COSMOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF TERRACED STRUCTURE AT THE SAWAH LUMPANG SITE, SIRAMPOG, BREBES, CENTRAL JAVA

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Abstract

Research on megalithic sites in Indonesia has largely focused on typological classification, while studies of terraced structures as integrated landscapes remain limited. This study examines the Sawah Lumpang site in Sirampog, Brebes, Central Java, which consists of an eleven levels terraced structure with a stone mortar (lumpang batu) at the summit. The study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach based on field survey data, including measurements, spatial observations, photographic documentation, and environmental recording. The site is situated on an elevated hill and is oriented toward the north-northeast, facing Mount Tumpeng, a hill regarded as sacred by the local community and currently used as a cemetery complex. The vertical arrangement of the terraces, the position of the stone mortar at the summit, and the site's orientation toward Mount Tumpeng suggest that the structure may have held significance beyond practical or technical functions. Comparative archaeological and ethnographic evidence from the Indonesian archipelago indicates that elevated landscapes, terraced structures, and stone mortars could be associated with agricultural activities, ritual practices, ancestor veneration, and locally specific concepts of sacred space. The axis mundi concept is used as a heuristic framework to examine the possible relationship between vertical movement, elevation, monument placement, and sacred landscape. The findings suggest that Sawah Lumpang may represent a culturally meaningful landscape rather than a purely utilitarian structure. However, the interpretation remains provisional because direct evidence concerning the site's chronology, ritual activities, and the beliefs of its builders or users is unavailable. Further research involving excavation, absolute dating, spatial mapping, material analysis, and ethnographic investigation is required.

Keywords: Megalithic tradition, Terraced structure, Cosmology, Axis Mundi, Cultural Heritage

INTRODUCTION

Communities across the Indonesian archipelago constructed various stone monuments, commonly referred to in archaeological literature as megaliths. The monuments include menhirs, dolmens, terraced structures, and stone mortars (lumpang batu), which have been documented in several regions, particularly in Java, Sumatera, and Sulawesi (Prasetyo, 2015). In Central Java, megalithic sites have been identified in Karanganyar (Kasnowihardjo, 1995), Gunungkidul, Banyumas, Purbalingga, Pemalang, Tegal, and Brebes, including areas along the slopes of Mount Slamet (Prasetyo, 2015;

Sulistyarto, 2024). The diversity and spatial distribution of these remains indicate the past communities developed varied ways of constructing, arranging, and using megalithic monuments.

Recent research on Indonesian megalithic sites has increasingly moved beyond the measurement and typological classification of individual remains toward the analysis of spatial relationships and site organization. Megalithic structures did not necessarily stand in isolation, rather, they could constitute spatially organized components of a broader cultural landscape. Accordingly, understanding a megalithic site requires consideration of how past communities organized and used space, because spatial arrangements may provide insights into their worldview, social, and cultural practices (Renfrew & Bahn, 2020: 401-403).

This perspective is particularly relevant to sites characterized by complex spatial arrangements, such as the Sawah Lumpang site. The site is located in Legok Hamlet, Sridadi Village, Sirampog District, Brebes Regency, Central Java. It consists of a terraced structure with eleven levels and a stone mortar (lumpang batu) positioned at its summit. Although the combination of the stepped structure and the stone mortar suggest intentional spatial arrangement, the site has not yet been specifically examined in relation to possible cosmological concepts.

This study therefore aims to describe the terraced structure at the Sawah Lumpang site based on field observations and to examine its possible relationship with cosmological ideas reflected in spatial arrangement. The study addresses two research questions are: (1) What are the vertical arrangement and environmental context of the terraced structure at the Sawah Lumpang site? and (2) What possible cosmological significance can be inferred from the stepped terraces and the stone mortar located at the summit?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Axis Mundi and Sacred Landscapes

This study employs the concept of the axis mundi as a heuristic framework for examining the possible symbolic significance of the Sawah Lumpang site. The concept was principally developed by Mircea Eliade in his comparative study of religious symbolism. According to Eliade, certain natural and architectural features, such as

mountains, temples, hills, pillars, and trees, may function symbolically as sacred centers through which different cosmic realms are connected. In this sense, the axis mundi represents a symbolic relationship between the celestial realm, the terrestrial world, and the underworld (Eliade, 1963). However, the concept does not, by itself, demonstrate that a particular archaeological site possessed such a meaning.

