

# Tracing Early Christianity at the Bongal Site, Central Tapanuli District, North Sumatra

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**Abstract.** The history of the spread of ancient Christianity in the 4-5th century AD to Sumatra is still a mystery among historians. Written sources mention that the Nestorian church had developed as far as Fansur or Barus on the west coast of Sumatra. This research aims to uncover traces of the arrival of ancient Christianity in the early AD through the discovery of various Christian artifacts at the Bongal Site. Some of the early Byzantine-era archaeological artifacts recovered in this research include cross-bearing rings, Roman beads, cross-carved stones, and Byzantine liturgy spoons. Based on the comparative analysis that has been carried out, it appears that there are similarities between the findings of Christian artifacts at the Bongal Site and the Byzantine and Roman Empire Christian artifacts in the early AD. From these findings, Christianity is estimated to have reached the west coast of Sumatra in the 4th and 5th centuries AD.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Bongal Site, Central Tapanuli

## 1. Introduction

In 2019, an important world-class site was discovered in Jago-jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli Regency. The discovery of this site shocked the world of Indonesian historical and archaeological research because the data found could change the existing historical reconstruction. The Bongal site was discovered by chance at a community gold mine located at the foot of Bongal Hill, not far from a large river mouth, the Lumut River. Bongal Hill is about 324 meters above sea level. At the foot of this hill, a traditional gold mining process has been carried out by the local community for a long time. In the report of the visit of the Medan Archaeology Center team in 2004 to identify the statue findings at the foot of Bongal Hill, it was mentioned that there were traditional gold mining activities near the statue discovery site. In 2016, the area of artisanal gold mining at the foot of Bongal Hill expanded, leaving large and deep excavation ponds. It was while searching for this gold that the miners discovered a wide variety of archaeological artifacts, of which they did not recognize the type and function.

The Bongal site is located at 01°35'30.9" North latitude and 98°49'42.1" East longitude, precisely on the west coast of North Sumatra Province. Based on a literature review, the west coast of Sumatra Island in the early centuries AD was one of the most important areas in the world's maritime trade routes. This is because the west coast of Sumatra is a producer of trade commodities that are very marketable in the world market at that time, namely gold and spices [1]. Evidence of the involvement of the west coast of Sumatra in international-scale maritime trade networks in the early centuries AD is evidenced by archaeological findings in the Barus region, which is also located in the Central Tapanuli district, North Sumatra [2].

The Bongal site is 94 km away from the Lobu Tua site in Barus [3]. The results of research that been carried out at the Lobu Tua Barus Site from 1995-2005 found various important archaeological findings that indicate that foreigners from India, Persia, Arabia, and China have sailed across the Indian Ocean to reach Fabsur or Barus since at least the 6th century AD [4]. The proximity between these two sites further strengthens the assumption of the existence of the Bongal Site as one of the commercial centres on the West Coast of Sumatra in the early centuries AD.

In 2014, traditional gold mining activities at the foot of Bongal Hill began to use mud suction machines which made mining activities more extensive and deeper below the ground surface. During the use of this mud suction machine at a depth of 3 meters, various ancient artifacts over 1500 years old such as coins, ceramic and pottery shards, beads, and various artifacts related to major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and even Christianity were discovered. The discovery of various artifacts encouraged the North Sumatra Archaeology Center to conduct excavations at the Bongal Site from 2020-2021. In addition to the excavation, the North Sumatra Archaeology Center also conducted various seminars and FDGs on the artifacts found at the

Bongal Site. Since 2022, the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) has continued excavation and research at the Bongal Site. Based on the archaeological remains found, the Bongal Site has an older dating than the Barus Site [3].

The discovery of artifacts related to religion is very interesting at the Bongal Site, especially Christianity. Some of the Christian artifacts found at the Bongal Site include a ring with a cross symbol, Christian ritual equipment with a cross symbol, incense burning equipment, and Roman beads which are thought to be jewellery or also functioned as Rosaries (prayer beads) of Ancient Christianity in the 3-5th century AD. In various studies by previous researchers, the emergence of Christianity in Indonesia has always been associated with the arrival of Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British sailors in the 17th century. The discovery of these early Christian artifacts will overhaul the historiography of Christianity's entry into Indonesia through the role of the Bongal Site as a trading centre that brought Christianity to the region in the early centuries AD. This is what makes the research team interested in conducting research with the title "Tracing traces of Early Christianity at the Bongal Site, Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra.

