
Moidams (India) No 1711

1 Basic information

Official name as proposed by the State Party

Moidams – the Mound-Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty

Location

Assam
Charaideo District
India

Brief description

Set in the foothills of the Patkai Ranges in eastern Assam, the nominated property contains the royal necropolis of the Tai-Ahom. For 600 years, the Tai-Ahom created moidams (burial mounds) that work with the natural features of hills, forests, and water, creating a sacred geography by accentuating the natural topography. Banyan trees and the trees used for coffins and bark manuscripts were planted and water bodies were created. Ninety moidams of different sizes are found within the nominated property boundaries. They were created by providing an earth cover over a hollow vault constructed of brick, stone or earth. The vaults contain the buried or cremated remains of kings and other royal individuals together with grave goods such as food, horses, and elephants, and sometimes queens and servants. The Tai-Ahom rituals of “*Me-Dam-Me-Phi*” and “*Tarpan*” are practiced at the Charaideo necropolis. While moidams are found in other areas within the Brahmaputra Valley, those found at the nominated property are regarded as exceptional.

Category of property

In terms of categories of cultural property set out in Article I of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

Included in the Tentative List

15 avril 2014

Background

This is a new nomination.

Consultations and technical evaluation mission

Desk reviews have been provided by ICOMOS International Scientific Committees, members and independent experts.

An ICOMOS technical evaluation mission visited the nominated property from 5 to 11 October 2023.

Additional information received by ICOMOS

A letter was sent to the State Party on 4 October 2023 requesting further information about cultural landscape,

boundaries, protection and management of the nominated property, visitors and tourism.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 6 November 2023.

An interim report was provided to the State Party on 19 December 2023, summarising the issues identified by the ICOMOS World Heritage Panel.

Further information was requested in the interim report on: inventory of moidams, attributes in the buffer zone, buffer zone protection, governance arrangements, research plan, intangible cultural heritage, and landscape approach to management.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 19 February 2024.

All additional information received has been incorporated into the relevant sections of this evaluation report.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report

13 March 2024

2 Description of the nominated property

Note: The nomination dossier and additional information contain detailed descriptions of this property, its history and its state of conservation. Due to limitations on the length of evaluation reports, this report provides only a short summary of the most relevant aspects.

Description and history

There are several theories about the origins of the Tai, and about the migrations that led to the vast number of peoples with Tai languages and/or ancestry in south, southeast and east Asia in present day Thailand, Myanmar, India, Laos People’s Democratic Republic, Cambodia, Malaysia, Viet Nam and China. These groups are often known by other cultural names, and exhibit a high diversity of languages and religions.

The nominated property is located in the Brahmaputra Valley in upper Assam, in northeast India. Before the arrival of the Tai, this part of India was ruled by several smaller kingdoms. The Tai arrived from Mong-Mao (also known as Maulung), an area bordering today’s Myanmar and China in the 13th century. The Tai Prince Siu-ka-pha established Charaideo as the first permanent capital of the Tai-Ahom. The Tai-Ahom became a powerful dynasty between the 13th and 19th century, ending with the British colonial period.

The history of the Tai-Ahom is documented in the “*Buranjis*” (royal chronicles). Over time, the Tai-Ahom adopted the Assamese language and are associated with the foundations of modern-day Assamese identity. Other Tai groups in the region have retained their language and practice Theravada Buddhism, illustrating the diversity of Tai peoples.

Tai-Ahom spirituality is oriented around ancestor worship, and introduced specific traditions of royal burial mounds or “moidams” (“home”-for-spirit”) at Charaideo. There was a tradition that the tombs for kings, queens and other nobles should be at Charaideo, and it was maintained throughout the six centuries of the Tai-Ahom dynasty. The State Party has documented 319 moidams in the Brahmaputra Valley, and there are more than 90 moidams of varying sizes located within the nominated property, associated with 42 Tai-Ahom kings and other royals.

The nominated property has an area of 95.02 ha, and a buffer zone of 754.511 ha.

The nominated property is located within the Patkai hills. Each moidam (or maidam) is an earthen mound (*Ga-Moidam*) covered in vegetation, topped by a small shrine (*Dole* or *Chou Cha Li*) within a low octagonal wall (*Garh*). The shape symbolises the Tai universe. Within the moidam is a brick-and-stone vault (*Tak*) with a grave-pit (*Garvha*) for the embalmed body or cremated remains of the king. The vaults were believed to function as a temporary resting place for the deceased, along with the grave goods (various objects, food, horses, and elephants). Servants and sometimes a queen were also buried with the king. After a period of twenty-one days, the spirit of the person made its journey to heaven to become a *Phi*. The *Chou Cha Li* on top of the mound is the *Mungklang*, a middle space symbolised as a golden ladder establishing a heaven-earth continuum. The mound then became a focus for rituals to venerate the *Phi*, to venerate ancestors, and seek blessings for the communities.

Located in the buffer zone are some additional moidams and elements that are associated with the ritual uses of the moidams, including two ceremonial pathways (*Dhodhur Ali* and *Sha Niya Ali*), and pools where the intestines were removed and the body was washed (*Petu Dhuwa Pukhuri* and *Sha Dhuwa Pukhuri*). There are also some archaeological remains of the first Tai-Ahom capital, and two sacred temples (Temple on the *Deo-Shal* and *Gota Dole*).

