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# A DIVINE INTRIGUE: KĀRTTIKEYA ON IMPERIAL GUPTA COINS

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**Abstract:** *The numismatic presence of divinities and deities on Ancient Indian coins has been an interesting and intriguing phenomenon, enjoying a hoary antiquity, at least from 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE onwards. The figuration of a dramatic interplay between deities and kings, exhibited on the numismatic medium became artistically and politically prominent during the consecutive regimes of the Indo-Greeks (c. 190-75 BCE) and the Kuṣāṇas (c.105-226 CE). It continued further in the Indian subcontinent in the coinage issued by the Imperial Guptas. Among them, Kumāragupta I significantly utilised the medium of coins to seek divine favour, or gain luminous legitimisation from his mythological namesake - Kumāra Kārttikeya. This paper seeks to study the political machinations and numismatic renditions that furthered the aims of an ambitious monarch, and delineate the role of Kārttikeya in the numismatic arsenal of Kumāragupta I. It shall also examine the ramifications of a short-lived numismatic and iconographical experiment.*

**Keywords:** *Kārttikeya, Kumāragupta, coins, peacock, legitimisation*

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## Introduction

Gods and goddesses have frequently occupied a revered and assured space on coinage. This observation is valid from the myriad city-states of 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Ionian Peninsula (Grierson: 1975: 12) to the Indian punch-marked coins (Gupta: 2014: 4), though in the latter case, their presence is more inclined towards *symbolic*

*iteration* (Nain: 2023: 19). The coupling of obverse-device exhibiting the authoritative monetary value, with the reverse possessing divine sanction and benediction swiftly became crystallised, and became a specifically ingrained and socio-culturally embossed coinage-tradition (Cribb: 2003: 55). It became popular on the Indian

subcontinent after the gradually growing degree of interaction and intercourse between Indians and rulers of foreign extraction, a phenomenon also observed in related numismatic cases of figure-designs and coin-legends (Srivastava:2014: 16-24). However, complete Indianisation occurred when such numismatic processes and practices were brought to use by Indian monarchs.

### Coins and Gods: Meanings behind the Motifs

The utilisation of deity-figures on coins has been a mysteriously elusive motive in the Ancient World, with many competing viewpoints and contesting theories (Kaniseti: 2023: 48). The right answer, though not in grasp completely and confidently, must be gleaned from contextual and socio-cultural factors (Srivastava: 2014: 20). Here, we shall assert and delineate upon a range of probable intentions.

#### Dynastic association

Some divinities on reverse are associated, either through die-reuse or die-continuation, with the members of a particular dynasty. For instance, zoomorphic figure of Varāha occupied the reverse of coins of Chālukyas of Vātāpi, possibly as it was the dynastic emblem, and it further matched well with the royal titles of Śrī-Vallabha and Pṛthvī-Vallabha (Dikshit: 1980: 24). It thereby offered a visual glimpse of the issuing authority, and deeply integrated the coinage-system into the political climate of the times (Ramesh:1984: 42). The rulers of the Indo-Greek house of Euthydemus maintained a differentiated numismatic identity through a constant connection with the deity-figure of Zeus, either standing or sitting, holding sceptre or hurling a thunderbolt (Narain: 1957: 44).

#### Lineage continuation

Coins acted as the perfect source of propaganda- they were easily portable, transacted at multiple levels and times in commercial markets, stored by merchants, transported by traders, and deemed

significant in a monetised society (Kaniseti: 2023: 89-91). An incessant and implicit repetition of a specific message tacitly entered public imagination, and in a way prepared the *terra firma* for legitimation gained from public, who now associated the king with a similar issuance circulated previously. After the turbid and sanguine demise of Kaṇiṣka I (c. CE 127-145) from Kuṣāṇa throne (Mahajan: 2010: 82), Huviṣka I (c. CE 140-198) managed the ravished political terrain through political and symbolic measures. He introduced some obverse-devices made defunct during the rule of Kaṇiṣka, which included throne-type, cross-legged type, profile-type, etc., along with the reverse-device depicting OESHO with attributes that were in oblivion in Kaṇiṣka's reign. (Mann:2012: 56) asserts that Huviṣka was trying to connect his personage with his grandfather Vima Kadphises (c. CE 101-127).

