CHAPTER I: TRAVEL WRITINGS AND ANTIQUITIES

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine two distinct colonial discourses about historical artefacts that existed side-by-side in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The first was the ‘Romantic’ mode deployed by the British travel writers and artists who traversed the subcontinent during this period. These travelers framed their objects as ‘wonders’ and ‘ruins’, viewing them primarily in terms of Romantic aesthetic categories, subjectively perceived and artistically represented. The historicity of these artefacts was important only in so far as it lent an ‘aura’ of age that augmented the aesthetic effects. The second colonial mode, by contrast, framed many of the same artefacts as ‘antiquities’. The antiquities frame gave epistemological priority to the historicity of the artefacts; their status as aesthetic objects was not recognized within this frame. However, their visual and material characteristics were far from unimportant; these functioned as traces or indices of their origins in an earlier historical context.

By the mid-19th century, the Romantic travelogue was relegated to a minor literary genre in the context of India. What is interesting is that its aesthetic frames did make periodic, subliminal reappearances at the margins of late 19th century colonialist historical discourses and institutional practices, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter. The antiquities frame, on the other hand, grew from strength to strength in the first half of the 19th century; it survived the utilitarian crackdown on philology-driven ‘Orientalist’ researches by shedding its some of its philosophical moorings, eventually transmuting into the colonial archaeological discourse.

Background

With the spread of Enlightenment rationality and growing secularism in 18th century Europe, the fear of the unknown, satanic, heathen East and its ‘monstrous’ gods abated.¹ The British, under the banner of the East India Company, travelled across the subcontinent, established trading posts and

pieced together a colony through conquest. Increasing familiarity, accessibility and pragmatic concerns diminished the cosmological significance of this strange and distant land in the European imagination. India became a knowable quantity, to be explored, documented and described “through the taxonomic structure of 18th century natural science.”

It is in this ‘safe’ context that the new generation of European travellers explored the subcontinent and recorded their observations, some of them inspired by the phenomenon of the ‘grand tour’ gaining popularity in England. European merchants, seafarers, astronomers, doctors, natural historians, missionaries, artists, scholars; travellers of all persuasions toured the subcontinent, some documenting, others painting and yet others describing in letters and journals their encounters with Indian antiquities.

The Indian version of the ‘grand tour’ revolved around a few standard and mandatory sites. Due to their location near European settlements, and the air of mystery and grandeur that surrounded them, the caves of Elephanta, Jogeswari, Ellora and Kanheri, Mamallapuram and the ‘black pagoda’ at Konark received extensive coverage. Also described were the more monumental South Indian temples at Madurai, Thanjavur and so on.

According to Kate Teltscher, travel literature was the second most popular genre among Britain’s reading public in the 18th century; it was instrumental in projecting India’s monumental ruins as mysterious, exotic, while retaining at a subliminal level, the threat of the unknown, the decaying, the heathen. The ‘picturesque’ illustrations of artists like Hodges and the Daniells, published and reasonably accessible, were calculated to fortify this image visually. By the end of the 18th century, a whole new field of knowledge had developed around the subject of Indian antiquities, based on eyewitness accounts of European travellers. A cursory analysis of 18th and early 19th century European travel writings about artefacts from India’s past reveals a heterogeneity of style, substance and emphasis. Broadly speaking, this heterogeneity can be resolved into two different approaches to ‘ancient

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4Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600-1800* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.
remains’. The first is the Romantic travelogue that frames these artefacts along with their natural settings as part of the ‘wonders’ encountered by the traveler in the subcontinent – mining these for subjective and aesthetic effect. The second approach coalesces, by the last quarter of the 18th century, into a more objective, systematic and empirical research into ‘antiquities’, with a view to using these as corroborative evidence for the colonial historiographical project.

SECTION I: THE ROMANTIC TRAVELOGUE

European Romanticism, particularly its English variant, fostered an enthusiasm for Indian monuments and ‘ruins’ among ‘amateur’ travelers, including, in the 19th century, several women travellers. Travelling for pleasure or personal edification, these Romantic grand tour enthusiasts were drawn to mysterious ruins set in picturesque locales, mining the encounter for subjective effect. Their narratives were recorded in journals and memoirs, with parallel manifestations in the field of painting.

Thomas and William Daniells’ influential *A Picturesque Voyage to India* (pub. 1810), Maria Graham’s illustrated autobiographical *Journal of a Residence in India* (published in 1812), artist James Forbes’ *Oriental Memoirs* (1813), John Seely's *Wonders of Elora* (1824), Bishop Reginald Heber’s *Narrative of a journey through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay 1824-1825, An account of a journey to Madras and the Southern Provinces, 1826, and letters written in India* (pub. 1828) are some examples of this genre. Professional artists William Hodges (travelled in India 1780-1783) and the Daniells, Thomas and William (travelling between 1786 and 1794)

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6 Maria Graham, *Journal of a Residence in India*, 1813.
7 James Forbes and Eliza Rosée Montalembert (comtesse de), *Oriental Memoirs: A Narrative of Seventeen Years Residence in India* (Richard Bentley, 1834).
9 Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey Through the Upper Provinces of India: From Calcutta to Bombay, 1824-1825, (with Notes Upon Ceylon); an Account of a Journey to Madras and the Southern Provinces, 1826; and Letters Written in India* (Carey, Lea and Carey, 1828).
recorded their impressions of the natural and monumental landmarks of the subcontinent in watercolour and aquatint.\textsuperscript{10}

In this section, I discuss a small sampling of Romantic travel-writings between the second half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century and the first half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century to demonstrate their framing of monumental ‘wonders’ encountered within the Indian subcontinent. I argue that even within the Romantic travelogue, there is a considerable interplay between the more self-consciously literary conventions and subjective narrative that we associate with Romantic writing and the objective mode associated with a more scientific or empirical approach that characterizes the research into antiquities. Individual texts negotiate the ‘presence effects’ of the encountered object by frequently switching modes and this feature alerts us to the variability of the subject-object relations within a single discourse.\textsuperscript{11}

**Aesthetic categories**

The Romantic travelogue frames the sights and sounds of the subcontinent within the aesthetic categories of the Sublime, the Picturesque and less frequently, the Beautiful. All these categories were theorized extensively throughout the Romantic period in the writings of Thomas Addison, Richard Payne Knight, William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant and later, John Ruskin. Both the Picturesque and the Sublime associated with the Romantic response to Nature (not Art); both notions partake of a certain ruggedness, disorder, irrationality while Beauty is also applicable to an aesthetic response to art – connoting order, symmetry, smoothness (Burke) rationality and ultimately, Truth (Keats).

When the Romantic travel-writer frames the artefact-in-its setting through the aesthetic categories listed above, she is not approaching it as an *art object* per se but as *an object that evokes aesthetic feelings*. (In Kantian aesthetics, as for many Romantic poets, the aesthetic feelings evoked by of Nature are primary, paradigmatic.) The programmatic conflation of natural


\textsuperscript{11}Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht contrasts “presence effects” with “meaning effects” in the way cultures relate to “the things of the world”, arguing that aesthetic experience can be conceived of as an oscillation between the two. Hans Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, 1st ed. (Stanford University Press, 2003).
and cultural phenomena in these texts demonstrates this point. A partial exception may be found in the category ‘Beautiful’ – as shown in the section below, the concept of the ‘beautiful’ is often applied to artefacts which demonstrate skill and expressiveness.

The Picturesque Ruin

The texts analysed here frequently resort to framing the countryside, its ruins and the ‘natives’ as ‘picturesque.’

