

## ABBASID COINS IN NORTH SUMATRA: EVIDENCE OF INTERACTIONS WITH ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION IN THE 8<sup>TH</sup>–9<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY A.D.

Ery Soedewo<sup>1</sup>, Nur Ahmad<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pusat Riset Arkeologi Lingkungan, Maritim, dan Budaya berkelanjutan,

Organisasi Riset Arkeologi, Bahasa dan Sastra, Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Jurusan Tasawuf & Psikoterapi, Fakultas Ushuluddin & Humaniora, UIN Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia

[soedewo\\_ery@yahoo.com](mailto:soedewo_ery@yahoo.com)

**Abstrak.** *Situs Bongal sejauh ini adalah situs purbakala di Nusantara yang memiliki bukti artefaktual tertua hadirnya peradaban Islam di Nusantara sebelum abad ke-12 M. Hal itu berbeda dari teori yang menyebut Islam di Nusantara berasal dari India dan mulai hadir sejak abad ke-12 M. Artefak yang ditemukan di Situs Bongal itu adalah koin-koin perak (dirham) dari masa Dinasti Abbasyah yang berasal dari kurun abad ke-8–9 M. Pertanggalan koin-koin Abbasyah tersebut bersesuaian dengan hasil pertanggalan mutlak terhadap material organik yang didapat dari ekskavasi di Situs Bongal. Hasil analisis karbon menunjukkan rentang okupasi Situs Bongal antara abad ke-6–10 M. Temuan berupa koin-koin Dinasti Abbasyah di situs Bongal adalah jawaban dari permasalahan tentang masuknya peradaban Islam ke Nusantara. Dalam kajian sejarah masuknya Islam ke Nusantara, muncul beragam teori yang menjelaskan asal dan masa kedatangannya. Salah satu teori menyebutkan bahwa Islam di Nusantara masuk sejak abad ke-7 M dibawa oleh para saudagar dari Asia Barat (Timur Tengah). Permasalahan dari teori tersebut adalah tafsirnya yang hanya didasarkan pada data historis semata tanpa dukungan data arkeologis. Koin-koin Abbasyah dari Situs Bongal menjadi bukti bahwa salah satu unsur peradaban Islam di Nusantara hadir seiring jalinan perniagaan kepulauan ini dengan Asia Barat (Timur Tengah) jauh sebelum abad ke-12 M.*

**Kata kunci:** Islam, Abbasyah, koin, Situs Bongal, Sumatra Utara

**Abstract.** Abbasid Coins in North Sumatra: Evidence of Interactions with Islamic Civilization in The 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. The Bongal site is an archaeological site in the archipelago with the oldest artefactual evidence of the presence of Islamic civilization before the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. This is different from the theory that Islam in the archipelago originated from India and began to appear in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. That artefactual evidence is silver coins (dirham) from the Abbasid dynasty dating from the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The dating of the Abbasid coins corresponds to the absolute dating of organic materials obtained from the excavation at the Bongal Site. The carbon dating results show the Bongal Site's occupation range is between the 6<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The findings in the form of Abbasid dynasty coins at the Bongal site answer the problem of the entry of Islamic civilization into the archipelago. In the study of the history of the entry of Islam into the archipelago, various theories emerged that explain the origin and time of its arrival. One theory says Islam in the archipelago entered in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, brought by merchants from West Asia (Middle East). The problem with this theory is that its interpretation is only based on historical data without supporting archaeological data. Abbasid coins from the Bongal Site are evidence that one of the Islamic civilization elements in the archipelago was present along with the trade relations of this archipelago with West Asia (Middle East) long before the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD.

**Keywords:** Islam, Abbasid, coins, Bongal Site, North Sumatra



## 1. Introduction

*Nusantara* (Indonesian Archipelago) is an area consisting of large and small islands between two oceans, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The strategic position makes the Archipelago a route for sailors and merchants from various origins. From prehistory to history, various cultures leave an enduring legacy of their respective wealth to the human inhabitants of the archipelago. Part of the cultural heritage that the inhabitants of the archipelago preserve are the system of religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Confucianism. One of those religious systems, Islam, is followed by most archipelago inhabitants. No wonder the history of the entry of Islam to the archipelago has become an important study for experts, especially Muslim scholars from this region and scholars of Islamic History in general.

The study on the growth and development of Islam in the Archipelago is based on historical sources supported by archaeological data from several sites in the archipelago. Historical sources, such as travel journals of foreign adventurers, become important data for reconstructing the early history of interactions between cultural-support agencies and Muslim areas in West Asia (the Middle East). On the other hand, archaeological data from various artifacts from Muslim areas becomes another crucial evidence that strengthens historical data. Both data types are often employed to describe and explain opinions on Islam's origin, arrival, and preaching to the archipelago.

A number of scholars hold the theory that the origin of Islam in the archipelago was India. The first scholar who put forward this theory was Pijnapel. He argued that the Arabs who followed the Shafi'i school and settled in Gujarat and Malabar were the preachers of Islam to the archipelago (Drewes 1968, 439–440). This theory was later developed by Snouck Hurgronje, who stated that Muslims from South India (mostly intermediary traders between the Middle East and the archipelago) played a significant role in the Islamization of the archipelago at least since the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Hurgronje 1924, 7)

In line with Pijnapel, Moquette (1912) concluded that Islam's origin in the archipelago is Gujarat. He based his opinion on the gravestones from Pasai, dated 831 A.H./1428 A.D., and the tombstone from Gresik, dated 822 A.H./1419 A.D. The ancient tombstone from the archipelago turned out to be from Cambay in Gujarat, India. Based on the tombstone, Moquette further stated that Islam in the archipelago came from Gujarat, India (Moquette 1912, 536–548).

According to Arnold (1896), apart from Coromandel, Malabar, and Gujarat (all three in India), Arabia is also the place of Islam's origin in the archipelago. In his view, the traders from Arabia were the first preacher of Islam to the archipelago. It happened when traders from Arabia dominated trade links from West to East since the first century of Islamic history in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Arnold 1896, 293–94). An important clue to the traders' existence from West Asia (Middle East) in the archipelago is through the discovery of *'Ajaib al-Hind*, the work of Buzurg ibn Syahriar al-Ramhurmuzi (written around 390 A.H./1000 A.D.), suggesting the existence of a Muslim community in the territory of the *Zabaj/Zabag* kingdom (the name Sriwijaya in Arabic & Persian sources) (Azra 2013, 7).

