

Rock Engravings and Indigenous Art of Champhai District, Mizoram

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Abstract: From 2016, The Champhai district in Mizoram, has been an area of much interest to scholars, organisations like Archaeological Survey of India, Art and Culture Department, Mizoram, INTACH-Mizoram Chapter and individuals since. Recently (2016) the villagers in the district encountered surface finding by chance which have enormously helped in enhancing the field surveys. This often-led scholars to understand that Champhai district as 'an abode of archaeological remains.' Almost every village have some archaeological remain that can convey many important aspects to researchers. The traces for any primary site or a proper trail excavation is not feasible. A village to village survey, literature review, interviews and discussion with locals were used as research methodology in order to understand the area under study. Mizo are the natives who have been erecting memorial stones since the time they occupied this present area. Rock art or engraving are mainly found on memorial stones, rock outcrops and rock boulders. It speaks voluminous entity of Mizo culture and is still a living tradition in Mizoram. Mizo never stayed at a site for longer than 5-6 years. The longest stay were mostly 10 years which were only in rare cases. Instances like they could not find a strategic location in a geographical setting to protect themselves from enemy's attack. In certain occasion, the new site for habitation was not suitable for farming as well as prevalent of water shortage. However, while connecting the dots on habitation or settlement pattern with the memorial stone, it still does not create a proper picture unlike the south Indian Megaliths. Memorial stone of Mizoram are mostly brought from its original location and erected on the entry of the village.

Keywords: Champhai, Site Tracing, Mizo, Culture, Movement, Rock art

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Introduction

Rock art covers a wide range of meanings across different times and space that has been under check in recent years. The like of carvings and cupules putting under non-utilitarian connotation. Unless after careful consideration concerning their context it can be categorised as an art object (Varma 2012). The

vagueness of rock art meaning gives researcher's shortcomings to further intensify research in this area. The art historians, reluctance to give a proper perspective in the study of its dynamism, have left it rather challenging to fit rock art within the realm of Art History (Porr 2019). Thus, confining its studies only to social anthropology and archaeology, while making its realm quite limited in scope. While the recent attempt to connect the semiotic theory and the study of Rock art has enhanced its study with a systematic approach. Rock art serves as a visual aid in the traditional beliefs and sacred values in a community. Rock art can be defined as "any visual art representation made on rocky support through different engraving and/or painting techniques. Like any human production, rock art is the result of a creative process, an artefact, but with the particularity of being the graphic representation of something, where that something can have – or not – a real material existence." (Martel 2020) As a process of creativity, it is mediated by thought and implies a purpose for communication. The rock art terminology is very broad like rock carvings, rock engravings, rock paintings or rock drawings. It is made by markings on natural stones by man and has being reported from many regions of the world in different context. The Rock art is divided into two main categories; one is pictographs, art which are painted on the rock surface and petroglyphs, art which are carved into the rock surfaces and the smaller category of rock art is associated with Megaliths i. e. petroforms. In India, all these three category of Rock art is found.

Area of Study

The present study is confined to the Champhai District (23° 28' 28" N.; 93° 19' 32" E.) which is one of the eleven districts of the state (Figs. 1a&1b). It is located in the easternmost part of the state. The district is bounded on the north by Churachandpur district of Manipur, on the west by Saitual and Serchhip district, Mizoram and in the south and east by Myanmar. The district occupies an area of 3185.83 km². Champhai town is the administrative headquarters of the district. The natural vegetation and mountainous terrain, which is rough and steep, covers the region. Sandstones, shale, and chert of tertiary rocks are found in this area. This field survey was conducted for two season in the year 2018 and 2020.