The Tai-Ahom believe that elements of the surrounding environment have a spirit (*Khwan*) – including the sky, mountains, topography, forests, flowing water, rice fields, animals, and water bodies. The wider landscape features planted trees with ritual and spiritual purposes such as banyan trees, *uriam* (used for coffins), and *sanchi* (used for bark manuscripts).

The wider Charaideo landscape features rice terraces and tea plantations. The physical transformation of the scenic natural landscape into a dramatic sacred geography was achieved by clustering burial mounds of varied sizes. The design of the Tai-Ahom sacred landscape developed over 600 years. The nominated property therefore testifies to their religious beliefs, which are connected to nature, giving symbolic meaning to trees, plants and water bodies.

The royal burial ritual ceased with the arrival of British rule but some Tai-Ahom rituals of ancestor worship are practiced, including *Me-Dam-Me-Phi* (ancestor worship) and *Tarpan* rituals (libation of consecrated water).

State of conservation

The nominated property is well-maintained, and there are no adverse effects of development. The moidams are mostly undisturbed. Five of the moidams have been subject to archaeological excavations (Moidams C002, C038, C077, C078 and C090), involving differing levels of intervention. Works are also in place to prevent soil erosion and the growth of trees on the mounds.

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation of the nominated property is generally good.

Factors affecting the nominated property

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the main factors affecting the nominated property are heavy rainfall, soil erosion and vegetation growth.

The State Party discusses risks associated with earthquakes and heavy rain. Assam is located in a seismic zone, but there is little evidence of earthquake damage to the moidams. Monitoring of the compaction of the earth cover is an important means of managing this risk.

Heavy rainfall is a factor affecting the nominated property. Assam has heavy rain for at least four months each year. Rainfall can cause erosion and water logging to the mounds. The areas around the moidams are actively managed and monitored to avoid these impacts. Water logging can cause trees to fall, so trees located near the mounds are also monitored.

Vegetation growth could damage the mounds. Site maintenance therefore involves weeding and removal of excess vegetation. Removal of trees within the nominated property requires the approval of the Department of Forestry, ensuring that the natural heritage and biodiversity of the area is well-managed.

Some steep areas have bamboo palisades to arrest erosion. Former looting pits into the mounds pose an additional risk in high rainfall periods. In some cases, thatched roof shelters have been erected to protect these. Flooding is not a substantial risk due to the relatively high elevation of the site.

There could be minor incidents related to trespassing, vandalism, looting, and border disputes. However, security is provided by the archaeological park staff and a nearby police post.

ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation is generally good, and that factors affecting the nominated property are heavy rainfall, soil erosion and vegetation growth.

3 Proposed justification for inscription

Proposed justification

The nominated property is considered by the State Party to be of Outstanding Universal Value as a cultural property for the following reasons:

- The nominated property is a royal sacred mound-burial landscape of the Tai-Ahoms that practiced this funerary tradition from the 13th to 19th centuries.
- The moidams created a space where Tai-Ahom royals became gods, symbolising the heaven-earth continuum.
- Rituals for ancestor worship (“*Me-Dam-Me-Ph*”) and libation (“*Tarpan*”) continue to be practiced at the necropolis.
- The nominated property has the highest concentration and best-preserved examples of Tai-Ahom moidams in the Brahmaputra Valley, and is the place where Tai-Ahom royalty were buried.
- The nominated property has the complete architectural, landscaping, and spiritual expression of the Tai-Ahom belief system, and demonstrates the evolution of moidam architecture.

ICOMOS consulted the State Party about whether the nominated property should be evaluated as a cultural landscape. ICOMOS considers that the presence of the Tai-Ahom for six centuries has contributed to the cultural, historical and spiritual richness of the site, and that the natural landscape was selected and modified for this purpose. In the additional information received in November 2023, the State Party was not in favour of this possibility because of the specific architectural characteristics, the lack of a seamless integration with the natural environment, and the relatively modest size of the nominated property. While ICOMOS considers that the cultural landscape category could be valid for the nominated property as a funerary system and symbolic landscape (in addition to its monumental aspects), this is not essential for the justification of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value.

Based on the nomination dossier and the additional information, the key attributes of the nominated property are the burial mounds and their contents, the layout of the area (including the clustering of the moidams, the sculpting of the topography, and orientation to elements of the natural setting), and the continuing Ahom rituals.

Comparative analysis

The property is nominated on the grounds that it is the most comprehensive representation of Tai-Ahom royal funerary architecture and landscape planning. The State Party has provided some text regarding Tai cultural traits,

but there are also many differences due to the adoption of Buddhism in many instances, and the influences of diverse local cultures. The State Party did not provide detailed information that places the nominated property within the context of the many other Tai cultural sites in Asia. This is justified on the basis that it is only at Charaideo that the royal Tai-Ahom funerary traditions were sustained over a long period and are evident and comprehensive today.