Indication of the earlier existence than the source from Buzurg Ibn Syahriar is news from the *amr al-bahr* (admiral) al-Jahizh (163–255 A.H./783–869) in his *Kitab al-Hayawan*. Al-Jahizh knew the letter from *Maharaja Hind* from Abū Ya'qūb al-Thaqafi who heard it from 'Abd al-Mālik ibn 'Umayr (653–753 A.D.). Abd al-Mālik ibn 'Umayr found the letter in the secretary office of the caliph Mu'awiyah ibn Abū Sufyan after his death. In addition, Ibn 'Abd al-Rabbih's notes (860–940 A.D.) in his *al-Iqd al-Farid* contained a letter from *Maharaja Hind* to Caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz (717–720 A.D.). In the letter, *Maharaja Hind* mentioned his kingdom character and its natural resources: aloes, spices, nutmeg, and camphor (Azra 2013, 27–29). A variety of natural commodities called by *Maharaja Hind* are essential clues to the possibility that the country with such natural wealth is *Nusantara* (the Archipelago). In addition, in the 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., the only ruler in the archipelago

who deserved to be called a maharaja was the Śrīwijaya Kingdom ruler.

An indication of archaeological data existence which could be evidence of the early arrival of Islam in the archipelago was found when a team from Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara (the Archeology Center of North Sumatra) visited the Bongal site in the Jagojago village, Badiri subregency, Central Tapanuli regency, North Sumatra province. The team found several coins inscribed with Arabic characters on both sides. The local community members previously found those coins at Jagojago village. Further investigation into the coin existence from Bongal reveals that similar coins are also seen as part of Museum Uang Sumatera's collection (the Sumatra Money Museum) in Medan. The problem is when and where the Arabic coins from the Bongal site on Jagojago village were created.

The main objective of this study is to reveal the origin, period, and ruler who ordered the issuing of coins from the Bongal site. The results will form the basis to prove the interaction between Muslims from the Middle East and the archipelago inhabitants long before the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The disclosure of these three things will at first provide different perspectives and narratives on parts of the archipelago that interacted and were exposed to Islamic culture long before the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Method

Early Arabic records, such as the works of Al-Jahizh and Buzurg ibn Syahriar indicate the interaction between the center of Islamic culture in West Asia (Middle East) and culture in the archipelago. In addition to Arabic records, various identifiable artefactual data originating from West Asia (Middle East) represent the interaction between Islamic culture from West Asia and Nusantara (The Archipelago) culture at the Bongal site. Arabic coins found at the Bongal site are one type of artifact from West Asia (Middle East), which will be analyzed further than other artifacts. This is because the coins contain information not explicitly conveyed by different artifacts, such as the date, place of manufacture, and the person who ordered them

to be made. The technique of revealing the date and inscription of the coins from Bongal begins by describing the morphological aspects of the artifact. The information obtained through these steps is the artifact's size, weight, and color. The following analysis is a transliteration from Arabic to Latin. Arabic transliteration to Latin refers to the transliteration system of the Library of Congress (LC). The results are then translated from the original language used on the coins from Bongal into English. The results obtained from transliteration and translation will provide information about the origin, period, and ruler who ordered its minting. The information obtained from the transliteration will also reveal other messages conveyed through the inscription on the Abbasid coins. Another ideological message can indicate efforts to spread the basic values shared by religion, in this case, Islam.

## 3. Research Result and Discussion

The discovery location is at Bongal Hill, an administrative area of Jagojago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra Province (see Figure 1). The landscape excavated by the community members is in the form of dominated peatlands, and the vegetation is dominated by *nipah* trees (*Nypa fruticans*). The land was formed by Sungai Lumut (Lumut River) sedimentation, which flows toward the Indian Ocean (Purnawibowo & Restiyadi 2019, 3).

The member of Jagojago Village currently stores various types of archaeological data found in the Bongal site. They include fragments of stone statues and two metal artifacts allegedly depicting Avalokiteshwara and *vajra*. One kind of metal artifact that the local villagers kept is in the form of a coin. They were found by Suaib Alam Siregar (46 years) on Mr. Yuda's land in Dusun IV Bukit Bongal, close to where the Gaṇeśa statue was found at the top of the hill. These coins are inscribed with Arabic letters on both sides. All coins have a diameter of 1.5 cm to 2 cm (Purnawibowo and Restiyadi 2019, 8).

The follow-up to the discovery of archaeological objects at the Bongal Site was sending a team by the Archeology Center of North Sumatra in 2020 to document and identify

