# Princely Archaeologies and Plural Sovereignties in Modern South Asia

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Edited by Rafiullah Khan

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Cover: The eastern gateway of the Great Stupa at Sanchi. Courtesy: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



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To my parents

# Contents

# Acknowledgements

The works collected in this volume were previously published in different sources. The publishers and authors welcomed my idea and kindly agreed to my request to republish them in a collection. I owe my thanks to all of them for their cooperation and generosity to permit me to reproduce parts, or whole, of their publications here.

For Part I, the credit goes to the India Society, London, which has ceased to work anymore, as it has been taken from their 1939 publication entitled *Revealing India's Past: A Cooperative Record of Archaeological Conservation and Exploration in India and Beyond*.

Moreover, I am thankful to the publishers and authors of the four chapters included in Part II. Nayanjot Lahiri's study is republished from her book, *Marshalling the Past: Ancient India and Its Modern Histories*, published by Permanent Black, Ranikhet, India, in 2012. The author and her publisher kindly permitted me to use chapter second from the book in this collection. Upinder Singh happily consented to my request of reproducing a part of chapter nine from her 2004 book, *The Discovery of Ancient India: Early Archaeologists and the Beginnings of Archaeology*, also Permanent Black's publication. I owe my gratitude to both the author and the publisher. Rajasri Mukhopadhyay's chapter was first published in the 2002 *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, and the Indian History Congress positively responded to my idea of the publication of this volume. The permission to reproduce this work was kindly granted. I sincerely acknowledge this act of academic cooperation and generosity. For the inclusion of Luca M. Olivieri's immensely revised article, an earlier version of which appeared in *East and West* (2023), my thanks go to both the author and IsMEO, Italy. All these studies add a valuable collection to the field of South Asian archaeological historiography.

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August 2025

# Foreword

Histories of South Asian archaeology have tended to focus on the colonial period and institutions such as the Archaeological Survey of India. Certain prominent individuals, such as Alexander Cunningham, John Marshall and Mortimer Wheeler have received considerable attention. But there are other political contexts, institutions and individuals who have not been adequately studied or understood. Against this background, this book, edited by Rafiullah Khan, marks an important intervention.

The British empire presented itself engaged in a civilizing mission that included retrieving the lost history of conquered lands. The colonized were, for the most part, cast in the role of 'ignorant natives,' lacking the skills and critical faculties needed for historical inquiry. However, archaeological research and the conservation of historical monuments in the subcontinent was not the monopoly of the British government or European scholars. The European discovery of the South Asia's past would not have been possible without the so-called 'native informants,' who usually remained anonymous or were barely mentioned in passing. Further, there were several 'native scholars' who distinguished themselves in the study of ancient texts, inscriptions, coins and also contributed to archaeology. It should also be remembered that at its height, British colonial rule covered only about three-fifths of the subcontinent, the rest being under the governance of hereditary princes. The princely states varied greatly in size, population and resources. Apart from the many small principalities, there were larger, politically important ones such as Hyderabad, Mysore, Gwalior, Baroda and Kashmir. The history of archaeology in colonial South Asia has to include what was happening in these states.

The title of this book recognizes the importance of the political context and the existence of multiple sovereignties. The relationship between the British and the princely states and that between the Archaeological Survey and these states was complex and was marked by collaboration as well as conflict. Many major historical sites that interested the officers of the Survey lay outside the jurisdiction of the British government of India. These included Sanchi in Bhopal state, Bharhut in Nagod, Ajanta in the Nizam's domain, and Mandu in the principality of Dhar, to mention just a few. So interactions were inevitable. However, the details of these interactions have so far only been partially reconstructed.

This book focuses both on the activities and the historiography of princely archaeology in South Asia. The first part is directly drawn from the volume edited by J. Cumming, *Revealing India's Past: A Cooperative Record of Archaeological Conservation and Exploration in India and Beyond*, published in 1939. Here are useful contemporary summaries of the archaeological, conservation and other work being conducted in several princely states, recounted by some of the major participants themselves. These include an account of Hyderabad by G. Yazdani, Mysore by M.H. Krishna, Baroda by H. Sastri, Jammu and Kashmir by Ram C. Kak, Gwalior by M.B. Garde, Travancore by R.V. Poduval, Jaipur by D.R. Sahni, and Bhopal, Nagod and Mayurbhanj by R. Chanda. These document diverse activities such as the setting up of Archaeological Departments; exploration and excavation of sites; collection and publication of manuscripts and inscriptions; conservation work; establishing of museums; publication of reports and monographs; and the passing of legislation. When the details are collated, they reveal patterns of involvement as well as differences in scale and degree of interest and financial outlay, providing a good overview of archaeological work in these princely states from the latter half of the 19th century till the late 1930s.

