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Samudragupta's Aśvamedha Coins in the Patterning of Early Gupta Coin Designs

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ABSTRACT: Samudragupta's gold coins of Aśvamedha Type are frequently mentioned by historians of ancient India for their obvious link to this king's Vedic Horse Sacrifice. Surprisingly limited attention has been given to their actual 'looks'. And what do these coins tell us about the minting processes at mints operating in the time of Samudragupta?

This paper discusses the textual, archaeological and sculptural testimonies to the Aśvamedha sacrifice as a recurring royal event. Its main focus, however, are the details of the designs and Sanskrit legends in Brāhmī script on the coins. The approach is through the mint idiom of the coins—that conglomerate of styles, iconographies, fabric, palaeography of legends and shaping of symbols shared by coins from the same mint. This analysis brings out that the coins were probably struck at one and the same mint, although we do not yet know where this site was located. A comparison with other coins struck for Samudragupta suggests that the minting of Aśvamedha Type coins was also restricted time wise.

KEYWORDS: Aśvamedha Type, gold coins, Guptas, Horse Sacrifice, mints, mint idioms, *yūpas*, forgeries.

Among collectors, the coins of Aśvamedha Type struck for Samudragupta are highly favoured (Figs 1 and 2).¹ These precious *suvarṇas* ('gold [coins]') posit this Gupta ruler among the ranks of kings claiming universal rule through a royal sacrifice involving the expenditure of huge amounts of wealth, particularly gold.² The *aśvamedhayajña* was 'an event of momentous politico-religious significance' (Shastri 1997: 66). The Gupta coins herald a message also contained in the inscriptions: here is a dynasty intent on

putting its stamp on the society of the age.

Ajay Mitra Shastri held that the Aśvamedha coins came third in relative quantity, after those of Sceptre and Archer Types (1997: 66), but statistics on documented coins show otherwise (Fig. 3).³ Not surprisingly, the Sceptre Type (Figs 4 and 5) is the most prolific among coins of Samudragupta, while those of King-and-Queen (ratio 1:4, Fig. 6), Aśvamedha (1:4.5) and Kāca Types (1:5, Fig. 7) make up the mid-segment. Considerably less numerous are the coins of



FIG. 1: Gold coin, Aśvamedha T., Gr. 3, Var. 1.1.
W: 7.29 g, D: 2.15 cm. Ashmolean Ms, 694 HCR
23085. DIN822 (Courtesy: Ashmolean Museum Oxford)



FIG. 2: Gold coin, Aśvamedha T., Gr. 3, Var. 1.2.
W: no data, D: no data. Todywalla, auction 11
(2005), lot 73. DIN4529 (Courtesy: F. Todywalla)

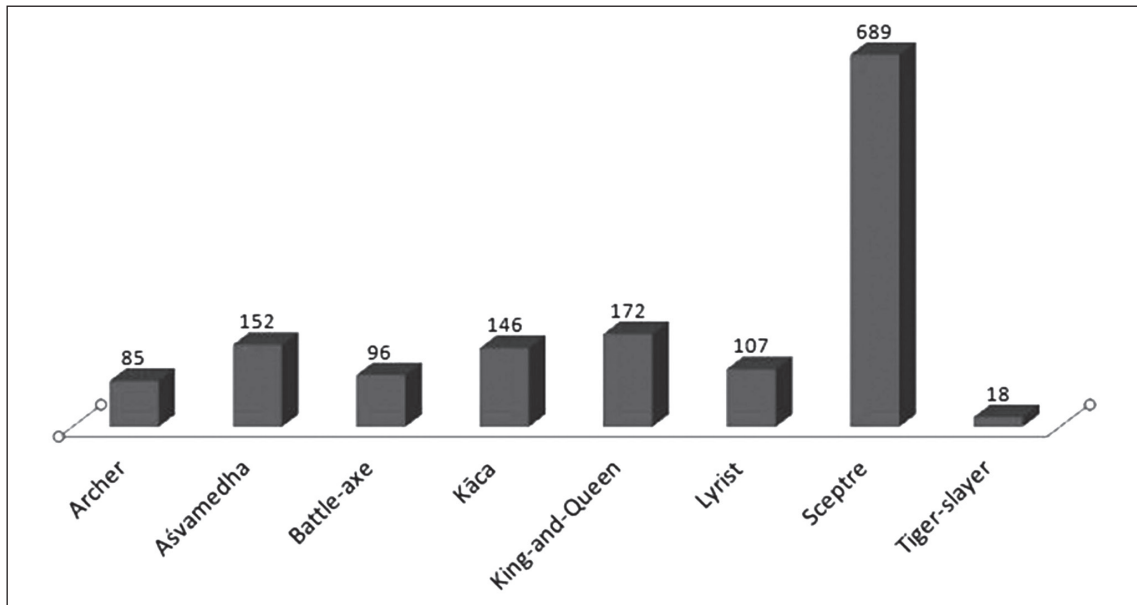


FIG. 3. Relative type distribution of documented coins of Samudragupta.
DINARA, 28.04.2016



FIG. 4. Gold coin, Sceptre T, Gr. 3. W: 7.80 g,
D: no data. Government Ms Mathura, 1246.
DIN8015 (Courtesy: Pankaj Tandon)



FIG. 6. Gold coin, King-and-Queen T, Gr. 4.
W: 7.86 g, D: 2.00 cm. British Ms, 1910,0403.3.
DIN568 (Courtesy: British Museum)



FIG. 5. Gold coin, Sceptre T, Gr. 4. W: 7.38 g,
D: 2.11 cm. Deepak Dhaadha coll.,
G1-Sceptre-DD-157. DIN7452
(Courtesy: Deepak Dhaadha and Pankaj Tandon)



FIG. 7. Gold coin, Kāca T, Gr. 3. W: 7.32 g,
D: 1.90 cm. Pankaj Tandon coll., 344,28. DIN2740
(Courtesy: Pankaj Tandon)

Lyryst (ratio 1:6, 5, Fig. 8), Battle-axe (1:7) and Archer Types (1:8), while the rare Tiger-slayer coins (Fig. 9) bring up the rear (ratio 1:40), suggesting that these may have been fairly rare even in Gupta times. We do not know yet which circumstances exactly resulted in such relative numerical differences, as most details of coin manufacture in the Gupta period are still beyond our vision.⁴

In 2003, Steven Lindquist⁵ pointed out that historical and art historical studies never dwell to any serious extent on the *Aśvamedha* coins. He wanted to offer a kind of repair, while focusing on the choice of the horse rather than the king as the obverse device. Lindquist studied this numismatic device in the context of the *Aśvamedha* ritual and the position of the actors therein. His rather cursory description of the actual coins focuses mostly on identifying elements of the ritual; the outward make and the legends on the coins were not Lindquist's prime concern.

An artistic rendering of the sacrificial post used at Samudragupta's *Aśvamedha* features on every *Aśvamedha* coin struck in his name. It is generally assumed that these gold pieces were issued for this occasion and distributed as sacrificial fees and gifts, just as the proper execution of this ritual of regeneration and opulence requires. Because of the probable link to such a grand event, scholars have often referred to the *Aśvamedha* coins as 'commemorative medals', which strictly speaking could mean a non-currency gift money.⁶ The considerable wear of many of these coins, however, indicates that they did circulate. These *dīnāras* surface in hoards in similar patterns as the other coins of Samudragupta and Candragupta II do.⁷ As we shall see subsequently, everything in their make-up likewise indicates that the *Aśvamedha* coins were part of the currency system of their time, to be used in the same way as other gold coins.

The present paper does not aim to expand on existing studies of the Vedic *Aśvamedha* ritual, nor does it zoom in on the historic context of Samudragupta's horse sacrifice.⁸ Instead it puts the coins that testify to the event in the centre of attention. This entails a historiography of the



FIG. 8. Gold coin, Lyryst T., Gr. 3. W: 7.57 g, D: unrecorded. Goldberg, auction 42 (23.9.2007), lot 843. DIN300 (Courtesy: Ira & Larry Goldberg)



FIG. 9. Gold coin, Tiger-slayer T., Gr. 3. W: 7.57 g, D: 2.00 cm. British Ms, 1853,0301.372, from Emily Eden. DIN1285 (Courtesy: British Museum)



FIG. 10. Gold coin, *Aśvamedha* T. Controversial strike. W: 7.98 g, D: no data. In trade before 2010. DIN7187 (Courtesy: Pankaj Tandon)

study of the *Aśvamedha* coins (§4), a detailed description of the devices on obverse and reverse (§§6–7), examining the Sanskrit legends (§8) and engaging in some hard-core mint idiomatic analysis (§9). The paper then moves on to a case study (§10) of three near-identical *Aśvamedha* coins on which there was considerable controversy (Fig. 10).⁹ I shall show how these

coins both resemble and differ from the others. I conclude by arguing how the outcome of this mint-idiomatic analysis helps us develop a vision on how the manufacture of the Aśvamedha coins related to the actual Horse sacrifice that was held in honour of Samudragupta (§§11–12).

For a proper contextualisation of the coin devices, I shall first introduce the Aśvamedha ritual (§1) and shortly consider the wooden sacrificial stakes that were used in it (§2). We will also revisit certain stone memorial pillars that were raised to commemorate a grand-scale Vedic sacrifice (§3) and examine a few horses in stone and clay that might have had a similar function (§4).

1. The Aśvamedha Ritual

Inscriptions offer ample references to the performance of the Aśvamedha ritual by ancient Indian kings,¹⁰ and so do texts, coins and inscribed, stone *yūpas*. The Dutch Indologist, Jan Gonda, expressed the status of the ritual thus: ‘Nur ein König darf es vollziehen, und zwar ein siegreicher König, dessen Macht unangefochten ist. Es bildet die höchste rituelle Manifestation der Königswürde, verbürgt die Erfüllung aller Wünsche, sühnt alle Sünden. Einer, der es vollzieht, macht Prajāpati und sich selbst vollständig ([*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*] 13.3.1.1).’¹¹

The horse is the principal victim in the Aśvamedha, to be sacrificed for the appeasement of the god Prajāpati, the presiding deity of the sacrifice. ‘The victim represents the sacrificer himself, or rather his divine self awaiting him in the other world, as is clearly implied in the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 11, 1, 8, 6; 11, 2, 2, 6. Behind this seems to lie an even deeper felt cosmic truth: that the victim may even be a substitute for the divinity to be appeased, and by sacrificing the animal the god himself is offered up anew in the sacrifice with the belief that the dismemberment of the gods is also in itself the renewal of all cosmic life and matter’ (Ganguly 1984: 158). Steven Lindquist focused on the first of these two ritual identifications; he emphasised the ‘deliberate equation of the sacrificing king and the sacrificed horse: the horse is ritually the king during the course of the sacrifice’ (p. 108).¹²

A king aspiring to universal power and greatness, who by lucky circumstance was wealthy enough to finance an *aśvamedha*, would be advised to comply with Vedic ideals of universal kingship and arrange for the performance of this sumptuous ritual. The ideal time for its celebration was after a real or ritual ‘conquest of all four directions’ (*digvijaya*) as described for Samudragupta in his Allahabad pillar inscription.¹³ According to the Sanskrit texts, the crowned queen, the king’s favourite queen, and the discarded queen feature among the royal actors in this ritual play. They anoint the horse with clarified butter and decorate its head, mane and tail with golden beads. By doing this, so the texts explain, the queens confer the lost royal virtues on the horse, and thence, by ritual equation, on their spouse, the king.¹⁴

The historic kings of ancient India were keen to emulate their epic role models in order to enhance, or at least proclaim, their status of *cakravartin* or universal monarch. Many inscriptions therefore refer one way or another to Aśvamedhas being performed.¹⁵ The Allahabad pillar inscription—at least in its legible lines—is silent about any Aśvamedha of Samudragupta, but in one of her inscriptions, the king’s granddaughter, Prabhāvatī Guptā, proudly refers to her grandfather as performer of multiple such sacrifices.¹⁶ In inscriptions of Samudragupta’s descendants with genealogical sections offering customary titles, he is also remembered as *cirotsannāśvamedhāharttā*, likely to mean ‘the performer of the protracted Aśvamedha’.¹⁷

As they expected a close link between the Aśvamedha ritual and the Aśvamedha coins, for many decades scholars unhesitatingly identified the single, female figure on the reverse of the Aśvamedha coins as Dattadevī, the foremost of Samudragupta’s three queens (Fig. 1). She is shown balancing a fly-whisk (*cāmara*) on her right shoulder. The narrow ribbon in her left hand, which is sometimes overlooked in descriptions, was interpreted as the cloth used by the queen to wash the horse.

