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Antecessor and successor of Imperial Kushāṇas in Kauśāmbī

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Abstract

A scrutiny of the numismatic issues of the post-Kushāṇa phase in the Kauśāmbī region establishes that the region escaped the prepollent grasp of the Imperial Kushāṇas, courtesy of Bhīmasena, whose publicised his declaration of sovereignty by issuing coins and embracing the title of Mahārāja. Furthermore, as a corollary, the paper will also prove that Prajāpatimitra was the local ruler of Kauśāmbī when the Kushāṇa juggernaut under Kanishka steamrolled through it along with other local polities lying to the east of it.

Keyword: Kauśāmbī, Kushāṇas, Bhīmasena, Prajāpatimitra

Introduction

Kanishka's suzerainty over Kauśāmbī, Sāketa, Pāṭaliputra and Champā is asseverated by the Rabatak inscription^[1]. The Kushāṇa control over Kauśāmbī and other satrapies to the east of it seems to have ended during Huvishka's reign as there is no mention of Huvishka or any of his successors in the epigraphic records found from this region. It seems some politically conscious feudatories, aware that there would not be any Imperial backlash, seceded from the Empire. As more and more evidence started emanating, Indologists started proposing different contenders for the claim of being the liberator of Kauśāmbī and so there seems to be a lack of unanimity amongst scholars pertaining to the discernment of the ruler who raised the banner of revolt and started issuing his coins after attaining independence from the Imperial Kushāṇas.

Bhīmasena

During the cold season of 1883-84, Alexander Cunningham while on tour in the Bundelkhand and Rewa regions noticed an inscription in a cave near the top of the Ginja hill, about 40 miles to the south-west of Prayagraj. The epigraph dated in the year 52 of the reign of Mahārāja Śrī Bhīmasena and the style of recording the date agreeing with that used by sovereigns like Kanishka, Huvishka, and Vāsudeva, he took the samvat employed as the era of the Seleukidae and concluded that the year corresponds with 140 AD^[2]. John Marshall reported a sealing from Bhita dating from the 2nd or 3rd century AD onward, of a Rājā Vāsishṭhīputra Bhīmasena, a king he thought was connected with the Andhra line^[3]. According to K.P. Jayaswal, the Bhīmasena of the Ginja inscription and Bhita seal was the governor of Kauśāmbī and probably a son of Pravarasena ruling in 300 AD^[4]. In March 1938 an inscription was discovered by N.P. Chakravarti at Bandhogarh dated in the year 51 of Mahārāja Vāsishṭhīputra Śrī Bhīmasena^[5]. Motichandra^[6] and Mirashi^[7] took Bhīmasena as the first ruler of the line of local kings in Kauśāmbī in the 2nd century AD. Altekar surmised that Bhīmasena ruled in the jungles of Baghelkhand and never controlled Kauśāmbī^[8]. The credit for taking Kauśāmbī from the Kushāṇas by diplomacy or a coupe is given by him to Bhadramagha who expanded the kingdom during the reign of his father Poṭhasiri and managed to rule the city as an independent ruler^[9]. In 1946, S.S. Roy published a coin of Bhīmasena with the obverse showing a tree in railing above, immediately below a small nandipada symbol, and a circular legend beginning at IX to the left of the railing legend in bold Kushāṇa script "Raja Bhīmasena"^[10]. The reverse depicted a bull facing right^[11].

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Thus, the statement made by JN Banerjea and Jagannath in 1957 that Bhīmasena did not mint coins ^[12] for he was a feudatory of the Imperial Kushāṇas is fallacious. In 1958, S Chattopadhyaya asserted that the earliest defection from the Kushāṇa empire seems to have been Kauśāmbī with Bhīmasena carving out for himself a kingdom when Huvishka was still in power ^[13].

Magha

In 1951, D.C. Sircar suggested that the dynasty that replaced the Imperial power in Kauśāmbī may have been founded by a lieutenant of the Kushāṇas named Magha ^[14]. The Kauśāmbī hoard of the Magha coins brought to light a coin with a hill on the left and a tree-in-railing on the right on the obverse and a bull standing to the right on the reverse ^[15]. The only plausible restoration of the incomplete legend as “Mahārāja Magha” ^[16] done by A.M. Shastri allowed the ascertainment of the genesis of the dynastic appellation Magha. This founder of the dynasty, according to Shastri, preceded Bhīmasena ^[17].

Dhanadeva

Cunningham, in 1891, revealed the existence of numerous coins of a king named Dhanadeva with Bull and tree-in-railing motifs ^[18]. John Allan published a coin of this king in 1936 and assigned him to the early centuries AD ^[19]. Sircar placed him roughly between the 1st century BC and the 4th Century AD ^[20]. On paleographic grounds, K.D. Bajpai gave him a more specific date of 3rd century AD ^[21]. This king must have been associated with the Varanasi region too, a fact attested by the discovery of a large number of his sealings from the 1940 excavation of Rajghat ^[22]. Bela Lahiri, noticing the similarity between the form of the tree device on the coins of Rajanīmitra, who in her opinion was the last member of the Mitra dynasty, and on Dhanadeva's issues adjudged the latter to be the earliest monarch in Kauśāmbī in the post-Kushāṇa phase ^[23]. W. Pieper echoed Lahiri's placing of Dhanadeva ^[24].

