



Early Christianity in Central Tapanuli: The Bongal Site as a Historical Learning Resource

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to present the findings from the Bongal Site as an important learning resource for the History subject in Senior High Schools, particularly in exploring the dynamics of cultural interaction and the spread of religion in the Indonesian archipelago during ancient times.

Methodology: This research employs a qualitative methodology, integrating historical and archaeological approaches. The historical approach is used to reconstruct the process of Christianity's arrival on the west coast of Sumatra, while archaeological data are supported by extensive literature review and field observations.

Main Findings: The findings reveal that the spread of early Christianity to Sumatra, though still debated among historians, is evidenced by written sources indicating the presence of the Nestorian Church in the Fansur (Barus) region. Archaeological excavations at the Bongal Site uncovered various artifacts such as rings engraved with crosses, Roman beads, carved stones with Christian symbols, and Byzantine liturgical spoons that support this narrative.

Novelty/Originality of this study: The originality of this study lies in the identification and comparative analysis of artifacts that bear significant resemblance to early Roman and Byzantine Christian objects. These findings not only offer new insights into the early presence of Christianity on Sumatra's west coast but also support the use of the Bongal Site as a contextual and meaningful historical learning resource in secondary education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Bongal Site, situated in Jago-jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra, is a significant historical and archaeological location that has uncovered new insights into Indonesia's early history. Geographically, the site lies at the base of Bongal Hill, near the Lumut River, which empties into Tapan Nauli Bay and ultimately connects to the Indian Ocean. Located in Jago-jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli, North Sumatra, the Bongal Site is a key historical and archaeological discovery that sheds new light on Indonesia's early centuries. Positioned strategically at the foot of Bongal Hill and near the Lumut River — a waterway flowing into Tapan Nauli Bay and the Indian Ocean — the site's geography suggests its historical significance as a hub for early maritime activity and cultural exchange. The topography of the area is in the form of peat land and the vegetation is dominated by rumbia trees. The Bongal Site is at an altitude of about 50 meters above sea level and is about 1700 to 1800 meters from the edge of Tapan Nauli Bay [1].

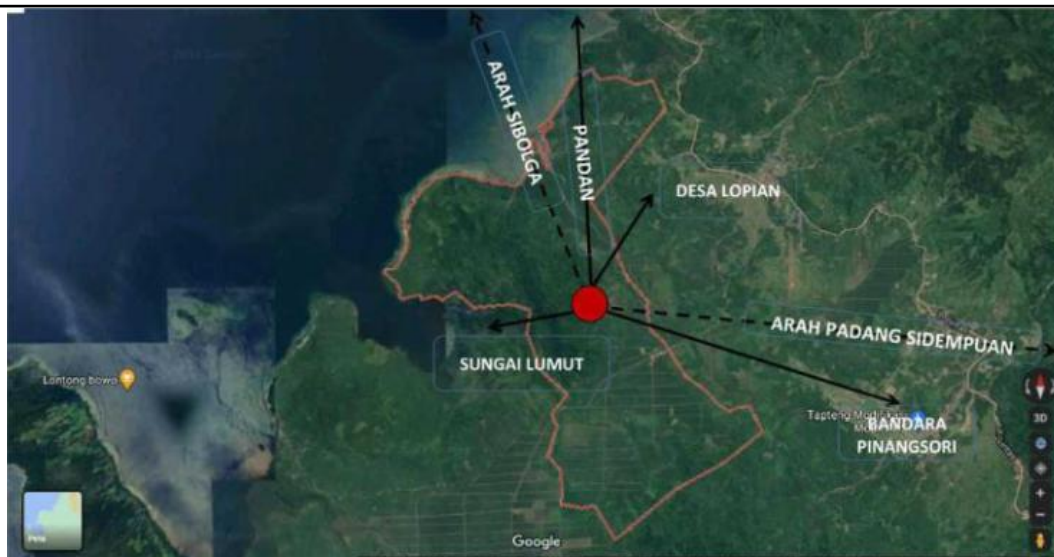


Figure 1. Map of Bongal Site Existence

Source: Google Earth (2020)

Archaeological findings indicate that the Bongal Site predates the Barus Site [2]-[3]. Thousands of ancient artifacts from regions such as the Middle East, India, China, and Europe serve as historical evidence of international trade networks that were active in this area since the early centuries of the Common Era. Excavations at the Bongal Site reveal that it is older than the neighboring Barus Site, highlighting its crucial role in early regional history. The discovery of thousands of ancient artifacts originating from the Middle East, India, China, and Europe demonstrates that the west coast of Sumatra had already become a vibrant node in global trade networks from the beginning of the Common Era. These findings suggest a dynamic exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures long before the later prominence of Barus. This trade route connected the western coastal areas of Sumatra which produced gold and spices as the most important trade commodities, which were then taken to various world trade centers at that time [4]. This is what made the Bongal Site in the early Common Era grow into a spice trading city and ancient industry that was visited by traders from the Middle East, India, China and Europe.

More significantly, the discoveries at Bongal challenge long-standing assumptions about the spread of Christianity in the Indonesian archipelago. Artifacts such as rings engraved with crosses, Roman glass beads, stones etched with Christian symbols, and Byzantine liturgical spoons suggest the presence of an early Christian community on Sumatra's west coast. These findings call into question the dominant historical narrative, which attributes the arrival of Christianity solely to European colonial expansion in the 16th century [5]. Instead, they point toward earlier, more complex patterns of religious and cultural transmission via precolonial maritime routes.

The findings at the Bongal Site mark a pivotal moment in revising the historical narrative of Christianity's introduction to Indonesia. Traditionally, historical scholarship has attributed the spread of Christianity to the activities of European explorers—specifically the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and English—in the 17th century. However, these new discoveries suggest that Christian influences may have reached Indonesian shores much earlier than previously thought, indicating a far more complex and older pattern of religious and cultural exchange.

Previous historical scholarship has typically linked the spread of Christianity in Indonesia to the arrival of European powers, particularly the Portuguese and Spanish in the 16th century. Jong, for instance, identified this period as the starting point of Christian presence in the archipelago [6]. Artonang also traced early Christian-Muslim encounters to interactions involving European sailors in the Moluccas during the 16th century, followed by the activities of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. However, other scholars have challenged this Eurocentric narrative. Noerwidi noted the presence of Nestorian Christians in Sumatra from as early as 645 AD to 1500, although the evidence remains largely textual and lacks archaeological substantiation [7]. Similarly, Christian influences in the archipelago dating back to the 7th century, but their claims are not widely accepted due to the absence of material culture as supporting evidence.