In the context of the Southeast Asia, Heine Geldern (1982) explained that conceptions of the state and kingship were closely associated with Hindu Buddhist cosmological ideas. These ideas included the conception of Mahameru as a sacred mountain and cosmic center, as well as the symbolic ordering of political space in relation to the cosmos (Heine Geldern, 1982). Within this comparative framework, terraced structures may be examined as possible material expressions of vertical order, hierarchy, and sacred space. Nevertheless, this interpretation should not be applied automatically to every terraced structure, since the meaning of a monument depends on its specific cultural, historical, and archaeological context.

The concept of elevation is also relevant to this framework. Higher locations may have been associated with particular ritual or symbolic significance, especially when they were connected with mountains, ancestor, deities, or restricted ceremonial activities. However, elevation cannot automatically be equated with a higher degree of sacredness. In this study, vertical differences are therefore understood as a possible indication of culturally meaningful spatial organization rather than as definitive evidence of a tripartite division of the cosmos. The stepped form of the Sawah Lumpang structure may consequently be examined as a spatial arrangement through which movement, elevation, and access were potentially organized according to particular social or religious ideas.

Regional historical evidence provides a relevant comparative context. In his study of the role of mountains during the Late Classical period in Sumedang, Saptono noted that Mount Tampomas was regarded as a sacred mountain. He also discussed Pasir Limus, which was identified with Mahameru in relation to the Tembong Agung Kingdom (Saptono, 2006: 50-52). These examples demontrate that mountains and elevated places could be incorporated into political religious and cosmological frameworks in the Indonesian archipelago. They do not, however, establish that the terraced structure at Sawah Lumpang had the same meaning. Instead, they provide a regional comparison for

examining whether elevation, topography, and monument placement may have held symbolic significance.

The Axis Mundi concept is not limited to monumental mountains or large- scale temples. An Axis Mundi may also be represented by smaller, localized features, including altars, shrines, or the central hearth of a dwelling, which function symbolically as points of connection between the human and divine realms (Wright, 2021). This conceptual flexibility permits the framework to be applied to a wide range of archaeological contexts, including the terraced structure at Sawah Lumpang. In this context, the site may be examined as a possible localized ritual setting, although its function cannot be established without additional archaeological evidence.

The application of the axis mundi concept also involves theoretical and methodological limitation. Eliade's comparative categories have been criticized for potentially treating diverse religious traditions as expressions of a universal pattern. Scholars have therefore cautioned against applying such etic concepts uncritically to emic categories or locally specific understandings of sacred space (Kosticova, 2019). In addition, the symbolic meaning of a mountain, terrace, or elevated location cannot be inferred solely from its physical form or position. Any interpretation must be supported by convergent evidence and remain sensitive to cultural and historical variation.

This study applies the axis mundi concept explicitly as a heuristic device rather than as definitive evidence of the beliefs held by the community associated with Sawah Lumpang site. The framework is used to formulate questions concerning the relationship between elevation, vertical spatial organization, monument placement, and possible concept of sacred space. Its application is combined with an analysis of the site's archaeological remains, historical setting, environmental context, and relevant local or regional comparative data. The interpretation of Sawah Lumpang site as a possible localized sacred center therefore remains provisional and will depend on the extent to which these lines of evidence support one another.

Comparative Study of Terraced Structures in the Indonesian Archipelago

Research on terraced structures in West Java was conducted by Saptono in the Quaternary volcanic slope zone of the Bandung region. At Bukitunggul, he identified a terraced earthen structure surrounded by smaller terraces, with a Ganesha statue

reportedly located at the summit. At Mount Tampomas, he documented a stone structure consisting of four terraces, accessed by a stone staircase and surmounted by a Ganesha statue (Saptono, 2005: 75-77).

In the Muria Peninsula, Priswanto et al. (2023) documented three terraced structures, Angin Temple, Bubrah Temple, and Aso Temple. These structures are stepped punden buildings oriented toward the northwest. Their orientation is associated with the summit of Mount Muria and the Java Sea (Priswanto, et al., 2023: 678-679).

Saptono (2006) noted that Mount Tampomas was regarded as a scared mountain during the Late Classical period in Sumedang.This conception is reflected in the archaeological remains at Sanghiang Taraje and Puncak Manik (Saptono, 2006: 48-49). The association between mountains and religious significance can also be observed at Mount Lawu, where Sukuh and Cetho Temples were constructed on the mountain slopes and have been discussed in relation to ancestral veneration. At Mount Penanggungan, numerous sacred structures, including terraced constructions, were established along the mountain slopes in ways that adapted to the natural gradient of the landscape (Saptono, 2006: 48).

