Plate 1. The Larger Drum head.

Plate 2. The Smaller Drum head.
The Drums At Kampong Sungai Lang

by

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In 1926 a curious disc of badly corroded bronze came to light at Batu Pasir Garam on the Sungai Tembeling in Pahang, doubtless as the result of erosion caused by the unusually severe flooding in December of that year. Such was our knowledge forty years ago of the earliest metal-using cultures of Southeast Asia that when Dr. W. Linehan reported the discovery of this object, he described it as the lid of a ceremonial bronze urn. It was in fact the tympanum of a bronze drum belonging to a category generally called Dong’s-son after the classic site on the Song Ma in the province of Thanh Hoa in what is now North Vietnam.

As more data accumulates and our understanding of the coming of metallurgy to Southeast Asia expands, the existence of numerous metal artefacts from Malayan sites showing clear affinities to the styles of the classic Mainland centres has been recognised. Some years before the Tembeling drumhead was found, probably in 1905, three large bronze bells were discovered at Klang. Of these, one was sent to the British Museum, another was lost when the Selangor Museum was destroyed during the war and the third, fortunately preserved in the Perak Museum, is now on display in the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur. The Klang Bells are excellent examples of a type well-known from Bronze Age sites in Indochina, one actually having been excavated from Dong’s-son itself and another, found at Battambang in Cambodia, being almost identical in terms of both shape and decoration to the Klang bell now in the British Museum.

During the Japanese occupation in 1944, the remains of another bronze drum of Dong’s-on type, comprising part of the tympanum and a large fragment of the body, were unearthed in the course of construction work on the hill known as Bukit Kuda to the north east of Klang. The Japanese placed these relics in the Selangor Museum, the bombing of which with great good fortune they survived. The Klang drum is now on display in the National Museum.

In addition to the drums and bells, a total of five socketed bronze axe heads have been found over the years in the course of mining operations in Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Kelantan. These likewise have close parallels from Indochina.

Also to be included in this brief inventory of the cultural remains of Malaya’s pioneer metallurgists are the group of strange, not to say enigmatic, socketed iron implements, commonly known as tulang mawas and of relatively frequent occurrence at sites on the west coast from Perlis to Selangor and along the main rivers of Pahang, the cist graves made of granite slabs, beads of various kinds and a characteristic pottery with which tulang mawas have been associated at


a number of localities. An attempt has recently been made by Sieveking to suggest that the origin of the Malayan *tulang mawas* should be traced to certain bronze implements from Dong-s’on, which, if his suggestion is accepted, would afford yet another cultural link with Indochina during this period.³

It will be seen from this summary that Malaya is by no means lacking in vestiges of early cultures conversant with the use of metals. Unfortunately, only a few of the granite slab graves and their contents have been excavated under controlled conditions, the remainder of this corpus of objects having been acquired by chance through such natural agencies as river erosion or human activities like road-making or mining. We therefore have little or no information regarding their associations with other objects or their position in the natural or artificial deposits in which they came to be interred. Largely due to this lack of contextual data, so essential to any reliable archaeological interpretation, there are in fact far more unsolved problems than there are concrete conclusions that can lay claim to general acceptance.

We have, for example, no certain knowledge of the dates of any of these objects, although many guesses have been hazarded. Mr. Tweedie, in his pamphlet *Prehistoric Malaya*, supposes, on the basis of typological comparisons with Indochinese specimens, that the Malayan bronze drums should be dated to about the second century B.C.⁴ Linehan, on the other hand, would prefer the period from the first century A.D. to the first quarter of the third century A.D. as the date for the introduction of bronze and iron metallurgy into Malaya.⁵ Loewenstein accepts this same time span for the Malayan bronze objects of Dong-s’on type, but establishes a separate and later Malayan Iron Age which he dates to between the ninth and tenth centuries A.D.⁶ Linehan, discussing the granite cists and the artefacts associated with them, suggested the first three centuries A.D. as a reasonable time bracket, basing himself on a report by Beck on the date of some beads found in the graves⁷.

