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## **Tree and serpent worship**

**Fergusson, James**

**London, 1868**

Plate XXV. To XXVII. - Tree Worship. - From a Drawing by Lieut.-Colonel  
Maisey

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FIG. 1.

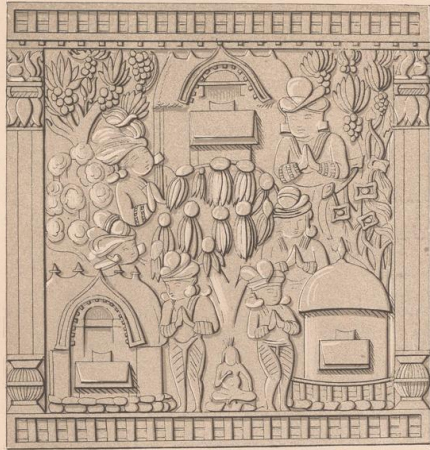


FIG. 2.

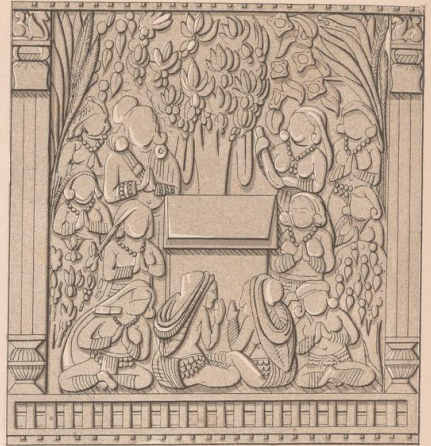
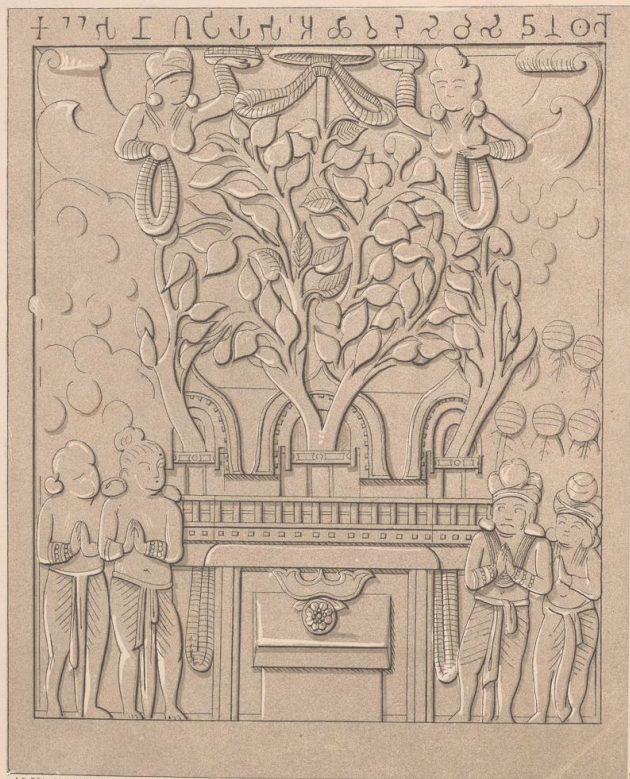


FIG. 3.



L. GOL. MAISEY DEL.

W. GRIGGS, LITH.

TREE WORSHIP.

## PLATE XXV.

WHATEVER doubt may exist as to the extent to which the Hindus intend at Sanchi to honour the Serpent, or to represent the Serpent as honouring them, there is none whatever as to the reverence they everywhere are represented as paying to Trees. These alternate with the Dagobas on the architraves as the two principal objects of worship, but taking also the representations on the pillars into account, the Tree is certainly the chief divinity of the place.

