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ANCIENT TOMBSTONES IN TONJONG, BREBES, CENTRAL JAVA: A STUDY OF FORM AND DECORATIVE ARTS

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Abstract

Ancient tombstones are cultural artifacts strongly associated with human beings. In the Tonjong District of Brebes Regency, Ancient tombstones are distributed along the Pedes River. This study seeks to address two questions: first how the forms and decorative art of these ancient tombstones evolved, and the nature of the relationship between the ancient tombstones and the people associated with them. The study aims to demonstrate that ancient tombstones are not merely objects; rather, they are elements capable of evolving in form and style while maintaining a profound connection to humanity. A three-stage methodology was employed: data collection, data processing, and interpretation. Two primary theoretical frameworks were utilized: the Three Stages of Decorative Art Evolution and Human-Thing Entanglement Theory. The findings reveal an evolution in the form and decoration of ancient tombstones in the Tonjong area, characterized by a trend toward greater simplicity. Furthermore, as cultural agents, humans have imbued these ancient tombstones with deep significance.

Keywords: Ancient Tombstone, Tonjong, Decoration, Brebes, Central Java

INTRODUCTION

A tombstone is a marker, typically used to mark a person's grave according to a particular religion or belief. The term *nisan* or *maesan* comes from the Sanskrit word *mahisa*, meaning buffalo. This opinion is supported by a pre-Hindu tradition of erecting a stone and slaughtering a buffalo during an offering ceremony (Ambary and Burhanuddin 1998). The term *maesan* is derived from *paesan,* which refers to a decorative mirror and stems from the Old Javanese *pa-hyas, paes* or *paesan,* meaning ornament. In this context, the tombstone functions as an ornamental marker upon the grave (Arafat 2023). Another opinion states that the word *nisan* comes from the Arabic

word *mizan*, meaning scales (Arafat 2025). Regardless of its origin, the tombstone itself is an essential component of a grave, serving as a sign that a body is buried there.

The concept of ancient Islamic graves in Indonesia is divided into several parts: the *jirat*, the tombstone, and the cupola. The shape of a tombstone can be divided into four parts: the foot, the body, the shoulders, and the head. The foot and body of the tombstone are rectangular, octagonal, or round. Meanwhile, the shoulders of the tombstone are usually flat or pointed, with a triangular, square, or round peak (Sukendar 1999). The basic classification of a tombstone's shape is determined by its cross-section, which results in a rectangular form or other shapes such as octagonal, cylindrical, or irregular. There is a type of tombstone distributed across the Malay Peninsula, Aceh, and Brunei known as *Batu Aceh*. Generally, the stone consists of six parts, which are the base, lower body, upper body, shoulder, head, and peak. Based on the shape of its upper body, this tombstone is divided into five main types, namely the flat board shape, square shape, inverted octagonal cone shape, four-shouldered octagonal shape, and plain inverted cone shape (Perret and Razak 2003). In Java, there are two types of ancient tombstones, namely the Demak and Troloyo types. The Demak type has a flat rectangular shape with its base and crown adorned with *padma* moldings. Meanwhile, the Troloyo type features a shape depicting a buffalo head with ears, with two or three lines forming a rectangle at the bottom. This form is varied with motifs such as *tumpal* daggers, crowns, or tendrils (Ambary 1984).

In ancient Islamic cemeteries in the Indonesian archipelago, the term *nisan menhir* also exists, referring to the *menhir*-like shape of tombstones. The object is made of natural stone. This tradition can be said to be a continuation of pre-Islamic culture. *Menhir* are upright stones used as a sign of respect for ancestors during the megalithic period (Handoko 2016). In the megalithic tradition, *menhir* are believed to be a means of respect, a throne for the arrival of spirits, and a symbol for those honored, in this case, the spirits of ancestors (Poesponegoro 2008). In Islamic burials, a tombstone is used as a marker to indicate that a site is a grave. According to Islamic teachings, tombstone structures should be constructed as simply as possible, such as by placing a stone marker at the head (Ambary and Burhanuddin 1998).

