



## ANALYSIS OF COINAGE FROM THE GUPTA PERIOD WHILE REVIEWING INDIAN HISTORY

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### **Abstract**

*According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a coin is a piece of metal (gold, silver, copper, etc.) having a set weight and value that is converted into currency by being imprinted with a legally recognized device. Coins are typically circular discs. Most ancient civilizations throughout the globe have their histories mostly based on their coinage, and in the case of Indian history, the Kushana and Gupta empires did as well. It is simpler to recreate the social, political, and economic history of the Gupta rulers based on the study of their iconography since their currency hoard was the largest ever discovered. The Gupta coins also provide light on the theological transformations that occurred inside the Gupta culture as well as the rulers of this time. This article examines four of these coins and makes an effort to explain what is shown in their inscriptions and iconography, as well as possible uses for the coins beyond than serving as a medium of commerce and a unit of measurement for value.*

### **Introduction**

Coins from the Gupta Empire, which reigned over a large portion of the Indian subcontinent from around 320 AD to 550 AD, may be seen in the Heberden Coin Room of the Ashmolean Museum. Since the first hoard was discovered in 1783 at Kalighat, ten miles from Calcutta, by Nab Kishen, who then gave about 200 of them to Warren Hastings, the then Governor General of the East India Company, they have been used as a significant source of data for the political, economic, and social history of India under the Gupta Emperors. Hastings sent them to London, where one roll of twenty-four coins was given to each of the British Museum, Mr. Hunter's Museum, Ashmolean Museum, and Cambridge Public Library, while the others were melted down. This article examines four of them and makes an effort to clarify the meaning conveyed by their iconography and inscription, as well as any potential uses they may have had besides serving as a means of trade and a gauge of worth.

### **Gupta Period and its Coinage**



The Gupta Period is referred to as the Golden Age of Indian History by V.A. Smith. Additionally, it is said to have been during the Indian Renaissance when language, literature, art, science, and metallurgy all witnessed considerable advancements. In 240 AD, Sri Gupta established the Gupta Dynasty in eastern Uttar Pradesh, North India, with Prayaga serving as its political hub. Although Sri Gupta was presumably a minor chieftain, the Gupta Era really began with the ascension of his grandson Chandra Gupta I in 320 AD, and it peaked with the reign of his son Samudra Gupta in 335 AD.

One of the primary sources for the history of this time period is coinage. Given that majority of the coins were struck under Samudra Gupta's name, it is strongly disputed whether Chandra Gupta I or he was the one who originally issued the coins. While it was initially argued that this was the first Gupta coin to be struck, recent studies by the Numismatic Society of India state that it was likely issued by Samudra Gupta to honor his parents. There is only one type, known as the King and Queen type, which depicts the marriage of Chandra Gupta I with the Lichchavi princess, Kumaradevi. However, owing to a lack of evidence, nothing can be established for sure, and it is widely considered that Samudra Gupta's rule saw a substantial development in Indian currency based on the quantity and variety of coins discovered carrying his name. During and after his reign, the coins started to honor dynastic successions, various sociopolitical occasions, such as alliances, marriages, and ritual practices, as well as the artistic and personal achievements of the Emperors. These occasions were typically depicted on the obverse, while an Indian deity was shown on the reverse. The silver coins were known as rupakas and had legends, mainly in Brahmi Script, which was likely the common language at the period, but some coins also include Sanskrit inscriptions. The gold coins were known as dinara or suvarna. This article examines four distinct coins from four different Gupta Emperors and attempts to analyze the iconographic contrasts between them.

### **The Initial Studies and Early Hoards**

R. Payne Knight initially examined the Gupta coins in the early nineteenth century with the intention of decoding the inscriptions, and he concluded that they were imitations of Greek symbols and letters (Burns 148). These were successfully decoded in 1823 by William Marsden, who identified their Indian provenance and read the name Chandra on one of the



coins, determining that they most likely date to the fourth century AD. While H.H. Wilson and James Prinsep investigated these coins for the Coin Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal at the same time, the Gupta coins were executed entirely in India while adhering to the 'Indo-Scythian' coinage design. These studies expanded in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth because additional hoards were found in North Eastern India, particularly close to Bengal. There have been 17 hoards of Gupta coins discovered so far, with the Banyana Hoard—the largest—found in 1946 and yielding 1821 coins. The Bharsar Hoard, the Allahabad Hoard, the Hugli Hoard, and the Mithathal Hoard are further significant hoards.

