THE SILVER PLATES OF THE
GUNGERIA HOARD:
THEIR MONETARY SIGNIFICANCE

BY

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Introduction

Uninscribed Punch-Marked coins represent the earliest coinage in India, but surprisingly, we know little about the origin and antiquity of the unstamped metallic currency in the sub-continent. According to Basham, a money economy existed in India from the days of the Buddha only, whereas in Mesopotamia the Babylonians and the Assyrians had invented much earlier the unstamped silver shekels which served as means of exchange\(^1\)). However, the emergence of the Punch-Marked coins in India was not a sudden phenomenon; it was preceded by an unstamped metallic currency during the protohistoric times. Besides the recovery of the unstamped silver money from Mohenjodaro\(^2\)), the Rgveda is replete with references, which allude to the prevalence of metallic currency long before the Punch-Marked coins came into existence. Since no archaeological evidence has yet been adduced to corroborate the literary references, the origin and antiquity of the unstamped metallic money in India, like so much of her early history, remains unfolded. In 1870 a hoard, consisting of 424 copper implements and 102 silver plates, was incidently discovered at Gungeria in Madhya Pradesh\(^3\)).

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1) A.L. Basham, Wonder that was India, Fontana, 1967, p. 36.
While the copper implements have often attracted the attention of the scholars, the significance of silver plates appears to have escaped their attention.

**Discovery and conjectures**

The village Gungeria (approximately, 22°25' N-80°08' E), is situated in the Mair estate in Balaghat district of Madhya Pradesh. The place lies about 36 miles (58 km) to the north of Burha, and half way in between Mandla and Seoni. The famous hoard was found on the 21st January, 1870 by two cattle grazers in a piece of waste land about 100 yards (91.43 m) south-west of the village. Nearly 20 years before the discovery, the site had been reclaimed through deforestation for cattle-grazing. The hoard was recovered only a few centimeters below the surface from a 91.5 cm square, and 122 cm deep pit 4).

While the copper weighed altogether 414 1/2 seers (375.96 kg), the silver weighed 80 1/2 tolas 5) (966 g) only. The copper pieces were found and arranged carefully; the longer pieces laid in alternate transverse layers, and the others in a regular order, one above another. The silver was found in a lump by the side of copper 6). The arrangement of the copper and silver pieces suggests that the silver was presumably kept in a purse, which together with the copper, were buried in a wooden box 7); both purse and box have decayed in due course. The hoard seems to represent the concealed treasure of an unknown merchant 8).

As regards the purpose of the hoard, Cockburn had argued, "this curious find had originally been buried for some special object, probably in connection with some religious rite, as the silver ornaments,

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4) Brown, op. cit., p. 146.
5) Ibid., p. 146.
6) Ibid., p. 146.
7) V.A. Smith, 'The Copper Age and Prehistoric Bronze implements of India', Indian Antiquary, 36, 1905, p. 233.