

RECENTLY DISCOVERED INSCRIPTIONS OF LICCHAVI NEPAL*

Gautamavajra Vajrācārya

Kathmandu

At present the most important source for the history of the Licchavi period in Nepal is the stone inscriptions. For the most part (but by no means exclusively) these inscriptions are confined to the Kathmandu Valley, the dynastic seat of the Licchavis from ca. A. D. 300 to 850. They are written in Sanskrit and inscribed in Gupta characters. Some are lengthy records, often royal edicts, engraved on thick stone slabs and on pillars; others are dedicatory lines, sometimes very brief, inscribed on the base of an image or Śivalinga in stone or bronze, on stone stupas, waterspouts, architectural fragments, clay seals, pottery or other similar time-resisting objects.

Subsequent to the well-known compendium of ninety-one Nepalese inscriptions in Gupta characters published by Raniero Gnoli a quarter of a century ago,¹ many others have come to light. Of these sixty-five have been already published, largely by Nepalese scholars in local journals, and now the published total swells to one hundred and fifty-six.² This, however, does not appear to exhaust the corpus of Licchavi inscriptions and ten recently discovered examples will be discussed in this paper.³

*The author expresses his deep gratitude to H. M. the King of Nepal for permission to carry out historical research in the Hanuman Dhoka Palace (Inscription V).

1 *R. Gnoli: Nepalese Inscriptions in Gupta Characters* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1956), hereinafter cited as *Gnoli*.

2 In 1969 the number of published Licchavi-period inscriptions totalled 151 according to the tabulation of the Nepalese journal *Pūrṇimā* (Kathmandu: *Samśodhana-maṇḍala*, V.S. 2026 Śrāvaṇa [July 1969], vol. 6, no. 2, issue 22, p. 156, n. 1). Since that summary an additional five Licchavi period inscriptions have been published, as follows: *Pūrṇimā* (V. S. 2026 Māgha [January 1970], vol. 6, no. 4, issue 24, p. 336; Mohanaprasāda Khanāla, *Abhilekha-saṃkalana* [Collected Inscriptions] (Patan: *Sājhā Prakāśana*, V.S. 2027 [1971], Inscr. 1, pp. 1-3; and Śaṅkaramāna Rājavaṃśī, *Kāntipuraśilālekha-sūci* [Catalog of Kathmandu Stone Inscriptions] (Kathmandu: Department of Archaeology, National Archives, His Majesty's Government, V. S. 2027 [1970], Inscrs. 17, 50, and 51, pp. 11-12, 35-36).

3 Most of the new inscriptions were found in the Kathmandu Valley in 1971 in company with Dr. Mary Slusser as we pursued our joint researches in Nepalese culture. Thanks are due Dr. Slusser for being instrumental in their discovery and to her and to Dr. Pratyapaditya Pal, Curator of Indian and Islamic Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, for critically reviewing the present paper and for offering many valuable suggestions. I should also like to thank my colleague, Mahesh Raj Pant, for his assistance

The Licchavis used two separate, consecutive eras for dating their records. The first of these, now considered to be the widespread Śaka era,⁴ reckons from an epoch year corresponding to A. D. 78. The earliest known Licchavi record in this era is dated Saṃvat 386 (A. D. 464)⁵ the last, 535 (A. D. 613).⁶ The Śaka Saṃvat was replaced with a local one, known as the Aṃśuvarṃā or Mānadeva era although probably Aṃśuvarṃā introduced it. The epoch year of the new era corresponds to A. D. 576. Heretofore, the latest stone inscription in the Aṃśuvarṃā era was Saṃvat 207 (A. D. 783)⁷ but inscription IX, published here, dated Saṃvat 242 (A.D. 818) now provides a still later record.⁸

Although originally most Licchavi-period inscriptions bore exact dates in one or the other of these eras, many of the published inscriptions, including seven of the ten published here, do not. Usually, physical damage subsequent to their original engraving accounts for this absence. In some instances the chronological position, if not the exact year, of a dateless inscription can be determined from the presence in the text of the name of a chronologically fixed ruler. The dating of many inscriptions, however, including the seven undated examples published here, depends entirely on a comparative study of their paleographic peculiarities.

There is a considerable difference between the characters used in the early and later inscriptions of the Licchavi period. These differences represent so gradual and continuous an evolution of the script that it precludes establishing exact dividing lines between the various evolutionary stages. Nonetheless, certain specific changes

in making the rubbing and in deciphering the text of Inscription IX. The research which made this paper possible was financed through Dr. Slusser by a grant from the JDR 3rd Fund, New York, an assistance for which the author takes pleasure in acknowledging his gratitude.

⁴ *Luciano Petech*, "The Chronology of the Early Inscriptions of Nepal," *East and West* (Rome, December 1961), new series, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 228-229; *R.C. Majumdar*, "The Eras of Nepal," *Journal of the Asiatic Society* (Calcutta, 1959), vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 47-49.

⁵ *Gnoli*, Inscr. 1, pp. 1-4.

⁶ *Gnoli*, Inscr. 40, p. 55.

⁷ *Rāmaji Tevārī and others*, "Kāṭhmāḍaṃ Hanūmāṇḍhokāko abhilekha [An inscription from Hanūmān Dhokā, Kathmandu]," *Abhilekha-saṅgraha* (Kathmandu, V. S. 2019 Vaiśākha [April 1962], part 5, p. 12.

⁸ Licchavi records in Gupta characters may be traced for another decade in manuscripts, the last recorded date in any medium being a manuscript dated Saṃvat 252 (A. D. 828) (*Luciano Petech*, *Mediaeval History of Nepal* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1958), p. 25, n. 3).

permit us to group the evolving script into four broad chronological divisions, each one approximately a century in duration. These four periods of Licchavi script, blending one into the other but at the same time compartmentalized by their distinctive nuances, may be divided as follows:

1. from King Mānadeva's first inscribed date, Saṃvat 386 (A. D. 464)⁹ through Gaṇadeva's last, Saṃvat 489 (A. D. 567);¹⁰
2. from A. D. 568 through the last inscribed date of the joint rulers, Bhīmārjuna-deva and Viṣṇugupta, Saṃvat 65 (A. D. 641);¹¹
3. from A. D. 642 through Jayadeva's single inscription, Saṃvat 157 (A. D. 733)¹² and,
4. from A. D. 734 through the last stone inscription, Saṃvat 242 (A. D. 818).

