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# A Micro Study of Pottery Traditions from the Early Medieval Brahmaputra Valley (c. 7<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE)

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Received: 20 August 2018; Revised: 26 September 2018; Accepted: 14 October 2018

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 6 (2018): 310-332

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I have attempted a systematic classification study of the pottery from six sites of the Brahmaputra Valley belonging to the early medieval period. The six sites are Ambari (Kamrup District of Assam), Bhaitbari (West Garo Hills of Meghalaya), Garhdol (Sonitpur District of Tezpur), Paglatek (Goalpara District of Assam), Rajpat (Koch Behar District of West Bengal) and Suryapahar (Goalpara District of Assam). It is an attempt to engage with the predominant historical narrative of the region and augment it with certain new findings in the field of archaeology specifically related to the pottery traditions. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and political processes of the early medieval Brahmaputra Valley it is necessary to engage with all the available sources in a holistic manner.

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**Keywords:** Pottery Tradition, Early Medieval Period, Brahmaputra Valley, Celadon, Green Glazed Ware, Sites, Gangetic Valley

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## Introduction

The historical period of Assam begins with the discovery of the *Umachal* and *Nagajari-Khanikargaon* rock inscriptions in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. The sanskritic sources such as the inscriptions and texts refer to the region of Brahmaputra Valley as *Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa* state. Scholars interchangeably use various terms to refer to the period from 5th to 13th centuries CE such as Ancient Assam (till about 7th century CE), Early Assam, Early Medieval Assam (from 7th-13th century CE) and Pre-Ahom Assam. Historian Nayanjot Lahiri (1991) popularized the term 'Pre-Ahom' for the early medieval period which refers to the advent of the *Ahoms* in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Ahoms are believed to have entered the valley in 1228 CE which can be called a major break in the socio-political processes of the region.

The term 'Pre-Ahom' Assam I have used here not as an affirmation but to highlight the problems embedded in this terminology. The historical period at Assam begins at a very later period, so in this scenario the usage of the term ancient and early medieval is not very convenient. The term 'Pre-Ahom' ends up giving significance and centrality to the medieval state formation of *Ahoms* while in reality there were many other parallel

political entities of the *Ahoms* such as the *Dimasa* kingdom, *Bodo-Kachari* kingdom and so on. Thus, it is problematic to use such terminology to describe the period from 5<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Many scholars prefer using the term Early Assam to describe this period due to the above cited issues.

Among the historical researches done in this period one can see that beyond creating a political historical narrative of the region, not much has been attempted. The source mainly used by the historians to write the political history of the Brahmaputra Valley is epigraphs. An attempt to have an alternate reading of this source has been attempted only by a handful. Another aspect that comes across is the failure of this historical narrative to include the archaeological data. There are a number of archaeological sites excavated in the region of Brahmaputra valley (Figure 1) in the period of my study which I will be discussing in my paper. The rich material culture of sites such as Ambari, excavated for more than 10 seasons beginning in 1960 till 2010, need to be incorporated in the historical narrative of the region and period under study. I will attempt to initiate a dialogue between the two disciplines of history and archaeology by using pottery and certain epigraphic information to throw light on the political, social and economic processes of early Assam.

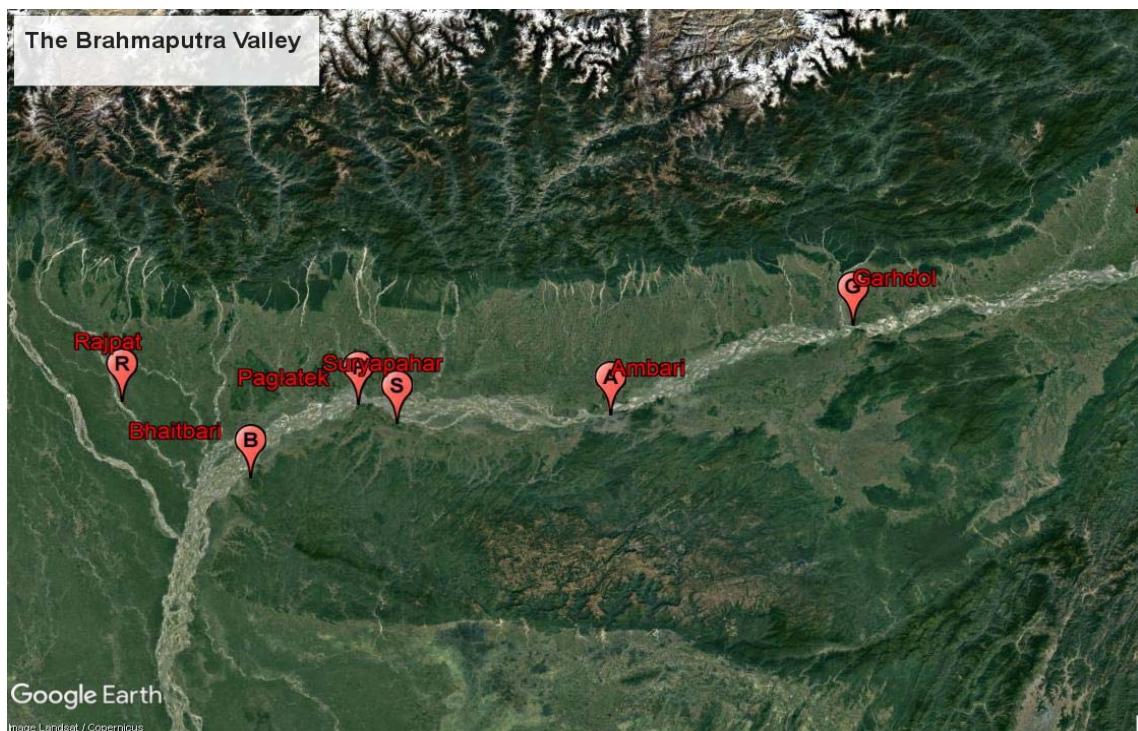


Figure 1: Location of the 'Pre-Ahom' Sites

## Introduction to the Archaeological Sites

The site of Ambari (26°11.089'N 91°45.207'E) is situated in the city of Guwahati in Assam, close to the Brahmaputra River (Figure 1). It has been excavated from 1969 to 2010 which were conducted by State Directorate of Archaeology (Assam) and the last

