

RESEARCH PAPER

The Sculptures of Ambari in Assam—A Discussion on Their Stylistic Features and Assessing Their Local Idioms

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The region of Guwahati that has been identified with the ancient city of Pragjyotishapura has a rich cultural heritage primarily in the form of material remains. The city, being adorned with a large number of temples provides testimony of the role of patronage in facilitating the establishment of these religious establishments. The temples are adorned with sculptures that throw valuable light on the nature of prevalent religious beliefs. In analysing the significance of the material culture towards understanding the history of the region, mostly it is associated with accidental discoveries. The Ambari archaeological site, located in the heart of Guwahati provides rich evidence of finds in the form of terracotta objects, pottery and sculptures. The significance of the site was the outcome an accidental discovery while the construction of the building of the Reserve bank of India was being undertaken. This paper is an attempt to highlight the sculptures recovered from the Ambari archaeological site, followed by a discussion on the style and iconographic aspects of the sculptures as well as tracing their local characteristics.

Keywords: Ambari; Style; Sculpture; Local; Iconography

Introduction

The modern city of Guwahati stands on the bank of the river Brahmaputra. A large number of archaeological remains in the form of temples, sculptures, pottery, inscriptions, coins, etc. has been found from this region which indicates influence of different art forms as well as trade links. The rich material culture from Guwahati not only demonstrates the nature of religious beliefs that were prevalent but also provide valuable insights towards understanding the social, political and economic aspects. The paucity of indigenous literary sources prior to the 13th century CE towards reconstructing the history of early Assam highlights the significance of material remains. In this context, the Ambari archaeological site was an accidental discovery. While the process of digging trenches for the construction of the Reserve Bank of India was being undertaken in the year 1967, certain objects were unearthed among which the remains of pottery and sculptures predominated. These finds established the antiquity of the area. The sculptures fall within the time framework of 10th–12th century and 13th–14th century CE respectively. The sculptures that primarily constitute the deities of the Brahmanical pantheon are those of Visnu, Surya and Mahishamardini Durga along with those of Ganga, Yamuna, Muni (ascetic), Manasa, Nataraja, Chandanayika, lingas and yoni-pithas. This paper is an attempt to discuss the stylistic features of the sculptures and understanding the local idioms evident in them.

A Brief Overview of the Ambari Excavations

The Ambari archaeological site was an accidental discovery when the process of digging trenches for the construction of the Reserve Bank of India premise was being undertaken. The significance of the site came to be established in the year 1967 when artefacts in the form of sculptures and pottery were found. In the light of the discoveries made, the Anthropology Department of Gauhati University in collaboration with the Directorate of Museums and Archaeology began the excavation work of the site in the year 1969 (Dutta: 2006: 01). The excavation of 1969 exposed five layers containing sculptures, brick fragments and pottery (Indian Archaeology, A Review: 1968–69: 7). From the second layer were unearthed stone sculptures of Visnu, Surya, Mahishamardini Durga, linga and yoni-pithas. Excavations which were resumed in the year 1970 confined deep digging to only two trenches even though twelve trenches were initially taken up for excavation (Indian Archaeology, A Review: 1970–71: 10). Pottery, terracotta objects and stone sculptures were the noteworthy finds. Miniature icons of Visnu, Surya and Durga were found along with lingas and yoni-pithas. Among the terracotta finds, the image of a dancing girl is significant marked by fine modelling (**Figure 1**). Being ornamented with armlets and bracelets, the figure has been dubbed as Ambari Urvashi. Other noteworthy terracotta finds include female headdress (**Figure 2**), Ganesa medallion with the existence of lotus petals on its outer surface, (**Figure 3**) etc. (Das: 2007: 424–425). The Ambari archaeological site was excavated for nine seasons. In the subsequent excavations conducted, the finds were simi-



Figure 1: Dancing Figure of Kaolin clay, Ambari, 8th–9th century CE.



Figure 3: Ganeśa Medallion, Ambari 8th–9th century CE.