The lotus support beneath the lady’s feet seemed problematic in this interpretation. It

required some contorted explaining away in a prolonged process that was initiated by John Allan in 1914.¹⁸ Like Smith before him, he did recognise the lotus. However, as it seemed overdone for a mortal queen, Allan settled for 'a sort of chain, the exact significance of which cannot be determined'.¹⁹ Anand Sadashiv Altekar, who, like Allan, actually recognised a lotus in certain well-preserved dies, apparently felt uncomfortable with an overtly divine iconography and called the support a circular, pearl-bordered mat with a lotus design (1957: 62). Admittedly, befitting their style, in many instances the engravers used a beading pattern to indicate lotus petals. Occasionally, however, the engravers chose to draw true petals. Evidently they were never in any doubt about the vegetative nature of the support (Fig. 11).

Calembus Sivaramamurti finally shifted our attention to another level of interpretation of the entire device, by identifying the lady as Rājyalakṣmī, the goddess of sovereignty (1979). Alf Hildebeitel then provided elaborate, ritual and epic source materials on Śrī as such a divine source of sovereignty (1991). Early ritual texts already claim that a sovereign is wedded to the goddess (p. 149). In a more narrative format, the epics emphasise that such a divine partnership is neither guaranteed nor stable. Only the continued display of distinct royal virtues—physical, intellectual and behavioural—ensure a king's association with fickle-minded Śrī, as she dwells 'in truth, gift, vow, austerity, strength and virtue' (p. 164).

I always dwell in an Indra among men, one appearing like a conqueror [*jītakāsinī*], a hero [*śūre*], unretreating in battles... Ever do I dwell in one constant in dharma (*dharmanitye*), of great intelligence [*mahābuddhau*], pious [*brāhmaṇye*], humble [*praśrite*], and liberally disposed [*danaśīle*]...

In *Mahābhārata* 1, 221, Hildebeitel 1991: 164

The close parallelism between the qualities expected in Śrī's ideal partner and those of Samudragupta as praised in the Allahabad *praśasti* is obvious. Or, as Daud Ali wrote: 'by the Gupta period the very nature of nobility was considered to be a judicious mix of the values



FIG. 11. *Aśvamedha* T, Gr. 3, Var. 3.3. W: no data, D: 2.22 cm. LACMA, M.84.110.1. DIN858 (Courtesy: Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

of heroism and valour on the one hand, and gentility, or "irenism", on the other' (2007: 4).²⁰

The *Aśvamedha* coins bring the same message in portable format. The horse ritually represents Samudragupta himself. By ritually making unctions on parts of the horse's body, three of his queens restore the essential royal qualities to their spouse: *tejas* (majesty), *indriyam* (physical force) and *paśu* (cattle, viz., 'wealth'), all of which had abandoned the king during the year in which the horse roamed about.²¹ The fourth royal quality is *śrī*, 'prosperity', visually personified on the coins by the goddess Śrī holding a fly-whisk (*cāmara*) instead of a lotus, her usual attribute. To bring the message home, the legend on the reverse announces Samudragupta to be *aśvamedhaparākramaḥ*, which can be interpreted as 'he who is powerful enough to perform the *Aśvamedha*' (see below in §8).

The absence of the lotus as an attribute in Śrī's image is certainly uncommon, but the context of the ritual may have required a specific iconography befitting her role of a divine queen. They were to fan and 'wash' the horse. Admittedly, a *cāmara* whisk is not a fan, but as one of the prime emblems of royal dignity handled by those attending on royalty, the yak-tail whisk may have been a most appropriate attribute during the ritual. The small washing cloth completes this iconography.²² Śrī, as the invisible, divine, fourth queen, materializing before our very eyes on the *Aśvamedha* coins, apparently then dons the queens' outfit while attending on king and horse alike.²³

2. The Wooden *Yūpas*

Next to the powerful horse and the elegant Śrī, the exuberant *yūpa* is the third eye-catcher of the Aśvamedha coins. The Vedic texts prescribe the use of a wooden *yūpa* with a rough, unhewn base, an eight-sided mid-section, and a ring over a rounded projection jutting out from the top (Hiltebeitel 1991: 121).²⁴ The epics have retained descriptions of what such sacrificial posts look like. One of the best known *Rāmāyaṇa* narratives involving an Aśvamedha centres on King Daśaratha, who hopes that the merit accruing from this grandest of royal sacrifices will give him a son and heir. All the righteous kings of the surrounding areas are invited to attend the event and they flock to the sacrificial site on the bank of the river Sarayu. The text repeatedly emphasises that every part of the elaborate ceremony is carried out correctly and in full accordance with tradition-honoured prescriptions. The event is first and foremost a feast of plenty for everybody—royal guests, numerous priests and their attendants, monks and ascetics, the aged, the children and women. There is food and drink for everyone, and between the ceremonies learned pandits debate on metaphysical problems and show off their wisdom.

Daśaratha's Aśvamedha involves the erection

of 18 wooden *yūpas* overlaid with gold. Each of the polished posts is 7 m high and firmly fixed in the earth. They have an octagonal shape, are covered with embroidered cloths, and adorned with sandalwood and flowers. Together they are as magnificent as the constellation of the seven sages in the sky.

At the end of the sacrifice the king gives away his entire kingdom to the officiating priests. The latter object that they are not able to protect, defend and administer the empire, and would rather dedicate themselves to the study of holy texts. So they give back the lands to the king in return for gems, gold and coins. Daśaratha then bestows a hundred million gold pieces and four times as many silver coins on the *brāhmaṇas*. Gold is also distributed among those who had come to witness the event. The chapter concludes by stating that this great sacrifice served as the ultimate means to destroy sin and attain heaven.²⁵

Next to textual descriptions, there are also visuals showing us the performance of a sacrifice involving a *yūpa*. Here I only mention a well-known architrave from the gateway of a temple complex at Pawaya (MP) dating back to Gupta times. Its relief offers a clear depiction of a *yūpa* used in the sacrifice of a sheep (Fig. 12). The lord of the sacrifice in this relief is the demon King



FIG. 12. Sacrifice at a *yūpa*, *torāṇa* architrave, Pawaya, fourth century CE

Bali, who is seen making a grant to Vāmana, no other than Viṣṇu in disguise. The *yūpa* stands at the corner of the *vedi*, apparently half inside and half outside the sacrificial platform, and several fires and utensils can be recognised. The top of the post is curved inwards, and the prescribed rings adorn its top (though they are similar in shape here, contrary to prescriptions).

The Guptas were certainly not the only kings or the first kings to document the performance of the *Aśvamedha yajña* on coins. In his booklet dedicated to the *Aśvamedha* ritual and coins, Prashant Kulkarni (2004) illustrates a fine range of strikes in copper showing us devices of horses and/or *yūpas*, as issued by various Indian kings in pre-Gupta times.

3. The Stone Memorial *Yūpas*

In early historic India the custom arose to apply the term *yūpa* also to a column serving as a more durable memorial of a Vedic sacrifice, whether *Aśvamedha* or otherwise.²⁶ An inscription on such a memorial column from Isapur, near Mathura (UP), dates back to the Kuṣāṇa period. It states that the *yūpa* was erected after the completion of a sacrifice lasting 12 nights (and days—*dvādaśarātra*). Such stone memorial pillars could evoke the shape of an actual, wooden *yūpa* through a curved top with a ring shoved over it.²⁷ The stone *yūpas* from Isapur show this detail (Vogel 1914). They even reproduce the rope tied on the sacrificial stake (Fig. 13) prescribed by the texts. The shafts are octagonal and bent at the top. They reproduce the top-ring (*caṣāla*), while the gird-rope (*raśanā*) of Kuśa grass is also carved on both pillars. On one pillar it is wound three times around the shaft, as the ritual prescribes. A garland is shown hanging down from the top of the pillar.²⁸ The Isapur *yūpas* are exceptional in the extent to which they reproduce their wooden counterparts. Neither the *yūpas* erected by Maitraka royals at Badva (in Rajasthan)²⁹ nor the *yūpa* now in the fort at Bijayagarh (see below) are girded by ropes. Some stone *yūpas* were given an octagonal shaft as ritually required for the sacrificial stake, but others are round. All these memorial *yūpas* have a squared basis, which fits



FIG. 13. Stone *yūpa* from Isapur. Government Ms Mathura, Q.13. Photograph by J.E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw 258/7 (Courtesy: Kern collection [BAKA, P-002897], UL, Leiden University)

better with the architectural tradition of shaping pillars than with Vedic prescriptions for the *yūpa*.

In 1878, A.C.L. Carllyle reported on a stone pillar from the hill fort of Bijayagarh near Bayana (now in Rajasthan). The Sanskrit inscription, carved lengthwise on the faces of the octagonal pillar, was read by Georg Bühler, who identified it as a *yūpa* raised by the order

of King Viṣṇuwardhana in the year 428.³⁰ The date probably referred to the local Mālava era, later known as the Vikrama era, which counts from 56 BCE. This places the event near the end of Samudragupta's reign, around *c.*373 CE, so probably not far time wise from his Aśvamedhas. The pillar commemorated the celebration of a Puṇḍarīka sacrifice by a king that probably belonged to the local Mālava dynasty.

Bahadur Chhand Chhabra compiled data on such memorial *yūpas* and their inscriptions as reported on by 1947. He pointed out that these pillars had been erected in specific areas of India only (now lying in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) and in certain regions of Indonesia, as discussed recently by Arlo Griffiths among the 'early Indic inscriptions' of Southeast Asia (2014: fig. 38). Taken together, the inscriptions engraved on the stone *yūpas* listed by Chhabra mention different Vedic sacrifices, but, rather remarkably, not an Aśvamedha. Since Chhabra's inventory more stone inscriptions styling themselves *yūpas* have been brought to light, but unfortunately none that could be attributed to a Gupta king.³¹

4. Memorial Horses

Not surprisingly really, the Aśvamedha horse also figures among devices found on ancient Indian sealings, including those from the Gupta period. E.J. Rapson published such a sealing, which in 1901 was part of the collection of L. White King (Fig. 14).³² The horse stands to left in front of a *yūpa*. Underneath, a horizontal line serves both to support the horse (as on the coins) and to separate the image from the legend, as often seen in sealings. The text reads '*par(ā)krama*'.³³ In particular this *biruda* ties the sealing tightly in with Samudragupta, although we can only speculate what purpose it served. Thaplyal dismisses the possibility that it was an official seal, as it does not carry the dynastic Garuḍa emblem. D.R. Bhandarkar assumed that it once sealed a document sent from the sacrificial hall. Might it instead have been a low-cost token to be distributed at the event or shortly afterwards to those not sharing in more costly gifts?

More 'pious' than low-cost was the gift of a *c.*1.5 m tall, stone horse 'dug up near the ancient fort of Khairīgarh' (Smith 1893: 98), in



FIG. 14. Sealing depicting a horse and a *yūpa*. Legend: *para(ā)krama*. In 1901 in the L. White King collection. D: 2.3 cm. After Rapson 1901: fig. 3



FIG. 14a. Terracotta sealing of Āryamitra. Gupta period. Legend: *śrī-āryamitrasya*. British Ms, 1892,1103.93. Width 4.45 cm, H: 5.2 cm, Depth: 1.1 cm (Courtesy: British Museum)

the Lakhimpur Kheri district up in north Uttar Pradesh (Fig. 15). It is now in the State Museum Lucknow (H.219). From the moment of its rediscovery the sculptor of the horse was criticised for his 'rude workmanship'. 'The attitude is stiff, and the workmanship of the legs is hard, weary and unnatural, but the back is skilfully caparisoned' (Führer 1891: 286). Smith called the horse 'curious' and found its artistic merits even 'contemptible', a qualification literally repeated by D.R. Bhandarkar in 1981 (p. 41). Joanna Williams (1982: 25) characterised its execution more professionally as 'more geometrical in contour' and 'schematic' compared to the *Aśvamedha* horse on Samudragupta's coins. She took this as a sign of immaturity of the stone-carvers' arts, 'longer in the germ' than that of the coin engravers of their time. I do agree that the sculptor of the Khairigarh horse did not try, or if so, failed to capture the natural curves and musculature of the horse's body and legs to the extent that the engravers managed to do. Nevertheless, I would hesitate to date the horse early in the Gupta period only on the basis of such a stylistic difference between works of art in distinctly different media.

