

Before Modern Terrorism: Was There Political Terror in Ancient Indonesia?

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates whether political terror can be examined in ancient Indonesia without anachronistically applying the modern concept of terrorism to early political formations. Employing a qualitative historical-critical literature review and epigraphic source analysis, the study examines the emergence and representation of political authority from prehistory to the early Sanskrit Yūpa inscriptions discovered at Muara Kaman, East Kalimantan, conventionally associated with the polity known as Kutai. The analysis integrates archaeological, historical, linguistic, and political-violence scholarship. The findings suggest that social differentiation and ranked authority plausibly predated the earliest surviving written records of kingship. The Yūpa inscriptions document dynastic genealogy, Sanskritic political representation, Brahmanical ritual, royal generosity, and claims of military conquest and tributary submission under King Mūlavarmān. Importantly, these accounts of conquest constitute evidence of the political representation of military domination, but do not independently establish systematic intimidation, deliberate fear-producing violence, or psychological effects extending beyond the immediate targets of conflict. The study therefore distinguishes military conquest, political subjugation, symbolic legitimization, and audience-directed terror as analytically separable mechanisms of political power. It argues that ancient political authority could be communicated through both coercive and legitimizing claims without necessarily satisfying the defining characteristics of terrorism. Rather than identifying ancient terrorism, the article demonstrates how the political communication of authority and the political communication of fear can be investigated as related but distinct historical phenomena.

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INTRODUCTION

Histories of political power in the Indonesian archipelago often begin at the point at which authority becomes visible in durable records: inscriptions, named rulers, religious monuments, courtly institutions, and identifiable territorial polities. Yet this documentary threshold creates a basic historical problem. The earliest surviving inscription cannot automatically be treated as the beginning of political organization. It is better understood as the earliest surviving evidence through which modern observers can glimpse political transformations that may already have been underway. The question, therefore, is not simply when the first kingdom appeared in the record, but how political authority became possible before kingdoms became historically visible. This leads to a deceptively simple question: How did political authority first emerge in the Indonesian archipelago?

The problem is especially significant in a region characterized by extensive mobility, ecological diversity, maritime connectivity, and geographically dispersed communities. Long before the appearance of historically documented kingdoms, populations moved through Island Southeast Asia, interacted with earlier inhabitants, established settlements, and participated in increasingly extensive networks of exchange. Research on Austronesian expansion has linked population movement with changing forms of settlement and social organization, while comparative work on Austronesian societies suggests that ranking and hereditary forms of status may

have deep prehistoric roots (Bellwood, 1996, 2005). These developments indicate that hierarchy did not suddenly appear with the first inscriptions. Yet migration, exchange, and social differentiation do not by themselves explain kingship. Communities can trade without becoming centralized states; populations can migrate without producing monarchies; and inequality can exist without generating a ruler whose authority is recognized beyond a narrow kin group. The transition from relatively decentralized communities to more durable and hierarchical political formations therefore requires explanation. Comparative theories of political development have emphasized combinations of economic control, social inequality, military or coercive capacity, and ideological power in the emergence of chiefly and state authority (Earle, 1997; Flannery & Marcus, 2012). Such approaches make an internally generated pathway to political hierarchy plausible, but they do not exhaust the possibilities relevant to early Southeast Asia.

The archipelago was also embedded in wider Asian networks. During the early centuries of the Common Era, connections between South and Southeast Asia became increasingly visible in archaeological and epigraphic evidence. Sanskrit emerged as a major language of elite inscription and political-cultural expression in parts of Southeast Asia, while Hindu and Buddhist concepts, ritual practices, artistic forms, and political idioms were selectively adopted and transformed within local societies (Ali, 2011; Bronkhorst, 2011; Manguin et al., 2011). The political significance of Sanskrit can also be understood within the wider development of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, in which language, literary expression, and royal representation became interconnected across premodern South and Southeast Asia (Pollock, 2006). Nevertheless, participation in this transregional cultural sphere did not necessarily produce uniform political institutions. Local rulers could appropriate Sanskritic forms selectively, incorporating them into existing structures of authority and political competition (Ali, 2011; Mabbett, 1977a, 1977b; Wolters, 1982). The significance of these connections lies not merely in the presence of foreign cultural elements, but in the possibility that interaction with them expanded the repertoire through which authority could be represented, justified, and organized. This creates a second question: What happens to political organization when ideas, symbols, ritual practices, languages, and specialists associated with an external civilization enter an already existing social landscape?

The question is not whether “Indian influence” reached Southeast Asia. The more difficult issue is what such interaction did - and did not do - to local configurations of power. Older scholarship frequently approached the problem through the language of “Indianization,” sometimes encouraging diffusionist interpretations in which Southeast Asian political development appeared as the consequence of cultural transmission from India. That model has long been contested. Even early critiques emphasized the limitations of simple one-directional explanations, while later scholarship has focused more strongly on localization, selection, adaptation, and the agency of Southeast Asian societies themselves (Mabbett, 1977a, 1977b; Manguin et al., 2011). Ali (2011), moreover, cautions against assuming a straightforward correspondence between Sanskrit cultural practices and particular state structures. The relationship between external cultural resources and political transformation therefore remains an empirical question rather than a conclusion that can be presumed in advance.

This distinction opens a productive conceptual space. If forms of hierarchy were already developing within local communities, did Indic cultural and religious resources primarily provide new vocabularies and symbols for authority that was emerging for other reasons? Did they alter the scale, durability, or perceived legitimacy of political authority? Or did different combinations occur in different places? These possibilities cannot be resolved simply by identifying the presence of Sanskrit, Hindu-Buddhist ritual, or imported material culture. They require attention to the mechanisms through which authority became recognizable and compelling. For the study of political violence, this raises a further question: what role, if any, did coercion and fear play in that transformation? Political authority does not rest on physical violence alone. Comparative theories of power distinguish the capacity to compel from the processes through which domination is recognized, justified, routinized, or accepted as legitimate (Weber, 1978). Archaeological approaches likewise emphasize that durable political power may combine economic, military, and ideological resources rather than depend on any single source (Earle, 1997). Fear, therefore, is analytically relevant not because all authority is terroristic, but because coercive capacity and perceptions of possible punishment can coexist with ritual, status, belief, and legitimacy.

This distinction is essential when concepts from Terrorism Studies are brought into a much earlier historical setting. Modern terrorism is not synonymous with violence, intimidation, or fear. It is generally treated as a distinctive form of political violence in which violence or its threat has communicative effects extending beyond its immediate victims and is directed toward political or social objectives (Crenshaw, 2000; Schmid, 2011). To describe early kingdoms simply as “terrorist” would therefore collapse important historical and conceptual differences.

