

Reappraisal of the Antarikṣa / Vyomapaṭṭa, Dhubela

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The Museum at Dhubela (now perhaps the Bhopal Museum) houses almost a square stone slab, little more than 90 cm in length and breadth, datable to c. 10th-11th century (acc. no. 156/881; Figs. 7.1-5). Years back, on 29th February 1984, this slab depicting a large number of astral and some other deities, one hundred in all (human 80 + 1 ṛṣi missing and 19 others), in three concentric bands was studied by myself and Shri R. C. Agrawala. It has subsequently been published by me in 1991, discussing identification of some of the figures seen therein.¹ Now in light of some literary evidences, new information has been gathered, hence this 'Reappraisal'.

In the centre of the slab there is a small plain circle, around which there are three concentric bands. The base of the slab outside of the outer band has on each corner a Nāga uplifting the entire depiction and also a worshipper seated in *namaskāra-mudrā*. Similarly, on the top corners of the slab, there was a ṛṣi at each end, now only the one on our left is extant.

The first band nearest to the plain centre has thirteen seated females and one male figure. It also depicts constellations Vṛṣcika (Scorpio), Dhanu (Sagittarius) and upper part of Makara (Capricorn). In the next band, that is the middle one, easily identifiable are Meṣa (Aries), Vṛṣa (Taurus), Mithuna (Gemini), Karka (Cancer), Siṁha (Leo), lower part of Makara, Kumbha (Aquarius) and Mīna (Pisces). Curiously, Kanyā (Virgo) and Tulā (Libra) seem to be absent. Along with these *Rāśis*, Sūrya on chariot with eight other planets, bull-headed eight Vasus, and two horse-headed Aśvinikumāras can also be well recognized. Besides all these, in this band one can notice a small circle just over the bull (Vṛṣa), another circle surrounded by seven males (seen up to their busts only), and a big conch. We have named the circle and seven males as Dhruva, the Polar Star surrounded by Saptarṣis. This identification gains ground, when we see that the sun on chariot is exactly to the East of Dhruva indicating North (Figs. 7.2-5).

We take the central plain space as symbolizing Ākāśa, which is also known as 'Śūnya'. This is actually the hub or pivot of the entire depiction. Now Ākāśa is the foremost