Another pre-Islamic tradition is classical culture, with its developing religious teachings, namely Hinduism and Buddhism. In Islamic cultural remains, particularly

tombstones, classical traditions are also found. One reflection of this is the decorative motifs on the tombstones. Tombstones typically feature floral vines, leafy patterns, or geometric patterns. Several ancient tombstones have been found decorated with lotus flowers, or *padma* in classical tradition. In classical belief, the lotus holds a deep spiritual significance because it thrives in water, mirroring the gods who remain detached from the earthly realm. This sacred flower is also revered as the divine seat of Vishnu during the creation of the universe (Munandar 2019).

Ancient Islamic tombstones in Java follow the shape of the saints' tombstones. There are general similarities in the shape of the saints' tombstones: flat shapes with numerous decorative patterns. Another similarity is the lack of written data on these tombstones stating the names and times of death (Sodrie 1995). Flat tombstones were common during the spread of Islam in Java, which also marked the transition from the previous Hindu-Buddhist culture. Many tombstones are flat or rectangular prisms, have curved or pointed ends, and resemble pyramid-shaped roofs (Awwalun et al. 2025). Characteristics of ancient tombstones in Java were also influenced by the Majapahit period. There are tombstones featuring the sun emblem, which is commonly found in the Troloyo cemetery complex and often referred to as the *Sinar Majapahit* (Sun of Majapahit). This decorative motif was used by the nobility during the Majapahit era (Damais 1957).

Tombstones are viewed as ‘things’ in archaeology that represent the product of human culture and thought. Therefore, tombstones are not only merely tangible objects but also possess meaning in various aspects of society. Human-produced objects, including tombstones, can be studied from three perspectives: as markers of value, as markers of identity, and as encapsulations of culture and politics (Woodward 2007). Tombstones are markers of identity, discernible through their form and inherent symbolism. Through form and symbolism, cultural identity is interpreted contextually (Hodder 1992).

Brebes Kidulan, revolves around Bumiayu District as its primary socio-economic nucleus. This sub-region directly influences adjacent administrative areas, notably the Tonjong District (Figure 1). Historically, Brebes, Tegal, and Losari formed an integrated territory until 1678, a pivotal year when Susuhunan Amangkurat II formally instituted the inaugural Regent of Brebes (Iskandar 2004).

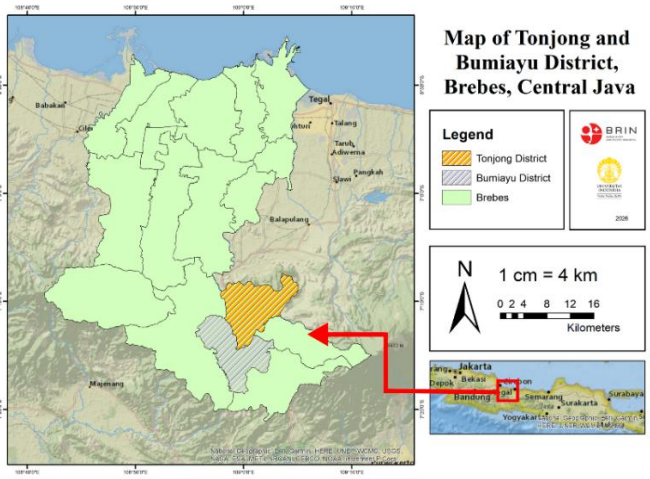


Figure 1. Map of Location Tonjong and Bumiayu District, Brebes, Central Java (Source: Documentation of Mardhiyah)

Ancient tombstones are never merely inert stone posts; rather, they serve as symbolic media that record the cultural dynamics and worldviews of the societies that created them. Their presence encompasses two intertwined, fundamental dimensions of inquiry, one conceptual and the other temporal:

- How do the forms and decorative art of these tombstones reveal patterns of change over time, an evolution of sorts?
- What are the interrelationships, and their associated meanings, between these tombstones and the people, other tombstones, or even related surrounding objects?

This research aims to analyze and explain how ancient tombstones connect with people, other tombstones, and surrounding objects to uncover their underlying social, religious, and cosmological significance. Simultaneously, it seeks to map the morphological characteristics and decorative styles of the ancient tombstones to reconstruct patterns of stylistic change and the continuity of local traditions over time.