Not only is the question of chronology in dispute, but the relationship between the slab graves, *tulang mawas* iron implements, beads and pottery on the one hand, and the bronze drums, bells and socketed axe heads on the other, is hotly debated. Linehan clearly thought in terms of a group of closely associated and contemporary Bronze-Iron Age cultures in Malaya, while Loewenstein, influenced perhaps by an urge to fit the Malayan facts into the time-honoured tripartite scheme of Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages, sees instead a period marked in the archaeological record by bronze drums and bells and separated by nearly ten centuries from “the advent of the people who constructed the slab-graves of Southern Perak and forged the iron *tulang mawas*.”

Last but not least of the difficulties arising from this phase of prehistory is the problem of the origins of Malaya’s first metal-using cultures. It is not of course questioned that the initial impulses must have come from the Dong-s’on centres in Mainland


Southeast Asia. What has not yet been resolved are such matters as whether the Malayan bronze artefacts are imports brought by migrants from Indochina (a thesis supported to some extent by the great rarity of copper ores in Malaya), whether Malaya formed an intermediate link in the chain of diffusion of Dong-s’ on traditions into Southeast Asia, or whether reflux contacts with the Indonesian islands played a more important role in the rise of the early metal-using cultures, as the primary distribution of sites along the west coast seems to suggest.

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In June, 1964, at Kampong Sungai Lang some twenty five miles from Klang in the District of Kuala Langat, Selangor, a chain of events took place which led, fortuitously, to a discovery of unparalleled significance to Malayan and Southeast Asian prehistory, one which brings within sight solutions to many of the major problems which have been outlined above.

Kampong Sungai Lang is founded on a peat soil which in turn rests on an underlying stratum of mangrove mud. The area seems to have been first cleared of its virgin peat swamp forest cover and drained in 1938 when it was given over to rubber growing. Coffee is now supplanting rubber as the major crop on most of the holdings in the kampong and while engaged in clearing his land for its first coffee planting, one of the small-holders found his operations hindered by a large mound of mud protruding like an island from the surrounding peat soil. It is significant that this mound does not appear to have been an obstacle to the original clearance of the plot in 1938. Observations indicate that as a result of cultivation and drainage the peat has shrunk up two feet, suggesting that the mound was once completely, or almost completely covered by the deposition of the peat swamp forest.

Addressing himself to the removal of the mound, the small-holder commenced by attacking its periphery and continued by mining down into the centre. After lowering the level of the mound some three to four feet, he was surprised to strike two substantial metal discs lying side by side which, on being lifted, he found to be decorated with cabbalistic designs surrounding a central raised star motif. This unexpected discovery seems to have occasioned some alarm which had the effect of protecting the mound and its hidden contents from further immediate molestation. The mysterious discs were removed and deposited for safe-keeping in a nearby shop where after some time had
passed they were noticed by a newspaper reporter and their existence recorded by a brief item in the *Berita Harian*. These few lines might well have roused scant interest had they not caught the attention of Enche Mokhzani, an anthropologist at the University of Malaya. Suspecting them to be the heads of bronze drums of Dong-s’on type, Enche Mokhzani went at once to Kampong Sungai Lang where his surmise was confirmed. He was able to purchase both drumheads together with a substantial fragment of the side of one of the drums, numerous small decorated bronze pieces and a much corroded socket of an iron implement, all of which had been found in the course of digging into the mound.

The objects were brought back to Kuala Lumpur and deposited in the National Museum. When the writer was informed of the discovery and had examined the drumheads and other small finds, he lost no time in visiting the site at Kampong Sungai Lang accompanied by Enche Shahrom bin Yub, Acting Director of Museums, and Enche Mokhzani. A preliminary investigation was not immediately encouraging. It was obvious that a large part of the mound had been levelled, the soil well broken up and planted with tapioca and coffee. Furthermore, the prone trunks of rubber trees in the process of being cut up into logs hindered even the most casual investigation of the site. However, on clearing away the loose soil at the spot where the small-holder claimed to have encountered the drums, we were delighted to find in the moist underlying soil clear impressions where they had lain (Plate 3). Further probing revealed the existence of a plank of wood underneath the drums. (Plate 5).

