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Archaeological Investigations of Lithic Monuments in Northeast India: A Spatial and Typological Study

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Abstract: ***Stone has been used by humans for various purposes since antiquity, including tools, art, architecture, and sepulchral monuments. Due to its hardness, it lasts for ages and is often used for erecting monumental forms, such as for marking important events, village boundaries, and commemorations. Lithic monuments in the North - Eastern Region are diverse in structure and function, with cairns, capstones, cists, dolmen, menhir, monolithic jars, and trilithons. These monuments can be broadly classified into funerary and non - funerary types, with wide variation among them. Menhir is the most commonly used and seen in ethnic communities' villages. Local inhabitants continue to create lithic specimens, but jars lack a living tradition. Deciphering these ambiguities is a challenging task due to the ambiguity surrounding their use and the difficulty in understanding their history. Overall, stone has been a valuable tool for understanding and preserving the past.***

Keywords: Antiquity, Monument, Diverse, Lithic specimens, Living tradition

1. Introduction

Since antiquity, stone has been used by human beings for various purposes— tools, art, architecture, sepulchral monuments, etc. Its hardness makes it difficult to work, but once executed it lasts for ages. With time, people mastered building wonderful artistic and architectural forms, many of which still stand as testimony of past societies. These varied creations tell us about their builders and help researchers in understanding the past. A large stone was preferred for erecting monuments for marking important events and boundaries of the village, memorials of the deceased, victories in an expedition, ceremonial sacrifices, burials, and among others. Such monuments are broadly termed monoliths, which have a considerable overlap with megaliths. There are numerous lithic monuments of various types that are spread all across the North - Eastern Region. Meghalaya has the highest concentration of megaliths remains in the region.

Lithic monuments in the North - Eastern Region were studied and documented over time. It was first acknowledged by H. H. Godwin - Austen (1872) who documented the stone monuments of the Khasi Hills. His other megalithic works include the lithic monuments of Dimapur Rajabari (1874) and the stone monuments of the Naga tribe (1875). After Godwin - Austen, it was J. H. Hutton, who attributed much of his research to documenting the megalithic monument of the region. Some of his prominent works include on the monoliths of the Nagas (1922a), on carved monoliths of Dimapur (1922b), on carved monoliths at Jamuguri (1923), on megalithic work in the Jaintia Hills (1926), on Assam Megaliths (1929), and the joint work with J. P. Mills on ancient monoliths of North Cachar (1932). In the independence period, the megalithic monuments of the region and the traditions associated with it attracted Indian scholars (Roy 1963; Jamir 1998; Mawlong 2004; Sharma 2017; Marak 2019). These works help to understand the use and erection of lithic monuments by the ethnic communities. Although, the comprehensive works of all these monuments are very few. Inthe absence of script, the ethnic communities preserved their *itihasa* and marked important events relating to social as well as political in lithic specimens. Thus in this work, lithic monuments from across the region were studied systematically which shed light to uncover the bygone past of the region.

2. Types of Lithic Monuments

Lithic monuments in the North - Eastern Region are of various characteristics in terms of both structure and function. The classification of these monuments, which can widely be seen in the region, comprises a cairn, capstone, cist, dolmen, menhir, monolithic jar, and trilithon (Table 1). Based on their usage and functions, they can be, broadly classified into two main types viz. funerary and non - funerary (commemorative) but with a wide variation amongst them. Menhir is the most commonly used and seen in any of the villages of the ethnic communities. The local inhabitants still create lithic specimens, but jars are the only class, which does not have a living tradition attached to them. Because of such ambiguities, it becomes a painstaking task to decipher it.

