

ANIMAL SYMBOLS IN MAURYA ART

Formal and Cultural Significance

—NIHARRANJAN RAY

More than half-a-century of study and research in the field of Indian archaeology and art history as much as in that of the history of early Indian religions, have made it familiar to even a casual student in these areas of knowledge, that the symbols of a few animals, notably those of the lion, the elephant, the bull and the horse, played a very meaningful role in early Buddhist art and literature, particularly in the art reared up by the Maurya emperor Aśoka and his two immediate predecessors. In the so-called Northern Buddhist tradition these symbols came increasingly to occupy a more important position, relatively speaking, than in the so-called southern or Pāli tradition. Yet the fact remains that it was the earlier, that is, the Southern or Pāli tradition which seems to have adopted these symbols from still earlier religions (Vedism and Brahmanism), incorporated them in its own body of myths and legends and given them wide currency. While this incorporation seems to have been taking place even from the time of the Buddha himself there does not seem to be any doubt that the wide popularity of these symbols was due to what Aśoka did in this regard.

A little over thirty years ago I referred but briefly to these animal symbols and tried to explain their significance in Maurya art and culture¹. In recent years two competent and fairly detailed contributions have been made to the study of the subject by two scholars, the first one by Balkrishna G. Gokhale² and the second, by John Irwin³. Gokhale's analysis and interpretation while shedding some new light from textual evidence, generally upholds all that I said in brief, and there is pretty little that I can add. Irwin's canvas is very much bigger, in which the symbolism of the columns and its meaning and purpose occupy a most dominant position. Nevertheless he has quite a few pertinent things to say about the animal symbols too. Since not long after Irwin's series of lectures I published a long critique covering all that he had said,⁴ I thought I had nothing more to say on his comments on animal symbols in early Indian art. Indeed, when the esteemed editor of this journal asked me to give him a short paper on this theme, I put forward this plea, giving my reasons at the same time. But he insisted, arguing that I should re-state my position, howsoever briefly, if for nothing else at least to say how I viewed the situation in retrospect. This then is what I propose to do in this brief note.

II

It is common knowledge, more or less, among scholars that the tall and tapering, free-standing Maurya columns were but translations in monolithic terms, of the traditional, tall and tapering *śāla-stambhas* which used to serve the purpose of *dhvaja-stambhas* or flag-posts set up by the tribal people to mark significant spots and/or events. Attempts have also been made to explain these *stambhas* as symbolizing the *axis munde* or the world axis connecting the bowels of the earth below and the wide, open heaven above. Personally

Copyright of the illustrations (photographs) belongs to the Archaeological Survey of India.

I do not seem to see any conflict between the two explanations since the symbolism of the world axis may not have been altogether beyond the imagination and practice of tribal peoples.

One also knows that these wooden *stambhas* were traditionally crowned with animal capitals. Early Pāli texts speak of an architectural motif called *hatthinakhaka* which was nothing but a pillar-capital with four elephant heads shown back to back.⁵ That this was not just a figment of imagination is proved by what remains of early Buddhist architecture of the two centuries on each side of the beginning of the Christian era, and if there could be pillar-capital with figures of elephants there is no reason why there could not be such capitals with figures of such other traditionally well-recognized animals as the bull, the lion and the horse as indeed there were if one can go by the evidence of early Buddhist architecture. Normally these capitals must have been fashioned out of wood since pre-Maurya architectural constructions were generally of wood, in which case the matter of affixation of the capital with the shaft could not have been a difficult problem. But Irwin argued in course of his lectures that when the pillars were shaped and formed of wood the crowning animal capital was one of cast copper, gilded in all likelihood, in support of which he cited both literary and archaeological evidence. Personally I have no reasons to doubt his hypothesis. According to him the heavy metal animal was affixed to the wooden shaft by means of a dowel and an exterior binding of fabric and rope, to prevent the wooden shaft from splitting. That a copper dowel was made use of for affixation of the capital with the shaft even when the two members were of stone, has been proved archaeologically in the case of the Maurya column with the capital, at Rampurva.