The two most helpful indices in determining the relative chronological position of a given inscription are the character of certain vowel marks and letters. Other vowel marks and letters remain relatively constant throughout and thus provide no clue to dating. The vowel marks which evidence distinct evolutionary differences are the ākāra-mātrā, ikāra-mātrā, ikāra-mātrā and ekāra-mātrā. These vowel marks become longer in the second period, A. D. 568 to 641, than in the preceding period. Similarly, they are even more elongated in the later periods and also become somewhat curved.

The letters which evidence the most distinctive changes from century to century are a, i, ka, ṇa, tha, pa, ma, ya, la, sa, and ha. A particularly revealing letter is the yakāra when it is used in compounds such as kya or khya. After the first period the final upstroke of the yakāra becomes progressively elongated until the letter is almost U-shaped.¹³

The evolutionary changes in these particular vowel marks and letters for the first three periods, A. D. 464 through 733, are given in tabular form below. The fourth period, following Jayadeva's inscription, includes at present only six stone inscriptions, three of which, inscriptions VIII, IX, and X, are published here. Illus-

⁹ *Gnoli*, Inscr. 1, pp. 1-4,

¹⁰ *Gnoli*, Inscr. 21, p. 29.

¹¹ *Gnoli*, Inscr. 62, pp. 83-84.

¹² *Gnoli*, Inscr. 81, pp. 114-119; Pūrṇimā (V. S. 2025 Kārtika [October 1968]), vol. 5, no. 3, issue 19, p. 188.

¹³ The scribes of the later periods often imitated the earlier letters according to their personal whim, but the later forms, of course, never occur in the early inscriptions.

trations or rubbings of the three previously published inscriptions¹⁴ are not available—one of them is indeed now lost—and the character of the scripts is therefore unknown. Moreover, the texts of the six are so brief and fragmentary that they are insufficient for the purpose of exact comparative study. Therefore, until the vowel and letter changes for the fourth period can be determined more precisely, it is omitted from the table (p. 132). Moreover, vowel marks and letters which exhibit no distinctive changes in the evolving script are also omitted.

There are other aspects of Licchavi-period inscriptions, particular orthographic differences, for example, which also help to place undated inscriptions chronologically. But generally the differences in the vowel marks and letters, as noted above, are by themselves sufficient to classify a given inscription within a century. Thus, it is primarily by means of a comparative study of these key signs that I have fixed chronologically the undated inscriptions among those published here.

The importance of this epigraphic tool, not only for unravelling the early political history of Nepal, but also the history of her art, is, of course obvious. While the art historical considerations of the inscribed stone images introduced here will be taken up elsewhere in a joint paper with Dr. Slusser, a few preliminary remarks with reference to their inscriptions might be made.

Four of the undated inscriptions, numbers I, II, III, and X, are on stone images. These inscriptions range from two vestigial letters (Inscr. II) to—the longest—two puzzling and as yet undecipherable lines (Inscr. X). Yet brief and noncommittal as these four inscriptions are, their epigraphic peculiarities provide a rather exact means of determining the chronological position of these sculptures, all of which are newly found and unpublished. In the history of Nepalese art such dating is of particular importance, since style alone, with its notable conservatism, is not always an accurate index of the chronology of a given image. Thus, in the instance of the Umā-Maheśvara relief at Mṛgasthali (Paśupatinātha), we may date it with some certainty to the early Licchavi period, between ca. A. D. 464 and 567. If this dating is correct, the inscribed panel would represent the first *fixed* example in a series that, on stylistic comparison, begins considerably earlier and, punctuated intermittently with other chronologically fixed pieces, continues to the present.

Inscription I, a brief dedication inscribed on the base of a seated Mother Goddess, is particularly of profound importance. The image in question belongs to a rather extensive group of other such sculptures which seem to be closely related to the Kusana style of Mathura. So thus far, this Mātṛkā represents the only inscribed image of the group and thus affords a primary index for dating all other stylistically related images.

¹⁴ *Gnoli*, Inscr. 89, p. 131, Inscr. III of the *Addenda Altera*, p. 137, and *Abhilekha-saṅgraha* (April 1962), part 5, p. 12.

Inscription V is of paramount importance for the general history of Nepal. In the ethno-political history of Nepal the existence prior to the Licchavi occupation of the Kathmandu Valley of a people known as the Kirāta has been for many years a contended issue. Our knowledge about these seemingly mythical people has heretofore been limited to brief and unsubstantiated references to them in chronicles compiled many centuries after their time. But now, with the entry, “kirātaveṣadhara (wearing the dress of the Kirāta)”, Inscription V provides our first unequivocal, contemporary reference to the Kirāta and seems to substantiate their reality.¹⁵ Thus, the inscription, despite its lamentably fragmentary condition, is an extremely important landmark in the history of Nepal.

—:o:—

¹⁵ I use the cautionary phrase “seems to substantiate” since the entry, uncapitalized of course, could refer equally to kirāta, a term simply meaning “barbarian.”

INSCRIPTION I.

On the base of an animal-headed, stone Mother Goddess (probably Śivadūti or perhaps Vārāhī) enshrined with other images in a small temple to Gaṇeśa, just south of the Mahābaudha Stūpa, Kathmandu. The inscribed part, at the lower left of the image, is about 14 cm. wide. The script belongs to the first phase of Licchavi writing. This is demonstrated by a comparison of the letters ṇa, ka, and yakāra with those of the table.