These comparative cases indicate that terraced structures in Java were frequently situated within elevated landscapes and may have been associated with sacred or ritually significant places. However, the relationship between elevation and sacredness should not be assumed automatically. The possible significance of these structures must be assessed through their spatial organization, orientation, associated archaeological remains, environmental context, and historical or religious context.

More recent research has further expanded the discussion by emphasizing the relationship between megalithic monuments and their wider landscape settings. A study of the distribution of megalithic sites in Bondowoso, East Java, found that megalithic remains were frequently located near water sources and settlements. This pattern suggests that the placement of the monument may have been influenced by both cultural preferences and environmental constraints (Prasetyo, 2026). Such findings reinforce theview that megalithic monuments should be examined as components of broader cultural landscapes rather than as isolated objects.

Ethnographic Data on Stone Mortars

Prasetyo notes that in Nias and Toraja, large stones placed in highland areas or near ancestral graves have been associated with relationship between living communities and ancestral spirits. In Nias, such stone are placed on hilltops and may be associated with worship. In Toraja, large stones functions as markers of social status in burial areas (Prasetyo, 2015).

Research by Laili at Lake Ranau indicates that stone mortars are known by various regional terms, including watu lumpang in Javanese, pabeasan in Sundanese, lasuang in Minangkabau, and palungeng in Bugis. These objects were generally used for pounding grain and foodstuffs (Laili, 2014). On Samosir Island, the function of stone mortars may be differentiated according to the size and form of their depressions (Wiradnyana, 2011). At Andaleh, West Sumatera, stone mortars with depression diameters ranging from 27 to 33 cm have been interpreted as implements for pounding rice (Susilowati, 2011).

In addition to their practical functions, stone mortars have also been associated with ritual activities in several communities. Among the Baduy, stone mortars are used in annual ceremonies related to the prediction of agricultural yields (Permana, 2003). On Samosir Island, stone mortars decorated with particular motifs were not used for everyday activities but were associated with ritual practices (Wiradnyana, 2011). These examples indicate that stone mortars could have served both practical and ritual purposes, depending on their physical characteristics, associated features, and archaeological contexts.

Ethnographic evidence from Tana Toraja further demonstrates that elevation and spatial arrangement may have symbolic significance within megalithic and mortuary traditions. Rosmawati showed that the elevation of burial chambers in Torajan mortuary practices is closely related to social status and spiritual proximity. Members of lower social strata were buried in chambers located at lower elevations, whereas high-ranking nobles were interred in elevated chambers containing elaborately decorated coffins shaped like boats or buffaloes. In this context, elevation functioned not merely as a topographical feature but also as a medium through which social hierarchy and relationships with the spiritual realm were expressed (Rosmawati, 2025).

These ethnographic and archaeological examples provide a comparative basis for examining the relationship between stone mortars, elevation, social organization, and ritual practice. However, they do not demonstrate that the stone mortar at Sawah Lumpang had the same function or meaning. The eleven terraces and the stone mortar at the summit may indicate an intentional spatial arrangement, but their possible sacred or cosmological significance must be evaluated through the local archaeological context.

Relevant considerations include the stone mortar's physical characteristics, traces of use, association with other remains, access to the terraces, orientation, environmental setting, and local historical or ethnographic information. Accordingly, the Torajan evidence should be used as a comparative analogy rather than as direct proof that Sawah Lumpang site constituted a sacred landscape or a localized axis mundi.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical research design. This approach was selected because the study seeks to interpret the possible cosmological significance reflected in the physical configuration and spatial organization of the Sawah Lumpang site rather than to measure variables statistically.

The primary data were obtained through a field survey conducted in 2025 at the Sawah Lumpang site, located in Legok Hamlet, Sridadi Village, Sirampog District, Brebes Regency, Central Java. The field survey focused on the documentation of visible archaeological remains, their spatial relationship, and the surrounding environmental context. Archaeological site surveys commonly record a site's coordinates, elevation, visible features, environmental conditions, photographic documentation, and local information relevant to the site's interpretation.

