



Rewriting the Origins of Masjid Zahir: A Critical Historical and Architectural Reappraisal

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Abstract

This study re-examines the origins of Masjid Zahir, a monument conventionally dated to its 1912 reconstruction under British Malaya architect James Gorman. Drawing from classical Malay manuscripts, spatial analysis, archival accounts, and on-site artefact evaluation, this paper argues that such a date reflects only the latest architectural phase of a much older sacred site. Evidence shows that a previous timber mosque was present at the same site as early as 1735, which aligns with the founding of Kota Setar as the royal capital of Kedah. The finding of 18th-century ritual artifacts, the mosque's alignment with the palace complex, and similar designs in regional royal mosque styles support this new interpretation. By placing Masjid Zahir within the context of destruction, rebuilding, and architectural changes especially after the Siamese invasions (1821–1842), this paper illustrates that the mosque's heritage goes beyond its Indo-Saracenic colonial appearance. Reassessing its beginnings provides a more precise historical account, highlighting Masjid Zahir as one of the oldest mosques still in operation in Malaysia. It is also a lasting symbol of Kedah's political authority, cultural resilience, and Islamic continuity.

Discipline: Architectural Heritage, Architectural History & Theory, Islamic Architecture, Islamic Studies.

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1 Introduction

Masjid Zahir is widely celebrated as the state mosque of Kedah, with formal documentation attributing its construction to 1912. Yet this date oversimplifies its historical development, as scholars have shown that mosque histories in the Malay world often involve multiple cycles of

construction, destruction, and reconstruction across generations (*Mahmood, 2018; Othman & Zulkifli, 2018*). As one of Southeast Asia's earliest Islamic sultanates, Kedah would have required a central congregational mosque long before the British-influenced structure seen today. Historical evidence suggests that royal capitals in the Malay world typically positioned a main mosque adjacent to palace compounds, symbolising political legitimacy and religious authority (*Hamid & Yunus, 2016; Aziz, 2016*).

This paper synthesises classical manuscripts, spatial analysis, and historical narratives to demonstrate that Masjid Zahir stands on the site of an earlier wooden mosque established during the founding of Kota Setar in 1735, aligning with broader patterns of Malay royal mosque development (*Abdurrahman, 2018; Basri & Mat Salleh, 2015*).

2 Literature Review

The researchers reviewed previous studies, archival documents, and historical manuscripts pertaining to the history of the Kedah Sultanate. The primary focus of this inquiry was to obtain information related to the architectural development of Masjid Zahir. The following three sub-topics outline the preliminary findings of this study.

2.1 Historical Background

Kota Setar was founded in 1735 by Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Abidin II as Kedah's political and administrative centre. Historical accounts affirm the existence of a royal mosque adjacent to the Balai Besar palace, reflecting the mosque–palace spatial model typical of Malay sultanates (*Hamid & Yunus, 2016*). This early mosque, constructed in timber, is believed to have undergone multiple cycles of damage—particularly during the Kedah–Siam conflict of 1821–1842, which resulted in widespread destruction of royal structures (*Fadzil, 2018; Kassim, 2020*). The timber-based mosque was subsequently demolished, and its structural remnants were relocated to Kampung Alor Merah (*Saa'id, 2025*). However, the wooden structure can no longer be traced today. Figure 1 illustrates the current surrounding landscape of Masjid Zahir in Kota Setar.



Figure 1: A sketch of surroundings of Kota Setar and Zahir Mosque.

2.2 Architectural Evolution and Colonial Influence

The architectural grandeur of present-day Masjid Zahir (Figure 2) —completed in 1912 and designed by British Malaya architect James Gorman (Saa'id et al., 2023)—despite its status as a major urban landmark frequently visited by both locals and tourists, tends to overshadow the deeper layers of historical meaning embedded in its site. While the mosque's British Indo-Saracenic façade, marked by strong Mughal-Indian stylistic influences, has become the most visually celebrated aspect of the building, such features reflect broader colonial reinterpretations of Islamic architecture in Malaya (Ali & Hassan, 2020; Farhan, 2019; Tarmizi, 2021).



Figure 2: Frontage of Masjid Zahir

Today, the mosque's iconic domes and minarets often serve as a backdrop for photography and social media engagement, with many visitors spending their time capturing images or taking selfies at the frontage (Figure 2). Yet, for most of them, the ground upon which they stand remains an unrecognized historical landscape. Few are aware that this very site was once a battlefield where thousands of Kedah's defenders perished while resisting the Siamese and Bugis invasions nearly two centuries ago—a period central to Kedah's political memory (Fadzil, 2018; Rahman, 2020). This profound historical narrative—rooted in sacrifice, conflict, and the forging of Kedah's political identity—is rarely acknowledged in the contemporary visual reading of the mosque, despite scholarly emphasis on memory and continuity in mosque heritage (Ishak & Mahmud, 2021; Yazid & Arif, 2019). Thus, Masjid Zahir's current architectural expression represents not only a colonial-era reinterpretation of Islamic design but also a structure that inadvertently veils the deeper socio-historical memory of the land it occupies (Wan Salleh, 2018; Bakar, 2018).