These ruins [in Mamallapuram] cover a great space; a few small houses inhabited by Brahmins, are scattered among them, and there is one large and handsome temple of Vishnu of later date and in pretty good repair, the priests of which chiefly live by shewing these ruins. One of them acted as our cicerone....Two boys preceded us with a pipe and a pair of small cymbals, and their appearance among these sculptures was very picturesque and appropriate.¹²

‘Picturesque’ descriptions suggest arrested, frozen spectacles – immobile passive objects ‘captured’ by a mobile, active subject, who gazes from a vantage point outside the frame. The effect is one of pleasing disorder, disorder within limits; the chance ‘discovery’ of the picturesque vista simulates the accidental, the spontaneous, the ‘natural’. However, if we attend to how the objects are selected and composed in the picturesque description, the adjectives and metaphors used to highlight their visual appearance, and the invisible power exerted by the frame itself, we become aware of the essentially synthetic, artificial, even conventional nature of this construction. The picturesque traveller compensates for the inadequacies of the ‘real’ landscape in her field of vision by tweaking the composition and filling in atmosphere, using her skill and imagination. The constructedness of the picturesque is borne out in the visual sphere as well – in the landscape views painted by William Hodges or the Daniells.

¹²Heber, Narrative of a Journey Through the Upper Provinces of India, 219–220.
The architectural ruin is the picturesque object *par excellence*. Maria Graham describes a large tank in Mamallapuram “the walls of which are just enough decayed to have become picturesque.”\(^{13}\) She continues;

A ruined muntapom stands in the middle, and on its banks several buildings of the same kind, some partially hid by the trees, and others boldly projecting, with their verdant crowns of peepil or euphorbia. These objects, lighted up by the setting sun, with groups of natives bathing, and cattle grazing on the edge of the tank as we went by, made an enchanting picture.\(^{14}\)

‘Natives’, cattle, trees and ruins bathed in the light of the setting sun – all in a state of nature. The deliberate and artful conflation of the natural and the cultural is one persistent characteristic of Romantic description; in the dialectical struggle between nature and culture, nature eventually emerges triumphant. In his treatise *On Picturesque Beauty* (1791), William Gilpin distinguishes between the elegance and ‘smoothness’ of the beautiful architectural object and the painterly ‘roughness’ of the picturesque ruin.

A piece of Palladian architecture may be elegant in the last degree. The proportion of it’s parts-- the propriety of it’s ornaments--and the symmetry of the whole, may be highly pleasing. But if we introduce it in a picture, it immediately becomes a formal object, and ceases to please. Should we wish to give it picturesque beauty, we must use the mallet, instead of the chisel: we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps. In short, from a smooth building we must turn it into a *rough* ruin. No painter, who had the choice of the two objects, would hesitate a moment.\(^{15}\)

The ‘picturesque ruin’ unambiguously situates the viewing subject *outside* the frame. The synthetic operation involved in the *re-*presentation (visual/textual) of the picturesque prospect, even while it foregrounds the ‘presence’ of the objects in terms of ‘discovery’, immediacy, spontaneity and

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\(^{13}\)Graham, *Journal of a Residence in India*, 161.

\(^{14}\)Ibid.

accident, implies the mastery of the viewing subject.\footnote{See Gilpin on how the artist should control the composition, variety and contrast of his Picturesque painting for maximum effect. ibid., 19–21.} This is most apparent in the ‘ruin’ paintings and aquatints of Hodges and Daniells, where they systematically distinguish a darkened foreground (a ‘refuge’ proximate to the viewer’s position – from where the viewer sees but is not seen) from the luminous middle-ground which focuses attention on the architectural ruin in all its picturesque glory, and the background – natural features blurred by atmospheric perspective leading to a very atmospheric sky. Here, the ‘presence effects’ are graspable, containable within Cartesian perspectival views vouchsafed by the monocular camera obscura, amenable to manipulation and ‘correction’. In an article on early nineteenth century technologies and modes of seeing, Erna Fiorentini writes,

“...around 1800, the Camera Obscura was expected to show nature not as it could be experienced directly, but as it should look like in order to make a good picture. The Camera Obscura seems to have satisfied the needs of a literally ‘picturesque’ visual approach to nature: What mattered for the users was not the degree of concordance between the ‘reality’ outside the device and the image inside it, but rather the painterly effect which nature was able to produce on the screen.”\footnote{Erna Fiorentini, “Camera Obscura Vs. Camera Lucida – Distinguishing Early Nineteenth Century Modes of Seeing,” 31, accessed April 27, 2013, http://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/Preprints/P307.PDF.}

The Sublime

The evocation of the Sublime, by contrast, is designed to reverse the power equation between the subject and the object. The status of the viewing subject is diminished by the larger-than-life ‘presence’ of the Sublime spectacle. There is a sense of immersion, of being overwhelmed by a presence that exceeds human attempts to draw meaning out of it.

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by
consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect.\textsuperscript{18}

The Romantic travelogues examined in this study deploy the aesthetic of the Sublime judiciously, less frequently than they use the picturesque frame in their descriptions of ‘grand tour’ sites. John Seely dwells on the Sublime in his \textit{Wonders of Elora}:

On a close approach to the temples, the eye and the imagination are bewildered with the variety of interesting objects that present themselves on every side. The feelings are interested to a degree of awe, wonder, and delight, that at first is painful, and it is a long time before they become sufficiently sobered and calm to contemplate with any attention the surrounding wonders.\textsuperscript{19}

The Sublime aesthetic defies the containment afforded by a camera obscura view of the world. In one sense, the Sublime is unrepresentable, and any attempts at representation are doomed to failure. The aesthetic of the Sublime in travel narratives recreates in the literary mode what Martin Jay terms the baroque scopic regime, with “its yearning for a presence that can never be fulfilled.”

Indeed, desire, in its erotic as well as metaphysical forms, courses through the baroque scopic regime. The body returns to dethrone the disinterested gaze of the disincarnated Cartesian spectator.\textsuperscript{20}

The Sublime spectacle is represented as engulfing and penetrating the viewing subject with an almost physical intensity – the emotional reactions it seems to provoke are pain, agitation and often enough, a post-climax melancholy. The evocation of the Sublime in the context of India, as I


\textsuperscript{19}Seely, \textit{The Wonders of Elora}, 125-126.

understand it, posed a definite risk to the colonial travel-writer; it threatened both his epistemological mastery over and his ontological distance from, all things ‘native’. Both engulfing and penetration are the prerogative of the conqueror, not the conquered. It is interesting how travel writers stage their recuperation from the threat of the Sublime, recovering their voice after a temporary lapse into incoherence, restoring order after chaos. A brush with the Sublime, it appears, mandates a withdrawal into the self, expressed in the form of poetical or philosophical reverie. For Bishop Heber, the ruins of Mamallapuram conspire with nature to recall, through an association of ideas, Southey’s *Kehama*

...the noise of the surf, the dark shadow of the remaining building, the narrow slip of dark smooth sand, the sky just reddening into dawn, and lending its tints to the sea, together with the remarkable desolation of the surrounding scenery, were well calculated to make one remember with interest the description in *Kehama*, and to fancy that one saw the beautiful form of Kailyal in her white mantle, pacing sadly above the shore, and watching till her father and lover should emerge from the breakers.\(^2\)

Seely’s imagination conjures up an extravagant heathen ritual in Ellora, overstuffed with stereotypes of the Hindu ‘Other’ – an imaginary ‘presence’ that is replete with absence.

Where now is the whole mechanism of Ellora’s former splendour—the mystic dance, the beautiful priestesses, the innumerable midnight lamps, the choruses of hundreds of devoted victims, the responses of music, the shouts of fanatical fakeers, the solemn supplications of the graceful-looking Brahman of the ‘olden day’, clothed in long white vestments?\(^2\)

Because the transcendence implied by the Sublime aesthetic is dangerously close to religious epiphany, the framing of the heathen ruin-in-nature as Sublime seems to indicate the need for some undoing. The Christian-moral undercurrent in Seely’s reaction finds an echo in Maria Graham’s meditation on the Mamallapuram Sublime.

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\(^2\) Heber, *Narrative of a Journey Through the Upper Provinces of India*, 218.

The view of these objects, together with the loneliness of the place, the depth of the sands, and the distant roarings of the ocean, dispose the mind to meditate concerning the short duration of human pride…. The monuments they have left now adorn a desert, which Nature, as if in scorn of man, seems to pride herself in decking with gay colours, and fresh smells of every shrub and flower, whose Author can never be mistaken.\(^{23}\)

Graham transforms the desolation of the ruins-in-their-setting into something of an object lesson – the hubris of Babel. Nature, the handiwork of the Divine Artificer, eventually undoes all that ‘human pride’ seeks to immortalize. This is a fairly standard response to the ruin in the Romantic period, Shelley’s Ozymandias being an ironic, more secular version of the same idea.

