
Rereading the History of Coins in Kerala

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Received: 04 June 2020; Revised: 24 November 2020; Accepted: 17 December 2020

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 8.1 (2020): 336-344

Abstract: *The study about Kerala archaeology would be incomplete without the study of numerous coins which were in circulation ever since the ancient period. The earliest evidence of coins in Kerala were both punch marked coins and Roman coins. Muziris was a great trading emporium in ancient Kerala from where trade and commerce were carried out to Roman empire. Numerous hoards of Roman coins unearthed from South India throw light on it. The Cheras also minted coins in ancient period. Foreign powers like Dutch, English, French, etc., minted and circulated different types of coins in Kerala. Ananthavarahan and Anantharayan were two well-known coins circulated in Travancore. The Zamorin of Calicut and Kolathiri of Kannur circulated a coin called 'Panam'. 'Puthen' was coin which was minted from Kochi. The English East India Company also circulated one-rupee coins in Kerala. The first machine made coin in Travancore was R. V. Fanam. The Dutch circulated 'lanta coins' in Kerala. This article deals with the history of coins in Kerala.*

Keywords: Numismatics, Minting, Archaeology, Chakram, Fanam, Eezha-kasu, Anantharayan Panam

Introduction

The History of coins in Kerala starts with the study about punch marked coins and Roman coins which were on circulation in ancient period. Muziris in ancient period and Kochi in Modern period are two great trading emporiums in Kerala. The Roman coins found out from different parts of Kerala throw light on the trade relation between Kerala and Roman empire in the Sangam period. In the medieval period apart from the coins of local rulers, Arab coins, Chinese coins were also used for exchange in Kerala. The advent of Colonial powers like the Portuguese and Dutch necessitated the need of establishing mints in Kerala. Local rulers like Travancore, Kochi, Zamorin of Calicut circulated different types of coins in the early modern and modern period. Foreign trade with these colonial metropolitan countries, the expansion of free trade and finance capitalism, the rise of domestic trade, etc. compelled the native rulers to circulate coins like, *Ananthavarahan, Kasu, fanam, Ezha Kasu*, etc., in Kerala. The English East India Company circulated Rupee in Kerala for free trade. The scientific study of these coins are very helpful to analyse the nature of economic development in Kerala in these days.

The Numismatic sources of Kerala history are of two types (a) direct evidence, consisting of ancient Roman coins and north Indian punch marked coins; and (b) indirect evidence in two form of references to coins in inscriptions and medieval poetry (Gurukkal and Varier 2018: 5). Many coins, foreign and indigenous, have been in circulation in Kerala from early days (Gurukkal and Varier 2018: 5). Indigenous and foreign coins of various types of the ancient period have been discovered from different places of Kerala. Foreign coins are mostly Roman coins. Large number of Roman coins had been discovered from Kannur. The coins found out from Eyyal, Thrissur district in 1946 are considered as made between BCE 117 and CE 123 in Rome. Plenty of Roman coins were obtained from Kottayam nearby Thalassery, Roman coins found from places of Northern Paravoor, Niranam and Poonjar. The studies about the ancient Roman coins obtained from Kerala help to specify the commercial business relationship between ancient Kerala and Roman empire. The gold coins unearthed from Kothamangalam in 1960-61 belong to Umayyad Khaliphas (CE 820-920) who governed the Arab empire. Coins in metals were issued by the Chinese from early times (Kumar et al. 2016: 147). Thousands of Chinese coins have been recovered from the coastal areas of Kollam port as a result of dredging in 2014 (Vinuraj et al. 2017: 779). *Ezha Kasu* of ceylon were popular in Kerala. Coins made in other places in India were also found out from Kerala. Punch marked coins, which were popular during Buddha's time in north India, were the oldest among the coins found in this way. Coins, popular by the name *Anayachu* belonging to the Chola kings, and *Thulukkaassu* of the Pandya were also found from Kerala. Gold, silver, bronze, and lead were the common metals used for minting the Travancore coins. Gold was a metal which was in use since ancient period (Thomas 2015: 36-37). An extensive collection of ancient coins is on display at the Nedumangad Koyikkal Palace, which was established in 1980 under the State Archaeological Department. Most of these were received as treasures from Eyyal, Kottayam, Valluvalli, and Angamaly in Kerala.

