

Archaeology in Peninsular Malaysia Past, Present and Future

by ADI Haji Taha

INTRODUCTION

The Federation of Malaysia was formed in 1963 comprising the Malay Peninsula and the states of Sabah and Sarawak. In Peninsular Malaysia¹, archaeological activities including the protection of archaeological sites is under the jurisdiction of the Museums Department while the East Malaysian states have their own enactments and programmes covering this aspect of research². For this reason I will restrict this paper only to the archaeology of

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Peninsular Malaysia.

Peninsular Malaysia which lies between 1 degree to 7 degree north of the equator covers an area of 131,794 square kilometres. Its landform is characterized by the coastal plains and a rugged mountains interior. The backbone of the country is the Main Range running roughly in the north-south trend with elevation varying from 1,000 metres to 2,000 metres. The peninsula is drained by a network of rivers sharing a common watershed in the Main Range. The climate of the peninsula is equatorial, and vegetated with thick equatorial rain forest with plentiful fruit and food resource. Despite the rugged mountainous terrain in the central part of the peninsula, archaeological sites are not only confined to coastal areas

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the dance gurus of the National Theatre.

The last part of this paper will be devoted to the discussion of how an ordinary Thai dance teacher creates a new dance. Certainly, a new dance is expected in some festivals. Generally, the teacher will prefer to create something based on northeastern dances since this type of dance is less subject to restrictions. For novelty, the teacher often borrows the elements from the daily activities of northeastern Thais such as weaving, fishing, frog hunting, rice pounding etc. But the problem lies in the choice of music. Today Thai Dance music are very few, hence there are very limited opportunities for a dance teacher to obtain a musical piece specifically composed for a new dance. The teacher normally uses existing musical pieces as the bases for the new dance. Consequently, the new dance is restricted by the available music. The teacher then transmits his or her ideas to the students little by little, first without music, and later with music. The teacher trains his dance students relying mainly on counting rather than on melodic line. This approach of dance training has a certain deficiency. The students always lack emotional involvement while dancing because they put their concentration on counting. Thus, their dances become lifeless. Although there are some aesthetic deficiencies in recent dance creations, many new

and interesting dances were invented; and some of them are well received.

In summary, dance in Thailand, has a very long tradition. It was influenced by many sources yet developed a special style of its own. Thai dance has many distinctive regional styles and requires many years of training. Dance has many functions in Thai society today ranging from entertaining and communicating with gods, to attracting tourists. Dance is part of the national culture and is being taught in schools for appreciation, and as part of preserving Thai cultural identity. The Government supports dance education in schools and colleges which produce many young and active dancers. Tourism subsidises dance indirectly since dances and other cultural performances are part of tourism promotion. There is need for new dances but there is a dearth of proper musical materials and designs which can truly reflect Thai cultural identity. Many new choreographers emerged yet they require advance training in choreography, a kind of training which is not yet available in the existing system of dance education in Thailand where conservative values prevail. It is the hope that the Workshop for Choreographers and Dancers for the Younger Generation will have a very fruitful result for the future dance in Thailand.

but occur in the interior region of the country such as Gua Cha (Sieveking 1954), Gua Kecil (Dunn 1964) and others. The upper reaches of the Tembeling, Kelantan and Perak rivers has been actively occupied by the prehistoric people and it seems these rivers form the main inland routes used by the early population of Peninsular Malaysia.

Being situated at the southern tip of the Asian mainland, Peninsular Malaysia has undeniably played a considerable role in the shaping of human history in this region. This is much so with the rise of sea levels at the close of the Pleistocene where lower parts of the Sundaland was submerged which resulted in the restriction of movements of man and animals from mainland Asia to Insular Southeast Asia and vice versa³ - a situation which has made Peninsular Malaysia a significant potential landbridge for any southward migrations (Tweedie 1953:5). In fact, Heine-Geldern (1945:140) has placed the Malay Peninsula as the last common home of the Austronesian speakers before their dispersal.

In the later history of Southeast Asia, the geographical position of Peninsular Malaysia, being situated half-way between the major trade centres of China in the east and India and the Arab world in the west, also seems to point out the significant role it might have contributed in the early maritime trade. At the time when long distant navigation depends to a great extent on monsoon winds, the Malay Peninsula serves as an ideal port to break the journey whilst waiting for the appropriate monsoon, and this claim could be proved archaeologically.

