Ancient North Borneo

> *Thousands of years of civilisation before colonial contact*

A Land of Ancient Peoples

The island of Borneo has been inhabited for at least 40,000 years. Archaeological evidence from the Niah Caves in present-day Sarawak confirms one of the oldest records of human habitation in Southeast Asia. The indigenous peoples of North Borneo — the Kadazan-Dusun, Murut, Bajau, and dozens of other communities — developed rich and distinct cultures, languages, and governance systems over millennia.

Early Trade and Civilisation

By the first millennium CE, North Borneo had established trade links with China, India, and the maritime civilisations of Southeast Asia. Chinese records from the Tang and Song dynasties describe the export of forest products, camphor, and beeswax from the island. Hindu-Buddhist influences reached the coastal communities, later followed by the spread of Islam through the Sultanates of Brunei and Sulu.

The Sultanate Period

By the 15th and 16th centuries, the Sultanate of Brunei exercised suzerainty over much of the northern coast of Borneo, while the Sultanate of Sulu — based in what is today the southern Philippines — held influence over the northeastern regions. These sultanates were the dominant political entities in the region at the time of European contact.

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