

THE MONUMENTS OF SĀÑCHĪ

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CHAPTER IX

SCULPTURES OF THE SECOND STŪPA AT SĀÑCHĪ, OF BHARHUT AND BODH-GAYĀ

FROM the monuments of Aśoka we pass to the sculptures of the Second Stūpa at Sāñchī. Between them come the minor carvings on the berm and stairway balustrades of Stūpas 1 and 3, which were executed shortly after the middle of the second century B.C., but the light which the latter throw on the history of local sculpture is a negligible one, and it is unnecessary, therefore, to pause and discuss them. As stated in a previous chapter, the sculptures of Stūpa 2 date from the last quarter of the second century B.C. (probably from about 110 B.C.), and being, as they are, the earliest important examples of indigenous relief-work in stone, they constitute a specially valuable landmark in the evolution of Indian art—the starting point, in fact, from which the whole progress of this indigenous art—as distinct from the foreign, official art of the Mauryas—can be traced down the centuries. To understand aright these first beginnings of sculpture, we must endeavour to visualise the conditions in which they were made and the difficulties that confronted the Buddhist sculptors. The greatest of these difficulties were the technical ones. Stone carving was a relatively new form of craftsmanship to the Indian. In wood and ivory carving he was expert enough, for he had been practising them from time immemorial; and he was skilled, too, in painting and in the hammering out of designs in relief from copper and bronze. But to carve figures out of brittle and refractory stone, was a very different proposition. Stone was not ductile, like metal, and capable of being hammered into shape; nor could it be cut easily and sharply like wood, however finely tempered the chisels of steel¹ might be. Hammer blows were needed to chip away the new material, and a blow that was a fraction too sharp might ruin the work. To be sure, there was the marvellous lion-crowned pillar of Aśoka to demonstrate how stone could be carved: none could wish for a more perfect model! But that had been made of old by the *devas*; and there was none now to teach the sculptors how to set about such work. What they had to do, then, was to try and make the best of their own traditional methods; to carve the stone as they were accustomed to carve wood and ivory; and if they could produce in it the same kind of figures in relief, they would be more than satisfied. Of the essential difference in texture between stone and wood and ivory, they knew, of course, nothing; nor had they any idea of how the peculiar texture of stone can be turned to account in the hands of a skilful sculptor.

Importance of
carved
balustrade
of Stūpa 2 in
history of
Indian art

Technical
difficulties

¹ Pieces of virtually pure steel swords were found used as wedges beneath the pillar of Heliodorus at Besnagar, which was contemporary with Stūpa 2 at Sāñchī.

Their one objective was to get the same effects in durable, that they had been wont to get in perishable, materials, and to achieve this, they went to work as nearly as possible in the same way.

