

# A Brief Note on Muara Kumpeh Hilir : An Early Port Site on the Batang Hari?

by E. Edwards McKinnon

During the course of the SPAFA Consultative Workshop on Environmental and Archaeological Studies on Srivijaya, held in Jakarta, Palembang and Jambi in September 1982, the Organizing Committee very kindly provided facilities for Abu Ridho of the Museum Nasional, Jakarta, Dr P-Y Manguin of the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, Paris and the author to visit Suak Kandis and Muara Kumpeh Hilir some 72 km downstream on the Batang Hari from the modern provincial capital of Jambi. The village of Suak Kandis is located in the administrative district of Kecamatan Kumpeh, Kabupaten Batang Hari in the province of Jambi.

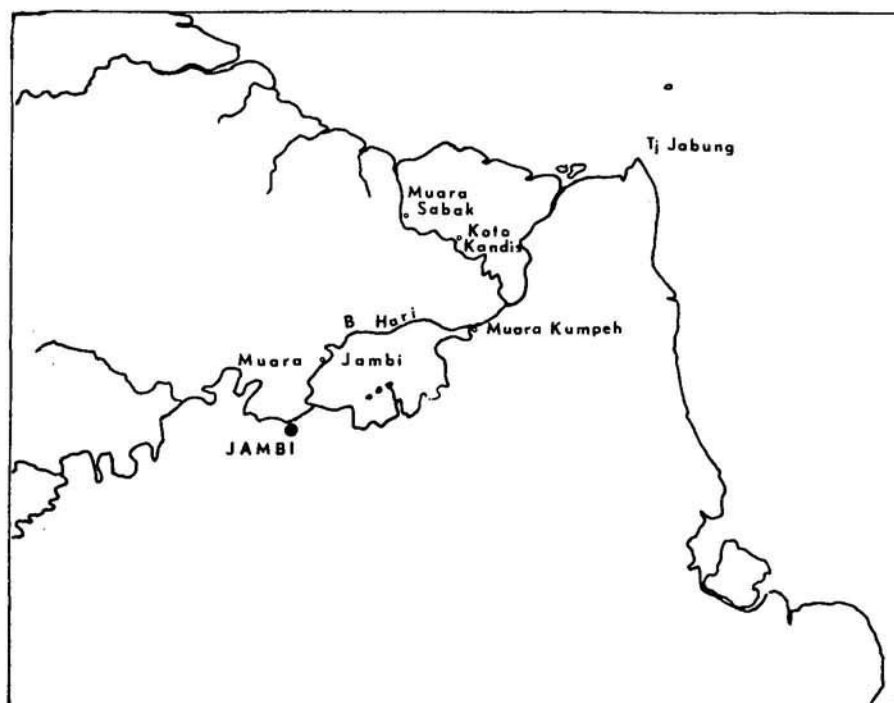
When, in 1921, Adam visited Muara Kumpeh along with Ujung Jabung and Koto Kandis, he was unable to find any trace of ancient habitation or monuments. He did, however, record a legend that linked these settlements to pre-Islamic "Hindu" occupation. He also commented to the effect that if any traces of former habitation did exist they were presumably buried

under the mud of the river bank (Adam 1921:184).

Schlegel's remarks that Muara Kumpeh "is the principal port of the country (of Jambi)" (Schlegel 1901:34) and that Kumpeh occupies a strategic position on the approach to Jambi suggest that it may have been of importance in earlier times. In a recent article concerning Pulau Kompei in Aru Bay, it

was suggested that there may have been a mistake or at least confusion in the thirteenth century Chinese text, the *Chu fan-chi* of Chau Ju-kua, regarding the toponym Kompei or Kumpeh to which sailing directions relate and a second harbour of the same name which was known as a source of tin and pearls. Neither tin nor pearls are likely to have been available in any

Map 1: The Lower Batang Hari



*Dr. E. Edwards McKinnon, a noted art historian, has a Ph.D. from Cornell University. He has done considerable work in Sumatra where he is currently based.*

quantity on Sumatra's northeast coast. Muara Kumpeh on the Batang Hari thus appears as a possible candidate for the toponym Kompei or Kumpeh which is known in Chinese sources as early as the seventh century A.D. (Edwards McKinnon and Luckman Sinar 1981).

The recent visit was thus intended to test the hypothesis that confusion existed between two toponyms named Kompei or Kumpeh in Chau Ju-kua's text and that Muara Kumpeh on the Batang Hari is a possible alternative source for the appearance of the name in Chinese texts.

