

The Elephant as a Regnal/Dynastic Motif as Seen on the Coins from the Indian Sub-Continent

Kurush F. Dalal

ABSTRACT

The elephant has for the last 2500 years been seen as the very embodiment of all the virtues and attributes of a king in the literature, folk traditions and history of the Indian sub-continent. This is also very vividly documented on the Early Historical and Early Medieval coins of the Indian sub-continent.

Right from the Buddhist Jataka texts we have numerous examples of the elephant and his wisdom and sacrifice in the ruling of his 'people'. The legendary encounter of Asian war elephants by Alexander in his 'Battle of the Hydaspes' against Porus sets the underlying foundations for the erection of this edifice of elephant awe even amongst those not of the sub-continent.

This respect and awe for the elephant have given a truly physical manifestation from the time of the Mauryan emperors with their elephant images at Dhauli, Sankisa, Kalsi, on the Sarnath capital, and on the very coins of the Imperial series of silver PMCs. The elephant was perhaps accorded this status even earlier if we go by the dates for the Elephant and Hill type of round UCCC from Balathal.

In the post-Mauryan period the Maharathis took this to the next level using the elephant on the obverse of many of their coins (2nd c BC).

Simultaneously, the Bactrian Greeks took up the gauntlet and we see the Elephant on the coins of Apollodotus, Archebios and Menander (to name a few). Demetrius sports an elephant helmet and even Azes and Maues of the Indo-Scythians use this device on their coins.

The use of this image appears to briefly decrease in frequency with the Kushana coinage. The only extensive known use of the elephant is on the coins of Huvishka and perhaps a few rare copper issues of Kanishka. It reappears on the coins of the Satavahanas of the Deccan a few years hence and then even makes sporadic appearances on the coins of the Guptas (Kumaragupta I and Chandragupta II).

With the decline of the Guptas and the general decline in coinage (as suggested by RS Sharma, Irfan Habib and even John Dyell) the elephant motif appears to vanish from the

Deccan until the arrival of the Rashtrakuta emperor Amoghavarsha. The elephant is interestingly also seen on the coins of the Gujarat Chalukyan king Jayasimha II. The elephant also appears on the copper issues of the Hindu Shahi dynasty (Afghanistan and NWFP) around the same time. This is either a very interesting coincidence or something that needs more research.

In southern India the elephant is first seen on the coins during the Sangama Era where it is clearly struck on the coins of the Pandyas as well as the Cheras (300 - 100 BC?). Subsequently it is seen very prominently on the gold coins of the Gangas (10th c AD). The Vijayanagara Empire too saw a few issues with an elephant (15th c AD).

With the arrival of Islamic rule and Islamic coinage the elephant motif almost completely disappears from the sub-continent. The only exception to this is on the coins of Tipu Sultan where the elephant features very prominently (18th c AD). This imagery is so prominent that it continues unabated on the coins of the Wodeyars of Mysore right up to the late 19th c AD.

In Sri Lanka the elephant is seen on a few PMCs and on the coins of the Sangama Era Pandyas and from coins of the Elephant and Swastika type (which some scholars attribute to Devanampiya Tissa) and the rarer Elephant and Bull type. The elephant (in pairs) is also seen on the rectangular Gajalaxmi coins. These coins have all been attributed to the Early Historic Period. The next appearance of elephants on the coins of Sri Lanka is directly in the Colonial period where they appear on Stuivers and Rix Dollars issued by the Dutch and later the British (1796 onwards).

Asst Prof (Archaeology), Centre for Archaeology, Centre for Extra-Mural Studies, University of Mumbai

kurushdalal@gmail.com