

The Journey of Indian Archaeology: From Antiquarianism to Archaeology under British Rule

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Since the British ruled India, it was in their interest to construct an image in where they appeared as the saviours and guardians of sub-continental monuments. It is however in our interest to look beyond the framework that was created for India and reconstruct a picture where the mapping of the Indian archaeological universe is shown as being related to the larger imperial agenda of the British Raj. That this was an agenda that could view the pious as “desecrators” and attempt to remove heterogeneous forms of worship and guardianship at several religious shrines, has also been highlighted. Viewed in this light, the terms of the problem are altered in several important ways. Among other things, instead of the stereotyped image of Curzon as the conservator par excellence, a more complicated picture emerges where the destruction/exclusion of cultural meanings accompany the conservation of cultural property. Equally important is the sense that the “natives” were not just conforming to British notions of them. Instead of a passive acceptance of conservation measures proffered by the government, indigenous groups appeared to articulate their sentiments and policies around their own agendas; agendas that were not exclusively shaped by those of the colonial state.

Initial Archaeological Interest

Interest in archaeology in India began earlier than the establishment of the Asiatic Society by William Jones in Calcutta in 1784.¹ From the sixteenth century onwards, there are copious references to Indian monuments in the writings of European travellers in the country. Travelogues thus constitute the first source material of archaeological writings on India. The tradition continued well into the eighteenth century, but from about the middle of that century there is clear evidence of the beginnings of systematic scholarly attention to archaeology.²

The urge for archaeological investigations took a very long time to germinate on Indian soil. There are hardly any traces of archaeology in the country’s history.

Ancient India never seems to have experienced the urge for archaeological investigation and medieval India too remained practically unaffected by it till the end.³ The earliest work on the related subject was done in the eleventh century by a historian, Kalhana, who seems to have understood, however imperfectly, the value of historical reconstruction of the material remains of bygone ages. He not only

attempted a thorough study of coins and inscriptions, but also made it a point to personally inspect ancient monuments and relics, and acquired in addition a thorough mastery of the topography of his land. All these means enabled him to marshal a vast assemblage of factual data, which endowed his masterpiece, the *Rajtarangini*, with a degree of objectivity never met with before in India.⁴

Abu Raihan-al-Biruni (in the eleventh century) was another historian who showed a scientific understanding and an objective approach through his writing entitled *Alberuni's India*. Later Abul Fazl (in the sixteenth century) displayed a more scholarly approach to the national relics of the past and his *Ain-i-Akbari* embodies fairly accurate notices of a large number of historical monuments and sites.⁵

A true antiquarian spirit in India ultimately came from the West only towards the end of the eighteenth century. It was Dr. Samuel Johnson, an English litterateur and his friend Sir William Jones, who were the first to perceive the supreme need for systematic investigations into the remains of India's past.⁶

(a) The Period 1784-1870

The intellectual environment, which made the study of Indian civilisation possible and gave birth to archaeology, is associated with the name of Sir William Jones. On January 15, 1784, under the initiative and guidance of Sir William Jones, the Asiatic Society, for enquiring into the history, antiquities, arts, sciences and literatures of Asia, was founded in Calcutta. The establishment of the Society provided a great fillip to Asian studies. In 1788, a journal called *Asiatic Researches* was started and, in 1814, a museum was established to house the objects collected by the workers of the Society.

Indian archaeology is most indebted to Sir William Jones. His discovery of the synchronism between Chandragupta Maurya and Alexander the Great provided Indian archaeology with its first positive date. In 1788, Charles Wilkins, a close associate of Jones, unlocked the mysteries of the Gupta as well as the *Kutila* scripts and laid the foundation of epigraphical studies in India.

In 1800, Lord Wellesely deputed Francis Buchanan to survey Mysore. In 1807, Buchanan was again deputed to survey the topography, history and antiquities of Bengal. For the next eight years, Buchanan surveyed the districts of Dinajpur, Rangpur, Purnea, Bhagalpur, Patna, Bihar, Shahabad and Gorakhpur. Though his report was never published, what little of it was made available in 1838 by Montogomerie Martin gives an idea of the keenness and accuracy of his observations.⁷

Yet the real impetus for archaeological research came from the remarkable James Prinsep, who was the presiding genius of the early period. Alexander Cunningham and Falconer both stressed his "burning, irrepressible enthusiasm" which led him to accomplish the work of a dozen men. Edward Thomas noticed his wide, scientific curiosity. James Fergusson wrote in 1845:

Had Mr. James Prinsep lived to continue for a few years longer the researches, which commenced and continued with such success, he probably would have succeeded in raising the veil which still shrouds in obscurity the antiquities of India.

The reading of the Indian scripts is a remarkable story. Its culmination was reached in Prinsep's deciphering of the *Brahmi Lipi* in 1834, a discovery which closely parallels in time Henry Rawlinson's reading of the cuneiform Sumerian script (1835).⁸ Within a few years of this event, the second script used in the North-West of the Indian subcontinent, commonly known as the *Kharoshthi* script, was deciphered.

The man, whose genius and labours helped archaeology to free itself from antiquarian and literary affiliations, was James Prinsep, who assumed the direction of virtually the entire field of archaeological work in India. Prinsep was essentially a man of science and he brought precision to his task and the scientist's mastery of factual details, which enabled him to march from discovery to discovery. Initiatives taken by Prinsep were not only in making new finds, but in subjecting existing discoveries to an interpretative analysis, such as the exploration of the *stupas* in Afghanistan, particularly the historical site of Begram, which brought to light for the first time the names of the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Scythian dynasties, of whom no previous historical records existed at all. The required conservation of a stone pillar in the Allahabad fort, which had ancient inscriptions, attracted his attention and the work of preserving it was undertaken.⁹

It was under Prinsep that the task of translating original material from the authentic records of ancient Hindu dynasties of the Southern Peninsula was completed and they were published.¹⁰ Prinsep died at the early age of 40, as mentioned by Lord Curzon in his speech at the meeting of the Asiatic Society in 1900: "How these men laboured is illustrated by the fact that Prinsep died of overwork at the age of 40."¹¹

The pattern of research, which Prinsep created may be found in his *Indian Antiquities* (London, 1858), a posthumous edition of his historic, palaeographic and numismatic essays. In both, the collection and reading of inscriptions and coins, Prinsep's mantle fell upon Cunningham's shoulders, but many others were also inspired. Thus Lieutenant Bret made a thorough record of the West Indian cave inscriptions, and it was the interest aroused by the publication of his *Historical Researches* (Bombay, 1847) and Fergusson's early work on the coins, which led to the formation of the Bombay Cave Commission in 1848 to investigate the history of the caves and undertake their preservation. He found the caves of Udaygiri and Khadagiri near Bhubaneswar in Orissa occupied by *bairagis* or wandering mendicants, but

once observed that a few picnic parties from Cuttack or Puri and pilfering by a few would-be antiquarians did more damage to these caves than these *bairagis*.¹² In North-West India and Afghanistan, Charles Masson, whose real name was James Lewis (1800-1853), but who travelled throughout present-day India, Pakistan and Afghanistan under the assumed name Charles Masson after deserting his post with the British East India Company in 1827, recorded many sites in these areas, visiting the great mound of Harappa for the first time in 1826. The fruits of his work are contained in his notes to the Bengal Asiatic Society and in *Asiana Antiqua* (London, 1841) where he contributed a description of the sites (mainly *stupas*) he had excavated, while H.W. Wilson wrote a study of his coin finds and ancient geography. Masson's discoveries at Begram drew the attention of scholars to the astonishing Indo-Greek coinage and "opened a new page in the history of Greek art". Mention must be made of one more work of this period, the 'Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus' (London, 1834) by Ram Raj, a judge and magistrate in the state of Mysore. Although this work is concerned more with theoretical problems in the interpretation of the *Silpa-Sastra*, it deserves notice as being the earliest archaeological work by an Indian. (Published by the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, London, 1834)

Many others deserve mention: Alexander Burnes, Jean-Baptiste Ventura, Court, and Gerard Lake all collected coins and recorded sites in North-West India and Afghanistan. Captain Cautley discovered the remains of a large settlement of Behat near Saharanpur. His excavations are among the earliest in India to be applied to a non-monumental site.¹³

Fired with Prinsep's enthusiasm, Colonel Todd was led to write:

Let not the antiquity forget the old
cities of East and West of Jumna. In
the desert and in the Punjab, of which
I have given lists, where his toil will
be richly rewarded. I possess bagfuls
of these Indo-Greek Gentry.

He goes on to suggest the need for the formation of 'Station Branch- committees of the Asiatic Society', aimed at arousing the latent talents of many a young officer.¹⁴

The whole period is dominated by Prinsep's enthusiasm; Prinsep, who inspired the collection of those materials upon which Indian archaeology was to rest. The principal workers were military officers and already a relationship was established, as can be seen in the case of Cohn Mackenzie. In 1810-11 Cohn Mackenzie was ordered to Java where he also pursued his antiquarian interests, and on his return to India in 1815, was posted to Calcutta as the first Surveyor General of India.¹⁵ Eventually his antiquarian work received the appreciation of the Court of Directors in England and the military government was asked to "present him with a sum of 9000

pagodas, as full remuneration for his past labours, and as a mark of our approbation of his work.”¹⁶ In addition, he was given a certificate acknowledging his collection of materials. It is interesting to note that, apart from inscriptions, hero stones and megalithic glasses, the Mackenzie collection comprised drawings of architectural remains, sculpture and “collections of coins, chiefly Hindu, in different parts of the country, are Roman, Chinese”¹⁷. His collection also included a single square silver coin, specimens of which have been found in Hindustan, as well as in the South.¹⁸ The officers either treated antiquarian research as a hobby, which their field campaigns permitted, or as an integral part of their own duties. In Coutley’s case, the rival interests of archaeology and geology were already evident. These three callings: military service, engineering, and geology were to play an important role in the researches. James Prinsep’s prominent successors were Alexander Cunningham, Markham Kittoe and Edward Thomas in North India; Sir Walter Elliot in South India, and Dr. J. Stevenson and Dr. Bhau Daji in Western India. A great event that took place in the year 1847 was the formation of the Archaeological Society of Delhi, the first voluntary organisation to devote itself exclusively to archaeological work. The object of the new organisation, as defined by itself, was “the investigation by means of plans, drawings, and elevations, by inscriptional and... historical researches of ancient remains, both Hindu and Mohammedan, in and around Delhi; and the institution of similar researches in other parts of the North Western Provinces”.¹⁹

The nature and distribution of Indian historical antiquities came to be understood within the framework of local religious and political history. Alexander Cunningham published a paper in the journal of the Asiatic Society in 1848, asking the Government of India to help in the preservation of ancient monuments of the country by appointing a suitable government officer who possessed a thorough knowledge of the religion and arts of India. In 1860, after India had come under the Crown, Lord Canning became the first Viceroy of India, and Cunningham duly submitted a memorandum to Viceroy Canning in November 1861. It began by pointing out the necessity of preserving monuments in different parts of India by an accurate and faithful description of the archaeology involved. Whatever had hitherto been done had been entirely on private initiatives, as the government had been busy “with the extension and consolidation of the empire”. However it would be now add to the “Honour of the British Government to institute a careful and systematic investigation into all the existing monuments of ancient India.”²⁰ Cunningham’s arguments in his memorandum had a compelling effect and Lord Canning was convinced. As he mentioned in his Minute on the Antiquities of Upper India, dated January 22, 1862.²¹

Thus the Archaeological Survey of India was established in 1862 and Cunningham was appointed the first Archaeological Surveyor of India. Cunningham’s activities were confined only to the North-Western Provinces and Bihar in the earlier phase of his career (1862-65). He was paid a monthly salary of Rs. 450/- per month with Rs. 250/- as a field allowance, and also a share in the antiquities to be covered by him.²²

On December 1, 1861, the conduct of the operations decided on by the government was formally entrusted to Cunningham.²³ He continued to be in the field during every cold season, writing up and preparing the reports in the succeeding summer and monsoon months till 1885, with a four-year break during 1866-70. This is the longest peregrination by an individual in India. On February 9, 1866, the post of Archaeological Surveyor was abolished by Lord Lawrence,²⁴ which led to great resentment. Scholars like James Fergusson advocated the revival of the Archaeological Department under the Government of India. The vacuum created by Cunningham's withdrawal was but inadequately filled by spasmodic official efforts, in which genuine archaeological aims played a very small part. Prompted by a letter privately addressed by Sir Stafford Northcote, the new Secretary of State, on the need for preserving architectural remains in India²⁵, the Government of India, under the Viceroyalty of Lord Mayo, finally sanctioned the post of Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1870.²⁶