Do the three inscriptions engraved on the Khairigarh horse help us to attribute the image to a specific king? Not yet, so it seems. They were engraved in two different scripts—one in the familiar Gupta Brāhmī on the right side of the neck; two others in the notoriously difficult-to-read Shell script (*śankhalipi*) on the horse's back³⁴ and on one of its hind legs. Apparently the Brāhmī inscription had been superficially engraved, and as the horse stood in the open air at the entrance of the museum for many years,³⁵ the text gradually became illegible. In the 1880s Vincent Smith worked from a photograph supplied by the archaeologist Alois Führer. He accepted the reading offered by the latter as '... *dda guttasa deyadhamma*', which translates from Prakrit as 'the pious gift of ...dra Gupta'. The use of Prakrit rather than Sanskrit has always been considered uncommon and perhaps problematic when trying to link the horse to an official Gupta royal sacrifice. Nevertheless, D.R. Bhandarkar



FIG. 15. Stone horse, Khairigarh (UP). State Ms Lucknow, H.219 (Courtesy: Friends of the Kern Institute [Kern collection, P-037762], UL, Leiden University)

suggested that 'possibly representations of the sacrificial steed such as this were put up by Samudragupta at important places in his empire as souvenirs of his celebration of extreme politico-religious importance'. The phrase *deyadhamma*, 'pious gift', however, would require some further explaining (not here and now) for such as politically inspired scenario.

In 1928, Jagannath Das Ratnakar deciphered one of the Shell script legends on the stone horse as *candraguptapituḥ*, 'of the father of Candragupta'. In 1983, B.N. Mukherjee drew renewed attention to the Khairigarh horse by his 'first definitive reading of a Shell inscription'. He read one of the Shell script lines as *mahendrādityaḥ*. This royal Gupta *biruda* would link the horse unequivocally to Kumāragupta I instead of his grandfather, Samudragupta. Mukherjee also offered a completely new reading of the Brāhmī-script legend, now *aśv(o)rasa... yājñiṇo...sya*,³⁶ which then appears to refer to a horse and a sacrifice. A reattribution of the sculpture would not in itself be problematic, as Kumāragupta I must also have arranged an *Aśvamedha* sacrifice, so his coins tell us (Fig. 16).³⁷ Mukherjee's methodology for deciphering the Shell script, however, was severely criticised by Richard Salomon (1987). Unfortunately the latter could not yet offer an actual alternative reading. For the time being it seems best to stay close to what the Gupta Brāhmī text revealed back in the 1880s.



FIG. 16. Gold coin, Aśvamedha T., Kumāragupta I. W: 8.10 g, D: 2.00 cm.
Dhananjaya coll. DIN7208 (Courtesy: Dhananjaya)

At least three more horses are usually mentioned as possibly related to an Aśvamedha in the Gupta age. One is a horse from Darleganj near Allahabad, now also in the State Museum Lucknow (G.137), apparently severely damaged (Williams 1982: 25, fn. 17). I have no further details. Jagannath Das Ratnakar (1928) reported on an inscribed, stone horse found in the village of Nagawa, near Varanasi. His illustration shows that the sculpture has no stylistic links whatsoever



FIG. 17. Rock-cut horse, Nagauri (MP). Length 2.5 m
(Courtesy: Sachin Tiwary and Rusav Sahu)

with the horse from Khairigarh. Das read the inscription on its right side as *srī-candragupta*.³⁸

A fourth stone horse is in situ at Nagauri (Nagouri), a quarry site close to the *stūpas* of Sanchi, Sonari and Satdhara (Fig. 17). The rock art specialists Sachin Tiwary and Rusav Sahu recently described and illustrated it among more sculptural remains surviving nearby (2013: fig. 21). The animal was carved from local rock, and now measures 1.62 m in height. In length it is closely comparable to the Khairigarh horse. A flat, wide collar adorns the horse's neck. The authors noticed cracks that may have been the reason for abandoning this work of art. The closeness of the quarry to major Buddhist centres of worship suggests that the animal was meant for that context rather than serve the Guptas as a memorial. Julia Shaw, who has done extensive research on the Sanchi area and its environs, suggested to me that the sculpture might be earlier than the Gupta period, considering the closeness of the Buddhist sites and the abundance of early paintings of horses in the nearby rock-shelters. The animal might for instance have been intended to serve as the capital of a pillar.³⁹ A tenon left beneath the horse's belly, mentioned

by Shaw and visible in the illustration in *Heritage and Us* (Fig. 17) could have secured the sculpture in such a lofty position. The horse sculptures discussed above did not have such a tenon. Still, I could not help noticing how close the collar is to that given to the sacrificial steed on coins of Kumāragupta I (Fig. 16)!

5. The *Aśvamedha* Coins Described— A Bit of History

In 'Hindu coins of the Conouj series', which is one of the earliest (1835) systematic studies of Gupta coins, James Prinsep presented two *Aśvamedha* coins. One of these came from his own collection, and it 'had excited not a little curiosity'. The other was part of the Swiney collection. Prinsep had been able to read the epithet *aśvamedhaparākrama-* on his coin (Fig. 18). Astute as ever, he correctly linked it to 'the celebrated horse-sacrifice' and suggested that the lady on the reverse presented 'one of the princesses acting as his [the horse's] attendant' (p. 638, figs 39.31–32). Prinsep could not yet establish 'who may lay claim to this fine and curious medal'.

Horace Wilson published a third specimen, 'procured by Mr. Thomas at Saharanpur' (1841: fig. 18.2), which was acquired by the British Museum in 1850.⁴⁰ Contrary to Prinsep, Wilson took the side with the standing female figure as the obverse. He accepted its link to the *Aśvamedha* sacrifice, but could not recognise the *yūpa* ['altar in front, whence rises a waving flame (?)']. He could now link the coin to the Gupta dynasty, but not yet to a specific king (p. 421).

It was the next specialist for Gupta coins, Edward Thomas, who linked the *Aśvamedha* coins to Samudragupta and placed the horse back to the obverse (1855: 498), next to 'an Altar'.⁴¹ Among the small number of gold coins discussed and illustrated in his 1876 *Records of the Gupta Dynasty*, Thomas included an *Aśvamedha* coin of the British Museum. He suggested that the female figure could perhaps be Pārvatī (p. 22, fig. 7.4). Apparently in these decades there was a tendency to identify female figures on the reverse of Gupta gold coins with this goddess. In his influential cataloguing articles and book,



FIG. 18. Probably the first *Aśvamedha* coin published. Drawing by James Prinsep (1835)

which came out between 1884 and 1906, Vincent Smith convincingly argued that she 'in almost every instance' is the goddess Śrī, representing Fortune, Victory and regal splendour. One of the exceptions was the 'female figure' on the *Aśvamedha* coins, for whom Smith suggested a royal status in his 1906 catalogue for the Indian Museum. In this way he actually 'upgraded' her royal status, as first suggested by Prinsep in 1835, from princess to queen.⁴²

In his 1884 catalogue, Smith described the bent pole in front of the horse, and he wondered whether it represents the 'standard of Indra'. He reproduced the legend given by Thomas earlier, but noticed at least one more variation (in his 'references and remarks' on pp. 175–7). In his upgraded catalogue of 1889, Smith reiterated his view that these coins were 'commemorative medals'. This qualification would eventually lead certain scholars to argue that the *Aśvamedha* coins were not really part of the normal currency of their time.⁴³

Smith suggested two readings for the obverse legend, which were slightly different from what earlier scholars had presented (p. 65).⁴⁴ In the 1906 catalogue for the Indian Museum, Smith mentioned the *yūpa* and suggested, for the first time perhaps, that the standing female is probably the chief queen standing on a lotus. All in all, while sensing a link between the *Aśvamedha* coins and the *Aśvamedha* ritual, it had taken numismatists the good part of a century to develop a coherent explanation for most of the devices on the obverse and reverse together.

A decade later, while the British Museum was developing a series of catalogues on their Indian coins, John Allan took Gupta coin study to the next level. He incorporated much of what had been achieved, and expanded this with new data and theories. Allan's description of the *Aśvamedha* coins stayed fairly close to that offered earlier by Vincent Smith. In his eloquent style, Anand Sadashiv Altekar subsequently described the *Aśvamedha* coins as being 'among the best specimens of the numismatic art of ancient India' (1957: 62) 'with a noble and graceful horse, which seems to be resigned to its impending doom. ... The figure of the queen is slim and graceful, her attitude one of alertness, as befits her role at the sacrifice'. Here much is read into the images, perhaps expecting an understanding of the sacrifice beyond what the die engravers may have been expected to grasp and express. In any case, these craftsmen were certainly successful in representing the horse and the lady adequately, fully in keeping with a long Indian tradition of animal and female imagery harking back to prehistoric times.

6. The Central Device on the Obverse

The horse stands to left, towards the *yūpa*, supposedly tied to it, though this is not clearly

visible (Figs 1–2, 11, 19–29). On many coins we can still recognise the golden beads that the queens were to lace into the crest, manes and tail of the horse. The string of beads that occasionally floats above the horse's back does not reflect a Vedic prescription as such, but may have been inspired by epic tales or customary ritual practice. The ritual texts require that the *yūpa* shaft should have a bend in the centre as well as at the top, both in the same direction. The monumental *yūpas* do not conform to this prescription, but, as Altekar noticed (1954: lxi), for the coins the die engravers were carefully instructed to reproduce this requirement. They also show the girdle (*rāsana*) of Kuśa grass. Although its ends should have been tied together, the coins show the 'girdle' floating freely, fully in keeping with the customary iconography of standards and sceptres in coin and seal designs. Apparently the die engravers were not specifically instructed to reproduce the eight-sided shape of the *yūpa*, as neither, apparently, were the sculptors of the Pawaya architrave (Fig. 12).

The engravers also reproduce the wooden *caśāla*, which is prescribed to be 10 *aṅgulas*⁴⁵ long and described as a kind of 'ring narrow in the centre'. It rests over the top of the sacrificial stake and, when rendered in stone, became a kind of



FIG. 19. Gold coin, *Aśvamedha* T., Gr. 3, Var. 2. W: 7.58 g, D: 2.20 cm. Shivlee coll., 1034. DIN5589 (Courtesy: Sanjeev Kumar, Shivlee database)



FIG. 20. Gold coin, *Aśvamedha* T., Gr. 4, Var. 1.1.
W: 7.55 g, D: 2.10 cm. Deepak Dhaadha coll.,
G1-Asva-DD-024. DIN7291
(Courtesy: Deepak Dhaadha and Pankaj Tandon)



FIG. 21. Gold coin, *Aśvamedha* T., Gr. 4,
Var. 1.2, with a step beneath the horse. W: 7.569 g,
D: 2.20 cm. Government Ms Mathura, 21. DIN829
(Courtesy: Pankaj Tandon)



FIG. 22. Gold coin, *Aśvamedha* T., Gr. 4, Var. 1.3.
W: 7.611 g, D: 2.20 cm. State Ms Lucknow, 10923.
DIN7981 (Courtesy: Pankaj Tandon)



FIG. 23. Gold coin, *Aśvamedha* T., Gr. 4, Var. 1.4.
W: 7.54 g, D: no data. Baldwin's, auction 40 (3 May
2005), lot 654. DIN455 (Courtesy: A.H. Baldwin)



FIG. 24. Gold coin, *Aśvamedha* T., Gr. 3, Var. 3.1.
W: 7.51 g, D: 2.30 cm. Shivlee coll., 1040. DIN888
(Courtesy: Sanjeev Kumar, Shivlee database)



FIG. 25. Gold coin, *Aśvamedha* T., Gr. 3, Var. 3.2.
W: 7.39 g, D: c.2.10 cm. Nupam Mahajan coll.
DIN880 (Courtesy: Nupam Mahajan)

ring-shaped band at the top of the memorial *yūpas*. On the coins the two sides of the *caśāla* were mostly represented by two dots, the die engravers' usual solution for roundish shapes. A piece of cloth flies from the top of the *yūpa* like a pennon, probably recalling the fluttering of cloths with which the sacrificial stake is covered.

