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India: Historical Archaeology

Barry Lewis

Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL, USA

Introduction

The roots of Indian historical archaeology rest in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century

antiquarian research, a collaborative enterprise driven mostly by questions of historical interest for which archaeological evidence played an important role. The results of these investigations brought India's rich history, ancient and diverse literary traditions, and spectacular archaeological sites and monuments onto the world stage. They also gave India's colonial government its main rationale for direct involvement in archaeology and the creation of early national policies concerning archaeological sites and monuments.

India's archaeological horizons expanded considerably in the twentieth century as research revealed the temporal depth and richness of its past. By mid-century, the focus turned increasingly to work on questions of prehistory and protohistory, which now consume far greater attention and resources than historical archaeology. The latter subfield, however, will play a larger role in twenty-first century Indian archaeology as the nation addresses such issues as heritage conservation, tourism development, and identity in a rapidly changing and diverse country.

Indian historical archaeology today faces many of the same challenges as other countries. The sites and monuments that are the primary archaeological objects of its research are often either part of crowded urban landscapes; highly visible and, consequently, vulnerable features of the rural countryside; or are still in active daily use. As elsewhere too, these sites are being destroyed at a rapid rate (Fig. 1). On the historical research side of the picture, India shares with other former European colonies the problem that many primary documents relevant to historical archaeology do not reside there, but are in Europe, principally in British archives. The effects of these challenges are compounded by India's recent rapid economic growth, its significant urban and rural infrastructure problems, its complex central and state government bureaucracies, and its population density, which is growing at a rate that, if sustained, will result in India overtaking China as the world's most populous country by 2021.



India: Historical Archaeology, Fig. 1 The recent past is just as endangered as that which is thousands of years old. This unique early twentieth century roadside shrine, which has Mysore State constables for door guardians, is threatened by simple benign neglect and encroaching urban developments (Photo by Barry Lewis)

Definition

In common with most European countries, India takes a broad view of the domain of historical archaeology. As practiced, it is best defined as the study of that part of the archaeological record for which there exists contemporary documentary evidence. Such evidence spans most of the last 3,000 years (Chakrabarti 2006: 287, 315), but the boundary between Indian history and prehistory is a fuzzy one.

Elsewhere, notably in parts of the Americas and Australia, the term “historical archaeology” is increasingly associated with the period of European colonial expansion, or roughly the past 500 years (Orser 1996: 23-8). While India

has much to contribute to the latter research, this represents only one theme in a large and more complex research field (Fig. 2).

Historical Background

Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century antiquarians in India were committed to the Enlightenment belief in the interpretive value of reason as the primary means to understand the order of a knowable world. And there was plenty to know in India, for ruined cities, ancient monuments, art, undecipherable inscriptions, epic poems, and diverse literary traditions in a host of languages seemed to present themselves at every turn. Challenged by the evidence of India’s past, these early scholars sought to construct an understanding of Indian history that mapped ancient texts and other documentary evidence onto the archaeological record (Chakrabarti 2010: 4-5, 9).

Questions about India’s past attracted little government interest and support, except in such specialized areas as legal systems and land tenures. Antiquarian research was centered in a few scholarly organizations, the most famous of which was the Asiatic Society of Bengal, which formed in early 1784 under the leadership of William Jones. In South India, the less formally organized, but productive research of Indian and European philologists and antiquarians such as Colin Mackenzie and other members of the “Madras School of Orientalism,” turned equally fertile ground (Trautmann 2009).

Brilliant and committed though the antiquarians were, their work did not directly result in the creation of a distinct scholarly discipline of archaeology. They lacked a clear understanding of how old the “past” may be, practical methods that would enable them to reconstruct the past from archaeological evidence and relate it to the relevant documentary evidence, and essential concepts of time, space, and culture upon which to build basic interpretive frameworks for this past.

