

Original Research Article

Archaeological Heritage of Tamil Nadu: Mahabalipuram

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Abstract

Historians have two major avenues which they take to better understand the ancient world: archaeology and the study of source texts. Primary sources are those sources closest to the origin of the information or idea under study. Primary sources have been distinguished from secondary sources, which often cite, comment on, or build upon primary sources. Archaeological sites are merely the residues of settlements and structures, reduced to rubble and earthworks by decay, erosion, stone-robbing and the invasions of plant and animal life. Mahabalipuram is a monument complex on the Coromandel Coast of the Bay of Bengal, in Kancheepuram district of Tamilnadu, India. It is located near Chennai. With approximately forty sanctuaries, including the largest open-air rock relief in the world, Mahabalipuram gained UNESCO World Heritage site distinction in 1984. This complex was built during the period of Pallavas.

Keywords: Archaeology, Monuments, Sculptures, Heritage, Sanctuaries.

Introduction

Archaeological anthropology has been derived from the broad field of Archaeology (archaism means ancient and logia means study) which is concerned with the study of the extinct cultures. Man, the central figure of

anthropology existed long before the development of written record. Therefore, archaeology is able to supplement anthropology by recovering the remains of ancient men of bygone days along with the material evidences of his culture.)

Classical archaeology is a combination of fine arts, history and classics. It seeks the antiquities of the past. So, it cannot be an exclusive domain of anthropologists, but anthropologists have to depend on archaeologists in describing the human of the past and to find out the ancient cultures which were flourished before 5000 years from now.

Archaeologists often work with the palaeontologists, geologist, and chemists to reconstruct the days of prehistory. For many parts of the world like Australia, Melanesia, Polynesia and most of the New World and Africa, knowledge of writing is fairly recent. Naturally to discover the prehistoric man and his cultural activities, anthropologists have found no way other than to rely on the archaeologist's work. Archaeology, thus, has become an indispensable part of anthropology. Without archaeology, physical anthropologists could not have been successful in determining the place of *Homo sapiens* in nature; the long process of human development would very little to be understood.

Cultural anthropology also depends on archaeology. Cultural anthropologists deal with the social behaviour of man; the past and the present are equally important to them. They trace the emergence and development of customs and social behaviour from the prehistoric level and go up to the contemporary level where both the primitive and civilized people from the social counterpart. Since most of the evidences of human life in prehistoric days are intangible and perishable, they leave no permanent imprint behind. Past life-ways and cultural processes can only be understood on the basis of a few tools, which have been dug out and interpreted by the archaeologists.

The archaeologist is first a descriptive worker: he has to describe, classify, and analyse the artifacts he studies. An adequate and objective taxonomy is the basis of all archaeology, and many good archaeologists spend their lives in this activity of description and classification. But the main aim of the archaeologist is to place the material remains in historical contexts, to supplement what may be known from written sources, and, thus, to increase understanding of the past. Ultimately, then, the archaeologist is a historian: his aim is the interpretive description of the past of man. Archaeology, or archaeology, is the study of human activity in the past, primarily through the recovery and analysis of the material culture and environmental data that they have left behind, which includes artifacts, architecture, biofacts (also known as eco-facts) and cultural landscapes (the archaeological record). Because archaeology employs a wide range of different procedures, it can be considered to be both a social science and a humanity, and in the United States it is thought of as a branch of anthropology, although in Europe it is viewed as a separate discipline.

Archaeology studies human prehistory and history from the development of the first stone tools in eastern Africa 4 million years ago up until recent decades. (Archaeology does not include the discipline of palaeontology). It is of most importance for learning about prehistoric societies, when there are no written records for historians to study, making up over 99% of total human history, from the Palaeolithic until the advent of literacy in any given society. Archaeology has various goals, which range from studying human evolution to cultural evolution and understanding culture history. The discipline involves surveying, excavation and eventually analysis of data collected to learn more about the past. In broad scope, archaeology relies on cross-disciplinary research. It draws upon anthropology, history, art history, classics, ethnology, geography, geology, linguistics, semiology, physics, information sciences, chemistry, statistics, paleoecology, palaeontology, paleozoology, paleoethnobotany, and palaeobotany.

