

DIVINITY AND MOTIFS ON EARLY INDIAN COINS

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Coins as a symbol of ideas and ideals, working behind the mind of the rulers at different periods, open up a most comprehensive and interesting study. Although references to coins occur in the early Indian Literature, punch-marked coins¹ are found the earliest ones spread over a large area² from Pakistan in the northwest to Tamilnadu (India) in the south; from Taxila (Pakistan) in the west to Chandraketugarh (India) in the east. These comprise both silver and copper coins; in the first group, bent bar coins from Taxila are also included. Their chronology is not definite, however, their beginning may be assigned to the sixth-fifth century BC.³

Various type symbols *viz.*, geometric, naturalistic, animal and human, are found punched on these coins. Geometric motifs like triangle, circle, etc., and naturalistic motifs like sun, mountain, etc., gradually disappeared, while animal and human symbols continued to occur in modified form in the later periods. Symbols like six-armed sign, taurine, cat-like animal on a hill, fish, rising sun, sun-like whorl, bull, etc., are found variously on the single type silver punch-marked coins. *Svastika*, simple triskeles, the *nandipada*, the hollow-cross, sun, circular dot inside the circle, the dot by which bull is surrounded, mountain, various animals taken to represent as the vehicles of different gods and goddesses, arches with crescent on top, crescent symbol, equilateral triangle representing Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra; *chakra* with six or eight spokes, the arrow with a small handle described as an umbrella, very rarely some human figures, and also the trident of Śiva appear on the silver punch-marked coins; elephant, tree-in-railing, mountain, lion, *svastika*, *linga*, wheel on the uninscribed cast coins; *chaitya*, *bodhī*-tree, *svastika*, plan of monastery or stupa, trident, battle-axe, bull, tree-in-railing, elephant before tree, snakes, *dharmachakra*, lotus flower, rayed-disc of sun, *triratna*, humped bull, various other animals, besides Lakshmi and Śiva, etc., are seen on the copper punch marked coins.

Foreign rulers, right from the Bactrian Greeks onward, adopted the devices of the coins already in circulation without any radical change in the media of exchange. They adopted Indian gods and goddesses then worshipped in the various regions as their coin device to win the confidence of local people.

The Greek sovereigns belonging to the two dynasties *viz.*, Eucratides and Euthydemus, issued a large number of coins depicting the Hindu deities, animals and symbols which are reflective of popular belief and gradual process of assimilation. The images and legends on the coins of Indo-Greek rulers in India mostly represent the pantheon of Greek mythology, which, in course of time, were found to coincide with those in the Brahmanical pantheon like Apollo depicting the Sun god, Eros representing Kama the god of love, besides paying respect and devotion to Śiva-Pārvatī, Viṣṇu-Lakṣmī, etc.⁴ The fact remains that the divinities and the symbols⁵ on the Greek coins had more of Indian elements than the typical grace and beauty, reminiscent of the schools of Praxiteles and Lysippus of Greece.

The legends on the reverse of Greek coins were either in Kharoṣṭhi or Brāhmī as found on the coins of Pantaleon and Agathocles. It is interesting to note that the weight of these coins were made to conform to the Indian standard instead of general Attic standard of the west. The Indo-Greek coins show four different categories (a) coins with figures of the Indian divinities; (b) coins showing celestial beings; (c) depicting Indian symbols and (d) bearing sacred animals.

The Greek god⁶ Apollo being the nearest counterpart of Hindu concept of Surya was commonly depicted on the coins issued by Apollodotus I and II, Dionysius, Hippostratus, Strato I and Zoilus

II.⁷ Generally the full figure of standing Apollo, facing with bow and arrow, naked and lauriate was the commonly accepted figure. The reverse of a rare silver coin of a king named Telephus depicts the nimbate Sun god. A radiated deity driving a chariot drawn by four horses,⁸ is found to appear on the reverse of the coins of Plato. The chariot of Surya drawn by seven horses is found in later coins also. On the coins of some of the Greek rulers like Hippostratus, Pantaleon and Peucolaos, female figures are shown with lotus or cornucopia (a conical pot full of corn) in the right hand, decked with ornaments and gorgeous costume reminiscent of the iconographical traits of Lakṣmī and the name of the city is Ujeni. These were current in the Avanti region in the neighbourhood of modern Ujjain. The coins issued by Agathocles and Telephus (Euergetes) with the inscriptions of Indian celestial beings mainly belong to this category. On the reverse of the coins issued by Agathocles, a female figure is shown with long pendants in her ears, wearing trousers and holding a flower in her right hand. It has been described as a dancing girl by some scholars while others identify it as *yakṣinī-aśvamukhī*⁹ because of her non-human head. This *yakṣī* figure is also found on many other coins issued by Agathocles.

