

Historical Traces of Sriwijaya's Influence in the Portibi Region: A Historical Study of the Bahal Temple Complex in North Padang Lawas

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical traces of Sriwijaya's influence in the Portibi region through a historical investigation of the Bahal Temple Complex in North Padang Lawas, a site whose role within Sriwijaya's regional network remains insufficiently explored in Indonesian historiography. The study reconstructs the historical background of the temple complex, identifies archaeological and historical evidence reflecting Sriwijaya's influence, and analyzes its significance within the cultural landscape of the Pannai Kingdom. The research employs the historical method through the stages of heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography, supported by field observations, interviews with relevant stakeholders, and documentary analysis of scholarly publications, archaeological reports, and official records. The findings demonstrate that the Bahal Temple Complex, an eleventh-century Vajrayana Buddhist monument, preserves historical traces of Sriwijaya's influence through its architectural characteristics, red-brick construction, spatial organization, Buddhist iconography, and strategic location along an ancient riverine transportation network. These findings indicate that the Portibi region formed part of a wider political, religious, and commercial sphere associated with the Pannai Kingdom under the influence of Sriwijaya. This study contributes to Indonesian historiography by integrating historical, archaeological, and geographical evidence to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of Sriwijaya's regional influence in North Sumatra while reinforcing the historical importance of the Bahal Temple Complex as one of the most significant archaeological legacies of the Sriwijaya period.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sriwijaya Kingdom emerged as one of the most influential maritime powers in Southeast Asia between the seventh and thirteenth centuries CE, extending its political, economic, and religious influence across large parts of Sumatra and neighboring regions. Its dominance was sustained not only through maritime trade but also through the establishment of Buddhist religious networks, river-based transportation systems, and cultural exchanges that connected inland communities with coastal commercial centers (Tanjung et al., 2025). Consequently, traces of Sriwijaya's influence cannot be understood solely through political history but must also be examined through archaeological remains that preserve evidence of regional interaction. Such remains provide an important historical basis for reconstructing the expansion of Sriwijaya beyond its political center.

One of the most significant archaeological sites associated with this historical network is the Bahal Temple Complex in Bahal Village, Portibi District, North Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra. The complex consists of three Vajrayana Buddhist temples, constructed primarily of red brick, and is generally dated to the eleventh century CE. Its architectural characteristics, spatial organization, and construction techniques reflect a highly developed religious and cultural tradition that flourished in inland Sumatra during the late Sriwijaya period (Ayeris & Herwindo, 2023). The strategic location of the temple complex along the Batang Pane River further indicates that the site participated in broader transportation, commercial, and religious networks connecting the interior of Sumatra with regional maritime routes.

From a historical perspective, the Bahal Temple Complex has frequently been associated with the Pannai Kingdom, which, according to historical and archaeological evidence, maintained close political and religious ties with Sriwijaya. Documentation preserved at the Bahal Temple Site I identifies the Pannai Kingdom as part of Sriwijaya's

sphere of influence. At the same time, the complex's location corresponds to settlement patterns commonly found at Sriwijayan archaeological sites, which developed along navigable rivers (Meyanti, [2019](#)). These characteristics indicate that the Bahal Temple Complex should be interpreted not only as an isolated religious monument but also as evidence of a wider regional network shaped by political authority, Buddhist religious activities, and economic exchange.

Previous studies have examined the architectural features of the Bahal Temple Complex, its archaeological remains, and its role in the development of Hindu-Buddhist civilization in North Sumatra (Ayeris & Herwindo, [2023](#)). Other studies have discussed the historical importance of Sriwijaya and the Pannai Kingdom, or emphasized the need to preserve the temple as an important cultural heritage site (Susanti et al., [2024](#); Tanjung et al., [2025](#)). Although these studies provide valuable historical and archaeological information, they generally examine architecture, historical context, or heritage preservation as separate themes. Consequently, the relationship between archaeological evidence, historical reconstruction, and Sriwijaya's regional influence in the Portibi area has not yet been analyzed through an integrated historical perspective.

This limitation reveals an important research gap within the historiography of North Sumatra. Existing scholarship has not sufficiently explained how the Bahal Temple Complex functioned as historical evidence of Sriwijaya's cultural, religious, and political influence beyond the kingdom's principal centers, nor has it comprehensively connected archaeological findings with historical sources and contemporary preservation efforts. The key issue addressed in this study, therefore, concerns how historical evidence preserved within the Bahal Temple Complex reflects Sriwijaya's regional influence and what this reveals about the historical position of the Portibi region within wider cultural networks of the Indonesian archipelago.

