

# Early Dates for "Seated" Burial and Burial Matting at Niah Caves, Sarawak (Borneo)

*Received 4 April 1975*

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## NIAH BACKGROUND AND NEW C-14 DATES

WE have nearly 50 C-14 dates resulting from the Niah Cave excavations conducted by this writer (when Curator of the Sarawak Museum) during the 1950s and 1960s. These range from just under 1000 years B.P. ("death ship" in the Painted Cave) to 41,500 B.P. associated with the deepest *Homo sapiens* skull in the West Mouth, Great Cave (Brothwell 1960; Harrison 1970). Many refer to the 5000 square feet of the West Mouth "cemetery" with 166 excavated human burials catalogued and classified in detail (B. Harrison 1967). This sector lies mainly below a charcoal "seal" of close to 2000 B.P. (Groningen, 1963), so that burials here normally will be neolithic (in terms of Borneo dates).

The present notes call attention to new data on two aspects of this cemetery's tremendous range: the curious "seated" burials (4 out of 166) previously classed as "mesolithic" and among the earliest whole-corpse treatments; and at the other end of the scale, extended burials carefully laid out with associated matting—in this instance exceptionally well-preserved in sufficient quantity for analysis. The Physics Laboratory at the University of Groningen kindly supplied dates for this material in February 1975. These make it possible to elaborate significantly previous ideas on Borneo death (Harrison 1962).

The oldest date given in Table 1 is the earliest yet for any whole burial in the region. The others extend the earliest matting by a thousand years. All tend to indicate the antiquity of quite elaborate human observances in Southeast Asian caves, although these need to be confirmed by equivalent excavation results farther west and south in the archipelago.

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TABLE 1. NIAH CAVE C-14 DATES, WEST MOUTH "CEMETERY"  
(Material excavated 1965, tested 1975)

CEMETERY BURIAL NO.	GRONINGEN LAB. NO.	MATERIAL	TYPE OF BURIAL	DATE B.P.
75a	7202	Wood (coffin)	Extended	3080 ± 40
75b	7204	Matting (wrapping)	Extended	3410 ± 100
147	7203	Charred bone (human)	"Seated"	13,640 ± 130

#### NEOLITHIC COFFIN (NO. 75)

Burial no. 75, one of the 66 extended burials, is in trench M/5 of the West Mouth cemetery. This burial consists of a wooden coffin, here sampled from the underside, approximately 12 inches below the cave deposit surface. This contained a small child along with a partly burned, red-dyed (hematite) adult skull which had probably (not certainly) been placed on rather than in the coffin, perhaps later?

Such extended burials, sometimes complicated and always with neolithic-type associations, are typical of the top level in West Mouth. Twenty-two of the 66 are in wooden coffins of the same sort, including hollow logs; 34 are in bamboo; the rest uncertain. This Groningen date of around 1000 B.C. is toward the younger end of the extended series near a peak of neolithic activity at Niah and in northwest Borneo generally.

#### MATTING WITH BURIAL 75

The term "matting" is rather loosely used here to describe layers or strips of vegetable material arranged, sometimes carefully interwoven, as a cover or wrapper, occurring under or around skeletons or even coffins, part or whole.

It has not yet been possible scientifically to identify the parts involved. But most appear to be either a long-leaved riverine bull-rush or the common *Pandanus* ("screw-palm" or "*pandan*") of subcoastal zones, still extensively used in native matting today. *Pandan* can be rendered soft but durable, and is rather easily worked. Of the cemetery mats provisionally identified as *pandan*, 15 are with wood coffins, 10 with bamboo. More elaborately meshed material including (?) netting has been found with 2 of the wood coffins, but not in sufficient separation or quantity for C-14 analysis. Similar fragmentary pieces also occur, apparently as wrappers, with Niah cremations, an osiery, and on a multiple burial (no. 60 B-D) already provisionally radiocarbon-dated at 2500 B.P., which was hitherto the earliest such "mat" date for the region. The present result runs back nearly a millennium earlier. In addition, some sort of leaf is used for "pillows" under the head of the (6) extended burials (another 5 of rhinoceros bone).

It is possible in burial no. 75 that the child's remains were originally wrapped in this dated matting, and that some of the human bone which has been dated is intrusive later. The complications of these funerary arrangements are indeed considerable (see B. Harrison 1967: 54).

No matting or any other material of the kind has been found with the seated,

flexed, or other burials having pre-pottery, deeper archaeological characteristics which place them as "pre-neolithic" (in the sense defined by T. Harrison 1972).

#### "SEATED" BURIAL (NO. 147)

Burial no. 147 is in trench E/D2. The human bone analyzed here came from 32 to 34 inches below the deposit surface on 23 August 1965. This is one of the four "seated" burials which, with 18 flexed on their sides, have previously been classified on archaeological grounds as the earliest treatment of whole skeletons at Niah. Carbon-14 dating confirms this classification.

The new result of 13,640 B.P. is the earliest date yet for any full burial in the region. It relates to another immediately adjacent seated burial, no. 146, which has recently yielded a bone collagen date of 11,700 B.P. (S. Brooks, personal communication; cf. Harrison 1972: 388, and data below).

