



Islamic Creed and Legal Thought in Hulu Terengganu in the Fourteenth Century: A Philological–Religious Historical Analysis of the Terengganu Inscription (BBT)

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Abstract: This study aims to analyse the Terengganu Inscription (*Batu Bersurat Terengganu*, BBT) as one of the earliest Islamic historical sources in Southeast Asia through a philological–religious historical approach, namely a critical reading of a religious text as a historical document that reflects the structure of Islamic creed (*‘aqīdah*) and law (*fiqh*) of its time. The findings demonstrate that the BBT exhibits clear elements of Islamic creed as well as well-structured, mature provisions of Islamic law, indicating that Islam had already been institutionally embedded within Malay society by the fourteenth century. This level of intellectual and legal maturity was most likely achieved through the role of external scholars who had assimilated into the local society and maintained close relations with the ruling institution. From the perspective of *usūl al-fiqh*, the application of the principles of *maslahah mursalah*, *‘urf*, and *fiqh siyāsah* reflects a contextualised understanding of *maqāsid al-sharī‘ah* in the implementation of law. Although this study does not directly determine the identity of the ruler or the specific form of governance in Hulu Terengganu at the time, the analysis confirms that Islam had functioned as a normative foundation for law, authority, and social life within the Malay community, thereby contributing to the formation of a distinctive Islamic–Malay tradition.

Keywords: religious history; development of Islamic law, sharī‘ah law; *usūl al-fiqh* thought, historical sources

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Introduction

The Terengganu Inscription (*Batu Bersurat Terengganu*, hereafter BBT) constitutes one of the earliest historical sources that indirectly reflects the development of Islam in Southeast Asia during the fourteenth century.¹ Beyond serving as material evidence for the existence of religious institutions under a Malay polity of the period, the discovery and study of the BBT are believed to enrich scholarly understanding of the structures of Islamic creed (*‘aqīdah*) and legal norms (*fiqh*) in practice, as the text clearly demonstrates the emergence of Islamic legal regulation at that time.²

Nevertheless, earlier studies on the BBT have largely focused on epigraphic and linguistic aspects, with limited attention to the stone’s archaeometry properties.³ Consequently, relatively few studies have attempted to interpret the inscription’s historical significance, due in part to the scarcity of contextual information and the obscurity of available sources, particularly with regarding the society to the religious life. In simple terms, there remains a notable gap in analyses that approach the BBT as a document of religious history, as traditional approaches tend to view it primarily in terms of its literal textual content, writing system, and stone petrology. The lack of sustained engagement with the religious and legal implications embedded in the text has thus left a significant lacuna in understanding the BBT as a historical religious document that is, in fact, rich in theoretical knowledge.

To address this gap, the present article seeks to contribute by emphasising a hypothetical and interpretative reading of the BBT as a logical reflection of the structures of Islamic creed and legal thought of the time, with the aim of reconstructing aspects of the religious history of the Malay community in that period. Through this approach, the study aims to deepen understanding of the historical and social context of fourteenth-century Terengganu, while contributing to a more comprehensive narrative of Islamic history in Southeast Asia.⁴

¹ Ahmad Umar Yakin, “Dialectic between Islamic Law and Adat Law in the Nusantara: A Reinterpretation of the Terengganu Inscription in the 14th Century,” *Historia: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Penelitian Sejarah* 3, no. 2 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.31291/HN.V3i2.14>.

² R. A. A. Rahim, M. S. Salleh, and J. Awang, “Batu Bersurat Terengganu: Satu Tafsiran terhadap Pelaksanaan Syariah Islam,” *Jurnal Fiqh* 7, no. 1 (2010): 135–158, <https://doi.org/10.22452/FIQH.VOL7NO1.6>.

³ M. Y. Abdullah and R. Hamat, *Batu Bersurat Piagam Terengganu: Wadah Intelektual Tamadun Melayu* (Lembaga Muzium Negeri Terengganu, 2013).

