



## DECODING DEATH: CONNOTATION OF THE CROSS IN THE CIRCLE IN INDIAN ROCK ART

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**ABSTRACT** - Symbols are the medium of expressing ideas telescopically and they can be communicated to others without articulate words or language. They are predominantly preponderant in a literate or semi-literate society. It is a universally accepted fact that every symbol has its own identity. Often it is understood by contemporary society in enigmatic ways. Following the contribution of post-modernist and post-processual ideas, each individual interpretation should be rightfully comprehended. In the rock art context we come across many symbols which have not been unidentified. Among numerous signs specifically the cross in circle interestingly signifies the importance of symbols in past society.

The present paper attempts to decode the meaning of the symbol of the cross in circle, also described as a plus in a circle, wheel cross, sun cross, kutsuwa-mon, cardinal cross, consecration cross, Woden's cross/Odin's cross, sun disc, sacred hoop or loop, sacred ring, sacred circle filled with a cross, Celtic cross, peace symbol, sun wheel, ring cross, spoked chariot wheel, circle of life. The author has been able to observe the symbol cross in circle in different localities and in a variety of contexts in Indian society. It has been found represented in rock shelters, caves, memorial stones, megaliths, stamped on living animals and sometimes also used as a totem. Based upon the archeological findings, as well as ancient literary references, this paper tries to decode the meaning and importance of the symbol cross in circle in society from the earliest to modern times.

**RIASSUNTO** - I simboli sono un mezzo per esprimere telesopicamente idee e possono essere trasmessi agli altri senza articolazione di parole o linguaggio. Sono preponderanti nelle società alfabetizzate e molto spesso anche in quelle semi-alfabetizzate. È un fatto universalmente condiviso che ogni simbolo abbia la propria identità. La società contemporanea lo comprende spesso in modi enigmatici. In seguito al contributo delle idee Post-Moderniste e Post-Processuali, ogni interpretazione individuale deve essere compresa correttamente. Nel contesto dell'arte rupestre ci si imbatte in molti simboli non ancora identificati. Per quanto riguarda il significato dei simboli, tra i molti segni uno in particolare, la "croce nel cerchio", rappresenta in maniera significativa e interessante l'importanza dei simboli nelle società del passato.

Il presente articolo cerca di decifrare il senso del simbolo della "croce nel cerchio", chiamato anche "il simbolo 'più' dentro al cerchio", "ruota crociata", "croce del sole", "kutsuwa-mon", "croce cardinale", "croce della consacrazione", "croce di legno", "croce di Odino", "disco solare", "sacro cappio o cerchio", "sacro anello", "sacro cerchio riempito da una croce", "croce celtica", "simbolo della pace", "ruota solare", "ruota raggiata di carro", "cerchio della vita".

L'autore ha potuto osservare il simbolo della "croce nel cerchio" in diverse località e in svariati contesti della società indiana. È stato rinvenuto in grotte, cave, lapidi, megaliti, marchiato su animali vivi e talvolta usato come totem. Basandosi sulle scoperte archeologiche e sui riferimenti della letteratura antica, questo articolo cerca di decifrare il significato e l'importanza sociale del simbolo della "croce nel cerchio" a partire dai tempi più remoti fino alla Modernità.

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### INTRODUCTION

Art's forms have come to us through the language of symbols. Symbols served the purpose of decoration and space filling. Nevertheless, there too they helped in the expression of ideas aesthetically, introducing in the charm that enhanced the appeal. The meaning of any one symbol will be more, because it depends on the cognitive approach of the interpreter. For example, the pentagram has been used to transmit occult power in all kinds of rituals for centuries, but to Christians the same shape may simply represent a star, a special part of God's creation.

### THE PLUS SIGN IN A CIRCLE SYMBOL

This symbol has various names. Each given name shows the different scholars' cognitive aptitudes, depend on the finding scenario and material culture. The author will focus on each symbol's name and its supposed and suggested meaning. For a proper understanding of the plus sign in a circle symbol, it is important to understand the various components of this symbol and their individual meanings. Apparently, there are three main components in the symbol, together with the swastika, which may be regarded as a small variant of the plus

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sign. Of these three, the circle, plus and swastika have been found to have meanings relevant to death rituals and associated philosophies. The amalgamation of the three symbols and their meanings makes the plus in a Circle a death symbol when interpreted in the context of the death ceremony.

