

MOUNDS, TOMBS, AND TALES:
ARCHAEOLOGY AND ORAL TRADITION
IN THE SOUTH SUMATRA HIGHLANDS

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Introduction

This contribution presents the results of research carried out by a Franco-Indonesian team in the South Sumatran highlands. It illustrates an approach that we call “archaeo-geography”, which we have been pursuing for several years in the Indonesian field. It combines several scientific approaches to the study of landscape, time, and society in order to understand the general mechanisms of human settlement and the constitution of identities and territories. This approach ascertains the age and sequence of settlements, as a classical archaeological study would do, but tries to go further and, by focusing on the archaeological remains, inform us about the meaning of oral traditions and present-day representations of the past, which are essential for the understanding of today’s territoriality.

After a general presentation of the archaeological remains found in the highlands, we will concentrate on a particular site which proved to be crucial to our survey. Its excavation, based on the identification of occupation levels, revealed all the phases of human settlement in the highlands and allowed us to draw a significant connection between archaeology and oral tradition. In this way it provided an explanation for the setting up of socio-political divisions and territories in this part of the highlands.

**The Megalithic Remains in the Pasemah:
Connections to the Bronze/Iron Age**

Our fieldwork took place in the Pasemah region of highland Sumatra (fig. 18-1), an area renowned for numerous megaliths that are generally associated with the Bronze Age (van der Hoop 1932; Soejono 1977; Haris Sukendar/Sukidio 1983/1984; Bellwood 1985; Ayu Kusumawati/Haris

Sukendar 2000). Some of the megaliths are stone figures representing humans and animals, often elephants or buffaloes (fig. 18-2). Others consist of stone chambers (*rumah batu*) with decorated inside walls. Still others comprise enigmatic remains such as *batu lesung*, which are square stones with a different number of holes carved in them, or millstones whose exact function remains questioned.

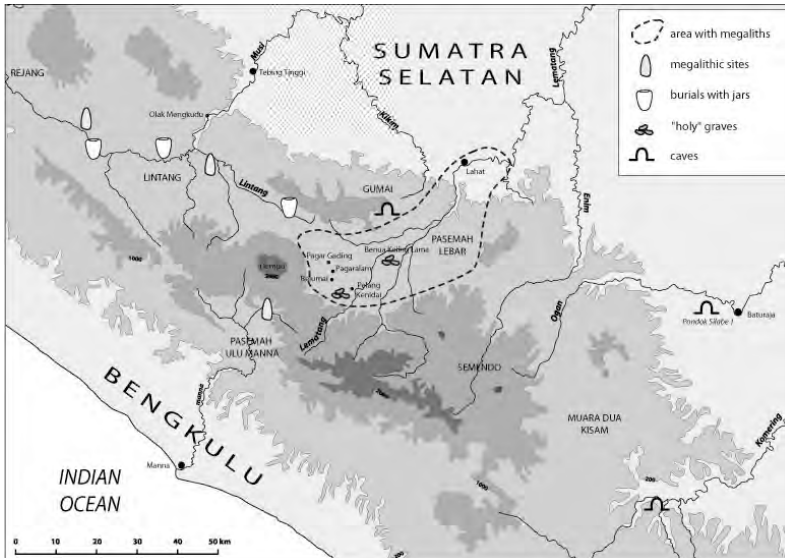


Fig. 18-1: Map of the Pasemah region and of the main localities cited in the text (Laurence Billault, IRD Orléans)

Although various authors have provided insights into the typology of the megaliths, the chronology of these archaeological remains has still not been determined. Most of the dates suggested for the megaliths are derived from analogies with other regions in the archipelago or more generally in Southeast Asia and have been deduced from clues provided by the iconography. For example, the most famous megaliths of the Pasemah region, *Batu Gajah* (elephant stone)¹ and *Batu Tatahan*,² reveal some themes that belong to the Metal Ages, such as metal ornaments (e.g.,

¹ Presently located in the Museum of the provincial capital, Palembang, but originally found in the hamlet of Kotaraja (Westenik 1922: fig. 2a).

