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EPIGRAPHY

Sealings from Puṇḍravardhana

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ABSTRACT: Despite decades of relatively intensive official excavation, the number of published sigillographic finds from Mahasthangarh, in northwest Bangladesh, corresponding to ancient Puṇḍravardhana, has remained surprisingly limited for an early-historic/early-medieval site of its importance. A recent overview covers just six items found at the site, only one of which endowed with a seal legend. We publish here two sealings that were issued from ancient Puṇḍravardhana. The devices and legends on these two specimens give occasion to publish at the same time four further sealing-types. All of these have very likely surfaced during unauthorised digging at Mahasthangarh.

KEYWORDS: Seal, sealing, clay, Puṇḍravardhana, *cakra* with ribbon, Lakṣmī.

Last year's volume of this journal contained the publication by Arlo Griffiths of two copperplate inscriptions of substantial significance for the early history of Puṇḍravardhana, both intact with their primary seals in bronze, and both of these primary seals marked by subsidiary seals. The second copperplate published last year, held in a private collection in Hong Kong, is a sale deed of the village Mastakaśvabhra issued in the fifth year of a king Pradyumnabandhu, 'when his appointee as governor, (named) Cellaka, was managing affairs in Śrī Puṇḍravardhana province'; its seal legend reads *ghoṇādvīpakaviśaye °adhikaraṇasya*, meaning 'of the council in Ghoṇādvīpaka district'. The first plate, salvaged from a scrap metal shop in Dhaka and said to have been found in Bogra district, is now preserved in the collection of Noman Nasir.¹ Its seal legend reads *maddhyamaṣaṇḍīkavīthyāyuktakādhikaraṇasya*, meaning 'of the council of appointees of the territory of Madhyamaṣaṇḍīka', and the complex series of transactions it records starts with a purchase of land by the *mahāmātra* of Puṇḍravardhana named Suvarcasadatta. While neither of the two copperplates were issued

from Puṇḍravardhana proper, these grants shed light on the complex early history of the greater Puṇḍravardhana region, i.e. the northern subregion of ancient Bengal.

This short contribution builds upon Griffiths' previous study by presenting two sealings from Noman Nasir's collection that were issued from ancient Puṇḍravardhana itself. The devices and legends on these two specimens give occasion to publish at the same time four further sealing-types from the same collection. All of these sealings have very likely surfaced during unauthorised digging at the modern site of Mahasthangarh. Despite decades of relatively intensive official excavation, notably in the context of Franco-Bangladeshi archaeological collaboration,² the number of published sigillographic finds from this site has been surprisingly limited. The recent overview of 'sealings' and 'tokens' by Sandrine Gill, Jean-Yves Breuil and Md Shafiqul Alam (in Salles 2015: 135–7, with notes) covers just six items found at Mahasthangarh, only one of which includes a seal legend,³ and mentions less than a handful of references to publications of finds from other sites in West Bengal and

Bangladesh.⁴ The dimensions and weights of the clay artefacts to be discussed below are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Dimension and weight of the artefacts

<i>Artefact inv. nr.</i>	<i>Outer dimensions (mm)</i>	<i>Inner dimensions (mm)</i>	<i>Weight (gr)</i>
1.1	88 × 85	25 × 20	93.7
1.2	95 × 90	40 × 26	73.8
2.1	40 × 40	34 × 27	16.0
2.2	40 × 40	35 × 25	15.4
2.3	40 × 40	35 × 27	15.6
3.1	50 × 50		58.6
4.1	23 × 19		5.6
5.1	80 × 72		165.5

The clay sealings 1.1 and 1.2 are shown in Pls 1–2. The main legend, identical on both specimens, reads *puṇḍravaraddhanādhiṣṭhānādikaraṇam*, meaning ‘council of the capital (or city) of Puṇḍravardhana’. The script indicates a date in the fifth or sixth century CE. Compared to other seals of the same region and period, it is noteworthy that, in this instance, we apparently do not find the expected genitive case ending; rather, the nominative,⁵ with a final *-m**, written by the special sign discussed briefly last year (Griffiths 2015: 19, with n. 10, p. 34). This sign is quite clear on Pl. 1a.

