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## **Tree and serpent worship**

**Fergusson, James**

**London, 1868**

Plate LVIII. To LXI. - Elevations Of Internal Faces Of Two Pillars Of Outer  
Enclosure. - Photographed by W. Griggs

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## PLATES LVI. AND LVII.

THE upper external frieze of the great Rail, Plate LVI., is in many respects one of the most pleasing parts of the design. Nothing can well be better, as an architectural ornament, than the wavy flow of the long roll, borne by animated figures, and interspersed with emblems appropriate to the dedication of the Tope.

The three fragments in this Plate, it will be observed, are all of different depth though of the same design, and must therefore have belonged to different parts of the great Rail. Either it was that the deepest were used to eke out the height of the small Rail (Plate LIII.), and so make it range with those parts having taller pillars, or there was one quadrant or some part which had a Rail of a smaller proportion altogether. As we have no knowledge where each fragment was found, it is impossible to say which theory is the true one, either is equally probable, such irregularities being very usual in all Hindu buildings.

Like the last-described features, it seems to be of Bactrian origin. Something at least very like it occurs among the sculptures at Jamālgiri near Peshawer,\* and there so mixed with classical details as to make it appear very ancient. Something very like it is still used, I am told, in Burmah. On the occasion of the funeral of the late High Priest at Rangoon, long rolls, made as lightly as possible of paper, and bound round with rags and coloured decorations, were borne by men on each side of the procession in precisely the same manner as here represented, and probably the same practice will be found elsewhere when looked for. At Amravati the roll is not only most elaborately, but also very tastefully, ornamented, and so interspersed with emblems as to give it all the variety requisite for architectural embellishment. These are generally, of course, the emblems with which we are already familiar, such as the Tree, the Wheel, and the Dagoba, but in the centre of the upper left-hand fragment an ornament is introduced which is new to me, in so far as India is concerned, but is found on the mystic representations of Diana of the Ephesians.†

By far the most curious, however, of the episodes introduced into this frieze is that on the right hand of the upper portion. It represents Garuḍa, the bird of Vishnu, the dreaded enemy of the Nagas in all ages, holding in his beak, evidently for the purpose of destroying it, a five-headed Naga. It is difficult to guess what this can mean in a temple where the Naga is honoured almost as the chief god, and where everything is at least so mixed up with the honour of this many-headed divinity.

It is interesting, however, as it is just one of those incidental allusions which, when a sufficient number of them are collected together, may enable us to trace

\* One slab of this frieze was destroyed in the fire at the Crystal Palace in December 1866. A very imperfect representation of it will be found, *J. A. S. B.*, XXI. 606.

† There is a statue of the Ephesian Diana in the Museum at Naples, which has been frequently engraved, which is covered with figures like these. A representation of it will be found in Falkener's *Ephesus*, p. 286.  
(4799.)

the affiliation of Indian religions, and to decide as to their affinities. In the present instance it is another of the indications of the connexion between Buddhism and Vishnuism so often alluded to in these pages.

The lower frieze, Plate LVII., is not remarkable in a mythological point of view, but curious as a piece of playful fancy, and in perfect keeping with the frolics of the Gana or dwarfs, which are next to it in position. The leading idea throughout the frieze is the humorous one of boys holding on by the tails of animals in a state of greater or less excitement, which they are evidently incapable of controlling.

