

SECRET MARKS ON THE COINS OF THE BENGAL PRESIDENCY

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Introduction

At least since the publication of Major Pridmore's work on the coins of the Indian Presidencies¹, it has been known that milled coins, both gold and silver, issued from the mints of Calcutta, Murshidabad, Patna and Dacca, have secret dot mint marks. Pridmore assigned the various marks to particular mints, but his reason for this assignment was somewhat tenuous and needs further exploration.

However, the presence of the secret marks is not disputed and has led the author of the current work, in discussion with others (notably Nick Rhodes and Jan Lingen), to consider whether or not secret marks may have been placed on coins issued from the various Bengal mints, before the introduction of the milled coinage. The present paper is an attempt to explore this possibility as well as an investigation of the attribution of the marks to the different mints issuing the milled coinage.

Silver Coins Issued in the Name of Alamgir II

By December of 1760 the Calcutta Council had decided that they would never succeed in getting the Kalkutta coins widely accepted into circulation and they agreed to approach the Nawab and ask for permission to strike Murshidabad rupees²:

And as we find that notwithstanding our frequent application to the Nabob concerning the want of currency of our rupees in the country from whence many inconveniencies proceed such as their being frequently refused for goods, the risk of carrying them from place to place to be exchanged (by which a boat passing from Malda to Murshudabad with 4000 Calcutta siccas for that purpose was lost in the Great River) & the loss in exchange. Those evils have never been remedy'd, the only means to effect it is to gain the Nabob's consent to our coining Muxadabad siccas in our mint in the same [way] as Arcot rupees are coined at Madras. Agreed therefore that the President endeavour to prevail on the Nabob to give his consent to our coining Murshudabad siccas in our mint.

The right to strike Murshidabad rupees was granted by the end of December 1760³:

The President acquaints the Board he has at last after much solicitation prevailed upon the Nabob to consent to our coining Murshudabad siccas in our mint... Ordered the Mint Master to prepare stamps for coining the Muxadabad rupees.

In July 1761 the Calcutta Council received notice that the Nawab had begun striking coins in the name of Shah Alam II, regnal year 2 and they agreed that coins issued from the Calcutta mint should follow suit⁴:

...The Nabob supplied him [Shah Alam] with considerable sums of money during his residence at Patna, & at the time of his departure [for Dehli] caused siccas to be struck in his name throughout these provinces of which, having advised the President, it was agreed that the siccas in the name of Shah Allum should also be struck in our mint on the fifteenth of July which was accordingly done, the usual notice being first given.

From the above discussion, it seems clear that the Calcutta mint starting producing Murshidabad rupees at the very end of 1760 or, more likely, early in 1761, before agreement was reached to produce coins in the name of Shah Alam II. During the first half of 1761, therefore, these Murshidabad rupees would have been struck in the name of Alamgir II, regnal year 6. The question is, can we differentiate those coins struck at Calcutta from those struck at Murshidabad? A typical Murshidabad sicca rupee is shown below



Murshidabad Rupee, Alamgir II RY 6

An example exists with three extra dots below the *Shah of Badshah* on the obverse, and an extra group of dots next to the star on the reverse. In an earlier paper⁵, I speculated that these dots might be a secret mark of the Calcutta mint. However, further consideration of the dates involved mean this is unlikely because the beginning of 1761 would equate to the hijri year 1174, and the coin with the extra dots clearly shows the last numeral of 1173 on the reverse.



Murshidabad Rupee, Alamgir II, RY 6. 3 dots below Shah and extra dots on reverse

However, a rupee dated 1174 has been discovered and this coin has the style of the earlier Calcutta mint coins. This coin is shown below and probably emanates from the Calcutta mint.



Fractional Rupees of Alamgir II



Quarter Rupees, Rys 2, 5 & 6

The fractional rupees (i.e. quarters and below) of Alamgir II issued from the Murshidabad or Calcutta mints cause some problems of attribution. In considering this matter, several points need to be taken into consideration.

Firstly, these coins were issued by the Nawab of Bengal from his mint of Murshidabad, with the regnal years, *inter alia*, 4, 5, & 6.



Eighth Rupees, RYs 4 & 6

Secondly, the EIC issued silver coins with the mint name Kalkutta and dates of RY 4, 5 & 6. These coins were very similar to the Murshidabad silver coins issued by the Nawab, except for the mint name. Since the mint name is almost never visible on the silver fractions, and assuming that denominations below a half rupee were issued, the problem of distinguishing between the Kalkutta and Murshidabad coins arises. Pridmore illustrates a quarter (Pr. 10) clearly showing the mint name Kalkutta. However, he also lists eighths and sixteenths (Pr 11-13) with either no illustrations, or with illustrations that do not show the mint name. These could, therefore, equally well be coins issued from the Murshidabad mint. At present, no way of attributing the coins to the two mints is known, unless the mint name is visible. Auction sale catalogues are misleading on this point. However, rupee fractions were rarely issued from the Murshidabad mint during the preceding decades, and, although the fractions of Alamgir II (RY4,5,6) are rare, they are more common than earlier fractions. It is, therefore, likely that some, if not all, were issued from the Calcutta mint.