season was a joint venture of Archaeological Survey of India (hereafter ASI), Guwahati circle and State Directorate of Archaeology, Assam (hereafter ASI). The stratigraphic study at Ambari has shown chronologically two periods in the excavations. Period I can be approximately dated from circa 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century and Period II from 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. This dating is done on the basis of evidence of pottery, stylistic pattern of sculptures, other antiquities collected and C-14 dating at Ambari. The C-14 test of a charcoal sample collected from a depth of 1.2 m or layer 3 has given a date of 1030 + 150 CE (Indian Archaeology: A Review, 1970-71: 4). The natural soil could not be reached in any of the excavations due to rising water level.

Bhaitbari is situated in the West Garo Hills District of Meghalaya (Figure 1). The site has been excavated for a season in 1992 by the Prehistory Branch of ASI, Nagpur. The excavators on the basis of excavations have dated the site to 'beyond second century BC'. The basis of these dates seems to be handmade pottery which A K Sharma, Director of the aforesaid excavations found similar to Sekta in Manipur and the sites in Indo-Gangetic plains. On the basis of my reading of the pottery, the site seems to belong to early medieval period of 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century CE. A similar date has been given by G N Bhuyan on the basis of his reading of the stylistic pattern of the terracotta tiles of Bhaitbari (Bhuyan 1972: 11-12).

Garhdol is situated at Tezpur in the Sonitpur district of Assam (Figure 1). This site has been excavated for two seasons in 2006 and 2007 by State Directorate of Archaeology, Assam. It has been dated to the period from 4<sup>th</sup> century CE to 11<sup>th</sup> century CE on the basis of the pottery.

Paglatek (26°.30'N 90° 30'E) is situated on the Goalpara-Pancharatna road in Goalpara district. It is situated on the south bank of Brahmaputra on a hillock overlooking the river (Figure 1). It is situated within 5 km radius from the site of Suryapahar. Similar to Suryapahar, Paglatek has yielded two rock cut caves facing the river on the hill. It has been excavated for two seasons in the years 1997-98 and 2004-05. On the basis of archaeological evidence the site is said to have flourished earlier than 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century CE and continued till 11<sup>th</sup> century CE and afterwards (BREPAS 2004-05: 3). The pottery at Paglatek are dated to three periods 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century CE (layer 3), 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century CE (layer 2) and 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century CE (layer 1) respectively by State Directorate of Archaeology (Assam).

The site of Rajpat (26°.09'N 89°21' 12"E) is located in the village of *Khalisa Gosanimari* in Koch Bihar district of West Bengal (Figure 1). The excavators have identified the Rajpat mound with the capital of ancient Kamata kingdom, Kamatapur. Rajpat is located in a deltaic zone and excavations show that settlement started on a dried river bed (Ota 2006: 176). The site was first reported by F. Buchanan Hamilton in 1809. The site was excavated by ASI under the supervision of S B Ota for 2 seasons 1998-99 and 1999-2000. The excavations have identified three periods at Rajpat on the basis of 'limited structural remains and associated findings corroborating certain literary data'. They

are: Period I (10<sup>th</sup>- 12<sup>th</sup> century CE); Period II (14<sup>th</sup>- 15<sup>th</sup> century CE); and Period III (16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century CE) (Ota 2006: 181-82).

The site of Suryapahar is situated in the Goalpara district of Assam near the Brahmaputra River (Figure 1). The site has been excavated for 6 seasons between 1992 and 2001. The excavators have identified two distinct phases on the basis of the structural evidence, terracotta stylistic aspects, pottery and iconography. Phase I have been dated roughly from 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, and the Phase II from 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE (IAR 1995-96: 4).

## Review of Literature

I have divided this section into three parts: a) archaeological and ethnographic studies of pottery related specifically to the region; the b) theoretical approaches to pottery analyses and c) historical works related to early Assam.

Most pottery studies in the region of Brahmaputra Valley concentrate on Ambari. Ambari is also one of the most extensively excavated sites in the region. While compared to Ambari the other sites have hardly been given due importance in the studies available. Especially in the field of pottery studies, apart from Ambari, there are no such studies in the case of the other sites. The pottery studies mostly have followed a pattern of classification wherein only single attributes of the potteries have been discussed like color or fabric of the pottery. The pottery studies mostly have entailed classification on the basis of the color or fabric of the pottery. The study of Sharma, Ashraf and Mahanta (2006) has mentioned details like quantities and the morphological types within Ambari pottery. Goswami and Roy (1972) have classified the pottery on similar lines of color distinction. They have also classified the decorated wares. Sonowal (2006) has used the similar methodology and classified the pottery on the basis of the color of the pottery. Sonowal in contrast to others, who have emphasized more on the South East Asian connections, draws similarity between the Ambari pottery cultures with that of the pottery cultures from the sites of the Gangetic Valley.

Further, some works have made an attempt to understand the excavated pottery through studies on the present potter communities. These ethnographical endeavors can be seen in the works of Sharma, Ashraf and Mahanta, Roy (Roy 1976, 1977, 1983 and 2010), Medhi (Medhi 1992), and Sarmah (Sarmah 2001). In all these works, the overarching concern is to trace the continuity from pre historic times to the present times. However, these assumptions are not well substantiated with the evidence. This idea of changelessness and continuity in potting tradition is problematic. It fails to recognize the micro details that are embedded in different regions as well as periods. Similarly, the temporal and spatial changes easily get overlooked in such studies.