### *Circle*

Circles commonly represent unity, wholeness and infinity, without beginning or end, without sides or corners. Circles are often seen as protective symbols. Conversely, a circle can also mean containing or keeping that which is inside from being released. Circles are frequently used as sun symbols, the element of spirit, seen as an element equal or superior to the physical elements of fire, air, water and earth, commonly represented by a circle (Sharma, 1990: 25, 45). However, it can be assumed as the symbol of the eternal soul as it represents unity, wholeness and infinity.

The cross with equal arms is often found with various meanings. In some systems, this symbol means death, or the end and beginning of inscriptions on coins.

### *Swastika*

The word 'Swastika' comes from the Sanskrit *Svastika*, 'su' meaning 'good,' 'asti' means 'to be' and 'ka' is a suffix (Heidmann, 1991: 937–939). The swastika literally means 'to be good'. Another translation can be made: 'swa' is 'higher self', 'asti' means 'being' and 'ka' is a suffix, so the translation can be interpreted as 'being with higher self' (Heller, 2000: 35). For the Eastern world, the swastika symbol is in the clockwise direction and for Western world swastika symbol it is anti-clockwise (Quinn, 1994: 54). This symbol is widely represented in every corner of the earth right from prehistoric times to modern days. In India, it is a most sacred symbol, widely accepted in every Hindu family and in every ritual activity, such as in *Upanayana Samkskara* (Sacred Thread Ceremony). The meaning behind the interpretation of 'to be good' or 'being with higher self' can be directly associated with the purpose of life after death. The rituals and functions of the death ceremony are performed for the person who has died. Therefore it can be assumed that the swastika symbol may have been derived from the r symbol 'plus in circle' with minor modifications. A similar motif has been revealed from the excavation at Nagarjunikionda, Andhra Pradesh in 1958–9. The excavation exposed an architectural plan of a swastika inside a circle. This is the plan of the stupa which is again for commemoration; we all are aware with the purposes of stupa (A. Ghosh, 1959, Plate IV, B: 5–10).

### IMPORTANCE OF DEATH IN SOCIETY

In order to commemorate a loved one after his or her death, family members and close friends plan a death ceremony that reflects their religious or cultural attitudes towards death. The death ceremony is a popular and powerful ritual done after the death of a person. A death ceremony not only highlights the fact that a life has ended, but it also specifies how a life was lived by the deceased. In addition, it helps the survivors to heal emotionally as they get a chance to express their grief. Experts say that one must express grief in a proper way, otherwise it will create problems in accepting the truth and moving forward in life.

### *Context and proposed meaning of this symbol*

The sacred circle filled with a cross is described in many regions and in many periods as the spirits of the north, east, south and west or the basic elements: earth, water, air and fire. In addition, the Celtic cross of American traditions, the Nero's cross of the Vikings called it the death rune, while among the Germanic people it is known as the rune of death. After the Second World War (1939–1945), it was found on the tombstones of the soldiers of Hitler and labeled 'the dead man's rune'. Maga-tamaor Mitsu Tomoe of Japan and the Trimurti of Bhutan and Tibet are also related to this theme. The Nordic Odin and the Teutonic Wuotan or Woden was the supreme god of the Nordic religion before Christianity. Odin was the god of art, culture, warfare and the dead.

### *Indian thoughts*

The plus in the circle is considered one of the most popular symbols of ancient Indian art and tradition. This is the life cycle, the rotating life of human, nature, earth and everything, which is directly associated with humans. The *Harivamsa Purana* mentioned that the plus in circle also has some Shiva connections, his philosophy of and his work as destroyer. Here again it is important that the symbol is associated with Lord Shiva, the destroyer. It also signifies the concept of fast-moving time, *Kala*, though the meaning of *Kala* is ending, destruction and the condition in which everything will be the last.

This symbol is one of the first non-pictorial graphic images to appear when humankind was on the threshold of the Bronze Age. It is common on rock carvings. It appears in ancient Egypt, China, pre-Columbian America, Lille Strandbygård, Sydbornholm and the Near East.

