



# GUARDIAN FIGURES IN THE SCULPTURAL ART OF HĀDAPESWARA, ASSAM

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**Abstract:** *The custom of engraving guardian figures on the temple walls have been practiced since antiquity. They were sculpted mostly to ward off evil and to protect the principal deity and the devotees. Similar type of figures, although crude is also found from the material remains of early Assam, especially the temple remains which were of Nagara style. One such important seat of power during the rule of Salastambha and Pala dynasty of Prāggyotisha-Kāmarūpa is the present Tezpur region. The region was known as Hādapeswara or Hārappeswara in the early times. It has yielded a number of artefacts datable to the period prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE. Sculptural remains formed a huge bulk of the material remain found from the sites of Tezpur region, most of which are placed in the Tezpur District Museum and Chitrlekha Udyan or erstwhile Cole Park. At Da-Parbatia and Bamuni Pahar we find such remains in situ. Some of these sculptural pieces appear to be guardian figures. The present paper is an attempt to identify the different categories of guardian figures found in the region of Hādapeswara or present day Tezpur in Assam. The study area is limited to archaeological sites in and around Tezpur region, namely Da-Parbatia, Bamuni Pahar ruins, Cole Park or Chitrlekha Udyan and remains found at the Tezpur District Museum.*

**Keywords:** Guardian figure, Tezpur, Sculpture, Assam, Art

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## **Introduction**

The region of Prāggyotisha-Kāmarūpa or early Assam has left a mark in the history of early India since antiquity. Geographically it constituted almost the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, including parts of Bangladesh, Bhutan and North Bengal at its prime. It has been associated with

many myths and legends regarding its origin. The earliest mythical king of the region was Mahiranga Danava, whose successor was later defeated by the most popular legendary ruler known as Naraka (Baruah: 2013:78). All the three major ruling dynasties of early Assam, namely the Varmans, Salastambhas and Palas traced their descent from Naraka. Numerous literary texts like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Kalika Purāna*, *Yogini Tantra* among others have discussed about the extent of the kingdom, as well as the origin of the kingdom. Later Vedic texts, such as *Brahma Purāna* and *Vishnu Purāna* narrates that Naraka was born of mother earth or Prithvi and Vishnu in his boar incarnation (Sircar:1990: 83). He is said to be adopted by king Janaka of Videha. Naraka later migrated to the north-eastern part of the Indian-subcontinent and established his own kingdom as Prāggyotisha-Kāmarūpa with Prāggyotishpur or the present Guwahati region as his seat of power (Baruah: 2013:79).

The historical dynasties of Kāmarūpa however commenced from 4<sup>th</sup> century with the Varman line of kings and their seat of power being at Prāggyotishpur. It was during the time of Sālastambhas and Pālas that the seat of power was shifted to Tezpur region, which was named as Hādapeswara or Hārappeswara (Barua: 2014: 13). In the later period, the capital was also shifted to present North Guwahati or Kāmarupanagar. The early period of Assam lasted till 12<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> century CE, with the end of Pāla dynasty of Assam and the influx of Turko-Afghan invaders from the west and the migration of the Tai-Ahoms under Sukapha, the first of the Ahom rulers who settled in the easternmost part of the Brahmaputra valley.

### **Guardian Figures in the Sculptural Ruins**

Guardians are an important figure which literally translates to one who protects. They are symbolic in Indian art and architecture and therefore several guardian figures were engraved on the walls of temples and palaces. In case of guardians

engraved on temple walls, their main role was to protect the principal deity and also the devotees and attendants associated with it and also to ward off evil and negative forces of nature. Each and every sculptural art has symbolic meanings. Representation of guardian figures are also found from the material remains of early Assam. An important site is the Tezpur region, which was once recognized as a prime seat of power of early Assam. As a result, considerable sculptural remains were recovered from various sites of Tezpur region which pose similarity with that of the guardian figures of *Nagara* temple art in northern and central India. Although the sculptures found in Tezpur were not as majestic and intricate, they were carved with similar symbolic meanings and attributes.