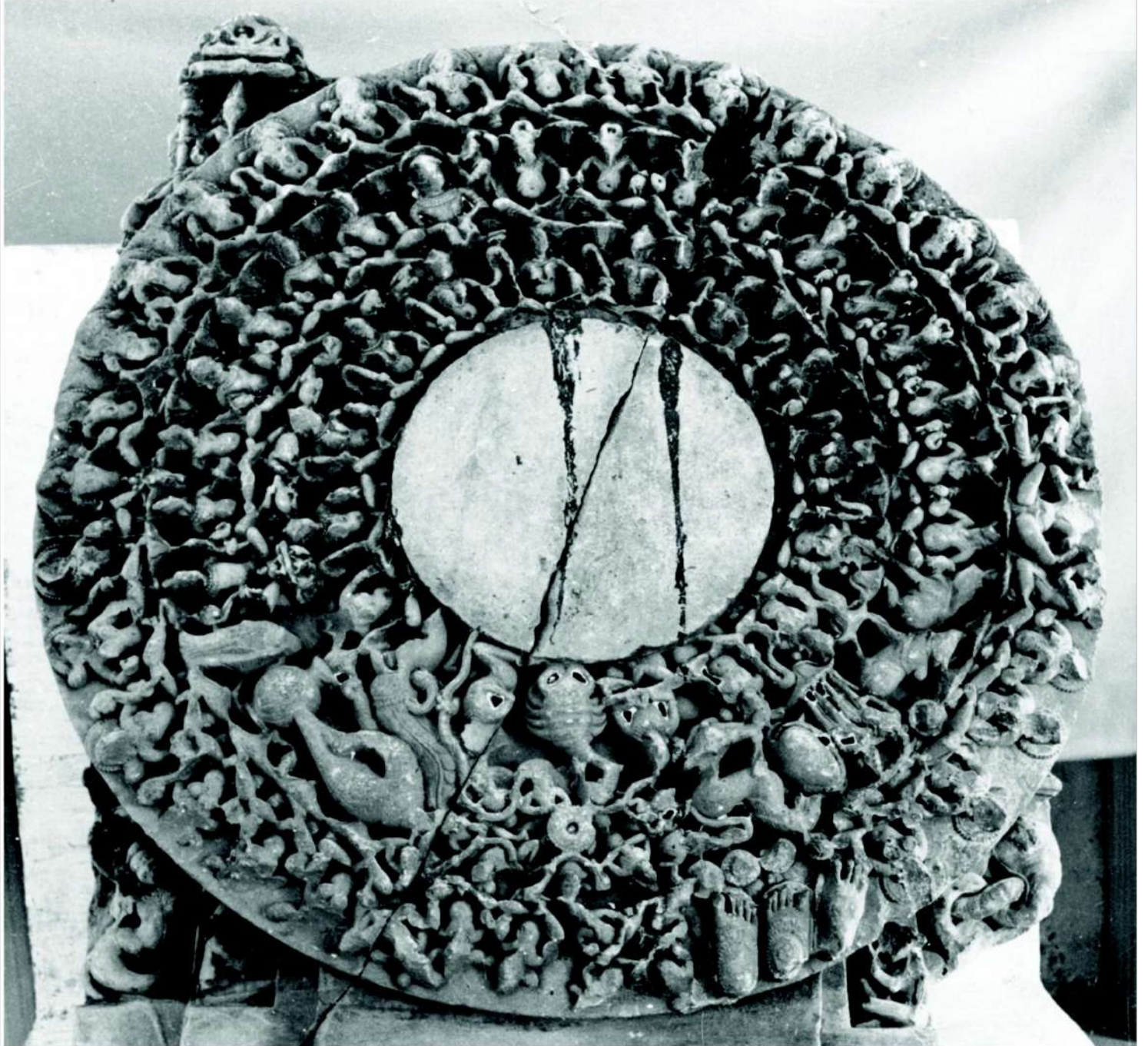


Fig.7.1 : Antarikṣa / Vyomapaṭṭa, Dhubela

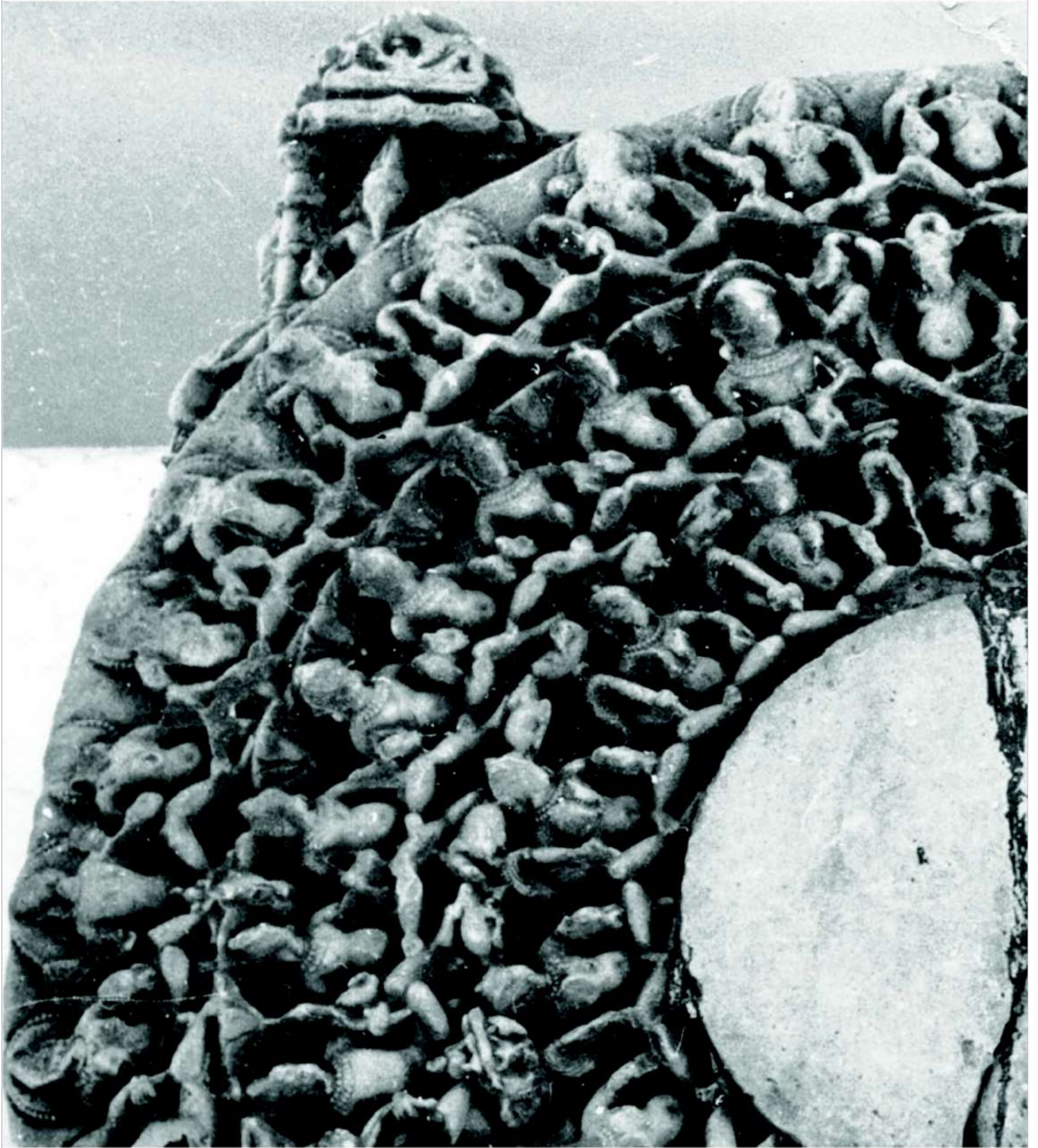


Fig.7.2 : Upper right and middle – clockwise:
Band-I – Six seated female figures
Band-II – Sūrya with eight Grahas; first bull-headed Vasu
Band-III – Eleven seated human figures; first one partly visible

among the Five Subtle Elements (*pañca-mahābhūtas*), which have their respective Objects of Senses (*tanmātrās*). *Śabda* or *Dhvani*, that is ‘sound’ is the *tanmātrā* of *Ākāśa*, and the big conch (*śaṅkha*), which, however, is in no way associated with astral depictions, seems standing for this *tanmātrā*. The sound producing *śaṅkha* (Fig. 7.5) suggests *śabda*.

Before we pass on to the outer-most band, we would like to make a note that all the figures in the first band, that is the smallest one, are problematic and we are not in a position to propose any identification for them.

No less interesting is the third band, which is the largest one. Here, just over the lion (Leo) (Fig. 7.4), there are four small circles bearing spoked patterns atop three prominent human foot-prints. On the right of these, there is a square (often termed as *mañca*) formed by four male busts. Moving further clockwise, there are twenty-four human figures seated in *lalitāsana*, which are mostly females. Thus we come to West, just in front of the seated *Sūrya* on chariot in the second circle. At this point there is a strange depiction. Here, there is a male figure with his back towards us duly flanked on both sides with a female