**Cultic Affiliation**-Many rulers had inclination towards certain cult-systems, either due to personal-interest or political-contingency (Srivastava: 2019: 36). This is exhibited on coins particularly of the Seleucid dynasty of Syria, where Apollo with his bow-arrow and tripod appears on the reverse. His presence is significant on the *Campaign issues*, where revering Kings pledged their ritual obligation to Apollo, chiefly to merit his divine grace in challenging battles (Lorber & Iossif :2009: 93). The thematic and mythological stance of Apollo on coins was also carried forth on Bactrian currency, who were inspired by the coinage-tradition of their western neighbours (Mairs:2020: 247).

#### Geo-political machination

Coins directly and indirectly symbolised connection of royal figurines depicted on the obverse with deity-figures minted on the reverse (Grierson: 1975:26). Vima Kadphises re-designed the obverse art-motif of Gotarzes III, where the Parthian King was shown wearing loose, short-garment, fashioning royal-standard and offering oblations in fire-altar (Mukherjee:1969:12). It possibly certified the control of the Kuṣāṇa

Emperor unto the Eastern-territories of Parthia, and was specifically formulated to extend Kuṣāṇa numismatic provenance and prevent market-irritation. After conquering Gangetic plains, Samudragupta (c. CE 335-375) issued coins bearing the figure of Goddess Gangā standing on *Makara* (mythic crocodile), her *Vāhana* (mount). Similarly, Chandragupta II (c. CE 376-414) specially initiated the *Simha-Nihantā* type coinage, to commemorate his victory over Saurāṣṭra peninsula (Altekar: 1957: 62). Such issues, practically helped the King to spread his victorious valiance across all major segments and social groups of his empire.

### Imperial competition

During the triangular Kannauj Wars (c. CE 793-890), the Gurjara-Pratihāras and the Rāṣṭrakūṭas were locked in a dangerous game of powerover Malwa for reignal supremacy (Kaniseti:2023:302; Altekar:1934:14). The Rāṣṭrakūṭas borrowed their imperial honorific titles from the preceding rulers of Vātāpi Chālukya Dynasty (Shastri: 1997:237), and deployed them frequently in amusing themselves over the plight of subdued enemies (Altekar:1934: 45). The reign of Pratihāra ruler Mihira-Bhoja (I) and Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Amoghavarṣa I Śarva were roughly simultaneous between c. CE836-870, during which Mihira-Bhoja started the production of a novel coin-design, bearing the denominational name *Ādi-Varāha* Drama, weighing roughly about 66.5 grains, modelled after existent Indo-Sassanian coinage of Western India or certain remnants of Indo-Greek currency (Deyell:1991: 27). According to Smith, it signified the hatred nourished by Bhoja against Muslim invaders (Smith: 1906: 445). Ray on the other hand asserts that it was manifestation of a symbolic competition between two rival dynasties, where one *ridiculed* the other by numismatically absorbing the political credentials of the other (Ray:2019:572).

### Figurative impersonation

The inter-side linkage between figures of the monarchs and divinities is well-known in annals

of Indian Numismatics. However, it is rare to find a deity-figure providing semantic equivalence to the King's body-politic (Foucault: 2007: 2). The coins of the renowned Pāñchāla rulers depict a deity-figure providing semantic equivocation to the name of the ruler on obverse, which was possibly a deliberate strategy to either present divine sanction or provide a visual backing for illiterate subjects (Shrimali:1983: 11). The *Simha-Nihantā* type coins depict Chandragupta II defeating a lion with mere bow-arrow, while the obverse depicts Goddess Durgā atop a lion (Kumar: 2017: 62). Kumāragupta I was following a somewhat similar numismatic and iconographical stratagem, which will be elaborated in the next section.

