

Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland

<http://journals.cambridge.org/JRA>

Additional services for *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Art. IV.—*On the Three-faced Busts of Siva in the Cave-Temples of Elephanta, near Bombay; and Ellora, near Dowlatabad*

W. H. Sykes

Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland / Volume 5 / Issue 09 / January 1838, pp 81 - 90

DOI: 10.1017/S0035869X00015148, Published online: 14 March 2011

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0035869X00015148

How to cite this article:

W. H. Sykes (1838). Art. IV.—*On the Three-faced Busts of Siva in the Cave-Temples of Elephanta, near Bombay; and Ellora, near Dowlatabad*. Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland, 5, pp 81-90 doi:10.1017/S0035869X00015148

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

CAMBRIDGE JOURNALS



ART. IV.—*On the Three-faced Busts of Siva in the Cave-Temples of Elephanta, near Bombay; and Ellora, near Dowlatabad.* By
LIEUTENANT-COLONEL SYKES, F.R.S.

Read on the 17th June, 1837.

IN the fifth number of the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, p. 100, there is a translation, by Mr. Wathen, of the Bombay Civil Service, of inscriptions on copper-plates, said to have been found at Karda in Dekkan. At the bottom of the page there is a note explanatory of the phrase in the invocation, "Uncreated, Triple, Celestial Trio," in which Mr. Wathen says, "This is an invocation to the Trimúrti, or united form of Brahmá, Vishnu, and Siva, the Hindú triad: the centre figure in Elephanta."

A good deal of useless, not to say acrimonious discussion, respecting the true character of the celebrated three-faced colossal bust in the Cave-temple of Elephanta, has been carried on, not only by British Orientalists, but by those of Europe at large: the explanations offered in the first instance became only the more involved by the ignorance of the disputants in Hindú mythology, and by the desire of some to graft upon the subject, and to point out a tangible representation of the knowledge in India of a European religious dogma: and latterly, when our persevering Sanskrit scholars had made themselves acquainted with the Hindú Pantheon, they were disabled from coming to satisfactory conclusions respecting the bust at Elephanta, in consequence of the mutilations it had sustained from barbarian bigots and enthusiasts, not the less barbarian, although clothed in the garb of civilization.

Up to the year 1818, it was supposed (I believe) to be the only monument of antiquity of the kind, in the multitudinous cave-temples of India, from Ceylon to the Himalaya Mountains. In that year I paid a visit to the Caves of Ellora, and as I had gone there with the intention of giving a detailed account of these wonderful works of ancient art, and with ample leisure, I made it a point to inquire for the smallest excavations. The consequence was my being led by the attendant Brahmans to the plateau of the scarp, in which the temple called Dumar Lena, dedicated to the Linga, is excavated. In the banks of a rivulet which falls over the face of this temple, I met with numerous, small, square excavations, in each of which was a Linga standing in the centre of the floor, and to my

great surprise and gratification, on the wall fronting the entrance, I found sculptured in alto-relief a bust with three faces, similar in all their numerous details of attire and ornament, to those now remaining of the Elephanta bust; and as many of these busts were quite perfect, there was a most legitimate inference, that the defective parts of the Elephanta bust had a similar correspondence. There was no room for future doubt or hesitation whether or not the bust was that of the Triad: the bust was not the bust of Brahmá, Vishnu, and Siva, but the bust of that popular divinity Siva himself. The centre face with its youthful placid air, the third eye in the forehead, the moon tressed up in the cap on the right side, and a human skull in a similar manner on the left side, all attributes of Siva, here probably represent him as the generator. On his left is a youthful face, which cannot be mistaken, from its feminine traits, to be other than that of a female, did not the bracelets on the arms, the looking-glass in the hand, and the pencil for applying antimony to the eyelids, eyelashes, and eyebrows, place it beyond doubt. Her head-dress is made up of the coils of the terrible Nag, or Cobra da Capella (*Coluber Naga*), which is sacred to Siva; and the head of the reptile forms the top-knot. Here we have the Sakti, or female energy of the god Siva. In some of the busts it is doubtful whether the death's-head belongs to the head-dress of the centre figure, or to the female. In case it belongs to the female, combined with the Nag it would identify her as Durgá. The face of the figure on the right is strongly furrowed and lined with traits of violence and passion; but there is still the symbol of Siva in the Nag held up before the face, and the head-attire corresponds with that of the centre face. In one hand is held up a dish, into which the mouth appears to be blowing or breathing. If the rosary and cocoa-nut in the hands of the centre figure be indicative of preparations for sacrifice to the mystic union of the Linga and Yóni, placed on the floor before the bust, the prolific source of all nature, then it may be that this face of Siva, in his fabled character of breathing fire as the destructor, is supplying this requisite for the sacrifice. Mr. Erskine mentions that this figure has also the eye in the forehead, characteristic of Siva; but as it is not in my original drawing, I have no doubt it was an omission on my part, and I have supplied it on the drawing sent herewith. Whatever may be thought of these explanations, it is at least shown, that the bust of Elephanta and those of Ellora are not representations of the Hindú triad of gods—Brahmá, Vishnu, and Siva; nor have I ever heard of any sculptures or pictorial representations of the kind

