

A NOTE ON THE RHINOCEROS TYPE COIN OF KUMĀRAGUPTA I

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Coins, as is well known, form one of the most important source for knowing the past. Very often they not only reflect the socio-economic conditions of the times but also shed light on the territorial jurisdictions of the kings or the issuer of that type of coin. So far as social conditions are concerned, they present a picture of the various facts of social life including religious beliefs and practices, dresses and ornaments, military accouterments and even other predilections of the ruling chief. Economically, the large number of gold coins hitherto found in various parts of the country and belonging to numerous dynasties furnish information about the flourishing conditions prevailing in the country. Yet, in some cases, they also indicate and corroborate some positive historical occurrence gleaned from literature and epigraphs. It is well known that the mighty emperor Chandragupta II conquered the western regions and restruck the silver currency of the Śakas which was mostly prevalent in areas ruled by them.¹ The Mehrauli Pillar inscription refers to his western conquest as far as the seven mouths of the Indus and even upto Bāhlika whose identification is a matter of controversy.²

Chandragupta II, according to the inscriptions referred to above, defeated a confederacy of kings in the east and extended his empire upto the Lauhitya river.³ This indicates that his empire extended from parts of Assam in the east to the western seas as stated in the said inscription. His conquest of western India is also proved by numismatic evidence as he issued the Lion-slayer type of coins which were not issued by his illustrious father, Samudragupta. Now, lions are to be found only in certain areas of Gujarat, though their depredations in parts of south western Rajasthan were also known in medieval times. Thus these coins very well affirm the conquest of Gujarat by Chandragupta II.

1. Majumdar, R. C. (ed), *The Classical Age*, p. 19.

2. *Ibid*; p. 20 fn. 2.

3. Fleet, J. F., *C II*, Vol. III, p. 141. [This river is not mentioned at all in the said inscription. Only Vaṅga is mentioned. T. P. V.]

Chandragupta II did not issue any coin which might relate to his eastern conquest. But his son and successor, Kumāragupta I issued as many as 14 types of gold coins, besides issuing silver and copper ones as well. One of his coins, popularly known as the Rhinoceros-slaying type is worthy of special attention.¹ Though Kumāragupta I also issued the Aśvamedha type of coins, signifying performance of Aśvamedha, no epigraph informs us of any conquest or military expedition undertaken by that king during his long reign (415-455).² He seems to have ruled peacefully and rested on the laurels of his famous father. The question is what was the purpose and significance of issuing this particular type of coin by that emperor ?

It is well known that rhinoceros is to be found either in eastern India i. e. Assam or in Nepal. Since Nepal is no where referred to as forming part of the Gupta empire and is only known as a frontier kingdom in the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta,³ we may rule out its conquest at any stage by the mighty Guptas. Otherwise its conquest would either have been referred to in any one of the epigraphs hitherto discovered or by the Chinese pilgrims. We may, therefore, presume that the coins under discussion reflect some sort of martial attainment by Kumāragupta I in the eastern region where the rhinoceros is to be found in plenty even today.

It may be argued that these parts had already been conquered by his father, as referred to in the Mehrauli Pillar inscription, but it is significant that Chandragupta II commemorated his western conquest with the issue of Lion-slayer type of coin, but so far no coin of his has come to light depicting him as slaying a rhinoceros. Even the epigraphic evidence says that he 'defeated a confederacy of hostile chiefs in Vāṅga which would suggest that some chiefs in eastern India had rebelled and were suppressed. We cannot, on the evidence at hand, ascribe the conquest of parts of Assam to Chandragupta II.

Now Kumāragupta, on numismatic evidence stated above, performed a horse sacrifice. The mere performance of this sacrificial ritual

1. Altekar, A. S.; *Corpus of Indian Coins*, Vol. IV, *The Coinage of the Gupta Empire* pp. 167-239.

2. Majumdar, R. C., *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

3. Fleet, J. F, *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

indicates some sort of martial activity or conquest on the part of that ruler. We know of no other conquest made by him from any other source. It has recently been suggested that Kumāragupta I made certain conquests towards the Narmada Valley and in order to commemorate that victory he performed the Aśvamedha sacrifice.¹ But such a suggestion goes against the combined testimony of the Bhitari and the Junagarh inscriptions. Besides, there was also the Vākāṭaka empire which was closer to the area alluded to have been conquered by Kumāragupta I.² There is also no evidence whatsoever to suggest that there was any armed conflict between the Vākāṭakas and the Gupta emperor. All his inscriptions and grants are silent about of his conquests in that direction. The only clue that could satisfactorily explain his performance of the horse sacrifice may be found in his issue of this particular type of coin under consideration.

Kumāragupta I would certainly have tried to emulate his father by some fresh conquests in the early days of his rule. There was no scope for expansion towards west which had already been conquered by his father. The eastern chiefs on the other hand had only been subdued by Chandragupta II. Kumāragupta I would certainly have tried to extend his dominions in the east. He seems to have been successful in the enterprise and in order to commemorate that event he not only performed the Aśvamedha sacrifice but also issued a fresh type of coins in the same way as his father had done by issuing the Lion-slayer type of coins. This argument would tend to prove the justification of issuing the Rhinoceros type of coins and also explain the significance of his Aśvamedha sacrifice.³

Something may be said about the history of Kāmarūpa during the days of the Imperial Guptas. The first historical ruler, Pushyavarman owed allegiance to Samudragupta.⁴ He even went to the extent of naming his son Samudravarman after the name of Gupta emperor and the analogy was further carried in the name of latter's (Samudravarman's) queen who

1. Chattpadhyaya, S. *Early History of North India*, pp. 177-78

2. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

3. Altekar, A. S., *Op. cit.*, pp. 167-239

4. Fleet, J. F., *Op. cit.*, p. 8, The genealogy of Kāmarūpa Kings puts Pushyavarman as the contemporary of Samudragupta. Cf. Nidhanpur grant of Bhaskaravarman, *E I*, XII, p. 73.