

New Evidence on the Date of Candragupta III

Pankaj Tandon¹

There is a growing consensus that there was a Gupta king who has come to be called Candragupta III. There is a long history of discussion around such a king,² but, in his presently accepted incarnation, he was first identified by P.L. Gupta in a 1981 paper³ as the issuer of heavy-weight Archer type coins with the name *candra* on the obverse, the epithet *śrī vikrama* on the reverse, and an object between the king's face and the Garuḍa banner. Gupta mentioned three such objects: a crescent, a wheel or *cakra*, and an unusual symbol which he dubbed an architectural symbol. In a 2013 paper,⁴ I argued that Gupta's architectural symbol was in fact a fire altar, introduced some Archer type coins that appeared to be issues of the same ruler that featured a sun symbol in front of the king's face, and published the first two known Horseman type coins of this king. I also included a coin with a *śrīvatsa* symbol, which had been posted by Sanjeev Kumar on his website.

Despite the consensus on the *existence* of this king, there is no consensus on his *date*. P.L. Gupta placed him after Budhagupta and before Vainyagupta.⁵ Gupta was convinced that Candragupta III was the Candra mentioned in the *mañjuśrī-mūlakalpa* as ruling after Deva (who Gupta identified as Budhagupta) and before Dvadāśa (who seemed obviously to be Vainyagupta Dvadāśāditya), hence his dating of the king. Nisar Ahmed, working primarily with the weights of the coins, divided them into two groups; he assigned the crescent and *cakra* coins to a Candragupta III ruling between Kumāragupta I and Skandagupta, and the altar coins to a Candragupta IV who reigned after Skandagupta.⁶ Ellen Raven, basing her conclusion on a careful analysis of the stylistic aspects of the coins, argued that they were all issued by a king ruling between Kumāragupta I and Skandagupta.⁷ In my paper, I supported the idea that Candragupta III commenced issuing coins immediately after the death of Kumāragupta I and before Skandagupta did so, but suggested that the two kings then issued coins *in parallel*. The reason for this conclusion was that Candragupta III issued coins as light as 7.87 gm, lighter than any coin ever issued by Skandagupta, but then issued coins as heavy as 9.19 gm. Since Skandagupta's early issues weighed around 8.5 gm, it seemed clear to me that he must have

¹ Boston University. I wish to thank Ellen Raven for extremely helpful discussions and for sharing images from the DINARA database. The idea for this paper arose during a visit to the British Museum, made possible by a Neil Kreitman grant from the Royal Numismatic Society. The paper was written while I was a Fulbright-Nehru Scholar at the Indian Institute of Research in Numismatic Studies. The support of the RNS, Fulbright and IIRNS is gratefully acknowledged.

² I reviewed this history in Pankaj Tandon: "Horseman Coins of Candragupta III," *The Numismatic Chronicle*, 173 (2013), pp. 171-185.

³ Parmeshwari Lal Gupta: "Heavy Weight Coins of Candragupta," *Numismatic Digest*, Vol. V, Part II, December 1981, pp. 36-43.

⁴ Tandon: *op. cit.*

⁵ See Parmeshwari Lal Gupta and Sarojini Srivastava: *Gupta Gold Coins in Bhārat Kalā Bhavan*, Vārāṇasī: Bhārat Kalā Bhavan, 1981, coin 218.

⁶ Nisar Ahmad: "Chandragupta III," *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, Vol. 46-47, 1984, pp. 91-95.

⁷ Ellen Raven: "Candragupta III: Tracing the Coins of a Gupta King," *South Asian Archaeology*, 1989, pp. 441-448.

commenced the issuance of coins before Candragupta III had issued the heaviest weight coins that he did.

The purpose of this brief paper is to present evidence that has not yet been brought to bear on this question and that proves conclusively that Candragupta III commenced his reign before Skandagupta, but casts doubt on the argument for a parallel issuance of coins by the two kings. Thus I would modify my position to that of Raven's, although not for the reasons one might expect. The evidence is in the form of three coins issued by Skandagupta that feature objects between the king's face and the Garuḍa banner. These coins must certainly have been issued after the Candragupta III issues but they also reveal that perhaps not all the coins thought to have been issued by Candragupta III were in fact his.

