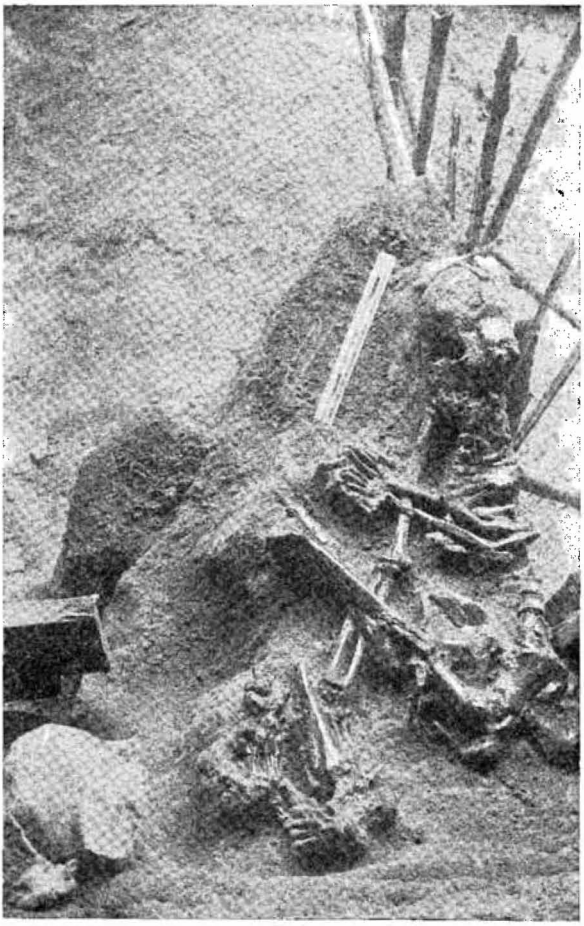

Plate I Burial 25.

Plate II Burial 27 (courtesy Sarawak Museum).

A Preliminary Report on the Palaeoserology of the Niah Cave Burials

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A PHYSICAL anthropological analysis of Niah Cave skeletal material was begun in the summer of 1966 with funding from the National Science Foundation (grant GS-1054), as well as support in the field from the then Director of the Sarawak Museum, Tom Harrisson. Before the grant application for funding of a palaeoserological study was submitted to NSF, a pilot study was made on Niah skeletal material, which had been removed sometime earlier, and which was sent to the laboratory in the United States during 1966. The bone/blood study was conducted by Rodger Heglar, who is now in the process of analyzing the palaeoserological results from the more than 150 burials recovered by the Harrissons and the Brooks from Niah Cave.

The methodology utilized will be described in detail by Heglar in his forthcoming paper on the palaeoserology of the complete Niah burial series. In this preliminary report it is significant to state that the process involves a comparative analysis of soil samples of dirt removed from within and around the burial prior to an analysis of vertebral bone from the skeleton. To keep the bone sample consistent, the bone utilized is the centrum of the vertebra (preferably the thoracic or lumbar vertebrae). The purpose of the soil analysis is to determine if the bone has absorbed A or B factors from the surrounding soil.

On the basis of the results obtained in the preliminary study, a request was granted for funding of the palaeoserological study as a part of the overall analysis of the Niah Cave skeletal data. In the field, soil samples were obtained from the immediate vicinity of each burial, most often from the area under the rib cage or between the ribs and the pelvis. These soil samples were sent to Heglar for analysis in the laboratory before the bone samples were sent. The soil sample study has been

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completed and the process of analysis of the bone samples has begun. The research on the bone samples is being done so that the assessment will be completely independent of the soil sample results.

The bone samples and soil sample, which were tested in 1966, were thoracic vertebral bone from two burials, Burial 25 and Burial 27 (Plates I and II), removed in 1957 and stored in the interim at the Sarawak Museum, Kuching. Both bone samples gave an H specificity up to run 3; the soil sample, associated with Burial 27, gave an A, B, H specificity up to run 3. Summarizing the results of this small study, it appears that the bone is giving a clear Group O (H specificity) for both bone samples, and is not taking up A or B from the soil.

Since the purpose of the pilot study was to determine whether the bone was picking up A or B from the soil, the results indicated that the bones from the other burials also would be free from this contamination. To date the laboratory analysis of bone samples is confirming this expectation.