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Triratna and Triloka: **A Dabber, the Fish of Aśoka, and the Visit of Indra**

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Abstract:

A dabber from the last centuries BC bears an inscription of the owner and four graphic units. One of these prove that the so-called *triratna* symbol was originally not a symbol at all, but a monogram that can be read as *namo*, “veneration”. The other three, fish, flag, and rotating star, have parallels in artistic expressions of many religious communities of ancient India. The fish can be used to understand part of the historical role of the cave ensemble at Barabar, while the rotating star throws light on the world of Indra in the art of Sanchi and Gandhara.

Keywords:

symbols: *triratna*, *namo*, fish, bird, flag, rotating star, Aśoka, Barabar, lion pillar, visit of Indra, Pañcaśikha, Apalāla.

In religious contexts, symbols are convenient because they take up little space graphically, but can still convey a deep and weighty meaning. However, symbols do not always reveal what considerations were at the forefront of their creation. For a younger interpreter, they often offer a range of – even contradictory – interpretations. A good example of such a contradiction is the so-called *triratna* symbol. It has an entry in Wikipedia, which is peppered with fanciful inventions. Supposedly it is said to consist of a “lotus flower within a circle”, topped by a “diamond rod or vajra”, on which rests an “ananda-chakra”, and finally “a trident, or trisula”. None of this has a literary basis. It results from deliberate “fake mythology”, yet will inevitably become a pseudo-spiritual “electronic truth”. There is no need to document here ancient or current examples of this use of the term, it is current, even in circles of serious Buddhism. It would be more difficult to find authors who prefer not to translate our symbol as “*triratna*”.

This common rendering implies a Buddhist context since the three “jewels” (*ratna*) referred to are the Dharma, the Buddha, and the community of monks, the Saṅgha. In Buddhist literary works, these jewels often appear, individually or together, but are they also subsumed under the one particular symbol? And does this interpretation also apply in religious contexts that are certainly not Buddhist? Already in 1977, M. Bénisti showed that our symbol has nothing exclusively Buddhist to it, although it is used more by Buddhists than by any other group. In 2011 (p. 26), I proposed to “read” this symbol as a

monogram, as a combination of the two Brāhmī letters *na* and *mo* superimposed (fig. 1).¹ A great number of the earliest depictions at Bharhut or Sanchi show the symbol in situations where the idea of “veneration” (Skt. *namas*) is central. Maybe because of the mass of such circumstantially supportive evidence my interpretation has not been challenged even once in the past dozen years, but it also has not even once been adopted. This cautious reluctance is not without reason: There is not a single early text that enumerates symbols that speak of a symbol or monogram called *namo*. However, no text speaks of a *triratna*-symbol either. Nonetheless, a guess in the direction of the three jewels stood at the beginning of the research of J. Prinsep, H.H. Wilson, and H. Sykes, as Maisey (1892: 79) has shown, who himself preferred to speak of a “disk-and-crescent” symbol with origins outside and after “what is now called Buddhism” (1892: 78). Other early authors tried various alternatives. E. Burnouf ([1852], 1925: 627) thought of the *vardhamāna(ka)*, and A. Cunningham (1854: 355) constructed a symbol of Dharma, which he traced back to a monogram of Brāhmī letters. Our views on these letters agree only regarding the presence and position of the “Pāli letter na” (1854: 356). Later, Johnston (1931: 591) expected to see a “*triśūla(?)* over a wheel”. Bhattacharya (2000) has dealt with several further explanations.

What I understand as an original monogram turned symbol shared the fate of so many other monograms or symbols: The outline could change dramatically,² the meaning was fair game for all, and its name was subject to arbitrariness. The circle of the *ma* was filled with a flower, the split base of the *na* assumed all sorts of distortions, and the three prongs inflated. In Gandharan veneration scenes, one or three wheels were mounted upon the prongs (fig. 2), and an alternative type has the same three wheels representing the *ratnas* resting on a pillar, all three in a horizontal row, with no trace of the alleged *triratna*-symbol remaining.

The following sections will hopefully show that the meaning of *namo*, “veneration”, makes sense also beyond the earliest pieces at Bharhut and Sanchi. Its meaning of “veneration” applies perfectly to coins from Gondophares up to the end of the Kushan imperial period.³ Like most other early signs, it came out of use with increasing literacy, since all terms could be written unambiguously in the standard script and language.

For an artist or celator, the monogram expresses pure action, “veneration”. This veneration needs an object to make sense, either figuratively, like the Buddha or a king,

¹ An unmistakable representation of the veneration inherent in the term *namo* can be found on the post-Mauryan coppers from Vaṭasvaka, a place near Taxila (Pieper #1578). The moon-on-hill is central and a person stands facing it in *kṛtāñjali* attitude. The *namaskāra* will go to the moon-on-hill, representing the *antarikṣa* (cf. p. 37), but also a pile of rocks below it will be included into the process, for which cf. p. 38.

² The *namo*-monogram is often found upside-down, even in the floral decorations of the lintels at Bharhut. This results from the many pierced pieces worked in semi-precious stones, which were threaded in such a way that the heavier upper part remains hanging at the bottom.

³ Fig. 3 shows that the sign assumed a new role in the first century AD. The three concurrent rulers Jihonika, the successors in the name of Azes, and Gondophares with his successors, all introduced it in times of constant wars, all of them “venerating” a deity: Jihonika possibly presents the deified ancestor Maues on his horse, Gondophares and successors preferred Zeus, the Kushan Kujula adopted the “venerated” bull alias Śiva from Jihonika, followed by Vema Takhtu. Vima Kadphises kept the sign for his preferred deity Wēsh. From Kaniṣka onward no Kushan venerated a deity through his coinage, possibly, because the Kushans felt like being deities themselves (Falk 2019). The last kings expressed their heavenly nature by attracting the *namo*-symbol to their own obverse side.

or verbally, like the *dharma*. Therefore, our monogram is mostly found in conjunction with terms or symbols that illustrate the object of veneration.⁴

The -ya extension

A reference to *triratna* is undoubtedly implied whenever the graphical *namo*-symbol is topped by three wheels. This combination is frequently found in Gandharan art, but also in Mathura, Sanchi, or Sarnath, to name just the best-known sites. There is not the slightest reason not to take the three wheels as the three *ratnas*. But what to do with the supporting device below the wheels? In case we read it as *namo*, as proposed, we can read the fully assembled device as *namo-dharma-buddha-saṅgha*, and the “reader” can think that the full formula goes *namo dharmāya, namo buddhāya, namo saṅghāya*, although there is no sign of the dative marker, *-ya*. In AD times, at least in Taxila, metal smiths created a combined sign from sheet bronze, that ends with a *-ya*-bend at the lower end and thus completes the formula.⁵ According to Marshall (1951,II: 604), such sheet metal devices were found at the entrances of monks’ cells at monasteries and may have been attached to the doors or the lintels. He dates all of them to the fifth century AD.

A possibly older piece was unearthed by Spooner (1908–09) at Shah-ji kī Dherī.⁶ Other examples find their way to collectors even today. A gilded example is in the possession of the Hirayama Collection, lavishly presented by Tanabe (2007: 256, no. VI-103, our fig. 4b). Another one from Taxila was shown in the Gandhāra exhibition in 2009 (Luczanits ed. 2008: 215, no. 142). None of the publications propose how this graphical device should be understood, apart from “*triratna*”, which at least covers the greater part of it.

The *thu* extension

Theoretically, if what I call the *namo*-symbol plus the three wheels meant nothing but “*namo+triratna*”, then an added *-ya* could complete the phrase to a correct *namo triratnāya*. This sounds feasible. Even fewer doubts about the verbal equivalent should be possible in the next case, an added *thu*, leading to *namo thu*, Prakrit for Sanskrit *namo ’stu*, “may veneration be (to s.)”. This extension implies that the designer wanted to superimpose a *thu* on the circle of the *ma*. So the circles of the two characters had to merge. The central dot can only come from a *tha*, not from the *ma*.

This tripartite monogram is found once on a clay dabber inscribed in Prakrit, in a script almost Aśokan in its simplicity (fig. 5f). From BC times, I know of only one more case, a chalcedony cube seal (fig. 6c), perforated lengthwise, inscribed in early Brāhmī with the personal name *mulabhutisa*, “of Mūlabhūti”, and on a second side *bharadajasa*, “(a member of the) the Bhāradvāja-(gotra)”. Follows a side showing a lady between two water plants,⁷ and a last side with a lion to right, facing a *namo*-monogram to which a

⁴ I assume that there is another such monogram, which consists of Brāhmī *pa+ma* (fig. 25d), reading Skt. *pāmaḥ*, “we protect”, for a short time in narrow confines of Malwa. “Protection” as an action also requires an object, and the three worlds would provide one.

⁵ Marshall 1951,III: pl. 178, nos. 402, 403, 405 = 1951,II: 577, 604 “Door ornaments”.

⁶ Spooner (1908–09: 57): “Buddhist temple ornament in excellent preservation, representing the Three Jewels supported on a central shaft crossed in the middle by a trident and terminating in a crescent below”, with fig. 5 on the following page.

⁷ This equals a standing Gajalakmī found on an unpublished crystal seal, topped by a *namo* monogram

further circle is added below, with a central dot. There is no further space for an *-u-* stroke below. The *namo-th(*u)* seems to address the water-based female deity. The owner hails from a brahminical family. The seal is said to come from the border to Burma, but its production will have been in northern India. It shows again that *namo* and *namo'thu* are not particularly Buddhist.

Excursus on dabbers

Our singular and certainly early evidence for dabber technique comes from an excavation at Maharajanj near Gorakhpur in the Therai. Also called *anvil*, this instrument resembles a mushroom in size and shape. Potters use it to densify the clay of water pots (*ghaṭa*) before firing. It is held against the wall of a vessel from the inside while the potter beats the dried but unbaked clay from the outside with a wooden paddle. Originally probably just a rounded stone, this anvil was optimized by adding a handle to one side. At Taxila, the dabbers found were all made of dressed stone, unearthed at the Bhir Mount, Sirkap, and later sites.⁸ Since the dabbers for *ghaṭas* all look similar, often (but not in Taxila) a short inscription was incised to prove ownership in case that a colleague mistook one of them erroneously for his own.

Well-documented is a dabber from Mathura, reading nothing but *kachipasa*, “(property) of Kaśyapa” (Lüders 1961:120 no. 83) in Brāhmī. Another one in Gupta Brāhmī from the surroundings of Kurukṣetra reads *indrasya* (Kumar 2014: 864), another one from near Kanpur was read (Wahal [2012]: 10) as *rayo brasasa*, but instead of a king Brasa, the picture leads only to a [*śrī?]rggayādāsasa in a timeless classical Brāhmī, furnishing a (hybrid) *śrī-Gayādāsa. More interesting is a dabber from the Uchali Lake, 150 km southwest of Taxila (fig. 7), which recently was spotted on the internet by Azeem Ali. It reads *nanisya kulalasya kuṇḍakārasya* in a Gupta-time Brāhmī, meaning “(This is the property) of Nani the potter (*kulāla*), who produces firepots (*kuṇḍa*)”. The production of firepots which are kept under the overcloth in the cold season was in the hand of specialists already in those days.⁹ Nani as a proper name is unknown so far, probably derived from Nān(a), the female deity of Kushan times. At Sonkh, Härtel (1993: 305a, no. 2) found a dabber in an “early Kushana” stratum with three letters reading *bukasa*, “(property) of Bukka”. A case inscribed in Kharoṣṭhī script comes from Shaikhan Dherī and reads *pipasiasya*, “of Pipāsika (?)”.¹⁰

Already this short and incomplete survey reinforces the impression that dabber-cum-paddle pottery is well-attested in the northern part of ancient India, from Gandhara down through Uttar Pradesh to Gorakhpur. The dabbers are used to this day in an identical shape, at least in Himachal Pradesh.¹¹ The oldest dabbers seem to come from Harappa (Mackay a.a.). At the same time, traces of paddle beats are seen on the face-urns of the Gandhara Grave Culture, mainly at home in Swat, dating to the middle of the second

and a *svastika*. Only the wind-*antarikṣa* is missing.

⁸ Marshall 1951,II: 502f.; 1951,III: pl. 142, no. 125.

⁹ Cf. Zubair (2010-11: 1053): “Rasool makes *Kundals* (firepots) only and that on a massive scale, as these are in demand during the winter season.”

¹⁰ Read *pipadhiasa* by Dani (1965–66: 110, no. 5), turned into *pipasiadhre* for the caption of the display in the Peshawar University Museum. Dani’s eye-copy and reading are adopted for CKI 213,1, but my own photographs clearly show the top extension of the *si*.

¹¹ Cf. Perryman 2000: fig. p. 32.

millennium BC.¹² A ninth-century BC piece from the Panjab-Doab divide came to light at Madina (Dangi 2016: 175b; fig. 209), uninscribed of course. Dabbers from a potters' center at Indor Khera (28°14'57" N, 78°12'48" E) have two phases, one in the latter half of the first century BC, and then again around AD 500 (Varma & Menon 2016: 18b).