Brief Review of the Coinage of Candragupta III

Before presenting the evidence, I need to recall the structure of Candragupta III's Archer type coinage, which I presented in my earlier paper. As readers will recall, most Archer type coins feature a symbol (or *tamgha*) in the reverse left field. In my paper, I pointed out that all coins accepted to be those of Candragupta III feature one or the other of only two reverse symbols, which I called the "circle symbol" and the "diamond symbol." The two symbols are illustrated in Figure 1. Gupta and Srivastava suggested that these symbols may represent mint marks,⁸ and I find this suggestion very attractive. I will therefore use it as a working hypothesis in what follows, although the argument does not hinge on this assumption at all.



Figure 1: The two *tamghas* or reverse symbols seen on Candragupta III's coins⁹

All of what are normally considered Candragupta III's coins can then be organized into two sequences, one for each reverse symbol, with the chronological order of the coins signaled by their weights. The coins with a sun symbol on the obverse would have been first, as they were the lightest, the crescent symbol coins would have followed, the *cakra* symbol coins would have come third and the last coins would have been the altar coins, which were the heaviest coins of the series. Table 1 summarizes what I reported about the average weights of the different varieties and Figure 2 illustrates the varieties with one of each type.








⁸ Gupta and Srivastava, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁹ This was Figure 4 in my earlier paper.

Coin variety	# of coins	Average weight	Min Weight	Max weight
Sun	5	8.02	7.87	8.22
Crescent	16	8.30	7.87	8.56
Cakra	18	8.42	7.83	8.61
Altar	10	8.73	8.56	9.19
Śrīvatsa	1	9.1	9.1	9.1

Source: Adapted from Tandon, *op. cit.*, Table 1

Table 1: Weight pattern of different Archer varieties of Candragupta III

	Circle Symbol	Diamond Symbol
Sun variety		
Crescent variety		
Cakra variety		
Altar variety		None known

Śrīvatsa variety	None known		
------------------	------------	--	---

Figure 2: Chronological Sequence of Candragupta III Archer Coins¹⁰

Thus Candragupta III appears to have issued his Archer type coins in four phases. The coins with the sun symbol are lighter than any coins Skandagupta ever produced, while falling well within the range of Kumāragupta I's coinage. These therefore must have been issued immediately after the death of Kumāragupta. They prove that Candragupta III did not rule after Budhagupta as contended by P.L. Gupta; the earliest (and indeed all the) coins are too light. The later varieties were then issued over time, with the average weights going up, and the Altar variety being the last of the sequence. One curious aspect of the series is that all the known Altar coins carry the circle symbol only; none are known with the diamond symbol. The unique coin with the *śrīvatsa* carries the diamond symbol, and I had suggested in my paper that this was the counterpart to the altar symbol at the diamond "mint."

One other aspect of the coinage that I wish to point out at this stage is that the altar coins seem to be somewhat different stylistically from the previous coins in the sequence. Although there are several aspects of style that could be highlighted, the most prominent is perhaps the rendition of the king's *dhoti* and lower garment. On all the previous coins in the series, the king wears a tunic like garment with prominent "tails" that look like the outline of a skirt on either side of the king's legs. The altar coins, however, show no such tails. Instead, the king is shown with a bare torso and wears a dhoti that looks almost like a pair of shorts with prominent horizontal lines representing the folds.

The Skandagupta Coins and their Implications

The evidence on the date of Candragupta III that I wish to present in this paper consists of three Archer type coins of Skandagupta that feature objects between the king's face and the Garuḍa banner. Two of the coins, illustrated in Figure 3, were previously known but their significance has not been fully appreciated. The third coin, illustrated in Figure 4, is published here for the first time.

The first coin in Figure 3 is now in the collection of the British Museum and was published by Allan in his BM Catalogue, when it was in the collection of the Hon. Mr. Burn.¹¹ It

¹⁰ This is a modified version of Appendix Table 2 of my 2013 paper. Circle symbol coins (in order): Tandon collection 586.06, Tandon collection 586.05, British Museum, photo, courtesy Joe Cribb, and Tandon collection 182.17; Diamond symbol coins: Tandon collection 597.1, Shivlee collection, photo, courtesy Sanjeev Kumar, Tandon collection 570, and Shivlee collection, photo, courtesy Sanjeev Kumar.

¹¹ John Allan: *A Catalogue of the Indian Coins in the British Museum: Coins of the Gupta Dynasties and of Sasanka, King of Gauda*, London: British Museum, 1914, p. 118 and plate XIX. 15.

features an altar that is somewhat modified from the form seen in the earlier coins, but is recognizably the same symbol. Allan reported its weight as 141.5 grains (= 9.17 gm).



