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Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

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Preface.

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PREFACE.

THE story of this book is simple, but it seems necessary it should be told in order that much which it contains may be appreciated at its true value, and not taken for what it does not pretend to be.

When in the autumn of 1866 arrangements were being made in this country for the great Paris Exhibition, to be held in the following year, Mr. Cole suggested to me that it would afford an excellent opportunity for forwarding my designs for a dissemination of knowledge of Indian art and architecture. Having then just completed my "History of Architecture," and having consequently the requisite leisure, I fell readily into his views; and after due consideration it was arranged that I should exhibit a large collection of Photographs of Indian Architecture which I possessed, together with others to which I had access. It was felt, however, that a mere collection of Photographs, without some more prominent object to draw attention to them, would hardly answer the purpose. I therefore proposed that, in addition, some casts of Indian sculpture or architectural fragments should be added, not only to give a character to the exhibition, but also to enable students to judge of the merit of the objects from specimens of the true dimensions.

I next examined, among other places, the collection in the India Museum, then at Fife House, for the purpose of obtaining the requisite models for casting; and after carefully going over the whole, fixed on four examples of sculpture from the Amravati Tope as those best suited for my purpose. I had long been familiar with these marbles, as they had been sent to this country by Colonel Mackenzie before 1820, and were the principal ornaments of the old Museum in Leadenhall Street. I had often admired them when there, and considered them so curious and so interesting that, had an opportunity occurred, I would have thought it well worth while to make a voyage to India specially for the purpose of exploring the Tope, and of examining the numerous antiquities I knew to exist in its neighbourhood. I was therefore not a little astonished at being informed that a large collection of marbles from the same monument were stored in the coach-houses of the establishment.

On investigation I found that Mr.—now Sir Walter—Elliot, when Commissioner in Guntûr in 1845, had excavated a considerable portion of the monument, and sent down to Madras the results of his explorations. They lay there, exposed to the wind and rain, for ten or twelve years, and then were sent home, and after a short sojourn in the Docks, were deposited where I found them, in consequence of there being no space in the Museum itself for their exhibition.

This most unexpected discovery made a considerable alteration in the plan of campaign. It was now determined, instead of casting any, to send four or five specimens of the marbles themselves to Paris, and to bring out and photograph the whole to the same scale, so as to enable them to be pieced together, and a restoration of the monument was thus effected. In this project I was warmly seconded by Dr. Forbes Watson, the Director of the Museum, who lent me every assistance which the means at his disposal afforded, and notwithstanding numerous difficulties,—it was mid-winter, and the snow on the ground the greater part of the time—the task was successfully accomplished, in consequence of the intelligence and untiring zeal of Mr. Griggs, the photographer attached to the establishment.

As soon as a complete set of the photographs was obtained, I set to work to piece them together, and by processes explained in the text obtained two elevations of the outer Rail, shown on a reduced scale in Plates XLVIII. and XLIX., and one of the inner Rail, Plate LXXV., all which were exhibited in Paris with the marbles, and some 500 other Photographs of Indian architectural objects. During the three or four months, however, which I had spent poring over these Photographs, I had not only become familiar with their forms, but had acquired a considerable amount of unexpected knowledge of ancient Indian art and mythology. The greater part of this was quite new to me, but seemed of sufficient importance to justify me in making it public; and in pursuance of this object, I exhibited the Photographs and read a paper on the subject to the Royal Asiatic Society in June 1867, which afterwards was printed in their Journal, vol. III. of new series, p. 132, et seqq. This paper, however, was very far from exhausting the subject, or from illustrating the monument to the extent which seemed desirable, and I in consequence appealed to the Secretary of State for India in Council for assistance to enable me to publish the whole of the Photographs, with such explanations as might seem desirable. Sir Stafford Northcote entered warmly into the project, and the Council most liberally granted the permission and funds necessary for its execution, in the section of the India Museum devoted to the reproduction of works of artistic value.