It was apparent at this stage that the two drums had been intentionally buried side by side in an inverted position, a wooden plank having been first laid down to receive them. It also seemed very likely that up to the time of the initial levelling of the mound, the drums had been quite intact and that the small-holder, being unable to discern the thin line of corroded metal in the soil, had in fact cut away the greater part of the walls of both. This was, of course, profoundly disappointing, but we had also to be thankful that the discovery had reached our notice at all.

The configuration of the soil indicated that the drums had been interred in a small mound, either natural or artificial, and that sufficient remained for further intensive investigation to be profitable. It was thereupon decided to excavate the area, the work to be performed jointly by the Archaeological Research Unit of the University of Malaya and the National Museum under the direction of the writer.

Our preparations had already attracted a large crowd of fascinated bystanders whose numbers were reinforced from time to time during the work by visitors from far afield, drawn by reports of the discovery in the press and on television. We were gratified that their interest in our activities remained unflagging throughout the twelve days that the excavation lasted, but in order to allow the work to proceed unhindered, it was necessary to rope off a rectangle well outside the area being investigated. We were also indebted to the help of the District Officer of Kuala Langat, Enche Suleiman bin Mohd. Don, and the Penghulu of Kampong Sungai Lang in maintaining order and the security of the site.

The excavation proceeded in two adjacent square cuttings with sides of ten feet. Each cutting was dug in turn to the surface of the underlying
mangrove mud which was archaeologically sterile. As the peat layer was gradually removed to its point of contact with the mangrove mud, a segment of a circle, marked by differences of colour and texture, was revealed on the floor of the first cutting (Fig. 2). This was clearly part of the boundary of the original mound, thus establishing indubitably that the latter was man-made.

Owing partly to disturbance caused by cultivation and partly to the positioning of the squares in relation to the mound, neither cutting was able to show adequately the stratigraphical context of the mound. It was important to ascertain at what stage in the deposition of the two main soil layers at the site the drums had been interred and the mound constructed. It was with the aim of acquiring this
data that the final phase of the excavation was undertaken. This consisted of a trench forty-eight feet long and three feet deep arranged to cut roughly diametrically across the site. As soon as the walls of the trench had been cleaned, we were delighted to see the profiles of the outer edges of the mound quite clearly on both sides. From these it was immediately apparent that the mound had been heaped up on the mangrove mud surface before the area had been colonized by peat swamp forest and the peat layer had commenced to form (Fig. 3).

The separate items of information which accumulated as the excavation progressed can now be fitted together into an overall composite picture. We found that at a time when the mangrove was declining and yielding its place to a peat swamp forest and the district was probably relatively open
and easy of access, two bronze drums of Dong-s'on type had been buried in an inverted position in the centre of a circular mound which reconstructed measurements suggest had been some fifteen feet in diameter and about three feet six inches high. The wooden plank on which the drums had stood was about six feet six inches long as excavated but had been longer since both ends were broken. It was oriented on a north east to south west line. The upper surface had been worked with an adze, the marks of which could still be seen, to produce a slightly concave section. The lower surface on the other hand had been severely battered and worn. It is tempting to see the plank as the remains of the bottom of a dug-out canoe. The identification of the wood as chengai by the Forest Research Institute at Kepong lends strong support to this interpretation. If we are right, then the canoe was probably of the type with a strong one piece dug-out bottom and separately attached side strakes (Plates 4 and 5).

Before the earthen mound was piled up over the canoe with its precious cargo of drums, several pottery vessels were disposed round it, perhaps containing offerings of food and drink. A total of ten pots, or in some cases nests of pots, were located and are lettered A—J in the accompanying plan. All the vessels were badly broken and had no doubt been crushed soon after their burial by the weight of the dense mangrove mud of which the mound was made. Fortunately several large sherds were recovered and these will enable reliable reconstructions of some of the pottery vessels to be made. Underneath one of the pots were found large numbers of small opaque glass beads of a terracotta red colour. These had either been strung as a necklace, or, conceivably, had been used to decorate a ring stand for the pot which, being made of some perishable material, had long since mouldered away.