Research related to ancient tombstones has been conducted by Ambary (1984), with the title *L'art funéraire musulman en Indonésie des origines au XIXe siècle: épigraphie et typologie*. In this paper, it explains the division of ancient tombstones in Indonesia based on their regional development. Furthermore, there is also a Ph.D. Thesis, Yatim, Othman bin Mohd, 1988, *Batu Aceh Early Islamic Gravestones in Peninsular Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Negara,* which divides the types of tombstones found

in Aceh gravestones. In addition, in the book written by Uka Tjandrasasmita, *Penelitian Arkeologi Islam dari Masa ke Masa*, writes about the development of Islamic archaeological research including research related to ancient tombstones, which initially in the colonial period was found in Kampung Pasai. Research related to ancient tombstones in Java, has been conducted by M. Yaser Arafat in his two books entitled *Nisan Hanyakrakusuman* and *Nisan Hamengkubuwanan.*

METHOD

This research uses the method proposed by James Deetz (Deetz 1967), which consists of three main stages: data collection, data processing, and interpretation.

Data Collection

The initial stage in this research is data collection. Two types of data are collected: primary and secondary data. Primary data is the archaeological data source itself. In this study, the tombstones, as archaeological objects, serve as the primary data. Primary data collection was conducted through field recording. The recordings were in the form of verbal and pictorial descriptions. Verbal recordings consist of object descriptions, including shape, body, dimensions, and site characteristics. Pictorial recordings involved taking photographs and re-sketching to clarify the depiction of the object. Secondary data consists of supporting data related to the object, such as historical records, old maps, literature studies, and observations with comparative objects.

Data Processing

During the data processing stage, classification was carried out by grouping data objects into specific variables. There are two main classifications, namely based on form and decorative art. The classification of tombstone shapes can be divided into several parts. First, the classification of body shape, in this case, tombstones come in various shapes, including flat, square, octagonal, and others. Furthermore, the classification of tombstone shapes also divides the tombstone into the top, head, shoulders, body, feet, and shaft (Yatim 1985). Meanwhile, the classification of decorative art is usually divided into geometric, floral, and faunal decorations, with other subtypes possible (Fadillah and Ali 2024).

Interpreting

The interpretation stage is the interpretation stage. The description and classification of the data previously conducted will be analyzed, supported by the theories

used. Two main theories are used to address the two research questions. The first is the theory of the Evolution of Decorative Arts, which addresses how the form and decorative art on tombstones can produce chronology and evolution. The second is the theory of Human-Thing Entanglement, which helps address the relationship between tombstones as objects and humans.

THEORY

Basic Principles and Three Stages of the Evolution of Decorative Art (Balfour 1893)

In examining the development of decorative art, Henry Balfour asserts that decorative patterns do not emerge suddenly from abstract ideas; rather, they evolve gradually from initial realistic forms into conventionalized ornaments. He categorizes the evolution of decorative art into three primary stages. The first is the adaptive stage, wherein early humans or traditional societies accepted and utilized natural visual effects or the accidental shapes of materials to enhance their aesthetic value. The second is the stage of creation or imitation, driven by the natural human impulse to artificially replicate or mimic visual effects and natural objects on other media. This process occurs both consciously and unconsciously. The third stage is that of variation, which serves as the key driver in the transformation of decorative styles. This variation operates through two mechanisms: unconscious variation and conscious variation. Unplanned variation occurs when artists, constrained by limitations in tools, skills, or memory, engage in repetitive imitation. Each new iteration deviates slightly from the original type, causing the realistic form to gradually lose its original resemblance. Conversely, planned variation is driven by the artist's desire to vary, embellish, or adapt a motif to the available space. This often involves processes of reduction and emphasis on specific elements, transforming realistic representations into arrangements of geometric or functional decorative lines that may appear devoid of inherent meaning.

