



## Islamic Archaeology in Kota Rintang: A Historical Study of the Existence of the Aru Kingdom in the Development of Islam in North Sumatra

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### ABSTRACT

Kota Rintang, located in North Sumatra, is rich in Islamic history and cultural heritage in Indonesia. This study aims to explore the existence of Islamic archaeological remains in Kota Rintang and their implications for understanding Indonesian history and culture. The research questions focus on identifying the types of Islamic archaeological remains in this area and how these artifacts provide insight into the development of Islam in Indonesia. The methodology employs a historical approach combined with archaeological techniques, collecting data from sites such as tomb complexes, mosque ruins, and everyday artifacts like statue fragments, jewelry, and pottery. The findings indicate that these remains are crucial for uncovering the past lives of the community and the role of Islam in shaping local cultural identity. In conclusion, the archaeological remains in Kota Rintang not only enrich our understanding of Islamic history in Indonesia but also strengthen the nation's cultural identity.

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## INTRODUCTION

North Sumatra is one of the regions in Indonesia that is rich in Islamic history and archaeological heritage. These remnants encompass various aspects of past life and culture, playing a significant role in understanding the development of Islam and cultural diversity in the area. One of the most renowned Islamic archaeological sites in North Sumatra is the complex of Malay Islamic royal tombs in Deli Serdang (Sumanti & Batubara, 2019). These tombs stand as silent witnesses to the golden age of the Deli Sultanate, which was a cultural and religious center of Islam in North Sumatra. Through archaeological and historical research, scholars can uncover various information regarding the social, cultural, and religious life of past communities (Supriatna, 2022).

In addition to tombs, there are other archaeological sites that form an essential part of the Islamic heritage in North Sumatra. These include ancient mosques, artifacts, and old manuscripts that provide a glimpse into how Islam was introduced and developed in the region. Studies on the architecture of ancient mosques and religious artifacts offer valuable insights into the religious practices and spiritual life of the people during those times (Pinem, 2018).

The Islamic archaeological heritage in North Sumatra also faces various challenges such as environmental degradation, climate change, and human activities that can threaten the preservation of these historical sites. Therefore, the protection, maintenance, and further research of Islamic archaeological remains are crucial to ensure that this valuable heritage can be enjoyed by future generations. Besides their historical and archaeological value, Islamic archaeological remains in North Sumatra also have the potential to become cultural tourism attractions that can provide economic benefits to local communities (Guillot, Kalus, & Molen, 2008).

Kota Rintang is one such area rich in Islamic history and cultural heritage in Indonesia. The Islamic archaeological remains in this region are of great significance in understanding the development of Islam in Indonesia and strengthening the nation's cultural identity. In this paper, we will explore the existence of Islamic archaeological remains in Kota Rintang and their implications for understanding Indonesian history and culture. The Islamic archaeological remains in Kota Rintang include various forms, from tombs and mosques to everyday artifacts. A notable example is the complex of tombs that serve as the final resting place for religious figures and local rulers. Additionally, there are ruins of mosques and artifacts such as statue fragments, jewelry, and pottery that provide insights into the lives of past



communities (Batubara, [2020](#)). The preservation of Islamic archaeological remains in Kota Rantang holds significant importance in maintaining the nation's cultural heritage. By understanding and preserving these archaeological remains, we can appreciate our ancestors' legacy and strengthen the nation's cultural identity (Perret et al., [2020](#)).

As a comparison to the title of the relevant research and the novelty value related to this study, we present several relevant previous studies:

The research by Siahaan et al. indicates that the site in Rantang Village, Hamparan Perak District, Deli Serdang Regency, was an active trading port from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, related to the Aru/Haru Kingdom, with artifacts including ancient tombs, celadon, and pottery reflecting the morphology of modern gravestones (Siahaan, Ritonga, & Faturrahman, [2024](#)). The research by Gultom shows that the Kota Rantang site on the eastern coast of North Sumatra, which was once an active trading center and a significant axis of civilization besides Pulau Kampai and the Kota Cina site, is evidenced by numerous archaeological findings indicating local interaction with international traders (Gultom, [2018](#)). Suprayitno's research indicates that the typological and chronological analysis of Aceh gravestones and inscriptions in Kota Rantang and Barus, North Sumatra, suggests that the Islamization process has been ongoing since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, forming the Islamic political community of the Aru Kingdom in Kota Rantang Hamparan Perak (Suprayitno, [2012](#)).

