

AN ANNOTATION ON BATU ACEH ISLAMIC  
GRAVESTONES IN PULAU PINANG, MALAYSIA

BY

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## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted in order to annotate different relevant data on the subject of classical Malay-Muslim Islamic gravestones known as Batu Aceh in the state of Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. Batu Aceh are valuable lithic (stone) archaeo-historical artefacts that provide various information on the complex local society in the past. Previously, the construction of the Malay World's historical narrative, especially pertaining the presence and emergence of the earliest Islamic society in the region, began with the study over different stone inscriptions, such as those in Permatang Pasir (Pahang), Leran (Java), Pangrang (Vietnam) and Kuala Berang (Terengganu). Likewise, Batu Aceh's role is similar as a form of primary source where they are mainly observed from their patterns of distribution, physical aspects as well as historical documentation in explaining their presence. Batu Aceh are civilisational material and philosophical products of the local society of the past; they were manufactured by professional artisans from as early as 15<sup>th</sup> century CE to 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, when they began to transform into modern gravestone manufacture. Batu Aceh in Pulau Pinang are studied via extensive annotation of data based on three main aspects, which are: the sites and distribution, the forms and features, and the historical context. The first aspect demonstrates that Batu Aceh gravestones do exist in significant numbers at different historical sites and they are a part of a larger similar Islamic gravestone culture found across the region. The second aspect annotates the physical manifestation of the artefacts, namely through dimension (size), typology, ornamentation and epigraphy (inscription) as they provide information over the identity of the deceased and the society which once revolved around their presence vis-a-vis status, gender, name, date, etc. The final annotation provides historical context of Batu Aceh from various different sources, such as old manuscripts and traditions, colonial documents and modern academic works. This aspect also helps establish the early presence of Malay Muslims as developers and rulers of the state from 15<sup>th</sup> century CE until early modern time. The findings of this study will help in strengthening the existence of Malay-Muslim society in Pulau Pinang, especially against the colonial and Eurocentric historical narratives.

