

Elephanta

THE CAVE OF SHIVA

Photographs by Carmel Berkson

Essays by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, George Michell, and Carmel Berkson

Princeton University Press : Princeton, New Jersey

ISBN 0-691-01005-5

from *Elephanta, the Cave of Shiva*, by Carmel Beckson
(Princeton: Princeton Univ Press, 83)

GEORGE MICHELL

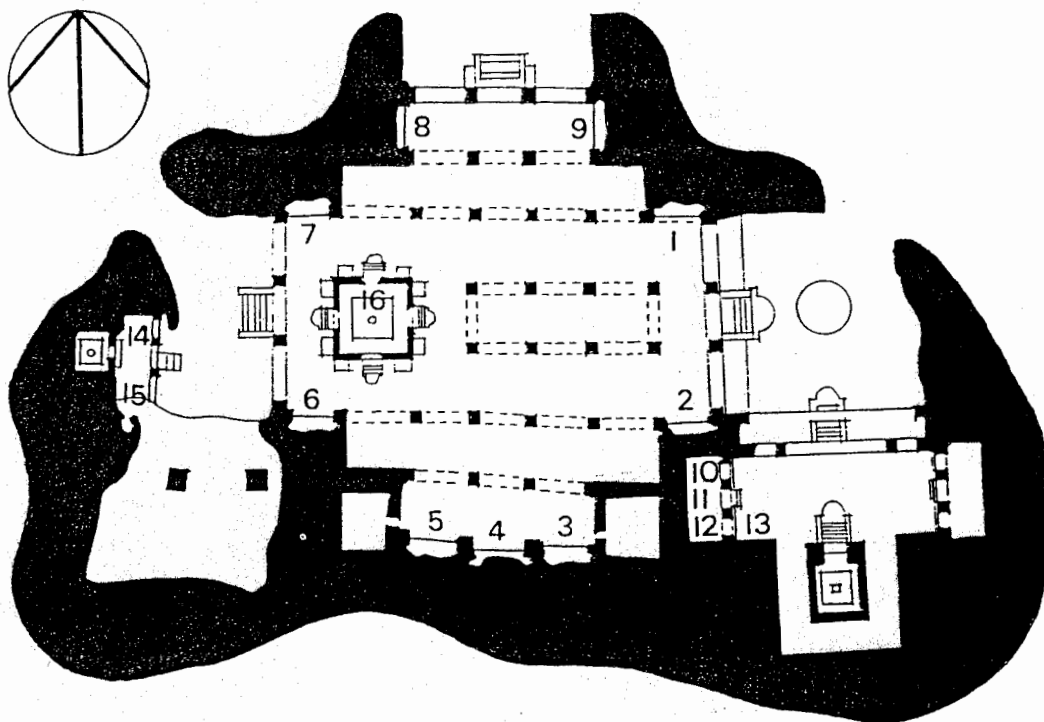
The Architecture of Elephanta: An Interpretation

THE CAVE TEMPLE on Elephanta island is the home of Shiva, the greatest of all the gods (Maheshvara-Eternal Shiva, Pls. 39, 40). It is the place where Shiva displays his paradoxical and mysterious nature in different forms. But the cave temple is much more than a setting for divine manifestations; it is an image of the heavenly mountain residence of Shiva and, on a higher level of association, of the structure of the universe itself. In fact, one of the chief characteristics of Shiva, his relentless energy, is identified with the cosmic rhythms of creation and destruction.

All the elements of the architecture at Elephanta are directed toward invoking the divine presence of Shiva and making visible notions about cosmic order. By a complex process of symbolism parts of the cave temple and, more significantly, ritual movements within the interior space are identified with Shiva and the universe that he controls. Not only is the mythology of the god illustrated in elaborate sculpture panels but the very layout of the cave temple—in terms of space, light, and movement—is itself a myth. Here the devotee leaves the world of man and progresses toward the world of the gods; the rituals he performs permit a communication between human and divine spheres.

