

A Numismatic Study of Abbasid Gold Coins Collected at the Bangladesh National Museum

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Abstract: The Abbasid dinar, a striking gold coin from the Islamic Golden Age, epitomizes the era's economic vitality and artistic sophistication, reflecting the profound influence of the Abbasid Caliphate across the medieval world. Eight valuable, unpublished gold coins from this dynasty, preserved in the collection of the Bangladesh National Museum, hold significant historical value. Discovered in the Chandpur and Brahmanbaria districts near the *Samatata* archaeological site in 1996 and 2002, these coins are not detailed in the museum's inventory beyond their discovery and acquisition history. This study reveals key details such as their issuing authority, year of issuance, mint name, metal composition, measurements, and inscriptions that promote Islamic monotheism and praise the Prophet Muhammad. Analyzing the inscriptions on these coins, the study briefly highlights the distinctive features of Abbasid gold coins. These coins represent as essential artifacts in the history of early Arabs and ancient Bengal, prominently featuring commercial symbols. Indirect references in the historical texts from Arab-Persian geographers suggest that Bengal was a flourishing commercial hub in ancient time and well-integrated into maritime trade networks with early Arab merchants. The archaeological evidence of their trading interactions is substantiated by these gold coins, illustrating the extent of this relation spanning from the eighth to the tenth centuries. This article aims to provide meticulous identification of these coins, analyze their inscriptions and examine their historical significance in the context of early Arab-Bengal trade relations. In pursuit of these goals, the study employs a qualitative methodology with a numismatic approach, supplemented by historical data from primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Bangladesh National Museum; Abbasid Coin; Bengal; Samandar; Early Arab- Bengal Trade.

1. Introduction

The Bangladesh National Museum, one of South Asia's prominent institutions dedicated to the collection and preservation of historically significant coins, houses a vast collection of 57,992 coins made from gold, silver, copper, and other metals, out of a total of 93,838 artifacts collected till 30th of June, 2024. This extensive collection includes a significant number of Muslim coins, which hold particular historical importance. Historically, these coins served as both a medium of exchange and a symbol of Muslim ruler's sovereignty. The Umayyad dynasty (661-750) introduced the first purely Islamic-Arabic coinage system, issuing *dirham* (silver coin), *dinar* (gold coin), and *fals* (copper coin) during the 690s in the history of Islam. This system marked a departure from pre-Islamic coinage traditions and established a new standard for Islamic monetary practice. The Abbasid dynasty (750-1258) followed with a similar coinage system but altered the inscriptions on the Umayyad coins and introduced new ones. Their gold coins (*dinars*), minted under the direct supervision of the caliphs, are particularly noteworthy for their role in the empire's extensive trade network.

Eight unpublished Abbasid gold coins, preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum, are particularly significant for understanding early Arab and ancient Bengal¹ history within the context of trading contacts. These coins, discovered in 1996 and 2002 in the Chandpur and Brahmanbaria districts of Bangladesh, are unique in that no other region in Bangladesh has yielded a comparable collection of such coins. The museum's inventory lacks detailed information about these coins beyond their discovery and collection history. These coins feature Arabic inscriptions in the Kufic script², yet details such as their issuing authority, issuing year, mint name, measurements and the details of their inscriptions remain unidentified and unexplored. Preliminary analysis reveals that many inscriptions include Quranic verses, emphasizing their Islamic significance.

Coins are crucial archaeological artifacts that can unveil historical mysteries and fill gaps left by written records. The Abbasid gold coins discovered in Bengal, featured with commercial symbols, provide crucial evidence of early Arab trade relations with ancient Bengal. Historically, Bengal with its abundant natural resources and favorable climate made it an attractive destination for foreign traders (Ali, 2007). The Arabs were professional and experienced merchants since ancient times at the very least. Despite their early conquests in Sindh and Multan during the early eighth century, their influence did not reach deep into the heart of the Indian subcontinent, not to speak of her eastern regions like Bengal (Karim, 2014). However, indirect references in the historical texts from Arab-Persian geographers regarding early Arab-Bengal trading contact suggest that Bengal was well-linked with the early Arabs through sea trade routes a very long time before the conquest of Lakhnawti by Bakhtiar Khalji in 1204 CE. During the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, from the eighth to the twelfth century, international trade both in the East and the West flourished under the dominance of these caliphates. The Abbasid Caliphate, in particular, fostered a vast global trade network that extended across continents. The Chittagong port in Bengal played a crucial role in this commercial activity, transforming the southeastern regions of Bengal, particularly east of the Meghna River, into a vibrant trade hub. Based on indirect references by geographers, it is inferred that Arab maritime traders and travelers established initial contact with Bengal for trade and commerce purposes during the eighth century (Islam, 2003). Although these historical accounts do not specify exact dates or years, their nuanced references suggest several factors that are believed to have initiated Arab-Bengal trading interactions in that period. The discovery of eighth to tenth century Abbasid gold coins in Bengal, particularly in the *Samatata*³, a well-demarcated ancient sub-region of Southeast Bengal, suggests the

presence of Arab traders in Bengal during this period. As archaeological evidence, they also firmly corroborate the accounts of geographers.

This article will first provide a meticulous identification of these coins, revealing their key details such as issuing authorities, year of issuance, mint names, metal compositions, measurements, artistic intricacies, and other distinguishing features embedded with inscriptions. It will then analyze the inscriptions on these coins, investigating the unique characteristics of Abbasid gold coins. Additionally, the article will explore their historical significance based on literary accounts from geographers regarding early Arab-Bengal trade relations.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach in numismatics incorporating primary and secondary sources to delve into the underlying significance related to the research goals. The research begins with a systematic inventory that identifies eight unpublished gold coins preserved in the reserve collection of Bangladesh National Museum. Each coin was meticulously examined in the museum's laboratory, where dimensions and metal compositions were recorded using specialized equipment, yielding crucial data about the coins' physical characteristics. Information regarding the coins' discovery and accession was gathered from the museum's inventory register, providing pivotal context regarding their provenance and historical background. Given that these coins feature Arabic inscriptions, transliteration from Arabic to Latin was carried out following the Library of Congress's (LC) method. The resulting transliterated data were then translated into English, providing insights into the mints, issuing years, and ruling authorities associated with the coins. This process also uncovered additional messages conveyed through the inscriptions. The compiled data from these coins were cross-referenced with geographers' accounts and other relevant literature to ensure the research yielded optimal results, thereby deepening the understanding of the historical significance of these Abbasid gold coins.

