

Representation of Hindu–Buddhist Heritage in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum: The Politics of Memory and Early Historical Identity

Muhammad Ricky Hardiyansyah*, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

Surya Aymanda Nababan, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

Audy Amalia Putri, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of Hindu–Buddhist heritage in the Museum Situs Kotta Cinna and its role in shaping memory politics and early historical identity in North Sumatra. The study asks how Hindu–Buddhist remains are curated and narrated, and what form of historical identity is constructed through these practices. Using a qualitative approach that combines site observation, exhibition analysis, archival research, and interviews with museum stakeholders, the study applies theories of memory and identity to interpret curatorial strategies and narrative framing. The findings show that the museum selectively presents Kotta Cinna as evidence of an early cosmopolitan polity shaped by transregional networks while integrating it into contemporary local and national identity discourses. This process reflects how archaeological objects are transformed into symbolic capital for regional pride and historical legitimacy. The study contributes by demonstrating that museum representation functions as an active mechanism of memory production rather than mere preservation, offering a clearer framework for understanding the role of heritage institutions in constructing early Sumatran identity.

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*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

✉ mhd-ricky@fkip.uisu.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

The Kotta Cinna Site Museum is a public institution established to manage, preserve, and exhibit archaeological findings from the Kota Cina Site along the eastern coast of North Sumatra. Institutionally, the museum functions as a space for education and historical interpretation, presenting artifacts such as Hindu–Buddhist statues, imported ceramics, coins, and remnants of brick structures through permanent exhibitions. The management of its collections is carried out through processes of curation, classification, and presentation grounded in specific historical narratives, positioning the museum not merely as a repository, but as a medium through which historical meaning is actively constructed for the public.

Within contemporary scholarship, museums are understood as epistemic institutions that produce, classify, and disseminate knowledge about the past through particular representational frameworks. Approaches in *museum studies* demonstrate that exhibition design, object curation, and interpretive language constitute discursive practices that shape the public's horizon of historical understanding (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Macdonald, 2006). From a critical perspective, heritage is not treated as an inherent entity, but as a construct legitimized through authoritative discourse and institutional mechanisms. Collective memory, when institutionalized within museum spaces, reveals how historical experiences are reorganized into coherent and structured narratives (Halbwachs, 2020; Nora, 1989).

Hindu–Buddhist heritage in Indonesian historiography is often positioned as an early phase in the formation of political structures, religious systems, and trade networks across the Nusantara region. Archaeological findings in the form of statues, brick structures, inscriptions, and imported artifacts from Asian maritime networks point to the intensity of cultural and economic exchanges from the first millennium to the early second millennium CE (Miksic, 2007). Representations of this period contribute to shaping collective imaginaries regarding the depth of history and the continuity of regional civilization. The production of meaning surrounding Hindu–Buddhist heritage unfolds not only within academic discourse but also within public institutions endowed with interpretive authority.

The Kota Cina Site, located on the eastern coast of North Sumatra, has been identified as a settlement and port area active between the 11th and 14th centuries CE. Archaeological research records the presence of brick structures,



fragments of Hindu–Buddhist statues, Chinese ceramics, coins, and evidence of trade activities integrated into Southeast Asian maritime networks (McKinnon, [1984](#); Perret et al., [2013](#)). These findings situate the site within a complex regional historical configuration, encompassing economic, religious, and social interactions. The multilayered character of the site indicates that Kota Cina constitutes a historical space that cannot be reduced to a single interpretive dimension.

The Kotta Cinna Site Museum serves as an institutional medium that transforms archaeological data into public narratives through curatorial practices, spatial organization, and the formulation of interpretive texts. This process determines how artifacts are selected, arranged, and imbued with meaning, thereby producing specific representations of the past. Such a condition underscores that museums are not neutral entities; they are actively involved in shaping frameworks of historical understanding.

The concept of the politics of memory provides an analytical foundation for understanding how the past is institutionalized within museum spaces. It refers to institutional practices that determine the selection, hierarchy, and articulation of historical narratives in the public sphere (Assmann, [2011](#)). As loci of memory representation, museums operate mechanisms of legitimation through the selection of objects deemed representative and authoritative. The emphasis on Hindu–Buddhist artifacts in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum reflects a symbolic construction of a particular historical phase that is granted a central position within the narrative.

