

**New Discoveries of Petroglyphs in Vangchhia:
A Preliminary Study***Salam Shyam Singh***Abstract**

Vangchhia is a small village in Mizoram, lying on the Indo-Myanmar border. Many engraved menhirs were discovered at Vangchhia during the course of exploration. Also, petroglyphs were found in four localities of this particular village. Though their number is very limited, they are very significant for study as they will reflect the cultural life of the people who carved these petroglyphs before the current inhabitants of the area arrived. In terms of subject matter, they are similar in style and theme to their engraved counterparts on the menhirs found in this village. These petroglyphs are made by applying the simple methods of engraving and carving on the exposed rock outcrops situated on the hill slopes overlooking the Tiau River, which flows about a kilometer to the east of the petroglyph sites. It is worth studying these petroglyphs to reconstruct the cultural history of Mizoram mainly before the introduction of Christianity in Mizoram, as the Mizos stopped the practice of engraving petroglyphs on the rock surfaces after their conversion to Christianity in the 19th century. So this work has been taken up for discussion. This paper will discuss the form, subject matter and distribution of the rock art sites in this village and the probable purpose of these petroglyphs.

Introduction

Vangchhia (23° 12' 064" N – 093° 20' 506" E) is a village in the Champhai District of Mizoram (Fig. 1). It is situated about 60 km southeast of the Champhai District headquarters. This village has the largest number of carved menhirs in the whole of North East India. Besides them, few petroglyph sites are situated in this village. This village is located on the Indo-Myanmar border area on a hill slope looking down onto the Tiau River, a natural boundary between Myanmar and India. Being located in the hilly border area and wanting in good transport facilities, access for visitors as well as scholars to this site is limited. Recently, the village has become attractive for visitors and scholars due to finds of a large number of carved menhirs and the subsequent discovery of petroglyph sites. An old footpath made of stone slabs passes the area. Most of the petroglyphs are found near this footpath.

As per the ethnographic information furnished by Mr. F. Malsawmtluanga s/o Laldawla, President of the Vangchhia Village Council, this village area was occupied by the Suaknuea Hmar Vangchhia first. The village perhaps got its name from the Hmar sub-clan known as Vangcchia, who settled in this area. However, the time of their occupation is unknown. Dating back to even before their time are the carved memorial stones, remains of stone structures and other petroglyphs in this village. After the Vangchhia period, the area

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Author's address:

Salam Shyam Singh
Assistant Archaeologist
salamshyam.singh@gmail.com

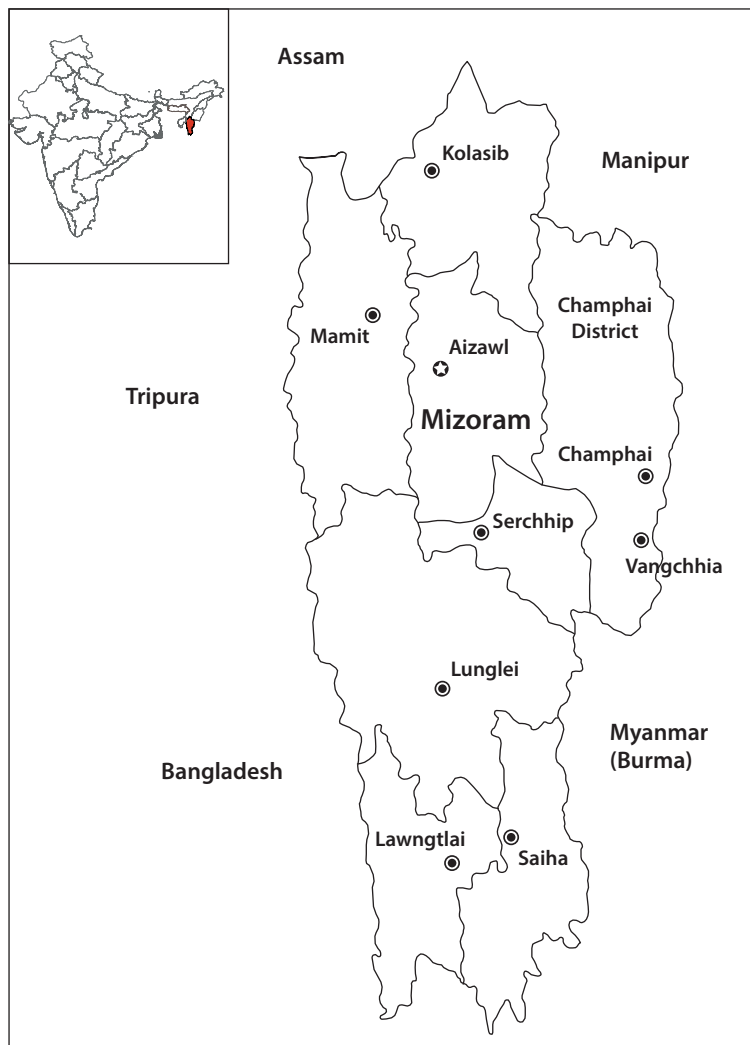


Fig.1. Map of Mizoram state showing Vangchhia.

was occupied by the chief of Luahtua Hualngo. Then the present village was established in 1885 by a chief named Thawmpuia of the Sailo tribe. Since then the village has never been abandoned, except for three years when all the inhabitants were forced to shift to a neighboring village called Vaphai due to the conflict between the Mizo National Front and the Indian army. At present, various clans such as Fanai, Chawngthu, Sailo, Khiangte, Chhangte inhabit the village. The main religion of the villagers is Christianity nowadays. The principal occupation of the villagers is agriculture. The main crops are rice, sugarcane, maize, ginger, pumpkin, mustard, taro, corm, and the like. They practice *jhum* cultivation on the hill slopes and permanent cultivation on the bank of the Tiau River.

General description of petroglyph sites

The petroglyph sites are generally found in the forest areas on the steep hill slope, some distance from the present settlement area. So the existence of the petroglyphs remained unknown for many years. Recently some villagers came across them while they were hunting and undertaking other *jhum* works. Since then, their existence has been brought to the light of others. The present author is lucky enough to have had access to the largest petroglyph site in 2011 when it was first discovered. Since then, three other sites have been revealed recently. At present, the existence of four petroglyph



sites has been confirmed in different parts of Vangchhia village. For the convenience of study, these sites are given names such as Locality-1, Locality-2, Locality-3 and Locality-4 as per the distance from the protected menhirs and caves site, which is located about 1 km away, in the northeast of the present settlement area of Vangchhia (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Google image showing petroglyph sites of Vangchhia (Map: Google Earth).

Locality-1

This locality is situated on the eastern slope of a hill known locally as the Ralven Puk Tlang, about 1.5 km away on the northeastern side of the centrally protected menhirs and caves. At this site, two rock outcrops with petroglyphs have been brought to light. The first rock outcrop (Fig. 3; L-1A) on the right measures 5.30 m high and 4.43 m wide. Three rows of human figures in anthropomorphic form, one above the other, are depicted on it. The lowest row consists of six human figures. The tallest human figure in this row is 59 cm high whereas the shortest one is 48 cm high. The hands of the first and second human figures (from the left) are shown hanging down whereas the third, fourth, fifth and sixth human figures are shown without hands. The head of the first human figure is typical. It is slightly pointed towards the top. In a similar way, the head of the sixth human figure is pointed like the beak of a bird. Between the fourth and fifth human figures, there is a depiction of a long ladder which extends up to the top of the rock outcrop and is 3.10 m long. This figure is very typical and this kind of depiction is hardly seen in the rock art of North East India.

The middle row has five human figures. The head of the first (from the left) in this row looks like the head of a bird and the figure is depicted without hands. The second one is the tallest of them at 75 cm high. Eyes and mouths of the third and fourth human figures are marked by shallow holes. The fifth human figure is totally disturbed due to the emergence of cracks in the mother rock on which the figures are engraved.

