

BURIED 1500 YEARS AGO AND DISCOVERED BY CHANCE IN 1946.

A RICH INDIAN'S HOARD OF THE GUPTA DYNASTY.

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THE discovery of a big hoard of the coins of the Gupta dynasty, ruling in Northern India 1500 years ago, buried in a copper pot near Bayana, about 125 miles to the south of New Delhi, is perhaps the greatest event in Indian numismatics in the present century. All the Gupta coins preserved in the different numismatic collections in the East and the West hardly exceed 2000; the present hoard contained more than 2200 pieces, of which as many as 1821 were recovered. Never before has so big a hoard of gold coins been discovered and recovered in India.

The discovery of this hoard, which was made in 1946, was quite accidental. The Maharaja of Bharatpur had gone on a shooting expedition with his guest, the late Field-Marshal Lord Wavell, then the Viceroy, in the jungle near Bayana. After the departure of the party, the children in adjacent villages went in search of empty cartridges; it was while digging for them that they accidentally lighted upon the copper pot containing the hoard. The pot was hardly one inch below the present surface of the ground. The unsophisticated discoverers thought that it contained copper buttons, but their guardians immediately recognised their real nature. There was a scramble for gold and about 300 coins were melted down and converted into ornaments. The Bharatpur State police, however, soon got scent of the discovery, and thanks to its remarkable efficiency, the greater part of the hoard was recovered.

The coins of the hoard are all issues of six Emperors of the Gupta dynasty, ruling between 310 A.D. and 468. The Gupta Empire was shaken to its foundation in c. 455 A.D. by the Hun invasion, which made life and property unsafe in the modern Delhi-Agra area. The unknown millionaire owner of the present hoard buried it in his field before fleeing as a refugee, hoping vainly to take it out on his return. The average weight of a coin of the hoard is about 125 grains; its bullion value in modern currency will be about £80. Some of the coins of the hoard are, however, so rare that they were purchased by coin collectors for £300 apiece.

The Gupta Emperors represented in the hoard are Chandragupta I. (310-325 A.D.), Samudragupta (325-370), Kachagupta (370-375), Chandragupta II. (375-414), Kumaragupta I. (414-455), and Skandagupta (455-468).

The coins of Chandragupta I., the founder of the dynasty, are extremely interesting and throw considerable light on the contemporary history. The Gupta Empire was founded after the marriage of Chandragupta with the Lichhavi Princess Kumara-devi. The Lichhavis were, however, a proud race; they were not prepared to lose their identity in the new empire, and insisted that the coinage of the new dynasty should give a visible proof of their contribution to its rise to eminence. The obverse of the coins of Chandragupta therefore show him as offering the wedding ring to his bride, Kumara-devi, who stands by him (Fig. 1); the reverse legend gives the name of the Lichhavis to whose clan the Queen belonged (Fig. 2).

The goddess on the reverse of the coins of Chandragupta (Fig. 2) is an Indian incarnation of the Roman deity Abundantia (Ardoxsho). It will be seen that though wearing a sari, she still holds the cornucopia full of fruits in her left hand. Effort is made here, however, to Indianise her by seating her upon a lion, which was the mount of the Hindu goddess Durga, the consort of Siva, the god of destruction. Ardoxsho first appeared on the coins of the Scythian rulers whom Chandragupta had defeated. It is interesting to note that on the obverse (Fig. 1) the king is wearing the Scythian overcoat and trousers, though his bride is wearing the usual Indian sari. This may recall the practice of modern India, where men are adopting foreign dress, but not women.

Samudragupta, the next ruler, who is sometimes described as an Indian Napoleon, on account of his extensive conquests, issued coins of several types. In his Archer type, on the obverse, he holds the bow in one hand and the arrow in the other (Fig. 3); the reverse continues to show the Roman goddess Ardoxsho on her usual throne (Fig. 4). The legend on the Battle-axe type describes the fiery conqueror as holding the battle-axe of the God of Death; we can clearly see it in his left hand (Fig. 5). Here the king is shown as surveying and directing the movements of a battle from a point of vantage; there is a soldier to report the latest events and receive the imperial orders. Samudragupta performed a horse sacrifice to celebrate the successful termination of his memorable expeditions and this event is commemorated by issuing coins of the Horse Sacrifice type. Here the obverse shows the doomed horse standing before the sacrificial pillar; how the noble animal has resigned itself to its impending doom can well be visualised from its mien and expression (Fig. 6). The reverse of this type shows the Empress in the rôle of an attendant of the horse, holding a fly-whisk in one hand and towel in the other (Fig. 7).

