

Theuns-de Boer, Gerda. 2008. *A Vision of Splendour: Indian Heritage in the Photographs of Jean Philippe Vogel, 1901-1913* Mapin Publishing and The Kern Institute. 191 pages. 149 B/W photographs. ISBN 978 0 944 14274 5

Photography, archaeology and afternoon tea



Gandharan Buddhas. Lorian Tangai (NW Frontier Province, Pakistan); overview of excavated Buddhist sculpture, 2nd-5th century. Alexander E. Caddy, 1890s.

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In 1901, a young Dutchman named Jean Philippe Vogel arrived in Lahore, fresh from the successful defence of his doctoral thesis on the *Mrichchhakatikam* ('The Little Clay Cart'), a well-known work of Sanskrit literature. He had come to India to continue his Sanskrit studies and to get a taste of Indian culture. Instead, his potential was noticed by Marc Aurel Stein, a Sanskritist and archaeologist working in India, and he was inducted into the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) as an archaeological surveyor in the Punjab, Baluchistan and Ajmer Circle. At the time of joining the ASI, Vogel knew nothing about archaeology. Nevertheless, it was not altogether surprising that he should have been

considered for the job, as many of the officers of the ASI were in fact textual scholars, who had learnt archaeology while on the job. Over the years, Vogel found himself playing an important role in excavating major sites such as Charsada, Kusinara and Saheth-Maheth. He wrote fine, meticulously detailed scholarly works on a wide variety of themes including the medieval monuments of Lahore, Delhi and Agra, the art of the Punjab Hill states, the sculpture of Mathura, and serpents in Hindu legend and art. In 1910, he rose to the position of Deputy Director General of the ASI, a post he occupied till 1912. Vogel left the ASI in 1914, to take up a professorship in Sanskrit at Leiden University. He retired in 1939 after 12 extremely fruitful years of archaeological work in India and a quarter of a century of academic work in Leiden.

Vogel was not only a gifted and industrious scholar, he was also an institution builder. In 1924, along with Nicolaas Johannes Krom, he founded the Kern Institute in Leiden. The institute was named after the first Dutch Sanskritist, Hendrik Kern (1833-1917), and swiftly became a major centre of Indology in Europe. The Kern Institute also became home to Vogel's collection of some 10,000 photographs. These photographs were taken variously by amateurs, professional photographers, and officers of the ASI. Some were taken by Vogel himself. The images cover not only India, but also Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and Cambodia.

Gerda Theuns-de Boer's *A Vision of Splendour* contains a selection of some 150 photographs from this archive, all taken between 1870 and 1920. Con-



Kusinagara, Colossal statue of a seated Buddha before and after restoration, ca. 12th century. Ghulam Nabi, 1911.





left picture: Churah area, possibly Devikothi (HP); women during a festival. Jean Phillipe Vogel, 1902.



right picture: The Dutch sanskritist and archaeologist Jean Phillipe Vogel, photographed at the ASI head office in Shimla (HP). Unknown photographer, 1908.

Chamba (HP); The Rajas of Svai, Ulansa and Gurola. Jean Phillipe Vogel, 1902.



necting the arresting and evocative sepia and black and white images is a narrative that gives a sense of how these images are embedded in the history of archaeology and photography. The major focus of the book is Vogel (1871-1958), his life, his work, and his ideas about the care of Indian heritage. Theuns-de Boer has also drawn on Vogel's letters to scholars and members of his family, as well as his diaries (all part of the Kern Institute collection). Together with the photographs, they offer an engaging sketch of the man and his time.

