

1 Some Rare Kuninda Coins

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The Kunindas occupy a place of pride in the galaxy of ancient Indian republican tribes and the brilliance of their silver currency epitomizes their might and riches. Though literary texts refer to them under various variants like Kulinda, Kalinda, Kalinga, Pulinda, Kaulinda, Kauninda, etc., we find the name of the tribe spelt as Kuninda on their coins. The *Mahabharata* contains numerous references to the Kunindas¹ as a people constantly living in the mountains, *parvata-vasa-nityah*, having hundreds of groups, *kuninda-sata-samkulam*² and to their king, *kunindanamisvarah*³, living on both the sides of, still unidentified, river Shailoda, conquered by Arjuna during his conquest of the northern quarter, presenting lumps of *paipilika*, dug out by *pipilika* ants, gold to Yudhishtira⁴, etc.

The Buddhist text *Mahamayuri*⁵ alludes to the popularity of the worship of *yaksha* Ushtrapada amongst the Kulindas, *Ushtrapadah Kulindeshu*. The Kunindas find mention in *Bhagavata Purana*, *Brahmanda Purana*, *Markandeya Purana* and *Vayu Purana*.⁶ Alexander Cunningham identified the Kunindas with the modern Kunets whose “population in the hill States between the Beas and Tons rivers cannot be taken at less than 4,00,000 persons” and concluded that the Kunindas “seem to have occupied the hill districts on both sides of Satlej from time immemorial”.⁷ S.B. Choudhary derived Kulinda from Kalindi and associates the tribe with the Yamuna.⁸ Hodgson, as quoted by K.K. Dasgupta, regarded Kunets as of mixed breed. M.C. Joshi felt inclined to consider them as “people of Indo-Aryan origin with several sections and sub-sections” like the Yaudheyas and Arjunayanas.⁹ He also drew our attention to place-names in Kumaon and Garhwal region like Kainyur, Kanalichhina, Kanyalikot, Kunalta, Kulanteshvara, Kunelkhet, etc. and to castes like Kanyal, Kanaunia, Kulalul, Kanyani, Kundal, Kanet, Kanedi, Kanwal Kanouli, etc. retaining the reminiscences of the ancient name of the tribe. Powell-Price connected the Kunindas with Kartripura of Allahabad *Prashasti* and regarded the Katyurs as the “successors and perhaps the actual descendants of the Kuninda dynasty”.¹⁰ The *Vishnu Purana* refers to both the *Kulinda* and *Kulindopatya* and describes *Kunidesha* as falling on Bharata’s journey across the Vipasha (Beas) river.¹¹

The earliest coins of the Kuninda tribe made of silver, billon and copper were discovered at Behat near Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh in 1837 and published by James Prinsep.¹² Cunningham stated that “The reading of Kuninda was made by me in 1868, and published in the Academy in 1874. Afterwards, in 1875, the decipherment was adopted by Mr. E. Thomas without acknowledgment”.¹³ He also recorded that “the greater number of their coins are found in the country between Ambala and Saharanpur. I think it probable

that their capital may have been at Srughna, or Sugh, on the west bank of the old Jumna, where the high road from the Punjab to the eastward had crossed the river for many centuries”.¹⁴ Cunningham attributed to the Kunindas not only silver and copper coins bearing the name Amoghabhuti and the name of the tribe,

but also copper coins showing Siva standing holding trident-battleaxe in his right hand and the Brahmi legend *Bhagavata(o/h) Chitresvara Mahatmanah* on the obverse and deer facing a female figure and tree in railing on the reverse. Those bearing the name of Amoghabhuti and the tribe are definitely attributable to the Kunindas but the Siva-*Chitresvara* type coins bear affinity to the Karttikeya/Shashthi or Karttikeya/Deer type Yaudheya copper coins and have been attributed by me to the Yaudheyas.¹⁵ This has also been accepted by scholars.¹⁶ The module of the silver coins was suggested by the hemi-drachms of the Indo-Greek rulers but the types are purely Indian.¹⁷ They are struck on 20 *ratti*, 2.312 g, weight standard and initially had high silver content, generally more than 70 per cent. Subsequently, the silver content seems to have declined. They are all round in shape and their diameter varies between 1.41 and 2.01 cm, Figs. 1.1a,b & 1.2a,b. They are available aplenty and have been studied in a much better way than the copper coins. These silver coins, Fig. 1.3, are beautiful specimens of numismatic art, invariably depict the deer to right, and may be described as following:

Obverse: A deer or stag to right with a female figure, generally identified with Goddess Lakshmi, sometimes standing on a lotus, enface or slightly turned to her right, holding flower/s in uplifted right hand; *srivatsa* or two cobras, , between the horns of the deer and a square box with parasol on its back, ; with or without some auspicious symbol embedded in the legend around, under the deer or between the deer and goddess; and the Brahmi legend around from about VIII-IX to III-V o'clock reading *Rana(o)/Rajna(h) Kuni[m]das(y)a Amoghabhutis(y)a with Maharajas(y) a* below in the exergue.

Reverse: Six-arched hill surmounted by an umbrella and a *triratna* or *nandipada*, , in the centre; tree-in-railing having three or four horizontal branches with drooping leaves on the right; *svastika* above an *Indradhvaja*, triangle-headed standard, , on the left and a wavy line below, . The Kharoshthi legend from about V o'clock along the border is *Rana Kunidasa Am[o]ghabh[u]t[i]sa* with *Maharajasa* in the exergue.



Figs. 1.1a & 1.1b : Silver coin of Amoghabhuti, obverse & reverse, dia. 1.8 cm, Jñāna Pravaha Museum, Acc. No.2009.188



Figs.1.2a & 1.2b : Silver coin of Amoghabhuti, obverse & reverse, dia. 1.7 cm, Jñāna Pravaha Museum, Acc. No.2009.189



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Fig.1.3 : Kuninda silver coins

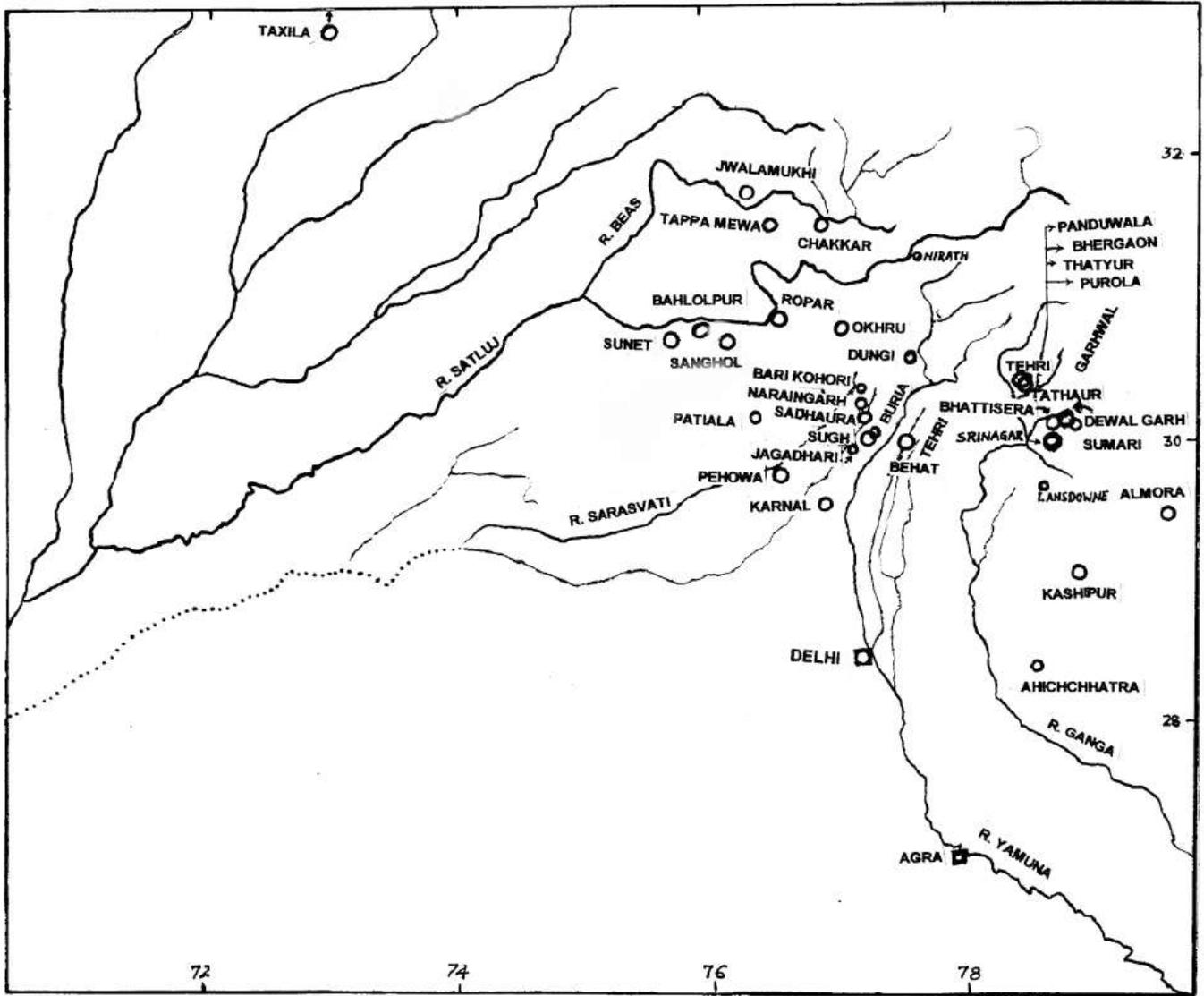


Fig.1.4 : Map showing the distribution of Kuninda coins

John Allan distinguished several varieties on the basis of different symbols below the deer or while these are absent. On the basis of the distribution of their coins known till then Allan postulated: “The Kunindas occupied a narrow strip of land at the foot of the Siwalik hills between the Jumna and the Sutlej, and the territory between the upper courses of the Beas and the Sutlej”.¹⁸ Subsequent discoveries have further extended the area of distribution of Kuninda coins, Fig.1.4.¹⁹ Allan ascribed the silver coins to 1st century BCE. Vincent Smith²⁰ observed that most of the Kuninda coins, both silver and copper, bear legends assigning them to the reign of Maharaja Amoghabhuti, Raja of the Kunindas, but they vary much in execution, and probably extended over a considerable period. The name Amoghabhuti seems to have been continued on the coinage long after his decease.

It is notable that the tree within a railing on the reverse of Kuninda silver coins is mostly depicted with three horizontal branches with drooping leaves. Four-branched trees are very rare. The latest classification of Kuninda coins has been presented and patented by Sanjeev Kumar²¹ after studying a big lot of more

than 2000 silver coins of a hoard, named by him as the Daruwala Hoard, found from Shimla district in Himachal Pradesh. Amongst the cluster comprising more than 2000 coins now forming part of his Shivlee Collection and several other collections, he could find only two specimens showing the railed tree with four branches. The first from a private collection and the second from his own Shivlee collection, wrongly mentioned in the catalogue as Fig.47A but actually Fig.46B.²²

As far as Kuninda copper coins are concerned they belong to neat and course fabrics,²³ Fig.1.5. Kharoshthi legend on the reverse of these copper coins is substituted by a beaded border. Coins of neat fabric are rare. However, an exhausting study of Kuninda copper coins, an important genre of tribal coinage, has still not been undertaken seriously. Avinash Upadhyay²⁴ studied 355 Kuninda copper coins of a hoard found from Garhwal and distinguished more than 40 varieties on the basis of the placement of different symbols on the two sides of Kuninda coins. This hoard included coins showing the deer to left also, the first ever specimen of which was brought to light by K.K. Maheshwari.²⁵ In 1988, P.L. Gupta published the numismatic hoardings of the State Museum, Shimla and Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, which included Kuninda coins of a big hoard found from Chakkar near Mandi in Himachal Pradesh. It included 11 coins depicting the deer to left but unfortunately Gupta's description of these coins is not flawless and selective illustrations are not at all clear. Of these, ten scarce coins are illustrated in Fig.1.6.



Fig.1.5 : Kuninda copper coins



Fig.1.6 : Kuninda copper coins of Chakkar Hoard showing deer to left

I had the opportunity of examining these coins of the Chakkar Hoard in the State Museum, Shimla, in March 1993 through the courtesy of the then Curator S.M. Sethi. Coins of this hoard betray numerous variations of symbology and the use of numerous dies.²⁶ I have recently studied another hoard containing 46 and 147 Kuninda coins of silver and brass/bronze, betraying use of tin, obtained from Pandoh in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh now preserved in the State Museum, Shimla, through its present Curator, Hari Chauhan. In this lot, I came across examples of tribal names recorded in orthographically different ways as Kuna, Kanana, Kanina, Figs.1.7.3-4) and Kunina, Figs.1.7.1, 5, betraying indiscriminate use of cerebral and dental nasals with wrongly attached vowel marks. There appear shorter legends like *Rana(o)/Rajna/ Maharaja(sa) Kunidasa Amoghabhutisa, Maharajasa Kunidasa Amoghabhutisa or Maharajasa Amoghabhutisa*, Fig.1.7.7-10, only on the obverse.

The reverses of these copper coins show many variant forms of the symbols and often betray different combinations. They too generally show three and rarely four or five-branched tree on the reverse. P.L. Gupta classified Kuninda copper coins of the Chakkar Hoard on the basis of the combinations of the reverse symbols and did not take into consideration some variant and interesting copper coins in the British Museum cabinet. These are illustrated here. Fig.1.8, and show the tree in railing on the reverse as having four branches. The first of these, Fig.1.8.1, betrays that an *ardha-padma* symbol surmounted the *triratna* capping the arched symbol as well as the *svastika* placed above the triangle-headed symbol on left. The depiction of *ardha-padma* on both, the *triratna* and the *svastika*, met with here is unique though it rarely exists individually either on the *triratna* or *svastika*. The second coin, Fig.1.8.2, also has the unique

feature of the *triratna* bedecked with garlands and *ardha-padma* surmounting the *svastika*. The third coin, Fig.1.8.3, with two perforations seems to have been used as a pendant and shares this feature with some other old coins and clay bulla. An updated illustration of the classificatory system of the copper specie known till now is presented here, Fig.1.9.



Fig.1.7 : Amoghabhuti's coins from Pandoh Hoard with shorter legends

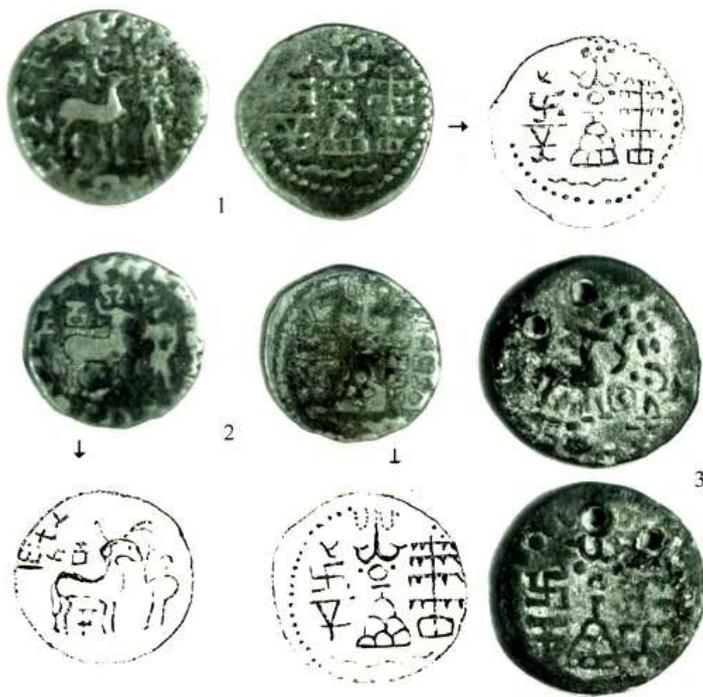


Fig.1.8 : Some unique copper coins

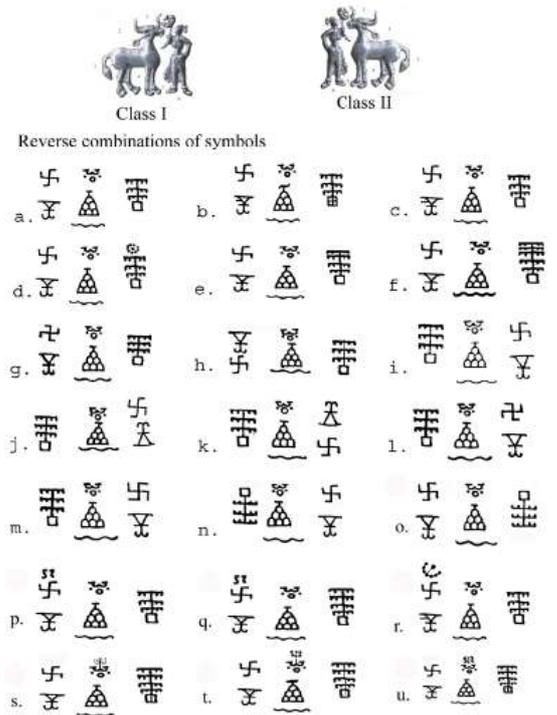


Fig.1.9 : Combinations of reverse symbols on Kuninda coins

The Pandoh Hoard contains silver and brass/bronze coins as indicated above. These latter coins have not been assayed to know the exact metallographic contents. Susmita Basu Majumdar²⁷ is the only scholar who has got six copper and one silver, actually silver plated, coin of the British Museum collection analyzed

using X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF) at small areas of the edges of the coins after duly cleaning them and removing the 'potentially unrepresentative surface metal/corrosion'. The following table gives details of the metals with trace elements:

British Museum Accession No.	Cu	Sn	Fe	Pb	Bi	Ni	As	Ag	Comments
1983-0119.24	79.2	19.3	1.3	-0.03	c.0.05	<0.05	<0.03	<0.05	High tin bronze
1982-1108.5	79.5	19.7	0.7	0.03	c.0.05	<0.05	<0.1	<0.05	High tin bronze
1983-0119.19	79.0	19.1	1.7	<0.03	<0.05	<0.05	0.2	<0.05	High tin bronze
1983-0119.15	79.0	19.7	1.1	<0.03	<0.05	<0.05	0.2	<0.05	High tin bronze
1850-0305.273	98.6	<0.1	0.05	<0.05	c.0.1	0.18	1.1	<0.05	Copper
1983-0120.129	21.2	<0.2	<0.03	1.3	<0.05	<0.05	0.5	77.0	Silver alloy
1894-0507.1309	XX	-	tr	tr	tr	-	tr	xx	Silver plated copper

[Cu = Cuprum, tamra (copper), Sn = Stannum, trapu (tin), Fe = Ferrous, tikshna (iron), Pb = Plumbum, sisa (lead), Bi = Bismuth, Ni = Nickel, As = Arsenic, Ag = Argentum (silver); XX denotes major element, xx stands for minor element, tr denotes trace element, - denotes not traced, < stands for less than and c. denotes circa]



Fig.1.10 : Kuninda copper coins showing five-branched tree

The analysis shows that of the four of the seven coins were made of high tin bronze. Bronze is an alloy of 88 % copper and 12 % or more tin and brass is an alloy of copper and zinc. The Pandoh Hoard coins have not been assayed but a cursory look shows that they have a shine of brass and malleability of bronze. If so the hoard would indicate easy availability of tin and zinc to the Kunindas. Only trace elements obtained from metallographic test of specimens may lead us to determine the exact source of tin and zinc, a highly desired aspect of these coins.

In 2007, I published a Kuninda copper coin from Chakkar Hoard showing a five-branched tree in railing on the reverse for the first time.²⁸ This has remained the only published example of this type for long. As stated above, P.L. Gupta had studied and published this hoard earlier²⁹ but did not notice this five-branched tree motif. Besides the above-mentioned specimen, Fig.1.10.3, an updated study shows the existence of some more coins of five-branched tree on the reverse of these coins, Figs.1.10.1-2 & 4, all belonging to different varieties.

It is for the first time that so many Kuninda copper coins and that too belonging to hitherto unknown or scarce types and varieties form the subject of this paper. The study of these coins reveals many unknown facts and features of Kuninda coinage like minting technique, annealing, metal technology, orthography, palaeography, die-cutting, regionalism, etc. making it a great desideratum to evaluate the context properly. These coins are as important as the silver specie and require due attention.

Endnotes

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***Note:** *Illustrated coins are not to scale.*

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