

The following are not in the 1959 article

Below, Sohgaura copper plate, scanned from J.F. Fleet, "The Inscription on the Sohgaura Plate," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1907, pp. 509-32 (plates in back of volume). Apparently Mauryan, 3d cent. BCE.



Actual width approx. 2.5 inches = 6.4 cm.



Above, silver coin from Kuninda kingdom, N. India, c. 2nd-1st cent. BCE, carrying some of the same symbols seen on the Sohgaura plate (and others, including the swastika). Brahmi inscription surrounds the symbols on one side, and a Kharosthi inscription on the other.

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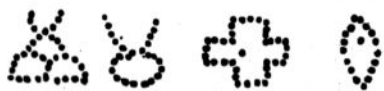
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## UPON THE CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CERTAIN GROUPS OF ANCIENT INDIAN SIGNS

By F. R. ALLCHIN

IT is more than 20 years since Durga Prasad published his 'Observations on different types of silver punch marked coins, their periods and locale'.<sup>1</sup> In this lengthy paper one section was devoted to demonstrating that certain signs can be regarded as Mauryan royal marks (pp. N 61-7). This conclusion and the many probabilities it raises have long been widely accepted in India, but in Europe acceptance has been more reserved. We are not here concerned with Prasad's main argument but with the section indicated above, our purpose being to restate that part of the evidence and consider its probable meaning. From some points of view Prasad's advocacy was imperfect, for in presenting his case he made certain assumptions which we are unable to accept, and thus weakened the force of his argument.

The starting place for the inquiry is the Rāmpurvā copper bolt at present in the India Museum, Calcutta. This was discovered in 1880 by Cunningham and H. B. Garrick. It was buried beside the fallen southerly pillar on which was engraved a set of Aśoka's pillar edicts. The pillar and its lion capital were subsequently fully excavated by Daya Ram Sahni.<sup>2</sup> The more northerly Rāmpurvā pillar is that associated with the famous bull capital. The bolt was examined by Cunningham who concluded that there could be no doubt of its being original and that it must have served to hold the lion capital in place upon its pillar.<sup>3</sup> It is probable that other Aśokan pillars and capitals bear mortises for similar bolts. This one is described as barrel shaped, of pure copper, measuring 2 ft. 0½ in. in length, with a diameter of 4⅞ in. in the centre, and 3⅝ in. at each end. Cunningham makes no mention of any marks upon the bolt, but Durga Prasad published an impression of four marks. They are made of lines of impressed dots and include the hill-with-crescent, the taurine or *Nandipada*, and the open cross :



Here then these signs occur upon an object which must have been made by craftsmen working for Aśoka or one of his predecessors.

The second context is the base of one of the polished Chunār sandstone

<sup>1</sup> *JASB*, 3rd Ser., III, 1937, Num. Suppl., N 51-92.

<sup>2</sup> *ARASI*, 1907-8, 181 ff. The mortises of both pillars are clearly visible, pls. LXVI and LXVIIA.

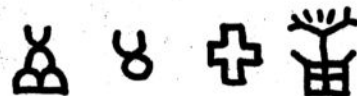
<sup>3</sup> *ASR*, XVI, 1883, 112-13.

pillars excavated by Spooner at Kumrahār.<sup>1</sup> The four quarters of the circumference are marked by arrows and in the centre are various marks, including three rows of three circles which Spooner thought to be masons' marks. Prasad, however, points out that there are several others which Spooner did not explain. In the very centre is the hill-with-crescent, above and to the right a *stambha* symbol, and to the left a taurine. Immediately above the taurine is an indistinct mark, perhaps a simple cross. Thus the base bears the following marks :



No satisfactory explanation of the unique pillared hall, whose traces were discovered by Spooner and which is so evocative of the work of the Achaemenids, has yet been offered, unless it is that it forms part of a royal palace of Pāṭaliputra, probably that described by Megasthenes. Here then, once again, we find these marks occurring in a context that is surely Mauryan, the products of royal masons.