Figure 3: Two Coins of Skandagupta with Altar symbols¹²

The second coin in Figure 3 is from the Singhi collection (number 138) and was published by Raven in her paper on Candragupta III.¹³ At the time, Raven thought it was a coin of Kumāragupta I, and presented it as such. However, she has subsequently realized that it is a coin of Skandagupta, and she has placed it in her forthcoming catalogue in the same mint-idiomatic group as the other two coins presented here.¹⁴ Although we have only poor quality photographs to work with, it seems that the legend in the obverse right field is *skanda*, not *kumāra*. In any case, even if it were *kumāra*, we would have to treat it as a coin of Kumāragupta II, since it would not fit into any of the known sequences of the coins of Kumāragupta I, and therefore the following discussion would still be equally valid. Unfortunately, we do not know the weight of the coin. It is worth pointing out that, whether the coin is of Skandagupta or Kumāragupta II, it is the first recorded coin of that ruler to depict the king holding the bow with the bowstring out, a format common for Kumāragupta I. Because of its mint idiom, though, Raven firmly assigns it to Skandagupta, and I agree with her attribution.



Figure 4: Coin of Skandagupta with *śrīvatsa* symbol¹⁵

¹² First coin, British Museum, photo, courtesy Joe Cribb; second coin, Singhi collection, no. 138, photo, courtesy Indian Institute for Research in Numismatic Studies.

¹³ Raven, *op. cit.*, Figure 53.10, p. 446.

¹⁴ I am very grateful to Ellen for sharing her realization with me and permitting me to publish it.

¹⁵ In trade, October 2012; photo, courtesy Prashant Kulkarni.

The third coin, illustrated in Figure 4, is a coin of Skandagupta that features a *śrīvatsa* in place of the altar, with the *śrīvatsa* looking like a modified (and solid) version of the altar in the British Museum coin. The coin weighs 9.16 gm, and also features the circle symbol, as do the other two coins of Skandagupta presented here. The *śrīvatsa* coin proves conclusively that the reverses of the other two coins feature Lakṣmī scattering coins, which she is clearly doing on this coin and appears to be doing on the others, only they weren't quite clear enough for us to be absolutely sure.

The significance of these three coins cannot be overstated. They prove conclusively that Skandagupta followed Candragupta III, as there would be no other way to explain his use of the altar or *śrīvatsa* symbol in the obverse left field. Further, with the two known weights of 9.16 gm and 9.17 gm, they demonstrate that Skandagupta's issue of these coins comes clearly after the earlier issues, all but one of which weigh between 8.56 and 8.73 gm; the one exception is a heavier one that still weighs a similar 9.19 gm.

But the coins have another important thing to tell us. Note that all three Skandagupta coins show the king wearing a tunic with long tails. The re-emergence of this feature suggests that these coins do not "follow" the earlier altar coins in the usual sense. In particular, they call into question whether those previous altar coins are in fact issues of Candragupta III at all. If there was a stylistic change in the coins of Candragupta III, this could be explained by the replacement of a die cutter at the mint. But we would then expect that change to persist when the mint moved on to making coins for the successor king. Here, however, we have a break and then a restoration in the design. Is it possible that the circle "mint" fell out of the hands of Candragupta III and was then recovered subsequently by Skandagupta? In the interim, is it conceivable that coins were issued at the "mint" by those who had displaced Candragupta III?

The coins may therefore be telling us something significant about Gupta history. We know that Skandagupta fought several major wars, and there were certainly ups and downs in this series of conflicts. The Bhītari pillar inscription of Skandagupta says, in part:

(L. 6) Skandagupta ...

(L. 12) when (his) father had attained the skies, conquered (his) enemies by the strength of (his) arm, and established again the ruined fortunes of (his) lineage; and ...

(L. 14) with his own armies, established (again) (his) lineage that had been made to totter ...¹⁶

These lines, and similar ones in Skandagupta's Junāgaḍh rock inscription, have been the subject of much speculation in regards to the question of who were the enemies that Skandagupta mentions. Suggestions have included the Hūṇas,¹⁷ his maternal uncle from the Nāga dynasty,¹⁸ and Ghaṭotkacagupta, his paternal uncle.¹⁹ In fact, the inscription itself tells us in line 15 that

¹⁶ John F. Fleet: *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors*, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Vol. III, Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publications Branch, 1888, pp. 54-56.

¹⁷ Allan, *op. cit.*, p. xlvi.

¹⁸ D.R. Bhandarkar, B. Chhabra and G.S. Ghai (eds): *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors*, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Vol. III, New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1981, p. 80.