Problem of
subject matter

Buddhist
emblems

Mundane art :
Plants, trees,
birds and
animals

Then there was another problem. With what sort of themes were they to decorate the new balustrades? Clearly the decorations must be as distinctive as possible of the Buddhist faith, but how to make them so? The art of the Church was still in its infancy, and its imagery strictly limited. Of course, there were the relic-stūpas and wheel-crowned pillars of Aśoka. These were now the outstanding features of the saṅghārāma; everybody was worshipping them, and countless copies had been made of them; so that they were already familiar motifs for the artist, and had already come to symbolize two great events in the life of the Master, namely, the Great Decease and the First Sermon. Naturally, therefore, they must figure prominently in the new sculptures. So, too, must the effigy of Māyā¹ supported on a lotus, which would remind the Faithful of the Master's miraculous Birth, and the Bodhi Tree, which would equally remind them of his Enlightenment. Then, there were certain emblems which the Church had appropriated to itself and which were now looked upon as peculiarly characteristic of the Buddhist Faith:—the ever-moving Wheel that typified the Master's Law; the three-pointed *Triratna*, mystic symbol of the Three Jewels—Buddha, the Law and the Order; and the "shield" or *Śrīvatsa*, the meaning of which has long since been lost in oblivion. These motifs, also, could find an appropriate place among the sculptures; but after all they were not many and would not go far on a massive railing of 88 pillars. Still, even if there was only a sprinkling of them here and there among the reliefs, they would give a decidedly Buddhist flavour to the whole. For the rest, there was variety enough in the stock-in-trade motifs and designs that made up the ordinary mundane art of the day. At stylised plants and flowers, the artists were marvellously adept; could weave them into countless lovely patterns and suit them to almost any shape of surface. Their special forte was the lotus, which they could draw to perfection in every form of leaf and bud and blossom. Even the boasted art of the Yavanas could show nothing quite to equal it. Trees, too, they were fond of, and could carve not unskilfully, bringing out the salient points of each—the long pointed leaves, for example, of the *pīpal* or the pendent suckers of the banyan; nor did they find any difficulty in hanging woven garlands and necklaces and jewels from the boughs of the enchanted *kalpavṛksha* or in showing birds perched among its foliage or lions and deer starting in pairs from its stem. Bird-life did not appeal over-much to them, though there was no mistaking such birds as the parrot, the peacock or the goose, when they chose to represent them. What they really loved best of all was

¹ For representations of Māyādevī and the Nativity, see pp. 183-6 and 197 *infra*. Some of the Māyā figures on the balustrades and gateways are identical with the familiar type of Śrī-Lakshmi, standing or seated on a lotus, which the Buddhists evidently appropriated, along with so many other formulæ and motifs, from the current art of the period, since it can hardly be doubted that the Śrī-Lakshmi type goes back to a more remote age than Buddhism. Dr. Coomaraswamy inclines to the view that in the figures of this type the Buddhists recognised, not Māyā, but Śrī-Lakshmi herself; but an insuperable objection to this view is that the type appears six times on the square dies of the gateways of Stūpa I, which were reserved exclusively for the Four Great Miracles—the Nativity, Illumination, First Sermon and Decease. Cf. Pls. 24, 25, 30, 41, 44, and 56; and A. K. Coomaraswamy in *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. xi, 2, pp. 357-60.

the four-footed animals, both wild and tame : the deer and the bull, the horse and, most of all, the elephant, which they were never tired of modelling, sometimes with consummate skill, in one or other of its characteristic attitudes. With the camel and lion, on the other hand, they were less at home, for the reason, no doubt, that they seldom, if ever, came into contact with either ; nor are their efforts at portraying the rhinoceros, boar, bear and dogs very successful. Then, there was a whole galaxy of fabulous creatures on which to ring the changes : fish-tailed *makaras*, winged human-headed lions, griffins with parrot beaks, centaurs with riders, horses with human heads or women with horses' heads, stags with elephants' heads and fishes' tails, cobra-hooded *nāgas* with human bodies, and weird monsters of the deep—these and other creatures of the imagination could be used at will to fill some of the empty spaces. Some of them, like the *nāgas*, were of Indian origin and from time immemorial had been fraught with a religious significance, albeit not Buddhist ; others, like the winged lions and griffins and mounted centaurs, had arrived more recently from the West and were still mainly of a decorative order.

Fabulous
creatures

With the figures of men and women, the sculptors had more difficulty than with animals or plants. Their *Yakshas* and *Yakshīs* were still stiff and disjointed, with awkward feet, and attitudes never quite natural. And when a group of figures had to be portrayed, the best that could be done was to range them side by side or one above the other, in more or less rigid isolation. In the constricted spaces on the railing, there was of course no room for elaborate groups ; otherwise, they might perhaps have attempted to depict other incidents in the Buddha's life or in the *Jātaka* stories that told of his previous births. That, however, was impracticable. The most they could do was to recall the best known episodes by inserting some allusive figures or emblems. Thus, an elephant with a lotus, or a lotus alone, would, like the figure of *Māyā*, suggest the Nativity ; a deer would call to mind the Deer Park (*Mṛigadāva*) and, no less than the wheel (*dharmacakra*), suggest the First Sermon that the Buddha preached there ; and even a single figure, like a horse-headed *Yakshī*, might stand for one of the *Jātaka* stories.¹

