

Semiotics of Symbols in Ancient Indian Historical Writing: With Special Reference to Indo-Greek Coins

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Abstract: Semiotics of Symbols in Ancient Indian Historical Writing: With Special Reference to Indo-Greek Coins

A critical aspect of studying ancient objects and their import is the understanding of signs and their meaning, referred to as semiotics. This paper deals with the semiotics of symbols within the Indo-Greek coins and analyses specific forms of ancient Indian historical writing. These coins provide further evidence of the post-Alexandrian (2nd century B.C.E–1st-century C.E) settling times of the Hellenistic influence in Indian political, cultural, and religious spheres.

Coins of Indo-Greek kings were issued in Northwestern India and were known for their unique fully Greek and Indian bilingual and symbolic elements. This research thus looks into the symbols embedded in these coins. It investigates how Hellenistic deities, Indian elements, or royal branding function further to legitimize political rule and represent religious and cultural syncretism.

The semiotic explanation of these coins demonstrates a variety of representations when depicting certain figures such as Zeus, Heracles, the Indian bull, or the elephant; aimed at the demonstration of the rulers' dynasty.

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INTRODUCTION

The study of symbols and their semiotic significance plays a crucial role in unraveling the mysteries of ancient civilizations. In the context of Ancient Indian historical writing, the examination of symbols takes us on a journey through time, offering insights into the beliefs, values, and cultural exchanges that shaped the rich tapestry of the subcontinent's history. This article delves into the semiotics of symbols, focusing on Indo-Greek coins as a key artifact to understand the interplay of cultures and ideologies.

SEMIOTICS: DECODING SYMBOLS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Semiotics, as a field of study, explores the interpretation of signs and symbols and their roles in communication. In the context of historical writing, symbols serve as a visual language that transcends

linguistic barriers, offering a unique lens through which to analyze cultures and their interconnected histories (Scanlon, 2015). By decoding symbols, historians can unravel the layers of meaning embedded in ancient artifacts, shedding light on the socio-political, religious, and cultural landscapes of bygone eras.

INDO-GREEK COINS: A WINDOW INTO CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTION









The Indo-Greek Kingdom, a Hellenistic state that flourished in the Indian subcontinent between the 2nd century BCE and the 1st century CE, represents a fascinating chapter in ancient history (P. Masson-Oursel, 1996, pp. 67-72). The numismatic evidence left behind by the Indo-Greeks provides valuable insights into the amalgamation of Greek and Indian culture (Garfinkel, 2018).

ICONOGRAPHY ON INDO-GREEK COINS

The coins minted by the Indo-Greeks are adorned with a rich array of symbols, blending Hellenistic and Indian iconography. The depiction of rulers, deities, and mythological motifs serves as a visual narrative of the cultural exchange that occurred during this period. Symbols such as the elephant, owl, bull, lion, etc. a revered creature in Indian tradition, coexist with images of Greek gods, creating a unique fusion that reflects the synthesis of diverse cultural elements (Bhandarkar, 1913). In Ai-Khanum numerous coins were found, consisting of six Indian-standard silver drachms depicting Hindu deities. These are the first representation of Vedic deities on coins, and they display early Avatars of Vishnu: Balarama-Samkarshana and Vasudeva-Krishna and are thought to correspond to the first attempts at creating an Indian-standard coinage as they invaded northern India. (Benerji, 2019)

RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM: GODS AND DEITIES ON INDO-GREEK COINS

One of the prominent aspects of Indo-Greek coins is the depiction of deities from both Greek and Indian pantheons. The syncretism of religious symbols reflects a harmonious blending of belief systems. The inclusion of Greek gods like Zeus alongside Indian deities such as Shiva on these coins symbolizes a convergence of spiritual ideologies, offering a unique perspective on the religious landscape of ancient India.