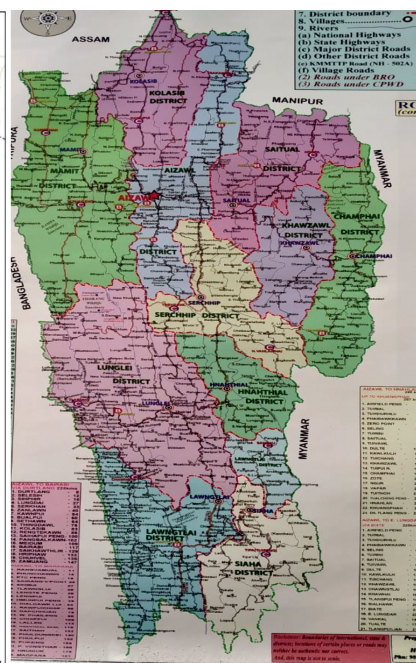


Figure 1a: Map of Mizoram (Old)

Figure 1b: Map of Mizoram (New)

(Courtesy: VanlalhumaSingson)

Some of the villages visited during the said field work from 2018-2020 viz. , Ngur (23° 32' 19.24" N.; 93° 22' 24.73" E.), North Diltlang (23° 32' 19.24" N.; 93° 22' 24.73" E.), Vapar (23°37' 10" N.; 93° 20' 58.55" E.), Murlen (23° 39' 39.46" N.; 93° 17' 2.92" E.), Hnanlan (23° 41' 37.65" N.;93° 22' 54.22" E.), North Tualcheng, (23° 43" 27.95" N.; 93° 18' 15.38" E.), Lungphunlian (23° 45' 44.7" N.; 93° 18' 17.4" E.), Vaikhawtlang (23°53' 27.44" N.; 93°22' 18.08" E.), Selam (23° 48' 12.39" N.; 93° 27' 30.09"E.), Sazep (23° 14' 7.58" N.; 93° 18' 6.32" E.), and Vangchhia (23° 12' 12.78" N., 93° 19' 59.61" E.).The sites have been plotted on the Google map and is shown in **Fig. 2**.

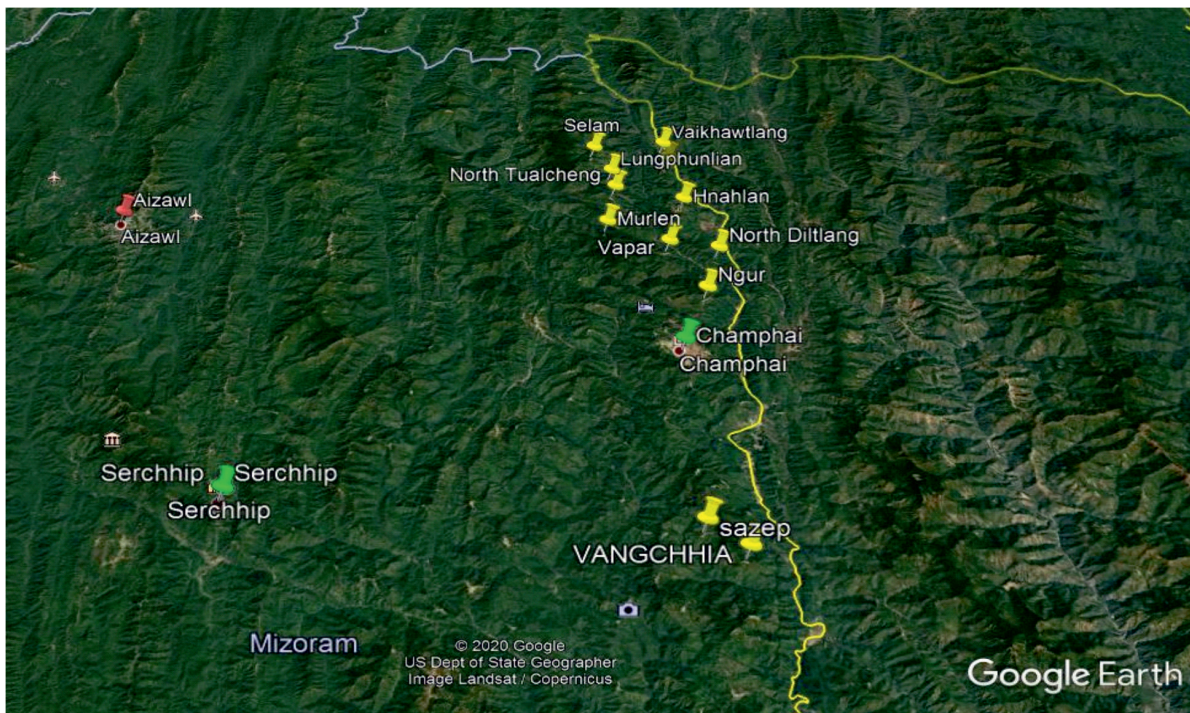


Figure 2: Map showing the surveyed village in Champhai District, Mizoram

Aims and Objectives

The present research aims in examining rock art within a larger context, style, ethnography, and cultural material:

- To record and archive petroglyphs digitally from the surveyed area.
- To understand the significance and various motifs in art forms found in different areas.
- To further enhance the symbolic art and tries to connect the dots with the Mizo tradition before the advent of Christianity.

