Maṇḍalas and Yantras

Because of the popular interest in the topic, there has been considerable confusion about the meaning and significance of manḍalas. Some authors have indiscriminately dealt with Buddhist and Hindu manḍalas and arrived at excessively generalized conclusions. In secondary sources, manḍalas have been described too uniformly as aids to meditation. While they certainly function as meditational devices in some traditions (as e.g. the śrīcakra frequently does), this use of manḍalas is but one aspect of a larger picture.

The terms manḍala and yantra are frequently used as synonyms and often translated as "(mystical) diagrams." The fact that their geometric designs are similar contributes to confusion between the terms. Not only Western authors confuse the terms, even late Sanskrit texts often use "manḍala" and "yantra" rather loosely as synonyms. A related term is cakra, which can also refer to a diagram featuring geometric designs. In this article I will try to establish a distinction among the three terms, mainly by considering the different functions of manḍalas, yantras and cakras in Hindu ritual.

Maṇḍalas

In its most general use, the word manḍala refers to something that is round or circular. It can also mean a region, geographical division, domain, assembly or a group. The etymology of the word is uncertain. Tantric texts often render the word's assembly or a group. The etymology of the word mean a region, geographical division, domain, to something that is round or circular. It can also...

of a king. In tantric traditions, manḍala often refers to a structured space that is enclosed and delimited by a circumferential line, and into which a deity or deities are invited by means of → mantras. This space is often a circle, but may also appear as a square, a triangle, or another shape. The various shapes and structures of manḍalas are based on the traditions of the different schools and depend on ritual applications, the deities worshipped, and the practitioner's qualification and goal.

Authorities on ritual recognize manḍalas among the places into which deities can be invoked and worshipped, along with statues, ritual vessels, and fire.

Manḍalas are required in occasional (as contrasted with daily) rituals, such as → festivals or religious observances (→ vrata) and, more importantly, tantric initiation (dikṣā) rites (→ Tantrism). Further, manḍalas, like yantras, are used in rituals leading to the attainment of supernatural powers.

They are prepared from various materials, including colored powders, precious stones, fruits, leaves, and fragrant substances.

In tantric initiation, the viewing of the manḍala is an essential element. At the time of initiation, the manḍala structure functions as a place in which the deities become visible to the initiate for the first time, thereby confirming the initiate's new identity (Törzsök, 2007, 183–184, 189, 190). It is thus clear that the manḍala is not so much a physical structure with a specific design as the place in which the practitioner beholds the deities who have been invoked into it and so have become an integral part of the structure.

The manḍala structure can function as an important device for representing the pantheon of deities in a system or school and for expressing the hierarchy of deities within a system. While most manḍalas follow the common pattern of a concentric arrangement of deities in order to express a hierarchy, the triśūlamanḍala (trident manḍala) of the Trika of Kashmir (→ Kashmir Śaivism) also features a vertical ascent. The manḍala’s trident appears to rise three-dimensionally from a central lotus, as if emerging from the manḍala’s surface (Törzsök, 2007, 196). We do not know whether three-dimensional manḍalas were actually constructed. Such manḍalas are
known of Buddhist texts and traditions. The Viṣṇusamhitā (Rastelli, 2007, 123) instructs the practitioner to make the lines of a maṇḍala in varying thicknesses, with the center of the maṇḍala its most elevated part, which could be taken to imply three-dimensionality. Three-dimensional yantras are not uncommon in the Hindu traditions (see below)

Types of Maṇḍalas

H. Brunner (2007, 156) defines the term maṇḍala as a limited, not necessarily round, surface and suggests a system of classification based on her study of early Śaiva texts. Here I will present a modified version of this system based on my study of later tantric texts:

Type 1: Maṇḍalas for Establishing a Foundation

These are limited surfaces without a clear structure, and are commonly employed to protect divinities, men, or ritual objects placed on them during ritual. They are made of various materials and include maṇḍalas of cow dung smeared on the ground. If such supports also take the form of simple geometric patterns, they can be classified as “yantras for establishing a foundation” (sthāpanayantra; see below).

Type 2: Maṇḍalas into Which Deities Are Invited to Receive Worship

These are limited surfaces with geometrical designs prepared from colored powders, and serve as supports for the regular or occasional worship of deities. They are constructed with a well-defined directional orientation. Commonly three, four, or five different colors are employed. These maṇḍalas are often called “powder maṇḍalas” (rajomadala) but may also be made from other materials, such as grains. They may be large enough to allow for the priest to enter through the “doors” and move around in “corridors.” These maṇḍalas are for temporary use, being destroyed after the ritual.