## **2. Research Method**

This research is a qualitative study that uses historical methods with an archaeological approach. The historical method is used to reconstruct the entry of Christianity to the west coast of Sumatra in the early centuries AD. The historical method consists of four stages: heuristic, criticism, interpretation and historiography [5]. Heuristics is the stage or activity of finding and collecting primary and secondary sources through literature studies in the form of archives, books, e-books, e-journals, maps, old photographs or drawings, newspapers, observation of historical artifacts, and interviews with traditional leaders and local communities. Criticism is the stage or activity of critically examining sources, information, and traces. External criticism aims to analyze whether historical sources are genuine or fake based on the concrete form of sources found based on historical analysis and archaeological approaches. In this research, external criticism has been carried out in the form of analyzing the appearance of literature and artifacts found at the Bongal Site which is the object of research. Internal criticism is more about the content of the source/document/interview results and whether it can be accounted for or not. The internal criticism helps in examining the content of the literature, as well as the archaeologist's analysis of the Bongal Site artifact findings. Interpretation is the stage of interpreting the facts and establishing the meaning and interrelationship of the facts obtained (analysis and synthesis) based on historical and archaeological analysis. Historiography is the last stage in historical research, namely the writing stage by the facts and data that have been obtained during the research process.

## **3. Results and discussion**

### **3.1 The emergence and development of early Christianity**

The cycle of human civilization is inseparable from the emergence and development of religion as the substance of civilization itself. The role of religion for mankind is very important, especially in terms of fulfilling spiritual needs and leading humans back to their human nature [6]. Religion encourages humans to love other creations and on the other hand have a relationship with God, where humans are in the position of being called to stand before Him [7]. In the context of civilization, the religious system is an important part to study, because religion is a form of cultural heritage that is still preserved by the population by their respective beliefs [8].

In the history of Christianity, Antiochia is the place where Jesus' followers were first dubbed as Christians. In addition to Christians, the followers of Jesus are also called Syriacs. It is named after Cyprus, the Persian king who conquered Babylon in 539 BC and liberated the Jews back to Judea. The name Syriac was later used to refer to Christians from Mesopotamia, Persia, India, and the Far East, who converted to Christianity because of apostles and pastors from Syriac. The Apostle Peter is believed to have founded a church in Antioch in 37 AD, the remains of which are now found in Antakya (the modern name of Antioch), Turkey. The continuation of this church is now called the Syrian Orthodox Church. The Antiochian church played an important role in the early history of Christianity, where they played a part in the first three councils, namely the councils at Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381 AD), and Ephesus (431 AD), which formulated early Christian doctrine. After the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) [8].

The earliest recorded use of the term Christian is by Ignatius of Antioch c. 107 AD, which is further associated with the modification of the Sabbath, promotion of bishops, and criticism of the Judaizers. Jerusalem was an important church centre until 135. It had the prestige of being the city of Jesus' death and reported resurrection, and was the centre of the Apostolic Age, but went into decline during the years of the Jewish-Roman wars (66-135). Constantinople became prominent

only after the early Christian period, being officially founded in 330, five years after the First Council of Nicaea, yet the much smaller original city of Byzantium was an early centre of Christianity mainly due to its proximity to Anatolia [9].

Rodney Stark estimates that the number of Christians grew by about 40% during the first and second centuries. This phenomenal rate of growth forced Christian communities to evolve to adapt to the changing nature of their communities as well as their relationship with their political and socio-economic environment. With the increase in the number of Christians, the Christian community became larger, more numerous and spread further geographically [10].

### **3.2 The Beginning of Christian Congregations on the West Coast of Sumatra**

The pre-dawn international trade between Asia and Europe led to the emergence of Christian congregations on the west coast of Sumatra. Various important trading commodities originating from Sumatra made the West Coast of Sumatra grow as a centre of trading commodities visited by traders from various nations since the early centuries AD. Pepper, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, cardamom, frankincense, and camphor are the most important spices originating from Sumatra. These spices became highly prized commodities on international trade routes in the early centuries AD. Spices in those days were often associated with symbols of wealth and social class. For Christians, spices have a very important position, whereas for them spices are an obsession [10]. This led to the involvement of Christians in the international Southeast Asian and Sumatran trade networks in the early centuries AD.