The novelty of this study lies in integrating historical reconstruction, archaeological interpretation, and cultural heritage preservation within a single analytical framework. Rather than examining the Bahal Temple solely as an archaeological monument or conservation object, this study interprets the complex as historical evidence of the interaction among the Sriwijaya Kingdom, the Pannai Kingdom, and inland communities in North Sumatra. This integrated perspective contributes to Indonesian historiography by providing a broader interpretation of Sriwijaya's regional influence while strengthening historical understanding of the Portibi region as an important component of the kingdom's wider cultural landscape.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to reconstruct the historical development of the Bahal Temple Complex, analyze the historical traces of Sriwijaya's influence preserved within the site, and examine the roles of government institutions and local communities in safeguarding the complex as an important cultural heritage site. Through this approach, the study seeks to contribute not only to the historiography of Sriwijaya and the Pannai Kingdom but also to broader discussions concerning archaeological interpretation, regional historical networks, and sustainable cultural heritage preservation.

METHOD

This study employed a historical method with a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the historical traces of Sriwijaya's influence in the Portibi region through the Bahal Temple Complex in North Padang Lawas. The research was conducted at the Bahal Temple Complex in Bahal Village, Portibi Subdistrict, and at relevant institutions, including the North Padang Lawas Regency Culture and Tourism Office and the North Sumatra Region II Cultural Preservation Center. The study applied the stages of heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography to reconstruct the site's historical background, identify evidence of Sriwijaya's influence, and analyze preservation efforts involving the government and local community (Kuntowijoyo, [2003](#)).

Primary data were obtained through direct observation and structured and semi-structured interviews with informants knowledgeable about the history, management, and preservation of the Bahal Temple Complex. The informants included government officials, cultural heritage officers or site managers, and local community leaders selected based on their institutional roles, practical involvement, and knowledge of the site. Observation focused on the physical condition of the temple complex, building structures, spatial layout, surrounding environment, and archaeological features associated with Sriwijaya's cultural and religious influence. Secondary data were collected through a literature review of scientific articles, books, archives, research reports, official documents, cultural heritage inventory reports, conservation records, documents from the North Padang Lawas Regency Culture and Tourism Office,

reports from the North Sumatra Region II Cultural Preservation Center, and data from the National Cultural Heritage Registration System (SRNCB) (Fiantika et al., [2022](#)).

Data analysis followed the historical research procedure by selecting, comparing, verifying, and interpreting primary and secondary sources. Source criticism was conducted by examining the authenticity, credibility, consistency, and relevance of information obtained from observations, interviews, official documents, and literature. Interview data were validated by comparing informants' explanations with field observations, documentary evidence, and published historical or archaeological sources to reduce subjective bias. The verified data were then interpreted to explain the relationship between the Bahal Temple Complex, the Pannai Kingdom, and Sriwijaya's regional influence, before being arranged historiographically into a systematic, chronological scholarly narrative of the historical traces of Sriwijaya's influence in the Portibi region.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical Development of the Bahal Temple Complex and the Emergence of Sriwijaya's Influence in the Portibi Region

The Bahal Temple Complex occupies an important position in the historical development of the Portibi region because it preserves material evidence of the expansion of Buddhist civilization into the interior of North Sumatra during the late first millennium and early second millennium CE. Rather than functioning merely as an archaeological monument, the complex reflects a historical process through which political authority, religious institutions, and regional trade networks became interconnected. This perspective enables the Bahal Temple Complex to be interpreted not only as a surviving architectural structure but also as historical evidence for reconstructing the regional dynamics associated with the expansion of Sriwijaya's cultural influence. Consequently, the site's historical significance lies in its ability to explain broader processes of interaction between coastal political centers and inland communities (Tanjung et al., [2025](#)).

The Bahal Temple Complex is located in Bahal Village, Portibi District, North Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra Province, and forms part of the larger Padang Lawas temple complex, which developed as an important Buddhist religious center in inland Sumatra. Cultural heritage records indicate that Bahal I occupies approximately 1.7343 hectares, with the principal architectural complex covering nearly 3,000 square meters and located at coordinates 1.4092845° North Latitude and 99.7267015° East Longitude (Siswanto et al., [2020](#)). These geographical characteristics become historically significant because the temple was constructed near the Batang Pane River, which connects to the Barumun River system and historically functioned as one of the principal inland transportation corridors. Rather than representing an isolated religious establishment, this strategic location indicates that the temple participated in wider regional communication and exchange networks extending beyond the immediate Portibi area.

The physical characteristics of Bahal I further support its historical interpretation. The complex stands on elevated ground, surrounded by red-brick enclosure walls approximately 60 centimeters high and 1 meter thick, while its surroundings have gradually transformed into plantation and residential areas (Susanti et al., [2024](#)). Archaeologically, these architectural elements demonstrate advanced construction techniques characteristic of Vajrayana Buddhist monuments in Sumatra. Historically, however, the elevated spatial arrangement also reflects deliberate religious planning intended to distinguish sacred space from ordinary settlement, illustrating how religious authority became institutionalized within the regional landscape.

