

Stone Jars of Assam, North East India: A Comprehensive Overview

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to offer an overview of the stone jars of Assam. These unique archaeological remains are located in the central part of Assam and were first reported by J. P. Mills and J. H. Hutton in 1932. From then, they lay in the dark without any systematic archaeological survey or research. In 2014 and 2016, the author and his team conducted archaeological examinations of the jars. The State Department of Archaeology, Assam, also conducted investigations subsequently and reported two new sites. The present paper therefore offers a holistic overview based on these field researches. The paper also considers the stone jars of Laos as well as those from Assam, as both have striking similarities: perhaps both are the products of the same cultural behavior.

Introduction

The stone jars of Assam form part of the unique archaeological evidence from South Asia that has striking similarities with the stone jars of Southeast Asia, where the Xieng Khouang and Laung Phrabang Provinces of Laos hold the majority of stone jar sites with more than 2,000 documented jars, spread over approximately 80 localities (Genovese 2015, 87; O'Reilly et al. 2018, 1–31). Apart from Laos, stone jars are also reported from Myanmar (Luce 1961, 9–25) and Indonesia (Bonatz 2008, 259–261). In India, the stone jars of Assam were reported in 1929 by J. P. Mills and J. H. Hutton, located in Dima Hasao District (Mills/Hutton 1929). Assam is one of the northeastern states of India, bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh in the north, Mizoram and Meghalaya in the south, Nagaland and Manipur to the east and West Bengal and Bangladesh to the west. To the north across Arunachal Pradesh lies the border with China, to the east across Nagaland and Manipur the border with Myanmar. Geographically, therefore, the northeastern region of India is connected to the landmass of East Asia and Southeast Asia and since prehistory the region has enjoyed cultural contact with that landmass. Evidence of the Hoabinhian from Meghalaya and Manipur, though needing a study of the stratigraphic context and chronology, reflects the region's early cultural contact with Southeast Asia (Sharma 1988, 136–139). Neolithic culture too, in terms of pottery and tool type-technology, shows affinities with East Asia and Southeast Asian Neolithic cultures. Therefore the stone jars are not the only artifacts to emphasize the similarity or affinity of archaeological evidence between North East India, Southeast Asia and East Asia. However, the stone jars are some of the artifacts that have prominent distribution within a large geographical area covering Southeast Asia and South Asia's North East India. These indeed tell us about a

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previous culture whose manufacturing and use of stone jars was an integral part of their cultural behavior.

Stone jars of Dima Hasao: discovery, archaeological works and their significance

Dima Hasao, previously known as North Cachar, is located towards the south of the state of Assam. The district is bounded by parts of Manipur and Nagaland in the east, Meghalaya and part of Karbi Anglong District in the west, parts of Nagoan and Karbi Anglong Districts in the north, and by Cachar District, Assam, in the south. The district has an area of 4,890 km² and is mainly covered by the Barail Range, which comprises post-Oligocene sedimentary rocks that merge with the Mikir Hills to the north and extend further to the Naga Hills to the southeast. The average elevation of the range is between 1,300 and 1,650 m. The Barail is the source of several rivers, the main ones of which are the Kopili, Diyung, Dehangi, Mahur, and Lagting.

In January 1928, while making an official tour, J. P. Mills noticed some stone jars, which he described as “pear-shaped”, at Ndunglo and subsequently at Blouson. In April of the same year, the subdivisional officer of the North Cachar Hills, Mr. Calvert, discovered three more stone jar localities at Derebora, Kobak and Kartong. Later in that year, Mills and Hutton revisited all the sites, and the result was the paper “Ancient Monoliths of North Cachar” (Mills/Hutton 1929). Mills and Hutton offered an extensive discussion on the jars along with the menhir localities, probably having affinities to the jars and celts found near them. They seemed to be unaware of Laotian jars as there is no mention of these in their lengthy discussion. After Mills and Hutton’s visits, jars in Dima Hasao were noticed by Ursula Graham Bower, a British anthropologist (Bower 1952, 111–123). She visited the North Cachar Hills during World War II and stayed in the village of Laisong for a considerable time due to her interest in the Zemi Nagas. Bower’s encounter with the stone jars and her collection of local memories of jars are significant. She noticed two more sites at Khangnam and Haijaichak during her tour among the Zemi and, as she wrote, some of the jars at both sites were covered with stone slabs. Jars at other sites, those that Mills and Hutton reported, were not covered with lids. Bower’s noting of jars with lids therefore confirmed that the jars from Dima Hasao were also concealed with lids like those in Laos. She described the jars as “funerary urns” based on the memories and beliefs prevalent among the Zemi Nagas, who believed the *Siemi*, a lost people, made the jars to keep their dead along with grave goods in, and concealed them. Zemi Nagas used to loot the jars in search of beads. Bower too believed that, based on the Zemi Nagas’ beliefs, the jars were funerary urns of a pre-Naga society, perhaps the *Siemi*, and traces of *Siemi* settlements were very much present on the Barail Ridge. On the ascent to the village of Asalu lies the ruin of an abandoned *Siemi* settlement.

