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Liṅga or Buddhist Bell?

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Abstract:
A number of coins from the Taxila region recently made public show that an object inside a frame must be a metal bell, and not a śaiva *liṅga*, as was maintained in the recent past. The coins date to the early second century BC and show a bell in an area where Buddhist establishments were founded already by Asoka.

Keywords:
Early Indian numismatics, Śaivism, liṅga, Buddhist monatic life, bell, transitional period between Mauryas and Indo-Greek rule.

The realm of Aśoka certainly included Gandhara. Further west he could install his edicts as far as Nangarhar and Laghman, and towards the south, down to Kandahar. North of the Kabul plains, in Bactria, there ruled the Graeco-Bactrian kings of Macedonian stock. Around 200 BC several problems arose and weakened the Mauryan government. Possibly the most important was that the silver supply from the mines in the Aravelli mountains in Rajastan came to an end, because the ore could not be further exploited beyond the 250 m below ground-water level that had been reached (Craddock e.a. 1989: 66). This deficiency of fresh silver had an impact on the number of military forces that could be engaged to guard the western border. As a result, the Graeco-Bactrian king Demetrios I crossed the Hindu-Kush and thus became the first so-called Indo-Greek king. Agathokles and Pantaleon, his sons or relatives who succeeded him, took to ruling Nangarhar and Gandhara. In the meantime the choked silver supply had forced the local governors to issue a copper or rather bronze coinage, a sort of emergency currency. Some issuers were merchant guilds, and on their coppers they wrote *negama* or similar, Skt. *naigamaḥ,* "relating to the business center". A completely different set mostly showed the "moon-on-hill" (Fig. 1,a) by the side of various pictograms. It seems that the *negama* and the "moon-on-hill" series were developed without the Indo-Greek kings' collaboration, but soon the local agencies and the intruding Graeco-Bactrians worked together, the latter issuing what is now called Indo-Greek currency with Greek legends. Soon the copper types were supplemented by artful silver currency, the metal mined in the Panjeer valley and other places outside the former Mauryan reach.

This long introduction is meant to show that the coins we will discuss below derived from a politically unstable situation, when the Mauryas were on their way out but the Indo-Greeks were not yet firmly installed.

Because the mint station is unknown the term "Pushkalavati" is often used by numismatists for these emergency issues, although only a few pieces were unearthed at

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Charsadda, the old city of Puṣkalāvatī, Greek *peukelaotis.* Likewise, the assumption that some of the mints were at home in Taxila, east of the Indus, is justified. A voluminous treasure trove from there was bought by A. Cunningham (1882: 18). The collection showed that these coins can be classified into two groups. The first group shows the "moon-on-hill" by the side of one or more pictograms and has received the punches on one side only. This group was succeeded, but not replaced, by a second group of a higher weight, with different signs, punched on both sides. There is one single pictogram that occurs in both groups, and in the second phase it is the only one with a legend punched onto its reverse, in the western Brāhmī script. All other signs from the first group disappear.

This paper is about the single legend, its reading and its bearing on the interpretation of the pictogram. Previous descriptions of the pictogram never dealt with a reading, as Cunningham, Smith and Allan knew only pieces from the first phase, with blank reverse. Not long ago, a few inscribed pieces, formerly unknown, were published. W. Pieper (2013: 368) noted a specialist's first reading as *lapata raye*, with no translation. For a follow-up publication (Pieper 2015), I proposed to read *lohada*(*ṃ*)*ḍiyā*, which somehow would refer to an "iron staff".

