

A Unique Gupta Period Terracotta Sealing from Thanesar, Depicting the Female Counterpart of Hari-Hara

Manoj Kumar

INTRODUCTION

The small town of Thanesar (Kurukshetra district, Haryana), is situated seven kilometres west of Pipli (Kurukshetra) on the ancient trade route known as National Highway 1 (NH1). Kurukshetra is most famous for being the location of the Great War in the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*. Epigraphic and textual records reveal that Thanesar has had several names over the course of its history, including Sthanvisvara, derived from *sthana* (abode) and *isvara* (lord), or *sthana* and *saras* (lake). The Chinese monk Xuanzang visited the Buddhist community here and refers to the town as Sa-ta-ni-shi-fa-lo,¹ while the Greek geographer Ptolemy, calls it Batan-Kaisera.² There is a reference in the *Rig Veda*³ to a lake named Saryanvati, identified with Lake Sanihita Sarovar in modern-day Thanesar.⁴

This town is located on the banks of the Saraswati River and has long been a vibrant pilgrimage centre, drawing people from far and wide.⁵ In ancient times, Thanesar was located in the Kuru *mahajanapada* (kingdom), one of the sixteen *mahajanapadas* mentioned in the *Anguttara Nikaya*.⁶ According to the Dipvansam, Kurukshetra was visited by the Buddha who received alms on the Anotatt Lake (Ajusaghat)⁷ at a place called Thullakohita which D.C. Ahir identifies as Thanesar.⁸ It was here that the Buddha delivered some of his wisest discourses to the Kurus who embraced Buddhism.⁹ During the reign of Emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE, a *stupa* was constructed at Thanesar, then part of the kingdom of Magadha. In the late sixth century CE, King Prabhakara Vardhana (father of Harsha Vardhana), ruled from Sthaneshvara (Thanesar).

Archaeological remains survive from the Shunga, Kushana, Gupta, Vardhana, pre-medieval and medieval periods at Thanesar. The author conducted archaeological scientific clearance work in 2012-13 CE under the direction of Dr. Ranvir Sashtri, Deputy Director of the Department of Archaeology & Museums, Haryana, at a mound in the campus of Kurukshetra University in southern Thanesar and in the northwest corner of the sacred lake, Brahmasrovara. During the excavations, a wealth of antiquities, potteries, and structural remains came to light.

The site was first explored by Prof. Mohinder Singh¹⁰ and the State Archaeology & Museums Department conducted scientific clearance work in 1994-95 and uncovered a massive baked-brick structure. According to the excavator, the recovered structural remains appeared to belong to a stupa of the Vardhana period. Other antiquities and pottery datable to between the Kushana and later medieval period were reported.¹¹

During the recent archaeological investigation at the mound, a round terracotta sealing with a diameter of 5 cm was found (Fig. 1). The sealing, which is coated with a red slip, depicts the figure of a standing



Figure 1: Gupta period terracotta sealing from Thanesar.

goddess with a *prabha-mandala* (halo), composed of raised clay dots. The upper body of the goddess is exposed, however, she wears a very long cloak and a *dhoti* on her lower half. She is adorned with ornaments including earrings and a long twisted-necklace falling between her breasts. In her lowered left-hand she holds a lotus wreath or rosary in a relaxed manner. In her right hand she holds up a large ovoid-shaped fruit with a few leaves attached to the stem. On the right side of the figure is a *trishula* (trident), and on the left side, a *chakra* (discus). A *sankha* (conch) is positioned close to the left foot of the goddess. In the lower register of the sealing is a legend composed of two lines.

LEGEND

The legend contains eleven characters in Brahmi script, altogether forming six words. The legend reads “*padama Sri Rajni hita devika puru*” in Sanskrit.

Pa: May be used for *padama* (lotus).

Sri: One of the names of the goddess Lakshmi.¹²

Rajni: A name associated with the goddess Parvati.

Hita: In favour.

Devika: Divinity (used for the goddess).

Puru: For the name of the place.

