# Tree and serpent worship

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Conclusion. Architecture - Religion - Ethnology

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# CONCLUSION.

## Architecture.

There are few of the subjects mooted in the previous pages regarding which it would not be easy to say a great deal more than has been said, nor would it have been difficult to find illustrations from other monuments which would have rendered the subject much more complete. It has, however, been thought better, in the first instance at least, to confine the work to the representation of the two monuments named on the title page, with only such introductory matter and descriptions as were requisite to render them intelligible, and to leave their application to a future time, and probably to other hands.

In so far as the History of Architecture is concerned, we do not learn much from these Topes that had not previously become known to us from an examination of the rock-cut examples, but there is a great deal in them that confirms what was previously only suspected, while a knowledge of their forms fills up some important gaps which existed in our history of the early styles of Indian art.

Irrespective of this, however, these two Topes are interesting, inasmuch as they are the two oldest structural buildings which, so far as we yet know, are to be found in India in anything like an intelligible state. If the Tope at Sanchi was really erected by Aśoka—and there seems no good reason for doubting that it was so—it is the only one of the 84,000 Stûpas he is traditionally said to have erected of which a vestige now remains, and its Rail is the oldest and simplest in form of all those of which any fragments now exist. Its gateways, too, are unique, as no other example of such a form is known to exist anywhere in India, though judging from the frequency with which representations of them occur at Amravati, they must have been at one time very common. All those, however, that occur in the bas-reliefs of the Southern Tope seem to have been of wood, and those at Sanchi, though of stone, are very slightly removed in form from their wooden prototypes.

The whole of the superstructure is so essentially wooden in construction that we rather feel inclined to wonder how men dared to attempt its erection in stone, and are equally astonished that it should have stood for eighteen centuries nearly uninjured. The pillars, too, are evidently imitations of carved logs. The irregularity in spacing the divisions, the mode in which the dividing string courses stop, without running all round, and the wavyness of the lines, all betray the workmanship of

people unfamiliar with the even bedding requisite for stone masonry in such positions, though the irregularity may be rather pleasing in wood carving.

All this is changed when we come to the age of the Great Rail at Amravati. There the architectural details are carved with sharpness and precision. The string courses are horizontal, and the general construction so truly lithic, that it requires some study and some knowledge to detect the wooden forms that still remain. The examples of Rails at Muttra and Buddh Gya are probably intermediate between these two, and when published may perhaps enable us to render our history a little more complete. Enough remains at Gya to enable it to be restored with certainty when anyone will take the trouble to do so. That at Muttra is probably too far ruined, but meanwhile, till casts or photographs can be obtained, it is impossible to speak with any certainty regarding them. These four Rails, however, are nearly all that now remains to enable us to write the history of structural architecture in India anterior to the building of the great Bhuvaneswar temple in 627 A.D.* We may eventually be able to eke out this meagre list by hints borrowed from the Topes in Ceylon and Afghanistan, but they, I fear, are either too modern or too much ruined to be of much service. The real complement to our scant knowledge must be derived from the Caves. We have in Behar some nearly as old as Aśoka, though more modern than the Rail at Sanchi, and at Bhâjâ and Karlee in the Western Ghats we have others which were excavated before the Christian era. From that time to those at Junir and Nassick there are probably a hundred examples, including those of course at Kundana, Ajanta, and elsewhere, which may have been executed in the first three or four centuries of the Christian era, and those at Cuttack may be even earlier than those of the western side of India. All this makes up an amount of evidence probably sufficient for present purposes, but the caves being all interiors, do not supply all the information required. Even if the Topes at Sanchi and Amravati do not suffice to complete our knowledge, they and other bas-reliefs add immensely to our stores, and when the whole is combined together we can form a very fair idea of what the architecture of India was from the time when stone was first employed till the inhabitants acquired that perfection in the art which is exhibited in the carvings of the Rails at Amravati.

The fact, however, of our having been obliged hitherto to rely to such an extent on rock-cut examples for our knowledge of the early arts of India, has prevented our being able to ascertain how far the history of sculpture and decorative art has coincided with that of architecture. There is very little sculpture in the early Caves, and what there is, is generally carved in a coarse unsuitable material, and frequently in situations where it is badly lighted and imperfectly seen. It was therefore perfectly open to anyone to argue that these sculptures were not a fair test, and that the Hindus may have been proficient in representations of the human form and in decorative sculpture at a time when their architectural knowledge was still in its infancy.