3. Identification and Analysis of Abbasid Gold Coins

The focus of this study revolves around the Abbasid gold coins stored in the collection of the Bangladesh National Museum. Before delving into the identification and analysis of these coins, it is essential to provide a brief introduction to the Abbasids and explore the history surrounding the discovery of these coins. This background is crucial for comprehensive understanding of all aspects of the research.

3.1. A Brief Introduction to the Abbasid

The Abbasids were the descendants of Abbas bin Abdul Muttalib (566-653), the youngest uncle of Prophet Muhammad. He belonged to the Hashemite branch of the Quraysh tribe in Mecca from whom the dynasty derived its name. They initiated a protracted campaign against the Umayyads, asserting their own legitimacy as the rightful successors of Prophet Muhammad. This struggle culminated in the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate, following the defeat of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II (744-750), at the Battle of Zab in 750 CE. The founder of this caliphate, Abul Abbas as-Saffah (750-754), initially ruled from Kufa. However, it was his successor, Abu Jafar al-Mansur (754-770), who truly consolidated the dynasty by founding the city of Baghdad and designating it as the capital in 762 CE. From this point forward, the majority of subsequent Abbasid caliphs administered the empire from Baghdad. Over the course of their reign from 750 to 1258 CE, a total of 37 caliphs governed vast

expanses of the Middle East. The periphery of their empire was extended from the Atlantic Ocean to Sindh River and the Caspian Sea to the Nile. For the first three centuries, the Abbasids maintained an uninterrupted line of caliphs, a continuity that bolstered the development of Islamic governance and fostered significant intellectual and cultural advancements during the Golden Age of Islam. However, by the mid-tenth century, the influence of non-Arabs on the Abbasid caliphs began to undermine the dynasty's dominance. The caliphate ultimately persisted for 508 years until it was collapsed by the Mongol leader Hulagu Khan in 1258 CE, who razed Baghdad and executed the last Abbasid caliph of Baghdad, Al-Mutasim Billah (1242-1258).

3.2. History of the Discovery of Abbasid Gold Coins in Bengal

As of June 30, 2022, the Bangladesh National Museum's collection includes 747 gold coins, out of a total of 57,952 diverse coins preserved in its cabinet. During the cataloging process of these gold coins in 2023, we found eight unpublished valuable Abbasid gold coins preserved there. These coins were collected from the Chandpur and Brahmanbaria districts, adjacent to the renowned archaeological site of *Samatata*, in 1996 and 2002. It is known from the inventory register of the Museum that a hoard of twelve early Arab gold coins was discovered by a local cultivator in 1996 while excavating land at Warukbazar of Hajiganj in Chandpur District. These coins were first collected by a local goldsmith named Md. Fazar Ali and were later purchased from him by a local coin collector, Md. Oli Miah of Chandpur, who subsequently sold them to the Bangladesh National Museum in 1996. The collector reported that the hoard originally comprised more than twenty coins, some of which were fragmented during excavation and subsequently melted by Fazar Ali. Aside from this, a few gold coins were sold out to private collectors. Of the twelve coins, seven have been identified as Abbasid. In 2002, the museum collected two more early Arab gold coins from the Brahmanbaria District. The collector of these two coins who later sold them to the Bangladesh National Museum mentioned that he had collected them from a jewelry shop of Brahmanbaria. The shop proprietor informed the collector that these coins had been discovered by a farmer in 2002 during excavation in a high land of the district. One of these two coins has been identified as Abbasid. All eight coins, comprising seven from Chandpur and one from Brahmanbaria, are in excellent condition of preservation.

3.3. Identifications and Descriptions of the Coins

The eight Abbasid gold coins discovered in Bengal are circular in shape. They feature inscriptions in ancient Arabic script, rendered in the Kufic style. Unlike contemporary Arabic writing style, these inscriptions lack the use of dots and diacritics such as *Jabara*, *Jera*, and *Pesha*. Indeed, both the Umayyad and the Abbasid dynasties generally eschewed the use of such marks in their scripts. The detailed identifications and descriptions of these coins are as follows:

01. The obverse of the first coin features the following text in the inner circle: *ون ال ونا ال الال مدح ال* (Lā ilāha illāllāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu) and surrounding the inner circle: *دمح* *وہك یذنا ہع ہزیظین قحنا یذنیبب وسرا لال لسر* (Muḥammad rasūl allāh) and around the inner circle: *دللا* *dīnil haqqi li-yuḏhirahu 'alāddīni kullihī*). The reverse contains inscriptions in the inner circle: *دللا* *qunṣ ṭḥṭ 'yḥṭā' qū'ī yṣb lā qurṣ adī zūnīna* (Muhammad rasūl allāh) and around the inner circle: *دمح لسر* *(Bismillāhi ḍuriba hadhā ddīnar sanah thalatha wa thalathīna wa miah)*.



Figure 1: Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)

Ruler: Not mentioned, Mint: Not mentioned, Date: 133 AH (750 CE)

Diameter: 20.16 mm, Weight: 4.11 gm, Provenance: Chandpur

Accession No. 01.01.003.1996.00070

02. The obverse of this coin features the following text in the inner circle: *لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَحْدَهُ لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ* (Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu Ubādullāh bin al-Sarī) circle: inner the around and *وَمَا يَذُنُّهُ رَبُّكَ إِلَّا لِيُظْهِرَهُ لِبَنِي إِسْرَافِيلَ* (Muhammad rasūl allāh arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuẓhirahu 'alāddīni kullihī). The reverse contains inscriptions in the inner circle: *أَلِ الْخَلِيفَةِ مُحَمَّدٍ رَّسُولِ اللَّهِ* (Al khalīfah muhammad rasūl allāh al-Māmūn) and around the inner circle: *بِسْمِ اللَّهِ قُرَيْبًا هَدَاهُ* (Bismillāhi ḡuriba hadhā ddīnar bimiṣr sanah 'ashara wa mīatān).



