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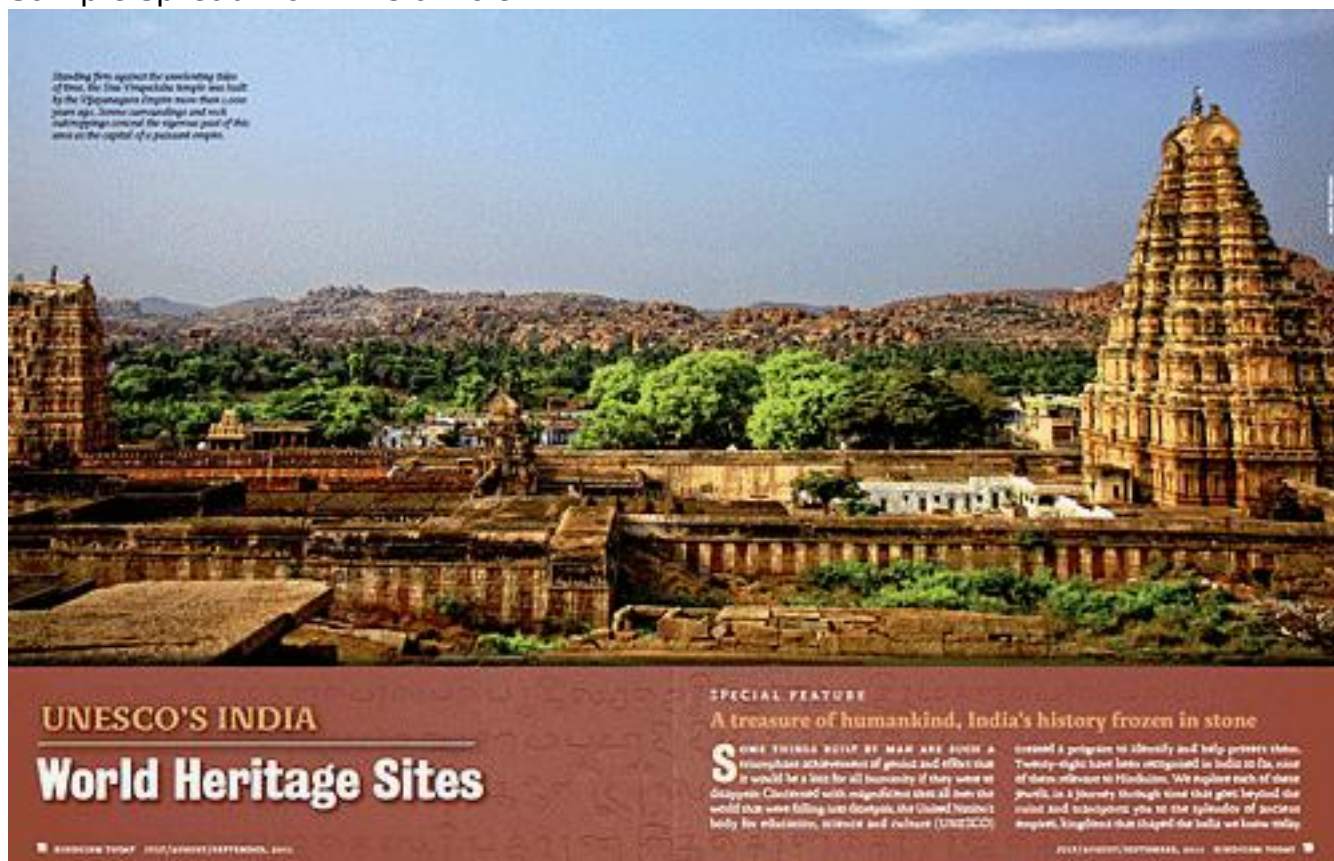
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Special Feature

UNESCO's India World Heritage Sites

A treasure of humankind, India's history frozen in stone

Sample spread from this article



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Some things built by man are such a triumphant achievement of genius and effort that it would be a loss for all humanity if they were to disappear. Concerned with magnificent sites all over the world that were falling into disrepair, the United

Nation's body for education, science and culture (UNESCO) created a program to identify and help protect them. Twenty-eight have been recognized in India so far, nine of them relevant to Hinduism. We explore each of these jewels, in a journey through time that goes beyond the ruins and transports you to the splendor of ancient empires, kingdoms that shaped the India we know today.

Vijayanagara

Hampi village, Karnataka (14th to 16th centuries)

The quiet area around the little village of Hampi, in Karnataka, was once occupied by Vijayanagara City, the capital of the prosperous and far-flung Vijayanagara Empire. The ruins of the great city still attest to its former glory.