2.3 Reconsidering the Original Date

Restricting Masjid Zahir's history to 1912 erases nearly two centuries of earlier sacred activity. The preserved wooden beduk, believed to date from the 18th century, serves as a critical artefact supporting this earlier origin (Figure 3). Timber mosques and their associated artefacts

have long been recognised as historical markers within northern Malay mosque typologies (Adnan & Razak, 2020; Ramli, 2017). Furthermore, the existence of nearby mosques predating 1912 undermines the notion that Masjid Zahir was the first monumental mosque in the region (Kadir, 2017; Sharifah, 2019). Global heritage discourse similarly acknowledges original founding dates for sacred sites rebuilt across multiple generations, emphasising continuity of place rather than the completion date of the most recent structure (Mansor & Saleh, 2021; Habib, 2020).



Figure 3: Beduk of Masjid Zahir.

3 Method

This study employs a qualitative historical approach involving the analysis of classical Malay manuscripts, colonial records, and modern scholarship. This mirrors established methods in mosque heritage research where textual and physical evidence are cross-examined to reconstruct historical layers (Habib, 2020; Johar *et al.*, 2011). Field observation was conducted to examine physical artefacts such as the 18th-century wooden beduk. The *beduk* is a traditional wooden drum carved into a large cylindrical form—typically from a hollowed tree trunk—and historically served as an essential acoustic device in Malay and Nusantara mosques. In earlier mosque traditions across the region, a *beduk* was commonly used to signal the arrival of prayer times for the surrounding community, functioning as an auditory marker of ritual timekeeping (Adnan & Razak, 2020; Ramli, 2017). Comparative references to reconstruction traditions—particularly those in historic Japanese temple complexes—provide a contextual framework for understanding architectural continuity across time, consistent with global studies on sacred-site rebuilding (Mansor & Saleh, 2021).

4 Result and Discussion

Revisiting the origins of Masjid Zahir provides a wider understanding of how religious monuments evolve through cycles of construction, destruction, and renewal. Rather than viewing the mosque as a creation of 1912, it is more accurate to interpret it as the latest architectural phase

of a sacred site that has been in continuous use since the 18th century. This aligns with broader patterns observed in Malay royal capitals, where mosques serve as focal points of political power, cultural identity, and spiritual continuity.

The architectural development of Masjid Zahir also illustrates the adaptive capacity of Kedah's Islamic built environment. Although Mughal-Indian influences dominate the present structure, these stylistic elements were selectively adopted without displacing the underlying spatial logic of earlier Malay mosque forms. The survival of the site itself—despite warfare, political shifts, and structural transformations—demonstrates the resilience of local Islamic traditions.

The absence of detailed documentation from early periods should not be interpreted as evidence against the existence of an earlier mosque. Many Southeast Asian heritage sites rely on oral transmission, spatial assessment, and artefact evaluation to reconstruct their historical trajectories. In the case of Masjid Zahir, the alignment of the mosque with the royal administrative core, the presence of early artefacts, and the logical cultural context strongly support its pre-1912 significance. Overall, the discussion emphasises the importance of interpreting Masjid Zahir not as an isolated colonial monument, but as a living heritage site shaped by centuries of cultural, political, and spiritual continuity.

5 Conclusion

This study concludes that Masjid Zahir's historical significance cannot be confined to its 1912 reconstruction, as commonly presented in official histories. Instead, the evidence collectively affirms that the mosque represents a continuous sacred tradition originating from the mid-18th century. Its earlier timber predecessor, established during the founding of Kota Setar in 1735, anchored the spiritual and administrative landscape of the Kedah Sultanate—a role that persisted despite cycles of political disruption, particularly during the Siamese occupation of 1821–1842.

The current Indo-Saracenic structure, though visually dominant and widely celebrated, is best interpreted as a colonial-era architectural layer superimposed upon a much older religious foundation. This recognition reframes Masjid Zahir not as a standalone monument of British Malaya, but as an evolving palimpsest shaped by centuries of cultural continuity, royal authority, and community devotion. Acknowledging this longer historical trajectory also aligns Masjid Zahir with global heritage frameworks that prioritise site continuity over single-phase construction dates.

To preserve the integrity of this deeper narrative, the mosque's earlier artefacts, spatial configurations, and intangible histories must be systematically documented, curated, and communicated to the public. Doing so will not only correct historical oversimplifications but also elevate Masjid Zahir's standing as one of Malaysia's oldest active mosques—an enduring testament to Kedah's resilience, identity, and Islamic heritage.

6 Availability of Data and Materials

Data can be made available by contacting the corresponding authors.

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