Figure 2: Decorated Female Headdress, Ambari 8th–9th century CE.

lar in nature in the form of pottery, blocks of stone and sculptures. The excavation conducted in the year 2002–2003 revealed the existence of brick built clusters that probably denoted residential quarters (Indian Archaeology, A Review: 2002–2003: 96). The excavation of 2008–2009 was conducted under the supervision of S.K Manjul, the then Superintending Archaeologist of Guwahati Circle, Archaeological Survey of India and H.N Dutta, formerly Director, Directorate of Archaeology, Assam. The most significant discovery of the excavation was a stepwell (Dutta: 2012: 96). Brick steps were also recovered from the site, bearing similarity with the Sunga- Kusana

period (Assam Archaeology, A Review: 2005–2010: 48). The coming to light of different layers in the course of the excavations denotes the habitation of the site in different phases.

The Style of the Ambari Sculptures

In analysing the stylistic features of the Ambari sculptures, it needs to be mentioned that both miniature as well as bigger icons have been recovered from the site. While the former sculptures are datable to the 10th–12th century CE, the latter belong to the 13th–14th century CE. Art trends during this time demonstrated regional tendencies following the decline of the Gupta Empire. The emergence of different regional schools of art thus came to be firmly established by the second half of the 8th century CE. In this context, mention may be made of the Palas who succeeded in establishing their rule over the regions of Bengal and Bihar. In Bengal, they were followed by the Senas and ultimately they were replaced by the Turko-Afghan rulers in the beginning of the 13th century CE. Similarly, in the context of the developments in ancient Assam, the Varmanas were replaced by the Salastambhas and in the second half of the 10th century CE the Palas of Assam succeeded to the throne under Brahmapala. The evolution of these regional tendencies which emerged gradually and was firmly established, led to the growth of regional schools of art (Saraswati: 1975: 461). Art and sculptural remains carved during this period assumes a sense of mechanical repetition in which the style becomes formal and consequently artificial. An increase in stylisation is moreover visible and the sensitive modelling of

Gupta art tradition is followed by heaviness in form with lack of spiritual expression. A 'brooding heaviness' thus characterises the art form of the early medieval period (Saraswati: 1971: 154).

The coming into power of the Palas of Bengal and Bihar provided a great impetus to the art of Eastern India as well. This new school of art with a lingering of Gupta traits in the form of slender body and emotional sensuousness lasted till the end of the 12th century CE till the Muhammedan invasions penetrated into Bengal, Bihar and Assam (Banerji: 1981: 18–20). The art form of the 9th century CE shows a trend towards soft fleshiness and definite outlines with tender facial expression and half-closed eyes (Majumdar: 1994: 647). However, with the influence of Pala rule of Bengal, an evolutionary growth of the stele is witnessed. The stone sculptures of the Pala period are generally carved out of black basalt, which is either coarse or fine grained (Banerji: 1981: 3). The images all possess a stele and are in high relief. As early as the 8th century CE, the stele comes to assume its full shape with its upper end somewhat pointed or rounded. The central figure forms a prominent part of the stele with attendant or accompanying figures surrounding the main figure. The stele was at the beginning rounded at the top which gradually assumes the shape of being slightly pointed on the top. The stele moreover is supported by a pedestal which as a rule had several *rathas* or projections. The carving of the images on the stele conforming to the East Indian Art style are characterised by it being richly decorated and the decoration extending all over its surface. Attention is paid towards carving the minute details of the images in terms of their ornaments, the facial features such as crossed eyebrows, ridged lips, etc. During the first half of the 9th century CE, the stele is mostly plain and devoid of any elaborate decoration. It exhibited only a rope like design that functioned as a border surrounding the central figure. Another significant feature of the sculptures of the 9th century CE is the *atibhanga* posture in which the weight of the body is placed on one side and the knees are slightly bent in a relaxed mode. In terms of the bodily features of the sculptures, no stiffness is apparent (Dutta: 1991: 77). From the 10th century onwards, jewellery as well as background decoration begins to increase. The facial expression of the sculptures represents emotions of sensuousness with the figures being more heightened in relief. A vigorous and robust body form with more slenderness in the carving of the body is also evident (Saraswati: 1975: 189). The modelling of the figures moreover assumes the character of stiffness and rigidity. The stele being ornamented continues during this period. The top of the stele is occupied by the *kirtimukha* and flanked by *vidyadharas* on either side (Stoler: 1994: 228).