throughout India. And it is probable my friend Major Moor, of Hindú Pantheon honours, with all his stores, may be able to bear me out in this belief. But my opinion must have small weight with Orientalists, particularly in Europe. I may be excused, therefore, fortifying it by quoting the convictions of one to whom most persons will be disposed to bow, I mean Mr. Erskine, late of Bombay, a profound Orientalist, the author of the *Remains of Buddhism in India*, the *Life of Baber*, &c. In the third volume of the *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay*, p. 524, in his paper on the *Remains of Buddhism in India*, he says, when speaking of Ellora, "Above the Dumar Lena are the singular chapels of the Triads, so well illustrated by Captain Sykes. They PROVE BEYOND ALL MANNER OF DOUBT, that the grand three-headed figure at Elephanta DOES NOT REPRESENT the three chief gods of the Hindús, or what has been denominated the Hindú Trinity. In all these busts, two heads have the third eye, the remaining head seems to be Parvati,¹ who is sculptured in conjunction with her husband; and, in most instances, she holds up a round hand-mirror, and the antimony-needle for dressing and colouring her eyelids and eyebrows."

I come now to the object of this paper. The Royal Asiatic Society is necessarily solicitous to extend a just knowledge of Asia, and above all to clear away those mists of error, on many topics, which have obscured the horizon, in matters connected with the physics, politics, literature, and morals of that great continent. It has been most eminently successful, and in proportion to its reputation is the risk and injury to truth of its name giving a temporary colouring to error. The Society is certainly not responsible for the opinions of contributors to its *Transactions* and proceedings; but I believe it to be the duty of every member of the Society, where he thinks there may be a compromise of its good name by the record of an error in its publications, to come forward with his aid to ensure its correction. In the case of the quotations from Mr. Wathen, I felt it the more necessary to do so, as from the distinguished reputation of that gentleman as an Orientalist, any opinion of his is likely to have the force of a dictum; and I feel perfectly assured, that the assertion he has made is the simple result of inadvertence, for he had the means of satisfying himself of the fact by a reference on the spot to the *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay*. With unalloyed feelings of respect for Mr. Wathen, therefore, and

¹ The wife, or Sakti, of Siva.

utterly free from any captious desire for emendation, I beg to offer to the Society a copy of my original drawing of the bust of Siva at Ellora; and if the Society does me the honour to give it the wide circulation of its Journal, a glance of it will do more to rectify error than a lengthened dissertation. It has already appeared in the third volume of the Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay, in my account of the Caves of Ellora; but as only two hundred and fifty copies of that volume were printed, and as the book is only to be met with in the libraries of learned institutions, the public is, in fact, cut off from a knowledge of its contents; and I do not hesitate to believe that a fresh engraving, or lithograph, will be useful, and possibly acceptable. It is right to remark that in some of the busts at Ellora the female face is to the right of the centre face, and the aged male to the left.