The *adhiṣṭhānādihikaraṇa* of Puṇḍravardhana is referred to in several copperplate grants of this period, as an important decision-making body in land transactions.⁶ Similar seals, generally formulated in the genitive, of the *adhiṣṭhānādihikaraṇa* of other North Indian cities have been listed by Thaplyal (1972: 132–3), who observes that ‘the term *adhishṭhāna* means a ‘city’ where the headquarters of the local administration were located’ and hence that ‘these sealings would indicate the functioning of some sort of civic boards’. They would have been attached to letters issued by such a body. Before dispatch, they were countermarked with subsidiary seals that presumably served a purpose such as authentication or approval.⁷

The device on the main seal resembles that on plate XXXII, no. 11 in Thaplyal 1972, where it is described (p. 433) as ‘a peculiar standard coming out of a pot’. The sealing in question was part of the rich sigillographic corpus unearthed at Bhita, and the device was described by Marshall (1915: 60, no. 116) as follows: ‘Symbol resembling monogram on copper coins of Azes, which General Cunningham interpreted as meaning Kaspapura or Multan’.⁸ The validity of the latter interpretation aside, it is clearly not applicable to Puṇḍravardhana. In any case, the Bhita sealing does not show exactly the same device as found on this Puṇḍravardhana seal type, which in the present state of our knowledge is unique.⁹

Sealing 1.1 bears a subsidiary seal (Pl. 1c) that appears to comprise only a legend—presumably a name—in four akṣaras, each of which is set off in a separate square box. We have tentatively read these akṣaras as *ma/ca/ra/ta*, but their meaning remains uncertain. A cross-shaped sign (perhaps a *ma*?) stands above the second box. This legend is enclosed in a double-lined frame, placed within an oval plane. This oval plane is encircled by an inner and an outer string of raised pearls or beads.

The subsidiary seal on 1.2 (Pl. 2c) shows the combination of a device with a legend. It is very fortunate—and, in the light of their presumed common provenance, also very likely not coincidental—that three independent impressions of what seems to have been the same seal matrix are held in Noman Nasir’s collection, two of them shown here (2.1 and 2.2, Pl. 3). With the help of these extra specimens, we can read the legend as *vimaladāsasya*, meaning ‘of Vimaladāsa’.¹⁰ This Vimaladāsa was probably a local dignitary, who stamped his seal on separate lumps of red clay, while also using it to counterseal a decision of the Puṇḍravardhana council.

It seems that a round object, perhaps a lotus bud, fills what would otherwise have been an empty space at the bottom of this seal. The device of this seal is a *cakra*, in three-quarter view, flanked on either side by a *śaṅkha*. A very clear example of the same device, but raised on a pedestal, is found on a beautiful seal matrix from Bhita, published by Marshall (1915: 48,

pl. XVII no. 7— the plate shows an impression, reproduced here as Pl. 4a).¹¹ From the *cakra*'s hub emerges a ribbon, an element not recognised by this scholar. This same element is found further afield on seals from Gandhara (Amanur Rahman and Falk 2011, cat. nos 05.02.09, 05.02.10), on Jaina sculptures from the Gupta Period onward,¹² and in the sculpture of Buddhist sites beyond the dominion of the Guptas but roughly contemporary with their reign.¹³ It is also commonly found in the depiction of Viṣṇu's *cakra* in the art of Bengal of about the eleventh century.¹⁴ At least one first-millennium specimen from Bengal is known to us,¹⁵ and examples are not rare in the depiction of Viṣṇu elsewhere.¹⁶ We think the ribbon was intended to evoke the presence of wind and rapid motion.¹⁷

Two other sealings from Noman Nasir's collection, our items 3.1 and 4.1 (Pls 4b–d and 5a–c), again show the device of *cakra*-with-ribbon on pedestal. The first, with two non-identical objects (apparently representing structures) drawn in rather schematic manner flanking the *cakra*, is furnished with the legend *bhagavato mandīrasvāmina(h)* in script of the fifth or sixth century. This means 'of the lord Mandīrasvāmin' or, perhaps, 'of the owner of the temple of the Lord'. The second, showing only the *cakra*-with-ribbon on pedestal, bears the legend *kulasvāmi*, which must perhaps be understood as nominative *kulasvāmī*, as there is no space for restoring a genitive *kulasvāminaḥ*. Neither of the names on these last two sealings can immediately be connected with any name attested in Bengal epigraphy so far, or in the 'List of names on seals' furnished by Thaplyal (1972: 296–315). Both are vaguely reminiscent of the 'shrine of

