

# The Cultural Interaction and Local Identity Formation at the Beteng Sari Archaeological Site, East Lampung

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## ABSTRACT

The Beteng Sari Archaeological Site in East Lampung represents a socio-historical landscape shaped by long-term cultural interaction within the civilizational networks of the Indonesian archipelago. This study aims to analyze Beteng Sari as a space of cultural interaction and dynamic local identity formation, moving beyond the predominantly descriptive approaches of previous research. Employing a qualitative historical case study design, the research is based on field observations, in-depth interviews, and the analysis of archaeological remains and written sources. The main findings indicate that the configuration of earthen fortifications and ditches, the distribution of domestic artifacts, the presence of Chinese ceramics, metal objects, ancient coins, and a cosmologically oriented burial complex demonstrate Beteng Sari's integration into regional trade networks and cultural mobility. The coexistence of megalithic traditions, Hindu-Buddhist influences, early Islamic remains, and imported material culture reveals a layered process of acculturation characterized by continuity and adaptation rather than cultural replacement. It is concluded that Beteng Sari functioned as an interregional node of interaction in which local agency played a crucial role in shaping spatial organization, social practices, and collective memory, thereby framing local identity in East Lampung as a contextual and non-essentialist historical construction, with theoretical implications for studies of cultural interaction and landscape archaeology.

*Situs Purbakala Beteng Sari di Lampung Timur merepresentasikan lanskap sosial-historis yang terbentuk melalui interaksi budaya jangka panjang dalam jaringan peradaban Nusantara. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis Beteng Sari sebagai ruang interaksi budaya dan pembentukan identitas lokal yang dinamis, melampaui pendekatan deskriptif yang selama ini mendominasi kajian situs. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus historis melalui observasi lapangan, wawancara mendalam, serta analisis tinggalan arkeologis dan sumber tertulis. Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa konfigurasi benteng dan parit, sebaran artefak domestik, kehadiran keramik Cina, artefak logam, uang kuno, serta kompleks makam berorientasi kosmologis menegaskan keterhubungan Beteng Sari dengan jaringan perdagangan dan mobilitas budaya regional. Koeksistensi tradisi megalitik, pengaruh Hindu-Buddha, Islam awal, dan budaya material impor mengindikasikan proses akulturasi berlapis yang berlangsung melalui kesinambungan dan adaptasi, bukan penggantian budaya. Disimpulkan bahwa Beteng Sari berfungsi sebagai simpul interaksi lintas wilayah, di mana agensi masyarakat lokal berperan penting dalam membentuk tatanan ruang, praktik sosial, dan memori kolektif, sehingga identitas lokal Lampung Timur dapat dipahami sebagai konstruksi historis yang kontekstual dan non-esensialis, dengan implikasi teoretik bagi kajian interaksi budaya dan arkeologi lanskap*

**Keywords:** cultural interaction, local identity, Beteng Sari, archaeological site, East Lampung

## Introduction

Archaeological heritage does not merely represent material remains of the past, but also records processes of cultural interaction, civilizational networks, and the formation of social identity. In contemporary historical and archaeological scholarship, ancient sites

are understood as spaces in which economic, political, and religious exchanges take place and shape local identities within broader regional and intercultural contexts (Smith, 2011; Trigger, 2006). From this perspective, identity is not static, but continuously negotiated through encounters between groups and the appropriation of diverse cultural elements, as demonstrated by cross-regional studies showing that cultural interaction produces hybrid, contextual, and dynamic forms of identity (D'Agata, 2019; Mengoni, 2010; Sinner, 2015).

International research further indicates that landscape, space, and social practice play a central role in this process. In the Roman Durius Valley, sustained interaction between communities and their environment generated fluid and situational identities (Clarke, 2017), while in the Lower City of Idalion, Cyprus, architectural forms and cultic activities contributed to the continuity of place-based identity despite political and administrative change (Bartusewich, 2013). Contemporary studies in Supe Puerto and Paramonga, Peru, also reveal that present-day site conditions and social engagement shape local identity, particularly among younger generations involved in public archaeology (Ebrahimi, 2023; Echaiz, 2023). Theoretically, approaches such as the "archaeology of sameness" and concepts of creolization challenge essentialist views of identity by emphasizing local agency in negotiating and transforming external influences (Huntley, 2017; Szamalek, 2014).