Historical identity, within this framework, is understood as the outcome of discursive articulation shaped through representational practices and the institutionalization of memory (Hall, [1990](#)). Collective imaginaries concerning origins and continuity are constructed through symbols and narratives legitimized by cultural institutions (Anderson, [2006](#)). The Kotta Cinna Site Museum positions Kota Cina as an early historical entity characterized by temporal depth and transregional connectivity. This articulation integrates archaeological heritage into the broader construction of regional identity.

Representation in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum also reveals the relationship between the complexity of archaeological data and the need for systematic narrative presentation. Archaeological evidence is inherently fragmentary and open to reinterpretation, whereas exhibition spaces demand structural coherence to be intelligible to visitors (Walsh, [2002](#)). The negotiation between the diversity of data and communicative demands produces curated and directed forms of representation. This process highlights the institutional role in defining the boundaries of historical meaning.

The Hindu–Buddhist heritage displayed in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum further represents the dimension of maritime cosmopolitanism along the Sumatran coast. Imported artifacts and indications of international trade networks demonstrate significant cross-cultural connectivity (Miksic, [2013](#); Perret et al., [2024](#)). The emphasis on this aspect expands the meaning of the site as part of a dynamic Southeast Asian historical configuration, positioning Kota Cina within a broader historical landscape that transcends local boundaries.

This study situates the Kotta Cinna Site Museum as an institution that actively constructs collective memory and historical identity through representational practices. It addresses a gap in existing scholarship, which remains limited in linking the institutional dimensions of museums with the production of historical meaning, while also clarifying the museum's contribution to understanding the relationship between archaeological heritage, the politics of memory, and identity construction in North Sumatra.

Previous studies indicate that the representation of heritage within cultural institutions is closely intertwined with the politics of memory and identity construction. Macdonald ([2013](#)), in *Memorylands*, argues that museums function as arenas for negotiating collective identity in Europe through the selection and narration of the past, a perspective that resonates with the representational dynamics of the Kotta Cinna Site Museum; however, Macdonald's work focuses on the contemporary European context, whereas this study examines Hindu–Buddhist heritage in North Sumatra. Harrison ([2012](#)), in *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, demonstrates that heritage constitutes a social practice legitimized through institutions, similar to the institutionalization of Hindu–Buddhist artifacts in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum, although his analysis does not specifically address Southeast Asian archaeology. Smith ([2006](#)) introduces the concept of *Authorized Heritage Discourse*, explaining the dominance of certain narratives within heritage institutions; while the similarity lies in the analysis of authoritative discourse, this study focuses on the context of a local site museum. Pearce ([1992](#)), in her examination of museums and identity in East Asia, finds that early historical exhibitions are often used to establish

regional identity legitimacy, a finding relevant to the construction of early history in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum, despite differing geographical contexts. Meanwhile, O'Connor (2015), in his study of archaeology and maritime memory in Southeast Asia, shows that ancient port sites are frequently represented as symbols of historical cosmopolitanism; the parallel lies in the interpretation of maritime networks, whereas this study explores how such symbolism is articulated within the spatial and interpretive framework of the Kotta Cinna Site Museum. Collectively, this body of literature demonstrates that museum institutions play an active role in shaping interpretive frameworks for material heritage and historical identity.

These studies reveal a strong emphasis on developing theoretical frameworks concerning museums, heritage, and memory, yet they have not specifically examined how site museums in Indonesia—particularly the Kotta Cinna Site Museum—construct historical meaning through curatorial practices based on local archaeological findings. Existing research also tends to separate archaeological analysis from representational analysis, leaving the relationship between material data and the production of historical narratives insufficiently integrated within the Southeast Asian context.

This study bridges archaeological materiality with museum representational practices within a unified analytical framework focused on the politics of memory and identity construction. It contributes to the fields of museology and historiography by providing an empirical analysis centered on the Kotta Cinna Site Museum, thereby enriching understanding of how Hindu–Buddhist heritage is represented, negotiated, and mobilized as a foundation for articulating early historical identity in North Sumatra.

