CITY, HOUSE, AND GRAVE

Symbolism in Central and South-Asian architecture

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A review about architecture in India has to give room for some ideas about the symbolic values of architectural forms, expressed in the model concepts of city, house and grave, interconnected with concepts of world and life.

This may sound simple to the Italian reader, trained to see St. Peter as the theater of the world, at least as the cosmos, inside which the liturgy repeats the religious history from creation to redemption — the cupola as heaven and the quadrangular room as the organized world, as it is expressed verbatim by Kosmos Indikopleustes, to whom the cosmos was quadrangular, has four walls and the cupola of heaven. The model is Hagia Sophia at Istanbul, where even a non-figurative mosaic represents a square with 15 small circles around a big circle, the last the world, 12 signs of zodiacus, and one for Jesus, Sophia and the logos (fig. 1).

It is wellknown that at least the architectural concepts to erect churches depends on concepts of world believed in by the builder — for example the gothic cathedral should symbolize the heavenly Jerusalem — and the simple oratorii of Bernhard de Clairvaux are refusals of such concepts. But to identify the cathedral with Jerusalem in Heaven meant in the same time to identify church, palace and capital — to remember the old concept of Roma quadrata, the ideal plan of Rome as centre of the world.

This idea of a central "navel of earth" — may it be the omphalos at Delphes or the tree of world in Germanic mythology or the Ka'aba in Islam brings us to Asia, where the idea of "mandala" is shared by buddhists, hindus and old Iranian tribes — and even in China we find the circle and the square as the main forms to express the world and the rule over it. The "quadrature of circle", known in the tradition of European mathematics as an insoluble
task is nothing else than the secularized concept of the world expressed by square and circle. In the sufis-literature it took the form, that the perfection of quadrature means the end of the world, being constituted by the motion of matter (square) and spirit (circle).

In sanscrit-tradition the ancestor-fire should burn at a square hearth — cared for by the men — and the wife works at a round hearth. The consequence is, that in the late bronze age — burials at Tulchar (southern Tadshikistan) — the men are buried with a square hearths and the women with a round one.

Similar symbolism ruled the architecture of Mykenaian Greece, in the royal compounds the centre was a round hearth in the square hall of the royal court.

Such material, as the Bishkent graves, show, that the use of square and circle as symbols is going back at least to the second millenium B.C.. An excavation in Northern Afghanistan has given proof, that the famous mandala of ancient India is as old as Tulchar. Tucci describes in his famous book "Geheimnis des Mandala, Theorie und Praxis" the mandala as a psychokosmogram; "Es ist in der Tat ein Kosmogramm, das wesentliche Schema des Universums, ... das Universum nicht nur in seiner unbeweglichen räumlichen Ausdehnung, sondern in ständiger zeitlicher Revolution... In ihm spiegelt sich auch das ideale Bild des Königssitzes von Çakravartin, dem universalen Monarchen der indischen Überlieferung..." (S. 29).

"In der Mitte von jeder der vier Seiten öffnet sich eine Pforte in Gestalt des Buchstaben T ... (47)". "Eine Zeremonie, die sich in Mandala vollzieht, ist vor allem ein abhiseka, eine Krönung ... Die Buddha-Bilder im Mandala weisen königliche Gewänder auf ..." (48).

(It is in fact a cosmogram, the man model of the universe... the universe not alone in its unmovable extension in room but in endless timely revolution... It mirrors the model of the royal residence of Çakravartin, the universal monarch of Indian tradition... In the centre of the first circle the true mandala is designed, named palace too... that means, it symbolizes the spot, where the figures of gods were kept... In the middle of each of the four sides opens a gate in form of the letter T... A ceremony, hold in the mandala, is in main an abhisika, a coro nation... The figures of Buddha inside the mandala, have royal garments") (fig. 2).