Although no basis other than a flattened ground surface was textually prescribed for a wooden *yūpa*, on the coins the post is raised on a built-up basis. Mostly we see a two-step, raised foot tapering towards the top and decorated with beads at one or both levels (Figs 1–2, 19–23). In certain designs it is a fairly simple, rectangular



FIG. 26. Gold coin, Aśvamedha T., Gr. 3, Var. 3.4.
W: 7.72 g, D: no data. CNG, auction Triton 9
(9 January 2006), lot 1165. DIN1196
(Courtesy: Classical Numismatic Group)



FIG. 27. Gold coin, Aśvamedha T., Gr. 3, Var. 4.
With *hayamedhaḥ*. W: 7.37 g, D: 2.30 cm.
Pankaj Tandon coll., 405,60. DIN892
(Courtesy: Pankaj Tandon)



FIG. 28. Gold coin, Aśvamedha T. Gr. 3, Var. 5.1.
W: 7.636 g, D: 2.20 cm. Government Ms Mathura,
754. DIN830 (Courtesy: Pankaj Tandon)



FIG. 29. Gold coin, Aśvamedha T., Gr. 3, Var. 5.2.
W: 7.47 g, D: 2.20 cm. State Ms Lucknow, 3977.
DIN832 (Courtesy: Pankaj Tandon)

stand (Figs 11, 24–9), such as we frequently encounter in Gupta period art.⁴⁶ Altekar assumed that the engravers were moved by artistic considerations when they added a basis to the *yūpa*, in other words, that they made it up to make the *yūpa* look more fancy and impressive. We might consider instead that they may have felt inspired by the architecture of pillars or even stone *yūpas* with an ornamental basis of some kind. The consistency with which the engravers also added a brick-built platform⁴⁷ underneath the horse suggests that some effort indeed did go into creating the most suitable environment, either for the event itself, or for the site meant to commemorate it afterwards.⁴⁸

The wooden *yūpa* is supposed to mediate between the areas inside and outside the actual sacrificial ground (*mahāvedi*). The animal to be sacrificed stands directly adjacent to the *mahāvedi* area, possibly, so the coins suggest, on a brick-

faced surface which is only marginally lower than the *mahāvedi*. In the coin design, the perfect balance between the vertical and horizontal lines of the *yūpa* and the platform on the one hand and the sinuous lines of the pennon and strings of beads flying from the *yūpa* on the other, betrays an expert eye for compositional effects.

7. The Central Device on the Reverse

The image of the lady, whom I hold to be Śrī as the divine queen of Samudragupta, rests a *cāmara* on her right shoulder, and holds a piece of cloth in her left hand. In particular designs a long dress elegantly covers her legs down to her ankles (Figs 20–3, 25). In other designs the queen wears a knee length lower cloth and multiple *mālās* with (Fig. 25) or without beads, resembling the beaded cords worn by Candragupta II in particular early coins from his reign.

One of the most spectacularly sensuous images of Śrī graces an *Aśvamedha* coin now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Fig. 11).⁴⁹ The lady's feet have been positioned as if she is walking to the left, but the artists in fact aimed at showing her in a pose of *déhanchement*, with a flexed hip, one knee bent forward. Gaṅgā standing on her *makara* mount on Samudragupta's Tiger-slayer coins is shown in a similar stance (Fig. 9). The die engravers have successfully used a visual formula for the representation of feminine grace and fertility that stone sculptors in the early historic period had developed to great heights.⁵⁰

The slender staff in the left field, which is always decorated with a pennon, has been explained in various ways: as a standard (Smith), as a spear, or as a ceremonial needle with which the queens are required to puncture the horse's body (e.g. Altekar 1948). Several scholars even toyed with the idea that the staff or spear symbolised the ruler himself, basically because he is portrayed with a 'standard' or sceptre with a pennon or fillet in his left hand on the Sceptre Type coins (Figs 4–5). There is actually not much outward similarity between the sceptre held by the king and the pointed object on the *Aśvamedha* coins, which sometimes looks quite spear-like in certain dies (cp. Fig. 29). Unlike a *dhvaja* it does not carry an emblem (such as a crescent, a wheel or an animal figure) that could refer to a dynasty or a deity under worship.

More likely this festooned ceremonial object is a numismatic parallel to the festooned standard or spear found on sealings of the early centuries of our era. E.J. Rapson illustrated one such terracotta sealing of an owner named Āryamitra (1901: 104, fig. 7). It carries the devices of a roaring lion sitting to left, flanked by a standard with a tall, pointed top that is constricted in the middle and appears to have a ridge along its vertical axis. Several collar ornaments and waving festoons decorate the staff beneath the top. The lower part rests in a tiny, pot-shaped basis, which itself rests on a pointed tip (Fig. 14a). The Sanskrit legend beneath the horizontal line gives the issuer's name in a genitive ending, written in ornate, angular Brāhmī script.⁵¹

Kiran Kumar Thaplyal presented more sealings of kings with names ending on *mitra* from Ayodhya, featuring a bull combined with either a *dhvaja* in railing, a standard with a pointed top (never in a railing) or a *yūpa*. Many sealings found at Rajghat, of a ruler named Dhanadeva, which are palaeographically datable to around the second century CE, also combine a bull device with a spear-like standard and a *yūpa* (Thaplyal 1972: 25–6).⁵² Apparently then the festooned standard with a pointed top belongs to a range of devices that one way or another may signal power and/or auspiciousness.⁵³ The format used for the *Aśvamedha* coin's rear imagery may thus have been partly derived from the way in which seal devices were employed. The joint motif of a human figure and a standard was well engrained in early Gupta coin designing. Next to the *Aśvamedha* design, we find it in various guises on the Tiger-slayer coins (Fig. 9), The Lyrist coins (Fig. 8) and the Battle-axe coins as well.

8. The Sanskrit Legends on the Obverse and Reverse

OBVERSE

In 1914, Allan concluded that the obverse legend exists in two varieties. He suggested one version to read: *rājādhirājah ṛṥthivīm avitvā divaṃ jayaty-
aprativāryavīryah*, 'the king of kings, of irresistible prowess, having protected the earth, wins heaven' (1914a: p. cxi). On two other coins he read the second half of the first line as *rājādhirājah ṛṥthivīm vijitya* instead (1914b). In spite of the twenty *Aśvamedha* coins that the Bayana hoard added to the known corpus, the obverse legend still remained 'one of the most difficult to read' (Altekar 1957), a situation which, in fact, has not much improved by 2016.

The Sanskrit verse on the obverse, for which the central device leaves precious little room, exists in two versions, so Altekar concluded. Starting from Allan's proposal, he reconstructed one version of the legend as *rājādhirājah ṛṥthivīm avitvā divaṃ jayaty āhr̥ta vājīmedhah* on most coins, translating it as 'After protecting the earth, the King of Kings, who has performed the *vājīmedha*,

wins heaven' (1957: 65). This reading has been accepted ever since as more or less definitive, and we find it repeated whenever Aśvamedha coins are described. Altekar conceded that 'on some coins' the verb form *avitvā*, 'after protecting', had been replaced by *vijitya* 'after having conquered' (p. 65).⁵⁴ It appears, however, that the legend situation is even more complex than assumed. It seems there were probably three or even four different legends (for references to illustrations, see §9 below):

Version 1: problematic for its first half, and reconstructed as: *rājādhirājah prthivīm avitvā divam jayaty āhrtavājimedhaḥ*. This is the most often encountered circular legend on these coins, and one that has defied reading quite persistently. John Allan suggested the first part of the verse somewhat hesitantly (1914b: 256), but it was accepted and further expanded by Altekar in 1957. I have not been able to read this exact phrasing. In particular the *ma* necessary with *prthivīm* to read *avitvā* with the *absolutivum* of the verb *av*, 'to protect', is not there. The engraved letters read more like *prthivīm vitvā* or at times like *prthivīm vit(v)ā* with the *v* mark not clearly indicated.⁵⁵

Recently I sought the advice of Dr Arlo Griffiths (EFEO, Paris) in the matter. Although admittedly I could at that time show him only a small group of coins with different parts of the legends on the flan, he could not confirm the expected reading either. He pointed out: 'In these circular legends on Gupta coins we time and again see the returning *figurae etymologicae* with the verb *ji* 'to conquer' ... 'I cannot find a *ma* after *prthivī* indeed, so the reading '*prthivīm avitvā* simply does not seem to exist. The spelling *prthivīm avitvā* is not to be expected for reasons of Sandhi. I cannot see this on any of the coins. I feel *avitvā* is never there...' (letter 24.04.2016; translated from Dutch). He suggested that the intended legend might instead be *rājādhirāja prthivīm vijitvā divam jayaty āhrtavājimedhaḥ* (so version 3 of the legend, see below). However, like Allan and Altekar earlier, I could not trace the *vaja* (required for *vijitvā*) in the legend either. Version 1 is found on

coins of Variety 1 in Group 3 and on coins of Group 4 (see §9.2).

Version 2: *rājādhirājah prthivīm vijitya divam jayaty āhrtavājimedhaḥ*, as read by Allan (1914a: 21), but probably on very rare coins. Arlo Griffiths suggested it to be 'the most original and correct form of the half Upajāti strophe' (letter 24 April 2016). Allan read it on a coin in the Bodleian Library, but did not illustrate the piece. I could not trace the coin in the Ashmolean Museum cabinet.⁵⁶ Arlo Griffiths could read this legend on one of the rare coins with the *biruda* spelled as '*hayamedha*', here in Variety 4 of Group 3 (see §9.2): *rājādhirājah prthivīm vijitya divam jayaty ā[...]*, on the coin in the Pankaj Tandon collection.

Version 3: *rājādhirājah prthivīm vijitvā divam jayaty āhrtavājimedhaḥ*. Allan considered the verb form *vijitvā* 'an impossible form'. That is why he suggested to read *prthivīm avitvā* (so version 1). He did allow for the possibility that 'other coins have *jivā* preceded by some synonym of *prthivīm* (Allan 1914b: 256). In the subsequent year Hiranand Shastri published two Aśvamedha coins that were definitively not struck from the same pair of dies, but which both carried a legend containing *vijitvā* all the same. He felt 'disposed to think that the form was quite possible and that Panini allows it...' (1915: 478). Gerald Browne felt as uncomfortable as Allan about the verb form. He pointed out that it does not conform to classical grammar (which requires *vijitya*), but forms with *-tvā* do occur in Vedic and classical texts (1994: 31–2). The legend on a coin in the State Museum Lucknow confirms the reading unequivocally (Fig. 29). Version 3 is found in Group 3 on coins of Varieties 2, 3 and 5.2.

Version 4: *rājādhirājah prthivīm vijayaty āhrtavājimedhaḥ*. A coin in the collection of Pankaj Tandon, shown in full splendor on his website CoinIndia.com, carries the 'fourth' version of the Aśvamedha legend. It is no longer metrical, as Arlo Griffiths pointed out in his letter. John Allan reported on a similar coin back in 1921. It belongs to Variety 5.1 in Group 3.

Numismatists and historians have racked their

brains over these legends for nearly 200 years, often working without clear illustrations. A more precise mint idiomatic approach now allows to link these different versions of the legend with specific designs done in a distinct style and iconography, as will be shown in §9. Hopefully this will lead to an increase in successfully read legends on *Aśvamedha* coins in museums and private hands.