Meaning is what seems to be doubly absent in the Sublime ruin. On the one hand, the Sublime object itself is all presence; its ‘meaning effects’ are edged out by its ‘presence effects’, even as meaning remains out of reach. On the other, one of the preconditions of the ruin as an ontological category is that it must have lost its original function (hence - meaning). Seely’s hyperbolic reconstruction of Ellora’s original function underscores this absence of meaning in the monument’s present.

**The Beautiful**

The words ‘beautiful’ and ‘beauty’ pepper the Romantic travelogue with a regularity that is to be expected. The ‘beauty’ of sunrises, moonlight, prospects, ruins-in-nature, native women and so on imply a subjective appreciation of beauty, beauty perceived by the mind of the beholder. But in their descriptions of Ellora, Elephanta and Karle, among other ‘wonders’, travel writers also appear to invoke a different concept of beauty, based on ‘just proportions’, good design, taste and workmanship. This ‘objective’ notion of beauty is more in line with an 18\(^{th}\) century classical aesthetic.

...though my expectations were highly raised, the reality much exceeded them, and .... both the dimensions, the proportions, and the sculpture, seemed to me to be of a more noble character, and a

more elegant execution than I had been led to suppose. Even the statues are executed with great spirit, and are some of them of no common beauty, considering their dilapidated condition and the coarseness of material.²⁴

The cave of Carli is really one of the most magnificent chambers I ever saw, both as to proportion and workmanship....the most laboured part of the work is the portico of the temple. One third of its height is filled up by a variety of figures, one of which, in a dancing posture, is remarkable for gracefulness of design....²⁵

We will not stop at this place to enter into the exploits, attributes, and powers of the infinite variety of Hindoo deities and heroes. At all times it is an interminable subject, and one of those that, after the deepest research and closest investigation, produces neither amusement nor information, being monstrous lies and fabled imposture from beginning to end, as I know by the experience of many a weary and ill spent day of study. Where it is necessary, however, to elucidate our .subject, reference will be made to their pantheon; at other times it would be only exhausting the reader's patience, and wasting my own time on points, " flat, stale, and unprofitable." It is not the history of the sculptured figures that we are chiefly to admire, but the labour, skill, and patience displayed by the artificers of the caves in executing their almost super-human task. It is here I wish to interest and fix attention.²⁶

In Patterns of Intention, Michael Baxandall distinguishes ‘three kinds of descriptive word’ which we use to say things about pictures. Effect words refer to the effect of the picture on the beholder, for example – ‘noble character’ and ‘magnificence’ Then there are comparison words, often metaphorically used, which would include straightforward references to representations in stone as if they were real - ‘giants’, ‘monsters’, ‘deities’ or figures ‘in a dancing posture’, as well as larger frames, comparing a sunset scene to an enchanting picture. Finally, there are cause words, which “...describe the effect of the picture on us by telling of inferences we have

²⁴Heber, Narrative of a Journey Through the Upper Provinces of India, 139–140.
made about the action or process that might have led to the picture being as it is”.  

In the examples cited above, phrases like ‘elegant execution’, ‘workmanship’ and ‘labour, skill and patience’ of the artificers are inferred from the works themselves. This acknowledgement of intentionality and agency is one feature that distinguishes the Romantic travelogue from the more ‘scientific’ descriptions of the archaeological genre. Both cause and effect words are gradually whittled away in later frames with the result that the objects described are stripped both of the ‘intentionality’ that brought them into being and of their sustained ‘intentional visual interest’. Baxandall makes a fascinating distinction between two aspects of intentionality which historical objects such as paintings display. On the one hand, they imply rational human action on the part of historical actors. On the other, there is purposefulness in historical artefacts themselves, and whatever their purposes, these are achieved primarily through a visual/tactile modality, which is what distinguishes a sculpture or a painting from a work of poetry or music.  

**Objective description as distancing device**  

In a letter to a friend in England dated 1783, Hector Macneil describes his visit to the caves of Kanheri, Jogeswari and Elephanta which “are now the general topic of conversation” among the “virtuosi” of Bombay. This narrative is a good example of the co-existence of the Romantic and the empirical-objective modes within a single text. Even though Macneil’s letter is reproduced in *Archaeologia* (probably justified by its considerable empirical content) the Romantic vision that shapes the account is unmistakable. The following extract exemplifies the induction of the Romantic aesthetic categories of the Sublime and the Picturesque into the travel writings of this period. The writer begins his narrative with a standard objective ‘fixing’ of the location of Kanheri caves within a modern ‘universal’ grid of geographical coordinates, a convention that continues in official tourist brochures supplied by the Archaeological Survey of India today:

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28Ibid., 41–43.

The island of Salset lies in the same latitude with Bombay and is separated from it only by a narrow arm of the sea at the N. W. extremity of the island. It is considerably larger than Bombay, and excels [sic] it as much in beauty as it does in all kinds of animal and vegetable productions, which are found in great abundance and perfection. The principle town is Tarmah..."\(^{30}\)

The writer switches to a recognizably Romantic narrative, describing the surroundings of the caves as...

...a spot as singular for the production of art, as for the lonely romantic scenes of nature that surround it.... For near three miles round the caves, the country, from its not hitherto having been cleared, is a continued wilderness, beautifully diversified with hill and dale, rocks and murmuring rills. The variety likewise of tree and shrub is peculiarly striking, and furnishes a noble source of entertainment to the lover of nature. The mango tree, one of the richest and most graceful in India, grows here in such plenty, that you might meet with it every twenty and thirty yards.... I had the opportunity for an instant of seeing and hearing the Mangoe-bird, so remarkable for the vivid tints of its plumage....The notes of this beautiful bird, though simple, were plaintive and melodious....\(^{31}\)

Transporting us beyond the mundane world of landmarks and coordinates, the writer sets the stage for the 'wonders' still to come. From the somewhat familiar 'hill and dale', 'rocks and murmuring rills', the English reader is given a taste of the exotic – the mango-tree and the Mangoe-bird. This multisensory defamiliarising is achieved through an evocation of the aesthetic of the Picturesque. The wandering attention of the writer mimics the randomness of the picturesque. But what lies beyond is truly uncanny.

On my first approach to this astonishing scene, I was filled with new wonder at every step; palaces, statues, giants, monsters, and deities seemed as if starting from the bowels of the earth to open day...I found myself in a kind of street, where on the one hand, a range of lofty domes ornamented with porticos, pillars, arches, and

\(^{30}\)Ibid.
\(^{31}\)Ibid., 252–253.
human figures burst upon the eye at one view, and presented a scene more like enchantment than reality.\textsuperscript{32}

Here the aesthetic of the Sublime takes over. ‘Giants’, ‘monsters’ and ‘deities’, threatening presences, are imbued with an agency of their own which the writer seems unable to resist. He ‘finds himself’ in an ‘enchanted’ scene as if his own agency has been temporarily taken away from him.

In the next paragraph, the author changes to a more objective descriptive mode itemizing “an open court, of about twenty five feet square, with two pillars, on which are represented, in basso relievo, a lion and a tiger...\textsuperscript{33} The narrative becomes more systematic, moving from section to section, naming each significant object represented, giving measurements, noting the state of preservation, with an occasional comment on the aesthetic qualities of the sculptures.

The author concludes his description of the caves with the opinion that “…the grand cave of Canara [Kanheri] must ever be considered by the man of taste as an object of beauty and sublimity, and by the antiquary and philosopher as one of the most valuable monuments of antiquity.”\textsuperscript{34}

This curious intertwining of subjective-imaginative excursions and objective description within the Romantic narrative merits investigation. A straightforward explanation would be that the Romantic travelogue, even though it belonged to a genre distinct from the more ‘scholarly’ empirical texts about the subcontinent, and catered to a lay readership, was still not to be mistaken for a work of fiction or poetry. It had to retain its ‘realistic’ or documentary bearings for purposes of credibility, to be read as a ‘report’ and not merely as a work of imagination, a fabulous account. In order to do this, it had to fall back upon descriptive devices already established within the scholarly empirical genre.

