

# MAIDAMS at CHARAIDEO

SIVASAGAR  
ASSAM



प्रलकीर्तिमपावतु

Archaeological Survey of India  
Guwahati Circle  
2014

From 13<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Ahoms ruled over Assam. Their long reign established political and cultural unity and gave economic stability to this region. This helped in the process of evolution of a new nationality and culture by bringing together various ethnic groups under one administration. Their policy of matrimonial alliances and socio-cultural assimilation paved the way for the growth of a composite nationality, which was later on recognized as the Assamese.

Traditionally and culturally the Ahoms are members of the Great Tai (Tai-Yai) group of peoples. In the year 1215 CE, the Ahoms migrated from *Mong-Mao* or *Mong-Mao-Lung* (present Dehong Dai Jingpho autonomous prefecture of South-Western Yunnan province of Peoples Republic of China). They entered in to the upper Assam region of the Brahmaputra Valley through Patkai hills under the leadership of a Mao-Shan Prince, named Chau-lung Siu-ka-pha. He became the first king or *Chao-Pha* or *Swargadeo* (Lord of the Heaven) of the Ahom dynasty, who established the first Ahom capital at Che-Rai-Doi or Charaideo. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Ahoms had expanded their kingdom over the length and breadth of the Brahmaputra Valley. In their long six hundred years of power, Chau-lung Siu-ka-pha's able and intelligent successors like Suhummung (CE 1497-1539), Suklengmung (CE 1539-1552), Pratap Singha (CE 1603-1641), Gadadhar Singha (CE 1681-1696), Rudra Singa (CE 1696-1714), Siva Singha (CE 1714-1744), Pramatta Singha (CE 1744-1751), Rajeswar Singha (CE 1751-1769), built a strong state in the Brahmaputra Valley by defending it from the Islamic rulers including the mighty Mughals and the provincial rulers, which provided this Valley an era of peace and prosperity and helped the multi-ethnic Assamese Culture to flourish.

The Ahoms took up a number of secular and religious architectural activities in their reign. One of them which has drawn the attention of the world community is the *Maidam* (the burial mounds) architecture. No other funerary structures found in other parts of the country can be compared with them. They are quite distinct in their style and architecture and are a reminiscent of their foreign origin.

There are four *Maidams* under the Archeological Survey of India at Charaideo. These are Maidam No.1 (265m diametre), No.2 (300m diametre), No.3 (150m diametre) and No.4 (150m diametre). Besides these four, there are a number of smaller *Maidams* with Archaeological Survey of India. A large number of *Maidams* are



protected by the Government of Assam while many more are unprotected.

Traditionally, the Ahoms buried their dead. The *Maidams* are the burial mounds of the Ahom kings, queens and nobles. The word *Maidam* is derived from the Tai word *Phrang mai-dam* or *mai-tam*. *Phrang mai* means to put into the grave or to bury and *dam* means the spirit of the dead.

Though *Maidams* are found in all the districts of Upper Assam, Charaideo, the first capital of the Ahoms was the necropolis of almost all the Ahom Royals. Charaideo is situated 28 km. east of Sivasagar. The first king of the Ahoms, *Chao-pha Siu-ka-pha*

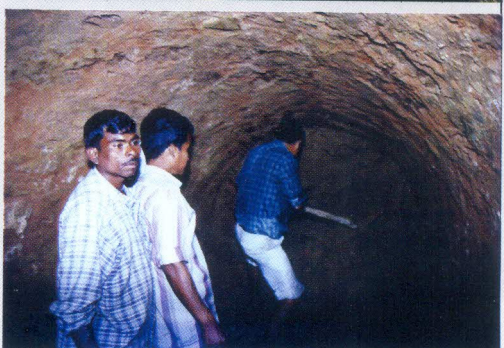
was buried at Charaideo after his death observing all the Tai-Ahom religious rites and rituals. Since then, it turned into a norm to bury the Tai-Ahom kings, queens, princes and princesses at Charaideo. During their six hundred years of rule, this place became a venerated and sacred place.