⁴ M. H. Nadri, M. A. Kasmu, and M. Y. Z. M. Yusoff, “Tamra Terengganu 702H: Continuation of Pre-Islamic Malay Prasasti Tradition,” *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 15, no. 1 (2020): 13–24.

Methods

The study of the Terengganu Inscription (BBT) was conducted through several key stages designed to ensure a comprehensive and critical analysis. First, data collection involved a close rereading of the Jawi text of the BBT based on the transliteration proposed by Ahmat Adam,⁵ which was selected for its greater clarity and consistency in compared with other scholarly transliterations. This step was essential to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the text under analysis, thereby providing a solid foundation for subsequent interpretative work.

The second stage consisted of philological analysis, in which the BBT text was examined critically to identify its discourse structure, lexical choices, and stylistic features. This analysis also included the identification of specific expressions related to Islamic creed and legal norms as understood in the fourteenth century. The philological approach enabled the researcher to assess not only the literal content of the text, but also the linguistic implications and implicit meanings underlying particular formulations.⁶

The third stage involved religious–historical interpretation. Drawing on the results of the philological analysis, the text was interpreted within the framework of *usūl al-fiqh* and Islamic epistemology, before being situated within the broader history of Islam in Terengganu and the Southeast Asian region. The primary objective of this stage was to understand how the contents of the BBT reflect contemporary societal perspectives on creed, law, and collective values. Through this approach, the BBT is treated not merely as a linguistic artefact, but as a historical source rich in social and religious information.

Finally, data synthesis was undertaken through a comparative analysis of the findings against established historical and societal contexts in Southeast Asia.⁷ This stage aimed to assess the coherence between the inferences drawn from the BBT and existing historical narratives, thereby enabling more holistic conclusions about regarding role in shaping understandings of Islamic creed and legal structures in the fourteenth century.

⁵ Ahmat Adam, *Batu Bersurat Terengganu: Betulkah Apa yang Dibaca Selama Ini?* (Strategic Information and Research Development Centre [SIRD], 2009).

⁶ A. S. Fatoni, “Pernik-Pernik Metode dan Pendekatan dalam Penelitian Filologi,” *Jurnal Mahasantri* 2, no. 1 (2021): 346–367, <https://ejournal.iainh.ac.id/index.php/mahasantri/article/view/104>.

⁷ Yakin, “Dialectic between Islamic Law and Adat Law.”

Discourse Structure Analysis

An analysis of the discourse structure of the Terengganu Inscription (*Batu Bersurat Terengganu*, BBT) indicates that the text is functionally divided into three principal sections: (1) the Introduction, (2) the Body of the Charter, and (3) the Conclusion. The Introduction corresponds entirely to Panel A, while the Body of the Charter encompasses Panels B and C, as well as the majority of Panel D. The Conclusion, on the other hand, is confined to lines 4–5 of Panel D.

In terms of discourse style, the Introduction in Panel A begins with a doxological formulation, namely expressions of praise to God, blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad, and prayers for his family and Companions as an opening convention. However, the portions containing praise to God and blessings upon the Prophet are no longer extant due to the breakage of the upper section of the stone, leaving only the prayer addressed to the Prophet's family or Companions.

"... dengan nang uwarang santabya mereka saka 1/ asa pada Dewata Mulia Raya ... 2"

The structured division into an introduction, a body of legal provisions, and a conclusion, together with the ordered sequence of praise, blessings, and supplication within the doxological section, reflects characteristics typical of early Islamic writing traditions. This organisation demonstrates continuity with, and mature integration into, the broader and universal tradition of Islamic textual composition.

The doxological opening then gradually transitions into emotive–directive statements, particularly in the form of supplicatory expressions imbued with hope and earnestness:

"... beri hamba meneguhkan ugama Islam 2/ dengan benar bicara dharma meraksa bagi sekalian hamba Dewata Mulya Raya 3/ di benua ko ini panantu ugama Rasul Allah Sallallahu alayhi wasallam raja ... 4"

This transition is carefully executed before the text proceeds to declarative–constative statements, namely formal proclamations that are normative and binding. This sequence reveals a coherent logical progression linking theological legitimacy, moral supplication, and the exercise of legal authority.

