

Ceramics and Other Archaeological Finds as Evidence of Ancient Ports Existence and Its Role in Eastern Coast of South Sumatra in Early Centuries

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Abstract

The East Coast of Sumatra has been often associated with great maritime empire in Southeast Asia, namely Srivijaya. However in this paper does not focus on the presence of that empire, but the traces of settlements and port related maritime activities early centuries AD. Foreign ceramics is one solid indication of their relationship and trade exchange activities between the origin places of ceramics was produced with which it was found on the very site of east coast South Sumatra, the same thing happened to other findings as well. By revealing these sites we might have picture what Southern Sumatra role was in maritime activities of early centuries AD.

Key words: Ceramics and Archeological Findings, Southern Sumatra, Ancient Ports

Preface

The east coast region of Sumatra Island is commonly known for seafaring since ancient times. As a “gate route” to enter the Indonesian Archipelago, its connected or passed by ships with destinations to and from the Yellow Sea in the North. The peak of trade activity in east coast region of Sumatra Island happened during the period of the Maritime Kingdom of Srivijaya. Its vast territory covered almost all of the western part of Indonesian Archipelago and Malay Peninsula (Kedah) up to southern part of Thailand (Ligor).

Based on ancient inscriptions and foreign written sources, the period of this enormous kingdom was emerging presumably in 6th until 13th

Centuries. Yet it cannot deny, some of archaeological evidences that found in east coast of Sumatra Island, indicated the contacts activity with foreigner already conducted far before 6th Century. The peak of trading activity in eastern Sumatra through the Malacca Strait at that time appropriated with the period of “silk road” trade routes between East and West from the 8th -11th Centuries (Wolters, 1967). In land route of “silk road”, the traders were assessing the desert land through Central Asia, Eastern Asia to Europe, like wise from Europe to Central Asia. However, the sea routes in “silk routes” were sailing the routes which connected Mesopotamian and Persian Gulf in the West to South of China, through the Melaka strait and the East Coast of Sumatra.

Meanwhile the trade network from trade centers in the West also expanded to the South East. The 8th -11th Centuries were expanding period of Muslim trade along coastline of Indian Sea to China. The Ships sailed from Mesopotamia and Persian Gulf or from Egypt and Middle Sea (Mediterranean) to India and Malabar, continued to Srilangka, Indonesia, Indochina, and Southern China territory. They were loaded with commercial goods such as rocks, turtle skin, comb, and metal bars. All of those things were exchanged for elephant trunks, rhinoceros horn, and camphor along the Indian seashore. Whereas in China, the trade goods were exchanged for precious things such as silk and ceramic, all of those were going to sale in Mediterranean markets and the Indian sea became center for the distribution of spices, perfume, aromatic ingredients, and medicines. (Lombard, 1996)

The sea trade routes between East and West had went on far before the arrival of the Islamic religion into Indonesian Archipelagos. Traders and seafarers from China, Arabia and Persia had travelled using the advantage of monsoon winds. By assessing the historical records, we

have descriptions of their navigation network and the kind of commodities which were traded. The journey from China to Indonesian Archipelagos and South East Asia, at least had 3 stages period of journeys:

The first period was the 5th – 7th Centuries; the journeys were motivated by religious pilgrimages. It is marked by Fa-shien journeying to religious centers in India and Ceylon in 414 AD. In his returned journey to China, he passed and stopped in Yeh Po Tie which located in the East Coast of Sumatra. At this time, the trade commodity was limited only to luxurious or royal goods such as: pearls, turtle skin, and religious effects such as benzoin, perfume and other exceptional things (Wolters, 1967).

The second period was in the 7th – 13th Centuries; the sea journeys not only were intended for luxurious and royal goods, but also for spices and medicines. This period was marked by the emerging of maritime kingdoms in Sumatra such as Sriwijaya and Melayu. As we found in It-Tsing's records (677 AD), in his journey to India he stopped in Palembang, he noticed that Palembang had already become an important port. Another record made by another Chinese traveler, Hsu- T'ang –Shu, mentioned that Sriwijaya had at least 14 harbors or ports and Barus were one of its biggest one in the west coast of Sumatra, which produced camphor and had its own administrative rules (Wolters, 1967).

