




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Beyond conservation: Royal picnics at Elephanta and the legitimization of empire

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## Abstract

Histories of conservation suggest that from the nineteenth century onwards, the custodianship and conservation of colonial antiquities enabled European powers to legitimize imperial claims. This article complicates this view by focusing on a series of visits made by British royals to the Caves of Elephanta, near Bombay, as part of their tours of India. Of particular interest are the visits in 1870 and 1875, which were essentially picnics, including fireworks and feasting, with little showcasing of ongoing conservation efforts. The article argues that these early visits also sought to advance a narrative of imperial legitimization through the British heirs' presence at an Indian monument. Rather than acts of rational governance, such as conservation measures, these picnics were transactions within the ceremonial economy that privileged consumption as a means of legitimizing empire. They present a register of imperial engagement with an Indian monument that is neither 'plunder' nor 'preservation'. Instead, they are posited as predecessors of the *durbars* (courts/assemblies) produced by the British administration from 1877 onwards. As acts of imperial political communication, the Elephanta visits drew upon the popularity of the picnic as a form of leisure, and consumption, and the long-standing aesthetic resonances of the site, such as the island's picturesque framing and the Caves' Romanticist associations. These enduring aesthetic frameworks made the acts of consumption legible as imperial political communication. The picnics at Elephanta demonstrate that colonial antiquities featured in imperial narratives of legitimization based on political pageantry, exceeding conservation and rational governance.

**Keywords:** Conservation; imperialism; colonial antiquities; Romanticism; picnics; pageantry; ceremonial economy; communication

## Introduction

Historicizing conservation, one critical view suggests, is a movement from 'plunder to preservation', whereby 'historic preservation and imperialism were increasingly used for mutual legitimization, and ... constantly enhanced and strengthened each

other'.<sup>1</sup> That is, by acting as preservers and protectors of colonial antiquities, Britain and other European powers justified imperial rule. Reflecting on conservation's role in the legitimization of empire, this article examines the changing modalities of the visits of British royalty to a single site—Elephanta. The island of Elephanta, off the coast of Bombay (now Mumbai) in western India, is home to pre-modern rock-cut cave shrines. These feature monolithic sculptures of the Hindu god Shiva that are as monumental as they are aesthetically refined. The visits—part of the royals' respective tours of the Indian subcontinent—were planned, ostensibly, to keep in view the Caves' aesthetic and historic importance. At first glance, the visits to Elephanta encourage the reading that the colonial government was desirous of projecting the British royals and, by extension, the British empire, as saviours of Indian antiquities.

However, the modalities of the visits showed a distinct shift. The first two visits, in 1870 and 1875 respectively, were patterned on picnics, while the third was cancelled. The fourth visit, in 1911, was the only one where the British monarchy demonstrably concerned itself with the conservation and preservation of the Caves. This article posits the visits—in 1870, 1875, 1905, and 1911—as emblematic of the evolving relationship between empire, monarchy, the custodianship of colonial antiquities, and public perceptions around conservation.

Despite the local impetus towards conservation, and the emergence of the idea that the movement from 'plunder to preservation', could legitimize empire, conservation efforts were, in fact, cast aside during the initial royal visits. Instead, consumption—of the landscape and the Caves, and in the form of a picnic—was celebrated and publicized. These actions may seem like a misstep, blatant hypocrisy, or even a missed opportunity to offer an 'object lesson' in appropriate engagement with a monument. This article argues that the picnics at Elephanta need to be read as early iterations of political communication or transactions in the ceremonial economy, as much as the subsequent visits, that bear out the links between custodianship of colonial antiquities and imperial legitimization. The picnics, too, legitimated imperial power, but they did so by showcasing transactions within the ceremonial economy, rather than as acts of rational governance, such as conservation efforts. The article posits that the Elephanta picnics were predecessors to the imperial *durbars* or assemblies of 1877, 1903, 1905, and 1911; they drew upon the site's aesthetic resonances to do the same ideological work as the *durbars*—producing a symbolic means of legitimizing British imperial expansionism—and they did so at the expense of concerns around conservation.

The British assemblies and *durbars* cited Mughal courtly culture to produce an 'invented tradition'.<sup>2</sup> Picnics, on the other hand, referenced a form of leisure that had come to characterize Romantic Britain—the 'willful picnicking' of the British was

<sup>1</sup> Astrid Swenson, 'The heritage of empire', in *From plunder to preservation: Britain and the heritage of empire, c.1800–1940*, (eds) Astrid Swenson and Peter Mandler (British Academy Scholarship Online, 2014), p. 4, <https://doi.org/10.5871/bacad/9780197265413.003.0001>.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'invented tradition' is borrowed from Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's volume, and refers to '...a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past'. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, 'Introduction: Inventing traditions', *The invention of tradition*, (eds) Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 1.

carried over to their colonial holdings in South Asia.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous precedents for picnics, that is, references to an outdoor meal enjoyed with favoured company, are found enfolded within folk practices, religious rituals, and pilgrimages.<sup>4</sup> These practices acknowledged, and cited the importance of, the place, including its topography. As the following sections demonstrate, what was grasped at Elephanta was the importance of the site for staging a display of British royal and imperial power. This staging of imperial power was centralized and elaborated upon in the *durbars* that took place a few years hence. The choice of Elephanta as a site for the royal visits, coupled with the act of picnicking, made the royal picnics at Elephanta an early iteration of the *durbars*. In the *durbars*, the colonial government not only referenced historically important sites related to Mughal rule but also took to rewriting the landscape, erecting entire 'tented cities', in addition to processions, marches, and the like.<sup>5</sup> The royal picnics at Elephanta sit at variance with the British colonial government's interest in appearing as protectors of Indian antiquities. In the subcontinent, governors-general, starting from Lord Canning in 1862, made strident claims about the necessity of linking the preservation of India's material past to asserting British imperial dominance.<sup>6</sup> India's past, in many of the writings of the colonial period, was presented as being in a state of steady decline that could be halted only by rulers from the outside. Such writings thus aligned to foretell the British presence on the subcontinent, and present it as inevitable and desirable.<sup>7</sup> The 'utility value' of these teleological narratives lay in 'illustrating the British feats of bringing India into the scientific methods of archaeological enquiries'.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the systematization of the study of the Indian past is commonly dated to the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India (henceforth, ASI) in 1861. In

<sup>3</sup>Megan Elias, *Lunch: A history* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), p. 122.

<sup>4</sup>An example of a religious ritual that involves the act of eating outdoors is the *vanbhajanam* (translated as a meal in the forest), common in parts of present-day Andhra Pradesh and taking place in the Hindu month of *Kartik*, that is, in the winter months. Here, meals are usually consumed under Indian gooseberry trees. Anne Feldhaus, in her discussion of the sacred geography of Maharashtra, discusses ritual meals by pilgrims on the banks of rivers, for instance, or in the context of various religious processions, with entire villages involved in the activity. See Anne Feldhaus, *Connected places: Religion, pilgrimage, and geographical imagination in India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Regarding the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is highly unlikely that the rising middle classes in colonial India did not take to picnicking, especially considering the fact that European society indulged in it frequently. However, our understanding of how Indians responded and/or mimicked picnics is constrained by a lack of detailed sources, pointing to a gap in the field. Picnics are often indexed under food and leisure histories. In colonial India, a discussion on picnics more often than not centres on British narratives, rather than Indians' engagement with this form of leisure. Mentions of picnics are either to be found in the descriptions of the lavish entertainments organized by Indian rulers, or through anecdotal accounts of family history. See, for example, a feature on picnics by Priyadarshini Chatterjee, 'The history and diversity of picnic food in India, from the Mahabharata to the British Raj', *The Scroll*, published online on 27 August 2022, available at <https://scroll.in/magazine/1031070/the-history-and-diversity-of-picnic-food-in-india-from-the-mahabharata-to-the-british-raj>, [accessed 2 August 2023].

<sup>5</sup>For a multifaceted discussion on the *durbars*, see Julie Codell (ed.), *Power and resistance: The Delhi coronation durbars* (New Delhi: Mapin, 2012).

<sup>6</sup>Swenson, 'Heritage of empire', p. 8.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Metcalf, *New Cambridge History of India: Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 148–159.

<sup>8</sup>Sudeshna Guha, *Artefacts of history: Archaeology, historiography and Indian pasts* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2015), p. 9.

noting the beginnings of this extant institution, an unbroken teleology is constructed: from individual efforts to the institutionalization of the care of Indian antiquities.<sup>9</sup> However, this ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’ study of India’s past, too, rested, overwhelmingly, on scholar-administrators for whom the colony served as a space for disciplinary and legislative experimentation.<sup>10</sup> In India, interventionist legislation around the conservation of antiquities occurred in advance of Britain, since colonial administrators were unhindered by the primacy of private property.<sup>11</sup>

Alongside legislation, the concomitant surfeit of reportage on archaeological tours, annual reports, monographs, and zealous musealization point to an extant discourse around conservation, marked by contestations and tensions. However, the picnics are nowhere to be found in this surfeit, making them aberrant events. This is brought into relief by the fact that the later royal visit, in 1911, was carefully recorded in the annals of the ASI. Juxtaposing the institutional/colonial archive with mass-media accounts of these events, recovers a new and unique constellation of imperial power, in which antiquities are not ‘saved’ but were consumed by empire and monarchy. Distinct from the model of ‘plunder’, and turning away from ‘preservation’, this consumption was marked by the citation of long-standing aesthetic frameworks, popular forms of leisure in Britain, and the emerging mass media.

The article begins with a brief historical overview of British control over Elephanta, up to the period preceding the royal visits. This section points to the ongoing conservation efforts in the 1870s; it establishes that concerns around the site’s decline were at the forefront for the Bombay government and preliminary measures had been put in place by the time of the royal visits. The next section foregrounds the import of the royal tours and the *durbars* in the ceremonial economy of empire. The two picnics in 1870 and 1875 are reconstructed and analysed chronologically; their import as acts of political communication is underscored through the analyses of the representation of picnics, including the picturesque and Romantic associations of the site. In stark contrast with the picnics, King George and Queen Mary’s visit to the Caves in 1911 signalled a paradigm shift, which is discussed in the final section. This visit distinctly marked the growing importance of conservation for monarchy and empire. The article concludes that the British colonial government’s engagement with Indian monuments such as Elephanta included a pre-history that was neither plunder nor preservation;

<sup>9</sup>The Archaeological Survey of India, in its post-independence iteration, continues to offer the same potted history, for example, on its website. See the ‘Archaeological Survey of India: History’, available at <https://asi.nic.in/about-us/history/>, [accessed 2 August 2023].

