

Björn-Uwe Abels

A post-Gupta coin-type from the Punjab (NW-India)

The coins under discussion were part of a large hoard of over 100 coins, which had been found in a clay-pot at Rupar in the Punjab. While most of the hoard had unfortunately already been sold, I managed to purchase the remaining coins, presented in this paper (see Pl. 62.63).

A. Cunningham published coins of this type, from Bananni near Harappa in the Punjab, as early as 1873¹. M. Mitchiner mentioned another find from Jeera, again in the Punjab². Our coins are made of silver. Their weight varies from 0.75 to 0.78 gr., one exception being no. 13, the weight of which is 0.61 gr. These weights correspond to about $\frac{1}{3}$ of those of the Gupta silver drmmas, and accordingly of the Mahakshatrpa drmmas. The diameter of our coins varies from 1 to 1.2 cm.

The obverse shows a portrait to the right of extremely poor quality. Some of the obverses are so severely debased, that almost nothing can be made out (no. 5–8)³. Three parallel lines with dots at their ends emerge from the over-large ear (no. 8–11). A broad kind of a band runs across the upper part of the coins, covering the oval-shaped head and the ear (no. 1.2). The occasionally almond-shaped eyes are again extremely large (no. 1.2). The nose is hooked (no. 3.12.13). Three dots stand for the nostral, the mouth and the chin (no. 12.13). A circle of dots seems to surround the portrait (no. 1.2.5–8.11.12). None of the portraits are identical, although those of no. 1 and no. 2 are rather similar. All the obverses only show parts of the portraits, which might thus be completed: Pl. 62,a.

Accordingly, the coin-die must have had a diameter of about 2 cm.

For the development of the portraits, two sources have to be taken into account. The facial half and the ears (no. 1.3.4.9.12.13) are rather similar to those on the obverse of the drmmas of Skandagupta (no. 14.15). Some of these already show a steady degree of deterioration in their quality (no. 15)^{3a}. Especially the ear on coin no. 9 looks almost identical to that on a dramma of the youthful Skandagupta (no. 14). On the other hand, neither the shape of the head nor that of the eyes, can be found on Gupta coins, whereas they are quite common on Hūṇa coinage⁴. The band above the head, and the three parallel lines behind the ear, might well be the remains of a head-dress.

The reverse shows in its centre three dots, and below them a symbol shaped like a Roman I. This symbol represents a fire-altar, and the dots stand for the flames emerging from that altar. Again, none of the reverses are identical, except those of no. 9 and 12. These two might well have been struck with the same die, while different dies were used for their obverse. Furthermore, the reverse shows a legend which runs approximately from 8 o'clock to 5 o'clock.

¹ Cunningham, Arch. Survey of India, ann. rep. 1872–73, p. 104 plate 31.

² Mitchiner, Oriental coins and their values. The Ancient and Classical World, 600 b.C. – a.D. 650 (1978) p. 610 no. 4905–4909.

³ The obverse of the coins published by Mitchiner are of the same poor quality.

^{3a} In fact, the portrait of this specific coin looks so very debased that it might well have been a prototype of our series and that it might already have been minted by the earliest Hunas that reached the former western provinces of the Gupta empire.

⁴ R. Göbl, Dokumente zur Geschichte der iranischen Hunnen in Baktrien und Indien (1967) Em. 40–83.86–104.

The fire-altar is well known from the reverse of the Hūṇa coinage, which derives from that of the Sasanians⁵. Again, the fire-altar was struck on the reverse of the silver drammas of Skandagupta, which were current in the western provinces of the Gupta empire⁶. This fire-altar seems to be the earliest one known from Indian coinage. Fire-altars however, continue to be struck on West-Indian coins as lately as the beginning of the 13th century⁷.

Of all the fire-altars (Pl. 62,b), the one on the coins Skandagupta resembles that on our coins the most (no. 15).

The legend on the reverse of the coins under discussion, raises an almost unsolvable problem⁸. M. Mitchiner suggested, that the letters at 9 o'clock and at 3 o'clock should be read as ›ga‹ and ›pta‹⁹, which led him to the conclusion, that these letters stand for ›Gupta‹, while the other letters above might indicate a personal name¹⁰. Except for these letters there are remains of two letters visible on either side of the fire-altar at 5 o'clock and at 7 o'clock respectively, both of which could be a ›ra‹ or the upper half of a ›ṭa/da‹ or a ›na‹. As most of the letters vary in their style, and as they are partly incomplete, one can actually only make out a few of them fairly clearly:

no. 1: at 9 o'clock = bha or ta

no. 2: at 10 o'clock = bha or ta; at 3 o'clock = ṣa?

