

SITE VISIT TO SANTUBONG HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

In 1955, Mr Tom Harrison, renowned curator of the Sarawak Museum started an expedition to the foot of Mount Santubong that was to uncover one of the most important historical and archaeological finds in Sarawak. The party brought to light evidence of human habitation, industry and worship in the area dating back perhaps as early as the 10th Century AD.



Mr Tom Harrison with an unnamed local Dayak (Picture sourced from the internet)

Fast forward to 2011, Joseph Ingai Gasing, a member of the team to work on the original dig, retraced his steps with a significantly less intrepid group of SHS members in tow, sharing his knowledge and memories.

Batu Gambar

Harrison's original expedition set out to investigate a find made by local people who worked in the area in 1886. Situated some 30 km away from Kuching, in the shadow of Mount Santubong, about two kilometres from the present Santubong Village to the east, with no road access at the time, the original party hacked their way into the jungle. The modern visitors took a more leisurely stroll from the road into a shady clearing. Here, a cloud of mosquitos rose up to greet them, feasting on an unexpected buffet of city folk. Joseph was prepared. He whipped out his mosquito spray, holding the army at bay. He recalled that, on his original visit, one of their party was so badly stung, his face and body swelling in such enormous welts that he was unable to even open his eyes; he was forced to return to hospital in Kuching.

Mosquitos repellent applied, the party took in the scene. The site is on the side of a small hill, about half a kilometre from the present river bank - though there is some speculation that the river was much closer 1000 years ago - and a few meters, if any, above the high tide level. The trenches dug by Harrison's team from 1955 to as late as 1966 are still clearly visible. Here they unearthed the remains of human occupation which included broken shards of pottery which was mainly produced in China during the Sung Dynasty or the 10th-13th Century.

Beyond the clearing, just above the mangrove and nipah palm groves, lie a series of large, sandstone boulders. The first three show numerous small carvings - vague ghosts of human figures and graphic shapes etched into the stone.



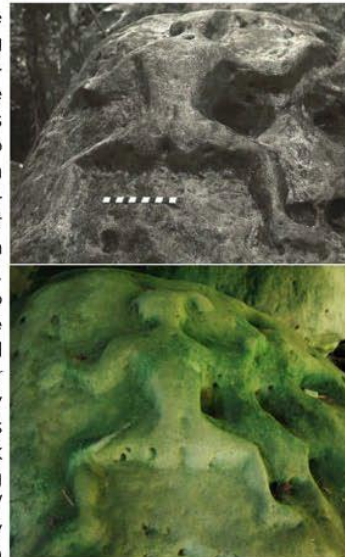
A depression remains where the Archeological team in the 1960s dug their trenches.



One of the large, sandstone boulders with numerous small carvings.

But nothing can quite prepare visitors for the vital force of the last. Hewn out of the rock is a large spread-eagle figure of a man, his head covered in a turban-like head-dress, clasping the gigantic boulder in a powerful embrace. Even sheltered in a rickety shed and fenced off by incongruous chicken wire, the weight of 1000 years of history is palpable.

It is thought to be the work of the Orang Lauts who were perhaps members of the Srivijaya security forces sent to Riau, and who returned from Tawaran in Sabah during a rotation of personnel that had found Sarawak in the 9th Century A.D. They are believed to have landed in the Tanjung Datu area and eventually pushed their way east to occupy the coastal land strips that led to the Sarawak River Delta. The Orang Lauts were from Hindu/Buddhist sects and they practised their religion for a very long time spreading to quite a large area including some inland sites like Samarahan in the Sadong River system and the upper Sarawak River up to Semedang and Sempu where their religious artifacts and other relics were found in the 1840s.



Pictures of the Batu Gambar as taken in 1960s (top, pic source : Sarawak Museum) and during the site visit (bottom).

However, it seems the main population made Santubong their base. Here they probably met with the Chinese traders who came with their junks and anchored at the mouth of Santubong River which they then called Negeri Batu Buaya. From what is recorded in the Sarawak Museum Journal, this site at Sungai Jaong was inhabited by Chinese traders who had come from mainland China and, while waiting for the right wind to bring them back home, set up an iron industry, evidenced by the iron slag found covering the ground over quite a large area, still visible today.



A group photo of the enthusiastic Society's members and friends after emerging from the Batu Gambar site. Gunung Santubong can be seen at the far sight.

