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ASI Discovers 1,500-Year-Old Stepped Reservoir on Elephanta Island

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ASI Discovers 1,500-Year-Old Stepped Reservoir on Elephanta Island

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WHY IN NEWS:

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) discovered a **1,500-year-old T-shaped stepped reservoir** with 20 stone steps on Elephanta Island (Gharapuri), Maharashtra. Stones were transported from the mainland — pointing to advanced ancient water management technology and maritime capability dating to the 5th–6th century CE.

ELEPHANTA ISLAND — AT A GLANCE

Elephanta Island (ancient name: **Gharapuri** — “City of Caves”) is a small island in Mumbai Harbour, approximately 11 km from the Gateway of India.

FEATURE	DETAIL
Modern name	Elephanta Island
Ancient name	Gharapuri (means “City of Caves”)
Location	Mumbai Harbour, Maharashtra
Distance from Gateway of India	~11 km by ferry
Administrative status	Raigad district, Maharashtra
UNESCO Status	World Heritage Site — inscribed 1987
Known for	Rock-cut cave temples dedicated to Lord Shiva
Depictions	Maheshmurti (Trimurti) — 6m tall, 3-faced Shiva sculpture
Peak period	5th–8th century CE (Kalachuri/Chalukya/early Rashtrakuta period)

THE DISCOVERY: A T-SHAPED STEPPED RESERVOIR

What Was Found

ASI archaeologists, conducting a systematic survey of the island, discovered:

- A **T-shaped stepped reservoir** (also called a “stepwell-type cistern” or *vapi*)
- **20 stone steps** descending to the water collection chamber
- Cut stones used in construction were **transported from the mainland** (the island’s natural rock is predominantly basalt but the reservoir stones show different quarry characteristics)
- Estimated age: **~1,500 years** (5th–6th century CE)
- Size: Moderate — designed for community/ritual water storage rather than large-scale agriculture

Why It Matters

- 1 **Water management sophistication:** The T-shape is an engineering feature for maximising water collection while minimising evaporation — a design seen in other South Asian stepwells but rare on island contexts
- 2 **Maritime capability:** Transporting heavy stone blocks from mainland to a harbour island required boats, ropes, and organised labour — demonstrating advanced seafaring logistics
- 3 **Settlement pattern:** A permanent stepped reservoir implies **sustained habitation** on the island — not just a temporary religious site. This revises understanding of Elephanta’s ancient demographics.
- 4 **Religion-water integration:** Stepped reservoirs (*vapi/kund*) are often associated with temple complexes — water for ritual purification, temple maintenance, and pilgrim use

ELEPHANTA CAVES — HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Rock-Cut Architecture

The Elephanta Caves are a remarkable example of **Shaiva rock-cut architecture** from the Deccan:

CAVE	DEITY	NOTABLE FEATURE
Main Cave (Cave 1)	Shiva	The Maheshmurti (Trimurti) — 6m sculpture of Shiva with 3 faces
Cave 2–5	Shiva (various forms)	Smaller; some Buddhist influences in earlier phases

The Maheshmurti shows Shiva as:

- **Tatpuruṣha** (right face): Shiva as creator/teacher
- **Aghora** (left face): Shiva as destroyer
- **Uma/Sadyojata** (central face): Shiva as preserver — the benevolent aspect

Who Built Them?

Attribution is debated among historians:

- **Kalachuri dynasty** (6th century CE) — most commonly cited
- **Chalukya of Badami** — alternative theory for some cave modifications
- Later **Rashtrakuta** additions

The Portuguese colonisers renamed the island “Elephanta” after a large stone elephant statue they found there (now relocated to the Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA (ASI)

FEATURE	DETAIL
Established	1861
Founded by	Alexander Cunningham (first Director General)
Under	Ministry of Culture
Authority	Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) Act, 1958
Functions	Excavation, conservation, documentation, museum management
Protected monuments	~3,691 monuments of national importance
UNESCO WHS management	ASI manages India’s UNESCO sites

ANCIENT WATER MANAGEMENT — BROADER CONTEXT

India has a rich tradition of water harvesting architecture:

TYPE	REGION/PERIOD	EXAMPLE
Stepwell (Vav/Vapi)	Gujarat, Rajasthan; 3rd–19th century	Rani ki Vav (Patan, Gujarat) – UNESCO WHS
Tank/Reservoir (Kund)	South India, Deccan; 5th century onward	Hemkund (Himalayas); Pushkar lake
Surang Tawa	Chhattisgarh; medieval	Underground water channel
Johad	Rajasthan; traditional	Community earthen pond
Karez	J&K, Afghanistan; Persian origin	Underground aqueduct
Phad system	Maharashtra; medieval	Communal river diversion

The Elephanta reservoir discovery adds a **maritime island variant** to this tradition.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 – History	Rock-cut architecture; Kalachuri/Chalukya period; Shaiva temples
GS1 – Art & Culture	Elephanta Caves UNESCO site; Maheshmurti sculpture; Trimurti iconography
GS1 – History	Ancient water management; stepwell tradition; maritime trade
GS2 – Governance	ASI; AMASR Act 1958; UNESCO World Heritage Site management
Mains Keywords	Elephanta Island, Gharapuri, Maheshmurti, Trimurti, Kalachuri dynasty, ASI, AMASR Act, stepped reservoir, Rani ki Vav, rock-cut architecture, UNESCO WHS

FACTS CORNER

ITEM	DETAIL
Island name	Elephanta / Gharapuri
Location	Mumbai Harbour (~11 km from Gateway of India)
UNESCO inscription	1987 (World Heritage Site)
Discovery	T-shaped stepped reservoir; ~1,500 years old (5th–6th century CE)
Steps	20 stone steps
Stone origin	Transported from mainland (cross-island maritime logistics)
Main cave deity	Lord Shiva (Maheshmurti/Trimurti sculpture — 6 metres tall)
Cave period	5th–8th century CE
Builders (attributed)	Kalachuri dynasty (most cited)
Portuguese name origin	Named after a stone elephant statue (now at Bhau Daji Lad Museum)
ASI founded	1861 by Alexander Cunningham
ASI under	Ministry of Culture; AMASR Act 1958
Comparable site	Rani ki Vav, Patan (Gujarat) — UNESCO WHS stepwell

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