

#ELEPHANTA

The Elephant That Left the Island

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Off the coast of Mumbai lies Elephanta Island, one of India's most famous historical sites. Today, the island is known for its magnificent rock-cut caves and ancient sculptures dedicated to Lord Shiva. However, many visitors are surprised to learn that the island's famous elephant is no longer there. The very statue that inspired the island's modern name was removed centuries ago and now stands in Mumbai.

From Gharapuri to Elephanta

The island's original name was Gharapuri, meaning "City of Caves." It was an important cultural and religious center long before Europeans arrived. When the Portuguese reached the island in the 16th century, they discovered a gigantic stone elephant sculpture near the shoreline. Impressed by its size and craftsmanship, they called the island "Ilha Elefante" (Island of the Elephant). Over time, this Portuguese name evolved into Elephanta, the name by which the island is known today.

The Elephant That Gave the Island Its Name

The massive stone elephant was believed to stand near the entrance of the island as a symbol of royalty, power, and welcome. In Indian culture, elephants have long represented strength, wisdom, and royal authority. It is believed that the sculpture greeted kings and distinguished visitors arriving by sea, making a grand first impression before they entered the sacred caves.

Ironically, the elephant that gave the island its name is no longer on the island itself.

The Journey to England That Never Happened

During British rule, the elephant sculpture attracted great interest. In 1864, British authorities decided to transport it to England. The enormous statue was loaded for

shipment, but during the operation, the lifting crane failed. The elephant crashed to the ground and shattered into several pieces. Since the damaged sculpture could no longer be transported, the plan was abandoned. The broken pieces were left behind for several years.

Reassembled in Mumbai

Later, the broken elephant was carefully reassembled in Mumbai and placed in the gardens of the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum (formerly the Victoria and Albert Museum, Bombay), where it can still be seen today. Although the island no longer has its famous elephant, the sculpture survives as an important historical monument in the city.

A Royal Banquet Inside Sacred Caves

One of the most unusual events in the history of Elephanta took place in 1875. Instead of being used for religious worship, the ancient caves became the venue for a grand royal banquet organized during the visit of the Prince of Wales to India. Around 400 distinguished guests attended the lavish dinner inside the centuries-old cave complex.

The event transformed the sacred halls into a magnificent dining venue, illuminated and decorated for the occasion. It remains one of the most remarkable episodes in the island's colonial history.

Conclusion

Elephanta Island is much more than a collection of ancient caves. Its story includes changing names, colonial encounters, an elephant that inspired the island's identity, a failed attempt to transport that elephant to England, and even a royal banquet held inside its sacred caves. Although the elephant no longer stands on the island, it continues to symbolize the rich and fascinating history of Gharapuri, the original "City of Caves."



The Lost Sanskrit University Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra



Adhai Din ka Jhonpra.

● Bulbul Joshi

Standing in the heart of Ajmer, Rajasthan, the monument known today as *Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra* is often remembered as one of the earliest of said to be Indo-Islamic monuments in India. Over the centuries, folklore has surrounded the structure, with one popular legend claiming that it was built by djinn in just sixty hours, two and a half days, giving rise to its present name. While this tale remains a part of local tradition, archaeological discoveries made during the nineteenth century have revealed a far more remarkable and historically significant story. Beneath the mosque lies the remains of an earlier Sanskrit university and temple complex built during the reign of the Chahamana (Chauhan) king Vigraharaja IV, also known as Visaladeva.

In the mid-twelfth century, Ajmer flourished as one of northern India's foremost centres of Sanskrit learning. Vigraharaja IV, remembered not only as a powerful ruler but also as a scholar and patron of literature, established the Saraswati Kantha Bharana Mahavidyalaya, a

prestigious institution dedicated to higher learning. The university was closely associated with a Temple of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge, symbolising the inseparable relationship between education and religion in medieval India. The king himself was an accomplished Sanskrit author and composed the play *Harakeli Nataka*. His court poet, Somadeva, wrote another celebrated drama, *Lalita Vigraharaja Nataka*, reflecting the vibrant literary culture that thrived under the Chahamana court. For centuries, these works were believed to have disappeared from history until fragments of both plays were unexpectedly rediscovered during archaeological restoration of the monument.

