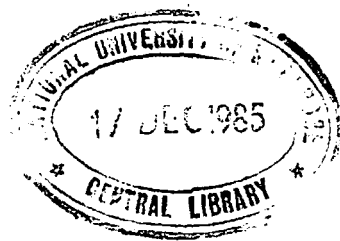


INDIAN ART

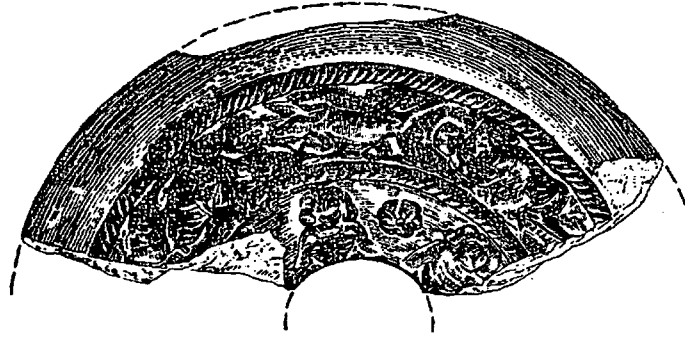
rd and Second centuries B.C.—Mauryan and Late Mauryan)



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2. The Ringstones



THE RINGSTONES, like monolithic pillars, form a distinct group in the gamut of Mauryan and Late Mauryan art objects. Although their time-bracket appears to be largely confined to third and second centuries B.C., yet some of them may be still later, by about a century or so.

There is a peculiar charm about them. Their jewel-like workmanship and exquisite finish, have elicited the comment 'unsurpassed by any other specimen of stone-work from ancient India' from Sir John Marshall. Some of them also represent the earliest attempt in India towards achieving a perfect balance in the composition of figures in relation to voids; this was accomplished, as in all ancient arts, through symmetrical arrangement of individual items in repetitive panels or running friezes. Even a glimpse would convince one that these objects formed part of the general background to which the Bharhut-Bodh Gaya-Sanchi tradition belonged.

These are possibly the earliest examples in which human, plant and animal life commingle within a framework of geometric patterns. Mythical representations and ritualistic motifs are also found generally sprinkled over them. Each one is, therefore, a miniature world in itself. This as well as the exuberance of the so-called 'honeysuckle' motif and nude mother goddess, should ensure these ringstones a permanent place in India's long and rich history of art. But their legitimate claims have generally been overlooked in favour of monumental pillars and caves; for no one knows exactly for what purpose these objects of rare beauty were fashioned. Coomaraswamy (1927: 20) was a bit confused on this issue, as his two contradictory observations, that these could be ear-rings in one and that it will not be (since the discstone from Sankisa is without hole, in another, clearly indicate. Moreover, they do not appear to have formed part of the accepted canons for iconographic texts. They are, therefore, somewhat enigmatic although some scholars, like V.S. Agrawala and Pramod Chandra, do find their reflection in the Vedic texts, like the *Sri Sukta* of the *Rigveda*. Moti Chandra (1973, 42) agreeing with Przyluski (1934) feels that the nude goddess may have come to India from Western Asia, Babylonia to be exact.

The history of their discovery goes back to the late nineteenth century. Cunningham recovered

Diameter 4.7 cm, thickness 1.6 cm. PM/Arch. 10746.

- Pl. 25 a** 12. This disc has a fourteen petalled lotus in the centre. The flower is encircled by a line. The outer frieze has seven animals and two birds : (1) an elephant facing right, (2) a peacock looking behind, (3) a stag facing right, (4) a stag (?) facing right, (5) a rhinoceros facing right, (6) a stag looking behind, (7) a stag facing right, (8) a horse facing right, (9) a peacock facing right.

On the reverse there is a roughly engraved ladder symbol.

Diameter 5 cm, thickness 1.6 cm. PM/Arch. 10747.

- Pl. 24 a** 13. This disc has a fifteen petalled lotus in the centre round which moves a frieze with five animals and three birds, arranged clockwise : (1) a stag, (2) a peacock, (3) a stag, (4) a horse, (5) a peacock, (6) a stag, (7) a horse, and (8) and an owl which alone is facing front.

On the reverse is a roughly drawn figure of two triangles joined at the vertex.

Diameter 4.7 cm, thickness 1.3 cm. PM/Arch. 10748.

- Pl. 36 a** 14. This disc is also interesting for some unusual features. The central lotus has thirteen large and an equal number of small petals, alternating each other. The figures, practically resting over it, include nine birds and one animal. The background is granulated, *i.e.*, decorated with raised dots, also called the 'engine-turned' design, starting with the figure of : (1) a heron facing left and moving clockwise there are the figures of (2) a heron facing left, (3) a goose facing left, (4) a heron facing left, (5) to (8) herons looking behind, (9) a cat facing front, and (10) a heron facing left.

The peripheral frieze consists of 56 finials with corrugated stems.

Diameter 4.4 cm, thickness 1.3 cm. PM/Arch. 10749.