Everything about Elephanta suggests a withdrawal from the everyday world. Several journeys have to be undertaken in order to reach the cave: water must be crossed, a mountain climbed, and a cave entered (Pls. 1, 2, 3). For the devotee this passage across, upward, and inside is interpreted as a progression toward the god. There is no outer elevation to the cave temple, only the natural mountain, the image of which always dominates the interior space of the cave within the mountain. Access is through three entrances on the east, north, and west sides, actually excavated trenches. On the east and west the entrances lead from artificially created sunken courtyards with minor shrines (not considered here).

The interior of the cave is clearly laid out (Pls. 18, 19), the space being divided into a number of aisles by columns. These columns have tapering shafts and



0 25m

FIG. 1. Key to the sculptures at Elephanta.

Main Hall

- 1. Ravana
- 2. Gambling Scene
- 3. Androgyne
- 4. Eternal Shiva
- 5. Ganges

- 6. Marriage
- 7. Andhaka
- 8. Shiva Dancing
- 9. Lord of Yogis

East Wing Shrine

- 10. Karttikeya
- 11. Matrikas
- 12. Ganesha
- 13. Dvarapala

West Wing Shrine

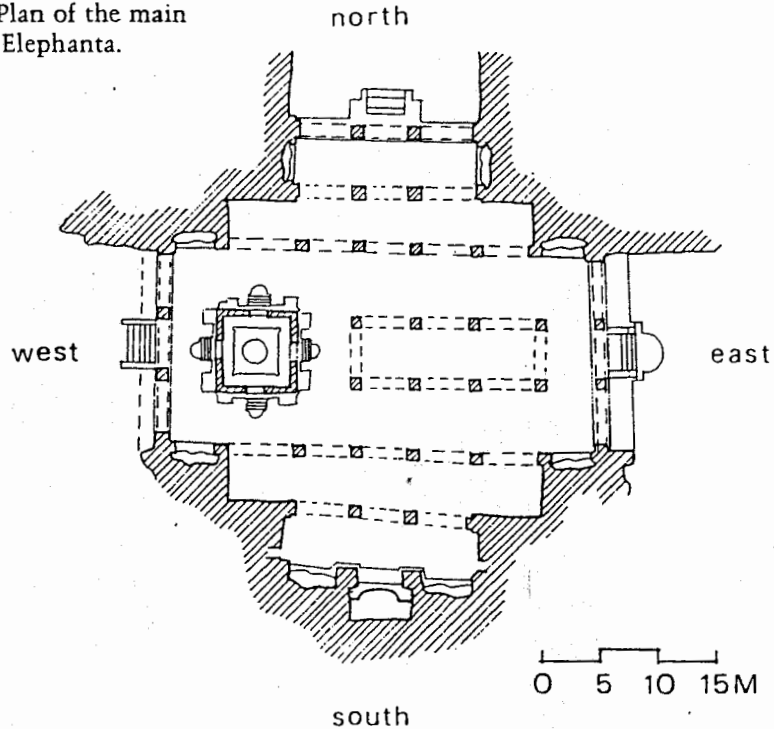
- 14. Lord of Yogis
- 15. Shiva Dancing

Main Hall Shrine

- 16. Linga

144

FIG. 2. Plan of the main cave at Elephanta.



fluted, "compressed-cushion" capitals. Above the capitals are brackets supporting "beams" which run along the ceiling, articulating the space. There is a slight variation in height throughout. Inside this columned space, toward the west entrance, is a square sanctuary (Pls. 4, 5, 6) detached from the walls; inside this sanctuary is a monolithic *linga* (Pls. 7, 8). Sculpture panels deeply carved into the walls are positioned at either side of the three entrances and along the south wall. Other than the carved columns and wall panels the architecture of the interior is plain and massive (Figs. 1, 2).*

Of great significance is the symmetrical plan. Although excavated somewhat irregularly out of solid rock, it is not difficult to establish the original geometric concept of Elephanta. Two axes pass through the center of the space aligned with the cardinal points. Two concentric circles, their centers coinciding with the

* All figures in this essay are by the author.

