

EXPLORING ISLAMIC TRACES IN TAPANULI THROUGH THE BONGAL SITE: HISTORY, IDENTITY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

The Bongal Site in Jago-Jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra, offers groundbreaking archaeological evidence that significantly rewrites the historiography of early Islam in Tapanuli: it demonstrates that the region had established direct contact with the Islamic world as early as the 7th century CE predating the Lobu Tua site in Barus by approximately two centuries. This finding challenges the long-held scholarly assumption that Aceh and Barus were the sole entry points of Islam in North Sumatra. This study aims to identify and analyze Islamic-related artifacts at the site, explore their significance for the cultural identity of the Central Tapanuli community, and evaluate the site's potential as a cultural heritage asset. Employing a descriptive qualitative historical approach, data were collected through field observations, artifact analysis, literature review, and in-depth interviews with key informants including an archaeologist-historian from Universitas Negeri Medan, the administrator of the Fansuri Museum at the Bongal Site, and the site owner. The findings reveal that the site contains a diverse assemblage of Islamic artifacts Umayyad and Abbasid coins, Islamic glassware, Arabic-inscribed intaglios, Middle Eastern ceramics, and Islamic medical instruments that collectively attest to sustained commercial and cultural interactions with the broader Islamic world. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity and the concept of cultural heritage, this study further demonstrates that the Bongal Site is not merely an archaeological resource but an integral component of the collective identity and historical memory of the Central Tapanuli community, warranting systematic and sustainable preservation.

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INTRODUCTION

Tapanuli is a region in North Sumatra Province, Indonesia, known for its rich historical legacy, cultural diversity, and strategic position within the maritime trade networks of the Indonesian archipelago (Nisa & Pane, 2022). Administratively, the Tapanuli region is divided into three regencies: North Tapanuli, Central Tapanuli, and South Tapanuli (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Sumatera Utara, 2024). Throughout history, the coastal areas of Tapanuli, particularly Barus, played a significant role as trading ports linking the archipelago with the Middle East, India, and China through the Indian Ocean trade network (Guillot et al., 2008). This strategic position facilitated intensive interactions

among different cultures, beliefs, and communities, including the early transmission and development of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago (Nisa & Pane, 2022). Consequently, Barus was designated as the "Zero Point of Islamic Civilization in the Archipelago" due to its significant contribution to the historical development and dissemination of Islam in Indonesia (Burhanuddin, 2022)

Nevertheless, the archaeological discoveries at the Bongal Site, located in Jago-Jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli Regency, have provided a new perspective on the early history of Islam in the Tapanuli region. Recent archaeological discoveries play a significant role in filling the historiographical gap regarding the introduction of Islam to Indonesia, as the recovered artifacts serve as material evidence that reinforces accounts of the early process of Islamization. The site attracted scholarly attention after local residents uncovered various artifacts during gold-mining activities in 2019 and 2020, including ancient boat planks, ceramic fragments, glass fragments, earthenware, and a variety of metal objects indicating the existence of maritime and commercial activities in the area during the past (Soedewo & Manurung, 2020).

Further research employing radiocarbon dating methods revealed that the ancient ship remains discovered at the Bongal Site date back to approximately the seventh century CE (Purnawibowo & Restiyadi, 2022)). This chronology positions the Bongal Site as one of the most significant archaeological sites for understanding maritime history and trade networks along the western coast of Sumatra. Moreover, the site is estimated to be around two centuries older than the Lobu Tua Site in Barus (Soedewo & Manurung, 2020) suggesting that the Tapanuli region had already been integrated into international trade networks during the early period of Islamic expansion.

The significance of the Bongal Site is further demonstrated by the discovery of numerous Islamic-related artifacts, including gold coins from the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, fragments of Islamic glassware, Arabic-inscribed intaglios, beads, Middle Eastern ceramics, and Islamic medical instruments (Siregar & Prayogo, 2024). The presence of these artifacts indicates the existence of commercial connections and cultural interactions between the coastal communities of Tapanuli and the wider Islamic world as early as the seventh century CE. These discoveries provide important material evidence that enriches the historiography of Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago, which has traditionally focused on Aceh and Barus as the primary centers of early Islamic influence.

