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The Archaeological Survey of India and Communal Violence in Post-independence India

Susan Johnson-Roehr

This article argues that the discipline of archaeology as practised by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) significantly contributed to communal violence in post-Independence India. The essay investigates several legacies handed down from the colonial ASI to the post-Independence ASI, with a goal of explaining the contribution of archaeology to the ongoing disturbances at Ayodhyā in Uttar Pradesh. The colonial ASI was marked by four characteristics: it was a monument-based archaeology based on geographical surveys, literary traditions and Orientalist scholarship. These four characteristics combined to form a traditionalist, location-driven excavation agenda that privileged specific holy sites in the post-Partition era, sustaining the violent disagreements between Hindu and Islamic populations of India and Pakistan.

Keywords: India; Archaeological Survey of India; Colonial Archaeology; Communal Violence; Ayodhyā

It hardly seems necessary to outline the tragic history of the temple town of Ayodhyā in eastern Uttar Pradesh, as indeed, the name of the city is all but synonymous with communal violence. On the surface, the basic narrative of the events at Ayodhyā reads quite simply: In 1528, Mir Baqi, a noble from the court of the Mughal emperor Babur, built a mosque in the town of Ayodhyā. The mosque, commonly known as the Babri Masjid (Mosque of Babur), was allegedly constructed on the site of a former Hindu temple (mandir). This temple, reportedly demolished in order to make way for the Babri Masjid, was not a negligible monument; rather, it (again, allegedly) marked the site of the Lord Rāma’s birth (Rāmajanmabhumi), and thus its destruction assumed...
iconic importance in the minds of devout Hindus. While it is true that the debate over the prior existence of the temple began well before the year of Independence (1947), the arguments over the site’s history intensified after the partition of India and Pakistan. Despite some efforts at compromise and negotiation between conflicting interests in the decades following Independence, on 6 December 1992, the Babri Masjid was destroyed, brick by brick, by Hindu militants supported by the majoritarian political organisation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its sangh parivar. The numbers of deaths attributed to the violence at Ayodhyā can scarcely be counted: more than 2,000 were killed in riots across the subcontinent immediately following the destruction of the mosque; ten years later, the violent response was still playing itself out. For example, in February 2002, 57 Hindu nationalists associated with the programme to rebuild the temple at Ayodhyā were killed when Muslim arsonists attacked the train in which they were riding. One day later, the names of 76 more individuals, killed by mobs in reprisal attacks, were added to the list of fatalities. In July 2005, five suspected Islamic gunmen were killed by security forces after they set off a bomb along site’s perimeter; a pilgrim guide, initially suspected as a suicide bomber, was killed in the blast. Today, the Indian government continues to implement new security measures, each step of which is heavily protested by representatives of opposing Hindu and Islamic factions.

While assessing blame after such explosions of communal violence hardly seems useful—finger-pointing between Hindu and Muslim communities inevitably leads to even more bloodshed—there is still something to be gained by analysing the history of such deep animosity. We might even expect an academic consideration of the conflict to bring to light some of the historic factors contributing to the longevity of the communal dispute, factors that may not directly implicate individual political or religious communities quite so directly in the matter. On the other hand, such an investigation might also implicate scholarly enquiry itself, or rather, the institutions that support it, in the prolonging of the animosity. What does this mean? Quite simply, I propose that the discipline of archaeology as practised by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and its directorate may be in many ways complicit with the outrages at Ayodhyā and beyond. This paper will investigate several legacies handed down from the colonial ASI to the post-Independence ASI, with a view toward explaining the contribution of archaeology to the ongoing disturbances at Ayodhyā. The colonial ASI was marked by four characteristics: it was a monument-based archaeology based on geographical surveys, literary traditions and Orientalist scholarship. These four characteristics combined to form a traditionalist, location-driven excavation agenda that privileged specific holy sites in the post-Partition era, feeding the beast of communal discord between Hindu and Islamic populations of India and Pakistan. Struggling to free itself from the confines of a colonialist methodology, the ASI deliberately positioned itself as a scientific institution in the post-Independence era. Vestiges of nineteenth-century ideologies lingered, however, combining with nationalist aspirations that co-opted positivism and scientific objectivity to contribute to—if not create—one of the most volatile communal conflicts of the twentieth century.
Although early European visitors documented several historic sites on the South Asian subcontinent, the formal beginnings of Indian archaeology are generally located near the middle of the eighteenth century. While the term ‘archaeology’ did not make an appearance in this early discourse of documentation and categorisation of subcontinental sites until the second half of the nineteenth century, it is clear that European engagement with the material record of Indian antiquities intensified around 1750, providing the foundation upon which the later expansion of the discipline would be based. At the very least, it was in the latter half of the eighteenth century that the two major theoretical approaches—the first philological, the second geographic—to the historical and archaeological past of India were codified.

