



# **SPAFACON2021**

**Papers from the SEAMEO SPAFA International Conference on  
SOUTHEAST ASIAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND FINE ARTS**

**13 - 17 December 2021**

**Editor: Noel Hidalgo Tan**

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# INTRODUCTION

This volume contains the extended abstracts from the papers presented at the SEAMEO SPAFA International Conference on Southeast Asian Archaeology and Fine Arts, which was held online from 13 to 17 December 2021. Also known as the SPAFACON2021, this conference was organised online due to the pandemic. Despite the disruption brought about by Covid-19 to our in-person events, training programmes and field research, it is heartening to see that archaeology and cultural heritage has continued under new modes of communication and collaboration.

This fourth iteration of the SPAFACON is also scheduled a year earlier than our usual triennial cycle to commemorate the 50th anniversary of SEAMEO initiating a centre dedicated towards archaeology and the fine arts. Over the past year, SPAFA has also been highlighting this legacy of international cooperation and capacity-building by sharing our photographic archives on our social media.

I am delighted by the high level of enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity brought by the participants to the conference. During our call for papers we received close to 90 submissions, but owing to the pressures of time and the online format, we were only able to accept 34 papers for the conference. The variety of papers present here, although a small set compared with our usual proceedings, reflects the breadth of the centre's ambit – covering not just archaeology, but also performing arts, visual arts, museum studies, and other aspects of Southeast Asian cultural heritage.

I would like to thank all the participants, without whom this conference would not be possible in its present form, in particular, our Governing Board members who represent every country in Southeast Asia, and to the Ministry of Culture, Thailand and the Ministry of Education, Thailand for their long-standing support of SEAMEO SPAFA and its activities.



Mrs Somlak Charoenpot

Centre Director

SEAMEO SPAFA



# **The Rock Art in Kinta Valley, West Malaysia: A synthesis**

## **Lukisan Gua di Lembah Kinta, Semenanjung Malaysia: Satu sintesis**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents a synthesis of the new rock art mapping project in the Kinta Valley of West Malaysia. Through our collaboration with Kinta Valley Watch, we have successfully located more than 30 new rock art sites between 2019 and June 2021. The rock art is represented by both red and black paintings, with a wide variety of motifs including anthropomorph, zoomorph, botanic, watercraft, weapon, animal rider, handprint, geometric shape, line art, and other abstract design. This discovery is instrumental to the contemporary rock art research in Malaysia and demonstrated a collective effort in rock art research through long-term collaboration with the local stakeholders.

Kertas kerja ini merupakan satu sintesis hasil daripada projek pemetaan lukisan gua di Lembah Kinta, Semenanjung Malaysia. Melalui kolaborasi dengan organisasi tempatan iaitu Kinta Valley Watch, kami telah mengenalpasti lebih daripada 30 lokasi lukisan gua antara tahun 2019 dan 2021. Antara bentuk lukisan gua yang dijumpai termasuklah antropomorik (igura manusia), zoomorik (igura haiwan), tumbuh-tumbuhan, perahu, senjata, penunggang haiwan, gambar tangan, geometrik, seni garisan dan simbol abstrak. Jumpaan ini amat berharga untuk kajian lukisan gua di Malaysia dan memaparkan satu usaha bersama demi kajian lukisan gua melalui kolaborasi jangka panjang dengan komuniti tempatan.

### **Keywords**

rock art; Kinta Valley; Malaysia; local stakeholders

lukisan gua; Lembah Kinta; Malaysia; komuniti tempatan

## **Introduction**

### ***Kinta Valley***

Kinta Valley is a river valley in Perak sandwiched between the Main Range to the east and the Kledang Range to the right. The main river system is known as Kinta River, and it flows southwards into the Perak River, with many tributaries in a herringbone pattern. Archaeological excavations were conducted here intermittently between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century and these investigations had yielded evidence of human occupation from the Hoabinhian period to Neolithic period (Wray, 1897, 1905; Sieveking, 1956; Matthews, 1960; Taha and Jaafar, 1990; Jusoh, 2011). Fortuitous finds of Buddhist bronze artefacts from tin mines in Kinta Valley dating to the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Khoo and Lubis, 2005) indicated that Buddhism influence was already presented in the region during that period. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kinta Valley was the largest tin exporter in the world, and later on it became the central location of the Malayan Emergency between 1948 and 1960 (Khoo and Lubis, 2005). The multi-layered history of Kinta Valley had contributed to the wide variety of rock art in the region.

### ***Previous research***

Prior to 2019, there were only three known rock art sites in Kinta Valley, namely Gua Tambun, Gua Kelawar, and Gua Mat Surat. Among these three, Gua Tambun is the most researched archaeological locality because of its ease of accessibility and its significance as the only surviving red painting rock art site in West Malaysia. It was first discovered in 1959 (Matthews, 1959), with an excavation conducted in subsequent year (Matthews, 1960). In 2010, Tan (2010a) conducted a comprehensive rock art documentation project as part of the fulfilment of his MA study at Gua Tambun and he successfully documented at least 640 motifs from the site. The motifs were then systematically classified into five categories, namely anthropomorph, zoomorph, botanic, geometric shape, and abstract shape (Tan and Chia, 2011). In terms of chronology, the site was relatively dated to the Neolithic period (~4000 to 2500 years ago) based on the finding of Neolithic pottery sherds in the absence of chronometric dating scheme. Recognising its archaeological importance, the site was gazetted as a National Heritage site in 2010.

