



ANALYTIC AND COMPARATIVE STUDY OF COINS AND SEALS FROM NORTH- WESTERN INDIA: CIRCA 4TH CENTURY BCE TO 11TH CENTURY CE

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Abstract

Seals and Coins are as significant sources as inscription in history, as they lend credibility to the information from literature. Whether the seals followed the same trends in art and iconography as the coins is an interesting study. Coins were issued by kings, republican tribes and rarely by guilds whereas seals belonged to all classes of peoples and institutions. Similar symbols were used in ancient times in various forms of art, but the relationship between seals and coins in so far as their shape, size and design are concerned, is very close. The king between seals and coins is especially apparent from similarities in technique and has been given particular emphasis in many studies of the seals of antiquity. Similarities are rare between seals and other figural arts. It is surprising that, unlike those of other comparative study of sources, the relationship between seals and coins have received so little attention. Drawing a correlation between seals and coins is the purpose of this present paper.

Keyword: Correlation, Seals and Sealings, Coins

INTRODUCTION

Seals are extremely widespread as a means of establishing identity or ownership. Seals were used as a form of signature on contracts and other legal documents as well as administrative ones, and to prevent the sealed text from being altered; they also to authenticate documents and merchandise, and sealed private letters.¹

Their easy portability provides valuable information concerning trade routes. Their range of subjects and styles is enormous and they lend themselves to approaches based on iconography, history and the history of religions. In a Buddhist Indian setting, seals were also used for contracts and are known in monastic contexts, being affixed to the rings that bound copper plates inscribed with monastic land charters or lists of royal lineages.² Seals were also used for letters and parcels among the general populace attested by “a number of seal impressions collected in the Northwest that show this practice was widespread”³

Since they often carry inscriptions and monograms, they constitute an important source for epigraphic studies. Not least, the techniques of their production make them a major form of glyptic art.⁴

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SEALS AND COINS

The kingship between seals and coins is especially apparent from similarities in technique and been given particular emphasis in many studies of the seals of antiquity. The secure chronological landmarks provided by ancient coins for any

study of the history of art have made it possible to situate many seals within a chronological and geographical context. This is evident that coins are particularly valuable as comparative material. There is however a risk of interpreting such a close yet complex relationship as though it were one in which seals derive from coins.

When between a seal and a coin a common origin can be discerned, perhaps the same workshop in the case of some seals from Taxila⁵ this does not necessarily imply a derivation of the former from the latter. Too few facts are known to allow a complete reconstruction of the techniques of a workshop hypothetically producing both seals and coins, but in the absence of any proof to the contrary, the only certain principle seems a close interdependence between the two categories, so that while a seal may draw inspiration from a coin the converse can also obtain.

The only important publication to date on the seals of Gandhara considers not merely that the two materials are related but that the seals derive from coins.⁶ Two considerations contradict this assertion: first the materials belong to different categories, and second the stylistic similarities between them are slight. As Bivar observe⁷, the purpose and use of seals and coins, even those possibly produced by the same craftsmen, are entirely different, and this condition their appearance. To guarantee its owner's identity and avoid the pitfalls that seals were intended to eliminate, a seal has to be unique. Whereas coins are struck by a political power, most of those seals that have come down to us were commissioned by private clients, whose personal tastes and the free play that could be given to the craftsman's own ideas make for greater variety and an absence of stereotyping.

The second consideration is based upon a comparison of the style of the seals and coins of the North-West. Coin types which are often the only means of situating seals, chronologically provide many classes of seals with a firm and often iconographic point of reference. For instance, all the classes and individual types which show the male and female tutelary deity, whether separately or as a couple, can be dated to the 2nd-3rd centuries CE by comparison with Kushan coinage. Since usually, however, the resemblance remains at the superficial level of a general iconographic similarity and specific iconographic or stylistic parallels are extremely rare, it is difficult to accept Fussman's view that the glyptic art of the North-West draws its inspiration from the coinage or that the wide distribution of the female deity (whom he identifies as Ardoxšo) on seals is explained by the frequency of Ardoxšo-type Kushan coins.⁸ It seems inappropriate to postulate any connection, even a quantitative one, between two such different types of material as seals, which are always individual examples, and dies, which can be used for more than one striking, even bearing in mind the limitations of numismatic techniques in antiquity, or to base statistical conclusions on so small a collection numerically as that, in the Cabinet des Médailles.

The popularity of the Ardoxšo seals must surely reflect that of the deity, or perhaps generically of female deities displaying fertility characteristics that have merged syncretistically into a single main iconographic type. Their popularity is amply documented in other fields including numismatics. The frequency of the male deity on seals is also probably in proportion to the popularity of his cult, to judge from the diffusion of Kārttikeya devotion in North-West India.⁹

In attempting to assess similarities and divergencies between the seals and coins in any way related to them it is helpful to begin with the Ardoxšo images already mentioned. The only coin type with exact counterparts in glyptic art are those of the deity enthroned on coins attributed to Kaniska II¹⁰ and to the Kusānsāh Peroz.¹¹ On these coins and two gems from the same class, (See Callieri, Cat U 7.15 and Cat U 7.16)¹² the similar seated posture, attributes and treatment of throne, body and drapery, all suggest a possible common origin, perhaps in Roman seals depicting Demeter-Ceres.¹³

Portrayal on seal of the standing Ardoxšo are totally different from corresponding examples on Kushan coins, but show strong resemblances with the Roman seals. Which must surely be the prototypes.

