

The Lion Conqueror Type of Kumaragupta I

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A few years ago, I acquired a gold coin of Kumaragupta I that had appeared in a CNG auction.² The cataloguer, saying it was a new variety, had dubbed the coin the “Lion Conqueror” type because of the extraordinary pose of the king, who stands triumphantly over the carcass of the lion he has presumably just killed. In fact, there is at least one other coin that shows the king in this posture, a coin in the U.P. State Museum in Lucknow that has been published by P.L. Gupta.³ Gupta had named the coin the “Lion Killed Type,” but that seems like an odd name for it. All Gupta coin types are identified by the action or position of the king or principal subject (the Archer, the Lyrist, the Horseman, the Lion-Slayer, etc.), so it seems odd to identify the coin type by the fact that the *lion* portrayed in it has already been killed. I therefore, prefer the title “Lion-Conqueror,” which aptly describes the attitude of the king on the coin. Be that as it may, I had the opportunity to examine the Gupta coin on a recent visit to the Lucknow museum, and to photograph it anew. Since the photograph in Gupta’s paper is very dark, I will provide another photo here, along with a new reading of the obverse legend and some other observations about the coin, some of which are at odds with Gupta’s description. Then I will provide a photo of my own coin, which has a different legend and therefore qualifies as a new variety of the type.



Figure 1: Lucknow Museum Accession No. 11586
Coin details: Weight: 8.16 gm, Diameter: 20 mm, Die axis: 1 o'clock

The Lucknow coin is shown in Figure 1 and is very interesting for several reasons. The obvious one is that the king is not engaged in the act of fighting or killing the lion, with the normal pose of holding a drawn bow and aiming an arrow at the lion,⁴ but rather is standing triumphantly over the animal’s carcass with his hands apparently on

his hips. But there are several other interesting features of the coin. The obverse legend is unknown from any other coin. Gupta had “doubtfully” read it as *Mahata vira*. This reading appears to be incorrect. Rather, as can be seen from the detail in Figure 2, the visible part of the legend reads *sihanivārī* (one who wards off the lion).⁵ Perhaps this coin commemorates the slaying of a man-eater who was terrorizing the people. Apart from the fresh reading, there are two notable things about this legend. First, it appears that there is a *chandrabindu* between the first and second letters, perhaps intending to spell out *simhanivārī*. This would be an unusual rendition and it would be worthwhile for an epigraphist to comment on this. Second, it could be that the visible part of the legend is all the legend there was. There is a hint of perhaps a couple of letters at around 3 o’clock; if these are indeed letters, the legend continues, although it is not legible. But, if they are not letters, the legend is very short and in sharp contrast to the normal lion-slayer type of Kumaragupta, where the legend goes all around the obverse of the coin. One last observation I would like to make about the obverse is that the king seems to be holding his bow in his lap or in front of his body, a feature that had not been noted by Gupta.



Figure 2: Legend detail of Lucknow coin

The reverse of the coin is also interesting. On the surface, it has the usual figure of the goddess Lakshmi seated on a couchant lion, along with the legend *mahendrasimha*. But we can then observe some unique features. First, while the goddess is normally (*i.e.*, on most of Kumaragupta’s lion-slayer coins) seated either on the lion’s back or on a cushion placed on the lion’s back, here it appears she is seated on a *lotus* placed on the lion’s back. We can see three petals of the lotus under Lakshmi’s leg. Second, while the normal Kumaragupta lion-slayer type coins have a *tamgha*, or geometric symbol, in the left field, here we have the title *śrī*. P.L. Gupta had noted the presence of a letter in the left field, but rendered it as “*ga* or *gu*.” However, it clearly reads *śrī*. This is a very important observation, because later gold coins from Bengal frequently have this title accompanying the image of Lakshmi; this is perhaps the first occurrence of this phenomenon, and perhaps suggests that this coin also was made somewhere in the eastern part of the Gupta empire. The presence of this title on the coin also solidifies the identification of the deity as Lakshmi. Third, while Lakshmi normally holds her (proper) right arm more or less horizontally in an outstretched position, here she holds it bent upward, although we cannot see what (if anything) she is holding in that hand. Gupta, in his description of the coin, asserted that Lakshmi held “a small *pāśa* in the left hand and the right hand upraised with a garland most likely of *muṇḍa* (skull)”, but this statement seems radically incorrect. The left hand clearly holds a lotus stalk, with the lotus blossom shown in the right field, and there is no evidence at all of any kind of garland or other object in the right hand.