Table 1: List showing types of Lithic Monuments and their Structure

S.No	*Its Nature*	*Representation*
1.	Cairn	A mound of stones of considerable size placed over one another without any enclosure
2.	Capstone	A circular or rectangular stone slab of varying size and shape
3.	Cist	A coffin - like structure to hold the body of the dead buried underneath the ground
4.	Cylindrical Pillars	A monolithic pillar intricately carved with various designs and patterns
5.	Dolmen	Table stone found singly or either in a cluster
6.	Menhir	An upright stone slab
7.	Monolithic jar	Carve in sandstone into various shapes and sizes. The most common being the pear shape and bulbous

		with a hollow
8.	Trilithon	It refers to a structure consisting of two upright stones with a slab on its apex
9.	Wooden Structures	Some of the tribes erect wooden structures in place of stone
10.	Miscellaneous	Monuments comprising of 'V' shaped pillars, monolithic hut, and among others

(*i*) *Cairns*

Cairn is made up of many small stones or rubbles piling one above another either enclosed within a circle of small or considerable - sized boulders or freely raised on the ground by pilling up the stones one above the other without any enclosure. Cairns are of varied geometrical shapes such as circular, square, rectangular, or triangular. Naturally, a flat platform is formed on its top and is used as a seat by placing flat stones above the heap. Cairns are predominantly found in the Senapati district of Manipur in the areas of the Mao - Maram - Poumai (Philip 2017: 79). It is known as *ranii atu* among the Maram, *tazantatbotusom or tabao long* among the Liangmai of Oklong villages and *kathitokhu* ("*kathi*"=Death and "*tokhu*"=heap of stones) among the Mao. The procedure of erecting these cairns and the tradition they held differs from each other.

(*ii*) *Capstone*

Capstones are stone slabs of varying shape and size and sometimes they are often found in clusters. The most common shapes are either circular or rectangular. Based on their functions, capstone can differentiate between two— capstones and stone slabs. The former are stones with funerary functions and are used as a cover for a pit, while the latter are stones placed directly on the ground and are usually without any funerary functions. This kind of stone slabs/seats is seen in almost all the megalithic sites of the North - Eastern Region.

(*iii*) *Cist*

A cist is a stone chamber of varied size used as a repository to hold the bodies of the dead (fig.1). These are usually buried underground or half underground and are opened periodically by removing one of the vertical stones for depositing the ashes or bones of the dead clan members. Cists are rare in the distribution in North - Eastern Region and are found abundantly only in the Khasi - Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. Stone cists of different shapes and sizes are seen among Khasis— - of the individual, family, and clan. There are also instances when cists remain buried under the floor if they are in the area during the construction of the house. In such a case, the owner considers it as a symbol of fertility rather than a bad omen (Sharma 2017: 85). Apart from the Khasi - Jaintia Hills, Mushrif - Tripathy *et al*. (2009) identified different cists— oblong cist with primary/secondary inhumation, and jar - burial with secondary inhumation from Jotsoma near Kohima. Besides, a passage chamber leading to a cist, an exceptional feature in the region, was also reported from Nartiang in Jaintia Hills (Meitei and Marak 2015).



Figure 1: Jaintia Hills: A clan cist (*source*: Q. Marak 2012: 49)

(*iv*) *Cylindrical Pillars*

On entering the fortified area at Rajabari site in district Dimapur, one encounters a series of exquisitely carved stone pillars (fig.2), some standing and many more lying fragmented, here and there. Among these, the "chess - men pillars" or the "cylindrical pillars" are the most distinguishing feature of Dimapur. These sandstone monoliths have a general form, vertically having five segments, viz. the hemispherical cap, the neckline, midriff, lap, and the basement. It has a large hemispherical top which is ornamented with floral, graphic, and geometrical designs. Below this, there is a narrow zone that looks like a band engraved with geometric design. The portion below this narrow zone has two parts separated by an elongated circular band decorated with geometric designs. The portion below the narrow 'neck' is ornamented with vertical plaits, and their edges are ornamented with three circular bands. Various floral patterns, wheels, daggers, etc. carved on the lower part show similarity with carved patterns, and geometric design on the upper part but no animal, bird, or human is carved. Ornamentation on these pillars, their size, and other details vary considerably. Although they all have somewhat similar patterns but they are different from each other. Because of their peculiar shape, these monoliths are termed as the 'chess - men pillars' or sometimes as 'mushroom pillars. '



