



## A Comprehensive Study of Huna Invasion in India during the Reign of Skandagupta

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v5i5.236>

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### **Abstract**

The Gupta age was considered the golden age of ancient Indian history. However, during the reign of Emperor Skandagupta the stability of the Empire was threatened by the invasion of a Central Asian tribe, The Huna. Emperor Skandagupta was at that time dealing with the rebellion of Pushyamitra's. and The Huna after ravaging Persia thought that time was ripe to invest in India. Even though the imperial fabric of the Gupta's was in a decaying stage, nevertheless Skandagupta defeated the Hunas. The conquest of the Hunas is mentioned particularly on the Bhitari pillar inscription, and the conquest of the Mlechchhas is mentioned in more general terms on the Junagadh rock inscription, albeit the Mlechchhas cannot be definitively identified as the Hunas. The Hunas were thoroughly defeated by Skandagupta, according to the inscription on the pillar. This article is aimed to highlight the nature and outcome of the conflict between Skandagupta and The Hunas.

**Keywords:** *Bhitari; Huna; Mlechchha; Pushyamitra; Skandagupta*

### **Introduction**

The famous Bhitari Stone Pillar Inscription is carved on a red sandstone pillar outside the present-day village of Bhitari in the Sayyidpur Tahsil of the Ghazipur district of Uttar Pradesh by the Gupta monarch Skandagupta (Vajpeyi, SKANDAGUPTA'S BHITARI GRANT TO VISNU-SARNGIN AND BHITARI EXCAVATIONS 1983, 70). The Bhitari inscription is one of the most vital epigraphic sources which gave us a clear-cut idea about the genealogy of Imperial Gupta family and also vividly describes the menace of Pushyamitras and the Hunas, which nearly destroyed the empire. The Bhitari inscription also inform us about the brave role played by Skandagupta while repealing the invasions of the *Mlechchhas*. S R Goyal observed that the victory which Skandagupta attributed to his mother alludes not just to the Pushyamitras, but also to other opponents with whom he may have battled concurrently, rather than sequentially (Goyal 1967, 235-36). According to B P Sinha, Skandagupta conquered the Pushyamitras when he was still a prince, and he defeated the Hunas after becoming the emperor, as described in the Bhitari inscription where his victory over the Hunas were after it is declared that he saved the stumbling lineage and controlled the land with his own hands (Sinha 1954, 2). Furthermore, the fact is that there was only one coin of Kramaditya, i.e. Skandagupta, was discovered in the Bayana trove suggests that he ascended the throne when the empire was at a critical juncture due to the panic created Huna (Thaplyal

2012, 260). The inscription claims that the combat between the invaders and the Guptas was so fierce that it "made the earth shake" (*dhara kampita*) during the Huna invasion (Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings & Their Successors* 1960, 56). Skandagupta's campaign against them was such a success that they were crushed and fled, carrying tales of Skandagupta's incredible prowess with them, and for another half-century there was no major scale invasion (A. Agrawal 1989, 212).