The present study takes a different route. Rather than projecting the modern category of terrorism backward, it asks whether a concept central to Terrorism Studies - the political production and communication of fear - can illuminate a more fundamental historical problem: how coercive capacity becomes socially meaningful and politically consequential. The issue is not whether early rulers practiced terrorism, but how emerging elites may have combined material power, violence or its threat, ritual, symbolic distinction, and claims to legitimacy in ways that encouraged obedience.

The distinction between political violence and political terror is particularly important in interpreting early Indonesian epigraphic evidence. The Yūpa inscriptions associated with King Mūlavarman include a royal claim that other rulers were defeated in battle and made tributary to his authority (Chhabra, 1965; Supomo, 2006). This account indicates that military conquest and political subordination formed part of the representation of early rulership. Yet conquest should not automatically be equated with terrorism.

An inscription celebrating military victory may legitimize royal supremacy, communicate political dominance, or commemorate

successful expansion without necessarily documenting a deliberate strategy of intimidation directed toward a wider population. The analytical challenge is therefore to distinguish evidence of organized violence from evidence that fear itself was intentionally employed as an instrument of political influence (Schmid, 2011; Tilly, 2003; Zakharov, 2019).

The Indonesian archipelago is particularly useful for this inquiry because its early political history sits at the intersection of local social development and long-distance cultural interaction. The eventual appearance of historically visible kingdoms need not be interpreted either as a purely indigenous evolution or as a political system imported from India. Both formulations risk deciding the answer before the evidence is examined. A more productive approach is to investigate how local hierarchy, exchange, coercion, ritual authority, and external cultural resources interacted - and whether their interaction changed the ways political power could be imagined, displayed, and enforced. Accordingly, the central research question is: How did coercion, fear, symbolic authority, and external cultural influences interact in the emergence of political power in the Indonesian archipelago?

This study aims to develop a historical-conceptual account of the emergence of political authority in the Indonesian archipelago by examining the interaction of social hierarchy, coercive capacity, fear, legitimacy, and cross-cultural exchange before and during the emergence of early kingdoms. Rather than imposing the modern category of terrorism on ancient societies, it investigates the mechanisms through which violence or its threat, symbolic authority, and legitimacy could become politically meaningful.

The study's contribution lies in bringing a carefully bounded question from Terrorism Studies into the study of early political formation without treating ancient political violence as terrorism. Scholarship on early Southeast Asia has extensively examined cross-cultural interaction, Sanskritization, localization, ritual authority, inscriptions, and state formation (Ali, 2011; Bronkhorst, 2011; Mabbett, 1977a, 1977b; Manguin et al., 2011). Comparative archaeological scholarship has likewise examined the economic, military, social, and ideological foundations of hierarchy and political power (Earle, 1997; Flannery & Marcus, 2012). What is less developed is a systematic conceptual bridge between these literatures and the political psychology of fear that is central to the study of terrorism and political violence.

The proposed contribution is therefore not a historical continuum of terrorism. It is an investigation of a potentially much older political mechanism: the production of obedience through changing combinations of coercion, fear, symbolic authority, and legitimacy. This framing deliberately leaves the causal direction open. It does not presume that Indic influence created kingship, that fear produced political authority, or that coercion preceded legitimacy. Those relationships are questions for the research to investigate. The inquiry begins, therefore, with a question that precedes the kingdom itself: Before political authority became visible in inscriptions and named rulers, who possessed the capacity to make others obey - and through what combination of power, belief, fear, exchange, and legitimacy did that capacity become recognized as authority?

POLITICAL VIOLENCE, FEAR, AND THE HISTORICAL BOUNDARIES OF TERRORISM

Terrorism is a modern analytical category, whereas the political use of violence, intimidation, and fear is considerably older. This distinction is fundamental to the present study. The purpose is not to retrospectively classify early Indonesian societies as "terrorist," but to ask whether some mechanisms that are central to the analysis of terrorism (especially the relationship among violence, fear, communication, and political influence) can illuminate earlier processes through which political authority was constructed.

Definitions of terrorism remain contested, and no single formulation commands universal agreement. Nevertheless, political purpose or political influence occupies a central place in many influential conceptualizations, alongside violence or its threat and psychological effects that extend beyond the immediate victim (Crenshaw, 1981; Hoffman, 2006; Schmid, 2011). Crenshaw (1981) treats terrorism as a strategic form of political action rather than an inexplicable eruption of violence. Hoffman (2006) likewise distinguishes terrorism from ordinary crime partly through its political character, while Schmid's (2011) synthesis foregrounds the communicative and psychological dimensions of terrorist violence. The conceptual bridge used here is therefore not violence alone, but violence or intimidation that acquires meaning through its relationship to political influence and an audience.

Fear, accordingly, should not be treated as synonymous with terrorism. Fear can arise from warfare, punishment, repression, ritual, religious belief, social hierarchy, or threats to material security. Its analytical significance emerges when the production or anticipation of harm is connected to attempts to shape conduct, collective expectations, or relations of authority. This distinction makes it possible to ask historically whether fear functioned politically without presuming that the actors who produced it were terrorists in the modern sense.

The study therefore situates terrorism within the wider terrain of political and collective violence. Tilly (2003) treats collective violence as a form of contentious politics and emphasizes the relationship between coordinated physical damage, collective claims, and political relations. His framework is broader than terrorism and is consequently useful for historical comparison: it permits coercion, organized violence, and struggles over authority to be analyzed without forcing them into a modern terrorist category. In the present study, political violence functions as an intermediate analytical level between the specific category of terrorism and the much wider historical phenomenon of coercive power.

A second component is Weber's (1978) theory of legitimate domination. Durable political authority cannot be reduced to the capacity to inflict violence. Domination may also rest on beliefs that make commands appear valid and obedience appropriate. Coercion and legitimacy should therefore not be treated as mutually exclusive alternatives, but as analytically distinguishable

mechanisms that may operate together. For early political formations, the relevant question is how force or its threat interacted with status, ritual, belief, and claims to legitimate rule.

The third component is symbolic power. Bourdieu (1991) emphasizes that power also operates through systems of classification, representation, language, and recognition. Symbolic power is especially useful here because emerging political hierarchy may be communicated and naturalized through forms that do not themselves constitute physical coercion. In the context of early Indonesian polities, this directs attention to the possible political significance of Sanskrit, ritual expertise, genealogy, titles, and Indic-derived symbols without presuming in advance that these elements created kingship or that they functioned identically across societies.