Amateurs, dilettantes and professionals

Vogel came to India at an important threshold time in the history of Indian archaeology, and the first chapter of the book gives a brief overview of the history and growth of the ASI, and the changing and expanding role of photography therein. In the 19th century, Indian archaeology had successfully emerged from beneath the umbrella of antiquarianism and had carved out its own distinct domain. However, the ASI was still dominated by amateurs and dilettantes, and its activities presented a rather haphazard and disorganised picture. Conservation was not high on the British Government of India's list of priorities, and there were many instances of vandalism carried out in the name of archaeological investigation and bad restoration (even renovation) carried out in the name of conservation. The early 20th century saw important changes, largely due to the political vision and leadership provided by the Viceroy Lord Curzon and the archaeological vision and leadership of John Marshall, who became Director General of the ASI in 1902. Indian archaeology now became more professional, and large-scale excavations were carried out methodically, with due consideration towards the principle of stratigraphy. Indians also began to be associated in a bigger way in the activities of the ASI, which till then had been almost entirely a European show.

During his years as an archaeological surveyor and superintendent based in Lahore, Vogel concentrated on early Islamic and Mughal monuments (Chapter 2). His job involved many things - making lists of antiquarian remains; directing excavations; advising and inspecting the work of conservation and repair; making copies and lists of inscriptions; interfacing with museums; and writing annual progress reports. File work frequently interfered with field work. The work was enormous (he travelled an average of 6,500 km a year) and the budgetary and human resources pitifully meagre.

The task of conserving historical monuments (discussed in Chapter 3) was not directly in the hands of the ASI. The execution of repairs was the responsibility of the Public Works Department (PWD); the ASI was basically an advisory and supervisory body. The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act (1904) was an important piece of legislation and, in 1907,

John Marshall published a pamphlet giving basic guidelines for the conservation of ancient monuments. However, much remained to be done. Sometimes major blunders were made, such as when the Vishnu temple at Bhitargaon was plastered and whitewashed, and the 'repairs' had to be undone. Furthermore, the illegal trade in antiquities continued in spite of legislation.

Theuns-de Boer gives an account of Vogel's excavations, especially Char-sada and Kasia (Chapter 4). The technical features of excavations in the Marshall era could have been brought out with greater specificity. Nevertheless, the book has interesting details such as the fact that the Saheth-Maheth excavations (1908) took off earlier than planned, as the Government decided to convert them into a famine relief operation which, at its peak, offered employment to 1,600 people.

Vogel had a passion for Chamba (in the northern state of modern Himachal Pradesh), and visited it almost every year. Most of the photographs in this book were taken by other photographers. A few were taken by Vogel, and these reflect his interest in Chamba's monuments and its people. This area contained a wealth of epigraphic sources and Vogel busied himself collecting, copying, editing, translating and publishing inscriptions. He was to go on to write a major work titled *Antiquities of Chamba State*.

'Archaeological teas'

The ASI mainly employed British officers, but it also included Europeans from other lands, the most notable of whom were the Hungary-born Marc Aurel Stein, the American David Brainerd Spooner, the Norwegian Sten Konow, and of course Vogel himself. Vogel as a Dutch social intermediary between the British and the Indians is the subject of the last chapter of this book. There are interesting details, for instance the fact that he was active with the Boer war prisoners in India, and that this almost cost him his job. Or the 'archaeological teas' Vogel organised in Simla, along

with Sten Konow, where antiquities were displayed and discussed over cups of tea and snacks.

Theuns-de Boer's sketch of Vogel's personality includes quotes from his diary reflecting his impatience with official pomp and ceremonial and the boring parties and balls he had to attend. There are his remarks on Curzon's overbearing interference. Snippets from his correspondence with John Marshall suggest excellent mutual rapport. Other letters reflect the fact that like many of his European contemporaries, Vogel's attitude towards 'native scholars' was not very positive, and that he had grave reservations about the increasing Indianisation of the Archaeological Survey.

This book is really a photo-essay, dominated by the numerous beautiful black and white photographs. These photographs form part of an important visual documentation of the history of monuments, their dilapidation and repair, and the discovery and de-contextualisation of artefacts in late 19th and early 20th century India. The photographs of officers associated with the ASI give a face to some of the many scholars who played an important role in the construction of India's ancient and medieval past in the early 20th century. These men and the photographers whose work appears in this book deserve full-fledged biographies. So does Jean Philippe Vogel.

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