Beyond Turk and Hindu
Rethinking Religious Identities
in Islamicate South Asia

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Admiring the Works of the Ancients

The Ellora Temples as Viewed by Indo-Muslim Authors

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One of the recurrent problems in the interpretation of Indo-Muslim identity is the attempt to ascribe a consistently Muslim attitude toward Hindu temples. This problem arises initially with the incorporation of building materials from Hindu temples in the construction of mosques or other buildings commissioned by Muslim patrons. Although the evidence for the significance of this kind of recycling is sometimes later and retrospective, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this phenomenon involves the triumphal political use of trophies. Perhaps the most notable example is the Quwwat al-Islam (or Qubbat al-Islam) mosque near the Qutb Minar in Delhi, which contains numerous columns with partially effaced Hindu caryatids and Jain (or Buddhist?) figures, as well as the famous Iron Pillar. This kind of triumphal reuse of temple materials and ancient royal monuments has been seen since British times as evidence of the insatiable propensity of Muslims to destroy idols at every opportunity. Today it affords ammunition to the Hindu extremists who led the attack on the “Baburi” mosque at Ayodhya; the supposition is that the mosque not only rests on the site of the birthplace of Rama but also took the place of a preexisting temple.

There are, of course, competing theories of the exact relationship between the Ayodhya mosque and any preceding temple. Some believe that the mosque was built of the remains of the temple and that the construction of a mosque thus required the demolition of a temple; the reverse of this zero-sum game is that the erection of a temple on that spot would require the destruction of the mosque, as indeed took place in
December 1992. Others like P. N. Oak assume that Muslim buildings are only partially defaced Hindu structures, so that in theory only a slight amount of restoration would presumably be required to return them to their original functions, rather than full-scale destruction and reconstruction; this has the appearance at least of a less costly program. The problem arises, however, when these modern interpretations of Muslim iconoclasm deduce Muslim attitudes from an essential definition of Islam rather than from historical documentation of the significance that particular Muslims attached to Hindu temples. Attempts to describe Muslims as essentially prone to idol-smashing are confounded by the historical record, which indicates that Muslims who wrote about “idol temples” had complex reactions based as much on aesthetic and political considerations as on religion. The concept of unchanging and monolithic Muslim identity accordingly needs to undergo serious revision.

This article is an attempt to fill out the historical dossier, by presenting a translation and analysis of a brief text in which a Muslim author, Rāfiʿ al-Dīn Shīrāzī, has set forth a striking interpretation of one of the jewels of Indian architecture, the Ellora cave temples. Shīrāzī viewed Ellora not as religious architecture but as a primarily political monument, which fit best into the category of the wonders of the world. When Shīrāzī’s reaction to Ellora is compared with other accounts of it by Muslim authors, with Muslim accounts of other “pagan” monuments in Egypt, and with descriptions of Ellora by early European travelers, his aesthetic and political reaction does not seem very unusual. This account is another reminder that, for premodern Muslims, the monolithic Islam defined by twentieth-century discourse was far from being the only or even the primary category of judgment.

The text in question is Tadhkirat al-mulak (Memorial of kings), a Persian history of Bijapur written by Rāfiʿ al-Dīn Shīrāzī in 1612. The author (born in Shiraz in 1540) had a long career in Bijapur government service, from the age of thirty serving Sultan ‘Alī ‘Adil Shāh as a steward and scribe. In 1596, Sultan Ibrāhīm ‘Adil Shāh appointed him ambassador to Ahmadnagar, and he also held posts as governor of the Bijapur fort and treasurer. Shīrāzī witnessed many important events over more than a century in the Deccan, and he was also steeped in the tradition of Persian historical writing, having written abridgements of standard court chronicles such as Mir Khwand’s Rawdat al-safā and Khwand Amīr’s Ḥabīb al-siyar. His history is an important independent historical source comparable to the chronicle of Firishta.
In the handwritten edition of Khalidi, the outline of the text is as follows, divided into an introduction, ten parts, and an appendix:

Introduction (1–15)
I. The Bahmani dynasty (15–35)
II–V. The ‘Adil Shāhī dynasty (36–83)
VI. Dynasties of Gujarat, Ahmadnagar, and Golconda (84–156)
VII. Various events in the Deccan (157–96)
VIII. Ibrahīm ‘Adil Shāh, the author’s patron (197–269)
IX. The Mughals (270–93)
X. The Mughals and Safavids (294–496; in some MSS this lengthy section is divided in three parts to make twelve parts in all)
Appendix. On Wonders and Rarities (497–566)

The section under discussion occurs toward the end (476–83) of the tenth part, and although its title includes the phrase “wonders and rarities,” it does not fall into the appendix proper; instead, it is sandwiched between accounts of military campaigns of the Safavids and the Mughals. The appendix consists of a series of accounts of *mirabilia* of the *‘ajā’ib* genre of wonders long established in Arabic and Persian literature. Some of these wonders are related by others, although a few were seen by the author himself. These include narratives based on the Persian *Book of Kings* by Firdawsi (497–517), travelers’ tales of strange islands (517–32), and accounts of the rivers and geography of India (532–43), followed by brief reports of natural wonders (544–66).