The signs occur again in groups upon certain types of incuse die-struck and cast copper coins, found in Patna, Taxila, and many other ancient city sites, but as yet rarely published in their archaeological contexts. The following examples are derived from the British Museum *Catalogue of coins of ancient India*. Allan comments that they are very common and usually found with silver punch marked coins, both groups probably belonging to the same period.<sup>2</sup> However, we must note that their weights are very irregular and that they fall into many different types, some approximating more nearly to the inscribed copper 'tribal' coins. Thus it is almost certain that all the types do not belong to one period, and many may be later imitations or derivatives of the original types. The hill-with-crescent sign appears on 12 of Allan's 19 types; the open cross upon 10; and the taurine upon 7. On types G, H, J, and K the three appear together on the reverse with a fourth 'tree with railing' sign :



The obverse of these types includes the elephant and *stambha* in each case, together with two other signs. Other types, such as Allan's M, N, and O (fig. 2, nos. 6, 7), have single signs on obverse and reverse, the open-cross, hill-with-crescent, tree with railing, etc. The possibility that these coins may be of Mauryan origin is raised by Allan, but has not as yet been generally

<sup>1</sup> *ARASI*, 1912-13, pl. XLIX.

<sup>2</sup> J. Allan, loc. cit., 1936, lxxiv-lxxvii.

accepted. As archaeology is so far scarcely ready to supply any examples from well dated contexts we shall defer consideration of their age.<sup>1</sup>

From the Bulandibāgh excavations at Patna, Manoranjan Ghosh recovered a group of nine shallow *thalī* bowls of grey earthenware; two bore in the centre a circular stamp impression of 2 cm. diameter, containing the hill-with-crescent, open cross, square, and lotus bud signs, a third bore the

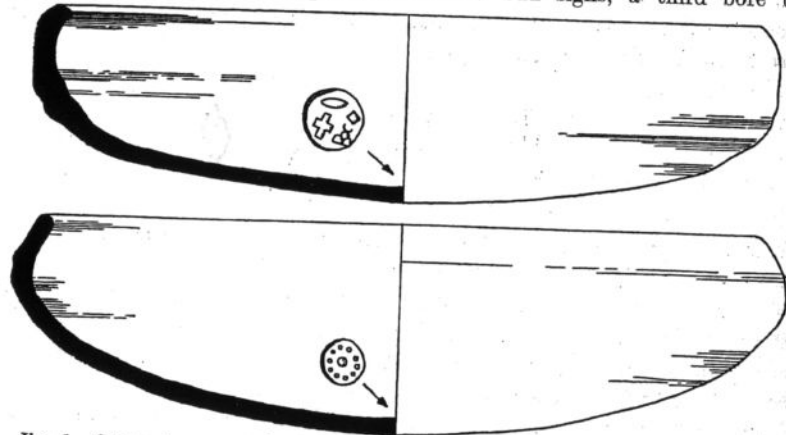


FIG. 1.—Stamped grey ware bowls from Bulandibāgh at present in Patna Museum (1:2).

hill-with-crescent alone, and another a small rosette. These bowls, whose forms have hitherto remained unpublished, are made of a fine alluvial clay with characteristic mica content.<sup>2</sup> The surface appears to have been treated with a slip in some cases, but in others it resembles that of a weathered NBP ware from which the black dressing has disappeared. The outer surface was probably turned and shaved before drying (fig. 1). The cluster of four signs is strikingly reminiscent of those of the Rāmpurvā bolt and of the cast copper coins. The little rosette stamp is as near to those of Early and Late Hellenistic pottery from Antioch-on-the-Orontes as to any published Indian examples,<sup>3</sup> and appears again on Han grey wares in the Victoria and Albert Museum;

<sup>1</sup> Two coins were found at or near the base of the Aśokan column at Sārnāth (*ARASI*, 1927-8); others in the 'Mauryan level' at Bulandibāgh; at Hastināpur B. B. Lal reports similar coins throughout his period III, dated by the presence of NBP ware (*Ancient India*, 10-11, 1954-5, 102-3); at Taxila their chief occurrence was in Bhir mound I and II (Marshall, *Taxila*, 1951, 756-63); at Maheshwar related types are found in levels producing NBP (Sankalia, Subbarao, and Deo, *Excavations at Maheshwar*, 1958, 66-72); and at Ahichhatrā, Rupar, and Ujjain they occur in equivalent levels (*Ancient India*, 9, 1953, 138 and 124, and *Indian Archaeology*, 1956-7, 23). Allan lists many other find spots. Since this paper went to press I have received a copy of S. C. Ray's *Stratigraphic evidence of coins in Indian excavations and some allied issues* (Numismatic Notes and Monographs, No. 8), Banaras, Numismatic Society of India, 1959. In this interesting study Ray shows with considerable detail the occurrence of cast copper coins in many recent excavations. Their earliest appearance is almost invariably in what we may call the period of the NBP, but other examples—often one suspects of clearly later types—occur consistently into the first century A.D.

