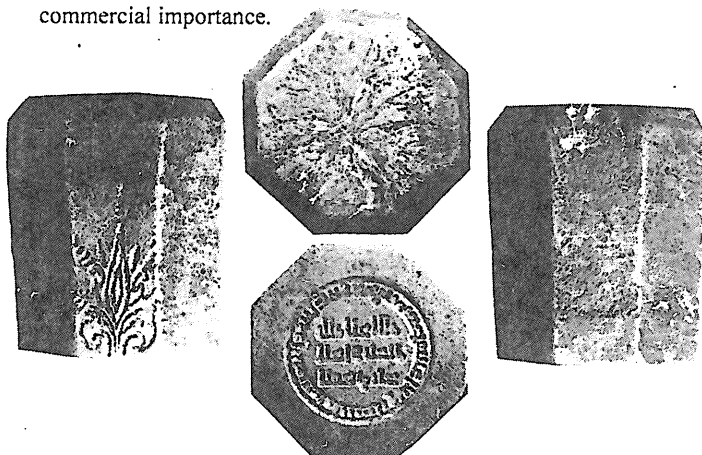


A DIE FOR IMITATION OF UMAYYAD DINARS FOUND IN INDIA

By Shailendra Bhandare and Stefan Heidemann

Finds of Islamic coin dies are noteworthy and Bacharach and Awad analysed in 1973 all material known to them¹. Lately an article by K. Khromov in ONS newsletter no. 157, reported a die that seems to have been employed for striking crude imitations of 'Abbasid Dirhams and which was found in the Caucasus area. It is even more interesting to note a find that is distant from the Islamic heartland.

The die being reported hereunder existed in the collection of P. G. Bħargave, a coin collector from Nasik, India². He procured it as a surface find in the ancient village of Prakashe, district Dhule, Maharashtra State. The village is located about 450 km northeastward of Bombay and is situated on the banks of the river Tapi. Remains of archaeological interest lay strewn all over the village and the mounds adjoining the river deserve urgent archaeological attention., apart from preliminary explorations, however, no attempts at an extensive excavation have been made. The explorations have indicated that the antiquity of Prakashe stretches back to the Chalcolithic period (c. 800 BC) and the village survived as a prosperous township until c. AD 1500. The location of Prakashe on the river gives it direct estuarine access to the Arabian Sea. In fact the port of Surat is located at the mouth of the same river that flows past Prakashe. It is believed that Prakashe lay on the ancient trade route from Bharuch to Paithan, and a pass named 'Kondai Bari' that links the South Gujarat plateau to the highlands of North Maharashtra is located quite close to it. The village therefore had a considerable commercial importance.



The die may be described as follows on the basis of photographs: Brass, height 36 mm; diameter 28 mm; diameter of the engraved coin 19 mm. The edges of the upper side are smoothed. This upper side was obviously not treated with hammer strokes and shows no signs of wear: there are traces of casting still visible. On one of its edges (facets), the die has a neat arabesque design engraved in the metal, which is very unusual for a die in actual use. If it ever served to strike coins, it can be seen as an obverse die, set in an anvil. The arabesque probably served as an alignment tool when the die was set in the anvil. This can be inferred from the position of the inscriptions on the die, which is correctly aligned only when the facet with the arabesque is at 180 degrees.

An Umayyad Dinar served as a model for this die. The inscription may generally be said to have been carefully cut. However, the errors, omissions and misrepresentations that have crept in suggest that the engraver must have been unfamiliar with

Arabic (Kufic) script. The three-lined inscription in the centre is engraved retrograde, as one would expect for a die. However, the marginal inscriptions have been cut in the positive as the engraver saw it on the coin. This is evident from the *dāl*-like characters. The marginal legend is extremely corrupt. Between 2 and 4 o'clock, either '*ashara wa-mi'a*' or '*ishrīna wa-mi'a*' seems to be the model for engraving. In an attempt to ascertain what the model was for the immediately preceding group of corrupt characters between 5 and 4 o'clock, the numbers *iħda*, *arba*', *sab*', and *tis*' can be probably excluded because the endings of Arabic characters suggestive of these numbers would have left identifiable traces even in a corrupt rendering. It therefore seems possible that the date of the model would have been one between AH 112 and AH 128, corresponding to AD 730-1 and AD 745-6.