Balfour also observed that motifs carrying sacred, religious, or group/clan-based symbolic significance tend to undergo stylistic deviations similar to those of purely decorative patterns. Often, a motif's symbolic meaning endures far longer than its visual realism. Even after the visual representation has been reduced to a conventional or geometric pattern, the traditional meaning continues to be passed down through generations, until, eventually, the meaning is lost, leaving behind only a purely decorative ornament. Furthermore, Balfour emphasized that three-dimensional art likely developed

earlier than two-dimensional pictorial art, as solid forms are more readily grasped and responded to by human aesthetic perception. The early development of this decorative art was also closely linked to the naturistic and animistic worldviews of traditional societies. Unusual or unique natural forms were perceived as possessing mystical significance and were believed to serve as dwellings or conduits for spiritual forces, whether benevolent or malevolent. People modeled, carved, or positioned these symbolically significant decorative objects to attract the influence of benevolent forces or to localize and contain malevolent forces within their living environments.

Human-Thing Entanglement Theory (Hodder 2011)

The concept of human-thing entanglement asserts that the dynamics of social life and the development of human civilization cannot be separated from the existence of material objects. Historically and evolutionarily, humans have relied on objects to sustain various fundamental functions, ranging from meeting needs for food and physical protection to facilitating social interaction and religious practices. This long-standing dependency has shaped the development of both human physical and cognitive capacities.

Etymologically, the word "things" is rooted in Old English and Old German terms signifying an assembly or a gathering. This concept illustrates that although an object may appear physically autonomous, it exists within a chain of interconnections involving various other factors. These binding relationships between objects demonstrate that the existence of one material entity is inextricably linked to others.

This relationship is reciprocal, as objects also depend on humans. Their creation, use, maintenance, and eventual disposal, or the attribution of meaning to them, fully involve human action throughout the object's lifespan. Given that materials undergo weathering, alteration, and degradation over time, the human role is crucial in sustaining their function and significance.

This multidimensional entanglement, encompassing the connections between humans and objects, objects and humans, and among objects themselves, forms a complex web of relationships. The presence of material objects within this web undergoes constant adjustment, driving the evolution and adaptation of civilization.

Epistemologically, Ian Hodder positions entanglement as an integrative paradigm. This framework establishes materiality as a vital element alongside culture and biology, thereby bridging previously disparate approaches, such as social theories of materiality,

behavioral ecology, biochemical materials science, and biological evolution, into a unified foundation for archaeological analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data description

Tonjong District is a sub-district in Brebes Regency, bordering Bumiayu, Bantarkawung, and Sirampog. It is crossed by a major road connecting Brebes and Purwokerto. It also borders Tegal Regency via the Linggapura-Bumiayu Road. Overall, this sub-district is uncrowded and is dominated by rice fields, gardens, and forests. Several rivers flow through the sub-district, including the Pedes River and the Prupuk River. This research location is at a public cemetery where ancient tombstones have been found. Points A and B are in the same village, Kutamendala. Point C is in Purwodadai Village, point D is in Watujaya Village, and point E is in Tanggeran Village (Figure 2).

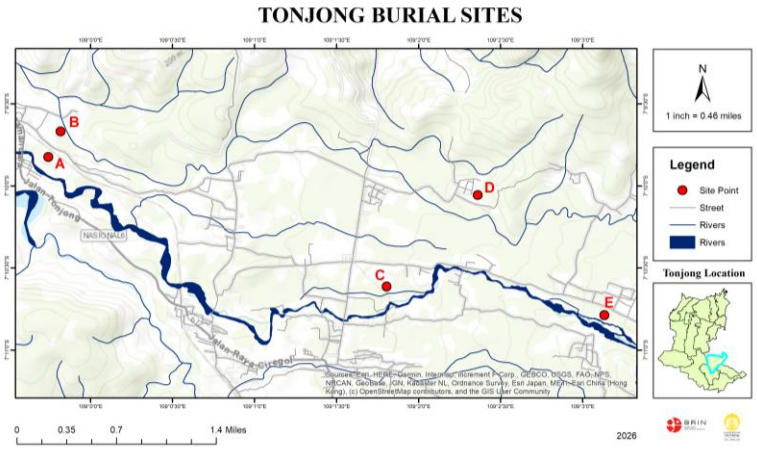


Figure 2. Map of the distribution of cemeteries with ancient tombstones in Tonjong (Source: Documentation of Mardhiyah)

In total, 131 ancient tombstones were discovered across all the sites. All were made of andesite and featured a flat, rectangular shape. Six ancient tombstones were recorded at Site A, and six ancient tombstones were also found at Site B. Site C yielded the fewest finds, with four ancient tombstones. At Site D, the number of finds rose slightly to seven. Meanwhile, Site E recorded the highest number of finds among all locations, with a total of 108 tombstones.

