

The Coins and History of Toramāṇa

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At a recent seminar,² Michael Bates made an impassioned plea to abandon the practice of always attempting to classify coins as issues of specific political authorities and to allow for the fact that coinages are frequently highly specific to location. This paper on the coins of Toramāṇa in Michael's honor illustrates how these two phenomena can coexist: coins can be the issues of a specific political authority and yet can be highly localized, as the political authority seeks to conform to local traditions in order to encourage the uninterrupted flow of commerce.

Over a century ago, J. F. Fleet (1889) published in the journal *Indian Antiquary* a paper with exactly the same title as the present one. Fleet knew of only two coins of Toramāṇa, both silver drachms of the Gupta *madhyadeśa* type (Göbl 1967, type 119; here, Figure 1). His reconstruction of a skeleton history of this king was based not so much on coins as on several known inscriptions. According to this skeleton history, Toramāṇa started his career somewhere in northwest India, probably Punjab, perhaps as early as the year 460 CE, gathered strength there, and eventually advanced (probably in the last decade of the fifth century) into central India where he established his rule in the area around Eran. He must have died some years later, say around the year 510 or 515, because we find that his son Mihirakula was defeated by the Aulikara king Yaśodharman some years thereafter.

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**Figure 1: Silver drachm of Toramāṇa (Göbl 1967, type 119)
(British Museum, photo, courtesy Shailen Bhandare)**

Fleet's argument, in a nutshell, was this. We start with the date of Mihirakula, outlined in Fleet (1886). From the Gwalior stone inscription of Mihirakula, dated in the fifteenth year of his reign, we know that he was the son of Toramāṇa. Further, from the Mandasor pillar inscription of Yaśodharman, we know that he defeated Mihirakula, who had to bow to his feet. From a different inscription from Mandasor, arguably made around the same time as the previous one (it was inscribed by the same scribe), we can date Yaśodharman to c. 532-533. Fleet surmises that Yaśodharman must have defeated Mihirakula at around that time, and that the Gwalior stone inscription was incised also at around that time, so that the fifteenth year of Mihirakula's reign must have been c. 530. Therefore, Mihirakula's reign must have started c. 515, which would therefore be our best estimate of the date of Toramāṇa's death.

Now we can look at Toramāṇa's career. The Eran boar inscription is inscribed in year 1 of the reign of Maharājadhīrāja Toramāṇa. Fleet argues that this year 1 could not represent the first year of his reign, which must have started somewhere in the northwest, as we know of his

Kura inscription in the Salt Range of Punjab. It would have been impossible for him to reach Mālwa all the way from Punjab in the very first year of his reign. Rather, the year 1 of the boar inscription must represent the first year of his reign specifically in the Eran area. We can date this year approximately by reference to the fact that the boar inscription was incised by one Dhanyaviṣṇu, who is also mentioned in the Eran pillar inscription of the Gupta king Budhagupta, dated in the year 484 (Gupta era 165). The boar inscription must have been inscribed shortly after the pillar inscription because the pillar inscription mentions Dhanyaviṣṇu's brother Matriviṣṇu, who is also mentioned in the boar inscription but is stated to be deceased in the latter. So Toramāṇa must have ruled Mālwa sometime soon after Budhagupta. Fleet mentions a silver coin of Budhagupta carrying the date 175 (Gupta era, equivalent to 494 CE). Thus he argues that the year 1 of the boar inscription must refer to the year c. 495 or shortly thereafter. This date is supported by the Valabhī records, which show that the Senapati Bhaṭārka was acquiring glory around this time fighting the Maitrakas or Mihiras, who Fleet takes to be the tribe of Toramāṇa and Mihirakula.

Finally, Fleet argues that Toramāṇa's silver coins carry a date of 52. This, he says, must be a regnal date. Therefore, Toramāṇa's career must have started c. 460, which, combined with a terminal date of 515, gives him a reign of approximately 55 years. That completes his reconstruction of Toramāṇa's history.

We can now consider the new evidence on Toramāṇa that has emerged since Fleet wrote his article and examine how this new evidence might change our understanding of his history.

New Evidence: Coins

For over a century after Fleet's article, the only coins, apart from the silver drachms studied by Fleet, that were definitively attributed to Toramāṇa were several copper types published by Göbl 1967 (types 120-123, see Figure 2). Göbl reported that coins of type 120 had been found in Punjab, with no further details known, while coins of type 123 had been found at Manaswal, in Hoshiarpur District. Subsequently, more examples of type 120 were found at the excavations at Sanghol (Ray 2010). These coins all identified the issuer by the Brāhmī legend *tora* on the reverse.