Type 3: Distributive Diagrams

This term, introduced by H. Brunner (2007, 161), designates limited surfaces divided into a certain number of squares or units. They are domains into which divine or demonic powers are invoked to receive food offerings (bali). Their construction usually does not involve the use of colors. The best known maṇḍala in this category is the vāstu (purusa) maṇḍala, a type of maṇḍala employed in the construction of buildings. H. Brunner also includes in this category geometrical figures divided into squares among which objects are distributed.

However, in texts and ritual practice the distinction among the types of maṇḍalas is not always that clear.

Some Structural Elements of Maṇḍalas

Maṇḍalas display different shapes and patterns, and are made up of various constituent parts that reflect the tradition they come from. Different theological interpretations have been applied to them by correlating their structural parts and deities with doctrines of different systems. Interpretations are extremely varied, and even one text may provide more than one interpretation of the parts of a maṇḍala.

In the following I will describe two basic structural elements of maṇḍalas: the lotus design and the square grid. Geometric figures like the triangle and hexagram, which occasionally also appear in maṇḍalas, will be described in Yantras Employed in Optional Desire-Oriented Rites below. In this article I will look at maṇḍala patterns of different periods and traditions as if they were contemporaneous, without attempting to treat the topic historically.

Lotus Designs

→ Lotus designs appear commonly in Indian art, since the lotus is a common South Asian symbol of creation, purity, transcendence, and the sphere of the absolute. It is especially known as a symbol of the female reproductive organ. The lotus has also been connected since ancient times with water symbolism, as witnessed by a statement in Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa 7.4.1.8: “The lotus is the waters.”

The lotus pattern is commonly found in ritual practice. An eight-petalled (aṣṭādala) lotus, prepared from grains or colored powders, frequently functions as a support for ritual vessels. Atop the vessel is a “dish filled (with grains)” (pūrṇapātra), often uncooked rice, that serves as the seat of the main deity of the rite.

In maṇḍalas with a lotus design, the central deity is positioned in the pericarp (karnikā), and the emanations or subordinate deities on the petals. A lotus design may have one ring or
several concentric rings of petals. The petals of an eight-petalled lotus ideally point in the cardinal and intermediate directions, but we find numerous specimens in books and on coins in which it is the spaces between two petals that are oriented to the points of the compass. This orientation may be due to the ignorance of the craftsmen who prepared the manḍalas. The eight-petalled lotus whose petals do the pointing is a shape which is well suited for positioning deities in their respective directions. This purpose is not served when two petals point in each of the cardinal directions and none in the intermediate directions. The relationship between directions and lotus petals is borne out by a statement in Maitrāyanīyopaṇiṣad 6.2 which identifies the lotus (of the heart) with space (ākāśa), and its eight petals with the four cardinal and intermediate directions.

In addition to eight-petalled lotuses, lotuses with two, four, 10, 12, 16, 24, 32, 100, and 1,000 or more petals appear in manḍalas. The number of petals is usually even, but odd numbers of petals (for example, five) are also found, in which case their directional orientation may not be of any obvious relevance.

A pattern of nine lotuses arranged in groups of three appears in several important manḍalas. These include the → Pāñcarātra navapadmamanaḍala (see fig. 1) and the Śaiva navanābhamanḍala. The nine-lotus-design is also seen in several versions of the Buddhist vajradhātumanaḍala.

Fig. 1: The navapadmamanaḍala.
The central lotuses in mandalas often have triangles and hexagrams inscribed in their pericarps. In a two-dimensional structure, the lotuses are usually surrounded by a square enclosure, often termed a seat or throne (pitha), adjacent to which may be a corridor or passage (vīthi) for circumambulation (pradakṣīṇa). In a three-dimensional structure, the pitha can be viewed as the support of the lotus and project beyond it. Between one and three concentric circles and a square (often consisting of three nested squares) frequently surround the central lotus on the outside. These geometrical structures will be discussed separately in Yantras Employed in Optional Desire-Oriented Rites below. A central lotus in a mandala may be replaced by a wheel (cakra). The deities are then assigned to the hub and the spokes of the wheel. In descriptions of mandala-like structures, words denoting parts of a lotus are sometimes treated as interchangeable with words denoting parts of a wheel (Törzsök, 2007, 181). A wheel may in fact appear in combination with a lotus design.

