

INCoH 2017
The Second International Conference on Humanities
**THE POST-14TH CENTURY ANCIENT KEDAH: A PORT IN
DECLINE?**

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Abstract

Ancient Kedah is a collection of ancient settlements, consisting of ports as well as centres for iron production, located in the Bujang Valley. From the 2nd to the 14th Century C.E., various Indian, Arab and Chinese texts mentioned the importance of Ancient Kedah as a trading and iron production centres. Such is evident from the various archaeological remains found in the area, consisting of tradewares, Hindu-Buddhist structural remains, icons and inscriptions, as well as iron smelting sites. Although much has been written regarding the trade and culture of Ancient Kedah during its height, the period of Ancient Kedah's decline in the 14th Century C.E. has been understudied. By using geomorphological, archaeological and historical evidences, the circumstances which led to the decline of Ancient Kedah is discussed in this paper. This research had shown that the decline of Ancient Kedah was caused by multitude of factors, both internal and external. The internal factor is the environmental and geomorphological changes, which made the area of Bujang Valley less accessible to trading vessels. As for the external factors, the leading cause was the political disunity as well as the shifting of old tradework after the decline of Srivijaya. After the establishment of Malaccan Sultanate in the early 15th Century, the role of Ancient Kedah as an international trading centre ended.

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Keywords: Ancient Kedah, Port, Bujang Valley, Sungai Batu, Sungai Mas, Pengkalan Bujang.



1. Introduction

Ancient Kedah is a collection of different coastal and riverine settlements, which most of their cultural remains concentrated in the Merbok-Muda river valleys. These settlements collectively functioned as centres for international trade during the early historic period. The recent findings in the Sungai Batu and Jeniang Archaeological Complex had suggested Ancient Kedah also function as iron mining and production centre, throughout its development. Ancient Kedah was mentioned as an important seaport by various Indian and Arab accounts, being referred in various toponyms such as Kaḍaram, Kaṭāhadvīpa, Kaṭāha, Kalah-Bar and Kalah (Nasha, 2011). The cultural remains found in the Bujang Valley consisted of tradewares, beads, earthenwares, as well as Hindu-Buddhist shrines, icons and inscriptions. Excavation in the Sungai Batu and Jeniang Archaeological Complex yielded iron smelting sites and remains of brick jetties. Although the issues regarding the political organization, art and culture, as well as demography of Ancient Kedah are still far from being resolved, the economic role is clear from the direct historical and archaeological evidences. Ancient Kedah began functioning as an international seaport, in circa 2nd Century B.C.E., as evident from the poems of Pattinappalai and Sillappadikaram as well as the findings in Sungai Batu (Zvelebil, 1973, 1975). However, the real prominence as the centre for international trade probably began in the 7th Century C.E., with the discoveries of large number of tradewares and shrines near the Bujang and Muda rivers (Nik Abdul Rahman & Mohd Yatim, 1992). From the 10th to the 13th Century C.E., Ancient Kedah reached the height of international trade, which is evident from the discoveries of Sung-Yuan period tradewares in Pengkalan Bujang, Simpang Tambang, Kampung Sireh and Kampung Sungai Mas (Nik Abdul Rahman & Mohd Yatim, 1992; Leong, 1973; Allen, 1988). Aside from the political and economical climate of the region, the most decisive factor for the existence of Ancient Kedah as a port was its location and geographical characteristics. Being located at the entrance of the Straits of Malacca, the Bujang Valley was a large protected bay, surrounded by small islands as well as the imposing Jerai Peak which was then projected towards the sea.

However, things took a big turn in the mid-14th Century C.E., where the old trade networks started to be dismantled, bringing ports like Ancient Kedah started to its decline (Nasha & Nazarudin, 2008). The decline is characterized from the lack of post-14th Century archaeological findings in the Bujang Valley. The decline could have been caused by environmental factors, the crucial factor which led to its emergence as a port in the first place, and further aggravated by the economic and political upheavals during the time.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. The environmental factors for the decline of Ancient Kedah had not been discussed in detail.

Although it is known that Ancient Kedah started to decline after the 14th Century C.E., the geomorphological and environmental factors which led to the decline had yet to be studied in detail.

