



UNEARTHING SETTLEMENT HISTORIES: HABITATION SITES OF ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL ASSAM IN THE NORTH BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

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Abstract

In order to recreate the settlement history of the area using archaeological evidence, this article investigates the habitation sites of ancient and medieval Assam along the north bank of the Brahmaputra Valley. It examines fortified villages, temple complexes, sculptural remnants, tanks, ramparts, roadways, and inscriptions at Dhemaji, Biswanath, Sonitpur, Darrang, Udalguri, Kamrup, and surrounding areas using published archaeological reports and field observations. The study shows how the Brahmaputra River and successive political powers from the Gupta to the Ahom eras built this network of interrelated settlements. It highlights the continuity and evolution of settlement patterns and stresses the need for methodical archaeological investigation, recording, and conservation to protect Assam's rich cultural legacy.

Keywords: Ancient Assam; Medieval Assam; Habitation Sites; North Brahmaputra Valley; Archaeology of Assam; Settlement Archaeology; Fortified Settlements; Cultural Heritage.

Any spot on earth that contains something that is the handiwork of human agency suggests human habitation either at the spot itself or in its vicinity. Innumerable such isolated spots are to be seen strewn across the length and breadth of the state, especially the Brahmaputra valley, where in some spots, only a few chiselled stones lying together, or a small section of a rampart or a depression which once may have been a pond for all we know are encountered. The mere enumeration of such spots is not likely to yield a clear and definite pattern of human settlement. Therefore, for the sake of convenience, by habitation sites are meant only those areas where there are sufficiently large concentrations of architectural ruins, sculptural remains, ancient tanks, ramparts, tumuli, network of ancient roads etc within defined areas which can ipso facto be treated as human settlement. A number of such areas can be seen throughout the

State which can plausibly be said to have once contained fairly dense and well-organised human populations. A brief description of some of these sites on the northern banks of the Brahmaputra river is given below .

Rajakhana or Rajgarh area , Dhemaji : Situated about 7 kilometres west of Dhemaji, Rajakhana or Rajgarh is a rather lofty fortification measuring 150 m. by 100 m. in area , and is now reduced into a swampy land by the Dihing river which changed it's course in 1905 and started flowing through it, thereby washing away parts of the northern and the southern ramparts. Inside, in the centre, is a brick mound which was destroyed by the subsidence caused by the earthquake of 1952. Locally, it is associated with the name of Arimatta.

About half a kilometre north of Rajakhana, there exists the ruins of a brick wall with five layers of bricks still extant, together with a piece of chiselled stone. Similarly brick ruins, together with the foundation of a stone temple, are to be found about half a kilometre south of Rajakhana. The site contains stone structural components and, judging by their style, they seem to belong to 11th/ 12th century . West of Rajakhana also are to be found architectural ruins as well as mounds containing ruins.

Arimattar Garh Dhemaji:

Situated at a distance of about 19 Km from Dhemaji and one Kilometre from Choukham gaon, this fortified area, although associated with the name of Arimatta, is a late medieval site measuring 315 metre square and surrounded by a moat, with one entrance. Inside is to be found an earthen mound, in all probability a tumuli (Moidam), which has been badly pilfered. There also exists a number of patches of elevated land which were probably foundations of thatched houses. In all probability, it was a permanent army camp, meant to check the periodic incursions of the Dafalahs from the northern hilly tracts. Hence its alternative name Daflagarh.

Biswanath :

Situated at the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Burhidihing rivers, Biswanath, Biswanath district, was reputed to be of great strategic importance during the late-medieval period, where the Ahom rulers had a regular camp.

The area contains a river islet known as Umatumani, which once constituted a part of the mainland. Here once existed a brick temple of goddess Uma (now renovated), Hence its name . The islet also contains a huge rock bearing as many as three inscriptions, twelve geometric designs of various types like grids, and labyrinths, incised temple forms and animal motifs , all engraved on the rock face.

On the mainland, evidences of low ramparts show that this part was once thickly populated. There once existed altogether five temples of Late-medieval period of which only two have survived more or less intact, Besides, existing architectural as well as sculptural evidence show that during the medieval period also there existed more than one temple, some of which may go back to 8th century CE.

The low-lying area in between Unatumani at the main land contain the remains of a medieval stone temple which remain submerged during the monsoon.

