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Sailing between worlds: The symbolism of death in northwest Borneo

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Introduction

The Niah Caves complex in northwest Borneo is best known for its early *Homo sapiens* remains, but the various Niah entrances and nearby caves also contain a wealth of archaeological deposits from later time periods. The rich metal-age record (from c. 2000 years ago) of Niah is nearly exclusively represented by burials, and while some attention has been directed to understanding the West Mouth cemetery zone (e.g. B. Harrison 1967; Zuraina 1982), other deposits have received less attention. Kain Hitam was one of the last sites in the Niah area to be excavated by Tom and Barbara Harrison, and only received brief or popular treatment in the published literature (e.g. T. Harrison 1958, 1960, 1964). Nevertheless, it has been regarded as a remarkable expression of metal-age mortuary ritual and the Kain Hitam rock art has been mentioned numerous times in press (e.g. Ballard *et al.* 2004; Lape *et al.* 2007). Based on a study of the field archive and curated materials, we present here details of the Kain Hitam mortuary site. We further assess claims about cultural affinities for the site (e.g. Chêng 1969) and situate Kain Hitam within the larger realm of commentary on Southeast Asian ‘ship-of-the-dead’ rites.

Background

Kain Hitam was discovered by Barbara Harrison in 1958, when excavations in the various mouths of the Niah Caves were well underway (see Figure 1). On the cave floor, a group of dugout canoes lay ‘beached’ (Figure 2), and closer inspection revealed associated scatters of human bone, shell, earthenware and trade ware. A profusion of red pictographs was also noted,

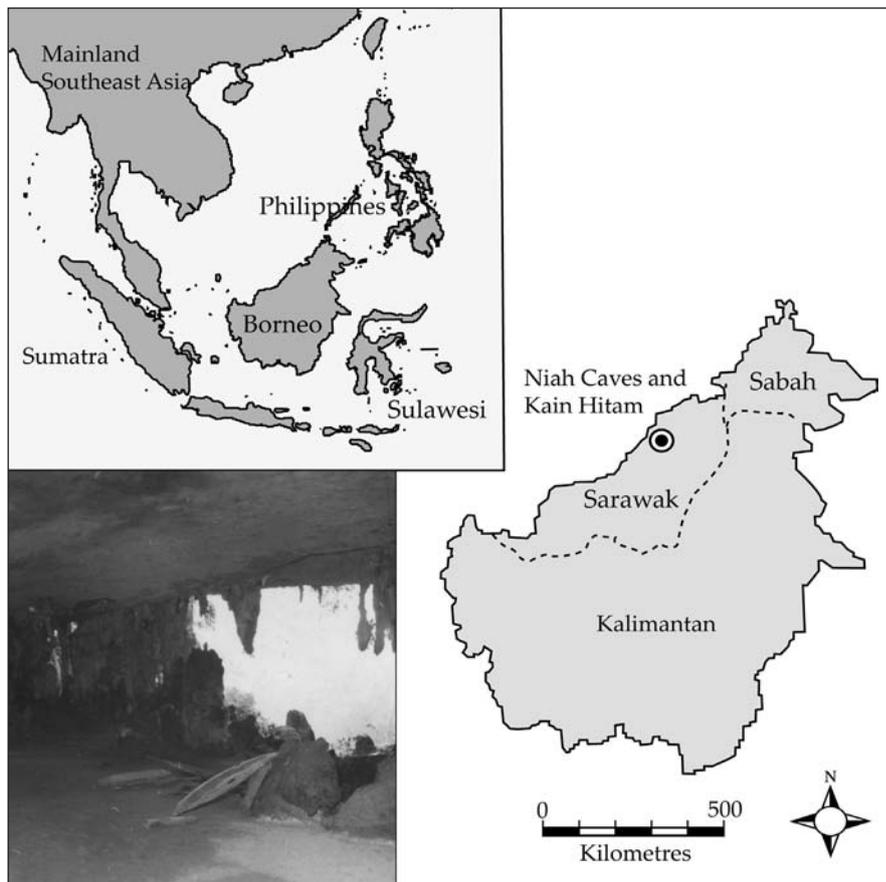


Figure 1. Map to show the location of Kain Hitam within Southeast Asia and Borneo. The picture on the lower left is of the Upper Cave at discovery, looking out from the rock art towards the entrance.

forming a 46 m panel along the west wall and acting as a back-drop ‘mural’ to the boats. The cave has opposing north and south openings on different levels, with a steep slope connecting the two. The rock-art mural is in the Upper Cave, which is the area largely considered in this paper. The Lower Cave had a smaller number of boat burials, and, as revealed by the photographic and artefact archive, was also excavated by Harrison.

It appears from the photographic archive that much of the excavation was done by brush, with provenance of artefacts recorded by grid-square and depth. All material was accessioned on site. Deposits were shallow, with rarely more than 15 cm of deposit removed before reaching a layer of flowstone. Tom Harrison published very little on Kain Hitam – or the ‘Painted Cave’ as it is otherwise known.¹ All excavated material is held in the Sarawak Museum Kuching or Niah National Park branches, and includes unworked and worked shell, human bone, bone artefacts, bronze, earthenware and trade ware ceramics, and glass artefacts, while the paper archive contains some of Tom Harrison’s original field notes, on-site renderings of the spatial distribution of artefacts, and unpublished correspondence and manuscripts on aspects of the archaeological assemblage.

The material record

In April 2006, parts of the Kain Hitam assemblage were studied by Szabó and Piper, and the photographic and paper archives were digitised. Material physically analysed during this period included unworked and worked shell, and bone, bronze and glass artefacts.



Figure 2. View of part of the Kain Hitam showing death ships in situ before the area is gridded for excavation.

The 'death ships'

A number of dugout wooden canoes were identified in the Upper Cave with an unknown smaller number located in the Lower Cave. Harrison puts the Upper Cave number at 16, however each 'death ship' (following the terminology of T. Harrison) consisted of two parts: an upper and lower 'boat' which slotted together, and it is unclear whether his numerical value related to whole coffins or individual halves. Most of the canoes were instantly associated by Harrison with standard Dyak river perahu, although slightly smaller and shallower (T. Harrison 1958:200). One of the death ships was significantly smaller in size, and labelled as a 'child coffin'. The spatial arrangement of the death ships was recorded on-site by Harrison, before any movement of archaeological materials² (see Figure 3). The boats were largely oriented along an east-west axis, and were 'pulled up' on a gently sloping surface, which was separated from the rock-art panel by a 7 m long flat expanse. This area between the death ships and the rock art is notably lacking in material culture, which is found in profusion around the death ships themselves and on a travertine platform adjacent to the rock-art panel. The discovery of a wooden post with a v-shaped end still propping up the stern of death ship A1 indicates that at least some of the boats were literally 'facing' the rock art. Harrison (1958:200) states that it was likely both ends of the boats were elevated using such posts, perhaps by analogy with his Sabah data (e.g. Harrison and Harrison 1971:48–49).

While the death ships resembled standard river craft, the bowsprits of the Kain Hitam death ships were elongate and carved with representations of various stylised animal heads. Easily recognisable are those of crocodiles, in particular (see Figure 4), however clouded leopards (*Pardofelis nebulosa*) and a 'sabre-toothed dragon' (Harrison 1958:200, 203) were also present. It would appear from the Harrison archive that human remains were not found *inside* the death