The creation of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in the early 1860s marked the beginning of direct government involvement in

India: Historical Archaeology, Fig. 2 In rural India, the material remains of the past weave in and out of the present. This isolated tree and the carved stones placed against its trunk are a modern Naga shrine, which was created with *nagakal* (snake stones) recycled from an old shrine (Photo by Barry Lewis)



archaeology, the first professional archaeologists, and the first steps toward a national policy concerning historical sites and monuments. Most research continued to emphasize historical questions, but archaeology's role was typically as a "handmaiden to history" (Trautmann & Sinopoli 2002: 499, 501), which often amounted to little more than illustrating history books with interesting photographs, drawings, and descriptive details.

The first half of the twentieth century was a high water mark for the ASI and for Indian archaeology generally. ASI announcement in 1924 of the discovery of the Indus civilization astounded the archaeological world and pushed back the dating of the emergence of urban society by several millennia. Although the nature and complexity of Indus society continues to be the object of considerable discussion, the discovery ensured that Indian archaeology had a seat at the table of international inquiry into the origins of civilization (Paddayya 2002: 143). It also pulled resources away from research on the historical periods and contributed in some respect to the growing sentiment of Indian nationalism and the push for independence.

Archaeology in the mid-twentieth century turned increasingly to research on protohistory and prehistory, sometimes to the near exclusion

of questions of historical interest (Chakrabarti 2003: 1, 9). The focus shifted again in the late twentieth century when renewed interest in historical archaeology began to develop and expand its role as an active partner in the construction of historical perspectives (Trautmann & Sinopoli 2002: 517-8). This trend has opened a continuing dialogue as archaeologists, historians, politicians, and the public alike address fundamental questions such as who owns the past, the role of the past in modern identity politics, the public representation of the past in everything from heritage sites to school textbooks, and what should be national priorities and policies for the conservation of the archaeological record in a rapidly changing country.

Key Issues/Current Debates

India faces several challenges that have significant implications for historical archaeology, if not the entire discipline. These challenges include the impact of modern political agendas and religious fundamentalism on historical archaeology, the need for strong professional archaeological leadership, and the development of a sense of shared stewardship for India's past. Each challenge is considered briefly in turn, below.

Indo-Aryan Debate

Discovery of the Indus civilization had a strong impact on Indian national identity. The effects of this discovery were so great that, following Independence in 1947, when the most famous Indus sites became part of the new nation of Pakistan, Indian archaeologists launched major research efforts to discover comparable sites within the redefined boundaries of India (Chakrabarti 2003: 1; Rajeeve 2006). Fortunately, while it was an instance of archaeological research motivated mostly by national pride, it was also quite productive.

Recent examples of the sociopolitics of Indian archaeology have not been so simple or easy to work through. Current hot button issues include the language of the Indus script, the “Aryan Migration,” the relationship between the Indus civilization and the Vedas, and the interpretive value of India’s most ancient writings as historical texts.

Strictly speaking, the Indus civilization does not fall within the purview of historical archaeology. Although authorities generally agree that it was a literate society, its script is undeciphered and may remain undecipherable given the few data at hand. Nevertheless, the many attempts made to read the Indus script have also fed a long-standing controversy about the origins of Indian civilization, whether it was a largely indigenous development or one that can be explained by the migrations of Indo-European speakers (the so-called Aryans) into the subcontinent (Trautmann 2005; Chakrabarti 2008). DNA evidence, which could potentially clarify the issue, has, thus far, proved to be equivocal.

The debate is further complicated by controversy that surrounds the possible relationship between the Indus civilization and ancient texts called the Vedas. Did the Indus civilization rise and fall before the Vedas, or was it the Vedic civilization (Trautmann 2005: xxxvi)? And, do the ancient texts possess interpretive value? Scholarly opinions of the value of the Vedas as historical texts range from positive to nil. Answers to these questions have implications for major issues in national politics, religion, and Indian identity (Chakrabarti 2008). They

have even spilled over into heated controversies about how such topics are treated in school textbooks (Viswesvaran et al. 2009). These issues have no easy resolution, and historical archaeology is caught in the middle of the debate.