The uppermost, third row consists of four human figures. The first human figure (from the left) is the tallest of them at 97 cm high. The heads of the first and second human figures appear to be the head of a bird with beak. The head of the third human figure is slightly

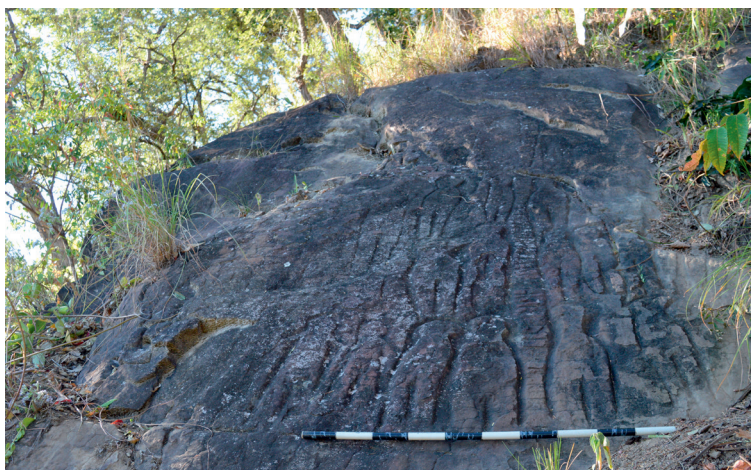


Fig. 3. Petroglyphs at Locality-1A.

oval in shape and that of the fourth figure is flat. All these figures are engraved without hands. Facial features are not clear due to the weathering of the rock surface.

After a gap of 66 cm from the head of the third row of human figures, a mithun head has been depicted, above which a necklace has been carved. A row of two animal figures is to be seen above the necklace. In the right corner, above the third row of human figures, two bows are carved and above them stands a row of five animal figures.



Fig. 4. Petroglyphs at Locality-1B.

In the northwestern corner of this rock outcrop, there is another (Fig. 4; L-1B) with petroglyphs. It measures 1.64m high and 1.48m wide. A bold human figure, whose height is 17 cm, is carved on it. He holds a spear in his right hand and an indistinct object in his left. Two necklaces hang down on the left side over the hand. A flint box (?) surmounted by three circular figurines is shown near his left leg. On the right, two shields, which are flanked by two vertically positioned, circular figures, probably gongs, are depicted. Ten vertical rows of human heads are shown on his left side. Another four vertical rows of human heads are carved on the right and upper sides of the prominent human figure. In the upper part of this rock outcrop, a horizontal row of two mithuns is carved and a flying bird is carved above the head of the first mithun. All of the figures mentioned are surmounted by the prominent elongated figure of a bird.

Locality-2

This locality is about 400m away, to the northeast of L-1. A rigid rock surface on the hill slope was selected to make the petroglyphs. The whole face of the rock is full of carvings (Fig. 5). Two rows of human figures are prominently depicted, one above the other. The bottom row has depictions of ten human beings. They are shown in standing positions and with hands joined at shoulder level. At the base of their feet, a pair of lines cut vertically at intervals is depicted. Another row consisting of ten standing human figures is again depicted above the first row of human figures. Their hands are shown joined at shoulder level. A row of eight curved figures in the form of arches is depicted above them. Two objects are shown on the top part of this rock outcrop. They appear to be shields (?). The topmost portion of this rock is decorated with a necklace. Cracks are emerging in various areas of the rock and its surface is also flaking off in many areas. Also, another rock outcrop with petroglyphs is also to be found to the northeast.