Taken together, the framework proposes an analytical sequence rather than a claim of historical causation: terrorism as a specific modern category is situated within the broader field of political violence; political violence may generate fear and communicate power; fear may influence political behavior; and political authority may be sustained through varying combinations of coercion and legitimacy. Symbolic power provides an additional mechanism through which hierarchy can become intelligible and authoritative.

The study therefore investigates a historical continuity not of terrorism itself, but of a broader problem that remains central to Terrorism Studies: the political organization and communication of fear. This formulation preserves the historical boundary around terrorism while allowing ancient evidence to address a theoretically relevant question: under what conditions does fear become politically meaningful, and how does it interact with coercion, symbolic power, and legitimacy in the formation of authority?

METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a qualitative historical design combining a historical-critical literature review with primary-source, material, and epigraphic analysis. The purpose of the design was to reconstruct changes in the representation of political authority while maintaining a clear distinction between evidence generated in the ancient period and concepts derived from modern Terrorism Studies. Ancient political formations were therefore examined on their own historical terms before comparison with concepts such as terrorism, political violence, coercion, legitimacy, and political fear. This ordering was used to minimize anachronism and to prevent the theoretical framework from predetermining the reading of the historical record.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND SOURCE SELECTION

The literature review employed a purposive, historical-critical search and selection strategy to identify scholarship relevant to the emergence of political authority, organized violence, and the representation of rulership in ancient Indonesia. Literature discovery was conducted through Google Scholar, Elicit, and supplementary AI-assisted academic search tools. These platforms were used to identify potentially relevant scholarly publications, trace associated research, and locate historical and epigraphic discussions. The review was designed as a critical interpretive synthesis rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis.

The search strategy addressed five interconnected domains: (1) prehistoric settlement, migration, and Austronesian expansion in the Indonesian archipelago; (2) prehistoric social differentiation, hereditary ranking, and early political organization; (3) South–Southeast Asian cultural exchange, Sanskritization, and the localization of Indic political and religious traditions; (4) the Yūpa inscriptions, Kuṇḍunga, Aśvavarman, Mūlavarman, and early political developments at Muara Kaman; and (5) theoretical perspectives on political violence, military conquest, coercion, symbolic authority, legitimacy, fear, and terrorism.

Search expressions included combinations of terms related to "Yūpa inscriptions", "Kutai", "Muara Kaman", "Mūlavarman", "Kuṇḍunga", "early Indonesian kingdoms", "Sanskrit inscriptions", "Indianization of Southeast Asia", "state formation", "military conquest", "political violence", "political legitimacy", and "terrorism". Alternative spellings and transliterations of historical names were considered to accommodate differences across epigraphic editions, Indonesian publications, and international scholarship.

Sources were selected on the basis of their relevance to the research questions, scholarly credibility, evidentiary contribution, and capacity to clarify or challenge competing historical interpretations. Priority was assigned to published epigraphic editions and translations, peer-reviewed historical and archaeological research, academic monographs, and authoritative documentation concerning the provenance and interpretation of inscriptions. Foundational studies were retained irrespective of publication date because early epigraphic scholarship remains essential to the interpretation of the Yūpa corpus. More recent studies were considered to incorporate developments in archaeological interpretation, historical linguistics, and theories of Southeast Asian political formation.

Sources were excluded from the principal evidentiary analysis when their historical claims lacked identifiable primary evidence, when they relied exclusively on unsupported modern retellings, or when they conflated later political traditions with the period represented by the inscriptions without adequate chronological justification. Popular historical materials and AI-generated summaries were not treated as independent evidence for ancient events.

The review applied historical source criticism by comparing inscriptional statements with published transliterations, scholarly translations, archaeological contexts, and secondary interpretations. Particular attention was given to disagreements concerning the origins of Kuṇḍunga's name, the retrospective designation of the polity as Kutai, and the interpretation of Mūlavarman's military achievements. AI-assisted discovery tools served as aids to identifying literature rather than substitutes for evaluating published

evidence. The synthesis consequently distinguished direct inscriptional testimony, scholarly interpretation, and theoretical inference (Bowen, 2009; Vogel, 1918; Chhabra, 1965; Supomo, 2006; Zakharov, 2019).

PRIMARY SOURCES AND MATERIAL EVIDENCE

The principal primary-source corpus comprised the Yūpa inscriptions discovered at Muara Kaman, East Kalimantan, conventionally associated in modern historiography with the early polity known as Kutai. These inscribed sacrificial posts constitute the earliest substantial Sanskrit epigraphic corpus presently known from the Indonesian archipelago and are conventionally dated palaeographically to approximately the fourth or early fifth century CE. The study relied on published epigraphic editions and scholarly translations, particularly Vogel (1918) and Chhabra (1965), supplemented by the historical interpretations of Supomo (2006), Santiko (2013), and Zakharov (2019). Particular attention was given to the inscriptional passage describing Mūlavarman's conquest of other rulers in battle and their subsequent tributary relationship, as reproduced in Chhabra's epigraphic edition. Ancient objects and inscriptional texts were analytically distinguished from modern museum labels, catalogues, and archival metadata. The inscriptional texts were treated as primary historical testimony concerning royal self-representation, while modern documentation was used to contextualize provenance, preservation, chronology, and subsequent interpretation. Descriptions of royal achievements were not automatically accepted as independently verified historical events.

EPIGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

The Yūpa corpus was examined at three complementary levels. First, textual analysis identified references to genealogy, rulership, ritual practices, sacrifice, royal gifts, Brahmanical specialists, political hierarchy, military conquest, tributary relations, and representations of royal supremacy. Second, linguistic and inscriptional analysis examined the use of Sanskrit, royal titles, dynastic terminology, and southern Indic-derived scripts as elements of transregional elite political representation. Particular attention was paid to the distinction between the wording of the inscriptions and subsequent historical interpretations, including uncertainty regarding the linguistic origin of Kuṇḍungga's name. Third, material and representational analysis considered the Yūpa as ritual objects and durable statements of royal authority. References to conquest and submission were assessed separately from evidence of systematic intimidation, exemplary punishment, or deliberate communication of fear to wider audiences. This distinction prevented the presence of warfare or political subordination from being treated automatically as evidence of terrorism.

