

An Investigative Study of Symbolism in Punch marked Coins: Perspectives from Domestic and International Scholars

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Abstract

Punch-mark coins are ancient coins that can be found in both India and Sri Lanka. They feature various marks on both the obverse and reverse sides. These coins were in circulation from the 6th century BC to the 2nd century AD. With over 600 different symbols found on these coins, there is no unanimous consensus among scholars regarding the interpretation of these symbols. The aim of this research is to explore the diverse interpretations of these symbols and propose a more appropriate understanding. To accomplish this objective, we employed a methodology that involved a comprehensive review of relevant literature. The symbols found on punch-mark coins encompass representations of the state, the emblem of the coin maker, the emblem of the family associated with the coin, and the emblem of the authority responsible for verifying the coin's legitimacy. It is important to note that these symbols do not exclusively pertain to a single religious or social group. Instead, they reflect the thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes of the general populace at the time.

Keywords: *Investigative Study, Symbolism, Punch marked Coins, Perspectives from Domestic and International Scholars*

Introduction

Punch-mark coins play a significant role in the study of ancient coins in Sri Lanka. These coins are named as such due to the presence of distinct marks on both the obverse and reverse sides of the metal coins. They were utilized in both Sri Lanka and India. According to literary and archaeological sources, these coins were in use in India as early as the 6th century BC. In Sri Lanka, it is believed that these coins were in circulation from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD. These coins

are often referred to as "Karshapana" or "Kahapana" in literary sources.

The manufacturing of these coins predominantly involved silver with a smaller proportion of copper. Thin sheets of silver were crushed and cut into geometric shapes of the required size, and the corners of these metal pieces were trimmed to ensure uniform weight among the coins. Subsequently, distinctive marks were applied.

The interpretation of the meaning of these marks on the coins remains uncertain. This ambiguity arises from the limited information available in historical sources. Durga Prasad suggests that these symbols are connected to Hinduism, while V.A. Smith posits that these marks were employed by private trading companies in their commercial transactions. D. C. Sharthar, on the other hand, suggests that these tokens were marked by certain monopolies to guarantee the standardized weight of the coins they represented.

Objectives

These coins feature over 600 distinct symbols, encompassing representations of the sun, moon, mountains, animal figures, human figures, tree figures, and various unrecognizable geometric shapes. Different scholars have proposed diverse interpretations of these symbols.

However, the extent to which these interpretations align with historical accuracy presents a significant challenge. The objective of this research paper is to ascertain the true meaning of these symbols within the context of ancient society.

Materials and Methods

To accomplish these objectives, the primary methodology employed was the examination of literature sources. This involved studying archaeological information pertaining to punch-mark coins, both from domestic and international sources, as well as investigating historical literary records concerning punch-mark coins.

Results and Discussions

Archaeological evidence suggests that these coins were highly popular during the Mauryan Empire. The book "Arthashastra," authored by Kautilya, the advisor to Mauryan King Chandragupta in the 4th century AD, mentions the existence of a post called "Panyadhakshaka" responsible for verifying the authenticity of coins. Consequently, it is possible that one of the symbols on these coins served this purpose.

The "Saddharma Ratnavaliya," written by Dharmasena Thero in Sri Lanka, also provides significant insights into the symbolism of these coins in the narrative "Kumbhagoshaka Katha Puvata." This narrative tells the story of Kumbhagoshaka, a young man from an affluent family who disguises himself as a pauper. When the king investigates, he discovers some coins in Kumbhagoshaka's house. Upon inquiry, Kumbhagoshaka claims these coins as his own, indicating that they bore the mark of his clan or family.

In addition, an essential reference to a parable found in the book "Vishuddhi Marga," authored by Buddhaghosa Thero, provides valuable instructions on meditation. This parable suggests that a skilled goldsmith possesses the ability to examine a coin and determine which craftsman produced it and from which region within the state it

originated. Consequently, it is plausible that one of the marks on these coins could have represented the state where they were issued.

For instance, the sun symbol and the six-armed symbol can be identified on almost every coin dating back to the Mauryan Empire period. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that these symbols likely represented the Magadha or Maurya Empire.