Shirāzi’s location of his account of Ellora in the dynastic history proper, and not in the appendix on wonders, suggests that he wished to treat it as a serious political concern, framed around a legendary Indian monarch named Parchand Rāo. It thus remains separate from the superficially similar stories about fabulous islands and idol temples that occur in the appendix. Those remain comfortably in the realm of two-headed calves and other marvels, but the serious point that Shirāzi wanted to make about art and royal monuments required that he situate the story of Ellora amidst similar political and military narratives. In this kind of arrangement Shirāzi resembles the Egyptian chronicler of the pyramids, al-Idrīsī, who kept his meticulous measurements and historical accounts of the pyramids in one chapter and saved the bizarre and the miraculous for the last chapter of his book. Shirāzi’s chapter has, however, been circulated separately as a “Treatise on Wonders and Rarities,” and in this form it would not have taken on the political coloring afforded by its inclusion in the dynastic history.
forded by its contextual position in the larger history. Here follows a translation of the extract:

Description of the Wonders and Rarities of the Building of Ellora in Daulatabad, Which Parchand Rāo, the Emperor of India, Built Nearly 4,000 Years Ago

1. Parchand Rāo was an emperor. With great majesty, he had brought under his control all the land from the border of Sind, Gujarat, the Deccan, and Telingana to the limit of Malabar, and most of the neighboring kings were his subjects. He was noble, just, and upright, and he lived in harmony with the people. The peasant and the soldier in the days of his reign were in all ways happy and free from worry. They passed all their lives in happiness, joy, contentment, and pleasure.

2. In the springtime, when the climate was perfectly mild, Parchand Rāo would go on a tour of the kingdom, and he let the people partake of his magnificence. He made every effort to bring about justice and fairness. In every place that he saw abundant water, greenery, and good climate, he laid foundations for buildings, and he supplied the officials of the kingdom every resource for completing them. In this way, having traveled through the entire kingdom three times, he constructed and brought to completion lofty idol-houses (but-khāna) outside the buildings just mentioned throughout most of his kingdom.

3. Now as for the famous Daulatabad—fine and elegant fabrics were available there, and in the neighborhoods and environs merchants brought them as gifts and donations, and they still are active and do so; wealthy merchants full of tranquillity are always dwelling in that city, both Muslim and Hindu. Every year nearly a thousand ass-loads of different kinds of silken and gold-woven fabrics are brought to its neighborhoods and environs, and general welfare prevails. The same Parchand Rāo made Daulatabad his capital, and people from the four corners of the world headed in the direction of Daulatabad. Most of this multitude came to a place that was nearly five or six farsakhs away, and having built houses and gardens, they settled there; tall houses were set up with some difficulty.

4. One day in the assembly of Parchand Rāo there was a discussion of the construction of buildings and abodes, and the king said,
“During my reign, I have built and finished many buildings in my dominion, but these ordinary buildings do not have much permanency. I want a building that will be truly permanent, so that it will be spoken of for years afterward, and there should be wonders and rarities in it so that it will endure and remain lasting for long years and uncounted centuries, and its construction will be famed and well known throughout the world.”

5. Some of the architects, engineers, and stoneworkers were dedicated to the emperor and spoke his language, because of the many buildings that they had made. They said, “In the region of this very city there is a mountain that is unlike any of the mountains of the world. This is because the mountains that we have seen and see today are mostly of this kind: part is bedrock, and part is soft and has cracks and fissures. In this city there is a great and lofty mountain that has absolutely no cracks, joints, fissures, or rubble. In this way, one can make a great and lofty house, which every great king can do, for lofty buildings have been repeatedly built. If one brings together all the eighteen workshops of the realm, which are famous and well known, so that the supervisor does not need to have any other building built, and he has the capacity and basis associated with that workshop, and the quantity of men and animals necessary for those workshops, then they will prepare everything from stone: the assembly of the king’s realm, the private palaces, the soldiers in attendance on the king—all will be carved in stone, so that each will be established in the proper place. Until the dawn of the resurrection, that court, those workshops, and those people will all be preserved, each in the proper place. Such a court as this, this foundation, and this army will all be in five or six sections of stone, with the human and the other animals of proper proportions in the same form and size in which they were created, neither larger nor smaller.”

6. The emperor said, “This account that you have given, if it is possible and can indeed take form, is a wonder. By all means, let them make a model from wax or chalk so that I can have a look.” When the artisans, engineers, and stoneworkers heard that the emperor asked for a model, they had to come to agreement and make a completed model such as the emperor had asked for from brick, clay, and chalk. When they invited the emperor to their premises [to see the model], he became very happy, and he consented with delight.
7. Beginning from the middle of the mountain, they made a great open space in the palace, which they call the retreat (khilout-khana). On all four sides of the open space, they cut open spaces (sar-sāya, lit. “shades”) in the stone, perfect in height, width, and length, with a polished and proportioned foundation. In most places these are carved in the fashion of great arches (ṭāq) needing no pillars. The carving is extremely even and polished, or rather, is even given a luster. In some of these open spaces there are alcoves (bahl, usually bahāla, lit. “purse”) with caves. Their ability reaches such subtlety that if the master artist wished to paint one with a brush made from a single hair, nowhere would it be easy for him [to match their skill]. In some of the arches there is a string of camels, and in some a stable of horses. Some are with saddle, and some with colored blankets. There is no need to mention the extraordinary workmanship and subtlety again. One should compare the alcove with the palace; in each one of these palaces there are some human forms in the attitude of servants, which are necessary in those palaces. One would say that all are standing ready to serve, while some appear in such a way that one would say they are in the act of being rejected. The remaining animals, wild beasts and birds ... are everywhere in the manner of delivering an obligatory reply to a question. The forms of armed and equipped soldiers, to the number of one or two hundred, are as if ready for service, each one established in his own place. On the courtyard in front of the palace gate, here and there several large and small elephants are standing in order. Around each elephant a few attendants stand in their regalia.