Bactrian and Indian coinage of some early Indo-Greek kings (200-145 BCE)				
Territory/Ruler	<u>Agathocles</u> (190-180 BCE)	<u>Pantaleon</u> (190-180 BCE)	<u>Apollodotus I</u> (circa 180 BCE)	<u>Eucratides</u> (171-145 BCE)
Bactria				
India				

GREEK PANTHEON ON INDIAN SOIL

Indo-Greek coins often feature representations of Greek deities, seamlessly integrated with the artistic styles of the Indian subcontinent. The presence of Greek gods and goddesses like Zeus, Athena, and




INDIAN DEITIES IN HELLENISTIC GARB


[illegible]

	<p>Agathokles coin <i>Rajaye Agathukleya</i> (Brahmi <u>script</u>).</p>
	<p>Obv- Lion with Greek legend: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΓΑΘΟΚΛΕΟΥΣ. Rev- Lakshmi, with Brahmi legend <i>Rajane Agathukleyasa</i> "King Agathocles".</p>

Elephants, a recurring motif on Indo-Greek coins, hold religious significance in both Greek and Indian traditions. In Indian culture, elephants are associated with Ganesha, the remover of obstacles. On the other hand, In Greek mythology, the elephant is linked to the god Dionysus. According to A.K. Narayan, the presence of elephants on coins symbolizes the blending of religious symbolism, reinforcing the idea of a shared cultural and spiritual space. Among the myriad symbols found on Indo-Greek coins, the elephant holds particular significance. In both Greek and Indian traditions, the elephant symbolizes


power, strength, and divine attributes. However, the interpretation of the elephant on Indo-Greek coins goes beyond a mere representation of strength; it becomes a symbol of political legitimacy and cultural assimilation.

	<p>The coins associated the elephant with the Buddhist Chaitya or arched-hill symbol, sun symbols, six-armed symbol, and a river. The bull had a <u>Nandipada</u> in front. The symbol at the top of the bull is also considered  as a <u>mint mark</u>.</p>
	<p>Silver coin of Demetrius I of Bactria (reigned c. 200–180 BC) in the Greco-Bactrian standard, wearing an elephant scalp, symbol of his conquests of areas in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent.</p>

The Nandipada (“foot of Nandi”) is an ancient Indian symbol, also called a taurine symbol, representing a bull’s hoof or the mark left by the foot of a bull in the ground. The Nandipada and the zebu bull are generally associated with Nandi, Shiva’s humped bull in Hinduism. The Nandipada symbol also happens to be similar to the Brahmi letter “ma”. 

GARUDA AND EAGLE MOTIFS

The depiction of eagles and Garuda, a legendary bird in Hindu mythology, is another fascinating aspect of religious symbolism on Indo-Greek coins. The eagle, associated with Zeus in Greek mythology, coexists with Garuda, a divine bird in Hinduism. This amalgamation of avian symbols signifies the cohabitation of religious motifs, suggesting a mutual acceptance and integration of diverse religious iconography.

	<p>Gold Stater of Diodotus I from 'Series A', issue 7. Obverse:- Diademed head of Diodotos I, facing right. Reverse:- Zeus advancing left, holding thunderbolt in right hand, aegis draped over extended left arm, N mark at left, eagle at his feet standing left, Ancient Greek: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ ('Of King Antiochus')</p>
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LOTUS AND RELIGIOUS CONNOTATIONS

The lotus, a sacred flower in Hinduism, Buddhism, and various ancient Indian religions, frequently appears on Indo-Greek coins. This symbol transcends religious boundaries and carries profound spiritual connotations. Its incorporation into the coinage reflects a shared appreciation for the symbolism of purity, enlightenment, and divine transcendence. Around the beginning of the 2nd century BCE, two Bactrian-Greek rulers, Agathocles and Pantaleon, who were either contemporaries or close successors, issued for the first time a bilingual copper coinage for the Indian territories. These coins were remarkable in several respects. First, the shape of these coins was changed from the usual round shape of the Bactrian-Greek coins to rectangular to make them appear similar to the local coins. Secondly, in addition to the Greek, the local script Brahmi and the local language Prakrit were also adopted for writing the coin legend (Gardner, 1886). Which helped in the decipherment of the Brahmi script in the 19th century. Another important feature of these coins was their indigenous iconography. These coins show a lion standing to the right with a Greek inscription on one side and a female deity holding a lotus

and Brahmi inscription on the other. Some scholars have identified the female deity with Subhadra, Krishna's sister, or Lakshmi. These changes were attempts by the Greek rulers to gain some sort of acceptability for their coinage and also for themselves in the newly acquired Indian territories.

