

Utilization Practices of Ancient Manuscript Collections by Students of the Islamic Cultural History Study Program at UIN Ar-Raniry in the Aceh Museum Library

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ABSTRACT:

Background: Ancient manuscripts are cultural heritage that contain various important information about history, religion, customs, and knowledge of the past. The collection of ancient manuscripts stored at the Aceh Museum holds immense value, both as a source of learning and research. However, the effectiveness and depth of their utilization by students remain questionable.

Objectives: This study aims to determine how students of the Islamic Cultural History Program at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh utilize ancient manuscripts at the Aceh Museum, as well as to identify the factors that influence, the challenges faced, and the forms of utilization carried out.

Methods: The study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive method. Participants include 15 students and 5 museum staff members from the Aceh Museum, selected through *simple random sampling*. Data was collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, and analyzed qualitatively through the stages of data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

Result: The results of the study indicate that students utilize ancient manuscripts primarily in an academic context to fulfill assignments for courses in Philology and Ancient Manuscript Studies. Internal factors influencing utilization include academic needs, interest, and motivation, while external factors include the completeness of the collection, librarian services, and faculty support. The main challenges faced by students are limited ability to read ancient scripts and the scarcity of available transliterations.

Conclusion: The utilization of ancient manuscripts by students is already underway but remains limited to practical academic purposes. To optimize their use, additional strategies are needed, including literacy training, digitization of collections, and the integration of manuscript-based learning to enable deeper and more sustainable utilization of ancient manuscripts.

Keywords: Collection Utilization, Ancient Manuscripts, Students, Aceh Museum

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INTRODUCTION

Libraries serve as information centers, places for collecting, storing, and disseminating knowledge that supports the needs of library users (Arias Rodriguez & Sánchez Bello, 2022; Asnawi, 2015; Firman et al., 2016; S. Rahayu, 2017; Rahmawati, 2017). One of the important collections stored in libraries, especially museums, is ancient manuscripts or manuscripts. Ancient manuscripts are not only valuable as cultural heritage but also contain various information about religion, customs, law, governance, traditional medicine, and literary works that are relevant for further study (Handayani, 2023; Hidayati & Marintan, 2024; Nugraha & Laugu, 2021; E. S. R. Rahayu, 2017; Rizkyantha et al., 2025). The Aceh Museum is one of the institutions that houses a significant collection of ancient manuscripts of high value, which has great potential to be utilized by students to support academic activities, particularly in the field of Islamic Cultural History.

Previous studies have shown considerable interest in the utilization and preservation of ancient manuscripts. For example, research at the Rekso Pustoko Library in Surakarta emphasized the internal and external utilization of manuscript collections by library users; research at the Nagari Adityawarman Museum in West Sumatra highlighted the limitations of manuscript preservation due to a lack of resources; while research at the Dewantara Kirti Griya Museum emphasized the problems of digitizing ancient manuscripts. These studies reveal a diversity of issues related to the management, utilization, and preservation of manuscripts, but generally do not place students as the primary focus of the research, particularly students who directly study manuscripts within a formal educational context.

From the literature review, it appears that there is an important research gap. Most previous studies have focused on technical aspects of the management, preservation, or digitization of ancient manuscripts (Aisyah & Lawanda, 2024; Ardhana & Nuriyadin, 2024; Husain & Tajuddin, 2018; Mahdi, 2018). However, studies on the extent to which ancient manuscripts are actually utilized by students, especially in relation to relevant courses such as Philology or Ancient Manuscript Studies, are still very limited. This raises questions about how Islamic Cultural History students utilize ancient manuscript collections at the Aceh Museum, as well as the factors that encourage or hinder this process. Thus, this study fills this gap by presenting a utilization perspective from the viewpoint of direct users—the students themselves.