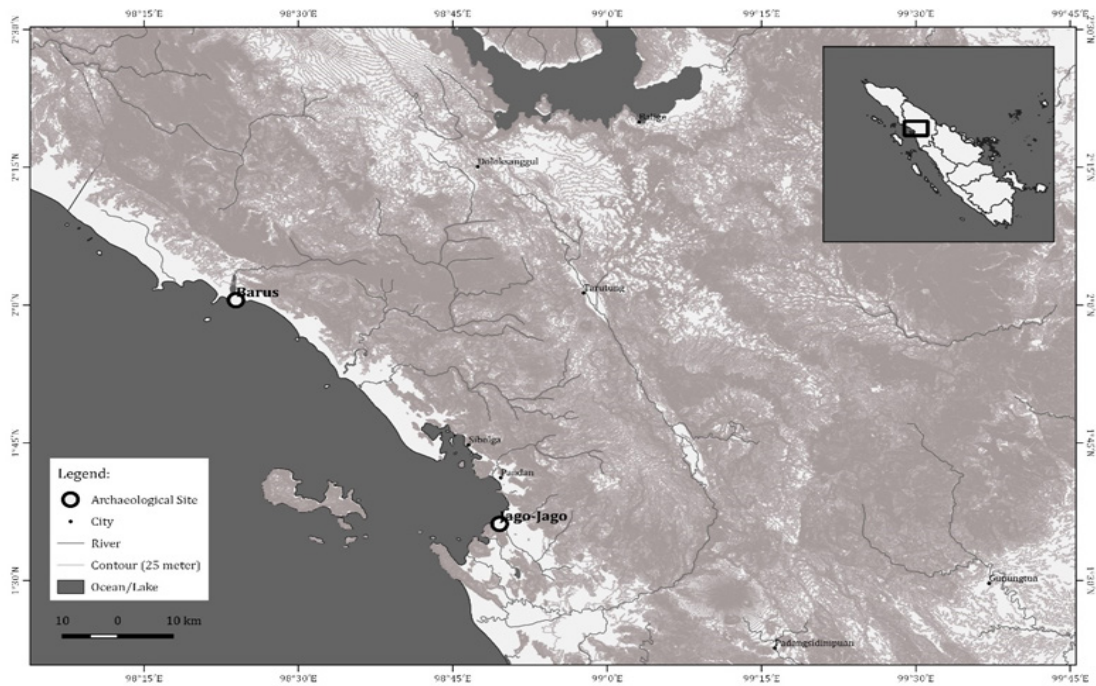


Figure 1. The map archaeological Site at Bongal Hill (Source: Purnawibowo and Restiyadi 2019,) 3)

archaeological objects stored at the Education Office of Central Tapanuli Regency and the Jagojago Village community. Regarding origin, the artifacts found at the Bongal site come from the Middle East, South Asia, and China (Soedewo and Manurung 2020, 42).

More systematic effort to uncover the past of the Bongal Site was taken in 2021. From mid-January to late January 2021, a joint team from the Archeology Center of North Sumatra and PT Media Literasinesia conducted surveys and excavations at the Bongal Site. One of the excavation results was the absolute dating of several organic samples, such as resin (680–750 A.D.), nibung/*Oncosperma tigillarum* (770–890 A.D), and candlenut (880–990 A.D.). Dating analysis conducted by the Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory, The University of Waikato, New Zealand, using the Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) showed that humans had actively occupied the Bongal Sitens in the 7<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Soedewo et al. 2021, 146–148).

### 3.1 Identification

The first coin is a dirham (silver coin), a collection of Museum Uang Sumatra (the Sumatra Museum of Money) (see Figure 2). This museum obtained this coin from a resident

of the Jagojago village, whose daily activity is mining for gold at the Bongal site. The coin has a diameter of 24.68 mm, a thickness of 0.76 mm, and a weight of 2.83 gr. On both sides of this coin are inscriptions in Arabic letters in Kufic style. The obverse carries the inscription: *lā ilāha illallāh waḥdahū lā sharīkalah* (There is no deity but God alone, no partner for Him), while on the margin, it read: *bismillāh ḍuriba hadhā al-dirham bi-al-kūfah sanah thalātha wa arba'in wa mi'ah* (In the name of Allah. This dirham



Figure 2. Dirham from Caliph Abu Ja'far Al-Mansur reign, date 143 A.H. (760–761 A.D.), obverse (left) & reverse (right) (Source: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara)

was minted in the city of Kufah in the year of one hundred and forty-three). On the reverse, it is read: *Muḥammad Rasūlullāh* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah), while on the margin, it read: *Muḥammad Rasūlullāh arsalahū bilhudā wa dīn-al-ḥaq li-yuḏhirahū ‘ala-al-dīn kullih wa law kariha al-mushrikūn* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. He sent him with guidance and the Religious of Truth to make it prevail over all religion, though the idolaters are averse).

The second coin is a *dirham* (silver coin) from the Suaib Alam Siregar collection, a resident of Jagojago Village (see **Figure 3**). The coin is 1.7 cm in diameter and inscribed with Kufic style of Arabic letters on both sides. On the obverse, it read: *lā ilāha illallāh waḥdahū lā sharīkalah* (There is no deity but God alone, no partner for Him), while on the margin it read: *bismillāh ḡuriba hadhā al-dirham bi-al-raī sanah sab‘ wa arba‘īn wa mi’ah* (In the name of Allah. This dirham was minted in the city of Ray in the year of one hundred and forty-seven). On the reverse, it is read: *min-mā amara bihī al-mahdī Muḥammad ibn Amir al-Mu‘minīn* (By order of al-Mahdī Muhammad, son of the believers’ leader), while on the margin, it read: *Muḥammad Rasūlullāh arsalahū bilhudā wa dīn-al-ḥaq li-yuḏhirahū ‘ala-al-dīn kullih wa law kariha al-mushrikūn* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. He sent him with guidance and the Religious of Truth to make it prevail over all religion, though the idolaters are averse).



**Figure 3.** Dirham from Caliph Abu Ja’far Al-Mansur reign, 147 A.H. (764–765 A.D.), obverse (left) & reverse (right)  
(Source: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara)

The third coin is a *dirham* (silver coin) collection of Suaib Alam Siregar, the residence of

Jagojago Village (see **Figure 4**). The coin is 1.7 cm in diameter and inscribed with Arabic letters in Kufic style on both sides. On the obverse, it is read: *lā ilāha illallāh waḥdahū lā sharīkalah* (There is no deity but God alone, no partner for Him), while on the margin, it is read: *bismillāh ḡuriba hadhā al-dirham bi-al-raī sanah sab‘ wa arba‘īn wa mi’ah* (In the name of Allah. This dirham was minted in the city of Ray in the year of one hundred and forty-seven). The reverse shows: *min-mā amara bihī al-mahdī Muḥammad ibn Amir al-Mu‘minīn* (By order of al-Mahdī Muhammad, son of the believers’ leader), while on the margin, it read: *Muḥammad Rasūlullāh arsalahū bilhudā wa dīn-al-ḥaq li-yuḏhirahū ‘ala-al-dīn kullih wa law kariha al-mushrikūn* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. He sent him with guidance and the Religious of Truth to make it prevail over all religion, though the idolaters are averse).