figure in profile seated in *namaskāra-mudrā* (Fig. 7.3). This we have taken as *Triśaṅku*, about whom we shall discuss a little later. Moving still further, there are again four seated females, and here we reach the foot-prints, and thus, our *pradakṣiṇā* in the third band becomes complete. Total number of the figures in this band, excluding the *Triśaṅku* group of three, is twenty-eight. Now the identifications.

Three foot-prints (Fig. 7.4)

Previously we had identified them as three strides of *Viṣṇu*, which seems to be not very correct. At the moment, two identifications are before us. One comes from the Vedic source, while the other concerns astronomy. In the *Puruṣasūkta*,² it has been said that one *pāda* of *Virāṭa-puruṣa* covers the ‘world of beings’ (*viśvābhūtāni*) and three are there in the *divi* (heaven). There is pun (*śleṣa*) in the word *pāda*. It means the ‘fourth part’ as well as the ‘foot’. For depicting presence of *tripāda* in *divi*, the sculptor seems to have carved the three foot-prints.

The other identification is that it is the *Nakṣatra* (lunar mansion) *Śravaṇa*. As per chart showing the ‘forms’ of *Nakṣatras*, which Sir William Jones had got prepared on the basis of *Śripati*’s *Muhūrta* work *Ratnamālā*³ (c. 1000 CE; Fig. 7.6), the symbol for *Śravaṇa* is exactly the three foot-prints with circles embossed. *Sripati*’s work is more or less contemporary to our slab under reference.

Small circles atop the foot-prints (Fig. 7.4)

In this very chart, there are five *Nakṣatras* with wheel-like or circular symbols.

