CHAPTER I

The Acehnese past and its present state of study

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What does it mean to study the history of Aceh? What kinds of questions have been asked, and which remain to be formulated? Once posed, what sources are available to consult in answering these questions? This volume presents a series of investigations into the diverse source bases that have relevance to Aceh in various periods of its history. This introductory essay aims to provide a broader framework for these individual studies by presenting an overview of the current state of Acehnese history, while highlighting the areas where new work is needed in order to develop a better understanding of the rich heritage and experience of this region.¹

Aceh has a long, rich and complex history, and the earliest sources we have point already to its position as a site of cultural and commercial contact with a wide range of other societies stretching from China to the Coromandel Coast of India. Maritime sites in the area such as Lamri are mentioned in the texts of Arab geographers as early as the ninth century.² Archaeological finds from that site reflect its position as a node in trans-regional trading networks, with considerable amounts of South Indian red-ware found alongside higher-fired ceramics from China, including Yuan blue and white porcelain, in deposits demonstrating a clear intermixture of these various trade items, rather than simply stratigraphic layering.

Some still preliminary observations on the northern and eastern coasts of Aceh also report the presence of early Muslim grave markers carved in a distinctive obelisk-like form known as plang pleng, that bear possible southern Indian stylistic overtones (Illustration 1). Similar markers are also found at Gampong Pande in Banda Aceh.³ Another early Islamic site, in the vicinity

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Figure 1. Toppled *plang pleng* Muslim grave marker at Lamri. Photograph by R. Michael Feener.