The Bahal Temple Complex consists of three interconnected monuments—Bahal I, Bahal II, and Bahal III—arranged according to distinct spatial patterns reflecting different religious functions. Bahal I is the largest complex, containing one principal shrine and four subsidiary structures arranged symmetrically (Siswanto et al., [2020](#)). Rather than viewing this configuration solely as an architectural characteristic, the spatial organization suggests the existence of an established Buddhist religious institution supported by sufficient political authority and economic resources to maintain monumental construction. Such evidence indicates that the Portibi region had already become integrated into broader religious and political developments occurring across Sumatra during the eleventh century.

Historical reconstruction generally associates the construction of the Bahal Temple Complex with the Pannai Kingdom, which flourished during the eleventh century CE. Previous scholarship often interprets the Pannai Kingdom as existing within Sriwijaya's sphere of political and religious influence due to similarities in Buddhist traditions, river-based settlement patterns, and regional trade networks (Koestoro, [2018](#)). Nevertheless, the available historical evidence should be interpreted cautiously because direct contemporary inscriptions explicitly confirming political

subordination remain limited. Therefore, rather than concluding that Pannai functioned simply as a dependency of Sriwijaya, this study argues that the Bahal Temple Complex more convincingly demonstrates intensive cultural, religious, and economic interaction between the two polities than unequivocal political control.

This interpretation becomes stronger when archaeological evidence is considered together with geographical and historical data. The temple's location along an important river system aligns with broader patterns observed throughout the Sriwijayan world, where rivers served simultaneously as transportation corridors, commercial routes, and channels for the dissemination of Buddhist ideas. Consequently, Sriwijaya's influence in the Portibi region should be understood as developing through interconnected networks of trade, religion, and cultural exchange rather than solely through direct territorial expansion. Such an interpretation provides a more balanced historical explanation by distinguishing between material evidence preserved at the site and subsequent scholarly interpretations concerning political relationships.

The historical importance of the Bahal Temple Complex became increasingly recognized following its rediscovery during the nineteenth century. Historical records indicate that Franz Junghuhn first documented the site in 1846, thereby introducing it into modern scholarly discourse (Siswanto et al., [2020](#)). Subsequent visits by Von Rosenberg in 1854 and Kerkhoff in 1887 expanded the documentation of the temple's architecture and historical significance, thereby laying the foundation for future archaeological investigations (Muhsin et al., [2025](#)). These early expeditions transformed the Bahal Temple Complex from a neglected historical monument into an important object of scientific inquiry concerning the history of Buddhism and Sriwijaya in Sumatra.

Modern archaeological investigations and conservation activities have further enriched the understanding of the historical significance of the Bahal Temple Complex. Studies examining the architectural layout, religious symbolism, and spatial organization of Bahal I, II, and III have provided important evidence concerning the development of Vajrayana Buddhism and the historical position of the Portibi region within wider regional networks (Siswanto et al., [2020](#)). Government conservation programs—including restoration undertaken during 1977–1978 and 1982–1983, national designation as Cultural Heritage in 2011, and local heritage recognition in 2021—have ensured the preservation of this historical evidence for future research (Akhirani, [2017](#)). Overall, the Bahal Temple Complex should be understood not merely as an archaeological monument but as a historical source that enables reconstruction of the emergence, development, and regional influence of Buddhist civilization associated with the Sriwijaya world in inland North Sumatra.

Historical and Religious Characteristics of Bahal I Temple as Evidence of Sriwijaya's Cultural Influence

Architectural Evidence within the Historical Context

The Bahal I Temple preserves important historical evidence for understanding the expansion of Buddhist civilization into the interior of North Sumatra during the eleventh century CE. Rather than representing an isolated architectural monument, the temple reflects the interaction between religious institutions, political authority, and regional trade networks that developed across Sumatra during the late Sriwijaya period. The use of red brick as the principal construction material demonstrates advanced technological knowledge while simultaneously indicating the existence of organized labor and sufficient political authority capable of supporting monumental religious construction. Consequently, the architectural characteristics of the Bahal I Temple should be interpreted not merely as physical remains but as historical evidence of broader socio-political and religious developments associated with the Portibi region (Siswanto et al., [2020](#)).

Field observations indicate that the Bahal I Temple occupies the central position within the temple complex and faces east, following a spatial orientation commonly associated with Buddhist sacred architecture. The principal structure consists of four architectural components: the foundation, temple base, temple body, and a roof shaped like a *dagoba* (cylindrical stupa). Rather than describing these elements solely from an architectural perspective, their arrangement illustrates how Buddhist cosmological concepts were translated into monumental religious space, reflecting the institutionalization of Vajrayana Buddhist practices in inland Sumatra. The symmetrical relationship between the principal shrine and the subsidiary temples further suggests that the temple complex functioned as an organized religious center rather than as an individual place of worship.

The spatial organization of the Bahal I Temple Complex also provides historical evidence concerning the social organization that supported its construction and use. The main temple, four subsidiary temples, entrance gate, and enclosed courtyard form a carefully planned sacred landscape that required coordinated planning and sustained labor investment. Such monumental planning indicates that the community responsible for the temple possessed administrative capacity and economic resources extending beyond local subsistence activities. Therefore, the temple complex reflects not only religious devotion but also the emergence of a regional political structure capable of supporting large-scale religious institutions.