From the first report by Mills and Hutton until 2014, no systematic survey was undertaken to investigate the jar sites in Dima Hasao. Indeed, no substantial work was undertaken to evaluate their archaeological significance with new data. Therefore a survey was conducted in 2014 with the aims of locating the jar sites again, exploring these and their surrounding areas for more discoveries, identifying habitation sites, and understanding the shape, size and spatial distribution of the jars (Thakuria et al. 2016). The survey was successful in locating the sites discovered by Mills and Hutton and in discovering further evidence of engravings very close to jars at two sites. In 2016, survey

and surface documentation work was taken up at Dubungling (Derbore). Though the work could not be extended to excavating near jars, a trench at a habitation deposit, identified in 2014, was created to retrieve the remains of material that can be linked with the jars. However, material retrieved from the trench seemed to be very recent and nothing was found to correlate with the jars. Surface clearance at one of the localities discovered in 2014, away from the jars at Dubungling, revealed evidence of homogeneously shaped and engraved stones placed systematically in a criss-cross pattern. A flat slab with a human figure engraved on it was located quite close to the jars at the site. The homogeneously engraved stones and slabs engraved with human figures added significant information for an understanding of the landscape around the jars.

The State Department of Archaeology, Assam, undertook exploration and excavations at Dima Hasao between 2016 and 2017 (Deori 2017). Two more sites, Lugmailai and Bolsan, were reported and an excavation at Kobak was undertaken by the State Department. The excavation was around 1 km down from the jars' location at Kobak. The excavation revealed several circular stones placed in a linear pattern. It is uncertain whether the stones are associated with the jars.

Distribution of jars in Dima Hasao

The jars are located mainly in the Haflong and Maibang subdivisions of Dima Hasao District. The jars had been placed on a hillock with gentle slopes or the tops of table-like formations with elevations in a range of 800 to 1,000 m. Jars are generally distributed at the top of slopes but never at the foot of hills. A similar kind of distribution can be seen in the case of Laotian jars. The number of jars varies from site to site. Most of them are now badly damaged, mutilated and in some cases only traces of them are left. Mills and Hutton reported 400 jars at Nuchubunglo (Bolasan). Against such a large number, only 180 jars were able to be located in 2014. Presently, Melangpeuram (Molongpa) has 21, Kobak 25, Kartongsip 11, and Dubungling 35 jars. The exact count of jars at some newly discovered sites at Khangnam, Haijaichak, Lugmailai, Lundichang, Ndunglo, Bolosan and Baigaon is not yet known. So far, there is a total of twelve reported jar localities.

Raw material

The jar makers of Dima Hasao employed mainly sandstone to manufacture jars. Sandstone is locally available in the Barail Range and skilled masons applied their skilled technique to it. All the jars were shaped from a single block of stone. A quarry site is yet to be identified in Dima Hasao to provide an understanding of the method of quarrying and shaping jars from sandstone. However, the sighting of sandstone outcrops and blocks in the vicinity of the jars gives an impression that masons selected hillocks with exposed sandstone blocks that they shaped into jars (Thakuria et al. 2016, 37). Unlike in Laos, jars were placed in and around the site where they were manufactured. This could be the reason for finding debitage perhaps belonging to jar manufacturing at Melangpeuram, Kobak and Kartongsip. In contrast, in Laos, jars were manufactured at the quarry site itself but in one or two instances jars were also found shaped from exposed blocks at the jar locality itself. Despite the uniform use of sandstone to manufacture jars in Dima Hasao, jars in Laos were made of five different types of rocks. In order of frequency, they are

sandstone, granite, limestone, conglomerate and breccia (Genovese 2019, 59).

Production technique

The technique used to produce the jars is difficult to explain completely in the absence of unfinished jars. However, it can be assumed that a suitable block was shaped by chiseling with a metal tool, most probably with an iron chisel. The technique of shaping is most likely the same as the technique employed in Laos. After a block was selected, it was hollowed to the desired depth by chiseling and simultaneously the outer portion was chiseled out to the required shape. This was perhaps pre-decided or decided according to the nature of the block. The chisel marks on the outer surface were smoothed whereas the surface of the cavity was often left without smoothing (Fig. 1). But in some cases at Dubungling, the surfaces of the cavities have also been smoothed.

