

## "KHADGA-TRĀTĀ" COINS OF KUMĀRAGUPTA I

BY S. V. SOHONI

The Bayāna hoard contained<sup>1</sup> four coins of what has been called, "the rhinoceros slayer type". A fifth piece has recently been described<sup>2</sup>. One may hope that more would be found.

All these five coins are of Kumāragupta I. This type holds a unique picture on either side; of a king on horseback hunting a rhinoceros (on obverse); and of a river goddess (viz. the Ganga) with her right hand pointing upwards, standing on a crocodile, having a long snout and with a female attendant holding a royal umbrella.

There are three main suggestions in this analysis—

- (a) that the rhinoceros was not intended to be killed and was hunted for its horn;
- (b) that natural history and popular<sup>3</sup> lore about the rhinoceros must be taken into account correctly to appreciate the mint master's intention;
- (c) that the Gangā was depicted as a pathway leading to heaven; and that most probably, the occasion was a *śrāddha* at Prayāga.

Several details are worth noticing about this rhinoceros hunt. It is apparent that Kumāragupta I's mint office paid close attention to natural history.

There are three known varieties among rhinoceroses—

- (1) The big one-horned rhinoceros, on whose flanks the fold behind the shoulders stops short of the top ridge of the back.
- (2) The small one-horned rhinoceros, on whose back the fold behind the shoulders runs right over the top ridge.
- (3) The two-horned rhinoceros.

As regards accessibility, the big one-horned rhinoceros is more conveniently hunted. The other two varieties are not found in this country or near its frontiers. The small one-horned rhinoceros is seen in Burmese jungles; and the two-horned species is now confined to the Malay peninsula and Java and

is rare elsewhere, it being even doubtful whether it at all survives in Burma and Assam.

It is the big one-horned rhinoceros which is shown on Kumāragupta I's coin. Its size can be inferred on a comparison with that of the royal mount. Its distinctive characteristic is also clearly seen; there is no fold carried over the back behind its shoulders.

It is not necessary to hold that Kumāragupta I had to go to Kāmarūpa to hunt a big one-horned rhinoceros. Essentially an inhabitant of forested banks of rivers, this variety is found in Nepal and partly in northern fringes of Tirhut jungles; and in isolated areas in Kāmarūpa. Prater has observed, "Formerly extensively distributed in the Indian Peninsula. Today it is restricted to parts of Nepal and Assam. In Nepal, it is found only in the country to the east of the Gandak River known as Chaitwan, in Assam in isolated areas of the plains."

The rhinoceros of this variety is found even now straying into Champaran jungles in North Bihar, particularly in the forests on the Gandak left bank where that river debouches into the plains.

It is more probable that Kumāragupta I's hunt of rhinoceros took place in North Bihar jungles adjoining the Chaitwan region in Nepal, not far away from Vaiśālī, than in distant Assam. A ruler of Pāṭaliputra would have found this more convenient. Sailing from Pāṭaliputra, he could have gone upstream the Nārāyaṇī (also called the Gandak or the rhinoceros river) up to Govindganj; and then to Triveni by the ancient route on which Asoka has left his pillars. Tirabhukti-*viśhaya* was almost a home province of early Gupta rulers. Its headquarters at Vaiśālī was only 27 miles from Pāṭaliputra. A seal of Kumāragupta I's mother Dhruvasvāminī was found at Vaiśālī. It is not unlikely that Dhruvasvāminī's children were very familiar with Tirabhukti-*viśhaya* with all its attractions viz. places sanctified by association with Rāma and Sitā in Mithilā and its famous jungles.

It could be safely assumed on account of this variety's extensive distribution in North India centuries ago, that Kumāragupta I could have hunted a big one-horned rhinoceros, much nearer home than in Assam. In a list given by Bāṇa<sup>1</sup> of presents sent from Kāmarūpa for Harṣavardhana, no rhinoceros was specifically mentioned, probably, on account of its not being regarded as a rare animal. Secondly, as would presently appear, this factor of distance was a material consideration.

(1) A. S. Altekar: *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coin in the Bayāna Hoard, 1954*.

(2) J.N.S.I. Vol. XVII pt. II pp. 104-106.

(3) S.H. Prater: *The Book of Indian Animals*, pp. 191-194.

(1) Bāṇa's *Harsha-charitra*, pp. 217-218.