Figure 1. Front View of Bahal I Temple, Portibi
Source: Researcher's Documentation, 2026.

Religious Symbolism and Historical Interpretation

The reliefs and decorative elements preserved at the Bahal I Temple provide additional evidence regarding the religious beliefs practiced within the Portibi region during the eleventh century. A pair of *makara* sculptures, positioned on either side of the principal staircase, served as symbolic guardians of sacred space in Hindu-Buddhist cosmology. At the same time, reliefs depicting dancing human figures adorn the walls leading to the main sanctuary (Halim, [2017](#)). Although several carvings have deteriorated over time and under environmental conditions, their surviving forms continue to demonstrate the temple's ritual character. Rather than serving merely decorative purposes, these artistic elements reflect the symbolic language through which religious beliefs were expressed within the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition.

Additional ornamental features further strengthen the historical interpretation of the temple's religious function. The seated giant carved on the temple base most likely symbolized the protection of sacred space, while floral garland motifs decorating the upper sections represented purity, spiritual enlightenment, and harmony within Buddhist philosophy. These decorative elements should therefore be understood as components of a coherent religious program rather than isolated artistic expressions. Their presence indicates that the Bahal Temple Complex served as an institutional center where religious doctrine, ritual practice, and symbolic representation operated simultaneously.

Bahal I Temple has long been recognized as a Vajrayana Buddhist monument due to its architectural features, religious symbolism, and spatial organization (Herwindo & Salim, [2022](#)). The *dagoba*-shaped roof symbolizes the Buddhist path toward enlightenment. At the same time, the hierarchical arrangement of the temple complex reflects cosmological concepts that position the principal sanctuary as the spiritual center of religious activities. These characteristics demonstrate the presence of a well-developed Vajrayana tradition in inland North Sumatra rather than isolated religious practices. Consequently, the temple provides historical evidence for the establishment of organized Buddhist institutions capable of maintaining religious activities over an extended period.



Figure 2. Relief Depicting a Dancing Human Figure Carved on the Brick Wall of Bahal I Temple
Source: Researcher's Documentation, 2026.

Historical Interpretation of Sriwijaya's Influence

The relationship between the Bahal I Temple and Sriwijaya requires careful historical interpretation because the available evidence comprises both direct archaeological remains and subsequent scholarly interpretations. Historical documents associated with the Bahal Temple Complex identify the Pannai Kingdom as part of Sriwijaya's broader sphere of influence. At the same time, the temple's location near the Batang Pane River corresponds with settlement patterns commonly associated with Sriwijayan river-based transportation and commercial networks (Hudaidah & Elsabela, [2022](#)). Nevertheless, these characteristics should not automatically be interpreted as conclusive evidence of direct political control because contemporary inscriptions explicitly documenting administrative authority remain limited. Accordingly, archaeological evidence should be evaluated alongside historical sources rather than treated as independent proof of Sriwijaya's political dominance.

The historical development of Sriwijaya's influence in the Portibi region can instead be understood as a gradual process shaped by interconnected religious, economic, and cultural networks. During the expansion of Sriwijaya between the seventh and eleventh centuries, river systems became important channels through which Buddhist teachings, commercial exchange, and political interaction reached inland communities. Within this historical context, the Bahal Temple Complex most likely emerged as part of a regional Buddhist network connected with the Pannai Kingdom rather than as an isolated religious establishment. This interpretation better explains why the temple exhibits similarities with Sriwijayan religious traditions while simultaneously preserving distinctive local characteristics.

Historical evidence also suggests that Sriwijaya's influence did not remain static but evolved alongside broader political transformations in Sumatra. The weakening of Sriwijaya following external military expeditions and changing regional trade networks gradually reduced its political authority, while local polities such as Pannai increasingly developed their own regional identities. Nevertheless, Buddhist traditions and monumental religious architecture continued to survive beyond the decline of Sriwijaya's political power, demonstrating that cultural and religious influence often persisted longer than political domination itself. Consequently, the Bahal Temple Complex should be interpreted as historical evidence of a dynamic process involving the emergence, development, and gradual transformation of Sriwijaya's cultural influence rather than as a static symbol of political control.

The historical significance of the Bahal I Temple lies not merely in its architectural uniqueness but in its ability to illuminate the historical processes through which Buddhist civilization, regional political authority, and Sriwijaya's cultural influence interacted within the Portibi region. The combination of archaeological evidence, historical records, geographical context, and religious symbolism demonstrates that the temple constitutes an important historical source

for reconstructing regional developments in North Sumatra during the late first and early second millennia CE. This integrated interpretation also distinguishes between material evidence preserved at the site and scholarly inferences concerning the relationship between the Pannai Kingdom and Sriwijaya, thereby providing a more balanced historical explanation consistent with the objectives of this study.

