

The reciprocal relationship of trade, exchange, and cultural interaction between the ancient Graeco-Romans and Indians is an important part of Indian maritime history. On the eastern seaboard, Odisha has a plethora of evidence of Indian commercial (both direct and indirect) contact with the Western world, China, and South-East Asia. Besides other artefacts, numismatic evidence and bullae play an extremely important role in understanding the nature of trade and exchange.

Explorations and excavations in Odisha have brought to light numerous archaeological findings from ports, exchanges, and trade centres, Fig.1. Sila Tripathi and Rudraprasad Behrain their research have pointed out evidences of such cultural interactions. This evidence include terracotta Roman bullae with Roman portraits, lamps, amphorae shreds, and rouletted ware unearthed from excavated sites like Sisupalgarh, Manikpatna, Palur, Radhanagarand Talapada on the eastern coast (Tripathi 2015).



Fig.1: Map of ancient ports with Roman artefacts, Odisha



Fig.2: Gold hybrid pendant, Sisupalgarh. Courtesy: Lal

Sisupalgarh (20°13'30 north, and 85°51'30 east), is one of the most prominent early historic urban centres, and is located about 1.5 miles to the south-east of the temple city and the capital of Odisha, Bhubaneswar. One gold coin with pendant hole and suspension loop is quite significant and attracts our attention among thirty-one coins from the site, Fig.2.

Obverse: King standing to left with peaked helmet and suit of male, making an offering with the right hand over altar; long spear in the left hand.

Legend: [Ma] [hara] ja- ra [ja] dhasa Dhamadamadhara [sa]

Reverse: Head of Augustus

Legend: HAIEAI. ZNAI

Size: 82"

Weight: 5.20 gm

The condition of the coin pendant is fairly good. What is interesting is that on one side the imitation coin has a Kushana device and on the other, it has a Roman prototype bearing the head of a male

resembling the portrait of Augustus. It was used as a pendant as it has two holes. It was carefully minted to keep the alignment of both the obverse and the reverse in a 12 o'clock position. Hence, the Kushana prototype of the king conducting a sacrifice at an altar is also properly aligned to have the standing king in the correct position when worn as a pendant. What is intriguing is the addition of the suspension loop which is not a common feature in the Indian subcontinent; rather, South-East Asian pendants commonly depict such suspension loops. Thus, this oblong coil of gold wire for suspension may be considered a typical South-East Asian feature.

This coin-pendant was first reported in the Sisupalgarh excavation report by B.B. Lal who correctly identified it as a hybrid coin with Kushana and Roman devices on either side. However, he considers the Kushana side as the obverse and the Roman side as the reverse, but we are not sure about it. Lal also mentions 'the weight of the gold coin' is 5.20 gm (Lal 1949, 64- 66). But we should remember that this weight also includes the tubular loop attached to the pendant.

The main reason for mentioning this coin pendant as Roman-inspired is its hybridity. One side of it imitates a Roman bust which can be identified as inspired by Augustus's coinage but the legend here is gibberish. The other side of the coin is a prototype of a Kushana device with a Brahmi legend. The attempt to read the Brahmi legend on the Kushana-inspired side is futile as it is a meaningless copy of the original legend. A.S. Altekar mentions that the combination of the Kushana motif and Roman bust is unique. In this case, we have to remember that Kujala Kadphises issued coins imitating Roman bust inspired Augustus' bust on the obverse and a deity on the reverse (Khan and Ullah 2023, 164). We should also consider a very famous hybrid Roman / Kushan pendant from Pakistan, displayed in the gallery of the British Museum, as an example of a Romano-Kushan hybrid, Fig.3. The obverse features the



Fig.3: Constantine I: Ardochsho hybrid coin pendant from British Museum gallery. Courtesy: British Museum: Photo clicked by author

portrait head coin designs of Constantine the Great, whereas the reverse interestingly depicts the figure of the Goddess Ardochsho, holding a Cornucopia (British Museum, OR.5200). Though not all scholars agree that the pendant is a Kushano-Roman hybrid. According to Emilia Smagur and Joe Cribb, the Sisupalgarh pendant is a hybrid of Roman on one side and representation of Mars on the other side (Smagur 2022, 171-172).

Although the pendant from Sisupalgarh was mentioned by B. B. Lal and Altekar as a coin, its function was not that of an official medium of exchange. First, it was a pendant and second, it was a strange hybrid creation. Brigitte Borell discusses such hybrid pendants from South-East Asia. One of the pendants from southern India, Fig.4, has a similar pendant hole and a suspension loop, however, the pendant holes have been purposefully closed.

This issue has been discussed by Susmita Basu Majumdar in a recent article (Basu Majumdar 2023, 207-16). She recently argued that the functions of pendant holes and tubular loops were different, as were their implications. Both Borell (2014, 7-33) and Basu Majumdar are of the opinion that the use of such suspension loops was specific to South-East Asian pendants. Taking a cue from Borell and Basu Majumdar, we would like to indicate that the suspension loop in our pendant indicates Sisupalgarh's linkage with South-East Asia, especially in those areas where such pendants have been reported.