The examination indicates that the die is equipment intended to create imitations. It would be interesting to propose a theory for its encounterance in India. Finds of gold coins of middle-eastern origin are not scarce in India. Mitchiner in his latest monograph on Indian tokens³ lists such finds from numismatic literature as well as their occurrence in the trade. Many of them pertain to the Umayyad dynasty, and most of them are from South India. These coins weighed in the vicinity of 4 g and therefore fitted very well with the currency standards prevalent in South India, which survived on gold pagodas (Hons) weighing 3.8-4.2 g. As such there was no need for their conversion into a local currency and they had no problem in circulating freely. Their appearance was entirely different from the indigenous coins. Perhaps this added to their novelty. Indeed, many coins found today often have two holes pierced into them. This indicates that they were used for jewellery purposes. Apart from their aesthetic utility, the tradition prevented their disappearance into general circulation and the person wearing such jewellery often saw it as a means of saving. The popularity of these coins must have contributed to the practice of them being imitated, and it is very likely that the die described above must have been used for such a purpose.

It would not be inappropriate at this juncture to put down some thoughts about the import of Islamic coins into pre-Islamic India. As stated above the coins did not require a conversion and, as such, must have provided an affordable exchange medium for the Trans-Arabian sea trade. The Arabs established themselves in Sind in the middle of the 8th century under Muħammad ibn Qāsīm. Subsequently, governors representing the Umayyad and later 'Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad ruled Sind till the 11th century AD. The establishment of an Arab sway in Sind must have had a considerable impact on the trade between the Arabian Sea and entrepots situated in Gujarat and Konkan on the Western Coast of India. It is interesting to note that the date of the coin that acted as a model for this die is not far removed from the establishment of Arab rule in Sind. It can be therefore envisaged that a steady flow of Middle-eastern gold had begun to flow towards the Western Indian coast in these years. The intended purpose of the die also indicates the level of popularity these arcane coins reached soon after their arrival in India. This is partly because there was a gap in indigenous gold coins in the 8th-9th centuries and the demand for foreign gold must have been high. In the wake of this fact it is possible to believe that the die could also have been intended to produce imitative dinars for currency use., Judging by the logic involved, however, it is more probable for it to be the equipment of a jeweller.

The Arab coins reaching India gradually tended to move southwards, because that was the region where they fitted into the currency system and proved to be a profitable exchange medium. The location of the find-spot of the die, as described earlier, is on the trade route leading from Bharuch on the west coast to the highlands of Maharashtra and thence to the urban centres situated further south in the Deccan.

It is interesting to note in this respect that the traders from the Islamic empire actually established trading colonies or outposts on the Western Coast. Further, evidence points out to their involvement in the feudal hierarchy under the Rashtrakutas in the Deccan. As traders, they were regarded in high esteem by the Indian Monarchs. A few copper plate inscriptions conferring civil and judicial indemnities upon Muslim colonies are known. The earliest of these is the Chinchini Copper plate of Rashtrakuta Indra III, dated *shake* 848 (926 AD)⁴. The exact location of the colony mentioned in the inscription has been a source of some debate. Nevertheless there is general agreement that it was located on the western coast.

The name of the feudal lord in this colony has been mentioned as 'Madhumati', a rather strange Sankritisation of the Arabic name 'Muḥammad'. Other names finding mention in these grants include 'Sahariyarhar', standing for the Persian name 'Shahryār' and 'Sugatipa', whose linguistic equivalent either in Arabic or Persian can not be ascertained. The origin of all these individuals from the Islamic empire is established by their Sanskrit addressal as 'Tājik', which is derived from the Persian word *tāzī* for an Arab. Although the copper plates postdate the reconstructed date on the die under discussion by a couple of centuries, the establishment of Arab-Persian colonies on the Western Indian coast is of considerable importance to understand the theme of mediaeval trans-Arabian Sea trade in its entirety. Hence the inclusion of this reference.

1. Bacharach, J.L. and Awad, H.E.: "The problem of Obverse and Reverse in Islamic Numismatics". *Numismatic Chronicle* 7th series 13 (1973), pp. 183-191, provides a list of known mediaeval Islamic coins dies.
2. The present whereabouts of the die cannot be ascertained with satisfaction. It was photographed while in the possession of Mr Bhargave. The authors are grateful to Mr Bhargave for allowing them to document the die.
3. Michael Mitchiner: *Indian Tokens: popular Religious & Secular Art from the ancient period to the present day* (Sanderstead 1998), Chapter "Foreign gold coins from Southern India: Roman Byzantine and early Islamic", pp. 35-38.
4. *Epigraphia India*, vol. 32, 1957-58, pp. 45-55.



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