

The Elephanta Caves

Known to natives as *Gharapuri*, the Elephanta Cave Island is located in the Bombay harbour (on the northerly west coast of the Indian subcontinent). The island was named by the Portuguese, who, upon arrival to the island in 1534 found a large stone elephant sculpture on entry into the bay. Evidence suggests that even before the Portuguese arrival, there had been foreign visitors to the island since the 5th century (see Collins 16-17). Measuring approximately three kilometers long (Knapp 352), the island houses massive temples excavated from the island's great rock composition. The most extraordinary (in size and seeming importance) of these caves is solely dedicated to the Hindu deity Siva. This cave houses large stone relief sculptures depicting many forms of the deity. Suggested chronological placement for the construction of the caves is sometime during the 6th CE, during the great Gupta Dynasty rule in India. The Gupta Dynasty is widely recognized for striving to unite Indian states, and encourage all cultural pursuits including Indian art (Knapp 352).

Because of Siva's significance as one of the major Hindu deities, the great cave at Elephanta has become a large pilgrimage site for Hindus today. Known as the cosmic creator, preserver, and destroyer Siva is regarded in the Shaiva Puranas as the supreme or absolute (Shattuck 47). Architecturally, the temple considers the cosmic associations of Siva, as the construction allows for space, light, and movement. Interestingly, the journey to the shrine is an integral part of the pilgrimage experience. Reaching the temple is a symbolic removal of self from the physical world (across water, up a mountain, then entering the cave), transcending from the human realm into the divine realm (Berkson 17).

The cave temple has three entrances, from the north, west, and east - all leading into the main interior hall. Both the east and west wing entrances have their own sculptures associated

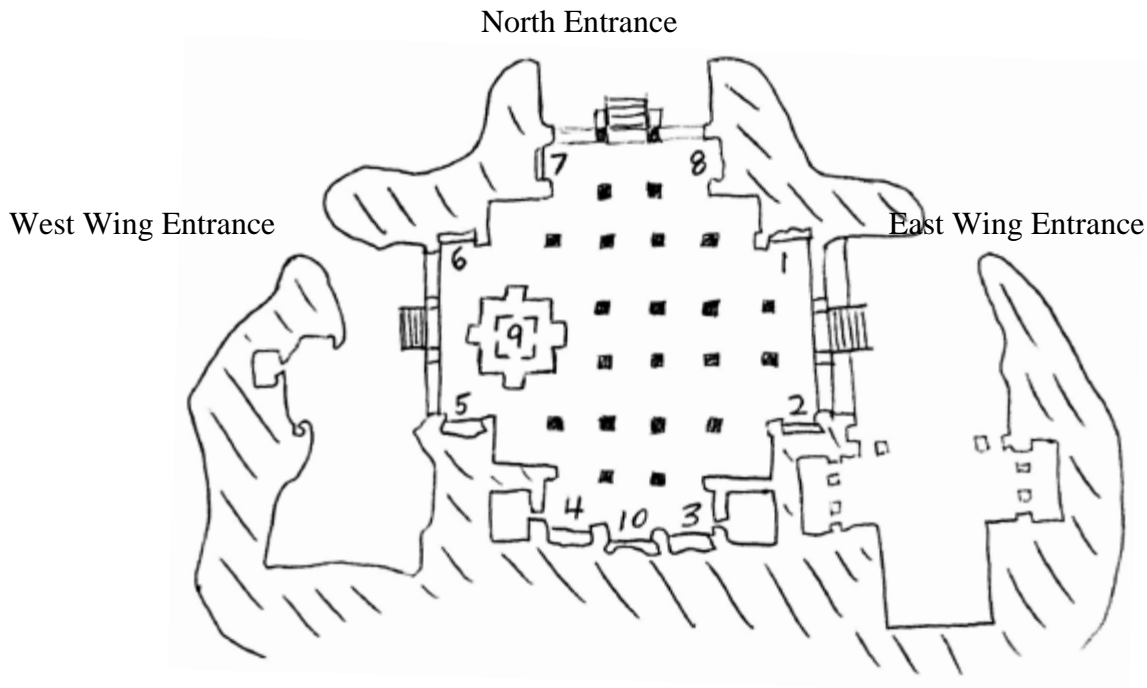
with Siva. Sixteen sculptures in total are present in and around the temple cave, nine of which are housed within main hall of the temple. Either in relief or as standalone sculptures, they are carved directly from the hill's rock composition. Each of these nine works depicts a form of Siva or a figure associated with the deity (see Berkson 17-18). The two most significant of these sculptures are the *linga* sculpture contained within a chamber (completely separate from the rock walls) near the west entrance, and a massive bust sculpture of the five-headed (with only three being visible) Sadashiva (the Eternal Siva form) protruding from the southern wall in the temple. Travelling along the directional axes and through the center of the temple would lead one to encounter either the *linga* chamber (east to west) or the Eternal Siva bust (north to south). This suggests even more attention to the specific construction of the temple, and a possible geometric link between the two sculptures for ritual movement purposes (see Berkson 19-21).

The square chamber enclosing the *linga* form has an opening on each side, with each also being guarded by large *dvarapalas* (Berkson 20-24). The symbolic association of doorkeepers to Siva is debated in interpreting Hindu mythology, but their purpose can be generalized, as either to prevent or preserve sexual contact (see Berkson 29). The presence of doorkeepers around the housed *linga* serves to promote the exclusiveness to Siva and symbolically, to serve the shrine as guardians. The *linga* form of Siva represents the phallic nature, and exudes the energy associated with its nature of creation (Knapp 363). The energy radiated from the *linga* is considered, as it is allowed to travel outward through the four open doorways surrounding its enclosure and outward in all directions, auspiciously affecting any devotees in or near the temple (see Berkson 25).