<sup>2</sup> They are at present housed in the Patna Museum.

<sup>3</sup> O. Waage, *Antioch-on-the-Orontes*, iv, 1948, fig. 4, etc.

but comparable rosettes are not uncommon upon NBP bowls and their contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> Thus we may conclude that these Patna bowls are from all points of view consistent with a dating to the period when NBP flourished.

A very wide variety of signs appear on the silver punch marked coins. The whole question of their dating has hitherto centred around the two great hoards discovered in the Bhir mound at Taxila, but confusion of the dates of deposition and dates of coin types, together with the uncertainty which surrounds their exact find spots, has not helped the discussion.<sup>2</sup> The hill-with-crescent symbol is absent from the larger hoard of bent bar and pure silver coins, Marshall's 'earlier' group, which contained also coins of Alexander and Philip Aridaeus. This suggests, as the Greek coins are in mint condition, a date of accumulation for the hoard of c. 300 B.C. But the hill-with-crescent sign is found throughout the second hoard of debased silver punch marked coins. This hoard contained a coin of Diodotus II, dated to c. 235 B.C. Kosambi analysed the hoards and, accepting the dated coins as indices for the punch marked, worked out a chronological sequence for the smaller hoard coinciding with the Mauryan dynasty.<sup>3</sup> Even before this Jayaswal regarded the hill-with-crescent sign as Mauryan.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly the remaining four signs upon this series are very rarely found on the cast copper coins (fig. 2, no. 8). The two most common, after the hill-with-crescent, the *cakra* and the six armed sign, are almost never found, certainly never upon the types we quoted above. However, as Dani has recently shown the hoards cannot be taken as characteristic of the Bhir mound sequence.<sup>5</sup> It seems certain that all three hoards were deposited in pits dug from the floors of BM II if not later, and hence the chronological sequence suggested by the Greek coins is not necessarily related to the dates of deposition. Its relationship to the other coins in the hoards is thus not certain. With the remaining coins found by Marshall in the Bhir mound we are on safer ground: in BM IV and III they are mainly oblong bar and round-and-concave types; while in BM II and I they are predominantly of the 'later' debased silver and copper punch marked and 'local' Taxilan die-struck and cast copper currency. These later punch marked coins are of similar fabric to those of the smaller hoard and the majority have the hill-with-crescent as one of a group of five signs. But, as Allan noted, the silver punch marked coins of the so-called earlier hoard are almost certainly foreign to Taxila and the north-west, for the types are not found there outside the hoard.<sup>6</sup> The question of their origin and relative age need not concern us here, but Dani and Allan both doubt the earliness which Marshall assigned to them. Our concern is with the smaller hoard and with

<sup>1</sup> B. B. Lal, loc. cit., 57, for an example in NBP from the early part of period III at Hastināpur; for other examples in NBP from Rupar and Rājgir, see *Ancient India*, 9, 1953, fig. 5, 127, and fig. 2, 120.

<sup>2</sup> See particularly chapters 39-41 of Marshall's *Taxila*.

<sup>3</sup> *NIA*, iv, 1941, 1-35 and 49-76; *JBBRAS*, xxiv-xxv, 1948-9, 33-47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ep. Ind.*, xxii, 3, and Durga Prasad, loc. cit., N 61.

<sup>5</sup> *JASP*, i, 1956, 109-20.

<sup>6</sup> In Marshall's *Taxila*, 1951, 854-5.

the punch marked coins of similar fabric from the levels BM I and II. The dating suggested by the coin of Diodotus is reasonably consistent with Marshall's view that this level was Mauryan. This also would agree with Allan's view regarding the origin of the local copper coinage. The geographical distribution of the punch marked coin types has been too little noticed. This aspect seems often to have been neglected by the earlier collectors for they rarely record find spots, but even with the incomplete data available to Durga Prasad in 1934 it was possible for him to notice their wide dispersion.<sup>1</sup> Thus the find spots of the varieties found in the smaller Taxila hoard are as widely spaced as Peshawar, Swat, and Rawalpindi in the north-west; through Mathura, Lucknow, and Kosambi to the central Ganges valley; and thence via Benares, Ahraura (Mirzapur district), Patna, and Bhagalpur to Dacca in the east. More rarely the identical types have been found in the Deccan. Prasad lists no less than 16 examples of a single type, extending the above distribution to Ceylon. The numerous types found in both the North West Frontier and the central Ganges valley are particularly suggestive. It is probable that a thorough survey of museum collections would greatly extend the distribution, but even as already noticed it speaks for itself.<sup>2</sup> There is not as yet much good stratigraphic evidence for the coins, but their first occurrence is usually linked with the NBP. Thus at Hastinapur a silver coin bearing the hill-with-crescent sign appears in the lowest levels of period III,<sup>3</sup> and again at Rugar punch marked coins occur in similar context.<sup>4</sup> At Maheshwar a silver punch marked coin of (?) earlier fabric was found at the bottom of the NBP levels, while coins of (?) later fabric appear in the middle levels.<sup>5</sup> At Taxila, outside the BM hoards, Marshall found the first fragments of NBP at depths well below the first occurrence of punch marked coins of 'later' fabric, although not below the earliest silver bar coins. Thus as with the cast copper coins, the associations of their first occurrence in stratified sequences appear to be fairly constant.<sup>6</sup>