The essays in Part II contain post-colonial reflections on the history of South Asian archaeology. What binds them together is that they supplement published sources with archival ones, thereby

offering new insights into archaeological exploration, excavation and conservation, revealing the interactions of different branches of government and agencies, and bringing to light differences in approaches and ideas of various individuals. Archival sources make it possible to look behind and beyond the stereotypes produced and perpetuated by the colonial state. There is enough evidence to argue that destruction went hand in hand with documentation and protection. In fact, certain British officers such as Lepel Griffin (agent to the governor general for central India) and Henry Hardy Cole (curator of Ancient Monuments) were outspoken critics of the vandalism of the archaeologists. Another stereotype was that of ignorant native princes who were either indifferent to historical heritage or saw the past exclusively through a religious or communal lens. This too is belied by the evidence, for instance, by the support extended by the Bhopal Durbar towards the work at Sanchi and the efforts of Sultan Jahan Begum to have the Sanchi relics brought back from England to India. It is not for nothing that John Marshall's volumes on this important Buddhist site in central India are dedicated to the Begum's memory. The archaeological work done in Mayurbhanj state in the early 20th century is less known and reflects the intersection of nationalism and regional pride. Also revelatory are archival sources such as the Malakand Papers and the 'Swat Folder' which enable the detailed reconstruction of the history of the Gilgit manuscripts before and after Giuseppe Tucci obtained them from a Pakistani army officer in 1956 and handed them over to the Department of Archaeology, now housed in the Karachi National Museum. This story reveals the intersection of national, princely and international jurisdictions and interests.

The editor Rafiullah Khan highlights the importance of historical investigations of princely archaeologies in the Introduction as well as the third part of the book. He also points to various issues that require further investigation. These include broadening the ambit of inquiry to hitherto unstudied princely states, examining the interactions among the various durbars, and identifying the differences in their attitude and approach. The ideological underpinnings of the colonial state's interest in excavating and preserving South Asia's past are well researched. Not so the ideological underpinnings of archaeology and conservation in the princely states. According to Khan, these represent a local modernity which recognized the important place of the materiality of the past in claims to sovereignty. Appeals to the past were of interest not only for the colonial state but also for the princes of South Asia. Clearly, this is a subject that requires a great deal of further attention and excavation of the wealth of information that lies buried in dusty files in regional archives. It also calls for greater collaboration and conversation among South Asian archaeologists and historians about their shared past and cultural heritage.

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25 July 2025

# Introduction

Rafiullah Khan

Colonial South Asia constituted a mosaic of polities, such as, ranging from preponderant British India to Burma, Nepal and five hundred or so princely, or Indian, states. All of them worked in a web of political and administrative relationship which scholars have worked upon in the past few decades. Of particular interest to us are Indian states which were embedded into the British paramountcy through an elaborate system of treaties and mutual obligations. On the whole, the states were free in dealing with their internal affairs while such a privilege was denied to them with regard to foreign relations, communication and defense. In other words, princes were subject to the requirements which British paramountcy entailed. Serious investigations have so far been done in this regard (see for a review, Zutshi 2009). Yet many aspects of this complex relationship still need our attention. Historical studies of archaeological research and management in princely India make one such issue which should not be left unattended anymore. This apparently simple matter in fact marks a much deeper problem in South Asian historiography.

We are aware that there has been an increasing realization that princely histories should be viewed in connection to South Asian history (Ernst and Pati 2007). Building upon this proposition, the present volume aims to broach the subject of princely archaeologies in relation to South Asian, and more particularly archaeological, historiography. In this pursuit, archaeological fieldwork, including conservation, and the complex legal-institutional apparatuses, as were in place in both British India and some of the princely states, need to be taken account of so as to make sense of mutual collaborations and obligations as well as situations of conflict, assertion of ownership or other such crucial issues. All this will potentially go much beyond investigating the process of archaeological research and creation of archaeological evidence into areas such as sovereign and legal pluralities and management of archaeology. Undoubtedly, let me reiterate, we no more can ignore exploring such themes for examination and historiographical analysis.