Historical Traces of Sriwijaya's Influence in the Portibi Region

Historical Evidence of Sriwijaya's Cultural and Religious Influence

The Bahal Temple Complex constitutes one of the most important historical sites for reconstructing the expansion of Buddhist civilization into the interior of North Sumatra during the classical period. Rather than functioning merely as an archaeological monument, the complex preserves material evidence of the interaction among regional political authority, religious institutions, and socio-economic networks associated with the Sriwijaya world. Archaeological remains, historical documentation, and geographical context collectively indicate that the Portibi region was integrated into broader cultural and religious developments occurring across Sumatra during the eleventh century. Consequently, the historical significance of the Bahal Temple lies not only in its surviving architecture but also in its capacity to explain the historical processes through which Sriwijaya's influence reached inland communities (Soedewo, [2018](#)).

The architectural characteristics of the Bahal Temple provide the primary material evidence supporting this historical interpretation. The main structure consists of a foundation, pedestal, temple body, and a *dagoba*-shaped roof, reflecting the architectural tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism that flourished in Sumatra between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries CE. The extensive use of red brick demonstrates advanced construction technology while simultaneously indicating the existence of organized labor and institutional support capable of sustaining monumental religious architecture. Nevertheless, similarities in architectural style alone cannot be regarded as conclusive evidence of direct Sriwijayan political control, since comparable construction traditions also developed in several contemporary Buddhist centers across Sumatra (Halim, [2017](#)). Therefore, the architectural evidence should be interpreted as indicating cultural and religious interaction rather than unquestionable political domination.



Figure 3. Cylindrical *Dagoba*-Shaped Roof Decorated with Floral Garland Reliefs
Source: Researcher's Documentation, 2026.

The spatial organization of the Bahal Temple Complex further strengthens its historical interpretation. The principal temple occupies the central position within a sacred enclosure and is surrounded by subsidiary temples arranged according to a carefully planned religious layout. Siswanto et al. ([2020](#)) observe that this spatial configuration resembles temple complexes associated with the Sriwijayan cultural sphere, particularly those constructed near navigable river systems. Historically, this geographical position is significant because rivers functioned as the principal transportation corridors through which political authority, commercial exchange, and Buddhist religious traditions expanded from coastal regions into the interior of Sumatra. Accordingly, the location of the Bahal Temple along the

Batang Pane River should be understood as part of a wider historical network rather than as an isolated geographical coincidence.

The religious ornaments preserved within the temple complex also contribute important historical evidence concerning the diffusion of Buddhist beliefs. The presence of *makara* sculptures flanking the principal staircase, together with reliefs depicting human figures and mythological beings, reflects symbolic traditions widely recognized within Hindu-Buddhist religious art throughout South and Southeast Asia. These iconographic elements suggest that religious ideas circulating through transregional Buddhist networks were adapted to the local cultural context of the Portibi region rather than reproduced unchanged (Handriyotopo, [2022](#)). Consequently, the artistic program of the Bahal Temple illustrates the historical process through which external religious traditions were assimilated into local society.



Figure 4. Stone *Makara* Ornament Located at the Main Staircase of Bahal I Temple
Source: Researcher's Documentation, 2026.

The discovery of Vajrayana Buddhist statues, ritual ornaments, and iconographic elements further reinforces the interpretation that the Bahal Temple functioned as an established center of Buddhist religious activity. Several archaeological studies identify similarities between the iconography of Padang Lawas and Vajrayana traditions that flourished within the wider Sriwijayan cultural sphere. Nevertheless, these similarities should be interpreted carefully because iconographic correspondence demonstrates cultural transmission rather than necessarily indicating direct political administration. Therefore, the archaeological evidence is more appropriately understood as reflecting the circulation of religious knowledge, artistic traditions, and intellectual exchange across interconnected Buddhist communities in Sumatra and Southeast Asia.

Historical Interpretation of Sriwijaya's Influence in the Portibi Region

Historical evidence indicates that the Bahal Temple Complex was constructed during the eleventh century CE, a period in which Sriwijaya continued to exercise considerable influence across maritime and inland regions of Sumatra. During this period, the expansion of Buddhist institutions occurred alongside the development of commercial networks linking coastal trading centers with interior settlements via navigable river systems (Soedewo, [2018](#)). Within this historical context, the Portibi region emerged as an important religious landscape connected to broader political and cultural developments. Rather than representing an isolated local phenomenon, the establishment of the Bahal Temple reflects the historical expansion of Buddhist civilization into inland North Sumatra.

The earliest modern historical records concerning the Bahal Temple emerged during the nineteenth century through the observations of European explorers. Franz Junghuhn documented the site in 1846, followed by Von Rosenberg in 1854 and Kerkhoff in 1887, whose reports became the principal documentary sources for subsequent historical and archaeological investigations (Ayeris & Herwindo, [2023](#)). These records did not create the site's historical significance; rather, they reintroduced an existing historical landscape into modern academic scholarship.