That represented as the principal subject (Fig. 3.) of this Plate, may be considered as a typical example. It occurs in front of the left-hand pillar of the Eastern Gateway (Plates XIV. and XV.), next to the Fire Temple, with the Naga of the last Plate, and their juxtaposition may have some meaning, all the figures in the Naga bas-relief being Dasyus, all those in the Tree picture being Hindus. The tree itself is the Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*), the true Bo-tree of the present Buddha. A temple has been built around it, and it is represented as growing out of its windows. In front is an altar, on which is the Trisul emblem, and it is difficult to understand what its presence here can mean, unless it is "Buddha," or "Sacred to Buddha." Above the tree is the ennobling Chatta, and on either hand Garuḍas or Devas bearing offerings. Below, on each hand, two male worshippers in the costume of the Hindus.\*

Fig. 1. of this Plate is one of several subjects to which it is difficult to attach any distinct meaning or story. In the centre is a tree of a different species from any we have yet met with; and two men in Hindu costume, one on either hand, seem to be offering worship to it. In addition to this, however, there are two small shrines or temples, each with what appears to be an altar in front. That in the centre above has no worshippers. The one on the left below is encircled apparently with a wall of rude stones; that on the right by the usual Rail. Men in Hindu costume seem to be offering prayers to both these temples—are they tombs?—and between them a child is seated cross-legged, in the attitude we usually associate with Buddha. This bas-relief is in front of the left-hand pillar of the Northern Gateway (Plate XXXI.), a little higher than Fig. 2., which is the lowest of three bas-reliefs which ornament the inner face of this pillar.

The tree in Fig. 2. is of a different species from that represented in Fig. 3., though it occurs in both the upper corners of Fig. 1. There, it does not appear as a sacred tree at all. In this bas-relief it stands behind an altar, and has garlands pendent from its branches, but no ennobling Chatta surmounts it. Notwithstanding this, one male and eleven female figures are certainly worshipping it, and one woman presenting an offering.

It would be interesting if the species of this tree could be determined, as

\* The inscription, according to Cunningham, p. 263, reads, "The pillar gift of Nāgapriya Achavada, the Śreshthī or Chief of the weavers."

according to Buddhist tradition each of the twenty-four successive Buddhas of the present "Kappo" had a different Bo-tree.\* Their names, in Pali, are all recorded, and could no doubt be identified with known trees, and many of them with those represented in these sculptures. This is evidently a flowering tree (Champa?), and occurs more frequently than any other, except the "Religiosa," which we know to be the Bo-tree of the present Buddha.†

The women in the bas-relief all wear the enormous chignon which ladies in these days seem to have considered a sufficient substitute for all other dress. In this instance, however, their costume is not quite so open to this objection as is usually the case either here or at Amravati.

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\* Turner's Mahawanso, p. XXXII.

† I have been unfortunate in not being able to procure from any competent Indian botanist the assistance requisite to enable me to determine the species of the various trees represented in these bas-reliefs. There is difficulty attending it, no doubt, as the representations are to a considerable extent conventionalized; but still artists who could draw animals so well, that in no instance can a mistake be made as to which is intended, could also draw trees so as to enable them to be identified. The subject, however, is neither pressing nor very important, and can be done hereafter. There are, I think, only six or seven species altogether, and there can be very little doubt as to one or two of these. Ward, in his Hindu Mythology (3d edition, vol. I. 263), enumerates the following trees as considered sacred and worshipped by the followers of Vishnu:—the Pipal and the Banyan, *Ficus religiosa* and *Indica*; the Vukoolu, *Mimusops elengi*; the Huritukee, *Terminalia citrina*; the Amalakee, *Phyllanthus emblica*; and the Nimbu, *Melia azodaracta*. Except the Banyan, all these will, I believe, be found in our bassi-relievi.



FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.



L. COL. MAISEY DEL.

W. BRIGGS, LITH.

TREE WORSHIP.