It may probably be desirable to say a few words on the singular fact of these busts of Siva at Ellora not having become generally known to Europeans in India during the ages that have past. This may be partly accounted for in the short stay which most visitors make, from the insecurity of the neighbourhood of Ellora, in the multiplicity of magnificent works, both Buddhist and Hindú, and the utter exhaustion resulting from one or two days' labour in rambling from cave to cave, in a powerful sun on the side of a hill, and to the final inquiry to the cicerone, "Well, have we seen all the caves?" the answer would be, "Yes, all *worth* visiting." "But are there any more?" "Oh, yes, many small ones, like closets, up the hill, but they are not worth the trouble of the walk; some have got the Linga, and some are without anything."¹ To the satiated visitor this answer would be decisive, and the examination would cease. Those visitors who made their way up the hill with their guns, in search of the hyæna, would probably look into the gloomy, indeed almost dark excavations, but missing their search would scarcely interrupt their pursuit; and in case they saw the busts, would carelessly or ignorantly associate them with what they had already seen below.

My case was different from all these. I went there, as I before said, for the express purpose of measuring, describing, and sketching the wonders of the place; I encamped at the caves for a week, protected by a guard; nevertheless, I might have missed seeing these busts, but for my disappointment in not meeting with the inscriptions in the ancient character, so common at Karlí, in Salsette,

¹ The latter probably being dormitories attached to the Buddhist caves.

at Junar, the Nana Ghát, and other places, and which I had previously looked upon as a distinctive characteristic of Buddhist monuments; for in no instance had I met with an unreadable inscription, that is to say in an unknown character, in Hindú works of art. Frustrated in my search, it was only the day but one¹ previously to my proposed departure, that, instituting a searching inquiry for further excavations, I was led to the chapels, as Mr. Erskine calls them, containing the busts;—but inscriptions I did not meet with. My friend Mr. Walter Elliot, indeed, speaks of inscriptions “cut on the pillars of temples, or on their exterior walls, as on the *sandstone* temples of Ellora.” But as he calls the *trap-rocks* of Ellora sandstone, Mr. Elliot may have been equally misinformed with respect to the inscriptions. I looked for them in vain: that is to say, for inscriptions in the antique form of the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. I had particular views in searching for these inscriptions; for having long entertained an idea that, whatever was to be *relied upon* respecting the ancient history and state of India was to be obtained from these widely-diffused inscriptions, when translated, I had been in the habit of collecting them as opportunities offered.

My previous observation of the works of ancient art of the Buddhists and Saivas, or followers of Siva,—for there is not anywhere a rock-temple excavation dedicated to Brahmá or Vishnu,—had considerably shaken my faith in the asserted superior antiquity of the Brahmanical power in India; and a deliberate comparison of the works of art at Ellora, of the Buddhists, and the followers of Siva, for he is the only Hindú god to whom honour is done at Ellora, the history of the Avatars of Brahmá and Vishnu being mere ornaments to the galleries, corridors, or walls of his temples, as pictures are to a mansion, strengthened my convictions, and I had the temerity to put on record opinions respecting the previous and universal prevalence of Buddhism, which exposed the value of my judgment to great hazard. Nevertheless, after a lapse of eighteen years, not idly spent with respect to Oriental matters, I have no wish to recede from my former opinions; and I am partly led to this by the recent successful labours of gentlemen who appear to have been pursuing the same track of inquiry that I was then following.

Subsequently to my paper on the Caves of Ellora having been sent to the Literary Society of Bombay, in turning over the volumes

¹ October 15, 1819.