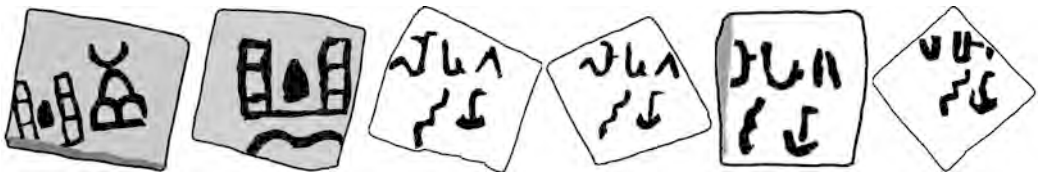

Fig. 1: So-called *liṅga*-in-railing of the 'Pushkalavati' series from Taxila a): VAuctions, Triskeles 28, 485 obv., 9.11 g.; b) zeno.ru #238805 obv., 7.36 g.; c) #238765 rev., 7.01 g.; d) #210056 rev., 7.41 g.; e) #238805 rev., 7.36 g.; f) #238760 rev., 6.86 g.

Still more recently, twelve further examples from this rare type were uploaded by J. Lingen to zeno.ru, where all of them can be inspected, the clearest cases under the numbers 210056, 219320, 238514, 238760, 238766, and 238805. We see that the Brāhmī belongs to the oldest phase, of Aśoka, with *o*-vowel-strokes on different levels and the short horizontal stroke of the *ha* below the tip of the right side vertical. This does not mean that the writing dates to the times of Aśoka, it only shows that in the west of the Mauryan empire, where Aramaic script and Kharoṣṭhī were employed, old letter forms were still alive.

The third letter was the last to be fully seen. First it appeared as a *ga,* but due to the letter touching the edge of the flan, a *gi* or *gu* was possible as well. No. 238805 (Fig. 1, c) now makes it fully clear that the plain *ga* shows no vowel stroke at all.

The legend continues in a second line below. The first letter looks like a stepped line slanting strongly towards the right. The earlier reading of *ra* or *ri* would require an upright position instead. In principle, an Aśokan *ra* can be a straight vertical line, or a wavy vertical line, or a series of "steps" amounting to a vertically oriented zig-zag line (cf. no. 238506 rev.). The new pieces make it clear that we see here the two ordinary steps of a letter *ḍa,* and a third step, being the angular, that means Mauryan style, addition of an *i*-vowel. The often supposed reading *ra* or *ri* can thus be given up and must be replaced by an ordinary, again Aśokan-style, *ḍi.*

The last letter is a *yā* which was always beyond question. Together we get an indisputable *lohagaḍiyā. Loha* means iron or copper or bronze, in any case a standard working metal. What then is *gaḍiyā?*

Unfortunately, the writers of the time do not always mark nasals. Some writers do, but most don't. Accordingly, our *gaḍi/gaḍiyā* could also be *gaṇḍi/gaṇḍiyā.* Likewise, some clerks do not mark long vowels, so that we have to reckon with *gaḍi, gāḍi, gaḍī, gāḍī, gaṇḍi, gāṇḍi, gaṇḍī* and *gāṇḍī.* In addition, the closing *-yā* could either be a case ending or part of the stem, and then, being close to Gandhara, the form could represent *gaṇḍikā.* To make a long story short: only *gaṇḍi/gaṇḍikā* make sense, and in both forms this refers to a "bell" or "gong". I opt for the nominative, *gaḍiyā=gaṇḍikā,*[1] in line with legends like Brāhmī *negama, negame, negamā, nekamā, dojaka, dojakā* Kharoṣṭhī *dojaka, koṭhare* etc. on the contemporary merchants' series from Taxila.

Such a *gaṇḍi/gaṇḍikā* is an essential feature of Buddhist monasteries, in that with its help points in time (e.g. eating time, *bhojanakāla*, Mūlasarvastivādavinaya, Pravrajyā-vastu) are audibly marked, regulating the beginning and the end of a number of daily duties. Today in Sri Lanka we often find a piece of a railroad iron suspended for that purpose. In other parts of the Buddhist world a "long, symmetrically shaped, piece of wood" (Thomas 1914: 753) is used.[2]

Our compound *loha-gaṇḍi* or *-gaṇḍikā* would thus describe a hollow tubular bell or a flat gong, not wooden as usual, but made from metal.