A mint master has to think of several aspects before a coin type is decided upon. The space available for showing any drawing on a coin is very small. Having received an imperial order that a rhinoceros should be depicted, care had to be taken to distinguish it from say, a wild boar. This was done by emphasising a very characteristic feature which has been described by Prater in these terms: "on the flanks, shoulders and hind quarters, the skin is studded with masses of rounded tubercles." Our Catalogue refers to these rounded tubercles as "black spots".

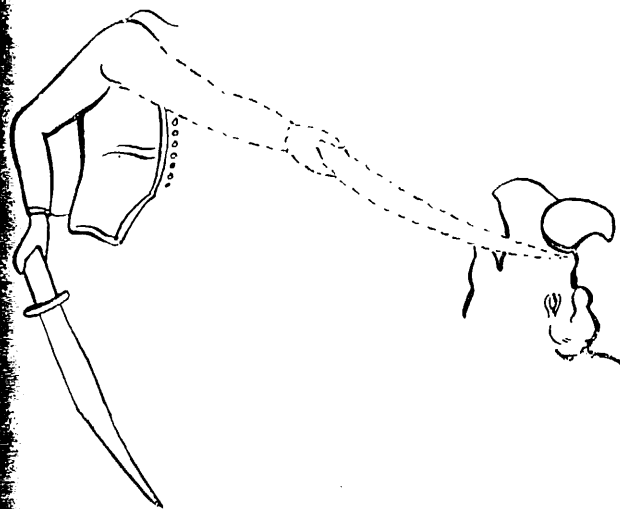
On the coin, the horseman is shown having taken the safest position while dealing with his rhinoceros. There is ample indication that the rhinoceros had been stalked i.e. followed from behind and taken by surprise. This was not done without good reason. A parallel position would ensure safety, since with its grotesque and heavy build a rhinoceros cannot change its course easily. Further, Prater has noted that this animal is solitary as a rule and has referred to one of its strange habits which helps its enemies: "Along the numerous rivers which flow through the jungles of the Nepal Terai the rhino has particular places for dropping its excreta. Mounds so accumulate in places. In approaching these spots, a rhinoceros walks backwards and so falls an easy victim to poachers."

Therefore, the rider came to a sudden halt, moving behind the animal. The horse is shown as prancing on its hind legs—firstly, because this is what it does in such circumstances; and secondly, because it was necessary to show its neck away from that of the rhinoceros, to avoid confusion of detail.

On the coin, the rhinoceros is shown with its head and its horn raised to their highest point. This was not without a very fundamental reason.

If one were to calculate, using details of this coin, drawing, the sweep of the weapon held by the horseman, it is clear that the tip of the weapon would have hit the horn of the rhinoceros with maximum effect. The horseman's right foot is on the rhinoceros' back. This position helps the delivery of the blow. It is clear from all five available coins that the horseman is shown watching the head of the animal—and most probably its horn. (cf. top and middle figures on p. 181).

Whatever that weapon might be, the sharpest edge would have made no difference to the back of the rhinoceros. Judging from the way the weapon is shown as being held by the horseman, it is either resting or is just being moved for making the maximum swing for striking against some object. It is clear that the rhinoceros cannot be killed or even severely



Top : See page 180.

Middle : See pages 180 & 183.

Bottom : See page 198.

injured with a sword—blow on its flank, shoulders and hind quarters, in contrast with any other animal similarly struck.

Only the horn was liable to be dismembered. Prater has observed, "The horn is formed of a closely matted mass of horny fibre, issuing from the skin. It has no connection with the skull, although a supporting boss of bone in the skull may serve as its foundation". It grows throughout life and if lost is reproduced. It is prized for its supposed medicinal properties also. Average length is 15 to 16 inches. A male has shorter and thicker horn (as on the coin), blunted in combat.

This much is inferred from details known about distribution, physical characteristics and habits of this animal.

In minting this curious coin type, what was intended to be impressed on Kumāragupta I's subjects? "Commemoration" of a successful hunt in Kāmarūpa does not seem to be a satisfactory motive. This animal was not a monopoly of that region. Further, a rhinoceros is far less destructive than a wild elephant; and very much more innocent than a yellow cat like a tiger or lion. It feeds on grass; and only during rains it might damage cultivation. It is not a menace to human life.

Perhaps an explanation lies in terms of a religious belief associated with this animal. Its flesh and blood were considered highly valuable for use during a *śrāddha*. Prater remarked, "On ordinary *śrāddha* days the libation of water and milk is poured from a cup carved from its horn."