## مُلخَصُ البَحْثِ

أُجْرِي هذا البَحْثُ لإِضَافَةِ بَيَانَاتٍ تَوْضِيحِيَّةٍ مُخْتَلِفَةٍ تَتَّصِلُ بِمَوْضُوعِ شَوَاهِدِ قُبُورِ مُسْلِمِي المَلايو المَعْرُوفَةِ بِاسْمِ "بَاتُو آتَشِيَه" فِي وِلايَةِ جَزِيرَةِ بِيِنَجِ المَاليزِيَّةِ؛ إِذْ تُعَدُّ مِنَ الأَثَارِ التَّارِيخِيَّةِ الحَجْرِيَّةِ القِيَمَةِ الَّتِي تُوفِّرُ مَعْلُومَاتٍ مُخْتَلِفَةً عَنِ المَجْتَمَعِ المَحَلِّيِ المُنْتَوِعِ فِي المَاضِي، فِي السَّرْدِ التَّارِيخِي العَالَمِيِّ لِلنَّقُوشِ الحَجْرِيَّةِ نَجْدَ أَنْ دَرِاسَتَهَا بَدَأَتْ فِي المَاضِي، وَلا سِيَمَا مَا يَتَّعَلِقُ بِبَدْءِ نَشْوَءِ المَجْتَمَعِ الإِسْلَامِيِّ فِي المَنْطِقَةِ؛ مِنْ مِثْلِ تِلْكَ الَّتِي فِي: بَرْمَاتِنَجِ بَاسِيرِ (بَهِنَجِ)، وَلِيرَانَ (جَاوَا)، وَبَانَجَرِنَجِ (فِيْتِنَامِ)، وَكُوَالِبِيرِنَجِ (تَرِنَجَانُو)، كَمَا يُعَدُّ "بَاتُو آتَشِيَه" نَوْعًا مِنَ المَصَادِرِ الرِّئِيسَةِ مِنْ خِلَالِ المَوْقِعِ وَالشَّكْلِ وَالمَدُونَةِ التَّارِيخِيَّةِ، وَهُوَ مَنْتَجٌ ذُو رَمَزٍ حَضَارِيِّ وَفَلَسْفِيِّ لِمَجْتَمَعِ المَحَلِّيِّ، اعْتَنَى بِهِ حَرْفِيُّو النَّقْشِ الحَجْرِيِّ مَا بَيْنَ القَرْنَيْنِ الخَامِسِ عَشَرَ وَالتَّاسِعِ عَشَرَ المِئَلادِيِّينَ؛ إِلى حِينِ التَّحَوُّلِ إِلى صِنَاعَةِ شَوَاهِدِ القُبُورِ الحَدِيثَةِ، وَقَدْ جَرَتْ دَرِاسَةٌ "بَاتُو آتَشِيَه" فِي جَزِيرَةِ بِيِنَجِ مِنْ خِلَالِ شَرْحِ شَامِلٍ تَوْضِيحِيٍّ لِلبَيَانَاتِ؛ اسْتِنَادًا إِلى ثَلَاثَةِ عَنَاصِرٍ رِئِيسَةٍ هِيَ: المَوَاقِعُ وَتَوَرُّعُهَا، وَالأَشْكَالُ وَمِلامِحُهَا، وَالمَدُونَاتُ التَّارِيخِيَّةِ؛ إِذْ يُوَضِّحُ العَنَصْرُ الأَوَّلُ أَنَّ شَوَاهِدَ القُبُورِ كَثِيرَةٌ فِي مَوَاقِعٍ تَّارِيخِيَّةٍ مُخْتَلِفَةٍ، وَأَنَّهَا جُزْءٌ مِنَ ثَقَافَةِ "بَاتُو آتَشِيَه" المَنْتَشِرَةِ فِي المَنْطِقَةِ، أَمَّا العَنَصْرُ الثَّانِي فَيُشْرِحُ التَّشْكِيلَ المَادِي لِلْمَنْقُوشَاتِ مِنْ حَيْثُ الحِجْمُ وَالتَّصْنِيفُ وَالزَّخْرَفَةُ وَالنَّقُوشُ وَمَا فِيهَا مِنْ مَعْلُومَاتٍ عَنِ المَتُوفَى اسْمُهُ وَجِنْسُهُ وَحَالَتُهُ الاجْتِمَاعِيَّةِ وَتَارِيخُ وِلاَدَتِهِ وَوَفَاتِهِ... إِخ، فِي حِينِ يُوَضِّحُ العَنَصْرُ الثَّالِثُ المَحْتَوَى التَّارِيخِيَّ لِلشَوَاهِدِ مِنْ مَصَادِرٍ مُخْتَلِفَةٍ؛ مِنْ مِثْلِ المَخْطُوطَاتِ القَدِيمَةِ وَالتَّقَالِيدِ وَالمُوثَاقِ الاستِعمَارِيَّةِ وَالدَّرِاسَاتِ الأَكَادِيمِيَّةِ الحَدِيثَةِ، مِمَّا يَسَاعِدُ فِي تَوْضِيحِ الحُضُورِ المَبْكَرِ لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ المَلايو حُكَاةً لِلدَّوْلَةِ مِنْذُ القَرْنِ الخَامِسِ عَشَرَ المِئَلادِيِّ إِلى يَوْمِنَا هَذَا، وَتَعْزِيزِ حُضُورِ مَجْتَمَعِ المَلايو المُسْلِمِ فِي جَزِيرَةِ بِيِنَجِ، مِمَّا يَنَاقِضُ الرِّوَايَةَ التَّارِيخِيَّةَ الاستِعمَارِيَّةَ الأوروپِيَّةَ.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in History and Civilization

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATMA UKM	Institute of the Malay World and Civilization, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
BORR	Butterworth Outer Ring Road
CenPRIS	Centre for Policy Research and International Studies
CGAR (PPAG)	Centre for Global Archaeological Research (Pusat Penyelidikan Arkeologi Global)
IIUM	International Islamic University of Malaysia
IPG	Institut Pendidikan Guru
ISTAC	International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation
KOMTAR	Kompleks Tun Abrul Razak
MAIPP	Majlis Agama Islam Pulau Pinang
MAPESA	Masyarakat Peduli Sejarah Aceh
PADAT	Lembaga Adat dan Muzium Negeri Selangor
PLUS	Projek Lebuhraya Utara-Selatan (North-South Expressway Project)
PSMCK	Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia Cawangan Kedah
UKM	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Pulau Pinang (lit. Penang Island) is a small modern state within the Federation of Malaysia, situated on the north-western coast of the Malay Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> Its geography consists of Pulau Pinang Island, and Seberang Perai which is on the mainland opposite of it. Both are separated by a narrow strait but connected with water transportation service and two long man-made bridges. Pulau Pinang, throughout history, has been an important port of call for sea voyagers and traders from all over the world. Its days of glory started as early as the 15th and 16th centuries of the Common Era (CE), when Zheng He, in his cartography, mentioned *Pinlang Yu* Island as a stop along his journey to the West.<sup>2</sup>

The Portuguese also visited her water and landed near the shore to replenish from their long and exhaustive voyage between the Indian port of Goa and their possession in the Strait of Malacca and the Eastern Sea. Throughout 16th and 17th centuries CE, they battled the Acehnese armada who wanted to dominate the whole Strait of Malacca for its lucrative monopoly on pepper and other spice commodities from the Portuguese.<sup>3</sup> The brief appearance of the Dutch after their conquest of Malacca in 1624 along the northern shore of the Malay Peninsula was followed by a much more serious British agenda. In order to compete with the Dutch's monopoly down south the

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmad Murad Merican et al., *Views from Pulau Pinang Countering Modern Orientalism and Policy Perspectives* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD), 2018). The thesis will follow recent concept of de-colonising the name of local places and to use their original local Malay names instead. For convenience, their European names will be mentioned as well where relevant.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese* (Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya Press, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> James Frederick Augustine, *Bygone Kedah* (Kedah: The State Museum Kedah Darul Aman, 1992).

strait, the British saw Pulau Pinang as the most potential site for their oriental trade headquarters.

In the 1500s, after visiting Aceh and on his way to Johor and Siam, James Lancaster anchored off the southern harbor of Pulau Pinang, where he met local inhabitants and mentioned that the island was a famous retreat for the Kedahan royal family. From Aceh, the British visited Kedah, where Francis Light acquired Pulau Pinang from a treaty signed with the Sultan of Kedah in 1786 CE. The mainland side was fully annexed via another treaty with the same sultanate in 1800 CE, showing that the territory was very strategic to both the British colonial interests and to the local sultanate. It was clear that 1786 was not the first foot being set upon the land of Pulau Pinang, though the British were accountable in turning it into one of the most modern and bustling entrepot in the late classical period in the Orient before they decided to focus more on Singapore after 1824 CE.

Pulau Pinang was well known as the place where cultures and civilisations from the West, from as far as as the British Isles, to the East as far as Japan, met and blend in a colourful mosaic and as a melting pot. Ideas, politics, trades, cultures, sciences and technologies were present in the small island. From thereon, the paradigm of the people shifted locally and internationally and became the impetus for cultural reformation, revivalism, modernisation and globalisation.<sup>4</sup> However, we must take note that the history of civilised Pulau Pinang as such started much earlier than ever believed. It indeed predates any existing record by proving the existence of local inhabitant activities, habitations and settlements that were neither primitive nor relatively complex to the region and yet as vibrant as the colonial establishment later.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Zabielskis, Yeoh Seng Guan and Kat Fatland, *Penang and Its Network of Knowledge* (Penang: Areca Books, 2017).



This is a lost culture and civilisation actually, which makes us perceive that the colonial power, through their preserved infrastructure, sophisticated records of administration and continuity of culture, predominated over the local Malays. However, the vernacular society and system actually prevailed as well, with significant honour and development at par, though it may not have surpassed the former. Francis Light mentioned that in a survey made in the 1780s, the area of Tanjong Penaga (also referred as Tanjong by local Malays until today; also modern-day Georgetown) and Sungai Pinang were inhabited by several hundreds of Malay settlers; together with Batu Uban, both localities are evidence for the presence of earlier semi-urban Malay settlements. They were recorded to be established by locals from Sumatra, Borneo and other Malay islands from around the archipelago from as early as 1690 CE and 1710 CE.<sup>5</sup> These settlements were associated with early pirates and were replaced by later settlers from Sumatra led by Datuk Jenaton, Nakhoda Nan Intan, Nakhoda Kechil and Nakhoda Bayan.<sup>6</sup>

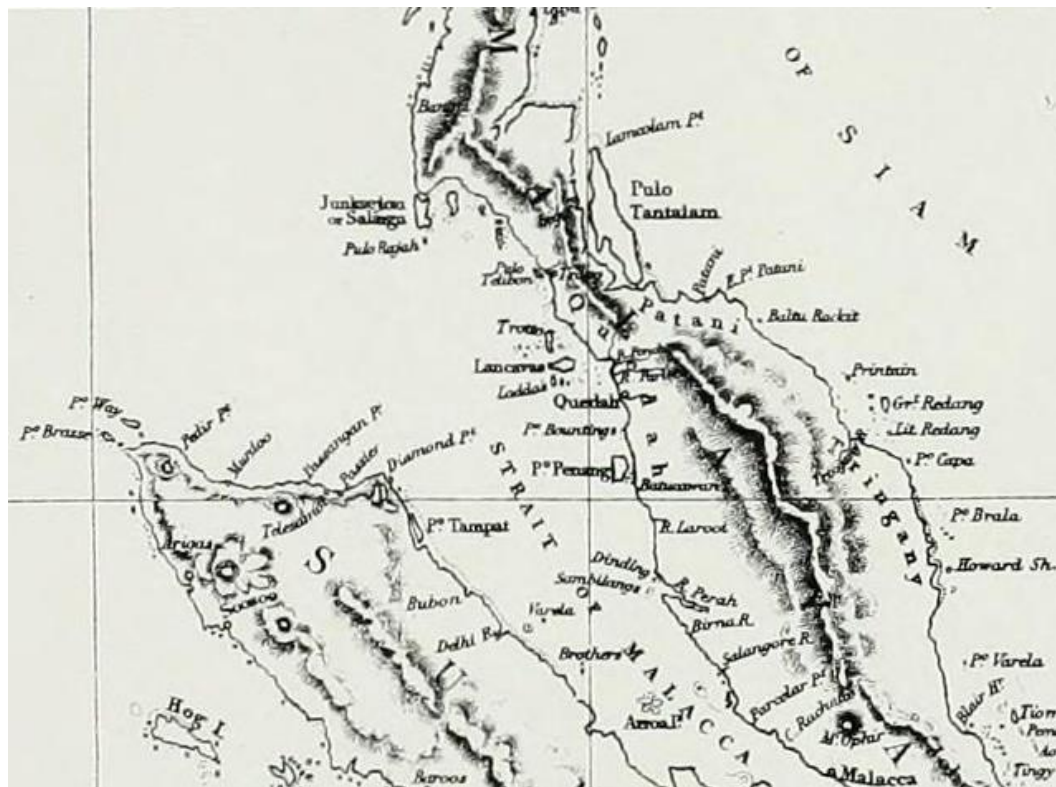
The British did notice these pre-colonial settlers but ignored them as an establishment. Ironically, the former made use of the latter to maintain their immediate settlement, which was set up in the town of Tanjong on the island and Perai (Butterworth) on the mainland. The settlers proved to be useful in maintaining British economic and administrative network on the mainland. Another enigma on the historicity of this area was the understudied role of Malay leaders during the colonial period, such as Tunku Sayyid Hussain al-Aydrus, a royal pretender to the throne of Aceh who was later dubbed as the tycoon *raja* (king) of Pulau Pinang. Arriving from the war-torn Aceh in 1795 CE, he based his activities in Pulau Pinang with colonial

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<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Haji Salleh, *Sejarah Awal Pulau Pinang* (Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2008). See also Ahmad Murad Merican (2015), *Batu Uban Sejarah Awal Pulau Pinang*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

support until his death in 1820s CE.<sup>7</sup> He indeed was the colonial state's strongman for decades and a central figure within the local-colonial system whom has gone unrecognised.



Map 1 : An old map of the Strait of Malacca in 19th century. The island of Pulau Pinang and its mainland corridor are situated at the center of world Indo-Pacific maritime network. The location won its fame as a bustling international port-of-call or entreport from as early as the 15th. (Source: www.nas.gov.sg)

Concrete evidence for the existence of local Malay early settlements in Pulau Pinang is agreeably scarce until today and local scholars are trying to uncover more evidence. The frequent use of perishable timber structure made masonry as a better and durable alternative, but they were almost non-existent and scarcely found except for a

<sup>7</sup> Marcus Langdon, *Penang: the Fourth Presidency of India, 1805 - 1830* (Penang: Areca Books, 2013)

handful. Based on this development, we may turn our attention to other masonry artefacts as historical primary references. We have, in this area, numerous ancient graves and gravestones owned by Malay Muslims. In fact, Pulau Pinang has a significant number of these artefacts known as Batu Aceh (lit. Aceh stone), which will be the main subject of this study. In olden Malay *hikayat*, they also referred as *nisyan* (lit. memorial inscription), which is still in use in modern Malay literature as *nisan*. Briefly, the *hikayat* became a good source of evidence that the local Malays were present within early socio-political entity, together contributed with the development of Islam in the region.

Batu Aceh, as a generic term, is widely used in Malaysian archaeological tradition. Its presence is important as it provides us with various information not only about the owners from among noble class, but also towards the pattern of settlement, craftsmanship, and the historical context surrounding their lives. Suprayitno stated that the term “Batu Aceh” is well known in Malaysia, while in Indonesia or in North Sumatra, the local locals used to call the artefacts “Batu Meraksa”. The latter term is taken from its place of origin in an Acehnese village known as Meraksa.<sup>8</sup> They significantly represent the centrifugal and sacralized manifestation of the local Malay-Muslim culture of the time. A large number of them were indeed annotated and discovered across the Malay World; in Malaysia alone, it may reach around five hundred (500), while in North Sumatra, it superceded five thousands (5000), making them the most significant archaeo-historical material ever made into use in this region.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Suprayitno, "Evidence of the Beginning of Islam in Sumatera: Study on the Acehnese Tombstone", *Tawarikh: International Journal for Historical Studies* 2, no. 2(2001).

<sup>9</sup> Othman Mohd. Yatim, *Batu Aceh Early Islamic Gravestones in Peninsular Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Museum Association of Malaysia, Department of Museums, Malaysia, 1988). See also Daniel Perret et al. *Makam-makam Islam Lama di Maritim Asia Tenggara* (Kuala Lumpur: Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient and Jabatan Muzium Malaysia, 2017). See also Mohamad Noval, Mokhtar Saidin and Husaini Ibrahim, "Nisan Plak Pleng Sebagai Nisan Terawal dalam Perkembangan Nisan Aceh" (unpublished article).

The continuation of such a tradition is associated with the development of Islam and Muslim sultanates in the Malay World, which started to embrace Islam as early as from the 10th to 13th centuries CE, and progressed along with the religio-cultural development in India, the classical Middle East and Africa.

Annotation and the archaeo-historical study of stone inscriptions, where documentation and contextualisation of the studied subjects are involved, is proven to be vital in deciphering this early development as well as in marking the trajectory milestones achieved by the local society in Pulau Pinang and Seberang Perai areas as one of its regional centres. In Pulau Pinang, twenty four (24) pairs of Batu Aceh have been discovered so far; with the exception of Tunku Sayyid Hussain Tunku's Acehnese gravestones, the rest are significant pre-colonial artefacts, which may place the local Malay-Muslims' history in Pulau Pinang to have begun since 15th century CE.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

This study is focused on the subject of Batu Aceh Islamic gravestones in the Malay World. Based on early observation, several main issues or problems were identified in rationalising the study. The problems faced are generally gaps found from previous studies by scholars and students, in particular within the scope of the state of Pulau Pinang.

The first issue is that we want to know on how far Batu Aceh artefacts are present physically and thus distributed within the boundary of the state of Pulau Pinang. In the past theses produced by Othman Yatim, Daniel Perret, Kamaruddin Abdul Razak, Ludvik Kavlus and Abdul Halim Nasir, no documentation or annotation on the subject

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was produced, except for two pairs situated at the Masjid Melayu Lebu Aceh that was owned by the late Tunku Sayyid Hussain al-Adrus, who was of Acehnese origin. We need to produce proper and comprehensive annotation over the real number of Batu Aceh as they are artefacts of significant value to the local, regional and international Islamic history and culture. The problem lies in the effort of identifying the sites, which are either lost or forgotten by many; although they exist among the society, they remain rather out of their awareness radar. Urbanisation and rapid infrastructural development involving the locations of Batu Aceh are prone to hill slope terracing, riverbank and coastal reclamation projects and the replacement of traditional old *kampungs* or cemeteries. Within the archaeological practice, the discovery of the artefacts themselves is not enough without the efforts of identifying, firstly, the contexts such as the history of the sites, secondly, the socio-cultural and economic background of the community and, thirdly, the natural environment such as the geography, hydrography and topography of the sites.

Secondly, the subsequent identification of the sites and their surrounding contexts are where we will obtain information pertaining the Batu Aceh themselves. The gravestones, as they appeared and produced over centuries in a specific and unique form of style, make them rather distinguished compared to other types of artefacts, including normal gravestones. Batu Aceh contains messages and significant information behind the forms and features, which, to this day, remain as incomplete annotation on all the gravestones spreading across South East Asia or the Malay World region. This makes getting a conclusive and comprehensive picture as to why they were carved and manufactured as a challenging prospect. In this development, a few past studies have tried to identify and sort Batu Aceh into classified typologies and chronology so that the development of the art, socio-religious mind and philosophy of

the Islamic community of local origin and their possible diffusion throughout the Indo-Pacific region may be understood. The comparative study of Batu Aceh's dimension, shapes typology, epigraphy of Quranic, hadith and poetic texts, calligraphic styles and tradition, gender, spatial and intra-spatial orientations, the ornamental Arabesque or local pre-Islamic floral or geometrical motifs are all relevant elements of the subject. The study of these artefacts within the state of Pulau Pinang may add to our general knowledge by linking them to previous studies around the region as well as for prospective and potential future studies.

Thirdly, we would like to know the historical context of what made Batu Aceh to be at their respective sites, as there must be stories related to or recorded about them contemporarily or after they were produced. Pulau Pinang society and polity did not appear out of nowhere as they were built over the ruins of pre-colonial society. The arrival of Francis Light for instance did not mark the beginning of a complex human society in the area. According to a colonial survey from 1770s it was stated that several hundreds Malay-Muslim graves were found scattered at Datuk Keramat, Sungai Pinang and became a clear evidence to disprove the wrong euro-centric and pro-colonial historical narrative that the Englishmen were the first to open a modern civilised settlement there. The gravestone tradition in the area was connected with those found at neighbouring sultanates such as Lamuri, Perlak, Samudera-Pasai and Aceh in northern Sumatra, together with Kedah and Beruas-Perak and other sultanates on the Malay Peninsula, which were known to possess Batu Aceh Islamic gravestone tradition.

Going even further in history, the early Muslim society in this region was not unknown with Islamic inscription tradition. We may find them across at Leran in Java, Pandurangga in Champa, Kianggeh in Brunei, Permatang Pasir in Pekan Pahang, and at Bujang in Kedah and many more. The typo-chronological knowledge of these

artefacts will give us more insight into knowing the owners of the gravestones and their historical life, authority, events surrounding their office and other activities that somehow are represented in the forms and features found on the gravestones. The Malay World, which is rich in historical documents and ancient manuscripts as found in various *hikayat* (chronicles), *lipurlara* (lores) or in foreign records, must be in cross-reference with this hard evidence. The most recent examples of such are found in the discoveries of royal, noble and scholarly Batu Aceh in Aceh, the first and early succeeding sultans of Kedah, the *tok engkus*' of Kelang, the *datuk adat perpatih*, (two titles of local nobility) in the southern region of Malay Peninsula and the early sultans of Kelantan, among others.

In general, annotating Batu Aceh sites, their forms and history are important for the sake of preserving and maintaining premier historical evidence of pre-colonial Malay Islamic society, which in turn would greatly benefit the academia and cultural establishment of Malaysia and the Malay World.

### **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this study are to answer the questions that have arisen from the above identified problems. This study will be able to: a) annotate the sites and distribution of Batu Aceh gravestones in Pulau Pinang; b) annotate the forms and features of Batu Aceh in Pulau Pinang and; c) annotate the historical context of the Batu Aceh in Pulau Pinang.

### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Several questions have been identified in order to answer and solve relevant problems that have arisen from this research, and they pose as a sort of guidance or focus on what

should be discussed under the general topic as well as the specific subtopics found within. They are:

1. What is the distribution of Batu Aceh in Pulau Pinang?
2. What are the forms and features of Batu Aceh in Pulau Pinang?
3. What is the historical context of Batu Aceh in Pulau Pinang?

### **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study is significant in order to develop a thorough and deeper understanding of how Batu Aceh Islamic gravestones were able to take its significant position in relation to the archaeo-historical field in the Malay world. By understanding the evolution, diffusion and development of Islam visible through the region from the creation and manufacture of stone inscriptions and gravemarkers and the ideas, philosophy and practices attributed to them, we may observe the complex and dynamic nature of these artefacts that are found scattered across the maritime region of South East Asia, marking the shift of paradigm and evolution of the society under centuries of Islamisation. Batu Aceh may be understood as a finial classical product of Muslim society, which later clashed with colonial occupation, Islamic reformism period and modernisation. However, their quality survived their purpose, appreciation, respect and relevance as a historical and ahistorical material.

Proper documentation and analysis or annotation on the physical forms and features of the gravestones are required. The gravestones were indeed the manifestation of ideas and philosophy of people of the past. The intricate and lavish ornamentation lack the megastructural impact as found in traditional Indian Muslim and Middle Eastern mortuary culture. However, the intricate design found over the body of stone markers themselves, fully developed with simple technology by highly skilled hands,