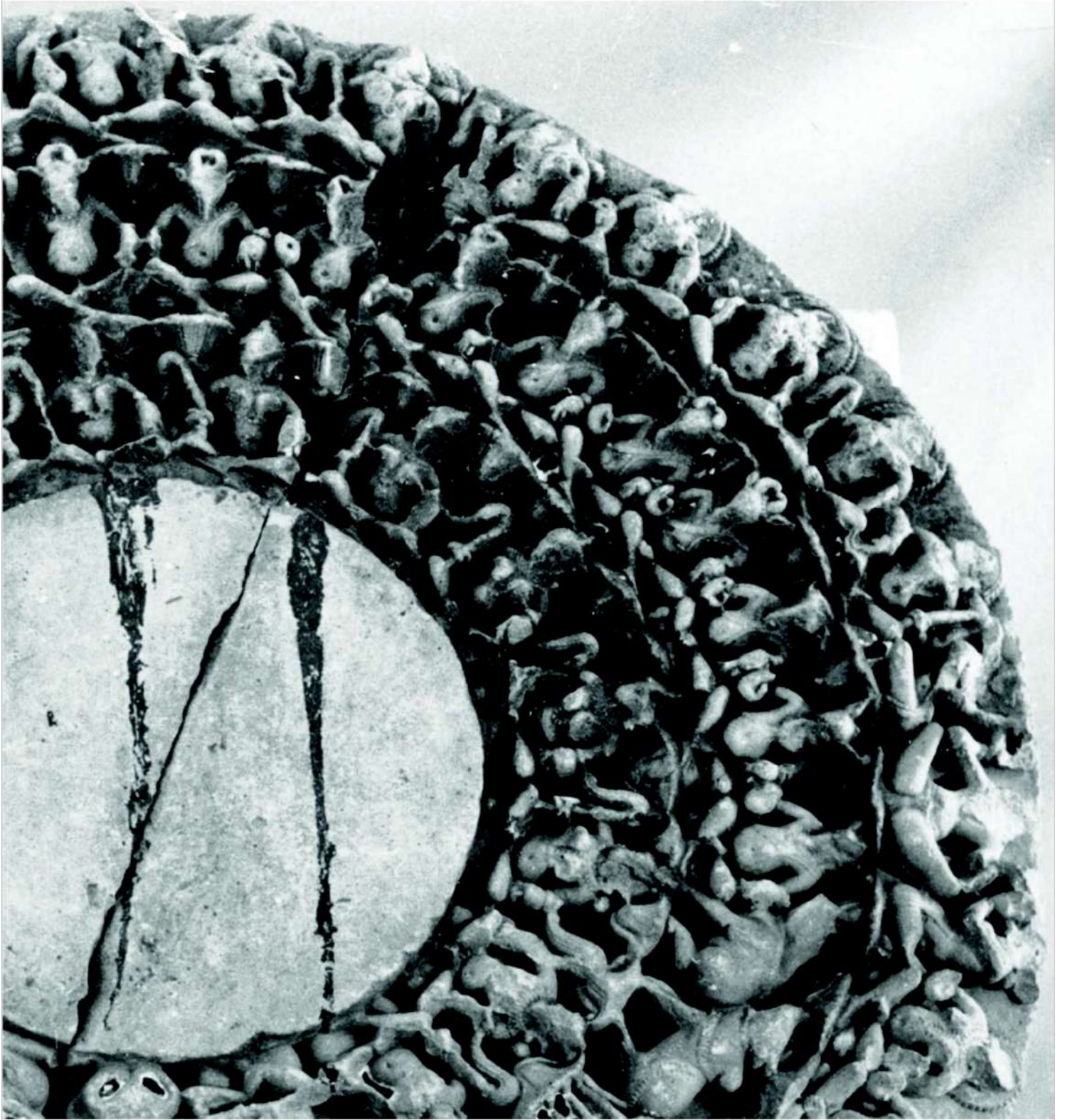


Fig.7.3 : Upper and middle left:
Band-I – Eight seated female figures
Band-II – Seven bull-headed Vasus; two Aśvinikumāras; Rāśis: Meṣa, Vṛṣa
Band-III – Eight seated female figures; Triśaṅku flanked by worshippers; followed by one more female figure

These are Ārdrā, Āśleṣā, Citrā, Svāti and Jyeṣṭhā. Should we take these small circles in the slab as Nakṣatras?

Square (*mañca*) formed by four male busts (Fig. 7.4)

As per *Ratnamālā*, four other Nakṣatras, namely Pūrvā-phālgunī, Uttarāphālgunī, Uttarāṣaḍhā and Pūrvā-bhādrapada, have rectangular or square-like symbols. Even if the depiction stands for these Nakṣatras, it is difficult to pin-point any particular one.