The comparative analysis provided by the State Party has examined other necropolis landscapes inscribed in the World Heritage List and Tentative Lists that are also associated with important dynasties. These include: Historic Monuments and Sites in Kaesong (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, 2013, criteria (ii) and (iii)); Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor (China, 1987, criteria (i), (iii), (iv) and (vi)); The Ancient City of the Sardis and the Lydian Tumuli of Bin Tepe (Türkiye, Tentative List); Archaeological Site of Aigai (modern name Vergina) (Greece, 1996, criteria (i) and (iii)); Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group: Mounded Tombs of Ancient Japan (Japan, 2019, criteria (iii) and (iv)); Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region (Japan, 2017, criteria (ii) and (iii)); Stone Circles of Senegambia (Senegal and Gambia, 2006, criteria (i) and (iii)); Complex of Hué Monuments (Viet Nam, 1993, criterion (iv)); Gordion (Türkiye, 2023, criterion (iii)); Bronze Age Burial Site of Sammallahdenmäki (Finland, 1999, criteria (iii) and (iv)); Burials in Bunong Cultural Landscape (Cambodia, not in the World Heritage List or Tentative List); Gebel Barkal and the Sites of the Napatan Region (Sudan, 2003, criteria (i), (ii), (iii), (iv) and (vi)); Memphis and its Necropolis – the Pyramid Fields from Giza to Dashur (Egypt, 1979, criteria (i), (iii) and (vi)); Dilmun Burial Mounds (Bahrain, 2019, criteria (iii) and (iv)); Archaeological Sites of Bat, Al-Khutm and Al-Ayn (Oman, 1988, criteria (iii) and (iv)); Complex of Koguryo Tombs (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, 2004, criteria (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv)); Gaya Tumuli (Republic of Korea, 2023, criterion (iii)); Royal Tombs of the Joseon Dynasty (Republic of Korea, 2009, criteria (iii), (iv) and (vi)); and Western Xia Imperial Tombs (China, Tentative List). This is a long list and very diverse in terms of the historical periods, geocultural regions and specific physical, geographical, cultural, and spiritual characteristics. ICOMOS considers that the most relevant sites are those associated with Tai cultures in the Asian region..

The State Party has provided a very brief comparative summary of the funerary architecture and practices of Tai groups throughout Asia. The table provided very briefly describes the funerary architecture in western, southern, central Mekong, central upland, eastern, Tai Lai (originally in northeast Thailand), Tai Khamtis and Tai Daikong groups. ICOMOS considers that this is too briefly presented, and incomplete. However, it is accepted that Tai cultural groups are diverse (for example, many Tai peoples follow Theravada Buddhism), and that the Tai Ahom traditions are distinctive.

Finally, the comparative analysis also considers some other “transcendental landscapes” in India, such as Humayun’s Tomb, Delhi (1993, criteria (ii) and (iv)), and components within sites included on the Tentative List of India, such as Qutb Shahi Monuments of Hyderabad Golconda Fort, Qutb Shahi Tombs, Charminar; and Iconic Riverfront of the Historic City of Varanasi. These sites do not significantly contribute to the establishment of a clear comparative context for the nominated property.

Regarding the selection of the nominated property, the State Party provided additional information in February 2024 about the inventory of all known moidams in Assam, including their condition and integrity. There is a total of 319 moidams, but not all of these are protected, and many are overgrown with vegetation. This information serves to better support the selection of the ninety moidams in the nominated property as the densest concentration and most complete Tai-Ahom moidams. In addition, it is only at this place that the remains of the Ahom kings and other royals were entombed.

ICOMOS considers that the comparisons with other Tai landscapes has not been sufficiently comprehensive to establish the place of this landscape amongst all possible Tai burial traditions. However, the Tai-Ahom was a significant Tai kingdom, and the comparative analysis and additional information received in February 2024 sufficiently establish the importance of this landscape for the Tai-Ahom.

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of this property for the World Heritage List.

Criteria under which inscription is proposed

The property is nominated on the basis of cultural criteria (iii), (iv) and (v).

Criterion (iii): *bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the nominated property bears witness to the Tai-Ahom kingdom, which had its capital at Charaideo from the 13th to the 19th centuries. The moidams are a unique type of funerary architecture of the Tai-Ahom, and the nominated property is the royal necropolis of the Tai-Ahom. The nominated property demonstrates their spiritual beliefs and practices.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property testifies to the 600 years of Tai-Ahom funerary traditions at Charaideo. The comprehensive archaeological remains of the moidams are testimony to the funerary architecture, landscaping, and associated rituals of the Tai-Ahoms. The archaeological remains are evidence of the architecture, layout, and spiritual manifestations of the Tai-Ahom sacred royal necropolis.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion is demonstrated.

Criterion (iv): *be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the moidams and landscape of Charaideo are a unique and superlative typology of royal necropolis and that the nominated property has all the elements needed to represent a tangible manifestation of the spirituality of Tai-Ahom culture. The changes over time from wood to brick and stone construction, and two types of “Ga-Moidam” are illustrated at the nominated property.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property is an outstanding example of a Tai-Ahom necropolis that represents in a tangible way Tai-Ahom funerary traditions and associated cosmologies. For over 600 years, the Tai-Ahom sculpted this landscape according to their cosmological beliefs. The undulating topography was accentuated by excavating ditches and marking the troughs with moidams. The natural vegetation was enhanced by planting sacred trees, and water bodies were added by channelising streams to fill them. Together these features symbolise the Tai universe, and a heaven-earth continuum.

While moidams are found in other areas within the Brahmaputra Valley, this particular cluster is regarded to be the most significant, and the continuing rituals in this landscape enhance its overall significance. Considering the cultural influence of the Tai-Ahom ethnic group in Assam and its long period of geopolitical prominence, criterion (iv) is considered appropriate.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion is demonstrated.

Criterion (v): *to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the nominated property is an outstanding example of land use for a sacred royal necropolis, a symbolic heaven-earth continuum for Tai-Ahoms, and a depiction of Tai heaven. This sacred landscape is where god-like kings became spirit gods. Ancestor worship rituals engage these spirits for the benefit of the living community.

ICOMOS considers that the State Party has explained well the complex interplay of nature and culture in this landscape, and the ways in which they combine to create a sacred place for the Tai-Ahoms. However, the nominated property is focused on the necropolis and funerary traditions of the Tai-Ahoms, and relatively little is documented or included in the nomination concerning the relict landscape created by the traditions of six centuries of Tai-Ahom settlement. For these reasons, ICOMOS considers that criterion (v) is not demonstrated.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property meets cultural criteria (iii) and (iv), but that criterion (v) has not been demonstrated.

Integrity and authenticity

Integrity

The integrity of the nominated property is based on the extent to which it contains all the attributes necessary to convey the proposed Outstanding Universal Value, the condition and intactness of the attributes, and the management of major pressures.

In order to justify the rationale of the selection of the nominated property from amongst the entire number of known moidams, additional information received in February 2024 provides an inventory of the 319 known moidams in northeastern India.

There are no settlements, modern high-rise, electricity infrastructure, industries, or agriculture within the nominated property. The surrounding areas provide views of the Patkai hills, forests, tea plantations, gardens, and small homesteads. There is minimal threat of development or encroachment, and the nominated property is well protected. The visual integrity is well-established.

The delineation of the boundaries of the nominated property was questioned by ICOMOS given that the nomination dossier provides details of moidams and other elements of the funerary system located in the buffer zone. In the additional information received in November 2023 and February 2024, the State Party clarified that while moidams occur outside the property boundaries, the nominated property contains the densest concentration of moidams, and that these are the most significant, comprehensive and representative of Tai-Ahom tombs. The State Party also explained that the other elements within the buffer zone (such as the ceremonial pathways and water bodies) are not attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. Based on exchanges with the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS accepts the rationale for the delineation of the boundaries, noting in particular the efforts of the State Party to provide a generous buffer zone and the efforts of the Assam state to ensure the legal protection of moidams and other features located in the buffer zone.

ICOMOS considers that the integrity of the nominated property has been demonstrated.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the nominated property is based on the ability of the attributes to convey the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. For this purpose, the State Party refers to the *Buranjis* (royal chronicles) as an authoritative source of information. These writings provide details of the Tai-Ahom world view and daily life. The *Chang-Rung Phukonar*

Buranji and the *Ahom Buranji* provide information on the funerary rituals and spiritual associations, as well as details of the materials and labour required to construct the moidams.

The nominated property is a sacred landscape with built royal burial mounds, and other elements such as water bodies and trees that reflect Tai-Ahom beliefs. The tombs of royals of the Tai-Ahom dynasty are located at Charaideo, and the continued rituals of ancestor worship at the nominated property contribute to its authenticity.

ICOMOS considers that the authenticity of the nominated property has been demonstrated.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the conditions of integrity and authenticity of the nominated property have been met.

Boundaries

There are no inhabitants within the nominated property, and approximately 4,017 inhabitants in the buffer zone (figures are based on 2011).

The State Party advises that the boundaries of the nominated property encloses all the elements that are integral to the spiritual purposes of the moidams. Ninety moidams are located within these boundaries. In the additional information submitted in November 2023, the State Party has further clarified that the boundaries reflects land ownership and administrative arrangements, despite some variance in the alignment with the mapped heritage designations at the national and state levels.

The boundaries are well marked on the ground. An existing boundary wall separates the lands held by Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and Assam Government's Directorate of Archaeology (DOA) Assam, but this will soon be removed to allow a homogenous vista and access, as well as facilitating the joint management and custodianship by the two organisations.

The buffer zone is marked by roads and cart paths and consists mostly of private land, homesteads, small scale cultivations, tea gardens, plantations, and rice paddy fields. Public and commercial facilities, such as shops, garages, workshops, and schools are found along the principal vehicular roads. There are also some forested areas.

ICOMOS notes that the nominated area has a high concentration of moidams associated with Tai-Ahom royalty. As already mentioned, there are other associated elements located in the buffer zone, including moidams and sites related to the funerary system (eg. *Petu Dhuwa Pukhuri* and *Sha Dhuwa Pukhuri* water features for the ritual cleansing of the deceased and the *Sha Niya Ali* and *Dhodhur Ali* ceremonial pathways). The buffer zone has been extensively surveyed and officially demarcated, and all archaeological sites are clearly marked.

In the additional information provided in November 2023 and February 2024, the State Party explained that the moidams in the buffer zone occur in smaller clusters and have lesser integrity than those within the boundaries of the nominated property. The water bodies and pathways are not considered to be attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. The State Party has explained that pre-burial practices took place at different remote locations with few available records that verify these past uses. A list of the individual Ahom sites located in the buffer zone was provided in February 2024. The Assam state has made provisional notification for protection of these sites and the process for finalising their protection can take up to six months. In some instances, there are efforts to negotiate with private owners and/or acquire land parcels, including the recent acquisition of land from a tea plantation containing part of the *Phuleswari Kuwori* Moidams.

The buffer zone is bounded by the *Dhodar Ali* Road on one side and is surrounded by tea plantations. The immediate setting of the nominated property and vistas are included within the buffer zone. No new development is permitted within the buffer zone, and improvements to existing structures require permits and are limited to the existing footprints. The buffer zone therefore provides additional protection beyond the 100 metres prohibited zone and 200 metres regulated zone established by the legal frameworks. Consultation with residents and landowners within the buffer zone were part of the development of the nomination dossier.