2.2. The data of 14th Century Ancient Kedah had not been studied in detail.

Although the historical and archaeological data on Ancient Kedah throughout its development between the 6th Century B.C.E to the 13th Century C.E. is well documented, archaeological finds dated during its decline had yet to be documented and studied in detail.

2.3. The regional politic and economical factors had not yet been studied.

In the 14th Century C.E., there were economic and political upheavals in Southeast and East Asia. These factor may directly or indirectly caused the decline of Ancient Kedah. Thus, all factors which may possible caused the fall of trade in Ancient Kedah.

3. Research Questions

- 3.1.** What was the geomorphological configuration of Ancient Kedah in the 14th Century C.E?
- 3.2.** What historical and archaeological remains of 14th Century Ancient Kedah currently available?
- 3.3.** What happened in Ancient Kedah during the decline of its trade, and the factors?

4. Purpose of the Study

4.1. To Reconstruct the Geomorphological of Ancient Kedah in the 14th Century C.E.

Throughout the development of Ancient Kedah, the area of Bujang Valley existed as a natural harbour, with a large bay surrounded by islands. However, in the 14th Century C.E., the geomorphological configuration started to change, which inevitable changed the form of cultural material as well. Thus, this paper attempts to put the archaeological findings and geomorphological features of the post-14th Century Kedah into context.

4.2. To discuss the historical sources, as well as archaeological data on 14th Century Ancient Kedah

Although the number foreign records on Ancient Kedah after the 14th Century C.E. dwindled, there are few local and regional of this period, especially from the local historical literature sources, and fragmentary accounts from Sumatra and Java. Although they are small in number, they could give some insights into the social and political situation of the area.

4.3. To discuss the decline of Ancient Kedah

Due to the lack of conclusive evidences, the period of trade decline, as well as the factors which led to it had not been properly discussed. Among the possible factors which should be taken into account include the political changes in Southeast Asia, trade policy of China, as well as the geomorphological changes.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Literary Method

For this period, the historical records consisted; 1. Local historical literature works such as Salalatus-Salalatin, Al Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah, Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa rtagama 2. Tombstone of Minye Tujoh 3. Nagarakrtagama. The data regarding the concerned period are extracted from these sources and analysed. In addition, the history of the surrounding areas is also considered to put the discussion regarding the post-14th Century Ancient Kedah into proper historical and cultural context.

5.2. Geomorphological Reconstruction

Among the vital aspect which determines human activities is the geomorphological setup of the area. Thus, the Palaeo-environmental changes which happened between the 13th to 15th Century C.E., especially in terms of the changes of the coastline, and how it affected the economic activity is studied.

5.3. Historical Reappraisal

Based on the study and analysis on the archeological data, historical records and the palaeo-environment condition, the possible economic and political structure of Ancient Kedah. Based on the consideration of the geomorphology and the political landscape in the 14th Century C.E., the factors which led to the decline of trade in Ancient Kedah will be suggested.

6. Findings

The development of Ancient Kedah a seaport owes a lot to its geological and geomorphological formation. During the height of Ancient Kedah, it had a long ancient coastline consisting of a large protected bay, with rivers connecting the coast with the rich hinterlands. This enables trading vessels to safely harbour, as well as for traders to sustain their settlements. However, the geographical features are by no means permanent, and are subject to changes over certain period of time, which consequently determined the rise and fall of the trade volume. From the 4th to the 14th Century C.E, Bujang Valley is characterized by its abundance in historical records and archaeological finds. The discovery of the Sungai Batu Archaeological Complex had pushed the date of Ancient Kedah further to 6th Century B.C.E. However, after the 14th Century C.E., the geomorphological changes had the non-consolidated Quaternary deposit replacing the big bay with swamps and flat fertile lowland. After such changes, trade only happened at a far smaller scale, and the main economic activity shifted to agriculture. During the 14th to the 15th Century C.E., archaeological findings such as Hindu-Buddhist structural ruins, inscriptions and sculptures are so far, almost absent. The last structural remains known to have been dated at 13th/14th Century C.E. are the Bukit Batu Pahat and Permatang Pasir sites. The lack of such findings shows that there were no longer communities of Hindu and Buddhist traders in the area, as compared to the preceding centuries. As for ceramics, the excavations done by Alastair Lamb, Leong Sau Heng and Nik Hassan Shuhaimi had revealed the volume of trade in the Bujang Valley in the post-14th Century period. The amount of foreign tradewares found, especially Chinese ceramics, became the most important indicator to show the level of trade in the