Christian spirituality has recently emerged as a distinct academic field in universities, colleges, and theological schools. The history and arrival of Christianity in Indonesia can be found in various previous literature studies: first, A History of Christianity in Indonesia written by Artonang and Steenbrink [8]. This book touches on the presence of Christians in Barus/Fansur around the 7th-9th centuries which is still being debated by experts. Hutahaean in his writing entitled History of the Indonesian Church mentions the arrival of Nestorian

Christians to Sumatra in 645-1500 [9]. Unfortunately, the description of Nestorian Christians in Sumatra in this book is not elaborated further. Jong in his writing "From Colonial Separation to Joint National Struggle A Brief History of Islamic-Christian Relations in Indonesia (±1520-1949)", makes the arrival of the Portuguese and Spanish in the 16th century as the starting point for the presence of Christianity in Indonesia [10].

Another important work discussing the arrival of Christianity in Indonesia is *The History of the Encounter between Christianity and Islam in Indonesia* by Aritonang [11]. This study highlights the encounters between Christianity and Islam, beginning with interactions between Spanish and Portuguese sailors in Maluku during the 16th century, followed by the activities of the VOC in the 17th and 18th centuries, and continuing into the Reformation period (1998–2003). Meanwhile, evidence for the presence of Christianity in Indonesia as early as the 7th century is mentioned in the research of Prihantoro and Hestiningrum in their work *Overview of the Development of World Religions and Their Spread in the Nusantara* [12]. Tukiran, in his study titled *The Nasaran Nasahitrah Church in Fansur in the 7th Century: A Note for Peter Y. Bakker, SJ*, also emphasizes the existence of the Nasara Nasathirah Christian Church (Nestorian Church) in Pancur, near the Barus region [13].

The history of the arrival of major religions in Indonesia is an important part of understanding the social, cultural, and religious dynamics of the Nusantara community. One religion that has an early trace in Indonesia is Christianity. Although the influence of Christianity in Indonesia is better known through the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century, archaeological evidence shows that Christian influence arrived earlier, even since the 4th to 5th centuries AD.

The Bongal Site, located in Jago-Jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra, stands as a significant discovery in uncovering evidence of the early spread of Christianity in the Nusantara region [14]. Situated in Jago-Jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli, North Sumatra, the Bongal Site represents a crucial archaeological discovery in tracing the early dissemination of Christianity across the Nusantara archipelago. Its findings offer important insights into the region's historical religious dynamics, suggesting that Christian influences may have reached the Indonesian archipelago much earlier than previously believed. The discovery of various artifacts such as rings with cross symbols, Roman beads, stones engraved with crosses, and Byzantine liturgical spoons strengthens the suspicion that an ancient Christian community was once present on the west coast of Sumatra [15]. This finding also shows the existence of extensive maritime relations between the Nusantara and the Middle East and Mediterranean regions at that time.

This research is important to do not only to enrich the national historical treasury, but also as an effort to introduce high school students to the complexity and depth of Indonesian history since ancient times. By utilizing the Bongal Site as a learning resource, students can understand that cultural and religious interactions in the archipelago have been going on for thousands of years, long before the arrival of Europeans. By using these archaeological findings as teaching materials, it is hoped that history learning in schools will be more contextual, evidence-based, and able to foster curiosity and love for national history.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach, combining historical and archaeological methods. The historical approach is utilized to reconstruct the entry of Christianity into the west coast of Sumatra. The historical method involves four key stages: heuristic, criticism, interpretation, and historiography [16]. The heuristic phase focuses on the search and collection of primary and secondary sources through literature reviews, including archives, books, e-books, e-journals, maps, old photographs, newspapers, direct observations of historical artifacts, and interviews with local figures and communities [17]-[18]. The criticism stage involves critically evaluating sources and evidence; external criticism assesses the authenticity of historical materials, while internal criticism examines the reliability and credibility of their content [19]. Interpretation refers to the process of analyzing and synthesizing facts, determining their meanings and interrelationships [20], with archaeological findings from the Bongal Site being closely analyzed during this stage. Finally, historiography represents the stage of writing and presenting the research findings based on the verified historical data [21].

In addition to conducting fieldwork, this study reinforces its findings through extensive literature research. The researcher examined a range of written sources related to the expansion of the Nestorian Church across Asia, with particular attention to references about the presence of a Christian community in Fansur (Barus) during the early centuries AD. The literature reviewed includes historical documents, previous archaeological research reports, and academic studies on the dynamics of ancient maritime trade between the Nusantara archipelago and various international regions [22]. This multi-source approach ensures a comprehensive analysis that connects archaeological discoveries with broader historical patterns of cultural and religious interaction.

All findings and analyses from this study are interpreted to construct a coherent historical narrative about the early spread of Christianity along the west coast of Sumatra. The archaeological discoveries at the Bongal Site serve not only as historical evidence but are also adapted into contextual learning resources for Senior High School history education. By integrating these findings into the curriculum, students are encouraged

to engage with history through real, tangible evidence and to understand the broader dynamics of cultural interactions that shaped the archipelago in ancient times [23]. This approach not only enriches historical knowledge but also fosters critical thinking and a deeper appreciation for Indonesia's multicultural heritage among students.

To enhance the credibility and representativeness of the findings, this study also outlines a purposive sampling strategy. Key informants were selected based on their historical knowledge, cultural heritage involvement, or direct experience with local traditions—such as community elders, cultural historians, and local religious leaders. Archaeological samples, including ceramics, stone crosses, and burial artifacts from the Bongal Site, were selected systematically based on stratigraphic context and preservation condition to ensure chronological reliability.

Data validation was ensured through triangulation, combining multiple data sources and methods: oral interviews were cross-referenced with written historical documents and physical evidence uncovered through archaeological excavation. Triangulation across these dimensions helped to confirm interpretations and minimize reliance on a single source type. To address potential biases, especially those arising from retrospective interpretations and researcher subjectivity, reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were employed throughout the research process. The researcher maintained reflective notes during fieldwork and analysis to acknowledge positionality and subjective assumptions. Furthermore, the interpretations of the archaeological findings were peer-reviewed by experts in early Southeast Asian Christianity and maritime archaeology to strengthen objectivity and academic rigor.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Emergence and Development of Christianity in the Early Common Era

Human civilization cannot be separated from the rise and development of religion, which not only functions as a belief system, but also as a main pillar that forms the social, cultural, and moral structure of a civilization [24]. Religion has a fundamental role in fulfilling the spiritual needs of humanity, which go beyond physical and intellectual needs [25]-[26]. In this context, religion functions as the main guide that directs humanity towards a deeper understanding of the true nature of life and their existence in this world [27].

