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Members news

Our Treasurer, Mr. V. Brown, has copies of the ONS accounts for the year to April 1983. These are available to any member on request (please send SAE or IR coupon).

'East Asia Journal' has recently been started by Bruce W. Smith (...). There are about 100 pages per issue and subscription for the four annual issues costs 15 (USA), or 20 (elsewhere) dollars. The main focus is on the numismatics of China and such adjacent regions as Tibet, Thailand, Vietnam (etc.). The current issue (no. 6) includes a reprint of Edward Toda's 'Annam and its minor currency' which was originally published in the Journal of the North China branch of the Royal Asiatic Society for 1882. This contains much information on Annamese cash that is not readily available elsewhere. The previous issue (no. 5) included an article on the Early history of the Manchus and their coinage. For further details please contact Mr. Bruce Smith.

ONS meetings

The next ONS meeting in London will commence at 2-30 pm on Saturday, 31st March 1984 at the usual venue, 28 Little Russell Street, London W 1. The Northeastern USA Chapter of the ONS is holding a meeting in New York this month (cfr. N/L 85 - 86). The Numismatic Society of India is holding its 71st Annual Conference at Madras University in late December.

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(to be continued)

Single Punch Marked Coppers of Ancient Northern India

by Robert Tye

There exists among the mass of yet unattributed ancient Hindu coppers a group of uniface coins with a single large punchmark. These pieces have puzzled me for some time – why go to the trouble of producing a punch for impressing the coins, when a die would do just as well? If a coin is to be impressed several times, as with silver punch marked coins, then punches (ie. dies with the excess field removed) must be used to save each successive impression from obliterating the previous ones – but this is unnecessary when only one impression is to be made.

I am publishing here four types of single punch marked coins, each coming from separate regions of North India, including coins which can be positively assigned to the ancient environs of Mathura, Ujjain and Kausambi. The issue of Mathura has been published in the past¹, the other three types appear to be unpublished. This is rather surprising as the issues of Ujjain and Kausambi do not appear to be particularly rare. I can only assume that other scholars have disregarded these crudely produced pieces² because the large variety of more attractive coppers to be found on these two sites have diverted that attention.

The coins I publish seem to form a coherent series, being more alike to one another than any of them are to other coins of their own particular area. I can think of only one explanation for these single-punch-mark coins which explains the use of a punch, rather than a complete die. The series must belong to the earliest period of copper coinage in India, sometime in the third century BC – before the Indo-Greeks brought the art of die striking into India, a period when punchmarking was the sole local method of coin production. Furthermore, the similarity of these coins produced by cities many hundreds of miles distant from one another suggests that the coins were requisitioned by a central authority – this also points to the third, or the early second century BC, as the date for the coins, since after that time northern India became divided among a host of petty kingdoms.

These deductions appear to have been confirmed by archaeological evidence. The Sonkh excavations³ (near Mathura) produced examples of the Mathura single-punch-mark coins in level 34/33, a late Mauryan level. No copper coins were found in earlier levels, but the first cast copper coins⁴ were found in the same strata. Prof. Hartel kindly informs me that no die struck coppers were discovered until the much later level 28⁵.

Previous authors have considered the cast coins to be India's first copper coinage. On the present evidence the single-punch-mark coins appear to have circulated at approximately the same date, and both series appear to have been requisitioned by a central (Mauryan or Sunga) authority. To me it seems most likely that the crudely fabricated single-punch-mark coins were the first, abortive, experiment with a base metal coinage; the much more plentiful cast coppers replacing and superceding them. It is not possible from the excavation data to confirm this opinion.

The copper coinage was probably introduced, as Dr. Mitchiner has suggested, to replace the tiny silver one ratti coins. Perhaps future excavations might enable us to put a date on this change of metal for low denomination issues. My own observation of specimens suggests strongly that the silver one ratti coinage became badly adulterated, with the result that the majority of surviving specimens appear to be contemporary plated forgeries. It would be satisfying to see the egalitarian hand of Ashoka as reforming the adulterated small change of his empire and requisitioning first the single-punch-mark coppers, and later the cast coinage in copper – but I suppose foolhardy to advance such a hypothesis without the necessary evidence to support it.

- 1 Allan, BMC Ancient India, page 237 (Taxila?, nos. 7 - 11). Gupta, JNSI 1975, 'Punchmarked coins from Sonkh' page 8, type 9. Mitchiner, Ancient and Classical World, page 568 nos. 4482 - 4486. Some of these last coins were acquired by the late Dr. Vost while working at Mathura (communicated by Dr. Mitchiner).
- 2 Gupta (ibid.), however, does note in listing the coins of Mathura 'I remember having seen similar coins as finds from Kausambi'.
- 3 Hartel, 'German scholars in India' vol. II, 1976, The excavations at Sonkh 1966 - 74
- 4 For details of these cast coppers see Tye, ONS newsletter no. 69
- 5 These appear to be stray coins from the Ujjain series.

Mathura lion type:

- 1 Lion walking left with standard in front
Rev. blank (5.3 gm)

Ujjain and Kausambi elephant types:

- 2 Elephant standing left with tusks slightly raised
Rev. blank (4.0 gm)
- 3 Elephant standing left with tusks lowered
Rev. blank (1.4 gm)
- 4 Elephant walking left with tusks raised, taurine symbol in front
Rev. blank (4.1 gm)

All photographs are enlarged twice (x2).