area. Studies in the Pengkalan Bujang, Kampung Sungai Mas, Simpoh Tambang and Kampung Sireh sites show extremely small number of Yuan-Ming period ceramics as compared to those coming from the Sung period. The absence of Hindu-Buddhist findings, as well as the scarcity of tradewares during this period clearly marks the fall of Ancient Kedah as the trading centre. The decline of Ancient Kedah appears to have been closely related to the geomorphological changes in the Bujang Valley. The earth formation process in the Bujang valley began circa 550 million years ago. From a general perspective, Bujang Valley is located within two types of a geological formation; the Jerai Formation dan Petani Formation. Jerai Formation consists of granite, sandstone, shale and minor conglomerate, while Petani Formation consists of shale, siltstone, sandstone and orthoquartzite. The highest peak in the area is Gunung Jerai (1,217m), located at the north part of the valley, formed by magma intrusion around 220 million years ago. The evolution also created Merbok River at the southern part of the valley, with its wide river mouth, profoundly affected by the tidal change. Given the strategic location of Bujang Valley within the Straits of Malacca, it was one of the earliest civilizational sites in Southeast Asia. Gunung Jerai acts as a natural navigational landmark among the sailors plying the east-west sea route via the Hindi Ocean and the South China Sea, while the estuary of Merbok River provides safe harbour and natural resources (Figure 01).

