

ROCK-CUT CHAMBERS ON THE EAST COAST OF SUMATRA:

A TRANSLATION AND REVIEW OF G.L. TICHELMAN'S *FELSENGÄNGE AN SUMATRAS OSTKÜSTE*,
WITH ADDITIONS AND AMENDMENTS



E. Edwards McKinnon
(with translation by Dieter Bartels)



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E. Edwards McKinnon is an Associate Researcher at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. He was born in the U.K and worked in Indonesia initially as a rubber planter in the Medan area from 1960, and subsequently as a forestry and development consultant. His research interests are art history and the archaeology of Sumatra, and he has conducted much research on early Indic and Sri Lankan relations with that island. He received his MA (1981) and Ph.D (1984) in Art History from Cornell University and his doctoral study of Kota Cina based on excavations there remains the key text on that site. He now resides in Bogor, West Java. Email: edmund.edwardsmckinnon@gmail.com

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The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang, Singapore 119614

TELEPHONE : (+65) 6870 4559

FAX : (+65) 6775 6264

E-MAIL : nsc@iseas.edu.sg

WEB : <http://nsc.iseas.edu.sg>

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Rock-cut Chambers on the East Coast of Sumatra: A Translation and Review of G.L. Tichelman's *Felsengänge an Sumatras Ostküste*, with Additions and Amendments

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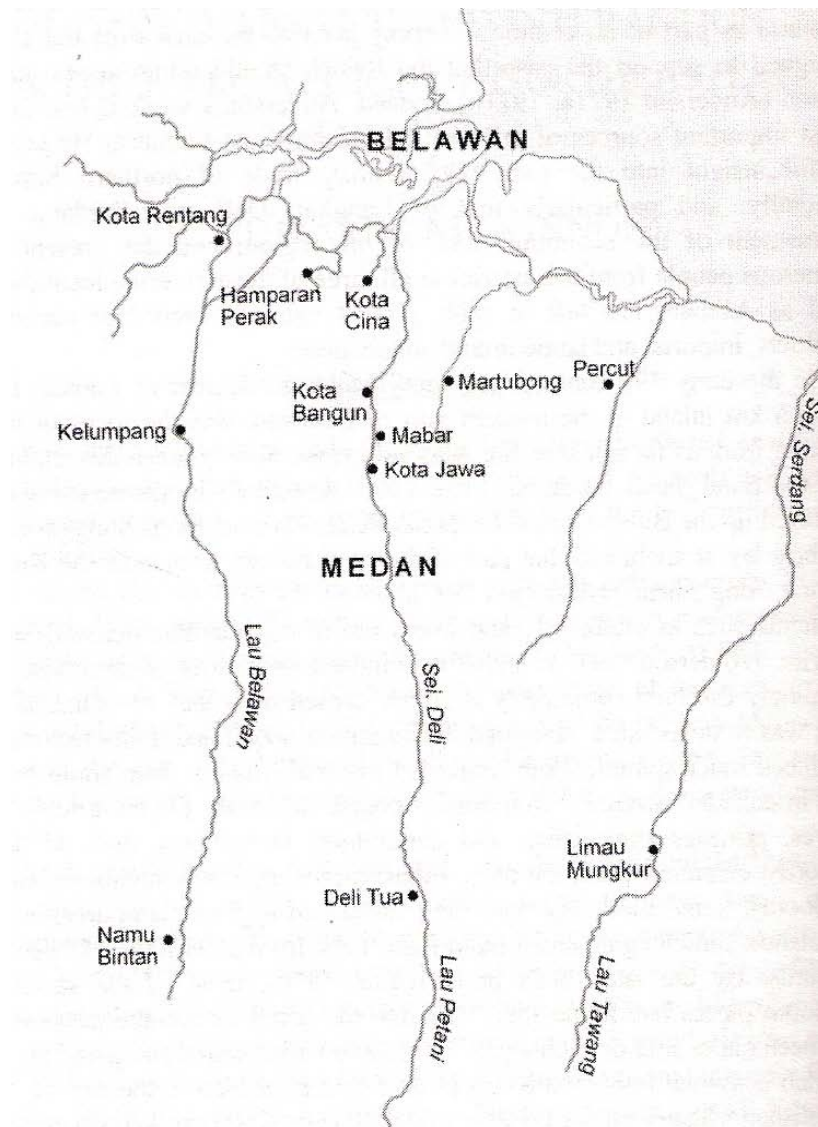
INTRODUCTION

A key but little-known text on the history of Sumatra is G.L. Tichelman's¹ "Felsengänge an Sumatras Ostküste," originally published in German in the journal *Paiduma* in 1939.² In this text, he examines the rock-cut chambers found on the east coast of Sumatra and for some distance inland. This article is provided in English translation below.

Having had an opportunity in the early 1960s and again in the early to mid-1970s to visit many of the locations mentioned by Tichelman, in this article I have updated the original data and, where appropriate, added annotations and amendments in the hope that these phenomena are still of interest. Tichelman's list included not only the so-called *rumah umang* or "houses of the *umang* or little people" (which in themselves varied in form and probable use), but also a number of natural caves and grottos. A number of new discoveries have been made since the compilation of Tichelman's inventory and, where possible, data on the more recent discoveries have been added to the list. Although the majority of the chambers appear in the Karo *dusun* areas of Deli Serdang and Langkat and on the Karo plateau, a number are also known from the Simelungun region.

¹ Gerard Louwrens Tichelman (1893-1962) was a government official in the Dutch East Indies and a historian. He wrote prolifically on a diverse range of historical and contemporary issues relating to the regions in which he worked.

² Originally published as "Felsengänge an Sumatras Ostküste," *Paiduma*, 1.4 (1939), pp. 179-191.

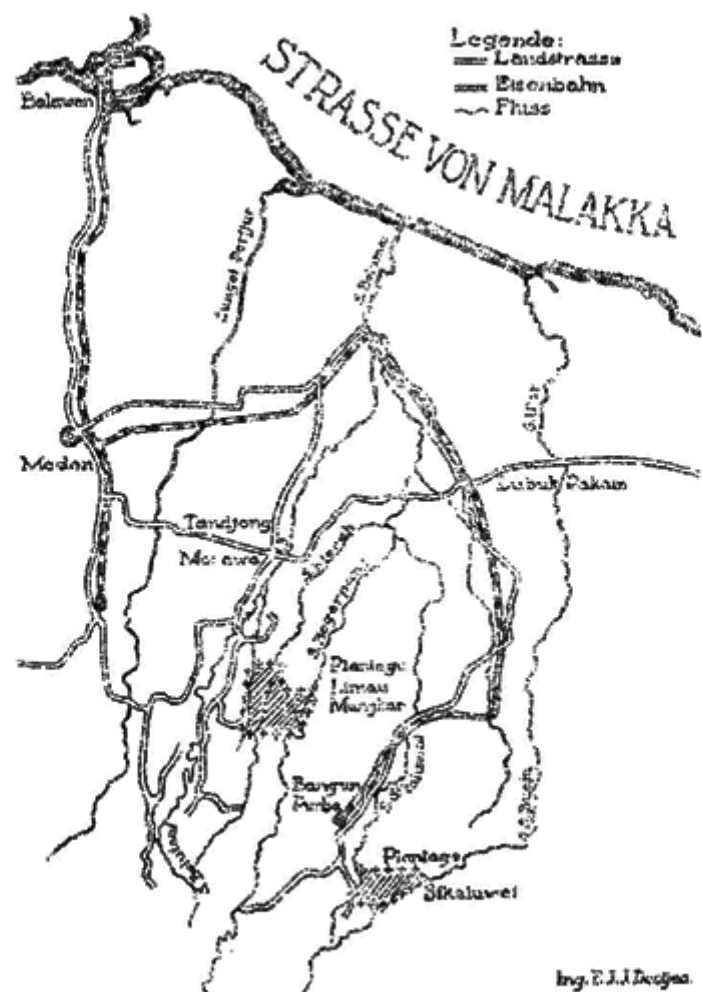
Figure 1. The Deli region (after Veth 1875)

Source: Map drawn by Sebastian Hageneuer for E. Edwards McKinnon, "Ceramics, Cloth, Iron, and Salt" In Dominik Bonatz et al. (ed.) *From Distant Tales: Archaeology and Ethnohistory in the Highlands of Sumatra* (2009). Fig. 6-1, p. 122.