Description of the Foundation of the Palace Fort and Its Capacity

8. Four arches (ṭāq) cut from stone are on one side of the courtyard, and within, two shorter ones are in the place of the gate. Symmetrical in height, breadth, and length, these four are linked by a single roof. Two great benches (ṣuffa) are built into the great arches, as a seat for servants, for the servants of the fort and the courtyard are within. Nearly five or six hundred people are sitting in their places, some standing fully armed. Outside of that, many weapons are carved in various places, such as swords, daggers, dirks (Hindi kat-dra), spears, bows, quivers, and arrows. One remains in astonishment at the subtle and painstaking work. In the
courtyard, inside the four arches, are benches, porticoes (*ayān*), and rooms carved and hollowed out in the same style. On one side are the imperial workshops, such as the armory, stable, waterworks, kitchen, storehouse, and wine cellar. In every one of these palaces there are at least fifty or sixty human forms, each one of which appears to be in the act of performing something. The skill of each workshop is cut into rock to such a degree that the human mind cannot imagine it. Everyone who goes there says that the people [in the stone reliefs] are having a party. One should spend several days at the palace if one wishes to see them all, and to understand them fully a long lifetime would be needed. Many wild beasts and birds have also been added to these festivals to adorn the palace.

9. Proceeding behind this palace, there is a fort and some other palaces pertaining to the previously mentioned palace. Here too a multitude of figures is made in the form of servants, done with great workmanship, in a more prominent position, and the courtyard of this is greater than that in the previous palace. Some workshops are set up in this palace, and benches, arches, and porticoes have been raised up to heaven. By way of workshops, things such as the bachelor quarters (*dar al-‘azab*), goldsmith shop, fountain shop, wardrobe, treasury, and the like [have been made] with such subtlety and workmanship that a hair of a single brush could not have rendered it. The attendants of the workshops, their trade, tools, and basis of each workshop have been made to the necessary extent, each one being made in the performance of [the appropriate] action, and each servant of these palaces has been made firm in the proper position.

*A Hint of Conditions of the Court and the Arrangement of the Place of the Workmen and Attendants*

10. Having made another palace with the arch and portico in perfect proportion, and having placed some smaller palaces to the sides with workmanship and beauty, and the imperial throne at the front of the portico, they fixed the portrait of the emperor upon it, depicting that amount of ornament on the limbs of the emperor that is customary among the people of India, some sculpted and some in relief. Its painstaking subtlety is beyond description. To the left and right of that throne, half-thrones have been prepared with solid foundations, and on each of these they have sat princes...
and nobles of the realm. Behind the head and shoulders of the emperor are servants, friends, and relatives, each in the proper place. There are some watchmen holding swords with handkerchiefs in their hands, in the Deccan fashion. Waterbearers in their own manner and order hold vessels of water in their hands, and waiters (shtra-chi) hold a few flagons with cups in their hands. Winebearers, by which I mean betel-leaf servers, hold trays of betel leaf in their hands with suitable accompaniments, some trays having sweet-scented things, for in each tray are cups of musk, saffron, and other items. The saucers in those trays are made in the fashion of cups, with pounded ambergris, sandalwood, and aloes, and aromatic compounds are set forth, and trays full of roses. This portico, which is subtler in arrangement than a rose, is such that the description, beauty, workmanship, and subtlety of workmanship of that assembly do not fit into the vessel of explanation.

11. In front of that portico of the court, the chief musician (sar-i nawbatān) and the court prefect (shihna-i divān) stand in the proper arrangement and position in their places. On both sides, nearly 2,000 horsemen, extremely well executed, are in attendance in the proper fashion. In the courtyard of the court and the portico, across from the emperor, there are several groups of musicians, each standing with his own drum and lute; one would say that they are dancing. In the same courtyard, tumblers, jesters, wrestlers, athletes, and swordsmen exhibit their skill. One would say that each group in its particular area and assembly is right in the middle of its activity. Several famous and large elephants, which were always the apple of the emperor’s alchemical eye, are in his presence, and several head of elite imperial horses, which were always present with the court drum, are present in the customary fashion.

12. So many beautiful and well-wrought things are in those buildings and courtyards that, if one wished to explain them all, he would fail to reach the goal. The listener should prepare for fatigue of the brain!

13. Outside this assembly, several other small banquet assemblies have been made and constructed, which tongue and pen are unable to explain. Three or four private palaces have been built, and in each palace are the private inhabitants, who are the women and eunuchs—more than one or two hundred. Each one is in a distinct style and position, and a detailed account of the motions
and postures of those palaces would not be inappropriate; it can be generally summarized in a few words. In each of these palaces some obscene activities—none repeated—are taking place.

14. In general, of that which is actually in existence at Ellora, not one part in a thousand has been mentioned. Few people have reached the limit of its buildings, and those who have [come] simply take in the generality of it with a glance. What is presently observable and displayed takes up nearly two farsakhs. Even further, there are places with buildings and hunting lodges, but a wall of chalk and stone has been firmly set up, so no one goes past that place. It is famous.