Methods Used

A village-to-village survey was conducted with the help of YoungMizo Association, also literature review was done, interviews and discussion with locals were used as a research methodology to understand the area under study.

History of Rock Art studies in Mizoram

Rock art study in the state has received limited attention by researchers. Some of the reports and work carried out have been in the form of documentation. The earliest known record of documentation was done in the 1970s (Chatterji 1976), and from the 1980s the government agencies took interest in

this region and briefly published its report (IAR 1989-1990). After a decade, in 2000s scholars like Darchhawna(2005) began to show interest in the archaeological remains of Mizoram and published report in the Indian Archaeology Review (2008-2009: 11-12). Laishram & Salam (2013) also reported about the rock engravings. However, the first systematic investigation was carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India in 2010, and ever since has been actively exploring and publishing its report (ASI 2018). Malsawmliana (2017) is perhaps the first scholar to fully understand its importance and meticulously studied for his doctoral theses and later published it in a book form. He has classified the types of Rock art techniques and connected the engravings by using ethnographic studies and analysing the cultural material of the past Mizo society. Later, ethnoarchaeological approach was incorporated and an attempt was made to co-related with the archaeological remains (Lalhminghluia 2017). It accelerated the idea of understanding rock art and its implication and values in the study area, which also bridged a huge gap and fixed the missing pieces. Furthermore, Jenla, A.(2019) reported on the rock art from Serchhip and Lunglei districts and also mentioned about the delapidated condition of the rock art in the state.

Migration and Settlement

The Champhai District can be classified as Mountainous Terrain Province. The overall relief in the east is higher and the slopes are much steeper than in the west of Mizoram. The altitude ranges from 400 m - 2,157 m (the average elevation is in the order of 1,000 meters). The slopes are very steep, and the elevation difference between the ridge top and valley varies between 200-600 meters (Pachauu 2009). The ranges are aligned mostly in a north-south direction. Champhai valley is the only plain area, covering an area of about 3,185.83 square kilometres (1,230 sq m) in the Champhai district. Mizo made their temporary settlement in the form of a village on the hilltop or ridge. The village life was simple and a chief protected the village from animals attacked and enemies. The houses were made of thatched and bamboo with a large verandah on the front and no window. Interestingly, the layout of the houses were in two rows facing each other. The chief's house was at the centre of the village, and the area was called *Mualveng*. However, residing in the same place was not possible for long. The Mizo stayed in one place for not longer than four to five years due to security reasons. And the longest stay would be ten years. A village had to be moved when it was felt unsafe and security had loosened. It was also due to the *jhumming* cultivation that made Mizo look for more fertile land. Hence, the accumulation of wealth in the form of permanent property was difficult. Frequent migration from one place to another was the norm and the trend remains until the early twentieth century. Based on this, if analyses are done, four to ten years was a short duration for erecting a memorial stone which was expensive. It also included elaborate feasting and the entire community participated (Lalrinawma 2005). However, while Mizo were settled at a place, they erected memorial stone as well as commemorative stones. As early as the first half of the ninth century C.E., we find mention of memorial stones of the Zo/Mizo in the Chindwin valley, 2 miles from Sibani village, and not far from Monywa is a Zo ritual ground. A Memorial stone of about 13 feet (4.3m) in dilapidated condition was found. In Sathung, a village near Mintaipen, there are remnants of Zo memorial stones that records date of Zo attacked by Mingyi Kyaw Saw (Vansum 1986). Since carving on the memorial stone of the Sailo is recorded as early as the 15th-16th century C. E., it suggests a slow process of rock art development. The engravings were as sacred as the erection of the stones.