My initial opportunity to visit the Limau Mungkur chamber came in 1961 when I was stationed on the Begerpang rubber plantation, east of Medan. This chamber, which is set high on the river bank on the west side of the Kali Tawang, is also accessible through Namu Rambei (Batu Lokong), a division of the Begerpang estate. It comprises a rock-cut tunnel with sections carved into the sides and roof in imitation of the interior of a wooden building.

A similar rock-cut chamber also exists at Sukaluwai. This was described in detail by Tichelman whose article included an area map showing the relationship of the chambers with local river systems running down to the coast on the Melaka Straits (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Tichelman's map showing the positions of the Limau Mungkur and Sukaluwai chambers relative to the Melaka Straits



Source: Tichelman, "Felsengänge an Sumatras Ostküste" (1939).

Yet another cave, upstream from the Limau Mungkur grotto on the Kali Tawang, which I visited in the company of four or five friends in 1961, is a natural cave formed in the volcanic tuff (Fig. 3). Access was from the river bank through a narrow tunnel. By then, the roof of the main chamber had collapsed and the air probably poisoned by a pocket of carbon

monoxide gas. Bats were, however, seen to be flying around in the rear of the cave. As the lights on our petromax lamps dimmed and we coughed and spluttered, we beat a hasty retreat to the entrance. Extreme caution is thus required for any further visits to this particular cave.

I will return to the discussion of these rock-cut chambers after the presentation of Tichelman's article.

Figure 3. Natural grotto: Exploration party in Limau Mungkur (1961)³



Although inhabited by bats, the interior of these caves contains pockets of carbon monoxide gas and they are thus dangerous to humans.

³ All photographs are by E. Edwards McKinnon, unless otherwise stated.

TRANSLATION OF TICHELMAN'S "FELSENGÄNGE AN SUMATRAS OSTKÜSTE" ⁴

Listing of reported rock chambers:

Location	Information regarding the chambers
Kuala Mencirim Plantation, Langkat	<i>Rumah umang</i> (dwarf's house): information from J.H. Neumann, missionary.
Nammo Trassi, Langkat	<i>Rumah umang</i> ; insignificant: information from J.H. Neumann, missionary.
Marijke Plantation, Langkat (20 km past Kuala)	Natural cave; ⁵ visited by Ir. G.E. Bekkering. ⁶ Series of underground water-formed tunnels.
Tributary of the Sungei Bohorok, on the border of the failed enterprise Timbang Rawang	This stream flows through a natural cave of some 1,800 m length; recorded on the topographical map: visited by Ir. G.E. Bekkering. Limestone, black marble, chalk formations. Indigenous (Karo) population did not dare to enter due to <i>hantu</i> (spirits or ghosts). Name: <i>Lobang Angin</i> . ⁷
Durian Tani	<i>Batu Kemang</i> . Literature: Hagen, <i>TvITLV</i> .XXVIII (1883), pp. 534-35, Plate II and p. 543. Westenberg, <i>BKI</i> 5, VII (1892), pp.233-34. E.J. van den Berg and J.H. Neumann: "De Batoe Kemang nabij Medan" in <i>BKI</i> 7. VI (1908), ⁸ pp.89ff. (with drawings and photographs). Dr. P.V. van Stein Callenfels "De Batoe Kemang" in: <i>Oudheidkundig Verslag</i> (1924), pp. 134ff. (with drawings and photographs). Reliefs on the outside. A <i>bindu matoga</i> figure at the entrance. According to Callenfels, the age of this monument is some five centuries and it is a Batak burial chamber. ⁹
Sukaluwai Plantation	<i>Rumah umang</i> : This was visited by Westenenk, who supposedly found a "Hindu" inscription on the cross-beam on the rear wall

⁴ The following pages contain Dieter Bartels' translation of Tichelman's article. At that time, Bartels was a graduate student at Cornell University's Southeast Asia Program. When necessary, some minor corrections in grammar and formatting have been provided by the author and editors of this Working Paper. Various new illustrations have also been provided. Please note that the "author" referred to in Bartels' translated text refers to the original author, Tichelman. Footnotes are provided by the present author.

⁵ Created by an impervious layer in the tuff through which the water could not penetrate. Narrow and slightly more than the height of a man.

⁶ Visited by E. Edwards McKinnon and companions, Erik Klinkhammer, Djunaedi and Poniman of Begerpang Estate in 1961.

⁷ There is the water course and the nearby sink-hole from which water vapour creates a cloud over the rocks. There is another large cave in close proximity to the gate or source of the stream. The sink-hole is referred to below as the Liang Mampiring.

⁸ Should be 1906 - EEM

⁹ Located in a durian forest on a steep slope some several hundred metres upstream above the bridge, on the left (nearside) bank of the river at Sembahe coming from Medan on the road from Pancurbatu to Berastagi, opposite the ascent to Sibolangit. I visited this monument in 1971 and again in 2010. I am unaware of the basis for van Stein Callenfels' dating but agree in suggesting that this monument is of Karo origin that could be anywhere from about 500 to 800 years old.

	which in the meantime has now been destroyed (information from the Acting Administrator of Batak Timor district at Bangun Purba). Also visited by Dr. van Stein Callenfels who also spoke of a Hinduistic origin (information from the manager of the concession, Mr Allison). Visited by Dr Voorhoeve and the author on 9 July 1937. According to the <i>Batakspiegel</i> , p. 20, the chamber was discovered in 1923.
Limau Mungkur Estate near Tanjung Morawa	<i>Rumah umang</i> : visited in 1923 by the Medan section of the <i>Natuurhistorische Vereeniging</i> (Natural History Association) under the leadership of J.H. Neumann. Frescoes (wall paintings). Visited by Dr. P. Voorhoeve and the author on 9 July 1937.
Cave at Limau Mungkur	A natural cave: Mr A. Roders gives an explanation of its origin in a letter addressed to Mr F.D. Kistenmaker dated 24 March 1932. Visited by Dr. P. Voorhoeve and the author on 9 July 1937.
Gunung Rinteh Estate, Senembah & Tanjung Muda	<i>Liang</i> , natural stalactite cave: comprises a large round hall, called a <i>türe</i> by the Toba Batak. Described in a report by Mr A.H. Doornick who was at the time Asst. Controller B.B. in Lubuk Pakam.
Tanjung Muda	There must here be a “bat cave” in which, according to the Acting Administrator of Batak Timor district, <i>pelor hantu</i> or ghost bullets are sometimes to be found.
Batu Lokong Estate	This borders on the Limau Mungkur concession. According to Mr Wagner, formerly the manager of Limau Mungkur, there is the possibility of yet another cave there. ¹⁰
Sarinembah	<i>Rumah umang</i> : located near to the bathing place at Sarinembah. Mentioned in <i>Batakspiegel</i> , p. 20. See also below.
Buluh Naman	<i>Rumah umang</i> :
Lingga	<i>Rumah umang</i> : reportedly now completely collapsed.
Raya	<i>Rumah umang</i> : of no particular significance.
Berhala	<i>Rumah umang</i> : not personally visited by Neumann.
Siberaya	<i>Rumah umang</i> : not personally visited by Neumann.

In the mountains,¹¹ according to information from Mr J.H. Neumann.

Location	Information regarding the chambers
Keriahen	<i>Rumah umang</i> :
Kuala	<i>Rumah umang</i> :
Rumah Gerat	<i>Rumah umang</i> :

¹⁰ This is probably a reference to the *rumah umang* at Limau Mungkur as it is also, as noted above, accessible from Batu Lokong. Tichelman referred to this location as “Batu Lökkung.”

