

# Rock Art of Perlis, West Malaysia

## Lukisan Gua di Perlis, Semenanjung Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the rock art sites in Perlis of West Malaysia, namely Gua Bintong, Gua Semadong, Bukit Jernih, and Bukit Tengku Lembu. In general, the Perlis rock art consists of black charcoal drawings with a wide variety of motifs such as anthropomorphs, zoomorphs, watercraft, geometric shapes, ray motifs, and abstract designs. This paper provides new insights into the rock art from Perlis and further explores their relationship with other rock art sites across West Malaysia. We propose that the rock art from these sites were possibly made between middle 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century CE by the Negrito Orang Asli.

*Kertas kerja ini membentangkan tapak-tapak lukisan gua di Perlis, iaitu Gua Bintong, Gua Semadong, Bukit Jernih dan Bukit Tengku Lembu. Secara amnya, lukisan gua di Perlis terdiri daripada lukisan arang yang berbentuk seperti manusia, haiwan, kapal, geometrik, sinar, dan reka bentuk abstrak. Kertas kerja ini memberi perspektif baharu mengenai lukisan gua di Perlis dan seterusnya menerokai hubungannya dengan tapak-tapak lukisan gua lain di Semenanjung Malaysia. Kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa lukisan gua di Perlis dihasilkan antara pertengahan abad ke-19 dan ke-20 oleh Orang Asli Negrito.*

**Keywords:** rock art; charcoal drawings; Perlis; Malaysia | lukisan gua; lukisan arang; Perlis; Malaysia

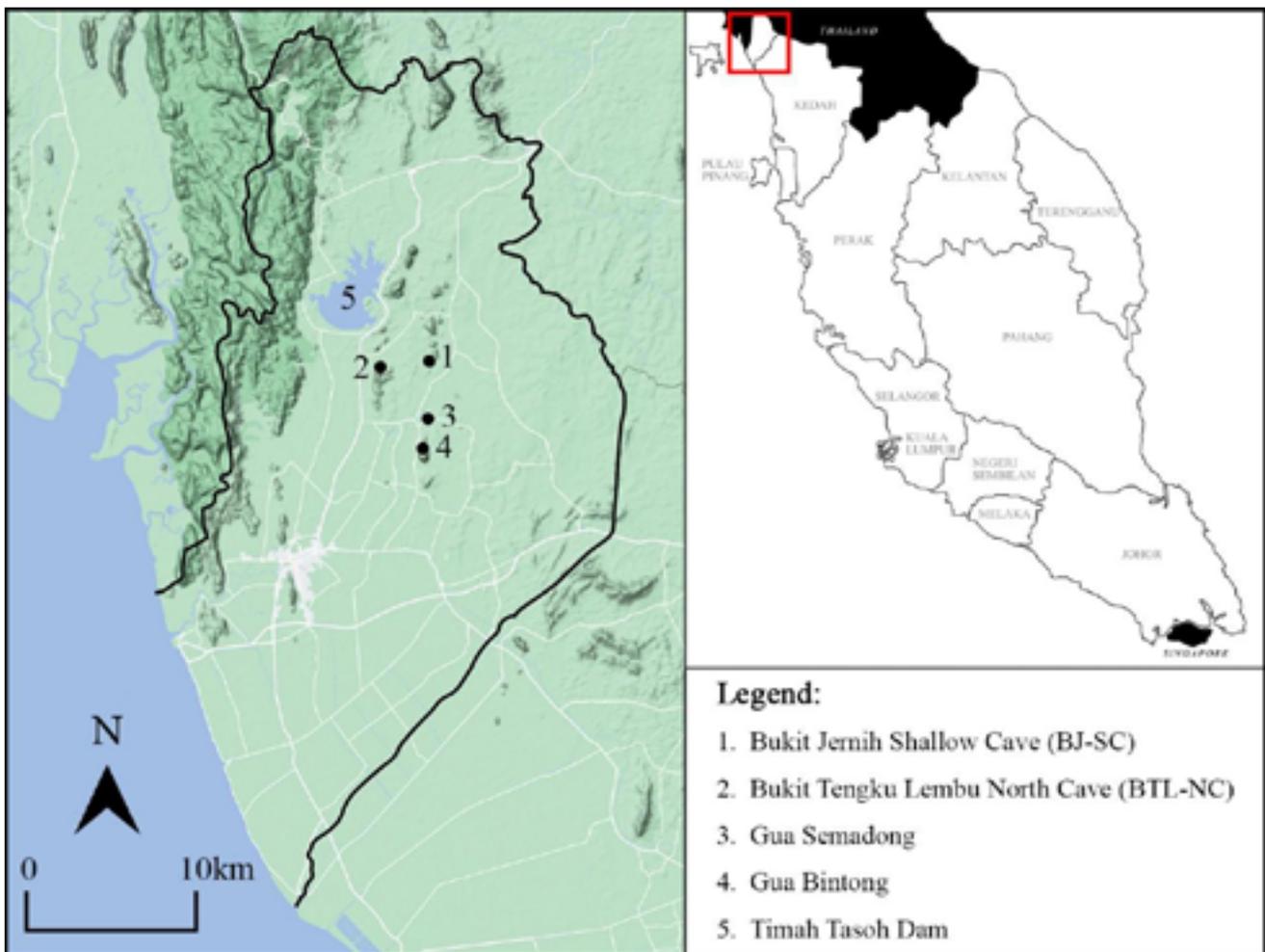
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## INTRODUCTION