Shape

Mills and Hutton defined the shape mainly as “pear-shaped” (Mills/Hutton 1929). However, “pear-shaped” jars are not common at all sites. In 2014, six types were identified (Thakuria et al. 2016). Type I represents elongated biconical jars (Fig. 2). The edge of the cone is not exactly in the center but more towards the apex where the cavity is carved out. The other apex is more pointed. Type II represents biconical jars where the edge is almost in the center. The apex by the cavity is broader than the other apex. Type III is represented by cylindrical jars. The base of the cylinder is narrower than the cavity end. Type IV represents almost bulbous jars (Fig. 3). Type V is represented by “pear-shaped” jars. The body is bulbous at the cavity and the base is pointed (Fig. 4). Sometimes, the cavity end is so flat that it looks like a cone. The base of this type of jar is still deeply buried in the ground. Therefore, at first sight, it resembles the shape of type IV. All the bulbous types have bigger cavities.

Genovese reported various types of rim on the jars of Laos (Genovese 2014, 93–106). In contrast, no evidence of rims has been reported from any of the sites in Dima Hasao. Except for an example of the zig-zag type of engraving on the mouth of the cavity seen at Kobak (Fig. 5), all the jars from Dima Hasao are rimless, with a simple mouth.



Fig. 1. Evidence of chiseling to make a jar.



Fig. 2. A jar of type I.



Fig. 3. A jar of type IV.



Fig. 4. A jar of type V.



Fig. 5. Engraved decoration on the mouth of a jar.

Size

The jars are of various sizes. The maximum length recorded is 150 cm, the minimum around 50 cm. Jars at Bolosan and Dubungling are mainly between 100 and 150 cm in length (Fig. 6). Kobak has jars of all sizes ranging between 50 cm and 150 cm. Jars at Kartongsip and Melangpeuram are of average size. Laotian jars are comparatively larger than jars from Dima Hasao. The longest Laotian jars measure around 300 cm and the smallest average length is around 100 cm (Genovese 2019, 58–59). Variations in size may have some functional significance but need substantial data to infer their functional and cultural significance or burial customs. Colani suggested that, in the case of Laotian jars, the size and depth of jar cavities might indicate social rank (Colani 1935, 150). However, size and depth of the cavity might have affiliations to the region or site. The jars in Xieng Khuang Province have wide apertures and deep cavities compared to

the jars in the Phou Khoune and Luang Prabang Provinces (Genovese 2019, 58). In Dima Hasao, apertures and cavities are bigger compared to the other sites. In Melangpeuram, apertures are wide but cavities are shallow.

Fig.6. A large jar from Dubungling.



Discs

Though Ursula Graham Bower reported jars with discs, at present no such jars are seen in Dima Hasao. The jars were perhaps covered with discs made out of stone. At Kobak, two discs were noticed that had fallen close to a jar cluster (Fig. 7). These two discs resemble closely simple discs found in Laos. Discs there are often decorated with anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures. Much work is needed to locate discs in Dima Hasao to understand their stylistic morphology, decoration and function.



Fig 7. Discs at Kobak.

Decoration

Jars are rarely decorated except for a few examples of decoration with engravings on the bodies of the jars found at Kobak (Fig.8). Some jars at Kobak are decorated with human faces, buffalo faces, hoes, daggers, and zigzag lines near the middle sections and the lips of the jars. Laotian jars, on the other hand, are hardly decorated with engravings and rarely with carved human and animal effigies.



Fig.8. Engraved decoration on the body of a jar at Kobak.

Function

Mills and Hutton, back in 1929, proposed that the jars were used for funerary purposes. Their argument was based on the discovery of a bone from a human skull from the jar. However, they were left with no chance to draw ethnographic parallels with living funerary practices prevalent in the region to interpret the funerary function of the jars. Their interpretation of a funerary function appears correct if we consider the evocations of Zemi Nagas on the jars. According to their recollection, those were created by a tribe known as the *Siemi* to keep the cremated corpse in. Otherwise, there is hardly any substantial evidence to explain their function.

Some of the tribes recently inhabiting the jar sites and the surrounding areas believe that the jars were made by their king to brew rice beer. Such popular stories are also prevalent in Laos and are mere expressions of local sentiment towards the jars to explain their unknown history, glorification and perhaps attempts to legitimize their coexistence.

It is now unanimously agreed that the Laotian jars were connected with funerary practices. Colani suggested that, based on her excavation work (Colani 1935, 173), the jars were used for secondary burials. The discovery of a flexed skeleton at Ban Hay Hin site 1, located through a ground-penetrating radar survey (Shewan et al. 2016), confirmed the funerary function of the jar. This is the first instance of a primary burial from the Plain of Jars, following decades of

secondary burials discovered by Colani in the mid 1930s, by Japanese and Lao archaeologists in the mid 1990s and test excavations by UNESCO-appointed archaeologists in recent years (Genovese 2019, 67).