15. There is a smaller building like this in a village at least fifty farsakhs from Ellora. It is said that in every place palaces, buildings, and hunting lodges have been built in the same fashion, and it is still in existence. But God knows best as to the realities of the situation.

Description of Various Matters on the Same Subject

16. There are several constructions of similar form in the neighborhood of Shiraz, and that region is called Naqsh-i Rustam and The Forty Towers (Chihil Sutun, i.e., Persepolis). In The History of Persia it is well known that there were four such towers that Jamshid had made, and on top of all the towers he had made a single tall building, so that these towers were pillars for that building. He spent most of his time in that building sitting on the seat of lordship and holding public audience. The people from below bowed to him and worshiped him. In that building of Ellora, most places are roofed and dark. Some places are made with illumination from windows, and most rooms have no roof and are perfectly illuminated. Since this was three or four thousand years ago, and in that time lifetimes were long, and humans were mighty of frame and full of power and strength, such places as have been written of above, which they made—if anyone of this age wished to make them, and had a thousand people and a period of a thousand years, it is not known whether it could be carried out to completion. In fact, the intellect is astonished at that construction.

17. There was always a joke about that building which was shared between the former Burhān Nizām Shāh and Shāh Tāhir. The Nizām Shāh used to say that sodomy was brought to the Deccan during the present time by foreigners [i.e., Persians]. Shāh Tāhir objected: "Once when I was in Persia, I saw a deep trough, a hand of the building. 'Have I moved the water?'

Description of Various Matters on the Same Subject

18. In ancient times, there was a trough of unbelievable proportions, and the inhabitants, of all sound, had many wonderful and elegant. Many would astonishment to see the visions of such as it to a trough to a degree that it was of ten new animals, and finger, the trees of the of the the...
...appropriate; it can be seen that these palaces serve no further place.

At Ellora, not only is this practice [of making love] prohibited, but many people have [come] simply to see the carvings that is presently visible for thousands of akhs. Even further, there are inscriptions, but a wall has been built past that.

17. In the neighborhood of Bankapur is a town called Lakmir. At Ellora, most of the buildings fell into ruin, and only a few were still inhabited. But four hundred idol temples remained perfectly sound, having been constructed with the utmost of painstaking and elegant workmanship. At the time when we saw it, we saw many wonders and rarities, and astonishment increased upon astonishment. Out of all those, we saw one idol temple with dimensions of seventy cubits by fifty cubits. Both inside and outside of it a trough (taghārī) had been cut in relief. Its subtlety was to the degree that in the space of a hand, in natural proportions, the forms of ten men had been made, along with the forms of ten or fifteen animals, both beasts and birds, in such a way that the eyelashes and fingernails were visible. On the border were roses, tulips, and trees of the locality, about the size of one hand. This degree of artistry has been forgotten.

18. In the neighborhood of Bankapur is a town called Lakmir. In ancient times, it was the capital of one of the great emperors of unbelief. With the greatest architectural skill, the emperors, princes, and pillars of the realm built many idol temples in imitation of one another, extremely large and well built. Years passed, and most of the buildings fell into ruin, and only a few were still inhabited. But four hundred idol temples remained perfectly sound, having been constructed with the utmost of painstaking and elegant workmanship. At the time when we saw it, we saw many wonders and rarities, and astonishment increased upon astonishment. Out of all those, we saw one idol temple with dimensions of seventy cubits by fifty cubits. Both inside and outside of it a trough (taghārī) had been cut in relief. Its subtlety was to the degree that in the space of a hand, in natural proportions, the forms of ten men had been made, along with the forms of ten or fifteen animals, both beasts and birds, in such a way that the eyelashes and fingernails were visible. On the border were roses, tulips, and trees of the locality, about the size of one hand. This degree of artistry has been forgotten.

19. Imagine how much work has been done on the inside and outside of all the idol temples, and how many days and how much time it took to complete them. May God the exalted and transcendent forgive the World-Protector [i.e., ʿAlī ʿAdil Shāh, d. 988/1580] with the light of his compassion, for after the conquest of Vijayanagar, he with his own blessed hand destroyed five or six thousand adored idols of unbelief, and ruined most of the idol temples [at the battle of Talikota or Bannihatti, January 1565]. But the limited number of buildings] on which the welfare of the time and the kingdom depended, which we know as the art of Ellora in Daulatabad, this kind of idol temple and art we have forgotten.

There are several striking aspects to this text. First of all, Shirāzi makes hardly any reference to Indian religions in his description of
Ellora. Second, he appreciates the monument on an aesthetic level, and he explains its origin in political terms. For him, Ellora is a royal monument that depicts the court life of an ancient king of India, making it comparable to pre-Islamic Persian monuments such as Persepolis. The statue of Shiva in the Kailas temple is explained as a royal portrait.