The Kerala kings also minted coins. The silver coins were found out from Tirunelveli district in 1944, which has the name of King Veerakerala Varma printed on it. Coins brought out by the Kolathiri king and Zamorin were under the name *Panams*. Apart from *Vellichakra* the gold coins printed by Travancore kings were *Ananthavarahan* and *Anantharayan*. *Anantharayan Panam* (Figure 1) existed during the reign of Ayilyam Thirunal Rani Gouri Laxmi Bayi (1810-1813). On the obverse side of the coin is a Chakram within a large crescent above *Vishnupadam* (feet of Lord Vishnu) that is represented by two curved lines and ten pellets for the toes, and on the reverse, twelve pellets within a curve considered as the 12 *Rasi* or the signs of zodiac flanked by sprays with flowers. Half *Anantharaya Panam* (Figure 2) existed during the reign of Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma. On obverse side 4 pellets above a crescent *Vishnupadam* (the feet of Lord Vishnu) represented by two curved lines and ten pellets for toes - all within a circle of dots, and on the reverse 12 pellets above a crescent representing the *Rasi* or signs of the zodiac line and pellets below all within a circle of dots. Various gold *Panams* and *Velli Puthens* were used in Travancore before the nineteenth century. The oldest known *Rasi* also has a *Sankh* on the obverse and is closely allied to the *Viraraya*

*Panam*s of Calicut (Information obtained during a visit to the Koyikkal palace). During the eighteenth century, the copper coinage of Travancore was known as the *Ananthan Kasu*; on the obverse was a five headed cobra, and on the reverse the value of the coin like 1, 2, 4 and 8 cash written in Tamil.



Figure 1: *Anantharayan Panam* (Courtesy: <https://www.marudhararts.com>)



Figure 2: Half *Anantharaya Panam* (Courtesy: <https://en.numismata.com>)

Various coins of South India were also circulated in Kerala. In the past, the silver wheel printed from the Travancore ritual was circulated in countries like Madurai. The name Chakra refers to *Sudarshan*, one of the weapons of Lord Vishnu. Rajakesavadasan is credited with printing gold coins and silver wheels such as *Anantharayanpanam*, *Chinna Panam* and *Ananthavarahanpanam* from the committee, which even deserves the praise of the numismatist Sir Walt Elliott. Coins have been circulating all over Kerala for a long time.

A coin named *Oru Kasu* inscribed with a clean conch is a coin in existence during the reign of Sri Swati Thirunal (during 1840). On obverse side is a conch in circle, surrounded by beads, on the reverse side is seated deity, most likely, the goddess Lekshmi holding lotus blooms, within circle, surrounded by beads. *Oru Kasu* (Figure 3) is a coin that was in existence during the reign of Maharaja Sri Uthram Thirunal Marthandavarma (1847 - 1860 CE). On obverse side of the coin is a picture Sri Krishna holding balls of butter in both hands, all within a circle of dots, and on the reverse is the Sudarshan Chakra (six-pointed star) inscribed on the coin. In 1869, *Thulabharam* coins were in circulation in Travancore. This coin bears the name of Sri Padmanabha (Rajeshkumar Pers. Comm.). It is said that there are many such coins in the Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple, Thiruvananthapuram. *Velli Chakram* (Silver coin) is a coin that was in existence during the reign of Sri Ayilyam Thirunal. The Travancore Varahan coin of 1877 is also famous. This coin has the image of a conch on obverse side and the inscription '1877 R V' on the reverse side (Figure 4). It is said that the four coins were existing coins of the time of Maharaja Sree Moolam Thirunal. The coin has a picture of a conch on one side and four coins on the other in English and Malayalam. Another coin that existed during his reign was *Oru Chakram* with the image of conch inscribed in a circle on one side and 'RV' and 'Oru Chakram' inscribed on the other. Inside the circle of the coin is a picture of a conch and a crowned king as *Oru Kasu* that existed during the reign of Sri Chitra Thirunal Balarama Varma. Four *Kasu*, eight *Kasu* and one *Chakram* were also in existence at this time.



Figure 3: *Oru Kasu* (Courtesy: <https://en.numismata.com>)

The Travancore *Kaal Roopa* (1937) (Figure 5) was a currency in circulation in Travancore. The British 1-rupee coin is minted by the English East India Company, with King William IV looking to the right on one side and the rupee (1835) on the other, as the English East India Company. In 1840, one-rupee coin issued by the English East India Company with head of Queen Victoria on obverse side and One Rupee, 1840, English East India Company on reverse side. The old Travancore coins

used *Rasi Palaka* (Figure 6) for easy measurement and the *Rasi, Velli Panam* (silver coins) were so small that it was difficult to count, and the exact number could be found in the pit. There were zodiac signs with 100 to 1000 holes. It is said that gold and silver were kept in a treasure chest obtained from Brahmapuram. This treasure chest was to be buried in the ground. A variety of coin minting machines were used in Travancore. Many coins used by Travancore are now kept at the Koyikkal Palace, owned by the Department of Archaeology, Kerala State at Nedumangad in Thiruvananthapuram, where the palace is located. We can see a large collection of coins in this palace (Pillai 2001: 31).