Human figures

Allusive
emblems

Such, roughly, was the range of subjects which the artists of the day had at their command, and on which they could draw for the adornment of this railing. Now let us turn to the railing itself, and see how they succeeded in carrying out their task ; and first, let it be noted, there is not only a general absence of uniformity in the designs of the carvings, but some measure of disparity also in the quality of their workmanship. This could hardly have been otherwise ; for the posts, cross-bars and coping stones were the gifts of many donors—presented, not all at once, but over a period, it may be surmised, of several years ; and we should be safe, therefore, in inferring, even if the carvings themselves did not demonstrate it, that many artists were employed in their execution, who doubtless varied the designs according to the amount of money available, or to suit their own taste

Disparity of
workmanship

¹ E.g., No. 432. Cf. p. 181 *infra*.

it are already very varied. And though these are more often than not borrowed from the vegetable or animal kingdom, they include also quite a number of human figures and a few symbols.

Symbols

Some of the latter, such as the stūpa, are borrowed direct from architecture, or, like the wheel, are commonly perched on one of those columns which were once the pride and are now the glory of the emperor Aśoka (cf. Pls. 74, 82 and 86). The felly of this wheel is trimmed outside, as on the old coins, with an edging of umbrellas, even where it forms the centre of a pseudo-lotus, as on Pillar 13 b (Pl. 76). Once it is placed upon the symbol called *nandipada* or taurine, which itself rests on a stone throne supported by genii (Pl. 74, 1 c). The *nandipada* itself reappears several times, sometimes set among lotuses (Pillars 12 b, 13 b, 26 b), or lotuses loaded with gems (9 b and 25 b), sometimes forming a part of this floral pattern (31 b, 35 a, 56 b, 68 b, 72 a, 82 b, 83 a, 87 b). Another symbol, the shield or *śrīvatsa*, so far enigmatic, is connected with the lotus in various ways (9 b, 22 b, 40 a, 48 a, 51 a, 53 b, 75 b, 83 b). In a reduced form it combines more readily with variations of the 'palmette' or 'honeysuckle' (16 b, 17 b, 19 a, 22 a, 32 b, 42 b, 48 a, 60 a, 65 b, 69 a, 72 a, 82 a, 87 a), and once, even, with the latter and lions placed back to back (51 b).

Plants

This so-called honeysuckle ornament, the most frequent of the floral patterns after the lotus, is found isolated and in clearly recognizable form on Pillars 13 b, 22 a and b, 27 a, 28 a, 38 a, 44 c, 51 a, 71 a, and the number of these reproductions makes it very probable that the artists invested it with symbolical meaning and sacred character. Of the trees, we shall have more to say anon about the *aśvattha* (pīpal, *ficus religiosa*). The mango is also found several times, either sheltering an elephant (58 b), or in the form of isolated branches covered with fruit, which is sometimes being plundered by squirrels (25 a) or birds (44 a), sometimes placed in the hand of a crouching man (74 b) or of a fantastic figure (86 b). The middle medallion of Pillar 59 b shows what seems to be a palm-tree, together with a tree, strangely cut in the shape of an arbour, just like those which we see on the Western Gateway of the Great Stūpa (Pl. 64 c). We shall find, too, in the hands of the Caryatids of the *torāṇa* the same blossoming bignonia as in that of the Yakshī on our pillar 1. As for the bunch of flowers on Pillar 27 b, it is too ornate to be true to life.

