

Legacy of the Indian 'Gymnosophists' through Greek Sources

ABDUL SAMAD

The naked philosophers of India, the so-called 'Gymnosophists' were mentioned frequently by the classical authors. This direct encounter with Indian doctrine left remarkable traces on the subsequent history of Macedonians.

According to Greek classical sources, the names of at least two Brahmins are preserved, (a) *Calanus/Kalanus*, who joined Alexander in 326 BCE near Taxila and (b) *Dandamis*, who refused to submit to the Macedonians. Some of the classical sources portrayed Alexander the Great as a seeker for truth, the reason being that for nearly two years, *Calanus* was present in Alexander's court and enjoyed royal goodwill.¹

Megasthenese,² Arrian and Diodorus reported that *Calanus* accompanied Alexander to the west. *Calanus* was troubled by a constant abdominal complaint, and, rather than treatment, he insisted on suicide. With Alexander's unwilling permission, he had a pyre constructed. He jumped in that and was burned alive before a large audience. According to Diodorus (17.107.5, cf Bosworth 1998: 179), the suicide evoked sharply contrasting comments. Some admired *Calanus*' courage; others condemned his death as insanity or empty arrogance.

Consequently, to commit a suicide by burning oneself into flames emerged as a formal and accepted manner of death among the Macedonians, especially when *Calanus* suicide was ceremonially re-enacted for Augustus in 20 BCE. A similar case was with the suicide of *Peregrinus* at Olympia.³

Megasthenese visited Punjab in around 319 BCE⁴, and had discussions with the Brahmins of Taxila who showed a hostile attitude towards *Calanus* due to his act of suicide. So far, this legacy of naked ascetics and their inspiration of the Greeks are confined to literary evidence, but before taking this discussion into more detail, it should be remarked that the Sanskrit equivalent of *Calanus* is '*Kalyāṇa*', which means the auspicious or prosperous.

A short paper published by O. Bopearachchi (1995: 8-9) presented an unusual type of coin type, issued by the Indo-Greek king Telephus (Figure 1). The date and succession of this king is still the matter of a controversial debate among numismatists. Cunningham placed him in 135 BCE, succeeding Hippostratus. He was followed by Whitehead who dated Telephus contemporary to Maues. According to Mitchiner, he ruled between 80 and 75 BCE. Interestingly, Tarn even called him a usurper (1957: 313) and hesitated to call him a king.⁵ In this article, we assume an approximate date of around 80 BCE.⁶ Our main concern, however, is the iconography and palaeography of his coinage, which has largely been ignored so far. The square copper coin depicted in Figure 1 can be described as follows:

Obverse: Zeus is sitting on a high throne and leaning to left with a sceptre in his left hand, while the right hand is outstretched. The Greek legend on the margin reads: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΤΗΛΕΦΟΥ

Reverse: A naked ascetic squatting on the rocks, and holding a branch of tree on his shoulder.⁷ The objects in front of him can be discerned as a *kamaṇḍalu* and a fire altar. The Kharoṣṭhī legend reads: *maharajasa kalaṇakramasa telephasa*.

This interesting coin shows two major aspects: (1) the naked ascetic (gymnosophist) on the reverse, and (2) the legend inscribed on this coin. Generally, on the obverse of the Indo-Greek coins, we find the portrait of the king, while the reverse side shows a Greek deity. According to this, we could interpret the naked male figure in terms of replacing the standard Greek deity.

Telephus's coin is the only example of the depiction of an Indian Brahman among the Indo-Greek coinage. Furthermore, the Gandhāri *kalaṇakramasa* seems to be the same as Sanskrit *kalyāṇakrama*, which is the epithet of *euergetos* (ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ), which means 'auspicious deed or prospers deed'. This legend is interesting in combination with the Brahman figure. Telephus was the second Indo-Greek ruler after Antimachus Nikephorus who did not use his own portrait on coins. In fact, the legend '*kalaṇakramasa*' is not only used on the Brahman type, but also on some of his other issues. The coin in Figure 2 shows on its obverse a triton with the Greek legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΤΗΛΕΦΟΥ, and on the reverse a Helios radiate and Selene with the Kharoṣṭhī legend: *maharajasa kalaṇakramasa telephasa*. This legend shows the standard epithet Telephus, which does not only refer to the Brahman on the reverse, but also to the king himself.

The figure of Brahman is depicted as a squatting bearded old man holding a staff on his shoulder with a *kamaṇḍalu* placed in front of him and the fire altar. It may be noted that altar is not the usual Persian fire altar but is of a typical Indian type. The ascetic is sitting on rocks. Its visual appearance can be compared with the description of Indian 'Gymnosophists' of the Alexanderian period. One can pose the interesting question as to why Telephus as an Indo-Greek king should depict an Indian Brahman on his coin instead of a Greek deity. It is too simple to assume – as Tarn did – that he was a follower of non-Greek beliefs. It seems to be more probable, that he took up Alexander's attitude as 'a truth seeker'. At the same time, he might have used a Brahman portrait to gain the support of the local population, especially in the declining period of Indo-Greek power. It cannot be excluded that the depiction of a Brahman on Telephus' coin was influenced by his epithet *kalyāṇakarma*, a translation of the Greek *euergetos*. It is quite possible that this Indian rendering recalled the name of Calanus (Skt. *kalyāṇa*), the popular 'gymnosophist' who met Alexander the Great and was even living in his court. By depicting an Indian Brahman Telephus took up this tradition and presented himself as a 'true follower' of Alexander the Great.

Telephus' coin is significant in several respects: firstly, it is the only example of an Indo-Greek ruler who used the portrait of a Brahman, and secondly, it also contributes to our knowledge of the early popular religious beliefs of the Indian northwest. The influence of Greek mythology is common in early northwestern religion, but 'the integration of the northwestern beliefs by the Greeks' is a much less popular phenomenon. Therefore, the period of Telephus could be considered as an early and yet unexplored phase of the Indianization of foreign religious ideas.⁸

Notes

1. There are several Greek references mentioning Calanus meetings with Alexander and later his suicide, i.e. Strabo. 15.1.68 (717). Arrian 7.3.1-2 mentions Calanus' illness and determination to die; for other general

account Diodorus. 17.107.1-5; and Plut. Al.69.6-70.2; Ael.VH 5.6., Arrian. 7.3.6 and 7.13.2, 14.7, 24.2, 7.3.2, 15.1.68 (717), 11.11.3 (515), Plut: Al.69.7. Diodotus: 17.106.5, Onesicritus, who witnessed the suicide of Calanus also mentioned it in FGrH 134 F 18.

2. FGrH715 F 34a. cf. Strabo: 15.1.68 (718).
3. Strabo. 15.1.73, 720. cf. Bosworth: 1998; 177.
4. Arrian Indica. 5.3 and Arr. 7.2.4 (FGrH 715 F 34b).
5. Even though Telephus used the title 'maharajasa', the great king.
6. This date is the most agreeable among numismatics, beside here the intention is not to jump in the discussion of Telephus' 'Date and succession'.
7. Usually in Gandharan iconography, the Brahman is shown using tree branch as a staff.
8. Agathocles was the first to depict Saṃkrṣṇa and Vāsudeva on his coins.

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3