Once more it is more or less common knowledge that the translation from originals in wood, to monolithic columns and animal capitals in terms of stone, was not certainly an Aśokan innovation. By his own admission in his Seventh Pillar Edict as much as on grounds of shape and form, one knows today that of the free-standing columns which we have any knowledge of up-to-date, there are atleast two which are pre-Aśokan, namely, the Vaiśālī and the Sāñkiśya pillars, the former with a lion capital and the latter, with an elephant one. This is a view which I have been holding for long. But Irwin suggests, on his own arguments, that there were quite a few others besides which were also pre-Aśokan. I have already indicated that one may find it difficult to fall in a line with him in this regard. But be that as it may, the weight of facts known and arguments advanced so far by scholars like Chanda⁶, Barua⁷, Gokhale, Irwin and myself that is, those who have articulated themselves on this particular point, tend to leave no doubt that Asoka was the one individual who caused to be raised the largest number of monolithic columns with lithic animal capitals, popularizing thereby the symbols of the four animals, namely, those of the lion, the elephant, the bull and the horse. The main purpose of his raising monolithic columns was to record his edicts of *dhamma* and to mark certain spots sanctioned by the association of the Buddhas including the Buddha Śākyamuni. Of the Maurya pillars known to date, at least eleven have epigraphs inscribed on them; I have no doubt in my mind that these eleven at least were raised at the instance of Aśoka himself. Indeed, I would argue on the basis of what little I can perceive of a monarch of Aśoka's fibre and fervour, that he would not choose to have his edict inscribed on a column which he himself had not caused to be raised. He must have raised more than eleven columns but he might not have found

time and opportunity to have them inscribed. Of the columns known to us so far, inscribed or not, pre-Aśokan and Aśokan, the animal capitals of eight alone we have before us; these are either in position or were recovered later detached from their original position. An analysis of these capitals reveal that as many as five of them represented the symbol of the lion, three in singles and two in quadripartites. And if Fa-Hien is to be believed, one may add another, the lion capital of a column at Sāñkiśya.⁸ The bull symbol is represented in two places, singly at Rampurva and in quadripartite, at Salempur. The elephant is represented at Sāñkiśya alone, and Hiuen Tsang testifies that the Rummindei or Lumbini pillar was crowned by a horse capital⁹, a piece of evidence which I do not see any reason to disbelieve. The abacus of the quadripartite lion capital at Sarnath shows three animals, each in its characteristic gait, which were held as sacred by Aśoka, following the current Buddhist tradition. There is a fourth one which is at the top. These four animals are the lion, the elephant, the bull and the horse. This fact clinches the issue, it seems; a column with a horse capital is not therefore anything which one may not expect. One may argue however that, comparatively speaking, the horse as a symbol plays a lesser role in early Buddhist literature and art than the three other animals. Except in the legend of *Mahābhini-shkramaṇa*, the horse does not seem to appear in Buddhist legends in any significant manner. From the evidence of animal capitals one might also argue that the elephant too, played a lesser role since we do not have any elephant capital other than the one at Sāñkiśya. But this would not be a valid argument. In Buddhist legends the elephant appears again and again as an important symbol, and Aśoka himself pays homage to this great animal more than a couple of times : first, there is that majestic figure of the dignified animal at Dhauri and the word *Seto* or the 'white one' at the end of the Dhauri Rock Edict, otherwise known as the Kalinga Edict; secondly, the phrase alluding to the white elephant below the Thirteenth Girnar Rock Edict; and thirdly, the word *gajatame* or 'the best of elephants' and the big, incised drawing of an elephant on the north face of the Kalsi rock. These pieces of facts are enough to show that the elephant symbol was indeed a very prized one, next only to the lion symbol which was certainly the most significant one so far as Aśoka himself was concerned, the bull symbol being the third, if one has to hold close to the evidence of the Maurya free-standing columns.