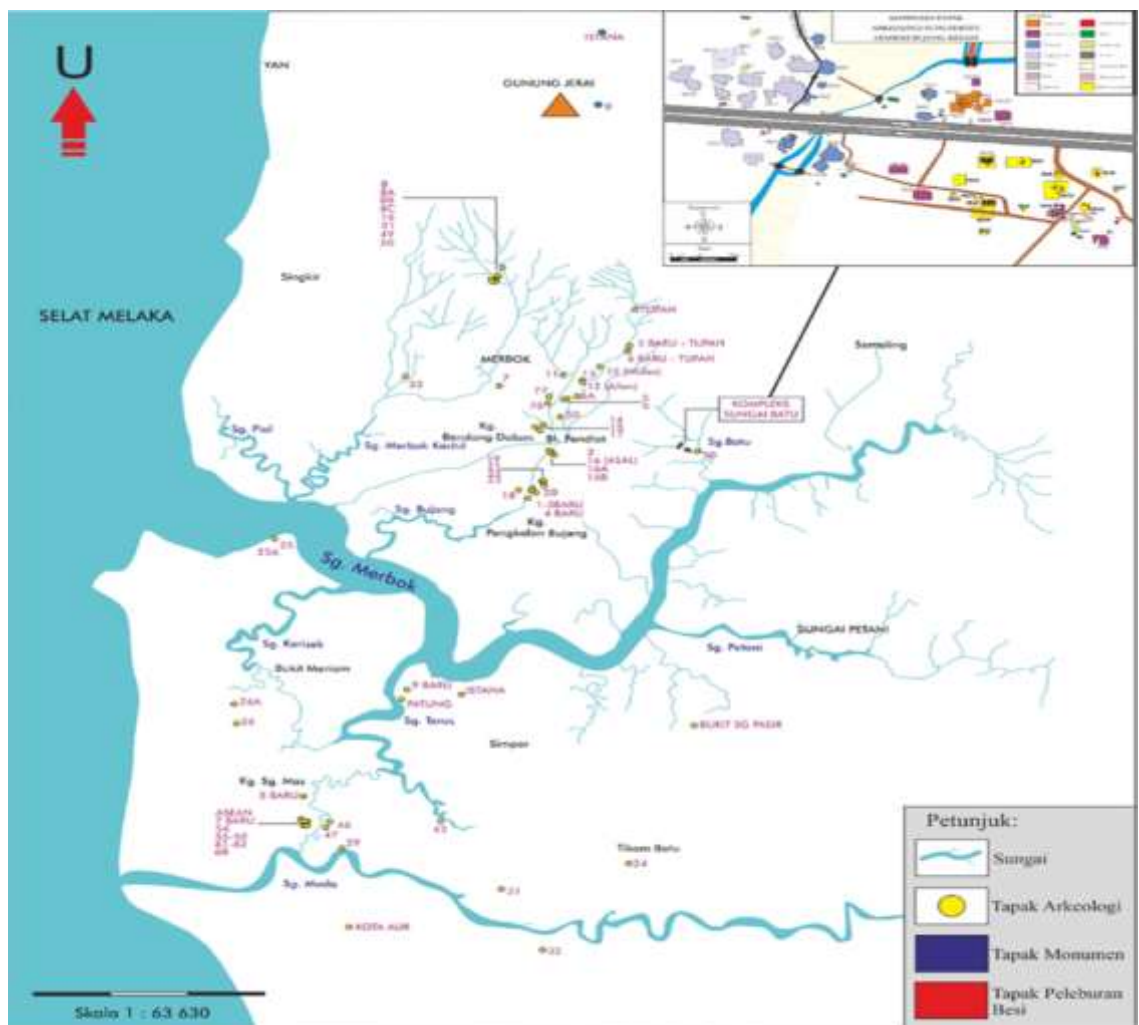


Figure 01. Sites distribution in the Bujang Valley (Source: CGAR USM)

During the Quaternary period around 2 million years ago, the fluctuation of sea level affects the mainland and islands of Southeast Asia. At the beginning of the Holocene period (10,000 years ago), the sea has risen to 5m and dropped down to -25m from the current sea level. The highest mark (5m) was recorded around 5,000 to 7,000 years ago (Sathiamurthy & Voris, 2006). Based on this record, Mokhtar, Saidin, Abdullah, Osman, and Abdullah (2011) conducted a palaeoenvironment survey around Bujang Valley in 2007, to understand the human movement and settlement that relied on the sea level fluctuation. By using geophysics method, as well as core drilling and remote sensing, a map of the sea level around Bujang Valley from the 1st century AD to 14th century AD was established. During 1st- 3rd century AD, due to the rise of sea level, most of the archaeological sites of Sungai Mas and Pengkalan Bujang was under the sea, while Sungai Batu is located by the sea (Figure 02). During 4-10AD and 11-13AD, a drop in sea level created a more significant land mass in the valley and pushed the shoreline much further towards the Straits of Malacca. More sites were established during this time, especially at Sungai Mas and Sungai Merbok that used to be a focal point or trading centre, as well as the centre for Hinduism and Buddhism in the Bujang Valley.

