

Maritime Historical Archaeology Research at Balok River, Belitung Island

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Abstract. Balok River is one of the rivers in the southern part of Belitung Island, which empties into Balok Bay. This bay forms wide and sheltered water in which it is directly connected to the Java Sea. This paper aims to provide an overview of the past maritime relationship pattern along the Balok River and the surrounding waterfront environment. This study examines existing data from archaeological research conducted by South Sumatra Archaeological Research Office and the National Archaeological Research Center from 2011 to 2021. Archaeological remains such as ceramic artifacts from China, Southeast Asia, and Europe showed that these regions had been involved in long-distance international trade networks. Regional contact with outsiders is also proved by findings of pottery shreds such as jug and roof tile fragments that were not produced locally in the Belitung area. Oral history reveals that there was once a kingdom named the Balok Kingdom along this river. This kingdom raised in the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, dwellings from the period before the Balok Kingdom's existence is unknown. The toponym along the Balok River also indicates topographical features associated with maritime culture, namely Pangkalan. This toponym probably refers to the docks in the past. At this time, places using pangkalan toponyms are still functioned as boat mooring places by Balok Villagers and its surroundings. Balok River is the main route for people to the sea for fishing

1 Introduction

Belitung Island is one of the two large islands in the administrative area of the Bangka Belitung Islands Province. Administratively, Belitung Island is divided into two regencies namely Belitung Regency with Tanjungpandan as its capital and East Belitung Regency with Manggar as its capital. Geographically, Belitung Island is between two oceans, the South China Sea in the north and the Java Sea in the south. While in the west, there is the Gelasa Strait which connects Belitung Island with Bangka Island and in the east, there is the Karimata Strait which connects it with Kalimantan Island (Figure 1.).

Historical data states that sea areas around Belitung Island were a bustling maritime trade route in the XV century. However, an analysis of the ceramic found in the wreck site in these areas reported that maritime trade routes had existed since the IX century [1]. This shipping lane was getting busier as the spice trade flourished in the colonial period. Another archaeological data indicating the busy shipping lanes in Belitung sea areas is the presence of light-houses. There are four lighthouses built between 1862 and 1893. The lighthouse's construction is due to the condition of the

Belitung sea areas which are quite dangerous so signs are needed to avoid accidents at the time of voyage [2].

Archaeological research on Belitung Island conducted by the South Sumatra Archaeological Research Service and the National Archaeological Research Center shows that past settlements were generally located in the interior of the watershed. These were found in the watershed of the Padang River, Buding River, and Balok River [3]–[6]. In general, the subsistence system of the community did not only utilize resources derived from terrestrial ecosystems but also marine ecosystems [3], [4]. The artifacts suggested that people who lived along the three watersheds in the past had involved in long-distance maritime trade networks [3]–[6].

This paper aims to provide an overview of the pattern of maritime relations in past settlements along the Balok River and its surrounding aquatic environment. The Balok River is chosen as the focus of the study because recent research documented that sites related to maritime activities in the Balok River watershed have not lost their role despite changes in the political system in the region [7].

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Figure 6. Artifacts found on Pangkalan Asam Kumbang

Pangkalan Tebing Tinggi; The pangkalan is located at coordinates -3.02398, 107.89413 (Fig. 7.). The naming of Tebing Tinggi is based on the morphology of the base, which is a fairly steep river cliff. From the mainland of the river, it descends and creates stairs from the ground to the banks of the river. The location of the access road to base passes through the settlement (kelekak). Pangkalan Tebing Tinggi is in the meander of the Balok River. River orientation at the southeast-west base. The current condition of the base is still used by residents as a place to lean on small boats (Fig. 8.). The boat is used to catch fish in the waters of Balok Bay [7].

