

From Artifacts to Understanding: Transforming Museums into Contextual Learning Laboratories for Islamic Studies

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Abstract

This study explores the educational potential of the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum as a medium for contextual learning in Islamic Studies. The museum houses a diverse collection of artifacts spanning prehistoric times, Hindu-Buddhist periods, and early Islamic eras, representing dynamic traces of local civilization. Employing a qualitative approach through an exploratory case study design, data were collected via observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, then analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that the museum's artifacts possess historical, spiritual, and pedagogical values that can be harnessed to strengthen Islamic historical literacy and foster contextual understanding of Islamic teachings. The museum functions as an active learning laboratory, enabling students to comprehend relationships between Islamic texts and local historical-cultural contexts. Integrating the museum into a Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) framework proves effective in cultivating reflective, critical, and moderate attitudes toward understanding Islamic teachings among students.

Keywords: museum-based learning, contextual teaching and learning (CTL), Islamic studies education, archaeological artifacts, historical literacy, pedagogical innovation

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Introduction

Education is a fundamental pillar in the construction of human civilization. In the Indonesian context, education is not merely tasked with transferring knowledge, but must also serve as a vehicle for instilling contextual values of culture, religion, and nationalism. Islamic education, in particular, carries a broad mandate to shape character, morality, and historical consciousness within the Muslim community. Nevertheless, our educational system continues to face significant challenges, especially in delivering meaningful and contextual learning that resonates with students' lived realities and enables them to develop metacognitive skills to effectively decontextualize and recontextualize knowledge across diverse settings (Rivière et al., 2019).

One approach that aligns with these needs is Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) (Johnson, 2007). CTL emphasizes the importance of connecting academic content with

students' real-world experiences. Learning cannot remain purely textual and theoretical; it must be dynamic, applicable, and rooted in direct student engagement. In Islamic Studies, a contextual approach becomes increasingly vital, as Islamic teachings are not only normative but also deeply historical and cultural. Understanding Islamic values cannot be separated from the historical and cultural contexts in which those teachings emerged and evolved.

One of the learning resources capable of enlivening contextual education is the museum. A museum is not merely a place for storing ancient objects or antiques; it is a living space that preserves the traces of civilization. Within the museum, learners can directly observe historical relics, understand their cultural contexts, and reflect on the values embedded within them. The museum thus becomes a valuable educational resource for bridging historical inquiry with Islamic studies (Jalal et al., 2022). Unfortunately, in everyday educational practice, museums are often still perceived as recreational venues rather than educational institutions. This reflects a significant gap between formal education and cultural institutions such as museums.

Among the many museums in Indonesia, the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum holds a particularly strategic position. Located in the southern region of Brebes Regency, this museum houses a diverse collection of archaeological artifacts that depict prehistoric human life—from fossils of ancient animals such as *Stegodon* and *Rhinoceros sondaicus*, to stone tools, ornaments, and other cultural objects. These artifacts are not only archaeologically significant but also open avenues for exploring the dynamics of local civilizations that eventually intersected with the arrival of Islam in the region.

The presence of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago did not occur abruptly. Islam arrived and interacted with pre-existing local cultures, resulting in unique forms of cultural acculturation. In the context of Bumiayu, the traces of local civilization preserved in the museum serve as important indicators of how Islam was received, adapted, and institutionalized within the local context. Therefore, the artifacts housed in the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum can serve as highly valuable learning materials in the study of Islam.

Islamic Studies, in its broader approach, is not limited to theological and normative dimensions alone, but also encompasses historical, cultural, and social inquiries. Therefore, Islamic education should be encouraged to engage with historical sources, including artifacts, manuscripts, ancient texts, and other archaeological remains. Unfortunately, this approach remains underutilized at the higher education level, particularly within Islamic education programs. This is largely due to the lack of instructional modules that integrate artifact-based sources as part of Islamic historical and cultural learning.

Previous research has emphasized the importance of non-textual learning resources in enhancing students' understanding. Museums, as experiential learning environments, have proven effective in increasing both cognitive and affective engagement. Direct experiences gained through interaction with historical artifacts foster a stronger sense of historical awareness than merely reading textbooks or listening to lectures. Moreover, the outing class model, which emphasizes experiential learning, encourages students to observe and analyze historical objects—cultivating critical thinking and creativity (Amirullah & Patahuddin, 2023).

In this context, museum-based learning needs to be redesigned to better integrate with the Islamic education curriculum. One viable strategy is to develop a contextual learning model centered on museums. This model positions the museum not merely as a site for visitation, but as an active learning space. Students are not only expected to observe, but also to investigate, take notes, ask questions, analyze, and construct new knowledge relevant to Islamic learning themes. This process enriches their understanding both intellectually and spiritually.