The large bust sculpture depicting Sadashiva reveals three of its implied four headed figure. The implied fourth face at the back and fifth face on the top, noted as being Sadyojata (the first manifestation of Siva) and Ishana (the highest manifestation of Siva) respectively

(Berkson xv). Each of the visible faces describes a part of Siva's nature and embodies specific features to allude to those qualities. Siva's right face portrays the masculine/destructive nature of the deity (*aghora* - fierce) (Berkson 13). The face is rugged and aggressive looking, and carries a moustache along with a snake being held near the face to further emphasize the physical, and philosophical masculine nature. The sculpture's left face offers the duality of this and embodies a feminine (*vamadeva* - graceful) form of Siva (Berkson 13). The face looks tranquil and pure, with a lotus held near the face to help to convey the creator nature of the deity. The center face of Siva is an embodiment of both male and female forms (*tatpurusha* - transcendent) (Berkson 13). Aligned together, and transcending both forms, this face is serene and tranquil. Siva's eyes are closed suggesting deep meditation and inward thought while still remaining ever present; allowing for the presentation of the dichotomies he represents (active yet passive, finite and infinite, energetic yet ascetic, etc.) (Knapp 363).

The remaining seven sculptures are relief panels carved into the walls surrounding the interior of the temple and embody depictions of Siva. The placement and relation between each set of relief sculptures also represents the dual natures of the deity. Below is a diagram depicting the location of each of the sculptures within the main temple, as well as accompanying descriptions derived from Berkson (18, 23-24):



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|--------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Ravana | 5. Marriage | 9. <i>Linga Shrine</i> |
| 2. Gambling Scene | 6. Andhaka | 10. Eternal Siva |
| 3. Ardhanarishvara | 7. Siva Dancing | |
| 4. Ganga | 8. Lord of Yogis | |

Located on either side of the eastern entrance to the shrine and facing each other on opposing walls:

1. Ravana – depicting Siva and Parvati at their celestial residence on Mt. Kailasa. Siva is casually fending off Ravana as he has come to disturb them.
2. Gambling Scene – also situated on Mt. Kailasa, Parvati and Siva are depicted as at leisure playing gambling games.

Mt. Kailasa is mythically believed to be situated precisely where the Siva cave at Elephanta is carved. Simply, the contrast between the two images here is Siva at home and at rest in the gambling scene, and on guard or defence at his home.

Located on panels on either side of the Eternal Siva Shrine, both facing north:

3. Ardhanarishvara – shows Siva and Parvati joined in a unified form (androgynous). This androgynous fused form is beside Nandi the bull. Nandi represents fertility and the agricultural nature of Siva in animal form.
4. Ganga – portrays Siva breaking the fall of the river Ganga's descent to earth (here Ganga is being depicted as a goddess with three bodies).

As the Ganga is sometimes regarded as the wife to Siva, these two panels play off each other; they present the symbolisms of husband-wife and male-female, while connecting these to the Eternal Siva figure who separates the two. The rising three heads of the Eternal Siva sculpture contrasts with the falling three-bodied Ganges relief depiction and further suggests a calculated placement of the sculptures.

Located on either side of the western entrance to the shrine and facing each other on opposing walls:

5. Marriage – depicts Siva being wed to Parvati.
 6. Andhaka – shows Siva killing the demon Andhaka by impaling him with a sword.
- This dichotomy is more evident and represents two moods being experienced. Siva is angered, aggressive, and dangerous fighting Andhaka; but is calm, at peace, and joyous marrying Parvati.

Located on either side of the northern entrance, both facing the Eternal Shrine to the south:

7. Siva Dancing – shows several forms of Siva dancing with other deities surrounding him.
8. Lord of Yogis – presents a large image of Siva as the Lord of Yogis – Yogiashvara, meditating.

Contrasting energies between these two images are evident. Siva, while dancing, presents outflowing, active, dynamic energy; where, as the yogi the energy is inward flowing, passive, and static. Although seemingly different, it is suggested that the energies of the images are identical just executed in different manners.

As the Elephanta caves are not one of India's major tourist destinations, the majority of visitors to the caves are Siva devotees. This heavy traffic (being upward of tens of thousands each year) requires the caves to be protected and maintained. UNESCO appoints the Indian government to maintain the cave temple at Elephanta, which was declared a World Heritage Site in 1987 (see UNESCO).

References

- Berkson, Carmel, O' Flaherty, W., & Michell, G. (1983) *Elephanta the Cave of Shiva*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Collins, Charles D. (1988) *The Iconography and Ritual of Siva at Elephanta*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
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- UNESCO (2002) *Periodic Reporting Section ii*. Retrieved Mar. 31, 2006, from <<http://whc.unesco.org/archive/periodicreporting/cycle01/section2/244.pdf>>.

Related Topics for Further Investigation

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Mt. *Kailasa*

Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

- <http://www.world-heritage-tour.org/asia/in/elephanta/trimurti.html>
(This link provides a 360-panorama view from inside the main hall)
- <http://www.devi.org/elephanta.html>
- http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=244
- <http://www.templenet.com/Maharashtra/elephanta.html>
- <http://www.worldheritagesite.org/sites/elephantacaves.html>

<http://theory.tifr.res.in/bombay/architecture/building/elephanta.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elephanta_Caves

<http://www.maharashtratourism.gov.in/mtdc/Caves.aspx?strpage=Caves-Elephanta-Island.html>

Written by Brett Ferster (March 2006) who is solely responsible for its content.