

SOURCEBOOK FOR THE SHAHI KINGDOMS*

Hindu Śāhi Coinage: Towards a New Chronology¹

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From the beginning of the 9th century (c. 822 CE), the Hindu Śāhi dynasty took control of part of the Indo-Iranian borderlands replacing the Turk Śāhi and extending their power from Kābulistān to Gandhāra (Rahman 1993, 1998; Inaba 2018: 137). Throughout their reign, the Hindu Śāhi rulers represented the main political counterpart to the Abbasid Caliphate in the area.

Hindu Śāhi coinage offers insight into the economic policy of the areas under the control of the dynasty and constitutes a turning point in the monetary history of the regions, also affecting the subsequent coin issues, including the Islamic ones. For these reasons, the necessity to deepen the study of Hindu Śāhi coinage was recognized. The main issues are in silver and belong to the “bull and horseman” type: on the obverse, the bull Nandi below a legend in Proto-Śāradā script (usually Śrī + name or title + *Deva*); on the reverse, a knight holding a spear.

State of the research

The first classification of the Hindu Śāhi coins was the work of David MacDowall, published in 1968, in which he examined coins belonging to private and public collections, especially European ones. Making use of spectrographic analyses to detect the silver content, his typological and metrological classification of the issues is still used by scholars as a chronological reference today:

- Spalapati Deva (c. 750-850);
- Vakka Deva (c. 800-850);
- Sāmanta Deva (c. 850-970);
- Khudavayaka (c. 870s);
- Bhīma Deva (c. 955);
- Sāmanta Deva Billion issues (approx. 1000).²

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¹ The present paper presents a preview and summary of the study carried out on the Hindu Śāhi coinage for the project “Cultural Formation and Transformation.” The final results and chronology will be presented in the contribution to the final volume of the project (title: *Hindu Śāhi coinage*). This volume will contain two other studies by the author: the Hindu Śāhi coins from archaeological excavations (title: *Coin Finds of the Śāhi Kingdoms from the Indo-Iranian borderlands*; with E. Shavarebi) and the Islamic coins from the archaeological excavations from Qol-e Tut (title: *The Coin Finds from Qol-e Tut*; with M. Alam, N. Schindel, and Z. Paiman). Our participation in the project has allowed us to complete the study of the numismatic material from the excavations of Ghazni and Tapa Sardār carried out by the Italian Archaeological Mission. The publication of the numismatic material is being finalized (with M. Alam, and introductions by G. Verardi and R. Giunta).

² The attribution of these authorities and/or titles of these coins to individual kings of the dynasty is nearly impossible; the only ones that seem to find correspondence in al-Bīrūnī’s list are Sāmanta (= Sāmānd) and Bhīma (=Bhīm), but these attributions are questioned (MacDowall 1968: 190). This gap has had a direct consequence on the long-debated chronology of this coinage.

The issues of Spalapati Deva (with the legend *Śrī Spalapati Deva*) are of the “bull and horseman” type, both in silver and bronze. *Spalapati* may derive from a Sanskritized version of an Iranian military title (MacDowall 1968:191).³ The issues with *Śrī Vakka Deva*, in bronze, partly contemporary with those of the previous type, bear for the first time the “lion and elephant” type, which remained unchanged on all the bronze issues of the dynasty. *Śrī Sāmanta Deva*’s coins exist in silver and bronze, with the “bull and horseman” and “lion and elephant” types, respectively.⁴ The issues of Khudavayaka (*Śrī Khudavayaka*), in silver, would be connected to the Saffarid conquest of Kābul (c. 870), above all due to the presence of the term *‘adl* (“justice”) in Arabic script on the reverse of one of the two classes (*ibid.*: 198, 211).⁵ The latest issues are those of Bhima Deva (*Śrī Bhīma Deva*), in silver and bronze.

From the end of the 10th century, a series of billon coins were struck bearing the title *Śrī Sāmanta Deva*. Generically, “post-Śāhi” is the denomination used to identify these coins, either issue from the last years of the dynasty or, more likely, coins minted by Muslim and non-Muslim rulers who adopted the Hindu Śāhi monetary model in the areas that had been under the control of this dynasty.

The second major study on the Śāhi is by Abdur Rahman (1976) and is also based on the use of historical and epigraphic sources. He attributes the coins of Spalapati Deva to the period of the Turk Śāhi; the issues of the Hindu Śāhi would officially begin with those of Sāmanta Deva. The chronology is partly established on that proposed by D. MacDowall (*ibid.*: 185, 196).

The reappraisal of the work

The author started a new study on the coinage of the Hindu Śāhi analyzing a group of coins currently held by the Münzkabinett of the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna (KHM). The material includes 231 specimens: 220 in silver, 9 in billon, and 2 in bronze. One of the bronze coins bears the legend *Śrī Spalapati Deva*, while the other belongs to the “lion and elephant” type of *Śrī Sāmanta Deva*.⁶

Most of the classified specimens belong to the Spalapati Deva and Sāmanta Deva groups. A small cluster of coins falls within the class of Khudavayaka; some coins are “post-Śāhi” issues.⁷

The KHM conducted XRF analyses on 76 Spalapati and Sāmanta Deva coins to detect the silver content and confirm the origin of the metal from the mining areas of Panjshir, located in the northeastern part of Afghanistan and under the control of the Hindu Śāhi.