### **Controversy Over the Location of the Famous Battle**

The location of the fight between Skandagupta and the Huna's not been determined reliably. Fleet reads the sentence as *rotreshu Ggadhvani* near the end of line 16 of Skandagupta's Bhitari epigraph. Some historians believe the fight was fought on the banks of Ganga, based on Fleet's interpretation (Thaplyal 2012, 260). The reading *Ggadhvani* was rejected by Jagannath Agrawal because, according to him, the Hunas were never able to infiltrate India as far as the nearby area of gangetic plain (J. Agrawal 1986, 29). He looked at the inscription's stampage and noticed that what was interpreted as *ga* was actually *sa*, and the following word was not *nga* but *rnga* (J. Agrawal 1986, 59). Agrawal renamed the word *sarnga-dhvani*, or "*twang of the bow*", and interpreted it as a war scene (J. Agrawal 1986, 29). While describing the conflict between Raghu and the Yavanas, Chhabra compares it to *sarnga-kujita* in the *Raghuvamsa* of Kalidasa (Thaplyal 2012, 260). On the other hand, K.K. Thaplyal agrees with Sohoni that the Huna's overran the Gangetic plain up to Bhitari and that Kumaragupta was killed in the conflict (Sohni 1967, 105); otherwise, there is no explanation why Kumaragupta was honored in this particular location. R.P. Tripathi also observed that, "The reference to Ganga here has been made merely as a clever poetical device and not an expression of geographical locality" (Tripathi 1978, 10). Circumstantially, as Atreyi Biswas has already demonstrated, it is difficult to accept that Skandagupta could only stop the first Huna invasion of India after they penetrated as far as the bank of the Ganges in the Gupta empire (Biswas 1973, 50). The hypothesis that Skandagupta and the Huna's battled at Bhitari doesn't seem plausible, because the Guptas wouldn't have sat about waiting for the Hunas to run across their land and get as far as Ghazipur. J. Agrawal noted that The Hunas entered India via Bolan pass, and the battle was fought in Surashtra, the province for which Skandagupta is claimed to have searched long and hard to find a capable ruler (J. Agrawal 1958, 160-61). This viewpoint has been thoroughly explored and agreed upon by Ashvini Agrawal (A. Agrawal 1989, 214). Cunningham however established this battle place in the lower Indus (Cunningham, *LATER INDO-SCYTHIANS. 'EPHTHALITES, OR WHITE HUNS* 1894, 245). Raghavendra Vajpeyi was also pretty skeptical about accepting the above theory about Huna invasion during the time of Skandagupta. He argued that "Whether Skandagupta's conflict with the Huna's was an isolated event or it was sparked off by some unprovoked invasion of the Huna's on the Gupta empire are matters of conjecture" (Vajpeyi, *A CRITIQUE OF THE HUNA INVASION THEORY* 1978, 62). To support his finding Raghavendra Vajpeyi cited Bhitari inscription aided by the translation of Fleet, where he highlights a line from the inscription —

*Hunairryasya samagatasya samare dorbhyam dhara Kampita bhimavartta-karasya*

Which translate as,

"By whose two arms the earth was shaken, when he, the creator of a terrible whirlpool, joined in conflict with the Huna's"-Fleet's translation)" (Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptum* 1888, 54). In its current form, *samagatasya* is an adjective compound of *bhimavartta-karasya*, and it has been used to Skandagupta rather than the Huna's. However, if it is modified to *samagataih* and prefixed with the *Hunaih*, it is certain that it refers to the Huna's who have arrived. Because the inscription's author has not done so, it is impossible to conclude that the verse alludes to the Huna invasion. He suggested that The Huna invasion theory should be dismissed because it is unsupported by evidence, and evidence from fifth-century Gupta-Vakataka inscriptions and Kalidasa demonstrates that Gupta-Huna contacts stretch back to the reign of Gupta emperor Candragupta II.

### ***Analysis of the Conflict***

From Chndravykarana, KP Jayaswal interprets *ajayad Jato (Gupto) Hunan*, which means Gupta king, who is to be identified with Skandagupta, defeated the Huna (Thaplyal 2012, 259). In a story about king Vikramaditya recorded in Somadeva's *Kathasaritsgara*, Allan detects an echo of Skandagupta's victory against the Huna's (Allan 1914). According to the legend Vikramditya, son of Mahendrditya, king of Ujjain, took to the throne after his father abdicated, and efficiently put a stop to the activities of the *Mlechchhas* who were ravaging the land. Although this account cannot be trusted totally, it is plausible to believe that the *Kathasaritsgara's* Mahendrditya and Vikramditya are the Gupta rulers Kumaragupta I and Skandagupta, because they did adopt those titles (A. Agrawal 1989, 212). Thus, Hunas can, of course, be associated with the *mlechchhas* (A. Agrawal 1989, 212).

