

## Comparison between Barus and Plak-Pling tombstones based on analysis of motif design

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**Abstract:** The Centre for Global Archaeological Research at Universiti Sains Malaysia (transl. University of Science Malaysia) had signed a memorandum of understanding with Universitas Syiah Kuala (Unsyiah) and Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU) regarding Islamic archaeological research in Sumatera. This cooperation was in order to unearth new clues on the early history of Islam in the South East Asia region. A preliminary survey had been done in Aceh and Barus which found a number of tombstones belonging to the early Muslim population in the area. This study focused on the Barus tombstones found in Penanggahan, Barus during the fieldwork in the December of 2014. The oldest tombstone found in Barus to date was dated to about 1350 AD. The Barus tombstones were made from tuff. This particular tombstone was unique in its form, the decoration and motif not conforming to any known classification to date. The engravings and carvings on the surface of the tombstones have its own distinct style. There are also similarities of the ornaments with those of the Plak-Pling tombstones which seems indicative of contact between Barus and Aceh during the time of the spread of Islam in the region.

**Keywords:** Islamic archaeology, tombstone, headstone, gravestone, grave marker, Barus, Aceh, ornament

### INTRODUCTION

A survey and mapping of the area where the Barus tombstones was found was done in 2014. The survey was conducted in seven Islamic cemeteries, some of which are part of a burial complex and the rest are spread out over several locations in Barus. However, many of the tombstones found in Penanggahan are already damaged and the ruins scattered around. This was due to the quarrying activities by the locals. The human activity in the area had resulted in many of the tombstones being displaced from their original locations as well as inflicting permanent damage upon them. The classification of Barus tombstone was done by Perret & Surachman (2015) when the tombstone was found. This tombstone which was dated to about 1350 AD is the oldest known Barus type tombstone to date. Detailed analysis and study of its motif and decoration had revealed similarities in design with the Plak-Pling tombstones from Aceh. The main focus of this study is to compare the ornamental features between the two types of tombstones. The Barus tombstone has only to date be found in the Nusantara region. There has not been another tombstone found which resembles the tombstone in morphology. This tombstone is a very important clue due to the year written within its inscription.

### GEOLOGY OF THE AREA

Geological composition of the Barus area consists of rocks of the Carboniferous-? Early Permian age in the Tapanuli Group (Cameron *et al.*, 1980; Pulungono &

Cameron, 1984). There have been three identified formations, namely: (1) Bohorok Formation, (2) Kluet Formation, and (3) Alas Formation.

#### Bohorok Formation

Unbedded pebbly mudstone is the characteristic lithology of the Bohorok Formation; with poorly sorted breccia or conglomerate consisting of angular to subangular rock fragments. 0.1-2.0 cm is the general size of the rock fragments but sizes up to 75-80 cm can be found in east Aceh (Aspden *et al.*, 1982). A fine-grained matrix of dark grey or dark brown siltstone or mudstone encloses the rock fragments. Vein quartz, slate, chlorite schist, phyllite, greenish calcsilicate rocks, limestone, marble, quartzose arenites, quartzite, more rarely mica-schist and granitoid, sometimes with tourmaline, rare chert and rhyolite are examples of the pebbles in the formation (Barber & Crow, 2005).

#### Kluet Formation

Black slates with phyllites, quartzose arenites and conglomeratic metagreywackes containing lithic clasts up to 40 cm in diameter are the main makeup of the Kluet Formation (Barber & Crow, 2005). Along the road from Sibolga to Tarutung, poorly sorted volcanoclastic wackes were also observed by Barber & Crow (2005). Calcareous horizons and detrital limestones can also be observed locally (Barber & Crow, 2005). Cameron *et al.*

(1982b) also observed that the sandstones are generally massive and devoid of sedimentary structures with the exception of the areas of Krueng Kluet and Sidikalang Sheet where typical deposition of turbidites (made up of graded beds, mud clasts, slumped units, load casts and dewatering structures) were also reported (Aldiss *et al.*, 1983).

**Alas Formation**

Located within the Sumatran Fault System, between the outcrops of the Bohorok and Kluet formations by a preponderance of limestones and meta-limestones, the Alas Formation is mainly distinguishable from its neighbours by its geographical location (Barber & Crow, 2005). Other than that, its composition is similar to the Bohorok Formation, minus the pebbly mudstones as well as the Kluet Formation. Possible green tuffs have been observed (Cameron *et al.*, 1982a). There exist faults along the outcrop with migmatized rocks with granite intrusions which are intensely folded locally (Barber & Crow, 2005).

