Neolithic hominid site at Gua Siam, Langkawi

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Amongst the twenty four caves located, described and illustrated in the tourist book *Mysterious Caves of Langkawi* jointly published by the Department of Irrigation and Drainage, Ministry of Agriculture, Malaysia and Design Dimension Sdn. Bhd. (1994) is Gua Siam located at the Sungai Batu Gajah in the heart of a wide expanse of mangroves in Setul Limestone country south of Tanjong Rhu, northwest Langkawi. Although it is not a very large or spectacular cave compared to the others it was included because skeletal remains of humans and animals and primitive stone tools have been discovered in it. Some broken bones and a monkey skull were illustrated in the photographs in the book.

Two brief visits were made in June and September last year to conduct some preliminary investigations of the cave followed by a third visit in May this year to map out the cave. Accessibility to the cave is difficult as one has to bash through some thick mangrove swamp after arriving by boat before reaching the limestone hill. The cave entrance is not easily seen as it is located about 5 metres above the ground. It is accessible only by climbing up a near vertical cliff using the roots and vines clinging to the rock face.

The cave is located on the west side of the limestone hill with its entrance oriented roughly north-south and it narrows towards the east. The chamber of the cave is not very big being only about 8 metres in diameter at the entrance where it is widest and 14 metres deep with a series of narrow tunnels on the southeast wall. There is sufficient natural lighting to illuminate the chamber during the day.

As is common to most prehistoric cave sites in this country the guano digger has preceded the archaeologist (Peacock, 1965), the cave shows obvious signs of having been dug up and until quite recently too as evidenced by a piece of nylon fish-netting and tin dustpan left in the rubble. Pieces of broken bones (to access the bone marrow for food), tooth of a large herbivore, jaw of a small carnivore and lots of shells of freshwater, brackish and marine molluscs including the common freshwater food-snail, *Brotia costula,* with chopped-off apices were found amidst the rubble and brown earth on the cave floor. The skeletal relics illustrated in the book were gathered together in a small recess on the north side of the entrance. Apparently no one else has visited the cave after DID team's visit. Some samples from the relics including a large crude hand axe were collected during the first visit.

The second visit took place in September 1996. While searching for the entrance to Gua Siam, a few smaller shallow caves including a rather large circular one (which I shall call Gua Bulat), were found slightly

to the north of Gua Siam. There were also indications that they had been inhabited in the past as evidenced by "eaten" shells. While sifting through the rubble a polished stone adze which is a much more refined artifact than the crude hand axe from Gua Siam was found. Another two such stone adzes were recovered by others from Gua Siam itself. Cord-impressed pottery sherds were also recovered from the rubble in Gua Siam indicating that the prehistoric remains in the caves were most likely to be post-"Hoabinhian" that is early Neolithic age as comparable polished centre-edge ground adzes and cord-impressed pottery sherds had been recovered from other prehistoric sites in Malaya, for example at Dengkil by Batchelor (1978).

Another large crude hand-axe was recovered from the smaller cave north of Gua Siam during the third visit. Examination of non-carbonate stones found in the caves showed that many of them had been worked and perhaps abandoned when the flaking did not produce the desired results by the stone-tool makers. An interesting find in Gua Siam during the third visit was two large flat stones, one of which has a distinct worked depression in the middle remniscent of a grind-stone. Also found near it were lumps of greyish clay foreign to the nodular brown soil on the cave floor which could be the parent material to be grounded for pottery manufacture. On the other hand it could also be used for grounding fibrous food or for both purposes. The second flat stone of flaky fine sandstone material also shows an abraded side and could have been used for grinding as well.

These discoveries would add Gua Siam to the numerous known Malaysian Neolithic sites in caves around the region including Pulau Tuba and several others in Kedah and Perlis (Peacock, 1965). A more precise dating of the age could be obtained by radiocarbon dating the shells used as food by the prehistoric inhabitants of Gua Siam. There is a strong possibility that other hard to access caves in Langkawi could also hold prehistoric relics of archeological interest and a find comparable to Perak Man (Zuraina Majid, 1994) is just waiting for the lucky palaeoanthropologist in one of them.