Gua Kelawar was investigated by the Museums Department of Malaysia in 1986, and the charcoal drawings of Gua Kelawar was later briefly described in a report (Taha and Jaafar, 1990). Motifs described by Taha & Jaafar (1990) include human figures, animal figures, figures of the universe, abstract figures, and boat figures. One of the abstract figures of a “round mushroom” described by Taha (1990) has been identified the “Keroh

Variant” during our survey, and it will be discussed later in this paper. The drawings were believed to have been produced by the Orang Asli living in the vicinity of the cave (Taha, 1990). However, this hypothesis is still an open question as area around the cave has been converted into plantation, and no fieldwork was known to be conducted with the Orang Asli regarding the rock art.

In 2011, Gua Mat Surat was reported by Jusoh (2011) following an excavation lead by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The paper was written in Bahasa Malaysia, and the descriptions are inconsistent and self-contradictory. The author emphasized on the similarity between the rock art of Gua Mat Surat and Gua Kelawar solely because both sites used charcoal for the rock art and both sites depicted human figures and animal figures (Jusoh, 2011).

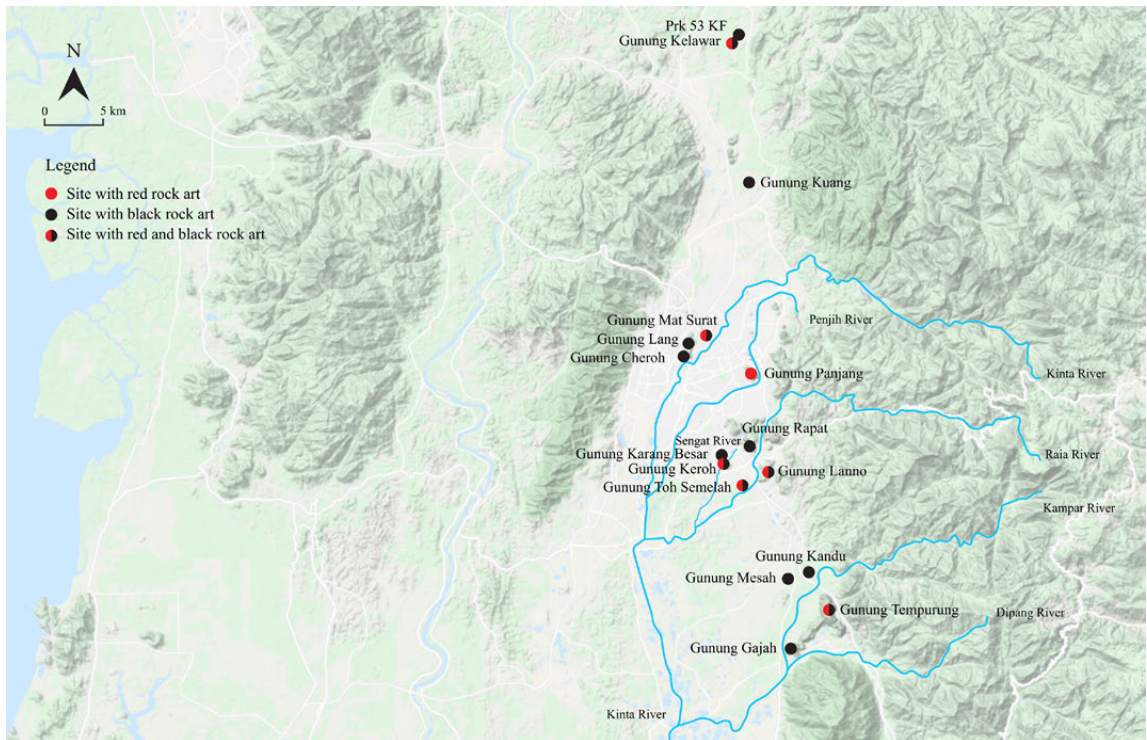
### ***Kinta Valley Watch***

Kinta Valley Watch (KVW) is a non-profit organization started by a group of local cave enthusiasts in 2018. They usually go for caving within Kinta Valley few times per month, either exploring caves that were documented by previous researchers or looking for undiscovered caves. We got in touch with KVW in October-2019 and they kindly offered their assistance to explore the rock shelters and caves across Kinta Valley. Since we have a mutual goal of documenting and preserving the cultural heritage of Kinta Valley, a collaboration is formed between us and KVW. We provide consultation and training for KVW while they would help to survey for sites with archaeological potential during their weekly caving activities. Since then, rock art surveys have been carried out intermittently up until the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia in 2021. Based on the information provided by KVW, our documentation set to prioritize the vulnerable sites, especially those that are threatened by quarrying activities or illegal religious activities (i.e. adaptative use of cave as temple). This collective effort has greatly propelled rock art research in West Malaysia. Nevertheless, systematic rock art documentation and analysis requires a lot of time just to complete the inventory of a single site. To date, our collaboration has led to the identification of more than 30 rock art sites in the region, of which only 11 sites have been systematically documented.

