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## The Succession after Kumāragupta I

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Most dynastic lists of the Gupta kings state that Kumāragupta I was succeeded by Skandagupta. However, it is widely accepted that Skandagupta did not accede to the throne peacefully. Nor is it certain that the succession was immediate, since there is a gap between the known dates of Kumāragupta's and Skandagupta's reigns. This paper is concerned with the events following the death of Kumāragupta, using numismatic evidence as the primary source, and inscriptional and other epigraphic evidence as further support. Some of the numismatic evidence is new, and even the evidence that is not new has so far received little attention in the literature on the succession after Kumāragupta. Questions are raised about one particular theory that is presently enjoying some currency, that Skandagupta was challenged primarily by his uncle Ghaṭotkacagupta. Some other possible scenarios for the political events in the period after the death of Kumāragupta I will then be proposed and analyzed.

Most authors agree that Skandagupta was not the rightful heir to the throne. While he does announce himself on his inscriptions as the son of Kumāragupta I, his mother is not identified by name in any known text or inscription,<sup>2</sup> suggesting that he was, at best, the son of a minor queen of Kumāragupta, or more probably the son of a woman who was not a queen at all. P.L. Gupta concludes that Skandagupta's mother "in all probability had an extremely low rank, not unlikely of a mistress, concubine or a slave-girl in the royal harem."<sup>3</sup> Bakker goes so far as to call him "a bastard son of Kumāragupta" and "a boy from the harem,"<sup>4</sup> and he may well be correct in doing so. In any event, what seems quite clear is that he was not entitled to the throne by virtue of his birth.

Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that he had waged, on his father's behalf, a successful defense of the Gupta empire against enemies called the Puṣyamitras by Fleet,<sup>5</sup> but who are left nameless in the Bhandarkar edition of the Bhitri inscription.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of their name, these enemies are mentioned in the inscription before any

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<sup>2</sup> This is in sharp contrast to the case of other Gupta kings, most of whose mothers are named in the genealogical lists.

<sup>3</sup> Parmeshwari Lal Gupta: *The Imperial Guptas*, Vārānasī: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 1974, p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Bakker: "A Theatre of Broken Dreams: Vidiśā in the Days of Gupta Hegemony," Chapter 9 in Martin Brandtner and Shishir Kumar Panda (eds.): *Interrogating History: Essays for Hermann Kulke*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2006, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> J. 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. 53-54.

<sup>6</sup> 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. 315.

mention of Kumāragupta's death. It is therefore likely that Skandagupta waged this war against them during his father's lifetime. As a result, he may well have earned his father's favor and so his father could plausibly have appointed him as his successor. However, the inscriptional evidence suggests otherwise. Sometimes, what is not spoken is just as significant as what is. In no inscription does Skandagupta make any claim of having his father's special favor or having come to the throne at his father's direction, even though it clearly would have been to his advantage to publicize this fact if it were true. Instead, the Bhitri pillar inscription, for example, says that "when (his) father had attained the skies, [he] conquered (his) enemies by the strength of (his) arm, and established again the ruined fortunes of (his) lineage."<sup>7</sup> Further, "with his own armies, [he] established (again) (his) lineage that had been made to totter." Similarly, in his Junāgaḍh rock inscription, he is called:

"Skandagupta, of great glory, the abode of kingly qualities, who, when (*his*) father by his own power had attained the position of being a friend of the gods, bowed down his enemies and made subject to himself the (*whole*) earth, bounded by the waters of the four oceans, (*and*) full of thriving countries round the borders of it; whose fame, moreover, even (*his*) enemies, in the countries of the Mlêchchhas . . . . . having (*their*) pride broken down to the very root, announce with the words- "verily the victory has been achieved by him;"-(*and*) whom the goddess of fortune and splendour of her own accord selected as her husband ..."<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, if Allan's interpretation of the Bihār pillar inscription is correct, Skandagupta mentions that Candragupta II "was accepted by him," that is, chosen by his father (presumably over his older brother Rāmagupta) "as the best fitted to succeed him."<sup>9</sup> And the Allahabad inscription of Samudragupta could have provided a perfect precedent in its description of how the chosen heir

"was bidden by (*his*) father,--who, exclaiming "Verily (*he is*) worthy," embraced (*him*) with the hairs of (*his*) body standing erect (*through pleasure*) (*and thus*) indicative of (*his*) sentiments, and scanned (*him*) with an eye turning round and round in affection, (*and*) laden with tears (*of joy*), (*and*) perceptive of (*his noble*) nature,-[to govern of a surety] the whole world"<sup>10</sup>

for him to claim having been "accepted" or "bidden" by his own father. But he made no such claim.

We see from these inscriptions that Skandagupta does not mention anything about being his father's chosen heir, even though he was not the rightful one. Rather, he talks about the strength of his arm and the power of his armies, allowing him to restore a tottering lineage. He specifically mentions that, when his father "had attained the skies"

<sup>7</sup> J. 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.

<sup>8</sup> Fleet, *ibid.*, pp. 61-65, consulted online on February 15, 2011, at <http://www.sdstate.edu/projectsouthasia/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&PageID=853536>.

<sup>9</sup> Allan, *op.cit.*, pp. xxxiv-xxxv.

<sup>10</sup> Fleet, *ibid.*, pp. 10-17, consulted online on September 21, 2011, at <http://www.sdstate.edu/projectsouthasia/upload/Allahabad-Posthumous.pdf>

and “had attained the position of being a friend of the gods,” he (Skandagupta) “conquered (his) enemies” and “bowed down his enemies and made subject to himself the (*whole*) earth, bounded by the waters of the four oceans.” Indeed, he points out specifically that it was not his father but the “goddess of fortune” who “selected [him] as her husband.” Thus the inscriptional evidence, both from what it contains and from what it does not contain, points clearly to the scenario in which Skandagupta came to power by the force of his arm and armies, ostensibly to rescue a tottering empire and lineage from destruction.