Religion provides a framework for understanding the origins of life, the purpose of human existence, and the relationship between humans and the universe and God. In every religion, there are teachings that teach about love, peace, and forgiveness, which in turn strengthen the moral and ethical values that shape the social order. Love in religion not only leads to a harmonious relationship between humans and God, but also between fellow humans and with all creation. This concept leads to the formation of an attitude of mutual respect, sharing, and care for the existence of other creatures, which is part of human responsibility as caretakers of the earth.

In the major religions, we see how spiritual teachings often emphasize the importance of a deep relationship between humanity and God. For example, in monotheistic traditions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, religion teaches its followers to always be in a state of submission, humility, and respect before God as the creator and maintainer of the universe. Religion also provides deep moral guidance on how humans should live in a world full of challenges and trials, provides direction on what is right and wrong, and teaches how to achieve a meaningful life and true happiness, both in this world and in the afterlife. In addition, religion functions as a guardian of social stability by forming norms that regulate individual behavior in society. Religious teachings are often closely related to the formation of social laws that protect basic human values, such as justice, brotherhood, and peace. Religious systems help keep society organized with values derived from spiritual teachings, which provide a sense of higher purpose to each individual. Furthermore, religion also plays a role as a connector that unites society, transcending differences in ethnicity, nation, and language. With religion, humanity is invited to get to know each other, appreciate, and celebrate diversity in a positive and constructive context. In this case, religion becomes a force that not only leads to individual development, but also builds social solidarity that strengthens unity and oneness in living together.

Ultimately, religion is a central element that not only functions as a personal spiritual aspect, but also as a foundation in building a just, peaceful, and loving civilization [28]-[29]-[30]. Through religion, humanity is invited to live a more meaningful life with full awareness of a higher purpose in life, and to respect and care for God's creation, both in the form of nature and fellow human beings. As a belief system that regulates human relations with God and with others, religion plays an important role in forming a civilization based on universal values that respect human dignity and the safety of the universe. In the study of civilization, the religious system is vital, as it represents a form of cultural heritage preserved by communities based on their beliefs. In Christian history, Antioch holds significance as the place where followers of Jesus were first called Christians. They were also referred to as Syrians, a term derived from King Cyprus, who conquered Babylon in 539 BC and allowed Jews to return to Judea. Over time, the name Syria came to represent Christians from regions such as Mesopotamia, Persia, India, and the Far East, who were converted by apostles and priests from Syria. The

Apostle Peter is traditionally credited with founding the Church of Antioch in 37 AD, the remains of which are now in Antakya (modern-day Antiochia, Turkey). This church's legacy continues in the Syriac Orthodox Church. The Church of Antioch played a key role in early Christianity, contributing to the first three ecumenical councils: Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Ephesus (431), which helped shape the early Christian doctrine, prior to the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD).

The earliest recorded mention of the term "Christian" comes from Ignatius of Antioch around 107 AD, where it is linked to key developments such as the modification of the Sabbath, the rise of bishops, and the criticism of Judaizers [31]. Jerusalem, revered as the site of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, remained a central hub for the Christian church until 135 AD, during which it held immense prestige as the heart of the Apostolic Age. However, its significance waned during the Jewish-Roman wars (66-135 AD). In contrast, Constantinople's prominence emerged later, with its formal establishment in 330 AD, five years after the First Council of Nicaea. Yet, the smaller city of Byzantium, which preceded Constantinople, was an early center of Christianity due to its strategic location near Anatolia. Sociologist Rodney Stark estimates that Christianity grew at an astounding rate of 40% during the first two centuries. This rapid growth compelled Christian communities to adapt and evolve, both in terms of their internal structures and their external relations, as they became larger, more dispersed, and increasingly intertwined with their political and socio-economic surroundings.

3.2. The Presence of Christians in the Southeast Asia-Sumatra Trade Route

The emergence of Christians in Southeast Asia and Sumatra cannot be separated from the existence of the Silk Road as an international trade network that has existed since hundreds of years before Christ [32]-[33]-[34]. This trade route stretches from the western hemisphere to the eastern hemisphere. The Silk Road, which connects the ancient trade network from the East (China) to the West (Rome), then expanded to Southeast Asia, including the west coast of Sumatra. The international scale trading activities formed on the Silk Road became a factor in attracting Christians to the Southeast Asia and Sumatra trade network.

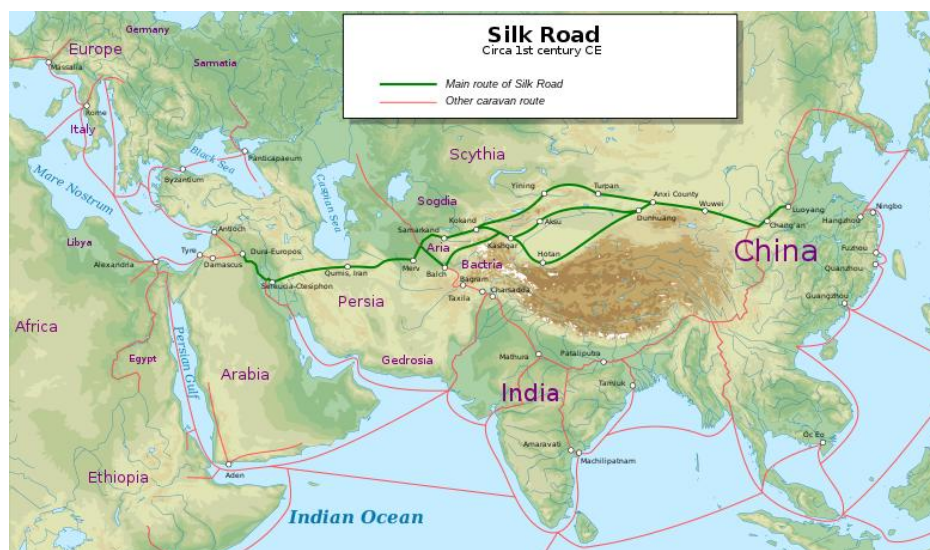


Figure 2. Silk Road in Early AD
Source: nationalgeographic.grid.id

Southeast Asian trade routes, particularly those involving the coast of Sumatra, played a vital role in the formation of international trade routes connecting the great civilizations of the ancient world [35]. Since before the Common Era, the region has been a strategic point in global trade routes, especially thanks to the highly valued spice commodities. Sumatra, with its strategic location on major shipping routes, not only served as a link between East and West, but also as a center for the production of spices that were in great demand in the Silk Road trade network.

Spices, such as pepper, cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon, had extraordinary value in various cultures at that time [36]. Spices were used not only for culinary purposes, but also for medicine, food preservation, and as a symbol of social status. In the ancient world, especially in the Middle East, India, and China, spices were often associated with luxury and wealth, and were highly sought after by the elite and rulers. Therefore, the Southeast Asian region, especially Sumatra, became an important center in international trade flows, involving various nations, from Indian, Chinese, Persian, to Arab traders.

This trade route connected Sumatra with large areas such as India, China, East Africa and Europe. The presence of traders from various nations caused Sumatra to become a meeting place for various cultures, religions and ideologies, which then created a profound influence on the social and cultural development in this

region. In addition, the spice trade also played a role in the development of maritime kingdoms in the Nusantara region, such as Srivijaya, which utilized this trade route to strengthen their power and economy. Not only functioning as a center of trade, Sumatra also became a meeting point for various cultural currents, which helped shape local cultural identities. The interaction between traders from India, Arabia, China and other regions influenced the development of religion and beliefs in this region, including the spread of Islam and Christianity which were influenced by these trade routes. Thus, the trade routes in Sumatra not only had an economic impact, but also brought significant cultural and religious influences, which ultimately shaped the social and political dynamics in Southeast Asia.

The existence of Sumatra in this international trade network not only reflects the importance of spice commodities as an economic center, but also as a key in bringing together various nations and cultures that influence each other [37]. In this context, Sumatra is not only a spice producing region, but also a center for meetings between civilizations that resulted in significant changes in global history. For Christians, these spices became a significant obsession. The entry of Christianity into Southeast Asia's trade networks during the early centuries AD can be traced back to the 4th century, with the establishment of Christian communities in South India. Persian Christians played a key role in reviving the Apostolic church or establishing new migrant communities along the Indian coast during this period. Further evidence of Christian presence in the region comes from a historical document referring to the merchant Thomas of Cana and other holy men who acted as Christian missionaries in 345 AD. From the beginning, South Indian Christians maintained strong ties with the Mesopotamian and Persian churches, following Persian teachings, terminology, and Syriac liturgy, marking them as Nestorians. The relationship between the Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and the Indian bishop was notably close, maintained as much as political conditions under Muslim rule allowed.

The Nestorian Church, also known as the "Church of the East," originated from a split within the Catholic Church of the Roman Empire in the 5th century. The followers of Nestorius, who rejected the doctrinal rulings of the Council of Ephesus in 431, were expelled from the Roman Empire and sought refuge in Persia. There, the Nestorian Church became centered in Lower Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). One of the distinguishing features of the Nestorian Church was its active missionary work, spreading the Gospel to far-reaching regions. In addition to their religious fervor, the Nestorian community also developed a strong entrepreneurial spirit, which contributed to their influence in distant trade networks.

By the 6th century, the Nestorian Church had expanded its reach to India and Sri Lanka, and by the 5th century, it had already spread to Central Asia [38]-[39]. In 635 AD, it made its way to China, and evidence suggests that its influence extended to Korea, Japan, Thailand, and the Malay Peninsula during the same period. Archaeological relics, historical texts, and letters from the Nestorian Church archives provide proof of this widespread mission. Persian records, notably those written by Mar Abhd Isho (Metropolitan of the Chaldean Church from 1291-1319), reveal that by the 7th century, the Chaldean Church had established an archdiocese for various regions, including Sumatra and Java, referred to as Dabhag (Zabag/Zabaj), along with areas like Sin (China) and Macin. This ecclesiastical presence likely extended into southern India as well. Th. Van den End further asserts that in the early centuries AD, Christian traders from Egypt and Persia settled across Southeast Arabia, West and South India, and Sri Lanka. The Christian communities they established, particularly in South India, continue to thrive today, as seen in the Mar Thoma Church.

The Persians are known to have navigated the maritime Silk Road as early as the 4th century AD, establishing trade routes that connected Southeast Asia. By 650 AD, reports indicate that Christian communities had already formed in Kalah (or Kedah) on the west coast of Malaya, near Langkawi Island, where traders from India, China, and the Indonesian archipelago met. Persian colonies on the Malay Peninsula are also documented in Chinese sources, including an account of five hundred Persian families living in Tun-sun on the peninsula during the 4th century AD. Christians often traveled to Southeast Asia aboard Persian ships. On the west coast of Sumatra, traces of Christianity can be found in Barus (or Fansur). Shaikh Abu Salih al-Armini's 10th-century work, *Tadhakur fihi Akhbar min al-Kana'is wa'l Adyar*, mentions a Nestorian Christian community in Fansur, where several churches, including one dedicated to the Virgin Mary, were likely established around 645 AD. Recent local research has uncovered the name "*Janji Mariah*" or "Promise of Mary" near Barus, further suggesting the presence of Christian influence in the area. Known as Nasara Nasathirah, the Nestorian church in Barus was part of a broader movement that brought Christianity from Lower Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) to Sumatra between 645 and 1500 AD, according to Hutahaeen's research.

3.3. Bongal Site in the West Coast of Sumatra Trading Network

In the early centuries AD, the west coast of Sumatra had become a strategic center of international trade, playing a central role in the global economic network that connected major civilizations. Its geographical location facing the Strait of Malacca, which was a major shipping route between India, China, and the Middle East, allowed Sumatra, especially Barus (or Fansur), to become one of the most important trading ports at that time. The existence of Barus as a major port can be seen from historical and archaeological evidence that shows the intensity of trade that has occurred there since the first century AD.

The commodities traded in Barus were very diverse, but the most prominent were natural products that were very valuable on the international market, such as camphor, frankincense, gold, and spices. Camphor, which is extracted from the *Dryobalanops aromatica* tree that only grows in the forests of Sumatra, is highly valued as an ingredient in perfumes, medicines, and preservatives, making it one of the main commodities in demand by foreign traders. Frankincense, a resin from the *Styrax* tree, was used for religious purposes, aromatherapy, and perfume, making it a highly sought-after commodity by traders from India and the Arab world. Gold, which was also abundant in several areas of Sumatra, became a symbol of wealth and a major attraction for traders from various parts of the world. Spices, including pepper, cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon, which were known to have high value in the Indian and Chinese markets, also played a major role as commodities in international trade.

Barus, with its strategic natural harbor and direct access to international shipping routes, became a meeting point for traders from various regions, including India, China, the Middle East, and even Africa. Traders from India brought goods such as textiles, gemstones, and other luxury goods, while Chinese traders brought ceramics, silk, and metal products. Traders from the Arab and Persian worlds brought goods such as perfume, incense, and other spices. These trade interactions brought not only commodities, but also ideologies, cultures, and religions, which played an important role in the social and cultural development of local communities on the coast of Sumatra.

Historical sources, such as travel records of Arab and Chinese traders, as well as classical geographical writings, confirm the importance of Barus as a major trading port in the region [40]-[41]-[42]. For example, Ptolemy, a second-century Roman geographer, mentioned Barus in his *Geographia* under the name "Barousai," indicating the city's existence as an important port in the global trade network at that time. In addition, the travel notes of Shaikh Abu Salih al-Armini in the 10th century in his book *Tadhakur fihi Akhbar min al-Kana'is wa'l Adyar* mention the presence of a Nestorian Christian community in Barus, indicating the influence of religion brought by traders.

The existence of ports such as Barus is also closely related to the development of large maritime kingdoms in Southeast Asia, such as the Srivijaya kingdom, which used Barus as a center for trade and resources. Srivijaya, which flourished in the 7th to 13th centuries, utilized Barus' geographical position to control maritime trade routes and expand its influence throughout Southeast Asia and even to India and China. In addition, the existence of Barus as an advanced trading port in the early AD also provides strong evidence of the advancement of shipping and navigation technology possessed by the coastal communities of Sumatra. They mastered sophisticated shipbuilding techniques, and were able to adapt to the demands of international trade, which allowed them to interact with traders from various parts of the world.

Overall, the west coast of Sumatra, with Barus as its main port, played an important role in the formation of a global trade network connecting Southeast Asia with India, China, and the Middle East. The superior commodities such as camphor, frankincense, gold, and spices, which were traded in Barus, are clear evidence of how great the influence of maritime trade routes was in shaping the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of the region in the early centuries AD. References to Barus in ancient trade networks appear in various records from Arab, Tamil, Greek, Persian, Chinese, Malay, and Javanese traders. Notably, the 2nd-century geographer Claudius Ptolemy mentioned Barus as "Barousai," a port known for its camphor production, which had been traded to Egypt for embalming purposes since the reign of Ramses II, over 5,000 years before the Common Era. Archaeological research by teams from the *Ecole Française D'Extreme-Orient* (EFEO) and the National Archaeological Research Center (PPAN) in Lobu Tua-Barus has revealed that, by the 9th to 12th centuries AD, Barus had developed into a multi-ethnic hub, home to diverse groups including Arabs, Acehnese, Indians, Chinese, Tamils, Javanese, Bataks, Minangkabau, Bugis, and Bengkulu. The discovery of high-quality, ancient artifacts supports the notion of Barus as a prosperous trading center. However, the Bongal Site, located nearby, likely predates Barus in its involvement in maritime trade networks. Evidence from the Bongal Site, including thousands of international artifacts such as Middle Eastern coins (7th to 9th centuries AD), ancient Chinese coins, ceramics, ship fragments, glass pieces, and Pallawa script, suggests it was a prominent trading port as early as the 1st century AD. These findings indicate that the Bongal Site was a cosmopolitan settlement, engaged in extensive trade spanning Southeast Asia, West Asia, North Asia, and the Mediterranean.



Figure 3. Artifacts Found at the Bongal Site
Source: Personal Collection

3.4. Traces of Christianity at the Bongal Site in the 4th-5th Century AD

Evidence of Christianity at the Bongal Site dating back to the 4th-5th centuries AD has been uncovered through a range of archaeological artifacts from the early Byzantine period. Key findings from this era at the Bongal Site in Jago-jago Village include:

1) Ring with a cross symbol

A gold ring featuring a cross symbol, dating back to the 5th century AD, was discovered at the Bongal Site. This ring, from the early Byzantine (Early Christian) period, reflects the religious significance of the time, as Christians in Byzantium were known for crafting engraved gemstones for religious purposes. The cross motif on the ring represents the identity of Eastern Christians, who were in theological conflict with the Catholic Church in the Roman Empire. Weighing 14.64 grams and measuring 3.69 mm in width and 2.33 mm in height, the ring likely served as both jewelry and a marker of the wearer's Eastern Christian affiliation. Only one such gold ring with a cross engraving was found at the site.



Figure 4. Gold Ring with a Cross Engraving Found at the Bongal Site
Source: Personal Collection

The cross symbol on the ring, shown in Figure 4, shares notable similarities with the Nestorian cross found in Sian-Fu in 781 AD during the Tang Dynasty. This connection suggests that Nestorian Christians, who were active in trade across Southeast Asia and China, likely passed through Bongal, bringing Christian artifacts with them. Given that Bongal was a bustling international trading hub frequented by traders from diverse nations and faiths, the discovery of this gold ring at the site further supports the presence of Nestorian Christians in the region.

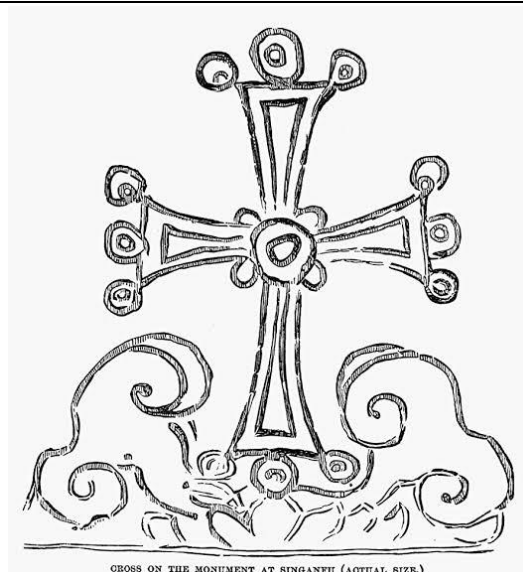


Figure 5. The Symbol of the Cross in Sian-Fu China 781 AD
Source: indgenousjesus.blogspot.com

2) Roman Beads

The Bongal Site yielded an array of glass, gold, and silver-plated beads, uncovered during an excavation by researchers from the North Sumatra Archaeological Center and Media Literasi Media (now the Sultanate Institute) in February 2022. These beads, estimated to date back to the 6th century AD, were originally produced in Egypt between the 1st and 4th centuries AD under Roman rule. Known as Roman beads, they reflect elements of Roman culture and were part of a widespread trade network reaching South and Southeast Asia, including the Nusantara region. Glass beads, in particular, were highly valued trade commodities. The beads found at Bongal were discovered within terracotta pottery, alongside onyx, jasper, carnelian, and semi-precious stones, suggesting they were grave goods. This discovery parallels findings from the Pangkung Paruk Site in Bali, where beads were also buried with other artifacts. Similar beads have been found in Mesopotamia and Egypt, often in temple and palatial contexts. The presence of Roman gold glass beads at Bongal provides valuable insight into the site's role in the West Sumatran coastal trade network and helps establish its historical timeline.



Figure 6. Glass, Gold and Silver Beads from Excavations at the Bongal Site
Source: (www.kompas.id)

When considered alongside other Christian artifacts uncovered at the Bongal Site, the Roman glass, gold, and silver beads shown in Figure 5 are believed to have served as prayer beads during the 3rd to 5th centuries AD. The use of beads for prayer dates back to at least 185 BC in Hindu traditions in India (Wiley, 2002), and by the 3rd century AD, Christians had adopted similar practices. The tradition of using prayer beads

likely began with the Desert Fathers, and Eastern Christians have referred to their prayer ropes as "chotki" since the 4th century AD. Given the historical context of bead usage in Christian worship, along with the importation of Roman-style beads from Egypt to Southeast Asia and the discovery of Byzantine-era cross symbols among the artifacts, it is plausible that the glass, gold, and silver beads at the Bongal Site were indeed used as prayer beads.



Figure 7. Gold-Plated Beads Found at the Bongal Site.

3) Cross-carved stone

Along with the gold ring, cross motifs were also discovered on stone and copper artifacts at the Bongal Site. This research successfully identified two types of cross-carved stones, as shown in pictures 8 and 9. One of the stone carvings, displayed in picture 12, weighs 7.9 grams and measures 30.36 mm in both length and width.

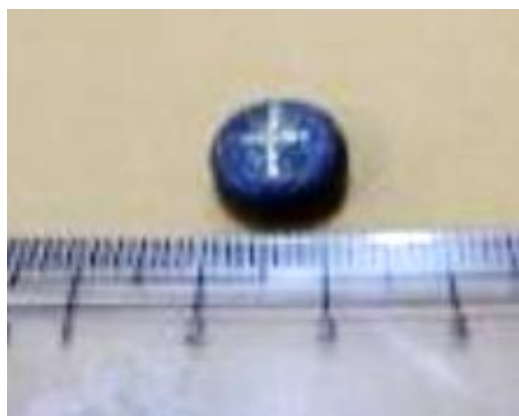


Figure 8. Cross-Carved Stone Found at Bongal Site
Source: Personal Collection



Figure 9. Cross-Carved Stone Found at Bongal Site
Source: Personal Collection

4) Byzantine liturgical/communion spoons

Byzantine liturgical spoons, gold-plated utensils used in Orthodox traditions for administering the Eucharist, are crafted in limited quantities for church services and liturgical purposes. These spoons play a vital role in serving communion to the clergy and laity, where consecrated bread is soaked in wine and offered to the congregation (Taft, 1996). As these spoons come into contact with the Body and Blood of Christ, they must be made from gold or gold-plated materials, symbolizing both sacredness and wealth, which is why gold is commonly used in Christian worship artifacts. At the Bongal Site, seven Byzantine gold-plated liturgical spoons were discovered, with lengths ranging from 11.4 cm (weighing 7.46 grams) to 15.3 cm (weighing 11.38 grams).

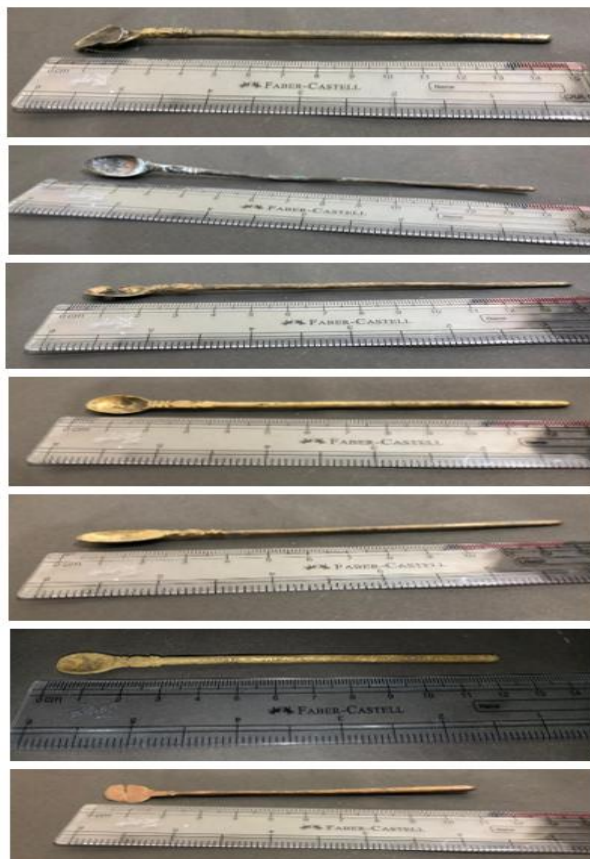


Figure 10. Byzantine Gold-Plated Liturgical Spoon Found at Bongal Site
Source: Personal Collection

Relevance of the Bongal Site to History Material in High Schools

Research on the Bongal Site as an early trace of the spread of Christianity on the west coast of Sumatra has strong relevance to the History learning material at the High School (SMA) level, especially in the following topics:

Interaction between Asia and the World (Indonesian History Material Phase E/XI in Merdeka curriculum)

In this material, students are invited to understand more deeply the trade routes and cultural interactions that occurred between the Nusantara region and other regions such as West Asia, India, and Europe. One important piece of evidence of this interaction route is the discovery of artifacts at the Bongal Site, located on the west coast of Sumatra. This discovery provides a concrete picture of the intensity of maritime trade routes that have existed since the beginning of the Common Era, and how these trade relations involved not only commodities but also ideology and religion, including the spread of Christianity.

