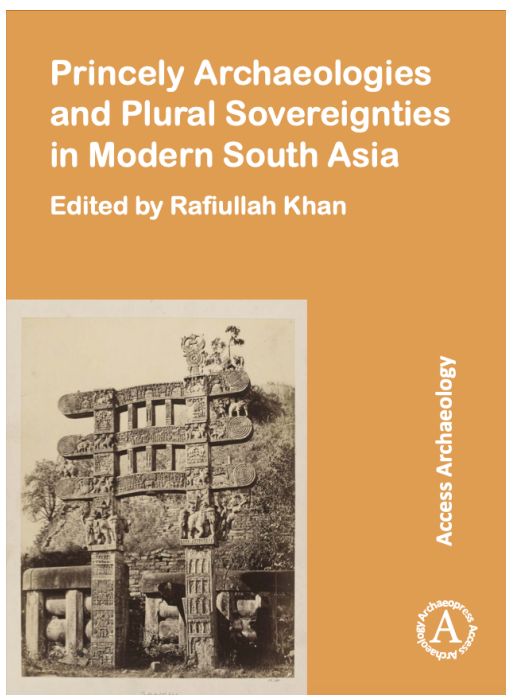


Review: Rafiullah Khan ed. (2025)
*Princely Archaeologies and Plural Sovereignties
in Modern South Asia.* Archaeopress, Oxford

Luca M. Olivieri



The scientific output on South Asia in the fields of archaeology and ancient history is colossal. Especially in the last 15 years, the number of publications (whether books, articles, or conference proceedings—so many!) has increased exponentially. Until around 2000 it used to be the researcher’s job, and a point of honor, to keep up to date by frequenting libraries, especially the ‘new arrivals’ sections, ordering books from catalogs received by mail, keeping handwritten lists of works to order, and subscribing to the most important journals... It was a meticulous, careful task, on which the scholar’s entire work and prestige depended. There was nothing worse than being caught out by a colleague

in writing, or—worse still—during a public discussion, for not having cited this or that publication out of ignorance. The journals to be consulted could be counted on the fingers of two hands, new books appeared at a rate of two or three a year, sometimes less, sometimes none. What was written and published was intended to be valid for years and years, and scholars often waited decades before publishing their data, because they were always attentive to revisions, revisions of revisions, corrections of revisions... Always with the idea of writing something ‘definitive’. Today, it’s the opposite. Every month, at least 10 works of some importance to the discipline are published, and every year at least an half a dozen books are published, designed more as ‘instant books’, with partial data and interpretative models thrown into the air like the Albionian arrows in Shakespeare’s Battle of Agincourt. Not to mention the new journals: at least two or three new journals a year from the most remote corners of the globe with increasingly long and obscure titles. All indexed: you exist because you are certified. You are certified, therefore you are valid (regardless of what you write!). Barrage fire, paper artillery (not

paper: digital bites!) obscuring the clear sky of science and knowledge. Background noise rather than harmonies of thought. “Sorry, I didn’t see it!”, “You didn’t send it to me,” “Was it online?” These are now the excuses of researchers, who have become deaf to the excessive noise of the artillery.

It is impossible to keep up with these offensives launched in waves to the cry of “Publish or perish!”, with ever new waves of conscripts: after the officers (the various grades of professors) come the fresh troops, who are enlisted more and more frequently. There is no PhD student who does not already have her/his ‘revolutionary’ publication published or planned, where rather than new things, it is preferred to ‘deconstruct’ those of those who have now passed away...

