

“Indianisation” of a Roman coin design in Early Historic India: a study of an imitation from the British Museum



Abstract: Roman *aurei* and *solidi* in India led to imitations of gold being produced there of these coins, with a gradual infiltration of indigenous elements observed in the iconography of some examples. An imitation of a Roman *aureus*, now in the British Museum collection, demonstrates how the Roman coin design was renegotiated to fit an Early Historic Indian cultural landscape. Specifically, the design of the reverse of this specimen finds no prototype in Roman coinage of the times. It must have been a local development, with the Indian craftsman reworking a representation of a female deity known from issues of the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius and adding a temple to it. The Indian form of the building suggests that the figure should be interpreted as a Hindu goddess, possibly Lakshmi, shown in the act of blessing her temple.

Keywords: *aureus*, Early Historic India, imitation, Roman coins, Indian Ocean trade

A gold coin from the collection of the British Museum (No. 1988,0808.11), purchased from a renowned London coin dealer Howard Simmons in 1988, is an extraordinary example of an Indian imitation of a Roman *aureus* [Fig. 1]. The diameter is 19 mm, corresponding to Roman *aurei*, the weight 6.76 g, the axis 6 h. That it is an imitation of an *aureus* is surmised from the chronological and denominational structure of finds of Roman coins from India, where there is a notable, almost complete absence

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of 2nd-century *denarii* and bronzes. The obverse design imitates a coin of Antoninus Pius (138–161) with a representation of the emperor's wife, Annia Galeria Faustina, sometimes referred to as Faustina I or Faustina the Elder (it was initially wrongly identified as an imitation of a Julia Domna/Domitian *aureus*; Berghaus 1993: 308, Fig. 10). The issues referred to here were struck in the Rome mint in year 141 CE. On the Indian specimen, the draped bust of Faustina I is shown to right, with hair elaborately waved in several loops around the head and drawn up and coiled on top (e.g., RIC III 344, 348a, 349Aa, 352a, 354, 356a, 357Aa, 361a, 364A, 366a, 367). The legend is DIVA CAVSTIIA. However, the correct legend on Roman coins of this type reads DIVA FAVSTINA.

The reverse design depicts a female figure standing next to a temple, with

the legend AIVOION and OVIVI in the exergue. Unlike the inscription on the obverse, which is a corrupt version of the original legend known from the coins of Antoninus Pius, the pseudo-legend on the reverse appears to repeat the more prominent characters from the obverse rather than endeavouring to copy a specific Roman prototype.

A scratch mark in the shape of the Greek letter Γ with a shorter bar between the letter arms can be seen in the upper field on the reverse. It was probably made later, in the next phase of the object's life-cycle. Such intentional scratch marks on late Roman coins appear on a significant number of coins from India, with certain complex shapes recurring, and, therefore, they may suggest some sort of a recognized symbolic language of the time (Darley 2013: 281–284).



Fig. 1. Indian imitation of an *aureus* (BM 1988,0808.11) (© The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0] licence)

SOURCES OF THE REVERSE DESIGN

Without a prototype in the Roman coinage, the design on the reverse of this imitation should be recognized as a local Indian development. Even so, there are elements of the drawing, like the female figure, that seem to be copied from a Roman coin. The representation seems to have been modeled after a depiction of a deity on a Roman *aureus*. The figure is depicted draped, in three-quarter view to the left, with her head turned left as well, following the gesture of her arm. Her hair is pulled back and tied in a knot at the back of the head. The right arm, with a raised hand, is bent at the elbow, the left one is shown drawn to the waist. Female figures with the upper body thus projected can be found on coins of Antoninus Pius with the DIVA FAVSTINA legend (see, e.g., RIC III 367) [Fig. 2] and were most probably a prototype for this Indian representation. It is unclear whether the figure depicted on the British Museum coin actually holds something in her left hand; the presence of a blurry object to the right of the figure could suggest it.

The Indian die-engraver modified the lower part of the depiction, raising the right leg of the figure to place the foot on the podium of a temple, possibly the first step. The raised right arm of the figure touches the temple superstructure. The left foot is enclosed by a line depicting an oblong object on which it stands.