Pratapgarh:

Pratapgarh is situated about twelve kilometres west of Biswanath Chariali. Also known as Pratappur, it is a fortified rectangular area surrounded by an earthen rampart measuring 4 kilometres east-west and 2 kilometres northeast, and a moat all around. The fort was reputedly built by Pratapsimha alias Ramachandra, a scion of Dhamapala alias Jitari, and father of Arimatta, sometime in the 14th century. It has its entrance at the centre of the eastern rampart, which is reinforced by two parallel ramparts on its north and three similar ramparts on the south. It was further surrounded by a number of additional ramparts and moats, their lengths ranging between 0,30 Km and 8 Km, of which remains of three ramparts are still existent. West of it runs the late-medieval Salal-garh, starting from Biswanath and ending at the foot of the Dafla hills. Inside this vast fortified area is to be seen another fortress comprising about four acres of land with its ramparts measuring about 6 metres in height. The inner four sides of the ramparts bear traces of the three offsets or terraces facilitating ascent to the top of the rampart.

Inside this fortress there exists a circular pond. South of this inner fortress, there exists another large rectangular tank. The area is littered with bricks of the Late medieval period.

In this area are to be seen remains of three ancient roads, one of them emanating through the entrance of the fort, another starting from the northeast end, which is locally known as Raj-Ali, and the third one running south to Biswanath.

In addition, there are to be seen in this region more than a dozen tanks in between Pratapgarh and Biswanath, the largest of which is known as the Kunwari pukhuri.

Bihali Forest Reserve :

In an area of about 9 square kilometres inside the deep jungle of Bihall Forest Reserve, Biswanath district, remains of altogether four stone temples along with seven tanks, one of them lined with stones, can be seen, which probably belong to the early part of the late-medieval period. These are enclosed by an earthen rampart.

The area also contains ruins of two brick temples. These apart, south of the Forest reserve down to the Brahmaputra river, more than a dozen tanks, both large and small, exist, which are probably contemporaneous with the above ruins. At any rate, all these ruins existing together are indicative of a flourishing settlement there once upon a time. In this area are also to be seen three ancient roads probably contemporaneous with the above ruins.

Sotea Jamuguri region:

Inside the Ghiladhari T. E., adjacent to Sotea there are three large tanks, one lined with stones which are reputed to have been excavated by some local Bhuyan Chief. South of Sotea there are two late medieval medium sized tanks. Sotea itself has a tank together with the ruins of a medieval temple

This region also contains two roads of the late-medieval period measuring in length approximately 6.50 Km, and 5 Km, respectively. At places in this regions there exists a few other such roads some of which are still in use. Similarly Jamuguri region also contains altogether sixteen tanks of the late-medieval period.

Singri region, Sonitpur:

Situated at a distance of 11 kilometres south of Dhekiajuli, there exists inside the Singri T.E. extensive ruins of two temples, locally known as Viswakarma Mandir and belonging to the 10th century CE. A kilometre east of this place are to be seen a number of small brick and stone mounds in a row at a place called Dhirai -Majuli, from which a number of stone architectural components belonging to c.10th century CE have been recovered. A kilometre west of Vishwakarma Mandir are to be seen the ruins of a c. 12th century temple at a village called Bangali-gaon. Three kilometres south of Bangali-gaon, there exists the Singri temple with different phases of repair. Close by, on top a hill are the ruins of a medieval stone temple. Lastly, about 3 kilometres east of the Singri T.E., scattered ruins of a stone temple of c.11th 12th century along the Brahmaputra.. This region therefore bears evidence of human habitation from the 10th century onwards. It is very probable that this region had a flourishing population even earlier, constitute as it did a part of the kingdom of the Salastambha dynasty with their capital at Hadappresvara in the Tezpur region which is situated about 50 Km west of Singri.

Tezpur region:

The modern town of Tezpur and its peripheral region, where the ancient capital of Hadappesvara of the Salastambha dynasty(c. CE 655 to c.CE 900) was located contain a large number of ancient brick and stone ruins, both of the medieval and the late-mediaeval periods.

On the south eastern outskirts of the town, on top of a hillock known as Bamuni Pahar, there once existed a temple complex of c.11th century, consisting of altogether seven structures including those of a Toran (gateway). On the west of this hillock, along the Brahmaputra river, diggings for purposes other than archaeological have yielded from time to time large numbers of various types of temple components, variously ascribable to the period ranging from 7th to 11th century. In fact, the entire township is littered with stone architectural components. It also contains the remnant of a huge dried-up tank, known as Harjara-pukhuri, a name suggestive of Harjaravarman of the Salastambha dynasty. In the heart of the town are the ruins of the c.9th century Mahabhairava temple, lying scattered around the modern temple which has been built on the foundation of the old one.