The exterior of the *Maidams* is hemispherical in shape and their sizes vary from a modest mound to a hillock of twenty metres or so in height, depending upon the power, status and resources of the person buried. A *Maidam* consists of three major features: a vault or chamber, a hemispherical earthen mound covering the chamber with a brick structure (*Chow-chālī*) for annual offering over it and an octagonal boundary wall around the base of the mound having an arched gateway on its west. However, the smaller *Maidams* did not have all the above features.

Earlier, the vaults were made of solid wooden poles and beams. Probably from the time of King Rudra Singha (CE 1696-1714) and his successors, wooden vaults were replaced with stone and brick vaults. According to the chronicles of *Chang-rung Phukan* (*Chang-rung-Phukanar Buranji*), the bricks and stones of the *Maidams* were joined with a mortar mix consisting of lime (lime stone and snail shell), pulses, resin (*Canarium resiniferum*), hemp, molasses, fish etc.

Inside the vault, the mortal remains of the dead were kept, after observing the rituals which extended from 6 months to 2 years. The Ahom kings used to be buried along with their treasures including articles of their day to day use i.e., clothes, ornaments, weapons etc. The Ahom chronicles refer that a huge quantity of valuables and attendants living or dead were buried with the royalty and the dignitaries. The practice of burying alive was banned by King Rudra Singha (CE 1696-1714).

As a custom (as mentioned in the Ahom chronicles), only the people from the *Gharphaliya* and *Lukhurakhan Khel* (*Khel* is the group of people who were assigned to do specific jobs and every *Khel* consisted of 1 to 5 thousand people) were permitted to bury the bodies of kings and queens. In the Ahom *Buranjis* (chronicles), it is mentioned that a coffin was made of a specific type of timber called *Urium* (*Bescoffia javanica*). The coffin was known as *Rung-Dang*. *Rung-Dang* was carried to the burial ground in *Kekora Dola* (a kind of Assamese litter) only by the people from *Gharphaliya* and *Lukhurakhan Khel*. The massive vault under the hemispherical earthen mound is known as *Kareng-rung-dang*, where *Rung-dang* (coffin) was placed in east-west direction. Only the *Lukhurakhans* were allowed to enter *Kareng-rung-dang* and after placing the body they sealed the door of the vault with boulders in clay mortar. At Charaideo, there



was a specific road to carry the dead bodies, known as *Sa-nia Ali* (*Sa*: dead body, *nia*: to carry, *Ali*: path or road) and a specific tank for the ritualistic bath of the dead bodies, which is known as *Sa-Dhowa Pukhuri* (*Sa*: dead body, *Dhowa*: bath, *Pukhuri*: tank).

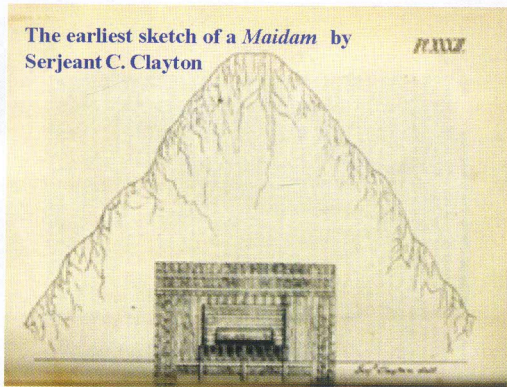
The Ahom kings appointed special officer, known as *Changrung Phukan*, for the construction and maintenance of all the civil works including royal *Maidams*. *Changrung Phukan* was one of the nine Phukans of the highest rank. Special officers, called as the *Maidam Phukans* and guard groups, known as the *Maidamiya* were appointed to protect and maintain the *Maidams*.