The Bongal Site holds importance not only in its archaeological and historical value but also in its role as an integral part of the cultural identity and cultural heritage of the people of Central Tapanuli. As a site that preserves evidence of interactions between local communities and the Islamic world since the seventh century CE, the Bongal Site serves as a bridge between the past and the present through the material remains that can still be observed today. Its existence provides local communities with an opportunity to reconnect with their regional history while fostering awareness of the cultural roots that shape their collective identity.

From Stuart Hall's perspective (1990) cultural identity is not understood as a fixed or static entity but rather as a social construction shaped by historical experiences, collective memory, and ongoing processes of interpretation and representation. In this sense, archaeological remains function not only as sources of information about the past but also as mediums through which communities represent and reconstruct their cultural identities. Therefore, the artifacts and historical remains discovered at the Bongal Site can be interpreted as symbols reflecting the historical connections between the people of Tapanuli and the broader networks of Islamic civilization.

Furthermore, the concept of cultural heritage emphasizes that historical remains possess significance not only as material evidence of the past but also as cultural assets that embody educational, social, and identity-related values for contemporary society (Smith, 2006). Within this context, the preservation of the Bongal Site is essential not only for the advancement of historical and archaeological research but also for safeguarding the continuity of the cultural identity and cultural heritage of the people of Central Tapanuli for future generations.

Several previous studies have examined the Bongal Site from different perspectives: Soedewo and Manurung (2020), through their initial archaeological investigation at the foot of Bukit Bongal, documented various archaeological discoveries, including ancient ship planks, ceramics, glass fragments, earthenware, and metal artifacts, all of which indicate the existence of maritime and trading activities in the area. Their study laid the foundation for subsequent research on the archaeological significance of the Bongal Site.

A more comprehensive study was conducted by Purnawibowo & Restiyadi, (2022) who identified a range of artifacts associated with international trade networks, including gold coins from the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, Tang Dynasty ceramics, glazed pottery from Nishapur, Islamic glass bottles, medical instruments, and fragments of an ancient ship. These findings demonstrate that the Tapanuli region was connected to both the Islamic world and East Asian trade networks between the seventh and tenth centuries CE. Likewise, Siregar et al. (2024) argued that the presence of

Islamic artifacts at the Bongal Site provides important evidence of early contact between the peoples of the Indonesian archipelago and the Islamic world through maritime trade routes. Meanwhile, studies on Barus conducted by Guillot et al. (2008) and other scholars highlight the strategic role of the western coast of Sumatra within international trade networks and the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, providing important historical context for understanding the position of the Bongal Site within the broader history of Islam in Tapanuli.

Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains. Most previous studies have primarily focused on artifact identification, site chronology, and the reconstruction of maritime trade networks. The critical question of how the material evidence from Bongal shapes a new reading of cultural identity and cultural heritage for the contemporary Central Tapanuli community has not been adequately examined. Existing research tends to stop at artifact inventory without interrogating what those artifacts mean for the living community that inhabits the same landscape. This gap is consequential: without understanding how the Bongal Site functions as a site of identity formation and collective memory, preservation efforts risk remaining detached from the community's own cultural stakes in the site.

In response to this research gap, the present study offers a different perspective by integrating a historical approach, Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, and the concept of cultural heritage to analyze Islamic traces in Tapanuli through the Bongal Site. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify and analyze Islamic-related artifacts discovered at the site; (2) explore the meaning and significance of the Bongal Site in shaping the cultural identity of the Central Tapanuli community; and (3) evaluate its potential as a cultural heritage site that possesses historical, social, and cultural values worthy of sustainable preservation. Through this approach, the study is expected to contribute to the historiography of Islam in Indonesia while strengthening efforts to preserve the Bongal Site as an important cultural heritage asset for both local communities and the nation's historical legacy.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in historical research methodology. The research was conducted at the Bongal Site in Jago-Jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra, and at the Fansuri Museum of the Bongal Site. The study followed the four established stages of historical research: heuristics (systematic data collection), source criticism (internal and external verification of sources), interpretation (analytical synthesis of evidence), and historiography (written reconstruction of historical findings).