² Found near the village of Pagar Gading (Vonk 1934: 297).

warrior helmets and armbands), weapons (e.g., daggers and swords), and what has been identified as kettle drums. But so far no systematic dating has been undertaken and most of this iconography could also correspond to much more recent times.³

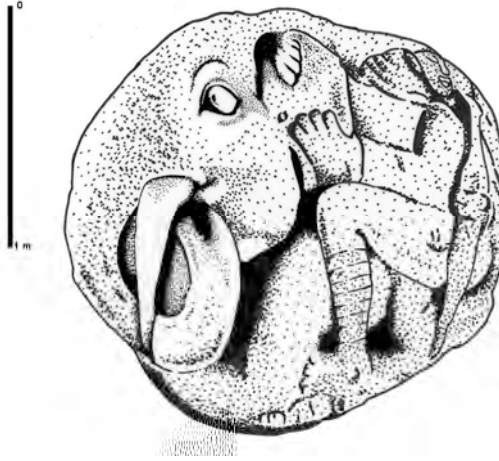


Fig. 18-2: The Batu Gajah (elephant stone) (Laurence Billault, IRD Orléans)

Only one object that is figured on the Pasemah megaliths is clearly a time marker: the kettle drum. These large drums are often represented on the back of statues, as on the *Batu Tatahan* where two men are shown carrying it (fig. 18-3). Although the images are abundant, no actual kettle drum has been discovered until now in the Pasemah region. Numerous remains, though, have been found in neighboring regions including a fragment of a drum near Lake Ranau, a small and badly damaged drum in Bungur, another drum between Kota Agung and Suoh in Lampung to the south, and a fragment near Lake Kerinci to the north of Pasemah (Hà Truc Càn 1989). Two Dongson drums have also been discovered to the west in South Bengkulu, on the west coast, in an area populated by a group linguistically related to the modern Pasemah dwellers. We can therefore

³ For instance, the photographs taken at the beginning of the 20th century on the island of Nias clearly show warriors, helmets, swords, spears with more or less the same metal ornaments as the ones displayed on the Pasemah carvings. See Wirz (1929); Feldman et al. (1990).

postulate that such drums were not only represented, but very probably present in the Pasemah region itself.



Fig. 18-3: The Batu Tatahan: a drum between two carriers (Laurence Billault, IRD Orléans)

The bronze kettle drum is the best known remains of the Dongson tradition. These drums are commonly classified in the four styles of the Heger typology (Heger 1902). In addition to the drum, there are also a number of other objects, such as daggers, statues, ornaments, miniature drums, and flasks, which exhibit more or less the same kind of decoration as the drums. All these objects display very elaborate engravings. What is known of the societies that created these artefacts is largely derived from these engravings which depict, besides non-figurative motives, animals (e.g., birds, frogs, elephants, and buffaloes), rice, architecture (Schefold, *infra*: fig. 16-22) canoes/boats and humans (fig. 18-4). It is supposed that most of these bronze artefacts were moulded⁴ in a specific area of North Vietnam, the region of the Red River where the eponym site of Dongson is located, and were disseminated as regalia or objects of power among the various societies of the archipelago, which were linked in a vast network of exchange and power. In the Dongson area, the centres of metallurgy and power arose between 400 and 600 BCE, while, according to the Bellwood (1985: 272) the networks that they generated remained active until 500 CE or later in Indonesia.

⁴ Those bronze artefacts were made using the lost wax casting technique.

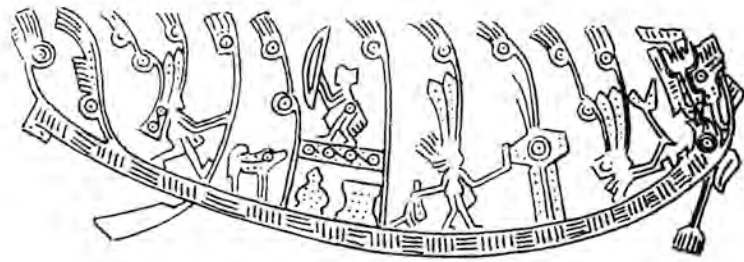


Fig. 18-4: Some engravings from the Dongson drums (Laurence Billault, IRD Orléans after Goloubew 1940)

Dongson society remains something of a mystery to us in terms of its structure, religion,⁵ agricultural base (either rainfed or irrigated rice appears on the drums (Bellwood 1985: 275), and levels of social conflict (images of war seem also present). The archaeological work carried out in the region of Dongson in Vietnam has revealed the presence of some burials containing rich offerings, which could indicate important differences of status within the society. Similarly, in the Pasemah region, the stone chambers and stone cists which have been excavated have provided numerous beads, gold nails, bronze, and iron objects (van der Hoop 1932). Inhabitants of the village of Belumai, who dug out one of these stone chambers, for example, found gold leaves, beads, iron, and polished stone tools. The polychromic images on the inside walls, however, do not provide clear insights into the society or the rituals (Bie 1932). However, the sumptuous nature of the stone cist burial and the presence of offerings seem consistent with the idea of a strong hierarchy, possibly based on warfare and slavery, which would be rather in accordance with common representations of the Dongson influence. Although it is implicitly admitted that all the megalithic remains in the Pasemah region belong to more or less the same type of society and the same period, there could be different phases involved in the history of these stone monuments.