<sup>10</sup>On scholar-administrators, see, for instance, Indra Sengupta, ‘Culture-keeping as state action: Bureaucrats, administrators, and monuments in colonial India’, *Past and Present*, vol. 226, Issue Supplement 10, 2015, pp. 153–177. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtu026>.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Basu and Vinita Damodaran, ‘Colonial histories of heritage: Legislative migrations and the politics of preservation’, *Past and Present*, no. 226, Issue Supplement 10, 2015, pp. 240–271, p. 242. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtu028>. On colonial legislation and access to sites, see Nayanjot Lahiri, ‘Destruction or conservation? Some aspects of British monument policy (1899–1905)’, in *Destruction and conservation of cultural property*, (eds) Robert Layton, Peter Stone and Julian Thomas (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2001), pp. 264–275; Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, objects and histories: Institutions of art in colonial and post-colonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 268–304; Deborah Sutton, ‘Devotion, antiquity, and colonial custody of the Hindu temple in British India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2013, pp. 135–166.

conservation was strategically cast aside to articulate a message of imperial legitimacy through the ceremonial economy of empire.

### The British custodianship and conservation of Elephanta

Bombay's harbour gained importance in western India from the sixteenth century onwards, making Elephanta island and the Caves—locally called Gharapuri (Village of Caves)—visible and accessible to travellers. A monumental, monolithic, basalt elephant found in the harbour led the Portuguese to call the island, and the Caves, Elephanta.<sup>12</sup> Scholarly debates suggest a timespan ranging from the middle of the sixth to the early ninth centuries for the excavation of the Caves and its sculptures.<sup>13</sup> The scale and finesse of Elephanta's sculptures, as well as its complex iconographic programme, suggest royal patronage.<sup>14</sup> Though a total of six caves have been excavated on the island, it is the 'Great Cave', featuring Shiva in varied forms, that is best known (see Figure 1).

European visitors identified the Caves as a pagan shrine. This also made them vulnerable to the iconoclastic mutilation of its sculptures, and its conversion to a Christian chapel by the Portuguese, as reported in 1588.<sup>15</sup> While early foreign visitors responded with varying degrees of shock and awe, there was also aesthetic appreciation. Accounts of the site have been found in travelogues in Portuguese, Dutch, and English.<sup>16</sup> While deficient in the iconographical understanding of the sculptures, the architectural grandeur and treatment of the human figure were appreciated by early travellers; even the Portuguese Jesuits paid 'grudging tributes' to Elephanta.<sup>17</sup> The Portuguese statesman, Joao do Castro, who visited the Caves in the sixteenth century, left behind one such rich account, constituting 'the first attempt on record to measure an Indian monument'.<sup>18</sup> However, as sectarian rivals Britain and Portugal fought for territory and influence in the subcontinent, British scholarship from the eighteenth century onwards attempted to erase these early scholarly projects. The British showcasing of Portuguese barbarity and erasure of scholarship appear as a shrewd move to cover its own vandalism at the site.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup>The stone elephant was removed and brought to the mainland in 1864, and now sits in a compound of the Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum.

<sup>13</sup>For a concise overview of the debates around the dating of the Caves, see Charles Dillard Collins, *The iconography and ritual of Siva at Elephanta* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 4–30.

<sup>14</sup>The Caves are square in plan. George Michell refers to the north-south axis as the royal axis representing Shiva's 'royal' aspects, while the east-west axis is the devotional axis. The dual axes and the complex iconographic programme suggest the desire of a royal patron to use the site for devotional use and for kingly rituals. See George Michell, 'The architecture of Elephanta: An interpretation', in *Elephanta: The cave of Shiva*, (eds) Carmel Berkson, Wendy Doniger Flaherty and George Michell (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 23.

<sup>15</sup>J. P. Maffei in *Historianum Indicarum Libri XVI* (Florence, 1588), 259a, cited in Partha Mitter, *Much maligned monsters: History of European reactions to Indian art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 34.

<sup>16</sup>For travellers' accounts and early European responses, see Mitter, *Monsters*, pp. 31–47. For Puranic sources and references, see Collins, *Siva*, pp. 4–24.

<sup>17</sup>Mitter, *Monsters*, pp. 31–34.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup>Captain Isaac Pyke's survey of Elephanta in 1712 highlighted the desecration of the Caves by the Portuguese Jesuits and their 'lack of curiosity' about them. This flew in the face of accounts by the Portuguese botanist Garcia da Orta (1534) and Joao Castro, who also made an aesthetic assessment of the



**Figure 1.** The marriage of Shiva and Parvati, Caves of Elephanta. Source: From the *Vibart Collection of Views of South India*, unknown photographer, 1855, photographic print. Courtesy of the British Library Board (Photo 254/3(25)).

The island of Elephanta passed into British control in December 1774. The cave shrines had fallen out of worship, or may have seen worship mainly by the island's few inhabitants. However, from the nineteenth century onwards, the Caves attracted worshippers from the mainland during the festival of Mahashivratri, when a fair was also held at the site. As a sign of this revived worship, we read, for instance, of a Bombay merchant building a flight of steps costing the large sum of Rs 12,000.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Caves were re-sacralized by the Hindus and saw a large congregation of worshippers, at least

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sculptures in 1538. Guha contends this was a deliberate omission—and characteristic of colonial British historiography. See Guha, *Artefacts of history*, pp. 35–38.

<sup>20</sup>James Campbell's *Gazetteer* entries are one of the most comprehensive accounts of the Caves and the island, following James Burgess's publications in 1871 and 1880. Campbell notes, 'From the time of the Portuguese conquest till within the last few years, Elephanta seems to have almost ceased to be a Hindu place of worship...'. Dr Burgess mentions that on 'Shiv's great day in February (Magh vadya 13th) a fair is held and the ling in the central shrine worshipped'. See James Campbell, *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency: Places of Interest—Thana, Volume 14* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1882), pp. 59–97, pp. 88–89; also see James Burgess, *Cave temples of Western India* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1880) and James Burgess, *Rock temples of Western India* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1873).



on two festival days. Juxtaposed with this revived worship at the Caves, conservation measures appear as the 'increasing control by archaeologists', and the transformation of Elephanta is posited as proceeding 'from a temple to a museum'.<sup>21</sup> While the worshippers' evolving relationship with the site is beyond the scope of this article, the section below demonstrates that colonial archaeologists hardly secured control of the site.<sup>22</sup> Further, events such as the royal picnics, taking place against the backdrop of conservation efforts, raise questions about what constituted 'museum-like' engagement with the site and the straight line drawn from 'a temple to a museum'.

When the antiquarian James Burgess visited the Elephanta Caves in early 1871, he found them seriously vandalized.<sup>23</sup> On 22 March 1871, Burgess addressed the chief secretary to the Government of Bombay.<sup>24</sup> He detailed the nature of the Caves' destruction:

They were unfortunately much defaced before they came into British possession, and even since then they have not been very carefully looked after. Visitors have now and again defaced the pillars and even some of the sculptures, both by wilfully breaking them and by carving their names upon them; but of late this has been done at an alarming rate. On a recent visit, I found the faces of the Trimurti and other large figures scribbled all over with names in chalk and charcoal...Parties of ships of war (?) also go over for ball practice in the neighbourhood and adjourn to the Great Cave where the marines amuse themselves by cutting their names where they please, and though there is a sergeant in charge of the cave and two police peons, I have failed to find them interfering to prevent such men from carving their names or otherwise defacing the cave. Unless some means be taken to stop this, there may very soon be more damage done than has been for many years past.<sup>25</sup>

Burgess's letter of 1871 is our entry point into the Bombay government's efforts to conserve the Caves by regulating access as well as policing visitor behaviour at this site. His account underscored that passing into British possession had done little to improve the condition of the Caves; instead, they had met with a worse fate. Burgess contended that the groups responsible for the extensive damage to the caves were

<sup>21</sup>See Preeti Chopra, *Joint enterprise: Indian elites and the making of British Bombay* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 201.

<sup>22</sup>The author discusses the tensions between worship and conservation at Elephanta in her unpublished manuscript: Deepti Mulgund, 'The social life of art: Tracing the development of art publics in colonial Bombay, 1850–1930s', PhD thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2019.

<sup>23</sup>Dr James Burgess (1832–1916) was a mathematician. He developed an antiquarian interest in cave temples once in Bombay, and authored volumes on rock-cut architecture, including a monograph on Elephanta in 1871. In 1873, he was appointed as the director of the Archaeological Survey of Western India.

<sup>24</sup>James Burgess to Secretary to the Government of Bombay, 22 March 1871, General Department, vol. 6 of 1872, Maharashtra State Archives (henceforth, MSA).

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

parties of men employed by warships and marines, that is, European sailors rather than worshippers.<sup>26</sup>

Burgess suggested the placement of information boards prohibiting visitors from carving into or scratching the sculptures and the tables and benches. The boards, reasoned Burgess, would make governmental authority visible at the site. However, his plan for enforcing appropriate behaviour seemed to rest, mainly, on the deterring effect of the three guards at the site. As a further measure, Burgess proposed that the sergeant may be 'supplied with a Visitors' Book to allow those who wish to leave their names to do so, and who might even pay a small fee for the privilege'.<sup>27</sup> Burgess's recommendations were meant to contain destructive behaviours at the site. The visitors' book, and charging a fee, suggest a reconfiguration of the means through which visitors interacted with the site and the economy within which they left their traces at the site.<sup>28</sup> The letter triggered a consideration of the state of the Caves within the government machinery, albeit not at the pace required.

The letter was first forwarded to the Collector of Thana, J. W. Robertson, under whose jurisdiction the island fell. Robertson observed,

Some years ago the Public...urged on the attention of the government the desirability of conserving these valuable relics. The Caves were therein cleared of much of the rubbish—the accumulation of years. The fence put up in front to protect cattle from getting inside, and a flight of steps was constructed leading from the landing place to the Caves themselves. This accomplished, nothing further seems to have been done, that is to say, no annual grant has been set apart for the preservation of these antiquities of a past age.<sup>29</sup>

Robertson also agreed about who the troublemakers were, noting that visitors to the Caves would invariably find 'the special scenes selected for picnics by sea-faring and other like classes'. While crediting 'Public' critique as goading the government into action, Robertson also echoed Burgess's distinction, namely between the 'Public' that demanded protection of the antiquities and the 'sea-faring and other like classes' who used the Caves for picnics (see [Figure 2](#)). This distinction aside, Robertson directed another level of critique—scathing and unforgiving—at his countrymen:<sup>30</sup>

When however it is remembered, that, the Elephanta Caves are daily resorted to by all classes as an agreeable place at which to hold festive Picnics—that liquor is abundant on such occasions—and that the spirits of the participators of the

<sup>26</sup>Whether religious iconoclasm played a part in the sailors damaging the sculptures is hard to ascertain.

<sup>27</sup>James Burgess to Secretary to the Government of Bombay, 22 March 1871, General Department, vol. 6 of 1872, MSA.

<sup>28</sup>Visitors' books, in the context of modern practices of tourism, whether at museums or commemorative sites, are 'public volumes that performatively embody and present encounters between institutions and exhibits and those visiting and consuming them': Chaim Noy, *Thank you for dying for our country: Commemorative texts and performances in Jerusalem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. xiii.