Erecting of memorials is of two type - the Memorial to the deceased and the Commemorative stones. The later was also observed during the establishment of a new village and for an individual who have attained the feast of merit. And one may or may not find engravings on the erected stone.

However, all served its purpose for portraying an auspicious achievement of the individual and also additional significant meaning of the Mizo culture. The Commemorative stones particularly erected in honour of chiefs and *Thangchhuah* were prestigious and regarded as status symbols. It is important to mention in the passage about *Thangchhuah*. It is derived from *Thangkim* (all famous). This is a series of feasts an individual has to give to the entire villagers. To attain this coveted title, one has to kill a certain number of animals and feast too. *Thangchhuah* is of two kinds –

i) *Ram lama Thangchhuah* by killing prescribed animals

ii) *In lama Thangchhuah* -

- (a) Chawn
- (b) Se daawi,
- (c) *Se khuangmitthirawp lam, and*
- (d) *Khuangchawi.*

This feasting had many stages and only a person of wealth could attain it. After this, he was given a special shawl together with special headgear called *Diartial*. It was believed that achieving the status of *Thangchhuah* not only assured a safe passing to *Pialral* (paradise) but even gain a respectful honour and prestige in the present life. In such cases, stone with engravings of human, animals, and essential items which a person possess was erected during his lifetime or by his relatives after his death as a Commemoration of his attainment of a certain task. Warriors depicted with heads of mithuns, often used in the feasting was considered for measuring wealth and status in Mizo society. Some of the engravings includes-

- **Human figures:** In most of the carving rows of human beings are depicted with a prominent figure and the prominent human figure depicted is said to be the warrior in whose name the stone was erected.
- **Birds (*Sava*):** Most of the birds engraved on the memorial stones are *vapual* (Hornbills). The feathers on the headdress of a warrior were also of the hornbill, which he was entitled to wear after *Thangchhuah*.
- **Animals:** It has been categorised into wild and domesticated animals. Wild animals were generally hunted as part of game hunting which included *Sazuk* (sambar deer), *Sakhi* (barking deer), *Sakei* (tiger), *Rul* (snake). *Sai* (Elephant). As for domesticated animals, it was usually used for sacrificial and also form part of their diet. Animals like *Vawk* (pig), *Kel* (goat), *Uileh* (dog), *Ar* (fowls), *Sial* (Mithun), *Sakawr* (horse), and *Sangha* (fish) were reared in the Mizo household. It was usually used for sacrificial and also form part of their daily diet.
- **Figures of essential items:** The items included like *Fei* (spear), *Phaw* (shield), *Fungi* (flask made of mithun horn), *Puan* (cloth), *Thi* (beads), *Vai bel* (smoking pipe), *Dar* (Gog), *Silai* (gun). However, *Silai* (gun) has not been spotted in any of the rock art catalogued to date by the present author.

The rock art tells a story of someone or a community involved in accomplishing an important event in their lifetime. It serves as a form of writing not only for the artist but even of those individuals in a community (Shock 2001). The engravings are not found on all the menhirs, hence, generally not all megaliths in the Champhai district have engravings. Rock art, therefore, associating with megaliths is regrettably dubious (Malsawmliana 2019). But then, engravings are also made on the menhirs so

megalithic structure and rock art are inter-related. Carvings are a valuable tool in understanding the social complexity of the Mizo. As in the carvings, a chief or a warrior story is depicted along with his community partaking in its celebration. It cannot be completely ruled out, the megaliths especially while studying material cultural and ethnography in this region.

Rock Art in Champhai District

Rock art is divided into pictographs, petroglyphs, and pictograms. The type of rock art found in the Champhai District is petroglyphs. Petroglyphs are an image that are carved on rock surface either by incise, pecking, abrading or carvings. The term is derived from the Greek word, “petros” meaning stone and “*glyphein*” which means to carve. The original word is from French word “*petroglyphe*.” Some petroglyphs like the one found in Champhai district depicts real life events, while the rest are just abstract. There are many aspects to this rock art like transmitting knowledge, religious or ceremonial symbols. Many common themes has been found showing universality of purpose and impulses that leads to the creation of image. Hence, art historians believes that it laid the foundation of art and indicator for the development of cognitive and abstract ability in the evolution of humankind. During the field survey, the present author visited these villages (Fig. 2) and found that petroglyphs are mostly found in the villages that are close to the Tiau¹ river. These rock art were also studied carefully and technique was meticulously catalogued. After much speculation, the petroglyphs technique are divided into three types (modified after Malsawmliana 2017);

Type I First is the shallow incised or scratching of figures (Fig. 3),

Type II Second is cutting deep into the surface (Fig. 4 & 5) and

Type III Engravings in high relief or embossed is the third technique (Fig. 6).

