

Tracing the Islamic Journey in Barus: The Genesis of Islam's Spread

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Abstract. This article aims to trace Barus as the zero point of the spread of Islam in Indonesia. The study is motivated by Barus' historical position as an ancient city and a major port on the west coast of Sumatra, which has been identified as the entry point of Islam into the archipelago since the 7th century AD. Using a qualitative approach through field studies and literature review, the findings show that Barus played a significant role in the arrival of Islam through interactions between Muslim traders from Arabia, Persia, and India with local communities, especially via marriage and social assimilation. This interaction gave birth to an early Muslim community that lived harmoniously and left archaeological traces such as the Papan Tinggi and Mahligai tomb complexes, indicating the early presence of Muslims. Thus, Barus not only served as a geographical gateway but also as a center of early Islamic civilization integrated with local culture. The Indonesian government formally recognized Barus' role by inaugurating the Barus Monument as the "Zero Point of Islam in the Archipelago" on March 24, 2017. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical roots of Islam in Indonesia and highlights the importance of Barus as a cultural heritage site. It suggests the need for further archaeological and historical research in Barus to uncover more evidence about the Islamic civilization in the region. In addition, the findings support the incorporation of Barus into national education curricula and cultural tourism programs to strengthen historical awareness and interreligious harmony.

Keywords: Barus, Islamic Zero Point, Spread of Islam, Islamic Historical, Early Islamic Civilization

INTRODUCTION

Islam as a religion in Indonesia has basically been intertwined with Indonesian history, but regarding the early arrival of Islam, no one knows for sure the date. At least four theories have been circulating in Indonesia about the spread of Islam, namely Arabic, Persian, Indian and Chinese theories (Roza, 2024 & Hastuti, 2022). These differences in views start from the time of arrival, the area of origin and the spreader or carrier of Islam itself to Indonesia (Putri, et al., 2025). Muslim traders from Arabia, India and China played a key role in introducing the teachings of Islam to the local population and the local community, especially in the coastal areas. Archaeological relics such as ancient mosques, tombstones, and historical documents reflect the rich cultural interaction between Islam and local traditions (Azwanda, Yusuf, & Roza, 2024).

Regarding the spread of Islam which has spread to many areas in the archipelago, it was definitely initially established in port cities and of course on the coast at the tip and west of the island of Sumatra because most of the archipelago is at the crossroads of sea routes for traders who will trade to the east or to China and vice versa (Roza, 2024). Therefore, the spread of Islam in the archipelago was relatively easy because its teachings did not recognize the caste system like the religion before Islam. This different system is what attracts the attention of the public to embrace Islam so that Islam continues to develop and is able to maintain its existence as the majority religion in Indonesia (Manik, 2024).

As explained, the spread of Islam in the archipelago began from port cities such as Barus. in Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra. The capital of this regency is in the city of Pandan which is on the west coast of the island of Sumatra. This means that geographically, if you look closely, it turns out that Barus is located at an altitude of between 0 to 3 meters above sea level and the area of Barus District is 21.81 km², with a population of 18,919 people (Putri, et al, 2025). Barus is famous for producing camphor. Camphor is the resin or sap of the *Dryobalanops Camphora Aromatica* tree. This tree grows widely in Sumatra and Kalimantan. The height of the tree reaches 65 meters. The resin comes out of the cracks of the branches and twigs. Each tree can produce 2 to 10 kg of camphor (Encyclopedia Indonesia, 1990). Camphor or camphor in the chemical formula is called C₁₀ H₁₈ and its chemical name is *naphthalene*. Camphor has many uses such as repelling insects and small animals that fly and crawl (National Encyclopedia of Indonesia. 2004). Camphor is very famous for its distinctive aroma and is widely used in traditional medicine in the Arabian and Persian regions. Its high selling value makes it very popular in the world market (Erwadi, 2014). However, nowadays camphor-producing trees are increasingly difficult to find. Although they do, most of them are not old enough to produce the lime powder that is usually found in the middle of the tree trunk.

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Various scientific studies reinforce Barus's position as one of the earliest entry points for the spread of Islam in Indonesia, a site not only of high historical value but also of cultural and Islamic educational relevance. The article titled "Reconstruction of Educational and Islamic Civilization Values at the Zero Point of Barus" by Indra Harahap, M. Hatta Azwar, Richa Ardelila Hutabarat, Ainun, and Yusril Mahendra, published in Jurnal Pendidikan dan Konseling Vol. 4 No. 5, 2022, concludes that the spread of Islam in Indonesia began in Barus, supported by findings such as ancient tombs like Mahligai and Papan Tinggi, as well as the existence of the Zero Point Monument. This study emphasizes the importance of reconstructing educational and civilizational Islamic values from this historical legacy (Harahap, Azwar, Hutabarat, Ainun, & Mahendra, 2022).