The Square Grid
A common structural device of certain mandalas is the square grid, which may incorporate a lotus design (made of squares) in its center. Examples of this structure are the bhadramandalas, square-shaped mandalas employed mainly in concluding ceremonies of religious observances (vrata) in Śmārtar ritual. The mandalas are used mainly as supports for ritual vessels. The square grid of these mandalas is obtained by drawing a certain number of vertical and horizontal base lines to form squares on a surface. The squares, called pada or kosṭha, are assembled into different shapes and parts by filling them with colored powders or grains. The most common of the bhadramandalas is the sarvatobhadra (see fig. 2), believed to be particularly well suited for Vaiṣṇava rites. The word sarvatobhadra means “auspicious from all sides” and very likely refers to the symmetry of the mandala design. The constituent parts of this mandala include (see table): a “step well” (vāpi), an “offset” design (bhadra), a “creeper”

![Fig. 2: A sarvatobhadra.](image)
Diagram 1: Basic square unit (*pada, kośha*)

Diagram 2: “Enclosure” (*paridhi*)

Diagram 3: “Step well” (*vāpī*)

Diagram 4: “Offset” (*bhadra*)

Diagram 5: “Creeper” (*vallī*)

Diagram 6: “Chain” (*śrīkhalā*)

Diagram 7: “Crescent moon” (*khaṇḍēndu*)

Diagram 8: Phallic symbol (*liṅga*) of Śiva

Diagram 9: Rāmamudrā rājā rāma

Table: Constituent parts of the *bhadramāndalas*. 
(vālī), a “chain” (śriṅkalā), and a “crescent moon” (khaṇḍendu). In the center is usually a lotus displaying a pericarp (karnikā), and on the outside of the maṇḍala a square with three nested squares inside it. The three lines are interpreted as representative of the three constituents (→ guṇa) of primary matter (→ prakṛti) in the → Śaṃkhya system, namely sattva, rajas, and tamas, and colored white, red, and black respectively from the inside to the outside. In addition to these parts, the lingatobhadras, a subcategory of bhadrarnamanḍalas employed in vratas connected with deities of the Śaiva tradition, contain one or more phallic symbols of → Śiva (→ liṅga), which are themselves called Rudra or Śiva (see table). Some lingatobhadras contain additional parts, such as a corridor or passage (vīthi) for circumambulation around a throne (pītha) and miniature creepers (laghuvali) and miniature chains (laghuśriṅkalā). The characteristic element of the rāmatobhadras, another subcategory of bhadrarnamanḍalas employed in rituals for → Rāma and → Viṣṇu, is the “seal” of Rāma. The “seal” is defined as the words rājā rāma (King Rāma; see table), or, in reverse order, rāma rājā.

The ganeśabhadra and sūryabhadra, prescribed for use in vratas connected with these deities, feature images of Ganeśa (→ Gaṇapati/Gaṇeśa) and the sun (Śūrya; → navagrahas), respectively.

The Relevance of Maṇḍalas

Patterns exhibited by maṇḍalas have had widespread influence. On the level of folk art, the kohbar maṇḍalas, which decorate the walls of nuptial chambers in the Mithila region of northern → Bihar (India) and → Nepal, are a good example of this. So are the auspicious floor designs prepared with rice flour or colored powders. Regionally known as rāṅgoli, aḷpanā, muggulu, or kōḷam, they have been influenced by maṇḍala and yantra patterns (see → raṅgoli and kōḷam).

Maṇḍala patterns of cities have frequently been described. However, it often remains unclear what the connection between a maṇḍala and a city or temple really is. Problems arise when one attempts to correlate maṇḍala structures and actual building plans. Patterns typical of maṇḍalas and yantras have inspired modern Indian architecture, art, and dance. The Mumbai-based contemporary architect Charles Correa has been guided by maṇḍala designs in his layout of buildings, such as the new State Assembly (Vidhan Bhavan) in Bhopal. A navagrahamandala pattern inspired him to design the Jawahar Kala Kendra, a cultural center in Jaipur, while his Surya Kund in Delhi is said to be based on a maṇḍala plan featuring the śrīcakra in its center.