This account of Skandagupta’s ascension to the throne raises some questions that have not yet been fully answered. First, who were the enemies that Skandagupta defeated in order to take power? Second, who was the rightful heir to the throne and what was his fate? Third, to be more specific, what was the role of Purugupta, the one known son of Kumāragupta and his principal queen Anantadevī, in these events? This paper attempts to examine these questions, particularly in light of numismatic evidence, some of which is new, that has so far received insufficient attention in the discussion.

### **Ghaṭotkacagupta**

P.L. Gupta thought that Skandagupta’s principal rival must have been his uncle Ghaṭotkacagupta. We know of Ghaṭotkacagupta from a seal from Vaiśālī and from the Tumain inscription.<sup>11</sup> We are able to conclude from the latter that he was Kumāragupta’s viceroy in Malwa. From the inscription, it is not clear whether Ghaṭotkacagupta was Kumāragupta’s son or brother, but we now know from the Kevala Narasiṃha Temple inscription from Ramtek that he was the son of Candragupta and hence Kumāragupta’s brother.<sup>12</sup> Gupta had concluded that Ghaṭotkacagupta must have been Skandagupta’s rival based on the existence of two gold coins of the Archer type carrying the name *Ghaṭo* under the king’s arm, assumed to be issues of this prince. One coin is in the collection of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and was published by Allan and also by Altekar.<sup>13</sup> The second coin was in the collection of Ajit Ghosh and was published by him.<sup>14</sup> These coins were attributed to Ghaṭotkacagupta because of the similarity between his name and the name *Ghaṭo* on the coins, and Gupta concluded that their issue suggested that Ghaṭotkaca must have had imperial ambitions.

Recently, this view of the rivalry between Skandagupta and Ghaṭotkacagupta has been further espoused by Bakker who, without citing Gupta’s work, also came to the same conclusion, based on the same coins and a further piece of evidence: a new interpretation of a passage from the Bhitṛī pillar inscription of Skandagupta.<sup>15</sup> This inscription states that Skandagupta

<sup>11</sup> See the discussion in Gupta: *The Imperial Guptas*, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> Bakker, “Theatre,” *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>13</sup> 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. 149 (Plate XXIV, 3); also published in Altekar, A.S. *The Coinage of the Gupta Empire*, Varanasi: The Numismatic Society of India, Banaras Hindu University, 1957, p. 264 (Plate XIV, 16).

<sup>14</sup> Ajit Ghosh: “Discovery of a second gold coin of Ghatotkachagupta,” *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, Vol. XXII, 1960, pp. 260-261.

<sup>15</sup> Hans T. Bakker: *The Vākāṭakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology*, Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997, pp. 26-27.

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 then, crying "the victory has been achieved," betook himself to (*his*) mother, whose eyes were full of tears from joy, just as Kṛṣṇa, when he had slain (*his*) enemies, betook himself to (*his mother*) Devakī;<sup>16</sup>

Bakker sees in the reference to Kṛṣṇa slaying his enemies a parallel to Skandagupta slaying his; in particular, since Kṛṣṇa went to his mother after slaying his uncle Kāṁsa, Bakker sees in Skandagupta's inscription the suggestion that he went to his mother after slaying *his* uncle, Ghaṭotkacagupta. This theory has also been adopted by Willis, who goes on to suggest that Ghaṭotkaca may have ruled as long as eight years, that he "probably held the upper hand against Skandagupta for some time"<sup>17</sup> and that "[d]rawing parallels between current events and the life-stories of the gods was something that became increasingly prevalent in the Gupta period."<sup>18</sup>

Although this theory is attractive and seems on the surface to have some plausibility, it has some problems. The most important one is that the coins that establish Ghaṭotkacagupta's credentials as a true imperial rival to Skandagupta are unlikely to have been issued around the time of Kumāragupta's death; they are too heavy and large. The St. Petersburg coin weighs 9.16 g (141.2 grains) and the Ghosh coin 8.78 g (135.5 grains),<sup>19</sup> indicating that both coins were issued some considerable time after the death of Kumāragupta. Kumāragupta's coinage was issued to several weight standards,<sup>20</sup> which are thought to be chronological markers. The standards used were 121, 124, 127 and 130 grains (equaling 7.84, 8.04, 8.23 and 8.42 g respectively), with coins of the 130 grain standard being quite rare and probably the last in the series. Upon his accession, Skandagupta in turn began issuing coins to a 132 grain (8.55 g) standard, modifying this subsequently to a 144 grain (9.33 g) *suvarṇa* standard later in his reign.<sup>21</sup>

The St. Petersburg coin of Ghaṭotkacagupta, at 9.16 g, is unquestionably of the *suvarṇa* standard and the Ghosh coin, while somewhat lighter, is heavier than all of Kumāragupta's and Skandagupta's pre-*suvarṇa* coins and its reported size (0.9" or 23 mm) clearly indicates that it also belonged to the heavy weight large format standard introduced by Skandagupta later in his reign. The coins of Kumāragupta I and the early, low weight coins of Skandagupta are typically 19 to 20 mm in diameter, while the later *suvarṇa*-standard coins of Skandagupta are larger. Therefore, the *Ghaṭo* coins were almost certainly issued some length of time after the accession of Skandagupta, either late in his reign, contemporaneous with his late *suvarṇa*-standard issues, or after his death, and it therefore seems unlikely that they were issued by a rival claimant to the throne at

<sup>16</sup> Fleet, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-56, accessed online March 10, 2011 at <http://www.sdstate.edu/projectsouthasia/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&PageID=853457>.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Willis: *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 38. I am indebted to Dr. Willis for bringing this book to my attention.

<sup>19</sup> Altekar, A.S. *The Coinage of the Gupta Empire*, Varanasi: The Numismatic Society of India, Banaras Hindu University, 1957, p. 354 and Ajit Ghosh: "Discovery of a second gold coin of Ghatotkacagupta," *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, Vol. XXII, 1960, p. 260.

<sup>20</sup> See the discussion in Altekar, *Coinage, op. cit.*, Chapter VIII.

