

GREAT BUDDHIST TOPE AT SANCHI, BHOPAL STATE, CENTRAL INDIA.

The great tope at Sanchi is well known in the scientific world through the writings of Gen. Alexander Cunningham and Mr. J. Fergusson. Captain Cunningham, when Political Agent at Bhopal, noticed these antiquities in a paper communicated to the Bengal Asiatic Society in 1847. Major H. (afterwards Sir H.) Durand made drawings of various portions of the Sanchi Gates in 1850-53. But the more detailed discoveries of General Cunningham and Lieutenant (now General Maisey) in 1851 (when they also opened the topes around Bhilsa) are described in "The Bhilsa Topes," published by General Cunningham in 1854.

No relics were found in the great tope in 1851; the southern and western gates were fallen, the pieces lay scattered on the ground, and a recommendation is recorded in the above mentioned work for their removal to the British Museum, "where they would form the most striking objects in a Hall of Indian Antiquities." Nothing was done, however, on account of the great difficulty and expense of transporting such large masses of stone over a rough and hilly country to the seaboard.

In May, 1868, Major Willoughby Osborne, Political Agent in Bhopal, informed the Government of India that the Begum of Bhopal had been requested to present one of the Sanchi Gates to the Emperor of the French, to be erected in Paris, but that she desired to know whether the British Government would accept the gate in question for the British Museum. The Government of India in the Foreign Department then wrote to the authorities in Central India, asking that no removal of any portion of the Sanchi remains might be permitted, and stating that casts of the more interesting portions would be procured and copies presented to the French Government.

Major H. H. Cole was accordingly deputed in 1868 to undertake the casting operations, and in 1869 made a full-size model of the eastern gateway of the great tope, as well as portions of the sculptures of the three other gateways. Copies of these casts may be seen in Paris and in London and Edinburgh. Casts of some of the sculptured panels are in the Imperial Museum, Calcutta.

Early in 1880 Major Prideaux, Political Agent in Bhopal, submitted a recommendation through Sir Henry Daly, then Agent to the Governor General in Central India, to clear the vegetation at Sanchi, and to re-erect the fallen gateways. A grant for this purpose was accordingly made, and the work carried out.

The Sanchi Stûpas, or Topes, and their sculptures have been illustrated and described more than any other monument of Indian antiquity. An elaborate notice of them would merely repeat what General Cunningham and Mr. Fergusson have written. The following brief summary will, however, show the value of this unique historical building.

General Cunningham assumes the dates to be as follows:—Tope, B.C. 500—300; railing, B.C. 250; gates, about the Christian Era.

The tope is elliptical in plan, measuring at the base 118 feet by 125 feet. Its present height above ground is about 55 feet; the railing is also elliptical in plan, measuring 137 by 150 feet. There are four gates—at the north, south, east, and west—giving entrance to the processional path between the tope and railing. The tope is faced with stone; the railing being composed of uprights and crossbars of stone, inscribed with the names of donors. The four gates, or torans, are alike in construction, consisting of two pillars, about 10 feet from centre to centre and 2 feet square in section, for a height of nearly 15 feet from the ground. The superstructure consists of capitals about 6 feet high, supporting three cross lintels, measuring about 22 feet from end to end. The total height of each gate without the upper row of statues and symbols measures about 33 feet.

The architectural embellishments of these curious gates are of three kinds:—1. Detached statuettes and sculptured symbols. 2. Sculptured capitals, caps and bars. 3. Bas-reliefs of historical and religious meaning.

A large number of the detached sculptures have disappeared, but it is evident from those that remain, as well as from the slots which held those missing, that all the openings between the cross lintels were filled. Each upper rail was crowned by a central symbol of the wheel, flanked by statuettes of porters holding chauris, trisal emblems and winged lions or elephants. Men on horseback and riding elephants, dancing women, tigers and lions, filled the spaces between the upright bars of the cross lintels. The capitals of each of the pillars were flanked by brackets, representing dancing women under trees.