The philological interpretative structure for the study of Indian antiquities is best exemplified by the scholarship of William Jones, an antiquarian who came to India to work as a judge for the British East India Company court. Although he is often credited with the establishment of the discipline of archaeology in India, neither Jones nor the institution he founded in Calcutta—the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784)—initiated any archaeological excavations. Rather, the work of Jones and his contemporaries informally consolidated an exegetic methodology that, despite its distance from the actual work of excavation, would shape archaeology well into the nationalist period of Indian history. As Jones’s Inaugural Address to the Society indicates, the intellectual agenda of the institution was extravagantly broad, encompassing art, science, history, medicine and law, among other subjects. Jones’s own research interests were shaped by the demands of the East India Company, which partially subsidised his compilation of Hindu and Islamic laws. It was Jones who first established a credible theory that linked Sanskrit, Greek and Latin. This linguistic connection was an essential component of Jones’s view of Universal History; along with many of his contemporaries, Jones subscribed to the idea that all of humankind was descended from a single ancestor. By demonstrating the relationships between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, Jones could argue that the people of India—both ancient and modern—were related to Europeans, but represented a different direction of social and political development. That is, while all of humankind shared a common origin, once dispersed, various societies could progress or degenerate, a hypothesis supposedly proven true by the Society’s researches in India. Thus, Jones could on one hand dismiss much of contemporary Indian culture by noting that ‘whoever travels in Asia, especially if he be conversant with the literature of the countries through which he passes, must naturally remark on the superiority of European talents’, while simultaneously embracing the culture of ancient India as an ideal, arguing that despite the ‘degenerate and abased’ state of contemporary Hindus, ‘in some early age they were splendid in arts and arms, happy in government, wise in legislation, and eminent in various knowledge’. Although it would be inaccurate to position Jones as the origin of the Orientalist/Indological discourse that characterised India as corrupt and stagnant, it is true that his work repeatedly depicted India as a nation in need of a rational, European government. Not surprisingly, reaction against this construction of India as ‘degenerate and abased’ played a large role in later
nationalist movements. As we shall see, one part of the rejection of the colonial discourse was a determined effort to demonstrate India’s modernity through its institutions of science and research.

Working in combination with Jones’s interpretation of a weakened, failing Indian state were the more ‘spatial’ histories of the subcontinent, namely, the immense mapping projects sponsored by the British East India Company. While the Asiatic Society, with Jones at its helm, offered a structure of ordering and interpreting the history of India based on language families, the geographical surveys offered a parallel frame of reference by locating the material record of history at specific points on the imperial map. We can see the underpinnings of the geographic tradition in the work of the French geographer, J. B. B. d’Anville, who undertook a large-scale mapping project of the subcontinent at the request of the Company in the middle of the eighteenth century.15 D’Anville’s work was later expanded as part of a collaborative cartographic survey undertaken by the German Jesuit Joseph Tieffenthaler, East India Company servant James Rennell and French scholar Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil du Perron.16 The eighteenth-century mapping of India, particularly as represented by Rennell’s efforts in the systematic recording of Bengal, laid the groundwork for later triangulation surveys, most notably, the Great Trigonometric Survey. The tradition of archaeology as a component of geographical surveys was elaborated by military engineer Colonel Colin Mackenzie. While Mackenzie’s primary goal was the systematic documentation of the subcontinent in service of the British government, he reportedly ‘visited nearly every place of interest south of the Krishna river, and prepared over 2,000 measured drawings of antiquities, carefully drawn to scale, besides facsimiles of 100 inscriptions, with copies of 8,000 others in 77 volumes’ as he surveyed the landscape.17 In south and east India, Francis Buchanan worked in a similar manner, folding documentation of archaeological sites into his geographic surveys.18

This early model of interpreting archaeology as part of a greater geographical survey perhaps reached its apex with the surveys of Sir Alexander Cunningham. As the head of the Archaeological Survey for more fifteen years (1861–65 and 1871–85), he made a major contribution to the early philosophy of Indian archaeology. In particular, two aspects of Cunningham’s research agenda carried over into post-Independence archaeology. First, the excavation programmes promoted by Cunningham, upon which the initial reports of the Archaeological Survey of India were based, specifically directed archaeology toward a locative purpose: rather than excavating to interpret a culture through its artefacts, Cunningham was excavating simply to prove that a site existed as predicted by a written record. This gives us an indication of the second important contribution Cunningham made to the future of Indian archaeology: it was under his watch that subcontinental archaeology was linked with ancient Indian literary traditions and epics.