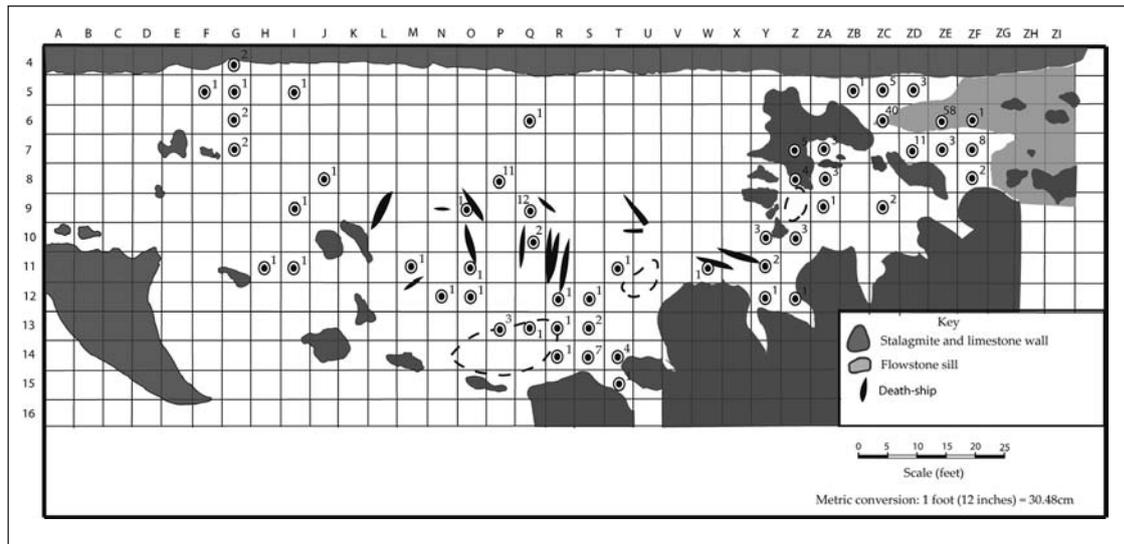


Figure 3. Schematic plan view of Kain Hitam, with the locations of all shell, bone, glass and metal artefacts in relation to the death ships. The numbers represent individual artefacts present. Areas in broken lines represent the extent of scattered pieces of a single death ship (redrawn from Tom Harrison's site plans).

ships themselves, but rather were scattered around the boats. Their poor condition is at odds with the excellent state of preservation of most other material recovered from the Kain Hitam deposits and suggests the remains, once emptied from the coffins, received no further special treatment. While such an elaborate death staging would seem to conflict with such apparently casual treatment of the skeletal remains themselves, there are certainly precedents; generally based on beliefs in which the soul is seen to leave the body after decomposition, leaving simply 'matter' in the form of bodily remains (see Huntington and Metcalf 1979:Chapter III *passim*).

Other locales in Southeast Asia and the Pacific have furnished evidence of boat burials, where the body is interred within a boat or boat-like coffin (e.g. Spriggs *et al.* 2005:81 for Aru, Bellwood *et al.* 2007 for Vietnam, and Tenazas 1986 for the Philippines). While a comparative analysis of boat-associated mortuary practices is not the goal of this paper, it is worth pointing out that we do not believe the Kain Hitam death ships acted as coffins associated with single bodies, nor that the scattering of the human remains is a result of site disturbance. The remarkable preservation of the often-fragile death ships and the elevated position of death ship A1 (mentioned above) suggest that taphonomic agents such as medium-large carnivores and/or scavengers have not seriously interfered with the mortuary setting. Furthermore, the 1000-year span of the death ships themselves (see below), coupled with the many bags of fragmented human remains, suggest the same death ships were used repeatedly. A more parsimonious explanation is that the death ships were receptacles for bodies, to facilitate the transition to the afterlife. After the successful passage of the soul, the earthly remains were of little import, and simply 'cleared away'. For ethnographic parallels within Southeast Asia, see Huntington and Metcalf (1979:86–91).

Bone artefacts

In total, 75 complete or fragmentary bone artefacts were recorded from the Sarawak Museum archive (see Table 1). These include 24 finished and unfinished cylindrical beads, one barrel bead, one bead curated to make a toggle, 10 'ear cuffs' (Figure 5a), one rectangular plaque made from a male pig canine with holes bored in each corner, three teeth with holes bored through the root, two carved fragments of soft-shell turtle carapace/plastron (Figure 5c), two bead spacers (Figure 5b), one expedient bone point and one formal bone point. Where identifiable, different

skeletal elements from various taxa had been utilised, including the radius, ulna, humerus, femur and metapodials of monkeys, squirrels, civet cats and small deer, the carapace or plastron of soft-shell turtles and bird bone (see Table 1). Further observations of techniques associated with bone-ornament production will be presented elsewhere. Holes drilled through the teeth of clouded leopard, civet cat and dog (cf. *Canis familiaris*), as well as those seen in the bead spacers, are absolutely straight, with no evidence of bevelling or counter-sinking. Such perforation morphology is generally indicative of the use of metal-tipped drills (Szabó 2005:264; Basilia *et al.* 2006). Also worthy of note are four shark vertebrae, one of which has a large, worn, central perforation and an abraded perimeter.

Shell artefacts

Artefacts produced for shell are less common than those in bone within the Kain Hitam assemblage, but nevertheless show a range of forms and raw materials. There are 24 shell artefacts, including a perforated *Conus* sp. spire, two disc beads hewn from *Melo* sp. shell (Figure 5d), two *Cypraea annulus* shells with the dorsum removed, one *Nassarius pullus* with the dorsum removed and ground, and two *Oliva* sp. shells with worn holes at the apex. A collection of three *Anadara granosa* and 11 *Polymesoda erosa* valves has hewn holes at the umbo, and technological analysis supports an interpretation of them as shell sinkers from casting nets (Szabó and Yang In preparation). The final ‘artefact’ is an unmodified *Vexillum* cf. *citrinus* which, as an occupant of clean coral sand, is clearly an import from some distance away.

Earthenware and ceramic trade wares

The trade-ware ceramics from Kain Hitam were not viewed by the authors, but the paper archive revealed that a number of sherds were sent to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, in 1963 for comment. According to correspondence between Ms Eine Moore (Sarawak Museum) and Ashmolean staff, the Kain Hitam ceramic trade wares can generally be characterised as ‘Yueh-ware’ (following Gompertz 1958) and ascribed to the T’ang Dynasty (618–906 AD), with a handful of examples possibly more closely associated with early Northern Sung wares (from 960 AD).³ The assemblage consists mainly of smaller vessels, including jars, vases, bowls and ewers. Some bear lotus-leaf-pattern decoration. While seemingly early in a regional context (e.g. see Bellwood 1997:275), a number of sites in Sarawak contain volumes of trade wares contemporaneous with those at Kain Hitam – such as Bukit Saripah and various of the Santubong Delta sites (Harrison 1958:200; Moore nd).

There is little information in Harrison’s notes about the earthenware pottery, but a number of details can be discerned from his on-site plans and keys. Firstly, earthenware pottery appears to be at least as abundant as ceramic trade wares within the site. The range of vessel forms includes double-spouted vessels, impressed and incised earthenware,

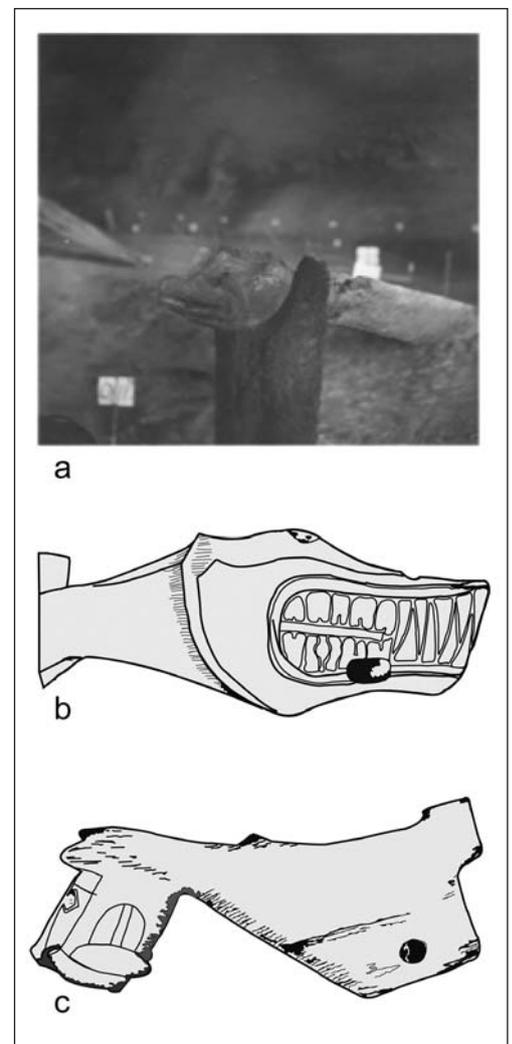


Figure 4. Details of bowsprits of death ships: (a) site photograph of death ship A13 with a crocodile bowsprit; (b) ‘sabre-toothed dragon’ bowsprit after Harrison (1958:figure 5); (c) clouded leopard bowsprit after Harrison (1958:Figure 4).

Table 1. Bone artefacts recovered from Kain Hitam recorded by Szabó and Piper in 2006.

