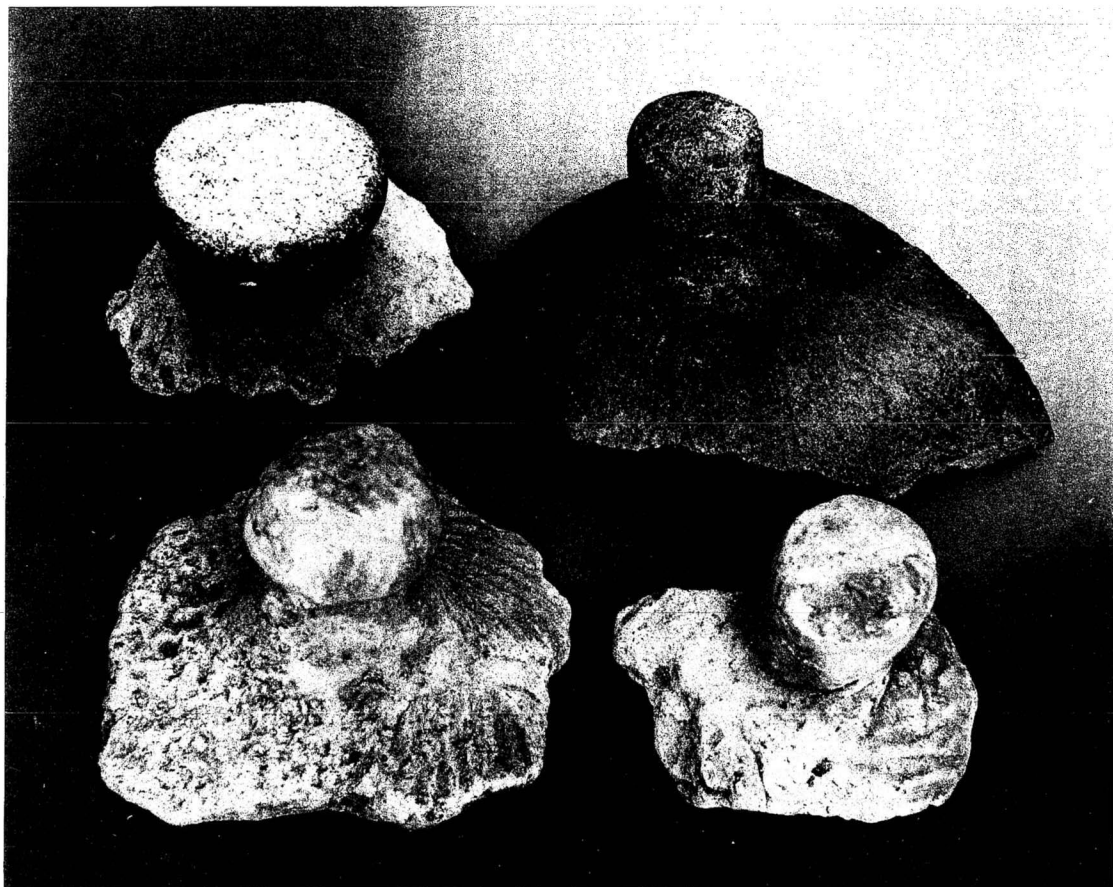


Plate I Four "phallic-tops" from West Borneo sites: *a*, from upper Sarawak River, Semadang football field, in association with later import stonewares; *b*, the Tapadong Cave example (cf. Fig. 1); *c, d*, from W. G. Solheim's coastal headland T'ang site in the Sarawak River delta.

