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Exhibition Review: Roman Coins in South India

The Centenary Exhibition Hall, Government Museum, Chennai

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Early this year, the Madras Government Museum (Chennai) took the rare step of exhibiting some of its significant collection of Roman gold and silver coins discovered in India. Created in conjunction with the Italian Embassy Cultural Centre (New Delhi) and the Indo-Italian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Chennai), the exhibition offered a short introduction to Indo-Roman trade, and successfully publicised the Roman finds from south India, of which the Madras Government Museum has the largest public collection in India.¹

Held in the Centenary Exhibition Hall, at the heart of the Museum's large Egmore complex, this display represented a significant positive move towards engaging public interest in the pre-modern history of the sub-continent. It was also, arguably, a lost opportunity to address publicly some of the tangled complexities surrounding the subject of Indo-Roman trade.

These strengths and weaknesses were both demonstrated and to a great extent created by the exhibition layout. Arranged around the edge of a round hall, with the starting point and direction clearly marked to the guest's left on entering, the exhibition was easy to follow. On the other hand, it was not an inspiring use of a creative and bright space, but rather left the guest clinging to the walls, requiring conformity to the organisers' narrative rather than the creation of new interpretations or juxtapositions. The podium at the front of the hall, with a table and seating for

¹ The exhibition confined itself to the Museum collection, despite the fact that the Krishnamurthy Collection of Roman copper coins from Tamil Nadu is located in Chennai. Given Krishnamurthy's willingness to publish his collection and engage with scholarship, this oversight certainly represents a missed opportunity, but must be viewed in light of the general separation which exists in India between the Museum community and private collectors, and will not receive further comment here.

delegates still laid out in front of the exhibition poster partially explains this design. A remnant from the opening ceremony, this arrangement left the exhibition hall looking like a cross between a museum display and a themed conference, and further reduced the sense of freedom to explore or move freely between different parts of the exhibition.

A similar rigidity and uncomfortable relationship between public display and academic discourse underlay the arrangement of display cases. On one hand, they were clean, bright and not over-stuffed with poorly contextualised objects. On the other hand, they sat in deep tension with each other and the explanatory boards provided. This was particularly well-illustrated by the arrangement of the first and third cabinets. The first contained bowls of spices, a tortoiseshell and a stuffed peacock in a visual but simplified summary of the Indian goods traded to Rome. The third case (and other subsequent coin cabinets), in contrast, contained the coins mounted at eye-level beside an enlargement and descriptions more suited to a numismatic catalogue than a public display. The name and regnal dates of the issuing emperor were accompanied by telegraphic descriptions such as 'left bust' or '*Roma seated*'.

Given the generally limited knowledge of the Classical West in India, some information about the emperors named, or even their political or cultural context would have been helpful. Instead, the Roman Empire in this exploration of Indo-Roman trade stood aloft throughout like the long shadow of Eurocentrism. While the contemporaneous social organisation of Tamil Nadu was sketched with reference to Tamil poetry, the guest was left feeling that one simply *ought* to know about Rome.

If this suggests that some of the themes of the exhibition belonged to an earlier period of scholarship, its unambiguous and uncontested narrative confirmed this view. For a scholar of Indo-Roman trade, its most striking feature was undoubtedly a tendency to submerge all debate in favour of streamlined interpretation.

Slash marks, for example, which are found on numerous Roman coins in India have multiple possible explanations. Indeed, they are the focus of long-running and

unresolved debate.² The exhibition hints at this uncertainty with the phrase 'scholars opine' before expounding only the theory that slash marks put the coins out of 'official' circulation. It would, however, have been more helpful to give the visitor a summary of the various arguments put forward. The exhibition overall was compact and uncluttered, so there would certainly have been space, both physically and intellectually, for such a discussion. This approach would have broadened the audience's perception of Indo-Roman trade as a contested and dynamic space.

Another example concerns imitation coins, which were mentioned as having been produced when the Roman originals were insufficient to meet local economic demand. This neatly circumvented a plethora of problems concerning the uses of the original coinage in the Indian economy, let alone the use of some imitations which could in no way have been intended to have functioned as economic forgeries (due to dramatic differences in weight and style from their prototypes).

If any other major criticism may be levelled at the exhibition it was an agenda, discernible to the informed, but far from transparent to the casual viewer. The various Italian agencies, which sponsored the exhibition, must be viewed in light of the 2007 study (made possible by the Development Cooperation Office of the Embassy of Italy, New Delhi), which proposed amongst other things, significant commercial development of the 'Indo-Roman trading' site of Arikamedu. This included the suggestion that a 'leisure zone' attached to the site might heighten visitor attraction.³ It is therefore interesting that the site of Arikamedu received such prominence. Undoubtedly, it is an interesting site in the context of the development of modern Indian archaeology but it is no longer most significant for the creation of new information.⁴

For all of these faults, however, the exhibition is largely to be commended. It told an unambiguous story where much ambiguity exists, but it did tell a story, which was

² For some of the main strands of this debate see: P. Turner (1989) 29-40; T. MacDowall Hellings (1998); A. M. Shastri (1992) 129.

³ S. Suresh (2007) 85-92.

⁴ In contrast, the recently discovered site at Pattinam in Kerala, currently being excavated and believed by its excavation team to be the Muziris of Roman literature, was not mentioned.

easy to follow and likely to have been largely new to most visitors. It also put on display original coins in the Museum collection, which is not usual museum practice in India for security reasons. Finally, for a short exhibition on a comparatively obscure subject, by the time of my visit (on its penultimate day) I was the 455th person to sign the guestbook. The majority of these visitors left short but positive comments, in particular about the interest value of seeing original coins. The exhibition also received quite significant newspaper attention.⁵ Thus, as a means of providing public space for the subject area and engaging public interest, the exhibition can be regarded as having had moderate success.

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⁵ For an overview see: D. Madhavan (2011); Ramakrishnan (2011), Special Correspondent (2011).

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