However, in a study by Misri A. Muchsin titled "The Peureulak Sultanate and the Discourse on the Zero Point of Islamic Civilization in the Archipelago", published in the Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies, Vol. 2 No. 2, 2018, it is stated that the Peureulak Sultanate in Aceh deserves recognition as the oldest Islamic kingdom in Southeast Asia, as it had an Islamic system of governance as early as 840 CE (Muchsin, The Peureulak Sultanate and the Discourse on the Zero Point of Islamic Civilization in the Archipelago, 2018).

Lastly, the article "Field Study for Islamic Education Teachers: The History of Islam's Arrival in the Archipelago through Barus and Religious Moderation in Barus", by Restu Prana Ilahi, published in NYIUR-Dimas: Jurnal Ilmiah Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat, Vol. 4 No. 1, 2024, concludes that Barus was one of the main gateways for the spread of Islam in the Archipelago. Barus is not only historically significant, but

its people also embrace values of religious moderation, reflected in a socially tolerant and harmonious interfaith life (Ilahi, 2024).

Based on the various scientific studies mentioned above, the author concludes that the focus of this article differs from previous studies conducted by the aforementioned scholars. Therefore, this article is highly suitable for publication in this journal, as it will reach a broad audience and raise awareness about Barus as one of the earliest regions to receive the spread of Islam in Indonesia.

METHOD

The method used in writing this article is qualitative. Qualitative methods are approaches used to understand a phenomenon in a natural context, not in a created or engineered situation such as in an experiment. The researcher plays a direct role as the main instrument while the main focus of qualitative research is on the meaning of the phenomenon being studied, not on efforts to produce generalizations and does not require hypotheses (Sugiyono, 2022).

Qualitative research is in the form of research that aims to describe, summarize various conditions, various situations or various social reality phenomena that exist in society (Arikunto, 2016). Thus, qualitative research does not calculate numbers when processing results but the meaning of the observed phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

Furthermore, a field study was conducted on October 26, 2024 in Barus with the main focus on tracing the traces of the spread of Islam, especially visiting historical sites such as the Tomb of the Upper Board, the Mahligai Tomb and the Zero Barus Point Monument. Therefore, this article is the result of field research and literature research. According to Fuad & Nugroho (2013), one of the methods of data collection in qualitative research that requires in-depth mastery of literature and special skills from the researcher. In this study, the historical approach is the main basis, namely by identifying and collecting various historical sources, such as archaeological documents, travel records, artifacts, and other sources that can provide an overview of the development of Islam in Barus. Through this approach, the research seeks to trace the roots and dynamics of Islamic civilization in the region.

Furthermore, qualitative research analyzes data through content analysis. which works with several steps, namely (1) processing data by sorting the data; (2) read all the data; (3) coding all data; (4) the setting (domain), people (participants), categories and themes to be analyzed; (5) description; (6) interpretation (Creswell, 2014 & Bungin, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Getting to Know the City of Barus

Before being known as Barus, this area was originally referred to as Fansur or Panchur by the Mandailing and Batak people who inhabit the surrounding area. At that time, before the introduction of Islam and Christianity, the local tribes were known to have traditions related to the practice of witchcraft. In Mandailing and Batak, the word *pancur* means 'spring', which is then absorbed and adapted by the Arabs into *Fansur*. The name Barus itself began to be used after the Malay community came and settled in the area, then blended with the local population. From this mixture, the Mandailing tribe was formed who embraced Islam. The name *Barus* was then associated with the name of the river which became the main route for the entry of Malays into this region (Irsyad, et al, 2023). Here you can see the map of Barus.

