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Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

London, 1868

Appendix G. - Birth Of Sâlivâhana

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APPENDIX G.

BIRTH OF ŚĀLIVĀHANA.

THE following two extracts from a paper by Colonel Wilford in the ninth volume of the "Asiatic Researches" are of little value from any historical point of view, but being derived from Brahmanical sources, they are curious as an unconscious testimony to the prevalence of Nāga traditions at the time the Sanchi Gateways were being erected.*

"Towards the end of his reign, Vicramarca sent secret messengers through all the world to inquire whether a child were born of a virgin one and half year old. The messengers returned to Ujjayini with the news that a male child was born of a virgin, the daughter of a potmaker, begot by the King of Snakes (called Taeshaca or the Carpenter in the original), while she was in her cradle. They informed him also that the child named Śālivāhana had attained the age of five years, and that his grandfather had made numberless figures of soldiers to amuse him.

"Vicramarca marched at the head of an army, but the protecting Snake came to the assistance of the Child, and inspired the figures of clay with life, who started up as able warriors, attacked Vicramarca and his army, and defeated them" (p. 120).

"There were two Brahmans, who had a sister who lived with them in a state of widowhood—her husband having died while she was yet very young. She conceived by a Nāga Cumāra (or Taeshaca), and the brothers, ashamed of this seemingly disorderly behaviour of their sister, left the country. The unfortunate young widow thus deserted found an asylum in the humble cottage of a pot maker, where she was delivered of a male child, whom she called Śālivāhana."

After some irrelevant matter, the story reaches the battle, and goes on thus:—"They fought on both sides with courage, but the Nāga Cumāra, or son of the Great Serpent, stupefied Vicramarca's army, who, finding his soldiers asleep, implored the assistance of the Serpent, Vāsuki, who gave him some Amrit, with which he revived his troops, and Śālivāhana, hearing of this, sent two of his men for some of it, and Vicramarca complied with his request, and here ends the legend" (p. 130).

* Śālivāhana died A.D. 78. His capital was situated 300 miles south-west from Sanchi, but his kingdom extended to the eastward of Nagpore (vide supra, p. 154). If I am not very much mistaken, Nāgārjuna, Kanishka, and Śālivāhana are the three persons who had the greatest share in engrafting on Buddhism that Serpent Worship which gave rise to those forms which it has been the object of the preceding pages to develop.

NOTE.

The following footnote was inadvertently omitted on page 94:—

Professor Wilson, quoting from the Mahā Bhārata, says, "The King Sagara, in obedience to his Guru, Vasishta, deprived the Ml̥chch'has of their institutes, and imposed on them these marks: the Sacas had half the head shaved, the Yavanas and Cambojas the whole of the hair taken off, the Paradas were ordered to wear beards."—Asiatic Researches, XV. 49.