This study highlights the existence of the Aru Kingdom and its role in the development of Islam in North Sumatra through archaeological research in Kota Rantang, which has not been extensively discussed in previous literature. The novelty of this research lies in the typological and chronological analysis of Aceh gravestones and inscriptions found in Kota Rantang, revealing the Islamization process since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This study also fills a research gap by providing strong archaeological evidence of the interaction between local communities and international traders and the significant role of the Aru Kingdom in spreading Islam. The state-of-the-art in this research is a holistic approach combining archaeological analysis with historical studies, providing a comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of that period, thereby adding new insights into the study of Islamic archaeology and history in North Sumatra.

## METHOD

The research methodology employed in this study is a historical approach with an archaeological perspective. The research began with data collection through literature review and field observations (Majid & Wahyudi, [2014](#)). The sources used include historical records, ancient manuscripts, and archaeological findings such as gravestones, inscriptions, and other artifacts discovered at the Kota Rantang site. Data collection was conducted using direct observation techniques on location, photographic documentation, and recording the position and condition of the artifacts. Additionally, interviews with local historians and archaeologists were conducted to obtain relevant additional information (Gottschalk, [2010](#)).

Data analysis was performed through typological and chronological approaches aimed at understanding the historical and cultural context of the artifacts found. Gravestones and inscriptions were analyzed using epigraphy techniques to identify and interpret the inscribed texts. The data obtained were then integrated with historical records to reconstruct the chronology of the existence and development of the Aru Kingdom within the context of the Islamization of North Sumatra. This method enabled the researchers to identify historical patterns and cultural interactions that occurred, providing a more comprehensive picture of the role of the Aru Kingdom in the spread of Islam in the region. The analysis results were then presented in the form of a historical narrative supported by archaeological evidence, contributing significantly to understanding Islamic history in North Sumatra.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### Kota Rantang

Islamic archaeological remains in North Sumatra are evident along the eastern coastline bordering the Malacca Strait. These locations have the potential to hold valuable archaeological information, including Klumpang, Kota Rantang, Hamparan Perak in Deli Serdang, Mabar Sukamulia in Medan, Pulau Kampai in Langkat, and the Barus burial complex. Kota Rantang is situated at the mouth of the Belawan River in Deli Serdang. Kota Rantang is a village located west of China City, approximately 2 km from residential areas. The water in this village has a salty taste. This place is located 15 km northwest of Medan. The Diski and Semayang rivers converge in this settlement. Kota Rantang has a relatively

extensive land area. The search was conducted at geographic coordinates 3° 44' 20.22" N and 98° 35' 20.70" E, corresponding to the location of the KRT/TP2/2016 excavation on Pulau Majapahit (Gultom, [2018](#)).

Kota Rantang is a rural settlement located in Hamparan Perak, Deli Serdang, North Sumatra. This location is believed to have been a former trading center on the eastern coast of Sumatra. Archaeological findings at the Kota Rantang site provide conclusive evidence of an ancient civilization that existed in this area. Findings from this site indicate maritime and trade connections within and outside the Sumatra coast. These connections directly facilitated the exchange of goods between inland residents (who produced various products) and newcomers from around the world located outside Sumatra. The presence of external traders not only benefited local traders but also the local community as a whole. This is because these traders met the community's needs by offering various commodities not available or produced locally, particularly in North Sumatra, located on Sumatra Island (Koestoro, Purnawibowo, & Oetomo, [2016](#)).

