



Article

## Potential of Islamic Cemetery Complexes in Barus-North Sumatra as Archaeological Tourism Destinations

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Article Information	Abstract
Received : June 8, 2024 Revised : July 5, 2024 Accepted : August 18, 2024 Published: September 19, 2024	Historical and Archaeological Potential Exploration Program in Barus, Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra that was carried out in 2017 had discovered Islamic cemetery complexes distributed throughout the area that have potential as destinations for archaeological tourism. This is supported by the data obtained from field surveys to each cemetery complex and focus group discussion conducted with local residents of Barus. This study focuses on exploring the potential of five cemetery complexes comprising the Mahligai Cemetery, Papan Tinggi Cemetery, Tuan Ambar Cemetery, Ibrahim Syah Cemetery and Tuan Machdum Cemetery to serve as archaeological tourism destinations. The process of spreading Islam carried out by the <i>ulama</i> or Muslim scholars and the existence of various types of tombstones are subjects of attraction for visitors. In the process of developing a cemetery complex as a destination, it is necessary to improve public facilities such as the construction of museums or galleries, places of worship, parking lots, and public toilets. Improving the human resources are also a necessity, which can be done by empowering the local residents.
<b>Keywords</b> Archaeological tourism; tombstones; tourism destination; Islamic cemetery; Barus; North Sumatra.	
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## INTRODUCTION

A field survey conducted in 2017 in Barus on cemetery complexes had provided data on the current condition of each complex. There are five large cemetery complexes containing 670 tombstones, both intact and damaged. The five cemetery complexes consist of the Mahligai Cemetery, Papan Tinggi Cemetery, Tuan Ambar Cemetery, Tuan Machdum Cemetery and Tuan Ibrahim Syah Cemetery. The locations of these five complexes are spread throughout Barus and are easy to access. Only the location of the Papan Tinggi Cemetery is quite far because of its position on a hill and requires visitors to climb 700 stairs to reach the tombs.

Based on the results of epigraphic analysis on the inscription conducted by Ludvik Kalus (2008), there are several tombstones that have the year of death and the name of a character who has the title sheikh, king, and a name 'Suy' which is believed to be a woman. In 2015, Perret also managed to read an inscription written with the year 1350. Until now, this tombstone is the oldest to bear an inscription of year found in Barus (Perret & Surachman, 2015). The scattered distribution of such tombstones is evidence that there had been a spread of Islam in Barus. Although the number of tombstones that have inscriptions is minimal, the data on names and years that are decipherable have provided much needed information to indicate a process of preaching or teaching Islam in Barus, which were directly carried out by distinguished religious scholars. Such historical value and archaeological remains could potentially elevate Barus as a prospective archaeological tourism destination.

## METHOD

This study uses inductive reasoning, where data is collected to obtain information that is then used in preparing arguments. The techniques of collecting primary data were carried out by means of observation and focus group discussions with local people. Furthermore, secondary data was obtained from books, journals, and data from the tourism office of Central Tapanuli Regency.

The methods of historical and archaeological analyses are used to study and explore the facts or experiences as well as the past developments by trying to draw conclusions and make interpretations of the data from these events. The results of the data analysis are then interpreted to provide an overview of the historical background and its use. The interpretation results are expected to be able to explain the potential of the Islamic cemetery complexes in Barus as an archaeological tourism destination. This can be illustrated by the process of cultural travel in Barus, related to trade contacts at ports that had occurred and the process of Islamisation that had existed in Barus.

### Location of Barus

Barus is a sub-district in Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. The coordinates of Barus are at latitude 2°00'46.16", longitude 98°23'58.04" with an altitude of 1 – 261 m above sea level. The topography of Central Tapanuli Regency has a stretch of mountains, beaches, seas and rivers that are directly adjacent to the Indian Ocean coastline for ± 200 km and located in the Bukit Barisan mountain range.

Central Tapanuli Regency has an altitude that varies between the lowest areas, which are parallel to sea level to the highest areas in mountainous areas. As much as 50.46 percent of Central Tapanuli Regency is located at an altitude above 100 m above sea level. The area of Central Tapanuli Regency can be divided into several typologies of varying slopes consisting of Flat (*Datar*, 0–8%), Choppy (*Berombak*, 8–15 %), Wavy (*Bergelombang*, 15–25%), Steep (*Curam*, 25–40%) and Very Steep (*Terjal*, > 40%).