<sup>21</sup> Altekar, *ibid.*, Chapter X.

the time of his accession. This point was argued long ago by Allan, who, speaking of the *Ghaṭo* coin in the St. Petersburg collection and the Ghaṭotkacagupta of the Vaiśālī seal, had concluded that “The coin in question cannot be attributed to this Ghaṭotkacagupta, for it is certainly later in date.”<sup>22</sup>

Given that the *Ghaṭo* coins were issued some time after the accession of Skandagupta, it is natural to wonder who issued them. As Bakker has stated, Ghaṭotkacagupta was probably about the same age as Skandagupta, since the Kevala Narasiṃha Temple inscription suggests that he was born after his sister Prabhāvatī was given in marriage to the Vākāṭaka king Rudrasena II. Thus he could well have been alive after Skandagupta’s death and could have issued these coins then. On the other hand, Bakker has interpreted verse 17 of the inscription as indicating that Ghaṭotkacagupta died around the time of Skandagupta’s accession. The verse states:

... he of desirable appearance [...] by/with Indra, [...] (her) brother brought the proud woman [...], back to his own residence with force.<sup>23</sup>

Bakker has interpreted the one “of desirable appearance” to be Ghaṭotkacagupta, who, presumably, has joined Indra in the sky. The brother is Pravarasena, the Vākāṭaka king and brother of Ghaṭotkaca’s wife (“the proud woman”) Atibhāvatī, and he brings his sister home after her widowhood. If this interpretation is correct, then the *Ghaṭo* coins were probably not issues of the Ghaṭotkaca of the Tumain and Ramtek inscriptions, but of some later prince, since Bakker’s interpretation implies that Ghaṭotkacagupta was not alive late in Skandagupta’s reign when those coins must have been issued. That is one possibility. However, another possibility is that the *Ghaṭo* coins were in fact issues of Ghaṭotkacagupta, the brother of Kumāragupta. This would imply that he survived at least late into Skandagupta’s reign, in which case the coins call into question Bakker’s interpretation, based on a highly damaged and fragmentary source, of verse 17 of the Kevala Narasiṃha Temple inscription.

Another factor that argues against identifying Ghaṭotkacagupta as Skandagupta’s principal rival is that the Bhitri pillar inscription suggests that Skandagupta’s principal rival was in fact outside the Gupta royal family.<sup>24</sup> The inscription repeatedly mentions how Skandagupta “prepared himself to restore the fallen fortunes of (*his*) family,” and then that he “established again the ruined fortunes of (*his*) lineage” and further that he “established (*again*) (*his*) lineage that had been made to totter.” Even if we focus on line 12, in which his father’s death is mentioned, the inscription reads: “when (*his*) father had attained the skies, [*he*] conquered (*his*) enemies by the strength of (*his*) arm, and established again the ruined fortunes of (*his*) lineage.” Would Ghaṭotkaca’s accession have been considered a ruination of the fortunes of the lineage? It hardly seems likely. Ghaṭotkaca

<sup>22</sup> Allan, *op. cit.*, p. liv. Admittedly, Allan’s argument was that the coin was later than Ghaṭotkacagupta “could possibly be.” This is an indication of Allan’s view of the fact that the coin was probably issued late in the numismatic sequence. Now that we know that Ghaṭotkacagupta was about the same age as Skandagupta, we need to revise our estimate of the possibility that he might have issued the coins. However, the date of the coin issues must remain late on numismatic grounds.

<sup>23</sup> Bakker, “Theatre,” *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>24</sup> This point was argued by Allan; see his discussion in Allan, *op. cit.*, pp. xlv-xlvii. In this section, Allan also suggests an explanation for why Skandagupta came to his mother to report on his victories: his father had just died.

was of royal blood, and a brother replacing a brother could scarcely be considered that unusual; witness Candragupta II's deposition of his brother Rāmagupta just two generations prior to Skandagupta's time. The evidence of the inscription, therefore, points more strongly to an outside enemy. Two candidates are mentioned specifically in the inscription itself: the Puṣyamitras (if we accept Fleet's translation) and the Hūṇas. The Puṣyamitras (or whoever the enemies of "great power and wealth" of line 10 were) are mentioned in the inscription before any mention of Kumāragupta's passing has been made and it is therefore likely that Skandagupta's conflict with them took place during his father's lifetime. The Hūṇas are mentioned later and therefore seem like better candidates, although they are not mentioned directly in the context of the wars Skandagupta fought upon his father's death. However, in the Junāgaḍh rock inscription, Skandagupta does identify his enemies at the time of his accession as being "in the countries of the mlecchas," which appellation is surely appropriate for the Hūṇas and not for any member of the Gupta royal family. So, while the identification is not certain, the evidence seems to point much more strongly to the Hūṇas as the threat to the Gupta lineage rather than the opposition of Ghaṭotkacagupta.

There is a further possible problem with Bakker's proposal. It should be noted that, while Kaṃsa was Kṛṣṇa's *maternal* uncle, Ghaṭotkacagupta was Skandagupta's *paternal* uncle.<sup>25</sup> In using the English word "uncle" to draw a parallel, we somehow imply a similarity of relationship that well may not have occurred to the Gupta mind. Thus it is not obvious that the parallel Bakker sees here is a valid one. The interpretation offered for this line of the inscription by Allan, that Skandagupta went to his mother because his father was no longer alive, may in fact be extended to connect the situation to the story of Kṛṣṇa and Kaṃsa. Specifically, Kṛṣṇa went to Devakī after killing Kaṃsa in order to set her free. Similarly, if Skandagupta's mother was a slave girl in the imperial harem, the young prince may well have gone to her after his father's death in order to free her from slavery. Thus it is possible to offer an alternative interpretation of the mention of Skandagupta going to his mother.

