



Preliminary Archaeological Survey in the Salangthel Hill in Manipur, India

RESEARCH PAPER

OINAM PREMCHAND SINGH 

]u[ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

An archaeological survey was conducted in the Salangthel Hill, in Manipur (India), in 2019 to assess the nature of material records. The survey documented megaliths and engraved marks on stones such as footprints, female genital organs, and depressed marks, some of which were previously reported but also include documentation of unreported features such as a rock pool. The survey reveals that three ethnic communities settled near the vicinity assert their claims to these stone monuments as legacies of their ancestors. It shows that several stone monuments were destroyed recently due to ethnic tension and construction activities, particularly road cutting and house building. These new findings will be of interest to archaeologists working in the region and policymakers in general.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Oinam Premchand Singh

Jawaharlal Nehru University,
New Delhi, IN

oinampremchandsingh@gmail.com

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Singh, OP. 2021. Preliminary Archaeological Survey in the Salangthel Hill in Manipur, India. *Ancient Asia*, 12: 17, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/aa.220>

A preliminary archaeological survey was conducted from April 10–25, 2019, in the Salangthel Hill in Manipur. The survey aimed to assess the nature of the archaeological remains recorded by previous surveys and examine the site changes. This is particularly important because this area has never been re-surveyed for more than 25 years. The last survey was that of Potsangbam Binodini Devi (1993). Therefore, a lot more was expected to have changed regarding how well archaeological features and sites are adapting and surviving, especially considering the recent development activities of road constructions and settlement expansions in the area in the last two decades. The survey also aimed to generate a reproducible dataset of the archaeological features and sites and oral histories of different ethnic communities to shed new insights on the material remains.

STUDY AREA

The survey in the Salangthel Hill was broadly confined within 24°23'09.33" E to 24°31'40.35" E and 93°31'40.05" N to 93°42'23.73" N. An area of approximately 5 × 5 kilometres comprised the study area. This area formed a portion of the Thangning range located in the Churachandpur District in Manipur (*Figure 1*). The study area is a rugged hill landscape bounded by the contiguous hill ranges in the three cardinal directions: north, west, and south. Except in the dry season (i.e., February–April), the area is impenetrable to foot walking due to thick vegetation. Local informants claim that wild animals such as deer, wild boars, etc., are not uncommon. Two hamlets are located on the hill slope, within the confine of the survey area, but more compact and larger village settlements are only located in the adjoining plain on the east.

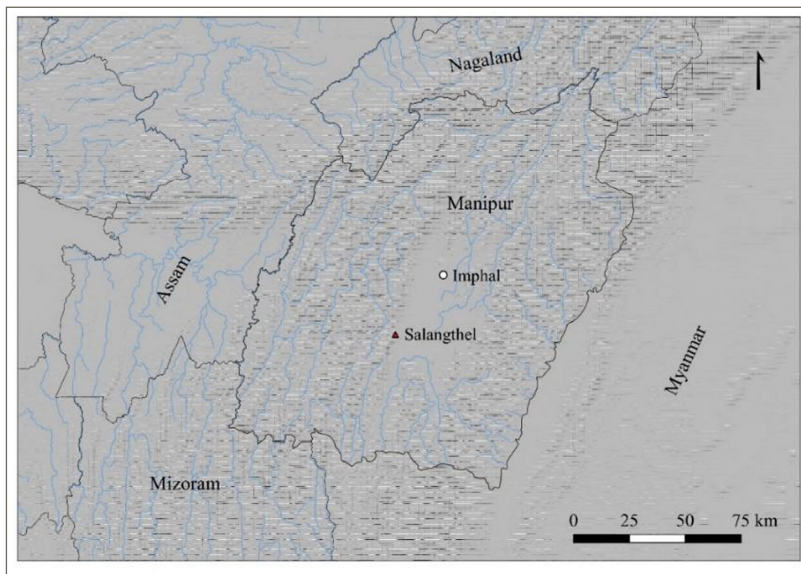


Figure 1 Study area.