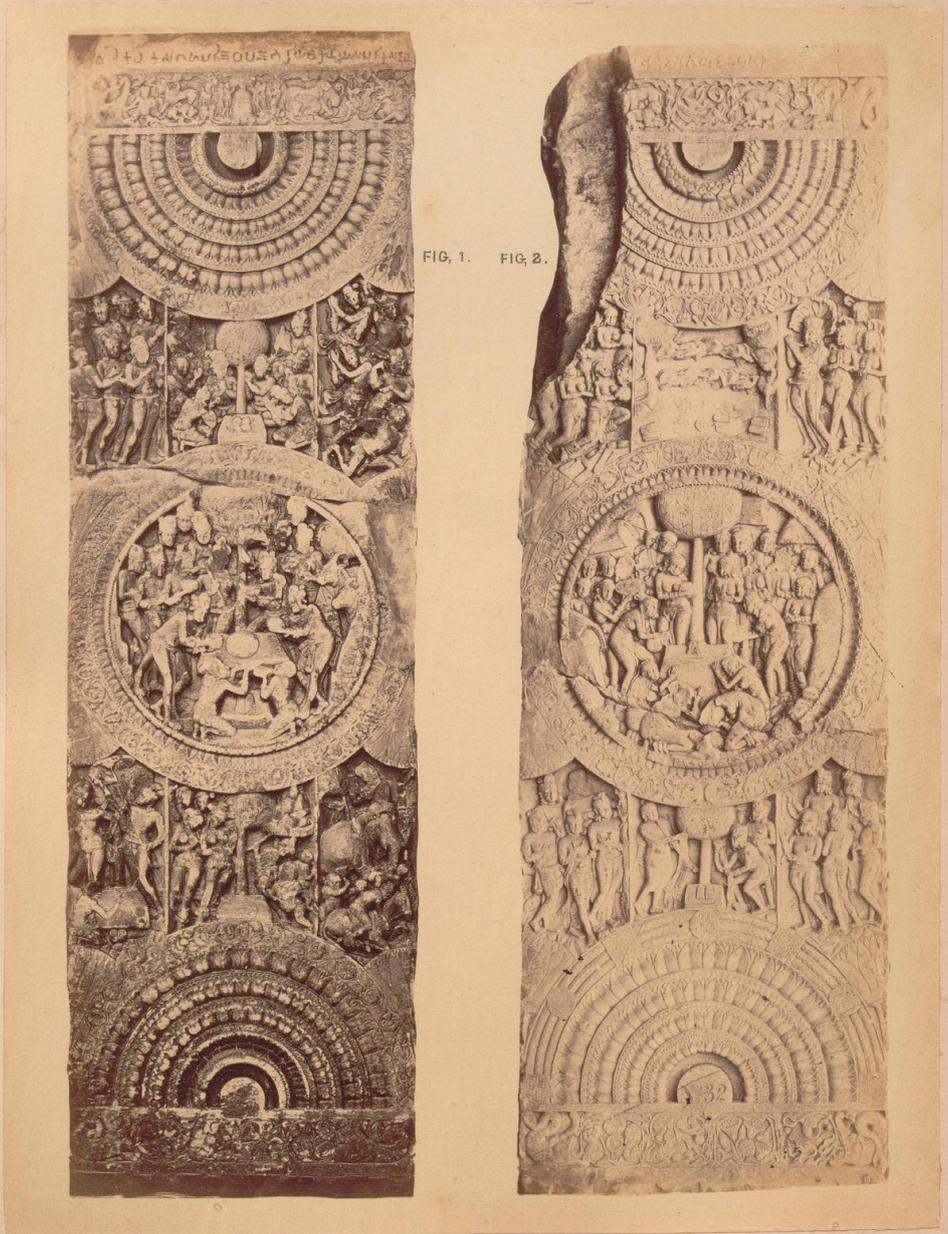
In the upper figure a boy has got hold of the tail of a bull, very fairly executed, but not so well as the galloping humped animal next below it in the Plate. The latter is as perfect a representation of a bull of purely Indian breed as can probably be found in any Indian sculpture, and the action also is free and animated in an unusual degree. The two-winged lions who follow are by no means so commendable as works of art, but they are curious as lineal descendants of those discovered by Botta and Layard at Nineveh. They are, however, considerably further removed from those prototypes than those which adorn the gates at Sanchi (Plate VII. or Plate XXXIX.), and which still retain many features in common with their Assyrian ancestors.\*

The elephant in the last figure shows the same perfect appreciation of the characteristic features of that animal as is done in all the representations of the elephant, both here and at Sanchi. The boy in this instance has got hold of his tusk,—the comic element of the representation, as just remarked, consisting apparently in the absurdity of a boy controlling the largest of animals by such means, or of holding a lion or bull by their tails.

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\* At the great Pagoda at Rangoon winged lions with human heads guard all the portals leading to the enclosure in which it stands. As may be supposed, from the distance of time and place, they are very different looking animals from their prototypes, but I do not think it admits of a doubt but that they, and a great deal of the architecture of Burmah, were derived from the banks of the Euphrates or Tigris.—See my History of Architecture, p. II. 518.





