

Gold for Pepper: The Multiple Roles of the Roman Coins in the Ancient Rome-India Commerce

In recent decades, there have been several studies on the interactions between the early kingdoms of South Asia, mainly India, and the Roman Empire and its successor empires in the Mediterranean region (MacDowall: 1996, Suresh: 2007, Turner: 1989). These contacts commenced around 300 B.C.E. and continued right upto around the fourth century C.E. and to a limited extent, even during the later times. But the height of the contacts was undoubtedly in the first two centuries C.E. The initial contacts were based on commerce—Rome wanted India's aromatic spices—mainly pepper, textiles, gemstones and peacocks and in return, India obtained gold, silver, copper, antimony, wine and coral from Rome. Gradually, these commercial ties extended to diplomatic exchanges and cultural interaction.

The Roman coins, discovered all over India, mainly South India, constitute the most visible and crucial evidence for the commerce. These coins were the single most important item of export from Rome to India as the Indians insisted that the Romans pay in gold, silver and copper, for all the goods that they took from India. The reasons for this insistence was two-fold: one, gold, silver and to a lesser extent, copper were scarce throughout India and second, Rome had hardly anything else to offer in exchange for the large quantities of goods that it took from India.

Based on extensive museum and field researches in India and the U.K, the present paper, for the first time, attempts to analyze the multiple 'roles' played by the Roman coins in the Indian context. Obviously, the Indians had no knowledge of the Roman monetary policies and the Roman coin denominational systems. They sought the Roman coins solely on account of its metallic or intrinsic value. This is attested by the fact that throughout India, the Roman gold coins are numerically far higher than the silver ones and more important, Roman coins, whether

in gold or silver, post-dating Emperor Nero's famous currency reforms of 64 C.E. (which reduced the purity of the denarius and the weight of the aureus) are very few, compared to the pre-reform issues, even in hoards with a *terminus post quem* (TPQ) of the late first or second centuries A.D. Once in India, these Roman coins had, at different times and regions, multifarious uses—local currency, jewelry, ritualistic offerings at Hindu and Buddhist shrines. Sometimes, the Roman gold coins were melted to produce local coins and/or jewelry (Suresh, 2004). But a large number of the Roman coins, in all metals, were used as circulation money. This is revealed by collectively considering the following factors

- a) Finds of Roman coins in a series of recent archaeological excavations in South India
- b) Finds of early Indian coins in association with Roman issues in hoards as well as in archaeologically-stratified contexts
- c) High incidence of worn Roman coins in the various finds, especially the finds from the archaeological digs
- d) References to Roman coins in ancient Indian literature and inscriptions
- e) The finds of ancient imitations or copies of the genuine Roman coins, in both the hoard and stratified contexts. These imitations were produced to offset the shortfall in the supply of the real Roman coins in a specific region of India. Thus, as these imitations were produced with legal sanction and without any intention of criminal fraudulence, many of these copies equal, not only in weight but also in the purity of the metal, the genuine Roman coins.

Bibliography

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