The oblong object is difficult to identify but it could be either a small rug filled with coins or simply a pile of coins, a motif known from Indian iconography. Representations of the deities of good fortune Pharro [Fig. 3] and Ardochsho, shown with feet resting on a small rug among scattered coins, are sometimes depicted on Kushan coinage.¹ In wall paintings from cave 2 at Ajanta, two *yakshas* are depicted with dome-shaped piles of coins, jewellery, fruit and lengths of cloth in front of them. These could be either donations made to or gifts bestowed by the *yakshas*. The same iconographic motif appears, for example, in front of the *yaksha* sculptures on the façade of cave 26 in Ajanta, in Amaravati and in the so-called "Palikhera group" linked with the Mathura school of art (Zin



Fig. 2. RIC III 367 (Antoninus Pius), diameter 18 mm, weight 7.22 g; CNG Auction 114, lot 895 (© Classical Numismatic Group, LLC, www.cngcoins.com)



Fig. 3. Huvishka coin with Pharro, diameter unknown, weight 7.90 g; CNG Auction 76, lot 964 (© Classical Numismatic Group, LLC, www.cngcoins.com)

¹ For Pharro see Göbl 1984: Nos 322–323; Jongeward, Cribb, and Donovan 2015: Nos 774–775. For Ardochsho see Jongeward, Cribb, and Donovan 2015: Nos 1201, 1606, 1613, 1616.

2015: 131–133). Moreover, in the Early Historic period, *yakshas* are often depicted holding a purse in their hands.

Another unique feature of this coin is the representation of a religious building. The temple *garbhagriha* (sanctum) stands on a decorated or compartmentalized double *pitha* (temple base), probably with stairs leading to it. The rows of horizontal and vertical lines might suggest a portico or colonnaded hall in the temple entrance. The *shikhara* (superstructure) consists of an elongated base with a thickened and raised left corner as well as a hemispherical structure. Topping it is a finial composed of two elements: an *amalaka* and a *kalasha*. The *amalaka* could indicate the Nagara Indian temple style, since this element does not appear in Dravidian architecture.

Elizabeth Stone (2016) argues that a small, domed and pillared shrine represented on a drum slab depicting a stupa, from the Amaravati stupa (Stone 2016: 62, Fig. 76), resembles the temple of Vesta known from Roman coins and constitutes an example of Roman numismatic imagery being integrated into the art of South India. However, she also points to examples of pillared, domed shrines represented in Andhra sculpture. A hexastyle temple, with a seated figure of an empress shown inside it, appears on *aurei* of Antoninus Pius with the DIVA FAVSTINA legend (Antoninus Pius: RIC III 354); its shape, however, differs from the representation on the British Museum coin. Similarly, neither the round temple of Vesta, which is sometimes depicted on Roman *aurei* with a ribbed domed roof and a statue of Vesta

inside (Nero: RIC I² 61; Vespasian: RIC II.1² 515, 516, 524, 530, 537, 548, 549, 550, 557, 558, 559, 704, 708; Septimius Severus: RIC IV.1 586; Caracalla: RIC IV.1 249, 250, 271, 272A, 272B, 392b, 392c), nor any other building appearing on Roman coins could be considered as a prototype for this particular representation. Moreover, a look at the iconography of some earlier and contemporary Indian coins leaves little doubt as to the local source of inspiration for this depiction. Therefore, the reverse design of the British Museum coin should be understood and interpreted in light of Indian coin iconography incorporating depictions of religious structures from the earliest period.

Probably the earliest representation of religious architectural motifs on Indian coins appears on silver punchmarked coins of the Saurashtra Janapada (located in a peninsular region of modern Gujarat in western India, on the Arabian Sea coast). These are coins classified by Pieter Anne van't Haaff as Type 7.1. (“*vihara* [monastery] with turrets and dots”) of the Later Series. According to Dilip Rajgor (1996) they should be dated to 350–300 BC;² however Anne van't Haaff (2004: 22, 41) dates them to 200–40 BC. The aforementioned building has an arched entrance, pillars and a podium, and is sometimes shown over a floor plan (Anne van't Haaff Type 7.1.1). The only deity represented in anthropomorphic form on the Saurashtra coins is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, good fortune, power and beauty. Interestingly, images representing Lakshmi in the region seem to be restricted mainly to coins of the Saurash-

2 For the dating of Saurashtra coinage see also Tye 1984: 8, Nos 92–93; Mitchiner 2004: 1093.

tra Janapada series (Mishra and Ray 2017: 102–103); nevertheless, the association between the goddess and the *vihara* depicted on the coins is not clear. Her images were frequently overstruck by other Lakshmi images, representations of bulls, elephants, *viharas*, temple floor plans or the paddle-wheel (Anne van't Haaff 2004: 12).

