

Rock-Engravings and Mason Marks in the Brahmaputra Valley: Historical Significance

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Abstract

Rock art is a distinct archaeological record that provides evidence of human artistic behavior right from the Palaeolithic period. The study of rock art in the Indian context has a history of over 150 years. These studies have dealt with the typology, chronology, and behavioural aspects behind their creation in various regions of India. The pictographs and petroglyphs found across the country have provided vital components to formulate a chronological framework and reconstruction of the human past. However, the extent of rock art in Northeast India is negligible both in quantity and diversity. A number of sites with rock engravings have been recorded from the states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Mizoram. However, the chronology is still a matter of academic debate among the scholars. This paper attempts to discuss the nature, contexts, and historical importance of the rock engravings found in the Brahmaputra valley.

Keywords: Megaliths, Pictographs, Petroglyph, Temple ruins, Manikarneshwar, Anthropomorphic figures, Labyrinths.

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Introduction

Studies on rock art in India have a long history of over 150 years. Thorough scientific investigations have been carried out on different aspects of rock art, including their typology, chronology, behavioural aspects behind their creation, and so on. Pictographs and petroglyph varieties found across the country have provided key components to formulate a chronological framework for human artistic expression from the Palaeolithic to the historical period. Rock art studies have developed into an important arena of archaeology globally and contributed immensely to reconstructing the human past.

In comparison to the abundant concentration of pictographs in central India and petroglyphs in south India, the extent of rock art in Northeast India is negligible both in quantity and diversity. Though this region is considered to be a corridor of human migration during the prehistoric period (Hazarika 2017), a reflection of such activities in the form of rock art is minimal to none due to several reasons, among which the crucial one is its physical environment encompassing geological formations and geographical features (Sundara 19). There is no plausible report of pictographs from this region. The foremost prerequisite for the creation of rock paintings or engraving is the suitable rock formation. Rock shelter-like formation, which often offers temporary habitat to the nomadic hunter-gatherers and provides the necessary canvas for the creation of rock art (Sonawane 26), is uncommon in the region. A number of sites with rock engravings have been recorded from the states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Mizoram. However, the chronology is still a matter of academic debate among the scholars. Against this backdrop, this paper is an attempt to discuss the nature, contexts, and historical importance of the rock engravings found in the Brahmaputra valley based on a review of the existing literature and recent findings by the authors.

Most of the rock engravings reported from the region are from a historical context. The historical Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa flourished in the Brahmaputra valley from the early Common Era till the 13th century CE. Many publications deal with the history, art, architecture, and sculptures of the Brahmaputra valley, yet a detailed discussion on the rock engravings and their historical context needs further special emphasis. A handful of scholars have worked on rock art in Northeast India and Brahmaputra Valley in particular.

Besides the rock engravings found in religious sites of historical contexts in the Brahmaputra valley, the megalithic structures in some parts of Northeast India provide fascinating evidence of this art form. Megaliths with decorations are recorded in Mizoram, mainly at Vangchhia (Nayan 2021) and Zote (Singh 72-78). Similar

megaliths with animal depictions are reported from southern Manipur on the Indo-Myanmar border (Haokip 2021). Cup marks, along with rock engravings linked with Buddhism, can be seen at Tawang in West Kameng and Upper Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh (Deori 30). Engravings have also been reported from the Dima Hasao district of Assam, where petroglyphs are observed on rocks and stone jars (Thakuria 57-62). Compared to other regions of Northeast India, the rock engravings of the central Brahmaputra valley are well documented (Bezbaruah and Devi 2016; Bezbaruah 2017; Sanathana and Hazarika 2019).

Rock-engravings in Brahmaputra Valley

Rock engravings of the Brahmaputra valley are mostly found near early medieval archaeological vestiges such as temple ruins, on the boulders containing rock-cut sculptures, and on ancient rock quarry sites. Most of these sites can be dated between the 8th to 13th centuries CE. Additionally, a distinct variety of engravings linked with megaliths and ethnic communities was observed on the rocks and stone jars found in North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao district).

Based on the theme, these engravings can be sorted into five categories such as,

- i. Anthropomorphic figures and narrative panels
- ii. Engravings of a religious nature
- iii. Flora fauna depictions
- iv. Labyrinths
- v. Geometric designs
- vi. Mason marks

The significant engravings found in the valley are discussed with selected examples below.