In response to the publication of Foe Koue Ki ou Relation des Royaumes Bouddhiques, a book that described the fifth-century (404–414 CE) subcontinental pilgrimage route of Fa Xian (Fa Hsien/Fa Hian/Fa-Hien), both H. H. Wilson and Alexander Cunningham began working to identify sites visited by the Chinese pilgrim.19 Cunningham, in particular, proposed an ambitious campaign to follow Fa Xian’s route from city to city,
exposing any topes (stupa) that could be found by search parties. Simultaneous with Cunningham’s interest in the pilgrimage of Fa Xian was his attention given to the route of a second Chinese traveller, Xuan Zang (630–644 CE). The publication of Xuan Zang’s travelogue coincided with the discovery of textual sources that supported claims that the Buddha had been a living person with a verifiable past. In this case, the archaeological and literary records coincided within a discourse of authenticity, one that in Cunningham’s mind placed archaeology in the supreme position of final judge of the past. Cunningham addressed Sanskrit resources with a great deal of scepticism, an attitude reinforced by their scriptural silence about what he knew to be ‘true’ in terms of Buddhist activity in India based on both the travelogues and the opening of Buddhist topes. Lamenting the lack of Puranic commentary on Buddhist history, Cunningham asserted that the ‘discovery and publication of all existing remains of architecture and sculpture, with coins and inscriptions, would throw more light on the ancient history of India, both public and domestic, than the printing of all the rubbish contained in the 18 Puranas’. The discovery of material artefacts would not just deepen the knowledge of India’s history, but would counteract the belief system of the indigenous population by revealing the ‘real’ history of the subcontinent. The physical details of the Buddhist sites did not necessarily interest Cunningham; as a surveyor, he was interested in the location of the site, not the site’s contents. Thus, his investigations of Buddhist topes sometimes consisted of little more than a test probe of the mound to reveal the reliquary casket. While he did catalogue certain of his findings more fully, it is also fair to say that it was the discovery of the stupa itself, not its form or contents, that Cunningham found valuable to his argument about Buddhism in India.

Although it took nearly two decades of lobbying and politicking to gather support for his far-reaching excavation project, in 1861 Cunningham finally found himself at the head of the newly founded Archaeological Survey of India, a position he held until 1885. Apart from a short hiatus from the post between 1866 and 1870, he worked with a small staff of assistants and draftsmen to implement his plan to document the landscape and history of ancient India through extensive geographical surveys. As with his earlier work along the trails of Fa Xian and Xuan Zang, Cunningham paid little attention to the physical details of archaeological monuments. Excavation was not his focus; rather, it was the mapping of ancient India through the identification of previously occupied sites that concerned the new Director General of the ASI.

On the surface, it appeared that Cunningham was wresting the story of India’s past from a language-based study as advocated by William Jones in order to place it in a geographical and topographical context; however, by basing his excavations on travelogues and Buddhist literature, Cunningham was arguably tying archaeology to text and language at a much deeper level than had Jones. This connection was made even more explicit with Cunningham’s focus on epigraphy. Although he concentrated on the location of ancient sites rather than individual buildings or monuments, Cunningham was careful to document any epigraphic evidence that he discovered in the course of his travels, believing that the inscriptions found on ancient structures would provide incontrovertible evidence in support of his theories about Buddhism. His emphasis on epigraphy comprised another significant characteristic of colonial
archaeology, one that drew the researcher’s attention toward buildings and sculptures. Although Cunningham was not deeply concerned with the preservation of singular monuments, the early emphasis on the systematic collection of epigraphs by the ASI had the side effect of valorising the individual buildings and monuments upon which epigraphs were inscribed. For instance, while the first volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* focused on Ashokan epigraphy, the book also located the inscriptions within the sites, providing descriptions and dimensions of the caves, rocks and pillars from which the inscriptions were transcribed. This type of locative methodology was formalised with the creation of the Epigraphy Branch of the ASI in 1886.

The documentation of monuments as part of a larger epigraphic programme reached its peak under Director General John Marshall at the turn of the twentieth century. The previous decade had witnessed little new activity by the ASI—indeed, the institution had ceased to exist as a centralised body. However, this situation changed in 1899 when George Nathaniel Curzon was appointed Viceroy of India. As part of his duties as colonial administrator, Curzon gathered the resources of the ASI together again, and charged the Survey to fulfil its duty to ‘to dig and discover, to classify, reproduce and describe, to copy and decipher, and to cherish and conserve’. With the appointment of Marshall as the new Director General, the ASI began publishing new excavation and epigraphic reports. More importantly, from a policy of incidental conservation of monuments in conjunction with epigraphy developed a more systematic and comprehensive preservation agenda. Both Marshall and Curzon believed that a more formal programme for the conservation of archaeological monuments should be followed by the ASI. The end result of this new direction in archaeology was the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904, which broadly defined ancient monuments and outlined a methodology for their preservation. With this Act, the individual monument was assigned a new importance in the literature of Indian archaeology, setting a precedent for the privileging of discrete buildings (mosques, temples, forts, palaces) within later excavation programmes sponsored by the ASI.