⁵ Some authors have interpreted the images on the drums as a clue to the existence of shamanism. Although there is no indication of any strictly defined religion on the drums, shamanism, a vast category, was widespread in the area and has remained so even in recent times.

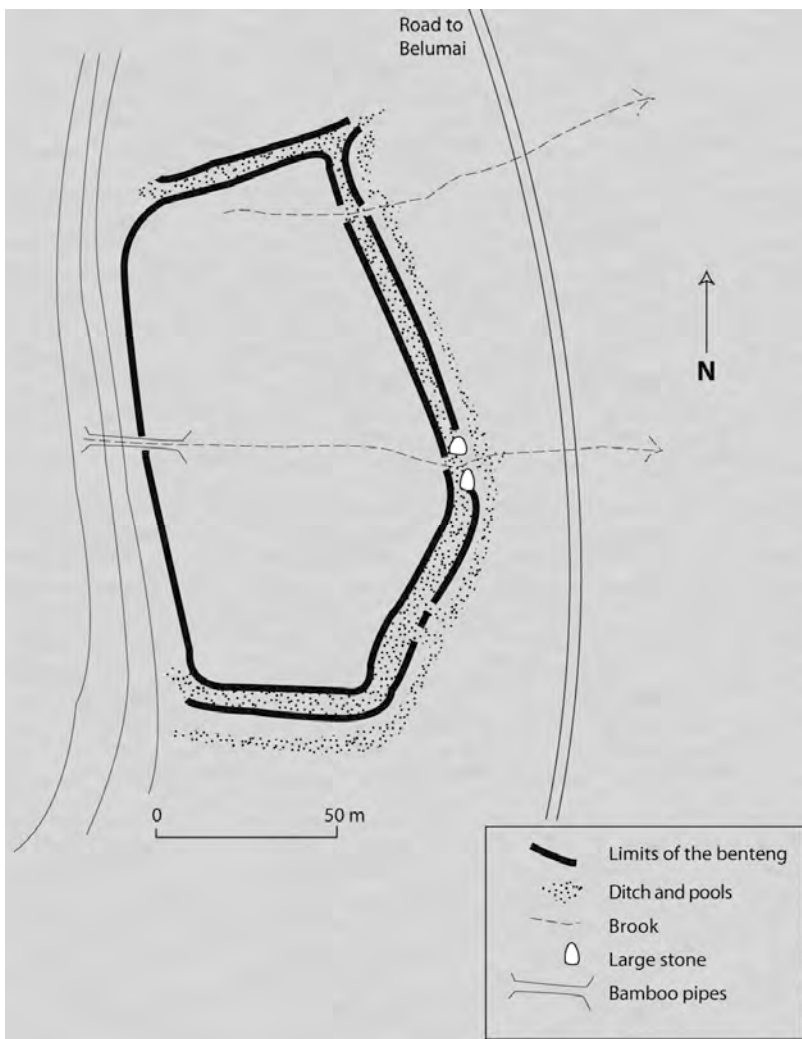


Fig. 18-5: Sketch of a *benteng* near Belumai (Laurence Billault, IRD Orléans)