It was then intended that the work should consist of thirty or thirty-two Photographic Plates and eighteen or twenty Lithographs, with the accompanying explanations, but should be confined wholly to the Amravati Tope. It was then also

agreed that the price should be limited to three guineas, on the principle adopted in the Department, that the public should obtain this and other similar works at prices calculated only to cover the cost of production. In the course, however, of the investigations required for carrying out this project, I lighted on a beautiful series of drawings of the Sanchi Tope, made in 1854 by Lieutenant-Colonel Maisey, of the Bengal army, and which were then in the Library of the India Office; and at the same time received from Lieutenant Waterhouse, R.A., a set of Photographs of the same monument. The sculptures of this Tope bore so directly on the subject in hand, that, having now ample means of illustrating the Sanchi Tope also, I determined to publish it as a sequel to that at Amravati. As the work progressed, however, it became apparent that this was in reality putting the cart before the horse. That at Sanchi was the oldest of the two Topes; and it would be reading the book backwards to publish first the more modern example. I in consequence again applied to the India Council, and my proposal being met in the same liberal spirit, the work has assumed its present form and price.

When this stage was reached it became a very serious question what form the text of the work ought to assume. The great danger to be avoided was apparently the assumption that the Tree and Serpent Worship portrayed in the illustrations of this work should be considered as a mere local Indian superstition. In order either to enlist the sympathy of European scholars, or to place it on its true basis, it seemed indispensable to explain how far that form of worship had prevailed in other countries, and to what extent it underlaid or influenced other forms of faith. To do this fully and completely was quite incompatible with the scope of the present work, even if I had been qualified to attempt it. At the same time, however, I could not but feel that to have made the text a mere description of the two Topes, and to announce it as such, was simply to seal the book against general readers, and to relegate it to the small and I fear diminishing body of enthusiasts who are supposed to delight in grubbing in the despised local antiquities of India. On the other hand, to treat it from a scientific and more cosmopolitan point of view required an author who not only knew Sanskrit and Pali sufficiently well to read the ordinary texts, but who could also decipher inscriptions and pronounce on paleographic puzzles. He ought also to have devoted some years study at least to the Western branch of the subject, from the early Grecian to its latest Finnish developments.

To none of these accomplishments can I make the smallest possible pretensions. My knowledge of Indian languages is confined to the vernacular dialects, and I had never devoted any special attention to Tree or Serpent Worship in the West before I undertook this work. I am therefore wholly dependent on translations, which are seldom complete and not always trustworthy, for my knowledge of the Eastern

branch of the subject, and to a moderate course of reading for the Western. A more cautious or prudent man, aware of the numerous pitfalls which such a course must lead him across, would have declined the undertaking altogether; and all I can plead in excuse for my temerity is, that in all instances I have tried to write well within what I believe to be my real knowledge. So much indeed is this the case that my impression is, that the work is more open to criticism for what it omits than for what it contains, and I in consequence lay myself open to the reproach of seeming ignorant of what it may be assumed ought to be known to every one treating of such a subject. It would have been far easier to write an introduction twice or three times as long, and to have left it to the reader to discriminate between the wheat and the chaff; but I have thought it better to put forward only what I felt I could substantiate, and to leave the fuller development of the subject to more competent scholars.

At the same time, though fully aware of my shortcomings in a literary point of view, I felt that I probably was as competent as any other person I could name to treat of the subject of the Topes and their sculptures from an architectural or archæological point of view. Long personal familiarity with Indian monuments, and loving study of them, extending through half a lifetime, had given me a readiness in discriminating their peculiarities, which I am sorry to think very few possess; and I felt, therefore, some confidence in undertaking this part of the work.