Historical Background

The development of the field of Archaeology has its roots with history and with those who were interested in the past such as kings who wanted to show past glories. Later, Herodotus was the first scholar to systematically study archaeology. Then, the 16th and 17th century saw the rise of Antiquarians who were interested in the collection of artifacts. The Antiquarian movement shifted into nationalism as personal collections turned into national museums. It evolved into a much more systematic discipline in the late 19th century and became a widely used tool for historical and anthropological research in the 20th century. Also, in this time, there have been great advances in the technologies used in the field.

Archaeology had its start in the European study of history and in people who were interested in the past. King Nabonidus (556- 539 BCE), the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, was interested in the past so he could align himself with past glories. He led a revitalization movement and rebuilt ancient temples. Even back in what one would think was ancient times itself there was the start of the systematic investigation into the past by Herodotus (c. 484-c. 425). He was the first western scholar to systematically collect artifacts and test their accuracy. He was also the first to make a compelling narrative of the past. He is known for his set of 9 books called *The Histories*, in which he wrote of everything he could find out about different regions. A few examples are he discussed the causes and consequences of the Greco-Persian Wars. He also explored the Nile and Delphi. However, scholars have found errors in his records and believe he probably did not go as far south down the Nile as he said he did. In India, the urge for Art History is a very modern phenomenon in the wake of the archaeological investigation by the British scholars. In the ancient and medieval periods, Indian scholarship and rulers evinced no appreciable interest either in archaeology or in Art History. Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* (completed in 1148 A.D.), the earliest available Indian chronicle, gives only the genealogy of the Kashmir rulers and the political events connected with them, but it is silent about their artistic contributions.

The stimulus for an intellectual enquiry about the past of India came from the west towards the middle of the 17th century A.D. with the publication of the *Open Door to Hidden Heathendom* (1651) by Abraham Rogers. Dr. Samuel Johnson and Sir William Jones were the two greatest minds. In 1774, Dr. Johnson wrote to Warren Hastings requesting him to examine the tradition and history of the east "to survey the remains of its ancient edifices so that the west shall know the arts and the opinions of a race of men from whom very little has hitherto been derived." The idea of Dr. Johnson was translated to reality by Sir William Jones, rightly called the 'Father of Indology', who founded the Asiatic Society in 1784, with the purpose of "enquiring into the History the Antiquities, Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia." The British scholars, who under the learned guidance of Sir William Jones initiated antiquarian studies in India, can in a way be called as the true pioneers of Indian archaeology and art history. In fact, art history was only a by-product of their archaeological investigations, which too found a very low priority in their extremely crowded programme.

The real take-off in archaeology took place nearly a century after William Jones, when in 1861 Alexander Cunningham started his epoch making survey of North India, a very vast area stretching from Gaya to Indus, and discovered an extensive collection of Indo-Greek sculptures in Punjab (1873); several monolithic capitals of Asoka (1873-77) and numerous specimens of Gupta architecture. In the meanwhile, a few other British scholars were exploring the cave temples and stupas in North India. Among them the most significant was James Burgess, a Scottish Professor of Mathematics in a college at Calcutta, who studied many caves and temples in the Deccan and brought out two monographs *Temples of Satrunjaya* (1869) and *Rock Temples of Elephanta* (1871). When he succeeded Cunningham as the Surveyor General of the Department of Archaeological Survey in 1885, he intensified