HISTORICAL SOURCE CRITICISM AND TRIANGULATION

Historical source criticism was applied throughout because royal and ritual inscriptions cannot be assumed to provide neutral descriptions of social reality. Claims were assessed in relation to wording, genre, commissioning context where recoverable, material setting, probable audience, and ideological function. The analysis distinguished among what an inscription explicitly states, what can reasonably be inferred from its language and context, and what later historians or epigraphers have interpreted it to mean. Evidence was triangulated across inscriptions, archaeological and material contexts, institutional provenance records, and secondary historical scholarship. Convergence among independent forms of evidence increased interpretive confidence, whereas disputed translations, chronological uncertainty, and evidentiary gaps were preserved rather than resolved through speculation. Military conquest narratives were examined as both potential records of political conflict and rhetorical statements of royal achievement. The claim that Mūlavarman defeated other rulers and made them tributaries was therefore treated as direct evidence that conquest and subjugation formed part of royal political representation, while independent confirmation of the reported events remained a separate evidentiary question (Chhabra, 1965; Supomo, 2006; Zakharov, 2019). Such accounts were not taken to establish systematic intimidation or audience-directed fear in the absence of additional evidence concerning the targets, methods, and psychological consequences of coercion.

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

Analysis proceeded iteratively from historical reconstruction to source criticism and conceptual interpretation. The first stage reconstructed the demographic, archaeological, and historiographical context preceding historically visible kingship. The second examined the Yūpa corpus for evidence concerning lineage, ritual, authority, political representation, military conquest, tributary submission, and potential indications of intimidation or the deliberate production of fear. The third compared these findings with the theoretical distinctions developed earlier between coercion, legitimacy, symbolic power, political communication, and fear. The comparison was conceptual rather than classificatory: evidence of hierarchy, kingship, military conquest, tributary subordination, or ritual authority was not considered sufficient to establish terrorism without additional indications that violence or its threat was deliberately used to influence a broader political audience through fear. Claims concerning fear were retained only when supported by the historical record; where such evidence was unavailable, uncertainty was treated as a substantive result rather than filled by inference.

RESULTS

Deep prehistory: different human populations, not a single linear ancestry

The political history examined in this study begins much later than the human history of the archipelago. Java preserves one of the world's most important records of *Homo erectus*. At Sangiran, hominin remains and archaeological deposits document archaic

human occupation extending back well over one million years (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). The historical name *Pithecanthropus erectus* is associated with the early study of 'Java Man', but the relevant fossils are now classified within *Homo erectus* rather than treated as a separate evolutionary stage. At Ngandong, the youngest securely dated *Homo erectus* bone bed is modelled to approximately 117,000–108,000 years ago (Rizal et al., 2020). These deep-time populations should not be presented as a simple linear ancestral sequence culminating in present-day Indonesians.

Homo sapiens entered Wallacea much later, but the chronology continues to move earlier as new evidence is dated. Rock art from Liang Metanduno on Muna Island, Sulawesi, now provides a minimum-age constraint of 67,800 years for a hand stencil, strengthening the case for very early modern-human presence and symbolic behaviour in Wallacea (Oktaviana et al., 2026). This evidence does not establish a direct biological or political line from Pleistocene populations to later Indonesian kingdoms. Rather, it demonstrates the great temporal depth of human occupation and cultural expression against which the much later emergence of documented political authority must be situated.

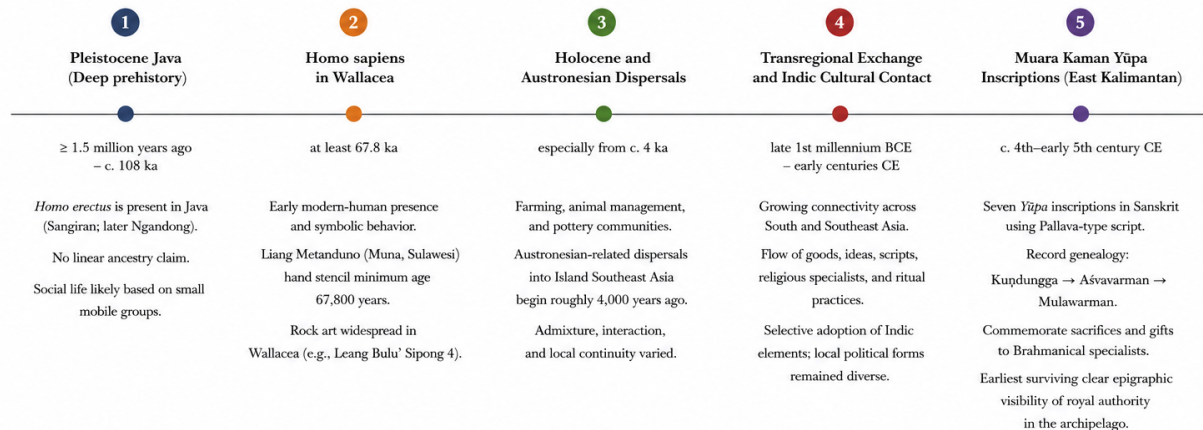
Neolithic and Austronesian dispersals: migration, admixture, and ranked social possibilities

A major later demographic and linguistic transformation occurred during the Neolithic. Archaeological and linguistic models associate the expansion of Austronesian-speaking farming populations with movements from Taiwan through the northern Philippines and into Island Southeast Asia beginning roughly 4,000 years ago (Bellwood, 2022; Spriggs, 2011). Ancient and modern genomic evidence broadly supports a Taiwan-related component in Austronesian-speaking populations, while also demonstrating substantial admixture with populations already living across western Indonesia and Wallacea (Lipson et al., 2014; Oliveira et al., 2022). The appropriate model is therefore expansion plus interaction, not population replacement.

These dispersals are relevant to political history because Austronesian societies provide evidence for diverse forms of ranking, precedence, and founder-focused ideology. Bellwood (1996) argued that hereditary rank and the enhanced status of founders or founding lines may have deep roots in parts of the Austronesian world. This does not demonstrate kingship in prehistoric Indonesia, but it makes clear that social differentiation and inherited status need not have originated with Indic contact. Before inscriptions appear, the region may already have contained communities with unequal status, localized leadership, ritual precedence, and mechanisms for organizing collective action.