The majority of the studies discussed here follow the cultural historical approach wherein the historical developments are explained through the twin phenomenon of

migration and diffusion. The capacity of the region to produce certain changes on its own or in some other way has been mostly negated. Also, the ethno archaeological approach has been least explored. Most of these scholars have done ethnographical studies that hardly help us to reach a better understanding of the excavated pottery. The ethnographical studies have given detailed information about the society and culture of the present potter communities but this information has not been rigorously analysed to answer questions related to past societies. While relating the past with the present through these studies, one has to be careful in not making gross generalizations and reaching to anachronistic conclusions. Since there is a huge time gap, one has to be cautious about suggesting continuity between the ancient past and the present.

In this section I will be discussing those works that have provided the foundation of my study and are the genesis of my understanding. I will be discussing the specific aspects which I have borrowed during my research. The works of scholars such as Dean Arnold (1985), Prudence Rice (1987), Carla Sinopoli (1991) and Heather Miller (2007) provide the basics of any pottery study. These studies have explicated in great detail the theoretical framework involved in pottery classification and analysis.

Dales and Kenoyer (1986) have provided a systematic classificatory scheme for understanding the MohenjoDaro pottery which can be used for classifying pottery elsewhere as well. Their contribution to pottery study in the Indian subcontinent is remarkable as it has introduced a classification model very different from the traditional way of pottery classification.

Rice (1987) has tried including in her work almost all the concepts and issues related to the study of pottery. She has pointed out that most archaeological studies of pottery are based on three approaches: classification, decorative analyses, and compositional studies (Rice 1987: 25).

Sinopoli (1991) has discussed the important role played by pottery classification in determining our understanding of the past. She discusses three types of approaches in classification: intuitive typology, type-variety typology and quantitative or statistical approach. Intuitive typology involves the process of sorting the ceramic sherds into groups on the basis of recognition and division based on the perceived patterns of similarities and differences. In the type-variety method ceramics are first sorted into broader groups or types and then they are further regrouped into finer groups or varieties. This sorting is usually done on the basis of raw materials, clays and tempers used and decorative treatment done to a ceramic. The quantitative or statistical method is based on explicitly defining and measuring a number of attributes or traits of ceramics, and using a variety of statistical techniques to examine their distributions and dividing the vessels into objectively verifiable categories (Sinopoli 1991: 4-5). She also discusses the role pottery can play in unveiling the social relations and social systems of the past. It also can help in explicating the relationship between pottery

production and distribution with the state processes of the past. The pottery classification typology I have followed in this study is an amalgamation of the three techniques that Sinopoli discusses, so that an effective recording and analysis of the micro details of the decorated pottery could be undertaken.

Smith (2001) has done a case study of the town of Kaundinyapura in the Vidarbha region of Central India. The case study involved a systematic surface collection at Kaundinyapura as well as another nearby site called Dhamantri. She has tried looking at the patterns of regional exchange in relation to the processes like production as well as distribution of goods in the region. She discusses the process of classification and how the construction of typologies affects the subsequent utilization of archaeological data set. In practical terms, classification serves as a means of simplifying a large number of items into groups whose boundaries are formed both by the similarities between individuals within groups, and the difference between individuals belonging to different groups (Smith 2001: 58).

Mishra (2008) has studied the pottery of the Chalcolithic site of Balathal and provides a good example of systematic and scientific pottery study. He has attempted a comprehensive classification of the pottery including decorated wares and a statistical analysis of the data collected on the pottery. He has conducted a detailed classification and documentation of decorative patterns like incised, appliqué and painted on the basis of technique employed.

Selvakumar (2014) in his article discusses the paddle impressed pottery technique and its prevalence across different regions of the Indian sub-continent. It has been reported from the Neolithic period till the modern times. But, he points out that the cord impression on Neolithic cord/paddle impressed pottery of the Vidarbha region might have not been a conscious effort but a byproduct of the paddle anvil technique.

In southern India the paddle impressed pottery has been reported from the megalithic site Kodumanal and early historic sites such as Arikamedu, Kudikkadu, Alangankulam, Pattanam and so on. This pottery has also been reported at Chandraketugarh of West Bengal and Sisupalgarh of Orissa in the early historic period. In the early medieval context this pottery has been found at the site of Ambari in Assam. In the medieval context this pottery has been recorded at a few coastal sites of Tamil Nadu such as Periyapattinam. In the ethnographic context this technique is still practiced at Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Goa and West Bengal. He goes on to suggest that this pottery style might have regional or cultural significance on the basis of his findings. He feels this technique might have reached southern part of the sub-continent from north-eastern part via the Bengal coastal route. I would like to discuss the historical literature of early Assam in this section. I have divided it into two sections. The first section will cover the older works and the ones following a political-dynastic narrative. The second section covers those works who have explored certain new dimensions but by using the same bunch of 33 available inscriptions.

The history of early Assam is mostly a narrative covering the political events as noted in the epigraphs from the 5th to 13th centuries CE. The source that has been exhaustively used in light of relative absence of textual sources is the 33 inscriptions found on rocks, copper plates and also clay seals. The historical understanding of this period and region has been developed by scholars such as K L Barua (1933), B K Barua (1952), P C Choudhury (1959), S L Barua (1985), H K Borpujari (1990) and so on with complete reliance on a single historical source, the epigraphs. The historical narrative of early Assam created by them adheres to an account of the kings of *Kamarupa-Pragjyotisha* belonging to the three dynasties of *Bhauma-Varmana*, *Salastambha* and *Palas* as depicted in the inscriptions.

Nayanjot Lahiri (1990) and Chitarekha Gupta (1992) have looked at the same bunch of inscriptions and has discussed the rural agrarian settlement pattern in the region of Kamarupa. Recently, Nirode Boruah (2010) has investigated the historical geography of early Kamarupa through the inscriptions. He has done a meticulous study to identify rural and urban centers in this region. Jae-Eun Shin (2011) has discussed the idea of political legitimacy in the case of Kamarupa and its three dynasties. The boundary markers of the Early Kamarupa copper plate charters have been thoroughly studied by Suchandra Ghosh (2014), which has revealed certain interesting land grant pattern.