Text

1. brāhmaṇa x ś a k a b h a ṭ a ṣ y a¹
2. putraṣya² r a g h u (?) s y a³ k ṛ t i h

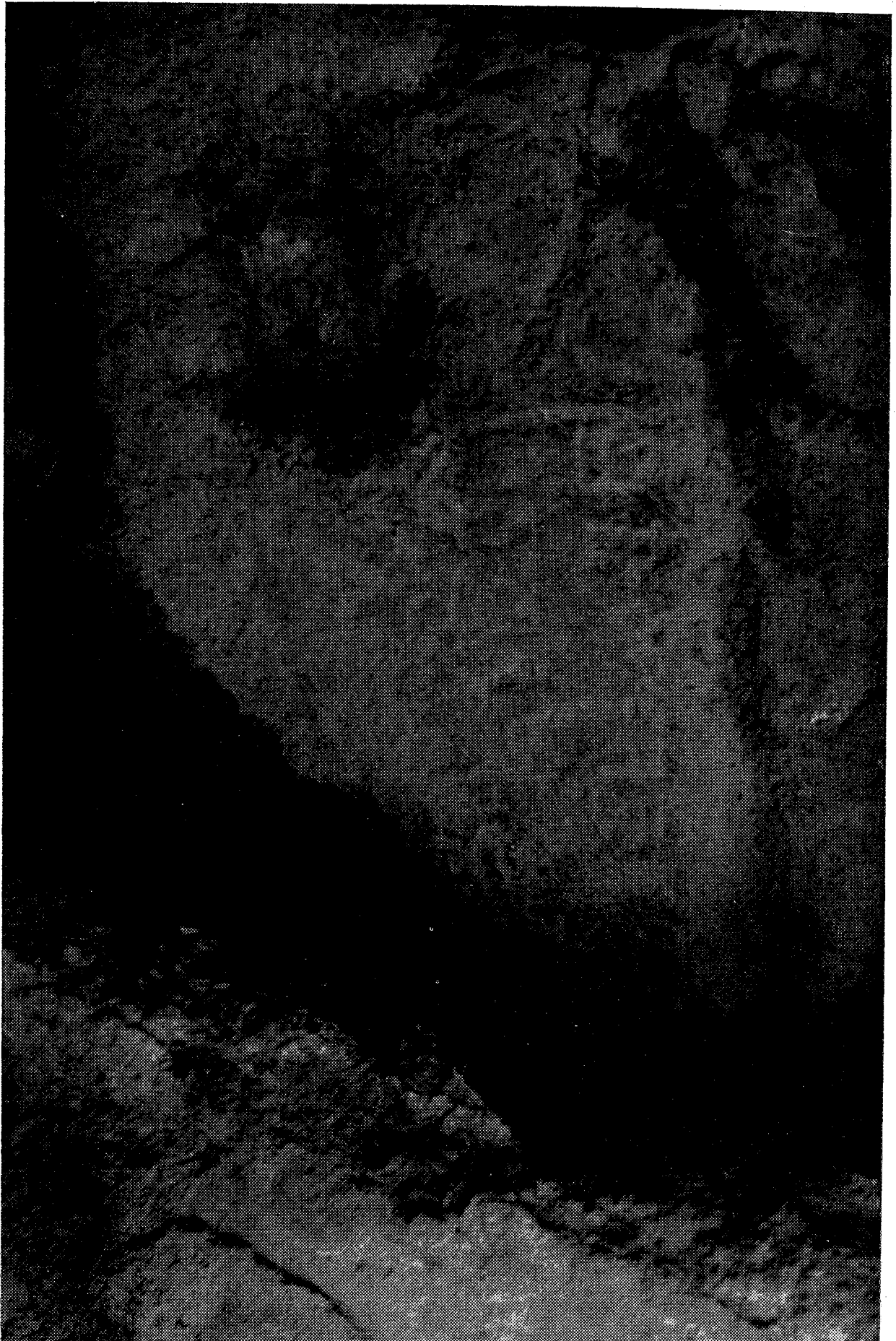
Translation

Commissioned by Raghu (?), the son of the Brahman, Śakabhata.