The great fact that we learn from a study of the sculptures of the Topes at Sanchi and Amravati is, that the plastic arts followed the same law as those of

* I am doubtful about the age of the Takht-i Sulimán temple in Cashmere, but it may be older, A.D. 290 ?

construction. We can now assert with confidence that all the permanent forms of art arose in India after its inhabitants were brought into contact with western civilization, by the establishment of the Grecian kingdom of Bactria. It seems probable that such sculptures as we have of Aśoka's reign were actually executed by Grecian or at least by Yavana artists; but from his time to the present day we can now trace the rise and fall of Hindu art almost without a break. We can assist at its first rude but vigorous attempts. We can follow it till it reached its highest point of manipulative dexterity, in the fourth century, at Amravati. We see it maintaining itself nearly at the same level—with some fluctuation, of course—till the decline of Buddhism, and the irruption of the Mahomedans. From that point the history of Hindu art is too surely written in decay, and we can trace its gradual deterioration to the present day.

In a few words, what we have gained by the study of the arts of the two Topes, is the assurance that the whole history of permanent art in India is comprised in the last twenty-one centuries, and that we now possess a sufficient number of examples, and have sufficient knowledge, to grasp the subject as a whole. There may be some gaps still to fill up, some details that require rectification, but for the first time it can now be said that we know the beginning, the middle, and the end of the history of the arts of that great Indian branch of the family of mankind.

## Religion.

The picture which the sculptures of the Topes at Sanchi and Amravati afford us of the religious faith of the inhabitants of India at the time they were erected is perhaps more novel, and also more interesting, than the information they afford regarding the arts of the country. Before they were discovered, the only contemporary record we possessed of the early forms of the Buddhist faith was that derived from the inscriptions of Aśoka, engraved on pillars at Delhi, Allahabad, and in Tirhoot, &c., and those on the rocks at Orissa, Gujerat, Peshawer, and elsewhere. What we find in them is Buddhism without Buddha. Except in the short inscription at Bhabhra (App. C.), the founder of the religion is not once mentioned, nor any of his doctrinal formulas. That marvellous tenderness towards everything that has life is strongly inculcated; respect for parents and superiors, mutual kindness and forbearance, and above all, toleration of other faiths, are insisted upon, and many moral doctrines common to Buddhism and other forms of faith; but we scarcely gather whether they emanated from some Solon or some Socrates or from Śâkya Muni. The faith was then the rival of that of the Vedas, and affected their purity and absence of all human agency or miraculous manifestations.

At Sanchi, 300 years afterwards, we find the state of affairs altered, but not to any very great extent. Buddha, the great ascetic, as we have always hitherto known him, nowhere appears. In his place we have only the Prince who forsook parent, wife, and child, and threw aside his royal state and all worldly advantages, that he might devote his life to the benefit of his suffering fellow men. But even this is, as it were, only incidentally announced. It requires some knowledge and a great deal of study to detect it. On the other hand the religious observances which the

sculptures of Sanchi reveal to us are, that in those days the old ancestral worship of a Turanian people had been refined from reverencing the sepulchres of their forefathers into a veneration for relics and relic shrines, the Dagoba or Tope being the object most frequently and most prominently worshipped there. Next to the Dagoba, if not indeed more important, is the worship of the Tree. It occurs quite as frequently, and often in more prominent positions in the sculptures, but against this we must bear in mind the fact, that the great Tope itself was there, and those Gateways were themselves erected to do it honour.

Next in importance to these, but very much less frequent, is the worship of the Wheel, and next to it the Trisul emblem, though it is very doubtful whether this last ought to be considered as an object of worship at Sanchi, and not merely as an hierogram, expressing a sacred meaning, but not an idol.

The Serpent is only once worshipped at Sanchi, and then apparently by a people totally distinct from the governing race, who erected the Gateways and carved the representations upon them. But groups occur six, or it may be ten, times in which a man sits shielded by the seven-headed Naga, and surrounded by women who have the strange accompaniment of a single snake at the back of their heads.

The most remarkable circumstance, however, connected with the bas-reliefs at Sanchi is the total absence of anything approaching asceticism. No priests appear anywhere; and though we have palaces, there is no building that can be taken for a monastery. On the other hand, the sculptors revel in depicting regal state. Music and dancing take the place of divine service, and drinking and love-making fill up the time of the Buddhists of those days. Most strange of all, we have war! It is true it may have been undertaken to acquire or recover some valued relic, or for some such Buddhist object, but fighting on a Buddhist monument is at strange variance with usually received opinions.

When from these we pass on over another three centuries to the time of the sculptures at Amravati, we find a state of affairs much more nearly approaching to the usually received formula of Buddhism. Buddha, the ascetic, occasionally appears in the usual attitudes and the usual costume, but much more frequently in the more modern than in the older bas-reliefs of this Tope. His statue does not apparently occur among the fragments of the central Dagoba,* and only twice on the fragments we possess of the great Rail. On the smaller Rail, however, such representations become frequent, and very similar to what we are accustomed to on the Caves and Buddhist temples after the fifth century.