¹¹ Although these chambers are noted as being “in the mountains” so are the above-mentioned chambers at Lingga, Raya, Buluh Naman and Siberaya, all of which are located on the Karo plateau.

Reports of Rock Chambers in Simelungun.

Location	Information regarding the chambers
Between Harangaol and Tongging, on Lake Toba	A natural cave?: Information from Pater F. van Duinhoven.
Sinundol, 2 km from Bah Pasunsang, Raya	<i>Liang na homin</i> : located on the path between Upper and Lower Raya, according to the Pengulu balei, Djaudin Saragih. The actual form of this chamber is unknown to the informant.
Near Nagori Dolok, in the forest	<i>Liang na homin</i> :
Bongbongan (Silau Kahean)	<i>Parporlokan</i> (bat cave): flushed out by water according to the informant Tuan Jan Kaduk, district chief of Raya Kahean.
Bah Gambir Estate	According to Mr. S. Siemelink, there are supposedly caves located on a river bank on the way to this small agricultural concession. They can only be reached through descending on <i>rotan</i> ropes. Nothing further is known about them.
Beribu Jawa, on the Sungei Belutu	Natural stalactite cave: information according to Mr. H.J. van der Mark.
Halombingan, Girsang Sipangan Bolon	"Sleeping place of the <i>homing</i> ": probably a natural cave.

Finally:

Location	Information regarding the chambers
Near Kuperas, Bohorok above the Wampu	<i>Liang Mampiring</i> : a very large cave, visited in 1900 by Búcking (Information from Dr J.H. Druif). ¹²
Near Rantau Prapat, Huta Godang	A little known (natural) cave: on the way from Perbaung to Sungei Rubai Bintai Julu.

* * *

According to Batak belief, these grottos and caves are inhabited by dwarf-like beings. These gnomes or goblins are called *homing* in Toba Batak, *homin* in Simelungun (Timor) Batak, *umang* or *kemang* in Karo and *omang* in Mandailing.

Stories can also be found elsewhere about the presence of dwarves. They should not, however, be confused with the *habonaran*, benevolent spirits which live in the open fields or in the forests. Nor should they be confused with the *begu salin salinan*, the malevolent

¹² The Liang Mampiring (sink-hole?) in an outcrop of Tertiary limestone should be discussed along with the Lobang Angin as both are close together on the edge of the former, but long-since abandoned, Timbang Rawang tobacco concession.

striped tiger which may sometimes appear in human form, but is hindered by his long tail. The latter is an enemy of man, while a *habonaran* is even helpful to an unfortunate soul who has lost his way in the dark rain forest, presenting him with gold or earthly goods. The *harbonaran* also, occasionally, comes into the villages in human form and lucky persons who possess a *tondi* (soul) and are worthy of presents are given cattle, gold and silver money. Unworthy people are said to unfailingly lose these presents again — the cattle run away, the Maria Theresa silver dollars (thaler) turn into useless sherds and the gold (*dorahim*, *dirham*) changes into slices of yellow *kurkuma* (turmeric) root.

The *homang* can appear malevolent when they feel that someone has taken advantage of them. The Batak say that their great grandparents and even their grandparents watched the activities of these stocky cave dwellers with great trepidation. Tradition unanimously confirms that the legs of these beings are reversed and that their feet point backwards. It is remarkable that the same anatomical deviation is also reported in all indigenous stories about the *orang pendek* (little people).

The mighty Simbolon mountain range is supposedly home to many *homang* dwellings, but it is only after these mysterious beings leave their homes permanently that the caves in the mountainsides become visible to ordinary people. From time to time, whilst working in his fields, a Batak farmer may hear the vague sounds of a *gondang* (a Batak orchestra) which are carried from the blue mountains in the far-off distance. Returning to his village, he will report that the *homang* are celebrating a feast and dancing (*manortor*).

The man-made rock chambers at Sukaluwai and Limau Mungkur have been investigated by Dr. P. C Voorhoeve and by the author.

The Sukaluwai chamber is located near the Suka Luwe rubber estate, (the name is also written “Suka Luwey”, “Suka Luwe” and even “Sika Luway”) which formerly belonged to the Central Serdang Plantation Company, and which is located some five kilometres south of the railway station at Bangun Purba, at 130 metres above sea level.

The Limau Mungkur “tunnel” is located at the edge of the rubber plantation of the same name belonging to the Senembah Corporation and is 88 metres above sea level. The estate can be reached from Medan through Tanjung Morawa. It is situated in the area of the Sungei Bahasa concession, about 20 kilometres south of Tanjung Morawa. Both concessions are located in the Serdang region. The distance between these two chambers is about 12 kilometres, as the crow flies, whilst the distance from the coast is some 38 kilometres at Sukaluwai, and 30 kilometres at Limau Mungkur.

The chambers can also be reached from the Toba plateau. A tortuous road leads down from Seribudolok, near the border between Simelungun and Tanah Karo, going over the Buaya pass. The road winds through *belukar* (secondary jungle), alongside foaming mountain streams and between rice terraces in uneven and sloping terrain. It allows, however, the occasional breathtaking view across forested hills and valleys down to the Deli plain. The road seems to be roughly aligned with the border between the Timor and the Karo Batak.

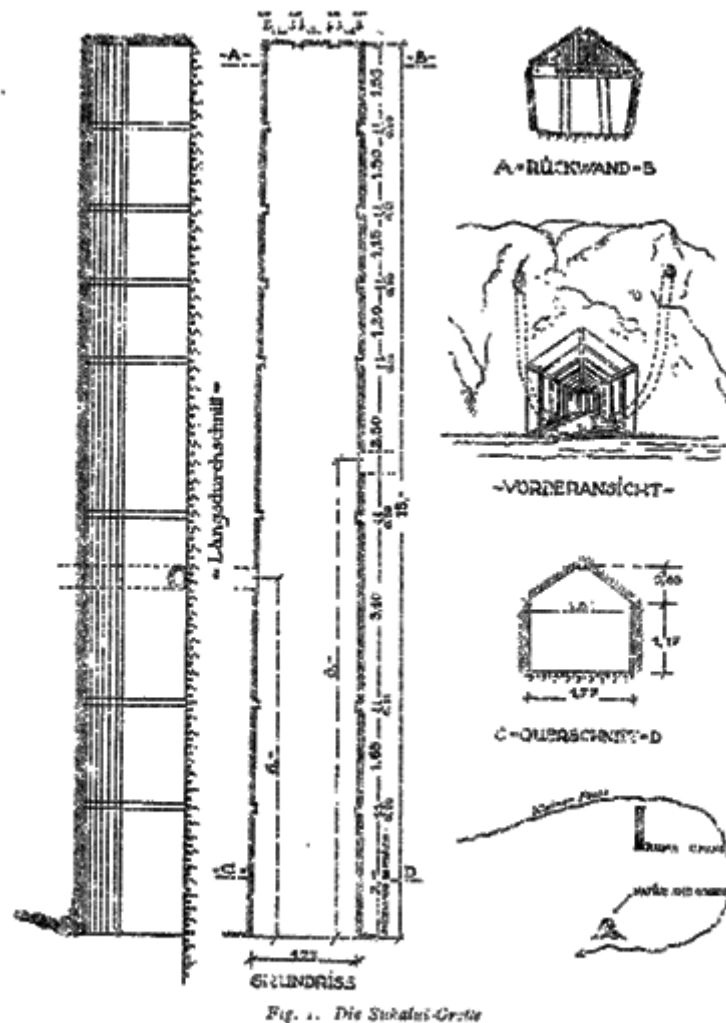
The old, but still vigorous *jaksa* (judge) Dja Aminudin Lubis, Acting Administrator of Batak Timor district, led us to the grottos. He himself is Mandailing by birth and used to work as a clerk for the well-known administrative official C.J. Westenberg. He also visited the Sukaluwei grotto with C.L. Westenenk at a time before the surrounding land was opened up for plantations.