Figure 2: Copper Coins of Toramāṇa (Göbl 1967 types 120-123)

In his update of Göbl, Vondrovec 2014 published four more copper types, all very similar to the previous coins. Because the photos of the coins are very dark, it is Vondrovec's line drawings of these coins that are reproduced in Figure 3. We see that three of these coins carry the *tora* legend, but one, type 55A, has the full name *Toramāṇa*. These coins differ from the ones

illustrated in Figure 2 in one noticeable way: the reverses are not divided into two registers, with a solar wheel in the upper and the legend in the lower, as the Figure 2 coins are. This may give us a clue about the prototypes on which the two groups of coins are based. Since the Vondrovec coins are all from the collection of the noted Pakistani collector, Aman ur Rahman, it is likely that the coins illustrated in Figure 3 were all found in western Punjab or even Gandhara. All the information we have about the coins in Figure 2 indicates that they were found in eastern (modern Indian) Punjab. These coins certainly seem to be based on Gupta prototypes; see Kumar 2017 pp. 280-81. It is not obvious which coins inspired the coins in Figure 3 but they seem broadly Hunnic in inspiration. Since Fleet already knew of Toramāṇa's early career in Punjab, the finding of these coins did not alter our knowledge of his history in any fundamental way.

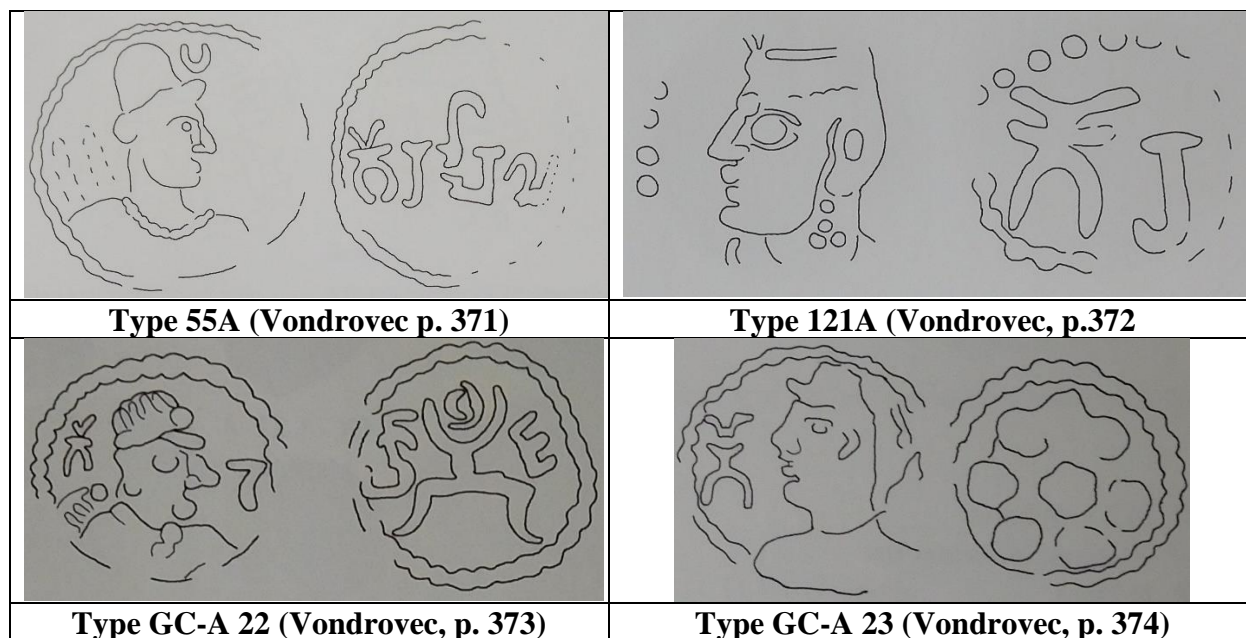


Figure 3: Copper Coins of Toramāṇa published by Vondrovec 2014

One item that possibly does shed new light on Toramāṇa's history is not a coin but a sealing discovered at Kauśāmbī and discussed by Thaplyal 1969. The clay sealing had two impressions on it: the seal of the Ghoṣītārāma monastery and the seal of Toramāṇa. Since this

was a clay sealing, Thaplyal argued, both impressions must have been made at the same time when the clay was still soft, and the Ghosītārāma monastery is known from other sources to have been located in Kauśāmbī. It is therefore highly probable that the impressions were made in that city. Thaplyal speculates that Toramāṇa may have wanted to demonstrate his control of the monastery by imposing his seal on top of that of the monastery. This sealing, therefore, strongly suggests that Toramāṇa at one point was situated in Kauśāmbī, the first physical evidence we have that he had a presence in the Gangetic valley. The evidence is further supported by the discovery in the same place of a sealing in the name of a “Huṇarāja,” who may have been Toramāṇa, and of several Hunnic arrowheads.