Data were gathered through four complementary methods. First, field observations were conducted directly at the Bongal Site and the Fansuri Museum to document the physical condition of the site, the spatial arrangement of artifacts, and the preservation environment. Second, artifact identification and analysis were conducted collaboratively with two specialist informants. Prof. Dr. Phil. Ichwan Azhari, M.S., an archaeologist-historian from Universitas Negeri Medan, contributed expertise in Islamic archaeology and the historical context of early trade networks in North Sumatra. Pidia Amelia, M.A., lecturer and archaeologist at Universitas Negeri Medan, provided direct archaeological knowledge of the artifact collections housed at the museum. Through guided examination sessions at the Fansuri Museum, both specialists assisted in identifying artifact typologies, attributing geographic and cultural origins, and situating individual findings within the broader chronology of Islamic civilization. This collaborative approach ensured that artifact interpretations were grounded in established disciplinary knowledge rather than relying solely on secondary literature.

Third, literature was selected systematically, prioritizing peer-reviewed archaeological and historical studies directly related to the Bongal Site, early Islamic trade networks in the Indian Ocean, and cultural heritage theory, with particular attention given to primary archaeological reports and site excavation records. Fourth, in-depth semi-structured interviews were also conducted with Basrul Al Abbas, administrator of the Fansuri Museum, and Muzrin Siregar, the owner and primary custodian of the Bongal Site, to capture institutional and ground-level perspectives on preservation challenges and community relations. Interviews were conducted in person, audio-recorded with informed consent, and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data were analyzed thematically and interpretively: artifact evidence was cross-referenced with regional comparative findings to establish chronological and cultural attributions, while interview data were analyzed through thematic coding to identify recurring patterns in how informants understood the historical significance, cultural meaning, and preservation challenges of the site. To ensure data validity, triangulation was applied across four sources of evidence: archaeological artifacts, documentary and published sources, field observations, and interview testimonies with discrepancies noted and discussed as sites of interpretive tension rather than resolved arbitrarily.

This study is limited to artifacts currently accessible at the Fansuri Museum and published archaeological reports available at the time of research; it does not conduct new radiocarbon dating or independent laboratory analysis, relying instead on dating results and typological classifications established by prior archaeological investigations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Islamic Traces at the Bongal Site through Archaeological Artifacts

The Bongal Site constitutes one of the most significant archaeological discoveries in recent Indonesian history, providing direct material evidence of early Islamic contact along the western coast of Sumatra. Covering a surface area exceeding 200 hectares across the Bongal hills and the alluvial plain extending toward the Lumut river, the site has yielded a quantity and diversity of archaeological material suggesting the existence of a port site dated between the 4th and 10th centuries CE, participating in trade networks covering Southeast Asia, China, South Asia, and the Middle East. Critically, assuming that the occupation of Bongal started in the 4th century CE, its activity would therefore precede by five centuries the activity of Barus–Lobu Tua, the beginnings of which are attested in the 9th century CE. This chronological gap is not merely a numerical difference; it demands a fundamental reassessment of where and when the western coast of Sumatra first entered the orbit of Islamic civilization (Soedewo et al., 2024).

Among the most direct and unambiguous evidence are the gold coins from the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. As Arrumdani et al. (2022) argue, these coins constitute numismatic proof the most reliable category of datable material evidence in Islamic archaeology of commercial contact between Tapanuli and the Islamic world during the 7th and 8th centuries CE. Unlike ceramics or glass, which may have passed through multiple hands across long chains of trade, coins bearing Arabic calligraphy and dynastic inscriptions presuppose direct or near-direct engagement with Muslim merchants or their networks. The subsequent presence of Abbasid coins extending into the 9th century CE (Soedewo & Ahmad, 2022) indicates that this contact was not episodic but sustained across at least two dynastic periods. By comparison, the earliest Islamic numismatic evidence from Lobu Tua in Barus dates to the 9th century CE (Guillot, C., Perret, D., & Fanani, A. S., 2008) making the Bongal coin assemblage considerably older and historically more consequential.