Lord Govindasvāmin' (*bhagavato govindasvāminaḥ devakula*) known from the Baigram copperplate inscription of the Puṇḍravardhana region (128 GE), as well as of the deities Varāhasvāmin, Śvetavarāhasvāmin and Kokāmukhasvāmin mentioned in copperplates of the same period and region.

Finally, our item 5.1 (Pls 5d–e and 6a–b) shows an unusual variant of the common seal-type with Gajalakṣmī device (examples of which have been discussed and referenced last year—Griffiths 2015: 18, 28 with n. 24). In this variant, we do not see Śrī/Lakṣmī being doused by elephants. Instead, anthropomorphic heavenly beings hold garlands at the height of the goddess' head. The legend here reads ś[r](ī)śul(k)ādhikaraṇasya. Other interpretations are imaginable, but we propose that this might have meant 'of the council responsible for divine/royal levies': this was apparently the seal of a body involved in collection of levies (*śulka*) which, in our interpretation, would have flowed to a temple or to the royal palace. The back of the lump of clay (Pl. 5e) shows clear traces of its former attachment to some kind of document; the front shows impressions of two subsidiary seals, one rectangular and one round. Because the impression is too faint, not much can be said about the rectangular one, except that it bore a short legend ending in *-sya*. As for the round subsidiary seal to its left, it is clearly another example of a seal-type with *cakra*, in three-quarter view, flanked on either side by a *śaṅkha*, such as our 2.1 and 2.2. Although the seal legend is not legible, it is tempting to speculate that we have here another impression of the same seal of Vimaladāsa.

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Notes

1. See the article 'A Hoard of Coins of the Candara Dynasty of Arakan', co-authored by Noman Nasir

with Nicholas G. Rhodes, that has appeared in *Pratna Samiksha*, New Series 1: 155–61 (2010).

2. See the reports edited by Jean-François Salles (2007, 2015).

3. This is item 3, inventory number MAH 93.1438, shown in fig. 3-15. The authors cite only an incomplete reading, but the whole can be read with some confidence as *viśā(kha)dattasya*.

4. On the distinction made by these scholars between ‘seals’ and ‘tokens’, see also Aman ur Rahman and Falk (2011: 13): ‘we have to name also those sealings which were not attached to any document relating to merchandise. These objects can be lens-shaped, globular or conical. We call these objects “tokens” and suppose that they were used as a sort of passport for legitimizing the bearer in the name of the sealer.’ According to this definition, some or all of the artefacts to be presented below might have to be called ‘tokens’. Among the references furnished in Salles (2015) is a publication from a previous issue of this journal (Jana 2010). An important publication in Bengal sigillography that might be added is that of Sircar (1967–8).

5. Cf. Thaplyal (1972: 6): ‘Mostly, the legends end in the genitive and rarely in the nominative.’

6. Damodarpur plates #2, l. 4 (128 GE), #4, l. 3 (date lost), and #5, l. 4 (224 GE); Paharpur plate, ll. 1, 4, 11 (159 GE). It is remarkable that the precise expression *puṅḍravarddhanādhiṣṭhānādikaraṇa* has not so far been encountered in the epigraphic record.

7. On such subsidiary seals, see Aman ur Rahman and Falk (2011: 12): ‘The co-occurring of large and smaller seals on one piece of clay [...] may have been produced by witnesses to a transaction effected by the owner of the large seal.’ See also Griffiths 2015: 28–9, for further references.

8. Marshall refers to Cunningham (1888: 15).

9. Ellen Raven kindly refers us to the very useful table of emblems represented on the ‘tribal’ coins of the centuries around the beginning of the common era by Allan (1936, Index VII), which illustrates how many different types of emblems were in use.