The namothu dabber

The evidence elucidating the *namo*-problem comes from a dabber (fig. 5a-f) excavated at Maharajganj near Gorakhpur in the Therai. It is inscribed in a rather old Brāhmī in pointillée technique, followed by some symbols in straight scratches, reading with spaces added, pictorial symbols in square, and monogram in pointed brackets:

burara sonagutikaye [fish] [flag] [rotating whirl] ⟨*namo thu*⟩

The text seems to consist of three lexical units, *burara*, *sona*, and *gutikaye*. *Sona* I take for Skt. *śravaṇā* or *śroṇā*, a *nakṣatra*. Although **śroṇāgupta* or a variant is not attested in the literature, it is a classical formation and beyond suspicion. At Bharhut (A123) there is a lady named as a donor in the genitive *sonāya*. The **śravaṇāguptikā* on our dabber can be taken as a proper female personal name, written *sonagutikaye* as the required genitive form. Regarding women in the trade, Sikdar & Chaudhur (2015: 13) say about a modern potter caste in Gujarat: “Throughout the whole process of pottery making there is no division of labor between male and female potters.”

More uncertainty commands the explanation of the first word *burara*. In the first position and without an apparent case ending it could name the object itself. Unfortunately, the term *burara* is not found in old texts. In modern languages *konerā* with variants is the most-used term for the dabber in Pakistan.¹³ However, for Dir, Rye & Evans (1976: 19a) list “*ghundāray*” for the anvil and *tapanā* for the paddle. A form like *γundāray* could possibly stand at the beginning of both *burara* and *kunera*, the first as a loanword in Bihar, the second gradually developed in the west.¹⁴

And so I propose to understand:

“This dabber (is the property) of (lady) Śravaṇāguptikā”

As said, the object and name are written in pointillée, placing dots in close succession

¹² In Greece, the technique of tapping with an anvil stone came up only shortly before 600 BC (Sparkes e.a. 1970: 34f.).

¹³ A Sanskrit term for this anvil is unknown to the dictionaries. Regarding present-day terms Marshall (1951,II: 502) calls the dabber *konora* throughout and the paddle *thatwā*, as if there were no alternatives. However, according to Mackay (1930: 130, fn. 2), a *thatwā* is “a mallet used in the Upper Panjab to shape a very large vessel on the wheel”, while in Sindh the dabber is called “chappana” and the paddle *kunaro*. In contrast, according to Sikdar & Chaudhuri (2015: 6), a standard dabber is called *pella* in Gujarat, a smaller version *PELLI*. Zubair (2010-11: 1054), reporting from Kashmir, knows a completely different term “*creed*”: “Tools such as anvils (*creed*) are of terracotta and are made by the potters themselves. Paddles (*thathwan*) are of wood and are made by a local carpenter.” For Prang (NWFP, near Malakand) Rye & Evans (1976: 40b) note *kunerā* for the anvil and *tātī* for the paddle, in line with Marshall for Taxila. Similar terms are reported for Dera Ismail Khan (1976: 51b) and the Panjab (1976: 61a). On anvil techniques in general cf. Rye & Evans (1976: 121).

¹⁴ Alternatively to a nominative, we could also consider a place-name *burara*, parallel in construction with *Kurara*, known from coins and Sanchi. But then we had to assume a locality term placed first in a compound followed by a personal name, a case with no parallel.

according to the outline of the letters. The technique was adapted from inscribing owners' names onto metal objects.¹⁵

On our object, we find the letters pointed, while the following four signs are scratched in continuous lines. We see four signs of which the last (fig. 5f) is the one I read as *namo*, “veneration”, but in contrast to the ordinary shape the circle of the *mo* has received a central dot, turning the circle into a dental *tha*. As a second change, this same circle has received a short downward stroke, turning the *tha* into *thu*. None of the additions look arbitrary or as the result of a slipping pen. If we take the *thu* verbally, we can add or rather superimpose the *thu* on *namo* and receive a complete reading *namo thu*, the Prakrit version of Skt. *namo 'stu*, “may there be veneration”.

But what exactly is venerated, what hides behind the three symbols? In the standard Buddhist context, the three *ratnas* would be the object of veneration. In our case, we also find three objects, but these are certainly not the notorious *ratnas*. The syntax behind the two formulae is thus identical, but the objects on the dabber do not point toward Buddhism. What are they? On the dagger we see a fish, then the flag, followed by a whirl of eight bent lines.

I propose to take the three symbols as representing the *triloka*, another trinity with a long tradition, outside and above all sectarian restrictions. Already the Bṛhad-āraṇyakopaniṣad (1.5,4)¹⁶ tells us: “There are three worlds, as follows: This world here (on which we stand) is speech. Mind is the space between (earth and heaven). Breath is that world (in heaven)”. These three regions are related to three elements water, wind, and air.¹⁷ Together, these regions are known as *triloka* or *trailoka*, with *trailokya* as an adjective. As required, they or the ruling forces behind them also enjoy *namas*, veneration, individually.¹⁸ Vedic ritual parlance sums them up in the formula *bhūr bhuvah svaḥ*. There are various additions to the three basic habitats, like the *pātāla*, the underground, which supplements the “earth” sphere with an underworld for dangerous demigods.¹⁹ All Indian religions with early literature know this *triloka*, and none of them claims to have particular rights in it. This trinity is a common part of how to conceive our cosmos, *idaṃ sarvaṃ* “this all”.²⁰

Although the three worlds are common knowledge, they hardly receive the attention

¹⁵ Also in Gandhara pointed letters are known from a non-metal vessel, turned stone, dated Azes 139, ca. AD 91 (Falk 2010: 16 = 2013: 214; pl. 6).

¹⁶ *trayo lokā eta eva. vāg evāyaṃ loko mano 'ntarikṣalokaḥ prāṇo 'sau lokaḥ*. BrhUp 1,5.4.

¹⁷ For a comparatively recent Buddhist example cf. Yaśomitra (ed. Wogihara 1932–36: Tib. 12b): *pr̥thivī bho gautama kutra pratiṣṭhitā. pr̥thivī brāhmaṇa apmaṇḍale pratiṣṭhitā. apmaṇḍalaṃ bho gautama kva pratiṣṭhitam. vāyau pratiṣṭhitam. vāyur bho gautama kva pratiṣṭhitah. ākāśe pratiṣṭhitah*.

¹⁸ Cf. Liṅgapurāṇa 1.72,127: *trilokāya tridevāya vaṣaṭkārāya vai namaḥ*; Revākhāṇḍa 29, 85: *tryambakāya trisūlāya trilokāya ca te namaḥ*. A wider scope arises from the Vaikhānasamantrapraśna 1.94,1: *bhūr agnaye ca pr̥thivyai ca mahate ca namo(,) bhuvo vāyave cāntarikṣāya ca mahate ca namas(,) suvar ādityāya ca dive ca mahate ca namo (...)*.

¹⁹ Cf. three worlds with the underworld as an addition: *trayo lokāḥ sapātālā dr̥ṣṭvā tan mahad adbhutam*. BrahmāṇḍaP 2,40.30; the same with a further addition beyond *svar*: *sorddhvalokaṃ sapātālaṃ taṃ namāmi haram param*. BrahmāṇḍaP 2,32.30.

²⁰ The idea as such is already found on Harappan seals where a singular chimera has one body carrying the busts of a bull (earth), unicorn (*antariṣa*), and gazelle (heaven), from top to bottom (Parpola 1991: 135, nos. M1169–71). In another case, the gazelle is replaced by a free-floating fish on top, which makes sense once we accept the basic argument of A. Parpola that we have to think in Dravidian terms where *m̐n* names both “fish” and “star”, and the latter is certainly in heaven.

they deserve for their appearance in Indian numismatics and plastic art. If we assign the single parts to the three spheres (watery) earth, (windy) *antarikṣa* and (astral) heaven, then there is hardly a doubt: the fish should stand for *bhū*, earth, with its waters; the flag conforms to the *antarikṣa* wherein a true flag flutters, and the rotating whirl could mean something similar to the rotating *svastika* which stands for the sun, in several cultures.

The whirl

On the dabber, the whirl is last in position, here it will be dealt with first to remove initial doubts about the *triloka* proposal. If it can be shown to represent heaven, then the two other worlds will fall in place more naturally.

The whirl seems to be a symbol generally known to potters. Bhattacharya (2000: 268) points at the excavation of Sonkh by H. Härtel, who presents stamps and their imprints on pots.²¹ The whirl is rarely found on Buddhist buildings. An exceptional example can be seen in the Bedsa cave in Maharashtra.²² Five pillars on the right side of the back part of the *caitya* hall have received ornaments close to the top. Each of the last three of the five shows an additional *namo* monogram (fig. 8a). The very last pillar of the straight row is decorated with a large whirl on the side facing the entrance. The adjoining pillar front carries another *namo*,²³ the next one a *śrīvatsa*, and the last one to the right a *dharma* wheel on a stand (fig. 8b).

If our whirl was related to the *svastika* we had to deal with an old and undisputed symbol of the sun.²⁴ This connotation of the *svastika* holds good in ancient Greece and many other regions in antiquity. Aśoka uses *svastika* and the *ma*-letter at Jaugaḍa, probably to express *ācandrasūryaṃ*, “as long as sun and moon exist”. The whirl could refer to the same heavenly sphere, but its shape makes it unlikely that it represents the sun as well. We have several Gandharan reliefs which provide the clue: When Māra tries to disturb the Buddha in his meditation he approaches the Buddha with his daughters and his army. In one case, on exhibit at the Freer Gallery (fig. 9)²⁵ one of the soldiers is shown hurling down a large stone which is marked with two such whirls. On other reliefs that deal with the same attack, no stone is marked similarly. That means, the whirl can be there, but it is not necessary. What capacity can turn a stone into a particular kind of stone? Most stones on earth started as part of earthen rocks, but some are different. They have fallen from heaven, in most cases as remnants of a broken-up meteorite. The phenomenon is spoken of already in the Ṛgveda.²⁶ Meteorites fall on earth, looking like a fireball with a tail produced by the evaporating water of the air. Meteorites are not rare in India and “read” as heavenly signals from the Adbhutrāhmana to the Bṛhatsaṃhitā. When we expect the whirl to show a stone falling from heaven then we must concede that in Buddhist art their depiction seems to be confined to Gandhara. Apart from the

²¹ Härtel 1993: 341, no. 81, phase IV; 346, no. 126, phase V; 352, no. 171, phase VI; 355, no. 8b, phase V/VI.

²² In the context of *nandyāvarta* first seen by A.-M. Quagliotti, according to G. Bhattacharya (2000: 269), both are content with naming the object a whirl, without proposing a Skt. equivalent.

²³ Possibly instead of a so-called tiny “taurine” symbol, a small solid circle with a crescent at the top. There are several cases where this and the *namo* sign are confused, in both directions.

²⁴ So Bautze-Picron in Luczanits (ed. 2008: 169).

²⁵ Kurita (2003,I: 116–117, fig. 226.).

²⁶ Cf. RV 10.68,4 *avakṣipānn arkā ulkāṃ iva dyóh*.

singular attack of Māra, stones with whirls on Gandharan reliefs are conspicuous in two mythological contexts: a) Indra’s visit of the Buddha at the *indrasāla* cave, and b) the story of how the Buddha taught the Nāga Apalāla to behave. In both cases, I suggest that the whirl is a reference to their innate fate as fiery meteorites. Earlier interpretations were different.²⁷

If our whirl has a Sanskrit name it could be *nandyāvarta*, since a rotating movement seems to be implied by the bent rays of the whirl, and among the earliest symbols listed in texts only *nandyāvarta* is built from the root *ā+vrt*, “to turn, to rotate, to return”. There is ample evidence²⁸ that a flowering plant called *nandyāvarta* is nothing other than the well-known jasmine bush with its five-petaled flowers. The pedals are slightly curved and thus differ from our whirl only by the number of arms. Since the Indian jasmine is known by more than one name, I assume that our whirl is not named after the Jasmine flower, but that the Jasmine flower will have received its additional epithet on account of its shape similar to the symbolic whirl.

This assumption could help to understand another symbol that is only known from lists of *maṅgalas*: The *vardhamāna* appears as a separate symbol. This term means “growing, waxing”. Yet early lists of *maṅgala* symbols in Sanskrit or Pali texts (Johnston 1931: 587; von Hinüber 1974=2009 *passim*) present *nandyāvarta* resp. *naṃdiyāvartta* and *vardhamāna/vaḍḍhamāna* almost invariably in immediate succession,²⁹ as if a “growing” *nandyāvarta* was once at the origin of the development. All translators take the pair as two separate items, even at the few places where a separation is not required by syntax. However, in the field of symbols, all sorts of changes and confusion are rather the rule than the exception. The change from the “flag”, or triangle-on-stand, to the *bhadrāsana* of the Jain sources (Leumann 1883: 55, §49) shows how early such rededications occurred.