III

Long ago I suggested that these four animal symbols were not specifically Buddhist symbols but were known earlier to Vedism and Brahmanism. These were potent and meaningful symbols at the time of the Buddha and Mahāvira and their immediate followers who saw no reason why they should not adopt and incorporate them in their myths, legends and ideational repertoire. Gokhale in his excellent paper already referred to, has laid bare in detail the Vedic, Brahmanical and popular background of these symbols and shown how these were incorporated in the Buddhist tradition. The literary evidence cited by him "indicates that these four animals had become fixed in folk memory, literary usage and art before Aśoka used them on his own monuments. All of them had acquired distinct 'personalities' and had quasi-divine associations rooted in both the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions". He has also taken the trouble to cite reference from early Buddhist literature with a view to find out how these four animal symbols came "to acquire specific Buddhist meanings in Early Buddhist thought". He rightly says : "The argument that these animals also have a special symbolic meaning

in Brahmanical tradition does not deprive them of the special meaning attached to them in the Early Buddhist tradition".¹⁰

Generally speaking, the lion who is traditionally regarded as the king of the forest and the most powerful and most majestic of all animals, has a specific meaning in the early Buddhist tradition. The Buddha was Śākya-simha, the lion of the tribe of the Śākyas; his voice is the voice of the lion, the *simhanāda*. The elephant especially the white one, enters the womb of Māyādevī in dream; the Bodhisattva is born as a white elephant; the Buddha is a tamer of elephants; a Buddhist *arhat* is unafraid and roams in the wilderness all by himself, just as an elephant does. And if the implications of early Buddhist literature can be interpreted to have any cultural significance, the Buddha was the bull, the most significant inseminator, amongst all contemporary teachers and leaders, of new ideas, thoughts and visions. Finally the horse which apart from its role in the legend of the Great Departure, was, along with the elephant, regarded as another important symbol of royalty, of universal monarch, in both temporal and spiritual sense. These two animals were also considered as jewels or *ratnāni* of *cakkavatti* kings and their flesh was forbidden to be eaten since they were, along with the lion, regarded as "royal" animals. Then there is the mythical Anotatta Lake which was supposed to have four outlets shaped and formed like the lion, the horse, the bull and the elephant. There is thus no doubt that these four animals were each invested in early Buddhist tradition with a strong symbolical meaning and the four together seem to have made up a close preserve in which no other animal, not even the deer of the *isipatana-migadāva*, could enter. The reason is very clear indeed. The Buddha was considered a *rāja-cakkavatti*, a universal monarch, a *mahāpurusha* or a great leader of men, strong, powerful, dignified and majestic, all doubtless in a spiritual sense, and these four animals, individually and collectively, symbolized these qualities.

But one may as well argue that these are as much temporal qualities as spiritual and that any temporal king aspiring to be an *ekarāt*, a sovereign monarch, would like to acquire these very qualities and become a personification of majesty and dignity, a great leader of men, so strong and powerful as to be able to strike terror into the hearts of his enemies. In non-Buddhist secular literature and in frankly Brahmanical texts important kings and emperors and temporal heroes have actually been described as endowed with these qualities and compared invariably, through similes and metaphors, with the lion, the elephant, the bull and the horse. If therefore one chooses to comment that there is nothing specifically Buddhist in the totality of this animal symbology, one would not be perhaps logically in the wrong.

When therefore Aśoka and his predecessors adopted these animal symbols, I feel like arguing, they did so because in the current tradition and in the people's imagination these four animals symbolized the temporal qualities of wide sovereign authority, of dignity and strength, of potency and power, of supranormal energy and awesome majesty, not in any spiritual sense or in any specifically Buddhist meaning except in the case of the elephant perhaps. In more than a couple of places in Aśoka's inscription this animal is referred to, though very briefly, in such terms as to suggest specifically Buddhist associations and to imply a religious regard. But even in this case, the religious association and/or emotion need not be interpreted to exclude temporal strength and energy, power and potency, dignity and majesty. Religion and temporal

authority and power have been known to co-exist in human societies in close mutual understanding and accommodation.