In the Type - I rock art technique, it is done by scratches forming a shallow line, that seems like drawing a line on a rock surface. The Type-I technique is found dominantly in the northern region of the district. The technique of the Type - II is done by using chisel and hammer and its cut a bit deeper about 1 cm to 2 cm deep. The figures are engraved by deep incise or deep cutting. Thus, it makes the engraving stands out from the main frame. This Type - II is dominant in the Champhai district, if not in the whole of Mizoram. While Type-III are rare. In this method the figures were first engraved on high relief and then the outer layer of stone was chiselled off, so that the figure appears to bulge out that give the impression of embossing. The engravings are smooth and plain and are of high quality. The engravings in high relief (Type-III) is mostly found at *Kawtchhuah Ropui* in Vangchhia and *Mangkhaia Lungin* Zotlang. Engravings essentially include human figures, birds, animals, and essential items like *Dar* (gongs), *Thi* (bead) necklace, *Chawbel* or *Baibel* (pottery), *Fei* (spear), *Vaibel* (smoking pipe), tools and *Vakiria* (headgears) used by the Mizo (Fig. 7). It is found on most of the erected stones as well as on the rock panels, rock outcrops, and rock boulders. Most of the art are rugged. The tools used for carving on stones were mostly chisel and hammer, and sandstone has been used for the engravings as well as for the erection of the megaliths. The petroglyphs, in the north of the Champhai district, one finds very few incisions Type- I technique while in the central and southern region, all three types of petroglyph techniques exist. Does it mean there were different groups of people involved? Can Megaliths be used to established chronology for these engravings?

In the village vicinity of Vangchhia, about 2 to 3 km on the northeast sidethere is a site call *KawtchhuahRopui* (23°12.063 N; 93°20.502 E) meaning “Great Convergence Pointer or Gateway” at the elevation of 1599 m that hosts a number of menhirs with engravings. It is also here that many roads connects to different places. Beyond this point, a stair case (footpath) leads down the steep terrain,

and connects the village with the Tiau river. According to the narrator², the footpath exist since the earliest time. These ancient route called *MirawngLamlia*n is already broken, however, alignment and stair cases were traced at regular intervals. In 2010, a non-governmental³ agency tried to trace the route from *KawtchhuahRopui* down to the Tiau river. And along the pathway, there are petroglyphs of Type -I and Type – II techniques on rock boulders at regular intervals. These rock boulders in some area are on the edge of the cliff and one has to climb up or down very carefully. Though the continuity is broken, we cannot rule out that a great network of road existed. It is stretch for a few kilometres It could have been used as a pathway's demarcation for the travellers or used as a migration route by the different ethnic groups, while entering from the east (Chin Hills). In the villages situated close to Tiau river, there are footpath that connects to the river and other neighbouring villages. The mystery remains that no such relics or rock art was left in these routes like the one found in Vangchhia. So, the question is – who and for what purpose rock art was created along these route? The creator of the rock art may not be known and there is less evidence to support this theory. However, one can attest that the rock art along this footpath may have been use as a demarcation, and even to remind the frequenter about the might of the village they were entering to. It also must have been a busy footpath like a main road for many of the traders and travellers, which is why the famous path is called *KawtchhuahRopui* or “The Great Convergence Pointer or Gateway.”

Conclusion

The drawback of this research lies in not able to connect the executor of rock art and the community that are presently occupying the village. As there were frequent migration from one place to another and settle at a place for a very short duration. Hence, scholars working in this area still finds it difficult to understand, redefine, and address this issue- who were the community that executed this rock art? Further exploration is on hold for the time. In the next field survey, some more places will be investigated especially, SouthKhawbung, Lianpui, Farkawn, Zote, Khankawn, Dungtlang, and Zotlang in the next session. Only then a rough answer will be able to open up for further research.