Research on Kota Cina has predominantly focused on archaeological reconstruction and maritime trade networks, while museum studies have generally addressed the politics of memory at a conceptual level without examining representational practices in local site museums in detail. No study has yet provided an integrated analysis of how Hindu–Buddhist heritage in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum is represented and mobilized in constructing early historical identity. This study offers a novel contribution by combining curatorial analysis, the politics of memory, and identity formation within a single framework centered on the Kotta Cinna Site Museum as a producer of historical meaning. The *state-of-the-art* of this research lies in positioning the site museum as an institutional arena that actively shapes early historical narratives through the selection and visualization of Hindu–Buddhist artifacts.

This research has two primary objectives. First, to critically analyze how Hindu–Buddhist heritage is represented within exhibition structures, curatorial narratives, and visualization strategies at the Kotta Cinna Site Museum. Second, to examine how these representational practices operate as forms of the politics of memory that contribute to the construction of early regional historical identity, particularly in framing Kota Cina as a foundational historical locus of North Sumatra.

METHOD

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach with a case study design, focusing on the Kotta Cinna Site Museum as the unit of analysis. The approach is grounded in a constructivist paradigm that views social reality—including historical representation—not as an objective reflection of the past, but as the outcome of discursive and institutional constructions. The case study design is selected to enable an in-depth contextual analysis of representational practices within a bounded institutional setting, specifically the exhibition space and curatorial policies of the Kotta Cinna Site Museum (Creswell, 2015; Yin, 2017).

The analytical framework of this study is anchored in *critical museology* and the *politics of memory*. *Critical museology* conceptualizes museums as arenas of meaning production that are inherently non-neutral, actively engaged in legitimizing historical narratives through the selection, classification, and visualization of artifacts. The *politics of memory* serves as an analytical lens to examine how the past is institutionalized, prioritized, and organized within specific symbolic hierarchies in the public sphere (Assmann, 2011; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Within this framework, the representation of Hindu–Buddhist heritage is understood as an institutional practice that constructs early historical identity through mechanisms of artifact selection and narrative articulation.

Data collection was conducted through limited participant observation of spatial arrangements, interpretive flows, artifact classification, and visual strategies at the Kotta Cinna Site Museum over approximately two months (May–June 2025). The researcher's role remained non-interventionist, observing as an engaged visitor without influencing curatorial activities. Observation was directed toward identifying representational structures and patterns of symbolic

emphasis on Hindu–Buddhist artifacts, including the placement of statues, interpretive labels, and the sequencing of exhibition narratives. Additional data were obtained through document analysis, including interpretive panels, exhibition catalogs, institutional archives, and archaeological reports that inform curatorial references. Document analysis was used to examine the relationship between the production of archaeological knowledge and its transformation within exhibition spaces. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four key informants, consisting of curators, museum management staff, and individuals involved in developing exhibition narratives, in order to explore the rationale behind artifact selection and the institution’s representational vision (Kvale & Brinkmann, [2009](#); Prior, [2003](#)).

Data analysis was carried out using *thematic interpretive analysis*, operationalized through three main categories: (1) curatorial logic and narrative structure; (2) forms of symbolization and framing of Hindu–Buddhist heritage; and (3) the articulation of early historical identity within exhibition discourse. The analytical process involved stages of data reduction, thematic coding, and theory-driven interpretation, linking empirical findings to the conceptual frameworks of *critical museology* and the *politics of memory*. The analysis was directed toward examining relations of power, historical legitimation, and the construction of meaning within the museum institution. Validity was strengthened through methodological triangulation (observation, documents, interviews), triangulation of data sources, and researcher reflexivity throughout the interpretive process (Braun & Clarke, [2006](#); Denzin, [2009](#)).