The empire was created during the 14th century, a time when northern kingdoms were falling to Muslim armies one after another. Inspired by the rousing discourses of saint Madhavacharya, local Hindu kings realized their common identity and united for mutual protection. The empire soon merged with the neighboring Hoysala kingdom, creating a vast sovereign state that stood strong and defended itself for centuries. Transcending regionalism by promoting Hinduism as a unifying factor, the empire harbored a golden age for Hindu art, religion and culture. Its architecture, reflecting the empire itself, merged various South Indian traditions. This same dynamic inspired talented craftsmen and catalyzed innovation, producing masterpieces unmatched before or since. The empire's patronage enabled fine arts and literature to reach new heights in Kannada, Telugu, Tamil and Sanskrit languages; it was also during this period that Carnatic music evolved into its current form. Artistry in Hindu sculpture reached its zenith in the 15th century, a few decades before the apex of the Italian Renaissance, a time when the world basked in magnificent art.

Efficient administration and vigorous overseas trade brought new technologies, such as complex irrigation systems. The capital had water supply systems constructed to channel and store water, ensuring a consistent supply throughout the year. Huge reservoirs were built by thousands of laborers. The royal palaces had a system with sophisticated channels using gravity and siphons to transport water through pipelines, an innovation in its day.

Vijayanagara excelled in military strength. King Krishnadevaraya, who reigned from 1509 to 1529 ce, had a personal army of 100,000 infantry, 20,000 cavalrymen

and over 900 war elephants. The nation's army and navy comprised between one and two million soldiers at all times. The army, recruited from all classes of society, also consisted of archers, musketeers and a class of soldiers carrying the largest shields ever taken to the battlefield. The empire was the first in India to use long-range artillery. This was commonly manned by foreign gunners; mercenaries were hired from as far as the borders of the Caspian Sea. Horses and elephants were fully armored, and the elephants had knives fastened to their tusks to inflict maximum damage. With such a massive military operation, sometimes with the help of the Portuguese from Goa who were their trade partners, the empire successfully held control of South India for centuries, essentially keeping Hinduism from being diminished by Muslim invaders.

But even as religious wars raged, Vijayanagara kings were tolerant of all religions and sects, a fact that surprised foreign visitors. Staunchly Hindu, the kings were addressed by titles such as "protector of cows" and Hinduraya-Suratrana, "upholder of the Hindu faith." At the same time, tolerance earned one ruler the honorary title "sultan among Hindu kings." The Empire's founders, Harihara I and Bukka Raya I, were devout Saivites, but made grants to the Vaishnava order of Sringeri and took Madhavacharya as their patron saint.

The empire's legacy includes many monuments spread over South India, but the best known are those at Hampi. The final capital of the last great kingdoms of South India, this city, enriched by cotton and spice trade with Europe, was one of the most beautiful of the medieval world. Its palaces and Dravidian temples were much admired by travelers, be they Arab (Abdul Razaak), Portuguese (Domingo Paes) or Italian (Nicolo dei Conti)--see sidebar, below.

Vijayanagara reached its apogee under King Krishnadevaraya, whose name evokes awe in India to this day. The king was reputed to be cheerful and courteous, but ruthless in maintaining the law. Ever a general, he kept fit through strenuous daily exercise. Travelogues depict him as an able administrator and excellent warlord, leading from the front in battle and tending to the wounded. In 1524, he began transitioning power to his son, Tirumala Raya; but the crown prince was fatally poisoned, allegedly by the king's trusted commander and advisor, Timmarusu, who was blinded as a punishment. Heartbroken, the king fell ill and never recovered.

The empire would not last much longer. Vijayanagara city was ruthlessly defeated by the Deccan Muslim confederacy at the battle of Talikota in 1565, plundered over

a period of six months and then abandoned. With it, also fell the empire.

Historical Accounts

Travelers from Europe, struck with awe, wrote back to their kings describing the imposing Vijayanagara Empire

The size of this city i do not write here, because it cannot all be seen from any one spot, but I climbed a hill whence I could see a great part of it. What I saw seemed to me as large as Rome, and very beautiful to the sight; there are many groves of trees within it, in the gardens of the houses, and many conduits of water which flow into the midst of it, and in places there are lakes. The king's palace has chambers made of ivory, with roses and lotuses carved at the top, so rich and beautiful that you would hardly find anywhere another such.

This is the best provided city in the world, and everything abounds. It is stocked with provisions such as rice, wheat, grains, Indian-corn, barley and beans, mung, pulses, horse-gram, and other seeds, and there is a large store of these and very cheap; but wheat is not so common as the other grains, since no one eats it except the Moors.