Note

1. Tiau rivers forms the international boundary lines between India and Myanmar.
2. Pu. K. C . Khuma(64 years old) is a knowledgeable person on the history of the village of Vangchhia, who acts as a tourist guide and narrator time and again to people who wish to learn more about the village.
3. INTACH-Mizoram Chapter is very active in exploration and publication of Built Heritage and monuments in Mizoram.

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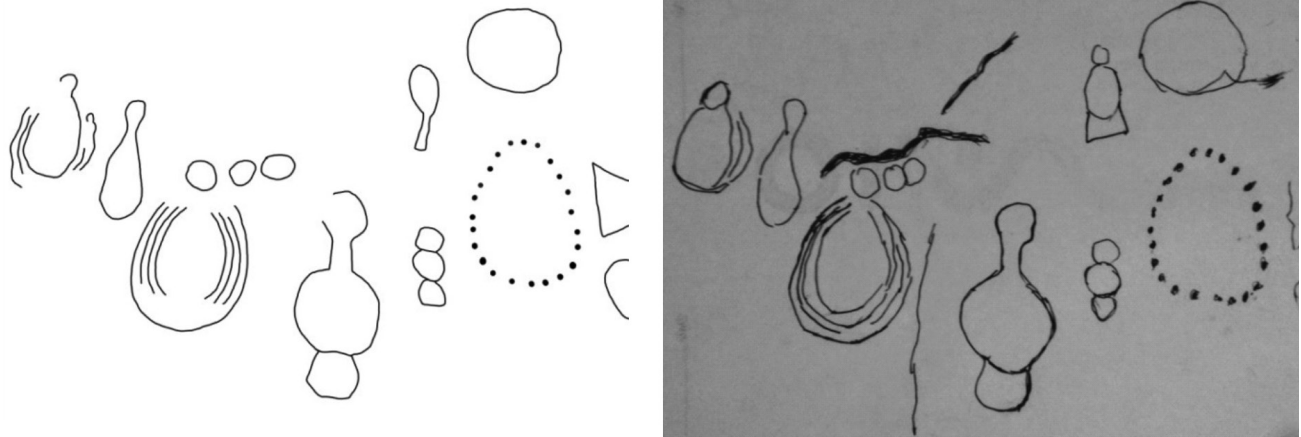


Figure 3a & b: Essential items depiction (Digital & Hand Drawing)



Figure 3c: Essential items depiction on a rock outcrop using technique Type IN. Tualcheng (Photo Courtesy: INTACH-Mizoram Chapter)



Figure 4a & b: Animals engraving (Digital and hand drawing)



Figure 4c: Animals engraved using Type II technique
(Photo Courtesy: INTACH-Mizoram Chapter)

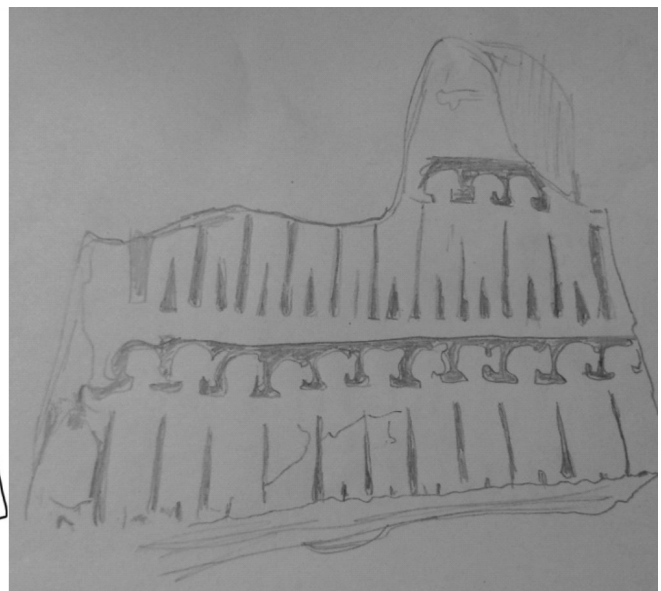
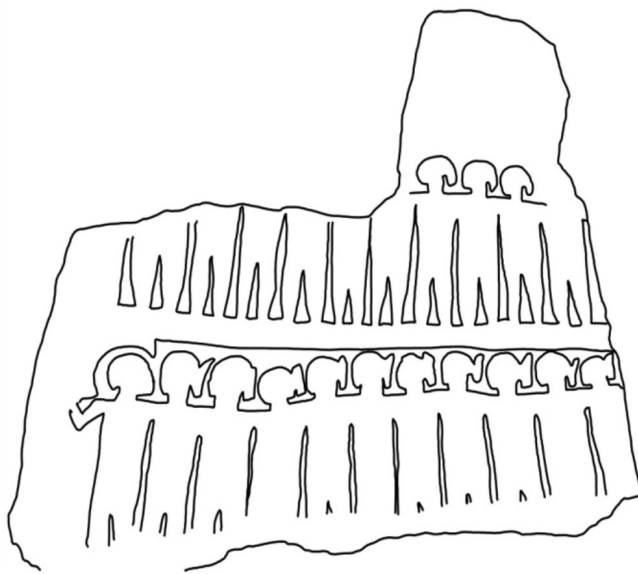