The urgency of this research lies in the importance of ancient manuscripts as primary sources for understanding the history, culture, and scholarship of Islam in Aceh. Students of Islamic Cultural History have an academic obligation to study ancient manuscripts directly as part of their learning process. However, limitations in reading ancient scripts, challenges in transliteration, and a lack of deep exploration habits often result in ancient manuscripts being used merely as supplementary materials in lectures. In fact, optimal utilization could enhance the quality of student research, enrich local literature, and support cultural preservation. Therefore, this study has a strong rational basis for examining such utilization practices.

This study aims to determine the extent to which students of the Islamic Cultural History Study Program at UIN Ar-Raniry utilize ancient manuscripts in the Aceh Museum. More specific objectives include: (1) describing the forms of utilization of ancient manuscript collections by students; (2) identifying internal and external factors influencing utilization; and (3) examining the challenges faced by students in accessing, understanding, and using ancient manuscripts as learning materials or research tools. With these objectives, this study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions for academics, students, and museum library managers.

Although this study uses a descriptive qualitative approach, substantive hypotheses can be proposed as a framework for thinking. The initial assumption is that Islamic Cultural History students utilize ancient manuscript collections more as a course requirement than for ongoing scientific needs.

Additionally, it is estimated that there are inhibiting factors such as limited skills in reading ancient scripts, the scarcity of available transliterations, and insufficient facilitation from museum authorities. Conversely, the assumed motivating factors include academic requirements from philology courses and faculty support in encouraging students to engage in hands-on practice at the Aceh Museum.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on gaining a deep understanding of the experiences, behaviors, and meanings constructed by students when utilizing ancient manuscript collections. The descriptive method is used to provide a realistic and systematic description of the current state of ancient manuscript utilization at the Aceh Museum, without manipulating the variables under investigation.

Participant

The research participants consisted of students from the Islamic Cultural History Study Program at UIN Ar-Raniry from the 2016, 2017, and 2018 cohorts who had taken courses in Philology and Ancient Manuscript Studies. A total of 15 students were interviewed, plus 5 staff members from the Aceh Museum as supporting informants to strengthen the data on services, access, and forms of utilization of ancient manuscripts.

Population and Sampling Methods, Instrumentation

The research population consists of all students of the Islamic Cultural History Program at UIN Ar-Raniry who have taken courses related to ancient manuscripts. The sampling technique used was simple random sampling, ensuring that the selected informants represent a broader population. The data collection instruments include:

- Guidelines for interviews with open-ended questions about the use of ancient manuscripts, obstacles, and supporting factors.
- Participatory observation, where researchers document students' behavior when accessing ancient manuscript collections.
- Documentation, including photos of activities, a list of manuscript collections, and museum management archives.

The instrument was tested through face validity (appearance test) by consulting with the supervising lecturer, and strengthened with content validity using relevant literature on collection utilization indicators (intensity, frequency, and number of uses). Reliability was maintained through triangulation of sources and techniques, namely by comparing interview data, observations, and documentation.

Instrument

The main research instrument is the researcher himself as a human instrument, who plays a role in collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data. The researcher is assisted by additional instruments in the form of:

- Semi-structured interview guidelines, to guide interactions with students and museum administrators.
- Observation sheets, to record student behavior and interactions while utilizing the collection.
- Cameras and audio recorders, as documentation tools to maintain data authenticity.

Procedures and Time Frame

The research process was conducted over two weeks, from December 20, 2021, to January 1, 2022, at the Aceh Museum. The research stages included:

1. Preparation, including obtaining research permission, developing interview guidelines, and coordinating with museum staff.
2. Data collection, through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and collection of supporting documents.
3. Data recording and organization, including interview transcripts and field notes.
4. Data triangulation, which involves comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation to ensure the validity of the information.