This study examines how Hindu–Buddhist heritage is represented in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum while also assessing how these representational practices function as institutional mechanisms in the production of early historical identity. This methodological positioning situates the study within broader scholarly debates on the relationship between archaeology, museology, and identity construction in local contexts that are simultaneously embedded within global heritage discourses.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Representational Strategies of Hindu–Buddhist Heritage in the Exhibition Structure of the Kotta Cinna Site Museum

The curatorial pattern applied reveals a logic of selection grounded in symbolic significance. Artifacts such as statue fragments, brick structures associated with religious activity, and iconographic findings are organized into categories that affirm a Hindu–Buddhist identity. This selection reflects practices of heritage authorization, in which certain objects are legitimized as representations of “early history.” Artifacts with strong visual appeal occupy central positions in vitrines and interpretive panels, while less visually striking findings are allocated more limited space (Smith, [2006](#)).

The thematic grouping within the exhibition space indicates a tendency to associate Hindu–Buddhist heritage with maritime trade networks and transregional interactions. Imported ceramics and supporting artifacts are displayed in visual proximity to statues or religious fragments, forming an association between economic cosmopolitanism and Hindu–Buddhist cultural expression. This pattern aligns with archaeological findings regarding Kota Cina’s connectivity within Southeast Asian networks during the medieval period. The exhibition structure constructs a narrative in which Hindu–Buddhist heritage represents a phase of advancement and global interconnectedness (Miksic, [2013](#)).

Interpretive language on panels and labels plays a central role in shaping symbolic meaning. Terms such as “early civilization,” “cosmopolitan traces,” and “major cultural influence” frame artifacts within a horizon of meaning that extends beyond their material context. This language functions as a framing device that directs visitors’ perceptions of the historical significance of the objects. Such linguistic representation reinforces the construction of Hindu–Buddhist heritage as a symbol of early historical legitimacy (Macdonald, [2006](#)).

The visualization of artifacts through lighting, vitrine placement, and reconstruction illustrations further reinforces this narrative. Focused lighting on statues or iconographic fragments produces an effect of monumentality that amplifies their symbolic value. The aestheticization of exhibition space represents a common representational strategy in museum institutions to construct an aura of authority and authenticity. In the context of the Kotta Cinna Site Museum, this strategy strengthens the image of Hindu–Buddhist artifacts as central historical focal points (Preziosi & Farago, [2019](#)).

The relationship between artifacts and interpretive texts reveals a process of transformation from archaeological data into symbols of identity. Material evidence that is initially fragmentary and context-dependent is integrated into a

linear narrative of early regional development. This process demonstrates how the museum mediates between scientific complexity and the need for coherent presentation. The narrative structure positions the Hindu–Buddhist phase as a primary reference point in local history (Pearce, [1992](#)).

Curatorial strategies also emphasize historical continuity. Hindu–Buddhist artifacts are not presented as an isolated phase but as part of a sequence leading to subsequent periods. This chronological arrangement produces an impression of progressive historical evolution. Linear narratives of this kind are frequently employed in history museums to establish temporal coherence. Such a structure facilitates visitors' understanding of history as a directed and intelligible sequence (Arnold-de-Simine, [2013](#)).

The use of reconstruction illustrations strengthens the visual dimension of the narrative. Imagined depictions of settlements or religious structures enable visitors to envision the context of the artifacts. This form of visual representation functions as a bridge between material fragments and historical imagination. Within the Kotta Cinna Site Museum, reconstruction illustrations extend the meaning of Hindu–Buddhist artifacts from isolated objects into components of a broader social landscape (Erl, [2011](#)).

The exhibition structure also reveals a symbolic hierarchy among artifacts. Objects associated with religious expression occupy more central positions than domestic or economic artifacts. This hierarchy shapes the perception that religious aspects hold greater significance within the narrative of early history. Such hierarchical practices form part of institutional representational mechanisms. The placement of artifacts becomes an indicator of the narrative priorities articulated by the museum (Harrison, [2012](#)).

The interaction between text, objects, and spatial arrangement produces a directed interpretive experience. Visitors are guided to understand Hindu–Buddhist heritage as a symbol of cultural advancement and maritime integration. The exhibition structure constructs associations between artifacts and regional identity through the repetition of themes such as cosmopolitanism and the origins of civilization. This pattern of repetition reinforces the internalization of symbolic meanings within visitors' consciousness (Olick & Robbins, [1998](#)).