of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, my eye rested upon a Sanskrit inscription of six hundred years old,¹ and I observed some of the unknown Buddhist letters in it. I then sought for others of older dates, and found an increased number of the Buddhist letters in proportion to the antiquity of their dates, until I came to the translated inscriptions from Buddha Gaya,² and here they obtained to a considerable extent, so that in the whole number of inscriptions I had identified forty-five Buddhist letters: the deduction was simple, that the unreadable Buddhist inscriptions were only in a more ancient form of the Sanskrit character, of which the changes could be readily traced, and it only required some stages beyond the Buddha Gaya inscriptions to lead up to the most ancient known, namely, that found in the caves of Western India and on the Lát of Delhi, and the key would be thus obtained to unlock some of the treasures of history in a language which was supposed to be exclusively Brahmanical and Hindú; but which, nevertheless, had only reference to Buddhism and Buddhists, and, as far as could be read, was utterly silent respecting the Polytheism of the Brahmans. My speculations were embodied in a paper for a literary Society, but were previously submitted to some friends, and either warmly combated or quietly put aside, and they did not in consequence get the length of the press; but the memoranda on which they were founded are preserved, and I am proud of having been treading in the same track of research with those who are doing so much for the ancient history of India. The goal of my speculation has not yet been reached; but several distinguished individuals have made rapid strides towards it; Mr. James Prinsep, the Rev. Principal Mill, Mr. Wathen, and the Rev. Mr. Stephenson. Mr. James Prinsep says, speaking of inscriptions on ancient coins, "And here the letters resemble those of the *lâts*, or of the caves on the west of India, the *most ancient* written form of the Sanskrit language."³ The Rev. Mr. Mill, speaking of the inscription at Harsha, at a temple of Siva, says, "The character, though illegible at present to the Pandits even of Northern India, presents no difficulty after deciphering the *more ancient* inscription, whose characters resemble those of the *second* on the pillar of Allahabad. This stone exhibits the Devanagari in its state of transition, from the form visible in that and other yet older monuments, to the writing which now universally bears that

¹ Asiatic Researches, vol. ix. p. 401.

² Ibid. vol. i. p. 284.

³ Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol. iv. p. 627.

name, and which may be traced, without sensible variation, as old as the twelfth century."¹

And what do we deduce from the labours of these gentlemen? The moment they pass beyond the barrier of the comparatively modern form of the Sanskrit character, the light of Hindúism is dimmed, and they are surrounded with the dazzling glories of Buddhism. The Rev. Principal Mill makes the Harsha inscription a standard to judge of the age of other inscriptions in the ratio of their variations; and it may, I suppose, be almost reducible to a rule of three proposition. If it took twelve hundred years to alter the form of the letters of the Buddha Gaya inscription to that of Harsha, and six hundred years to change the form of the latter to the present Devanagari,² how many years must it have taken to alter the form of the Buddha Gaya inscriptions into the form of that on the Láts of Delhi, or that of the Buddhist Caves of Western India? This calculation would carry us deep into antiquity; deeper, probably, than would be advantageous to Brahmanical pretensions. There is another step in this rule of three progression, also, in Mr. Wathen's translation of inscriptions and plates from Gujarat, about fifteen hundred years old; the form of the characters *resembles* that of the inscriptions in the Buddhist caves of Western India; and Mr. Wathen says it is *evidently* derived from the more ancient one which is found in the caves of Kanari, Karlí, &c.³

But a new and rich field of illustration is opening by that able and most indefatigable inquirer, Mr. James Prinsep, and his friends; I mean the investigation of the ancient coins of India, which are pouring forth in astonishing quantities from the receptacles in which they have been buried for twenty hundred years, or more. Not only has he made a vast collection himself, but he has lithographed his own coins and those of his friends, with his own hands, and published them in his admirable Journal; which latter authority takes its place with the first scientific and philosophical periodicals of Europe, and has thus thrown more historic light upon Ancient India in two or three years, than the preceding century afforded to us. Here, again, we have the most ancient Indian coins associated with Buddhism and Buddhist symbols. Mr. Prinsep says, "It is an indisputable axiom, that unstamped fragments of silver and gold, of a fixed weight, must have preceded the use of regular coin, in

¹ Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol. iv. p. 167.

² Asiatic Researches, vol. ix. p. 401.

³ Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol. iv. p. 478.

those countries where civilization and commerce had introduced the necessity of some convenient representative of value. The antiquarian, therefore, will have little hesitation in ascribing the *highest grade of antiquity* in Indian Numismatology to those small flattened bits of silver, or other metal, which are occasionally discovered all over the country, either quite smooth, or bearing only a few punch-marks on one or both sides."¹