Being famous as treasure troves, the *Maidams* attracted many plunderers from Mughal to the British and even the locals, who plundered the *Maidams* many a times. The earliest sketch of the ground plan of a *Maidam* was published in the Journal of the Asiatic society of Bengal, June, 1848, drawn by Serjeant C. Clayton, who superintended an excavation of *Maidam* during 1840, at the request of Captain T. Brodie, the then Principal Assistant Commissioner of Assam. Clayton and his team found rings, silver toothpick case, ear ornaments, goblets, platters and a small gold lime container, which were later purchased by some Mr. Bedford. The archival reports show that in 1905, under the surveillance of many Ahom princes, one *Maidam* was excavated, but nothing is known thereafter.

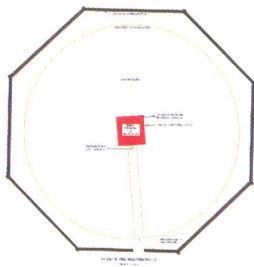
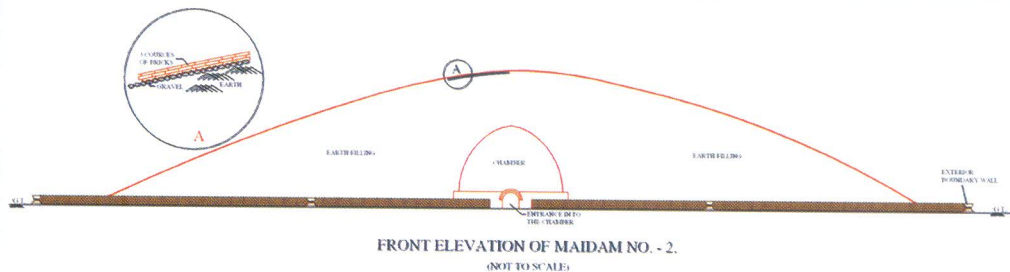
In 2000-02, Archaeological Survey of India, Guwahati Circle excavated the *Maidam* No. 2. It retains all the three major characteristic features of a full-fledged *Maidam*. It has a hemispherical earthen mound enclosing a vault within and the whole structure is encircled by an octagonal boundary wall. The earthen mound was covered with three courses of bricks laid over stone pebbles. At the top of the mound, there is a circular brick-paved platform (3.60m). The structural features of the *Maidam* No. 2 are massive in dimension. It was made of burnt bricks and plastered with lime-*surkhi* mortar. A hole on the top of the *maidam* roof indicates that it was robbed earlier. The arch-shaped door of the *Maidam* No. 2 was found on the western wall of the structure, which was originally sealed with bricks and random stone masonry. The plan of the structure is rectangular and measures (5.35×4.40)m internally. The side walls are raised up to 2m above the floor, over which the domical upper structure or roof is set. There is a rectangular platform in the centre of the chamber. Though robbed, scientific excavation of the chamber of *Maidam* no. 2 yielded several artefacts including the skeletal remains of the five individuals. Among the artefacts, the most noteworthy are the ivory decorative pieces and pieces of wooden objects. One of the wooden objects is probably the shaft of a dish-on-stand (*Sorai*) designed in the shape of *stambha* (pillar). One ivory

The earliest sketch of a *Maidam* by  
Serjeant C. Clayton

PLATE



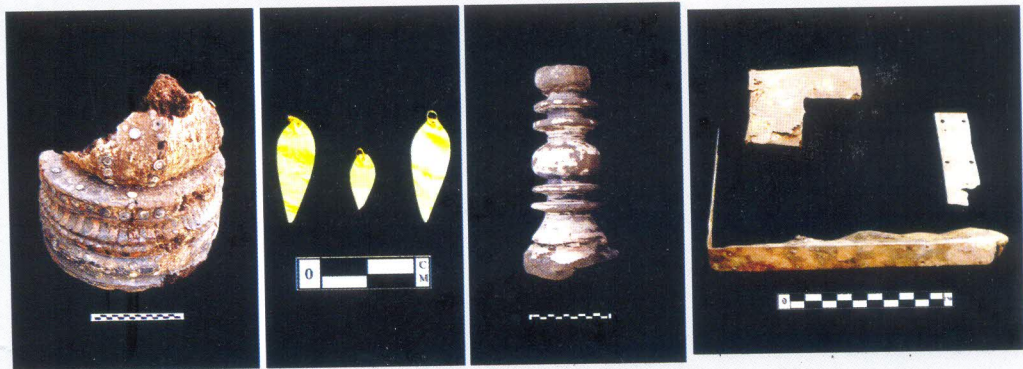
Sketch Courtesy : The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, June, 1848.