Our contemporary knowledge of rock art in West Malaysia has mainly derived from publications in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Daly 1879; Skeat and Blagden 1906; Evans 1920; Collings 1937; Williams-Hunt 1952b; Peacock and Dunn 1968). However, early rock art record was fairly sporadic, with little descriptions and rarely accompanied by photographs or illustrations since the research were heavily focused on the excavated archaeological materials or ethnographic observation or anecdote. In the last two decades, despite a growing literature on the rock art in West Malaysia, the publications are still heavily focused in the state of Perak and Kelantan (e.g., Mokhtar and Taçon 2011; Zuliskandar 2019; Zuliskandar et al. 2020; Saw and Goh 2021, 2022). This paper aims to address the understudied rock art sites in Perlis, a small state located in the northern Peninsular Malaysia. Its archaeological potential has been noted since the 20<sup>th</sup> century after a series of archaeological surveys carried out by the Department of Museum Malaysia (previously known as Department of Museum and Antiquity) (Adi 1990). The archaeological record of Perlis can be divided into three main phases, the prehistoric period (10,000 to 3,000 years ago), the pre-Islamic period (10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE) and the early historical period (16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century CE) (Adi 1990).

The earliest mention of rock art in Perlis was in the 1937 during an archaeological excavation at Gua Bintong (Collings 1937). However, rock art was never systematically studied, and no new rock art sites were reported for a period of 80 years. It was until 2017 that the rock art at Gua Semadong was discovered, then the caves in Bukit Jernih and Bukit Tengku Lembu were reported with rock art in 2022. This paper focuses on the latter two because they were only newly discovered in 2022 and have not been published elsewhere. The term *gua* and *bukit* are Malay terms meaning a cave and a hill respectively. Both the caves were unnamed, hence for reference, we label the site at Bukit Jernih as BJ-SC (Bukit Jernih Shallow Cave), and the site at Bukit Tengku Lembu as BTL-NC (Bukit Tengku Lembu North Cave). All sites included in the discussion are severely threatened by human activities, such as quarrying, guano digging, graffiti, vandalism, and the landscape of the caves have been altered.



**Fig. 1** Rock art sites in Perlis and the Timah Tasoh Dam. **Source:** Saw

### Motif categorization

This categorization on the Perlis rock art motifs adopts the five-level categorization model which was applied in the study of rock art in Perak (Saw 2022). By adopting the same categorization model, a multivariate analysis could be applied to study the patterning of rock art across different localities in the future, this approach will allow a more coherent interpretation of rock art across West Malaysia.

According to this model, a motif is first categorized as Determinate or Indeterminate motif (Level 1). The former can be categorized as Figurative or Non-figurative motif (Level 2). Under Figurative motif, there are six categories (Level 3): Anthropomorph, Zoomorph, Anthropomorph & Zoomorph, Material Culture, Botanic, and Handprints, whereas under Non-figurative motif there are Geometric, Line Art, and Abstract. Each of these categories can be further separated into smaller groups (Level 4). For example, under Anthropomorph, there are Plain Anthropomorph, Decorative Anthropomorph, Face/Mask, or Undetermined. The classification for Non-figurative motif is more specific and can further categorized into Level 5.

## Overview of the rock art of Perlis

### *Gua Bintong*

Gua Bintong is a cave on the western side of Bukit Chuping. Archaeological excavation was conducted at the mouth of Gua Bintong in 1936 (Collings 1937). The excavation unearthed Hoabinhian stone tools, Neolithic stone tools, pottery sherds, eight human teeth, bone tools, shell tools, bone beads, large numbers of shells, broken animal bones, and a carnelian bead. Collings (1937) noted the presence of watercraft motifs, but there no further elaborations or images relating to the rock art were published. He believed that they were made by the Negrito people in the late 19th century (possibly around 1887 to 1897 based on the year of publication). Subsequent visits to the site also discovered Hoabinhian stone tools (Williams-Hunt 1952b; Adi 1987) and pottery sherds in the cave (Williams-Hunt 1952b; Sieveking 1959; Adi 1987). Unfortunately, no photos or illustrations on the rock art are available, and the site is now heavily quarried, making it inaccessible due to safety concerns (Liew et al. 2021).