his explorations and brought out four magnificent volumes with numerous photographs and other illustrations covering the monuments of Kutch and Kathiawar, Belgaum, and the Buddhist cave temples of Deccan. Robert Sewell and Alexander Rae, the two stalwarts who assisted Burgess, brought out valuable monographs on the art and architecture of South India (especially on those of the Chalukyas and the Pallavas), based on their field explorations. Thus these pioneers in archaeology bringing to light the art treasures of India initiated the discovery of Indian Art. Immediately, there arose a great demand for Indian sculptures, paintings and handicrafts in the museums abroad. Henry Cole's Catalogue of Objects of Indian Art Exhibited in the South Kensington Museum (1874) gave the Western world 'the very first history of Indian Art'." Most of Cole's formulations are irrelevant by present standard of scholarship. However, all these roused the interest of many European scholars on Indian Art, especially on the Religion of Buddhism and its art on which Burgess had already published many valuable papers. Consequently, Waddel, Grunwedel, Foucher, Alice Getty and many others published pioneering works on Buddhist iconography.

Mahabalipuram

Mahabalipuram is a monument complex on the Coromandel Coast of the Bay of Bengal, in Kancheepuram district of Tamil Nadu, India. It is located near Chennai. With approximately 40 sanctuaries, including the largest open-air rock relief in the world, Mahabalipuram gained UNESCO World Heritage site distinction in 1984. This complex was built during the Pallava period.

Ratha Temples

Ratha Temples are temples carved out of rock in the shape of chariots. These are five monolithic structures carved in diorite or granite rocks which project above the sandy beach and give the impression of chariots on a tableau or procession. These five Rathas are also known as the Pandava Rathas (Pandavas were five brothers and their common wife Draupadi of the epic Mahabharata) and date back to the 7th century reign of the Pallava Dynasty. These are namely, the Dharmaraja Ratha, the Bhima Ratha, the Arjuna Ratha, the Nakula and Sahadeva Ratha, and the Draupadi Ratha. All the five rathas are carved from a single rock but have different layouts. As they were not fully completed, therefore, worship is not offered in any of these temples. Apart from these five rathas, there is also another ratha which was built in the late 7th century known as the Ganesha Ratha. The dating of this ratha is based on an inscription of the name of Parameshvaravarman I, who was the grandson of Mahamalla. Pancha Rathas or the Pandava Rathas are an innovation of Narasimhavarman and are without any precedent in Indian architecture. The complex is under the auspices of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and is part of the UNESCO World Heritage site inscribed by UNESCO as Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram.

Draupadi's Ratha

Each of the five monuments in the Pancha Rathas complex built in the shape of a chariot (ratha), is carved over a single, long stone or monolith, of granite which slopes in north-south direction with a slight incline. The monoliths are named after the Pandavas, but these names are considered to be a misrepresentation as the structures have no association with the iconic characters of the Mahabharata epic. They have no religious significance either, as they remained unfinished and consecrated. The uncut rock parts at the base and top of the rathas are still visible. The ASI confirmed the unfinished nature of the structures and suggested that they instead be referred to as vimanas. However, the Pandava names have become permanent. A plaque displayed at the site by the ASI mentions that the Pallava dynasty had planned the structures as models of chariots in rock based on prototypes of ancient rathas built in wood. Work on these five rathas was discontinued following the death of Narasimha Varman in 668 AD. The purpose of their construction is not known as the structures were not completed.

Mandapas

Mandapas or rock-cut Caves are sanctuaries or temples adorned with bas-relief works. The earliest period of use of caves as sanctuaries is dated back to the Buddhist and Jain periods when these were excavated. Of the eleven mandapas or caves seen in Mahabalipuram, the most remarkable are the Varaha Cave Temple, Krishna Cave Temple, Panchapandava Cave Temple, and the Mahishasuramardini Mandapa. All of these are cut and decorated with panels in the Mamalla style, whereas the Adiranchanda caves temples are dated to the Mahendravarman period of the 8th century. Fragments seen in the caves also show that they were plastered and painted when built. One of the most impressive bas-reliefs, carved on the walls in the caves, is that of the goddess Durga (a form of goddess Shakti), who killed Mahishasura, the buffalo-headed demon. This bas-relief panel in the Mahishasuramardini Cave Temple is considered a masterpiece of Indian art. Many of the caves of the Pallava period have remained incomplete.