Archaeological Leadership and the ASI

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) celebrated its 150th year of operation throughout 2012. The ASI is India’s key archaeological institution and one of the world’s largest archaeological agencies. Founded in 1861, its government mandate and budget place the ASI at the center of Indian archaeology. Most states have archaeology departments, but their budgets, staff training, and priorities vary greatly within the limits set by state antiquities and monument legislation and appropriations. At least 25 universities also have archaeology programs, often as part of history departments. While some of these programs, such as that at Deccan College, enjoy international research reputations, others lack the support necessary to maintain active fieldwork (Chakrabarti 2006: 510-3).

ASI leadership, which should be of the highest quality, faltered over the past couple of decades (Lahiri et al. 2002). No single reason adequately explains the lapse. For more than 12 years, the ASI director general, who reports to the Ministry of Culture, was not an archaeologist, but a career civil servant deputed from the ranks of the Indian Administrative Service. Many ASI staff and line positions went unfilled. Few excavations and other research were published. The ASI handling of the Ayodhya controversy, the flashpoint of which was the destruction of a sixteenth century mosque by a mob in 1992, also left it open to criticism at several levels (Guha 2005; Chadha 2010: 230-1).

The ASI is working to reclaim its former leadership role. The current ASI director general is a qualified professional archaeologist, and recent changes in the upper echelon of the organization ensure that qualified candidates can now realistically aspire to the top ASI post. Moribund publications such as *Ancient India* and *Epigraphia India* have been relaunched, and the entire run of the journal *Indian archaeology – a review* has

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Fig. 3 Political party slogans and other graffiti deface a late medieval fort gateway at Mudgal in northern Karnataka. Cultural heritage education in the schools may help to curtail such vandalism by instilling in students a conservation ethic and a sense of stewardship of the past (Photo by Barry Lewis)



been placed online. The ASI website has become a useful and frequently updated information source, and the various ASI circles, or regional divisions, have implemented their own websites. ASI-administered financial assistance to state archaeology departments and universities was announced in late 2011 by the Ministry of Culture, which also proposed to create archaeological fellowships for young scholars.

Heritage and the Commitment to Stewardship

India needs a comprehensive, feasible national policy for the care of its cultural heritage, one that encourages the development of a widely shared sense of stewardship of the past (Fig. 3). Its rapidly growing population and the attendant sprawl of cities and towns, industrial development, and even changes in agricultural technology are destroying archaeological sites in every part of India. It is unquestionably true that the prosperity and well-being of today's India is of far greater concern than the care of its ancient sites, but, while it is easy to concede this point, it is equally clear that the destruction of the nation's cultural heritage must be controlled as much as possible for the public good and for the understanding of India's past by future generations.

On the legislative side, the Indian government recently took several measures to support heritage conservation. Several new initiatives encourage active cooperation between the ASI, state archaeology departments, universities, and nongovernmental organizations like the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH). Government also announced the creation of a National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities in 2007. Its mandate is to construct a cultural heritage database of sites, monuments, antiquities, and art treasures and actively promote a national awareness of India's cultural heritage (Fig. 4). In 2010, a major amendment to The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act of 1958 created the National Monuments Authority, which adds teeth to existing legislation that protects the immediate vicinity of national monuments and sites from unauthorized encroachments.

More than anything else, education will help to ensure that citizens become proactive stewards of the past for the sake of future generations. Promotion of a conservation ethic and pride in India's diverse cultural heritage in the classroom, a concerted effort by archaeologists to communicate what they do to local audiences and in local

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Fig. 4 Remains of the tomb or *samadhi* of an early Chitradurga king rest largely forgotten in the middle of a cultivated field. Like hundreds of thousands of sites, it has yet to be documented in state or national databases (Photo by Barry Lewis)



languages, prompt publication of research, encouraging the awareness of regional heritage priorities, and programs among local bodies such as village panchayats – all of these activities can make a difference.