"fardu pada sekalian raja manda- 6/ -lika Islam menurut sa titah. Dewata Mulya Raya dengan benar 7/ bicara berbajiki banua panantua itu maka titah Sri Paduka 8/ Tuhan, madudukkan tamra ini di banua Tarangganu ... 9"

In general, the Introduction—rich in features of the Islamic writing tradition—first establishes divine authority as the foundation of the charter’s overall legitimacy before moving to supplication and moral appeal. This shift is significant in portraying the ruler as a servant of God, weak in essence yet entrusted with the responsibility of implementing divine law on earth. It is on the basis of this divinely sanctioned mandate that the formal enforcement of law is proclaimed, demanding obedience and loyalty from the entire populace. The order and arrangement of these elements are clearly deliberate rather than incidental, having been carefully designed to construct the normative legitimacy and authority of the BBT.

The Body of the Charter, contained in Panels B, C, and D, comprises ten legal provisions arranged systematically, in accordance with the declarative function introduced in the opening section. The declarative function of a legal document requires that norms and legal rulings be articulated in an orderly and explicit manner in order to serve as an authoritative and binding reference, rather than as narrative discourse or moral exhortation. Accordingly, the organisation of these provisions into discrete and thematic units reflects an awareness of the functional requirements of the text as a legal instrument, intended to institutionalise social regulation grounded in an Islamic creedal framework within the structure of society.

Table 1 Extracts from the BBT Concerning the Ten Legal Provisions

Law	BBT Text (Panel)	Status	Domain
1	<i>Panel B</i> ...	Missing	Unknown
2	...	Missing	Unknown
3	<i>Kulawarga di banua Jawa ... kana tol[ih] 1/ dating berikan ... 2</i>	Incomplete and not fully understood	Unknown
4	<i>... Kaem[pat dharma barang] orang berpihutang 2/ jangan mengambil ... k[alantara?] ... [a]mbil mana hilangkan emas 3</i>	Complete and understood	Muamalat
5	<i>Kalima dharma barang orang ... [mar]dika 4/ jangan mengambil tugel bwat ... r n [...] emasnya 5/ Jaka iya ambil hilangkan emas ... 6</i>	Complete and understood	Muamalat

6	<i>... kaenam dharma barang 6/orang berbwat malacara laki-laki perempuan sa titah 7/ Dewata Mulya Raya jaka mardika bujan palu 8/ sa ratus rautan jaka mardika beristeri 9/ Atawa perempuan berswami ditanam hinggana 10/ pinggang dihambalang dengan batu matikan 11/ jaka inger ma[lacara] hambalang jaka anak mandalika [...] 12/</i> <i>Panel C</i> <i>bujan dandanya sa puluh tengah tiga jak ana d [...] 1/ mantri bujan dandanya tujuh tahl sa p[aha ...] 2/ tengah tiga jaka tetua bujan dandanya lima ta[hil ...] 3/ tujuh tahl sa paha masuk bandhana jaka o[rang] 4/ Mardika ... 5</i>	Nearly complete and understood	Munakahat
7	<i>... ketujuh dharma barang perempuan hendak [...] 5/ [...] tida dapat berswami jak ana berbwat malacara bukan ada [...] 6</i>	Nearly complete and understood	Munakahat
8	<i>Panel D</i> <i>... [...] tida benar dandanya sa tahl sa paha ... 1</i>	Incomplete and not understood	Unknown
9	<i>... kasembilan dharma [...] 1/ [...] Sri Paduka Tuhan siapa tida ta pranaya dandanya 2</i>	Nearly complete and understood	Muwatanah
10	<i>[...] ata jaka iko atawa pamanakan ko atawa cucu ko atawa kulawarga ko atawa anak [ko] 3</i>	Incomplete and not understood	Unknown