Similarly, on the obverse of a coin of Telephus (Euergetes) is found a snake-legged figure (*yakṣa*) holding in each hand a lotus stalk emerging from his serpent-like legs. The giant holds a lotus stalk in each hand while the legs terminate in lotus flowers and tendrils, who, in fact, is a lotus *yakṣa*. In case of *yakṣa* figures belonging to the early period, the lotus flowers and tendrils generally come out from the mouth or the navel but the same issuing from the legs appears to be Hellenistic in conception.¹⁰

On the coins issued by the kings Agathocles, Apollodotus I (Soter) and Menander I, the symbols of sun, arched-hill, tree-in-railing, wavy line, taurine, eight-spoke wheel, upright palm branch and stupa are commonly seen. In one of the coins issued by Menander I,¹¹ the wheel containing eight spokes is representative of the eight-folds (*ashtanga-marga*) of early Buddhist philosophy. It may also be mentioned here that books like *Milindapanha* and the Shinkōṭ steatite casket inscription of the time of Menander clearly indicate his faith and belief in the teachings of Gautama Buddha and in the fitness of things the 'wheel of righteousness' was adopted as a coin device.

On many coins of Agathocles, a stupa surrounded by a star is found on the obverse side and a legend in Kharoṣṭhi;¹² whereas on the reverse, a tree in square railing occurs with a legend in Brāhmī. The enlightenment and *parinirvāna* of the Buddha are symbolically represented respectively by the tree-in-railing and the stupa in the early Indian sculptural art and paintings.

Various animals either independently or with their patron deity are found on Indo-Greek coins, e.g., humped bull and Nandi—the mount of Śiva and those were very popular symbols.¹³ On the reverse of the coins of Epander the bull is found exhibiting an attitude of prancing up, reminding the passage in the *Matsya Purāṇa*, *devakisanatatparah* an attitude of looking at the god.¹⁴ Elephant was also accepted as a common device as it symbolically represents Indra since Airavata was the mount of Indra. On the circular and square coins of Apollodotus I and Heliokles, the elephant and the bull are seen on the obverse and reverse respectively. The obvious significance sought to be conveyed in the mighty personality and valour of the king that rank with the majesty of the full grown elephant and bull described in the *Raghuvamsa* of Kālidāsa.¹⁵

These foreign rulers of India freely assumed Hindu epithets¹⁶ like *soteres* (the Greek form of Prakrit *tratarasa* and Sanskrit *trata*) which was specially common among the Greek rulers of eastern Punjab. The association of this epithet with Vishnu—the protector is noteworthy. The epithet *kalanakarma* (*kalyanakarma*) meaning good or illustrious work on the snake-legged *yakṣa* coins of Telephus (Euergetes) is not found on any other known coins of the Greek rulers in India. The concept and design is peculiarly Indian.

On the coins issued by the Śaka rulers Maues, Azes I and II (*circa* 88 BC to AD 19), mainly found in Sind and the Punjab, are seen the Indian gods and goddesses, imitating the coins of the Indo-Greeks.¹⁷ On a series of coins issued by Maues,¹⁸ Zeus is found transformed into the nearest Indian counterpart Indra¹⁹ and the exploits of Maues are mentioned by contemporary poets to compare with the war and conquests of Indra. There were two series of Indra type coins. In the first series, Indra is represented both in the theriomorphic and anthropomorphic forms, whereas in the second, Indra is found holding a personified *vajra*. Incidentally, such depiction of *ayudha-purusha*—a typical Hindu concept, is the earliest recorded evidence of its kind. The western scholars identified the figures as Zeus and winged female figure respectively. Maues also paid homage to Śiva by issuing a number of coins delineating the god in various forms.²⁰ There is a human figure on the obverse, standing in front with a long trident in the left hand and the right foot resting on a small radiate figure underneath him, right hand rests on the knee. This is probably the first appearance of Śiva²¹ on these coins—the identification of which is based on a bronze seal from Taxila. On this seal, a deity is depicted trampling a bull-shaped dragon. The Kharoṣṭhi legend on it has *badusa vispamitrassa* (of the young Brāhmana Viśvāmitra) and stood for Śiva because Viśvāmitra is one of the various appellations of lord Śiva. On certain other coins of Maues, Śiva is shown holding a club and a trident or spear or sceptre on his shoulder, striding to the left. The figure is almost identical (including the club, the trident on the left shoulder and the characteristic stride)²² with that on a seal²³ from Taxila bearing the Kharoṣṭhi legend *Śivarakshita* (one protected by Śiva).²⁴ A few more coins of Maues, Azes and Azilises are found to have male figure with elephant goad over the left shoulder on the reverse.²⁵ According to JN Banerjea it represents Śiva as the elephant goad as an attribute of Śiva occurs on the coins of Kaniška and Huviška. Adoption of this device by foreign rulers of the early centuries of Christian era clearly indicates the continuation and development of an earlier tradition for a long time.