In the prehistoric religion of Bronze Age Europe, crosses in circles appear frequently on artifacts identified as cult items. Symbols identical to the plus in circle are documented in rock art in Mexico inside shelters and caves. Again, its identification or decoding is an enigma among scholars of the respective regions. It is also reported from many rock art sites of India, from the extreme south to the north, west and east. It is reported from the famous petroglyph sites Edakkal and Marayur at Atala of Kerala (Mathapal, 1998: pl: 23 A, 14 B). The plus in circle symbol with four spokes can be seen in Kabra Pahar (Raigarh) rock painting (Gupta, 1967: pl. XVII). Another example of the plus in circle can also be seen in Sitakhardi (Chambal valley) rock paintings. It is reported from the wall of the shelter. As compared with other sites such as Kaimur and Central Indian rock art this symbol is very limited in the Edakkal rock art. At the Odishan rock art sites the symbol in pictograph form has been noticed on the wall along with petroglyphs and it has been executed in bichromatic form. Generally there are four other small circles with a dot on each direction attached to the main circle and connected with every four spokes. Similar symbols are reported from the Mirzapur rock art on the ceilings of the shelters. This was just the beginning of evidence for such symbols in the Kaimur region. The author reported on and documented innumerable plus in circle symbols from the ceilings and walls of the shelters and caves. They are painted in a total of 11 shelters of the one locality in every cave and shelter, with a dark and light *geru* colour. It is very interesting because it has been executed near a trident symbol, which we all are aware is the *ayudha* (weapon) of Lord Shiva, the destroyer. The trident symbol is very rare in comparison with the plus in circle, but it has been noticed in every cave and shelter. The reason to establish this symbol as a death symbol is also drawn from the evidence of the pictographs of battle scenes close by. Here in two shelters scenes of war are executed in which the warriors are shown with war weapons and they are painted on the wall in a red colour. This is a supporting fact that after war some warriors died or were killed, in whose commemoration these particular symbols were executed with a desire for their improved life beyond death.

The earliest representation of the plus in circle is found in rock shelters, in pictograph and petroglyph forms, on Harappan, Neolithic, Chalcolithic and megalithic artifacts and even on early coins. In subsequent periods it also frequently appears on seals, sealings and terracotta figurines, plans of stupas, *ayagapattas* and indigenous coins in various forms. The same symbols are noticed from other archeological artifacts, which prove the facts about this symbol. The Bronze Age (mid-second millennium BC) symbol has also been connected with the spoked chariot wheel, which at the time had four spokes. In the context of a culture that celebrated the sun chariot, it may also have had a solar connotation. Wheel pendants dating to the second half of the second millennium BC, found in Zürich, are at the Swiss National Museum. Variants include a six-spoked wheel, an empty circle and a second circle with 12 spokes surrounding one of four spokes.

On the seals from Mohenjodaro and Harappa (X PL. XCVII (554), it is depicted as a cross inside a circle on the back of the bull (Mackey, 554; Ancient India, 16; Pl. XXI, B.4). Uninscribed copper coins from Kausambi (third century BC) also exhibit frequent renderings of the plus in circle symbol with four spokes on the back of the bull and elephant.

On a Neolithic pottery piece of Piklihal, a six-spoked circle can also be seen (Allchin, 1960: 26–77). On a potsherd from Lothal B., it appears with four spokes. The Chalcolithic potsherd from Navadatoli also shows the marks of a four-spoked circle. The plus in circle can also be seen on the megalithic pottery from T. Narsipur on a fragment of a vase, decorated with a stamped design, from Rajghat, Varanasi period II, a unique example with religious significance. Here we find three plus in circles, a hollow cross and a *Triratna* or *Nandpada* on the top of the small poles fixed in a rectangular railing (Narain, Roy, 1977: 46). A similar symbol is reported from the south Indian megaliths (Lal et al., 1960: 4–6). In the excavation at Nagarjunikonda Site 24, 27, 54, excavators exposed the stupa plan (Ghosh et al., 1993: PXLIV: 22–3), of the same form as a plus in circle (Sharma, 1990: 271). The importance of this plan and its affinity with the similar symbol that is the plus in circle, the stupa was in practice for the commemoration of the person who died. The plan is the same as the authors described earlier and this again proves it.

The identification of the plus in circle in Buddhism and Jainism is amply illustrated in the art of Sarnath, Sanchi, Bharahut, Amarawati, Taxila and Mathura. This symbol is also reported from the royal tomb at Kivik, Scania and the excavators are confused about the identification of this symbol on that tomb and the location. It was also reported from South worth Hall Barrow, Croft, England, during 1980 on the bases of Bronze Age



burial urns. These examples confirm the popularity of this symbol and establish its venerated position within these religious places. Their architecture is constructed to commemorate a dead human. Similar symbols are also noticed at the megalithic burial of Pillar Stone, Gallarus Oratory, County Kerry, Ireland. A similar symbol with identical proportions but minute variations has been reported from various megalithic sites and burials. We noted a variation in the form of representation of the plus in circle on ancient coins but their significance is not very well understood (Table 1).