A significant change is seen towards the beginning of the 11th century CE when the heaviness in body form of the figures is followed by a preference being given to thin waist and broad chest (Dutta: 1990: 82). The legs of the figures become more stiff and column like. Profuse decoration all over the surface of the stele is noticeable by the use of decorative motifs in the form of *vidyadhara*,

kirttimukha and accessory figures along with the principal figure (Barpujari: 1990: 466). The accessory figures accompanying the principal deity are seen to be more independent from the main figure. By the end of the 11th century CE, the stele comprising of stylised motifs is noticeable in the sculptures. At the same time, the pedestal shows a number of *ratha* or projections. Thus, by the end of the 11th century CE, the increasing ornamentation of the stele is subsequently followed by the accessory deities being carved with the principal deity. All of these features are seen in the sculptures from Ambari (Kauli: 2012: 9). By the 12th century CE, there is more lavishness in the form of decoration that covers the entire surface of the stele. The retention of the slender body form of the earlier times is seen but the modelling of the images assumes a petrified character (Majumdar: 1994: 648). The main deity moreover is overshadowed by the accessory deities, decorative *kirttimukha* and other motifs (Dutta: 1990: 85). The sculptures are more elongated in nature and there is more stiffness in attitude with the legs becoming column like. This indicates a trend towards a loss of plasticity in art. Heavy ornamentation of the sculptures both of the principal deity as well as of the attendant figures results in a lack of gracefulness. The movement of the accompanying figures becomes stiff, with the facial features assuming a rigid character. The pedestal of the deities also reflects the existence of projections along with their distinctive *vahanas*. The richness in ornamentation of the 12th century CE images thus indicates a changing outlook on the part of the artists and the images lack spiritual content.

Stylistic variations in the Ambari sculptures are noticeable in the sculptural remains found from the site. The images are mostly of the deities of the Brahmanical pantheon. The majority of the images are those of Visnu, Surya and Durga in her Mahisasuramardini aspect. Others represent Nataraja, Ascetics, Ganga and Yamuna. Among the other valuable finds are Siva *lingas* as well as *yonipithas* and images of Agni, Vishnu in Kurma *avatara*, Vrishava. Dressed blocks of stone have also been recovered from the site. On stylistic grounds, the miniature images from Ambari are datable to the 10th–11th century CE. All of them represent either Durga, Surya or Vishnu. The miniature images of the deities from Ambari are carved on the stele which assumes a conical shape. The use of the *kirttimukha* at the apex which forms a significant aspect of the East Indian School of Art however is not present in the small images. The loss of fluidity in the movement of the images is also very much visible. The use of decorative motifs in the stele of the miniature images is not very evident though rigidity in the posture of the images is noticed. This is particularly noteworthy of the images of Visnu and Surya. The Durga icons representing the Mahisasuramardini aspect is similarly characterised by a plain stele which is pointed at the top. All the images are ten armed (Choudhury: 1985: 238).

The deity is seen holding the distinctive *ayudhas* with the existence of a band surrounding the stele. It is however significant to note that a flexibility in the movement of the deity is visible without having any signs of

stiffness. A slight bending posture can be noticed as the goddess is shown in the fighting posture. On the other hand, the images of Visnu and Surya do not show any signs of flexibility and are characterized by stiffness in standing attitude (*samapada-sthānaka*). Retention of the features of the Pala-School of art in the form of a frontal attitude, existence of *rathas* or projections, attendant figures accompanying the principal deity along with their distinctive *vahana* is visible. The roughness and crude features of the small images from Ambari is in no way comparable to the polished images of the Pala domain. This probably implies the lack of requisite skills on the part of the craftsmen in carving the images in a polished manner.

The miniature images of the Brahmannical deities from Ambari are alike in style and exhibit similar features. The stele of all the images is slightly pointed at the top with the deities having stiff attitude. This is particularly noticeable in the images of Visnu and Surya (Figures 4, 5 and 6). The smaller Visnu icons are of dimensions $0.255 \times 0.113 \times 0.05$ m, $0.263 \times 0.135 \times 0.05$ m and $0.26 \times 0.12 \times 0.06$ m respectively. The Surya icons measure $0.245 \times 0.12 \times 0.04$ m. The Mahishamardini icons have a pointed stele but show a fluid movement with the goddess being seen in an attacking posture (*ugra murti*) (Figures 7 and 8). They are all in small size, the maximum size being $0.29 \times 0.13 \times 0.55$ m. The *ayudhas* of the deities are not clear owing to the rough grained stone. It is very likely that the similarity of the features of the images must have been an outcome of a huge demand. Being small in nature and exhibiting crude features, the small images from Ambari were most probably produced to adorn the private shrines of the common people. They might also have been intended to adorn the outer surface walls of a temple as a decorative motif, though evidence of any such temple structure is lacking from Ambari. With the beginning of the 13th century CE, art in Assam together with Eastern India witnessed a significant transformation showing a trend towards developing



Figure 5: Visnu (10th–12th century CE) Ambari Site Museum.