This discussion of the founding methodologies of the Archaeological Survey of India, although cursory, indicates several of the major components of archaeology as practised in the colonial era of Indian history. While legislation meant to protect the integrity of individual sites and monuments was not passed until the twentieth century, it had its roots in the earliest archaeological endeavours as represented by the geographic and epigraphic surveys of Sir Alexander Cunningham. Likewise, while the large-scale land surveys of the subcontinent, based on literary traditions and travelogues, enabled historians to locate ancient sites and populations on the colonial map, they also cooperated with the ruling ideology as explicated by Jones and his contemporaries in the Asiatic Society that posited India as a morally and politically degraded state much in need of European rule. As India passed from an extended period of political subjugation to a new era of independence and home rule, the directors and members of the Archaeological Survey of India found themselves sharing a complex legacy of colonial ideologies and methodologies, through and
against which they would need to work to define a nationalist archaeology of post-Partition India.

Nationalist Archaeology

India and Pakistan won their independence from the United Kingdom (and from each other) only after sacrificing hundreds of thousands of potential citizens in the name of nationalism. The tragic story of Partition has been recounted in great depth elsewhere; here, I will only suggest that the animosities fuelling the division of territory, people and religions are not negligible in their contributions to post-Independence archaeology. Leading members of the ASI found themselves inheritors of a colonial archaeology that viewed the subcontinental past through a lens of European bias, a situation that was further complicated by the increased fragmentation of the material record by Partition. Not only did the archaeologists suddenly discover their ‘Indian’ fieldwork at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro was located in Pakistan, but they also found themselves negotiating hotspots in Bangladesh (after the 1971 separation), Sri Lanka and Nepal. Unable to sustain a national (for ‘national,’ read ‘Hindu’) narrative based on ancient cities newly relocated to the Islamic state of Pakistan, archaeologists were forced to look elsewhere to develop an archaeology capable of telling the story of the new nation of India.

At the time of independence, the Archaeological Survey of India was operating under the guidance of Director General Mortimer Wheeler. Although the direction of archaeology in India was determined long before Wheeler’s four-year tenure (1944–48), his work as represented in the first five issues of the ASI journal Ancient India indicated a commitment to a more ‘scientific’ archaeology than previously pursued by the institution. First, although earlier studies at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro were conducted in a systematic manner, Wheeler insisted that all archaeology should aspire to scientific analysis. Further, he advocated comprehensive excavation plans in order to preserve archaeological stratigraphy during and after the dig. The preservation of stratified material—in particular ceramic fragments—contributed to a more exacting comparative study of land use and cultural succession between multiple sites. Also notable was Wheeler’s involvement of Indian students in archaeological field training, a practice that had a long-term effect on the way excavations were run even after his departure from the ASI. Perhaps because he understood the immense challenges faced by the newly independent country in maintaining archaeological sites across such a large geographic area, Wheeler encouraged that future archaeological work be extended ‘from the confines of a Government Department [that is, the ASI] into the liberal activities of the universities and learned societies of India; from the monopoly of the civil servant to the free initiative of the educated public’.

As noted by Suraj Bhan, despite any excavation agendas Wheeler might have privileged, his emphasis on ‘problem-oriented research’, combined with a rhetoric of scientific objectivity, continued to shape the discipline even after N. P. Chakravarti stepped into the position of Director General in 1948. Without question, positivist, processualist methodologies dominated the archaeology of the new nation.
plan to preserve stratigraphic relationships, while operating within the discourse of scientific archaeology, also played a large role in the growing nationalist ideology. Wheeler’s dependence on the language of science and objectivity contributed to the co-option of the archaeological record in the 1970s and 1980s by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in support of its policy of Hindūtva (literally, ‘Hinduness,’ or a privileging of Hindu values). As Malik and Singh point out, the BJP was intended as an alternative to the single-party dominance of the Congress Party, as well as a potential antidote to the economic stagnation emplaced by the state monopoly of industrial production. However, while it is clear that the BJP appealed to many voters who felt disenfranchised or disempowered by the economic and social policies of the Congress Party, the dramatic success of the BJP in the 1991 elections relied in large part on the party’s ability to mobilise voters around the issue of Hindu nationalism and the (re)construction of the Rāma temple in Ayodhyā. For instance, the Babri Masjid was invoked repeatedly by BJP President Lal Krishna Advani as a symbol of cultural encroachment by Muslims on sacred and ancient Aryan Hindu space during his inflammatory Rath Yatra (Chariot Procession) from Somnath to Ayodhyā in September–October 1991. In a rhetorical move reminiscent of Alexander Cunningham’s nineteenth-century arguments about Buddhist tope, the BJP and its sangh parivar claimed that scientific excavations completed under the watchful eyes of the ASI represented the ‘true’, unbiased history of an Aryan India, an assertion that directly contributed to the anti-Muslim sentiment in relation to the buildings in Ayodhyā. As it turns out, however, just as significant as this deliberate (mis)use of the archaeological record by a political party, may have been the incidental role played by the ASI in the drama. In an attempt to reject the oppressiveness of colonial archaeology, the directors of the ASI arguably leaned too far toward the Hindu nationalist position after Independence, creating an opportunity for majoritarian demagogues such as Advani to manipulate the discipline of archaeology and its practices in their own favour.

