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Elephanta Caves

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Elephanta Caves

The Elephanta Caves are rock-cut Shiva temples on an island near Mumbai. The great cave holds a famous three-faced Sadashiva. No inscription names the builder. UNESCO listed the caves in 1987.

What it isa group of rock-cut cave temples, mainly for Shiva.

WhereElephanta Island, also called Gharapuri, in Mumbai Harbour.

Main imagethe three-faced Sadashiva, popularly called the Trimurti.

ListedUNESCO World Heritage Site, 1987.

What should I know first about the Elephanta Caves?

1 What are the Elephanta Caves?

The Elephanta Caves are cut into the rock of Elephanta Island. The island is also called Gharapuri. It lies in Mumbai Harbour.

The caves are mainly for Shiva. The great cave, Cave 1, is cut into the western hill. UNESCO lists the whole site as a World Heritage Site. The year is 1987.

What is on the island besides the caves?

The island has remains of other periods. Remains of people living there go back to the 2nd century BC. Buried stupas lie towards the eastern side of the hill. A cannon stands at the top.



The three-faced Sadashiva in Cave 1. Photo: Dinesh Valke, via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 2.0).

> **Quick check 1.** UNESCO listed the Elephanta Caves as a World Heritage Site in 1987. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: whc.unesco.org; sahapedia.org

2 Why is the island called Elephanta?

The Portuguese gave the island this name. They saw a huge stone elephant near the old landing place. They called the island after it.

The older name is Gharapuri. Its meaning is not clear. The 1934 Guide links it to a Prakrit word for a fort. Another source reads it as “hill settlement”.

What happened to the stone elephant?

The head and neck fell off in 1814. The rest later fell to pieces. In 1864 the stones were moved to the Victoria Gardens in Bombay and set up again. Today the elephant stands in Jijamata Udyan in Mumbai.

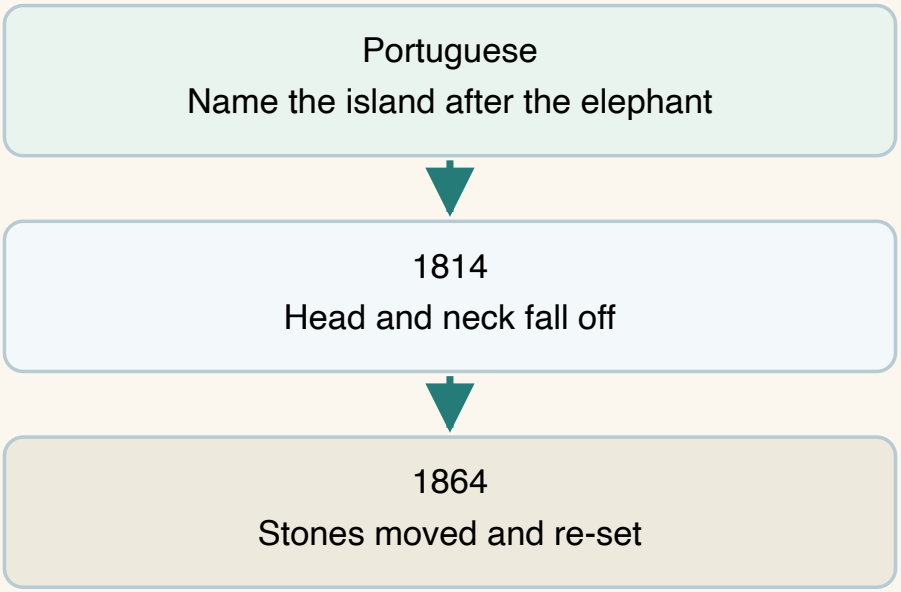
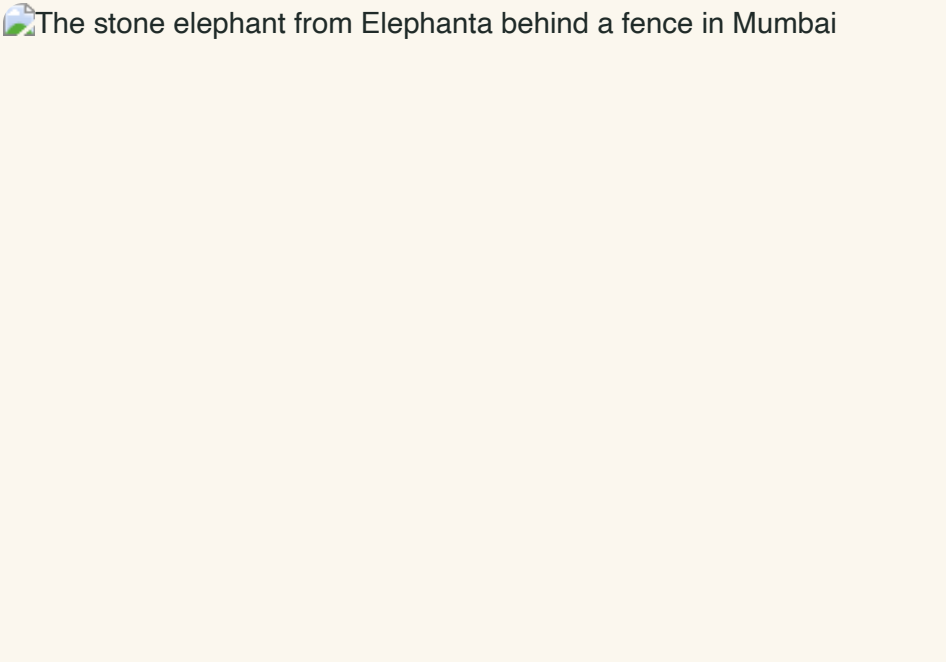


