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## **Roman Coins in India and Their Impact**

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History is always based on sources. In modern times as result of rapid development of science and technology source of history is available in several other dimensions like internet etc. In ancient time when human civilization, society and economy were in primary stage of its construction there was lack of sources of history. By relative discussion of its sources and archaeological evidence we come to understand the role of coins in study of history. The study of coins provides additional evidence to establish historical chronology.

The English word “*Numismatic*” is derived from Latin word “*Numisma*” means “Study of coin”. Coins are remarkably durable objects and remained in circulation for long period of times after they were originally issued. There are several series of foreign coins found in India. It is often applied in India to coins minted in the Indian subcontinent by dynasties of Non-indigenous origins, as well as to coins imported from abroad. These are truly outside the main fabric of Indian coinage. There foreign coins in the Indian subcontinent. Though external to Indian coinage, such foreign coins have sometime influenced the indigenous monetary system and economic development. Among such coins, I would like to discuss some of the best coins found in ancient India, the Roman coinage. So I shall select only a few of them to illustrate the relevance of their study, imported into India by a way of commercial activities, brought by the indigenous people and left behind by the travelers.



In recent times people generally take more care of higher value of coins and are less worried about their small change. Such coins tell us much about the places from where they actually origin. The discovery of a large number of Roman coins in India should originally indicate about commercial contacts of their origin. The coins are actually used for payments, but their value would have been determined by the worth of their metal in the Indian market. The Roman coins imported as bullion could have been used in certain areas and periods as mode of exchange. It containing precious metal like gold, silver etc. will have arrived in India as trade consignment. The importance of the Roman coinage in India goes beyond their commercial implications, and directly reflects on Indian coinage. The arrival of a large number of Roman coins in India can however be dated to the early face of Indo-Roman trade, the period of 30 B.C.-45 A.D. the coins are generally used as medium of exchange, as raw material for the Indigenous coinage and as ornaments for the natives.

In the present essay an attempt has to be made to investigate the impact and influence of Roman coins on India. The type, techniques, weight-standard, metallic compositions, variety of these coins has to be studied. Since a large number of research papers, some monographs and books are available for serious researcher. Here an attempt will be made to acquiring the layman about the significance and Importance of the foreign coins especially the Roman coins found in India. For the present study my analysis is on description, impact and influence of Roman coins on indigenous currency system.

## **ROMAN COINS**

The large number of Roman imperial coins found certainly indicates commercial



relations between Roman Empire and India. The coins of one period could have been exported to India in a subsequent period due to economic and monetary situations in the empire. There is no doubt that the coins were imported as bullion, and accepted according to their intrinsic worth. They could actually have been used for payments but their value was also determined by the worth of their metal. These pieces of precious metals were also hoarded.

The coins are found in various parts of India, like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka and Tamilnadu. In comparison with other parts of India Roman coins were mostly found in Southern India especially in Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh.

In general view of scholars is that the import of the Roman specie to India took place in two forms: “Gold for external commerce and Silver for small change, and the Romans money was deliberately exported to India to create a Roman currency there and fill the vacuum caused by the dearth of a commercial coinage” (F. H. Warmington 275) this proposition has not met with general acceptance. But the discovery of a large numbers of “Roman coins in the peninsular region” (Paula J. Turner 6-7) certainly calls for an explanation.

The issue of gold and silver coin exported to India was carefully selected. They were the issues with high gold and silver content, usually when there had been a major reform that had reduced the metal content of new issues while the older, superior coins were being withdrawn from circulation. These coinages provided a good source of Silver, Gold a later



copper on favorable terms for the export trade. The precision with which Roman coins were dated enables us to chart the time when the coins exported were originally struck, but this was not necessarily the time when they were exported. This has to be established by other criteria, such as changes in the Roman monetary system which led to their export. It simply establishes when it was more profitable and practical to export Gold, Silver and Copper in the form of withdrawn coins rather than in the form of bullion bars etc.