ELEVATION OF INTERNAL FACES OF TWO PILLARS OF OUTER ENCLOSURE.  
SCALE 1 INCH TO 1 FOOT.

## PLATE LVIII.

Of the two great pillars of the outer Rail represented in this Plate, that on the left hand was considered as the most beautiful in the Elliot Collection. It was in consequence selected for the honour of being exhibited, and was attached to the outer wall of the India Museum at Fife House. The result has, however, been unfortunate. The frost of our winters has so destroyed the surface of the stone that it has in many places peeled off to such an extent that it is now difficult to trace the design, and the whole is in a degraded and perishing condition.

Its sculptures are wholly devoted to Tree Worship. In the central circle some circular object is placed on the altar in front of the Tree, to which the attention of the bystanders seems to be especially directed. Two men on either hand are making offerings to it, or adding offerings to one already made, and two kneeling figures in the foreground seem trying to catch what may overflow from the right-hand man's offering, which seems to be a liquid presented in a jar. Behind him is a yoke of oxen, indicating that he is a stranger arrived for the purpose of worship. Below the altar are impressions of Buddha's feet.

In the upper bas-relief the altar table is removed. The Tree rises simply behind the representation of the sacred feet, and in the central compartment a number of men are engaged in adoring it. In the left-hand compartment seven men, in standing attitudes, are also paying respect to the sacred Tree. On the right, an equal number, in violent action while in the act of worshipping, seem also to be flying as if driven from the sacred presence.

Something of the same action is repeated in the lowest bas-relief on the pillar. Four women on the left and four dwarfs on the right are worshipping the Tree. On the right stands the king or prince, with the umbrella of state borne over his head in front of another Tree, with a kneeling figure in front of the altar.

On the right an elephant pursues a horseman. His horse has fallen on his knees, and he is being knocked on the head by a dwarf with a mallet.

It is probable that the interest of the story centres in the fallen horseman, who, with his companions in the corresponding compartment above, seems to be driven from the congregation of the faithful; but till we recover a *Druma Purāna*, it is hardly likely we shall know who he is. The *Lalita-Vistara* and the books we have make no prominent mention of Tree Worship. It belongs apparently to an earlier form of faith, and the legends connected with it are not to be found there.\*

\* The following is a curious instance of the irradicability of local forms, even long after the religion to which they belonged may have perished. At the present day, during the festival of Navarātri, in honour of Śiva as Amreshwar, the immortal lord, on the third night a brazen tree is carried round the town in procession; on the fifth night a ten-headed serpent in brass. At the close of the festival the worshippers go in great pomp to a tree called *Shemmu Veerchum*, where the god is made to exercise in shooting an arrow at the sacred tree, followed by a discharge of fire-arms in the air, which closes the ceremony. In the festival called *Siva Mahārātri*, the procession to the same tree is the culminating point, to which all previous arrangements are subordinate, and thus the festival closes.—See *Asiatic Journal*, vol. XV. p. 472 and 473.

The two lower bas-reliefs on the right-hand pillar of this Plate are devoted to the same subject. In the centre a number of women—there are no men—are performing various acts of devotion, and bringing offerings, to the sacred Tree. The scene is laid in the centre of a village, the huts of which are seen both above and on either hand.

In the lower bas-relief all the actors are men. Two in the centre present pieces of cloth or garments to the Tree, and those in the side compartments seem also to be bringing scarfs or similar objects.

The upper sculpture is of a different nature. In the centre a flight of Hansas or sacred geese are winging their way across what appears to be a lake, between two trees. A hand issues from the right-hand tree, with two circular objects in it, and the geese under it look as if falling dead on the shore, but it may be they are only flying downwards. On the sand are five impressions of the sacred feet,—there were probably originally eight,—and two birds, apparently peacocks, are somewhat indistinctly seen strutting on the sand. I have met with no legend that explains all the incidents depicted in the bas-relief, but it seems probable that it is an early form of a Jâtaka, still found in Ceylon. “The royal Hansa assembled all his subjects in an extensive plain, that his daughter might choose a husband from among them. She chose the peacock, at which the vain bird was so elated that he raised his tail, and made such a display as to disgust the king, who in consequence broke off the match.”\* If this is the legend, all that can be said is that what is here represented must be an earlier form.† On the left hand are several women presenting flowers in pots, and on the right the Naga Raja with his seven-headed snake hood, and behind him his three wives, over each of whose heads may be seen the single-headed snake, which always marks them.‡