Historians have overtly depended on the inscriptions mostly to write the history of early Assam. Though, the second group of historians has brought certain freshness in the historical engagement with this period, though it is not without certain shortcomings. Apart from the inscriptions, most historians have not explored other sources citing paucity of other sources. But, there are a few early medieval sites, which I have taken up to discuss in my study, which could have been interwoven into the historical narrative. The rich material culture of these sites definitely could enhance our understanding of the social- economic processes, also move beyond just politico-economic dimensions.

## Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study involves the classification of pot sherds into types and sub types. The pottery typologies have been created on the basis of multiple attributes exhibited. The analysis of the pottery profiles created across the seven has been compared within each site and across the valley. The method of classification followed is an amalgamation of the three techniques that Sinopoli discusses, so that an effective recording and analysis is possible. I classified the pottery wherein every attribute related to fabric, form and decoration pattern was recorded. Within pottery fabric firing, slip/ burnish/ glaze and inclusions were distinctly documented. Pottery form such as pot, jar, bowl and dish has been identified and recorded along with their dimensions. The decoration typology was neatly recorded by observing the technique employed such as paddle impressed or stamped. Later, within that category the sherds were futher sorted into smaller groups depending on the variation they exhibited to record the variations within a particular decorative style or technique. I have

introduced a new method of classification for the decorative patterns by giving the individual decorations a code rather than just a descriptive term which most pottery studies do. This helps in documenting the nuances in the decoration patterns across space and time. I used this classification model to glean out information from pottery deposits of the Brahmaputra valley in the period between 7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.

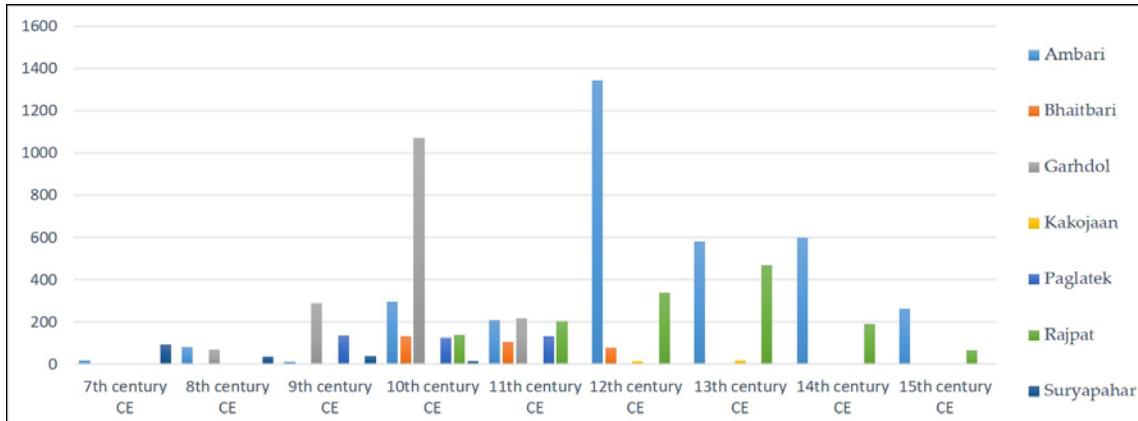


Figure 2: Layer wise Distribution of Pottery in Six Sites

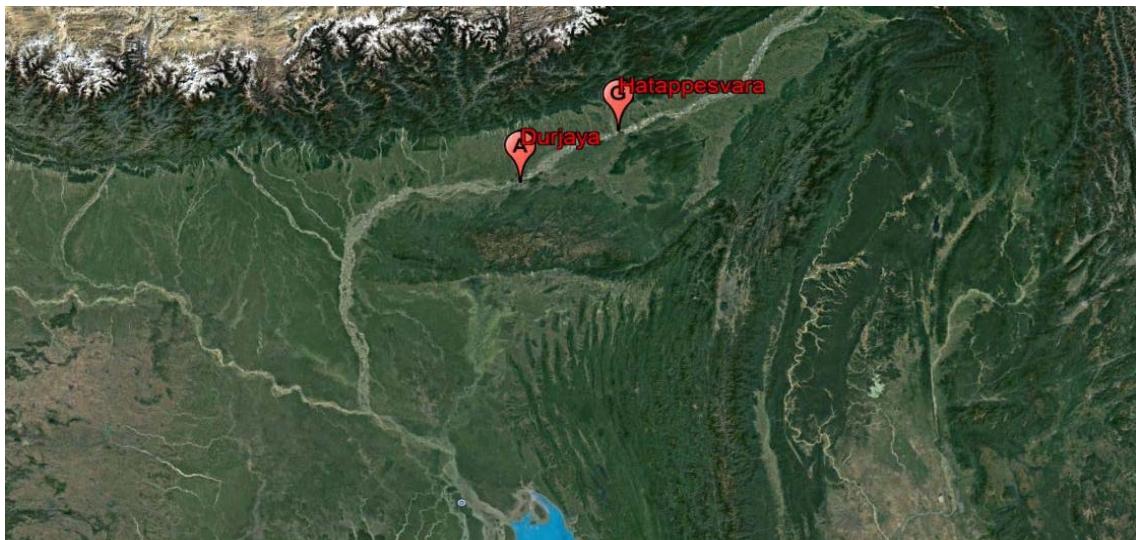


Figure 3: Location of Hatappesvara and Durjaya

### Pottery Distribution Pattern

The pottery deposits, layer wise across the seven sites, show their peaks in distribution within the early medieval period (Figure 2). All the sites with the exception of Rajpat experience the peak in the pattern of pottery distribution in the period from 7th to 13th centuries CE. Ambari and Garhdol have comparatively recorded higher quantities of pottery deposits in relation to the other five sites. The peaks of pottery distribution observed at the seven sites are roughly as follows: 11th-12th centuries CE (Layer 4) at Ambari, 10th century CE at Bhaitbari (layer 3) and Garhdol (layer 4), 13th century CE (Layer 1) at Kakojaan, 8th-9th centuries CE (Layer 3) at Paglatek, 12th-13th centuries CE (Layer 3) at Rajpat, and 7th-8th centuries CE (layer 4) at Suryapahar.