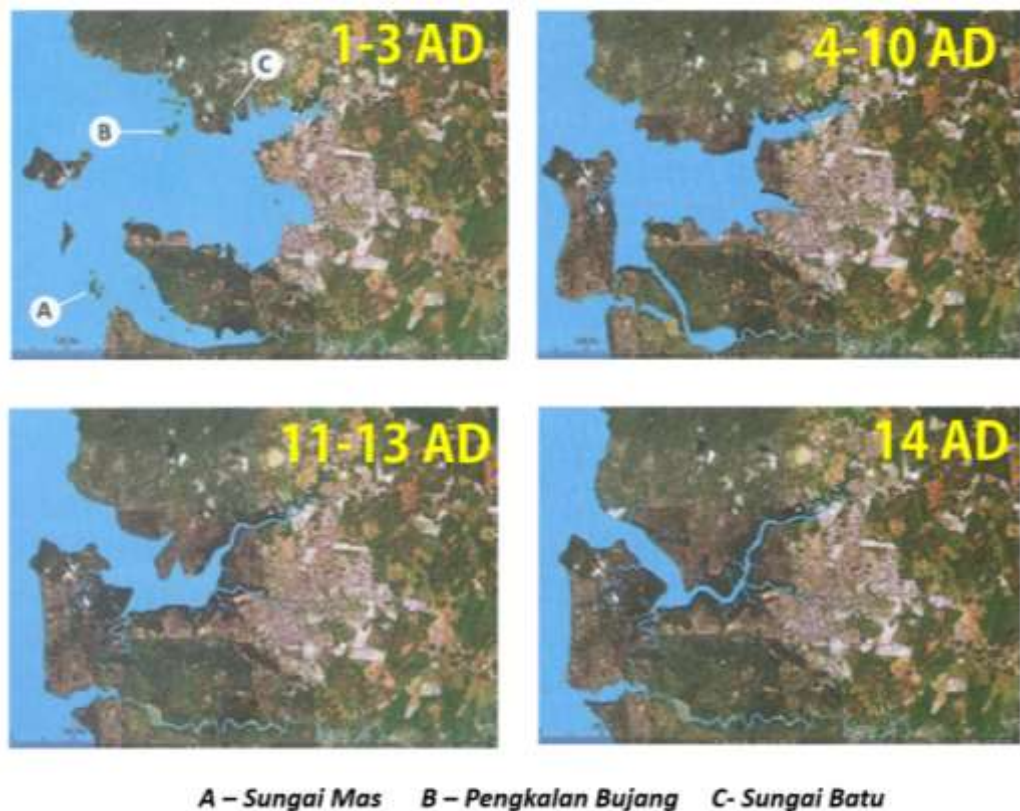


Figure 02. The palaeoenvironment of Bujang Valley, since 1st century AD

During 14th century AD, Sungai Batu and its surrounding area have become land. This is significantly due to the sedimentation of rocks and soil from the upper area (Gunung Jerai) to the lower area via high turbidity current, through Sungai Merbok and Sungai Batu river and it gradually settled down by gravitational forces (Saad et al., 2016). At the same time, hydrogenous sediments from the Straits of Malacca also contributed in the deposition process in the Sungai Batu area, due to transportation via

longshore drift from tidal current to form range of landforms (Zakaria et al., 2016). This process had gradually narrow down the large and deep bay with sandy coastline, turning it into a swampy river with thick mangroves on both banks. As a result, most part of the settlements were cut off from the coastlines, and consequently the volume was affected. As the protected coastline of the bay became narrower, the number of trading vessels which could be able to access the trading sites were significantly reduced. The decline of trade in the Bujang Valley area which led to the decline of Ancient Kedah, and the internal political situation at the time is described in the historical sources.

The local historical literature sources give limited information regarding this period. The sources known to date include *Al Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah* and the *Nagarakṛtagama*. In the Minye Tujuh Inscription found in Aceh, it was initially thought to have mentioned about Kedah in the 14th Century C.E. (Stutterheim, 1936; Marrison, 1951). However, this interpretation has been refuted by Molen (2007). The text of *Al Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah* gave some hints regarding the fall of Bujang Valley as the trade and economic centre in the 14th Century C.E.. It is said that Sultan Ibrahim Shah (1321-1373), he had moved his capital from Kampung Sungai Mas to Kota Seputeh, with Kampung Sungai Mas being ruled by his uncle, Tengku Ahmad (Muhammad Hassan, 1968, p.39).¹ Kampung Kota Sungai Mas was one of the international trading centre of Ancient Kedah, alongside with Pengkalan Bujang, Simpang Tambang and Kampung Sireh (Allen, 1988; Leong, 1973). The change of capital far to the north, in the Kubang Pasu district, suggest that the Bujang Valley area had lost its importance. The *Nagarakṛtagama*, composed by Mpu Prapañca in 1395 C.E. described in length regarding Majapahit during its height of power, among which include the list of tributary states of the empire. Among the tributaries are two polities, named as *Keda* and *Jere* (Slamet, 1976, p.139). *Keda* could have been the an area around the Kedah River to the North, while *Jere*² could refer to the Bujang Valley in the South. The texts *Nagarakṛtagama* and *Al Tarikh Salasilah Negeri*, appears to have been consistent with each other. The *Al-Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah* clearly mentioned that while Sultan Ibrahim Shah moved his capital to the Kota Seputeh, at the upper reaches of the Kedah river, he placed his uncle to rule in Kampung Sungai Mas in the Bujang Valley. Thus, The *Keda* and *Jere* mentioned in *Nagarakṛtagama* could have referred to Kota Seputeh and Kampung Sungai Mas respectively.