Representation in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum also demonstrates efforts to maintain scientific legitimacy through references to archaeological research findings. Interpretive panels frequently cite excavation results or specific discoveries as the basis of the narrative. Such references generate an impression of objectivity and academic authority. The integration of scientific language with more accessible public discourse creates a balance between scholarly legitimacy and public accessibility (Lidchi, [2013](#)).

The applied curatorial pattern indicates that Hindu–Buddhist heritage is positioned as an early symbol radiating values of universality and cross-cultural connectivity. Thematic grouping that links religious artifacts with trade networks constructs the idea that Kota Cina functioned as a node of global interaction. This representation expands the scope of the site's meaning from a local scale to regional and international frameworks.

Analysis of the exhibition structure shows that representational strategies in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum do not merely present archaeological findings but also construct interpretive frameworks concerning the origins and historical legitimacy of the region. Hindu–Buddhist artifacts are reproduced as symbols of early history through integrated curatorial, visual, and linguistic mechanisms. The exhibition structure operates as a system of representation that affirms the position of the Hindu–Buddhist phase within the narrative of regional identity (Hardiyansyah et al., [2024](#); Matondang et al., [2022](#)).

The exhibition structure functions as an epistemic device that regulates the relationship between objects, knowledge, and authority. Visitors do not encounter "artifacts as they are," but rather artifacts that have been positioned within a network of explanations, categories, and prescribed interpretive sequences. Choices regarding spatial order, focal points of vitrines, and the placement of interpretive panels activate a particular way of seeing, guiding visitors to treat one layer of history as central while interpreting others as supporting elements.

Interpretive frameworks of "origins" are often constructed through narrative strategies that establish a point of beginning. When Hindu–Buddhist artifacts are positioned as the entry point of the narrative, the museum effectively sets a temporal horizon that determines where history "begins." This initiation produces a foundational effect: the

Hindu–Buddhist phase is treated as the base, while other periods are positioned as continuations or derivatives, even though archaeological realities are more layered and not always linear (Nababan et al., [2019](#); Tanjung et al., [2022](#)).

The historical legitimacy of the region emerges through practices of symbolic validation. Artifacts possessing religious or aesthetic attributes tend to be endowed with stronger representational power because they can be more readily converted into signs of “civilization.” The museum thus constructs an implicit association between “civilization” and “historical authority,” as if the emergence of Hindu–Buddhist iconography automatically signifies socio-political maturity. This association produces a hierarchy of value, in which certain objects are considered more representative of the past than others that are more domestic or profane.

The reproduction of artifacts as symbols also operates through the reduction of complexity. Material fragments that originally depend on contexts of discovery, stratigraphic layers, and relational associations are transformed into self-contained units of meaning. Visitors are directed to read form and appearance as evidence, while information concerning contextual ambiguity, chronological uncertainty, or the plurality of scholarly interpretations is often marginalized within the exhibition experience. The result is a presentation of history as ordered certainty rather than as an open field of interpretation.

The integration of visual and linguistic mechanisms produces a form of “exhibition truth” that is performatively powerful. Interpretive language supplies claims, visualization generates conviction, and spatial arrangement provides coherence. Together, they create the impression that the museum narrative constitutes the most plausible pathway of understanding, as visitors experience it as a spatial reality rather than merely as text. When claims are attached to objects that appear authentic, narrative authority is strengthened without requiring extended justification (Hardiyansyah et al., [2024](#); Tamba, [2023](#)).

The representational system also produces an effect of selection that appears natural. Displayed objects seem to represent the entirety of the site, even though such representation results from curatorial decisions. What is absent from the exhibition space is more easily perceived as insignificant, although such absence may stem from spatial limitations, narrative preferences, or institutional-political considerations. In this way, the museum communicates not only through what is displayed, but also through what is omitted from view.

The emphasis on the Hindu–Buddhist phase within regional identity carries implications for the scale of memory being prioritized. Narratives of “early history” direct identity toward a long temporal horizon that conveys depth and prestige, while potentially displacing attention from more recent social histories, conflicts, or local dynamics that do not align with foundational narratives. The identity produced tends to be orderly, celebratory of connectivity and grandeur, while constraining space for more problematic or contested memories (Afandi, [2023](#); Indradjaja & Susetyo, [2025](#)).