Figure 4: Travancore Varahan (Courtesy: <https://nnp.wustledu.com>)



Figure 5: Kaal Roopa (Courtesy: <https://coins.techcollections.info>)

Krishnapuram Palace in Kerala is a great repository of coins. Travancore had adopted punching technique for making coins in the earlier period. Travancore silver *chakrams* and copper *Kasu* were made by using the dies and punches. This technique was in use from the late Seventeenth century to middle of the Nineteenth century. There is evidence to show that silver coins like the Bombay Rupee and Dollars were bought for

coining the Travancore silver *chakram*. These silver coins were melted in a *moosa* (clay crucible). When this molten silver is suddenly poured into cold water, it falls into water as grain and dust. This form of silver was weighed to the exact weight of a *Chakram*, and separate quantities were thrown into small cavities in large earthen plate. This plate with its contents is then put into the furnace for three or four hours with high temperature. The grains of metal are fused and formed into separate globules. There may be 3000 such globules in a single earthen plate. Silver *Chakrams* and copper *Kasu* circulated largely in Travancore. Silver *Chakram* is a tiny silver coin about the size of a small pea and its weight was below 6 grains. The impression on one side appears to be crescent and dots on two curved lines. It represents the legs and toe of the Travancore State deity Sri Padmanabha.



Figure 6: *Rasi Palaka* (Courtesy: Koyikkal Palace, Nedumangadu)

From the early part of the Nineteenth century the coinage of Travancore was more technically advanced. A press with feeding machine for the manufacture of *Fanam* (*panam*) pieces was procured from England. The first machine - struck silver coin in Travancore was *R.V Fanam* of Rama Varma IV (1860-1880 CE). A number 5 and 6 show the dies used for minting the *R.V Fanam*. The various coins of Dutch the English, Tippu Sultan were also common in Kerala. Mahe Panam is the thin coin printed by the French for the people of Mayyazhi. During the early part of the colonial occupation, European coins came in for circulation in Kerala. The European coins, especially the Mediterranean coins, were used at the ports for trading activities. Dutch copper coins, several species of *Varahans* (e.g. *Parangivarahan*, *Ikkeri Varahan*, etc.), the *Ikkeri Honnu*, the elephant cash (Mysore coins of the pre-Muslim era), the Sultan Cash (Tipu's coin),

the *Mahe Panam*, the English Surat rupee, the company rupee, etc., were among the other coins which were in circulation in different parts of the state in the modern period (Menon 2016: 42). *Mahe Panam* was one of the most interesting coins in circulation in the Malabar. Silver coins issued by the English East India Company from its mint at Thalasseri in 1799 and 1805 were the commonest coins in circulation in the coast in the early part of the Nineteenth century. They bore the letter 'T' to indicate the initial letter of the mint.

Keralites were accustomed to the monetary system even before the Christian era. The oldest of the coins is the 'zodiac'. It is believed that it was brought by 'Parasurama'. The zodiac sign, a gold coin, weighed about ten pounds. In Kerala, prices and rights were recorded in the zodiac sign marked *Shankhumudra*. There are references in Sangamakala works and folk songs to a zodiac sign that was larger than *Manchadikuru*. The origin of the word 'seizure' is related to zodiac money. Later, King Kolathiri issued a coin called *Kaliharayan* based on this model. The Zamorin named his coin 'Veerarayan'. Half-wheeled and one-wheeled coins, gold coins, silver coins, copper coins, single coins, double coins, four coins, and eight coins were found in Travancore.

During Tipu Sultan's conquest, he ordered that nothing, but his coins should be allowed in Malabar and Kochi. Tipu set up a *Kammattam* at Farook, Kozhikode to make these coins. He made *Swarnavaraha* and cash in the name of his father Hyder Ali, single and double 'rupees' in silver and *Anakash* in copper. Although these coins disappeared with the fall of Tipu, *Anakash* was still used for trading in Ernakulam, Valluvanad and the northern part of Kochi. The oldest coin in Kochi was the *Puthen*. There were two types, single and twin. Each coin was made of a single piece of silver. If the weight of a single coin was five to eight grains, the weight of a double coin was sixteen grains. The oldest in *Puthen* was *Kaliyamani*.