The data collected in this study included geographic coordinates 07º11' 51.6" S and 109º 03' 22.5" E, an elevation of 520 m above sea level, measurements of the distances between the terraced levels, the dimensions of the stone mortars, photographic documentation, field sketches, and observations of the surrounding environment. Particular attention was paid to the site's orientation in relation to prominent landscape features, especially the hill locally known as Mount Gunung Tumpeng. This hill is visible from the site and continues to be regarded as sacred by members of the local community.

The instruments used during the field survey included a measuring tape, a Garmin GPS device, a digital camera, and field notes. The measuring tape was used to measure the distances between the terraces and the dimensions of the stone mortar. The GPS device was used to record the site's geographic position and elevation. Photographs were used to document the physical and the spatial arrangement of the site, while field notes were used to record observations, local information, and other relevant findings. In addition to the primary field data, this study also draws on secondary data obtained from books, journal articles, and previous research reports. These sources were used to establish the archaeological, historical, ethnographic, and theoretical context of the site.

The data were analyzed descriptively and interpretively. The analytical process involved data presentation, analysis of the vertical spatial arrangement, cosmological interpretation using the Axis Mundi concept, and synthesis of the findings. The axis mundi concept was not treated as direct evidence of the beliefs held by the community associated with Sawah Lumpang site. Instead, it was used to generate analytical questions concerning the possible relationship between elevation, vertical arrangement, monument placement, landscape orientation, and sacred space. The interpretation was therefore based on the convergence of archaeological observations, environmental context, historical information, ethnographic comparisons, and relevant theoretical perspectives.

This findings of this study should be interpreted with caution. First, the analysis is based primarily on surface observations and has not been supported by excavation, absolute dating, or material analysis. Second, no direct evidence of ritual activity-such as offerings, human remains, inscriptions, or associated artifacts-has been identified at the site. Third, the relationship between the terraced structure and the stone mortar remains tentative.

Finally, the interpretation of Sawah Lumpang through the axis mundi is subject to the limitations of comparative analysis. The concept represents an etic analytical category and should not be assumed to correspond directly to the emic beliefs of the local community. For this reason, the results are presented as a possible interpretation that remains open to revision when new archaeological, historical, ethnographic, or scientific evidence becomes available.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Sawah Lumpang Site

The Sawah Lumpang site is located on the summit of a hill that is currently used by local residents as a vegetable garden. Rice fields surround the hill. Situated at approximately 520 m above sea level, the site occupies a relatively elevated position within the surrounding landscape. The identification of a megalithic site in Sirampog adds to the evidence for the distribution of megalithic traditions in the Brebes region and along the slopes of Mount Slamet.

Field observations indicate that the site is oriented toward the north-northeast, with the terraced structure facing Mount Tumpeng, a prominent hill visible from the site (Figure 1). Mount Tumpeng is still regarded as sacred by members of the local community and is currently used as a cemetery complex. This spatial relationship suggests that theorientation of Sawah Lumpang may have been deliberately aligned with a prominent and culturally meaningful landscape feature. However, orientation alone cannot establis the original intention or meaning of the site, it must be considered together with the site's topography, access, chronology, associated remains, and local traditions.



Figure 1. Google Earth image of the Sirampog area showing the location of the Sawah Lumpang site, Legok Hamlet, and Mount Tumpeng (Source: Google Earth, 2026).

The significance of Mount Tumpeng as a landscape feature is further supported by historical cartographic evidence. On the topographic maps sheets of Boemiajoe, numbered 43/XL-D & 43/XLI-B), Mount Tumpeng is explicitly labelled (Figure 2). By contrast, the hill immediately west of the Sawah Lumpang site, locally known as Mount Ambeng, is not identified on the same maps, despite its prominent topographic position. The Boemiajoe map sheets belong to a 1: 50,000, topographic mapping series covering the Boemiajoe-Brebes area.

The difference in cartographic treatment is noteworthy, but is should note be interpreted as conclusive evidence that Mount Tumpeng possessed greater cultural significance than Mount Ambeng. Topographic maps record selected physical and cultural features according to the purpose, scale, conventions, and information available to the surveyors and mapmakers. Historical maps of Java could include natural features, settlements, cemeteries, antiquities, other landmarks, but the presence or absence of label does not necessarily correspond directly to local sacred status.

Nevertheless, the continued use of Mount Tumpeng as a sacred cemetery provides independent local evidence that the hill has cultural and spiritual importance. When considered together with its visibility from Sawah Lumpang, its location along the site's north-northeast axis, and its representation on the historical map, this evidence supports the hypothesis that Mount Tumpeng may have served as a meaningful spatial reference point. The relationship should therefore be understood as a possible landscape alignment rather than as definitive proof of a cosmological orientation.