This wedding of ASI interests to right-wing Hindu extremism is often linked to B. B. Lal, Director General of the ASI from 1968 to 1972. In particular, the intersection of Hindūtva and archaeology can be seen in two of his projects based on ancient Indian oral and literary traditions. The first, an attempt to identify multiple sites associated with the ancient epic of the Mahābhārata, was carried out by Lal in the 1950s, demonstrating his interest in the historicity of Hinduism well before he became Director General of the ASI. As part of this project, Lal and his team excavated in the city of Hastināpura in 1950–52 expressly because local tradition held that it was the former capital city of the Kauravas of the Mahābhārata. In order to make this connection, Lal extended the date of the epic backward in time to before 600 BCE, disregarding the commonly accepted date of the Mahābhārata as between the fourth century BCE and fourth century CE. In this way, the archaeologist could assign a ninth or tenth century BCE date to the great Mahābhārata battle (assuming the conflict as fact). Having thus rearranged the chronology to fit his needs, B. B. Lal could only have expected to find certain evidence consistent with the epic battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas at the present-day site of Hastināpura.
The excavations at Hastināpura yielded a vertical stratigraphy indicating sequential occupation of the site by five different cultures with significant gaps in time separating each of them. The problems with Lal’s interpretations begin with his reading of Period II, a layer in which Painted Grey Ware (PGW) was discovered. In addition to PGW, slag of iron was located in the upper levels of the layer, along with evidence of horses, rice, glass, writing, coins, and standard weights and measures, all contained in a matrix that suggested a semi-rural context. This settlement, dated between 1000 BCE and 800 BCE by Lal, apparently met its end by flooding from the Ganges. Encouraged by the location of PGW in other sites associated with the Mahābhārata, such as Mathurā, Panipat, Kurukshetra, Achichchhatrā and Purāna Qila, Lal argued that these PGW cultures must have been synchronic with the Mahābhārata. In addition, he concluded that the Ganges flood that destroyed the PGW settlement at Hastināpura was the same Puranic flood described in the Mahābhārata.42 At the time of excavation, however, Lal appeared hesitant to conclude that he had validated the truth of the epic, noting only ‘that the evidence is entirely circumstantial and until and unless positive ethnographic and epigraphic proofs are obtained to substantiate the conclusions they cannot but be considered provisional [italics in original]’.43

Although Lal did not firmly identify Hastināpura with the Kaurava capital city of the Mahābhārata, at least some of his colleagues read his report with trepidation. For instance, A. Ghosh, then Director General of the ASI, suggested that an excavation agenda determined in response to epics and literary traditions should be undertaken with great care. In written remarks directed to B. B. Lal and included as a preface to the published field report, he noted that ‘a word of caution is necessary, lest the impression is left on the unwary reader that the Hastināpura excavation has yielded archaeological evidence about the truth of the story of the Mahābhārata and that here at last is the recognition by “official archaeology” of the truth embodied in Indian traditional literature’. Ghosh believed that archaeology could not authenticate any epic, and that ‘it is indeed tempting to utilize archaeological evidence for substantiating tradition, but the pitfalls in the way should be guarded against, and caution is necessary that fancy does not fly ahead of facts’.44 As Ghosh saw it, the numerous references to the Mahābhārata made by Lal in the Hastināpura report, combined with the author’s speculation as to the discovery of Painted Grey Ware at other sites associated with the epic, undermined Lal’s position of scientific neutrality and objective scholarship.

But perhaps B. B. Lal did not take his colleagues’ warning seriously. In the 1970s, with full support (financial, technical and otherwise) of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Simla, and in collaboration with the ASI, the archaeologist undertook an investigation of four sites mentioned in Valmiki’s Rāmāyana: Ayodhyā, thought to be the capital of Rāma; Sringaverapura, the point at which Rāma made his river crossing after his father reluctantly exiled him; Bharadvaja Ashrama, site of one of Rāma’s wilderness sojourns; and Nadigrama, the city from which Bharata ruled. Known officially as the ‘Archaeology of the Ramayana Sites’ National Project, the excavation began in 1975 under the management of Lal, who by then had become director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, and Shri K. V. Soundara Rajan of the ASI, with assistance from Sarvashri B. Narasimhaiah, Rambabu, M. S. Mani, R. K. Sehgal, J. C. De and A. K. Mishra.
Lal’s intention was to excavate in a manner that would preserve the vertical stratigraphy, allowing him to do a cross-comparison between the earliest cultural layers of each site. The Ayodhya excava-tions, which also served as a field school for the students of the School of Archaeology of the ASI, took place between 1975 and 1980. The earliest layer at the site was revealed as Northern Black Polished Ware (NBP), which Lal dated to the seventh century BCE. Based on this date, the excavation seemed to reveal that the site was continuously occupied past the end date of the NBP period (c.200 BCE), through the Sunga-Kushana and Gupta periods (although the Gupta period was not ‘significantly indicated at this site’), and into the medieval era, the time period encompassing the years during which the Babri Masjid was built by Mir Baqi.

