

CONSERVATION OF THE PASEMAH MEGALITHIC SITES IN THE MODERN ERA: CHALLENGES AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY-BASED PRESERVATION STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The Pasemah megalithic site in South Sumatra is an invaluable cultural heritage reflecting the social, religious, and aesthetic life of prehistoric communities. However, its preservation faces serious challenges, including environmental degradation, land-use conversion, weak regulations, and limited public awareness of ancestral heritage. In the modern era, conservation efforts should not only focus on physical maintenance but also integrate digital technology as a strategic approach. Digitization through three-dimensional mapping, virtual reconstruction, online archives, and dissemination via digital media can expand public access and awareness. Such strategies not only safeguard the authenticity of the site but also promote it globally as an educational and cultural resource. Technology-based conservation requires synergy among government, academics, local communities, and the wider society to ensure the sustainability of its historical values for future generations.

Keywords: conservation, megalithic site, Pasemah, preservation, digital technology

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1. Introduction

The megalithic sites in Indonesia are cultural heritage with very high historical, archaeological, and social value. The existence of megalithic remains not only represents traces of prehistoric civilization, but also serves as important evidence regarding the dynamics of community life in the past. One of the regions rich in megalithic remains is the Pasemah area in South Sumatra. This area has long been

known by archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists as a center of megalithic culture in Indonesia, even in Southeast Asia, marked by the existence of stone statues, dolmens, menhirs, sarcophagi, and various other forms of stone monuments (Maysuri et al., 2023). These artifacts not only contain information about the religious and social practices of prehistoric communities, but also demonstrate a high level of technical, artistic, and cultural symbolism skills. Therefore, the Pasemah megalithic site has universal value that needs to be preserved(Wijaya et al., 2025).

In this modern era, the conservation of megalithic sites faces increasingly complex challenges. Factors such as environmental degradation, changes in regional spatial planning, infrastructure development pressure, and lack of public awareness about cultural heritage preservation have led to many archaeological sites being in a threatened condition (Purwohandoyo, J., Cemporaningsih, E., & Wijayanto, 2018). In the context of Pasemah, the phenomenon of neglecting megalithic sites is still found, both in the form of physical damage due to natural factors or human actions. For example, vandalism, artifact theft, and land conversion have reduced the integrity and authenticity of the sites. Even though, based on Law Number 11 of 2010 concerning Cultural Heritage, every historical site has legal protection and must be preserved for the interests of science, culture, and national identity.

Conservation challenges are increasingly exacerbated by the limited human resources and funds allocated for preservation activities. Local governments and related institutions often face difficulties in conducting comprehensive monitoring, documentation, and restoration of megalithic sites. The vast geographical conditions of the Pasemah region with its diverse site distribution also complicate regular surveillance efforts. Additionally, low community involvement in conservation programs causes preservation to often become the sole responsibility of formal institutions, without substantial support from local communities who should be the primary actors in safeguarding cultural heritage (Indrayati et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the modern era presents new opportunities in cultural heritage preservation efforts through the utilization of digital technology. Digital transformation has permeated various aspects of life, including in the fields of archaeology and conservation. Technologies such as 3D scanning, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), photogrammetry, Virtual Reality (VR), and Augmented Reality (AR) have been widely used to document, visualize, and publish historical sites across different parts of the world (Suprobo & Jatmiko, 2025). Digital technology enables the creation of virtual archives that not only facilitate academic research but also provide educational access and cultural tourism for the general public (Luo & Feng, 2024). Thus, technology-based conservation strategies can become innovative solutions in addressing the limitations of conventional methods that have been used to date.

The use of digital technology in the conservation of the Pasemah megalithic site offers several advantages. First, digitization of artifacts allows for safer data storage that can be accessed anytime. Second, technology visualization can enhance public appreciation of the site's aesthetic and historical value. Third, the implementation of

AR or VR-based interactive applications in the tourism sector can increase the appeal of cultural destinations without adding direct pressure to the physical site. Additionally, GIS-based mapping can be used to identify distribution patterns of sites and continuously monitor changes in the surrounding environmental conditions (Sonalitha et al., 2024). These strategies align with the principles of sustainable conservation that emphasize the balance between cultural heritage protection, academic interests, and community economic development through cultural tourism.

