A spate of new tooled forgeries of Kushan and Pāratarāja Coins

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One of the banes of the coin collector is the presence of forgeries in the coin market. Forgeries can come in many forms. Some are complete fantasies, purporting to be unique, exotic new types such as the coin pictured in Figure 1. Others are very well-

![Figure 1: Fantasy “Indo-Parthian” gold coin](image)

made copies of known coins, perhaps high-pressure cast copies of actual examples, where the best, maybe even the only, way to recognize the fakes is to spot mould replicates – exact copies of one another. The two coins in Figure 2 present an example of this that was discussed recently on the South Asia Coins Discussion Group. No two ancient coins are exactly alike. With die struck coins, there were always at least small differences in the centering and depth of the strikes, and even with cast coins there would always be some differences in the casting. Plus on all ancient coins there would be differences in wear over the years. Thus when we see two coins as identical as the two in Figure 2, we can be quite sure they are modern forgeries. A third type of forgery is the tooled forgery, and that is the subject of this brief note. I have noticed a number of tooled forgeries recently of Kushan and Pāratarāja coins, and I thought it worthwhile to bring these to the attention of collectors.

A tooled forgery is a coin where a forger has taken a genuine coin and has then used tools to either “enhance” the detail on the coin or to alter the coin in some significant way. Tools are also sometimes used to clean coins. Some coins may emerge from the ground so heavily encrusted that it is impossible to tell what the coin is.
Cleaning such coins may sometimes involve picking away at the encrustations with fine tools such as dental picks, and this process can leave scratches on the coin, particularly if the cleaning is being performed by a relatively unskilled worker. Thus it can sometimes be difficult to spot a tooled forgery, as the presence of scratch marks around the details of the coin may not be conclusive evidence of chicanery. But when one gets to know a coinage well, it becomes easier to distinguish tooled forgeries from simply badly cleaned coins.

The first example I will offer is a silver drachm of the Pāratarāja king Miratakhaṃa. The first panel in Figure 3 shows the coin photo as I first saw it, while panel (b) repositions the obverse by turning it slightly. We see that the forger mistook the coin to feature a right-facing bust and tooled it to enhance the portrait. But he had misunderstood the coin, which in fact features a left-facing bust. We can see it quite clearly in panel (b), particularly when we compare it with the coin in panel (c), a genuine coin struck with the same obverse die. In retrospect, the portrait in panel (a) now looks obviously tooled. Note the tell-tale “edge” created in front of the face in the right field, marking the point on the surface of the coin where the forger commenced “digging” into the coin to create the face. The details of the portrait also look obviously incorrect. This coin tipped me off that there was at least one workshop where Pāratarāja coins were being tooled, and led me to examine other coins with a greater sense of skepticism.

Figure 2: Mould Replicate Forgeries of a Satavahana coin
Figure 3: Tooled and genuine drachms of Miratakhma

(a) Tooled coin with right-facing bust

(b) Same coin with obverse turned to emphasize actual left-facing bust

(c) Genuine coin struck with the same obverse die
The second example is a similar one ... a Pāratarāja coin where the portrait has been tooled in an attempt to enhance its detail, seen in panel (a) of Fig. 4. This time the coin is a billon drachm of the Pāratarāja king Bhimarjuna. Once again, the reverse has been left untouched, only the obverse portrait has been tampered with to “improve” its appearance. Although there is not enough original detail on the coin to identify a die match, panel (b) of the figure shows a genuine version of the same type. We can see the outline of the hair on the tooled coin, but little else. Compared to the genuine coin, we see immediately that the details of the portrait are wrong. We also see the tell-tale “edge” where the forger started to modify the surface in front of the face on the tooled coin. Some might say that this coin is not a forgery at all, but just one that has been heavily tooled to enhance its appeal. I would say, however, if the tooling has been so heavy as to significantly change the coin to the point where it might be regarded as a new type, that we should regard it as a forgery.

Figure 4: Tooled and genuine drachms of Bhimarjuna
A third example is another Pāratarāja coin that had me fooled enough that I published the coin as genuine. But after seeing the previous two coins, I decided to re-examine it, and I have now concluded that it is false. I believe the coin was originally a normal quarter drachm of the Pāratarāja Yolamira. Figure 5 shows the coin in panel (a) along with a genuine coin struck with the same obverse die (and possibly the same reverse die) in panel (b). Here, both sides of the coin have been heavily tooled. We see the now-familiar “edges” on both the front and the back. Details around the neck and the back of the head show that the obverse die matches the one on coin (b), but the facial features have been entirely created. More egregious is the reverse. When it emerged from the ground, the reverse must have been very heavily encrusted: we see the remnants of that encrustation around the edges of the coin even now. So the coin presented a blank slate and the forger had to decide what to create on it. Since almost all Pāratarāja coins have a swastika on the reverse, it must have seemed logical to the forger to insert a swastika here as well. But the Yolamira quarter drachms actually do not have a swastika reverse, as we see from the coin in panel (b). Unfortunately the actual reverse design has been obliterated in the process of tooling the coin.

Figure 5: Quarter drachms of Yolamira
The little information I have about the origin of these coins is that they are found in the area of Loralai in Pakistani Balochistan, but they then make their way to the bazaars of Peshawar. It could well be that the forgery workshop is active in the Peshawar area, not far from the village where the famous 19th century “Utmanzai” forgeries were made. These examples suggest that collectors buying coins that may have been sourced in that area of the world should watch carefully for signs of tooling, particularly for the “edges” created when the forger starts to dig into the coin surface in order to create a sculptural element.

It was this awareness that has led me to also identify within the past year a number of Kushan bronzes with “Buddha” reverses that appear to have been manufactured by tooling other coin types. Given the big price disparity between the Buddha coins and other bronzes, this would certainly be a lucrative activity if successful. Exposure of these forgeries is therefore desirable as a way to warn collectors.