The third Period was in the 14th -17th Centuries; it was the summit of Chinese commercial activity in the Ming Dynasty. At that time the Chinese Empire was as its acme in prosperity and leading culture. At the beginning of the 15th century, it was a period where there was an enormous interest from the Chinese Empire to expand its influence to overseas lands, its trade's become more developed and more diverse, as well as China's knowledge in geography had became wider and more detailed (Mills, 1969). The famous and legendary trader and envoy at this time was

Admiral Cheng Ho or Ma Huan (1403-1430 AD). Ma Huan or Cheng Ho noted and recorded on his journey in his journal and he wrote a book “*Ying Yai Sheng Lan*” (The Overall Survey of The Ocean’s Shores) (Mills, 1969).

Base on its chronology, ports and trade settlements along east coast Sumatra could divide into several periods,

1. Ports which emerged in pre or early Sriwijaya period 4th– 7th C
2. Ports during Sriwijaya Period 7th – 13th C
3. Ports which existed after Sriwijaya period and at the time of emerging of many maritime kingdoms in Sumatra such as Panai, Malayu, and Samudra Pasai, as same period with Majapahit supremacy in East Java in 13th C.
4. Port that was emerged and developed in 18th-19th C

From all of the five stages of Chronology, the existing of the ports was the most varied. Some of ports could survive through several periods but there also ports which only existed only in one period and abandoned afterward.

Archaeological researches in eastern Sumatra, supported by written sources, is also conducted by field research through either surveys or excavations. The results of this research revealed that most of the sites in this area were dated back to pre- and during the Sriwijaya period in 4th - 13th C. The primary indications for the existence of those ports in east coast of Sumatra were an enormous number of ceramics found, mostly along the line of its seashore. As well as the ceramic sherds there’s also traces of ancient settlements remains such as bricks, poles of wooden

house pillars, fragments of ancient ships/vessels, beads, metal and wood relics.

Other data that we could use to explain the existence of the ports are the shipwreck cargos, which found in Indonesian Sea, such as shipwreck from Pulau Buaya, Bangka Belitung, and the recent finding from Cirebon Sea. The data from these projects are very important and relevant evidences reveal the ancient trade activity and its commodities for export and import from other places outside of the Indonesia Archipelago. More over with sunken ship sites, which might have same chronological assemblage, contains a high value of large number ceramic data related to other kinds of commodities which were also important. The ceramics we could identified the origin of its dated and place, and from ceramics dating we could confirm the variation of other commodities which came from the same period of the ceramics.

This paper tries to decipher which sites have indicated that these activities and how their role in shipping, trade and cultural exchanges of the past by using both written source and artifacts that found in very sites.

The Archaeological Findings And Past Ten Years New Reveals In South Sumatra

Most of sites that indicated maritime and long distance trade activity in early centuries are located in two provinces in southern part Sumatera, which are South Sumatra province and Jambi province.

A. Jambi Province

The existence of ancient port in south Sumatra began with toponim of a place called “Muara Sabak”. It’s located in Batanghari estuary. The word Sabak could be refer to Arabian noted in 7th C called Zabag , a place that might be located in Sumatera (L. Damais, 1964). Nowadays Muara Sabak

is in Tanjung Jabung distrik, along with others sites that had reveals later in late 90's such as Lambur. Nipah Panjang, Siti Hawa, and Koto Kandis.



Fig. 1: Tanjung Jabung District in Jambi Province.

Tanjung Jabung district lies in a delta at the mouth of the Batang Hari River, the second largest river in southern Sumatra. The lowland region mostly consists of peat swamps. Several rivers flow into this delta, which partly empties into the Berhala Strait, among other rivers; Pemusiran, Lambur Luar, and Simbur Rise. Those sites located in this region are on the banks of the river flow, both of which still exist as well as the flow of an ancient river that has dried up. The most prominent finding on sites in this region is the distribution of foreign ceramics which is quite dense and evenly distributed on every surface of the site.

Ceramic findings, especially Chinese ceramics are quite dominant to the sites in the estuary area up to Muara Jambi site in the mid-stream of the River Batanghari. In addition to ceramics, the findings in the estuary of the river, also a variety of other ship findings such as wooden pegs, fiber ropes, ship fragments, metal, pottery, gold, and other findings that show traces of settlement activities and maritime activity of past trade. Mostly

ceramic finds in this area came from the Sung Dynasty era; 11th to 13th Century, and consists of various kinds of white ceramics, caldrons, jars, ewers, which came in quite fine quality.

