Recent finds of more slab-graves in the Bernam Valley, Peninsular Malaysia

BY LEONG SAU HENG

Stone cist graves have long been known from a limited number of areas in Southeast Asia, especially from the Bernam Valley of Peninsular Malaysia, the Pasemah highlands of south Sumatra, and from central, west and east java. Solitary finds of stone cist graves have also been reported from South Vietnam, at Sa Huynh and Xuan Loc, and the Philippines [1]. These cist graves are normally regarded as Late Metal Age antiquities from the early first millennium AD and are also considered to be one of the many manifestations of early Southeast Asian megalithic cultures. One scholar (Heine-Geldern, 1945), for instance, had grouped these stone monuments as belonging to a younger megalithic complex considered to be distinct from earlier megalithic cultures predating the Metal Age.

In general, despite the fact that archaeological investigations on cist graves in Southeast Asia had begun since the early decades of this century, our knowledge of these culture(s) remains rather vague. This is due to the fact that the majority of the sites were excavated in the pre-war era when field techniques and laboratory analyses were not as advanced as that of today, consequently much data that could have been obtained from such sites were not retrieved. In Peninsular Malaysia, for instance, although a total of 9 slab graves (so called because they were constructed of large slabs of granite) were excavated from the Bernam Valley between the years 1919-1936, these ancient graves continue to be an enigma in the pre/proto history of the region. Several scholars, both archaeologists and historians have spent much time on the questions of the origin and chronology of the graves and of the people who constructed them (Evans, 1928; Wilkinson, 1939; Bradell, 1939; Noone, 1939; Winstedt, 1941; Linehan, 1951; Lowenstein, 1956; and Sieveking, 1956).

For more than half a century (since 1936), no further discoveries of slab-graves were made. This rather dismal situation is now being changed by our recent discoveries of four more slab graves in the Bernam Valley. Two were found at Changkat Menteri and two at Ulu Bernam close by.

The recent discoveries were made in early October 1992 by an archaeological reconnaissance team from the Selangor State Museum headed by the author. Changkat Manteri, a low hill on the banks of the Bernam River was chosen as the first point of our reconnaissance work in the Bernam Valley. In fact, the very first slab-grave reported in the Bernam Valley was accidentally discovered on this hill in 1895 by a British sub-assistant surveyor. The grave was later excavated in 1919 by H.C. Robinson (director of Museums, Federated Malay States) and R.O. Winstedt. Meanwhile, archaeological interest seemed to have shifted from Changkat Menteri when more slab-graves were found elsewhere, namely at Sungkai (which were excavated by I.H.N. Evans in 1927 and 1930) and at Slim River (exvavated by H.D. Collings in 1936). No further discoveries of such graves were made in Changkat Menteri until our recent archaeological reconnaissance work there last year. Two slab graves were discovered. These are all located in a palm oil estate belonging to United Plantations. The first grave, designated K 1 was found on rising ground not far from the bank of the River Bernam. The second, designated K 2 was found on high ground, just slighty over 2 metres below the top of a low hill. The site is about 2 km north of K 1. Slab grave K 1 was excavated in late October 1992 while K 2 was excavated in early January 1993. The excavation team comprised nine personnel from the Selangor State Museum and three from the Museums Department (National Museum) with the present writer as the director of excavations.

A further important outcome of our excavations at Changkat Menteri was the fact that by then many of the local estate workers, especially those who had worked in the estate for a long time, had become familiar with what we were looking for. According to some of these workers, at least 5 other graves had been unearthed accidently in the past. According to one informer, 3 graves were exposed by tractors some 20 years ago in a field[2] just next to Field 8 where K 1 is located. One large grave was found on top of a hill at Ulu Basir nearby. All these went unrecognised (for their archaeological signifcances) and were subsequently bulldozed. The same fate would have befallen the recently discovered slab-graves K 3 and K 4 had it not been for the fact that by now the local folks are able to recognise such structures. Both K 3 and K 4 were recently found by a tractor driver while levelling a large tract of land in a neighbour's estate in Ulu Bernam about less than 2 km downstream from K1. The land here was being cleared (of old oil palm trees) for replanting purposes. The findings were ported to the estate authorities who immediately contacted me at the university. Slab grave K3 is just 76 metres northeast of K4. Excavation of both sites was conducted in February 1993.

