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# Coins, Inscriptions, and Kings: Epigraphy and Numismatics of Ancient Bengal

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## Introduction

This handbook is designed for readers who want to reconstruct political history from the ground up—quite literally—from texts cut in stone and metal, and from legends and images struck on coins. Focusing on ancient and medieval Bengal, broadly spanning the third century BCE to the sixteenth century CE, it combines catalogued inscriptions and numismatic evidence with interpretive essays to show how “material records” can be made to speak. The approach is deliberately practical. Rather than offering a narrative history and leaving the sources in the background, the book places epigraphs and coins at the center of inquiry and demonstrates step by step how they enable, constrain, and sometimes overturn received chronologies.

The period covered here begins with the Mauryan presence in the eastern subcontinent and follows the region’s political transformations through post-Mauryan formations, the Gupta horizon, the florescence of Pala and Sena rule, and the Bengal Sultanate. Across these centuries, scripts evolved, titlature shifted, mints opened and closed, and monetary standards rose and fell. Each change left a trace: a new formula in a copperplate charter, a subtle ligature in a stone inscription, an altered weight standard in silver issues, or a redesigned emblem proclaiming altered claims to sovereignty. By collecting such traces, correlating them with findspot data and hoard profiles, and reading them against one another, we can assemble a more precise political chronology than text-only narratives allow.

Because inscriptions and coins are both durable and fragmentary, they require different habits of reading. Epigraphs reward close attention to formulae—genealogies, land boundaries, donation clauses, and invocations—while coins condense authority into compact signs—portraits, deities, symbols, monograms, and abbreviations. Neither medium is transparent. Inscriptions can exaggerate royal power and smooth over conflicts; coins can cross political boundaries as bullion or trade instruments, creating misleading distributions. This book therefore emphasizes method: paleographic sequencing, metrological analysis, die and fabric studies, stratigraphic context, and the careful tracking of provenance. It also confronts the risks posed by unprovenanced artifacts and forgeries, outlining ethical guidelines and practical tests to protect both scholarship and heritage.

The chapters are arranged to move from tools to applications. Early chapters introduce scripts, languages, materials, metrology, and documentation standards, providing readers with the technical vocabulary needed to evaluate an inscriptional edition or analyze a coin’s fabric. Middle chapters develop interpretive frameworks: how to read titlature and regnal years; how to interpret hoards and findspots; how to use iconography to map changing religious and political affiliations; and how to

integrate quantitative analyses with historical argument. Later chapters apply these methods to Bengal's major political formations and frontier polities, tracing how authority was articulated, negotiated, and sometimes contested through epigraphic and numismatic media.

A distinctive feature of this handbook is the consistent pairing of catalogued data with worked examples. Each methodological discussion is followed by case studies that illustrate how conclusions are reached—and where uncertainty remains. Readers will see, for instance, how a sequence of letter-forms narrows the date of a copperplate grant; how a die-link network reassigns a coin series to a different mint; or how a cluster of hoards, mapped alongside trade routes and river courses, reframes the territorial reach of a dynasty. The goal is not to flatten debate but to make its evidentiary basis explicit and replicable.

Throughout, the book advocates for integrative practices. Epigraphy and numismatics are often treated as adjacent specialties; here they are interdependent. A change in titulature may synchronize with a monetary reform; an iconographic shift on coins may echo a doctrinal emphasis in monastery charters; a new mint signature may correspond to a reoriented trade corridor or a reconfigured frontier. Digital tools—GIS mapping, network analysis, and standardized metadata—are introduced not as ends in themselves but as means to test historical hypotheses with greater precision and transparency.

Finally, this is a handbook for multiple audiences. Archaeologists will find protocols for recording, conserving, and interpreting field finds; historians will encounter models for building chronologies that foreground material evidence; and students of epigraphy will gain a scaffolded path from script identification to critical edition. By the end of the volume, readers should be able to move from an inscriptional squeeze or an uncleaned coin to a historically grounded argument about political authority, territoriality, and change in ancient and medieval Bengal. The ambition is modest and bold at once: to teach the craft of reading things, and in so doing to refresh the stories we tell about power, place, and time.