A mandala is a square, with a T on each side; inscribed to a circle — often added eight angles ("half-Ts") — symbolising the residence of the ruler of the world — and the world itself in extension and motion. It is a characteristic symbol in lamaistic and other buddhist art, in Jainism, it could be found on mirrors of late Chou — and Hanti-me and as the plane of Ming-T'ang at Xian of Han-period6 (fig. 3), a hall of the "heavenly light". We find it again at Polonnaruva, the monastery Jetawanarama, at the Ananda-temple at Pagan or as the stupa Mahacetiya at Nagarjunikonda. It is the main form of the vihara — but the eldest form known up to now in the middle of Dashly — oasis in Afghanistan. It was built in the middle of the second millenium B.C. (the published C 14 — date
has to be corrected with about 400 years) (fig. 4-5).

It is a Cakravartin-palace of an old Aryan-tribe, 88 m. to 84 m. The court is 38 m. to 40 m., surrounded by four nearby equal corridors of one m. breath, in the middle of each side we find a corridor in T-shape and at each corner two angles equal to one T as was shown by another "palace" of Central Asian bronze age — Sapalli-tepa.  

Inside the court was a small palace and some fences, may be for the animals of the eastern calendar. The area is fortified. Sapalli-tepa has two at each side, built in a way to make the building revolving to the left. Both architectural complexes were later used as residential quarters, but seemed to be built for the coronation of a Cakravartin. 

That these structures mean the universal rule by the owner could be supported by the islamic architecture of abbasid time, giving the capital (or a symbolic building) the form of a wheel around a square palace — with a central cupola-hall, for instance the "madinat as-salam" of Bagdad or the unfinished monument of Heraqla near Raqqa. The last one is a circle form 1 km diameter, with four doors and a central square palace. Four ivans guide to the central hall. The four door rooms differ markedly inside, the first has a round room, the opposite a square one, the next has six and his opposite door eight corners. They show the steps from square to circle — a quadrature. The monument was built by Harun ar-Rasheed as sign of his universal rule after having defeated the Byzantine caesar near Heraclia (today Eregli). 

The concept of a round world is of course taken from the visible horizon and the square from the house, the defence against the alien. The 6, 8 or 12 corner-structures are steps of quadrature — shall express the reconciliation of square and circle — so that the famous eight ribbed vaults at the mosque of Bib Mardun (Toledo) signifies Allah's rule, the reconciliation of matter and idea in architecture. The same is true for the cupola above the mihrab at Cordoba and the other mosques in Islam.

To go back to India, we find the same forms and architectural concept — for example the tomb of Ghiyath ed-Din at Delhi — Tughlaqabad, the Jam Masjid at Champanir — or the famous Kotia of Firuz Shah at Delhi, where even one of the old pillars of Asoka is taken to represent the centre of the world according to hindu-
tradition. A real catalogue of world-conceptions seems to be used by the architects of Akbar. The divan-i khas at Fatehpur Sikri placed the sultan in the centre of a square, on a column, connected with four bridges, below the meeting-place for the representatives of all religious, listened by the head of the Din Illahi — the Çakravartin, sitting in the round column head again the heaven — or the sun, the celestial wheel, guiding the ruler to the dominion over all regions.

The concept of Çakravartin rules the architecture of Akbar’s grave at Sikandra too. The square rules the famous Moghul gardens, the garden-rugs of Iran etc.

The indoislamic architecture found this concept once in the old Indian tradition — the stupa, the vihara and the rôle of column as the navel of the world — and the Afghan and Moghul dynasties brought it again from central Asia, where it could be found since the second millennium B.C. — as it was known in Europe and China.

Even in ancient Mesopotamia the god-like ruler was the “ruler of the four quarters of the world”, residing in a square palace as the pharaoh of the old empire buried in square pyramids.

The use of square and circle was not limited to the “old world”, but were in use as symbols in Old America too. But they are not used everywhere, for example in the Greek architecture of the first millennium B.C. use was limited to heron, the prytaneion or similar traditional buildings, while the great temples were rectangles and only exceptional squares or circles — the symbols of the world and the heaven.

The world of Islam with the Ka’ba on the centre. Ahmad Sharifi, Sfax 1552. acc. to Lewis, 1976, p. 17, pic. 1. (Fig. 7/A).

NOTES

7. Brentjes, 1981, Abb. 2
11. Hoag, 1977, Pl. 56
16. Hoag, 1977, Pl. 381
17. Hoag, 1977, PI. 393-394
20. Hoag, 1977, PI. 496