However, I want to draw attention to the regularity with which the empirical mode \textit{disrupts} the flow of poetic narrative in these texts. It appears as if the empirical mode also functions in these accounts as a rhetorical device, a distancing device that anchors the writers (and their readers) from the all too

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., 253.
\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., 254.
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., 260.
absorptive flights of imagination that threaten to spirit them away. The writer re-establishes mastery over the scene unfolding before her/him and the reader once again treads *terra firma* – the mundane world of measurements, numbers and itemized descriptions.

The height of these gigantic statues, as nearly as I could judge by the measurement of a long pole, was about twenty-two or twenty-three feet, and (except the shoulders which appeared to me rather too broad) the whole figure is very well proportioned. The little finger measured exactly fifteen inches; the length of the foot from the heel thirty-five inches, the extended hand from the wrist thirty-seven inches, the leg from the foot four feet three inches and a half, the thigh five feet, and from the pedestal to the upper part of the kneepan five feet nine inches. The attitude of these figures is erect...\(^{35}\)

This tendency becomes a central feature of the ‘antiquities’ frame that I discuss next where reports are purged, in stages, of metaphorical usage and speculative content.

**SECTION II: THE RESEARCH INTO ANTIQUITIES**

Throughout the latter half of the 18\(^{th}\) century and the first half of the 19\(^{th}\) century, another mode of representing artefacts from the subcontinent existed side by side with the Romantic travelogue, catering to a different, arguably niche, readership, in Europe and in the colonies. European ‘men of science’ and colonial functionaries of scientific bent approached these artefacts with a view to inspecting their features and recording their observations in a systematic manner. The trend was established in the 18\(^{th}\) century by European travelers like the French Orientalist scholar A. H. Anquetil Duperron, the Danish natural historian Carsten Niebuhr, French

\[^{35}\text{Ibid., 254–255.}\]
scientist Le Gentil de la Galasiere and French natural historian Pierre Sonnerat.\textsuperscript{36}

Around this time, the first English-language writings with a comparable approach found a forum in \textit{Archaeologia}, the journal of the Society of Antiquaries based in London. As early as 1712, Captain Pyke included an illustrated account of Elephanta in his journal while on a British ship in Bombay harbour. This section was extracted by Alexander Dalrymple and presented at the Society of Antiquaries about 70 years later.\textsuperscript{37} The accounts of William Hunter (surgeon), Captain Pyke (later Governor of St. Helena), Charles Boon (sometime Governor of Bombay) and Hector Macneil, describing the cave temples around Bombay, were featured in the seventh and eighth volumes of \textit{Archaeologia}\textsuperscript{38} while (surgeon) Adam Blackader’s description of the temple at Madurai appeared in the tenth volume of \textit{Archaeologia}, dated 1792.\textsuperscript{39} These somewhat scattered writings were important precedents for the new discourse on ‘antiquities’ institutionalized under the aegis of the Asiatic societies in India and Great Britain.

In the very first volume of \textit{Asiatick Researches}, we find a clear-cut ontological (and therefore epistemological) distinction between what is produced by nature and what is performed by man; the deliberate blurring of boundaries between nature and culture, which served both an aesthetic and a symbolic function in the Romantic travelogue, is cast aside for the more instrumental approach to these artefacts, whose primary function henceforth will be to illuminate the obscure history of the subcontinent. Colonialist scholarship claims interpretive privilege over ‘antiquities’, and these are effectively locked into the colonial discourse of history.

\textsuperscript{36}see Partha Mitter, \textit{Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art} (University of Chicago Press, 1977).
\textsuperscript{39}Adam Blackader, “XL. Description of the Great Pagoda of Madura, the Choultry of Trimul Naik, in a Letter from Mr. Adam Blackader, to Sir Joseph Banks, Bart. P. R. S. F. A. S.,” \textit{Archaeologia} 10 (1789): 449–459.
A History for a Subject Nation

The significance of the 1780’s for British knowledge-production about India cannot be overstated. British territorial expansion across the subcontinent had transformed the former trading power into a colonial one. By the last quarter of the 18th century, the colonizers were putting down roots and settling into the business of administering a country they knew very little about. It is this altered political context that separates British historical research in India, post-1770’s, from its forebears. While the older tradition was in the nature of dillettantish and scholarly exertions, the new studies became increasingly goal-oriented.

Knowledge-gathering became an urgent concern, both instrumental knowledge about laws, usages and land tenure and more general inquiries into the customs and traditions of the people - in other words, matters cultural and historical. The need to understand India historically and culturally became a late 18th century imperative; it generated “a growing body of assertion and argumentation about the fundamental nature of Indian society and its civil and political institutions, in the context of the extensive debates about the colonial project of conquering and ruling India.”

Two areas of historical/cultural research, initiated during this period relate directly to political and material interests of colonialism. The laws, customs and conventions of the native population were studied alongside textual sources of jurisprudence, in order to enable the British to codify and systematise the legal system along ‘indigenous’ lines. The second area was covered by historical/geographical researches into the ‘land question’ - comprehensive surveys of political histories extending over long periods and across regions which explored the relations between power and property, economic surveys which focussed on political economy and revenue distribution and local histories (mostly in the form of reports) relating to individual or micro-regional landholdings. These large projects dealing with revenue generation, property and traditions of jurisprudence were mostly

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40 Nicholas B. Dirks, “Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive” in Carol Appadurai Breckenridge and Peter Van der Veer, Orientalism and the Postcolonal Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 45

commissioned researches, feeding directly into the expansion and consolidation of colonial gains.

Equally significant, however, was a growing corpus of more ‘liberal’ inquiries, both scholarly and amateur, into the cultural peculiarities of an alien land, its religions, customs and manners, languages and literature, history and antiquities. Localized, fragmentary and less obviously instrumental to colonial governance, these privately undertaken inquiries were nevertheless considered vital contributions to the cumulative process of knowledge gathering about the culture and history of the subcontinent.

In a letter to Warren Hastings, dated 1774, Samuel Johnson wrote:

> I hope you will examine nicely the traditions and histories of the East, that you will survey the corridors of its ancient edifices, and trace the vestiges of its ruined cities, and that, on our return, we shall know the arts and opinions of a race of men from whom very little has hitherto been derived.\(^42\)

The establishment of Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta in 1786 was a landmark event in this context. It provided a unifying forum for the hitherto diffused body of writings about Indian culture and history, soliciting contributions to the field and conferring on them institutional and disciplinary legitimacy. Quite predictably, ‘History and Antiquities’ were priority areas for the private research initiatives patronized by the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

The inaugural volume of *Asiatick Researches* defines the society as ‘Instituted in Bengal for Inquiring into the Antiquities and History, and the Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia’. Here, ‘history’, denotes ‘civil’ and ‘natural’ history, ‘civil’ history concerning itself with the ‘actions of men’ and including ‘geography’(‘where they acted’) and peculiarly enough, ‘astronomy’ (as a guide to ‘the time of their actions’).\(^43\) This curious classification is reflected in the *Asiatic(k) Researches* corpus.

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\(^42\)Mildred Archer, R. W. Lightbown, and National Art Library (Great Britain), *India Observed: India as Viewed by British Artists, 1760-1860: an Exhibition Organised by the Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum as Part of the Festival of India, 26 April-5 July 1982* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1982), 16.

The belief in the civilizing power of history forms the backbone of colonial historical scholarship in India. From the eighteenth century onwards India was perceived as a country without a history. Bernard Cohn calls this a ‘double lack of history.’ One, India had not progressed since ancient days; while Europe was progressive, India was static. Two, there were no documents or records here which could be called historical. In his Discourse on Asiatic History, Jones laments that “...no Hindu nation, but the Cashmirians have left us regular histories in their ancient language.”

The first lacuna could be remedied through colonial political intervention: India could be positioned on the road to progress through the corrective influence of colonial rule. The second was to be remedied in the cultural sphere—it was a colonial responsibility to write a history of an a-historical nation; the responsibility of a combined task force of colonial philologists, historians, surveyors and other functionaries in the line of duty, ‘gentlemen amateurs’ with historical, cultural and antiquarian interests. The second project was to contribute positively to the first-- by inducting India’s a-historical past into the framework of the European meta-discourse of history, the nation could be ‘civilized’ and now had potential to progress.

