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The American Numismatic Society Collection of Kushan Coins

The American Numismatic Society in New York is a major international center for numismatic research. Its numismatic cabinet contains over 800,000 objects and ranks with the largest in the world. The collection is recognized internationally as an extraordinary resource for students of the humanities and its unique library is the most comprehensive collection of numismatic literature in existence, with more than 100,000 titles, including books, journals and many other related publications.

I am completing a catalogue of the American Numismatic Society Collection of Kushan Coins. When research commenced, I believed the collection numbered about 600 coins. The count is now well over 2000 coins, thanks in part to the ANS response to my request that they assist in tracking down, recording, and photographing Kushan coins that were often mistakenly identified and distributed among several ANS trays that contained coins from Central Asia, India, and Kashmir. We also found many Kushan coins in boxes and trays with unsorted contents. In addition to coinage of thirteen Kushan kings, the catalogue will include the ANS collection of Kushano-Sasanian coinage, as well as coins of the Kidarite Kushan. More than two hundred of the coins are gold, all of which will be illustrated. A few are silver, most are copper, a selection of which will be included in the catalogue, with the remainder available for view on the ANS website.

The Kushan empire thrived from the 1st to 4th century AD in a vast area of Central Asia that includes modern day southern Uzbekistan, northern Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir and north India. One of many unusual features of Kushan coinage is a pantheon of deities that appear on the coins. Nearly thirty deities are represented, derived from highly diverse culture histories, including Greek, Roman, Persian, and Indian. The Kushan deities include the sun god Mioro, a moon god Mao, a fire God, Athsho, a wind god, Oado, and a Kushan mountain and sky god, Oesho, that draws its coin iconography from Indian representations of the Hindu Shiva and his bull Nandi.

My collaborator and co-author is Joe Cribb, former Keeper of the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, now retired. Peter Donovan, a retired United Nations geologist, and now a part time curator at ANS, has been our invaluable research assistant in the Kushan catalogue project. This catalogue will be the first English language treatment of Kushan coinage. Kushan coin catalogues by Robert Göbl (1984, 1993) remain primary reference sources for Kushan coinage, but our catalogue presents an up to date analysis and organization that we hope corrects and/or clarifies a number of problems raised by Göbl's treatment. The catalogue will be published in colour, with coins illustrated twice actual size, and with some enlargements three or four times actual size. Our approach is designed to appeal to numismatists and collectors, but also to culture historians and historians of religions. The catalogue will include introductions to each section as well as detailed descriptions of the coin images and inscriptions. It is scheduled to be published by the ANS in late 2012.