In Southeast Asia, the Lampung region occupies a strategic position along the corridor linking southern Sumatra, Java, and the wider maritime world. Since the early first millennium CE, this area has been integrated into networks of trade and cultural mobility, as indicated by foreign ceramics, defensive structures, and complex settlement patterns (Hall, 2011; Santiko, 2005). Studies over the past decade have highlighted major sites such as Pugung Raharjo as ancient settlement centers, nodes of maritime interaction, and resources for local historical education (Ekwandari, 2021; Herdanta, 2025; Murtiarina et al., 2022). Chinese ceramic assemblages from various periods further attest to Lampung's involvement in international exchange and cross-cultural interaction (Febrian, 2025)

Nevertheless, the strong emphasis on major sites and on educational or tourism-oriented perspectives has meant that other locations of comparable historical potential have received limited analytical attention. The Beteng Sari Archaeological Site in East Lampung, characterized by earthen ramparts, ditches, stone artifacts, ancient burials, and fragments of foreign ceramics, provides clear evidence of a long cultural trajectory from megalithic traditions and Hindu-Buddhist influences to early Islamic presence and of its integration within regional networks. Yet existing studies remain largely descriptive and inventory-based, and have not situated Beteng Sari within conceptual debates on acculturation, local agency, and identity construction (Ansori, 2023; Saptono, 2020).

This situation points to two main research gaps: first, the absence of a systematic analysis positioning Beteng Sari within interregional networks of cultural and historical

interaction in the Indonesian archipelago; and second, the lack of in-depth discussion of its role in the long-term formation of local cultural identity in East Lampung from a dynamic and non-essentialist perspective. Accordingly, this article aims to examine Beteng Sari as a space of cultural interaction that reflects processes of acculturation and local identity formation, employing a historical approach that integrates material evidence, oral traditions, and written sources. Through this framework, the study seeks to contribute conceptually to the archaeology and local history of Lampung, while also enriching broader discussions on identity dynamics within the interconnected civilizations of the archipelago.

## Methods

This study adopts a qualitative historical approach with a case study design to reconstruct patterns of cultural interaction and local identity formation at the Beteng Sari Archaeological Site. The historical approach enables the critical and contextual examination of past events and processes through systematic analysis of sources across time (Gottschalk, 1986; Kuntowijoyo, 2003), while the qualitative orientation facilitates the interpretation of social and cultural meanings embedded in material remains and spatial arrangements (Creswell, 2014). Beteng Sari is therefore treated as an integrated case unit and analyzed as a cultural landscape rather than merely a physical location, allowing for a holistic understanding of the relationships between artifacts, space, and social practice (Yin, 2018).

Data collection was conducted through field observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis. Field observation focused on recording and documenting physical features of the site, including earthen ramparts, ditches, stone artifacts, ancient burials, and ceramic distributions, using descriptive and visual techniques commonly employed in site-based qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In-depth interviews were carried out purposively with site custodians, local elders, and community members possessing historical and symbolic knowledge of the site, in accordance with criteria of information-rich cases and credibility (Patton, 2015). In addition, archaeological reports, scholarly publications, and local historical documents were reviewed to provide a broader regional and chronological framework.

Data analysis involved external and internal source criticism to assess the authenticity, reliability, and relevance of each category of evidence (Gottschalk, 1986; Sjamsuddin, 2007), followed by triangulation across field data, oral accounts, and written sources to enhance the validity of interpretations (Denzin, 2012). The analyzed data were then interpreted thematically within the conceptual frameworks of cultural interaction, acculturation, and local identity formation, leading to the construction of a historical-analytical synthesis that elucidates not only chronological developments but also the social meanings and intergroup relations embedded in the civilizational networks surrounding the Beteng Sari site.

