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Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

London, 1868

Chapter I. Introductory Classification Of Monuments - Stone Circles -
Buddhist Rails - Gateways And Pillars

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-62112](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-62112)

THE TOPE AT SANCHI.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

BEFORE proceeding to describe the two buildings which form the subject of the present work, it may be convenient to point out, as briefly as possible, the general characteristics of Buddhist architecture, and to indicate the relations of these two monuments to the other members of the group to which they belong.

In the first place, it cannot be too strongly insisted upon, or too often repeated, that stone architecture in India commences with the age of Aśoka (B.C. 250). Not only have we as yet discovered no remains whatever of stone buildings anterior to his reign, but all the earliest Caves either in Behar or in the western Ghâts show architecture in the first stage of transition from wood to stone. One half, indeed, of the essential architectural structures of the Caves at Bhājā and Kārlee, and of the earliest at Ajanta, is wooden, and the wood still remains in some of them to the present day. Though some of these Caves are earlier than the Christian era, none are so old as the time of Aśoka.*

Whether looked at from an archæological, an architectural, or an ethnographic point of view, this wooden origin of Indian Buddhist architecture is one of the most interesting facts connected with the subject. To the archæologist it affords an assurance that in this instance, at least, we have got to the beginning of things, and that all beyond the first imitation of wood can only be rude masses of stone that in themselves tell no tales, and can only be dated from evidence external to themselves.

The architect, in studying this art, feels that for once he is assisting at the birth of a new style, and that during the five or six centuries, to which this work refers (B.C. 250 to A.D. 360), he is gradually watching the growth of an original form of art, which was uninfluenced by any external or foreign element, but left to its own innate powers of development.†

The steps by which the rail at Sanchi was elaborated into that at Amravati will be pointed out in the sequel, in so far as they are at present ascertained;

* For particulars I must refer the reader to my *History of Architecture*, II., p. 456, et seq.

† The nearest approach to anything like this in the west, is to be found in Lycia. Its early tombs are as wooden as the Caves of India, but they fell almost immediately under the influence of Greek art, and became Ionic before they had time to develop themselves into a native Lycian style.

and it forms as interesting an example of the natural development of style as anything in the history of architecture. There may, it is true, be some difference of opinion as to the beauty of the Amravati example, but there can be none as to its originality; and even those who may be inclined to dispute the taste displayed in its design, must admit that it is singularly appropriate to the purposes to which it is applied, and in richness of ornament one of the most elaborate pieces of architecture to be found in any part of the world.

It is perhaps, however, in an ethnographic point of view that this wooden origin of Buddhist architecture is most interesting. As I have frequently had occasion to point out in another work,* the Aryan races are not builders. They always had too firm a conviction of the immortality of the soul, and consequently of the existence of a future state, ever to care much for a brick or stone immortality in this world; and no material art satisfied the cravings of their higher intellectual powers. The Turanians, on the contrary, never rose to a distinct idea of an external God, nor of a future state, but supplied the place of the latter by metempsychosis and final annihilation, while their intellectual status never enabled them to create such a literature as would satisfy that hankering after immortality which is inherent in the human breast. It consequently happens that all the literature of India belongs to the Aryan or Sanscrit speaking races, and all the buildings to the Turanians or those speaking Dravidian or cognate tongues. The result of this distinction, in so far as the present subject is concerned, is this: so long as the Aryans retained their purity of blood and supremacy of power, no permanent buildings were erected in India. On the other hand, if there is one fact with reference to Buddhism more clear than another, it is that it is the religion of a Turanian race. It was not a reform on the Vedic religion of the Aryans, but simply that when they had lost their purity, Sākya Muni called on the subject races to rise, and moulded their feelings and their superstitions into that form of faith we now know as Buddhism. It was when these Turanians first came into power that permanent architecture was thought of in India; and as they grew in strength, and their influence extended, so did their architecture acquire consistency, and spread over the length and breadth of the land. They had no literature, or next to none; at least we have not yet found one Buddhist book that was reduced to its present shape till nearly 1,000 years after the death of the founder of the religion;† but we have buildings everywhere, and it is this circumstance that renders their architecture so valuable in an historical point of view, and so interesting as an expression of a great ethnographic fact.

Stated in its broadest term, the distinction is this,—all the literature of India is Aryan, all the architecture Turanian; and the latter did not come into existence till the former race had lost their purity and power, or, in other words, till the Turanian religion, known as Buddhism, rose to the surface, and its followers usurped the place hitherto occupied by the Aryans and their Vedas.