If we want to know what a “growing” *nandyāvarta* could be, we need to look at the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*. First (BṛS 33,1) we are told that meteoric stones falling from the sky are entities whose life in heaven has expired. There are five varieties of falling objects, meteors (*ulkā*) being one of them. Its head is larger than its tail. We learn that “As it falls it grows bigger” (BṛS 33,8 *nīpatantī vardhate*). In addition we learn that if an *ulkā* has the shape of a *svastika*, it announces prosperity (BṛS 33,10). The name tells us that a *Nandyāvarta* rotates in some way, and a “growing *Nandyāvarta*” may even look similar to a *svastika*. Von Hinüber (1974/2009: 357/792) refers to the *Sādhanamālā*, a classical text on iconography. There we read that a *nandyāvarta* is turning to the left with all four

²⁷ Bautze (1991–92: 219), Zwalf (1996,I: 197b), and Kurita (2003,I: 322b) took it naturalistically and thought of grass or moss on the rocks. Whenever real grass is shown between rocks, it is shown as straight lines, cf. Kurita (2003,I: 288, no. 629).

²⁸ Cf. Saṅghabhedavastu p. A383: *taiḥ sadyobalā oṣadhayaḥ prakṣiptāḥ; tatra ca kṣīre saṃparivartamāne cakrasvastikanandyāvartāni cihnāni dṛśyante*, “when these plants are placed and turned in milk, the signs of wheel, svastika or *nandyāvarta* are seen.” Cf. von Hinüber 1974/2009: 361/800 fn. 35, end. A plant appears in *nandyāvartamūla* with its root, Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa p. 532. This plant is one of eight *puṇyapuṣpāni* *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* 22,81; it has leaves (*dala*: 22, 102); the *Nānārtharatnamālā* 2212 knows *nandyāvarta* as a name of the *tagarapādapa*, the Jasmine shrub, *Tabernaemontana coronaria*; cf. von Hinüber 1974/2009: 362/801 fn. 39. The Jasmine shrub is known to Drury (1873: 494) as “Nundiavuthen”. Watt (1893: 401) is clearer with Telugu *nandivardhana*. Another related name used (not exclusively) for the *Tabernaemontana* species is *nandīvrkṣa* (Meulenbeld 1974, s.v.).

²⁹ Add *Lalitavistara* (ed. Vaidya: 75).

sides (*catuḥpārśveṣu vāmāvarttēna*). The “four sides” need not imply exactly “four arms”. The commentary to the Aupapāṭikasūtra defines the *nandiyāvatta* as having “nine corners in all [four] directions”.³⁰ The whirl at Bhedsa has six arms, just like some non-*svastikas* on the coinage of Śuktimatī. In all cases, the direction of turning is the same, to the left.

There is a north-Indian seal of a man called Nandivardha (fig. 10), which we will come back to in another context. It shows a four-armed symbol that resembles the angular *svastika*, but differs from it due to its rounded arms. The rounded *Nandyāvarta* and the angular *svastika* can occur together on one object. Some of the Jaina *āyāgapattas* assemble an ever-growing number of *maṅgala* symbols around a central square. Three examples are found on plates I and II in von Hinüber (2009: 796f.). The first one arranges four *namo*-symbols in the center, has a *nandyāvarta* in the top row, and a *svastika* in the bottom line. Another one (Tafel Iib/797b) has the same circle of *namo*-symbols in the center and the four arms of a *nandyāvarta* circling around it. These four rounded arms are filled with *svastika*, flag, *śrivatsa*, and two fishes.

Graphically, *svastika* and *nandyāvarta* are not very different from each other, and still, they are always easy to keep from each other. Among the whirls with rounded arms, those with many arms looks older, and the four-armed variety can be taken as a simplification.³¹ In the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, the *ulkā* meteor resembles a *svastika*. It can be “growing” as it heats up and burns the more so it approaches the earth. A meteoric stone, small as it often ends, is perceptively very hot, demonstrating that where it came from, heaven that is, fire is the predominant element. The *svastika* and the *nandyāvarta* are not identical,³² but for some time the term *nandyāvarta* may have been used to describe meteoric objects falling from heaven. Its name means “Bringing (back) happiness”. A meteoric stone and the flower of the Jasmine shrub agree in a way in shape and bearing.

Indrasālaguha: Graphical and literary elements in exchange

The most frequent presentation of our whirl is connected with the *indrasālaguha*. Its literary form is found in the *Dīghanikāya* (*Indrapaññasuttanta*, DN 2.21), followed by a great number of further versions. The DN locates the cave precisely “to the north of a Brahmin village called Ambasaṇḍa”.³³ There are several allocations, ancient and recent, most of them pointing to the region north of Rajgir in Bihar. All are now superseded by the work of Narendra Prasad who in 2015 published his discovery that the old Ambasaṇḍa is the present Apsad.³⁴ Earlier (1977), P.K. Prasad had listed everything he could find on the antiquity of Apsad. He even proclaimed the identity with Ambasaṇḍa (1977: 253) but referring to the wrong text he missed the relevance of the *Indrasāla* cave. The settlement of Apsad is situated south of a conspicuous hill, which has a large cave

³⁰ Leumann 1883: 127c: *pratidig-navakoṇaḥ*.

³¹ On copper coins of the city of Śuktimatī the sign can have six or four bent arms (Pieper #423f.); whirls on lions can have many or just four arms (Bautze 1991-92).

³² Mbh 7.58,19 *svastikān vardhamānāṃś ca nandyāvartāṃś ca kāñcanān*.

³³ A particular syntactic construction is evidence of the age of the text, as shown by O. von Hinüber (2006: 199). The uniqueness of Ambasaṇḍa in the entire Pali literature, apart from commentaries, lends it further weight.

³⁴ For details and pictures cf. <http://nalanda-onthemove.blogspot.com/2015/06/parwati-hill-indrasaila-guha-from-dream.html>.

in its south side (25°5'2.89"N, 85°39'0.20"E). Faxian and Xuanzang were there, and their description tallies well with the modern position.

According to Buddhaghosa,³⁵ the cave was once used by Indra. Since a Sāl tree stood near its entrance, it was called “Indra’s Sāl tree cave”. Its pictorial renderings come in several groups, one differing from the other.

The standard story goes that the Buddha lived in the said cave. Without any initial correspondence between the two, Indra wanted to question the Buddha and sent the musician of his realm, Pañcaśikha, to sing a song for the Buddha to the accompaniment of his *vīṇā*. The Buddha listens and is delighted. Through the mediation of the musician, Indra is allowed to visit the Buddha and is presented with an extensive, but simplified (Zhu 2009: 494) introduction to the *dharma*.

Version 1: Bodh Gayā

The episode was early illustrated in plastic art on stūpa railings. The oldest presentation is found around the stūpa of Bodh Gayā, in three versions (fig. 11a,b,c). Everything is in line with the explanations of Buddhaghosa (DN-A: 697) who states that around that hill there was a row of trees that looked like a fence (*vedikā*) of precious stone and so the name of the mountain was *vediyaka*. For a presentation to the Buddha, the town people provided the cave with a wind-shielding wall (*kuṭṭa*, *vātapāna*).

In the DN, Indra is said to descend from his heavenly abode to the *vediyaka* hill in a split-second together with his gods. According to their heavenly nature (*yathā taṃ devānaṃ devānubhāvena*) the whole hill as well as the town of Ambasaṇḍa was ablaze and looked like on fire.

Of all the places where the scene is illustrated, Bodh Gaya with an 80 km distance is by far the closest to Ambasaṇḍa. We see the fence on two panels (a, b), the artificial air-giving door in all three (a, b, c), as well as the man-made rock wall. But there is no fire, just the musician, who in one case is accompanied by a further person, Indra. The Buddha is present through his seat.

Analyzing the contents of the DN version, the original story could have been pretty simple: First Pañcaśikha entertains the Buddha and asks how to win a beautiful girl. The pictures are preserved as well as the text. In the DN, the answer is contained in the ensuing song of Gopikā-Gopaka: Give up all thoughts of sensual love. Even a woman, formerly named Gopikā, is known to have been reborn in Indra’s heaven as Indra’s son, *devaputra* Gopaka, because she gave up the “women mentality” (*itthacitta*, DN ii, 271) and took on male attitudes (*purisacitta*). This simple trick beats even the efforts of a standard monk who as a *śrāvaka* studies the *dharma* but cannot stop thinking of worldly lust. At the end of the story in the DN, Indra (instead of Pañcaśikha) is said to understand the impediment inherent in “emotion” (*ejā*), but nonetheless Indra adopts the position of a father (*pettike ṭhāne*), that means he, the *deva*, makes Pañcaśikha his son (*putra*), exactly like Gopikā became Indra’s son Gopaka before. In addition, the musician is raised to the position of Gandharvarāja and given the fair maiden he had longed for. It seems that a story about the Gandharva giving up *ejā* and adopting the position of a son of Indra – according to the recipe exemplified by Gopikā-Gopaka before – was enlarged

³⁵ Sumaṅgalavilāsinī, PTS ed. vol. 3: 697.

at the end in order to incorporate Indra, who is now to understand the negative influences of *ejā*, while Pañcaśikha loses much of his original role.

Version 2: Bharhut

At the stūpa of Bharhut, the story was part of an earlier stone structure. During a phase of reworking, a roundel decorating a stone pillar and showing the episode was chopped short for a different purpose (fig. 11d), but the inscription *idasālaguha* above the roundel survives and leaves no doubt about what the picture presents. Indra sits inside the cave, sided by eight devas. The musician has to stay outside, part of his *vīṇā* remains visible. The scenery is a wooded rocky area, with monkeys and two animals peeking out from their caves.

From this version onward, the fence is missing, as is the rounded entrance. As before, the Buddha is present by his *āsana*.

At first glance, the minor innovation is the two animals in their caves. They have no counterpart in the written versions, but will become a constant element in Sanchi and Gandhara.

From a number of literary renderings (Waldschmidt 1932: 58–113, Rhi 2009; 2024), we know what the change implies. The Buddha is no longer dealing with the musician and his problems, but demonstrates that he can change the size of a cave at will. No matter how many visitors come, his cave widens to accommodate them all. This is not the simple village cave any longer, but a magic cave.

Version 3: Sanchi

All this plus the two animals is given much space in three large panels at Sanchi. In all cases the visiting deities appear as a group, resuming the presentation at Bharhut. At the northern gate, a group of visitors is shown in front of the cave. The Buddha is lodged in a cave that has received a stylish facade.³⁶ Already in 1928, A. Coomaraswamy pointed at two crucial details. He saw (1928: 39) that at Sanchi we have two panels where the Buddha acts in a landscape characterized by perforated rocks. By a great number of tiny holes, the rocks are marked on the Indrasāla panel, where the *devas* stand in front of the cave facade (fig. 12, northern *torāṇa*, left pillar, inside, first panel from top). The same tiny holes mark the rocky ground on the second panel at the western gate (fig. 13, right pillar, front, second panel from top), where the devas stand *kṛtāñjali* around a Sāl tree with small flowers.³⁷ Both panels are characterized by flames coming out of stones or stony ground. These perforations and flames seem to render pumice in various states.

Coomaraswamy (1928: fn. 13) takes the flaming lava panel as showing the Buddha in the Tuṣita heaven, which otherwise is not known for flaming ground. However, the Sāl tree in the center points rather at the Indrasāla episode in the Trayastriṃśa heaven, as do

³⁶ An artificial residence is also lined out at Kanganhalli with a rectangular door in a smooth front side. Poonacha 2011: 393, pl. LXXXVII-B, mislabeled. For the contents cf. O. von Hinüber (Nakanishi & von Hinüber 2014: 95 no. 12).

³⁷ It is not clear whether this heaven is Indra's *devaloka* or the Trayastriṃśa heaven or whether the two are regarded as identical. Instead of the *adhyeṣaṇa*, as commonly assumed, it rather depicts the arrival of the Buddha in the same heaven where also the *sāla* cave was, likewise marked by open fire.

the two *vāhana* lions left and right of the *āsana*.³⁸ After the Buddha has taken residence in the Sāl cave, that tree bursts into bloom, shown within the rocky cave just one panel further down (fig. 14), with Indra in the same position again recognizable by his crossed legs. There is still rocky ground depicted, but in this congested composition the stone ground is too narrow for the perforation.³⁹

Coomaraswamy has overlooked a third panel with pumice ground marked. It is found bottom-most at the left pillar front of the northern gate (fig. 15). In line with Coomaraswamy's observation, it shows Indra's heaven: Several couples sit on perforated rocks. A waterfall pours into two cascades, there is a musician with *vīṇā* and female accompaniment, and two elephants used as *vāhanas* enjoy toying with plants of a lotus pond. If Indra's heaven is made of "fiery" rocks, then these fiery rocks could exclusively show Indra's heaven and define the location of the three cave panels as the Trayastriṃśa heaven, Indra's true home. The Buddha went there to visit his mother after her demise, and this place could have been adopted for "Indra's visit", at Sanchi, but also at Gandhara.

Indra's paradise with waterfall in a pumice landscape seems to indicate that the artist imagined the happy *indraloka* as located in volcanic surroundings with lava ground, its surface appearance rendered quite close to nature. There is no active volcano on the Indian mainland, but pumice balls will have been a useful trade commodity, helpful not only for cosmetic purposes but also for artistic usage where polishing is required. Traders will have talked about the volcanic origin of pumice. And if a pumice stone can fall from the sky, then the real falling meteoric stones in India must also come from there.

