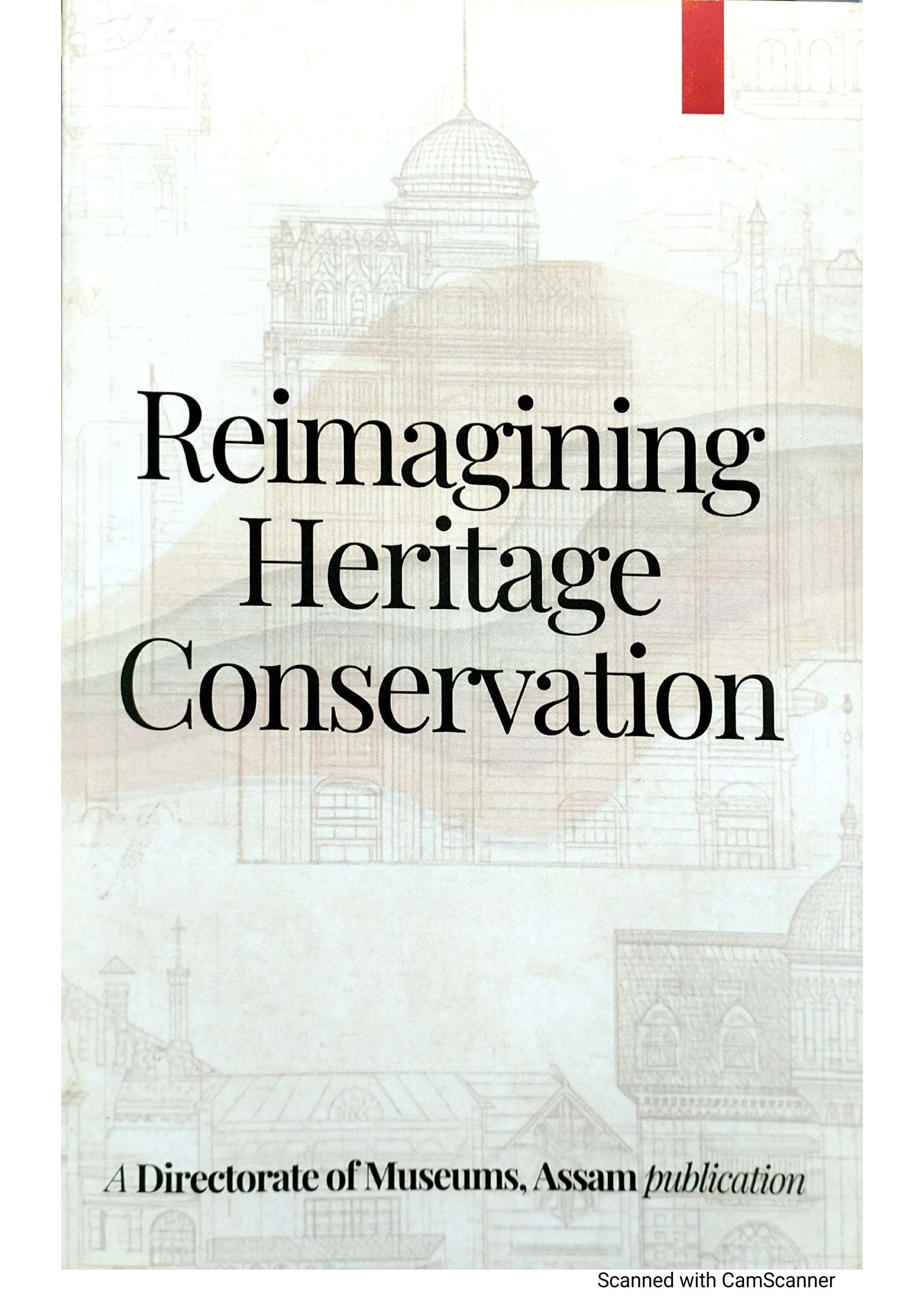




Reimagining Heritage Conservation

A Directorate of Museums, Assam *publication*

Dimasa Heritage in the Northeastern Region of India: A Study

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Abstract:

The Dimasa are an ethno-linguistic group who once nestled a kingdom over a substantial part of the Northeastern Region of India (NER) between ca. 11th-19th century CE. Although the ethnic group did not have a written record of their past, they built monuments, such as monoliths, gateways, fortification walls, rock-cut temples, brick-built temples, etc., at Kasomari Pathar, Dimapur, Maibang, and Khaspur. But the problem is that apart from the site reports by colonial authorities, there is no detailed account of remains therein. To remit the gap, the author and a few participants undertook field surveys in the aforementioned sites between January and February 2024 and collected data on monuments. Besides, interviews were also conducted in native languages to retrieve the oral tradition. The result highlights a comprehensive account of archaeological remains of four major Dimasa-built sites.