Sixteenth Rupee, RY 6

Thirdly, the EIC started issuing silver rupees in the name of Alamgir II, with the mint name Murshidabad, in RY 6 (see above) and it is possible that fractions were also issued. Once again, the problem of distinguishing those issued from Murshidabad from those issued at Calcutta, arises. The photos above reveal an interesting change in one of the dot patterns on the coins. The group of dots on the reverse, to the left of the numeral expressing the regnal year and above the beginning of the word *Julus*, is either a group of 5 dots or a group of three dots. Earlier years always seem to have the group of 5, but some RY 6 coins have the group of five and others the group of three. Not very many coins have yet been examined, but it is interesting to speculate that perhaps one of these groupings represents the secret mark of the Calcutta mint, for RY 6 coins struck with the mint name Murshidabad. If this were true, then the coins with the three dots would be a likely candidate for Calcutta, because Murshidabad coins were only issued from Calcutta in that year. However, the different dots also occur on the rupees (see above), but the hijri date visible on the rupee with three dots, shown above, seems to be 1173, which is too early for the Calcutta mint to have begun striking Murshidabad silver. Since the dies for the rupees also seem to have been used for the fractions, it seems unlikely that these dots indicate different mints. Coins with RY 6 were issued for some time after Alamgir's death so perhaps the change in dot markings has

something to do with this, rather than indicating different mints.

Silver Coins 1761-1764

In December 1762, the Calcutta Council was informed that the Nawab had started striking four sun siccās in his mints of Murshidabad, Patna and Dacca, and the Calcutta authorities decided that the three sun siccās in the treasury there, should be sent to the mint for re-stamping as four sun siccās and that from 1st February, all new coins would show the fourth regnal year⁵⁴. Before this work was started, the Council reconsidered the practice of re-stamping coins and it is clear from the entry in the records that up until that time the practice had been to actually re-stamp the old coins i.e. use the old coins as blanks. This caused the coins to have a larger diameter and to be thinner than those struck at the Murshidabad mint. They could, therefore, be easily recognised as Calcutta mint issues, and were not so easily passed in currency. It was, therefore, agreed that henceforth the coins should be re-coined, i.e. melted down and then re-coined⁵⁵:

The Board now taking into consideration the practice of re-stamping rupees in the Company's mint, and the many complaints made thro-out the country regarding the Calcutta Siccās, apparently owing to the custom of re-stamping, which as it draws the rupee broader & thinner & leaves the stamp less perfect & distinct, renders it very [easy to] distinguish them from the rupees struck at Moorshedabad, & obstruct their currency – think proper to prevent in future the many bad effects, which arise therefrom, to call upon the Mint Master's opinion concerning the expense of recoining siccās...

It is therefore agreed to abolish the custom of re-stamping & instead thereof to recoin in the mint all rupees of the sicca standard at the rate of 2 ¼ per cent – whereby there accruing a profit of 14 annas

Ordered that eight annas thereof (the same sum that was gained by re-stamping) be paid to the Company – and the remaining six annas to the Mint Master

Several times in this paper the problem of distinguishing those rupees struck at Calcutta from those struck at Murshidabad has been discussed. The above archival extract appears to offer a possible means of arriving at the answer to this question, at least for coins dated regnal year 2 of Shah Alam II. Specimens that are thinner and of greater diameter are likely to be from the Calcutta mint and may help substantiate or refute a hypothesis advanced by Nick Rhodes (personal communication). He has found that coins of the early years of Shah Alam II might have been marked with different groups of dots and it is possible that these represent the different mints.



Rupee of Shah Alam II, RY 3



Rupee of Shah Alam II, RY 4



Rupee of Shah Alam II, RY 5

The three pictures above show that different coins have different dot arrangements in the top line of the obverse. The first has two dots to the right and three to the left, the second has two dots to the right and two to the left, and the third has three dots to the right and two to the left. The full set of information discovered so far is given in the following table:

Regnal year 2	2 dots right	3 dots left
Regnal year 3	2 dots right	2 or 3 dots left
Regnal year 4	2 dots right	2 or 3 dots left
Regnal year 5 and later	3 dots right	2 dots left

Regnal years 3 & 4, at least, have two sets of patterns, though which might represent which mint (if any) is not known. More information is required to help address this issue.