The Islamic glass artifacts represent a second category of direct evidence, though their interpretation requires greater nuance. Based on identification by Amelia et al (2024) these include bowls, plates, bottles, and jars in blue, green, and yellow, most originating from Nishapur and Khorasan in Persia, dated from approximately the 7th to the 10th centuries CE. The provenance attribution to Nishapur is significant: Nishapur glass was among the most prized luxury commodities in the early Islamic world, distributed through highly organized merchant networks across the Indian Ocean (Kröger, 1995). Its presence at Bongal is therefore strong circumstantial evidence of direct participation in these elite trade circuits. However, it is important to note that the presence of Persian glassware does not by itself confirm the presence of Muslim inhabitants at the site; it establishes commercial connectivity with the Islamic world, which may or may not have been accompanied by religious or cultural transmission at this early stage.

The intaglios engraved gemstones bearing Arabic inscriptions including "Bismillah" in early Arabic script represent perhaps the most culturally specific evidence at the site. According to Siregar & Prayogo (2024) seven Islamic intaglios have been discovered, some now preserved in the First Hijri Century Museum in Solo and the Qur'anic Museum of North Sumatra. In classical Islamic societies, such objects functioned as official seals for administrative and ownership purposes, suggesting not merely commercial contact but the presence of individuals operating within Islamic administrative or religious frameworks. This moves the interpretation beyond trade connectivity toward the possibility though not yet certainty of a resident Muslim community or at minimum, Muslim administrators operating at the site.

Middle Eastern ceramics with characteristic monochrome glazes in turquoise blue, bluish green, and golden brown typical of 9th and 10th century CE production centers in the Middle East (Amelia et al., 2025) alongside beads of glass, gemstone, and ceramic, further corroborate the picture of sustained, multi-commodity exchange. Excavations also revealed the presence of Sumatran spices including candlenut, cardamom, and keluwak, as well as Tang Dynasty Changsha ceramics, indicating that Bongal functioned as a two-directional node: receiving luxury imports from the Islamic world and China while exporting high-value forest commodities such as camphor and benzoin that were prized across the Indian Ocean world (Soedewo et al., 2024).

The ancient Islamic medical and pharmaceutical instruments deserve particular analytical attention because they are the most interpretively contested category of artifacts. Siregar & Prayogo (2024) note their resemblance to collections in Islamic museums in Turkey and Middle Eastern archaeological sites. If this attribution is confirmed through systematic comparative analysis, these instruments would suggest that the exchange networks at Bongal extended into the domain

of specialized scientific knowledge a remarkable implication given that Islamic medical science represented one of the most advanced intellectual traditions of the medieval world (Azra, 2022) It must be acknowledged, however, that this interpretation currently rests on typological resemblance rather than chemical or provenance analysis, and should therefore be treated as a compelling hypothesis requiring further verification rather than an established conclusion.

Finally, the discovery of an ancient wooden ship dated through radiocarbon analysis to approximately the 7th century CE (Purnawibowo & Restiyadi, 2022) provides the structural foundation for all the above interpretations. The vessel's existence confirms that Bongal was not simply a point of accidental artifact deposition but an active maritime port with the infrastructure to receive seagoing vessels from distant regions. Shaleha et al (2025) and Sinaga et al (2024) argue that this chronology makes the Bongal Site one of the oldest maritime archaeological sites identified along the western coast of Sumatra. The existence of such a vessel demonstrates the mobility of people, commodities, and ideas, facilitating contact between local communities and Muslim merchants from various regions. The end of occupation at Bongal would coincide with the beginnings of occupation at Barus on the site of Lobu Tua, which flourished later a succession that suggests Bongal may have served as the predecessor settlement to Barus, a hypothesis that aligns with references in Batak chronicles to a settlement called Pansur prior to Lobu Tua (Soedewo et al., 2024)

Taken together, the archaeological evidence from the Bongal Site presents a layered picture: direct evidence of commercial contact with the Islamic world from the 7th century CE; strong circumstantial evidence of integration into elite Islamic trade networks; and suggestive but not yet conclusive evidence of cultural and intellectual exchange. This differentiated reading is important because it positions Bongal not as an isolated anomaly but as the earliest identified node in a western Sumatran maritime corridor that would later include Barus and, further north, the ports of Aceh a corridor that collectively shaped the trajectory of Islam's entry into the Indonesian archipelago.