The introduction of Christianity into Southeast Asian trade routes in the early centuries AD can be traced to the presence of Christian communities in South India as early as the 4th century AD. During the fourth century, Persian Christians revived the declining Apostolic church or established migrant communities on the Indian coast. Evidence of the presence of Christians on the trade routes in India is also recorded in an old document that mentions the presence of The merchant Thomas of Cana and other saintly men as Christian preachers in 345. From the earliest times, Christians in South India have been in close contact with the Mesopotamian and Persian churches. South Indian Christians follow Persian Syriac teaching, terminology, and liturgy and are therefore considered Nestorian. The relationship between the Patriarch in Seleucia-Ktesiphon and the Indian bishop was quite close as far as the political situation under Muslim rule allowed [11].

The members of the Persian or Nestorian Church refer to themselves as the 'Church of the East'. The Nestorian Church was a church that split from the Catholic Church in the Roman Empire in the 5th century. The first Nestorian Church congregation was the followers of Nestorius who rejected the doctrinal decisions of the council of Ephesus in 431 and was expelled from the Roman empire. They then moved to the Persian region and subsequently the Nestorian Church was centered in Lower Mesopotamia (Iraq) [12; 15]. And one of the characteristics of the Nestorian Church is that they actively preach the gospel to distant places. In addition, the Nestorian Christians also had a strong trading spirit [13].

The Nestorian Church had expanded to India by the 6th century, Sri Lanka by the 6th century, to Central Asia by the 5th century and to China by 635. There is also evidence to suggest that the Nestorian Church extended to Korea, Japan, Thailand and Semenjung Melayu at the same time. One of the evidence is ancient remains, historical writings, and letters from the archives of the Nestorian Church [14]. Persian records written by Mar Abhd Isho (Metropolit of the Caldean Church, 1291-1319) report that since the 7th century the Caldean Church has had archdioceses for the islands of the sea and the interior of Dabhag (Zabag/Zabaj), as Sumatra and Java are called, Sin and Macin (China), certainly as far south as India [12; 15].

Th. Van den End states: that in the first centuries AD, Christian traders from Egypt and Persia settled in Southeast Arabia, West and South India, and Sri Lanka. Their congregations in South India continue to survive today (Mar Thoma Church) [13].

For Southeast Asia, the Persians are known to have used the maritime Silk Road since at least the 4th century AD. As early as 650 AD Christians were reported in Kalah or Kedah on the west coast of Malaya, near Langkawi Island. In this place, there was a meeting between traders from India, China and Nusantara traders. The presence of Persian colonies in the Malay Peninsula is also mentioned in Chinese sources. One of them is about five hundred Persian families living in Tun-sun on the Malay Peninsula during the 4th century AD. Christians preferred to travel on Persian ships to Southeast Asia [12].

On the west coast of Sumatra, traces of Christianity already exist in Barus or Fansur. This is identified through the writings of Shaikh Abu Salih al Armini in his *Tadhakur fihi Akhbar min al-Kana'is wa'l Adyar min Nawahin Misri wal aqtha'aha* (List of news about churches and hermitages from the province of Egypt and lands beyond) which mentions the Nestorian Christian community in Fansur. There were several churches in Fansur at that time, one of which was named after Our Lady of the Holy Virgin which is thought to have been founded in 645. Local research found an old place name near Barus, "Janji Mariah" or "Promise of Mary" or just a

'solemn' promise (Aritonang and Steenbrink, 2008: 5; Bdk, 1974: 14). The Nestorian church in Barus is also known as Nasara Nasathirah. Hutahaean [13] states that the arrival of the Nestorian Christian group centered in Lower Mesopotamia (Iraq) to Sumatra occurred between 645-1500.