Real Animals

When we turn to the animals, we have no difficulty in recognizing at once, in the forefront, the lion and the elephant, followed by the horse; the bull, which must be considered as the fourth sacred animal, plays a much less important part.¹ Instead, stags or hinds appear frequently, sometimes isolated and either kneeling down (1 c, 14 b; cf. Pl. 8 a, 3) or scratching their muzzles with their hind-feet (Pl. 8 c, 4); sometimes face to face (Pl. 8 a, 6) or back to back (31 b, 40 b; cf. 5 a, 44 b and c, 49 a, 66 b); sometimes expiring in the jaws of a lion (8 a, 24 b, at the top) or pursued by a dog with its tail up (44 a). Other mammals appear only sporadically, such as the camel with or without a

¹ We shall have to return to this later, p. 188.

rider (54 *a* and 66 *c*), the buffalo (Pl. 8 *a*, 2 and *b*, 2), the rhinoceros (24 *a*), the boar (86 *a*), the squirrel (25 *a*) and two other rodents not yet identified (24 *b*). The monkey, so frequent later on, is absent, but the bear is seen on Pl. 8 *c*, 2.

Of the birds, the famous *hamsa* or Indian goose is most in evidence, generally in pairs (55 *b*, 86 *a*) and often combined with the lotus on the half-medallions (6 *b*), medallions (43 *b*, 52 *a*) or creepers (44 *a*, 49 *b*, 66 *a* and 71 *b*). It might often be confused with the crane (*cf.* 5 *b*), which is also twice represented in pairs (73 *a* and 84 *a*). A peacock, spreading out its tail between its two tiny females, fills a whole medallion on Pillar 10 *b*. The parrot may sometimes be recognized among the creepers (see especially 44 *a*). Of other birds, it would be hard to identify a number, particularly those which, on several half-medallions, are carrying garlands in their beaks or on their necks (*cf.* especially 25 *b*, 73 *b*, 79 *b*, 80 *b*). By analogy with these last, one can guess that the central theme at the top of Pillar 18 *a*, between the two addorsed lions, is again a bird's head thrust through a collar of flowers.

Even fish may be found on our balustrade, sometimes being trampled underfoot by an elephant (35 *b*), sometimes being swallowed by strange sea-monsters, to which we shall return in a moment (*cf.* 34 *a*, 79 *b*, 86 *b*). We shall also recur (p. 184) to the peculiar part played by the tortoise. As for serpents, we can find only one real cobra, writhing in the beak of an exceedingly conventional vulture (38 *b*). The two other specimens, each with five heads and hoods (32 *a*, 81 *a*), supply the transition to the supernatural beings which remain to be enumerated.

In addition to these polycephalic serpents, we meet with a strange creation of the Indian imagination in the shape of an elephant with stag's antlers or, more accurately, a stag with an elephant's head (84 *b*). As to the stag with the fish-tail in No. 11 *b*, it is the well-known form of a Chaldean god. The sea-monster, whether borrowed from occidental art or not, seems in India to have assumed a crocodile's head (79 *b* and 86 *b*), and owes to the same animal its name of *makara* (now *makar* or *magar*). But the saurian muzzle soon became so inordinately lengthened as to recall quite deliberately the trunk of an elephant (8 *b*), which, to leave no room for doubt, sometimes also displays its tusks (30 *a*). Not only can we thus follow on our balustrade the evolution of this decorative motif which was destined to have such a long and far-reaching success,¹ but we see the *makara* in a new function, vomiting forth scrolls of leaf and blossom, sometimes on medallions (25 *a*, 39 *b*, 64 *b*), sometimes on whole faces of pillars (22 *a*, 71 *b*, 88 *a* and *c*).

The lion, too, served as a theme for numerous fantastic variations (we see it again as a sea-monster in 25 *b*), all of which are obviously suggested by Græco-Persian art. Thus, there are the winged lions, sometimes shown front-face, with such a curiously clumsy

¹ *Cf.* the studies by Mr. Henry Cousens in *A. S. R.*, 1903-4, pp. 227-31 and Pl. 65 and by Prof. J. Ph. Vogel in *Revue des arts asiatiques*, t. vi, pp. 133-147 and Pls. 33-39.