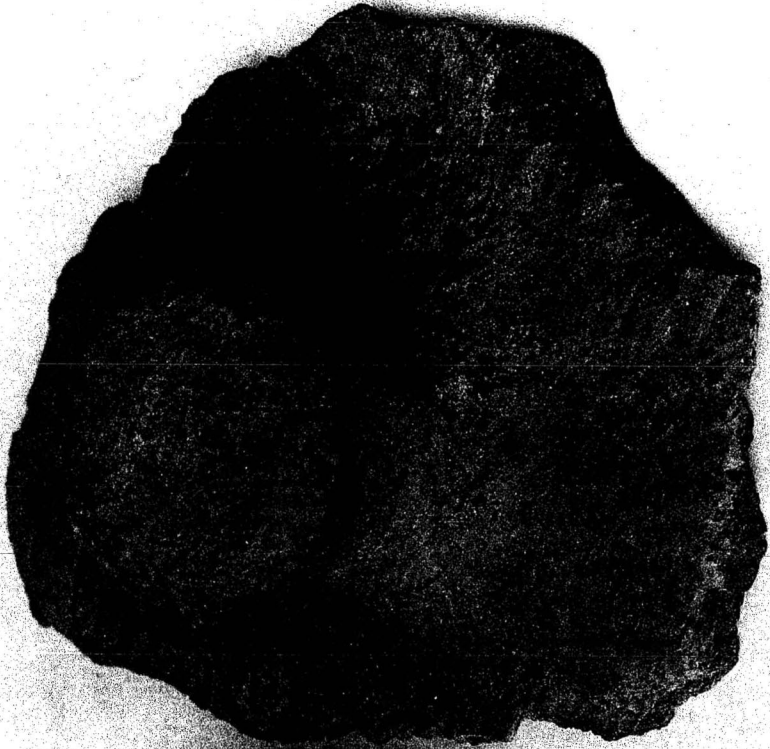


Plate II The only knobbed-lid so far known from the Niah Cave excavations, 1954-1967;
from the Painted Cave, trench Z/C7 at 3 in. (cf. text).

west down the coast from Niah and 600 mi. from Tapadong (Solheim 1965: particularly 17, 28, 48-50; cf. Fig. 14 and Plate X).

Since Solheim's 1959 study of the delta earthenware, completely excavated by the Sarawak Museum at an open headland, Tanjong Kubor, in 1955 (for background see T. and B. Harrison 1957), much further work has been done in the delta. Particularly, during 1966, I in conjunction with S.J. O'Connor, of Cornell University, made an extensive analysis of phallic lids from *other* T'ang and Sung open sites in the delta, including new material excavated during that season. This includes a fresh comparison with the type established by Solheim for Tanjong Kubor (which dates to the T'ang Dynasty and is one of the earliest sites in this rich delta *entrepot* pattern). The new study, in conjunction with Solheim's basic paper, clearly proves that the phallic lids belong to a deeply established and only slightly changing Borneo craft-style whose external relationships possibly extend even to the phallic usages on funerary earthenwares in pre-T'ang China (as suggested on the spot by Te-k'un Cheng, of Cambridge University, who visited us in the delta field in August 1966). O'Connor and I will discuss this aspect further in a monograph we are now preparing.

What is immediately clear from comparing the Tapadong Cave "turtle-ware" lid top with the large series available from the Tanjong Kubor and other open sites in the far separated Sarawak River delta, is that all belong to the same general tradition and approach, although indeed at the opposite ends of the scale. If one ignored the pattern as such, then the shape, finish, and particularly the treatment of the Tapadong Cave "phallic top" can be closely matched in style and "feel" from Sarawak River examples excavated in sites to which this earthenware can only have been brought in bulk between A.D. 650 and A.D. 1400—at either end of these terminal extremes.

A series of *similar* (but not wavy-patterned) phallic tops have recently been disclosed while clearing a football field at a Land Dayak long-house well up in the headwaters of the Sarawak River, far beyond the southwesterly tidal limits, further extending the inland range down south (see Plate II). This last is evidently an ancient longhouse site, with associated later Chinese domestic stoneware and porcelain crockery as well as glass beads. These particular phallic-tops are nearly always quite *flat* on top, but like the Tapadong one have the interesting feature of a design carried on *over* the top—sometimes it is incised separately from the rest of the body pattern, which is ordinarily done with a carved paddle.

Moreover, in several *caves* still further up in the Sarawak River headwaters, our excavations since 1947 have produced other phallic-top lids, quite clearly in the same general tradition—for instance, from Gua Sekunyit near Batu Kawa (excavated 1952 and 1966); Lobang Angin at Bau (1950); and Gua Sirih near Tarat (1959-1961). All this makes it clear that some of these earthenwares had great persistence, out of the Stone Age or through the full impact of iron and over a wide area too.