### *Gua Semadong*

The rock art of Gua Semadong was discovered in 2017 by a local NGO known as Perlis Nature & Wildlife (Ramon 2019). However, the rock art only made national headlines in 2021 along with the discovery of human skeletal fragments at Bukit Keteri which is not far from the rock art site (Aizat 2021). The human remains were estimated to be 5,000 to 10,000 years old whereas the rock art was believed to be of protohistoric period (Aizat 2021). No follow up report has been published since then.

Based on the photos retrieved online<sup>2</sup>, all seven motifs at Gua Semadong are Determinate motifs, and all are categorized as Figurative motifs. They include depictions of three Anthropomorphs, two of which with upraising arms, and another with only one arm upraised but appears to be in a “standoff” gesture with a snake motif (Ramon 2019; Jabatan Penerangan Negeri Perlis 2021; Aizat 2021). Apart from the snake motif, other Zoomorphs include a bovine, an elephant, and another snake with coiled body. The motifs are either solid infilled with black colour or have a black outline with maroon infilled. The motifs represent the sole instance of bichromatic rock art in West Malaysia. This is very unusual because all motifs discovered from other sites thus far are monochromatic in black or reddish hue.

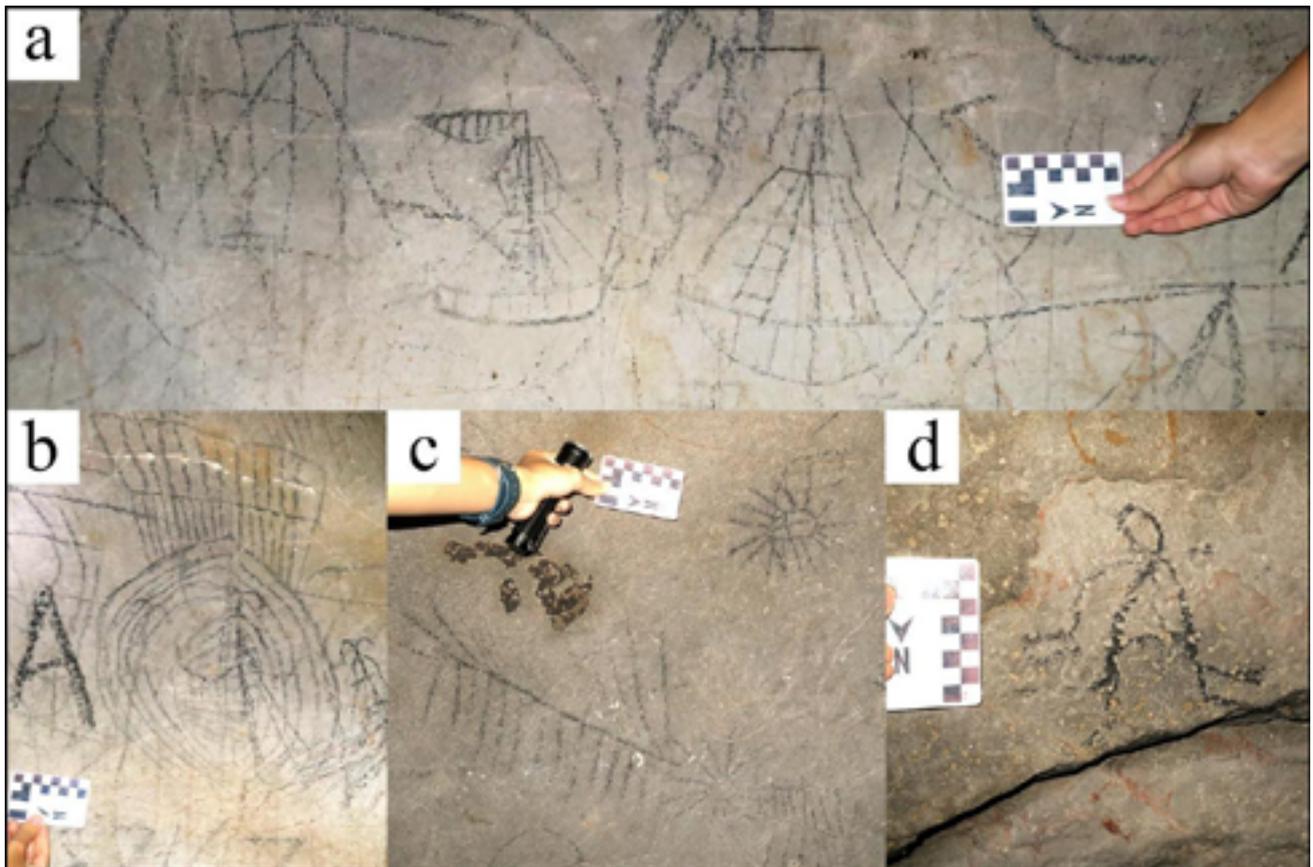
### *Bukit Jernih Shallow Cave (BJ-SC)*

Bukit Jernih is one of the sites within the Aspiring Perlis Geopark, which was gazetted in 2021. The front of the hill has been converted into a camping ground, and tour packages are being offered to the public to promote tourism in Perlis. The site BJ-SC is a small cave some distance away from the main tourist trail. Like most rock art sites in West Malaysia, the cave wall is covered with graffiti, some appear to be from the 1980s based on the written dates.