**Figure 4.** Dirham from Caliph Abu Ja’far Al-Mansur reign, 147 A.H. (764 – 765 A.D.), obverse (left) & reverse (right)  
(Source: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara)

The fourth coin is a *dirham* (silver coin) collection by the Sumatra Museum of Money (see **Figure 5**). This museum obtained this coin from a resident of the Jagojago village, whose daily activity is mining for gold at the Bongal site. It has a diameter of 26.29 mm, a thickness of 0.81 mm, and a weight of 2.87 gr. On both sides of the coin are inscriptions in Arabic letters in Kufic style. On the obverse side, it is read: *lā ilāha illallāh waḥdahū lā sharīkalah* (There is no deity but God alone, no partner for Him), while on the margin, it read: *bismillāh ḡuriba hadhā al-dirham bi-al-Muḥammadiyah sanah tis‘ wa arba‘īn wa mi’ah* (In the name of Allah. This

dirham was minted in the city of Muhammadiyah in the year of one hundred and forty-nine). On the reverse side, it shows: *mim min-mā amara bihī al-mahdī Muḥammad ibn Amīr al-Mu'minīn 'ain* (By order of al-Mahdī Muhammad, the son of the believers' leader), while on the margin it read: *Muḥammad Rasūlullāh arsalahū bilhudā wa dīn-al-ḥaq li-yuḏhirahū 'ala-al-dīn kullih wa law kariha al-mushrikūn* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. He sent him with guidance and the Religious of Truth to make it prevail over all religion, though the idolaters are averse).



**Figure 5.** Dirham from Caliph Abu Ja'far Al-Mansur reign, date 149 A.H. (766–767 A.D.), obverse (left) & reverse (right) (Sources: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara)

The fifth coin is a *dirham* (silver coin) collection by the Sumatra Museum of money (see **Figure 6**). This museum obtained this coin from a resident of the Jagojago village, whose daily activity is mining for gold at the Bongal site. The coin has a diameter of 24.73 mm, a thickness of 0.80 mm, and a weight of 2.75 gr. Both the obverse and the reverse of the coin were inscribed with Arabic letters in Kufic style. On the obverse, it is read: *lā ilāha illallāh waḥdahū lā sharīkalah* (There is no deity but God alone, no partner for Him), while on the margin, it is read: *bismillāh ḡuriba hadhā al-dirham bi madīnat al-salām sanah arba' wa khamsīn wa mi'ah* (In the name of Allah. This dirham was minted in the city of Salam in the year of one hundred and fifty-four). On the reverse, it is read: *Muḥammad Rasūlullāh bakha bakha* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah, letter ba and kha'), while

on the margin, it is read: *Muḥammad Rasūlullāh arsalahū bilhudā wa dīn-al-ḥaq li-yuḏhirahū 'ala-al-dīn kullih wa law kariha al-mushrikūn* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. He sent him with guidance and the Religious of Truth to make it prevail over all religion, though the



**Figure 6.** Dirham from Caliph Abu Ja'far Al-Mansur reign, date 154 A.H. (770–771 A.D.), obverse (left) & reverse (right) (Source: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara)

The sixth coin is a *dirham* (silver coin) collection of Suaib Alam Siregar (see **Figure 7**) (Purnawibowo and Restiyadi 2019, 8). The size of the coin is 1.8 cm in diameter and inscribed with Arabic letters in Kufic style on both sides. The obverse shows: *lā ilāha illallāh waḥdahū lā sharīkalah* (There is no deity but God alone, no partner for Him), while on the margin, it is read: *bismillāh ḡuriba hadhā al-dirham bi-al-Muḥammadiyah sanah sitt wa sittīn wa mi'ah* (In the name of Allah. This dirham was minted in the city of Muhammadiyah in the year of one hundred and sixty-six). On the reverse, it is read: *Muḥammad Rasūlullāh ṣallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam al-khalīfah al-mahdī* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah, peace be upon him. Caliph al-Mahdī followed by letter mim), while on the margin, it is read: *Muḥammad Rasūlullāh arsalahū bilhudā wa dīn-al-ḥaq li-yuḏhirahū 'ala-al-dīn kullih wa law kariha al-mushrikūn* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. He sent him with guidance and the Religious of Truth to make it prevail over all religion, though the idolaters are averse).



**Figure 7.** Dirham from Caliph Muhammad Al-Mahdi reign, date 166 A.H. (782 – 783 A.D.), obverse (left) & reverse (right) (Source: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara)

The seventh coin is a *dirham* (silver coin) collection by the Sumatra Museum of money (see **Figure 8**). This museum obtained this coin from a resident of the Jagojago village, whose daily activity is mining for gold at the Bongal site. The coin has a diameter of 25.20 mm, a thickness of 0.84 mm, and a weight of 2.60 gr. Both sides of this coin were inscribed with Arabic letters in Kufic style. On the obverse side, it is read: *lā ilāha illallāh waḥdahū lā sharīkalah* (There is no deity but God alone, no partner for Him), while on the margin, it is read: *bismillāh ḡuriba hadhā al-dirham bi madīnat al-salām sanah khams wa tīs‘īn wa mi’ah* (In the name of Allah. This dirham was minted in the city of Salam in the year one hundred and ninety-five). On the reverse, it is read: *Rabbī Allāh Muḡammad Rasūlullāh min-mā amara bihī ‘Abdullāh al-Amīn Muḡammad Amīr al-Mu‘minīn al-‘Abbās* (Allah is My Lord.



**Figure 8.** Dirham from Caliph Muhammad Al-Amin reign, date 195 A.H. (810–811 A.D.), obverse (left) & reverse (right) (Source: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara)

Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. By order of Abdullah al-Amin Muhammad, the leader of the believers, al-Abbas), while on the margin, it is read: *Muḡammad Rasūlullāh arsalahū bilhudā wa dīn-al-ḡaq li-yuḡhīrahū ‘ala-al-dīn kullih wa law kariha al-mushrikūn* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. He sent him with guidance and the Religious of Truth to make it prevail over all religion, though the idolaters are averse).