Mr Allison, manager of Suka Luwai estate, also accompanied us to the cave situated in his concession. This cave is carved into the steep slope of a hill which is located on the bend of a former river. Immediately below the cave is a piece of level land planted with rubber. On the other side of the slope one can supposedly find a small natural grotto in the rock wall. Here, the shallow Sungei Buaya flows across large boulders, but it is not improbable that formerly the stream flowed at the foot of the slope into which the chamber is hewn. Indeed, everything points to it. The stream itself must often have changed its bed.

The cross-section of the 15-metre long chamber, which testifies to careful workmanship and has remained remarkably untouched, shows similarities to that of a Batak house. The

chamber was driven horizontally into the soft rock,¹³ 6 to 7 metres above the foot of the cliff. Uprights were carved out of the rock as if to support the rafters, the upper lateral beams and the connecting ridge pieces. At the rear wall, the cross beam rests on two mid-beams, on the centre of which is fastened the ridge joint which divides the pediment into two rectangular triangles, of which the right one exhibits nine vertical bands and the left one shows incisions reminiscent of a human face.

¹³ This is, of course, volcanic tuff from the dramatic Toba eruption of some 60,000 years BP which constitutes the bedrock of most of the east coast of Sumatra.

Figure 4. Ground plan of Sukaluwai grotto*Fig. 1. Die Sukaluwei-Grotte*

Ground plan of the Sukaluwai grotto, with cross-section, entrance view and location map.

Source: Tichelman, "Felsengänge an Sumatras Ostküste" (1939).

According to the judge's account, there used to be lettering on the upper cross beam which Westenank thought to be of Hindu origin. This "inscription" has been lost for it has crumbled away, or was perhaps destroyed.

One can get a clear picture of the grotto from the accompanying pictures, site plan and comparative scale ground and cross-section plans.

The work has been executed in imitation of the interior of a wooden building.¹⁴

The manager of Suka Luwai concession, Mr Allison, declared that Dr van Stein Callenfels who had visited these excavations, considered them to be of “Hindu” origin. One of the most obvious differences between the Sukaluwai chamber and the Batu Kemang -- also investigated by Dr van Stein Callenfels, and which he considered to be of Batak origin -- is the much greater depth of the former. Here, too, we find the same smooth, solid walls with relief pillars. The side walls diverge a few centimetres at the top.

The ridge piece, which runs the entire length of the chamber, protrudes somewhat more than the side beams and the upright posts which divided the side walls evenly on both sides into seven different sized panels. These range from 1.5 metres to 3.1 metres in width. On both sides of the entrance, parts of the wall surface have collapsed.

Figure 5. Sukaluwai: The entrance overlooking the Lau Buaya



The ridging on the walls and roof is clearly visible.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that there are very close similarities between these tunnel-like chambers and similar constructions in the Kerala and Tamil Nadu regions of southern India used by both Buddhist and Hindus.

Approximately midway towards the rear are openings in the rock near the floor on both the right and left sides of the chamber, which look like the apertures of chimneys. It is possible, however, that these apertures are natural phenomena due to the effects of water. The rock itself appears to be filled with a number of small cavities. This can be ascertained by the sound which can be heard when the rear of the right wall is tapped. A gap exists between the bottom edge of the carving on the rear wall and the present floor level which possibly indicates that the chamber was once filled with more soil than it is at the present time.

At the foot of the slope, under the entrance to the rock chamber, lie two large fragments of stone with flat edges, estimated to be 2.5 and 1.5 cubic metres in size. These stone fragments may formerly have closed up the opening. The good state of preservation of the Sukaluwai grotto stands out considerably compared with that of the Limau Mungkur cave which is already considerably weathered. It is therefore probable that the entrance of the Sukaluwai cave was originally closed off by the rock which has now fallen and split into two pieces.

The following legend about the “dwarf’s house” at Sukaluwai was current among the local population:

The chief (*perbapaan* or *penghulu*) of the village of Urung Ganjang that was situated on a high hill top near Sukaluwai, was, a long time ago, a most influential man in the region. He owned much property, houses, *ladang* [dry, unirrigated rice fields], and other assets. This man intended to extend his land holdings through the construction of new *sawah* in the river region of the Sungei Buaya. He therefore turned to the sovereign of the dwarf people who lived in the rock chamber above the river and asked him to construct the rice fields for him. The *raja umang* (king of the dwarves) pledged his assistance on the condition that the *penghulu* presented the dwarves with a white *kerbau* (buffalo) as a reward. This was to be done as soon as the irrigation ditches were dug and the *sawah* complex was completed along the side of the Sungei Buaya. The dwarf people planned to use the white *kerbau* for a great feast.

The *penghulu* accepted the condition and made a solemn promise to provide a white buffalo once the *sawah* were completed. The industrious dwarves then started the work and after some time the irrigation ditches were excavated and the *sawah* complex completely finished. The king of the dwarves then asked the *penghulu* to accept the fruit of their labour. The latter was fully satisfied with the work and immediately went in search of a white buffalo. The *penghulu* and his people spread their search to all point of the compass but nowhere could such an animal be found. The *penghulu*, anxious to fulfil his promise at any price, finally resorted to a ruse. A large, dark grey *kerbau* was whitewashed and then offered to the king of the dwarves as the promised reward for the construction of the new rice *sawah*. The dwarf king who was no fool, realised that he was being swindled and pleaded with the Almighty to punish the trickster. At that very moment the devastating breath of an irate deity swept over the land. A great storm sprang up. A violent rain storm poured down and the heavenly water completely washed off the whitewash from the body of the buffalo. The enraged king of the dwarves yelled out to the *penghulu* of Urung Ganjang, “*Lu tipu!*” (“You cheat!”). Quickly the swollen waters of the Sungei Buaya rose rapidly above its banks and all the newly-constructed *sawah* were completely flooded and the irrigation ditches caved in. The whole labour of the dwarf folk was completely destroyed.”

The local population still believe that no more *sawah* may be built in this place. They avoid the cave, which according to legend is guarded by an old *siamang* (gibbon), a morose and solitary creature. None of the local people hunt in the area surrounding this cave, for someone rash enough to disturb the peace of this place will undoubtedly be struck by bad luck -- he might kill his own hunting dogs or even be killed by his own bullet!

Through Bangun Purba, we journeyed to the Limau Mungkur concession. There, the 13.3-metre long chamber (Figure 7) is driven horizontally into the same kind of rock formation as the one at Sukaluwai and corresponds largely to the one already described. It is, however, in a greater stage of decay and more difficult to reach. The entrance is located in a steep cliff face about 25 metres above the Sungei Begerpang. The arrangement of the rear wall is

different. The triangular gable section rests on an intermediate post and the side walls diverge more at the top than the Sukaluwai chamber, namely by ten centimetres. The side walls are each divided into seven panels but are more even, with four compartments having a width of 1.80 metres and the others 1.73 metres, 1.76 metres and 1.83 metres respectively. The lower wall to the right of the entrance sweeps back above the threshold in the form of a segment of a circle. Only a little soil is to be found on the floor of the chamber. Along the edge of the chamber, the floor is somewhat elevated in places but the centre section is not excavated so that one cannot speak of a *talang* or gutter.