Beyond that, this approach also contributes to strengthening local Islamic historical literacy. Many narratives of Islamic history in Indonesia tend to focus on major regions such

as Aceh, Demak, or Yogyakarta. Yet, areas like Bumiayu also hold rich narrative potential that remains largely unexplored. By incorporating the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum into educational inquiry, we not only expand the scope of Islamic Studies but also simultaneously reinforce both local and national identity.

Museum-based learning also supports an educational paradigm that emphasizes student-centered learning. Students are no longer passive recipients of information but become active subjects who explore, evaluate, and construct their own knowledge. Within the framework of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), the museum functions as an “open laboratory” where students can directly engage with historical evidence and conduct critical reflection. This reflection then becomes the foundation for understanding the meaning, values, and messages of Islam in a more tangible context.

However, not all educational institutions are immediately prepared to implement museum-based learning. Collaboration is needed among various stakeholders: museum curators, lecturers, teachers, students, and local government authorities. It is also necessary to develop specialized learning modules that can guide educational activities in museums in a more structured and systematic manner. These modules may include observation guidelines, worksheets, concept maps, interview instruments, and assessment rubrics. In this way, museum visits are no longer incidental but become an integral part of the teaching and learning process.

This study emerges as an effort to fill that gap. Using an exploratory case study method, it seeks to examine in depth the characteristics of the collections at the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum, their relevance to the development of Islam in Indonesia, and their pedagogical potential in promoting experiential learning. The findings of this research are expected to serve as a foundation for designing learning models and modules that can be implemented within Islamic education environments, particularly at the higher education level.

On another level, the urgency of this research is closely tied to cultural preservation and the enhancement of public awareness regarding the importance of local history. In today’s fast-paced globalized era, many young people are increasingly disconnected from their cultural roots. They are more familiar with foreign cultures through social media than with the history of their own hometowns. Without systematic efforts to integrate local history into the education system, we risk losing a vital part of our cultural identity.

Islam in Indonesia has grown through a long dialectical process with local cultures. Therefore, the teaching of Islamic history must emphasize the importance of diverse expressions of Islam that are tolerant, contextual, and rooted in the cultural foundations of society. In this regard, the museum becomes a crucial window through which we can observe how Islam did not arrive to replace local cultures, but to harmonize with them, modify them, and imbue them with deeper meaning.

By positioning the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum as a learning laboratory, students do not merely study history in its chronological sense, but also in its ideological and philosophical dimensions. They learn how humans have thought, adapted, cultivated culture, and embraced faith across time. This is the true essence of Islamic education: to cultivate individuals who think critically, are historically aware, possess noble character, and cherish cultural heritage as a divine gift.

Method

This study was designed using a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study model, as its primary focus is to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the educational potential of the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum within the context of contextual Islamic Studies learning. The exploratory approach is often employed to investigate

phenomena that remain under-researched and to formulate initial questions or hypotheses for future studies (Creswell, 2018). This approach enables researchers to examine phenomena holistically, treating field realities as the primary source of meaning rather than merely testing deductive hypotheses. Accordingly, the research object is not understood in isolation from its social, cultural, and religious contexts, but rather viewed as part of a complex and meaningful whole.

The selection of the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum as the study site is deliberate. The museum houses artifacts of significant historical and cultural value, which can potentially be integrated into Islamic education through a contextual approach. The research subjects include museum curators who possess deep knowledge of the collections and their historical significance; Islamic scholars or historians capable of interpreting the relationship between the artifacts and the dynamics of Islamic civilization; and educators (teachers or lecturers) who play a strategic role in designing and implementing learning based on local sources. In qualitative research, subject selection is purposive, based on the relevance and depth of information they can provide.

Data for this study were collected through three main techniques: passive participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observation involved directly examining the physical condition of the artifacts, the information presentation system, the historical narratives displayed, and the museum's interactive potential as a learning space. The researcher was present in the field not as an intervening agent, but as an active observer who recorded, documented, and reflected on each finding using a reflective-hermeneutic approach. This observation was supported by a systematic observation sheet developed in advance.

Meanwhile, in-depth interviews were conducted with three main groups of informants: (1) museum curators as key sources regarding the authenticity, classification, and contextual background of the artifacts; (2) Islamic historians or local cultural experts capable of linking the artifacts to the process of Islamization in the Bumiayu region; and (3) educators who offer perspectives on integrating museums into history or Islamic Studies instruction. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning the researcher used a question guide as an instrument while allowing space for further exploration when significant information emerged beyond the prepared framework. This technique enabled richer and more contextual depth of data.