REVERSE

The reverse of the *Aśvamedha* coins nearly always reproduces a version of the king's favourite epithet *parākramaḥ* (literally 'one with bold advance'). It was adapted for the occasion to become *aśvamedhaparākrama-*. E.J. Rapson (1901: 102) suggested that it might have been intended to mean 'he, whose might has been established by the *Aśvamedha* sacrifice', or 'he who bears the title *parākrama* as a result of his performance of the *Aśvamedha* sacrifice'. The first translation suggests that Samudragupta's rise to power was the result of his performing the sacrifice, but more likely the event was organised after the king had subdued his direct adversaries, viz. the kings of neighbouring states. The use of the title *parākrama* on the prolific Sceptre Type coins, arguably the first series out, indicates that this was his preferred title. There is no evidence to suggest that the *Aśvamedha* coins came out before those of Sceptre Type. That is why I would interpret the *biruda* to mean 'he who is as boldly advancing as one befitting the *aśvamedha*'. In a rare strike (Fig. 27) this *biruda* was replaced by *hayamedhaparākramaḥ*, which employs an alternative name for the horse sacrifice which is already attested in Vedic literature.⁵⁷

9. Classifying the *Aśvamedha* Coins

Oddly enough, the *Aśvamedha* coins escaped the classifiers' scrutiny. Whereas most other Gupta coins were divided into a number of classes and varieties, the *Aśvamedha* corpus was usually treated as monolithic (except for the legends). Numismatists certainly noticed differences in carved details and legends, but this did not lead them to create a systematic grouping. Only

Parmeshwari Lal Gupta and Sarojini Srivastava divided the coins into two varieties on the minimalistic basis of the absence or presence of a crescent over the buttocks of the horse (1981). Unfortunately this did not create meaningful groups.

My approach to the diversity among the *Aśvamedha* coins is to see it as a phenomenon that operates largely at a supra-type level. In this model, the diversity for which Gupta coins are renowned originates not so much from minor differences between varieties of one particular type, but largely from differences one level up, those between entire *groups* of coins (that include various coin types). So in order to fully understand the differences between *Aśvamedha* coins, we need to link them up to other coins of Samudragupta. The links that we seek are shared 'mintidiomatic' features such as style, iconography, legends, palaeography, symbols, size, weight and gold content.

Samudragupta's coins can be divided over seven or eight such mintidiomatic groups.⁵⁸ This does not mean that minting practice was extremely fractionalised. These groups are not isolated islands in an ocean. Close and systematic affinities between the coins of Groups 1 to 4 suggests that they were all manufactured at the same mint. Among them are all the known varieties of *Aśvamedha* coins, which fit best in either Group 3 or Group 4.

Samudragupta's Coins of Group 3

Group 3 includes coins of *Aśvamedha* (Figs 1–2, 11, 19, 24–9), *Kāca* (Fig. 7), *Lyrist* (Fig. 8), *Sceptre* (Fig. 4) and *Tiger-slayer Types* (Fig. 9). The figures portrayed on these coins are tall, long-limbed and well built. They have long faces and high cheekbones and may have beady eyes. The king is broad-chested, the lady on the reverse full-breasted. Headgear mostly consists of a cap closely covering the skull with curls framing the face. There is no sign of a fillet tied on the nape of the neck (unlike on coins in Groups 1 and 2). In certain dies the lady's cap is adorned with a string of beads curving along the top of the cap towards the back. When the goddess sits to front,

only the curls framing her face can be seen, and no cap is indicated. The Tiger-slaying king wears a three-lobed diadem, which is a novelty (Fig. 9).

The compositions of obverse and reverse designs in Group 3 have been oriented along imaginary horizontal and vertical axes, ensuring the optimal use of all four quarters of the die. The engraving of the curved lines is firm and secure. When present, the halo is wide. The clothing of the king varies, depending on the coin type. When given a sceptre (whether with or without a wheel on top), he usually wears a tailed coat over beaded trousers (Figs 4, 5 and 7). The coat is decorated with beads along the collar and down the front. The length of the coat's front varies from just below the navel to knee-length. The Tiger-slaying king wears a short loin-cloth (Fig. 9).

Fully in keeping with the stylistic tastes of the Gupta age, the die engravers strike a fine chord by making the bare-chested Lyrist king wear a

delicate pearl necklace (Fig. 8). When dressed in a tailed coat, Samudragupta wears a necklace with slightly bigger, round beads. Overall the engravers making dies for coins of Group 3 liked to employ round, beaded shapes in their designs. The hairdo's, throne ornaments, the pearls on the king's coat and seat, the beading on the lady's cap, and the pearl string floating above the Aśvamedha horse are testimony to this.

The goddess, when standing, may wear one or more, knee-length *mālās* down the front over a knee-long lower cloth hugging her hips and thighs. At times we can see fine, tubular beads strung on this thin cord. Such a beaded *mālā* first occurs in certain dies for Samudragupta, and reappears occasionally in the designs for Candragupta II until approximately around 400 CE or so, when it disappears from the coin portraits.

Beaded *mālās* such as these may have been part of royal adornment, and we find them particularly worn by mythic Serpent kings and queens in the area of Sanchi. A monumental *nāgarāja* at Nagauri, datable to about the first century CE, wears a single-string cord with beads (Shaw 2007: fig. 139). The matching in situ *nāginī* (Fig. 30), probably the one now reported stolen from the site (Shaw 2007: 94), offers us



FIG. 30. *Nāginī* wearing a beaded *mālā*. Stone, Nagauri, c. first century CE. Photograph ASI (Courtesy: Friends of the Kern Institute [Kern collection, P-037762], UL, Leiden University)



FIG. 31. Detail of a clasp on a *mālā* worn by a *nāgarāja*, Firozpur, c. fifth century CE (Courtesy: Huntington Archive)

a tantalising close-up of this royal ornament. It persists into the Gupta age, as is evident from the iconography of *nāgas* and *nāginīs* found at Firozpur, only 8 km west of Sanchi (Williams 1976). A fairly slender *nāgarāja* there, carved in early Gupta style, dons a double-laced *mālā*. Its strings are held together by means of flat, ornamental clasps (Fig. 31).⁵⁹ All the royal *nāginīs* at the site that were carved in the same period, wear the more delicate, single-string *mālā*. Coin imagery and sculptural arts are beautifully intertwined here, an avenue for further research!

Particular coin groups come with particular palaeographic shapes of the letters in the legends, another of those mintidiomatic links. The *ma* in coins of Group 3 takes two different shapes, again depending on the variety: either an adapted form of the 'western' *ma*, with two slanting uprights meeting on the base line; or the full 'western' *ma* with a triangular basis.⁶⁰

Coins in Group 3 often carry a crescent in the obverse field and a geometric symbol on the reverse (depending on the coin type). This symbol usually has four prongs with dots on top, a double horizontal bar in the centre, and a lozenge with dots below.

The *biruda* on the reverse, engraved in bold Brāhmī script, mostly has been placed in a vertical fashion. The coins of Group 3 are relatively wide; on average they measure 2.15 cm, while some go up to even 2.30 cm! The average weights calculated for the coins of the various types so far range between 7.49 and 7.66 grams (115.6–118.2 grains).

The Aśvamedha Coins within Group 3

OBVERSE

The *Aśvamedha* coins of Group 3 come in five varieties (1–5). Some of these exist in subvarieties that show relatively minor differences among them. The horse stands near the *yūpa*, but is not visibly tied to it. No straps can be seen on the animal's neck. A short, single fillet waves from the post. The horse has a tall and strong neck and shoulders, which are sculpturally more emphasised than the low and long back and hindquarters (Figs 1–2, 11, 24–9). On coins of

Variety 2 the horse stands on taller legs, and its build is more compact (Fig. 19).

Other easily detectable differences reveal themselves in the shaping of the *yūpa*'s basis. On coins of Variety 1 it has two tapering tiers, the lower wider than the upper. Either tier may be adorned with beading. The two tiers are divided by a constricted riser (Figs 1–2).

Quite different is the *yūpa*'s basis on coins of Variety 2: the top tier is flattish and not tapered (Fig. 19). The lower tier rests on a high basis, which itself rests on the brick-lined platform. On coins of Varieties 3–5 (Figs 11, 24–9) the basis has two equally wide, plain tiers. In Gupta coin design such a support is best known from the *garuḍadhvajā* device, in particular on coins from the time of Samudragupta and Candragupta II. It is also quite familiar in sculptural arts, e.g. as a support beneath Viṣṇu's *cakra* attribute (see §6). The low and simple basis on coins of Varieties 3–5 allowed for streamers, tied to the *yūpa*, that wave out at both sides of the stake.

The platform beneath the horse has been engraved in different ways, again depending on the variety. It may be represented by a horizontal line above one or two rows of obliquely placed bricks (Variety 1, Figs 1–2). Coins of Variety 2 have only one such row (Fig. 19), while on those of Varieties 3–5 the bricks may have been left out, and even the horizontal line beneath the horse is sometimes absent (Figs 11, 24–9).

As indicated earlier, designs in Samudragupta's Group 3 often carry a crescent symbol and the *Aśvamedha* coins are no exception. On coins of Varieties 1 and 2 the crescent rests near the edge on III o'clock with the opening directed towards the right (Figs 1–2, 19). On coins of Varieties 3–5 (Figs 11, 24–9) the symbol sits above the horse's hind quarters, with the opening towards the top.

In most coin types struck for Samudragupta the circular legend has a more or less fixed starting point; usually at I o'clock, far less often at VII o'clock. For the *Aśvamedha* designs the engravers apparently were given more freedom. On coins of Group 3 the circular legend starts on VII, VIII or XI o'clock.

All four (?) versions of the circular legend

make their appearance, neatly divided over specific mintidiomatic designs:

Group 3, Variety 1 carries version 1 of the legend (with the previously reconstructed *pr̥thivīm avitvā* written more like *pr̥thivīm vitvā* or at times like *pr̥thivīm vit(v)ā* from VIII or XI o'clock (Figs 1–2);

Group 3, Variety 2 carries version 3 of the legend (with *pr̥thivīm vijitvā*) from VIII o'clock (Fig. 19);

Group 3, Variety 3 carries version 3 of the legend (with *pr̥thivīm vijitvā*), but starting from XI–XII o'clock (Figs 11, 24–6);

Group 3, Variety 4 carries version 2 of the legend (with *pr̥thivīm vijitya*), but starting from XI–XII o'clock (Fig. 27);

Group 3, Variety 5.1 carries version 4 of the legend (with *pr̥thivīm vijayaty*) from XI o'clock (Fig. 28);

Group 3, Variety 5.2 carries version 3 of the legend (with *pr̥thivīm vijitvā*), likewise starting from XI o'clock (Fig. 29).

Beneath the horse appears the letter *si*, assumed to be an abbreviation for *siddham*, 'good luck'. The size of the letter varies, depending again on the variety: big in Varieties 1 and 2 (Figs 1–2), definitely tiny in Varieties 3–5 (Figs 11, 19, 25–9).

REVERSE

Differences in the gestures of hands are clear markers of design variety in Gupta gold coins. This is particularly true for the image of Śrī on the Aśvamedha coins. Some postures are quite specific for a certain subvariety, while others are shared among designs across Group 3. Although seemingly a minor detail, it is important to notice these details, as they return in designs for other coin types and signal shared workmanship.

The way in which Śrī holds the *cāmara* handle looks quite realistic in some designs, and decidedly unrealistic in others. Thus, on most coins of Variety 1.1 (Fig. 1) the goddess balances the handle on the open palm of her hand, while securing it with her tiny thumb. In other coins (so not of Variety 1.1) she may be seen holding the

handle in a firm grip, her palm inwards, fingers across from outside to inside, the thumb resting against the inner side of the handle (e.g. Fig. 2). Sometimes she flips one tiny finger across the handle, palm downwards (in Variety 2, Fig. 19) or two fingers, palm outwards (in Varieties 3–4, Figs 11, 24, 26–7). Most engravers did not aim at a physically realistic pose, and gave Śrī a tiny, squarish hand folded sideward across the handle, the thumb placed in front rather than behind the handle (Fig. 28). As for the whisk itself, on coins of Group 3 the top of the *cāmara* has a long, thin tail.