Grid	Material	Common Name	Element	Artefact Type
I/9	cf. <i>Amyda cartiliagena</i>	Asian soft-shell turtle	Carapace/plastron.	Carved sub-cutaneous bone
R/13	Aves sp.	Bird	Tibiotarsus	Expedient point
R/13	Aves sp.	Bird	Humerus	Finished bead
R/14	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Unknown	Finished 'ear cuff' fragment
R/19	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
S/14	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Unknown	Finished 'ear cuff' fragment
S/14	Aves sp.	Bird	Humerus	Finished bead fragment
S/14	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
S/14	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
S/14	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
S/14	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
S/14	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
S/14	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Caudal vertebra	Vertebra with bored hole
T/14	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
T/14	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
T/14	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
Y/10	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Unknown	Curated bead - toggle?
Y/11	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/Macaque	Femur	Unfinished bead fragment
Z/7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Unknown	Fragment of bead separator
Z/7	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/Macaque	Radius	Finished bead
Z/7	Petauristinae sp.	Flying squirrel	Femur	Unfinished artefact fragment
Z/7	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/Macaque	Ulna	Unfinished bead
Z/8	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Radius?	Finished bead fragment
Z/8	Aves sp.	Bird	Tibiotarsus	Finished head fragment
Z/8	Sus sp.	Pig	Male lower canine	Artefact fragment
Z/10	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished bead fragment
Z/10	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
Z/10	Sus sp.	Pig	Male lower canine	Artefact fragment
Z/A7	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished bead
Z/A7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished bead fragment
Z/A7	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/Macaque	Radius	Finished bead fragment
Z/B7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Fibula?	Shaft of a point
Z/C5	Viverridae	Civet Cat	Tibia	Finished bead fragment
Z/C5	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/Macaque	Radius	Finished bead
Z/C5	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Unknown	Unfinished artefact fragment
Z/C5	cf. <i>Sciuridae</i>	Squirrel?	Femur	Unfinished artefact fragment
Z/C5	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/Macaque	Femur	Finished bead fragment

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Grid	Material	Common Name	Element	Artefact Type
Z/C5	Sus sp.	Pig	Male lower canine	Small plaque
Z/C5	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Unknown	Piece of carved bone
Z/C5	cf. <i>Amyda cartiliagena</i>	Asian soft-shell turtle	Rib fragment	Point
Z/C6	Elasmobranch sp.	Shark/ray	Vertebra	Modified neural canal
Z/C6	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished bead fragment
Z/D5	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
Z/D7	cf. <i>Tragulus</i> sp.	Mouse deer	Femur	Complete 'ear cuff'
Z/D7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
Z/D7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished 'ear cuff' fragment
Z/D7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Femur	Finished 'ear cuff' fragment
Z/D7	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/Macaque	Ulna	Finished bead fragment
Z/D7	Petauristinae sp.	Flying squirrel	Humerus	Finished bead
Z/D7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished 'ear cuff' fragment
Z/D7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
Z/D7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Longbone shaft fragment	Finished artefact fragment
Z/D7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Longbone shaft fragment	Barrel 'bead' fragment
Z/D7	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/Macaque	Humerus	Complete 'ear cuff'
Z/E6	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/Macaque	Radius	Finished bead
Z/E6	Cercopithecidae/ <i>Hyllobates</i>	Leaf monkey/Macaque/Gibbon	Metatarsal	Finished bead
Z/E6	Phasianidae	Pheasant/wild fowl/ domestic chicken	Tibiotarsus	Unfinished artefact fragment
Z/E6	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Longbone shaft fragment	Complete 'ear cuff'
Z/E6	Aves sp.	Bird - fowl-sized	Tibiotarsus	Finished bead
Z/E6	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/macaque	Ulna	Finished bead
Z/E6	Viverridae	Civet Cat	Canine	Bored hole pendant
Z/E6	<i>Pardofelis nebulosa</i>	Clouded leopard	Canine	Bored pendant
Z/E6	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Unknown	Fragment of bead separator
Z/E7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Longbone shaft fragment	Unfinished artefact fragment
Z/E7	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/macaque	Femur	Finished 'ear cuff' fragment
Z/E7	<i>Muntiacus</i> sp.	Muntjac	Metatarsal	Finished artefact fragment
Z/F6	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/macaque	Femur	Complete 'ear cuff'
Z/F7	Cercopithecidae	Leaf monkey/macaque	Femur	Unfinished artefact fragment
Z/F7	cf. Petauristinae sp.	Flying squirrel?	Radius	Finished bead (in two fragments)
Z/F7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Unknown	Finished bead
Z/F7	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Unknown	Finished bead
Z/F7	Aves sp.	Bird	Longbone shaft fragment	Unfinished bead fragment
Z/F7	<i>Canis familiaris</i>	Dog	Canine	Bored pendant
Z/F8	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Unknown	Finished artefact fragment

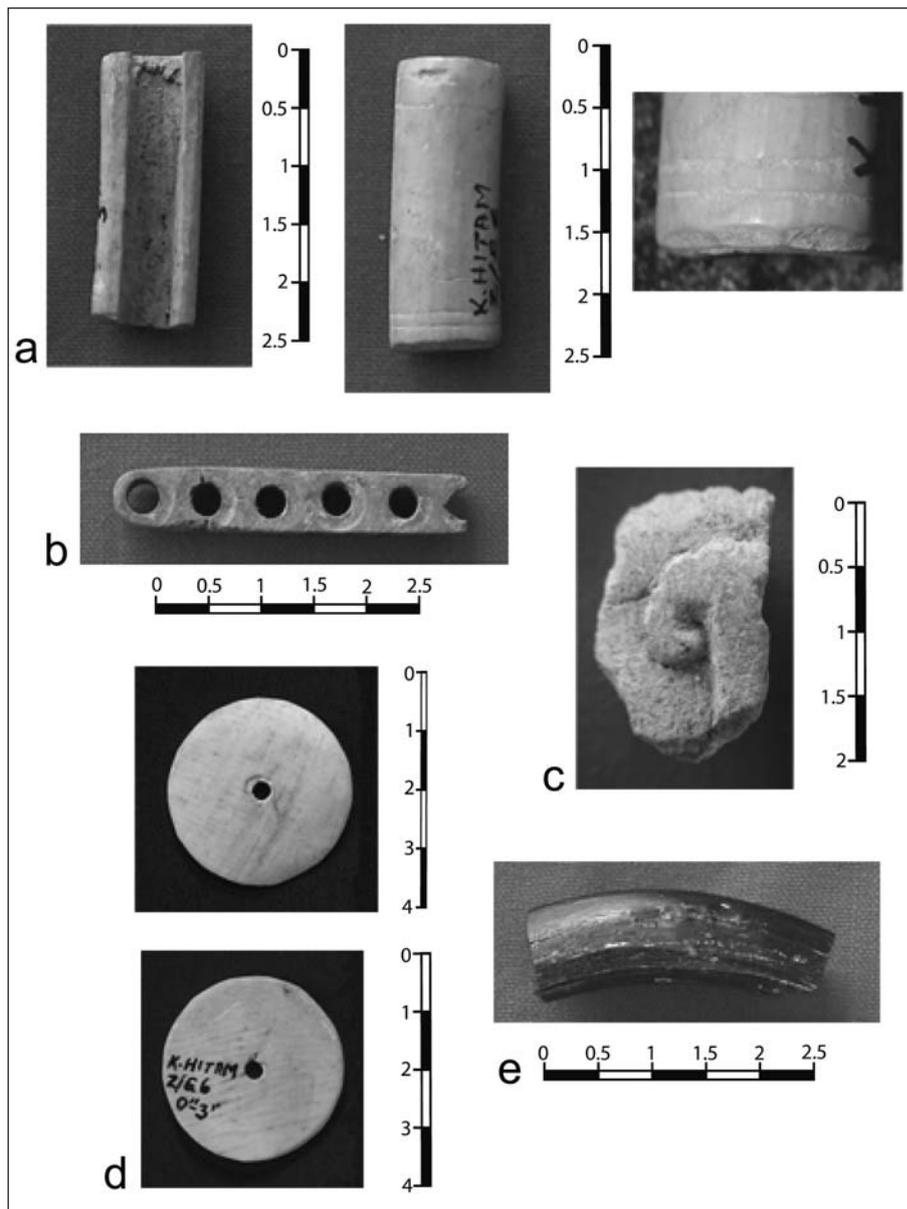


Figure 5. Artefacts from Kain Hitam: (a) three views of a bone cuff (Z/E6:0–3''). The cutting of the ends in stages following by grinding can be clearly seen, as well as the typical concentric incisions seen on most bone beads and cuffs. The image in the top right corner is at 10x magnification; (b) bone bead spacer (Z/7:0–3''), with the impressions of beads visible; (c) soft-shell turtle carapace or plastron carved in low relief (I/9:0''). Two further pieces from Lobang Tulang suggest the motif may be that of a tree of life; (d) inner and outer views of a *Melo* sp. disc bead (Z/E6:0–3''); (e) fragment of reworked blue glass bracelet (N/12:0''). Scale bars are in centimetres.

