300 - 600 CE

OUTLINE:

6.3 GUPTA INDIA: ROCK-CUT ARCHITECTURE AND THE ART OF SUBTRACTION

The Stones of the Gupta Dynasty; From Caves to Piles: Karli, Sanchi, Ajanta, Elephant

Post-Gupta Dravidian Temple

North Hindu temple style: Deogarh, Aihole, Ellora

South Hindu temple style: Mahabalipuram/ Mamallapuram

Buddhas: Bamiyan

Note: India will resume in Chapter 8, part 1.

• The Stones of the Gupta Dynasty; From Caves to Piles: The ancient empire of the Mauryan dynasty fell apart in the early second century BCE, and India reverted to feudal fragmentation. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism remained non-hierarchical, permitting a multiplicity of divinities and varied strains of dogma. Buddhism, which tended to appeal to the wealthier patrons, produced the earliest architectural prototypes, later reworked for Hindu and Jain buildings. The best-preserved examples remained those carved in the cliffs. The Ghats, hills formed from horizontal shelves of stone in the central western regions of India near Mumbai, served as the site for many of the great rock-cut works. The caves at Bhaja, about 100 km (60 miles) southeast of Mumbai, were among the earliest Indian rock-cut temples, carved during the mid-first century BCE. (OUP)

• From ancient times, caves have been considered hallowed places in India, because they were frequently the abodes of holy men and ascetics. Around the 2nd century BCE cave like sanctuaries were hewn out of the stone plateaus in the region of south central India known as the Deccan. They were carved top to bottom like sculpture. The monastic community used two types of rock cut halls: vihara functioned as monks’ living quarters, and the chaitya usually enshrined a stupa. (Stokstad)

• During the centuries that correspond to the early medieval period in Europe regional dynasties ruled parts of India. Among the most important were Palas and Chandellas in Northern India and the Pallavas and Cholas in the south. Buddhism declined during this period in India. (Gardner)

• Construction of cave temples coincided with a period when the rulers of principalities favored Brahmin practices. Buddhist shrines, financed by wealthy merchants, were built in remote sites to avoid conflicts with Brahmins. Buddhists built the earliest surviving shrines and established the model on which early Hindu architecture was based. (Moffett)
The Guptas in the 4th century founded a dynasty (lasted until the 6th century) in eastern central India and its influence was tremendous. The earliest surviving Hindu temples date from this time. (Stokstad)

The decimal system is an invention of this period, along with astronomical calculations. As Buddhism was gaining new converts across East Asia, India saw it gradually waning. This transition took place during the Gupta Empire, when Buddhist practices began to fuse with the surviving Vedic practices of pre-Buddhist times creating what is now called Hinduism. The Guptas maintained subject kings as vassals, and also exploited Buddhist institutions for Hindu purposes, and Buddhist institutions continued to thrive. (Wiley)

The Gupta dynasty declined in the 6th century. The newly emerging small kingdoms asserted their regional control, leading to a period of prolific temple building. Also during this time “Indianization” was expanding India’s economic reach into Southeast Asia as it was being transformed into a series of regional rice producing centers. (Wiley)
India will pick up again in Chapter 8.

Note: we will start with the following:

• Karli (west)
• Sanchi (central)
• Ajanta (west central)
• Elephanta (west) 10 km. off the coast

• Note: Bamiyan (north); Ajanta, Elephanta, Karli/Karla, (on the west coast)
  Sanchi, (at center), Thanjavur and Mamallapuram (at southern east);
  Ellora is near Ajanta.
Note: the stupa at rear.