## PLATE XXVI.

THE two bas-reliefs represented in Plate XXVI. occur the one over the other on the inner face of the right-hand pillar of the Northern Gateway; Fig. 2. is, however, on the pillar above instead of below Fig. 1. (Plates X. and XII.) Both are representations of Tree Worship, but the lower one is remarkable because the two principal devotees are monkeys. Two men in Indian costume stand behind them, with their hands in the attitude of prayer, and beside them two females with offerings in their hands. In front of the altar, behind which the Tree stands, are two other Hindu females, with a child between them, kneeling in deep devotion. Of the two monkeys one is making an offering to the Tree, the other is in ecstasies.

In describing the back of the Eastern Gate, we have already seen all the beasts of the field (not monkeys) hastening to do honour to the Sacred Tree, but here we have monkeys mixed with men, or rather preferred to them; as the men stand back, while the monkeys present their offerings, they are really the principal worshippers. All this may have arisen partly from the tenderness for animal life and kindness to all created beings that Buddhism always inculcated; partly from the doctrine of metempsychosis, which was always an essential part of the faith; but something may in this instance be due to local tradition. It was in the forest of Daṇḍaka, certainly not far from Sanchi, that Rāma met with Hanumān, the godlike monkey, who played so important a part in the subsequent records of the Rāmāyaṇa. If monkeys could fight in Hindu tradition side by side with men, why in Buddhist forms should they not pray with them?

The Sacred Tree, in this instance, appears to be the *Ficus religiosa*, but two other trees are represented, which occur frequently in the bas-reliefs. The one with the large fruit appears intended for a species of Jack (*Artocarpus integrifolius*), the other a flowering tree, which has not yet been identified.

The upper bas-relief (Fig. 1.) represents a Hindu Raja, known to be so by his Chatta, with four female and two male attendants, doing honour to the Tree, to which two of the females, more fully clad than usual, are presenting wreaths. Above, two Garuḍas, bearing offerings, are seen full length. This is one of the few instances in these bas-reliefs in which these figures are seen complete, so that all their features may be distinguished. Their feet, wings, and tails are those of birds; their heads and bodies are those of human beings, but always, as far as can be made out, males, which may be an objection to the name of Harpy, which would seem a name that might be appropriate. These in classical representations were always apparently females, and of an odious nature. Here they are always represented as heavenly messengers, and bringing offerings. As Garuḍas are always represented as the fifth in rank among the eight heavenly beings\* in the Buddhist pantheon, that name is probably the one the Buddhists would themselves employ.

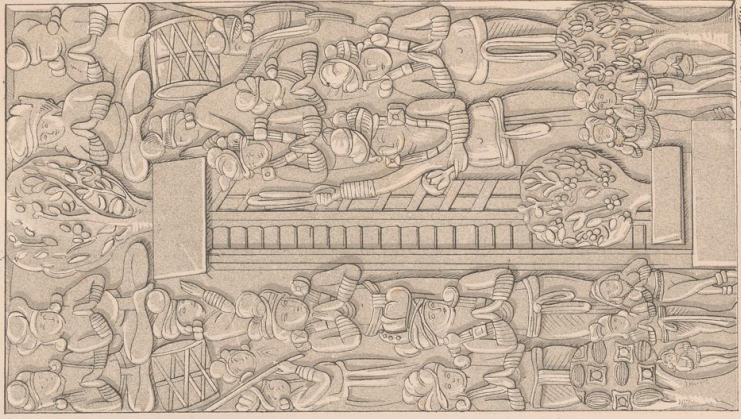
\* In the Lalita-Vistara (Foucaux), p. 250, et passim, they are enumerated as les Dieux ou Devas, les Nāgas, les Yakchas, les Gaṇḍharvas, les Assouras, les Garuḍas, les Kinnaras, et les Mahōragas.



Above the tree on the right is another figure very common in these sculptures, but seldom seen so completely as in this instance,—a winged lion figure, on which a man rides, bearing an offering. There are abundance of winged lions on the Assyrian sculptures, but they are never represented as flying. At Sanchi they are always in the air, and always carrying human figures bringing offerings to the Tree or shrine. The representations at Sanchi are, of course, very much more modern than those in Assyria, but it is not clear that the Indian form may not be of an original stock as old or older than the Assyrian.



FIG. 3.