Silver Coins 1771 to 1773

The decision to standardise the coins of all four mints had been discussed since regnal year 10 of Shah Alam II, and was finally implemented in regnal years 11 & 12. Sometime in regnal year 11, all four mints started producing identical coins as far as was possible. Of course, die production was not centralised, so there were bound to be minor differences but this was not the only major worry at that time. The authorities were also worried that the different mints might produce lightweight or low fineness coins, and since the coins were supposed to be identical, the mint responsible would not be identifiable. Once the milled coinage was begun in the 1790s, a decision was taken to add secret marks to the coins to address this problem (see below). It is interesting to speculate that the authorities may have taken this approach with the earlier coins of RY 11 and 12, although no archival evidence has been found to support this idea. However examination of a number of coins has revealed the following observation (thanks to Jan Lingen and Nick Rhodes who helped with this study):



4 dots in L of Fazl



3 dots above J of Julus

RY	AH	Status	Obv Symbol	L of Fazl	above Julus
2			Sun	3?	3
				5	3
3	1176			5	3
4		Nazarana		5	3
5	1178			5	3
	1179			5	3
7	1179			5	3
7	1180			5	3
8	1181			5	3
9	1182			5	3
10		Nazarana		5	3
10	1183		Crescent	5	3
11	1184			5	0
				4	3
11	1185			5	0
				5	3
				4	3
11	1187?			4	3
12	1165			4	3
12	1185			4	3
12	1186			5	0
				5	3
12	1187			5	0
12	Not clear			5	0
				4	3
13	1185	Nazarana		4	3
15	1188	Nazarana		4	3
15	1189			4	3
	1190			4	3
19	all			4	3

From RY 2 to RY 10 the dot groupings are pretty well all 5/3. Suddenly in RY 11 this changes and we get three combinations, 5/0, 4/3 and 5/3. Then after RY 12 everything becomes 4/3. We know that from year 2 until RY 10, only Murshidabad and Calcutta were striking the Murshidabad Siccās.

Similarly in RY 15 both these mints were striking these rupees, Patna and Dacca having been closed. After that, only Calcutta struck the coins.

It is therefore tempting to draw the conclusion that Calcutta and Murshidabad both used the same combinations, initially 5/3, and later 4/3. In Rys 11 and 12, when we know that all four mints were operating and supposedly striking identical coins, we could assign the 5/0 dots and 5/3 to Patna and Dacca, though which might be which is not clear. This is complicated by the fact that there are also other dot groupings that may need to be taken into account, particularly the group that sometimes appears next to the regnal year on the reverse.

The Milled Coinage

In 1789, a major report about the coinage of the Bengal Presidency concluded that the problems of *batta* as well as counterfeiting, filing, drilling etc, could be overcome by the introduction of coin production using the 'European' method. John Prinsep, of course, had already done this earlier in the 1780s, but most of his machinery and skilled employees had been rejected by the Calcutta authorities and by 1790 little capability was available in the Calcutta mint to achieve the stated objective. Fortunately, the Calcutta Mint Master had employed Prinsep's foreman and his assistant, the latter of whom was to make a significant contribution to the construction and operation of the new mint. The new coinage was to be produced in the mints of Calcutta, Murshidabad, Patna and Dacca. Milled gold coins were produced reasonably quickly, but

milled silver coins proved more difficult and were not produced in Calcutta until 1793. Even then, the production of silver blanks continued to be undertaken manually and it was not until 1802 that this part of the process was automated. Before 1793, the Calcutta mint produced silver rupees struck with a fly-press but on blanks that were smaller than the dies. I have named these '1205 dump rupees' for the purpose of this paper.

The new mint at Dacca was the first of the subsidiary mints to be opened in late 1791, but did not immediately start producing milled coins. Although the records are not specific on the point, it is likely that the Dacca mint started operations by producing the 1205 dump rupees. The records are clear, however, that Dacca did not begin striking milled coins until 1794.

Mints were opened in Murshidabad and Patna at the very end of 1792 and the beginning of 1793 respectively. It is likely, for various reasons, that these two mints immediately began production of milled rupees.

There was, therefore, a period of several months during the second half of 1793 and the early months of 1794, when the three mints of Calcutta, Murshidabad and Patna were all issuing milled rupees, whilst Dacca apparently continued to issue the 1205 dump rupees.

The Coins and the Secret Marks

Three types of milled rupee were issued during the early 1790s. One with a broad rim and slightly larger flan (Pr 153), and this type need not concern us for the purposes of this discussion. The two other types are illustrated above. One has the Hijri date of 1202, but later it was decided to remove this date and just leave the fixed regnal year 19 on the reverse. Coins with the Hijri year 1202 are found with three of the secret marks, whilst the later coins, without the Hijri year, are found with all four marks.