SL. NO.	PERIOD	SITES In India	SITES In Abroad	CONTEXT	MATERIAL
1.	Prehistoric Cave	Kabra Pahar, Sitakhardi, Bhimbethka (Central India), Kaimur (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh), Kerala, Odisha	Egypt, China, pre-Columbian America, and the Near East, Lille Strandbygård, Sydbornholm, Indian rock art of New Mexico,	Rock Art	On the Rock Wall
	Neolithic	Pikalihal		Potteries	Terracotta
2.	Indus Valley civilization	Mohenjodaro, Lothal B, Harappa		Potteries	Terracotta
				Seal	Stone
				Sealing	Terracotta
				Terracotta Figurines	Terracotta
3.	2 <sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.		Zürich, Switserzerland	----	Bronze
4.	Megalithic	T.Narsipur		Pottery	Terracotta
5.	Chalcolithic	Malwa Ware, Nawadatoli,		Pottery	Terracotta
6.	Early Historic	Ramnagar, Magadha, Gorakhpur, Kausambi, Paila, aurihar, Mamdar, Bhabhua, Rajghatm Jhansi, Pratappgarh, Patna, Rairh, Bahal, Jaunpur.		Punch Marked Coins	Silver and Copper
7.	Early Historic-Historical	Kausambi		Uninscribed Cast Coin	Copper
8.	Historical	Nagarjunikonda site 27, 24, 54 <i>i.e.</i> Four-spoked Chakra Stupa base. (Courtesy, ASI, I.A.R.)		Stupa Architecture On Plan	Bricks
		Sarnath, Sanchi, Bharahut, Amrawati, Taxila Mathura	1. On the ancient slabs of Nordic countries, Pre-Columbian America, Mediterranean countries. 2. On the floor of the ancient buildings of the American, the royal tomb at Kivik, Scania. 3. South worth Hall Barrow Croft, England on the bases of Bronze Age burial urns. 4. Pillar stone, Gallarus Oratory, County Kerry, Ireland.	On the stone architectural members, Burial	
		Rajghat Period III		Pottery	
		Rajghat I-II Mathura III-IV		Terracotta Figurine	Terracotta
					Terracotta

## Ancient Indian literature – Garud Purana

In the ancient literature, *Garud Purana* mentions the death ritual on the tenth day of the death ceremony. Even the Vedic literature is full of references to the symbolic forms revealing the truth of cosmic realities (Agrawal, 1965: 3). *Garuda Purana* is one of the *Puranas*, which are part of the Hindu body of texts known as *smriti*. It is a *Vaishnava Purana* and its first part contains a dialogue between Vishnu and Garuda, the king of birds. The second half contains details of the life after death, funeral rites and the metaphysics of reincarnation, so it is recited as a part *antyesti* (*Antim Sanskar*) or funeral rite (funeral liturgy) in Hinduism (Wood, Subrahmanyam, 1911:13). The *Padma Purana* categorizes *Garuda Purana* as a *Sattva Purana* (Wilson, 1840: 12), where in chapter 10 paragraphs 7, 8, 9 and 10 the process of the funeral is mentioned.

In Sanskrit	Transliterations
पश्चिमे विष्णुकलशं गङ्गोदकसमन्वितम् । तस्योपरि न्यसेद्विष्णुं पीतवस्त्रेण वेष्टितम् । 7 ।	Pashchimevishnukalshamgangodaksamanvitam   Tasyopari nyasedvishnumpitavastren veshtitam  7
पूर्वे तु ब्रह्मकलशं क्षीरोदकसमन्वितम् । ब्राह्मणं स्थापयेत्तत्र श्वेतवस्त्रेण वेष्टितम् । 8 ।	Purvetubrahmakalashamkshirodaksamanvitam   Brahmanamsthapayettatrashtvetvashtren veshtitam  8
उत्तरस्यां रुद्रकुम्भं पूरितं मधुसर्पिषा । श्री रुद्र स्थापयेत्तत्र रक्तवस्त्रेण वेष्टितम् । 9 ।	Uttarashyamrudrakumbhampuritam madhusarpisha   Shrirudrasthapayettatraraktavastrenveshtitam  9
दक्षिणस्यां यमघंटमिन्द्रोदकसमन्वितम् । कृष्णवस्त्रेण संवेष्टय तस्योपरि यमं न्यसेत् । 10 ।	Dakshinashyamyamghantamindrodaksamanvitam   Krishnavastrensamveshtayatasyopariyamamnyaset  10
<i>English translation</i>	
Vishnu Kalash (Pot) filled with Ganga-jala (Water from the holy river Ganga) and wrapped in yellow cloth is placed in west direction.  7	
Brahma Kalash (Pot) filled with Water and milk and wrapped in white cloth is placed in east direction.  8	
Rudra Kalash (Pot) filled with honey and ghee and wrapped in red cloth is placed in north direction.  9	
Yama Kalash (Pot) filled with rain water and wrapped in black cloth is placed in south direction.  10	