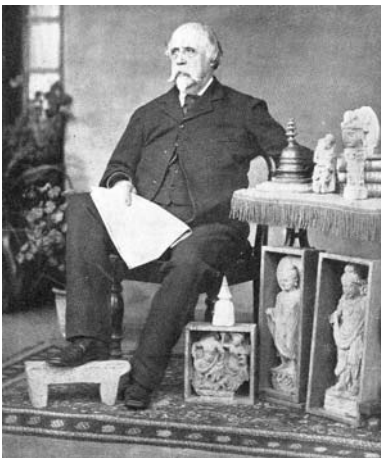
The fortunes of the university changed dramatically following the Second Battle of Tarain in 1192 CE. The defeat of Prithviraj Chauhan by Muhammad of Ghor marked the end of Chahamana rule over Ajmer. Soon afterwards, Muhammad Ghor's general, Qutb-ud-din Aibak, ordered the construction of a congregational mosque on the site. Completed around 1199 CE, the mosque incorporated large quantities of architectural material taken from the earlier university and neighbouring Hindu and Jain temples.



Cunningham (fourth from the right).

During repairs, Cunningham made discoveries that transformed the understanding of the monument. Stone slabs reused within the mosque's walls were carefully removed after it became apparent that they contained Sanskrit inscriptions. These slabs had been deliberately turned inward, concealing their engraved surfaces within the masonry. Working alongside the archaeologist D. R. Bhandarkar, Cunningham documented these inscriptions and identified fragments of the long-lost *Lalita Vigraharaja Nataka* by Somadeva and *Harakeli Nataka* by King Vigraharaja IV himself.

#SARASWATI KANTHA BHARANA MAHAVIDYALAYA



Major General Sir Alexander C. Cunningham.



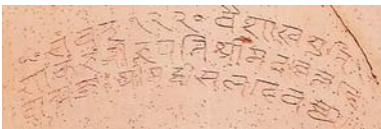
Vigraharaja IV ruled the Sapadalaksha kingdom.



Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar.

For centuries, little was known about the monument's earlier identity. By the 1870s, however, the structure had fallen into severe disrepair. Of its approximately 350 original pillars, only about seventy remained standing. Recognising its exceptional historical value, Alexander Cunningham, the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, described it as one of the most deserving monuments in India for preservation. Between 1875 and 1878, under the conservation programme initiated during the tenure of Viceroy Lord Mayo, extensive restoration work was undertaken to stabilise the crumbling walls and preserve the surviving structure.

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Visaladeva inscription on Delhi-Toprā, 12th century.

Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (July 6, 1837-August 24, 1925) was a pioneer of Orientalology (the study of the indigenous traditions of ancient East and South East Asia) in India. He extensively studied the history of India, with a particular focus on the Deccan region. His research relied on inscriptions, coins, archaeological sources, foreign accounts, and religious literature.

Lord Canning, then Viceroy of India, appointed Cunningham as an archaeological surveyor to the Government of India. He held this position from 1861 to 1865, but it was then terminated through lack of funds.

Most antiquarians of the 19th century, who took interest in identifying the major cities mentioned in ancient Indian texts, did so by putting together clues found in classical Graeco-Roman chronicles and the travelogues of travellers to India such as Xuanzang and Faxian. Cunningham was able to identify some of the places mentioned by Xuanzang, and counted among his



Save the Snow Leopard: A Call for Conservation

celebrated on October 23. International Snow Leopard Day shines a spotlight on one of the world's most elusive and endangered big cats. This day aims to raise awareness about the threats snow leopards face, including habitat loss, poaching, and climate change, while promoting conservation efforts to protect these majestic creatures. Wildlife enthusiasts, researchers, and communities come together to advocate for sustainable practices, preserve mountain ecosystems, and support anti-poaching initiatives. By celebrating International Snow Leopard Day, people across the globe are reminded of the importance of safeguarding biodiversity and ensuring that future generations can marvel at these silent, powerful predators in their natural habitats.