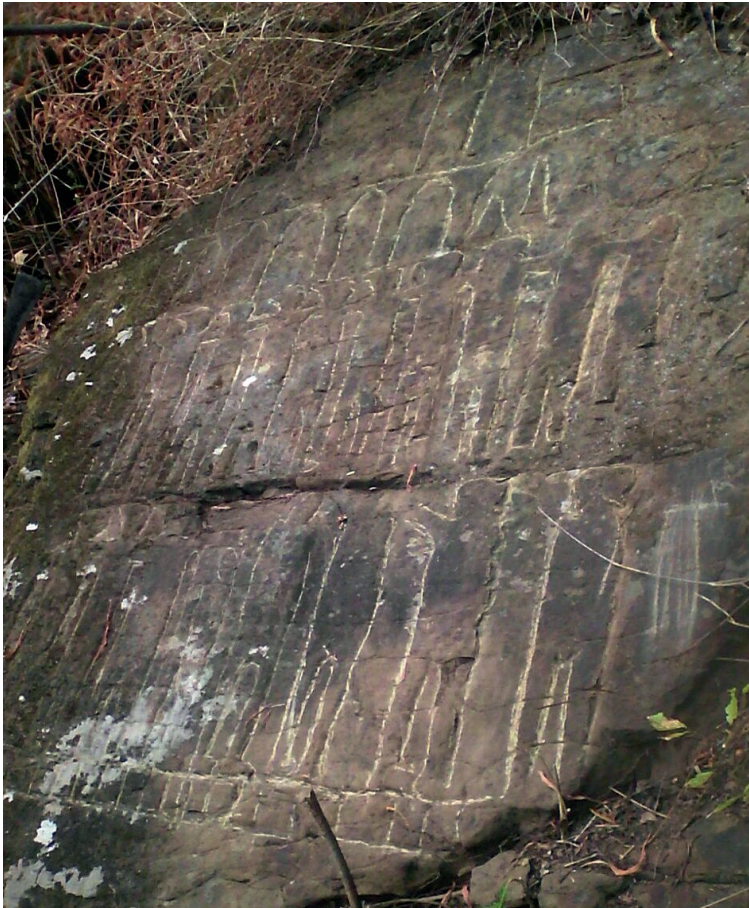


Fig. 5. Petroglyphs at Locality-2.

Locality-3

Locality-3 is about 300m away, northeast of Locality-2. One rock outcrop with petroglyphs is found here (Fig. 6). A flaking mark is prominently visible on the upper portion of the rock. The lower portion has a depiction of three rows of human figures - one above the other. The lowest row consists of 21 human figures shown in a standing position, facing towards the left and joining one another at shoulder level. Stylized hair bunches are shown on the backs of their heads. A square made out of two horizontal lines is carved at the

base of their feet. The second row consists of 19 human figures, also in a standing position. The way they face and their hairstyles are almost the same as those of the figures in the first row. The uppermost row consists of eight human figures in a standing position, also facing towards the left. Their hairstyle is different from the figures of the other two rows, shown simply hanging down at the back.

Fig.6. Petroglyphs at Locality-3.



A prominent human figure is depicted on the right upper area of this rock outcrop. He holds a long spear in his right hand but a smoking pipe (?) in the left hand. He is devoid of ornaments. He is flanked by a shield on the right and a vertical row of five animal figures on the left. Animal figurines are profusely carved on the top portions of this rock outcrop. Still one more spear is carved behind the long spear which the prominent figure holds in his right hand. One circular shape, probably a gong, is depicted near his head.

Locality-4

Locality-4 is about 300m northeast of locality-3. Here stands a large rock outcrop, locally known as Lung Ropui, which is decorated with petroglyphs (Fig. 7). It measures 4.74 m long, 3.09 m high and 2.10 m thick. A platform (2 m x 4.80 m x 0.70 m) made of undressed stone slabs is provided in front of this outcrop. The artist of bygone times selected the southern face of this rock outcrop to carve the petroglyphs. The whole scheme of these petroglyphs is depicted systematically. The lowest part of this rock outcrop has depictions of a double square line pattern. Two rows of human figurines, one



Fig. 7. Petroglyphs in Locality-5.

above the other, have been carved above it. The first row (from the bottom) has 21 human figures, shown in a standing position and with their legs apart. Their hands are joined at shoulder level. The bunches of hair of the first seven figures are shown hanging at the back whereas the heads of the other figures are well decorated with stylized hair bunches. They are shown facing left. Body portions are carved straight.