The third technique, document analysis, was employed to obtain secondary data that would reinforce the validity of the observational and interview findings. The documents analyzed included museum catalogs, archaeological reports, scholarly articles on Bumiayu's local history, Islamic education policy documents, and references on contextual learning approaches. This documentation was essential for situating the field findings within a broader scientific and historical framework.

All collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process began with data reduction—sorting relevant information and categorizing it into thematic clusters such as “types of artifacts,” “historical and cultural value,” “connections to Islam,” and “pedagogical potential.” The next step involved presenting the data in the form of descriptive narratives, thematic matrices, and key quotations from informants. The final stage was interpretive conclusion-drawing, which involved reading the symbolic meanings and implicit values embedded in the artifacts, and exploring how these values could be actualized in Islamic Studies learning.

To ensure data trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation across three dimensions: source triangulation (comparing data from different informants) and

methodological triangulation (comparing findings from observation, interviews, and documentation).

Overall, the research design was systematically constructed to explore artifacts not merely as static objects, but as living “historical texts” that can be read and interpreted within the epistemological framework of Islamic scholarship and education. Thus, this study is not only descriptive but also constructive—laying the groundwork for a museum-based learning model that can be practically implemented in Islamic higher education settings. Within this broader framework, the research methodology serves as a bridge between past artifacts and present educational praxis, between historical values and spiritual meaning, and between knowledge and faith.

Results

This study affirms that the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum is not merely a repository of artifacts, but an epistemic space that preserves traces of civilization and spirituality—traces that can be actualized through contextual Islamic education. Located in Brebes Regency, Central Java, the museum houses a transhistorical collection spanning prehistoric, Hindu-Buddhist, and early Islamic periods. These artifacts reflect the social, economic, and religious dynamics of local communities. Discoveries such as faunal fossils, Paleolithic and Neolithic stone tools, megalithic relics, temple fragments, and coins from the Sultanate of Jambi serve as tangible evidence that Bumiayu has long been a cultural crossroads open to interreligious and intercultural exchange.

In the context of Islamic education, artifacts must be approached not merely as archaeological objects but as instruments of historical reflection (*tadabbur*)—linking Islamic values to historical and cultural realities. Within Islamic intellectual tradition, relics of the past are regarded as *atsar*, meaningful traces of earlier communities imbued with wisdom. The Qur’an explicitly encourages believers to “travel through the earth and observe the fate of those before them” (Surah Al-Rum [30]: 9; Al-An’am [6]: 11), a methodological invitation to engage in contextualized historical inquiry.

Interviews with Islamic Studies lecturers reveal that museums hold immense potential as transformative learning environments. Understanding Qur’anic verses and prophetic traditions requires more than literal interpretation; it demands contextual engagement through concepts such as *asbab al-nuzul* (circumstances of revelation) and *maqashid al-shari’ah* (objectives of Islamic law). Local artifacts, in this regard, offer a gateway to identifying Islamic values manifested in architecture, technology, and social systems of the past.

Museums thus function as bridges between sacred texts and lived realities, between normative theology and historical experience. Contextual approaches grounded in material culture enable students to cultivate a more applicable, moderate, and inclusive understanding of Islam. Values such as innovation, rationality, and reverence for knowledge are traceable through artifacts—exemplified by the urban planning of Abbasid-era Baghdad, which embodied Islamic principles of social justice and collective responsibility.

Furthermore, museums serve as intellectual laboratories that support student-centered learning. Direct engagement with artifacts fosters reflection, analysis, and interpretation of Islamic values within historical and cultural frameworks. In the museum space, students do not merely absorb information—they encounter meaning. Artifacts become conduits for historical consciousness, worldly humility, and divine reverence, facilitating both intellectual and spiritual transformation.

Nevertheless, the study also identifies critical challenges, particularly the limited quantity and contextual data surrounding Islamic artifacts. These constraints hinder the

academic reconstruction of local Islamic history in a credible and accountable manner. Therefore, a careful methodological approach is required—one that ensures archaeological validity and alignment with classical Islamic literature to avoid distortion of meaning.

The Bumiayu Archaeological Museum has demonstrated its educational commitment through initiatives such as the “Museum Goes to School” program, student visits, and the documentation of archaeological sites. Several Islamic educational institutions in Brebes have begun integrating museum visits into history instruction, though implementation varies between extracurricular activities and formal curriculum inclusion.