### **Rock art survey between 2019 to JUNE 2021**

The surveyed area can be divided into three parts for the ease of discussion in this paper: the upper region, the middle region, and the lower region (Figure 1). The word *gunung* is a Malay word refers to a hill or mountain, whereas *gua* is a Malay word refers to a cave. We do not differentiate between cave or rock shelter, as most of the rock shelter in West

Malaysia are also commonly refer to as gua (e.g., Gua Tambun which is actually a rock shelter). The complete list of sites discovered is presented in Table 1. It is noteworthy that the total 33 sites is just a conservative estimate, as we haven't been able to thoroughly survey and document the sites in person. There are also ambiguities surrounding the name of the sites given that many of these caves and rock shelters are not officially named. For all the unnamed caves, we just assigned a generic name based on the name of the



limestone massif with a number.

Fig. 1 Limestone hills with rock art sites in Kinta Valley as reported by KVV as of June 2021.

The upper region covers the northernmost of Kinta Valley, and slightly extends into Sungai Siput town. This part includes Gunung Kelawar, Gunung Kuang, and a nameless limestone hill that can be identified with reference number Prk 53 KF (see Price, 2014).

The middle region covers all the sites from the south of Gunung Kuang to the north of Raia River. This covers a wide range of limestone hills, including Gunung Mat Surat, Gunung Lang, Gunung Cheroch, Gunung Panjang, Gunung Rapat, Gunung Karang Besar, Gunung Keroh, Gunung Toh Semelah, and Gunung Lanno.

Lastly, the lower region includes the limestone hills to the south of Raia River, including

Gunung Kandu, Gunung Mesah, Gunung Tempurung, and Gunung Gajah. Raia River is chosen as the boundary for the discussion of this paper because it was traditionally used as a natural boundary for the Orang Asli in Kinta Valley to demarcate their territory - Temiar Senoi to the north and Semai Senoi to the south (Khoo and Lubis, 2005).

Here, the term “coloured rock art” is used to denote red, purple, orange, or yellow coloured rock art, although in most cases there are only red paintings and “black rock art” represents the charcoal drawings. Overall, there are 24 sites with only black rock art, 2 sites that consist of only coloured rock art, and 7 sites with both coloured and black rock art. The number of rock art motifs ranges widely, from only one motif to hundreds of motifs per site.

No.	Hill name	Site name	Rock art colour
<b>Upper region</b>			
1	Gunung Kelawar	Gua Kelawar*	coloured & black
2	Prk 53 KF	Prk 53 KF	black
3	Gunung Kuang	Gunung Kuang 2	black
4	Gunung Kuang	Gunung Kuang 1	black
<b>Middle region</b>			
5	Gunung Mat Surat	Gua Mat Surat 1*	black
6	Gunung Mat Surat	Gua Mat Surat 2*	coloured
7	Gunung Lang	Gunung Lang 1	black
8	Gunung Lang	Gunung Lang 2	black
9	Gunung Cheroh	Gunung Cheroh 1	black
10	Gunung Panjang	Gua Tambun*	coloured
11	Gunung Rapat	Gunung Rapat 2	black
12	Gunung Rapat	Gunung Rapat 3	black
13	Gunung Karang Besar	Gua Karang Besar*	black
14	Gunung Keroh	Keroh Rock Shelter 1*	coloured & black
15	Gunung Keroh	Keroh Rock Shelter 2*	coloured & black
16	Gunung Keroh	Gua Keroh	black
17	Gunung Toh Semelah	Gua Toh Semelah*	coloured & black
18	Gunung Lanno	Kintaly Rock Shelters 1*	black
19	Gunung Lanno	Kintaly Rock Shelters 2*	black
20	Gunung Lanno	Gunung Lanno 1	black
21	Gunung Lanno	Gua Keelback	black
22	Gunung Lanno	Gua Kupu Kupu	coloured & black

23	Gunung Lanno	Gua Selari	coloured & black
<b>Lower region</b>			
24	Gunung Kandu	Gua Batang Buruk	black
25	Gunung Kandu	Gua Kandu	black
26	Gunung Mesah	Gunung Mesah 1	black
27	Gunung Tempurung	Gua Tempurung*	coloured & black
28	Gunung Tempurung	Gua Ular upper cave	black
29	Gunung Tempurung	Gunung Tempurung 1	black
30	Gunung Gajah	Gunung Gajah 1	black
31	Gunung Gajah	Gunung Gajah 2	black
32	Gunung Gajah	Gunung Gajah 6	black
33	Gunung Gajah	Gunung Gajah 7	black

Table 1: List of rock art sites as reported by KVV as of June 2021

(Sites that have been systematically documented are denoted with \* symbol)

## ROCK ART OF KINTA VALLEY

### *Coloured rock art*

The majority of the reported sites with coloured rock art are concentrated in the middle region whereas the upper region and lower region each documented one site with coloured rock art. Gua Tambun still contain the highest number of coloured rock art (N= 640) (Tan, 2010a), followed by Gua Tempurung with 127 coloured motifs and the remaining sites have much lesser coloured motifs, ranging from 1 to 16 (Table 2). Gua Kupu-kupu and Gua Selari have not been thoroughly surveyed, it is possible that these sites contain higher number of coloured rock art. Gua Tambun and Gua Mat Surat 2, on the other hand, are the only two sites without the presence of black rock art where all the other sites appeared to have higher percentage of black rock art compared to coloured rock art.