Anthropomorphic figures and narrative panels

Anthropomorphic figures are one of the most common forms of engravings found in the valley. Human figures of males and females, celestial beings, and gods are found incised on different sites in the region. In a few instances, these human or divine figures are also engraved as part of narrative panels. Such panels are seen in North Guwahati, mainly in Rajaduar Chowk and Kanai Barasi Bowa.

Rajaduar Chowk in North Guwahati is one of the localities concentrated on rock engravings of narrative panels, labyrinths, mason marks, and geometric designs. The site contains around five boulders with engravings along with evidence of ancient

stone quarrying and early medieval rock-cut sculpture of Ganesha. One of the boulders contains a panel of five engravings (Plate. 1, 2, 3), including a sword, mask, dancing image, running image with a shield, and a boat. These may be individual engravings or might be of a composite engraving depicting a story. The panel contains two human figures, one of which is shown in a dancing posture and the other one with a dagger and shield in a running posture. The image with a dagger and shield is shown running towards the boat. Keeping in mind that the region is well known for numerous historical battles this panel might be an illustration of a sequence from one such warfare.

An engraving of a female figure is observed on a boulder in the Kanai Barasi Bowa archaeological site (Plate. 4. A). Kanai Barasi Bowa is a historically important site situated in Northern Guwahati protected by the Directorate of Archaeology, Govt. of Assam. The site is a rocky outcrop of granitic boulders which contain rock cut images, inscriptions, engravings and wedge and mason marks. One of the four major rock inscriptions mentions the annihilation of the first Muhammadian incursion into the Guwahati area in the Saka year of 1127 (1206 CE) by the Kamarupa ruler. The other two rock inscriptions indicate the victory of the Ahoms over the Muhammadans in 1667 CE. Another inscription records the victory of Bar Phukan over the invading forces in the same war (Das 60). Different engravings on the rocks include geometric designs, human figurines, deities, and dot marks. A well-decorated female figure has been engraved on this site. She is adorned with an embellished crown, earrings, and multiple necklaces and garlands. She is shown in standing posture and her hands are shown crossed. The image was a life-sized one however only above the torso of the figure is surviving the natural flaking/sapling of the rock. However, in some portions of the rock with its original surface, we can observe designs of well-decorated drapery.

A bust of a royal or a celestial figure is engraved at the foothills of the Sithachal in North Guwahati (Plate. 4. B) at the site of Dirgheswari. Dirgheswari is one of the major rock-cut sculptural complexes of the valley. Over 12 rock-cut images of various gods and seers can be witnessed on the hill. Along with these rock-cut images, a series of rock engravings of elephants, human figures, and geometric figures also can be observed. Based on the style of the mukut, the engraving can be identified as of a male figure. The incised sketch is shown with lamba karna (elongated ears), and a tilak can be observed on the forehead. The engraving is adorned with a necklace.

A life-sized rock engraving of a dancing image is observed on a boulder on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra in the Ghoramara area (Plate. 4. C). This image is shown in dancing posture as both the hands and legs are in dancing movements. It appears to be an image of Shiva as a moon is depicted on the head, hence the Chandrachoodadhara or Shashidhara form of Shiva. Interestingly, in the early inscriptions of Kamarupa, Shiva is addressed as Shashidhara (one who wears the

moon) (Sharma 1978). This image is exclusively depicted in Digambara (naked) form. Shiva is depicted with open hair rather than the usual matted hair (jata). It is apparent in this image that the engraver tried to show Shiva with flying hair. Shiva is revered as Vyomakesa, which means that his hair is like the sky (Vyoma means sky, and kesa is hair). A half-moon is depicted amidst splendid flying hair. A huge bindhu (an auspicious dot on the forehead) is shown on the forehead. It might be the indication of the third eye of Shiva. Portray of eyes and eyebrows suggests the mastery of the artist. Open mouth with a terrific smile, one of the key features of natya images of Shiva is also present in the engraving. Karna kundalas can be observed hanging in both ears. Thick bracelets have been shown in both arms. The deity is adorned with a necklace and garland, as well as a garland made of human skulls (runda mala). Well-proportionately chiselled upper body along with kucha (nipples) and nabhi (navel) are also noticed in this image. Both the hands are depicted with dancing mudras and the left leg is shown lifted whereas the right one is footed straight. It is interesting to note that Aghora form of Shiva is described as the one who lives in the cremation grounds, near the river banks (ghats), dances exuberantly, walking nude, appearing insane with rolling red eyes and incoherent shouts. The artist has effectively depicted all these aspects through shallow engravings in this image at Ghoramara.