Without attempting too minute a classification, the Buddhist buildings erected in India since Aśoka's time may be arranged in three principal groups:—

* History of Architecture, Introduction, et passim.

† Max Müller, Chips from a German Workshop, I. p. 196.

1st. Topes or Stûpas, with their surrounding rails and lâts; two of the oldest known examples of these, which happen also to be among the richest and most elaborately ornamented, form the subject of the present work.

2nd. Chaityas. Both in form and purpose these are almost absolutely identical with the early Churches of the Christians, though several of those cut in the rock were most probably excavated before the Christian era.

3rd. Vihâras, or Monasteries, forming in the earliest times the residences of the monks or priests who were attached to the service of the Topes or Chaityas, but afterwards the independent abode of monastic communities, who had chapels or places set apart for devotional purposes within the walls of their monasteries.

Taking the last first, we are almost wholly dependent on rock examples for our knowledge of the arrangement and mode of adornment of Indian monasteries. Of these, probably not less than 800 to 1,000 examples are still known to remain in India, of all ages, and extending from a century or two before the Christian era to the tenth or eleventh century afterwards. They also are of all sizes, from the simple cell of a single anchorite to a great hall 80 feet square and more, and sometimes surrounded by sixteen or twenty cells for the accommodation of the monks. The difficulties of lighting naturally limited the extent of each individual example in the rock, but they are generally found in groups of twenty or thirty Vihâras, affording, when taken together, accommodation for a large religious community.

The ruins of a very large Vihâra have been recently excavated at Sârânth, near Benares.* It had, however, been destroyed by fire, and nothing but the foundation of the walls now remains. A still larger one was cut through by the railway works near Sultangunge in Bhagulpore, and destroyed of course; but here also nothing but the foundations remained, sufficient to show the plan, but nothing more. In 1861-2 General Cunningham found the remains of the great Nâlânda Vihâra to extend 1,600 feet in one direction by 400 in another, and no doubt excavations might bring some interesting particulars to light regarding this most celebrated of Indian monasteries, but too much must not be hoped for.† It was built of wood and brick, and for more than 1,000 years it has been used as the quarry of the fertile district in which it stood.

At Sanchi there are the remains of several Vihâras. One of the best preserved is represented in the Photographic Plate, No. XXIII. Its date is comparatively modern, probably ranging from the eighth to the tenth century, and its dimensions are so small—about 100 feet across—that it would hardly be worth notice were it not that it happens to be the best preserved specimen of a Buddhist structural Vihâra known to exist in India. It will be described further on.

As might be expected, the Chaitya Caves are much fewer in number than the Vihâras; not more than twenty have been described; and it is hardly probable that more than thirty exist. As before hinted, they are almost exact counterparts of the choirs of Christian churches, consisting of a central nave, at the inner end of which stands the Dagoba or Stone Altar, either containing or simulated to contain a relic. Round this and along either side runs an aisle, which is entered by one

* J. A. S. B., Volume for 1844, p. 473.

† General Cunningham's Report to Government for 1861-62, p. 11.

of three doors, which open outwardly under a gallery corresponding to the rood-loft of Christian churches. The central aisle was covered with a roof, supported by wooden ribs, like the hull of a ship turned upside down—semicircular internally, but of an ogee shape outside. In all the earlier Caves the ribs were put up in wood, and at Karlee remain to this day as they were put up 1800 years ago, but in later Caves their form was repeated in stone, and afterwards merged into a purely lithic ornament.

The only example of a structural Chaitya yet brought to light is a small one at Sanchi, which will be described when speaking of Plate XXII. Like the Vihāra it is small, and so much ruined that it is not easy to feel sure how it was originally finished, but as a unique example it is well worthy of attention.

We should not, perhaps, be justified in asserting that the Stūpas* or Topes were at all times the most important monuments of the Buddhist. They have become so now, but that may be owing to their form and the solidity of their construction, which has prevented their decay, while the more complex structures of the Vihāras and Chaityas, and the frailer materials of which they were composed, have caused their disappearance. Judging from the glowing descriptions given by the Chinese travellers of the Sanghārāmas (Halls of Assembly) which they visited, and the monasteries in which they were entertained, it would appear that they considered them at least as important.