Nava

In 1906, V.A. Smith brought to light some Kosam-type coins on which, following Rapson, he had read *devasa* ^[25]. KP Jayaswal corrected it to *NA* after comparing the first letter with the letter occurring in the scripts from the first century AD to the third ^[26]. Taking the symbol above the legend to be a Nāga, he assigned the coin to the founder of the Nava Nāga dynasty of the Purāṇas whose official title was Bhāraśivas ^[27]. This king was assumed to be an independent ruler in the eastern part of the United Provinces in the reign of Vāsudeva ruling between c. 140-170 AD ^[28]. Altekār initially placed this Nava after the end of the Magha dynasty between c. 300-320 AD, ^[29] but later influenced by the stratigraphic position of Nava's coins changed his stance and accepted Nava as a predecessor rather than a successor of the Maghas in Kauśāmbī ^[30]. In 1968, GR Sharma and JS Negi emphatically concluded that Jayaswal's intuitive characterisation of King Nava as the heroic Indian who ousted the Kushāṇas from eastern U.P. is supported in Kauśāmbī archaeology ^[31]. A very conservative statement was made in 1976 by B.N. Mukherjee that either Mahārāja Magha, Nava, or some other member of the Magha family succeeded the Kushāṇas in Kauśāmbī ^[32].

Chronological arrangement based on coin motifs

With a hill and tree-in-railing on the obverse and bull to the right on the reverse, Magha seems to be closest to Bhādrāmagha (and Praushthāśrī). Dhanadeva with a tree-in-

railing on the obverse and hill symbol on the reverse seems to have preceded Magha. Nava and Bhīmasena without the hill symbol are definitely pre-dhanadeva. Since the legend on the coins of Bhīmasena is written circularly, as opposed to the coins of Nava and Dhanadeva where the legend is written in a horizontal line, Bhīmasena appears to be the earliest in this group.

Pre-Kushāṇa Kauśāmbī

To aid the appointment of the successor of the Imperial Kushāṇas in the Kosam area, the pre-Kushāṇa Kauśāmbī phase has to be brought into play. In 1942, A.S. Altekār announced the discovery of nine new kings ruling at Kauśāmbī when he brought to light coins from the collection of Rai Bahadur Braj Mohan Vyas ^[33]. A coin, found from Ramnagar but issued from Kauśāmbī, bearing a tree-in-railing in the upper half and circular legend below (IX-III) restored as *Rajanīm [itasa]*, was enough for Altekār to justify the pronouncement of a new king named Rajanīmitra ^[34]. He found the name of the king a little peculiar because the first part of the name is feminine ^[35]. The similarity of the tree-in-railing with the coins of Nava and the palaeography of the coin also being nearer to him, he concluded Rajanīmitra to be one of the near predecessors of the king who issued the coins with the legend *Navasa* ^[36]. Another coin portraying a circular legend and carrying a tree within railing in the centre to the left and a portion of the Ujjayini symbol to the right on the obverse with a bull to the right and a three-arched hill on a platform on the reverse was published by Altekār ^[37]. The circular legend was restored by the scholar as *Pajapati [mitasa]* ^[38]. In part II of the same issue, Altekār reported two more coins of Prajāpatimitra with a tree within railing on the obverse and a Bull with the Ujjayini symbol above it on the reverse ^[39]. Bela Lahiri placed Prajāpatimitra and Rajanīmitra, two kings connected by the arrangement of their coin legends written circularly along the margin instead of in straight lines as was the custom prevailing with Mitra kings, about the middle of the first century AD ^[40]. In the excavations conducted at Kauśāmbī, sub-period IV has yielded coins of the second Mitra dynasty, including Prajāpatimitra ^[41]. The layers intervening between sub-period IV and V gave the coin of Rajanīmitra ^[42]. Coins and seals of the Kushāṇa kings were found in the strata lying between sub-periods V and VI while sub-period VI yielded many coins of the Kushāṇas, King Nava, and the Magha rulers ^[43].

Verdict

In 1963, KD Bajpai eliminated the existence of a king named Rajanīmitra by correctly pointing out that what has been read as “*NI*” by Altekār is actually “*BHĪ*” and consequently the legend should be restored as *Rājā Bhīma [Sena]* ^[44]. Thus, the stratigraphic evidence effectually places Bhīmasena before Nava and the Magha rulers. The circular placement of the legend and the choice of motifs on the coins of Bhīmasena seem to have been influenced by the issues of Prajāpatimitra. Coins of Prajāpatimitra with tree-in-railing on the obverse and bull to right on the reverse would have been in circulation when Kanishka conquered Kauśāmbī because Prajāpatimitra was most probably the last Mitra ruler of Kauśāmbī. After the short stay of the Kushāṇas, when Bhīmasena wrested the Kauśāmbī region from them he, although allowing the Kushāṇa coins to remain in circulation for some time, seems to have chosen the coin of the last indigenous ruler who ruled in the region as inspiration to mint his currency. Thus, it seems to be quite certain that a fastidious investigation of the local numismatic issues found from Kauśāmbī aids the

placement of two monarchs, namely Prajāpatimitra and Bhīmasena, in the chronological framework, with the former being the last Mitra ruler who ruled the region before it got enveloped in the expanding Kushāṇa empire and the latter as the monarch who orchestrated the secession of Kauśāmbī from the Kushāṇa empire.

Table 1: Taking the motifs and the arrangement of the legend into account, this seems to be the sequential order of the select numismatic issues of the local rulers of Kauśāmbī.

King	Obverse	Reverse
Prajāpatimitra ^[45]	Tree-in-railing, nandipada and Ujjayini symbol, circular legend	Bull to right
Bhīmasena ^[46]	Tree-in-railing, nandipada, circular legend	Bull to right
Nava ^[47]	Spear, tree-in-railing and chowrie, in a row from left to right	Bull to right
Dhanadeva ^[48]	Tree-in-railing	Bull to left and before it three arched hill
Magha ^[49]	Three arched hill on the left; tree-in-railing on the right	Bull to right
Praushthaśrī ^[50]	Three arched hill on the left; tree-in-railing on the right	Bull to right
Bhadramagha ^[51]	Three arched hill on the left; tree-in-railing on the right	Bull to right

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