

Sculptural Parallels in the Coinage of Vijayanagar

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The coinage of Vijayanagar and the later successor state of Mysore is relatively unique among Indian coin series in that a number of coin types have close sculptural parallels. In this brief paper, I will point out a few of these, using two specific cases, reliefs of Hanumān and the gold varāhas of Hari Hara I and Bukka I, and the statue of Bālakṛṣṇa from the Kṛṣṇa Temple in Hampi and the Bālakṛṣṇa type coins of Kṛṣṇadevarāya, to illustrate how the observation of the close parallel between sculpture and coins can yield us insights into the coinage and the historical context that might not otherwise be obtainable.

Hanumān



Figure 1: Relief of Hanumān and Copper Coin of King Harihara I

Figure 1 shows a relief of Hanumān seen in the onsite Museum at Hampi. A similar relief is present in the Raṅga Temple built by Sadāśivarāya and, according to Lutgendorf, hundreds of others are scattered about the ruins of the Vijayanagar capital.² Hanumān had a particularly important place in the pantheon at Hampi because, according to local tradition, he had been born on Anjaneya Hill across the river from the city. Also shown in Figure 1 is a copper coin of Harihara I (1336-54), showing Hanumān in essentially the same pose, the only difference being that the right (back) foot is raised, giving the figure a more dynamic feel. Although the date of the Museum relief is probably later than the coin, as is certainly the relief in the Raṅga Temple,

¹ Boston University. I thank Govindraya Prabhu S. for helpful discussions and Forrest McGill and John Huntington for helpful suggestions; the opinions here are my own. All photos are self-taken, unless otherwise noted and all coins except for the one in Figure 7 are from my personal collection.

² See Philip Lutgendorf: *Hanuman's Tale*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 60. I thank Forrest McGill and John Huntington for bringing this book to my attention.

this representation of Hanumān had by this time become a standard one. The earliest known image of this kind is in Khajuraho and bears an inscription that dates it to the year 922 CE,³ and many other images follow, in various locations. As Lutgendorf describes them, all “these images display the characteristically energetic “heroic” (*vīra*) pose with erect tail and one hand raised (either holding a weapon or mountain peak, or poised to deliver a slap) and one foot suppressing a male or female demon.” The Hampi images and the coins actually leave out the demon underfoot, but otherwise conform to Lutgendorf’s description. The god is shown striding to the right, with his right arm raised and his tail curling up to form a canopy over his body. Bukka I (1354-77) also issued copper coins of this kind, showing Hanumān in precisely this position (see Figure 2a), with even the right foot placed securely on the ground. There can be little doubt that the images stem from the same tradition.



Figure 2: (a) Copper and (b) Gold coin of King Bukka I

Seeing the clear correspondence of the images on the copper coins and on the reliefs allows us to consider the identity of similar images seen on gold varāhas of the same two kings. Figure 2b shows a gold varāha of Bukka I, which shows a figure in the identical pose. Harihara I issued similar coins.⁴ The question is: Who is the figure on the gold coins supposed to represent? The pose is so similar to the one on the copper coins and on the reliefs that many authors, such as Ganesh, Narasimhamurthy and Sankara Narayan, have identified the figure as Hanumān.⁵ This is often the description in auction catalogues also.⁶ However, the figure on the gold coins departs significantly from the figure on the reliefs and on the copper coins: most significantly, it lacks a tail and it shows the figure with a sword. It also eliminates the protruding simian face seen on the reliefs and the copper coins. Some have suggested that the figure is shown with the head turning back, but this seems unlikely. Why would the figure be turning backwards when it is about to deliver a blow in front of it? The figure in fact faces right and what some have interpreted as the protrusion of the face is instead a hair-knot at the back of the head. We see a similar hairstyle on a hero stone from Karnataka now at Bharat Kala Bhavan in Varanasi and reproduced in Figure 3. This figure is in roughly the same position as the Hanumān and Bukka images, although the right hand holds a short sword or dagger at the hip. By the context and the form, it is clear that this figure is human, and we see the hair tied behind the head in a large knot, precisely what we see

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See K. Ganesh, *Karnataka Coins*, Bangalore: Author-published, 2007, type 9.1 (p. 116).

⁵ For example, Ganesh, *ibid.*, types 9.1-9.4 (Harihara I) and 9.13 (Bukka I), A.V. Narasimhamurthy: *Coins and Currency System in Vijayanagara Empire*, Varanasi: The Numismatic Society of India, 1991, pp. 48-49, and N. Sankara Narayana: *Catalogue of Vijayanagar Coins in the Madras Government Museum*, Madras: Commissioner of Museums, 1994, pp. 26-27.