Figure 2: Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)

Ruler: Caliph Al-Mamun (813-833), Mint: Egypt, Date: 210 AH (827 CE),

Diameter: 17.00 mm, Weight: 4.19 gm, Provenance: Chandpur

Accession No. 01.01.003.1996.00071

03. The obverse of this coin features the following text in the inner circle: *لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَحْدَهُ لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ* (Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu) and around the inner circle: *وَمَا يَذُنُّهُ رَبُّكَ إِلَّا لِيُظْهِرَهُ لِبَنِي إِسْرَافِيلَ* (Muhammad rasūl allāh arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuẓhirahu 'alāddīni kullihī). The reverse contains inscriptions in the inner circle: *لَسْرٍ هَدَاهُ* (Muhammad rasūl allāh Umar) and around the inner circle: *بِسْمِ اللَّهِ قُرَيْبًا هَدَاهُ* (Bismillāhi ḡuriba hadhā ddīnar sanah thalatha wa sab'īna wa mīah).



Figure 3: Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)

Ruler: Not mentioned, Mint: Not mentioned, Date: 173 AH (789 CE)

Diameter: 18.16 mm, Weight: 4.23 gm, Provenance: Chandpur

Accession No. 01.01.003.1996.00076

05. The obverse of this coin features the following text in the inner circle: **ون زفع جال ونا الاللا مذك ال** (Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahū lā sharīka lahu ja 'far), around the inner circle: **يسب** (Bismillāhi) and in the margin: **بیتیبی یسبح بئ قنس والسن ا قنذب زنیذا اذی قرض للا** (as-salām sanah thamāni wa khamsīna wa miatān) and in the margin: **لوزلا للا ز صرب للا زیا ال ی مبق ی ذعب** (Lillāhi alamru min qabli wamin ba 'di wa yawma 'izin yafrāḥul mu 'minūna binaṣrillāh). The reverse contains inscriptions in the inner circle: **للا** (Lillāhi muhammad rasūl allāhi al-Mu'tamid alāllāh) and around the inner circle: **لترثنا مكن و مك یذا ع ه مزیطین قحنا یذ یزینب و سیرا للا لسر دحم** (rasūl allāhi arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuzhirahu 'alāddīni kullihi walaw karihal mushrikūn).



06. The obverse of this coin features the following text in the inner circle: ال و ن ا لا مللا مذح ال (Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu abū abdullāh), around the inner circle: بميسر ددینار هادها دیربا (Bismillāhi سب مللا اذی فرض مللا *bimīṣr ddīnār hadhā ḍuriba*) and in the margin: ملل زی ال ا ی مبق ی ذعب ذئی ی حزفی (*sanah thamāna wa thalathīna wa miatān*) and للیلا ازلن ب (*Lillāhi alamru min qabli wamin ba'di wa yawma 'izin yafrāḥul mu'minūna binaṣrillāh*). The reverse contains inscriptions in the inner circle: للیلا محمد ل سیر مللا مکتن ا ن مللا (*Lillāhi muhammad rasūl allāh almutawakkil alāllāh*) and around the inner circle: دمحم ل سیر (*arsalahu allāh rasūl*) and للیلا (*Muhammad*) and للیلا (*bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuzhirahu 'alāddīni kullihī walaw karihal mushrikūn*).



Figure 6: Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)

Ruler: Caliph Al-Mutawakkil (847-861), Mint: Egypt, Date: 238 AH (852 CE)

Diameter: 20.95 mm, Weight: 3.98 gm, Provenance: Chandpur

Accession No. 01.01.003.1996.00127

07. The obverse of this coin features the following text in the inner circle: ونالالامذح *(Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu)* and around the inner circle: دمحم لسر مللا *(Muhammad rasūl allāhi arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuzhirahu ‘alāddīni kullihi)*. The reverse contains inscriptions in the inner circle: لسر مللا دمحم *(Muhammad rasūl allāh)* and around the inner circle: يسب مللا قرض اذى زنيذنا قنس

يسب مللا قرض اذى زنيذنا قنس *(Bismillāhi ḍuriba hadhā ddīnar sanah thamāna wa sittīna wa miah).*



Figure 7: Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)

Ruler: Not mentioned, Mint: Not mentioned, Date: 168 AH (784 CE)

Diameter: 18.29 mm, Weight: 4.15 gm, Provenance: Chandpur

Accession No. 01.01.003.1996.00126

08. The obverse of this coin features the following text in the inner circle: ونالالامذح *(Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu)*, around the inner circle: يسب مللا قرض اذى *(Bismillāhi ḍuriba hadhā ddīnar bifilistīn sanah thalathah wa tisīna wa margin: the in and mīatān)* *(Lillāhi alamru min qabli wamin ba‘di wa yawma’izin yafrāḥul mu’minūna binaṣrillāh)*. The reverse contains inscriptions in the inner circle: لسر مللا دمحم لسر مللا *(Lillāhi muhammad rasūl allāh almuktafi billāh)* and around the inner circle: دمحم لسر مللا ومسرا *(Muhammad rasūl allāhi arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuzhirahu ‘alāddīni kullihi walaw karihal mushrikūn).*

يسب مللا قرض اذى *(Muhammad rasūl allāhi arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuzhirahu ‘alāddīni kullihi walaw karihal mushrikūn).*



Figure 8: Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)

Ruler: Caliph Al-Muqtafi Billah (902-908 CE), Mint: Palestine, Date: 293 AH (906 CE)