Domingo Paes, Portuguese explorer, 1522

The king here is more powerful than all the other kings of India. He takes to himself 12,000 wives, who follow him wherever he may go, a third on foot, another third on horseback and the remainder carried by men in litters.

At a certain time of the year their idol is carried through the city, placed between two chariots, in which are young women richly adorned, who sing hymns to the God, and accompanied by a great concourse of people. Some, making an incision in their side, and inserting a rope thus through their body, hang themselves to the chariot. This kind of sacrifice they consider the best and most acceptable of all.

They keep festivals of especial solemnity. On one of these occasions the males and females of all ages, having bathed in the rivers or the sea, clothe themselves in

new garments, and spend three entire days in singing, dancing, and feasting [New Year]. On another of these festivals they fix up on the outside on the temple roofs an innumerable number of lamps of oil of sesame, which are kept burning day and night [Dipavali]. On the third, which lasts nine days, they set up in all the highways large beams, like the masts of small ships, to the upper part of which are attached pieces of very beautiful cloth of various kinds, interwoven with gold. On the summit of each of these beams is each day placed a man of pious aspect, dedicated to religion, capable of enduring all things with equanimity, who is to pray for the favour of God [Navaratri].

There is also another festival during which they sprinkle all passers-by, even the king and queen themselves, with saffron colored water, placed for that purpose by the wayside. [Holi]. This is received by all with much laughter."

Nicolo da Conti, Italian explorer, 1421

Pattadakal

Karnataka (6th to 12th centuries)

On the banks of the malaprabha river lies Pattadakal, the capital of the Chalukya dynasty, which reigned in South India from the 6th to the 12th century. The rule of the Chalukyas marks a golden age in the history of Karnataka and an important milestone in India, the shift from smaller kingdoms to large empires. For the first time, a South Indian kingdom took control and consolidated the entire region between the Kaveri and the Narmada rivers. The rise of this dynasty saw the birth of efficient administration, overseas trade and commerce and the development of a new style of architecture.

The kings claimed to be descended from Divinity and nursed by the Sapta Matrikas (seven mothers). A court poet from Kalyani thus sung, "Once Brahma was engaged in the performance of the twilight rituals. Indra approached and beseeched him to create a hero who could vanquish the rising evil on Earth. Brahma looked steadily into the oblation water on his palm and out sprang a great warrior, the progenitor of the Chalukyas." The Chalukyas worshiped many Gods, foremost among them Siva, but also Vishnu, Chamundi, Surya, Kubera, Parvati, Vinayaka and Karttikeya.

Even though Pattadakal is now abandoned, it has so many temples that some consider it still holy. It represents the high point of an eclectic art which blends architectural forms from North and South India. (The style, known as Badami Chalukya, takes its name from a nearby town.) The carvings are so harmoniously integrated that they seem to flow from stone to stone. There are nine impressive Hindu temples here, as well as a Jain sanctuary, but one masterpiece stands out: the Virupaksha Temple, a Saiva sanctuary built in 740 by Queen Lokamahadevi. It served as inspiration for Hindu temples at Ellora, which in turn were used as models for later Buddhist constructions.

The fortunes of the Chalukyas waned in the 11th century. Danarnava, the king, was killed in battle in 973 by King Bhima of the Telugu Chodas, who then imposed his rule over the region for 27 years. During this time, King Danarnava's two sons took refuge in the rival Chola kingdom. In the year 1000, Saktivarman I, the elder of the two sons, returned to Pattadakal as the ruler, though under the protection of king Rajaraja Chola, who was a suzerain to the Telugu Chodas. Eventually, the Chalukyas were peacefully absorbed into the Chola Empire. Many centuries later, their serene art style reappeared in the pillared architecture of Vijayanagar.

Mahabalipuram

Tamil Nadu (6th to 9th centuries)

On India's east coast, 37 miles south of populous Chennai, lies Mahabalipuram, a 7th-century port city built by the Pallava dynasty, which ruled northern Tamil Nadu and southern Andhra Pradesh from the 6th to the early 9th century. The city's original name, Mamallapuram, (city of Mamalla) is believed to refer to the Pallava king Narasimhavarman I, who took on the epithet mahamalla (great wrestler) after his favorite sport.

The Pallavas were staunch Hindus known for their tolerance of other faiths. Chinese monk Xuanzang, who visited Kanchipuram during the reign of Narasimhavarman I, reporting that there were 100 Buddhist monasteries and 80 temples in the Pallava capital.

Music, painting and literature thrived under the patronage of this dynasty, with some of the most illustrious Sanskrit poets, like Bharavi and Dandin, belonged to this era. But the greatest surviving monuments are architectural.