### Kumāragupta and Kārttikeya: An Intriguing Dalliance

After the rule of the Yaudheyas and Kuṣāṇas, the Guptas present the next evaluative phase concerned with the numismatic evolution of Kārttikeya. Yet, to describe it in isolation to its plethora of contextual and synchronic inter-connections would be an effort in vanity. The numismatic appearance of Kārttikeya should be examined in the context of the simultaneous changes that occurred in statuary, epigraphy and cult-functions of Skanda-Kārttikeya throughout North India. The Guptas emerged in the post-Kuṣāṇa period of early India, contesting swords with other 'native' polities, such as the Nāgas, Maghas, and Maukharis (Dani:1986: 112; Pires:1934: 14). While the earlier Gupta kings were possibly feudatories (Thaplyal:2012: 17), from the reign of Chandragupta I (CE 305/319-325/335), the Guptas became an independent power to reckon with in the Gangetic Doab, with further exponential expansion by Samudragupta (CE 335-375) in all directions. The Kathiawarcampaigns of Chandragupta II (c. CE 376-414) brought seemingly all of Gujarat under the Gupta's *Garuḍa*-banner, except North-West, which possibly remained in the hold of Kārdamaka-Śaka King Rudrasimha III (Tandon:2018: 25). This task was valiantly finished by Kumāragupta

I (c. CE 414-448), who issued commemorative coins with the apt legend- *Simha-Nihantā*, to celebrate this feat. This zeal to record victories and inclinations can provide important insights in future endeavours concerning numismatic history of early India. The demise of Kumāragupta I was calmed by Skandagupta (CE 455-467), whose strong-hold over the reins of the empire kept the Guptas in a position of political, if not geo-economic supremacy, for almost two decades (Mookerji:1947: 221), after which seemingly all structures holding the imperial design began to rapidly disintegrate and dismantle, and got absorbed and diffused into innumerable local dynasties and regional powers, who now saw vast and bewildering opportunities that was initially non-existent (Devahuti: 1970: 62).

Willis (2005) distinguishes about three different types of deity-forms associated with the visual-physical depiction of Kārttikeya during the Gupta-Vākāṭaka period (c. CE 355-590). The Eastern Variety, based on the statue discovered from Rajghat, Varanasi in the 1970s, frames and sculpts Kārttikeya as a young, juvenile god, sitting on a wicker stool, holding spear in left-hand, a fruit (grapes/pomegranate) in right-hand, with the beak and neck of a peacock emerging from the gap between his legs, and his feathery-sheath forming the awe-inspiring background of the sculpture. It has been argued many a times that the Guptas figuratively and surreptitiously employed many Mauryan-references to bolster their claim and continuity in Magadha region, with evidence ranging from the name of the first prominent monarch to the peacock emblem of Kumāragupta I, although complete association is not beyond doubt (Nair 1974 vide Mann 2012: 98). The Western sculptural-form, based on the illustrative evidence of archaeological finds at Shamalaji and Tanesar is chiefly inspired by the Mahāsena-imagery of the Kuṣāṇas, that was most probably popular in Western India, and was transmitted to other regions, such as South India (under the Ikṣvāku Kings of Andhra) by the cultural mediation of the Western Kṣatrapas

(Mirashi:1981: 15). The cock and spear dominate this figuration, but the associative element related to the Mātṛa-cult has returned. Schostak (1985) has argued that there reemerged a protective cult, now collectively called *Mātṛkās* that arose due to the political unity and cultural intermixing under the Kuṣāṇas. However, the association of Kārttikeya with the Mātṛkās somewhat weak with the former getting absorbed in Śaivism and the cult of *Gaṇapati*, as is evident from Elephanta and Ellora caves, and also from scenic relief-carvings in living rock at Udaygiri caves (Gonda: 1954: 18), where through cunning decorative and moulding techniques, Kārttikeya was simultaneously assimilated in both Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism (Curtis:2007:413-434). Barring the momentous and rare literary evidence of *Kādambari*(XI.7.98), all evidences point towards the fact that the martial valour of *Mahāsena-Kārttikeya* reigned supreme on all minds. That same valour was used by Kumāragupta with acclamatory intrigue, verve and style. Some gold-coins of Kumāragupta I, labelled as Peacock-type by Allan (Allan:1936: xxi; 1936: 41) or Kārttikeya-type by Altekar (Altekar:1954:89), depict a somewhat softened and relatively domesticated image of Kārttikeya (Gupta :1974:184). This coin type on the obverse depicts a standing King, nimbate, slightly bent rightwards, right-hand is seen extended towards the right holding fruits (bunch of grapes?), feeding it to a peacock grasping it to its right. Legend reads- *Jayati Sarvagunair-gunah Mahendrakumārah*. The Reverse side shows a male deity wearing lion-cloth, sitting on a moving peacock with lance/spear in the left-hand (absent on majority of samples), the right-hand is outstretched with the deity sitting in profile having tail-feather of the peacock in full bloom behind Kārttikeya. A small halo around the head is also seen. (Fig.2.1)

