The Zodiacal and Portrait Coins of Emperor Jahangir: Art and Poetry in Circulation

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Noor ud-Din Muhammad Jahangir succeeded his father Akbar as the fourth Mughal emperor on 3 November 1605. He inherited a prosperous and well-administered empire, which stretched from Kashmir and Kabul to the North, to Bengal in the East, Gujarat in the west and part of the Deccan plateau in the South. His reign is often considered to be the beginning of a period of apogee for Mughal Art and Architecture, which continued during the reign of successor, Shahjahan.

Jahangir was one of the few Indian rulers who was actively interested and intimately connected to his coinage. Mughal coinage followed the tenets of Islamic kingship in which the right of *Sikka* or to have coins struck in the king's name constituted a fundamental validation of the ruler. As we know from salient mentions in his memoir, the *Tuzuq-i Jahangiri* and as evident from his coins, he had a personal interest in what the coins struck in his name depict. He appears to have developed an acute sensibility about coins and how, as a circulatory medium of exchange, they reflect the royal ideology and contribute to his image amongst his subjects. Jahangir's coins are considered a paragon of Mughal coin design, with several features such as calligraphic variations, ornamental borders and inclusion of decorative elements, which reflect on high artistic merits of artisans that produced them. Poetic verse inscriptions in Farsi constitute a prominent element of the designs, reflecting on Jahangir's role as a veritable patron of 'arts and letters'.

Two particular instances of Jahangir's coins make his coinage stand out in not only just Mughal, but also the much wider subject of Islamic Numismatics. The King, in the Islamic ideal of kingship, is the 'shadow of the Divine' and coinage is one of the rights that legitimise his kingship. As such, figural representation on coins meets with a general disapproval in Islam. However, in the sixth year of his reign, Jahangir did something highly unusual. He issued gold 'coins' with a specific purpose. They were, as indicated by the Mughal historian Khafi Khan, to be given to his acolytes or 'disciples' and 'sincere followers', who were to 'wear them in their turbans, or on their breast-front on a sash', as a special gift as 'life-preserving amulets' to show that they had been graced by imperial favour. These coins had the impression of the emperor's likeness (*shabih*) on one side and the Iranian motif of a lion with the rising sun as a backdrop, on the other.

Jahangir records the genesis of this idea in his memoirs. The pieces appear to straddle a multitude of functions – as Jahangir himself notes they were talismanic and carried a protective quality that derived from the king's bodily merit or *Baraka*. In this way, they were

similar to the European ‘touch pieces’ – coins that were distributed by the king – which were made into medals and worn by elite individuals to protect them from epidemic diseases such as plague. But the coins also offered the receiver another rare opportunity and that was to ‘see’ the king at his will. The ritual of *Darshan*, or royal sighting, formed an important part of Mughal court culture under Jahangir’s father Akbar. He would present himself at dawn at a specially designated balcony window and offer his sight to the public. Jahangir continued this practice and in fact the depictions on these special coins show him being at the *Darshan* window with his hand resting on its balustrade. The offer of the coin from the king meant that the recipient did not have to rely on this ritual or indeed, a requirement to come the court to see the king. He could have an object, which facilitated the *Darshan* for him as a special favour. Amongst the receivers of these pieces were foreign dignitaries who visited Jahangir’s court such as the English ambassador Thomas Roe and the French-Italian jeweller Augustine Hiriart a.k.a. *Hunnarmand* . The choice of these individuals reflects on the significance of international presence at his court.

During 1615-1619, Jahangir moved his court to Ajmer for three years while pursuing a campaign against the rebellious Ranas of Mewar. In the ninth year of his reign while at Ajmer, a spectacular gold coins bearing Jahangir’s portrait was struck. It shows the Emperor seated on a hexagonal throne in full royal splendour, reclining against a brocaded bolster and carrying in his hand what appears to be a wine cup. Many numismatists have suggested this shows the emperor in fond attachment to his favourite affliction, labelling the depiction as a ‘Bacchanalian portrait’. Jahangir’s love for intoxicants is well documented but he was also acutely aware of the poisonous effects of alcohol. Moreover, the portrait clearly depicts Jahangir at his court, where sobriety was expected and implemented rigorously. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that the Emperor here is shown in the act of consuming alcohol. The Mughals treated precious cups as objects of high artisanship. They were given as special gifts to important persons – indeed, Jahangir presented Thomas Roe with a highly priced cup. Depicting the king admiring such an object reflected on his role as patron of high art. It is more plausible to regard Jahangir shown doing precisely this, than to imagine him drinking wine while at court.

The coins are also noteworthy for the poetry they bear. Around the effigy of Jahangir, a verse proclaims -

On face of gold did Destiny delineate

Jahangir the Emperor’s portrait

The reference to ‘fate’ or ‘destiny’ (*Qizah* in Farsi) is a strong indication of the king’s belief in fatalism and the role of ‘destiny’ in shaping the kingly fortune.