## **CHAPTER ONE: Landscapes and Sources: Reconstructing Bengal's Political Past**

Bengal, a land where rivers intertwine like ancient script and the monsoon dictates the rhythm of life, presents a unique challenge to the historian. Before the advent of modern cartography, its boundaries were fluid, shaped by shifting river courses, dense forests, and the ambitions of numerous rulers. Reconstructing the political history of this fertile delta, from the Mauryan epoch to the medieval period, is akin to piecing together a vast, waterlogged mosaic where many vital tesserae have been carried away by the currents of time. Yet, it is precisely within this challenging environment that the material records—coins and inscriptions—emerge as indispensable guides, offering tangible anchors in an otherwise elusive past.

The geographical reality of Bengal, particularly its deltaic character, has profoundly influenced the survival and distribution of these material records. The annual floods, while enriching the soil, also relentlessly rework the landscape, burying settlements deep under layers of silt or sweeping away evidence altogether. The humid climate is unkind to organic materials, leaving epigraphic and numismatic evidence, crafted from durable stone and metal, as often the most resilient witnesses to bygone eras. Understanding this interplay between geography and archaeological preservation is the first step in appreciating the biases inherent in our available data. We often find our best evidence in the slightly higher, less inundated tracts, or in areas where human intervention, such as the construction of temples or fortified settlements, offered some protection against the elements.

Our journey to reconstruct Bengal's political past begins not with grand narratives, but with the humble fragments that survive. These fragments are broadly categorized into two primary forms: inscriptions and coins. Inscriptions, typically carved on stone or engraved on copper plates, offer direct textual insights into royal genealogies, administrative decrees, land grants, religious endowments, and sometimes even specific historical events. They are, in essence, the official pronouncements of their time, carefully crafted to convey authority and legitimacy. However, their survival is often accidental, dictated by factors ranging from the durability of the material to the vicissitudes of human conflict and natural disaster. A beautifully inscribed pillar, once a proud marker of imperial reach, might now lie half-buried in a field, its message weathered by centuries of rain and sun.

Coins, on the other hand, provide a different, yet equally vital, class of evidence. They are the tangible markers of economic activity, trade networks, and monetary systems, but more importantly for our purposes, they are potent symbols of sovereignty. The

issuer's name, titles, regnal year, and chosen iconography emblazoned on a coin speak volumes about their political aspirations and religious affiliations. Unlike inscriptions, which are often static and site-specific, coins are mobile. They travel with merchants, soldiers, and pilgrims, offering clues to the extent of political influence and economic reach, sometimes far beyond the formal boundaries of an empire. A hoard of coins discovered hundreds of kilometers from its presumed mint can illuminate ancient trade routes or the movements of armies, hinting at connections that texts alone might never reveal.

The challenge lies in integrating these two distinct categories of evidence. Inscriptions provide detailed, if sometimes idealized, narratives, while coins offer a more dispersed, yet often more immediate, snapshot of political authority and economic realities. The ideal scenario is when both types of evidence corroborate each other, allowing for a robust reconstruction of chronology and political structures. More frequently, however, they present complementary pieces of information, with inscriptions filling in the narrative gaps suggested by coins, and coins providing independent verification or even contradiction to inscriptional claims. It is in these moments of apparent discord that the historian must exercise critical judgment, scrutinizing the biases inherent in each source. For instance, an inscription might proclaim a ruler's undisputed authority over a vast territory, while the scarcity of their coinage in outlying regions might suggest a more tenuous control, perhaps relying on local chieftains for administration rather than direct imperial oversight.

The scope of "ancient Bengal" itself requires careful definition, as its geographical contours shifted significantly over millennia. During the Mauryan period, the reach of imperial power into the easternmost regions of the subcontinent is primarily evidenced by the presence of Brahmi inscriptions, albeit sparse, and the circulation of punch-marked coinage, hinting at a degree of integration into a larger administrative and economic sphere. The subsequent post-Mauryan period sees the emergence of more localized coinages and a greater regional diversity in epigraphic styles, signaling a fragmentation of political authority and the rise of distinct regional polities. The Gupta Empire then brought a period of renewed imperial consolidation, marked by a standardized gold coinage and a proliferation of elaborate copperplate grants, which often delineate the administrative hierarchy and landholding patterns of the era.