panel depicts a mythical dragon—the Ahom royal insignia, along with intricate carvings of elephant, peacock and floral motifs. Other objects found were pieces of copper objects fitted to wood, iron hook, iron pin, small ivory decorative art objects, round shaped ivory buttons, cowries, gold pendants and a few lead cannon balls.

The exact date of this Maidam or to whom it was dedicated is difficult to ascertain in the absence of written records. But on the basis of the artefacts and the nature of the brick structures and taking the literary references from the *Buranjis* on the cremation practices of the Ahom after embracing Hinduism, the construction of Maidam No. 2 could be assigned to the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE.

With the influence of Hinduism, the Ahoms also started to cremate their dead. Never the less, this burial system is still practiced by the priestly sections of the Ahoms i.e., *Mo'-Chai*, *Mo'-Hung* and *Mo'-Plang* and the *Chao-dang* (royal bodyguards) clan.



**Information courtesy:**

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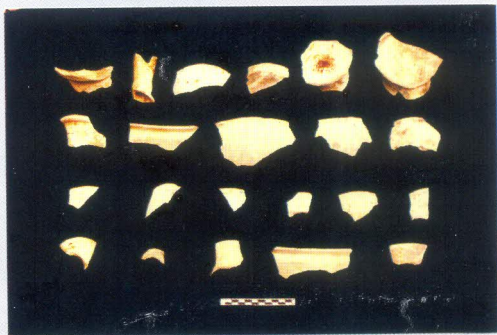
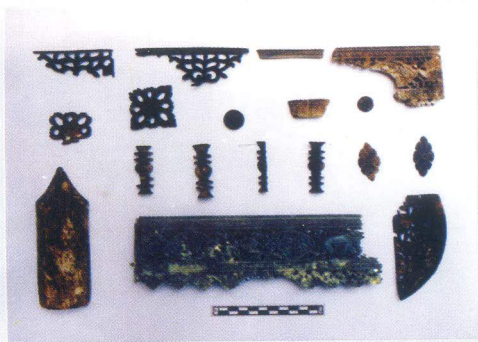
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The Government of India by Gazette Notification has declared the Director (Culture), Government of Assam as Competent Authority for granting permission/forwarding No Objection Certificate application in respect of centrally protected monuments/sites under ASI, Guwahati Circle.