The Tope is, however, a solid circular pyramid† of brick or stone, and from its form, and under similar circumstances, might have lasted as long as those of Egypt. Those, however,—especially in the valley of the Ganges,—have long been used as quarries by the inhabitants of these thickly-peopled plains, and have consequently disappeared. With very few exceptions, it is only in remote or in thinly-peopled districts that any examples are now to be found.

It scarcely admits of a doubt but that the Tope is the lineal and direct descendant of the funereal Tumulus which, from the very earliest age to which our knowledge extends, the Turanian races—and probably some others—raised over the graves of their dead. Such Tumuli exist all over the north of Asia; they are found in Asia Minor and in Greece. They crowd the cemeteries of Etruria. They are far from being uncommon in Germany, and in the western parts of France. We all know what numbers of them dot the downs of Wiltshire and Devon, wherever an open country enabled a pastoral people to depasture their flocks without the necessity of clearing away the forest; and they are frequent in Scandinavia, and over the whole of the north of Europe.

It is doubtful whether any sepulchral Tumuli exist in India. If these were of earth, the probability is they would be washed away by the overflowing rivers or by the tropical rains, but they do exist in Afghanistan, grouped around the Topes.‡ There are two peculiarities which distinguish the Tope of India from the Tumuli of other countries. The first is, that being of brick or stone the material enabled them to assume a rounded or domical form, while the earthen Tumulus was as generally

* From the Sanscrit, *Stūpa*, a mound or heap.

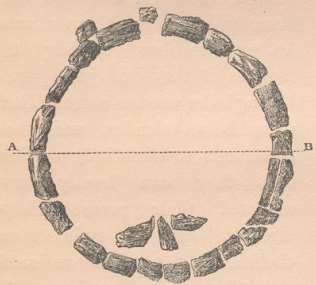
† Clemens of Alexandria, *Stromat.* I. 15.

‡ Masson, in Wilson's *Ariana Antiqua*, 61, et seqq.

straight lined. The circular form seems to have been adopted to assimilate them with the roofs of their other sacred and domestic buildings, which we learn from the sculptures were always curvilinear in outline. The second peculiarity is, that, instead of being the last resting place of a body, they had become depositories of relics only. Precisely the same change took place in the Middle Ages, when the stone coffin became an altar, and the place of the deposit of relics and other treasures, instead of containing a body. In India, where the practice of burning the dead seems always to have prevailed, this probably took place from the first. It may, however, be considered as an argument in favour of the foreign (Scythian?) nature of Buddhism in India, that the *Tope* should have been domical from the first instead of straight-lined, and should always have been a relic-shrine, never apparently a tomb.

In addition to its primary and general use as a relic-shrine, the *Tope* in India was also very commonly used as a memorial tower to mark a sacred spot.* Of the 84,000 *Stûpas* which *Aśoka* is traditionally said to have erected, we gather from the Chinese travellers that one half at least were erected to mark spots where Buddha or some *Bôdhisatwa* had performed some miracle, or done something worthy of being recalled to the attention of the faithful.† When Messrs. Masson and Honigberger opened the *Topes* in Afghanistan, they found about one half contained relics; the remainder were "blind *Topes*," and contained nothing.‡ The same probably will

be found to be the case, though to a less degree, in other countries. Where the *Tumulus* was a grave in reality, the chances are that not one in a hundred would be a memorial tower, though these last would probably be the largest and most important.



SEPULCHRAL CIRCLE AT AMRAVATI.
From a Drawing in the Mackenzie Collection.

The rails which surround the Indian *Topes* are sometimes as important as the *Tumuli* themselves. In the case of *Sanchi*, and especially at *Amravati*, they are certainly more so. Like the *Topes*, their origin is sepulchral. The circles of rude stones found all over Europe certainly are so in most cases. They may sometimes enclose holy spots, and may possibly have in some instances been places of assembly, though this is improbable. Their application to the purposes of ancestral worship is, however, not only probable, but appropriate. Sometimes a circle of stones encloses a sepulchral mound, as at *New Grange* in Ireland,§

* Properly speaking, the *Tumulus* containing a relic ought always to be designated "*Dagoba*," a word derived from "*Dhātu*," a relic, and "*Garbha*," literally the womb, but here used as the receptacle or enclosing shrine. The memorial tower ought, on the contrary, always to be called "*Stûpa*," from the Sanskrit word *Stûpa*, a cairn or heap. The difficulty in applying these terms is, that there are no external signs by which the two can be distinguished, and till the contents of all are ascertained, any attempt at precision might only lead to errors.