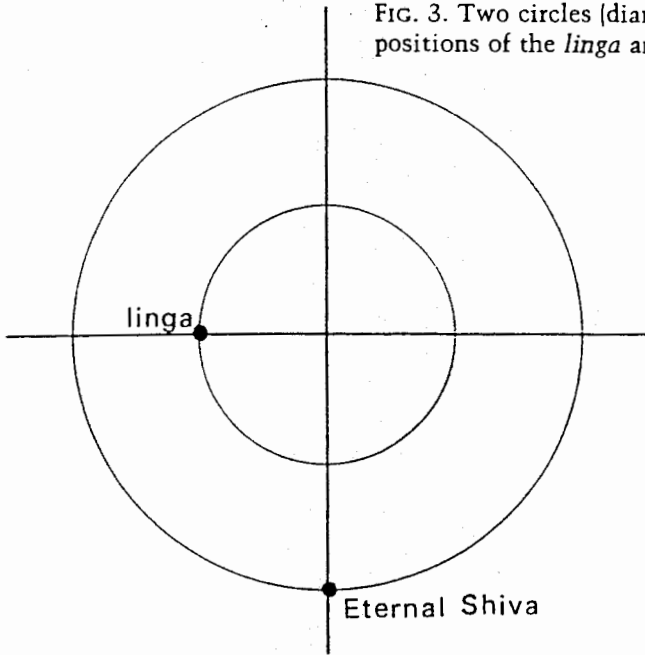


FIG. 3. Two circles (diameters in 1:2 proportion) determine positions of the *linga* and the Eternal Shiva image.

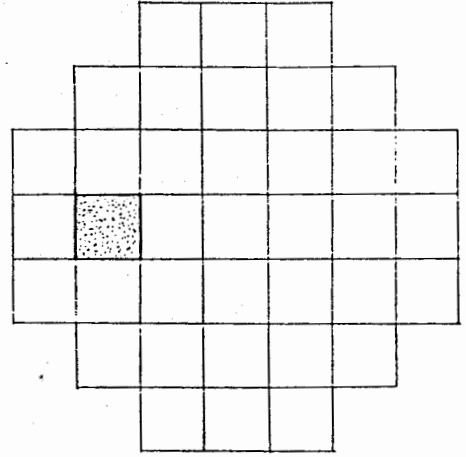


FIG. 4. Layout of the plan in squares. The dotted square indicates interior of the sanctuary. Thirty-six other squares create the columnal space.

intersection of these axes, determine the position of the *linga* in the center of the sanctuary on the east-west axis and the *furthestmost* extensions of the plan—the three staircases at the east, north, and west entrances, and the Eternal Shiva image on the south wall (Fig. 3). (The three visible heads of this image, Pls. 39, 40, are deeply recessed into the wall, and there is the implication of a fourth unseen head. The circle and the north-south axis meet at a point coinciding with the center of the four heads, almost at the back wall of the niche.) In this way the two most important focal points within the cave—the *linga* and Eternal Shiva—are geometrically related. The two circles have diameters of about 22m and 44m (1:2). The columns creating the aisles, the sanctuary, and the stepped walls are laid out on squares, the corners of which coincide with the centers of the columns and along the walls (Fig. 4). Thirty-seven squares are symmetrically grouped in rows of 3, 5, and 7, running in both directions. One of these squares forms the interior of the sanctuary. Thus the number of squares creating the columned space is 36 (6×6), a number generally imbued with great significance

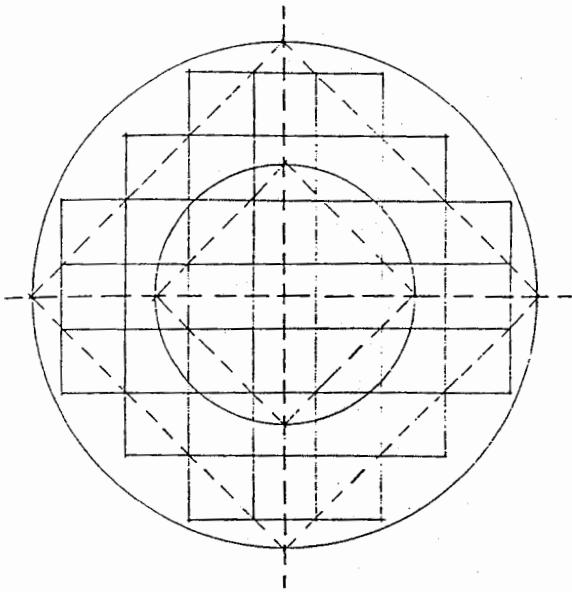


FIG. 5. Relationship of circles and squares.