Triśaṅku (Fig. 7.3)

The unique position of the man seated with back towards us and the reverence that he is receiving presupposes some significant event related with the heaven. This could be the episode of Triśaṅku, who finds mention in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*,⁴ *Mahābhārata*⁵ and *Vāyupurāṇa*.⁶ Reading all together, the account runs as follows:

Triśaṅku of Ikṣvāku family and the king of Ayodhyā had become *cāṇḍāla* due to the curse of the sons of Vasiṣṭha, the family priest of the Ikṣvākus. In spite of that, he cherished a strong desire to reach heaven (*svarga*) with his mortal body intact. He approached the sage Viśvāmitra, who was on almost hostile terms with Vasiṣṭha. Viśvāmitra acceded to his request and as Chief Priest himself arranged a sacrifice to fulfill the king's desire; but, though properly invoked the gods did not come to have their shares, because they were against an impious (*cāṇḍāla*) person reaching heaven and that too with his mortal body. Thereupon, Viśvāmitra at the cost of his own merit sent the king to the heaven. Obviously, Indra did not like this and he ordered that the king should be thrown down. The gods obeyed their lord and the king was thrown with his head down (*avākśira*) topsy-turvy. In toppled down condition, he cried for help from Viśvāmitra. The sage thereupon stopped him there in same position and himself started to create a parallel world (*loka, pratiṣṭi*). Thus located in the South⁷ came up a new group of Saptarṣis, Nakṣatras (Nakṣatravaṁśa) including Śravaṇa (*pratiśravaṇa pūrvāṇi nakṣatrāṇi*) and parallel Indra along with other gods was on the way of being created. Highly disturbed with these activities, the gods started appeasing Viśvāmitra. Finally, the matter came to a close on conditions that all that had been created would continue to exist (in area) out of *Vaiśvānarapatha*,⁸ and that king Triśaṅku would also be there in the heaven in toppled condition but authorized to enjoy the status of the gods (*amarsannibhaḥ*) and Nakṣatras would keep on following him (*anuyāsyanti*).

With this account in view, we propose to deduce that:

- (i) The man seated with back towards us in the outer band, though not in toppled condition, is Triśaṅku.
- (ii) Being a god, he is being flanked by females in *namaskāra-mudrā*.



Fig.7.4 : Lower left:

Band-I – Three seated figures; Rāśis – Vṛścika, Dhanu (partly visible)

Band-II – Rāśis: Meṣa to Simha; Dhruva with Saptarṣi

Band-III – Worshipper of Triśaṅku; four seated figures; three foot-prints; mañca formed by four figures