Taken altogether, this is one of the most elegant of the Amravati pillars; and whether as regards its sculptures or its ornamental details, exhibits the progress in elegance and purity of design that has been made since the representation of the Naga Raja and his three wives was carved, which is seen on Plate XXIV., Fig. 2., from Sanchi. The snakes here are so subdued as not to be offensive, and the figures of the women are of great elegance. The ornaments of the circles on this pillar are also of great beauty. Those of the lower semicircle are not surpassed by any in this collection, though the scale of the photographs is rather too small to exhibit them in all their perfection.

\* Upham's Historical Books of Ceylon, vol. III. p. 289.

† There is another legend quoted by Schiefner (Transactions of the St. Petersburg Academy, 1851, p. 238) from a Thibetan life of Buddha, which may be the one referred to. Devadatta, it is there related, wounded a goose, which fell into the garden of the Bodisattwa. He extracted the arrow, and having cured the wound let it go. It was claimed, however, by the sportsman, and hence arose a serious quarrel. A tree figures as the most important feature in this legend, which may be that one on the left hand; but no hand from another tree, and no peacocks. On the whole the probability seems to be that there was an older legend which is here represented, and which was afterwards broken up into numerous fragments.

‡ The inscription will be found in Appendix E., Nos. XVII. and XIV. They merely record the names of the donors.





ELEVATION OF INTERNAL FACES OF TWO PILLARS OF OUTER ENCLOSURE.  
SCALE 1 INCH TO 1 FOOT.

## PLATE LIX.

THERE is no difficulty in recognizing the principal figure in the two central circles of the pillars in Plate LIX. In the first it is the Prince Siddhârtha riding\* forth from the city gate, with all the insignia of his rank. The umbrella of state is borne over his head; Chaori bearers attend on either hand, and music and dancing precede him. The glory round his head marks him as the elect—the future regenerator of the world. This is the first time we meet with this distinguishing mark, as there are no glories at Sanchi, though they are found commonly behind the heads of saints in the Peshawer sculptures.

In the circle of the right-hand picture we have the same individual after he had attained Buddhahood, in the robes in which he is always represented after apparently the second or third century of our era. On his right a woman, more fully clothed than any other woman in these sculptures, presents a boy to him, who catches hold of his garment as if entreating him to come with him. The boy's toys are seen in the foreground. It hardly seems doubtful but that this represents Yaçodharâ and her son Râhula entreating the great ascetic to return home to them, and reoccupy the position of his rank and his duties as a prince and a father.

The figures around Buddha are his disciples, among whom will be remarked in the foreground a hump-backed woman (Kubja), who frequently reappears in the sculptures.

The lower bas-reliefs on both these pillars seem to continue the subjects represented in the principal circles. In the centre of the left-hand pillar we have Siddhârtha with the glory round his head; one man kissing his feet, and others in reverential attitudes; and beside him "the Horse," to whom we shall frequently have occasion to revert hereafter. On the left of this a man bearing a relic in a tray; the same as seen in Plate LL., whatever it may be. Below him is a Naga Raja in a kneeling attitude. On the right is the worship of the Chackra or Wheel, with the usual accompaniments, and two antelopes in the foreground.

The story told in the lower bas-relief of the right-hand pillar is easily made out. A prince is seated on a couch, surrounded by his attendants, and a boy with a bow seems to ask him to join in the chase or some martial exercise. In the central compartment he resists the temptations of the daughters of Mâra;† and in the third, having assumed the priestly robes, teaches a multitude under a Bo Tree. It looks at first sight as if intended for an epitome of the life of Buddha, but it may be doubted whether he is really the person intended here, as in none of the three compartments has he a glory round his head, and it is hardly probable that in the same

\* It is worthy of remark that at Sanchi the prince is always in his chariot, at Amravati on horseback. There is only one chariot in all the sculptures at Amravati, Plate LXXXVI., and the subject of that bas-relief is singularly connected with Sanchi.