PREVIOUS SURVEYS

The megalith in the Salangthel Hill was first discovered in 1983 by O.K. Singh of the Department of State Archaeology Manipur (IAR 1983–84: 59). The Mutua Museum Group, spearheaded by Mutua Bahadur, subsequently reported the engraved footprints marks on the stone (Mutua Museum 1984: 17). The first detailed survey was carried out in 1989 by R.K. Tamphasana Devi, who happened to be a part of the Mutua Museum Group that previously surveyed the area. She documented 106 stone monuments of which 8 stones with engraved sex symbols (female genital) with additional 4 stone circles and 1 semi rectangle, 1 stone seat and engraved marks of headhunting symbols, footprints, counting symbols (small parallel lines) on stones (Devi 1989: 5–15). Later, P. Binodini Devi (1993: 117–129) surveyed the area by dividing it into 15 localities. She claim to have documented 5 alignments (or row of monoliths containing 40 menhirs), 1 cairn, 1 avenue (with more than two rows of monolith alignments containing 15 monoliths and 2 fallen monoliths), 24 Menhirs and 8 fallen menhirs, 13 horizontal flat stones, 13 pairs of engraved footprint marks, 1 female genital organ, and counting symbols (small parallel lines). She claims that these features were “erected by some ancient inhabitants”

(Devi 1993: 116). Though these previous works have contributed to understanding the nature of archaeological records, reassessing them using the latest survey tools was expected to generate a far more reproducible dataset and bring to light several undocumented features and site changes. Further, an emphasis on the oral histories of local communities would shed further insight into archaeological records.

SURVEY METHODS

Field-walking was done intensively on the hilltop areas and extensively in areas accessible to foot walking, considering the local guides' suggestions and feasibilities (**Figure 2**). Field-walking was done along with the local guides. An important aspect of the survey was the interviews of the locals settled in and around the Salangthel Hills. Interviews of the Thadou Kuki community settled at Tuikong and Geljang hamlets; Meitei community settled at Moirang and Thapnapokpi, and Kabui Naga at Khojai was conducted (**Figure 3**). This was to garner local participation in field walking and to understand their knowledge which was expected to help locate potential features and sites. The oral histories of these local communities were gathered before and after field walking for further insights and discussions. The Manipuri or Meiteilon language – the *lingua franca* language in Manipur – was used for the interviews because it was learnt these communities are lucid speakers of this language. They settled nearby and used it as a common language in day to day transactions and interactions amongst them. As the author is a native speaker of this language, it was chosen as a medium for the interviews rather than relying on the local interpreters.



Figure 2 Thick vegetation in the survey area.



Figure 3 Interview at the Geljang hamlet.

The survey documented 122 megaliths, 1 rock pool, 2 destroyed megalith sites, 7 rock engravings, and oral histories of the local communities.

MEGALITHS

i) Menhir

The survey documented a total of 67 menhirs (see supplemental file for GPS locations and detailed shapes and sizes of each stone monument). All the menhirs documented by the survey are located near footpaths or roads (*Figures 4 and 5*). Local informants claim that motorable roads over the footpaths were built in the recent period. They were observed to be associated with stone slabs and located a few meters away from the roadside and footpath on the hilltop. Except for isolated menhirs (e.g. SAL 15 and 16), the recorded menhirs aligned north-south and east-west directions. Nearly half of the documented menhirs ($n = 30$) are oriented north-south and others ($n = 35$) in east-west. However, the significance of this is unclear, but it shows that they were built orienting in some specific directions. The bulk of the menhirs were observed erect, but few were also in slightly tilted positions. And two menhirs were also recorded in fallen conditions. What caused these stones to fall is unknown. Observation of the fallen menhirs reveals that they were not buried deep into the ground and that about one-third of the body length was buried. Each of them is unique in its structural form because no two have the size and shape. Upon inspection of the stone surfaces, erosion mark on the outer exposed surfaces was a common attribute. Besides, the stone surfaces were observed to be dark and partially covered with small plants. These attributes give the impression that these stones were exposed to the weather for a long time and therefore were no recent construction but erected a long time back.



Figure 4 Megaliths.