Early transregional exchange and Indic contact preceded the Yūpa inscriptions

By the opening centuries of the Common Era, maritime networks increasingly connected the Indonesian archipelago with South Asia and other parts of Southeast Asia. The process traditionally called 'Indianization' is no longer adequately described as the passive reception of a superior foreign civilization. Mabbett (1977a, 1977b) showed that the mechanisms of early Indian cultural influence were historically uncertain and that no single diffusionist explanation was sufficient. Later scholarship has likewise emphasized localization and the difficulty of mapping Sanskrit cultural practices directly onto particular state structures (Ali, 2011). This distinction is central to the present findings. Indian cultural contact did not encounter an empty political landscape. It entered a region that already possessed long histories of settlement, migration, exchange, social differentiation, and local authority. The surviving record does not permit a precise reconstruction of those institutions at Muara Kaman before the inscriptions. It does, however, make a model of political transformation more plausible than a model of institutional creation *ex nihilo*. Figure 1 summarizes this deep chronology while deliberately separating biological history, archaeological evidence, social differentiation, transregional interaction, and the first surviving epigraphic representation of kingship. The figure is schematic and does not imply a linear evolutionary sequence. Dates indicate approximate evidence ranges rather than continuous occupation or inevitable political development.

Figure 1. Deep History and the Emergence of Documented Political Authority in the Indonesian Archipelago*Schematic chronology: archaeological visibility is not equivalent to the beginning of political organization*

Interpretive boundary. This sequence does not depict biological or political evolution as a single ladder. *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens* represent different populations; later social differentiation did not inevitably culminate in kingship. The Yūpa mark the earliest surviving clear epigraphic visibility of royal authority in the archipelago, not the proven beginning of political authority.

Dates are approximate and refer to the earliest plausible evidence ranges.

Evidence anchors:

UNESCO World Heritage (Sangiran); Rizal et al., 2020; Oktaviana et al., 2026; Bellwood, 1996, 2022; Spriggs, 2011; Ali, 2011; Mabbett, 1977a, 1977b; Vogel, 1918.

Sources: see References.

Note. BCE = Before Common Era; CE = Common Era; ka = thousand years ago.

The Muara Kaman Yūpa: Local Genealogy, Military Authority, and Indic Political Representation

The Yūpa inscriptions discovered at Muara Kaman, East Kalimantan, constitute the earliest substantial Sanskrit epigraphic corpus presently known from the Indonesian archipelago. Written in Sanskrit using an early Pallava-type script, the inscriptions are conventionally dated on palaeographic grounds to approximately the fourth or early fifth century CE (Vogel, 1918; Supomo, 2006). Although the inscriptions are commonly associated with the early kingdom of Kutai, the name "Kutai" does not appear in the surviving Yūpa texts and represents a later historiographical designation (Sarip, 2020). The inscriptions provide evidence of dynastic genealogy, royal titles, ritual performances, Brahmanical specialists, religious donations, and claims of military conquest and tributary submission. Their significance therefore extends beyond the ritual legitimization of kingship to include the representation of military authority and political domination. Nevertheless, the inscriptions primarily preserve elite-sponsored accounts of royal achievements and cannot be regarded as comprehensive or independently verified records of the political practices they describe.

One of the Yūpa inscriptions records three generations of a ruling lineage: Kuṇḍungga, his son Aśvavarman, and Aśvavarman's son Mūlavarman. Aśvavarman is described through the Sanskrit expression *vaṃśakartṛ*, commonly interpreted as "founder of the dynasty", while Mūlavarman is presented through elevated royal titles and descriptions of exceptional virtue and authority (Vogel, 1918; Chhabra, 1965; Supomo, 2006). The distinction between the personal name Kuṇḍungga and the Sanskrit names of his descendants has often been interpreted as evidence of the gradual adoption of Indic cultural and political forms. However, the linguistic origin of Kuṇḍungga remains uncertain. Although some scholars have interpreted the name as local or non-Sanskritic, alternative interpretations have considered possible South Indian linguistic connections (Chhabra, 1965; Minattur, 1964; Cœdès, 1968; Santiko, 2013). The genealogy therefore supports an interpretation of cultural and political transformation across generations without independently establishing the ethnic origin of the ruling family or a definitive sequence of religious conversion.

Military Conquest, Tributary Submission, and the Representation of Royal Power

An important dimension of the Yūpa inscriptions concerns the representation of military conquest and political subordination. In the inscription identified as Inscription C in Chhabra's epigraphic edition, Mūlavarman is described as having defeated other rulers in battle and made them tributaries, with his achievement compared to that of Yudhiṣṭhira, the celebrated royal figure of the Mahābhārata (Chhabra, 1965, pp. 90–91). This passage provides explicit inscriptional evidence that military victory and the subjugation of rival political authorities formed part of the royal narrative associated with Mūlavarman.

Supomo (2006) interprets this passage as evidence of Mūlavarman's expansion of political influence over surrounding rulers, while acknowledging uncertainty concerning the identities and political organization of those who were defeated. Zakharov (2019) situates the inscription within a wider pattern of early Southeast Asian royal epigraphy in which military success, conquest, and political superiority were important components of kingship. These interpretations demonstrate that the Yūpa corpus cannot be characterized exclusively as a record of religious generosity and ritual legitimization. However, the inscription's military narrative must be

distinguished from independently verified historical events. Royal inscriptions frequently functioned as commemorative and legitimizing texts, and references to extraordinary military achievements could incorporate conventions of royal praise and epic comparison. The reference to Yudhiṣṭhira is particularly relevant because it places Mūlavarman's victory within a recognizable Sanskrit narrative of idealized sovereignty. The inscription establishes that conquest and tributary submission were publicly represented as royal achievements, but it does not independently establish the scale, frequency, methods, or consequences of military operations. Most importantly, military conquest and political subjugation are not conceptually identical to political terror. Warfare may involve coercion, displacement, punishment, and fear, but the surviving inscription does not establish that Mūlavarman deliberately employed systematic intimidation or violence designed to produce fear among audiences beyond the immediate targets of military conflict. The distinction is therefore between inscriptional evidence of conquest and the additional evidence required to demonstrate terror as a specific mechanism of political influence. The former is present in the Yūpa corpus; the latter remains insufficiently documented.

Sanskrit functioned as a transregional medium of elite political representation

The use of Sanskrit is one of the clearest transformations visible in the record. The inscriptions do not merely identify persons; they place genealogy, rulership, ritual performance, merit, and generosity within a prestigious transregional linguistic repertoire. Ali (2011) warns against assuming a direct correspondence between Sanskrit cosmopolitan culture and a particular form of state structure. The present evidence supports that caution. Sanskrit demonstrates participation in an Indic cultural and literary sphere, but it cannot by itself prove centralized administration, territorial sovereignty, or coercive capacity.

