

International Seminar on Gupta
Archaeology, Numismatics, Literature
and Epigraphy
Proceedings Papers



and the journal of the
Indian Coin Society:
Nidhi, Vol. III,
2025

THE FIRST HUNNIC WAR: THE HUṆĀ INCURSION INTO THE GUPTA EMPIRE

Pankaj Tandon

Abstract:

It has long been thought that the Huṇās invaded the heartland of the Gupta Empire in the late fifth century, but there has been little hard evidence for this conclusion. In this paper, I will argue that such hard evidence is available in the form of gold coins in the Gupta style issued by the Huṇās, most probably in eastern Uttar Pradesh. These coins include the coins of the Horse-rider Lion-slayer type identified by the *biruda* Prakāśāditya, which we now know to be issues of the Huṇā king Toramāṇa, and also the “Nameless” coins of the Archer type, those Archer type coins without any name under the arm of the king. The realization that these coins are Huṇā issues gives us a much clearer picture of the events surrounding the waning days of the Gupta Empire and points to the First Hunnic War identified by Hans Bakker to be more complex than he suggested.

At the Nagpur Seminar, I presented my then-recent publication on the identity of Prakāśāditya (Tandon 2015) and some follow-up research arguing that the so-called “Nameless” coins of the Archer type, generally attributed at that time to Budhagupta, were also Huṇā issues. That follow-up research was also subsequently published (Tandon 2018). Since that time, Hans Bakker (2017, 2020) has published some very interesting work surrounding what he calls the First and Second Hunnic Wars. The First Hunnic War, as characterized by Bakker, was the war between the Huṇās, presumably led by Toramāṇa, and the Aulikaras, led by Prakāśadharmman and his feudatories, lasting roughly between the years 495 and 515 according to Bakker. The Second Hunnic War was the war between the Huṇās, this time led by Mihirakula, and the Aulikaras again, now led by Yaśodharman. That war took place around the years 530-535. These Hunnic Wars, naturally, have something to say about the Huṇā incursion into the Gupta Empire. I will argue in this paper that Bakker's description of the First Hunnic War is incomplete, and that a more complete description of it sheds important light on the waning days of the Guptas.

Since it does not make sense to republish what is already available elsewhere, I will not include here a detailed repetition of my Nagpur presentation. I will quickly summarize that work for the sake of completeness and because it is of relevance to what will follow. As a follow-up, I will then argue that my work points to a rounding out of Bakker's account of the military history of the Huṇās in India, as it suggests that there was more to the First Hunnic War than Bakker described. This extension of the First Hunnic War took place between the Huṇās (led initially by Toramāṇa and later presumably by his brother or son) and the Guptas themselves, led by Narasimhagupta, around the years 510 to 515. It was this extension of the First Hunnic War that spelled the true end of Toramāṇa's campaign in India. Subsequently, the war between Mihirakula and Yaśodharman, the so-called Second Hunnic War, marked the end of the Huṇā incursion into the heart of India.

The Identity of Prakāśāditya

The first part of my Nagpur presentation outlined my detailed argument establishing that Prakāśāditya, long thought to be an unidentified Gupta king, was in fact the Huṇā king Toramāṇa. The main thrust of the argument was simple: I had discovered a coin in the UP State Musuem in Lucknow that had on it the first three letters (out of four) in Toramāṇa's name, specifically the letters *to ra* and *mā*. I pointed to there being persuasive evidence that the following letter, seen only partially on a few coins, could well be *ṇa* or *ṇo*, thereby completing Toramāṇa's name. Almost all Gupta coins present the issuer's name in the obverse legend only, featuring just an epithet or *biruda* of the king on the reverse. Until my discovery, no coin of Prakāśāditya had been noted which carried the name of the king on the obverse, as a result of which the identity of the king remained a mystery. Thus, reading the king's name on the obverse for the first time was the key to solving the more-than-century-old puzzle. Further, I showed that the partial legends visible on all known coins of Prakāśāditya were consistent with my full reading of the obverse legend: *avanipati toramāṇo vijitya vasudhām divam jayati*. The Lucknow coin is illustrated in Figure 1. A detail of the coin, showing the first part of the obverse legend, including the king's name, is in Figure 2. Finally, Figure 3 illustrates a coin from the National Museum in New Delhi, which has parts of the whole legend visible, showing its compatibility with my reading. Note that the letter arrangement in the National Museum coin differs from that on the Lucknow Museum specimen. The hind quarters of the lion on the National Museum coin interrupt Toramāṇa's name after, rather than before, the letter *mā*. In addition to the legend reading, I provided considerable evidence to suggest that the coin was indeed issued by a Huṇā king rather than a Gupta. There can be little doubt the veracity of my reading and argument and indeed this finding has been widely accepted by the scholarly and collector communities.



