

## Numismatic Imagery and Beyond : Some Observations

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In the history of religion, recognition of the power and manifestations of Nature and the worship thereof has played a very significant role, almost universally. Some of the natural powers like the sun, moon, stars, etc. seem to have been symbolized and worshipped from a remote antiquity. Worship of trees and plants, mountains and rivers probably followed soon and continues to the present day. The crystallization of concepts and the association of certain objects with particular deities, as for example the lotus with Lakshmī, the *bliva* with Śiva; *śaṅkha* and *cakra* with Viṣṇu, *triśūla* and bull with Śiva; horse with Sun, elephant with Indra, etc. led these various objects to symbolize the deities or got associated with them as their vehicles and hence venerated. A transition from the aniconic to the iconic forms is represented by the coins. Various scholars have dealt with the significance of the symbols found on different series of ancient Indian coins. Here we take the case of Śiva only.

It is well known that the emergence of coinage took place in India some time during the first half of the first millennium before the current era when 'sixteen major states' (*Mahājanapadas*) and many minor ones (*Janapadas*) were occupying and ruling over different territories of India. Dilip Rajgor (2001) has done yeoman service to Indian numismatics by publishing at one place some known and numerous unknown coin types of the various *Janapadas* which ruled before being annexed and absorbed into the Magadha Empire.<sup>1</sup> Of the 625 symbols listed by him on these early coins, only three show human figures, which I identify as Sūrya



( ), Saṁkarṣaṇa (  ) and Gaja-Lakshī (  ), the last one

with two variations<sup>2</sup> (symbol nos. 621-25 respectively). The first occurs on a *kārṣāpaṇa* of Kosala *Mahājanapada* with three other symbols and is dated to 525-465 BCE while Saṁkarṣaṇa and Gaja-Lakṣmī with its variants without the anointing elephants are seen as the sole symbols on the *Pāda-kārṣāpaṇas* (8-*rattī*) of Surāshtra *Janapada* and are datable to 5<sup>th</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>3</sup> These symbols are the sure evidence of the emergence of iconic forms (fig. 1.1-3). The solar symbol on the



Fig.1. Images and Symbols on Early Indian Coins

contemporary coins of the *Mahājanapadas* and subsequent Imperial punch-marked series and the occurrence of the railed plough on pillar on those of the Kāśī, Magadha and Vatsa *Mahājanapadas* (symbol nos. 436-38) furnish evidence of the worship of Sūrya and Saṁkarṣaṇa in symbolic form also.<sup>4</sup> A Mauryan seal from Tripuri showing the plough on a post accompanied by the auspicious symbols like *svastika* and taurine corroborates the above point.<sup>5</sup>

Saṁkarṣaṇa appears in human form as  (pl. 1.5) along with  (fig. 1.4-5) which is now generally regarded as *Viṣṇu* or *Kṛṣṇa* on the five-symboled 32-*rattī* (approximately 56 grains or 3.4 grams) silver *kārṣāpanas* of pan-Indian currency of the Magadhan Empire.<sup>6</sup> The appearance of these two deities in their anthropomorphic forms on the coins of Agathocles (pl. 1.1-2) in the second century BCE indicates their continued popularity and worship in their anthropomorphic as well symbolic forms of *cakra* and *hala* 'plough'. The *cakra* symbol (, , , etc.) had a wide distribution indicating the wide-spread popularity of the Vaiṣṇava cult during the second half of the first millennium BCE. Sometimes the *cakra* is shown on a platform of pedestal () which I think is the evidence of its sanctity and veneration. *Cakra* placed on a pillar () may be regarded as *cakra-dhvaja* (like the plough on pillar, *sīra-dhvaja*, pl. 1.6-9) on the punch-

