

## THE KAILASANATHA OF ELLORA

The Kailasanatha Temple is a Saivite Temple located near Maharashtra in western India. It is grouped in a family of structures referred to as the Ellora Cave Temples and is one of dozens of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain temples among the structures. The Kailasanatha is generally regarded to have been excavated in the mid-8th century during the Rastrakuta Dynasty, inscriptions claim during the rule of Krsnaraja I, who ruled from 757-772 C.E. It is constructed out of a single rock.

The claim that it was constructed under a single ruler, or in the short period of fifteen years, seems rather absurd considering the sheer size of the structure. The architecture and sculpture art are not completed with a uniform style, in fact at least ten different styles can be found each belonging to a particular section on the temple (see Goetz 85-87). The caves in the court walls also appear to have been constructed at a later date. Because it is a cave temple though its historical sequence follows from the top, where the surface was when excavation began, to the bottom. For this reason it is believed that Krsnaraja I was the ruler whom it was completed under. [Goetz (1952) delves slightly further into a few other Ellora cave temples that are believed to be constructed around the same time]. Most of the court as well as the lower story of the temple appear to have been created under Krsnaraja, the higher levels under the rule of his predecessor Dantidurga (735-756 C.E.). The courts and lower levels also don't appear to integrate with the older designs; leaving chambers in the upper levels unreachable except by means of ladders (see Goetz 93-94). Though the Court was likely completed early in Krsnaraja's reign as many sculptures appear to be more similar in style to those constructed during the time of Dantidurga, simply of smaller size.

Though the architecture and excavation of the Kailasanatha are staggering in and of themselves they are outshone by far by the incredible artwork, sculptures, and statues all about the temple. Much of the artwork supports similar themes to several of the Puranas, this is due to the fact that these texts would have been written close to the same era as the temple was constructed. [for more on the Puranas and their relation to the artwork, and specific texts check Heston 1981-1982].

Though Kailasanatha contains undeniable evidence toward the conclusion that it is a temple of Siva, at least a few of its designers did not see issue with frequently interspersing sculptures and art of many other deities, especially Visnu. There are both Vaisnavite and Saivite subjects scattered liberally about the temple structure (see Hawley 80-82). There are also many depictions of the Dikpalas, *naga*, and River Goddesses, though they never appear quite as important as the sculptures of Siva, Visnu, and Brahma, usually appearing smaller and or made to look as if standing further back (see Heston 220-221).

The *gopura* (entry gate) of the temple is an area clearly depicting and paying homage to several other Hindu deities. The entry gate depicts many stories with diametrically opposed themes on opposing walls. The north wall clearly portrays Siva as the supreme deity, while enforcing unity among all deities and forces; it supports the pursuit of knowledge in order to achieve *moksa*. The sculptures contain images such as Siva in several modes of dance, a story of Visnu and Brahma seeking the beginning and end of a flaming *linga*, with turns out to be Siva in

his ultimate form. The sculptures continue, showing Harihara a composite form of Siva and Visnu, showing unity though with Siva dominant in the representation. The next sculpture is one of Siva with his divine consort again with Siva appearing in a superior fashion (see Heston 222-223)

The south wall portrays a radically adverse side of Hindu tales. The sculptures all reveal tales of a deity's heroic victory over a demon in battle. One is of Visnu incarnated as a boar, the story of which is told in the Puranas of this incarnation saving the earth goddess from the primordial ocean. Another depicts the dwarf Vamana (another form of Visnu) defeating the demon Bali and claiming the universe for the gods. Some of the carvings are damaged and others still depict demons being killed or defeated. One of these however reveals the connection between the northern and southern walls. The specific carving is one of Siva thrusting his trident into a demon, upon his impalement the demon sees past the illusion and lies of the material world and achieves true knowledge. The demon in the tale is a metaphor for that illusion, the story clearly stating that only through Siva, among other deities, and proper ritual will one achieve that knowledge (see Heston 223-225). This is another section of the temple where the sculptures place emphasis not only of Siva but also depict stories of Visnu and Brahma in tales of seeking knowledge, on the north wall, and in triumph of *asura*, on the south.