Third, and most unexpectedly, he only makes a strong bow to religion when he calls upon God to forgive his former patron, Sultan 'Ali 'Adil Shāh, for destroying the temples of Vijayanagar. This last gesture turns the stereotype of Muslim iconoclasm on its head. Shirāzi acknowledges that temple destruction has taken place in military and political contexts of conquest, but he deplores it as a violation of beauty and, ultimately, as an offense against God. Although he does not mention it, the temple at Bankapur, which he also admires, was evidently the “superb temple” that ‘Ali ‘Adil Shāh destroyed and replaced with a mosque when he took the city in 1575. Shirāzi’s strong emotional and religious reaction against the destruction of temples is all the more noteworthy in view of his basically conservative Muslim attitude; his account of the religious innovations of the Mughal emperor Akbar is highly critical, closely resembling Badā’ūnī’s negative view of Akbar rather than the universalist perspective of Abū al-Faḍl.8

Shirāzi was not the first Muslim to appreciate the importance of Ellora. The Arab scholar Mas’ūdī (d. 956) spent several years as ambassador to the powerful Rashtrakuta empire, under whose auspices some of the temples of Ellora were constructed; the Rashtrakutas had friendly relations with the Arabs, whom they viewed as allies against the Gurjaras of northern India.9 In his Meadows of Gold, in the context of a lengthy disquisition on temples of the ancient world, Mas’ūdī briefly describes the temple of Ellora in the following passage, noting that in another place (unfortunately, a lost work) he has more fully discussed: “the temples (huyakil) in India dedicated to idols (asnām) in the form of Buddhas (bidada), which have appeared since ancient times in the land of India, and information about the great temple which is in India, known as Ellora; this is an object of pilgrimage (yuqada) from far distances in India. It has a land endowment, and around it are a thousand cells, where monks supervise the worship (tsim) of this idol in India.”10

It should be noted that in this account, Mas’ūdī does not distinguish between Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain temples and images; the words for “idol” in Arabic (bidada) and Persian (but) were in fact derived from Buddha (he immediately follows this reference with a vague note about the temple to the Buddhist continuum with which we shall return in the period after Ellora had ceased to be a frontier for some Turkish sultans and whom they came into conflict in 1318, Sultan Qutb al-Dīn Hasan, awaiting the minor Sultan of Warangal.13 A Persian prince, al-Dīn Hasan, built a mosque at Ellora in 1352, as is shown by the inscriptions and understanding the walls.”14 We learn from Nizām Shāh, a second Mughal emperor, that the great temple at Ellora today is dedicated to the pleasure.

The most significant Sufi figure in the Mughal empire that Shirāzi admires is the governor under the Mughals in the Deccan sultanates and at whom many consider the Chishti shrine at Shrāfī near Ellora, a sufi from Ellora. In his Meadows of Gold, Chishti has a “subha” (tract) on the work of the temple in India, Ellora, and there, or why not? It appears to Seely, a British visitor in 1810, recorded in his Journal of a Tour and cow slaughter, and the same skeptic Seely has the same skepticism, at the same.16 Catering to the iconoclasm in India, nothing more than acts of nothing more than acts of setting down prefigured
The most surprising of all the admirers of Ellora is none other than the Mughal emperor Aawrangzib, who spent years in the Deccan, first as governor under Shah Jahan, and later as emperor reducing the Deccan sultanates and quashing Maratha rebels. He was buried in 1707 in the Chishti shrine complex at Khuldabad, just a few miles down the road from Ellora. In a letter, Aawrangzib recorded a visit to Khuldabad, Daulatabad, and Ellora, describing the latter as “one of the wonders of the work of the true transcendent Artisan (az ‘ajā‘i bil-‘i bāqī subhānahu),” in other words, a creation of God. The tourist visiting Ellora today is inevitably informed that half-ruined elephants, etc., are due to Aawrangzib’s fanatical destruction of idols, but there is no historical evidence to indicate that the emperor engaged in any destruction there, or why he would have stopped with so much left undone. J. B. Seely, a British soldier who spent several weeks on furlough at Ellora in 1810, recorded many reports from local informants on idol smashing and cow slaughter by Aawrangzib at Ellora, but he viewed them with the same skepticism that he reserved for tales of Portuguese doing the same. Catherine Asher has pointed out that the reports of Aawrangzib’s iconoclasm in the Deccan are typically from late sources that may reflect nothing more than legends that were hung on Aawrangzib; his documented acts of temple destruction were almost all associated with putting down political rebellions. Ironically, some of the examples of
Awrangzib’s temple destruction given by these late sources are failed attempts, frustrated by snakes, scorpions, or a deity. It seems that temple destruction is viewed as an essential characteristic of Awrangzib, regardless of whether he succeeded in actually carrying it out.18

The reaction of Shirazi to the destruction of Vijayanagar’s temples can be compared to that of certain Muslim writers in Egypt in the thirteenth century, who were enthusiastic admirers of the great pyramids at Giza. As Ulrich Haarmann put it, they were “deeply disturbed by the brutal demolition of intact pharaonic remains and the mutilation of pagan pictorial representations in the name of Islam, yet in reality all too often out of a very mundane greed for cheap and at the same time high-quality building materials.” Similarly one may quote the physician ‘Abd al-Latif, who in 1207 made the following remarks about Egyptian temples: “It is useless to halt to describe their greatness, the excellence of their construction and the just proportion of their forms, this innumerable multitude of figures, of sculptures both recessed and in relief, and of inscriptions that they offer to the admiration of spectators, all joined to the solidity of their construction and the enormous size of the stones and materials in use.” The literature of Muslim travelers in fact contains much of this kind of admiration for ancient "pagan" monuments.