Besides these coins, a few clay bullae have also been unearthed from the site of Sisupalgarh.

Here, we will discuss the clay bullae which bear human portraits (head/bust) on them.

The first clay bulla shows the bust of a person with very prominent indigenous features; the headgear is also very distinct, Fig.5. The second bulla also shows the portrait of a person, and 'ta ra' in Brahmi script, in the upper-right corner above the head, but the features of the head seem different than the first one, Fig.6. The third bulla with a human bust from the site of Sisupalgarh is unique. The facial feature here are completely different from the previous iterations. The headgear and the ornaments are also very distinct, Fig.7. Interestingly, all the bullae from Sisupalgarh are cast from single moulds and have a flat back, occasionally with finger impressions.



Fig.4: Roman-inspired pendant from Sisupalgarh
Courtesy: Ashutosh Museum, Kolkata

The excavators of Sisupalgarh, consider the bullae with portraits to be “Clay imitations of Roman coins” (Lal 1949, 101). But if we observe the facial features carefully, these are typically indigenous and not inspired by Roman busts. Monica L. Smith also agrees that the influence of the facial features of the bullae can be traced in the bullae and coins with busts by various contemporary indigenous rulers (Smith 2015, 35-36). In addition, Emilia Smagur opined that the amalgamation of indigenous elements into the iconography of the Roman coin imitations, copies and bullae can also be observed (Smagur 2022, 231-240). Recently, Basu Majumdar detailed a coin from Khlong Thom, Thailand, which portrays the combination of a Satavahana-inspired bust on one side and a Roman-inspired bust on the other. Thus, it is a double obverse coin which is unique, though its function was not that of a coin as Basu Majumdar argues (Basu Majumdar 2023, 209). Other bullae with human portraits with localized features, have also been unearthed from different archaeological sites in the subcontinent (Smagur 2018, 4) (Suresh, S. 2004, 14-150).

Another important site, Kankia (Lat. 20°41' Long. 86°11'), locally known as Radhanagar, is about 90 km to the north of Bhubaneswar, Odisha (Patnaik 2014, 88-97). According to Sunil Kumar Patnaik, this settlement thrived between *c.* fourth-third century BCE to *c.* fourth-fifth century CE, and again, was sporadically revived from the early medieval period, i.e. from seventh-eighth to the



Fig.5: Sisupalgarh Bulla 1
Courtesy: Lal



Fig.6: Sisupalgarh Bulla 2
Courtesy: Lal



Fig.7: Sisupalgarh Bulla 3
Courtesy: Lal

thirteenth-fourteenth century CE. Numerous artefacts including approximately fifty coins and many terracotta bullae, figurines, ornaments, and tablets have been excavated from the site of Radhanagar. Three bullae from the Kankia excavation are significant for the present context as they bear portraits on them.

The first bulla, Fig.8, from the OIMSEAS Collection of Kankia (Radhanagar) artefacts, is mentioned as a Roman clay bulla by the excavators¹. Though it is inspired by Roman coinage, the facial features of the portrait; especially the eye, has a distinct indigenous form. In the absence of headgear, a legend, or other specific features of a Roman bust, it would not be prudent to identify it as a Roman bulla. The present author would like to identify it as a Roman-inspired local bulla.



Fig. 8: Radhanagar Bulla 1
Courtesy: <http://nmma.nic.in/nmma/antiqDetail.do?refId=1243422&state=OR>

We shall now discuss the other two bullae with portraits on them, also unearthed from the site of Radhanagar. One of them has a clear depiction of a human portrait on it. This bulla can also be identified, based on features as a Roman-inspired local bulla. The third bulla also has a portrait on it but is quite corroded.

Odisha probably did not engage in direct maritime contact with the Roman world, but numerous artefacts unearthed from excavations and explorations here indicate indirect Roman contact. This might be due to the participation of local traders in the so-called Indo-Roman trade (Behra 1998, 954-955). The pendants as well as the imitation coins turned into pendants are unique and need a fresh assessment and appraisal. Basu Majumdar has pointed towards these being used as trade tokens by merchants. If so, then this is direct evidence of the involvement of the merchants from Odisha in the Indo-Roman trade network. One must remember that Odisha was famous for its elephants, and hence this region would have provided ivory to the Roman traders which was in huge demand in the Western world. This is a preliminary work to bring together the portrait-type coins and clay bullae under one umbrella to indicate a common, if not similar functionality of both; however further work in this area is still needed.

Endnote

¹ The excavation was started in January 2011 and continued up to June 2013. Prof. S. Pradhan, Prof. K.K. Basa, Prof. R.N. Singh, Dr. S. Acharya, Sri A.K. Patel & Dr. J.K. Patnaik along with Research scholars of Banaras Hindu University and Utkal University extended their helping hand during the excavation.