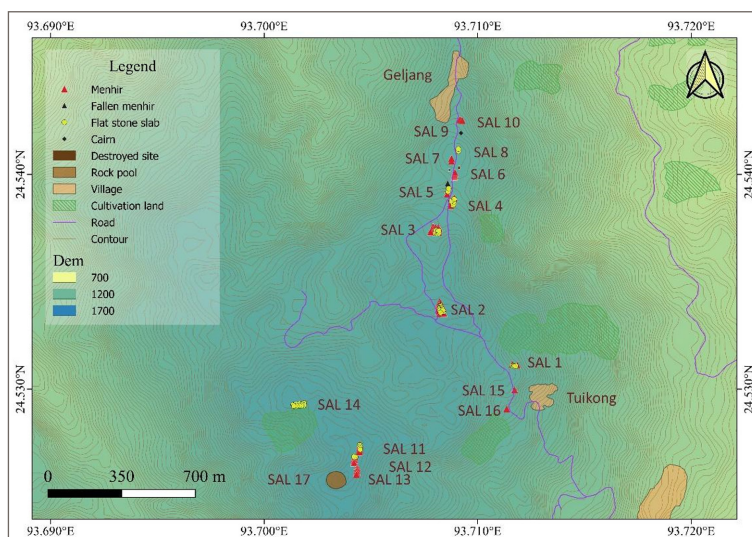


Figure 5 The survey area and the archaeological features (10 meters contour intervals).

ii) Flat stone slab

Local informants, however, claim that only some of the documented stone slabs are burial stones. But it was difficult to identify which stone slabs are burial stones by simple observation in the field. The survey recorded a total of 51 stone slabs (see supplemental file for GPS locations and details of their shapes and sizes). The majority of them were located close to areas where menhirs were also located (*Figure 5*), except for a few isolated stone slabs (e.g. SAL 8 and 14). The shape of the recorded slabs is slightly rectangular. The stone surfaces of the stones have weathering marks indicating their long period of exposure into the atmosphere. This may be because recorded stone slabs were covered with vegetation and largely unexposed to the weather. A majority of them ($n = 37$) were recorded in partially buried conditions, making it impossible to measure their thickness precisely (see *Figure 6*). However, what material remains beneath these stone slabs are difficult to suggest without excavations.

Singh
Ancient Asia
DOI: 10.5334/aa.220

5



Figure 6 Flat stone slab (partially buried).

iii) Cairn

A cluster of small stones was observed to be piling up in the survey area. It was recorded as cairn by the survey. The pile of the stone was observed to have been at this location for a long time. The stone surfaces show weathering and a long period of exposure to the environment. The extent of this site (SAL 9) is 3×4 meters (*Figure 7*).



Figure 7 Cairn.

The survey documented four pairs of footprints marks and 1 genital organ, and 3 depressed marks on the stones.

i) Footprints

Four pairs of footprints (left and right footprints) were documented on a partially buried flat stone slab (designated stone no: 2K). It was observed that the footprints were engraved using sharp pointed tools as neat cut marks on the stone suggests (*Figure 8*). Two of the documented ones are relatively broader on the forefoot with bigger toes (*Figure 8A* (a and b)), whereas the other two have smaller toes (*Figure 8A* (c and d)). These inferences suggest male and female footprints.

ii) Female genital organs

Another recorded engraved feature is the female genitalia – clearly depicting external anatomy of female genitalia such as *labia majora*, *labia minora*, and *vaginal orifice* - on a naturally occurring boulder (*Figure 8B*). It measures 29 × 13 cm. This was confirmed by the locals as a link to their oral histories, thereby ensuring its historicity. It was observed to be an old engraved mark.

iii) Depressed marks

A total of three circular depressed marks were recorded on a naturally occurring stone recorded at the rock pool site (*Figure 8C*). The largest depressed marks (*Figure 8C1*) measures approximately 23 cm in diameter, the second measures 14 cm (*Figure 8C2*), and the third one measures 19 cm, respectively (*Figure 8C3*). The symbolism of these marks, however, remains unclear. That said, simple observation of their shapes and finely polished nature suggest not of natural depressions. They are likely to have been used as locations for sharpening metal objects - probably spearheads and spearhead edges - as the smooth depressed marks suggest polishing activities.