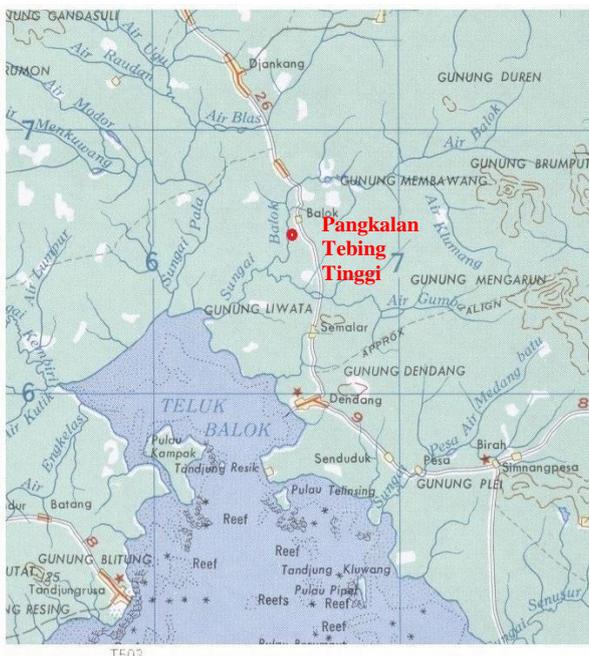


Figure 7. The Location of Pangkalan Tebing Tinggi

The artifacts found at the Pangkalan Tebing Tinggi site are fragments of glass, ceramics, and pottery (Fig. 9.). The glass artifact was identified as part of the bottle. Ceramic artifacts are in the form of fragments, bowls, plates, vase lids, cups, and jars. These were ceramics made of porcelain originating from China during the Yuan Dynasties (XIII-XIV centuries) and Ching (XVII-XX centuries). Ceramic artifacts were made from

stoneware in the form of jar fragments. The glaze on the jar fragments had generally been peeled off so that the origin of the artifacts is unidentifiable. Pottery artifacts found at the Pangkalan Tebing Tinggi site are roof tiles, pot fragments, and plate fragments [7].



Figure 8. The Situation of Pangkalan Tebing Tinggi

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Figure 9. Artifacts found on Pangkalan Tebing Tinggi

The observation of tile artifacts reveals that the type of tile found is commonly called as flam which has existed since the early Dutch colonialism. The technology used for producing roof tiles was simply by using a printing tool made of wood and burning it at a temperature of 600-650°C. Only one side is printed, while the other side is manually aligned. The traces of this manufacture can be observed from different tile surfaces. There is no historical records suggesting that the Belitung people produce roof tiles. Therefore, the tiles were possibly products imported from out-side Belitung Island though the origin of this tile is still unclear. Similar tiles are still being produced in Central Java, especially on the north coast and Kebumen. This tile has been produced since the 1700s until now [7].

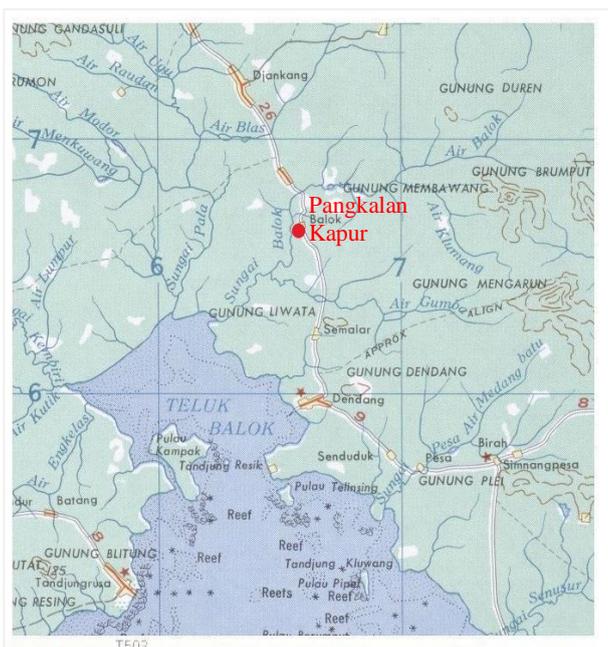


Figure 10. The Location of Pangkalan Kapur

Pangkalan Kapur; The pangkalan is at coordinates -3.02, 107.89496 (Fig. 10.). Residents reported that the base has not been used for a long time (Fig.11.). The current condition of the base is overgrown with trees and there are large stones. Further, this place is also the last base of the Balok River because the condition of the river is rocky and difficult to navigate [7].



Figure 11. The Situation of Pangkalan Kapur

To the southeast of Pangkalan Kapur is the Sacred Tomb of Padang Penyengat (Fig. 12.). At this location, there are two adjoining tombs namely the tomb of Kyai Abu Bakar in the east and the tomb of the mother of Kyai Abu Bakar on the west side. Both of these tombs have a north-south orientation characteristics. Kyai Abu Bakar's tomb has a tombstone made of weathered wood, but around the tomb is a wooden plank barrier. The tomb of Mrs. Kyai Abu Bakar has been restored with cement, the tombstone is also made of wood and there is whole pottery in the shape of a white pumpkin next to the gravestone [7].