No.	Site name	Number of coloured rock art	Total number of rock art	Percentage of coloured rock art (%)
1	Gua Tambun	640	640	100
2	Gua Tempurung	127	397	32
3	Keroh Rock Shelter 2	16	135	12
4	Gua Toh Semelah	15	87	17
5	Gua Mat Surat 2	8	8	100
6	Keroh Rock Shelter 1	5	87	6

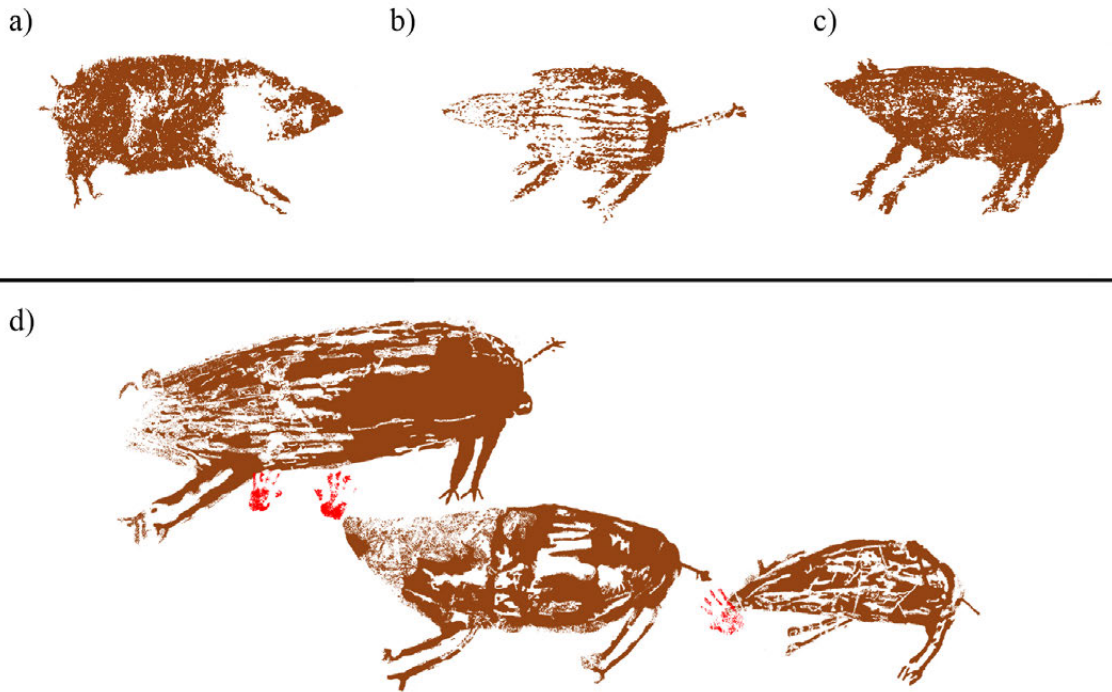
7	Gua Kelawar	5	324	2
8	Gua Kupu-Kupu	1	undocumented	n/a
9	Gua Selari	1	undocumented	n/a

Table 2: Number and percentage of coloured rock art based on sites.

The rock art of Gua Tambun, Gua Tempurung, Gua Toh Semelah, Gua Mat Surat 2, and Gua Selari are of a mixture of figurative and non-figurative motifs. The motifs can be divided into anthropomorph, zoomorph, botanic, handprint, geometric shape, line art, and abstract design. The majority of the coloured rock art are solid infilled. The anthropomorphs come in various style, and none are identical to each other. In most cases they are relatively larger in size compared to black rock art; with the largest recorded from Gua Tempurung, measuring to approximately 130 cm in length.

Zoomorphic motifs of Kinta Valley include land animals, marine animals, and reptiles. In terms of land animals, the “wild boar” motifs of Gua Tambun are significantly similar to the “wild boar” motifs of Gua Tempurung in terms of drawing technique, head shape, body shape, hooved legs, and bushy tail (Figure 2). Although other motifs from these sites do not share many similarities, the resemblance of certain motifs seems to suggest a potential cultural connection between Gua Tambun and Gua Tempurung given its close geographic proximity.