Finally, the concluding section, located in lines 4–5 of Panel D, employs a preventive rhetorical style aimed at restraining and deterring any form of violation of the proclaimed charter. Such rhetoric is commonly found in classical Islamic legal texts, particularly in the form of moral and religious threats directed at those who transgress established laws. The use of preventive rhetoric underscores that

the provisions of the BBT are not merely ethical recommendations but formally enacted laws binding upon society.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that the BBT is not only systematically organised in physical and linguistic terms but also exhibits a mature structure of Islamic legal discourse as early as the fourteenth century. The integration of doxology, the declaration of authority, and preventive rhetoric confirms that the text functioned as a firm, authoritative legal code rooted in Islamic epistemology, thereby reinforcing the BBT status as a crucial primary source for understanding the early development of Islamic law and thought in the Malay world.

Philological–Religious Historical Analysis

Based on what remains intelligible from the extant text of the Terengganu Inscription (*Batu Bersurat Terengganu*, BBT), the ten recorded legal provisions encompass aspects of *mu'āmalāt*, particularly matters related to debt and financial transactions, as well as *munākahāt*, most notably the prohibition of illicit sexual relations between men and women.

From the perspective of philological–religious history, the detailed articulation of these legal provisions is significant because it does not merely reflect the ideal norms of Islam, but also records the social realities encountered by the Malay community in the fourteenth century. In this context, the BBT functions not only as a legal code but also as a text that reveals the types of social problems considered significant and recurrent in the society's lived experience at that time. The location of Kuala Berang or Hulu Terengganu as an inland port, for instance, would have facilitated intensive interaction between traders and local inhabitants, thereby explaining the need for legal enforcement to regulate social activities deemed deviant.⁸

As a written legal document that institutionalises norms and regulations grounded in an Islamic creedal framework, the BBT demonstrates a level of Islamic internalisation that had reached a structural dimension within the social and political order of fourteenth-century Malay society. From the perspective of religious history, this finding challenges the assumption that Islam during this period was confined merely to initial introduction or ritual practice. Instead, Islam had already functioned as a normative foundation governing the collective life of the community.

⁸ See, for example, T. R. Faqih, *Tarikh Fathani*, in *Khazanah Fathaniyah*, ed. W. M. Saghir (1998), 16.

An analytical reading of the BBT indicates that Islam was understood by the Malay community of the fourteenth century not only as an individual belief system, but also as a collective religious system institutionalised as the basis of law, a source of political legitimacy, and a framework for social ethics. This understanding can be traced through two principal religious dimensions that appear to have matured within the text, namely:

- i) the creedal dimension (*'aqīdah*), which forms the theological foundation of a state order grounded in *tawhīd*; and ii) the dimensions of *fiqh* and *usūl al-fiqh*, which guide the formulation and practical implementation of law within the local societal context.

These two dimensions are discussed in turn as follows:

1. Creed (*'Aqīdah*)

From the creedal perspective, the BBT presents a robust understanding of *tawhīd al-rubūbiyyah*, namely the recognition that God is the absolute Possessor of sovereignty, the true Legislator, and the ultimate source of authority in human life. Within this framework, the ruler is not regarded as the creator of law, but merely as its executor. This conception aligns with the fundamental principle of Islamic political thought that ultimate sovereignty (*al-hākimiyyah*) belongs to God, while human beings—including kings—are only vicegerents and trustees.

Panel A: ... beri hamba meneguhkan ugama Islam 2/ dengan benar bicara dharma meraksa bagi sekalian hamba Dewata Mulya Raya 3/ di benua ko ini ... 4

bhumi panantua itu fardu pada sekalian raja manda- 6/ -lika Islam menurut sa titah'. Dewata Mulya Raya dengan benar 7/ bicara berbajiki banua panantua itu ... 8

The statements above clearly signal a major epistemological shift in early Malay political thought—from a pre-Islamic conception of sacral kingship to a conception of divine sovereignty that binds the ruler himself as one of God's creatures.