- Subtraction as a method allowed one to forgo such criteria as foundations, support systems and roofs, but had to account for the displacement of material.
- Capitals around the stupa are unadorned.
- The hamika above the stupa is an inverted stepped pyramid capped with a wooden umbrella.
- Indian temple builders from the 1st to the 8th centuries carved into stone cliffs or out of piled rocks, making art of subtraction. The tradition of rock-cut works reached its zenith during the Gupta period in the 4th and 5th centuries. (OUP)
- Made for Jain and Buddhist monks. The interior is a barrel vault with arching ribs. The interior was brightly painted. The stupa has a railing motif at its base. (Stokstad)
- The semicircular arched ceiling is patterned after flexible bamboo structures, which could not have had these spans. (Moffett)
Title: chaitya (sanctuary) hall at Karle (Karla), Maharashtra, India

Architect: Gupta period India  
Date: ca. 120 CE

Note: see interior of vestibule in following slide.

- Ashokan pillars out front, a stupa at rear. The ceiling is a barrel vault with wood ribs. (OUP)
- Note the freestanding columns (one of two) supporting lion sculptures. (Moffett)

Source: Pearson publishing

Medium: Section/ cutaway

Size: approx. 46’/ 14 m H. x 128”/ 45 m L.
CHAITYA HALL, KARLI

Title: Entrance, Great Chaitya Cave, Karli
Architect: Gupta period India, Buddhist
Date: 1st cent. BCE-2nd cent. CE
Source: Fergusson, James, (1808-1886) Illustrations of the Rock Cut Temples of India, 1845; 19th cent. photo: wikipedia
Medium: 19th cent. photo; illustration
Size: interior: 124’ x 46.5’ x 45’

Note: don’t miss the thatched-roofed hut out front.

• Columns once supported a wooden façade. Dominating the upper portion of the main façade is a large horse-shoe shaped opening that provides the hall’s main source of light. Originally it was fitted with a carved wooden screen, some of this remains, which filtered the light. (Stokstad)
• The cliff face was smoothed and shaped to resemble the façade of a chaitya hall. (Moffett)
• The opening is defined by a horseshoe arch [at both scales] reminiscent of the leaf of the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha is believed to have gained Enlightenment. (Thapar)
• The word cave is misleading since they are “constructed” structures. (Wiley)
**Title:** Stupas and Monasteries at Sanchi  

**Architect:** Mauryas  

**Date:** published in 1956 Bombay, India, first published 1900  

**Source:** wikipedia, from Indian Architecture, Buddhist and Hindu  

**Medium:** reconstruction drawing by Percy Brown (1872-1955)  

**Size:** n/a  

**Notes:** This was from lecture 4.3. We’re seeing it here to see the (reconstructed) front of Temple 18, a freestanding chaitya hall.  

- Chaitya halls permitted year round devotions by enclosing a small stupa at the end of a rectangular hall. The end of the hall embracing the stupa was curved to reflect the shape contained within. The architectural form could be freestanding as here, or excavated from solid rock. (Moffett)
CHAITYA HALL, KARLI

Title: Vestibule, Great Chaitya Cave, Karli

Architect: Gupta period India, Buddhist

Date: 1st cent. BCE-2nd cent. CE

Source: Catenacci, published in a French book, c.1887

Medium: An engraving of the left side of the facade

Size: interior: 124 ft x 46.5 ft x 45 ft

mithuna: (Sanskrit) a pair of mail and female
(wiktionary)

Note:
- The walls of the vestibule are carved in relief with rows of small balcony railings and arched windows, simulating the appearance of a great multistoried palace. At the base of the side walls, enormous statues of elephants seem to support the entire structure on their backs. Flanking the doorways are mithuna couples, that evoke the auspicious qualities of harmony and fertility. (Stokstad)
Title: Chaitya hall, Karli  Architect: Gupta period India

Date: 120 CE

Note: the outside of the cave gives the outline of the outline of the rock face

- Pilgrims circulated on the perimeter of the colonnades and around the stupa. (OUP)
- Three entrances allowed access to the interior. Pillars demarcate the path to circumambulate around the stupa. (Stokstad)
**Title:** Chaitya hall, Karle/ Karla

**Architect:** Gupta period India  

**Date:** 1st Cent. BCE to 1st Cent. CE

**Source:** Fergusson, James, (1808-1886) Illustrations of the Rock Cut Temples of India, 1845; photograph by Scott Lenhart, S.F. Bay Area, CA;