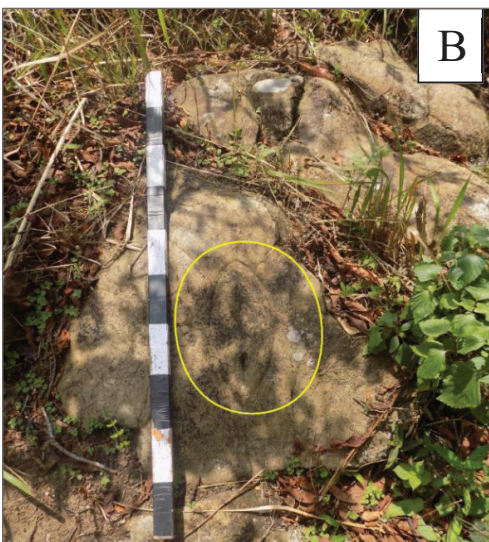
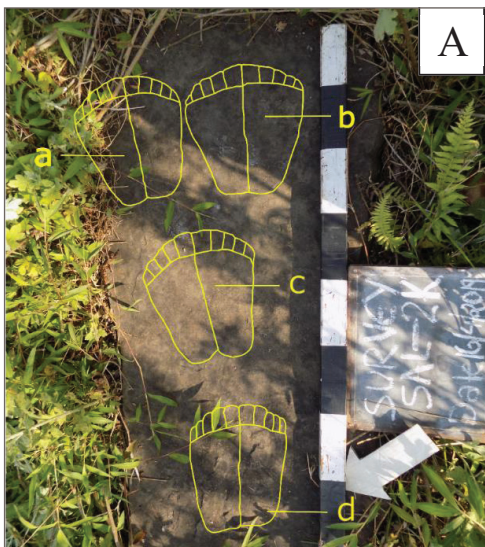
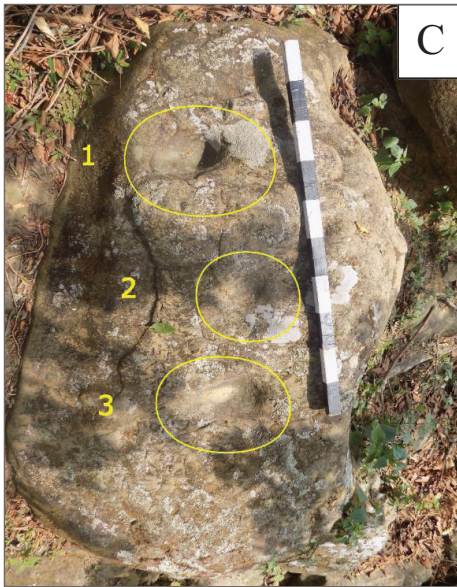


Figure 8 A, footprints; **B**, female genital; **C**, depressed marks.



ROCK POOL

The survey recorded a circular area rock pool (or SAL 17) measuring approximately 27 meters in diameter (*Figure 9*). It is an exposed portion of the sandstone layer on the southern hilltop. The stone type recorded in this site is sandstone, similar to the stone type for all the recorded megaliths. At this site, exposed rectangular stone blocks are found as naturally occurring stones, requiring little to no effort to quarry them into desired stone shapes. Since no other stone source was observed in the area, this rock pool would be the stone source and the quarry site in the past. Because transportation of heavy stone blocks up from the downhill for building megaliths would be unlikely considering its hill terrain landscape.

DESTROYED SITES

The survey documented two destroyed sites where megalith pieces were observed piling up near the roadside (*Figure 10*). Therefore, the impression was that many menhirs would have been already destroyed by the time of the survey. The local informant claims three factors that lead to the rapid destruction of megaliths in the surveyed area.



Figure 9 Rock pool.

i) Naga-Kuki clash of the 1990s

It was informed that a large number of menhirs were destroyed during the Naga-Kuki conflict in the 1990s in Manipur. It is worth noting that the Naga-Kuki clash (1992–1997) is considered as

one of the widespread and lengthiest ethnic clashes in northeast India, an ethnic conflict that was largely centred in the state of Manipur but was also extended to the neighbouring states of Nagaland and Assam. It led to the loss of several thousand lives, destruction of homes and villages and displacement of several thousand people on both sides of the two communities (for more, see Haokip 2013; Vashum 2000).