Figure 2: Dimapur: Cylindrical pillars in a cluster (*source*: Shring Dao Langthasa)

(*v*) *Dolmen*

Dolmen is a 'table stone' found either singly or in a cluster and is generally circular with various sizes (fig.3). Clustered dolmens are a common occurrence in areas occupied by the Karbis, Maos, Poumais, and Khasi - Jaintias. Among the latter, these structures are erected in front of a row of menhirs and usually in front of the tallest menhir termed as 'maternal uncle stone. ' One of the largest dolmens is seen in Laitlynkot in Khasi Hills, which is erected with the supported with ten upright pillars. Although, dolmens look similar but are complex in their functions, which probably differ according to the local terminology for the dolmens. For example, dolmens are known as *mawkynthei* (female stone) as well as *mawshongthait* (resting stones) among the Khasi (Marak 2019: xix - xx). In the context of the North - Eastern Region, based on the appearance a dolmen might appear like a cist. However, the dolmen is merely a table stone, while the latter is a repository of the dead. Dolmens are erected within the settlement area and are generally used as sitting stones. Dolmens found in district Dima Hasao of Assam are generally associated with the Zeme Naga tribe. These are constructed alongside the road or in the central area of the village either singly or with menhir.



(A) **(B)**

Figure 3: Bolasan: Dolmen constructed in the central area of the village (*source*: Shring Dao Langthasa)

(*vi*) *Menhir*

Menhirs are the most common type of lithic structure found all over the region. These are of various shapes and sizes and also of the wide variation in their appearances. Menhirs are either found singly or in clusters and function as memorials or commemorative. They are raised during the lifetime of a person to attain the highest position in the social ladder, or after death. They also act as memorials and commemorations for various events. The largest menhir is seen in Nartiang in Jaintia Hills standing at 823 cm. x 227 cm.76 cm. (height breadth x thickness) to a menhir of 10 cm. in the form of a *song kosi*in Garo Hills (Marak 2019: xix). Menhirs that are found in the region are mostly rough and plain without any engravings. However, the menhirs from Mizoram differ considerably from the rest of the menhirs of the region. Here most of the menhirs are full of engravings and embossing depicting the life and achievements of the local Mizo chief or heroes. One such fine example in this aspect is the menhir site at Vangchhia in district Champai. At the site, there are over 180 menhirs of different sizes full of carvings and embossing of different forms such as rows of human figures, animals, circles, weapons, gongs (?), etc. Among the central menhir (fig.4), there is one human figure holding a spear and wearing headdresses known locally as "*chhawndawl*" and "*areke - ziak*. " Local traditions have it that these are put on those people, who have killed enemies in the war and the menhirs raised in memorial of the chief or hero. The depiction of other objects in the menhir is the achievement of the said individual during his lifetime (ASI 2020).



Figure 4: Vangchhia: Menhirs with full of carvings and embossing (*source*: ASI 2020)

(*vii*) *Monolithic Jars*

The jars are carved into various sizes and shapes on sandstones. The average height ranges between 150 cm to 30 cm. It was first documented by J. P. Mills in one of his official tours in district Dima Hasao in1928 CE, where he happened to notice by the path near the village of Ndunglo two unusual stones in district Dima Hasao in Assam. These on investigations, he found to be a monolithic jar, which was artificially dressed and each containing a cavity hollowed in the bulbous end (Mills and Hutton 1932: 285). This discovery led him to enquire more on the subject and resulted in identifying more or less similar sites in Bolasan, Dubungling, Khobak, and Kharthong. Until recent times, new jar sites are reported from the district (Thakuria and Bathari 2020). Apart from district Dima Hasao, the other site that has yielded monolithic jars is from the bordering district of East Jaintia hills in Saipung Reserve. Mills and Hutton

