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## **Coins and tokens from ancient Ceylon: being a critical survey of the coins and coin like objects unearthed on the island based on a thoroughly annotated catalogue of finds, and supplemented by an analytical part dealing with the island's ancient economy and its trade with the western world**

der Reihe / of the series

**Ancient Ruhuna; Volume 2 (FAAK Bd. 5)**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34780/46zc-69fz>

**Herausgebende Institution / Publisher:**  
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut

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## Introduction

The basic intention of this monograph is to present a critically annotated catalogue in the English language of the known finds, published and unpublished, of Roman and other ancient coins in Śrī Laṅkā, and to lay a basis for future studies in the monetary history of the island. It seemed necessary to undertake this painstaking work – hoping to be as objective and precise as possible – because of the numerous publications released during recent years, in which hardly any reliable numismatic information can be found. Generalisations and conjectures cannot substitute detailed and systematic publication of the coins<sup>1</sup>. In addition, many new data and quite a few new objects have become available during the last twenty years, which have led to additions and corrections of an earlier work on this topic<sup>2</sup>. In particular, the significance of the results of modern archaeological excavations at various places on the island cannot be overestimated. These have been undertaken by the *UNESCO Sri Lanka Project of the Cultural Triangle* in the ancient capital cities of Anurādhapura, Sigiriya, and Polonnaruwa (although the latter yielded no ancient coins). Simultaneously excavations were also carried out by the Archaeological Department in Kuchchaveli and Māntai. Coins from all these places were identified and partly published (Sigiriya in 1982/3, Kuchchaveli in 1985). The remaining coins from Sigiriya, as well as those from Anurādhapura and Māntai, were due to be published by the excavators, but for details the catalogue section of this study can now be consulted. In 1992 archaeological excavations were undertaken in Tissamahārāma by the then *Kommission für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Archäologie* of the German Archaeological Institute, which has recently been renamed *Kommission für Archäologie Außereuropäischer Kulturen*. Thus provided with precise archaeological data, the coins unearthed in the ancient capital city of the former dominion of Rohaṇa up to the 2005 campaign have been integrated into the catalogue section. This material was supplemented by coins bought by the excavators from

local peasants. After scientific treatment, these coins were handed over to the Archaeological Department in Colombo, to be held there in perpetuity.

The present study is therefore in line with a demand already formulated some ten years ago: “Perhaps archaeological research can now take the lead, and provide a proper framework for the interaction of the Indian Ocean communities, and not rely upon historically driven models of Western (and Eastern) trade, which seem to have more in common with the activities of the P&O line <Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company> than indigenous traditions of seafaring” (Horton 1997: 749). Interpretation of numismatic data in archaeological contexts, however, should in the end lead to at least a halfway reasonable result. It makes no sense when the pros and cons put forward by the same author in discussing the data ultimately neutralise each other (Reece 2003).

To avoid misunderstandings, it must be emphasised that the monograph presented here is *not* an English translation of my aforementioned article published in German in 1985. That was the revised and enlarged version of my doctoral dissertation which was privately published in 1981, and focused only on Roman coins and their Śrī Laṅkā imitations. The framework of the catalogue compiled below is oriented on the structure of publications such as the volumes of *Coin Hoards* edited by The

<sup>1</sup> It is dispiriting to read even in an encyclopædia of high repute (RAC 18: col. 25 [Dihle]) that coin finds in Śrī Laṅkā start with Claudius; this obviously referring to the fragmentary first report on the discovery of Roman coins in the 16<sup>th</sup> century at Māntai. Furthermore, we are forced to read (col. 29): “Die Münzfunde in Ceylon und Süd-I ... setzen mit der Regierung Constantins wieder ein, was mit der durch ihn veranlaßten Einführung einer stabilen Goldwährung zusammenhängen wird”.

<sup>2</sup> Walburg 1985, supplemented by Walburg 1998a, summarising the results of studies published during the preceding decade.

Royal Numismatic Society and *An inventory of Greek coin hoards* by Thompson, Mørkholm, and Kraay. In short, it is primarily intended to be an annotated gazetteer of finds of ancient coins unearthed in Śrī Laṅkā.

The critical presentation of material also seeks to be an adversary against the vast number of speculative contributions to the subject of the trade of the Roman Empire with the East, which at their most extreme either uncritically compile earlier secondary literature, or simply expound incredible nonsense<sup>3</sup>. Only quite interesting but not entirely helpful, is Carswell 1996a.

The topic 'Rome and India', as well as 'Rome and Śrī Laṅkā', has been *en vogue* for several years. Thus there were and still are congresses, symposia, workshops, annual meetings, etc. dealing with these subjects, but the advantage of such events should be questioned. Inevitably, these meetings produce numerous essay volumes, followed by monographs and further articles. However, the benefit of this multitude is doubtful. The enumeration of volumes of the first category only is frightening: Bandanarayake *et al.* 1990, Begley / de Puma 1991, Cimino 1994, Boussac / Salles 1995, Ray / Salles 1996, Reade 1996, de Romanis / Tchernia 1997, Bopearachchi / Weerakkody 1998, and Ray 1999. It is exhausting to read repeatedly the same articles of certain authors, only slightly altered, if at all; or others, simply translated into another language<sup>4</sup>. Because of frequent repetition, some opinions have started to establish themselves as facts which other scholars rely on. The consequences are easily imaginable. Research based exclusively, or as much as possible, on reliable primary sources is hard to find. Especially in the field of numismatics, there is a serious lack of well-founded in-depth investigations observable in either India or Śrī Laṅkā. The hope remains that by the publication of "The Gazetteer of Roman Artefacts in India", including the coins, things will change for the better – at least in India (MacDowall 1996).