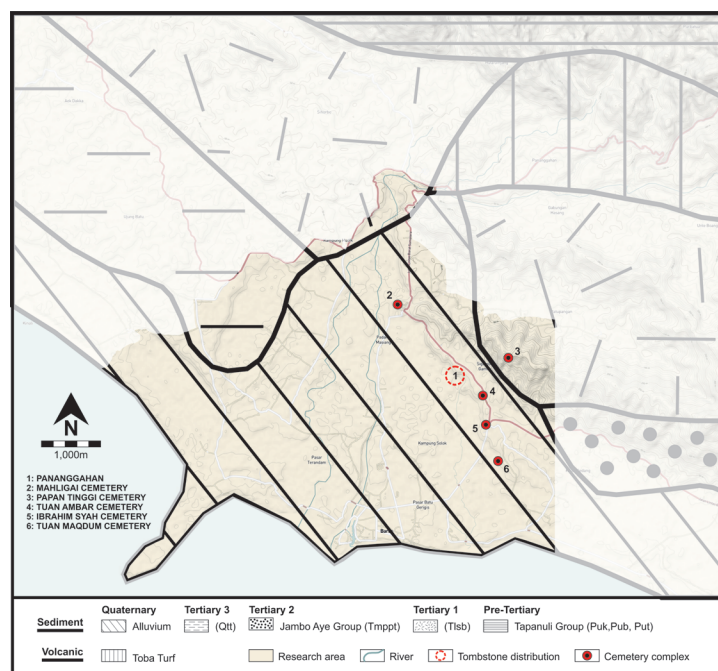
From the composition of the rocks of the area surrounding Barus, it could be surmised that some of the rocks were used as materials to make the tombstones. The majority of the sediments are sandstones, tuff and granites (Figure 1).

**THE HISTORY OF BARUS**

The name of Barus originated from a maritime port town which has a history tracing back to the time of early development and spread of Islam in the Sumatera Island. The district of Barus is located in Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra province along the western shores of Sumatera Island.

Barus was a well-known port in the past at places as far as areas of modern China, India and the Middle East, due to the variety of important goods that it produced and exported. One of its most famous products was the camphor, known locally as *Kapur Barus* (lit. “Barus’ chalk”). Resin was also a widely traded product due to easy access to its sources in the nearby Barus inland (Vuuren, 1908). In the year 902 AD, an Arabic merchant named Ibn al-Faqih had recorded that Fansur (another name for Barus) was a huge port city in the western shores that produced resin, camphor, cloves, sandalwood and nutmeg (Pradjoko & Bambang, 2013).

A stele dated to 1088 AD had been found in the village of Lobu Tua, Barus, Central Tapanuli Regency which is located about 3 kilometres from the shoreline. The Tamil inscription on the stele, translated and interpreted by Prof. Nilakanta Sastri (1932), mentioned of ongoing trading activities during the period likening them to “yang kelima ratus dari seribu arah” (lit. the five hundredth from a thousand directions). The inscription also mentioned that the Velavuram, Varocu and other three groups of people who had to pay taxes. The Velavuram and Varocu were referring to the areas where the Tamil merchants and traders were grouping together. According to Subbrayalu’s analysis, the Varocu seemed to have a connection with Barus since the Tamil people have mentioned both Barus and Varocu as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. Besides that, other trade goods were mentioned within the inscriptions of the stele, namely: precious stones (such as sapphire, moonstone, emerald, pearl), forest products (lime, resin, cardamom, turmeric, clove and sandalwood) as well as animal products (such as rhinoceros’ horn, elephant tusks, turtle shells) (Sastri, 1932). Based on the descriptions, it can be surmised that Barus was a port city which attracted many Tamil traders and merchants.



**Figure 1:** Location of the unique Barus headstone.

Besides the Tamils, there were also the Arabs and Persians. This is due to the abundance of desirable trading goods, chief of which was the camphor, a key ingredient in the making of anti-depressant drugs used in the treatment of fever. Besides trading, the purpose for them coming to the region was for the spreading of the teachings of Islam in Indonesia. The spreading of the Islamic religion was done through preaching and marrying the locals. The oldest evidence of the presence of Islam in Barus is the burial complex of Tuan Ibrahim Syah. The tombstone was dated “10 Safar 602 Hijrah” or 1206/7 AD. This proves that there have been people practising Islam since the early 13<sup>th</sup> century AD.