Keywords: Archaeology, Dimasa, Field Survey, Heritage sites, NER

Introduction:

Dimasa has a biennial connotation that applies to the ethnic group and its language. In other words, they are an Indo-Mongoloid group of people who speak a branch of the Tibeto-Burman language. The Dimasa ethnic group is listed as a Schedule Tribe as per the Government of India norm and in the Northeastern Region of India (NER), confined to the geographical space of Assam's Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong, Nagaon, Hojai, Cachar, Hailakandi, and Sribhumdi districts. Besides that, they are also sparsely distributed in Nagaland's Dimapur district and Manipur's Jiribam district. This ethnic group once ruled a kingdom between ca. 11th and 19th centuries CE, leaving its mark through material remains in heritage sites at Kasomari Pathar, Maibang, and Khaspur in Assam, and Dimapur in Nagaland. Previous

studies on these heritage sites date back to the colonial period, when Grange (1840) reported on Dimapur's ruins. Butler (1855) and later Goodwin-Austen (1874), acknowledging the previous work's limitations, produced a detailed survey report on the Dimapur ruins. Goodwin-Austen also coined the term "chessman column" to denote the carved cylindrical pillars at Dimapur. Bloch (1909) observed two sites, Dimapur and Kasomari Pathar. In Dimapur, he observed a third type of monolith called the "buffalo horn column." Bloch was also the first to report on Kasomari Pathar's monolith. Hutton (1922) compares Dimapur's monoliths with those erected by other ethnic groups in NER. A more recent study was conducted by Langthasa (2019), and we also have an excavation report of Dimapur by Nienu (2024). However, the problem is that there has not been a comprehensive study of the four major heritage sites and monuments collectively. Thus, the present study is guided to fulfil the objective.

Material and Method

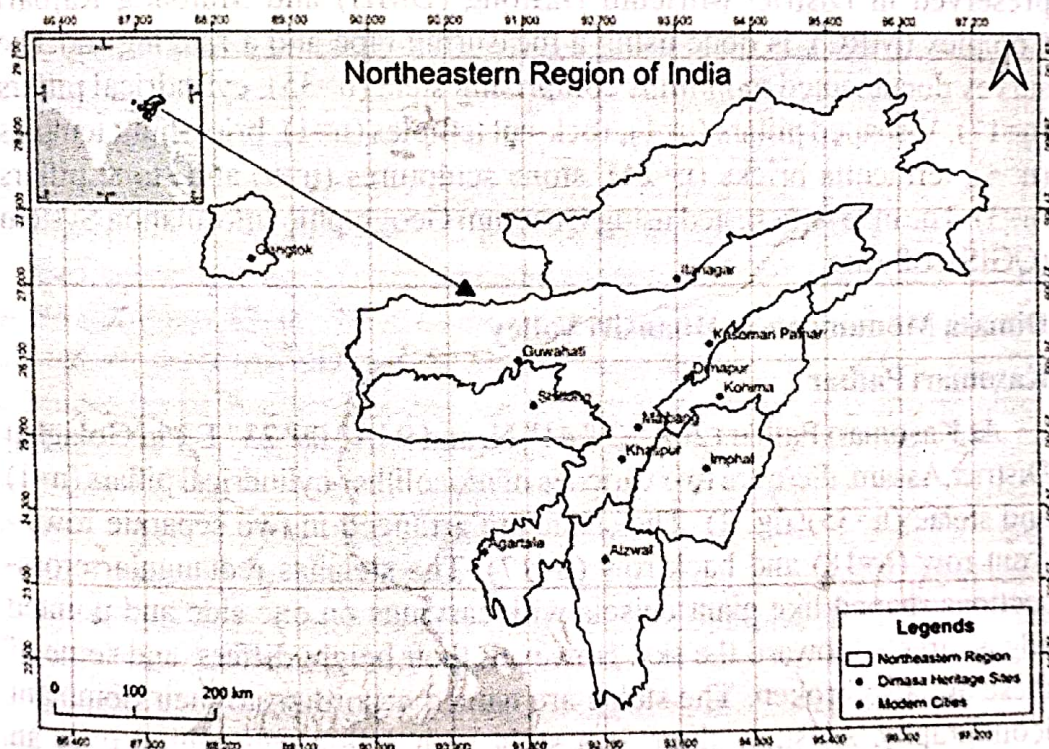


Figure 1: Map of NER highlighting the heritage sites, prepared using Google Earth data and QGIS software

