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*Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Siti Zuraina Abdul Majid received her award from Sultan of Perak Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, the royal patron and chairman of the Merdeka Award Trust.*

# Renowned historian honoured for archaeological discoveries

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**S**OME would argue that history is not set in stone. The country's first archaeologist, however, has a different story to tell.

Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Siti Zuraina Abdul Majid first visited the Lenggong Valley in Perak while pursuing a missing historical link to pre-historic migration.

A row of stones by the valley's roadside led her to discover a 74,000-year-old Palaeolithic stone tool site and the famous 10,000-year-old Perak Man.

"A geologist told me that these were not naturally formed stones. I had a hunch it was man-made, but this needed further investigation. But funding to open a new excavation site was not easy to come by.

"So, my husband and I raised our own money to revisit the area. During an excavation, I found a stone tool workshop similar to what one of my professors at Yale University discovered in Africa.

"I was overjoyed. I was the first to see and touch this amazing site that was left pristine for over 70,000 years!

"Stone tools were the only technology that Paleolithic people knew. So, I knew I hit the jackpot when I found the site," she said.

Siti Zuraina's discoveries placed Malaysia on the global archaeological map.

The Merdeka Award Trust recently honoured the renowned historian with the prestigious Merdeka Award for her contributions in conjunction with its 15th anniversary.

Besides Siti Zuraina, five other recipients were recognised and celebrated this year for their exemplary efforts in fostering a culture of excellence and for their remarkable contribution to Malaysia and its people.

The Merdeka Award, supported by Petronas and Shell, recognises and rewards those who embody the spirit and heart of 'Merdeka' — individuals and organisations who epitomise perseverance, emerging with an enduring purpose to improve the prosperity and progress of our people, as well as the well-being of society at large.

Siti Zuraina, 78, dedicated the award to her late husband and her "dream team" who worked with her in Lenggong.

*Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Siti Zuraina Abdul Majid's discoveries have placed Malaysia on the global archaeological map.*



Even today, she recalls the excitement when they discovered the remains of the Perak Man in Gua Gunung Runtuh.

"I wanted to explore Lenggong because I felt the valley could be the first settlement and the focal point for the local population at that time.

"I waited for a while before exploring Gua Gunung Runtuh. The cave was some 400m above the ground, and we could not see the cave floor. Hence why it is called Gua Gunung Runtuh.

"In the first trench that I dug there, we found the Perak Man. The Perak Man is about 10,000 years old and, it is the most complete skeleton of his time range for Southeast Asia.

"The discovery of the Perak Man led to the first ever revelation of a Palaeolithic burial ritual in Southeast Asia. The Perak



*Excavation of the Perak Man, Gua Gunung Runtuh, Lenggong, 1990.*

Man also revealed the world's earliest evidence of a rare deformity from birth, the Brachymesopthalgia Type A2.

"We even discovered that he probably died due to a tumour or ulcer after suffering for around one week," she said.

For most of her discoveries in Lenggong, Siti Zuraina thanked her lucky stars. She said that it was extremely difficult in tropical regions like Southeast Asia to recover undisturbed sites, like the 74,000-year-old stone tool workshop.

The ashes from the Toba volcanic eruption that were blown to the area allowed Siti Zuraina's team to obtain the site's date. She also believed that the site was abandoned following the catastrophe.

Her findings led the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation to declare the Lenggong Valley as a World Heritage Site in June 2012. Through her influential leadership, she also obtained several Unesco inscriptions and conventions — including for historical Melaka and George Town as World Heritage Sites, and Batu Bersurat Terengganu as a Memory of the World site.

During her excavations in Gua Niah, Sarawak, she also discovered the remains of a 2,000-year-old man with a rare congenital deformity, known as Amelia. In archaeology, it is rare for a country to discover two ancient birth deformities from the Palaeolithic era.

Siti Zuraina also established the Centre for Global Archaeological in Universiti Sains Malaysia to train scholars in archaeology.

In 2020, Yale University presented her with the Women at 50 Yale 150 Award and she also represented Malaysia in Unesco's evaluation committee for intangible cultural heritage in March this year.

Since 2017, Siti Zuraina has also served as a heritage adviser to the sultan of Selangor.

Currently, she is working on two sites that Malaysia has nominated to Unesco to be inscribed as world heritage sites — the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) and the Royal Belum Forest.

For Siti Zuraina, every archaeological discovery is like a jigsaw piece to reconstruct the larger puzzle of mankind's past, and ethics play a very important role when you are working on the field alone.

"You have to be honest because you are writing history. And you are writing it for the world to see," she said.