International Perspectives

Archaeology was a European invention in India (Paddayya 2002: 119), and there is a long tradition of international collaboration, research funding, and training. In the best examples of international participation, such as the interdisciplinary project centered for more than 20 years around the ruins of the late medieval city of Vijayanagara (Fig. 5), the nation, its citizens, the historical and archaeological resources, and world archaeology derive considerable benefit from the relationship (Trautmann & Sinopoli 2002: 513-5). Regrettably, there are also counter-examples of international collaboration, which generate hard feelings in a country where the inequities of colonialism are still part of living memory (e.g., Chakrabarti 2003).

The future of international involvement in Indian archaeology clearly depends on the forging of long-standing research commitments in which Indian scholars are engaged in full collaborative partnership and where the international

team brings skills, technology, or perspectives that are not readily available within India itself. While the *information* about India's past (about every country's past) may be said to belong to the world, Indian scholars must remain the primary creators of this information.

Future Directions

After decades in which prehistory and protohistory dominated Indian archaeology, historical archaeology is again emerging as an important research focus. However, its proper domain is now considered to be much broader than the fabled cities, palaces, and dynastic histories that interested the antiquarians of two centuries ago (Settar & Korisettar 2002: xvi). The breadth of current research responds in part to the widely perceived need for perspectives of the past that speak equally to every Indian without prejudice, rancor, or disrespect. It is only then that researchers can expect the public to fully appreciate their cultural heritage, the value of archaeology, and why archaeology may deserve their support (Fig. 6).

Historical Evidence Is More than Texts

Indian history is based mostly on the authority of sources such as ancient texts, dynastic lists,

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Fig. 5 Kota Shankara gateway at Vijayanagara, Bellary district, Karnataka. An ASI protected monument and UNESCO World Heritage site, the central core of Vijayanagara covers more than 25 km²; archaeologists estimate that its fortified “metropolitan region” is roughly 600 km². Immense archaeological sites like Vijayanagara pose extraordinary heritage conservation challenges (Photo by Barry Lewis)



inscriptions, coins, and the like (Chakrabarti 2010: 1-3). Historical archaeology’s often-mentioned “handmaiden” role in the construction of history is due in no small part to its ready acceptance that this is the best part that archaeology can play (Ray & Sinopoli 2004). These constraints are largely self-imposed.

There are good reasons to cast widely for new types of sources that meet the criteria of valid and reliable primary evidence. For example, among nonliterary textual sources for precolonial and colonial India, historical archaeologists may find much of research value in relatively unexplored village-level records such as the *kaditas* or “black books” of the South (Hatti & Heimann 1991), *khanasumari* or house census records (Peabody 2001), and the archives of monasteries and *mathas*. Even the ocean floor is yielding valuable historical archaeological evidence as researchers investigate maritime and drowned terrestrial sites along India’s thousands of kilometers of coastline (Gaur & Vora 2011).

Among other major sources that most researchers have yet to tap, historical cartography and high-resolution digital aerial imagery of India’s landscape hold extraordinary promise for historical archaeology. As recent as the

1990s, it was hard to acquire aerial imagery in India, and inexpensive global positioning system (GPS) devices were no more accurate and precise than within tens of meters. Now, Google Earth and other spatial websites can show detailed images of most places on Earth at the expense of a few mouse clicks, and readily available GPS technology offers submeter accuracy. For those archaeologists who master the necessary technical geographic information systems (GIS) skills or whose research budgets can afford to pay for this expertise, a whole new world of historical archaeological spatial studies lies at their feet.

For their part, historians also have an important part to play in the creation of archaeological evidence. Harding’s (1997–1999) exhaustive study of East India Company smallarms is a good example of historical research that has significant archaeological implications. By limiting his research to firearms, a category of material culture that played an important role in the establishment of British hegemony in India and elsewhere, Harding succeeds in placing it into social, political, and technological context in a way that earlier researchers could only imagine. Now, archaeologists and historians alike, when they walk the field at Assaye or the fort walls at



India: Historical Archaeology, Fig. 6 A “hero stone” or *virakallu* that vandals uprooted and left abandoned among the ruins of a fourteenth century fort. It may eventually find its way into a local museum or collection or enter the pipeline that feeds the world market of stolen antiquities (Photo by Barry Lewis)

Srirangapatna, have a much more robust basis with which to evaluate the documented contribution made by infantry to these battles.