In "seated" burial, the body was placed in a pit, in a sitting position comparable to the classical posture of some later Buddhas, with legs tightly flexed to form an angular base-platform. Later, the upper bones collapsed or worked downwards. Hematite or charring by fire may be associated. No matting or container has been identified. Related artifacts are very few, including rhinoceros teeth and a quartz crystal fire-striker.

#### BURIAL 147 AND A PALAEO-LITHIC "TERMINAL PEAK"?

There appear, from our excavations, to have been three periods of peak activity at Niah:

1. Early (local) iron age, with inrush of Chinese ceramic and other trade—ca. 1200 to 600 B.P.
2. Full neolithic with quadrangular adzes and advanced earthenware (Harrison 1972)—4500 to 2250 B.P.
3. Very late Palaeolithic (cf. mesolithic)—14,000 to 8000 B.P.

This possible palaeo-mesolithic intensity is perhaps strengthened by the only pre-metal date at the Kota Batu open site farther north in Brunei, and the only two early dates so far from Sabah, North Borneo, both very close to each other in time though from widely separated caves (T. and B. Harrison 1971: 68, cf. 87). I call attention to this phenomenon as it merits further checking not only in Borneo but throughout Southeast Asia.

The relevant Borneo dates on this point are:

14,350 ± 300	Kota Batu, Brunei (cut wood)
13,640 ± 130	Niah (seated burial, no. 147)
11,700 + 1600	Niah (seated burial, no. 146)
— 1400	
11,030 ± 220	Niah (charcoal)
10,800 ± 2000	Agop Atas Cave, Sabah (food shell)
10,300 ± 1000	Tapadong Cave, Sabah (human bone)
10,110 ± 310	Niah (charcoal)

## RELATED DATA AND GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

These new Groningen dates fit quite well into the long series of other dates previously established from Niah. As laboratory director W. G. Mook wrote in a covering note, "the results show good agreement with your expectations." They broadly correlate, equally, with the collagen series analyzed in Japan from Niah cemetery burials under intensive study by Sheilagh and Richard Brooks at the University of Nevada (in press), though in direct comparison there are some complications to be discussed in a following paper.

As more exact information on sequences comes in, the impression is steadily strengthened that in this wild, jungled island there were very considerable local insular developments after the last Glacial, when Borneo was cut off from Sundaland. In particular, loving care for the dead has now to be seen here as something much older than had generally been allowed.

On the other hand, metal appears to have arrived and spread late, leaving the stone age to a long indigenous prehistory. In interpretation, it could be dangerous to put much emphasis on stone tool forms and typologies. These are proving most unreliable when correlated with demonstrable activities like burial and hunting techniques. It may well be that stone was unimportant at Niah, anyway. Certainly, in this region, judgment either of dates or of human skills and sophistication cannot be made on stone alone, at least as far as the late palaeolithic and neolithic are concerned (Harrisson 1975).

## ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

In accordance with a recent editorial suggestion (Solheim 1974), these prehistoric results may usefully be given an ethnographic setting. Detailed accounts of Borneo burials in historic times indicate the continuation and elaboration of extended ground burials in some sort of coffin or cover from out of the stone age. Along with this emphasis on the flat corpse grew elaboration of "secondary" burial treatments. These began well before 3000 years B.P. in the West Mouth cemetery, but proliferated into the metal age with the use of stoneware jars in trees or on hillocks, megalithic containers for the bones, splendid carved posts, and the direct rock-shelter cremation of the Land Dayaks (see Stöhr 1959 and Harrisson 1962 for full discussions).

On the other hand, although flexed burials are fairly widely known in other contemporary settings, none of the peoples presently living anywhere near Niah seem to have practiced anything of the kind in the past thousands of years. The seated burials are even more restricted in time and space. Their relative frequency in the cemetery (3 seated, 18 flexed) suggests some special usage (? leaders, shamans)—an aspect which may be clarified by the Brooks' skeletal analysis, now concluding.

So far there seems to have been no clear cultural *transition* between the seated or flexed treatments and the abundant extended style which has remained common form into the twentieth century.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks are due W. G. Mook and W. A. Casparie for help with the Groningen C-14 dates. G.-J. Bartstra, of the Biologisch-Archaeologisch Institute at Groningen, also gave assistance with the dates. The Curator and staff of the Sarawak Museum provided the essential background, in work primarily supported by the Gulbenkian Foundation, the Shell Company, and the Sarawak Government.

The Curator of the Brunei Museum, P. M. Shariffuddin, extended his usual generous courtesies. Sheilagh Brooks and Barbara Harrisson both valuably checked points of substance.

Finally, all of us who have worked in Indonesia and the islands generally have grown to respect H. R. ("Uncle Bob") van Heekeren, whose death deprives us of the old-style gentle, gentlemen's view of early regional evolution, full of both knowledge and common sense. We all enjoyed his generosity and wise advice, this writer as lately as the Groningen Palaeolithic conference.

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