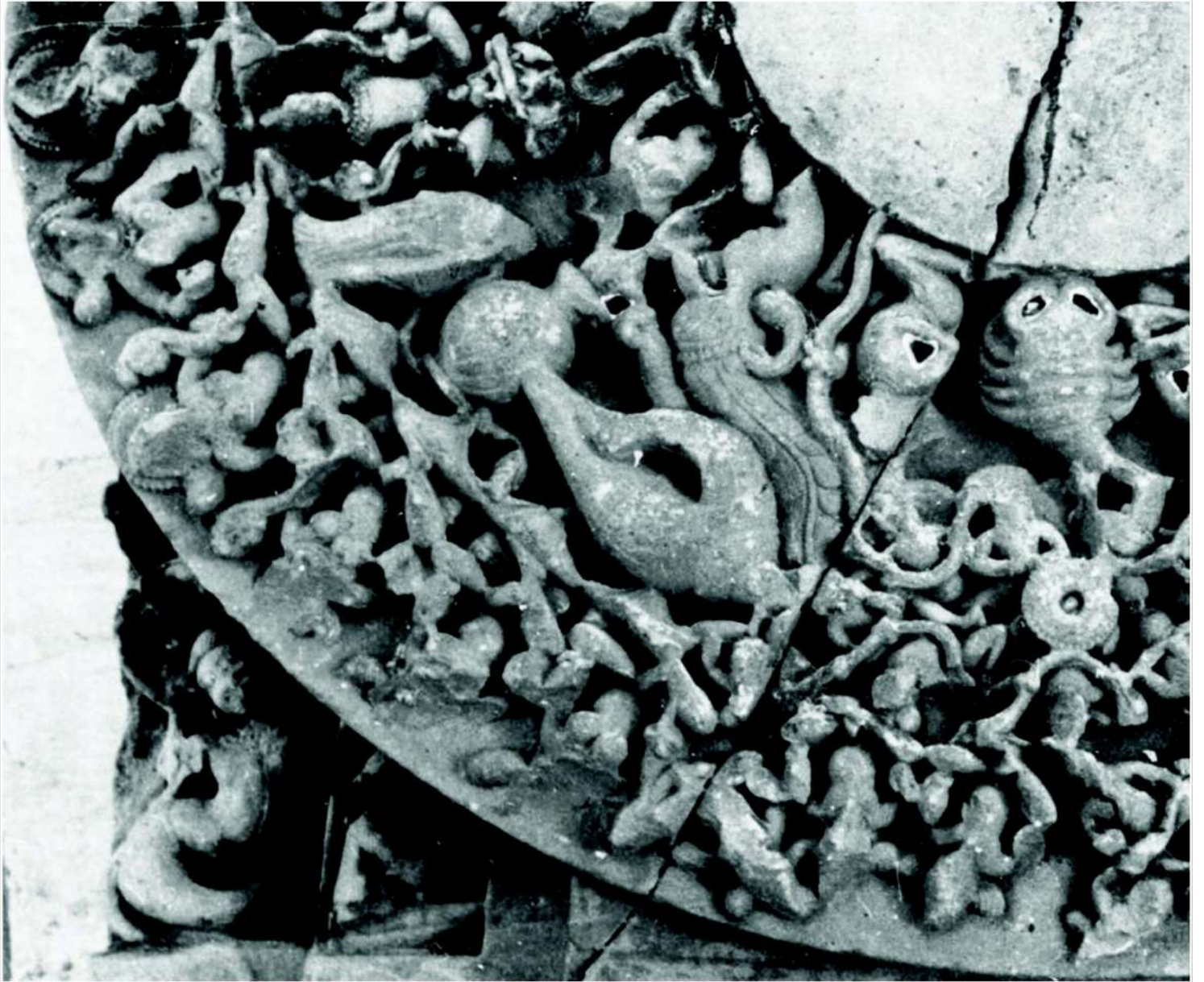


Fig.7.5 : Lower right:

Band-I – Rāśis: Vṛścika, Dhanu, Makara; one human figure

Band-II – Dhruva with Saptarṣi; conch; Rāśis: Kumbha, Mīna; followed by Sūrya on chariot

- (iii) All the other figures in *lalitāsana* with haloes behind are the twenty-eight Nakṣatras (including Abhijit) created by Viśvāmitra located out of *Vaiśvānarapatha*.
- (iv) Among these, a few are males and others are females. We venture to suggest that the males are the evil Nakṣatras (*Krūra, Mūlasajñaka*), namely Mūla, Revatī, Jyeṣṭhā, Maghā and Aśvinī. Another suggestion is that the Nakṣatras, whose names are in masculine, such as Hasta, Mūla, Śravaṇa, Pūrvabhādrapada, Uttarābhādrapada appear as males. These suggestions can be confirmed only after rechecking the slab in original, as the exact number of males and females cannot be ascertained from the photograph. Mythologically, all the Nakṣatras are daughters of Dakṣa Prajāpati given to Candra in marriage. Besides, the iconographic details (*pratimālakṣaṇa*) of Nakṣatras would also enlighten the point.

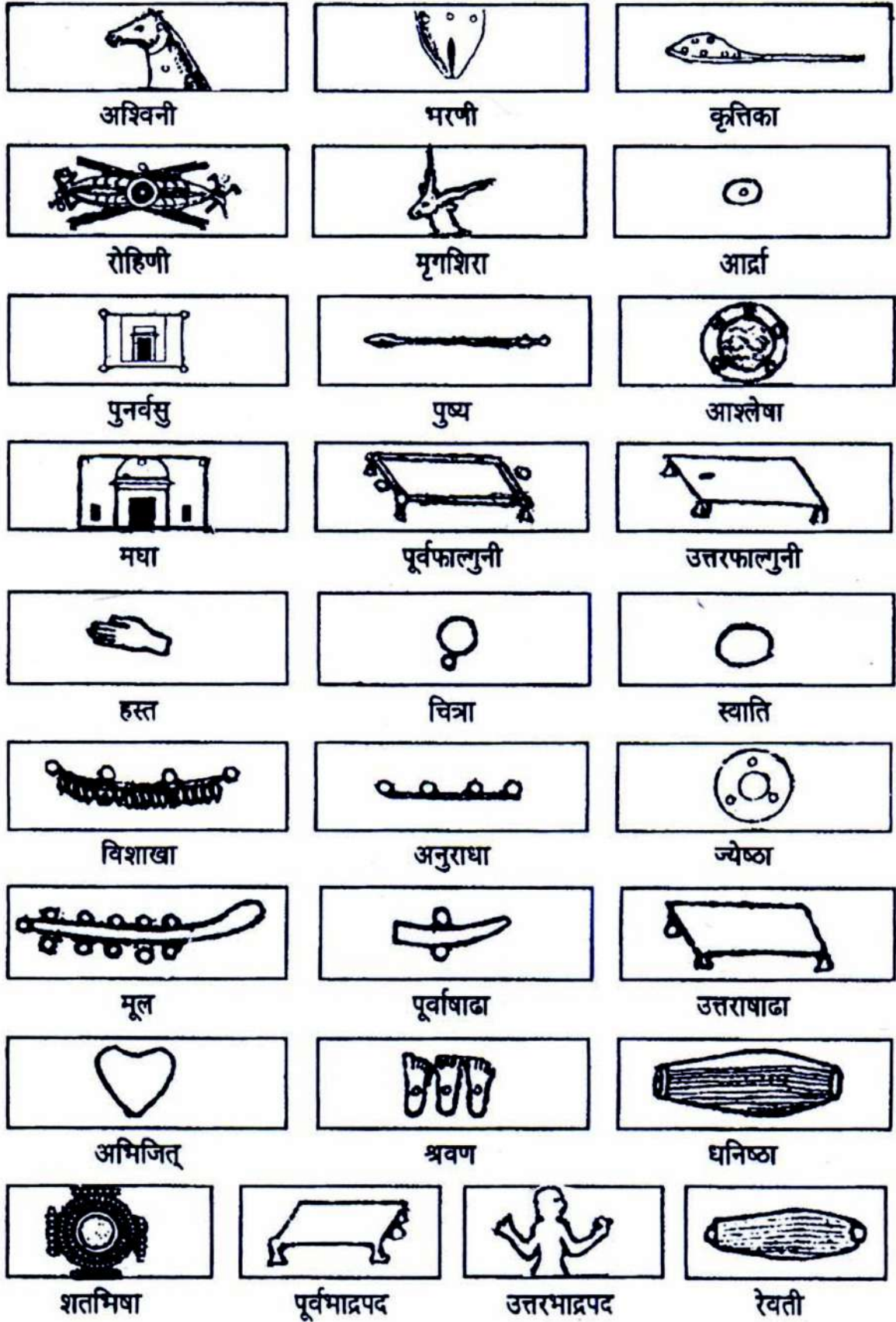
In this connection, again a question arises that if our identification of the three foot-prints, five small circles on them and the square formed by four males are Nakṣatras in this very circle are correct, then why should these again appear amongst the 'twenty-eight'? Is it to distinguish between the original group and subsequently created Nakṣatravaṁśa by Viśvāmitra?