The site today is known for its chariot-like temples, cave sanctuaries, and giant open-air reliefs. The carved-stone structures are so numerous that visitors wonder if they are in a city made of rock. Mahabalipuram absorbed, refined and disseminated myriad stone-building influences. It was here, it is believed, that Hindu temple architecture evolved from the ancient pattern of carving and refining a natural cave, and adopted new techniques of quarrying and moving stones and creating pillars, so that temples could be built far from the native rock.

These craftwork shown here, on the cutting edge 13 centuries ago, is still impressive today. The sculptural style, characterized by softness and supple mass, established the foundations of medieval South Indian architecture and spread widely to civilizations that traded with the Pallavas: Kambuja (Cambodia), Shrivijaya (Malaysia, Sumatra, Java) and the empire of Champa (Annam).

Some believe that this area served as a place for masters of different schools to demonstrate their work to the king. The site feels like an artist's studio immortalized in stone, with sketches more than a thousand years old. The sculptures, some half finished, showcase several distinct styles of architecture. This can be seen in the pancha rathas, five large, ornate chariot shrines carved wholly from a monolithic outcropping of pink granite honoring the Pandavas of the Mahabharata epic. While the Yudhisthira, Arjuna and Draupadi rathas are square, the Bhima and Nakula rathas are rectangular, and the Sahadeva ratha is semi-circle. A completely different style is exemplified by the Shore Temple, which was constructed from granite blocks. Now eroded by seawater and wind, the temple is still a breathtaking sight against the deep blue waters of the ocean. Visitors can only imagine its original glory.

Chola Temples

Tamil Nadu (10th to 13th centuries)

Civilization in south india has flourished in unbroken continuity for many thousands of years. Mighty empires and powerful kings have ruled millions of people from their capitals. But where are their opulent palaces?

In India's architectural tradition, as in her culture and religion, God is first and foremost. Great rulers made their mark on history not by building extravagant

abodes for themselves but rather by creating magnificent temples, where the Divine ruler dwelled. Case in point: the awe-inspiring temples created by the Chola empire. UNESCO calls them the "Great Living Chola Temples;" for unlike most World Heritage monuments, they are as functional today as they were a thousand years ago. Built in the 11th and 12th centuries, these are Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur, the Temple at Gangaikondacholisvaram (also called Brihadisvara Temple) and Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram.

The most important of the three is the Thanjavur Temple, built during the reign of the great king Rajaraja I (985-1014), the true founder of the Chola Empire. At its greatest expanse, his realm stretched over all of South India and the neighboring islands (see map). Historians owe much to him, as he was the first king of South India to record each event of his rule in detail. Without those records, much of the history would be unknown.

Rajaraja Chola is revered as one of the most competent rulers of all time, militarily and administratively. He fought many battles with the Chalukyas in the North and the Pandyas in the South, each victory strengthening the foundations for a Chola dynasty. His son and successor, Rajendra Chola I, would extend the empire even further.

Rajaraja streamlined administration by dividing the country into districts and standardizing revenue collection through systematic land surveys. His massive infrastructural projects, including Thanjavur's temple, effectively circulated the money back out amongst his subjects.

The Chola system encouraged the building of countless small temples and shrines, one for each village. Temples were the heart and center of the community, a place of gathering, a hub for culture and worship and a source of identity for those living in the area. In the Chola kingdom, every citizen felt connected to a temple and considered it his own.

Even financially, temples were the center of the empire: rather than perpetually accumulating wealth, they served as a channel for money to reach the community or return to the central government. They acted as banks, lending money or buying products, creating incentives for farmers and merchants. Soldiers borrowed from

the temple and paid interest in cash. Each temple sponsored specific troop regiments, including elephant troops, cavalry and foot soldiers, all manned and funded by the community of that temple.

In 993 ce, Rajaraja Chola invaded Sri Lanka. A copper-plate inscription describes his powerful army crossing the ocean by ships to defeat Mahinda V, the king of Sinhalas. Anuradhapura, the 1400-year-old capital of Sinhala, was totally destroyed and abandoned. It is believed that after thus consolidating his power, while he was still in Sri Lanka, Rajaraja conceived the wish to build a mammoth temple. The Brihadisvara Temple of Thanjavur was erected in only seven years, and completed in 1010.

Sometimes called Rajarajesvaram, the sprawling edifice was richly endowed by the sovereign. There, major royal ceremonies were performed, such as anointing the emperor and linking him with God Siva. Inscriptions and chronicles indicate the temple had a permanent staff of several hundred priests, 400 devadasis (sacred dancers) and over 50 musicians, as well as record-keepers, scholars and craftsmen.