The impact of Vaishnavism on the life of the Śaka rulers is also evident from a series of coins issued by them. The figure on these coins has been described as Tyche holding in one hand a patera and a wheel in the other which is likely to have been an early form of Vaishnavism. Another series of coins minted by Maues bear a female figure on the reverse, standing between trees or creepers. The figure has been identified as Bacchante among Vines.²⁶ In all probability the figure represents a Hellenized form of Lakṣmī *padmavasini*.²⁷

Azilises who became a king after Azes introduced *abhisheka*-Lakṣmī type of coins.²⁸ On the reverse of the round silver coins of this type, Lakṣmī is found standing on a lotus flower with twin stalks and leaves. On each leaf stands a small elephant sprinkling water on the head of the deity. Azilises also circulated a series of a very interesting type of coins bearing figures of gods and goddesses. On the reverse of a number of round silver coins, Lakṣmī has a diadem in her right hand and wears a crown and a cornucopia in her left hand. The male deity carries a scepter in left hand and points with outstretched right arm. According to some scholars, this represents mounted king, gods and goddesses whereas some others identify the male deity as Zeus and the goddess as the tutelary deity of Puṣkalāvati.²⁹

There is no evidence yet to show that Liaka and Polika, the two early Satraps of Taxila issued any coin but Jihunia or Zeionisus the later Satraps, issued a series of coins. On the obverse is found a king on horseback with a whip in the right hand, the bow being tied to the saddle. The reverse bore the legend *mani gulsa chhatrapasa putrasa chhatrapasa Juhuniasa* with the king facing the city deity wearing mural crown and holding wreath and the cornucopia. It is inferred that the Satrap was probably a contemporary of Azes II and the deity represented the fortune of a conquered city (Lakṣmī). Śaka-Satraps of Mathura like Śivadatta, Hagamasa, Hagana, Rajuvula³⁰ and Sodasa³¹ issued a series of coins accepting the devices of the earlier Hindu rulers of the region *viz.*, Lakṣmī and *abhisheka*-Lakṣmī. In the later variety *abhisheka*-Lakṣmī is seen invariably on the reverse.

Rajuvula assumed the epithet of *apratihatachakrasa*—which became a popular coin legend adopted by the Gupta kings.

Yasamalika was the first Satrapa of Ujjain whose son was Castana. His son Jayadaman predeceased his father. Mahakshatrapa Castana ruled jointly with his grandson Rudradaman, who turned out to be the most famous ruler of the line. He was succeeded by several rulers and the last in the line was defeated by Chandragupta II Vikramaditya. The popular device on the coins of Śaka rulers was the bust of king and inscription in Greek character. Later on, this Greek inscription was discontinued. On the reverse the symbols commonly found are those of arched-hill surmounted by crescent, beneath wavy line, crescent, star, border of dots and inscription.

The Śaka rulers in the Punjab and Sind were subjugated by Gondophares (AD 19–25), a renowned Indo-Parthian king. It may be mentioned here that Gardner considers the figure as of Poseidon as the characteristic marks of Śiva are absent. He issued Śiva type coins³² which was adopted as a standard for centuries to come. The coins were of bullion and base silver. On certain bullion coins, Śiva is shown standing with his left leg slightly advanced and head bent a little towards the left—clasping a long trident in his right hand and a palm-leaf in the left. Faint traces of *jata* can also be seen. On the reverse of a series of base silver coins, Śiva is found facing the front and holding the trident in the right hand and the palm-leaf in his left.

According to a legend of third century AD Gondophares, his brother Gad and his sister's son Labdanes embraced Christianity under the influence of St Thomas who visited India during the time.³³ This contemporaneity with St Thomas is also proved by other sources. On the face of this conversion to Christianity, Gondophares continued to pay homage to Śiva. He was succeeded by rulers who were too weak to withstand the Kuṣāṇa onslaught and subsequently came under their sway.

The Kuṣāṇas led by their chief Kujula Kadphises (Kilu-Kuei-Shuang) crossed over Hindukush mountain and conquered Kabul as far south as Arachosia (Kandahar). Kujula Kadphises issued a series³⁴ of coins. On the reverse of one of the coins there was depiction of Śiva with bull or standing two or four-armed image of Śiva. On the other series of coins Buddha is depicted on the obverse while the figure of the king or Zeus appears on the reverse.³⁵ It may be noted that on the coins of the earlier Śaka and Pahlava rulers or the succeeding Kuṣāṇa rulers,³⁶ Śiva is generally found standing with his usual attributes and sometimes with Nandī. On the coins of Kujula Kadphises, however, Śiva is shown holding a mallet in his right hand resting it on the right shoulder and seated in *padmāsana*.