Diameter: 22.76 mm, Weight: 4.30 gm, Provenance: Brahmanbaria

Accession No. 01.01.003.2002.00274

The collection of the eight Abbasid gold coins described herein represents the largest hoard of such coins ever discovered in Bengal. No comparable collection of these coins has been found in any other region of Bangladesh. Each coin is verified as genuine based on its dimensions and metal composition, leaving no room for doubt regarding their authenticity. These coins bear the names of caliphs or rulers, the years and places of issuance, declarations of monotheism, and some laudatory inscriptions in honor of the Prophet Muhammad. It is noteworthy that the recitation of the caliph's name during the Friday congregational prayer's sermon and the issuance of coins were considered significant symbols of the caliph's recognition and two prerogatives of sovereignty in the Islamic administrative system. Mentioning the ruler's name in sermons and coins meant accepting the sovereignty and suzerainty of that ruler, and it was considered the principal criterion of sovereignty for an Islamic ruler (Mernissi, 1993). As part of his policy to unify the various regions under Islamic rule, Umayyad caliph Abdul Malik ibn Marwan (685-705) introduced the first Umayyad *dinar* (gold coin) at a time of discord between the Umayyad and the Byzantines over the merits of Islam and Christianity (Ali, 2004). Following the introduction of purely Arabic gold coin, the *dinar*, in 77 AH/696 CE, he subsequently introduced the *dirham* (silver coin) in 79 A.H./698 CE, and the *fals* (copper coin) in 81 AH/700 CE (Mitchiner, 1977). Subsequent Umayyad rulers, in conjunction with the Abbasids, followed Abdul Malik by adopting a similar coinage system comprising three types of coins primarily utilized for transactions. During both the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, the minting and circulating of the *dinar* became a standardized practice. The Umayyad *dinar* was directly derived from the Byzantine *solidus* (gold coin) and continued to be used under the name *dinar* throughout both the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. These *dinars* typically weighed approximately 4.30 grams, mirroring the weight of the Byzantine solidus. This standard weight for the *dinar* remained largely unchanged throughout the Umayyad and Abbasid eras. The weight of the Abbasid gold coins discussed in this paper aligns with the aforementioned standard.

3.4. Analysis of the Inscription of Abbasid Gold Coins

The information gleaned from the inscriptions on the obverse and reverse of the coins encompasses declarations of monotheistic Islamic belief, laudatory statements directed at the Prophet Muhammad, the years of issuance, the names of the mints, and the names of the rulers who ordered their minting. The inscription declaring the oneness of the Almighty, "*Lā ilāha illallāhu wahdahu lā sharīka lahu*" (There is no deity but Allah alone; He has no partner), first appeared on Umayyad coins and was

subsequently adopted by the Abbasids. This proclamation is present on all the coins mentioned in this paper. The exaltation of the Prophet Muhammad by Allah is expressed in the inscription “*Muhammad rasūl allāh*” (Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah), which appears on the reverse of all Abbasid coins. The Abbasids innovated by inscribing this text in three rows on the obverse of their coins, replacing the verse of Surah Ikhlas that was used on Umayyad coins. Another significant Quranic verse venerating the Prophet Muhammad is: ‘*Muhammad rasūl allāhi arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuḏhirahu ‘alāddīni kullihī walaw karihal mushrikūn*’ - Al Quran, 61:09, (Muhammad is Allah’s messenger, sent with guidance and the true religion to ensure its supremacy over other all religions though those who engage in polytheism dislike it). This verse appeared partially on all Abbasid gold coins prior to 214 AH/829 CE. The Umayyads were the first to inscribe this verse in full on their silver coins and partially on gold coins (up to *alāddīni kullihī*). The early Abbasids followed the Umayyad and they also inscribed this verse partially on their gold coins. Caliph Al-Mamun initiated the complete inscription of this verse (from beginning to *wa law karihal mushrikūn*) on dinars in 214 A.H., and subsequent Abbasid caliphs adopted this practice (Ali, 2010). The prophecy that inspired Muslims to firmly believe in the command of Allah is *‘Lillāhi alamru min qabli wamin ba’di wa yawma’izin yafrāḥul mu’minūna binaṣrillāh’* - Al Quran, 30:04, (The ultimate authority to decide the outcome of the affair, both before and after, lies only with Allah, and on that day the believers will experience great joy at the victory willed by Allah). Caliph Al-Mamun was the first to feature this verse on his coins in 207 AH /822 CE, and subsequently, all Abbasid caliphs followed him (Ali, 2010). It is likely that the Abbasids included this verse on their coins as the victory reverberation of them against the Umayyad. This verse is found on our coins of Caliph Al Mutamid Billah, Caliph Al Mutawakkil, and Caliph Al Muktafi Billah.

Seven of the eight coins exhibit distinct years of issuance. The year of issue for the fourth coin remains indeterminate, as the inscriptions on its edge have been eroded through abrasion. Four of the coins explicitly name the caliphs: Caliph Al-Mamun on the second coin, dated 210 AH/825 CE; Caliph Al-Mutamid Billah on the fifth coin, dated 258 AH/871 CE; Caliph Al-Mutawakkil on the sixth coin, dated 238 AH/852 CE; and Caliph Al-Muktafi Billah on the eighth coin, dated 293 AH/906 CE. The remaining four coins do not feature the names of any caliphs. Notably, it is worth mentioning that Abbasid gold coins did not bear the names of caliphs before 190 AH/805 CE (Ali, 2010). Caliph Al-Mahdi introduced the practice of inscribing the caliph’s name on *dirham* in 161 AH/777 CE (Mitchiner, 1977), while Caliph Harun al-Rashid (785-809) implemented this practice on *dinar* in 190 A.H/805 CE in the history of Muslim coins (Al- Naqshabandi, 1953). The year of issuance on the first coin is 133 AH/750 CE. It lacks both the name of the ruler and the mint, but the issuance year suggests it was struck during the reign of Caliph Abul Abbas al-Saffah (750-754). The seventh coin, dated 168 AH/784 CE, is attributed to Caliph Al-Mahdi (775-785). The third coin is dated to 173 AH/789 CE, with the name ‘Umar’ inscribed on the lower segment of the reverse. This date corresponds to the period of Caliph Harun al-Rashid. He issued five distinct types of coins, and the second type featured only the name of a provincial administrator or vizier (Ali, 2010). It is probable that Umar was a provincial governor under Caliph Harun al-Rashid. The margin and ruler name of the fourth coin are obscured, rendering it impossible to determine its year of issue and the ruler’s identity. This coin appears to be similar to the third coin, suggesting it was also minted during the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid.

Some coins feature both the names of the caliph and the governor or successor. On the second coin, the inscriptions include the name of Caliph Al-Mamun and Governor Ubaidullah bin Al- Sari.