B. South Sumatra Province

Other than Batanghari River, the largest river in South Sumatra is Musi River. The maritime site in this province mostly scattered in the bank of this river. South Sumatra province are well-known on its role in trade route either in historical or archeological data.

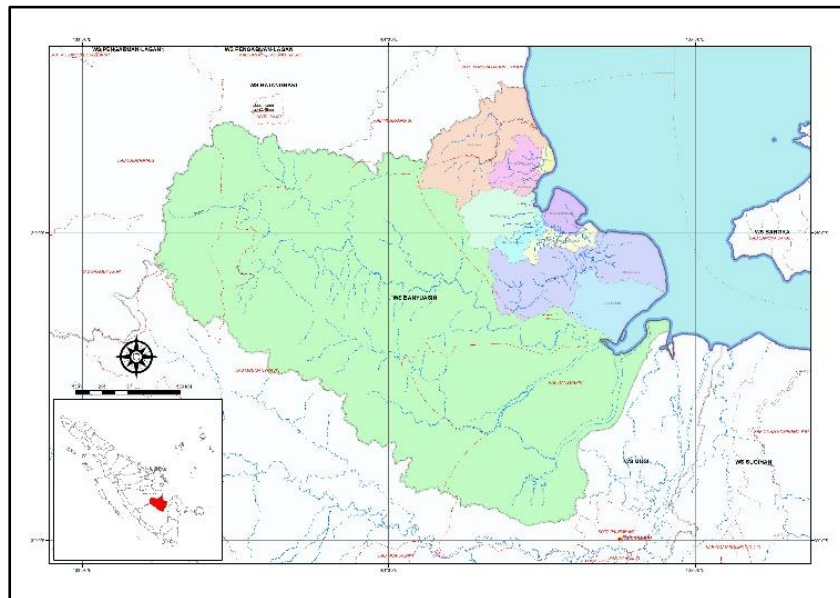


Fig. 2: Air Sugihan Site, South Sumatra Province.

The oldest data in this region date came from the early of the 7th century AD, known as the Srivijaya period. The sites located in the estuary of the Musi River facing directly into the Strait of Malacca, among others are the wetlands sites on along the edge of the east coast of South Sumatra, such as the sites in Bayunglincir, Karang Agung to Air Sugihan, and the site of Kota Kapur in Bangka Island. These sites clearly indicate the trace of ancient settlements existence and maritime activities from the beginning of AD (century 3-4 AD). In addition to the findings of ancient settlements,

there are household appliances (grinding), pottery, beads, and metal fragment fragments, as well as Chinese ceramic findings from Tang dynasty by the end of 9th century AD. For the oldest ceramic find in the eastern seaboard South Sumatra is a jug from the 6th Century Sui dynasty found on the site of Air Sugihan.

The district of Air Sugihan lies on the south side of the delta of Musi River on an ebb and tide, swamp area. Since 1980 was made for transmigration settlements, canals and bridges were built to reach the villages. Since inhabited, many archaeological findings were reported yet illegal digging occurred around the 1990s. Preliminary surveys were conducted in 1998 and again in 2003 through to 2011, and 2013 by Indonesian National Research Center of Archaeology. The research had identified several sites with surface finds such in Kertamurti, Nusakarta, Banyubiru, and canal 7. Excavations were carried on at 2007 and 2008, 2011 and 2013.

Beside the traces of ancient settlement, sites in east coast of South Sumatra also show remains of ancient maritime activities such as; part of the remaining ancient boats, wooden fragments of ships; oars, peg wood, rope fibers, shoe stoves, as well as remnants of an ancient dock. Some others finds in Air Sugihan area which indicated similarity with other sites in South India. China Mainland and South East Asia have various beads made of glass and stone; stamps made of glass/stone; decorated pottery; Chinese ceramics; and metal objects.



Fig. 3 (left): The end of a wooden boat fragment (National Research Center of Archaeology).

