

# PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

**Cambridge Antiquarian Society,**

25 JANUARY—15 MARCH 1909.

WITH

## **Communications**

MADE TO THE SOCIETY

LENT TERM 1909.

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Monday, 25 January, 1909.

Dr VENN, President, in the Chair.

Professor RAPSON, M.A., delivered a lecture, of which the following is a *résumé*, illustrated with many lantern slides of inscriptions and coins, on

**EARLY INDIAN HISTORY.**

At the meeting of the Antiquarian Society on Monday, January 25, Professor Rapson gave a lecture on 'Early Indian history illustrated by inscriptions and coins.' He began by observing that the ancient classical literatures of India, when compared with those of Greece and Rome, showed one marked peculiarity—they included absolutely no works of a professedly historical character. In all the vast field occupied by Sanskrit, Pali or Prakrit, during the period from about 1200 B.C. to 1000 A.D., there was not to be discovered a single writer who could be compared to Thucydides or Livy. When the existence of these literatures was first revealed to Western eyes, a hundred

and twenty-five years ago, the early history of India was found to be a complete blank. Its outlines have since been gradually recovered chiefly from the monuments. '*Factum abiit, monumenta manent.*' Chief among these sources of history are the inscriptions on stone or copper-plate and the coins of the various dynasties which have ruled in India. The object of the lecture was to show about forty lantern-slide views of some of the most important of these monuments and to explain how the evidence supplied by them had made such a reconstruction of history possible; and the historical survey was not carried beyond the period of the Gupta empire which began to decline about 480 A.D. The political conditions of ancient India differed from those of India at the present day chiefly in two respects. The North-Western corner, which it was now the object of all Indian statesmanship to keep closed against any possible Alexander, was not then secured; and through this opening there burst from time immemorial wave after wave of foreign invasion—Persian, Greek or Scythian. On the other hand, the continent of India itself was occupied by a great number of separate kingdoms, one or other of which from time to time rose into power and became a great empire at the expense of its neighbours. Both of these main features in early Indian history—foreign invasions from the North-West, and the growth and decline of native powers—could still be traced to some extent in inscriptions and coinages after almost every other trace of their existence had been swept away by time. Perhaps the most interesting of the inscriptions illustrated were some of the edicts of the emperor Aśoka (250 B.C.), the grandson of Chandragupta, the *Σανδρόκοττος* of Alexander's historians. These edicts engraved on rocks or pillars are found on the confines of an empire which extended on the north beyond the limits of the British dominion and included much of what is now known as Afghanistan, while it occupied the whole of the Indian peninsula except the extreme south. Their chronological importance consists chiefly in the fact that they contain the mention of five contemporary Hellenic sovereigns whose dates are known with approximate certainty, while they afford evidence by means of which the date of Buddha's death may

be calculated. The earliest of the coins shown were those of Sophytes, an Indian king contemporary with Alexander the Great, and certain curious pieces of square shape which, being little more than weights of metal stamped with the marks of the money-changers through whose hands they had passed, represent a stage in the evolution of currency in India. Especially interesting from the artistic point of view were the large silver coins of the Greek kings of Bactria, whose portraits are among the most life-like to be found in antiquity. Of numerous other objects shown in illustration of the period selected, another series of silver coins may be referred to as affording a striking instance of successful reconstruction. From about 120 A.D. to 390 A.D., there reigned in Gujarat a dynasty of about thirty members known as the 'Western Satraps,' the Indian title *kshatrapa*, like the Greek *σατράπης*, denoting Persian origin. As each of these princes includes in his coin-legends not only the name of his father, but also the date of the coin (in years of the Çaka era beginning in 78 A.D.), it has been possible, now that the coins have been carefully collected and studied, to determine the dates of the Western Satraps with almost perfect precision. The limits of their reigns are almost as certain as those of the kings and queens of England. Apart from the coins and a few inscriptions all record of them has vanished. Professor Rapson quoted this instance as, perhaps, the most complete triumph of the study of Indian numismatics. The progress which has been made in Indian archaeology is certainly amazing. Only a few years ago a distinguished scholar declared that all Indian dates were like skittles: they were simply put up to be bowled down again. This jibe has now lost its sting, for it is no longer true. The story of ancient India which once seemed to be as hopelessly lost as the Sibylline books has now been in a great measure recovered. Surely this is not the least of the many triumphs of human patience and ingenuity of which archaeology, systematically and scientifically pursued, can now make its boast.

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