⁶ See, for example, Classical Numismatic Gallery, Auction 5, lot 347.

on the gold coins. Thus the figure on the coins is quite different from the relief images of Hanumān. These departures from the accepted iconography for the image of Hanumān, and the image seen on the copper coins, suggest that the figure is not intended to be the deity, rather, it is a human figure, most probably meant to represent the king.⁷



Figure 3: Hero Stone from Karnataka⁸

Presenting the king in the same pose as Hanumān no doubt had propaganda value, as it would create in the viewer's mind an equivalence between the two figures. The king becomes the earthly manifestation of the god. This calls to mind the coinage of the Pratihāra king Bhoja I, who represented himself on his coinage in the same pose as the well-known relief statue of Varāha, the boar manifestation of Viṣṇu, from Udaigiri. Figure 4 shows a photo of the Udaigiri relief, along with the photo of a coin of Bhoja I. Clearly the images are in the same pose and the image on the coin is intended to look like the relief. But the fact that the coin image represents not the deity but the king is clear from the fact that his left foot is resting not on a demon, as in the relief, but on a lion. The lion may have represented the Rāṣtrakūṭas, rivals of the Pratihāras, as it was their dynastic symbol,⁹ and so the coin may have been intended to convey the message that, just as Varāha vanquished the demon to save the earth, Bhoja was vanquishing the "demon" Rāṣtrakūṭas to save the earth. Harihara I and Bukka I, in choosing to depict themselves as Hanumān, may well have been trying to evoke a similar parallel, asserting their great strength and perhaps also their loyalty. In particular, identifying themselves with Hanumān must have seemed particularly appropriate for the early kings of the Saṅgama dynasty, who were not of royal descent themselves, but, rather, were generals in the Hoysala army who now were taking power into their own hands. They may well have felt the need to claim loyalty in the face of their own disloyalty!

⁷ This is the description offered by Mitchiner, who refers to the figure as "Warrior walking right." See Michael Mitchiner: *The Coinage and History of Southern India, Part One: Karnataka – Andhra*, London: Hawkins Publications, 1998, p. 160.

⁸ Photo from the archives of the American Institute of Indian Studies, Accession No 23473, and reproduced by their kind permission. I thank Forrest McGill for bringing this photo to my attention and John Huntington for editing it to improve its quality.

⁹ This parallel may have first been suggested by Wilfried Pieper.



Figure 4: Relief of Varāha from Udaigiri and Silver Coin of Bhoja I Pratihāra

It is worth pointing out that the image of the “warrior walking right” used by the Vijayanagar kings was not their innovation but was borrowed from the king Irungola II of the Nidugal Cholas. The attribution of these coins is somewhat controversial. Mitchiner assigns them to the Chalukya king Someśvara IV, while Ganesh attributes them to the Kalāchuris.¹⁰ However, the legend, which reads *dānava murārī baṁṭa*, identifies them as issues of Irungola, who is known from an inscription dating to the year 1247 to have borne the title *dānava murārī*.¹¹ Thus it seems fairly certain that these coins belong to him. Figure 5 shows two coins of this king, gold varāhas that are normally identified as a Garuḍa type and a Hanumān type. The first coin shows a clear beak, making the description as Garuḍa seem very plausible. However, the second coin shows no beak, but it also shows no tail, nor does it show the protruding face that we would expect if this was intended to be Hanumān. Therefore, even though this image lacks the sword seen on the early Vijayanagar coins, I would argue that this is also not intended to be the deity but the king.



Figure 5: Gold coins of Irungola II of the Nidugal Cholas

¹⁰ See Mitchiner, *op. cit.*, type 282 and Ganesh, *op. cit.*, types 5.54-55.

¹¹ See Benjamin Lewis Rice: *Epigraphia Carnatica: Inscriptions in the Chitaldroog District*, Bangalore: Mysore Government Central Press, 1903, p. 19.

Garuḍa

Figure 6 shows the figure of Garuḍa from a pillar in the Kṛṣṇa Temple in Hampi, one of many such images in the temple, and a copper coin of Kṛṣṇadevarāya. The two images are clearly iconographically identical, with the winged Garuḍa depicted wearing a tall crown in a kneeling position with hands folded in a prayerful *namaskār*. They also date from the same time period; the connection between them is therefore unmistakable. We know that the primary gold type of Kṛṣṇadevarāya featured the image of Bālakṛṣṇa. So we have a coinage where the base metal copper coins depict the “servant” Garuḍa, while the precious metal gold coins feature the principal deity. This contrasts somewhat with the coinage of the early kings, where the copper coinage had the deity and the gold coinage featured the king!