Ubaidullah served as the governor of Egypt from 822 to 826 CE. Another coin, issued under Caliph Al-Mutamid Billah, names his successor as ‘Jafar’. Jafar, the son of Al-Mutamid Billah, was appointed as governor of Egypt and the Maghreb, with the title Al-Mufawwaj (designating a position of authority). However, in 279 AH/892 CE, Al-Mutamid Billah revoked Jafar’s succession and removed his name from the coins. Similarly, the coin of Caliph Al-Mutawakkil features the name Abu Abdullah, his son, who is better known by his regnal title, al-Mu‘tazz Billāh (866-869). It is significant to note that the practice of inscribing the name of a successor (*wali ahad*) on coins was first initiated by Caliph Al-Mansur during the Abbasid period in the history of Muslim coins. Although Al-Mansur himself did not inscribe his own name on the coins, he did feature the name of his son, Al-Mahdi, on *fals* in 151 AH/768 CE and on *dirham* in 153 AH/770 CE (Mitchiner, 1977).

The term *Lillah* (لله) is inscribed at the top of the reverse side of three of our coins. This inscription was first introduced by Caliph Al-Mamun in 198 AH/813 CE, and it was subsequently adopted by his Abbasid successors (Ali, 2010). The Abbasids engraved the term *dinar* as زندي (without *alif*) on their coins, as seen on all of our coins, while the Umayyads used ربندي (with *alif*). The term *Al-Khalifa* (الخليفة) is inscribed on the coin of Caliph Al-Mamun, symbolizing the leader’s religious and political authority within the Islamic realm. This word not only reinforced the ruler’s legitimacy but also underscored his connection to the Islamic faith. The presence of this title on coins fostered a sense of unity among Muslims under a singular leadership, thereby strengthening the notion of a cohesive Islamic community. Notably, Caliph Al-Mahdi was the first to inscribe the word ‘*Al-Khalifa*’ on the *dirham* minted at Madinat as-Salam in 161 AH/778 CE (Mitchiner, 1977), while Caliph Harun al-Rashid was the pioneer in doing so on the *dinar* (Al-Naqshabandi, 1953). Subsequently, Caliph Al-Amin adopted the term for his coins starting in 195 AH. Following the conflict between Caliph Al-Amin and Al-Mamun in 195 AH/810 CE, relations deteriorated, prompting Al-Mamun to issue *dinars* from 196 AH/811 CE, in which he presented himself as both Al-Imam and Al-Khalifa (Ali, 2010). The title ‘*Al-Khalifa*’ was subsequently adopted by all succeeding caliphs.

Three mint names are inscribed on four of our coins. The second and sixth coins bear the mint name Egypt (Misr), the fifth coin is marked with Madinat-as-Salam (Baghdad), and the eighth coin features Filistin (Palestine). The first, third, fourth, and seventh coins do not bear any mint name. The first coin, issued by Caliph Abul Abbas al-Saffah, was likely minted in Kufa. The third coin, issued by Caliph Harun al-Rashid, and the seventh coin, issued by Caliph Al-Mahdi, were both probably minted in Madinat-as-Salam (Baghdad). It has been previously mentioned that the Umayyad did not include the caliph’s name on their coins and rarely mentioned the mint name on their gold coins. The practice of inscribing the mint name on *dirhams* was initiated by Abul Abbas al-Saffah in 133 AH/750 CE (Mitchiner, 1977), and on *fals* by Al-Mansur (Ali, 2010). Caliph Al-Mamun was the first to initiate the practice of inscribing the mint name on *dinars* in 198 AH/813 CE in the history of Muslim coins (Ali, 2010). This practice was subsequently adopted by all following caliphs.

4. Historical Significance of Abbasid Gold Coins in the Context of Early Arab-Bengal Trade Relations

The Arabs were traditionally traders from the very beginning because the Arabian Peninsula lacked sufficient arable land and most of its territory was desert. Throughout ancient times, they were the most widely recognized navigators in the world. Prior to the rise of Islam, the Arab territories had a crucial role as a pivotal connecting point in the trade routes that linked the Eastern and the Western regions

through the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. These sea passages encompassing the Arab Sea, the Pacific, and the Indian Ocean were under the absolute dominion of Arab Muslims after the advent of Islam (Muhit et al., 2024). During the Umayyad, Muslim rulers conquered many kingdoms and their empire was elongated into an enormous area including Europe, Asia, and Africa. Their conquest of Sindh and Multan in 712 CE and 713 CE, greatly contributed to the expansion of Arab maritime trade in the coastal area of South and Southeast Asia. The Abbasids came to power overthrowing the Umayyad in 750 CE, and they reigned for most of the caliphate as caliphs from their capital at Baghdad in modern-day Iraq. The geographical location of Iraq made it a land bridge between Iran, India, Central Asia and China on one side; and the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Egypt and the West on the other (Duri, 1974). Therefore, under propitious circumstances, the people of Iraq became capable to develop into proficient intermediaries of global business, as they were situated at the confluence of the various seas and land trade routes, making it a transit trading hub for neighboring areas. It should be noted that Caliph Harun-or-Rashid was the first Muslim ruler who established an alliance with the Chinese Tang dynasty sending embassies to China (Giles, 1926). He was called ‘A-lun’ in the Chinese Tang Annals (Broomhall, 1910). He also built up an alliance with the King of India. Major new port facilities were built at Basra under his reign, serving as thoroughfares for commercial transportation, while Ubulla, a nearby port city of Basra on the Arabian Gulf, functioned as the gateway for maritime trade to India and China. Arabian merchant vessels used to ply all oceans in the east from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, exporting and importing goods to and from various countries (Karim, 2014). Significant Arab trading settlements were all along the south and the west coastlines of the Indian Subcontinent, as well as in Sri Lanka, throughout both the Umayyad and the Abbasid periods. Therefore, Bengal along India’s coastline probably developed into one of the most significant global commercial hubs, where Arab traders had to stay to conduct trade from West Asia to Southeast Asian nations as well as up to far eastern China. The Abbasid enhanced their trading activities throughout the whole South Asian coastline, including Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia and China. As a result, the coastlines of India and Bengal served as a transit point for commerce between the West and the far east of China (Hourani, 1995). Bengal was a flourishing trade zone at the time that definitely enticed the early Arab traders because of its geostrategic position, congenial climate, and useful products. However, no written records exist regarding early Arab-Bengal trading interactions. Therefore, it is essential to examine the accounts of geographers and the archaeological discoveries in Bengal to gain insights into this relationship.