The spatial relationship between Sawah Lumpang and Mount Tumpeng is relevant to the interpretation of the site as part of a broader cultural landscape. The terraced structure, the stone mortar at its summit, the elevated location, and the visible sacred hill may have formed a meaningful spatial configuration. Within the axis mundi framework, this arrangement can be examined as a possible relationship between vertical monumentality, elevated terrain, and culturally significant landscape feature. However, because the interpretation is based primarily on surface observation and comparative evidence, the proposed cosmological significance remains provisional.



Figure 2. Topographic maps of the Bumiayu, Brebes
(Source: Topographic maps of Boemiajoe sheet 43/XL D & 43/XLI
http://maps.lib.utexas.edu/)

Terraced Structure and Stone Mortar

The principal archaeological feature at the Sawah Lumpang site is an eleven-level terraced structure extending from the base of the hill toward its summit (Figure 4). The distances between the terraces, presented in Table 1, are not uniform and range from 0,400 to 1,298 m. Despite this variation, the terraces form a continuous ascending arrangement toward the summit. Five stone blocks were identified on the second terrace and may represent remains of a structural feature or boundary elements. The seventh terrace lacks a visible stone wall, unlike the other terraces. The presence, arrangement, and repeated constructional pattern of the terraces indicate that the structure is anthropogenic rather than a natural formation.

Table 1. Distances Between Terraced Levels at the Sawah Lumpang Site

No	Terrace Segment	Distance (m)	Remarks
1	Terrace 0-1	1,294	Lowest terrace
2	Terrace 1 - 2	0,757	Contains five stone blocks
3	Terrace 2-3	1,025	-
4	Terrace 3-4	1,298	-
5	Terrace 4-5	0,960	-
6	Terrace 5-6	1,013	-
7	Terrace 6-7	0,823	Without stone wall
8	Terrace 7-8	0,780	-
9	Terrace 8-9	1,230	Width: 3.86 m
10	Terrace 9-10	0,400	Width: 1.64 m
11	Terrace 10-11	0,470	Width: 2.04 m/Topmost terrace

Source: Field Survey, 2025

At the summit, immediately beyond the eleventh terrace, a large stone mortar and three other stone blocks were identified. The stone mortar measures 93 cm in height, 133 cm in length, and 96.5 cm in width. The stone mortar's depression measures 27 cm in outer diameter, 17.5 cm in inner diameter, and 13 cm in depth (Figure 3).

In Indonesian megalithic archaeology, a stone mortar (lumpang batu) generally refers to a relatively flat stone containing one or more deliberately carved depressions, usually circular in shape. These depressions are commonly associated with the pounding, processing, or husking of grains, and other foodstuffs. Their diameters generally range from approximately 25 to 50 cm, although larger examples also occur, and their depths may vary considerably (Yuniawati, 2000:30). In megalithic contexts, stone mortars may also have been associated with the preparation or deposition of offerings, although such interpretations require supporting contextual evidence (Prasetyo, 2015)

The location of the stone mortar at the summit is therefore important for understanding the spatial organization and possible function of the site. Its position indicates that the mortar was not an isolated find but formed part of the summit area of the terraced structure. Nevertheless, the spatial association between the mortar and the terraces does not, by itself, establish whether they were constructed during the same period or served a common function.

Functional Interpretation

In terms of size, the stone mortar at Sawah Lumpang is comparable to examples documented in the vicinity of Lake Ranau (Laili, 2014). Based on the classification used in that study, the stone mortar at Sawah Lumpang, with a depression measuring 27 cm in outer diameter and 13 cm in depth, may be consistent with mortars used for pounding grains, including rice and possibly tubers. This interpretation is also compatible with evidence from Andaleh and Samosir, where stone mortars have been associated with the processing of agricultural products (Susilowati, 2011; Wiradnyana, 2011).

However, the Sawah Lumpang stone mortar differs from many comparable examples is one important respect, it is located at the summit of a hill, at the end of an eleven-level terraced structure. In other contexts, stone mortars located within settlements have been interpreted primarily as implements for food processing. By contrast, mortars associated with ritual settings may have had additional symbolic or ceremonial functions. At the Arca Domas site among the Baduy for example, a stone mortar or mortar-like feature was associated with the observation of rainwater conditions and the prediction of agricultural success during an annual ritual (Permana, 2003). The clarity and quantity of water in the mortar were interpreted as signs related to rainfall and harvest conditions.