The obverse of the Lyrist type shows his Majesty seated upon a high-backed cushioned couch and engaged in playing upon a lute (Fig. 8). The king's torso is bare; the idea probably was to represent his Majesty as seated on the terrace of his palace on a summer evening

engaged in spending his leisure hours in music, his favourite hobby. Sport was another hobby of Samudragupta, and on one of his coin types we find him engaged in shooting an arrow at a tiger at close quarters. The tiger is shown as collapsing (Fig. 9).

The most interesting coins of Chandragupta II., the successor of Samudragupta, are of the Lion-slayer type, represented by thirty-eight specimens in the hoard. Here also the king is shown as shooting the lion at close quarters, but sometimes the king of beasts is shown as beating a retreat before the king of men (Fig. 10).

The most unusual piece of the hoard is a coin of Chandragupta II. of the *Chakravikrama* type. This type was previously unknown, and it is represented in the hoard by a single specimen only. The obverse (Fig. 11) shows the god Vishnu, the pre-eminent wielder of the divine wheel (*chakra*), as manifesting himself before his royal devotee, Chandragupta II. The god has a double halo and is offering three round objects to his royal devotee, who stands before him lifting up his hand to receive the gifts. The reverse of this type shows the goddess standing with a lotus in one hand and pointing at some object with the other (Fig. 12).

Chandragupta's successor, Kumaragupta I., is represented in the hoard by 628 coins issued in fourteen different types; we can refer to only a few of them. The most popular was the Horseman type, where the king is shown on the obverse as riding a horse and usually armed with a bow (Fig. 13). The "sporting" series of Kumaragupta is very interesting; his Majesty is shown as hunting the lion, the tiger, and the rhinoceros, and his Elephant-rider Lion-slayer type (Fig. 14) is particularly worth illustrating. The obverse shows the king as seated on an elephant, which is swinging to the right and trying to trample the lion under its front left foot. The lion is, however, anticipating the move of the elephant by trying to bite its right foreleg in its jaws, widely opened for the purpose. The king is supporting the elephant's effort by attacking the lion with a sword. Remarkable indeed is the skill shown in portraying the fury of the ponderous elephant, the cleverness of the supple lion and the determination of the agile Emperor.

The reverse of this type shows an equally interesting motif. The Queen, going out perhaps for an evening party, is followed by her pet, a peacock. She, however, is turning back and trying to send it away by offering a grapefruit (Fig. 15).

The rhinoceros is now almost extinct in India, but the Rhinoceros-slayer type of Kumaragupta indicates that such was not the case 1500 years ago. The obverse of this type shows the king riding a horse and leaning forward to attack the rhino in his front with a sword. Suddenly confronted by the wild beast, the horse raises its head in alarm. The beast bravely stands at bay, turning back its head to attack the king (Fig. 16). The reverse shows the goddess Ganga (Ganges) standing on a crocodile, with a parasol-bearer behind her (Fig. 17).

In his King-and-Queen type, which was first disclosed by the present hoard, Kumaragupta imitates the only known type of his great-grandfather, Chandragupta I. The obverse of this type represents the king and the queen facing each other; but here the king is offering to his spouse not the wedding ring but a bunch of flowers (Fig. 18).

The *Apratigha* (Invincible) type represents a scene which cannot yet be interpreted with confidence. The obverse shows three figures standing (Fig. 19). The central one is certainly the king, for he is expressly named as such in the inscription by his sides. But why he should not be wearing a royal dress and should be folding his hands on his chest is a mystery. To his left there is a female figure standing in profile, with right hand bent up as if in the attitude of protest; her fingers are almost touching the cheeks of the king, with whom she is obviously expostulating. To the king's right is standing a male figure, also in profile, holding a shield in one hand and the Imperial Eagle standard in the other. The precise significance of this mysterious scene is not yet known to us. Most probably it represents the impending abdication of the king on religious grounds and the efforts made by his queen and crown prince (or commander-in-chief) to dissuade him. His folded hands suggest his inability to accept their plea. The legend on the reverse *Apratigha* (Invincible) probably refers to the adamant resolve of the king to carry out his resolution. This side shows the goddess of Good Luck (Lakshmi) seated on a beautiful double-petalled lotus (Fig. 20).

