

Indian Influence on Kushana Coins

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Abstract

The migrators from Central Asia, who conquered the Greco-Bactrian kingdom on their way to India, called themselves Kushan. They were related to the ancient Yuezhi tribe known as nomadic people in the early Chinese histories. Kushan invasion and consequent establishment of a large empire by Kujula Kadphises, are important chapters of Indian history. They were known for fierce battles and a paradoxical cultural and economic prosperity in their kingdom. They followed coin-pattern of their predecessors the Indo-Greek rulers and issued fine specimen in gold and other metals. This paper is an attempt to understand the influence of Indian culture on their coinage.

Key Words: Yuezhi, Kujula Kadphises, Kanishka, Taxila, Boddo

A large part of the north-west frontier of India, which was earlier under influence of Indo-Greek princes – mostly known from their numerous coins, came into influence under the Kushans. The Kushan warriors belonged to the ancient Yuezhi tribe of Central Asia. In search of better homes, they migrated towards west and fought their way to Europe. From here they moved eastwards to India. Kujula Kadphises succeeded in establishing an empire in the north-west region of India on the cost of Indo-Greeks and Sakas. Taxila, earlier Indo-Greek capital, was chosen to be the major town of the Kushan kingdom. Archaeological excavations have revealed a large number of Kushan coins from Taxila. Kujula was succeeded by Vim Taktu and Vim Kadphises. Later, it was Kanishka who achieved prosperity in almost every field for the Kushan empire.

Kushan kings issued many coin-types during their reign. Their coins resemble very closely to the coins of their predecessor Indo-Greek princes and the coins of their largest trading partner – the Roman empire. The *aureus* of Romans inspired the Kushan mints. Kushan gold coins are famous for their fine workmanship and diversity in types. They bear portraits – both royal and divine – on their obverse and reverse motifs. Inscriptions are present on these coins using regnal years of the king to date the coin. Thus, the coins provide us an invaluable source for the history of the Kushan period of India.

The divine images inscribed on these coins belong to the icons of many cultures, including the

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Sumerian Goddess Nana, the Persian Gods Oado and Athsho, and the Hindu divinities Vasudeva, Shiva and Buddha. As many as twenty-three divine icons are present on the Kushan coins. The inscriptions on these coins are according to their area of dominance. In India, they issued bilingual coins using Prakrit – in Greek and Kharosthi scripts.

Kanishka reformed the currency system of the Kushans and issued coins of a new variety. The king was shown as a warrior while his coins bear Indian God Shiva prominently, along with others. It was, as surmised by scholars, due to his adherence with Shaivism. In his early life he was more inclined towards Buddhism and we find depiction of Buddha in many forms on his coins. Later, Greek or Bactrian legends were preferred over bilingual coins.

These coins are valuable not only for their artistic importance, but also for the narration of political, social and economic history of ancient India. The depiction of images and inscriptions from these primary sources provides essential details. For example, the change in style of the divine icons may be related to geopolitical shifts in Kushan power from Gandhara to East. Eastern shift comprised of territories including Mathura and beyond. Similarly, for history of art these coins show development of iconology which is reflected more clearly in the study of sculptures. The Kushan art seems to be a major influence on the art of the Gupta empire.

The numerous coin types issued by Vime Kadphises, Kanishka, Huvishka and Vasudeva are important for our study as they show departure from earlier styles to Indian influence. These coins belong to the time frame of 50 CE to 175 CE. The Kushan inscriptions tell us that the geographical extent of the empire was through the Punjab to Mathura and beyond. In these rulers, Vima was the only one whose area of influence was not up to Mathura – limited to the whole of Punjab and Taxila. Kanishka and Huvishka enjoyed largest tracts of influence, while the dominions of Vasudeva narrowed considerably, but perhaps still included Mathura.

On the reverse of the gold coins of Vima, we find portrayal of God Shiva – alone or with Nandi:

1. Reverse: Au, Rd.

Shiva – stands nude facing; holding a trishool or parashu in right hand; mrig skin on left arm; a pot (kamanadala) in left hand; his hair knotted and wearing a thread in neck.

2. Reverse: Au, Rd.

Shiva – stands – wearing dhoti, facing; holding a trishool or parashu in right hand; mrig skin on left arm; a pot (kamanadala) in left hand; his hair knotted and wearing a thread in neck.

Nandi with Shiva.

Both coin-types attempt to delineate musculature by enhancing the size and angle of the right hip, similar to the depiction of Herakles on some Indo-Greek coins of Demetrius. But the Hellenistic influence is limited in comparison with local style of iconography.

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Dr. Dinesh Bhargava

During the reign of Kanishka, the depiction of Shiva on coins seems more natural. On his coins God Shiva has four arms instead of two. He wears a dhoti and sacred thread, holding five symbols – trishool, mrig, kamandala (these three as in Vim type coins), ankusha and vajra. No attempt to super impose muscles is evident on these coins, which is close to Indian tradition. The depiction is also very close to sculptural examples retrieved from Mathura region.

After Kanishka, early coins of Huvishka bear resemblance to the Kanishka types. But gradually, the Indian character can be seen more clearly:

1. Reverse: Au, Rd.

Shiva – standing erect, facing; He has three heads; holding trishool, vajra, mrig and six spoked chakra in his four arms.

2. Reverse: Au, Rd.

Shiva – standing erect wearing dhoti, facing; He has three heads; holding trishool, club, kamandala and fire (agni) in his four arms.

Broad shoulders, slim waist and the horizontal angularity of the shoulders build a grace comparable to the Buddhist sculptures from Mathura and Sarnath which belong to the Gupta period. The coins are small and the sculptures are large.

These Kushan coin-types follow their contemporary Indian art styles which later developed during Gupta Age, bearing 'Kushan influence'. When Kushan power began to decline during the reign of Vasudeva, the depictions on his coins seems more close to those of Vim Kadphises. The emphasis on musculature returns. But overall the Indianisation of Kushan art is still visible.

It is clear that the coins of Kushan rulers were influenced by local art. The coin-types were closer to their Hellenistic counter-parts during the early phase of the empire. When the boundaries of the empire were extended towards East, a shift in depiction style of divine images can be seen. The icons became more Indians in their form, bearing less Hellenistic influence. This is corroborated with other sources which reconstruct the political history of the Kushans in India.

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Indian Influence on Kushana Coins

Dr. Dinesh Bhargava

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