In summary, it seems highly unlikely that Ghaṭotkacagupta was Skandagupta's principal rival in his path to power. The key pieces of evidence cited by Gupta and Bakker, the *Ghaṭo* coins, were in all probability issued after the reign of Skandagupta and therefore fail to serve as proof of a rival to Skandagupta. In any case, the rarity of the *Ghaṭo* coins does not argue strongly for these to be the issues of the rightful heir to the Gupta throne who possibly vied for power against Skandagupta for several years. Bakker's interpretation of the Bhitṛī and Ramtek inscriptions as indicating that Ghaṭotkaca resisted Skandagupta's accession and consequently met his death at the hands of his nephew may well be correct; indeed it is quite plausible and attractive. But it is highly speculative and cannot serve as the principal evidence for the proposition either. There is further evidence for this conclusion in the numismatic record, as we shall see in the next section. Finally, the evidence of the Bhitṛī inscription seems to point to a foreign power being the principal threat that Skandagupta faced down and the Junāgaḍh rock inscription appears to identify the principal enemy as a mleccha tribe or community.

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<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Sivasankara Menon for raising this point.

### “Candragupta III”

There is a growing awareness that the numismatic sequence does not go smoothly from Kumāragupta I to Skandagupta and then on to his successors. Rather, there is a series of gold coins that seems to have been issued between the coins of those two kings. Many of these coins had at one time been attributed to Candragupta II but they have now come to be attributed to a ruler called Candragupta III. It is believed that they were issued either in the interim between the coin issues of Kumāragupta I and Skandagupta, or contemporaneously with the coins of Skandagupta. First properly identified as a distinct group by P.L. Gupta,<sup>26</sup> and subsequently studied by Nisar Ahmad<sup>27</sup> and Ellen Raven,<sup>28</sup> the coins are mostly of the Archer type, although two coins of the Horseman type have also recently been identified.<sup>29</sup> The Archer types are similar to the coins of Candragupta II in that they carry the legend *candra* under the king’s arm on the obverse and the title *śrī vikrama* on the reverse. This is why they were initially thought to be coins of Candragupta II. However, they are distinguished from the coins of Candragupta II by their weight and style. The primary distinguishing feature of the coins is their weight, which, for most coins, lies in between the weights of the coins of Kumāragupta I and the later, heavy-weight coins of Skandagupta. Thus they are considerably heavier than the coins of Candragupta II, which were lighter even than the coins of Kumāragupta I.<sup>30</sup> There are also elements of style that point to the intermediate dating of these coins, argued quite convincingly by Raven in her paper. One particular aspect of this difference is the presence of an object on the obverse of the coin, located between the face of the king and the figure of Garuda atop the standard at left.<sup>31</sup> So far, five such objects have been identified in the literature: a sun, a crescent, a *cakra* or wheel, a fire altar, and a *śrīvatsa*. Figure 1 illustrates each of these varieties, and also a Horseman type, which differs from Candragupta II’s coins by its weight (8.40 g), by the addition of the honorific *śrī* on the reverse legend and the feature of a peacock in the reverse design.<sup>32</sup>

In a companion paper to this one,<sup>33</sup> I have studied these coins in detail and have attempted to extend Raven’s already convincing argument that the coins were issued largely between the time of Kumāragupta’s death and Skandagupta’s introduction of the

<sup>26</sup> Parmeshwari Lal Gupta: “Heavy Weight Coins of Chandragupta,” *Numismatic Digest*, Vol. V, Part II, December 1981, pp. 36-43.

<sup>27</sup> Nisar Ahmad: “Chandragupta III,” *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, Vol. 46-47, 1984, pp. 91-95.

<sup>28</sup> Ellen Raven: “Candragupta III: Tracing the Coins of a Gupta King,” *South Asian Archaeology*, 1989, pp. 441-448. P.L. Gupta also studied them again in a later paper: “Chandragupta III and his Coins,” *Numismatic Digest*, Vol. 16, 1992, pp. 66-79.

<sup>29</sup> Pankaj Tandon: “Horseman Coins of Candragupta III,” unpublished paper, Delhi, September 2011. The Archer coins with sun and *śrīvatsa* were also discussed for the first time in this paper, which is forthcoming in an as yet untitled book on Gupta coins edited by Ellen Raven and Ashwini Agarwal.

<sup>30</sup> The coins of each of the Gupta kings vary considerably in their weights, such that, for example, the heaviest Candragupta II dinar is heavier than the lightest Kumāragupta I dinar. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that, generally speaking, the coins of Kumāragupta I were heavier than those of Candragupta II, and, in the same sense, the coins of “Candragupta III” are heavier than those of Kumāragupta I.

<sup>31</sup> There are a few coins of the Archer type that are of low enough weight to have been issues of Candragupta II. More careful analysis needs to be done to decide which king issued those coins.

<sup>32</sup> Coin (e) in Figure 1 is from the Shivlee Collection and is reproduced here by kind permission of Sanjeev Kumar. The other five coins are from my own personal collection and were originally published in Tandon, *op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> Tandon, *op. cit.*

heavy weight *suvarṇa* standard to his coinage. A few of the Candragupta III coins in fact seem to belong to this heavy standard and therefore seem to overlap the period after this standard was introduced. Thus the coins cover a relatively long period that starts with the death of Kumāragupta I and extends to the period after Skandagupta's introduction of the *suvarṇa* standard. In my paper, I gather details on all previously published coins of this series, adding some more that belong to my own personal collection and others not previously recorded.<sup>34</sup> I was able to list a total of 53 coins in the series. Thus the known coins of Candragupta III outnumber the *Ghaṭo* coins by a substantial margin and become a far more important piece of evidence on the question of succession after Kumāragupta than the latter two coins, even if one argued that they may have somehow been issued at that time.



(a) Archer type with Sun



(b) Archer type with Crescent



(c) Archer type with *Cakra*



(d) Archer type with Altar



(e) Archer type with *Śrīvatsa*



(f) Horseman type

**Figure 1: Examples of the six known coin varieties assigned to Candragupta III**

<sup>34</sup> In this exercise, I had considerable help from Ellen Raven, who has been assembling data on these coins in an invaluable database, the DINARA database, that she shared freely with me.