† If anyone had the patience to classify them, this probably would be the result, at least so it appears in reading the travels of *Fahian* and *Hiouen Tshang*.

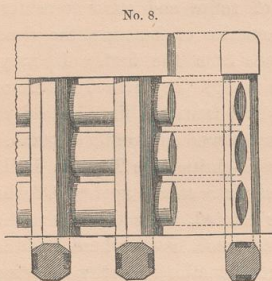
‡ Wilson's *Ariana Antiqua*, p. 68, et seqq.

§ *Archæologia*, 1770, and frequently since described.

(4799.)

and very frequently in Scandinavia* and Algeria.† In India rude stone circles are of frequent occurrence. In the neighbourhood of Amravati alone there are some hundreds of them (Woodcut, No. 7), and all are sepulchral; but, like the Topes when adopted by the Buddhists, they were sublimated into a symbol instead of a reality.

Another circumstance of interest connected with the rail at Sanchi is, that it



GREAT RAIL AT SANCHI.
From a Drawing by Colonel Maissey.

is only the first step from the wooden form. Its construction and general appearance will be easily understood from the annexed diagram (Woodcut, No. 8) and the photographs. From these it will be perceived that there is nothing lithic in its character. The three intermediate rails must, during construction, have been held in their places by some means not now apparent. The next pillar was pushed laterally to receive their ends in the mortices prepared for them, and the top rail was then fitted on to a tenon on the top of the post (as at Stonehenge), so as to hold the post upright and in its place. All this is good carpentry, but it is very clumsy masonry.

In Ceylon the top and intermediate rails were omitted. One or three rows of upright stone posts were arranged round the Dagobas,‡ as in the Thūparāmaya (Woodcut, No. 9), but not joined together.



VIEW OF THE THŪPARĀMAYA DAGORA, ANURĀDHAPURA.

In theory these look much more like the rows of detached rude stone pillars of northern climes. In practice, however, they too look as if they had just passed through the wooden stage. Their form is so slender, and their ornaments so essentially wooden, that they can hardly have assumed their present shape directly from a rude stone obelisk. My own impression is that they were used as the supports of tapestry, which on festal occasions was hung between them. When Fa-hian visited Ceylon (A.D. 405), he was present when the Tooth relic was carried to Mehentele, which, like the procession of Jagannāth, was the great annual festivity of the place. On these occasions both sides of the roads were hung with paintings of the 500 different manifestations of Buddha, "painted in different colours, and executed with such care as to appear living."§ This is so exactly doing on canvas what we, about the same time, find

* Olaus Magnus, I. 29, and subsequently in every work on Sweden.

† Journal de la Société Archéologique de Constantine.

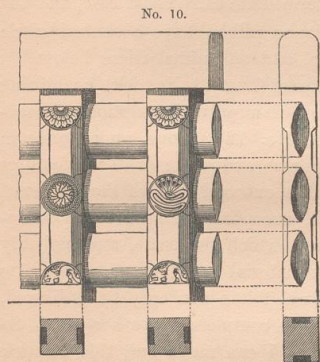
‡ Transactions Royal Asiatic Society, III. pl. 17, 18, 20, &c.; History of Architecture, II. Woodcut, 1007.

§ Foë-Kouë-Ki, p. 335.

done on stone at Amravati, that it seems hardly doubtful but that the one is the counterpart of the other, and for the Ceylonese form these tall thin pillars seem peculiarly appropriate.

The Buddhist rail, in the form in which it is found surrounding the great Tope at Sanchi, is especially interesting to Indian antiquaries, inasmuch as it was copied everywhere at that age, and became the favourite architectural ornament of the age. At Bhājā and Kārlee, in the early Caves at Ajanta and at Kenheri, all the string courses and friezes are mere copies of this rail. Like the wooden triglyph of the Doric order, it was repeated through centuries in stone. It occurs on the central Dagoba at Amravati, but not on the rails or any of the surrounding buildings. We do not find it, however, in any of the Caves of Ellora or Elephanta; indeed its use seems to have died out about the fourth or fifth century, but meanwhile its greater or less prevalence is no bad test of the real or comparative age of the building in which it is found.