‘corrugated’ (paddle-impressed?) earthenware, box vessels with lids, and a further category called ‘nose pots’ by T. Harrison. The distribution of earthenware vessels in Kain Hitam also matches the spatial patterning observed in the trade wares and other artefacts (see below for further discussion of spatial patterning).

Beads and ornaments in glass and semi-precious stone

A total of 185 beads and one fragment of a glass bracelet were recovered from the Kain Hitam upper and lower caves, and a number of ‘grottos’ within Kain Hitam investigated by the Har-

rissons. The majority (82 percent) are glass ‘Indo-Pacific’ beads (terminology following Francis 2002), in an assortment of colours, including red, yellow, orange, green, black, white and blue. None of the beads was chemically analysed in this recent study, but details of technology were recorded, including whether beads were generated through ‘drawing’ or ‘coiling’ techniques. The coiling of molten glass around the central mandrel to produce beads is distinctive of Chinese glass-making technologies, whereas pulling molten glass lengthwise along the mandrel has its roots in Indian technologies (Francis 2002:Chapter 8; Munan 2005:27). Out of 153 Indo-Pacific beads, 100 were drawn and 68 were coiled, clearly indicating that the Kain Hitam bead assemblage is composed of trade items of mixed origin.⁴ This is reinforced by chemical analysis of a sample of glass beads from Kain Hitam and other Sarawak locales sent by T. Harrisson to the Corning Glass Museum in New York. The variation in lead values within the Sarawak samples indicates that while some beads correspond to ‘high-lead’ Chinese glass, others do not (Brill 1999:171, XV E).

The single bracelet fragment is of dark blue translucent glass, with an internal diameter of c. 7 cm and a triangular cross-section (see Figure 5e). Closer inspection under a low-power microscope indicated that the surface of the bracelet had been extensively ground, with the two corners intersecting with the interior of the bracelet having been ground flat on single facets. This is not the first time that the grinding of glass bracelets has been noted for Borneo, with a transparent green glass bracelet fragment sent to the Corning Glass Museum being published as having ‘some ground surfaces’ (Brill 1999:171). Interestingly, the morphology after grinding matches precisely the cross-section common in metal-age bracelets produced in *Tridacna* sp. shell, with one such example being recovered from the upper/metal age deposits of the Gan Kira entrance of the Niah Caves. A further eight beads in varying morphologies were produced from semi-precious stone, including carnelian, crystal, onyx and unidentified dark grey stone. A barrel bead produced in baked clay is clearly an imitation of the opaque red glass barrel beads also present in the Kain Hitam assemblage.

Bronze and precious metal artefacts

There are only three bronze artefacts within the Kain Hitam assemblage and none in iron. Two of the bronze pieces are identical Chinese coins, and a note in T. Harrisson’s hand links it to the reign of Emperor Kao Tsu (618–625 AD) in the Early T’ang dynastic period. The third bronze artefact is a fragment of a small vessel with a rim diameter of c. 7 cm. The only other evidence of metal at Kain Hitam is a human incisor with three gold plugs. The insertion of gold plugs into human incisors is also seen in proto-historic-period sites in the Philippines, such as Calatagan (see Barretto 2002), and in the Bolinao skull, as well as the First Millennium AD deposits in Burma (Hudson 2003), however these plugs have a ‘fish-scale’ appearance not seen in the Kain Hitam tooth.

Unworked shell

Eleven large boxes of unworked fresh-water shell from Kain Hitam are present at the Niah National Park branch of the Sarawak Museum. Hundreds of individuals of the stagnant/slow-moving water species *Cipangopaludina* sp. and *Pila ampullacea* occur, along with valves of the brackish water bivalve *Polymesoda erosa* and lesser numbers of *Melanoides tuberculata* and *Ellobium aurismidae*. These species have been recovered throughout the Niah Caves archaeological sites, associated with later deposits, in most cases clearly representing shell midden (Szabó In preparation).

The occurrence of discrete fresh-water shell deposits within the Niah burial cave Lobang Tulang led Barbara Harrisson to comment that these, together with lumps of iron slag,

represented the only evidence of ‘casual incidents not linked to the burial rites’ (B. Harrison 1959–60:171). While this is certainly a viable interpretation, we feel the fresh-water shell may well be linked to burial rights. This interpretation is reinforced by the spatial distributions of the fresh-water shell remains, which map on to the highly patterned distributions of other artefact types. Fox (1970:72) has also noted the association between shellfish, sometimes covered in red pigment, and burials in the Tabon Caves sites of Palawan, just north of Borneo in the southwestern Philippines.

Rock art

The rock art was systematically photographed and sketched by a local artist, Paul Kerek, during excavations. While we have been able to scan the photograph proof sheets, we could not locate the sketches and paintings done by Kerek. The rock-art panel is so extensive, and the photographic archive so fragmented, that we will not endeavour to reproduce the panel in its entirety, nor statistically analyse motif occurrences here. Rather, we will discuss prominent motifs and the main themes. While the site has been visited on multiple occasions by the authors, present-day observations do little to supplement information from the Harrison archive, as since 2006, much (if not most) of the rock art has been obscured by the growth of green micro-algae over the rock surface. All of the rock art has been executed in red pigment, and it has recently been demonstrated that this is not a hematite-based compound, but rather derives from an organic source, probably a tree resin (Pyatt *et al.* 2005). There is minimal evidence of superimposition of pictographs, and all of the mural components fall comfortably within the ‘curvilinear red tradition’ identified by Wilson for the western Pacific and the eastern reaches of Southeast Asia (2003). Thus, there is an overall cohesiveness to the rock art that, while not suggesting synchronicity, implies a totality in design and motivation. Dominant motifs include boats, isolated human figures and animals, interspersed with abstract curvilinear designs. The boats are the most strikingly dominant (Figures 6 and 7), with more than 20 examples still visible.



Figure 6. Section of the rock-art panel from Kain Hitam, including ships of the dead, anthropomorphs and animals. Note the trees of life emerging from some of the vessels and the double-crescent motifs at the prow (drawn from a colour photograph taken in 2005 by Szabó and Piper).

While the Kain Hitam boat representations have been compared with those from Timor (e.g. Glover 1972:42; Lape *et al.* 2007:4), it is unclear whether the two are in any way related. While it is argued that the Timorese boats contain visual traces indicating past maritime technologies, the Kain Hitam boat representations are stylised to such an extent that they contain no such information, but rather a wealth of symbolic imagery. At least eight boats have ‘trees of life’ sprouting from the deck and a recurrent double-crescent motif associated with the bows and/or sterns (see also Adams 1977:97). Most of the boats contain rows of highly stylised figures, some with additional anthropomorphs in a row with hands joined (refer to Figure 6). Individual anthropomorphs outside boats are typically in active poses, though we hesitate to ascribe such postures to dancing (e.g. T. Harrisson 1958:202).

Recognisable animals include a crocodile (Figure 7), snails, turtles, quadruped mammals, and figures with both bird and human features. It could be argued that a number of the human-like figures wear head dresses or costumes, however the common representation of a tail on such figures shrouds in ambiguity their human, or true, nature. As originally pointed out by T. Harrisson (1958), and elaborated on below, recognisable features of the Kain Hitam rock art clearly link with death symbolism, and thus the archaeological site at the panel’s base.