Its income in gold, silver and precious stones was legendary, but efficiently managed, providing not only for the upkeep and improvement of the buildings but also for real investments. The outer walls, for example, which befit the massive temple, are thought to have been built later, in the 16th century, using the temple's own funds. The temple lent money to shipowners, village assemblies and craft guilds. It was a business hub for thousands of suppliers, who brought countless flowers, brass items and barrels of ghee and sesame oil. The temple also served as a center for cultural events, such as worshipful dance. The outer walls are covered with intricately carved portrayals of Lord Siva as Nataraja, in the 108 poses of His cosmic dance.

At the center of a large courtyard stands a pavilion housing a colossal statue of Nandi, the vahana bull of Siva. From there, a succession of halls and vestibules (mukta mandapam, maha mandapam, ardha mandapam) leads to the sanctum sanctorum which enshrines a giant Sivalingam, a stone pillar 12 feet tall, the largest in any temple worldwide, representing Siva as Absolute Reality, beyond time, form and space.

Rising high over the sanctum is the 206-foot-tall pyramidal temple tower (vimanam) crowned by a monolithic capstone weighing 70 tons--one of the architectural masterpieces of India. The feat of lifting and placing this massive stone so high up in the air still baffles modern engineers. With no mechanized cranes, the ancient builders had to rely on ingenuity and brute strength. How did they do it? Miles away from the temple are the remnants of a ramp incline that some believe (with satellite images to back their claim) was used to move and raise the stone, using elephants, ropes, levers and rollers.

Rajaraja Chola dedicated Brihadisvara Temple strictly to God Siva, though temples and shrines for other Deities were added in later centuries. These include a Devi temple, built in the 13th century by Pandyan king Koneriramaikondan, and a Subrahmanya temple, built in the 17th century by a Nayak king of Madurai and a Ganesha temple around erected also the 17th century.

The Sun Temple

Konark (13th to 16th centuries)

Surya, the sun god, is extolled in the Vedas; in fact, the Chandogya Upanishad focuses solely on Surya worship. Though temples for this Deity are rare--there are only seven in existence--the complex of Konark, Odisha, where the Sun has been worshiped continuously since ancient times, shines bright amid the constellation of renowned temples of India. Located on the shoreline, now about two miles from the sea, the Sun Temple was designed and built to represent Surya's chariot, ever moving, navigating unflinching through the skies, with twelve pairs of exquisitely decorated wheels at its base and drawn by seven spirited horses, each over 15 feet tall. The entire complex is decorated with intricate carvings depicting the gamut of all that the Sun's rays touch. The Konark temple is testimony to the religious fervor of 13th-century Odisha. Built during the reign of King Narasingha Deva (1238-64) of the Eastern Ganga dynasty, it was probably erected to celebrate a victory over Muslim forces. The location was once the busy port of Kalinga, a bustling and wealthy capital, which had maritime trade relations with Southeast Asian countries. Solar symbols on ancient punch-marked coins prove Sun worship's antiquity. The temple is oriented so that the first rays of the Sun strike its principal entry. The portal is guarded by two giant lions, each pouncing on and subduing a war elephant, which in turn stands on a human. Beyond is the main structure that remains standing, the audience hall (jahamogana), where a pyramidal roof soars over 128 feet high. The vimana (principal sanctuary) that enshrined the presiding Deity, a curvilinear tower mounted by cupolas which stood 229 feet tall, collapsed in the 19th century. Now only its elaborate external projections remain. Also surviving the vagaries of time are the banquet hall (bhoga mandapam) and a few portions of the long dancing hall (natya mandir), where temple dancers danced in homage to the Sun God. On the north and south sides, completing the depiction of temple as chariot, are 24 wheels, each 10 feet in