The rock art was first discovered by a caver from Perak in early January 2022. He informed us about discovery which led to our survey in April in the same year. A total of 111 Determinate and two Indeterminate motifs were recorded across four panels (Figure 2). The rock art can be seen on the wall the back of the cave (Panel A), on the wall to the left of the cave and across the ceiling (Panel B-D). The motifs are mainly geometric shapes that were drawn in outline, and linear designs. Figurative motifs consist of three Anthropomorphs and seven Transport motifs. All the Transport motifs are depictions of watercraft, one of them has three masts and is approximately 1 metre long (Figure 3).

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<sup>2</sup> The authors have not visited Gua Semadong in person.



**Fig. 2** Some of the rock art motifs of BJ-SC: (a) Watercraft motifs, (b) Complicated abstract motifs, (c) Branch Variant and Ray Variant motifs, (d) Anthropomorph. **Source:** Saw.

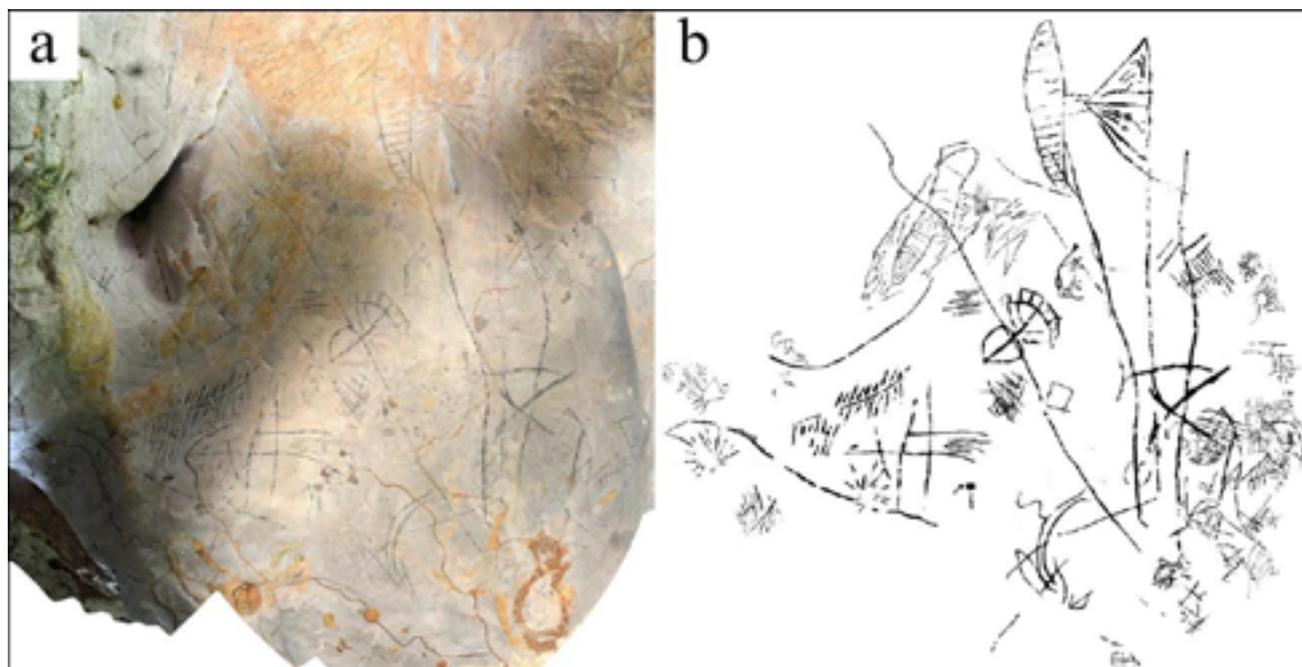


**Fig. 3** A large watercraft motif at BJ-SC that is approximately 1 metre long. **Source:** Saw.

### ***Bukit Tengku Lembu North Cave (BTL-NC)***

Bukit Tengku Lembu was destroyed by guano diggers in the 1950s but the Museum Department managed to recover the artefacts unearthed by the guano diggers (Williams-Hunt 1952b). The site reveals strong evidence of Hoabinhian and Neolithic occupation due to the presence of a large collections of Hoabinhian and Neolithic stone tools. A total of 94 vessels in complete and broken state, a stone bracelet, two bone tools, and three human burials were also recovered from this archaeological locality (Williams-Hunt 1952b; Sieveking 1962; Adi 1987; Chia 1998). BTL-NC is located at the northernmost tip of Bukit Tengku Lembu. It is uncertain whether this is the same cave examined by Williams-Hunt in 1951 since we were unable to obtain the site photos taken in the 1950s. BTL-NC was also heavily disturbed, a portion of the soil at the cave entrance has been dug out.