Consequently, nineteenth-century documentation should be understood as an important source for reconstructing historical memory rather than as evidence of the original establishment of the temple.

The relationship between the Pannai Kingdom and Sriwijaya remains one of the most debated issues in the historiography of North Sumatra. Numerous historians argue that Pannai developed within Sriwijaya's political sphere due to similarities in Buddhist traditions, settlement patterns, and regional commercial networks (Tanjung et al., [2025](#)). However, surviving historical evidence does not conclusively demonstrate the continuous political subordination of Pannai to Sriwijaya, as the number of contemporary inscriptions explicitly describing administrative authority remains limited. Accordingly, this study argues that the Bahal Temple Complex provides stronger evidence for sustained cultural, religious, and economic interaction than for direct political domination.

The historical development of Sriwijaya's influence in the Portibi region should therefore be interpreted as a dynamic process consisting of emergence, consolidation, and gradual transformation. During the expansion of Sriwijaya between the seventh and eleventh centuries, river-based trade facilitated the movement of merchants, monks, and religious ideas into inland Sumatra, encouraging the establishment of Buddhist institutions such as the Bahal Temple Complex. As regional political conditions changed following the decline of Sriwijaya's maritime dominance, direct political influence gradually weakened, yet Buddhist religious traditions and monumental architecture continued to survive within local communities. This historical continuity demonstrates that cultural influence frequently persisted beyond the decline of political authority, allowing the Bahal Temple Complex to remain an enduring testament to the long-term interaction between Sriwijaya and the Portibi region.

Historical traces preserved at the Bahal Temple demonstrate that Sriwijaya's influence should not be understood exclusively through political expansion but through interconnected processes of religious dissemination, commercial interaction, and cultural adaptation. The combination of archaeological remains, historical documentation, geographical evidence, and religious symbolism reveals that the Portibi region actively participated in wider regional networks extending across Sumatra during the classical period. By distinguishing between primary historical evidence and subsequent scholarly interpretation, this study offers a more balanced account of the relationship between the Pannai Kingdom and Sriwijaya, while strengthening the historiographical understanding of North Sumatra's role in the historical development of the Indonesian archipelago.

Historical Trade Networks and the Expansion of Sriwijaya's Influence

Sriwijaya expanded its influence into the Portibi region through extensive trade and religious networks that connected inland North Sumatra with major maritime centers across Southeast Asia during the classical period. As the dominant maritime kingdom controlling the Malacca Strait, Sriwijaya facilitated commercial exchange while simultaneously promoting political relations, religious interaction, and cultural transmission among different regions. Merchants, Buddhist monks, and local rulers interacted continuously through these networks, thereby reinforcing the dissemination of Buddhist traditions throughout Sumatra (Fatimah et al., [2024](#)). This historical process placed the Portibi region within an interconnected regional system instead of leaving it isolated from broader political and cultural developments.

The Bahal Temple Complex's geographic location strengthened this historical interaction. The Batang Pane River connected the Portibi region with the Barumun River and the eastern coast of Sumatra, enabling people, commodities, and religious ideas to circulate efficiently between inland settlements and coastal trading centers. Communities throughout the classical period relied heavily on river transportation to maintain commercial activities, political communication, and religious expansion. Consequently, the location of the Bahal Temple indicates that the Portibi region actively participated in regional exchange networks that developed under Sriwijaya's maritime dominance (Tanjung et al., [2025](#)).

Commercial interaction accelerated the spread of Buddhism throughout inland North Sumatra. Merchants traveling along Sriwijaya's trade routes frequently met Buddhist monks and religious teachers who introduced Buddhist doctrines to local rulers and surrounding communities. Local elites subsequently established religious institutions that accommodated both spiritual activities and regional political interests. This interaction explains why the Bahal Temple Complex emerged as an important religious center that grew alongside expanding commercial networks rather than developing independently of them.

The architectural characteristics of the Bahal Temple further strengthen this historical interpretation. Temple builders constructed *dagoba*-shaped stupas, *makara* sculptures, ritual ornaments, and Vajrayana Buddhist iconography that closely resemble artistic traditions circulating throughout Sriwijaya's cultural sphere. Historical records describing Sriwijaya as a major Buddhist learning center also explain why similar religious traditions appeared in geographically distant regions across Sumatra and Southeast Asia (Hudaïdah & Elsabela, [2022](#)). These similarities indicate continuous religious and cultural interaction, although they do not automatically prove that Sriwijaya exercised direct political authority over the Portibi region.

Historical developments also reveal that Sriwijaya's influence evolved through several distinct phases. During the kingdom's political and commercial expansion, Buddhist institutions flourished alongside growing trade networks, encouraging the construction of monumental religious architecture such as the Bahal Temple Complex. Political fragmentation and shifting maritime trade routes gradually weakened Sriwijaya's regional authority, reducing its direct political influence over inland North Sumatra. Nevertheless, local communities continued preserving Buddhist traditions, sacred spaces, and architectural heritage long after Sriwijaya's political power declined, allowing cultural influence to outlast political control.