On the other side, there is another Farsi verse, arranged above and below the central sunburst motif, which says –

The letters of ‘Jahangir’ and ‘Allahu Akbar’,

were from Eternity equal in number

There is an interesting element to this mathematics – the ‘number’ mentioned here is the sum of numerical value attached to each letter in the respective words by a mystical Islamic system called ‘Abjad’. On 26th day of the Persian month of Aban of his ninth regnal year,

Jahangir makes an entry in his memoirs. Upon entering the city of Ajmer a mystic came unto him and brought to his notice that the words 'Jahangir' and the 'Supreme Name' or *Ism-i-'Azam* ('Allahu Akbar') add up to the same total according to the tenets of the 'Abjad' system. "Considering this a good omen", Jahangir writes, "I presented the discoverer of this coincidence with land, a horse, cash and clothing". The couplet on the reverse invokes exactly the same sentiment of equivalence so in all likelihood, this encounter must have led to its composition and engraving on the coin.

In the thirteenth year of his reign, Jahangir notes another idea in his memoirs. It had been the practice in Akbar's reign to denote the month and the year of issue on coins. Akbar instituted the *Ilahi* or 'Divine' calendar, which followed Persian solar months and an era that began from his accession. In Jahangir's reign, the Divine Era of Akbar was discontinued but the months remained a feature of coin inscription. "It entered my mind", Jahangir writes, "that in place of the month they should substitute the figure of the constellation which belonged to that month". The outcome of this decision was a coinage, in silver and gold, bearing the signs of the Zodiac. "This usage is my own and has never been practised until now", claimed Jahangir. However, this is not entirely true, as we know that the Romans issued such coins. Some Islamic rulers, such as the Turcoman Atabegs of Mesopotamia, also issued coins with celestial motifs such as Zodiacal signs and personification of planets.

This was once again a move drastically away from the tenets of an Islamic coinage, perhaps considered even more heretical than depicting the king's image. These coins were intended for general circulation, unlike the portrait coins struck for a specific courtly purpose. Numismatists have studied the date and regnal year combinations and their correspondence to mint name mentioned on the coins, to note that they were issued only from places where the king was present. This sheds an interesting light on the peripatetic nature of the Mughal court. Thus, we see that the Zodiacal coins were issued from Agra, Ajmer, Ahmadabad, Lahore and Kashmir. A rare and unusual issue was prompted at Fatehpur while Jahangir made a temporary halt here as a plague epidemic raged in Agra, and an issue from a mobile mint that moved with the imperial camp (*Urdu*) is also known.

The Zodiacal coinage of Jahangir marks a numismatic genre of exceptional interest for its art and beauty. The signs are shown against the backdrop of the 'rising sun' and in some instances, more than one representations of a particular sign are known. The artistic merit of these coins remains high irrespective of where the coins are struck. It has also been observed that the dies with the depiction of the sign were recirculated in successive years, sometimes after making appropriate alterations such as re-engraving some features like the date.

While numismatists have studied the Zodiacal coins in detail, historians of Mughal art have not paid much attention to them. The depictions of Zodiac signs provide an important insight into the Mughal imaginary about cosmological objects. Some of the depictions, particularly those involving human or half-human elements, have undoubted vestiges of influence from European art. Noteworthy here are Sagittarius, Gemini and Virgo. The rendering of musculature of the Centaur figure for Sagittarius and the cherub-like chubbiness of the twin Gemini babies hugging each other are a case in point. By far the most significant example of European influence is the angel-like, kneeling figure of Virgo, depicted from an unusual perspective and bearing wings. On the other hand, some other depictions are directly comparable to the indigenous Mughal style. The realistic images of Aries (ram), Leo (lion)

and Taurus (bull) are examples of such a comparison. The anatomy of invertebrate creatures like Scorpio (scorpion) and Cancer (crab) is engraved with astute detailing which makes them comparable to the more famous paintings of exotic animals known from master painters of Jahangir's court, such as Mansur. These parallelisms remind us that the art of Mughal coins is very much a part of the wider world of Mughal decorative art and paintings and its genres.

Beautiful as they were, the inherent heresy in the design of the Zodiacal coins meant that their circulation was called off by Shahjahan, Jahangir's successor, who was of a more traditional religious temperament than his father was. The recall might have caused several coins to be melted down. However, due to their outstanding beauty and rarity, the Zodiacal coins very quickly came to be regarded as highly collectable, particularly by European collectors. Recent research by Dr Andrew Burnett shows that the English royal coin collection contained at least six gold Zodiacal coins when Elias Ashmole catalogued it in 1660. The late 17th century French traveller to India, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, notes that certain varieties were so hard to be found, that "an hundred crowns have been paid for one of them".

The desirability of these coins for collectors prompted their imitations. Made by private individuals and often struck in good gold, these later imitations bear telltale signs, such as a noticeably inferior style of execution, suggesting they are not the products of an imperial Mughal mint. These imitations were used as 'fillers' to hold spaces till the collector could acquire a genuine piece. Sometimes, entire sets of imitations were made for collectors. A leather wallet with French royal markings, made to carry such a set of imitations exists in the collection of Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.