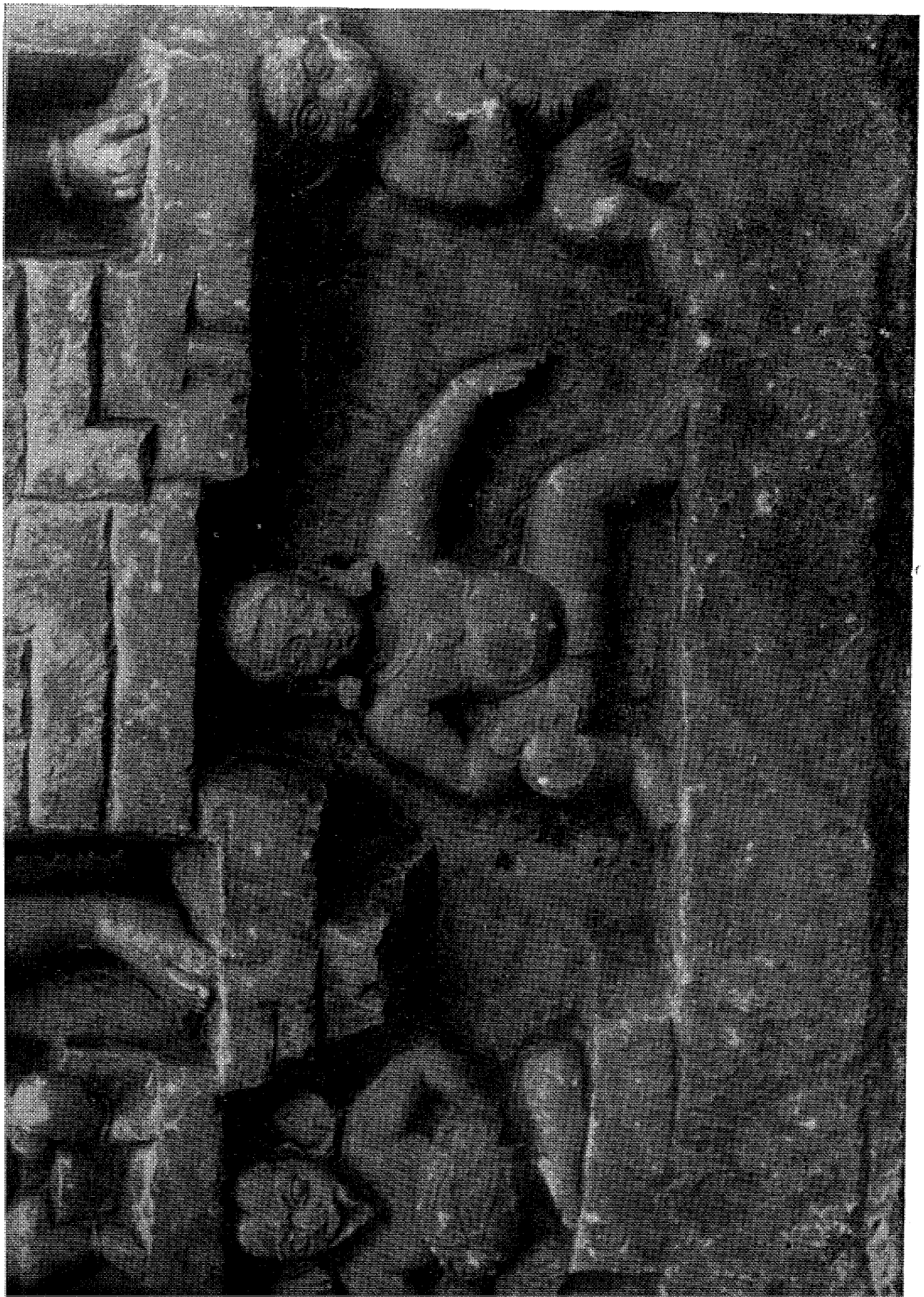
1. Read: ś a k a b h a ṭ a ṣ y a //

2. Read: putraṣya //

3. Read: r a g h o h // (Italic *h* represents visarga.)



Inscription I. Base of Mother Goddess image.



Inscription II. Stone image of Umā - Mahēśvara.

INSCRIPTION II.

On the base of a stone relief panel of Umā-Maheśvara behind the Rāmacandra temple on the eastern bank of the Vāgmatī River, in Mṛgasthali, Paśupatinātha, Deupāṭan.¹ With the exception of two letters, the original inscription is totally effaced. Nonetheless, these two letters indicate that the inscription belongs to the first period. Compare the letter ma with that of the table.

Text
ma x rā

1. This important image was pointed out to me by Dr. Pal. Later, while cleaning the image preparatory to photographing it, the effaced inscription came to light.

INSCRIPTION III.

On the base of a stone image of Jayavāgīśvari, enshrined in a temple in Deupātan, at the left side of the main road leading to Cā-bahil, just west of Paśupatinātha. The inscribed part of the image is about 28 cm. wide. There is no date given but the Script may be assigned to the first period. Compare ikāra, ha, and yakāra-mātrā of the inscription with those of the table.

Text

1. guhasoma xx tthavṛddhiṣyaḥ kṛ[tih]

Translation

Commissioned by Guhasoma... ..



Inscription III. Jayavāgīśvari.



INSCRIPTION IV.

The lower half of a stone slab, 33 cm. wide, north of the Maheśvari pīṭha, embedded at the eastern side of a former city gate emplacement on the southern perimeter of the city of Bhaktapur (Fig.4). The broken top of the stele is missing. Date : Saṃvat 31 (A.D. 607).

Text

1. yastvetām ājñā x x x pravartiṣyante . . .
2. maryādājñāvyatikrama x x ṇaṃ vi xxxxxx
3. x bhir bhūpatibhir dharmagurutayā gurukṛtaprasādānu-
4. x x bhir eva bhavitavyam iti svayam ājñā dūtakotra rājapu-
5. tra s t h i t i v a r m ā saṃvat 31 dvitiyapauṣaśuklāṣṭamyām

Translation

[We shall never excuse him]¹ who disobeys this order which is a legal edict. Future kings [also] must give importance to dharma and do as the honorable ones [former kings] have ordered. This is the direct order of His Majesty. Here his envoy is Rājaputra Sthitivarmā. Saṃvat 31, second pauṣa śukla aṣṭamī [eighth day of the bright half of of the repeated month of Pauṣa].

1. Based on the formula used in contemporary inscriptions.

INSCRIPTION V.