All this to say one very simple thing. This book, edited by Rafiullah Khan (Associate Professor, TIAC, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad), does not belong to the category of Albionian arrows, but—if you’ll forgive the comparison—to that of humanity’s fundamental inventions: the Paleolithic biface. Anyone who wants to know something about the management of archaeological assets in the so-called Native States in the pre-partition Subcontinent should throw away everything else and keep this book. This book has everything: it is comprehensive, reasonably conspicuous, rationally organized, full of precious and extremely relevant information, it is free, and can be downloaded from the internet without restrictions (i.e., it is “open access” as they say today). Disclaimer: I would have said the same thing even if I hadn’t contributed to the book. If anyone objects that it deals with a subject too specialized to be a ‘fundamental book,’ there are several responses. One level, which is fashionable today, is that it is a book that truly deconstructs outdated models: the archaeology of the British Raj was indeed a legacy of European Orientalists, but only in terms of structure, since the meaning of history and knowledge (especially knowledge!) were already powerfully present in the intellectual history of the Subcontinent. Behind every Prinsep, Stein, Bühler, Lüders (and Führer) (note that the majority of philologists in the service of the British Raj were of the German school, just as the artillery generals at the courts of Asia came from the Napoleon army), there were pandits, Brahmins, and *maulanas*.

This is one level of truth: even before many of these foreign “*savants*” there were personalities of the caliber of Bhagwan Lal (who did not know English, and yet...) and Pandurang Gopal Padhye, and many other obscure or well-known figures. A digression: I am a fairly well-known archaeologist in Pakistan, but I have always said and written that before me, in addition to my teachers such as Domenico Faccenna, there were not only the F.A. Khans and the Danis, but above all the native archaeologists, humble researchers or simple workers such as Zamani, Fazal Mahmud, or the valiant Aktar Munir (whose obituary we published in the *Journal of Asian Civilizations*), who had seen before me, understood before me, many of the things and discoveries that today go under my name...

Given this, *Princely Archaeologies and Plural Sovereignties in Modern South Asia* presents an alternative perspective. That said, with one important counter-statement: there is no doubt that the agnostic and philological method of study, the very concept of ‘the past’, and therefore in practice the archaeology of things, the perception of ‘ruins’ as vestiges, traces, instruments of knowledge as well as objects of study, all this is, taken as a whole, the great contribution that European scholars have exported from the very philosophical heart of Europe. This had succeeded—amid wars and revolutions, after the overthrow of the Ancien Régimes—in shaping a modern sense of the ancient world on which we all still depend. The British India ‘Ancient Monuments Preservation Act’ of 1904, although motivated by protectionist needs, was in fact the first legal instrument to explicitly include “any object of archaeological importance” in the cultural heritage.

Another level of interpretation to understand the shaping of Indian archaeology, and the role of Native States, is the historical one. Perhaps not everyone, even today in Pakistan (or in India, despite the current narrative), knows that this monolithic British Raj was not so monolithic after all. I am not referring here to political stability, although the numerous series of reforms and scandals and bankruptcies, and more reforms, would speak volumes about how chaotic, approximate, and sometimes incompetent the colonial administration was (the British one as well as the French, the Belgian and Italian ones, for that matter!).

Of course, back then “trains ran on time,” but apart from that... Yes, there were giants amongst them (Deane, Caroe, and many more) and military heroes, the “Lords of the Marches” of Aurel Stein, but overall, one should also consider the average level of military or civil servants, who set out from remote villages in the moors or mining suburbs in the north, crushed by the Motherland elitism, petty bourgeois or proletarians with no special skills other than their ambition, brushing the coal dust from their shoulders and becoming—to paraphrase Kipling—“men who wanted to be kings”.

Of course, they then suffered from ‘*Mal d’India*’ (or ‘Indian Nostalgia’) when they returned to their homeland, continuing to cook with curry and wear their waistcoats while stoking the fire in their poor two-bedroom cum kitchen houses: *India capta ferum victorem cepit*. This also applies to many of us, including me. My family were small landowners, former proletarians who have come to the city. I would queue at the post office like everyone else, but in Asia I am a different man. All my life I have tried to be in Pakistan the man I aspired to be, and I hope I have succeeded, at least in part.

I return to the question: I am talking here about geographical solidity. Look at a map of British India and you will see that the parts administered directly by the British Raj were like the spots on the fur of a snow leopard: the optical impression of the white background stands out from the rest. India was Indian well

before the Partition (the term India comes from Proto-Indo-Iranian *sín^huš i.e. ‘river’, the Indus being ‘the River’ *par excellence*).

Compare these two images in the next page: in one we find India as the British Dreamland, the other is the harsh reality of the actual administrative capillarity. Nor could the partition have been quick and sudden if it had not been for the rapid emptying of many drawers in different cupboards without bothering to close the door.