After giving the account regarding the demise of Skandagupta's father, The Junagarh rock inscription claims that defeated opponents whose pride had been humbled by him sang eulogies of Skandagupta in the *Melchchha* country. Some historians assume that this *Mlechchha desa* was located in Bactria during the Gupta period because Kalidasa recalls Hunas dwelling on the riverside of Vankshu (Goyal 1967, 226). *Mlechchha* is a term that is commonly used to refer to all foreigners, but in this context, it appears to relate to the Huna's (Allan 1914, xlvi). However, numerous researchers have since questioned this identification. According to S. Chattopadhyaya, the *Mlechchas* are not the Hunas, but rather a mixed horde of people comprising Persians, Greeks, and others. They may have attacked the Gupta realm soon after Kumaragupta died (Chattopadhyaya 1958, 218-219). Chattopadhyaya's argument has been successfully contested by Ashvini Agrawal, who points out that the Persians could never have considered invading India because they were themselves defeated by the Hephthalites in 454 CE, when they were forced to protect their own house from a dangerous enemy (A. Agrawal 1989, 212-213). In terms of the Greeks, they were insignificant, both in terms of numbers and in terms of military training that qualified them as mercenaries, let alone possessing any political significance (A. Agrawal 1989, 213). Bactria had been lost to the barbarians for centuries. B.N. Mukherjee associates the *Mlechchhas* with the Sassanians, providing numismatic evidence to back up his claim (Raychaudhuri 2011, 781). According to Mukherjee, Skandagupta's '*bust:altar*' type silver coins could have been minted in a region where Sassanian coins of a similar design have been in circulation for a long time. This realm could have been near Kathiawad in the lower Indus valley, which would have been under Skandagupta's control (as indicated by the Junagadh inscription) (Raychaudhuri 2011, 781-782). Even if we disregard the lack of supporting evidence for the Skandagupta-Sassanian competition, Mukherjee's theory is undermined by Altekar's description of the '*bust:altar*' type coinage. While making notes on these silver coins, Altekar observed that "It appears to have been borrowed from the gold coins, where it figures on the obverse of the Standard type of Samudragupta and the *Chhattra* type of Chandragupta II" (Altekar 1957, 254-255). The art, on the other hand, is rather poor, and we cannot rule out the idea that the device was intended for *Tulasi-vrindavana*, especially as the legend on the obverse proclaims the emperor's Vaishanava faith, which places significant value on the Tulasi plant. The connection of the *Mlechchhas* with the *Kidara Kushanas* by P.L. Gupta is likewise implausible (Gupta, Gupta Sāmarājya 1972, 324), for the simple fact that the *Kidara Kushanas* had lost all power before Skandagupta's reign began (A. Agrawal 1989, 213). As a result, the only acceptable option is to link these *mlechchhas* to the Huna's, as J. Allan, H.C. Raychaudhuri, and Ashvini Agrawal, among others, have done (A. Agrawal 1989, xlvi, 510, 219).

According to McGovern, the Huna's defeated Skandagupta numerous times, and the Gupta Empire nearly disintegrated as a result of their recurrent assaults (McGovern 1939, 416). Skandagupta died a third time fighting the Huna's, as per R.D Banerji (R. Banerji 1933, 52). He claims that during the Huna invasion, Purugupta established himself as a rival monarch (R. D. Banerji 1918-19, 79-80), Skandagupta, on the other hand, was defeated and slain by the Hunas. According to V.A. Smith, reseeded Huna raids occurred in the latter part of Skandagupta's reign, and Skandagupta wasn't able to hold them as he had done earlier, and thus lost to them (Smith 1999, 310). However, K.K. Thaplyal notes that some scholars were so

taken aback by the Huna's' combat prowess, as well as their track record of victory in conflicts beyond India, that they declared them victorious over Skandagupta despite the lack of evidence (Thaplyal 2012, 261). The belief that there were multiple Huna invasions under Skandagupta's reign appears to be founded, at least in part, on the assumption that there was debasement of that king's currency, which was resorted to because of the terrible economic situation produced by the Huna invasions. However, the idea of monetary debasement was based on Cunningham's chemical examination of Skandagupta's coinage, which was not entirely credible (Cunningham, *Coins of Ancient India from the Earliest Times Down to the Seventh Century A.D.* 1891, 16). Among two Classes of Skandagupta's coins, Class I is based on a weight standard of around 132 grains, and because it is closer to the weight of Kumaragupta I's coins, it may be considered early issues of that king. The weight of Class II coins is approximately 144 grains. Althoughh Skandagupta's heavyweight coins have more debasement than his predecessors, they according to a recent chemical examination conducted in the British Museum laboratory, contains the same amount of pure gold as those of his predecessors (Thaplyal 2012, 261).

There appears to be a lack of evidence to support D.R. Bhandarkar's claim that the Naga king invited the Huna chief to arrive to his aid (Thaplyal 2012, 81). The Nagas and the Huna's were vanquished, according to him, though the Gupta prince Ghaotkachagupta died in the battle. On the other hand, the Ramtek inscription reveals that the Gupta prince perished earlier when he rebelled against Kumargupta I. According to numismatic evidence in the shape of two coins, this prince declared himself king and struck coinage (Thaplyal 2012, 259). The 'serpent kings' mentioned in Skandagupta's Junagarh inscription could have been identified with the Naga king but it is difficult to believe that the Nagas could have posed such a serious challenge to the Gupta dynasty, given that their kings ruling in Matuhura, Vidisa, Padmavati, and other areas had been uprooted by Samudragupta and their kingdoms merged into the Gupta Empire. A Naga princess, Kuberanaga, was married to Chandragupta II, the Guptas and the Nagas were linked by matrimony (Thaplyal 2012, 259). The prospect of a Naga chief revolt can be ruled out altogether, because the Nagas would not have been able to build up a powerful military machine and revolt during the strong rule of Chandragupta II Vikramaditya and Kumaragupta Mahendraditya (A. Agrawal 1989, 210). The term "serpent kings" appears to be a generic term for all of Skandagupta's foes in the traditional meaning.