<sup>29</sup>Collector of Thana to Secretary, Government of Bombay, No. 1138, 31 March 1871, General Department, vol. 6 of 1871, MSA.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*





**Figure 2.** Picnickers at Elephanta. Unknown photographer, circa 1865, Albumen silver print. Source: Digital image courtesy of Getty's Open Content Program (84.XC.1625.13).

alfresco festival board (?) become considerably elevated, if not inebriated—it is no way to be wondered at, in the absence of any effective, responsible power to check them, that, some should, with that ... proverbial characteristic the Britisher has attained throughout the world give way to the impulse of carving names on the most inaccessible and grotesque positions of the antiquities so invitingly within their reach...

He also astutely observed that the guards—a retired European military man and two Indian policemen—would not prove a deterrent to the vandals. Robertson pointed out that, in fact, the white military pensioner would be more than willing to consort with the European parties in their drinking. The subordinates, either unable or unwilling to stop their white superior, were more likely to ‘look on with a sort of half respect, half awe, at the “*saheblog*” and their feast devoid of all reason...’<sup>31</sup> Robertson’s account underscored that ‘picnics’ had become shorthand for destructive behaviours at the site. This was attributed to visitor behaviour at the Caves, the lack of authority figures to prevent, and correct, inappropriate behaviours, and British tourism in the nineteenth century at sites of antiquity.

Robertson, too, attested that Elephanta was often the site of bacchanalian excess, with abundant liquor and ‘elevated’ spirits, rather than scholarly exertions or respectful contemplation of the Caves and the sculptures. In speaking of ‘any effective, responsible power’ Robertson put his finger on Elephanta’s specific problem, as well as the broader crisis of legitimacy plaguing colonial conservation: under what moral authority could the colonial government prevent its countrymen from vandalizing Indian antiquities? What would be the terms on which the colonial government would ‘civilize’ its own countrymen? Would it be through an appeal to ‘Britishness’, ‘gentlemanly conduct’, ‘honour’?

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

Contrary to the myth of a unified, elite, European ruling class, of the 150,000 Europeans in India, nearly half were ‘poor Whites’,<sup>32</sup> and the charge of vandalism at Elephanta stuck to them. In Bombay, European ‘loaferism’, or vagrancy, was most ‘virulent’ and ‘threatened the myth of the natural superiority of the ruling race undergirding the imperial self-understanding’.<sup>33</sup> Thus, for Burgess and Robertson, the question of preserving the Caves of Elephanta was indexed to larger anxieties around reforming European lower-class indulgences, beyond issuing communiques.<sup>34</sup> At the Indian Museum, Calcutta, too, staff urged that European attendants be employed, ‘to deal with sailors and other European visitors who frequently gave trouble’.<sup>35</sup> In his comment about his countrymen’s propensity towards scratching their names on ‘the most *inaccessible* and grotesque positions of the antiquities *so invitingly within their reach*’ [emphasis added], Robertson presented a pithy assessment of the relationship between empire and colonial antiquities. Empire made it possible for Britons—of all classes—to encounter antiquities and governed how they approached them. Imperial identity not only affected Britons’ encounter with Indian antiquities but also reconfigured domestic spheres of leisure and touristic consumption. Rome offers an example; for Britain, Italy’s classical past and its Catholic present served as a warning against the fall of empires. Consequently, Britain, as a growing imperial power, could claim that ‘Italians were unfit to inherit their Classical past, and it was reasonable, indeed necessary, for it to be appropriated by the “civilised” British’.<sup>36</sup> For India, too, the trope of the fallen civilization was used to justify the British presence.<sup>37</sup> The Romantic poet Lord Byron whose texts were, in fact, responsible for transforming the viewing of the Colosseum at night from ‘romantic fancy to touristic practice’ found Rome ‘pestilent with English’.<sup>38</sup> Robertson’s complaints drew upon this refrain—the ubiquity of the British and their picnic hampers—on the Continent and in distant, colonized lands.

After Robertson’s department, the papers were next forwarded to the holdall department of the colonial bureaucracy, the Public Works Department (hereafter, PWD), where Colonel R. E. Enthoven, too, agreed, ‘The carvings in the caves are now not only defaced in the most barbarous way but the caves themselves are

<sup>32</sup>See David Arnold, ‘European orphans and vagrants in India in the nineteenth century’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1979, pp. 104–127.

<sup>33</sup>Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Low and licentious Europeans: Race, class and white subalternity in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2009), p. 5; also see Aravind Ganachari, ‘“White man’s embarrassment”: European vagrancy in 19th century Bombay’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 25, 2002, pp. 2477–2486. See also by Harald Fischer-Tiné, ‘Britain’s other civilising mission: Class prejudice, European loaferism and the workhouse-system in colonial India’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 42, no.3, 2005, pp. 295–338. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946460504200302>.

<sup>34</sup>Burgess’s monograph, too, alludes to ‘certain classes of visitors’, ‘nautical visitors’, and ‘Europeans’, as well as ‘Parsis’ in the context of the mutilation of the sculptures. See James Burgess, *The rock-cut temples of Elephanta or Gharapuri* (Bombay: D. H. Sykes and Company, 1871), pp. 13–14.

<sup>35</sup>*The conference of Orientalists including museums and archaeology* (Simla: Government Central Press, 1911), p. 31.

<sup>36</sup>Jeremy Black, ‘Italy and the Grand Tour: The British experience in the eighteenth century’, *Annali d’Italianistica*, vol. 14, 1996, pp. 532–541, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24007464>, [accessed 2 August 2023].

<sup>37</sup>Metcalfe, *Ideologies*, pp. 148–159.

<sup>38</sup>See Christopher Rovee, ‘Sociability among the ruins: The Colosseum by moonlight, circa 1820’, in *Sociable places: Locating culture in Romantic-period Britain*, (ed.) Kevin Gilmartin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107587779.009>.

scandalously defiled.<sup>39</sup> Noting that until access was regulated, no restoration could succeed, Enthoven recommended written passes, to be issued on the condition that the Caves would not be made ‘the scenes of eating and drinking or of drunken orgies’. Rather than the free pass, contingent on appropriate behaviour, the Bombay government eventually decided upon an entry ticket costing four *annas*; the ticket collections, augmented by funds from the imperial government would pay for the repairs to the site.<sup>40</sup> This ticketing policy came into effect in 1872. In Calcutta, this plan invoked disgust in at least one unidentified official.<sup>41</sup> Naming it the ‘detestable English practice of charging a “small fee”’, this official reminded their colleagues that the government was ‘bound to preserve’ public monuments. At the same time, appropriate behaviour, that is, not destroying the site through bacchanalian picnics, was the responsibility of visitors. Thus, by the 1870s, the colonial government in Bombay attempted to link conservation efforts to changing the modes of interaction with the site, for ordinary visitors. The section below explains how the royal visits addressed British citizens and Indian subjects, but without foregrounding Britain’s role as a protector of colonial antiquities such as Elephanta.

### Elephanta and ‘bunting’

The royal tours exemplified Britain’s growing need to produce—in Britain and India—a “visible embodiment” of the mutually strengthening link between monarchy and empire.<sup>42</sup> This idiom of imperial mass communication naturalized and celebrated empire, and its links to the British monarchy were underscored. The first-ever visit by a British crown prince to the Indian subcontinent, and the Elephanta Caves, was by Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, second son of Queen Victoria, in 1870. The second was by the Prince of Wales, Albert Edward, later Edward VII (reign: 1901–1910) in 1875. George V (reign: 1910–1936) visited the subcontinent in 1905, while still the Prince of Wales, and in 1911, before the Delhi Durbar. Though included in the itinerary, the 1905 visit to Elephanta was cancelled.<sup>43</sup> The visits of the princes Alfred and Albert Edward were nearly identical in terms of their Bombay itineraries, but the second visit, in 1875, has received greater scholarly attention. The third visit, namely that of King George V

<sup>39</sup>R. Enthoven to Secretary, General Department, No. 648, 4 April 1871, General Department, vol. 6 of 1871, MSA.

<sup>40</sup>E. W. Ravenscroft, Acting Secretary to Government of Bombay, to J. Geohegan, Officiating Secretary to Government of India, Dept. of Agriculture, Revenue and Commerce, No. 785, 17 February 1872, General Department, vol. 6 of 1872, MSA.

<sup>41</sup>Home Department, Public Branch, No. 3345, 1872 Nos. 269–271, Public, A, April, 16 November 1872, National Archives of India (henceforth, NAI).

<sup>42</sup>Chandrika Kaul, ‘Monarchical display and the politics of empire: Princes of Wales and India 1870–1920s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2006, pp. 464–488. <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwl025>.

<sup>43</sup>Prince Alfred Victor (1864–92), Queen Victoria’s eldest grandson also made a trip to the subcontinent, arriving in Bombay in November 1889 but almost immediately left for Poona. For the official record of the 1905–1906 visit, see Stanley Reed, *The royal tour in India: A record of the tour of HRH the Prince and Princess of Wales in India and Burma from November 1905 to March 1906* (Bombay: Bennett and Coleman, 1906). For reference to the visit being cancelled, see ‘Madras Mail’, in *References in the press to the visit of their Royal Highnesses, the Prince and Princess of Wales to India, 1905–06* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of the Government Printing Press, 1907), p. 231.

in 1911, reflected the fruition of the idea that imperial power lay in the protection and conservation of distant, colonial antiquities. The visits are examined chronologically, below.

In May 1870, the Duke of Edinburgh's visit to the Elephanta Caves was noted as the 'crowning event' of his Bombay itinerary. The Caves and the island served as the venue for an evening banquet for the royal visitor. By one account,

The great stone figures of Shiva and his fellow-gods, beaming in the light of two hundred candles, looked down upon long tables loaded with sumptuous fare, and lined by two hundred and forty feasting Britons, for whose further enjoyment bonfires presently blazed on all the heights, and every vessel in the bay traced itself against the sky in lines of light. Sailors with lights in their hands stood up from a street of boats some three miles long. Arches of fire spanned the entrance of the Apollo Bunder. On the Prince's way home in the Governor's yacht, 'the air was alive with rockets, and the sea a sheet of flame'.<sup>44</sup>

Fireworks were fired from the island and by ships in different parts of the harbour, to bid farewell to the royal visitor. The return was described as follows:

The visitors having re-embarked, the procession to Bombay was formed... the caves and the beach of the island were splendidly illuminated, and at a signal fired from the *Dalhousie*, a shower of rockets was fired from the highest point of the island, followed by the immediate blazing up of a large bonfire. This was repeated from three other heights, and produced a charming effect.<sup>45</sup>

The sea-faring classes, who, a year later, were held squarely responsible for much of the vandalism to the sculptures, stood on boats with lanterns in their hands, and watched the fireworks display lit from the Caves. Presumably, they also knew of the great feast taking place inside the Caves. The picnic legitimized the site as one of merry-making. Using the sculptures and the Caves for target practice was common. The banquet, while possibly less harmful than the scratching of names on the sculptures, or firing at them, nonetheless extended permissibility to these actions, with its own extensive use of fireworks, not to mention feasting inside the Caves. These destructive behaviours by visiting British royalty, which were enabled by the Bombay government, nullified ongoing conservation efforts, including the attempts to overwrite how visitors interacted with site. This example effectively held greater force than any on-site warning issued by the guards. In the interim, between this visit and the next in 1875, Burgess found the Caves in serious decline. Nonetheless, for the Bombay government, despite the worsening damage to the sculptures, the site seemed significant enough to host the next royal visitor in 1875, namely that of the Prince of Wales, Albert Edward, later crowned Edward VII. The secretary of state for India, Lord Salisbury, the Council for