The construction of early historical symbolism also operates through a logic that equates cross-cultural connectivity with legitimacy. By linking Hindu–Buddhist heritage to maritime networks, the museum reinforces an image of cosmopolitanism as a form of identity capital. Cosmopolitanism is presented as a positive value that elevates the status of the site, strengthening claims that the region holds an important place in regional history. This emphasis often results in the whitening of past power relations, such as inequalities, subordination, or dynamics of economic domination embedded within trade networks.

The interpretive framework constructed by the exhibition also shapes how the public understands the categories of “local” and “external.” Hindu–Buddhist artifacts may be read as markers of external “influence,” yet the exhibition often frames them as evidence of local capacity to adapt and participate in broader networks. This framing transforms the relationship between local and transregional from one of dependency into one of participation. The museum produces an affirmative version of agency, as such agency supports the identity project it seeks to present.

A critical reading of the exhibition structure opens space for evaluating curatorial practice as an act of knowledge–power. The key question moves beyond “what is displayed” toward “how objects are turned into arguments” and “what values are normalized through representation.” From this perspective, the exhibition can be understood as a device that shapes historical consciousness: it teaches the public how to perceive the past, determines what deserves to be remembered, and establishes the criteria by which a region is recognized as possessing a meaningful “early history.”

The Politics of Memory and the Construction of Early Historical Identity in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum

The Kotta Cinna Site Museum can be read as an institutional arena in which collective memory is formalized through the representation of artifacts and historical narratives. Memory, in this context, is not understood as individual recollection but as a social construct produced and sustained through cultural institutions (Halbwachs, [1992](#)). The exhibition structure, interpretive texts, and artifact selection together form a framework that determines how the past is remembered and given meaning. The museum operates as a medium that organizes hierarchies of memory and defines which periods are positioned as significant for regional identity.

The politics of memory operates through processes of selection and narrative emphasis. The representation of Hindu–Buddhist heritage in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum reveals a prioritization of particular phases as foundational reference points in history. This process reflects institutional mechanisms that select fragments of the past to be transformed into symbolic foundations. Artifacts associated with religious expression and maritime cosmopolitanism are granted more prominent space, shaping the perception that the Hindu–Buddhist phase marks the initial milestone in the region's development (Assmann, [2011](#); Perret et al., [2013](#)).

The institutionalization of memory in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum unfolds through temporal framing that positions Kota Cina as an early historical entity of North Sumatra. This narrative does more than arrange chronology; it articulates origins that provide historical legitimacy to regional identity. Early historical identity functions as a symbolic resource that extends the temporal horizon of the community, fostering an awareness of continuity that transcends colonial or modern periods. The museum integrates Hindu–Buddhist heritage into a narrative that produces a sense of historical depth (Anderson, [2020](#)).

Narrative selection within the Kotta Cinna Site Museum also demonstrates the relationship between archaeological knowledge and the need for identity legitimation. Complex archaeological data are reduced into symbolic elements that can be easily integrated into the construction of regional identity. This mechanism reflects what is described as *authorized heritage discourse*, in which cultural institutions hold the authority to determine which forms of heritage are legitimate and meaningful. Historical legitimacy is constructed through the claim that Hindu–Buddhist heritage constitutes concrete evidence of the region's early civilization (Smith, [2006](#)).

The politics of memory operates not only through what is displayed but also through the boundaries of interpretation established by the museum. The narratives produced tend to emphasize cosmopolitanism and progress, while dimensions of conflict, inequality, or interpretive uncertainty receive less attention. This practice demonstrates how public memory is shaped through structured and directed processes of selection. The museum becomes an actor that mediates between the complexity of the past and the need for coherent narratives (Olick & Robbins, [1998](#)).

The framing of Kota Cina as the symbolic foundation of North Sumatra's early history generates a genealogical structure of identity. Regional identity is constructed through claims of continuity with the Hindu–Buddhist phase, presented as the starting point of subsequent social and economic dynamics. This genealogical structure produces a historical imagination that positions Kota Cina as a symbolic root reinforcing regional identity legitimacy. Such legitimacy gains influence because it is institutionalized within a public space endowed with cultural authority (Ashworth et al., [2007](#)).

