Excavation of the Harimau Cave, South Sumatra: New discoveries and perspectives

The Ogan Komering Ulu (OKU) Regency in South Sumatra, Indonesia, is one of the most important regions for understanding the prehistoric human occupation of island Southeast Asia. Archaeologists have recorded more than 60 sites in the OKU region, spanning the Paleolithic to early Metal Age periods. One of the most significant locales, now the subject of intensive ongoing research, is Harimau Cave ("Tiger Cave"). Recent excavations at this large and deeply stratified limestone cave have unearthed remarkable and impressive discoveries, including at least 66 human burials dating to the Neolithic period and onwards, and assigned on the basis of biological characteristics to early Austronesian-speaking peoples—Indonesia’s first farming communities.

The quantity and diversity of burials at Harimau provides us with crucial information about prehistoric Austronesian mortuary systems, as well as various “bio-cultural” facts about these ancient populations. Excavations have also produced abundant assemblages of stone and bone tools, pottery, faunal remains and other traces of human activity that shed new light on the cultural behavior and lifeways of the cave dwellers, and emphasise the site’s varying uses as a habitation and burial place and a “workshop” for tool-making activities. For example, metal artefacts (bronze and iron) from the uppermost deposits occur both as burial gifts or isolated finds and confirm our assumption about the increasing complexity of the Austronesian world during the protohistoric period. In addition, our recent research has recorded previously unknown cave paintings in Harimau—a key discovery given the long-standing belief that rock art traditions did not exist in prehistoric Sumatra. While the identity of the image-makers is still in doubt, based on similarities between the ancient rock art and pottery decorations (i.e., chevron and fish bone motifs) it can be surmised that the paintings date to the Neolithic period. As a final note, our excavations have also revealed evidence of a deeper and potentially far older history of occupation at Harimau Cave—thus opening up new avenues of research into Sumatra’s scarcely explored Late Pleistocene record of human settlement.