

A Report on the Neolithic tools from Sohpet Bneng Hill of Ri-Bhoi District in Meghalaya

(An Ethno Archaeological Study)

Marco Mitri

Introduction

U Sohpet Bneng (literally the navel string of Heaven), a hillock which is located between 25° 42' 26" N Latitude and 91° 55' 40", at 1350 M above sea level overlying the Umiam (Barapani) valley in the Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya has been chosen as an area for contextualizing folklore studies and archaeological research in the Khasi hills. The hill came to occupy a conspicuous place in the Khasi culture, as it has been epitomized in the Khasi folktale in conjunction with the primeval 'Myth of Creation' connected with the appearance of the Khasi community on this part of the earth. From a modern-day Khasi Renaissance perspective it would categorically identify U Sohpet Bneng mound as a 'heritage center'. In fact there is clear indication of this trend with the ongoing construction of a 'Heritage Gate'¹ at the foot of the mound close to Barapani, beside the National Highway Road No.40.

The first phase of archaeological survey on the Sohpet Bneng hill brought to light archaeological remains from the area in the form of Megalithic graves and Megalithic monuments, iron slag pieces and ceramic potsherds of both wheel and hand-made varieties. These findings open the scope for further field investigation into the surrounding areas of the ancient site. With the aid of the archaeological evidence from the area, a preliminary attempt has been made in a previous paper to understand the 'embedded historical narrative' associated with the 'myth of creation' of the folklore². The historicity of the ancient settlement in the site has been further corroborated through ethnographic analogy on the basis of the 'living Megalithic tradition' still being followed by a particular clan which claims direct ancestry to this settlement³.

The Archaeological Evidence

Recent archaeological findings from the hill in close proximity to the Megalithic site called Law Nongthroh, juxtapose the earlier findings

and open up additional evidence on the historical importance and antiquity of the settlement at Sohpet Bneng hill.

The second phase of archaeological exploration around the area of the reported Megalithic settlement led to the discovery of eight numbers of Neolithic stone tools and a few fragmentary pieces of coarse hand-made potsherds. The stone tools were very recently exposed to the surface after the soil had been ploughed for ginger cultivation on the upper slopes of the settlement⁴. Although the original context of the tools has been partially disturbed during the process when the soil was being turned over, yet, objects have not shifted much from their original location as all of them were scattered within an area of about 10-20 sq.mts. only.

The Potsherds From Sohpet Bneng Site

The ceramic materials recovered from the site are in a very fragmentary state. All the pottery samples were hand-made and fired at a very low temperature, as is evident from the bigger space of the dark core at the section profile of the potsherds. They are dull chocolate-brown in colour and the original clay colour is still clearly distinct. Only one piece can be reconstructed, and it has been identified with the rim part of a bowl. This bowl piece was made from well-prepared clay with a relatively smooth surface compared to the rest of the ceramic pieces in the collection. The rest of the collected potsherds are made from very coarse quality clay. The clay was heavily tempered with quartz grits, which are prominently evident on the outer surface of the sherds. With the exception of the rim piece-sherd, other sherds bear cord-impressed patterns on the outer surface, caused due to the 'beater and pad method', a characteristic feature of the pottery technology in the region⁵.

Stone Tools

The stone tools recovered from the site of U Sohpet Bneng are all made from locally available material. A general description of the tools and their probable types and the material used has been listed below (figures and plates attached at the end of the paper).

Tool No.1 (The Shouldered Variety): The shouldered tool is made from black slate. The body is broader at the cutting edge. The cutting edge which had already been used is already blunt and traces of the sharp edge are absent. The body and the tenon are sharply cut and ground to produce a sloping shoulder.

Tool No.2 (The Shouldered Variety): This is another variety of shouldered tool made of soft type of limestone material. The tenon is proportionately very small compared to the body. The angle between the tenon and the body shows a distinct curve and it has a weak shoulder. The body becomes wider towards the cutting edge. Due to unifacial grinding, the cross-section at cutting edge terminates at an acute angle.

Tool No.3 (The Shouldered Variety) : This is another shouldered tool made from slate. It is very thin in cross section. The tenon is almost negligible and the angle is almost absent. It gently slopes towards the body to form an extremely weak shoulder. The cutting edge is formed by unifacial grinding.

Tool No.4 (Splayed Axe Type) : This is a variety of the splayed axe with parallel sides and is rectangular in shape. It is made from soft limestone material. The cross section is lenticular in shape. The cutting edge is produced by unequal bifacial grinding and the butt is ground flat. The concavity on the sides is not very noticeable. Owing to the raw material used, the entire body of the tool is ground-smooth and polished.

Tool No.5 (Broken Piece) : This is a broken tool piece. Only the cutting edge portion of the tool has been recovered and its exact shape cannot be reconstructed. It is made from soft limestone material. A slight concavity can be seen at the cutting edge which seems to have been produced by unifacial grinding.

Tool No.6 (Bar Tool Type): This is a thick variety of bar-celt tool having perfect parallel sides and is relatively thick in section. It is made from soft limestone material. The sides and the butt are ground flat. The cutting edge bears plenty of scar marks indicating its use. One face of the tool is flat and fully ground while the other is rough with several hammered-pressed scars.

Tool No.7 (Axe with Broad Cutting Edge Type): This is an axe made from black slate. The sides are perfectly ground flat and its section is thin. The cutting edge still retains its sharpness probably produced through bifacial grinding.

Tool No.8 (Adze/Chisel Tool Type): This tool is an adze blade or chisel type which is made from black slate. It is a small rectangular tool with parallel sides. The sides are ground flat and the cross section is trapezoidal in shape. It shows marked unequal grinding at the cutting edge. The convex face of the tool gets more and more sharp till it makes an acute angle with the cutting shape.

Tool No.9 (Round Butt Axe Type): This is a highly fractured tool which is made from soft limestone material. One face of the tool has been roughly flaked while the other part shows evidence of grinding from three directions leaving a ridge in the middle. The shape is trapezoidal and the cutting edge is not very prominent.

Tool No.10 (Pointed Butt Type): The tool is made from slate and bears battering scars on the entire body surface. It has a broad cutting edge almost semi-circular and concave, probably meant for slicing function. The butt is pointed with a prominent ridge in the mid-rib.

Tool No.11: A small piece of flake tool without any distinguishable shape.

A brief report on the Neolithic Site of Umiam valley (Barapani) :

On the western flank, and very close to the Sohpet Bneng hill, lies the Umiam valley, commonly known as Barapani. A recent survey on the already reported Neolithic site from this area⁶, offers scope for close examination of the site both in its extent and its relation with the recently discovered Neolithic site of Sohpet Bneng. The site of Barapani appears to have been concentrated around the bank of the old Umiam stream which has been dammed up into the modern Barapani lake. A factory-site has been spotted at the foothill of *U Lum Diengiei* on the western corner of the lake. Large numbers of tools were recovered from this spot, but all of them have been artificially moved from their original context and either exposed to the surface due to the ploughing of the soil by the local farmers in the past, or disturbed by the earlier explorers of the site. Some tools have been piled up together in a huge heap at one place by the local farmers in recent times while clearing the area for cultivation. Evidence of the tools, both the finished and unfinished types are still seen lying scattered along the banks of the present Lake. During the dry seasons, when the water receded, large numbers of tools were exposed on the dry grounds, some of them clearly in sections of eroded layers of the natural embankment at the edge of the lake. The context of these stratified tools is however not very clear. The tools recovered from the factory-site at the foot hill of *U Diengiei*, were composed mostly of the rough, unfinished and broken pieces, and all of them bear large amount of flake scars on their surface. The nature of flaking on the tools seems to resemble that of the pre-neolithic types (?). Some finished-tools were

also recovered from the exposed bed and their surfaces are heavily rolled over by the seasonal impact of the water from the lake. At this stage no effort has been made to classify the types and characteristic features of the tools. The Barapani site appears to be of a much earlier period. Functionally, the site appears to be more a factory-site than a settlement-site. More field work is needed to bring about proper understanding of its spatial dimension and its functional purposes.