Furthermore, a myriad of distinct symbols exists, with varying interpretations offered by different scholars. Let us delve into their perspectives on some of these symbols and evaluate the extent to which their explanations are justified

Mountain Symbol

The mountain symbol, frequently observed on these coins, takes the form of one arch above two arches. Mr. Theobold suggests that this symbol represents the crest of a stupa. Mr. D.P. Hettiarachchi proposes that it signifies Lord Buddha's parinirvana. However, if the ancient artists intended to symbolize a stupa, it could have been achieved by depicting a scepter standing upright on a single arch.

Meduyangoda Vimalakitthi Thero posits that this symbol signifies the "Triakuta Parwatha" in Hinduism. J. N. Banerjee claims that it represents Lord Shiva. Nevertheless, there are instances where the symbol exhibits 5, 6, or 7 arches, and some coins display animal figures such as dogs and peacocks atop these arches. Therefore, it becomes challenging to associate this symbol exclusively with the Triakuta rock or Lord Shiva.

John Allen and Ananda Kumaraswamy point out that in China and Central Asia, people used this type of symbol to represent mountains. This interpretation appears to be plausible, depending on how

significant mountains were in the realm of human thought and belief.

Tree Symbols

One of the prominent symbols is a tree with branches, featuring a slender trunk enclosed within a fence. This symbol exists in various forms, often with a square fence surrounding the tree, imparting a sense of sanctity to it.

According to Mr. Spooner, this symbol represents the Asatu or Bodhi tree. D.P. Hettiarachchi suggests it symbolizes the enlightenment of Prince Siddhartha. Some scholars propose that it signifies the Kalpa tree, a source of profound wisdom. J.N. Born posits that it represents the "Chaithya Vruksha" and the "Sthala Vruksha" mentioned in ancient Hindu literature.

Nonetheless, the symbol lacks sufficient characteristics to definitively identify the specific type of tree it represents. Moreover, it cannot be attributed exclusively to one religious community, as it was a widely used symbol in a region with a rich tapestry of religions and philosophies.

There are historical evidences indicating the sacred significance of trees dating back to ancient times in the Indus Valley. Information also exists about deities who have chosen trees as their abodes; for instance, Vedic literature designates the Tulsi tree as the abode of Lord Vishnu. Consequently, it is plausible that this symbol was employed based on people's deeply held beliefs regarding trees

Animal Symbols

These coins feature a multitude of animal symbols, with the cow being a prominent figure. Various forms of cows, including "Cow with HUMP," "Cow without HUMP," "Cow turning left," and "Cow turning right," are evident. Some argue that the cow represents Lord Shiva, as it is considered his vehicle. However, during this period, the worship of Shiva was not widespread. Nevertheless, the cow held significance as a symbol of wealth and was frequently used in barter transactions.

Additionally, the elephant symbol is another commonly encountered motif, with variations based on the direction the elephant faces, the shape of its feet, and the form of its trunk, among other factors. The elephant has been regarded as a symbol of good fortune since ancient times. According to Mr. Senarath Paranavithana, an elephant represents rain. There is also a depiction known as "Gaja Lakshmi," where Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, is anointed by two elephants. The Tripitaka contains numerous references likening Lord Buddha to an elephant, illustrating that past societies regarded the elephant as an auspicious symbol transcending religious boundaries.

Furthermore, a wide array of animal symbols, including cobras, peacocks, owls, moths, frogs, fish, and more, can be discerned among these symbol

Conclusion and Recommendations

To sum up, the symbols found on punch-mark coins encompass representations of the state, the emblem of the coin maker, the emblem of the family to which the coin belongs, and the emblem of the authority responsible for verifying the legitimacy of the coin.

These symbols should not be confined to a single faith or belief system. This is because these coins were in circulation in both Sri Lanka and ancient Indian society, which featured a rich tapestry of diverse faiths and beliefs. Consequently, these symbols likely conveyed a multitude of ideas believed by the people in these regions, which could include concepts related to wealth, fortune, fertility, superhuman power, and security, among others

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