These comparisons suggest that stone mortars could have served both practical and ritual purposes, depending on their physical characteristics, location, associated features, and cultural context. Accordingly, the stone mortar at Sawah Lumpang may have been used for processing foodstuffs, but its position at the highest point of the terraced structures raises the possibility of an additional symbolic or ritual significance. Its elevated location may have contributed to the way the site was experienced and interpreted by the community that used it.

At present, however, there is insufficient evidence to determine whether the Sawah Lumpang mortar was used for everyday food processing, ritual activities, or both. No direct evidence of offering, residues, use-wear, inscriptions, or associated artifacts has been identified. The interpretation of the mortar's possible ritual or cosmological significance must therefore remain provisional. The relationship between its elevated position, the eleven terraces, and the surrounding sacred landscape should be examined together with further archaeological, environmental, historical, and ethnographic evidence.

Cosmological Interpretation

Within the Axis Mundi framework, the spatial organization of Sawah Lumpang can be examined through three interconnected elements: the hill as a possible vertical reference, the terraces as a route toward the summit, and the stone mortar as a focal feature located at the highest point. Movement upward across the terraces may be interpreted as a possible symbolic progression toward a higher or more restricted spatial zone. This interpretation is broadly comparable with evidence from Tana Toraja, where the vertical position of mortuary spaces has been associated with social status and spiritual proximity (Rosmawati, 2025) However, the Torajan case is used only as a comparative analogy and does not establish that the terraces at Sawah Lumpang had the same meaning.

The axis mundi concept also concerns the symbolic function of a center as a point of communication between different cosmic realms. Sacred places may therefore serve not only as symbolic centers but also as settings for ritual activities through which relationship between humans and the divine or ancestral realms are expressed (Wright, 2021). In the context, the stone mortar at the summit of Sawah Lumpang may have functioned as a focal feature. It may have been used for processing foodstuffs, preparing offerings, or both. At present, however, the absence of direct evidence such as residues, offering, or associated ritual artifacts prevents a definitive determination of its function.

The site's orientation toward Mount Tumpeng adds another dimension to the interpretation. The visual and spatial relationship between Sawah Lumpang and Mount Tumpeng suggests that the site may have formed part of a broader landscape in which elevated features were connected through visibility and directional orientation. The continued use of Mount Tumpeng as a cemetery regarded as sacred by the local

community provides evidence of its contemporary spiritual significance. This evidence does not demonstrate that the same meaning existed when Sawah Lumpang was constructed, but it establishes the hill as a culturally meaningful feature in the present landscape.

The interpretation of Sawah Lumpang as a possible Axis Mundi is therefore employed as a heuristic analytical framework. As discussed in the literature review, scholars have criticized the uncritical application of Eliade's concepts to non-Western contexts and have warned against treating etic analytical categories as direct representation of emic worldviews (Kosticova, 2019). Accordingly, the Axis Mundi interpretation is regarded as a tentative analytical proposition rather than as definitive evidence of the beliefs held by the community associated with the site. In this study, the concept is used to examine a possible cross-cultural pattern involving sacred centrality, vertical movement and the relationship between elevation and spiritual proximity. The specific cosmological beliefs of the community associated with Sawah Lumpang cannot, however, be reconstructed from the archaeological remains alone. This interpretation consequently remains hypothetical and provides a basis for future archaeological, historical, and ethnographic research.

Comparative Evidence from Java

The association between mountains, sacred places, and cosmological systems has been documented in several historical and archaeological contexts in the Indonesian archipelago. Saptono notes that, during the Late Classical period in Sumedang, Mount Tampomas was regarded as a sacred mountain, while Pasir Limus was identified with Mahameru in relation to the Tembong Agung Kingdom (Saptono, 2006: 48-49). Similar relationships between mountains and religious practices have been discussed at Mount Lawu, where Sukuh and Cetho temples were constructed on the mountain slopes and have been associated with ancestral veneration. At Mount Penanggungan, numerous sacred structures, including terraced constructions, were established along the slopes and adapted to the natural gradient of the landscape (Saptono, 2006:48).