## Muara Kumpeh: Historical Background

Little is known of the history of Muara Kumpeh. The point of confluence of the Batang Kumpeh with the Batang Hari, known as Tanjung Pelancu was, however, chosen in 1707 by the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (V.O.C.) as the site of a redoubt. This fortification was abandoned in 1724, presumably

ly due to an insurrection against the Dutch. It was reoccupied as a military post in 1834 and opened for general trade in 1847. The military post was withdrawn in 1868. Consequent to the treaty between the Sultan of Jambi and the Netherlands Indies administration of 1833, the post at Muara Jambi was set aside as a Government protected area (E.N.I. 1919,762). (See map 2).

Writing in 1820, Lt. S.E. Crooke of the Honourable East-India Company, who visited Jambi in the course of a politico-economic survey of the area, describes Muara Kumpoh mentioned "Muara Kampau", as "13 houses, on the right, at the junction of the arm of the river from which it takes the name. It is 42 miles below Jambi. The bank on which it stands is about 10 feet above the surface of the river at its lowest state but is inundated in the rains" (Anderson 1971: 398).

### Archaeological Evidence

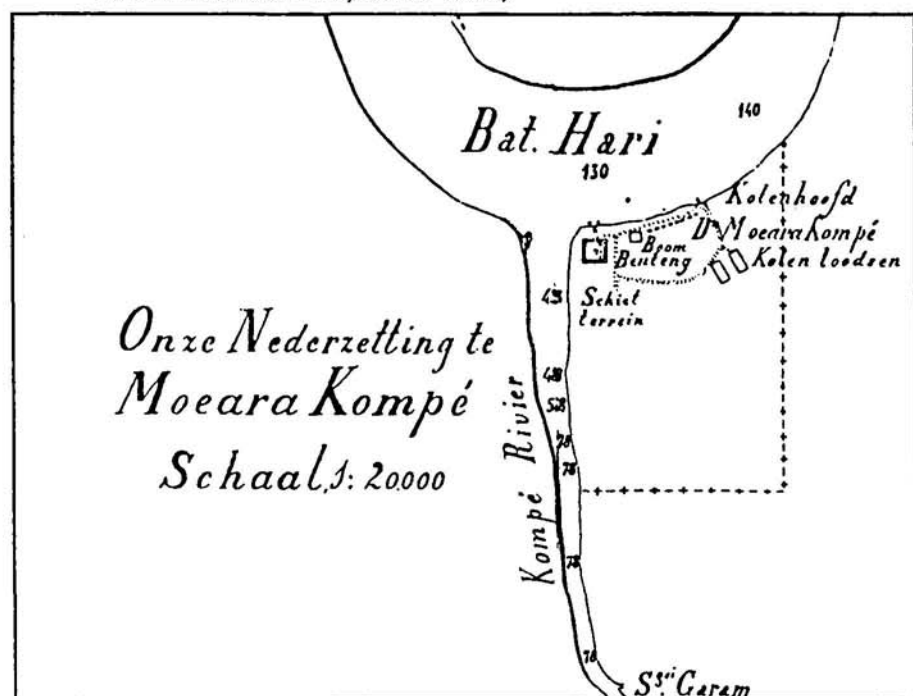
A brief inspection of the river

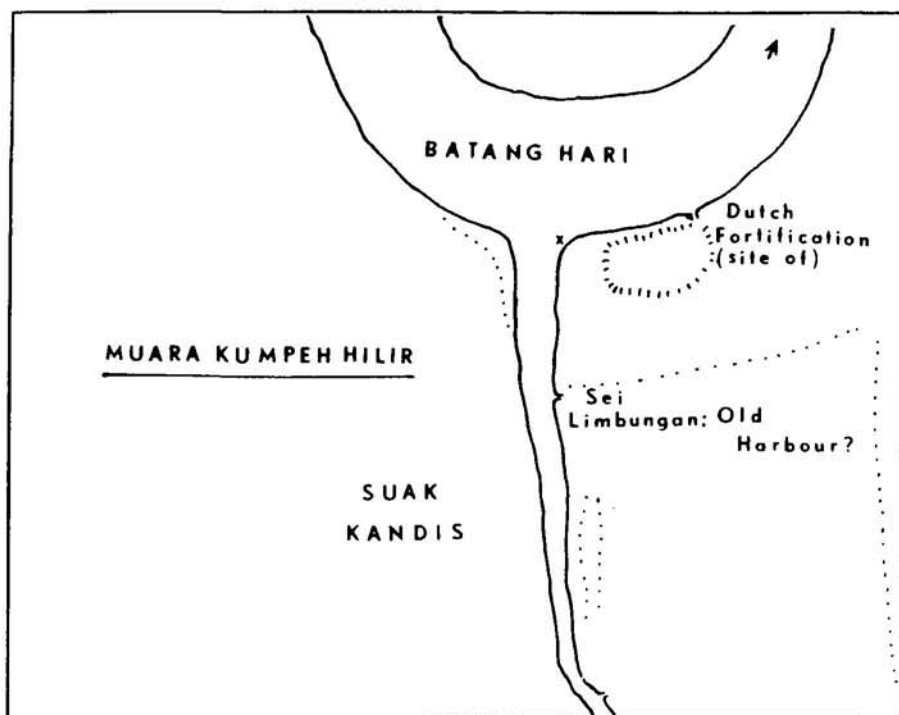
bank at Tanjung Pelancu, the downstream point of confluence of the Batang Kumpeh and the Batang Hari quickly established the existence of an accumulation of cultural remains revealed by the low state of the tide. Due to the short amount of time available in the late afternoon and rising water, it was not possible to ascertain the exact depth of the strata which appeared at about 1.75 below the surface of the bank and extended to at least 3 metres, the maximum amount of bank exposed at the time. According to a local informant, however, traces of rubbish are visible for at least a further one metre at low water. This information, if correct, would indicate that the accumulation of debris extends to a depth of some three metres overall. The top of the cultural layer is coincident with the high water level mark on the bank, approximately 1.75 m below the present ground surface. It was not possible to ascertain the full lateral extent of the remains which were exposed over some 20 to 30 metres.