Illustration: Steps as set out in this card.



The stone elephant, behind a fence outside a museum building in Mumbai. Photo: Elroy Serrao, via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 2.0). Resized from the original.

> **Quick check 2.** The British named the island after a stone elephant. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: archive.org; sahapedia.org

3 What does the great cave look like?

Cave 1 is the great cave. It is 39 metres from the front entrance to the back. The main hall is 27 metres square. Rows of six columns hold up the roof.

The cave has a square shrine with a Shiva linga. It has four entrances. This is the sanctum, or garbha-griha.

Which carvings should I know?

Large panels show Shiva in different forms. UNESCO names seven of them:

- Nataraja, Shiva as King of Dancers.
- Yogishvara.
- Andhakasuravadha, Shiva as killer of the demon Andhaka.
- Ardhanarishvara.
- Kalyanasundaramurti, the marriage of Shiva and Parvati.
- Gangadharamurti, the descent of the Ganga.
- Ravananugrahamurti.

UNESCO counts fifteen large reliefs around the linga chapel. UNESCO calls the fifteen large reliefs one of the greatest examples of Indian art.

Cave 1, the great cave

39 m from entrance to back

Main hall 27 m square

Square shrine, four entrances

Illustration: Measures as set out in this card.

The cave once had paintings. Only faint traces are left.

Sources: whc.unesco.org; sahapedia.org; archive.org

What is the Trimurti, and why is the name misleading?

4 What is the "Trimurti" really?

Visitors call the big image the Trimurti. That word suggests Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva together. The image is not that. All three faces show Shiva.

The image is Sadashiva, also called Maheshamurti. UNESCO gives its height as 7 metres. It dominates the entrance to Cave 1.

Who are the three faces?

UNESCO names them from left to right. The left half is Aghora, or Bhairava. The centre is Tatpurusha, or Mahadeva. The right half is Vamadeva, or Uma.

The 1934 Guide calls the name “Trimurti” a miscall. The name fits only as “triple form”, not as the Hindu triad.

Sadashiva, 7 m high

Left: Aghora or Bhairava

Centre: Tatpurusha or Mahadeva

Right: Vamadeva or Uma

Illustration: Faces as set out in this card.

Why are only three faces shown?

Five forms of Pashupati lie behind the image. They are Sadyojata, Vamadeva, Aghora, Tatpurusha and Ishana. Ishana is usually not shown. Images that show all five forms carry only four faces.