On the southern outskirts of the town not very far from Bamuni hill ruins, are to be seen the remains of a medieval Sakti temple, where the modern Bhairavi temple stands. In the village of Da-parbatiya existing on the western outskirts of the town, there is a large concentration of architecture and sculptural remains. Noteworthy among these are the door-frame of a temple of the Gupta period of late 6th century. Other remains of this area are the brick foundation of an old temple over which the modern Henguleswar temple stands. The stone pillars and lintels used in the Silar namghar (a modern Vaishnavite prayer-hall), the brick ruins and the stone pillars of c. 7th century CE at Baralimara satra (now shifted to the Cole Park at Tezpur); the Garh-dol, containing the ruins of two brick structures enclosed a low rampart with brick reinforcement; a cluster of seven tanks existing not far from the Garh-dol and traditionally assigned to Harjaravaman the structural ruins at Brahmachari Satra, Da-Chuburi, the inscription of Harjaravarman engraved on a sheer rock-face at the Thenuchana-parvat on the bank of the Brahmaputra the brick remains on the Dhenukhana parvat along the Brahmaputra near Da -parbatiya, the more than 4 meters tall Mukhalingam known as Tinagyesvara at Ketekibari on the outskirts of Tezpur, the 8th century temple ruins at Majgaon near Ketekibard etc, etc, All these ruins are indicative of human habitation in this region from 6th century onwards.

Kalaigaon region :

The Kalaigaon region, west of Tangla, contains a number of ancient ruins and tanks, scattered all over the region, suggesting human habitation. At Baruah Hawligaon is an old large tank on the bank of which there once stood a brick temple with stone components belonging to the medieval period, locally known as Bhoga Baruaar Mandir. The nearby village of Barnagari has an ancient tank, together with the ruins of a stone temple belonging to c.11th century CE. The 16th century Muradeor temple, built in the 16th century during the region of Naranarayan exists at Kabirali, a village near Barua Hawli, Kabirali also contains stone architectural remains of 11th/12th century.

Darangipara region : Similarly, at the Darangipara region, about 9 kilometres south of Odalguri, extensive signs of human habitation can be seen, such as, at Nalkhamara with stone temple components, and a brick temple which has been washed away by the turbulent Chandana river.

About 5 Km south of Odalguri are to be seen a large tank and the sanctum of a ruined brick temple, as also some stone ruins on another bank of the same tank. The Jurpukhuri ruins of 12th century situated about 15 Km north of Tangla, exists in the reserved area of Najgaon T.E. There also exists at a little distance two medium sized tanks, as also broken bricks spread over a wide area around these ruins, pointing to human settlements from the medieval period onwards.

Raigarh :

Rajgarh is situated a few kilometre north of Harisinga. It is a fortified area extending over about 50 acres of land. It has four entrances with stone pillars about 4 meters high.

Other sites : Not very far from Sipajhar, there exists the Jaypalar tank, supposedly excavated by a Bhuyan chief named Jaypal, and as such belonging to c. 14th-15th century. Around this region are numerous other tanks, such as the Deoraj pukhuri at Byaspara village, west of which, as per tradition, was the city of a local chief named Lokarai. On its bank there once stood a stone temple which no longer exists. The other tanks of this region are Baldeo Pukhuri, Baghmara Pukhuri with the remains of brick steps leading down to the bottom. Barhampur Pukhuri, Pachakia Pukhuri, Lakshmi Pukhuri, Dighi Pukhuri, Gorukamora Pukhuri etc.

Bhurar Garh exists near Charadhara in Kalaigaon Mouza and is a fortified area of about 130 acres. Inside the fortified area are to be seen a number of raised grounds suggesting their use for residential purposes, as also two small tanks. The entrance to the fortification was protected on either side by ramparts. The term Bhura may originally have stood for Bhuyan, which was in due course distorted into Bhura. This probability cannot be discounted since this region was once ruled by a number of Bhuyan chiefs during the 14th/15th century.

As such, it might have been constructed sometime in the 15th century, if not earlier.

North Guwahati region: Guwahati has been traditionally known as Pragjyotishpur, capital of the ancient kingdom of Pragjyotisha.

The greater Guwahati region including North Guwahati contains archaeological ruins ranging in date from the 5th century A D down to the 18th century. The southern part of this area, the North Guwahati region has a number of 18th century brick temples, all of which were constructed on the foundations of medieval stone temples namely, the Asvakranta temple, the Kurma Janardan temple and the Manikarneswar temple and the Dirgheswari temple. Besides these, the area also contains a number of earthen ramparts a stone bridge of the late-medieval period, tanks, three stone inscriptions, the earliest of them belonging to CE 1206, and a host of stray stone sculptural places belonging to the medieval period.