diameter and lavishly sculptured with symbolic motifs representing the cycle of the seasons and the months. Between the wheels, the plinth of the temple is entirely decorated. The carvings are prolific and exquisite. Thousands of images include Deities, celestial and human musicians, dancers, lovers, and myriad scenes of courtly life, from hunts and military battles to the pleasures of courtly relaxation and intimate relations. These are interspersed with birds, animals (close to two thousand charming and lively elephants march around the base of the main temple alone), mythological creatures, and a wealth of intricate botanical and geometrical decorative designs. The Konark complex was constructed from oxidized, weathered-looking ferruginous sandstone. Records describe a lodestone atop the vimana so massive that its magnetism attracted vessels navigating the nearby sea, confounding compasses and causing shipwrecks. To save their ships, the Portuguese voyagers are said to have taken away the lodestone, which was key in holding together all the stone walls of the main sanctum and the iron columns. Without it, the walls lost their integrity and eventually fell down. Folklore describes wide use of magnetism in the original temple, with a complex system that could make the Deity statue, because of its high iron content, float in mid air. The Siva Lingam of Somnath Temple, on India's west coast, was similar held in mid air by carefully placed magnetic stones. The Sun Temple retains its original magnificent for only three centuries. Odisha fell to Muslim control in 1568, whence began constant attempts to destroy the Hindu temples. The pandas (priests) of Konark removed the presiding Sun God murti for safekeeping, allegedly burying it deep in the sand. According to one story, the murti was later taken to Puri and kept in the temple of Indra; others believe it still lies in Konark, undiscovered. In either case, Sun worship in the temple ended upon the removal of the Deity. Gradually, many impressive items of the temple were moved to the Jagannath temple in Puri, including a few murtis of God Surya. In 1779, a sadhu took the Arun Pillar from Konark and put it in front of the Lion's Gate at Puri. By the end of 18th century, Konark had lost most of its glories and became overgrown with dense forest, resurfacing slowly as Indians became aware and proud of this jewel of their heritage. What remains, however, nonetheless testifies to the glory of India and the human genius behind the complex. Poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote of Konark: "Here the language of stone surpasses the language of man." **Ajanta**

Maharashtra (200 bce to 650 ce)

It was 1819, about 60 miles from Aurangabad, an expedition of British adventurers, flamboyant in their bravado, with native servants carrying their heavy gear, trudged through the hot jungle in search of a tiger to kill. To their astonishment, they stumbled on a warren of hidden caves, known only to locals, that bore witness to a great and ancient civilization, a kingdom that had mastered painting and stone-carving in the days when England, not yet conquered by the Roman Empire, was still a land of warring tribes, agricultural but possibly preliterate.

Cut into the volcanic lava of the Deccan among the sylvan Sahyadri Hills, the 29 caves of Ajanta were excavated beginning around 200 bce, then finally abandoned in 650 ce. Five of the caves were temples; the remaining 24 were monasteries, thought to have been occupied by some 200 monks and artisans.

Massive pillars support the caves' ceilings. On the walls are masterful paintings, their style fluid and sensitive. The refined lightness of the decoration, the balance of the compositions and the grace of feminine figures place the paintings of Ajanta among the major achievements of universal pictorial art. When most of the world's art was still flat and bi-dimensional, the Ajanta artists used light and shadow to give depth to their paintings. The Ajanta style has exerted considerable influence in India and elsewhere, particularly in Java and Sri Lanka.

The complex was home to both Buddhists and Hindus, a reflection of the Gupta Empire (4th to 7th century), in which the two religions coexisted. This was a golden period for Indian civilization, with scholars such as Varahamihira, Aryabhata, Vatsyayana and Kalidasa.

Ellora

Maharashtra (5th to 10th centuries)

Ellora, about 20 miles from Aurangabad in Maharashtra, was built by the Rashtrakuta rulers between the 5th and 10th centuries ce. The 34 man-made caves, representing the epitome of Indian rock-cut architecture, were excavated out of the tall Charanandri hills, continuing and improving the same style as Ajanta. They harbored monasteries and places of worship for Hindus (17 caves), Buddhists (12 caves) and Jains (5 caves), illustrating the spirit of tolerance characteristic of India, with three religions establishing sanctuaries in a single place.

Southernmost along the cliff are the Buddhist group of caves, which appear to be the oldest (c. 600 and 800); the Hindu group (c. 600 to 900) occupy the middle section; and northernmost are the Jain caves, created by Digambara monks towards 800-1000.

The most widely known of the Ellora caves are the Hindu group, which are mostly Saivite. Particularly famous is the Kailash Temple, an enormous complex probably undertaken during the reign of Krishna I (757-783) of the Rashtrakuta. Also called Kailasanatha, this king among rock-cut temples is the unrivalled centerpiece of Ellora. Sprawling over an area twice the size of Athens' Parthenon, this massive, multistory complex showcases elaborate workmanship, landmark architecture and monk-like attention to detail. Though the architects cut away all the rock around the perimeter so that it appears to be a free-standing structure, it was actually carved out the solid rock of the cliff. Designed to evoke Mount Kailash, Lord Siva's abode, the temple was originally covered in white plaster to represent that snow-covered peak.

The temple spans several stories, once connected by stairways and bridges that have now fallen. At the entrance, a towering gateway opens to reveal a courtyard edged by columned galleries three stories high. The galleries are punctuated by huge sculpted panels and alcoves from which sculptures of many Deities watch and bless the devotees. Originally, flying bridges of stone connected the galleries to the central temple structures.