The Kotta Cinna Site Museum also contributes to the production of a cosmopolitan imagination as part of early historical identity. Hindu–Buddhist heritage is linked to trade networks and extensive cross-cultural interactions. This representation constructs a narrative in which the region occupies a significant position within the broader historical configuration of Southeast Asia. The resulting identity is not merely local but one connected to global circulations of the past. This construction expands the scope of historical legitimacy from the local to the regional scale (Harrison, [2012](#)).

The relationship between memory and identity in this context demonstrates that the museum does not merely preserve the past but activates it as a source of symbolic legitimacy. Hindu–Buddhist artifacts are positioned as material evidence supporting claims of early historical identity. The materiality of artifacts conveys impressions of objectivity and authenticity, enabling the constructed narrative to acquire epistemological legitimacy. This process reveals the interaction between objects, narratives, and institutional authority (Erl, [2011](#)).

The institutionalization of memory in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum also contributes to defining the boundaries of identity. By emphasizing the Hindu–Buddhist phase as the point of origin, the museum establishes a temporal horizon that shapes how the public understands regional history. These temporal boundaries create interpretive frameworks that direct attention toward particular aspects of the past. Early historical identity is constructed through the reinforcement of elements considered representative and symbolic.

The construction of identity through the politics of memory reveals the relationship between history and symbolic power. As a cultural institution, the museum possesses the capacity to establish narratives deemed legitimate and representative. This capacity enables the formation of consensus regarding origins and regional legitimacy. The politics of memory operates in structured forms through curatorial policies and the presentation of public narratives. These structures produce meanings that are subsequently internalized within collective consciousness (Arnold-de-Simine, [2013](#)).

A close reading of representational practices in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum shows that early historical identity does not emerge as a direct reflection of archaeological findings but as the result of institutional construction. Hindu–Buddhist artifacts are articulated within a framework that supports claims of historical depth and cultural continuity. This process demonstrates how public memory is built through the mediation of space and narrative.

The Kotta Cinna Site Museum functions as a meeting point between archaeology and identity. Hindu–Buddhist heritage, previously situated within the domain of scientific research, is integrated into a representational space with broader social impact. This integration expands the meaning of artifacts from mere research objects into symbols of historical legitimacy. Such transformation underscores the role of institutions in shaping the relationship between scientific knowledge and identity consciousness (Kwan, [2016](#); Muijzenberg et al., [1987](#)).

An analysis of the politics of memory in the context of the Kotta Cinna Site Museum reveals that historical legitimacy is constructed through the institutionalization of structured narratives. The representation of Hindu–Buddhist heritage becomes a medium for articulating early historical identity, reinforcing the region’s position within the regional historical landscape. The museum presents history as a symbolic resource organized through systematic representational mechanisms.

The historical legitimacy produced by the museum operates through a logic of validation that often remains invisible because it is presented as “common knowledge.” Exhibition narratives fix particular modes of reading the past and establish them as standard references for the public. This process transforms history from a field of argumentation into a domain of interpretive compliance, as the version of the past presented by the museum appears as an official reference that is difficult to challenge by knowledge outside the institution (Day & Liem, [2010](#); Geertz, [1994](#)).

The institutionalization of narrative also relies on mechanisms of normalization. Visitors become accustomed to accepting the categories provided by the museum as natural: “early” periods, “development,” “peak,” “traces of civilization,” and so forth. Such categories produce knowledge that appears orderly, even though it results from conceptual decisions that simplify complex data. Normalization makes curatorial choices appear as logical consequences rather than political decisions.

The representation of Hindu–Buddhist heritage as a medium of early historical identity positions the past as symbolic capital that can be activated in contemporary contexts. This capital functions to elevate the status of the region: early history is used as evidence of depth, prestige, and connectivity. When prestige becomes the dominant value, attention shifts from “what actually happened” to “which narrative most effectively generates recognition.” At this point, the museum does not merely convey knowledge but also produces value.

The strengthening of the region’s position within the regional historical map occurs through a strategy of scale. The museum draws a local site into a broader landscape and presents this connectivity as an indicator of significance. The regional scale produces a dual legitimizing effect: the site appears important because it is connected to larger networks, while those networks appear credible because they are supported by material evidence at the site. This reciprocal effect reinforces claims without requiring extensive narrative justification (Cervini-Silva et al., [2018](#); Jefferson, [2014](#)).