Hijri date 1202



no Hijri date

We also know that a major shipment of dies was sent to the three subsidiary mints in about December 1793. It seems reasonable to assume that these were the dies for the new rupees, without the hijri date.

These events are illustrated in the figure (overview of key events) on page 48, below.

For the rupees and mohurs, Pridmore identified secret marks as a tiny dot in the centre of one of the three circles of dots found on the obverse of the coins:



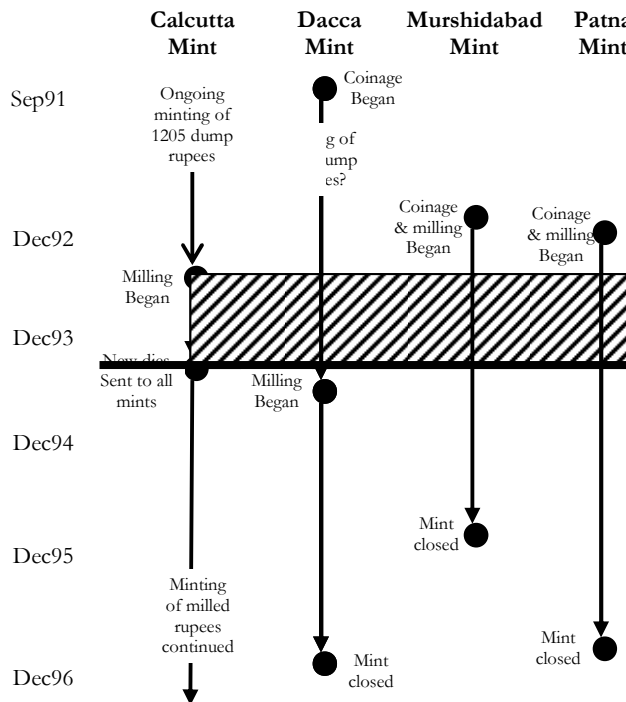
Secret marks. Dot in right-hand circle

He assigned coins with no dot to Calcutta, but he stated that Calcutta had an extra tiny dot in the top line (see below), coins with a tiny dot in the right-hand circle to Dacca (as shown above), those with the dot in the centre circle to Murshidabad, and those with the dot in the left-hand circle, to Patna. He stated that this attribution was not confirmed, and was simply based on the dates that the mints started production: Calcutta first, then Dacca, Murshidabad and Patna respectively. Using this logic, Pridmore assumed that the secret mark missing on the earlier of the two types, was that of Patna. The missing mark is the dot in the left-hand circle. However, the flaw in this argument is that although the Dacca mint started production before the other subsidiary mints, it did not start striking *milled* coins until after Murshidabad and Patna - in fact, after March 1794 (see discussion above). The missing mint mark, dot in left-hand circle, must, therefore, belong to Dacca.

Distinguishing between the other marks is not possible at present, and it seems reasonable to continue to follow Pridmore's attribution for Murshidabad (i.e.) dot in centre circle, which leaves Patna with a dot in the right-hand circle.

The Calcutta Mint Mark

Pridmore also attributed coins with a tiny extra dot above the two dots in the top line, to Calcutta. However this tiny dot also occurs on coins with the Patna mark, at least. There also exist coins with no dot in the centre of the three circles and no tiny dot in the top line. The dot is also sometimes absent in later series, which were only struck at the Calcutta mint. It, therefore, seems safer to assume the Calcutta mark is simply the absence of dots in the centre of the three circles. The tiny dot in the top line may be of no significance.



Overview of Key Events



No dot Calcutta



Dot in right-hand circle - Patna



*Dot in centre circle
Murshidabad*



*Dot in left-hand circle –
Dacca*



Dot in right-hand circle (for Patna) plus tiny dot in top line

Pridmore also identified different marks on the smaller denominations of coins, but no further comments on his attributions of these marks to the different mints are possible with the information currently available. The hidden dots on these smaller denominations appear in the three dot groups on the reverse around the beginning of the mint name.



*Calcutta – Dot in 2nd
circle*



*Calcutta or Patna – Dot in
2nd and 3rd circle*



*Dacca – Dot in first
circle*



Murshidabad – No dot

References

- ¹ Pridmore F (1975), *The Coins of the British Commonwealth of Nations, Part 4 India*, Volume 1, East India Company Presidency Series, Spink & Son Ltd.
- ² Bengal Public Consultations. IOR P/1/32, p712. 25th November 1760
- ³ Bengal Public Consultations. IOR P/1/32, p846. 31st December 1760
- ⁴ Sethi RR (Ed) (1968), *Fort William-India House Correspondence, Vol III (1760-63)*, Government of India p359. Letter from Bengal to Court, dated 12th November 1761.
- ⁵ Stevens PJE (2008), *JONS* 197 pp37-47