The Question of the Origin and Date of Maṇḍalas

Several scholars have suggested that tantric maṇḍalas are rooted in Vedic traditions (→ Vedas). The layout of Vedic altars is taken as indicative of an early interest in geometric designs endowed with cosmological symbolism (Gaeffke, 1987, 153). The method of determining compass directions for the construction of sacrificial altars, the consecration of bricks on the surface of a cayana altar by means of mantras, and the locating of deities on those bricks are essential features of Vedic rituals (Apte, 1926, 2–3). Aspects of these rituals recur in the practice of constructing maṇḍalas and invoking deities into their parts. The sacred space of maṇḍalas and yantras as such can be seen as a continuation of the Vedic sacrificial site (Schneider, 1988, 100), and the square enclosure of tantric maṇḍalas in particular as an analogue of the sacred fire altar (Gupta, 1988, 39–41). But the similarities between the two traditions appear to end there. Authors like H. Mitra (1958, 112) are going too far when they assume that patterns displayed by yantras and maṇḍalas can be traced back to the Śulbasūtras of the Vedāṅgas (which prescribe the way to construct sacrificial altar diagrams; see → mathematics and geometry), since the patterns displayed by tantric maṇḍalas are distinctly different. So are the mantras and the deities invoked into maṇḍalas, and the details of the rites. The problem of the similarities and differences between Vedic and tantric traditions is complex and needs to be explored in greater detail in a separate study. Such an investigation would have to trace the influences of other traditions on maṇḍalas as well.

Among the oldest maṇḍalas that can be dated are two types of vāstupuruṣamanḍalas described in Varāhamihira’s Brhatatīkā from mid-6th century CE. We can assume that the two maṇḍalas described in chapter 53 were not created by Varāhamihira but rather adopted from older unidentified sources. Thus the oldest Hindu maṇḍalas may well predate the 6th century.
Yantras

The word *yantra* designates an instrument or other type of mechanical device (esp. one used in warfare), or a magic diagram. It is derived from the Sanskrit root *yam-*, “to control.”

One general characteristic of *yantras* is that they are small in size. In contrast, *maṇḍalas* vary in size and can be large enough to allow for priests or initiands to enter them through doors and to walk around in them during, for example, an initiation (*dīkṣā*). With the exception of *yantras* placed below temple statues at the time of their consecration and *yantras* installed permanently for worship in *mathas* (→ monasteries) or → temples, and a few other cases, *yantras* are generally mobile, whereas *maṇḍalas* are not. While *maṇḍalas* can employ different color schemes, the use of color is less common if not indeed irrelevant in the case of most *yantras*. Texts may prescribe that the lines of a *yantra* be traced with a specific color, for example, with turmeric or blood, but the interior space is never filled with colors, as it is in the case of *maṇḍalas*. And while pictorial representations of deities can appear in *maṇḍalas*, such images are generally not found in *yantras*.

On the basis of an analysis of texts of the Trika School of Kashmir, H. Brunner (2007, 162) briefly defines a *yantra* as a linear representation on a specific surface, such as birchbark. She adds that *yantras* almost invariably have letters, seed (*bīja*) syllables or *mantras* inscribed in them. Since *mantras* frequently employ verbs in the imperative to express an order, H. Brunner suggests the translation “coercive diagrams” for *yantras*. Similarly, M. Rastelli (2007, 142) concludes from her study of the Pāñcarātra texts that *yantras* of that school have inscribed *mantras*. Authors such as Kṣemarāja (quoted by Sanderson in Padoux, 1986, 33) consider it characteristic of certain *yantras* that *mantras* are inscribed in them. But at least in later texts and in modern practice inscribed *mantras* are not necessarily parts of *yantras* (see below).

*Yantras* can be two- or three-dimensional. Two-dimensional *yantras* are outlined on paper, textiles, and other materials. Three-dimensional *yantras* are raised structures usually made of metal. The well-known *śrīyantra* or *śrīcakra* (see fig. 7) can be represented either two- or three-dimensionally.

Types of Yantras

Building on the work of earlier authors such as H. Brunner (2007) and S.K.R. Rao (1988) as well as on the results of my study of tantric texts (→ Tantras) of the later period, I would like to suggest the following tentative classification of *yantras* as a guideline. This classification, according to the distinctive features and ritual use of *yantras*, is not intended to be exhaustive and may not be applicable to all traditions.

Type 1: Yantras for Establishing a Foundation

These are *yantras* which function as supports for ritual implements (*sthāpanayantra*) during a worship ritual and display simple geometric shapes, such as a triangle or a circle. They function as supports for ritual implements, such as lamps or vessels and in special desire-oriented (*kāmya*) or magical rites. Such supports also figure in the regular tantric → *pūjā*, in which they appear to be referred to as *maṇḍalas* (see fig. 3). Their function can be compared to that of the “*maṇḍalas for establishing a foundation*” (see above). But unlike the cow dung *maṇḍalas* in this category, which are without any clearly recognizable structure, the *yantras* manifest a specific structure.