Notes on chronology and spatial patterning

T. Harrisson obtained a number of radiocarbon dates on wood from the death ships in the 1960s. He was fully cognisant of the ‘old-wood’ problem regarding long-lived trees, and thus he employed a local Penan worker to construct a boat out of Belian (*Eusideroxylon zwageri*) wood and dated samples of this, along with the archaeological specimens, to check inbuilt age. The modern death ship returned a date of 276±80 BP, indicating a general inbuilt age of c. 250–300 years. The radiocarbon dates (Table 2 and Figure 8) indicate a c. 1000-year spread for the death ships, beginning around the early metal age – or even late Neolithic – (c. 2300 BP) and continuing until around the 10th century AD. The latter part of this age range coincides well with the chronological reckonings based on ceramic trade-ware types and Chinese coins, but also affirms a significant pre-trade-ware period for the Kain Hitam site. It should be mentioned that two radiocarbon dates on charcoal from the Harrisson archive were recently obtained, both returning Pleistocene dates (see Table 2). These samples seem to derive from deposits surrounding broken flowstone underlying the visible deposits. Thus, while not shedding light on the material discussed here, these dates demonstrate an older history for Kain Hitam.

While it is clear from the radiocarbon dates that the Kain Hitam sites span the introduction of mainland Asian ceramic trade wares to the region, it is of particular significance that the high-fired ceramic, glass and bronze distributions map precisely on to intra-site spatial patterning observed in the local earthenwares, bone and shell artefacts (see Figures 3, 9 and 10). Indeed, apart from the gross distributions around the death ships and

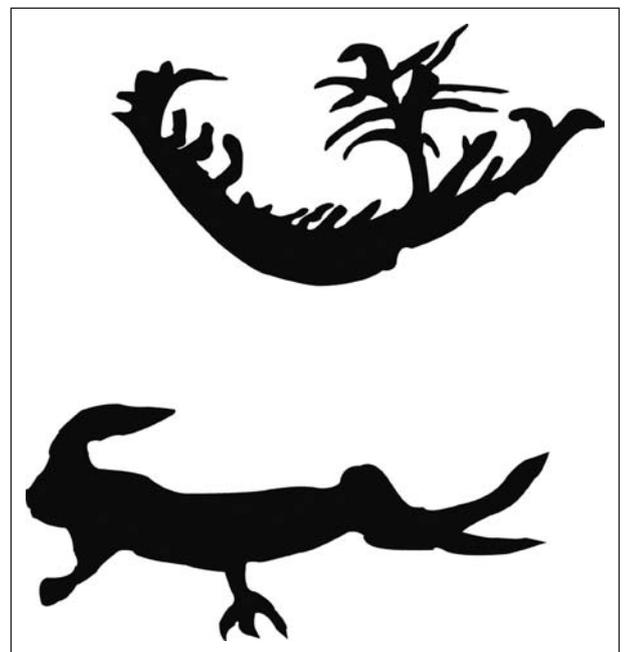
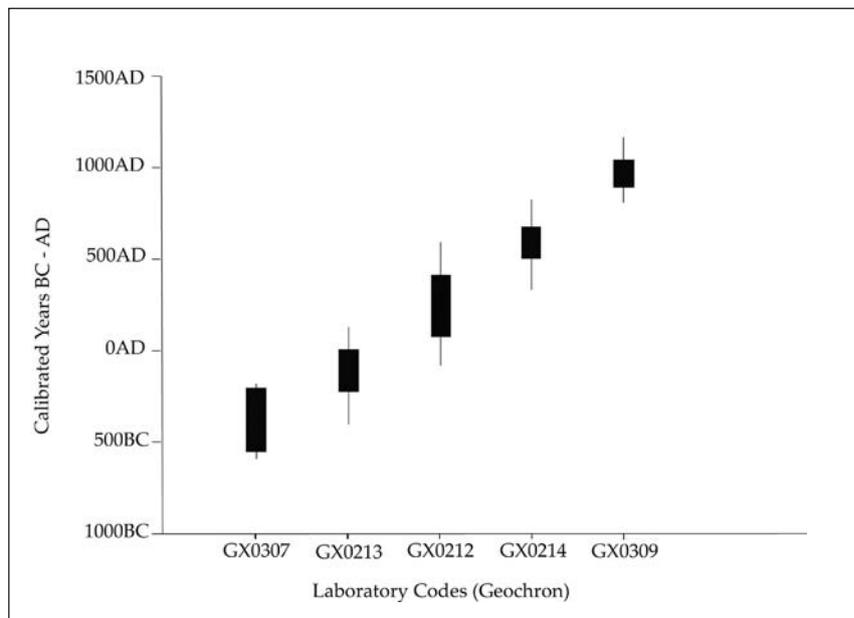


Figure 7. Two further pictographs from the Kain Hitam rock-art panel, showing a ship of the dead with emergent tree of life, and a crocodile (drawn from a black and white photograph from the Harrisson archive).

Table 2. Radiocarbon determinations for Kain Hitam and the Samti death-ship site. All dates are Harrison's, except for the two charcoal dates obtained by Szabó, Piper and Barker in 2006 on material collected by T. Harrison.

Sample code	Sample	Radiocarbon age (BP)	Calibrated dates (1 sigma)
GX0212	Death Ship X - Upper Cave	1780±150	(77 AD:413 AD) - 1
GX0213	Fragment of dense wood	2115±125	(356 BC:286 BC) - 0.215675 (252 BC:251 BC) - 0.00257 (234 BC:1 AD) - 0.781756
GX0214	Wood lower cave (Death Ship A20?)	1450±125	(433 AD:498 AD) - 0.217013 (501 AD:675 AD) -0.782987
GX0307	Child Death Ship A4	2300±80	(485 BC:464 BC) - 0.056146 (448 BC:444 BC) - 0.009874 (416 BC:342BC) -0.404504 (326 BC:204 BC) - 0.529476
GX0308	Modern Death Ship	276±80	(1486 AD:1669 AD) - 0.898092 (1780 AD:1798AD) - 0.080257 (1944 AD:1950 AD) - 0.021651
GX0309	Death Ship AI 8 - Lower Cave	1045±80	(891 AD:1042 AD) - 0.958061 (1107 AD:1117 AD) -0.041939
GX0310	Mixed bone sample - Upper Cave	4135± 330	(3264 BC:3242 BC) - 0.017356 (3103 BC:2205 BC) - 0.982644
OxA 16694	Charcoal from grid square Z/C5: 6-9	16515±60	Uncalibrated
OxA16695	Charcoal from grid square R/13: 3-6	26510±120	Uncalibrated

**Figure 8.** Box and whisker plot showing the calibrated radiocarbon dates for Kain Hitam at 1 and 2 sigma. Sample GX0213 is from the Samti death-ship site in the Niah Cave system. Full details of radiocarbon dates are presented in Table 2. Harrison's modern death ship and the aggregate bone date have been excluded from this graph.

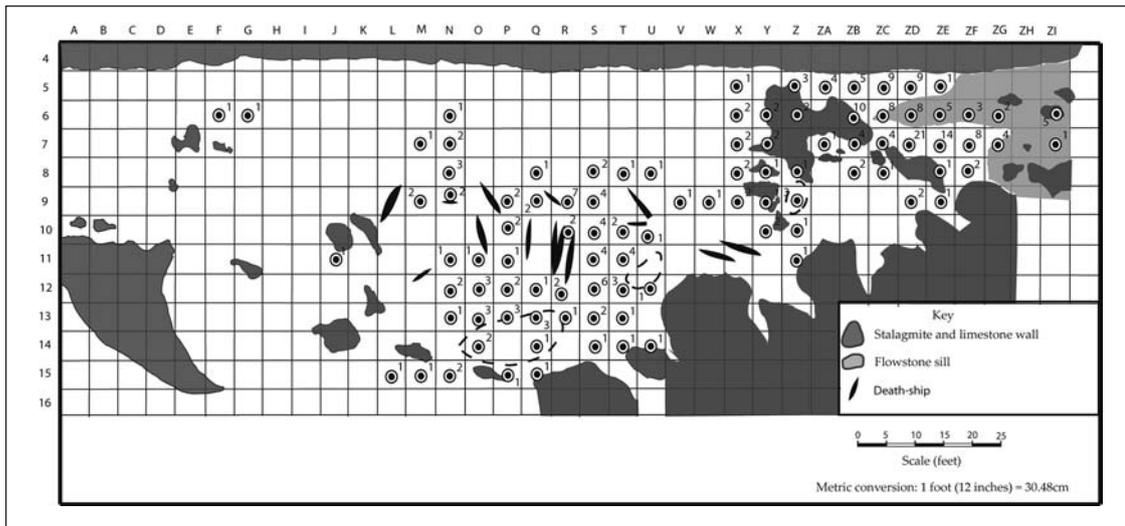


Figure 9. Distribution plan of occurrence of double-spouted vessel sherds at Kain Hitam. Numbers represent vessel fragments. Areas within dotted lines represent the scattered remains of individual death ships (redrawn from Tom Harrison's original plans).