When the ethnic clash erupted in the early 1990s, locals claim it was extended across the study area because Thadou Kuki and Kabui Naga villages settled there. Nonetheless, tensions over the land claim in the Salangthel Hill, particularly between these two local communities, existed before the clash, according to the local informants. The Kabui Naga claims that their ancestors built these stone monuments in the Salangthel Hill; and, therefore, represented markers of their territorial land, although the others currently inhabit the land. To quote their remarks:

“Our ancestors built these stone monuments. They (Kuki) know too that these stone monuments and land belong to our forefathers, and they are emigrants in this area recently. But now they are using the land and started to claim the land as theirs. They are now practising shifting cultivation in our ancestral land and, thus, destroyed many stone monuments. We feel that it is not worth arguing for land now because it will create more tension with our neighbouring villages.”

The Thadou Kuki also makes a similar justification. Informant claim that:

“A large number of stone monuments were destroyed during the recent Naga-Kuki conflicts. They (Nagas) came at night and destroyed the stone monuments. We did not destroy the stone structures because our ancestors built them. We found many destroyed stone structures each time they came to the area during the conflict. After the Naga Kuki conflict, they came in groups in Cars and SUV cars on a specific day every year to this area to see the stone monuments. We do not like their visits, but we also did not restrict them from visiting this area. It appears to us that they are still thinking about these stone monuments and land. Such kind of visits, we fear, has the potential to escalate into conflict in future.”

Both the communities allege one another for destroying the megaliths before, during and after the clash. Although it is unclear why megaliths became easy targets during the conflict, informants suggest that since these material records are being claimed as cultural legacies by the villages settled around, destroying them meant erasing the tangible evidence of the land claim.

ii) Road Constructions

Local claims that the road construction activities carried out in the last decade to bring better connectivity between the Tuikong and Geljang hamlets and adjoining plain and hill areas resulted in the demolition of many megaliths. To make way for a larger motorable road over the narrow early hill footpath, megaliths located near the early footpaths were destroyed, and destroyed megaliths were used for laying house foundations. But how many stones were destroyed in the process is unclear, but informants claim that a good number of the stone monuments were destroyed.

iii) Miscellaneous

Local claims that broken pieces of the stone monuments were used to lay house foundations by some households who did not want to invest money in buying the stones from the stone quarry because transportation charges of stones on trucks are unusually very high as their settlements are located on the hilltop. Therefore, some households resorted to using early destroyed pieces of the stones, and in many cases, new stones were destroyed to be used for house building. This explains why the survey could not document all the destroyed megalith structures used for house building by the locals. Besides, shifting cultivation is not, and forest fires for woodcutting activities were not uncommon in this area. This would be another contributing factor to the destruction of the archaeological records. Besides, this area is also visited sporadically by the Meitei people, especially teenagers and youths. In a few past instances, some teenagers got drunk and behaved wild on the hilltop by kicking or hitting the stone monuments with smaller stones or woods or anything they could hold on with their hands. Such activities also contributed (if not all) to the destruction of megaliths in the area.



Figure 10 Destroyed megaliths. Note the one meter scale in the photo.

ORAL HISTORIES

Three ethnic communities: Thadou Kuki, Meitei, and Kabui Naga, claim the legacy of these recorded materials by connecting them to their respective oral histories.

i) Thadou Kuki

The Thadou Kuki community settled at the Tuikong Hamlet and the Geljang suggests that whatever material remains that survived in the survey area are the legacy of Galngngam, who, according to their oral history, came to the Salangthel Hill while gallivanting across the hills. Upon his arrival in the Salangthel Hill, he met a beautiful woman, namely Suvikeshu and fell for her. He attempted to impress her with his extraordinary strength and magical power by constructing megaliths which no other males could. In so doing, he won her heart; and married her only to betray later. Suvikeshu, in return, removed all of her husband's magical abilities and killed him. According to oral history, the documented genital organs on the stone (*Figure 8B*) are attributed to Suvikeshu's genital organs and the footprints to Galngangam and Suvikeshu.