## **Result**

The results of this study are presented thematically to reflect the empirical patterns observed in the field and in supporting sources. Rather than merely listing artifacts, the findings are organized to show the spatial, material, and cultural dimensions of the Beteng Sari Archaeological Site as an integrated landscape. Four main themes emerge from the data: (1) the configuration of the landscape and earthen fortification, (2) the distribution of artifacts and indications of settlement activities, (3) foreign ceramics and associated remains as evidence of long-distance interaction, and (4) the ancient burial complex and the organization of sacred space.

### **1. Landscape Configuration and Earthen Fortification**

The Beteng Sari Archaeological Site is located within a gently undulating lowland landscape that is naturally framed by the Umbangan River, a tributary of the Way Sekampung. The core area of the site occupies a slightly elevated position relative to the surrounding terrain, allowing a wide visual range toward adjacent lowlands and river corridors. An earthen embankment forming an irregular circular enclosure is still recognizable, although parts of its structure have been softened by erosion and dense vegetation. In several sections, remnants of a surrounding ditch follow the curvature of the rampart, indicating the former presence of a deliberately constructed defensive system integrated with the natural topography.

The thickness and width of the earthen rampart vary along its course, suggesting that the construction adapted to local soil conditions and relief. Inside the enclosure, the ground surface is noticeably flatter than in the outer areas, forming level zones that may once have functioned as habitation spaces or communal activity areas. This spatial arrangement reflects an organized modification of the landscape, in which the fortified interior constituted a protected core, while the surrounding areas served complementary functions. The configuration of embankment, ditch, and internal platforms indicates a planned transformation of the environment to accommodate both security and settlement needs.

### **2. Artifact Distribution and Evidence of Settlement Activities**

Material remains recovered from the Beteng Sari area consist of stone implements such as dakon stones and perforated stones, fragments of locally produced earthenware, and scattered sherds of imported ceramics. The stone artifacts are predominantly concentrated in the central and eastern parts of the site, particularly on relatively stable and level ground. Their spatial clustering suggests repeated use of these areas for daily, communal, or ritual activities over an extended period. Local pottery fragments, characterized by coarse fabric and simple firing techniques, are widely distributed across surface layers, especially in present-day agricultural fields and residential plots. The density of domestic artifacts is higher within and near the enclosed area than in the outer zones, indicating that the main concentration of past settlement activities was located inside or immediately adjacent to the fortification. This pattern points to a structured

occupation layout in which the enclosed space functioned as the focal point of habitation, while peripheral areas were used for supporting activities and resource exploitation.

### 3. Foreign Ceramics, Associated Artifacts, and Traces of Interregional Exchange

One of the most prominent categories of material evidence at Beteng Sari is the assemblage of foreign ceramic fragments. These sherds display glazed surfaces in bluish-green, whitish, and brown tones, with vessel forms including bowls, plates, and small jars. Several fragments preserve decorative motifs and traces of Chinese characters, indicating their origin from Chinese ceramic traditions. Morphological and stylistic similarities can be observed between these finds and ceramic assemblages previously reported from the Pugung Raharjo site, suggesting that both locations were connected to comparable networks of distribution and exchange.



(a) Documentation of the batu dakon at the Beteng site, Bandung Archaeology Office, 2008



(b) Documentation of Historical Artifacts, 2023.