4.1. Arab-Persian Geographers’ Account about Early Arab-Bengal Trade Contact

Early Arab-Bengal trading contact was first indirectly mentioned in the writings of Arab-Persian geographers. A few indirect references are outlined below:

Sulaiman al Tajir was the first Arab geographer to write on various aspects of Arab trade and trade routes. He wrote a book in 851 CE titled *Silsilat-ut-Tawarikh* and in that book, he discussed a kingdom named Ruhmi, which was engaged in conflicts with Balhara and Jurz. He also noted that commercial transactions went on using cowries, which were the country’s existing currency at the time (Elliot & Dowson, 1867). Hodivala proposes that the kingdom of Ruhmi might correspond to the kingdom of Dharmapala (770-810), as Sulaiman’s *Jurz* references the Gurjara- Pratihara kings of Kanauj, while *Ballahara* refers to the Rashtrakuta king Ballahraya Roy of the Deccan (Hodivala, 1939). King Dharmapala engaged in prolonged conflicts with these kingdoms, known collectively

as the ‘Tripartite Struggle’ or ‘Kannauj Triangle Wars’. Thus, Dharmapala of the Pala Dynasty was a contemporary of Sulaiman’s *Silsilat-ut-Tawarikh*, suggesting that Ruhmi may well be associated with Dharmapala’s realm, i.e. Bengal (Karim, 2014). The presence of elephants, fine cotton textiles, rhinoceroses, and the use of cowries for trade all point to Bengal as the region in question. This identification is further supported by the consistent accounts provided by subsequent chroniclers, including Minhaj, Ibn Battuta, Thomas Bauri, and nearly all European travelers, who described Bengal in remarkably similar terms.

Ubaidullah ibn Khurdabih (825-912) once served as the Director-General of the Post and Intelligence Department (Diwan-al-Barid) of the Abbasid caliphate at the province of Jibal in Baghdad and subsequently at Samarra. While in service, he authored *Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik* around 870 CE, a seminal work detailing trade routes and kingdoms. In this book, he first outlined the trade routes utilized by Muslim merchants from Arabia to China (Ahmad, 1939). Among his observations on trade routes, locales, commercial connections, distances, and trading practices of Arabs along the Indian Ocean coast, he noted a Bengal port named Samandar. This port was notable for its rice production and the importation of aloe wood, which was transported from Qamrun and other regions via a 15-day journey through sweet water channels (Nainar, 1942).

Another Arab scholar, Al-Idrisi, composed his account in the mid-12th century, synthesizing information from various travelers and sailors for his work, *Nazhatul Mushtak*. In his narrative, he described the port of Samandar as a large, affluent, and commercially flourishing town where good profits to be made. It is a town dependent upon Kanauj. Aloe wood was brought hither from the country of Kamrut in 15 days’ distance, by the river of which the waters are sweet. To the north at seven days’ distance from Samandar, is the city of Kashmir the inner, celebrated throughout India: which was under the rule of Kanauj. It took four days from Kashmir to Kamrut and about seven days from Kashmir to Kanauj. This was a fine commercial city which gave the name to the King of the country (Elliot & Dowson, 1867).

A 10th century geographic book titled *Hudud al-Alam* (“Boundaries of the World” or “Limits of the World”), was authored in Persian by an anonymous writer from Guzgan (modern northern Afghanistan). The text references ‘Bahr Harkand,’ alongside Nimyas, Urnshin (Orissa), S.m.nd.r (Samandar), and Andras. It also mentions Qamrun, a kingdom in the eastern part of Hindustan, known for its rhinoceroses and abundant gold mines. This region was renowned for its super quality aloe wood (Minosky, 1937). The Persian term “Bahr” translates to “sea,” and Harkand is believed to correspond to the historical region of ‘Harikela,’ which encompasses Chittagong and its adjacent areas, including the port of Samandar, situated within and around present-day Chattogram.

Geographical references to Kamrut or Qamrun are unequivocally identified with Kamrup (currently part of Assam), renowned for its aloe wood and the sweet water rivers, likely the Meghna and the Brahmaputra. The reference makes it very evident that aloe wood was exported to the Arab world after being transported from Kamrup to Samandar through the inland river network. Ahmed Hasan Dani endeavored to locate Samandar, positing that it was situated somewhere on the Bengal coast, —most likely at the mouth of Maghanl i.e Meghna (Dani, 1951). Consequently, the port of Samandar’s location is inferred to be near the island of Sandhvip. Two prominent historians, Mohar Ali and Abdul Karim, have suggested different identifications: Mohar Ali proposed it as the present-day Chandpur (Ali, 1985), while Abdul Karim identified it with the Chittagong port (Karim, 2014).

Regardless of whether it was Chandpur or Chittagong, Samandar was indisputably defined as a Bengal port located in the eastern area of present Bangladesh.

4.2. Abbasid and Other Arab Coins As Archaeological Evidence of Early Arab-Bengal Trade Relations

The geographers' accounts as secondary sources hint indirectly at the existence of early Arab- Bengal trading contacts beginning from the latter half of the eighth century. However, these accounts lack specific dates or precise years and none of the geographers visited Bengal themselves. Consequently, archaeological evidence is crucial to corroborate and validate these historical accounts. The Abbasid gold coins found in Bengal may serve as valuable archaeological evidence for these accounts. These coins, dated from the mid-eighth century to the early tenth century, offer significant insight into the trading history between early Arabs and Bengal. It is hypothesized that some of these coins arrived in Bengal during the latter half of the tenth century. Historical practices reveal that traders and others often buried commercially acquired coins for safekeeping. Such hidden treasures are periodically unearthed from various locations. It is likely that the collector or custodian of these coins in Bengal remained alive into the tenth century and preserved them during that time. In addition to the Abbasid gold coins discussed in this paper, other early Arab coins discovered in Bengal are also mentioned here as archaeological evidence to support and authenticate the geographers' accounts.