Here, too, it seems that the rock walls are very porous. It is possible that here also there was a chimney dug into the sides of the chamber, for on the left side, some four and half metres from the entrance, the wall has collapsed.¹⁵

Figure 6. Wall painting at Limau Mungkur

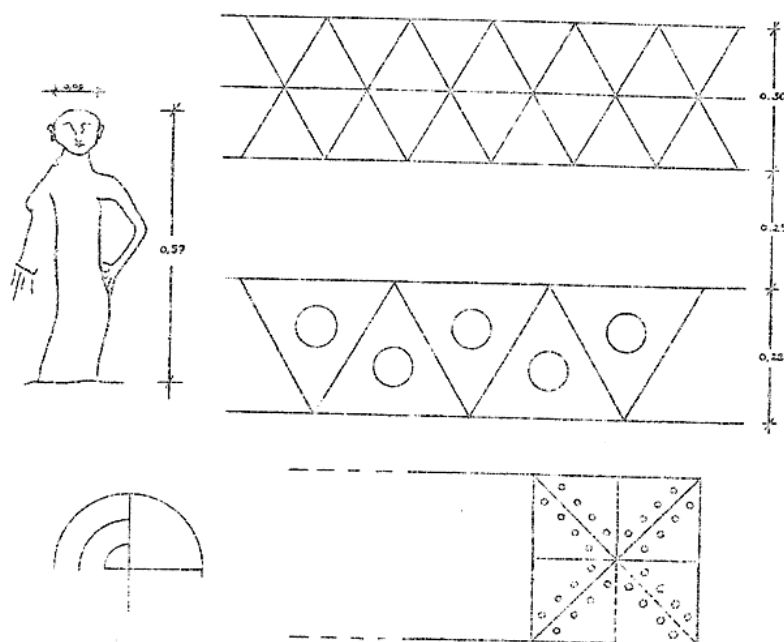


Fig. 2. Wandmalereien aus der Limau-Mungkur-Grotte

These sketches show wall decorations in the grotto at Limau Mungkur: to the left, an outline of a human figure; above and centre right, the triangular patterns drawn in red ochre and a square with diagonals and circles.

Source: Tichelman, "Felsengänge an Sumatras Ostküste" (1939).

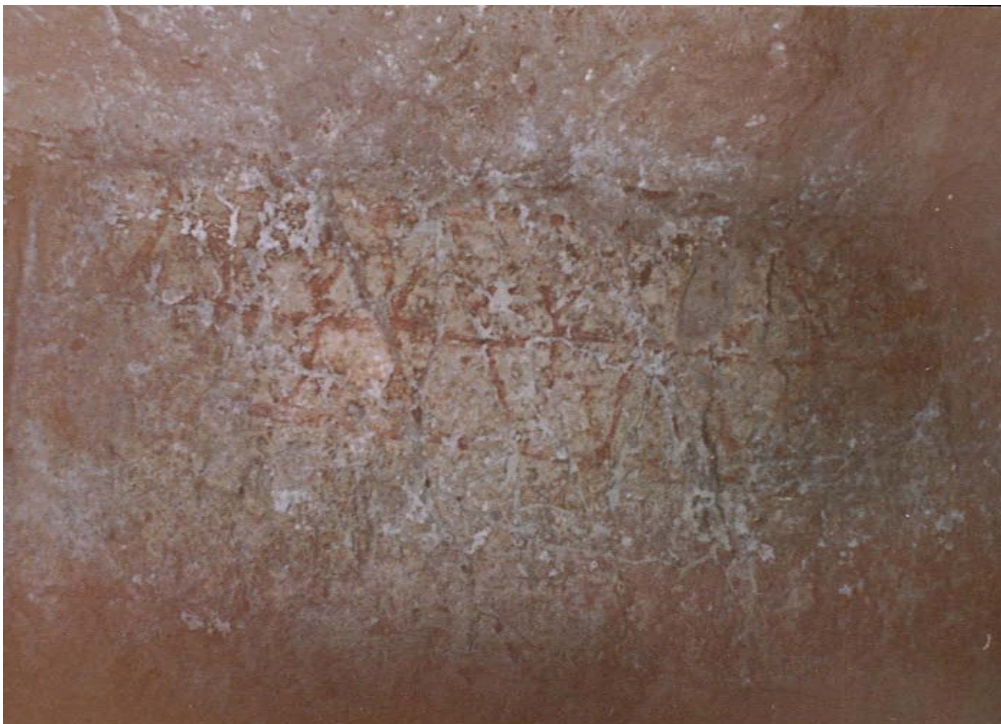
¹⁵ This would actually appear to have been a natural feature due to a small channel in the rock.

Figure 7. The Limau Mungkur (Batu Lokong) grotto



The Limau Mungkur (Batu Lokong) grotto in 1972 showing its seriously deteriorated condition. Illegal excavations had damaged both the walls and the floor. The “ridging” of the various panels is still, however, visible on the right of the picture.

Figure 8. Limau Mungkur wall decorations



Wall decorations: The angular, double triangle patterns were painted directly onto the rock using red ochre. Suns, moons and human figures were, according to Tichelman, also visible at one time.

Figure 9. Entrance to a natural grotto upstream of the rock-cut chamber at Limau Mungkur, explored in 1961



Access to this grotto is at stream level on the left bank of the Kali Tawang. The passage-way acts as a drain for the interior.

In some places on the wall surfaces at the entrance of the chamber, various designs painted in a reddish brown colour as well as painted figures (Fig. 8) can be found. These drawings have, however, suffered heavily through deterioration and erosion. The present-day population cannot tell anything about these figures except that they were “made with blood”! Indeed the red ochre colour makes one think of blood.¹⁶ The significance of these figures remains unexplained. We find, amongst others, the crude depiction of a human figure and what is presumably a sun disc.

It is clear that, in the case of these rock chambers, we are dealing with an imitation of the interior of a dwelling house. This would have been, as pointed out by Dr van Stein Callenfels, in his above-mentioned treatise on the Kemang burial chamber, “completely superfluous, if it had been actually used for living”. These chambers are not the least suited for living chambers. Besides, not the slightest trace can be found of people ever having lived in them. The concept of a dwelling house as the last resting place for the bodily remains of a beloved dead person, i.e., the idea of what remains, versus that which escapes and slips away to the

¹⁶ Haematite, an iron-based (Fe) mineral useful for colouring is common in east Sumatran soils.

next world, can be found everywhere and at all times. In the Batak lands, the bones of a venerated corpse are put into a stone coffin which resembles a house. Even today, a monument which looks like a house is erected above the grave of esteemed and great persons.

There is, apparently, little doubt that these chambers served as mass graves, presumably for corpses of the respected dead. One should think that such a cave was excavated at an appropriate time, when a convenient location was found. One by one, the burials were made so that the completion of the separate "living compartments" coincided with the body length of the deceased.

If the chimneys of these chambers were not naturally but artificially excavated, the probable intention was to create an exit for the souls of the dead from the sealed-up burial chamber. It is furthermore quite remarkable that not only are the interiors of both chambers similar, but that they occupy similar positions -- that is, overlooking a river -- an intention that perhaps dates back to the common megalithic conceptional associations between water and death.¹⁷ The stream leading to the land of the dead is a universal conception and these graves¹⁸ were probably meant to be part of a magico-religious conception about the abode of the deceased on the river of death.

Dr P. Voorhoeve has sent illustrations of two recently-discovered *rumah umang* (dwarves' houses) which were found together with five other dwarves' dwellings near the village of Singa Manik, located on the way from Kabanjahe (Tanah Karo) to Kutacane (Aceh). The steep bank of the small stream into which these chambers are hewn is known to the local people as the Lau Sira-sira. According to the Protestant missionary Neumann, it is a tributary of the Lau Biang. The name Lau Sira-sira cannot be found on any topographical map. Two of

¹⁷ This could, perhaps relate to somewhat later but similar beliefs. The death ceremony of the Karo Sembiring Sinyombak septs involved setting adrift the remains of their deceased in earthenware pots set upon specially constructed death ships which were then all placed on bamboo rafts and ultimately pelted with rocks.

¹⁸ Ossuary would probably be a better term. The Karo word for the special skull houses constructed for the skulls of the dead is *greten*.

the photographed chambers could only be hastily visited near sundown as the Karo who accompanied Dr Voorhoeve were afraid because of the approaching darkness.