Tezpur has yielded numerous archaeological remains of early period datable from 5<sup>th</sup> century till 13<sup>th</sup> century CE. They are placed at various parts of the town and few are well preserved and displayed in the Tezpur district museum. As far as the question of guardian figure prevail, the best specimen of is found on the Da-Parbatia gateway (Fig.6.1). Da-Parbatia is a small village in the vicinity of Tezpur town. Here we find a beautiful doorframe carved in high relief datable to 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. It is carved in Gupta style of art and is one of the finest pieces of art that has survived from early Assam. The doorframe is a testimony of northern Indian influence on the art on Kāmarūpa as is very similar to the door frames found in the temples of Nachna Kuthara and Bhumara. The site where the doorframe is found had the plinth of an early temple structure on which during the Ahom period re-construction was done. It is said to be temple of lord Śiva. The sculptural art on the doorframe is in high relief. It displays variety of sculptural designs and art and consists of divine, semi-divine, fauna and flora motifs carved in miniature. The guardian figures which are under study are also beautifully carved.

Each side of the doorjamb has four vertical bands above which is a lintel. The doorjamb also consists of the sculptures of river goddesses Gangā and Yamunā towards the bottom part who are considered as guardian figures whose duty is to protect the sacred sanctum and the devotees inside. The doorjamb on the left has the image of Gangā carved on the bottom in high relief. The image has the stylistic 5<sup>th</sup> century classical style influence of Gupta art and dynamism with transparent drapery, drooping eyelids, single piece of jewelry and sensuousness of the figure along with a spiritual aura to it. She is surrounded by two female attendants with *chamara* (fly whisk) and pot in their hands. The doorjamb on the right has the figure of Yamunā carved towards the bottom that is engraved in similar nature to that of Gangā. The only difference is in their number of attendants; in this case it is three in number with *kūrma* being engraved as the *vāhana* of the river goddess. Above both the sculptures is the miniature sculpture of an anthropomorphic *nāga* and *nāgi* guardian figure who are carved with joined hands in devotion with five serpent hoods over their head. Again, on the left side of the doorjamb, along with creeper and floral designs, are the images of *gana* who are also considered as attendants of Śiva and as guardian figures. They are shown as helping female devotees as well as dancing to tunes. Judging from the style of curvature, they are made to look dwarfish which was very common in the art of *gana* figures. Each of the figures is separated from one another by floral or geometric bands and designs. The right doorjamb also projects *gana* figures as dancing and helping female attendants. Two *ganafigures* on the doorjamb below the floral band are seen as plucking fruits or flowers (Goswami & Deka: 2017: 34). Thus, the sculptor has also managed to display the day-to-day activities of the people. On the lintel is the figure of a flying Garuda in anthropomorphic form who is clutching the tails

of *nāga* figures mentioned. Above which is the much bigger part of the lintel engraved with Lakulisa Śiva, Ihāmrga, and Surya with flying *vidyadharas* holding the lintel above (Choudhury: 2014: 15-18).

The Bamuni Pahar (or Hill) ruins also house various sculptural components representing guardian figures datable to 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. The hill consisted of shrines of seven temples, four to the corners, two bigger complexes in the middle and one on the eastern side (Blakiston: 1925-26:116). The principal shrine was dedicated to lord Vishnu, while the subsidiary shrines were dedicated to other gods such as, Śiva, Surya, Durga and Ganeśa (Hargreaves: 1928-29: 44). The most recurring are figures of *kīrtimukha*, *gana*, *dvārapāla*, *nāga*, and lion. The *kīrtimukha* or 'face of glory' motifs are lying scattered throughout the complex. They are found either as a design on friezes or as a single whole motif in stone. Mention may be made of a beautifully engraved *kīrtimukhamotif* in stone (Fig.6.2) which is depicted as fierce, with bulging eyes, raised eyebrows, huge nose, fangs which took the shape of a floral design towards the end and five strings of pearls or *rudrākshamālā* (sacred rosary) dripping from his mouth. It might have been part of a pillar column. It is similar in representation with that of temple art of Odisha, such as Lingaraja temple. Many *kīrtimukha* designs also found a place on the wall friezes. Among such is intricately decorated design with seven pairs of *kīrtimukha* engraved on it (Fig.6.3) which is now broken. The art piece has the usual features of a *kīrtimukha* design, seven of which are carved one after the other in horizontal line followed by triangular geometric design and scroll design below it. This shows an amalgamation of religious beliefs with nature. In another broken piece of a sculptural art, *ganas* are seen engraved playing on musical instrument, dancing and praying at the same time (Fig.6.4). The art piece shows divinities, attended by female