### 3.3 Ancient Christian symbols and worship tools

Religion is always related to symbols and worship tools that aim to support the success of religious ceremonies. The tools used in religious ceremonies play an important role in making it easier for religious people to communicate and interact directly with God, nature and the metaphysical things that control the universe. In Christianity, worship is a commandment of God that must be done by everyone who is redeemed and saved by the Lord Jesus Christ. Worship is also a sign of respect from every Christian which is demonstrated in the form of coming to church, praying, reading the word of God, praising God and making offerings to God for the salvation that has been granted [16; 17]. The supporting tools used in early Christian worship or liturgy include:

#### 1) The cross

The history of the use of the cross as a symbol in Christianity will always be associated with the crucifixion of Jesus. The use of the cross symbol itself is based on the spiritual journey that Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine I, made in 326 AD to Jerusalem. Before travelling to Jerusalem, Helena dreamt of receiving a command from her Lord to make a spiritual journey to the temple of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. When Helena reached the hill of Calvary, which is believed to be the place where Jesus was crucified, she ordered some men to dig up the place. The results of the excavation found three crosses located close to each other. These crosses were then taken and tested to find out which one was used to crucify Jesus. This test was carried out by bringing in a terminally ill person and bringing them close to the three crosses. Of the three crosses, one of the crosses managed to heal a sick person after being brought closer. People then believed that the cross with the miracle of healing was the cross used to crucify Jesus Christ [18].

Helena and her followers then bowed to the cross of Jesus Christ. She then brought the cross to his son Constantine and the Bishop of Jerusalem. The invention of the cross is what later made Helena known as the inventor of the cross. The cross was then accepted and recognized as a symbol of Christianity by Christians at that time [19].

#### 2) Prayer Rope (*Chotki* and Rosario)

Prayer ropes became The use of prayer ropes in Christian worship was pioneered by Pakomius the Great in the fourth century AD. This prayer rope was created by Pakomius to serve as a tool for illiterate monks to perfect the consistency of the number of prayers they had learned. The prayer rope is a string of knots made of wool, which is used to record the number of prayers offered. Prayer ropes usually consist of 33 or 100 knots that symbolize a particular prayer. In Catholicism, the prayer rope is also called the Rosary or rosary. This prayer rope is in the form of beads and a cross.

#### 3) Holy Communion

Holy Communion is one of the sacraments of the church that uses bread and wine as the medium. Holy Communion was an initiative of the Lord Jesus himself who wanted his students to feel his presence in their lives. The obligation to worship the Lord's Supper is based on the command of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Matthew 26:26-30, Mark 12:22-24, Luke 22:19-20. Holy Communion is held regularly and it is hoped that Christians interpret the banquet with seriousness of heart. A spoon (liturgy) is a must-have tool, as it is used to distribute the holy communion of bread and wine.

### 3.4 Bongal Site on the West Coast of Sumatra Commercial Network

By the early centuries, the west coast of Sumatra already had a well-established international trade network. Mothballs, frankincense, gold and spices became superior commodities that were in great demand by foreign traders at that time. Barus or Fansur was the most important ancient trading city on the west coast of Sumatra in early AD. The existence of Barus in the ancient trade networks of the world in the early AD has been mentioned in several records written by foreign traders such as the Arabs, Tamils, Greeks, Persians, Chinese, Malays and Javanese. The name Barus as an ancient commercial city was also mentioned by Claudius Ptolemy in the 2nd century AD in his book *Geographyke Hyphegeiss* which called Barus by the name Barousai [20]. Barousai is a commercial city producing camphor fragrances that have been brought to Egypt for embalming corpses since the reign of Ramses II, 5000 years BC.

Research by a team of archaeologists from Ecole Francaise D'extreme-Orient (EFEO) France and the National Archaeological Research Center (PPAN) in Lobu Tua-Barus, found that around the 9th-12th centuries AD Barus had become a multi-ethnic settlement of various ethnic groups such as Arabs, Acehnese, Indians, Chinese, Tamils, Javanese, Batak, Minangkabau, Bugis, Bengkulu and so on. This is based on the discovery of high-quality archaeological objects that are hundreds of years old, indicating that Barus was once a prosperous region [21].

The involvement of the Bongal Site in maritime activities and trade networks on the West Coast of Sumatra is thought to be older than Barus. This is evidenced by the thousands of international archaeological artifacts found in the region. Some of the artifacts related to trading activities found in this region include ancient Middle Eastern coins from the 7th to 9th centuries AD, ukkiyah (measuring tool for ancient Middle Eastern coins), ancient Chinese coins, ceramics, wooden ship fragments, beads, pottery, copper weights, metal objects, glass fragments from the Middle and Near East, ship fragments and wooden boards with Pallawa script [22;3]. All these findings suggest that the Bongal Site became one of the most important trading ports on the west coast of Sumatra in the early centuries AD. The artifact findings also indicate that the Bongal Site has been a cosmopolitan settlement since the first century AD. Trade transactions that took place in the region spanned Southeast Asia, West Asia, North Asia and the Mediterranean [23].