## Pottery Distribution and Historical Sources

I would like to compare the pottery distribution data with certain well established historical facts regarding *Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa* state as depicted in its inscriptions. The epigraphs discuss two very significant political events of early Assam regarding shift of the capital of the empire. The first shift of capital occurs at round 7th century CE, when capital is shifted from *Pragjtishapura* (ancient Guwahati) to *Hattapesvara* (ancient Tezpur). The second capital shift occurs in the period of King *Ratnapala*'s reign in the early part of 11th century CE. This time capital is shifted from *Hattapesvara* (ancient Tezpur) to *Durjaya* (Uzan Bazar-Ambari at Guwahati) (Figure 3).

I would like to compare this with the pottery distribution data. It seems after the first transfer in 7th century CE, it took a very long time for Tezpur to emerge as a socio-economic hub as represented by the pottery distribution data of Garhdol (Figure 2). At Garhdol the peak is recorded only in the 10th century CE. While at Ambari, the peak is clearly seen in the 11th-12th century CE period, after the shift in 11th century CE (Figure 2). The delay at Garhdol shows the shift probably was a political decision which took a very long time to become popular as a capital among people. In the case of Ambari, it seems the second shift was recognition of its importance due to its location and other factors such as networks and linkages. I will be discussing these networks and linkages of Ambari later. Thus, we can safely conclude that though certain events might seem 'momentous' in certain historical sources, like in this case the shifts of political centers of early Assam, but their impact probably was very limited and stayed within the political realm. Also the biasness of these sources in such a scenario becomes very apparent and clear. While using evidence from material culture, like in this case pottery, might throw ample light on the impact of certain events on the society and economy.

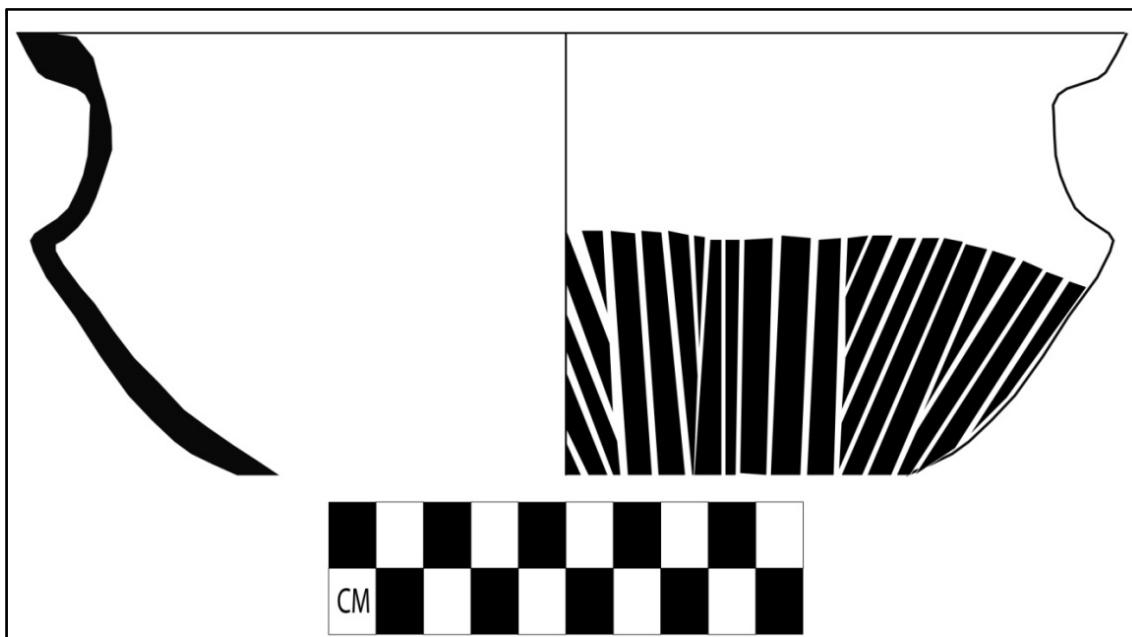
## Aspects of Brahmaputra Valley Pottery Tradition

In the traditional cultural-historical approach the focus is on identifying certain distinctive traits within material culture, which eventually defines particular cultures. Thus, the emphasis is on identifying certain similar attributes within the material cultures. Similarly in a comparative study, the natural inclination is always towards identifying the commonalities which eventually attains the entire focus. In the process the differences are not given any importance in the narrative. So, now I would like to discuss the aspects of 'similarities' and 'distinctiveness' I observed in the pottery traditions of the Brahmaputra Valley in the early medieval period. Across the pottery assemblage of the seven sites of my present study I observed certain similar pottery types as well as techniques. I will be discussing these 'similarities' in this section.

## Paddle Impressed Bowls

The first pottery type which has been recorded across the seven sites is paddle impressed globular bowl forms. The paddle impressed decoration seems to be performing a function. Mostly they were observed at the bottom of globular bowls

which were short in height with a wide orifice (Figures 4 and 5). The decorative patterns usually start from the mid-point of the bowl where it curves towards the bottom. Most probably the function that these patterns adhered to was to provide stability to these pots by reducing the pot's movement when kept on a flat surface, like a floor. Also these decoration types probably helped in providing a good grip on an otherwise smooth and globular surface. While handling these bowl forms which seems slightly on the heavier side especially with contents would definitely require a good grip. Mostly these bowl forms have a high breakage percentage around the neck area. The neck or carinated section is the weakest part which further comes under pressure if the handling is not careful. This is probably a reason behind rare occurrence of these bowl forms intact with rims (Figure 5). For this functional role of paddle impressed decorations, I call them 'functional' decorations.



**Figure 4: Paddle Impressed Globular Bowl**

The paddle impressed decorations are created by hitting a pot surface which is in a sun dried stage with a paddle either with a design or covered with cord/string wherein an anvil is placed on the inside. This replicates the paddle pattern on the vessel surface.