The transition to medieval Bengal witnessed the ascendancy of powerful regional dynasties such as the Palas and Senas. Their reigns are richly documented through a wealth of copperplate inscriptions, detailing extensive land grants to religious institutions and individuals, and less frequently, through specific coinages that bear their names and titles. These records illuminate the sophisticated administrative structures, the pervasive influence of religious institutions, and the complex systems of land tenure that characterized medieval Bengal. Finally, the arrival of the Bengal Sultanate marks a significant cultural and political shift, with a new wave of coinage featuring Arabic and Persian legends, reflecting the emergence of a distinct Islamic

polity and its integration into wider networks of trade and influence.

Understanding the *archaeological context* of these finds is paramount. An inscription found *in situ*—meaning in its original place—within a temple complex offers a different set of interpretations than one discovered reused as building material in a later structure. Similarly, a coin found in a securely dated stratigraphic layer of an archaeological excavation provides invaluable chronological markers, whereas a coin purchased from a dealer with no provenance, however aesthetically pleasing, carries a heavier burden of skepticism regarding its historical utility. The discipline of archaeology, therefore, forms an indispensable bedrock for the proper interpretation of epigraphic and numismatic data, lending credibility and precision to historical reconstructions. Without careful recording of findspots, associated artifacts, and stratigraphic relationships, much of the nuanced information that these material records offer can be irrevocably lost.

Beyond the physical location of discovery, the *composition* of hoards—collections of coins buried together—offers fascinating insights. A hoard composed of coins from multiple rulers or different mints might suggest periods of political instability, economic disruption, or perhaps vibrant inter-regional trade. The presence of debased coinage within a hoard could indicate economic stress or attempts by a ruler to manage dwindling resources. Conversely, hoards of meticulously crafted, high-purity coinage often correlate with periods of economic prosperity and stable governance. Analyzing the metallic content, the fineness, and the manufacturing techniques of coins within a hoard allows historians to track monetary policies and economic trends over time, providing a quantitative dimension to the political narrative.

The study of landscapes in relation to historical sources also extends to the pathways of communication and control. Rivers, often seen as natural boundaries, were in Bengal primarily arteries of commerce and communication. Major inscriptions and coin hoards frequently cluster along these riverine networks, indicating centers of political power, religious pilgrimage, and economic exchange. The Ganga, Brahmaputra, and their countless tributaries were not merely geographical features but active participants in shaping the political landscape, facilitating the movement of goods, ideas, and armies. Mapping the distribution of inscriptions and coin types against these ancient river courses and trade routes can reveal patterns of territorial control, the extent of administrative reach, and the intensity of commercial interaction.

Consider, for example, the distribution of early historic terracotta rings wells and punch-marked coins. Their presence in certain elevated regions, sometimes forming discrete clusters, suggests early urban or proto-urban settlements that were strategically located, perhaps to avoid annual inundation and to control local resources or trade routes. These material traces, seemingly insignificant in isolation, coalesce to paint a picture of nascent political formations establishing footholds in a dynamic environment. The subsequent emergence of specific dynastic coinages

further refines this picture, allowing us to trace the expansion or contraction of individual polities within these geographically defined zones.

The dense jungle cover that once characterized much of Bengal also played a significant role. It served as both a natural barrier and a resource, influencing settlement patterns and limiting the visibility of archaeological sites. While forests might have preserved some sites by shielding them from human interference, they also pose immense challenges to archaeological exploration. The stories embedded in the soil are thus often revealed through chance discoveries during agricultural activities, infrastructure projects, or through the persistent efforts of local communities who have long been aware of ancient mounds and relics in their vicinity. These local knowledges, when systematically engaged, can provide invaluable leads for archaeological investigation, bridging the gap between historical inquiry and living traditions.

Ultimately, reconstructing Bengal's political past through material records is an exercise in informed detective work. It requires an understanding of the region's unique geography, an appreciation for the biases inherent in the surviving evidence, and a meticulous application of specialized methodologies from both epigraphy and numismatics. Each coin, each inscription, no matter how small or fragmented, holds a piece of the puzzle. Our task is to carefully collect these pieces, clean them of the accumulated dirt of centuries, and then, with patience and critical insight, begin to assemble them into a coherent, nuanced narrative of power, people, and place in ancient and medieval Bengal. The landscape itself, with its rivers, fertile plains, and pockets of ancient habitation, serves as the silent witness, offering clues to those who know how to read its subtle signs alongside the more overt pronouncements on stone and metal.

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