associates in the center. Towards the right jamb is a scroll design and towards the left are four petal *padmā* (lotus) design. At the bottom are four pot-bellied *gana* figures engraved, two on each side. Ganas are engraved as an attendant figure as well as a guardian figure. They are mostly engraved on Śiva temples. Mention may be made of *nāga* figure on another sculptural art. Here the primary deity which is carved is Vishnu, flanked by two female attendants or *dvārapālika* figures. Towards their right is engraved another figure, which can be identified as that of a *nāga*. The image is that of an anthropomorphic *nāga*, who is carved joining both his hands in devotion. He is shown wearing *kundala*, *kanthikā*, *keyūra* and *śīrsaka*. His lower body part is engraved in the form of a tail which is shown moving upward. We also find the images of Navagraha or nine planets that are propitiated to ward off misfortune. A Navagraha panel shows the figure of Rahu-Ketu (Fig.6.5). A *dvārapāla* figure (Fig.6.6) is carved in stone which might have been part of wall design. Although it is partially corroded, the figure is shown standing in *abhanga* posture, holding a *gada* in his left hand. He is shown wearing ornament on his neck, ears and arms and headgear. He is accompanied by two female attendants or *dvārapālika* on his either side. The stone slab is also carved with scroll and floral bands. A sculpture of stylised lion is also found from the site of Bamuni Pahar. The head of the sculptural piece is broken, but the lower part is intact (Fig.6.7). The figure is shown in sitting posture. Lions which are engraved as guardian figures are found carved as sculptural piece in most of the temples.

The remains housed at Chitrlekha Udyan or Cole Park are beautiful specimen of art recovered from different parts of Tezpur and Sonitpur region datable from 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century CE. The most striking are the pillar capitals which have *kīrtimukha* designs engraved on them, below which is a band of floral motif representing a

four petal *padmā* (Fig. 6.8). The motif is also seen on the base of certain other pillars (Fig. 6.9) decorated with *padmā* and *pūrna kumbha* motif on the top. The motif also found a place on a panel alongside divine figures such as Ganeśa, *rishis*, and semi-divine attendants. Apart from that they are artistically crafted as part of wall frieze, which are broken but gathered together alongside other architectural components and have similar canonical expression. An image of a *dvārapāla* is engraved towards the base of a pillar (Fig. 6.10). He is shown holding a mace in his left hand and wearing *kundala*, *kanthikā*, *keyūra* and *śīrsaka* while being accompanied by two female attendants on his either side. The park also houses *gaja-simha* motifs (Fig. 6.11) similar to the ones placed in Tezpur district Museum. One of the friezes shows *nāgamandalā*. They are usually associated with *nāga* worship for protection or with Śiva.

The British era historic building called Dak Bungalow is presently the Tezpur District Museum that also houses numerous archaeological remains from Sonitpur district. The most notable guardian figures placed there include: *gaja-simha* motifs, *dvārapāla*, *kīrtimukha* among others. There are several plaques engraved with beautifully designed *kīrtimukhas*. All of them have general characteristic features. Apart from that *dvārapālas* holding trident, *jatamukuta* on their head, and adorned with rosary in their neck also formed part of pillar art (Fig. 6.12). They are carved towards the bottom of the pillar. Some are carved independently, while some are seen with female attendants.

The museum also houses certain *gaja-simha* and *vyāla* images. They have similar attributes and symbolic meanings with that of the *gajasimha* sculptures on the entrance of Sun Temple at Konark. However, such motifs or sculptures were not sculptured in an opulent manner as witnessed in the Konark temple, but hold similar symbolic meanings and attributes. One such sculptural

art of *vyāla* in stone belonging to 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century CE is placed in the museum (Fig. 6.13). It was recovered from Singri, near Dhekiajuli of Sonitpur district. The figure is shown standing on his hind legs, while turning his head towards his back with fearsome facial attributes as if trying to ward off negative energy or evil. Another *gajasimha* sculpture datable to 10<sup>th</sup> century CE is also housed in the museum (Fig. 14). Its findspot is the Agnigarh Hill of Tezpur. The figure of *simha* is shown standing on the back of *gaja*, who is carved in dwarfish form. Although the facial attribute of the *gajais* calm, but that of *simha* is fearsome. Similar sculptures are placed in the museum datable to 9<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> century CE from Singri Hills.

### Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is certain that guardian figures as engraved on the temples of northern and central India, especially on the Nagara style of temple architecture datable to early period are also present among the material remains of early Assam datable from 6<sup>th</sup>- 13<sup>th</sup> century. They include *Dvārapāla*, *Kīrtimukha*, *Gajasimha* or *Vyāla*, *Nāga* and *Nāgi*, *Gangā* and *Yamunā*, *Gana*, *Guardians of direction* etc., which are found abundantly in the ruins of temple remains of early Assam. It is evident that representation of these guardian figures on sculptural art is significant as they were found profusely from different parts of Assam. Further, the presence of such art also shows the mainland influence on the north-eastern part of the sub-continent. They are generally associated with Brahmanical cult and influenced by Tantric rituals. Apart from this, Buddhist and Jain influence of art was also prevalent in the form of *nāga*, *nāgi*, *yaksha*, *yakshi* sculptural art. Thus the presence of such sculptural art indicates an amalgamation of religious beliefs and symbolism which beautifully led to the rise of sculptural masterpieces in the form of guardian figures.

### Illustration



Fig. 6.1: Da-Parbatia Gateway



Fig. 6.2: Kīrtimukha, Bamuni Pahar



Fig. 6.3: Kīrtimukha frieze. Bamuni Pahar



Fig. 6.4: Ganas, Bamuni Pahar



Fig. 6.5: Rahu-Ketu, Bamuni Pahar



Fig. 6.6: Dvārapāla, Bamuni Pahar



Fig. 6.7: Lion, Bamuni Pahar



Fig. 6.8: Kīrtimukha, Chitrallekha Udyan

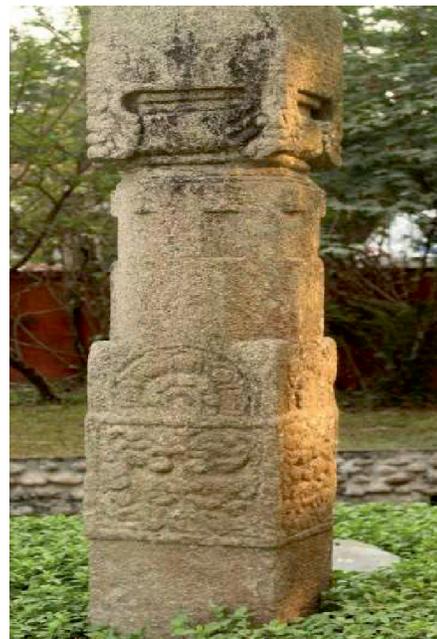


Fig. 6.9: Kīrtimukha, Chitrallekha Udyan



Fig. 6.10: Dvārapāla, Chitrallekha Udyan



Fig. 6.11: Gajasimha, Chitrallekha Udyan



Fig. 6.12: Dvārapāla, Tezpur District Museum

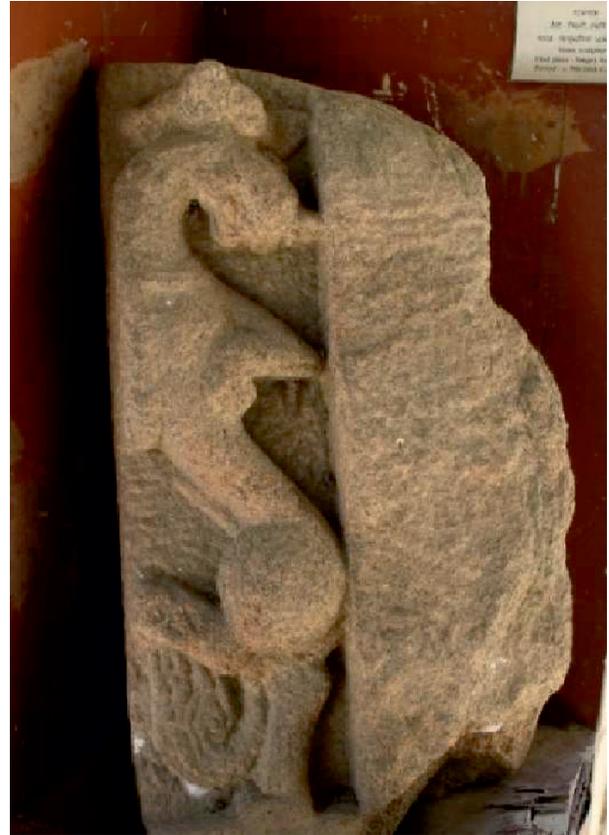


Fig. 6.13: Vyāla, Tezpur District Museum



Fig. 6.14: Gajasimha, Tezpur District Museum

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