The Elephanta image has three faces. The fourth is understood to be present but is not seen.

> **Quick check 3.** The three faces of the great image are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: whc.unesco.org; sahapedia.org; archive.org

5 How are the caves linked to the Pashupata sect?

The Pashupatas were a Shaiva sect. Kramrisch and Collins argued that the cave plan meets the rules of Pashupata teaching.

What was a Pashupata initiate's path?

At first an initiate did not have to be a monk. The path had four stages:

1. He lived in the house of his teacher.
2. He lived in a Shiva temple.
3. He lived in a cave.
4. He lived in a cremation ground.

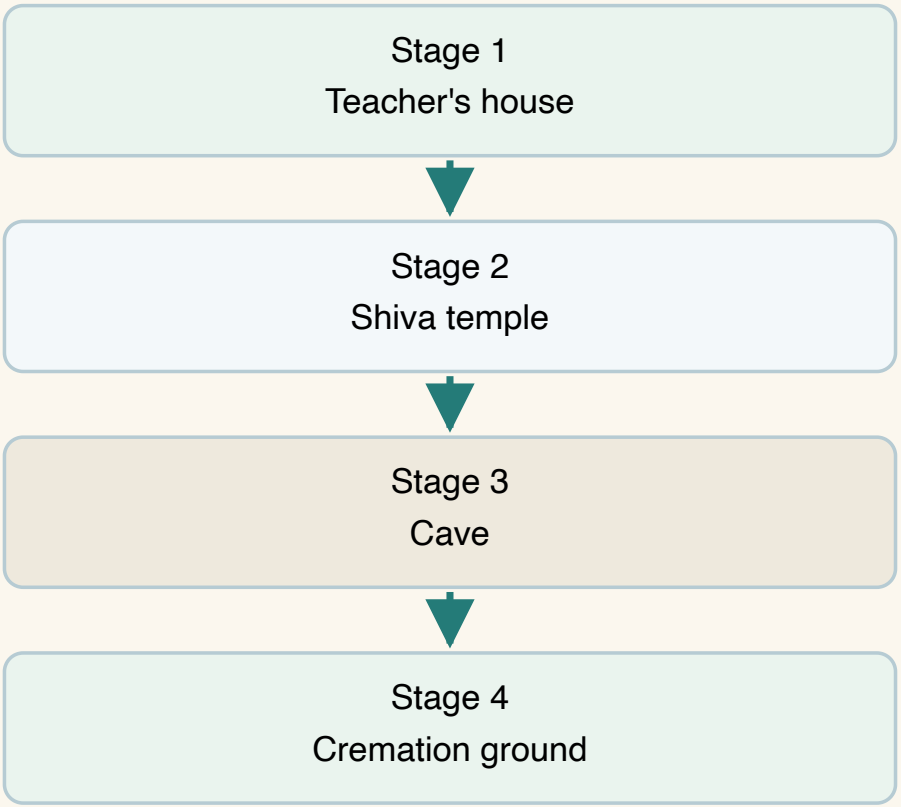


Illustration: Stages as set out in this card.

What did he meditate on?

He meditated on five forms of Pashupati, which is a name of Shiva. The order was Sadyojata, Vamadeva, Aghora, Tatpurusha and Ishana. In the last stage he meditated on Ishana. Ishana is usually not shown in an image.

Kramrisch notes that the caves at Mandapeshwar and Jogeshwari, Cave 29 at Ellora and the great cave share a similar plan. Scholars find it hard to prove one patron for all of them.

> **Quick check 4.** A Pashupata initiate lived in a cave as the last stage of his path. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: sahapedia.org

Who built the caves, and why is it debated?

6 Who built the caves?

Nobody knows for sure. No inscription survives that names the builder. The Portuguese removed a large inscribed stone from over the entrance. It was lost.

What is the Kalachuri theory?

Walter Spink holds that the Kalachuri king Krishnaraja had the great cave cut in the mid-6th century. Copper coins of Krishnaraja turn up in fair numbers in western India. Thousands of coins have also turned up on the island.