Thus, a correlation between coins and Gandharan seals is documented only at the late Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian period, before which the evidence suggests a direct derivation of Gandharan from Roman seals. Between the end of the 3rd and the beginning of 4th century, the coins may well have imitated seals, such as seal of Callieri, Cat U 7.15 or Cat U 7.16,¹⁴ which do not differ stylistically from 2nd – 3rd century seals. The other iconography common on seals of the same period and associated with Ardoxšo in the divine couple, the male warrior deity (Kārttikeya?), shows marked affinities with both Roman seals and a Kushan coin type. The clear resemblance which exists between one of the Gandhara seals of Kārttikeya¹⁵ and two Roman seals in the British Museum¹⁶ seem to provide incontrovertible proof of the origins of the image which corresponds in all significant respects to the Kushan coin type Saoreoro 4 of Huviska.¹⁷

Another iconography on both Kushan coins and seals probably deriving from the Roman iconography of Demeter-Ceres is Nana, found on seal¹⁸ and the coin type Nana 4 of Kaniska and Huviska.¹⁹

For some seals, however, only the link with Kushan coinage can be perceived and no common source has been traced.

An interesting seal in the BM²⁰ of a male deity has many characteristics in common with the Kushan coin type Pharro 3 of Huviska²¹ while the seals of British Museum²² male bust in profile to right show connections with that of Kaniska Mozdoono I.²³

The study of seals has greatly extended the artistic and cultural range of the North-West and coins no longer show affinities with Kushan coins only. The comparison of seals and sealings for example 'Hūṇa coinage reveals points of reference helpful for their attribution.

In this perspective, the need of a thorough investigation of all lesser-known categories, such as clay modelling and metals, is obvious, particularly since the evidence of seals confirm that artistic activity in the region was extremely complex. Such an investigation will certainly generate decisive principles for solving the many problems of interpretation besetting the art of Gandhara as still now conceived in its limited Buddhist context

Many seals, despite affinities with Sasanian glyptic art²⁴ torso and hair-style are rendered in a manner extremely close to coin of probably "kidarite" origin from about the end of the 4th century CE.²⁵ Few seals shares many characteristics with various 'Hūṇa' coinage between the second half of the 5th and the beginning of the 7th century CE including the treatment of the torso and the short fine pleats of the clothing seen on coins of Khingila) c. 450 CE²⁶, the broad wings delimiting the bust common to many coinages also of Khingila, and the hair-style with its border of small curls characteristic of the coining of Narendra (end of 6th to beginning of 7th century CE.²⁷

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Notes & References

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³ Michael D, *Ibid*.

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⁸ Fussman, 1972, *op. cit.*,

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¹⁰ R. Göbl. *System and chronology of the coinage of the Kusan Empire*. 1984, p. 23, no. 538/1 and pl. 164, type Ardoxšo 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25, no. 555/1 and pl. 164, type Ardoxšo 6.

¹² Callieri, *ibid*, p. 195: On this seal female deity (Ardoxšo) seated frontally, acornupia in her left hand and a bunch of grapes in her right, crowned by a cupid, left. Both the seals belonging to the Kushan-period group of Gandharan tutelary deities and possibly from the same workshop, closely resemble in general style and many individual details the Ardoxšo coin type of Kaniska II.

¹³ G. M. A. Richter, Metropolitan Museum, New York. *Catalogue of Engraved Gems*, pp. 351-52, nos. 346, 347

¹⁴ Callieri, *op. cit.*, p. 195

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Cat U 7.5, p. 191

¹⁶ H. B. Walters, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems, Greek, Etruscan and Roman in the British Museum*, London, 1926, p. 159, no. 1420.

¹⁷ Gobl 1984: *Op. cit.*, p. 27, no. 383 and pl. 170.

¹⁸ Callieri, *op. cit.*, p. 197, Cat U 7. 23: female deity Nana seated in three-quarters views to left on a lion which faces right, under a crescent; Bactrian inscription *freixoadēo*, a personal name. The seal which belongs to the Kushan-period group of Gandharan tutelary deities. Closely resembles a representative of Nana on the coins of Kaniska and Huviska.

¹⁹ Gobl, 1984: *Op. cit.*, p. 26, no. 359 and pl. 167.

²⁰ British Museum, Registration Number, 1962, 0518.17: Diademed frontal male figure (Kārttikeye).

²¹ Gobl, 1984: *Op. cit.*, p. 24, no. 322 and pl. 171.

²² British Museum, Registration Number, 1943, 10-9.26

²³ Gobl, *Op. cit.*, 7, no. 61 and pl. 267

²⁴ R. N. Frye, Sasanian Seals in the Collection of Mohsen Foroughi (*Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, III, Vol. VI.*) London, 1971: no. 95, pl. XLI.

²⁵ Gobl, *Documents on the History of the Iranian Huns in Bactria and India*, 1967, vol. I, p. 51, Em, 26 and 27, vol. III, pl. 13

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol I, pp. 71-72, Em, 61; vol. III, pl. 21

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 123-24, Em. 174; Vol. III, pl. 39