† This scene occurs again more in detail, Plate LXIII., where it will be more especially referred to.

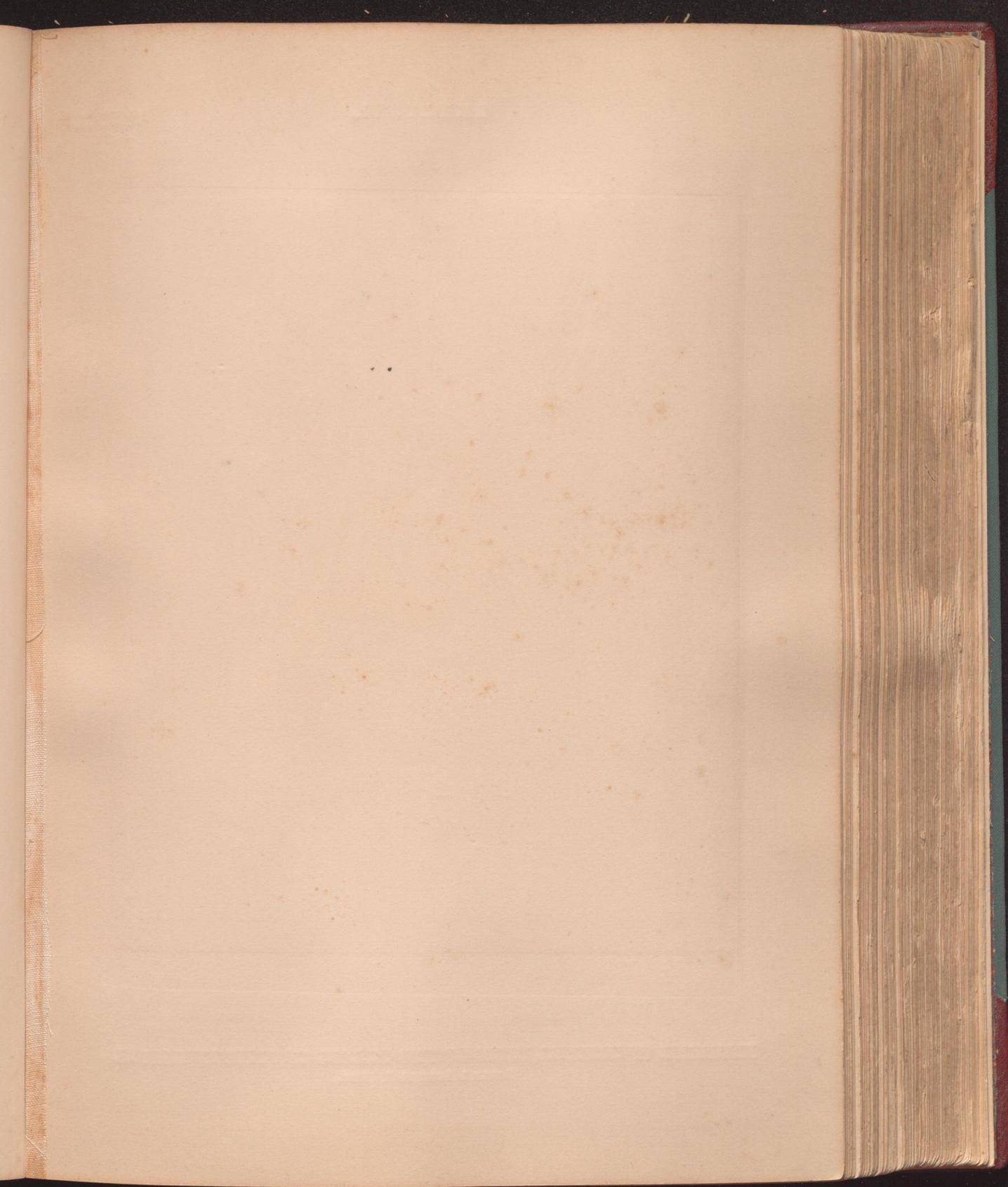
pillar he would be represented with and without this accompaniment. It may be some Bodhisattwa, but on the whole I am inclined to believe that it may represent scenes in the life of Rāhula, who seems certainly to be the hero of the central bas-relief; and if this is so nothing can be more natural than that his story should be continued on the same pillar. This prince, according to the legend, at the age of twenty, assumed the garb of a priest, and shortly after, by his father's teaching, rose to the rank of a Rahan.\* It will be observed that the old woman who appears behind the boy in the central picture reappears in the left-hand lower picture. Is she the mother of Yaḡodara?