The artists at Bharhut have added the flexible cave and the two lions, to which Sanchi added the fiery ambiance in heaven. The location where the Buddha is to lodge at Sanchi on the northern gate shows two lions and two demigods (fig. 12), probably in a subservient function. These two lions play no role in the relevant texts nor in any of the studies of the Indrasālaguha I could find. They seem to be regarded as illustrating wild mountainous surroundings, and wild animals, in function not different from the monkeys. At Gandhara, however, the two lions from Sanchi turn into a standard feature for most artists. Unlike real lions, they mostly live in narrow dens below the seat of the Buddha. Only their head and front paws look out. The usefulness of the lions becomes apparent on many panels at Sanchi, where the deities stand on the ground, while two lions fly through the air, mounted by servants holding up presents (fig. 13). From top to bottom, we see two Kinnaras, self-flying, holding up present dishes in their offside hands, with flames from the ground behind their tails. Below these we see two demigods, using lions as a transport (*vāhana*), holding up dishes with presents in their back hands, with flames from the ground in front of the lion heads. Below the four flying figures, we see Indra

³⁸ The panel just below the fiery lava shows the same Sāl tree, this time in full bloom and inside the narrow cave, and two tiny trees, one of them a mango tree, on the rocky, possibly unperforated ground in front of the entrance, as if a second "mango marvel" was intended.

³⁹ It may not be by chance that the only tree mentioned in Pañcaśikha's love song is a Sāl tree, "recently burst in bloom", *sālaṃ va na ciraṃ phullaṃ*. The stone masons took care to distinguish the Sāl tree above with flower buds and below with the much larger bloom leaves. Otherwise, the two panels are comparable in that both show Indra in the same position third from left, with crossed legs and wearing a cloak.

with crossed legs, wearing a cloak, along with eleven deities, all in *kṛtāñjali* posture. The flying lions carrying servant demigods on the western gate may explain the role of the two lions in their dens on the Indrasālaguha panel on the northern gate who could act as a transport for the two demigod servants to the guest lodged in the cave.

The Gandhara versions

There is no uniform presentation of the story in Gandhara. Some pieces show Pañcaśikha sole in front of the Buddha (Kurita 2003,I: 337), as at Bodh Gayā, others keep Indra hidden behind rocks for secret listening (fig. 16).⁴⁰ In yet others Indra comes with his elephant as a *vāhana* (Zwalf 1996,I: 219). There are pieces with only one lion, but most artists stick to the number two. In rare cases, the Buddha is accompanied by Vajrapāṇi (Zwalf 1996,I: 222). But in almost all cases, whirls can be seen on the rocks. They certainly indicate a fiery nature of the stones. Coomaraswamy (1928: 39, fn. 13) rightly considered the rocks marked with whirls to be “flaming rocks”.

In Gandharan art Indra’s heaven plays a prominent role, particularly on the stratified stūpa decorations and on stair raisers. By mounting up to the circumambulation path, the pilgrim surpasses this level of *devaloka* up on his way to a world above the earth where Buddhist tenets prevail. The intermediate *devaloka* is pictorially characterized by what I call “sex, drugs and rock’n roll”. This world of Indra is not on earth. Life there is happy, but transient. At will, Indra can visit the level of the humans, but his home is in heaven. Telling from the ambiance in flames, in Gandhara Indra’s visit to the Buddha takes place in heaven too, or the other way round, the Buddha went to the *devaloka* into the cave, where he was visited by Indra.

Such a locus in heaven is not found in the depictions of Bihar and Malwa. However, Rhi (2009: 395) has pointed to a relatively late Sanskrit text, the Karuṇapūṇḍarīkasūtra which contains another version of Indra’s visit which is in agreement with Gandharan art. We learn that the Buddha lodges in the house (*bhavane*) of the *yakṣa* called *indrākṣa*, which is located in a rocky cave (*śailaguhāyām*) of a rocky mountain (*śailaparvata*). The Buddha changes the size of the cave depending on the number of visitors. A few million are not too much. Śakra, that is Indra, also comes. He had reached the end of his life (*āyuhparikṣiṇas*) and feared an imminent rebirth as an animal (*tiryagyonyupapattibhayabhūtaḥ*). He sends the musician Pañcaśikha to awaken the Buddha from his *samādhi*. A lesson on the *dharma* by the Buddha prolongs Indra’s life for a thousand years.

The location is the property of a *yakṣa* named *indrākṣa*, an epithet of Indra himself. This Śakra alias Indra is not particularly interested in *dharma*, he has a very personal problem: how to escape rebirth as an animal. He is in heaven and he wants to stay in heaven. In the DN the devas bring light and fire from their home to the cave at Ambasaṇḍa, in Gandhara the devas are at home where light and fire is part of their common habitat. Its fire needs not to be illustrated in every case. But some artists do so nonetheless, as on a panel published by Kurita (2003,I: 173, no. 339).

With this shift of location in mind, it will be possible to interpret the Gandharan

⁴⁰ Luczanits (ed.) 2009: 231, no. 175; I. Kurita “The Indrasala Cave_3” at http://gandharan-archives.blogspot.com/2011/07/visited-of-indra-and-his-host-to_4150.html.

presentations of the Buddha in the Indrasālaguha as showing him surrounded by rocks which are potential meteors. The whirls anticipate the future of the rocks as whirling down to earth. A splendid example comes from the stūpa at Sikri (fig. 17), with scenery in the wilderness with deer, wild goats, and the lion, transport or not. Pañcaśikha plays the *vīṇā*, deities wait in the background, and “flaming” rocks encircle the cave entrance.

What happens to those heavenly lion *vāhanas*? Like any other being in Indra’s heaven, their time will run out and they will be reborn on earth. Was there the idea that real earthen lions show the symbol of their former habitat, the whirl, on their shoulders? In any case, it is remarkable that the whirl as a symbol changes from a multi-stranded model on the dabber, or at Bedsa, to the six- or four-armed *nandyāvarta*, in the same manner as the whirl on the shoulder or cheek of lions or tigers (fig. 18a) begins with many strokes and ends with the simple curved cross (fig. 18b).

Graphical transformation leads to a new narrative

A lengthy exchange between plastic art and written texts is not necessary for further developments when local guides need explanations to answer curious visitors. Faxian, the trustworthy pilgrim, describes his tour from Pāṭaliputra to Rajgir with two intermediate stations. First, he stops at a solitary rocky hill with a cave opening to the south, 9 *yojanas* (ca. 90 km) south-east from Patna,⁴¹ and 2 *yojanas* SWW to Rajgir.⁴² Distance and the Indrasālaguha episode tally well with the position and look of Apsad, the Ambasaṇḍa of old. He mentions the Buddha and Pañcaśikha, but alters the standard narrative in that Indra now begs to clarify 42 questions of his, “tracing (the questions) out with his finger one by one on the rock.” No Indic text version speaks of lines on the rocks, but there are *indrasālaguha* renderings where the earlier whirls have degenerated into random strokes.⁴³ That means, the stone masons lost track of the meaning of the whirl, and then people like pilgrim guides reinterpreted the dissolved strokes as traces of written questions. Xuanzang, who often copies from Faxian, tops his version (Watters 1906,II: 173) by saying that not only Indra wrote his questions down, but also the Buddha carved his answers on the wall.

Misunderstanding based on the deterioration of traditions leads to new versions. The fact that the dissolution of the whirls seems to have happened mainly in Gandhara while the misinterpretation was met with by the pilgrims in Bihar is of no import, as monks will have often commuted between these regions.

The Apalāla episode

There are many variants in the depictions of the Indrasālaguha. We followed the versions from Ambasaṇḍa west to Bodh Gaya and Bharhut, and further to Sanchi and Gandhara with ever changing minor and major details. The final stage at Gandhara receives support from the Apalāla episode, the only episode where the whirl-marked rocks are found again in plastic art. The Apalāla event occurred in Swat while the Buddha was wandering, just before the Parinirvāṇa, according to some non-Pāli Indian and some Chinese

⁴¹. Ca. 90 km, nine marching days; today, as the crow flies 76 km.

⁴². Ca. 20 km, two marching days; as the crow flies 25 km.

⁴³. Cf. the upper register of a frieze at the Art Institute of Chicago (<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/151081/>).

sources. He was told of a *nāga* called Apalāla who harassed the local population and eventually caused the Swat river to overflow to the chagrin of all the peasant Swatis on its banks. The Buddha had his bodyguard Vajrapāṇi throw stones at the *nāga* and his family from above until the culprit vowed not to harass the farmers again.

In the standard depiction, Vajrapāṇi is shown standing on the Indrasāla shelter of Indra, recognizable through the whirls on some rocks (fig. 19) and in rare cases also by a lion living in its den (fig. 20). In some cases, the rocks to be thrown from above look just like that rock pelted by a soldier of Māra, marked by the fire whirl as coming from fiery surroundings. It is not the Buddha's habit to throw stones. In all cases, his bodyguard Vajrapāṇi is commissioned with that action. The stones he throws come not from any mountain of the Swat valley, but from the fiery heaven where there is plenty of such ammunition at hand.

The episode around Apalāla is telling. The Nāga gives in on the condition that he can rob the crop every twelfth year by the overflowing Swat river, which means with the maximal interval of the El Niño phenomenon, which enlarges the monsoon water loads also in northern Gandhara. This way, the narrating monks use a recurring natural calamity as proof of the former presence of the Buddha in Swat.⁴⁴ This explains to some extent why the Apalāla episode is never depicted outside Gandhara.

It seems that the whirl-marked stones in the Indrasālaguha story and the Apalāla episode in both cases came from regions outside the human sphere. We would call the area where Indra had his paradise "heaven". For the early Buddhists, there were many such heavens. Whichever heaven included the *indraloka* in Gandhara, in any case, it was regarded as the source of those stones that fell or were made to fall from there down to earth. While they fall, they take the shape of a rotating fireball and this picture is suggested to have stood at the origin of the whirl as a symbol, symbolizing its place of origin, heaven.

This symbol of the fiery heaven is not confined to the Buddhist Gandharan art, it also left traces in numismatic art, which we will expand further below.

The fish

Aśoka and the fish at Barabar

Fish is frequently used as a decorative element. Alone (*maccha*, Leumann 1883: 25) or in a double version, the fish pair (*matsyayugma*), it becomes one of the eight classical "eight lucky signs" (*aṣṭamaṅgala*). As a fish, Viṣṇu restarted the present eon. There are some fishes found on the vestiges of Aśoka. Their meaning is rather obscure. But our dabber can help, once we look for fish as part of a trinity.

The first evidence comes from the Karṇa Caupār cave at Barabar, south of Patna, famous for its polished granite walls.⁴⁵ All the caves there were built by order of Aśoka, the third Mauryan king. Half of them were only completed after his demise. On the outside just by the side of the entrance, we find an inscription (fig. 21; Falk 2008: 248) on an evenly polished ground, slightly above the head of a human. The inscription tells

^{44.} A different explanation is found in Colliva & Olivieri 2023.

^{45.} New dimensions of understanding were reached through the technical survey conducted by the authors of Javan Film, <https://builders-of-the-ancient-mysteries.com>.

us that Aśoka had come here to *jalūtha*⁴⁶ and handed the finished cave over to the recluses of the Ājīvika sect.

In Prakrit, the term *jalūtha* is composed of *jala* and *uttha*, which means “produced from water”. It is comparable to Skt. *kṣīrottha*, *madhūtha*, *salilottha*, *sāgarottha*, *sindhottha*. All these compounds have a liquid as the first member. They also have a semantic twin that replaces their *-uttha*, “arisen”, with *-ja*, “born”, without changing the meaning. The twin to *jala-uttha* is then *jalaja*, which is well-attested and denotes a “fish”. That means, that Aśoka came to visit a “fish”.

The text ends in the fifth line with a *svastika*, followed on the same line by a sort of upright dagger (†), followed by the outline of a fish on the lowest level in a separate line, directly below the *svastika* and dagger. The nature or meaning of the fish and the dagger has been a mystery since their discovery and still is. But our seemingly trivial dabber from Maharajganj might shed some new light: If *svastika*, dagger, and fish stand for the *triloka*, the fish would surely represent the lowest unit, the earth with its watery substratum. Parallels are needed to substantiate this assumption.

The closest relative of the triad from Barabar and the one on the dabber is found on an ivory cube from ancient Malwa (fig. 22). In elongated rectangles, three sides show a fish, a man, and a double *svastika*. The fourth side bears a double *namo*-monogram, without the cross-bar.⁴⁷ If the parallelism is not coincidental, then the Aśokan dagger at Barabar takes the position of the “man” on the cube. The basic shapes are related. There does not have to be a duality of forms: What we call “dagger” in Barabar could be nothing other than the abstract form of a human. If the triad fish–man–sun represents the three *lokas* earth, *antarikṣa* and sky, then man as a typical inhabitant and *antarikṣa* as his habitat make a meaningful pair.