Its political significance lies instead in representation. A local ruling lineage was now made legible through concepts, titles, ritual idioms, and written forms that circulated far beyond East Kalimantan. The shift is therefore observable at the level of political communication: rulership was being inscribed, monumentalized, genealogically ordered, and associated with a prestigious cultural language.

Ritual and royal generosity were central to the public construction of authority

The Yūpa were sacrificial posts, and the surviving texts repeatedly associate Mūlavarman with ritual acts, gifts, merit, and Brahmanical recipients. Vogel's (1918) edition records inscriptions commemorating major acts of giving and sacrificial performance. The objects therefore joined ritual action to durable commemoration: an event that would otherwise have been temporary was converted into a lasting material statement about the ruler.

This finding supports an interpretation of ritual as a political resource, but the stronger phrase 'political technology' should be used cautiously. The inscriptions show that ritual, elite literacy, genealogy, and generosity participated in the representation of rulership. They do not establish how ordinary people interpreted those acts, whether participation was voluntary, or whether the ruler's claims were universally accepted. The evidence is strongest for the production of legitimacy claims, not for their reception.

Brahmanical specialists participated in the production of durable royal legitimacy

The inscriptions explicitly associate Brahmanical specialists with sacrifice, gifts, and the erection or commemoration of Yūpa. This establishes the presence of ritual-literary specialists within the political scene represented by the inscriptions. Their significance is not that they can be shown to have conquered, intimidated, or controlled local society; no such conclusion follows from the evidence. Rather, specialized knowledge linked to Sanskrit and Brahmanical ritual had become part of the apparatus through which royal status was publicly expressed.

The resulting configuration is best described as a conjunction rather than a causal formula: an existing local genealogy was represented through transregional ritual knowledge, Sanskrit political vocabulary, royal giving, and monumental inscription. This is consistent with a process of selective appropriation or hybridization rather than simple foreign replacement (Ali, 2011; Mabbett, 1977b).

What the Yūpa Establish, and What Remains Uncertain About Political Terror

The most important finding concerning violence and fear is the distinction between explicit representations of military domination and the absence of sufficient evidence for systematic political terror. The Yūpa corpus includes a royal account of Mūlavarman's conquest of rival rulers and the establishment of tributary relationships. Consequently, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the inscriptions contain no references to organized violence or coercive political relations. Nevertheless, the presence of military conquest does not establish that terror or deliberate audience-directed intimidation was employed as a governing strategy. The inscriptions do not document systematic exemplary punishment, threats directed toward broader populations, or the subjective fear of those subjected to royal authority. Inferring these psychological mechanisms solely from conquest or political hierarchy would exceed the available historical evidence.

The inscriptions therefore reveal a political order represented through multiple forms of authority: dynastic genealogy, ritual distinction, religious generosity, Sanskrit royal titles, military conquest, and tributary submission. Although claims of military domination are explicit, the concrete practices through which conquered groups were governed and the psychological responses of those populations remain largely undocumented. This distinction is theoretically consequential. It demonstrates that evidence of coercive political relations can coexist with extensive symbolic and ritual legitimation without establishing a systematic strategy of

fear-based political communication. The Yūpa thus provide an opportunity to distinguish military and political domination from terrorism rather than treating the presence of violence as sufficient evidence of the latter.

Chronological boundary: Arab and Islamic networks belong to a later historical phase

The later arrival of Arab and Muslim merchants should not be inserted into the pre-Kutai sequence. The Yūpa phase belongs approximately to the fourth or early fifth century CE. Reports interpreted as evidence of Arab merchant communities in western Southeast Asia appear only centuries later, including a debated Chinese notice dated to 674 CE; Islamic polities in northern Sumatra are securely visible much later, especially from the thirteenth century onward (Hill, 1963; Fogg, 2019). These later developments are important for the long history of political-religious transformation in the archipelago, but they do not explain the emergence of the Kutai inscriptions.

Taken together, the evidence supports a restrained reconstruction. Deep human occupation was followed by multiple waves of Homo sapiens settlement, interaction, and later Neolithic/Austronesian dispersal. Social differentiation and ranked forms of authority plausibly predated Indic contact. By the early centuries CE, South–Southeast Asian interaction introduced or intensified access to Sanskrit language, ritual forms, and political-cultural repertoires. At Muara Kaman, the Yūpa reveal a local genealogy represented through this repertoire in the fourth or early fifth century CE. The transformation is therefore best characterized as the inscriptional and ritual re-articulation of authority rather than the demonstrable creation of power by outsiders. The strongest empirical findings concern the representation of political authority through dynastic legitimacy, ritual patronage, military conquest, and tributary subordination. While the inscriptions contain explicit claims of coercive military domination, they provide insufficient evidence to determine whether systematic intimidation or deliberately communicated fear constituted mechanisms through which political authority was established or maintained. Fear therefore remains analytically relevant but historically unverified as a strategic instrument of rule in this particular corpus.

DISCUSSION

Political communication before terrorism

The principal theoretical contribution of the findings is to separate political communication from terrorism while showing why the former matters to Terrorism Studies. Terrorism scholarship frequently examines violence as communication: an act directed not only at immediate victims but also at wider audiences whose perceptions and behavior are the ultimate political target. The Yūpa evidence predates modern terrorism by many centuries and explicitly incorporates royal claims of military conquest and tributary submission. These accounts indicate that political dominance could be represented through references to coercive military achievement alongside ritual and symbolic legitimation. However, the inscriptions do not establish that military force was deliberately employed to generate fear among wider audiences as a systematic strategy of political influence. They therefore provide evidence of the communication of military authority and royal superiority without necessarily demonstrating the distinctive psychological and communicative mechanisms associated with terrorism.

This suggests that the most defensible bridge is not a genealogy of terrorism but a genealogy of political communication. The Yūpa converted ritual performance, genealogy, generosity, elite language, and Brahmanical authorization into durable public claims about rulership. Terrorism represents one historically specific way in which political actors later use violence and fear communicatively; monumental royal inscription represents a very different way in which authority can be communicated. The comparison is therefore functional and analytical, not classificatory.

The distinction is especially important because the political communication of conquest may serve purposes other than intimidation. Claims of victory can establish royal prestige, justify territorial expansion, assert superiority over rival rulers, or place military achievements within religious and moral narratives of kingship. In Mūlavarman's case, the comparison with Yudhiṣṭhira suggests that military success was presented within an established Sanskrit framework of idealized sovereignty (Chhabra, 1965; Supomo, 2006). This representation may have strengthened claims to legitimate domination, but it cannot independently establish the emotional responses of the audiences who encountered the inscriptions. The communicative function of royal conquest must therefore be investigated without assuming that its primary purpose or outcome was the production of terror.