Systematic representational mechanisms also generate a form of mnemonic discipline. Visitors move from one point to another along a path that limits interpretive possibilities. This discipline does not rely on coercion; it operates through the design of experience, rhythm, and the sequencing of information. Once the experience is structured, critique becomes a more demanding activity, as visitors must work against the predefined flow.

History presented as a symbolic resource tends to produce identities that are both affirmative and uniform. Affirmation arises because Hindu–Buddhist heritage is easily read as a marker of “progress” and “grandeur,” while uniformity emerges because dominant narratives suppress alternative voices. Such uniform identity facilitates the production of collective pride but risks limiting space for more plural, layered, or contradictory identities.

The structured nature of representation also shifts the center of authority from community experience to institutional authority. Official narratives become the primary determinants of meaning, while alternative social memories—whether from local communities, historical actors, or critical readers—often receive less recognition. This shift creates an asymmetry: the museum becomes the regulator of meaning, while the public becomes its recipient. This asymmetry constitutes one of the core dynamics of the politics of memory in institutional contexts (Indradjaja & Susetyo, [2025](#); Matondang et al., [2022](#)).

The use of heritage as a symbolic foundation has consequences for how the past is partitioned. When the Hindu–Buddhist phase is positioned as foundational, other periods tend to be interpreted as derivatives or continuations. Such partitioning produces a hierarchical temporal map, in which certain pasts are considered more valuable because they provide stronger legitimacy. This hierarchy can direct attention, funding, and preservation programs toward particular layers of history while neglecting others that do not align with the identity project.

The production of historical legitimacy also depends on an aesthetics of authority. When the museum presents artifacts with an aura of precision and order, it generates the impression that the accompanying narratives have been “fully verified.” This aesthetics of authority conceals uncertainty, even though uncertainty is inherent in historical and archaeological inquiry. Such closure shapes public historical literacy, encouraging the acceptance of history as a finished product rather than as a field open to debate.

A critical reading of the politics of memory in the museum opens important questions regarding the ethics of representation. The key issues concern who benefits from foundational narratives, whose voices are diminished, and which versions of the past are prioritized in shaping regional identity. The museum can become a space that enriches historical understanding when it acknowledges its selective nature and allows room for interpretive plurality. Without such openness, the museum will continue to produce powerful forms of legitimacy, yet that legitimacy rests upon a narrowing of the possibilities for understanding the past.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the representation of Hindu–Buddhist heritage in the Kotta Cinna Site Museum operates as a structured and institutionalized practice of the politics of memory. The museum does not merely present archaeological findings; it actively constructs the Hindu–Buddhist phase as the symbolic foundation of North Sumatra’s early history through integrated curatorial strategies, interpretive language, and exhibition spatial design. Artifacts are positioned as signs of historical legitimacy that shape a cosmopolitan narrative of the region, while also directing how the public understands the origins of local history. Early historical identity is formed through processes of selection, emphasis, and the organization of meaning imposed upon archaeological data within the institutional space of the museum.

This study contributes to the fields of museology and historiography by demonstrating empirically how representational practices in a site museum function as mechanisms for the production of historical identity. It expands current understanding of the relationship between archaeological data and public narrative in the Indonesian context, which has thus far been discussed more often at a conceptual level. The findings also underscore the importance of more reflective and inclusive museum management, particularly in presenting a plurality of interpretations and avoiding the oversimplification of history. Museum administrators need to consider a careful balance between symbolic narrative and the complexity of archaeological data so that historical representation does not become selective or exclusionary.

Future research needs to broaden this analysis by incorporating the perspectives of visitors and local communities in order to examine how the narratives produced by the museum are received, negotiated, or reinterpreted within

social space. Comparative studies involving other site museums that represent Hindu–Buddhist heritage are also important for mapping variations in strategies of the politics of memory at the regional level. An interdisciplinary approach combining discourse analysis, visitor ethnography, and cultural policy studies would further enrich understanding of the relationship between heritage, institutions, and the construction of historical identity in Indonesia.

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