### History of Islam in Barus

Since earlier times, Barus was famous for its rich resource of camphor. The Arabs first mentioned the name Barus in 851 CE in a manuscript entitled *Ahbar as-sin wa l-hind*. The manuscript explains that Barus is a production centre of camphor with the best quality (Guillot, 1998, 2002). Camphor has been the subject of connection between Barus and the centre of the Islamic world in the Middle East, at least since the 9<sup>th</sup> century. This is based on the findings of various artefacts from the Middle East in the area, including beads and amulets or stone seals inscribed with Kufic letters. Based on these findings, it is estimated that a group of people who came from the Middle East had settled in Barus since the 9<sup>th</sup> century. However, the number was no more than the Indians who had been recorded to arrive in Barus much earlier (Suprayitno, 2012).

Historical sources in the form of chronicles, such as the Hulu Chronicle or also known as *Asal Keturunan Raja Barus* (Origin of the Descendants of Raja Barus), explained that the Arabs had come and settled in Barus because they were interested in the trading activities developed by the Indians. This chronicle, as well as another one, which is the Hilir Chronicle that is also known as *Sejarah Tuanku Batu Badan* (History of Tuanku Batu Badan) do not describe the process of Islamisation in Barus, but instead the Islamisation process in Tanah Batak (present-day North Tapanuli Regency). According to the Hilir Chronicle, Sultan Sultan Ibrahim went to Silindung, Pasaribu, and Bakara because of a dispute with his father Sultan Muhammad Syah. Then, he married the daughter of Bakara king and gave birth to a son named

Singa Maharaja. This chronicle also explains his dispute with the Sultan of Aceh, which ended in the beheading of Sultan Ibrahim by the Sultan of Aceh. Both of these chronicles were translated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it is estimated that the events described occurred in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which in this time Islam was already growing rapidly in Barus (Drakard, [1988](#); Nurhakim, [1989](#)).

### **Barus port as an entrance to Islam**

The west coast of Sumatra was generally rarely visited by trading ships, because of its steep coast and the strong waves of the Indian Ocean. Foreign traders such as Indians, Arabs and Persians who came to the ports on the west coast were attracted by various forest products available on the west coast of Sumatra. Sumatra Island has rich natural resources in the form of forest products and mining products. Products brought from the interior to the coast to be sold to foreign traders made the trading ports on this coast developed (Meuraxa, [1973](#)).

Considering that it is much expensive to buy products of Barus through intermediaries in North and East Sumatra, Arab-Persian and other foreign merchants preferred to buy them directly at their place of origin in Barus for a cheaper price (Tjandrasasmita, [2009](#)). Since Barus is in the coastal area, gradually the Barus Port was formed. This port was eventually used by ships to dock and before sailing back, bringing the products from Barus. These crops were sold by the Batak tribe who lived in the interior of Barus and worked as forest product gatherers (Asnan, [2007](#); Drakard, [1989](#)).

As a centre for trading, the Barus Port essentially became a center for networking for people of various ethnic groups, making it also functioned as a meeting place for informational exchange. Eventually, Barus became the focal point of the spread of Islam, introduced by the traders and merchants who doubled as preachers (Paeni, [1993](#)).

### **Archaeological remains as evidence of Islamisation**

Nowadays, evidence of Islamisation in Barus is found in the form of a distribution of tombs that bear Islamic-style headstones of varying sizes. The tombstones are located in the cemetery complexes of Tuan Maqhdum, Tuan Ibrahim Syah, Tuan Ambar, Papan Tinggi and Mahligai. All these ancient cemeteries are located in the Bukit Hasang settlement and its surroundings (**Figure 1**). According to the locals, these ancient tombs are associated with a group of Islamic preachers known as the "44 Wali". In addition, some tombstones are scattered between rice fields and hills in the village areas of *Kawasan Desa Kedai Gedang* and *Si Gambo-Gambo* (Perret & Surachman, [2002](#), [2015](#)).

The tombstones found in this complex area are not all in their original positions, because fallen tombstones were often erected back, while the fragmented ones were gathered in a single spot in their respective cemetery complex. The tombstones found in Barus have a variety of typologies, and this indicates a diverse origins and influence. However, these origins and influences have not been fully identified. Out of all the tombstones identified, the tombstones that bear inscriptions are very few in numbers and their condition is poor and difficult to read (Kalus, [2008](#); Perret, [2007](#)).

Based on several tombstones that have inscription, it is known that some of them have the title 'Shaykh', which is usually owned by Islamic teachers (Marrison, [1951](#)). A character named Ibrahim is mentioned in many local Barus sources, but there is no evidence that his tomb is in the Ibrahim Syah Cemetery complex. The Papan Tinggi Cemetery complex is also mentioned in local sources as the location of the tomb of an individual named "Tuan Said Mahmud". On the other hand, the cemetery complexes of Tuan Maqhdum, Tuan Ambar and Mahligai are not mentioned in any sources (Nurhakim, [1979](#)).