Ten Umayyad and twelve Abbasid silver coins are housed in the Bangladesh National Museum. These coins were collected by M.F.C. Martin, a British military major, writer, and official collector for the Dhaka district during the early twentieth century. They span a historical range from the reign of Umayyad Caliph Abdul Malik (685-705) to Abbasid Caliph Al-Mahdi (775- 785). The precise location where these coins were found remains unknown, and it is uncertain whether they were discovered within Bengal or imported from elsewhere.

The Bangladesh National Museum reserve collections contain five early Arab gold coins. These coins were discovered by a local farmer during land excavation in the Chandpur District in 1996. The collections include: A gold coin from the Sajid dynasty of Azerbaijan. The rulers of this dynasty ruled Azerbaijan and parts of Armenia with its capital at Ardabil from 889 to 929 CE. This coin bears the name of Sajid Emir Yusuf bin Abu Saaj (901-928) alongside Abbasid Caliph Al-Muqtadir Billah (908-929), and was minted in Armenia in 301 AH/913 CE. Two Aghlabid gold coins from the Aghlabid dynasty are stored in the collection. The Aghlabid, an Arab ruling family, governed North Africa, particularly Ifriqiya, nominally under the Abbasid Caliphs from 800 to 909 CE. These coins feature the names of the Aghlabid Emirs Ibrahim II (875-902) and Ziadatullah III (903-909) respectively. Two Sulukid gold coins from the Sulukid dynasty are also in the collection. The Sulukid, a minor pre-Seljuq Iranian family, briefly controlled Rayy (Al- Muhammadiya). These coins bear the names of Sulukid ruler Ahmad bin Ali and Abbasid Caliph Al-Muqtadir Billah, and were minted at Al-Muhammadiya in 921 and 923 CE respectively.

Three silver coins of the Abbasid Caliphs have been unearthed by archaeologists. One was found during the 1937-1938 excavation at the ancient Buddhist site of Paharpur in the Nawgaon district of North Bengal. This coin bears the Muhammadia mint name and is dated 788 CE, corresponding to the reign of the renowned Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid (Ahmed, 1979). The other two coins were discovered during the excavation of Shalban Bihara in Mainamati, Cumilla District (Khan, nd). Regrettably, rust has severely eroded the inscriptions on these coins, rendering them unreadable.

Nevertheless, they are presumed to be from the Abbasid era and likely arrived through trade by early Arab merchants in the eighth or ninth century.

Two more early Arab silver coins were discovered during excavations at Shalban Bihar in Cumilla between 2014 and 2015 (PRATNA CARCA, 2021). Inscriptions on these coins are largely obscured, but the visible segments suggest that they are Abbasid silver coins from the ninth century. It is likely that the ruler mentioned on these coins is Al-Mutamid Billah. A Samanid gold coin, which was collected from the Brahmanbaria District in 2002, is also part of the reserve collections at the Bangladesh National Museum. This coin, minted in Samarkand in 908 CE, features the names of Samanid Emir Ahmad bin Ismail and Abbasid Caliph Al-Muktafi Billah. Recently ten Abbasid silver coins have been collected by the Bangladesh National Museum through purchasing from a coin collector of Noakhali. These coins are now housed in the museum's cabinet. They have been identified as being minted under Abbasid Caliph Al-Mahdi (775-785), dating from 160 AH to 165 AH. The collector reported that a cache of over twenty Abbasid silver coins was discovered by locals during the excavation of abandoned land in Chattogram, and they sold ten of them to a goldsmith and ten to him.

The aforementioned archaeological discoveries reveal substantial evidence of interactions between the early Arabs and Bengal. The Abbasid gold and silver coins, along with other early Arab gold coins unearthed from various prominent archaeological sites, are invaluable for reconstructing the history of vibrant trade in ancient Bengal. Beyond Bengal, Abbasid coins have been discovered across the Indian Ocean region, underscoring their broad circulation. Notably, two Abbasid coins were found in the ancient Thai city of U-Thong and at the Laem Pho site, bearing dates of 184 AH (800 CE) and 203 AH (818 CE). These coins are inscribed with the names of Caliph Harun al-Rashid and Caliph Al-Mamun (Chutamas, 2022). An Abbasid gold coin found in an archaeological site of Vietnam dated 291 A.H (903-904) was issued by Caliph Al-Muktafi Billah. This coin is preserved at the Tra Kieu Site, Quang Nam Province (Guy, 2020). In North Sumatra, eight Abbasid silver coins were unearthed through excavation at Bongal Hill, an administrative area within Jagojago Village, Badiri District. Among these, four coins are housed in the Sumatra Money Museum, two are in the Museum of Uang, Sumatra, and two are in the private collection of a resident of North Sumatra (Soedewo & Ahmad, 2022). The rulers mentioned on these coins include Caliph Abu Jafar al-Mansur, Caliph Al-Mahdi, Caliph Al-Amin, and Caliph Al-Mamun.

The coins mentioned above are the traces of Arab maritime trade to the east left by Arab merchants. These coins collectively demonstrate that the Arabs engaged in trade with South and Southeast Asia, particularly with Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Bangladesh. Analysis of Arab coins, coupled with indirect references from Arab and Persian geographers about the early Arab-Bengal trade contacts, suggests that the Samandar port, as noted by these geographers, was used widely by early Arab between the eighth and tenth centuries. Most likely, it became a prominent port in the eighth century following Tamralipti's decline. It was linked to South India, Ceylon, and West Asia (Chakrabarty, 2002). Moreover, Samandar was unquestionably linked to the landward river port of the Samatata Sub-region. It should be noted that Samatata was a well-heeled trade zone in ancient times as evidenced by the region's regular issue of gold coins. The commercial activities of early Arab traders were intricately connected to both Samandar and the Samatata-Harikela regions, as the majority of Arab coins have been discovered in these areas. The Arab traders might have arrived at Cumilla or Chattogram by the river of Meghna from the eastern coast of Bengal.