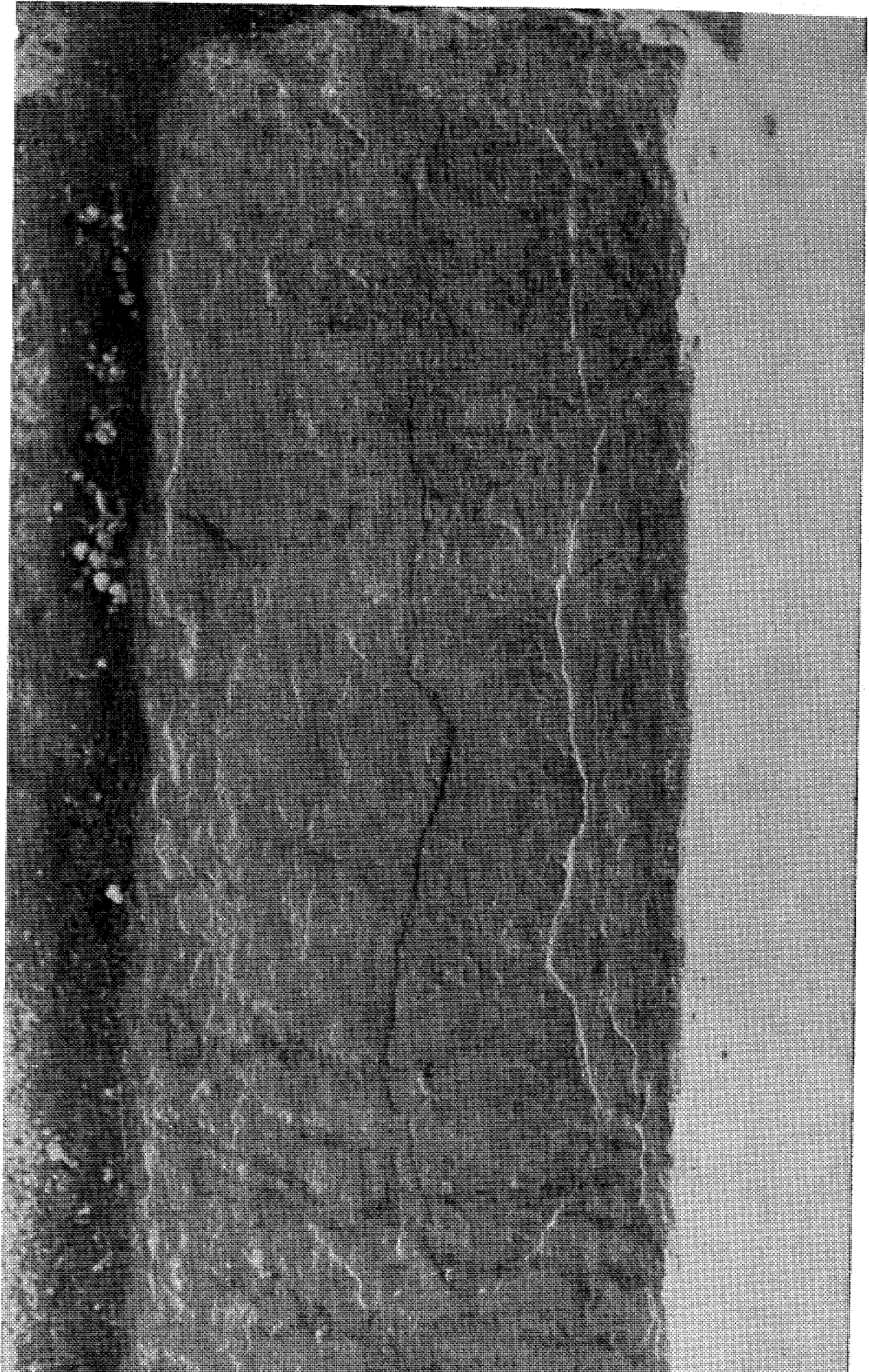
A thick slab of stone, about 173 cm. in length, used as a curbstone in the angle of the Degutale temple and the mask of Śvetabhairava (Hāthudya), near the entrance to Hanūmān Dhokā palace, Kathmandu. The stone is severely exfoliated and the beginning and end of the inscription, together with the presumed original date, are missing. The script belongs to the second period. Compare ākāra, ikāra, ekāra, ka, pa, ma, la and ha of the inscription (Fig. 5) with those of the table.

Text

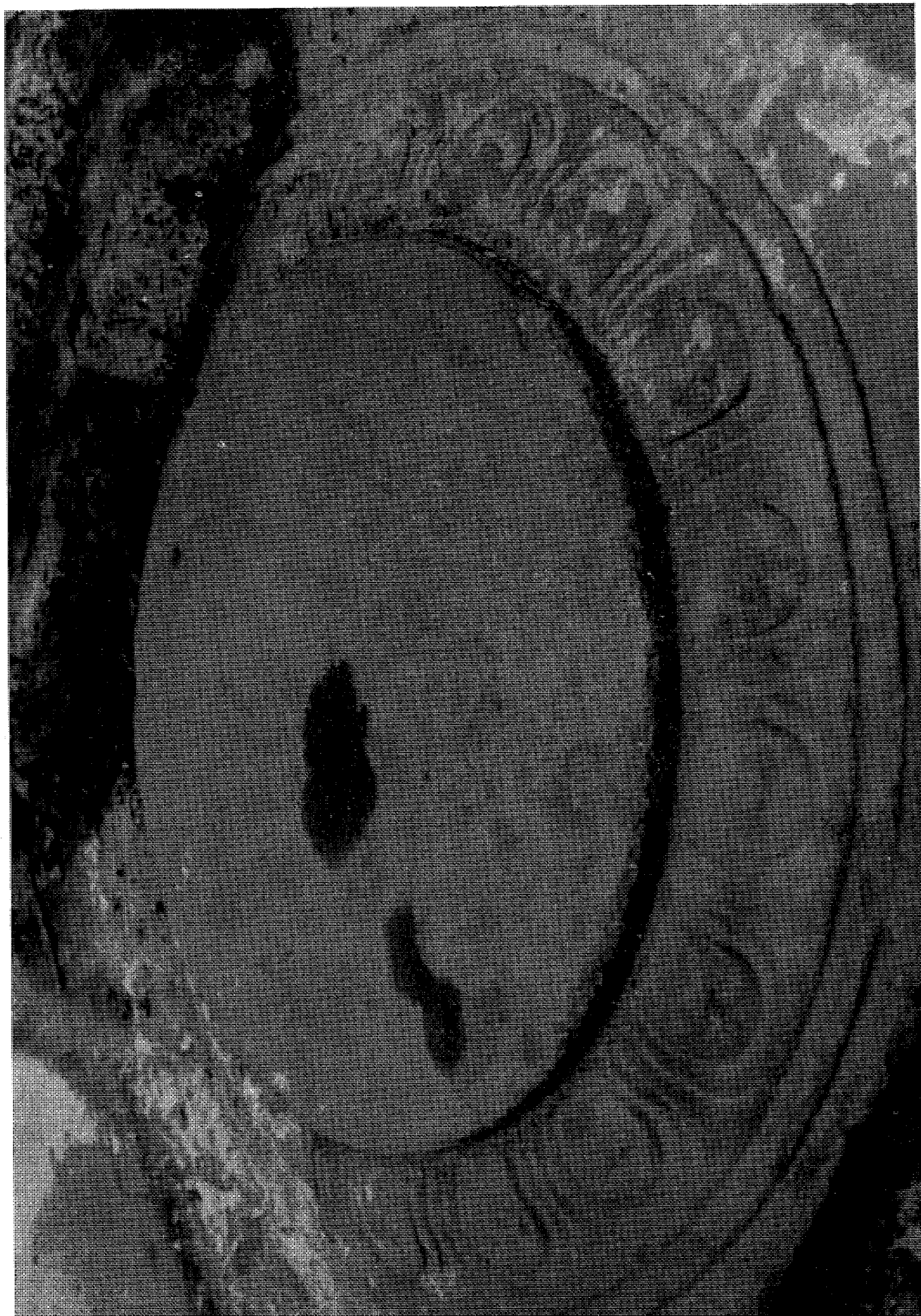
1. vividhaśakuntapaśu xx n̄kṛtavṛddharuḥh xx ka k i r ā t a veśadhara xxxxx
karoh ya.....
2. cirantanam l i c c h a v i rājakāritam purātanair vṛttibhāṭairupekṣi.....
3. ruḥh
4. kṣetram bhagnaka
5. punah punarvvasuh//

