Archaeologists hit ‘gold’ at Mansuli

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KOTA KINABALU: The Mansuli Valley in Sabah’s east coast Lahad Datu district houses the oldest human settlement in east Malaysia, archaeologists claim.

Tucked inside a forest reserve and accessible only by a dirt road, researchers stumbled upon a treasure trove in 2003, finding more than 1,000 stone tools that are believed to date back 235,000 years.

The research was jointly carried out by Universiti Sains Malaysia and Sabah Museum, which are also currently looking at other potential sites in the state’s interior Apin-Apin district in Keningau.

USM Centre for Global Archaeological Research director Prof Dr Mokhtar Saidin said the evidence showed people settled in Sabah during the Paleolithic period (also known as the Stone Age), 27,000 years earlier than previously thought.

Before this, it was claimed the oldest human settlement, dating back about 40,000 years, was in the Niah Caves, near Miri, Sarawak.

Dr Mokhtar said this in a talk to mark the launch of the Archaeology in Malaysia exhibition by state Tourism, Culture and Environment Minister Datuk Masidi Manjun at Sabah Museum here yesterday.

The professor said the new evidence showed that humans from the South-East Asian mainland came to Borneo when the Sunda Plain still existed.

(Also known as the Sunda Shelf, it is geologically an extension of the continental shelf of South-East Asia with the major land masses being the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Borneo, Java, Madura, Bali and their surrounding smaller islands. It covers an area of approximately 1.85 million square kilometres.)

Dr Mokhtar said that when connected to other Paleolithic archaeological sites in Sabah, the Mansuli Valley site established that the early humans had consistently made this part of Borneo their home.

He said efforts were being made to put this information into school books.

USM lecturer Jeffery Abdullah, who is part of the archaeology team, said they found the site by chance while working on the Samang Buat cave, about a kilometre from the site.

“We were walking to the cave when we found stone tools scattered and hidden among small rocks,” said Jeffery, who is pursuing a doctorate in archeology at the university.

Masidi said more should be done to study and conserve the state’s historical heritage.

“While many archaeological sites concentrated in Sabah’s east coast, more studies need to be held in the west coast and interior areas so we can get a better understanding on Sabah’s history as a whole,” he said.