<sup>44</sup>'The Duke of Edinburgh at Bombay', *The Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 13 May 1870.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

India, and a willing Prince, overrode the Queen's reservations to pull together the tour.<sup>46</sup>

The Prince and his retinue arrived in Bombay on 8 November 1875. The visit to Elephanta took place on 12 November, with the royal party reaching the island on a government steamer, the *May Frere*.<sup>47</sup> The Caves greeted the Prince with exuberant illumination. Lamps dotted the path leading up to the Caves, lighting up the entire hillside. In addition to the lamps were policemen to 'keep off intruders'.<sup>48</sup> At the top of the hill, and just outside the Caves, a carpeted area was created with chairs and couches where the Prince met his guests, while enjoying the sea breeze. Dinner was served in the central Cave. After a toast was given to the Queen's health, different parts of the Cave complex were lit up with fires, in red and green. Finally, fireworks were set off from the summit of the hill, after which the royal party began the departure, a journey no less impressive. Merchant ships and steamers were illuminated, and the men-of-war put on a display of changing coloured lights and fireworks. Sir J. Fayrer, the Prince's physician, memorialized it as 'the most gorgeous spectacle I have ever seen' and recorded that it had been a most successful picnic.<sup>49</sup>

Most reports skip forward to the feast, without mentioning if the party spent time looking at the Caves' sculptures. However, the Prince's secretary, Sir Russell, reported that after the feast and the toast made to the Queen, the Prince and his party 'made an inspection of the chambers of the Temple, admiring especially the massive columns with their beautiful carved capitals...and then escaped to the outer air...'.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the site's aesthetic and historical value was cursorily acknowledged and little attention was paid to the Bombay government's efforts at conservation. The picnic—what the royal party did at the Caves, rather than the Caves themselves and/or their upkeep—was underscored during the visit and in the subsequent reportage. To understand why the conservation efforts of the Bombay government, howsoever flawed, were not showcased, the efficacy of the picnic needs to be unpacked. This necessitates situating the picnic within the ceremonial economy of empire wherein the British sought to assert legitimacy not through recourse to rational governance but the symbolic order of rule.

British political pageantry in India was justified through instrumental reasoning—a 'ritual idiom through and by which British authority was to be represented to Indians'.<sup>51</sup> This interest in rewriting the symbolic order of Indian courtly ritual to underscore British imperial overlordship was most extravagantly articulated in the

<sup>46</sup>See Charles Reed, *Royal tourists, colonial subjects and the making of a British world, 1860–1911* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 8–23.

<sup>47</sup>'At the Caves', *Times of India*, 13 November 1875.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>Joseph Fayrer, *Notes of the visits to India of the Prince of Wales and Duke of Edinburgh, 1870–1875/6* (London: Kerby and Endean, 1879), p. 36.

<sup>50</sup>William Howard Russell, *The Prince of Wales' tour: A diary in India; with some account of the visits of His Royal Highness to the courts of Greece, Egypt, Spain, and Portugal, Volume 1* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1877), p. 167.

<sup>51</sup>Bernard Cohn, 'Representing authority in Victorian India', in *The Invention of Tradition*, (eds) Hobsbawm and Ranger, pp. 165–210.

*durbars* of 1877, 1903, and 1911, in the aftermath of the Revolt of 1857.<sup>52</sup> The *durbars* worked to actualize the myth that the British were ‘natural’ heirs to the Mughal throne, and empire, in the Indian subcontinent. There was a stated disavowal of, and insistence on the difference from, the courtly rituals that apparently characterized Indian rulers. The viceroy Lord Lytton (tenure: 1876–1880) and mastermind of the first Imperial Assemblage of 1877, famously explained, ‘the further east you go the greater is the need for a bit of bunting’.<sup>53</sup> The first *darbar* or assembly of 1877 was held in Delhi, a city dotted with Mughal monuments, and the procession wound its way through these ancient Mughal buildings to strengthen the association between the two empires.<sup>54</sup> The British were unconvinced that to Indians, rational governance would serve as sufficient justification for their ruling India; less examined, however, is their own belief in the transformative power of the ‘ornament’.<sup>55</sup> A concession to ruling a ‘feudal-minded people’, the British ‘admitted to no such appetites [for ceremony] of their own’.<sup>56</sup> If the colony demanded ‘bunting’, in Britain too, from the 1870s onwards, as the power of the monarchy waned, pageantry was on an ascendant. Consequently, the British monarchy’s ritual, ‘hitherto inept, private and of limited appeal, became splendid, public, and popular’.<sup>57</sup> Rather than the performance *for* Indians, the nub was the British conviction in the efficacy of, and consequent absorption into, pageantry, following colonial contact. In eschewing the choice to foreground conservation efforts, the picnics at Elephanta, bracketed within the royal tours, serve as an example of this absorption into the ceremonial economy. Predating the *durbars*, the picnics at Elephanta were an early iteration of the ceremonial economy of empire, and the first to harness the aesthetic and historical associations of an existing site such as the island and the Caves of Elephanta.

There was much invested in the success of the royal tours, as colonial officials ‘expected to control and display an iconic order of empire, free of the everyday politics of rule’ and to ‘naturalise British rule’ in the colonies.<sup>58</sup> In Britain, the Prince of Wales’s tour was a ‘sensational domestic media event’, which cast him as celebrity royal traveller.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, the picnic at Elephanta, like the rest of the Prince’s tour, was addressed not only to the Indian populace but also to the British public; the work of the mass media became critical for disseminating appropriate narratives around the

<sup>52</sup>The first of these, in 1877, was called an ‘imperial assemblage’ by Lord Lytton, with a view to evading the questions of precedence and order that typified *durbars*. See *ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>53</sup>Metcalf, *Ideologies*, p. 77.

<sup>54</sup>Julie Codell, ‘On the Delhi coronation *durbars*, 1877, 1903, 1911’, in *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, (ed.) Dino Franco Felluga, published online June 2012, available at [https://branchcollective.org/?ps\\_articles=julie-codell-on-the-delhi-coronation-durbars-1877-1903-1911](https://branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=julie-codell-on-the-delhi-coronation-durbars-1877-1903-1911), [accessed 2 August 2023].

<sup>55</sup>For an excellent discussion of the British absorption into Indian courtly rituals and ‘ornament’, see Joanne Punzo-Waghorne, *The Raja’s magic clothes: Re-visioning kingship and divinity in England’s India* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 1–53.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>57</sup>David Cannadine, ‘The British monarchy, c. 1820–1977’, in *The Invention of Tradition*, (eds) Hobsbawm and Ranger, pp. 101–164.

<sup>58</sup>Reed, *Royal tourists*, p. 35.

<sup>59</sup>H. Hazel Hahn, ‘Indian princes, dancing girls and tigers: The Prince of Wales’s tour of India and Ceylon, 1875–1876’, *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2009, p. 173, pp. 173–192.



tour. Conscious of this attention, the organizers of the Elephanta picnics sought an efficacious image, speaking to multiple audiences across the imperial network, as well as one in tune with the times. The following section considers the images through which the Prince's Elephanta sojourn was represented to subjects, and citizens, in India and Britain.

### Images of Elephanta: Consumption and circulation

Scholars have noted that the royal tour of 1875–1876 coincided with the efflorescence of illustrated journalism.<sup>60</sup> The Prince of Wales was accompanied by pioneering artist-reporters such as William Simpson of the *Illustrated London News*, Sydney Prior Hall of *The Graphic*, and others such as Herbert Johnson and Walter Charles Horsley.<sup>61</sup> While the Prince's tour was extensively photographed, including by the India-based firm of Bourne and Shepherd, no such photographic record of the picnic has been found by the author.<sup>62</sup> Thus, visually reconstructing the picnics requires turning to the printed images that were based on the sketches dispatched by these artist-reporters on the spot, carried in British newspapers. Juxtaposed with the silence of the institutional archive they acquire potency as the only, albeit widely disseminated, visual records of the event.

For the readers of the British press, visual material sent by Simpson for publication in the *Illustrated London News*, and in *The Graphic*, produced the 'panorama effect', enabling virtual travel, building upon an earlier corpus of 'classic views' of India, as an exercise in 'imaginative geography'.<sup>63</sup> In addition to the pillars briefly admired by the Prince's party, there was much more known about Elephanta—by 1871, Dr James Burgess had produced his impressive monograph *The Rock-Temples of Elephanta or Gharapuri*.<sup>64</sup> Thus, in addition to conservation efforts, colonial knowledge production by a scholar-administrator such as Burgess had annotated the Caves' aesthetic and historical importance. Unsurprisingly, however, it was the picnicking and feasting that stirred the imagination of the press—and the public consuming these accounts.

*The Illustrated London News* and *The Graphic* were at least two British newspapers that carried double-page illustrations of the Prince's picnic at Elephanta, in addition to textual descriptions carried by several other papers. In both the newspaper

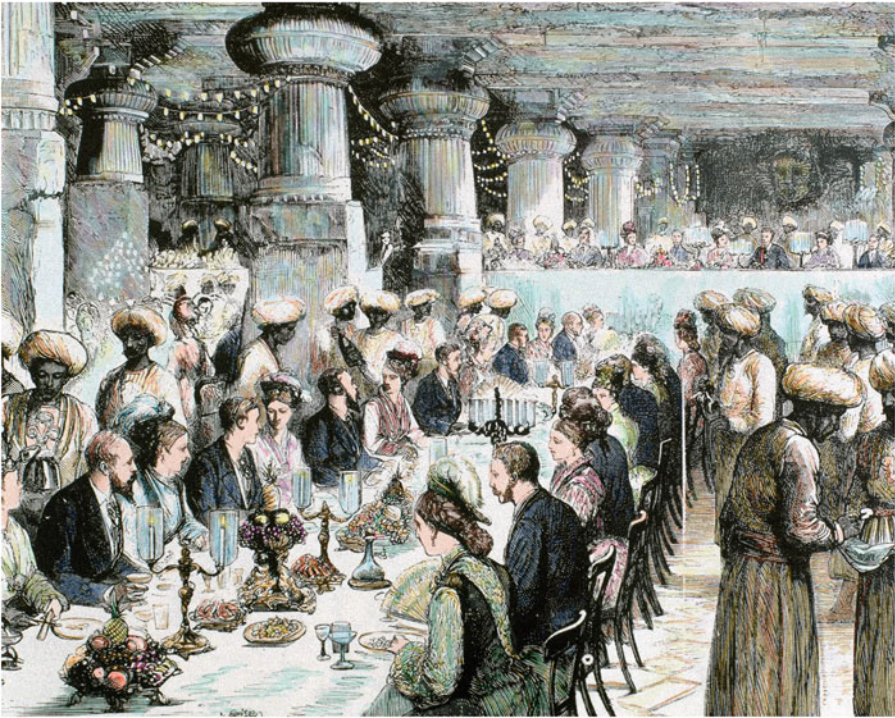
<sup>60</sup>On Simpson, and Hall's trip to India with the Prince, see Ruth Brimacombe and Catherine Waters, 'Royal pageantry and patronage. Prince of Wales's royal tour of India, 1875–76', in *Picturing the news: The art of Victorian graphic journalism* (Kent: University of Kent, 2017). Online exhibition, available at <https://research.kent.ac.uk/victorianspecials/exhibitionitem/prince-of-wales-royal-tour-of-india-1875-76/>, [accessed 2 August 2023].

