

# The Inscriptions on the Tillya-tepe and Pushkalavati Coins: Epigraphic, Linguistic, and Literary Remarks

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This article discusses paleographic and linguistic aspects of the Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions on the Tillya-tepe and Pushkalavati coins and adduces some epigraphic and literary parallels. It proposes a syntactically separate reading of the two sides of the Tillya-tepe coin, and concludes that in spite of some differences of execution the coins may have been produced in the same workshop.

In the preceding article, Joe Cribb summarized and discussed the various readings and interpretations suggested for the inscriptions on the Tillya-tepe and Pushkalavati coins. I here provide a more detailed paleographic and linguistic analysis and suggest some parallels from Buddhist literature.

The Tillya-tepe coin reads

*s[i]ho vigadabhayo*

on the side featuring a standing lion facing left. The *s* is of the type with half-closed head, which, in manuscripts, belongs to the middle period of Kharoṣṭhī (ca. first century BCE to first century CE), but on inscribed objects like these could occur later. The vowel sign *i* is diagonally attached to the head of the *s*. The following *ho* does not appear to have the dot under it that, from the Indo-Greek coins onward, is usually added to akṣaras with a rounded bottom that do not allow for the attachment of a regular footmark (cf. the *kra* on the other side of the coin). The *bh* is of the three-stroke type (corresponding to the type of the *k* in *kra* on the other side).

The inscription on the side showing a bearded figure pushing a wheel reads

*[dha]rmaçakra pravatati*<sup>1</sup>

Here the apparent bottom of the first akṣara *dha* could also be interpreted as containing an anusvāra, which would yield a Sanskrit-Prakrit hybrid spelling *dhaṃrma* as known from other epigraphic sources (such as the oil lamp CKI 550). The akṣara *kra* shows a dot under it that is best interpreted as a purely graphical footmark, as already noted above. An alternative interpretation as anusvāra mark is unlikely, both because anusvāras are not used at all in the corpus of at least the Indo-Greek coins and also because *-aṃ* would not be a phonetically expected ending. It is to be noted, however, that no dot footmark is apparent under the following *pra*, which would in principle also call for it. There appears to be a surface fissure to the right of the following, short-stemmed *va*. The final akṣara is a clear *ti* (not *ko*—note the difference from *kra*), first identified as such by Sadakata 1998.

While the identity of the individual words of the inscription is thus clear, the question remains whether they should be taken as constituting two separate statements, or rather one single sentence as suggested by Tanabe 2008. A review of the expressions on either side of

1. In the transcriptions given here, [ ] marks uncertain readings, and ( ) lost and reconstructed readings.

the coin in Buddhist literature quickly shows that they nowhere occur together, making a separate construal immediately more likely.

For comparisons of the Buddha with the lion as king of the animals in general, one may refer to Powers 2009: 26–27. Within the Gāndhārī corpus, the Buddha is compared to a lion in the Peshawar pedestal inscription (CKI 229: *sihenam sa[harthako vi]kramasya* “companion of lions in courage”). A birchbark scroll in the Library of Congress (CKM 261) contains the epithet *iṣmahovatsaṇaraśakasiho* “man from the Ikṣvāku clan, Śākya lion” (on *śākyasiṃha* as an epithet of the Buddha, see Fussman 1982: 166–67 in his discussion of the Tillya-tepe coins). Most relevant to the present context is the statement *siṃgasmi asaṃtrasta* “I am a lion who is not scared” in a string of self-praises of a buddha in a birchbark manuscript from Bamiyan (CKM 105), but the wording differs from the coin.

We have to turn to Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist literature for the closest parallels to the coin’s expression. The *Milindapañha* (Trenckner 1880: 24) introduces the formidable monk Nāgasena as *kesarasītham viya vigatabhayabheravaṃ* “a maned lion, as it were, without fear or terror,” and in a later passage (p. 278) explains: *sīho atijātītāya vigatabhaya* “a lion is without fear because he is a superior species.” The second *Avalokitasūtra* in the *Mahāvastu* (Marciniak 2020: 350) states that the bodhisattva, without fear or trepidation (*vigatabhayaromaharṣo*), looks around, opens his mouth, and clears his throat like a great lion (*mahāsīhaviḷokitaṃ viḷoketi, mahāsīhavijṛmbhitaṃ vijṛmbhetai, mahāsīhaūkkāsitaṃ ukkāsi*). The *Lalitavistara* (Lefmann 1902–8: 48) refers to the bodhisattva as *siṃha iva vigatabhayabhairavo* “a lion, as it were, without fear or terror” (cf. the description of Nāgasena in the *Milindapañha* above). And finally, in the *Śākyasiṃhajātaka*, in a description of the bodhisattva after his defeat of Māra (Hahn 2011: 214), he is simply called *vigatabhayasiṃha*—“a lion without fear.”

Turning to the other side of the coin, I first of all need to acknowledge that the agent noun *dharmacakrapravartaka*- does exist, at least in later Buddhist literature. In the *Jātakathavaṇṇanā* (Fausbøll 1877: 218), for example, the Buddha calls Śāriputra the *anudhammacakkapavattako* (so Cone 2001 s.v.; Fausbøll: *anudhammacakkaṃ pavattako*) “the next setter-in-motion of the dharma wheel.” In the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (Bendall 1902: 310), tathāgatas in general are called *dharmacakrapravartakāḥ* “setters-in-motion of the dharma wheel.”