A representation of a temple appears also on some tribal coins struck by the Audumbaras and the Yaudheyas, two of the oldest tribes of India. The coins of the Audumbaras are dated to the 1st century BCE/CE. The temple is depicted on square copper specimens classified by Devendra Handa (2007: 25–38) as Class 1, Types 1–4. Previous identifications of the building, discussed by Handa, include: a temple (Cunningham 1891: 70; Gupta 1988: 16), a structural shrine or pavilions (Coomaraswamy 1927: 45, Note 2), a stupa (Allan 1936: 122ff.), a moot hall or public building (Jayaswal 1955: 154). Handa identifies it as a temple of Shiva, mostly because of the motif of a trident-battle axe shown in the right field, near the temple. He believes the symbol to be a very important feature, its size suggesting that it must have been set on a pillar.

In the Yaudheya³ coinage, representations of temples appear on specimens classified as "Shadanana-Deer type copper coins", showing the Hindu god of war Kartikeya on the obverse and a deer next to a temple on the reverse (Handa 2007: 184–188). Handa distinguishes 39 types of

temples having domed, vaulted or wagon-shaped, flat or triangular spires (Handa 2007: 191, Fig. 21, 193, Fig. 22). The coins seem to have been struck for nearly two centuries from about the end of the 1st century BCE/beginning of the 1st century CE. According to Handa (2007: 190–198), the temples were dedicated to various deities like Shiva, Indra, Kubera, Surya or Vishnu, as indicated by their symbolism. And although Kartikeya was their tutelary deity, the Yaudheya worshipped also other Hindu gods. According to Richard D. Mann (2012: 115–116), the building on Yaudheya coins of Class 3 is a potential clue suggesting they worshipped the god Brahmanyadeva-Kumara, together with a Sasthi goddess, during this period. However, there is no physical evidence of the worship of these deities other than these coins, justifying a cautious approach to their meaning. The edifice placed in front of the animal can be interpreted in light of the Kuninda coins, on which, as on the Yaudheya issues, a deer or yak with some symbols is shown. The depiction of the temple on the latter replaced the representation of a female deity positioned in front of the animal on the Kuninda coins (Gupta 1987: 38–39).

The building on the British Museum coin has two distinctive features, the first of which is the shape of the left corner of the elongated base of the *shikhara*. A similar element appears on the reverses of copper coins of the Panchala ruler Indramitra (see note 3), on which the figure of the

3 The Yaudheya and Kuninda coins are usually classified as 'tribal'. The Yaudheyas are commonly referred to as a tribal republic occupying various regions of the modern Indian states of Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. The Kunindas issued coinage between the 1st century BCE and the 2nd century CE. They lived in the regions encompassing the tributaries of the Indus and Ganges rivers, however little is known about their history. The Panchala kingdom emerged under the Mitra kings in northern India after the collapse of the Mauryan Empire.

deity is depicted standing in an archway or in a temple (Pieper 2013: 352, Type 1016). In view of the rule that the deity represented on the reverses of these coins was the god after which the issuing ruler was named, it is to be assumed that the god shown standing in the religious building was Indra (Pieper 2013: 101–102). The Panchala series started about 150 BCE and extended well into the Kushan era, through the 4th century CE (Singh 2018: 16).

A temple with an elongated and raised *shikhara* end is depicted also on much later, punchmarked gold coins of Jayasimha II Jagadekamalla (1015–1043), a Western Chalukya ruler (J. Cribb, personal communication; Mitchiner 1998: 136, Type 273). This representation also recalls the second distinctive feature of the temple depiction on the British Museum specimen, that is, the three progressively smaller arches of the *shikhara*.

“INDIANISATION” OF ROMAN COIN DESIGNS IN THE EARLY HISTORIC PERIOD

The value and meaning of an object depend on the cultural background of the user. The first impression from contact with a coin is purely physical. From there, the impression passes through an individual cultural filter, allowing it to be interpreted and transformed into recognition (see Kemmers and Myrberg 2011: 94). The interpretation of its iconography might change in a new cultural context in which the object is used and understood. This is well illustrated by the phenomenon of locally produced clay *bullae* imitating Roman *denarii*, known from many archaeological sites in the Deccan [Fig. 4]. They must have had strong symbolic connotations, performing the function of amu-

lets bringing good fortune, protection, prosperity and money. Therefore, it can be said that in the Early Historic period Roman *denarii* played an instrumental role in creating new symbols of wealth and abundance (for an interpretation and references see Smagur 2018).