King Skandagupta, in whose reign the hoard was buried, is represented in the hoard by a single coin only. It is, however, likely enough that the coins melted by the villagers included his issues.

This brief and selective description of an outstanding hoard may suffice to show how ancient Indian coins throw light not only on contemporary political history but also upon the art, manners, dress and practices of the age. A catalogue of the coins, prepared by the present writer, is being published by the Numismatic Society of India, Bombay, under the patronage of the Maharaja of Bharatpur, the owner of the hoard.



FIG. 1. CHANDRAGUPTA I., FOUNDER OF THE DYNASTY, OFFERING THE RING TO HIS BRIDE, KUMARADEVÍ.

FIG. 2. THE REVERSE, SHOWING THE GODDESS ARDOXSHO, AN INDIAN INCARNATION OF THE ROMAN DEITY, ABUNDANTIA.



FIG. 3. A COIN OF SAMUDRAGUPTA, THE RULER IS SHOWN HOLDING A BOW AND ARROW.

FIG. 4. THE REVERSE OF THE ABOVE, SHOWING THE GODDESS ARDOXSHO.



FIG. 5. SAMUDRAGUPTA DEPICTED HOLDING THE BATTLE-AXE OF THE GOD OF DEATH. THE OTHER FIGURE IS OF A SOLDIER.



FIG. 6. SHOWING A DOOMED HORSE STANDING BEFORE THE SACRIFICIAL PILLAR. A COIN OF SAMUDRAGUPTA.

FIG. 7. THE REVERSE OF FIG. 6, SHOWING THE EMPRESS AS AN ATTENDANT OF THE HORSE.



FIG. 8. DEPICTING SAMUDRAGUPTA SEATED UPON A COUCH, PLAYING THE LUTE.

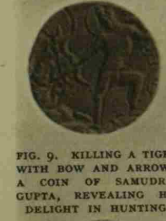


FIG. 9. KILLING A TIGER WITH BOW AND ARROW; A COIN OF SAMUDRAGUPTA, REVEALING HIS DELIGHT IN HUNTING.



FIG. 10. THIS HUNTING SCENE SHOWS CHANDRAGUPTA II. SLAYING A LION.



FIG. 11. AN UNUSUAL COIN OF CHANDRAGUPTA II., ON WHICH THE GOD VISHNU IS SHOWN OFFERING GIFTS TO THE KING.

FIG. 12. THE REVERSE OF FIG. 11, SHOWING THE GODDESS STANDING POINTING WITH ONE HAND AND HOLDING A LOTUS.



FIG. 13. A COIN OF THE NEXT RULER, KUMARAGUPTA I., SHOWING THE KING ON HORSEBACK AND ARMED WITH A BOW.



FIG. 14. THE KING MOUNTED ON AN ELEPHANT WHICH IS ATTEMPTING TO TRAMPLE ON A LION.

FIG. 15. THE REVERSE OF FIG. 14, SHOWING THE QUEEN FOLLOWED BY A PET PEACOCK, TO WHICH SHE OFFERS A GRAPEFRUIT.



FIG. 16. KUMARAGUPTA ON HORSEBACK ABOUT TO ATTACK A RHINOCEROS.

FIG. 17. THE REVERSE OF FIG. 16, SHOWING THE GODDESS GANGA STANDING ON A CROCODILE, WITH A PARASOL-BEARER.



FIG. 18. KUMARAGUPTA AND HIS QUEEN, TO WHOM HE OFFERS A BUNCH OF FLOWERS.



FIG. 19. A MYSTERY COIN WITH THREE FIGURES, ONE OF WHICH (THE CENTRE) IS THE KING. DOES IT REPRESENT THE KING'S ABDICATION?

FIG. 20. THE REVERSE OF FIG. 19, SHOWING LAKSHMI, THE GODDESS OF GOOD LUCK, ON A LOTUS.