Let us have a look at the obverse, and keep in mind that whenever realia are depicted on the obverse of a Taxilian copper coin, they are depicted *en face*. Not from the side, not from above, not in an angular perspective. What do we see? The design shows two vertical rows of squares and an object in their middle. The interpretation of this design started with A. Cunningham (1891: 61), who saw a "stūpa in its courtyard". This was repeated with somewhat more detail by Allan in 1936 (p. cxxxiii), who spoke of "the plan of the courtyard of a monastery with cells around and a stupa in the centre," thus presupposing the bird eye's view of an archaeologist enlarging it with a *stūpa* in side view.

The change came with A. Samad (2012: 21), who identified the object as a *liṅga.* A "*Lingam* in railing" is then also found in Pieper (2013: 368b, no. 1101) and in the data accompanying the collection of J. Lingen (2020) on zenu.ru and in recent auction lists.

What has a Buddhist "metal bell" on the reverse to do with a *liṅga* on the front side? Let us have another look. There are two ladder-like figures left and right of the supposed "*liṅga*", connected by a ground-line. The *liṅga* floats above the ground-line, and in most cases we see a wavy line below it, expressing a waterway in the vicinity. Why is the assumed *liṅga* not on the ground-line? What is the use of the two upright constructions? There are many railings on coins from the time, but they are shown *en face*, mostly with four vertical stands and three horizontal bars. Our supposed *liṅga*

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1. A vernacular *gaṇḍiyā* equals Sanskrit *gaṇḍikā*, which is absent from standard dictionaries, but found in the Kāraṇḍavyūha 13.8 where hitting (*ākoṭ*) the gong distinguishes a fervent Buddhist, and in a Buddhist Yoga manual (Schlingloff 1964: 169, 161R3), where someone watches the Buddha hit (*ākoṭ*) a *gaṇḍīkā*. As a result the sound fills the world all over.

2. According to Pannapadipo (2005: 138), in present-day Thailand bells are used to summon for the morning and evening prayers while they serve also as an alarm clock for the peasants in the vicinity.

railing is not of that common sort. Therefore I propose to see in this construction not a classical *śaiva* stone *liṅga* in a railing, seen partly in a bird-eye's view, but a metal bell or gong suspended in the air, hanging from a rope fixed to the two vertical ladder-like supports. The comparatively thin suspending rope is not shown. If it were, the idea of a *liṅga* would never have come up.

This way we have a bell suspended from a rack consisting of two ladder-like stands, to be seen on the obverse, and a short inscription on the reverse speaking of a "metal bell/gong". If we had only one of the two sides as the basis for an interpretation, doubts would reasonably remain. But with this mutually corroborative evidence any other explanation will appear unlikely.

The *liṅga* on a "Pushkalavati" coin was made known only recently and can now disappear without much loss, as Indian archaeology knows of no such objects before the first century AD (Kreisel 1986). Also, literary evidence for their worship is absent even from the first centuries AD. One of the earliest groups of *śaiva* ascetics, the Pāśupatas, "do not mention *liṅga* worship with a single word", and "during the first centuries of the Christian era, the brahmanical elite, whether priest, king or renouncer, preferred to venerate Maheśvara in iconic form and frowned upon liṅga worship" (Bakker 2001, repr. 2019: 498). Śaiva cults certainly were practiced in Gandhara in the second century BC. Personal names bear ample witness. But to expect a stone *liṅga* at the beginning of the second century BC would be anachronistic. Instead, on the coins under review we see an object of a seemingly Buddhist background. Was there a Buddhism-inspired group of issuers of the first run of the Pushkalavati coppers? Whatever its ideological background was, this first group seems to have lost influence when the second range of doubly punched coins took over.

At the moment we may not fully understand the role played by Buddhist groups in the formation of the emergency currency used in Gandhara after the withdrawal of the Mauryas. But we can be sure that no numismatic *liṅga* contradicts the evidence presented by archaeology and literature.

Acknowledgement

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