Legitimacy and coercion should be treated as independent dimensions

The findings challenge an overly linear understanding of political authority in which coercion and legitimacy are treated as opposite or mutually exclusive foundations of power. Weberian legitimacy and military domination may coexist within the same political formation. The Yūpa inscriptions illustrate this coexistence through their simultaneous emphasis on dynastic genealogy, Brahmanical ritual, royal generosity, military conquest, and tributary subordination. The inscriptions therefore provide evidence of both legitimizing representations and claims of coercive supremacy. However, the presence of these distinct mechanisms does not establish their relative importance in the everyday maintenance of political authority. Nor does the inscriptional celebration of conquest demonstrate that fear was systematically produced or directed toward broader audiences. The appropriate analytical distinction is consequently not between the presence and absence of violence, but between military domination, the legitimation of rulership, and the purposeful communication of fear.

This distinction matters because military coercion and symbolic legitimation are not necessarily competing explanations of political consolidation. Rather, they may function as complementary resources through which rulers establish superiority, secure recognition, and justify hierarchical relations. The Yūpa demonstrate how claims of conquest could be integrated with ritual achievement and religious generosity within a broader representation of legitimate kingship. Yet the inscriptions reveal substantially more about the ideals and claims of royal authority than about the practical administration of conquered populations. The communication of royal supremacy should therefore not be equated automatically with the communication of terror. The latter requires additional evidence concerning the intentional use of violence or threats to influence audiences through fear.

Fear must remain a testable variable, not a retrospective assumption

The original research question placed fear at the center of the inquiry, but the results require a distinction between the existence of violence and the intentional political production of fear. Although the Yūpa corpus contains a royal claim of military conquest and tributary submission, it does not establish whether intimidation was systematically used to influence conquered communities or wider political audiences. Military defeat may plausibly produce fear, but the psychological consequences of warfare cannot be reconstructed solely from an inscription celebrating royal victory. Even responses such as awe, submission, or reverence cannot be directly recovered from elite-sponsored texts. Future historical investigations should therefore operationalize political terror through more specific evidentiary indicators, including explicit threats directed at identifiable audiences, punitive formulas, exemplary violence intended to deter resistance, organized public punishment, descriptions of deliberate intimidation, or corroborating accounts concerning the psychological consequences of military domination. Such indicators would permit more precise differentiation between warfare, conquest, political repression, and the strategic communication of fear.

This is not a weakness of the study's conceptual ambition. It is a substantive finding. The evidence shows that political authority can be strongly communicated without surviving proof that fear was its principal psychological mechanism. Terrorism Studies therefore gains from distinguishing the political communication of authority from the political communication of fear. The latter is a narrower phenomenon and should only be inferred when evidence supports it.

Ecological uncertainty, ritual dependence, and religious authority

A further possibility concerns fear generated not by rulers but by ecological uncertainty. In agrarian and volcanically active environments, crop failure, irregular rainfall, disease, and eruptions can create forms of insecurity that no political actor directly produces. Such insecurity may nevertheless have political consequences when communities rely on ritual specialists, priests, diviners, or custodians who claim recognized competence in mediating relations with supernatural forces. Comparative phylogenetic research across 97 Austronesian-speaking societies found a reciprocal association between religious and political authority, suggesting that these forms of authority often developed interdependently rather than in isolation (Sheehan et al., 2023). This provides a plausible mechanism by which environmental uncertainty could strengthen ritual authority and, where ritual and political offices were connected, indirectly reinforce political hierarchy.

Indonesian evidence from later periods illustrates the mechanism without establishing it for fourth-century Kutai. Anjani and Suparta (2019), for example, show that an Old Javanese Merapi-Merbabu text contained mantras for summoning and stopping rain in response to unstable ecological conditions affecting upland rice cultivation. Ethnographic research around Merapi likewise documents ritual practices performed in relation to volcanic threat and communal safety (Permana et al., 2017). These materials make it reasonable to distinguish ecological fear from politically manufactured fear: people may defer to ritual specialists because those specialists are believed to manage uncertainty, not because the specialists themselves created the threat. If such dependence becomes institutionalized or allied with rulers, however, environmental insecurity can become a resource through which religious and political authority are mutually reinforced. The present evidence does not permit that mechanism to be attributed directly to the Kutai Yūpa; it is therefore treated here as a comparative hypothesis for future testing rather than as a finding about Mūlarman's polity.

Reconsidering "Indianization" as political reconfiguration

The Muara Kaman Yūpa inscriptions also contribute to longstanding debates concerning the processes conventionally described as "Indianization". The genealogy identifies Kuṇḍungga, followed by Aśvavarman and Mūlarman, whose names and royal representations incorporate recognizable Sanskritic elements. However, describing Kuṇḍungga's name as definitively indigenous would exceed the available linguistic evidence. Earlier scholarship has commonly interpreted the name as non-Sanskritic and potentially local, while other studies have considered possible Tamil or broader South Indian linguistic connections (Chhabra, 1965; Minattur, 1964; Cœdès, 1968; Supomo, 2006; Santiko, 2013). The precise linguistic origin of Kuṇḍungga therefore remains open to scholarly interpretation.

This uncertainty is analytically significant because a non-Sanskritic personal name does not independently establish ethnic identity, geographical origin, religious affiliation, or the direction of cultural transmission. Nevertheless, the contrast between the naming patterns across three generations and the use of Sanskritic dynastic terminology demonstrates that Indic-derived forms had become important components of royal self-representation. Such developments are compatible with processes of cultural appropriation, adaptation, interregional interaction, or elite transformation, but the inscriptions do not establish which specific mechanism

predominated. As Mabbett (1977a, 1977b) and Wolters (1982) emphasize in different ways, early Southeast Asian political development cannot be adequately understood through a simple model of passive cultural reception.

The combined evidence of genealogy, Sanskrit titles, Brahmanical ritual, royal generosity, and military conquest suggests that the transformation of early political authority involved both symbolic legitimation and claims of political domination. Rather than demonstrating that external cultural influences created kingship, the inscriptions reveal how emerging or existing elites represented rulership through a combination of transregional cultural resources and claims of military superiority. Whether these processes corresponded to substantial changes in administrative institutions, territorial control, or coercive organization remains uncertain.