The identification of the marine animal species appeared to be exceptionally challenging, in particularly dealing with the “fish” motif due to the lack of visual information. At Gua Mat Surat 2, however, a “sawfish” motif and a “stingray” motif were identified (Figure 3). These two motifs have distinct feature, one with a saw-like rostrum and the other with a diamond-shape body and a tail. Additional “squid” motif has also been identified in Gua Mat Surat 2. Since Gua Mat Surat 2 is at least 50 km away from the coast, these are likely to be depictions of freshwater species that can be found in the Kinta River which is only



1 km away from the site.

Fig. 2 (a)-(c) “wild boar” motifs of Gua Tambun; (d) panel from Gua Tempurung depicting three “wild boars”, three handprints can also be seen from this panel. Image not to scale. Tracings by Saw.



Fig. 3 Depictions of a “sawfish”, a “squid”, and a “stingray” from Gua Mat Surat 2. Photo and tracings by Saw.



Another discovery is the depiction of Handprints from Gua Toh Semelah and Gua Tempurung. Handprints have not been discovered in West Malaysia prior. More intriguingly, the Handprints from Gua Tempurung were placed on top of two of the “wild boar” motifs (Figure 2). While there are no comparable sites in Malaysia, nearby at Laos, handprints placed over zoomorphic motifs have been suggested to be part of a hunting ritual (Tan, 2018).

There is an absence of Figurative motif types from Gua Kelawar, Keroh Rock Shelter 1, Keroh Rock Shelter 2, and Gua Kupu-kupu. The first three sites consist of only Geometric Shape motifs, such as oval, square, triangle, or diamond shapes. At Gua Kupu-kupu, one triple-layered circular shape was discovered.

### ***Black rock art***

Black rock art is widely distributed throughout Kinta Valley and the motifs are relatively diverse, including anthropomorph, zoomorph, material culture, botanic, geometric shape, line art, and abstract design. In contrast to the coloured anthropomorphs, black anthropomorphs of Kinta Valley are generally demonstrated by small stick figures (Figure 4a). Few exceptions to this are those anthropomorphs recorded at Gunung Rapat 3 (Figure 4b), Keroh Rock Shelter 2 (Figure 4c), and Gua Tempurung (Figure 4d), where these motifs appear to have more variations and uniqueness as well as larger in size.



Fig. 4 Anthropomorphs from (a) Gua Keroh (Photo by KVV), (b) Gunung Rapat 3 (Photo by KVV), (c) Keroh Rock Shelter 2 (Photo by Saw), and (d) Gua Tempurung. Photo by Saw.

The most depicted black zoomorphs are elephant and fish. Other animals such as “horse”, “rooster”, and “reptile” are presented but relatively less common. Elephant is native to Kinta Valley and was once an important export of Perak between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century (Andaya, 1979). Apart from being depicted as “wild” elephants, there are also numerous depictions of elephant riders throughout Kinta Valley, some of the elephants were equipped with saddle or a howdah (Figure 5). These motifs may correspond to the Malay Sultanate period, where the Malay royals often travel or set out for picnic in the jungle with a great party by riding on elephants (Swettenham, 1906) and the mahout culture became obsolete in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Harrison, 1960, as cited by Saaban et al., 2011).



Fig. 5 Elephant rider motifs from (a) Gua Kelawar (Photo by Saw), (b) Gua Toh Semelah (Photo by Saw), (c) Gunung Lang 1. Photo by KVV.

Fish motifs were only discovered in the middle region. Although they can be identified based on the presence of fins, but the identification of the subspecies is always problematic since they are not always portraying a realistic depiction. Nevertheless, at Gunung Lang 1, numerous fish motifs are depicted with “barbels” at their “mouth”, suggesting that they are depictions of catfish or better known as *keli* among the local communities (Figure 6). *Keli* is commonly found in the freshwater, and they served as local delicacies up until present time.