As work at all the four sites has only just been completed, it is only possible to present here our preliminary findings. In all our excavations small bits of charcoal were found both inside and outside the graves. These were all carefully collected and will be sent for radiocarbon dating. Our careful excavations showed no signs of a pit at the sites. When the graves were opened, all were found to be infilled with the same soil as that found on

the outside. This suggests that the graves were not dug very deep into the ground at the time of their construction. At all the sites, the graves, or rather parts of them, were only exposed when the top soil, usually 3 or 4 feet thick, had been removed. This top soil was probably of natural accumulation.

One special feature of the Changkat Menteri graves, which was also observed in some of the Slim River graves, is that these graves are lined with floor slabs which slope down towards the foot of the grave. The graves are not orientated towards any particular compass point. Those located on the slopes of a hill, apparently would have the head end of the grave at the higher level so that the floor slab could slope downwards towards the foot of the grave. The Ulu Bernam graves, K 3 and K 4, which are located in the lowland near the river had the head of the graves pointing towards the river. No floor slabs were found in them. Another difference noted between the Changkat Menteri and Ulu Bernam graves is that the latter are are slightly larger and broader than graves K1 and K2 of Changkat Menteri. The Ulu Bernam graves were also constructed of relatively thinner granite slabs. Excavations of the inside of all the four slab-graves were carried out with the utmost care using 5 cm spit for horizontal control. At K1 and K2, patches of darker coloured soil, probably soil from decayed organic substances were found to ocuur in the soil inside the graves. Samples of these organic soils will be sent for phosphate and other chemical analysis. In K1 beads were found only in one area, i.e. at the neck-chest area of the grave. All these data do suggest that these cist-graves were receptacles for primary burials, not secondary burials. Owing to the acidic nature of the surrounding soil (Ph between 5 to 3.5) at these open sites no visible traces of human remains were found.

The same was also recorded for those slab-graves excavated in the pre-war years. This had led some to believe that the graves were probably used for secondary burials. Traces of charcoal found at some of the graves also led the early investigators to believe that secondary burials were practised. The present writer also found several charcoal bits in all graves. At grave K2 pieces of what looks like burnt resin, possibly Kemenyen (benzoin) were also found. All these charcoal bits were probably remains of burial rites conducted during the inhumation of the corpse.

Grave goods were found both inside and outside the graves. The most common grave goods found inside the graves were glass and carnelian beads. At K3 a very large spherical carnelian bead (diameter 25mm) was found inside the grave. A hexagonal bicone bead of rock crystal was also recovered from K3. Fragments of much corroded iron were recorded from all the four graves. Some of these appear to have a socket. The best preserved iron tools, however, were found at K2. They comprised a socketed sickle-shaped tool or weapon, and a socketed spearhead. These were excavated in-situ lying on the left side (looking from the head of the grave) on the outside just beside the grave. A large whetstone was also found together with these iron artifacts. These artifacts were deposited in a linear arrangement parallel to the long axis of the grave, first the whetstone, then the sickle-shaped tool/weapon and finally the spearhead.

Slab-grave K2 appears to be the richest and the best preserved of the four graves excavated by us. Apart from the above mentioned well preserved iron artifacts, more than 2,700 (present count)[3] small red glass beads have been recovered from the grave. Some of these were as extremely small, measuring between 0.5 mm to 0.8 mm in their axis (measured from one end of the perforation to the other), and 1mm to 1.2 mm in diameter. These small red glass beads were found scattered all over inside the grave suggesting that they could have been remains of beadwork. Some were also found outside the grave. The grave also yielded one large spherical carnelian bead, one blue glass bead and several chips or fragments of blue-green glass beads. Our wet sieving of the infilling soil of K2 also yielded several chips of what looked like tiny flakes of gold and two tiny seeds.

K4 is the only grave that yielded no beads. Since part of the grave had been disturbed by the tractor, some of the grave contents could have been lost. A piece of rock crystal together with a small pebble were found inside the grave. The surfaces of the rock crystal were in some places ground down. Other finds from K3 include a large piece of iron, a whetstone and fragments

of jet black glass.

It was, however, at K3 that we encountered one of the most surprising finds. When one of the top cover stones at the head of the grave was removed we found some fragments of a mush corroded iron object. Below this was what at first appeared to be a bronze object covered with a bright green patina. On further removal of the soil matrix (clay in this case) in which the object was embedded we found it to be part of the rim of a lead glazed vessel, probably a footed tray or a large plate. Long burial in the damp clay has caused the vessel to be so soft that it was not possible to fully recover the object without it breaking. The vessel has a fairly hard stoneware body of reddish to buff colour and is covered with a white slip. The glaze is of a bright yellowish-green color. No crazing is found in the glaze. Another fairly large sherd of the same ware was also found close by. This may be a sherd of another vessel or a sherd of the same vessel mentioned above. This group of ceramics is provisionally identified as early Tang wares of the pre-ninth century AD.