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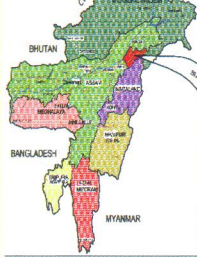
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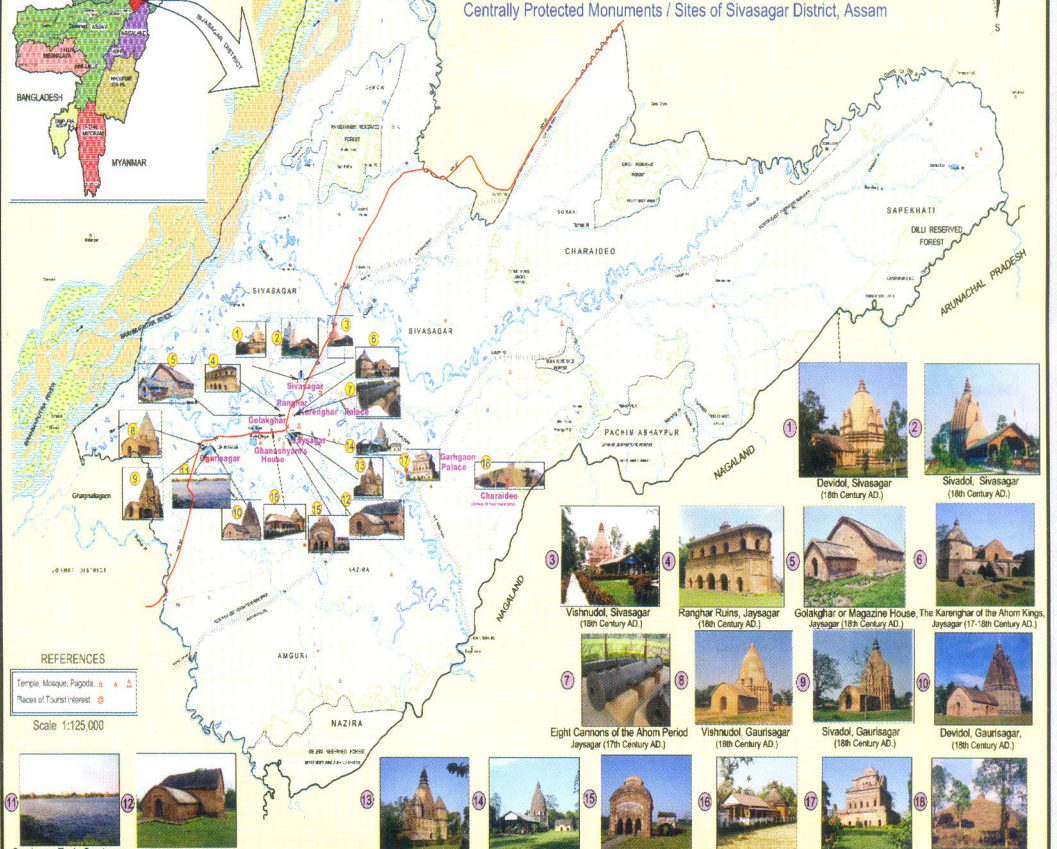
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# Archaeological Survey Of India

Guwahati Circle, Guwahati

Centrally Protected Monuments / Sites of Sivasagar District, Assam



## REFERENCES

- Temple, Mosque, Pagoda
- Place of Tourist Interest

Scale 1:125,000



11 Gaurisagar Tank, Gaurisagar (18th Century AD.)



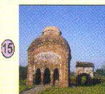
12 Devidol, Jaysagar (17-18th Century AD.)



13 Sivadol, Jaysagar (17-18th Century AD.)



14 Vishnudol, Jaysagar (18th Century AD.)



15 Ghanshyam's House, Jaysagar (17-18th Century AD.)



16 Ranganath Aole, Jaysagar (17th Century AD.)



17 Garbhgan Rajai's Palace, Garbhgan (18th Century AD.)



18 Group of four Mahadok Charaideo (17-18th Century AD.)



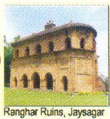
1 Devidol, Sivasagar (18th Century AD.)



2 Sivadol, Sivasagar (18th Century AD.)



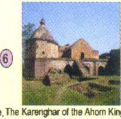
3 Vishnudol, Sivasagar (18th Century AD.)



4 Ranghar Ruins, Jaysagar (18th Century AD.)



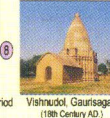
5 Golakghar or Magazine House, Jaysagar (18th Century AD.)



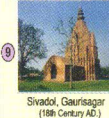
6 The Karenghar of the Ahom Kings, Jaysagar (17-18th Century AD.)



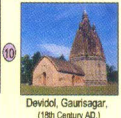
7 Eight Cannons of the Ahom Period (17th Century AD.)



8 Vishnudol, Gaurisagar (18th Century AD.)



9 Sivadol, Gaurisagar (18th Century AD.)



10 Devidol, Gaurisagar (18th Century AD.)