Historical Archaeology and the Rules of Evidence

Historical archaeology often gets little respect among historians, and even among some archaeologists, partly because its results sometime merely reaffirm that which we felt we already knew, and partly because these results often appear to be only weakly supported by convincing evidence that permits no other interpretation.

In historical archaeology, as in every research field, the power of an explanation, interpretation, or claim rests on the quality of the evidence that supports it. Many historians everywhere take

a skeptical view of archaeological interpretations because they often appear to be based on little more than conjecture and personal bias (Henige 2005). This view can change only when it is standard practice for historical archaeologists to demonstrate unequivocally the validity and reliability of their research results. Each claim must meet the rules of evidence of both history and archaeology; such rules are not trivial, nor do they vary with the race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or political views of the researcher. If an interpretation fails to meet the rules of evidence, then it must be discarded. There is no middle ground.

These comments about the rules of evidence are particularly relevant to the situation of historical archaeology in India today (e.g., Guha 2005). Is archaeological evidence to be determined by political or religious ideologies or by the same standards and conventions that scholars demand of each other in the rest of the world? The answer will determine much of the future of Indian historical archaeology.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Archaeology and the Emergence of Fields: Historical and Classical](#)
- ▶ [Archival Research and Historical Archaeology](#)
- ▶ [Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites](#)
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- ▶ [Nationalism and Archaeology](#)
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Indian Ocean: Maritime Archaeology

James W. Hunter III
Maritime Archaeology Program,
Flinders University, Adelaide, SA, Australia

Introduction

The Indian Ocean is the Earth's third largest oceanic division and covers approximately 20 % of its surface, with an estimated area of 28,350,000 mile² (73,427,795 km²). It is bounded by three continents – Asia to the north, Africa to the west, and Australia to the east – and shares its southern boundary with the Southern Ocean and Antarctica (Fig. 1). At its widest point, the Indian Ocean extends nearly 6,200 miles (9,977 km) between the southern tips of Australia and Africa. Small islands dot the Indian Ocean's continental rims, and several island nations, including Madagascar, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius, as well as the Maldives, Seychelles, Comoros, and Indonesian archipelagos, either border or are included within its waters. The Red Sea and Persian Gulf are both considered extensions of the Indian Ocean.

All of the world's earliest civilizations, including those in Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, and the Indian subcontinent, developed around the Indian Ocean. Its waters are considerably calmer than

those of both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and characterized by powerful monsoons with prevailing winds that undergo predictable alternating seasonal shifts. As a consequence, the Indian Ocean hosted some of the world's first maritime trade networks, including those that developed between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley c. 2500 BCE. Over the course of subsequent centuries, vessels embarked from ports in such diverse locales as Greece, Egypt, India, Persia, Indonesia, China, Portugal, the Netherlands, France, and Great Britain to engage in voyages of commerce, exploration, colonization, and warfare throughout its vast waters (Rais 1986: 13-36). Evidence of these and other cultures, and their interactions with one another and the larger Indian Ocean maritime landscape, are represented by a wide array of cultural heritage, including shipwrecks, submerged settlements, inundated landscapes, and abandoned infrastructure.

Definition

Keith Muckelroy (1978) originally defined the discipline of maritime archaeology as “the scientific study of the material remains of man and his activities on the sea.” This has subsequently been expanded and refined to include “human interaction with the sea, lakes, and rivers through the archaeological study of material manifestations of maritime culture” (Delgado 1997: 259). Using these explanations as a benchmark, maritime archaeology in the Indian Ocean may be regarded as the efforts of individuals and organizations to conduct scientific investigation of the material remnants of the Indian Ocean's maritime past, including – but not limited to – evidence of trade, commerce, exchange, conflict, water transport technology, seafaring, coastal settlement, port and harbor infrastructure, and inundated landscapes.

Historical Background

At present, maritime archaeological studies have either occurred, or are ongoing, within Indian

