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Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

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Chapter I. Introductory

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THE TOPE AT AMRAVATI.

CHAPTER I.

UNLIKE that at Sanchi, the Tope at Amravati has been so completely destroyed that a traveller might ride over the mounds in which it is buried without suspecting what they covered, any more than those who, before the discoveries of Botta and Layard, looked on the mounds of Assyria guessed what treasures of antiquity were concealed beneath their green slopes. In some respects it is fortunate that it is so, for so soon as a slab is uncovered, either by the monsoon rains or an accidental excavation, it is taken away to be used as a door-step, or more frequently to be burned for lime by the incurious natives. The consequence of this is, that nothing of the central building probably now remains on the spot, and hardly anything of the inner enclosure; but of the outer Rail there may still be enough to enable us to complete our restoration of it, and to fill up many of the lacunæ which the imperfect materials now available have left in our descriptions.

Although two of the Gateways at Sanchi have fallen, two others are still standing, almost quite perfect; and a quadrant of the Rail is entire, and so is the bulk of the Tope itself. We have consequently no difficulty in assigning their proper place to all the fragments of sculpture, nor any in comprehending the general appearance or form of the building. At Amravati the case is widely different. It is probable that many of the slabs which Colonel Mackenzie first saw in 1797, and afterwards drew in 1718, were then *in situ*, but he has left no written description of his excavations,* and it is only in the rarest possible instances that he has written in pencil on his drawings such brief indications as "inner circle" or "outer circle." Beyond this, there is no explanation of his plan. The slabs recovered by Sir Walter Elliot, which form the bulk of the available materials, had all been removed probably in the twelfth or thirteenth century from their original site, and built into a little chapel, of which they formed the walls, so nothing was to be learned from them. The task, however, is by no means so difficult as it at first sight appears. First, there are numerous analogies with other buildings which are

* The late Professor Wilson, who had long charge of the Mackenzie MSS., and knew more about them than anyone else, says, in his *Ariana Antiqua*, p. 32., "I have not found any description of it (the Tope at Amravati) amongst his papers, but from a few brief memoranda it appears to have been visited by him repeatedly, and in 1816 to have been measured and surveyed."

evident at a glance; but the circumstance that rendered the restoration most easy arose from the practice common to Indian architects of repeating everywhere representations of their main buildings as ornaments to the various parts of it. These, as will afterwards be explained, not only suggest the form, but confirm the restoration in a most satisfactory manner.

The Amravati Tope first attracted the attention of Colonel Mackenzie when on a tour of duty in the district in the year 1797. It seems that some two or three years previous to his visit the Rajah of Chintapilly, attracted by the sanctity of a temple dedicated to Siva, under the title of Amareśvara,* determined to erect a city on the spot, and on looking for building materials for his new capital, opened this and several other mounds in the neighbourhood, and also utilized the walls of the old city of Durnacotta or Dharanikotta, which stood about half a mile to the westward of the site of the new city.† Many of the antiquities perished in the process, and large quantities of the stones were used by the Raja in building his new temples and palaces, but several sculptured slabs still remained *in situ*. These attracted the Colonel's attention so strongly that he subsequently communicated an account of them to the Asiatic Society of Bengal,‡ and afterwards returned to the spot in 1816. Being now Surveyor-General of Madras he employed all the means at his disposal during the two following years to the elucidation of the principal temple, which he now styles Dipaldinna, and translates as meaning "Hill of Lights." The results of his labours are careful plans of the building and maps of the surrounding country, together with eighty very carefully-finished drawings of the sculptures. These were made by his assistants, Messrs. Hamilton, Newman, and Burke, and are unsurpassed for accuracy and beauty of finish by any drawings of their class that were ever executed in India. Three copies were made of all these drawings. One was sent to the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, another was deposited in Madras, and the third sent home to the Court of Directors, in whose library it still remains. As no text or description accompanies these drawings, they have attracted but little attention, probably because of this deficiency, and the consequent difficulty of understanding the form of the monument or the position of the fragments.

At the same time Colonel Mackenzie sent several specimens of the sculptures to the three museums just mentioned, and they have remained their principal ornaments to this day. But, except an attempt to translate two of the inscriptions, which appeared in Prinsep's Journal in 1837,§ very little notice seems to have been taken of them.

Fortunately, however, when Mr., now Sir Walter Elliot, was Commissioner in Guntur, in 1840, he determined to follow up what Colonel Mackenzie had so well begun. He excavated a portion of the monument which had not before been touched,

* Hence the full-length name of the place is Amareśvarapuram. Anglice, Amresbury.

† These and many other historical particulars in this paper are gleaned from two letters communicated by Colonel Mackenzie to Mr. Buckingham, published by him in the "Calcutta Journal," in March 1822. They were afterwards reprinted in "Allen's Asiatic Journal," in May 1823, and as the latter publication is generally accessible while the former is not, all my references to these letters will be taken from it.

‡ See Asiatic Researches, vol. IX. p. 272, et seq.