¹⁹ Parmeshwari Lal Gupta: *The Imperial Guptas*, Vārānaśī: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 1974, p. 332; Hans Bakker: "A Theatre of Broken Dreams: Vidiśā in the Days of Gupta Hegemony," Chapter 9 in Martin Brandtner and Shishir

Skandagupta “joined in close conflict with the Hūṇas.” It appears that there were at least three major episodes of war with which Skandagupta had to contend. In line 10, the inscription mentions the Puṣyamitras;²⁰ as this piece of information is conveyed before the inscription mentions the death of his father, we must assume that this first episode took place during the reign of Kumāragupta I. The second episode is mentioned in line 12, which occurs after his father’s death. Most authors have assumed that at this point Skandagupta was king and that he possibly was fighting rebels from within the Empire. But it is possible that he was not king at this point and I will discuss this in detail in the next paragraph. The third episode is described in line 14, when Skandagupta is fighting “with his *own* armies” (emphasis added); it seems that at this point he finally is the king.

Consider now the evidence of the Altar coins and the coins of Candragupta III in light of this inscription. Many have argued that Skandagupta was an illegitimate son of Kumāragupta I.²¹ Previous authors however believe that a war of succession immediately broke out, Ghatotkacagupta being the adversary, perhaps with Vākatakā help, and that Skandagupta quickly consolidated his grip on power. But it seems strange, if a war of succession broke out immediately, that Skandagupta’s adversary would be his uncle rather than his half-brother Purugupta, who surely was the legitimate heir. Indeed, it is odd that, in the literature, historians tend to phrase their descriptions by saying that Skandagupta faced challengers, implying that he was (by right) the king. But he was not the king by right, and, if there was a challenger, it would surely be he. The king would be the one who inherited the throne by right, and the challenger would be the one who did not have the right to the throne. I have argued that in fact Skandagupta probably did not rule for quite some time after the death of his father, that in fact someone else inherited the throne and that Skandagupta came to it only later, perhaps eight years later.²² That is the time gap between the last known date of Kumāragupta I and the first known date of Skandagupta. The coin evidence supports this. The first coins issued after the death of Kumāragupta were the coins of Candragupta III; he must have been the legitimate heir. Since the only legitimate son of Kumāragupta that we know of was Purugupta, I suspect Candragupta III and Purugupta were one and the same person,²³ but this identity is not crucial to the argument. Candragupta III / Purugupta then ruled for a period of time, as evidenced by his issuance of at least three coin series, featuring the sun, crescent and *cakra* symbols, with the average weight rising from around 8 gm to 8.55 gm. While Candragupta III ruled as the legitimate emperor, Skandagupta may have continued as the Commander of the army. If then a major city (the city where the circle mint was located) was lost to the enemy (as evidenced by the cessation of the production of Gupta coins there and their replacement by imitative coins of the enemy), and then Skandagupta re-took it (as evidenced by his issues of Altar coins from the same mint some time later), line 12 of the inscription would make perfect sense.

Kumar Panda (eds.): *Interrogating History: Essays for Hermann Kulke*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2006; and Michael Willis: “Later Gupta History: Inscriptions, Coins and Historical Ideology,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 15, No. 2 (July 2005), p. 137.

²⁰ At least the Fleet edition of the inscription does; the Bhandarkar edition leaves this enemy un-named.

²¹ For example, P.L. Gupta, *The Imperial Guptas*, *op. cit.*, pp. 332-333 and Hans Bakker, *op. cit.*

²² Pankaj Tandon: “The Succession after Kumāragupta I,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 24, No. 4, October 2014, pp. 557-572. Others, such as P.L. Gupta and Hans Bakker, have also noted that Skandagupta was illegitimate, but have assumed that this led to a contested succession right away

²³ I have made the detailed case for this identity in Pankaj Tandon: “The Coins of Purugupta,” *Numismatic Digest*, Vol. 38, 2014, pp. 88-117.