This aspect deserves examination. In his *Smṛiti*, Manu laid down that flesh of a rhinoceros should be regarded as being fit for a *muni* (Chapter III, 27 2<sup>4</sup>). Later, he has counted rhinoceros among animals eligible for human consumption (Chapter V. 18)<sup>2</sup>; and an animal killed for conducting religious rituals attained salvation for itself and the performer (Chapter V. 42).<sup>3</sup>

These notions hold good in Nepal even to-day with specific reference to performance of *śrāddha*. This is also not without other authority. Thus, in *Pāraskara Gṛihya Sūtra* it was enjoined that rhinoceros flesh should be used (vide *Śrāddha*

(1) कालशाकं महाशालकः खड्गलोहामिषं मधुः ।

आनन्त्यायैव कल्पन्ते मुन्यन्नानि च सर्वशः ॥

(2) साविधशालकं गोवां खड्गकर्म शशस्तथाः ।

भक्ष्यान्त्यश्च नलेष्वाहुरनष्टांश्चैकोदत्तः ॥

(3) पश्वर्थेषु पशुन्निहसन्वेदतत्त्वार्थविद्भिजः ।

आत्मानं च पशुचैव गमयत्युत्तमां गतिम् ॥

*Sūtra Kandikā*. VIII).<sup>1</sup> In the *Śrāddha Kalpa* section of *Gobhila Gṛihya Sūtra*, the rhinoceros has been mentioned as first essential requisite of *Akshayyatripti* (vide *Saptamī Khandikā* 2.)<sup>2</sup> In the *Yājñavalkya Smṛiti* also flesh of a rhinoceros has been referred to as a desirable material for performing a *Śrāddha*.<sup>3</sup>

*Yājñavalkya* proceeded to say that,

यद्दाति गयास्थाश्च सर्वमानन्त्यमश्नुते ।

तथावर्षात्रयोदश्यां मघासु च विशेषतः ॥

By saying that 'गयास्थाश्च' other places were also intended; and in the *मिताक्षरा* on this stanza was observed,<sup>4</sup> that other places like *Gangādvāra* and *Prayāga* were also referred to.

This reference to performance of *Śrāddha* at *Gangādvāra* and *Prayāga* is important.

There is no doubt that the *Gangā* was shown on the reverse of this rhinoceros coin. Some clue to that goddess' gesture is furnished by these lines from Kalidāsa—

वीथतोयव्यतिकरभवे जन्मुकन्या सरय्वो-

द्वेष्ट्यागादमरणगणनालेख्यमासाद्य सद्यः

(RV. VIII (95)

(2) समुद्रपत्न्योर्जलसंनिपाते पूतात्मनामत्रकिलाभिपेकात् ।

तत्त्वावबोधेन विनापि भूयस्तनुत्यजां नास्ति शरीरबन्धः ॥

(RV. XIII. 58)

(3) जन्मोः कन्या सगरस्तनय स्वर्ग सोपानपङ्क्तिम् ।

(Meghadūtam 54)

The river goddess is shown standing on an elephant-headed crocodile. (cf. middle figure on p. 181)

This was to identify the river as a *Samudrapatnī*, riding on a *mātanganakra*.

Kalidāsa has stated using that very phrase of तनुत्यजः

अकरोत्स तदौर्ध्वदैहिकं पितृभक्त्या पितृकार्यकल्पवित् ।

नहि तेन पथा तनुत्यजस्तनयार्वाजित पिण्डकाङ्क्षिणः ॥

(RV VIII 26)

(1) अथाज्ययत्तृतीः । खड्गमांसम् ।

(2) अथाक्षय्य तृतीः । (१) । खड्गाः ।

(3) खड्गामिषं महाशालकं मधुमुन्यन्नमेव च ।

लोहामिषं कदाशाकं मांसं वार्धोणसस्य च ॥

(4) च शब्दात् गंगाहारादिषु च ।

गंगाहारे प्रयागे च नैमिषे पुष्करे अर्बुदे

संनिहत्या गयायां च श्राद्धं अक्षेय्यतां व्रजेत् ॥

Performance of a *Srāddha* was a duty which Kumāragupta I could not have avoided. Using materials taken from a rhinoceros, was expected during a *Srāddha*. Kumāragupta I only took its horn.

I should add that in Nepal it is common practice that those who want to perform *Srāddha* have themselves to hunt a rhinoceros.

But a coin must be read in terms of not only what it depicts but of what is specifically inscribed on it i. e. according to its legends.

Certain points stand out prominently.