By far the most important numismatic discovery concerning Toramāṇa made in recent years was the realization that the king who named himself Prakāśāditya on a series of Gupta style gold coins, and who was almost universally believed to be a Gupta king, was in fact Toramāṇa (Tandon 2015). A typical coin of this type is shown in Figure 4. The identification is based on a full reading of the obverse legend, which reads *avanipatitoramā(ṇo) vijitya vasudhām divam jayati*. Thus the identification is quite certain. All the Gupta kings adopted a *biruda* or epithet in addition to their name, and it appears that Toramāṇa adopted the same practice.



**Figure 4: Gold dinar of Prakāśāditya/Toramāṇa
(Gemini auction II, lot 195)**

The discovery that Prakāśāditya and Toramāṇa were one and the same person opened the door to identifying a number of other known coins, and one previously overlooked coin, as those of the Hun king. Figure 5 illustrates these coins, all of which use the name Prakāśa or Prakāśāditya. Coin (a) is a copper coin very similar in design to coins 2(a)-(c), except that the name *tora* on those coins is here replaced by *śrī prakāśāditya*. These coins, found at Manaswal in the Punjab Hills and obviously Hunnic, had been discussed as early as Smith 1907. While noting that the legend on these coins named the same king as the one on the Gupta style gold dinars, Smith stated without explanation, “Of course, the White Hun chief must have been distinct from the Gupta king who used the same title, which means ‘sun of splendor’” (p. 95). We can now revise this statement, as the “Gupta” king has turned out to be Toramāṇa himself, and the copper coins must therefore be his.



Figure 5: Coins of Toramāṇa naming him Prakāśāditya or Prakāśa

Coin 5(b) is a gold coin in the style of the Kushans and Kidarites which names a king *śrī prakāśa*. This type is traditionally assigned to Kashmir, but it is more likely that it was produced in Punjab, like the preceding copper coins. Given its likely dating to the fifth century, the coin is almost certainly an issue of Toramāṇa. Kidarite-style gold coins had been produced in Punjab and Kashmir for an extended period of time and it is quite plausible that Toramāṇa issued coins in the same series. While these gold and copper coins issued by him in Punjab enrich our understanding of Toramāṇa’s coinage, they do not point to any dramatic revision of Fleet’s history.

Coin 5(c) is perhaps the most important of these newly attributed coins. This is a gold coin in the style of the Gupta Archer type, the canonical type of Gupta gold coin, and has been discussed in Tandon 2018. The coin once again names *śrī prakāśa* on the reverse and must

therefore be an issue of Toramāṇa. This recognition allows us to attribute the whole series of “Nameless” Archer coins to the Huns (Tandon 2018) and, perhaps more importantly, supports the notion that Toramāṇa penetrated deep into the Gupta heartland, at least as far as Vārāṇasī in eastern Uttar Pradesh, where it appears these coins were struck. We can now be more confident of Thaplyal’s assertion that Toramāṇa had established a presence in Kauśāmbī, as Vārāṇasī is even further east. We can also be more confident of the evidence of literary sources such as the accounts of Xuanzang and the *Mañjuśrī-mūlakalpa*, which suggested a conflict between the Huns and the Gupta emperor Narasimhagupta, also known as Bālāditya.

Finally, just within the last couple of years, three examples of a new type of silver drachm in the Gandhara style and format have appeared. I show two examples in Figure 6, one from a CNG sale and the other from my personal collection, being published here for the first time. These coins fill an important gap in the coinage of Toramāṇa, as coins in the Gandhara format are known for his son Mihirakula and also for Vazira (Vaysira), another king who issued copper coins similar to those of Toramāṇa from the Punjab Hills. It was therefore odd that no Toramāṇa coins in the Sasanian style typical of Gandhara were known. The coins show the bust of Toramāṇa right with a pair of feet, most likely *Buddhapada*, the feet of the Buddha, in front and a Brāhmī legend around: *jaya śāhi tora*; the reverse is the usual fire altar flanked by attendants. The feet are a new iconographic symbol for Toramāṇa and, as we will see, shed some light on the king’s religious beliefs or at least on the religious milieu in which he lived.