mentioned that the authorship of the jars based on the local tradition speaks of them as Karbi work, and in others at that of the Khasis and used as a repository for ancestral bones. On the other hand, T. Thakuria (2014) acclaimed that the monolithic jars of Dima Hasao are parallels with those from the Southeast Asian monolithic jars. Seven types of jars were identified based on their appearance such as— pear shape, barrel, bi - conical shape, conical, convex, wide openings, bulbous. Althoughtheir size varies and the method of carving differs. It is not clear who created it and what purposes that it served in the past. This is attributed largely because the tradition is no longer practiced by the communities and has already died out.

(*viii*) *Trilithons*

Trilithons or "three stones" refer to a structure consisting of two large vertical stones (posts) supporting a third stone set horizontally across the top. These types of stones are usually seen to act as a gateway, i. e. entry or exit gates to the villages. In the village of Nongbareh in War Jaintia area, the structure *dwarkor* is morphologically a trilithon. This stone acted as the entry and exit into the village. The pillars stand at 102 x 52 x 2 while the slab at the top is 82 x 22 x 2 in breadth (Meitei 2017). Many of the traditional village gates in Mao Maram areas also appear to be a trilithon.

(*ix*) *Wooden Structure*

In some of the tribes of the region, instead of stone, wooden structures are raised. *Maran - tarungs* are forked wooden posts or Y - posts found inside habitation areas in front of the merit seeker's house among the Tangkhul Nagas. These are found in a cluster constituted by five or ten such posts and always in association with one or two menhirs. Lamal - bam, a small collection of stones with a stout wooden post and branches of a special kind of tree along with Y post, is commonly found in Maring villages of Chandel District, Manipur. Garos use a Y - shaped post, to which they tether bulls before sacrifice in their death ceremonies and more or less round ones called *kima* as memorials to their dead (Playfair 1909). These *kimas* are at times shaped like a human figure and clothes and ornaments are attached to them.

(*x*) *Miscellaneous*

"V" shaped monolithic slabs (fig.5) are found at Dimapur Rajabari. Godwin - Austin (1874) noticed that these stone slabs were aligned in two rows but most have fallen now. They are unique, having two long square pillars joined at the base, and gradually increasing in distance from each other (Grange 1840: 954 - 957). They were carved out from a single stone. From the measurements of the broken portions, it appears that one arm used to be longer than the other. Pillars in the front row were a little taller than those at the back. A mortise has been cut on the top surface of each arm. Three sides of the slab were decorated with various animatic designs, rosettes, floral, vegetal and geometric patterns. These stone slabs are decorated with animal figures, such as elephants, deer, dogs, ducks, peacocks, etc. No human figure is noticed on these monoliths. Among the floral motifs, the lotus is the most popular. The other prominent monolithic monument found in the region is a monolithic temple (fig.5) cut - out of a rock on the bank of river Mahur. This is a unique example of art and architecture during Dimasa rule. The upper part of the rock was shaped like a hut having *a* rectangular plan and *doo - chala* roof. It has curvilinear eaves and four false doors on all four sides. The inscription on its wall suggests that the temple was built in 1721 CE and dedicated to the goddess Ranachandi, the tutelary deity of the Dimasas (Shakespeare 1914: 81). It also provides a narrow space for circumambulation around the temple.