The debris, exposed by water action on the river bank, are characterized by sherds of indigenous earthenware and Chinese stonewares of the 12th to 14th centuries A.D. Organic remains comprising wooden posts, bivalve shells, fragments of bone, coconut shells and copious amounts of carbonized material are also to be seen. The keel and timbers of an ancient ship were discovered protruding from the bank approximately two and one half metres below the surface of the river bank at the point where it begins to curve downstream on the Batang Hari.

A collection of ceramic sherds was taken from the river bank at or just above the water level, then a metre below the high water mark. Fifty three sherds were collected, of which 14 are earthenware and the remainder Chinese stonewares comprising fragments of characteristic Lung ch'uan green glazed (celadon) ware, white glazed fragments from Fukien kilns and the base of an unglazed stoneware bottle thought to be associated with the mercury trade<sup>1</sup>. The range and quality of material found at Muara

*Map 2: Muara Kumpeh Hilir in 1977 (from P. J. Vith Midden-Sumatra Expeditie 1881)*





Map 3: Muara Kumpeh Hilir

X - Site of the ship and archaeological finds at Tanjung Pelancu

Kumpeh appear similar to that recovered at Kota Cina in northeastern Sumatra<sup>2</sup>.

A single Chinese coin bearing the legend *K'ai Yuan t'ung pao*, datable to the T'ang dynasty (618-907), was recovered at the same spot, as was a fragment of a bead of *mutisalah* (red glass).

At Suak Kandis, on the opposite bank of the Batang Kumpeh, a brief inspection also revealed a scatter of Sung and Yuan period Chinese stonewares. Sherds are also said to be found at points downstream from Tanjung Pelancu on the Batang Hari itself.

A short distance upstream from Tanjung Pelancu on the Batang Kumpeh, the height of the river bank decreases rapidly. The Kumpeh is then joined by a stream known as the Sungai Limbungan. An examination of the river bank at this point revealed that the Batang Kumpeh has changed its course, leaving a wide, deep area of silted up flood plain bordered at a

distance by a ridge of higher ground. Such an area may once have afforded a useful anchorage of considerable extent. That this area was indeed an anchorage is suggested by the name of the stream given above: *limbungan* means literally an inner harbour or inland port (*sic*). The configuration of the topography would also help to explain the apparent lack of cultural remains upstream of Tanjung Pelancu on the Batang Kumpeh. The river is now much narrower than formerly. The low area is used by the villagers of Suak Kandis for *ladang* or dryland rice growing.