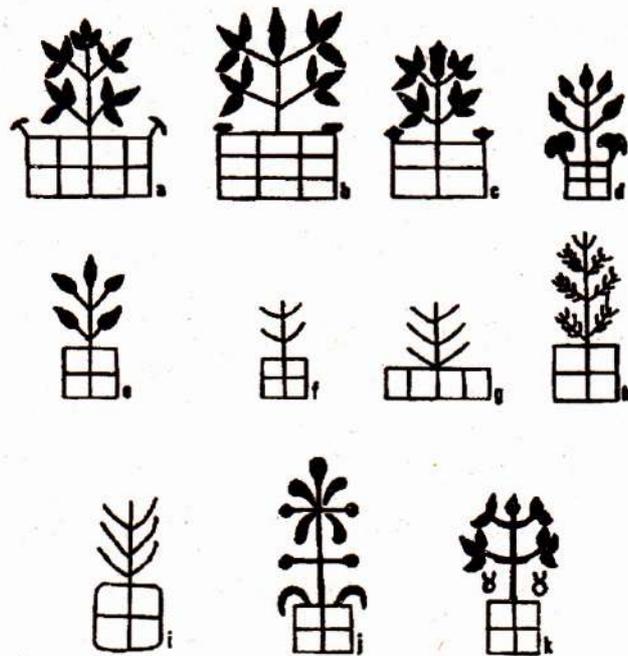


Fig. 2: Trees in railing on punch-marked coins

marked coins revealing the continued worship of Viṣṇu and Saṃkarṣaṇa during the 5<sup>th</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE and even subsequently.<sup>7</sup> There is however a great predominance of symbols and aniconic representations indicating the coexistence of aniconic and iconic forms. Though there is no definite evidence to relate various animals like the bull, elephant, horse, etc. On these coins to be related to Śiva, Indra, Sun, etc. yet the possibility cannot be denied. Similarly we cannot be certain about the association of plants which find depiction on the coins of the *Mahājanapadas*.<sup>8</sup> and subsequent Imperial *Kārsāpaṇa* series (fig. 2) with numerous varieties like *bilva* with Śiva, *Tulasī* with Viṣṇu, lotus with Lakṣmī, Bodhi with Buddha, etc. but it is difficult to rule out the possibility altogether.

I feel inclined to associate wheel (*cakra*), plough, *nandīpada*, etc. sometimes on a post or pedestal and even a railing, with Viṣṇu, Saṃkarṣaṇa, Śiva, etc. Many other symbols may also have religious affiliation, as for example the symbol



(fig. 1.6)<sup>9</sup> found on the coins of Andhra *Janapada*. Seems to me to represent the circumambulation and worship of Śiva in his *liṅga* form. The depiction of a phallic emblem on a railed tree with or without the association of a bull as found

on some Ujjain coins  (fig. 17) points to the association of this particular

type of tree with Śiva.<sup>10</sup> Similarly the depiction of *Abhiṣeka*-Lakṣmī  (fig. 1.8) on Ujjain coins (Kothari, 2006: 81, #RB 87)<sup>11</sup> and an example of the

anointment of a leaf or plant by the elephants  (fig. 1.9) on Ujjain<sup>12</sup> and Agra coins (Handa, 2007:10)<sup>13</sup> shows that the goddess of wealth was represented both in anthropomorphic as well as symbolic form.

Allan identified the figures ,  and  (fig. 1.10-12) which occur on Ujjayinī coins besides  (fig. 1.13) as Kārttikeya as they hold a spear. Allan has referred to the object in the other hand as bag-like object, bag (?) and pouch but can better be identified as *kamaṇḍalu* or water vessel. Another symbol

on variety 1 of Ujjayinī coins  (fig. 1.14) shows the human figure with three

heads and Allan observed that the other three behind are naturally not represented because they cannot be seen. Taking the figure to be six-headed, he identified it with Kārttikeya but observed that "The possibility is that he is Śiva, whose plurality of heads indicated in the same way, must not be overlooked; the absence of the trident or other symbol of Śiva, and the fact that he has only two arms-although this need not be stressed - is against this. The importance of the cult of Śiva Mahākāla at Ujjayanī is well known; it is of course not impossible that, as on the coins of the Yaudheyas, both deities are represented."<sup>14</sup> The occurrence of on punch-marked and Ujjayinī coins has led J.N. Banerjea<sup>15</sup> and following him some other scholars also to identify it as Śiva.<sup>16</sup> The Ujjayinī coins show a variety of

such figures :  (fig. 1.15-19), etc.<sup>17</sup> A horn-

like flourish on the head is clearly marked on all these figures. So they have to be distinguished from the simple headed figures. What is this horn-like appendage? I feel that it is actually the horn, sometimes shown backwards as on the head of a goat or turning forward as seen on the head of a ram. A parallel to this may be found in the representation of Naigameṣa (pl. I.3) in a Mathura sculpture<sup>18</sup> and numerous terracotta figurines of early historic centuries found from different sites of the country. Naigameṣa is a Jaina counterpart of Kārttikeya. The Rameshwara Cave 21 at Ellorā also contains a figure of the acolyte of Kārttikeya as bearing a goat-head with horns standing with folded hands (pl. 1.4).<sup>19</sup> I would therefore identify this horned figure as that of Kārttikeya. Even  are shown with a similar spear and may belong to the same deity.