no. 3: at 8 o'clock = ṭa or da? at 10 o'clock = bha or ta

no. 5: at 2 o'clock = pa

no. 7: at 9 o'clock = bha or ta; at 12 o'clock = gha? at 3 o'clock = pa

no. 8: at 10 o'clock = bha or ta

no. 9: at 10 o'clock = bha or ta; at 12 o'clock = gha; at 2 o'clock = ra? at 3 o'clock = ṣa

no. 10: at 10 o'clock = bha or ta

no. 11: at 9 o'clock = bha or ta; at 3 o'clock = pa

no. 12: no. 9

no. 13: at 9 o'clock = bha or ta; at 11 o'clock = gha? at 1 o'clock = ra? at 3 o'clock = pa

These letters joined together do not yet make any sense, although they probably are supposed to stand for the personal name of a ruler. It seems that we won't come any closer to a solution, unless some more coins with clearer legends have been found. On the whole the legend gives the impression as though it was written by someone who was little, or not at all acquainted with the Gupta alphabet. Under these circumstances it seems not altogether unlikely, that the legend on our coins merely served a symbolic purpose.

The debased portrait of Skandagupta on the dramma with the fire-altar (no. 15), and the ear of the youthful emperor on the other coin (no. 14) are the prototypes of the faces on our coins no. 12.13 and of the ears on the coins no. 1.3.4.9. The same accounts for the fire-altar (no. 15), which most likely is the prototype of that on the reverse of the coins under discussion¹¹. As Skandagupta's rule ended in 468 a.D., our coins can't have been minted very much later.

⁵ Göbl, *Dokumente* (note 4), Vol. I. II.

⁶ J. Allan, *Catalogue of the coins of the Gupta Dynasties and of Śaśānka, king of Gauḍa* (1914) § 115.118 plate 20,13–29; 21,1–12. A.S. Altekar, *The coinage of the Gupta empire* (1957) p.254–257 plate 18,11–18.

⁷ B.-U. Abels, *Ein Beitrag zur Entwicklung der Gadhia Münzen: AVA-Beitr. 4*, 1982, p. 109–123.

⁸ I am extremely grateful to Prof. P.L. Gupta (Nasik), Prof. H. Humbach (Heidelberg) and Prof. H. Plaeschke (Halle) for having tried to help deciphering the legends – unfortunately without much success, due to the very poor quality of the coins.

⁹ I am giving the position of the letters clock-wise, starting on the left, as this might be the beginning of the legend.

¹⁰ Mitchiner, *Oriental coins* (note 2), no. 4905–4909.

¹¹ Allan, *Catalogue* (note 6) § 118 p.101: He classified these coins as ›mis-shapen‹ and of ›rude fabric‹.

The shape of the deformed heads, as well as the large almond-shaped eyes (no. 1–4) derive from those on some Hūṇa coins, which R. Göbl dated between 450 and 490 a.D.¹². But, as portraits with artificially deformed heads were surviving on West-Indian coins for many centuries, the date achieved by Göbl only provides us with a terminus post quem¹³.

However, as the portraits on our coins are partly similar to those on the Hūṇa coins, and partly to those on the coins of Skandagupta, and as the fire-altar is rather close to that on the coins of the Gupta emperor, I should like to date them into the 6th century a.D.¹⁴. Taking the considerable debasement of the legends into account, I propose that our coins were minted in the second half of the 6th century.

The find-spots Bavanni, Jeera and Rugar lie in the Punjab. This far off western province was certainly lost to the Gupta empire by the time of Skandagupta's death, if not earlier. On the other hand, this region must have come fairly early under the influence of the Hūṇas. As our coins are distributed over not too large an area within the Punjab, they seem to represent the coinage of a ruler, who carved out of the disintegrated Gupta empire an independant principality. This ruler might well have belonged to one of the Gurjara clans, who were coming into prominence during the 6th century a.D. in NW-India.

Anschrift: Dr. B.-U. Abels, Bayer. Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Schloß Seehof, D-8608 Memmelsdorf bei Bamberg

¹² Göbl, *Dokumente* (note 4) Em. 40–83.86–104.

¹³ Artificially deformed heads are quite common on West-Indian coins up to the 10th century: Abels, *Gadhia Münzen* (note 7) Em. 2–4. The shape of such heads and eyes are still visible on the Basohli and Kishangarh miniatures of the 18th century, although the artificial deformation had gone out of fashion since many centuries. A detailed account on this subject is given by Göbl, *Dokumente* (note 4) Vol. II, p.235–246.

¹⁴ Mitchiner suggested the late 5th century.