One of the photographed rock chambers is circular, with a height of 1.5 metres and a diameter of 2 metres. The second chamber is rectangular. It has a moulding on the upper part of the side walls. The ceiling vault of this rectangular rock-cut chamber gives the impression that it was cut out at a later date. The depth is estimated at 7 metres with a width of some 2.5 to 3 metres. The direction in which these chambers were cut into the rock varies. For these chambers, a location has also been chosen on a more or less steep slope above a stream.

Finally, Dr Voorhoeve visited a chamber near Nagori Dolok in the Silau Kaeen area of Dolok Silau district. This grotto is a true dwarf's house (*rumah umang*), or in the language of the Simelungun region *liang na homin*, located not more than 100 metres away from the main road. It is only some 200 metres from the district office with its opening facing towards the main road. If there were no trees, this cave could be seen from the road.

The cross section of the Nagori Dolok chamber is pentagonal, exactly as that of the Sukaluwai chamber. The width at ground level is 1.7 metres, the height of the side walls is 1.1 metres, and the slanted edges of the ceiling are 0.9 metres and 0.95 metres in length. A protruding ridge piece is situated in between the slanting ceiling sections, measuring approximately 10 centimetres wide and 5 centimetres deep. The depth of the chamber is approximately 7 metres. The far end appears as though it was only recently excavated. The marks of a *tajak* (hoe) with a 6 to 7-centimetre wide cutting edge can be seen very distinctly. It could not, however, be ascertained if this chamber was reworked in the recent past or if it had been sealed up tightly for a long time and consequently preserved in excellent condition. The *Wakil* (Acting Regent) of Nagori Dolok told us that he was already a grown up when the people first discovered and entered this grotto during a search for a lost child.

I also received another report from Dr Voorhoeve about a dwarves' house (*rumah umang, ruang ni homin*) which he visited on 12 and 20 April 1939. It is located below *Parbutaran* on the right (eastern) bank of the Bah Boluk river, in the Besar Maligas area of Tanah Jawa, Simelungun regency. His report is as follows:

"The district chief had been given prior notice and had arranged that a comfortable path was prepared for climbing down into the ravine and then leading under the cliff face into which the chamber is carved. Before reaching the rock chamber, we passed an "abri sous roche" (linga) which appeared to have been man-made or at least retouched by man. A bamboo scaffolding with a ladder had been erected in front of the chamber, in order that we might comfortably survey and measure the chamber's interior as well as examine and photograph the reliefs situated on both sides of the cave.

The walls and floor are worked smooth. The floor was covered with a thin layer of bat droppings which had been removed at the second visit. The shape of the entrance points clearly to the fact that it must once have been sealed with a rectangular-shaped stone in exactly the same manner as that of the now-collapsed chamber overlooking the small Bah Dalu river near Parbutaran, from where the rock seal was supposedly brought to Pematang Siantar.

On the right (south) side of the entrance is situated a human figure in high relief which if viewed from the side is in a sitting position with its legs crossed in the so-called *sila* position. The head, on which the eyes etc., can be differentiated is full-face, the arms are two parallel upward-pointing arcs on which the fingers can easily be recognised. This figure is 1 metre in height, measured diagonally from forehead to buttocks. To its right is an indistinct form which probably represents a small bird. Above stands a large, heron-like bird 1.42 metre in height, measuring 0.77 metre from breast to tail. To the left of the entrance (north), above a collapsed portion of the chamber can still be recognised traces of the upper half of a human figure. Higher up still, and a little more to the left can be seen a very roughly executed

figure of a woman with large breasts and fin-like legs. Below is yet another very blurred relief, perhaps also a human figure or possibly a *waran* or large lizard.”¹⁹

Mr Westenberg, manager of the Mayang plantation, told me that in the Karo Batak lands, tiny gold rings are sometimes found, much too small to even fit even the little finger. The Karo attribute these rings to the same dwarf people (*umang*) who are also believed to have constructed the rock chambers.

According to Mr A. Dirks, Assistant Resident of the Simelungun Regency and the Karo lands, “the form of this (Bah Boluh) chamber is identical to several rock-cut burial chambers among the Toraja.” The latter, however, are always found clustered together, but the reliefs are never found there. The rock from which this chamber is cut is so soft that it can hardly be called rock. For the information of future visitors, it should be mentioned that a little human head was carved into the rock on the path by the labourers who repaired the path for us in order to kill time.

On the spot where the path leads down to the ravine, a small old altar was located. According to the local people, the latter has no connection with the cave but was the site of an offering made by the owner of a *ladang* in connection with an oath.

The people who made these chambers must have been skilled stone carvers. The stone sculptures of the Batak golden age, of which a number of more or less beautiful pieces still bear witness, probably originated from their artistic hands.

From among the extremely heterogenous products of sculptural art in the Bataklands can be differentiated megalithic elements of style, a relationship with the Dongson culture, linguistic traits and Islamic influence. Older and younger cultural strata thus continue side-by-side in Batak art.

¹⁹ This might possibly represent *boraspati*, a decorative device (*gerga*) representing Jupiter in the Buddhist and Hindu pantheons and formerly often woven into the sides of traditional Karo houses.

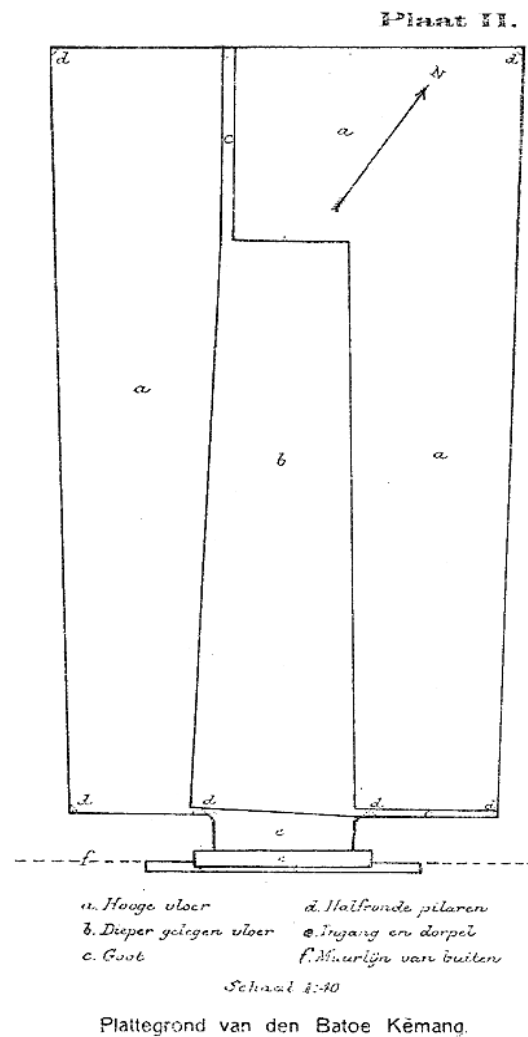
Marco Polo's comments about the cave burials of bones devoured by their own tribal brothers in the pagan state of Dagroian, by which he may possibly have meant the Batak region²⁰ should not remain unmentioned. The bones are said to have been laid down in rock-cut chambers in artistically worked boxes, or were hung up in beautiful small baskets, safe from man and animal and other disturbing influences. In all probability, the above-mentioned burial chambers were built by earlier generations of the present Batak population, before they were finally pushed back inland and therefore condemned to cultural sterility, and while they still felt the fecund influence of interchange with other cultures. Perhaps they were made during the rule of the mighty (Karo) Batak state of Aru, of which we have no particulars whatsoever. This state, which was no less important than Pasai or Melaka, was situated in Aru bay.²¹ In the sixteenth century, it is said to have been at its zenith, when its northern borders reached to Aceh and in the south to the Johore settlements on the banks of the Rokan river. In the second part of the sixteenth century, Aru was destroyed by Aceh and the population retreated deep into the interior.

It is difficult to establish the age of these burial chambers with any precision. It seems possible, however, that they are of the same age as the Batu Kemang chamber, which was estimated by Dr van Stein Callenfels to be about five to six centuries old.