The upper row has depictions of 17 human figures, also shown in a standing position and with hands joined. Body portions are portrayed straight. All face left. The left margin of this row has a portrayal of a prominent human figure. He has a spear in his right hand and no object in the left hand. A stylized hair bunch is shown at the back. He is shown in a standing position. One Y-shaped shield and a long sword are carved on his right.

Fifty-three animal figurines are shown on the upper portion of this rock outcrop. They have elongated bodies, so it is difficult to identify these animals. However, some of them have long horns. They are deer. Three flying birds, one lizard and one mithun head are depicted among these animal figurines. The birds are shown in a flying motif and they are carved on the uppermost part of the outcrop. Three large cracks have emerged on this valuable rock outcrop with petroglyphs, so immediate conservation measures to check these cracks are needed.

Besides these petroglyphs, cup-marks and other anthropic holes are also extant in various areas of Vangchhia village. Some of them may have been used as receptacles for ritual ceremonies, whereas many of them might have been used as postholes for the construction of wooden structures and fencing works.

Landscape for making petroglyphs

Hill slopes are preferable sites for making the petroglyphs at Vangchhia and the artists selected the rocky outcrops exposed on those slopes. Generally, petroglyphs are not found on the hilltops. The petroglyphs at Locality-1 are carved on a steep, east-facing rock cliff which looks down towards the Tiau River. The orientations of Locality-2 and Locality-3 are almost the same as those of Locality-1. Here, the artists selected the cliff exposed on the hill. The petroglyphs at Locality-4 are carved on a large boulder lying on a gentle hill slope. The artists of bygone days chose its southern face to carve petroglyphs. It can be approached easily. The sites are far from the present settlement areas. An old trodden pathway runs near these petroglyph sites. The remains of a few rubble structures are extant to the east of Locality-4.

Carving techniques

The techniques applied to make the petroglyphs at these four localities are simple. Three types of technique are mainly used to create these petroglyphs. The first technique involves making the outline of the motifs to be engraved first, before the execution of a small swallow cut around the outline of the figures. With the second method, the surface around the outline of the images is cut/carved out to produce low relief sculptures. In the third, the outline of the images is created by incisions. The first method of making swallow lines around the borders of the motifs is applied in making images at Localities-2 and -3 and the method involving wide holes is visible in some of the carved motifs at Locality-1. The second method is applied to produce the shallow relief sculptures at Locality-4. Pointed iron tools might have been used in making lines and flat iron tools like chisels could have been used to carve the surfaces around the outline of the images.

General analysis and conclusion

No written records about these petroglyphs are available. In the absence of written records, it is very difficult to deduce the significance of these petroglyphs. The ethnographic study of these petroglyphs among the inhabitants near the site is fruitless as they forgot the tradition of making petroglyphs long ago when they converted to Christianity. So the inferences are made from the traditions and legends recorded by British ethnographers, administrators and the other scholars who worked among the people having settled in this region and also from other areas having the similar theme of petroglyphs.

The theme or subject matter of the petroglyphs at Locality-1(A) appears to be more symbolic than real. The human figures are depicted in anthropomorphic forms - some are without hands and some of them are shown with the head of a bird, so they may not be normal human beings. The presence of a ladder and a bow and mithun head on this carving indicates that it may be related to the buffalo sacrifice during the Feast of Merit practiced among the Zote tribe, who settled in present-day Mizoram and other places. During this feast, a buffalo was sacrificed and the person giving the Feast of Merit erected one notched pole known as Chhura's ladder against the eaves of his house. A bow and arrow were fixed to the top of the ladder to ward off the *huais* (evil spirits). Such a practice of warding off

evil by using bow and arrow is used among the Meiteis at the time of the erection of the first post for the construction of a new house and during the ritual ceremony for a new-born baby. The human figures in anthropomorphic forms on this petroglyph might be the evil spirits to be warded off or the persons who were supposed to be present during the Feast of Merit; so this petroglyph may have been created in relation to the buffalo sacrifice carried out during the Feast of Merit, which was widely practiced among the various Naga tribes and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes of North East India and some parts of Myanmar.