The increasing influx of Roman *aurei* that started after emperor Nero's coinage reform in 64 CE and the inflow of *solidi* from the end of the 4th century CE resulted in the production of their imitations made of gold. The functions of the Indian imitations are not fully understood; however, the presence of a double piercing or loops on many of them suggest strong symbolic connotations, like those of the *bullae* used as ornaments. They might have constituted also a form of investment, along with saving for emergencies (Smagur forthcoming). Most probably, they may have also been used as currency in some cases (Smagur 2020).

Indian imitations of Roman gold coins vary greatly in their quality. Some of them are very well executed, suggest-



Fig. 4. Two *bullae* from Ter, diameters unknown (Photo courtesy Dr. Shreekant Jadhav)

ing the presence of genuine Roman coins used as direct prototypes during the process of their production. Others are crude and resemble the genuine coins only on a very general level in terms of iconography and inscriptions. One-sided, gold bracteate-like objects with obverses similar to Roman coins were also produced in the Early Historic period.

Examples of the like of the British Museum specimen discussed here constitute evidence of a gradual infiltration of indigenous elements into the iconography of Indian imitations of Roman coins. The finds from Sisupalgarh (Orissa, eastern India) exemplify a regionally specific cultural response to the production of portrait *bullae* (Lal 1949: 101–102; Smith 2015). From a technical point of view, these finds recall clay imitations of Tiberius coins (Borell 2014), but their particular Indian style makes them different from other finds from the Deccan. Instead, they resemble portraits known from the Satavahana dynasty coinage. Therefore, their source of inspiration was more complex and multifaceted (Smith 2015: 34–36). The same observation is true of some of the finds of gold imitations of *aurei* (e.g., imitation from the Upparipeta Hoard; Turner 1989: 79, Pl. III, No. 166)



Fig. 5. Indian imitation of a Diva Faustina *aureus*, diameter 21 mm, weight 6.77 g; CNG Electronic Auction 366, lot 32 (© Classical Numismatic Group, LLC, www.cngcoins.com)

[Fig. 5]. Another interesting example, also from the British Museum collection (No. 2002,0102.5247), is most probably an Indian imitation of a *denarius* of Vespasian, with a bull standing right on the reverse (Vespasian: RIC II.1² 841). On this specimen the most Indian feature is the hump of the bull, while the type of pseudo-legend and the small points used to depict Vespasian's hair resemble contemporary Satavahana coinage (Abdy, Moorhead, and Bracey 2018). There is also a medalion from a later time (British Museum, No. OR.5200) with representations copied from the coins of Constantine the Great (324–337) and Kanishka I (about 127–151) or Huvishka (about 151–190), probably produced somewhere in the northeastern region of India during the late 4th century CE. On this specimen the emperor shown on the obverse wears an earring (see Göbl 1976; Errington and Cribb 1992: 146).

Roman motifs are also believed to have been incorporated into the narrative art of Andhra. According to this view, Western classical art, particularly Roman art and architecture, were the source of some pictorial models, as well as the composition of scenes and the way of representing bodies on Amaravati reliefs (see, e.g., Kuwayama 1997; Stone 2006; 2008; Zin 2016). Pia Brancaccio (2005) believes that also other Western motifs, such as, for example, representations of Baubo or grotesque terracotta figurines from Alexandria, could have been regarded as a new iconographic way of depicting local deities and characters.

The "Indianisation" of Western motifs constitutes also an interesting feature of much later Indian imitations of Venetian

ducats. By the end of the 19th century, genuine sequins with the depiction of the Doge of Venice kneeling before St Mark on the obverse, and Christ in a mandorla on the reverse were prized as religious medals by Syrian Christian ladies in the Indian kingdom of Travancore because of the effigy of St Mark on them. The design of the imitations eventually evolved, and their makers started introducing Indian elements into the Western model. On many examples the effigies of St Mark, the Doge and Christ were deftly altered to serve as Hindu divinities. The figures on the ducats earned them several names in the local languages, such as the most popular name, Putali (meaning 'statue', 'effigy'). The Putali Maal, a traditional

necklace, is still encountered all over the Deccan, and many *putali* dies, some of recent origin, can be found on the sarafa bazaars in India. In Karnataka, the necklaces made of Venetian coins were used to adorn the statues of Hindu gods and goddesses in temples, most probably without knowing the significance of these coins (see Aravamuthan 1938; Bhandare 2004; Gopal 2005: 50–53). Therefore, the phenomenon of the use of Venetian ducats and their imitations in India constitutes an example of the transformation of value and meaning of an object in a new cultural context: the original meaning of the representation is lost, but the tradition of using the ducat design in jewellery continues.