V. V. Mirashi also names the Kalachuris. He puts the work in the early 7th century.

What do the other views say?

Ramesh Gupte points to the Chalukyas. He notes the pearled sacred thread worn by the figures. An earlier view gave the caves to the Konkan Mauryas. Mirashi answers that the Mauryas were only vassals of the Kalachuris. In his view they could not have paid for such a cave.

Walter Spink
Kalachuri, mid-6th century

V. V. Mirashi
Kalachuri, early 7th century

Ramesh Gupte
Chalukya influence

Illustration: Views as set out in this card.

Why do coins not settle it?

Coins show that a king's money was in use on the island. They do not by themselves say who ordered the cave. So the Kalachuri theory is one view, not a proven fact.

> **Quick check 5.** An inscription in the great cave names its builder. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: sahapedia.org; archive.org

7 When were the caves built, and how were they damaged?

UNESCO says the caves were built about the mid-5th to 6th centuries AD. The 1934 Guide says about the 6th century. Older writers gave the 8th or early 9th century.

What harm did the Portuguese do?

The Portuguese used the caves as cattle sheds and to store fodder. In 1712 a Portuguese hidalgo fired shots into the great cave. The shots broke some pillars. Cave 6 served as a Christian church.

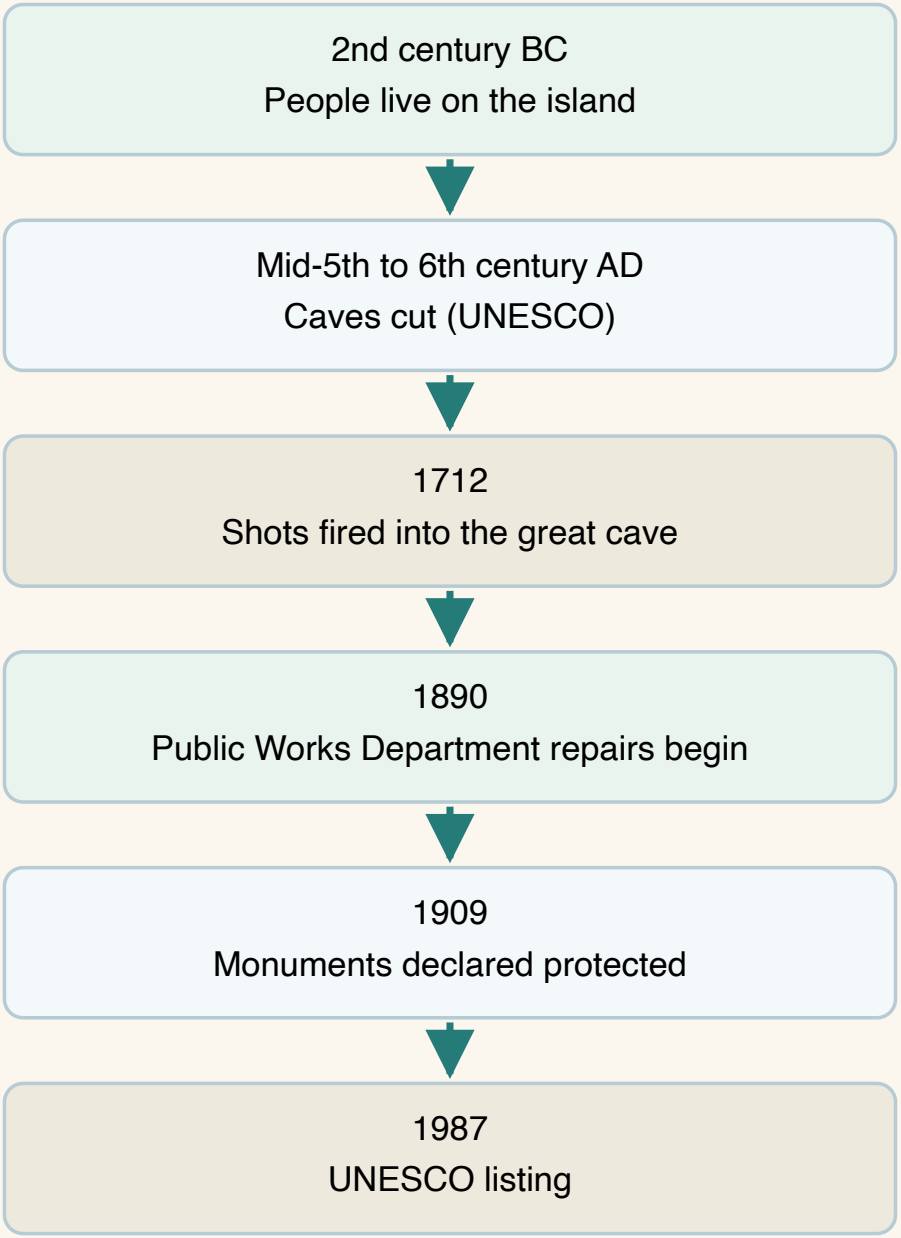


Illustration: Dates as set out in this card.

How have the caves been kept?

From 1890 the Public Works Department repaired the pillars. In 1909 the monuments were declared protected under the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act.

UNESCO notes that saline activity and rock decay still harm the caves.

> **Quick check 6.** In 1712 a Portuguese man fired shots into the great cave. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: whc.unesco.org; archive.org

How do I revise the Elephanta Caves in one minute?

8 What should I remember about the Elephanta Caves?

- **Place.** Elephanta Island, also called Gharapuri, in Mumbai Harbour.