The jars were, no doubt, according to the present state of knowledge, made for funerary purposes, either as repositories for cremated remains or for secondary bones. The tradition of storing secondary bones in earthen pots has been known since the Early Iron Age and continues among some of the tribes in North East India. It is not unlikely that the tradition of using stone jars as corpse repositories was associated with Austroasiatic groups who once occupied a large part of Southeast Asia and migrated to North East India in the second wave, bringing their tradition with them (Thakuria 2014).

Localities of engravings and statue

A fascinating discovery in Dubungling during the period 2014–2016 was one of the localities with circular stones with homogeneous engravings (Fig. 9). A total of three such localities were identified and one was selected for surface clearance in 2016 to reveal the shape, engraved patterns and placement. A total of 37 circular stones were exposed and their top surfaces were found to be engraved (Fig. 10). At the center, a double-lined square is engraved, surrounded by certain other symbols. All 37 circular stones have homogeneous styles with the same number of symbols. Their placement is not haphazard, rather systematic in a criss-cross pattern. Beside each circular stone, a flat slab was perhaps erected, as several fragments of such slabs were noticed between circular stones during the surface clearance. Most of them are damaged and no indications of engravings were found on the slabs; perhaps such slabs were rarely engraved. An isolated circular stone found in the compound of a house in Dubungling represents a different type of engraving. It has a stylistic star-type of engraving in the center with a zigzag decoration at the edge. The zigzag pattern is similar to that on the jars at Kobak.

Two elongated stone slabs were found far from the locality of the engravings but close to the jars. Each slab has a human figure engraved on it. The figure was carved and had a spread-eagled position, with both hands extended upwards (Fig. 11). A similar kind of depiction of a human figure was identified by Eiji Nitta at Ban Hay Hin site 1 in Laos, but the difference is that it was found on jars (Nitta 1996, 16). Other sites having a similar kind of carved human figures on jars are reported from a jar at Ban Na Kho site 2, Phaxay District, Xieng Khouang in Laos (Genovese 2019, 59).



Fig. 9. Engraving on circular stone.



Stone slabs with flat surfaces and engravings are located approximately 1 km from the jars at Nuchubunglo. The engravings represent a stylistic human face, lines and a circle with spokes. Almost the same kind of circle with spokes has been reported on a menhir at Ban Dornthip, Luang Namtha in Laos (Schipani 2008). The engraved slabs of Nuchubunglo are considerably bigger compared to the engraved slabs of Dubungling and perhaps once stood like menhirs.

A statue was reported by the State Department of Archaeology, Assam, during its archaeological work at Kobak in 2016. The statue represents a human figure similar to one found on the stone slabs in Dubungling and on jars from Laos: the figure is in a spread-eagled position with both hands extended upwards. The top portion is carved to give the shape of a human head and the body portion is engraved, not carved.

Fig.10. Excavated locality of circular stones.

Dating

No scientific date is available for the jars of Assam. All of them are empty. No excavations have so far been conducted at any of the jar sites and so no material is available for absolute dating. The Laotian jars have been dated to the Iron Age based on the grave goods collected. Colani suggested a date of 700 BC based on material found during her excavations and extensive documentation in Laos. Sayavongkhamdy and Bellwood suggested that, based on the AMS dating at Ban Hay Hin site 1 in Xieng Khouang Province, burial activity at the site perhaps commenced around 3,000 years ago, but they are not sure about the beginning of the stone jar tradition (Sayavongkhamdy/Bellwood 2000). Higham suggested, contrary to the early date, a time bracket of 300 BC-300 AD, based on the material found in and around the stone jars (Higham 2002, 148). Except for a dating comparative with those in Laos, there are no other means



Fig. 11. Human figure engraved on stone slab.

to assume a date for the jars of Assam. However, indications of the early use of iron in North East India by 400 BC suggest that the jars were either shaped before 400 BC or later (Thakuria et al. 2016).

Discussion and conclusion

The jars of Dima Hasao have immense significance in understanding the formation of the archaeological record in North East India. They form part of the archaeological evidence to aid the interpretation of social and cultural formation covering a vast geographical area stretching from Southeast Asia to North East India. This area was undoubtedly inhabited by population groups having uniform social and cultural behaviors, at least regarding funerary practices and stone jar making. Stone jars were confined not just to Dima Hasao. They even spread across the Kupli River to the adjacent East Khasi Hills. This further indicates that the ancient boundary of its distribution was vast within North East India, beyond the modern political boundary of Dima Hasao.

So far, we are in the dark regarding the cultural association of iron in North East India. If excavated, the jars will surely produce evidence for iron, perhaps its early use and its cultural association (Thakuria 2014).

Laotian jars and the stone jars of North East India certainly show great affinities in shape, size and distribution. There is rarely scope for hesitation to argue that both were products of the same tradition.

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