Figure 3: Tandon Collection, inventory number 591.07
Coin details: Weight: 8.27 gm, Diameter: 20 mm, Die axis: 12 o'clock



Figure 4: Legend detail of Tandon coin

Let us turn now to the new variety of the Lion Conqueror type from my collection, shown in Figure 3. Once again, we have the figure of the king standing in a triumphant pose with hands on his hips and his foot resting on his trophy: the carcass of a lion. He holds a bow in front of his body, more prominent here than on the Lucknow coin. The legend runs only from 12 o'clock to 3 o'clock; it clearly does not continue beyond this, which certainly marks the coin as highly unusual in the Kumaragupta oeuvre and suggests that perhaps the legend on the Lucknow coin is also short. The first two letters are unclear, but, as we see in the detail image of the legend in Figure 4, the remainder reads *nripādhipatih* (overlord over kings).⁶ Thus the coin emphasizes the king's imperial position and this suggests to me the particular aptness of "Lion Conqueror" to name this type. The conquest over the lion is of course only a metaphor for the conquest and overlordship over kings. It would be nice to have a full reading of the legend, but the first two letters are problematic. An ideal solution might have been to see the expected *siha* or *simha*, since this word appears on all lion-themed Gupta coins. While the first letter could well be *si*, the second letter appears to be *la* rather than *ha*. But no clear reading that makes sense emerges from these observations. One possibility is

that the second letter *la* is really a retrograde *ha* and that the intended legend is the expected *śimhanripādhipatih* (lion overlord over kings). Given the artistic quality of the execution of the coin and the legend, it seems unlikely that the die cutter would make the error of carving a retrograde letter, but I am unable to offer a better reading at this point. Certainly we do expect to see the word *śimha* in the legend, particularly seeing that it does appear in the legend of the Lucknow coin.

The reverse of the coin, as before, features the figure of the goddess Lakshmi seated in *lalitasana* on a couchant lion right. But there are several differences from the reverse of the Lucknow coin. First, the legend here reads *śrī mahendrasi(m)ha*, adding the word *śrī*. This suggests the possibility that the word *śrī* on the Lucknow coin might have been intended as the king's title rather than Lakshmi's. Second, the goddess is seated on a more normal cushion atop the lion, rather than on a lotus. Third, while the right hand is upraised, as on the Lucknow coin, here we see that she holds the long and sinuous stem of a lotus blossom, which is depicted clearly in the left field above her hand. One wonders if this suggests that the Lakshmi in the Lucknow coin also holds a lotus in her upraised right hand, although no stem is visible on that coin. Finally, the word *śrī* is not present in the left field, but neither is the normal *tamgha*; the space in the left field is occupied instead by a lotus bud emanating from the long stem. The overall artistic quality of the coin, as of the Lucknow example, is very high.



**Figure 5: Lion-slayer coin of Kumaragupta I,
Lucknow Museum Acc No. 11594
Coin details: Weight: 8.12 gm, Diameter: 18 mm, Die axis: 12 o'clock**

It is natural to wonder about the relationship between these two coins. One thing that is clear is that, although the coins are struck from different obverse and reverse dies, these dies are unquestionably the work of a single hand. The overall style is very much the same on the two coins. It is particularly noticeable in the rendition of the lion, with its three-quarter face, and in the figure of Lakshmi. I have found another coin in the Lucknow Museum's collection that is also clearly cut by the same die cutter; this coin is

shown in Figure 5. Interestingly enough, this coin also lacks the usual *tamgha* on the reverse, showing instead multiple stems of the lotus blossom in Lakshmi's hand.⁷ Unfortunately, I have been unable to read the obverse legend, but it appears to be different from all the legends known so far as none of them seem to "fit" given the shape of the letters that are visible.

Thus we have three coins made at the same place and more or less at the same time, of high artistic quality, and with several unique features that distinguish them from Kumaragupta's normal lion-slayer type coins. Determining the significance of these coins, and teasing out what they might tell us about Gupta culture and history remains a matter for future research.

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² Classical Numismatic Group, Triton IX, New York, January 10-11, 2006, lot 1200.

³ Parmeshwari Lal Gupta: "A new gold coin type of Kumaragupta I," *Numismatic Digest*, Vol. 17 (1993), pp. 37-39.

⁴ Figure 5 illustrates an example of the more normal lion-slayer type of Kumaragupta I, showing the king in the usual pose.

⁵ The legend was read by Shailendra Bhandare and Harry Falk concurred. Shailen pointed out the similarity of this word with the title *sihanihantā* seen on Kumaragupta's elephant-rider lion-slayer type.

⁶ The legend was read successfully by Harry Falk; Shailendra Bhandare concurred with this reading.

⁷ Ellen Raven pointed out another coin that shares the same style as these three, number 179 in Parmeshwari Lal Gupta and Sarojini Srivastava: *Gupta Gold Coins in Bharata Kala Bhavan*, Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University, 1981. This coin has been identified in the catalogue as a distinct variety, with Lakshmi holding a lotus in each hand, thereby conforming to the coin in Figure 5.