In one sense, it is heartening that up until now a number of meticulous studies have appeared which constitute a category of its own. Sourindranath Roy (1961), Dilip Chakrabarti (1988/2001, 1997), Upinder Singh (2004, 2021), Himanshu P. Ray (2008, 2018), Nayanjot Lahiri (2005, 2012), Sudeshna Guha (2015), Luca M. Olivieri (2015a, 2015b, 2019), Peter Stewart (2016), Mridu Rai (2009), Ifqut Shaheen (2022, 2024), Rafiullah Khan (2020, 2023, 2024) and many others have made valuable contributions to this field. All such works, save for a few exceptions, overwhelmingly look into the mainstream colonial archaeology and Indology. The present volume brings together some of these few exceptions in order to present a historiographical view of archaeological work in princely states. These works have been collected from different sources wherein they first appeared. They have been divided into two parts. Part I has been reproduced from *Revealing India's Past* (chapter VII) edited by John Cumming (1939). It discusses archaeological activities done till 1937 in the princely states of Hyderabad, Mysore, Baroda, Jammu and Kashmir, Gwalior, Travancore, Jaipur, Bhopal, Nagod and Mayurbhanj. Its different sections have been written by different authors. Overall, it provides a good summary of archaeological work in the mentioned Indian states from the latter half of the 19th century till the partition of India, short of a decade. In the present volume, the original chapter has been untangled in such a way as to make separate chapter for the archaeology of each state. There is just one exception: chapter eight is written by a single author and discusses the three states of Bhopal, Nagod and Mayurbhanj.

Part II of this volume includes four studies which have been published in different sources since the dawn of the 21th century. It makes sense to deal it as a category providing for a postcolonial view of colonial archaeology in princely states as well as the twist which occurred with the partition of India in 1947. Nayanjot Lahiri's study gives a reappraisal of colonial archaeology centred on the site of Sanchi. Sanchi was situated in the Bhopal state which stood 'on the eastern confines of Mālwā' and was bounded 'on the south by the Narbadā river' (Luard 1908: 1). Lahiri demonstrates how the site was burrowed for antiquities in the the 19th century and how with the durbar's vigilance and assertive presence John Marshall, director general of the Archaeological Survey of India (1902–1928), did a new work there. The durbar also tried to get the Sanchi objects repatriated from England, a pursuit which finally worked around the time of the British departure from India. Lahiri also challenges the communal as well as ahistorical prism through which orientalists viewed Indian society and history. In chapter tenth, Upinder Singh argues that local rulers took great interest in conserving monuments and remains in their states. They generously contributed large sums towards preserving and restoring sites of heritage. Both these studies convincingly illustrate how flawed the colonial view of indifferent, ignorant, vacuous and destructive native was. Rajasri Mukhopadhyay's chapter summarizes the archaeological work as was done in the Mayurbhanj state in the early 20th century. Mayurbhanj was one of the most significant states in the Eastern States Agency and was merged to the Indian federation on 1 January 1949 (Senapati and Sahu 1967: 1–5). Finally, Luca M. Olivieri discusses the Italian Archaeological Mission's arrival into Pakistan in the mid-1950s and the discovery and acquisition of the Gilgit Manuscripts by Giuseppe Tucci. This study is valuable in many ways. It belongs to a transitional period after the partition and documents the story from acquisition of the group of manuscripts to its study and publication and final return to Pakistan's Archaeology Department. Olivieri also contextualizes the discovery of the manuscripts to the first-time discovery of Gilgit Manuscripts in the 1930s within the Kashmir durbar's princely realm. Swat and the extension of Pakistan's archaeological laws into that state for commencing Italian archaeological research have also been related to his analysis. This adds an interesting aspect to princely heritage in postcolonial subcontinent.

Part III comprises my own fresh chapter which highlights the importance of historical investigations in princely archaeologies. It brings to the fore various issues for further research and points out the need to make such pursuits related to broader concerns in South Asian, primarily archaeological, historiography.

Since the works collected in this volume first appeared in various publications, the earliest one being in 1939, it was felt desirable to make these diverse texts consistent in terms of spellings, capitalization, diacritics, abbreviations, numerals, contractions, dates and references. Uniformity, therefore, was introduced as per the Archaeopress style and format. Transliterations in Part I have been removed while no such interfering has been made in Olivieri's work owing to some highly technical titles used by him.

Intriguingly, some of the states included in Part I also feature in the subsequent parts. Sanchi, situated in Bhopal, bulks large in chapters ninth and tenth while Kashmir has been referred to in chapter 12, in the context of the discovery of Gilgit Manuscripts in 1955–1956 in Pakistan, and chapter 13. A meticulous study about archaeology and politics in the Kashmir state has also been published by Mridu Rai (2009). For certain reasons, unluckily, it could not be added to this collection. We would have been fortunate if similar postcolonial reappraisals were available for the other states which Part I consists of. Yet, it is to be hoped that this theme would attract attention sooner rather than latter and one day we will be able to better understand princely archaeologies in relation to a broader South Asian historiographical scholarship.

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Map of the princely states and provinces of India, from C. Markovits. 2004. *A History of Modern India, 1480–1950*. Reproduced with kind permission of the author.