In his first field report, published in 1980 but based on excavation work from 1975, Lal failed to make much of the medieval occupation, noting only that ‘several later medieval brick-and-kankar lime-floors have been met with, but the entire late period was devoid of any special interest’. In fact, his attention was focused on the NBP cultural layers since, as he noted in 1983, his research agenda was directed toward establishing a ‘truth kernel’ of the Rāmāyana. Ten years later, however, Lal returned to his field notes to assert that he had located as many as 84 pillars under the Babri Masjid, a find that was indicative of a pre-existing columned Hindu temple on the site. Although he claimed the majority of his excavation notes had been lost in the intervening decade, he was able to produce a single photo of the excavation trench showing column bases allegedly associated with the original Rāma temple. When asked if he believed this really demonstrated that Rāma’s birthplace was located beneath the Babri Masjid, he was quoted as saying ‘I am not saying so. But my spade is.’

Of course, Lal’s reinterpretation of his excavation findings met with objections by many of his colleagues. Sita Ram Roy, for instance, used Lal’s own data to conclude that the area around the demolished Babri Masjid was inhabited by Muslims, not Hindus, in the pre-Mughal days. Further, Roy argued that none of the strata of the excavation that mark the earliest modern human settlement at Ayodhya ‘project [their] religious character in any way’, making Lal’s claims even more untenable. As for the pillar-bases, Roy’s opinion coincided with that of Lal’s opposition: since the excavations revealed neither an ancient nor medieval structure (secular or religious) associated with the column-bases, ‘the presumption of any temple on the basis of the flimsy remains of the so-called pillar-bases deserves to be treated as far-fetched and perhaps even somewhat motivated.’

Lal’s work might be best viewed as misguided or the result of a misinterpretation—indeed, few seem to fault his actual excavation techniques, but rather the interpretative reports produced after the conclusion of his fieldwork. It is difficult even to criticise the underlying agenda behind his excavation programme: as we know from our earlier consideration of Alexander Cunningham, carrying out archaeological investigations based on literary traditions was hardly new or unusual for the ASI. To lay claim to Cunningham, whose work on Buddhist topes derived directly from literary and religious traditions, as the founder of the ASI makes it exceedingly difficult to then distance oneself from Lal’s Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana projects. This is not to say
that archaeologists have not tried to do so, despite the apparent contradictions. For instance, Suraj Bhan argues that B. B. Lal’s excavation programme differed from the work of Cunningham and others ‘because his primary goal was to use archaeological evidence from his excavation for substantiating the historicity of the Tradition’. This is a very fine, but accurate, distinction: Lal was hoping to establish the *Rāmāyana* as historical fact; Cunningham was hoping to prove Buddhism once thrived on the subcontinent, not the veracity of every event mentioned in Buddhist literature. However, it is true that Cunningham’s work also relied on the assumption, verified through literary traditions, that the story of the Buddha was factual. This perhaps draws his methodology much too close to Lal’s for the comfort of some Indian archaeologists.

For many interested onlookers outside of the discipline of archaeology, the debate over the Babri Masjid–*Rāmājanmabhumi* is one over historical priority. Public discourse often boils down to a ‘We were there first!’ assertion, and the archaeological record is required to answer several questions viewed as essential to sorting out the history of the site. Although it seems doubtful that proof of prior occupation would really settle matters in Ayodhyā one way or another, both Hindu and Islamic combatants wish to demonstrate the validity of the land claims based on material traces—or the lack thereof—of a Hindu temple on the site. The ‘Archaeology of the Ramayana Sites’ National Project, fully funded by a government institution that advocated a scientific stance, played into a mentality that demanded a univalent, incontrovertible interpretation of archaeological data in favour of Hindu interests. While Wheeler and his contemporaries promoted archaeology as a science in an attempt to separate modern India from the image of ancient India created by the colonial government, right-wing Hindus egged on by the BJP were able to capitalise on the language of disinterestedness and objectivity employed by the ASI. Further, by deliberately cultivating an archaeology that would help define a new Indian national identity, the ASI created the ideological space for Hindus to claim Ayodhyā for their own purposes.