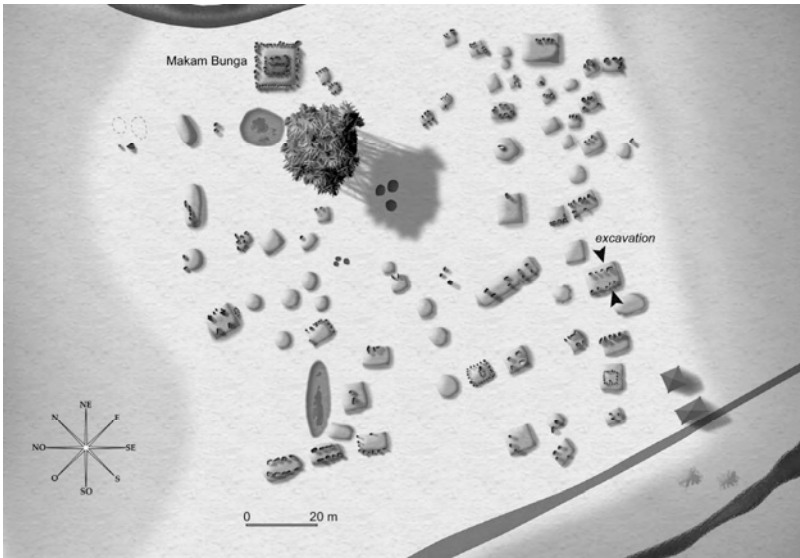


Fig. 18-6: Sketch of the site of Benua Keling Lama (Laurence Billault, IRD Orléans)

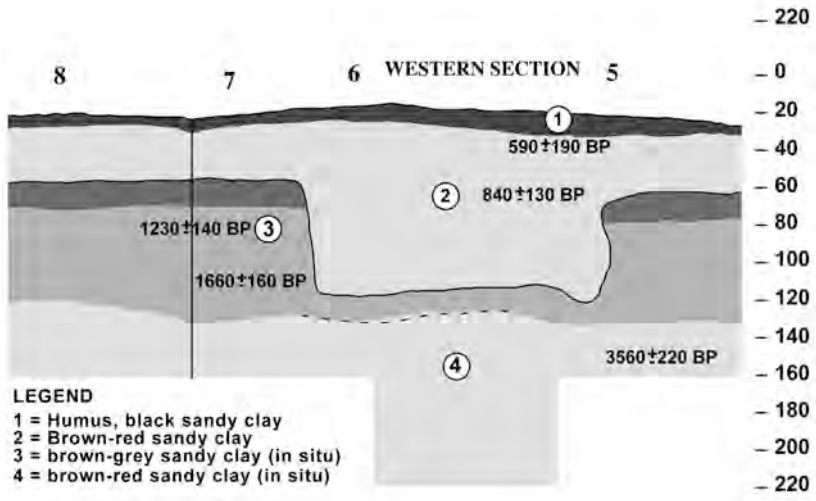


Fig. 18-7: The stratigraphy of the excavation in Benua Keling Lama (Laurence Billault, IRD Orléans)

There are other remains that have attracted less attention than the megaliths. The first category are the *benteng* or *kute*,⁶ fortified sites of the Pasemah (fig. 18-5), some of which are preserved in the memory of present-day inhabitants or in the archives of the colonial period. The Dutch colonisers who subjugated the Pasemah region in the middle of the 19th century gave descriptions of such settlements, which were circled by ditches whose edges were planted with thorny bamboos (Gramberg 1865: 18). These *benteng* are presumably the expression of conflict and insecurity, and they may also correspond to different phases of the settlement.

Another category of remains is represented by “fields of jars” which are found in some villages on the border of the Pasemah region (fig. 18-1). Some of these jars are red-slipped. The larger ones were used for burials, whereas the smaller ones seem to represent offerings accompanying the burials. What is known of these jar burials is that they are associated with remarkable stone adzes, sometimes made of a material (chalcedony for instance) whose source can not be located in the Sumatran highlands. However, the presence of polished stone artefacts alone does not allow us to associate these burials to the Neolithic period, as these valuable stones, which were still circulating in the highlands in recent times, could have been funerary offerings. Moreover, most of the jar burials in island Southeast Asia, according to Peter Bellwood (1985: 316), do not seem to be older than 200 BCE, which is precisely the supposed period of the Dongson. As to the enigma of the “fields of jars”, only dates from excavations can provide the answer. The work and analyses carried out by Bonatz and his team (see *infra*) seem to indicate a rather wide span of time for these kind of remains.

The Excavation of an Earth Mound at Benua Keling Lama: Finds and Chronology

Confronted with all the questions and uncertainties about the megaliths, we decided to undertake an excavation at a rather famous site, Benua Keling Lama. The site had been revealed by Abraham van der Hoop in the 1930s and was at that time described as being a haunted (*hantu*), holy graveyard. The site was reidentified by a team from the National Research and Development Centre for Archaeology (Puslitbang) in 1993 (Sonny Wibisono et al. 1993).

⁶ *Kute* refers to the fortified settlements of a local community while *benteng* is a more recent variation of this fortified site (Collins 1998: 302). According to the remains that we observed in the field, the *benteng*, most of which were burnt to the ground by Dutch forces in 1866, seem to have been larger in scale than the *kute*.