A crude human depiction is reported from Umatumani Island from Tezpur. Along with these depictions stick images of human figures also can be observed in different sites from North Guwahati, Mayong and Tezpur.

Another significant rock engraving site in Guwahati is Urvashi Island. This small island with rocky outcrops is situated in the midst of the Brahmaputra River and it contains multiple early medieval rock-cut sculptures, rock engravings, inscriptions with eastern nagari characters and a brick pillar of Ahom period to indicate the water level. For the most part of the year, this site is submerged underwater and inaccessible. The rock engravings of the island include multiple illustrations of Vishnu, Shivalingas, mason markings, and geometrical designs. Over eight engravings of Vishnu have been observed in four spots on the island, and incidentally, they are engraved in pairs. Vishnu is shown with four hands in standing posture in all the instances and adorned with conventional attributes of the deity (Plate. 5).

Rock-markings of Religious Nature

Along with the engravings of Vishnu, many Shivlingas of different dimensions (Plate. 6) are also carved on Urvashi Island. The island is one of the significant sacred spaces of Harihara worship in ancient Assam, as it contains multiple illustrations of both Vaishnavite and Shivite deities, along with a rock-cut image of Harihara.

An engraving of an eight-spoked wheel has been observed on the hill ridge on the bank of the Brahmaputra at Tatimara, in the Chandrapur circle of the Kamrup (Metro) district (Plate. 7). The wheel is shown on a pedestal and can be compared to the Dharmachakra of Buddhism. Since the engraved stone is located on the river section, which remains underwater during the rainy season, the engraving is getting eroded because of the strong water current. Interestingly, a similar engraving of a wheel has also been observed in the Kasosila area of Mayong.

By the riverside, on the left of the road leading to Kasosila from Hatimuria, close to the Kali Mandir, lies a boulder containing a few engravings along with a single-line inscription (Plate. 8 & 9). The engravings include a Dharmachakra with eight spokes shown on a lotus pedestal, a trishul with an axe attached to it, a mace and a vajra.

Rock-cut miniature shrine-like designs have been observed at Nilachal Hill and Dirgheshwari. In some instances, engraved sketches of the same are also found in these sites (Plate. 10). There was a fair amount of temple-building activities in the Brahmaputra valley during the early medieval period. Due to many reasons, none of those temples are in intact condition. Consequently, these sketches and miniature designs provide a lot of information on, in all probability, the structural designs of early medieval temples of the region.

Depictions of fauna and flora in rock-engravings

Dirgheswari temple in North Guwahati and Baman temple in the southern part of Darang district (Nath 2018) has yielded a series of elephant depictions (Plate. 11). A pair of birds has been depicted on the rock boulders of Kanai Barasi Bowa in North Guwahati along with other engravings and mason marks. A panel of petroglyphs containing engravings of a sword, a dancing image, a running image with a dagger and shield, and a boat also contains an animal face which might be of a cow in Rajaduar Chowk in North Guwahati (Sanathana and Hazarika 2019).

A stylized lion is a mythical animal depicted in sites like Borganga in Kapili Jamuna Valley, Baman village of Darang district, and Kanai Barasi Bowa in North Guwahati. The petroglyph bears similarity to that of a Minoan Griffin (Bora 2019).

Depiction of flowers along with stylized creepers can be seen on a boulder in Manikarneshwar in North Guwahati (Plate. 13). Four dug-out sockets can be observed around this floral decoration. This might be the shrine area, as many rock-cut images have been reported from this site (Sanathana and Hazarika 2019).

Labyrinths

Labyrinth designs in rock engravings are reported from multiple sites in Assam. Labyrinth motifs are universal phenomena in terms of rock art, as they are found in both pictographic and petroglyph contexts. There are different variants of labyrinths found across India. Two kinds of labyrinths are reported from northeast India mainly from the sites of Assam and Manipur (Kumar 2015; Devi and Bezbaruah 2016; Sanathana and Hazarika 2019).

