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Borneo writing

In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 121 (1965), no: 1, Leiden, 1-57

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BORNEO WRITING

Literally and closely defined, writing is the graphic counterpart of speech, the 'fixing' of spoken language in a permanent or semi-permanent form, or, in the words of a French scholar, '*une représentation visuelle et durable du langage, qui il rend transportable et conservable.*' By means of it, language is made capable of transcending the ordinary conditions of time and space.

(David Diringer, *Writing*,
London, 1962, opening sentences).

With Earth's first Clay They did the Last Man knead,
And there of the Last Harvest sow'd the seed:
And the first Morning of Creation wrote
What the last Dawn of Reckoning shall read.

(Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam*).

I. FORMS OF BORNEO WRITING.

Seventy years ago the great Bornean encyclopaedist Ling Roth suggested that curious marks, such as were found on Dayak-owned pots, represented a native script.¹ The pots have proved to be Chinese; and this overstraining of imagination helped divert attention from reality. For there are at least four distinct forms of "writing" — using charcoal, ochre, "ink," incision — which predate the advent of Magellan's world circumventing galleys to West Borneo, 1521.² Since 1947, the Sarawak Museum has gradually collected material even the existence of which was, in most cases, hitherto unknown. A sketch of this effort was given to the first conference of Asian Historians at Singapore, 1960.³ Here is the first report of field results.

¹ As usual, much of what Ling Roth wrote (in "The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo;" London, 1896, Vol. II: 286-292) remains good sense. It is rather astonishing that after his clues, still not even the great missionaries like Howell and Perham got on to the *genuine* writing around them.

² Pigafetta's account of the first European contact at Brunei in 1521 is contained in all Magellan accounts; most conveniently in the Hakluyt Edition.

³ A survey of all area materials is in "Malaysian Historical Sources" ed. by K. G. Tregonning, University of Singapore, 1962; Sarawak is at pp. 105-112.