Translation

...different kinds of birds and beasts...old trees...wearing the dress of the Kirātas...
constructed by the old Licchavi kings, neglected by the old professional soldiers...grown
...field broken...again Punarvasu planet.



Inscription V. Stone slab at Hanūmān Dhoka.



Inscription VI. Stone mandala at Cā-bahāl.

INSCRIPTION VI

A stone maṇḍala in the form of a lotus placed on the top of the supporting platform (medhi) on the northwest quadrant of the stūpa at Cā-bahil, Deupāṭan. The inscribed portion is 50 cm. wide. The date is missing but the script may be assigned to the third period. Compare ya and ka of the inscription (Fig. 6) with those of the table.

Text

1. ...tyāśca śunyahṛdayasukhakarā xxx maṇḍala...

Translation

The maṇḍala . . . giving pleasure to the vacant mind of . . .

INSCRIPTION VII

Inscription carved at the bottom of a stone sculpture attached to the eastern wall of the fountain near Gaṇabahāl, Kathmandu (Fig. 7). The inscribed part is 63 cm. wide. The era is missing. The script belongs to the third period. Compare ākāra-mātrā and ya of the inscription with those of the table.

Text

1. ...dvitīyāṣāḍhakṛ... divā śa x pañca.....
2. ...kā...yā...

Translation

On the second Āṣāḍha-kṛṣṇa-pañcamī [the fifth of the dark half of the intercalary Āṣāḍha]...



Inscription VII. Stone relief at Gana-bahāl fountain.



Inscription VIII. Stone stūpa at Su-bahāl fountain.

INSCRIPTION VIII.

On the base of a stone stūpa raised on a dais in the center of Su-bahāl hiṭi, a sunken fountain just east of Su-bahāl vihāra in the northeastern quarter of Pāṭan (Fig. 8).

The inscribed part is about 26 cm. wide. Date: Saṃvat 182 (A. D. 758).

Text

- 1.....
2. saṃvat 182 āṣāḍhaśuklatrayodaśyām

Translation

In Saṃvat 182 Āṣāḍha-śukla-trayodaśī [the thirteenth of the bright half of the month of Āṣāḍha]...

INSCRIPTION IX.

A stone pedestal for an image (now missing) at Bhīma-nanī, Hāṃḍigāuṃ, Kathmandu (Fig. 9). The inscribed part is about 40 cm. wide. Date: Saṃvat 242 (A. D. 818).

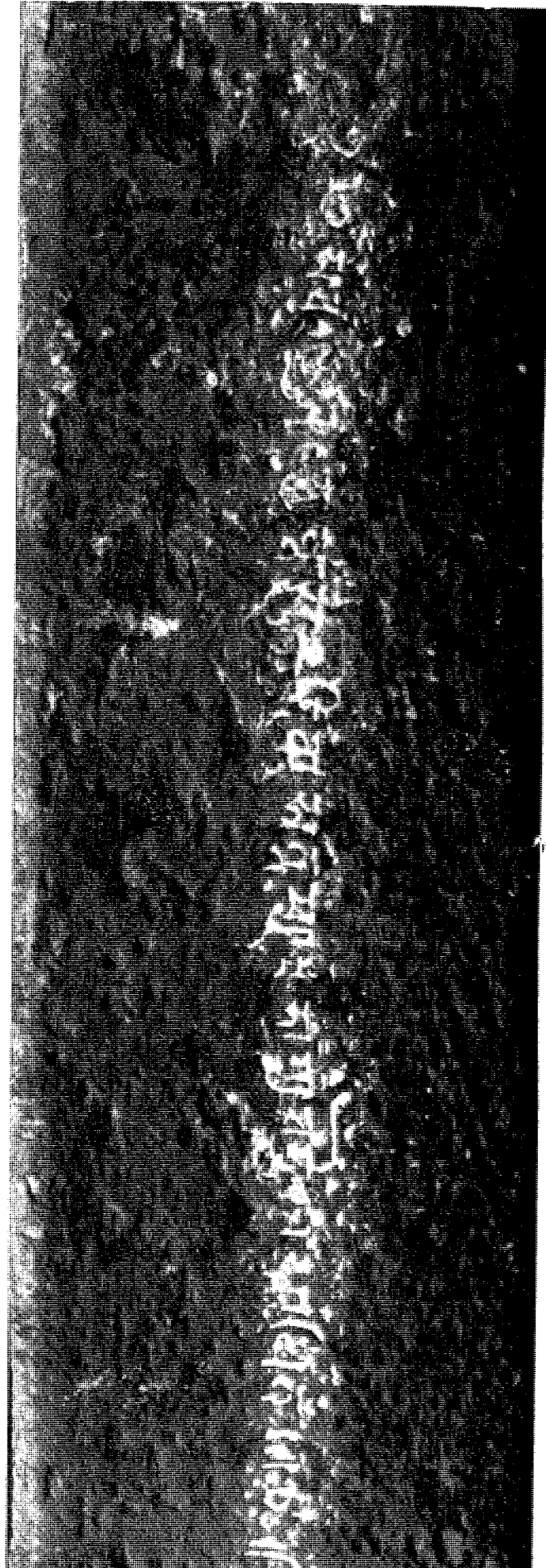
Text

1. Saṃvat 242 caitraśukladivā sattamyāṃ¹ bhāgyacandraṇa sthāpitam² //

Translation

Commissioned by Bhāgyacandra in Saṃvat 242 Caitra-śukla- saptamī.

