

Early “Jar Burials” in Borneo and Elsewhere

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IN AN article that appeared in 1960, W. G. Solheim discussed jar burial on several Philippine islands in the context of jar-burial practice elsewhere in Asia. Inez de Beauclair (1972) has valuably enhanced our understanding of this distinctive process as it is found on Botel Tobago Island (Hungt'ou Yü), off Taiwan. The present account extends the picture two thousand miles across open water to the southern limits of the China Sea, the Sarawak coast, and its hinterland of northwest Borneo. Here into modern times inland peoples such as the riverine Berawan (Furness 1902: 139) and the highland Kelabit (Harrison 1959; 1962*a*: 11) have favored both primary and secondary burials in imported Chinese stoneware jars. These burials, which include massive examples in three-colored earthenware (Solheim, Harrison, and Wall 1959: 167), are also a conspicuous feature of the cave Neolithic.

Beauclair is uneasy about dating Botel Tobago jar burials before the Ming dynasty (1972: 172–175), though she generalizes to a “chain of jar burials reaching from Indonesia over the Philippines . . . to Formosa, Japan, and Korea” extending in time “from the beginning of the Christian era to the eighteenth century” (1972: 172). Yet her Plate 1*c*—a bowl of grayish-white crackled porcelain from a Botel Tobago urn—gives two clear views of one of the earliest and most distinctive types of Chinese “export ware.” Although Beauclair hesitates to consider this bowl to be as early as Sung, it almost exactly matches those we have excavated at Jaong, the oldest of the Sarawak River delta ironworking sites. On ceramic and other grounds, we consider Jaong to overlap the end of the T'ang and the Five Dynasties (A.D. 959; Harrison and O'Connor 1969). Several examples of these “Yueh ware” bowls have been illustrated from Jaong (Harrison 1953: color plate and Plate I, *a-b*; Harrison and O'Connor 1970: plates 15 and 17, with a full text discussion, pp. 132–138; Moore 1968: Fig. 5*a*). Moore presents a good demonstration that they are from the Si-chun kilns northwest of Canton, which operated only from the late T'ang through the Northern Sung (A.D. 1126). Zainie and Harrison illustrate

another bowl from the equally early headland cemetery at Tanjong Kubor, Sarawak River (1967: Plate XIIIa). These bowls occur at Jaong with gold ornaments and the same glass bracelets as were found at Botel Tobago (Beauclair 1972; cf. Harrison 1962b).

Assuming, as others have before us, that jar burials of the region are broadly of one interrelated class, the Borneo cave evidence supports an earlier date of origin or evolution even on distant islands. At the Niah Caves, over 350 miles northeast of Jaong on the same Sarawak coastal plain, burnt wood from inside one of nine earthenware jars containing human remains in the West Mouth cemetery has been radiocarbon-dated at 3175 ± 105 B.P. (Geochron C-14 no. GX-1428, W.M. burial no. 159). This is nearly two millennia *before* the first evidence of glass or imported ceramics at Niah or elsewhere in Borneo.

This burial of ca. 1225 B.C. is in a jar with paddle-beater designs. The jar, 69.5 mm high and with 66.8 mm maximal diameter, is the largest yet for the Borneo Neolithic (for discussion see B. Harrison 1967: Plate 35; 1968). The burnt human bone within indicates secondary burial. Thus this is the earliest secondary burial yet dated in Southeast Asia, though results coming in for other Niah burials presently under study by Sheilagh and Richard Brooks may extend this further back in time (Sheilagh Brooks 1974, personal communication).

This burial can be compared with another secondary burial in an earthenware jar at Jeragan Cave, farther up the Niah river, which has been dated at 3070 ± 410 B.P. The Jeragan burial was associated with the funerary use of remarkable double-spouted earthenware vessels, a perfect example of which, dated before 1000 B.C. from Jeragan, I have shown elsewhere in situ (Harrison 1971a: Plate 19). These double-spouts, which are not known from any other excavations in the region, continued in changing forms over some three millennia at Niah until they were replaced by numerous Chinese ceramics after the T'ang and Yuan dynasties (Harrison 1971b).

The bigger urns, double-spouts, and "three-colour wares" of earthenware all vanished without visible trace after the advent of the harder imported stonewares. But the *idea* of urn and other ceramic-marked burial, both primary and secondary, continued with vigor within as well as outside the Niah Caves. It appears reasonable to suppose, in Borneo at least, that the more recent practices, central to life-death beliefs, are a carry-over from much earlier traditions (see Harrison 1962a for general discussion).

Similarly it seems not unreasonable to suggest that practices found on Botel Tobago and elsewhere are probably more deep-rooted than has been thought, and that ancestral forms of older earthenware may remain to be unearthed.

Further, it is plausible to propose that Botel Tobago and Borneo are only two far points on the periphery of a once active and very much more widely distributed sort of funerary observance. And though the same broad concept was strong in ancient China and elsewhere on the mainland, the evidence for identifying any one place as the single point of origin is—to say the least—incomplete. Any conclusions on this question would be premature.

A FRESH APPROACH TO JAR BURIALS AS A CLASS

A closer analysis of past and present jar burial styles, procedures, and materials, continuing from the base established by Solheim (1960), should yield better clues. I suspect a lot more must be attributed to local evolution/elaboration, as with the double-spouts at Niah. Nor is living on a continent necessarily the first requirement for the production or propagation of new ideas.

In this connection, a notable specialization inside an island is the use of massive stone urns among the upland Kelabits in one very small area of the far interior. These urns, up to nearly 5 feet high and bored in solid stone, occur above 3000 feet in the Baram headwaters and nowhere else in Borneo (Harrison 1973: 127). Although stone urns or vats are absent (or at least invisible) throughout the Borneo lowlands, they do occur in Sumba, central Sulawesi (Celebes), [Minahasa, northern Sulawesi; Ed.] Mindanao in the Philippines, and most famously on the "Plane of Jars" in central Laos.

Specifically, the urn fields in Sumba, another 1300 miles south of Niah on the easternmost edge of the Indian Ocean, offer (if looting has not yet stripped them) opportunities for sufficient comparison with Borneo and Philippine material. Van Heekeren's earlier work placed the rich Melolo site in East Sumba in the metal age, although no metal was ever found there! He has now, rather hesitantly, set it back with the neolithic "justifiably or not" (Van Heekeren 1972: 191). As on Botel Tobago, C-14 dates could provide some surprises here.

A general model for the suggested fresh approach might be taken from the recent study of the "bell beaker" cultures of western Europe and North Africa, by a young Harvard postgraduate student from England. Richard Harrison (1974) has shown the chaotic contradictions in earlier, often emphatic, theories for the spread of this classic, much-studied theme. Instead of the simpler diffusionist views still circulating, he proposes "multiple origins." Such thinking can be properly applied in Asia too.

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