**Medium:** stone  

**Size:** n/a

**Note:**
- kneeling elephants bearing mithuna couples on Persian-style capitals (OUP)

Fergusson, James, (1808-1886)  
Scottish architectural historian, rediscovered Indian antiquities
Title: Chaitya hall at Karle (Karla)
Architect: Gupta period India
Date: 1st Century BCE to 1st Century CE
Source: photo, Scott Lenhart, S.F. Bay Area, CA
Medium: stone detail of kneeling elephants bearing mithuna couples on the capital of one of the 30 columns (15 on each side)
Size: 124’ x 46.5’ x 45’

Note:
- Maithuna (Devanagari: मैथुन) is a Sanskrit term used in Tantra most often translated as "sexual union" in a ritual context. (wikipedia)
- These figures are the only sculpture within the austere hall, may represent nobility coming to pay homage. (Stokstad)
The Kushans ruled the area around northern India in the 1st to 3rd centuries CE. During this period were the first depictions of the Buddha, when previously, as at Sanchi, only symbols were used. During the Kushan period, in the Gandhara style of the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, sculptors depicted Buddha as more powerful and heroic than an ordinary person. The sculpting of drapery is probably influenced by Hellenistic artists. In the Mathura style, drew on an indigenous sculptural tradition of depicting yakshas, male nature deities. The Mathura style tends toward abstraction. (Stokstad)

- The Kushans had emigrated from Mongolia, but were predominantly Buddhist and also held shamanistic beliefs. (Wiley)

- We will even see an architectural representation of the topknot and elongated ears at Ajanta.
Title: Siddhartha in the Palace
Architect: Gupta period India
Date: Later Andhra period, c. 3rd cent. CE
Note: n/a

Museum: Detail of a relief from Nagarjunakonda, Andhra Pradesh, India/ National Museum, New Delhi
Medium: limestone
Size: n/a
Sanchi

Title: Sanchi
Architect: Gupta period India  Date: 400 CE

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sanchi_map.jpg
Medium: plan  Size: see scale

Note: Sanchi is a sacred Buddhist shrine, the site of the Great Stupa, seen earlier. Temple 17 is at right of the Stupa, just above temple 18.
To the sacred Buddhist shrine at Sanchi, just a few meters south of the Great Stupa, Gupta designers around the year 400 added a small square temple with a colonnaded porch, now known as Temple 17. Built of mortarless ashlar blocks, almost as if a rock-cut temple had been extracted from the cliff and transported to the site. The Gupta court also sponsored caves, quite similar in format to Temple 17, on a cliff only three miles from Sanchi, known as Udayagiri, which was similar to Temple 17, but Hindu, demonstrating the fluid exchange of precedents. (OUP)

Note:
- The porch is a transitional space between the outside world and the sanctuary. (Moffett)

Note:
- Udayagiri has some of the earliest surviving Hindu shrines. This two chambered temple form is amplified and embellished in later development. The sanctuary is known as the womb chamber and contains an image or element as a symbol of a god’s presence. (Moffett)
Title: Temple 17, Sanchi

Architect: Gupta period India  Date: 400 CE

Source: wikimedia, photo by Ismoon; below: https://vmis.in/ArchiveCategories/collection_gallery_zoom?id=1045&siteid=0&minrange=0&maxrange=0&assetid=43782&self_archive_id=66043&index=0

Medium: mortarless ashlar blocks  Size: n/a

antarala: doorway or threshold (Wiley)
darśana: (Sanskrit: दर्शन, lit. view, sight) is the auspicious sight of a deity or a holy person (wikipedia) “beholding of an auspicious deity” (Wiley)

Note:

• each column is stopped with an inverted lotus, a squared off impost and two crouching lions on each facet, (though hard to see). The cella is windowless and dark, and served for the devotional contemplation of an image. OUP)

