

THE *SVAMGU LOHAM* IN BHAKTAPUR —  
A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF THE NEWAR CONCEPT OF SPACE

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*Bhaktapur*

The present structure of Bhaktapur, the spatial relationship of streets and lanes and neighbourhoods (new. *twā*, nep. *tole*) to caste or occupational groups, is a result of constant growth and decay. Form itself does not persist but the basic fabric of ritual importance remains. This basic structure should be understood as the result of a historical process, an outcome of centuries of effort to endow the city with features of sanctity. The overall structure is not an ideal turned into reality, but it documents a long process of sanctification imposed on the town over a period of roughly 1000 years (800 A.D. — 1800 A.D.).

Essential to the understanding of Bhaktapur is knowledge of its site, lying on a southern-facing slope north of the Hanumante river, which flows from east to west. The main street roughly follows the elevation contour lines, and opens into intricate and essentially public places (Nāumanā, Taumādhi, Golmādhi, Tacapāl), which might have developed at crossroads in early village cores (before 800 A.D.). Tacapāl was the center of old Bhaktapur until Yakṣamalla moved his palace to the west in 1453. The town extended following a fairly even ribs system in a pattern conforming to needs.

Only after Bhaktapur had developed into its present shape, was a system of sanctification of 'town-space' gradually brought about. Groups of temples (Astamātrikā, Astaganesa, Astabhairava, Dasamahāvidyā, Cār Nārāyana, Trikundaganesa) marked the inhabited land and made it safe; the surrounding continuum was left as the abode of evil spirits.

Different ways of procession (*patha*) are used to circumambulate the town in order to reascertain and recall the taking of land for habitation. These *pathas* include the 'old' upper town (*thane*) and the 'extended' lower town (*kone*). Originally, the *pathas* were meant to integrate the town, but the people never managed to integrate new and old. The historical process of growth marks the dynamics of Bhaktapur, which is predominant even now. The problem of the 'upper' and the 'lower' town is manifest in all the festivals that mark the year. At Bisket Jātrā, it is channelled by letting each part of the town pull at one side of a chariot carrying Bhairava, one of the most important gods of Bhaktapur.

Along the main road—the ritual and commercial backbone of Bhaktapur—the Cār Nārāyana are located, two in the upper town and two in the lower town. Apart from innumerable *dhokas*, *chashas* and one of the Astabbairava, there are three stone marking the three places where Masāna Bhairava lost parts of his tongue.

Correlated with the growth of Bhaktapur, the legend of the *svamgu lohām* marks the problem of integration. The first stone lies between Varāhi Dyochem and Tekhāco Ganesa, the 'middle' stone (in the shape of a simple field stone) near the corner of the buildings surrounding Nārāyana Chok, just beside Bandi Bināyak. The third stone with an elaborately carved form, lies in Ināco in front of the Māhesvari Dyochem.

The three stones are meant as a device to unify the town. By circumambulation of a town its unity is acknowledged. To worship the stones, or even to walk through the town, is to be understood as overcoming history and realizing integration. To worship is to perform integration in time and space.

Just as water-spouts correspond to far-off places and thus convey the qualities of the original sources, and just as group of temples define habitable land, these stones which are placed in a line, realise a concept of space which serves to characterize Bhaktapur as a habitat which developed not around a core, but along a line. The town is not organized around a center, but along a road running from east to west parallel to the river.

The legend connected with the installation of the Bhairava stones mentions the Bhīmsen temple Tacapāl, the Chupin Ghāt and Mangal Ghāt. Essential, however, is the process of events which located the stones in the main street, the sequence of events being spaced out from west to east, contrary to the movement of history.

#### THE LEGEND

The legend is as follows. A long time ago, the people of Bhaktapur suffered greatly from the dreaded activities of the Masāna Bhairava of Mangal Ghāt, and the king was much worried about this. It is said that the people who went to the Ghāt for cremation (Mangal Ghāt was the main cremation ground for the lower town, which later was transported to Chupin Ghāt after this incident) always lost one member of the mourning party while returning home. Once, when the king was trying to find a