Interestingly enough, a large component of the archaeology community inadvertently enabled this misappropriation of the material record at Ayodhyā through its rejection of the ASI’s positivist methodologies at just the time the BJP and its *sangh parivār* seized upon them. In an attempt to diversify and democratise the discipline, post-processualist archaeologists argued vociferously for a more inclusive approach to the historical, material record that considers non-Western epistemologies as legitimate interpretative strategies. Part of the motivation behind this reassessment of the New Archaeology was the belief that the past is ‘a positive source of identity for subordinate groups, be they based on ethnic, gender, or political criteria’. In other words, post-processualist archaeologists saw their work at least in part as a mobilisation of the archaeological record to support identity building among the subaltern. While this ‘returning the past to the people’ was obviously conceived as a positive step that would allow for multivocal interpretations and a construction of an indigenous archaeology for populations previously denied access to the material culture of their own past, at Ayodhyā, we can also see the dark side of this epistemological shift. As Bernbeck and Pollock correctly suggest, much of postmodern, post-processual theory does not address the complexity of indigenous cultures, viewing them as monolithic, conflict-free
harmonious societies. In failing to provide a theoretical structure that not only evaluates competing interpretations of the past but also provides a mechanism for challenging ‘those versions of the past that contain racist, sexist or other discriminatory interpretations’, post-processualists unintentionally contributed to the situation at Ayodhya.\textsuperscript{56} The appropriation of B. B. Lal’s processualist fieldwork as part of the development of a Hindu national identity is in this way further legitimised by disciplinary theory.

The incessant focus of the \textit{sangh parivar} on Ayodhya ensures that any conflict between Hindu and Muslim factions anywhere in India or Pakistan will also give rise to new threats centred on this one barricaded site standing in an otherwise unremarkable town in Uttar Pradesh. That a single architectural monument could come to do so much symbolic work in the discourse of contemporary politics and national identity says something about the legacy of colonial archaeology. What began as incidental documentation of epigraphs and buildings within a larger geographical survey metamorphosed into a monument-focused archaeology some 40 years before Independence. By the time Lal formulated his ‘Archaeology of the Ramayana Sites’ National Project, a focus on one discrete mosque, one detached temple, was hardly unusual. The intensity with which the site was contested by both Hindu and Muslim political groups may have been unexpected, but certainly the practices of preservation and conservation as legislated through the ASI provided the opportunity for both contestants to valorise the buildings.

Clearly, neither archaeology in general nor the Archaeological Survey of India in particular caused the murderous violence at Ayodhya.\textsuperscript{57} The Babri Masjid–R\textit{m}\textit{a}m\textit{j}\textit{a}n-mabhum\textit{i} conflict is a symptom, not the disease itself, and the pathologies of the disease are multiple and contradictory. The conflict’s casualties—in both human and archaeological terms—resulted from an unfortunate confluence of factors with origins in the distant past. Colonial archaeology as practised by the ASI clearly pointed the way to a monument-driven, locative archaeology dependent on literary and religious traditions. If the outcome of Independence had not been Partition, would the anti-colonial narrative so desperately needed by a new nation have been more inclusive of Muslims, and thus not quite so dangerously volatile? If Cunningham had not set a precedent for tradition-driven excavation programmes, if Jones had not styled India as superstitious and decayed, would B. B. Lal have imagined a comparative archaeology based on the sites mentioned in the \textit{R\textit{m}\textit{a}y\textit{a}na}? As mentioned above, trying to assess blame for the atrocities at Ayodhya is an exercise in futility. However, if we can ever hope to resolve the conflict, we need to engage not with just contemporary political discourse, but also with the complex interaction between colonial archaeology and the nationalist aspirations of a post-Partition India.

Notes

[1] R\textit{a}m\textit{a} is thought to be the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the Supreme Being in the Hindu worldview. As the result of courtly intrigue, R\textit{a}m\textit{a} was exiled from his kingdom; the \textit{R\textit{m}\textit{a}y\textit{a}na} documents the exile of R\textit{a}m\textit{a} and his wife, S\textit{t}\textit{a}. The Valmiki \textit{R\textit{m}\textit{a}y\textit{a}na} (dated roughly from 200 BCE to 200 CE) is the most frequently referenced version of the tale.
For a consideration of competing claims to sacred space at Ayodhya during the nineteenth century, particularly during the crisis year of 1857, see Srivastava, *The Disputed Mosque*, 20–50. An excellent comparative analysis between the nineteenth-century conflicts at the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and the Mahâbodhi Temple in Bodh Gâya, Bihar, can be read in Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 268–303.


Sharat, ‘76 Dead in Hindu Reprisals’, A03.


Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 8–11.


Singh, op. cit. 8–9.


Although the most (in)famous exposition of Orientalism was written by Edward Said (see both *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*), in fact Partha Mitter’s ground-breaking treatise on European attitudes toward art and architecture India pre-dates Said’s publication. All of these early works on Orientalist discursive formations—but particularly Said’s *Orientalism*—have been challenged on many fronts, notably for a lack of attention to gender, resistance and agency. Still, in conjunction with Inden’s *Imagining India*, they represent the originary moment for postcolonial studies of imperialism and power in India. For a thoughtful re-evaluation of William Jones’s Orientalist scholarship, see Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 28–61.

Chakrabarti, op.cit. 5; Tiefenthaler, *Description Historique et Geographique de l’Inde*.