Within the courtyard, in front of the central Siva temple, stands the giant Nandi Mandapam, carved 95 feet tall with 16 pillars. Life-size elephants carved into the base hold the structure aloft. A rock bridge connects the Nandi Mandapam to the Siva temple beyond, a tall pyramidal structure reminiscent of a South Indian temple. The shrine, complete with pillars, windows, inner and outer rooms and gathering halls, has an enormous Sivalingam at its heart.

The construction of this cave was a feat of human genius--and patience. The largest monolithic structure in the world, it entailed removal of 200,000 tons of rock and took more than a century to complete.

Khajuraho

Madhya Pradesh (950 to 1400 ce)

By Aneesha Myles Shewani

Everything about Khajuraho is magical, even the legend of its origins: Hemavati,

the attractive daughter of a brahmin priest, was seduced one evening by the Moon God, Chandra, when she was bathing in the Rati river. A son was born from this union between a woman and a deva outside the bonds of matrimony. Beleaguered by society, Hemavati sought refuge in the dense forest with her young son, Chandravarman. The boy grew up under his mother's tutelage and, empowered by his divine heritage, founded the great Chandela dynasty. He was blessed by his father with a philosopher's mind, political skills and unsurpassed bravery. When he became a ruler, he dreamt that his mother wanted him to build temples that would reveal human passions and the emptiness of human desire.

The name Khajuraho is derived from "kharjuravahaka," an amalgamation of the Sanskrit words kharjura, date palm, and vahaka, "one who carries." The city was the original capital of the Chandela Rajputs, a Hindu dynasty that ruled Central India from the 10th to the 12th centuries. The Khajuraho temples were built over a span of a hundred years, from 950 to 1050. Of the original 80 Hindu temples, only 22 now stand over an area of about eight square miles, maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India. The largest and grandest temple of Khajuraho is the Kandariya Mahadeva temple, attributed to King Ganda (1017-29).

The seventeen main temples were built mostly for Siva (6) and Vishnu (6), but also for Surya, Brahma and the apsaras. Three temples are Jain; and one Vishnu temple has been converted into a Parvati shrine, the Devi Jaadambi. Folklore has it that most of the massive temples were originally surrounded by lakes.

The temples are made of sandstone. No mortar was used; the stones were put together with mortise and tenon joints and held in place by gravity. This form of construction requires very precise joints. The columns and beams were built with stones that weigh up to 20 tons. Each temple has an elevated substructure over which rises the body of the richly decorated building, the jangha, covered with several sculpted panels and from which side galleries are accessed. The structure is crowned by a series of bundled towers with curvilinear contours, the sikharas, characteristic of the temples in the Nagara style. Each tower symbolizes the "cosmic mountain," Mount Kailash.

Khajuraho is often misinterpreted by tourists as the "kamasutra temples." Beautifully carved erotic sculptures and sexual postures are among the carvings on the external walls of the temples. Travel writer McConnachie describes Khajuraho sculpture thus: "Twisting, high breasted-nymphs display their generously contoured

and bejewelled bodies on exquisitely worked exterior wall panels. These fleshy apsaras run riot across the surface of the stone, putting on make-up, washing their hair, playing games, dancing, and endlessly knotting and unknitting their girdles... Beside the heavenly nymphs are serried ranks of griffins, guardian Deities and, most notoriously, extravagantly interlocked lovemaking couples."

However, the suggestive carvings are actually a minor part of the art. A greater emphasis is put on the depiction of womanhood: here one woman is depicted writing a letter, applying makeup to her eyes, combing her tresses, dancing, picking a thorn from her foot, or playing with her child. All carvings are intricately detailed, sharply etched and sculpted with consummate skill. There are scenes from daily life, of warfare, of musicians and potters, and various forms and facets of a kingdom's routine. Khajuraho is not a temple that celebrates sex: it celebrates life itself.

Nonetheless, the morality of the first Western visitors was struck and challenged by what they saw on the walls, launching the temple onto a well-deserved fame--but for misplaced reasons. Barely emerging from the grasp of 19th-century Victorianism, the first British to see the temple focused only on the sexual carvings. Most people even make the mistake of assuming that, since these are temples, the carvings must depict sex between Deities, but they do not.

There are many explanations about why such suggestive sculptures are carved on the walls of a holy place. According to one theory, the Chandela kings were followers of the tantric cult. Another school of thought believes the sculptures portray that before paying respect to the Gods, we have to leave our worldly desires outside the temple walls. Other hypotheses hold that the sculptures were designed to prepare students--who traditionally observed brahmacharya (celibacy)--for married life, or that they simply depict what the army did to relax between battles, since the carvings are often intermixed with sculptures of warfare and victory.