In relation to the topic of the present study, it must be stated that with regard to India, which is indispensable for the study of the Śrī Laṅkā state of affairs, little attention has been paid to the finds of Late Roman coins. This has already been rightly criticised (Berghaus 1992), but since this time the situation has not improved significantly<sup>5</sup>. Only the pioneering work of Berghaus is worth mentioning in this context.

Focusing on the conditions in Śrī Laṅkā, the perspective is not as positive as it should, and could, be. Numismatic data obtained from archaeological excavations over the last decades have hitherto remained partly unknown to scholars. Either inadequately published or completely unpublished are the coins unearthed at Māntai (Carswell), Anurādhapura: Jētavanārāma (Bopearachchi), Abhayagiri (Wikramagama), citadel (2) (Coningham / Bopearachchi), and Sigiriya (Bandaranayake).

A critical compilation of the complete material available provides us with a solid foundation, but the interpretation is nevertheless much more difficult compared with our

<sup>3</sup> Ray (S. C.) 1991. Two samples of his skill are worth quoting in full (p. 142): "The Peutinger-Tables (AD 222) records that the Romans had built a temple for Augustus at Muziris and were maintaining a force of two cohorts <sic> at this place to protect their trade. This statement shows the nature of the authority of the Roman traders over the emporiums". Moreover: "The presence of the Graeco-Roman communities over years, having a cordial relation with the local rulers, the Satavahanas, Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas, and their superior military strength, which could keep the sea free from the dreaded pirates and a power that used to maintain troops in foreign lands to protect its interest, could have easily led the monarchs of South India feel the might of the trading community, analogous to the reverential fear that the East India Company used to create in the hearts of the local potentates of India. The rulers of the Peninsular India did not have the resources to strike gold coins, and it is not unlikely that the foreign traders were allowed to use their coins to facilitate smooth and quick commercial transactions, particularly on a large scale". This is only exceeded by Ramaswami / Boluvampatti 1992a, who publish some modern Italian medals made for tourists inscribed, for example, FONTANA DI TREVÌ or IL COLLOSSEO and come to the conclusion that: "These medals might have been used at the religious functions or other important events". To be rated as a 'minor error' is the statement that Agrippa (general of the first Roman emperor) "had trade relationship with Augustus Caesar", and similarly the dating of the period from Augustus to Caracalla ("Augustus Caesar, Tyberius, Kerakula and Cladius") from 100 BC to 500. However, the article itself is not the problem, but the fact that it was published not in a minor gazette or as a newspaper article but in the *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*.

<sup>4</sup> Tchernia 1995 in his review of Begley / de Puma 1991 formulated this kind of observation in a much more polite manner.

<sup>5</sup> MacDowall 1996 for example, in his article of 16 pages, deals in only three short sentences (p. 91) with the Roman gold coins of the fourth to sixth century found in India. The *æ*s coins of the fourth and fifth centuries are treated a little more extensively but the coverage of this topic as a whole is nevertheless quite cursory.

current knowledge of India during the first three centuries. By their various contributions, Berghaus and MacDowall have sufficiently elucidated this area, with its numerous finds of coins in precious metals. The explanations given for the presence of Late Roman *æs* coins in both India and Śrī Laṅkā, on the contrary, are still more or less hypothetical. Confined to recent studies, Burnett 1998 must be mentioned first, in treating this phenomenon thoroughly. For India, it is thanks to Krishnamurthy 1994 that we can see for the first time some of the Late Roman *æs* coins discovered at two places in South India. To Mitchiner 1995 and 1998b, we owe the knowledge of various additional places in India where coins of this kind have been discovered. For Śrī Laṅkā, Weerakkody 1997 is worth mentioning for trying to give a thought-out explanation for the existence of such coins on the island. The various contributions to this topic made by Bopearachchi will be analysed and commented on in the catalogue section as well as *passim* in the text of this study. The results of my own former efforts to contribute to the monetary history of ancient Śrī Laṅkā have been labelled and modified where necessary and are incorporated into this monograph.

An original point of view put forward recently may resolve all numismatic problems:

“The discoveries of Roman coin hoards in India are certainly dramatic. But coin deposits are notoriously unreliable as archaeological evidence, and numismatic conclusions often a little too glib” (Ball 2000: 132). Obviously, it is high time to collect and reassess the complete coin material from Śrī Laṅkā, especially the data that have been brought to our knowledge during the last two decades. A thorough survey of coins and coin-like objects is essential for the understanding of the presumed function of the different coin types in the monetary history of Śrī Laṅkā.

Placed after the catalogue section in this volume – and by this markedly separated from the other textual parts (I and II) – an analytical section (IV) has been added. After the plea against escalating speculations, it may seem odd when I myself now add some further provisional considerations that contribute to the discussion on the monetary and economic conditions of ancient Śrī Laṅkā, as well as to the debate on the presumed cause of the trade between the western world and Śrī Laṅkā. However, based strictly on the collected and critically evaluated coin material, and supported by the testimony of the ancient written sources, this *modus operandi* will I hope be allowed.