Similar to Bukit Jernih, we were notified by the Perak caver of the presence of rock art at BTL-NC in early January 2022. Two surveys conducted between April and June 2022 successfully documented a total of 231 Determinate and five Indeterminate motifs were recorded across seven panels. The rock art can be seen on the ceiling of the cave entrance (Panel A), and on various parts in a small room to the left of the entrance (Panel B-G). There are more varieties of motif forms at BTL-NC compared to other sites. The most common form is linear form, followed by outline form, six motifs in solid-infilled form and one in stipple form. The motifs are dominated by Non-figurative motifs of different sizes, while the Figurative motifs are much lesser and smaller (Figure 4). There are also more motif categories present here, including depictions of an elephant rider that are absent from other sites. Table 1 summarises the motif categories from Gua Semadong, BJ-SC and BTL-NC.



**Fig. 4** Portion of BTL-NC Panel A, note the small elephant figure in the centre of the panel. (a) Stitched photos of the ceiling panel (b) Tracing of motifs. Image not to scale. **Source:** Saw.

| Site               | Figurative (%) |          |              |                  | Non-figurative (%) |          |          | Total (%) |
|--------------------|----------------|----------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
|                    | Anthropomorph  | Zoomorph | Animal rider | Material culture | Geometric          | Line art | Abstract |           |
| Gua Semadong (n=7) | 42.9           | 57.1     | -            | -                | -                  | -        | -        | 100       |
| BJ-SC (n=111)      | 2.7            | -        | -            | 6.3              | 19.8               | 60.4     | 10.8     | 100       |
| BTL-NC (n=231)     | 2.2            | 2.2      | 0.9          | 1.3              | 24.2               | 51.5     | 17.7     | 100       |

**Table 1** Motif distribution of Gua Semadong, BJ-SC, and BTL-NC.

## DISCUSSION

### *Comparison with West Malaysian rock art sites*

There are approximately 60 rock art sites reported in West Malaysia, but only a handful were properly documented (Saw 2022). More than half of the sites were discovered in the state of Perak, as this state have been the main focus of archaeological research in West Malaysia (Saw and Goh 2021). There are two main types of rock art in West Malaysia: coloured paintings and charcoal drawings. The former mainly made up of monochromatic red, and are believed to be prehistoric in age due to their faded conditions and similarity with the general characteristics of the early rock art of Southeast Asia (Taçon et al. 2014). At present, Perak is the only state where coloured paintings still survive. On the other hand, charcoal drawings are present in most regions of West Malaysia. They are also believed to be younger due to the occasional presence of modern depictions, such as watercraft, motorcars, firearms, horses, or human figures resembling the colonial officials (Mokhtar and Taçon 2011; Saw and Goh 2021, 2022).

Due to the major difference between coloured paintings and charcoal drawings in the context of West Malaysia, the former was not included in the analysis in this paper. Comparison was made between the rock art motifs of BJ-SC and BTL-NC and charcoal drawings from other northern West Malaysian sites<sup>3</sup> (Figure 5). Five types of motifs were seen to occur repeatedly across this region: Ray Variant, Geometric shape with gridlines, Watercraft, Elephant rider, and Tiger. Ray Variant is a generic category referring to the motif design with multiple lines emanating from a single origin or from a concentric circle. They are often perceived as representing the sun but for the categorisation model used in this study, Ray Variant solely describes the design instead of suggesting an interpretation for the motif.

As shown in the Figure 5, Ray Variant has the widest distribution across the region, followed by watercraft and elephant rider motifs. This comparison was based not only on the motif categories, but also on the forms and styles. For instance, Gua Kelawar in Perak also has a watercraft motif, but the hull is solid-infilled and has three human figures on the boat, displaying no similarities with the watercraft motifs in Perlis. Similarly, the drawing styles of Gua Semadong rock art are highly distinctive not only within Perlis, but within West Malaysia as well. No comparable sites are known at present.

<sup>3</sup> Rock art is also present in the central region of West Malaysia, but we do not have access to the photos or rock art inventory (if any) during the writing of this paper.