### **Sources of Metals and Technique of Minting**

The use of copper and bronze in the Himalayan region marked the beginning of metallurgy in India around the second millennium BC. In the south, gold and silver were initially used approximately 1500 BC (South Indian Iron Age)<sup>1</sup>. The first gold mines discovered in India are from this time period and are located in Maski, which is in the southern state of Karnataka. Samudra Gupta's coins portray Deccan wars, and there is proof of his southern victories (Smith 291), therefore it is probable that gold was brought in from the south. The North-West is home to the earliest silver mines, and it's conceivable that silver was mined there throughout the Gupta Age as well. The coins were made using a die-striking technique, in which the necessary amount of molten metal was either mixed with alloying components and cast into sheets of the necessary thickness, which were then cut into pieces of the necessary size, or molten metal was poured into sockets of the necessary size and thickness. Then, using the obverse die lodged in the anvil and the reverse die above, the metal sheet was hit. Engravings were then formed by hammering or striking, which is why the coins were not perfectly spherical. Many coins have been released using the repoussé process.

The meterology of the Gupta coins, which weighed 120 grains, was inspired by the Kushana coins, claims A.S. Altekar. The analysis of many coins, however, shows that it differs for various rulers and from one metal to another. Coins weighed 120 grains during the reign of Samudra Gupta, but during the reigns of Chandra Gupta II and Kumara Gupta, three standards of 121, 124, and 127 grains can be found for gold coins alone, while gold coins of 130, 132, and 144 grains are discovered in the case of Skanda Gupta. However, they also



have a varying alloy percentage. Early Gupta coins had a 10% alloy and a 125 grain coin has 113 grains of pure gold, however Skanda Gupta and his successors' coins have a 25% alloy and a 150 grain coin has 113 grains of pure gold. While copper currency had an indefinite weight standard and its meterology varied from 18 to 87 grains, making it impossible to deduce any scheme in their weight system, silver coins had a slightly more uniform weight throughout the Gupta Era, weighing between 27 and 34 grains.

### **The Coin of Samudra Gupta**

The six principal forms of coinage under Samudra Gupta are Standard, Archer, Battle-axe, Ashvamedha, Tiger-slayer, and Lyrist. The Ashvamedha type of these was likely struck between 355 and 375 AD to honor the ceremonial horse sacrifice he undoubtedly carried out to commemorate his triumphs in Northern and Southern India. This coin (Image 1) is composed of gold, has a diameter of 21 mm, weighs 7.47 g, and was minted. On the reverse, a sacrificial horse is shown in front of a yupa or sacrifice post, with a pennon soaring over it from the top of the post. The queen is shown on the reverse holding a fly-whisk, or chouri, and a needle while standing on a mat with pearl borders. It also has a mythology called Ashvamedha Parikramah, which in Brahmi is translated as "the one strong enough to offer the horse sacrifice" (Bajpai 124). It is possible that many of these coins were produced to mark Samudra Gupta's horse sacrifice and his adoption of the title of "Emperor" or Maharajadhiraj since the king obtained the title of Maharajadhiraj, or supreme ruler of the state, after performing this ritual, which could only be performed by the king. The lady shown on the coin's reverse is Dattadevi, Samudra Gupta's principal companion, since she played an equal role in the conduct of this sacrifice. The Ashvamedha yagna and Rajasuya yagna,<sup>46</sup> which is another type of horse sacrifice in which the king receives tribute from the defeated king or kings and performs a horse sacrifice in their presence, showed the might of an emperor. Samudra Gupta's performance of one of these sacrifices shows the power of the Gupta Empire.

### **The Coin of Chandra Gupta II**

The iconography and metals used to make coins under Chandra Gupta II (also known as Vikramaditya), who succeeded Samudra Gupta and reigned from 375 and 415 AD, underwent major alteration. The kinds could now be classified as Standard, Archer, Lion-

slayer, Horsemen, Chattra, Couch, King and Queen on the couch, and Chakravikrama. The metals used also included silver and copper, suggesting a development in metallurgy.

