

Coins: A Reflection of the Island's History

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The collection of coins in the Colombo Museum is often overshadowed by the other more glittery and ornate exhibits that catch the eye of the visitor. But if studied do ely the collection could almost tell you the story of the country as it contains coins that were in use since the earliest recorded times in Sri Lanka.

Coins of the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kotte periods form part of the collection. Also included are Roman, Greek and ancient Chinese coins that have been found in various parts of the country. These coins provide a vital clue to the fact that there was brisk international trading in which Sri Lanka was engaged in ancient times, and that its ports were important entrepot centres in this region. Recent excavations carried out in the Cultural Triangle, the last one completed in January 1989, have unearthed a cache of coins, including foreign ones, that were in use during the Anuradhapura period.

The coin collection at the Colombo Museum will show that the oldest known type of coin found in Sri Lanka is the 'kahapana', also known as the 'purana'. Kahapanas were used from the very beginnings of Sri Lankan history (before 6th Century B.C.) and there is evidence that suggests they were in use until about the 10th Century AD. During the early centuries, the currency in Sri Lanka was closely connected with that of India, and it is believed that many of the kahapanas belonging to the early period found here were imported from India. According to Buddhist scriptures the beginnings of this coinage dates even before the time c.f. the Buddha, i.e. before 600 B.C.

These kahapanas were made by subdividing flattened bars of silver, and the proper weight was adjusted by clipping the corners of each coin. Anybody had the right to make these coins, but they had to be submitted for approval by the king, who then placed his stamp on the reverse side of the coin. As time went on, merchants and moneychangers "Buddha Swastika" coin. The swastika, a symbol of the Aryans, is also one of the sacred signs of Buddhism, and appears in ancient Indian coins as well as in stone engravings of India and Sri Lanka.

The keen numismatist will learn from the Museum collection and related publications that the gold kahavanna, or "kahavanuwa", was evident in Sri Lanka during the medieval period between the 6th and 7th Centuries AD. A time of prolonged internal strife of which few records exist, this period was known as the Dark Ages of Ceylon. Invasions of the Cholas from Southern India and a series of monarchs who shifted the capital from place to place marked this period. It was only in the 11th Century that the country was once more unified, when King Vijayabahu I succeeded in expelling the invaders and reestablishing Sinhala dominion. Perhaps reflecting the instability of this period and the succession of changes in the Sinhala throne, the coins of this period are without name or ruler, and only with symbols -the sun, the moon, the lotus, etc.

King Vijayabahu I is the first Sinhala king to stamp his name on the coins he issued. When he unified the country in the fifteenth year of his reign, in 1070 AD., coins were made with inferior gold, then in silver, and finally in copper. Nine kings and one queen who reigned in succession after King Vijayabahu I did not change the pattern of the coins except to change the name to his or her own. The “Sinhala Masu” coins were issued until the end of the reign of King Buvanekabahu I from 1273 to 1284 AD.



In the Cultural Triangle section of the Colombo Museum, easily found by the large orange banners in the room, coins from the turbulent reign of Queen Lilawati (1197-1200, 1209-1210, 1211-1212), and those from the reign of King Sahassamalla (1200-1202) are prominently displayed in glass cabinets.

The Museum’s collection of coins is enriched by those from the times when Sri Lanka was under foreign dominion. The Portuguese introduced their own currency when they invaded the country in the early years of the 16th Century. The first record of the use of larins, the Portuguese coins, occurs in 1517. Larins at that time were one of the principal trade coins of the Arabian Sea. Along with gold and silver fanams, larins are mentioned throughout the Portuguese period of Sri Lanka. Both larins and fanams were struck by the Portuguese captain of Colombo, presumably in the name of the King of Kotte, the capital at the time.

During the early years of the Dutch occupation in Sri Lanka, the Portuguese coins were still in use. To curb the minting of counterfeit coins, the Dutch rulers collected all the coins in circulation and stamped the letters V.O.C. on them. This was also stamped on the coins that were subsequently minted by the Dutch themselves. The letters do not stand for Very Old Coin as the old joke goes, but for the original Dutch name of the Dutch East India Company that ruled the

country: "Vereenigte Oost-Indische Compagnie". These coins are easily recognized by the intertwined symbol of the three initials, which was also the symbol of the company. Though not very valuable in monetary terms, with the increasing interest in the Dutch period they are now a more cherished possession among collectors.

There were two types of coins that the British first used in Sri Lanka. One was the gold ".Star Pagoda", which was in use in South India too. The Star Pagoda was equivalent to 45 Dutch fanams. The second type comprised the copper coins which were valued at 1/94th and 1/ 48th of a rupee. On one side of the coin was the name "United East India Company", and on the reverse side was the value of the coin and the royal insignia. The collection of coins at the Museum is one that keeps growing. With each new find from excavations not only are more exhibits added to the collection, but _it tells us a little more about the history of the country. With coins from the ancient times to a century ago, viewing them at the Museum is almost like walking through the ages of the country's history.