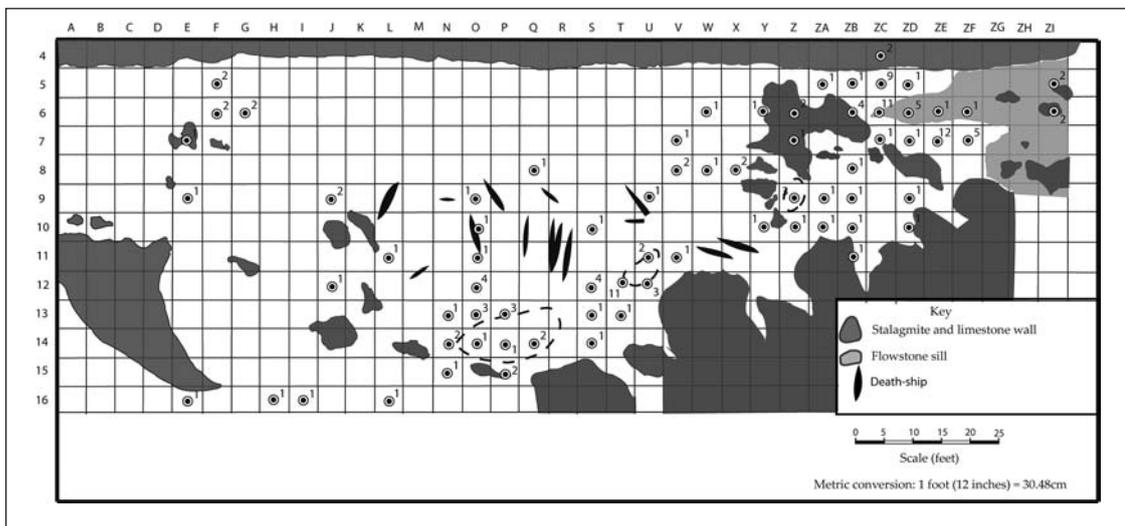


Figure 10. Distribution plan of occurrence of ceramic trade wares at Kain Hitam. Values represent individual vessels. Areas within dotted lines represent the scattered remains of individual death-ships (redrawn from Tom Harrison's original plans).

travertine shelf, no differential patterning of different types of artefacts can be discerned. This observation contradicts any argument that the importation of these goods revolutionised local cultures in either a structural or symbolic sense. Furthermore, it also argues strongly against the influx of new peoples synchronous with the extension of trade routes, replacing and/or transforming local cultures (e.g. Chêng 1969). It is also worthy of note that although artefacts in bone and shell are often, implicitly or explicitly, associated with Neolithic deposits in Southeast Asia (e.g. Francis 2002:151), the radiocarbon chronology points to a metal-age association at Kain Hitam.

Archaeological representations of death: An Island Southeast Asian context for Kain Hitam

While the use of death ships has parallels with only two other known sites in Sarawak (see below), the diverse types of material culture represented at Kain Hitam link it strongly to various locales within the Niah Caves complex. Pieces of bone carved with relief-scroll designs identical to the distinctive fragment recovered from Kain Hitam (Figure 5c), have also been excavated

from the Lobang Tulang mouth of the Niah Caves (T. Harrison and Medway 1962:Plate 2), where tubular bone beads were also recovered in some numbers (B. Harrison 1958). Bone cuffs were recovered from the upper levels of Gan Kira, and bone bead separators were recovered from both Lobang Tulang and Gan Kira (Harrison and Medway:Table 7). Lobang Tulang is a metal-age jar-burial site, while Gan Kira has two stratigraphic layers, of which the lower is Neolithic and the upper strata, with primary extended burials, is associated with the metal age (Piper and Szabó Unpublished data). The inter-site linkages observable in the bone artefacts can also be seen in artefacts produced from shell. We know of no analogues for the hewn disc beads in *Melo* sp. in Island Southeast Asia, but those recovered from Kain Hitam have exact parallels in examples from Gan Kira. A less restrictive spatio-temporal distribution is seen in the ground and perforated *Conus* sp. spires which occur widely across the Neolithic and metal ages of the Philippines and other locales in Borneo (Szabó 2005; Szabó Unpublished data). The same can be said of beads in *Cypraea annulus*, *Oliva* spp., *Pyrene* spp. and *Nassarius* spp. (see Szabó 2005).

The Kain Hitam rock art has not been dated,⁵ but the relative dates ascribed by Wilson (2003) for the curvilinear red tradition of the western Pacific fit seamlessly with the radiocarbon sequence for the site. Wilson (2003:277–278) goes on to make the important point that the curvilinear red tradition appears to be an outgrowth of the early Red1/Red2 painting styles, with an infusion of new motifs generated, most likely, by the expanding contacts and networks of the Southeast Asian metal age. The Kain Hitam site, as a cohesive whole, reinforces this interpretation, with metal-age trade goods clearly being drawn into extant cultural practices. It seems clear to us that the rock art is not chronologically disjunct from the archaeological material. The same themes and motifs bind the two together, and when this point is combined with the highly ordered structuring of space within the site, it argues for a direct association.

The symbolism of death: Kain Hitam and beyond

Ballard *et al.* (2004) summarise the ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence for the interwoven nature of boat symbolism and death ritual in Southeast Asia (see also Manguin 1986). While there is no need to reiterate their discussion here, there are particular aspects which we would like to develop, related to (1) the intertwined dichotomy between the sacred/profane or ritual/prosaic nature of boat and maritime themes in many Southeast Asian societies; and (2) the nature of the spatio-temporal patterning in boat/death symbolism, with the Kain Hitam evidence allowing us to tie together connections between mortuary expressions which have hitherto been overlooked. It is clear the Kain Hitam site is a very structured ‘deathscape’. With a period of utilisation apparently in excess of 1000 years, the placement of items of material culture, including the death ships themselves, in relation to the rock art and the cave mouth remains constant. While this constancy clearly reflects replicative practice related to mortuary ritual and (at least outward) expressions of social relations, it also binds all the items of material culture together within such practice. This is significant in that many such items are traditionally interpreted as ‘prosaic’ items of material culture (see discussion of B. Harrison’s interpretation of Lobang Tulang above). In the context of Kain Hitam, spatial distributions and material associations make it plain that fresh-water shellfish remains, casting nets for fishing, and earthenware pottery are invested with meaning *as a part of* the deathscape. As suggested by Ballard *et al.* (2004:398), such blurring between the margins of the ‘prosaic’ and ‘sacred’ reflects the fundamental basis of the sacred in everyday patterns of life. At Kain Hitam, such everyday patterns clearly revolve around boats, and the movement of material goods, people and ideas.

The fact that boats and boat transport are structuring ideas within many and varied

Southeast Asian societies is nothing new (e.g. Manguin 1986), and to leave the interpretation of the Kain Hitam site at such a point would be rather trite. Boat symbolism is clearly part of a wider conceptual structure that is expressed in a variety of different ways throughout insular Southeast Asia. The diversity in expression is, we feel, as important as the threads of connection. While the internal features of the Kain Hitam deposit are clearly highly structured, a wider gaze demonstrates that the location of Kain Hitam on the landscape itself is also structured. Located 91 m up a difficult cliff face, the cave of Kain Hitam is located over a point where the Sungai (River) Tangap⁶ disappears underground.

On noting this feature of geography, the Harrissons investigated other locales where tributaries in the vicinity of the Niah Caves disappeared underground, and found two more cave sites replete with death ships.⁷ Tom and Barbara Harrisson were quick to recognise the importance of such a location (T. Harrisson 1958, 1964), but did not fully explicate in print the importance of the river as a conduit between the worlds of the living and the dead.