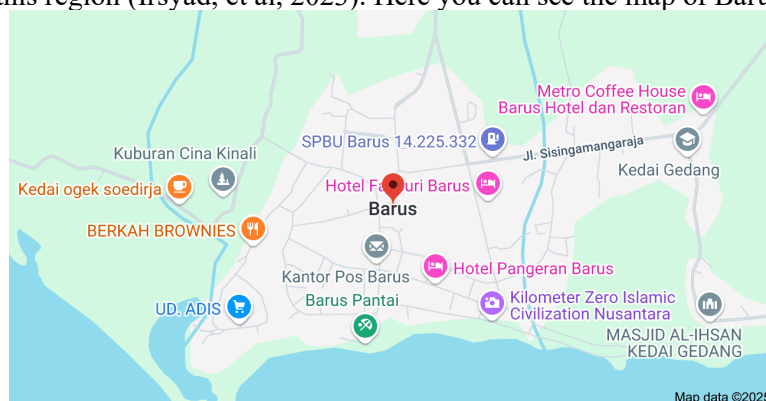


Figure 1. Map of the city of Barus

Source: <https://g.co/kgs/8CmmZjj>

The city of Barus is known as a producer of camphor which was once exported to the Middle East, including Egypt and other cities. Camphor was used to preserve corpses or mummify, which was a tradition in Ancient Egypt. One famous example is the use of camphor to preserve the Pharaoh's mummies which can now be found in the Cairo Museum, including the Ramseph Museum, where his remains are still in a durable condition to this day. In addition to being famous as a producer of camphor, Barus City also produces various other commodities, such as frankincense, pepper, resin, animal skins, and other natural products, which come from the interior areas of Toba, Singkil, Tanah Karo, Simalungun, and surrounding islands. (Khairunnisa & Pane, 2019)



Figure 2. Barus City Gate

Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/VES6ekrdnaAG5diC7>

According to Saleh (2020), Barus is known as one of the important trade centers that is rich in various valuable commodities and forest products typical of the archipelago that are of very high value, it is suspected that the existence of abundant camphor in this region is the main reason for the naming of Barus as one of the famous trading ports on the west coast of Sumatra. In fact, this place was mentioned by Claudius Ptolemaeus in his book *Geographyke Hyphegeiss* in the 2nd century AD, where he referred to Barus as Barousai. Meanwhile, according to Claude Guillot (2003), Barus is a unique name and is classified as a royal name that is commonly mentioned in various books but its history is unknown. The evidence of its existence is defeated by some unclear opinions because it is associated with Sumatra, camphor and Hamzah Fansuri.

Barus is known as one of the centers of the Islamic kingdom where the majority of people embrace Islam. One of the tangible evidence of the traces of Islamic history in this region is the existence of the Tomb of the High Board, which is also known as the Tomb of a Thousand Steps. This tomb is located in Penanggahan Village, North Barus District, and is one of the important sites that represent the Islamic heritage in the area. However, Barus underwent a process of Christianization since the Dutch Colonial period, and this situation continued until Indonesia became independent. As a result, Barus and its surroundings in Central Tapanuli are currently experiencing a shift into a minority Muslim community. However, some historians argue that Barus was the starting point for the entry of Islam into the archipelago, although this opinion is still a debate among academics and historians (Batubara, et al., 2023). Based on information, the camphor produced in the Barus area is the highest quality camphor. Therefore, the Egyptians in the time of Pharaoh had come to Barus to buy camphor and others for the purpose of medicine and preservation of corpses. The second and third mummies of Ramses who died in the Red Sea are said to have been mummified with camphor and spices from Barus (Wanti, 2006).

The Entry of Islam in Barus

The discussion of the entry and development of Islam in Indonesia is always said in a peaceful way and it has never been written or heard that the entry of Islam into Indonesia is forcible. The character of people who accept Islamic teachings is a disposition that does not have maximum violence because the nature of the environment of Indonesian people who live on the equator is very teposliro. This is very different from the nature of the spreader who comes from the Middle East who live in the natural flora of extraordinary heat (Roza, 2024).

The process of the entry of Islam into Indonesian territory occurred through two paths (1) local people began to get to know and interact with the teachings of Islam, until finally embracing the religion: (2) Muslim nomads from various Asian regions such as Arabs, India, and China came and settled in the

archipelago. They then marry into the local community and slowly blend in with the local culture. This acculturation process makes them integrate with local communities such as Javanese, Malays, and other ethnic groups (Roza, 2024). In line with the opinion of Ricklefs (1991) that there are several possibilities regarding the process of entering and developing Islam in a region, namely (1) indigenous people who have contact with Islam and then adhere to it; (2) Asian foreigners (Arabs, Indians, Chinese, etc.) who have embraced Islam steadily live and settle in an area in the archipelago and then marry indigenous people so that a new family is formed and follows the religion brought by the immigrants.

Barus, in its long history, has made Islam a social and political force in the form of a government that has been successful there. Therefore, Barus is identified with an Islamic kingdom with a Muslim majority population. This is evidenced by the large number of tombs as burial places for the spreaders of Islam in Barus. For example, the Papan Tinggi tomb, the Mahligai tomb and other tombs (Nurfaisal, 2013). In accordance with the results of the seminar on the entry of Islam into Indonesia in the city of Medan in 1963, it was concluded that Islam had touched Barus in the seventh century AD (Hasymi, 1993).