In view of this strategic position, data on archaeology and prehistory of Peninsular Malaysia is indispensable towards resolving the culture history of Southeast Asian on the whole and for any understanding of the cultural flows and movements into, within and from this part of the world.

BRIEF HISTORY ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN WEST MALAYSIA

The history of archaeological research in Peninsular Malaysia may be summarized into four periods. The first period marks the work by antiquarians mostly colonial administrators. G.W. Earl (1863) was the first to report on the antiquity of the Malay Peninsula when he explored a shell midden site in 1860, and at about the same time Colonel James Low unveiled the antiquity of the Bujang Valley in South Kedah. Cave exploration was initiated by Leonard Wray (1895, 1905), the first Curator of Museum in Malaya. Further reports were published on finds found by accident by A. Hale (1888) and R.M.W. Swan (1904).

The second period began with the appointment of I.H.N. Evans⁴ as ethnographer of the Federated Malay States Museums in the first decade of this century and ended with independence in 1957. This period was marked by an enormous increase in archaeological researches and the introduction of systematic techniques in excavation. From early 1930s, the staff of the Raffles Museum in Singapore were also involved in the archaeological excavations in Peninsular Malaysia with H.D. Collings concentrating on

the west coast, while M.W.F. Tweedie on the east⁵.

Research within this period was geared towards searching evidence of human migrations through the peninsula as suggested by Heine-Geldern (1932), and in the local arena strongly supported by Callenfels (1938) whose paper on the "Melanesoid" civilization and report on the Gua Baik excavation in which he participated followed this framework (Callenfels and Noone 1940). This view, unfortunately, has had an impact on the later researches especially those by Sieveking and Tweedie. Within this period extensive work on the classical sites in Bujang Valley was carried out by Dr. and Mrs. Quaritch-Wales (1940).

It is apparent that the interpretation of data within this period was much influenced by the traditional theory that Southeast Asia was a cultural back-water, and that early sophisticated stone tools, pottery and metallurgy which were found in this region were derived from elsewhere, especially from China and India. On the whole, this period revealed quite a number of important sites such as Kota Tampan, Bukit Chuping, Gua Cha and many more, and has laid a strong foundation for later researches.

The third period of archaeological research took a different turn upon Malaysia's independence. Researches were more concerned with analysis of excavation results rather than the quantity of sites that could be dug within a given period. The standard of recording and report writing improved considerably, including detailed information of the cultural developments of a site. The nature of research is exemplified by F.L. Dunn's excavation at Gua Kechil in Pahang (Dunn 1964). The focus of archaeological research was on seeking evidence of early practise of agriculture and domestication of animals in Southeast Asia as hypothesized by Sauer (1952), Linton (1955), Chang (1962) and Solheim (1969, 1970). Both Dunn (1964) and Peacock (1971) claimed that there is evidence to support the view of early agricultural development from Gua Kechil and Kota Tongkat respectively.



The Reconstructed Tripod Pottery from Kodiang, Kedah.

The University of Malaya through the Department of History in Kuala Lumpur played an active role in monitoring and motivating archaeological research immediately after independence. In 1964 the University of Malaya Archaeological society was organized. For the first time ethno-archaeological research focused on the utilization and trade of forest products in prehistoric times was undertaken (Dunn 1975).

There was also increasing interest on the archaeology of the Malays and Orang Asli particularly on their origins and cultural history, an aspect of great importance for the newly independent country. The excavations and subsequent restoration of a Hindu-Buddhist site in Bujang Valley by Lamb (1960) and other excavations in the area (Sullivan 1958) revealed new finds which require new interpretations (Lamb 1961, Braddell 1958). New evidence revealed some data which contradicted the earlier findings of Quaritch-Wales (1940) as to the origin, datings and relationships between the Bujang Valley inhabitants and Srivijaya, India, China and possibly Sri Lanka.

