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Numismatic Study of Vishnukundin Coins: Iconography, Metallurgy, and Economic Significance

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Abstract

The coinage of the Vishnukundin dynasty serves as an important source for understanding the political, economic, and cultural history of early historic Andhra Pradesh during the 4th to 6th centuries CE. These coins are characterized by distinctive iconographic features, notably a stylized lion on the obverse and a *kalasa* (vase) flanked by lamp stands on the reverse. For a long time, the attribution of these coins remained controversial, as earlier scholars assigned them to the Pallavas based on stylistic similarities. However, recent archaeological discoveries, especially from regions such as Telangana and North Andhra, along with supporting inscriptional evidence, have firmly established their association with the Vishnukundins.

This study examines the iconography, metallurgy, weight standards, and geographical distribution of Vishnukundin coins in detail. The analysis of symbols highlights the integration of political authority with religious and cultural meanings. Metallurgical study reveals the use of a unique ternary alloy of copper, iron, and tin, demonstrating technological innovation. The wide variation in weights indicates the existence of multiple denominations, reflecting a well-developed and flexible monetary system.

Furthermore, the distribution of these coins across Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and neighbouring regions provides insights into the political boundaries and economic networks of the dynasty. A comparative analysis with coin finds in Maharashtra and other parts of South India suggests that their circulation extended beyond the core region mainly through trade contacts.

Overall, Vishnukundin coinage reflects a complex and dynamic economic structure and contributes significantly to the study of ancient Indian numismatics. It remains a valuable source for reconstructing regional history, trade patterns, and state formation in early medieval South India.

Keywords

Vishnukundin Coins, Numismatics, Andhra Pradesh, Iconography, Kalasa, Lion Symbol, Metallurgy, Ancient Economy

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

- Examine the iconographic features and symbolic significance of Vishnukundin coins.
- Analyze metallurgical composition and coin manufacturing techniques.
- Study weight variations to identify denominations and monetary standards.
- Trace geographical distribution to reconstruct political boundaries.
- Evaluate the economic and trade significance of the coinage.

Methodology

The present study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data includes coin specimens recovered from archaeological sites such as Keesara, Tangudupalli, Korukonda, Revoor, and Karimnagar. These coins have been examined for their physical characteristics, iconography, weight variations, and metal composition.

Secondary sources include excavation reports, numismatic catalogues, journal articles, and scholarly publications. A comparative and analytical approach has been adopted to evaluate different scholarly interpretations regarding attribution and symbolism. Statistical analysis of weight data has been used to identify patterns of denominations and standardization. Regional comparison has also been employed to understand circulation patterns and economic interactions across South India.

Introduction

Coins are among the most reliable archaeological sources for reconstructing ancient history, as they provide direct evidence of political authority, economic organization, and cultural expression. In early historic India, coinage played a crucial role in facilitating trade and reflecting the administrative efficiency of ruling dynasties.

The Vishnukundin dynasty, which flourished between the 4th and 6th centuries CE, ruled over significant parts of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Their coinage represents an important aspect of their material culture and economic system. These coins are distinguished by a stylized lion motif on the obverse and a *kalasa* symbol with lamp stands on the reverse, reflecting both political authority and religious symbolism.

The attribution of these coins remained debated for a long time, as earlier scholars associated lion-type coins with the Pallavas. However, recent archaeological discoveries and inscriptional evidence have led to their reassignment to the Vishnukundins.

This study aims to examine the iconography, metallurgy, weight standards, and distribution of Vishnukundin coins in order to understand their historical significance and contribution to early medieval South Indian numismatics.

Iconography of Vishnukundin Coins

The iconography of Vishnukundin coins is distinctive and symbolically rich. The obverse typically features a stylized lion with an open mouth, raised forepaw, and uplifted tail. This dynamic depiction suggests power, royal authority, and military strength. The lion likely served as a dynastic emblem representing sovereignty.

The reverse usually displays a *kalasa* (vase) placed on a pedestal and flanked by two vertical lamp stands, all enclosed within a rayed border. The *kalasa* is an important symbol in Indian tradition, representing fertility, prosperity, and the "water of life." The lamp stands symbolize ritual purity and sacred illumination.