Analysis Plan

Data is analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis model consisting of four stages:

1. Data collection, from interviews, observations, and documentation.
2. Data reduction, which involves summarizing, selecting key points, and focusing on aspects of the utilization of ancient manuscripts by students.
3. Data presentation, in the form of narrative descriptions, tables, and thematic descriptions.
4. Drawing conclusions and verification, by checking the consistency of findings with field data through member checking with informants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Table 1. Research Findings Based on the Interactive Data Analysis Model

Analysis Stage	Data Findings	Evidence/Field Data
Data Collection	Students utilize ancient manuscripts through visits to the Aceh Museum, particularly during their Philology and Ancient Manuscript Studies course.	Observation of student visits; class attendance lists; interviews with 15 students and 5 museum staff members.
Data Reduction	The utilization is more academic (for course assignments) than independent research. Main challenges: limited ability to read Arabic Malay/Jawi script and lack of transliteration.	Student interview: "We read the script only for assignments; it is difficult to understand the ancient script."
Data presentation	Internal factors: academic requirements, limited motivation, and special interest in philology. External factors: sufficient collection availability, but limited transcription services, and information retrieval facilities are still manual.	Field notes; interviews with museum librarians; photographic documentation of the collection.
Conclusion	The utilization of ancient manuscripts by students is already underway but still lacks optimization. Students tend to be passive, only fulfilling academic requirements. The significant potential of the manuscript collection as a source for research on Acehnese Islamic culture has not been fully explored.	Triangulation of interview results, observations, and documentation.

The research findings indicate that the utilization of ancient manuscripts by students of the Islamic Cultural History Program at UIN Ar-Raniry is generally conducted within an academic context, primarily to support courses in Philology and Ancient Manuscript Studies. Observations at the Aceh Museum revealed that students more frequently access manuscripts as materials to fulfill academic assignments rather than exploring the content of the manuscripts independently. Thus, ancient manuscripts are still positioned more as supplementary tools for study rather than as sources of knowledge that are intensively examined.

Interviews with students revealed difficulties in understanding the texts, particularly those written in Arabic Malay script (Jawi) and regional languages. Many students reported difficulties in transliteration, limiting their access to the meaning contained in the manuscripts. As a result, some students only utilize the manuscripts at a superficial level, reading titles or specific sections without delving into the substance of the content. These challenges are further exacerbated by the lack of supporting resources, such as transliteration guides, available at the Aceh Museum.

Internal factors that encourage students to continue utilizing ancient manuscripts include academic obligations, curiosity, and interest in the fields of Islamic history and culture. However, external factors also play a significant role, including the availability of a substantial collection of manuscripts at the Aceh Museum, friendly librarian services, and direct access through academic visits facilitated by faculty members. Despite this, the information retrieval system at remains manual, resulting in lengthy searches for specific manuscripts and limiting the effectiveness of their utilization.

Overall, the results of the study confirm that the use of ancient manuscripts by students at the Aceh Museum has been ongoing but is not yet optimal. Students tend to use manuscripts merely for short-term purposes rather than as a source for in-depth research that could enrich their understanding of Aceh's history and culture. This conclusion is supported by triangulated data from observations, interviews, and documentation, which consistently show a pattern of practical and temporary utilization.

Discussion

The findings of this study have important implications for the practice of utilizing ancient manuscripts in academia, particularly in the field of Islamic Cultural History. The dominant use of manuscripts is formal academic, rather than independent exploration, indicating that students still view manuscripts as supporting instruments for learning, rather than primary sources for research. This aligns with Miles & Huberman's theory on the interactive data analysis model, which emphasizes the importance of data reduction and presentation in uncovering meaning ((Asipi et al., 2022; Hashimov, 2015; Onwuegbuzie & Weinbaum, 2016) . In this context, students are still at the data collection stage without delving deeper into the critical interpretation phase. Furthermore, this condition indicates that the concept of cultural heritage utilization, as emphasized by UNESCO, has not been fully realized, as ancient manuscripts should not only be studied for academic purposes but also understood as cultural heritage with transgenerational value (Asri, 2019; Chiba & Setiawati, 2024; Fitri et al., 2015) .