The next step in the elaboration of these rails is found on that surrounding the second Tope at Sanchi (B 2 on Map). This Tope



RAIL OF SECOND TOPE AT SANCHI.
From a Drawing by Colonel Maisey.

is relatively much taller in form than the great Tope, which is an almost certain sign of a more modern age, though it still may be anterior to the Christian era, and its rail earlier than the gates attached to the old rail of the great Tope. The innovation in this instance consisted in placing a centre disc on the pillar, ranging with the central rail, and two half discs at top and bottom* (Woodcut, No. 10). In the instance here given, too, the Serpent appears with the five heads, but whether this is a solitary instance or frequently repeated, we are not informed.

At Muttra, General Cunningham found fragments of a rail on which this form was repeated, with the addition of groups of sculpture, on what appeared to have been the angle columns. The rail which enclosed the great Bo Tree at Buddh-Gya was square in plan, measuring 131 feet by 90, and was ornamented as richly as that at Muttra. Neither of these rails have yet been published, nor have we any representation of many other fragments which exist in various other parts of India. This is to be regretted, as the next step is a very long one, and it must have taken some centuries of elaboration before even the richest of those mentioned became so highly ornamented as that at Amravati. At Amravati all the three rails have circular discs covered with a lotus or water leaf ornament externally, and with figures sculptured on their internal faces. The top rail also is adorned with a frieze of figures internally, and on the outer face with a procession of men bearing a roll such as is used in Buddhist processions in Burmah

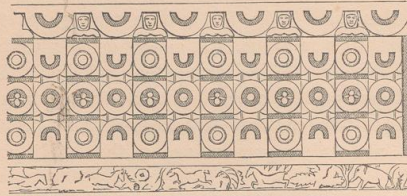
* The probability seems to be that when the rail was in wood, nails with large heads or metal plates were used to keep the structure in form, as is still sometimes done in framed doors or gateways, and that these afterwards became ornaments, and were used architecturally, as we find it here and elsewhere.

at the present day. The whole rail, in fact, which is 14 feet in height, is covered with sculptured ornaments, and as it was at least 600 feet in length, it may perhaps be considered as the richest and most elaborate piece of screen work in the world.

The only connecting link which has been discovered between these two forms

is in the Western Caves. In front of the great Cave at Kenheri, for instance, there is a low parapet wall, so weather-worn that it is difficult to make out its details. The annexed careful drawing (Woodcut, No. 11)—which, however, is fully confirmed by photographs—shows it to possess most of the essential features of the Amravati rail. Each of the three intermediate rails has a disc, and the octagon pillars have a central circle and two half-circles. There is a waving line at top, and an animal frieze below.

No. 11.

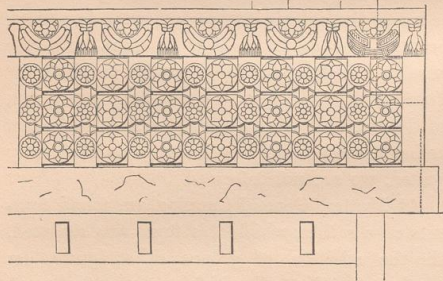


DWARF RAIL IN FRONT OF KENHERI CAVE.
From a Drawing by E. W. West, Esq.

and two half-circles. There is a waving line at top, and an animal frieze below.

Another rail similarly situated in front of the great Cave at Nassick, containing the Gotamiputra inscriptions (Woodcut, No. 12), shows an advance in this case, and possesses all the features of the external face of the Amravati rail, excepting of course the sculptures, which the scale, and probably the material would not admit of. Its animal frieze can only be indicated, it is so completely weather-worn. So far as I can make out, this Nassick rail is about the same age as that at Amravati; that at Kenheri may be either a little older or a little more modern. It is so weather-worn that it is difficult to determine which.

No. 12.



RAIL IN FRONT OF NASSICK CAVE.
From a Drawing by E. W. West, Esq.

My present impression is, that the Nassick rail belongs to the fourth, the other to the beginning of the fifth century of our era. They are both examples of the completed design, and certainly long subsequent to anything found at Sanchi or at Gya or Muttra.

So far as is at present known, the Amravati rail, besides being the richest of detached examples, was the last of its race. After the fourth or fifth century the rail became attached to the Tope in the form of a range of pilasters, and the procession path, instead of being behind the rail, as at Sanchi, was on a terrace above the range of pilasters as at Manikyala.* In the Topes in Afghanistan it frequently

* History of Architecture, Woodcuts, 978, 979.

degenerated into a mere ornamental band at some height from the ground, and gradually lost all trace of its original significance.

