

Book Reviews

History of Padang Lawas North Sumatra: The Site of Si Pamutung

By Daniel Perret and Heddy Surachman
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The two volumes, reporting the French-Indonesian archaeological team's findings at Padang Lawas between 2006 to 2010, showcase Si Pamutung, a site containing the largest concentration of Hindu-Buddhist archaeological remains in north Sumatra.

Such a concentration is intriguing. Overseas influences are usually more visible along coastlines, but Si Pamutung is situated in the interior of the island. However, positioned at the heart of the Barumon, the Batang Pane and the Sirumambe river systems, these waterways link it to the northeast Sumatran coast. It is noteworthy that the settlement of Binanga, the entry point to the archaeological complex, carries a name meaning 'crossroads' in the local language.

The prevalence of the Hevajra cult shows Padang Lawas' religion to be Vajrayana Buddhist. Its art and architecture reveal a melange of influences coming from Champa, Sri Lanka, China,

Bengal, Bihar, peninsular India, as well as those of Bali and Java. Such diverse strains attest to Padang Lawas' wide networks and cosmopolitan character, but make its history difficult to determine. How does one explain such vigour in an interior, somewhat isolated and sparsely populated region?

Since the information yielded by the site of Padang Lawas is so riveting, and because the issues raised by the authors are so complex deserving more discussion than a short book review allows, I confine my review to three issues: first, the unusual location of Padang Lawas; second, its networked nature with other polities, ports and adjoining production areas in Sumatra; and third, its overseas links, mainly with the Bengal-Bihar region in eastern India.

Perret's interpretation (volume 2, chapter 10) of the locational significance of Padang Lawas both as end-point and also as strategic node in various networks is a key consideration. Although an interior centre, Padang Lawas, through its port identified as P'anes or Panai, was an important gateway from interior north Sumatra into the Melaka Straits. If it is the P'anes of an early twelfth century Armenian text, then Padang Lawas apparently exported great quantities of camphor (p. 290). If it is also the Panai of the Thanajvur inscription, Padang Lawas was sufficiently important for it to be raided in 1025 by the Cholas. The raid may have been liberating for Padang Lawas, freeing it from Srivijayan reach and allowing it to trade independently with China and India.

Seen from the sea, the port of Padang Lawas functioned as gateway into the interior of north Sumatra, a region rich in natural resources. The sudden rise in its population in the thirteenth century attests a trade boom at Padang Lawas from the eleventh century. Its ceramics, glass and earthenware, iconography and architecture were cosmopolitan, testifying to Padang Lawas' position as crossroads on the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea's cultural routes.