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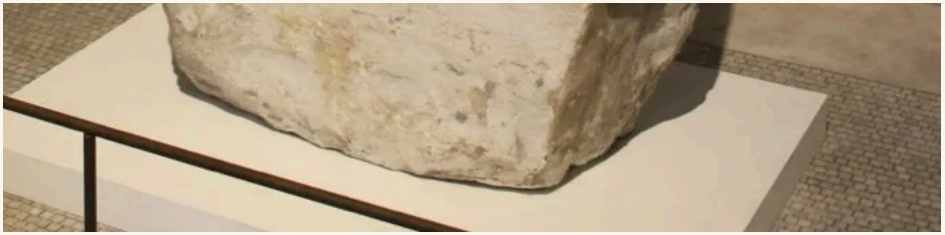
Rea, Longhurst, Sewell, Burgess and Elliot: Archaeologists of Colonial India

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Rea, Longhurst, Sewell, Burgess and Elliot: Archaeologists of Colonial India

In 1845, a British civil servant dug into a crumbling brick mound near the Krishna river. He pulled out some of the finest Buddhist sculpture ever carved in India. He didn't work alone. Four more colonial-era scholars, over the following ninety years, kept following the same trail across South India.





A railing pillar from the Amaravati Stupa, part of the collection first excavated by Walter Elliot in 1845. Photo by 14GTR, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.

> **The Five Names**Rea, Longhurst, Sewell, Burgess, Elliot
> **Shared Link**Archaeological excavations
> **Timespan**1845-1931
> **Key Sites**Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda

Elliot Marbles: the Amaravati sculptures Walter Elliot excavated in 1845, mostly sent to the Madras Museum.
Amaravati Marbles: the smaller portion of that same collection that later reached the British Museum, London.

1. Five Names, One Connecting Thread

1.1 What links these five men?

Alexander Rea, A.H. Longhurst, Robert Sewell, James Burgess, and Walter Elliot were all associated with archaeological excavations in colonial India.

1.2 Was this a coincidence?

No. All five worked for, or alongside, the Archaeological Survey of India or its regional circles. Between them they dug or documented Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, and dozens of other South Indian sites.

1.3 How long does their combined story span?

Their careers span nearly a century, from Elliot's 1845 dig at Amaravati to Longhurst's 1931 excavations at Nagarjunakonda.

2. Alexander Rea and A.H. Longhurst

2.1 What was Alexander Rea's career?

Alexander Rea joined the Archaeological Survey of Southern India in 1882. In 1902 he became its first Superintendent.

2.2 What did Rea do at Amaravati?

Rea dug at Amaravati three times: 1888-89, 1905-06, and 1908-09. His work came decades after Elliot's original 1845 dig at the same site. See AncHist0123 — The Amaravati Stupa for the site itself.

2.3 What did Rea find at Adichanallur?

He also dug at the Adichanallur burial site in Tamil Nadu, where he found 20 gold headbands. Adichanallur is an Iron Age burial ground, one of South India's most important sites from that stone-monument era.

2.4 Who was A.H. Longhurst?

Albert Henry Longhurst was a British archaeologist and art historian, active in India and Ceylon.

2.5 What did Longhurst dig at Nagarjunakonda?

From 1926 to 1931, he led careful, organized digging at Nagarjunakonda on the Krishna river. His team uncovered a great stupa, eight smaller stupas, four monasteries, six curved temples, and a stone wharf.

2.6 Where did he publish his findings?

Longhurst published his findings in *The Buddhist Antiquities of Nagarjunakonda* (1938), the standard record of that excavation for decades afterward.

> **Quick check 1.** A.H. Longhurst's major excavation was at the Amaravati Stupa, not Nagarjunakonda. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3. Robert Sewell and James Burgess

3.1 What was Robert Sewell's actual role?

Robert Sewell was a Madras Civil Service official and a historian. He served as Keeper of the Madras Record Office and recorded old inscriptions and monuments. He was also an excavator. In 1877 he

directed a dig at Amaravati and later published a Report on the Amaravati Tope (1880).

3.2 What book did Sewell write?

In 1900 he published *A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar*, one of the first serious modern histories of the Vijayanagara Empire.

3.3 Whose accounts did Sewell rely on?

Sewell translated two Portuguese travellers' accounts for the book: Domingo Paes and Fernao Nuniz, both of whom had visited the Vijayanagara capital.

3.4 What did James Burgess found in 1872?

James Burgess founded the journal *The Indian Antiquary* in 1872, still a key record of 19th-century Indian archaeology. It published site reports, inscriptions, and scholarly notes across many regions of India.

3.5 What did Burgess lead in Western India?

In 1873, he became Head of the Archaeological Survey for Western India, documenting the region's rock-cut caves and monuments.

3.6 What was his highest post?

He went on to lead the Survey for South India in 1881. He then served as Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India from 1886 to 1889. In that top post, he oversaw survey work across the whole subcontinent, not just one region.

Name	Signature Achievement
Alexander Rea	Amaravati (3 digs) and Adichanallur
A.H. Longhurst	Nagarjunakonda (1926-31)

Robert Sewell	Amaravati dig (1877); A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar
James Burgess	Indian Antiquary; Director General, ASI (1886-89)
Walter Elliot	Original 1845 Amaravati dig

Quick check 2. Robert Sewell was a field excavator who dug at Amaravati, like Rea and Elliot. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Try It Yourself: Which of these five men is best known for a history book rather than a dig, and which book was it?
Robert Sewell. He also dug at Amaravati in 1877, but he is best known for the 1900 book A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar.

Test Yourself

4. Walter Elliot and the Elliot Marbles

4.1 What did Elliot do in 1845?

Sir Walter Elliot, a Madras civil servant and naturalist, dug up and collected sculptures from the Amaravati Stupa in 1845.

4.2 What happened to those sculptures?

These sculptures were, for a time, known as the “Elliot Marbles.” Most went to the Madras Museum, later the Government Museum, Chennai. A smaller portion of the collection later reached London, where it forms part of the Amaravati Marbles at the British Museum today.

4.3 How does Elliot connect to Rea?

Elliot's 1845 dig started a chain of excavation at Amaravati that Rea continued decades later. Their combined work is why the site's sculpture survives at all today.

4.4 What did Burgess and Rea achieve beyond one site?

Burgess and Rea both went on to lead full regional circles of the Archaeological Survey of India. Their work turned monument recording into a proper, organized profession.

Remember This:

- All five men are linked by archaeological excavation, not press, churches, or railways.
- Elliot dug Amaravati first (1845); Rea returned three times later (1888-1909).
- Longhurst's signature site is Nagarjunakonda (1926-1931), not Amaravati.
- Sewell excavated at Amaravati (1877), but he is best remembered as a historian (A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar, 1900).
- Burgess founded the Indian Antiquary and rose to Director General of the ASI (1886-89).

Explain It Back: In your own words, explain what connects all five names. Then say why Sewell is best known for a book rather than a dig.

Practice MCQs

1. Who excavated the Amaravati Stupa in 1845, giving its sculptures the name “Elliot Marbles”?

A. Alexander Rea

B. Walter Elliot

C. James Burgess

D. Robert Sewell

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The correct answer is **Walter Elliot**. He dug at the site in 1845, near the west gate, and found a prostrate lion first. His finds became known as the Elliot Marbles. Robert Sewell is wrong because he dug later, in 1877. James Burgess is wrong because he examined the site in 1881 and 1882. Alexander Rea is wrong because no opened source links him to this dig. Memory hook: Elliot 1845, Sewell 1877, Burgess 1881. ↑ Q1

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2

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