Whether I was justified in this or not, others must judge; but at all events, I felt and feel to be only too true, that if I did not undertake it there was no one else, so far as I knew, who possessed the leisure, combined with the love of the subject, necessary for the task. Unless I availed myself of the opportunity, I could not but fear that the illustrations of the work might lie dormant for another half century—as those of the Mackenzie Collection have done—or at least for another quarter of a century, as has been the fate of those presented to the nation at so much trouble and expence by Sir Walter Elliot.

There was still another course open, which was to delay the appearance of the work till this time next year. Another twelve months' study and preparation might have enabled me to make my text much more complete than it now pretends to be; but even then it would not have been perfect. Personally I should no doubt have gained considerable credit to my own reputation by such a course, but so convinced do I feel that the illustrations of this work are in themselves—wholly irrespective of the text—the most valuable contribution that has been offered to the students of Indian antiquities for many years past, that I at once abandoned any such idea. The text has gone on *pari passu* with the plates, and my last sheet was sent to press before the last lithograph was ready for proving. The work has

not consequently been delayed one hour for anything I have done, and I am sure I have been right in acting thus. Still I might have been induced to delay the appearance of the work if I had been able to enlist the co-operation of persons in India who have local opportunities of acquiring knowledge regarding the subject. I have, however, found it so difficult to explain by correspondence, with strangers, what it is exactly that I wanted to know, and still more difficult to disabuse their minds from the idea that it was not a mere antiquarian crotchet on my part, that I am afraid that very little would be gained in that respect by delay. The real way to interest strangers is to show them what has been done, and to let them see what still remains undone. When this is once brought home to them, I feel convinced that there are hundreds of intelligent officers and others in India who both can and will at once supply the required information.

In the meanwhile, however, I must not be understood as complaining. General Cunningham, Colonel Meadows Taylor, Professor Cowell, Dr. Balfour, and Dr. Best, have contributed most important appendices to this work. Dr. Reinhold Rost has afforded me most valuable assistance in passing the sheets through the press, while Prince Frederick of Schleswig Holstein, and many others, have given me most useful information and aid. Still the subject, in its present form at least, is new, and it will require the co-operation of a considerable number of qualified individuals before it can be placed on an intelligible and secure basis.

This last is the fact to which, in conclusion, I would wish especially to direct attention. If this work is really of the importance and interest which from its illustrations I believe it really is, the very limited number of copies to which this edition extends will soon be exhausted, and the work must appear again either in a similar or a more popular form. Whether in that event it will also be more complete or perfect depends more on others than on myself. If those who are more competent, or who have special opportunities of gaining knowledge, will aid either by criticisms or communications to the public press, or by imparting information to me privately, a great deal may easily be done. I urge this the more earnestly, because it seems to be only by such co-operation, either in such a book as this, or under some more competent leadership, that we shall be able to follow the worship of the Tree or the Serpent through all their ramifications, or to trace them back to their source. My conviction, too, is that the subject will well repay any trouble that may be bestowed upon it, for if I mistake not it is the oldest—it was at one time the most prevalent, and it is now the most curious of all those forms of worship through which man ever attempted to approach or to propitiate the Divinity.

J. F.

20 Langham Place, November 1868.

N O T E.

THE difficulty as to the correct mode of spelling Indian names has presented itself with more than usual prominence in the following pages. The rule which it has been attempted to follow is, in the first instance, to leave all names which are already familiar to the English ear in the forms in which they have been adopted into our literature. Thus, such names as Cashmere, Cambodia, Karlee, Ellora, Amravati, &c., have been left as they are usually written. Such familiar terms as Rájá, Nága, Hindú, &c., which occur at every page in the latter part of the work, and regarding the pronunciation of which there can be no doubt, are written without any accents. All other Indian proper names are accented according to the method of transliteration most usually adopted by Indian scholars. This is done not only to indicate to the English reader the correct mode of pronouncing the word, but also to prevent any ambiguity as to the word or person intended.

It has been a little difficult to follow out these rules strictly on all occasions, but this is at least what has been attempted throughout.

2