There is no reference to either any valour being performed or any slaying being done, in sharp contrast with legends on coins showing a tiger or lion hunt. No *parākrama*<sup>1</sup> was claimed nor any description as a *Nihantā*.<sup>2</sup> No large title like *Mahārājādhirāja* or any poetic reference has been incorporated e.g. of Kumāragupta being a moon<sup>3</sup> on this world or of his dynasty.

The obverse legend on this rhinoceros type coin has its initial word or phrase obscured. Only the last letter in that word or phrase is visible and even our 5th coin does not clear this<sup>4</sup> detail. Dr. Altekar has suggested restoring this word as "भर्ता"<sup>5</sup>. I do not see how this restoration is at all possible. Firstly, this word is never used in any Gupta coin legend. Secondly, there seems to be more space left than would be occupied if only this word were to exist. Thirdly, if there were a word ending with त, it could have been अजित; also, as this word or its variant occurs so frequently on Kumāragupta's coins. But this is "ttu" and not "ta" on one out of five coins; and if it represents a word ending in Rta it could be some other word e. g. *Hartā* or *Kartā* also.

An important part of this coin legend is '*Khadgastrātā*'. Dr. Altekar has suggested<sup>6</sup> that, "The unknown author of the metrical legend makes a pun on the word *Khadga* and describes the emperor as '*Bhartā Khadgastrātā Kumāragupta jayatyānisam*'. 'Ever victorious is the lord Kumāragupta, who is *khadgastrātā* protector by the sword (*khadgenatrātā*), as well as protector from rhinoceroses (*khadgebhyastrātā*)'".

One may readily agree that there are occasionally puns in Gupta coin legend. A well known example is "क्षितिमवजित्य दि"

(1) *Bayāna Catalogue*, p. 277.

(2) *Ibid.* p. 294.

(3) *Ibid.* p. 242.

(4) *Ibid.* p. 248.

(5) *Ibid.* p. 298.

(6) *Ibid.* p. CVII.

(7) *Ibid.*

व्यति वृत्तिर्विक्रमादित्यः १", which involves reference to the rising Sun as well as to a king whose power is responsible for increasing public welfare. But I submit that there are good reasons for holding that there was no pun on the word खड्ग.

Nor is there much help from a comparable legend on what has been termed "elephant rider type" coin, about which Dr. Altekar has remarked<sup>1</sup>, "The obverse legend is most probably *Kshataripurājatrātā Kumāragupta jayati ripun*, 'Kumāragupta, whose enemies have been destroyed, and who protects feudatory kings, conquers the enemies.'

A metrical legend is more compact and would not commit a mistake of inconsistency between enemies having been already destroyed and enemies remaining under conquest.

There are, however, certain dependable parts of both obverse and reverse legends on this rhinoceros type coin which are definitely of value in making its appreciation. The reverse legend is *Sri Mahendra Khadyah*. Dr. Altekar has translated it as, "Rhinoceros (killed by) Mahendra." This conclusion, placed within brackets, is not tenable. It is inconsistent with a definite phrase put on the obverse viz. "*Khadgastrātā*". This phrase could certainly mean, "protecting a rhinoceros". Kumāragupta does not claim to be a *Khadga Nihantā* (as done for a lion on his lion hunt type coin.)

That this was proper interpretation, is conclusively proved by a remarkable stanza of Kālidāsa in Canto II of the *Raghuvansam* devoted to a remarkable description of Daśaratha's hunting in his forests.

प्रायो विपाणपरिमोक्ष लघुत्तमाङ्गान्खड्गोर्वकार नृपतिर्निशितं क्षुरप्रैः ।

शङ्खं सद्यस्विन्याचिह्नितः परेषामत्युच्छ्रितं न ममृषे ननु दीर्घमायुः ॥

(RV. XI. 62)

Kālidāsa would have it that Daśaratha did not kill rhinoceroses but only removed their horns as he merely wanted to put down those who raised their tops or heads too high due to pride.

Our coin is perfect numismatic parallel of this stanza. In fact, I would not be surprised (should a speculation be permitted), if hunting in all its variety of animal, described in this supremely beautiful Canto were found to have corresponding coin types besides those relating to rhinoceros, tiger and lion, so far discovered. Based on healthy contemporary outlook on advantages of hunting, this description has for its central principles, restraint and discrimination. Thus the deer and the peacock are not even touched. The yak loses only its tail;

(1) *Bayāna Catalogue*, p. CIX.

and the rhinoceros, only its horn. The wild buffalo is shot through the eye as the pair of horns must be preserved. In tigers' mouths are lodged arrows as would make them into quivers; and the lions are killed as if to cancel the debts owed to the war elephants. The mint-master clearly paid his tribute to Kālidāsa.