The eighth coin is a *dirham* (silver coin) collection by the Sumatra Museum of Money (see **Figure 9**). This museum obtained this coin from a resident of the Jagojago village, whose daily activity is mining for gold at the Bongal site. The coin has a diameter of 23.16 mm, a thickness of 0.96 mm, and a weight of 2.84 gr. Both sides of the coin are inscribed with Arabic letters in Kufic style. On the obverse side, it is read: *lā ilāha illallāh waḥdahū lā sharīkalah* (There is no deity but God alone, no partner for Him), while on the margin, it read: *bismillāh ḡuriba hadhā al-dirham bi-al- Muḡammadiyyah sanah arba‘ wa mi’ah* (In the name of Allah. This dirham was minted in the city of Muhammadiyyah in the year of one hundred and four). On the reverse, it is read: *Muḡammad Rasūlullāh al-khalīfah al-Ma’mūn* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. Caliph al-Ma’mūn. *It followed letter ha*), while on the margin, it is read: *Muḡammad Rasūlullāh arsalahū bilhudā wa dīn-al-ḡaq li-yuḡhīrahū ‘ala-al-dīn kullih wa law kariha al-mushrikūn* (Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. He sent him with guidance and the Religious of Truth



**Figure 9.** Dirham from Caliph Al-Ma'mun reign, date 204 A.H (819 – 820 A.D.), obverse (left) & reverse (right) (Source: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara)

to make it prevail over all religion, though the idolaters are averse).

### 3.2. Dating, Origin, and Distribution

Information obtained through transliteration and translation of the written text on both sides of the coins is the declaration of Islamic faith, the glorifying words to the Prophet Muhammad, the year of mint, the name of the place where the coin was minted, and the name of the ruler who ordered the mint. The declaration of the oneness of God is *lā ilāha illallāh waḥdahū lā sharīkalah* (There is no deity but God alone, no partner for Him). The writings that glorify the Prophet Muhammad is *Muḥammad Rasūlullāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* (Muḥammad is the messenger of Allah, prayers, and greetings go out to him).

Those words are written in Kufic script. According to Abulhab (2017), the Kufic script style is the development of the character that existed earlier, namely Mashq. Starting from the Mashq script, the Kufic script developed into a simpler and more dynamic form than the original character. The popularity of this Kufic script cannot be separated from the capital city relocation of the newly formed Islamic state to Kufa, around 656 CE (35 Hijri) (Abulhab 2017, 11). Kufic writing is the angular geometric script of a hieratic and monumental character that is more difficult to read than the Naskh script. The stiff Kufic was used in copying the Koran, cutting inscriptions on stones, and scribing legends on coins, while the simple Naskh was used daily (Lee-Niinioja 2018, 19–20).

#### 3.2.1. Dating

Eight coins found in the North Sumatra region contain details of years of minting, covering the period of the 8<sup>th</sup> A.D. and the 9<sup>th</sup> A.D. The years mentioned are *sanah thalātha wa arba ‘īn wa mi ‘ah* (in the year of one hundred and forty-three) in the first coin; *sanah sab ‘ wa arba ‘īn wa mi ‘ah* (in the year of one hundred and forty-seven) in the second and third coins; *sanah tis ‘ wa arba ‘īn wa mi ‘ah* (in the year of one hundred and forty-nine) in the fourth coin; *sanah arba ‘ wa khamsīn wa mi ‘ah* (in the year of one hundred and fifty-four) in the fifth coin; *sanah sitt*

*wa sittīn wa mi ‘ah* (in the year of one hundred and sixty-six) in the sixth coin; *sanah khams wa tis ‘īn wa mi ‘ah* (in the year of one hundred and ninety-five) in the seventh coin; and *sanah arba ‘ wa mi ‘ah* (in the year of one hundred and four) in the eighth coins.

The names of the rulers mentioned on the coins are Amr Muḥammad al-Mahdī ibn Amīr al-Mu‘minīn, Caliph al-Mahdī, Caliph Muḥammad Abdullāh al-Amīn, and Caliph al-Ma‘mūn. Among the eight coins, two coins did not mention the name of the ruler who ordered their mint. Those two were minted in 143 A.H. (760–61 A.D.) and 154 A.H. (770–771 A.D.). Judging from the years, they show the time of the reign of Abū Ja‘far al-Manṣūr. He was the second caliph of the Abbasid *Dawlāt* (Dynasty) to rule in the period 136–158 A.H. (754–775 A.D.) (Yousefi 2009, 98).

Al-Manṣūr’s successor was al-Mahdī, the third caliph of the Dawlat Abbasids, who ruled in the period 158–169 A.H. (775–785 A.D.) (Yousefi 2009: 128). Although officially al-Mahdī only served as caliph in Ṣulhijjah 158 A.H. (October 775 A.D.), his name was already inscribed on the coin dated 147 A.H. (764–765 A.D.) and 149 A.H. (766–767 A.D.). During that period, al-Mahdī was the crown prince and governor who ruled the province of al-Ray, located in northern Persia (Yousefi, 2009, 128). In both coins from 147 A.H. and 149 A.H., the name and title of al-Mahdī is *Muḥammad al-Mahdī ibn Amīr al-Mu‘minīn*/Muḥammad al-Mahdī, the son of the Leader of the Believers (the reign caliph). The person referred to as *Amīr al-Mu‘minīn* (Leader of the Believers) was the caliph in power at that time, namely Abū Ja‘far al-Manṣūr, Muḥammad al-Mahdī’s father. The name al-Mahdī is referred to as Khālifah al-Mahdī on coins dated 166 A.H. (782–783 A.D.).

Apart from al-Mahdī, another name was also inscribed on the coins found from the Bongal site, namely Caliph Muḥammad Abdullāh al-Amīn. He was the son and successor to Caliph Harūn al-Rashīd. Al-Amīn’s reign was short, only four years (194–198 H), due to the dispute over the throne with his brother, al-Ma‘mūn (Ibrahim & Saleh 2014, 367–368). The name of the Caliph



Muhammad Abdullāh al-Amīn was explicitly inscribed on the coin dated in 195 A.H. (810-811 A.D.).

The following name was inscribed on one of the coins found from Bongal, the Caliph of al-Ma'mūn. He was the Caliph Harūn al-Rāshīd's son and the Caliph al-Amīn's brother. Both al-Ma'mūn and al-Amīn were placed by Caliph al-Rashīd himself as the heir to the crown. Al-Rashīd's decision became the base of the feud and civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn after the death of al-Rashīd. Finally, al-Ma'mūn won the civil war and inherited Abbasīd *Dawlat* (Dynasty) from 198 A.H. to 218 A.H. (Ibrahim and Saleh 2014, 367–368). The name of Caliph al-Ma'mūn is explicitly inscribed on the coin number 204 A.H. (819–820 A.D.).