- Pl. 34 e** 15. This is a unique disc; for its entire surface is filled with solid triangles in eight rows forming various geometric patterns. It is significant to note that the whole surface is divided by criss-cross dotted lines in such a way that all the three sides of a triangle are marked by dotted lines. The design is finally enclosed by a dotted circle.

PM/Arch. 10750.

- Pl. 33 c** 16. The disc has a fifteen petalled lotus in the centre. Beyond it are two concentric circles, each with a series of finials. The entire background is granulated.

The reverse has a roughly drawn triangle.

Diameter 5.7 cm, thickness 1.3 cm. PM/Arch. 10751.

- Pl. 33 d** 17. The disc has a fourteen petalled lotus in the centre. The peripheral decoration consists of taurines which go round the lotus in a continuous series.

Diameter 5 cm, thickness 1.3 cm. PM/Arch. 10752.

- Pl. 33 f** 18. The disc has an eighteen petalled lotus in the centre. The peripheral decoration consists of finials with corrugated bodies.

Diameter 4.4 cm, thickness 1.6 cm. PM/Arch. 10753.

- Pl. 33 e** 19. The disc has a ten petalled lotus in the centre. The peripheral decorations are arranged in two concentric circles—the inner one consists of seven crescents and six taurines, alternating each other except at one place where two crescents are juxtaposed. The outer circle consists of corrugated finials. The background is filled with raised dots.

PM/Arch. 10754.

- Pl. 33 b** 20. A twelve petalled lotus is in the centre. The peripheral decoration consists of two concentric rings, the inner one depicting corrugated finials and the outer one taurines. The background is filled with raised dots.

Diameter 4.1 cm, thickness 0.95 cm. PM/Arch. 10755.

21. This example is plain except for the central roundel and the outer ring.

Pl. 34 a

Diameter 4.1 cm, thickness 1.6 cm. PM/Arch. 10756.

There are two other examples, a disc and a ring in Patna Museum.

22. This disc was discovered in 1935 by the Public Works Department while 'digging the city area near Govind Mittra Road at a depth of 14 feet. Although it is slightly bigger in size than Arch. 10749, slightly more than 5 cm in diameter, it resembles that in many ways.'

Pl. 29 c

In the centre there is the twenty petalled lotus with two concentric rings forming the peripheral decoration—the inner ring has eight animals and four birds. These are : (1) the horse facing left, and moving clockwise, (2) and (3) stag looking behind, (4) a heron facing left, (5) a lion facing left, (6) a stag looking behind, (7) a cock facing left, (8) a stag facing left, (9) a stag looking behind, (10) an owl facing front, (11) a lion facing left, and (12) a peacock facing left.

The outer ring is decorated with 68 corrugated finials.

PM/Arch. 9574.

23. It is a ringstone with a geometric decoration of two concentric rings on the upper surface but surprisingly, with a plain interior, except for a rough drawing of 'honeysuckle' or *nagapushpa*. In addition there is an inscription in typical Mauryan Brahmi characters which reads 'Vishakha' (*Vishakhasa*). PM/ Arch. 8814.

Pl. 33 d

Shere (1951 : 190) has made an admirable classification of the discs from Murtaziganj. He observes that "these 21 discs may be classified as 5 having the figures of mother goddesses, human beings, animals and birds; 9 having the figures of only animals and birds; 1 with only geometrical designs; 5 having only lotus flowers; and the remaining 1 absolutely plain, with a slight depression in the centre."

In all the "first five discs there appear the figures of mother goddesses and the following animals : (i) winged lion, (ii) lion, (iii) elephant, (iv) horse, (v) antelope, (vi) stag, (vii) deer, (viii) ram, (ix) goose, (x) peacock, and (xi) parrot. Out of these five, three have no lotus flowers, while only one has figures of human beings with animal-like faces."

The category of nine discs has the following animals and birds : the (i) lion, (ii) rhinoceros, (iii) elephant, (iv) horse, (v) bull, (vi) boar, (vii) deer, (viii) stag, (ix) dog, (x) goat, (xi) cat, (xii) peacock, (xiii) goose, (xiv) crane, (xv) heron, (xvi) cock, and (xvii) owl; two of these have no lotus flower.

Vaisali Group

From Vaisali two examples of discstones have been recorded by Krishna Deva and V.K. Mishra. Both, it may be pointed out, are greatly different from the usual discs but as they do share their basic concepts, they have been included here.

No. 1. The disc is of gray steatite and richly decorated with mother goddesses, winged lions, *pipal* tree (*Ficus religiosa*) and 'honeysuckle' or *nagapushpa* motifs on the convex side. The excavators describe it as follows :

"Within the outer cable design is carved a concentric register of floral pattern, resembling the honeysuckle motif. The principal design placed in a broad concentric band within the floral border consists of two Mother Goddess figurines and two winged lions, each separated from the other by a conventional tree motif resembling the *pipal* tree (*Ficus religiosa*). The inner