<sup>61</sup>On artist-reporters and special correspondents, see *ibid.*

<sup>62</sup>The darkness of the Caves may have been a factor, but opportunities for photography certainly existed outside of them. One British paper carried images of the Caves' sculptures. 'The royal tour: Strange ceremonies of the gorgeous East', *Penny Illustrated Newspaper*, 18 November 1875. To view the photographic album produced by Bourne and Shepherd, see 'The Prince of Wales's tour of India in 1875–6', Royal Collection Trust, available at <https://www.rct.uk/collection/themes/trails/the-prince-of-wales-tour-of-india-in-1875-6>, [accessed 2 August 2023].

<sup>63</sup>Ruth Brimacombe, 'The imperial avatar in the imagined landscape: The virtual dynamics of the Prince of Wales's tour of India in 1875–76', in *Virtual Victorians: Networks, connections, technologies*, (eds) Veronica Alfano and Andrew Stauffer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 195.

<sup>64</sup>Burgess, *Elephanta*.



**Figure 3.** 'The royal visit to India: The Prince of Wales dining in the Caves of Elephanta', *The Graphic*, London, published on 11 December 1875. Engraving based on artist's sketch. Source: Courtesy of Thaliastock/Mary Evans Picture Library (11019579).

images, the monoliths are almost entirely obscured, underscoring the marginality of the sculptures at the event. The Prince of Wales, the governor, and other grandees are seated on an elevated platform, with their backs to the impressive three-headed 'eternal' Sadashiva. The monumental sculpture thus loomed behind this smaller group, while, below, guests were seated in rows. *The Graphic* presented a full-frontal view (see [Figure 3](#)).<sup>65</sup> While the Prince and the accompanying grandees are pushed into the background, the Prince's platform acted as the endpoint of the rows of pillars, and guests.

Elegantly attired couples occupy either side of the table, bringing symmetry and order to the table. Appearing to be waiting for the next course to be served, they chat, exchange glances, and converse across the table. Most ladies sport elaborate coiffures or headdresses, and jewellery, with a few, sensibly, accessorizing with a fan. The table itself is set with centrepieces comprising fruit, including a towering pineapple, interspersed with candelabra, and 'proper' chairs—rather than outdoor furniture—complete the scene. A full set of cutlery, chalices, stems, decanters, and glasses are

<sup>65</sup>'The royal visit to India: The Prince of Wales dining in the Caves of Elephanta', *The Graphic*, 11 December 1875.

to hand. High above the guests, strings of lights hang between pillars, while a tower of lights, placed at table height, is seen in the left middle-ground. If the table shows all the signs of multiple courses and elaborate dining, that is, an abundant feast, the Indian servants appear just as plentiful, each marked out and unified by their turbans and the dark shading of their faces. The group of three servers, in the extreme right foreground, appear to be tapping the jelly pudding to check if the heat from the many lamps has altered its consistency, keen on ensuring that this very English feast could proceed as 'at home' inside the Great Cave at Elephanta.

The image carried by *The Illustrated London News* offers an oblique view, with the 'Trimurti' head visible, top-left (see Figure 4).<sup>66</sup> The image is restrained in comparison to the one carried by *The Graphic* (discussed above), with fewer figures in motion, and displaying the dominance of the massive pillars; some of these pillars, including the one in the centre, show considerable breakage. This damaged pillar's central placement attests to the passage of time, firmly locating the Caves as belonging to a bygone era. Here, too, the strings of lights, suspended from the pillars, have the effect of containing the span of the Great Cave. A tower of lights is seen in the right foreground. Turbaned servants stand out against the orderly, seated rows of Europeans; they have their hands full—carrying glasses, casseroles, bottles, and platters of meat. Women are largely absent from this view, unlike the image presented by *The Graphic*. However, both images show an orderly society that anchors the image, even at the expense of Prince's visibility, whose distinction is suggested through the elevated platform and his proximity to the colossal god-head.

While the illustrations attested to the fact that the picnic had, indeed, taken place, they also deployed the tonalities of the medium of engraving to compress other realities: the inherent gloom of the Caves, the smokiness caused by the lamps,<sup>67</sup> as well as the fact that the monoliths were worshipped occasionally and the Bombay government's attempts at curbing vandalism. The illustrations showing the feasting party, the monoliths, and the illumination meant to banish the darkness, all together conjured the 'atmosphere' of Elephanta for the newspapers' readers.<sup>68</sup> The abundance of food-stuffs, signalled by the multiple courses and evidenced by the accoutrements of elite dining, highlighted consumption. With even the Prince being reduced to a small figure in the background, what seemed to be on display was abundance and extravagance, marshalled within the dark Caves of Elephanta by colonial European society.

However, the Caves' religious significance and antiquity produced some discordant notes. The *Times of India* noted that the statues 'preserved a dim religious gloom in spite of the glare of a thousand lamps'.<sup>69</sup> Other reports, too, noted the 'disquieting contrast'<sup>70</sup> and the 'incongruity' of seeing 'champagne corks pop where priests

<sup>66</sup>'The Prince of Wales lunching in the Caves of Elephanta', *Illustrated London News*, 11 December 1875.

<sup>67</sup>Sir Russell, observed, '... when the excavations are lighted up and the feast spread, the glare and the heat of the torches and the smell of oil combined with the close reeking air produce an odorous temperature...'. See Russell, *A Diary*, pp. 166–167.

<sup>68</sup>Gernot Boehme conceives atmosphere as 'Spaces insofar as they are "tinctured" through the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations, that is, through their ecstasies'. See Gernot Boehme and (trans.) David Roberts, 'Atmosphere as a fundamental concept of a new aesthetics', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 36, no. 1, 1993, pp. 113–126, p. 121.

<sup>69</sup>'At the Caves', *Times of India*, 13 November 1875.

<sup>70</sup>'The Prince of Wales in India', *The Aberdeen Journal*, 24 November 1875.





**Figure 4.** ‘The Prince of Wales lunching in the Caves of Elephanta’, *Illustrated London News*, London, published on 11 December 1875. Engraving based on the artist William Simpson’s sketch. Source: Courtesy of the Illustrated London News Ltd/Mary Evans Picture Library (13975936).

had worshipped...’<sup>71</sup> If these accounts seem mildly critical of the picnicking, this merrymaking was nonetheless efficacious within the ceremonial economy of empire.

### The picnic, Elephanta, and the ceremonial economy of empire

The Bombay government, or the princes’ establishments, did not elaborate on why the picnic—as a form of leisure and consumption, or the site of Elephanta—were deemed politic choices for the princes’ itineraries in Bombay. However, by noting the choices not exercised, we can deduce the ones that were, in fact, made.

Both the princes set off for the picnic in the late afternoon, after official engagements.<sup>72</sup> This marked the event within the sphere of leisure in the princes’ itineraries. Visiting monuments by night, or after sundown, was historically restricted to elites and the leisured classes, underscoring the privileged access of the picnickers.<sup>73</sup> No simple evening excursion to see the Caves, it included a feast, in addition to fireworks and displays of light. Nor was it a private affair, restricted to the princes’ entourages: in both cases, over 200 Britons reportedly joined the princes, in addition to Indian

<sup>71</sup>‘The Caves of Elephanta illuminated’, *The Derby Mercury*, 17 November 1875.

<sup>72</sup>While the *Illustrated News* titled Simpson’s image ‘The Prince of Wales lunching at the Caves of Elephanta’, multiple accounts mention an evening feast.

<sup>73</sup>Even Goethe, in his *Italian Journey*, ‘flatly observed’ when on an evening stroll that the Colosseum was closed at night. See Rovee, ‘Sociability’, p. 186.

servants. There is, however, no mention of Indian notables having accompanied the party.<sup>74</sup> Official ceremonies, such as the inauguration of the docks, included diverse representations of Indian society other than traditional elites.<sup>75</sup>

With their open-air eating, picnics were in many ways ‘extensions of a domestic party in the controlled setting of people of one’s own class’.<sup>76</sup> The images discussed above—showing gentlemen and ladies feasting—support the idea of picnickers being unified by class. However, at Elephanta, the line was also drawn at race, and the picnics were akin to the racially exclusive, class-coded forms of leisure and socializing in the colony, such as clubs. In the colony, ‘clubbability’ was a line drawn to keep out Indians, while invoking ‘the protection of white women as central’.<sup>77</sup> Thus, it was a ‘clubbable’ set of Britons that accompanied the princes to a picnic at the Caves. In the image produced by *The Graphic*, this ‘protection’ of white women, and the anxiety of illicit sexual relations between races, is reflected in the strict seating pattern, with each lady flanked by a European gentleman. Just as the British colonial clubs functioned as ‘a “home” in an alien land’,<sup>78</sup> the picnic within the princes’ itineraries suggested a similar retreat into familiarity. This withdrawal—to Caves on an island away from the city—was not only spatial, but also temporal. Coming at the end of a day of engagements, including among Indian society, it may be read as a retreat from the stresses of holding on to a racially diverse *Pax Britannica* to an oasis of white, elite Britishness, and a withdrawal from the strictures of the propriety of the city.

The picnic, Andrew Hubbell notes, fuses the consumption of a ‘specific environment chosen according to an aesthetic standard’, and the sharing of a ‘moveable feast’ according to standards of behaviour.<sup>79</sup> Emerging among the leisured classes, where every invitee was expected to contribute monetarily, or bring a dish, the picnic is marked by an excess of victuals and drink: ‘picnics and food scarcity do not mix ... having more, not less, is normal’.<sup>80</sup> Further, the permissibility of excessive consumption

<sup>74</sup>Only the *London Standard* mentioned the presence of ‘the native princes’. However, this is not verified by examining at least three other accounts, namely those of J. Fayer, William Howard Russell, and George Wheeler, or other newspapers. The paper also mentioned 400 guests rather than the 200–250 reported by others. The *Standard*’s generally hyperbolic reportage of the tour was called out by a few critical newspapers (mentioned below). See ‘Banquet in the Caves: Telegram to the London “Standard”’, *The Weekly Times*, 8 January 1876, available at <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/219429959/23350812>, [accessed 2 August 2023].