§ Journal Asiatic Society, Bengal, vol. VI. p. 218.

and sent down to Madras a large collection of the sculptures, where they lay exposed to the sun and rain for fourteen years,* till they were ultimately sent home to this country about the year 1856. Unfortunately they arrived here in the troublous times of the Indian Mutiny, and just in the interval between the death of the old East India Company and the establishment of the new Indian Council. There was no proper place for their reception, and the greater part of them were consequently stowed away in the coach-house of Fife House, where they remained buried under rubbish of all sorts till accidentally I heard of their existence in January 1867. With the zealous co-operation of Dr. Forbes Watson and the officers of his establishment, I had them all brought out into the open air and photographed to a scale of one-twelfth the real size, and this was done so exactly that the photographs can be fitted together almost as well as the real stones could be. With these materials I set to work to restore the building; but though I had considerable knowledge of similar buildings, both older and more modern, I should not have succeeded but for the circumstance just mentioned, that among the sculptures themselves there are numerous miniature representations of the building itself and of its different parts, quite sufficiently correctly drawn to be recognized. With all these aids I believe I can now assign the true place and use to at least nine-tenths of the 160 fragments the India Museum possesses, and feel very little doubt that I might be able to recognize the position of all; but the process is slow and difficult, and requires more time and study than perhaps the value of the additional information now to be obtained would justify.

The position of the Amravati Tope will be easily understood from the map (Plate XLVI.). It is situated on the right or south bank of the Kistnah river, about sixty miles from its mouth, and nearly opposite to its junction to the Moony Air river. The Tope itself stands about half a mile to the eastward of the old town of Daranacotta, or Dharanikotta—the magic city—and unfortunately in the middle of the modern town of Amravati, to which circumstance it owes its destruction. To the westward of the town, a little more distant, is another mound, called Cootchtippa, which has not yet been explored; and to the south a third, called Nuckadeverdinna, which was dug up, and the materials used in building the new town. To the westward of the old town, near the Cootchtippa mound, are a great number of those rude circles of stone which were the burying-places of at least some of the inhabitants of the old city. A still greater number of these, however, are found at a distance of between four and five miles to the south-eastward, where they cover the roots of the hills in great numbers.† They range apparently from 24 to 32 feet in diameter, and when dug into have always yielded cinerary urns, burnt bones, and other indications of being burying-places. One of these has already been given from Colonel Mackenzie's work (Woodcut, No. 7.), where several of those at Amravati are drawn. They are, however, all alike in character, not only

* Selections from the Madras Records, 2nd series, vol. XXXIX. p. 195.

† In the map they are called "Circular Tumuli." This they certainly are not, as they are not raised in the centre. They are literally stone circles, but as the map is a fac-simile, I have thought it better to alter nothing. I have also generally retained the spelling of the map, though it certainly is not in all instances correct.

here, but, so far as I can ascertain, all over the south of India as far as Cape Comorin.

We are still very far indeed from any such knowledge of the modes of sepulture among the aborigines, as to be able to speak regarding them with anything like certainty. Ample materials, however, exist in India, and so soon as anyone will take the trouble to collect and classify them, we shall from their graves be able to discriminate between the different races, and assign to each its proper locality with a precision now entirely wanting to such researches. Nothing of the sort can of course be attempted here, but one curious feature may be alluded to, as it has not yet been suspected by European antiquaries; it is, that these rude megalithic monuments are of all ages; some no doubt of extreme antiquity, but many others of quite recent date; many, in fact, have been erected within the limits of this century, and it is not possible, either from their design or their form, to distinguish between those which are really old and those which are quite modern. In the meanwhile, however, I may be allowed to state that, to my mind, it does not appear doubtful but that the great Rail of the Amravati Tope is a Hindu sublimation of these Dasyu models, though we are still unable to trace the various steps by which so wonderful a transformation took place.

Besides these antiquities in the immediate vicinity of the town, there is a very extensive excavation near Datchapully, forty miles westward, covered with sculpture in a most masterly style, and another on the road leading from the river to the pagoda of Srichallum, ten miles further on. There seems also to be a four-storied cavern at Ondavully in Guntur, and another series in the Ellore districts, at a place called Jilkaragoodum. All these, however, are quite unknown to Europeans, though, if carefully examined, they would probably prove as interesting as the better known Caves of Western India.*

* The following curious memorandum, in a clerk's handwriting, is pasted into one of Colonel Mackenzie's volumes with some pencil marks of his own. I fancy it belongs to 1798, though that date on it is erased. Speaking of the Amravati sculptures, he says, "The most curious and most complete is to be found further on (from the Dipaldinna), close to the outside walls of the Pagoda enclosure, on the south, and going towards the river. Here is a small Pagoda of the Lingam, formed by three rough stones or slabs set on end and covered on the top by another placed transversely" (exactly like Kits Coty House, as shown by a little sketch on the margin). "On this stone is represented the escalade of a fort, a figure ascending a ladder, another from a turret on the walls shooting an arrow. Before the gate of the place a figure with a round shield prostrating himself before a chief seated on an elephant, and followed by others on horses, bullocks, &c. The whole forms a group in a very different style from anything observed anywhere else in this country; and as the attitudes, profiles, &c., differ from the common Hindu style, a correct drawing would be desirable."

This apparently was never made, and the slab is not in the Museum collection. The description reads almost as if intended for the Sanchi (Plate XXXVIII.), but the scaling ladder is an addition to the siege materiel there represented.