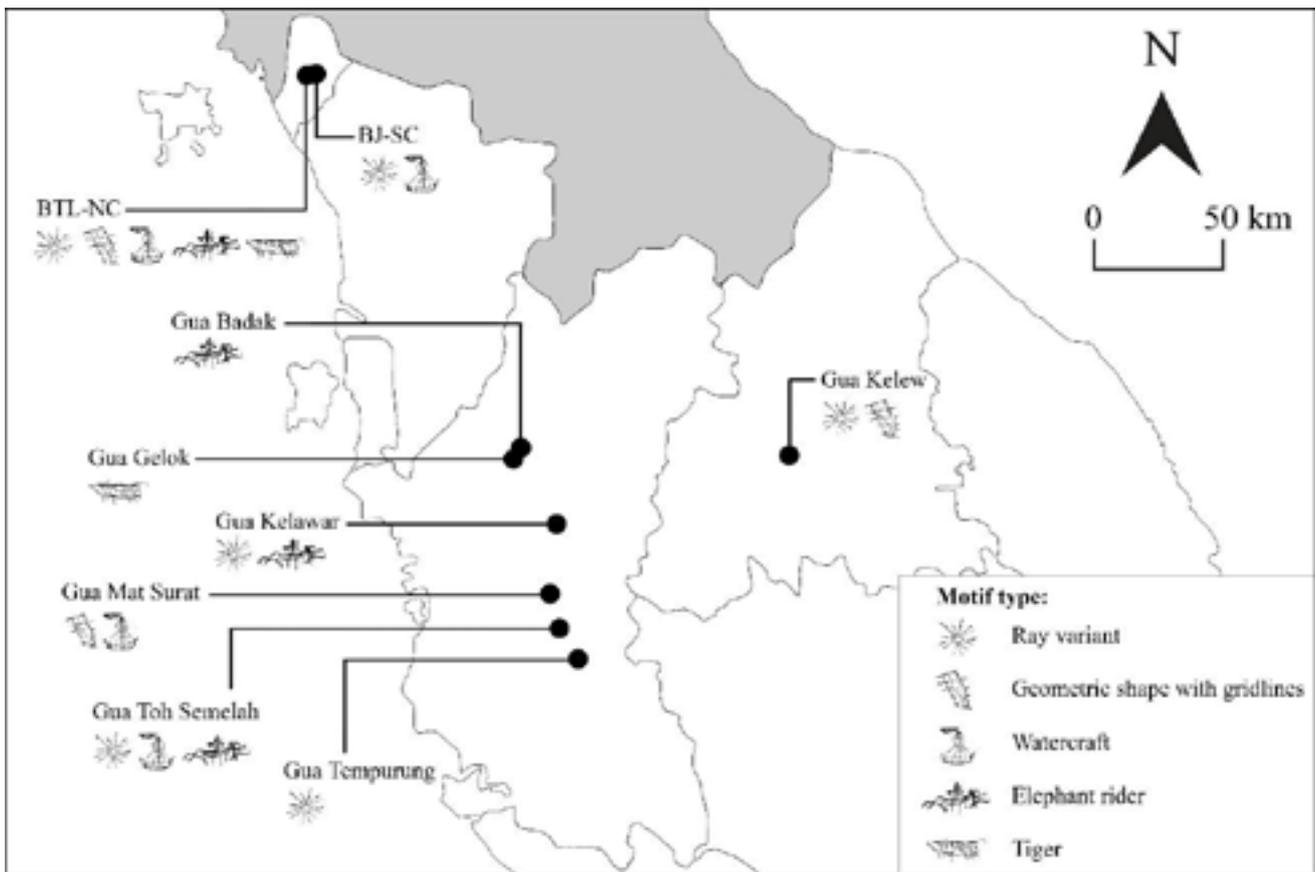


Fig. 5 Similar motifs from other West Malaysian rock art sites. Source: Saw.

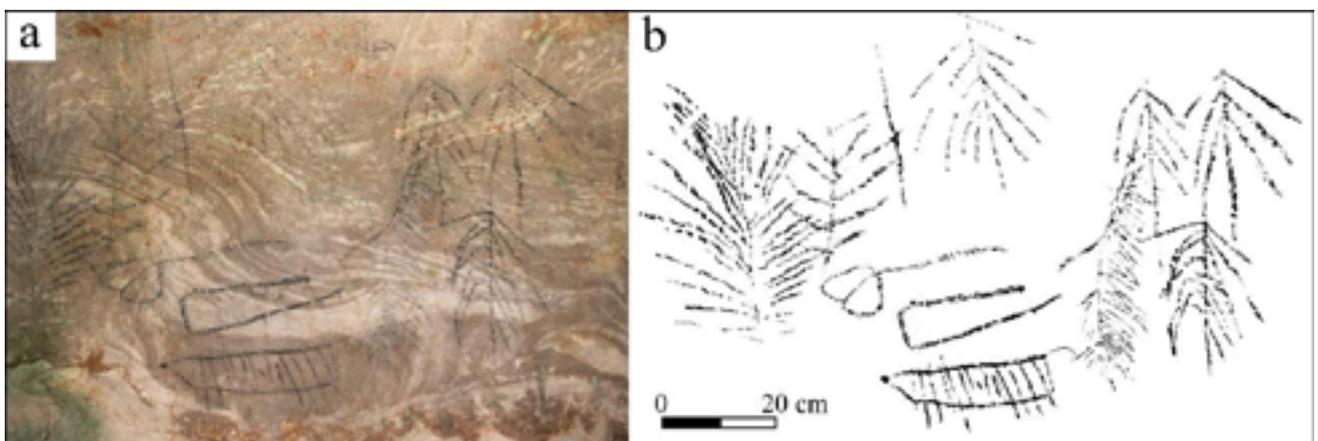
***Branch Variant, Ray Variant, and Complex Linear motifs***

The frequent occurrence of three similar motif types across BJ-SC and BTL-NC indicates a strong cultural connection between these two localities. These motifs are Branch variant, Ray variant, and Complex Linear designs (Figure 6). Based on superimposition, and their condition that often appear to be much more faded than other motifs, we postulate that they are from the earliest production phase at these sites.