Since paleographically, however, the reading of the coin is clearly [*dha*]rma*cakra prava*tati, the main question becomes whether the wheel can actually be the direct object of the verb, as suggested by Tanabe. In the examples surveyed, the presence of an object, as expected, requires the verb to be in the causative conjugation. Thus the explanation of the term *dharmacakka* in the *Paṭisaṃbhidāmagga* (Taylor 1905: 159) has *kenaṭṭhena dharmacakkaṃ? dhammañ ca pavatteti cakkañ cā ti dharmacakkaṃ* “Why dharma wheel? Because he turns both the dharma and a wheel, hence dharma wheel.” In the *Mahāvastu* (Senart 1890: 39), in a vow to attain buddhahood, the monk Abhiya declares *dharmacakraṃ pravarteyam* “I shall set in motion the dharma wheel,” but here too the form of the verb is causative (with ellipsis of *-ay-*; BHS §29.4). An example of the intransitive verb, with the wheel as its subject, occurs in another story of the *Mahāvastu* (Senart 1890: 277), where an owl adopted by a king lays out its views on proper governance including the following advice:

*dharmasthiteṣu āraḥṣāṃ sadā kuryāsi pārthiva |*  
*balacakraṃ hi niśrāya dharmacakraṃ pravartate ||*

You should always give protection to those steadfast in the dharma, o king,  
as the dharma wheel turns leaning on the wheel of power.<sup>2</sup>

Another is provided by a verse in the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* (Vaidya 1960: 20):

*adhiṣṭhānān narendrasya dharmacakram pravartate*

*prātihāryaśatākīrṇaṃ sarvalokaviśodhanam*

By the authority of the lord of men, the dharma wheel turns,  
filled with hundreds of miracles, purifying the entire world.

I conclude, then, that the two sides of the Tillya-tepe coin are best read separately and translated as follows:

The lion is without fear.  
The dharma wheel turns.

Moving on to the Pushkalavati coin, the British Museum copy on its own can be transcribed as:

ταυρος  
[u]ṣabhe

[po]khalavadidevada  
[dr]o[prasaya]

and the CNG copy as

ταυρος  
[u]ṣa[bh]e

[p](o)[khalavadi](devada)  
droprasaya

yielding a combined reading of the inscription as

ταυρος  
[u]ṣabhe

[po]khalavadidevada  
droprasaya

Base letters that occur on both the Tillya-tepe and the Pushkalavati coins are *da/di/de/dro* (a distinct S shape with head and foot turning to right and left), *po/prā*, *bha/bhe* (with a strong top line and a modestly sized right arm), *ya/yo* (both the old simple triangular shape), *va/vi* (both angular), and *sa/si*.

In general, the shapes of letters are compatible between the two coins, though two differences of formation can be observed: (1) The right arm of *pra* is more angular on the Pushkalavati coin than on the Tillya-tepe one. (2) The *sa* on the Pushkalavati coin has an open head, while the *si* on the Tillya-tepe coin has a half-closed one. This second difference could be explained as the frequently observed preservation of the more archaic form of a base letter

2. Jones (1949: 230) translates “the wheel of power turns in dependence on the wheel of justice,” irregularly taking *nīsrāya* as a preposition since he considers a doctrine of “might is right” not in keeping with the overall tone of the passage. That is not how the sentence has to be understood, however, and a message, as translated here, of “worldly power needs to support the righteous” seems quite appropriate.

in combination with a vowel sign. A difference of execution is evident in little knobs at the ends of strokes on the Tillya-tepe but not on the Pushkalavati coin.

The only word in this inscription that presents any problem of interpretation is the apparent epithet *droprasaya* of the depicted city goddess. In their publication of the coin, Senior and Babar (1998) cite a personal communication from Richard Salomon suggesting as etymology Skt. *duṣprasahya*- ‘difficult to conquer’, but noting the formal difficulty of *hy* > *y*, where in Gāndhārī one should have expected *ś*. It seems to me that the solution is to accept a different dialectal form on this coin, with *yh* in Pali *duppasayha*- providing a precise phonetic equivalent of the Kharoṣṭhī spelling *y*. What is more, we find the Pali word—in several of its smattering of occurrences—applied exactly to a city, such as in the following passage from the *Milindapañha* (Trenckner 1880: 345):

*evaṃ suvibhattaṃ kho, mahārāja, bhagavato dhammanagaraṃ evaṃ sumāpitaṃ  
evaṃ suvihitaṃ evaṃ suparipūritaṃ evaṃ suvavathhāpitaṃ evaṃ surakkhitaṃ evaṃ  
sugopitaṃ evaṃ duppasayhaṃ paccatthikehi paccāmittehi.*

So well proportioned, great king, is the dharmic city of the Lord, so well measured, so well equipped, so well filled, so well established, so well protected, so well guarded, so difficult to conquer by enemies or foes.

We can thus confidently translate the Pushkalavati inscription as

Bull (in Greek script)

Bull

The deity of Pushkalavati is difficult to conquer.

This is the same type of nominal sentence as in *siho vigadabhayo* on the Tillya-tepe coin, providing yet another link between the two epigraphs.

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