### 3.2.2. Origin

Another piece of information inscribed on the nine coins analyzed was the place of the mint. They are al-Kūfah, Madīnat al-Salām, al-Muḥammadiyyah, and al-Rayy. Although no existence has been found at the Bongal Site, it turns out that Abbasid silver coins (dirhams) were not only minted in cities located in Mesopotamia, such as Kufa, Baghdad, and al-Rayy. Outside Mesopotamia, Abbasid silver coins were also minted in the cities of the Hejaz region, such

as Mecca, Medina, and Beysha (Aljabr 2015, 122–123).

Al-Kūfah was originally a Muslim soldier's camp. During the reign of 'Alī ibn 'Abī Ṭālib as caliph, Kufah became the center of his power. When Baghdad became the caliphate's capital, Kufah continued to function as the provincial capital (Iqbal and Hunt 2003, 241). In the early days of the Abbasid Dynasty, Kufah was the seat of the government before being transferred to Madīnat al-Salām (Baghdad) during the reign of Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr in 146 A.H. (Ibrahim and Saleh 2014, 336).

The next place is al-Rayy, an archaeological site based on archaeological and historical data; it was a place that humans occupied from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC until the 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Long before Muslim troops overran it in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. On 330 BC, Alexander the Great made this place his troops' camp. When al-Mahdī became governor of al-Rayy, he changed the name of this place into al-Muḥammadiyyah (Treptow and Whitcomb 2007, 8). Judging from the coins found in Bongal, which contain the inscriptions of Muhammad al-Mahdī ibn Amīr al-Mu'minīn, al-Rayy, and al-Muḥammadiyyah, it could be concluded that the change of names from Al-Rayy to al-Muḥammadiyyah probably

**Table 1.** Abbasid dirham varieties from the Bongal Site

No	A.H	A.D.	Name of persons	Name of places	Weight (gr)	Qty
1	143	760–761	-	Al-Kufah	2.83	1
2	147	764–765	Muhammad Al-Mahdi ibn Amirul Mu'minin	Al-Rayy	-	1
3	147	764–765	Muhammad Al-Mahdi ibn Amirul Mu'minin	Al-Rayy	-	1
4	149	766–767	Muhammad Al-Mahdi ibn Amirul Mu'minin	Al-Muhammadiyyah	2.87	1
5	154	770–771	-	Madinat Al-Salam	2.75	1
6	166	782–783	Khalifah Al-Mahdi	Al-Muhammadiyyah	-	1
7	195	810–811	Khalifah Muhammad Abdullah Al-Amin	Madinat Al-Salam	2.60	1
8	204	819–820	Khalifah Al-Ma'mun	Al-Muhammadiyyah	2.84	1

occurred in 148 A.H. (765–766 A.D.) or 149 A.H. (766–767 A.D.).

Madīnat al-Salām (Baghdad) was an ancient location mentioned by the Arabs as Baghdadu. When the Caliph Abū Ja‘far al-Manṣūr came to power, this place was called Madīnat al-Salām, which means “The City of Peace”. The uniqueness of this city is its urban planning which is circular with four gates in the direction of the main cardinal directions (north, east, south, and west). Apart from functioning as the capital of the Abbasid Dawlat, since the time of the Caliph Abū Ja‘far al-Manṣūr, the city was also the center of culture and science. Started functioning as the center of power of the Islamic Empire in 146 A.H. (763–764 A.D.), Madīnat al-Salām (Baghdad) was finally conquered by the Mongols in 1258 A.D. (Iqbal and William 2003, 69–70).

The eight coins analyzed were originated from the Abbasid in West Asia (Middle East). The origin of dirhams found in the Bongal site is clear clues to supporting the existence of diverse cultural interactions in North Sumatra in the past. It is not impossible that the people from whom the dirhams were made were in close interaction during the time the coins were minted. The period of the dirhams found in North Sumatra is presented in Table 1.

### 3.2.3. Distribution

In addition to being found at the Bongal site, Arabic coins were also found elsewhere in the Indian Ocean region. One of them was in Bangladesh, which is now stored in the Bangladesh National Museum. The museum’s collection of Arabic coins dated back to the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. Abbasid coins collected by the Bangladesh National Museum consist of coins dated 131 A.H. (752 C.E.), 133 A.H. (754 C.E.), 152 A.H. (773 C.E.), 163 A.H. (784 C.E.), 172 A.H. (793 C.E.), 193 A.H. (814 C.E.) (Islam and Hoque 2017, 218–226). So far, only one ruler’s name of abbasid coins found in Bangladesh has been identified: Caliph Al-Mahdi (Islam and Hoque 2017, 222).

Discoveries in the form of Arabic coins from the Umayyad Dynasty and Abbasid Dynasty were also found in several ancient sites in Thailand,

including the ancient city site of U-Thong and Laem Pho site (Chuthamas 2021, 34). The year figures described on the Abbasid coins found in Thailand consist of 184 A.H (800 C.E.) and 203 A.H. (818–819 C.E.) (Chuthamas 2021, 49–50). At least two names of Abbasid dynastic rulers have been described on Abbasid coins found in Thailand: the caliph Harun Al-Rashid and caliph Al-Ma’mun (Chuthamas 2021, 49–50). Another region in Southeast Asia Mainland where the abbasid coin was found was Vietnam. The gold coin (dinar) located at the Tra Kieu site, Quang Nam Province, included the numbers 291 A.H. (903–904 C.E.) and was issued by Caliph Al-Muktafi (Guy 2001, 26).