Historical Significance of the Bongal Site in the History of Islam in Tapanuli

The archaeological discoveries at the Bongal Site hold considerable historical significance for understanding the early development of Islam in Tapanuli. For decades, scholarly discussions concerning the arrival of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago have largely emphasized Aceh and Barus as the earliest centers of Islamic influence on the western coast of Sumatra (Guillot et al., 2008). However, the findings from the Bongal Site offer a new perspective, suggesting that the Tapanuli region had already established connections with the Islamic world as early as the seventh century CE. These discoveries broaden existing interpretations of the Islamization process in the archipelago by demonstrating that the spread of Islam was not confined to a single region but occurred through extensive maritime trade networks linking various parts of the Indian Ocean.

The historical significance of the Bongal Site is reinforced by radiocarbon dating conducted on the remains of an ancient wooden ship discovered at the site. According to (Purnawibowo & Restiyadi, 2022) the vessel dates to approximately the seventh century CE. This chronology places the Bongal Site among the oldest known maritime archaeological sites on the western coast of Sumatra and suggests that the region had already participated in international trade activities during the formative period of Islamic civilization. Compared with the earliest occupation evidence from Lobu Tua, which dates to around the ninth century CE (Guillot et al., 2008) the Bongal discoveries indicate that maritime interactions involving the Tapanuli coast may have begun considerably earlier than previously documented.

This chronological repositioning carries several important historiographical implications. First, it challenges the assumption that early Islamic contact in Sumatra followed a simple and linear pattern centered exclusively on Aceh and Barus. Instead, the evidence from Bongal suggests a more complex and geographically distributed network of interaction along the western coast of Sumatra, where multiple ports may have participated simultaneously or successively in long-distance maritime exchange. Second, the Bongal discoveries highlight the importance of archaeological evidence in reconstructing the early history of Islam in Indonesia. While many existing narratives rely heavily on written records, chronicles, and oral traditions, the material evidence from Bongal demonstrates that archaeological remains can reveal historical connections that are absent from surviving textual sources. Third, the site raises the possibility although it remains a hypothesis requiring further investigation that Bongal may have been related to earlier settlement patterns associated with the development of Barus, including the settlement referred to as "Pansur" in Batak historical traditions (Soedewo et al., 2024)

From a maritime historical perspective, the Bongal Site highlights the strategic importance of the western coast of Sumatra within international trade networks linking the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia, and China. The discovery of Umayyad and Abbasid coins, Persian Islamic glassware from Nishapur and Khorasan, Tang Dynasty ceramics, Middle Eastern ceramics, and locally traded commodities such as camphor and benzoin indicates that Bongal was integrated into multiple overlapping commercial networks. Similar patterns of imported artifacts have been identified at other maritime

sites in western Indonesia, particularly Barus, yet the earlier chronology of Bongal suggests that such interactions may have developed sooner than previously recognized. These findings support the broader argument that maritime Southeast Asia participated actively in transregional exchanges rather than functioning merely as a passive recipient of external influence (Reid, 1993).

Nevertheless, analytical caution is necessary when interpreting the relationship between commercial contact and Islamization. The archaeological evidence from Bongal provides strong evidence of interaction with the Islamic world through trade and exchange networks from the seventh century CE onward. However, the presence of Islamic artifacts does not automatically demonstrate that local communities had already converted to Islam during this period. The artifacts confirm commercial and cultural connections with Muslim merchants and possibly other actors associated with Islamic civilization, but they do not conclusively prove the existence of an established Muslim community or widespread Islamic religious practice in Tapanuli at that time. Consequently, the evidence is best interpreted as proof of early Islamic contact rather than definitive proof of early Islamization in the full religious sense.