References

- Basu Majumdar, Susmita. 2023. "Key to Riddle of Hybrids: A Pendant from Khlong Thom", *Look at the Coins! Papers in Honour of Joe Cribb on His 75th Birthday* (Ed. Helen wang and Robert Bracy). Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, Oxford.
- Behra, K.S. 1998. "Archaeology in Orissa: Trends and Prospects", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 59, New Delhi, pp. 954-55.
- Borell, Brigitte. 2014. "The Power of Images: Coin Portrait of Roman Emperors on Jewellery Pendants in Early South-East Asia", *Zeitschrift Für Archäologie Aussereuropäischer Kulturen*. Wiesbaden, pp. 7-13
<http://nmma.nic.in/nmma/antiqDetail.do?refId=1243422&state=OR> (seen at 9.32 p.m. at 03/06/2023)
- Khan, Gul Rahim and Wasi Ullah. 2023. "A New Gold Coin of Vasudeva I with Investiture Scene *Look at the Coins! Papers in Honour of Joe Cribb on His 75th Birthday, 75th Birthday* (Ed. Helen wang and Robert Bracy). Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, Oxford.
- Lal, B.B. 1949. "Sisupalagarh 1948: An Early Historical Fort in Eastern India". *Ancient India: Bulletin of the Archaeological Survey of India*, 5, pp.95-105

- Mohanty, Rabindra Kumar and Monica L. Smith. 2008. *Excavations at Sisupalgarh, Orissa*. New Delhi.
- _____. 2009. "Excavations at Sisupalgarh, 2008". *Man and Environment*, 34, (1).
- _____. 2012. "Timeless Insights from an Ancient City: Research at Sisupalgarh, India", *Backdirt: Annual Review of The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA*. 2016, "Archaeology at Sisupalgarh: The Chronology of an Early Historic Urban Centre in Eastern India", In Vincent Lefèvre, Aurore Didier and Benjamin Mutin, eds., *South Asian Archaeology and Art 2012*, 2, Belgium.
- _____. 2014. "Sisupalgarh", *The Texts, Political History and Administration till c. 200 BC*, (Ed. Dilip Kumar Chakrabarti and Makkhan Lal). Vivekananda International Foundation (First Publication), Aryan Books International, New Delhi.
- Mohanty, R.K., Monica L. Smith and T. Matney, 2007. "A Preliminary Report of the Archaeological Investigations at Sisupalgarh 2006", *Man and Environment*, 32,(1),
- _____. 2014, "Excavations and Geographical Survey at the Early Historic site of Taladpada, Odisha 2013", *Man and Environment*, 39(2).
- Patnaik, Sunil Kumar, 2014. "Kanika-Radhanagar: An Early Historical Buddhist Settlement", *Odisha Review*, 71(5).
- Smagur, Emilia. 2018. "From coin to bulla: a cultural response to the influx of Roman Denarii to India", In Devendra Handa, Amiteshwar Jha and Sanjay Garg eds. *Numismatic Digest*, 42, Mumbai
- _____. 2022. "Indianisation" of a Roman coin design in Early Historic India: a study of an imitation from the British Museum". In *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*, 31(Regular Issue), <https://doi.org/10.37343/uw.2083-537X.pam31.17>
- _____. 2022. "Indian Imitations of Roman Aurei Reconsidered" In *The Numismatic Chronicle*, 182
- Smith, M.L. 2015. "Archaeological Research at Sisupalgarh, an Early Historic City in Eastern India". in Ute Franke-Vogt and Hans-Joachim Weisshaar, eds., *South Asian Archaeology 2003*, Aachen.
- _____. 2015. "The Concept of Copies: An Archaeological View of the Terracotta Ornaments from Sisupalgarh, India", *West 86th*, 22,(1).
- Suresh, S. 2004. *Symbols of trade: Roman and Pseudo-Roman Objects Found in India*, New Delhi
- Turner, P.J. 2009. *Roman Coins from India*. London: University College London Institute of Archaeology Publications 21.
- Tripati, Sila. 1993. "Ancient Ports of Orissa: Probable Cause of their decline", in *Puratattva: Bulletin of the Indian Archaeological Society*. 23. New Delhi.
- _____. 2015. "Maritime Trade Contacts of Odisha, East Coast of India, with the Roman World: An Appraisal" https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285038658_Maritime_Trade_Contacts_of_Odisha_East_Coast_of_India_with_the_Roman_World_An_Appraisal/citation/download. Accessed 03 June 2023.

Ms. Sreemanti Laha, Ph.D. research scholar, Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture, University of Calcutta, recipient of The Classical Numismatic Group Roman and Byzantine grant of the Royal Numismatic Society (2024), specializes in Ancient Indian Epigraphy and Numismatic Studies. She is currently researching on Roman coins from India. twinka180292@gmail.com