- (v) Should we take the first and second band as *Vaiśvānarapatha*, as Triśaṅku and others have been placed out of it?

Literary Evidence

No literary evidence fully answering to our slab is yet known to us, but some interesting information can be gathered from the *Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa*.⁹ This *Purāṇa* mentions making of Vyomarūpa. This consists of Pṛthvī, Antarikṣa and *bhadrāpīṭha* bearing an eight-petalled lotus with Sūrya in centre and the Lokapālas on respective petals. Obviously, this Vyomarūpa is totally different, but some facts in the description are useful for our purpose, such as:

- (A) The Vyomarūpa has been called embodying all gods (*sarvadevamaya*) or with presence of all gods (*sannihitāḥ sarve tridaśottamāḥ*), though there is carving of Sūrya and Dikpālas only.
- (B) Its worship is equivalent to worship of the entire world, and it fulfills all the desires.
- (C) It is rectangular (*caturasra*) in the beginning and subsequently becomes circular (*vr̥tta*).



भारतीय चांद्र नक्षत्र : यहां अभिजित् सहित इनकी संख्या 28 है? यह चित्र ज्योतिषी श्रीपति (लगभग 1000 ई.) के मुहूर्त-ग्रंथ 'रत्नमाला' के विवरण के आधार पर सर विलियम जोन्स (1746-94 ई.) ने तैयार करवाया था.

Fig.7.6 : Figural depiction of Nakṣatras (Courtesy: Tāron Bharā Ākāśa)

(D) Antarikṣa is just a part of Vyoma. It is, therefore, changing the original title, we have re-named the slab as Vyomapaṭṭa.

The first three features are present in our slab. It depicts a large number of deities; secondly, it was an object of worship; and thirdly, it is four-sided in the original, but the entire depiction is circular.

Some useful information about Vyomarūpa and its worship is there in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* also. Here, Sūrya calls himself as Vyoma and his consort Nikṣubhā as Pṛthvī. Thus, Vyoma pervades the entire world and commands worship by all.¹⁰ As per instructions of Sūrya himself, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva worshipped Vyomarūpa, namely the Sun-god at Puṣkara, Viṣṇu at Śālagrāma and Śiva on the mount Gandhamādana, respectively.¹¹ It is further interesting to note that Brahmā worshipped Vyoma in rectangular form (*catuṣkoṇa*), while Hari and Hara did the same in *cakra* and *vṛtta* forms (that is circular).¹²

The terms Mahadvyoma with *prṣṭhaśṛṅga* has also been recorded as a form (*rūpa*) of Sūrya.¹³ It may further be assumed that presence of the two worshippers and Nāgas below, perhaps suggest depiction of Bhūloka, Pātāla, etc., while the *ṛṣis* above stand for Maharloka, Janaloka, Tapoloka and Satyaloka.