Contribution to Terrorism Studies

The study contributes to Terrorism Studies in three ways. First, it clarifies an historical boundary: neither fear nor political violence alone is sufficient to define terrorism. Second, it distinguishes political authority from the specific communicative logic of terrorist violence. Third, it proposes a deeper comparative question (how political actors make power psychologically and symbolically consequential to audiences) without assuming that the answer is always fear.

The resulting model is better expressed as a set of analytically separable mechanisms than as a causal chain: political communication may operate through legitimacy, ritual, symbolic distinction, material reward, coercion, or fear; terrorism is one particular configuration in which violence or threat is strategically communicative and psychologically consequential. The Yūpa inscriptions document multiple components of early political authority, including ritual legitimation, royal generosity, dynastic representation, military conquest, and claims of tributary subordination. However, they do not establish the additional psychological and communicative conditions required to identify systematic political terror. The contribution of this study is therefore not the absence of violence in early Indonesian political history, but the analytical separation of military domination, symbolic legitimacy, and deliberate fear-based political influence. This distinction provides a historically grounded contribution to Terrorism Studies without retrospectively classifying ancient rulers as terrorists.

In terms of limitations, this study is constrained first by the character of the surviving evidence. The Yūpa corpus is small, elite-produced, and genre-specific: it records what rulers and ritual specialists chose to commemorate rather than providing a representative account of social relations or popular political experience. Its chronology is primarily palaeographic and therefore approximate. Although the inscriptions preserve claims concerning genealogy, royal virtue, sacrifice, and generosity, they do not reveal how non-elite populations received or interpreted those claims. Legitimacy in the Weberian sense therefore cannot be demonstrated directly from royal self-representation alone. A second limitation concerns the evidentiary relationship between military conquest and political fear. Although one of the Yūpa inscriptions explicitly describes Mūlavarman's conquest of other rulers and their subsequent tributary status, the surviving corpus does not provide sufficient independent evidence to reconstruct the scale, duration, institutional organization, or social consequences of those military activities. Moreover, references to conquest cannot establish whether systematic intimidation, exemplary punishment, or deliberately communicated fear was used to secure obedience among conquered populations. These limitations arise from the genre and preservation of the historical sources and should not be interpreted as proof that such coercive practices or psychological experiences were absent. The political landscape preceding Kutai is likewise underdocumented. Comparative Austronesian scholarship makes ranked authority historically plausible, but it cannot establish a direct institutional sequence from prehistoric communities to the polity represented in the Yūpa. Finally, both the category "Indic" and the comparison with Terrorism Studies require caution. "Indic" aggregates diverse South Asian languages, regions, religious traditions, ritual specialists, and possible intermediaries, and the evidence does not identify a single source or pathway for all elements visible at Kutai. Cross-temporal comparison with terrorism can illuminate mechanisms such as political communication, coercion, legitimacy, and fear, but it becomes anachronistic if modern categories are treated as historical identities. The conclusions are therefore deliberately mechanism-based and probabilistic rather than classificatory.

Further research should test the distinction developed here across a wider epigraphic and archaeological corpus. A comparative analysis of inscriptions from Tarumanagara, early Java, Śrīvijaya, and other Southeast Asian polities could code separately for genealogy, ritual legitimation, royal generosity, enemies, conquest, punishment, submission, threats, and other explicit markers of coercion. Such comparison would help determine whether the Kutai pattern (strong evidence for the symbolic communication of authority but weak evidence for the political communication of fear) was exceptional or part of a broader regional sequence. Diachronic analysis could further examine changes in the representation of military conquest, tributary relations, exemplary punishment, and explicit intimidation across successive Indonesian and Southeast Asian polities, assessing whether these changes corresponded to transformations in political organization or the strategic communication of fear. Future work should also integrate epigraphy more closely with archaeology at Muara Kaman and comparable sites. Evidence concerning settlement hierarchy, control of riverine exchange, prestige goods, fortification, weapon assemblages, destruction layers, mortuary differentiation, and spatial relationships between ritual and political sites could recover dimensions of authority that inscriptions alone cannot reveal. At the theoretical level, Terrorism Studies would benefit from comparative research that distinguishes the political communication of authority from the political communication of fear and examines the conditions under which the latter becomes strategically directed toward audiences. Such work could develop a deeper genealogy of political fear without presuming a continuous history of terrorism.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated whether political terror could be meaningfully examined in ancient Indonesia without retrospectively applying the modern category of terrorism to early political formations. The evidence from the Yūpa inscriptions discovered at Muara Kaman, conventionally associated with early Kutai, reveals a complex representation of royal authority involving dynastic genealogy, Sanskritic political vocabulary, Brahmanical ritual, religious generosity, military conquest, and tributary subordination. These elements demonstrate that early political authority was publicly represented through both symbolic legitimation and claims of coercive supremacy.

Importantly, the inscriptions cannot be interpreted as providing no evidence of violence. The account of Mūlavarman's military conquest and the establishment of tributary relationships constitutes explicit evidence that warfare and political subjugation formed part of the royal narrative. Nevertheless, as elite-sponsored commemorative texts, the inscriptions do not independently establish the full historical circumstances of those military achievements. More significantly, the available evidence does not demonstrate that systematic intimidation or the deliberate production of fear among wider audiences constituted an identifiable strategy of political control. Military conquest, political domination, and terrorism must therefore remain analytically distinct.

The findings also support a more cautious interpretation of early Indic cultural influence. Although the genealogy records Kuṇḍungga alongside descendants bearing Sanskritic names, the linguistic origin of Kuṇḍungga remains uncertain. The inscriptions demonstrate the incorporation of Sanskritic political and ritual forms into representations of rulership but do not establish that external cultural influences independently created local political authority. Instead, they suggest a historically situated interaction between existing political relationships, transregional cultural resources, and claims of military and symbolic superiority.

The article's central contribution to Terrorism Studies lies in distinguishing the political communication of authority from the intentional political communication of fear. Ancient royal inscriptions may celebrate military victory, assert hierarchical dominance, and legitimize rulership without necessarily documenting the distinctive audience-directed psychological mechanisms associated with terrorism. Consequently, ancient Indonesian political history should not be interpreted as evidence of a continuous tradition of terrorism preceding the modern era. Rather, it provides an important historical setting in which the relationships among military coercion, symbolic legitimacy, political subjugation, and fear can be investigated with greater conceptual precision and sensitivity to the limits of historical evidence.

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ETHICAL STATEMENT

This study did not involve human participants or animals.

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