In spite of her divine status, Śrī may appear with or without a halo. The nimbate appearance is more common; coins of the related Varieties 3 and 4 leave the nimbus out (Figs 4, 8–9, 24). Her cap is adorned with a lace of delicate beads emphasising the curve of her head towards the nape of the neck. In the exceptionally fine Aśvamedha coin in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Fig. 11) the beading is not very clear. Instead we notice crescent-shaped ornaments on the surface of the cap. This coin also retains the delicate hip girdle worn over the lower cloth.⁶¹

As for other clothing details, we cannot see any traces of a bodice on Śrī's upper body. From the waist down she mostly wears a closely fitting garment. It may cover her legs down to the ankles (Varieties 1.1, 2, 3.2), or leaves her legs free from the knees down. In well-preserved coins the pleats on hips and thighs are still visible. Even where her garment is long, the contours of her legs remain quite clear and the presence of the garment is mostly indicated through hems. The smooth curves of breasts, tummy and hips, beautifully contrasted with a narrow waist and an elegant stance, reveal the engravers' mastery of the aesthetic and stylistic, visual language of their age.⁶² In Var. 3.2 the garment's lower hem drapes itself in a wave movement over the lotus, completely covering the feet (Fig. 25). Often long strings or *mālās* are seen draped from the waist downward, in particular where Śrī wears a closely hugging hip cloth down to her knees only (Figs 2, 11, 19, 24, 26–7).

The *biruda* next to Śrī, shown in a perpendicular

fashion as customary in Group 3, mostly reads *aśvamedhaparākrama*; usually without, at times with a *visarga*. The rare honorary title *hayamedhaparākramaḥ* occurs on coins of Variety 4 (Fig. 27). Coins of varieties 1 and 2 show an adapted form of the 'western' *ma* in the *biruda*, with two slanting uprights meeting on the base line. Coins of varieties 3–5 carry the full 'western' *ma* with a triangular basis instead.

Fabric

As for the gold content, so far we have limited reliable data to go by, for lack of analysis of specific Gupta gold coins by means of up to date methods. Generally it was believed that until the time of Kumāragupta I the coins contained more than 80 per cent gold (Raven 1994a: 455), but a reinterpretation revealed large fluctuations in fineness between Sceptre Type coins of Samudragupta, moving between *c.*60 and 90 per cent of gold (Raven 1994a: 462–4, tables 77–9).

Another complicating factor is that specific gravity results give approximate estimates for binary alloys. The presence of more alloying metals leads to an error factor. Particular Gupta gold coins were shown to contain silver and copper next to the gold, but silver seems to be the dominant alloying metal (Raven 1994a: 455–6).⁶³ Pankaj Tandon kindly provided me with recent specific gravity measurements for Gupta gold coins in the State Museum Lucknow and the Government Museum Mathura:

Variety 1.2, Government Museum Mathura 31;

SG: 14.271;

Variety 3.4, State Museum Lucknow 3979;

SG: 15.151

Variety 5.1, Government Museum Mathura 754;

SG: 15.580

Variety 5.2, State Museum Lucknow 3977;

SG: 15.229

Allowing for a small error factor because of the possible presence of copper, the fineness of these four *Aśvamedha* coins would then sit between *c.*58 and 71 per cent, and probably closer to the higher of the two estimates.⁶⁴

Samudragupta's Coins of Group 4

Mintidiomatically, the coins of Group 4 are very close to those of Group 3, but there are nevertheless consistent differences.⁶⁵ Certain coins of *Aśvamedha* (Figs 20–3), King-and-Queen (Fig. 6) and Sceptre Type (Fig. 5) fit into this group. Compared to Group 3, the style evident in coins of Group 4 puts a greater emphasis on rounded shapes. This translates into a profuse use of beading and bead-like shapes: in the *yūpa* stand, the pennons, the throne legs, in clothing, in the curly hair, the rounded fingertips, the rounded ends on the cloth held by the goddess and the beaded petals on the lotus support. The facial shape and body contours are also more manifestly rounded and less elongated than in designs for Group 3. The rounded faces and short stature tend to give the king, the queen and the goddess a youngish look.

Another feature of designs now in Group 4 is their variation in the placement of the circular legend. In the case of *Aśvamedha* coins, the legend may start from I, VIII, or V o'clock. Similarly, the Sceptre Type shows two alternative starting points for the circular legend (I or VII o'clock). The *birudas* come with the adapted form of the 'western' *ma*, with two slanting uprights meeting on the base line. They have been rendered without a *visarga* and positioned as in Group 3.

In Group 4, the crescent is not nearly as ubiquitous as in Group 3. Of course Candragupta I holds on to his *candradhwaja* as usual (Fig. 6), but the crescent does not appear as a separate symbol between the couple, contrary to what is often seen in King-and-Queen Type coins of other groups. The crescent is also absent from the Sceptre Type coins of Group 4. In the *Aśvamedha* designs the crescent mostly persists. When part of the design, the geometric symbol in the top left quadrant next to the seated goddess was always chosen from the same symbol set as those of Group 3.

The coins of Group 4 are fairly large, with averages ranging between 2.06 and 2.14 cm. They are also remarkably stable in their weights,

with averages mostly sitting snugly between *c.*7.5–7.6 g (115.7–117.3 grains).

The Aśvamedha Coins in Group 4

The Aśvamedha coins in Group 4 are quite homogeneous, and we need to distinguish only one variety. Small differences allow us to distinguish four subvarieties.

OBVERSE

In Group 4 the horse has always been given two straps across the neck. Sometimes the ends of the straps hang down below the horse's mouth, looking fillet-like or tied into a loop. A pearl chain may wave from the horse's head towards the right field, but only rarely so. In many coins a crescent rests above the horse's hind quarters, the opening turned upwards in Varieties 1.1 and 1.2 (Figs 20–1) or to the right in Variety 1.3 (Fig. 22). In Variety 1.4 the crescent is absent.

The shape of the *yūpa* in the left field is similar to that seen in Variety 1 of Group 3 (cp. Figs 1–2 to 20–3). The platform beneath the horse reveals a single or a double row of obliquely placed bricks. The coins of Variety 1.2 show a rare peculiarity in the form of a low 'step' (Fig. 21) beneath the horse's front and hind legs. The horse does not stand on it. So far we have failed to understand what it may represent. What has not been pointed out before, is that the basis beneath the Khairigarh stone horse appears to have a similar, raised area in the exact same spot. The close-up photograph published by Joanna Williams (1982: fig. 11) reveals this.

All four varieties appear to share version 1 of the legend, so far read with the problematic *pr̥thivīm avitvā* (see above in §8), starting from I, VIII, or V o'clock. Beneath the horse appears the letter *si* in bold face, as in Varieties 1 and 2 of Group 3 (Figs 1–2, 20–3).

REVERSE

Śrī holds the handle in a firm grip familiar from coins of Group 3, with her palm turned inwards, the fingers coming across from outside to inside, the thumb resting against the inner side of the handle. The *cāmara*'s hairy top has taken on a

distinctly roundish shape, in which the texture has been indicated through round markings. The goddess holds a short piece of cloth in her left hand resting at her side.

Śrī wears a long garment hugging her breasts, narrow waist and legs. It has a plain collar. In fact, the garment resembles that worn by Queen Kumāradevī on the King-and-Queen coins of Group 4 (Fig. 6), by Śrī on the Sceptre coins from Group 4 (Fig. 5), and by the goddess on the coins of Kāca Type in Group 3 (Fig. 7). Below only her tiny feet are visible. There is no indication of a girdle. Her ornaments include earrings and bracelets. A *mālā* passes just beneath the knees. The lotus support is generally low and wide, with bead-like petals befitting the style of Group 4.

Just as in designs of Group 3, the title *aśvamedhaparākrama* has been positioned in a perpendicular way in the right field. It always carries the adapted form of the 'western' *ma* with two slanting uprights meeting on the base line. The *visarga* is absent.

FABRIC

For the Aśvamedha coins of Group 4, Pankaj Tandon could give the following, recent specific gravity measurements:

Variety 1.1, State Museum Lucknow 11672;
SG: 15.774

Variety 1.1, State Museum Lucknow 11669;
SG: 15.779

Variety 1.2, Government Museum Mathura 30;
SG: 15.460

Variety 1.2, State Museum Lucknow 4656;
SG: 15.966

Variety 1.3, State Museum Lucknow 10923;
SG: 15.782

Variety 1.3, State Museum Lucknow 3978;
SG: 16.121

On average these specific gravity values are slightly higher than for those measured for the Aśvamedha coins of Group 3. This could mean two things: either they contain a bit more gold, viz. between *c.*70 and 75 per cent (if the relative percentages of silver/copper are similar to those of Group 3), or there was relatively more copper

in the alloy (which would slightly inflate the specific gravity readings). An XRF analysis could bring this out.

FINALLY

This mintidiomatic analysis has revealed that there are numerous similarities between the *Aśvamedha* coins of Groups 3 and 4. They share a specific mint idiom. At the same time we have seen consistent differences too. This pattern is not only visible for the *Aśvamedha* coins, but is evident for all types that share the mintidiomatic traits of either Group 3 or Group 4. This suggests very strongly that all these coins were manufactured at the same mint. We do not see any evidence of a 'free' exchange of dies across Groups 3 and 4 for any of the types though. To understand how that mintidiomatic pattern could evolve, not only for the *Aśvamedha* coins but across the corpus of coins struck for Samudragupta, is the next huge leap to go.

10. A Controversial *Aśvamedha* Strike

Finally, after our close encounter with the complex patterning of *Aśvamedha* coins in Groups 3 and 4, I want to use the outcome to discuss a small group of controversial *Aśvamedha* coins (Fig. 10). In June 2008, I was approached by Mr Ken Kengatharan about one such coin (the 'Tandon' specimen mentioned below) on which opinions varied. Some regarded it as genuine, while others deemed it a forgery.⁶⁶ Pankaj Tandon had acquired the coin at auction, but had returned it because of his doubts about its status.⁶⁷ Mr Kengatharan specifically asked me whether its artistry was consistent with that of the known coins of the Gupta dynasty. At that time I had no fast and easy answer, as the published analyses of the *Aśvamedha* coins did not deal to any great extent with stylistic or technical issues. The question did, however, trigger a rapid intensification of my mintidiomatic quest on which I had started many years before.

A second specimen, of what soon proved to be a small group of near-identical *Aśvamedha* coins, has been part of the Shivlee collection for several decades. A third coin was picked up by

Mr Vikram Chand.⁶⁸ I found it resting on a small tag in a coin cabinet kept in the Department of Coins & Medals of the British Museum for study purposes. A curator, presumably Joe Cribb, had marked the tag with the comment 'fake?' A fourth specimen circulated in trade in 2014. Probably more specimens sit in private collections here and there. Now how do these controversial coins resemble or differ from the *Aśvamedha* coins discussed in §9?

Undoubtedly, the obverse resembles that of coins in Group 4, but there are noticeable differences:

The drawing looks angular, coarse and frequently insecure. This pertains in particular to the chest and front legs of the horse, the *yūpa* basis and parts of the pennon flying from the top of the *yūpa*;

Usually the pennon tied to the top of the sacrificial post flies from the left of two wooden rings (represented by dots; figs 26–30); in the *Aśvamedha* coins under review it waves from the right ring;

In Group 4 pieces of the cord tied on the horse's neck occasionally appear below the horse's mouth. In the coins under review two short pennons fly directly from the *yūpa* instead;

In coins of Group 4 the pearl chain flying from the *yūpa* is rarely seen. If present, it flies from the right ring (dot) and does not curve as closely along the full length of the horse's neck and back as on the coins under review (cp. Bayana Hoard no. 160, fig. 4.7);

The bricks in the platform beneath the horse are usually marked by oblique, narrow, 'brick'-like markings rather than by beads as seen in the coins under review;

The legend on the coins under review starts on XI o'clock, which is normal in Group 4. Although the first part is largely off the flan, we can see traces of (*rājādhirāja*[x]) *pra(tha)vīmavitvā*. The x represents what appears to be a superfluous dot and *tha* (in *pr̥thivīm*) is represented by what looks like a fanciful imitation or variation of this letter. Remarkably enough, this is so far the only

coin strike in which I could actually read the crucial and problematic part of version 1 of the legend, including the *ma* (cp. above, §8)!

