

Subject: History

Paper: Ancient India

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Topic: Numismatics

In modern times, money functions as a medium of exchange, a store of value, a unit of accounts, and a medium of deferred payment. In its most general sense, money is any item that is accepted by a community for the exchange of goods or services or for the discharge of debt.

Currency and coinage are more specific terms. Currency is a medium of exchange backed by an issuing authority, one that can be used to immediately discharge any kind of financial obligation.

Coinage is metal currency. It has a definite size, shape, and weight standard, and bears the stamp of an issuing authority. The main message bearing side of a coin is known as the obverse and the other side the reverse. In the world context, the earliest coins appear in Lydia in West Asia in c. 700 BCE and were made of electrum, a natural alloy of gold and silver.

Numismatics or the study of coins includes the analysis of the material out of which coins were made; the identification of the sources of the metals; the classification and study of the form of coins on the basis of their fabric (size, shape, thickness, design, workmanship), metrology (weight), design, metallic composition, techniques of manufacture, and message content. Ancient coins are usually discovered by accident. A very small proportion finds its way into the hands of coin collectors or governments; the majority end up getting lost, melted down, or destroyed.

Coins occur as stray individual finds or as part of hoards. Hoards are especially valuable for monetary history and consist of coins withdrawn from human custody (due to being buried underground for safety, or fire, floods, loss, etc.) and found subsequently.

Metrology--- the measurement and arrangement of coins by weight is an important aspect of Numismatics. In the course of circulation, coins are subjected to wear and tear and their weight gradually decreases. This fact enables numismatists to arrange them in a chronological sequence and to distinguish between coins of a hoard that have been in circulation for greater and less periods of time. Various techniques are used for ascertaining the metal content of coins. One method is to carefully inspect their colour and lustre. There are other informal physical procedures such as testing for resonance by dropping the coin on the hard surface to produce a sound or testing its ductility by biting it. A water displacement test can be conducted to measure a coin's specific gravity. There are also several chemical testing procedures for ascertaining metal composition. These are more accurate but generally damage the coin. Non destructive scientific

techniques such as X Ray Fluorescence (XRF) spectrometry, which are now being used to analyse the elemental composition of coins, provide quick and accurate results.

Mint towns can be identified by noting sites where large numbers of coin moulds have been found. An analysis of coin dies can help identify the number and sequence of issues and estimates of the volume of coins produced by these does can be made by extrapolation.

Coins As A Source Of History

At first glance, coins may appear to carry little historical information, but they provide clues to several important historical processes. They are linked to monetary history, which includes an analysis of the production and circulation of coinage, the monetary values attached to coins, and the frequency and volume of issues. Monetary history is in turn an important aspect of the history of exchange and trade. At another level, legends on coins give information on the history of languages and scripts.

The wide distribution of Kushana coins indicates the flourishing trade of the period. The ship on certain Satavahana coins reflects the importance of maritime trade in the Deccan during this period. Roman coins found in various parts of India provide information on Indo Roman trade. The few coin series issued by guilds indicate the importance of these institutions. Coins are often taken to indicate levels of economic prosperity (of the lack of it) or the financial condition of Ancient states. Historians frequently interpret the debasement of coins as an indication of a financial crisis in the state or more general economic decline, for instance, in the time of the later Guptas. However, in a situation where the supply of precious metals is restricted or reduced alloying or debasement can be a response to an increase in the demand for coins created by an increase in the volume of economic transactions. As already indicated, the numismatic record of early mediaeval India is closely tied up with broader debates about the nature of political, social, and economic structures of the time.

Details appear rarely on early Indian coins. Exceptions are Western Kshatrapa coins which give dates in the Saka era and some Gupta silver coins which give the regnal years of kings. Whether dated or undated, coins discovered in archaeological excavations often help date the layers. An example is the site of Sonkh near Mathura, where the excavated levels were divided into eight periods on the basis of coin finds.

As important royal message-bearing media, coins form a vital source of political history. The

area of circulation of dynastic issues is often used to estimate the extent and frontiers of empires. However, caution has to be exercised, because coins made of precious metals had an intrinsic value and often circulated beyond the borders of the state issuing them. They also sometimes continued to circulate for some time after dynasty faded from power. Several different currency systems would prevail in an area, and it is necessary to visualise multiple overlapping and intersecting spheres of coin circulation.

Numismatic evidence is an especially important source for the political history of India between c. 200 BCE and 300 CE. Most of the Indo Greek Kings are known almost entirely from their coins. Coins also offer information on the Pparthians, Shakas, Kshatrapas, Kushanas, and Satavahanas. The coins of 25 kings with names ending in the suffix 'Mitra' have been found in the area from east Punjab to the borders of Bihar. Coins found in various parts of north and Central India (Vidisha, Eran, Mathura, etc.) mention kings whose names and in the suffix 'Naga', about whom little is known from other sources. Coins also offer information on ancient political systems. The term gana on coins of the Yaudheyas and Malavas points to their non monarchical polity. City coins are suggestive of the importance and possible autonomy of certain City administrations.

Sometimes, numismatic evidence offers more than just the names of kings and provides biographical details. For instance, the only specific detail we know about the life of the Gupta king Chandragupta I is that he married a Lichchhavi princess, and this detail comes from coins commemorating the marriage. Coins have helped prove that a Gupta king named Ramagupta ruled between Samudragupta and Chandragupta II. The performance of the ashvamedha sacrifice by Samudragupta and Kumaragupta I is recorded on coins. The archer and battleaxe coin types of Samudragupta predictably advertise his physical prowess, while the lyrist type, which shows him playing vina, and represents a completely different aspect of his personality.

The depiction of deities on coins provides information about the personal religious preferences of kings, royal religious policy, and the history of religious cults. For instance, representations of Balarama and Krishna appear on 2nd century BCE coins of the Indo Greek king Agathocles at Ai Khanoum (in Afghanistan), indicating the popularity and importance of the cults of these gods in this region. The depiction of a great variety of figures from Indian, Iranian, and Graeco Roman religious traditions on the coins of the Kushana kings is generally interpreted as a

reflection of their eclectic religious views. But it can equally be read as evidence of the many religious cults prevailing in their empire and the wide range of religious symbols through which the Kushanas chose to legitimize their political power.