Moreover, in the centre the *Preta Kalash* that is the dead person's soul will be placed in the centre of all above. If we place the whole pot as detailed then it will be placed as in this drawing. In the *Rigveda* this circular symbol is defined as '*Pratyatgaman*' which is nothing but death, the motion of life, the motion of the circle as the cycle of life and life after death.

It is believed that during the death ceremony a cultural process called *Brikhotsharga* mentioned in *Garud Purana* ancient literature, in which the family of the deceased has to donate one bull with four cows with one or two cows with one bull only to the *mahapatra*. The *mahapatra* is actually the Brahmin, who has the right to receive all the pain of the person who has died and is wandering the earth. The donation is based on the status of the family. The lower left side body of bull is stamped with a trident and plus in circle symbol on the right side with a hot iron. The *Vishnudharmottara Purana* mentioned marking the bull's body with sandal paste only. The purpose behind the donation of the bull is fertility, and the *mahapatra* cannot domesticate the bull. However, that bull has the right to move anywhere, wherever he wants to. Nobody can beat him if damages the property of any body, including crops. It is believed in society that the bull is nothing, but has the soul of the dead man for whom the death ceremony with the bull was carried out. The stamped plus in circle on the back is identification among the public, those who can face the bull anywhere and anytime. This tradition is found in the Kaimur region among the class of every caste. It is interesting that such symbols are also noticed inside the rock shelter and cave on the ceiling of Kaimur rock art and that a similar symbol was noticed on the Harappan seals and similar motifs were also noticed on the bull and elephant on cast coins from Kausambi. It might have been used as a symbol of life after death, but it is very much in relation with the death ceremony. It may be the actual meaning of this symbol, but it is a fact that in the past symbolic language was used.

## LEGACY IN TRADITION

Living traditions of the death burial practice have been noticed by the author in many parts of Bihar, especially in the Kaimur region, Vaishali, Muzafferpur, Gaya and the Aurangabad district of Bihar. The author noticed many memorial stones in the southern and western areas of the village in Gaya and the Aurangabad District of Bihar. This small present monument is directly associated with the death ceremony. The stones in



practice are made of marble quarried and transported from the Rajasthan area. It is available in every local stone masonry factory. The memorial stone bears script in Devanagari, engraving the name of the deceased person along with date of birth, death, place, name of father/husband/brother/daughter name, with an address. The interesting part of this is the plus in circle which is engraved on the top of every memorial stone with three symbols, i.e. trident, the word *Om* and the plus in circle from left to right.

According to the local people, the tradition of the engraving of this symbol has continued from their ancestors but when the tradition was started is not known. As stated above, the memorial stone is erected either on the south or west side of the village, maybe due to the association of the south side with *yama*, who is the god of death and is always placed in a southern direction in Indian mythology. It is difficult to identify the symbols engraved on the top of the memorial stone. As we know, the trident is *aayudha*, attributes of the Lord Shiva and the *Om* is used for all Hindu gods and goddesses. The plus in circle is probably showing the cycle of life, life after death or the symbol of death.

#### INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSION

This symbol has a wide representation in various phenomena, viz. rock art, religious, archeological, supernatural and astronomical. However, the evidence found on the rock art death memorial pieces and the animal body can be associated with the representation of the death itself. Such a symbol could be in practice since the earliest times when the practice of the disposal of the dead was in existence, but the evidence is available in the Neolithic phase, followed by the Chalcolithic and plenty in the megalithic period, not only on the spot of burial practices but even on or in front of the houses of the dead person in present times. Archeological interpretations of this symbol more emphasize its meaning and purpose. Thus, the story has started, but it is not yet concluded.