The reverse of the coins under scrutiny closely resembles the design given to coins of Variety 1 in Group 3, but there are some noticeable differences as well:

Compared to coins of Variety 1 in Group 3, the drawing of the design looks stiff and coarse.

The stance of the lady's legs is awkward;

The shape of the cloth held by the lady appears to have been misunderstood.

Many of these traits might be explained by assuming that a novice engraver was put to work to carve the dies. However, the most serious problem is the combination of an obverse more or less done in the idiom of Group 4 with a reverse clearly using the idiom of Group 3.⁶⁹ Such a cross-combining of obverse and reverse designs fitting in two *different* mint-idiomatic groups sets them apart from all the other Aśvamedha coins documented so far.

Finally there is the matter of weights: Both the coin returned by Tandon and the specimen in the Shivlee collection weigh 7.98 g (123.1 grains). These two coins not only present the heaviest Aśvamedha coins documented by me so far, but they are also marginally heavier than the heaviest of all coins of every type present in Groups 3 and 4. The specimen in the Vikram Chand collection weighs much less, viz. 7.60 g (117.3 grains). Such a big difference in weights between these three double die-linked coins, which would have taken shape during the same manufacturing session, is both uncommon and unlikely.

11. The Coins and the Sacrifice

The Aśvamedha coins attest unequivocally to Samudragupta performing the Horse sacrifice, but this grand event is not mentioned in the surviving parts of the Allahabad pillar *praśasti* celebrating the king's accomplishments. This paper was not aimed to delve into that puzzling issue. The present mintidiomatic analysis, combined with results from earlier and ongoing work, does

offer some arguments worthy of consideration when visualising the actual manufacture of the Aśvamedha coins for Samudragupta's grand event.

Their mintidiomatic profile suggests that all Aśvamedha coins were struck at the same mint (named Mint A in my 1994a study);

Next to Mint A, another mint appears to have started striking gold coins in the time of Samudragupta. I referred to it as Mint B in my previous studies;

On the basis of a strong, shared mint idiom we may attribute coins of Sceptre (Raven 1994a: figs c28–32), King-and-Queen, Lyrist and Kāca Types (Raven 2010: fig. 31) to Mint B, but no Aśvamedha coins sharing their features have surfaced so far.

The relative chronology of coin manufacture at Mints A and B is as yet undetermined, but on the basis of type distribution, fabric and numerical coin output, I expect Mint A to have taken the lead. Its mint masters may have been ordered to strike Aśvamedha coins before Mint B became operative.

Alternatively, the manufacture of these coins was deliberately restricted to a mint nearest to where the sacrifice was to be held and thus copious spending of gold coins to be carried out. We expect that the horse sacrifice was celebrated in the vicinity of Samudragupta's capital, but even that location could not yet be identified with any certainty.⁷⁰ If not the location of the capital, possibly then ongoing mintidiomatic analysis linked to provenance detailing and hoard evidence may in due course help us track in which region Mint A operated. Unfortunately the sketchy documentation on most Gupta coin hoards, including those from eastern Uttar Pradesh, has so far resisted offering sufficient clues.

As for time, the Aśvamedha coins have close links to only two out of the four groups of coins struck for Samudragupta that I presently attribute to Mint A. This allows for the conjecture, however provisional, that their issue was restricted not only regionally, but also time wise. This of course fits the commonly held view

that the *Aśvamedha* design was created for the occasion of Samudragupta's Horse sacrifice. More importantly, the limitation to issues now making up Groups 3 and 4 and to Mint A could indicate that the use of the *Aśvamedha* design was restricted (by royal command or otherwise) to the period around the actual event. This conclusion can only be tentative, as we still need to improve our theories on which circumstances at Mint A could have led to the emergence of four different—and yet related—groups among its coins. However, this scenario would explain why Mint B did not take up the striking of *Aśvamedha* coins.

Concluding Remarks

Although assumedly issued from one mint, the *Aśvamedha* coins show a rich mintidiomatic diversity, which I have outlined into—perhaps exhausting—detail. It is in this detailing that we can recognise the undeniable links to specific other coins struck for Samudragupta and see the clear differences from coins struck either elsewhere or at another point in time. This pattern will enable us to make the *Aśvamedha* coins important determinants in any further study of mint chronology and design history for the early decades of Gupta coin manufacture.

Notes

1. The attribution of the coins to Candragupta II, as suggested by M.K. Dhavalikar in 1958, never found favour. My analysis also ties the *Aśvamedha* coins unequivocally in with other coins manufactured in the time of Samudragupta.

2. The four priests performing the rituals were to receive a thousand gold pieces each as a priestly fee. During the year in which the *aśvamedha* horse was allowed to roam about, two *vinā* players were to sing the victories and piety of the king on a daily basis. This also involved a salary of a hundred coins (metal not specified; Altekar 1954: lviii).

3. The DINARA coin database that I have built over the last several years enables us to qualify and quantify the corpus of documented Gupta gold coins. New data are added frequently. The help of collectors and coin traders is necessary to achieve this, and is highly appreciated. Unfortunately the coins in numerous private collections stay largely beyond our vision.

4. As for absolute amounts, while so far some 7,000 coins have been documented by me, a future die-study might help us estimate the approximate number of Gupta gold coins that may have circulated at a given moment in time.

5. Steven Lindquist is a specialist in Sanskrit religious literature at the Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

6. The expression 'commemorative medals' seems to have entered the discussions on Gupta coins from an early period onwards, in particular regarding the coins of King-and-Queen and *Aśvamedha* Types.

Vincent Smith set the tone by arguing that 'These pieces agree in weight with the ordinary coins of the period, but in other respects rather resemble medals, and the conjecture is allowable that they were issued as a special type of coin for distribution among the Bráhmans engaged in the ritual of the sacrifice' (1884: 128–9). A.S. Altekar still referred to the *Aśvamedha* coins both as 'commemorative medals' (1954: xlvi–xlvi) and as 'coins', but in his 1957 handbook he avoids the term 'medals', while still stressing the commemorative nature of their issue (p. 62).

7. No precise figures on the distribution of *Aśvamedha* coins (or any other type for that matter) in hoards can be given for the simple fact that most hoards are broken up and coins go 'underground' again before any documenting can take place. This situation has persisted right from the discovery of the Kalighat hoard back in 1783. A recent hoard of gold coins found in West Bengal, reportedly with at least 1500 pieces, was immediately dispersed along unofficial channels, mostly towards the trade market. Only a small group of coins was confiscated by police authorities. In 1957, Altekar offered a 'brief account' of then known hoards, but the whereabouts of the coins mentioned remained mostly unspecified. Hoards with *Aśvamedha* coins listed in chronological order by Altekar are: in 1885—Tanda (UP)—'some' *Aśvamedha* coins, together with coins of four other types of Samudragupta; in 1888—Raebareli district (UP)—two *Aśvamedha* coins, together with several, slightly later, Gupta coins and an 'Indo-Scythian coin'; in 1913–1914—Kasarva (UP)—

three Aśvamedha coins, together with coins of three other types of Samudragupta; in 1946—Bayana (Rajasthan)—20 Aśvamedha coins, together with coins of all other types of Samudragupta (next to coins of Candragupta II, Kumāragupta I and Skandagupta).

8. Kiran Kumar Thaplyal (2012) reappraises the evidence relating to the Aśvamedha of Samudragupta and refers to relevant primary and secondary sources.

9. Mahesh Kalra illustrated a coin of this strike in his recent article dedicated to Aśvamedha coins (2012: 16, top right).

10. An oft-discussed inscription recording a large number of such sacrifices was engraved by the order of the Sātavāhana Queen Nāgamnikā in a cave at the top of the Nanaghat pass leading from the Konkan to the town of Junnar. The Prakrit text was first published with a translation by Georg Bühler in 1883. It lists a number of sacrifices and the fees that these entailed. In the legible portions are mentioned the Agnyādheya ritual, the Anāmbhanīya, the Puṇḍarīka, the Rājasūya, two Aśvamedhas, a Bhagāla-Ḍaśarātra sacrifice, a Gargātīrātra, several Gavāmayanāṃ sacrifices, Aṅgirasāmayanāṃ sacrifices, the Śatātīrātra, Aṅgirasatīrātra, Chandomapavamānātrīrātra and Trayodaśarātra. The fees mentioned vary depending on the scale and status of the sacrifice. They include cows (in impressive, symbolically laden numbers, such as 1001, 1002 or even 10,001), an elephant, a horse with silver trappings, a silver water pot, a cart for conveying a mountain of grains, garments, and thousands of *kārṣāpaṇas* (very likely the copper coins of the Sātavāhanas). Among the goods making up the fee for the second Aśvamedha are a horse, one silver ornament, 12 golden ornaments, 14,000 *kārṣāpaṇas* and one elephant. See Bühler 1883: 59–64; Sircar 1965: 192–7.

11. Gonda 1960: 168. ‘Only a king is allowed to carry it out, and then only a victorious king whose power is unchallenged. It is the highest ritual manifestation of royal dignity, guarantying the fulfilment of all wishes, atoning all sins. One who carries it out, makes Prajāpati and himself complete.’ Many more scholars have discussed the connections between king, horse and Prajāpati.

12. A.B. Keith offers a concise description of the rituals before and during the sacrifice (1925, reprint 1976: 343–7). On Vedic concepts surrounding rituals that involve the killing of animals, and gradual changes in the attitude towards such rituals, see e.g. Jan Houben 1999.

13. The Allahabad pillar inscription is the most

often quoted primary source on Gupta history, so details and discussions can be easily traced in secondary literature. One of the more recent works, providing elaborate referencing to others, is Thaplyal 2012.

14. Numerous scholars have discussed the meaning of the epithet *cirotsannāśvamedhāharttā* for Samudragupta, given to him posthumously. See e.g. Agrawal 1989: 126–7 and Thaplyal 2012 for many more references.

15. D.C. Sircar (1957) offers a useful survey of inscriptional references to kings performing the Aśvamedha ritual. He explains that in some cases the horse-sacrifice is mentioned in the records of the performer, while in others it is referred to in the inscriptions of his descendants. ‘There is sometimes reference to the celebration of the Aśvamedha by a king in the legends on his coins but not in any of the inscriptions of himself or his descendants’ (1957: 93). Prashant Kulkarni also offers a list of references (2004). V.S. Pathak (1960) discusses inscriptional references to Vedic rituals, including the Aśvamedha, focusing mostly on the second half of the first millennium CE. His sources suggest a ‘general decline in congregational sacrifices’ in that period.

16. Mirashi 1963: 7–8, Poona copper plates of Prabhāvatī Guptā: *anekāśvamedhayājī licchavido(au)hitro mahādevyāṃ kumāradevyāmutṭṭanno mahārājādhirājāsrisamudraguptasya...*, ‘his excellent son (was) the Mahārājādhirāja, the illustrious Samudragupta, (who was) born of the Mahādevī Kumāradevī; (who was) the daughter’s son of the Licchhavi (chief); (and) who performed several horse-sacrifices’.

17. Cp. Jagan Nath 1953 and Bhandarkar 1981: 37–8 for various interpretations of this title, often discussed for the intended meaning of ‘*utsanna*’ as either ‘in abeyance’ or ‘extensive’.

18. Smith had not mentioned the support in his first descriptions (1889: 65), but calls it a lotus in his Indian Museum catalogue (1906: 101).

19. Allan 1914a: ‘She is standing to left on what on some coins appears to be the conventional lotus on which Lakṣmī stands in other types. It is clear from Pl. V.11,13 and 14, and I.M.C., Pl. XV.3, that it is not a lotus, and what seems to be petals on Pl. 9–12 is really a sort of chain, the exact significance of which cannot be determined’ (lxxvii–lxxviii).

20. Radha Kumud Mookerji compiled the various phrases and titles from inscriptions and coins, apparently convinced that these truly reflected ‘the many-sided genius and character of Samudragupta’.

He arranged them under headers such as 'ruler', 'conqueror', 'warrior', 'philanthropist', 'superman' and 'poet' (1942).

21. So the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* tells us, cp. Raven 1994b: 45–6.

22. Pal interpreted the piece of cloth in the left hand as 'a simplified version of the beribboned diadem, garland, or wreath frequently held by deities on Kushan and earlier coins' (1988: 198). A fillet or ribbon is indeed one of Śrī's common attributes on Gupta coins, but never in such an inconspicuous manner. If the engravers would have intended the goddess to hold a diadem fillet, they surely would have shown her as more explicitly extending it towards the king.