The large boulder in Rajaduar Chowk has three squarish labyrinths (Plate. 14 & 15) in a line. Such labyrinths are also found at Kanai Barasi Bowa and Umatumani islands in Assam (Kumar 84–115). According to Kumar (2015: 84–115), squarish labyrinths have a passage from all four sides, and each one is blocked by a plus design intricately connected with the whole labyrinth design. In Rajaduar Chowk, two of the three labyrinths match this description, but one is more crude and rectangular in shape. Just above these labyrinths, a few more petroglyphs can be observed, but they are eroded and have lost shape. A Ganesha face is also engraved on the same boulder, but it seems fairly recent.

The two squarish labyrinth specimens found in Kanai Barasi Bowa (Plate. 16 needed) and Umatumani islands respectively are very identical to each other. At Umatumani, the classical seven-course circular labyrinth is also depicted beside the square one. Kumar explicitly describes the morphology, distribution, and probable symbolic meaning behind these labyrinths (2015).

Mason Marks and Geometric Motifs

It is noteworthy that there are many recurring engraved marks observed on the rock boulders and architectural members of the region. Considering the nature of engraving and style, these can be identified as mason marks. Though certain styles of mason markings are universal, the meaning might vary from region to region. In the Brahmaputra valley, these marks appear in two contexts. They are on the rock boulders of ancient rock quarrying sites and on the architectural remains and dressed stones found in the early medieval temple sites. Rock quarrying sites with mason marks are found in sites like Rajaduar Chowk, Chapaidong, and Kanai Barasi Bowa (Plate. 17 & 18). A total of 24 different types of mason marks have been recorded from rock boulders of the Rajaduar area. These markings are small in size, ranging between 2.5 to 5 inches.

Chapaidong, located close to Bonda in Guwahati, is a rocky hillock situated on the bank of the Brahmaputra. It is an important granitic stone quarry site with extensive

evidence of ancient stone extraction. Whereas quarrying is evident in the entire hill range, more than 35 split rock boulders with wedge marks have been observed on the southern side of the hill. Along with wedge marks, various mason marks have also been recorded at the site. However, the absence of any further artistic work on the split rock boulders other than variants of mason marks suggests that the work of sculpting and decorating the rock pieces for use as architectural members was not performed at the site. The rock pieces were probably transported to other ancient stone temple sites, where these were used to make sculptures and architectural members of various sizes. The extensive early medieval temple sites spread across the Brahmaputra river valley, which pointed towards the requirement of massive stone quarrying in the past.

As mentioned above, the mason marks are also observed in early medieval temple ruins. The major temple sites with such pieces of evidence are Madan Kamdev, Pingaleshwar (Plate. 19), and Bamuni pahar in the Tezpur-Sonitpur region (Plate. 20). Along with mason marks engraved chessboard patterns that might have been used by the sculptures and artisans as pastime games also incised on a few architectural remains of these sites.

Rock Engravings of Dima Hasao

Engravings can be observed on the flat stones and stone jars in Assam's Dima Hasao region (Thakuria 2017:57-62, Langthasa 2019). These engravings, along with the presence of stone jars, establish the evidence of Southeast Asian cultural presence in Northeast India. The engravings include human images, animal depictions, and geometrical designs. Dubungling and Kobak are the major sites that have yielded evidence of the rock engravings. Thakuria (2017:62) relates these engravings to mortuary practices and perceives that they carry ritualistic, symbolic connotations.

Major Engraving Sites of Brahmaputra Valley

As mentioned above, rock engravings are found in different contexts in the Brahmaputra valley. The major related sites and their information are as follows:

Sl. No	Name of the Site	Nature of the Engravings Brief Description	Geo-coordinates
1	Rajaduar Chowk	Situated in Northern Guwahati. Anthropomorphic Figures and narrative panels, labyrinths, mason marks and geometric designs found beside an early medieval rock-cut Ganesha. Evidence of ancient rock quarrying and decorated architecture members were observed in and around the site.	26°12'461" N, 91°44'546" E