- **God.** Shiva.
- **Name.** The Portuguese named it after a stone elephant.
- **Elephant.** Head fell in 1814. Moved and re-set in 1864.
- **Main image.** Sadashiva. Three faces show. It is not the Hindu trinity.
- **Sect.** The Pashupata link. Initiates meditated on five forms of Shiva.
- **Builder.** Not named in any inscription. Kalachuri Krishnaraja is one of the main theories.
- **Listing.** UNESCO, 1987.

Sources: whc.unesco.org; sahapedia.org

Which slips cost marks on the Elephanta Caves? Exam practice

9 What do examiners test about the Elephanta Caves?

What are the traps?

1. **The British naming.** The Portuguese named the island.
2. **One large cave.** The island has caves on both hills.
3. **A Vishnu carving.** The famous image is Shiva as Sadashiva.
4. **The Trimurti.** It is not Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

Has this come up in the exam?

The answer is (d). The Pashupata sect is tied to the caves. Option (a) fails because the Portuguese named the island. Option (b) fails because the island has caves on both hills. Option (c) fails because the famous image is Sadashiva.

Sources: mcqquestion.com; sahapedia.org

Review your 6 understanding checks

Review the feedback after each answer. The understanding-check score lasts for this page session.

Reset the checks when you want another attempt. This score is separate from the practice score below.

Questions to think through

Why is “Trimurti” a misleading name for the great image?

The word suggests Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. All three faces are Shiva. The image shows Sadashiva.

Why do the coins not prove who built the caves?

Coins show that a king’s money was used on the island. They are a clue, not proof.

Why is a cave a fitting home for a Pashupata initiate?

The path had a cave stage. The cave suited quiet meditation on the five forms of Shiva.

Why are the Portuguese named in the story of the caves?

They gave the island its name. They also damaged the caves and took away the inscribed stone.