These coins suggest that Kumāragupta I was indeed succeeded by someone other than Skandagupta, presumably a son of Kumāragupta by one of his principal queens, who seemed to continue to issue coins even after the accession of Skandagupta. Who might this “Candragupta III” have been? Raven concludes her paper on this king by suggesting that he was “another son of Kumāragupta I.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Ahmad concludes his paper with a similar phrase, suggesting that he “might have been a son of Kumāragupta I and the elder brother of Skandagupta.”<sup>36</sup> Both these authors implicitly place Candragupta III chronologically in between Kumāragupta I and Skandagupta.<sup>37</sup> If he were so, he could have been the successor to Kumāragupta I who was then succeeded by Skandagupta or he might have been a rival claimant to the throne eventually attained by Skandagupta. The evidence of the coins suggests that Candragupta III was not replaced by Skandagupta but rather that they seemed to reign at least somewhat in parallel. We need to understand how this might have been and what this might imply for the identity of Candragupta III.

### Purugupta

Besides Skandagupta, the only son of Kumāragupta about whom we have specific information is Purugupta, and it is therefore natural to ask if Candragupta III and Purugupta might have been the same person. We know of the existence of Purugupta from the Bhitri seal of Kumāragupta II, in which Purugupta, son of Kumāragupta I and the *mahādevī* Anantadevī is named as a *mahārājadhirāja*, the grandfather of Kumāragupta II and the father of Narasimhagupta.<sup>38</sup> Thus Purugupta is clearly identified as an emperor and the sire of later emperors. Indeed, none of the later Gupta kings can be identified as descendants of Skandagupta, while three (Narasimhagupta, Kumāragupta II and Budhagupta) have been identified as descendants of Purugupta. Further, Purugupta was the son of Kumāragupta I with his principal queen, *mahādevī* Anantadevī. It therefore seems fairly reasonable to ask whether it was Purugupta who was the rightful heir to the Gupta throne, the role assigned in the previous section to Candragupta III.

There are divergent views about Purugupta’s history. Allan thought Purugupta did rule, but that his reign was after that of Skandagupta. Altekar was somewhat agnostic on the issue, allowing for three possibilities (that he ruled before Skandagupta, after him, or not at all), but seems to end up leaning towards the notion that he did rule briefly after Skandagupta. P.L. Gupta had concluded that “we have no coin or seal to suggest that Puru Gupta was ever a ruler,”<sup>39</sup> and therefore disregarded him and chose Ghaṭotkacagupta as his candidate for “chief rival.” I have earlier argued that the evidence that Ghaṭotkacagupta was Skandagupta’s rival is weak, but Gupta’s assertion that Purugupta never ruled, as we do not have any coin or seal of his, must still be addressed. It is not clear how true this view could be, because the Bhitri seal of Kumāragupta II does assign the title *mahārājadhirāja* to Purugupta. Even though the seal is not of Purugupta himself, it seems that the title of *mahārājadhirāja* would not have been used to describe

<sup>35</sup> Raven, “Candragupta III,” *op. cit.* p. 447.

<sup>36</sup> Ahmad, “Chandragupta III,” *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>37</sup> P.L. Gupta asserted that he was a king who ruled sometime between Budhagupta and Vainyagupta, but we could perhaps discard this idea in light of the clear conclusion that the coins were issued immediately after the reign of Kumāragupta I.

<sup>38</sup> The seal has recently been translated anew and extensively studied in Michael Willis: “Later Gupta History,” *op. cit.*, pp. 131-150.

<sup>39</sup> Gupta, *The Imperial Guptas*, *op. cit.*, p. 349.

him if he had never actually sat on the throne. And as for the lack of coins, it is natural to ask if the Candragupta III coins might actually have been issued by Purugupta.

Gupta argues that not only did Purugupta never sit on the throne, but that he never even contested it. His argument is that had “Skanda Gupta succeeded to throne after a struggle with Puru Gupta, as a shrewd statesman, he would have never allowed him or his descendants to survive; who, if alive, could not but be a constant danger to his life and throne.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Willis has asserted that “Skandagupta made peace with his legitimate half-brother Purugupta and ... this side of the family continued to flourish in the Gupta heartland.”<sup>41</sup> He cites as evidence the fact that “Purugupta’s descendants eventually found their way to the throne.” Thus both these authors speculate that Purugupta and Skandagupta coexisted with one another; Gupta believing this possible because Purugupta never contested the throne and Willis asserting that they made peace with one another. It is important to note, however, that the fact that they coexisted does not automatically imply that Purugupta never ruled; for this conclusion, Gupta depends upon the fact that there are no known coins or seals of Purugupta.

The question of whether or not we can assign any coins to Purugupta has been the subject of much attention and debate in the literature. Allan had assigned certain coins to him.<sup>42</sup> The coins were of the Archer type and carried the legend *śrī vikrama* on the reverse. One coin, from the collection of Dr. Hoey, has a name under the king’s arm which Allan read as *pura*, while others, from the British Museum’s collection, have no name on the obverse. These latter coins Allan assigned to Purugupta because of their apparent similarity to the Hoey coin. However, it was subsequently shown conclusively that the name Allan had read as *pura* is in fact *budha*, and the Hoey coin is an issue of Budhagupta.<sup>43</sup> Some have clung to the notion that the nameless coins should still be attributed to Purugupta, but clearly there is no real basis for doing so. They may as well be coins of Budhagupta, or of other late rulers.

Another suggestion, made originally by Hoernle in 1889, was that the king known as Prakāśāditya on his coins was none other than Purugupta. He based this idea on the simple logic that we did not know of any other coins of Purugupta, and we didn’t know who Prakāśāditya was or when he ruled, so perhaps the two were one and the same. This is not a particularly compelling argument. After Allan’s “discovery” of coins of Purugupta, Hoernle abandoned this position, but the view was taken up again by Altekar after Allan’s “Purugupta” coins turned out to be those of Budhagupta. He pointed out that the find spots of Prakāśāditya’s coins indicated that he did not rule in eastern India, hence he did not belong to the later Guptas who were confined to that region. In particular, in the Bharsar hoard, the latest coins are of Skandagupta and Prakāśāditya, suggesting that Prakāśāditya ruled around the time of Skandagupta. This and other evidence, seemed to Altekar to “point to the identification of Prakāśāditya with Purugupta,” although he stressed that this “proposed identification ... is only a probable theory; it may be

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<sup>40</sup> Gupta, *The Imperial Guptas*, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

<sup>41</sup> Willis, *op. cit.*, p. 137

<sup>42</sup> Allan, *op. cit.*, pp 134-135.