It remains obscure on what these three motifs represent, as their placements, orientations, and associated motifs appear to be random. One interesting panel from BTL-NC, however, suggested that the Branch Variant are perhaps tree branches. On this panel, a “tiger” is surrounded by several Branch Variant motifs, resembling a jungle scene (Figure 7). The depiction of tiger is also intriguing because it is the second known instance of the representation of this predator in Malaysia, the first one was documented at Gua Gelok, Perak (see Hamid 2014). Tigers were estimated to disappeared from Perlis after 1950s (Kawanishi et al. 2003), hence this rock art is unlikely to be made later than that year.

| Site   | Common motif types |             |                |
|--------|--------------------|-------------|----------------|
|        | Branch Variant     | Ray Variant | Complex Linear |
| BJ-SC  |                    |             |                |
| BTL-NC |                    |             |                |

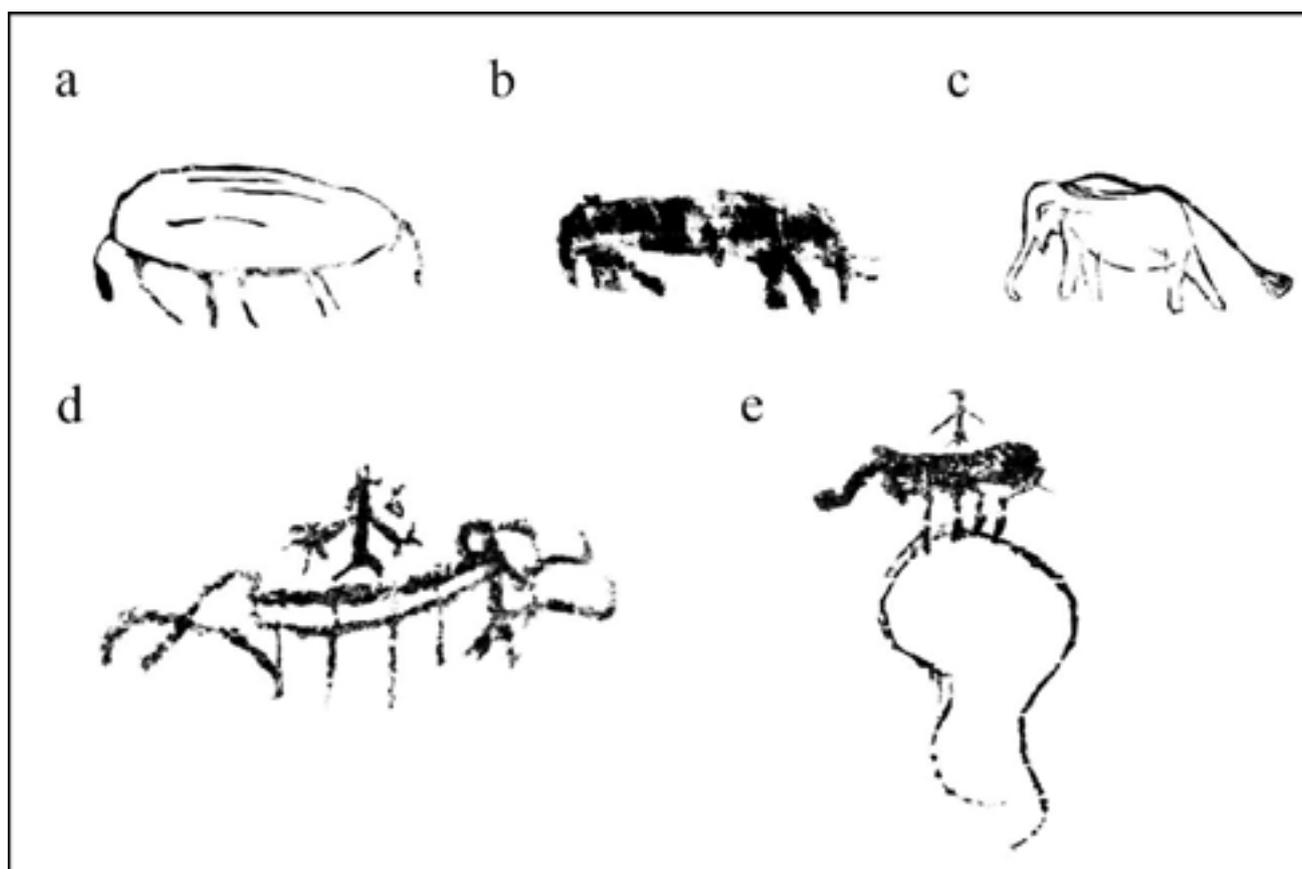
**Fig. 6** Common motif types at BJ-SC and BTL-NC. Image not to scale. **Source:** Saw.