Some scholars have proposed that the reverse design represents a temple structure flanked by agricultural implements. However, detailed examination of numerous coins supports the interpretation of the design as a ritualistic *kalasa* motif.

Thus, the iconography reflects a combination of political authority and religious symbolism.



Coins at Keesara Village



Coins at Tangudupalli

Attribution and Scholarly Debate

The absence of inscriptions or legends on Vishnukundin coins initially led to confusion regarding their attribution. Early numismatists classified lion-type coins as Pallava issues.

However, recent archaeological discoveries have challenged this view. Excavations at Yeleswaram in Nalgonda district yielded coins with similar features in a clear regional context associated with the Vishnukundins. Furthermore, the concentration of such coins in Telangana and North Andhra aligns with the known territorial extent of the dynasty.

Epigraphic evidence from Vishnukundin inscriptions further supports this attribution. As a result, modern scholarship largely agrees that these coins belong to the Vishnukundin dynasty, with lion-type coins representing the earlier phase of their rule.

Metallurgy and Coin Fabrication

One of the most remarkable aspects of Vishnukundin coinage is its metallurgical innovation. These coins were made using a ternary alloy consisting of copper, iron, and tin. The approximate composition is:

- Copper: 75.4%
- Iron: 22%
- Tin: 3%

The use of iron as a core material is particularly significant, as it represents an early example of composite coinage technology in India. The iron core was coated with copper alloy, providing both durability and aesthetic appeal.

This technique indicates advanced metallurgical knowledge and efficient utilization of available resources. It also suggests an awareness of economic considerations, as the use of iron reduced the dependence on more expensive metals.

Weight Standards and Denominations

The study of weight standards in Vishnukundin coinage provides crucial insights into the monetary system and economic organization of early historic Andhra. A systematic analysis of coins preserved in museums and recovered from excavations across Andhra Pradesh and Telangana reveals a significant variation in weight, which strongly indicates the existence of multiple denominations rather than a rigid, uniform standard.

The recorded data from major hoards and sites shows considerable diversity. Coins from Keesara range between 1.09 and 8.69 grams, while those from Tangudupalli exhibit an even wider range from 0.64 to 11.96 grams. Similarly, coins from Korukonda fall within a narrower range of approximately 2.76 to 5.31 grams, whereas the Revoor hoard presents the broadest variation, extending from 2.1 to 13 grams. Coins from Karimnagar and Tirupati also demonstrate moderate variation, with average weights around 7.45 grams. The lowest recorded weight of 0.64 grams and the highest of 13 grams clearly suggest that the Vishnukundins issued coins in several denominations suited for different levels of economic transactions.

This variation in weight is significant from a numismatic perspective. It reflects a flexible and adaptive monetary system rather than a centralized and strictly regulated standard. The presence of lighter coins indicates their use in everyday small-scale transactions, such as local trade and market exchanges, while heavier coins were likely used in larger commercial dealings, taxation, or long-distance trade. Such a system

would have facilitated economic activity at multiple levels, from rural markets to inter-regional trade networks.

Another important aspect is the lack of strict standardization across regions. The differences in average weights between hoards suggest that local factors—such as availability of metal, minting practices, and regional economic conditions—may have influenced coin production. This regional variation does not imply disorder but rather indicates a decentralized minting system operating under broad administrative control.

Furthermore, the use of a durable copper-based alloy with an iron core ensured longevity in circulation, making these coins suitable for repeated use. The variation in weights, combined with metallurgical strength, points toward a well-functioning currency system capable of supporting a monetized economy.

The diversity in weight standards of Vishnukundin coins reflects a sophisticated and practical monetary framework. It highlights the existence of multiple denominations, regional minting flexibility, and an active economic system that supported both local and long-distance trade during the 4th to 6th centuries CE.

Economic Significance

Vishnukundin coinage provides valuable insights into the economic structure of the period. The existence of multiple denominations indicates a monetized economy with active trade and commercial transactions.

The durable alloy composition suggests that coins were intended for prolonged circulation, reflecting a stable economic system. The symbolic imagery of prosperity and power further reinforces the idea of a strong and organized state.