The accounts of Arab-Persian geographers and the discovery of Abbasid gold coins in Bengal provide undeniable evidence of the extensive and sustained trade interactions between early Arabs and Bengal. Furthermore, early Arab Muslims were actively engaged in commerce with Southeast Asia, including regions such as China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand. It is likely that Bengal served as a crucial transit route to China, facilitating the acquisition and trade of forest products along the lengthy coastal stretch of the Bay of Bengal. Additionally, they probably sourced precious and rare products brought down from remote places of eastern India, Assam, Kamarup, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts to the coastal ports at diverse.

The Abbasid gold coins discovered in Bengal date from the mid-2nd century to the mid-4th century A.H. (mid-8th to mid-10th century CE), a period that represents the heyday of the Abbasid dynasty. The consistency in the metal content, dimensions, and weights of these coins reflects the prosperous and stable economic conditions of the Abbasid Empire at that time. These coins are crucial artifacts that substantiate Arab-Bengal trade relations, as they bear distinct trademarks and provide direct archaeological evidence supporting the geographers' literary accounts. They also suggest that Arab-Bengal trade activities were widespread from the eighth to the tenth centuries. Additionally, these coins carry ideological messages through their inscriptions, which proclaim the oneness of the Almighty and include laudatory references to the Prophet Muhammad, adding another layer of significance beyond their commercial context.

Evidence from Abbasid gold coins, some Arab gold coins from the Abbasid era, alongside Abbasid silver coins, discovered in Bengal and records from Arab and Persian geographers, demonstrates that Arab-Bengal trade relations commenced in the eighth century and expanded significantly throughout the Abbasid period. These coins offer concrete proof that Bengal was intricately entangled in a commercial network with early Arabs from the eighth to the tenth century.

5. Conclusion

The numismatic study of eight unpublished Abbasid gold coins preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum has illuminated several key aspects of Abbasid coinage and its historical significance. These coins have revealed distinctive features that enhance our understanding of Abbasid minting practices and stylistic preferences during various periods of the Caliphate. This study has identified the names of four Abbasid caliphs through the inscriptions on four distinct coins. Specifically, the coins reveal the name of Caliph Al-Mamun (813–833), Caliph Al-Mutamid Billah (870–892), Caliph Al-Mutawakkil (847–861) and Caliph Al-Muqtafi Billah (902–908). Seven of the eight coins have been identified with unique years of issuance: the first coin is dated to 133 A.H. (750), the second coin to 210 A.H. (825), the third coin to 173 A.H. (789), the fifth coin to 258 A.H. (871), the sixth coin to 238 A.H. (852), and the eighth coin to 293 A.H. (906). The year of issuance of the fourth coin remains undetermined due to the erosion of its edge inscriptions through abrasion. The four coins that lack caliphs' names include: the first coin, dated to 133 A.H (750), which is indicative to Caliph Abul Abbas as-Saffah (750-754); the third coin, dated to 173 AH (789), which points to Caliph Harun al-Rashid; and the seventh coin, dated to 168 AH (784), which suggests it was struck during the reign of Caliph Al-Mahdi (775-785 CE). The fourth coin bears similarities to the third, implying it was also minted during the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid. Three mint names have been identified on four of our coins. The second and sixth coins bear the mint name Egypt (Misr), the fifth coin is marked with Madinat-as-Salam (Baghdad), and the eighth coin features Filistin (Palestine). The remaining four coins—the

first, third, fourth, and seventh—do not bear any mint name. The first coin, issued by Caliph Abul Abbas al-Saffah, was likely minted in Kufa. The third coin, issued by Caliph Harun al-Rashid, and the seventh coin, issued by Caliph Al-Mahdi, were both probably minted in Madinat-as-Salam (Baghdad). Additionally, the analysis of the inscriptions on these coins has revealed distinctive features that define Abbasid gold coinage.

The identification and comprehensive analysis of these coins have introduced a novel dimension to the field of numismatic studies. The inscriptions of these coins provide insights into the political and religious messages conveyed through these coins, reflecting the broader socio-economic and cultural context of the Abbasid era. These coins suggest that Bengal was evidently connected with early Arab maritime trade networks. During the Abbasid period, Arab maritime trade with the Indian Ocean, particularly the Bay of Bengal, flourished significantly. These coins corroborate literary accounts by geographers, serving as archaeological evidence of early Arab-Bengal trade relations. It is evident that Bengal emerged as a crucial trading hub in the extensive Arab trade from the eighth to the tenth century. It is understood that early Arabs would pass through Bengal on their return journeys from trading in Southeast Asia, bringing back forest products and other valuable commodities collected from Bengal.

This research not only addresses a gap in the existing literature but also emphasizes the importance of continuing to explore and document lesser-known numismatic materials. The findings from this research pave the way for further investigations into Abbasid numismatics and underscore the need for ongoing scholarly attention to the vast array of historical artifacts that continue to shape our understanding of the past. Future discoveries of early Arab coins, particularly those from the pre-Abbasid period or the latter half of the tenth century, are expected to further illuminate early Arab-Bengal trade relations, offering new insights into this historical interaction.

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Notes

1. Bengal refers to the area situated roughly within 27° and 21° latitudes and 92.5° and 87° longitudes. It encompassed the current territories of independent Bangladesh and West Bengal, as well as parts of Orissa and Bihar in India, and indeed, once it represented a group of four principal sub-regions: Pundravardhana, Vanga, Samatata-Harikela and Radha. In historical sense, Bengal has been used here to denote the territories comprising the present Bangladesh and the Indian state West Bengal (Paschim Vanga).
2. Kufic script is an early and distinctive style of Arabic calligraphy that originated in the city of Kufa, Iraq, during the 7th century. Characterized by its angular, geometric, and linear form, Kufic script was the predominant script used in early Islamic manuscripts and inscriptions.
3. Samatata was a well-demarcated ancient sub-region of South-East Bengal. It was formed of the trans-Meghna territories of the Cumilla-Noakhali plains jointly with the bordering hilly region of Tripura in the east, while the Bay of Bengal flanks its southern boundary. It must have been somewhere in the vicinity of the archaeological remains of Mainamati-Lalmai area (Ref. Islam. S, *New Light on the History of Ancient South-East Bengal*, ASB, 2014, p.2)

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