Bongkissam Archaeological Site

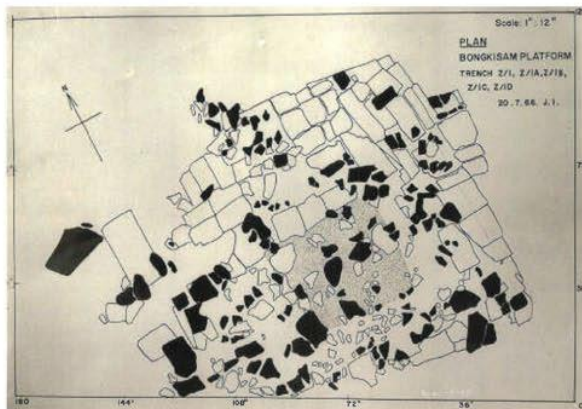


The shed currently covering the site of the original find.

After the initial work at the Batu Gambar in the 1950s, the team extended their attention to a new site at Bongkissam, about a mile closer to the modern-day Santubong village. Here, they uncovered artifacts consisting mainly of materials such as broken pottery and shards of Tang Dynasty or 7th-10th Century objects. It was at this point that Joseph joined the group.

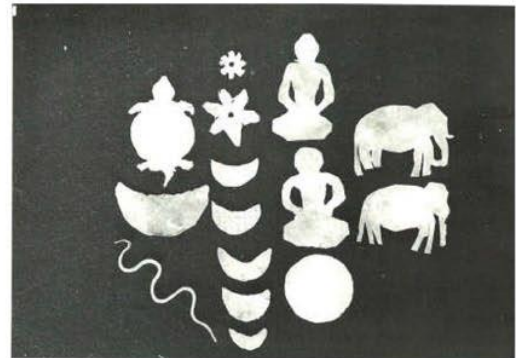
"When our work started in April 1966, I'd just joined the Sarawak Museum Department as a Junior Assistant Curator. The museum party was led by its Curator, the late Mr. Tom Harrison and accompanied by two foreign scholars, Professor Dr. Stanley O'Connor Jr. from Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y. and Dr Cheng Te-k'un of Cambridge University. When the work began, we wanted to extend the trench eastwards and immediately we discovered some clay slabs which were only a few inches deep, buried under sandy soil. When we proceeded further we discovered more and more until we'd exposed almost all the slabs."

"At that very moment we stopped the dig. I was so excited that I ran to the Government Bungalow where we had assembled our earlier finds and where Mr. Harrison and Dr. O'Connor were working on the materials collected so far. I immediately told Mr. Harrison that we had discovered a very interesting stone platform at Bongkissam. He and Dr. O'Connor then ran with me back to site. Upon reaching the site Mr. Harrison instructed the party to continue carefully and try to expose what was in a depression filled with rubble of similar clay slabs that had collapsed."



A Plan of the Bongkissam Platform where the archeological excavation was carried out in 1966 by the Sarawak Museum. (source : Sarawak Museum)

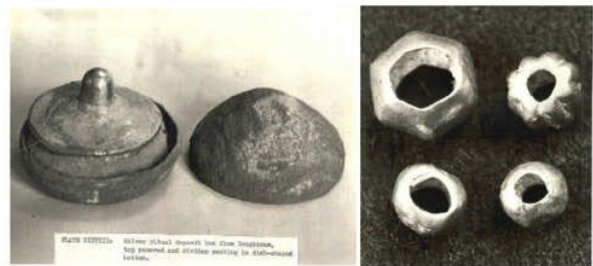
"After a while, with the slabs removed, we saw the centre was covered with pure white sand. Beneath it we discovered gold dust mixed with sand and eventually some artifacts were exposed, one after another. There were gold leaf figures of two elephants, a Buddha, stars and moons. Besides these, there were some semi precious stone crystals which were not of Sarawak origin. Above everything else was a silver box which contained some grey ashes, placed at the center of the depression."



Gold leaf figures discovered from the "Tantric Shrine" site. (source : Sarawak Museum)

This "Tantric" shrine was certainly interned by a prominent, religious leader of the Hindu and Buddhist religions. So, the evidence points to the fact that the tribe who first settled the area at the delta was the Orang Lauts adventurers who embraced this religion which they inherited from their homeland in Sumatra and which their forefathers practiced for centuries from mainland Asia before they were driven out of the Asian Continent in the 6th Century.

Little remains at the original site beyond evidence of some exposed depressions in the soil. The artifacts are currently housed in Kuching in the care of the Sarawak Museum.



The silver box which contained some grey ashes. The gold rings shown were found around the silver box. According to Mr Joseph Ingai, this silver box has since disintegrated (source : Sarawak Museum).