Most of the pottery was of the same highly distinctive type. The paste, usually greyish in colour and fairly soft, had been carefully smoothed and finished with a lacquer-like coating of some organic substance resembling damar. This coating possessed a high gloss and ranged through various shades of reddish-brown in colour. One or two fragments showed traces of a simple decoration consisting of a horizontal band of white paint just below the rim. As far as it is possible at this stage to discuss the shapes of the vessels, these seem to have been
uniformly ovoid with rounded bases and unusually wide sharply everted lips.

The two bronze drumheads were in an excellent state of preservation, thanks no doubt to their being well sealed in by the dense compact mud. One measured just over fourteen inches in diameter and the other slightly less than eighteen inches. The larger drumhead was also the more elaborately decorated of the two. Arranged round a central twelve-pointed star were bands containing motifs belonging to the typical Dong-s’on repertoire: a dentate pattern, circles with a central dot linked by tangents, a ‘ladder’ pattern, a zoomorphic design (probably birds standing with wings folded), conventionalised birds in flight and a final band composed of two rings of the ‘ladder’ pattern separated by tangent-linked circles (Plate 7). Round the edge of the drumhead were arranged four bronze frogs in the round each covered with geometrical designs (Plate 6). In the band containing the flying birds were two motifs shown in detail in Plate 7. This pattern, not commonly seen on Dong-s’on drums, is almost duplicated on one of the drums excavated at the classic site of Dong-s’on itself.

The smaller drumhead had an outer zone of decoration identical to that of its companion, a wide band of flying birds and three rings comprising the ‘ladder’ pattern, tangent-linked circles and dentate pattern disposed concentrically round the central ten-pointed star (Plate 2).

The hollow metal bodies of the drums were certainly of the form re-
ferred to in the literature as Heger’s Type I. This is essentially a shape composed of three conjoined sections: a hemisphere linked by a central cylinder to a base in the form of a truncated cone. Each drum was provided with two pairs of diametrically opposed metal loop handles decorated with a pattern resembling a plaited rope and cast integrally with the upper hemispherical section.

It is interesting to note that the upper part of the hemispherical section of the smaller drum had been perforated by a number of square holes arranged in two approximately alternating rows (Plate 8). The writer has observed similar square holes in the tympanum of the bronze drum found at Batu Pasir Garam on the Sungai Tembeling. These had been subsequently plugged with a soft metal alloy. More recently he noted a similar pattern of square holes in the

Plate 5. A closer view of the plank on which the drums had rested, after excavation. A group of potsherds which had made up Vessel G. are in the background.
upper part of a complete bronze drum preserved in the National Museum at Bangkok. Mr. Chin You Di of the Thai Fine Arts Department remarked that there are traditions among the hill peoples of Thailand to the effect that the holes are cut to commemorate the deaths of important men of the tribe. Conventionally, however, the holes are interpreted as ritually ‘killing’ the drum before its interment. It also seems plausible that the holes have a more pragmatic function connected with the tuning of the drums.

Why were the bronze drums buried with such ceremony in the mound at Kampong Sungai Lang? Their interment was no chance matter, but elaborately planned. Moreover, they must have been objects of considerable economic value, highly prized by their owners and not to be lightly consigned to the soil. It would be natural to assume that the mound with its contents was a grave, presumably of an important personage. However, despite a careful, expectant watch throughout the excavation, not a trace of skeletal remains, human or animal, was found. The conditions in the mound were ideal for the preservation of organic substances, as witnessed by the survival of the wooden plank. Human remains had they existed would certainly have left recognizable vestiges. It is of course possible that the drums themselves had formed urn-like receptacles for the ashes of cremation, or even perhaps the remains of secondary burial. It is certainly odd that the drums should have been buried upside down. Had this been the case, however, one would have expected some traces, in the form of partially calcined bones and teeth, to have been unearthed when the small-holder first dug into the mound. These are not likely to have escaped the excavators’ attention when the loose surface soil was sieved.