Benua Keling Lama (fig. 18-6) is a very impressive succession of more than 50 earth mounds, ranging from a few centimetres to more than a meter in height. Some mounds display alignments of stones, others have steles with or without engravings, while still other mounds have no stones at all. One of the mounds (i.e., the largest) is very famous in the region; it is called Makam Bunga and is supposed to be the grave of Atung Bungsu, the founding hero of the Pasemah people.

In 1995, when we first visited the site with the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (LIPI), we had already noticed some obsidian stone tools and a lot of potsherds on the surface of the mounds. The oral information designed it as a place of burial, but the remains found at the surface seemed rather to indicate that it had been a settlement site. Therefore, a few years later (2003) we decided to excavate one of the mounds (shown on fig. 18-6) with a team from the Puslitbang Arkenas. The excavation, measuring 3x1 m, went down to more than 3 m (fig. 18-7). The uppermost layer [1] consisted of a dark and humiferous sandy clay soil, corresponding to a layer that had been burnt during the clearing of the vegetation.⁷ Under it was a layer of red sandy clay [2], disturbed, intrusive to the following layer [3] of brown-grey sandy clay, darker at the top. Under this was another layer of red sandy clay [4].

What we found in this excavation was actually a burial: The layer [3], corresponding to the original surface, had been dug out to place the corpse, on top of which the earth had been replaced and a mound formed by gathering some more earth from the surroundings. The radiocarbon dating gave a date of the 14th century for the burial itself, which was accompanied by a ceramic offering. All the mounds on the site may not be of exactly the same period, but they represent the largest cemetery in the Pasemah region, which is remarkable for a people that say they did not bury their dead in former times, but rather abandoned the corpses in the wild.

The burial itself had been dug in a level which predated it. This level [3], displaying a dark soil, was dated back with ¹⁴C analysis to between 1650 and 1200 BP, that is 300 to 800 CE, which corresponds to the Metal Age. Some fragments of metal were also found scattered in this level. Unfortunately the findings in this layer do not indicate clearly what kind of occupation it had been.

In the level [4] below, we found another level which contained a fragment of a polished stone tool, made of chert. The radiocarbon dating indicates that this artefact dates to 3600 BP. The rest of the excavation was sterile.

⁷ The site has been turned into a coffee plantation.

How should we interpret these results? We seem to have a coherent sequence in this excavation. There could be first, on the same site, a Neolithic settlement, then a Metal Age one; finally the biggest disruption comes in the 14th century, when the settlement site is turned into a burial site. The data is scarce, due to the limited size of the excavation, but it can be compared to some other results derived from adjacent areas.

The Ancient Levels of the Neolithic Period: A Comparison with a Site in the Foothills

The oldest level excavated at Benua Keling Lama signals the first discreet evidence of the Neolithic period in the highlands. The data from this level can be compared to the ones that were obtained in the excavations of the small limestone cave of Pondok Silabe 1, near Baturaja in the foothills of the Barisan Mountains. This cave can be considered as a good reference for other archaeological finds in the region, as its sediments have been very well preserved through time. Its excavation was undertaken by our team between 2001 and 2004, and has provided a complete stratigraphy stretching from the pre-Neolithic (4500 BP) to the Metal Age and beyond to historic times (Simanjuntak et al. 2006; Bonatz, *infra*).

The Neolithic period in Pondok Silabe 1 (Simanjuntak/Forestier 2004) was characterised only by the presence of ceramics. In fact, the stone tools present in this level showed no element of polishing; rather, they were a combination of flakes and knapped tools made out of obsidian and flint. These finds in the cave could correspond to a marginal Neolithic settlement, adapted to the forest environment and to the very specific activities that took place there, mainly hunting and foraging. This settlement could have been occasional, seasonal, or permanent, but devoted to those specific activities related to the forest nearby. In all cases it seems to be located on the geographical and technical margins of a more “classical” Neolithic occupation, such as the one that can be discerned in Benua Keling Lama, which would be characterised by polished stone and ceramics together.

What is interesting is that the dates for the Neolithic period that were obtained in Benua Keling Lama are older than the ones that were derived from the excavations in the foothills at Pondok Selabe. Although, of course, further excavations could provide more accurate information, this might indicate that the process of Neolithisation started in the highlands, and eventually spread from there to the foothills and to the lowlands of Sumatra.