Varaha Cave Temple, also known as Adivaraha Cave Temple is a rock-cut cave. The most significant sculpture in the cave is that of Lord Vishnu in the incarnated form of a Varaha or boar lifting Bhudevi, the mother earth goddess from the sea. Many other mythical figures are also carved. The cave has a transitional style of architecture in its columns mounted on seated lions and frescoes carved on the walls inside the cave which belong to the rule of Pallava kings Mahendra Varman I and Rajasimha or Narasimhavarman I known as Mamalla. This style was continued by Mamalla's son Parameshvaravarman I. Historical research shows that Mahabalipuram town came to be established only after it was named after Mamalla and the caves and rathas are all attributed to his reign during the year 650 AD. It is the earliest known monument in Mahabalipuram. The distinctive feature of the Pallava style is that the frontage of the cave has finely carved columns mounted on lions in a sitting posture.

Krishna Cave Temple

Krishna Cave Temple (also known as Mandapa of Krishna and Krishna Mandapam) is an artificial rock-cut mandapa, and one of the Cave Temples of Mahabalipuram dedicated to Lord Krishna. It is one of the many architecturally distinctive mandapas in Mahabalipuram with a shallow cave portico hewn into the rock face. This rock-cut cave is also simple in design and layout, with minimum decorations. It is one of the ten caves cut out from rock faces and one of the oldest in Mahabalipuram. In designing this cave, the sculptors worked on the rock face to make an outline and polished the rock face to define the outline of a façade. This was followed by the cutting of columns in the polished surface and creating square panels on which frescoes on religious themes of the Hindu pantheon were carved. Their basic tool was the chisel that was used to first draw incised outlines with projections to be carved at the later stage of sculpting. The depth was dictated by the number of chambers to be excavated through the rock. The carving of images was then started after polishing the walls and the columns. This cave has nine reliefs carved on the rock surfaces, all dated to the 7th century but further renovated with additions made in the 16th century. One prominent relief portrays Krishna lifting the mythical Govardhana Hill on the finger of his left hand to save the people from a deluge caused by rains shower of Indra. People with their cattle are shown taking shelter under the mountain. In this fresco, Krishna is flanked by three females to his right; one of them is believed to be Radha, his childhood lover, as she is shown wearing a kirita makuta crown, a breast band, and many ornaments. On his right, stand two figures, one male and one female. There are several other images in the panel of animals and village folk also. In another fresco, Krishna is shown in a joyous mood with his Gopis (milkmaids), a reflection of his double role as a divine being. Other frescoes carved on the walls of the cave show: an elderly person carrying a child on his shoulders, a village scene of cowherds milking a cow with the cow licking the calf; the Gopis with water pots on their heads amidst a cowherd playing a flute; a woodcutter walking with an axe and a lady carrying a milk

pot and a rolled mat or bundle of grass; and a child hugging her mother. Krishna's fresco shows him playing a flute in the fields. The panel also has a standing bull, which is perfectly carved by the Pallava artists. In particular, the carvings in the Krishna cave are reported to be very realistic reinterpretations of Hindu mythological themes.

Structural Temples

The structural temples were also built by the Pallava kings but during the early 8th century during the reign of king Rajasimha (AD 700-28). It is located right on the shores of the coast of the Indian Ocean and has sustained severe wave actions and tsunamis. The most famous and prominent of this form of temples is the Shore Temple complex which has two small and one large temple enclosed within a two tier compound wall studded with images of Nandi. The main temple rises to a height of 60 feet over a 50 feet square base. It is a stepped pyramidal tower arranged in five tiers. It is decorated with thousands of sculptures shown to worship Lord Siva. There is also a small temple in the original fore court of this temple. The other two temples in the same complex are behind this large main temple, facing each other and are known as the Rajasimhesvara or Nripatisimha Pallava Vishnugriha and the Kshatriyasimhesvara. The latter is dedicated to Shiva while the former has an ancient reclining image of Anantashayana Vishnu carved in the bed of the river nearby. The temple walls on the rear side are carved with bas-relief panels depicting Siva, Parvati and their son, Skanda. The mandapa in front of the Rajasimheshvara extends up to the basement. The entire temple complex is covered by aracari (compound wall) coped with Nandis. As the Shore Temple is located next to the sea, it is affected by the rough sea and salt laden winds. The efforts undertaken by ASI such as construction of groynes, wall paper pulp treatment and casuarina tree plantations on the shore line are mitigation methods which have been implemented.