Evaluation of the proposed justification for inscription

In summary, while there are some shortcomings, ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of this property for inscription in the World Heritage List, and that criteria (iii) and (iv) are demonstrated. The boundaries are adequate, and the conditions of integrity and authenticity of the nominated property are met.

4 Conservation measures and monitoring

Documentation

An extensive program of inventory and documentation for the nominated property (and the buffer zone) has been undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and Assam Government's Directorate of Archaeology (DOA). Detailed documentation has occurred for the moidams that have been excavated and/or restored; and the majority of the moidams have been documented to a basic level. There is an ongoing program of recording. In the additional information received in February 2024, the State Party provided an inventory of all known moidams (319) in the Brahmaputra Valley, including information about their integrity.

Documentation work ranges from basic site measurements, measured drawings, photographic

records, and condition reports, to detailed aerial survey employing drones, 3D scanners and LiDAR technology. The documentation processes are oriented toward archaeological research, conservation, and monitoring.

A small number of moidams (Moidams C002, C038, C077, C078 and C090) have been subject to scientific study and intervention, including archaeological excavations and/or conservation. Overall, there is considerable potential for further archaeological research within the nominated property and wider setting. Additional information received in February 2024 provided details of current and planned research for the period to 2030. This is considered to be a dynamic document that could be further developed. The State Party also outlined plans to create an inventory of intangible cultural heritage and other steps toward safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of the nominated property.

Conservation measures

The National Policy for Conservation of the Ancient Monuments, Archaeological Sites and Remains (2014) sets out the principles and approaches to the conservation of the monuments and sites that fall within its scope and applies to the nominated property.

A summary of conservation works was provided in the nomination dossier. The conservation approach and planned actions to conservation and maintenance are outlined in the Site Management Plan. Current conservation works at Moidam C002 are scheduled to be completed after the end of the wet season.

Routine works include restoration of the earth covers, re-setting of dislodged bricks, removal of excess vegetation, propping of mature trees, and water tightening of the two "*Taks*" that are open to visitors. Other works are termed "special repairs" and include works to reinforce/restore slopes, bamboo and earth covers over former looting pits, water drainage and channels. Where necessary, some archaeological excavation is carried out to identify historic remains.

The ASI and DOA Assam employ traditional techniques and methods to repair to the brickwork and lime plaster of the burial mounds. Craftspeople skilled and trained in traditional materials are involved in this work.

A history of conservation works at the nominated property has been provided. Five moidams (Moidams C002, C038, C077, C078 and C090) have had larger-scale conservation interventions, but the remainder are monitored and maintained (eg. weeding, planting of grass over the mounds to prevent erosion, erection of bamboo palisades and timber shelters, routine removal of foliage). There are no plans to excavate any new moidams; and any future plans for excavation would require review and approval from the National Monument Authority.

The local population and communities frequently volunteer to participate in maintenance and site cleaning efforts.

Monitoring

The monitoring arrangements are briefly outlined in the nomination dossier. The indicators primarily involve observations relating to the pressures that affect the condition of the moidams such as surface water and vegetation. There are also indicators that are specifically directed at the state of conservation of the proposed attributes.

ICOMOS considers that the documentation, conservation, and monitoring are adequate. ICOMOS recommends that the further elaboration of the monitoring system is designed to integrate its outcomes into the Periodic Reporting questionnaire.

5 Protection and management

Legal protection

The Group of Four Maidams is an Ancient Monument of National Importance and is protected and managed by ASI through the provisions of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act of 2010. In addition, the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972 provides the State of India with the power to legally acquire antiquities or artifacts associated with protected monuments.

The remainder of the nominated property is the Charaideo Archaeological Site, an Ancient Monument of State Importance, protected and managed by the Government of Assam through the provisions of the Assam Ancient Monuments and Records Act, 1959. The National Monument Authority regulates development in the buffer zone and approves applications for archaeological excavation.

In the additional information received in November 2023, the State Party clarified that 18.87 ha is under the administrative control of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), and the other 76.13 ha is a state protected area under the jurisdiction of the Assam Government's Directorate of Archaeology (DOA).

The existing national and state protection laws are robust. No development is allowed to take place within the nominated property. A prohibited area of 100 metres surrounds the nominated property, and a regulated area of 200 metres surrounds the prohibited area. In the additional information received in November 2023, the State Party provided maps showing the two legally designated areas, including their prohibited and regulated zones.

In the additional information received in February 2024, the State Party advised that state legal protection of the buffer zone has come into force. In addition, an inventory of individual Ahom sites in the buffer zone was provided. The Assam state has made provisional notification of protection for these sites, and expects to complete this process within six months.

Management system

The management system is guided by the National Policy for Conservation of the Ancient Monuments, Archaeological Sites and Remains (2014). This Policy outlines the guiding principles in the management of the nominated property, including conservation principles and approach; conservation of monuments; building craftsmanship; capacity building; promotion; tourism and visitor management; community participation and access for differently-abled persons; new interventions; and disaster management.

The site is jointly managed by two separate entities, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Assam Government's Directorate of Archaeology (DOA), and all matters affecting the prohibited and regulated zones are approved by the joint management. In the additional information received in November 2023 and February 2024, the State Party explained that the procedures for conservation are aligned between the national and state agencies, ensuring that the nominated property will be conserved, protected, and managed as a single unit. The State Party confirmed that while each organisation maintains and conserves their part of the nominated property with their own funds, infrastructure, and staff, sufficient resources, expertise and staffing are provided to both organisations, and that there will be coordination in capacity building.

In the additional information provided in November 2023, the State Party informed ICOMOS that a coordinating mechanism of three committees has been established: the State-level Apex Committee (chaired by the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam), a Local Level Committee that oversees maintenance issues (chaired by the Deputy Commissioner of District Charaideo), and a Ministerial Committee, the highest committee for overseeing works and projects.

The Site Management Plan of Moidams – the Mound-Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty (2023-2030) has been developed by the DOA Assam in consultation with the ASI and applies to the whole nominated property. There are action plans and timelines for implementation. There are provisions for: archaeological investigations; conservation and maintenance of mounds and vaulted chambers; landscape conservation and maintenance; access and provision of pathways and shelters; visitor facilities and interpretation; risk preparedness and disaster management; buffer zone management; education, publicity, and outreach; and rural regeneration. There are periodic reviews of the actions, and a more substantial review will occur in 2029 as part of the budget process. The State Party has also provided information about the Infrastructure/Protection, Preservation of Charaideo Moidams Archaeological Site five-year project that complements the conservation plan and focuses on improvements to visitor infrastructure.

Other plans in place for the nominated property include a local plan which focuses more on rural development; a five-year conservation plan; and a tourism development

plan prepared by the Tourism Department of the Government of Assam.

In the additional Information received in November 2023, the State Party confirmed that Heritage Impact Assessment is a requirement of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act of 2010 which establishes the National Monument Authority. All development proposals within the nominated property are submitted to the National Monument Authority, which can request a Heritage Impact Assessment if necessary. Developments in the buffer zone are regulated through planning processes, including the Regional Development plans, Perspective Plans and Master Plans which guide local planning.

ICOMOS considers that, in addition to continuing to augment the management system with plans for sustainable tourism and interpretation, a landscape approach to the management of the nominated property should be developed. In the additional information received in February 2024, the State Party agreed with this suggestion, and pointed to a number of elements in place that already reflect such an approach. This should be further developed.

Visitor management

According to the State Party, current levels of visitors are considered moderate. Most visitors are Assamese and people of Tai-Ahom descent. The level of international visitors is negligible. Annual festivals attract large numbers of participants.

The Tourism Department of the State of Assam has developed the Charaideo Tourism Promotion Plan for the promotion and development of the nominated property. This includes a training program for tour guides. There are provisions for sight-impaired and mobility-impaired visitors, and the State Party is currently organising a series of heritage trails. A network of homestays is proposed in villages within the buffer zone to enhance local community participation and benefit sharing.

Site interpretation is currently under-developed and relies on a few signboards (in English and Assamese). There is a small site museum which is currently closed and scheduled for renovation. The museum stores the finds from excavations in the nominated property. Other visitor facilities include brick-lined pathways, a new ticketing building, parking areas and visitor centre (which has yet to have the interior fitted). An audio-guide, guidebooks and lockers are planned. The current projects in the Infrastructure/Protection, Preservation of Charaideo Moidams Archaeological Site plan include the creation of a new documentation centre in the site museum, and other education initiatives.

In the additional Information received in November 2023, the State Party outlined its plans to develop a framework for managing future tourism growth. Initiatives will include on-line ticketing, establishment of daily limits and time

slots for visiting the nominated property, recruiting, and training additional guides, and monitoring.

Community involvement

The State Party has provided a description of the consultations undertaken for the development of the nomination dossier with local residents, landowners, Ahom royal descendants and other stakeholders (eg. tourist guides, historians, teachers). The key requests from local residents have focused on employment opportunities through tourism and site management. Capacity building and employment projects are proposed, as well as craft and social and forestry-based entrepreneurship. Additional information received in February 2024 provided details of planned strategies for community engagement, including education, community involvement in conservation and maintenance work, use of relevant local traditional skills, establishing community committees for collaboration, collaboration in research and documentation, opportunities for employment and training, and promoting cultural tourism.

Group meetings are held periodically to ensure participation in relevant initiatives. The local communities regard the moidams as sacred burial sites and actively protect them, as well as advocating for the upkeep of the landscape.

Effectiveness of the protection and management of the nominated property

In summary, ICOMOS considers that the legal protection is adequate. The joint management arrangements require ongoing and effective coordination. Further development of the management system to include a sustainable tourism strategy and interpretation plan is needed. Given the high degree of community engagement and support for the nomination, implementation of the proposed measures for participatory activities is recommended.

6 Conclusion

Moidams – the Mound-Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty are a sacred landscape in eastern Assam, India, with more than ninety burial mounds established by the Tai-Ahom over 600 years. The moidams of Charaideo contain the remains of the Tai-Ahom kings and are set within a sculpted landscape that reflects Tai cosmologies, modifying the natural features of hills, forests, and water to create a sacred geography. The moidams at Charaideo are of different sizes and demonstrate changes in techniques and materials over time. They are created by providing an earth cover over a hollow vault constructed of brick, stone, or earth. The vaults contain the buried or cremated remains of kings and other royal individuals together with grave goods. Some Tai-Ahom rituals are practiced at the nominated property. While moidams are found in other areas in the Brahmaputra Valley, those found at the nominated property are regarded as exceptional.

