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Punch-marked coins of ancient India : Part 1



Name

- Name, ‘punch-marked coins’, given to the earliest available coins of India, by James Prinsep, in 1835
- Name based on the technique of manufacture of these coins
- Blanks cut from sheets of metal, adjusted to the required weight, and marked with symbols using punches

Origin and period of circulation

- Generally believed that punch-marked coins originated in India, independent of any foreign inspiration, *c* sixth century BC
- Continued in circulation up to *c* second century AD in northern India, and *c* third century AD in southern India

Metals

- About 90% of the available punch-marked coins are silver, and the rest are in copper
- Standard silver coin—*Dharaṇa* or *purāṇa*, and weighs 32 *rattīs* (about 56 grains)
- Standard copper coin—*Kārshāpaṇa*, and weighs 80 *rattīs*, (about 144 grains)
- Authentic gold punch-marked coins, unknown

Classification of punch-marked coins

- Punch-marked coins, not so far been classified with finality
- Classification, suggested by V A Smith, for the punch-marked coins in the collection of the Indian Museum, Calcutta, generally regarded as the most scientific
- Based on the metal of the coins, shape, and number of symbols on the reverse

Smith's classification

I. Silver		II. Copper	
A	Silver ingots	A	Approximately square coins i. with blank reverse ii. with a symbol or symbols on reverse
B	Bent bars or wheel-marked coins	B	Distinctly oblong coins i. with blank reverse ii. with a symbol or symbols on reverse
C	Rectangular coins i. with blank reverse ii. with one symbol on reverse iii. with two symbols on reverse iv. with three symbols on reverse	C	Circular coins All circular copper coins in the collection of the Indian Museum, Calcutta, have symbols on reverse
D	Roughly circular or oval coins i. with blank reverse ii. with one symbol on reverse iii. with two or more symbols on reverse		

Local and universal series

- On the basis of their area of circulation, punch-marked coins placed under two classes
- Local series, circulating within a confined area
- Universal series, circulating almost throughout the country
- Actually, local coins of Magadha became the universal series

Symbols

- Punch-marked coins are anepigraphous
- Have symbols punched on them
- On an average, 5-7 symbols on the obverse
- On an average, 1-3 symbols on the reverse
- Symbols on the reverse, relatively smaller in size
- Apart from the universal symbols, all the symbols found on punch-marked coins Indian in character

Classification of Symbols

Five classes

Sl. No.	Class of symbols	Examples
I	Natural symbols	Human figures, quadrupeds, aquatic animals, reptiles, amphibians, plants, the sun, the moon, stars, etc
II	Geographical symbols	Hill and river
III	Geometrical symbols	Circle, semi-circle, straight line, curved line, square, rectangle, dotted circle, divided square, star, etc
IV	Man-made objects	<i>Stūpa</i> , temple, arms and implements, etc
V	Miscellaneous symbols	<i>Svastika</i> , <i>śrīvatsa</i> , <i>nandipada</i> , taurine symbols, etc

Significance of symbols

- Symbols afford us a glimpse into the religious and cultural life of ancient India
- Due to largely irregular shape, punch-marked coins do not appear to be artistic
- But some of the symbols punched on them, quite beautiful

Thank you