Islamization in Indonesia occurred through trade that has been going on since before Christ, the main ingredient of which is camphor sap which is widely traded to various regions in the Middle East and its surroundings (Azhari, 2017). Camphor has in essence been used since ancient times as a material to preserve remains in the Middle East. In addition, spices had high economic value at that time (Trihanondo, 2020).

According to (Nasution, 2021), the process of the arrival of Arab traders to the archipelago should be through the Strait of Malacca, according to the ideal map. However, in practice, their trade routes to China actually take the route through North Sumatra, especially Barus, for security reasons because their shipping through the Strait of Malacca is hampered. Therefore, Muslim traders switched their shipping routes to the western route of the island of Sumatra, then crossed the Sunda Strait through the region now known as Singapore, before finally continuing their journey to Canton in China.

Therefore, the entry of Islam into Barus as a whole must be related to Arab traders that have been going on since the time of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH where Arab traders often made voyages to China, and one of their stopovers was Bandar Barus. This means that Barus has a central role as the initial path for the spread of Islam to the archipelago and is also related to diplomatic missions carried out by the Tang Dynasty during the reign of Emperor Kao Tsung. In this mission, the Tang Dynasty sent a delegation to Medina which was then under the leadership of Caliph Uthman bin Affan. The delegation also traveled back to China by sea. While on their way back from Medina to China, the group had stopped in Barus. This stopover was made to meet logistical needs and wait for changes in the direction of the season's wind. While in Barus, the envoys from Medina took advantage of the time to preach and introduce the teachings of Islam to the local community. From here, Islam began to spread in the Barus area (Muchsin, 2017).

Regarding the entry of Islam in Barus, it turns out that there are a number of Islamic scholars or preachers living in Barus. It is predicted that there are 36 Islamic spreaders in Barus who have a network with Islamic spreaders in the archipelago, including Sheikh Sayyid Mahmud who is buried in the Papan Tinggi cemetery complex (Zuhairansyah and Afrida, 2015).

Barus as the Zero Point of the Spread of Islam

Situs bersejarah merupakan benda warisan budaya yang harus di pelihara dan dilestarikan dengan baik (Setri, Sholehah, Amanda, & Rizka, 2023). The process of Islamization in Barus occurred naturally through trade and marriage. Barus is the place where Islam first "landed" in the archipelago in the 7th century. The Muslim traders who came brought the teachings of Islam and mingled with the local community. The existence of this early Islamic community is evidenced by archaeological relics in the form of an ancient tomb complex with Arabic inscriptions. which is in the cemetery area of Papan Tinggi, Mahligai and Aulia 44. This discovery strengthens Barus' position as one of the historical witnesses in religious and cultural encounters in the archipelago (Aizid, 2016). In addition, the entry of Islam through the flow because at that time, Barus became one of the largest ports of stopover on the west coast of Sumatra. Based on various evidence found, many parties believe that Barus was the first door for Islam to enter the archipelago. This belief is further strengthened by historical records that state that the existence of the Islamic kingdom in Aceh was only known after Marco Polo stopped in the Kingdom of Samudra Pasai in 692 H or 1292 AD. On his journey, Marco Polo noted that he met many Arabs who were active in spreading Islam there. (Aizid, 2016). This means that the process of the entry of Islam into Indonesia gave birth to various views and opinions. Some of the figures who gave this view were those who had direct knowledge about the entry and spread of Islamic culture and teachings in Indonesia. Meanwhile, there are also those who base their views

on various studies conducted by researchers from Europe who come to Indonesia to carry out tasks or work assigned by their government (Permana, 2015).

The spread of Islam to the archipelago did not occur quickly but took place slowly and through various approaches. Historians divide theories about the entry of Islam into Indonesia based on its characteristics and path of spread such as (1) The Mecca Theory holds that Islam entered Indonesia directly from Mecca or Arabia in the first century Hijri, around the 7th century AD.; (2) The Gujarat Theory states that Islam entered Indonesia through the Gujarat region, which is located in western India and directly borders the Arabian Sea, around the 7th century Hijri or the 13th century AD; (3) The Persian theory states that the process of entering Islam into Indonesia originated from the Persian territory, which is currently known as Iran (Azra, 2013). While the Chinese theory is still under debate by experts, it is only that according to records from the Tang Dynasty (618–960 AD) there have been Muslim communities on the coast of China such as Canton, Zhang-zhao, and Quanzhou. Local sources also indicate that the first Islamic king in Java, Raden Patah of the Demak Sultanate, is believed to have Chinese ancestry from his mother's side who came from Campa, a region in Southern China that is now part of Vietnam. This theory was further strengthened by the discovery of mosques that have typical Chinese architecture, which were built by the Chinese Muslim community in various regions, especially on the island of Java. In addition, ports such as Gresik have long been mentioned in Chinese records as a place of anchorage and settlement for Chinese sailors and traders since the 15th century (Nirmala, Samad, & Zulhedi, 2023).