The two upper bas-reliefs are too completely destroyed for their subjects to be made out. We can just see in the central bas-relief of the left-hand pillar that some person or object is being worshipped by women in the usual attitude, and on the right-hand pillar that Buddha himself is seated in the usual cross-legged attitude, and being worshipped by his followers. We can, however, restore with tolerable certainty the upper representation on the left of the left-hand pillar by comparing it with the left-hand pillar, Plate LI., or Plate LXXIII., Fig. 2. The man whose legs only appear, almost certainly bore a tray on his head, on which stood a cup or some similar object, and the others are reverencing it, whatever it may have been.

It will be observed the representation of Buddha here is very far in advance of anything found on the Gateways at Sanchi, and much more nearly resembling the modern representations found everywhere. The whole scene, indeed, shows a progress which fully accounts for the 300 years that elapsed between the execution of the two monuments.

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\* Bigandet, *Burmese Legend of Buddha*, p. 229, *Journal Amer. Or. Soc.* III. 69. His having entered the priesthood by no means precludes his having succeeded to the throne of Kapilawastu on the death of his grandfather. In Burmah, at the present day, nothing is so common as for members of the upper classes to become priests. Some remain so, but many more resume their civil status after three or four years' probation. A young Burmese gentleman looks on entering the priesthood very much as an undergraduate in one of our monastic colleges at Oxford or Cambridge regards his wearing a surplice in chapel. Many in our country remain in the priesthood, but as many return to civil life.





ELEVATION OF INTERNAL FACES OF TWO PILLARS OF OUTER ENCLOSURE.  
SCALE 1 INCH TO 1 FOOT.

## PLATE LX.

THE palace scenes portrayed on the two pillars in this Plate are among the most elegant of the Amravati sculptures, and interesting as pictures of life in India during the fourth century, though it is not easy to affix any particular story to the scenes they represent. Still, as the seated figure in the upper part of the central circle of the right-hand pillar has a glory round his head, we cannot refuse to recognize him as the Prince Siddhārtha; and if so, the scenes represent the Harem at Kapilawastu, which he deserted to devote himself to save his fellow creatures from sin and death.

In front of him, two of the ladies of the Harem are playing at Pachisi, or drafts, or some such game, while others are looking on; and in front of them a very graceful figure is dancing, while another plays on the flute, a third on a guitar, and one on a drum. Others are listening or applauding, and one child (is it the infant Rāhula?) appears in the foreground.

In the lower bas-relief the same Prince is seated on a couch, in conference with a Naga Raja, and in front of them two women are seated, apparently as attendants. On the left are the Naga Raja's people. On the right the country people are bringing presents of cattle, fruit, &c to the seated Rajas.

The head of the principal figure of the circle of the left-hand pillar is so completely destroyed that we cannot now know whether he had a nimbus round his head or not, nor consequently whether he is the same as the person represented on the right-hand pillar. Most probably he is. The object of the sculpture is to represent the entertainment of two distinguished guests. They are seated on a dais, on the King's right hand, with a table in front of each. The major domo stands between the Raja and his guests, and presents something to the nearest; while a girl in front offers apparently something to drink. In front of her, with his back to the spectators, is a man seated in one of those square-backed chairs which are common in these sculptures. The Queen sits on the Raja's left, in a chair of another and more elegant pattern, but extremely like the modern chairs we now use. To those familiar with Indian habits at the present day, few things are more curious than the fact that all dignitaries in these sculptures are always seated on chairs or sofas, like Europeans; never on the ground or on cushions cross-legged, as is the universal practice now-a-days. The only difference seems to be that the seat of the chair or throne must always have been made wide enough for the sitter to put up one leg on it, which seems to have been the fashionable attitude.