**Figure 1.** Locations of the cemetery complexes in Barus

It is known that some tombstones come from the type called ‘*Batu Aceh*’ (Aceh stone) based on typology (Othman, [1990](#); Suprayitno, [2011](#)). Perret & Surachman ([2015](#)) argues that it is possible that the stone was brought ready-made from Aceh except for the epitaph part of the inscription. This is known based on the similarities observed with tombstones found in Peninsular Malaysia, as well as in the Pattani region. In Barus, there were waves of tombstones imports from Aceh, which can be divided into two periods. The first wave of imports was estimated to occur in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the second wave of imports occurred in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the transitional period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These waves of imports can be distinguished based on the characteristics in terms of shape and decoration of the tombstones.

Ancient tombs with skilfully carved tombstones are significant monuments that are direct evidence inherited by the Batak-Barus Muslim community from the past. These ancient tombstones are archaeological and epigraphic evidence of the existence of a Muslim community in the development of Islam during early 13<sup>th</sup> century (Perret, et al., [2016](#)). It is also one of the important types of evidence in tracing the early Islamic culture in Barus.

However, some of the tombstones have the influence of pre-Islamic culture, which can be seen through the carving of decorative motifs in the form of symbols of Hindu-Buddhist teachings. This shows an important picture of the early stages of the development of Islam as a new teaching accepted by the Barus community (Perret, [2017](#)).

The ancient cemeteries in Barus are community burials that are based on a religious system as well as familial. For example, the Mahligai Cemetery complex is a cemetery that is very convoluted as it contains many groups of tombs (**Figure 2**). However, among the tombs are graves of famous sheikhs or scholars in Barus in the past. In addition, Barus there are also many graves of pious people as evidenced by the inscriptions of Qur'anic verses carved on the tombstones. This proves that Barus was once a place for the spread and teaching of Islam in the northern part of Sumatra (Maler, [2020](#), [2021](#)).



**Figure 2.** Mahligai cemetery

In addition to the presence of tombstones as archaeological evidence in Barus, an excavation was carried out in 1997 by a group of Indonesian-French archaeologists who later found a seal or amulet found outside the stratigraphic framework of the Lobu Tua site. The site is known to date from the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Although it is rather difficult to determine the exact year of the object, the object is the first ancient Islamic seal or amulet to be found in Indonesia based on records. This seal is made of dark green translucent glass, oval with a curved bottom edge. It is 15 mm long, 13 mm wide and 3 mm thick. There are two lines of Arabic inscriptions on the bottom side in the form of embossed reliefs. The first line reads the word "Allah" and the second line the word "Muhammad". Since the writing is upside down, it is clear that the object is a seal. However, the inscription can also be read from the other side since it is translucent (Kalus, [2000](#)). Kalus ([2008](#)) argued that this object also functioned as a talisman that was usually carried inside one's pocket. The year and origin of this object is still difficult to determine, but it can be concluded that this object is an imported item because glass making does not have a long tradition in Indonesia. Kalus ([2008](#)) also concluded that this seal is from the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century. In terms of origin, considering Barus had international relation at the port, it is possible that it came from foreign countries with a long history of glass-making technology like Iran or Khorasan.

## RESULT

The facilities in the five cemetery complexes in Barus have not undergone many renovations or additions. The facilities in question are everything related to supporting archaeological tourism program. The existence of ancient tombstones in the five cemetery complexes previously mentioned can be used to attract tourists. In the process of its formation, supporting facilities are needed so that tourists are more interested in visiting. Basic facilities such as tour guides are inadequate. This of course must be the main concern of the Tourism Office of Central Tapanuli Regency to develop the potential of archaeological tourism in Barus. The function of the tour guide is to provide explanations to tourists about the existence of the site, history, and other important values.