IV

A Maurya column and its animal capital constitute one single whole, formally, functionally and conceptually. The two elements have to be seen and understood together, not separately, that is, one away and apart from the other. Looked at as a unified whole these free-standing columns with animal capitals are not religious monuments as such but are frankly monuments that were meant to serve a temporal social purpose and at the same time, to respond to a decided royal intention. Aśoka himself called these columns *dharmastambhas* which recorded his royal edicts enunciating his social policies. Formally and aesthetically speaking, the smooth, glossy polish, the durable design, the dignified appearance and the imposing stateliness of the columns and capitals were all intended to impress and over-awe the people with the power, dignity and majesty of the imperial rulers, significantly of Aśoka more than of his predecessors. This is a view which I articulated in 1945; I do not see any reason to abandon this view. Everywhere in the ancient and medieval world all imperial monuments as distinguished from religious establishments and residential palaces, were intended to and did serve the same purpose.

A brief formal analysis of the shaft of the column and of the animal capitals themselves will make it clearer perhaps and reveal the various shades and nuances, even the differences in the treatment of the different animals. Here too, I should perhaps be repeating what I said more than thirty years ago.

I have already said that the shaft of the columns which was above ground was always and invariably polished to an extraordinarily smooth and glossy surface which must have impressed the contemporary people much more than it does us today. That this was a technology and practice which were imported from contemporary west Asian world of imperial power and grandeur, there cannot perhaps be any doubt about. But what is more significant is the fact that while the pre-Aśokan columns are relatively short and stumpy, the Aśokan ones, when arranged according to a chronological sequence, show a course of evolution towards gaining in height, taperingness, gracefulness and in proportionate balance and harmony. Indeed, this process of formal evolution is an index to their chronological fixation in time. One cannot therefore underline too much that all this was directed towards creating an impression on the sensibilities and perceptions and on the minds and imagination of the people, not merely to articulate a symbolic meaning in concrete forms. One may also bear in mind that irrespective of wherever these pillars were erected, they were all carved out of Chunar sandstone, which would mean that these were all fashioned in one central workshop which could not have been very far from modern Chunar itself and then transported from there to wherever they were set up. This could not have been possible without the conception and design, initiative, support and patronage of a central, unified politico-economic authority. This authority was that of the imperial monarch Aśoka and his predecessors.

From the point of view of form and treatment the animals represented, fall in two categories, more or less distinct: the lions, both singly recouchant and quadripartite, seated back to back, belong to one category, and elephants

and the Rampurva bull, to another. The horse of the Lumbini pillar is missing, but if one can form a judgement from the horse represented on the abacus of the Sarnath pillar, the form and treatment would fall in the first category. The animals of this category are somewhat conventional and stylized in treatment; the volume is tellingly powerful but the modelling is stagnant and accumulation of form schematic. They, particularly the lions, are frankly heraldic in form and meaning. I have no doubt in my mind that the original model of this form was derived from the Medo-Achaemenian and Hellenistic West Asia. It was from this source that the quadripartite, seated back to back form of lions, bulls, elephants and horses was also doubtless derived.

Not so the forms of the Rampurva bull and of the elephants. Not only these are not heraldic in form, but their treatment is frankly naturalistic. The Rampurva bull is characterized by a quiet, restrained dignity; its modelling is vigorous but not conventional and the linear and plastic treatment fully mature but not schematized. Compared to this bull, that on the abacus of the Sarnath capital is a conventional one though not heraldic; its modelling is coagulated and tension in movement over-emphasised. Despite the Sāñkiśya elephant being a somewhat clumsy one the Maurya elephants as one sees them on the Sarnath abacus, at Dhauli, on the Kalsi rock face and on the facade of the Lomasa Rishi cave, are however frankly naturalistic. Dignified in their full roundity of form they are characterized by a clear linear rhythm and a flowing plasticity.

How does one explain this difference in aesthetic vision and treatment? Has it been because of artists from two different cultures and two different social backgrounds working side by side in the same royal workshop? Or/ and could it be that the artists were not that familiar with the lion which was a wild animal as they were with the domesticated ones, the elephant and the bull in particular? And therefore they borrowed from another civilization the form of the lion which had already been conventionalized there in its heraldic form? The non-heraldic but nevertheless conventional and stylized treatment of the horse and the bull on the Sarnath abacus can however be explained by the assumption of non-Indian artists giving them shape and form in Indian environs.