Within the BBT, the ruler is depicted as a successor to the leadership legacy of the Prophet Muhammad, not in the sense of prophethood, but in the sense of responsibility for upholding justice and enforcing divine law.

Panel A: panantu ugama Rasul Allah SallalLahu alayhi wasallam raja [...] 4/ Mandalika yang benar bicara sebelah Dewata Mulya Raya ... 5

This is highly significant, as it indicates that the model of governance understood by the Malay community at the time was a prophetic one (*prophetic governance*), in which authority is not an inherent entitlement of the ruler, but a trust that will ultimately be accounted for before God. Consequently, the law articulated in the BBT is not merely an instrument of social control but a mechanism of justice mandated by religion to protect all subjects regardless of social status.

Similarly, in terms of punishment, the BBT not only threatens commoners who violate the law, but also explicitly addresses implications for members of the ruling elite. This constitutes an important indication that the concept of “equality before the law” had been aligned with the Islamic framework, even though it still operated within a feudal structure (that is, one that recognised social hierarchy as part of societal reality). The audacity to bind royal relatives with legal sanctions suggests that the compiler of the text—most likely an Arab scholar who had assimilated into local society—had gained the full confidence of the ruler to implement Islamic law in earnest. From the perspective of political history, this is far from trivial, as palace elites were typically beyond the reach of the law.

Also noteworthy is the presence of threats invoking divine curse and wrath against violations of the law.

Panel D: [...] tamra ini segala isi tamra ini barang siapa tida menurut tamra ini laknat Dewata Mulya Raya 4/ [...] dijadikan Dewata Mulya Raya bagi yang langkar acara tamra ini 5

From a theological standpoint, this demonstrates the close relationship between law and creed. Law is not viewed merely as a worldly regulation, but as a demand of faith. Obedience to law is a manifestation of obedience to God, while violation of law constitutes sin rather than merely a civil offence. This reflects a holistic form of religiosity in which social, political, and legal life operates within a divine orbit.

2. Fiqh and Usūl al-Fiqh

The second dimension that appears highly developed in the BBT is its understanding of *fiqh* and *usūl al-fiqh*, as evidenced by the manner in which punishments are formulated, categorised, and contextualised.

The implementation of the sixth legal provision, as presented in Table 1, for example, demonstrates the application of the principles of *maslahah mursalah*

and *urfas* bases for legal reasoning, particularly in differentiating forms of punishment between commoners and *anak mandalika* (members of the royal household). This approach should not be read simplistically as feudal discrimination; rather, it should be understood within the framework of *fiqh siyāsah*, namely the effort to preserve political stability and social harmony through the protection of the royal institution. In this context, *hifz al-dawlah* as one dimension of *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* functions as a normative justification for differentiated legal implementation in the interest of public welfare.

Within this framework, there are clear indications that the compiler of the text possessed a mature understanding of the distinctions between *hudūd*, *qisās*, and *ta'zīr*, and was not bound to a purely literalist interpretation. Certain punishments are implemented in the form of *hudūd*, based on explicit textual injunctions such as flogging and stoning for illicit sexual relations involving commoners. However, for similar offences, punishments imposed upon members of the nobility take the form of *ta'zīr*, such as monetary fines in gold. This flexibility demonstrates the capacity to distinguish between rulings that are *qat'ī* in nature and those open to administrative *ijtihād*, thereby affirming that Islamic law was understood as a living and layered normative system rather than a rigid religious doctrine.

Taken as a whole, this approach reflects a high level of *maqāsid* awareness within the Malay administrative system of the period, namely an understanding that Islamic law is not merely textual, but a system that must be implemented with due consideration of social context, power structures, and local realities. From this emerges a form of local legal reasoning rooted in the principles of Islamic *usūl al-fiqh*, rather than a literal or mechanical imitation of religious texts. Accordingly, the process of Islamisation in the Malay world may be understood as creative and adaptive, wherein Islamic principles were absorbed and dynamically translated into local cultural and political frameworks.