Imam, *Sir Alexander Cunningham and the Beginnings of Indian Archaeology*, 17.


[22] For a discussion of Cunningham’s more elaborate excavation of the Bhilsa Topes, see Singh, op. cit. 44–52. In reprint, see Cunningham, The Bhilsa Topes.


[26] The Act includes both epigraphs and buildings within its definition, defining an ancient monument as ‘any structure, erection or monument, or any tumulus or place of interment, or any cave, rock-sculpture, inscription or monolith, which is of historical, archaeological or artistic interest, or any remains thereof’. See Act No. VII of 1904, The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, Sec. 2 (1).


[28] Arguably, Mortimer Wheeler understood the problems of post-Partition archaeology sooner and more deeply than anyone else. He considered the new situation ‘an interesting one. Pakistan is found to include almost the whole of the known extent of the earliest civilisation of India, that of the Indus Valley… Almost all the Mohammadan monuments of the first importance remain in India’. He styled the loss of the Indus Valley as a positive, for now more attention could be paid to the Ganges River, ‘which may almost be said to have given India a faith’. His styling of the Ganges as the source of India’s faith can be assessed as a portent of things to come: India’s archaeology was soon to become a Hindu, rather than a secular, archaeology. See Wheeler, ‘Notes’, Ancient India 4 (1947): 2–3.

[29] According to Bruce Trigger, nationalistic archaeology is undertaken ‘to bolster the pride and morale of nations or ethnic groups’. Nationalistic archaeology is ‘probably strongest amongst people who feel politically threatened, insecure or deprived of their collective rights by more powerful nations or in countries where appeals for national unity are being made to counteract serious divisions along class lines’. While the most serious division in India is between religious factions, the above description provides a partial framework for understanding contemporary archaeology. See Trigger, ‘Alternative Archaeologies’, 360.


[34] Wheeler’s vision for the future of Indian archaeology paralleled the development of the ‘New Archaeology’ in the United States and United Kingdom. Advocates of processual archaeology argued for the use of an empiricist, scientific methodology similar to that used by geologists or palaeobotanists. This positivist school of thought came under attack by the postmodern ‘post-processualist’ archaeologists in the 1980s. See Hodder, Reading the Past, 156–81 and Guha-Thakurta, Monuments, Objects, Histories, 364, n. 38.


[37] Pannikar, op. cit., 69.

[38] Ibid., 69–73. Advani’s circus-like Rath Yatra began in Somnath on 25 September 1991 and ended in Ayodhya on 30 October 1991. Along the way, he gave approximately six speeches a
day, during which he agitated in the name of national pride for an aggressive response to alleged desecrations by Muslims centuries earlier. As evidenced by the 116 riots that followed in the wake of Advani’s journey to the Babri Masjid, his demagoguery more than encouraged a violent solution to the dispute in Ayodhya.

[39] The Mahābhārata is one of the two major epics (the other being the Rāmāyana) at the foundation of Hinduism. Assumed to be composed by Vyasa, the Mahābhārata recounts the battle over kingship between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Although ostensibly an epic tale of war, the poem is usually read as a philosophic or religious text, rather than as a history of a particular struggle for the throne.

[40] Lal, ‘Excavation at Hastināpura’, 147–49. My interpretation of the Hastināpura excavation relies heavily on the work of Suraj Bhan, former head of the Department of Archaeology at Kurukshetra University; however, any errors in the deciphering of Lal’s field reports are mine alone and should not be attributed to Professor Bhan. See Bhan, ‘Recent Trends in Indian Archaeology’, 3–15.

[41] Lal, op. cit., 149, 151.
[42] Ibid., 11–14, 21–15.
[43] Ibid., 151.
[44] Ghosh, ‘Notes’, 2–3. Others were less disturbed by Lal’s conclusions, believing that Lal’s fieldwork conclusively demonstrated the truth of the Mahābhārata. See, for instance, Gupta and Ramachandran, Mahābhārata Myth and Reality Differing Views, 18–19, 23–24, 52–60.

[48] Ibid., 53.
[53] Ibid., 120.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Although it falls outside the scope of this article, it should be noted that today, the ASI seems to be once again involved in the controversy, willingly or not. Until 2004, the ASI was overseen by Human Resources Development Minister M. M. Joshi, an active leader in the BJP. In 2003, the Special Full Bench of the Allahabad High Court in Lucknow issued an order for a new survey by the ASI. The resultant 574-page report instigated new communal violence, and brought the highly political nature of the ASI to the forefront. See Abraham, ‘Archaeology and Politics’, 253–60; Bagla, ‘Ayodhya Ruins Yield More Fuel for Ongoing Religious Fight’, 1305; Charan, ‘Ayodhya Update’, 16; Romey, ‘Flashpoint Ayodhya’, 49–55; and Shrimali, ‘Whither Indian Archaeology?’.

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