Through the first three periods, archaeological researches were in the hands of foreign archaeologists. At the turn of the last decade, which marks the fourth period, Malaysians took over archaeological research in the country. This is possible due to government recognition of the importance of archaeology in the nation's search for its cultural roots and as a means of promoting understanding among the multi-racial Malaysian population. In the early 1970s, archaeological researches were placed under the direct supervision of the Museums Department. Immediately after, Al-Rashid, Oswald Theseira and the author undertook archaeological research. The launching of the National Archaeological Survey and Research Unit (NASRU) in 1969 has increased the number of expeditions and surveys in the peninsula especially in the Bujang Valley area where more than fifty sites were discovered. The main task of the National Archaeological Survey and Research Unit was to survey and evaluate the potentials of sites which had earlier been identified and excavated, and on the bases of these data, a long term archaeological programme was drawn up. With archaeology introduced as part of the curricula of universities, it is expected that a firm and solid archaeological research programme will be carried out in the near future. This programme is important for the prehistory of Southeast Asia, since there are still very few scientifically excavated sites in Peninsular Malaysia. Assistance from archaeologists and experts in related fields is being sought by the Museums Department, through the National Advisory Board on Archaeology and the Association of Malaysian Archaeologists which were formed recently.

In the past, archaeology in Malaysia was a part of historical study rather than an anthropological one, hence it focused on the origins and relationships of cultures. In the fourth period, research was geared towards the understanding of cultural processes and change that had occurred at a site, and the search for the evidence of early human remains on the peninsula.

We have seen that archaeology in Malaysia began over a century ago yet cultural interpretation remains hazy and incomplete. In his synthesis on the Malayan Stone Age, Tweedie (1953) remarks that "the prehistory of Peninsular Malaysia had not advanced appreciably beyond demonstration of a long succession of cultures, each represented by rich and varied remains". These remarks still hold true until recently. The nature of cultural evolution on the Malay Peninsular is still unclear. For example, the chronology of the only Palaeolithic site at Kota Tampan, and the question of industrial sequence of the Hoabinhian and the Neolithic, are debatable. Based on available literature and evidence, three possible Hoabinhian/Neolithic relationships can be proposed. First, there was a long time lapse between the Hoabinhian and the Neolithic which was suggested by Sieveking (1954) from the Gua Cha site. Second, the two assemblages form part of a continuous developmental sequence as observed by Dunn (1964) at Gua Kechil. Third, the two assemblages were partly contemporaneous (Collings 1937). The focal interest of archaeological research in Peninsular Malaysia today are how to plot local and regional sequences, the exact nature of their relationships, and the nature and extent of external influences on local cultures.

EXCAVATION AND PRESERVATION OF SITES

The Museums Department which is under the portfolio of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports is the sole custodian and guardian of the country's movable and immovable cultural properties. The department also controls and regulates all archaeological excavations and



A Goblet Shape Neolithic Pottery from Bukit Tengku Lembu, Perlis.



Neolithic Pottery and Stone Implements, the Bottom Right is the 'Tembeling' Knife.

preservation of sites in Peninsular Malaysia, by virtue of the Antiquities Act 1976-a revised version of the Antiquities and Treasure Trove Ordinance of 1957. One of the provisions of this act requires any person who wishes to undertake research in archaeology in the country to apply for a permit to the Director-General of Museums. In addition a research permit issued by the Socio-Economic Research Unit of the Prime Minister's Department is also required. Under this act illegal digging is liable to fine, and imprisonment, or to both.

Under the museums' organizational structure, archaeology is part of the Division of Antiquity which also includes the Monument Section and Conservation laboratory. The Archaeology section is further divided into three sub-sections namely: Prehistoric Archaeology, Bujang Valley Archaeological Project, and Underwater Archaeology, each headed by a curator. However, due to lack of staff at present, the Prehistoric section also undertakes research and excavations of historical sites. The curator of Bujang Valley concentrates his activity on the Hindu/Buddhist sites which are found scattered in the valley covering an area of more than 400 square kilometres. The establishment of Underwater Archaeology was approved in 1982, but due to the economic recession the section has not been able to function as yet.

At present, all archaeological activities - survey, excavation, registration and preservation of artifacts and restoration of sites fall under the responsibility of the Museums Department. Programmes for archaeological activities in Peninsular Malaysia are drawn on a five-year basis in line with the

government's five-year development programme. In general, two types of archaeological activities are involved. First, rescue or salvage excavation designed to save as much as possible archaeological data at sites which are threatened to destruction as a consequence of development programmes. At the rate developmental projects are implemented in the country, a considerable number of archaeological sites are found, which take up much of the time and energy of the archaeology section just to conserve the sites.