This study contributes by emphasizing the role of students as key actors in the utilization of ancient manuscripts in the academic realm. While previous studies have focused more on technical aspects such as conservation and digitization, this study enriches the literature by examining the pedagogical dimension, namely how ancient manuscripts are utilized in the context of Philology and Ancient Manuscript Studies. Furthermore, this research supports the idea of cultural heritage as a living source of knowledge, where ancient manuscripts are not merely passive artifacts but active sources that can be revived through students' academic activities (Josefsson & Aronsson, 2016; Santamarina & Beltran, 2016; Towaf, 2017) . Thus, the contribution of this research lies in its effort to bridge the gap between cultural heritage preservation theory and higher education practice, thereby strengthening the manuscript-based learning approach in Islamic history and culture education.

Although it produced relevant findings, this study has several limitations. First, the limited number of participants, which only included students from the 2016–2018 cohorts, made it difficult to generalize the results. Second, the short duration of the study, which only lasted two weeks, resulted in brief observations that did not capture the dynamics of manuscript utilization in the long term. Third, technical constraints such as limited transliteration and digital facilities restricted the data obtained, forcing researchers to rely more on interviews and direct observation. Fourth, this study did not fully integrate international philological theory, such as Paul Zumthor's approach to textual fluidity, which could enrich the analysis of the utilization of ancient manuscripts as living texts that can always be reinterpreted.

Based on the findings and limitations above, several suggestions can be made. First, there is a need to improve students' skills in reading and interpreting ancient scripts through intensive transliteration training, given the importance of textual literacy in accessing culture. Second, the Aceh Museum is expected to expand the digitization of its ancient manuscript collection, as recommended by IFLA (2018), to make access easier, faster, and more inclusive for students and researchers. Third, lecturers teaching courses related to ancient manuscripts are advised to integrate project-based learning or problem-based learning methods, which can increase students' active involvement in solving real-world problems based on manuscripts. Fourth, further research is recommended to expand the participants to include students from various universities or independent researchers, so that the research results are more comprehensive. With these steps, the utilization of ancient manuscripts will not only strengthen the quality of learning in higher education but also reinforce the role of students as agents of cultural preservation and developers of knowledge based on local heritage.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the utilization of ancient manuscripts by students of the Islamic Cultural History Study Program at UIN Ar-Raniry in the Aceh Museum has been ongoing, but is still dominated by formal academic interests in fulfilling assignments for the Philology and Ancient Manuscript Studies courses. Students generally utilize manuscripts only for reading or noting basic information, while in-depth exploration of the manuscript content remains suboptimal due to limitations in reading ancient scripts, insufficient transliteration, and limited access to information retrieval facilities. This situation underscores that the significant potential of ancient manuscripts as a source of knowledge, culture, and research has not yet been fully harnessed by students.

Another important conclusion is that internal factors (academic needs, interests, motivation) and external factors (completeness of collections, librarian services, and lecturer support) greatly influence the level of utilization of ancient manuscripts. The findings of this study contribute by highlighting the role of students as key agents in cultural heritage preservation through academic activities. Therefore, strengthening strategies such as literacy training, manuscript digitization, and the development of manuscript-based learning methods are necessary to ensure that the utilization of ancient manuscripts is not merely practical and temporary but sustainable, in-depth, and relevant to the advancement of knowledge and the preservation of local culture.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

N.F.S., as the main author, played a key role in designing the research, collecting data through observation and interviews, and drafting the final research manuscript. This process was directly supervised by N.A., the first supervisor, who provided conceptual and methodological guidance, as well as substantial input in the analysis of findings. Additionally, N.R., as the second supervisor, contributed significantly to the technical aspects of writing, improving the systematic structure, and validating the scientific rigor to ensure the quality and accuracy of the manuscript. Thus, this research is the result of a collaborative effort between the lead author and the two supervisors in producing an academically accountable scientific work.

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