MEANING OF THE REVERSE DESIGN

The depiction on the reverse of the British Museum coin is evidence of a reworking and renegotiating of the Roman coin design into the Early Historic Indian cultural landscape. A representation of a female deity known from the coins of Antoninus Pius was reworked by the maker of the imitation, who added the temple. In effect, the representation was made to convey religious importance. It can also be assumed that the goddess is connected with the dedication of the shrine. Handa, discussing the representation of a temple depicted on the Audumbara coins, calls up archaeological and literary sources suggesting that in Early Historic Indian architecture, the emblem of the presiding deity was placed outside or in front of the temple building (Handa 2007: 33). The same principle governed depictions on Indian coinage, as discussed above.

In the case of the British Museum coin, the representation of a deity replaced its emblem. It is also worth mentioning that representations of a goddess within her sacred space, a shrine or *chaitya*, are known from terracotta art of the post-Mauryan period (Ahuja 2005: 346–347). On the discussed specimen the association between the deity and the temple is reinforced by the fact that she is shown in physical contact with the building, in the act of touching (blessing?) it.

It is much more difficult to establish the identity of the divinity. In the Indian context, the iconographic qualities of deities are established by a physical possession of attributes (Ahuja 2005), which are, however, very difficult to identify in the case of the representation on the reverse of the British Museum coin. The rug filled with coins under the deity's feet

could point to the figure's identification as Shri Lakshmi, goddess of good fortune, money, and a bestower of prosperity. Images of Lakshmi depicted with coins as the Goddess of Fortune are known in the plastic arts from the 1st century CE onwards (Agrawala 1965; Ahuja 2005; Srinivasan 2010; Smagur 2018). On terracotta plaques from the ancient cities of Chandraketurah in Bengal or Kaushambi in Uttar Pradesh, she is depicted standing on a *purana ghat* ('water-filled vessel wherefrom life arises') decorated with a girdle, coins and sheaths of corn. Assuming the deity depicted on the British Museum specimen is Lakshmi, the object in her left hand could be identified with a lotus flower, but this cannot be established based on the coin itself.

The last, very difficult question is whether the maker of this imitation intentionally changed the personality of the divine figure from the Roman prototype, or is the depiction actually an Indian translation of the Roman goddess. Such a practice of translation of the divine identity is confirmed in the early coinage of Kanishka I when Iranian gods appeared labeled with parallel Greek names (Cribb 1998; Bracey 2012: 199). Brancaccio (2005) believes that in the case of ornaments made out of Roman coins, the non-ordinary and powerful features of the Roman emperors might have been

associated with *yaksha*-like guardians, and thus judged as particularly appropriate for amulets. This explanation must remain hypothetical for lack of written sources on this subject, combined with differences in the iconography of *bullae* and depictions of *yakshas* in the terracotta art of the period. A later phenomenon, the use of Venetian coins in India and their local imitations there, appears to be quite similar. Writing in 1909, Edgar Thurston quoted one Mr. Fawcett: "If one asks the ordinary Malayāli, say a Nāyar, what persons are represented on the sequin, one gets for an answer that they are Rāma and Sīta; between them a coco[a]nut tree" (Thurston 1909: 367). The fact that the die-engraver of the British specimen did not stop at introducing new elements, such as a temple, but decided to redesign the reverse, illustrating also the relation between the goddess and the building, might indicate an intentional redoing of the scene to make it recognizable for the Indian user of this coin. The Indian shape of the building also strengthens the interpretation of the scene as showing a Hindu goddess blessing her temple. However, it cannot be excluded that users of coins familiar with Buddhism would have also seen in this image a scene of the veneration of a stupa, one of the most popular scenes in Buddhist art of the Early Historic period.

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Abbreviations

RIC I ²	Sutherland, C.H.V. (1984). <i>The Roman imperial coinage I. From 31 BC to AD 69</i> (2nd, rev. ed.). London: Spink & Son
RIC II.1 ²	Carradice, I. and Buttrey, T.V. (2007). <i>The Roman imperial coinage II.1. From AD 69–96: Vespasian to Domitian</i> (2nd, rev. ed.). London: Spink & Son
RIC III	Mattingly, H. and Sydenham, E.A. (1930). <i>The Roman imperial coinage III. Antoninus Pius to Commodus</i> . London: Spink & Son
RIC IV.1	Mattingly, H. and Sydenham, E.A. (1938). <i>The Roman imperial coinage IV.1. Pertinax to Geta</i> . London: Spink & Son

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