Overall, the historical significance of the Bongal Site lies in its ability to demonstrate that the Tapanuli region had become integrated into extensive maritime trade and cultural networks connected to the Islamic world since at least the seventh century CE. The archaeological evidence enriches current understanding of the early history of Islam in North Sumatra and provides an important empirical foundation for reassessing the chronology, routes, and dynamics of Islamic expansion in the Indonesian archipelago. Rather than replacing Aceh and Barus as historically significant centers, the Bongal Site contributes to a more nuanced understanding that the arrival of Islam in the archipelago was geographically more complex and chronologically deeper than previously recognized.

The Bongal Site as a Cultural Identity of the Central Tapanuli Community

From Stuart Hall's (1990) perspective, cultural identity is not understood as a fixed and essential entity but rather as a social construction shaped by history, collective memory, and ongoing processes of representation. Within this framework, the Bongal Site can be interpreted as a symbolic space that contributes to the formation of the cultural identity of the Central Tapanuli community. The presence of various Islamic artifacts dating from the seventh to the tenth centuries CE not only holds historical value but also serves as a source of meaning that connects present-day communities with their past.

In (Hall, 1990) first conception of cultural identity, identity is rooted in shared historical experiences and common ancestry. The Islamic artifacts discovered at the Bongal Site provide material evidence of Tapanuli's connection to the broader networks of Islamic civilization from an early period. For the predominantly Muslim population of Central Tapanuli, these findings reinforce awareness of the region's deep historical roots in Islam. Interviews with the administrators of the Fansuri Museum indicate that the Bongal Site is widely regarded as a source of regional pride and as important evidence linking local communities to the history of Islam along the western coast of Sumatra.

Beyond their archaeological value, these artifacts function as symbols of collective memory that enable contemporary communities to reinterpret their historical position within the broader history of Islamic civilization. The discovery of Umayyad and Abbasid coins, Arabic-inscribed intaglios, Islamic glassware, and Middle Eastern ceramics demonstrates that the Tapanuli region was historically connected to extensive maritime networks linking the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. These findings contribute to a renewed understanding of Central Tapanuli not merely as a peripheral region but as an active participant in early maritime and cultural exchanges. Consequently, the Bongal Site becomes a source of historical legitimacy through which local communities construct and strengthen a sense of cultural belonging and regional identity.

However, as (Hall, 1990) further argues, cultural identity is also a continuous process of production and negotiation. Field findings reveal that local communities hold diverse perspectives regarding the significance of the Bongal Site. Some view the site as a historical heritage that should be preserved because it represents the cultural and religious identity of the Central Tapanuli community. Others, however, continue to perceive the area primarily through an economic lens, particularly because the site was once associated with gold-mining activities. These differing perspectives demonstrate that cultural identity is not singular or static but is constantly shaped through interactions among social, economic, and cultural interests.

The Fansuri Museum plays a crucial role in the representation of this identity. The museum functions not only as a repository for archaeological artifacts but also as an educational and interpretive space that introduces the history of Islam in Tapanuli to the wider public. Through its exhibitions and historical narratives, the museum contributes to the construction of a collective understanding of Central Tapanuli's position within past networks of Islamic trade and

civilization. In this way, the museum serves as a medium that connects historical memory with the cultural identity of contemporary society.

Interviews with Pidia Amelia, M.A., further suggest that the cultural identity of the Central Tapanuli community cannot be separated from the region's maritime traditions and Islamic heritage that developed along the western coast of Sumatra. The archaeological discoveries at Bongal have expanded historical understanding of these traditions by demonstrating that connections between Tapanuli and the Islamic world emerged much earlier than previously recognized. In this context, the artifacts are not merely historical objects but identity markers that represent the continuity between contemporary communities and a long-standing maritime Islamic heritage.

Therefore, the Bongal Site can be understood as an important component of the cultural identity of the Central Tapanuli community. Through the meanings attached to its archaeological remains, the site functions as a medium of collective memory, a source of regional pride, and a symbol of historical continuity. The cultural identity associated with the Bongal Site is not inherited passively from the past but is continuously interpreted, negotiated, and reproduced within contemporary social life.