(End of "Felsengänge an Sumatras Ostküste" Translation)

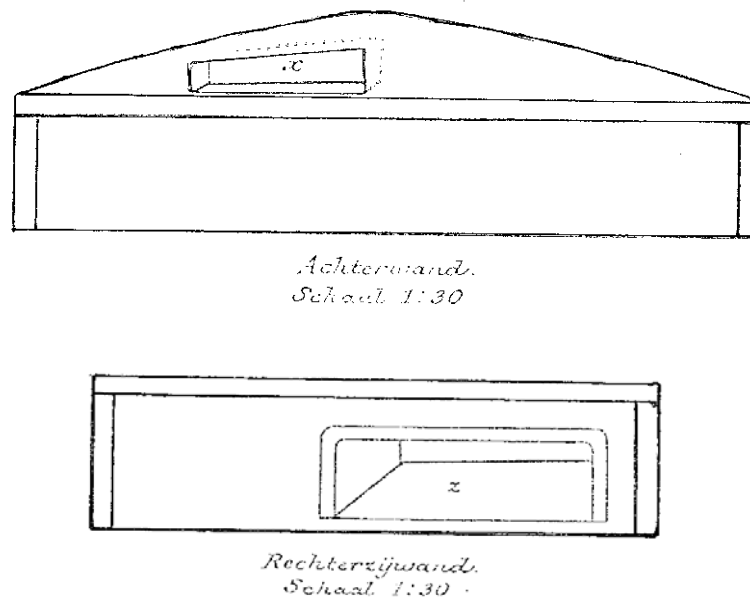
²⁰ See Col. Sir H. Yule, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, London: 1928; and L.F. Benedetto, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, London: 1937.

²¹ This is unlikely. Aru was almost certainly centred in the Deli region. A major medieval settlement has been identified at Kota Rentang, a short distance from Hamperan Perak which has revealed evidence of both pre-Islamic and early Islamic settlement. Kota Rentang appears to have been abandoned in the early sixteenth century — at the time when Aru was first overrun by Aceh in 1539. Aru Bay was, however, an anchorage during the Achenese expansion down the east coast of Sumatra in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Figure 10. Batu Kemang's ground plan

This sketch shows the interior layout of Batu Kemang comprising an entrance, drain and raised platform. Legend (Scale 1:40): a) Raised floor b) Lower floor c) Drain d) Semicircular pillars e) Entrance and f) Line of outer wall (of rock).

Source: Van den Berg & Neumann "De Batoe Kemang, Nabij Medan" (1906)

Figure 11. Cross sections of the ossuary at Batu Kemang

These sketches show the cross section of the ossuary within the Batu Kemang boulder.
Source: Van den Berg & Neumann, "De Batoe Kemang, Nabij Medan" (1906)

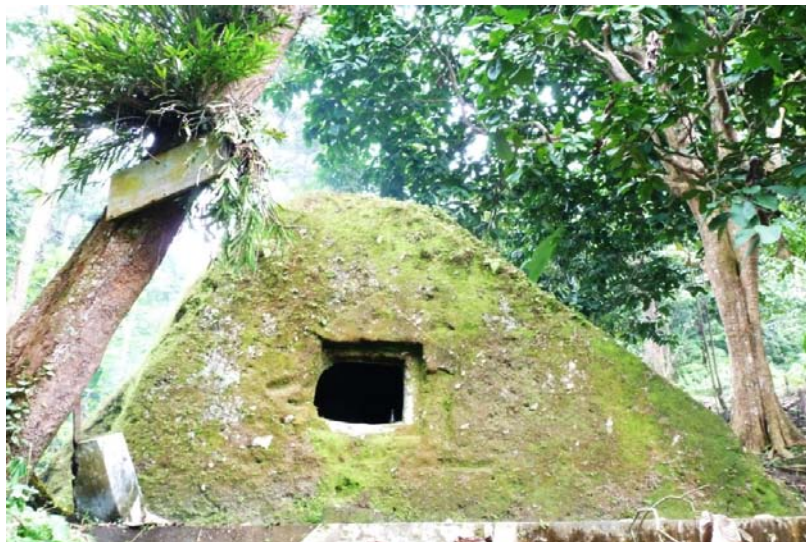
Figure 12. Batu Kemang: Front View

Figure 13. Batu Kemang: Rear view showing figure in relief



Figure 14. Batu Kemang: Side view showing second figure in relief



Figure 15. Batu Kemang: Interior view showing raised platform, rectangular cut-away section and gutter



DISCUSSION

Considerable advances have been made in understanding the early history of the east coast region of Sumatra since the above article was written. Important medieval sites such as Kota Cina, Pulau Kompei and Kota Rentang which straddle the pre-Islamic and early Islamic phases of local history, have been recognised and in part excavated, yielding information not available to earlier researchers.

It is now some 70 years since Tichelman published his article. New chambers have been discovered and known sites damaged or destroyed. The majority appear to be in and around the Karo plateau, with numerous others in what was known as the *dusun*, or lowland areas formerly occupied in the main by ethnic Karo people. Others are located in Simelungun. All these areas were once part of village federations known as *urung* among which were also a number of independent villages. The term *urung* in all probability derives from the medieval Tamil term *urom*, a federation of Sudra caste as distinct from the Brahminic villages. Most

chambers are to be found near villages, many of which may date back at least to the medieval period. Imported ceramic sherds, which I have recovered as surface finds at Siberaya and Ajinembah on the plateau, date back at least to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, if not earlier. More research is required to ascertain when precisely the traditional Karo villages of both the plateau and the lowland *dusun* areas were first occupied. There is good reason to believe, however, that some sites at least date to the late first millennium C.E.

Administrative boundaries have changed and continue to change. It has not always been possible to keep track of these changes to pinpoint the locations of chambers in current sub-districts with any precision. It is now, however, possible to place most sites in their respective district or *kabupaten* areas. An appendix sets out the regional locations of all known sites.

CONCLUSION

The dating for these chambers is still not ascertained precisely. They do, however, appear to be of medieval inspiration, dating possibly from the end of the first millennium C.E. through to perhaps as late as the sixteenth century and the Acehnese incursions into the Deli region. As to who constructed the chambers, Tichelman would appear to be correct in suggesting the ancestors of the present-day Karo and Timor Batak inhabitants who may, in turn have been influenced by external, possibly Tamil culture. Similar caves have been found in southern India, in both Kerala on the west coast and Tamil Nadu on the east coast where they are associated both with former Buddhist religious practices as well as, in some cases, Hindu influence. The *rumah umang* were thus, as suggested by both Tichelman and Voorhoeve, in all probability ossuaries, or chambers for the deposition of the bones of the dead. Some, if not all, were once closed with stones cut to shape with which to plug the access. They may thus represent one of the few tangible remains of Buddhistic and Hindu influence in northeast Sumatra. Research at the former Tamil trading settlement at Kota Cina near Labuan Deli has revealed both medieval Tamil Buddhistic and Hindu imagery suggesting that the traders followed a syncretic form of Buddhism known as Cholaappautam

which flourished in southern India and Sri Lanka between about the ninth and fourteenth centuries.²²

²² For which see E. Edwards McKinnon, "Continuity and Change in South Indian Involvement in Northern Sumatra: the Inferences of Archaeological Evidence from Kota Cina and Lamreh" in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, edited by Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade: Singapore and Delhi: ISEAS/Manohar, 2011. pp. 137-60.