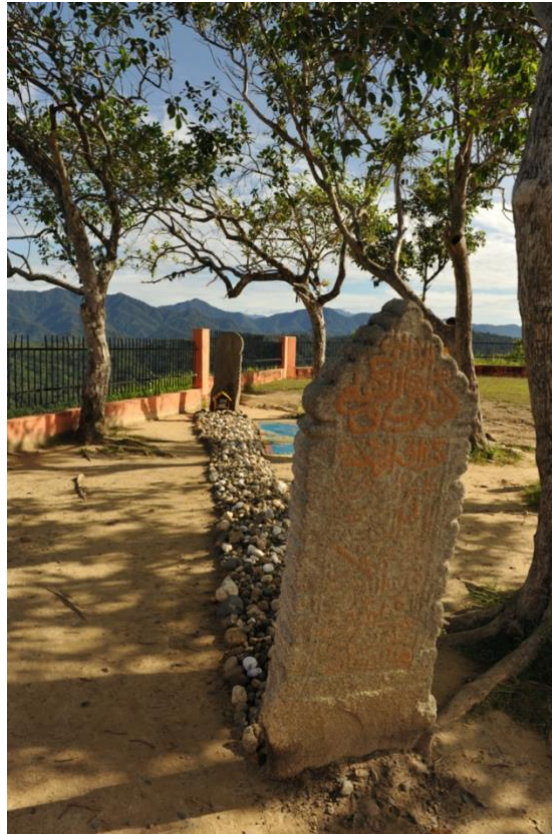
In addition to the Tourism Office of Central Tapanuli Regency, another governing agency that plays an active role in the development of Islamic Nusantara civilisation sites in Barus is *Balai Pelestarian Kebudayaan Wilayah II* (BPK or Cultural Preservation Centre) which oversees the cultural sites in the provinces of North Sumatra, focusing more on-site preservation. BPK *Wilayah II* is under the Directorate General of Culture, which is an institution of the central government under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia. Both the Tourism Office of Central Tapanuli Regency and BPK have the most responsibility for cultural sites at the local government and central government levels respectively. Hence, the cooperation of both agencies is advisable for the development of the site area.

Another important facility that is lacking is in terms of inadequate infrastructure. Facilities such as the Barus Tourism Information Centre have not been established yet, even though such facility is very necessary for tourist information in Barus. In addition, supporting facilities at tourist sites are also inadequate, such as parking lots, retribution counters, information boards, and a pavilion or shelter for tourists.

In the process of promoting a tourist spot, the involvement of stakeholders is needed. Stakeholders serve to bring tourists to tourist attractions. These stakeholders usually come from the tourism industry sector. One of the stakeholders who play a role is the community, especially the community engaged in tourism such as the creative community, the travel agency community and the community of culture and history lovers. All these communities are needed to develop tourism in Barus, but until now, there has been no such community in Barus.

## DISCUSSION

The archaeological tourism potential of the Barus cemetery complexes is remarkable attraction because it has historical and heritage values in the form of artefacts and monuments that can explain the process of spreading Islam in Indonesia, especially on the island of Sumatra. Until now, these five cemetery complexes are still often visited by visitors from outside Barus to make a grave pilgrimage. For example, for the Papan Tinggi Cemetery, visitors often visited with a small pebble that later will be placed between the north and south tombstones. The largest tombstone among those in other cemetery complexes in Barus is also located in Papan Tinggi Cemetery. The tombstone, with a height of 102 cm, 47 cm in width and 46 cm in diameter, is one of the attractions for visitors (**Figure 3**). In addition, the visiting the cemetery complex also requires visitors to climb up stairs of about 700 steps, which is also an attraction especially for visitors who are active climbers or hikers. Besides Papan Tinggi Cemetery, the Mahligai Cemetery complex is also an attraction for its large area of 1,960 m<sup>2</sup> and a large number of tombstones reaching 400 in total.



**Figure 3.** Papan Tinggi cemetery

The concept that can be done to empower potential of local residents and increase the potential of Islamic archaeological remains is to make an archaeological visit or tour package in the five burial complexes. The package would offer each visitor to be accompanied by a tour guide to get around, or visitors can walk around independently. However, every visitor must be charged a fee to enter. This fee will later be distributed to each guide who has taken visitors around and for site maintenance. If managed properly, this will surely be an additional income for the local residents of Barus. If visitors choose to visit all cemetery complexes at the same time, the tour should start from the Tuan Machdum Cemetery to the Tuan Ibrahim Syah Cemetery, Tuan Ambar Cemetery and finally the Mahligai Cemetery. For the Papan Tinggi Cemetery, it is better to do it separately because the terrain is different from the other four tombs. However, this can be discussed with visitors.

Out of the five cemetery complexes that have the potential as archaeological tourism destinations, only the Mahligai Cemetery complex has a slight improvement in terms of facility, as a resting place resembling a large pavilion has been built, as well as a parking lot (**Figure 4**). As for the other four cemetery complexes, due to limited space of the complex that are cramped with the housing area of local residents, constructions of more facilities are difficult to be carried out. The existing facilities in Mahligai Cemetery can certainly be used if it becomes the last cemetery to be visited under the tour package discussed earlier. As the suggested last stop of tour, the pavilion can be used as an area for educational activities besides as a resting place. An example of an activity that can be done is a workshop on how to write Kufic script, which is the most common type of script inscribed on tombstones in Barus. Visitors can bring back the results of their writing as souvenirs from Barus. This process would surely require tour guides that can conduct such activity.