Shore Temple

The Shore Temple (built in 700-728 AD) is so named as it overlooks the shore of the Bay of Bengal. It is a structural temple, built with blocks of granite, dating from the 8th century AD. It is one of the oldest structural (versus rock-cut) stone temples of South India. This temple is a complex of three temples, one large and two small. The Shore Temple was given the name Seven Pagodas by the sailors when they saw this tall structure on the seashore. The temple probably acted as a landmark for navigation of their ships. As it appears like a Pagoda, the name became familiar to the seafarers. This structural temple complex was the culmination of the architectural creations that were initiated by the King Narasimha Varma I in mid-7th century. Even though the architectural creation of sculpturing cut-in and cut-out structures continued during the following periods, as seen in the Atiranachanda cave, the Pidari rathas and the Tiger cave, the main credit for the architectural elegance of the Shore Temple complex in the category of structural temples goes to the King Rajasimha (700-28 AD), also known as Narasimhavarman II, of the Pallava Dynasty.

This temple complex was the last in a series of temples that seemed to exist in the submerged coastline. The architecture of the Shore Temple was continued by the Cholas who ruled Tamil Nadu after defeating the Pallavas. The Tsunami of December 2004 that struck the coastline of Coromandel exposed an old collapsed temple built entirely of granite blocks. This has renewed speculation that Mahablaipuram was a part of the Seven Pagodas described in the diaries of Europeans, of which six temples remain submerged in the sea. The Tsunami also uncovered some ancient rock sculptures of lions, elephants, and peacocks that used to decorate walls and temples during the Pallava period during the 7th and 8th centuries. In the Tsunami of 26 December 2004, the Shore Temple was not badly damaged, as the water level returned to its normal level within a few minutes. Most of the damage was to the foundation of the Bali petal (sacrificial altar) in front of the temple, the steps leading to the boat jetty, and

the small shrine with the Varaha (Boar) sculpture at the basement of the Shore temple. As the temple foundation is on hard granite rock, it sustained the Tsunami waves; the groynes erected around the temple area on the coastline also helped its protection. According to the two inscriptions found in the slab of smaller Shiva temple, the names of the three temples mentioned are as Kshatriyasimha Pallaveshvara-griham, Rajasimha Pallaveshvara-griham and Pllikondaruliya-devar. The entire temple complex is called as Jalashayana (lying in water). This confirms that the Vishnu shrine was the first shrine to be excavated here. The inscription on the lintel of the Vishnu shrine also mentions this as Narapatisimha Pallava Vishnu Griha where Narapatisimha is a title of Rajasimha.

Conclusion

Drawing upon the findings of Cunningham, Burgess and Fergusson, Vincent Smith wrote his famous *A History of Fine Arts in India and Ceylon* (1911). Smith systematized a host of scattered evidence and worked out a cohesive account with the premise that qualities of Indian Art has to be judged in terms of the classical (Graeco-Roman) standards. Thus, archaeological findings found scholarly elucidations as the second stage in the development of Indian Art History. Mahabalipuram is known for its architectural grandeur. It was also nicknamed as the “land of seven pagodas” by European sailors who landed on this coast. The unique monuments in Mahabalipuram represent a fusion of religion, culture and legends related to the Hindu religious pantheon. They are built in the Dravidian style of architecture, imbibing the art and culture of Tamil Nadu.

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