Research Note

A Wall in the Woods*

Note on the Recently Discovered Site at Kreung Jeureungeh, North Aceh

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Abstract

This short note presents a preliminary report on a recently discovered site in North Aceh. It presents some initial information and illustrations of an usual stone formation, and communicates some potential readings of it drawing on perspectives from geography, vulcanology, and the broader archaeological and historical contexts of northern Sumatra.

Keywords

Indonesia – Sumatra – Aceh – archaeology – history

This brief note is to call attention to a recent find at a previously unknown site in northeast Sumatra. The broad area stretching between the modern cities of Medan and Banda Aceh is known for some particularly rich archaeological sites, including a number of Hoabinhian shell middens (McKinnon 1991), and

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an extensive collection of medieval Muslim tombstones at Pasai, just outside Lhokseumawe, North Aceh (Guillot and Kalus 2008). Over recent decades, archaeological and epigraphical studies of Sumatra have advanced considerably and contributed to our evolving understandings of the significant place of the island in the long cultural, economic and political history of the broader region. Important work has been carried out and is still ongoing in many parts of the island—including South, Central and North Sumatra.¹ Other Sumatran sites—such as those in the vicinity of ‘Lamri’ (Lambaro/Kreung Raya)—have been identified but still await proper surveys and excavations (McKinnon 1988; Perret 2011). On a recent visit to North Aceh some of my students in Lhokseumawe told me of yet another site, where it was rumoured that a ‘Hindu temple’ had recently been stumbled upon by loggers working in the area. While sceptical about that particular identification, I thought that the site might be worth a look.

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The closest village to the site is Cot Calang/Riseh, Kecamatan Sawang, North Aceh, from which it is about a two and a half hour hike in, over a couple of steep hillsides and small river crossings. At the last of the creeks, the Kreung Jeureungeh, one comes across a remarkable sight. On the north side of the stream rises an impressive wall of what look to be large, rough-hewn stones. In its present situation it appears as a kind of retaining wall or foundation, standing on average about four metres above the (low) water level of the creek, and the largest blocks in the wall measure around 75 (l) × 40 (h) × 65 (d) cm. Behind, from the top of the exposed blocks, rises a steep, densely forested hill. The wall runs along the base of this hill on the side of the creek. It is overgrown in many places, but can be glimpsed in sections for about 75 metres from the most exposed section, following its course upstream as the river runs east by south. After that, the bluff on that side of the stream levels off, and the wall disappears into the overgrown embankment.

Unfortunately, time did not allow for anything more than a very preliminary survey on this initial visit to the site. In the few hours I did have there, I

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2 The village is located around 5°00′N/96°53′E. The rivers and streams running through the area wind in flows toward the north coast of Aceh, debouching between the modern cities of Bireuen and Lhokseumawe.
walked the course of the stream and climbed the thickly wooded hill behind the wall, scanning the surface for any other visible structures or artefacts. Further downstream one finds what appear to be a couple of larger (approximately 120 × 40 × 40 cm) rectangular blocks strewn in the course of the creek. These, however, do not evidence any regular pattern of distribution. Furthermore, this admittedly limited and superficial surface survey found no evidence of either shell mounds or pot sherds at the site. The absence of the latter in particular is striking, given how thick such materials are on the ground at other sites in North Aceh, such as at Pasai. It also poses considerable challenges to an archaeological dating of the site.

The wall thus presents a difficult object to interpret. There does not seem to be any published notice of another surviving structure resembling it anywhere else in the region, and from what I could gather there did not exist any local oral tradition telling of ancient structures in the area until the talk of a ‘Hindu

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3. The shell middens in the area to the south of this site (stretching between East Aceh and Deli) were, however, also not immediately visible on the surface when they were first discovered, but found buried beneath heavy layers of alluvium (Bellwood 1992:87).

4. Large amounts of diverse types of Chinese and Southeast Asian ceramics are, for example, easily seen as surface finds by anyone walking along the fishponds around Desa Kuta Kreung, Kecamatan Samudera, North Aceh, in the area of the former capital of Pasai.
temple’—a phrase that quickly came to be used to describe the site after its recent discovery. Furthermore, the absence of any other visible archaeological evidence in the vicinity leads one to question whether the formation is, in fact, even man-made at all. With this question in mind I collected a small sample that had fallen off one of the corner blocks. At first glance, it might be seen to resemble a block of very fine sandstone that has leached out metals to form hard layers on the surface—recalling a kind of material that Jacques Dumarçay has described as being used in some pre-modern monuments of the region.5 However, being no specialist in such matters myself, I sought out expert assistance to help with establishing a more conclusive identification of the material.

Upon returning to Singapore I shared photos of the site and the stone sample with a number of colleagues in a better position than I to confirm the composition of the stone. I first showed these materials to Robert Wasson at the Asia Research Institute (ARI—National University of Singapore), who initially concurred that it was likely a piece of cut sandstone of the type described by Dumarçay. However, a quite different interpretation was subsequently offered by Jamie McCaughey, Kyle Bradley and Fidel Costa at the Earth Observatory Singapore (EOS—Nanyang Technological University). After examining these materials, they are of the firm opinion that the stone is, in fact, not sandstone, but volcanic—and that its present configuration as a ‘wall’ is actually a naturally occurring formation, albeit a rather striking and unusual one. The cooling and contraction of the volcanic material formed the vertical cracks. The horizontal breaks took shape much more slowly, caused by the flow of the stream with the corners eventually rounding as a result of long processes of weathering. As they summarize their reading: ‘The order that we see in the rock outcrop is the result of the natural processes of cooling, crack formation (“jointing”), and weathering, not the result of human design.’6

From this it seems quite likely that the ‘wall in the woods’ may not even be a man-made structure—and certainly not the remains of a ‘Hindu temple’ (as it has quickly and widely come to be regarded in the eyes of people in the nearby

5 ‘The block [of sandstone] was first outlined by a thin ditch cut out with an axhammer and then removed from the line of the bed [...]. Once removed from its bed, sandstone loses the water that it contains due to evaporation. It brings to the surface a part of the cement that binds together the grains that make up the stone. This cement is left on the surface of the block and forms a hard crust [...].’ (Dumarçay 2005: 62–3).

6 I am very grateful to all of the colleagues named above for their generous assistance in helping to identify the make-up of the stone, and for their thoughts on its implications for interpreting the site at Kreung Jeureungeh.
village). Local would-be treasure hunters are already dreaming of unearthing valuable artefacts from the site. It seems, however, that they will most likely be rather disappointed in these hopes. If, however, more extensive surveys of the area around the wall are able to detect fragments of ceramics or other evidence of human activity, then the site may yet prove of interest and value to academic archaeology. Meanwhile, the search for other, yet undiscovered, sites for the further study of Sumatra's rich and complex past continues.

References