(b) Cunningham's Period (1870 - 1885)

In a dispatch dated January 11, 1870, the Duke of Argyll, the then Secretary of State, wrote about the necessity of centralising the archaeological activities under the government and systematising them. The government under Viceroy, Lord Mayo, accepted the suggestion and wanted Alexander Cunningham to head the Department of new central Department of the Archaeological Survey of India.²⁷ Cunningham laid special stress on the need for conservation, pointing out that it was the bounden duty of the government "to prevent its own servants from accelerating the decay" of monuments²⁸. He was also given three assistants: J.D. Beglar, A.C.L. Carlleyle and H.B.W Garrick.²⁹ Their work was confined to Northern India and mainly to the collection of historical and geographical data and the preparation of plans of important monuments.³⁰ Cunningham spent a greater part of this time in identifying the holy places that the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang had visited. By 1865 he discovered that the vast area stretching from Gaya in the east to the Indus in the north-west and from Kalsi in the north to Damnar in the south contained several such sites. He carefully surveyed and reported on every monument visited by the Chinese pilgrim. The volume of work done by him is amazing. He published twenty-one volumes of reports of the Archaeological Survey of India. Of his numerous publications mention must be made of the first volume of the corpus *Inscriptionum Indicarum* containing inscriptions of Asoka, ancient geography of India, etc. The significant discovery that Cunningham made in 1872-75 was the proto-historic site of Harappa. The extensive ruins at Harappa had attracted his attention in the year 1853 and again in 1856, but he made the first excavations only seven years later. He did not recognise the importance of relics found by him till Sir John Marshall showed these to be those of a great proto-historic civilization. Till then, conservation had been outside the purview of the Director-General. On February 13, 1873, the central government

however issued a circular assigning the duty of preserving all buildings and monuments of historical and architectural interest to the local government.³¹ To prevent the pilfering of archaeological remains by treasure hunters, the Treasure Trove Act of 1878 was passed by Lord Lytton's Government. Under the provisions of this Act, the government was authorised to claim possession of any unearthed treasure exceeding ten rupees in value.³² The exclusion of conservation from the scope of the Archaeological Survey brought forth comments from Cunningham, who believed that the trained and experienced archaeologist, who has examined, measured and described the buildings of different ages, was naturally the best authority to guide all the repairs that may be required for any ancient monuments. He pointed out that the divided authority was a mistake and that the only judicious arrangement was the combination of conservation with exploration.³³ Cunningham retired in 1885 and new arrangements were made in the Archaeological Survey Department. The surveys of north and south India were amalgamated and placed under the charge of Dr. James Burgess, who took over as Director General of Archaeology on March 25, 1886.³⁴ Considering the extent and fruitfulness of the work done by Cunningham, the above is only a modest estimate of his achievements.³⁵ That is why he is considered to be the father of Indian archaeology.

The State of the Archaeological survey of India (1885-1899)

There are two ways of looking at the history of the Archaeological Survey after it came under imperial charge. On the one hand, one can lay stress on the organisation's achievements, which were considerable in the fields of archaeological and epigraphic survey. The Archaeological Survey had to undergo several tribulations after the retirement of Cunningham in 1885. The most stringent curtailments came with the retirement of James Burgess as Director in 1889. The period between the retirement of James Burgess (1889) and the coming of Lord Curzon as the Viceroy (1899) has been described by Sourindranath Roy as "a bleak interlude". This is perhaps not a correct assessment of the period. Firstly, the Government of India had continued to be alive to its responsibility towards archaeology. Burgess insisted on professional control of archaeological excavations and pressed for official measures that would illegalize any digging except the excavations undertaken by or with the permission of the Archaeological Survey of India. He was also the first man to devote himself strenuously to the task of ridding India of robbers and art collection touts masquerading as antiquarians. As a result of his efforts, the government issued directions debarring public officers from disposing of antiquities found or acquired by them, without official approval, and the other forbidding the digging-up of ancient remains of any kind without the previous consent of the Archaeological Survey. The post of Director General was kept in abeyance and Burma, Bengal, Punjab and the Indian states were left without surveyors after the retirement of Burgess in 1889. It was only then that Lord Curzon appointed John Marshall as the new Director General.

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