In the central picture some of the women are seated on stools, some on chairs; but in both the circular bas-reliefs, as in the lower one on the left hand of the left-hand pillar, the Raja is seated on a throne with a square back, ornamented with lions' heads.

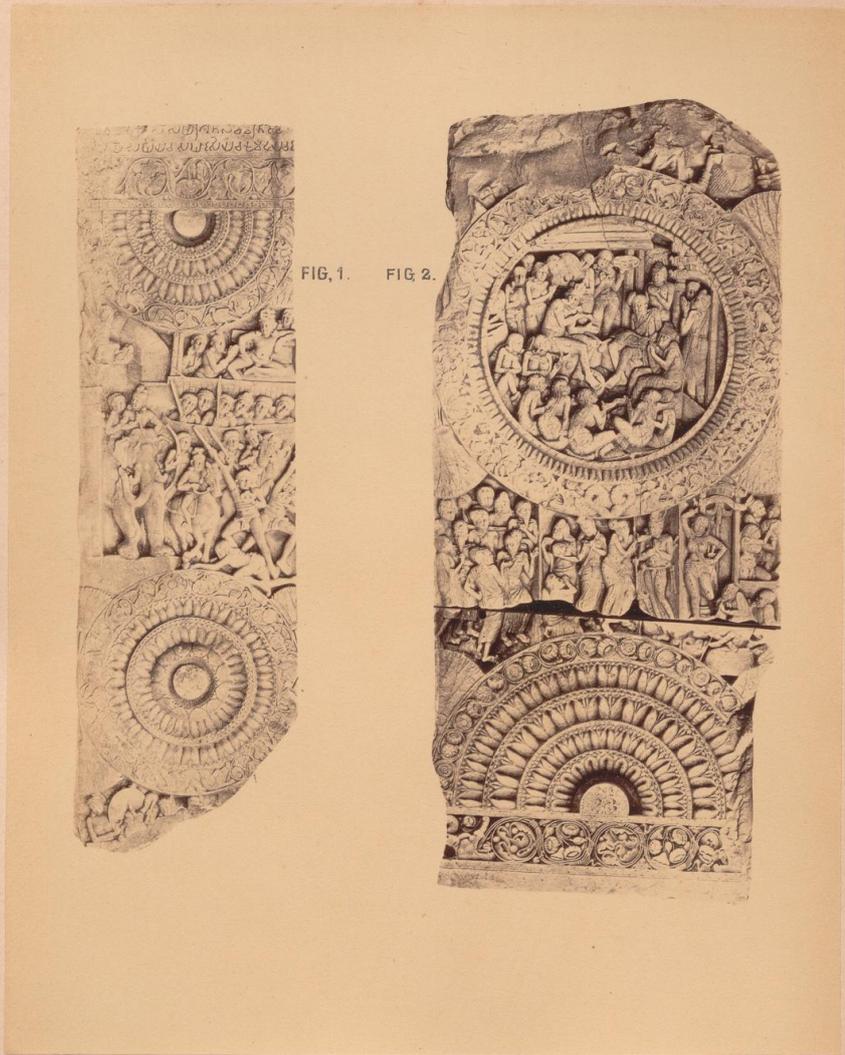
In the centre of the foreground of the circular bas-relief of the left-hand pillar, is a child attended by two women, one old and one very much younger.

This would seem to connect the two bas-reliefs as representing the same persons, and if that is so, it scarcely admits of doubt but that the principal figure is intended for the Prince Siddhârtha, and the child in that case must be his son Râhula.

In the central lower bas-relief of the left-hand pillar, the Raja is cutting something with his sword, which a man with a steelyard is standing behind him ready to weigh. What the object is cannot be made out from this representation. In the right-hand lower bas-relief a man, with a curious tall mitre or hat, is seated outside the palace gate, doing justice. The same head-dress is repeated several times in the sculptures, but whether it indicates that the wearer is always the same person is not clear. The central picture looks as if intended to represent the hero of the right-hand bas-relief cutting the Gordian knot which his legal acumen could not untie.