The hill-with-crescent sign is found again upon one of two seemingly related inscriptions, the Sohgaura cast copper plate and the Mahāsthān stone slab.<sup>7</sup> Both are written in Brāhmī script which has been assigned to about the third century B.C.; both are in Prakrit and are couched in similar terms. The Sohgaura inscription is complete and refers to the construction of storehouses (*koṣṭhāgāra*, Prakrit *koṭhagāla*) for grain in times of dire need (*ātyāyika*, Prakrit *atiyāyika*). Its four corners are pierced by nail holes, suggesting that

<sup>1</sup> *JASB*, xxx, 1934, Num. Suppl., N 5-59.

<sup>2</sup> Śrī Parameśvarī Lal Gupta, numismatist of the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay, has for some years been engaged in such a study and the publication of the results of his work is eagerly awaited.

<sup>3</sup> Lal, loc. cit., 102.

<sup>4</sup> Y. D. Sharma, *Ancient India*, 9, 1953, 123.

<sup>5</sup> Sankalia, loc. cit., 66-70.

<sup>6</sup> Here too, Ray (loc. cit.) has now provided a detailed study of the finds in many recent excavations, and this bears out our contention regarding the relationship of these coins to the period of the NBP, just as it did for the cast copper coins.

<sup>7</sup> D. C. Sircar, *Select inscriptions*, 1952, 82-3 and 85, with further bibliography.

it was attached to some wooden door. The find spot was on the river Rapti about 14 miles south-south-east of Gorakhpur. In the Mahāsthān inscription the letters are more clearly written and the storehouse appears as *koṣṭhāgāla*. Incidentally the use of the *daṇḍa* to separate words and phrases in this inscription is of interest. The content of the inscriptions recalls passages in Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* where the words *koṣa*, *koṣṭhāgāra*, *ātyāyika*, *śāsanam*, *mahāmātra*, etc., are found in comparable usages. Above the text is a register which includes two buildings presumably the storehouses mentioned, two trees with railings, and in the centre three signs, viz.



The upper part of the Mahāsthān inscription is missing. Its letters are cut deeply into the sandstone block.

One last object may be mentioned, an inscribed copper band discovered in Patna and published by Altekar.<sup>1</sup> This is about 11 in. in length and is also pierced by nail holes. On it are punched 21 signs which include the hill-with-crescent, open cross, taurine, *stambha*, *svastika*, hill-with-peacock, and other sometimes indistinct signs (fig. 2, no. 10).

We may now summarize the evidence. The Rāmpurvā copper bolt is marked with a group of four signs. Three of these recur upon two bowls from Patna together with a new fourth sign; two—if not three—recur on the Kumrāhār pillar base together with a further sign. Three again recur on four types of cast copper coins on the reverse, while other types show two or more of the signs on obverse or reverse. The debased silver punch marked coins have apparently a different system of five marks, but even here the hill-with-crescent is ubiquitous. Three, if not four, signs are found again on the Sohgaura cast copper plate inscription, while three also occur among the signs on the Patna copper band (fig. 2).