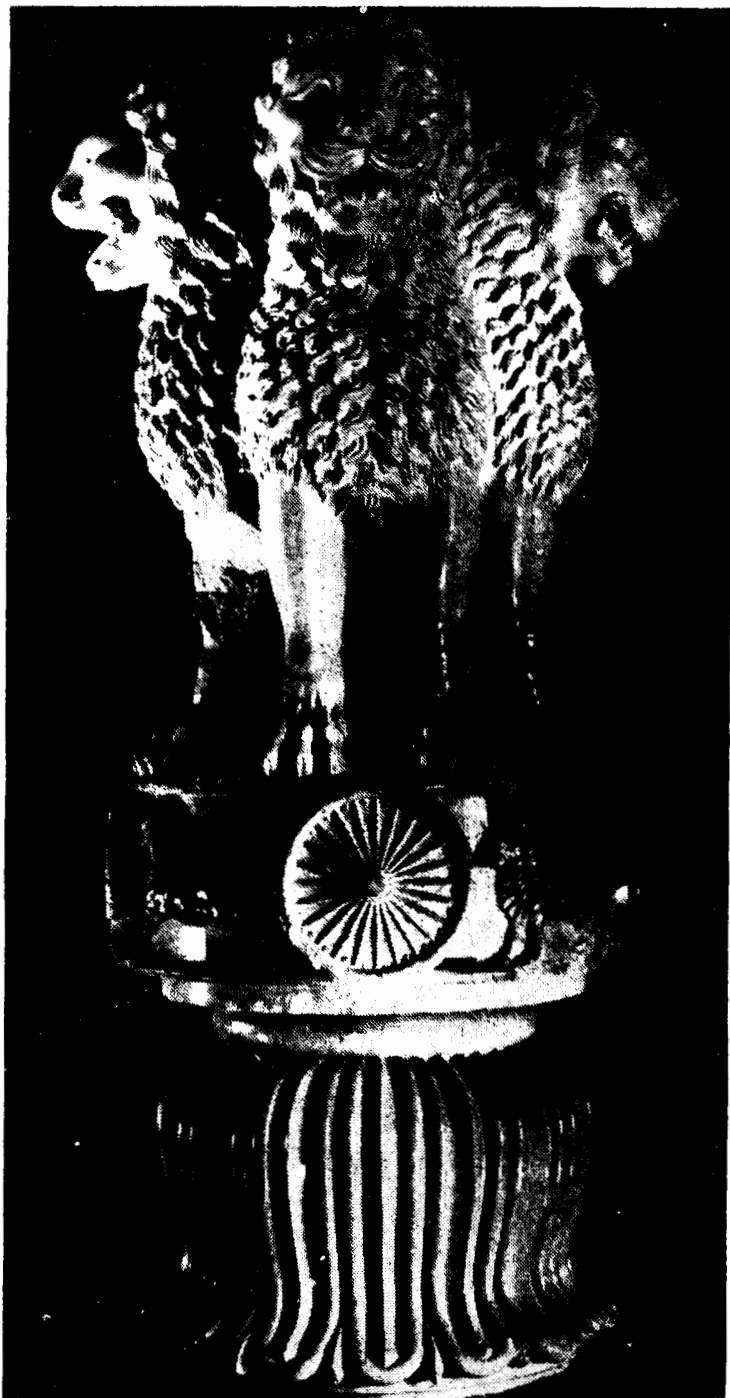
The animal symbols of Maurya art seem to show that though the symbols may have their origin and evolution in one given civilization their articulation in the concrete form of art may have different languages of form.

Notes and References

1. Ray, Niharranjan, *Maurya and Sunga Art*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1945; revised and enlarged 3rd. edn. issued as *Maurya and Post-Maurya Art*, Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, 1975, Sections 3 and 4.
2. Gokhale, Balkrishna G., "Animal symbolism in early Buddhist literature and art", in *East and West*, IsMEO, Rome, New Series 24, nos. 1-2, pp. 111-120.
3. Towards the end of 1975 John Irwin delivered a course of seven illustrated lectures on "Foundations of Indian art" at the National Museum, New Delhi. Actually the theme of the lectures centred round the Maurya columns and their animal capitals. A major part of the contents of the lectures were published in four separate issues of

the *Burlington Magazine*, London, but the final revised version is expected to be published early in book form.