The scenario this gives rise to is as follows. Skandagupta is an illegitimate son, but he shows military acumen and so his father puts him in charge of the army. He effectively protects the empire from an enemy we can call the Puṣyamitras. When Kumāragupta dies, the heir apparent inherits the throne. I believe this was Purugupta, but, as I said, that is not crucial to the argument. The heir takes the name Candragupta after his illustrious grandfather (much like his grandfather did himself) and starts issuing coins in that name and with the epithet *śrī vikrama* on the reverse. His half-brother Skandagupta continues in his military role. A few years later, after Candragupta III has issued at least three series of coins, and the weight of the Gupta *dināra* has risen to around 8.55 gm, the empire comes under attack again, and this time the enemy makes substantial gains. Perhaps Skandagupta is busy further west and the king leads the defense of the heartland. But he loses and perhaps gets killed in the process. Skandagupta at this point seizes (or is given?) the throne, and starts to issue coins in his name, with a weight of approximately 8.5 gm. The enemy (the Hūṇas perhaps?) occupy a major city and start issuing coins in the Gupta idiom from the city mint, although they remove the Vaiṣṇava symbol (the *cakra*) on the coins and replace it with a symbol more meaningful to their Persian-inspired religion: the fire altar. Their coins are also somewhat cruder, as their die-cutters are not quite as skilled as the Gupta celators. Skandagupta eventually mounts a counter-attack and, after a reasonably long period of time (judging by the somewhat lengthy sequence of Altar coins) succeeds in pushing out the occupiers. In other words, he restores the ruined fortunes of his family. He re-takes the city with its mint and issues some coins in his name from there.

This scenario is of course speculative, but it accounts for several things we know about Gupta history and about the coins:

- It explains why the coins at the “circle mint” change their style to a cruder one before reverting to the more classic Gupta style later.
- It creates a scenario where Candragupta III issues coins up to the *cakra* variety (most weights in the range of 8.4 to 8.55 gm) and then Skandagupta starts issuing his initial coins to the 132 grain (= 8.55 gm) standard.
- Thus there is an orderly transition from the coins of Candragupta III to Skandagupta, obviating the need to posit a parallel issuance of coinage that assigning the (heavier) altar coins to Candragupta III would require.
- We now have an account in which the co-existence of Purugupta and Skandagupta can be explained. Since there was no rivalry between the two half-brothers, there is no surprise that Purugupta’s descendants succeeded to the Gupta throne, especially if Skandagupta died childless, as many suspect.
- With Purugupta / Candragupta III reigning *before* Skandagupta, the logjam of kings that most authors run into when trying to fit all the known kings into a very short period *after* Skandagupta’s reign gets considerably relieved.

It could be asked why Skandagupta would revert to the Gupta style but leave in place a fire altar as the prominent symbol if that was a symbol meaningful to the invaders. There is no foolproof answer to this question. While the fire altar might have been more meaningful to the invaders, it would not lack meaning to the Guptas either, and there are Gupta coins that feature the king sacrificing at a fire altar. In any case, it appears that the use of the fire altar may have been short-lived and it is possible that the *śrīvatsa* may have been the replacement. The *śrīvatsa*

coin in Figure 4 shows evidence of some alteration around the symbol; perhaps the die originally carried a fire altar and then was re-cut to change the symbol from the altar to the *śrīvatsa*.

Some may point to the silver coins in the name of Skandagupta that feature a fire altar and ask why Skandagupta would issue those coins for the extended period that is implied by the number of coins extant. Actually, I believe the silver coins strengthen the argument made here. Following a suggestion made privately to me by Shailendra Bhandare, I have long believed that the silver coins featuring the fire altar were not issued by Skandagupta but are posthumous issues made by others. I presented the case for this in an earlier paper.²⁴ The main argument is that, while Skandagupta's Garuḍa coins had a silver content of between 81 and 75%, the coins featuring the fire altar have a silver content that varies between 22% and almost zero!²⁵ Thus, in all likelihood, the altar type coins were issued later, perhaps by the Hūṇas. We know from the Eran boar inscription and the Sanjeli copper plate of year 3 that Toramāṇa ruled in the Mālwa area for several years. And the Risthal inscription tells us of Mihirakula's presence also in that area some years later. We further know that Toramāṇa issued coins imitating the *madhyadeśa* type of the Guptas,²⁶ so it stands to reason that he would have issued coins imitative of the "western" type also. The imitation Skandagupta silvers featuring the fire altar would have been logical types for him and Mihirakula to have issued.