All this information seems to emphasize the complexity of the technical practices and settlement patterns corresponding to the Neolithic period in the highlands. Rather than it being a homogenous organisation based on agriculture and characterised by a sedentary way of life, the Neolithic seems more like a combination of agricultural and foraging activities, of sedentary and nomadic movements, of fields, villages and forest, while the techniques are adapted to the “rhythm” of each environment and activity. Without going far back in time, the present-day foragers in lowland Sumatra (the Suku Anak Dalam or Kubu) display the same kind of adaptation and flexibility to diverse contexts and environments, as well as the same complementary existence with the people of the Malay villages, with whom they trade and barter forest products (Retno Handini, *infra*).

The More Recent Levels: The Enlightenment of the Oral Tradition

The excavation of Benua Keling Lama provided little information about the Metal Age level, but we have more details on the last phase that has been identified: the historic period. The oral traditions⁸ seem to clarify to some extent what happened. To sum up what was told to us by local informants, the founder of the Pasemah, Atung Bungsu, who is buried at the site of Benua Keling Lama itself, is supposed to have come from the kingdom of Majapahit on the island of Java and was married in Srivijaya. One day he decided to go upstream to find a new land in which to settle. He went up the Musi River and every time he came to a confluence, he weighed the water and followed the river whose water appeared to be the heaviest. This weighing of the water could be interpreted as a way of looking for the most fertile land, as the water is charged with earth; but it could also be interpreted as a way of locating the region which could provide the greatest quantity of gold.

The rest of the story is commonly known in the highlands and has been summed up by Williams Collins (1998) and Bart Barendregt (2002). Atung Bungsu arrived in the Pasemah region, and found the place ideal for settling down. But the area was already populated by the Rejang. Through trickery, Atung Bungsu gained the land from the Rejang who, as a

⁸ The collection of oral traditions in this project has been carried out by Achmat Romsan and Usmawadi Amir of the University of Sriwijaya.

consequence, were partly assimilated by the Pasemah⁹ and partly expelled to the neighbouring area of Rejang Lebong to the north.

As a hypothesis, the reference made to Majapahit can give some clues about the timing of Atung Bungsu's arrival.¹⁰ Majapahit, which was centered in eastern Java, is rather precisely located in time. It started at the end of the 13th century, during the decline of Srivijaya in Sumatra, and ended with the rise of Islamic states in the 15th century. In the 14th century, Jambi, at that time the main kingdom in the lowlands of Sumatra,¹¹ was conquered by Majapahit. It is said that Adityavarman, the new ruler, also took control of the gold producing regions of the highlands in central Sumatra and founded a Minangkabau kingdom (Kulke, *infra*). The discourse of the Pasemah on their origins might therefore be very much inspired by the general tradition of the region, which assigns a specific place to each of the human groups of the highlands and beyond. However, it is during the 14th century that our site in the highlands ceased to be a settlement and was converted into a burial site, signalling important changes in the organisation of the region and probably inscribing in this precise place and time the arrival of the newcomers. The Rejang in this case seem to refer indistinctly to the groups that were here before Atung Bungsu and his people arrived, and this could correspond to a more complex category than it seems. As it is often the case, the domination of newcomers erases the differences within a previous more complex society.

⁹ The six original clans of the Pasemah are organised as a federation following the customary principle of "*lampik empat, mardike due*", which means that four of the clans are sitting on mats (*lampik*, the symbol of authority for the elders of each clan; these clans are Ulu Lurah, Sumbai Besar, Mangku Anom, Tanjung Raya), while two are independent (*mardike*: the clans Semidang and Penjalang), and would be of a Rejang origin. See also Collins (1998: 339).

¹⁰ This does not mean that Atung Bungsu himself came from Java. The reference to Majapahit indicates a moment and a context of the powers in the region, rather than describing the actual arrival of the founder of Pasemah.

¹¹ Miksic, *infra*, believes that by 1300 the main centre of Jambi was at Dharmasraya, near the headwaters of the Batanghari, rather than in the lowlands. But this is another question and we are dealing here with the symbols of local tradition rather than with strict historical evidence.