Numismatic evidence also sheds light on taxation systems, trade routes, and regional exchange networks. The presence of coins in different regions indicates economic interaction beyond political boundaries.

Geographical Distribution and Political Boundaries

The geographical distribution of Vishnukundin coins is an important source for reconstructing the political extent and administrative reach of the dynasty. A large number of coins have been discovered in regions of present-day Telangana and North Andhra Pradesh, particularly in districts such as Nalgonda, Karimnagar, Rangareddy, and East and West Godavari. These find spots closely correspond with areas known from inscriptions and literary sources, strengthening their historical association with the Vishnukundins.

Traditionally, the Vishnukundin kingdom was believed to be confined to the Vengi region, located between the Godavari and Krishna rivers. However, the discovery of coin hoards in interior Telangana, especially in Nalgonda and Karimnagar, indicates that their political influence extended beyond this core area.

These findings suggest a wider territorial control, possibly including parts of eastern Telangana as integral regions of the kingdom rather than mere peripheral zones.

Moreover, the presence of coins in border areas and occasional finds beyond the core region point to active trade networks and economic interactions with neighboring regions. Thus, numismatic evidence not only supports inscriptional data but also provides a more dynamic understanding of Vishnukundin political geography, highlighting both their territorial expansion and economic connectivity.

Comparative Study with Maharashtra and South India

A comparative analysis of Vishnukundin coinage across Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and other parts of South India provides valuable insights into regional political influence and economic interaction. In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the wide distribution of these coins clearly indicates their role as a primary currency within the core territory of the Vishnukundin dynasty. In contrast, their limited occurrence in Maharashtra, particularly in border regions, suggests that these coins reached these areas mainly through trade contacts rather than direct political control. Their rare presence in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu further supports the idea of restricted circulation beyond the core region.

In terms of iconography, coins from Andhra Pradesh exhibit a consistent representation of the lion and *kalasa* motifs, reflecting a standardized symbolic system. However, minor stylistic variations in coins found in Maharashtra indicate possible regional adaptations or imitative minting influenced by local artistic traditions.

Metallurgically, the ternary alloy composition remains broadly similar across regions, demonstrating the spread of technological knowledge. Nevertheless, variations in metal quality and finishing techniques suggest differences in minting processes outside the core region.

From an economic perspective, the structured weight system in Andhra Pradesh points to an organized monetary economy, whereas in other regions, the limited number of coins indicates their role in trade circulation. Overall, this comparative distribution highlights Andhra Pradesh as the political and economic nucleus of the Vishnukundins while emphasizing their wider trade and cultural connections across South India.

Importance in Numismatic Studies

Vishnukundin coins are of great importance in Indian numismatics. They demonstrate technological innovation, artistic expression, and economic organization. Their unique features, especially the use of iron cores and symbolic imagery, distinguish them from contemporary coinages. They also contribute significantly to the study of regional dynasties and early medieval Indian history.

These coins serve as crucial evidence for understanding economic systems, political expansion, and cultural developments.

Conclusion

The numismatic study of Vishnukundin coins offers a comprehensive understanding of the political, economic, and cultural dynamics of early historic Andhra Pradesh during the 4th to 6th centuries CE. The distinctive iconography, particularly the lion on the obverse and the *kalasa* on the reverse, reflects a meaningful blend of royal authority and religious symbolism, indicating the ideological framework of the dynasty.

The metallurgical composition, especially the innovative use of a copper-based alloy with an iron core, demonstrates advanced technological knowledge and efficient resource utilization. The wide variation in weight standards clearly points to the existence of multiple denominations, suggesting a flexible and well-developed monetary system capable of supporting diverse economic activities.

Furthermore, the geographical distribution of these coins across Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and neighboring regions provides valuable insights into the territorial extent and economic interactions of the Vishnukundins. The comparative analysis with regions like Maharashtra highlights the role of trade in the wider circulation of these coins.

Despite earlier controversies regarding their attribution, current archaeological and numismatic evidence firmly establishes these coins as belonging to the Vishnukundin dynasty. Overall, Vishnukundin coinage remains a vital source for reconstructing early medieval South Indian history and continues to offer significant scope for future research in numismatics.

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