Is it without significance that these three coin types of Kumāragupta I, खड्गनाता type व्याघ्रवलपराक्रम type and सिंह निहन्ता महेंद्रगज type should have been so clearly explained in four consecutive stanzas devoted to hunting these three kinds of animals in this superb Canto IX of Kālidāsa's *Raghuvansham*? A close relation between an extremely rare rhinoceros protection type coin and stanza No. 62 in that canto is not without some bearing on Kālidāsa's chronology.

Kālidāsa has referred to "धुरप्र" as the weapon used to slice off the horns of rhinoceroses—and not खड्ग. I suggest that even on our coin there is a small curvature at the other extremity and that "खड्ग" has been used in the legend strictly to mean a rhinoceros.

If this analysis were broadly correct, it would mean that—

(1) Kumāragupta I is shown about to cut off the horn of a rhinoceros, but deliberately sparing that animal's life. He was a शङ्खदन्ता as well as a खड्गनाता.

(2) In accordance with a law of corresponding qualities e.g. strength of tiger or prowess of a lion being excelled by the king, as on the tiger or lion slayer coins, the wellknown belief about the rhinoceros possessing a very long life led to this coin's reverse legend of श्री महेंद्रखड्ग; implying that Kumāragupta I had even a longer life. This claim probably turned true.

(3) This coin strikingly brought out that Kumāragupta I would permit nobody keeping his head high in front of him i.e. would sharply deal with every form of haughtiness.

(4) The rhinoceros horn was useful during a आद to ancestors. The Gangā indicated a road to Heaven. The coin was minted in early part of Kumāragupta I's reign. His hair are fuller on head here than on other coins. His figure is also more youthful. Hence his rhinoceros protector type coin might have been struck soon after he succeeded his father. That animal had definite associations with performance of a आद. This coin thus throws some light on Kumāragupta's succession.

(1) Prater has noted that the lion was once found over the whole of Northern and Central India as far south as the Narbada. Kumāragupta I need not have gone to Saurashtra to kill lions. Similarly tigers are also found outside Bengal.

This explains how a king of Ayodhya like Daśaratha could deal with a mixed assortment like lions, tigers, rhinos and yaks.

## THE GOLD CONTENT OF GUPTA COINS

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The gold content of Gupta coins has so far been investigated only by Cunningham (Table II.b) and Sinha (Table I. c.). In comparing their results we found some serious discrepancies. So we thought it advisable to study the gold content of the coins of the earlier Gupta Kings. In testing the coins we had the invaluable assistance of Mr. S. K. Guha, B. Sc., postgraduate research student, Birkbeck College, University of London, who weighed each coin both in air and water with great care. We have weighed almost all the gold coins of Chandragupta I and Samudragupta in the British Museum, with the exception of a few worn pieces; and for comparative study we have also weighed eight Archer-type coins of Candragupta II and nine Archer-type of his son and successor Kumāragupta I. Thus, a careful study of 77 coins of the early Gupta kings has fully convinced us that Cunningham's analysis is incorrect.

We have prepared an exhaustive table of early Gupta coins, and also of eleven coins of the late Kuṣāṇa king, Vāsudeva in order to understand the former properly. From the Table II.a we may draw some very interesting conclusions. Our analysis of Candragupta Kumāradevi coins in Table Ia agrees with Dr. Walker's report (Table I. b) on some of these coins, while on others the two analyses differ by only a few grains. These variations may be due to the fact that his assistant weighed the coins in water by means of a fine iron wire, which is not very flexible and suitable, instead of by fine cotton thread used by us at the time of taking the weights. So there is only a slight difference between the two sets of results obtained by Dr. Walker and ourselves. The air weights of the coins numbers 4 and 7 in the *B. M. C.* are not correct, for there is no loss of weight in water. In view of the discrepancy of weight in these two coins, we do not depend on the *B. M. C.* for air weight. It may thus be the fact that there is some discrepancy also in the *B. M. C.* in the case of the Candragupta Kumāradevi coins. In any case, either Cunningham's coins are entirely different from ours, or errors crept into his investigations. So we ignore his findings and concentrate our attention on our own analysis.

From the point of view of pure gold content we may group our coins in five categories :—

(I) Vāsudeva coins ... 118 grains