W. CHESB. SCULPT. INDIA MUSEUM.

FIG. 2.



FIG. 1.



DR. G. W. W. W. DEL.

## PLATE XXVII.

ON Plate XXVII. are engraved three forms of Tree Worship, which have been reduced to a smaller scale than usual, as they do not present any great features of novelty, but are interesting as indicating some of its forms. Fig. 1. represents eighteen men in Hindu costume, some sitting, some standing, doing homage to a Pipal tree surmounted by a Chatta and attended by Garuḍas. It is from the inner face of the right-hand pillar of the Western Gateway (Plate XIX.).

Fig. 2. is immediately above it on the same Gateway, and presents a somewhat more varied form of the worship. Below are three men, one standing in a gateway, in front of an altar, but this group does not seem to have any connexion with that above. In the middle of the picture are three men, three women, and a child, who also seem bent on doing honour to the tree. Above these, on the left hand, are five women, apparently of inferior rank, and on the right hand a lion, an elephant, a boar, an ox, a horse, and a sheep. Among them is a round, very jolly human face, with large ears, and evidently intended to represent a giant or ogre, or some of those semi-human beings so common in Eastern story. The interesting part of the bas-relief is that these animals evidently rank with the females opposite, and join with the men in doing honour to the Holy Tree.

The third bas-relief on this Plate is one which it is extremely difficult to make out, not that there is anything new in the form or in the objects worshipped, but that owing to the imperfect knowledge of perspective possessed by the artist, it is extremely puzzling to suggest what the stone work between the two trees is intended to represent. It looks at first sight like a stair with a rail on either hand, but it does not lead to any terrace or building, and the object for which it was designed, or why the two similar trees should be planted at each end, is by no means clear.

In other respects the sculpture presents no novelty—men, women, and children, with drums and musical instruments, are assembled to do honour to the Trees. The upper one seems to be a Pipal, evidently the same as that in Fig. 2. The lower bears some fruit or flower, but so does that in Fig. 1., which from the form of its leaves is intended to be a Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*). In the centre picture a Plantain tree is plainly distinguishable, and above that the tree I have ventured to suggest may be a Jack, with the flowering tree that occurs in several of the previous bas-reliefs.

This sculpture is from the outward face of the right-hand pillar of the Northern Gateway at the top (Plate XII.).

Taken together, these three figures fairly represent the most popular form of worship at Sanchi. It will be observed that no Dasyus appear in them. Indeed there is no instance at Sanchi in which those people are associated with the Hindus in worshipping either Trees or anything else. Their worship of the Serpent or Fire or any other object is solitary and apart. It is difficult to understand why this

should be so, as the Hindus seem never to hesitate to associate the beasts of the field with them in their worship, and if so why not their fellow men? This is the more remarkable as in other bas-reliefs these Dasyus are treated as equals, and many of the sculptures are wholly devoted to them and their pursuits, and this by the Hindus, who, we must presume, were the people who erected the monument and carved its sculptures.

The preceding—with one other example on the next Plate XXVIII. Fig. 2.—exhaust the illustrations of Tree Worship, in so far as they have been drawn by Colonel Maisey from bas-reliefs exclusively devoted to the subject on the pillars of the Sanchi Gateways. These Plates are far, however, from conveying an adequate idea of the extreme frequency of such illustrations, though they may represent nearly all the forms in which it is found. Taken altogether, the Tree is, generally speaking, the most usual and the most important object of worship represented in the sculptures at Sanchi Tope. Next after this comes the Dagoba, but neither so important nor so frequent. It may be suggested that this is owing to the great Tope being there itself to be worshipped, and that its mimic representation was therefore not needed. A careful study, however, of the sculptures renders this explanation hardly tenable. It can scarcely be doubted but the sculptures are intended to represent the creed, and the whole creed, of the people who erected the Gateways, and the relative importance of each part of the faith. It is probable, therefore, that the frequency or prominence of any object sculptured in these Gateways may fairly be assumed as representing its relative importance.