The Bongal Site as a Cultural Heritage and Preservation Challenges

The Bongal Site has received formal recognition as an important cultural heritage site at both the regency and provincial levels. It was officially designated as a cultural heritage site by the Regent of Central Tapanuli through Decree No. 2565/DISDIK/2021 and was subsequently recognized as a provincial cultural heritage site through the Governor of North Sumatra's Decree No. 188.44/465/KPTS/2022. These recognitions reflect the historical, archaeological, and cultural significance of the site and represent an important institutional step toward its long-term preservation. Nevertheless, legal recognition alone does not automatically guarantee effective preservation. The sustainability of the Bongal Site depends on how its historical value is understood, interpreted, and protected by both institutions and local communities.

From the perspective of cultural heritage studies, the Bongal Site possesses multiple layers of heritage value. According to (Smith, 2006) heritage should be understood not merely as a collection of physical objects but as a social process through which communities assign meaning to the past. Within this framework, the Bongal Site constitutes both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Its tangible heritage is represented by archaeological remains such as Umayyad and Abbasid coins, Islamic glassware, Middle Eastern ceramics, intaglios, beads, medical instruments, and ancient ship remains. At the same time, the site embodies intangible heritage expressed through local memories, historical narratives, collective identity, and community interpretations regarding the early presence of Islam in Tapanuli. This dual significance aligns with UNESCO's (2003) conception of cultural heritage as encompassing both material and immaterial dimensions of human culture.

The cultural significance of the Bongal Site extends beyond its archaeological value. As discussed in the previous section, the site contributes to the formation of cultural identity among the people of Central Tapanuli by providing material evidence of the region's historical connections with the wider Islamic world. Consequently, preserving the site is not merely an effort to protect archaeological remains but also a means of safeguarding collective memory, cultural continuity, and historical consciousness. In this sense, the loss of archaeological evidence would also represent the loss of an important source through which communities understand and negotiate their cultural identity.

The Fansuri Museum plays a crucial role in supporting this preservation process. As the primary institution responsible for housing and displaying artifacts from the Bongal Site, the museum functions not only as a repository of archaeological collections but also as a center for education, interpretation, and public engagement. Through exhibitions, educational activities, and historical narratives, the museum helps transform archaeological findings into knowledge that can be understood and appreciated by the wider community. Thus, the museum serves as an important bridge connecting archaeological evidence, historical memory, and contemporary cultural identity.

Despite these efforts, field observations indicate that the preservation of the Bongal Site continues to face significant challenges. One major challenge concerns the uneven level of public awareness regarding the site's historical and archaeological importance. While some community members view the site as a valuable cultural heritage asset that should be protected, others remain unfamiliar with its broader historical significance. This situation demonstrates that heritage preservation is not solely a technical process of protecting physical remains but also a social process that requires the transformation of historical knowledge into collective awareness. Without broader public understanding, the significance of the site may remain confined to academic and institutional circles rather than becoming part of the community's shared cultural consciousness.

A more pressing challenge concerns the impact of gold-mining activities in the area. Ironically, while local mining activities contributed to the discovery of many artifacts that revealed the historical importance of the site, continued uncontrolled excavation poses a serious threat to its archaeological integrity. Archaeological interpretation relies not only on artifacts themselves but also on their stratigraphic context, which provides essential information regarding chronology, function, and patterns of human activity. Once these contexts are disturbed or destroyed, valuable historical information becomes irretrievable. As emphasized by (Hutahean & Sirait, 2019), archaeological conservation requires not only legal protection but also sustainable site management capable of balancing preservation objectives with local socio-economic realities. The case of Bongal illustrates the broader challenge of reconciling heritage conservation with community livelihoods, particularly in regions where economic opportunities remain limited.

The preservation of the Bongal Site therefore requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders. In accordance with Tanudirjo's (2003) concept of participatory heritage management, effective preservation should involve local governments, research institutions, museums, local communities, and other relevant stakeholders. Preservation efforts are likely to be more sustainable when local communities are positioned not merely as beneficiaries of heritage programs but as active participants in managing and protecting cultural resources. The continued archaeological investigations conducted by the Sultanate Institute and the North Sumatra Archaeological Office of BRIN, supported by local government institutions and private partners, represent positive steps toward a more systematic and collaborative management framework.