Figure 6: Garuḍa from Kṛṣṇa Temple and Copper Coin of Kṛṣṇadevarāya

Narasimha

Figure 7 shows a relief from another pillar of the Kṛṣṇa Temple that depicts Narasimha, the lion-faced *avatar* of Lord Viṣṇu viewed frontally in a rather unusual pose. Again, there are a number of such images in the temple. The pose is duplicated on a copper coin attributed by Ganesh to Vira Narasimha (1505-1509), the brother of Kṛṣṇadevarāya. N. Sankara Narayana reports what may be similar coins in gold in the State Museum, Chennai. He describes two gold coins in that collection as “probably” belonging to Vira Narasimha, with the obverse being “A very crude figure in sitting posture, possibly the figure of Narasimha,” and a reverse consisting of a “Legend in Nagari in three lines possibly reading, Sri Pratapa Narasimha.”¹²

Another image of Narasimha that was used on coins is the statue of Narasimha in the Lakṣmī-Narasimha Temple at Hampi. The same image made its appearance not on Vijayanagar coins but on coins of the successor Mysore state; it appeared on the gold fanams of Kanṭhirava Narasa and Krishna Raja Wodeyar. Figure 8 shows images of the statue and of one of the gold fanams modelled on it. The fact that the coin is based on the statue is quite clear. Apart from the

¹² N. Sankara Narayana: *Catalogue of Vijayanagar Coins in the Madras Government Museum*, Madras: Commissioner of Museums, 1994, p. 47.

shape of the head and the posture, we have the unusual yoga band around the knees that makes the identification quite unmistakable.



Figure 7: Narasiṃha from Kṛṣṇa Temple and Copper Coin of Vira Narasiṃha¹³



Figure 8: Narasiṃha statue and Gold Fanam of Kanṭhirava Narasa¹⁴

Bālakṛṣṇa

An inscription standing at the entrance to the Kṛṣṇa Temple in Hampi tells us that the temple was built by Kṛṣṇadevarāya to house the statue of Bālakṛṣṇa that he had seized in Udayagiri in 1513 from the Gajapati king of present-day Odisha. The statue itself is now in the State Museum in Chennai. Figure 9 provides an image of that statue, along with a gold half varāha of Kṛṣṇadevarāya. Once again, it is quite clear that the coin image is based on the temple statue, an unusual adult-like pose for Bālakṛṣṇa. In particular, both images display the deity seated in *lalitāsana*, with his right foot hanging down in front of his tiered seat.

¹³ Coin photo from Ganesh, *op. cit.*, p. 135 (coin 9.82).

¹⁴ Photo of statue from Wikipedia.

Identifying the source of the coin image tells us a couple of things about the coinage of Kṛṣṇadevarāya that we might not know otherwise. First, we know that, after the overthrow of the Saṅgama dynasty, the production of coinage seemed to disappear from Vijayanagar. So far, no coins have been attributed to the Suluva dynasty (1485-1505), nor to the first king of the Tuluva dynasty, Narasa Nāyaka. His son, Vira Narasiṃha (1503-1509) is credited with a few very rare coins, such as the one illustrated in Figure 7. Thus, when Kṛṣṇadevarāya came to the throne in 1509, the Vijayanagar mints were not producing much, if any, coinage. The successful campaign against the Gajapatīs in 1513 must have yielded a large booty of gold and other plunder, and this enabled Kṛṣṇadevarāya to commence issuing coins in a big way. We know that his principal precious metal coinage is indeed the Bālakṛṣṇa type seen in Figure 9. We can therefore conclude that this coinage must have been initiated only after the campaign in Udayagiri in 1513.



Figure 9: Bālakṛṣṇa statue and Gold Half Varāha of Kṛṣṇadevarāya¹⁵



Figure 10: Gold Pagoda and Half Pagoda of Kṛṣṇadevarāya

A second observation on the coinage is that most of the Bālakṛṣṇa coins have a design that is slightly modified from the coin seen in Figure 9. Figure 10 shows a varāha and a half varāha of Kṛṣṇadevarāya; the vast majority of coins seen in collections and in the market look more like these coins than the one in Figure 9. The critical difference between the coins is that the coins in Figure 10 have the deity seated on a platform in what appears to be *sukḥāsana* or possibly *padmāsana* rather than the *lalitāsana* pose seen in Figure 9. The right foot is no longer

¹⁵ Statue photo from *The Hindu*.

hanging down, and the tiered seat has become more like a platform. For the last several years, I have been looking for coins similar to the one in Figure 9 but have found very few. Indeed, the only full pagoda of that type of which I am aware is a coin published by Ganesh in his book *Karnataka Coins*.¹⁶ The fact that some coins, such as the one in Figure 9, more accurately depict the original Bālakṛṣṇa statue that was installed in the Kṛṣṇa Temple suggests that these coins were the earliest ones in the series, produced at the principal mint, while the more common coins of the Figure 10 type were produced later, perhaps even at different mints. This observation could serve as a first step in a die analysis of Kṛṣṇadevarāya's coins.

In conclusion, I would argue that identifying the images seen on coins with sculptural images is a fruitful exercise, not only for the sheer interest, but also because the parallels can shed light on the coinage and the historical context in which that coinage was made.

¹⁶ Ganesh, *op. cit.*, type 9.84, p. 137 (first coin on the page).