Sources: whc.unesco.org; sahapedia.org; archive.org

Practice MCQs

1. Where are the Elephanta Caves located?

A. Ellora, Maharashtra

B. Salsette Island

C. Gharapuri island, Mumbai Harbour

D. Ajanta, Maharashtra

See answer ↓

2. Which one of the following statements about the Elephanta Island is correct?

A. It was given its name by the British after a large elephant structure located there.

B. It contains one large cave.

C. It is well-known for a spectacular carving of Vishnu described in the Vishnudharmottara Purana.

D. It is associated with the Pashupata sect.

See answer ↓

3. The Elephanta Caves are dedicated mainly to which deity?

A. Ganesha

B. Brahma

C. Shiva

D. Vishnu

See answer ↓

4. What inspired Portuguese sailors to name the island 'Elephanta'?

A. A Sanskrit name meaning 'elephant city'

B. An elephant that lived on the island

C. The island's shape resembling an elephant

D. A large stone elephant statue near the shore

See answer ↓

5. What is the central shrine at the heart of Elephanta's main cave, housing a Shiva linga, called?

A. The garbha-griha

B. The gopuram

C. The mukha-mandapa

D. The ardha-mandapa

See answer ↓

6. Besides Tatpurusha, Vamadeva, and Aghora-Bhairava, which two faces complete the five-faced Sadashiva concept behind Elephanta's Trimurti, even though they are not visible?

A. Brahma and Vishnu

B. Ganesha and Kartikeya

C. Sadyojata and Ishana

D. Indra and Varuna

See answer ↓

7. Why do historians say the exact builder dynasty of the Elephanta Caves is still genuinely uncertain?

A. British colonial records were destroyed in a fire

B. The caves were rebuilt too many times to date reliably

C. Radiocarbon dating of the rock gave inconsistent results

D. No royal inscription inside the caves names a builder

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The correct answer is **Gharapuri island, Mumbai Harbour**. Elephanta Island is also called Gharapuri. It lies in Mumbai Harbour. Ajanta and Ellora are other cave sites, so they are wrong. Salsette Island is not where the caves are. Memory hook: Elephanta is Gharapuri, in the harbour. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** The correct answer is **(d), the link with the Pashupata sect**. Scholars say the cave plan meets the rules of Pashupata teaching. Option (a) is wrong because the Portuguese named the island. Option (b) is wrong because the island has caves on both hills. Option (c) is wrong because the famous image is Sadashiva, a form of Shiva. Memory hook: Elephanta means Shiva and the Pashupatas. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** The correct answer is **Shiva**. The great cave holds Sadashiva and large panels of Shiva in many forms. Vishnu, Brahma and Ganesha are wrong because the caves are mainly Shiva temples. Memory hook: Elephanta is a Shiva site. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The correct answer is **a large stone elephant statue near the shore**. The Portuguese saw it near the landing place and named the island after it. The island's shape did not give the name, and no live elephant lived there. The older name Gharapuri is not read as 'elephant city'. Memory hook: the Portuguese named it, after a stone elephant. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** The correct answer is **the garbha-griha**. This is the sanctum of the great cave. It holds the Shiva linga and has four entrances. The mukha-mandapa and ardha-mandapa are other parts of a temple plan, not the sanctum. A gopuram is a gateway tower, not a shrine. Memory hook: the garbha-griha is the heart of the plan. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** The correct answer is **Sadyojata and Ishana**. The five forms of Pashupati are Sadyojata, Vamadeva, Aghora, Tatpurusha and Ishana. The image shows only three faces: Aghora, Tatpurusha and Vamadeva. Ishana is usually not shown. Brahma, Vishnu, Ganesha, Kartikeya, Indra and Varuna are not among the five forms. Memory hook: five forms, three faces. ↑ Q6

7. **D.** The correct answer is **No royal inscription inside the caves names a builder**. No inscription survives that names one. The Portuguese removed a large inscribed stone from over the entrance, and it was lost. That is why the dating and the dynasty stay open. The other options give reasons that no source supports. Memory hook: no inscription, so no sure builder. ↑ Q7

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** UNESCO inscribed the site in 1987, under criteria (i) and (iii). ↑ 1
2. **False.** The Portuguese named it. They saw a huge stone elephant near the old landing place. ↑ 2
3. **False.** All three faces show Shiva. The image is Sadashiva, not the Hindu triad. ↑ 3
4. **False.** The cave was the third stage. The last stage was the cremation ground. ↑ 4
5. **False.** No inscription survives that names the builder. The Portuguese removed a large inscribed stone, and it was lost. ↑ 5
6. **True.** A Portuguese hidalgo fired shots into the great cave to hear the echo. The shots broke some pillars. ↑ 6

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