Even as British Orientalist research, anchored by the Asiatic Society, found its feet and flourished in a short span of time, it was necessary to constantly reinforce its worth and to justify this somewhat broad-based acquisition of knowledge about India. In his article ‘On the Gods of Greece Italy and India’ initially written in 1794, Jones (quite appropriately) invokes humanism, paraphrasing Terence: “We are men and take an interest in all that relates to mankind.”

Jones’ verification of the ‘Family of Nations’ hypothesis nuanced the humanist argument, fortifying its position. A kinship, dating back to the dispersal from Babel, was established between the colonizers and the colonized. Jones’ much-publicized discovery of the Indo-European linguistic group is generally considered the crowning achievement of this period. Its immediate impact

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46 Jones, Asiatick Researches Vol 1, (Fifth edition, London, 1806), 224
was to stimulate research in Sanskrit and comparative linguistics; at a theoretical level, it provided documentary support to the Universal History tendencies of the time. For the first time in history, European and Indian cultures emerged on a common platform, a platform constructed on the certainty of common origins. However, the imperatives of colonial domination could not allow this dissolving of civilizational distance. On the one hand, this (in some ways uncomfortable) historical discovery made it impossible to hold on to the older, more naive cultural relativism of the ‘monster’ era. On the other, any degree of empathy with the colonized nation would only serve to undermine colonial power structures. To quote Gyan Prakash,

...the discoveries of the affinities between Sanskrit and European languages provided the premise for formulating the belief in an “Aryan race” from which the Europeans and Brahmans were seen to originate. This search and discovery of European origins in the India of Sanskrit, the Brahmans, and texts essentialized and distanced India in two ways. First, because it embodied Europe’s childhood, India was temporally separated from Europe’s present and made incapable of achieving “progress.” As an eternal child detached altogether from Time, India was construed as an external object available to the Orientalist’s gaze. Second, composed of language and texts, India appeared to be unchanging and passive. These distancing procedures overlooked the European dominance of the world that provided the conditions for the production of knowledge and that had constituted this discursive dominance. The India of the Orientalist’s knowledge emerged as Europe’s other, an essential and distanced entity knowable by the detached and distanced observer of the European Orientalist.47

By the last quarter of the 18th century, the historiographical project was no longer undertaken as a relatively innocent ‘compare and contrast’ exercise which allowed the Europeans to interpret the alien culture of India to their own people in terms of familiar epistemological structures. Built into the project and forming its very foundation, were the unequal power relations

between the colonizers and the colonized, between the knowledge-producing subjects and the 'objects' about which this knowledge was to be produced. Consequently, the essential, static, objectively observable 'otherness' of the Indian lay at the very foundation of the Orientalist project in India. This aspect of 'writing a history for a subject nation' was openly acknowledged and presented as a benevolent act, which would benefit both parties, although in different ways.\(^{48}\)

**History, Antiquarian Research and Antiquities**

The distinction between 'civil history' and 'antiquities' needs to be understood in the context of 18\(^{th}\) century Europe. According to historian Arnaldo Momigliano, Francis Bacon in his *Advancement of Learning* (1685) divided Civil History under the heads 'Antiquities', 'Memorials' and 'Perfect histories' (histories of ancient Greece and Rome written by classical authors) and defined Antiquities as "history defaced or some remnants of history which have casually escaped the shipwreck of time."\(^{49}\) In 17th century Europe, there were two fields for historical/antiquarian research – the classical world and the non/post-classical world. Ancient Greek and Roman historians were considered the ultimate authorities on classical history; there was no space for 'contemporary' rewritings of classical history; contemporary antiquarians, however, were allowed a space on the margins of this canon, often collecting and using non-literary sources for a study of classical history. Medieval and local histories of Britain and France, however, provided an open field for both historians and antiquarians.

By the late 17th century, the distinctions between historical and antiquarian research became blurred. Both historians and antiquarians used non-literary sources (coins, inscriptions, charters 'statues' – earlier the exclusive province of the antiquarian) to arrive at facts about the past. Both produced 'new' work on classical as well as post/non-classical history. However, whereas antiquarian research focussed on religion, institutions, art and emphasised description and classification, historical research tended to emphasise a diachronic approach to history (mainly political history) and 'events' in

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\(^{48}\)See for example, Warren Hastings' argument about the “accumulation of knowledge” which “attracts and conciliates distant affections” of the colonized natives, quoted in Cohn, 1996, 45.

chronological sequence. In the 17th and 18th centuries, there was another strand in historical enquiry – ‘philosophical’ history privileged the quest for universal principles and general historical laws over the ‘erudition’ of details that characterized the work of political historians and antiquarians.

In the context of late 18th-early 19th century historical research in India, there appears to have been considerable interaction between of philosophical, antiquarian and historical approaches, all making significant contributions to the historiographical project. An analysis of the historical-antiquarian writings in the first ten volumes of the *Asiatic(k) Researches*, for example, reveals that the study of antiquities articulates with the project of uncovering India’s past at three different registers, all broadly historical. 1) At the level of Universal History, antiquities research is used to verify and substantiate the theories of monogenesis, ‘human nature’ as constant, the ‘ages of man’ (poetic, mythic, prosaic), the progress of forms of government, and so on. Obvious examples of this approach would be William Jones’ lengthy dissertations which use antiquarian findings, among other sources, to validate and elaborate upon his ‘Family of Nations’ hypothesis. 2) As “…relics which illustrate ancient manners and customs”, antiquities are frequently mined for details regarding ‘traditions’ and ‘opinions’ held by people in the past, their ways of life, the level of material and technological advancement reached by them, the progress of ideas, ultimately enabling a comparative exercise between the European ‘norm’ and the Indian ‘deviation’. 3) Finally, antiquities are viewed as potential sources of new information about political and religious history – chronologies, dynasties, successions, wars, forms of government; different cults, changing practices, religious movements and so on.

The OED gives the broadest definition of the term ‘antiquities’ as encompassing ‘matters, customs, precedents, or events of earlier times; ancient records’. Thus, Thomas Maurice’s seven-volume work - *Indian Antiquities* (pub. 1794) is sub-titled

‘dissertations relative to the ancient geography, primeval theology, grand code of civil laws, government and profound literature of Hindoostan compared throughout with the religions, laws, etc., of

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50Ibid., 293–294.
Persia, Greece, Egypt ... The whole being introductory to the history of Hindoostan upon a comprehensive scale.’

A more restricted sense of the term denotes ‘remains or monuments of antiquity’ (in the European context, defined as the time of the ancient Greeks, Romans and early Christian era). An analysis of the use of the word in the early volumes of the *Asiatic Researches*, indicates that while both the broad and restricted meanings are employed, ‘antiquities’ increasingly privileges the latter usage, in line with Bacon’s ‘remnants of history which have casually escaped the shipwreck of time’.

William Jones outlines four general sources for information about India’s past; ‘Languages and Letters’, ‘Philosophy and Religion’, the ‘written memorials’ of India’s ‘Sciences and Arts’ and the actual remains of ‘Sculpture and Architecture’. In material terms, ‘antiquities’ research in this context covers Jones’ ‘actual remains of Sculpture and Architecture’, coins, as well as written records from the past in the form of manuscripts and inscriptions.

Some concrete examples will help delineate the contours, the actual ‘contents’, of the object field covered by the ‘antiquities’ frame. In volume 12 of the Asiatic Researches, published in 1818, a list of contributions solicited to build the collection of the Asiatic Society’s museum includes ‘Inscriptions on stone or brass’, ‘Ancient monuments, Mohammedan or Hindu’, ‘Figures of Hindu deities’, ‘Ancient coins’ and ‘Ancient Manuscripts’. These artefacts are ontologically separated, by their ordering in the sequence, from such objects of ‘utility’ (in their original contexts, at least) that feature in the list as ‘vessels employed in religious ceremonies’, ‘instruments of war’, ‘instruments of music’. Colonialist interest in this category was primarily ethnological, not historical. In this sense, their epistemological status within the museum

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51 Thomas Maurice, *Indian Antiquities:: Or, Dissertations, Relative to the Ancient Geographical Divisions, the Pure System of Primeval Theology, the Grand Code of Civil Laws, the Original Form of Government, the Widely-extended Commerce, and the Various and Profound Literature, of Hindostan: Compared, Throughout, with the Religion, Laws, Government, and Literature, of Persia, Egypt, and Greece. The Whole Intended as Introductory to, and Illustrative of, the History of Hindostan, ... Vol.VII, 1800).