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Appendix

Tentative locational summary of the known *rumah umang* by Kabupaten as of 2010

Kabupaten Deli Serdang [Karo dusun]

- Berhala? (site not yet identified)
- Durian Tani, Sembahe (*Batu Kemang*) Kec. Sibolangit
- Limau Mungkur (Batu Lokong) Kec. Tanjung Morawa (overlooking the Kali Tawang)
- Kota Tualah, (*rumah umang*) Kec. Namu Rambe (overlooking the Lau Petani)

Figure 16. Kota Tualah, Kec. Namu Rambei



A recently discovered (2010) tunnel-like *rumah umang* overlooking the Lau Petani, upstream of the Benteng Puteri Hijau, Kec. Namu Rambei, Kabupaten Deli Serdang. (Courtesy Sori Surilo, Medan). No information is as yet available relating to the dimensions of the interior of this grotto. Photo courtesy of Ita Apriliana M. Sori Sarulo (Medan).

- Sukaluwai (*rumah umang*), Kec. Bangunpurba (overlooking the Lau Buaya)

Kabupaten Langkat [Karo dusun]

- Bohorok (*rumah umang*) (site not yet identified, mentioned by Voorhoeve)
- Kuala Mencirim (*rumah umang*)
- Namu Terassi (*rumah umang*)

Kabupaten Simelungun [Timor Batak]

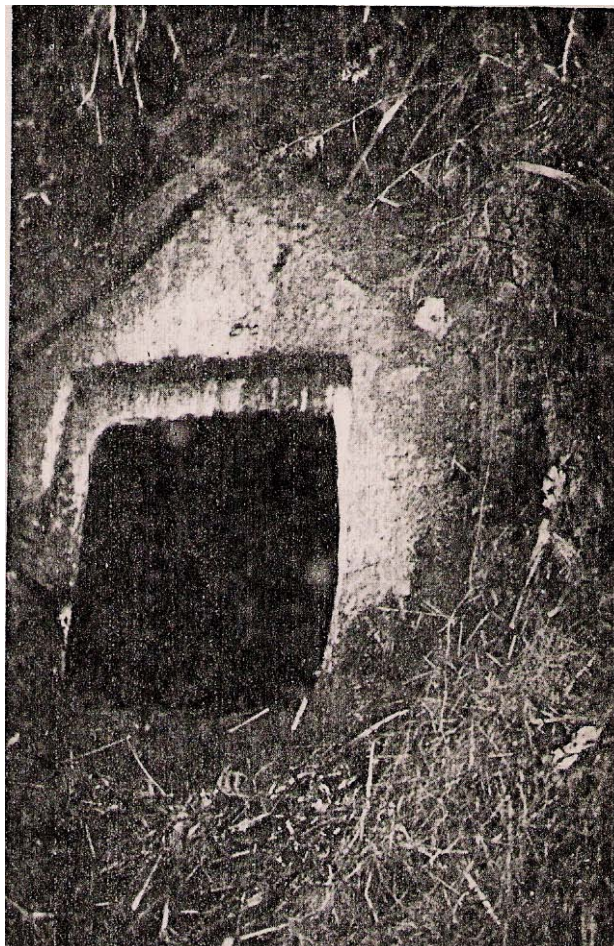
- Bah Gambir [*liang na homin*]
- Bongbongan (Silau Kahean) (natural cave?)
- Halombingun (Girsang Sipangan Bolon) (natural cave ?)
- Nagori Dolok [*liang na homin*]
- Parbutaran (overlooking the Bah Dalu/ Bah Boluk) Kec. Tanah Jawa (Voorhoeve 1940: 88, 89).
- Raya
- Seribu Jawa (natural cave?)
- Sinundol [*liang ni homin*]

- Tanjung Muda

Kabupaten Tanah Karo [Taneh Karo]

- Buluh Naman (*rumah umang*)
- Janji Meriah (*rumah umang*) on the right bank of the Lau Borus, facing SSW. This grotto is roughly circular in shape, some 2.40 metres deep and 2.47 metres in breadth, with a rectangular entrance 0.68 metres, above which is a roof-shaped motif (Voorhoeve 1940: 90).

Figure 17. Janji Meriah

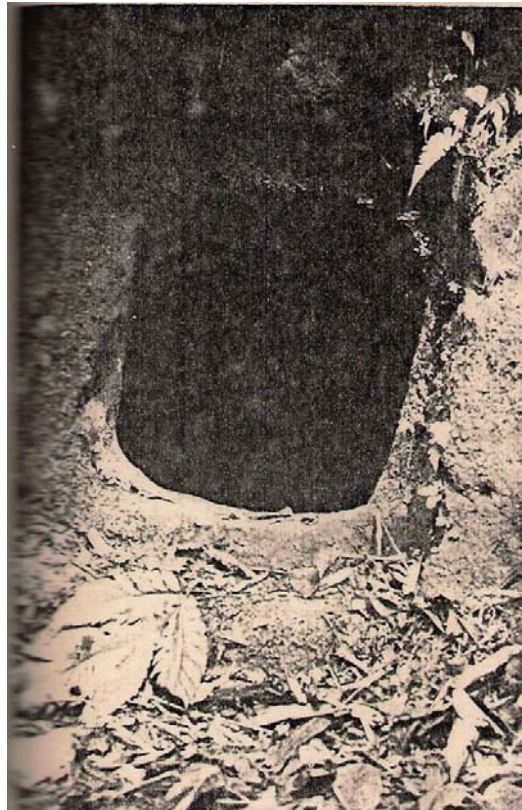


There is a roof-like triangular section above the rectangular entrance similar to Batu Kemang.

Note: Figures 17, 18 and 19 are reproductions from P. Voorhoeve's "Simaloengoense Steenplastiek en Rotskamers," *Cultureel Indië* 2. (1940), 88-92.

- Keriahen (*rumah umang*) Kec. Tiga Binanga (Gunung-gunung ?)
- Kuala (*rumah umang*) Kec. Tiga Binanga (Gunung-gunung ?)
- Kuta Galuh (*rumah umang*) overlooking the Lau Dalih, a small tributary of the Lau Kesompat. It faces SW, measures 2.40 metres in depth, is 2.60 metres wide and is 1.25 metres in height. It lies to the right of the path which leads down to the bathing place. The entrance is 0.50 metres broad and 0.52 metres in height. (Voorhoeve 1940: 91).

Figure 18. Kuta Galuh



Source: Voorhoeve, "Simaloengoense Steenplastiek en Rotskamers," (1940).

- Lingga (*rumah umang*)
- Negeri (*rumah umang*)

- Rumah Great (*rumah umang*) Kec. Tiga Binanga (Gunung-gunung?)
- Sarinembah (also known as Ajinembah) (*rumah umang*) Kec. Tiga Panah?
- Siberaya (*rumah umang*) overlooking the Lau Biang. Kec. Tigapanah.
- Singamanik (overlooking the Lau Sira-sira): two chambers.
- Sukatendel (*rumah umang*) on the left bank, overlooking the Lau Borus. The tunnel measures 4 metres deep; 3.8 metres broad at the rear, 3.6 metres near the centre and 2 metres at the entrance. The height varies from 1.25 to 1.35 metres. There appears to be a human figure with outspread arms carved in relief into the rock to the right of the entrance. Voorhoeve (1940: 91) suggests that this is a 3-metre high dancing female (Voorhoeve 1940: 90).

Figure 19. Sukatendel



Note the 3-metre high figure with outspread arms to the right of the entrance.
Source: Voorhoeve, "Simaloengoense Steenplastiek en Rotskamers" (1940).

- Tanjung (overlooking the Lau Garut) with 'boat reliefs' discovered in 1977.

Figure 20. Kampung Tanjung (with boat reliefs)



This chamber with its unique reliefs of two boats, a vessel with a single mast and steering oar on the left and on the right, a boat with a decorative stern and a human figure at the bow, cut into the rock face (*cadas* or tuff) overlooking the Lau Garut, a tributary of the Lau Biang near Kampung Tanjung in Tanah Karo was discovered by the late Drs Terbit Sembiring Kembaren, John Miksic and E. Edwards McKinnon in 1977. It is, or was, in all likelihood, a *greten* or ossuary. A rectangular cut cover stone intended to close the entrance was discovered below the reliefs. The relief suggests an intimate knowledge of sea-going craft among the people of the plateau.