Secondly, full-scale or total excavation, which requires proper planning and involve experts from related fields. This type of archaeological research has been done at temples and settlement sites in the Bujang Valley. In addition, the department also undertakes archaeological explorations (Adi 1983). Of importance in the history of archaeological research is the excavation of a megalithic complex in Kampong Ipoh, Tampin, Negeri Sembilan which was regarded sacred by the local people (Adi and Jalil, 1982).

Peninsular Malaysia possesses few excellent sites that could be preserved. Unfortunately most of these sites were either totally destroyed or situated too far inland where direct control is impossible. At present, the department concentrates on the preservation and restoration of the Hindu/Buddhist sites comprising mainly building foundations in the Bujang Valley. At least fifty structural remains were traced, and to date ten had been excavated and reconstructed, either on its original site, or moved and reconstructed in the museum's compound at Bukit Batu Pahat. A site museum was built in the area to house and exhibit the excavated artifacts so as to provide a better understanding of the

cultural remains in relation to its environment. The department is also responsible for the preservation of the only prehistoric rock paintings in Perak.

TRAINING OF RESEARCHERS

In Peninsular Malaysia, archaeology has not yet been accorded academic and professional status as a distinct discipline. Archaeology is being taught at three local universities but is offered as part of history or social science courses. It is also unfortunate that Malaysian young people seem to be primarily motivated in the pursuit of high-paying jobs or to obtain powerful government positions. Moreover, even if more Malaysian youths pursue archaeology as a profession, about the only place of employment is the Museums Department which cannot absorb a large staff. It requires a deep personal commitment for a person to keep working in the field of archaeology. During the last decade, the Museums Department has been hampered from carrying out a long-term programme of archaeological research for lack of adequate number of trained personnel. The Museums Department is also beset by the resignation of trained staff members due to insufficient economic incentives. Moreover, due to fast developments in the discipline, the Museum staff need further training if they are to keep themselves up-to-date. Fortunately the government is more generous in giving scholarships and funds for periodic, short-term training. Through the Training Programmes of SPAFA, many museum technicians had the opportunity to go for training at various Sub-Centres in Southeast Asia. Malaysia's participation in SPAFA programmes was suspended between 1968 and 1986 when she was not a contributing member thereby shutting up one form of access of the Museum staff for training in archaeological research.

Malaysia prefers to send her Museum and other personnel to other Southeast Asian countries for training since countries of the region share many similar cultural, environmental, and historical background. Besides, participation in regional archaeological programmes will serve to standardize research methodology and approaches within the region. I am happy to record here the kind cooperation extended to Malaysia by various institutions concerned with archaeological research in Southeast Asia, and the decision of the Malaysian government to return as a contributing member country of SPAFA.

In 1979-80, Professor W.G. Solheim was brought to the University of Malaya to help develop archaeological curricula and to start a programme of graduate training and research in prehistoric archaeology. However, the proposed project did not materialize.

COOPERATION WITH OTHER SCIENCES

Archaeology in Peninsular Malaysia has been until recently a historical rather than an anthropological study, partly because being a British colony at one time this discipline was much influenced by the traditional British school of archaeology. The main focus then was on establishing the

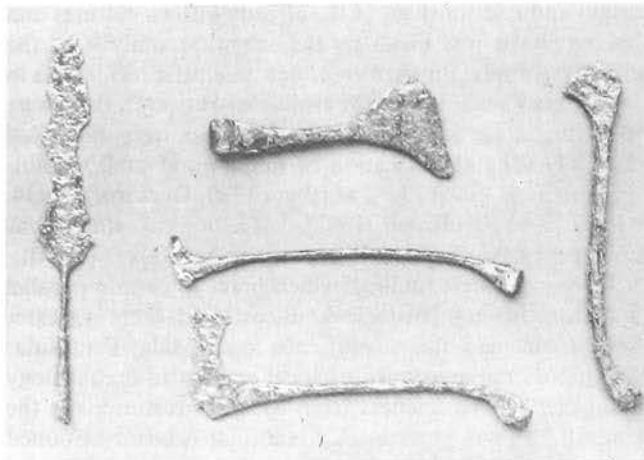
origin and relationships of the already known cultures and less emphasis was given on the scientific analysis of the excavated finds. Furthermore, new scientific techniques in archaeology were not readily available. However, there were instances in the past when other sciences were employed such as in the identification of human and shell remains (Huxley 1863, Snell 1949, Mijsberg 1940, Duckworth 1934, Trevor and Brothwell 1962). Geological study was undertaken for the Kota Tampan site by Walker (1954).