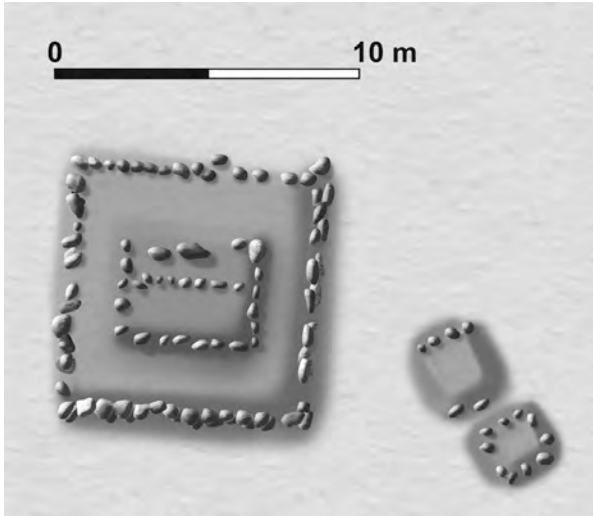


Fig. 18-8: Grave of Atung Bungsu in Benua Keling Lama (Laurence Billault, IRD Orléans)

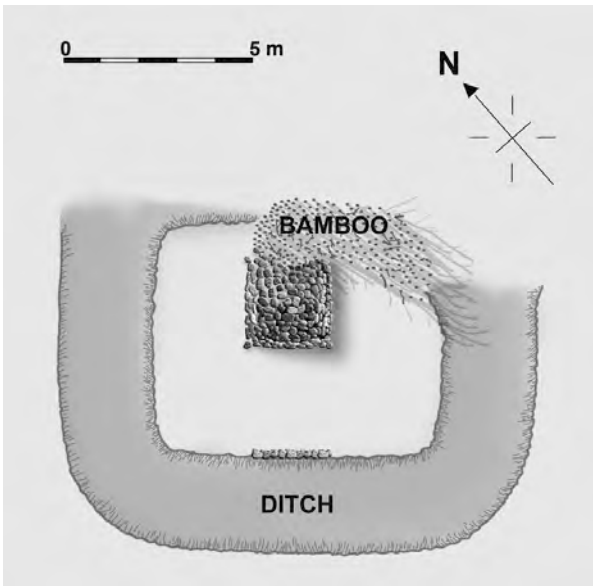


Fig. 18-9: Grave of Serunting Sakti near Pelang Kenidai (Laurence Billault, IRD Orléans after van der Hoop 1932: no. 91)

The Tombs of the Ancestors: The Root of Territories in the Pasemah Region

The holy grave of Atung Bungsu, at the site of Benua Keling Lama itself (fig. 18-8), is renowned as a rather important place for the Pasemah and the Rejang people, and is said to attract pilgrims from all over the region. There is also in the Pasemah region another place, which is very similar to this one: the grave of another founding hero, Serunting Sakti. That grave lies 2 km north of the village of Pelang Kenidai.

Some clans of the Pasemah region, such as the clan Semidang for example, do not recognise Atung Bungsu as their mythic ancestor, but rather believe that they are descended from Serunting Sakti. Better known as *Pahit Lidah* (literally “bitter tongue”¹²) Serunting Sakti travelled extensively in the highlands, turning people and animals into stones, with the megaliths being the consequence of his actions (Westenenk 1919, 1921, 1932). What is important to note is that the informants from the Pasemah region usually do not claim the megaliths as the work of their ancestors, but explain that the stones were here before they arrived. In contrast, the myth of Serunting Sakti seems to establish a link between the megaliths and some clans of the highlands. This tradition could be the remnant of an ancient pact between the newcomers and the previous inhabitants, who they dominated and partly assimilated, partly rejected to neighbouring areas such as Lintang, Rejang-Lebong, etc. To sum up the hypothesis one could draw the following correspondences:

Table 18-1: List of correspondences

	Original habitants	Newcomers
Ethnic identity	Rejang	Pasemah
Ancestor	Serunting Sakti	Atung Bungsu
Political status	<i>mardike due</i>	<i>lampik empat</i>

The grave of Serunting Sakti has been rebuilt in an Islamic fashion, but when van der Hoop visited it in the 1930s, it looked rather different (fig. 18-9). It is also a place of pilgrimage for some clans in the region. In Olak Mengkudu, some villagers that we met had just come back from this grave, where they said they went every year to pay homage to their

¹² The “Kingdom of Bittertong” corresponds to the extension of the myth of Pahit Lida, who reigned on the highlands, from Lampung to the latitude of Jambi (Westenenk 1922: 33).

ancestor. This clan originated from Pelang Kenidai, which they left a few generations ago in order to find new suitable land. It appears that there are many other examples of this “memory of origins” on the Pasemah plateau, and that in the highlands the networks of villages could be considered to emanate from the sacred tombs of these famous ancestors. In fact, there is a series of affiliated villages, and people remember the succession of village foundations through the successive tombs of ancestors that were left on their way; the more recent and discreet tombs mark the ultimate stages of the migration. The two holy graves in the heart of Pasemah are the source of the territorial system.

