Identity of Chandra and Vishnapalagiri of the Delhi Iron Pillar Inscription: Numismatic, Archaeological and Literary Evidences

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ABSTRACT

The oldest Sanskrit inscription inscribed on the Delhi iron pillar states that the pillar was constructed by King Chandra. The translation of the inscription is thus critically addressed. After reviewing the early commentaries on the identity of Chandra, conclusive numismatic evidences have been presented to show that the identification of Chandra with the Gupta monarch Chandragupta I Vishnapalagiri poses the least contradiction. Evidences have also been provided, for the first time, to identify Chhaya in the original location Vishnapalagiri of the iron pillar.

1. Introduction

The iron pillar located at the Quwwat al-Islam complex in New Delhi (Fig. 1) has attracted the attention of archaeologists and numismatists due to its excellent resistance to corrosion. The construction of this pillar is a remarkable engineering achievement considering that it was manufactured by forge-welding about 1200 years ago. There are many inscriptions inscribed on the Delhi iron pillar. The oldest and largest among these inscriptions is a dual-line, three-column inscription in Sanskrit which states that the pillar was erected by one king Chandra. Several theories have been proposed to identify this mysterious person Chandra. The present paper will focus on the age-old problem of identifying this king Chandra by analyzing critically the available evidence and providing new evidence. The second aim of the paper is to identify the original location Vishnapalagiri of the pillar. The identification of Chandra would provide the correct age of the pillar while the identification of Vishnapalagiri would provide details about the atmospheric environment the pillar was originally exposed to. Therefore, the analysis of the epithet certainly has an indirect bearing on the technical aspects of corrosion of the pillar.

The iron pillar was constructed during the rule of the Gupta empire in ancient India. On palaeographic grounds i.e., based on the nature of the characters of the Brahmi script,