It is pertinent to note in this context that the obverse of Roman gold in most cases, especially in Andhra Pradesh and sometimes of silver coins as well bears a variety of incision marks across the imperial face. The inclusion of Gujrat, Western Maharashtra and Western Malwa, which formed the *Kshatrapa* dominions, into the *Kushana* Empire even though it is generally taken for granted by most historians; and as regards the “flow of Roman Gold coins in the upper and lower Deccan, there could be absolutely no question of the *Kushanas* planning any role in the regulation of currency” (Paula J. Turner 29-34). It is worth nothing in this context that practically no *Kushana* gold coins have been reported from territories under the *Saka-Kshatrapas* and *Satavahanas*, which should have been the cases if their regions formed part of the *Kushana* Empire or fell within the sphere of their influence. The mere fact of the vast numbers of the coins found would suffice to indicate may establish once for all, the highly useful role played by them as an item of wealth and in the economic life of the areas in question. The mutilation which is almost invariably on the obverse and particularly confined to the imperial bust, was aimed at the cancellation of the authority of the issuing power, in other words to indicate that the region; where these coins were permitted to Roman in circulation, did not form part of the dominions of the Roman



Emperors. “In fact Roman gold coins served an important economic function by filling the vacuum caused by the absence of any local Gold currency. But this was not in the case of North India” (Ajay Mitra Shastri, IIRNS, 46-47).

The range of Roman coins found classified by Emperors; that trade begun under Augustus (31B.C-14A.D), reached a peak under Nero (54-64A.D), declined until the time of Caracalla (198-217A.D) and then almost ceased; but reviewed slightly in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. P.L.Gupta recognized that “Republican *Denarii* came to India only in the Imperial and saw that most of the hoards containing *Denarii* of Augustus were deposited in the time of Tiberius or a little later” (P. L. Gupta 122-37), but still concludes that Roman contacts with India began in the time of Augustus and continued into the time of Nero and most likely its tempo lasted only for about three quarters of a Century. Roman Silver *Denarii* of the Republic struck in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Century B.C were still current in very substantial numbers in hoards from Pompeii at the time of its destruction by the eruption of Vesuvius on 24<sup>th</sup> August 79 A.D. “the study of hoards of Roman Silver *Denarii* in hoards ending with the Flavians (70-96A.D) and 22.9% of the *Denarii* in hoards ending with Trajan (98-117A.D)” (Sture Bolin 335-57). Republican *Denarii* were still current inside the Roman Empire some 200-300 years after they were first issued, although they suffered a substantial loss of weight through wear.

## TYPES

In the Indian context most coins of gold and silver have arrived as trade consignments, and single finds may only be considered in the light of hoards containing comparable issues. In fact we find that the range of gold and silver coins from single finds





closely mirrors the range of coins found in attested hoards and the geographical distribution of single coins closely matches the distribution of hoards that contain the same issues.

### **ROMAN SILVER COIN: *DENARII***

“The composition of hoards of Roman silver *Denarii* found in India however is very different from that hoards of Roman silver *Denarii* found inside the Empire” (David W. MacDowall 62-74). The *Denarii* that they contain have been very carefully selected. Chosen for export were issues of *Denarii* which contained high quality Silver, especially those that could be easily recognized as such by the use of distinctive reverse types. During the Roman Republic the *Denarii* had been the standard coin denomination struck in good Silver 95-97% pure. The relatively rare Roman Republican *Denarii* from India usually occur in hoards with a terminal date in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century A.D., the period when they were disappearing from *Denarii* hoards found inside the Empire. The Indian finds contain any of the *Denarii* issues in the 1<sup>st</sup> two phases of Augustus between 31B.C and 15A.D, that had been struck to a mere variable standard of Silver purity, or struck after A.D 54 or 55-the year when Nero first reduced the Silver purity and weight of the *Denarii*, ten years before his more drastic and celebrated debasement in 64 A.D. Exported to India are the Roman Imperial *Denarii* that contained high quality Silver- particularly those issued in this category that had distinctive recognizable reverse types. In the years following Nero’s debasement of the Silver *Denarius*, the change in the Roman monetary system eventually drove *Denarii* of good quality Silver and higher weight out of circulation- some to be hoarded, others to be melted down and others to be exported. The destination of some of the exported *Denarii* was no doubt India. The choice of coins exported to India was the direct result of the debasements of Nero and



Vespasian, and the administrative action of Trajan.