Figure 6: Surya (10th–12th century CE) Ambari Site Museum.



Figure 4: Visnu (10th–12th century CE) Ambari Site Museum.



Figure 7: Mahishamardini Durga 10th–12th century CE Ambari Site Museum.

a regional and indigenous character. A situation of political turmoil marked by political disturbances in the long run gave a setback to the artistic activities of the region. The Turko- Afghan invasions of Assam from the west was simultaneously followed by the rise of petty kingdoms like those of Kamata, Koch and the Kacharis, which affected the social as well as political life of the region. The art of the earlier period lost its elegance and represents a phase of conventional character both in terms of facial as well as body form. That the art style of this period assumed a simplistic character is evident in the form of plain and simple decoration of the stele. A transition is thus seen from the rich and heavy ornamentation of the preceding period towards the surface of the stele being bare in terms of the use of decorative motifs, in most instances. The borders of the stele were either not carved out or flatly carved without any decorative design over it (Dutta: 1990: 87).

The overcrowding of the stele which was thus a characteristic feature of the earlier sculptures (of the 12th century CE) was markedly absent in the later period. Another characteristic feature of the sculptures of the 13th–14th century CE is that the *Pancaratha* and *Saptaratha* projections of the pedestals were avoided and the pedestals became a part of the stele. This feature is visible in the images of Ganga, Yamuna, as well as in some images of Vishnu and Surya. The legs are column like and stiff without a bend at the knees (Barpujari: 1990: 354). The size of the attendant figures accompanying the principal deity represents an elongated as well as a disproportionate form. In the context of the Ambari sculptural remains belonging to this period, a great number of large sized images representing Vishnu, Surya, Muni (ascetic) have been found that demonstrate these features (**Figures 9, 10 and 11**). They measure 123.5 × 69.5 × 25.5 m, 120 × 55.7 × 23.5 m and 110 × 52.8 × 22.3 m respectively. However, the images of Nataraja, Ganga and Yamuna show fluid movement of the postures (**Figures 12, 13 and 14**). The image of Ganga measures 121 × 64 cm while that of Yamuna is 130 × 60 cm. It is significant to note that the bigger images from Ambari demonstrate an expertise in skill

towards carving the images in comparison to the small icons, though the former reflects a trend of the developments of the 13th century in the form of the stele being sparse in decoration.



Figure 9: Vishnu, Ambari 13th–14th century CE Assam State Museum.



Figure 10: Surya, Ambari 13th–14th century CE Assam State Museum.



Figure 8: Mahishamardini Durga 10th–12th century Ambari Site Museum.



Figure 11: Muni (Ascetic), Ambari 13th–14th century CE Assam State Museum.



Figure 13: Ganga, Ambari 13th–14th century CE Assam State Museum.

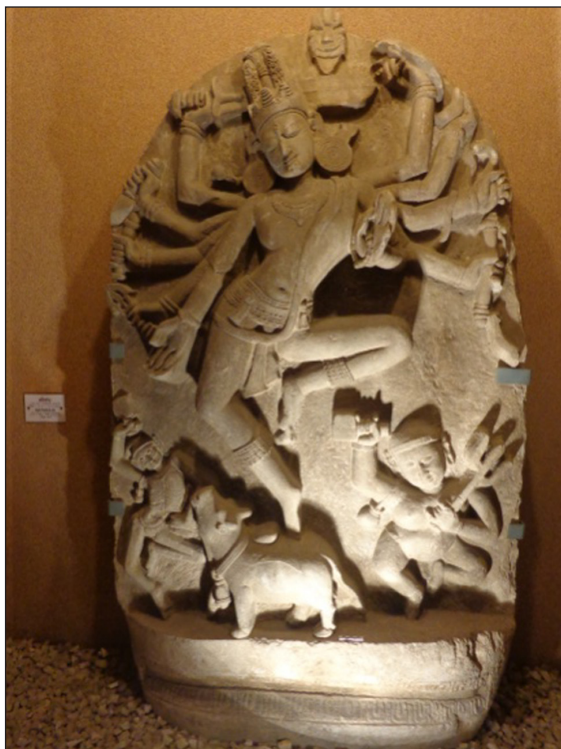


Figure 12: Nataraja, Ambari 13th–14th century CE Assam State Museum.