The relationship between Sawah Lumpang and Mount Tumpeng can also be compared with patterns documented in the Muria Peninsula. Research in that region indicates that several terraced structures were oriented toward the summit of Mount Muria

and the Java Sea, suggesting that directional alignment and visibility may have contributed to the organization of sacred space (Priswanto et,al., 2023: 678-679). This comparison is relevant to Sawah Lumpang because its terraced structure is also oriented toward a prominent elevated feature. Nevertheless, the specific meanings of orientation at the Muria sites cannot be transferred directly to Sawah Lumpang.

Saptono also documented terraced structures at Bukitunggul and Mount Tampomas, where Ganesha statues and lingga functioned as objects of worship. At Bukitunggul, the terraced structure was located on a hilltop and associated with religious activities. At Mount Tampomas, four terraced levels led to a summit containing Ganesha statues and menhirs (Saptono, 2005). These examples indicate that terraced structures were frequently constructed in elevated settings and may have served religious or ritual purposes.

Similar patterns appear in the late classical period, as described by Widyastuti (2014). She showed that sacred buildings at Mount Lawu (Sukuh Temple) and Mount Tampomas were constructed as terraced structure (punden berundak), oriented toward the mountain peak, reflecting a resurgence of pre-Hindu-Buddhist beliefs. She also noted the association of a terraced structure (punden), with a stone mortar at Punden Perigi in Purworejo, providing a potentially relevant archaeological comparison for Sawah Lumpang (Widastuti, 2014).

The sites in the Muria Peninsula share several similarities with Sawah Lumpang, including their elevated locations, terraced structure, and focal stone elements. However, a key difference is that the Muria sites contain Ganesha statues and yoni, whereas no comparable Hindu-Buddhist statues have been found at Sawah Lumpang. Saptono also discusses cultural transformation in the use of ancient objects in West Java. In Mayang Villages, Subang, a stone statue was found placed on a monolith. According to Saptono, statues and other ancient objects from the Classical period could later be incorporated into religious practices by communities other than those who originally created them.
Because these objects were regarded as sacred, they were placed in locations considered sacred (Saptono, 2005:81)



Figure 3 Stone Mortar



Figure. 4 Punden Terrace

(Doc.RIIM Bumiayu, 2025)

Interpretastion of Sawah Lumpang

Taken together, the field observations and comparative evidence suggest that Sawah Lumpang should not be interpreted solely as a functional or technical structure. The vertical arrangement of the eleven terraces, the concentration of stone elements at the summit, the presence of a stone mortar, and the orientation toward Mount Tumpeng indicate that the site may have been organized as culturally meaningful landscape feature. Within the Axis Mundi framework, these characteristics can be examined as possible evidence that elevation, movement toward the summit, and the relationship between visible landscape features held symbolic significance.

The stone mortar at the summit is particularly important because its physical form is compatible with practical food processing, while its position within the site may have enabled additional ritual or symbolic meanings. Its location does not prove that it was used for offerings or ceremonies, but it justifies further investigation into the relationship between its function and its placement.

The alignment toward Mount Tumpeng further suggests that Sawah Lumpang may have been integrated into a wider landscape rather than functioning as an isolated monument. However, the interpretation remains inferential. Direct evidence of the beliefs, rituals, chronology, or intentions of community that constructed or used the site is not currently available. Sawah Lumpang should therefore be understood as a site with

possible cosmological significance, rather than as a confirmed axis mundi or definitively identified sacred center.

CONCLUSIONS

The Sawah Lumpang site consists of an eleven-level terraced structure with a stone mortar at the summit. The terraces rise from the base toward the summit, while the site's elevated position and north-northeast orientation toward Mount Tumpeng form part of its environmental and spatial context. Mount Tumpeng is currently regarded as sacred and used as a cemetery complex, suggesting that it may have functioned as a meaningful landscape reference point, although its present significance cannot be assumed to reflect the original meaning of Sawah Lumpang.

The stepped terraces and the stone mortar at the summit may have held symbolic significance related to vertical spatial organization, elevation, and sacred space. Within the axis mundi framework, the hill may be understood as a possible vertical reference, the terraces as a route toward the summit, and the mortar as a focal feature. Nevertheless, this interpretation remains provisional because it is based primarily on surface observations and lacks direct evidence concerning chronology, ritual practices, and the beliefs of the site's builders or users. Further archaeological, material, spatial, and ethnographic research is required to clarify the function and possible cosmological significance of Sawah Lumpang.

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