The paddle grooved bowls have been recorded in all the sites. The percentage of occurrence, of these bowl forms within the pottery assemblages of each site, has been mentioned in the table 1. These bowl forms need to be studied in relation to V Selvakumar's assertion that these technique of pottery probably came down from south east Asia through north east India to Southern India (Selvakumar 2014: 196). Through my study I cannot give an affirmation to this assertion but I can definitely suggest that they form a significant portion of the pottery excavated from the early medieval sites of the Brahmaputra Valley. These bowl forms seem to play a very important role in the rice based feudal agrarian land grant economy of the valley in this period.



**Figure 5: Paddle Impressed Bowl Sherd from Paglatek**

I observed a certain degree of uniformity in the dimension and execution of these bowl forms across the six sites. The uniform production across the region is an indication towards uniform dispersal of knowledge/expertise of making these vessels in the valley. The pattern of distribution observed across the six sites mostly record a significant occurrence (Table 1). At Garhdol and Rajpat a slightly lesser amount has been documented but the presence of these bowl forms cannot be denied.

**Table 1: Percentage of Occurrence of Paddle Impressed Bowl Forms**

Sites	Paddle Impressed Bowl Percentages
Ambari	15.67%
Bhaitbari	13.33%
Garhdol	4.48%
Paglatek	20.81%
Rajpat	3.88%
Suryapahar	11.86%

### **Kaolin Pottery**

A distinctive pottery technique observed at the early medieval sites of the Brahmaputra Valley is the usage of kaolin clay as a raw material in the potting process. M K Dhavalikar has called this pottery the 'Ambari Ware' and has claimed it to be a distinctive feature of the Brahmaputra Valley civilization (Dhavalikar 1973: 138). Kaolin clay is a very fine variety of clay with no inclusions in its natural form. It is

white in color and devoid of ferric content. The chemical composition of the kaolin clay is 46.54%  $\text{SiO}_2$ , 39.50%  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  and 13.96%  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  which is  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3.2\text{SiO}_2.2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (aluminum silicates with hydrates) (Saikia et al 2003: 93). Since this clay is very fine, it is not very suitable for potting. To make it suitable temper is required, at these sites normal red clay and powdered pot sherds seem to have been used. The different varieties of kaolin fabric that I recorded are oxidised unslipped, oxidised slipped and oxidised red slipped kaolin fabrics with medium sized inclusions or temper. Only at Paglatek I recorded a fourth variety of kaolin fabric which was oxidised and unslipped but with coarse and bigger sized inclusions. The oxidised red slipped kaolin fabric is kaolin and normal red clay mixed pottery given a red clay slip on top (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Red Slipped Kaolin Medium Oxidised Fabric

The following table shows the percentage of occurrence of kaolin pottery in the pottery assemblages of the six sites (Table 2). At Ambari, Garhdol and Paglatek I could observe higher amounts of kaolin than the rest of the sites. Though kaolin pottery has been reported in all the sites, but their amounts vary.

Table 2: Percentage of Occurrence of Kaolin Pottery

Sites	Percentage of Kaolin Pottery
Ambari	39.06%
Bhaitbari	14.11%
Garhdol	36.33%
Paglatek	29.97%
Rajpat	4.12%
Suryapahar	5.31%

Among the different varieties of kaolin fabric documented, the most common is the oxidised red slipped kaolin medium fabric and the rarest is the oxidised unslipped kaolin coarse fabric. At Suryapahar only the red slipped kaolin fabric variety has been documented. I recorded minuscule amounts of the slipped kaolin variety compared to the other two varieties, across the six sites. In fact I did not observe any slipped kaolin fabric at both Bhaitbari as well as Garhdol. At Garhdol and Paglatek very high percentage of red slipped kaolin fabric has been recorded. While at Ambari more or less equal percentages of unslipped and red slipped kaolin fabric has been recorded (Figure 7).