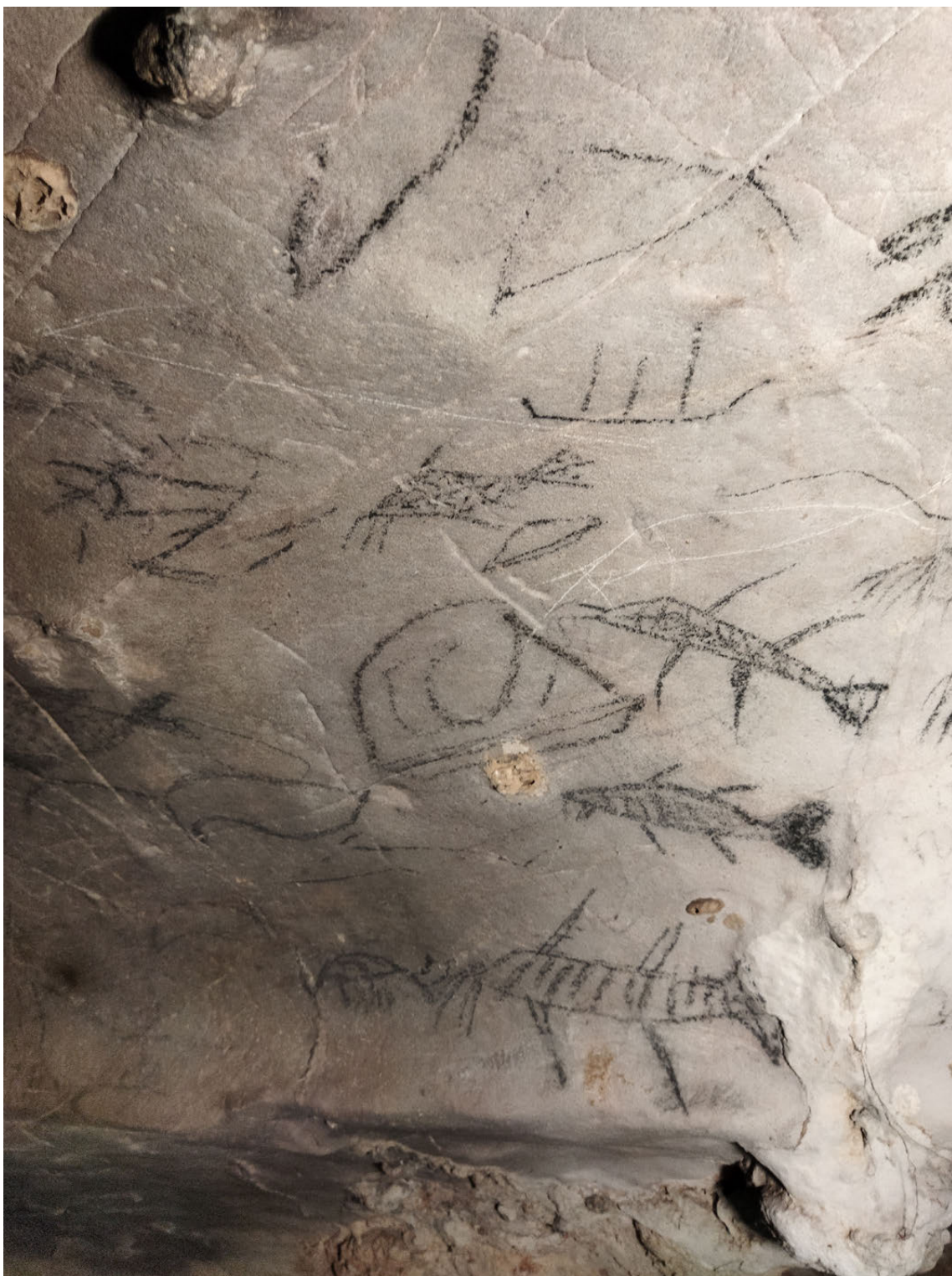


Fig. 6 Several fish motifs from Gunung Lang 1, note the “barbels” on their “mouth”. A boat motif can also be seen in the middle of the picture. Photo by KVV.

## Material Culture

Material culture motif refers to the depiction of man-made objects, such as house, weapon, and modern transport. Interestingly, all material culture motifs of Kinta Valley only restricted to black rock art. The “house” motifs are found in the upper and middle region. Most of these motifs resemble a traditional Orang Asli or Malay house, with only one instance at Gunung Lang 1 where a “brick house” was depicted. There are also few other motifs depicting the Malay traditional kite, the *wau*, at Gunung Lang 1.

Depiction of weapons is uncommon within Kinta Valley. Thus far, they are only recorded at Keroh Rock Shelter 2 and Kintaly Rock Shelter 1, both in the middle region. The former consists of the depictions of “Malay swords” and are not associated with any anthropomorphs. In contrast, the weapon motifs from Keroh Rock Shelter 2 are all associated with human figures. The weapons depicted are “daggers”, “swords”, “shield”, or “bow and arrow”. There is also a group of anthropomorphs in fighting stance, accompanied by three to four boat motifs with human figures in upraising arms, suggestive of a war-scene (Figure 7).

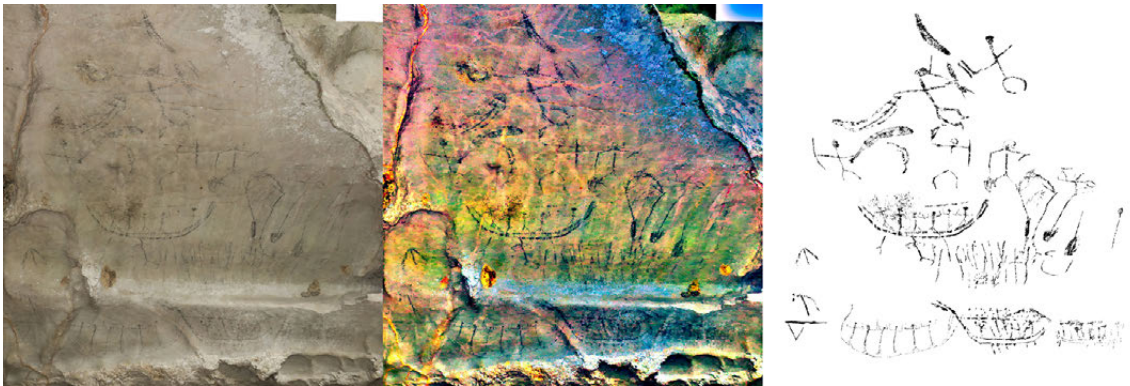


Fig. 7 Possible depiction of a war-scene from Kintaly Rock Shelter 1.