2	Kanai Barasi Bowa	Situated in Northern Guwahati. Anthropomorphic Figures and labyrinths, mason marks, geometric designs found along with four major inscriptions of Assam. Evidences of ancient rock quarrying are observed in the site.	26°12'615" N, 91°44'545" E
3	Dirgheswari temple	Situated in Sithachal hill in North Guwahati. Engravings of elephants, shrine like motifs, a human bust can be seen sketched along with series of rock-cut images of various deities sculpted around the hill.	26°14'35.91"N 91°44'57.00"E
4	Ghoramara	Life size engraving of Shiva in dancing form	26°11'7.62"N 91°43'8.62"E
5	Borganga	Situated in kapili Jamuna valley. An engraving of a lion like mythical creature. Similar depictions are observed at Kanai Barasi Bowa and Baman in Darang District.	26°11'11.02"N 93° 2'32.10"E
6	Baman	Situated in Darang district. Depiction of fauna and geometric designs.	26°27'8.24"N 92° 1'38.35"E
7	Umatumani islands	Island on Brahmaputra river situated in Tezpur region. It is one of the rock engraving complex of the valley. Contains labyrinths, mason marks and geometric designs.	26°39'30.80"N 93°10'36.34"E
8	Urvashi Island	Island on Brahmaputra river situated in Guwahati. Contains multiple engravings of Vishnu and Shivlingas along with varieties of mason markings and geometrical designs.	26°11'37"N 91°44'41"E
9	Madan Kamdev	Mason marks found on the architectural remains and dressed stones.	26°19'641"N 91°44'22.99"E
10	Pingaleshwar	Mason marks found on the architectural remains and dressed stones.	26°22'38.12"N 91°46'11.31"E
11	Bamuni pahar	Mason marks along with geometrical motifs and chessboard pattern found on the architectural remains and dressed stones.	26°16'59.11"N 92°47'43.59"E

12	Chapaidong	Situated in Mayong region, one of the ancient stone quarrying site. Observed multiple mason marks.	26°12'49.18"N, 91°50'41.15"E
13	Tatimara	On the banks of Brahmaputra river in Chandrapur circle in Mayong region. Observed an engraving of Dharma Chakra.	26°14'46.83"N, 91°55'11.16"E
14	Kasosila	Multiple Buddhism related religious symbols engraved along with an inscription on the boulder.	26°16'13.83"N, 92° 03'1.95"E
15	Hatisila	The human face and chessboard pattern observed.	26°13'08.82"N, 91°53'16.66"E
16	Bageshwari	Evidence of labyrinths and other geometric motifs.	26°28'27.14"N 90°34'8.91"E
17	Dekdhowa	Situated in the Goalpara district observed, circular motifs were found along with a series of rock-cut shillings.	26° 8'19.98"N 90°39'25.73"E
18	Dubungling	Engravings of ethnic nature are found on circular and rectangular stones.	25° 21'38"N 92°57'7.53"E
19	Kobak	Engravings were found on the stone jars and flat stones.	25°16'49.32"N 92°48'50.48"E

Concluding Remarks

Its periodization is the foremost issue with the above-mentioned rock engraving site. A good number of petroglyphs of the historical period have been noticed on the rock boulders in different parts of Assam. The key observations on the rock engravings of the Brahmaputra valley are as follows:

1. Rock engravings of Brahmaputra valley are mainly found on the stone quarry sites of the early medieval period. These engravings were created by artisans and labourers who extracted stone blocks for temple building. This is evident in the widely available mason markings and wedge marks, along with other engravings on these rock boulders (Sanathana and Hazarika 2019). It is observed that the mason marks found on the stone quarry sites match with the ones noticed on the early medieval temple sites like Madan Kamdev, Pingaleshwar, and Bamuni Hill in Tezpur. The engravings are a result of the recreational activities of masons, stone extractors, architects, and artisans of the early medieval period.
2. Engravings are found in both religious and as part of leisure exercises of the stone extractors, artists, and masons in the Brahmaputra valley. Markings of Buddhism

nature are found in the Mayong area, Shivate depictions in North Guwahati, equivalent depictions of Shiva and Vaishnava aspects at Urvashi island, and sketches of shrine outlines give an insight into the cults and cultural presence of bygone days in the valley. The engraved chessboard patterns and labyrinths indicate recreational amusements and pastimes of the early medieval period.