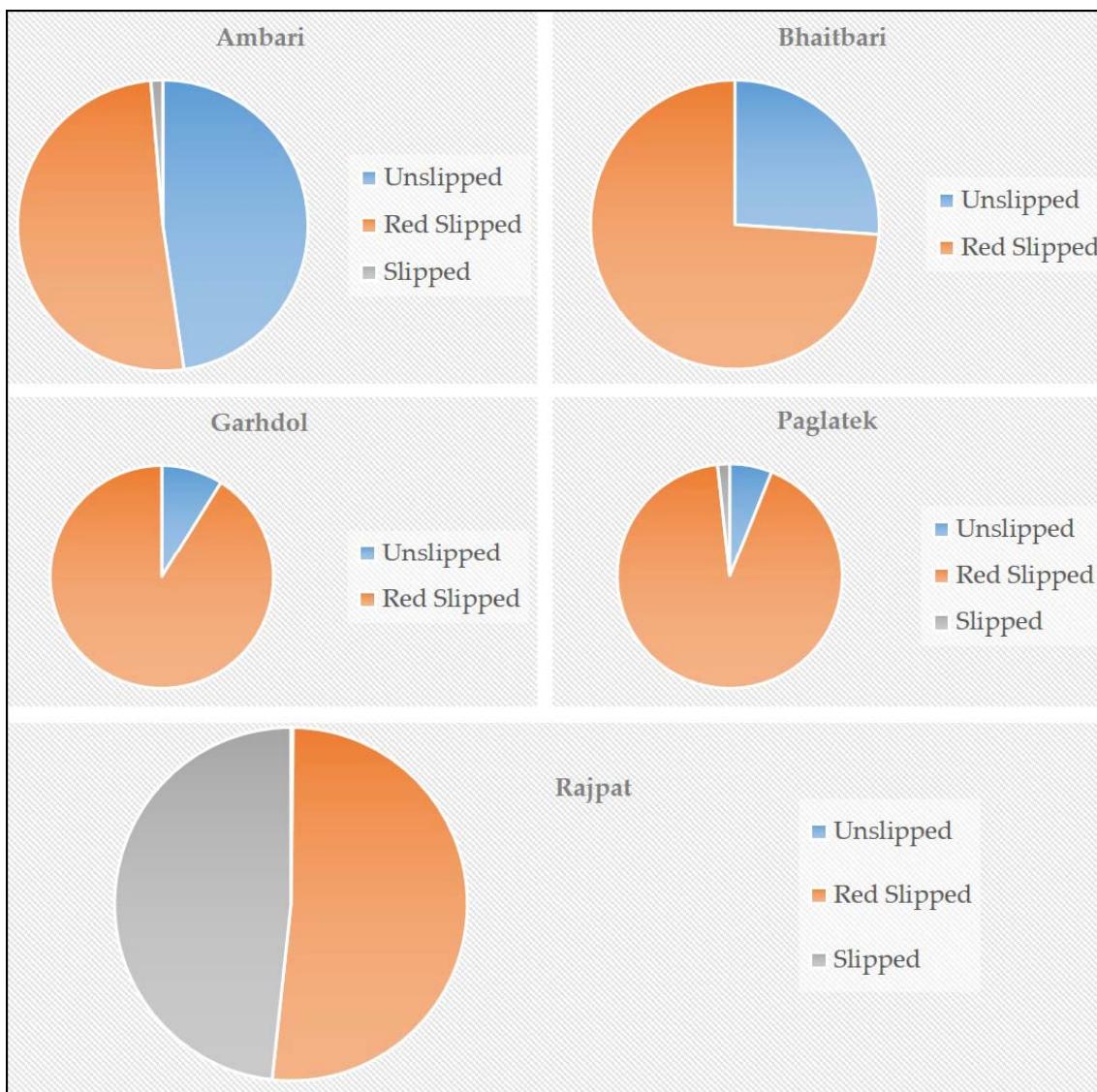


Figure 7: Kaolin Pottery from Various Sites

To conclude, I would like to point out that kaolin pottery is definitely a distinctive similarity observed across the Brahmaputra Valley pottery traditions of the 'Pre-Ahom' period. But, Dhavalikar's terminology of 'Ambari Ware' is problematic as within the

larger ambit of kaolin pottery there are fabric varieties as well as vessel forms. The micro aspects of kaolin pottery need to be looked at to understand the specificities of the pottery profile of each site of the valley. Also, calling it 'Ambari ware' is not fair since it has been reported across the valley. It is interesting to note the recording of very less quantities at Rajpat and Suryapahar. Interestingly, Suryapahar and Paglatek are sites located within 5 km radius of each other but the pattern of kaolin pottery distribution is very distinct. The availability of raw material of kaolin clay and distance from the source might have also played a role in the kaolin pottery consumption at all the sites. The site habitation character might have had a significant impact on the material culture of a particular site. For instance Suryapahar being a monastic settlement, where around 40 votive rock stupas of varying sizes along with monastic brick structures have been found, eludes a material culture distinct from the other settlements of the time. Rajpat and Bhaibari are geographically located slightly further from the region having natural deposits of kaolin clay in the Brahmaputra Valley. This in turn might have reduced the percentage of kaolin pottery within their respective material cultures.



Figure 8: Floral Patterns Recorded at Ambari

### Stamped Pottery

Stamped decorative patterns are made with stamps which replicates its own pattern on the surface of a sun dried unfired pot when stamped with it. In this method, stamping is done while the vessels still have enough moisture in it as to allow the decoration to be stamped. Stamped decoration types were recorded at the two sites of Ambari and Rajpat (Figure 8). At Ambari I observed a plethora of decorative patterns such as floral and diamond shaped ones. But, the common stamped decorations recorded both at Ambari and Rajpat are the floral decorations. The most common design pattern is translation symmetry (Figure 8). Translation is the simple serial repetition of an element or part along a straight line with no change in its orientation (Rice, 1987: 261). Sometimes there is more than one row of symmetrical decoration pattern (Figure 9). Also most stamped decorations are found on the shoulder and midsection of pot forms except in one case (Figure 10). In this single occurrence a rim of a pot was found adorned with a floral pattern around its orifice at Ambari (Figure 11).



Figure 9: Double Lines of Translation Symmetry



Figure 10: Diamond Pattern on the Shoulder



**Figure 11: Floral Pattern on the Orifice**

Most pottery studies record the decorative patterns under descriptive categories created usually after the style or technique used. This fails to document the nuances in the decoration patterns which can indicate variation in the techniques used across space and time. To glean out micro details from the decorated pottery, one needs to employ the principle of systematic pottery classification. I have introduced a new method of classification for the decorative patterns by giving the individual decorations a code rather than just a descriptive term. So within the floral category of decorations I observed four varieties: F1, F2, F3 and F4. I have recorded three commonly occurring stamped pottery decorations at both Ambari and Rajpat (Table 3). These three decorations are variations of floral pattern and they are F1, F2 and F3.

**Table 3: Floral Stamped Decoration Sherd Counts**

Decoration Type	Ambari	Rajpat
F1	4	3
F2	10	2
F3	1	3

### **Green Glazed Dish Forms**

The green glazed ware (Figure 12) looks like a deep dish/shallow bowl form with a wide flaring rim and a ring base. The glaze could be observed on the inside of the vessel not on the outside. The glaze was applied on a uniform oxidised surface which

is very fine. At Ambari the green glazed pot sherds have been recorded in layers 3, 4 and 5 which is roughly dated to 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Clearly, the peak in distribution is recorded in layer 4, roughly the 11<sup>th</sup>-12th centuries CE. Two such sherds have also been recorded at Paglatek belonging to the same period. The existence of such non local potteries in the material culture of this region points towards the networks and linkages that existed between the Brahmaputra Valley and the Arab world. This pottery is considered a significant marker of Indo-Arab trade routes and it was manufactured in the Arabian region.