The only real barrier I see to the scenario I have presented above is the existence of the (so far) unique *śrīvatsa* coin of Candragupta III, which is the last coin in Figure 2 above. If Candragupta III died at the end of the *cakra* phase of his coinage, where the maximum coin weight was around 8.6 gm, what is he doing issuing a coin of 9.1 gm from his diamond "mint"? There are three possible explanations for this coin:

- Candragupta III did not die, but retreated to a safer place in the empire. Skandagupta seized power in part of the empire, probably the west, and started issuing coins. The rarity of the *śrīvatsa* variety suggests that this explanation is not true, but it is not impossible. With the empire under duress, funds in the heartland may have been short, with resources being diverted to the army, which Skandagupta led. Thus Candragupta III may not have issued much, if any, coinage until Skandagupta had in fact defeated the enemy and re-taken possession of the circle "mint."
- The *śrīvatsa* coin is not genuine. This does not seem to be a very good explanation, as all aspects of the coin seem to indicate that it is authentic.
- The *śrīvatsa* coin was issued not by Candragupta III but by the unidentified enemy who issued the altar coins. Maybe the enemy seized the diamond "mint" late and did not issue many coins from there, accounting for the coin's rarity. Or they issued this coin after they lost control of the circle mint to Skandagupta. There are aspects of this coin that make even this explanation problematic, but it is the one I like the best of the three. First, the *śrīvatsa* coin is in the classic Gupta style, with the king wearing the tunic with the tails and the body modelling being more naturalistic. This would indicate that a Gupta die

²⁴ See Pankaj Tandon: "The Coins of Purugupta," *op. cit.*, pp. 91-93.

²⁵ This was the finding in K.K. Maheshwari and Biswajeet Rath: "Fire Altar type coins of Skandagupta: Towards a Typological and Chronological Definition," in K.K. Maheshwari and Biswajeet Rath (eds.): *Numismatic Panorama (Essays in honour of Late Sh. S.M. Shukla)*, New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, p. 186.

²⁶ Examples can be seen in Pankaj Tandon: "The Identity of Prakāśāditya," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 25, No. 4, October 2015, p. 661.

cutter was used to make this coin. Second, the coin would be expected to have an altar rather than the Hindu *śrīvatsa* symbol. I can only say that, since the form of the *śrīvatsa* is quite similar in shape to the fire altar, perhaps the die cutter misunderstood what his masters wanted and carved that instead of the altar.

None of these explanations is particularly satisfying, and this coin remains problematic in my mind. But the alternatives are even less satisfying. Attributing the coins to the enemies of the Guptas helps so many other things to fall into place.

Who might this enemy of the Guptas have been and where might the episode described in the scenario above have taken place? The obvious candidate for the enemy is the Hūṇas. Although there are other proposals for whom Skandagupta may have faced after defeating the Puṣyamitras,²⁷ such as the Nāgas and the Vākatakās, most authors do subscribe to the view that it was the Hūṇas who attacked subsequently. They are specifically mentioned in the Bhītari pillar inscription, and the Junāgaḍh rock inscription refers to the *mlecchas*, a term hardly suitable for the Nāgas or the Vākatakās. The use of the fire altar as a symbol on their imitative coins strengthens this identification.

As for the place, some have taken the reference to the river Ganges in the Bhītari pillar inscription to indicate that the battle took place on the banks of that river, possibly even at Bhītari, which is near Varanasi, because of its possible importance to the Guptas.²⁸ In a recent paper, I have argued that the Hūṇas issued Archer style gold coins probably in the Varanasi area later in the fifth century or early in the sixth,²⁹ which makes this location all the more plausible for the earlier conflict with Candragupta III and Skandagupta as well. A battle deep in the Gupta heartland seems to agree more with the phrases that Skandagupta uses, such as “the ruined fortunes of (his) lineage; and ... (his) lineage that had been made to totter” than would a battle somewhere on the periphery of the empire. It also makes more sense that, since Candragupta III apparently used only two (the “circle” and the “diamond”), the mints would be located deep within the empire.

Conclusion

In this brief paper, I have brought to notice three Archer type coins issued by Skandagupta that contain objects in front of the king’s face, a feature previously thought to be characteristic only of the coins of Candragupta III. The coins seem to confirm that Skandagupta reigned after Candragupta III. But they also seem to indicate that a series of coins previously assigned to Candragupta III may have instead been issued by a rival dynasty, most probably the Hūṇas. While this resolves many puzzling aspects of Gupta history and coinage, it also raises new questions. We must await more information in the form of coins or inscriptions before we can feel confident of our understanding of this poorly understood period of Gupta history.

²⁷ The literature is ably reviewed by Kiran Kumar Thaplyal: *The Imperial Guptas: A Political History*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2012, pp. 258-263.

²⁸ See the discussion in Thaplyal, *ibid.*, p. 260.

²⁹ Pankaj Tandon: “Attribution of the Nameless Coins of the Archer Type,” unpublished draft, May 2016.