Figure 1: The Lucknow Museum coin,
inventory number 6283¹⁷



Figure 2: Detail of the first part of the
legend (*avanipati toramā*)¹⁸

¹⁷This was Figure 8 in Tandon 2015.

¹⁸Extracted from Figure 9 in Tandon 2015.



Figure 3: Full legend restored on the National Museum Coin¹⁹

The Attribution of the Nameless Coins of the Archer Type

The second part of my Nagpur presentation concerned the attribution of the Archer type coins without the king's name under his arm, the so-called “Nameless” coins. This part of the talk was published as Tandon 2018, so the detailed exposition is available there. In brief, I argued that those coins were also Huṇā issues, like the Prakāśāditya coins. The argument had two main components. First, I reported on another coin I had discovered in the UP State Museum, Lucknow, that featured the name *śrī prakāśa* on the reverse. This coin is illustrated in Figure 4. Given the attribution of the Prakāśāditya coins to Toramāṇa, and the fact that the canonical Gupta gold coin type was the Archer type (which therefore we would expect would be the first type for a conqueror to imitate), the conclusion that this coin was also issued by Toramāṇa seems inescapable. Thus, at least this “Nameless” coin (“Nameless” since there is no name under the king's arm on the obverse) appears to be a Huṇā issue.

The second component of the argument was that the *śrī prakāśa* coin has a close stylistic affinity with all the Nameless coins, bearing design commonalities that make the group quite distinct from the usual Gupta coins. Figure 5 illustrates a typical Nameless coin. I showed that there were various aspects of the design in which the Nameless coins were very similar to the *śrī prakāśa* coin and quite different from the Archer type coins issued by the known Gupta kings. These aspects included the figure of the king, the treatment of the king's *dhoti*, the form of the sash and loop, the shape of the king's hand, and the treatment of the Goddess's hair. For all these reasons, I argued, the Nameless coins formed a quite distinct group. Given the attribution of the *śrī prakāśa* coin to the Huṇā king Toramāṇa, it seems natural to conclude that all the Nameless coins were also Huṇā issues, whether issued by Toramāṇa, or by other Huṇā kings. The bottom line of the two parts of the presentation was that the Huṇā kings issued a series of gold coins on the Gupta idiom.

¹⁹This was Figure 11 in Tandon 2015.



Figure 4: The *śrī prakāśa* coin, Lucknow Museum (accession # 11626)²⁰

literary evidence to back up this belief, first discussed by Gupta 1974, which I reviewed in Tandon 2020. Specifically, the Sanskrit text *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (Jayaswal 1934), tells of a powerful king from the west (interpreted by Jayaswal to be Toramāṇa) who 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. Further, P.L. Gupta (1974, p. 357) cites the evidence of the Chinese traveler Xuanzang (Beal 1884), which, as it were, continues the account of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*. Xuanzang reports that Mihirakula, the son of Toramāṇa, was enraged that the Gupta king Bālāditya, who we know from his coins was Narasimhagupta, did not pay his tribute and raised an army to punish his rebellion. Although he initially retreated from his capital, Bālāditya subsequently captured Mihirakula and banished him to Kashmir. The account in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* 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 Huṇās. 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. Many authors have discounted the accounts of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and Xuanzang as unreliable.