Among the images carved closer to the actual entrance of the *gopura* only depictions of the Dikpalas, or Gods of the Eight Directions, appear. It is commonplace to see these deities given a protector status, especially among temple entrances and other important religious locales. Four images lie on either side of the portal; unfortunately three are damaged, and of those two are completely unrecognizable. However, because in this era and in this setting it was popular to depict all eight deities together in this role it is assumed that the two damaged sculptures are the remaining Dikpala.

On the north side of the entry presides sculptures of Agni (fire god), Vayu (wind god), and Varuna (water god), the fourth is one of the destroyed sculptures. Varuna in this representation is attributed with a lotus, as opposed to his usual noose. The south side of the doorway consists of sculptures of Indra (sky god), carrying his typical lightning bolt, a damaged panel depicts a bull mount which is the usual vehicle of the deity Yama (death god). Another damaged, unrecognizable panel on this side as well as an image Kartikkeya, who is the son of Siva but is not a deity among the Dikpalas. Though throughout the Puranas Kartikkeya is seen as both as a seeker of knowledge and a sage, as well as a leader of an army of gods, in this he shows himself both as a protector, garnering a place among the Dikpalas, at least thematically. These two roles also aptly blend with the theme already beginning to shine through among the other sculptures (see Heston 226-234). It is impossible to ever tell which of the Dikpala Kartikkeya replaces, due to the two damaged carvings.

The deities flanking the door directly are Indra with his lightning bolt and Varuna carrying the lotus, again this is unusual in representations of Varuna. The lotus often represents knowledge, however, fitting seemingly with that wall's theme. The lightning bolt clearly held as a weapon in this case fitting with the theme of its respective wall. [It is interesting to note that Buddhist excavations in the Ellora Caves also similar symbols representing religious knowledge, Heston 1981-1982]

The temple also contains much smaller vastly intricate and detailed carvings of Hindu epics, *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, and *The Krsnacaritra*. The walls of the porch of the temple depict these stories in their episodic nature. Many believe these depictions are later additions to the temple for several reasons (see Hawley 77-78); this is believed in part due to the intense amounts of detail that has gone into these carvings as well as the fact that they do not seem to be very well integrated into the general architecture of the temple. Despite this studies have dated the story panels at least around the same time as the rest of the monument. It is interesting to note that regardless of the intricacy with which the many episodes of each story are depicted many arguably important episodes of each tale are either incomplete or just missing (see Markel 59).

The Kailasanatha is clearly a marvel of architecture, artistry, and an unfathomable amount of labour. It rests as the center piece and most impressive of the Ellora Caves, an already marvellous network. Its art characterizes a deep understanding of, and willingness to teach Hindu beliefs. It exemplifies the amount of devotion and care one has for something they truly believe in, while at the same time exposing the intelligence and creativity of its designers through their use of symbolism. It is no wonder this place attracts so many visitors, including scholars, pilgrims, and tourists, or why it is considered the unrivalled spectacle among the other cave temples.

## REFERENCES AND OTHER RECCOMENDED READING

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Markel, Stephen (2000) "The Ramayana Cycle on the Kailasanatha Temple at Ellora" from *Ars Orientalis Vol. 10 Supplement 1*. Ann Arbor: Freer Gallery of Art, The Smithsonian Institution and Department of the History of Art, University of Michigan.

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### **Related Topics for Further Investigation**

The Vishvakarma  
The Dashavatara  
The Indra Sabha  
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*The Ramayana*  
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*The Krsnacaritra*  
The Puranas  
*Siva Purana*  
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### **Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellora\\_Caves](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellora_Caves)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kailash\\_Temple](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kailash_Temple)

<http://www.templenet.com/Maharashtra/ellora.html>

<http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/india/kanchipuram/kai01.html>

<http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2501/stories/20080118504906500.htm>

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