-
1. Read: saptamyām //
 2. Read: sthāpitam //



Inscription IX. Stone Pedestal at Hadigān.



Inscription X. Vanakāli image

INSCRIPTION X.

On the base of a stone relief image of Vanakāli enshrined in the sacred grove west of Paśupatinātha. The inscribed portion is about 40 cm. wide. There is no date. On the basis of epigraphic analysis we can definitely exclude the inscription from the first and second evolutionary phases of Licchavi script. Compare, for example, the ikāra and ka of the inscription with those of the first two periods in the table. It seems that the script is even more developed than that of the third period and it is therefore provisionally classified in the fourth and final period. Despite an effort of more than six months' study, and consultation with other scholars, the inscription so far defies a full translation. We may not even positively assert that it is Sanskrit. In all probability the inscription is a secret mantra.

Text

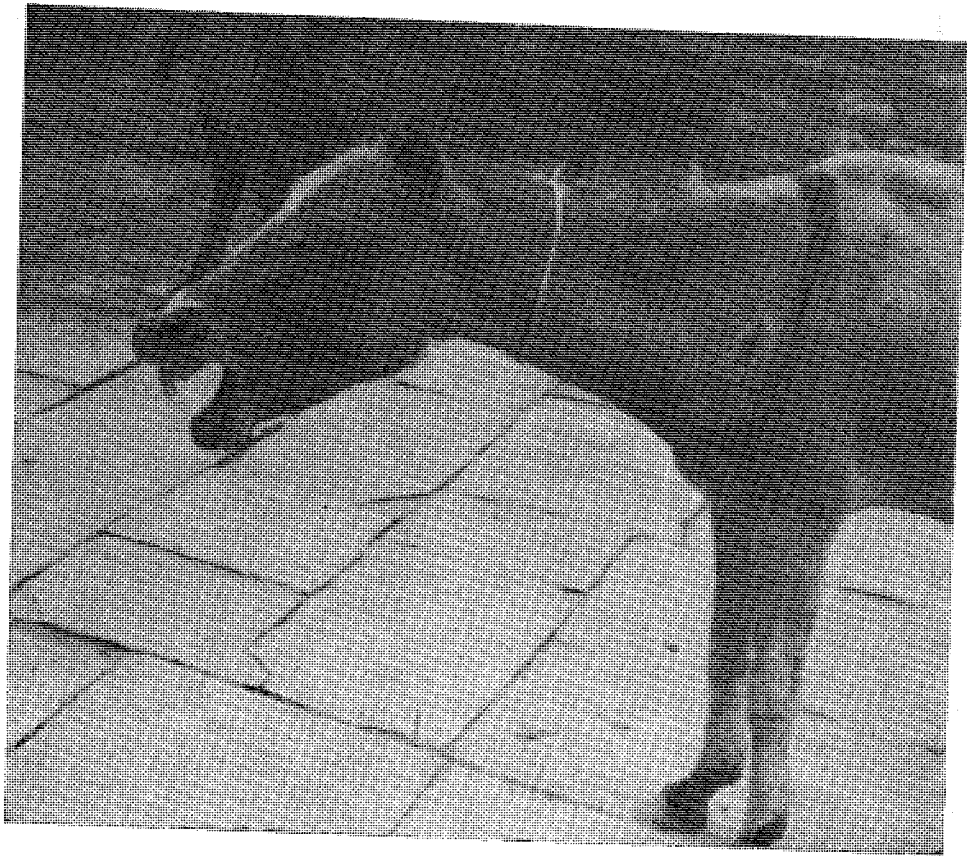
1. xx pasānyah kraka xx śih somomvacah dataniti
2.

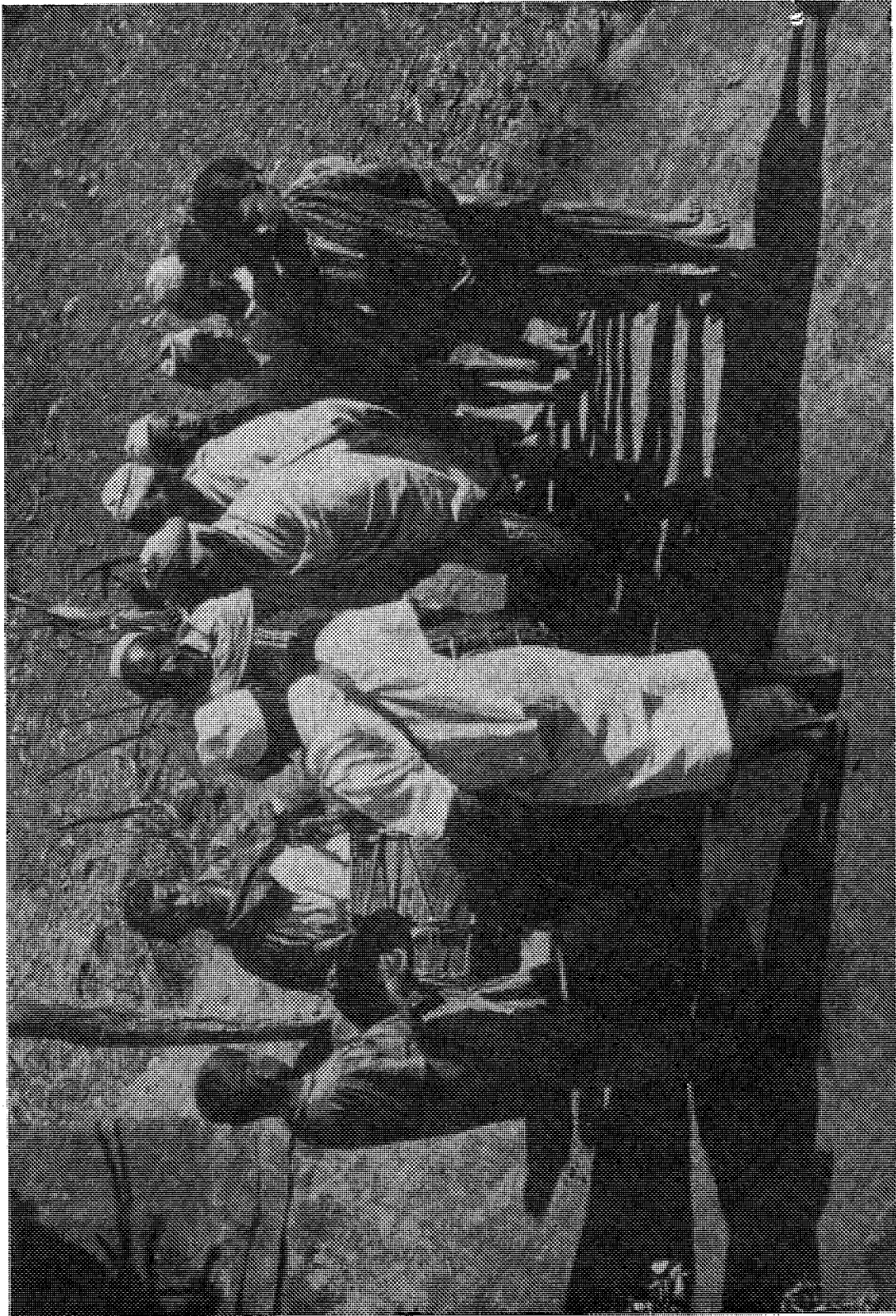
TABLE OF THE EVOLUTION OF CERTAIN GUPTA CHARACTERS
USED IN NEPALESE INSCRIPTIONS, A. D. 464 through 733