![Fig. 3: A supporting maṇḍala for the vardhani vessel in tantric pūjā.](image-url)
Type 2: Yantras into Which Deities Are Invited to Receive Worship

These yantras are employed in a practitioner’s regular tantric worship of a deity and are often referred to as “yantras (which are supports) for worship” (pūjāyantra, pūjādārayantra). They are frequently named for their presiding deity, for example, “yantra for the worship of Gaṇapati” (gaṇapatipūjāyantra).

Yantras of this type usually display common geometric shapes, but generally do not have inscribed mantras, at least according to the later tantric sources that I have studied. The deity and her/his emanations are, however, invoked into the yantra by means of mantras. Regardless of whether the mantras are only used to invoke the deity or whether they are also inscribed in the yantra, they are of utmost importance. It is for this reason that the Kulārṇavatāntra (6.85, 87) states that a yantra consists of the deity’s mantra.

In this category of yantras I would also include the śrīcakra, alternatively called śrīyantra (see fig. 7), which represents the goddess Tripurasundari and is of great significance in the Śrīvidyā system (Padoux, 2007a). In addition to being worshipped in ritual, this cakra is also visualized and experienced in the practitioner’s body as a manifestation of the cosmic process of creation and resorption, including the various spatial and mantric aspects of both. Yantras employed in regular worship are often made of durable materials such as copper.

Type 3: Yantras Employed in Optional Desire-Oriented Rites

This category includes yantras used in special rituals for certain deities and yantras prepared for specific magical rites. The latter are often named for these rites, for example, “yantra for (generating) attraction” (ākarsaṇayantra; see fig. 4). After the ritual is complete, the instructions may recommend that yantras consecrated for magical purposes be made into amulets and worn on the body (dāhāraṇayantra) in order to obtain the desired results, such as protection or the acquisition of power and wealth. Among these yantras, the yantras for protection (rakṣāyantra) figure prominently in texts. In the category of yantras for desire-oriented rites I also include magic (number) squares. These are diagrams with inscribed numbers, the sum of which remains the same regardless of the direction in which one adds them up.

The first and second types have similar geometric designs but usually no mantras inscribed in them. Yantras of type 2 usually consist of more complex geometric designs than type 1 yantras. Both types differ in ritual function. The first type is used as a support for objects in rituals, while the second type is the main object of worship. Yantras of type 1 are similar in function to the aforementioned “mandalas for establishing a foundation.” Yantras of type 3 are used in desire-oriented magical rites, usually have inscribed mantras and may have unusual designs.

The third category of yantras is required for the performance of optional rites, specific magical rites, and the like. These yantras are often made of perishable materials such as birchbark or paper. They are drawn, according to the instructions, with special writing materials and substances such as animal or human blood or ashes from a cremation ground. They may also be incised on more permanent materials such as metal plates. Discussions of the various styluses used and the materials on which protective yantras can be written are commonly found in texts. The materials are considered extremely important for the success of the ritual, and are in keeping with the nature of the rite performed. Thus cruel rites require repulsive materials, and the yantra used in the rite of killing (māraṇa) as described in Mahīdhara’s 16th-century Mantramahodadhi (25.56; 25.59) should be written on human bone with certain poisonous substances.
General instructions for drawing yantras for different purposes, including reducing fever, keeping snakes away, and countering the effects of poison, can be found in various texts; mention may be made of chapter 24 of Lakṣmanadeśīkā’s Śāradātīlaka, which is based on chapter 34 of the Prapatīcasāra, and chapter 20 of the Maṇtramahodādhi. Yantras for magical purposes are described in detail in Dāmodara’s 17th-century Yantracintāmani, also known as the Kalpa-cintāmani. The applications include the six rites of magic (abhicāra), namely, appeasement (śānti), subjection (vaśikaraṇa), immobilization (stambhana), creating enmity (vidveṣaṇa), eradication (uccātana), and killing (māraṇa). Depending on their purpose, these yantras are named “yantras for (bringing under) subjection” (vaśyakaranyayantra), “yantras for (generating) attraction (ākarsaṇayantra)” (see fig. 4), and so on. The use of yantras in rites of magic continues up to the present day. Yantras featuring Ṣaṅkarāṇa are sold in India for the safety of one’s vehicle (vāhanasurākṣaṇa). Other yantras are used upon the recommendation of ṛṣis for magical cures.