• This is a flat roofed garbha-griha and mandapa, linked by a simple stepped stylobate and architrave. The antarala between the garbha griha and the mandapa marks the all important moment of transition at which the worshipper and the deity come into direct visual contact and enact darsana. (Wiley)
Note:
• The Vakataka dynasty had been subject to Gupta rule. After winning regional control couriers began new construction at the rock-cut monastery at Ajanta. (Stokstad)
Title: Ajanta Caves, Maharashtra, India

Architect: Gupta period India; each cave had its own patron

Date: 2nd Cent. BCE - Vakataka Dynasty, c. 475 CE

Source: wikimedia

Medium: plans of rock-cut caves along a sheer cliff wall

Size: about 20-29 caves; the central hall of a vihara averaged about 6 m. x 10 m.

Note:
- Most of the caves are viharas, with cells around a courtyard. (Thapar)

Caves 9 and 10 are the oldest (for ref. only).
Note:
- While still replicating wood architecture, Ajanta shows the evolution of the integrating architecture with painting and sculpture, an integral feature of Indian architecture. (Thapar)
- Note the elaborate forecourt and side rooms. The caitya window, originally an imitation horseshoe-shaped wooden window, has now been transformed into an abstract representation of the Buddha with a prominent topknot and elongated ears. (Wiley)
Note:
- Under Mahayana Buddhism the esoteric abstractions of the stupa were slowly replaced by a more graphic and literal iconography. First the figure of the Buddha was considered to be equivalent to the stupa an idea that was often expressed by superimposing a Buddha figure onto a stupa, as at Ajanta. (Wiley)
• Actually rock cut, rather than caves. The Vakataka state was a major patron in gratitude for their status as the guardians of the dakshinapatha, the southern trade route through India. The caityas and viharas served Mahayana Buddhist monks and students. Mahāyāna Buddhists teach that enlightenment can be attained in a single lifetime and this can be accomplished even by a layperson. The patronage of the monks helped the laity in their own quest for Nirvana. Cave 16 is a vihara, which at Ajanta changed from simple dwellings for monks to full fledged ceremonial spaces. They had a rectangular colonnaded hall preceded by a portico and surrounded by cells. (Wiley)
Note:
- Many caves were carved around 475 CE. In Cave 1 were monk’s cells and a Buddha shrine, as well as cave murals. (OUP)
- Cave 1 is a large vihara hall with monks’ chambers on the sides, and a Buddhist shrine in the back. Its central court includes some of the finest wall paintings. (Stokstad)
- The columns are carved with floral and figural representations of the gardens where the Buddha preached and gained enlightenment. (Wiley)
Title: Wall painting in Cave I, Ajanta, Maharashtra, India
Architect: Gupta period India    Date: Vakataka Dynasty, c. 475 CE
Note: n/a
- Some of the murals depict stories from the Buddhas past lives. (Stokstad)

Source: Pinterest
Medium: clay mixed with straw and white lime plaster, which is left to dry, unlike true fresco, then painted with mineral pigments
Size: n/a
Title: *Bodhisattvas, details of a wall paintings in Cave I, Ajanta, Maharashtra*

**Architect:** Gupta period

**Date:** Vakataka Dynasty, c. 475

**Source:** left: Pearson; right: photo, permission of Willem Proos - W2C Media, the Netherlands

**Medium:** clay, straw and white lime plaster, which is left to dry, unlike true fresco, then painted with mineral pigments

**Size:** n/a

**bodhisattva:** In Buddhism, a being who has attained enlightenment but chooses to remain in this world in order to help others advance spiritually. (Stokstad)

**Note:**

- Two bodhisattvas flank the entrance to the shrine chamber. They are distinguished from the Buddha by their princely garments. (Stokstad)
- left: Buddha is shown holding an attribute, a blue lotus flower. (Gardner)
- The cave temples at Ajanta organize the chaitya hall in such a way as to focus on images of the Buddha rather than on a stupa form. (Moffett)
- Every surface of the viharas was painted, and a certain non-monastic sensuousness pervades the images. (Wiley)
Known in ancient times as Gharapuri, the name Elephanta island (Portuguese: ilha do Elefante), was given by 16th-century Portuguese explorers, after seeing a monolithic basalt sculpture of an elephant found near the entrance. They decided to take it home but ended up dropping it into the sea because their chains were not strong enough. Later, this sculpture was moved to the Victoria gardens and then the Victoria and Albert Museum (now Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum) in Mumbai, by the British. (wikipedia)