3. Nature and animals were major subjects of artistic expression found in the engravings of the Brahmaputra valley. It is innate human nature to express the surrounding environment through art, which has been evident since time immemorial. The animals and birds engraved in the valley are commonly found in this area. Depiction of elephants appears to be predominant across the state. Stylized lions are being reported from several sites in Assam.
4. The rock engravings of the valley do not follow any systematic art pattern; they are sporadic and found haphazardly across the valley. However, their common context, i.e., stone quarry sites and temple sites, implies their creation in an early medieval period.
5. Based on the stylistic aspects, types, and important context, the rock engravings of the valley can be broadly periodized into two phases. The ones are found in the context of stone quarrying sites, rock-cut sculptural sites, and temple ruins from the early medieval period. However, scholars have dated the engravings found in the Dima Hasao district in the stone jar cultural context to the 3rd century BC and early Christian Era. Nevertheless, further detailed study of them might bestow more information on their date and Southeast Asian connection.
6. A thin line execution has been observed on the engravings of Brahmaputra valley. They have undergone erosion and are affected by the growth of microbes over the period and challenging to document them accurately.

However, the abundance of rock engravings in the valley warrants further detailed investigation. Quantitative and GIS-based documentation and recordings might shed new light on this regard.

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Plate.1. Depiction of a sword, animal mask, and a dancing image



Plate.2. Boat and human figure with a dagger and shield

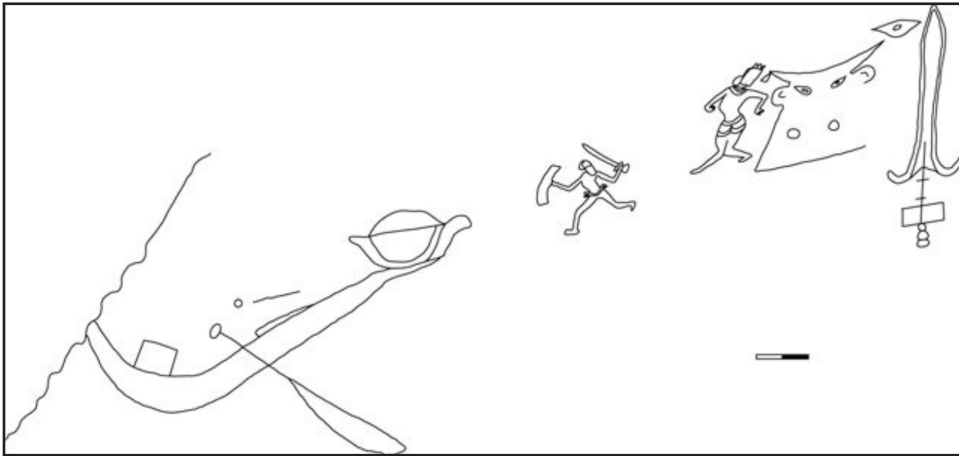


Plate.3. Drawing of the complete panel of the petroglyphs at Rajaduar Chowk



Plate.4. Anthropomorphic figures from (A) Kanai Barasi Bowa, (B) Dirgheswari, and (C) Ghoramara



Plate.5. Engraving of Vishnu with four hands



Plate.6. Engravings of Vishnu and Shivlingas



Plate.7. Engraving of Dharmachakra in Tatimara on the bank of Brahmaputra



Plate.8. Religious engravings from Kasosila



Plate.9. A boulder containing the engravings and the Stumpages of the engravings of (A) Mace, (B) Dharmachakra, (C) Trishula, (D) Vajra, and (E) an Inscription, Kasosila, Mayong



Plate.10. Rock-cut miniature shrine-like designs, Dirgeshwari



Plate.11 Depiction of animals on the early medieval rock engravings found at North Guwahati and Baman village of Darang district