The Bongal Site is one of the key points that illustrates how the influence of foreign cultures and religions, especially Christianity, began to enter the Nusantara region through trade routes that connected various great civilizations at that time, such as Rome, Persia, India, and China. Based on archaeological research, various artifacts were found related to the presence of Christianity, such as gold rings marked with crosses, Roman beads, stone pieces engraved with cross symbols, and Byzantine liturgical spoons. All of these artifacts provide clues that in the 4th to 5th centuries Common Era, Nestorian Christian communities already existed and were active in the coastal areas of Sumatra.

In addition, the discovery of these artifacts also shows the interaction between trading communities from various cultures and religions. For example, the discovery of glass beads originating from Roman Egypt,

which were used in worship and as merchandise, indicates the existence of trade in goods involving the Middle East to Southeast Asia. Based on historical records, in the 4th century AD, the Persians had participated in transcontinental trade, connecting regions such as India, Southeast Asia, and China. The intersection between various ethnic groups, such as traders from Persia, India, and China, in the Barus (Fansur) area at that time showed that the archipelago was part of an important international trade route.

Thus, the discovery of artifacts at the Bongal Site not only provides evidence of the existence of an international trade route involving various great world civilizations, but also shows how this interaction resulted in the influence of foreign religions and cultures, including Christianity, which began to enter the archipelago. This is important to understand in the context of how the early globalization process has occurred for thousands of years, which has had a major influence on the development of culture and religion in the archipelago.

The Development of Religion and Culture in Indonesia during the Classical Period

This material aims to discuss the development of major religions that influenced Indonesia in the classical period, especially Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, which began to develop in the early centuries AD. In this context, it is important to dig deeper into how these religions are not only limited to the long-known Hindu and Buddhist traditions, but also include Christian influences that began to penetrate the Indonesian region much earlier than previously understood.

The discovery at the Bongal Site, located on the west coast of Sumatra, provides concrete evidence of the arrival of Christianity in Indonesia in the 4th to 5th centuries AD. The discovery of artifacts related to Christianity, such as a gold ring marked with a cross, Roman beads, stone pieces engraved with a cross, and Byzantine liturgical spoons, indicates that the presence of Christianity in Indonesia, especially in the coastal areas of Sumatra, occurred long before the massive expansion of Christian missions in modern times. These artifacts not only function as liturgical objects, but also show that Christian traders and missionaries, especially from the Nestorian community originating from Persia, had actively interacted with local communities through maritime trade routes connecting the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia.

During this classical period, Indonesia had become a meeting point for various great world civilizations, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity [43]. Hinduism and Buddhism had already entered Indonesia through trade routes and missions from India. These two religions then developed rapidly, influencing various aspects of social, cultural, and political life in Indonesia, especially in great kingdoms such as Srivijaya and Majapahit. However, the discovery at the Bongal Site adds a new dimension to our understanding of the history of religion in Indonesia. This means that the influence of Christianity, although not as great as Hinduism and Buddhism at that time, had begun to color the lives of Indonesian society in an earlier period than has been recorded in historical records.

The Bongal Site illustrates that the maritime trade routes connecting great civilizations in Asia and Europe, especially through the Silk Road, were not only routes for the trade of goods but also ideology and religion. In this case, Christianity, especially the Nestorian sect originating from the Mesopotamia (Persia) region, was very active in establishing relations with trading communities in Indonesia. This evidence opens up a new perspective in understanding the religious dynamics in Indonesia at that time, which shows that Indonesia was a region that was very open to external influences and became a meeting point for various major religious traditions in the world.

Thus, the discovery of Christian artifacts at the Bongal Site is important evidence that in addition to Hinduism and Buddhism, Christianity also played a role in the history of religious development in Indonesia since the beginning of the Common Era. This enriches our understanding of the diversity of religious dynamics in Indonesia during the classical period, and opens up opportunities to further explore how major religions interacted and developed in the Nusantara land during that period.

Historical Sources and Historical Interpretation

In this material (content), students are taught to recognize and analyze various types of historical sources, including artifactual sources, which play an important role in historical reconstruction. These artifactual sources, which include historical objects found through archaeological excavations, provide in-depth insights into past civilizations and the interactions between cultures that shaped the development of society. These artifacts, which often consist of objects inherited or used in everyday life, are sources that not only document important events but also provide concrete evidence of the religious, social, and economic practices of the community at that time.

One concrete example that can be used as study material in this context is the discovery at the Bongal Site located on the west coast of Sumatra. This site provides very important evidence related to the meeting and interaction of various cultures, especially Christian culture that entered the territory of Indonesia since the 4th to 5th centuries AD. The discovery of artifacts such as Byzantine cross rings, gold liturgical spoons, cross-carved stones, and Roman beads is a very valuable starting point for reconstructing the course of the history of Christianity in Indonesia in a period earlier than that recorded in written historical records.

The Byzantine cross ring, estimated to date from the 5th century AD, not only functions as jewelry but also as a symbol of religious identity, showing the existence of an Eastern Christian community (Nestorian) that had adopted this symbol as part of their liturgy and religious life. The gold liturgical spoon, used in the practice of administering the Eucharist in the Eastern Christian tradition, shows that at that time, Christian religious practices were already practiced in a highly structured form and contained deep theological meaning. These objects are strong markers of the role of Christianity in the social and cultural life of the people involved in international trade in the region.

Furthermore, the discovery of artifacts such as beads originating from Rome and used in religious practices, provides insight into the international trade networks that have connected Indonesia, especially Sumatra, with the Mediterranean world and the Middle East since the beginning of the AD. The beads, produced in the Roman region, reflect the existence of trade routes that circulated not only goods, but also ideologies and religions. As a form of historical artifactual source, these beads prove that trade on maritime routes not only spread commodities but also religious ideas that later influenced the people of the archipelago.