While the location of the sites in relation to the river could be seen as fortuitous, there are a number of good reasons to think it is indeed important. Huntington and Metcalf (1979) elaborate a number of death rites from different ethnic groups in Borneo, and despite differences, strong themes are present. The Berawan of Long Jegan consider that souls travel upriver to the ancestral homeland, and in doing so, simultaneously move back in time, and from the everyday mundane world back past mythical ancestors to the realm of the sacred (Huntington and Metcalf 1979:72). Ngaju belief holds that the soul is transported on two different boats to the city of souls (Antoni 1982). Furthermore, the lance of the leader of souls takes the form of the mast of the boat, as well as a Garangin tree symbolising the tree of life at journey's end (Steinmann 1939:40; Schärer in Antoni 1982:150). The Maloh place the dead in dedicated structures set on high poles (kulambu), but transport the body to the kulambu in a boat-shaped coffin. Prohibitions were also placed on movement across the river during the period of mourning (King 1985:90, 191). Maloh cosmology holds that upstream regions of the river were associated with goodness, health, life and ancestral and aristocratic spirits, whilst downstream regions led directly to the land of the dead in the form of the underworld, populated by serpents and fish (King 1985:93). In the Philippines, the Sulod of Panay believe souls use rivers to travel between the lands of the living and the dead (Jocano 1970:187). One could continue listing examples, but as noted by van Gennepe (1960 in Huntington and Metcalf 1979:12), 'water journeys and island-like afterworlds appear over and over again' as motifs in death rites and symbolism across very many cultures. The close association between boats, rivers, the afterworld and the ship-of-the-dead motif seen in Borneo are replicated across Island Southeast Asia (Ballard *et al.* 2004).

Two mechanisms have traditionally been proposed for explaining these connections between cultural groups: (1) the influence of the Dongson culture of northern Vietnam with the expanding trade networks of the Southeast Asian metal age; and (2) demic diffusion of trading populations, resulting in a generally Sinicized cultural expression. We find both these explanations unsatisfactory, and believe a closer analysis of the nature and variability of mortuary expression across the region will illuminate why. Various ideas surrounding mortuary practices can be seen across the Island Southeast Asian region, often as far east as Remote Oceania. These include the ship of the dead, 'tree of life', animal associations including crocodiles, hornbills, sea serpents and turtles, and the curvilinear red art style (though not simply restricted to rock art) identified by Wilson (2003) for the western Pacific. While all of these elements have a wide geographical distribution, expression and recombination of elements differs. Here, we investigate mortuary expressions in Palawan, Philippines, as well as a new 'bronze ship' from Flores, Indonesia, to investigate both persistence and variability in the expression of major themes.

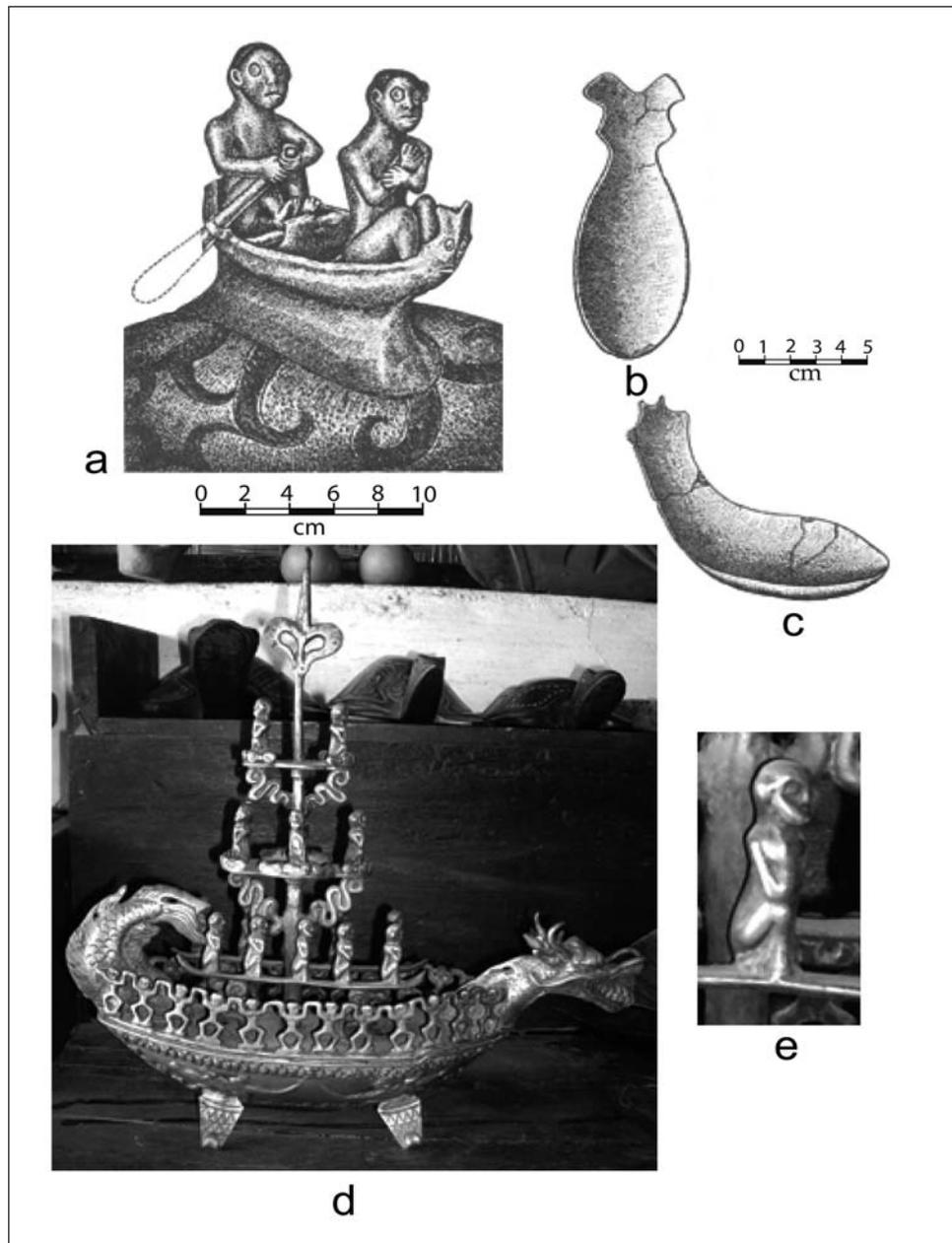


Figure 11. Ship-of-the-dead expressions from Palawan and Flores: (a) detail of the moulded lid of the Manunggul jar, Manunggul Chamber A, Palawan, Philippines (from Fox 1970); (b) and (c) *Turbo marmoratus* 'spoons' from the Tabon Caves complex (from Fox 1970); (d) cast bronze ship of the dead from Flores, Indonesia. Photographed by Szabó and Piper 2006 in Labuanbaju; (e) detail of seated figure from the Flores ship of the dead. Compare with (a). Figures a, b and c reproduced with the permission of the National Museum of the Philippines.

The Manunggul Chamber A mortuary site within the Tabon Caves complex in Palawan, Philippines (Fox 1970), has yielded perhaps the most famous piece of Philippine earthenware: the Manunggul burial jar (Figure 11a). This large vessel is topped with a cover bearing a molded 'ship of the dead', where two figures sit in a vessel with a distinctively shaped figurative prow. Both figures gaze forward, with the rear figure steering and the front figure sitting with arms folded across his/her chest. The boat is assumed to have originally had a central mast/cosmic tree (Tenazas 1986:17). While the sculpture on the Manunggul jar has been repeatedly linked

to ship-of-the-dead ideology since its discovery (Fox 1970:112–113), the association with red-painted curvilinear designs on the vessel itself is also worthy of note. Such designs are further replicated on various burial vessels from Ayub Cave, Mindanao (Dizon and Santiago 1996). The shape of the death ship is distinctive, and this precise design is replicated in artefacts produced in the large *Turbo marmoratus* shell,⁸ and generally referred to as ‘spoons’ (Figure 11b and 11c). Such artefacts have been repeatedly found in metal-age burial contexts in Palawan, sometimes associated with jar burials (Szabó 2005:Chapter 6 for Batu Puti; Fox 1970:54, 118, 140 for Duyong Cave and Manunggul Chamber B), and sometimes with extended inhumations (Szabó 2005 for Leta Leta; T. Vitales pers comm. for Ille Cave).