**Fig 7** A jungle scene from BTL-NC. A “tiger” is seen at the lower centre of the image. (a) Original photo of the panel (b) Tracing of the motifs. **Source:** Saw.

### *Elephant and mahout motifs*

Other motifs that can help to position the timeframe of the Perlis rock art are elephant and mahout motifs. Elephants were still sighted in the wild in Perlis in the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE but were estimated to disappear from Perlis around the 1960s (Salman et al. 2011). Mahout culture that was prevalent in the West Malaysia up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century eventually became obsolete around the same time (Salman et al. 2011). Therefore, the presence of an elephant motif and a mahout motif at BTL-NC points towards a date of no later than the 1960s (Figure 8). In addition, the absence of modern subject matter in rock art such as cars and weapons also suggests these were made prior to the colonial era.



**Fig 8** (a-c) Elephant motifs and (d-e) mahout motifs from BTL-NC. Image not to scale. **Source:** Saw.

### *Watercraft motifs*

Watercraft motifs are present at Gua Bintong, BJ-SC and BTL-NC. Watercraft motifs are also reported from a few other sites in West Malaysia, but the motifs from Gua Mat Surat and Gua Toh Semelah most closely resemble the ones from Perlis in terms of styles and boat typologies (Figure 9). Collings (1937) suggested that Gua Bintong motifs may have been made in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century CE by the local Negrito people (Collings 1937). This also coincides with the time when populous settlements existed along some of the rivers prior to the Siamese attack in the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE (Adi 1987). Another possibility is that they are related to the ancient trans-peninsular river route which connects Perlis and southern Thailand (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1997). The construction of the Timah Tasoh Dam between 1987 and 1992 had significantly changed the landscape and riverscape of the area. At present there are no rivers that can penetrate far enough into the sites that are located inland, or rivers wide enough to allow large watercraft to pass through. However, a map from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century shows that there was a route connecting Perlis to Ligor in Thailand (see Hall 1830). Perhaps in the early days, large boats or ships can be observed passing through this area, which was then being drawn onto the cave walls.

| Site            | Watercraft motif |
|-----------------|------------------|
| BJ-SC           |                  |
| BTL-NC          |                  |
| Gua Mat Surat   |                  |
| Gua Toh Semelah |                  |

**Fig. 9** Similar watercraft motifs from BJ-SC, BTL-NC, Gua Mat Surat, and Gua Toh Semelah. Image not to scale. **Source:** Saw.

### **Authorship**

The indigenous community (Orang Asli) is generally assumed to be the traditional owners of historical rock art in West Malaysia. Researchers have noted the similarity between the rock art motifs and the designs on Orang Asli material culture (Adi 2007; Mokhtar and Taçon 2011; Hamid 2014; Wan Noor Shamimi et al. 2019), and these rock art sites are usually found in the close proximity to Orang Asli settlements areas (Abdul Latib 1985; Zuliskandar 2019). Most importantly, ethnographic studies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century CE have recorded that the Lanoh Negrito Orang Asli produced some of the rock art in Lenggong Valley, Perak (Evans 1918, 1927; Schebesta 1928; Williams-Hunt 1952a).

For the case of Perlis, the Negrito people who was seen living in the neighbourhood in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century CE was believed to be associated with Gua Bintong rock art (Collings 1937). However, the Negrito people vacated Perlis since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century CE (Skeat and Blagden 1906; Evans 1937), and the reasons remain unknown. The closest Negrito tribe would be the Maniq people from southern Thailand. Two hypotheses stemmed from this scenario: (i) the Perlis rock art was made by the Negrito in Perlis prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, or (ii) the Perlis rock art was made by the Maniq people who moved across border from southern Thailand. If the second hypothesis is true, then future surveys should be able to find similar motifs in the traditional homeland of the Maniq people. It should also be noted that the rock art may also to be culturally affiliated to other cultural groups, given that the caves and rock shelters of West Malaysia were utilised by different communities over the years for different purposes. For instance, Buddhist pilgrims have occupied several Perlis caves since as early as 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE (Lamb 1962, 1964; Khaw and Mokhtar 2013).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the rock art of Gua Bintong, Gua Semadong, BJ-SC and BTL-NC belongs to the later phase of rock art production in Malaysia. Although archaeological investigations indicated a long period of human occupation in Perlis, the Perlis rock art is probably only 150 to 50 years old (19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century CE). The earliest phase mainly consisted of Non-figurative motifs (Branch Variant, Ray Variant, and Complex Liner), while Figurative motifs were added at a later period. The presence of Watercraft and Mahout motifs shows that the artists were in contact with foreign culture, possibly through trades. The authorship and purpose of the rock art remain an open question due to the heavily disturbed context of the site and the complicated historical background of Perlis. Nevertheless, this paper shows that there is a high potential for rock art research in Perlis.

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