There are about 300 tombstones littered around the Barus area (Figure 2). Some were in burial complexes while others in small concentrations in several areas in Barus. The discovery of the tombstones is one of the contributions of Barus towards Islamic Archaeology in Indonesia. The finding of the tombs in huge amounts with Islamic traits seems to signify a significant spread and influence of Islam in the area. These old cemeteries were related to a group of Muslim missionaries known as the “Auliya 44” (Nurhakim, 1979). There are about 11 cemeteries dating from the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In general, the site was

a burial complex that housed the remains of the relatives and followers of the Muslim missionaries. Similar burial complexes such as the Burial Complex of Tuan Ambar, Burial Complex of Papan Tinggi, Burial Complex of Tuan Maqdam, Burial Complex of Tuan Ibrahim Syah, Burial Complex of Makam Mahligai can be found in Desa Bukit Hasang, Penangahan and Aek Dakka as well as a few older cemeteries along the shoreline at the town of Kedai Gadang and Sigambo-Gambo (Perret & Surachman, 2015).

### THE UNIQUENESS OF BARUS TOMBSTONES

In the year 2014 during a survey of the Aek Dakka area, near the tomb of Tuan Ambar, a number of scattered tombstones which had been displaced from their original positions were found. Two Barus tombstones stood out from a group of tombstones which were partially buried. Tombstone 1 was in a complete condition and have already been studied by Perret *et al.* (2016). The second tombstone was found incomplete and only one half of it was recovered. This tombstone has three parts: the head, body and the foot. The second tombstone was classified by Daniel Perret as a special Barus tombstone. Daniel was of the opinion that this type of tombstone cannot be found anymore in the district in the Nusantara area (Perret & Surachman, 2015). It can

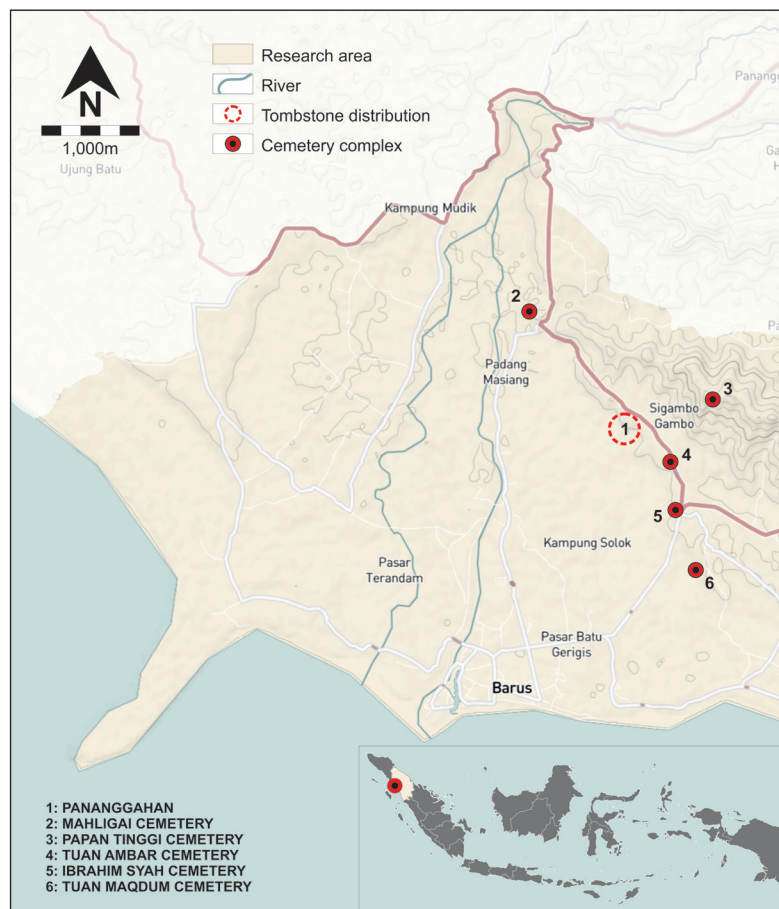


Figure 2: Map of Barus showing the locations of early Islamic cemetery sites.



be surmised that the tombstone is a product of the creative art exclusive to the Barus area (Figure 3).

The dimensions of Tombstone 2: 29 cm in height, 26.5 cm in width and 11 cm of thickness. The head is shaped like the letter “S” where it has two circular ends. In the centre, there is a diamond shape piece. On its body, the motif is like a pair of intertwining tree roots in a horizontal orientation. Below this, similar motif can be observed instead in a vertical orientation and on both sides bordering the inscription. It seems as if this was deliberately done in order to have a panel in which the inscription will be written on. However, half of the inscription had been lost due to extensive damage on the bottom half of the inscription. The upper still readable inscription has an older age when compared to the other Barus tombstones. On closer inspection, the ornamental decoration on the head of the tombstone shows similarities with the ornament on the Plak-Pling tombstones from Aceh.