Anyone who focuses solely on the sensuous side of Khajuraho loses the opportunity to enjoy one of the most beautiful temple complexes ever built by man. Hindus know that kama (pleasure) is only one of the four purusharthas (goals of life), along with artha (wealth), dharma (duty) and eventually moksha (liberation). It should be natural and joyful, but restrained and in the right measure; and so it is in the temple, where it amounts to about one-tenth of the total sculptures.

The fate of the Khajuraho complex is rare in that it survived the Muslim conquerors relatively unscathed. In 1202, the Chandela fort of Kalinjar, celebrated as an unassailable war stronghold, was finally taken. With it fell the Chandela dynasty. Most of the kingdom's temples were converted into mosques, and fifty thousand men were carried off as slaves. Khajuraho, however, was largely ignored by the new rulers; according to Ibn-Batuta, it continued to function until at least 1335.

However, it was finally abandoned; and the lush jungle overpowered the tall sikharas of the temples until a British officer spread word of its marvels in the 19th century.

It is possible that the Muslim vandals never had the heart to destroy these masterpieces--or perhaps devas and apsaras themselves intervened, unseen, from the inner planes. You may well believe that, if you witness the mystery, the mysticism and the magnitude of Khajuraho.

Elephanta

Maharashtra (unknown date)

The island of Elephanta in the sea of Oman, 10km offshore from Mumbai, seems unimposing at first sight. Its treasures lie underground. Here, in seven caves, Indian art has found one of its most perfect expressions, particularly in the huge high reliefs in the main chamber. Originally named Gharapuri, the "city of caves," the complex owes its modern name to the enormous stone elephant found there by Portuguese navigators, which today guards the Victoria Gardens Zoo in Mumbai. The main cave is famous for its carvings of Siva. At the entrance, to the north of an esplanade reached by a steep flight of steps, the visitor to this high place of Saivism is greeted by two large carved panels depicting, on the left, Siva Yogishvara (master of yoga) and, on the right, Siva Nataraja (the Cosmic Dancer), both carved in a monumental style. In a sanctum to the right stands a Sivalingam. This sanctum has four doors, each flanked by colossal figures of dvarapala, mediator guardians whose task was to admit the faithful and keep out ill-intentioned visitors. On each wall of the mandapa, enormous high-reliefs (nearly 20 feet tall) portray still more images of Siva. Opposite the entrance, on the south wall, is the iconic three-headed bust of the Mahadeva, whose three faces are Aghora, the dissolver, to the east; Vamadeva, the preserver, to the west; and Sadyojata, the creator, facing north. To the left of the Mahadeva is a relief depicting Siva Ardhanarisvara; on the right, a relief of Siva Gangadhara. The caves are hewn from solid basalt rock. All the caves were originally painted, but only traces remain now. The rock-cut architecture here dates between the 5th and 8th centuries, but the identity of the

builders remains a subject of debate. Some historians attribute the caves to the Konkan Mauryas, dating them to the mid 6th century. Others refute this, claiming theirs was a relatively small kingdom which could not undertake "the almost superhuman excavation effort" needed to carve the temples from solid rock; nor did they have the skilled labor to produce such masterful sculpture. When the Portuguese arrived in the 1600s, people on the island still used the main cave temple for Siva worship. Disrupted by the foreigners, the population stopped regular worship. Today only a celebration for Mahasivaratri is still performed, unflinching, every year. Portuguese soldiers used the reliefs of Siva in the main cave for target practice, sparing only the Trimurti Mahadeva sculpture. They also removed an inscription related to the creation of the caves, a missing link that could clarify the mysterious past of one of humankind's most impressive heritage sites.

What Are World Heritage Sites?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) seeks to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of those cultural and natural heritage sites around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity. World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located. This is embodied in an international treaty called the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 1972. The following summary is excerpted from the treaty:

The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, meeting in Paris from 17 October to 21 November 1972, at its seventeenth session:

Noting that the cultural heritage and the natural heritage are increasingly threatened with destruction not only by the traditional causes of decay, but also by changing social and economic conditions;

Considering that deterioration or disappearance of any item of the cultural or natural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world;

Considering that protection of this heritage at the national level often remains

incomplete because of the scale of the resources which it requires and of the insufficient economic, scientific, and technological resources of the country where the property to be protected is situated;

Considering that parts of the cultural or natural heritage are of outstanding interest and therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole;

Considering that it is essential for this purpose to adopt new provisions in the form of a convention establishing an effective system of collective protection of the cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value, organized on a permanent basis and in accordance with modern scientific methods;

Having decided, at its sixteenth session, that this question should be made the subject of an international convention;

Adopts on this sixteenth day of November 1972 a Convention to appoint and protect humanity's World Heritage Sites. P!pi