NEW ENGRAVINGS DISCOVERED AT SANTUBONG, SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

by
Paul S.C. Taçon, Mohd. Sherman Sauffi and Ipoi Datan

Abstract

We report on recently discovered engravings at Santubong, Sarawak, an archaeologically rich area north of Kuching. Eleven engraved boulders were documented in June 2010. We suggest that two boulders have traditional indigenous imagery while the other nine have symbols that may be associated with visits to a nearby Indian shrine built between the 10th - 13th centuries AD.

Keywords: Sarawak, Santubong, engravings, bas relief, India

SANTUBONG ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Santubong, Sarawak (Fig. 1) has long been known as an important location for ancient indigenous sites and others associated with the arrival of many groups from outside Borneo. It is Sarawak’s richest archaeological region, with a number of surveys and excavations since 1947 revealing a surprising range of sites. These include a prehistoric iron industry (Harrison and O’Connor Jr., 1968, 1969; Christie, 1988; Doherty et al., 2007) and sites associated with visits by people from India or those influenced by India between the 5th and 13th centuries AD (Griswold, 1962; Harrison, 1955; Harrison and O’Connor Jr., 1967). At some of the major sites, such as Bongkissam and Sungai Jaong (also known as Sungai Santubong), large quantities of Chinese pottery from the Tang and Song Dynasties were recovered. At Bongkissam a Buddhist shrine was built, complete with a ritual offering box containing numerous Buddhist and/or Hindu gold foil figures, and many other Buddhist or Hindu objects. It is believed to date between the 10th and 13th centuries AD (Harrison and O’Connor Jr., 1967: 220).
Fig. 1: Map of the Santubong archaeological area with new engraving sites indicated.
Buddhist artefacts were also found upslope at Bukit Maras (Harrisson, 1955), including an Indian-looking stone Buddha. Griswold (1962: 370) concludes it relates to Buddha images within Indian cave temples and dates to between the 6th and 9th centuries. A stone-lined pathway runs upslope from Bukit Maras toward the top of Mt. Santubong behind it and to the east. Santubong appears to have been an international port since the 5th century, part of a trade network linking West Asia, Southeast Asia and China. The Buddhist and Hindu relics found in Santubong indicate that this region of Borneo, known as Tanjung Pura, was in minor contact with India or with other ‘Indianized’ states in Southeast Asia’ (Shuhaimi and Rahman, 1998: 113). Until now only one location, close to the Sungai Jaong iron smelting site and the Jaong River, was known for rock art – engraved human figures and other designs on some boulders along with a large bas relief figure of a man in a spread eagle posture (Harrisson and O’Connor Jr., 1968). Good summaries of Santubong sites can be found in Christie (1985), Shuhaimi and Rahman (1998: 112-113) and Solheim (1983: 36-38) but there is no mention of the engravings we recorded.

Kampung Santubong engravings

Sarawak rock art

Rock art, consisting of paintings, was first found in Sarawak in the Niah cave complex (Harrisson 1958b: 588; 1958c) and since then a number of important sites with paintings, engravings, bas relief figures and megaliths with engraved designs have been recorded (see Chin, 1980: 21-27 and Datan, 1998a, 1998b for brief summaries; see Barker et al., 2009; Datan, 1993; Harrisson, 1958a; Harrisson and Reavis, 1966 for some specific examples). Engravings were first studied in detail in the Santubong area between 1952 and 1964 (Harrisson and O’Connor Jr., 1968: 45), although the bas relief figure of the spread eagle man had long been considered important, with a replica of the figure made in the 1930s by The Sarawak Museum (Harrisson and O’Connor Jr., 1968: 45) and later published in 1935.
(Colani, 1935). The engravings also include human figures, ‘often with female genitalia, never male’, designs interpreted as ‘symbolic representatives of female genitalia’ and ‘unintelligible but deliberate markings, sometimes incised, which some see as written characters’ (Harrisson and O’Connor Jr., 1968: 45-46). Almost 100 engravings were found on 16 large natural boulders after dense jungle was cleared, some of which are visible and protected by small roofed enclosures today. Harrisson and O’Connor (1968: 46) suggest ‘These are not casual doodles in stone, they are expressions of a powerfully held set of ideas’.