The occurrence of Chinese ceramics in a slab-grave here is, indeed, something new. The slab-graves of the Bernam Valley were previously held by many to be of Iron Age antiquity, i.e. belonging to the late prehistoric times dating before the mid first millennium AD. Some scholars have ascribed a relative date of 0 to 400 AD to these graves and the associated socketed iron tools industry. This dating was based on H.C. Beck's typological analyisis of the glass and stone beads found in the Sungkai and Slim River slab graves[4]. The recent finds of Chinese ceramics at slab-grave K3 of Ulu Bernam have, however, shown us that some of the Bernam slab graves might well date from the early historic times. In east Java, at Pakauman some stone cist graves were also reported to have been associated with finds of Chinese ceramics of ninth century date (Bellwood 1985). At Pekalongan, Java a tenth century Chinese jar with pale green glaze containing four socketed iron tools similar to those found in some of the Bernam slab graves has been earlier cited by Lowenstein (1956: 60-61). All these data therefore, do indicate a rather late date for some of the stone cist graves.

As noted earlier in this paper, the Ulu Bernam slab-graves were found to be slightly different (being less slender in shape and constructed of relatively thinner granite slabs) than those excavated at Changkat Manteri. It is likely that the slab graves at Changkat Mantyeri are much older than those at Ulu Bernam. Several charcoal samples have been collected from all the recently excavated sites. These will be sent for radiocarbon dating. It is hoped that these will soon provide us with more concrete dates for our understanding of the Bernam slab grave culture.

NOTES

1. This was reported by H. Otley Beyer as a grave "of similar type (to the Bernam graves), but of somewhat smaller slabs." See Ivor H.N. Evans, "Notes on the relationship between the Philippine Iron Age antiquities and some from Perak" , Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums vol. 12, 1929.

2. The plantation is divided into various sections or fields, each being about 100 to 150 acres in area.

3. Some of these beads were recovered by dry sieving at the site. The majority, however, were recovered by wet sieving of the soil brought back to the museum. Owing to the fact there was no water at the site, K2 being located up the hill, all the excavated earth, especially that from inside the grave was bagged, carefully labelled and brought back to the museum for wet sieving. At the time of the writing of this paper several bags of soil are yet to be wet sieved.

4. Beck's short report on these beads entitled "Beads from the slab graves in Malaya" is found in Collings' (1937) article in the Raffles Museum Bulletin.

REFERENCES

Bellood, P. 1985. **Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago**. Sydney.

Braddell, R. 1939. An introduction to the study of ancient times in the Malay peninsula and the Straits of Malacca. **Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society** 17(1): 16-212.

Collings, H.D. 1937. Recent finds of Iron Age sites in Southern Perak and Selangor, Federated Malay States.

Bulletin of the Raffles Museum 1 (2): 75-93.

Evans, I.H.N. 1928. On slab-built Graves in Perak. **Journal of the Federated Malay State Museums** 12: 111-119.

Evans, I.H.N. 1929. Notes on the relationship between Iron Age antiquities and some from Perak. **Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums** 12:189-196.

Evans, I.H.N. 1931. A further slab-built grave at Sungkai. **Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums** 15 (2): 63-64.

Hoop, A.N.T. van der 1932. **Megalithic Remains in South Sumatra**. Zutphen. Holland

Linehan, W. 1951. Traces of a Bronze Age culture associated with iron implements in the regions of Klang and Tembeling, Malaya. **Journal of the Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society** 24(3): 5-59.

Loewenstein, J. 1956. The origin of the Malayan Metal Age. **Journal of the Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society** 29(2): 5-78.

Noone, H.D. 1939. The Penarikan and Bernam land routes. **Journal of the Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society** 17(1): 144-145.

Sieveking, G.de G. 1956. The Iron Age collections of Malaya. **Journal of the Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society** 29(2): 79-138.

Wilkinson, R.J. 1939. The Bernam slab-graves. **Journal of the Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society**. 17(1): 134-43.

Winstedt, R.O. 1941. Slab-graves and iron implements. **Journal of the Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society** 19(1): 93-98.