Adhai Din ka Jhonpra, Arcade and mihrab dome.



Adhai Din ka Jhonpra Column, beam and dome.

ud-din Aibak. Vigraharaja IV patronized art and literature during his reign and built temples and colleges.

Among the recovered inscriptions was one identifying the engraver as Bhaskara, son of Mahipati and grandson of Govinda, preserving the names of the craftsmen responsible for creating these literary records. Another inscription, located to the left of the main entrance, explicitly identified the original complex as a Mahavidyalaya, confirming that the site had functioned as a great centre of Sanskrit education before its conversion.

Perhaps, the most remarkable discovery was a dated inscription from 1153 CE describing the original architectural layout of the complex. According to this record, the building had been constructed as a large square enclosure with tower-like chhatris at each of its four corners. On its western side stood a Temple of Saraswati, reinforcing the site's identity as both a sacred and educational institution dedicated to learning.

The discoveries also revealed the monument as one of India's finest examples of spolia, the practice of reusing architectural elements from earlier buildings in later constructions. Cunningham

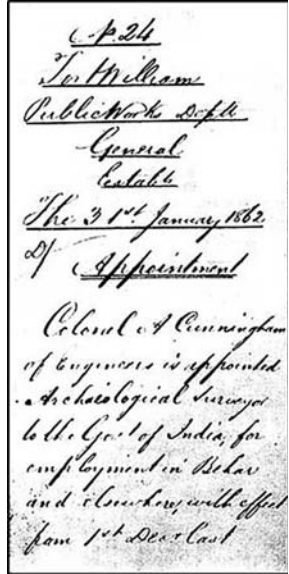
estimated that between twenty and thirty Hindu and Jain temples had been dismantled and that nearly seven hundred carved pillars had been incorporated into the mosque. While modern historians continue to debate the precise numbers, there is broad agreement that extensive reuse of earlier architectural material took place during the construction. Further examination of the surviving pillars and walls uncovered numerous damaged sculptures and carved figures. Cunningham recorded images resembling the Hindu goddess Kali, fragments of Sanskrit hymns dedicated to Surya, the Sun God, and inscriptions celebrating the Chahamana dynasty as descendants of the Solar lineage. These discoveries demonstrated that much of the artistic and literary heritage of the earlier complex had survived, albeit in altered form within the later structure.

Today, many of the sculptures, inscribed slabs, and architectural fragments recovered during these excavations are preserved in the Government Museum at Ajmer, where they continue to provide valuable evidence for historians, archaeologists, and epigraphists studying medieval India.

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Adhai Din ka Jhonpra Column.

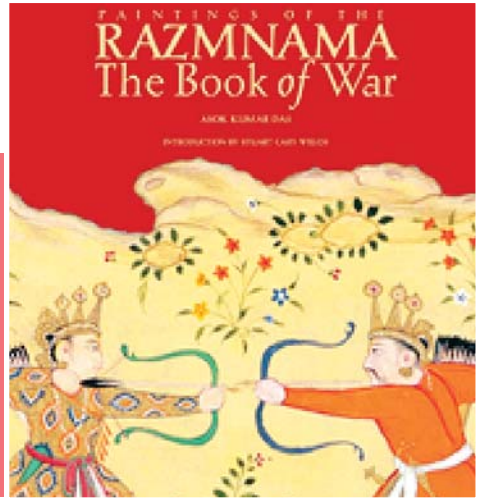


Draft gazette notification announcing Cunningham's appointment as Archaeological Surveyor.

#PAINTED BY BASAWAN

The Page That Explains India Better Than a Thousand Speeches

Based on "A Muslim Pilgrim Learns a Lesson in Piety from a Brahman," painted by Basawan for the Khamsa of Amir Khusrau, 1597-98



In 1597, inside the imperial workshop of the Mughal emperor Akbar, a remarkable painting was completed. A Hindu artist, Basawan, put his brush to a story written three centuries earlier by a Muslim Sufi poet, Amir Khusrau. The manuscript belonged to the library of a Muslim emperor who ruled over one of the largest and most powerful empires in the world.