The comparative analysis could have been expanded to provide a more detailed description of Tai cultures, their influences within the Asian region, and the diversity of funerary traditions. However, the comparative analysis is sufficient to establish the specificities of the Tai-Ahom funerary traditions and moidams.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property demonstrates 600 years of Tai-Ahom traditions at Charaideo. ICOMOS considers that the nominated property is an exceptional example of a Tai-Ahom necropolis that represents in a tangible way their funerary traditions and associated cosmologies. ICOMOS considers that criteria (iii) and (iv) are demonstrated, but that criterion (v) is not demonstrated. During the evaluation procedure, the State Party clarified the rationale for the delineation of the boundaries and the buffer zone, given that there are some moidams and other sites associated with the Tai-Ahom funerary rituals located in the buffer zone. ICOMOS understands the rationale provided by the State Party, noting the good size of the buffer zone, and the legal protection provided to identified Ahom sites occurring in the buffer zone. Accordingly, the conditions of authenticity and integrity are met.

ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation is generally good, and that factors affecting the nominated property are heavy rainfall, soil erosion and vegetation growth. The documentation, conservation, and monitoring of the nominated property are adequate, although some recommendations have been provided for continued work. The nominated property is well-maintained, and there are no adverse effects of development. Works are in place to prevent soil erosion and the growth of trees on the mounds.

ICOMOS considers that, while the legal protection and management system are adequate, their effectiveness will rely on the coordination between the national and state heritage agencies. The State Party has implemented measures to ensure this coordination. Further development of the management system to include a sustainable tourism strategy and interpretation plan is needed, as well as further development of the research plan and implementation of a landscape approach to the management of the nominated property. Given the high degree of community engagement and support for the nomination, the implementation of the planned mechanisms for community participation is recommended.

7 Recommendations

Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that Moidams – the Mound-Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty, India, be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of **criteria (iii) and (iv)**.

Recommended Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

Brief synthesis

Moidams – the Mound-Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty are a royal mound burial necropolis established by the Tai-Ahom in northeastern India. Set in the foothills of the Patkai Ranges in eastern Assam, the property contains features sacred to the Tai-Ahom and demonstrates their funerary traditions. Led by Prince Siu-kha-pha, the Tai-Ahom migrated to present-day Assam in the 13th century and selected Charaideo as their first capital and location for the royal necropolis. For 600 years (from the 13th to the 19th centuries CE), the Tai-Ahom created moidams (“home-for-spirit”) that work with the natural features of hills, forests, and water, creating a sacred geography by accentuating the natural topography. Sacred trees were planted and water bodies were created.

Ninety moidams are found within the Charaideo necropolis, sited on elevated land. The moidams have been created by building an earth mound (*Ga-Moidam*) over a hollow vault constructed of brick, stone or earth (*Tak*), and topped by a shrine (*Chou Cha Li*) at the centre of an octagonal wall (*Garh*). This shape symbolises the Tai universe. The shrine at the top is the *Mungklang*, a middle space symbolised as a golden ladder establishing a heaven-earth continuum. The vaults contain the buried or cremated remains of kings and other royal individuals together with grave goods such as food, horses, and elephants, and sometimes queens and servants. The moidams within the property testify to the changes in materials and design of the burial mounds over time. This is a physical space where Tai-Ahom royals became gods, symbolising a heaven-earth continuum. The Tai-Ahom rituals of *Me-Dam-Me-Phi* (ancestor worship) and *Tarpan* (libation) are practiced at the Charaideo necropolis.

Criterion (iii): Moidams – the Mound-Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty bear witness to 600 years of Tai-Ahom royal funerary architecture and customs and are a testimony to Tai-Ahom cultural traditions from the 13th to 19th centuries CE. The archaeological remains of the moidams are evidence of the architecture, layout, and manifestations of the Tai-Ahom beliefs and traditions. The continuing ritual practices of Tai-Ahom at the property are also significant in relation to this criterion.

Criterion (iv): Moidams – the Mound-Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty are an outstanding example of a Tai-Ahom necropolis that represents in a tangible way the Tai-Ahom funerary traditions and associated cosmologies. For over 600 years, the Tai-Ahom sculpted this landscape according to their cosmological beliefs. The undulating

topography was accentuated by excavating ditches and marking the troughs with moidams. The natural vegetation was enhanced by planting sacred trees, and water bodies were added by channelising streams to fill them. Together these features symbolise the Tai universe, and a heaven-earth continuum.

Integrity

The property contains the most important and well preserved Tai-Ahom royal mound burials (moidams). These are protected by national and state legal frameworks. The state of conservation is generally good, and the factors affecting the property are heavy rainfall, soil erosion and vegetation growth. The boundaries are appropriate, and the buffer zone protects the setting and other features associated with the Tai-Ahom.

Authenticity

The Charaideo necropolis is a sacred landscape with built royal burial mounds that reflect Tai-Ahom beliefs. The moidams are largely intact, as is the rural landscape setting. The *Buranjis* (royal chronicles) provide details of the Tai-Ahom world view and daily life, including the funerary rituals and spiritual associations, as well as details of the materials and labour required to construct the moidams.

Protection and management requirements

The property is protected by the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act of 2010, the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972, and the Assam Ancient Monuments and Records Act, 1959. The National Monument Authority regulates development in the buffer zone and approves applications for archaeological excavation. No development is allowed within the property.