<sup>75</sup>Official receptions included representations by members of the Municipal Corporation, Parsi and Muslim Freemasons, and schoolchildren, in addition to Indian rulers. On the presence of new, ‘respectable’ Indian notables belonging to the educated classes, see Reed, *Royal tourists*, esp. pp. 124–161. On the continued use of ‘loyalism’ by urban elites at the time of strident nationalist assertion, see Hilary Sapire, ‘Ambiguities of loyalism: The Prince of Wales in India and Africa, 1921–2 and 25’, *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 73, no. 1, Spring 2012, pp. 37–65.

<sup>76</sup>John Burnett, *England eats out: A social history of eating out in England from 1830 to the present* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 163.

<sup>77</sup>Mrinalini Sinha, ‘Britishness, clubbability, and the colonial public sphere: The genealogy of an imperial institution in colonial India’, *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2001, pp. 496–497.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 489.

<sup>79</sup>Andrew Hubbell, ‘How Wordsworth invented picnicking and saved British culture’, *Romanticism*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2008, p. 44.

<sup>80</sup>Walter Levy, *The picnic: A history* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2014), p. 21.

also made picnics into occasions charged with sexual frisson, permitting the overstepping of propriety, and enabling dalliances. It is not surprising, then, that the Elephanta picnics included only those whom male, colonial European elites accepted as appropriate social connections. Lower-class Europeans, such as the sailors manning the vessels decorated with lights, were also mere spectators to these picnics.<sup>81</sup>

If picnics resonated with associations of leisure at 'home', they were, nonetheless, marked by imperial relations. The plenitude seen in picnics was indexical of the possibilities of the nineteenth century, namely industrialization and empire. Growing control over the vagaries of nature by bringing land under cultivation was one source of this plenitude for landowners. This plenitude, however, was not merely the result of the rationalization of land under cultivation in Britain—it was augmented, and variegated, due to Britain's imperial holdings. In the late eighteenth century, 'eating connected the British to their empire, as foods became not only the most abundant products of imperial trade, but also the empire's most prevalent symbols'.<sup>82</sup> By the time the Prince of Wales picnicked at Elephanta, advances in packaging and a growing provisions industry made a two-way exchange of foodstuffs possible, and led to the production of new foodstuffs.<sup>83</sup> The images of tables laden with food suggested this abundance. The vignettes in the engraved images, such as the servants examining the jelly pudding, and tables heaped with exotic tropical fruit from the Americas, such as the pineapple, hint at these imperial flows.

It was not just the foodstuffs that travelled. Picnicking was also boosted by improved mobility due to modern means of travel, such as the car, not only among elites but also the middle and working classes.<sup>84</sup> The facility for travel and movement received a royal fillip when the Prince of Wales arrived in Bombay; chroniclers noted the Prince's personal ease and familiarity with the latest travel technologies, thus binding the 'Monarchy itself to modernity'.<sup>85</sup> Thus, picnics, with their associations of plenitude and movement—indeed, plenitude born out of movement to distant lands and their colonization—are imminently suited to be read as part of imperial culture. If Hubbell's readings of picnics as 'performances of Britishness' has to be taken into account, it was a 'Britishness' constituted by imperial relations.<sup>86</sup> Varied in scale and elaboration, the picnic as a form of leisure in the nineteenth century was a widely understood form of consumption. Popular across class lines, it was a germane medium for political communication.

While the picnic may be explained as a politic medium, how may we explain the choice of Elephanta as a site? For example, Bombay boasted a horticultural oasis, the

<sup>81</sup>A feast for the European sailors had taken place two days earlier.

<sup>82</sup>Troy Bickham, 'Eating the empire: Intersections of food, cookery and imperialism in eighteenth-century Britain', *Past and Present*, vol. 198, no. 1, 2008, p. 107.

<sup>83</sup>Lizzie Collingham offers a wide-ranging set of examples of the entanglements between Britain's empire and the consumption of foodstuffs. See Lizzie Collingham, *The hungry empire: How Britain's quest for food shaped the modern world* (London: Vintage, 2018), pp. 122–127.

<sup>84</sup>Burnett, *England eats out*, p. 212.

<sup>85</sup>On the role of technology in presenting the Prince as 'mobile and modern', see Joe De Sapio, 'Technology, imperial connections and royal tourism on the Prince of Wales's 1875 visit to India', in *The British abroad since the eighteenth century*, (eds) Martin Farr and Xavier Guégan, vol. 1 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 66.

<sup>86</sup>Hubbell, 'Wordsworth', p. 44.





Figure 5. 'View from the Island of Elephanta', from *Bombay Views*, James Wales, 1800, coloured etching. Source: Courtesy of the British Library Board (X436[12]).

Victoria Gardens, inaugurated a few years earlier; a visit there would have drawn attention to urban development under British rule. Adjoining the gardens was the recently opened Victoria and Albert Museum. Yet, Elephanta was the site of choice, repeatedly finding itself on the itinerary of the royal visitors. As noted above, the royal picnics did not engage with the Caves and its famed sculptures through modern attitudes of connoisseurship and/or scholarly contemplation. However, as the section below elucidates, Elephanta's aesthetic properties were in fact, crucial in explaining this choice of site.

### The Elephanta aesthetic

Early nineteenth-century visual productions such as James Wales's coloured etching—showing excellent prospects of the bay, the eponymous elephant from a bygone era, and rugged outcrops—framed and popularized the island as 'picturesque' (see Figure 5). The picturesque, as a genre, stood between the affective registers of the sublime and the beautiful, incorporating elements of 'wildness or irregularity'.<sup>87</sup> Its typical characteristics included '... a winding river; two *coulisses*, or side screens... which, in conjunction with some hills, mark the perspective...'.<sup>88</sup> Elephanta's framing as a picturesque site is best seen in George Wheeler's assessment during the royal visit:

<sup>87</sup>Diané Collinson and Julian Bell, 'Sublime, the', in *The Oxford companion to Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), available at <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662037.001.0001/acref-9780198662037-e-2539>, [accessed 2 August 2023].

<sup>88</sup>Jeffrey Auerbach, 'The picturesque and the homogenisation of empire', *The British Art Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, Spring/Summer 2004, pp. 47–54, p. 48.

'The island is covered with the most luxurious tropical foliage, and there are numerous romantic dells, rocky bays, and perfumed valleys to be seen, in addition to the far-famed caves of the Hindoo gods.'<sup>89</sup>

That Wheeler found Elephanta picturesque is not merely due to the previous circulation of views of Elephanta—the visual language of the picturesque emerged not just in the Lake District but also in Britain's colonial holdings.<sup>90</sup> In the colony, the picturesque grew into a 'visual compulsion' for the British, acting as both filter and frame.<sup>91</sup> Arguing for a distinct colonial picturesque aesthetic, scholars have noted that the picturesque was constituted through dispersed imperial geography, rather than having a discrete 'origin' and period of influence—its dispersal follows a jagged timeline, continuing well into the nineteenth century.<sup>92</sup> European adventurer-scholars like James Fergusson presented 'pioneering' scholarship on Indian art and architecture and continued to draw on the conventions of the picturesque, thus configuring disciplinary foundations. This was despite his stated disavowal of the picturesque in favour of a 'scientific' approach.<sup>93</sup>

The rise of the picturesque as an aesthetic form in both Britain and its colonies has been posited as the outcome of shifting land relations from the late eighteenth century onwards. Smaller land parcels and commons came to be enclosed within larger estates, and land in the colonies appeared ready for the 'European male subject...whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess'.<sup>94</sup> The picturesque, through its formal elements, functioned to elide the vast changes in land relations, and the spread of empire. Evoking nostalgia for landscapes undisturbed by the Industrial Revolution, or empire, the picturesque masked the chaos and misery that followed in the wake of these shifts, whether in rural England or colonial India.<sup>95</sup> It is, thus, best understood as an aesthetic dedicated to disappearing landscapes that participated in precipitating

<sup>89</sup>George Wheeler, *India in 1875–76: The visit of the Prince of Wales. A chronicle of His Royal Highness's journeyings in India, Ceylon, Spain, and Portugal* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1876), p. 94.

<sup>90</sup>On the colonial picturesque and homogenization of empire, see Jeffrey Auerbach, *Imperial boredom: Monotony and the British empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.47; also see Auerbach, 'Homogenisation'. For an analysis of the picturesque in relation to Indian landscapes, see Romita Ray, *Under the Banyan tree: Relocating the picturesque in British India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 1–17.

<sup>91</sup>Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 'The compulsions of visual representation in colonial India', in *Traces of India: Photography, architecture, and the politics of representation, 1850–1900*, (ed.) Antonia Pelizzari (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture; New Haven, CT: Yale Center for British Art, 2003), pp. 109–139, p. 116.

<sup>92</sup>On the problematization of the periodization of Romanticism, see Makdisi, *Romantic imperialism*, p.10. On the 'persistence of picturesque sentiment in modalities of travel [which] instructed generations in how to see the world', see Sean Smith, 'Aestheticising empire: The colonial picturesque as a modality of travel', *Studies in Travel Writing*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2019, pp. 280–297, p. 296.

<sup>93</sup>Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments*, p. 7.

<sup>94</sup>See Mary Louise Pratt, *Travel writing and transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>95</sup>At the time of the consolidation of property, the figure of the destitute, associated with the ruin, both of which were seen in picturesque landscapes, 'makes a radical break with property... a remind[er]...of the vanity of all human possessions'. See Raimonda Modiano, 'The legacy of the picturesque', in *The politics of the picturesque: Literature, landscape and aesthetics since 1770*, (eds) Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 196–219, p. 210. On changing land relations in rural England and the conventions of the picturesque, see Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and ideology: The English rustic tradition, 1740–1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 73–85.

their disappearance. At the picnics, the picturesque framing of the site elided older resonances as well as efforts to acknowledge the site's significance.

In this scenario of shifting land ownership and growing rationalization, there emerged two 'distinct and opposed' publics of the picturesque. They were differentiated by their 'economic and functional relation to the landscape': the 'improvers', who work on the land and govern it, and the 'sensationalist nomads moving through a world over which they have no control, a striated space marked by hands—whether those of Nature or of landowners'.<sup>96</sup> It is the virtuosic landlord, who can impose 'art and taste' in a landscape, in whom 'the picturesque and the drive to mastery intersect'.<sup>97</sup> At the picnic then, the Bombay government acted as a 'virtuosic landlord' whose mastery, in this case, lay in marshalling a moveable feast, and enabling a spatial and temporal withdrawal from the city, for the Prince.