The Lion-slayer type, which came in three separate classes—the lion-combatant, the lion-trampler, and the lion-retreating—is the most prevalent instance of these. This gold coin, which is the lion-combatant type and has an 18 mm diameter, weighs 7.87g. With the legend Narendrachandrah prathitrano rene jayatyajeyo bhuvī Simhavikramah, which translates to "The moon among the kings who is famous for his warfare, who is invincible, and who is valorous like a lion, victorious on the battlefield," the coin shows the emperor holding a bow to kill a lion on the reverse side. The inscription Simhavikramah, or "Vikram, the lion" in Brahmi, is found on the back of the piece, which also features a goddess, most likely Durga, sitting on a lion and holding a noose in her extended right hand and a lotus (Allan 44). In Hindu mythology, Durga, the goddess of strength and a representation of invincibility, is seen sitting atop a lion or a tiger. This coin was apparently meant to symbolize the emperor's prowess in hunting or his invincibility and ferocity as well as the fact that he was possibly a devotee of the god. Additionally, depictions of Goddess Durga show how goddess devotion evolved inside Hinduism at that time. Even though it is a part of Hinduism, goddess worship was not particularly popular or prevalent in India prior to this time (Erndl 12). According to legend, it was in "its full flower" during the Gupta Age and was subsequently incorporated into religious texts, the majority of which were revised at this time to include new deities, including many manifestations of the Mother Goddess, Durga being one of them (Keay 147). As a result, the symbolism of the coin also depicts changes in religion as well as the social mores of the period.

### **The Coin of Kumara Gupta I**

The electrolytic plating (Dufour ix.1) of copper coins with silver, in addition to the production of gold, silver, and copper coins, began under the administration of Kumara Gupta I, also known as Mahendraditya, who succeeded Chandra Gupta II in 414 AD and reigned until 455 AD (Smith 299). Twelve additional types, including the Horseman, Swordsman, Elephant rider, Elephant rider-lion slayer, Chattra, Apratigha, Rhinoceros-slayer, Ashvamedha, Kartikeya, King and Queen, and Garuda with expanded wings, appeared underneath him in addition to the Archer, Lion-slayer, and Lyrist types. This coin (Image 3)

is of the Elephant rider-lion slayer type, is made of gold, is 18.5 mm in diameter, weighs 7.95 g, and is struck in that metal (Harle and Topsfield 20). A dwarf may be seen standing behind the emperor and holding an umbrella over his head. The image shows the monarch riding an elephant that is stomping over a lion while wielding a knife. The reverse depicts a goddess or female attendant wearing a sari, jewelry, including earrings, bangles, armlets, and a necklace. Her hair is tied back, and she appears to be feeding a peacock with her outstretched arm, which was later identified as a parody of the Roman goddess Juno feeding peacocks. Simhanihant Mahendragajah, which translates to "the elephant of Mahendra killing a lion," appears on the coin. This coin shows an event rather than a skill, a significant social achievement, a religious conviction, or the emperor's authority and power. The iconography has also undergone a clear transition, with the figure of the queen or a divinity being replaced with a lady who has no apparent connection to the emperor or position of power. This is also evident in an other coin from the same ruler that is on display at the museum and has a different hunting scene on the reverse along with a woman attendant clutching an umbrella. The umbrella represents the governmental system of the chakravartin monarch, which is a phrase used in Pali to describe a good and morally upright worldwide sovereign. In all instances, it's likely that the representation genuinely refers to an unnamed goddess, but there is no evidence to support this theory or to show if the imagery is a reworking of Greek themes. The multiplicity of currency kinds indicates that Kumara Gupta probably ruled in peace.

### **The Coin of Skanda Gupta**

Due to several battles and military operations, the Gupta currency decreased under Skanda Gupta's 455–475 AD reign. The coin types were reduced to four—Archer, King and Lakshmi, Chattra, and Horseman—while two new kinds—Bull and Altar—were established for silver coinage. The coins were now exclusively made in gold and silver. The Skanda Gupta Horseman type coin (Image 4) has a 20mm diameter, is 9.1g in weight, and is struck in gold (Harle and Topsfield 20). On the coin's reverse side, the emperor is seen riding a horse while unarmed and with his sash flowing behind him. A circular, blurry inscription is also visible. On the reverse, a goddess clutching a long-stemmed lotus in her left hand and a noose in her right hand, whom John Allan identified as Lakshmi, is shown facing the left while



perched on a wicker stool. On the left, a blurred symbol can be made out, and on the right, a blurred legend with the words "Kramaditya" can be made out. The currency lacks the intricate patterns of those produced by the early Gupta Emperors, and it is evident that by this period, coinage diversity had lost its appeal.