³ An Old Persian title with **spāda-* (“army”) and *-pati-* (“military commander”) (*ibid.*: 191-192; Deyell 1990: 52). In Alram (2016: 153, no. 1) the legend is translated with “Seine Exzellenz, der den Heerführer (=Indra) als seine (persönliche) Gottheit hat.”

⁴ MacDowall (*ibid.*: 192) argues that *Sāmanta* has the same significance as *Spalapati* in Sanskrit; Deyell (*ibid.*: 52) translates it with “feudatory chief.” Alram (*ibid.*: 153, no. 2) translates it with “Seine Exzellenz, der den Universellen (= Brahma) als seine (persönliche) Gottheit hat.”

⁵ This assumption requires reevaluation. In light of the studies carried out and thanks to some unpublished specimens kept at the FINT, the Khudavayaka issues could be connected to the Zabulistān area and not to Kābulistān. In this regard, I express my thanks to Sebastian Hanstein, current director of the FINT, and Lutz Ilisch for giving me the chance to study these unpublished specimens.

⁶ A final detailed catalogue of these specimens will be included in the final contribution on the Hindu Śāhi coinage.

⁷ Our classification is based on that proposed by MacDowall.

Upcoming results of the research

On the whole coinage of this dynasty, we are conducting metrological, typological, iconographic, historical, and archaeological analyses, all aspects that provide more details on coins, as well as more updated historical-political and economic descriptions of the Hindu Śāhi kingdom. While D. MacDowall's relative chronology is still valid, it will be possible to review it in absolute chronological terms, especially as regards the beginning of the first issue of the Hindu Śāhi. One of the main lines of investigation that we are using lies in a careful comparison with the contemporary Islamic issues of the area—Abbasid and Saffarid. This last dynasty became primarily responsible for the Islamic expansionism towards the east and the first contacts/clashes with the Hindu Śāhi. Furthermore, the “bull and horseman” type was issued over a long period and influenced both Islamic and non-Islamic issues for at least five centuries (Tye and Tye 1995), with production peaking between the advent of the Ghaznavid dynasty (977-1186) and the Mongol invasion (first half of the 13th century).

This type of analysis integrates itself with the main study guidelines of the Shahi project, based on the concepts of cultural transfer and cultural mobility, in particular linked to the “zones of contact” that provide, respectively, a core geographic area and an extended zone of contact within which we will examine the meaning and function of the material culture (Klimburg-Salter 2010: 40). This approach refers to that also theorized by Finbarr B. Flood (2009), who put particular emphasis on the interpretation of cultural transfers along the Hindu-Muslim borders. Indeed, unlike the borders with the Byzantine Empire, the eastern frontier of the Abbasid Caliphate included a series of urban centers where different cultures could overlap, creating spheres of political and cultural influence, as well as areas of overlap in material production.⁸ The coinage of the Hindu Śāhi and the contemporary Islamic issues are an example of this cultural overlap, and only through a careful analysis of both components will it be possible to obtain a more complete and exhaustive reconstruction of the historical and economic scenario of the Indo-Iranian borderlands; this approach can help to define fundamental aspects of Hindu Śāhi monetary production.⁹

The study of this coinage as part of a continuous historical process that starts from the Hindu Śāhi will make it possible to gain insight into the economic and monetary policies, as well as the circulation of the coins in the territory through the new archaeological investigations.

⁸As noted by Flood (2009: 24), this difference is also reflected in the expressions used to identify the different nature of the borders in the *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*, an anonymous work by a 10th-century Persian geographer. The two most used terms for “borders” are *ḥadd* and *thaghr*. The former often identifies boundaries of political authority within and outside *dār al-Islām*, while *thaghr* refers to the outer boundaries, subject to hostile attacks by non-believers. The Abbasid border with the Byzantine Empire was the *thaghr* par excellence, while the eastern frontier lacked the *‘awāṣim*, a buffer zone preceding the *thaghr* proper. In fact, for the *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*, Ghazni was located on the border (*ḥadd*) between Muslims and non-believers (Anonymous, *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*: 104), using the same expression for the borders between the Arab Maṣūra and its dependency of Daybul (Flood 2009: 24). Therefore, the second term highlights the nature of the centers located on the boundaries defined as *ḥadd*, suggesting that they could be crossed. This characteristic of human and cultural mobility is also found in the description of centers such as, precisely, Ghazni and Bust, as crossing centers to reach Sind.

⁹ From a monetary point of view, the influences in the Islamic coinage are seen in the use of the “bull and horseman” type and Śāhi flans. These phenomena started with the Islamic dynasties of the Saffarids (861-1003) and the Samanids (819-1005) (Annucci 2022).

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