Figure 5: Dimapur 'V' shape pillars (*source*: Shring Dao Langthasa)

3. Periodization of Lithic Remains

Most likely the lithic tradition of building permanent structures began with the introduction of iron in the region. Cut mark generated through iron is seen in almost all the lithic remains scattered out in the region. If we try to establish the dates for this structure, first of all, the introduction of iron in the region has to be understood. The earliest iron smelting centre in the North - Eastern Region dated through the scientific method from charcoal and residual iron slag from several sites in Khasi Hills, such as the site of Nongkrem gave a date of 2140+80 BP, and the site of Raitkteng to 1110+30 BP (Prokop and Suliga 2013). There is also evidence of the finding of stone implements alongside iron. Thus it can be inferred that iron preceded the use of stone in the region and in most cases both are used simultaneously. Besides a few of the sites, also gave a C14 date procured from Jotsoma, which is of very recent date of 200+30 BP (Mushrif - Tripathy *et al*.2009). However, the megalithic site at Marakdola in Khasi Hills gave a comparatively older date. Here, from a single cultural horizon, cord - grooved kaolin pottery found in association with menhirs and dolmens was carbon - dated to 1296+100 BP (Rao 1991). From the same area, a recent excavation revealed a large number of potsherds of Kaolin ware from the foundation trench of a menhir which was OSL dated to 15th century CE. These dates prove beyond doubt that the megalithic culture of the region is rather of recent origin, and it flourished approximately 1000 years ago (Marak 2019: xxxi - xxxii).

4. Findings and Conclusions

The ethnic communities in the North - Eastern Region lived within the ambiance of nature and unitize every resource that was within their reach. One such material was stone, wherein they demonstrated their skill in documenting the events. With the passage of time they, mastered in creating exquisite lithic monuments with social and political implications. These stone monuments vary in outlook and functions and is still a living tradition in the region. Some of these monuments are rough and crude while some are engraved with various characteristics ranging from celestial bodies, flora and fauna, and social life of their time. However, it is not clear when this tradition began to be incorporated within the culture, and tradition of the ethnic communities. On the other hand, whether this tradition was native to this region or was an adoptive culture remains unclear. This may be due to the fact that the ethnic communities did not adapt to the habit of writing down the events. They transfer their traditional knowledge and history orally and in the process many of the past events went unrecorded. Thus, in the absence of a script, the origin of megalithic tradition in the region cannot be ascertained.

After thorough examination of the lithic monuments spread across the region and by corroborating them, it become obvious that this tradition was practiced in the region since the distant past. This notion can be validated by the workmanship as lithic monuments from the earlier period were rough and crude and are devoid of any engravings. On the other hand, monuments from the later period became more refined and polished. This suggested that the origin of the megalithic tradition in the region began before the introduction of metal technology. If we look upon the history of iron smelting in the region than it can be dated back to the first century BCE. The introduction of iron technology in the region paved the way for creation of more refined and varieties of lithic monuments. As workmanship on stone needed hard labour and dedication and without iron it seems impossible. This may be because the effort needed for their fine finishing requires metal. Following this, the creator showed their artistic genius and created different types. Some of them depict the social life of their time, besides the respect they gave to their ancestors, village boundary, and among others can be understood from the megalithic monuments.

5. Future Prospect

This megalithic monument is significant to understand the bygone past of the region, which was followed since antiquity. As aforementioned, the ethnic communities in the North - Eastern Region lack a script of their own and this created a lacuna in understanding the *itihasa* of the region comprehensively. It is worth mentioning here that the history of any region remains incomplete if certain areas are prioritise and the other is not given due importance. The history of the Brahmaputra valley where various dynasties have risen and succumbed since the fourth century CE has been researched by experts and published in various journals and periodicals. On the other hand, the history of the ethnic communities, which are mostly settled in the hilly regions, remains unknown. Previous studies have demonstrated that both of these cultures flourished simultaneously in the region. However, due importance is not given to understand the history of the ethnic communities and experts often shield their inability to decode their past by attributing the absence of script. It is equally true that there is lack of script, although there are other sources through which their history can be understood and one such prominent source is lithic remains scattered in the region. Thus, there is a great scope to research upon the megaliths of the North - Eastern Region as it may throw more light on the bygone past of the region. On the other hand, some of these megalithic monuments need to be further studied and properly documented. For instance, the monolithic jars of the region need scientific introspection as after decades of their discovery, it still fails to unfurl the reason behind their creation and the purpose it served.

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