Nevertheless, the implementation of digital technology in conservation is not without challenges. The main obstacles lie in the limited technological infrastructure in certain areas, the scarcity of experts capable of operating sophisticated digital devices, and the insufficient allocation of funds specifically for digitizing cultural heritage. Additionally, there are ethical and policy issues concerning the accessibility of digital cultural heritage data, particularly regarding the risks of excessive commercialization or the scope of the digital content produced. Therefore, digital technology-based preservation strategies must be designed holistically, taking into account technical, social, economic, and legal aspects (Pipit Mulyiah, Dyah Aminatun, Sukma Septian Nasution, Tommy Hastomo, Setiana Sri Wahyuni Sitepu, 2020).

Research on the conservation of the megalithic sites of Pasemah is not only important in the national context but also has international relevance. UNESCO in various policy documents emphasizes that irreplaceable cultural heritage is a world asset that must be preserved with modern and collaborative approaches. Several countries have successfully integrated digital technology in the preservation of historical sites, such as the use of laser scanning at Stonehenge, England, or VR applications for the Pompeii site in Italy. This international experience shows that digital technology can expand public access while protecting sites from physical damage due to excessive tourism exploitation. Therefore, the application of similar strategies in Pasemah is expected to enhance Indonesia's position in the world heritage preservation arena (Mahira, 2024).

Based on the exposure, this research focuses on how the utilization of digital technology can become a conservation strategy for the Pasemah megalithic site amidst the limitations of conventional methods and the challenges of modernity

This research contributes to the integration between the utilization of digital technology and local community participation in the conservation efforts of the Pasemah megalithic site. This distinguishes it from previous research that tended to focus solely on archaeological aspects or technical documentation. Thus, this research is expected to complement the studies of cultural heritage conservation in Indonesia, which have minimally integrated technological, social, and community participation perspectives.

Conservation of the megalithic sites of Pasemah in the modern era demands innovative strategies based on the utilization of digital technology. The success of preservation is not only determined by technical capabilities in documenting and restoring artifacts, but also by the extent to which local communities and stakeholders can be actively involved in the process. A collaborative approach that encompasses

technological, cultural, educational, and economic aspects is key to ensuring that the megalithic cultural heritage of Pasemah remains preserved and can be passed on to future generations.

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytic method. This selection approach is based on the research objectives which aim to deeply explore the phenomenon of cultural site conservation, specifically the megaliths of Pasemah, while considering social, historical, and technological aspects. Qualitative research is naturalistic because it places the object in its natural context and emphasizes meaning over numbers (Adlini et al., 2022). This approach allows researchers to examine conservation challenges and strategies from the perspective of stakeholders while understanding the socio-cultural meanings underlying the phenomenon.

The research location focuses on the Pasemah region in South Sumatra, which is known to have a high concentration of megalithic remains such as menhirs, dolmens, stone statues, sarcophagi, and other stone monuments. This area was chosen because of its high historical and archaeological value, while also facing real challenges in conservation efforts in the modern era. The main focus of the research is directed at identifying the actual conditions of the Pasemah megalithic sites, analyzing conservation challenges, and exploring the potential use of digital technology in sustainable conservation efforts.

The data sources used in this research consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants, including archaeologists, historians, local government officials, site managers, and local community figures. The number of informants interviewed was determined to be 3 people: site custodians who have academic knowledge in the field of archaeology or history, and local residents who are actively involved in cultural conservation activities. The informant selection technique used purposive sampling, which was then supplemented with snowball sampling to expand the network of relevant informants. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured techniques to enable the researcher to obtain more open and information-rich answers. Secondary data was obtained through literature studies in the form of books, scientific journal articles, previous research reports, and government policies related to cultural heritage and digitalization of cultural heritage. According to (Hafsiah, 2023), the combination of primary and secondary data can strengthen the analysis while providing a solid theoretical foundation in the research.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques. First, field observation to obtain a realistic picture of the condition of the Pasemah megalithic site, including physical damage, the surrounding environment, and community interaction with the site. Second, in-depth interviews with stakeholders to explore understanding of the challenges and conservation strategies. Third, documentation in the form of photos, archives, and relevant written data to complement the results of observations and interviews. Triangulation was used as a strategy to examine data validity by comparing results from various sources and methods.