All these coins were circulating in the trade market. Coin 6(a), offered as a Buddha coin, is quite clearly not one at all, but a more common reverse such as Miiro or Mao. Here, rather than re-carving the coin to “enhance” detail, the forger has attempted to smooth down elements of the coin, such as the normal raised right arm, in order to make it appear as a front-facing Buddha. Coin (b) may have been a Buddha to start with, but the area around the tamgha is clearly tooled and the tamgha itself is not the original. This casts doubt on the entire coin. Close examination reveals a change in the patina of the coin around the figure, marking a sort of “edge” where the tooling took place. Coins (c) and (d) are clearly tooled, with noticeable changes in the surface patina and identifiable “edges” around the figures showing where the genuine parts of the coins end. Coin (e) has had the entire reverse re-engineered, even to the extent of a created legend BOΔΔO, which appears on the gold coins but never on the bronzes. Finally, coin (f) is a smaller denomination drachm or quarter unit, on which the original deity has been carved away to be replaced by a seated Buddha and the BOΔΔO legend. Incidentally, none of these reverses matched any of the dies shown in the detailed study of Buddha bronzes by Cribb.9

Since these coins are normally found quite worn, it is not unsurprising to see examples in poor condition such as the ones shown here. Readers are advised to exercise care in buying these coins!
Fig. 6: Tooled “Buddha” bronzes of Kanishka

Lastly, I recently saw the photo of a rather unusual coin that had been sent to the British Museum for identification. The coin, seen in Figure 7, is a normal Kanishka coin.
tetradrachm or full unit, with a deity, most probably Athsho, on the reverse, but with an additional seated figure (a “Buddha” according to the person who sent it to the Museum) at right. If genuine, this coin would be unique, and would cry out for an explanation and interpretation of its reverse. However, it is probably not genuine, but rather a new type of tooled forgery where an entirely new design element has been carved onto a genuine coin. In the colour photograph I had at my disposal, the patina around the seated figure and the head of the deity is a fresh copper colour, entirely different from the rest of the coin, which is a normal dark green. Since I have not held the coin in hand, I cannot be absolutely certain about my conclusion. In hand, one could check to see whether the seated figure is in relief or whether the high points are lower than a proper relief would indicate. But the change in patina around the seated figure serves to provide the tell-tale “edge” that the tooled forgeries all seem to have. Further, I am fairly certain that the reverse is actually struck from the same die as Göbl 772.5, a Kanishka bronze with Athsho reverse. The seated figure on the coin in Figure 7 has been carved onto the area of the flan where the legend AθþO would have been. I believe I detect the bottom of the letter O below the seated figure, just where it would have been on the die of Göbl 772.5. If I am correct, this would be conclusive evidence that the coin is a tooled forgery.

This coin calls to mind another unusual Kushan coin that was recently published as genuine: an elephant-rider Huvishka bronze showing “Siva cursing Apasmarapurusa,” and one begins to wonder if this also is a tooled forgery. The coin’s reverse showed a normal four-armed Siva, with the legend ΟηþO at right, but a seated figure at left where the tamgha normally would be. The presence of this figure is what was interesting and unique about this coin and made its publication worthwhile. But, after seeing the coin in Figure 7, it behooves us to question the genuineness of the Huvishka coin also … it could be the product of the same workshop, working with the same idea of adding figures to otherwise normal coins. The figure on the Huvishka coin interrupts the circular dotted border of the reverse design, rendering it clear that the figure was not an element of the original design. Was it added as an afterthought by the original die-cutter? Or was it added by a modern forger, attempting to create an interesting, unique, coin out of a common bronze? If the latter, it was obviously done well enough to fool experts such as Bopearachchi and Pieper.

Figure 8: A genuine Huvishka bronze with a die flaw
In Figure 8, I illustrate a coin from my collection, a bronze Huvishka elephant-rider with OnηO reverse. I was looking to see if I had a die-match to the Bopearachchi-Pieper coin and I don’t think this is one, although it is very close. What caught my eye on my coin was the die flaw that has developed around the tamgha area on the reverse. Quite possibly a pit developed in the die as the tamgha details broke down, giving rise to a protuberance on the coins once struck. On my coin, the result is a shapeless blob of metal on the surface of the coin. But I could imagine that, in the hands of a forger bent upon creating new and interesting coin types, such a blob of metal could be turned into a seated figure similar to the one on the Bopearachchi-Pieper coin or the one in Figure 7.

Knowing that there is a workshop, perhaps somewhere in the Peshawar area, hard at work at altering ancient coins is a sobering thought, and one that makes it incumbent upon all collectors of coins from the area, especially Kushan coins, to be very cautious in evaluating new or unusual coin types that appear in the market.

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1. I wish to thank Peter Linenthal for many helpful discussions centering around Buddha coins and for sharing some photographs with me.
2. According to Joe Lang, coins such as this one are being manufactured in western China.
3. The first coin was presented by Wilfried Pieper and the second coin by Shailendra Bhandare, who noticed they were mould replicates. My thanks to Wilfried and Shailen for permission to publish the coins here.
4. I thank Jan Lingen for showing me this coin and permitting me to publish it.
5. In a way, the forger’s mistake is understandable and shows a decent knowledge of Pāratarāja coinage. All silver Pāratarāja coins other than this Miratakhma type feature a right-facing bust. Thus it would be natural to assume or look for a right-facing bust on this coin too.
6. My thanks to Alex Fishman for permission to publish this coin.
8. I suspect some very slight tooling around the nose of the coin in panel (b) as well.
10. I thank Robert Bracey for bringing this and the next discussed coin to my attention.