Majority of the reverse side coins of the Gupta monarchs show kings engaged in multifarious acts of valiant demeanour, ranging from hunting ferocious tigers to combating unassailable rhinoceros. Almost all Gupta monarchs issued



coin-reverse of Archer-type, Horseman-type, Lion-slaying type etc. This indicates an attempt to gain martial perfection and proficiency, the commemoration of the *best in the realm* (Raven: 2015: 70), skilled in the arts of combat and force (Willis:2005:131-150). It can then be safely assumed that Kumāragupta I possibly presented his selection by the lord of the valiant, due to his mastery and perfection in all battle-arts. This thematic scheme directs us to another aspect of this coin. It shows a small nimbus around the King on obverse, who is engaged in the act of feeding a peacock (Fig.2.2). This imagery tallies quite closely with the sculpture of Kārttikeya discovered at Varanasi. Unlike Huvīṣka, it is not difficult to believe that Kumāragupta I was also trying to at least partially equate his imperial radiance with the divine luminosity of the God of battles, or reflect his special proximity to the concerned deity due to his worthy martial and masterful personage, which would also definitely collude well with the larger theme of divine selection among many princes of same royal lineage (*tulya-kulaja*), as evident in the epigraphy of the Gupta-era. (Salomon: 1998: 75).

Dynastic legitimacy was a valid and wide concern of all monarchs of early India with the Guptas making no exception to the norm. However, the absence of a fixed law of primogeniture or pre-meditated rule of succession made muscle-power and monarchical-favouritism significant which assured felicitous succession amidst chaotic collateral, even lineal challenges. Bakker (2006) mentions that Kumāragupta I faced numerous competing claimants to the throne, which included his two brothers- Govindagupta, who had his power-centre around Vidisha, and was possibly favoured by the favourite queen (Vivātā) of Chandragupta II- Dhruvasvāminī (here with Devi suffix) and Ghaṭotakachgupta in areas surrounding the Narmada River Valley (as ascertained from Ramtek-Narsimha-Kevala and Tumain inscriptions), who was geopolitically closely linked to his (alleged) brother-in-law, Vākāṭaka lord Pravarsena II (c. CE 420-460).

The heavy influence of Eastern and Southern variety of sculpture of Kārttikeya, thus should be seen as one laden with much symbolic meaning. The copying of predecessor's coin-types is also astep in the same direction, i.e. to present strong assertions of lineage continuity, apparently at a time when every single prince in the Gupta royal household had a chance and opportunity, if properly exercised, to claim, conquer and occupy the Imperial Throne (Goyal :1967: 42).

The silver coinage of the Guptas commenced from the time of Chandragupta II, possibly after his victory over the majority of Kathiawar peninsula. He carried on the numismatic convention initially conceived by the Kārdamaka-Śakas, while making minor changes in the obverse-design, though the reverse underwent a complete and errant overhaul to depict the Garuḍa emblem, which was a probable standard flag-emblem of the Guptas (Raven:1994), and was possibly carried by the flag-marchers of Gupta militia. The change brought about by Kumāragupta I was significant, since the design of reverse was changed towards depicting a peacock. This heralds a significant change in military and economic domain the cause of which however remains in realm of oblivion. A notable feature of this silver coin is the change, not only on reverse, but also in the portrait of Kumāragupta I on obverse; the moustache here is absent, hairs are perfectly aligned, facial features are sharper and more angular, and exhibit the visage of a young man, and not of a middle-aged Emperor (Altekar:1957: 216) (Fig.2.3). It is possible that after introducing emblem of Kārttikeya, Kumāragupta gave orders to frame his image *more like the eponymous god*, probably to showcase his close and naturally obvious relation with the godly generalissimo. However, it is interesting that silver coins of Kumāragupta I circulated only in regions which were under the hold of contestants of the throne. Thence, a deliberate differentiation would not have been irrational. The short life of this type suggests only a momentary cause behind this eventful but silent change.