Kota Rantang is located in the village of Kota Rantang in Hamparan Perak, Deli Serdang. The topography of the Kota Rantang area consists of alluvial plains formed by the sediment deposition of the Sungai Hitam (*Arangdalu*) and the Sungai Paya Puntung, both of which flow into the Belawan River. Most residents in the area engage in agricultural activities, including cultivating their land for rice, coconut, oil palm, and cocoa plantations. Additionally, they participate in fish farming by establishing ponds and fish farms.

The discovery of ancient tombs around Kota Rantang provides evidence of Islam's impact on the area. Further investigation is needed to determine whether this region holds the key to unraveling the origins of Islam in the coastal areas of Medan. Based on these facts, it is plausible that this area had significant influence during that period. Given the current inadequate condition of the site, additional research can still be conducted in this area to gain a comprehensive understanding of the grandeur of this place on the eastern coast of Sumatra. We can show future generations that an important civilization emerged in ancient times in North Sumatra (Suprayitno, [2012](#)).

### Islamic Archaeological Findings in Kota Rantang

In Kota Rantang, archaeologists have found gravestone fragments and various ceramic fragments from different periods. These include fragments from the Yuan Dynasty in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Ming Dynasty in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese ceramics from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Thai ceramics from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Burmese ceramics from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and Khmer ceramics from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Based on research data from McKinnon and Tjahjono, the ceramic fragments are known to have different production periods and sources. The majority of the data found consists of pottery fragments from Thailand and China. The comprehensive findings from both studies are as follows: 24 fragments are from China in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, while 101 fragments are from China in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Additionally, 467 fragments can be traced back to China in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Fourteen fragments originate from China between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Additionally, seven artifacts from mainland Southeast Asia can be traced back to the Khmer era in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Furthermore, 262 pieces can be associated with Vietnam during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. There are 15 complete manuscripts from Thailand and 55 fragments from Burma, all from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The archaeological artifacts known as "Aceh Stones" are gravestones from Kota Rantang, dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Sumanti, [2021](#)).

The C14 radiocarbon dating results of the nibung wood column sample from box KRT/TP3/2016/spit 3 show a date of 1240 CE, equivalent to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, if the sample testing period is changed to 2016, the scenario is as follows: The earliest year is 1186 CE, equivalent to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, while the lowest year is 1426 CE within the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The main calculation result is 1306 CE, which falls within the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The chronological period determined by C14 radiocarbon analysis, based on the 2016 calculations, is 1186 CE - 1306 CE - 1426 CE. The figures for this year are still manually calculated. The C14 radiocarbon was analytically calibrated using Calib Rev 7.0.2, resulting in a range of 710 ± 120 BP. The calibration was conducted with a two-sigma result and a decimal value close to one (0936921). This calibration indicates a time range from 1118 CE (12<sup>th</sup> century) to 1435 CE (15<sup>th</sup> century).

The burial sites in Kota Rantang can be categorized into four different regions. They are located on the banks of the Sei Semayang River, specifically behind banana trees. The location coordinates are 03° 44' 09.4" N (Latitude) and 98° 35' 03.8" E (Longitude), with an elevation of 19 meters above sea level. Next, they are located on the banks of the

Diski River in the Mandailing community park area at coordinates 03° 44' 14.7" N (Latitude) and 98° 34' 43.6" E (Longitude), with an elevation of 18 meters above sea level; gravestones are scattered among the shrubs. Only three graves remain intact (Noviyanti & Putra, [2023](#)).

The third location is in a rice field area north of the first and second tombs, approximately 500 meters from the composite embankment. The coordinates are 03° 44' N (Latitude) and 98° 35' 06.8" E (Longitude), at an elevation of 16 meters above sea level. The fourth location is behind a rice mill on the Hamparan Perak-Tandam Hilir highway. The exact coordinates are 03° 42' 39.2" N (Latitude) and 98° 35' 30.7" E (Longitude), with an elevation of 19 meters above sea level.