There are various sites that are evidence of the arrival of Islam in Barus, namely the Papan Tinggi Tomb Complex, the Mahligai Tomb Complex and the Ibrahim Tomb Complex, the Anbar Tomb Complex, and the Makhudum Tomb Complex. The fifthThe site not only represents historical and religious values, but also reflects the cultural and social dimensions of the early Muslim societies that once settled in the region. The tomb complexes show the characteristics of early Islamic architecture, the use of Arabic script, and strong religious symbols, all of which are authentic indications of the existence of an established Islamic community since the early days of the spread of Islam in the archipelago.

The sites in question include the first of the Papan Tinggi Tomb Site, which is one of the most famous burial sites. The name "Papan Tinggi" was given because the location of this tomb complex is on a hill with an altitude of about 3,000 meters above sea level. The area of this tomb is approximately 40 meters x 15 meters and is surrounded by wall and iron fences with a height of about 160 cm.



Figure 3. The staircase to the High Board Tomb
Source: Team Documentation

To reach the Tomb Complex of Papan Tinggi, visitors have to travel through the path and climb the stairs for approximately 1.2 kilometers from the main road with a total of approximately 876 steps. Geographically, this tomb complex stretches from north to south and has the same orientation, which is north-south. From the sealing of the condition of this tomb complex, it seems that it has been well maintained. Pemanfaatan situs makam papan tinggi sebagai sumber pembelajaran tentang sejarah yang ada di kota barus, Sumatera utara (Siti Nur Azizah, 2025).

The second Mahligai Tomb Site, is located in Aek Dakka village, Barus District, which is located on a hill with an area of about 2 hectares. Access to the tomb complex can be reached by four-wheeled and two-wheeled vehicles through a paved road, although the road is uphill and makes the journey difficult. Around the tomb area, there are facilities such as rest houses, churches, vehicle parking lots and rice fields. The main access to get to the tomb can be done through the gate located on the east side of the complex.



Figure 4. Mahligai's Tomb
Source: Team Documentation

According to the tomb guards in the Mahligai Tomb complex, there are 234 tombs, consisting of three types of tombstones (1) round-shaped tombstones made of river stones as many as 104 tombs; (2) flat-shaped tombstones made of andesite stones with a total of 65 tombs; (3) 65 mace-shaped tombstones. The types and shapes of headstones in this complex vary, ranging from simple to those with decorative patterns, with various decorative sizes, from small to large. Some of the figures buried here include: Sheikh Rukumuddin, Sheikh Zainal Abidin, Imam Sheikh Khatib, Sheikh Siddi and Tuanku Mahligai (Interview with Mr. Ridwan, October 26, 2024).

Based on various studies on the entry of Islam in Barus by various circles, both regional and central, it is agreed that Barus is the zero point of the spread of Islam which was inaugurated by President Joko Widodo together with the Minister of Education and Culture on Friday, March 24, 2017 by inaugurating the Zero Point Monument of Islamic Civilization of the archipelago located in the city of Barus. Furthermore, the president and his entourage immediately visited the Mahligai Tomb. (Saleh, 2020)



Figure 5. Barus Zero Point Monumen
Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/rnFvU5LpUBagdATr8>

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Barus is one of the important areas in the early history of the entry of Islam into the archipelago. Its strategic location as an international trading port on the west coast of Sumatra made it a major stopover point for Muslim traders from the Middle East, Persia, and India since the 7th century AD. Through peaceful maritime trade routes and harmonious social interactions, Islam spread and was accepted by the local community. This is evidenced by the existence of historical sites such as the Papan Tinggi Tomb and the Mahligai Tomb and other tomb complexes that are early archaeological evidence of the existence of Muslim communities in this region.

Barus is not only the entrance to Islam geographically, but also serves as the initial foundation for the development of Islamic civilization and education in Indonesia. Historical findings and the support of the scientific literature show that Barus had a crucial role in the process of Islamization of the archipelago. In addition, the Barus people have shown tolerant and moderate living practices, reflecting the Islamic values that have developed culturally and socially in this region. Thus, Barus deserves to be remembered as one of the early nodes of the traces of Islamic civilization in Indonesia

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