(a) CNG eSale 383, lot 354	(b) Tandon Collection #695.40
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Figure 6: Silver drachms of Toramāṇa from Gandhara, based on Sasanian prototypes

New Evidence: Inscriptions

Several new pieces of epigraphic evidence concerning Toramāṇa have emerged since Fleet wrote his article. An important group of copper plates from the town of Sanjeli that mention Toramāṇa were published by Mehta and Thakkar 1978. There are three sets of copper plates, only the first of which actually mentions Toramāṇa. This plate is a land grant of Mahārāja Bhūta, dated in the year 3 of his overlord Toramāṇa. So it is safe to assume that this copper plate was inscribed two years after the Eran boar inscription and that Toramāṇa had established his rule in the area of Sanjeli, which is in eastern Gujarat (see map in Appendix). The second plate is a grant of the same king Bhūta, dated in year 6. The third plate is a grant of Bhūta's son Māṭṛidāsa, dated in year 19. Although these last two copper plates do not name Toramāṇa, it is safe to assume that the dates mentioned were indeed of his regnal years. We can therefore conclude that Toramāṇa's rule in that part of west-central India lasted at least 19 years.

Another recently discovered inscription concerning Toramāṇa is the Rīsthal Inscription of the Aulikara king Prakāśadharman, published by Ramesh and Tewari 1983 and discussed and reinterpreted by Salomon 1989. The inscription is dated in the Mālava year 572, equivalent to c. 515 CE, and reveals that Prakāśadharman “falsified in battle the Hūṇa overlord's title of “Emperor,” which (had) become established on earth up to (the time of) Toramāṇa ... whom he had defeated easily in the thick of battle” (Salomon 1989, p. 8). The dating of this inscription is indeed fortuitous, as Fleet had estimated that Toramāṇa had reigned up until c. 515, and this inscription seems to support this date. The inscription itself celebrates the dedication of a newly constructed lake and temple, so the defeat of Toramāṇa may have taken place some years prior to

this time, but certainly the approximate date cannot be questioned. Notably, however, Prakāśadharman does not claim to have killed Toramāṇa, so quite plausibly his history may have continued past his sojourn in Mālwa.

Finally, a third discovery made recently is the Schøyen copper scroll inscription published by Gudrun Melzer 2006. Although the find spot of this scroll is not known, the place where it was inscribed is contained within the document – a place called Tālagān. Melzer identifies this as a town called Ṭālaqān in Tukharistan, east of Qunduz and north of the Hindu Kush mountains. However, Étienne de la Vaissière 2007 has argued persuasively that a more likely identification is the town of Talagang in Pakistan, just north of the Salt Range and south of the Hindu Kush (see Appendix map). Bakker 2018 strongly supports this view, as he points out that the scroll mentions the village of Śārdīysa as the place where the stupa, which is the main subject of the scroll, was erected. Bakker convincingly identifies this village as modern Śārdi in Pakistani Kashmir, much closer to Pakistani Talagang than Ṭālaqān in Tukharistan. Talagang is also in the vicinity of the town of Kura (Khwera), from where we have a known inscription of Toramāṇa, and locating the scroll here would better explain the use of Brāhmī, the script in which the scroll is inscribed. A scroll inscribed north of the Hindu Kush might have been expected to have used the Bactrian script.

The purpose of the scroll is to record the dedication of a Buddhist stūpa. Its importance for us, however, is that it provides a list of donors who supported the building of this stūpa, and included in this list of donors are four known Alchon Hun kings: mahāśāhi Khīngīla, devarāja Toramāṇa, mahāśāhi Mehama and mahārāja Javūkha. As far as the history of Toramāṇa goes, we learn several things from this inscription: (1) it reinforces Toramāṇa's presence in the area of Punjab, perhaps at a time when he was not very senior in the Hun hierarchy, since his title here is

merely *devarāja*, (2) Toramāṇa was *not* the son of Khīṅgīla, as Göbl had speculated; if he had been, the scroll would certainly have mentioned the fact as Javūkha's father is named in the donor list, and (3) considering that the scroll indicates a patronage of Buddhism, it strongly supports the interpretation of the feet seen on Toramāṇa's Gandharan silver drachms as representing Buddhapada. Even if Toramāṇa was not himself Buddhist, his support for the construction of a Buddhist stūpa indicates his perceived need to identify himself as a patron of Buddhism, and the feet on his coinage probably served a similar function. The scroll is dated in the year 68 of an unnamed era. Melzer argues that this was most likely the Laukika era, which would date the scroll to c.492-93 CE. This date agrees nicely with an approximate date for the time when Toramāṇa ventured out of Punjab and established his rule in Mālwa.