The placement of the burial sites is concerning; the initial graves, including one gravestone adorned with a ship's anchor, have disappeared. The second grave has been partially excavated, as it was believed that there was valuable treasure beneath it. The third burial site also faced a similar fate, with many gravestones overturned and left among the foliage. The fourth burial site's condition is further worsened by the presence of rice mill waste covering it. The local community is unaware of the identities of the individuals buried at these sites or the historical background of the graves. Nevertheless, according to local residents, during the 1990s, they could still observe sturdy boat pillars planted in the middle of the swamp. However, these boat pillars are no longer visible today. The village name Majapahit might be interpreted as contemporaneous with the Majapahit kingdom between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. These boat pillars are believed to belong to ancient Majapahit ships that launched an attack on the Aru Kingdom around the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as depicted in the *Negarakertagama* poem, stanza 13:1 (Mustafar, [2022](#)).

### The Aru Kingdom in the Development of Islam in North Sumatra

The four burial sites in Kota Rantang are located near riverbanks. Specifically, the sites are near the Lalang River (site 4), Sei Semayang River (site 1), Diski River (site 2), and the confluence of the Diski and Sei Semayang Rivers (site 3). The sources of these rivers are in the hills, specifically Mount Sibayak in the Karo Highlands and Mount Leuser on the Aceh-Karo border. They then flow towards Belawan and eventually reach the Malacca Strait. Additionally, there are the Deli, Percut, Bedera, and Wampu rivers, along with various others, all emptying into the eastern coast of Sumatra.

The ancient nature of these burial sites can be inferred from their geographical locations. The site locations indicate that they were once important ports where economic and political activities occurred on the eastern coast of Sumatra. This happened during a time when land transportation was unavailable. The presence of pottery and glass bowls from Kota Rantang (9<sup>th</sup> century) and Buddha statues and other sculptures and ceramics in Kota Cina further support this view (Suprayitno, [2011](#)).

A total of 50 flat-base gravestones of types AP2, AP3, AP4, and AP8 were found in the four burial locations. The AP2 type gravestones are the most frequently encountered, with a total of 24 examples. The findings from Kota Rantang are intriguing for two main reasons: the large quantity and the basic, simple nature of the types and shapes. The smallest gravestone size available is the AP8 type, measuring 5x4x16 cm. The largest gravestone, also of the AP8 type, has dimensions of 22x9x40 cm. Gravestones from Peureulak, Samudera Pasai, Kampung Pande, and Pahang were found in Kota Rantang. However, the most interesting aspect is the absence of AP3 gravestones at other locations, including Aceh or Malaysia. Therefore, the geographical location of Kota Rantang is significant in two aspects: it is known for its distinctive and large gravestones, setting it apart from burial sites found in Sumatra and Malaysia, and possibly all of Southeast Asia.

The AP8 type gravestone is unique as it contains inscriptions written in Arabic script. The base of the monument has the Shahada inscription "*Lâ illâha illa Allâh Muhammad Rusûl Allâh.*" The top gravestone reads "*al-maut al-haq,*" meaning "death is real." The middle inscription consists of the letters "*ain*" and "*mim*," symbolizing the Arabic letters "*aqmun/sanahtun*," meaning "year," and the numbers 8 and 4. It can be concluded that in the year 804 H / 1383 CE, the estimation of 804 H aligns well with historical evidence that the Aru or Haru Kingdom was established in this area, with its center of government moving to the gateway of the Belawan River (Muhaeminah, [2012](#)).

Based on the above explanation, it is known that the gravestones in Kota Rantang have been used since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The countries where this particular type of gravestone is found can serve as a reference for determining the year of its discovery. It was utilized for purposes unrelated to the date inscribed on the gravestone. Samudera Pasai, Beruas, Malacca, and Pahang are Malay countries established in the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus, it can be concluded that the gravestones in Kota Rantang are contemporaneous with the gravestones in Samudera Pasai and

were utilized in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, Kota Rintang in Hamparan Perak holds significant importance in this century. Although the gravestones do not contain the deceased's names, they are presumed to belong to noble or religious families.