Before closing our discussions, we would like to make it very clear that identification of many of the details in this slab still needs a deeper thought, parallel instances and full literary evidences. We have no answers to questions like -

- (i) Who are there in the first or smallest circle?
- (ii) Why only ten *rāśis* have been shown?
- (iii) Who are the males among the twenty-eight in the outer circle?
- (iv) What is the basic purpose of carving such a slab?

We do hope that somebody would come forward and throw light on all these issues.

References

1. नी. पु. जोशी, 'धुबेला संग्रहालय का अन्तरिक्ष पट्ट', *संस्कृति संधान*, वाराणसी, अंक 4, 1991, pp. 24-26
N.P. Joshi, 'Devapatta, A Less Known Chapter of Medieval Iconography', *Eastern Approaches*, Ed. T.S. Maxwell, Delhi, 1992, Pl. 50, p. 138
2. *Rgveda*, X.90.3 - पादोस्य विश्वाभूतानि त्रिपादस्यामृतं दिवि
3. गुणाकर मुळे, *तारोभरा आकाश*, नई दिल्ली, 2004, p. 74
4. *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, Bālakāṇḍa, adhyāya 60
5. *Mahābhārata*, Ādiparva, 12.10 and dākṣiṇātya pāṭha; Ādiparva, 71.34 and dākṣiṇātya pāṭha

- चकारान्यंच लोकं वै क्रुद्धो नक्षत्रसंपदा
प्रतिश्रवण पूर्वाणि नक्षत्राणि चकार यः
गुरुशापहतस्यापि त्रिशंकोः शरणं ददौ।

6. *Vāyu-purāṇa*, Anuṣāṅga., 88.105-116, pp. 433 (Mor Edition), Kolkata

7. *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, Bālakāṇḍa, 60.21-23

8. *Ibid.*, 60.31-32

गगने तान्येतानि वैश्वानरपथात् बहिः
नक्षत्राणि मुनिश्रेष्ठ तेषु ज्योतिःषु जाज्वलन्॥
अवाक्शिरस्त्रिशंकुश्च तिष्ठत्वमरसंनिभः
अनुयास्यन्ति चैतानि ज्योतिषि नृपसत्तमम्॥

9. *Viṣṇudharmottara-purāṇa*, III.75.1-9, folio 345

व्योमरूपं समाचक्ष्व सर्वधर्मभृतां वर
व्योम्नि तु पूजिते पूजा कृतास्याज्जगतो भवेत्॥ 1
चतुरस्रं भवेन्मूले ततो वृत्तं महाभुज॥ 2

अन्तरिक्षं तथा स्तम्भं (पद्मं) ऊर्ध्वभागं ततो विदुः
तत्रसन्निहितास्सर्वे भवन्ति त्रिदशोत्तमाः॥ 7
सर्वदेवमयं व्योम कथितं ते महाभुज
तस्य सम्पूजनं कृत्वा सर्वकामनवाप्नुयात्॥ 8
व्योम्नः स्वरूपं कथितं मयैतत्
व्योम्नस्तु पूजा करणात्समग्रम्
संपूजितं स्याज्जगदेकवीर
चराचरं यादववंशमुख्य॥ 9

10. *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, Brāhma, 184, folio 138

आकाशं व्योम इत्याहुः पृथिवी निक्षुभा मता
भूतश्रेयो(?)हमाकाशो निक्षुभा दायिता मम॥ 32
मया निक्षुभया सर्वं जगद्व्याप्तं त्रिलोचन
तस्मादाराधय व्योम त्वं ब्रह्मा केशवस्तथा॥ 33

11. *Ibid.*

जगाम पुष्करं ब्रह्मा शालग्रामं जनार्दनः
वृषभध्वजो गतो वीर पर्वतं गन्धमादनम्॥ 155.24

12. *Ibid.*

व्योम्नि कृत्वा चतुष्कोणं ब्रह्मानित्यमपूजयत्
चक्रांकितं हरिर्नित्यं सम्यग्व्योमत्व पूजयत्॥ 26
हरोऽपि सततं वीर तेजसावहिसन्निभम्
अपूजयत् सदा वृत्तं व्योमं भक्त्या समन्वितः॥ 27

13. *Ibid.*

यन्मेरूपमहद्व्योम पृष्ठशृंगमनुत्तमम्।
तत्र देव कदम्बैस्तु भवान्नित्य निवत्स्यति॥ 155.45