<sup>43</sup> This discussion is reviewed and summarized by Altekar in his corpus *Coinage of the Gupta Empire*, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

confirmed or disproved by the discovery of fresh evidence.”<sup>44</sup> Why Purugupta’s coins should be found only in the west Altekar did not explain.

Against this view, Robert Göbl has argued that Prakāśāditya was not a Gupta ruler at all, but a Hūṇa.<sup>45</sup> Certainly the execution of the Prakāśāditya coins is relatively crude and below the normal artistic standard of official Gupta issues of the time of Kumāragupta I. Thus the notion that these may not have been issues of an official Gupta mint seems quite plausible. As noted earlier, the coins of Prakāśāditya are found only in the west, a fact that is consistent with a Hūṇa origin. Further, it was the practice of the Hūṇa kings to issue coins in the local idiom wherever they ruled, particularly at their first incursions. Thus we would expect them to issue coins imitating Gupta coins in the western parts of the empire where they gained some territory. Further still, the subject of the Prakāśāditya coins falls somewhat outside the pattern of Gupta issues. Although there are coins of Kumāragupta depicting the king hunting while mounted on a horse, the animal he was hunting was a rhinoceros. All the lion-slayer coins of the Guptas show the king slaying a lion while standing on the ground. In contrast, the Prakāśāditya coins show a mounted king slaying a lion (see Figure 2).<sup>46</sup> Most importantly, Göbl found a coin of Prakāśāditya where the king’s face and crown clearly resemble the busts seen on silver drachms of the Alchon kings, including a clear lunar crescent on the brow of the crown. The coin in Figure 2 is a coin of Prakāśāditya that shows such a lunar crescent. Figure 3 illustrates an Alchon Hun coin,<sup>47</sup> normally attributed to Kxingila and dating from the



**Figure 2: Gold dinar of Prakāśāditya, showing the lunar crescent crown**

<sup>44</sup> Altekar, *Coinage*, p. 284-285. Altekar points out that Allan had also considered this identification a possibility.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Göbl: “Das Antlitz des Fremden: Der Hunnenkönig Prakasaditya in der Münzprägung der Gupta-Dynastie,” *Anzeiger der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse*, Vol. 126, 1990, pp. 131-138. I am indebted to Joe Cribb for bringing this paper to my attention.

<sup>46</sup> The coin in Figure 2 is from Gemini auction II, lot 195, reprinted with permission.

<sup>47</sup> The coin in Figure 3 is from the Triton auction XIV, lot 551, reprinted by permission from CNG.



**Figure 3: Silver drachm of the Alchon Huns, 5<sup>th</sup> century, with lunar crescent crown**

second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, that shows the identical type of crown. Note the horizontal band running around the king's head and then the lunar crescent projecting from the brow. Gupta kings did not wear such crowns. In addition, the Prakāśāditya coins show the king wearing armor, another feature not seen on Gupta coins. Thus the identification of Prakāśāditya as a Hūṇa king seems very plausible; it is unlikely that these are coins of Purugupta.

Finally, Sanjeev Kumar has recently discovered a new variety of the Archer type identifying the issuer in the obverse circular legend as *śrī parākramāditya* and in the reverse *biruda* as *parākramaḥ*, and has speculated that this might be an issue of Purugupta.<sup>48</sup> However, there is no particularly strong reason to think this is so, and the style and weight of the coin (9.46 g) point to a much later date of issue.

The end result of all these proposals and discussions is that there are no recognized coins known for Purugupta, and the few candidates that have been suggested over the years seem poor possibilities at best.

It is in this context that we must look at the numismatic evidence provided by the coins of Candragupta III. As I have outlined in the previous section, there is little doubt that most of the coins we have assigned to Candragupta III were issued starting immediately after the reign of Kumāragupta I and continuing into the period of the monetary revaluation of Skandagupta. Thus they seem to be the issues of a king who was the rightful heir to the Gupta throne after the death of Kumāragupta I, and who coexisted with Skandagupta even after he came to the throne. So far the only "rightful heir" about whom we have independent evidence is Purugupta. Further, as Gupta and Willis have suggested, Purugupta and Skandagupta must have coexisted to at least some extent. It

<sup>48</sup> Sanjeev Kumar: "New discoveries and varieties in Gupta coinage," *Journal of the Oriental Numismatic Society*, No. 204 (Summer 2010), pp. 21-22. The coin can also be seen on the Purugupta page of the Shivlee Collection website: <http://shivlee.com/puruguptacoins.html> (accessed September 18, 2011).

therefore seems reasonable to suppose that the “Candragupta III” coins may be Purugupta’s.

Of course, the most obvious objection to identifying these coins as Purugupta’s is the fact that the name under the king’s arm on the obverse is *candra*. This does indeed suggest that the name of the issuing king was Candragupta. Might it not have been the case that Candragupta III was an older brother of Purugupta and the true rightful heir? While this possibility cannot be ruled out, I feel that there are at least two factors mitigating against it. First, the coins of Candragupta III seem to be quite extensive. We have identified five different varieties of the Archer type and now we also have a Horseman type. The corpus of his known coins stands at 53. It appears therefore that this king sat on the throne, or at least exercised a claim to it, for a reasonable period of time, perhaps several years. He seemed to coexist with Skandagupta when that king came to power, and therefore does not appear to have been a rival for the throne. We would expect such a king to have left some other traces of his existence. But there are no inscriptions or mentions in any literature that might support our belief in the existence of such a king named Candragupta. It seems that identifying this king as Purugupta, of whom we do know a fair amount from other sources, is a simpler explanation for the evidence at hand than the positing of yet another son of Kumāragupta I.