There are a few more fishes among Aśokan vestiges. Two are found cut onto pillar (Falk 2006: 196, fig. 5) and lion capital (Falk 2006: 198, fig. 10) at Rampurva, and one serves as the handle to the lid of a skillfully produced ovoid casket made of transparent crystal (Falk 2017: 53, fig. 5). The fish serving as the handle of the lid is hollowed out, and the cavity was found filled with golden tinsel when excavated. The former owner must have spent a fortune on it. It was part of the contents of the coffer once buried deep inside the brick *stūpa* of Piprahva.

We will return to the pillar of Rampurva below. At Barabar, we have a fish of Aśoka twice. The outline of one is at the end of his cave inscription, and the other is in the text of the same inscription and states that Aśoka personally came to “the fish”, *jalūtham*. What fish or sort of fish did he expect to see there?

There are no textual clues. As far as art-historical sources are concerned, a sacred fish is difficult to find in early sculpture. But on coins and seals, there are a number of fish attached to the top of a pillar within a railing. In these cases, the pillar and railing

⁴⁶ In older publications, I expected a reading *jalūṭha*, with no dot in the center of the *ṭha*-circle, because such a term is known once, from the Arthaśāstra (1.20,6), as the personal name of an otherwise unknown ruler. However, at Barabar, this circle is so damaged in its center that a dot (*ṭha*) is as possible as no dot (*ṭha*).

⁴⁷ The same mirrored form is found on copper coins from northern Vidarbha, 3rd/2nd cent. BC, along with whirl, dagger (!), and elephant (Kulkarni 2023: 87, fig. 21; 89, fig. 25). In these and many other cases, the watery earth is represented by a lady with prominent earrings, holding a couple of fish in the right hand. The temporal extension is present by the wheel of time, the attribute of Vāsudeva.

indicate a sacred site. Where was this site and what sacred power did it imply? The subject has attracted little attention. As required for Barabar, all the evidence cited here, including Patañjali the grammarian, dates somewhere between 230 and 20 BC, i.e. between Aśoka's twelfth regnal year and the advent of Khāravela, the intruder from Kalinga.

The examples of a “fish-on-pole inside a railing” come from a wide area, from Taxila down to Malwa, and will be listed below. The corpus is small and presented here in full.

A famous coin found in only a few pieces at Taxila shows the face of a bat-eared Yakṣa at the side of a fish on a pole in a railing (fig. 23a; cf. Pieper 2021: 230a, nos. 1503f.). The head is topped by a moon-on-hill symbol. The reverse shows a water plant. Numismatists date it to the end of the Mauryas or, better, to the beginning of Śuṅga rule.

Far from Taxila is the home of some Malwa types. In addition to the fish they also place an additional object close to the railing. It looks like a ladder with two rungs, but in two cases (the Rapson seal and Pieper #357 from Malwa) the rungs are slightly rounded, bulging towards the outside. I take this “ladder” as a litter, stretcher, Skt. *śivikā* or *śibikā*, P. *sivika*, itself attested as an auspicious symbol and listed with other symbols in the Ceylonese chronicles Mahāvamsa 11.30-1⁴⁸ and Dīpavamsa 11.34,⁴⁹ adduced by Johnston (1931: 589). In any case, it can be moved, since on the Rapson seal (fig. 10) the assumed ladder stands upright, and on Pieper #357 it lies horizontally. This object has so far not attracted any attention. The Malwa coins show the fish-on-pole, the said *śivikā*, a sun (fig. 23b), and on larger pieces also a classical stūpa *toraṇa* (Pieper 2021: 60a, no. 357). From the same area comes a type of fish-on-pole with a large *śivikā* lying flat in front (fig. 23c), and another one with tree-in-railing, fish-on-pole-in-railing plus an upright bier (fig. 23d).⁵⁰

So far we can say that the fish-on-pole is associated with a Yakṣa and an object that looks like a *palki* or bier, Skt. *śivikā*.

We can now turn to seals. A sealing of undeclared provenance was first made known by Rapson in 1900 (fig. 10; pp. 103–5). It shows a lion above a line, with a fish below that line. The lion faces a fish-on-pole in its fence. Above the lion, there is a *svastika* with rounded arms and a Brāhmī *ma*. There is a legend saying *nadivadhāsa*, Skt. *nandivardhasya*, “seal of Nandivardha”. By the side of the pole, Rapson saw a Kharoṣṭhī letter *śpa* and for various reasons took Taxila to be the place of origin. The nature of the alleged *śpa* may be disputed, but the spelling of *-śa* for the genitive – also for internal standard *sa* – is not rare in the period under discussion, from the old North-West down to northern Bihar. Not mentioned by Rapson is the *śivikā* symbol in front of the lion. Its close and singular association with the fish-on-pole somehow characterizes the deity of this edifice.

Another seal was on auction in Italy in 2021 (fig. 24a).⁵¹ Made in burned clay, it reads *bhadilasa* (Skt. *bhadrilasya*) in simple but old Brāhmī and shows the fish-on-pole

^{48.} *anotattodakaṃ ca gaṅgāsāḷilam eva ca, saṅkhaṃ ca nandiyāvattaṃ vaḍḍhamānaṃ kumārikaṃ. hemabhājanabhaṇḍaṃ ca śivikaṃ ca mahārahaṃ.*

^{49.} *gaṅgodakaṃ ca bhūṅkāraṃ saṅkhaṃ ca śivikena ca, nandiyāvattaṃ vaḍḍhamānaṃ rājābhiseke pesitā.*

^{50.} A second piece from the same series shows that a *svastika* or *nandyāvarta* above the *śivikā* is part of the design (Kulkarni 2007: 8, no. 3, and eye-copy preceding the paper).

^{51.} The cataloger linked it erroneously with the Harappan culture.

in its fence, a *svastika*, and the associated *śivikā*.⁵²

Outside the fold of coins and seals, I found only one item,⁵³ a sort of cover or a hilt of some instrument. The instrument is gone, and only the bronze sheet is left, preserved in the Museum of Allahabad, which one is not said (Srivastava 1979: 37). The accession number is given as “Mor. 41”. The object was found in Kaushambi, where and when we are not told. The photographs are as good as the material allows, and the author prepared eye-copies of its decorations (fig. 25a). One side shows a clear fish-on-pole inside its railing, the *śivikā* lying close to the fish’s face. Behind the fish is the flag symbol, which will be dealt with below. Two figures stand near the railing. Srivastava draws two *namo* monograms on the railing, but this view must be verified on the object. There are clear circles above the heads of the two people and no horns, as the author suspected. These round elements of the headdresses are those of important figures, including Yakṣas. The backside of the hilt carries the picture of a lady, at least on the eye-copy. The photograph is difficult to decipher, and whether there is a *svastika*, as the author maintains, may be doubted.

We can now say that the fish-on-pole inside a railing has a wide distribution, from Taxila to Kaushambi, and down to Malwa and the Narmadā. We must also say that the cases are sporadic. And we know that the alleged ladder belongs almost invariably to the presentation, and it is not found in any other context. All cases look decidedly BC, none is inscribed. A Yakṣa on the Taxila coin probably has a counterpart in one or two Yakṣas on the bronze sheath.

There is a lot of uncertainty, but also some cohesive evidence: A pillar was known from Taxila to Kauśāmbī and down to the Narmadā which carried a fish on top and stood inside a railing. This picture has two associations, one is a graph resembling a ladder, probably being a *śivikā*, and the other is a demigod, a *yakṣa* with pointed ears. Comparing this with the activity of Aśoka, we can say that the *yakṣa cum ladder cum pillar* with fish is a monument without a defined locality. On the other hand, Aśoka went to see a fish at the defined locality Barabar, where today no fish monument remains. Could the two views supplement each other?

What could be the reason for the wide distribution of the evidence for fish with bier, along with its rarity? The object must have stood in the interest of only a few and important people, and at great intervals. The rare, or rather single occasion of a marriage, coronation or cremation of a king could help. The late Maurya successors at Taxila could continue Aśokan habits. The Kaushambi, Malwa and Narmada rulers would follow rather at the end of the so-called Śuṅga period. What was it that the Mauryas had intro-

⁵² There is a further seal with fish-on-pole in the Allahabad Municipal Museum, from Rajghat, numbered 52. Thaplyal (1972: 168) mentions it, but provides no illustration. Another seal in almond shape is kept at the Colombo National Museum, Dept. of Ethnology, acc.no. 70.1.20959. It reads *nigohaśa*, “Of Nyagrodha”. *Nigoha* is the name given to the Aśokan cave at Barabar, commonly called Sudaman. Above the owner’s name in early Brāhmī letters is the outline of a fish, and after the *śa* a square, which looks like a Brahmi *ba*, but could as well be a short “ladder”. I owe the acquaintance with this seal to a paper of my lamented friend Iravathan Mahadevan (“An interesting old Sinhala Seal”), that he was planning to publish in 2008. Likewise almond-shaped is a seal from northern India reading *agibhutisa*, topped by a fish and itself topping a *svastika* and a tiny “taurine” symbol (Classical Numismatic Gallery 47, 18).

⁵³ On the Mauryan Patna copper band (Altekar 1947, no. 21) it could occupy the final position, looking like a “ladder” more than anything else.

duced and that others copied later on? The answer may have something to do with the fact that Khāravela thought it reasonable to demolish something at Barabar. In around 20 BC he marched into Magadha from Kaliṅga. He claims to have “destroyed *goradhagiri*”, and this term is found written in a graffito reading *goradhagiri* on the wall by the side of the entrance to the Lomas Rishi cave.⁵⁴ There is no intentional destruction apparent on what is left of Barabar. What did Kharavela destroy? Candidates are the stūpa on top of the peak on the north side, or, if it existed, the fish and the access to the underground world.

How likely is a sacred place, of imperial importance and at the same time an object of destruction? This ambivalence could have to do with the underworld, its treasures, and the *yakṣa* who guarded the site. The top Yakṣa is later mostly called Kubera, he is *yakṣarāj*. Kubera lives underground and is Lord over earthly riches. According to the Mahāmayūrī (DesJardins 2002: 406) a Yakṣa called Kiṅkara lived at *pātāla*, the underworld, and according to Mbh 14.64,5f. the *yakṣendra* Kubera is named along with the *kiṅkara* demigods. In the Mahābhārata, Kubera supplies one of the fighting parties with an object characteristic of him. It is called *śibikā*, denoting the palanquin, bier, or stretcher, which I proposed to see behind the assumed “ladder”.⁵⁵ The combination of fish pole and *śibikā* thus has to do with Kubera’s residential quarter under the earth, symbolized by the fish, and his means of transport or weapon, the palanquin. Khāravela came from Kaliṅga to *gorathagiri*, the term is also found in the Mahābhārata.⁵⁶ Can this name be explained? A bull-drawn chariot (*goratha*) is a means of transportation, and in this function it corresponds to the *śivikā*.⁵⁷ Who or what was being transported? The answer could clarify a number of questions surrounding Barabar. We know only that Khāravela knew this name, and that he destroyed something and that afterward the original positive notion, probably connected with pompous royal weddings,⁵⁸ got lost and nothing but the subterranean Yakṣa remained.

Today, the pilgrimage to Barabar focuses on the month of Bhādrapada. The aim of the pilgrims is a sort of pool fed by a lake inside the horseshoe of hills. Since the water disappears underground more or less on the spot, the water is regarded as the “hell Gaṅgā”, *pātālagāṅgā*.

Month Bhādrapada is not recommended for marriages, instead, it is the favorite period for ablutions and the removal of sins. Sins often lead to poor health, and so sick people have good reason to have them washed off by the waters of the Pātālagāṅgā. Xuanzang had heard of the caves and the holy waters and reports that drinking it or bathing in it “effaced the soil of sin”.⁵⁹ According to graffiti preserved on the walls of

⁵⁴ Jackson (1915) claims to have discovered it, but it was already seen and copied by Cunningham (1854: pl. XX, no. XX sic!), although not interpreted.

⁵⁵ Mbh 1.218,30c *jaḡṛhuḥ sarvaśāstrāṇi svāni svāni surās tadā*. 31ab: *kāladanḍaṃ yamo rājā śibikāṃ ca dhaneśvaraḥ*. How a palanquin can be used as a weapon remains unclear.

⁵⁶ *goragiri* in the Niśīthasūtracūrṇi 2005: 10 (*goragiri ṇāma pavvato. tassa-ñijjhare sivo*) is prove only for the age of the śaiva temple on top of the hill.

⁵⁷ Both occur in a list of transport vehicles in *Saddharmapūṇḍarīkaṃ*, ed. Vaidya p. 206.

⁵⁸ In particular, recent research by Patrice Pouillard and Jérôme Bardeau (Bâtisseurs de l’ancien monde; on Youtube, cf. fn. 45) has shown how two rooms each in Barabar and Nagarjuni were closely connected by the architects. Dictionaries take *mīnaketu* and *makaradhvaḥ* as epithets of Kāmadeva, who is well related to marriages. Cf. Revākhāṇḍa 150,3: *sa kāmān dadāti sarvān pūjito mīnaketanah*.