The actual worship of the Dagoba occurs as a rule only on the central building. It is frequently represented afterwards, and with more elaboration, on the inner Rail, which I take to be the last important addition to the Tope, but it can hardly be said that it is there represented as worshipped by the people of the sculptures. It is more like a frame to contain pictures to be reverenced by the people. The purely abstract symbol of Relic Worship has become a storied page of legendary lore, and, if I read it rightly, the picture has to a very great extent obliterated the original idea of the relic shrine.

* I do not feel quite sure about Fig. 1., Plate LXXXVII. It may belong to the central building, but I rather think it was a detached statue.

On the other hand, Tree Worship maintains nearly the same relative position of importance at Amravati that it did at Sanchi, but with this important qualification. Where the two Topes have anything in common, it is most apparent in those points in which they approach nearest in age. We find, consequently, the Tree Worship most important in the central building, next in the great Rail, but nearly evanescent in the sculptures of the inner Rail. It only occurs once in the place of honour on any Dagoba in our collections, and never on the frieze nor on the wall. The change is so gradual that it can hardly be accidental, and I am on the whole inclined to believe that Tree Worship was to some extent losing its importance before the sculptures at Amravati were complete.

The Chakra or Wheel, on the contrary, seems to have gone on growing in importance. Nothing at Amravati exceeds the fanciful elaboration of the pillars which support this emblem, and it is introduced so frequently and so prominently that it was evidently considered one of the principal emblems of the faith.

The Trisul emblem seems also to grow in importance as we descend the stream of time. As before mentioned, it does not seem to have been directly worshipped at Sanchi, nor is it so treated in the central building at Amravati, but on the great Rail it occurs several times elevated on what appear to be fire pillars, and most decidedly as a thing to be worshipped.

The greatest change that took place between the two epochs seems to have been in the position of the Naga. As just mentioned, he appears only once as an object of worship at Sanchi, and from six to ten times as spreading his seven-headed hood over some important personage.

At Amravati he occurs certainly ten or twelve * times in the place of honour on the Dagoba or on pillars as the principal object to be worshipped. Twice he occurs in a similar position shielding the head of Buddha, thrice protecting the sacred feet, and at least thirty, it may be fifty times spreading his hood over Rajas or persons of importance, exclusive of course of the women with their single snakes, who are always more numerous. There is of course some uncertainty in stating these figures, as we have only so small a portion of the Amravati sculptures at our command, but on the whole I am inclined to think that what we possess is a fair representation of the whole, and if so, it is not too much to assert that the Naga is the great and ruling idea at Amravati, and seems to have been growing in importance from the oldest buildings there till the time when additions ceased to be made, and the place became deserted.

The Horse is another animal which was certainly honoured at Amravati to an extent that we are justified in calling worship; it hardly, however, seems to have been a growing faith, and probably was more prominent in the central building than in subsequent erections, though it appears prominently on the inner Rail.

Another important change is, that at Amravati we have shaven priests, such as we easily recognise and such as we find at the present day on the other side of the Himalayas, or in Ceylon or Burmah.

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* I am forced to state the numbers thus rather vaguely, because I cannot always feel quite sure whether some of the drawings in the Mackenzie Collection may not represent sculptures in that of Sir W. Elliot; generally, the difference is easily recognized, but not always.

Music and dancing are still represented at Amravati, though rarely. Drinking hardly occurs, and love is kept in the background. In fact we cannot but feel, in comparing these sculptures, that when we come near the end of the Amravati series we are approaching very nearly to the state of affairs which existed when the Ceylonese and Thibet books were first composed. At Sanchi we were in another and an older world, but by degrees religious forms assumed a state more nearly resembling what we now find. Another century, and the sculptures of the Tope might have served literally as illustrations of the Mahawansa or the Lalita-Vistara. Meanwhile the great interest resides in the fact that they represent a state of affairs that existed before these or any Buddhist books we now possess were reduced to their present legendary form.

## Ethnology.

It is more difficult to speak with anything like precision regarding the ethnology than as to either the architecture or religion displayed in the Topes. This does not arise so much from any want of distinctness in the sculptures as because the countries of Hydrabad and Berar have never yet been scientifically explored. We are almost entirely ignorant regarding the different races who inhabit the vast central plateau of India, on whose outer edge these two Topes were erected, and we neither know whence they came nor when they settled in their present locations. Now that the Nagpore territory has escheated to British rule, there is a prospect of something being done to clear up these difficulties, but the only result hitherto obtained from the labours of the Nagpore Antiquarian Society is to show us how much remains to be done, and at the same time what a vast amount of valuable material exists on the spot and is available for the inquiry.