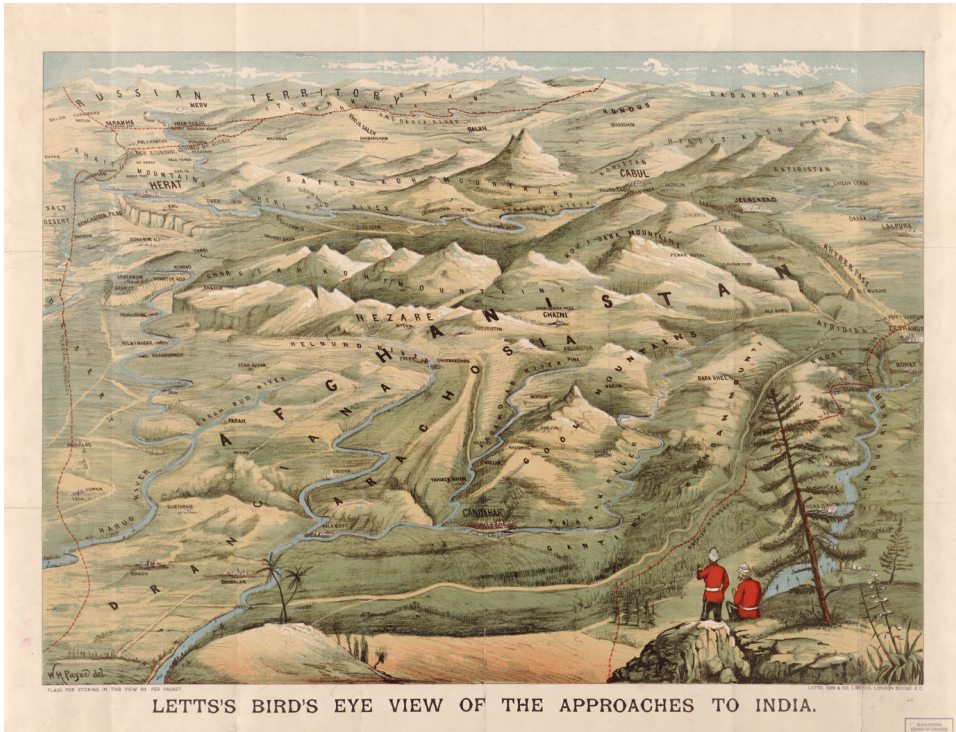


Fig. 1 - “Letts’s bird’s eye view of the approaches to India”
[<https://www.loc.gov/item/2006636637/>], World Digital Library.

Archaeology in India, therefore, was indeed the institutionalized archaeology of the colonial government, but to a large extent it was also the archaeology of the native states or practiced by them. So, in this case, the parameter must be, if not completely reversed, at least adequately balanced, and the credit for understanding this goes to the editor and creator of this book. If this is the case, it is clear that neither the history of discoveries nor the intellectual history behind them and generated by them can be understood without looking at these Native States as subjects, as key players in understanding what is now a discipline in its own right:

the history of Indian archaeology, a sociological, political, and anthropological history in the deepest sense of the term, social.

The book presents a vision that highlights, on the one hand, interstate interactions and, on the other, those between British India and the Native States of India. This is an aspect that Rafiullah Khan demonstrates in the last chapter (Chapter 13: *The Loss of Innocence: Princely Archaeologies vis-à-vis South Asian Historiography*), based on both the data reported in Parts I-II of the book and new sources. This has led the editor to define this history as the “connected” history of archaeological work in South Asia.



Fig. 2 – Map of British India and Native States; Edinburgh Geographical Institute; J. G. Bartholomew and Sons. - Oxford University Press, 1909.
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7381045>

I would stretch the argument a little and call it the invisible backbone, the endoskeleton of everything that our colleagues (including myself) have done, been able to do, and will be able to do in the past and present. So take this book and put it at the top of your reading list, and happy studying!

Post Script

The book can be downloaded here:

<https://www.archaeopress.com/Archaeopress/Products/9781805831495>

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