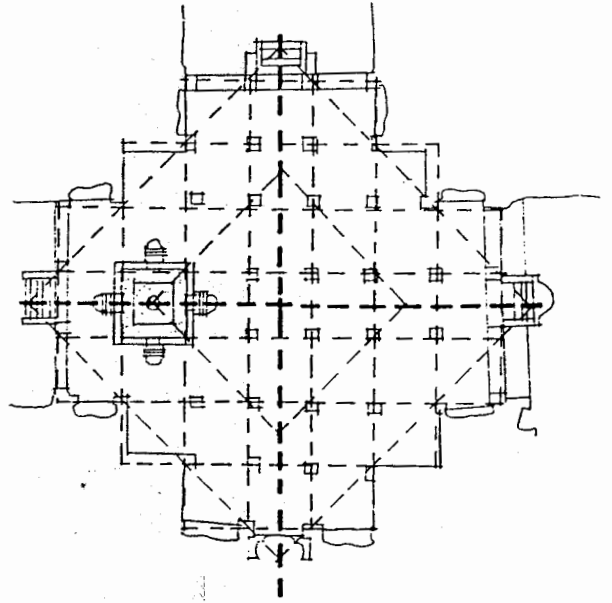


FIG. 6. Squares and axes superimposed on temple plan.

(as are other numbers in the series, 3×3 , 4×4 , 5×5 , etc.). The squares are about 5.5m. (If this is taken as the basic unit for the plan, then the diameters of the circles are in the ratio of $4 \times 5.5\text{m}$ and $8 \times 5.5\text{m}$.)

This fundamental geometry of the plan is actually a sacred mandala providing the interior space with a cosmic dimension through the medium of sacred mathematics. The circles are combined with the configuration of squares by means of diagonals passing through the squares (Fig. 5). Thus are related the center of the mandala, the position of the columns, walls, beams, and staircases, and also the two focal points of the interior—the *linga* and Eternal Shiva (both with guardian figures). Related to the location of these focal points are rituals of movement within the cave expressed as two axes leading to the *linga* and Eternal Shiva (Fig. 6). These axes are probably the most original feature of the architectural layout.

Running east to west and north to south, the axes pass through the center of the cave (Fig. 7). The east-to-west axis links the east entrance to the sanctuary.

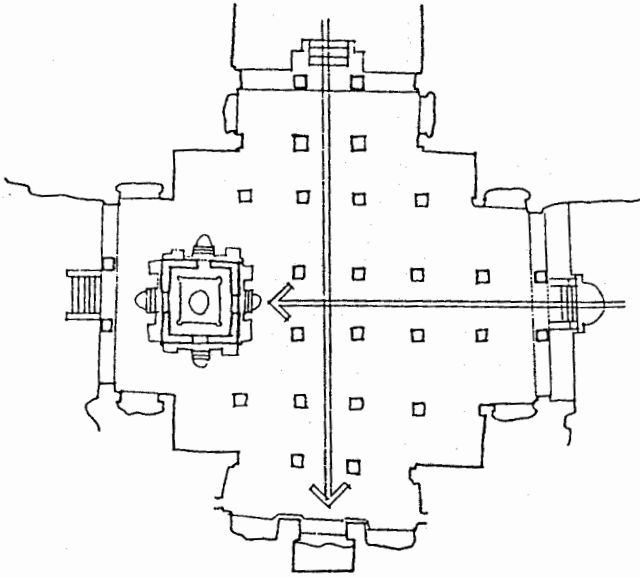


FIG. 7. East-to-west axis leads to the *linga*. North-to-south axis leads to Eternal Shiva.