FIG 1: Roman silver *Denarii* found in India



Source: Internet





## ROMAN GOLD COIN: *AUREI*

Roman gold *Aurei* was regularly issued from the time of Roman Emperor Augustus and the Roman monetary system became bi-metallic, based on both a gold and silver. The gold *Aurei* replaced the silver *Denarii* as the standard denomination after the major currency reform of Nero in 64 A.D. The silver *Denarii* retained its fixed market relation to the gold *Aurei* (25 silver *Denarii* still being worth of 1 gold *Aurei*), but its silver content was progressively debased by the addition of increasing amounts of copper. In spite of its silver content, it effectively became a more token denomination, overvalued in relation to the metal it contained. “Until the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century the Roman gold *Aurei* was struck in very fine gold with purity above 99% (A. Burnett 105-21). In hoards and single finds from India there are substantial numbers of gold *Aurei* issued by the first Emperor Augustus and his successor Tiberius. There are a few later *Aurei* up to currency reform of Nero in 64 A.D, but virtually no gold *Aurei* struck in the later years of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. The very rare exceptions are invariably heavy *Aurei* issued on the pre-A.D 64 weight standards by Domitian and Nevra and the first year of Trajan. Whereas hoards of Roman gold *Aurei* found inside the Empire contain large numbers of post A.D 64 *Aurei*, these issues are not found in the Indian hoards. In the case of the gold *Aurei* as with silver *Denarii* the coins exported to India have been carefully selected. The gold *Aurei* was not selected by purity of metal, as the silver *Denarii*, but by the weight of gold. There was a growing number of gold *Aurei* struck in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D in Indian hoards. Unlike 2<sup>nd</sup> century hoards found inside the Empire, the Indian finds do not include *Aurei* of Emperors from the reforms of Nero and succeeding Emperors in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. They usually consist of *Aurei* in excellent



condition of two or three Emperors only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D, with occasional but not many die links. They have clearly not come straight from the mint, but they have again been selected as having a good weight of gold. There is no 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. gold *Aurei* in Indian hoards. At this period gold became very scarce in the empire. Later, 2<sup>nd</sup> century gold *Aurei* provided the prototypes for the series of imitation gold coins manufactured in India- sometimes in bizarre obverse and reverse combinations which reflects the high esteem in which Roman gold coins had come to hold in the sub-continent.

FIG 2: Roman gold coins *Aurei* found in India

Obverse	Reverse
	
	

Source: Internet



Source: Internet

## INDO-ROMAN TRADE AND EXCHANGE METHOD

Indo-Roman relations began during the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus. The presence of Romans in India and the relations between Rome and India are still generally little known or understood. Unfortunately, historians lack the sort of accounts or 'histories' written by contemporaries or near-contemporaries which they have for, say, the earlier conquests of Alexander in India, to provide us with some sort of overview. While we have quite extensive and spectacular literary, numismatic and archaeological evidence, it is difficult to assemble anything approaching a comprehensive picture of the relations between





India and the Roman Empire. Instead, historians must build up a mosaic of many bits of evidence, mainly relating to the trade between them, and then try to 'connect the dots' to produce a plausible story. “Indo-Roman relations were built on trade” (David W. MacDowall 40-2). Roman trade with India began with overland caravans and later by direct maritime trade following the conquest of Egypt by Augustus in 30 BCE. The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* mentions a time when sea trade between India and Egypt did not involve direct sailing.



Source: Internet

FIG 3: Indo- Roman maritime trade according to the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 1st century CE.