New engravings

The new set of engravings was first reported to the Sarawak Museum in 2006 by British archaeologists conducting new research at nearby iron smelting sites (Doherty et al., 2007) but not recorded. We relocated and recorded them at the edge of Kampung Santubong (Santubong village) in June 2010. A total of 11 naturally-shaped boulders were found on the edge of a curving portion of the beach at Kampung Santubong (Fig. 2). They contain 22 rock engravings and one bas relief figure, distributed over about 75 metres. This section of the beach is right at the mouth of the Sarawak River, at a location where boats would anchor over the millennia. Mt Santubong lies to the east and the archaeological sites with Indian influence, Bongkissam and Bukit Maras, are located in a direct line between the engravings and Mt Santubong’s peak. Most of the engravings and the bas relief figure face water.

Starting at the northern end and moving south, boulder 1 has a life-size bas relief mask-like face (30 cm w x 38 cm h) that protrudes up to 4 cm (Figs. 3 and 4). It was produced by carving away the surrounding rock and then adding facial features. The human-like face is oriented so that it looks out over the water, to the southwest at 230°. The rest of the boulders are very different, having engraved geometric designs.

Boulder 2 is next to boulder 1. Two engraved spiral designs (19
human figures, 'often interpreted as 'symbolic squats' or 'eligible but deliberate carvings', forming the bulk of the engravings. On either side of the beach, in the dense jungle cleared of vegetation, there are many small roofed enclosures. These suggest that 'These are not the remains of a powerful held set of beliefs'.

The engravings extend to the Sarawak Museum Journal, 1997) but not recorded. At Kampung Santubong there are 11 naturally-shaped boulders in a small portion of the beach area. There are 22 rock engravings in the general area, about 75 metres. This area is located on the Sarawak River, at a distance of 1000 metres in the southeast. Mt Santubong is a volcanic mountain with Indian influence, forming a direct line between the engravings and the coastline.

In the southeast, boulder 1 has a large figure (28 cm w x 28 cm h) that protrudes from the surface. This figure is made by carving away the surrounding rock. The human-like figure protrudes towards the southwest. On the surface, having engraved spiral designs (19 cm w x 28 cm h; 23 cm w x 23.5 cm h) on one side face the bas relief figure, with the two boulders only a few metres apart (Fig. 5). The placement of the designs and their shapes connect them to the face while at the same time setting them apart from the other boulders.

Boulders 3-11 have more deeply engraved designs than the spirals of boulder 2. Their geometric figures are also more linear and there are both repeated patterns and variations on themes. Some of the figures have straight lines that end in small circles or ovals and most have a written character aspect about them, as if they are symbols or characters that once had specific meaning. Designs include crosses, various 'pitch-fork' variations, line- and oval-shapes, a ship-like engraving and other linear motifs (see Table 1 and Figs. 6-11).

Fig. 2: The beach area with engraved boulders.
Fig. 3: Mohd. Sherman Saufi next to boulder 1 with bas relief mask-like face.

Fig. 4: Close-up of the bas relief face
Table 1: Engraved designs found on Kampong Santubong boulders 3-11.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boulder</th>
<th>Engraved designs</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boulder 3</td>
<td>3 crosses with lines that end in circles; Rake-like design</td>
<td>10 cm w x 16 cm h; 10.5 cm w x 12 cm h; 16 cm w x 19 cm h; 12 cm w x 11 cm h</td>
<td>NE at 25°; faces inland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder 4</td>
<td>2 linear designs</td>
<td>34 cm w x 20 cm h; 28 cm w x 17 cm h</td>
<td>SW at 224°; faces water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder 5</td>
<td>Ship-like curvilinear design</td>
<td>27 cm w x 14 cm h</td>
<td>W at 25°; faces water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder 6</td>
<td>Line-and-oval; linear design; pitch-fork variant</td>
<td>11 cm w x 15 cm h; 20 cm w x 18 cm h; 15 cm w x 31 cm h</td>
<td>Line-and-circle faces up; others face SSW at 200° and water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder 7</td>
<td>Pitch-fork variant; cross with two horizontal lines; cross</td>
<td>10 cm w x 15 cm h; 7 cm w x 14 cm h; 12 cm w x 11 cm h</td>
<td>NW at 304°; faces water; crosses face up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder 8</td>
<td>Pitch-fork variant</td>
<td>38 cm w x 56 cm h</td>
<td>E at 64°</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder 9</td>
<td>2 pitch-fork variants</td>
<td>16 cm w x 33 cm h; 13 cm w x 28 cm h</td>
<td>S at 165°; faces water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder 10</td>
<td>3 line-and-oval designs</td>
<td>15 cm w x 20 cm h; 24 cm w x 23 cm h; 20 cm w x 18 cm h</td>
<td>W at 278°; faces water and along beach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder 11</td>
<td>Pitch-fork variant</td>
<td>14 cm w x 26 cm h</td>
<td>SW at 220°; faces water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 6: Drawing of designs from boulders 3-11.