Transport motifs include depictions of watercraft, motorcars, and aeroplanes (Figure 8). Watercraft motifs are very common, and its distribution are widespread across Kinta Valley. There is a wide variety of watercraft, with Gua Toh Semelah having the highest variation compared to other sites. By studying the boat typology and historical documents of Kinta Valley, Saw and Goh (2022, in press) concluded that the watercraft motifs of Gua Toh Semelah were likely to be created in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, corresponding to the time when the Raia River was an important trade route in the region.

Motorcar motifs were only discovered in the middle region at Gunung Lanno 1 and Gua Keelback. All motorcars are depicted in profile view, with more or less accurate depiction of the car structure, suggesting that the artist or artists have a considerable understanding of motorcars.

Lastly, three aeroplane motifs were discovered from the lower region at Gua Ular. The depiction of aeroplanes is likely related to the “jungle forts” built by the British in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The establishment of these jungle forts was to provide security and resources to the Orang Asli (Khoo and Lubis, 2005). One of the forts was located at Pos Dipang, which is not far to the southeast of Gua Ular. Each fort was equipped with a helicopter base, and as a result, “many Orang Asli who had never seen a car before were now familiar with helicopters” (Khoo and Lubis, 2005, p. 369).



Fig. 8 (a) A boat motif from Gua Mat Surat (Photo by Saw), (b) Two motorcar motifs from Gua Keelback (Photo by KVV), (c) A plane motif from Gua Ular. Photo by KVV.

### ***Keroh Variant & Centipede Variant***

Under abstract design and line art, two motif types stood out, namely the Keroh Variant and Centipede Variant respectively. They are widely distributed in the upper and middle region, but none has been discovered in the lower region thus far. This scenario seems to suggest that this is a style endemic to areas to the north of Raia River, which is within the traditional boundary of the Temiar Senoi people. It should be stressed that the traditional boundary we know at present-day is merely based on the documentations produced by the British after the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the settlements and movements of the Orang Asli across land prior to 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, is still largely unknown (Faulstich, 1990; Tan, 2010b). Therefore, interpretations should not be limited to only the Temiar Senoi since the chronometric dating of such motif remain uncertain.

Both Keroh Variant and Centipede Variant can be further divided into six styles respectively (Figure 9 & Figure 10). It is noteworthy that the Centipede Variant shows a striking similarity with the carving of centipede on a Besis (likely referring to the Mah Meri Senoi people) blowpipe (see, Skeat and Blagden, 1906, p. 493). Keroh Variant and Centipede Variant are often depicted side by side, or in close vicinity with each other. There are also occasions where only one motif type was discovered, but such occurrence is extremely rare.