Analysis

The latest findings of a Neolithic site at Sohpet Bneng hill have opened up a new opportunity to understand the content, dimension and the overall cultural patterns of the Neolithic phase in the hills. The analysis of the recent findings is as discussed below:

- (1) All the stone tools unearthed from the site at Sohpet Bneng hill bears the typical shape designed for highly specialised functions, such as for use in carpentry works, rather than simple agricultural implements. These, along with the evidence of fragmentary potsherds, point to the fact that the Sohpet Bneng site was no doubt a semi-sedentary settlement of the Neolithic dwellers. The evidence from the site supported the idea that a habitation settlement on the hill had started right from the Neolithic period onwards and must have continued till the period of the deserted ancient Mawbuh settlement. But unless supported by stratigraphical evidence, the relationship between the two cultural-phases (the Megalithic-Neolithic) at Sohpet Bneng, with reference to their continuity cannot be scientifically proved. On the basis of these recent finds, we can only assume that the area had been occupied by ancient settlers right from the Neolithic period, and the habitation of the site had continued till the late Megalithic phase.
- (2) As has already been postulated by earlier scholars, the Barapani Neolithic site appeared to be much older in age⁷. The same cannot be said about the site of Sohpet Bneng considering the fact that this site is still being treated as distinct from the former till this stage of research. A lot more of research and detailed investigation, combined with some sort of scientific dating is necessary to arrive at some degree of interpretation about the relationship between the two sites. However, hypothetically, it may be said that the Neolithic site of U Sohpet Bneng hill, if not representing the later phase of

the Neolithic culture of the Barapani factory-site, could well have been a settlement-site of the authors from the former. Such a hypothesis, once proved, will open up better scope to understand other facets of Neolithic cultures of the Khasi and Jaintia hills, the two most important areas of the Neolithic cultures yet to be studied in detail: firstly, this site will provide a clearer picture about the cultural content of the (till now) very vague Neolithic factory-site of Barapani; and, secondly, the site will open up new dimensions in understanding the settlement patterns of Neolithic dwellers in the Khasi-Jaintia hills as a whole.

- (3) The latest findings offer interesting evidence with regard to the folklore on 'myth of creation' associated with the Sohpet Bneng hill. Although there can never be any evidence substantial enough to authenticate the historicity of the such a myth, these recent discoveries have no doubt added new pointers to the antiquity of the myth, perhaps even extending back to the Neolithic-cultural period.

Conclusion

In my earlier paper, I have tried to contextualize the folklore of U Sohpet Bneng associated with the 'myth of creation' within the inhabitation settlement of the hill. A hypothesis has been forwarded, pointing out that the folklore got radiated throughout the length and breadth of the Khasi-inhabited areas due to migration of the people from this particular area. I tried to draw a direct analogy on the basis of ethnographic information that the first inhabitants of the existing Umroi Village⁸ moved from the ancient settlement of Sohpet Bneng Hill, called Mawbuh.⁹

As part of the same effort to give a historical perspective to the folklore, it is quite apparent that the story of U Sohpet Bneng can also be dated in its earliest phase to the Neolithic-cultural period. This inference was built on the basis of reference to how..

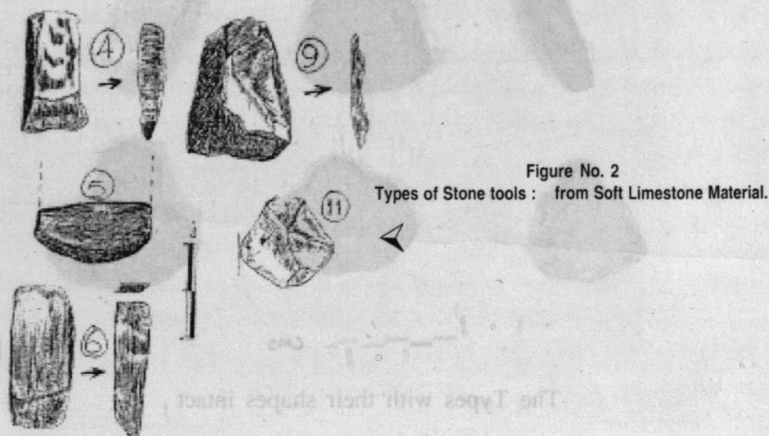
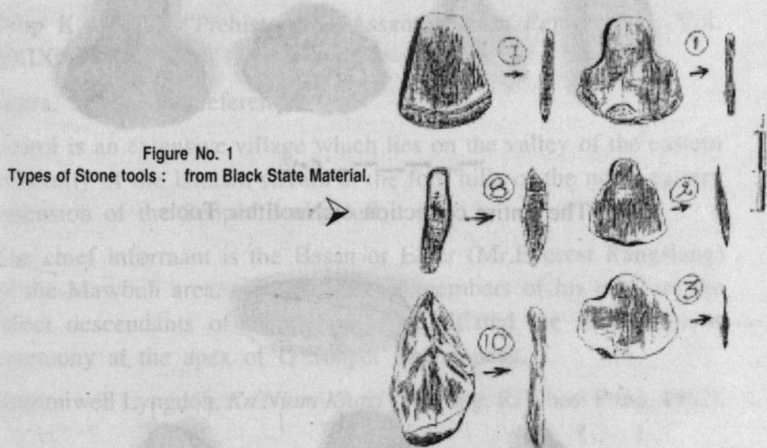
God taught man the art of sowing crops according to seasons, and showed them how to sow the right crop for a good harvest¹⁰.