The Central Tapanuli Regency is directly responsible for the Barus area by paying attention to the opportunities that can be developed in Barus, especially in the tourism sector

by providing training to the surrounding community. The training can be started with the group *Pokdarwis* (*Kelompok Sadar Wisata* or Tourism Awareness Group) which had been formed by the Tourism Office of Central Tapanuli Regency but had not been fully empowered yet. The trainings carried out could include training on tourism service businesses, information on tourism in Barus, and the need to maintain historical and archaeological sites or objects as tourist destinations. Human resource development is carried out through regular socialisation or counselling regarding cultural preservation and tourism awareness, training related to tourism development such as hospitality training, scouting training, information technology training, homestay management training, entrepreneurship training and others.



**Figure 4.** The facility of Mahligai cemetery

Social media also plays a role in promoting Barus archaeological tourism. The promotion would explain the price details for visitors who choose to use the services of a guide or without a guide. In addition, social media also functions as a means of setting a schedule for each visitor, so that clear data on the number of visitors can be seen. In managing social media, it can be empowered by young people who are more technologically perceptive in their operation. Hence, the opportunities that are available through the development of archaeological tourism can be filled by locals of various age groups.

In Barus, there is a warehouse built by the Arkenas Research Centre that stores artefacts from excavations that had been carried out in the area. The warehouse is not open to the public and can only be accessed if one is accompanied by an officer from BRIN (The National Research and Innovation Agency). A site that has a high historical value must at least have a museum or gallery that can be one of the visitor's destinations, as well as a medium of education. Such gallery can also be used as a place for exhibitions of tombstones that are no longer *in-situ* (in its original position). Besides exhibiting objects, the gallery can also function as a place to store tombstones that have only been placed on the outskirts of the cemetery complexes. The gallery can also serve as an educational tool for visitors who do not choose to be accompanied by a guide. For a gallery, it is better to make posters that contain an explanation of the history of Barus and each cemetery complexes, including significant information such as the existence of tombstones bearing the title 'Sheikh' and year of death. In addition, posters could be designed in an attractive way so that visitors are more interested in reading. Selecting



information to be incorporated in such posters can be ease through collaboration with the Cultural Preservation Centre (BPK) II of North Sumatra, since the archaeological sites in Barus are also under the scope of this institution. Such collaboration would make information presented to visitors to be more accurate.

Another suggestion is to have activities with community engagement, such as a demonstration by the local community on the process of making tombstones that are still being carried out in present time. Visitors can witness first-hand on the intricate process of producing such tombstones and find out the characteristic features as well as the continuity of such practice from the distant past to the present. In addition, other activities of the past still being practiced today such as working in paddy fields, breeding, and cultivating camphor that is the prima donna commodity in the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries could also be demonstrated as part of the archaeological tourism tour package.



**Figure 5.** The potential of Barus landscape

## CONCLUSION

This study found that Barus certainly has a great potential to become an archaeological tourism destination. This is because visitors are attracted to the tombstones distributed in the five cemetery complexes. Second, visitors are also interested in the historical narrative that can explain the role of *ulama* or scholars in spreading Islam in Barus. Third, these cemetery complexes are already becoming pilgrimage destination of Muslims, hence it has potential as a place for religious tourism. Finally, the natural environment of Barus that is consisted of mountains, hills, rivers, and the sea are worth to be witnessed and experienced by visitors (**Figure 5**). Based on the findings above, it is necessary to increase facilities such as museums or galleries, places of worship, parking lots, and public toilets. These facilities must also be supported by increasing the capacity of human resources, especially from the surrounding local community through programs that have been established by the Tourism Office of Central Tapanuli Regency.

Recommendations related to the sites in Barus included rescue efforts, maintenance and possible developments that can be carried out regarding the sites' usage as archaeological tourism destinations. Conservation of each tombstone needs to be considered again, because many tombstones have their position altered, possibly crooked due to changes in soil structure. Besides that, since most tombstones are directly exposed to the environment, weather conditions also made certain tombstones broke or damaged. Since most Muslim tombs have a pair of tombstones (north and south), those that are still in pairs will usually be maintained with conservation. For those that have lost its pair, they are usually placed on the edge of the cemetery area.

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