Hajo region :

Hajo in the Kamrup district was once a strategic region and the stronghold of the Mughals who were in occupation of the region west of Barnadi after the defeat of Nilambar by Hussain Shah in CE 1498. Hajo proper has altogether six temples built at different times most of them on the stone foundations of medieval temples. The earliest structural activities, especially of the Hayagriva-Madhava Temple, which is the principal temple of this locality, goes back to the 8th century. Centering on this temple an extensive habitation area grew up in course of time. This shrine is equally venerated by the Lamaist Buddhists as the alleged place of Mahaparinirvant of Sakyamuni or the Buddha. The area also contains two large tanks. Close by, on a hill top exists the 16th century Dargah of Ghiyasuddhin Auliya, and the place is venerated by the Muslim community of Assam as Poa Mecca. In CE 1657 a mosque was built here, which does not exist now

Baidyar Garh is situated at a distance of 25 km north of Rangiya town, and is a fortified area of several acres of land. As the area has been badly vandalised by modern habitation, no details of ancient remains are available.

Baldyar garh is traditionally associated with Arimatta. However going by its name it is more probable that it was constructed during the reign of Vaidyadeva sometime in the 12th century, which was subsequently used as capital by Arimatta.

Baihata Chariali area :

This area is replete with archaeological ruins, such as, architectural remains, old ramparts, tanks etc. The architectural ruins at Madan Kamdev, situated at a distance of 5 km southeast of Baihata Chariali and 40 kilometres north of Guwahati, exist on the top of a hillock of the same name. Remains of altogether 12 stone structures together with evidences of brick works existing side by side, all of which belong to a period ranging from the late 11th to 12th centuries are seen here. On the south of it, right in the midst of a swampy area is the Jalpeswar hillock which also contains contemporary stone structural evidences. About half a kilometre north of Madan Kamdev are to be seen stone structural remains on the Narasimha pahar. About 6 Km north of Mada Kamdev are to be seen the 12th century stone temple ruins at Pingaleswar together with a tank and scanty remains of a brick built mosque of late medieval period nearby. Thus this region bears evidences of altogether 25th stone structures, all of them temples, About 3 kilometres north of Madan Kamdev, in the village of Januru, is a large ancient tank, and another about one kilometre west of it. Besides, on the south of Madan-Kamdev, across the season al Madan Kamdev river flowing nearby and along the spine of the Bhitarsala hill range, is a road cum rampart with brick reinforcement running northeast southwest and curving down south along the Changsari-Kahara pahar and ending up at Lakhipahar. Along this north south stretch, this road cum rampart is interspersed with a number of earthen bastions. It was from Lakhipahar that this road again probably served northwest this time simply as a road and passed through the old stone bridge which was destroyed by the earthquake of 1897, and ended up at Sessa in the neighbourhood of Hajo or more probably continued further to Hajo, That this region had flourishing popula human population at least from the medieval period, if not earlier, with the Madan Kamdev complex as its nerve centre, can easily be deduced from the extent of the ruins and other remains in this region.

Sualkuchi area :

Sualkuchi is about 25 Km west of Guwahati where a medieval stone temple belonging to c.12th century exists on top of a hillock which was partly renovated during the late medieval period. A long earthen late medieval rampart, starting from one hill and running one kilometre and ending at the foot of another hill exists on the west of Sualkuchi . Subsequently, a good number of late-medieval Vaishnavite monasteries grew up here. Sualkuchi , thus bears evidence of human habitation from at least from the 12th century. About three kilometres north of this place, there exists a natural cave which enshrines a number of Hindu metallic icons. The antiquity of this cave as a place of veneration is not known.

From the ancient to the medieval era, the archaeological landscapes of North Bank Assam show a long and dynamic history of human settlement. The region's strategic importance along riverine networks and trade routes is demonstrated by the distribution of habitation sites, fortified settlements, religious centers, and associated material remains. The Brahmaputra River and its tributaries, in particular, played a significant role in determining patterns of settlement, resource utilization, and socioeconomic interactions. Settlement organization has undergone both continuity and change over time, as shown by archaeological evidence, which reflects shifting political, cultural, and economic conditions. The study of these habitation landscapes demonstrates how Northeast Indian traditions were incorporated into larger regional developments. However, many sites are still underexplored and increasingly under threat from urbanization, erosion, and other development processes. To reconstruct the settlement history of the north bank of the Brahmaputra river in Assam and preserve its rich cultural heritage for future generations, systematic archaeological investigations, conservation efforts, and documentation are required.

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