Form and Chronology

Table 1. Data of Form and Chronology

No	Location Point/ Site	Year	Shape of Head	Decorative		
				Head	**Body**	**Feet**
1	B	1861	Triangle	Semicircles facing away	2 Horizontal Line	-
2	E	1926	Square	-	2 Horizontal Line	-
3	B	1940	Triangle, Curves	-	2 Horizontal Line	-
4	E	1944	Rounded	-	-	-
5	E	1945	Rounded	-	3 Horizontal Line	-
6	E	1945	Rounded	-	-	-
7	E	1945	Rounded	-	-	-
8	E	1952	Rounded	-	3 Horizontal Line	-

(Source: Documentation of Mardhiyah)

The primary morphological classification focuses on the shape of the head and body of the tombstones, as they share similar physical structures and surface features. The classification was developed based on characteristics identified through empirical observation during field research.

There are eight ancient tombstones that explicitly include dates in the Common Era (Table 1), located at Site B and Site E. Site B has two tombstones dated 1861 and 1940, while Site E has six tombstones dated 1926 and 1944, three from 1945, and one tombstone dated 1952. Chronologically, the oldest tombstone, dated 1861, is at Site B; it features a triangular capstone with two semicircular ornaments facing away from each other, as well as a horizontal line on the body of the stone.

From the early to mid-20th century, there were morphological variations in tombstones, including square-shaped heads the 1926 tombstone at Site E, triangular-shaped heads on the 1940 tombstone at Site B, and horizontal line ornamentation on the body of the stone. Tombstones from the 1940s and 1950s at Site E exhibit morphological changes, such as rounded tops or tops without sharp angles. The ornamentation is simplified; some still feature horizontal lines, while others have eliminated decorative elements. This evolution of tombstones reflects a shift in decoration, where the complexity of the ornamentation was gradually reduced to simpler geometric forms. By the mid-20th century, the aesthetic of ancient tombstones had shifted toward a more minimalist decorative style, without losing their visual identity or symbolic function.

In the Adaptive/Imitative phase, in accordance with Balfour's view of the early stages of the evolution of decorative art, the forms from this period represent early

aesthetic expressions. In this early phase, human aesthetic appreciation aimed to create markers in the form of tombstones for a specific purpose: to symbolize the person buried there. Tombstones represent the identity of concepts or ideas as visual forms in the form of ornamentation. Humans have the concept of imitating objects or adaptation, which refers to their efforts to adopt the characteristics of objects, known as decorative art on stone surfaces.

The second stage of Balfour is the Creative stage. The creative process develops through the craftsmanship involved in making gravestones; a desire to replicate or imitate emerges as an impulse to represent humanity through the shaping of andesite stone, as shown in the image of gravestone number 1. The process involves carving, utilizing the characteristics of andesite stone, which is relatively wider, deeper, and more distinct. The recessed texture on the rock's surface remains clearly visible. There is an effort to shape the stone into a geometric structure with balanced visual composition. The resulting characteristics demonstrate refined skill, serving as an early form of patterns and designs for gravestones in the Tonjong area. At this stage, people exhibit creative actions to transform andesite stone into cultural objects possessing both function and aesthetic value.

During the variation phase, changes occurred in the gravestones created between the 1920s and 1950s, both in terms of shape and ornamentation, which are categorized as deliberate variations. There is a pattern of simplification in the shapes and ornamentation of gravestones over time, reflecting a shift toward a geometric style. These changes in gravestone design occurred through a process of selection, reduction, and transformation of specific elements. In more recent gravestones, craftsmanship has become increasingly refined, textures have become smoother, and ornamentation has become more minimalist. Decorative changes are evident in the ornamentation, with a decreasing level of visual complexity while the visual character is maintained through the structure.