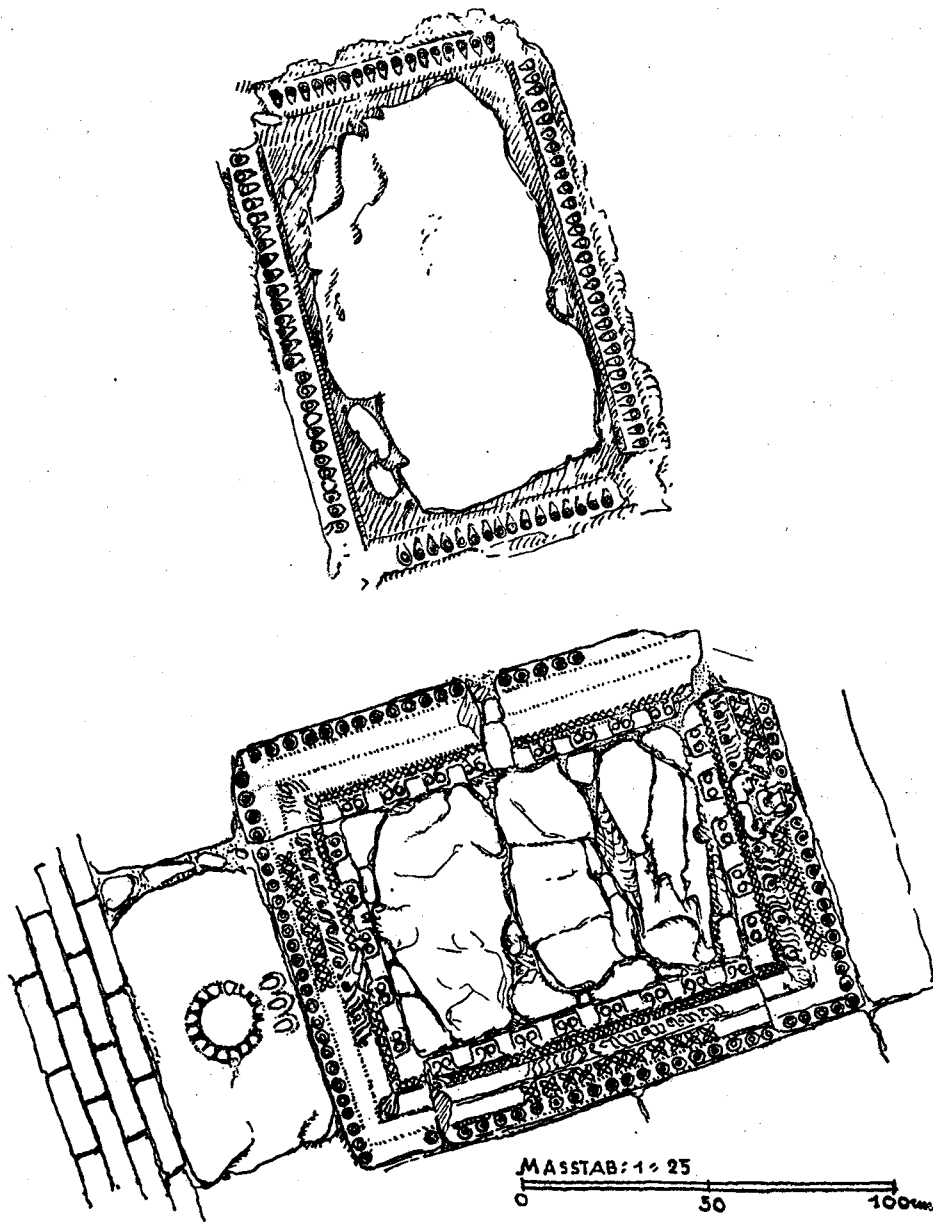


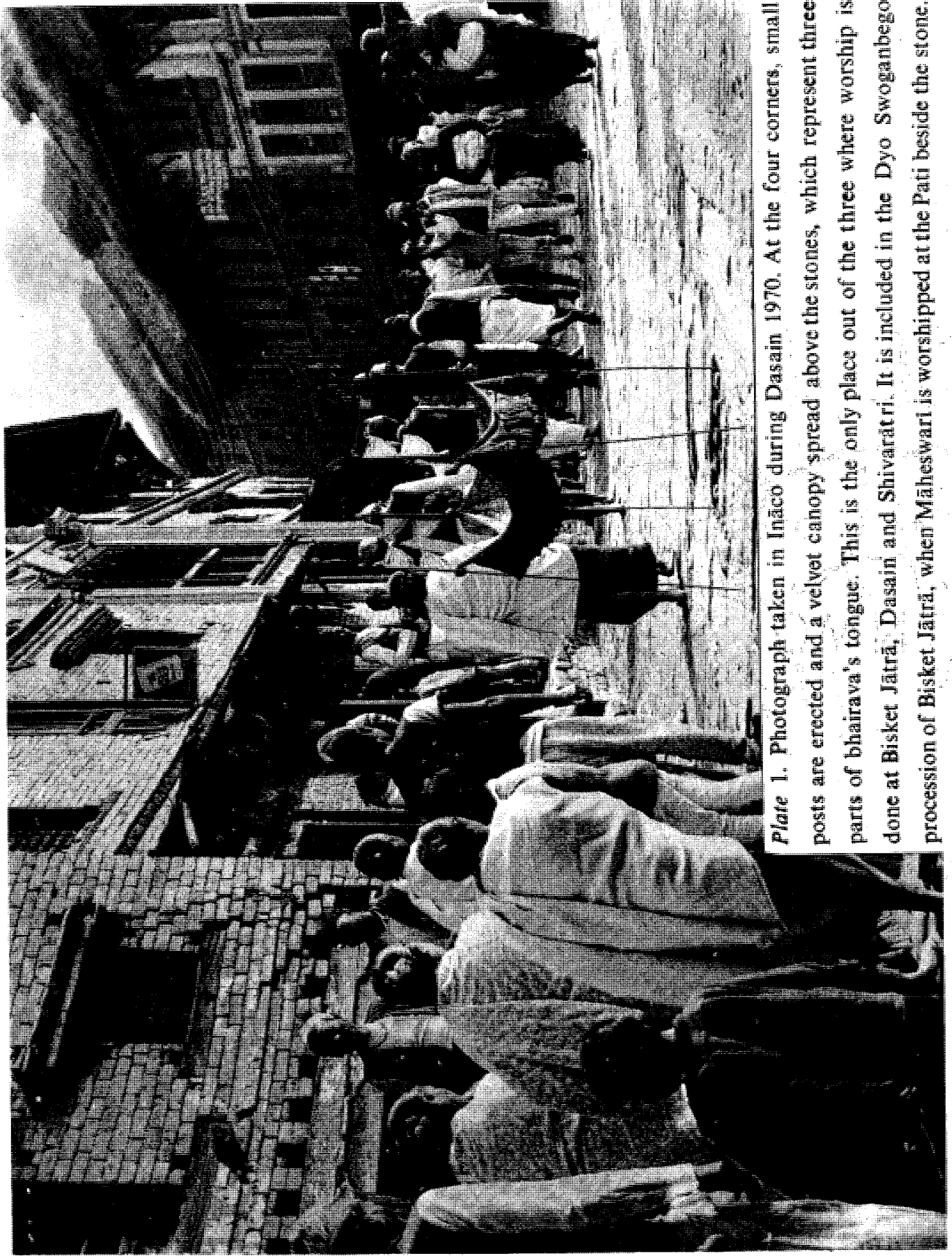
Figure 2. Above: The first stone in Tekhāco. Below: the third stone – which in fact comprises three stones – in Ināco. (Scale 1: 25. Drawing: Konstanty Gutschow.)

powerful Tantrika to pacify Bhairava, Bhairava came out from Mangal Ghāt cremation ground in his dreadful aspect and entered the city. People were so frightened that they closed the main entrances and the windows of their houses to avoid this unexpected and sudden misfortune. It was the worst thing that had ever happened to the country.

The rumour spread throughout the township. The helpless people went to the king to report the happening. The king promised to grant whatever he asked for whoever succeeded in controlling the Masāna Bhairava. Some Tantrikas were busy preventing the Bhairava from advancing further, while others were engaged in cutting the tongue of the Bhairava as soon as it became long enough to touch the ground. For it was believed that if the tongue touched the ground, this would cause a disaster affecting the town and the people. The first piece of the tongue was chopped off in Bamsagopal, and a stone was placed on the spot to commemorate this event. In spite of all their efforts, the people could not prevent Bhairava from going further into the town. When he had reached Taumādhi, the tongue was again cut by a Tantrika. At that very moment a milkman from a nearby village came towards Taumādhi to offer milk to Sabhunga Bhairava as usual. He was not a Tantrika by birth or by practice but he had obtained a boon of strong magical power from Sabhunga Bhairava as a reward for his daily offering of milk.

