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A New Nepalese Copper Coin of Kumaon

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During a recent visit to Nepal, I found the copper coin, illustrated below, in a pile of unidentified junk. Stylistically, it had the appearance of a coin of Almora, although rather heavier than anything that I had seen before, and with the mint name "Kumaon", only otherwise found on the rare silver *timashas* dated 1868 VS1.



Obv: (Sr)ji (Maha)raja Rana (Bah)adur Shah

Rev: (Zar)b Khumaon, 1851. Uncertain symbol, possibly like the 'fish' on coins of Najibabad

Diam 24mm

Weight 14.39 g

The legend on the obverse of the coin is very crudely written, and rather uncertain. However the date and mint on the reverse make the attribution not in doubt. Two points make this piece exceptional: first the weight, and secondly the mint name. There is no doubt that the mint name is the same as that found on the *timashas* that I published on ONS Newsletter No.151, where I postulated either Kumaon or Champawati, the only other possibility in the area. This copper coin, however, clearly has *nun* as the last letter of the mint, confirming the reading as Khumaon.

During the late 1780's, Kumaon suffered from a series of political intrigues, which gave the Nepalese an opportunity to expand their territory westwards, and in 1790 a Gurkha army marched into Almora. Soon after that, the Nepalese had to withdraw the majority of their troops to counter an invasion from a Chinese army in 1791, but did not relinquish their hold over Kumaon. In 1791-2, the head of the Nepalese administration, Jog Malla Subah, made a settlement of land revenue and imposed a tax of one rupee per *bisi* on cultivated land, a poll tax of a rupee per adult, and for the expenses of his office, an additional tax of a rupee and two and a half annas on every village. He was replaced in 1793 by Kazi Nar Sahi, a cruel governor, and then in the following year Ajab Singh Khawas Thapa, and the Governorship seems to have changed hands annually thereafter². The present coin has the date 1851 VS (=1794), so was presumably struck during the governorship of Ajab Singh Khawas Thapa, rather than as part of the initial tax raising exercise of the Gurkhas in 1791-2, but it does appear to be the earliest surviving Gurkha coin of Kumaon.

The weight, at over 14g, is significantly heavier than that of the other known coins of Almora struck in the name of Rana Bahadur³, which only weigh about 11 g, so it is tempting to assume that it is earlier than the other types. The change of mint name, from Kumaon, to Almora, would support that

suggestion, since the earliest copper coins in the name of the next king, Girvan Yuddha, also weigh c 11 g and have the mint name Almora.

The appearance of this new coin has led me to examine more closely the copper coin illustrated above, and published as no.1360 in RGV. This coin, which is in the collection of Ken Wiggins, weighs 7.6 g, and hence could be a half denomination on the heavier weight standard. The obverse legend on this piece is very poorly written, and although we originally read it as Girvan Yuddha, I now believe that this could be a half denomination on the higher weight standard. The king's name is not clear but the legend seems generally to be set out in a similar way to that on the new coin, although there may be traces of *Vikram* at the upper left, which would only be appropriate for *Girvan Yuddha Vikram Shah*. The mint name is, however, clearly written as *Almora*, and the date appears to be 1858 VS, although it has been engraved over the tail of *zarb*, and might possibly be 1854 VS (=1797) or 1857 VS. The earlier date would be appropriate for Rana Bahadur, but both the latter dates fall within Girvan Yuddha's reign. The earlier date fits much better with the theory that the weight standard of copper coins in Kumaon / Almora was reduced from 14 g to 11 g at the end of the 1790's, late in the reign of Rana Bahadur, but it does require a certain amount of wishful thinking, and I look forward to finding more specimens that may clarify the reading. My thanks to Ken Wiggins for some useful ideas regarding the attribution of his specimen.

This new piece gives us a much clearer picture of the earliest Gurkha coinage of Kumaon. The copper coinage was started by 1794, with the paisa struck to a weight standard of 14-15 g, and a half paisa of half weight. Towards the end of the 1790's, the weight standard seems to have been reduced to about 11 g, and the denomination *fulus* written on the coin, but further evidence of the precise date is required, and we have no documentary evidence to indicate what the coins were actually called locally. In 1801, similar coins were struck by Girvan Yuddha to slightly reduced weight standard of about 10 g, and then about 1809, the weight of the standard copper coin was reduced to about 5 g, but whether this was a half denomination, or a reduction in weight standard is not known.

1. N.G.Rhodes, "A New Nepalese Coin from Kumaon", *ONS Newsletter*, No. 151 (Winter 1997), pp.14-15.

2. *Almora*, Uttar Pradesh Gazetteers, by Saiyid Ali Akhtar Rizvi., Luknow 1981, p.60.

3 cf. Rhodes, Gabrisch and Valdetaro, *The Coinage of Nepal*, (RGV) nos. 1356/7.