Historical evidence shows that political authority, commercial exchange, religious expansion, and local adaptation collectively shaped the development of the Bahal Temple Complex. Archaeological remains provide material evidence of these historical processes, while geographical conditions and documentary sources explain how Sriwijaya's influence entered, expanded, and gradually declined in the Portibi region. This historical interpretation demonstrates that the Bahal Temple Complex represents North Padang Lawas's integration into wider regional networks rather than serving solely as evidence of Sriwijaya's political supremacy. Such an interpretation also distinguishes material historical evidence from broader historiographical interpretation and offers a more balanced explanation of Sriwijaya's influence.

Historical Preservation of the Bahal Temple Complex

The Bahal Temple Complex preserves historical evidence documenting the development of Buddhism and regional interaction in North Sumatra. Government institutions, cultural heritage authorities, researchers, and local communities continue protecting the site because it preserves material traces of Sriwijaya's historical influence in the Portibi region. Preservation activities maintain the monument's physical integrity while safeguarding the historical information embedded in the archaeological landscape (Siregar et al., [2024](#)). These collective efforts also strengthen the continuity of historical knowledge for future generations.

Government agencies continue implementing restoration, structural maintenance, environmental monitoring, and sustainable site management programs. Interviews with officials from the North Padang Lawas Regency Department of Culture and Tourism, together with cultural heritage documentation, indicate that conservation activities prioritize both structural authenticity and historical significance. These programs also reduce environmental degradation and minimize human activities that threaten the monument's long-term preservation. Consequently, government policies increasingly integrate cultural conservation with historical preservation.

Local communities also contribute directly to preserving the historical significance of the Bahal Temple Complex. Residents maintain the surrounding environment, participate in cultural activities, cooperate with conservation authorities, and introduce the site's historical importance to younger generations. These activities strengthen public awareness that the Bahal Temple represents an important historical legacy rather than merely an archaeological monument. Community participation, therefore, reinforces historical continuity while supporting sustainable heritage conservation.

Researchers continue documenting the site and expanding historical knowledge concerning the relationship between the Portibi region, the Pannai Kingdom, and Sriwijaya. Archaeological remains, historical records, and the surrounding cultural landscape provide valuable primary evidence for reconstructing regional historical development. Researchers also reassess previous interpretations by integrating archaeological discoveries with documentary sources and historical analysis, producing increasingly comprehensive explanations of North Sumatra's classical history. Continuous scholarly investigation, therefore, plays an essential role in preserving both historical evidence and historical interpretation.

Preservation activities protect not only the physical remains of the Bahal Temple Complex but also the historical processes that shaped regional civilization in North Sumatra. Government institutions, researchers, and local communities continue collaborating to maintain the site's historical authenticity while expanding public understanding of Buddhism, regional trade networks, and Sriwijaya's cultural influence. These collaborative efforts ensure that the Bahal Temple Complex continues to serve as an important historical source for understanding the interaction between local society and wider regional civilizations throughout the classical period.

Historical Continuity and Heritage Preservation of the Bahal Temple Complex

The preservation of the Bahal Temple Complex has played a crucial role in maintaining the historical continuity of one of North Sumatra's most important Buddhist heritage sites. Rather than merely protecting ancient architectural remains, preservation initiatives have safeguarded material evidence documenting the historical development of Buddhism, the expansion of Sriwijaya's cultural influence, and the historical interaction between the Portibi region and wider regional networks. These efforts also enable historians to reconstruct the historical processes through which political authority, religious institutions, and local communities interacted during the classical period. Consequently, preservation has become an integral component of historical research, ensuring that primary historical evidence remains accessible for future scholarly investigation.

Government institutions have continuously strengthened heritage preservation through restoration, conservation, documentation, and long-term site management. The Cultural Heritage Preservation Office (Balai Pelestarian Kebudayaan Region II of North Sumatra) initiated major restoration programs at Bahal Temple I in 1977–1978 and 1982–1983, following structural deterioration that threatened the monument's integrity. These restoration programs preserved not only the physical structure but also the authenticity of historical evidence associated with the development of Buddhism in North Padang Lawas. Furthermore, routine conservation activities, including vegetation control, structural monitoring, environmental maintenance, and periodic documentation, have enabled the temple complex to retain its historical character while protecting its archaeological integrity (Zikrillah & Batubara, [2022](#)).

The North Padang Lawas Regency Department of Culture and Tourism has expanded preservation efforts beyond structural conservation by integrating historical preservation with regional cultural development. Based on interviews with Mansyur Ashari Siregar, Head of the Tourism Division, local government attention toward the Bahal Temple area increased significantly after 1975, when preservation initiatives accompanied the development of cultural tourism. Local authorities have promoted the temple not only as a tourism destination but also as a historical resource that strengthens regional identity and public understanding of North Sumatra's classical civilization. Consequently, heritage management has contributed simultaneously to historical preservation, public education, and local economic development through tourism activities (Akhirani, [2017](#)).