Second, in *The life of Vasubandhu* by Paramārtha,<sup>49</sup> a 6<sup>th</sup> century text, reference is made to a King Vikramāditya of Ayodhyā who was a patron of the Buddhist sage and who sent his queen and crown prince Bālāditya to study with him.<sup>50</sup> Further, it is mentioned that when Bālāditya succeeded to the throne, he invited Vasubandhu to come to Ayodhyā, confirming that Bālāditya did in fact become king. Now we know from his coins that Bālāditya was the *biruda* of Narasiṃhagupta, and we also know from the Bhitī seal inscription that Narasiṃhagupta was the son of Purugupta. Therefore, according to the evidence of this text, we know that Purugupta did sit on the throne in Ayodhyā, and that he was known by the name Vikramāditya. This eliminates the theory that, in view of his brother Candragupta III’s succession, Purugupta never actually sat on the throne. Further, it tells us that he was known as Vikramāditya, thereby providing an explanation for the *biruda* found on the coins of Candragupta III: *śrī vikrama* and *śrīrajitavikrama*.<sup>51</sup> On grounds of both of these factors, the theory that Candragupta III was none other than Purugupta seems to fit the evidence in a simpler way than the theory that he was an older brother of Purugupta.

We have two alternative scenarios. In the first scenario, there is an older brother named Candragupta who succeeds his father, issues a long series of coins of both the Archer and Horseman types, even coexists with his half-brother Skandagupta for at least a while, but leaves no other trace of his existence, and leaves no heirs to succeed him. Instead, the progeny of his younger brother Purugupta become the monarchs of the realm. In the second scenario, Purugupta succeeds to the throne, issues a long series of coins in which he, somewhat inexplicably, calls himself *candra*, coexists for a while with his powerful half-brother Skandagupta, and thereby assures his descendants access to the

<sup>49</sup> J. Takakusu: “The life of Vasu-bandhu by Paramārtha (A.D. 499-569),” *T’oung Pao*, Second Series, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1904), pp. 269-296.

<sup>50</sup> Takakusu, p. 288.

<sup>51</sup> The *biruda* on the Horseman coins of Candragupta III is *śrīrajitavikrama*.

throne. Even in the face of the admittedly inexplicable use of the name *candra*, it seems the second scenario is more plausible.

Why might Purugupta have used the name *candra* on his coins? One possible explanation is that perhaps it was just a simple matter of his wanting to wrap himself in the mantle of his grandfather's glory. After all, Candragupta II had himself done the same with *his* own grandfather. Given the precedent of one king taking the name of his grandfather, it seems quite plausible that Purugupta may have done the same thing, particularly if he felt weak in the face of his powerful and heroic half-brother and felt that taking his glorious grandfather's name would emphasize his lineage and legitimacy over that of his (probably illegitimate) half-brother.

Another possible explanation is that *candra* was in fact his name! In other words, it might not be a matter of a king named Purugupta taking the name *candragupta vikramāditya* for purposes of his coinage, but a matter of a king named Candragupta (III) being later called Purugupta. Note that we do not have any contemporary records of Purugupta. We have only later records in which this king is named, so it is conceivable that a king known as Candragupta may have come to be called Purugupta late in his life or after his death. Why might this have happened? In the scenario I have painted, Candragupta III ascended the throne as the legitimate heir of his father, Kumāragupta I. The empire was at the time facing a serious threat in the west from the Hūnas, and Candragupta's half-brother Skandagupta defeated them and seized power, perhaps with Candragupta's implicit or explicit acquiescence. Perhaps the empire was partially split. Either before or after his death, Candragupta began to be known as Purugupta. In this context, it is worth noting that the name *Puru* is one of great prestige,<sup>52</sup> as it is a name that figures prominently in historical legend: Puru was an ancestor of King Bharat, after whom *Bhārat-varṣa* is named, and therefore an ancestor of the famous Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas of the *Mahābhārata*. With this title, the legitimacy of Candragupta as the royal ancestor may have been emphasized, thereby strengthening his descendants' claim to the throne. At least three of these descendants did in fact become kings. Thus, if the purpose in using the name Purugupta was to improve the claims of Candragupta's heirs to the Gupta throne, it seems to have succeeded.

There is one piece of literary evidence that may support the identification of Purugupta with Candragupta III. Allan points to a couplet from the *Kāvya-lankārasūtravṛtti* of Vāmana which refers to a son of Candragupta being the support of a great sage:<sup>53</sup>

*So 'yam samprati candraguptatanayaś candraprakāśo  
Jāto bhūpatir aśrayaḥ kṛtadhiyām diṣṭyā kṛtārthaśramaḥ.*

Allan argues that the sage being referred to is Vasubandhu and assumes the son of Candragupta being identified must be Kumāragupta. However, we have the testimony of Paramārtha that Vasubandhu taught Bālāditya, the son of Vikramāditya, and we know that, when he became king, Bālāditya invited Vasubandhu to Ayodhyā. Further, we know from the Bhitṛī seal that the father of Narasiṃhagupta Bālāditya was Purugupta. If Purugupta was originally known as Candragupta, then Vāmana could be referring in his couplet to Bālāditya, the son of Candragupta Purugupta. In this way, the identification of Purugupta with Candragupta III will resolve a mystery with regard to Vāmana's couplet,

<sup>52</sup> I am indebted to Sivasankara Menon for pointing this out to me.

<sup>53</sup> Allan, *op. cit.*, pp. xliii-xliv, fn 3.

as there was no independent information that Kumāragupta had ever been the student of a great sage. And this would become the first direct verification that Purugupta was also known as Candragupta.

This identification is, of course, difficult to prove conclusively. We need more concrete information in order to reach a firm conclusion about these events. But the scenario presented here has some plausibility and cannot be ruled out. It is consistent with all the facts we have before us, and it accounts for several things that otherwise remain unexplained. One particular aspect of this scenario is that Candragupta III does not play the role of chief rival to Skandagupta. We still have no clarity on who this chief rival was. That question is discussed in the next section.