Other alternative explanations are possible. The people of the drums were certainly coast-dwellers who probably relied on the sea for an important part of their living. Examples are not lacking from modern seafaring peoples, both primitive and civilized, of otherwise normal funeral rites being performed to commemorate the deaths of those lost at sea. It is certainly not outside the realms

of possibility that the drum mounds represents the symbolic or surrogate funeral of an important member of the tribe lost at sea while on a fishing or trading expedition.

Again, one cannot overlook the fact that the drum mound may have no connexion whatever with death and funerary ritual. Among the Lamet tribe of Laos bronze drums of a type similar to those excavated at Kampong Sungai Lang are obtained by trade from neighbouring peoples and are objects of very great spiritual value and real economic worth. The drums are only brought out to celebrate certain festivals and are kept buried in secret places when not in use\(^\text{10}\). The Kampong Sungai Lang mound may conceivably have been just such a secret hiding place.

On the question of dating, it has to be admitted that the objects themselves offer few clues on which to base chronological arguments. The drums are fundamentally of the same type as those found at Klang and Batu Pasir Garam and we have seen how uncertain is the dating of the latter. The terracotta red beads belong to a category which has been found associated with other bead types in the granite cist graves. These have been dated by Beck to the period 1—400 A.D. At Kampong Sungai Lang, however, we were fortunate in that circumstances lead to the preservation of substantial quantities of wood. Samples of this have been sent for radio-carbon analysis which we have every reason to hope will yield a date for the site with a degree of preciseness still rare in Malayan archaeology.

The stratigraphical position of the mound, standing on the mangrove mud surface and buried under some three and a half to four feet of peat, was clearly established. Professor Duncan Poore of the Department of Botany in the University of Malaya who examined sections during the final phases of the excavation said that it would not be unreasonable to suppose that such a peat layer had taken between 700 and 900 years in its formation. Certainly accurate figures based on radio-carbon dates now available for peat formation in other parts of Malaysia would support such an estimate. Such estimates, however, must be treated with reserve for it has to be recognized that many variable factors are involved and rates of deposition need not necessarily be uniform.

The association at the Kampong Sungai Lang site of bronze drums, pottery with a lacquer-like coating of organic origin, beads and the socket of

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an iron implement is highly significant. Recorded here for the first time from a controlled excavation, the fact lends strong support to the idea of close links between the various vestiges of early metal-using cultures in Malaya hitherto only separately reported. The beads are of a type well-known from the granite cist graves. Pottery with a coating of organic origin has been found in cist graves in Southern Perak\textsuperscript{11} and in association with a hoard of iron implements of tulang mawas type found at Klang in 1948\textsuperscript{12}. Finally the occurrence of the socket of an iron implement at Kampong Sungai Lang is most important. While the object is too corroded and broken to allow reconstruction of its original form, it is precisely the possession of a socket which serves to set apart the iron tulang mawas as a group and distinguish them from more modern iron implements which are normally tanged.

It is now known that the drum mound is not the only site in the vicinity of Kampong Sungai Lang. Soon after the excavation was completed, another mound, unfortunately very badly disturbed and situated partly under a house in the kampong, was reported. From this mound came two beautiful bronze bowls with a simple linear pattern scratched on their surfaces, several beads of rock crystal and one of carnelian and sherds of the characteristic coated pottery. Other localities producing pottery and beads have been noted within the kampong. All this adds greatly to the already overwhelming evidence of the importance of the west coast during the period of the early metal-using cultures and strengthens the contention that cultural influences came from Indonesia during this phase of Malaya’s prehistory.

There is good reason to suppose that the Klang River delta region still has much to yield of great archaeological interest. An intensive archaeological exploration of the area is to be initiated and it is confidently expected that many new facts will emerge to throw welcome light on Malaya’s past.


Plate 9. Side view of the larger Drum head.

POSTSCRIPT

After this article had been completed the results of one of the radio-carbon analyses, processed by the Geochron Laboratories Inc. of Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A., has been received. The sample gave an age of 2435 ± 95 years, that is to say c.485 B.C. This date is considerably earlier than had been anticipated and further corroborative evidence including the results of the second sample which is being analysed in Japan must be awaited before it can be accepted without reservation.