Data analysis is conducted interactively and includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion (Sundari et al., 2024). Data reduction is performed by selecting relevant information from observations, interviews, and documentation. Data presentation is done in the form of descriptive narrative so that researchers can systematically see the relationships between phenomena. The final stage is conclusion and verification, which is carried out continuously until valid findings are obtained that can answer the research problem.

To maintain research credibility, triangulation of sources, methods, and theories was used. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from various informants, method triangulation by combining observation, interviews, and documentation, while theory triangulation was done by aligning field findings with cultural conservation and digitalization theories (Patton, 1990). With this strategy, data validity is better ensured, thus the research results can be scientifically accountable.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Condition of the Megalithic Sites in Pasemah, South Sumatra

The megalithic site of Pasemah in South Sumatra is one of the most important archaeological heritages in Indonesia representing the megalithic tradition of the archipelago. The existence of this site reflects the social, religious, and cultural life of prehistoric communities that developed around 1000 BC to the early AD period. This site is spread across the Pasemah Highlands region which includes Lahat Regency and its surroundings, with various remains in the form of stone statues, dolmens, menhirs, sarcophagi, and stone reliefs that have artistic uniqueness and high historical value. The Pasemah stone statues, for example, are known to have distinctive features in the form of carvings of human and animal figures that show a high level of artistic skill for their time (Maysuri et al., 2023).

The current condition of the megalithic site in Pasemah is significantly affected in the era of modern visibility due to various factors. From an environmental perspective, global climate change and natural activities such as high rainfall, air humidity, and peak temperatures are the main causes of stone weathering. The megalithic stones made of andesite or basalt undergo a degradation process involving cracking, erosion, and the growth of moss and microorganisms (Province, S. S., Azmi, S. D., & Indriastusti, n.d.).

Besides environmental factors, development in an area also affects the condition of sites. The expansion of settlements, the opening of land for oil palm and rubber plantations, as well as road infrastructure projects often threaten the existence of locations. Some archaeological residences are even found in the middle of community plantations, making their locations vulnerable to daily activities such as logging or land grabbing. This situation shows the weakness of spatial planning control, which should consider the site area as a cultural protected area (Ardianza et al., 2017).

The social conditions of the community around the site also play an important role in determining the fate of the Pasemah megalithic site. Modernization and globalization have shifted the cultural orientation of the community, especially the younger generation, who are increasingly moving away from understanding the historical values of ancestral remains. The cultural attachment to the site has begun to

fade, so the community's role in preserving the site is not yet optimal. On the other hand, the site is sometimes viewed as an economic potential through cultural tourism, but its implementation does not always follow conservation principles. For example, uncontrolled tourist visits, the use of the location as a social activity arena, or inaccurate historical recording can have negative impacts on the site. Thus, the condition of the Pasemah megalithic site in the modern era shows a combination of ecological pressures, development pressures, and socio-cultural dynamics that demand serious attention in conservation efforts.

3.2. Challenges in the Conservation Efforts of the Megalithic Sites of Pasemah

Conservation efforts for the Pasemah megalithic site face multidimensional challenges involving technical, social, economic, and policy aspects. Technical challenges arise from the limitations of conservation methods suitable for megalith characteristics. The andesite and basalt stone materials that form the main components of statues and megalithic structures are highly vulnerable to tropical weather, especially in open environmental conditions. Physical protection efforts such as shading or fencing have not been consistently applied across all site locations, allowing natural degradation processes to continue (Wijaya et al., 2025)

Social challenges are also significant. Low public awareness of the importance of the site makes long-term conservation efforts unsustainable. Most of the public views the site as ordinary stones or even considers it an obstacle to economic activities such as agriculture and housing development. The lack of cultural education programs causes the community to not fully understand the site's potential as a historical identity and sustainable tourism resource.