Figure 12. Padang Penyengat Tomb

Pangkalan Beringin; The location of Pangkalan Beringin is at coordinates -3.04145, 107.89221, now it is used as a tourist destination under the name Keretak Nibung (Fig. 13.). The current condition is that there is

Ngabehi Sujuk called as Mangsayudha or Keramayudha, Ngabehi Belantu called as Surayudha, and Ngabehi Buding called as Istanayudha [11].

The founder of the Balok Kingdom was K.A. Gede Ya'kub with the title Cakraningrat I (1618–1661). He came from the Islamic Mataram Kingdom which was one of the descendants of Ki Ageng Pemanahan, a founder of the Islamic Mataram Kingdom. After serving in the Palembang Sultanate and married to N.A. Siti Kusuma, a Palembang noble lady, Cakraningrat I was then sent to Belitung to become the representative of the Palembang Sultanate in that region [11].

The first center of the Balok Kingdom government is located around Pangkalan Beringin. During the reign of Cakraningrat II (1661-1696), it was moved to Pangkalan Tebing Tinggi which was 2.5 km upstream. The movement was intended to avoid pirate attacks [5]. In the period 1740-1755, when KA Abudin with the title Cakraningrat V led, the Balok Kingdom experienced a decline. This impacted the younger brother of KA Abudin named KA Usman building a new settlement in Simba Cape in the Cerucuk River. During its establishment, the center of the Balok Kingdom on the Cerucuk River underwent two displacements. First, it was in Gunung Cape located at the mouth of the Cerucuk River. Then in 1854, it was moved again to Kampung Ume [12] Along with this, tin was explored by the Dutch East Indies government, until in 1860 the management was handed over to NV Billiton Maatschappij then continued by NV GMB. During the period of massive tin management by the Dutch, apart from being divided into several administrative areas, the Belitung area was also divided into several concession areas for tin production.

Observation of the map of Ertsevekaart van Billiton in 1927 shows that in the southern part of Belitung Island there are only a few concession areas and tin production. These concession areas are not even found in the vicinity of the Balok River watershed. The concession area in the southern part of Belitung Island is only found in the Pesak River and Senusur River watersheds (Fig. 19.). This became interesting since there was a kind of empty space that was not affected by the Dutch tin management around the flow of the Balok River. An area that was allegedly the center of government and activity center of the previous Balok Kingdom. The existence of pangkalans in this area is still used by the community even though most of its role as a transportation route has shifted to the road network [7].

This such condition is not found at the base sites located in the watersheds of the Padang River and the Buding River [4], [7]. The results of the 2021 study show that locations that have pangkalan toponym are generally associated with archaeological sites. In general, this toponymy is not only found in the watersheds of the Balok River but also the watersheds of the Padang River and the Buding River [4], [7]. Currently, except Pangkalan Kapur, pangkalans along the Balok River are still used as a place for mooring boats. For the people of Belitung Island, the toponym of pangkalan refers to the pier that serves to unload goods and people from the boat. Research results from the

South Sumatra Archaeological Research Office on the Padang River show that pangkalan not only functions as a dock but is also a meeting place for intermediary traders with local residents to carry out trade transactions [4].

Referring to this, the economy of the people living along the Balok River is also centered at the pangkalan. All commodities produced by the community, both in the form of daily consumption commodities and production commodities, are exchanged at this location. In the past, the Balok River was a medium of transportation to distribute commodity goods originating from outside to be exchanged for goods produced by local settlements.

Based on the artifacts found in the sites along the Balok River, it can be said that this area has been involved in long-distance maritime trade networks. Ceramic fragments originating from China, Southeast Asia, and Europe are often found around these pangkalans. In addition to these fragments, other finds in the form of glass fragments, metal, pottery fragments, and other clay objects such as roof tiles are quite densely found around Pangkalan Tebing Tinggi. Most of the materials found were not made locally in the Belitung Island area. The artifactual data indicates that the maritime trade network in the Balok region has been busy in the past. The role of Kampak Island on the front of Balok Bay is also considered very important because most of the artifacts found in the vicinity of the Balok River are also found on this island.

Sailing in the waters of Balok Bay is relatively easy because it is not affected by strong currents, high waves, or large winds. The geographical condition of the bay which is protected by land and islands makes the waters in this bay safe from waves and direct winds coming from the Java sea. However, this geographical environment also limits large ships and boats from entering shallow waters that are overgrown with coral reefs. Archaeological evidence showing that these waters are quite dangerous to navigate is the existence of the Kennedy Reef Wreck Site which is located southwest of Balok Bay [13].