### **Comparison of the Coins**

The four coins of the four Gupta Dynasty monarchs demonstrate a shift in imagery and topics as well as the usage of currency to convey societal messages. It represented the political clout of the kings and gave them a platform to distinguish themselves from their predecessors. All of the examples examined for the article clearly demonstrate this. Even though some coin types (such as the Archer type, the Lyrist type, etc.) were common to all the emperors, the coins' distinctive designs and finer details show that they were primarily used as a means of expressing individuality while keeping ties to the family. Coins were also clearly used to emphasize the ruler's own achievements and skills. One such example is the coin that Chandra Gupta II produced, as well as a few others that show him and other Gupta rulers as archers, hunters, lyricists, soldiers, etc. In addition to this, they also included depictions of the emperor's life events, battle scenes, weddings, and political and social relationships, making them a valuable resource for research into the royal family's material and home lives.

Some coins include pictographic statements that may be interpreted in a variety of ways and may represent the ruler's ferocity, splendor, or magnanimity. On the other hand, the value of the Gupta Age's aesthetic and cultural progress may be determined by its coinage. Learning, art, and education had a prominent position in Gupta culture, as shown by images of rulers reading, writing, and playing the lyre (seen on Samudra Gupta coins). Even though they sometimes lack physiognomic characteristics, the coins themselves have significant creative worth and depict intricate iconography with detectable postures, the clothing and jewelry worn, and traits of animals. Therefore, coinage also acted as a social life indicator.

The goddesses and yagnas represented the emperors' reverence for the state religion. Some coins may affect people's religious views by revealing the dominant god for a given ruler. For instance, Chandra Gupta II's coins depicting Durga and Lakshmi reveal his preference for the Hindu Shaktism sect, whereas Kumara Gupta and Skanda Gupta's coins with garuda and peacocks reveal their preference for the Vaishnavism religion.



The Gupta coins also demonstrate that some coin types were common to all of the dynasty's rulers, which is similar to how current coinage has standardized iconography for a family of monarchs. The representation of women, which was lacking in Indian currency before to this time, is a remarkable iconographic development that may be seen in Gupta coinage. This portrayal may also be seen from a social perspective, and when examined with the literature from this time period, it demonstrates how the role of women in Indian culture had altered during this time. This is also shown by the rise of goddess worship (a subset of Hinduism known as Shaktism) and the inclusion of goddesses in the revision of ancient texts.

The coins also provide information about the empire's financial situation. The majority of the coins were minted in gold, which speaks to the empire's prosperity. The following usage of copper, silver, and other metal alloys, together with the advancement in carving talent, point to substantial metallurgical growth during this period and the requirements of the less advantaged segments of society. However, the use of inferior metals and alloys may also portend worsening economic issues. This is especially true during the reign of the last two great emperors of the empire, Skanda Gupta and Kumar Gupta, whose military campaigns were also documented in edicts. This demonstrates the gradual decline in the economy and the final demise of the Gupta dynasty.

Since there are no written records of some of the monarchs of the Gupta Dynasty, such as Kacha, Prakasaditya, and Chandragupta III, the presence of these kings can only be determined by studying the coins. They sometimes act as the sole source of knowledge on significant political events (like Kumara Gupta's Ashvamedha sacrifice performance), which further emphasizes the significance of the alliance with the Licchavis. Additionally, the locations where their hoards were found reveal the sphere of influence of a certain king. The Saka and Gupta silver coins both confirm the dates for Chandra Gupta II's invasion of Western India.

varied researchers have varied perspectives on the forces that shaped the iconography of the





Gupta coins. The images of the horseman and the lion-slayer are among the emblems that the coins are said to have taken from Roman mythology, according to V.A. Smith. He has correctly recognized the peacock-feeding lady as Juno from the coin of Julia Augusta (also known as Livia), the wife of the Roman emperor Augustus, and the garuda<sup>3</sup> as the Eagle of the Roman aurei (Reece 126). The peacock alludes to Lord Kartikey's horse, after whom Kumara Gupta and Skanda Gupta were called, while the garuda refers to Vishnu, who is associated to them according to A.S. Altekar, who links them to Vaishnavism<sup>4</sup>. He thinks that since the Gupta rulers were shown wearing Kushana garb, the Kushana money had a greater effect on the coins than the Roman coinage. In addition, he sees the image of the goddess perched on a lion or perched on a stool as a reference to the Kushana motif of Ardoksho<sup>4</sup> holding a cornucopia, which was eventually supplanted by Durga and Lakshmi. It is debatable what the true theme or intent of the images on these coins was, but it can be said that coinage was a significant aspect of the Gupta Period that contributed significantly to the idea that the Gupta Age was the Golden Age of Ancient India. Coins can be used to interpret the social, cultural, religious, political, and economic mores of Indian society at the time.

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