Yantras employed in magical rites may be ritually destroyed after their use, inserted into a statue (which then undergoes burial), or otherwise disposed of (crushed and eaten, tied to a tree, or concealed in the intended person’s home), depending on the instructions. They may be enclosed in an amulet container, such as a tube or a locket, sealed and then worn around the neck, on the head, in one’s headgear, in a tuft of hair, on the arm, under the armpit, on the wrist or a finger, and so forth. A yantra meant to be inserted into a locket is first drawn on a piece of paper or similar material and consecrated in a worship ritual by a specialist. These lockets can be attached to the necks of animals, such as cows, for their protection. Yantras may also be attached to protective dolls hung near the entrance to a home or be placed above a door.

Yantras employed in desire-oriented rites may be similar in design to the yantras for establishing a foundation (see above), but they often have mantras inscribed in them. The mantras can be seed syllables (bīja) combined with verbs in the second person singular imperative, such as “subjugate,” which call upon the deity to carry out the magical effects of a rite on its intended recipient. The center of the yantra is frequently inscribed with the name of the person to be influenced, termed the recipient or intended person (sādhyā). The place where the person’s name is to be written is often indicated by the common name Deva-datta. Either the recipient’s name is surrounded by, or its syllables are intertwined with, the syllables of the mantra.

Yantras may also contain longer mantras or even well-known hymns (stotra, stuti). The composition and ritual use of hymns or devotional poems in praise of deities has a long history in South Asia. Such hymns (→ Stotras) are found in the → Purāṇa literature and tantric texts, and in independent collections (attributed to sages or seers; → ṛṣis) as well. To reinforce the efficacy of hymn recitation in bringing about the promised material benefits, the practice arose of reciting hymns a given number of times. This practice is modelled on that of repeating powerful mantras.

In time, hymns came to be regarded as powerful magical formulas. Whereas the shorter mantras may be repeated millions of times to achieve a particular result, hymns are recited at most hundreds or thousands of times. Hymns employed for such purposes include hymns for protection. These hymns often include in their titles such terms as “armour” (kavaca), “protection” (rakṣā), or “cage” (pañjara). In these hymns, the deity is asked to protect each part of the practitioner’s body. The different parts, from head to foot, are systematically enumerated. For each part of the body, the practitioner addresses the deity using a different descriptive epithet, which is often connected with the respective body part. The deity’s names are assigned to and “deposited” on the body parts of the practitioner, and are believed to protect him like divine armour. As well as being recited, these hymns can be arranged in the form of yantras. For those who cannot themselves recite the hymn, a yantra with the hymn inscribed in it is thought to bring about the same beneficial effects as recitation.

In addition to yantras containing the text of entire hymns, there are also yantras which are associated with individual stanzas of hymns of praise. Well-known examples are the yantras associated with the Saundaryalaharī, a hymn to the tantric goddess Tripurasundari in 100 (sometimes 103) stanzas. It is traditionally ascribed to the Advaitin Śaṅkara (Advaita → Vedānta). Each verse of the Saundaryalaharī became associated with a specific seed (bīja) syllable, which is
inscribed in a *yantra* shape, such as a square, a hexagram, a triangle, a lotus, and so forth. These *yantras* are worshipped, and the seed syllables inscribed in them are recited a large number of times, for the attainment of desired (usually mundane) benefits. The *yantras* associated with the stanzas of this hymn were obviously created later, their connection with the stanzas not being evident from the text itself.

The general instructions require that *yantras* be infused with life in the rite of *prāṇapratīṣṭhā*, of the same basic type as the one performed on statues of deities. Texts such as Brahmānandagiri’s 16th-century Śāktānandaṭāraṇāgini (264, 6ff.) also enjoin that certain purificatory rites (*sanskāra*) be performed on *yantras*, just as they are performed to purify *mantras*.

