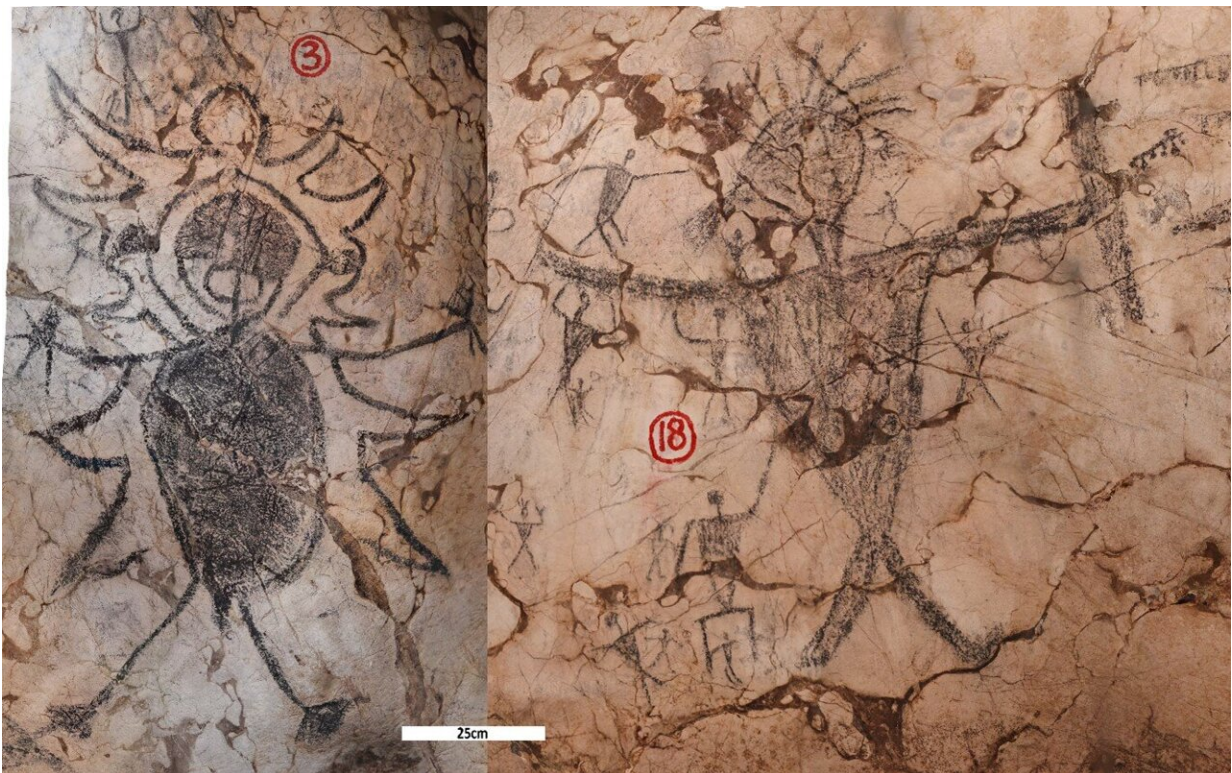


Malaysian rock art found to depict elite–Indigenous conflict

August 23 2023



The dated rock art. Image by Andrea Jalandoni. Credit: Andrea Jalandoni

A team of researchers led by the Griffith Center for Social and Cultural Research in collaboration with The Sarawak Museum Department have become the first to date drawings of Gua Sireh Cave in Sarawak, uncovering a sad story of conflict in the process.

The paper has been published in the journal *PLOS ONE*, titled "Rock art and frontier conflict in Southeast Asia: Insights from direct radiocarbon ages for the large human figures of Gua Sireh, Sarawak."

The limestone cave of Gua Sireh in western Sarawak (Malaysian Borneo) is famous for the hundreds of charcoal drawings lining the walls of its main chambers, attracting hundreds of visitors each year.

Approximately 55 km southeast of Sarawak's Capital, Kuching, the site is managed by the Bidayuh (local Indigenous peoples) in collaboration with The Sarawak Museum Department, with the drawings depicting Indigenous resistance to frontier violence in the 1600s and 1800s AD.

Radiocarbon ages for the drawings date them between 280 and 120 cal BP (AD 1670 to 1830), corresponding with a period of increasing conflict in the region when the Malay elites controlling the region exacted heavy tolls on Indigenous hill tribes, including the Bidayuh.

To the best of the team's knowledge, these [radiocarbon dates](#) are the first chronometric age determinations for Malaysian [rock art](#).

Study co-lead, Dr. Jillian Huntley said the first step was establishing what had been used to make the drawings.

"We wanted to confirm the images were drawn with charcoal, as there are a limited number of substances you can actually radiocarbon date," she said.

"We were looking at the decay isotopes of carbon, which meant the material had to be carbon bearing, and our analyses (with collaborator Dr. Emilie Dotte-Sarout at University of Western Australia) determined charcoal from different species of bamboo had been used.

"Being drawn on limestone, they're remarkably well preserved."

The art at Gua Sireh is part of a wider distribution of black drawings found from the Philippines through central Island Southeast Asia across Borneo and Sulawesi to Peninsular Malaysia. They are thought to be associated with the diaspora of Austronesian speaking peoples.



Mohammad Sherman Sauffi William from the Sarawak Museum Department and Jillian Huntley harvesting sample GS3. Credit: Paul S.C. Taçon.