The people most distinctly characterized in the sculptures of these two Topes are those I have designated Dasyus or Takshaks. They are infinitely more important at Sanchi than at Amravati, but appear in both places as a quasi aboriginal race, and treated as inferiors by the builders of the Topes. They appear at the same time to be the real and original Serpent worshippers, and if their connexion with Taxila and the Punjab can be satisfactorily established, it will throw considerable light on the principal features of the present inquiry. Meanwhile it is curious to observe, as we pointed out before, that as a straight line drawn from Taxila to Amravati passes through Bhilsa, Nagpore, and other localities where Snake Worship was especially prevalent, it does look like the central line of such a migration. If any such ever took place, it was long anterior to Buddhism, possibly before or in consequence of the great war, celebrated in the Mahâbhârata.

Another race, who seem almost as distinctly marked, are those with short curly hair. There are only two men so distinguished at Amravati, and the sculpture on which they are found is of such inferior execution (Plate LXXXIV.) that no argument can well be founded upon it. In Plate LXII., Fig. 2., several women are so distinguished, but no men. At Sanchi the case is different. The drummer boys generally have curly hair, so have the charioteers and menials in many instances, and in one bas-relief (Plate XXVIII.) these curly-headed people seem to be the

principal actors. From their costume they seem to come from some colder country, and I have suggested Bactria, though there are no doubt many difficulties in such an attribution. At first sight it might be supposed they came from Africa—Zanzibar—like the Hubschees at present in the Nizam's service, but in the absolute silence of all tradition the difficulties in the way of such an hypothesis seem greater than as regards the other. The question has rather a curious interest in an artistic point of view, as there seems little doubt that it was from this people—whoever they were—that Buddha derived the negroid hair by which his statues are always distinguished, and which has given rise to so much speculation. In so far as we now know, sculpture, taught by the Greeks, was practised in the North-west long before it penetrated into India Proper, and it is probable that the earlier statues of Buddha were fabricated there. If this is so it would favour the idea that the curly heads may have belonged to that country.

Even supposing it were possible to locate and name these minor groups, the great question would still remain, Who are the people who in the preceding pages have been designated as Hindus? From the appearance of Śâkya Muni, and their being so generally associated with him, I think that there can be very little doubt but that the sculptures meant to represent the inhabitants of the province now known as Upper Bengal, more especially of the districts of Tirhoot and Behar, which were assuredly the cradle of Buddhism. At first sight it might appear that a distinction ought to be drawn between the followers of Buddha at Sanchi, and those at Amravati. The figures, especially of the women at the former place, are so much fuller, it may be said coarser, and so much more like what we are accustomed to call Scythians or Tartars, that it might be assumed that they could not belong to the same race. On the whole, however, I am inclined to believe that the difference is more artistic than ethnographic. From the earliest sculptures in the Caves to a late period, there seems to be a tendency to refine and attenuate, and my impression is that this difference is due to that cause.

If this is so, the people who are associated with Buddha in both Topes are the mixed race of Bengal,—a people with a certain infusion of Aryan blood in their veins, but which had become so impure from mixture with that of the aboriginal tribes who existed in Bengal before the Aryan immigration, that the distinctive features of their higher civilization were almost entirely lost. Of this no greater proof could be given than that Buddhism was able to rise on its ruins.

Another important question is, Are the people who wear the snake-hoods of the same race as the others? Sometimes I have thought I could detect such distinctions as would enable a separate classification to be made, but on the whole it is probably safer to assume, for the present at least, that the differences are only artistic. Their costume, their mode of wearing the hair, and their features are certainly generally the same, with only such distinctions as may be accounted for by fashion or local peculiarities, and we ought therefore to consider them as two different nations rather than as two distinct peoples.

The people whose manners and customs appear to present the closest affinities with what we find on the monuments, are those now known as the Gonds and other closely-allied tribes inhabiting the country to the south of the Vindhya hills. From their language we learn that they were allied to the Dravidians, now occupying

nearly the whole of the Madras presidency, but ethnologists have not yet determined whether they occupied also the great basin of the Ganges, or whether another race more nearly allied to the Thibetans and Burmese originally inhabited these plains. From such indications as we gather from the sculptures of the Topes, I am inclined to the latter view, but it is perhaps better at the present stage of the inquiry to be content with stating the problem and its difficulties, rather than to attempt to solve it from the very imperfect data at our command. Be this as it may, everyone will probably be inclined to admit that the Plates published in this volume are a most important contribution for the elucidation of many of the difficulties connected with Indian ethnography, but the real value of this evidence will never be extracted from them till they are carefully examined by persons on the spot, who have local experience and personal knowledge of the tribes of Central India. When this is done the Topes at Sanchi and Amravati may contribute as much to our knowledge of the ethnography of India in the early centuries of the Christian era as they have certainly done towards completing the history of the architecture and illustrating the religious forms of the faiths of India at that early period of time.

FINIS.