4. Ray, Niharranjan, "Earliest stone pillars and capitals", in *The Hindustan Times*, Sunday Magazine, New Delhi, 25 January, 1976.
5. Gokhale, op. cit. p. 113, f.n. 21.
6. Chanda, Ramaprasad, *The beginnings of art in Eastern India with special reference to sculptures in the Indian Museum*, Arch. Survey of India Memoir no. 30, Calcutta, 1927. pp. 1-7, 20-26.
7. Barua, Beni Madhab, *Asoka and his inscriptions*, 2nd (reprint) edn., Calcutta, 1955, part II, pp. 1-18.
8. For Fa-Hien's account of a column with a lion capital, at Sankisya, one may see Beal, S., *Chinese Accounts of India*, Calcutta, 1957 (reprint edn.), vol. I, p. 23.
9. Smith, Vincent A., *A history of fine art in India and Ceylon*, p. 18; Hultsch, *Corpus Ins. Indicarum*, Vol. I. p.
10. Gokhale, op. cit, p. 114 and 117.



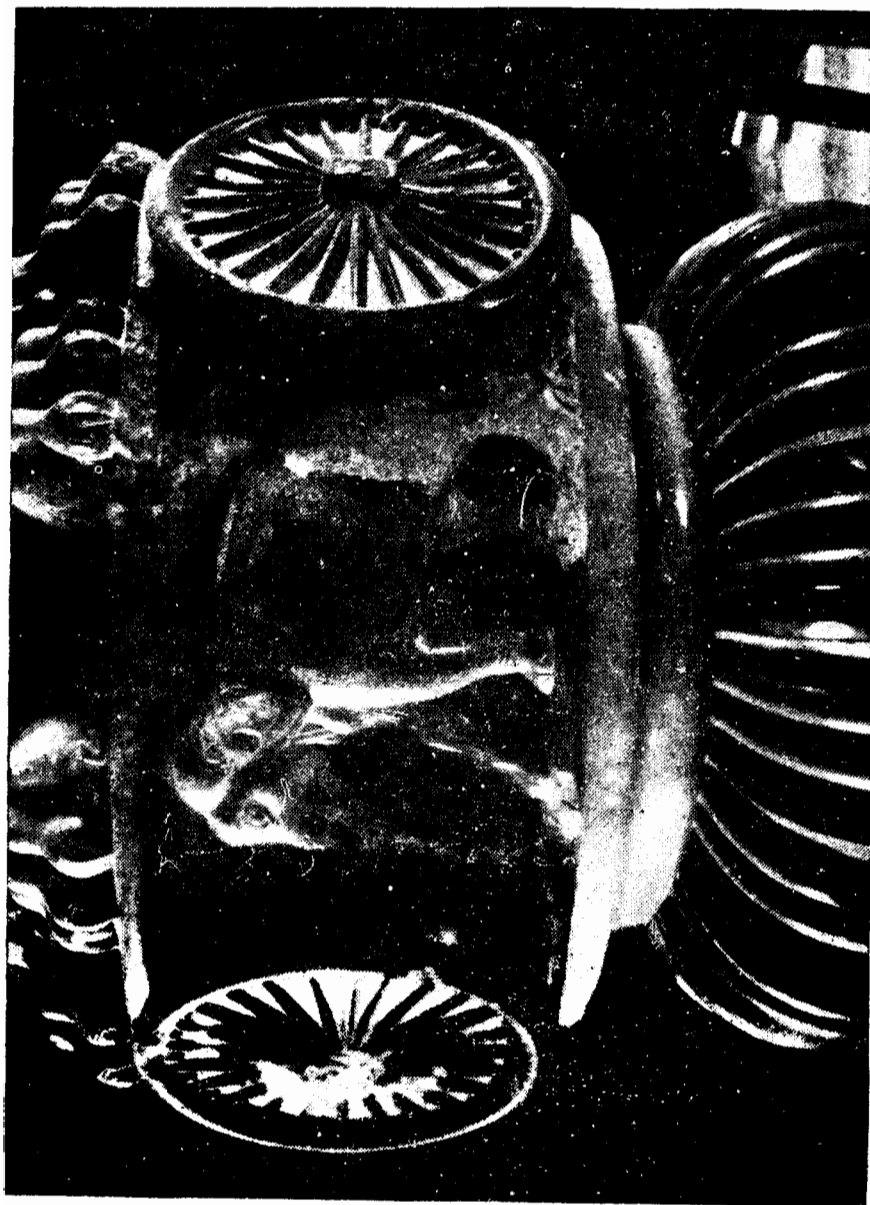
The Lion capital, Sarnath



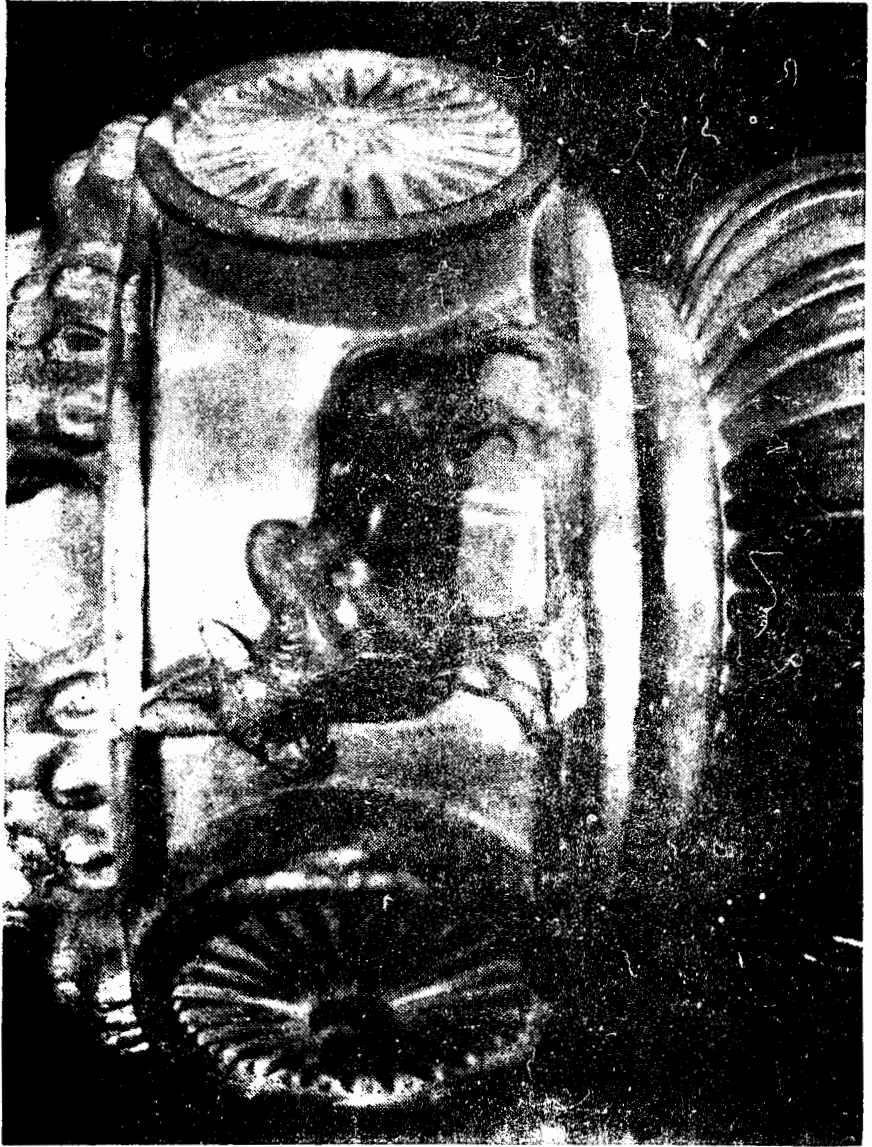
The Lion capital, Sanchi



The Elephant (rock-cut), Dhaulvi



The Elephant (on abacus), Sarnath



The Bull (on abacus), Sarnath



The Horse (on abacus), Sarnath