Apply this dictum to Mr. Prinsep's coins,² and it will be seen that some of the *most ancient* have the emblems called a Chaitya or Buddhist monument, and a Swastika or monograph, both of which emblems are initial in Buddhist inscriptions, in the Buddhist caves at the city of Junar in Dekkan. On others, again, are the lion and the pillar, constant associates of Buddha and his monuments. On one said to be a Hindú coin, No. 25 of the Kanouj Series, plate 39, there is a female seated on a lion or tiger, the attitudes of both lion and female being absolutely identical with those of a similar group sculptured in alto-relief of the size of life, on the terminal wall of the vestibule of the Buddhist cave at Ellora, misnamed Runchor; the opposite wall of the vestibule having a male personage sculptured, seated on a couchant elephant. This group is in my drawings of Ellora. The female in this cave is absurdly called by the Brahmans, Vágíswarí, a name of Sarasvatí, Brahmá's wife. In another cave, she is called Indraní, the wife of Indra: in one sculpture the lion is by her side; it will be no objection to coin 25, plate 39, being Buddhist, that the female is associated with a peafowl; for several of those birds are roosting on the branches of a tree over the head of my group. If these figures, which hold the most conspicuous and honourable situations immediately outside the precincts of the sanctum, represent the prince and his wife, who caused the temple to be excavated, then a knowledge of the date of the coin would probably give to us an approximation to the date of this particular excavation. I may mention, that the three circles, forming when close together, and surmounted by a crescent, the Chaitya or Buddhist monument mentioned by Mr. Prinsep, are engraved on the floors of several of the Buddhist caves, although the circles are not quite contiguous. I do not know what opinion Mr. Wathen entertains regarding the respective antiquity of the Buddhists and Brahmanists in India; but he has used very strong language respecting the systematical destruction by the Brahmans, of all historical

¹ Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol. iv. p. 626.

² Ibid. vol. iv. p. 627, plate 35.

documents relating to India, previous to the Mohammedan invasion. For which destruction, no doubt, the Brahmans had sufficient motives.

His words are: "In the course of antiquarian researches in India, we cannot but remark the very opposite course pursued by the Jainas and the Brahmans, in regard to the preservation of historical legends: the Brahmans are accused by the Jainas, of having destroyed, wherever they gained the ascendancy, *all the historical books in existence*, which related facts anterior to the Musalman conquest; and we certainly do not find, at least, in the Dekkan and other countries, which have been long under their exclusive influence, anything whatever prior to that period; whereas, on the contrary, the Jainas have treasured up in their libraries every historical legend and fragment, that could be preserved by them. May it not be inferred, that the Brahmans, sensible of the *great changes introduced by themselves* to serve their own avaricious purposes, in the Hindú worship, at the era of the Musalman conquest, neglected the preservation of the historical works which then existed? for as no king of their own faith remained, and their nobles and learned men must have lost power and influence, no one was left, who took any interest in their preservation: and it appears probable, that at such period, the Puránas were altered, and the novel practices now existing introduced, to enable those wily priests still to extort from the superstition of the people, what they had formerly enjoyed by the pious munificence of their own kings."

"The Jainas indeed assert, that the Puránas are mere historical works; that Parasuráma, Rámachandra, Krishna, &c., were merely great kings, who reigned in Oude and other places, and have not the slightest pretensions to divinity."¹

Is it that we have been hitherto mystified by the interpolated works and extravagant pretensions of the Brahmans, and that the indefatigable exertions of such inquirers as Mr. James Prinsep, Mr. Wathen, and their friends, and others following in the same track, may throw such a new and unexpected light upon the history of ancient India, as to modify or subvert our present opinions? We have never yet dared let our minds rest upon a period anterior to the Brahmanist: we may yet be enabled to do so.

But I beg pardon of the Society for a long digression. I have been insensibly drawn into it, by endeavouring to explain by what inducements I was led to the discovery of the three-faced bust

¹ Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol. iv. p. 482.

of Siva, and zeal in my subject has carried me on. I hope, however, it may not be quite useless, but that it may give rise to new speculations on the age of the bust which is the primary subject of this paper.

W. H. SYKES.

NOTE.—I beg to correct an expression inadvertently used in my account of Ellora. I spoke of the caves being partly excavated in granite. I was wrong, the whole formation is of trap; and the rocks, various basalts and amygdaloids, as is the case at Elephanta, Karlí, Salsette, Junar, the Nana Ghát, &c.
