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## **Art. VIII.—A few Observations on the Temple of Somnath**

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A RT. VIII.—*A few Observations on the Temple of Somnath; by CAPTAIN POSTANS.*

[Read June 15, 1844.]

As a strong feeling has been evinced by the Society that by means of graphic illustration the curiosities and monuments of antiquity in India should be rescued from oblivion, (a wish that has been most liberally met by the Honourable Company,) I have considered it somewhat conducive to the object in view to print the sketch which I took of the celebrated temple of Somnath during my visit to Girnar in 1838\*, and of which a description was given in the Royal Asiatic Society's Journal for October, in that year.

The principal historical notices of Somnath which have reached us are comprised in the well-known accounts of Mirkhond, (in his *Rozat-as-safá,*) Firishtah, in his great History, and a curious and quaint story of the poet Sadi's visit to the temple, about two centuries after the invasion of the Saurashtra by Mahmúd of Ghazni. From these, as well as collateral accounts, it is certain, notwithstanding a great discrepancy as to the peculiar form of the idol or object of adoration which Mahmúd found on his visit in the beginning of the eleventh century of our era, that the temple of Somnath was one of the richest and most gorgeous shrines then existing in Western India, and that this wealth and renown formed no little portion of the inducements which influenced the Mohammedan march to that extreme corner of the Gujarat peninsula. Like everything of an historical character in India, the Hindús themselves are totally ignorant respecting the interest which attaches to Somnath, and certainly in and near the spot, the fact of Mahmúd's invasion, startling though it was, is quite unknown, and the building itself looked upon in its ruined state without the slightest approach to respect or interest of any kind. How far this apathy may extend into the interior of India I am not prepared to state, but certainly in no part of the Bombay Presidency, or amongst the Rajput tribes of Saurashtra, did I ever hear a syllable indicative of an acquaintance with an interest in the Somnath, except amongst the Jain priests of Girnar, who in their crude historical records designate it as *Chandra prabasa*, and appear to consider it as one of their shrines; but of its political history they know nothing. The vicinity has shared the veneration of pilgrims (with the neighbouring shrine of Dwarkanath and the whole

line of coast,) from the legend which ascribes the death of *Krishna* from the arrow of his brother *Vali*, to a spot near Somnath, but to the temple itself they pay no respect. In an Upapurana it is mentioned as one of the twelve Lingas of Siva, and hence a great difference of opinion between learned commentators as to the Budhistical or Brahmanical character which should be assigned to the place when found and pillaged by Mahmúd: the able discussions on this point printed in the Asiatic Journal for May and June, 1843, must be referred to for every information on this head; it would ill become a mere observer and recorder of facts like myself to offer any opinion on so erudite a question; but as my impressions were given in 1838, so I venture to refer to them here, and will conclude this notice with the description I then gave of the actual appearance of the temple. Colonel Tod has quoted inscriptions found in the neighbourhood of Somnath, some of which I saw, and which appear to record repairs or additions made to the temple by petty princes or chiefs of Anthilwara; and the modern temple raised by Ahalia Bhye, near the ruin of the greater, is rather a proof that the Mahrattas considered the neighbourhood imbued with a certain degree of sanctity, as it certainly is to Hindús, than that they attached any interest to Somnath itself.

Pattan, and all the part of the country wherein it is situated, is now under a Mohamedan ruler, the Nawaub of Junagurh, and the city itself offers the most curious specimen of any I have ever seen of its original Hindú character, preserved throughout its walls, gates, and buildings, despite Mohammedan innovations and a studied attempt to obliterate the traces of paganism; even the very musjids, which are here and there encountered in the town, have been raised by materials from the sacred edifices of the conquered, or, as it is said by the historians of Sindh, "the true believers turned the temples of the idol worshippers into places of prayer." Old Pattan is to this day a Hindú city in all but its inhabitants—perhaps one of the most interesting historical spots in Western India. Mahmúd, we know, left a Hindú or a native ruler here, but successive changes have taken place since then, and various historians mention spoliations and conversions of the temples to mosques by succeeding conquerors, until Somnath assumed the appearance it now presents, of a temple evidently of pagan original altered by the introduction of a Mohammedan style of architecture in various portions, but leaving its general plan and minor features unmolested. Whether any or what portion of the original structure now stands as it was seen by Mahmúd in the eleventh century, I would beg to leave to more learned commentators to decide; I can only say, that in various portions, particularly the western front, where

it is most perfect, it is rich in ornament, and by whomever raised or restored, the work must have been done at a period when zeal and wealth prompted the labour. Its material altogether is cyclopean, and even in its present state would, unless wilfully demolished, stand for centuries, though exposed to the trying effects of damp sea air, and for some portion of the year to the whole violence of the monsoon. I would here express a hope that it may long be allowed to stand as a remarkable monument of Indian history, replete with an interest of which its total or partial former demolition cannot deprive it. It can never be again used for the purposes to which it has heretofore been appropriated; and any slight efforts for its preservation could not, therefore, be misconstrued.