54 *Asiatic Researches Volume 12*, (London, 1818) v. In the same volume, a list of donations actually received by the museum from 1810 onwards includes a carved stone with many figures of Buddha from Rajagriha, a “Dwaraca Chacra” of Vishnu, “brass” figures of “Bhavani”, “Buddha”, “Parvati” and “Ganesa”, etc., xv.
frame affiliates them to final category of man-made artefacts in the contributions list - ‘arts and manufactures’.  

In Jones’ writings, we find a clear-cut distinction between the useful arts, the fine arts and antiquities. The useful or mechanical arts are concerned with converting the ‘productions of nature’ into objects of utility for the ‘convenience and ornament of life’. This category includes dyeing, weaving and metallurgy. Apart from being viewed as ethnological peculiarities, these ‘objects’ of utility were studied in the context of the technologies involved in the manufacturing processes and of their commercial potential. 

The fine arts operate in the realm of “fancy” and “fiction”; for Jones, these include music, poetry, oratory, architecture and painting. ‘Art’, presided over by the faculty of Imagination, includes “…the beauties of imagery, and the charms of invention, displayed in modulated language, or represented by colour, figure, or sound.” Fine art, which Jones defines in the context of music, caters both to the senses and the imagination, “…speaking, as it were the language of beautiful nature, to raise correspondent ideas and emotions in the mind of the hearer; it then, and then only becomes what we call a fine art, allied very nearly to verse, painting and rhetorick…” 

Antiquities, on the other hand, speak the language of history; their aesthetic appeal (or lack thereof) is of little consequence to their primarily historical function. “The remains of Architecture and Sculpture in India, which I mention here as mere monuments of antiquity, not as specimens of ancient art, seem to prove an early connection between this country and Africa.” Here, Jones’ preoccupation with ‘monuments of antiquity’ is limited to their potential function as sources of information about India’s past, about India’s ancient connections with Egypt and Abyssinia. 

Writing in the first decade of the 19th century, Colebrooke assigns a special role to ‘monuments’; literature, and historical evidence gleaned from

55Ibid., v. 
56Jones, Asiatic Researches Vol 4, xi-xix. 
58Jones, Asiatick Researches Vol 1, xiii. 
61Jones, Asiatick Researches Vol 1, 421
'genuine' monuments (particularly inscriptions) perform a mutually corroborative role in the reconstruction of Indian history.

In the scarcity of authentic materials for the ancient and even for the modern, history of the Hindu race, importance is justly attached to all genuine monuments, and especially inscriptions on stone and metal, which are occasionally discovered through various accidents. If these be carefully preserved and diligently examined; and the facts, ascertained from them, be judiciously employed towards elucidating scattered information, which can be yet collected from the remains of Indian literature, a satisfactory progress may be finally made in investigating the history of the Hindus.62

Colebrooke’s use of ‘monuments’ is curious; in this context, it is worth considering the etymology of the word ‘monument’. In a recent article on restoration policies applied to South Indian temples, G.R.H. Wright explores the concept of a ‘monument’ and of ‘monumentality’ relating it to memory of the one hand and the aesthetic on the other. According to the etymology of the word, a monument ‘calls to mind,’ ‘reminds the understanding’. It commemorates something memorable in a memorable way. That is, it calls to mind history, it does so by art....Thus it can be seen that any monument possesses what may be termed an aesthetic character or instance to its nature and a historic instance to its nature.”63

When Jones refers to the remains of Architecture and Sculpture as ‘mere monuments of antiquity’, he expressly excludes aesthetic considerations from his purview (even though he recognizes the possibility of another ‘frame’). Colebrooke’s use of the word ‘monuments’ encompasses not only ‘monumental’ works of architecture and sculpture but also inscriptions in metal and stone, which he certainly does not view as ‘works of art’, but as potential sources of historical information. In other words, it appears that both Jones’ and Colebrooke’s ‘monuments’ function, in fact, as ‘documents’ of history (as we understand the word today). The OED clarifies that in 18th

century usage (particularly legal usage) ‘documents’ and ‘monuments’ shared a range of connotations.\textsuperscript{64}

In his famous introductory essay to \textit{Meaning in the Visual Arts}, Irwin Panofsky distinguishes between ‘monuments’ and ‘documents’ in the context of related humanistic disciplines, history and art-history. He introduces a hypothetical Rhineland altarpiece and a contract, purportedly related to the work, dated 1471. For an art historian, the altarpiece functions as ‘primary material’, as ‘monument’; its authenticity corroborated by the contract, the secondary ‘document’. For a paleographer, or a historian of law, the objects exchange significance; the contract is ‘primary’ while the altarpiece lends documentary support. For a historian exclusively interested in the reconstruction of ‘events’ however, all available historical materials become ‘secondary sources’ or ‘documents’.\textsuperscript{65}

As antiquities are epistemologically contained within the master discourse of civil history in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} century, antiquities function as ‘secondary sources’ for colonialist historiography throughout this period. In an era when Orientalist research was dominated by philological method and research protocols, the representation of ‘non-literary’ antiquities such as architectural and sculptural artefacts generated considerable confusion and ambivalence in colonial writing.

\textbf{Non-literary Antiquities and their troubling visuality}

A survey of all writings making references to antiquities in the first ten volumes of \textit{Asiatic(k) Researches} reveals a tripartite division of content. Writings dealing with ‘textual’ or ‘literary’ antiquities are most numerous. Epigraphical studies lead by specialists like H. T. Colebrooke and Charles Wilkins are devoted to describing, deciphering and commenting on inscriptions, coins and manuscripts. The second category deals with descriptive reports of “actual remains of Sculpture and architecture” - Mamallapuram, Elephanta, Qutb Minar, etc., in the form of empirical ‘field’ observations of antiquities by colonial functionaries, surgeons, engineers,

\textsuperscript{64}According to the OED, ‘Monument’, in 18th century usage, includes: “A written document, record; a legal instrument”. Both ‘monuments’ and ‘documents’ can be deployed either to ‘prove something’ or to provide new information. In this sense, all historical documents are monuments.

astronomers whose professional specializations have trained them in the skills of observation, ‘scientific’ description and measurement. The third category covers expansive, multidisciplinary, essentially *speculative dissertations* by ‘Orientalist’ scholars like Jones, Francis Wilford and John Shore, that synthesize information gathered about visual and textual antiquities, among other sources, to ‘verify’ and elaborate upon various theoretical constructs and hypothesis peculiar to 18\(^{th}\) century Universal History.