10. To our knowledge, this rather common name is so far attested in Bengal epigraphy only in the Jajilpara plate of Gopāla III (first half of the eleventh century).

11. Marshall describes this artefact as follows: ‘Soapstone seal-die with a perforated handle. Ht. 1¼”. Inscribed surface oval, 1½” × ¾”, with single border line. At top, ornamental wheel with pair of conches on pedestal. Below, legend in northern characters of the fourth or fifth century AD *Gaurīdāsa*.’ The same seal-matrix has been reproduced, along with an

impression, in figs 34–5 in Chhabra (1961–62), where (p. 47) the reading is silently corrected to Śaurīdāsa—it ought to be corrected further to Śauridāsa. Other impressions of seals with similar devices, but with varying legends, can be found in Marshall (1915, pl. XIX, no. 43) and Bloch (1903–04, pl. XLI nos 19, 20, 24, 29; pl. XLII, no. 40).

12. See Williams 1983, pl. 12–14 for three sculptures dated to the reign of Rāmagupta. For a somewhat later specimen, see Victoria & Albert Museum (London), IS.18-1956, published in Pal 1994: 134 cat. 21 (<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O25006/parsvanatha-relief-unknown/>). None of these sources comments on the meaning of this iconographic convention.

13. By way of example we can cite, from Phanigiri, the ornamental representation of a *dharmacakra* with ribbon on a pillar shown by Skilling 2008: 112 (fig. 25); from Nagarjunakonda, the depiction on a drum slab with two pillars on which *dharmacakras* with ribbons are mounted (Rosen Stone 1994: 61, fig. 148); from cave sites such as Karla and Kuda in the Western Ghats, depictions of such pillars taking the place of lotus stems below the throne of a major Buddha image (see Bautze-Picron 2010: 27 n. 49, 42–3, figs 47 and 53).

14. We owe this observation to Claudine Bautze-Picron, who refers us to Viṣṇu sculptures from Rampal and Keoar in Dacca Dt., items 7 and 8 on p. 86 of Bautze-Picron 2003. The former is presently held at the Norton Simon Museum (M.2010.1.54.S), whose website allows zooming in on the ribbon with perfect clarity; both were published by Bhattasali (1929: 85 and 107, pl. XXX/right and XXXVIII/right). Although the presence of the ribbon does not seem to be mentioned in any of the descriptions, and the images in most cases do not allow certainty about its presence, it seems that the catalog by Sengupta and Saha (2014) contains many comparable examples.

15. See the Harihara from Burdwan, Asutosh Museum acc. no. 161, published in Asher 1980, pl. 243.

16. See Viṣṇu sculptures from Mathura and Khajuraho discussed and depicted by Banerjea (1956: 405 and 406, pl. XXIII.2 and XXIV). See also a seventh-century sculpture from Kanauj in Begley (1973: 53, fig. 23). The presence of the ribbon remains unmentioned also by these two authors.

17. The *Vāmanapurāṇa* passage cited by Begley (1973: 30) might be cited in support of this interpretation: ‘In its motion exist wind, Water, Fire, Earth, Sky’.

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a. Sealing 1.1, Front



b. Sealing 1.1, Back



c. Sealing 1.1, Close-up of Subsidiary Seal



d. Sealing 1.1, Side



a. Sealing 1.2, Front



b. Sealing 1.2, Back



c. Sealing 1.2, Close-up of Subsidiary Seal



d. Sealing 1.2, Side



a. Sealing 2.1, Front



b. Sealing 2.1, Back



c. Sealing 2.2, Front



d. Sealing 2.2, Back



7

a. Impression of a Seal Matrix from Bhita.
Reproduced from Marshall 1915: 48,
pl. XVII, no. 7



b. Sealing 3.1, Front



c. Sealing 3.1, Back



d. Sealing 3.1, Side



a. Sealing 4.1, Front



b. Sealing 4.1, Back



c. Sealing 4.1, Side



d. Sealing 5.1, Front



e. Sealing 5.1, Back



a. Sealing 5.1, Side



b. Sealing 5.1,
Close-up of Legend and Subsidiary Seals