⁵⁹ Watters (1905,II: 96); the passage was correctly linked with news about Barabar by Cunningham

entrances to the caves, specialists for diverse calamities offered their services.⁶⁰

Presently, I opt for a twofold use of Barabar: Originally a site for majestic marriages, close to a *yakṣa* providing riches – until the demolition under Khāravela. Follows, after a pause, the use as a place for ablutions in the month of Bhādrapada, until today.

A few literary texts seem to refer to Barabar. Depending on their focus, they can be arranged before or after Khāravela. There is one text which seems to refer to the *pātālagāṅgā* disappearing in a hole in the earth. The Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa chapter 116 tells of the *dānava* Kuṣṭhmbha, living in the underworld Pātāla, or Rasātala. His name could be a word-play with Kubera; Jambhala, another name for Kubera, may have been associated as well. Kuṣṭhmbha's world is a hole in the earth (*pātālavivaraṃ*, *mahīrandhra*, vs 12, 27; 11), on the banks of the river called Nirvindhya (v. 33).⁶¹ Who ever kills this *dānava* will become “king of the whole world” (*samastavasudhāpatiḥ*, v. 22). King Vidūratha (v. 10) lived in his capital close to the Nirvindhya (v. 27), with two sons, named Sunīti and Sumati. He went to hunt in a wood and found the hole leading to the underworld.

The name Vidūratha could have been inspired by the name Dasaratha, which is written at the entrances of all the caves at Nagarjuni Hills, itself part of the Barabar setting. He had a son called Samprati whose name could have been transformed into Sunīti and Sumati. If Barabar was the hunting ground, the forest mentioned could be near the *khalatika-pabata*, as Aśoka calls that stretch of land within the hills, which must be close to the *khalatika-vana*, according to Patañjali, who tells us in his *vārttika* 4 to Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī 1.2.52⁶² that there is a rock or hill (*parvata*) called *khalatika* and also forests (*vana*) of the same name. The place must have been widely known, otherwise a mention in the Mahābhāṣya would make no sense. The origin of this text therefore looks pre-Khāravela.

If there was something demonic about Barabar, underground, then we have another clue in the account of Xuanzang, the Chinese pilgrim who also traveled from Patna to Rajgir after 600 AD. Jackson (1915: 159f.) addressed the parallelism, while Watters (1905,II: 107f.) had recognized that Xuanzang was reporting from hearsay.⁶³ Xuanzang never saw the hill on which “immortals” are said to have lived. But one or more “poisonous snakes and fierce dragons” (毒蛇暴龍) also lived there in an underground cave (窟穴). Xuanzang records that the Buddha once looked out over the land of Magadha from the top of a hill to the east of the ridge (摩揭陀). This presence on the mountain peak seems to be depicted at the Kanganhalli stūpa on two panels, one of which even shows the rocky peak. The inscription above the panel reads *khalatika-*

(1871: 53).

⁶⁰ Cunningham (1871, pl. XX) collected graffiti mainly from the inner sides of the entrances. They date in part to the times of the Chinese pilgrims. Most are legible and seem to refer to people with ailments: *klesākāntāra*, “pain calamity” (2×), *daridrakāntāra*, “poverty calamity”, *videśavāsīsyā kīrttiḥ*, *vikāṭa-tuṅgaśīva*, *karmacaṇḍāla*, “work slave”, *dukhāpriyaṭhādeḥ*. Buddhists may have profited from *bodhimūla* (2×).

⁶¹ A river of this name is known to Kālidāsa (Meghadūta 1.28) and the Bṛhatsaṃhita 16,9, both sites seemingly in the vicinity of Ujjain. Since its source lies in the *ṛkṣavat* mountains (ViṣṇuP 2.3,11), which form the eastern part of the Vindhya “from Bengal to the sources of Narmadā and Son” it could well be an old name of the Phalgu river.

⁶² *khalatikasya parvatasya adūrabhavāni vanāni khalatikaṃ vanāni*.

⁶³ This explains why Xuanzang mentions Barabar twice, once with a reference to the abolition of sins, and once with the maliciousness of the underground ghosts.

pavata,⁶⁴ a term adopted from Aśoka's cave inscription in the rock formation of the same name. The Buddha's visit to the top of the ridge is comparable to an event in the Mbh (2.18,30), where the Epic heroes stand on Goratha hill and look across the land [south] to Rajgir (*māgadham puram*).

None of the faint memories contain any reference to a fish, but all date from a long time after Khāravēla who could have brought the crucial change by destroying a statue there.

Finally, returning to the Dabber and its three "revered" symbols, we can say that the fish as a symbol of the watery earth in Barabar makes good sense with its royal importance and its geophysical specificity.

The flag

If the whirl represents the sky and the fish stands for the watery ground, the flag in the middle must be a symbol of the "void in between", *antarikṣa*, to make the *triloka* complete. As a graphical unit, the "flag" is also termed "standard", or "triangle-on-stand". Unlike many other early Indian symbols, it is not symmetrical, at least not in its final shape. The oldest form could well be the dagger at Barabar (fig. 21), simple as it is, as a vertical line with two slanting arms. Soon we see an improved version (fig. 25b) on the flat base of an early⁶⁵ Aśokan pillar unearthed at Kumrahar, the old city of Pāṭaliputra. The vertical and the two arms are still there, now with a triangle on top, possibly as a "head" of the human.⁶⁶

The punches of the Mauryan PMC in late phases show also the "triangle-on-stand", but where ever we expect a triangle with three straight sides, after close inspection we perceive only the shape of a human head as an elongated rectangle with parallel "cheeks" and a rounded "chin".⁶⁷ This means, the triangle-on-stand on PMC shows no triangle at all, but the outline of a human head. This form appears from the start with two short braids attached. After the fall of the Mauryas, the anthropomorph "head" disappears from the silver coins and all ensuing copper coins adopt the triangular form found on the Kumrahar pillar base.⁶⁸ The braids persists, but appear now to be flag-bands.

This is another case of a symbol changing its outer appearance, although, in this case, preserving its cosmological relationship, the sphere of the wind (cf. fn. 18), through all of its manifestations: a) dagger, b) dagger with triangular head, c) dagger with human-shaped head incl. two braids = woman, d) triangular flag incl. two bands = *dhvaja*. The

⁶⁴ For the plate cf. Poonacha (2011, pl. XCIII A and B), for the text and relevant references von Hinüber (Nakanishi & v.Hinüber 2014: 105). The visit of the top at Barabar will have been invented after the Ājīvikas had to cede the caves to Buddhist monks.

⁶⁵ This arises from the fact that the surface of the pillar is smoothed from top to bottom, while more recent pillars are left undressed where they will be underground when erected.

⁶⁶ Surprisingly, just by its side is a clear Brāhmī *na*. Below the *na* and touching it stands a *ma* with vowel strokes to the right side and below. Is this a first attempt at creating a *namo* monogram? Along with the improved "man" and the first attested moon-on-hill, all these forms point at none else but Aśoka as the first promoter of symbols.

⁶⁷ Even more man-like is the circular top of the "circle-on-stand" on the Mauryan copper band from Patna (Altekar 1947, no. 13).

⁶⁸ Series VII of the PMC presents the first numismatic triangular "flag", not on the obverse, but as a bankers' mark on the reverse. It is revealing that types 590ff. contain the same steelyard as is found on some *negama* coins from Taxila, which are clearly post-Mauryan.

change from c) to d) happened after the fall of the Mauryas.

After this development the flag turned into *dhvaja*, *dhvajapatāka*, or *patākā*. All these terms occur in some lists of the standard *maṅgala* symbols.⁶⁹ The triangle-on-stand or “flag” is again deformed on the coins of the Kunindas (first cent. BC) where the single stand-line spreads into two legs, a form adopted for Jaina *āyāgapatṭas* without the flying top lines. This modification must represent the *bhadrāsana* of the *maṅgala* lists. On Kuninda coins, this stool (*āsana*) occurs in association with a *namo* monogram, *svastika* (heaven), and wavy line (watery earth), presenting yet another change in form with unchanged reference (*antarikṣa*).

Parallel to the fish, in the zoological world, the most suitable animal representative of the air would be a flying one, like a bird. On seals or coins, birds are not found in this function, but on Aśokan pillars they are present. At Rampurva, close to the Nepalese border, there are two pillars, one with a bull on top, and no inscription on his shaft. The other one, with the standard Pillar Edicts, has several pictorial additions in crude outline (Falk 2006: 196f.: figs. 5, 7, 10), visible on the socle of the lion capital, and then again between the capital and the shaft, on the flat top of the shaft, invisible to anyone for two millennia. Both on the socle and the shaft the animals outlined are fish and peacocks. Three peacocks are incised on the shaft of the pillar at Niglivā (Falk 2006: 189, fig. 9–11). The pillar at Nandangarh cannot be inspected at its upper end, but the lower part of the shaft above ground shows three peacocks as well, drawn from different hands (Falk 2006: 185, fig. 3).

At Rampurva, the majestic lion on top will have stood for the heavenly Buddha, while the fish represent the underworld, and the peacocks, Prakrit *moriya*, stand for the ruling Maurya dynasty, on earth, in the sphere of the wind.

Reading the dabber

Returning to our dabber we feel justified to see the rotating device as a symbol of the *devaloka*, from where fiery objects fall to earth. Apart from this association, there are only the panels from Sanchi that prove that Indra’s *devaloka* also had fiery aspects. In any case, it was legal to speculate that fiery stones falling from heaven need to have their origin in a fiery ambiance. From this stony heaven occasionally some parts fall on earth.

Taking all the evidence together, the sequence of monograms and symbols on the dabber seems to say:

“Veneration be (*namo’thu*) to earth (fish), *antarikṣa* (flag) and *devaloka* (meteoric stone)”.

No sectarian affiliation is implied, although formally the reference to the *triloka* stands closest to the combinations of *namo*-symbol and the three wheels meaning: “Veneration to the Dharma, the Buddha, and the Saṅgha”.

Changes and variants of triloka symbols

Symbols express notions, abstract or concrete concepts. In many instances, one notion can be expressed by a multitude of symbols. In contrast to monograms, symbols do not

⁶⁹ Some decades ago, Indian numismatists invented the “standard of Indra”, *indradhvaja*, to describe the flag. Although such an object exists in Hindu festivals, Indra has no basis in PMC contexts.

have an invariable phonetic equivalent. Even if they are understood identically, formal variants tend to take on unexpected meanings. Once the phonetic value of a monogram is forgotten, it can transform into a symbol representing any term.

All these processes are omnipresent in our representatives of the three worlds. Some examples of duplicity, change, and distraction are given below.

a) The fish, or the watery ground

As a neutral symbol of the underworld, the plain fish came fast out of use. On coins, streams depicted as two parallel wavy lines with some fishes in between became an easy-to-read surrogate (fig. 26c). Often, the symbols for heaven and *antarikṣa* are obvious, but then the *śrīvatsa* is found where a fish would be clear. There are cases where the *śrīvatsa* is composed of two wavy lines of aquatic plants enclosing a fish (fig. 24b),⁷⁰ but in most cases the zoological element is absent. At Barabar, Aśoka wrote *svastika*, dagger = man, and fish, while Khāravēla at his home in Orissa framed his Hathigumpa inscription with *svastika*, flag, and *śrīvatsa*. Marshall & Foucher at Sanchi (1940,I: 96; 172) saw that the *śrīvatsa* “is connected with the lotus in various ways”. We know that the lotus belongs to the watery sphere and feel that it makes a good companion to the symbol of the watery earth. In fact, at Bharhut⁷¹ as at Sanchi,⁷² the *śrīvatsa* on a stem first occurs in tondos in combination or alternating with lotus heads.

Although the form appears altered, the symbolized sphere “watery ground” remains the same as in the days of the plain fish. On early post-Mauryan copper coins from Taxila, the full “text” of *namo*, *śrīvatsa*, moon-on-hill, and *nandyāvarta* is rather common (fig. 24c). This coincides with *svastika*, *śrīvatsa*, and flag in Malwa (fig. 24d) or further south in Sātavāhana-ruled territory (fig. 26d), with or without the *pāmaḥ* monogram. Apart from coins, seals also provide the same evidence, e.g. *⟨namo⟩-śrīvatsa-flag-svastika* on a seal of a royal minister (*rājāmātya*) from Sātavāhana Paithan (Handa 2010). All cases remained unsuspected so far as referring to the venerated “three worlds”, *triloka*.

b) The flag, or the airy antarikṣa

The *antarikṣa* is the arena of most mammals. We have encountered a “man” early, symbolizing his habitat, but also the “moon-on-hill”, a mountain, occupies this sphere and can alternate with the flag. I suspect, that several animals, like bull, elephant, and horse, can serve the same purpose, as well as the common tree in railing. The Mauryan “braided man” is kept alive in BC times unchanged on Magadha PM coins. After the fall of the Mauryas, the braided man first turns into the flag with triangula top with the pair of strands. A few centuries later it is found reshaped as the *bhadrāsana* on Jaina *āyāgapaṭṭas* and on coins of the Kunindas in the north or the Anandas from Kharwar. At this point, any reference to the Triloka seems to be forgotten.

