Megaliths

The centre of Borneo is rich in megalithic monuments. There are many different types, including standing stones, stone mounds, dolmens, slab-graves, and rock-art. So far over 35 have been documented in the Upper Kelapang area, and more remain to be discovered.

Some megaliths are said by the Kelabit to have been made at iau feasts, held at secondary funerals until the 1940s to commemorate prominent people. Others are said to be burial monuments.

**Batu Saruped (Standing Stones)**

Standing stones often occur in pairs: one tall and straight and the other shorter and pointed. They are said to represent a married couple and are paralleled with the twin-peaked mountain Batu Lawi, which is said once to have been a couple. The tradition of erecting stones in honour of the dead during iau feasts continued until the 1940s.

Aryl Panak (Telatu Ulu) from Pa’ Bangar standing by the batu saruped at Meratoh Semboro

The age and origins of the larger monuments, though, have been lost to folk knowledge. They are said to have been built by the ancestors in a time when people had supernatural powers. Many monuments are associated with mythical heroes who performed great deeds, which are described in the traditional songs.

**Batu Nariit (Rock Carvings)**

Rock carvings are found across the highlands. One of the most common motifs is a ‘spread-eagle’ human figure. The one on the front of this leaflet is located high up on a ridge close to the Ran’i Rawan pass.

The figures are sometimes said to commemorate successful headhunting raids. Some figures are holding the heads taken. There are also incised carvings of animals, mythical tigers, heart-shaped faces and seemingly abstract designs.

The Cultured Rainforest Project

The Cultured Rainforest Project investigated long-term and present-day interactions between people and rainforest in the Kelabit Highlands of central Borneo (Malaysian Sarawak), so as to better understand past and present agricultural and hunter-gatherer lifestyles and landscapes.

The project had three main strands:

**Anthropology** Studied oral histories and collected information on present-day relationships between people, the landscape, and the past as people remember or imagine it.

**Archaeology** Surveyed and excavated selected monuments to reconstruct the lives of people living in the highlands in the past.

**Palaeoecology** Analysed fossil pollen in sediment cores and from archaeological sites to document the long-term history of the rainforest and human impacts upon it.

The core study area was the Upper Kelapang valley. The fieldwork took place between 2007 and 2011, and was based mainly in and around the village of Pa’ Delah.

Acknowledgements and Further Information

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The Cultured Rainforest Project: long-term human ecological histories in the highlands of Borneo will be available from the Sarawak Museum and international bookstores.

[www.culturedrainforest.com](http://www.culturedrainforest.com) Leaflets, articles, view archive photographs, illustrations and audio-video recordings.
**Megaliths**

**Perapun (Stone Mounds)**

Perhaps the most impressive monuments in the highlands are the large mounds made from thousands of stones taken from a river bed. The mounds can be over 20 m across and 3 m high. They are found across the highlands and often occur as isolated monuments.

Stories say perapun were built by rich men or women who did not have heirs. To avoid a dispute over the inheritance, they had a big perapun built on top of their valuable gongs, beads and other possessions.

Excavations by the Sarawak Museum in the 1960s in a large perapun at Pa’ Lungan in the northern Highlands found much cremated animal bone. One piece has now been radiocarbon dated to about 2000 years old. Also found was local pottery and imported Chinese porcelain dating to the last 600 years, showing that the monument has been re-used and added to after it was first built.

At Long Keilt the Cultured Rainforest Project investigated a much smaller perapun. It had been disturbed in the past, probably by treasure hunters. Broken fragments of a 13-14th century Chinese bowl were found, but no evidence of a burial.

The perapun originally measured 3 m across by 1 m high and appears to be a smaller version of the much larger and older stone mounds.

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**The Cultured Rainforest Project**

**Megaliths of the Southern Kelabit Highlands**

Over 35 megaliths have been recorded in the southern Kelabit Highlands, and more are known to lie far from the present day villages.

Some monuments are isolated; some sites contain different types of monuments; and in some local areas many monuments are found close to each other.

At Pa’ Dailth there is a large perapun, four isolated batu nangan, a unique rock-cut shelf, and several memorial ditch cuttings (nabang).

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**Batu Nawl/Lungun (Stone Jars)**

In the southern Highlands there are four sites with a total of 64 large hollow, carved stone jars. One site, Pa’ Badong, was clearly very important as it has twice as many jars than any other cemetery, one carved with a human figure.

Until the 1940s, some of these sites were in use as cemeteries. Selected bones were placed inside the stone jars or inside Chinese ceramic jars or in wooden coffins – sometimes carved to represent a spirit tiger or befang – nearby.

Excavation at Long Dilat revealed small pieces of cremated human bone; one produced a radiocarbon date of 600 years old. It is possible that cremated bones were placed in the stone jars, though there is no oral history of cremation being practiced in the highlands.

**Batu Nangan (Stone Slabs)**

Batu nangan means ‘supported stones’. A large flat stone slab lies on top of standing stones or slabs forming a box or dolmen. Some are very large and would have needed many people to build. Eighteen batu nangan are recorded in the southern Highlands. They are found at stone jar sites and as single isolated monuments.

Some batu nangan have names, but it is not remembered who built them or when. They are believed to be burial monuments.

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**Megalithic sites of the southern Kelabit Highlands surveyed by the Cultured Rainforest Project 2007-2010.**

~ Help protect and preserve the cultural heritage of the highlands.

~ When visiting cultural sites act with respect.

~ It is illegal to disturb, damage, or remove material and cultural remains (Sarawak Cultural Heritage Act 1993).

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**None has been investigated, but they probably date, like the stone jars, to between 600 and 3000 years old.**

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Batu nangan in the midst of rice fields in Pa’ Dailth