The majority of the ceramic fragments were recovered from cultivated fields and residential areas surrounding the earthen enclosure, implying that they derive from earlier occupation layers that have been disturbed by agricultural activities. Their quantity and diversity indicate sustained access to imported goods rather than isolated contacts. In addition to ceramics, a range of associated archaeological remains further illustrates the intensity and complexity of past activities. Stone features such as dakon stones and perforated stones attest to the persistence of megalithic traditions from prehistoric times. A complex of ancient burials, including elongated graves measuring approximately four to six meters in length and oriented along a north-south axis, was also documented. These graves, constructed of andesite blocks or bricks, are locally associated with figures such as Ratu Salah Perintah (Syekh Abdurrahman), Raden Fatah (Syekh Joko Baru), Raden Joko Mulyono, Dewi Martini, and Siti Fatimah, and their exceptional dimensions are understood as reflecting differences in social status. Furthermore, the discovery of metal artifacts and ancient coins provides material indications of economic activities and interregional trade. Together, megalithic stone implements, Chinese inscribed ceramics, monumental graves, and metallic objects form a coherent assemblage pointing to long-distance interaction and sustained circulation of goods and people.



#### **4. Ancient Burial Complex and the Organization of Sacred Space**

The burial landscape surrounding the Beteng Sari fortification constitutes one of the most expressive elements of the site's cultural memory. A series of ancient graves is distributed in clusters at the periphery of the fortified area, forming a distinct mortuary zone that is spatially separated from the presumed habitation core. The graves are predominantly aligned along a north-south axis, a pattern that suggests the presence of shared cosmological or ritual orientations. Their markers and structural components are constructed from andesite blocks and bricks, some carefully arranged while others show signs of collapse and weathering, reflecting both deliberate architectural planning and long-term environmental transformation. Among these burials, several elongated graves measuring approximately four to six meters stand out for their exceptional dimensions, indicating differentiated mortuary treatment and a possible association with individuals of elevated social or spiritual standing.

The spatial organization of this burial complex indicates that Beteng Sari functioned not only as a center of settlement and defense, but also as a landscape imbued with sacred meaning. The clear separation between residential zones within the fortification and mortuary areas beyond its perimeter reflects an intentional ordering of space, in which the realm of the ancestors was positioned in proximity to, yet symbolically distinct from, the domain of everyday life. Through the continued visibility of these graves within the surrounding terrain, memory and lineage became materially anchored in the landscape, transforming the site into a commemorative environment where social distinctions, spiritual beliefs, and collective identity were sustained across generations.

#### **Discussion**

The findings from the Beteng Sari Archaeological Site demonstrate that the landscape cannot be interpreted merely as a local settlement with isolated material remains, but rather as a cultural arena shaped by sustained interaction, mobility, and social negotiation. The presence of an earthen fortification system, imported ceramics, megalithic stone features, and an organized mortuary complex indicates that the site functioned as an integrated socio-spatial system. In line with the perspectives of Trigger (2006) and Smith (2011), who view archaeological sites as products of social relations and cultural processes, Beteng Sari reflects how space, material culture, and memory were collectively structured to support both everyday life and symbolic order. The fortification and spatial planning suggest that the community possessed not only technical knowledge but also a social organization capable of coordinating labor and managing territory, a pattern commonly associated with societies embedded in wider political and economic networks.

The distribution of Chinese ceramics, metal artifacts, and ancient coins provides strong material evidence of Beteng Sari's participation in long-distance exchange systems. Previous studies on Southeast Asian maritime networks emphasize that imported goods functioned not only as trade commodities but also as carriers of cultural meanings,

technological practices, and social prestige (Hall, 2011; Santiko, 2005). The stylistic similarity between the Beteng Sari ceramics and those from Pugung Raharjo suggests that both sites were connected to comparable circulation routes, most likely through the Sunda Strait and riverine corridors of southern Sumatra. This finding supports research that interprets ceramic assemblages as indicators of sustained, structured interaction rather than sporadic contact. At the same time, it challenges earlier views that peripheral inland sites were passive recipients of coastal trade, instead pointing to their active integration into regional exchange networks.

The coexistence of megalithic stone features with Islamic-period graves and imported ceramics highlights a long process of cultural continuity marked by adaptation rather than replacement. Comparable cases from other regions, such as the layered mortuary traditions in Baoxing (Mengoni, 2010) and the persistence of ritual landscapes in Idalion (Bartusewich, 2013), demonstrate that cultural change often operates through accumulation and reinterpretation. From the perspective of creolization and cultural bricolage (Huntley, 2017), the Beteng Sari assemblage illustrates how local communities selectively absorbed external influences while maintaining older symbolic frameworks. This supports theoretical arguments that identity formation is not linear or homogenizing, but negotiated through the interaction of multiple cultural horizons.