Discussion

Understanding the historical and cultural foundations of Islamic civilization requires more than textual study—it demands engagement with tangible traces of the past that reflect the lived experiences of earlier communities. The Bumiayu Archaeological Museum, situated in Brebes Regency, Central Java, offers a compelling example of how local heritage can illuminate broader civilizational narratives. As a repository of diverse artifacts spanning prehistoric, Hindu-Buddhist, and early Islamic periods, the museum provides a rich context for exploring the evolution of social structures, religious expressions, and intercultural interactions in the region. This section examines the museum’s collections and their significance in reconstructing the historical landscape of Bumiayu, while highlighting the potential of material culture to serve as a pedagogical bridge between history, spirituality, and Islamic education.

Tracing the Footprints of Local History

The Bumiayu Archaeological Museum, located in Brebes Regency, Central Java, holds a wealth of valuable historical heritage. Interviews with the museum curator revealed that the museum houses an extensive collection of artifacts, including animal fossils, stone tools from the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods, bone implements, and megalithic relics such as batu kenteng and lumpang (stone mortars). The presence of these artifacts indicates that the Bumiayu region has been inhabited by human communities for thousands of years, who developed agrarian lifestyles and simple technologies.

Remnants from the Hindu-Buddhist period—such as temple fragments, lingga, umpak (pillar bases), and kemuncak (roof finials)—demonstrate traces of a religious civilization oriented toward monumental architecture and specific cosmological frameworks. It was during this era that Bumiayu entered a phase of more structured architectural documentation, reflecting the strong influence of major Central Javanese kingdoms such as Ancient Mataram. These fragments carry not only artistic significance but also suggest the existence of social hierarchies, centers of worship, and the interplay between political power and religious authority during that time.

Figure 1

Ancient Coins Collection at Bumiayu Archaeological Museum



Figure 2
Temple Fragments at Bumiayu Archaeological Museum



Of particular interest is the discovery of artifacts believed to date back to the Islamic period, notably several ancient coins from the Sultanate of Jambi. Although their quantity is limited and they have not yet been extensively studied, the presence of these coins opens up the possibility of historical trade routes or cultural interactions between the Bumiayu region and Islamic centers of power in eastern Sumatra. In addition to these artifacts, the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum also houses the oldest vertebrate fossils found on the island of Java, most notably a *Homo erectus* specimen estimated to be 1.8 million years old—one of only five such discoveries worldwide. The Bumiayu site in Indonesia preserves not only *Homo erectus* fossils but also associated artifacts such as hand axes, flakes, choppers, stone balls, and core stones (Fadhilillah, 2021). However, it is important to note that the limited quantity and contextual data surrounding the Islamic artifacts pose significant challenges to reconstructing a credible and academically sound narrative of local Islamic history.

The documentation of artifacts has been carried out gradually by the museum, through citizen reports, direct field discoveries, and collaboration with researchers. Despite certain limitations, the museum remains actively engaged in educational initiatives such as the “Museum Goes to School” program, student visits, cultural seminars (*sarasehan*), and the inventory of archaeological sites in the Bumiayu area.

Several Islamic educational institutions—including SMAI, SMP Islam, MAN 2, and Muhammadiyah-affiliated high schools and vocational schools—have integrated museum visits into their history learning activities. This reflects an emerging institutional awareness of the museum’s role as an alternative learning space, although its implementation varies, with some treating it as an extracurricular activity and others beginning to embed it within the formal curriculum.

Exploring the Traces of Spirituality and Civilization

In the Islamic scholarly tradition, relics of the past are not merely viewed as antiques, but as *atsar*—traces of earlier communities that carry lessons and wisdom. The Qur’an itself encourages Muslims to travel across the earth and observe the fate of previous nations, as stated in Surah Al-Rum [30]: 9 and Surah Al-An’am [6]: 11. In interviews with Islamic Studies lecturers, museum artifacts were considered highly valuable as tools for historical reflection (*tadabbur*) and for uncovering Islamic values.

One lecturer noted that understanding the Qur’anic text should not be limited to its literal meaning, but must also involve contextual interpretation, as emphasized in Qur’anic studies through concepts such as *asbab al-nuzul* (the circumstances of revelation) and *maqashid al-shari’ah* (the objectives of Islamic law). Certain legal rulings, for instance, must be understood in relation to their historical and social contexts. Similarly, historical objects should

not be studied merely as physical items, but approached analytically to identify values manifested in past architecture, technologies, or social systems.

Context serves as a bridge between text and lived reality. Through this approach, students gain not only normative-theological understanding of Islamic teachings but also insight into how Islamic values are applied in real-life situations. Contextual learning also helps prevent rigid and literalist interpretations, fostering moderate and inclusive attitudes. According to Latief et al. (2024), museums are ideal platforms for introducing history and culture to students, as their collections reflect the development of human civilization across social, economic, cultural, and religious dimensions.