Changes in objects and culture do not occur in isolation. This aligns with the concept of cultural evolution, defined as the process of cultural change within a society. Cultural change occurs because of adjustments or developments in various aspects such as beliefs, knowledge, customs, skills, attitudes, and language. A society's culture is highly likely to change when it receives significant information and interacts with external parties. If this occurs repeatedly over a period, the traces of such change become apparent. These traces can then be analyzed to identify patterns of cultural evolution. Multilinear evolution is defined as a stage of cultural evolution resulting from a variety of factors. The two primary factors in multilinear evolution are technology and the economy. Other secondary factors include politics, ideology, religion, and social systems. Cultural change within a society is not driven by a single factor but rather by multiple, interconnected, and interacting factors. It is also posited that changes in societies across

different locations follow their own unique chronologies and cannot be generalized (Steward 1972).

Decorative Art

The application of decorative on the tombstones across the study area demonstrates a highly structured zonal arrangement that follows the physical anatomy of the artifact, namely the head, body, and feet. This division indicates that decorative carving was not executed arbitrarily but was carefully planned to balance visual proportions with the technical function of each component. Given that the overall physical form and body structure are consistently uniform and flat, the primary aesthetic focus is concentrated from the neck up to the apex of the headstone.



Figure 3. Decorative Tombstone in Location E (Source: Documentation of Mardhiyah)

At the head zone, ornamentation serves as the primary visual identity of the artifact. This upper section displays the highest degree of morphological variation, ranging from rounded arches and triangular points to crown-like modifications. Within the head section, decorative motifs are expressed through geometric curves, open triangular lines, and incised scripts or recorded dates. The pattern on the head section, with its composition and unified curved lines, represents a human-like face. Placing these ornamental elements at the apex accentuates the upper silhouette of the headstone, making it stand out visually from its surrounding environment.

Meanwhile, the body zone is predominantly defined by horizontal incised lines running transversely across the stone, acting as a clear boundary between the upper apex and the main body. These horizontal lines, whether single or double, serve as sharp structural demarcations. On more intricate headstone types, the body zone also incorporates symmetrical geometric variations, such as back-to-back semi-circular motifs, oblique vertical fills forming trapezoidal patterns, or indented waistlines paired with central carved accents. Conversely, the feet zone across all recorded specimens remains consistently plain and unornamented.

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The human brain processes and assigns meaning to the order found in decorative art (Gombrich 1979). Humans naturally optimize their visual systems to avoid information overload. The brain operates through selective focus and extrapolation; rather than observing every ornamental detail individually, we grasp the general pattern and automatically fill in the remaining repetitive details. This mechanism relies on an expectation of order; consequently, when a repeating pattern is suddenly interrupted or deviates, that disruption instantly draws the eye and serves as a visual accent. This psychological phenomenon traces back to its evolutionary biological roots, where the visual ability to recognize fundamental patterns and detect disruptions in nature served as a basic survival instinct against threats. Decorative elements trigger specific emotional and psychological responses in the observer. Visual forms can create a contrast between tranquillity and restlessness: symmetrical straight-line patterns evoke a sense of stasis, stability, and calm, whereas intricate or irregular curved lines provoke a dynamic, restless perception. This is linked to concepts of balance and instability; horizontal and vertical symmetries evoke a natural, gravity-aligned sense of balance, while asymmetrical or tilted forms generate visual tension. Through the process of transforming form into meaning, the brain interprets abstract geometric shapes, such as bold lines, swirls, or waves, associating them with specific characters, colours, and emotional connotations for the viewer. Even the repetition of simple decorative elements can create visual illusions that appear complex and vibrant. Fundamentally, decoration never exists in passive isolation; instead, it establishes a visual force field that actively guides the eye's path, frames objects, and defines spatial boundaries. At an advanced level, specifically regarding "modifying the body", decorative art does not merely adhere to a surface; rather, it possesses the power to reconfigure the object's physical form. This perspective asserts that order in decorative art is not merely an objective quality inherent in the work itself, but rather the interactive result of the human brain's functioning, constantly seeking, simplifying, and constructing meaning behind visual patterns.