From the perspective of the sociology of religion, the BBT demonstrates that by the fourteenth century, Islam had penetrated the structural foundations of Malay society, rather than remaining confined to the level of individual belief. Islam successfully shaped concepts of justice, authority, punitive practice, and social responsibility, marking a stage of religious institutionalisation in which religion functioned as the foundational framework of the social system. This stands in contrast to earlier phases of Islamisation, which are often characterised by symbolic adoption of Islamic identity and basic rituals before evolving into more systematic forms.

The ability to translate principles of *fiqh* and *usūl al-fiqh* into a written legal code in an inland region of the Malay world such, as Hulu Terengganu, not only substantiates the presence of trained and institutionalised Islamic scholarly authority but also reflects a process of intellectualisation of knowledge—namely, the adaptation of *fiqh* into a systematic and governable normative framework. In the context of medieval Southeast Asia, such a role was very likely played by international scholars, particularly from Yemen or Persia, who possessed long-standing traditions of legal codification, judicial practice, and political advice in newly Islamised regions.⁹

This scenario positions the fourteenth-century Malay community not as passive recipients of Islamic civilisation, but as active agents who processed, adapted, and grounded Islam within local realities. Rather than merely imitating Arab or Persian models, they constructed a synthesis between Islam and Malay social structures. Consequently, a distinctive Islamic–Malay tradition emerged, in which the ruler was symbolically understood as *zill Allāh fī al-ard*—the shadow of God on earth.¹⁰ This concept signifies that Islam had reached a structural level, with its principles integrated into the systems of governance and administration as a normative foundation shaping political legitimacy, legal authority, and Malay state hierarchy.

Conclusion

This study affirms that the Terengganu Inscription (*Batu Bersurat Terengganu*, BBT) should be understood as a religious–historical and Islamic legal document that reflects a mature level of Islamic internalisation within fourteenth-century Malay society. In contrast to earlier approaches that primarily emphasised epigraphic and linguistic aspects, this study advances an interpretative reading through discourse-structural analysis and philological–religious-historical inquiry, with the aim of assessing the implications of Islamic creed, law, and legal thought embedded in the text. This approach allows the BBT to be read not merely as a written artefact, but as a normative code that institutionalised Islam within the social and political framework of Malay society.

⁹ See, for example, M. A. Ibn Battutah, *Rihlah Ibn Battutah*, ed. M. A. M. al-‘Aryan and M. al-Qassas (Dar Ihya’ al-‘Ulum, 1987), 630.

¹⁰ W. A. F. W. Wan Husain, “Konsep Kedaulatan Raja-Raja Melayu dalam Perlembagaan Persekutuan Malaysia Menurut Sejarah Perundangan” (PhD diss., Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2017), 176.

The findings demonstrate that the BBT is systematically structured through the integration of doxology, the declaration of authority, and preventive rhetoric, in accordance with the classical tradition of Islamic legal writing. This structure functions to establish, divine authority as the foundation of legitimacy prior to the enforcement of law, thereby affirming Islam as the normative basis of governance and legal order. The legal provisions, encompassing the domains of *mu'āmalāt*, *munākahāt*, and *muwātanah*, further indicate that Islam was not confined to ritual practice but comprehensively regulated collective life as an integrated system of creed and binding law.

More significantly, the BBT reveals a high level of sophistication in *fiqh* and *usūl al-fiqh* through the application of the principles of the *maslahah mursalah*, *ʿurf*, and *fiqh siyāsah*, including the contextual differentiation between *hudūd* and *taʿzīr*. This approach reflects a pronounced awareness of *maqāsid al-sharīʿah*, particularly in safeguarding political stability, and challenges the notion that Islamisation in the Malay world was passive or literalist. Instead, the BBT demonstrates that fourteenth-century Malay society acted as an active agent in interpreting, adapting, and grounding Islamic principles creatively and contextually, resulting in an Islamic–Malay synthesis deeply embedded within structures of governance, law, and social life.

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