

The Material Culture and Mortuary Architecture of the Ahom Swargadeos: A Study of the Ahom Maidamas at Charaideo

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Abstract:

The Maidams of Charaideo, the cultural capital of the Ahom dynasty, are often called the 'Pyramids of Assam'. These vaulted mound burials represent a unique blend of indigenous earthen construction and sophisticated masonry techniques. From a historical and archaeological perspective, the sites offer strong opportunities for inclusive research. Beyond architecture, the Ahom dynasty, one of Medieval India's long-standing dynasties, holds a notable position in administration and historiography. Despite their historical resilience and cultural value, these structures face ongoing threats from climate change, vegetation growth, and urban encroachment. A few years ago, the archaeological site of Charaideo, under the supervision of Dr K. C. Nauriyal, Chief Archaeologist, ASI, earned UNESCO World Heritage recognition.

This paper presents an in-depth case study of the site's entry techniques, preservation methods, and cultural relevance, based on a field report conducted in 2023 (by one of the authors). In addition to the field study, this research adopts a comprehensive historical analytical method to optimise the available data. By assessing the current restoration status using scientific methods, this study also calls for community-backed stewardship to safeguard these irreplaceable testaments of Ahom heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Charaideo, Maidams, Ahom Kingdom, Assam, Preservation

INTRODUCTION:

The Ahom Dynasty represents one of the most remarkable and enduring chapters in medieval Indian history. Ruling the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam for nearly six centuries (1228 to 1826 CE), the Ahoms preserved their sovereignty, resisted numerous imperial invasions, and forged a unique multi-ethnic regional identity.¹ The dynasty was founded in 1228 CE by Chao-Lung Chu-Ka-Pha, a Tai prince who migrated from Mong Mao (present-day Yunnan/Upper Burma region) across the Patkai mountain range into Assam. Upon arrival, Chu-Ka-Pha and his followers integrated with indigenous communities—such as the Baro-Bhuyans, Morans, and Chutiyas—laying the groundwork for an inclusive state. The Ahom kings adopted the title Swargadeo ("Lord of the Heavens"), symbolizing their supreme authority.

The Ahom period was particularly known for its administrative strength. The Paik System, under which every able-bodied adult male, grouped into 4 (later 3), was obligated to render physical labour or military service to the state in exchange for cultivable agricultural land. This system allowed the kingdom to mobilise massive workforces for monumental public projects, such as embankments, roads, tanks, and

¹ Boruah. S. L. (1995). *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. p. 107

large irrigation networks. In parallel, it provided a readily available standing militia without relying on traditional feudal levies. Following the Pikes, the Posa system of the Ahom kingdom provided ample opportunities to maintain good ties with the Hill communities, which mostly resulted in socio-cultural and economic assimilation. The ‘Duar’ (meaning Gates) regions acted as the transit points between such correlational adjustments.

According to contemporary sources, the Ahom dynasty's most crucial role in medieval Indian history was its fierce defence of Northeast India's sovereignty against the expansionist Mughal Empire. Despite the Mughals launching 17 major invasions, particularly during the reigns of Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb, the Ahoms successfully defended their borders. Despite these setbacks, the Ahom military proved superior in naval tactics and guerrilla warfare in the marshy terrain of the Brahmaputra Valley. The Battle of Saraighat, between the Ahom forces led by Lachit Borphukan and the Mughal armada led by Ram Singh in 1671, was a decisive factor in the Ahom-Mughal conflict. With the Ahoms' victory, Northeast India remained free from Mughal control.

In the final phase of Ahom rule, weak successors, the Moamorian rebellion, and the Burmese invasion together led to the kingdom's decline. Despite diplomatic tactics, aristocrats like Purnanda Burhagohain doomed the Ahom monarchy. The Treaty of Yandaboo and the East India Company's involvement were the final blows to Ahom rule.

Culturally, the Ahoms are celebrated for their policy of cultural syncretism. While maintaining aspects of their ancestral Tai heritage, they embraced local languages, customs, and patronized Hinduism and indigenous arts. Furthermore, the Ahoms introduced a unique historical tradition: the writing of chronicles known as Buranjis. Initially composed in the Ahom-Tai language and later in Assamese, these administrative and historical records provide rare, continuous chronological documentation of medieval governance, warfare, and diplomacy. Architectural landmarks like the Rang Ghar, Kareng Ghar, and numerous stone bridges stand as enduring testaments to their engineering and aesthetic mastery.

HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE:

Archaeological sources provide the physical foundation for historical narratives, offering tangible links to the past. While texts can reflect the biases of chroniclers, the ruling elite, or the limitations of contemporary preservation, material remains, such as ruins, coins, inscriptions, artefacts, and architecture, provide objective, verifiable evidence of past human societies. Apart from chronology, these sources illuminate the daily lives, technological capabilities, economic networks, and religious practices of ordinary people alongside royal achievements. E. H. Carr, in his text “What is History?”, rightfully mentioned: “The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without the historian are dead and meaningless”.² In the historiography of Medieval India, the Ahom period in Assam (1228–1826 CE) stands out as a prime example where archaeology is indispensable. Because early Ahom chronicles, known as Buranjis, were written primarily in Ahom and later in Assamese on indigenous materials like Sancipat (bark of the Aquilaria tree) and cotton paper, many texts suffered from decay, loss, or political interpolation. Archaeology bridges these gaps, providing concrete evidence of the kingdom's political stability, military engineering, and socio-cultural evolution over six centuries.

Architecture is perhaps the most visible archaeological testament to Ahom rule. The monuments of Garhgaon, Charaideo, and the capital city of Rangpur showcase sophisticated urban planning, brick-

² Carr, E. H. (1961). *What is History?*. p. 30.

making technology, and distinctive architectural styles that blended indigenous traditions with Islamic and Mughal influences. The iconic Rang Ghar, Kareng Ghar, and Talatal Ghar were prime examples of the period's architectural marvels. Furthermore, epigraphic evidence, including copper-plate inscriptions (Sanchi-pat grants and rock inscriptions), provides precise chronological frameworks, land grant distributions, and linguistic shifts from the Tibeto-Burman Ahom language to Assamese. Numismatics (coins) reveal crucial economic data, including trade relations, monarchical titles etc. The Ahom period was also known for tank excavations (such as the Sivasagar, Joysagar, and Rudrasagar tanks), which highlight remarkable water management systems. These massive artificial reservoirs reflect a deep understanding of hydrology and supported both agriculture and urban settlement.

CHARAIDEO & ITS IMPORTANCE:

Ancient Pragjyotishpura, or Kamarupa, represents present-day Assam of NE India. Based in the Brahmaputra Valley, this medieval civilisation was an amalgamation of millennial migrations of Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic, and Tibeto-Burman rulers. The city of Charaideo was an important part of it. The term “Charaideo” was taken from an Ahom word “Che-Rai-Doi”, literally meaning “the shining city of the hills”.³ It was the first capital of the Ahom dynasty, established by Chao Lung Siu-Ka-Pha in 1253 AD. Although the capital changed multiple times during the 600 years of Ahom rule, Charaideo remained a symbol of the Ahoms and was considered their cultural capital, earlier known as Che-Tom-Di-Phi, or city-hill-God.

Before the advent of the Ahoms, it was a place of worship for local tribes like the Moran and Borahi. After crossing the Patkai hills, Siu-Ka-Pha roamed various places of medieval Assam in search of a proper place for the capital. He crossed the Patkai hills in 1228 AD, and finally, in 1253 AD, Charaideo was selected as a suitable capital. During the reign of Sudnagpha (1397-1407), the relatively small Ahom kingdom was attacked by Mong Khowang, a Shan state in what is today Upper Burma. A Mong Kwang army sent under General Ta-chin-Pao advanced up to Tipam but was subsequently defeated and pushed back as far as the Kham Jang territory. The generals of the two armies conducted a peace treaty on the shore of the Nong Jake lake and, in accordance with the Tai custom, dipped their hands in the lake, fixing the boundary of the two kingdoms at the Patkai hills. Charaideo's geography also played a crucial role in the early settlement of the Ahoms and their feudatories. Charaideo lay next to the Patkai hills bordering present-day Nagaland. Chao Lung Chu-Ka-Pha cited this area as Mung-Dun-Sun-Kham, meaning a place of prosperity. It signifies the importance of the plains of Charaideo, privileged with the fertile basin of the Brahmaputra River. Another important aspect that set Charaideo apart from other temporary Ahoms capitals was its location in the highlands, which made it flood-proof. It is also said that the Ahoms introduced wet rice cultivation here for subsistence and to strengthen the economy.