23. The lady's halo might be seen as proof of her divine status, but in most designs Gupta kings and queens are given a halo as well. In some designs neither goddess nor queen has a halo. There are also designs in which the king has been provided with a halo, whereas the queen goes without. At times even Śrī, unequivocally identifiable by her attributes and lotus seat, appears without a halo.

24. Alf Hildebeitel discussed the positioning and shape of the sacrificial *yūpa*, elaborating on the studies by Madeleine Biardeau and earlier scholars. He indicates that the post is to be placed on the eastern margin of the trapezoidal 'great altar' (the *mahāvedī*) that is required for a Vedic animal sacrifice. Thus, the *uttaravedī* altar is nearest to the *yūpa*. Biardeau has commented that the post, half in and half out of the sacrificial compound, mediates between the animal, which remains tied to the outer side of the post, the gods and men, who move back and forth ritually and spiritually, between both worlds (Hildebeitel 1991: 118).

25. From the *Rāmāyaṇa* 1,14, after the translation by Hari Prasad Shastri (1952–9).

26. Jitendra Nath Banerjea's article on votive and memorial columns is concise, factual and still very useful (1937).

27. Heinrich Lüders (1961: 125–6) provides the Sanskrit text with a translation and references to the various publications by Vogel on these *yūpas*. Vogel's findings received follow-up by various scholars, including one of his former PhD students, the epigraphist Bahadur Chand Chhabra (1947).

28. Hildebeitel observes: 'The only serious incongruities with textual prescriptions concern the top rings (*caṣālas*) and the exaggerated 'tenon' portions that extend up through them. One top ring is square,

the other eight-sided, as is the norm. But neither has the mortarlike (or female waist-like) inward curvature towards the middle that characterises the *caṣāla* in the ritual texts. The streamlined stone *caṣālas* are set at an angle that would allow them ... to fit over the apparently exaggerated curve and width of the tenons, which are likewise stylised in ways that do not conform to Vedic prototypes; rather than being rounded, they continue the octagonal shape of the shaft, and the cut-off top faces away horizontally rather than upward' (Hildebeitel 1991: 121).

29. The *yūpas* erected at Badva-Kotah were published by A.S. Altekar in *Epigraphia Indica* 23 (for 1935, published in 1937, pp. 42–52) and 24 (for 1936, published in 1938, pp. 251–3).

30. The drawing in the report shows a tapering, octagonal column with a squared base. It is now approximately 7 m high, while the original top broke away obliquely in a ragged manner. Apparently Carlleyle saw a metal spike rising out of the centre of the fractured top, which is not visible in the drawing. Most probably then the top once reproduced the *yūpa*'s curved shape. The *caṣāla* rings, if reproduced, would also have broken away.

31. In the proofing stage of this article I came across a study by Vibha Upadhyaya dealing with inscribed *yūpas*. It looks more closely at the sacrifices and their religious contexts that can be conferred from the engraved texts (2005).

32. Thaplyal (2012: 366) indicates that it was acquired by the British Museum since, but Prof. Michael Willis of the British Museum informed me that this information appears incorrect (personal communication, July 2016).

33. Rapson mistakenly read a *visarga*, D.R. Bhandarkar gives the exact reading (1981: 41).

34. Richard Salomon offers a clear detail of the Shell script on the horse's back (1987: fig. 2).

35. Smith published a photograph showing the 'curious' horse sculpture in the open air at the entrance of the museum (1893: illustration opposite p. 77).

36. I give the rendering as reproduced by Salomon 1987: 313.

37. And from his Lyrist coins. I strongly believe that both types have a link to the *Aśvamedha yajña*, as has been suggested earlier. Their close mintidiomatic links require further study. For the mintidiomatic setting of Kumāragupta's *Aśvamedha* coins, see Raven (forthcoming).

38. Das adds a rubbing, but I found it hard to

recognise the name of Candragupta in the worn letters.

39. Mail communication with Julia Shaw, 21.04.2016.

40. Allan 1914a: no. 60; BM online collections, search COC307904.

41. Edward Thomas read ‘*Prithivi Vijayatya*’ in the obverse legend, which he linked to a similar style of eulogy in the Allahabad pillar inscription (1855: 498). He gives the legible part of the legend on the coin as *navajhamadhaḥ rājadhīrāja prithivi vijayatya pr*. He refers to a second Aśvamedha coin in the collection of Major Bush, with a different obverse legend, too worn to be deciphered (1855: 499). In his *Records of the Gupta Dynasties* (1876) he offers a restored reading *navajamadhaḥ rājadhīrāja prithivi jyatya* (p. 22) read on a coin in the BM, which is actually acc. no. 1847,1201.361 = Allan 1914a: no. 59, fig. 5.13 = Collections online, search COC307903.

42. Vincent Smith on the Aśvamedha coins: 1884: 128–9, 175–7; 1889: 9, 65–6; 1893: 19, 65–7; 1906: 101.

43. Like Vincent Smith, Vogel calls the Aśvamedha coins medals commemorating the horse sacrifice (1918: 200–1).

44. ‘Marginal legend imperfect; it includes the title ... *rājadhīrāja*, followed by ... *prithivīm jītya* or *jayati*, a boast of having conquered the earth’ [ER the Devanāgarī gives *prithivīm*, the transcript *prithivīm*].

45. An *aṅgula* is a traditional unit of measurement corresponding to the width of a phalanx of the patron, such as the king financing a sacrifice, the construction of a temple or the carving of a statue.

46. Already in the Kuṣāṇa period, standing images of Jinas made at Mathura can be seen positioned on an exact same stand, e.g. a Pārśvanātha image in the State Museum Lucknow, acc. no. J.143; photograph by van Lohuizen-de Leeuw in the Kern collection, University Library, Leiden, no. 9134. Udayagiri offers familiar, Gupta period examples. Many more could be easily listed.

47. S.V. Sohoni (1970) suggested that the entire scene on the coins represents the ceremonial bath of the horse and the application of decorations by the ladies of the court, including the chief queen. As this phase of the ritual precedes the actual sacrifice at the stake, the platform shown on the coins would then be the bathing platform, away from the sacrificial grounds. The prominent presence of the *yūpa* in the composition, however, renders Sohoni’s interpretation untenable.

48. Altekar 1957: 63 identifies the platform as the *vedi* or altar. However, the horse is supposed to stand on the ‘mundane’ side of the *yūpa*, so just outside the sacrificial space. Vedic texts prescribe that the area around the *yūpa* is to be flattened and made smooth by beating. By the early historic period the use of bricks to create smooth and flat surfaces (either in the form of a raised platform or low flooring) had gained popularity. See e.g. Upinder Singh’s description of the use of bricks next to other materials in early shrines raised in the area of Mathura, such as at Sonkh and Mat (2004).

49. The coin was discussed by Pratapaditya Pal in his article on the device of the chowrie-bearing goddess on these Aśvamedha coins (1988). He identifies her as Rājyalakṣmī.

50. See e.g. Asher and Spink 1987. The goddess Vasudhārā is given a *cāmara* in certain early Mathura images. The attribute is usually described as a ‘lotus parasol’. See e.g. Mathura Museum image no. GMM 1411, from Bajna (online digital special collections of Leiden University, Kern collection, P-037047).

51. Rapson read the name on the sealing as ‘Sūryamitra’. Alexander Cunningham corresponded with him on reading ‘Āryamitra’ instead. BM acc. no. 1892,1103.93, once part of Cunningham’s collection, acquired via A.W. Franks and then bequeathed to the museum. The letter of Cunningham to Rapson, dated 7 June 1893 is kept in the Department of Coins and Medals. I want to thank dr. Daniela de Simone for providing me with these data. See for an enlargement <http://collection.britishmuseum.org/resource?uri=http://collection.britishmuseum.org/id/object/RR12219>.

52. Thaplyal places this ruler in Kauśāmbi.

53. Rapson, overlooking the most obvious parallel, compared the ‘staff’ in front of the lion with the *garuḍadhvaja* on Gupta gold coins ‘similarly bound with ribbons’ (1901: 104).

54. Ajay Mitra Shastri (1997) interpreted this alternative phrase as a delayed correction of the verse, replacing an inappropriate ‘protecting’ by a more suitable ‘conquering’. He even thought that several decennia could have lain between the issues with these two different legends. However, the close similarity between strikes carrying either of these two legends makes a time difference highly improbable. I feel we would read too much of history into a poetic rephrasing.

55. In view of the complexity of reading and interpreting Brāhmī legends on Gupta coins, I am

glad that Arlo Griffiths has gracefully offered his help in rereading the coin legends for the handbook that is under preparation.

56. Rapson (1891) documented three *Aśvamedha* coins in his list of Bodleian Gupta coins (nos 694–696). No. 696 is on display in the gallery; coin no. 694 has the legend as version 1; the coin documented as no. 695 was not in the tray (during visits in 1988 and 2015).

57. *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 8.18.23 (ed. by Eggerling, reprint 1963).

58. This reflects the classification as of 1.4.2016. Interestingly enough, not every coin type recurs in each of these groups. The Sceptre Type, predictably, has the widest spread. It occurs in each of the seven or eight mint groups. The King-and-Queen Type is found in six groups. The *Kāca* and *Lyrist* Types have a medium spread over three groups. The Archer, *Aśvamedha* and Battle-axe Types appear in two groups, while the Tiger-slayer Type is part of only one group.

59. The full-length figure is depicted in Williams 1976: fig. 7 and Shaw 2007: fig. 161.

60. Raven 1994a: M2 form of *ma*. Cp. Altekar 1954: cxxix and Upasak 1961: 63–6. Especially Upasak's study is very helpful for recognising particular shapes of the *Brāhmī* letters on Gupta coins.

61. Pal 1988 offers very clear enlargements of this coin (figs 1–2).

62. It has been suggested that the image is that of a pregnant queen. The outward signs of pregnancy, however, do not fit the Indian portraiture of royalty and the divine, which aims at idealism rather than realism.

63. Andrew Oddy, while reporting on specific gravity methodology developed at the British Museum, pointed out that 'The British Museum computer program prints out two gold contents for each coin analysed, one assuming that only gold and silver are present and the second assuming that only gold and copper are present. These give a range within which the true gold content will lie, although, for most caes,

it will lie within about 3% of the gold-silver figure' (1998: 151). In my 1994a thesis I have given similar ranges for Gupta gold coins.

64. I have used a conversion table offered by Oddy and Hughes (1972: 81). They also discuss the effect of copper on the readings (p. 76). See also Oddy 1998 and Bracey and Oddy 2010.

65. One might easily devise a classification system that would divide the coins differently over Groups 3 and 4. The whole process remains a fairly subjective exercise, while taking small steps towards in-depth understanding.

66. Mail message with image received from Mr Ken Kengatharan on 14 June 2008.

67. Personal communication with Dr Pankaj Tandon (28.10.2010). I wish to thank him for providing me with excellent images and data on weights and sizes of his impressive collection of Gupta coins.

68. I am grateful to Robert Bracey of the British Museum for sending me photographs of the Chand coins and for Dr Chris Howgego and Dr Shailendra Bhandare to make a close study of the coins in the Ashmolean Museum possible; to Mr Vikram Chand, Mr Deepak Dhaadha, Mr Sanjeev Kumar and Dhananjaya for allowing me to study the images and metadata of their wonderful collections of Gupta coins. I also extend my thanks to other collectors and traders in India that shared images and info on their coins, *Aśvamedha* or otherwise!

69. A close comparison for the reverse may for instance be found in Bayana Hoard no. 158, Altekar 1954: fig. 4.5; now in the Patna Museum, acc. no. 18583.

70. K.K. Thaplyal's survey (2012: 33–9) illustrates how divided scholarly opinions have been. Eastern Uttar Pradesh (as e.g. argued by Fred Virkus 2004: 69 and many before him) and ancient Magadha, now in Bihar, have most often been put forward, while we have been urged to rethink the concept of 'capital' versus an organisational structure involving multiple regional centres.

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