### Some Constituent Parts of Yantras

*Yantra* and *manḍala* designs commonly feature a triangle and/or a hexagram, inscribed in one or several lotuses (*padma*) of four, eight, 10, 12, 16, 100, 1,000, or more petals (*dala*). The lotus petals are often surrounded by one circle (*vr̥tta*) or three concentric circles and a square (*caturasra*), again sometimes with three nested squares. In *yantras* of the Śaiva and Śākta traditions, the lines of a triangle or square may be formed by tridents whose prongs project beyond the lines of these shapes (see fig. 6). The main deity is worshipped in the center of the *yantra*, at a “point” (*bindu*), which may be visible or remain invisible/unmanifest, while his/her retinue is worshipped in various parts of the structure (see fig. 5). These parts...
include the angles (asra) or corners (konā) of a triangle or hexagram, the points of intersection (samdhī) of two triangles, the lotus petals (dala), and the tips of lotus petals (dalāgra). Special terminology is used in connection with the śrīcakra (see fig. 7), which is employed in the ritual worship of Tripurasundari. It is a complex configuration of a central point and sets of triangles surrounded by lotus petals, circles and a square. The three circles outside of the overlapping triangles are referred to as three “girdles” or “belts” (valaya); a point of intersection between two lines is called a “junction” (samdhī), a point of intersection between three lines is known as a “vital point” (marman), and a point of intersection between a “junction” and a “vital point” is termed a “knot” (granthi; see Bhāskararāya’s commentary Setubandha 31, 9 on the Nītyāsodāsikārvana and Umānandanātha’s Nityotsava 64, 4–5). The most important surrounding deities or emanations are invoked into the parts of the yantra closest to the center. One obvious advantage of a yantra compared to an icon is that a yantra allows for the deities who surround the main deity in enclosures (āvaraṇa, āvṛti, lit. covering or veil) to be worshipped in it as well.

The structural elements of yantras vary, as do the interpretations given for these elements. Some important constituent parts are described in the following, together with examples of interpretations from texts. Most descriptions and interpretations of the constituent parts of yantras found in the literature concern the śrīyantra or śrīcakra, the most important and influential of yantras.

The Point (Bindu)
The point (bindu) is located in the center of the yantra and may be visible or remain invisible. It is often interpreted as the principle from which all form and creation radiates. The Ganeśapārva-tāpanīyopanisad (c. 7th cent.), section 3, equates the central point with the void of space.

The Triangle (Trikona, Tryasra)
The triangle is a common constituent of yantras. It can be either downward-pointing or upward-pointing, and less frequently pointing toward the right or left. The downward-pointing or inverted triangle is known as a symbol of the female pubic triangle and the female sex organ or womb (yoni, bhaga). The letter e is identified with it because of its triangular shape (in certain Indian scripts). The downward-pointing triangle also symbolizes water (see the Vāstusūtropaniṣad, cited in Bāumer, 1986, 56). This symbolic significance is known from other cultures as well, for which the downward-pointing apex suggests the direction of falling rain.

Tantric texts commonly describe the reverse triangle, that is, a triangle resting on its base with its apex upwards, as the symbolic shape of the element fire. The apex of the upward-pointing triangle indicates the direction of the flame.

In connection with the śrīcakra (see fig. 7) authors such as Bhāskararāya refer to the downward-pointing (adhomukha) triangles as Śakti (→ Mahādevi) triangles and the upward-pointing (ūrdhva mukha) triangles as fire (vahni) or Śiva triangles. Both types of triangles are intertwined to form a hexagram (see below).

The triangle is naturally connected with the symbolism of the number three. Its three lines are usually interpreted as tripartite units, most commonly, metaphysical concepts. In other traditions, triangles are represented with a protruding “gate” on each side. These gates are identical in shape with the T-shaped gates of the outer square of yantras (see below).

The Hexagram (Śatkona, Śadara, Tāra)
The hexagram consists of two equilateral triangles with the same center but pointing in opposite directions, usually upwards and downwards. The apexes of the two triangles of the hexagram can also be oriented to the right and left sides. The triangles are shown either lying one on the other or intertwined with one another. The downward-pointing and upward-pointing triangles symbolize the sexual union of the female and male principles, of Śakti and Śiva, of water and fire (see above).

In the hexagram the deities are often worshipped at the points of intersection of the two triangles, while in the eight-petalled lotus they are worshipped in the petals, which ideally face in the cardinal and intermediate directions. Like these objects, the hexagram is equated with sextuple concepts and groups.

The Pentagram (Pañcakona)
The five-pointed star, the pentagram, pentacle, or Star of Solomon, is less commonly found in yantras. It is a constituent part of some yantras of Guhyakāli (see fig. 6), since the number five has special significance for the goddess → Kāli.
The Octagon (Aṣṭakona, Aṣṭāra)
The octagon appears less frequently as a constituent part of yantras and can be formed in several ways. A common method to obtain an octagon is to draw two crossed or intersecting squares. The symbolism of the octagon, like that of the eight-petalled lotus, is connected with the eight directions.

The Lotus
Like mandalas, yantras frequently feature a lotus design. Depending on the context, different interpretations of the lotus design and the lotus petals have been offered. The symbolism of the lotus is discussed above in connection with mandalas.