The original “man”, braided or not, may not have been forgotten. It may be found on the *torāṇas* at Sanchi. The first thing that a visitor approaching the great stūpa can distin-

⁷⁰ The example comes from a Jaina *āyāgapaṭṭa* from Kankali Ṭilā (cf. Rhie Quintanilla 2000, fig. 21). For a Buddhist context cf. Gupta 1985: 103, fig. 28 from Sanghol.

⁷¹ Barua 1937,III: pl. XXVII, fig. 22; XXXV, fig. 25.

⁷² Marshall & Foucher pl. LXXVIII, fig. 22b; LXXXIV, fig. 53b.

gish are some figures arranged on the top architrave: a *śrīvatsa* mounted on a *namo* monogram at the outer ends, *namo pṛthivyai* in plain Sanskrit, expressing “veneration to the watery earth”. Follows the statue of a man in the middle positions, (*namo*) *antarikṣāya*, “veneration to the space in between”. And instead of a *svastika* or a meteoric *nandyāvarta* whirl for the heavenly world of the gods (*devaloka*), the highest position is taken by the wheel of the *dharma*. But the *devaloka* is not absent. Its motto “sex, drugs and rock’n roll” is represented, *pars pro toto*, by the half-naked ladies clinging to the sides of the gate posts. This arrangement is remarkably similar to the reverse message at Bedsa (fig. 8): *dharma*-wheel on stand, *namo+śrīvatsa*, *namo+[namo*, wrong for flag or taurine?], *namo+whirl*. At Sanchi, whoever passes through one of the four gates gives all parts of the *triloka* their adequate recognition, being on the way to a new, higher, and eternal sphere of the pure *dharma* encountered on the upper circum-ambulation path.

c) *The whirl, or the sky*

The whirl in some cases was juxtaposed or exchanged with the *svastika*. It survives in some remote areas, as on the coins from Śuktimatī, a city of the Ceḍi kingdom. There, the whirl has six bent arms and differs from the *svastika*. With horse and *śrīvatsa* it makes the trinity, enlarged by a mussel (Skt. *śuktikā*) pool, to represent the town as such.

The fiery nature of the rotating stones has been preserved in a series of early post-Mauryan coppers from Taxila. Their trinity consists of a pile of rocks, a lady holding a lotus flower, and a moon-on-hill. The latter represents the *antarikṣa*, and the lotus with or without a lady stands for the watery earth.⁷³ Remains the pile of rocks. It should stand for the sky, which is no problem once we accept the rotating meteoric whirling rocks from Indra’s heaven. There are several issues where nine or ten rock balls have been piled up into a pyramid, mostly showing moon-on-hill, the *nandyāvarta* whirl, then a pile of stones, and the snaking line of a river, four symbols instead of three. If we look closely enough, we see that the pile of balls looks peculiar: the number of balls is always six, and the topmost ball has three short vertical lines (fig. 26a,b), which I interpret as the tail of a meteorite.

Symbols vs. script

We met with three symbols that made sense when regarded as representing the three classical parts of the cosmos, the watery earth, the wind-stricken room above, and the hot and rocky sphere of the sky. The lady owner of the dabber expressed her veneration to all three of them. Each of these three spheres could be adduced to by more than one symbol. From bottom to top, we have:

- a) the Earth, seen as a fish on the dabber, more frequently as the *śrīvatsa*. A single wavy line or a wavy double stretch with fish in it is often found on coins.
- b) The *antarikṣa*, where wind is the predominant element, can be alluded to by a man, or any other moving animal. After the Mauryas, the triangular “flag” on stand became dominant, as it was the choice of the dabber owner.

⁷³ Instead of a lotus in her right hand, the lady is depicted alone, holding one fish or two connected ones. Her connection to the watery earth is not affected.

c) The sky, home of Indra's heaven, is shown on the dabber as a whirl, depicting a falling meteorite. To the same sphere belongs the *svastika*.

If we compare this set of three groups of symbols with the 625 punch marks listed by Gupta and Hardaker (1985; 2014), we are amazed to see that the three are very sparingly met with on early PM coins. They become more frequent in the later ones of the eight PMC series. This is clear evidence for the chronological priority of the early PMC with their sign inventory over the standard *triloka* signs. This impression again is in line with the long-established insight that sign systems can only evolve as long as there is no alphabetic script. The PMC signs of the early types are older than Aśoka, who added script to Indian culture, but he or his artisans must also have had some predilection for graphical symbols, on coins and elsewhere. The PMC signs were not given up and not replaced by script, which shows that these older symbols must have had a *raison d'être* of their own. What was it?

The PM symbols are often regarded as random graphs. But there is more to them. In 2007, at the conference on South Asian Archaeology at Ravenna, I expanded on the idea that the five symbols of the PMC, *lakṣaṇa* in Sanskrit, stood in a definite relationship to the term *pañcalakṣaṇa*, which means, verbally, “five marks, five characteristics”. In the latter sense this term is used to describe the basic contents of the semi-historical literature called Purāṇa. Another use of the term *purāṇa*, “old”, is found in literature and inscriptions for “punch-marked coin”, which have “five marks” as well (fig. 27a,b). Thus we have two objects called “old”, and both objects have five “characteristic marks”. The two uses could have influenced each other.

For the literature, the five characteristics are known by name. They are *sarga*, “cosmic origin”, *pratisarga*, “expansion”, *vaṃśa*, “lineage”, *manvantara*, “epochs”, and *vaṃśyānucarita*, “dynasty”. Could it be that characteristics with the same name also befit the PMCs?⁷⁴

The *purāṇa* texts, as they came down to us deal with many more topics than these five terms cover. This shows that the idea of only five characteristics is older than the texts in their present form. In any case, the first two features form a beautiful pair. The term *sarga*, “cosmic origin” is dealt with in the texts, and an exploding sphere from which many strokes emerge looks quite fitting. Follows *pratisarga* on the text side. The texts deal with it and understand it as “counter-evolution”, destruction of the cosmos, the end of the world, *pralaya* in Sanskrit. On the coin side, we see a sign that is larger than the *sarga* and whose six arms are more developed than the *sarga* (fig. 27a,b). On the coins, these two symbols are invariably present, from series 0 over I up to VI.⁷⁵ What we see on the coins cannot refer to the end of the world, but only to an enlargement. This discrepancy would lead to an instant end to any equation of the two *pañcalakṣaṇas*, were it not for W. Kirfel (1927: XLVII). He has reconstructed an original *pañcalakṣaṇa* section from all Purāṇas containing a version of it. While dealing with the second theme

⁷⁴ The paper was not well received, especially by Indian archaeologists, and I respected their wisdom and withdrew it from print.

⁷⁵ Since the first two signs occur always as a pair it is impossible to say which one is number 1 and which follows as 2. In my opinion, Gupta and Hardaker arranged the two in an inverted order: The rayed dot should come first, and the developed sign should come second.

called *pratisarga* in the texts, he found that the assumed “end of the world” is not dealt with at all in the texts after the positive “creation”, while *sarga* is replaced by *ādisarga* (“initial creation”) in some passages, and a following *pratisarga* means nothing but “expansion, further creation”. So instead of going backward by expecting a meaning of *pralaya*, “dissolution”, for *pratisarga* at all occurrences, we can say that “further development” is a topic in the Purāṇas that is properly found following “creation”. In this way, an original sequence of *sarga* and *pratisarga* is well reflected in the sphere with simple rays and the sphere with elaborate rays. This coincidence shows that the order of the themes in the oldest, partly lost form of the texts must have corresponded to the order of the symbols on the PMC.

If there is no discrepancy, then the *pañcalakṣaṇas* in both meanings of *purāṇa* can describe time, from the creation of the world to the present day, with people and power diversifying. It may even be permissible to use at least *sarga* and *pratisarga* as names for the first two symbols on the coins. If the literary Purāṇas were already concerned with material and political history in their oldest form, then the five punch marks can do the same and depict the history of the world in a nutshell, or rather on a coin’s side. Why would they do that? I suspect that the five signs symbolizing the stages of time were seen as a kind of guarantee of value: These coins are valid as long as development continues.

With this partition of time in mind, we can now look at the *triloka* signs, where we see a partition of space, – and the two form a pair. Where the *triloka* signs fill a side of the coins, the guarantee of value extends “everywhere, in every world”. As simple as the two systems may seem, each of them shows more than just signs, they refer either to time or to space. What looks random might have a well-reflected structure, which could explain why the system was so resistant to outside temptations.

Not all customers handling PMCs will have understood the meaning of the marks. But it seems that the Graeco-Bactrian ruler Apollodotus I, residing in Bactria, was told about both directions intended, time and space. Ruling for about twenty years (ca. 180–160 BC) just after the downfall of the Mauryas, he tried to boost economic exchange by issuing square silver coins that looked Indian, using a square flan. They showed bull and elephant on the two sides, and as hemidrachms and diobols, they followed the Attic standard. In addition, they are inscribed in Greek and Kharoṣṭhī. They were designed as a type for two cultures. On the Greek side, we see five symbols (fig. 27c,d), the invariable *sarga* and *pratisarga* from the time-list above the elephant, followed by the space-list running down the right side in correct order: Sun, hill, and a snaking line below the animal. As suggested, the latter three stand for sky, *antarikṣa*, and watery earth. The cooperation did not develop the way it was expected and the following series of Apollodotus came without any Indian symbol at all.

Results

- The term *triratna* applied to a certain graphical symbol is a modern fabrication. Instead, the sign can be analyzed as a monogram reading *namo*, meaning “veneration”. This process calls for an object of veneration, either verbally or pictorially. The known examples all answer to this prerequisite. The inherent meaning of the *namo* monogram was understood at least until the reign of a ruler from the Vāsudeva line, close to the end of the Kushans.

- The basic monogram allows to “read” two enlarged forms. On a dabber, fashioned around the end of the Mauryas, we can read *namo'thu*, and on metal devices found in Buddhist monasteries, we read *namo (dharma-etc.)ya*.
- On the dabber, three symbols represent three objects revered which together form the “three worlds” (*triloka*) of the cosmos.
- The fish stands for the watery earth, the lowest part of the *triloka*. This interpretation sheds light on the historic role of Barabar, a sacred place of the fish in Bihar, visited by Aśoka for the same reason.
- The man or the flag (*dvaḥja*, *pātāka*) represents the middle *loka*, the *antarikṣa*. Often applied to coins after the fall of the Mauryas its meaning was forgotten and in AD times its shape changed to a *maṅgala* sign called *bhadrāsana*.
- The whirl shows a meteorite (*ulkā*), falling from the rocky heaven, *svarga*. Its shape and nature allow us to explain artistic representations of Indra’s heaven and the rocky element in the Apalāla story in Gandharan reliefs. In its prime function it appears last in the cave of Bedsa, Maharashtra.
- The three symbols taken together transport the idea of the threefold cosmos, Skt. *triloka*. This notion is older than the current Indian religions and can be found graphically expressed in several contexts where it was hitherto overlooked.

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PLATE 10

H. Falk, "Triratna and Triloka: A Dabber, the Fish of Aśoka, and the Visit of Indra"

Fig. 1: Scheme behind the monogram combining Brāhmī *na* and *mo* (after Falk 2011: 26).



Fig. 2: Monks venerating the three wheels placed on a *namo* pedestal from Jamalgarhi (courtesy Indian Museum, acc.no. GD68/5250/A23225).



Fig. 3: Dynastic use of *namo*-monogram: a) Jihonika silver, *deva*-side, b) Jihonika copper, bull side of bull-and-lion issue, c) Kujula copper, bull side of bull-and-camel issue, d) Vema Takhtu copper, bull side of bull-and-camel issue; e) Gondophares, *namo*-monogram between left leg and wand of Zeus, *deva*-side; f) Sases (Gondophares lineage), *deva*-side; g) Vima Kadphises *deva*-side; h) late successor of Vāsudeva, king's side (Elsen 83, 958).



Fig. 4 Sheet metal ornament which combines three *ratnas*, *namo* monogram, and an additional letter *ya*. a) From Taxila (Marshall 1951, III: pl. 178), b) Hirayama Collection (Tanabe 2007: 256).