The petroglyph located in the northwestern corner of Locality-1(A) displays a bold human figure along with rows of busts, animals, mithun heads, spears, necklaces, shields and an elongated bird figure. These motifs are often found in parallel on the memorial stones erected for a prominent person who can kill enemies, animals, birds and can offer Feasts of Merit to fellow men. So this petroglyph might have been carved as a memorial stone for a person who performed the above-mentioned deeds.

The rock outcrop at Locality-2 displays two rows of human figures interlocked at shoulder level. The engraving might have been executed in commemoration of a community feast or individual feast like the Feast of Merit, in which members of the whole community used to dance and sing merrily. This carving may have been made for a ritual for a community feast. One such piece of rock art displaying a community festival is visible on the bedrock of a river in the Tharon area of Tamenglong District, Manipur. This type of scene of merrymaking communities is widely prevalent in the rock art of various parts of India and other countries.

The carvings at Localities-3 and -4 with motifs of bold human figurines, rows of other minor human figurines, animals, birds, mithun heads, gong, shields, spears and the like were made as a memorial stone for a hero or prominent person. These carved motifs represent the lifetime achievement of the prominent person. His wealth and power are reflected in the carvings. The animals and birds carved along with him are supposed to have been killed during his lifetime just as a successful hunter or animals killed for the Feast of Merit he offered to the community. The other minor human figurines are the enemies he captured or killed and the other things like spears, necklaces, gongs, and shields are supposed to be his belongings.

It appears that the main themes of these petroglyphs are centered on a dominant person. Under these circumstances, it is reasonable to make assumptions that these petroglyphs were created as memorial stones for the dominant persons who can kill or capture enemies and can kill animals and birds or the persons who can offer Feasts of Merit to his fellow men. Many of such themes, like human heads, mithun/buffalo heads and some other animals, are well carved on the Naga village gates, on the posts of Marung and the posts of houses of people who have given Feasts of Merit in Nagaland. Most of them are carved to reflect successful headhunting and the capture of fierce animals sacrificed or killed during the Feast of Merit or community feasts. Similar types of carving in which one prominent person with his family members and the animals which are supposed to have been captured by him are carved on rock outcrops in the Intuma area of the Peren District of Nagaland. One memorial stone of a rich person who had given feasts has been erected by the villagers of Tharon, Tamenglong District of Manipur. On this stone, the image of the rich person and the animals which were sacrificed and his other belongings are depicted. These carvings in Nagaland and Manipur are made in memory of the achievements and belongings of the whole community of the village or individuals.

From these, inferences can be made that the petroglyphs at Localities-1(B), -3 and -4 might have been created as memorials as they contain similar themes.

It is also reasonable to assume that the community that made these petroglyphs might have practiced ancestor worship. Such a kind of ancestor worship is reflected in the rock art and woodcraft art in China and Vietnam. In this case, the dominant human figures in the Huashan rock art in China are interpreted as the depictions of great leaders, as mentioned by the Luo Yue people, who created this art. Many Zhuang people still believe that though the human body perishes, people's souls exist and the souls of ancestors will protect their descendants if they are worshipped properly. Some Zhuang groups still deify their renowned ancestors as local guardian gods or goddesses. Such beliefs are prevalent among the Muong people of Vietnam. Also, the Gaoshan people in Taiwan maintain the tradition of carving their ancestors' images on wooden boards and paying homage to these. Considering all this, it is highly possible that the dominant persons on the carved rocks could be the depictions of the great leaders of the Mizo people, who executed these carvings, which must have been created in homage to those great leaders with the expectation of their protection. The arrival of Christianity in the area deeply affected local populations and their culture, and that is why the study of these petroglyphs is important for the reconstruction of the cultural history of the Mizos before the arrival of Christianity in Mizoram.

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