Previous dating work, also led by the Griffith Center for Social and Cultural Research, has established similar drawings in the Philippines were made as early as ~3500 cal BP and ~1500 cal BP in southern

Sulawesi.

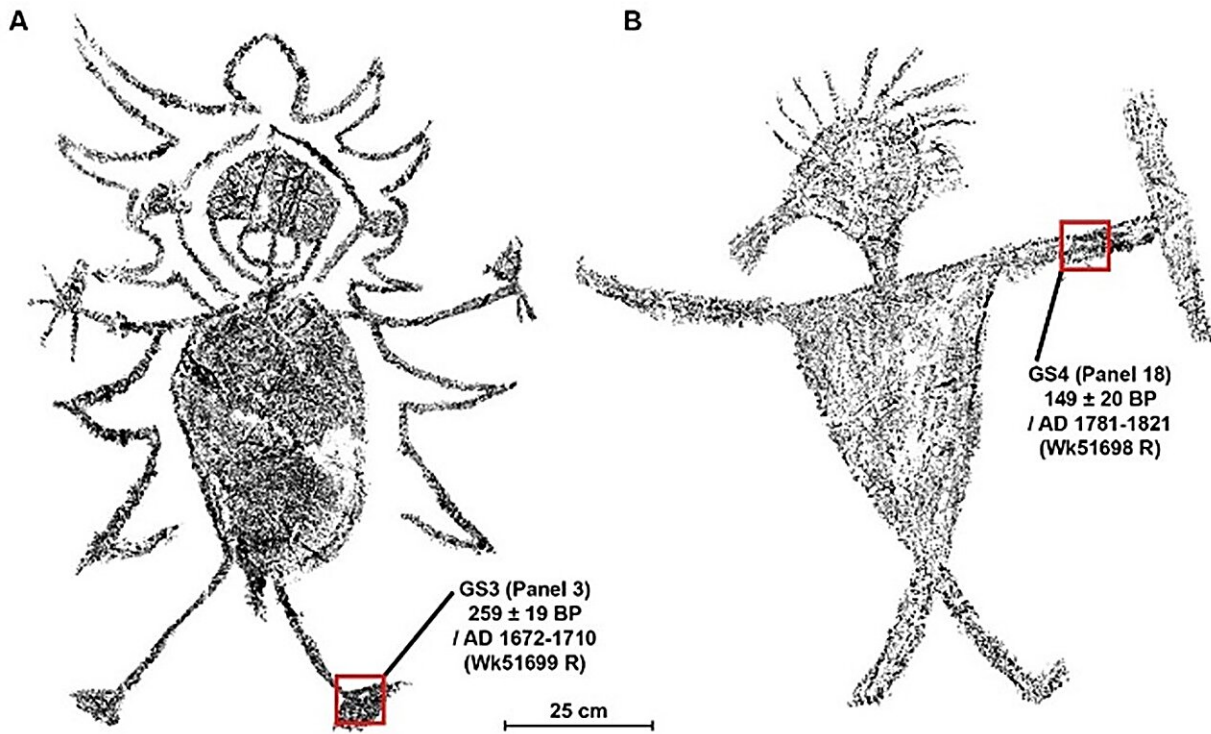
"Black drawings in the region have been made for thousands of years," Dr. Huntley said.

"Our work at Gua Sireh indicates this art form was used up to the recent past to record Indigenous peoples' experiences of colonization and territorial violence."

Co-lead Distinguished Professor Paul Tacon said the team knew from previous work in the region that northwest Borneo's rock art (the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak) is dominated by drawings of people, animals, ships and abstract geometric/linear design.

"At Gua Sireh, people are drawn wearing headdresses—some armed with shields, knives and spears, in scenes showing activities such as hunting, butchering, fishing, fighting and dancing," he said.

"We had clues about their age based on subjects such as introduced animals, but we really didn't know how old they were, so it was difficult to interpret what they might mean."



Infographic showing the dated rock art. Digital tracing and design by Lucas Huntley. Credit: Lucas Huntley.

Bidayuh descendant and curator at The Sarawak Museum Department Mr. Mohammad Sherman Sauffi William said understanding of the dates had been informed by the oral histories of the Bidayuh who have continuing custodial responsibilities over the site today.

"The Bidayuh recall Gua Sireh's use as a refuge during territorial violence in the early 1800s when a very harsh Malay Chief had demanded they hand over their children," he said.

"They refused and retreated to Gua Sireh, where they initially held off a force of 300 armed men trying to enter the cave from the valley about 60 meters below.

"Suffering some losses (two Bidayuh were shot and seven taken prisoner/enslaved), they saved their children when most of the tribe escaped through a passageway at the back of the largest entrance chamber which leads hundreds of meters through the Gunung Nambi limestone hill.

"The figures were drawn holding distinctive weapons such as a Pandat which was used exclusively for fighting or protection, as well two short-bladed Parang Ilang, the main weapons used during warfare that marked the first decades of white rule in Borneo."

More information: Jillian Huntley et al, Rock art and frontier conflict in Southeast Asia: Insights from direct radiocarbon ages for the large human figures of Gua Sireh, Sarawak, *PLOS ONE* (2023). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0288902 , [journals.plos.org/plosone/arti ... journal.pone.0288902](https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0288902)

Provided by Griffith University

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