The non-Islamic origin of these temples does not seem to have been a particularly big stumbling block to Muslim tourists. Some, like Shirazi, simply found religion irrelevant to their appreciation. Others were able to assimilate the non-Islamic religious traditions to acceptable categories. A number of Muslim authors interpreted the religion of the ancient Egyptians as forming part of the Sabian religion, an obscure Qur’anic term which permitted groups such as the Hellenistic pagans of Harran to function as “people of the book” for centuries. Popular Coptic mythology combined with Hermetic lore permitted Muslims to identify the great pyramids as the tombs of Agathodaimon (Seth), Hermes (Idris), and Sab, founder of the Sabeans, or else as the constructions of the Arab ancestor Shaddâd ibn ’Ad.21

Further examples can be added to the dossier of Muslim tourists who wrote appreciatively of Indian temples. The Timurid ambassador ‘Abd al-Razzâq Samarqandi, who visited Vijayanagar at the order of Shâh Rukh in 1442, reported with delight on the functioning temples he visited en route near Mangalore and Belur. He compared these temples to the paradisal garden of Iram mentioned in the Qur’an, and remarked that they were covered from top to bottom “with paintings, after the manner of the Franks and the people of Khata [Cathay].” Another in-
A short distance from here [i.e., Khuldabad] is a place named Ellora where in ages long past, sappers possessed of magical skill excavated in the defiles of the mountain spacious houses for a length of one kos. On all their ceilings and walls many kinds of images with lifelike forms have been carved. The top of the hill looks level, so much so that no sign of the buildings within it is apparent [from outside]. In ancient times when the sinful infidels had dominion over this country, certainly they and not demons (jinn) were the builders of these caves, although tradition differs on the point; it was a place of worship of the tribe of false believers. At present it is a desolation in spite of its strong foundations; it
rouses the sense of warning [of doom] to those who contemplate the future [end of things]. In all seasons, and particularly in the monsoons, when this hill and the plain below resemble a garden in the luxuriance of its vegetation and the abundance of its water, people come to see the place. A waterfall a hundred yards in width tumbles down from the hill. It is a marvelous place for strolling, charming to the eye. Unless one sees it, no written description can correctly picture it. How then can my pen adorn the page of my narrative?27

In this passage the moralizing tone is almost a perfunctory note, inserted in what is for the most part an enthusiastic report.

To modern Muslim scholars, Ellora provides a very different sort of lesson. Now equipped with the religious analysis that separates Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, the contemporary Iranian Indologist Jalali Nā'īnī cites Ellora as one of a series of Indian monuments that form an outstanding ancient example of that modern religious virtue, religious tolerance. “Apparently, prior to the edict [of Ashoka] in the Indian subcontinent, as early as the Vedic age, there was a kind of tolerance and patience between followers of various religions in terms of differing beliefs. Support for this assumption includes the hymns of the Veda and the caves of Ajanta and Ellora. In these caves the temples of three religions—Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist—are located in the bosom, the very heart of the mountains and hills of the Vindhya mountain range, about 60 miles from Aurangabad, and they can be taken as a clear sign of religious freedom and the search for peace and tranquillity among the followers of the three indigenous religions of India.”28

The vocabulary and conceptual apparatus of this remark derive from the European enlightenment rather than from medieval Islamicate culture. Nonetheless, one might characterize it as yet another Muslim reaction to Ellora, which puts the cave temples into a historical sequence constructed in terms of the relations between religions. It is also interesting to consider the estimate of Ellora by the former head of the archeological service of Hyderabad state, the well-known Muslim scholar Ghulam Yazdani: “At Ellora the religious fervor of the followers of the Brahmanical faith has carved out in the living rock temples which might well have been considered to be the work of gods not only by the votaries of that religion but also by the most discerning critic of the period, because they are unique specimens of this kind of architecture in the world.”29

The British, in contrast, tended to be reassured by looking at these monuments, sit such grandeur who, as Seely put it, “Surely a different race to the government must have presented day.”30 We were more likely to see a mentality rather than a materiality.

Today every Indian medieval king of India is well known as Alexander, but it is often forgotten that his antiquarian efforts on these names had various dynasties that dot the Indian lands with palaces and buildings such as the temples of the Daula with the construction of palm trees images of the Daula and the construction of monuments do not suggest that they were offered for officials by local rulers. The British, in contrast, were more likely to see these monuments, sit such grandeur who, as Seely put it, “Surely a different race to the government must have presented day.”30
As Seely put it, "Surely these wonderful workmen must have been of a different race to the present degenerate Hindoos, or the country and government must have been widely different from what it is at the present day." We would doubtless ascribe this reaction to the colonial mentality rather than to any internal imperative derived from Christianity.

Today every Indian schoolchild is taught the names of the ancient and medieval kings of India. Harsha and Candragupta Maurya are at least as well known as Alexander and Caesar are to western history texts. It is often forgotten that before the nineteenth century, and the prodigious antiquarian efforts of early orientalists and the Archeological Survey, these names had vanished from living memory. The rise and fall of multiple dynasties had erased the meaning of many monuments that dot the Indian landscape. Oral narratives were bound to replace lost traditions with plausible tales about the mighty men of old capable of building such wonders. We do not know what stories were told to Bijapur officials by local dwellers in the vicinity of Daulatabad about the impressive temples of Ellora, but they may well have been connected to images of the Daulatabad fort, which has notable stylistic similarities with the construction of Ellora. Shirazi's political interpretation of the monument does not seem strange when compared with the explanations that were offered to Seely by his guides in 1810. Large guardian figures were still being identified with Persian terms from Indo-Muslim court life, such as chubdār (mace-bearer) and pahlavān (wrestler). It is hard to recall that, before the age of modern tourism, travelers were not likely to see evidence of what we would call a foreign culture. The first European explorers of Asia and the New World went equipped with fantasies like The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, and they saw the cannibals, Amazons, and giants that they were prepared to see. Early European engravings of Indian idols have more than a passing resemblance to Roman deities. When the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama and his crew arrived in India in 1498, so great was their relief in seeing buildings that were evidently not "Moorish" mosques that they accepted the Hindu temples of Calicut as Christian churches, kneeling in prayer before goddesses that they described as images of the Virgin Mary and the saints (they were evidently unconcerned by the unusually large teeth and extra arms of these images). Seely notes that the first Indian soldiers sent to Egypt, in British military expeditions to combat
Napoleon, announced in amazement that the ancient Egyptians clearly worshiped Hindu gods in their temples; this was probably the first Indian hermeneutic of pharaonic antiquities. In a sense the response of the sepoys was a repetition of the reactions of early visitors from Herodotus onwards, who described the gods of Egypt in terms of their own theologies. When Shirāzī saw Ellora as analogous to Persepolis, he was only making a natural comparison from his own experience of ancient monuments. Seely did much the same when he described what he saw as Sphinxes at Ellora.