FIRE ALTARS AND RITUALISTIC IMAGERY

Indo-Greek coins often feature depictions of fire altars, which hold significance in Zoroastrianism and certain Indian religious traditions. The presence of these ritualistic symbols suggests an acknowledgment of diverse religious practices and a shared cultural space where rituals from different traditions could coexist. (A.K. Coomaraswamy, 1928-29)

CULTURAL INTEGRATION

The choice of the elephant as a symbol also reflects the Indo-Greek ruler's efforts to integrate with the local population. By incorporating indigenous symbols into their coinage, these rulers signaled a willingness to embrace and respect the cultural diversity of their subjects. The semiotic analysis of the elephant on Indo-Greek coins thus becomes a key to understanding the nuances of cross-cultural interaction. Apart from religious motives, elephants are adored as a symbol of success and victory. So we can say that the motif of elephants in Indian territory was announcing their success and victory and showing respect to the local sacred elements.

LINGUISTIC SEMIOTICS: INSCRIPTIONS ON INDO-GREEK COINS

In addition to visual symbols, the inscriptions on Indo-Greek coins contribute to the semiotic landscape of historical writing. The use of bilingual inscriptions in Greek and local scripts, such as Kharosthi, underscores the linguistic diversity of the region. By examining these inscriptions, historians gain valuable insights into the administrative practices, linguistic preferences, and the level of cultural assimilation within the Indo-Greek Kingdom. (Ray, 1988).

ROYAL PORTRAITURE: SYMBOLS OF POWER AND AUTHORITY

The portraiture of rulers on Indo-Greek coins serves as a visual narrative of power dynamics and political ideologies (Singh, 2005). The symbols associated with rulers, such as the royal diadem or specific regal poses, convey messages of authority and legitimacy. Examining these symbols allows us to discern the political strategies employed by Indo-Greek rulers to establish and maintain their rule in a diverse cultural landscape.

TRADE AND ECONOMIC SYMBOLS: DEPICTING PROSPERITY AND EXCHANGE

The economic symbols present on Indo-Greek coins provide insights into the flourishing trade and economic activities of the time. Depictions of trade routes, commodities, and economic instruments highlight the interconnectedness of ancient civilizations (Morris, 2021). Analyzing these symbols aids in reconstructing the economic landscape of the Indo-Greek period, showcasing the significance of trade in shaping historical narratives.

DECLINE AND TRANSFORMATION: SYMBOLS IN THE LATE INDO-GREEK PERIOD

As the Indo-Greek rule waned, the symbols on coins underwent transformations that mirrored the changing political and cultural landscape. Examining the symbols from the later period offers a glimpse

into the challenges faced by Indo-Greek rulers, including invasions and internal conflicts. Symbols of decline, adaptation, or persistence shed light on the complex historical processes that shaped the transition from Indo-Greek dominance to subsequent eras.

CONCLUSION: UNVEILING THE LAYERS OF ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY

In conclusion, the religious symbols on Indo-Greek coins serve as powerful markers of the cross-cultural interactions that defined the ancient Indian subcontinent. These numismatic artifacts bear witness to a harmonious integration of diverse religious beliefs, reflecting a shared cultural space where Greek and Indian traditions coexisted and influenced one another. The study of religious symbols on Indo-Greek coins not only enriches our understanding of the past but also underscores the intricate tapestry of religious syncretism that has shaped the cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent. By deciphering the symbols on Indo-Greek coins, historians can reconstruct narratives of syncretism, power dynamics, economic prosperity, and cultural exchange, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this fascinating period in history. The study of semiotics in ancient Indian historical writing is not merely an academic exercise but a journey into the profound interconnectedness of human civilizations through the symbolic language of the past.

Note- Images of coins used in this paper are taken from The COININDIA Coin Galleries <https://coinindia.com/galleries.html> and The British Museum <https://www.britishmuseum.org/>.

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