### **Skandagupta and Prakāśāditya**

We know that Skandagupta came to power by force of his arms but do not know who his chief rival was. I have already argued against the theory that Ghaṭotkacagupta played this role. The coins of Candragupta III seem to provide a possible candidate: a “rightful heir” who came to power after the death of his father, but who was then eliminated by Skandagupta. But the fact that the coins of Candragupta III perhaps continued to be issued after Skandagupta’s ascension suggests that the two kings may have co-existed and leads to the plausible idea that Candragupta III was none other than Purugupta. So then, why did the two kings, Purugupta and Skandagupta, coexist and who was Skandagupta’s rival, who he “bowed down” and “conquered ... by the strength of (his) arm?”

I would like to propose the possibility that this rival could have been the Hūṇa king Prakāśāditya. We know that the latest coins in the Bharsar hoard are those of Skandagupta and Prakāśāditya; thus the two were roughly contemporary. We know that Prakāśāditya’s coins are found only in the west and we have Robert Göbl’s discovery that Prakāśāditya was a Hūṇa king. And of course we know that the Hūṇas were the enemies of the Guptas, that Skandagupta struggled against them, and that he identified “mlecchas” as his enemies at the time of his accession. So it seems natural to conclude that Skandagupta struggled against Prakāśāditya.

This theory provides a possible explanation for Skandagupta’s repeated assertions in his inscriptions that he “established again the ruined fortunes of (his) lineage” and reestablished his “lineage that had been made to totter,” phrases which suggest that his rival was not a member of his own lineage, but rather was an outsider who threatened this lineage with destruction. Prakāśāditya fits this description. And Skandagupta specifically mentions the Hūṇas in his Bhitṛī inscription as an enemy whom he conquered.

It should be noted that Göbl had suggested that Prakāśāditya was none other than Toramāṇa, which is plausible. Toramāṇa is known to have issued silver and copper coins based on Gupta prototypes,<sup>54</sup> so it might be expected for him to have issued gold coins also. If the Prakāśāditya coins are his, then presumably that name may well have been the *biruda* he chose for himself. This identification is, of course, not at all necessary for the assertion here that Prakāśāditya was Skandagupta’s chief rival.

One argument against this conclusion is the fact that the coins of Prakāśāditya are generally quite heavy and appear to belong to the *suvarṇa* standard, or perhaps a standard

<sup>54</sup> See Parmeshwari Lal Gupta: *Coins*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1969, pp. 78-79 and p.253 (coins 168 and 169, plate XVI).

even heavier than the *suvarṇa*.<sup>55</sup> If the *Ghaṭo* coins are rejected as coins of Skandagupta's principal rival on grounds of their weight and size, should not also the coins of Prakāśāditya be rejected for the same reason? Admittedly, this is a serious objection, but there are at least three factors that can address it. First, although Prakāśāditya's coins are heavy, they are generally not large. Rather, they are generally about the same size as the majority of the coins of Kumāragupta I, around 19-20 mm in diameter.<sup>56</sup> The typical *suvarṇa* standard coins are around 23 mm in diameter. Second, the *Ghaṭo* coins clearly belong to the Gupta series as indicated by their style; therefore, it would be most unusual for them to depart radically from the rest of the series in terms of their weight. In contrast, the Prakāśāditya coins very plausibly do not fit into the Gupta series. Although they have so far been classified as Gupta coins, there are a number of factors, discussed earlier, that support Göbl's suggestion that they are in reality Hūṇa coins. If this is so, a radical departure in weight standard seems more plausible for these coins than it would be for the *Ghaṭo* coins. Third, the coins of Prakāśāditya have been found with coins of Skandagupta, lending credence to the idea that they were in circulation at around the same time. So, for these three reasons, it seems that the Prakāśāditya coins may well have been issued around the time of Skandagupta's accession. If they were in fact issued later, the suggestion that Skandagupta's principal rival was Prakāśāditya would be weakened. However, I would nevertheless argue in that case that the chief rival we are looking for may still be a Hūṇa king, perhaps a predecessor of Prakāśāditya.

### Conclusion

In the absence of contemporary written records, it is difficult to reconstruct fully the dynastic history of the Guptas. One specific gap in our understanding of this history concerns the events around the succession after Kumāragupta I. While we know that his son Skandagupta did rule sometime after his death, it has not been clear whether this succession was immediate or delayed. Nor do we know the exact nature of the opposition, mentioned explicitly in several of his inscriptions, faced by Skandagupta.

In this paper, combining the well-known evidence available from inscriptions and seals with less well-known numismatic evidence, I have attempted to shed light on this uncertain period of Gupta history. I have argued that there is strong numismatic evidence against a theory originally proposed by P.L. Gupta and currently enjoying some popularity, that Skandagupta was opposed primarily by his uncle Ghaṭotkacagupta. Instead, there is strong inscriptional evidence that the biggest threat Skandagupta faced came from a mleccha enemy and I have suggested that there is numismatic evidence to support this: the king known on his coins as Prakāśāditya was a Hūṇa and it was he who was Skandagupta's chief rival. I further argued that Kumāragupta was succeeded by another son, who has come to be known as Candragupta III, and that this Candragupta III may have been none other than the king known as Purugupta, the ancestor of several later Gupta kings.

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<sup>55</sup> Of the 53 coins of Prakāśāditya in the DINARA database, the weights of 42 are recorded. The average weight of these 42 coins is 9.33 g, with a minimum of 8.81 g and a maximum of 9.5 g. There was only one coin that weighed less than 9 g; the second-lightest coin in the database weighs 9.05 g. I would once again like to acknowledge my debt to Ellen Raven for freely sharing this database with me.

<sup>56</sup> The DINARA database has 28 coins of Prakāśāditya with recorded diameters. The average diameter of these coins is 19.1 mm, with a minimum of 17.5 mm and a maximum of 21 mm.