Values such as innovation, rationality, and reverence for knowledge can also be traced through artifacts. One example is the urban planning of Abbasid-era Baghdad, which reflected social order and sophisticated city management aligned with Islamic principles of social justice and collective responsibility. In the context of Bumiayu, the artifacts and historical traces preserved in the museum serve as concrete evidence of a rich and diverse civilization. Through these cultural relics, students can directly observe achievements across various fields. This not only strengthens their theoretical understanding but also cultivates appreciation for the richness of Islamic heritage—often overlooked in text-based learning alone.

It is important to note that interpreting Islamic values from artifacts requires a careful, methodical, and deliberate approach. Clear contextual understanding, archaeological data validity, and alignment with classical Islamic literature are essential to avoid distortion of meaning. In the context of the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum, this calls for more rigorous research to identify artifacts that can be authentically and responsibly incorporated into Islamic historical narratives.

The Museum as a Contextual Learning Medium for Integrating History and Spirituality

The contemporary era demands educational approaches that are not solely text-based, but also contextual, applicable, and multidimensional (Spelt et al., 2017). In the context of Islamic Studies, a contextual approach becomes increasingly vital to address the challenges of the times, particularly in aligning Islamic teachings with evolving social and historical realities. Informants in this study affirmed that museums—including the Bumiayu Archaeological Museum—hold significant potential as effective and profound media for contextual learning.

Islamic education must be oriented toward maqashid al-shari'ah, the noble values that constitute the ultimate purpose of Islamic laws and teachings. Through a contextual approach, students do not merely study Qur'anic verses or hadiths textually, but also interpret them within historical, cultural, and social frameworks. Museums can bridge this need by presenting historical narratives that support a comprehensive understanding of Islamic dynamics. Museum-based learning enables students to develop deeper insights into the intellectual and cultural heritage of Islam through interactive and experiential methods (Todino & Campitiello, 2025).

Museums are no longer passive display spaces; they are evolving into interactive, technology-driven learning centers. Beyond conservation, museums now serve as intellectual laboratories where younger generations can explore Islamic scholarly heritage through multidisciplinary perspectives (Badrin & Mutmainnah, 2024). Integration between museums and Islamic Studies curricula can be achieved through the use of multimedia, augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR) technologies to animate artifacts both visually and narratively. Museums can also function as historical laboratories, inviting students to think critically, interpret historical data, and connect it with Islamic principles in contextual and relevant ways.

Within the museum space, students do not merely absorb information—they experience values. Artifacts become mediums that guide them toward historical awareness, worldly

humility, and the majesty of divine principles. Thus, the museum can serve as a gateway to both intellectual and spiritual transformation. However, more serious efforts are still needed from Islamic educational institutions to integrate museums into formal education systems—whether through curriculum development, instructional modules, or inter-institutional program collaborations. Museums must be regarded as educational partners, not merely as supplementary field trip destinations.

Conclusion

The Bumiayu Archaeological Museum holds significant potential as a contextual learning medium in Islamic Studies. Beyond serving as a repository of historical artifacts, the museum can be transformed into an active learning space that connects Islamic values with local historical and cultural realities. This approach is highly relevant to the needs of contemporary Islamic education, which emphasizes comprehensive and contextual understanding of religious teachings.

The museum houses a wide range of artifacts from prehistoric times, the Hindu-Buddhist period, and the early traces of Islam's arrival in the Bumiayu region. These artifacts offer opportunities to explore the social, economic, and religious dynamics of past societies. Collections such as temple fragments and coins from the Sultanate of Jambi serve as evidence of interaction between Islam and local cultures. This suggests that Islam did not arrive in the archipelago by erasing prior traditions, but through a harmonious process of acculturation. By studying these artifacts, learners can understand Islamic history as part of a broader civilizational journey rooted in local cultural contexts.

A contextual learning approach is essential to prevent rigid and purely textualist interpretations of Islam. Artifacts function as *atsar*—traces that carry lessons and values. In Islamic tradition, this aligns with the Qur'anic encouragement to study the history of earlier communities. Museums can serve as a medium that bridges sacred texts with historical realities. This approach also fosters historical awareness, moderate attitudes, and appreciation for the diversity of Islamic expressions across regions.

Museum-based learning supports a student-centered paradigm, where learners become active participants in the educational process. Direct interaction with artifacts encourages reflection, analysis, and deep interpretation of Islamic values within historical and cultural contexts. The museum can also function as an intellectual laboratory, enabling students to cultivate critical thinking and historical literacy skills.

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Conflict of interests

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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