The legend appears to be recording the name of the goddess who bestows favour on the people and a place which might be related to the goddess.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE GODDESS

Gods and goddesses are identifiable by their attributes, devices, vehicles, physical appearance and posture. Some emblems and vehicles are associated with specific gods and goddesses, for example, the trident and bull with Shiva, and the *sankha* (conch) and *chakra* (discus) with Vishnu. In Hindu mythology composite gods exist, for instance, Hari-Hara – the composite figure of Shiva (Hara) and Vishnu (Hari).¹³ In sculptural representations of the composite deity, the left half of the image represents Hari and the right half represents Hara. Both are shown with their traditional attributes and clothing. Hari with a conch and *chakra* and wearing a *dhoti*, ornaments and a *kirtimukuta* (crown); and Hara wearing a loin skin and with matted dreadlocks, holding a *trisula*, *bilva* fruit and a *damaru* (drum). The concept of Hari-Hara came into existence after a conflict between *Saiva* and *Vaishnava* cults. Some schools focus on Vishnu (including his associated incarnations such as Rama and Krishna) as the supreme god, and others on Shiva (including his different incarnations such as Mahadeva and Pashupati). To engender a harmonious relationship between the sects a new divine icon was imagined. Ancient Brahmanical texts pre-dating the *puranas* do not lucidly describe such a deity. Symbolic references, however, are found in several texts such as in the *Mahabharata*, “*kapardin sarvabhutesha bhaga netranipatana vyatikramam me bhagavan ksantum arhasi shamkara*,”¹⁴ and ‘*Sivaya Vispu rupaya Sivarupaya vaisryave, Sivasya hridayam Vishnur-vishnoscha hridayam Sivah*’— ‘*Shiva in the form of Vishnu and Vishnu in the form of Shiva. Vishnu is the heart of Shiva and likewise, Shiva is the heart of Vishnu*.’¹⁵ The *Matsya-Purana* also gives a comprehensive explanation of the composite god known as *Shiva-Narayana*.¹⁶ The first sculptural examples of Hari-Hara emerged during the Kushana period,¹⁷ and in the Gupta period this icon became popular.¹⁸ Arguably, it was in the early medieval period that the finest Hari-Hara images were produced.¹⁹

The reported sealing points, albeit in a small way, towards a harmonious relationship between Shaiva and Vaishnava cults during the Gupta period. The left half of the female figure resembles the goddess Lakshmi, consort of Hari (Vishnu). The conch depicted on the left of the sealing is a well-known emblem of Vishnu, and Lakshmi is often portrayed holding the conch in her hand as, for example, on a sealing from Bhita.²⁰ The *chakra* illustrated on the upper right side of the goddess is also one of the devices of Vishnu. Surrounding the *chakra* is a ten-petalled lotus, a flower associated with Lakshmi since the Vedic period.²¹ This type of lotus was also illustrated on the coins of Kunida and Vemka tribes.²² The left hand of the goddess holds a string of beads, as Sri-Lakshmi does on certain Gupta gold coins of Kumaragupta (Pl-2).²³ These emblems provide strong justification for interpreting the left half of the goddess as a depiction of Lakshmi. The right half of the figure may represent the goddess Parvati, consort of Hara (Shiva). In favour of this identification are two Saiva emblems, namely a trident positioned to the right of the figure and a *bilva* fruit, the latter which the goddess holds in her right hand. The *bilva* fruit is linked to both Shiva and Lakshmi but is more



Figure 2: Courtesy: Ellen Raven

commonly associated with Shiva. The ornaments also demonstrate the composite nature of the goddess on this sealing. It seems that in her the right ear she wears a *sharpa kundala* (snake earring), which is associated with Shiva and Parvati,²⁴ and in her left ear she wears a *nakra/makara kundala* associated with Lakshmi.²⁵ It also appears that the goddess has a bracelet on her right wrist – probably a snake bracelet associated with Shiva. Her left wrist might be adorned with a gold bracelet of the type worn by Lakshmi.