### 3.3. Abbasid Maritime Trade and Spread of Islamic Civilization

Other artifacts also strengthen the evidence of commercial interactions between the Middle East (Arabia and Persia) and the Archipelago. The artifact is fragments of glazed finepaste ware and containers made of glass, which, judging from their morphology, were manufactured goods from the Middle East (Arabia and Persian). Morphological characteristics of glazed finepaste ware found on the Bongal site are soft white or beige, coated in a turquoise blue glaze on both sides (see Figure 10). Glazed pottery with distinctive features resembled the findings from the Bongal site found at the Lobu Tua (Barus) site, located  $\pm$  60 km north of Jagojago. This turquoise blue glazed pottery type dated back to the 9th–10th centuries A.D. The origin of the pottery is the region of Mesopotamia - Persia (Iran) (Guillot 2017, 181–182). Another type of artifact originating from West Asia is fragments made of multicolored glass. The color diversity includes transparent light green, turquoise blue, transparent light brown, clear-colorless, and many air bubbles inside (see Figure 11). Similar artifacts were found at the shipwreck site in Cirebon waters. According to Needell (2018), the glass artifacts found at the shipwreck site in Cirebon waters originated from the Nishapur (Iran). Nishapur’s glass artifacts were exported mainly via the port of Siraf, located in the Persian Gulf, to Southeast Asia in the 10th century A.D. (Needell 2018, 79–93).



**Figure 10.** Glazed finepaste ware from Bongal site  
(Source: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara)



**Figure 11.** Glass fragments from Bongal Site  
(Source :Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara)

Arab merchants and sailors brought these items to the Archipelago as goods traded in the archipelago's commercial centers. The artifacts from the Middle East at the Bongal site were not impossible to be brought directly by ships from the region. The ruins discovery of Arab ships in Belitung waters (Flecker 2004, 2–39) is clear evidence that Arab sailors and traders have known the waters and places in the archipelago. Aside from being traded, these goods from the Middle East were possibly exchanged for natural commodities produced in the area around the west coast and inland of North Sumatra. Agricultural commodities referred to were camphor, incense, and various natural gums, which had high economic value in the international market then.

The existence of Islamic Arabic coins at the Bongal Site is inseparable from the discussion of shipping and business from Arab ports in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea regions. The activities of Arab sailors and traders on the west coast of Sumatra Island are even traceable to the time before Islam. Aden and Socotra Island

ports became stopover points for various aromatic wood products from Southeast Asia until they reached Egypt during the Ptolemaic dynasty (Villiers 2001, 25). Four types of aromatic woods imported to Egypt include aloeswood, benzoin, camphor, and sandalwood (Villiers 2001, 24). In later times, evidence of the presence of Arab Muslim ships in the waters of the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea became increasingly apparent, as noted by Yijing (I-Tsing) in the VII century C.E. Yijing explicitly noted that he boarded a *Tashi* (Arabic/Persian) merchant ship, from Guangzhou to Sumatra (Villiers 2001, 28). Shipping during the Yijing period (7<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) grew when the Abbasid dynasty expanded trade abroad to include North Africa, Andalusia (Spain), Russia, Ukraine, Caspian Sea Area, Asia Minor, Volga River region, the Baltic Basin, the Finland Gulf, East Africa, India, Ceylon Island, North Sumatra, Malay Peninsula, Cambodia, Korea, and China (Oran and Khaznehkatbi 2009, 261).

Besides trading in the archipelago, West Asian merchants and sailors also traded with China. As early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Arabs and Persians were the majority of the foreign population in Canton, Ts'üan-chóu, and Yang-chóu. With the trading system development, more and more immigrants from West Asia were present in Canton until riots broke out in the city in 758 A.D. (Hirth and Rockhill 1911, 15). Due to the chaos in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., many Arab and Persian merchants moved their trading bases to cities in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. After the chaos ended, commerce in China seemed to be normal. Until the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., another chaos in China was caused by the T'ang Dynasty troops' rebellion against Emperor Hi-tsung. The revolt resulted in the port cities abandonment such as Canton and Ts'üan-chóu by foreign traders, many Arab, and Persian traders. Once again, they chose coastal cities in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, Palembang, and Kedah, as trade bases (Hirth and Rockhill 1911, 18).

According to Chuthamas (2017), maritime commerce to the east by the Arabs was growing when the Abbasid dynasty came to power to replace the Umayyad dynasty in the 8<sup>th</sup> century

A.D. At that time, maritime trade directly to the east was supported by several ports such as Basra, Siraf, and Suhar (Chuthamas 2017, 139). Their maritime trade to the east has left material traces from Bangladesh, the Bongal Site in Indonesia, Thailand, to Vietnam. The distribution of West Asia (Middle East) artifacts is material evidence of the interaction between Islamic civilization supporters from West Asia (Middle East) with other civilizations supporters in the Indian Ocean region to Southeast Asia mainland.

Coins have additional value compared to other types of artifacts originating from West Asia (Middle East), such as glass wares and glazed fineware. The additional value of the Abbasid coins compared to other contemporary artifacts found in Bongal is the ideological message affixed through calligraphy, containing the oneness of God declaration and glorifying words to the Prophet Muhammad. Besides its function as a medium of exchange in commerce, it is not impossible that the Abbasid coins from the Bongal site also became Islamic preaching medium in Bongal Port in the past.

#### 4. Conclusion

In particular, coins found on the Bongal site were the silver coins (dirhams) produced in West Asia (Middle East). The inscription on the obverses of the coins contains the place names of the printed ones, namely al-Kūfah, al-Rayy (al-Muḥammadiyah), and Madīnat al-Salām (Baghdad). The era of the silver coins (dirhams) found at the Bongal site, dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.H. (8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). The span of that period is the Abbasid Dynasty heyday. The important figures names explicitly engraved on the coins are Muḥammad al-Mahdī ibn Amīr al-Mu'minīn (the name of the Caliph al-Mahdī while serving as governor in al-Rayy), Caliph al-Mahdī, Caliph Muḥammad Abdullāh al-Amīn, and Caliph al-Ma'mūn. Those four names are the names of the rulers in the Abbasid dynasty. Muḥammad al-Mahdī ibn Amīr al-Mu'minīn and the Caliph al-Mahdī are the same people. The Abbasid dirhams found on the west coast of North Sumatra are concrete evidence that the west coast of North Sumatra is the earliest *Nusantara* (The

Archipelago area) intertwined in a commercial network and directly in touch with the Islamic civilization from West Asia (Middle East).