Conclusion

Let us go back to the site of Benua Keling Lama. We excavated only one mound which proved that the site started as a Neolithic settlement, became at a certain point a Metal Age settlement, and ended up in the 14th century as a cemetery. This raises all sorts of questions concerning the continuity of occupation through time and the activities associated with each of the different stages. The cemetery has obviously continued to be used for more recent burials, but we could not really find at the site itself much information about life over the last several centuries. Although, near the complex of earth mounds, there is a *benteng*, a fortified site (fig. 18-10), the excavation that we conducted there proved to be sterile; the pieces of ceramics which were picked up on the surface of the site indicated a very recent period of time: the 18th or the 19th century. The oral tradition indicates that after leaving Benua Keling Lama, the people moved to another Benua Keling nearby, a rather small *kute* on the side of a small, deep river. Those small and very defensive settlements, which could represent the standard after the 14th century, are found here and there throughout the region, as in Tange Mane which is reputedly a very old site. They are distinct from the larger *benteng* listed by the Dutch in the middle of the 19th century. This is all that can be derived from oral information; there are still huge gaps in our knowledge of the region, which other archaeological remains, such as the burial jars earthen mounds or some other kind of sites, could help fill in.

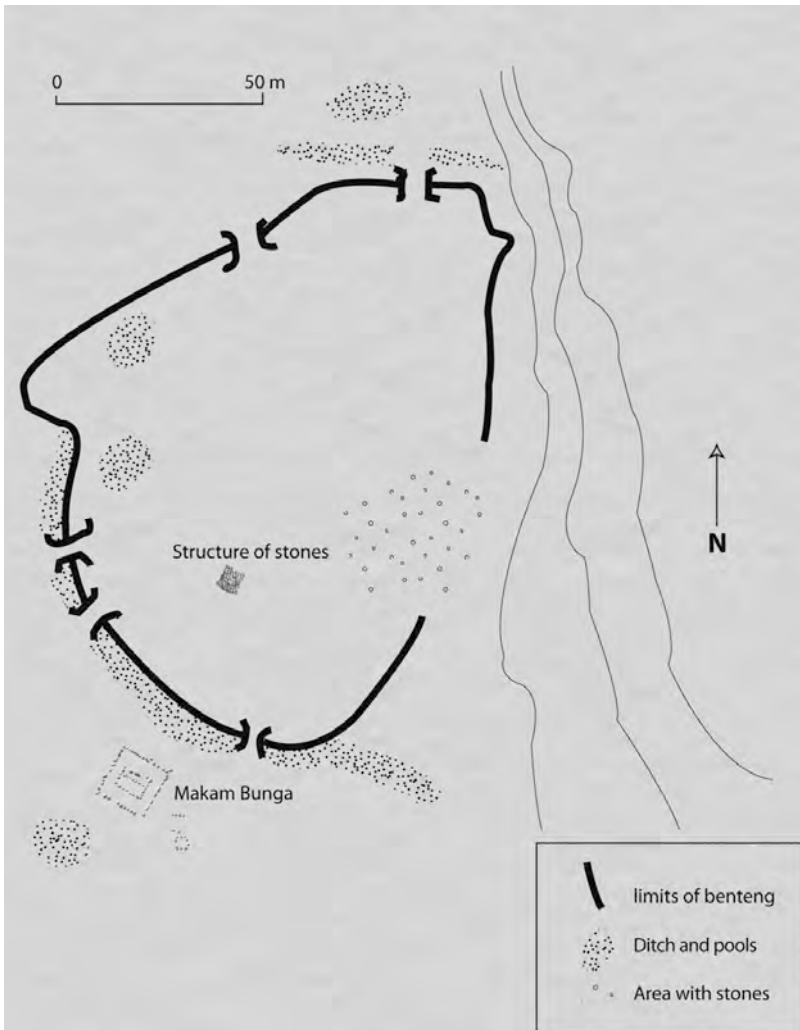


Fig. 18-10: Sketch of the *benteng* of Benua Keling Lama (Laurence Billault, IRD Orléans)

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From Distant Tales: Archaeology and Ethnohistory in the Highlands of Sumatra,
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