Figure 5 a & b: Rows of human beings (Digital and hand drawing)



Figure 5c: Human figures engraved using Type II technique. (Photo Courtesy: ASI, Aizawl Circle)

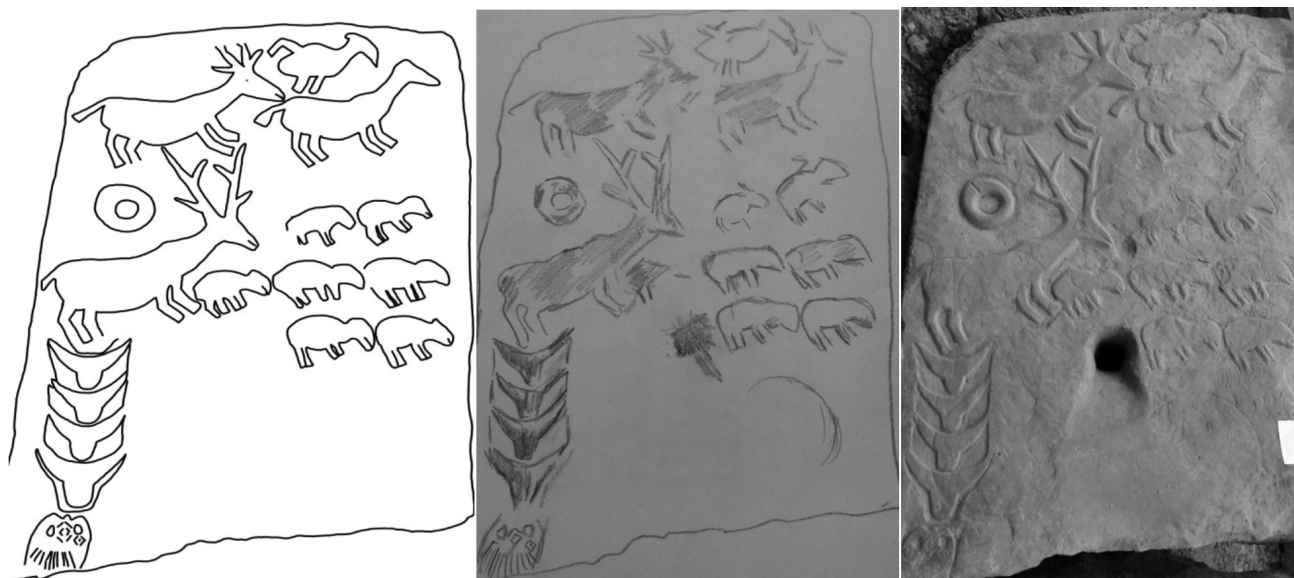


Figure 6 a, b & c: Engravings in high relief or embossed Type III technique, Vangchhai

Photo Courtesy: ASI, Aizawl Circle



Figure 7a & b: Human figure adorn with animals, human figure & essential items (Digital and hand drawing)



Figure 7c: Engravings in high relief or embossed type 3 technique, Vangchhia
(Photo Courtesy: ASI, Aizawl)



Figure 8a&b: Engravings on a rock boulder, Vangchhia