Most Hindu temples are dedicated to Shiva the Destroyer, Vishnu the Preserver, or Shakti, Kali or Durga, aspects of the mother goddess. The principal deity, his or her consort, and lesser gods are all assigned designated spaces within the temple precincts. (Thapar)
CAVE TEMPLE OF SHIVA, ELEPHANTA

Title: Cave-Temple of Shiva at Elephanta, Maharashtra, India

Architect: southern rivals to the Guptas, Hindu

Date: Post-Gupta period, mid-6th century CE

Source: n/a

Medium: view along the east-west axis to the lingam shrine

Size: cave is 40 m. north to south

Note:
• Note the unusual non-structural columns. The base takes up half the height, then a fluted round column shaft, and a fluted cushion capital. (OUP)
• Shiva is the Destroyer, but is also a regenerative force. As the latter Shiva can be represented in the form of a linga (a phallus or cosmic pillar) (Gardner)
• Elephanta is a Hindu shrine adapted from Buddhist structures. Embedded in a real mountain vs. the later representational ones as shikharas. (Wiley)
Title: Elephanta

Architect: southern rivals to the Guptas, Hindu

Date: Post-Gupta period, mid-6th century CE

Source: OUP

Medium: plan

Size: see scale

lingam: a stout stone cylinder representing the Hindu god Shiva set in the inner cell (garbha griha) of a temple; usually interpreted as a phallic symbol

mandapa: in a Hindu temple, an open hall dedicated to ritual worship. (Stokstad)

Note: Lingam shrine is square at center right; eternal Shiva is at center top (south niche)

The hypostyle meeting place is a mandapa hall, in a cruciform configuration. (OUP)

- The temple has three entrances, which are the only light source. The columns are non-structural, as always in a cave temple. The overall shape is a mandala. (Stokstad)
- The cave temples at Ajanta organize the chaitya hall in such a way as to focus on images of the Buddha rather than the stupa form seen at Karli. (Moffett)
- The lingam shrine can be circumambulated. (Thapar)
Title: Elephanta

Architect: southern rivals to the Guptas, Hindu

Date: Post-Gupta, mid-6th cent.

Source: OUP; below: http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/india/elephanta/eleplan2.jpg

Medium: plan

Size: see scale

Note: a version of the geometry of the layout of Elephanta.

• Four sets of nine-square mandalas with four subsidiary shrines interlocked at its corners. (Wiley) My version of the plan geometry in red above.
Title: garbha griha chamber, containing the lingam, Elephanta

Architect: southern rivals to the Guptas, Hindu

Date: Post-Gupta period, mid-6th century CE

Source: old photo: Leiden University Library, KITLV, image 92158 Collection page; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shiva_Linga_shrine_in_Elephanta_Caves.jpg

Medium: stone-cut cave Size: cave is 40 m. north to south

Note: Post-Gupta Dravidian Temples: The Huns, who invaded in 467, and their allies actively discouraged Buddhism, allowing other cults to absorb the style of Buddhist temples. (OUP)
Title: Cave-Temple of Shiva at Elephanta, The Lingam Shrine. Maharashtra, India

Architect: southern rivals to the Guptas, Hindu

Date: Post-Gupta period, mid-6th cent.

Source: Maharashtra, India

Medium: n/a

Size: cave is 40 m. north to south

Note:
- The lingam represents the phallic symbol of Shiva, symbolizes both his erotic nature and as the Great Yogi. (OUP)
- The linga is is the abstracted symbol of Shiva that represents his presence as the unmanifest Formless One, or Brahman. It is synonymous with Shiva. (Stokstad)
Title: Eternal Shiva, Elephanta
Architect: southern rivals to the Guptas, Hindu
Date: Mid-6th cent. CE
Source: Pearson
Medium: rock-cut relief
Size: approx. 11’ H.