Kujula was succeeded by Vima Kadphises in AD 64 who extended his empire far more and established diplomatic relations with the Roman and the Chinese emperors. This contact also helped export trade and payments received were in gold. This flow of gold in large quantities into the country might have resulted into the striking of gold coins for the first time by the Kushans. The king was a devotee of Śiva.³⁷ On the reverse of a series of gold coins, Śiva is shown standing with head to the left and holding a long trident in right hand. Behind is a bull and the deity appears to be leaning towards it. He assumed the title *sarvaloka isvarasa mahisvarasa* (lord of the world—Mahisvara). Mahesa is another name of Śiva.³⁸ On another series of gold coins the trident battle-axe³⁹ was found on the reverse. This *ayudha* of Siva on his coins is a clear indication of his devotion to Śiva.⁴⁰

Vima was succeeded by Kaniška⁴¹ who issued several series of gold and copper coins. Although the symbols adopted by him in the beginning were the Sun god,⁴² Moon god, crescented male figure, bearded deity, Fire god and the Wind god—all pantheons of Greek origin, yet these symbols were very soon discarded and replaced by the Indian deities. Coins bearing Siva or *Oh po*—two-or-four-

armed with usual attributes of trident, etc., clearly indicate his religious leanings towards Hinduism. In subsequent times, several new forms Śiva⁴³ were however, evolved by his successors. These depict the multi-headed or multi-faced forms of Śiva. Huvishka coins show generally the multi-faced form of Śiva. Śiva is found with three-heads and four-arms carrying a vase, thunderbolt, trident and club. This design was also adopted by Vasudeva⁴⁴ in his coins except that Śiva is represented with three faces and two-arms, holding wreath and trident with a bull behind him.

Coins bearing the images of gods Skanda and Visakha were issued by Huvishka⁴⁵. Here these are shown standing face-to-face nimbate—Skanda holding a standard surmounted by a bird in the right hand and Visakha holding a spear in his left hand. A series of coins which may be added to this type are found with three figures, standing and facing front. The central figure is with horns and Skanda-Visakha appear on either side. The central figure seems to be Naigamesa, while Skanda and Visakha represent the Indian deity Kumara.

On the Huvishka⁴⁶ coins known in Greek as ‘stater’ the figures of male and a female are found standing face-to-face. They were identified as *Oeso* (Bhavesa) and Nana respectively. The legend was interpreted as *Ommo* (Uma)⁴⁷ and the object which the female deity holds in her hand may perhaps be a flower⁴⁸ and is quite different from the well known symbol of Nanaia; therefore, the goddess Uma appears to be one of the few Indian deities represented on Kuṣāṇa coins. This may be a very early and most popular representation of *Umasahita Śiva*⁴⁹ or Uma and Śiva found in south Indian sculptural art. Besides, there is representation of Ardoksho—a form of Indian Lakṣmī which occurs quite frequently on the Kuṣāṇa coins.

The Mahāyana sect of Buddhism also had a lasting effect on Kaniška’s life.⁵⁰ This fact is supported by Buddhist literature and a number of inscriptions. One of his coin types bears the legend *Boddo*, i.e., Buddha. Buddha is found standing in *abhaya-mudra*. Huvishka and Vasudeva continued to delineate the figure of the Buddha on their coins. It may be observed that the last three Kuṣāṇa kings were by birth foreigners, but Indians by adaptation and faith, which is evident from the Indian name assumed by the last notable king of the line as Vasudeva. Thus it shows that the Kuṣāṇa rulers virtually accepted the most flexible Hindu religion including Buddhism. The human form of the Buddha is represented for the first time on the coins of Kaniška who was a staunch supporter of Buddhism; while in earlier depictions, the Buddha is shown symbolically.

Significantly Śiva appears in human form with four hands on the earlier coins and is also depicted theriomorphically as suggested by the delineation of humped bull on the coins of foreign rulers in India. Lakṣmī is also present in various forms indicating iconographic development of the deity who as ‘Ardoksho’ is shown on the Kuṣāṇa coins seated on a lotus with a lotus in her hand and scattering coins as the goddess of wealth. The Kuṣāṇa coins bearing the figure of a number of Greek, Iranian, Buddhist and Brahminical deities not only reveal the religious sentiments of the rulers and the ruled indicating the deities held in veneration but also throw light on the development of various pantheons and their iconographic form.

Notes and References

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