Muslims were not the only ones to reinvent Ellora's significance along new lines. When the Rashtrakutas conquered the Chalukyas and took over power in the Deccan in the seventh century, in addition to adding new Hindu monuments such as the Kailas temple, they converted Buddhist viharas into Hindu temples, chiseling out many Buddha images at Ellora and covering or replacing some with images of Vishnu. Architectural guidebooks unfortunately do not indicate what essential characteristic of Hinduism caused this extreme form of renovation. The Yadavas of Deogir were not a direct extension of the Rashtrakutas, and they must have formed their own interpretations of the meaning of Ellora, a monument near the center of their empire. While we can only speculate about the way the Yadavas positioned themselves in relation to Ellora, their interpretation must have reflected their own self-interpretation as a successor-state to the Rashtrakutas. The founder of the Mahanabhuva sect, Cakradara, is said to have briefly established a new form of worship in Ellora that was completely unrelated to the Shaiva, Buddhist, and Jain traditions of earlier eras. Ellora evidently took on a new significance among the elites of the Marathas, starting from the sixteenth century. As James Laine points out, Maloji, grandfather of the Maratha warrior Shivaji, is buried in an Islamicate tomb in the village of Ellora. In the eighteenth century, Ellora evidently received further patronage from the ruling Maratha family of the Holkars, who must have interpreted the monuments in terms of their own political and religious position.

European travelers such as Anquetil du Perron in 1760 and Seely in 1810 were informed by local brahmins that Buddha images in some of the caves actually represented Vishvakarma (a form of Vishnu), and Seely was given conflicting opinions about the meaning of Jain figures in a cave that the guides regarded as dedicated to Jagannath (another form of Vishnu). These Hindu names for Buddhist and Jain temples are still used at Ellora today.
Egyptians clearly by the first In­ ters from Hero­ of their own he was the response of Ancient of what he saw

Col. Meadows Taylor, author of Confes­ claimed that a Thug told him that the Ellora caves con­ All this goes to say that Ellora, like any ancient monument, has not had a single fixed meaning over time. The precincts were constructed over centuries, with multiple religious patterns that we today distinguish by the categories of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain. Different generations of patrons contributed their own interpretations with their commissions and constructions. Just as the monuments themselves are subject to physical modification by later visitors and patrons, their meaning has been adjusted to the symbolic parameters of new civilizational orders.

As far as the question of Muslim iconoclasm is concerned, the evidence of Muslim travelers who visited Hindu temples does not provide justification for assuming that idol-smashing activity is easily detectable, much less the visceral instinct that it is often assumed to be. The examples cited above are not random or selective, but constitute the results of a fairly extensive search for textual reactions by Muslims to Hindu temples. Why should we assume that Muslims are by nature and training iconoclastic, and when they do violence to idols or temples, why do we assume that this behavior is rooted in Islamic faith? Take the example of Babur, in an incident that took place near Gwalior in 1528. On that occasion, he recorded a bout of severe opium sickness with much vomiting. The next day, he saw some Jain statues, which he de­ "On the southern side is a large idol, approximately 20 yards tall. They are shown stark naked with all their private parts exposed. Around the two large reservoirs inside Urwahi have been dug twenty to twenty-five wells, from which water is drawn to irrigate the vegetation, flowers, and trees planted there. Urwahi is not a bad place. In fact, it is rather nice. Its one drawback was the idols, so I ordered them destroyed." The following day, he visited Gwalior fort. "Riding out from this garden we made a tour of Gwalior’s temples, some of which are two and three stories but are squat and in the ancient style with dadoes en­
tirely of figures sculpted in stone. Other temples are like madrasas, with porches and large, tall domes and chambers like those of a madrasa. Atop the lower chambers are stone-carved idols. Having examined the edifices, we went out." At that point he enjoyed an outdoor feast.

What part of Babur’s behavior during these three days was Islamic? On day one, he was hung over from drug intoxication, on day two, he destroyed two naked Jain idols, and on day three he enjoyed a pleasant excursion to Hindu temples with the governor of Gwalior fort and left the idols there intact. Why did he destroy idols on one day and enjoy them the next? His good mood on the third day may have had something to do with either his recovery from hangover or the embassy of submission he received that morning from a major Rajput ruler. Alternatively, he may have considered it ill-mannered to destroy part of a monument he was being shown, in a fort that one of his subordinates was in charge of. In any case it is clear that it is highly problematic to predict political behavior (such as destruction of temples) from the nominal religious identity that may be ascribed to an individual or group, without reference to personal, political, and historical factors.