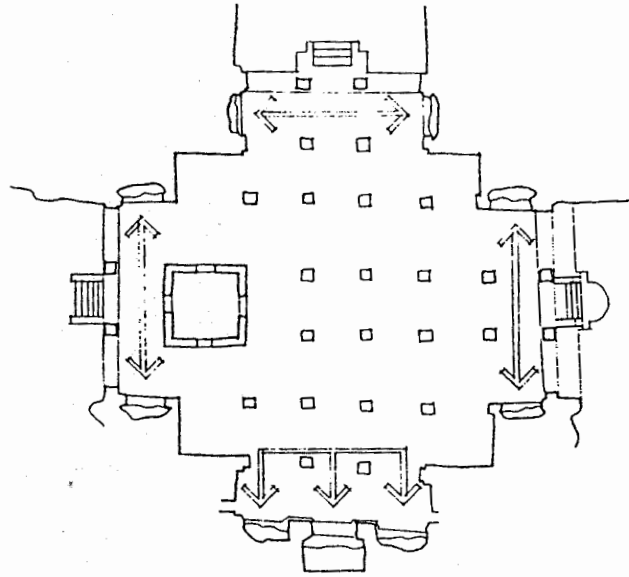


FIG. 8. Four groups of sculptures.

The "beams" connecting the column brackets mostly run in an east-west direction along the ceiling, creating a movement from the eastern entrance toward the sanctuary. Characteristic of this axis is the progression toward the *linga* at the center of the sanctuary, impressively silhouetted against the doorway behind, lit from the court beyond. The *linga* is the most significant point within the cave. It is housed in a sanctuary originally entered through four pairs of swinging doors flanked by colossal male guardian figures. They stand gracefully but powerfully posed, some with tilted hips, shoulders, and heads. Entering at the east end of Elephanta, then, the devotee progresses toward the *linga*. This is the direction toward a world beyond iconic forms.

Movement along the north-to-south axis is a different experience. Passing under the "beams" that traverse the interior space, the devotee penetrates deeper and deeper into the cave toward the great triple-faced Eternal Shiva. Leaving the daylight at the entrance, the devotee is increasingly enveloped in the surrounding darkness as he approaches Eternal Shiva. Movement along this axis is thus one

of penetration from light to darkness, from outside to inside, always dominated by the stupendous triple-faced Shiva image.

Altogether, nine great sculpture panels are carved inside the Elephanta cave, forming a series describing the mysterious nature of the god to whom the cave is dedicated. Though their function is primarily one of didactic illustration, the sculpture panels also serve a secondary purpose as devotional icons. The panels are positioned within the interior space to create a carefully calculated "program" of related images.

The sculptures are divided into four groups—the panels facing each other at the north, east, and west entrances, and the trio of panels along the south wall (Fig. 8). The opening to the north, facing the sea and functioning today as the principal entry for innumerable tourists and pilgrims, is flanked by images of the Lord of Yogis (Pl. 68) (left) and Shiva Dancing (Pl. 64) (right). This is no accidental pairing, for these are the two most vividly contrasting images of Shiva ever to have been created by Indian artists. Here the energy of the god finds its most powerful and paradoxical expression: it is inward, silent, and still (as the yogi), also outward, noisy, and dynamic (as the dancer). Though presented as opposites, the energies of these two images of Shiva are actually identical; they are merely focused in different directions as a reminder of the fluid connection between outer and inner rhythms, of the unity underlying the different forms of the god.

At the east entrance and on the axis leading to the devotional focus of the cave are twin images of Shiva and Parvati seated on Kailasa, the celestial mountain residence of the god. These scenes, crowded with accessory figures, take place on the mythical world mountain, identified with the mountain in which the Elephanta cave is carved and inside which the devotee now penetrates. Great care has been taken by the artists of these panels to depict Shiva's mountain retreat, especially the rocky outcrops and flying divinities. Shiva and Parvati are here relaxed, for they are "at home": they gamble together (left), or Shiva casually suppresses Ravana, who had disturbed his peace (right).

Opposite, flanking the western entrance to the cave, are panels illustrating Shiva impaling Andhaka (left) and the marriage of Shiva and Parvati (right). As at the north entrance, these paired images illustrate opposing aspects of the god. The theme here, however, is contrast of mood rather than contrast of energy. Shiva is terrifying, active, and angry (as the destroyer of demons); also compassionate, calm, and happy (as the husband of Parvati). He is the god of the cremation grounds and of the inauspicious crossroads, in fact, of everything demonic; he is also the tender lover of the daughter of the mountain.

More complex associations are discovered in the three great panels on the