Historical preservation has nevertheless encountered several social challenges throughout its development. Government plans to expand support for tourism infrastructure have occasionally generated disagreement with local landowners concerning land acquisition and compensation. These differing perspectives illustrate that heritage preservation involves continuous negotiation between historical conservation, community interests, and regional development rather than solely protecting ancient monuments. Therefore, sustainable preservation requires participatory decision-making that balances historical significance with contemporary socio-economic realities.

Local communities have also contributed actively to maintaining the historical continuity of the Bahal Temple Complex. Residents of Bahal Village protect the surrounding environment, support conservation activities, and preserve the historical significance of the site as part of their regional identity (Nasution & Siregar, [2025](#)). Their participation demonstrates that historical preservation depends not exclusively on government intervention but also on community awareness regarding the cultural and historical importance of local heritage. Accordingly, local communities continue serving as historical actors who sustain the relationship between the past and the present through everyday conservation practices (Barroh, [2018](#)).

The community also recognizes that preserving the Bahal Temple Complex generates broader socio-economic benefits. Tourism development has created opportunities for residents to establish small businesses, provide visitor services, and participate in cultural tourism activities surrounding the site. These economic opportunities strengthen community commitment to preserving the temple because residents increasingly associate historical conservation with sustainable local development rather than viewing preservation solely as a government responsibility (Siregar et al.,

[2024](#)). Consequently, historical preservation has evolved into a shared commitment that supports both cultural sustainability and community welfare.

Community responses toward the organization of Vesak celebrations since 2021 further illustrate how historical heritage continuously acquires new meanings in contemporary society. Initial concerns among some residents about potential religious conversion reflected differing interpretations of the site's religious role in present-day social life. Community leaders, government officials, and Buddhist representatives subsequently established constructive dialogue that successfully resolved these misunderstandings and strengthened mutual trust (Putri et al., [2020](#)).

Preservation efforts also continue to confront environmental and developmental challenges that threaten the long-term sustainability of the Bahal Temple Complex. Continuous exposure to rainfall, humidity, biological growth, and temperature fluctuations gradually weakens the red-brick structures, requiring regular conservation and scientific monitoring to prevent irreversible deterioration (Ansari et al., [2024](#)). Simultaneously, expanding tourism development has increased pressure to improve supporting infrastructure while maintaining the authenticity of the historical landscape. These conditions demonstrate that heritage management requires balanced policies that protect historical integrity without limiting sustainable regional development (Zikrillah & Batubara, [2022](#)).

Historical preservation of the Bahal Temple Complex demonstrates that conserving cultural heritage extends far beyond the protection of archaeological structures. Government institutions, local communities, and heritage professionals have collectively preserved historical evidence that explains the emergence, expansion, and transformation of Sriwijaya's cultural influence in the Portibi region. Their collaboration has maintained the continuity of historical memory while ensuring that future historical research continues to access reliable material evidence concerning the relationship between the Pannai Kingdom, Sriwijaya, and the broader development of Buddhist civilization in North Sumatra.

CONCLUSION

This study reconstructs the historical development of the Bahal Temple Complex by explaining how the Portibi region became integrated into wider political, religious, and commercial networks during the classical period. Historical evidence indicates that the Pannai Kingdom engaged in intensive interactions with Sriwijaya through regional trade, the dissemination of Vajrayana Buddhism, and cultural exchange, rather than solely through direct political domination. Local communities adopted and adapted these external influences over time, allowing Buddhist traditions and cultural practices to develop within their own historical context. Consequently, the Bahal Temple Complex preserves an important historical record that explains the evolution of regional civilization and the long-term interaction between North Padang Lawas and the broader Southeast Asian world.

This study also enriches Indonesian historiography by placing the Bahal Temple Complex within a broader historical framework that connects political development, religious expansion, commercial interaction, and cultural transformation. Instead of limiting the discussion to architectural description or archaeological interpretation, this study explains the historical processes through which Sriwijaya's influence entered, developed, and gradually declined in the Portibi region. This historical perspective broadens current understanding of Sriwijaya's role in inland North Sumatra while encouraging historians to examine interior regions as active participants in regional historical development.

This study nevertheless encounters several limitations. The historical reconstruction relies primarily on documentary sources, archaeological evidence, and existing historical interpretations because contemporary written records concerning the relationship between the Pannai Kingdom and Sriwijaya remain limited. These conditions require historians to synthesize different categories of evidence before drawing historical interpretations. Future research should expand comparative historical studies, examine newly discovered inscriptions and archival sources, integrate interdisciplinary archaeological findings, and investigate other inland regions of Sumatra to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the emergence, development, transformation, and legacy of Sriwijaya's influence.

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