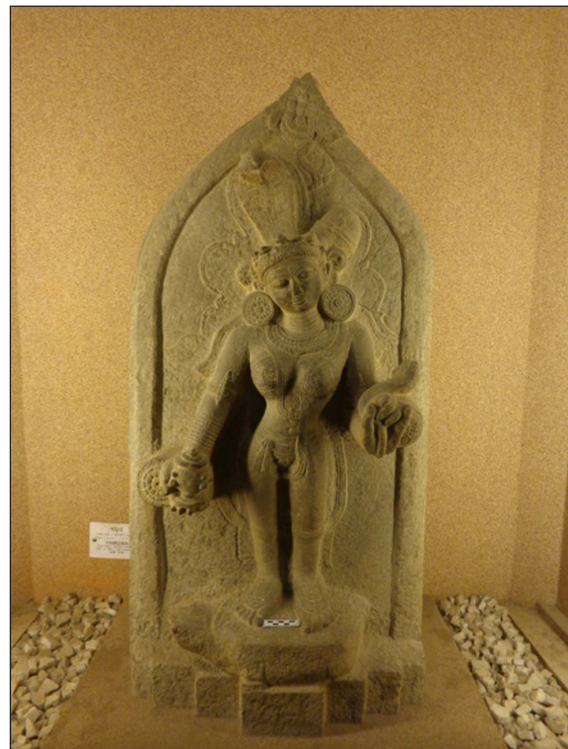


Figure 14: Yamuna, Ambari 13th–14th century CE Assam State Museum.

The Local Idioms visible in the Sculptures of Ambari

As mentioned above, the stylistic features of the Ambari sculptures need to be assessed in the context of the East Indian School of Medieval Art (EISMA). The rise of this

school of art was marked by certain distinctive characteristics such as the stele, the existence of attendant figures with the principal deity, the *kirtimukha* (the grinning lion) occupying the top of the stele and *vidyadharas* (demi-gods) on either side of the stele. The EISMA school bears

close resemblance with the Pala- Sena school of art that is marked by these features. Nevertheless, Ambari and a careful examination of its sculptures display variations. This is not only visible in terms of the raw materials used for carving the images but also the technique. The sculptures from Ambari demonstrate the use of local raw materials such as gneiss, granite, amphibolite unlike the black basalt stone that was used while making the images of the Pala- Sena period. Moreover, retention of the features like the stele, *kirtimukha*, *vidyadharas*, stiff posture noticeable in the sculptures from Ambari bring them in close proximity with the Pala- Sena school. However, the images from Ambari (bigger images) in contrast to the sculptures of the Pala- Sena school does not show too much overcrowding of the stele. The facial expressions of the images also do not display sharp features. The miniature icons from the site are nevertheless crude in character due to the quality of stone used and are not polished. The local element is also visible particularly in the icons of Ganga and Yamuna from Ambari that shows the existence of snake canopy, a unique feature not found in the sculptures from elsewhere in the Brahmaputra valley. Thus, the retention of the features of the Pala- Sena School has been carefully blended with the local aspects that are exemplified in the Ambari sculptures.

Conclusion

The sculptural remains recovered from Ambari archaeological site primarily belong to the deities of the Brahmannical pantheon. The predominant ones are of Vishnu, Surya, Muni (ascetic), Nataraja. The Sakti icons from Ambari constitute another category of significant finds. The Mahishasuramardini aspect of Durga is noticeable in the smaller images. Apart from these, one image of Chandanayika, one each of Ganga and Yamuna, and a great number of Siva *lingas* as well as *yonipithas* have been recovered from the site. The sculptures of Ambari and their iconography reflect the contemporary religious beliefs and indicate the familiarity of the artists with the canonical norms. It is significant to note that Ambari which forms a part of the greater Guwahati city has been characterised by a wide range of archaeological remains that clearly indicate continuous human habitation from the 1st century BCE/CE onwards as discussed earlier. The style of the Ambari sculptures shows a departure from that of the Gupta art in terms of carving techniques and modelling of the images. Corresponding to the emergence of the East Indian School of Medieval Art (EISMA), the sculptures of Ambari show the evolutionary growth of the stele. The evolution of the stele is seen in term of the changes in its shape. The stele initially assumes a round character with a slightly pointed top as early as the 8th century CE. The stele moreover is supported by a plinth which shows the presence of projections known as *rathas*. In the subsequent phases, importance is given in carving the minute details of the figures adorning the stele. This is not only true of the principal deity that occupies the central place in the stele but the attendant figures that are seen accompanying the main deity. The pedestal also forms a part of the stele. The use