Banerjea<sup>20</sup> identified  and even the three-headed figure as that of Śiva. The multi-headed god is identified as Śiva-Mahākāla by T.V. Mahalingam<sup>21</sup> and as Kārttikeya by A.M. Shastri. Shastri's argument for holding  as Śiva is based on the fact that "On the coins of the Indo-Parthian ruler Gondophaernes we find only single-headed figure of the god. The first Kushana chief to introduce the figure of Śiva on his coin is Wima Kadphises. On his coins as also on those of the next king, Kanīṣka, Śiva is usually shown with a single head. It is on the coins of Huviṣka that we find Śiva popularly represented both as single-headed and three-headed". He therefore argued that "Śiva was at first represented with only one head and that the feature of the multiple heads made its appearance at a later

phase in the development of Śiva's iconography. Śiva, therefore, could have hardly been represented with multiple heads on Ujjayinī coins which are by general consensus assigned to the third-second century B.C.E. I feel, therefore, that the figure is intended to represent the six-faced (*ṣaḍānana*) god Kārttikeya"<sup>22</sup>. If the representation of Śiva and Kārttikeya on Yaudheya coins is taken into consideration we find that tricephalous Citreśvara-Śiva precedes the uni-cephalous Citreśvara-Śiva and six-headed Kārttikeya on the unique silver and Ṣaḍānana-Ṣaṣṭhī or *Ṣaḍānana*-Deer type precede the single-headed Kārttikeya on 'Yaudheya-gaṇasya jaya' type coins. As far as Wema (Vima) Kadphises is concerned, Bopearachchi has brought to light a very interesting coin-type (pl. I.10) from a hoard of 4000 gold coins struck by him and his son Kaniṣka found some time back at Pipal Mandi in Peshawar in a bronze vase.<sup>23</sup>



This particular type is commemorative in nature struck by Wema Kadphises commemorating his father Wima Takt(/d)o showing the bust of the bearded king to right emerging from the clouds, wearing a high rounded hat, himation clasped on the right shoulder, holding in his right hand a club held against his corresponding shoulder, flames rising near the left shoulder, *tamga* at the back of his head and Greek legend BACILEUC OOHMO KADPHICEC from 8 to 4 o'clock. The reverse shows three-headed Śiva, naked, standing to front holding in his right hand a trident adorned with a *vajra* 'thundebolt' or *ḍamaru* 'dumb-bell', *paraśu* 'battle-axe', and *cakra* 'discus' with left hand supporting a *kamaṇḍalu* 'water vessel' and having a tiger-skin on the left arm. The god wears a sacred thread and a tight-fitting *dhotī*.

This is a very important discovery and Bopearachchi deserves the appreciation of the numismatic fraternity for bringing it to light. But before we appraise the iconographic features of the deity depicted here, let us see the

preceding attributive representations of Śiva. Taurine or trident placed on a pillar or pedestal indicating its venerable nature is found on punch-marked coins.<sup>24</sup> Trident-axe appears on Audumbara square/rectangular copper coins beside a Śiva temple. Trident-battleaxe with *damaru* 'dumb beṭ' attached to the filleted shaft appears on the silver coins of Dharaghosh.<sup>25</sup> Trident with axe, adze or discuss attached to the shaft is found on the Mahādeva type silver coins.<sup>26</sup> While trident, axe/adze and *damaru* are the well known attributes of Śiva, discuss is associated with Viṣṇu. Of the Hindu Trinity, Brahmā perhaps never attained the importance and popularity which Śiva and Viṣṇu achieved. It will be interesting to note that Brahmā has recently been recognized as a single-headed figure holding a scepter on Ujjainī coins, the clinching evidence being the Brāhmī legend Bramhā on them. The trident combined with axe, dumb bell and discuss in the right hand of the deity wearing the sacred thread shown on the coin of Vima Kadphises thus betrays syncretistic attributive elements of Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahmā (as indicated by the sacred thread) to portray him as the Great God Mahādeva. The *Kūrma Purāṇa* (Uttarādhama, chapter 35, verses 62-73) establishes the oneness of Śiva-Viṣṇu *Brahmā ca bhagavān Rudrah*. The god depicted is thus not only Śiva but Mahādeva Śiva. Bopearachchi, however, sees the possibility of the depiction of an animal (antelope) head on the right. No literary or iconographic text, however, refers to any such head associated with Śiva-Mahādeva. It is perhaps because of the worn out state of the coins that such a possibility has been felt. What have been recognized as the horns of antelope are actually the matted locks or *jaṭās* of the god. Kushāṇa coins show various forms of Śiva<sup>27</sup> indicating not only the emergence but also the development of iconographic forms of various deities. The coin discussed above seems to have been issued in commemoration of his father by Wema Kadphises immediately after coming to power and is thus an early type with tri-cephalous Śiva. He issued coins showing single-headed Śiva with his mount but on the reverse (pl. I.11) indicating clearly that multi-faced figures did not necessarily followed single-headed figures.