C. Bangka Island

Bangka Island was used to part of South Sumatra Province, now the island namely Bangka and Belitung have become a Province of Bangka Belitung. The Bangka Island it self with its Menumbing hill has been known by sealer in early centuries. The oldest written story written before Sriwijaya about Bangka obtained in India. A Buddhist literature written in century 3 AD (Mahaniddesa) mentions a number of place names in Asia, among others about Swarnnabhūmi, Wangka, and Java. Swarnnabhūmi name can be identified with Sumatra as mentioned also in the book Milindapanca while Wangka may be identified by Bangka. More detailed information about the picture there Bangka Island the Chinese news from the year 1436 AD is Hsing-Ch'a Sheng-lan (General Reports Journey at Sea) written by Fei Hsin of a place called Ma-yi-tung lying west of Kau-lan (Belitung) in the southern sea (L. . Damais, 1995; Groeneveldt, 1960)

Kota kapur, a prominent archaeological site in Bangka island, well known as its inscription about the invasion to Bumijawa. The inscription was originally thought to have come from the 7th century AD, but with the discovery of a statue Vishnu style 4 -5 centuries AD as it is also found in the port of Oc Eo sites in northern Vietnam. With the discovery of these findings, it can be said Kota Kapur site has been going on around the 4th

century AD or the period before the Realm of Srivijaya. The findings from this site not only inscription but also remains of brick temples, with one of it center consist about 20 ceramic bowls dated from North Song Dynasty 10th C arranged in circle row.

The island of Bangka has a strait of Bangka that connects with Malacca Strait. In the 7th century AD, the Malacca Strait has become an important shipping lane and crowded with the Indian region. In 2013, National Research Center of Archaeology has revealed remnants of an ancient dock /port on southwest shore of Kota Kapur, facing to the mouth of Musi River, This remnant presumably as an entrance dock to Kota Kapur in early century. In addition to the rest of the pier, around the location are also found the remains of a large wooden boat, pottery shard, and the remains of house poles.



Fig. 4 (right): Excavation on ancient dock in Kota Kapur Site of Bangka. (National Research Center of Archaeology)

Conclusion

Indonesia was presumably greatly involved in the Indian Ocean network trade at very early period. Indonesian products such as camphor, benzoin, cloves, and gold were demand in India and China, moreover to Middle East, Rome and west coast of Africa. Historical evidence however

indicates that the main emporia in western Indonesia were not located near the producing center, but instead were in south east Sumatra (Miksic, 1979)

The oldest evidences of long distance trade route, between southern Sumatra's east coast to elsewhere, are the finding of ceramic jars from the Sui dynasty's 6th -7th century, the Arikamedu's pottery shard of 4th - 5th century, also some potteries which are the same as found in Oc Eo site (4-5 C). In Air Sugihan site, not only the potteries but also beads, metal works, and also amulet are similar with those found in 4th-5th century site of Oc Eo.

From the chronology of ceramic finds, ceramic that found in Tanjung Jabung area of Batanghari estuary are mostly latter than those found South Sumatera east coast. It is indicated that settlements in South Sumatra by the Musi River estuary were older (9th-10th C) than Batanghari's (11th -13th C). The ceramics and other artifacts such as metal work, glass and others found in Jambi and South Sumatra sites are the same as those found in Pulau Buaya, Intan and Cirebon Shipwreck, which mean all those were came from the same period and the same trade business (Taim, 2016)

Some boat fragments found in Air Sugihan or Bangka site shown the use of Southeast Asian tradition of boat making. Southeast Asian boat making techniques that consist of sewn plank technique and lash lug techniques. This technique was flourishing in Southeast Asia so it use to call as Southeast Asian Technique, which starts in early first century (Abas, 2009).

The eastern coastal area of southern Sumatra contains several areas that indicate long-distance maritime and trade activities. The region covers

Jambi province, south Sumatra, and Bangka Belitung. Based on the findings of archaeological remains, the Jambi province area relatively younger by archeological findings than the other two regions (southern Sumatra and Bangka). This is in accordance with the chronology of the history of the kingdom of Srivijaya which was mentioned in Sumatra by Coedes (Coedes, Damais, Kulke, & Manguin, 2014). Wolters, an English Historian , also said that Jambi to South Sumatra area are the suitable and strategic location, as enter port while waiting for the best wind that might bring the ship to east (Manguin, Py,. Soeroso MP, 2006)

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