Implications of the New Evidence for the History of Toramāṇa

One important part of Fleet's history of Toramāṇa that probably needs revision is his assertion that his career began c. 460. Fleet based his conclusion exclusively on his reading the date 52 on the one silver drachm in the British Museum's collection. Unfortunately, it is not at all clear that the reading is correct; Fleet himself did not appear to be very sure, and it is not even clear that what is on the coin is meant to be a date. The use of the title *devarāja* for Toramāṇa in the Schøyen scroll suggests that he was still relatively junior in c. 492; it is therefore unlikely that his career began around 460. A start date c. 490 would be more plausible.

Other than that, Fleet's reconstruction receives considerable support from the new evidence. We can be more certain that his career began in Punjab or Gandhāra, as we have more inscriptions and more coins to back this up. His earliest coinage probably consisted of the thin silver drachms of Gandhāra (Figure 6) and possibly the Kidarite style gold coins (Figure 5, coin

b). He then began a campaign southward that took him through Sanghol, probably following the Yamuna river and then further south along the Chambal and Betwa river valleys into Mālwa. Either before or during this campaign, he would have issued the Gupta-style Punjab coppers (coins in Figures 2, 3, and 5a). In Mālwa, his dominion over places like Sanjeli and Eran is attested, and he must surely have made an effort to capture Ujjain, the big prize in the region.

Curiously, even though we now have inscriptional evidence pointing to a reign in Mālwa of at least nineteen years, we do not have any definitive knowledge of coins issued in this area by Toramāṇa. He surely must have issued some. The coinage current in the region would have been the Western Kṣatrapa style of silver drachms. Given Toramāṇa's practice of issuing coinage in the style of whichever region he found himself in, it would be logical to expect him to have issued coins of that type. One plausible candidate is the imitation drachms of the altar type in the name of Skandagupta (see Figure 7). It is virtually certain that these coins were issued after Skandagupta's reign. Their silver content is far below the norm for Skandagupta's coinage (0-22% versus 75-81%, see Maheshwari and Rath 1996). Plus the fire altar would have been an appropriate choice of reverse symbol for a Hun ruler. It is plausible therefore to speculate that this coinage may have been Toramāṇa's issue for Mālwa. It should be noted though that there was a gap of several decades between the end of Skandagupta's reign (c. 467 CE) and Toramāṇa's arrival in Mālwa. Therefore, in all likelihood, the imitation drachms of the altar type must have commenced issue much before the latter event. If these coins were issued by Toramāṇa, he must have continued an imitative series that was already current.



Figure 7: Imitation silver drachm in the name of Skandagupta (Tandon coll. #130.47)

Fleet had assumed that Mālwa was the extent of Toramāṇa's campaign into the Indian heartland and his history of the Hun king ended there. The new evidence that has appeared since he wrote, however, tells us that he also campaigned deep into the Gupta heartland, and this is the most significant revision of Fleet's history that we can make now. There was a hint of information in this direction even during Fleet's time – the *madhyadeśa* type drachms about which Fleet wrote (Figure 1) belong to the Gangetic valley and are typically found in places like Mathura and Benares (Allan 1914, p. xcvi). One could argue that, on his way from Sanghol to Mālwa, Toramāṇa would have followed the course of the Yamuna, passing Mathura along the way, and this could have given him the occasion to issue the *madhyadeśa* type drachms. But it is more likely that he issued these coins farther east and we now know of his presence farther east, in places like Kauśāmbī and Vārāṇasī. Of course, the more significant coins he issued in the east were the Gupta-style gold dinars in the name of Prakāśāditya or Prakāśa (Figure 4 and coin 5c).