Above all, it is noteworthy that the occasions when Muslim writers have invoked God and religion in relation to Hindu monuments have been when they have been awed by the creation of beauty. While Ra’if al-Din Shīrāzī in a sense reduced the significance of Ellora to the familiar terms of imperial monuments, he was also stirred to protest on religious grounds against the iconoclasm of his imperial patron. It does not seem accidental that at the moment of praising the extraordinary, even in what seems the stereotyped convention of the wonders of the world, the emotion of reverence should take control. It would be a shame if contemporary ideological conflicts blinded us to the perception of the profound admiration that Indian monuments like Ellora have evoked in Muslim visitors. More to the point, accounts like Shīrāzī’s indicate that Muslims had complex reactions to non-Muslim religious sites. Their responses could be dictated by a variety of factors, including their education and temperament, the political situation, and whether the building fell into the category of ancient wonder or living temple (Muslims seem to have enjoyed both). The popular one-dimensional portrait of Muslim iconoclasm survives as a durable stereotype because it does not acknowledge its subjects as actors in historical contexts. The iconoclasm stereotype derives not from the actual attitudes of Muslims toward temples, but from a predetermined normative definition of Islam. The reasons for the appeal of such a portrait elsewhere.

Notes

1. To this list we can add, for example, Kadamba, Swabhāsī, and other autocratic kings of western India. These tropes are also found in the biographies of the Tughluq ruler Tughluqubad, the pujya of the School of Oratory (Ishfar), and Babur’s father, Jahan Behzad. By the late 16th century, the renunciation of idol worship became a yardstick of orthodoxy.


appeal of such religious stereotypes, ironically, will need to be sought elsewhere.

Notes

1. To this category of the trophy belongs the transport of Ashokan columns and other ancient pillars, of which the Iron Pillar of Delhi is but one example. These trophies may be found in royal mosques of the Sultanate period at Hisar and Jaunpur as well as the Qutb-ul-Islam mosque of Delhi, and possibly at Tughlaqabad as well. Cf. Mehrdad Shokoohy and Natalie H. Shokoohy, "Tughlaqabad, the Earliest Surviving Town of the Delhi Sultanate," Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 57 (1994): 548.

2. I am basing this analysis on the critical edition of the text established by the late Abū Naṣr Khalīlī, which has been entrusted to me by his son, Omar Khalidi, to see through the press; it is to be published by the Islamic Research Foundation of the Ashtān-i Quds-i Rizawi in Mashhad, Iran. For further information on this author, see my articles “Shirāzī, Raff al-Dīn,” in The Encyclopaedia of Islam, ed. H. A. R. Gibb et al., 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960-), IX, 483 (cited henceforth as EF), and “Ebrahim Shirāzī,” in Encyclopedia Iranica (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 1986-), VIII, 76.


6. On Persepolis, see M. Streck [G. C. Miles], "Istakhn," EI', IV, pp. 219-22. It is worth noting that the author of this article attributes the defacement of human figures at Persepolis to "Muslim fanaticism," something that calls for further analysis.


commit the atrocious act himself, he allowed his
orders), 2:547, §1424, corresponding to 4:95–96 in the nineteenth-century edition of the Arabic text by Barbier de Maynard. There are problems in the Arabic text published in Egypt; I have followed the French translators in reading bidada rather than bidra (which would result in “the form of the moon” rather than “in the form of Buddhhas”), and Ellora (Alur) rather than the anomalous MS readings al-adiri and bilad al-ray.

Both Arabic editions are in error, however, in reading jawairin (“female slaves,” pl. of jariya) in place of jawairun (“resident pilgrims,” pl. of jari, probably in this case meaning Jain monks); this led the French translators to render the last phrase as “jeunes esclaves destinees aux pelerins qui viennent de toute l’Inde pour adorer cette idee.” From what we know of Ellora under the Rashtrakutas, it would have functioned as a monastery rather than as a massive dwarapula center.

11. The British traveler Seely, too, was fairly vague about the relations between Hinduism and Buddhism; see J. B. Seely, The Wonders of Ellora or the Narrative of a Journey to the Temples or Dwellings Excavated out of a Mountain of Granite at Ellora in the East Indies (London, 1824), 197–98.


18. Seely’s brahmin informants told him “that if Aurungzebe actually did not commit the atrocious act himself, he allowed his court” (241).


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21. Wiet, L’Égypte de Murtadhi fils de Gaphiphe, 60.


31. Ibid., 258.

32. Seely (145–47) was informed that the Ellora caves were excavated by the Pandavas prior to the main action of the Mahābhārata.

33. Ibid., 139, 299. Seely also records that “two colossal figures resting on large maces” were called dewriedars (172), apparently from the Hindi term ‘dwar’ (door) plus the Persian suffix -dar (holder); cf. Sarkar in Māṣir-i-‘Alamgiri, 325. Modern scholars unselfconsciously go back to the classical Sanskrit term dwārapāla to describe the massive doorkeepers at Ellora (Surendranath Sen, ed.,
Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri, Indian Records Series [New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1949], 320 n. 6).


35. Seely, The Wonders of Ellora, 156–67. It was particularly representations of the bull (i.e., Nandi) and of serpents that aroused recognition among the “Bombay Siphaees.”

36. Ibid., 156–58.