The mortuary landscape of Beteng Sari further reveals how social differentiation and collective memory were materially expressed. The north-south orientation, monumental scale of certain graves, and their association with named historical-religious figures indicate that burial space functioned as a medium for legitimizing status, lineage, and spiritual authority. Archaeological studies of burial organization consistently show that mortuary practices encode social structure and cosmological conceptions (Clarke, 2017; Sinner, 2015). In this context, the spatial separation between habitation areas and cemeteries at Beteng Sari reflects a deliberate ordering of the living and ancestral realms, while their integration within one landscape underscores the continuity between social life and sacred memory. This pattern reinforces the interpretation of the site as a place where identity was anchored not only in economic activity but also in ritualized space and genealogy.

Taken together, these findings address the main objective of this study, namely to interpret Beteng Sari as a space of cultural interaction and identity construction rather than as a static archaeological locus. The fortification system, trade-related artifacts, megalithic survivals, and Islamic-period burials collectively demonstrate how local society negotiated security, exchange, belief, and social hierarchy within a single cultural landscape. This confirms that Beteng Sari was embedded in interregional networks while simultaneously developing a distinctive local identity, thus fulfilling the research aim of situating the site within broader civilizational processes and understanding its role in the historical formation of East Lampung's cultural identity.

The principal contribution of this study lies in its integrative interpretation. Unlike previous works that tended to focus on individual artifact categories or on major sites such as Pugung Raharjo, this research positions Beteng Sari within a theoretical framework of interaction, acculturation, and non-essentialist identity formation. By combining spatial analysis, material culture, oral tradition, and historical context, the study demonstrates that identity in the Lampung region emerged through continuous negotiation between local traditions and external influences. This perspective enriches the discourse on Indonesian archaeology by emphasizing local agency and the dynamic nature of cultural boundaries, thereby contributing to broader debates on how peripheral yet connected communities participated in the making of Nusantara's civilizational networks.

Nevertheless, this study also has limitations. The analysis relies primarily on surface observations, oral accounts, and secondary data, while systematic excavation, absolute dating, and laboratory analyses of ceramics and metals have not yet been conducted. As a result, chronological resolution remains approximate, and interpretations of social differentiation and trade intensity cannot yet be quantified with precision. Future research should therefore include stratigraphic excavation, radiocarbon dating, compositional analysis of ceramics and metals, and geophysical surveys to refine the temporal framework and to better understand the internal organization of the site. From a practical perspective, these findings also suggest the need for integrated heritage management that combines archaeological research, community participation, and educational programs, so that Beteng Sari can function not only as a protected site but also as a living medium for strengthening historical awareness and local identity in East Lampung.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the Beteng Sari Archaeological Site constitutes a cultural landscape of long-term interaction linking local communities of East Lampung with broader regional civilizational networks, as evidenced by the configuration of earthen fortifications and ditches, the distribution of domestic artifacts, the presence of imported ceramics and metal objects, and a mortuary complex structured by cosmological orientation. The coexistence of megalithic remains, Hindu-Buddhist influences, early Islamic burials, and indicators of long-distance trade reveals a layered and continuous process of acculturation in which local agency actively appropriated and re-signified external elements to shape spatial order, social practice, and symbolic identity. By situating Beteng Sari beyond descriptive inventory and interpreting it as a dynamic socio-historical space, this study contributes a non-essentialist perspective on local identity formation within the interconnected networks of the Indonesian archipelago, while advancing theoretical implications concerning cultural interaction, symbolic continuity, and the materialization of collective memory in landscape. These findings also point to future research directions involving controlled excavation, absolute dating, and



laboratory analyses to refine chronology and to strengthen the integration of archaeological knowledge with heritage management and local historical education.

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