THE SARAWAK MUSEUM JOURNAL
**Fig. 6:** (cont.)
Fig. 6: (cont.)
Fig. 7: Ship-like engraving, boulder 5.

Fig. 8: Boulder 6, with deeply engraved designs.
Fig. 9: Engraved line-and-oval design on boulder 6.

Fig. 10: The most elaborate engraved pitch-fork variant, boulder 6.
Fig. 11: Three line-and-oval designs, boulder 10.

Cultural associations

Boulders 1 and 2 were likely carved by ancestors of indigenous Sarawakian people, such as the Iban. The bas relief human-like face on boulder 1, for instance, is similar in technique to figures from many Sarawak sites with carved boulders, including nearby Sungai Santubong (Barker et al., 2009: 140-141; Chin, 1980; Harrisson, 1958a; Harrisson and O’Connor Jr., 1968: 45, 1970: 316-317). The face itself is similar to historic Iban masks, many of which are on display in the Sarawak Museum. It also is similar to the face of a carved soft stone figure found 80 kilometres inland near Saratok in 1928 (see Chin, 1980: 21 and 25, figure 4.3).

Boulder 2 has spiral designs also associated with indigenous Sarawakian sites and historically recorded peoples. For instance, spiral and other curvilinear designs feature at rock art sites elsewhere in northern Borneo, including in the Upper Trusan River of the Limbang Division of interior Sarawak (e.g. Chin, 1980: 27) and Sabah.
(e.g. Ulu Tomani, Sabah; see Harrisson, 1973). Fage and Chazine (2009: 42) note that spiral engravings occur throughout Kalimantan and illustrate two from Batu Kalung that are very similar to the Santubong engravings. Spirals also figure prominently in historic Iban wooden carvings. While conducting survey at the Sungai Santubong site Doherty et al. (2007) located a decorated wasted stone on the road to Santubong. It has curvilinear engraved designs including small spirals (2007: 87) similar to the smaller one on boulder 2. At this point it is difficult to comment on the exact age of the spirals and the bas relief face but they may be from the same period as the other engraved and bas relief figures of the region, and thus likely were produced any time during the past 1000 years (Barker et al., 2009; Harrisson, 1958c: 700).

The other boulders have designs that are even more problematic. A few resemble ancient Pali inscription while others are similar to Hindu symbols still added to rock painting sites near Hindu temples in the Kurnool region of southern India (see Taçon et al., 2010). Current research involves comparing and contrasting the designs to inscriptions, symbols and rock art designs elsewhere in southeast and south Asia to test the hypothesis that the designs were made by pilgrims to the Bongkissam shrine and Bukit Maras. If this hypothesis is strongly supported the engravings may date to between the 10th and 13th centuries AD.

Preserving the past for future generations

The Kampung Santubong engravings are a unique and important part of Sarawak’s heritage. Chin (1983) was one of the first to note the need to better preserve Sarawak’s past. ‘Our heritage is not only being increasingly threatened by the natural causes of decay, but also by economic and social changes’ (1983: 61). Chin also emphasises that steps should be taken ‘to protect and preserve some of the megaliths and rock-carvings scattered throughout the State’ (1983: 63). Today the Santubong area is experiencing rapid development with condominiums and five star resorts being built. Every effort.
should be made to preserve and protect the newly documented engraving complex, as well as the other important ancient sites of this archaeologically significant part of Sarawak. These sites are a part of Sarawak and Malaysia’s identity, something important for its future generations and world heritage in general.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the archaeological staff of The Sarawak Museum for assistance recording the engravings and tracking down reference material. Griffith University is thanked for providing financial and other forms of support. All photographs are by Paul S.C. Taçon. The map was produced by staff of The Sarawak Museum. The drawings are by Rachel Hoerman.

REFERENCES CITED


Chin, L.

Christie, J.W.

Christie, J.W.

Colani, M.
Datana, P. I.


Doherty, C., Buckley, R., Gnanaratnam, A., Beavitt, P. and W. Beavitt

Fage, L.-H. and J.-M. Chazine

Griswold, A.B.

Harrisson, T.


Harrisson, T. and S.J. O’Connor Jr.
Harrisson, T. and S.J. O'Connor Jr.


Harrisson, T. and J.L. Reavis

Shuhaimi, N.H. and N.A. Rahman (eds.)

Solheim, W.G.

Taçon, P.S.C., Boivin, N., Hampson, J., Blinkhorn, J., Korisettar, R. and M. Petraglia