Figure 5: A typical Nameless coin (Tandon collection #597.4)²¹

Finally, I offered some hard but circumstantial evidence on find spots to suggest that these Gupta style Huṇā issues were minted somewhere in eastern Uttar Pradesh, most likely in or near Vārāṇasī. Since we have hard evidence of Toramāṇa having reached as far as Kauśāmbī (Thaplyal 1972, pp. 61-62), which is only 83 miles (133 kilometers) from Vārāṇasī, the idea that the Huṇā king might have reached that far is not hard to believe. There is also

However, the numismatic evidence we now have, of Toramāṇa issuing gold coins on the Gupta model in the heartland of the empire, suggests that those accounts may indeed be correct. Further, if the accounts are indeed true, Toramāṇa died in Vārāṇasī. This means that his Gangetic Valley campaign came at the end of his career, presumably after his time in Mālwa.

²⁰This was Figure 8 in Tandon 2018.

²¹This was Figure 1 in Tandon 2018.

Bakker's Reconstruction of the Huṇā Incursion into India

In his Gonda Lecture (Bakker 2017) and then again in his book (Bakker 2020), Hans Bakker has provided a detailed view of what he calls the First and Second Hunnic Wars. The Second Hunnic War, between Mihirakula and Yaśodharman, does not concern me here and I have nothing to add about that. What is central to my discussion, however, is his First Hunnic War, which is essentially an account of Toramāṇa's campaign into the heart of India. This is a campaign first discussed by Fleet 1889. Bakker's account differs from Fleet's in some important respects, based on evidence that has emerged about Toramāṇa's activities since Fleet wrote his piece and Bakker's own analysis.

Perhaps the most notable difference is the starting point of the campaign. Fleet simply states that Toramāṇa began his campaign from somewhere in “the extreme north-west corner of India” (p. 229) and dates the start of his reign (although not his campaign) to circa 460 CE. Bakker (2020, Chapter 4), by contrast, is more specific: suggesting a campaign start date of around 498 CE and revealing his highly plausible suggestion for the location of Toramāṇa's capital. Bakker proposes a spot on the banks of the Chenab river very near the modern town of Akhnoor, in the modern Indian territory of Jammu and Kashmir. He arrives at his conclusion by starting with a verse from a Jain text of the year 779 called the *Kuvalayamālā*. In Bakker's translation, the key sentences read: “On the banks of [the Chandrabhāya river] is the famous Pavvaiyā,... where the illustrious King Tora resided while ruling the earth. His guru was the venerable Harigupta of the Gupta lineage.” The king is surely Toramāṇa and he is said to have resided with his guru of the Gupta lineage in a Hill City on the banks of the Chandrabhāgā (Chenab) river.

Next, Bakker reminds us that the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang had noted that the city of Śākala (Sialkot) in the kingdom of Zhejia was the capital of Mihirakula, Toramāṇa's son. Further, he mentioned that the capital of Zhejia, which he left unnamed, was actually 14 to 15 *li* to the northeast of Śākala. Therefore, Bakker started looking for an ancient city on the Chenab to the northeast of Sialkot which had known connections to the Guptas and Huṇās. He discovered a site called Pambarwān, just over 2 km. east of Akhnoor fort and located on the northern bank of the Chenab, which had been excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India in fits and starts from 1961 onwards. A detailed excavation was carried out in 1999. It revealed four distinct layers of occupation from the pre-Kuṣāṇa to the post-Gupta periods and a series of artifacts, starting with a Kuṣāṇa period gold reliquary containing charred bones, found within silver and copper caskets and placed in a stūpa; a large number of Gupta period terracotta figurines; and a number of coins, including coins of several Kuṣāṇa kings and a copper coin of Toramāṇa. This place thus fits all the requirements Bakker was looking for and it therefore seems very reasonable to propose that this is the site of Toramāṇa's capital, and the starting point of his Indian campaign.

In Bakker's telling, the campaign started in roughly the year 498. Leaving the Indus basin (since the Chenab is a tributary of the Indus), Toramāṇa entered the Ganges basin, following the river Yamunā. He conquered Mathurā, made his way to Kalpi and then entered the Betwa valley to head south towards Eran. This is of course the fixed point known to be in Tormana's history, since he must have

won a battle in the area, probably causing the death of the Gupta feudatory Mātrviṣṇu, and allowing himself to be proclaimed *mahārājādhirāja* in the Eran boar inscription of his year one. Bakker's account here parallels that of Fleet, who also knew of the Eran boar inscription.