Abbasid coins found at the Bongal site have also become a medium for conveying Islamic ideology in all places of commerce, including the Bongal site in the past. The findings of the dirhams from the Bongal site prove that this interaction occurred in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It means the interaction between Muslims from the Middle East and the archipelago's inhabitants, particularly on the west coast of North Sumatra, was long before the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

The study of Abbasid coins from the Bongal site is the first stage of a broader study of the site's past. Judging from the absolute dating results of several organic samples from the excavation of the Bongal Site, archaeological data from a period older than the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. may be found in the future. A further search of the people of Jagojago Village from their mining results at the Bongal site could reveal other possibilities for finding Arab coins from an older period, such as coins from the Umayyad Dynasty.

#### References

- Abulhab, Saad D. 2017. "Early Mashq and Kufic Scripts: A Historic and Typographic Introduction" in *A Handbook of Early Arabic Kufic Script: Reading, Writing, Calligraphy, Typography, Monograms*. New York: City University of New York. 10–24
- Aljabr, Hessa Abdulrahman Abdulaziz. 2015. "Coins in the Hejaz During the First Abbasid Period 750–847". In *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry* 15(1): 117–126.
- Arnold, Thomas Walker. 1896. *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*. Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co.
- Azra, Azyumardi. 2013. *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah dan Nusantara Abad XVII & XVIII Akar Pembaruan Islam Indonesia*. Depok: Prenadamedia Group.
- Chuthamas, Suniti. 2017. "Archaeological Evidence of the Abbasid Maritime Trade in Thailand (750–1258 A.D./132–656 A.H.)

- Analytical Study.” Dissertation, Amman: University of Jordan.
- Chuthamas, Suniti. 2021. “Arab-Islamic Coins in Thailand: Inscription Analysis and Dating” *Damrong Journal of the Faculty of Archaeology Silpakorn University* 20(2): 34–57.
- Drewes, G. 1968. “New Light on the Coming of Islam to Indonesia ?” *Bijdragen to de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenende* 124: 433–459.
- Flecker, Michael. 2004. “A Ninth-Century Arab or Indian Shipwreck in Indonesia First Evidence of Direct Trade With China”. In *The Belitung Wreck Sunken Treasures from Tang Cina*. New Zealand: Seabed Explorations. 2–39.
- Guillot, Claude. 2017. *Barus Seribu Tahun Yang Lalu*. Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, École française d’Extrême-Orient, Association Archipel, Pusat Penelitian dan Pengembangan Arkeologi Nasional, Forum Jakarta Paris.
- Guy, John. 2001. “Rare and Strange Goods: International Trade in Ninth-Century Asia”. In *Shipwrecked Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*. Washington D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. 19–28
- Hirth, Friedrich, and William Woodville Rockhill. 1911. *Chau Ju-Kua: His Work on the Chinese and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries: Entitled Chu-Fan-Chi*. St. Petersburg: Printing Office of the Imperial Academy of Sciences.
- Hurgronje, Christiaan Snouck. 1924. *Verspreide Geschriften*. Vol. VI. Den Haag: Nijhoff.
- Ibrahim, Qasim A., and Muhammad Saleh. 2014. *Buku Pintar Sejarah Islam Jejak Langkah Peradaban Islam dari Masa Nabi Hingga Masa Kini*. Jakarta: Zaman.
- Iqbal, Muhammad, and William Hunt. 2003. *Ensiklopedi Ringkas Tentang Islam*. Jakarta: Taramedia.
- Islam, Shariful, and Muhammad Manirul Hoque. 2017. “Unpublished Umayyad and Abbasid Silver Coins in The Bangladesh National Museum”. *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 62: 205–231
- Lee-Niinioja, Hee Sook. 2018. *Islamic Calligraphy and Muslim Identity: A Case Study of Kuwait*. Helsinki: Novel & Noble Communications.
- Moquette, Jean Pierre. 1912. “De Grafsteenen Te Pase En Grisse Vergeleken Met Dergelijke Monumenten Uit Hindoestan”. In *Tijdschrift Voor Indische Taal-, Land-En Volkenkunde* 54. 536–48.
- Needell, Carolyn Swan. 2018. “Cirebon: Islamic Glass from a 10<sup>th</sup> Century Shipwreck in the Java Sea”. *Journal of Glass Studies* 60: 69–114.
- Oran, Ahmad Farras, and Ghaida Khaznekatbi. 2009. “The Economic System under the ‘Abbasid Dynasty’”. In *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Economics*. 257–266.
- Purnawibowo, Stanov, and Andri Restiyadi. 2019. *Laporan Penanggulangan Kasus Objek Objek Arkeologi di Desa Jagojago, Kecamatan Badiri, Kabupaten Tapanuli Tengah, Provinsi Sumatera Utara*. Medan: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara.
- Soedewo, Ery, & Johan Manurung. 2020. *Laporan Pendokumentasian Objek-objek Arkeologi dari Situs Bongal, Desa Jago-jago, Kecamatan Badiri, Kabupaten Tapanuli Tengah, Provinsi Sumatera Utara*. Medan: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara.
- Soedewo, Ery, Fadhlán S. Intan, Andri Restiyadi, Stanov Purnawibowo, and Taufiqurrahman Setiyawan. 2021. “Laporan Penelitian Arkeologi: Jejak-jejak Kepurbakalaan dari Abad VII– X Masehi di Situs Bongal, Desa Jagojago, Kecamatan Badiri, Kabupaten Tapanuli Tengah, Provinsi Sumatera Utara”. Medan: Balai Arkeologi Sumatera Utara dan PT Media Literasinesia.
- Treptow, Tanya, and Donald S. Whitcomb. 2007. *Daily Life Ornamented: The Medieval Persian City of Rayy*. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
- Villiers, John. 2001. “Great Plenty of Almsgiving Trees: The Trade in Southeast Asian Aromatic Woods in The Indian Ocean and China 500 BC–AD 1500”. In *The Great Circle* 23(2): 24–43
- Yousefi, Najm al-Din. 2009. “Knowledge and Social Order in Early Islamic Mesopotamia (60–193 AH/680–809 CE).” Dissertation, Virginia, Virginia Tech.