In a last attempt the furious Bhairava put his tongue out as far as possible in order to touch the ground. But it was cut into three pieces by the milkman. The place where this happened in Ināco was marked by three stones in the middle of the street to remind the people of the incident for a long time to come. The milkman humbly requested Masāna Bhairava to be calm and go back to his place. But he did not pay any attention to the words and tried to proceed further. The milkman took this as an insult and felt forced to use all his power. He succeeded in getting the Masāna Bhairava under his control, and compelled him to obey his order. Masāna Bhairava was stopped at the Bhimsen temple in Tacapāl and sent back to his place at Mangal Ghāt. Accordingly a Bhairava was later painted onto the southern wall of the Bhimsen temple to let the people know about these events.

Bhairava made his way back to Taumādhi and from there down to Chupin Ghāt, because he did not like to return to his original place. When the milkman learned what Bhairava had done, he forced him by his magical power into a water jar. The jar was buried with a ritual performance near Chupin Ghāt and only since that



**Plate 1.** Photograph taken in Ināco during Dasain 1970. At the four corners, small posts are erected and a velvet canopy spread above the stones, which represent three parts of bhairava's tongue. This is the only place out of the three where worship is done at Bisket Jātrā, Dasain and Shivarātri. It is included in the Dyo Swoganbego procession of Bisket Jātrā, when Maheswari is worshipped at the Pati beside the stone.