#### 4. Traces of Christianity at the 4th-5th Century Bongal Site

Traces of the existence of Christianity at the Bongal Site in the 4th-5th centuries AD can be traced through various archaeological artifact findings of the early Byzantine era. Some of the early Byzantine-era archaeological artifacts found in this research at the Bongal Site in Jago-jago Village include:

1) Ring with cross

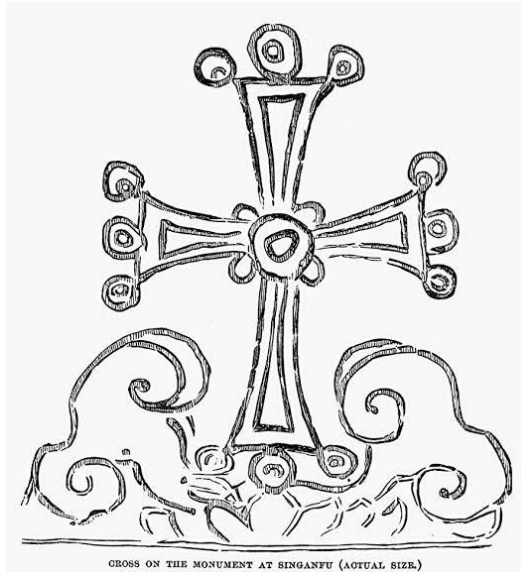
The ring with the cross is thought to date back to the Byzantine (Early Christian) era, around the 5th century AD. During this time, Christians in Byzantium produced many gems that were carved for religious purposes. The cross motif engraved on this ring served as the identity of the Eastern Christian community in opposition to the Catholic Church in the Roman Empire.

The ring with the cross found at the Bongal Site is made of gold. It weighs 14.64 g. 3.69 mm wide and 2.33 mm high. This gold ring probably served as jewelry and the identity of the wearer who was of Eastern Christian origin. The number of findings of gold rings engraved with crosses at the Bongal Site is 1 piece.



**Fig 2.** Cross-engraved gold ring found at the Bongal Site  
Source: private collection

The cross shown in Figure 8 is similar in some respects to the Nestorian cross found in Sian-Fu in 781 AD (Tang Dynasty). The involvement of Nestorian Christians in trade activities in Southeast Asia and China, including stopping at Bongal and bringing various Christian objects, can be a strong reason why the gold ring was found at the Bongal Site, which was once an international trading hub visited by traders from various nations and religions, including Nestorian Christians.



**Fig 3.** Cross emblem in Sian-Fu China 781 AD  
Source: indgenousjesus.blogspot.com

## 2) Roman beads

The beads found at the Bongal Site are glass, gold and silver plated beads. These beads were found in an excavation by researchers from the North Sumatra Archaeology Center together with Media Literacy Media (now Sultanate Institute) on February 14-22, 2022. Research by the North Sumatra Archaeology Center estimates that the glass, gold and silver plated beads date back to the 6th century AD. The beads found at the Bongal Site were produced in Egypt around the 1st-IVth century AD when the Romans ruled Egypt. This is what makes the beads found at the Bongal Site have elements of Roman culture and are then known as Roman beads. Glass beads have become a trade commodity in the Asian region, where one of the destinations for the production of these beads in Egypt was for export to South Asia and Southeast Asia Mainland and Islands (Nusantara). Until the development of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, bead production continued in Egypt.

The glass beads found at the Bongal Site were collected in terracotta pottery along with other beads made from onyx, jasper, carnelian and ruby red stone (semi-precious stone). These items are thought to be someone's grave provisions. The discovery of the Bongal Site beads buried with other artifacts is similar to the findings of excavations at the Pangkung Paruk Site, Bali. In Mesopotamia and Egypt beads are found in large quantities from temple and palatial complexes [24;25]. The discovery of Roman gold glass beads at the Bongal Site can guide researchers in uncovering the periodization of the Bongal Site's appearance in the trade network of Sumatra's west coast in the past [26].