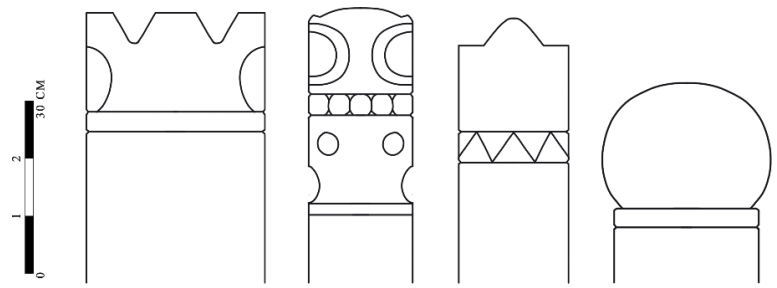


Figure 4. Illustration of Form and Decorative Ancient Tombstones at Tonjong (Source: Documentation of Mardhiyah)

Culture

The human brain is said to possess an innate mental set or mindset that more readily recognizes and accepts familiar visual forms. This perceptual habit binds both artists and observers to specific stylistic conventions; consequently, established decorative forms feel natural, whereas overly unfamiliar innovations tend to be rejected. This dynamic gives rise to phenomena of imitation and visual metaphor, wherein decorative art continuously borrows from natural forms, such as plants and the natural world, or mimics the qualities of other materials. Decorative motifs are analysed not merely as elements of visual beauty, but as signs carrying profound meaning, a perspective known as "Designs as Signs." Simple geometric forms, such as circles, triangles, or dots, are rarely perceived neutrally; human vision and culture invariably tend to imbue them with symbolic associations. The meaning of a motif is not always intrinsic; often, it is a secondary meaning ascribed by society through cultural convention. The physical, environmental, and ritual contexts in which an object exists provide a framework for interpreting whether a form functions as a sign with magical-religious significance or merely as an aesthetic element. Because certain abstract motifs are universal, a single motif can be adopted and reinterpreted by diverse religions and cultures throughout history (Balfour 1893).

Field findings reveal decorative elements on tombstones that can be linked to specific historical and cultural contexts, ranging from localized instances to broader, widespread traditions. The decorative art observed consists primarily of simple geometric patterns, such as horizontal lines, variations of triangles, and curved lines or circles. These decorative elements did not emerge in isolation; within the cultural context, such patterns were widely utilized. For instance, horizontal line motifs appear on the bodies of Demak-style tombstones (Ambary 1984). Horizontal line decorations also appear on Old Malay inscriptions found at the Ambar cemetery in North Sumatra (Perret et al. 2020). Furthermore, the ancient tombstones discovered also feature curved line decorations, resembling back-to-back semi-circles, that, on some stones, look like crescents. Viewed

as a whole, the tombstones bearing this decoration resemble a human face. Throughout human history and culture, the representation of living beings within inanimate objects has been a widespread practice; such human-like representations on inanimate objects are termed "anthropomorphic."

Animism, intimately intertwined with anthropomorphism, fundamentally defines a belief system wherein all entities, both animate and inanimate, possess an inherent spiritual essence. In his foundational concepts, Jean Piaget argued that animism emerges during the formative stages of human societal development. Crucially, even as these communities evolve in intellectual capacity, behavioural patterns, and technological advancement, such animistic remnants prove remarkably resilient and difficult to eradicate. Beyond a rudimentary belief system, animism functions as a structured cognitive output, operating essentially as a perceptual strategy across three distinct behavioural levels. Within this framework, perception serves as an interpretive process that generates cognitive meaning, which is subsequently validated within a broader cultural consensus. Anthropomorphic phenomena, therefore, stem directly from this fundamental quest for meaning; as early humans observed environmental dynamics and projected life onto inanimate surroundings, they intuitively ascribed human attributes to non-human entities (Guthrie 2015). One specific type of ancient tombstone that exhibits this anthropomorphic form is the "Anthropomorphic Gravestone Type" from Barus. The basic shape of this stone marker is rectangular, topped by a semicircular section. This semicircular upper portion represents a human head, complete with a nose, eyes, and eyebrows (Ambary 1984).