Senior Government Officer's Bungalow

On a hill overlooking Santubong village and the sea beyond is the concrete bungalow from which Harrison directed operations for his dig. It is reputed to be the site where a previous old wooden building was built, in perhaps as early as 1854, for the friend of James Brooke – the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace who worked in the Santubong area.

The current building was built by the British after the state was handed to them during the colonial period from 1946. The exact date is not known but by estimation it would have been built when senior British officers were posted to serve in Sarawak. It was common to see bungalows similar to this one built in remote places throughout the state for them to rest and enjoy the scenery, the country side and beaches along the coast during their breaks.

"I remember very well" says Joseph "when we wanted to have a place for us to work and lay down the artifacts collected from our archaeological sites before sorting them out, we managed to get permission from the District Office in Kuching to make use of the bungalow for the purpose. There were not less than five officers staying at the bungalow while some lived among relatives in the village nearby. But during the days, our workers joined us at the building."

"Dr. O'Connor and Dr. Cheng had separate rooms upstairs. Mr. Tom Harrison managed to find accommodation at our boat driver Encik Jemel bin Bogor's house at Tanjung Tegok in the cove towards Damai. We made use of its ground floor area for us to work while upstairs rooms were for us to sleep in. I remember I was given a room which was next to my sleeping room to lay down some maps and drawings."

"One incident which I will not forget was during an evening storm which blew so hard that it made all the windows and doors bang on the frames. This made Mr. Harrison shout at the top of his voice for us all to close the windows and doors."



The Bungalow in the 1950s. (Source : Sarawak Museum)



The Bungalow as it stands today

"We occupied the place for almost three months and during the period we had beautiful times working with old colleagues of mine who have all now passed away. One evening, they had killed a python and invited me for dinner. I told them that I had never tried snake meat before, and the smell from the kitchen was mouth-watering indeed, but once I peeped into the pot and saw the glistening and shining rays, it turned my stomach upside down."

"Sometimes we had a wonderful company of our foreign guests at the Bungalow as we were often offered buckets full of prawns and crabs which the villagers had fished out below our place at the Bungalow. I remember running down the hill as the shops closed quite early in the evening to buy some beers and some other bottled drinks."

After the expedition finished, the bungalow continued to serve as a government rest house. An SHS member, whose father was a government officer, recalled staying in the bungalow during her childhood and cooking huge feasts on the verandah overlooking the ocean. But now, it sadly lies derelict and unmaintained, though the local inhabitants use the grounds to cultivate crops. Wandering through the rooms is a sad reminder of a once elegant structure with a fascinating history.

However, a newspaper report from May of this year quotes Datuk Ik Pahon Joyik, Tourism and Heritage Ministry Permanent Secretary announcing that these several sites around Santubong are due for restoration and some infrastructure will be put in place to encourage tourists to visit. The bungalow itself will be turned into a research station in collaboration with Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.



Sultan Tengah's Mausoleum

Heading back towards Kuching, this mausoleum sits on the slope of Bukit Maras by the side of the main road that goes to the resort at Pantai Damai. It was built in 1998 in commemoration of the one and only Sultan who ever ruled Serawak (the area from Tanjung Datu to the left bank of the Sadong River).

In 1476 A.D. Serawak was bought by the Sultan of Brunei from its former owner, the Sultan Bahkei of Johore. He inherited the area at the turn of the 14th Century AD during the Majapahit Empire from his grandmother who married the son of Raja Jawa (a Javanese King) known by the name of Raden Dipati.

Sultan Tengah, whose real name was Pengiran Ibrahim Ali Omar Shah, was sent to be the Governor of Serawak from 1582. He was accompanied by at least a thousand Brunei subjects and a number of ministers. When he reached Serawak he moved his capital to Ensengei at the Sadong River and employed local residents and Malay elders to work with his ministers. Once his Istana and his Hall were completed, he then was called to accompany his aunt to Johore where she was supposed to be married.

However, on his return journey their boat was swept off course and he landed in the Sukadana region in West Borneo. As he could not find his way home, he married a local princess. Progressively, he tried to move closer to Serawak but, on his way, was attracted to the daughter of Matan and so he married for a second time.

At last he managed to find his way home and sailed back to Serawak. But, before reaching the Sadong River he stopped at Batu Buaya at Santubong where he reached an ignominious end. He detached from the group to relieve himself, but unfortunately his bodyguard mistook him for an enemy and killed him. So, his remains never reached Ensengei but were buried at the foot of Bukit Maras where this mausoleum was built around it centuries later.

Picture left : Sultan Tengah's Mausoleum completed in 1998. It was constructed with aid from the Brunei Government. (source : Sarawak Museum)