These concurrences are remarkable and require an explanation. I am not aware of any other objects or categories of objects which demonstrate these particular groups of signs. Singly, no doubt, it is possible to pick out individual examples among other groups in later copper coinage, etc., but these do not carry the conviction of those we have listed. The pillars which bear the Aśokan edicts and the unscripted pillars of the same series cannot well belong to a period other than that from Chandragupta Maurya to Aśoka. Thus the copper bolt from Rāmpurvā must bear marks put on it at that time, probably by the royal coppersmiths. Even without agreement upon the precise meaning of the marks this context is indisputable and leads one to regard other objects marked by the same system as belonging to a related contextual complex. In particular the ubiquitous hill-with-crescent sign, recurring throughout, may

<sup>1</sup> A. S. Altekar, *JNSI*, ix, 2, 1947.

have something of the significance of the mark of a far-reaching authority, extending at least from Patna to Taxila, and impressing itself upon the products of stone-masons, coppersmiths, copper and silver coiners, potters, etc. Such a mark may be expected to be a royal or dynastic sign (Kauṭilya's *rājānka* or *narendrānka*) as Jayaswal and Prasad long ago opined.<sup>1</sup> If indeed it has

## Other Signs

1									
2									
3									
4									
5									
6									
7									
8									etc.
9									
10									etc.

FIG. 2.—1, Rāmpurvā bolt; 2, Kumrāhār base; 3, Patna bowls; 4, cast copper coins, types G, H, J, K; 5, ditto, type F; 6, ditto, type M; 7, ditto, type O; 8, debased silver punch marked coins; 9, Sohgaoura plate; 10, Patna copper band.

that significance then it can only belong to the Mauryan dynasty or at least to a single ruler thereof. No other dynasty or ruler, or for that matter authority, answers so completely the various conditions established by the contexts in which the mark occurs. Using this conclusion as a starting-point we may assemble our facts in the form of a coherent hypothesis.

The Rāmpurvā copper bolt and the Kumrāhār pillar base bear groups of

<sup>1</sup> Durga Prasad, loc. cit., N 63. Thus 'arms and allied objects are to be marked with the royal mark (*narendrānka*) and kept in the magazine', *Arthaśāstra*, v, 3.

marks indicating the authority which caused them to be made. This authority can only have been that of a Mauryan ruler, either Chandragupta, Bindusāra, or Aśoka. Two systems of coinage should belong to the same authority, for they are marked by a similar and a related system of marks: these are the cast copper coins and the debased silver punch marked coins. Coins of these two classes and of the types we have been studying are found throughout northern India, from the North West Frontier Province to Dacca, and are also known in the Deccan. They appear together in stratified excavations and invariably along with the NBP ware. But they also appear to coincide with the two classes of coin named in the *Arthaśāstra*, debased silver (*rūpyarūpa*) and alloyed copper (*tāmrarūpa*).<sup>1</sup> Various other objects, the Patna terracotta bowls, copper band, etc., should belong to the same period. The forms, and the rosette of one of the bowls, are also features which occur in the NBP ware. The copper band with its nail holes may well have been a reference or index mark attached to a wooden treasure chest, or some such object, in the royal mint or treasury at Pāṭaliputra. The Sohgaoura and Mahāsthān inscriptions have been inferred to belong to the Mauryan period not only by their script and language, but by their contents. Both refer to the construction of storehouses in times of calamity, both give the impress of a single powerful authority, and the one complete inscription, a cast copper plate with nail holes to fix it to a door, etc., would appear to bear the mark of that authority at its head. Both inscriptions use terms which are found in similar contexts in Kauṭilya. This again suggests the contextual aptness of the *Arthaśāstra*.

The manner in which the several parts of this hypothesis fit together and lend each other support encourages one to accept it. No other explanation accounts for them so well, and if it be 'vain to do with more what can be done with fewer', then it should provide a good basis for further investigation. Finally we may remark that if, as we have argued, the hill-with-crescent, etc., in these contexts had more than a merely auspicious connotation, and had indeed the seal of Mauryan authority, then it would be quite understandable that in the centuries which followed the decay of Mauryan power the symbols thus established should have continued in currency, resorted to by princeling and forger alike to lend dignity and value to their coins. Thus, we reiterate, all is not necessarily Mauryan that bears these marks. However, while it may well be that the *svastika* and the taurine had even earlier acquired meaning as auspicious signs, the hill-with-crescent appears to have been the specific invention of either Chandragupta or Aśoka, and has every right to be regarded as a 'hall-mark' originating in the Mauryan period.

<sup>1</sup> *Arthaśāstra*, II, 12. Durga Prasad states (loc. cit., N 45) that the 'chemical quantitative analysis' of a coin bearing the hill-with-crescent symbol showed percentages of silver, copper, and base metal which 'tallied very nearly' with the ideal proportions laid down by Kauṭilya in that chapter. This suggestive claim needs to be backed by more exhaustive chemical analysis if it is to be accepted. A similar investigation of the copper coins should now be made.