Interviews with Abbas the administrators of the Fansuri Museum further reveal that the preservation of the Bongal Site should not be viewed solely as the responsibility of scholars or government agencies. Rather, it constitutes a collective responsibility shared by the people of Central Tapanuli as the inheritors of this cultural legacy. This perspective resonates with (Lowenthal, 1998) understanding of heritage as a bridge connecting the past and the present, providing communities with a sense of continuity, belonging, and cultural meaning.

To strengthen the position of the Bongal Site as a significant cultural heritage asset, several strategic measures are recommended. These include pursuing national-level cultural heritage designation, enhancing the capacity of the Fansuri Museum as a center for education and heritage tourism, promoting community-based heritage management, developing digital platforms for public access to historical information, organizing educational and cultural programs related to the history of Islam in Tapanuli, and encouraging sustained academic research to further uncover the site's historical and archaeological potential. Through these integrated efforts, the Bongal Site can continue to function not only as an archaeological resource but also as a living cultural heritage that preserves the historical memory, cultural identity, and collective legacy of the Central Tapanuli community.

CONCLUSION

The Bongal Site, located in Jago-Jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli Regency, represents a landmark archaeological site whose significance extends far beyond its material remains. Based on the findings of this study, three principal conclusions can be drawn.

First, the Bongal Site provides substantial material evidence that the Tapanuli region had been integrated into global Islamic trade and cultural networks as early as the seventh century CE. The discovery of Umayyad and Abbasid coins, Persian Islamic glassware from Nishapur and Khorasan, Arabic-inscribed intaglios, Middle Eastern ceramics, Islamic medical instruments, and the remains of an ancient wooden ship collectively demonstrate sustained interactions between the local population and the wider Islamic world over several centuries. These findings are historically significant because they suggest that Islamic contact in the Tapanuli region occurred earlier than previously assumed. Consequently, the Bongal Site contributes important new evidence to the historiography of Islam in Indonesia and broadens current understanding of the chronology and geographical distribution of early Islamic interactions along the western coast of Sumatra.

Second, the application of Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity demonstrates that the Bongal Site functions not only as an archaeological site but also as a source of cultural identity for the contemporary Central Tapanuli community. The archaeological remains serve as material representations of a historical connection between local society and Islamic civilization, reinforcing collective memory and regional identity. At the same time, field findings reveal that perceptions of the site are diverse and continuously negotiated among community members. While many regard the site as an important symbol of cultural and religious heritage, others continue to view it primarily through an economic perspective associated with former gold-mining activities. These differing interpretations reflect Hall's argument that cultural identity

is a dynamic process of becoming rather than a fixed and unchanging essence. In this context, the Fansuri Museum plays an important role in mediating historical knowledge and promoting public awareness of the region's Islamic heritage.

Third, the Bongal Site constitutes a cultural heritage asset of exceptional historical, archaeological, and cultural value. Although it has received formal recognition at both the regency and provincial levels, significant preservation challenges remain. Ongoing threats posed by uncontrolled gold-mining activities, uneven levels of public awareness, and the absence of national-level cultural heritage designation continue to affect the long-term protection of the site. Therefore, sustainable preservation requires collaborative efforts involving local governments, research institutions, the Fansuri Museum, local communities, and national heritage authorities. Strategic priorities include pursuing national cultural heritage status, strengthening the museum's role as a center for education and heritage tourism, promoting community-based heritage management, and supporting continued archaeological research to further explore the historical significance of the site.

In conclusion, the Bongal Site should be understood simultaneously as an archaeological landmark, a source of cultural identity, and a valuable cultural heritage asset. Its archaeological discoveries enrich our understanding of the early history of Islam in North Sumatra and highlight the importance of maritime interactions in shaping cultural and religious exchanges across the Indonesian archipelago. Future research is encouraged to undertake more extensive archaeological investigations, comparative studies with other early Islamic sites in maritime Southeast Asia, and community-based heritage programs that place local communities at the center of preservation efforts.

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