The painting depicts a simple encounter on a road to God. A Muslim pilgrim is journeying to Mecca when he comes upon a Brahman on his way to a temple. The Brahman is not merely walking. He is measuring the entire road with his body, lying flat on the ground, marking the point his hands can reach, rising, stepping forward, and repeating the act again and again.

Mile after mile. The Muslim traveler watches. He cannot match such devotion. Faced with a display of faith greater than his own, he does not argue theology, denounce idolatry, or proclaim superiority. Instead, he removes his shoes and continues his own pilgrimage barefoot.

The lesson is disarmingly simple: true piety can be recognized even across the boundaries of religion.

What makes the image extraordinary is not only the story it tells, but the world that produced it.

The tale originated in the Khamsa of Amir Khusrau, the celebrated poet often called the "Parrot of India." Khusrau lived in the Delhi Sultanate and wrote in Persian while drawing deeply from the cultural life of the Indian subcontinent. Three centuries later, his work was being illustrated by Basawan, one of the greatest painters in Akbar's court.

A Muslim poet's story. A Hindu painter's hand. A Muslim emperor's manuscript. One page. And this was not an isolated example.

During the same period, Akbar's atelier was engaged in one of the most ambitious translation projects in Indian



history: rendering the Mahabharata into Persian. The resulting manuscript, known as the Razmnama or "Book of War," was lavishly illustrated by artists from the imperial workshop. Hindu epics, Persian poetry, Islamic scholarship, Jain philosophy, and Christian theology all found their way into discussions at Akbar's court.

This was not public propaganda. These manuscripts were created primarily for the emperor and his circle. They reflected a genuine intellectual curiosity, a willingness to ask whether wisdom might exist beyond inherited boundaries.

The Mughal Empire, at its most confident, was not afraid of comparison. It could place a Brahman and a Muslim pilgrim on the same page and allow the reader to decide whose devotion ran deeper. It could translate Sanskrit epics into Persian and invite scholars of different faiths to debate before the throne. The painting

reveals something often forgotten in modern arguments about identity and religion: civilizations are strongest not when they are certain of everything, but when they are curious enough to question themselves.

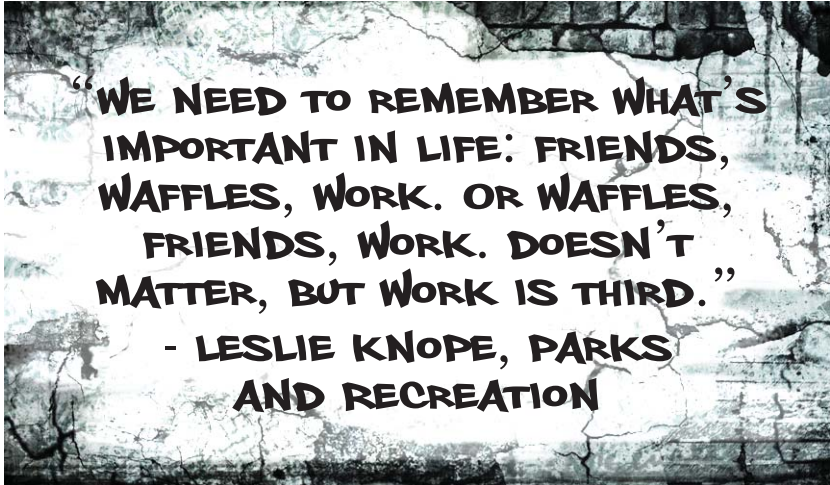
More than four centuries have passed since Basawan painted that scene. Empires have risen and fallen. Languages have changed. Borders have been redrawn. Yet, the image remains. A Muslim sees devotion in a Hindu.

A Hindu illustrates a Muslim poet.

An emperor preserves both. And somewhere on that long road to the sacred, the shoes are still off.

Based on "A Muslim Pilgrim Learns a Lesson in Piety from a Brahman," painted by Basawan for the Khamsa of Amir Khusrau, 1597-98, in the imperial atelier of Akbar. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

THE WALL



BABY BLUES



ZITS



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman