

A Counterfeit Kuninda Gold Coin

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Abstract

The article is devoted to Kuninda coins. The *Mahabharata* contains numerous references to the Kunindas as a people having hundreds of groups. The earliest coins of this tribe were discovered at Behat near Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh in 1837. The very first look of coins reveals that it is an attempt to copy the Kuninda silver specie. The Brahmi letters, the depiction of the goddess and the animal differ so much from the genuine specimens that even a layman can make out the differences.

The Kunindas occupy a place of pride in the galaxy of ancient Indian republican tribes and their name shines forth with the brilliance of their silver currency. Though we find the name of the tribe spelt as Kuninda and Kunina on their coins yet literary texts refer to them under various variants like Kulinda, Kalinda, Kalinga, Pulinda, Kaulinda, Kauninda, etc. Some scholars identify them with Kuluna of Panini also taking back their antiquity to *circa* fifth century BCE. The *Mahabharata* contains numerous references to the Kunindas as a people having hundreds of groups (कुणिन्दशतसंकुलम् *Kuninda-shata-samkulam*), living on both the sides of (still unidentified) river Shailoda, conquered by Arjuna during his conquest of the northern quarter 'digvijaya', presenting lumps of *paipilika* (dug out by *pipilika* ants) gold to Yudhishtira, etc. They have also been mentioned along with the Paishachas, Ambashthas and Barbaras. One of their princes is referred to as living constantly in the mountains (पर्वतवासनित्ये *parvata-vasa-nityah*) [1]. The *Ramayana* also mentions them. The Buddhist text *Mahamayuri* alludes to the popularity of the worship of *yaksha* Ushtrap¹da amongst the Kulindas (उष्ट्रपादे कुलिन्देषु *Ushtrapadah Kulindeshu*) [2]. Ptolemy's *Geography* (VII.1, 42) mentions K/Sulindrine 'where the Vipasha, Shatadru Yamuna and Ganga take their rise'. The *Brihatsamhita* of Varahamihira refers to a Kuninda king (XIV.33) and mentions them along with the Kashmiras, Kulutas and Sairindhra. It also places them in the northeastern division (XIV.30). Vagbhatta in his *Kavyanushasana* refers to

Kalindendra Mountain (हिमालय-जालन्धर कालिन्देन्द्रकीलपर्वत *Himalaya-Jalandhara-Kalindendrakila...parvatah*). Various Puranas like the *Bhagavata*, *Brahmanda*, *Markandeya*, *Vayu* etc. also mention the Kunindas. 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 4, 00,000 persons' and concluded that the Kunindas "seem to have occupied the hill districts on both sides of Satlej from time immemorial" [3]. S.B. Choudhary [4] derives Kuninda from Kalindi and associates the tribe with the Yamuna. Hodgson [5] regarded Kunets as of mixed breed. M.C. Joshi [6] feels inclined to consider them as 'a people of Indo-Aryan origin with several sections and sub-sections' like the Yaudheyas and Arjunayanas and draws our attention to place-names in Kumaon and Garhwal region like Kainyur, Kanalichhina, Kanyalikot, Kunalta, Kulanteshvara, Kunelkhet, etc. and castes like Kanyal, Kanaunia, Kulalul, Kanyani, Kundal, Kanet, Kanedi, Kanwal Kanouli, etc. which still seem to retain the reminiscences of the ancient name of the tribe. Powell-Price [7] connects the Kunindas with Kartripura of Allahabad *Prashasti* and regards the Katyurs as the 'successors and perhaps the actual descendants of the Kuninda dynasty'. The *Vishnu Purana* refers to both the Kulindas and Kulindopatyakas (I.207, 51-53) and describes Kunidesha as falling on Bharata's journey across the Vipasha (Beas).

The earliest coins of this tribe were discovered at Behat near Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh in 1837 and published by Prinsep in 1838. Cunningham states that "The reading of Kuninda was made by me in 1868, and published in the Academy in 1874. It was afterwards, in 1875, adopted by Mr. E. Thomas without acknowledgment" [8]. He also observed that the Kunindas seem to have occupied the hill districts on both sides of the Satluj and identified them with the Kunets who formed the bulk of population in Kullu, and all the hill districts around Shimla at that time. 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" [9]. Vincent Smith, who listed in his Catalogue 37 silver and copper coins of the Kunindas in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, 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 extend over a considerable period. The name Amoghabhuti seems to have been continued on the coinage long after his decease" [10]. He made the important observation that "Some of these Kuninda coins seem to be wholly cast; others perhaps die-struck on cast blanks; and others die-struck on hammered blanks" [11]. Silver and copper coins of Amoghabhuti, which bear the name of the tribe, are definitely ascribable to the Kunindas. The module of the silver coins was suggested by the hemi-drachms of the Indo-Greek

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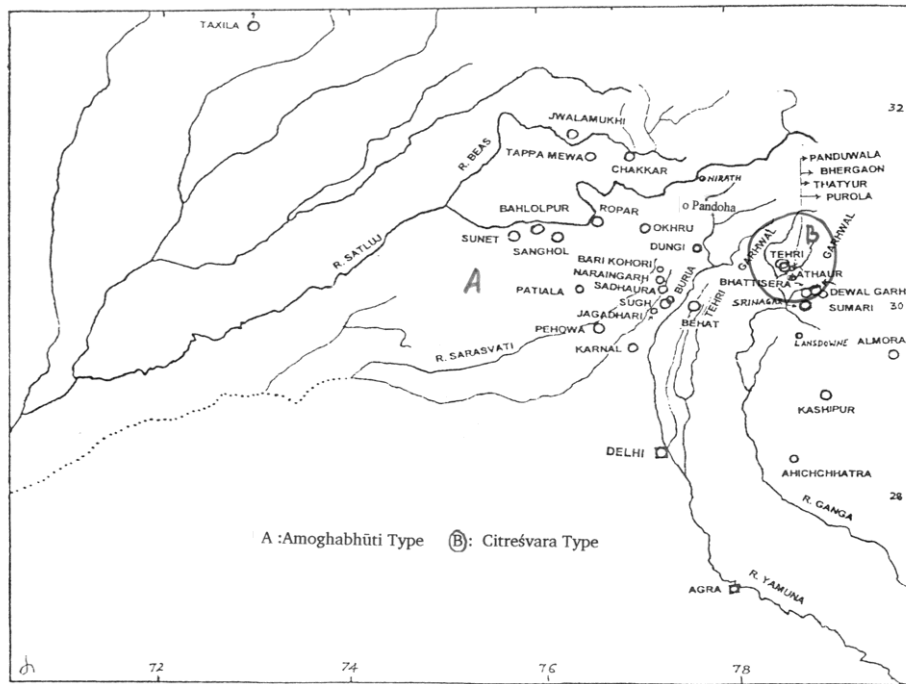
ruled but the types are purely Indian [12]. They are struck on 20-ratti (2.312 g) weight standard. They are all round in shape and their diameter varies between 0.65 and 0.8 inch (1.62 to 2.0 cm). They may be described as follows.

Obverse: A deer or stag to right with a female figure (generally identified with goddess Lakshmi) standing facing on right, holding flower/s in uplifted right hand. Between the horns, above and sometimes also below the deer are symbols like *shrivatsa* (or two cobras), tree-in-railing, crescented hill (or *chaitya*), *svastika*, etc. and the Brahmi legend around from about VII o'clock reads *Rajnah Kuni[m]das(y)a Amoghabhuti(s)y(a)* with *Maharajas(y)a* below in the exergue.

Reverse: Six-arched hill surmounted by an umbrella and a *nandipada* in the centre, tree-in-railing having three or four horizontal branches with drooping leaves on the right, *svastika* above an *Indradhwaja* (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[ol]ghabh[ut]i[s]a* with *Maharajasa* in the exergue.



Kuninda Coins (not to scale)



The Kunindas : The Distribution of their Coins

Allan ascribed the silver coins to first century BCE. He distinguished different varieties on the basis of the different symbols below the deer or their absence there. On the basis of the distribution of their coins Allan postulated that “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” [13]. Subsequent discoveries have further extended the area of distribution of their coins [14].

We thus see that Kuninda coins have been found from an extensive area comprising of the hilly region between Kangra-Mandi in Himachal Pradesh and Garhwal-Kumaon in Uttaranchal and the adjoining plains of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. Some scholars ascribe to this tribe coins of some varying varieties also [15].

Dr. Abha Malhotra of the Department of History, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla had informed me more than a decade back of the discovery of a gold coin of Amoghabhuti but more and authentic information was not available then [16]. A gold Kuninda coin has surfaced recently [17] and is illustrated and discussed here for the first time. The very first look reveals that it is an attempt to copy the Kuninda silver specie. The Brahmi letters, the depiction of the goddess and the animal differ so much from the genuine specimens that even a layman can make out the differences. The palaeography of the Brahmi letters of the legend is different and the letters have been



engraved wrongly. The pattern and arrangement of the reverse symbols does not conform to the silver specimens and the forger does not seem to have been conversant with the Kharoshthi letters at all to copy them diligently. Since rare coins are highly priced nowadays and are sold at a premium someone has tried to forge it in gold to deceive unknowledgeable collectors. The copious silver currency of the Kunindas perhaps prompted him to pass on his forgery as an evidence of the prosperity and riches of the tribe. Since Kuninda coins are a collectors' item now because of their beauty even copper coins of the tribe are being forged now. Students and svants of numismatics as well as lay dealers and collectors should therefore be quite cautious and vigilant to these forgeries.

Bibliography of Cited Work

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- [2] *Journal Asiatique*, 1915, pp. 52, 101.
- [3] Alexander Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey Report (CASR)*, XIV, p. 125-35.
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- [5] *Language and Literature of Nepal*, Part 2, p. 37.
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- [9] *Ibid.*
- [10] Vincent A. Smith, *A Catalogue of Coins in the Indian Museum*, vol. I, Oxford, 1906, p. 161.
- [11] *Ibid*, p. 169, fn. 1.
- [12] John Allan, *Catalogue of Coins of Ancient India*, British Museum, London, 1936 (reprint, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1975), p. ci.
- [13] *Ibid*, p. ciii.
- [14] Devendra Handa, *Tribal Coins of Ancient India*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2007, p. 56.

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[15] *Ibid*, pp. 53-73.

[16] *Ibid*, p. 58.

[17] Source; Internet; the size and weight of the coin were not recorded. The illustration is not to scale.