While most of the spoons are in a clear metal-age association, a *Turbo marmoratus* ship-of-the-dead artefact is associated with a firm Neolithic context in Leta Leta Cave, northern Palawan (Fox 1970; Szabó 2005), confirming the pre-metal presence of ship-of-the-dead beliefs in this region. Such ‘spoons’ have also been excavated from other Philippine locales (Bautista 1996), as well as from the Ryukyu Islands, southern Japan (e.g. Takemoto and Asato 1993), and from southern Taiwan (Li 1983), but have not been recovered from Borneo or Indonesia.

An arresting example of death-ship imagery comes from Flores Island in eastern Indonesia in the form of a cast bronze sculpture recorded by Szabó and Piper in Labuanbaju, Flores, in 2006 (Figure 11d and Figure 11e) (see Adams 1977 for a different example). Many elements of death imagery combine in this piece, including the crocodiles around the hull of the boat (see Tenazas 1986 for more examples of crocodile imagery and death in the Philippines and Borneo), the central tree-of-life mast, and the sea-serpent form of the bow and stern. The similarity between the seated figures (Figure 11e) and those represented on the Manunggul jar can hardly be missed, and the frieze of stylised figures around the edge of the deck mirror those represented in the Kain Hitam rock art.

While the Kain Hitam deathscape, mortuary sites in Palawan, and the Flores bronze ship are strongly connected in terms of imagery, the differences in expression and context must not be forgotten. There are no clear, recurrent linkages between the types of burial (i.e. jar burial, death ship, primary extended inhumation) and associated imagery. Thus, while ship-of-the-dead imagery is apparently confined to death-ship contexts in Sarawak, it is associated with both jar and primary extended burials in Palawan. Media and modes of expression are likewise different, with a complete absence of prehistoric rock art in Palawan, and differing associated artefacts, with bone ornaments near absent in Palawan and expressions in shell being rather understated in Sarawak.

Tantalising lines of evidence further suggest in Sarawak and Palawan that ship-of-the-dead beliefs pre-date the metal age. Variability in mortuary expression has implicitly or explicitly been assumed to represent chronological patterning (e.g. Bellwood 1997:296), but the evidence from Niah, coupled with that from Palawan, demonstrate that these various articulations are, at least to some degree, synchronous (see also Tenazas 1986:15). Thus, while Kain Hitam is characterised by boat burials, Lobang Tulang is a jar-burial site, and Gan Kira has extended burials including Tom Harrisson’s ‘murder’ type.⁹

Associated artefacts of both local and foreign manufacture, however, overlap between all three sites, stalling any interpretation that would seek to attribute the differences to distinct cultural groups. There are those who have attributed later prehistoric burial practices at Niah and elsewhere in Sarawak to Chinese immigrants (e.g. Chêng 1969), and there are some obvious Chinese parallels in beliefs surrounding death, including watery journeys, crocodiles, sea serpents and trees of life (see Antoni 1982 for a discussion of Wang Ch’ung’s *Lun-heng* 27–97 AD). According to Rawson’s (1998) analysis of changing mortuary expressions in China, many of these

distinctive beliefs in animal spirits and ‘imaginary’ beings are found in the southern Chinese record contemporaneous with very different Shang (c. 1200–1050 BC) and Western Zhou (c. 1050–771 BC) expressions in the north (Rawson 1998:122). She also points to a growing incorporation of these southern belief systems detectable from the Eastern Zhou (771–221 BC) into the Han Dynasty (BC 206–220 AD) as China was unified (Rawson 1998:112–113, 122).

The links between the Southeast Asian evidence and that of southern China – perhaps associated with the ‘Hundred Yueh’ – hint that such belief systems may not originate in ‘China’, but were already extant among local indigenous peoples with connections to Southeast Asia. The continuity witnessed in the Southeast Asian archaeological record across the Neolithic/metal-age boundary further serves to confound an attempt at unsubtle Sinicization.

Rather than simply attributing any (perceived) change to immigrant populations, the more popular mechanism invoked for explaining the wide spatial distribution of cultural expressions of the Southeast Asian metal age is the influence of the Dongson culture of northern Vietnam (e.g. Harrisson 1958; Spriggs in Wilson 2003:277; Ballard *et al.* 2004:393). Tangibly, this influence is seen in the wide distribution of bronze kettle drums of Dongson manufacture,¹⁰ but it has been the boat motifs incised on the drums which have perhaps been credited with widespread influence. Such motifs have encouraged an interpretation in which the Dongson culture is seen as the progenitor of ideas such as the ‘ship-of-the-dead cult’, with an influence (e.g. economic, stylistic) that spread to encompass insular Southeast Asia and as far as Near Oceania (e.g. Goloubew 1929; van Heekeren 1958:96; Badner 1974). While the clear presence of ‘ship-of-the-dead’ philosophies in Neolithic Island Southeast Asia could alone act to undermine the directionality of such connections, we feel that such interpretations mask, rather than elucidate, the interactions developed and sustained by maritime contact.

Thomas (1991:27) points out that socio-economic evolutionary thinking turns on and recapitulates the divisions between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ societies. The assumed impact of metal and prestige trade goods from the Asian mainland into Island Southeast Asia can be seen in this light. Thomas (1991:27) suggests it should not be the [pre-]historian’s aim to shift such divisions back in time, ‘but rather to displace such exercises through an analysis of process and grounded regional distinctions which actually relate to peoples rather than rhetorical types’. Recognising this, any analysis of ‘influence’ and ‘trade’ must consider *how* new goods and ideas were integrated into local economies and psyches. It is this appropriation and reinterpretation of foreign goods and ideas that patterns the archaeological record, rather than any simple presence of strangers or trading vessels. In the words of Thomas (1991:88):

Indigenous interests in trade are not presumed to be straightforward or predictable but must instead be contextualized in prevailing ideas of what foreign visitors and their goods represented. This cultural context is not easy to apprehend, especially since interpretation must be based mainly upon what can be discerned of indigenous reactions at the time ... But the analytical problems must not prevent us from attempting to give an account of the local way of recognizing new strangers: these perceptions conditioned what was at stake in contact and exchange.

With reference to Kain Hitam, the spatial/structural replication of burial practices over a 1000-year period, with the simple insertion of overseas trade goods into this structure when they entered local economies, testifies to the local continuity through this economic ‘transition’. It is clear that boats, water, maritime contacts and connections between worlds over water were already configuring features of indigenous consciousness, as represented by death ships, casting nets, shark vertebrae beads, the rock art and the (votive?) deposits of fresh-water shell. Such expressions can also be clearly seen in Palawan and elsewhere throughout the Island Southeast

Asian region, but they manifest in different ways. These entangled connections projected through local response serve to remind us that trade goods and (seemingly) extra-local ideas should always be ‘interpreted in the context of the place into which they are introduced, and not taken as essences that have merely been moved physically from places of origin’ (Thomas 1991:186).

Endnotes

1. The name Kain Hitam literally translates as ‘Black Cloth’ in Bahasa Melayu.
2. It is worthy of note that published photographs of the Kain Hitam death ships (e.g. Harrison 1958, 1960) were ‘staged’ by Harrison, and do not represent the original positions of the boats.
3. Solheim (1983) states that the Kain Hitam ceramics more likely date to the 14th–15th century AD, however it appears that this upward revision was not based on an analysis of the material. Given the disjuncture between other features of the site and a Ming-period age for the trade wares, we continue with Tom Harrison’s chronology, although further analysis of the Kain Hitam trade wares would be valuable.
4. Francis (2002:77) comments on the Kain Hitam glass beads, relying on the commentary by Solheim (1983), and thus duplicates the erroneous conclusions that there were no Chinese ceramics in Sarawak before the 10th century AD, and no coil beads at other Sarawak sites until the 12th century AD.
5. Dating of the rock art from Kain Hitam has been attempted, but was unsuccessful due to the low organic levels.
6. Erroneously referred to by Tom Harrison as the ‘Subis River’ (T. Harrison 1958:202).
7. One of these sites is the ‘Samti’ site, while the other is unnamed. Both are apparently located in the Great Cave within the Niah system (see Harrison 1958).
8. Such artefacts were originally thought by Fox (1970) to have been produced in the Chambered Nautilus (*Nautilus pompilius*), however further study (Bautista 1996; Szabó 2005) has confirmed *Turbo marmoratus* as the raw material.
9. Tom Harrison’s ‘murder’ burials are primary extended burials demonstrating violent deaths. One example from Gan Kira has the shaft of a spear still protruding from the body.
10. Although, notably, no bronze drums have been recorded for the Philippine archipelago, and few from Borneo.

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