Plate.12. Mythical animal from Borganga in Kapili Jamuna Valley



Plate.13. Engraved Floral Designs Manikarneshwar



Plate.14. Boulder in Rajaduar Chowk with three squarish labyrinths

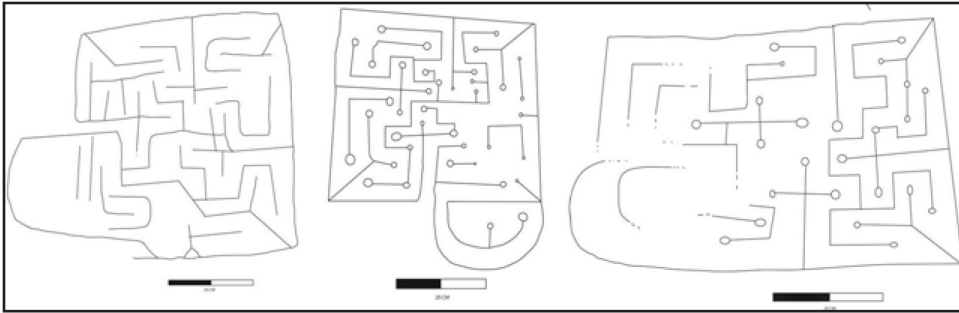


Plate.15. Drawings of three squarish labyrinths, Rajaduar Chowk

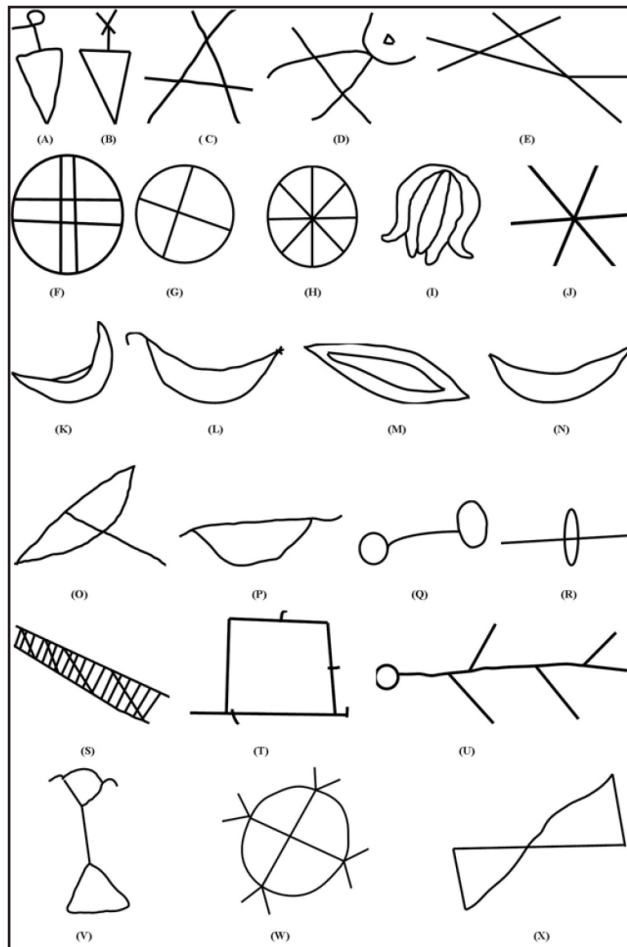


Plate.17. Mason marks found in North Guwahati



Plate.18. Evidence of ancient stone quarrying and Mason marks in the Chapaidong area near Bonda

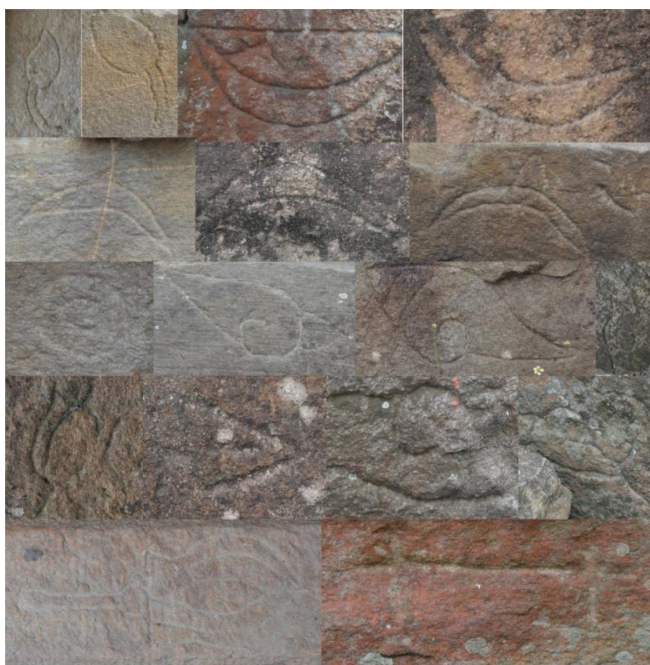


Plate.19 Markings found on the dressed stones and architectural members at Madankamadev and Pingaleshwar



Plate.20. Rock engraving from Bamuni Pahar, Tezpur



Plate.21. Rock engravings Kobak, Dima Hasao



Plate.22. Rock engravings Dubungling, Dima Hasao