Bakker continues beyond the account of Fleet by asserting that Toramāṇa's next step was an assault on the heart of the Gupta empire, as proven by his presence in the city of Kauśāmbī. The evidence for this is a sealing discovered in the excavations at that city. The stamp is that of the Ghoṣitārāma monastery of the city, but it is over-struck by a counterstamp with the name Toramāṇa. The counterstamp was obviously applied while the clay of the sealing was still wet (Thaplyal 1969). Since this sealing was discovered only in the 1960s, Fleet did not know of it.

Similarly, Fleet did not know of the Sanjeli copper plates, first published by Mehta and Thakkar 1978. Bakker incorporates them into his description of Toramāṇa's campaign as indicating that he returned to central India in year two or three of his reign to campaign through Rājasthān and Gujarat. The Sanjeli copper plates include one which dates itself as having been inscribed in the year 3 of the *mahārājādhirāja* Toramāṇa. The other two are dated in years 6 and 19, presumably of the same reign. Bakker conjectures that Toramāṇa undertook this campaign as he was looking for a route to the sea so that he could control the trade routes of western India.

Finally, Fleet and Bakker agree on 515 being the approximate date for the end of Toramāṇa's reign. Fleet arrived at this date by arguing that 515 must have been the approximate date for the start of the reign of Toramāṇa's son, Mihirakula. He knew of Mihirakula's Gwalior inscription of the year 17, and he dated this to roughly 532 by strong arguments to date the Mandsaur pillar inscription of Yaśodharman, who we know defeated Mihirakula, to approximately that date. Therefore, he argued, Mihirakula's reign must have started c. 515, which therefore must have been the final year of Toramāṇa's reign. Bakker, on the other hand, based his date on what he took to be the closing event of the campaign: the defeat of Toramāṇa at the hands of the Aulikara king Prakāśadharman, recounted in the Rīsthal inscription of the latter king. In it, Prakāśadharman is reported to be the one (Bakker 2020 p. 90) by whom the title 'Overlord' (*adhirāja*) of the Huṇā commander (*adhipa*) was nullified in battle, (though it) had been firmly established on earth by the time of King Toramāṇa, whose footstool had glittered with the sparkling jewels in the crowns of kings (that had bowed at his feet).

Bakker's account of Toramāṇa's campaign differs therefore from that of Fleet in three important ways, all of which are based on discoveries made long after Fleet's paper was written. He is more specific as to where Toramāṇa's campaign began, thanks to his own use of the Jain text, the *Kuvalayamālā*, leading to the “discovery” of Toramāṇa's capital. He recounts a campaign into the Gupta heartland, at least as far as Kauśāmbī. And he suggests a western campaign towards Sanjeli and the sea.

An Alternative Account of Toramāṇa's Campaign or the First Hunnic War

In Tandon 2020,²² I had proposed an alternative account of Toramāṇa's campaign, and this account resolves some anomalies in the descriptions of Fleet and Bakker. My construction followed many of the same lines as Fleet and Bakker, but I made use of several other pieces of evidence. First, I took advantage of the attribution of the coins in the name of Prakāśāditya to Toramāṇa and of the Nameless coins to the Huṇās more generally. The Nameless coins are found primarily in eastern Uttar Pradesh and that suggests that Toramāṇa and the Huṇās advanced deeper into the Gupta realm than Kauśāmbī. Second, I applied this suggestion to two other sources of literary evidence: that of the Sanskrit text, the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, and of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang.