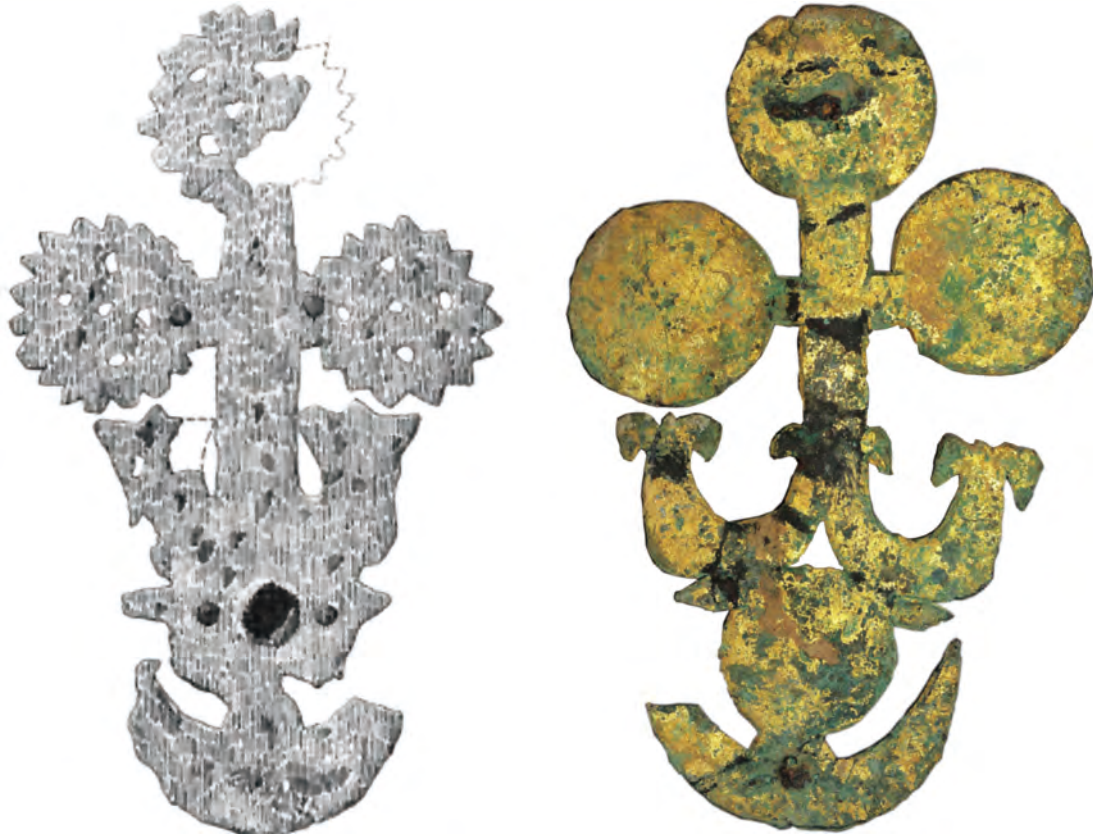


Fig. 5: Inscription on a clay dabber from Maharajganj (Gorakhpur), followed by one monogram and three symbols.



Fig. 6: Cubical chalcedony seal from the border to Myanmar, reading *mulabhutisa* and *bharadajasa*, showing a Brāhmī *tha* below a *namo* monogram. Courtesy Thanandon Rattanasuk.



PLATE 12

Fig. 7: Inscribed dabber from the Ucchali Lake, 150 km southwest of Taxila, mentioning Nani, a specialist in wearable fire-pots. Courtesy Azim Ali.



Fig. 8: Pillars on the right side of the caitya hall at Bedsa, Maharashtra, showing from left to right a) whirl, *namo*, and *śrīvatsa*, all with separate *namo*-monograms, and b) a *dharmacakra*, all four with flower rosettes. Courtesy Kevin Standage.



Fig. 9: Panel with the temptation of the Buddha by Māra and his army. One of the soldiers is about to pelt a rock with whirl at the Buddha. Original in the Freer Gallery, Washington. Photo author.



Fig. 10 (upper left): Sealing showing lion over fish and below two sky symbols. The lion faces a fish-on-pole. After Rapson (1900: 103).

Fig. 11: Early depictions of visits to the Indrasāla cave: a) (middle left) Pañcaśikha standing (Bodh Gaya Museum acc.no. 58828; AIIS no. 513.52). b) (upper right) Pañcaśikha or Indra sitting (Bodh Gaya Museum 58833, AIIS no. 513.45); c) (lower left) Pañcaśikha and Indra standing (Bodh Gaya Museum 58837, AIIS 513.35); d) Bharhut, Central tondo chopped. Indian Museum, Coomaraswamy 1956: Fig. 63. Above it a Brāhmī inscription *idasālaguha*.



PLATE 14

Fig. 12: Sanchi, Indrasāla panel, northern gate, left pillar inside, topmost panel: Devas standing in front of cave facade, rocky hill in perforated stone, aflame on top, two lions in separate caves and two demigod servants right.



Fig. 13: Sanchi, at Indra's visit devas stand outside the cave. West-gate, right pillar front, second panel from top. The Sal tree flowers are still within buds.



Fig. 14: Sanchi, at Indra's visit the devas stand inside the cave. West-gate, right pillar front, third panel from top. The Sal tree flowers stand in bloom.



Fig. 15: Sanchi, Indra's paradise. Northern gate, left pillar front, lowest panel.



Fig. 16: Pañcaśikha and the Buddha in conversation; Indra hides behind rocks. Courtesy Chr. Luczanits.



Fig. 17: Buddha inside the Indraśaila cave with entrance rocks. From Sikri stūpa, Lahore Museum.



PLATE 16

Fig. 18: a) Lion from an *āsana* with whirl on the shoulder. After Luczanits (ed.) 2008: 328, no. 228. b) Head of a lion from a pillar capital from Khokhrakot, Hariana, Kushan period, National Museum New Delhi acc.no. 67.617. Courtesy Gary Todd.



Fig. 19: Taxila, Dharmarājika: Apalāla episode with Vajrapāṇi standing upper left on stones with whirls. After Luczanits (ed.) 2009: 230: no. 173.



Fig. 20: Apalāla episode with Vajrapāṇi throwing stones from the roof of a cave. Most of the whirls are dissolved into random strokes. After Kurita 2003,I: 289, no. 637.



Fig. 21: Inscription by the side of the entrance to the Kaṇṇa Cauṇṇā cave at Barabar. Reading in outline verified on the spot and superimposed on an old rubbing. Cf. Falk 2006: 262, fig. 14f.

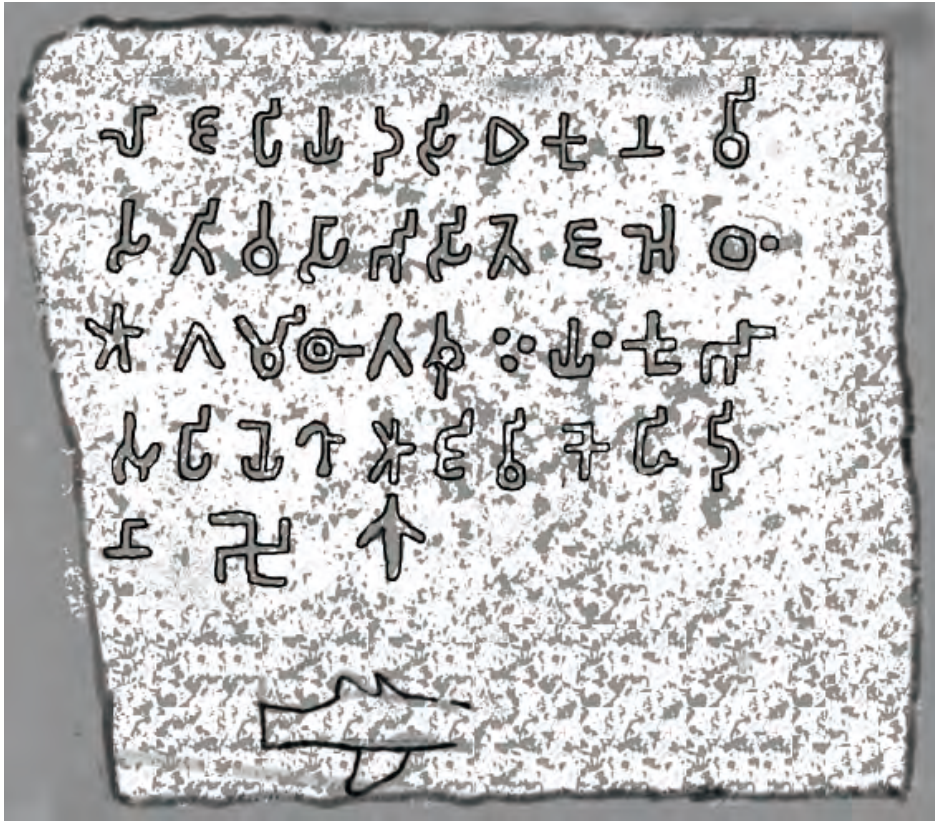


Fig. 22: Four-sided ivory seal from Malwa, perforated lengthwise: a) fish, b) man, c) double *namo*-symbol, d) double *svastika*/*nandyāvarta*. (Classical Numismatic Gallery 44, 43).



Fig. 23: Fish-on-pole on coins. a) Taxila copper: Face of Yakṣa with pointed ears, fish-on-pole in railing left, moon-on-hill above (Xenoru 209059). b) Malwa, Ujjain region: Fish-on-pole in railing, star, bier (Oswal 85, 9) c) Malwa copper. Fish-on-pole in railing, bier (Classical Numismatic Gallery 43, 45). d) Narmada valley, copper: Tree-in-railing, fish-on-pole in railing, bier to right (Classical Numismatic Gallery 43, 44).



PLATE 18

Fig. 24: a) Clay seal with fish-on-pole in railing, bier, *svastika*. (Reperti Archeologici - Antiquities, April 2021, 283).
 b) Mathura *āyāgapaṭṭa*: Fish-in-snakes/seaweeds, formally between fish and *śrīvatsa*.
 c) Taxila copper with *namo* and *triloka*: *śrīvatsa*–moon-on-hill–*svastika*/*nandyāvarta*.
 d) Vidisha copper: *pāmaḥ* monogram and *triloka*: *śrīvatsa*–flag–*svastika* (Classical Numismatic Gallery 44, 94).



Fig. 25: a) Drawing of a bronze metal sheet once covering an unknown object, with fish-on-pole in railing, flag symbol, bier, two figures (*yakṣas*?). After Srivastava (1991: 373). b) Symbols on the underside of an Aśokan-style pillar at Kumrahar: Flag-on-stand without ribbons, moon-on-hill, Brāhmī *na* over *ma* or *mu*.

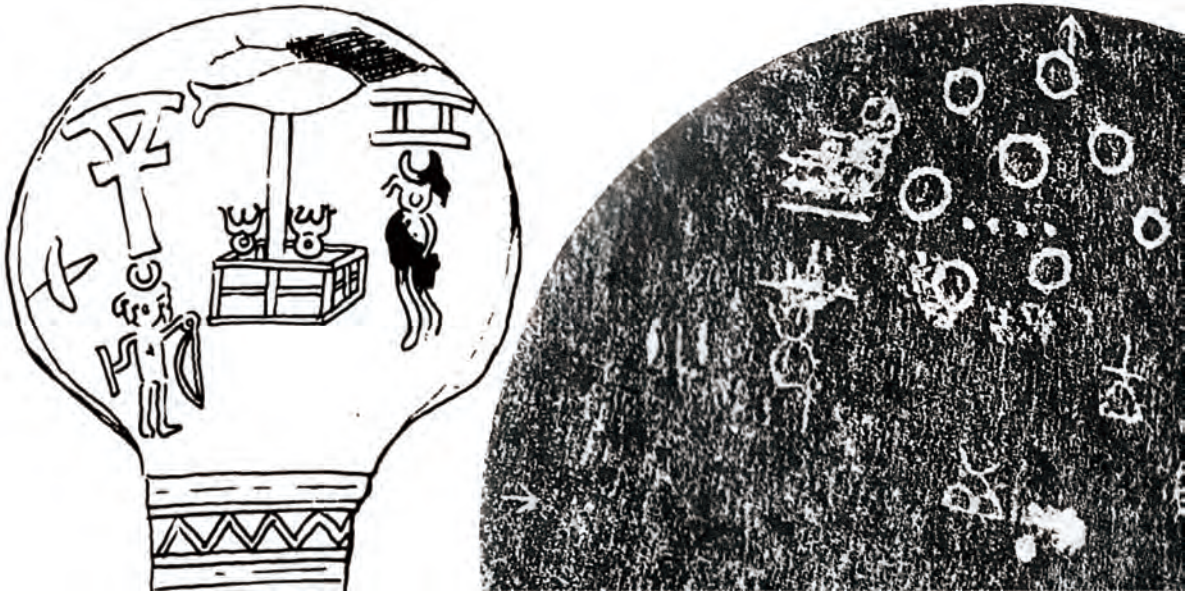


Fig. 26: Forms of *triloka*. a) Taxila copper with pile of meteorites, lotus lady, and moon-on-hill (courtesy Hinduja Heritage).
 b) Close-up of top meteorite with tail. c) Taxila copper with pile of (meteorite) rocks, moon-on-hill, and water current (CNG 213, 214). d) Copper Sātavāhana, *rañō sirisādakamṇisa*, flag–*śrīvatsa*–*svastika* (courtesy Hinduja Heritage, no. 19487).



Fig. 27: *Pañcalakṣaṇa* and *triloka*: a) and b) Early PMC with *sarga* below, *pratisarga* in center. a) GH series 0, #21 (4 punches; here expanded to 5 by small rosette; Marudhar 23, 2). b) GH series 0, #10 (4 punches; here enlarged by whirl to 5; Todywalla 71, 4). c) and d) Apollodotus I drachma, Boppearachchi, série 3: *sarga* and *pratisarga* on top, *triloka* to right and below: sun-hill-water course.