### PLAK-PLING TOMBSTONES

The first ever mention of the Plak-Pling tombstones was by Montana (1996). This type of tombstone seemed to have originated from the region of Kampung Pande and Lamreh in Aceh Besar (lit. Big Aceh). The name ‘Plak-Pling’ means ‘to be open at the top and bottom’. This could be due to the motif of floral decoration with its petals opening both upwards and downwards on the tombstone. The shape of the tombstone itself is similar to the shape of a menhir which is present in the Hindu tradition as well.

The overall height of the tombstone is 85 cm with its base having a width of about 20 cm (Figure 4). The tombstone is divided into three sections: (1) the upper part having an onion shape, (2) a trapezoid body which is wider on the bottom and subdivided into four sections of ornamental decoration with the top three sections having a similar pattern of a lotus flower while the fourth section have a different shape, (3) the bottom most part is a panel with an inscription on the stone.

The Plak-Pling tombstones owe their existence to the openness of the Nusantara culture group towards foreign influence. This cultural diffusion and amalgamation were only possible due to the Nusantara culture group adopting foreign cultures into their own. This was an adaptation strategy by the locals to the changing environment (Oetomo, 2016).

### METHODS

Data was initially collected through the observation during fieldwork and through literature review. This was followed by a descriptive and comparative analysis. This was done by looking at the shape, motif and inscription. Besides that, a comparison was also done between the historical background of Barus and any known history of related governments or political bodies.



شهر جمادى الاخر سنة

احدو خمسين وسبعمائه

*End of year Jumadil*

*751/6 August-3 September 1350*

**Figure 3:** Barus tombstone found in Penanggahan (source: documentation from the scouting group of USU-USM 2014).



**Figure 4:** Plak-pling tombstone found in Lamreh (source: documentation from the scouting group of UNSYIAH-USM 2014)

## TYPES OF TOMBSTONES

The Barus tombstones can be classified into three categories based on the material(s) used to make the tombstones (Perret & Surachman, 2015): (1) tuff, which is commonly used and found in Barus, (2) grey coloured granites with rough textures, (3) yellow or grey fine sandstones. The second and third type of tombstones were made from materials sourced from outside of Barus. It is for now still difficult to pinpoint the exact source(s) of the granite stones and there are too many possible sources of sandstones to be able to accurately determine the source of the materials used in the tombstone making in Barus. The tombstones made from tuff (Figure 5) are to date not found anywhere else, even within the Nusantara region, that it is highly likely that the design is a local innovation.

Based on the shapes of the typical Barus tombstones, it can be further categorised into four sub-groups: (1) rectangular flat base, (2) square base, (3) round base, and (4) bases which are not uniform. There also exists other variations within each sub-group (Nurhakim, 1979). Other than the typical Barus tombstone, the other tombstones which were made from foreign sourced materials have Persian, Arabic, Gujarati and Aceh influence on the shape and typology.

## DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Between both the tombstones, the most interesting feature is the similarity in the shape of chiselling. Upon closer observation, the shape of the chisel can be seen on the head and main ornament of the Barus tombstone while it can be observed on the body and the final section on the Plak-Pling tombstone. On the Plak-Pling tombstone, there seems to be levels within the arrangement of the chiselled motif. This is likely to be representative of the social status of the buried individual. Besides that, the chiselling on the tombstones from Plak-Pling seems more refined compared to the Barus tombstones. This would seem indicative of a more highly skilled workmanship by the artisans who made the Plak-Pling tombstones. The sultans of Aceh had



**Figure 5:** Tuff stone is used as a typical tombstone of Barus.

a great interest in the arts and gave their artisans freedom to work on their craftsmanship. The sultans also prepared and provided places in the land under his rule specifically for very highly skilled artisans (Leigh, 1989).

The Plak-Pling tombstones were found in greater numbers in Lamreh compared to the number of Barus tombstones. The Barus tombstones, which dated to as early as 1350 AD, seemed to have predated the existence of the Plak-Pling tombstones with the oldest Plak-Pling tombstone only dating to 1419 AD. Thus, there is a high possibility that the artisans who made the Plak-Pling tombstones borrowed ideas from the makers and design of the Barus tombstones while adopting them into their own original designs. It is also equally possible that the Plak-Pling tombstones signifies a direct evolution of tombstone making and chiselling techniques from the earlier Barus tombstones. Many of the inscriptions on the tombstones in Barus has the name 'Syekh' written on them while in Aceh, the majority of the tombstones have 'Sultan' inscribed on them instead. This is something very interesting especially if the ulama (lit. the learned ones) came from Barus. These ulama were originally Arab traders who were also tasked with the spreading of Islamic teachings. A few of the tombstones at Barus even have anthropomorphic designs that signified beards and moustache which were also a trait that many (if not all) ulama possessed.

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