Note: Shiva and Parvati
- Sadashiva/ Eternal Shiva aspect. Three heads are seen, but five are implied. Five fold nature:
  Creator: back, Protector: left, Destroyer: right, Obscurer, front, Releaser: top, typically not depicted.
  He is depicted as creative and female at the left, and a fierce male at right. (OUP)/ (Stokstad)
Title: *Eternal Shiva*, Cave-Temple of Shiva at Elephanta

Architect: southern rivals to the Guptas, Hindu

Date: Mid-6th century  

Photo: left: Pearson; right: wikipedia

Medium: rock-cut relief  

Size: height approx. 16’/ 5 m.

Note: eternal Shiva aspect. Five fold nature: Creator: back, Protector: left, Destroyer: right, Obscurer, front, Releaser: top

Title: *Shiva bringing the Ganges River to Earth*, Cave-Temple of Shiva at Elephanta

Note:

- eternal Shiva aspect. Five fold nature: Creator: back, Protector: left, Destroyer: right, Obscurer, front, Releaser: top
**HINDU TEMPLES**

**Title:** Elements of Architecture: Northern/Nagara and Southern/Dravida Hindu Temple Styles  
**Architect:** Gupta period India  
**Source:** Pearson

**garbhagriha:** the inner sanctum of a Hindu temple, usually capped with a pyramid, (shikhara). The garbha griha is the residence of the deity.

**shikhara:** a pyramidal tower built over the sanctuary (garbhagriha) of a Hindu temple

**Notes:**

- All Hindu temples are built on a plan known as a mandala: a schematic design of a sacred realm.
- The shikara, the square “womb chamber” distinguished the Hindu temple from the Buddhist predecessor.
- **Northern Temple:** shikhara in parabolic form, the shikhara is a solid mass above the sanctum, or garbhagriha “womb chamber”. An imaginary axis mundi runs though the forms. (OUP)
- From the 5th century onward Hinduism became the dominant religion. Most Hindu temple designs include forms that are symbolic of the holy mountain, the sacred cave and the cosmic axis. (Moffett)
- Jointing is through sockets and dowels. (Thapar)
In the northern style a curvilinear shikhara rises over the garbhagriha of the temple. (Stokstad)

Hindu temples are simultaneously dwellings of the god, places for worship, and objects of worship in themselves. Aspects of the cosmos and the gods are incorporated into the temple by the use of specific forms, sacred geometry, ornamentation and axial alignments. The temple as a three dimensional form in the landscape becomes a focal point for community life. The shikhara has been traced to bamboo structures rising from a square base. (Moffett)

Also known as Nagara style. (Thapar)

The shikhara marks the vertical axis in the form of a cosmic mountain; its purpose is to enable the worshipper to visualize the order of the complete universe. (Wiley)
Title: Dashavata Vishnu Temple at Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

Architect: Post-Gupta period

Date: ca. 530 CE

Source: Pearson; plan: pinterest.fr/pin/528961918707271149

Medium: stone  Size: see plan

mandala: a magic diagram of the cosmos made from overlaid geometric patterns, used throughout India as the basis for the plan of monumental religious structures

superstructure: An edifice built on something else; that which is raised on a foundation or basis (wiktionary); an upward extension of an existing structure above a baseline (wikipedia)

Note:
- The temple is patterned on a mandala. Much of the central tower, the shikara has crumbed away. (Stokstad)
- A more prominent superstructure erected over the sanctuary. (Moffett)
- One of the earliest surviving examples of the freestanding Hindu temple. (Thapar)
- Deogarh is a new invention – a shrine constructed with stones to appear as if it is monolithic or rock-cut, with a representational mountain as its shikhara. Four axes radiate out defining axis paths, but Deogarh is only accessible from the west, (the direction of Vishnu) and has three ghatana-dwaras (Wiley)