

Zuraina's passion for archaeology opens up the minds of the young

By [Dzulkifli Abdul Razak](#) - October 5, 2022 @ 3:14pm



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

SITI Zuraina Majid is well known in the study of archaeology, one that she has nurtured at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) since its early days.

The writer was then a science student who had little inkling about it. Fortunately, the university adopted a multi-disciplinary approach to education that opened the doors to other disciplines.

In fact, those studying the sciences are encouraged to take up to 30 per cent of courses in the humanities and social sciences.

Here is where archeology began to leave its imprint on the minds of many.

Locations like Lembah Bujang, said to be the richest archaeological site in Malaysia, created a world of its own that tells stories of yesteryears.

It provided a glimpse into the kind of society and lifestyle that often fascinates the mind.

The site is in the process of being nominated to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's World Heritage List.

Then comes the Perak Man. It is the name given to skeletal remains of a male thought to have lived about 11,000 years ago in the Lenggong Valley district of Hulu Perak.

It is said to be the oldest human skeleton found in Peninsular Malaysia. The remains were hidden for more than 10,000 years until they were excavated by a USM team in the early 1990s.

The Perak Man opened many more windows into trying to envisage the archaeological past, and connecting it to the present, if not the future.

The Archaeological Heritage of Lenggong Valley was added to Unesco's list of World Heritage Sites in 2012.

To students, such an exercise is intriguing since it leaves more rooms to explore, understand and create narratives that could offer a meaning of life.

At that point, education changes from passing examinations to passing through life in search of purpose and meaning.

This is the gap that needs to be closed because too often the learning of science, unlike archaeology, stays in labs and classrooms.

Seldom does science get to be translated into reality to provide answers to users.

It is seen as elitist and distant, and sometimes boring. When it was further reduced to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), it got dehumanised too.

All this point to the importance of inter- or transdisciplinary subjects like archaeology.

For this, Zuraina has done much. She has not only unearthed artifacts, but has also nurtured the minds of the young that are sometimes clouded by superstition.

The writer will be among the first to testify to this, especially after helming the alma mater beginning at the dawn of the 21st century.

Among the first challenge then was to reverse an attempt to close down the Archeological Centre.

The decision was allegedly recommended by the Office for Research and Innovation.

Archaeology was then regarded as "less" of a science and more of the humanities.

Many, including the writer, thought it was flawed, thanks to the early exposure to the discipline. Arguably, archaeology straddled between the two disciplines.

For example, the use of carbon dating to determine the age and period of an artifact is sufficient to illustrate how science comes in handy in interpreting archaeological discoveries.

Indeed, there are other cases where science and humanities are interwoven. As such, the Archaeological Centre was saved, and later expanded to discover other sites as it grew more relevant and confident.

One such discovery was in Bukit Bunuh located between the Titiwangsa Range and Bintang Hill. Its claim to fame is its possibility of being a local meteorite impact site.

All these were made possible by Zuraina's dedication.

The writer, an NST columnist for more than 20 years, is International Islamic University Malaysia rector