The appearance of Kārttikeya on coins of Kumāragupta is a remarkable innovation, for the number of gods occurring on Gupta gold-coins is pretty restricted, and heavily biased towards Vaiṣṇavism. Raven contends that the *biruda* Mahendra of Kumāragupta was not necessarily related to Indra, but characteristically highlighted the salient features of *a young, valiant warrior*, most frequently associated with Kārttikeya in the *Mahābhāratam* (Raven:2015:73). Probably, by employing artistic similarity with the divine generalissimo, Kumāragupta intended to posit his communion with targeted deity-figure. Mann alternatively suggests that Kumāragupta wanted to imply symbolically a somewhat diffused form of lineage continuity, by using the two specific dies with his other issues (Mann:2012:87). However, it can be highlighted that, in order to actually craft a similar stance with Kārttikeya, Kumāragupta should have utilized the aggressive form of sculpture of Mahāsenā. Even though, it was a form not widely acknowledged in Magadha region, it was situationally available and known in Mathurā (Sharma: 1984: 119). It must have become quite popular due to the wide provenance of Kuṣāṇa coinage. Also, while the argument suggesting lineage continuity holds good for the softened form of Kārttikeya, which is usually connected with childbirth, it would have been much off the point, since Kārttikeya type coins marked a deviation, not a continuity. Furthermore, thematic continuity could have been better portrayed in other older coin-types issued by Kumāragupta. A possible explanation regarding this has been provided in the next section.

### The Arrival of Kārttikeya

An attempt has been made here to provide a coherent and chronological framework to decipher and decide the process of induction and introduction of Kārttikeya in the coinage of the Imperial Guptas. From the provenance and production-pattern of Kṣatrapa coins, it has been recently posited beyond doubt that it was not Chandragupta II, but Kumāragupta I who

finished the deed commenced by his predecessor. Rudrasimha III (c. CE388-414+?) survived the wrath of Chandragupta II, as proven astutely by the discovery of his coins bearing a date beyond CE 414 (Jha & Rajgor: 1994: 248). Kumāragupta I probably accomplished the mission of conquering Saurāṣṭra and Kathiawar around 420-21CE (Jha & Rajgor:1994: 251), a fact delineated by the discovery of only Gupta Silver coins of Kumāragupta bearing dates beyond the benchmark year. However, Kumāragupta I differed from familial tradition, by issuing silver coins of Kṣatrapa fabric bearing not a Garuda, but a trident on reverse, a royal symbol of Śarva dynasty (Shah :2016: 118). Another innovative step was to commemorate his victory by issuing Lion-trampling type coins, which showed a *slight mutation* of Simha-Nihantā type of Chandragupta II (Tandon :2016:14) (Fig.2.4).

It was possibly after these two successful feats that Kumāragupta decided to venture forth, and innovate further. In order to invoke expressions of strong benediction, Kumāragupta turned to the deity with whom he could have been most intimate- Kumāra Kārttikeya (Mann: 2012: 78). A move towards *imitative innovation* took over Gupta mints which started to re-frame older die struck coins with newer attributes, and thence were produced the unique specimens of Kumāragupta's reign, for e.g. *Elephant-rider Lion-slayer type*, etc. (Raven: 2015:80) (Fig.2.5). A step further in this innovation program was the development of three dies portraying Kārttikeya riding a peacock, two differing varieties of Lakṣmī feeding a peacock, and three varieties of Kumāragupta providing something edible to a peacock. While they certainly could hail from different mints, but the mint-idiomatic analysis of Raven has established that most of them, if not all, stem from the same mint (Raven:2015:74). Variations were possibly produced to cope up with excessive wear and test resulting from sheet pressure experienced from repetitive hammering (Grierson: 1975: 100). If this is true, then the *innovative wave* theory reaches proximity to the intentions of

Kumāragupta, who now vowed for establishing a numismatic semblance with his divine namesake. An aggressive stance was not necessitated, since it was a commemoration of victory. After framing this peculiar die-continuation in minds of the public, Kumāragupta proceeded to apply the unique *Lakṣmī feeding peacock* reverse to other martial types in circulation, to possibly portray his affable and valiant connection with both Kārttikeya and the *Kula-Lakṣmī* of the Guptas (Srinivasan:2005: 238).