If this statement is true, it means that the Aru/Haru Kingdom has been officially recognized as an Islamic state since the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. This conclusion is drawn from the analysis of several gravestones found in Kota Rintang and references from the Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai, the history of the Malay people, and Marco Polo's documentation of his visit to the area in 1292. The gravestones include that of Sultan Malikussaleh, established in 1297 CE. The identity of the first ruler of Aru who converted to Islam remains unknown. According to Chinese records, the name Aru/Haru was first recorded in 1282 CE when it sent envoys to Emperor Kublai Khan (Makmur et al., [2022](#)).

The only archaeological evidence of the Aceh gravestone in Kota Rintang is the only gravestone estimated to date from the 14<sup>th</sup> century (1383 CE). Therefore, a study of the gravestones in Kota Rintang and Barus will be conducted to develop a hypothesis about the Islamization process in North Sumatra before the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The gravestones in Kota Rintang are similar to the gravestones in Peureulak and Pasai, as evidenced by the types of letters. The lack of elaborate decorations and overall simplicity indicates that the Islamization process in this region was still in its early stages. As a result, there was a shortage of skilled artisans in gravestone carving, unlike during the Samudera Pasai and Aceh Darussalam Kingdoms (Dwisuda, Rohani, & Susanti, [2022](#)).

The discovery of more than 50 gravestones in Kota Rintang, Hamparan Perak, with the same types and letters as those found in Peureulak and Pasai, provides strong evidence that the Kota Rintang area holds significant historical importance in the Haru Kingdom. Royal family burial complexes are usually located near the king's residence, commonly known as the palace. Traditional royal cities often arrange the king's palace, mosque, market, square, and royal/noble burial complexes close to each other. Therefore, it can be concluded that Kota Rintang was the final resting place of the Haru royal dynasty, originating in Kota Cina (Labuhan Deli).

In Kota Rintang, archaeologists have found gravestone fragments and various ceramic fragments from different periods. These include fragments from the Yuan Dynasty in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Ming Dynasty in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese ceramics from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Thai ceramics from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Burmese ceramics from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and Khmer ceramics from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The gravestones at this site bear unmarked Shahada inscriptions.

The four burial sites in Kota Rintang are located near riverbanks. Specifically, the sites are near the Lalang River (site 4), Sei Semayang River (site 1), Diski River (site 2), and the confluence of the Diski and Sei Semayang Rivers (site 3). The sources of these rivers are in the hills, specifically Mount Sibayak in the Karo Highlands and Mount Leuser on the Aceh-Karo border. They then flow towards Belawan and eventually reach the Malacca Strait. Additionally, there are the Deli, Percut, Bedera, and Wampu rivers, along with various others, all emptying into the eastern coast of Sumatra (Perret et al., [2020](#)).

## CONCLUSION

The conclusions of this study indicate that the Aru Kingdom played a significant role in the Islamization process in North Sumatra in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeological findings of inscribed gravestones and other artifacts indicate the presence of a significant Muslim community in Kota Rintang, which interacted not only with the local population but also with traders from outside the Nusantara. This process of Islamization influenced the spiritual and religious aspects of the local community and brought about changes in the social and political structure of the region, as reflected in the artifacts that depict Islamic culture and civilization. This study has several limitations that need to be addressed. First, limited access to some significant sites and artifacts that may still be buried or hidden restricts the completeness of the data collected. Second, the interpretation of archaeological data is highly dependent on the condition and preservation of the artifacts found, which in some cases may have deteriorated. Additionally, the limited literature and written sources about the Aru Kingdom also affect the depth of historical analysis. Therefore, further research with more intensive excavation techniques and a multidisciplinary approach is essential to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the role and contribution of the Aru Kingdom in the development of Islam in North Sumatra.

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