The property is jointly managed by the Assam Government's Directorate of Archaeology (DOA) and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The Group of Four Moidams is an Ancient Monument of National Importance, and the remainder of the property is the Charaideo Archaeological Site, an Ancient Monument of State Importance. Three committees have been established to ensure coordination: the State-level Apex Committee, a Local Level Committee that oversees maintenance issues, and a Ministerial Committee for overseeing works and projects.

The management system is guided by the National Policy for Conservation of the Ancient Monuments, Archaeological Sites and Remains (2014). The Site Management Plan of Moidams – the Mound-Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty (2023-2030) applies to the whole property. The Infrastructure/Protection, Preservation of Charaideo Moidams Archaeological Site five-year project focuses on improvements to visitor infrastructure. The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act of 2010, establishes processes and

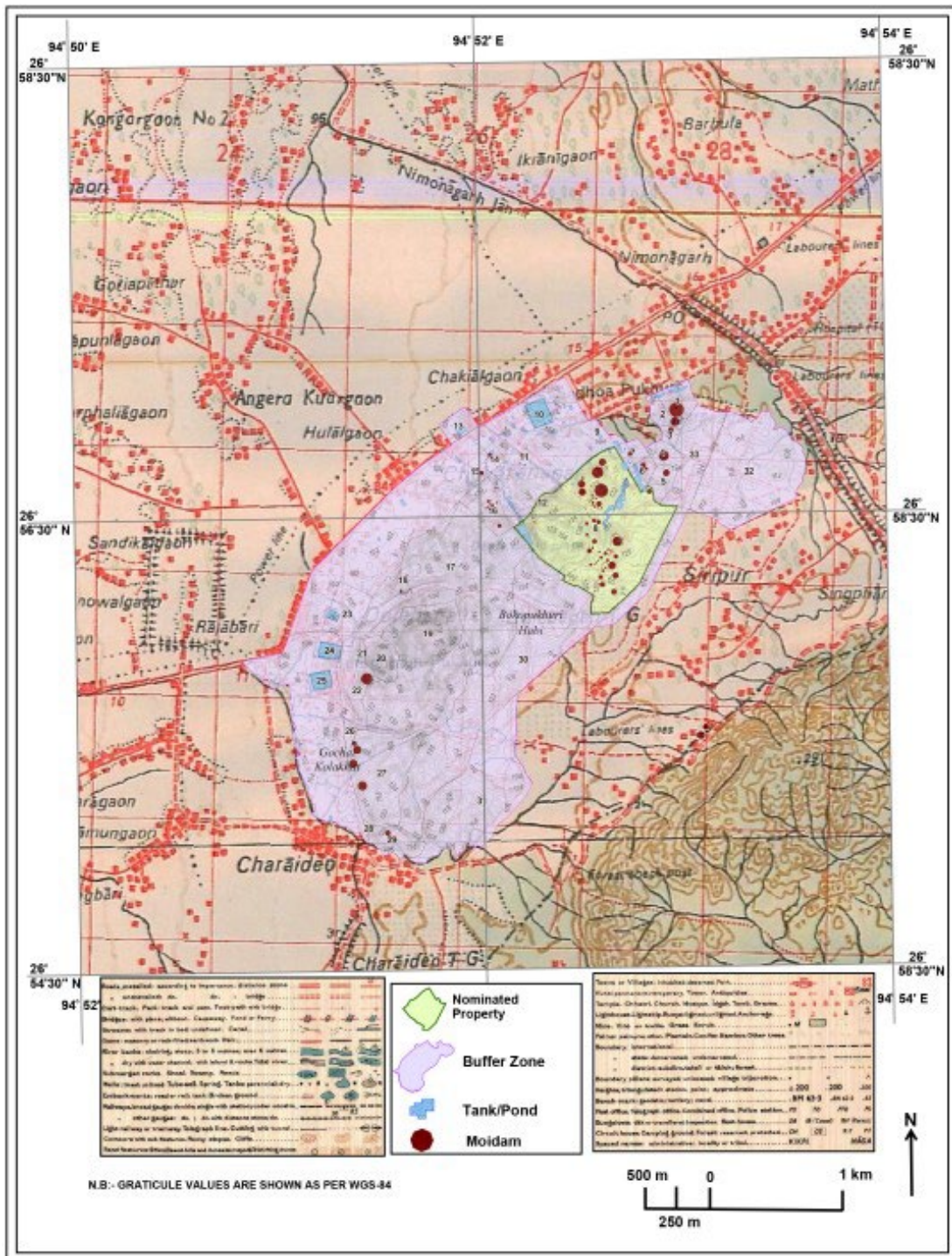
requirements for Heritage Impact Assessments. Further development of the management system to include a sustainable tourism strategy and interpretation plan is needed; as well as further development of the research plan and implementation of a landscape approach to the management of the property.

Local communities regard the moidams as sacred burial sites and actively protect them. In recognition of the importance of the involvement of local communities, additional strategies for community engagement have been outlined.

Additional recommendations

ICOMOS further recommends that the State Party give consideration to the following:

- (a) Removing the boundary wall between the areas managed by the Assam Government's Directorate of Archaeology (DOA) and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI);
- (b) Implementing and further developing the research plan in cooperation with academic partners;
- (c) Finalising the state level protection of Ahom sites located within the buffer zone;
- (d) Developing the sustainable tourism strategy and interpretation plan;
- (e) Implementing the proposed measures for community engagement and further developing mechanisms for formal community participation in the management structures;
- (f) Further developing the landscape approach to the long-term management of the property, buffer zone and wider setting.



Map showing the boundaries of the nominated property