of the *kirrtimukha* as a stylised motif on the top of the stele is also another significant feature of the East Indian School. Though the Ambari sculptures show retention of the features of the East Indian School of Medieval Art, differences are noticeable not only in terms of the use of raw materials but also the use of decorative motifs adorning the stele. For instance, the miniature icons unearthed from Ambari that are primarily those of Visnu, Surya and Durga in her Mahishamardini aspect, demonstrate a crude nature marked by a rough surface with the features not prominently carved. Similarity in style is a prominent aspect noticeable in these images. This is essentially in the form of the size of the images and a conical stele. The *kirrtimukha* also is not seen in the stele of the images. However, the deities are accompanied by attendant figures on the pedestal of the stele. The depiction of the *ayudhas* that each of the deities is seen carrying in their hands is not prominent owing to the nature of raw material used for carving them. The use of granite, gneiss is characteristic of the miniature icons from Ambari that display crude features. The similarity in the sizes and the features of the small images probably indicate their use in domestic shrines. It establishes the status of Ambari as a flourishing centre of production i.e. an atelier.

Continuity in the production of the sculptures from Ambari is seen from the 13th–14th century CE. This development can be associated with significant political changes that transformed the nature of patronage for artistic activities in the region. The beginning of this period witnessed the onset of the Turko-Afghan invasions from the west that brought a deviation in the earlier art style. Regional art forms began to take shape with features like flat face, broad nose, and thick lips being very prominent. The sculptures moreover take the shape of being frontally carved. The figures have disproportionate sizes that assume a stiff character. The profuse decoration characteristic of the stele of the earlier period is lacking during the sculptures of this period. The sparse decoration of the stele however shows retention of the features of the Pala-Sena school of Bengal and Bihar. This is evident in the form of the *kirrtimukha* adorning the top of the stele. In the bigger images from Ambari, variations in the shape of the *kirrtimukha* can be noticed. While in the images of Visnu, Surya and Nataraja, the *kirrtimukha* is in the shape of a grotesque figure with a protruding tongue, in the images of Ganga and Yamuna, the *kirrtimukha* lacks a distinctive appearance appearing almost comical instead of frightening. The images of ascetics (Muni) from Ambari have a lotus instead of the conventional *kirrtimukha*.

The stiffening postures of the deities notably of Visnu and Surya continues to be an important feature of the Ambari sculptures. The deities are seen being accompanied by attendant figures with the stele being a part of the pedestal. Variations are however noticeable with the pedestal of some of the images being plain while the others has *rathas* or projections. Each of the deities is further shown with their distinctive *ayudhas* indicating the familiarity of the sculptors with the canonical norms. On the

other hand, the images of Ganga, Yamuna and Nataraja lack rigidity and are seen in graceful attitude. The sparsely decorated stele of the images marked by an unfinished character in terms of depiction of the details implies that they belong to the closing decades of the 13th century CE. The bigger images from Ambari lack the crude aspects characteristic of the smaller images. The traits reflected in the Ambari sculptures thus are an amalgamation of the features of the East Indian School along with the assimilation of local idioms. With the exception of a small Manasa icon and a lattice carved stone window, the use of indigenous raw materials imply the significance of the Dighalipukhuri tank that may have served as a means of transporting them to the Ambari site. Thus, it was possible that stone blocks, bricks and other building materials were brought to the site (Choudhury: 1985: 241). Moreover, though the evidence of a standing temple is lacking from the Ambari archaeological site, the profuse quantity of these sculptures may probably denote that some of them, notably the miniature icons must have been made to adorn the private shrines or were meant for the purpose of decoration on the niches of temple walls. It is very likely that Ambari functioned as a production centre since evidence of dressed blocks of stone has also been recovered from the site. The enormous quantity of sculptures found in Ambari has not been found in other places of the Brahmaputra valley. The distinctive stylistic features of both the smaller and bigger images along with assimilation of local traits in carving them thus establishes the independent status of Ambari as an atelier, with such characteristics not noticeable in other sculptures from the region.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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