I have already discussed these sources in the discussion on the Nameless coins above. These sources suggest that Toramāṇa waged a campaign in the Gangetic valley that had him go beyond Kauśāmbī to the Gupta heartland in eastern Uttar Pradesh and modern Bihar and then dying of natural causes in Vārāṇasī. The numismatic evidence of Toramāṇa issuing gold coins on the Gupta model in the heartland of the empire supports these accounts. A complete account of the First Hunnic War, therefore, should follow the series of steps enumerated below:

1. Toramāṇa commenced his campaign around the year 495. The date of 460 that Fleet had for the start of Toramāṇa's reign was the product of his having read the date 52 on one of Toramāṇa's silver coins. But that reading was not correct. The date of 498 adopted by Bakker is too late because then the terminal date of 515 would be only year 17 of his reign. This would put into question the Sanjeli copper plate dated to the year 19, presumably of Toramāṇa. Therefore the latest date for his year one in Eran would have to be 496. He could have commenced his campaign in 495 or 496 and arrived at Eran quickly. We can't date him in Eran any earlier because the Schøyen copper scroll inscription (Melzer 2006), issued at a time when Toramāṇa was surely still in Punjab, is dated to 495-96 (see Melzer 2006 and Bakker 2020, p. 48).
2. On the way to Eran, Toramāṇa must have passed through, and probably defeated a Gupta garrison in, Sanghol. Coins of the Guptas and of Toramāṇa have been found in excavations there (Ray 2010). Neither Fleet nor Bakker mention this site but it is the only one for which we have concrete evidence of the presence of both the Guptas and Toramāṇa between Punjab and Mālwa.
3. The principal event of Toramāṇa's campaign in Mālwa then took place in approximately 496 when he presumably defeated the army of the Guptas or their feudatories and established his year one in that region.
4. At some point within the next couple of years, he extended his campaign westward, bringing the area around Sanjeli under his sway and possibly expanding as far as the sea, as suggested by Bakker. There is no need to think he made a foray to Kauśāmbī at this time; logically, that happens during the next step.

²²In what follows, I draw heavily from this source.

5. Perhaps sometime early in the 6th century, Toramāṇa set his sights on the heart of the Gupta empire. Leaving a garrison in Mālwā, he headed back north to the Yamunā and headed east. He sacked Kauśāmbī, as detailed by Bakker, and continued further, reaching Vārāṇasī and proceeding even further east into Magadha. He defeated the Guptas, installed a puppet prince on the throne, presumably setting tribute terms, and returned to Vārāṇasī, where he fell ill and died.
6. There remains the question of properly explaining the events in Mālwā around the year 515, described in the Rīsthal inscription of Prakāśadharman. Scholars have presumed that Prakāśadharman defeated Toramāṇa and that this event marked the end of the latter's career. If correct, this interpretation would negate the assertion in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* that Toramāṇa died of natural causes in Kāśī. What if Prakāśadharman defeated not Toramāṇa but his appointed commander? The Rīsthal inscription does not have Prakāśadharman boasting of having brought Toramāṇa down in the way that the Mandsaur pillar inscription of Yaśodharman crows of his having reduced Mihirakula to bowing before him. Instead, the inscription speaks only of his having “nullified in battle” “the title 'Overlord' (*adhirāja*) of the Huṇa commander (*adhipa*).” Surely Toramāṇa, who is identified in the inscription as one “whose footstool had glittered with the sparkling jewels in the crowns of kings (that had bowed at his feet)” would not be addressed simply as *adhipa*. This is not a matter of honoring Toramāṇa; rather, it is a matter of glorifying Prakāśadharman. If he had truly defeated Toramāṇa, it would behoove him to make more of that feat. The tone of the inscription makes much more sense if we allow the commander defeated by Prakāśadharman to simply be Toramāṇa's appointed representative.²³ This interpretation would then allow the story of Toramāṇa's Gangetic valley campaign to stand unchallenged.

This account of Toramāṇa's campaign in India differs significantly from those of Fleet and Bakker. By adding a successful attack on the Gupta heartland, in which Toramāṇa reduced the Guptas to vassals of the Huṇās, it provides a much clearer picture of the extent to which the Huṇās brought down the Gupta Empire. Even though it appears that Narasimhagupta restored Gupta sovereignty by defeating Mihirakula, the restored Gupta state must have been in a considerably weakened condition, rendering it vulnerable to rising powers such as the Maukharīs. The demise of the Gupta empire was the inevitable consequence.

²³In an email exchange, Hans Bakker agreed that this was a plausible interpretation of the inscription.