9. *Archæological Research in North Borneo*

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No systematic prehistoric research has been conducted to date in North Borneo. However, a variety of miscellaneous artifactual materials have come from this area, for over a half century, out of any stratigraphic context. Several random collections or prehistoric materials were made by officers of the North Borneo Chartered Company, but generally were destroyed in World War II, or now are scattered widely in England, Australia and elsewhere. Some items, randomly collected, are now in collections of the Sarawak Museum. These collections have been used to reconstruct North Borneo prehistory; but the chronologies and relationships suggested so far are no more than highly general speculations. Prehistoric cultural sequences, relationships, and specific chronologies, as determined by comparative geological, palæontological, stratigraphic and typological evidences, remain to be established by specific investigations based on the techniques and logical processes of modern science. Studies of a scientific nature will have to be conducted by visiting scholars until there are trained archæologists resident in the country. This report is intended to draw attention to sites likely to be productive of significant prehistoric data.

In the course of ethnological study of the Dusun in 1959–60, and 1962–63 I took opportunity to survey four cave sites which appeared to offer possibilities for systematic archæological research.

One large cave site, located in a limestone formation near Batu Punggul, on the Sungei Palagan, in the Pensiangan district of the North Borneo Interior Residency (approximately 4°N, 116°E.), seems at the moment to hold greatest promise of prehistoric materials in sequence of time and association. The area may be reached quickly by air transport from Keningau, Interior Residency, to a newly completed grass strip at Sepulut, some two days by river travel from the site. Foot travel to the area, over a government bridle path, is not difficult and will take three to four days. Surface collections of caves at Batu Punggul, and a test pit of the largest cave yielded data which suggest that site is an extensive Neolithic complex—with a strong possibility of Palæolithic materials. Sherds of mat and cord-marked types and wares appearing to be red and black in style, with stone materials similar to those of the Southeast Asian neolithic, were obtained from the test excavation.

Approximately ninety air miles north of this location, in the highlands of the Trus Madi range, near Mt. Trus Madi (approximately 5°N, 116°E.), there are

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three large cave sites which appear to be worthy of systematic investigation. Routes of access to the sites, which are concentrated on the west outflanks of Mt. Trus Madi, are by mountain trails over most difficult terrain. To reach each site would mean three to five days of walking on slippery mud and rock trails. Supplies would have to be brought in with assistance of local carriers. All three sites are used occasionally as overnight resting places and, sporadically, as burial locations, by Dusun travelling from the eastern flanks of Trus Madi. The Tambunan plain, located fifty miles north of the Interior Residency offices at Keningau, may be reached most of the year by Land Rover type vehicles. Foot trails to the site areas lead off the Tambunan plain at differing locations.

Surface surveys and limited test-pit excavation in these sites again give evidences of sherds of mat and cord-marked types, wares of red and black styles and stone materials similar in form to the general Southeast Asian neolithic stone-work. The most promising site is a combined cave and rock overhang shelter located on the high plateau between the twin crests of Mt. Trus Madi, just below the moss and fern-forest vegetation line.

A third cave site is located in the foothills of the Crocker range at the northwestern edge of the Keningau plain (approximately 5° N. 116° E.). The location is easily accessible in one day by Land Rover and foot from the Interior Residency offices. It comprises a rock overhang and a cave penetrating a hill-side above a small mountain tributary of the Pegalan river. The site was used in World War II as a hiding place for government officers escaping Japanese occupation. A surface survey of the site shows that it would merit systematic prehistoric investigation, since there is quite obvious evidence of long-term habitation.

The fourth cave site is located in the Sandakan Residency, to the north and some sixty miles from the mouth of the Kinabatangan river (approximately 5½° N. 118° E.). Termmed as the Gomanton caves, the site is a series of openings penetrating a large limestone formation. Long known and used by collectors of birds' nests and bat guano and a focus of political concerns in the nineteenth century, the caves comprise a location of potential prehistoric interest. A number of recent accounts by casual visitors to the caves has given the impression that the site is of no prehistoric value. My survey of the site indicates it could be of value in systematic reconstruction of North Borneo prehistory. Systematic excavation would be conducted with some difficulty due to the three to five days which river transport of supplies would take.

A number of other cave sites have been reported to me by Dusun informants. At least four of these are located in the upper Kinabatangan river valley, while a half dozen more are located in the Crocker and Trus Madi ranges. I have not surveyed these sites, although I intend, in the course of my 1962–64 field research, to make at least surface investigations of the more accessible sites as I continue my ethnological surveys of Dusun and Murut culture. I shall report on these locations at a later date.

In summary, it must be said that there is ample opportunity at present, and basic need, for systematic investigation of likely prehistoric sites in North Borneo. It is not unlikely that the Government of North Borneo would be most sympathetic to responsible archaeological research in the country. Requests for detailed information on the sites reported here can be made by letter.