The following is the translation of an inscription in the Cufic character, transcribed by Major Rawlinson, which was found on the reputed gates of Somnath, brought, in 1843, by our victorious troops from the tomb of the champion of the faith at Ghazni.—“*In the name of the most merciful God (may there be) forgiveness from God for the most noble Ameer the great King, who was born to become the Lord of the State, and the Lord of religion, Abdúl Kassim Mahmúd, the son of Sabuktagin, may the mercy of God be upon him,*” (remaining phrase illegible.) A sketch of these gates has, I believe, been published, but it is curious to observe, whatever may have been their architectural character or material, as applicable to Somnath, whence vague tradition has assigned their removal, that there is no allusion to the exploit in the above, unless the illegible phrase may contain it.

The following is the description of the appearance of Somnath, which I have elsewhere ventured to describe with pen and pencil.

“ This famous shrine occupies an elevated site in the north-western corner of the city of Puttan, on the western coast of the Gujarat peninsula, overlooking the sea and close to the walls. In its present mutilated state it may be difficult to convey any very distinct or correct idea of *Somnath*, for though its original design and gorgeous architecture may still be traced even in the complete ruin it presents, its general effect is likely to be better understood from an effort of the pencil than the pen.

“ The temple consists of one large hall in an oblong form, from one end of which proceeds a small square chamber, or sanctum. The centre of the hall is occupied by a noble dome over an octagon of eight arches; the remainder of the roof terraced and supported by numerous pillars. There are three entrances. The sides of the building face to the cardinal points, and the principal entrance appears to be on the eastern side, (the view is taken from this quarter.) These doorways

are unusually high and wide, in the Pyramidal or Egyptian form, decreasing towards the top; they add much to the effect of the building. Internally, the whole presents a scene of complete destruction; the pavement is everywhere covered with heaps of stones and rubbish; the facings of the walls, capitals of the pillars, in short, every portion possessing anything approaching to ornament, having been defaced or removed, (if not by Mahmúd, by those who subsequently converted this temple into its present semi-Mohammedan appearance). On a pillar beyond the centre arch, and leading to the sanctum, is an inscription which, anxious as I was to learn anything connected with the temple, much excited my curiosity. On translation, however, it proved to be merely a record of a certain *Selát* or mason, who visited the place some 300 years since. I learnt, to my inexpressible regret, that an ancient tablet, whose unoccupied niche was pointed out to me, had been removed from Somnath some years ago by a European visitor. I need hardly quote Col. Tod's remark on this mistaken, though I fear too frequent practice; but if what he says be applicable to the mere architectural ornaments of a building, how much more so to engraven records similar to that which is here wanting.

"Externally the whole of the buildings are most elaborately carved and ornamented with figures, single and in groups of various dimensions. Many of them appear to have been of some size; but so laboriously was the work of mutilation carried on here, that of the larger figures scarcely a trunk has been left, whilst few even of the most minute remain uninjured. The western side is the most perfect: here the pillars and ornamenti are in excellent preservation. The front entrance is ornamented with a portico, and surmounted by two slender minarets—ornaments so much in the Mohammedan style, that they, as well as the domes, have evidently been added to the original building. The two side entrances, which are at some height from the ground, were gained by flights of steps: of these latter the remains only are to be traced. The whole space, for a considerable distance around the temple, is occupied by portions of pillars, stones, and fragments of the original building."

Such is a brief description of the present appearance of the renowned *Somnath*, which, notwithstanding its original spoliation and subsequent alterations, must always prove an object of great interest to all who have studied the history or antiquities of India. I must not omit to mention, as a proof of the wonderful solidity of this structure, that within a few years its roof was used as a battery for some heavy pieces of ordnance, with which the neighbouring port of Virawal was defended from the pirates who previously infested the coast.