### Conclusion

The remains at Muara Kumpeh Hilir suggest the existence of a settlement site similar in nature to that of present day Sungsang at the mouth of the Musi river in South Sumatra<sup>3</sup>. The vestiges of piles indicate that buildings stood at or

just beyond the water's edge.

Considering the immediate spatial relationships of Kumpeh and, in particular, its proximity to the major archaeological site of Muara Jambi situated some 40 km upstream, the author speculates that it may have been a riverine port of considerable importance. At Muara Jambi, excavations have revealed evidence of considerable overseas contacts and trade. Recoveries include quantities of Chinese ceramics datable to the early and late Sung and Yuan periods as well as sherds of Thai Swankhalok ware. Fragments of statuary, including the slender wrist and hand of a polished black stone Thai Buddha (probably c14, early Ayudhya style), have also come to light<sup>4</sup>, as well as a bronze gong with a dated Chinese inscription (Puspan n.d.).

The identification of an early settlement at Kumpeh is, however, important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it establishes beyond doubt the feasibility of ancient settlement in the lower Batang Hari region during the early second millennium and possibly earlier. This, in itself, underlines the necessity for further surveys and test excavations at Kumpeh and locations such as Koto Kandis<sup>5</sup>, Ujung Jabong and other estuarine locations including Sungsang on the Air Musi. It also calls for a reassessment of Obdeyn's "gulf" theory on the approach to Jambi at least in relation to Srivijaya. One must be careful not to confuse geological with historical time. As in 1978 when Professor Wolters had to "unlearn" that the effect of geomorphic changes in the Palembang/Sungsang has probably been exaggerated, researchers now seems to think that the same is also true of the lower Batang Hari<sup>6</sup>.

Kumpeh is also important for ecological reasons and an understanding of environmental conditions. The high water table at Kumpeh bears the promise of much well-preserved organic materials. This is already indicated by the recoveries at Tanjung Pelancu which included hearth debris, coconut shell and bone fragments as well as piling. Any team excavating at this

site should therefore include specialists to deal with faunal and floral remains (including pollen) and be adequately equipped to deal with large organic specimens.

The exciting combination of archaeological and environmental factors at Kumpeh should help to advance the knowledge of ecology in an early riverine settlement. Initially, however, it is essential to achieve a sense of terrain and learn to see the riverside landscape from the water in the same way as a Malay. This is, perhaps, a different perspective for most of us but important if one is to begin to recognise habitation sites in such an environment<sup>7</sup>

With regard to Chau Ju-kua's text, it seems probable that there was indeed confusion between two (contemporary?) harbour sites of the same name. Only further survey and excavation will reveal the extent and duration of ancient commercial activity at both Pulau Kompei and Muara Kumpeh.

Pulau Kompei in Aru Bay was, no doubt, an important anchorage on the northeast coast of Sumatra. Muara Kumpeh, however, had the advantage of an extensive hinterland rich in natural resources including alluvial gold and a wide range of forest products. It will be interesting to see, if any, evidence of former commercial and cultural contacts between remains of Kumpeh and the upper reaches of the Batang Hari river basin along with evidence of contemporary overseas contacts.

### Footnotes

1. For a discussion of stoneware bottles used in the mercury trade of Southeast Asia, see: Treloar (1972).
2. The Kota Cina site, situated on a branch of the Belawan river in northeastern Sumatra, was occupied by a cosmopolitan mercantile community between c12 and c14. See: Edwards McKinnon (1977).
3. On Sungsang, see: Wolters

(1979:1). For a more recent discussion of the configuration of the coast of the Selat Bangka, see Manguin (n.d.).

4. Schnitger (1937:21) notes that Thai bronze images have been found at various locations in eastern Jambi. Unfortunately he does not specify the origin of his information or the locations of the finds.
5. A 35 cm high bronze figure of a woman bearing a lamp, executed in late Cola style, was found recently at Koto Kandis (*Kompas*: 13 Augst 1982). The bronze was found by children in a river bank. Bricks are also to be found in the immediate vicinity (M. Nazir, personal communication). The inference from this

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discovery is that there may be the remains of a *candi* in the Koto Kandis area.

6. See Wolters' discussion on the approach to Palembang, Wolters (1979, II, 25).
7. I am most grateful to Professor Wolters for the opportunity of discussing the nature of Srivijayan habitation sites and for many valuable ideas expounded in his lectures on early Southeast Asian history at Cornell in 1978.

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