The Gateway in this bas-relief is curious, as almost literally reproducing those at Sanchi. There are at Amravati at least a dozen representations of the same thing, all nearly though not exactly alike, but all evidently intended to represent a wooden erection, such as it can hardly be doubted suggested those at Sanchi. Though these are in stone, this material did not at once supersede the wooden form which continued to be employed long afterwards in India, as it is at the present day in China.





ELEVATION OF TWO PILLARS OF OUTER ENCLOSURE.  
SCALE 1 INCH TO 1 FOOT.

## PLATE LXI.

THERE does not seem to be any sign or symbol by which we can attach a name to any of the actors in the scenes portrayed in the principal circle of the right-hand portion of Plate LXI., though it is easy to describe the action. It is evidently a disputation held between two men, one of whom, of superior rank, sits in the middle of the picture, and lays down the law in an authoritative manner. The other, on a lower seat, is evidently represented as beaten in argument. Between the two disputants sits an old man with something like a book on his lap, the arbiter in the contest, and behind him an attendant apparently with refreshments. Another man is standing in a gateway of the Sanchi type, and turning to listen. The rest of the audience are all women, ten of them are there as listeners only, an eleventh bears a fan, and a twelfth food. This presence of women in such scenes as these is one of the remarkable features of the sculptures, both here and at Sanchi. Not only do they take part in every action almost without exception, but seem almost as important as the male actors. Certainly the idea of a veiled or Purdah woman had not occurred to the Hindus when these sculptures were executed.

In the lower bas-relief the king or prince issues from one of these Sanchi portals, followed by his wife, to meet or feed a body of mendicant friars or monks. It is the first appearance of these noted priests in these sculptures, and is the more remarkable as there are only two other instances in which they appear at Amravati, and as before mentioned no trace of them is to be found at Sanchi. Both in costume and appearance they differ entirely from the people I have there designated as Dasyus, so that with the knowledge we now possess it seems impossible to confound the two, but this will become more apparent as we proceed. The absence of priests is the more remarkable, because if we were to believe Buddhist books, they flocked in thousands and tens of thousands from all parts of India to attend the great convocations held five or six centuries before these sculptures were commenced.

The story of the left-hand pillar is perhaps more graphically told than almost any other on these pillars. A king is seated on his throne, to whom a messenger with clasped hands brings intelligence or solicits orders. In front of him a part of the army is seen defending the walls of the citadel, and on the left hand the moveable force is sallying from the city gate. In front the infantry, in attitudes of great excitement, are seen advancing to the fight, and the rear is brought up by horsemen and elephants, all remarkably well drawn foreshortened. In the foreground one of the enemy falls on his knees to beg pardon and mercy.

If the lower part of the pillar had been preserved, we might have seen the result of this sally. It no doubt was successful, and as women appear in the fragments that remain the whole ended probably in triumph.

According to the *Lalita-Vistara*\* and other Indian works, a perfect army always consists of four arms, elephants and horsemen, chariots and infantry. Three of these are represented here, but strange to say the chariots are absent, as they always are at Amravati, though, as before remarked, they are so prominent at Sanchi. This probably is owing to some local peculiarity which could only be discovered on the spot. It can hardly be that they had gone out of fashion, because in the great temple of Nakon Vat, in Cambodia, built probably eight centuries after Amravati,† chariots are everywhere used by the chiefs in war, and with wheels as perfect and as light as could be made now by a London coach-builder. Those who know how much civilization is involved in a perfect wheel will acquire a higher estimate of the stage reached by the snake worshippers there, from these mechanical appliances, than even from their sculptures themselves.

Taken altogether, this pillar, both in its decorations and its sculptures, is one of the most elegant at Amravati, and it would consequently be extremely interesting if its inscription told us something of its story. All, however, we gather from it is that the pillar was the gift of three men and their three wives.‡

It is so much narrower than the others just described, that it evidently did not form one of the regular pillars of the outer Rail, but as it is the same height and the circles are the same distance from centre to centre, it probably belonged to one of the projecting Gateways, either as an angle column, or on some return where narrower pillars only could be introduced.

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\* See also the *Niti-sāra*, or *Elements of Polity*, by Kāmandaki. Calcutta, 1861, ch. 19.

† See *History of Architecture*, by the Author, vol. II., p. 713, et seqq.

‡ See Appendix E., No. XIII.