Maritime trade in the past is strongly influenced by natural conditions, such as wind direction, currents, weather, and dangerous water conditions such as coral reefs and shallow waters [14]. The pattern of maritime trade in the archipelago area was largely determined by the direction of the wind, so it could be ascertained that long-distance shipping always waited for a good time by following the direction of the wind and returning to the opposite season [15]. From September to November, the wind blows from the west to the east. The wind conditions in these months can be used by ships from the west to sail to the eastern region sides. On the other hand, from December to November February wind direction moves from east to west. From June to August, the South China Sea wind blows to the north, making it easier to sail to the north [16].

Observations of the boats moored at the pangkalan along the Balok River indicate that the boats are categorized as small boats. The average size range of a boat is about 5 meters long and 1 meter wide (Fig. 20.). This small boat, in the northern region of Belitung

Island, is capable of a cruising range of up to 5 nautical miles [4]. However, this is not the case in Balok River. People in this area say that the boats are only used to look for food in the waters of Balok Bay as far as 0.5 - 1 nautical mile from the estuary. The Balok River connects land areas with water areas but only in locations that allow small boats to sail. This shows that people who live in the Balok River tend to cultivate agricultural land for living. However, the connection with the sea is maintained to meet daily needs that are not available on land. In addition, the territorial sea areas also provide better chance to communicate with people from outside the area and even outside the island.

The utilization of marine resources for daily needs can be found at the Pangkalan Tebing Tinggi site. At this site, the shells of *Anadara* sp. are thought to be leftovers from food consumed by the local community. The general public used to name the shells *Anadara* sp. by the name of blood clams or mangrove shells. This species lives in estuarine and coastal areas, especially in the intertidal zone bordering the mangroves [17], [18]. Observations on the Blue Chart Pacific Map issued by Garmin in 2007 show that the estuary area of the Balok River is an intertidal zone that is between 0.6 - 1 nautical mile from the coastline. Furthermore, the vegetation along the coastline around the mouth of the Balok River is in the form of mangrove plants thus this area is ideal as a habitat for *Anadara* sp.

The Balok River is navigable only by relatively small boats. This condition indicates that the exchange of commodity may occur in the middle of the sea. Small boats have an important role in the distribution system of these commodity goods. As explained previously, Balok Bay is in the shallow water category. In addition, the water is over-grown with coral reefs. This condition certainly forced large ships to anchor far from the mainland. To anticipate this, the local community using small boats will sail closer to the ships so that exchange activities can occur. Even in Dutch documents and maps before 1900 the water of Teluk Balok itself were better known as ankerplaats or where ships anchored. This mention appeared before the construction of Dendang Pier which in Dutch documents is referred to as hoofdplaats.

Geographically, Balok Bay is surrounded by fringing reefs along the coast and relatively narrow rivers that make it impossible for large ships to navigate, so that shipping in this area is likely to rely more on small boats that are able to move freely near the coast. Large ships are safer to move around the mouth of the bay because it is deeper and safe enough for large ships to avoid coral reefs. The meeting of a large ship with a boat is likely to occur at sea, as well as commodity transactions which of course are more likely to occur at sea.

5 Conclusion

Based on the description in previous sections, it is concluded that although tin has been exploited on a large scale by the Dutch, the pangkalans in the Balok River watershed have not lost their role as the center of the

economy. At first, these pangkalans functioned not only as a harbor for goods and people but also as a meeting place for residents and intermediary traders for trading transactions. However, the construction of the road network has reduced the role of the base for the community. The role of the pangkalan as the center of the economy has partially disappeared and is only used as a dock for mooring boats.

The role of the Balok River is also gradually decreasing. Initially, the Balok River acted as a medium for interaction between local communities and people outside the area and even outside the island. As the time going, it turned into a medium of transportation and place for fishing by local people. This is supported by the construction of the Dendang pier which directly connects the road with Balok Bay.

Commodity such as ceramics, pottery, and glass are imported goods. It can be an evidence indicating a trading activity in the sites along the Balok River. Further, factors of distance and mobility also played important role. The producers of the goods were far apart from the consumers in the Balok River. Therefore, it can be said that residents in the Balok River watershed are contributors to the trading system between long-distance areas. Through a gradual route, the artifacts eventually accumulated along the Balok River as remnants of the activities of the past inhabitants.

Due to the geographical condition of the Balok River, the means of transportation used by the community in the past were small boats. Observation results show that slender and small are still used by the community. The use of this slender-shaped boat may also have been used by the community of the past to approach large ships anchored in the sea. This is due to the condition of Balok Bay which is overgrown with coral reefs, so a boat that is able to move freely is needed to avoid these.

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