The considerable philological resources of the Asiatic Society at this point enabled scholars to deal swiftly and confidently with textual/literary antiquities. Equipped with a sophisticated critical method for dealing with texts and considerable understanding about the function and conditions of production of an inscription or coin, derived from European precedents, the language specialists of the Society were able to transform data to information to usable knowledge. They were less certain of how to deal with the recalcitrantly material ‘remains of architecture and sculpture’. Momigliano describes a similar dilemma faced by antiquaries in early 18\(^{th}\) century Europe:

> When we survey the achievements of the antiquaries in formulating the rules for the proper interpretation of non-literary evidence, we must make a sharp distinction. The success in establishing safe rules for the use of charters, inscriptions and coins as regards both authenticity and interpretation was complete….Vases, statues, reliefs and gems spoke a much more difficult language. The imposing literature of Emblemata which had accumulated since Aciato was not likely to improve the clarity of this language. Given a monument with images on it, how can we understand what the artist meant? How can we distinguish between what is only ornamental and what is meant to express a religious or philosophical belief?" 66

According to Momigliano, the dominant 18\(^{th}\) century response to the inherent ambiguity of non-textual European antiquities was to approach them from the angle of meaning and intent. Even Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who

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pioneered the use of stylistic (formal) criteria for the dating of Greek sculptures, was drawn to the study of iconography, viewing Greek statues not just as vehicles of style and aesthetics but also as repositories of meaning. By contrast, colonial field reports deal with the Indian equivalent of ‘vases, statues’ and ‘reliefs’ in a crudely empirical fashion - describing, measuring, illustrating – in other words, treating them primarily as evidentiary objects supporting the colonial historiographical project, and only secondarily or tangentially, as vehicles of intended meaning. This epistemological hierarchy becomes apparent when we compare excerpts from two ‘reports’ of Mamallapuram antiquities, both produced for the colonial establishment within a few years of each other:

The first excerpt, a description of the Gangavatarana/ Arjuna’s Penance relief in English, is authored by J. Goldingham, a British astronomer stationed at Fort St. George, and published in the fifth volume of the *Asiatic Researches*:

...the surface of the rock, about ninety feet in extent, and thirty in height is covered with figures in bas-relief. A gigantic figure of Krishna is most conspicuous with Arjuna his favourite, in the Hindu attitude of prayer; but so void of flesh as to present more the appearance of a skeleton than the representation of a living person. Below is a venerable figure, said to be the father of Arjuna [in a footnote-Goldingham mentions a local Brahmin’s identification of this figure as Drona] both figures proving the sculptor possessed no inconsiderable skill. Here are the representations of several animals, and one of which the Brahmins name *simha* or lion; but by no means a likeness of that animal, wanting the peculiar characteristic, the mane. Something intended to represent this is, indeed, visible, which has more the effect of spots. It appears evident, the sculptor was by no means so well acquainted with the figure of the lion as with that of the elephant and monkey, both being well represented in this group. This scene, I understand, is taken from the Mahabharata, and exhibits the principal characters whose actions are celebrated in that work. 67

The second is a translation from Telugu, of the report of Kavali Lakshmamya, an interpreter and assistant of Lt. Colin Mackenzie, trained in the colonial method of observation and data collection during his years of service.

On the East side of the hill, the rock has been fashioned into figures representing Arjuna’s Penance as Kirata and Arjuna. Here is Arjuna his two arms extended over his head, performing penance; and here is four-armed Isvara as he appeared, holding the Pasupatastra, Damaruka, Trisula etc. Between Isvara and Arjuna stands Viswakarma, with an adze on his right shoulder, the handle of which he holds in the right hand. Above Isvara’s head are Surya, Chandra etc. Below Arjuna, is Krishnaswami in a fane, four-armed and holding the Sankha, Chakra, Gada etc. To his right, is Dronacharya, seated in the lotus-posture with emaciated body, performing penance. On Krishna’s left, the rock is fissured, so Naga maids appear issuing from Patalaloka, and with the 5 virgins come a naga maid for Arjuna. On the North side of these appears Indra, accompanied by his wife, mounted on the elephant called Airavata, coming to visit Siva. Behind Airavata is another elephant. Below Airavata there are three elephant cubs. And there is a cat, with her kittens, facing to the East, with upstretched paws.

Round the god Indra, in the form of a ring, are figures of Garudas, Gandharvas, Kinnaras, Kimpurushas, Siddhas, Vidyadharas, etc., some with wives, some without wives, coming, as ascetics, to visit Siva. There are here 36 figures. Among these demi-gods are three deer. Behind them, to the North in the middle (of the rock) are seven lions and one sheep. To Isvara’s right, and above are Dharmaraja and Bhima sitting, performing penance. On their right are a hog and a tiger. On Isvara’s right are 24 figures of troops of Pramathas and Rishis coming to visit Siva...They are thus represented accompanied by their wives. Altogether there are 80 male and female figures.68

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Both accounts are descriptions from direct observation – of an outdoor sculptural relief at Mamallapuram. Language differences apart, the two reports are barely recognizable as descriptions of the same object.

Goldingham’s tone is exaggeratedly objective and ‘disinterested’, bordering on the iconophobic, constantly referring to the subject’s gaze in the act of scanning the panel, witness the repeated use of viewing words like ‘conspicuous’, ‘representation’, ‘appearance.’ The author treats the relief panel as a ‘representation’, in bas relief, of a scene from the Mahabharata. He selects for description, certain ‘objects’ that are represented on the relief panel in a somewhat arbitrary manner and judges these representations in terms of the adequacy of their verisimilitude to their referents in the real world. Goldingham painstakingly separates his own empirical observation (first order knowledge) from hearsay or native interpretation (second order knowledge). There is an implied gap between the signifiers (as Goldingham describes them) and what (according to the natives), they signify. The object is static and passive, the gaze active and appropriating. Lacking narrative focus, the gaze is quickly fatigued. The repeated use of non-diegetic comments and qualifiers ruptures the narrative and functions as a distancing device.

Where Goldingham ‘observes’, Lakshmayya ‘reads’; here cognition/observation coincides with recognition. Lakshmayya’s description is not about disjointed objects in relief on a surface ‘representing’ real objects in nature; it is about story-as-performance. Arjuna, Isvara and the other beings of the heavens, the earth and the netherworld ‘appear’, actually manifesting for the viewer, embodied in stone. Whereas Goldingham ‘scopes’ the panel with an alien, intransigent, instrumental gaze, Lakshmayya suspends disbelief to participate in a theatrical ‘unfolding’ of the narrative before him. The active gaze allows itself to be led by the performing tableau, and description follows the gaze, unifying disparate objects in an imaginative narrative, converting the static relief into ‘enactment’. Even as the diegesis is seamless, Lakshmayya co-operates with the semantic intentions of the visual narrative and perhaps as a consequence, packs considerably more visual information into his paragraph than does Goldingham, who appears caught up in a complicated negotiation between proximity and distance.
What the comparison seeks to highlight is the possibility of at least two kinds of ‘observation’ of the same object, within the same time-space and circumstances of knowledge production. The intention here is not to claim for Lakshmayya a ‘native’ authenticity which renders his description superior to Goldingham’s account. What I want to highlight is that colonial empiricist protocols in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries appear to privilege a ‘morphological’ over ‘semantic’ understanding of the visual artefact, ‘distancing’ over ‘participatory’ procedures. Within the antiquities frame, both the semantic aspects and the ‘intentional visual interest’ (or the ‘presence effects’) of these objects figure as problematic excesses, which it is unable to account for. Bereft of aesthetic categories such as the Beautiful and the Sublime, unable to nuance the protocols of objectivity and distance required by the colonial epistemological structures of the time, the antiquities discourse limited itself to a documenting and archiving of visual antiquities in the form of peculiarly attenuated descriptions and awkward illustrations. It is significant, in this context, that Lakshmayya’s account is relegated to an appendix of M. W. Carr’s 1869 compilation titled \textit{Descriptive and Historical Papers Relating to the Seven Pagodas on the Coromandel Coast}.\textsuperscript{69}

\textbf{CODA: ‘CURIOSITY’ AND ‘WONDER’}

The Romantic travelogues of the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries share a number of characteristics with the accounts of antiquities found in the journals of the Asiatic societies. Enabled by the expansion and consolidation of colonial rule in the subcontinent and the access to different locations it facilitated, both these genres draw their authority from the fact that the descriptions are based on direct observation ‘in the field.’ Further, many of the passages of objective description that feature in the Romantic travel writings mentioned above are virtually indistinguishable in style and language

\textsuperscript{69} Lakshmayya’s application to the Madras Division of the Asiatic society to complete Mackenzie’s archiving project after the surveyor’s death was rejected by James Prinsep on the grounds that no native was qualified to undertake a project that called for critical and evaluatory acumen. See Dirks, “Colonial Histories and Native Informant”, in Breckenridge and Veer, \textit{Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament}, 310.
from the descriptions of visual antiquities in the *Asiatic Researches*. This strengthens the argument that both discourses were premised on some common empirical foundation, and that the divergences were intentional, partly at least dictated by the differences of genre and audience, rather than indicating a radically different ‘way of seeing’.