### Keroh Variant

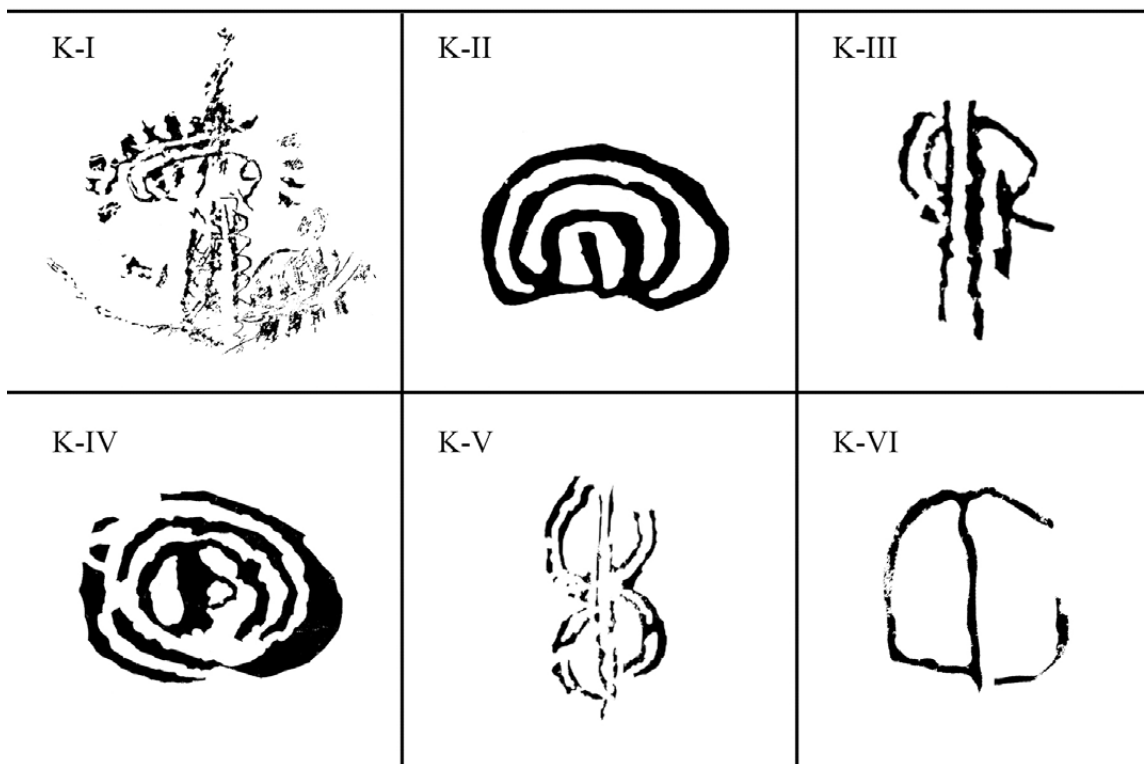


Fig. 9 Six types of Keroh Variant identified in Kinta Valley. Tracings by Saw.

## Centipede Variant

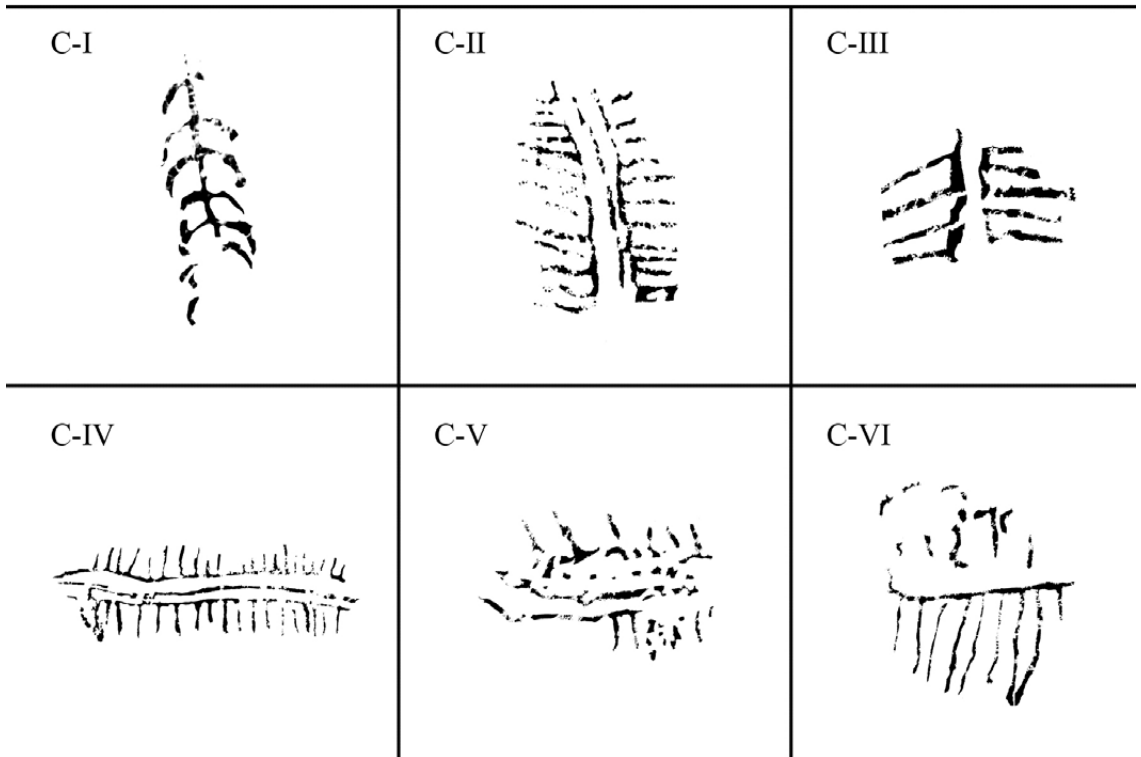


Fig. 10 Six types of Centipede Variant identified in Kinta Valley. Tracings by Saw.

### Conclusion

Our current understanding of Kinta Valley rock art suggest that the rock art of this region is extremely diverse, and the rock painting traditions have been presented in this region for thousands of years. In Southeast Asia, red rock art without diagnostic features are presumed to be prehistoric (Tan, 2014), whereas black rock art is attributed to historical period (Saidin and Taçon, 2011; Tan, 2014). Similarly for Kinta Valley, although no chronometric dating scheme has been undertaken, it is evident that the majority of the coloured rock art is of deeper antiquity compared to black rock art. This is because when both black and coloured rock art presents together, the black motifs are always superimposed over the coloured motifs. Even when superimposition does not occur, black motifs are often smaller than the coloured motifs and appear to fill into the blank spaces between the coloured motifs that are much larger in size. Furthermore, the occurrence of modern subject matter in black rock art, such as animal riders, watercraft, motorcars, aeroplanes, helps to chart a timeframe for these rock arts to somewhere between 17<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup>

century. At present, there is a 3,000-year gap in between the transition of prehistoric rock art to the historical black rock art in Kinta Valley. Further investigations into the rock art of this region will be extremely fundamental in extending our understanding of the rock art traditions in Malaysia, especially during the transitional period from prehistoric to the historical era.

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