Literally, it appears to have some link with the origin in the art of sowing crops. It can also be interpreted in terms of a narration about the beginning of domesticated cultivation and specialized farming. With the support of the archaeological data in the form of the Neolithic stone

tools and traces of fragmentary potsherds, the argument seems plausible. But only direct empirical evidence in the form of grain samples or any form of paleo-botanical remains can add substantial support to this theory.

In conclusion, it is important to note that with the use of the multi-disciplinary approach, new insights have emerged in our understanding of folk history and culture; it has added much towards the dynamics of historical research. The approach can be used not just in the context of the Khasi and Jaintia hills but also in the other regions of North East India.

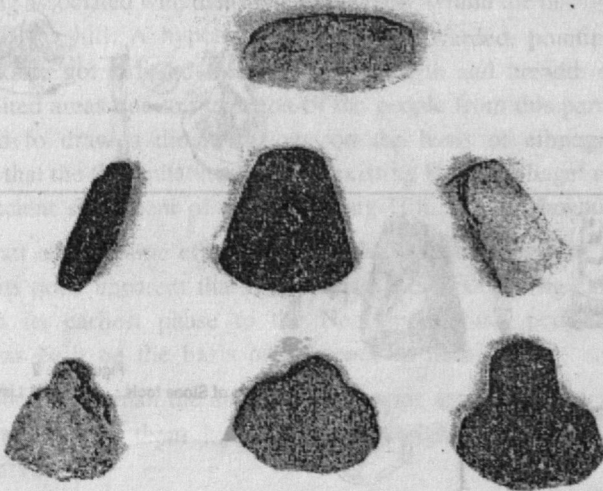
Figures of Neolithic Stone Tools from Sohpet Bneng Site : Ri-Bhoi District Meghalaya



**Plates of the Neolithic Tools from Sohpet Bneng :
Ri-Bhoi District Meghalaya**



The Entire collection of Neolithic Tools



The Types with their shapes intact

Notes and references

1. This has been told to me by Mr.D.L.Nongbri, Secretary, Sohpet Bneng Committee of Seng Khasi (an indigenous socio-religious organisation of the Khasis).
2. Marco Mitri. "An Ethno archaeological Study on the Folktale of 'U Lum SohpetBneng'" *NEIHA Proceedings*, Volume 25, pp.65-71.
3. Rangslang Everest, *Ka Khanna Pateng Lyngkot jong ka Raij Mawbuh*, ed. D.L.Nongbri. Lyngkhuh Snem Ba 100.Seng Khasi
4. *Ibid.*
5. Sharma T.C. "A Note on Neolithic Pottery of Assam," *MAN* Vol. 2, 1967.
6. Dilip K. Medhi, "Prehistory of Assam", *Asian Perspectives*, Vol. XXIX, No.1 (1990).
7. *Supra*, 3n, for the reference.
8. Umroi is an extensive village which lies on the valley of the eastern extremity of the Umiām stream at the foot hills of the north eastern extension of the Sohpet Bneng hill.
9. The chief informant is the Basan or Elder (Mr.Everest Rangslang) of the Mawbuh area, who claims that members of his clan are the direct descendants of the people that initiated the first religious ceremony at the apex of U Sohpet Bneng peak.
10. Hommiwell Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi* (Shillong, Ri Khasi Press, 1962).