The use of artifactual sources such as these allows students to understand how material evidence, such as religious objects, can be used to analyze historical dynamics that are not always recorded in written documents. By studying these artifacts, students can detail the influence of foreign cultures on the development of Indonesian society, especially in the context of religion and religious practices. It also teaches them to analyze how foreign cultures, in this case Christian culture that came through trade routes, influenced social and religious structures in the archipelago, which in turn contributed to the formation of local cultural identities.

Overall, the discovery of artifacts at the Bongal Site not only enriches the understanding of the history of Christianity in Indonesia, but also becomes a very effective tool for reconstructing the course of history through an archaeological approach. These artifacts provide a real picture of how foreign cultural influences, especially Christianity, spread to the archipelago through intensive trade interactions, thus enriching students' insights into the dynamics of history, culture, and religion in Indonesia during the classical period.

The Importance of Maritime Routes in Indonesian History

The Bongal site, located on the west coast of Sumatra, is important evidence of the strategic role of sea routes in accelerating cultural interactions between regions, including the spread of religion. As an archaeological site that reflects the dynamics of maritime trade, Bongal provides a clear picture of how sea routes became the main link between the archipelago and various great civilizations in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, since the beginning of the Common Era. Sea routes connecting Indonesia with the outside world served as vital channels for the exchange of goods, ideologies, and religions, which had major implications for social, cultural, and religious developments in the region.

In classical times, sea routes were not only a means of transporting goods such as spices, gold, and other agricultural products, but also became the main route for the spread of major religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. In this context, the Bongal site can be seen as a strategic stopover point in a vast maritime trade network, which also became a meeting place for various cultures and religions. The discovery of various religious artifacts, such as Byzantine cross rings, liturgical spoons, and Roman beads, shows that the spread of Christianity in the archipelago has occurred since the 4th to 5th centuries AD, through maritime trade routes connecting the Sumatra region with the Middle East, India, and even Europe. Sea routes connecting Indonesia with the outside world allow for faster and more effective cultural exchange. In this case, the development of maritime kingdoms in the archipelago, such as Srivijaya, was also influenced by the existence of these trade routes, which were not only commercial routes, but also routes for the spread of culture and religion. Maritime kingdoms in Indonesia used sea routes as a means to connect with large kingdoms in India, China, and even the Mediterranean world, so that they could participate in international trade and also in the exchange of ideologies and religions. In particular, the role of sea routes in spreading Christianity in Indonesia can be seen from the discovery of Christian artifacts at the Bongal Site, which shows that Christian influence has been present in the region through interactions with Christian traders from Persia and Mesopotamia, who used maritime trade routes as channels to spread their religion. This discovery confirms the importance of sea routes as a link between distant regions, allowing the simultaneous spread of religion and culture.

Furthermore, the existence of this site illustrates how cultural and religious exchanges through maritime routes not only influenced social order, but also shaped local cultural identities. As one example, the influence of Christianity found in Bongal is not only limited to religious artifacts, but can also be seen in the adaptation of local cultures to religions that came through trade routes. This enriches our understanding of how sea routes became the main medium in the development of maritime kingdoms and in the spread of diverse cultures and religions in Indonesia. Thus, the Bongal Site provides concrete evidence of the strategic role of sea routes in accelerating cultural and religious interactions in the archipelago. This discovery also underlines the importance of maritime trade routes in the formation of maritime kingdoms in Indonesia and how these interactions influenced social, cultural, and religious developments that shaped Indonesian identity during the classical period. Sea routes, as a means of cultural and religious exchange, became a key factor in shaping religious and

cultural dynamics in this region. Research on the Bongal Site can be used as a contextual learning source to strengthen History material in high school, especially in the themes of inter-regional interaction, the development of religion in the classical era, the use of historical sources, and the importance of maritime routes. Thus, students can link the theories learned in class with real evidence found in the field, as well as develop critical and analytical thinking skills in understanding the course of Indonesian history.

4. CONCLUSION

The Bongal site, located in Jago-jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra, holds significant historical and archaeological value in tracing the arrival of Christianity in Indonesia. The Silk Road, which connected the great civilizations of China and Rome, also facilitated the involvement of Christians in Southeast Asian trade, particularly along the coast of Sumatra. The Nestorian Church, based in Lower Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), is believed to have reached Southeast Asia as early as the 4th century AD. Literature sources confirm Persian participation in the Silk Road trade network in the Southeast Asian region by this time, and Chinese records mention Persian colonies on the Malay Peninsula during the 4th century. The Christian presence on Sumatra's west coast is documented in the writings of Shaikh Abu Salih al Armini, who referred to the Nestorian Christian community in Fansur/Barus, estimating their arrival between 645-1500 AD. Traces of Christianity at the Bongal Site, dating back to the 4th-5th centuries AD, are revealed through the discovery of Byzantine-era artifacts, including cross-symbol rings, Roman beads, cross-engraved stones, and Byzantine liturgical spoons. A comparative analysis of these artifacts shows clear similarities with early Byzantine Christian items and those from the early Roman Empire, supporting the evidence that Christianity arrived on the west coast of Sumatra during the 4th and 5th centuries AD. Research on the Bongal Site in Jago-Jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli Regency, shows that Christianity reached the west coast of Sumatra in the 4th to 5th centuries AD. The findings of artifacts in the form of rings with cross symbols, Roman beads, stones engraved with crosses, and Byzantine liturgical spoons provide strong archaeological evidence of the influence of ancient Christianity in the area. The similarity of characteristics between artifacts at the Bongal Site and artifacts from Byzantium and the Roman Empire support the conclusion that there was cultural and religious interaction between the archipelago and the outside world since the early AD. Therefore, the Bongal Site has important value as a learning resource in History subjects in Senior High Schools, especially to enrich students' understanding of the dynamics of the spread of religion and ancient maritime trade networks in the archipelago. To build upon the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed. First, further archaeological excavations at the Bongal Site and surrounding areas are needed to uncover additional artifacts and strengthen the historical chronology of early Christianity in Sumatra. Second, future research should adopt an interdisciplinary approach, involving collaboration among archaeologists, historians, theologians, linguists, and cultural anthropologists to produce a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings. Third, the integration of Bongal Site discoveries into national history textbooks is recommended to enrich students' understanding of Indonesia's early religious and cultural interactions. Additionally, the development of heritage-based learning modules for high schools can transform these findings into interactive educational resources. Lastly, local community involvement should be strengthened through awareness programs and heritage-based tourism initiatives, ensuring the preservation and sustainable use of the site as a cultural asset.

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