From an economic perspective, budget limitations remain the primary issue. Conservation programs are often implemented on a small scale and for short durations. Budgets from both central and regional governments are insufficient to meet comprehensive conservation needs. In some cases, more funds are allocated to tourism development than conservation, creating a blend between economic aspects and cultural preservation. This situation indicates that conservation is still viewed as a financial burden rather than a long-term investment for sustainable development.

Policy challenges are equally important. Although the megalithic sites of Pasemah fall under the category of cultural reserves protected by Law Number 11 of 2010 concerning Cultural Reserves, the implementation of this regulation still faces obstacles. Weak inter-agency coordination, delays in the official designation process of sites, and lack of field supervision make the sites remain vulnerable.

Compared to global practices, Indonesia's readiness still faces gaps. World sites like Stonehenge in England or Pompeii in Italy demonstrate how technology-based conservation is fully supported by sophisticated infrastructure, human resource capacity, and strict long-term-oriented regulations. In contrast, Pasemah is still constrained by technical aspects, policies, and limited public support. This difference emphasizes the need for critical analysis of how well Indonesia can adapt global strategies while considering local context. Thus, the conservation challenge of

Pasemah is not merely a technical issue, but also a systemic readiness that encompasses policies, funding, and community participation.

Furthermore, the development of cultural tourism in Pasemah presents its own challenges. Although this sector can support the local economy, the lack of tourism regulation and management can lead to excessive land exploitation. Mass tourism activities, vandalism, and visitors' non-compliance with rules can accelerate site damage. This phenomenon shows a dilemma between economic needs and cultural preservation. Therefore, the conservation challenge of the megalithic sites in Pasemah requires innovative solutions that can simultaneously address technical, social, economic, and policy dimensions.

3.3. Digital Technology-Based Conservation Strategies

In addressing the conservation challenges of the Pasemah megalithic site, the utilization of digital technology offers innovative strategies relevant to modern era needs. Digital technology not only serves as a documentation tool but also as a means for preservation, education, promotion, and continuous empowerment. One important strategy is the use of 3D scanning technology (3D laser scanning) and photogrammetry. This technology enables the creation of highly precise three-dimensional digital models of the megalithic site. The 3D models can store surface details of the stones, including cracks or carvings, which are useful for monitoring damage over time. Additionally, digital data can be used as information backup in case of physical damage that cannot be documented (Dharmatanna, 2025).

Besides 3D documentation, the use of GIS (Geographic Information System) technology is also important in conservation strategies. GIS allows for comprehensive mapping of the distribution of megalithic sites in Pasemah, including the surrounding environmental conditions. The spatial data generated can be used to identify the vulnerability level of each site to environmental and development threats. Integration of GIS with rainfall, vegetation, and human activity data will help in formulating damage risk maps, which in turn can support early mitigation policies.

Digital strategies can also support educational and promotional aspects through augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technology. AR/VR technology allows the public to experience interactive virtual exploration of megalithic sites, either through applications or digital museums. Thus, the younger generation, familiar with technology, can more easily connect with ancestral cultural heritage.

However, the utilization of digital technology also carries the risk of dependency that needs to be critically considered. First, there is the potential for encryption of 3D scanning and GIS data results, such as information theft or unauthorized commercialization, which could harm national interests. Second, technology sustainability becomes a challenge due to high maintenance costs for hardware and software that often exceed local budget capabilities. Third, the risk of long-term data loss due to digital format changes or weak storage systems can reduce the effectiveness of conservation strategies. Therefore, in addition to adopting the latest technology, there is a need for ethical standards, data protection regulations, and obsolescence strategies to ensure that technology does not create new vulnerabilities.

Digital-based preservation strategies must involve the participation of local communities. Simple training programs, such as digital documentation using smartphones, managing social media for site promotion, or creating digital cultural content, can increase people's sense of ownership of the site. Collaboration between local governments, universities, local communities, and the private sector can create a sustainable conservation ecosystem. Meanwhile, policy support is needed to integrate digital technologies into conservation regulations, for example through standardization of digital documentation, 3D data protection, and public-private collaboration-based financing.