The survey was conducted in four sites, three located in Assam (e.g., Kasomari Pathar, Maibang, and Khaspur) and one in Nagaland (e.g., Dimapur) (fig. 1). All these sites are in river valleys surrounded by hill terrain. Although the site's archaeological remains belong to the Dimasa ethnic group, the contemporary demography associated with the sites is

diverse. For instance, the area around Kasomari Pathar is inhabited by the Bodo ethnic group, while the Naga ethnic group inhabits Dimapur. Maibang and Khaspur are the only two sites where a sizeable Dimasa population inhabits. The survey in the study area was conducted during the dry winter months of January and February 2024 with the help of community participants. The archaeological survey was done intensively through footwalking in the accessible area around the footpath with the participants' support (Singh, 2023).

Regarding documentation, an archaeological resource documentation schedule was prepared based on the documentation method enumerated by Kadambi (2011) and Singh (2023). Each site was listed separately, and each monument, whether a monolith or temple, was given a separate code for identification and description. A hand-held Global Positioning System (GPS) device recorded the site's coordinates. The measurement of each monument and artifact, of varied shapes and sizes, in the site or those preserved in District Museum Haflong (DMH) and Maibang Rajbari Complex (MRC), is done using a measuring tape and a ranging rod. The survey documented monoliths comprising stela ($n=35$), cylindrical pillars ($n=17$), V-shaped pillars ($n=1$), rock-cut temples ($n=1$), brick-built temples ($n=4$), terracotta bricks ($n=24$), stone sculptures ($n=9$), and stone pillars ($n=3$). The map was created using Quantum Geographic Information System (QGIS) software.

Dimasa Monuments at Dhansiri Valley

Kasomari Pathar

At Kasomari Pathar ($26^{\circ} 29' 41''$ N. and $94^{\circ} 09' 23''$ E.) in Golaghat District, Assam, there are two varieties of monoliths--cylindrical pillars ($n=1$) and stelae ($n=35$) (fig. 2). The stelae are arranged in two separate rows--front row ($n=18$) and back row ($n=17$). The stelae have rectangular cross-sections shaped like giant chisels with carvings on one side and pointed edges directed toward the sky. However, their height differs, and some of these are also broken. The stelae are named according to their dominant iconography. As such, there is a stela with a lion triumphing over an elephant, another with a human head motif, and another with a four-handed human figure. There is also an isolated cylindrical pillar about 4 m. high, divided into multiple segments. Its upper segment is shaped like a mushroom and adorned with a wheel and geometrical designs. The next segment has a narrow zone, beneath which is a girdle-like structure decorated with circular and floral motifs. At the base, there are circular bands. At the same time, sword engraving fills the gap between them.



Figure 2: Stela and Cylindrical Pillar at Kasomari Pathar (source: S. Nath)

At Dimapur ($25^{\circ} 54' 45''$ N. and $93^{\circ} 44' 30''$ E.) in the Dimapur district, Nagaland, remains of monuments, such as monoliths, fortifications, and brick gateway, are found (fig. 3). Regarding the monoliths on the site, in the premise, these monoliths are distributed in four areas: 'Monolith no. 1', 'Monolith no. 2', 'Monolith no. 3', and 'Monolith no. 4'. In the 'Monolith no. 1' area, monoliths ($n=17$) are arranged in three parallel rows in the north-south direction. Observation of the cylindrical pillars in the 'Monolith no. 1' area suggests that the highest pillar stands in the centre, while the rest diminish on both sides. Besides, the pillars at the south end appear older and coarser than those erected in the north or the centre. The distance between the two rows of the cylindrical pillar is also narrower at the south end. One erect V-shaped pillar and other broken fragments lie on the ground in the same area. In 'Monolith no. 2', broken pieces of multiple monoliths are exhibited. However, in 'Monolith no. 3', cylindrical pillars are arranged in two parallel rows in a north-south direction. In the first row, there is one erect cylindrical pillar, while in the second row, there are four such erect pillars, while the other pillars are broken and lie on the ground.

In 'Monolith no. 4', a large single cylindrical pillar stands. It measures 5 m. in height and 7 m. in circumference. The top segment has a hemispherical cap decorated with floral and geometrical motifs. Then, there is a narrow zone under the hemispherical cap where geometric motifs are engraved. Below it, there are two rooms separated by an elongated circular band with a geometric motif. Other motifs include a flower, a wheel, and a sword. The base also has a similar geometric motif. On the other hand, the V-shaped pillar appears as two long rectangular slabs joined at the base while

gradually increasing in distance. These are decorated on three sides with dog, goat, peacock, and flower motifs. Each motif is created within a room with double vertical lines. The space between the lines is adorned with geometric motifs.



Figure 3: Cylindrical Pillar at Dimapur in Monolith no. 1 (source: S. Nath)

Dimasa Monuments at Mahur Valley

Maibang

Maibang ($25^{\circ} 19' 26''$ N. and $93^{\circ} 9' 52''$ E.) in the Dima Hasao district, Assam, exhibits a plethora of archaeological remains, including terracotta brick, rock-cut temple, sculptures, and stone pillars. Some of the artifacts retrieved during construction activity are preserved at DMH and MRC. The only monument at Maibang is the rock-cut temple on the Mahur River bank (fig. 4). The temple is designed as a hut carved from the rock's upper portion. The plinth area has a rectangular dimension and a double roof structure with curvilinear eaves. It also has four false doors on each side. Regarding the sculptures, six gatekeeper or dvarapala sculptures are exhibited in DMH ($n=5$) and MRC ($n=1$). Although the dimensional proximity varies, the design of these sculptures is similar as they stand upright in a stela holding a staff. Furthermore, these are decorated with bead necklaces, waistbands, and bracelets around the wrist and arm.

The chimera, identified as a horse, is exhibited at DMH ($n=1$) and MRC ($n=1$). The sculptures have four legs decorated with bead necklaces around the neck and hip, while two wings protrude from the front legs. The

peculiarity of the sculpture is its sharp canine teeth, which do not appear to be those of an herbivorous animal. Thus, leading to the assumption that it is a chimera, not a horse. Besides, fragments of pillars with intricate carvings of leaves, flowers, and animals are exhibited at DMH (n=3). There are also semi-broken terracotta bricks displayed at DMH and MRC (fig. 5). Table 1 below provides the dimensions of the bricks. The depicted iconography in bricks includes a tusked elephant rider, a horse rider, a flower and a twig, a standing man, Krishna playing flute, and a vase with twigs on both sides. The iconography displays the Dimasa's belief system, familiar animals, and utilized utensils.



Figure 4: Rock-cut Temple at Maibang (source: S. Nath)

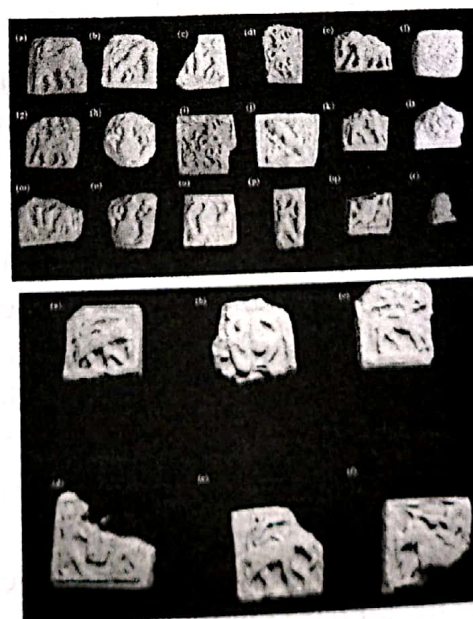


Figure 5: Terracotta Bricks at DMH (above) and MRC (below) (source: S. Nath)

Table 1: Terracotta Bricks from DMH (acc. no. 34) and MRC

Sl. No.	Figure Number	Iconography	Dimension (in cm.)		
			Length	Width	Thickness
1.	1(a)	Tusked elephant rider	17	17	3
2.	1(b)	Flower and twigs	16	16	4
3.	1(c)	Standing man	16	15	4
4.	1(d)	Krishna playing flute	17	12	4
5.	1(e)	Tusked elephant	17.5	12.5	4.5
6.	1(f)	Floral circle	15	15	3.5
7.	1(g)	Horse rider holding a sword	15	15	4.5
8.	1(h)	Vase with twigs on both sides	16.5	15.5	2.5
9.	1(i)	Krishna playing flute near a tree	17.5	17.5	3
10.	1(j)	Flower and twig	15.5	18.5	4
11.	1(k)	Horse rider	12	13	3
12.	1(l)	Floral circle	14	15.5	1.5
13.	1(m)	Two standing men	14	19	3
14.	1(n)	Vase with twigs on both sides	16	14	4
15.	1(o)	Unidentified	15	14.5	3
16.	1(p)	Standing man	17.5	10	4
17.	1(q)	Unidentified	12	13	5
18.	1(r)	Vase	9	8	3.5
19.	2(a)	Elephant rider	15	15	3.5
20.	2(b)	Unidentified	17	17	4
21.	2(c)	Horse rider	18.5	16	3
22.	2(d)	Standing man	18.5	19	4
23.	2(e)	Tusked elephant rider	17.5	17.5	3.5
24.	2(f)	Tusked elephant rider	18	18	3.5

(source: authors)

Dimasa Monuments at Barak Valley

Khaspur

At Khaspur ($24^{\circ} 54' 49''$ N. and $92^{\circ} 55' 26''$ E.) in the Cachar district, Assam, brick-built monuments, including fortification walls (0.9 m. wide and 2 m. high), gateway (n=1), and temples (n=4), are observed (fig. 6). The gateway has a rectangular plan of about 8.9 m. x 3.6 m. It has a double roof structure with tapered pilasters at its corners, and on its sides, there are two guard rooms with two openings and pointed arches facing each other. The Ranachandi Temple has a 5.8 m. x 4.2 m. rectangular plan. It is a one-story building with pilasters at the corners and a double roof. There are also pointed arches in each doorway, and the gap between them is filled with pilasters. According to the Dimasa's oral tradition, the prescribed deity in the temple was once symbolically worshipped in the form of a sword. However, it was shifted to another such temple at Bijoypur during the Burmese invasion of the Dimasa kingdom in the early 19th century CE.

The Vishnu temple is a one-story building with a double roof structure and a rectangular plan of 4.9 m. x 7.3 m. It has one door in the middle (1.6 m. high), serving as the main entrance, with false gates on both sides of the door. Similarly, on the temple's rear side, there are three false gates. Besides, on the side walls are three pairs of two-tiered windows and tapered pilasters on the corners. A small square space is also near the temple where the Tulsi or Holy Basil (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*) is planted. The ritual bathing temple, or Snan Mandir, has a domed roof and four doors in each cardinal direction. It has a square plan of about 2.9 m. x 2.9 m. The Kali temple is a brick-built, one-story, double-roof building with pilasters at corners. It has a rectangular plan of about 3.9 m. x 5.6 m. The temple has three doors at the entrance. Each doorway has pointed arches, while the gap is filled with pilasters. On the temple's rear and lateral sides are pairs of three false gates with tapered pilasters on the corners.



Figure 6: Monuments at Khaspur. a, Ranachandi temple; b, Vishnu Temple; c, Snan Temple; d, Baroduari; e, Brick fortification; f, Gateway (source: S. Nath)

There is also Baroduari('baro' = twelve + 'duari' = door), a two-story building with lime plaster and stucco decoration. It has a rectangular plan of about 4.3 m. x 5.7 m. The building has rectangular rooms on both stories and twelve doors, with three on each side. However, only one door on each story is open, while the rest are false doors, which were opted for decoration. A window in the first story is also open near one of the false doors to the right of the main door. Likewise, there are steps through which one can reach the first floor, and in it, the tapered pilasters rise above the arch while the gap is decorated with floral (mostly lotus bud) and rosette motifs. On the other hand, no such decorative niches or motifs are observed on the ground floor. Moreover, on the ground floor, around the rectangular hall, there is a corridor. The building has a double roof structure. There is also a small brick house with a single roof near the building. According to oral tradition, it was used as a platform for monarchs and courtesans to witness cultural festivals or sports. However, others consider it a temple.

Findings

Based on field surveys and explorations, this paper successfully fulfils its objective of documenting and providing a descriptive account of heritage sites and monuments preserved at these locations. At Kasomari Pathar, 36 monoliths were recorded, arranged in two rows-18 stelae in the front and 17 in the back-alongside a separate cylindrical pillar. In Dimapur's palace complex, monoliths are distributed across four distinct zones, featuring cylindrical and V-shaped pillars arranged in three rows. Dimapur also has remains of brick fortifications, gateways, and tanks. In Maibang, the rock-cut temple dedicated to goddess Ranachandi is the chief attraction, while other structural remnants are in a ruined state. Khaspur is notable for its brick-built Vishnu, Kali, and Ranachandi temples and buildings like the gateway and the Baroduari. These heritage sites, with their tangible remains, attract travellers and tourists, contributing to cultural awareness, preservation, and the local economy.

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