The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* lists the articles of trade imported by the three major West coast ports of India. Barbarlkon at the mouth of the Indus the only metals imported are money and silver plate. But at Barygaza the list of metals imported included copper, tin, lead, antimony, gold and silver money, which can be exchanged at a profit



against the local currency and for the king valuable silverware at the ports of Limyrike in south India the metals imported include a great amount of money, antimony, copper, tin and lead. Assuming that “money” that includes both gold *Aurei* and silver *Denarii*, metals account for six of the fifteen items imported.

There was no silver or gold money in those days, the trade with India was by batter and did not use coinage as the Ancient Greek coins from Karur medium of exchange. This does not of course mean that Roman gold and silver coins had no place in the trade- indeed substantial numbers of Roman gold and silver coins have been found in India- but that Roman gold and silver coins, if accepted, were accepted as gold and silver bullion. Bullion bears no such guaranty and is simply worth the intrinsic value of the metal it contains, calculated in terms of weight and metal purity, of coins of the same denomination in any monetary system. Because of the government’s guaranty, in most monetary systems coins slightly different weights and metal purity continue to circulate together freely, but of course within the margin of overvaluation.

The term *suvarna* (gold piece), mentioned in a Nasik inscription of the time of *Nahapana* as exchangeable with local silver *karshapanas* at the rate of 1 to 35, may well indicate the use of Roman gold coin in local media of exchange in north-western Deccan during that time. Again the term *Denarii*, which is referred to in a *Nagarjunikonda* inscription of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. as the name of a hundred pieces employed to make endowments, may indicate the use of Roman coins. The coin name *dinari-masaka*, appearing in another *Nagajunikonda* epigraph, could have denoted pieces carrying 1/16 of the value of a *Denarius*. These data may allude to the incorporation of Roman coins in the local currency





system of north-eastern Deccan in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.

From the land of the *Pandyas*, the Romans purchased the pearls for which the south-eastern coast of Tamilnadu was famous. From the *Chola* country the Romans brought fine cloths as well as pearls, semi-precious stones of Kongu and from Kerela, they imported pepper. Once Indo-Roman trade had been established there is strong evidence that trade between the Roman world and the far south of India remain continues throughout the complete period of the Roman Empire. The *Cheras* accepted Roman silver *Denarii*, but the *Pandyas* did not. At a later date the *Pandyas* and Cholas accepted payments in copper, but the *Kongu Rattas* and the *Cheras* did not.

For Roman silver coins to prove acceptable to the *Cheras* as a means of payment it was normally required that such coins should have their intrinsic value guaranteed by bearing a standard coin design. The phase of bulk trade in Roman silver to the *Cheras* came to an end in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. , and trade payments were made by the Romans only in gold and not in any other metal.

### **IMPACT OF ROMAN COINS AND INDIA**

Roman coins could have influenced the manufacturing technique, metrology, devices and nomenclature of the coinage of India. “In spite of their external origin, Roman specie might have made in certain cases great impact on the indigenous monetary system” (B. N. Mukherjee, IIRNS 1-8). The dates of a series of Roman coins or the known periods of their issue do not determined the chronology of their exportations from the area of their origin or importations into India. The importance of Roman coins in India goes beyond their



commercial implications. They influenced *Kushana* gold series metrological as well as typologically. The series of South Indian coins also reflect the impact of Roman coinage. The name *Dinara*, introduced in the wake of Indo-Roman contacts, remained in circulation for a long time in the field of Indian coinage.