ii) Meitei

The Meitei community settled in the village of Thapnapokpi, and a small town called Moirang link the stone monuments to the love story of Khamba and Thoibi: Khamba, a poor man (but a legitimate heir to the throne), and Thoibi, the daughter of the king. Khamba was raised in the Salangthel Hill by his maternal father, Kabui Salang Maiba, the famous physician. According to this story, he would be allowed to descend to the valley only when he showed his father his strength and vigour to meet his adversaries in the valley. To prove this, he uplifted stones from the stream and river basin down the hill and brought them up on the hilltop and erected them (for more Singh 2015). Khamba, therefore, builds all the stone monuments located there. He then stayed in the valley and got entangled in love with the daughter of the king, Thoibi. The footprints and other engraved marks on the stones are linked to the stated oral history. Every year, Meitei ritual specialists (*Maiba* and *Maibi*) and laymen would visit this place on a few specific days to perform rituals and see the stone monuments located in the Salangthel Hill.

iii) Kabui Naga

The Kabui Naga of the Khojai village, on the contrary, tell a different story. According to them, the stones were transformed from people who attended a marriage ceremony. Traditionally, marriage parties are strictly forbidden to halt a night on the return way from the bride to the bridegroom's house right after the marriage as far as the early tradition of the Kabui Nagas is concerned.

The oral history has it that once upon a time, there was a marriage between two villages: the bride (a pregnant woman) from a village in the Thangjing Hill, and the groom from a village in the Laimaton Hill. After the marriage, both the parties, on their way back to the groom's house, had to spend a night at the Salangthel Hill as it was already nightfall time. According to this story, all those who spent a night at the Salangthel Hill got transformed into stone monuments (megaliths) which remain until today.

The survey reveals that many megaliths and archaeological features were destroyed in the recent period due to the ethnic tension and simmering contesting claim over the land among the local communities accentuated by the construction activities such as road building and other local activities in the area. Some of the features reported by previous surveyors are no longer visible on the landscape and could not be documented by the survey. Therefore, immediate institutional support is needed for preservation work. This could be accomplished at the institutional level by declaring the area a heritage site by the State Archaeology Department of Manipur. Besides, awareness programs with institutional support could be organised to impart the value of their heritage at the local level to ensure better preservation.

The survey also reveals that three ethnic communities claim the stone monuments as material records of their forefathers based on their oral narratives. Therefore, a detailed engagement with the oral histories of the three communities will shed more light on how the same material records are linked to their local identities and claim over the land. While surveying the area, it was informed that some kilometres away to the west and east on the hilly terrain are located several unexplored megaliths. Therefore, more extensive future surveys and in-depth inquiry on the oral history of the communities hold the key to revealing insights on archaeological features in the Salangthel Hills.

ADDITIONAL FILES

The additional files for this article can be found as follows:

- **Supplementary file 1.** Dataset. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/aa.220.s1>
- **Supplementary file 2.** Photos. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/aa.220.s2>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Dr Supriya Varma for her encouragement, support, and academic guidance. I would also like to thank my friend, Amarjeet Khwairakpam, who helped me as a survey team member. I am grateful to the people of the Tuikong and Geljang hamlets for cooperating in the survey. I thank my family members for bearing the costs of the survey. Lastly, I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Oinam Premchand Singh  orcid.org/0000-0001-6726-6899
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, IN

REFERENCES

- Devi, PB.** 1993. *Studies on the Megalithic remains of Manipur* (Unpublished PhD Thesis). Gauhati University.
- Devi, RK.** 1989. *Megalithic Monuments of Salangthel, Manipur*. Imphal: Mutua Museum.
- Haokip, T.** 2013. The Kuki-Naga Conflict in the Light of Recent Publications. *South Asia Research*, 33(1): 77–87. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728013475545>
- Indian Archaeology 1983–84: A Review*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India. p. 59.
- Mutua, M.** 1984. *Manipuri Rock Carvings and Inscriptions, Bulletin 4*. Imphal: Mutua Museum.
- Singh, LR.** 2015. *Manglamchatki Puyagi Wari*. Imphal: Kh. Sadashiva Singh for Manipuri Sahitya Parishad.
- Vashum, R.** 2000. *Nagas Right to Self Determination: An Anthropological-Historical Perspective*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Singh, OP. 2021. Preliminary Archaeological Survey in the Salangthel Hill in Manipur, India. *Ancient Asia*, 12: 17, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/aa.220>

Published: 28 September 2021

COPYRIGHT:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Ancient Asia is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.