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Walburg, Reinhold

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Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Zentrale, Podbielskiallee 69–71, 14195 Berlin, Tel: +49 30 187711-0
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Summary

For a long time, the ancient coins discovered in Śrī Laṅkā hardly attracted any attention from numismatists, while economic historians, as far as one can see, never touched on this area. The monograph by H. W. Codrington was therefore a landmark publication, and for decades the ‘state of the art’ in terms of research on the island’s coins. Written with the support of all of the numismatic knowledge then available, concentrated in the work of a few dedicated contemporaries, the author presented his study on *Ceylon Coins and Currency* in 1924. It was published in the series of the Memoirs of the Colombo Museum and even today must be regarded as a “quarry” for future research, as it provides valuable information regarding the island’s monetary history from the very beginnings to the author’s own lifetime. The present study is largely a modification of Codrington’s chapter two on ancient numismatics. It focuses, however, on the two types of ancient coin that have been discovered in greatest numbers on the island: Indian silver punch-marked coins and Late Roman *æs* coins. As a side effect of this, however, I have had to eliminate three entries from the canon of objects previously accepted as coins: the “earliest inscribed coins”, the goddess plaques, and the maneless lion tokens. Today, we are in a far better position than Codrington was in the 1920s. During the last two decades, scientifically conducted archaeological excavations at Anurādhapura, Sīgiriya, and especially at Tissamahārāma, have yielded reliable, essential data, which have now enabled us to make some well-founded numismatic and economic conclusions:

1. Imported Indian punch-marked coins were used at least to the seventh century and possibly even longer.
2. Cast imitations of punch-marked coins were manufactured in Śrī Laṅkā to meet local demand when the supply of original specimens ceased.
3. Late Roman *æs* coins minted in the fourth and fifth centuries were not exported directly to Śrī Laṅkā as part of a constant flow of trade from the Roman Empire to the island from the time of Constantinus I. Intermixed with some Greek coins from the eastern Mediterranean and specimens from North Africa, they were shipped as merchandise in the second quarter of the fifth century as a bulk cargo to South India, from where they were passed on to Śrī Laṅkā.
4. Struck imitations of Roman coins were produced exclusively in the extreme south of the island, within the borders of the ancient dominion of Rohaṇa, over a short period of time from around the middle of the fifth century. They were definitely *not* minted for economic reasons, to increase the amount of money in circulation, but rather to replace the accumulated genuine Roman coins that – for whatever reason – had been taken out of circulation.
5. Buddhist temples / monasteries became centres of collective wealth and were of considerable economic importance. The imitations of Roman coins were possibly struck in the monasteries, judging by their partly distinctive religious symbolism and legends.
6. Roman coins were only a strictly limited factor in the island’s wider economy. Although additionally enriched by a strong religious association, they were only of secondary importance in a generally non-monetarised society. The presence of these imported items provided a transitory inspiration for the creation of an indigenous currency based on imitations of them. However, this temporary process unequivocally shows that there was no real monetary need for coins at this stage of economic development.
7. Punch-marked coins and their imitations were used as an *all purpose money* or general currency, whereas Roman coins and their imitations functioned as *special purpose money* for essentially monastic purposes.

8. All the other coins discovered in small quantities in Śrī Laṅkā are almost certainly intruders from India, for the most part from South India. The large coins with a lion & swastika design unearthed at Tissamahārāma can be assigned to the Peninsular Indian Mahārāṭhis.
9. The true nature of the goddess plaques, discovered abundantly on the island and discussed for more than a century, can now definitely be ascertained as non-monetary. At present, their use is attested over a period of about eight to nine hundred years, with unaltered design. Their exact (ritual) function still needs to be determined.
10. The maneless lion tokens are likewise not intended as coins. These specimens of fourth century date, discovered only as single finds and never together in larger numbers, are connected with the heretical policies implemented during the reign of King Mahāsena (334–362).
11. The newly discovered artefacts named the “earliest inscribed coins” are definitely not coins. Cast individually with a great variety of designs these tokens lack all the accepted features of true coinage.
12. The numismatic ‘dark ages’ of Śrī Laṅkā apparently lasted from the eighth or ninth century until the second half of the tenth century when, for the first time in the island’s history, a local, uniform currency emerged on a scale that not only covered domestic needs but later even spread beyond the island.

data, direct trade between the western world and the island only emerged around the end of the fifth or at the beginning of the sixth century. Barter trade prevailed throughout this period, and coins were essentially treated as a form of merchandise.

The role played by the ancient dominion of Rohaṇa in the economic history of Śrī Laṅkā is highlighted in an appended analytical section. Coin finds unequivocally demonstrate that trade activity was most intense around this area in the extreme south of the island. Furthermore, an attempt is made to elucidate the structure and development of the long distance trade between the western world on one side, and South India and Śrī Laṅkā on the other. Written sources uniformly attest that in late antiquity there was no direct trade carried out by Roman or early Byzantine merchants between the Roman Empire and Śrī Laṅkā. In the middle of the fifth century, the South Indian port of Muziris was still active as an *emporium* and remained the primary regional focus for trade with the West. According to the numismatic