The use of Roman *Aurei* as current coins finds support from some other facts. The find of Roman coins in hoard alongside Indian silver punch-marked coins is very instructive. A number of such hoards have been reported from several localities in Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu. As is well known, silver punch-marked coins continued in circulation right up to the early medieval period, and their being founding association with the Roman coins should suffice to indicate the use of the latter as current coins during the early century AD. The Roman traders brought with them coins in an excellent or in a very fair condition, if not mint-fresh. But when they were included in the hoards, they were more often than not in a considerably worn state, indicating that they had been circulating for a long time prior to their interment. Roman *Aurei* had attained such great popularity as coins that local imitations were made and we have a number of such examples. Many of them have two holes indicating that they were used as pendants and local jewellery in the early century AD. Imitations were made also of imported Roman coins, but apparently not for circulation as coins. They were especially utilized as pendants attached to chains, for ornaments of this type led to them being imitated. It had a lasting influence in the traditional jewellery of Indian subcontinent.

From the *Dhulikatta* excavations, there is a handmade red-slipped terracotta male figure wearing a hat like head-gear. The figure forming the mouth of a water jar is shown with parted lips as if laughing. This is a unique figure without any parallel so far in the Indian



early historical terracotta. It might represent a Roman or western trader who was seen enough by local artisans a representation in terracotta. Other notable antiquities from *Dhulikatta* excavation include three pyriform wine vessels of all black ware with narrow neck, out turned rims, bodies that bulge at the shoulder and then taper down to a narrow flat base. These wine jars of unusual Indian form might be importations from Rome filled with liquor exclusively intended for the royalty of *Dhulikatta*.

During the early centuries AD Indo-Roman trade was in full swing and, the balance of trade being favorable to India, an enormous volume of Roman gold and silver coins flowed into the Deccan and South India. “Both these coinages were accepted as normal currencies in South India as there was no local gold coin available because there was practically no difference of weight between Roman *Dinari* and the silver punch-marked coins” (Ajay Mitra Shastri, IIRNS 48-52). The markets decide their relative value. In respect of gold coins, the local ruling powers, especially the *Satavahanas*, disfigured the Imperial portraits with the object of cancelling the authority of the issuing Roman emperor. Naturally, it must be the act of those ruling powers, were very particular about their own political authority. But as these coins are mostly reported from Andhra Pradesh, which was under the *Satavahana* during this period and as they were very conscious regarding their political authority, they must be taken to have effected this disfigurement, was also done by the Western *Kshatrapas*, and was not same in Tamil country.

Roman silver *Denarii* also appears to have been in use in the Deccan and South India during this period. It is instructive to remember in this context that a majority of the *Denarii* have not been subjected to the mutilation which has disfigured the *Aurei*. The Roman *Denarii*



were generally of the same weight as silver punch-marked coins, they were treated as of the same value. It is also quite likely that some of the Roman silver coins on the west coast was melted and reminted by the *Kshaharata Kshatrapas* and the *Satavahanas* after they decided to issue their own silver coinage. The Roman silver coins were also allowed to circulate along with the silver issues of the *Sakas* and *Satavahanas*.

## CONCLUSION

In the present paper, I have tried to draw a brief discussion of the Roman coins, their important types, Indo-Roman trade and use of Roman coins as barter or as their trade value. I also have tried to explain the economical, socio-cultural and political impact Roman coins in India. Roman coins in India are taken by traders. They might have tried to use these Roman coins not by their monetary exchange value, but might be by the value of precious metals in India. These coins were later minted in order to make coins of Indian rulers and also were used as jewelry. It might have made a great impact on Indian monetary system that has made the beginning of gold coins or silver coins in Indian monetary system. These coins were also conserved by some rulers or people as precious metals in order to get the higher price in later period, so that could have been stored underground which we find now as hoards.

Roman coins in India basically come in coastal areas or in empires connected or situated by the coastal area. It also shows that the traders were much more known as sea navigation instead of roadways. Roman coins also made change in the life and culture of people. Use of Roman coins as jewelry had led a new style or generation of ornaments. Through the images on coins have attracted the people to know about the culture and life



style of the Roman people, by this could may have inherited the socio-cultural pattern and also might be the political system of the empire was influenced by Roman politics through the attraction of king toward the Roman ruling system.

However, still the impact of Roman coins on the society, culture, politics, and economy is not so much clear. So in order to understand the factual impact further study or research is required to throw the light on it.





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