Both Maria Graham and William Chambers\(^7\) describe the ‘ruins’ in Mamallapuram in their respective accounts. The vast differences in the way these writers represent their objects cannot be reduced to some ‘subjective’ versus ‘objective’ dichotomy, nor are they merely a function of language. Each writer frames his/her objects within a different ecology, each responds to different aspects of the object’s visuality, its material presence, its intended meaning, the agencies responsible for its existence, its relation to the past. As a consequence, they project different values on to their objects of representation.

The Romantic traveler casts her objects in a frame that includes her impressions of surrounding topographical features and an atmosphere which has as much to do with the with external weather and light conditions as with her subjective response to the experience of encounter. The primary matrix within which these objects are embedded is space, space as related to geography, as well as space as it is perceived optically and experienced haptically. The significance of these objects, for the Romantic writer, is their exotic Otherness, which she tries to highlight rather than subdue through literary means. The deployment of familiar aesthetic categories seeks to establish a common ground only for subjective responses, leaving untouched the aura of wonder and aesthetic strangeness around the objects themselves. Ultimately, this Otherness can be aligned with the Self only at a philosophical level.

By contrast, the antiquities researcher extracts his objects from their physical and environmental setting, their local associations and functions, and views them in terms of their specific morphological characteristics. He filters out those aspects of the objects’ present/presence which he considered

\(^7\) William Chambers, “An Account of the Sculptures and Ruins of Mavalipuram, A Place a few Miles North of Sadras, and known to Seamen by the Name of the Seven Pagodas,” *Asiatick Researches* Volume 1, 145–170.
superfluous to their significance as antiquities, as documents of history. Geography and topography are included in descriptions only to the extent that they help fix the coordinates of the objects’ location. Local interpretations are recorded as a standby, because they may provide hints about the historical significance of the objects. Even material state of preservation, which is recorded with noticeable frequency and clinical precision in these reports, is included less as an acknowledgement of the fragile materiality of these artefacts than as an objective index of their historicity.

When Europeans encounter and describe the ruins of Mamallapuram in this period, their gaze is already an irrevocably historicizing one. For William Chambers (surgeon, empiricist) as for Maria Graham (Romantic travel writer), the monuments of Mamallapuram appear refracted through the prism of history. The difference lies in how ‘history’ affects the consciousness, what value it acquires within each of these accounts.

For the Romantic imagination, the sights and sounds of nature, the beauty of man-made creations and the mysterious, unknown world of antiquity merge into one inseparable continuum; together they provide a point of departure for aesthetic appreciation and philosophical reflection. It is not important, for the purposes of the ‘Romantic’ narrative, to zero in on the historical facts - dates, attribution, cultic orientation, etc., - that may be gleaned from the antiquities themselves and accessory documents. If anything, such detailing would mar the air of mysterious ‘antiquity’ that shrouds the location and stimulates the subjective response. History itself is fetishised and ‘ancient-ness’ is transformed into an aesthetic entity, a version of the Sublime. The Romantic writer views the ‘antiquity’ of her objects as a kind of totality; the past is both lost in the mists of time and materially inscribed in the forms of the ruins encountered across the subcontinent.

For Chambers, on the other hand, the submergence of Mamallapuram antiquities in history motivates further enquiry. The past is recoverable, and it is necessary to recover it; he even suggests a method by which the history of the ‘Hindoos’ may be unraveled; “…by comparing names and grand events, recorded by them [the poet-historians of the ‘Hindoos’], with those recorded in the histories of other nations, and by calling in the assistance of
ancient monuments, coins, and inscriptions,... some probable conjectures, at least, if not important discoveries, may, it is hoped, be made on these interesting subjects.” 71

The fault lines that separate the Romantic appropriation of these artefacts and their objectification within the antiquities frame become evident when we compare the phenomenology of wonder with that of curiosity. ‘Wonder’ and ‘curiosity’ are concepts that recur in many 18th century discourses, referring both to subjective attitudes as well as to objects onto which these attitudes are projected. Thus Graham writes of ‘the wonders of the cavern of Elephanta’ and Seely titles his travelogue The Wonders of Elora while for Goldingham, the artefacts of Mamallapuram are ‘curious remains of antiquity’. 72 Even though they are generated within the same colonial contexts, these two positions are incompatible.

In an article titled “Curating Curiosity: Wonder’s Colonial Phenomenology”, Khadija Z Carroll views wonder and curiosity as different responses to the unknown, the unaccountable.

Curiosity, unlike wonder, does not illicit helplessness. There is no remainder once you have accounted for curiosity, while wonder entails an unaccountable remainder. The term I use for this unaccountability, this inability to measure, compare or even comprehend, is incommensurability. Like antinomy, incommensurability signals a contradiction or incompatibility in thought arising from the attempt to apply to the ideas of the reason relations which are appropriate only to the concepts of experience. In the colonial discourse from Captain Cook onward, curiosity and wonder shape the terms of response to incommensurability. 73

Carroll goes on to examine Wittgenstein’s formulation of aesthetic experience as wonder and contrasts this with Bernard Smith’s suggestion that “to say

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71 Ibid., 157-158.

72 Goldingham, op. cit., 69

that an object was “curious” was to express an interest in it without passing an aesthetic judgment.”

Within the Romantic frame, the Sublime, the Picturesque and the Beautiful, as subjective responses to artefacts-in-their-setting, coexist with another, more objective response to the beauty of the artefacts themselves – intentionally created by their makers. This recognition of intentional visual interest, while it must have played a subliminal role in spurring antiquities research, is suppressed in favour of the larger scientific project. “The experience of wonder, with all its attendant threats at disarming the individual of their expectations, seems at odds with this scientific purpose.”

For the antiquities researcher, both literary and non-literary antiquities are equivalent at an epistemological level; they are both documents of history. At a pragmatic level, however, (given the focus on philology during this phase) literary antiquities – inscriptions, coins and manuscripts – prove more useful and secure as historical documents.

Another characteristic of wonder, according to Carroll, is that it does not see its objects possessively whereas ‘curiosity knowledge’ is a kind of possession; it reveals an urge to control its objects. It does this by slotting them in a pre-existing schema; “....one could say that curiosity can be satisfied, that satisfaction is accounted for by a means of taxonomy and classification and that an existing schema accommodates those classificatory means. Thus the incommensurable colonial artifact becomes a variation on an existing European model.”

When we view ‘antiquities’ as a functional rather than an ontological category, the instrumental nature of this appropriation becomes evident. By abstracting artefacts from their ecological, social and cultural settings, their participation in other life-worlds, the antiquities frame is actually creating a new domain of objects. Antiquities are harnessed irrevocably to the

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74Ibid., 208.
75Ibid., 211.
76Ibid., 215.
77The antiquities frame is a pre-fabricated one, designed for objectifying and representing artefacts/things of a certain kind in 18th century Western Europe. Admittedly, the frame undergoes changes in the course of its career in the subcontinent and is eventually replaced by other, more nuanced frames.
historical project and the colonial establishment is becomes the authorized interpreter of their value. Their link with history is their primary significance; their other attributes and affiliations are factored in only insofar as they are deemed relevant to the historical project.

Non-literary antiquities like the artefacts at Mamallapuram and elsewhere are caught in a peculiar position within this frame. Their overwhelming materiality, their compelling visuality and their semantic density – these are aspects that the antiquities discourse has no interpretive tools to deal with. Unlike inscriptions, coins and manuscripts – the other members of their domain, they resist easy assimilation into the larger discourse of civil history. In her book Destination Culture Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett traces the trajectory of the ethnographic object that is transformed from curio to specimen to art. "As curiosities, objects are anomalous. By definition they defy classification."78 According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "(f)or a curiosity to become classifiable, it had to qualify as a representative of a distinguishable class of objects."79 Pending a taxonomy, a classification and a definite chronology, non-literary antiquities occupy an uneasy space within the antiquities discourse, suspended between 'curiosities' and the scientific objects - archaeological specimens - that they will become in the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century.

\footnotesize{78}Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett, Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage (University of California Press, 1998), 25.
\footnotesize{79}Ibid., 26.