It was also known as *Shankhilla Puthen* as it did not have a conch seal. According to him, the single and twin novels of 1856 and 1858 had the image of 'Poornathrayesa' (Lord Vishnu) emblazoned on them. Portuguese had an extensive copper coinage, minted, and put into circulation in the Cochin provinces (Premkumar 2014: 51). Portuguese coins were minted in Portugal. Francis Day in his book 'The Land of the Perumals: or Cochin, its Past and Present', when the Portuguese were in Kochi, their coin 'Reedy' was used. This was known as *Choondalkash*. The construction of the reedy was wrapped around silver wires. According to the Sea Land of Perumal, the coin 'Basrocal' was minted here by the Portuguese. These coins were made of molten metal with lead and zinc.

The pagoda is another gold coin that was found in ancient Kerala. Here it is known as 'Idol'. Canter Visscher records in his book that it was used during the Dutch period. The exchange rate here was two 'lanta dollars' (Dutch dollars) per idol. The coins minted in the kingdom of Kochi with the assistance of the Dutch are known as Indo-Dutch coins (Premkumar 2014: 52). Some coins in this category are found at

Kottappuram (Premkumar 2014: 52). These coins were circulated widely among the traders on the Kerala during the medieval period. They are minted in two types: the superior coins and minor coins. The superior type coins were popularly known as *Ottapputhen* (one puthen) and the minor type coins were known as *Erattaputhen* (two puthen). One coin found at Kottappuram belongs to the category of *Ottapputhen* (Premkumar 2014: 52).

Another Indo-Dutch coin from Kottappuram belongs to a different category known as gold *Rasi Panam* (Premkumar 2014: 52). These coins were in use from the late Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries. At that time Dutch coins were in circulation all over Cochin. These are commonly known as *lanthuttu*. Coins from ancient Rome and Greece have been unearthed from various places in Kerala. The reason for the arrival of European coins here is the trade relations that existed with the natives even before the Christian era. At the same time, coins that existed in Kerala were found in Tamil Nadu. Coins of the Chera king Veera Kerala were mined at Tirunelveli in 1945. On one side of them is written *Sri Veera Keralasya*. The coinage was made of gold and copper. Veera Kerala is believed to have been the king of the first Chera dynasty based at Thrikkakara. The reason for the presence of foreign gold coins is the pepper trade.

According to historian K.P. Padmanabha Menon, these gold coins were used for making jewelry in this country. In addition to their own coins, Dutch coins were also used in Kochi. The years were marked on coins issued from 1731 to 1792. These so-called 'Lanta Coins' were made in Holland, the homeland of the Dutch. On one side was the name of the Dutch East Company and on the other was the lion. Coins were minted in five states there. So, the shape is in five ways. They used this coin until the Dutch left Cochin. Visscher (1862: 165-190), discussed about the foreign currency in circulation in Kerala and mentions the use of the Dutch coin 'Ricks Dollar' and *Dakatoon* and a Spanish coin. These coins were mainly used for commercial exchange purposes. The exchange of 'Puranas' engraved on square and round silver pieces also took place in Kochi. The reason for the arrival of this coin is the trade with North India through the port of Kochi in the past. According to Visscher (1862: 165-190) the *Ducat* silver coin, which was in use in Venice was used in Kochi. These gold coins are popularly known as '*Vilkash*' and '*Amada*'. These coins with the image of the Lord of Venice standing in front of the cross have been found in some parts of Tamil Nadu. The Tamils used to call it '*Shanarkash*'.

Conclusion

Kerala archaeology is indebted to Kerala numismatics. The construction of Kerala history particularly the economic history of Kerala owes a lot to the scientific study of various coins which were in circulation in Kerala. The Punch marked coins which were in circulation in north India were also could be seen in Kerala. Kerala maintained trade relation with north India from the then time.

The Roman coins found from Kerala were not in circulation, but they were considered as valuable goods. But the amount of coins unearthed from different parts of Kerala

shed light on the magnitude of trade that Kerala traders maintained with the Roman empire. The foreign powers like Dutch, English, and French minted and circulated coins in Kerala. The Travancore rulers minted different types of coins having different values like *Chakram*, *Vellichakram*, *Kasu*, etc. The Cochin, Kolathiri, and Zamorin also circulated different types of coins in their kingdom. The weight of the coins, the metal used for the coin, etc. gives us a lot of information about the economic condition of these kingdoms.

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