

The Ellora Caves

The historically and archaeologically significant Ellora Caves are located near the city of Aurangabad, in the Maharashtra state. The Ellora Caves site is comprised of thirty-four temples and monasteries cut directly from the vast cliffs that surround the caves. The site exemplifies the Dravidian tradition of rock-cut architecture and art. The Ellora Caves were given UNESCO World Heritage site accreditation in 1983 (UNESCO). There is also evidence that the various caves have been used throughout history for Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu worship (Heston 219). The site culminates at the centre, where the vast Kailasanatha Temple sits in the middle of the courtyard area. Although the other thirty three caves are similarly intricate and interesting, the most is known about the Kailasanatha, or Kailasa Temple.

The caves are an excellent example of the Dravidian architectural tradition. The *gopura*, or gateway, at the Kailasa Temple [as well as at several of the other caves] is monumental to the study of Hindu religious architecture (Heston 219). In particular, the Kailasa *gopura* features numerous figural images that are extremely important to the Hindu tradition. The *gopura* is often seen as an indication to the worshipper as to what kinds of themes they may wish to consider upon entering the temple. *Gopura* sculptures typically depict guardian gods and goddesses, whereas depictions of other more important deities are reserved for the inside of the temple (Heston 220). This is an example a hierarchy within the Hindu tradition, where images such as one of a river guardian may be present at the *gopura*, but important imagery such as the *linga*, representing Siva, are present inside the temple. At Ellora, several *lingas* adorn the inner niches of the Kailasa Temple, along with other depictions of Siva, Visnu, and Brahma.

The use of several Hindu [as well as Buddhist and Jain] deities throughout Ellora, and particularly Kailasa, represents a certain unity present in many elements within the Hindu tradition. For example, one image in the niches of Kailasa depicts Harihara, a composite of Siva and Visnu together (Heston 223). Another example is a male and female fusion of Siva and his divine consort. This image is called the Ardhanarisvara, and represents the union of powers, or *sakti*, and could be based on the *purusa-prakrti* doctrine (Heston 225).

The Ellora Caves offer great insight into the development of Indian architectural traditions throughout the county, but particularly on the Indian subcontinent. There are other rock-cut cave sites that exist in India. Sites such as Elephanta and Kanheri offer additional insight into the realm of ancient architecture, but Ellora remains one of the more important sites (Chakrabati 327). Despite its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site, the knowledge surrounding Ellora is still somewhat patchy. It is an immense challenge to try to piece together the historical context within which the Ellora Caves were constructed. From 1830 to 1861, excavating megaliths in southern India became very popular (Chakrabati 328). Many images and relics at Ellora [and other sites] were supposedly damaged during this time due to over-enthusiastic excavation (Chakrabati 328). After 1939, Indian universities became more interested in archaeology, the preservation of historical information, as well as pre-historic research endeavours. This contributed to existing theories about the history and context of the Ellora Caves.

The Ellora Caves are renowned for their exemplary rock-cut architecture. The caves and the images within were carved directly from the rock face of the staggering cliffs that surround the site. The time it must have taken the ancient architects to design

and execute such a massive feat can only be imagined, especially when the dimensions of the site are taken into consideration. The Kailasa Temple alone, stands at the centre of the Ellora site, and measures 200 feet long, and 100 feet wide and high (Goetz 85). The entire site stretches even further towards the faces of the cliffs, making the feat of creating such a masterpiece very impressive. The Kailasa Temple, although it is not technically a cave, is one of the most important examples of ancient Indian art. Also carved directly from the rock face, Kailasa is a freestanding structure that sits in the middle of the enormous court surrounded by the wall of cliffs (Goetz 89). The Kailasa has been generally accepted to date back to the middle of the eight century of the Common Era (Goetz 89). This assertion is based on inscriptions present in Kailasa that indicate the temple was erected in honour of Krishnaraja (757-772 CE) of the Rashtrakuta Dynasty (Goetz 90). The courtyard walls surrounding the Kailasa Temple are generally accepted as being carved out later. These ties to the Rashtrakuta Dynasty are what help make Kailasa so important to Indian art history.

Although Kailasa is mainly credited to the Rashtrakuta Dynasty, scholars have accepted that it would have been impossible for the entire temple to have been finished under one ruler (Goetz 92). Not only would the construction of such a marvel be extremely time-consuming, but there is also the issue of the non-uniform nature of much of the imagery throughout Ellora. Due to India's rich history of rock-cut architecture and other art, it is also near impossible to cross-reference the Ellora Caves with other sites such as Elephanta. The fact that few monuments survive from the time of the Rashtrakuta Dynasty suggests that it was a violent period in which temples were constantly changing hands, and therefore were re-appropriated over time. [By the tenth

century of the Common Era, the Ellora site seems to have been occupied by the Jains (Goetz 92)]. It is currently accepted that Kailasa could not have been completed during the reign of Krishnaraja, even though he is the ruler who is thought to have commissioned the temple, and maybe even the entire site (Goetz 92).

Another important factor in determining the historical context within which the Ellora Caves were constructed is that rock-cut structures were built backwards. Normal temple construction began with the gateway, or *gopura*, and progressed into the rest of the temple afterwards. Rock-cut temples began with the construction of the inner rooms and builders would have worked towards the mouth of the cave, finishing with the *gopura* (Goetz 94). This concept is very useful in analyzing another of the major structures at Ellora, the Dasavatara cave. This cave houses fifteen inscriptions about Dantidurga (735-757 CE), who is thought to have been the founder of the Rashtrakuta Dynasty (Goetz 97). This would mean that Krishnaraja, although he had previously been credited with Ellora, could not be the mastermind. The chronology of the Dasavatara cave, along with the inscriptions and general styles of the images contained within, may prove that Dantidurga, not Krishnaraja, was the planner behind the Ellora Caves. Despite this evidence, Krishnaraja I is still credited with completing the Kailasa Temple, although his contribution to Ellora as a whole is still somewhat questionable. There are implications that Krishnaraja killed Dantidurga's two sons, who would have been the rightful heirs to the Rashtrakuta Dynasty, and took power by force. This may be why Dantidurga's contribution to the Ellora Caves seems somewhat covered-up, and Krishnaraja's contributions glorified (Goetz 99)

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