Figure 12: Green Glazed Sherds

Till now I was pointing out the threads of commonality and similarity that I observed within the pottery traditions of 'Pre-Ahom' Brahmaputra Valley. Now I would like to throw light on the 'distinctiveness' observed within the pottery traditions in the sites of my present study. I observed a few non local potteries at Ambari among the pottery assemblage which requires an adequate discussion to understand the networks and connections of Ambari in the early medieval period. The three types of non-local potteries are roulelled pottery, celadon pottery and mica glazed pottery. They do not seem to have local origin.

Excavators at Ambari like claiming the roulelled ware as of Roman origin which is questionable though. The studies of Vimala Begley (1988) and Gogte (1997, 2002) have laid emphasis on the dissipation of this technology from the Roman world but its production was probably local in character. Thus, there was wide scale production of roulelled pottery in south Asia which continued being produced till much later. In case of the roulelled pottery at Ambari (Figure 13a) it has been documented in layers 1, 2, 4 and 5 which is roughly 10<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. The roulelled ware sherds are oxidised finely slipped very fine fabric.



Figure 13: a - Roulelled Potsherds and b - Celadon Sherds

The celadon ware sherds found at Ambari are of very fine character (Figure 13b). The four sherds of celadon ware found at Ambari are documented in layer 1 which is roughly dated to 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. The fourth non local pottery type is the mica glazed potsherds (Figure 14) found at Ambari. It has been reported in layers 4 and 5 which roughly are dated to 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. The mica glazed pot sherds have a golden and glittery surface. Usually, during pottery classification one comes across pot sherds that have a high presence of mica particles. But, in this particular case the presence of mica in the pot sherds is not an accidental presence but a deliberate presence. The mica particles seem to have been mixed in high concentration in fine clay water mixture. This mixture was applied as wash on top of the sun dried pots and then dried and subsequently fired. After firing the mica particles present on the surface reflected a golden sheen.



**Figure 14: Mica Glazed Sherds**

Another distinctive feature observed at Ambari was the wide variety of decorated pottery not seen in any other site. They chiefly occur with three fabric types: oxidised unslipped medium fabric, oxidised unslipped kaolin medium fabric and oxidised red slipped kaolin medium fabric. At Ambari this fabric is mostly found with decorated pottery. Stamping or Incising on this fabric rendered a bichrome effect as it penetrated the red clay slip and revealed the kaolin surface after firing. This might explain its popularity among the potters for making decorated pottery with.

**Table 4: Percentage of Occurrence of Oxidised and Reduced Potteries**

Sites	Oxidised	Reduced
Ambari	96.28%	3.01%
Garhdol	92.66%	7.33%
Paglatek	94.88%	5.11%
Rajpat	29.91%	70.08%
Suryapahar	99.46%	0.53%

There is a clear divide in the preference for oxidised and reduced pottery fabrics (Table 4). Rajpat exhibits a higher concentration of reduced potsherds compared to the other 6 sites. Thus we can infer that, technology wise, oxidizing technique of firing pottery was prevalent at the other sites while at Rajpat the technique of reduction firing of pottery was preferred. At Bhatibari only oxidised pot sherds have been recorded with no trace of reduced pot sherds.

I recorded at all the sites the four vessel forms: Pot, Jar, Bowl and Dish with the only exception of Rajpat. At Rajpat I did not observe any dish forms. At Ambari, Garhdol and Rajpat highest sherd counts I recorded in the category of pot forms. At Bhaibari and Paglatek pot and bowl forms records more or less equal percentage of occurrence. At all the sites dish and jar forms record very less percentage of occurrence except at Suryapahar. At Suryapahar bowl forms have recorded higher sherd counts than the rest. Also the dish forms have recorded much higher percentage of occurrences than the other sites (Table 5).

**Table 5: Percentages of Occurrences of all Pottery Forms**

Sites	Pots	Bowls	Jars	Dishes
Ambari	54.28%	36.78%	5.45%	3.51%
Bhaibari	46.98%	42.16%	4.81%	6.02%
Garhdol	69.82%	22.51%	4.73%	2.93%
Paglatek	49.34%	43.42%	3.28%	3.94%
Rajpat	64.08%	35.21%	0.70%	0%
Suryapahar	24.32%	45.94%	8.1%	21.62%

## Discussion

I have discussed above certain patterns observed during my systematic pottery classification study of the six sites: Ambari, Bhaibari, Garhdol, Paglatek, Rajpat and Suryapahar. I attempted three issues primarily; firstly, I have attempted a critique of the preexisting pottery studies especially the shortcomings in their methodologies. In turn I have introduced the concept of multiple attribute based pottery study in the region of my study. Most of the existing studies either try to establish continuity in the pottery tradition of Brahmaputra valley from the prehistoric times till the present times; or they attempt to show how the pottery tradition of this region is an extension of the Gangetic Valley or South East Asian tradition. Thus, the major thrust here is to search for the origins and diffusion of the pottery traditions based on the culture historical paradigm of study. In these studies there is no scope for understanding the local processes that contribute in shaping the region.

Secondly, I have attempted a critique of the predominant cultural-historical paradigm of studies within archaeology. In my comparative study of pottery traditions I have discussed the overall 'similarities' and the localized 'distinctiveness' that exists within the pottery profiles of these sites. Lastly, it has been intended to bring the much neglected aspect of early medieval period of Brahmaputra Valley into focus through the use of the archaeology. I have highlighted the lacunae within the conventional mode of historical studies and the need to explore other sources and methods of engaging with the past.

## Conclusion

The historically contiguous fluvial zone of the Brahmaputra Valley in the early medieval period seems to exhibit a very dynamic socio-economic environment with

networks and linkages at the micro as well as macro level. My study is an attempt to divert the traditional focus from the 'political' and move 'beyond the kings and brahmanas' through study of a common everyday item such as pottery. The pottery traditions exhibit connections that led to dispersal of ideas/knowledge related to crafts such as pottery in the early medieval Brahmaputra Valley within the sites of the region and with other regions of the world as well. The argument of 'paucity of sources' given by historians needs to be reexamined in the light of new researches done within archaeology. Archaeology can provide new insights into the material as well as social life of the early medieval Brahmaputra Valley.

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