If Elephanta stood transformed by the royal presence, the Prince, too, appeared transformed by Elephanta. Having travelled vast distances, thanks to modern technologies, in withdrawing to Elephanta in the evening, the Prince appeared as a Romantic individual. This was partly because the Caves were 'amongst the earliest Indian sites to capture the Romantic imagination'.<sup>98</sup> Through the early nineteenth century, Elephanta had served 'as the most prominent symbol of the darkened Indian landscape', which was an 'invitation to plumb its mysterious depths ... a darkened crypt to be deciphered ...'.<sup>99</sup> However, the Prince's withdrawal to Elephanta was Romantic in the sense that it was 'dialectically bound up with modernisation... [a sensibility] found wherever the culture of modernisation is found, whether dominant, residual or emergent, in the West and in the non-West alike'.<sup>100</sup> Withdrawal into 'nature' by the Prince—in this case, the island and the Caves away from the city and its urbane civility, and *Pax Britannica*—suggested 'the formation of an individuality that is self-referential and entirely natural...'.<sup>101</sup> Such an authentic, 'manly', modern Western subject stood in opposition to the Eastern 'other'.<sup>102</sup> As an example, some accounts admiringly reported the Prince's decision to walk, rather than be carried up, the hill. Underscored thus was the authentic, autonomous, and vigorously masculine British monarchy's ability to counter Elephanta's challenges and age-old darkness. If Romanticism is that which prevails where modernity may be found, the Prince's picnic was an apt example of this. His visit combined the following: modern technologies of travel, which brought him to the subcontinent; imperial power which allowed for the use of Great Cave as a banquet hall; and his personal effort, such as walking up the hill.

<sup>96</sup>Kim Ian Michasiw, 'Nine revisionist theses on the picturesque', *Representations*, no. 38, Spring 1992, pp. 76–100, p. 82.

<sup>97</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>98</sup>On Elephanta's constitutive role in the British imaginary about India, see Niharika Dinkar, *Empires of light: Vision, visibility and power in colonial India* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 41–66.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

<sup>100</sup>Saree Makdisi, *Romantic imperialism: Universal empire and the culture of modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>101</sup>Modiano, 'Legacy of the picturesque', p. 200.

<sup>102</sup>On Romanticism, and 'Oriental', aristocratic degeneration, see Saree Makdisi, 'Romantic cultural imperialism', in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic literature*, (ed.) James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 601–620, p. 606. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521790079.028>.

While this may explain the choice of Elephanta, and the form of the picnic, a further question arises: why did the Bombay government not choose to foreground its conservation attempts at the Caves, and thereby act as *truly* virtuosic landlords? After all, a visit to Elephanta, without a feast and fireworks but one which foregrounded British conservation of the site, as was done in 1911, may well have articulated the message of an enlightened and robust monarchy and empire. One probable reason for showcasing the picnic rather than conservation efforts could be the belated recognition of the discourses of heritage conservation in Britain.<sup>103</sup> While colonial antiquities, and landscapes became subject to interventionist measures, the same was not true of Britain. In addressing the British public, therefore, the picnic, with its excessive consumption, was likely to have been seen as a far more efficacious means of communicating the link between monarchical and imperial power. However, with the picnics, the Bombay government transformed the island and the caves into a *locus amoenus*—‘a site of “improvement,” of land reclaimed from desolation, of a refuge that allows the traveller to rejuvenate him/herself’.<sup>104</sup> Desolation in the Indian landscape suggested human acts of commission (acts of war) and omission (lack of cultivation), thus inviting British rationalization of land. At Elephanta, the Bombay government, as the improving landlord, rationalized the ‘use’ of the Caves through the picnic. That is, Elephanta, despite its continuing depredations, could be refashioned as a place of refuge, through consumption.

For transforming Elephanta into a *locus amoenus*, it was the (European) subject whose mastery emerged at the forefront. The Caves’ technical and aesthetic virtuosity were superseded by the autonomy and superiority of the princes and their retinues. More than one British account of the picnic remarked on the wonder that the artisans and/or the Hindu gods might have experienced upon seeing the Caves transformed for the grand banquet.<sup>105</sup> Wonder, then, was not invoked by the monumental carvings themselves, but by the British ability to marshal a moveable feast or picnic—replete with abundant foodstuffs, the accoutrements of fine dining, and spectacular illumination—in the Caves. Restoring the Caves to their glory, as conservation efforts set out to do, would have foregrounded the importance of the Caves, rather than British ability and ‘enterprise’ which made the picnic possible, and on a scale befitting the Prince of Wales.

A few notes of censure emerged in the press against the elision of the site’s meanings. An excerpt from the Indian newspaper *Bombay Gazette* was carried in a

<sup>103</sup>The Ancient Monuments Bill was passed in Britain in 1882, while in India, Act XX of 1863 and the Treasure Trove Act of 1878, had already vested powers in the colonial government to determine which sites/buildings and artefacts could be taken into governmental custody. See Basu and Damodaran, ‘Legislative migrations’.

<sup>104</sup>Pramod K. Nayar, ‘The imperial sublime: English travel writing and India, 1750–1820’, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, Fall/Winter 2002, pp. 57–99, p. 79.

<sup>105</sup>George Wheeler mused, ‘What a taste of heaven it would have been to the poor native sculptors...had they been allowed to look upon the dazzling spectacle of Friday, when the “Heir of Empires” spent hours in admiration of their magnificent achievements.’ Wheeler seems to count the very visit and the feasting inside the Caves as an expression of ‘admiration’. See Wheeler, *India in 1875–76*, p. 95. *Once a Week* reported, ‘... the solemn triple figure which gazes from the wall of rock had surely never witnessed such a scene’: see ‘A bit about Bombay’, *Once a Week*, 27 November 1875, p. 152. The *Times of India* read the banquet as a ‘scene from an opera’ astonishing the gods: ‘At the Caves’, *Times of India*, 13 November 1875.

British weekly, with a title 'Flunkeyism and falsehood', which noted its disgust at the reportage as,

The notion of telegraphing to London how many drops of perspiration stood on each guest's manly brow as he climbed the steps to the caves of Elephanta, strikes one as exquisitely ludicrous. Why not have added how much brandy and soda the exhausted climbers consumed when they had reached the plateau?... After the banquet we are told that when the toast of 'The Queen,' was given 'the old gods might have been startled with the cheers...There was really no cheering at all. But one toast was proposed...'<sup>106</sup>

*The Examiner*, another progressive weekly, also called attention to the inappropriateness of picnicking in the Great Cave. However, the weekly wrongly concluded that the shrines were worshipped by the 'Buddhist Singhalese'. Metaphorizing, it noted,

'Westminster Abbey was brilliantly illuminated. An elegant collation was served in the chapel, the high table being arranged along the chancel. The Sultan's chair was immediately in front of the high altar... a huge crucifix which remains in excellent preservation, looked down upon the variegated scene.' If Macaulay's *New Zealander* is a Mahomedan, and sends home such a report to Wellington or Dunedin, it will probably cause some pain to any Christians...'<sup>107</sup>

Barring a few such critical voices, much of the British press ignored the site's religious meaning and/or its historical and aesthetic value. In contrast with media coverage of the picnic, in the subsequent official reportage on the conservation of the site, the royal picnics went unmentioned. Officials such as Robertson and Burgess, expectedly, had little to say about the royal festivities, and the 'example' set before British and Indian subjects about appropriate terms of engagement with the site. Thus, there was one story for posterity and another for the present.

Playing the improving landlord, the Bombay government and the Prince's tour planners addressed the populace they governed through 'bunting'. An aspect of the picnic that was as spectacular as it was public was the illumination and fireworks. With the rows of light created by the lantern-holding sailors on the vessels, lamps decking the hillside, and the setting off of a bonfire resembling a 'volcano' from the main rock-face of the Caves, as well as the fireworks, the city bore witness to both princes' enjoyment of the Caves. During the visit of the Prince of Wales, we read,

...on the top of the highest eminence in the island had been prepared a huge fire, which flared to heaven as the evening fell, lighting the land and sea near and far. Lines of fire running down from the summit gave the hill the appearance of a volcano in active eruption... As the steamer returned with the royal party from the illuminated islet, the fleet lying in the harbour saluted with splendid effect, and hung out lamps from every spar and rope, while rockets hissed into the moonlit

<sup>106</sup>'Flunkeyism and falsehood', *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 16 January 1876.

<sup>107</sup>*The Examiner*, 20 November 1875, p. 1295.

air, and every merchant vessel and country boat contributed lanterns, or lamps, or fireworks.<sup>108</sup>

Along with the images depicting the revellers enjoying the feast amidst ample illumination, the fireworks, and the rapturous descriptions of this display that followed, proclaimed victory over the darkness of Elephanta. For centuries, fireworks had featured in monarchical pageants and courtly celebrations, in India as well as in Europe. Fireworks allegorized control over elements of nature, and society, by 'bringing the heavens down to earth, imitating life'.<sup>109</sup> When held on or incorporating water bodies, firework pageants underscored the harmonizing of opposing natural elements. Another favoured allegory was the volcano.<sup>110</sup> Visible from the Bombay harbour, Elephanta offered the perfect *mise-en-scène* for a waterborne pageant of fireworks, and allegorized the harmonious commingling of India and Britain, or past and present. By turning the city's inhabitants into spectators of the fireworks display, a public aspect of the evening's festivities was produced, but public interest was reduced to pre-modern pageantry.

The fireworks display, and gathering to see them, were critical transactions within the ceremonial economy of empire and the royal tours. When at the height of the Non-Cooperation movement, another Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) toured India in 1921, Gandhi exhorted Indians to 'refuse to illuminate or to send our children to see the organized illuminations', underscoring the potency and public function of the fireworks display in the royal tours.<sup>111</sup> The display was amplified through British press reportage, memoirs, and travel accounts, proving 'the propaganda value of these costly, ephemeral entertainments rested less on the event than on its offspring, the record of the event'.<sup>112</sup> The image of the picnic in the caves, along with the descriptions in newspapers back home, then, created an image of empire in which it was possible to picnic one's way through dark, gloomy caves and, indeed, the colony. One function of picturesque colonial landscapes was their effectiveness in masking the hardships and boredom of empire.<sup>113</sup> Analogously, the picnics dispelled Elephanta's primordial darkness with feasting and fireworks, duly reproduced through textual accounts and large illustrations—at once, empire and monarchy were made familiar, as well as powerful.

<sup>108</sup>Once a Week, p. 152.

<sup>109</sup>Simon Werret, *Fireworks: Pyrotechnic arts and sciences in European history* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 15. For an early history of fireworks in India, see P. K. Gode, 'The history of fireworks in India between A.D. 1400 and 1900', *Transactions: Indian Institute of Culture*, vol. 17, 1953, pp. 1–26, pp. 11–14.

<sup>110</sup>On fireworks imitating the volcanoes of Mount Etna and Mount Vesuvius, as the 'eruptive sublime', see Kevin Salvatino, *Incendiary art: The representation of fireworks in early modern Europe* (Santa Monica, CA: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1997), pp. 54–76. Exhibition catalogue, available at <https://www.getty.edu/publications/virtuallibrary/0892364173.html>, [accessed 2 August 2023].

<sup>111</sup>Kaul, 'Monarchical display', p. 475.

<sup>112</sup>Salvatino, *Incendiary art*, p. 3.

<sup>113</sup>Auerbach, *Imperial boredom*, pp. 52–56.