### ***Skandagupta and Prakasaditya***

Pankaj Tandon's study here suggest another theory, aided by Robert Göbl's finding he suggested that Skandagupta had to fight with certain Prakasaditya, whom he identifies as the Huna king, for the control of the empire. According to him, "the Hunas were the enemies of the Guptas, that Skandagupta struggled against them, and that he identified 'mlecchas' as his enemies at the time of his accession. So, it seems natural to conclude that Skandagupta struggled against Prakasaditya" (TANDON 2014, 571). Skandagupta's repeated assertions in his inscriptions that he "established again the ruined fortunes of (his) lineage" and "lineage that had been made to totter" could be explained by his theory, which suggests that his rival was not a member of his own lineage, but rather an outsider who threatened the lineage's destruction. Prakasaditya thus fit into it. In his Bhitari inscription, Skandagupta particularly lists the Hunas as an enemy he defeated. The fact that Prakasaditya's coins are often fairly heavy and look to belong to the *suvarna* standard, or perhaps a standard even heavier than the *suvarna* is one reason against this conclusion. Should the same argument be used if the *Ghato* coins are rejected as Skandagupta's main rival's coins due to their weight and size? This is, without a doubt, a serious objection, but there are at least three ways to overcome it. First, while Prakasaditya's coins are weighty, they are not particularly huge. Rather, they are all roughly the same size, measuring around 19-20 mm in diameter. Like the majority of Kumaraditya I's coins, Second, the *Ghato* coins certainly belong to the Gupta series, as evidenced by their design; consequently, it would be rare for them to deviate much in weight from the rest of the series. The Prakasaditya coins, on the other hand, did not belong in the Gupta series. Despite the fact that they have been categorized as Gupta coins thus far, there are a number of features, as noted before, that imply they are Huna coins. If this is the case, a major change in weight standard for these coins seems more likely than

for the *Ghato* coins. Third, coins of Prakasaditya have been discovered alongside coins of Skandagupta, implying that they were in circulation at the same time. As a result of these three factors, it appears that the Prakasaditya coins were produced around the period of Skandagupta's accession. If they were published later, the theory that Skandagupta's main competitor was Prakasaditya would be refuted. Here Tandon suggest that the rival could have been a predecessor of Prakasaditya (TANDON 2014, 572).

### Conclusion

After conquering the Sassanians in 454 CE, the Huna's would have considered Skandagupta's conflict with the Pusyamisras as an opportunity to launch their own invasion against the Guptas. They were defeated by the ruler of Gupta lineage named *aika-virah* (Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings & Their Successors* 1960, 53), and had to retire to their homeland with tales of Skandagupta's incredible prowess. After defeating the Huna Skandagupta "established a stable administration by appointing able wardens .in the Northern and Western marches" (Prakash 1946, 127). The Kahaum stone pillar inscription refers to the year 141 (Gupta period) as a *sante varshe*, indicating that Skandagupta won in eradicating the threat to the empire and had created serenity throughout his dominion by 460 CE (Bhandarkar 1968, 360).

Skandagupta was not the true heir to the throne, as per most scholars. While he declares himself to be Kumaragupta I's son on his inscriptions, his mother is not named in any known scripture or inscription, implying that he was at best the son of a minor queen of Kumaragupta I, or more likely the son of a woman who was not a queen at all. His mother according to P.L. Gupta, "had an extremely low rank, not unlikely of a mistress, concubine or a slave-girl in the royal harem" (Gupta, *The Imperial Guptas* 1974, 330). Bakker even goes to the length by calling him "a bastard son of Kumaragupta" and "a boy from the harem" (Bakker 2006, 178). In any case, it appears that he was not entitled to the throne simply because of his birth. Even when he was not destined to rule by birth, he defended the empire on his father's behalf. He crushed the insurrection of Pusyamisras, repel the invasion of *Mlechchhas*, who were probably were the Hunas. Thus, Skandagupta truly made his mark on the pages of history.

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