Another variety encountered is the existence of variations of the triangular shape, both made singly and repetitively. In Indonesia, triangular decoration is called *tumpal*. This decorative motif has been known to exist since the Islamic era, such as *tumpal* on bronze bells and tumpal in Hindu-Buddhist architectural art. The use of *tumpal* variations is also found in weaving and *batik*. In Hindu teachings, triangles are closely related to the depiction of Mount *Mahameru.* In the writings of Dr. W. F. Stutterheim (Stutterheim 1926) the idea related to *Mahameru* is the transfer of the peak of the mountain of the gods from *Jambudwīpa* (India) to the island of Java on the orders of the Śiwa to be used as a weight so that the land of Java no longer shakes. In this cosmological process, Vishnu acts as the binding dragon, Brahmā as the grounding turtle, and Bāyu as the mountain turner, until finally the peak of *Mahameru* is stuck in Java and is identified as Mount Penanggungan. This Nusantara version of the story is fundamentally different from the *Aměrtamanthana* myth of the Indian *Mahābhārata*; while the Indian tradition places Mount *Mandara* as merely a churning device for the Ocean of Milk, the Javanese tradition makes *Mahāmeru* the center of the macrocosm that directly emits the *Kâlakuta* poison,

which is then transformed by Śiwa into the holy water of *Tattwâměrta.*

History

In the 19th century, traces of Hindu-Buddhist Classical culture were still evident in the hinterlands of South Brebes. When the Regent of Brebes, Raden Arya Tjandra Negara, visited areas ranging from Salem and Bantarkawung to Mount Sagara around the 1880s, he encountered communities that, while familiar with Islam, still practiced Hindu traditions; consequently, he personally provided religious instruction to local caretakers (Iskandar 2006, 2004).

The enduring influence of this Classical tradition is corroborated by various archaeological findings in the Bumiayu region and its surroundings, such as the remains of large brick structures and a *nandi* statue at Candi Watu Jaran, Laren Village, as well as a *dwarapala* statue at *Candi Gagal Golok*. Beyond physical artifacts, the tradition of asceticism in the Mount Kumbang area, dating back to the pre-Islamic era, is recorded as having been preserved by local leaders well into the 19th century. Meanwhile, in the Mount Sagara and Mount Kumbang areas, researchers discovered wooden reliefs featuring motifs of ascetics, *candrasangkala*, and zoo-anthropomorphic figures; at the time, local caretakers reinterpreted these images as *Sanghyang Naga*, the Prophet Muhammad, and *Bagawan Kures* (Sunjana et al. 2024).

CONCLUSION

Based on Henry Balfour's theoretical framework regarding the evolution of decorative art, the evolutionary dynamics of the decorative art found on the tombstones at the research site reveal stages of transformation in form and ornamentation that indicate a process of visual simplification spanning the 19th century to the middle 20th century. This simplification is evident in the absolute and relative chronologies reflected in the forms and decorations of these historic tombstones. Regarding the relationship between the tombstones and people, humans served as the creators of the objects themselves. Beyond merely acting as makers, humans also imbued these tombstone objects with meaning and values. This is demonstrated by the consciously crafted patterns of form and ornamentation, which signify underlying intent and significance.

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AI DECLARATION

During the preparation and writing of this manuscript, the author utilized Google Gemini as a technological aid, limited to language translation, grammatical refinement, vocabulary enhancement, and sentence structuring. It should be emphasized that this generative artificial intelligence (AI) technology was not employed to design the research concept, conduct archaeological data analysis, interpret material culture, or draw scientific conclusions. Following the receipt of suggestions from the tool, the author conducted a thorough, meticulous, and independent review, verification, and editing of the entire manuscript to ensure academic precision, scientific integrity, and contextual accuracy. The author retains full intellectual ownership and assumes complete, independent responsibility for the originality, scientific validity, overall substance, and final content of this publication.

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