**Fig 4.** Glass, gold and silver plated beads from the Bongal Site excavation.

Source: (www.kompas.id)

In conjunction with other Christian artifacts found at the Bongal Site, the Roman glass, gold and silver beads in Figure 5 are thought to have also been used as prayer beads in the 3-5th century AD. The oldest prayer beads have been recognized by the Hindu community in India since 185 BC [27]. Christians have been using beads or stones for worship processions since the 3rd century AD. Praying using beads among Christians probably originated with the Desert Father. Eastern Christians have known prayer beads as "chotki" since the 4th century AD. Chotki is a prayer rope made of knotted wool [28].

Based on the history of the use of beads for Christian prayer processions associated with the import of beads from Roman Egypt to Southeast Asia in the early AD, as well as the discovery of several Christian artifacts bearing Byzantine-era crosses, it can be assumed that the glass, gold and silver-plated beads found at the Bongal Site were used as prayer beads.



**Fig 5.** Gold-plated beads found at the Bongal Site.

Source: private collection

### 3) Cross-carved stone

In addition to gold rings, the Bongal Site also found crucifix carvings on stone and copper. In this research, two types of cross-carved stones were found, as shown in Figures 6 and 7. The cross-carved stone in Figure 7 weighs 7.9 grams and is 30.36 mm long and 30.36 mm wide.



**Fig 6.** Cross-carved stone found at the Bongal Site

Source: private collection



**Fig7.** Cross-carved stone found at the Bongal Site  
Source: private collection

#### 4) Byzantine liturgy/communion spoon

Byzantine liturgical spoons are gold-plated spoons used in various ways for the administration of the Eucharist in all orthodox traditions. This spoon is a special spoon that is produced on a limited basis for the benefit of the church and certain liturgical purposes. In the Byzantine tradition, this spoon was used to serve communion to clergy and laity lower than both species. The consecrated bread is soaked in consecrated wine, and then served with a spoon to the congregation [29]. Because it touches the Body and Blood of Christ (the rest of the Gifts), the liturgy spoon must be made of gold or gilded. In addition, the symbol of wealth and monetary gain from gold made it widely used for Christian worship utensils.

A total of 7 pieces of Byzantine gold-plated liturgy spoons were found at the Bongal Site. These spoons range in length from 15.3 cm (11.38 grams), 14.3 cm (weight 6.34 grams), 13.8 cm (weight 7.32 grams), 13.3 cm (weight 8.50 grams), 13 cm (weight 10.14 grams), 12.4 cm (weight 7.78 grams), and 11.4 cm (weight 7.46 grams).



**Fig 8:** A gilded Byzantine liturgy spoon found at the Bongal Site.  
Source: private collection

## 5. Conclusion

The Bongal site in Jago-jago Village, Badiri District, Central Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra is a historical and archaeological site that can deconstruct the historiography of the arrival of Christianity in Indonesia. The Silk Road which connected two great civilizations, China and Rome, also brought the involvement of Christians in trade activities to Southeast Asia and the coast of Sumatra. The Nestorian Church, centred in Lower Mesopotamia (Iraq) or Persia, is thought to have reached Southeast Asia in early AD. According to the literature, Persians have



been involved in the Silk Road trade network in Southeast Asia since at least the 4th century AD. The presence of Persian colonies in the Malay Peninsula in the 4th century AD is also mentioned in Chinese sources.

Christian communities on the west coast of Sumatra were identified through the writings of Shaikh Abu Salih al Armini in his *Tadhakur fihi Akhbar min al-Kana'is wa'l Adyar min Nawahin Misri wal aqtha'aha* (List of news about churches and hermitages from the province of Egypt and lands beyond) which mentions the Nestorian Christian community in Fansur/Barus. This Nestorian Christian community is thought to have come to Barus between 645-1500 AD.

Traces of Christianity at the Bongal Site in the 4th-5th centuries AD can be traced through various archaeological artifact findings of the early Byzantine era. Some of the early Byzantine-era archaeological artifacts found in this research at the Bongal Site in Jago-jago Village include a ring with a cross, Roman beads, a stone carved with a cross, and a Byzantine liturgy spoon. Based on the comparative analysis, it appears that there are similarities between the findings of Christian artifacts at the Bongal Site and those of early Byzantine Christianity and the early Roman Empire. Based on the comparative analysis, it appears that there are similarities between the findings of Christian artifacts at the Bongal Site above and Byzantine and Roman Empire Christian artifacts dating back to early AD. This fact can be used as evidence of the arrival of Christianity to the west coast of Sumatra in the 4th and 5th centuries AD.

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