

Greek, Indian, Indo-Greek?

Bilingual coin legends of Hellenistic kings in India

The so-called Indo-Greek kingdoms came into existence after the Graeco-Bactrian kings were repelled south of the Hindu Kush Mountains by an invasion of nomadic people of Scythian descent around the middle of the 2nd century BCE (see for the coins Bopearachchi 1991, Bordeaux 2018 and Glenn 2020). Another century later Indo-Greek rule in turn was overthrown by Indo-Scythic rulers coming from Bactria (Senior 2001-2004). Overall, sources from and about these kingdoms are not numerous, the only sources we have left in abundance are the various rulers' silver and bronze coins. Although their significance is supported by scattered and isolated material evidence, nearly everything we know about these kingdoms – their social structure, their religious pantheon, and of course their economy – must be deduced from these coins.

These coins show an intriguing design, with a portrait of the king on the obverse and a deity on the reverse, which follows the Hellenistic standard set by the successors of Alexander the Great. What is peculiar to Indo-Greek coins is that together with a Greek legend, naming the king with his epitheton (or even epitheta) on the obverse, a Prakrit (Indian) legend written in Kharoṣṭhī is set on the reverse, representing an exact translation of the Greek. Additionally, Indo-Greek bronze coins keep the twofold legend but are minted on square flans, likewise unseen in the rest of the Hellenistic world and following Indian precedents.

My paper will take a bifocal approach: On the one hand I will try to reconstruct the reasons behind this choice of languages regarding questions of monarchical self-representation and identity. On the other hand the concrete impacts this choice had on the producing of the coins will be analyzed by observing precisely the traces of the tools used for cutting the dies' metal surface. Whereas on the obverse – for the Greek legend – traces of usages of a drill are clearly visible, the reverse legend – the Indian – misses these marks. Furthermore, dashes can be found on the reverse, signaling the start of the Indian legend. These dashes are no longer found on the Indo-Scythian coins, hinting towards a change in the personnel at the mint. Furthermore, already on Indo-Greek coins the monograms, best understood as marks of a specific mint or workstation and usually consisting of pure Greek characters, are augmented with Kharoṣṭhī signs hinting towards an inclusion of the “new” language in the mints' workflow.

Therefore, the analysis of the possible applications of the two different scripts found on these coins and the meticulous observation of the tools used for preparing the coin dies allow us a deeper insight into the character and identity these rulers chose to portray for themselves on the one hand, on the other an insight into the people working in an Indo-Greek mint during Hellenistic times and their language choices.

Literature:

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Senior 2001-2004 = R. C. Senior, Indo-Scythian Coins and History Vol. I – IV. An Analysis of the Coinage, Lancaster, Pa.