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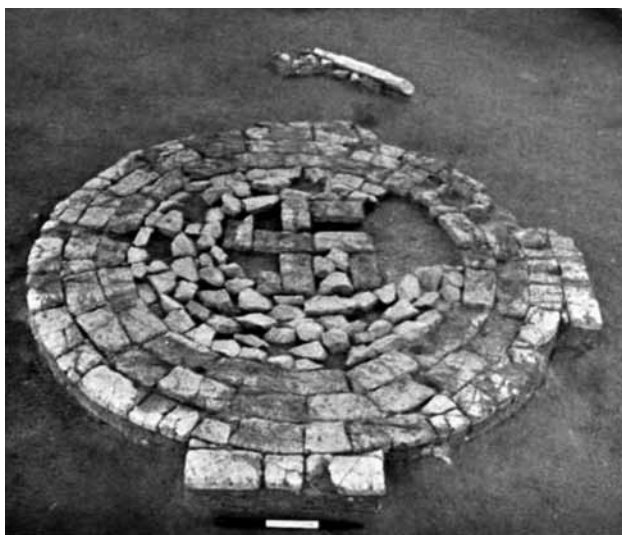


Fig.1: Exposed stupa architectural plan of swastika inside circle, Nagarjunikonda, Andhra Pradesh



Fig.2: Petroglyphs on the bedrock, Lille Strandbygård, Sydbernholm



Fig.3: Pictograph on the ceiling of the shelter at Atala, Kerala



Fig.4: Pictograph on the wall of the shelter, Odisha



Fig.5 A, B: Pictographs of trident on the wall of the shelter, Kaimur



Fig.6 A, B: Symbol of the plus in circle on the pot of megalithic 6 A, plus in circle on the back portion of the Harappan seal of bull

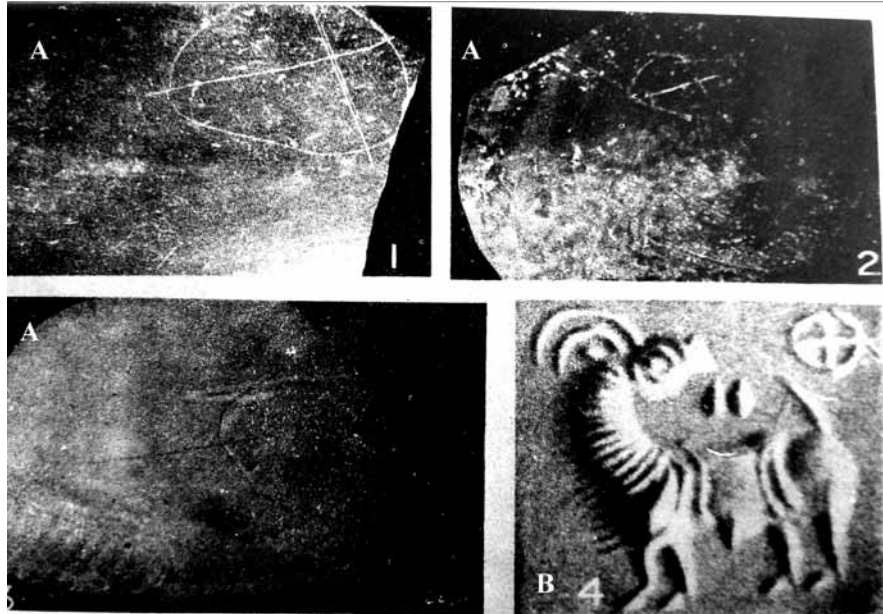
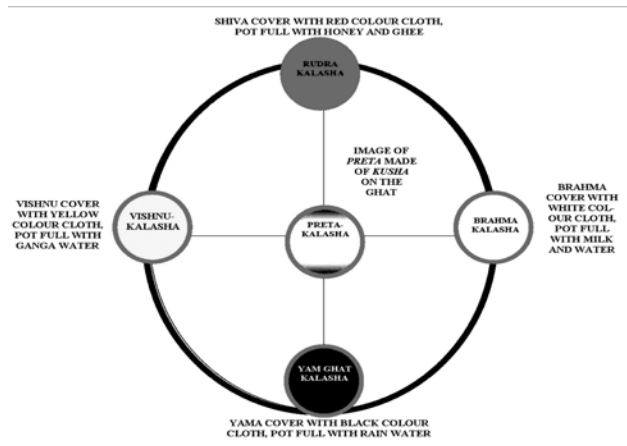


Fig.7: The stupa plan of Nagarjunikonda Sites 24, 27, 54, Nagarjunikonda, Andhra Pradesh



Fig.8: Pictographs from the royal tomb at Kivik, Scania



▲ Fig.9: The drawing prepared based on Garuda Purana text

◀ Fig.10: Megalithic burial of Pillar Stone, Gallarus Oratory, County Kerry, Ireland