In view of new findings which point to certain parallel developments in prehistoric Southeast Asia, there is greater need to excavate sites scientifically in the Malay Peninsula. This needs the assistance of local experts in archaeology and other related sciences from various institutions in the country. For this purpose, a National Advisory Council was established comprising experts in various fields who will guide and assist archaeological excavations. The response from universities and government institutions has been very encouraging and many have shown keen interest to participate in archaeological projects in the country. However, their contribution is at present rather limited since many are not yet aware of the work involved in archaeology. Most disciplines in Malaysia tend to be self-contained units without venturing beyond their scope of study. Nevertheless, given time we hope that this limitation can be overcome.

The Tun Dr. Ismail Atomic Research Centre in Bangi, Selangor has a low level (activity) laboratory which in the near future will have facilities for radiocarbon or at least thermoluminescence analysis. At present the centre is capable of undertaking neutron activation analysis for archaeological artifacts and also neutron radiographic analysis. Fission track dating would be another aspect the centre is looking into in future. For the time being the department has to rely on external laboratory facilities for carbon-14 and other dating methods.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION FOR THE PROMOTION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES IN ASIA

Archaeology in Peninsular Malaysia is still at its infancy. It is only very recently that Malaysian archaeologists entered the field. Lately, archaeology has aroused a great deal of public interest as people seek and try to interpret their roots. As a consequence more people appreciate the importance of excavations. Since the last decade, archaeological research in Peninsular Malaysia can only be undertaken by Malaysian archaeologists to the exclusion of foreigners. However, projects organized at intergovernmental level, depending on the nature of cooperation, are welcomed. In fact, the department is most interested in participating in projects at regional level especially ASEAN, like the Intra-ASEAN Archaeological Excavation and Conservation which was held in Bujang Valley in late 1985. This kind of cooperation is very important for us to fully understand the processes of cultural development that had taken place in Peninsular Malaysia.



Iron Age Implements Known as 'Tulang Mawas' to the Local People Meaning 'Bones of Orang-Utan'. Shapes of these Iron Tools Reflect More Ceremonial Function.

CONCLUSION

So far, available archaeological evidence demonstrate a long succession of prehistoric cultural development in Peninsular Malaysia. Although data are still inadequate, we can formulate a tentative sequence of cultural development with much overlapping rather than following neat, and distinct stages : Paleolithic (Kota Tampan); Hoabinhian (Gua Cha, Gua Chawan, Gua Tappaq in the Nenggiri River system of Kelantan); Neolithic (Gua Kechil, Pahang); later Prehistory with evidence of metals bronze and iron tools (Kampung Sungei Lang, Selangor). With new and more scientific approaches in archaeological research, and with more trained archaeologists, this tentative formulation will undoubtedly be refined and the gaps in the sequence filled in. As far as organizing archaeological researches is concerned, the Museums Department takes it as its policy that this is the primary duty of Malaysian nationals for which reason it seeks to upgrade the competence of its staff. Nevertheless, the Museums Department recognizes that there is much to be gained in cooperating with other countries specially with Southeast Asian nations.

FOOTNOTES

1. The term Peninsular Malaysia refers to the present political unit of West Malaysia, formerly known as the Federation of Malaya. This term is used here interchangeably with Malaya, West Malaysia and the Malay Peninsula.
2. During the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, the East Malaysia states retained the right and autonomy to manage the cultural affairs of the people including the administration and programmes on museology and archaeology.
3. The fossil records and traces of human activity on the mainland as well as in Insular Southeast Asia support such a claim. (See Hooijer 1975 : 37, Movius 1944)
4. Most of Evan's work appears in *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums* between 1918 to 1931, and he partially summarized his work in his "Papers on the Ethnology and Archaeology of the Malay Peninsula" 1927.
5. By 1930s, archaeological researches in the Malay Peninsula was undertaken by the Raffles Museum, partially financed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and results of excavations were published

in the *Bulletin of the Raffles Museum* under Series B.

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