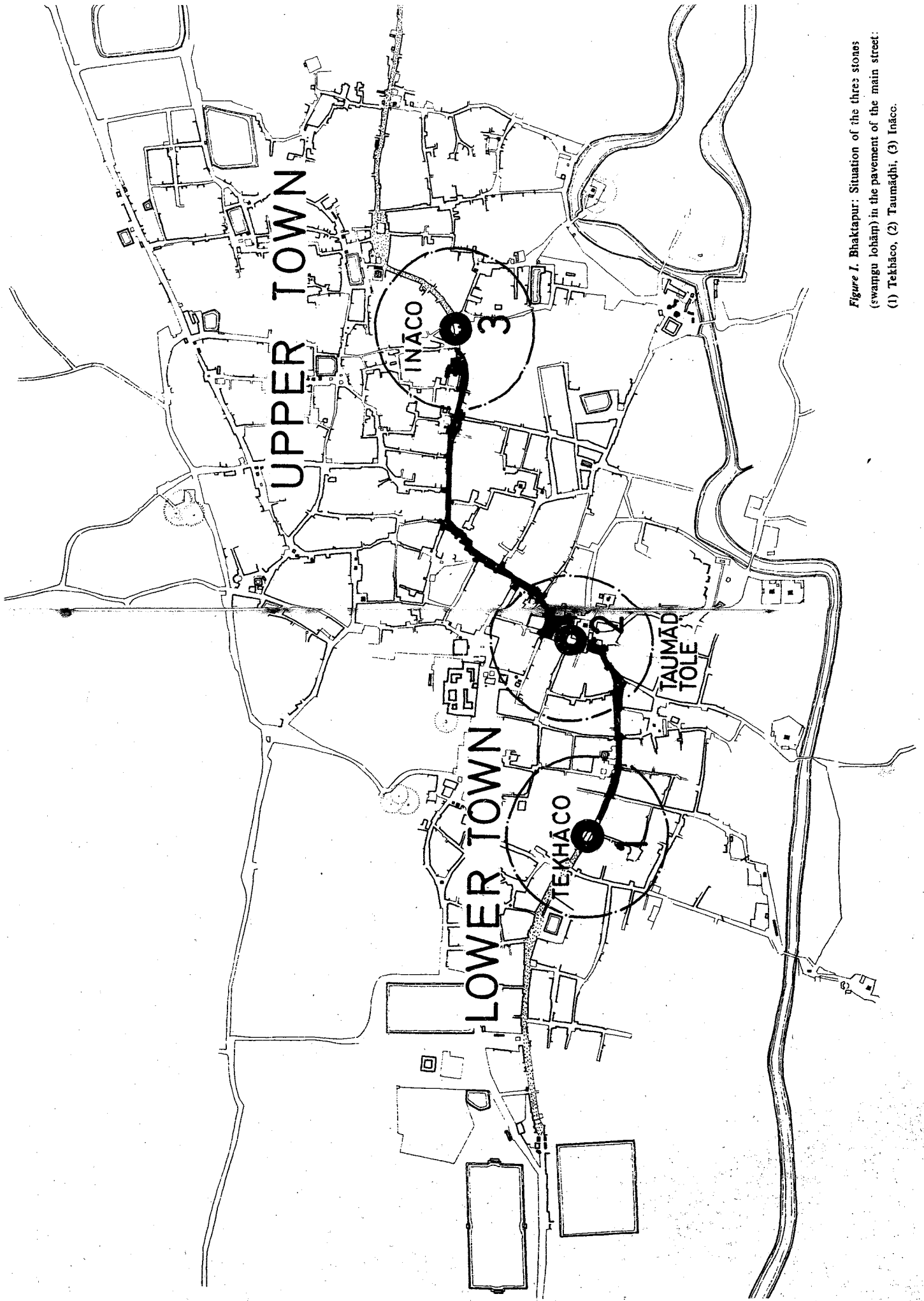


Figure 1. Bhaktapur: Situation of the three stones (swangu lohām) in the pavement of the main street: (1) Tekhāco, (2) Taumādhi, (3) Ināco.





Plate 2. The three tongue-stones of Ināco painted red and worshipped by a priest during Dasain 1973.

time are people said to have used that place as a cremation ground. After all these events the milkman was brought before the king for his proper reward. According to his wish he was appointed to one of the higher posts in the Taleju temple. He was entitled Vijayapati, the lord of victory.

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