As far as written records are concerned, the records which describes the period of 14th to 16th Century C.E. are extremely scanty as compared to those describing the preceding centuries. The lack of written records, especially by foreign traders and travellers suggests the diminishing importance of Ancient Kedah as the centre of trade. Studies on the Chinese ceramic distribution in the Bujang Valley shows that only 5.6% of the total Chinese ceramics found in the Bujang Valley came from the Ming and Qing Dynasties (14th to 19th Century C.E) (Nasha, 2011; Allen, 1988). This is just a fraction of the percentage of ceramics found during the Sung-Yuan Dynasties (9th to 13th Century C.E), which is 76.3% (Nik Abdul Rahman 1984; Leong, 1973; Wales, 1940; Nasha, 2011). In addition, there is a total absence of post-14th Century structural remains and Hindu-Buddhist artefacts. Such archaeological finds imply that the international trade which previously happened at a large scale, had come to almost an abrupt end. Although

¹ The text runs as:

“Sultan Ibrahim yang maha mulia dengan segala isi istana baginda berangkat daripada kota Sungai Mas bersemayam di Kota Seputeh yang telah disediakan oleh Paduka Ayahanda Tengku Ahmad Raja Muda”

² One of the interpretation of the word *Jere*, is the word could refer to the area around Mount Jerai, which is the Bujang Valley.

the geomorphological setup in the 14th Century C.E. were not as favourable for a large scale trade in the Bujang Valley, due to its strategic location, the international trade could have continued, though at a smaller scale. The sudden fall of trade in the 14th Century C.E. shows that aside from the environmental changes, external factors could have also contributed to the decline of Ancient Kedah. Such external factors can be deduced by studying the political and economic events which took place in the region from the 13th to the 14th Century C.E.

Issues regarding the decline of Ancient Kedah have been briefly discussed by (Allen, 1988; Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 1992, 2002; Leong, 1973) and Alastair Lamb (1961). As a port-polity, the rise and fall of Ancient Kedah crucially depends on the factors determining the volume of trade which took place in its ports. Aside from the natural factors, regional political situation also plays important role in influencing the level of trade in Ancient Kedah. From the 7th to 13th Century C.E., Ancient Kedah was one of the chief ports of the thallassocratic empire of Srivijaya (Wolters, 1989, p. 275). The close tributary and trade relation between Srivijaya and China (the Tang and Sung Dynasties) as well as the strong military might of the maritime empire, had led to political stability, and consequently, flourishing trade (Nasha, 2011, p.333-334). During the height of Srivijaya, with their naval force the empire could coerce traders to trade in their chief ports, and gain revenue from the taxes, as well as participating in the trade itself. However, things took a big turn in the 14th Century C.E., when the Srivijaya Empire started to decline. The disintegration of the Srivijayan political power meant that the old political and trade network which previously had benefited the trade in Ancient Kedah, had no long exist (Coedes, 1968; Wolters, 1990). As a result, traders no longer visit chief ports of the empire such as Jambi, Palembang or Ancient Kedah in large number. The lack of central power had also led to political disunity and instability in the region, where the newly established Ayutthaya and Majapahit kingdoms had overlapping claims over (Coedes, 1968; Nasha, 2011; Slamet, 1976; Wheatley, 1961). Towards the end of the 14th Century C.E., the Malaccan Sultanate finally replaced Ancient Kedah's role as the emporium.

7. Conclusion

The archaeological remains and historical sources had given some insights into the political and economical situation in Ancient Kedah in the 14th Century. At that time, international trade had almost ceased, and there is no longer evidences for the presence of communities of foreign traders. The written sources on the other hand imply that Bujang Valley already lost its importance, with the capital of Ancient Kedah moved to Kota Seputeh, further to the north. In the 14th Century C.E., Ancient Kedah was also decentralized, where it existed as at least two separate polities. The palaeoenvironment reconstruction shows the geomorphological changes in Bujang Valley which happened over the centuries. In the 14th Century C.E., the large bay of Ancient Kedah started to silt-up, cutting off the coastal settlements from the sea, while the new coastlines were covered by swamps. This had become one of the factors for the decline of Ancient Kedah, which were further aggravated by the decline of Srivijayan empire. The rise of Malacca in the early 15th Century C.E., brought an end to Ancient Kedah role as a centre of trade.

Acknowledgments

We greatly acknowledge the Ministry of Education Malaysia and Universiti Sains Malaysia for the FRGS research grant entitled “The Archaeological Monument of Bukit Choras: Geo-Archaeological Survey and Geophysical Mapping” (Tapak Monumen Arkeologi Bukit Choras, Kedah: Survei Arkeo-Geologi dan Pemetaan Geofizik) (INDUK/PARKEO/6711591) for supporting this research. We would like to thank anonymous reviewers for their constructive and valuable comments which have improved the manuscript quality.

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