The Circle
One circle or three concentric circles frequently surround the inner structure of yantras.

The Outer Square
The circle or circles in a yantra are usually surrounded by an outer square, which often consists of three nested squares. The square, which also appears close to the outer edge of mandalas, is called “earth house” (bhūgrha), “earth city,” or “earth citadel” (bhūpura), since the square is a symbol of the earth. Among the symbolic shapes of the elements, a (yellow) square represents the earth. The symbolism of the square is connected with that of the number four and the four cardinal directions.
The square has a T-shaped gate (dvāra) in each cardinal direction. Like the sides of a square, the gates are equated with groups of four. Pāñcarātra Saṃhitās interpret the three nested squares of the outermost square as sattva, rajas, and tamas. This interpretation is also attested for the three nested squares of the outer square formation of the bhadrānādallas of the Smārta tradition, which are white, red, and dark, symbolizing the three constituents (guna) of primary matter (prakṛti) in the Śaṅkhya system.

The Relevance of Yantras

The patterns displayed by yantras, like those of manḍalas, have had widespread influence, for example, in the Citrabandhas (literary compositions in Sanskrit in which text is arranged in yantra-like shapes). Like manḍalas, yantras continue to be worshipped in South Asia. The śrīcakra or śrīyantra (see fig. 7) is widely worshipped in contemporary India and Nepal. It is installed and worshipped, among other places, in the Sringeri Mutt (→ Karnataka), which claims to uphold Śaṅkara’s tradition. In Nepal, it decorates roofs of shrines. The śrīcakra is now also sold as a pendant to be worn around the neck, and is printed on wall calendars. A numerical yantra, the visoyantra, is currently worshipped in Ambaji, Gujarat. Popular books promote yantras for miscellaneous mundane purposes, including safe driving.

Fig. 7: The Śrīcakra.
\textbf{Cakras}

The term \textit{cakra} (circle or wheel) has several primary and secondary meanings.

- \textit{Cakra} can refer to a wheel as the central part of a \textit{manḍala} structure, to whose hub and spokes deities are assigned. In this function, the wheel can either substitute for a lotus or appear in combination with it (see also above).
- The term \textit{cakra} can refer to a group or circle of deities invoked into a \textit{manḍala} or \textit{yantra} structure.
- Some later authors appear to use \textit{cakra} synonymously with \textit{yantra} and \textit{manḍala}.
- The word \textit{cakra} also refers to a diagram or tabular device employed in ritual.
- A well-known use of the word \textit{cakra} is with reference to the “wheels” or “lotuses” believed to be located in the human body.

In the following, only the second, fourth, and fifth meanings are discussed.

\textbf{The Cakra as a Circle of Deities}

The term \textit{cakra} refers to a group of deities invoked into a \textit{manḍala} or \textit{yantra}. At the same time, the term also denotes the support for these deities in the form of a specific surface. This is very likely the reason why the word \textit{cakra} appears synonymously with \textit{yantra} and \textit{manḍala} in later texts – a use of the term that requires further investigation. It also explains why the parts of the \textit{śrīcakra}, which display a variety of shapes (such as triangles and lotus petals), are referred to as the nine \textit{cakras}.

\textbf{The Cakra as a Ritual Diagram/Tabular Device}

The word \textit{cakra} also refers to diagrams containing specific arrangements of letters of the alphabet or of numbers. Diagrams such as the \textit{akathamacakra}, the \textit{akadamacakra}, the \textit{naksatracakra}, and the \textit{rāśicakra}, which are used to determine whether a \textit{mantra} suits a candidate, fall under this category. Unlike the “distributive diagrams,” namely, \textit{manḍalas} of type 3 in the earlier classification (see above), which are ritual diagrams divided into squares into which divine or demonic beings are invoked to receive food offerings, these diagrams are simply tabular devices, which do not serve the purpose of invocation.

\textbf{The Cakra as a “Wheel” or “Lotus” in the Body}

The word \textit{cakra} is used with reference to the currently rather popular tantric concept of the “energy centers” or “power centers,” which are believed to be located in the body. They are referred to either as “wheels” (\textit{cakra}) or as “lotuses” (\textit{padma}). In some systems these \textit{cakras} have lotus shapes and are occupied by deities. The lotuses may also have an inscribed geometric figure (such as a triangle or hexagram). The number of \textit{cakras} and their location in the body varies depending on the traditions. Some systems assume sets of four, five, six, nine, 12, 16, 24, 27, 32, or more \textit{cakras}.

\textbf{Bibliography}