That means the whole area of Charaideo can be divided into three blocks:⁴

- Patkai hill area
- Foot hills
- River plains

Presently, it is bounded by Dibrugarh district in the North-East, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh in the South, and Sivasagar Sadar Sub-Division and Nazira Sub-Division of Sivasagar district in the West. The

³ Kalita, A. and Dutta, M. *Traditional Knowledge System of the Maidams of Charaideo*. P. 14

⁴ Information retrieved from personal interview in the site in 2024.

district shares a 35 km boundary with Nagaland and 27 km with Arunachal Pradesh. The main rivers flowing throughout the district are Desang, Towkak, Suffry, Timon and Teok.

THE MAIDAMS:

Charaideo is famous for the pyramid-shaped burials of Ahom kings called as “Maidam”. A Maidam is a burial of the royalty and aristocracy of the medieval Ahom Kingdom (1228–1826) in Assam. Burial is the predominant funeral rite of the Tai people, to which the Ahom people originally belonged. This is opposed to the Hindu system of cremation. After the Ahom kings adopted Hinduism, they chose to bury the ashes after cremation. The royal Maidams are found exclusively at Charaideo, while other Maidams are scattered in the region between Jorhat and Dibrugarh. Structurally. As per the source (internet), the actual number of Maidams all over Assam is more than 150. In Charaideo, the number is 90. The archaeological site of Charaideo that we visited is situated 30 km from another historical place in Assam: Sivasagar. Dr Nauriyal mentioned in his speech that the 1st ever Maidam built in Charaideo belonged to Siu-Ka-Pha (died in 1268 AD). The importance of Maidams in contemporary Assam can be seen in the fact that a special group of pikes was allotted to manage them, called “Maidamia Piek”. A group of pikes consisted of 4 members. Each of the pikes was bound to work for the royal house for a certain amount of time.⁵

Another feature of the Maidams of Charaideo is that these burials were constructed in honour of royal blood only. Among these Maidams, no evidence of the burial of any high-ranking officer or equivalent has been found so far. If we look at the administration of the Ahoms, we can see that the concept of agnatic primogeniture prevailed there. This means they highly emphasised royal lineage, and only descendants of Chao Lung Siu-Ka-Pha could be enthroned as king. The Swragadeo's eldest son was considered the potential king. Later, even seven clans or Foids were divided among his descendants to challenge the kingship. In the reign of Rudra Singha, this rule was changed. He allowed all of his sons to be enthroned in descending order of age. In the absence of a suitable successor, the Ahom priestly class indirectly controlled the monarchy. Notably, from such a royal lineage system, the importance of royal blood could be easily evaluated. The same reflection was present in the Maidams of Charaideo.

Usually, the king's body was buried along with other items in the Maidams. But after the reign of Rajeswar Singh, the Hindu tradition of cremation was added to the Maidams. As a result, instead of corpse relics, cremation was started to be buried in the Maidams. Historians tried to compare the concept of Maidams with other parts of the world and their culture. But they found that although several funeral concepts were similar, none matched the precise details of the Ahoms. Charung Phukan, the officer of the Ahom kingdom assigned to oversee construction work, recorded his assignments in a Buranji known as “Charung Phukanr Buranji”. It mentions five different types of Maidams constructed by the Ahoms. These are –

- Pit Maidams
- Burial Maidams
- Earthen cover Maidams
- Maidams with dome (on top)
- Maidams with octagonal wall

Our guide, Dr Nauriyal, even mentioned these Maidams as a part of living culture. Among the Tai-Ahom communities of Assam, the concept of constructing small maidam-like structures during cremation was still present. Again, the “Tarpan” ceremony is another important part of the Charaideo excavation site.

⁵ Personal interview of Dr. K. C. Nauriyal, Chief Archaeologist.

Here, people came to worship their ancestors annually. A special religious structure was constructed near the site's entry gate for this traditional ceremony. Eventually, Charaideo was listed on the UNESCO World Heritage list as a cultural heritage site.

STRUCTURE OF THE MAIDAMS:

Simply put, a Maidam was a large dome of mud with a brick structure. A Maidam consists of vaults with one or more chambers. The size of Maidams always matters. The larger the size, the more powerful the ruler. Another common feature of Maidams was that they all faced west. The dead bodies are placed towards the East.⁶ It signifies the traditional religious beliefs of the Ahoms. According to their religious ethos, deities should be worshipped on the Eastern side. As the ancestors were also worshipped, the structure of Maidams seemed so. Similarly, the site of Charaideo is covered with forest lands. This again reflects the worship of Som-Deo (an Ahom deity) and their concept of heaven. According to Ahom mythology, Chom-Deo lived in a forest-covered heaven. The Patkai hill range was another area of attraction for this community, because Chao Lung Siu-Ka-Pha entered Assam by crossing the Patkai hills. That's why the Maidams were being constructed in the foothills of Patkai, engulfed with jungle.

In traditional Tai Ahom beliefs, a king never dies. The divinity of a king passed to the next generation, and the earlier one entered heaven. From this perspective, the concept of Maidams can also be seen as part of the divine journey of kings. Thus, the tradition of tarpan was linked to the Maidams.

Regarding the structure of the Maidams one notable feature was that these were not well planned. The site of Charaideo is full of Maidams randomly placed anywhere without any geometrical plan. As Dr Nauriyal explained, the way of constructing Maidams was simple and straightforward. Workers dug the soil and formed maidams nearby. Therefore, a large number of man-made holes can be noticed alongside the Maidams. The earliest Maidams were made of clay only. Later, burned bricks became more common. In most cases, two layers of bricks can be found above the Maidam heap. One special Maidam with a circular structure can also be found in Charaideo. The No. 78 Maidam at the site has a special stone structure arranged in a circle. Archaeologists termed the stone ring around the Maidam as "ring of purls".⁷ In the circular stone structure, two stones were placed together. In addition, the Maidam has a gap between the brick formation and the stone circle. As per analysis, this separate part of Maidam might have been used as a flower garden, which was common in medieval Assam. A similar stone structure is also spotted in Maidam No. 90, but in a fragile state. One octagonal boundary wall among the items of Charaideo also drew much attention. The length of this Maidam was approx. 32 meters. Along with the brick wall, certain circular bases are present in the corners of this Maidam. Dr Nauriyal describes it as an example of Mughal influence in Ahom architecture.

Chow Chali is another important part of some Maidams. The vaults have a domical superstructure that is covered by a hemispherical earthen mound that rises high above the ground, with an open pavilion at the peak called Chow Chali. Basically, this kind of over-the-top formation reflects the traditional belief system. According to the belief, the Ahom kings built this part to rest.

Inside any Maidam, there is a base for the king's carcase. The base was built with materials like hard rock or brick. Above the base, a well-constructed bed was placed to lay down the body of the king. As excavation and preservation continue, new items are found in the Maidams. For instance, the Archaeological Department of India excavated one of the Maidams in 2001. Here, several remains were

⁶ Op. cit. Dr. Nauriyal, personal interview.

⁷ Information retrieved from personal interview and site visit.

found. Notably, 5 human skulls were found in that Maidam, which raised the probability of burying living persons along with the king's body. Female bodies were also found, which eventually indicated queens or servants. Evidence of wooden (?) doors can also be found from Maidam no 78. In the same Maidam, iron nails were used.

PRESERVATION:

Preservation is an initial part of any archaeological site. In our field study, the archaeologists and their co-workers showed us how to preserve anything at a historical site. First, to label each part of the Maidams, the whole structure is divided into a large rectangular area called a trance. Again, each trance is divided into four parts. Each part is called a quadrant. For DNA sampling and testing to decode the lineage of a dead body, researchers take DNA samples from members of living Ahom royal families. This way, historians can be certain that Maidams were constructed for royal blood only. For the C-14 dating, artefacts with carbon footprints are preserved separately. The main concern is protecting these artefacts from the locality's climatic conditions. The same logic applies to the Maidams as well. As I learned, before the Archaeological Department took over the site, the whole site was covered with jungle. Several tea planters even opened tea gardens in this historical site and ruined many artefacts. Prior to that, during British rule, Maidams were destroyed and looted for colonial benefits. Colonial rulers illegally extracted the treasure stored inside the Maidams and used it for development projects. In fact, the Maidams of Assam were targeted from the medieval period onward. For instance, during Mir Jumla's invasion, the Mughals looted many Maidams. Local villagers later exploited the remaining Maidams in search of hidden treasure. According to colonial records, 10 Maidams were dug for treasure. Approximately 90,000 worth of wealth was drained from that area. Between 1860 and 1862, colonisers initiated this drain of wealth.⁸ As a result of such unethical exploitation, along with the treasure, the archaeological remains of those Maidams were destroyed. It took away a large part of medieval Assam's history. For such reasons, the preservation of remaining resources became a prime concern for the Department of Archaeology, Assam.

During the visit, the archaeologists informed that during excavations, they found several remains from the respective Maidams (No. 01 & 78). Some of these include:

- Five human skulls
- Human bones
- Metallic pendants
- Cowries
- Wooden parts of a royal bed
- Deluxe potteries
- Chinese-style pottery, etc.

It is also said that some Maidams remain untouched in the dance forest areas. Future excavations in these areas might reveal new information about Assam's heritage. In the preservation process, modern technology and engineering techniques are also being used. For instance, the No. 90 Maidam is preserved by reconstructing its outer layer. For this purpose, specially made bricks are used to replicate the older construction technique. Again, to replace the "coral" (cement-like binding agent), synthetic molecules are used alongside natural materials. As the chief engineer demonstrated, natural elements like lime, cow dung, grains, egg, jaggery, wood apple gum, Amla, Myrobalan, etc. were used in the medieval period for

⁸ Op. cite. Personal interview.

construction work. Today, because several elements like eggs are scarce, synthetic materials are used. Some simple but important measures are taken to save these monuments for future generations. For instance, the use of jiggery has been stopped because of the risk of insect damage. These efforts show the team's determination to explore and protect the Maidams.

HO FI OR DEO SAAL:

Near the archaeological site of Charaideo, there sits another hospice of the Ahom kingdom. According to assessments, the Deo Saal of Charaideo is an important place for both the archaeological and religious aspects of the Tai-Ahoms. It is as important for the Ahoms as Mecca is for Muslims. Simply speaking, the Ho Fi is the area for worshipping the deities of the Ahom community. From the historical point of view, the area of Deo Saal was earlier under the control of the Barahi tribes. After the invasion of the Ahoms, they willingly offered this place to Chu-Ka-Pha as a place of worship.

The site of Deo Saal is situated at a height of 600 Ft. from sea level. Two hillocks are present in parallel in the same area, called the “shrine of God”. At the site, a multi-circular pillar at least 8 ft. high is visible. At the time of the visit, most parts of this site were destroyed, and only 3 pillars were standing. The orientation of this site is Northeast and Southwest. Surprisingly, the Maidams are present in the back-right direction of the site. It also reflects the importance of this site in the medieval period. In the second hillock, “Lankuri doul” is situated. It is another important monumental structure of the Ahom period. The floor of the Ho Fi site was covered with bricks at that time. Currently, only the remains are present. The stone pillars of Deo Saal are set into some circular stone holes. It is a unique feature of this site. Dr Nauriyal hypothesised that there may have been a wooden roof above this place, which may have collapsed in a natural disaster. In the medieval period, when the Ahom rule was at its peak, the coronation ceremony was held here. The Archaeological Department initiated the preservation of Ho Fi along with the Maidams sites in Charaideo.⁹

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, Charaideo is a living archive of the History of Medieval Assam. Not only an archaeological site, but the Maidams also reflect cultural values of the Ahoms and their empire. In particular, the large number of archaeological remains in this area makes it a strong site for historical and archaeological research. Following the efforts of the Archaeological Department and the Government of Assam in 2024, UNESCO recognised the site. These developments at Charaideo's historical sites will surely add extra value to Assam's history. Alongside this, Charaideo and other regions of Sivasagar could be developed for cultural tourism in the near future. Further excavations or more advanced studies at Charaideo will surely unearth new findings and research opportunities.

⁹ Op. cite. Personal interview.

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