### Skanda-Kārttikeya nd Skandagupta

The coinage of Skandagupta is difficult to evaluate, since his coin-types show relatively less variety than his predecessors (Altekar: 1954: 72), with only the Archer-type and Chhatra-type to represent his range of gold-coins (now with an additional Horseman-type that has recently surfaced; see Tandon 2018), an attribution stemming from his prolonged engagement with hordes of political opponents. His legends are also (relatively) muted, while the circulation of the silver-coin with peacock-reverse in central and western parts of his territory are consequences of either similar geo-political problems, or matters of continuing a legacy, though only in a namesake manner. Recently, Falk has discussed a silver plate, possibly belonging to the Gupta Era, and more specifically to the beginning of the *stable years* of the reign of Skandagupta (Falk:2023:159-178). If the assertions, as verily and excitedly posited by Falk stand testing waters, then the role of Mahāsenā was not yet over in the political machinations of the Gupta polity. Based on dress, design, metal components and artistic rendering, the plate is safely and confidently dated to c. 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Century CE. The stylistic features bring it quite close to similar copper/silver plates discovered from Gunaria, Pipriwaha (Srivastava:1996: 20), while the iconic ensemble reiterates familiar traits found in Gupta numismatic schemes, emphatically asserted especially in the regime of Kumāragupta. It shows two figures, with the elder one wearing royal aprons, and the relatively

younger accomplice wearing garments of battle, being crowned by the other figure. The two of them are enjoined by a creeping stalk, while the bottom figures assert a lion with claws cut, and gnawed by two genies on either side (Fig.2.6). The whole scenario has been interpreted by Falk in the following manner:

In the centre of this plate, you see the Gupta royal official Ghaṭotkachagupta to the left and the army leader Skandagupta to the right. As uncle and nephew they are related, both descending from Candragupta II. This blood relationship is expressed by a long textile band held by both. Ghaṭotkacha places a circular head-gear on the head of Skandagupta. Such circles ending in two small globes are known from Kushan coin where they are worn by Skanda Kumāra and Viśākha. The crowned person thus seems to be promoted to a deva, a royal figure. On the outer rim we see four animals which symbolize four religions in the cardinal directions. Two heavenly beings at the lowest point of the circular rim touch a platter that shows a centrally incised footless Lion. The platter ends in two vulture busts on every narrow side. The hands of the flying genie are placed atop the vulture heads as if to keep them down. Taken together, the platter seems to celebrate the end of the political adversary, Pūrugupta, who vied with the central couple for the succession of Kumāragupta.

Falk further argues that the hairdo of the younger figure, i.e. Skandagupta, has been arranged intentionally to portray the intentional resemblance between him and the eponymous deity, who is frequently sculpted with a similar typological scheme (Falk:2023:206). It is contended, in the same vein and connection, that Skandagupta and his elderly uncle joined forces to prevent their common rival- Purugupta, from occupying the royal throne, where they further found grounds of commonality on accord of the non-royal and muted imperial standing of their mothers, who are mysteriously never attested to in dynastic epigraphs (Thaplyal:2012: 410). In his framework, Skandagupta received the support

of his uncle Ghaṭotakachagupta in vanquishing Purugupta, and ascending the throne felicitously, albeit briefly for just about 12 years, after which the throne was attended to by Ghaṭotakachagupta, somewhat strangely proven by the year mentioned on some of his silver coins (GE 152=CE 472). While the suggestions of Falk further await a closer scrutiny, it ostensibly is established beyond doubt that the political mileage of Skanda-Kārttikeya was not yet exhausted, and served brilliantly in matters of war and dynastic tussle.

The appropriate and proper use of Mahāsenā-Kārttikeya for political ends, thus belongs befittingly to only Kumāragupta I, although it was essentially limited to the needs of high-value economic transactions and elite-considerations (Mann: 2012: 57). Among the general public, Kārttikeya was more or less associated with birth-time apotropaic incantations, as it is mentioned in *Kādambari*. His veneration among the warrior-class is preferably done in his *Mahāsenā* form, as seen in Bilsad, Sohawal and Valkha inscriptions, although in Southern region, the Talgunda inscription of Kakustha-varma (c. CE 425-450) offers an interesting epigraphical evidence of coalition between Mahāsenā and the Mātṛkā-cult (Ramesh: 1984: 223).

## Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is patently clear that the image of Kārttikeya performed a critical and crucial role in Gupta numismatics; it is simply not just another addition into the existent divine pantheon that manifests on coins. It can be acclaimed as an innovative initiative, a strategic step, a political manoeuvre and an artistic creativity all together enmeshed harmoniously into one. While the concept of *Divine Kingship* did not exist in Ancient India in accordance to that in Near-East (Gonda: 1954: 22), Indian Kings never left an opportune moment to devise parallels with mythological narrations, and sought proximity, if not equality with divine figures. Thus, when we see Kumāragupta, in a way, imitating the pose, posture and position of Kārttikeya on the obverse

of his Peacock type coinage, he attempts to create a semi-divine environ, in which he stands as a herald of the divine generalissimo, equalling him in mirth and merit, and that too rightly, since he had accomplished a mission that his father had begun, and therefore deserved the throne (Gupta: 1974: 86; Mookerji: 1947: 55) (Fig.2.7). The degree of detailing and artistic attention given to Kārttikeya type coins is both alluring and informing, since it informs us much about the intentions of a valiant Emperor, sequences of coinage production and issuance, and the numismatic narrative that is veiled, but not beyond the scope of a numismatic inquiry. Kumāragupta probably issued the Kārttikeya type coins and re-designed die-combinations for his other coinage types after the conclusion of his Saurāstra campaign, in which he acquired unparalleled victory. This prompted him to induce some mutations in existent types, thence giving birth to the Lion-trampling type, followed by an earnest desire to initiate the production and circulation of not just mere commemorative issues, but one which defined his legacy and contribution to the process of extending the frontiers of the Gupta Empire, and achieving the much sought after and yearned for dreams of his father and grandfather.

The case of Skandagupta is somewhat different, both in form and function, from that of his father. By his time, the fight for throne had become an Empire wide affair, with claimants including both his brothers and uncles (Bakker: 2006: 52). The body-politic of Kumāragupta I had acquired a legitimizing potential in this period, a phenomenon that well suited the name and image of Skandagupta, who also bore a name of the divine generalissimo, and had proven his mettle earlier while Kumāragupta was still alive (Mookerji: 1947: 67). It is not known whether Skandagupta was elected as a successor by Kumāragupta I; since a war of succession definitely left its trace in numismatic and epigraphic records (Thaplyal: 2012: 358). The best way to elicit a comparison with and connection to his deceased father would have been through the



use of figuration models deeply associated with Kumāragupta, a phenomenon where Skanda-Kārttikeya could not have been ignored. While the military business of Skandagupta kept him alarmed and occupied, he sought continuity not through innovation, but only through continuity. The intentional continuation of Peacock series in the Madhyadeśa type was a consequence of one such principle. An innovation on gold coin was hardly merited by the intentional valuation-increment that occurred in it; it was the weight and worth, and not the devices which signified

the gold-coins issued under Skandagupta, since they were the result of a deliberate strategy to lure more merchants and traders towards its effective use in markets (Kumar: 2023: 19). Thus, we have shown and highlighted the numismatic role of Kārttikeya in Gupta numismatics of the times of Kumāragupta I and Skandagupta. In future, this can be substantiated through the inclusion of epigraphical and sculptural evidence of the times, while novel discoveries will surely enlighten us, and broaden our analytical constructs and horizons.

### Illustrations



Fig. 2.1: Kārttikeya type coins of Kumāragupta I (Courtesy: Coin India Gallery)



Fig. 2.2: Peacock type silver coins of Kumāragupta I (Courtesy: Kumar 2017)





Fig. 2.3: Extracted portraiture of the Kārttikeya type gold-coins (Courtesy-Mudra Auctions)



Fig. 2.4: Lion-trampler type coins of Kumāragupta I (Courtesy- Tandon 2018)



Fig. 2.5: (above) Archer-type coins of Kumāragupta I (Courtesy- Wikimedia Commons);  
(below) Elephant-rider Lion-slayer type coins (Courtesy- Coin India Gallery)



Fig. 2.6: The Silver plate possibly bearing figures of Ghaṭotakach Gupta and Skandagupta (Courtesy- Falk 2023)



Fig. 2.7 The Kārttikeya like pose of Kumaragupta on obverse (Courtesy- Raven 2015)

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