Finally, for the present phallic examples, we have a single such topped lid from Kain Hitam, the splendid Painted Cave at Niah (see Harrison 1959: color plate) at trench Z/C7.3 in., which I excavated. Here the association is vivid with imported T'ang stonewares, glass beads, and other fully "iron-age" insignia. This lid has a flat top to the knob and is in general quite close to the Tapadong Cave prototype. It also has heavy sooting on the inside, which is finished more flat, less concave, than the Tapadong one. It is remarkable that this is the only such lid so far detected from the hundreds of thousands of earthenware sherds in this and other caves at Niah, including the Great Cave and Lobang Angus, where "turtle-ware" is present. It is most unlikely that it is an indigenous, locally made pot in this context.

In my general discussion of Tapadong (1964), I showed that it was primarily a late stone-age and early metal-age cave. The finds there included a single very unusual piece of thin iron, as well as the first direct proof of bronze tools excavated *in situ* in Borneo. There are *no* Chinese import stonewares and *no* glass beads: invariable markers of the true iron "exploration of impact."

Therefore, perhaps this "turtle-ware" may be directly related to the knob-top lids with roughly "phallic" symbolism; and very possibly, the two ideas—the wavy design and the "phallic" symbol—met and overlapped in the north of this great island. Of fundamental significance, I think, is the indication of a widespread distribution for these correlated styles between the ending of the Stone Age and the early phases of iron in Borneo. Also, the clear implication that even then earthenware was being traded, both before and along with the stoneware from China that came flooding in with the full impact of iron, but are not once repeated at Tapadong Cave in the northeast (though they occur in *other* Sabah caves of later date). This evident maritime spread of quite simple earthenware objects or of the craft of making them along the coast and far up the rivers, requires further analysis. The matter will be pursued in the monograph mentioned earlier.

Meanwhile, the generalization is given dramatic effect when we examine the pottery being made today by the Bajaus—now 100 percent Moslem—around Kota Belud on the west side of Sabah. They are hand-shaped "phallic-pot lids" in which the clay differs markedly, but the result sometimes still resembles closely those from the Sarawak River delta, the upper Sarawak sites, and the Tapadong specimen from Sabah. For those who wish to pursue that angle prior to fuller publication, reference may be made to the discussion of these *modern* Bajau phallic tops in papers by the late Ivor H.N. Evans (1955) and John Alman, both describing and illustrating contemporary Bajau pot-making in northwest Sabah, roughly halfway between Tapadong and Niah. This relationship with the living "Bajaus" is not accidental. I hope later to show that their role in this and other "native trade" activities spans a much longer time-and-space period in Indo-Malaysia—and in a considerably more consistent way—than has generally been supposed (e.g., by D.E. Sopher in his long study "The Sea Nomads" (1965).

REFERENCES

- ALMAN, JOHN
1960 Bajau pottery. *SMJ* n.s. IX, 15-16: 583-602.
- EVANS, IVOR H. N.
1955 Bajau pottery. *SMJ* n.s. VI, 5: 297-300.
- HARRISSON, TOM
1959 New archaeological and ethnological results from Niah Caves, Sarawak. *M* LIX, Art. 1: 1-8.
- HARRISSON, TOM
1964 A stone and bronze tool cave in Sabah. *AP* VIII, 1: 171-180.
- HARRISSON, TOM
1965a Excavation of Tapadong Cave. *Sabah Society Journal* 4: 151-159.
- HARRISSON, TOM
1965b "Turtle-ware" from Borneo caves. *SMJ* n.s. XII, 25-26: 63-68.
- HARRISSON, TOM
1966 "Turtle-ware" from Borneo caves. *AP* IX: 134-139.
- HARRISSON, TOM and BARBARA
1957 The prehistoric cemetery of Tanjong Kubor. *SMJ* n.s. VIII, 10: 18-50.
- HARRISSON, TOM and LORD MEDWAY
1962 A first classification of pre-historic bone and tooth artifacts based on material from Niah Great Cave. *AP* VI: 219-229.

MOORE, EINE

1966 Earthenware from a Sabah Cave (Tapadong). *SMJ* n.s. XIV, 28-29: 291-307.

SOLHEIM, WILHELM G. II

1965 The prehistoric pottery of Tanjong Kubor, Santubong. *SMJ* n.s. XII, 25-26: 1-62.

SOPHER, D. E.

1965 The sea nomads. *Memoirs*. Singapore: The National Museum.