Character	First Period	Second Period	Third Period
ākāra-matrā	𑀓 ¹	𑀓 ¹⁷	𑀓 ³³
ikāra-mātrā	𑀔 ²	𑀔 ¹⁸	𑀔 ³⁴
ikāra-mātrā	𑀕 ³	𑀕 ¹⁹	𑀕 ³⁵
ekāra-mātā	𑀖 ⁴	𑀖 ²⁰	𑀖 ³⁶
	𑀗 ⁵	𑀗 ²¹	𑀗 ³⁷
i	𑀘 ⁶	𑀘 ²²	𑀘 ³⁸
ka	𑀙 ⁷	𑀙 ²³	𑀙 ³⁹
na	𑀚 ⁸	𑀚 ²⁴	𑀚 ⁴⁰
tha	𑀛 ⁹	𑀛 ²⁵	𑀛 ⁴¹
pa	𑀜 ¹⁰	𑀜 ²⁶	𑀜 ⁴²
ma	𑀝 ¹¹	𑀝 ²⁷	𑀝 ⁴³
ya	𑀞 ¹²	𑀞 ²⁸	𑀞 ⁴⁴
la	𑀟 ¹³	𑀟 ²⁹	𑀟 ⁴⁵
sa	𑀠 ¹⁴	𑀠 ³⁰	𑀠 ⁴⁶
ha	𑀡 ¹⁵	𑀡 ³¹	𑀡 ⁴⁷
yakāra	𑀢 ¹⁶	𑀢 ³²	𑀢 ⁴⁸

NOTES TO TABLE ON PRECEDING PAGE

1. GNOLI, Plate 3, Inscr. 1, line 9 (see rā).
2. *Ibid.*, line 11 (see vi).
3. *Ibid.*, line 2 (see śri).
4. *Ibid.*, line 13 (see the).
5. *Ibid.*, line 1.
6. *Ibid.*, line 4.
7. *Ibid.*, line 2.
8. *Ibid.*, line 6.
9. *Ibid.*, line 11 (see thā).
10. *Ibid.*, line 4.
11. *Ibid.*, line 10.
12. *Ibid.*, line 11.
13. *Ibid.*, line 1.
14. *Ibid.*, line 7.
15. *Ibid.*, line 10.
16. *Ibid.*, line 15 (see pya).
17. *Ibid.*, Plate 37, Inscr. 35, line 15 (see vā).
18. *Ibid.*, line 1 (see hi).
19. *Ibid.*, line 3 (see li).
20. *Ibid.*, line 12 (see ge).
21. *Ibid.*, line 11.
22. *Ibid.*, Plate 52, Inscr. 53, line 14.
23. *Ibid.*, Plate 37, Inscr. 35, line 15.
24. *Ibid.*, Plate 41, Inscr. 40, line 12.
25. *Ibid.*, Plate 36, Inscr. 34, line 7 (see thā).
26. *Ibid.*, Plate 38, Inscr. 36, line 8.
27. *Ibid.*, Plate 42, Inscr. 41, line 13.
28. *Ibid.*, line 10.
29. *Ibid.*, Plate 27, Inscr. 23, line 14.
30. *Ibid.*, Plate 38, Inscr. 36, line 11.
31. *Ibid.*, line 5.
32. *Ibid.*, line 8 (see sya).
33. *Ibid.*, Plate 77, Inscr. 80, line 16 (see cā).
34. *Ibid.*, line 18 (see vi).
35. *Ibid.*, (see śri).
36. *Ibid.*, Plate 71, Inscr. 72, line 16 (see ye).
- 37., *Ibid.*, Plate 69, Inscr. 70, line 21.
38. *Ibid.*, Plate 77, Inscr. 80, line 13.
39. *Ibid.*, line 8.
40. *Ibid.*, Plate 78, Inscr. 81, line 30.
41. *Ibid.*, Plate 72, Inscr. 73, line 25.
42. *Ibid.*, line 2.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*, line 35.
45. *Ibid.*, line 14.
46. *Ibid.*,
47. *Ibid.*, line 25.
48. *Ibid.*, (see sya).





Hayu musicians and dancers on the last day of the annual festival.