Attention may be drawn here to the pre-Śaka Pāñchāla coins<sup>28</sup> which are characterized by three symbols (  ) on the obverse with the king's name below in the genitive in a square die impressed on a round coin forming a characteristic incuse, and a deity or a symbol or attribute of the deity on a kind of platform corresponding generally to king's name, e.g. Viṣṇu on Viṣṇumitra's coin,

Indra on Indramitra's coin, Bhūmi (Earth) on Bhūmimitra's coin, Phālgunī star on Phālgunīmitra's coin, solar disc on the coins of Sūryamitra and Bhānumitra, sacrificial altar on the coins of Yajñapāla, and so on. The reverses of Pāñchāla coins (fig. 2) are thus of special interest to the students of Hindu iconography and architecture. These coins, however, represent a phase when the iconography of different deities was still in a fluid stage.

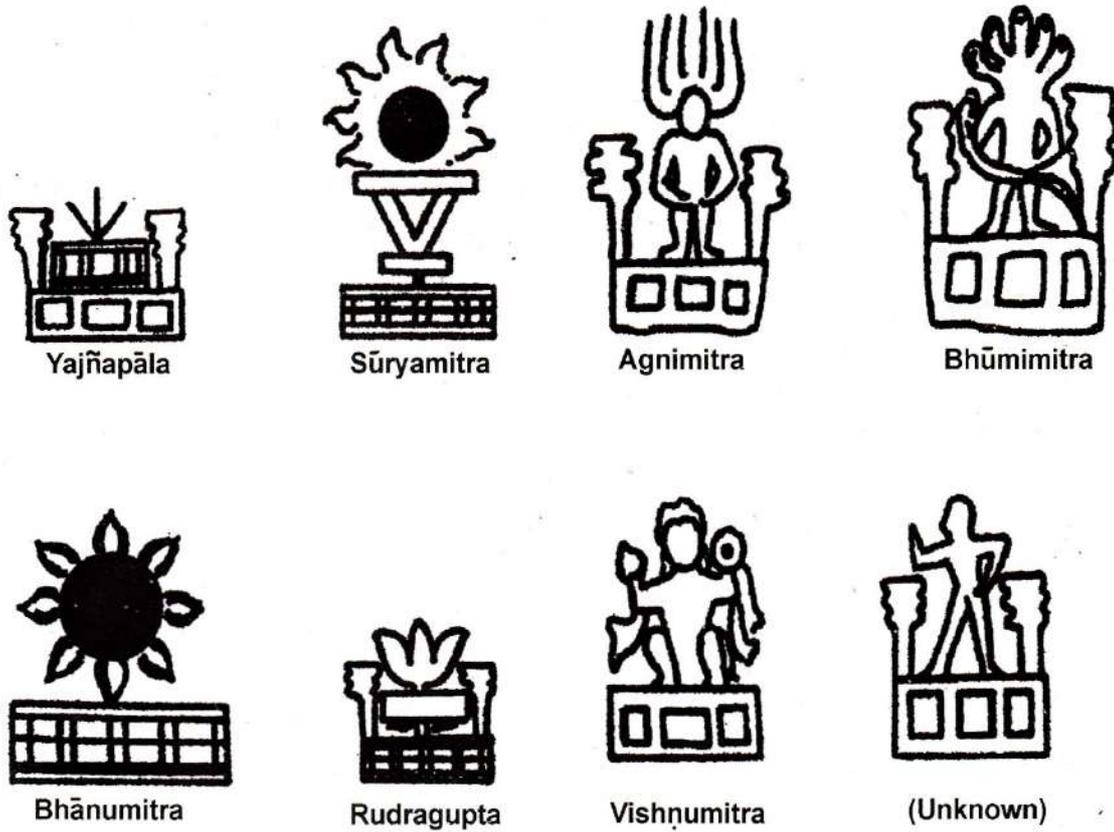
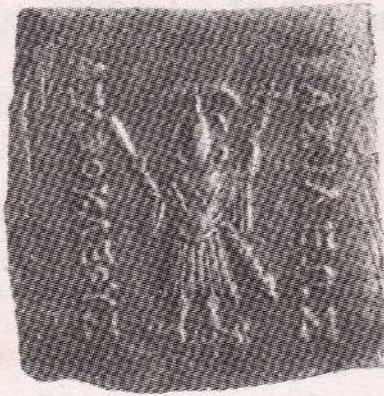