This strategy can also serve as a means of developing culture-based creative economy. The digital site model can be utilized for creating replicas, educational content, and even technology-based tourism applications that bring economic benefits to the community without sacrificing the original site. By understanding local readiness as well as digital dependency, this strategy is expected not only to preserve the physical site but also to continuously strengthen its social, cultural, and economic value without losing relevance to global developments.

4. Conclusion

The conservation of the megalithic site in Pasemah, South Sumatra, presents both a significant challenge and a strategic opportunity in preserving the nation's cultural heritage amid modernization. This megalithic site is not merely an archaeological remnant but also a symbol of cultural identity reflecting the creativity, religiosity, and social interactions of the prehistoric communities of the Indonesian archipelago. The uniqueness of stone statues with meaningful carvings of human and animal figures, along with the presence of menhirs, dolmens, and sarcophagi, establishes Pasemah as one of the important megalithic cultural centers in Southeast Asia. However, the current condition of the site indicates serious vulnerabilities threatening its sustainability, stemming from environmental factors, development, as well as social changes in the modern era.

From an environmental perspective, high rainfall, tropical air humidity, and global climate change accelerate the weathering of stone materials that form the main elements of the site. In terms of development, the expansion of settlements, plantations, and infrastructure pose real threats to the site's integrity. Meanwhile, from a social dimension, younger generations tend to be less familiar with the value of the historical site, leading to a decline in cultural continuity. Even tourism development, which should support conservation, sometimes becomes a risk factor when not managed with proper conservation principles. This situation demonstrates that the Pasemah megalithic site is in a condition requiring comprehensive, innovative, and sustainable conservation strategies.

The conservation challenges faced are not limited to technical factors, but also social, economic, and policy aspects. The limited number of conservation experts in the region, low public awareness, minimal budgets, and weak implementation of conservation policies indicate that conservation areas require a multidimensional approach. Conservation should not be viewed merely as a technical effort to repair or

protect stone monuments, but also as a socio-cultural endeavor that demands active community participation and strong regulatory support. This aligns with the understanding that cultural heritage preservation cannot be separated from the social, political, and economic context of the surrounding community.

In this context, digital technology-based preservation strategies emerge as an innovative solution. Technologies such as 3D scanning, photogrammetry, and GIS can be used to document, map, and unify site conditions more precisely and sustainably. Meanwhile, AR and VR technologies open new opportunities in site education and promotion, enabling them to reach younger generations and global communities without harming the physical preservation of the site. These strategies also allow for the development of environmentally friendly digital ecotourism while supporting the community's creative economy. Furthermore, the involvement of local communities in digital documentation, social media management, and cultural content creation will strengthen the sense of ownership and increase collective awareness of the site's importance.

Indonesia's preparations for implementing digital conservation still need to be critically compared with global practices. Countries like the United Kingdom and Italy already have strong regulations, professional digital conservation human resources, and sustainable supporting infrastructure. Indonesia, particularly in the Pasemah context, still faces limitations in budget, access to advanced technology, and long-term data management systems. Therefore, although great opportunities are available, its implementation strategy must be realistic and contextual with national conditions.

Digital dependency risks that need to be anticipated. Misuse of scanned data, weak cybersecurity, and the potential for conservation projects to not continue due to lack of funding can be serious challenges. On the other hand, dependence on technology also risks creating new abysses if it is not balanced with traditional approaches, both in terms of local wisdom and manual conservation methods that remain relevant. Therefore, the integration between traditional methods and digital innovation is absolutely necessary for conservation to run in a balanced and sustainable manner.

Conservation of the megalithic Pasemah site in the modern era requires integration between traditional approaches and digital innovation. Digital technology is not merely a supplement but also a key instrument in maintaining the increasingly complex sustainability of conservation. With supportive policy backing, cross-sector collaboration between government, historians, local communities, and the private sector, as well as the wise utilization of digital technology, conservation efforts will not only preserve the physical continuity of the site but also safeguard the cultural values contained within it. Pasemah can thus continue to stand as a witness to human civilization's history and at the same time serve as a source of inspiration for future generations.

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