### Conservation, empire, and a new public

The next royal visit to the subcontinent was by King George V and Queen Mary, the first of their two tours of the subcontinent, in 1905–1906 and 1911. In November 1905, the then Prince and Princess of Wales stopped in Bombay. By this time, Lord Curzon's zeal to be known as the saviour of Indian antiquities, and one who advanced the protection of Indian antiquities as an important instrument of the 'beneficence of imperial governance in India', had resulted in the passing of the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904.<sup>114</sup> A visit to Elephanta was on the itinerary, but along with a few other engagements, it was cancelled. The 'early afternoon heat' was the stated reason for cancelling the visit and instead a tour of harbour was arranged.<sup>115</sup> Without discounting that the contingencies of the weather, and the presence of the Princess, may have influenced this outcome, the passing of the Act of 1904, and the meticulously recorded visit, offer the possibility of reading this cancelled visit as the interlude that helps us see the emergent pattern. The growing import of conservation to imperial self-image made it impossible to repeat the previous picnics, and yet a new idiom of expressing monarchical and imperial interest in conservation was not yet fully articulated.

The next royal visit, almost four years later, in 1911, marked a distinct shift. Beyond legislation, other systemic changes included the professionalization of the discipline of archaeology, and the gradual emergence of the 'native' archaeologist, draftsman, and modernized *pandit*, changing the contours of the discipline.<sup>116</sup> Equally, Bombay's inhabitants, having had to pay for an entrance ticket since 1872, felt entitled to voice their expectations of the government's custodianship and conservation of the Caves.

The 1911 visit clearly signalled the British monarchy's interest in conserving Elephanta as a site of aesthetic and historical importance—local conservation efforts were foregrounded and the event was discursively commemorated by publishing a booklet, *The Guide to Elephanta Island*.<sup>117</sup> King-Emperor George V (reign: 1910–1936) and Queen Mary visited the Caves on 5 December 1911, before presiding over the Delhi Durbar. This royal visit comprised a modest reception, consisting only of tea. Critically, it included the presence of the Indian archaeologist, D. R. Bhandarkar, who was the archaeological superintendent, Bombay Circle. The Caves received far greater attention than in the previous royal visits through the King's 'enquiries' around the pace of conservation. Unlike the picnics, this visit is self-consciously memorialized in the ASI's archive. Bhandarkar recorded his interaction with the royal party in the progress report of the Archaeological Survey of Western India in the following year. Reportedly, the chief amazement of the royal party came from being told that the Caves were carved entirely out of one rock. Bhandarkar noted, 'They looked hard but in vain for joints and other signs of structural buildings in the cave. But they were at last convinced that it was a rock-cut monolithic temple, and could not help uttering "wonderful"?'<sup>118</sup> Unlike previous occasions, wonder was now expressed by British

<sup>114</sup>Lahiri, 'Destruction or conservation?', p. 268.

<sup>115</sup>*Madras Mail*, 13 November 1905.

<sup>116</sup>On the emergence of the 'native' archaeologist, see Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments*, pp. 85–111.

<sup>117</sup>Hirananda Sastri, *Guide to Elephanta* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1934), p. iii.

<sup>118</sup>D. R. Bhandarkar, *Progress Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, Western Circle for the Year Ending 31st March, 1912* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1913), p. 8.

rulers about the marvellous workmanship of the Caves, rather than by the stone gods or artisans, about the grand feast at the Caves.

The King expressed his satisfaction with the restoration being carried out, and his dissatisfaction with the debris lying around. This interest in the site's conservation gratified Bhandarkar. He proceeded to compare the royal visitors' interest with those of the people of Bombay, remarking, 'What a contrast to the Bombay people, to most of whom the place offers only the pleasure of a sea-trip and picnic!'<sup>119</sup> Bhandarkar's comment belies amnesia about the previous royal visits, patterned on picnics. It was also reflective of his institutional location in the ASI. The *Times of India* offered a rebuttal: 'is the allusion to Bombay people wholly justified? Public opinion has had a good deal to do with the conservation of the caves and has prevented the perpetuation of errors of taste inside them.'<sup>120</sup>

In 1911, while the King may have expressed satisfaction with the conservation, public opinion in the weeks leading up to the visit, as reflected in the newspapers, had been anything but conciliatory towards government efforts. The 'errors of taste' mentioned concerned the restoration of the pillars of the Caves, which had been ongoing since 1909. In place of the fallen pillars, 'ugly piles of blue stone' were reportedly placed to ensure the Caves' stability.<sup>121</sup> An 'Artist' visiting the Caves a month before the visit wrote to the *Times of India*, claiming the Caves were entirely reconstructed. Invoking the government's duty as a custodian they noted, 'the people of the whole world... have a right to demand an explanation for this foul act of barbarism'.<sup>122</sup> The newspaper investigated, and identified the villain responsible for the wrongdoings on the site—the Public Works Department (PWD)—and it was, apparently, 'at its worst'. Without due consultation with the ASI, the PWD had replaced the broken pillars, and to differentiate them from the older ones, a 'rough copy' of the old pillars was made. The old and new pillars were then finished with the same mix, so the pillars were now coloured khaki of 'the most virulent brightness'. The editorial called this a 'stroke of genius seldom if ever eclipsed in the annals of archaeology in India'.<sup>123</sup>

The embarrassment to the government can also be gauged by the fact that a variety show running at the time, produced by the Bandmann Opera, had a character lampooning the 'restoration' of the Elephanta Caves by the PWD, in song.<sup>124</sup> If any other verdict was necessary, the special Durbar correspondent of *The Times* (of London) reported emphatically, 'The temple is ruined.' And ended with, 'Had Westminster Abbey been whitewashed for the Coronation, the vandalism could hardly have been more gross.'<sup>125</sup> The irony that the Bombay government and its varied agencies were being accused of 'vandalism' due to incorrect conservation and restoration, and not when they were organizing picnics at the Caves, is a rich one. It also suggests that an increasingly critical, vigilant public saw the colonial government as duty-bound to correctly conserve and restore Indian antiquities.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8

<sup>120</sup>'Current events: The King at Elephanta', *Times of India*, 3 December 1912.

<sup>121</sup>'Repairs at Elephanta', *Times of India*, 25 February 1909.

<sup>122</sup>'An Artist', letter to the editor, 'Barbarism at Elephanta', *Times of India*, 2 November 1911.

<sup>123</sup>'PWD at its worst', *Times of India*, 10 November 1911.

<sup>124</sup>'Bombay amusements', *Times of India*, 11 November 1911.

<sup>125</sup>'Vandalism at Elephanta', *Times of India*, 25 November 1911.

In late 1921, when another Prince of Wales, Edward Albert (later, Edward VIII), visited Bombay during his tour, Elephanta no longer appeared on the itinerary. The Non-Cooperation movement was underway and protests and demonstrations abounded, presenting 'an alternative political pageantry to the pomp of monarchical imperialism'.<sup>126</sup> This Prince, however, found an 'informal' visit to the Prince of Wales Museum on his itinerary.<sup>127</sup>

## Conclusion

Scholarship has annotated the role of modern conservation in bolstering the legitimacy of imperial conquest. This article focused on British royalty's visits to the Caves of Elephanta in 1870 and 1875, which were patterned as picnics. In these initial visits, little was done by way of showcasing the conservation efforts at the site. Indeed, these royal picnics at Elephanta may be considered spectacularly scaled-up versions of activities that, at the same time, the Bombay government was forbidding for ordinary visitors. By demonstrating that conservation efforts were contemporaneous with the royal picnics, the article establishes that the picnics were not aberrations occurring *before* systematic conservation measures undertaken by the colonial government. Presenting the choices that were exercised, as well as eschewed, the article infers that modern conservation and scientific and rational governance of the site was consciously cast aside, *in favour* of the picnic at Elephanta. Thus, the idea that the British colonial government sought to establish its legitimacy through 'rational' and 'scientific' measures in relation to Indian monuments is problematized.

The article demonstrates that in late nineteenth-century Bombay, bacchanalian consumption (in the form of a picnic), rather than conservation, marked the British royalty's engagement with a monument such as Elephanta. The search for an efficacious mode of imperial political communication informed this decision. The image of the princes picnicking at the Caves in grand fashion, rather than playing the saviour of Indian antiquities, was deemed more efficacious for asserting imperial legitimacy. The royal picnics featured the Indian monument of Elephanta not as a site to be conserved, but one to be consumed. This was neither plunder, nor preservation; instead, the royal picnics, through their excesses, validated a range of destructive behaviours at the site. Notwithstanding this, the picnics point to a new and unique set of relations between Indian antiquities, empire, and monarchy.

In imputing intent to the picnics as acts of imperial political communication, the article has situated them at the interstices of the histories of conservation and the histories of political communication. The article suggests that as transactions in the ceremonial economy of empire, the picnics can be understood as predecessors to the *durbars* or assemblies produced by the British colonial government. Scholars have noted that the *durbars* drew upon the valence of sites, for instance, Mughal monuments in Delhi, to propagate the idea of the continuity of empires in the Indian subcontinent. Elephanta's picnics present one of the earliest iterations of this attempt, linking Indian monuments and sites, the British monarchy, and the narratives of imperial legitimacy.

<sup>126</sup>Sapire, 'Ambiguities of loyalism', p. 38.

<sup>127</sup>M. O'Mealey (comp.), *Programmes, speeches, addresses, reports and references in the press relating to H.R.H the Prince of Wales' tour in India 1921-1922* (Delhi: Government of India, 1923), p. 5.

A skein of associations made the picnic at Elephanta a politic choice for the touring princes, particularly, the Prince of Wales. Cutting across class lines in Britain, the picnic epitomized the possibilities of industrial progress, such as modern means of travel, as well as empire, seen in the plenitude and variety of foodstuffs commonly found at picnics. The consumption that was celebrated in the Elephanta picnics was made legible due to the long-standing aesthetic resonances of the site. The island of Elephanta had long been framed as a ‘picturesque’ spot, and the Caves had featured prominently in the British Romantic imaginary; as such, these aesthetic associations made Elephanta a politic choice as a backdrop for the Prince’s activities and, indeed, framing his modern, masculine, and vigorous subjectivity. The picnics, with their spectacular consumption, and reconfiguration of the landscape, with lighting and fireworks, sentries lining the path, and accoutrements of the feast, etc., became efficacious as transactions within the ceremonial economy. These enduring frames—of the picturesque views of Elephanta and the Caves’ association with Romanticism—also enabled the overwriting of the site’s contemporary meanings, including the long-standing British neglect of the site, their resacralization, European vandalism, as well as contemporary efforts at conservation.

Framed through the illustrations of artist-reporters, the royal picnic of 1875 offered a convincing and appealing image of empire. The amplification of the image’s message through circulation was anticipated, if not entirely premeditated. The images and the descriptions of a familiar act, namely picnicking, taking place in a far but resonant outpost of empire helped domesticate and rationalize the use of the Caves and, by suggestion, empire itself. Interrogating the colonial government’s transactions within the ceremonial economy at a site of antiquity is also to destabilize the historiography that continues to deploy the custodianship of museum artefacts to legitimize imperial power structures. Elephanta’s picnics remind us that imperial power is often constituted by pageantry—and at the cost of ‘rational’ governance.

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