Fleet had never placed Toramāṇa in the Gangetic plain, but other authors, such as Gupta 1974, had. Gupta had cited the Sanskrit text *Mañjuśrī-mūlakalpa* (Jayaswal 1934), in which a

powerful king from the west (interpreted by Jayaswal to be Toramāṇa) defeated the Gupta forces and installed a young Gupta prince on the throne in Magadha. He then returned to Kāśī where he fell ill and died (Gupta 1974, p. 357). Gupta also cites the evidence of the Chinese traveler Xuanzang (Beal 1884), which, as it were, continues the account of the *Mañjuśrī-mūlakalpa*. Xuanzang reports that Mihirakula was enraged that the Gupta king Bālāditya (who we know from his coins was Narasiṃhagupta) did not pay his tribute and raised an army to punish his rebellion. Bālāditya subsequently captured Mihirakula and banished him to Kashmir. The account in the *Mañjuśrī-mūlakalpa* provides the backdrop to this story, as it explains why Bālāditya needed to pay tribute in the first place - the Guptas had become vassals of the Huns. If these accounts are correct, then the last days of Toramāṇa's career had him successfully defeating the Guptas in their heartland and then dying of natural causes in Vārāṇasī. This narrative is completely outside of Fleet's reconstruction, and many authors have discounted these accounts as unreliable. The numismatic evidence we now have, of Toramāṇa issuing gold coins on the Gupta model in the heartland of the empire, suggests that the accounts of the *Mañjuśrī-mūlakalpa* and Xuanzang may indeed have some truth to them. Further, if the accounts are correct, Toramāṇa died in Vārāṇasī. This means that his Gangetic Valley campaign came at the end of his career, presumably after he had been defeated by Prakāśadharman in Mālwa.

Conclusion and Final Remarks

Our reconstruction of the history of Toramāṇa therefore agrees on some points with Fleet's account but differs on others. Specifically, we find that Toramāṇa's career most probably began later than argued by Fleet, around c. 490 rather than c. 460. As asserted by Fleet, this career began somewhere in Punjab, perhaps in the hilly foothills of the Himalayas. Around the

year 495 or so, Toramāṇa moved south towards Mālwa, where he established a reign that lasted at least nineteen years. Perhaps around the year 510 or 515, he was defeated by the Aulikara king Prakāśadharman and perhaps withdrew from Central India. Fleet's history ended there. But we now know that Toramāṇa then campaigned in the Gangetic plain and appears to have subjugated the shrunken Gupta empire, installing a vassal on its throne and issuing his own Gupta-style gold coins. He died in Vārāṇasī of natural causes around the year 515.

We now have a much richer understanding of the variety of coins issued by Toramāṇa. Fleet knew only of his silver drachms of the *madhyadeśa* type. Now we know that he issued a wide variety of coins, each one conforming to the customary types of the various regions in which he issued them. In roughly chronological order, we can say that Toramāṇa issued the following types:

1. Sasanian style silver drachms in Gandhāra, citing *ṣāhī tora*.
2. Kidarite style gold coins in the Punjab Hills, naming *śrī prakāśa*.
3. Hunnic and Gupta style copper coins in the Punjab Hills and plains, some naming him *tora* or *toramāṇa* and others naming him *śrī prakāśāditya*.
4. Imitative silver drachms of the Western Kṣatrapa style in the name of Skandagupta (this is speculative; we are not sure that Toramāṇa issued these, but it is very likely that he issued some coins while ruling in Mālwa, and these coins appear to be the best candidates).
5. Silver drachms in the style of the Gupta *madhyadeśa* type somewhere in the Ganges Valley, naming *śrī toramāṇa*.
6. Gold coins in Gupta style of the Horseman Lion-slayer type, naming him as both *śrī toramāṇa* and *śrī prakāśāditya* (as an epithet), issued in eastern Uttar Pradesh.

7. Gold coins of the Gupta Archer type naming *śrī prakāśa*, probably issued in the Vārāṇasī area.

Returning to the point made by Michael Bates and discussed in the first paragraph of this paper, we see that Toramāṇa issued coins of many different varieties, each type typical of the area where the coins were issued. We see this pattern followed repeatedly by conquerors, presumably wishing to keep commerce flowing wherever they established their rule. A notable example is the Kushan king Kujula Kadphises, but many other examples could be given. Even the British, in the process of establishing colonial rule in India, issued Mughal style coins for decades before they finally introduced a “European” style of coinage. This phenomenon points to the essential conservatism of businesspeople engaged in commerce and the need for the political authority to acquiesce to their needs. Thus, the desire to attribute coins to specific political authorities need not be incompatible with the coins conforming to local coinage traditions.



**Appendix: Map Showing Places associated with Toramāṇa
(modern borders shown for reference)**

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