Fig. 3. Reverse devices of some Pañchāla coins

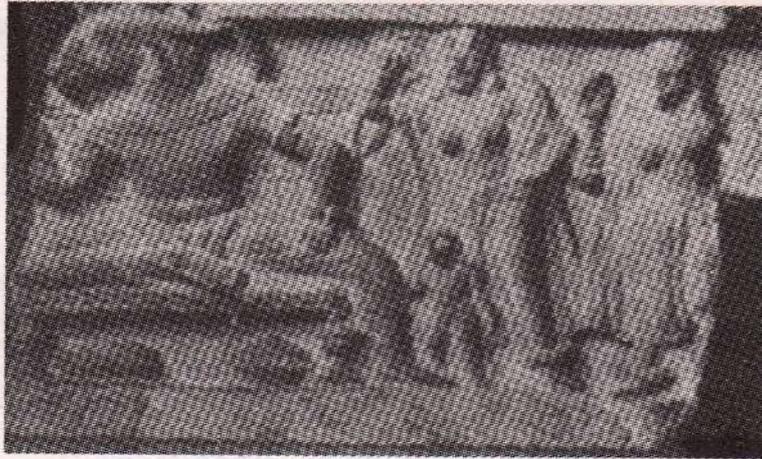
We thus see that Indian numismatic art like the plastic art is predominantly symbolic in its early phase. Though images of Sūrya, Saṁkarṣaṇa and Lakṣmī made their first appearance on coins in the beginning of the later half of the first millennium BCE and Śiva and Kārttikeya, Vāsudeva and Saṁkarṣaṇa were depicted on the Imperial *kārṣāpaṇa* series or punch-marked coins yet numerous symbols seem to have continued to represent various divinities (fig. 3). There is sufficient numismatic evidence to show the existence of shrines of various types for the worship of different deities<sup>29</sup> but definite iconographic forms developed only during the first-second century CE.



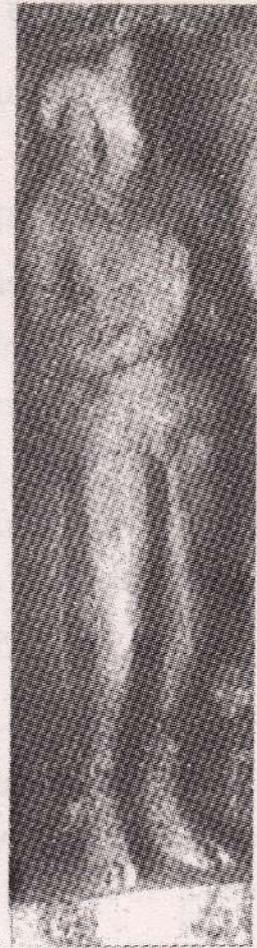
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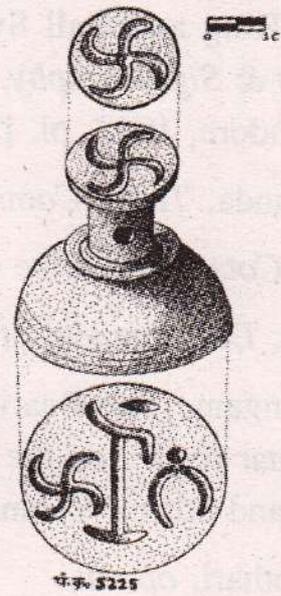


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Plate-I

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