When thoroughly investigated there are few architectural arrangements that will afford a more curious illustration of architectural development than these Buddhist rails. Already we can trace them from the rude circular sepulchral enclosure to such plain unadorned erections as those at Sanchi or Stonehenge, and thence to those of Buddh Gya; from that we can go on to that at Amravati, and till they lose themselves in the north of India. Many of the links are yet missing, though they will no doubt be easily supplied so soon as attention is really directed to the investigation.

Another interesting feature connected with these rails is the gateways attached to them. These are frequently represented in the sculptures at Amravati and the paintings at Ajanta, but the only examples known to exist standing are those at Sanchi. They are more modern than the rail to which they are attached, being slightly subsequent to the Christian era; but still betray, like everything else in this style of architecture, their wooden origin. Such a form could never have been invented in stone; and the reason they are not more frequently found, is probably that they were generally executed in wood, even when attached to stone rails. The Chinese Païloo is undoubtedly the lineal descendant of these gates; but even that is very generally at the present day constructed either wholly or partially in wood. It must, indeed, have required considerable courage to attempt such a construction in stone,* and the wonder is rather that several should have survived the wreck of eighteen centuries, rather than that so few should be found. The form of those at Sanchi and their sculptures form the first division of this work, and need not, therefore, be further enlarged on here; and as they are the only examples of their kind, no classification is possible.

The lâts or Stambhas form another group of early Buddhist monuments that must not be passed over. Four or five out of a larger number of those erected by Aśoka still exist, either standing or in recognized fragments. They form, however, such excellent rollers for the British road maker, and such capital sugar or rice mills for the native zemindar, that the wonder is that so many are left. All those of Aśoka are similar to one another,—circular stone shafts of a single block, 30 or 40 feet in length, and surmounted by a capital with the falling leaf or bell-shaped form found at Persepolis. This form of the capital, together with the Grecian or rather Assyrian honeysuckle ornament with which it is generally associated, are two of the most valuable ethnographic indications which the architecture of this age affords. As we have every reason to suppose that the real architecture of Aśoka's time remained essentially wooden in all its forms, it is curious to observe him copying the details of the architecture of the countries of his allies, Antiochus or Antigonus, in his first attempts at a more permanent style in stone. So far as we now know, the use of these foreign forms were confined to lâts and detached objects, and

* Henry of Huntingdon's description of the Trilithon at Stonehenge is curiously applicable here:—"Ubi lapides miræ magnitudinis in modum portarum elevati sunt, ita ut portæ portis superpositæ videantur."—*Monument. Hist.*, p. 694.

were not employed in buildings, properly so called, till more than two centuries after their introduction, and then very much modified from their original forms. The object for which Aśoka's pillars were erected was, that certain edicts might be engraved upon them, which he desired to enforce on his people. Those at Pathari and Erun were erected by the Guptas in the fifth century, and mark the change that had taken place in Buddhist feeling. His own personal greatness and glorification was the object of the king who erected the more modern examples, and no longer a disinterested desire for the religious welfare of his people, which seems to have been Aśoka's only motive. Intermediate between these two periods we have numerous examples. Some cut in the rock, as at Karlee and Kenheri; but generally they are found attached to Topes. Two certainly at one time adorned each of the four entrances of the rail at both Sanchi and Amravati, and several of these still remain; most of them, however, are prostrate, though some are standing.

The capitals of those of Aśoka were generally surmounted by a single lion or elephant* or other animal. At Sanchi and Karlee we have four lions seated back to back on their capitals, and at the former place sometimes a single figure of a man standing. My impression is, that wherever four animals are found surmounting a column, they were not intended as the final ornament, but as the support of a wheel—probably in metal—or some other Buddhist emblem. In other instances we have four men, and these overshadowed by the seven-headed serpent. At Amravati they seem more generally to have been crowned by miniature Dagobas, but sometimes also by men, and by other emblems.† As all these will be more particularly described in the sequel, when this occurs in the Plates, it is not necessary to dwell more on their peculiarities in this place.

* History of Architecture, Woodcuts, 969 and 970.

† From some photographs recently received from Nepal, it appears that the practice still prevails there. The statues of their kings stand or are seated on the capitals of tall pillars, sometimes with metal umbrellas over their heads, and in one instance at least the king is shaded by the Serpent hood. This in the nineteenth century!