The legend found on the sealing offers clear evidence in support of the female figure being a representation of the composite figure of Lakshmi and Parvati. As mentioned above, the legend reads: “*Padama Sri Rajni Hita Devika Puru*”. *Padama Sri* is one of the names of Lakshmi. During the Gupta period, *Sri* was often used for Lakshmi. The *Matsya Purana* also mentions *Sri* with Vishnu.²⁷ The third word of the legend has been deciphered as *Rajni* which is a name of Parvati. She is known by several names including *Kalaratri* (black night), and *Hiranyaratri* (golden night). *Rajni* also alludes to the night.

In composite images of *Hari-Hara*, *Hari* is positioned on the left-hand side and *Hara* on the right. Their respective consorts have also been placed in the same arrangement, with *Lakshmi* on the left and *Parvati* on the right. The legend too, supports this composition, with *Lakshmi*, or *Sri* mentioned first, and *Parvati* or *Rajani*, second.

DATING THE SEALING

In order to date the sealing, stratigraphic, palaeographic and iconographic approaches have been taken. Using this methodology we can arrive at an approximate date. This sealing was recovered from a layer that yielded typical Gupta period culture elements such as red-slip ceramics, carved bricks similar to those found at *Bhitargaon*, and other Gupta period materials. In addition, the Brahmi characters are in the early Gupta style. Sanskrit was the official language during the Gupta age and *Lakshmi* was a popular goddess often found on fifth-century sealings. All evidence indicates that the sealing belongs to the Gupta period.

CONCLUSION

This sealing offers evidence regarding the religious harmony between two sects – the Shaivas and the Vaishnavas. Moreover, it shows a new icon of the goddess as a form of the combined figures of Lakshmi and Parvati. To the best of my knowledge, no similar image has been found to date, and nor is such a goddess mentioned in the texts. Her uniqueness suggests that she might have been a regional divinity. The sealing and other excavated remains suggest that perhaps a temple of Hari-Hara existed here, bordering the holy tank of Brahasarovar during the Gupta period.

NOTES

1. Samuel Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2004), p. 167.
2. *Karnal District Gazetteer* (1976), p. 521.
3. *Rigved Manadla* 9.65.22; 9.113.1.
4. H.A. Phadke, 'Saryanavat', *Proceedings of the all India Oriental Conference, Kurukshetra (History Section)*, (1974).
5. R.C. Majumdar, 'The Antiquity and Importance of Kurukshetra', *Haryana studies*, 5.1-2 (1970), pp. 1-10.
6. *Anguttara Nikaya* 1.213; 4.252-260.
7. Arun Kesarwani, *Kurukshetr ka Itihas, Sanskritian Purattav*: A.K. Sarvekshan, *Smarika: The 44th India Oriental Conference*, K.U.K. (2008), pp. 140-155.
8. D.C. Ahir, *Buddhism in the Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh* (New Delhi: Maha Bodhi Society of India, 1971), p. 15.
9. B.C. Law, 'Kurukshetra in Ancient India', *Belvalkar Felicitation Volume* (1957), p. 259.
10. Devendra Handa, 'Kuruksetra Stupa Areas Revisited', *History Today*, 14 (2013), pp. 20-22.
11. Devendra Handa, 'Heritage of Haryana: An Introduction to the Buddhist Remains in the Region,' *Journal of Haryana Studies*, 27 (1995-96), p. 2.
12. Gopinath Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, vol. I, part-II (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), p. 373.
13. Bhagwant Sahai, *Iconography of Minor Hindu and Buddhist Deities* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1975), p. 133.
14. *Mahabharata*, 3.40.57.
15. *Harivamsha Maha Puranam* 2.125.29; quoted in D.C. Bhattacharyya's *Iconography of Composite Images* (New Delhi: 1980), p.11.
16. *Matsya Purana*, ch. 260, pp. 21-27.
17. Sahai, p. 136.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
21. Devendra Handa, 'The Lotus in Indian Art, Thought and Literature', *Lakshna Series: 6th Lecture* (Shimla: Himachal State Museum), p. 16.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
23. Personal communication with Dr. Ellen M. Raven, Leiden University, 2017-18.
24. *Vamana Purana*, 1.26.
25. J.N. Banerjee, *The Development of Hindu Iconography* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1974), p. 546.
26. Rao, p. 373.
27. *Matsya Purana* 258.15.

