Chinese Coins from Thangassery: A Medieval Port in Kollam District, Kerala

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Received: 30 June 2017; Revised: 28 July 2017; Accepted: 06 September 2017
Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 5 (2017): 778-791

***Abstract**: Kollam, the coastal district in Kerala has been a major centre of prehistoric activity and revealed a few Paleolithic sites, a Mesolithic rock shelter, Neolithic Celt and a number of Megalithic sites. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala, Kariavattom, Thiruvananthapuram carried out explorations in 2013-14 and 2014-15 at the site locally Known as Thangassery, a fishing harbor in Kollam City, which is mentioned as the Kollam Port in some literary resources and in the accounts of several foreign Travelers. The exploration yielded the evidence of an active medieval port which is mentioned as the Kollam Port in some indigenous literary resources and in the accounts of several foreign Travelers. Several Chinese sources authenticate the diplomatic relations between China and Kollam. The material evidence collected from the site includes west Asian ceramics, Chinese Ceramics and coins as well as large amounts of local ceramics. The present paper here attempts to highlight the chronological data gathered from Chinese coins as a mean to understand the growth and influence of trade between China and Kollam.*

Keywords: Kollam, Thangassery, Travelogues, China, Coins, Trade, Legends

Introduction

Kollam district (08°52′46.14″N; 076°34′03.06″E) is a coastal district located on southern Kerala. It is known in ancient records as Colon, Kulam, Ku-lin and Mahlai etc, (Sarasan 2014 9). It has a geographical area of 2491 sq km, which is about 6.48% of the total state. Kollam district is situated in the south-west coast of India bordering Lakshadweep Sea in the west, the state of Tamilnadu in the east, Alappuzha district in the North and Thiruvananthapuram district in the south. It is the seventh largest district in Kerala. It has the shortest coastal line in Kerala (37 km). Kollam, one of the oldest settlements is the fourth largest city in Kerala. Thangassery and Neendakara ports triggered the development activities in the region and led to the growth of settlements around these ports and thus Kollam developed as an important commercial centre in the southern part of Kerala. During the colonial period it was known as Quilon and was famous for its trade linkages and industrial potential from the ancient period onwards. Kollam was the capital of the Venad dynasty from 9th century CE onwards and during their

rule, Kollam evolved as a major trade centre of spices and an important port in the Malabar Coast. Sangam literature, classical, Chinese, Arab and local literary works mentions this site as a thriving port harbor with a huge trade network. Kollam was a part of Ay kingdom which comprised of present day Thiruvananthapuram, Alappuzha, Kollam and southern Tamilnadu. (Menon 2007 97), but Venad later sustained an independent status and a separate Kingdom centered at Kollam was later established owing to the fact that Kollam was an active port from 9th century CE onwards. Evidences of long distance trade with Chinese and Arabs have been established from the evidences like Chinese pottery, Chinese coins and West Asian ceramics. Kollam's rise to prominence is coincided with the establishment of Jewish-Christian merchant community which is evident from the Tarisappally copper plates. The establishment of Kollam era is associated with this event (Sarasan 2014 11). Kollam was also home to merchant guilds like Anchuvannam (Foreign) and Manigramam (Local). The maritime associations between china and Kollam have been recorded by several travelers. Kollam has been recorded as Mahlai in many Chinese records. Ibn Batuta also mentions that Kollam was an important trade centre of Chinese traders. According to records of tang dynasty (618-913 CE), Quilon was their chief settlement and they give it the name of Mahlai. The king of Quilon and the neighboring districts is referred to these records as Benati or Venad. In the itineraries composed by Chinese geographer Kia Tam between 785 and 805 CE it is mentioned that Chinese had trade relations with Kulam (Quilon) on the Malabar Coast (More L 2003 3). In Unnunlisandesham written in 14th Century CE, there is direct mention about Kollam as a centre of administration and port (Kunjan Pillai S 1996 177). One of the earliest inscription which mentions about Kollam is Tarisappally copper plates of Sthanu Ravi. The inscription discloses that one Iso Tapir erected a church named Tarisappalli at Kurakkeni-Kollam (Quilon). It is the most striking evidence of the establishment of a Jewish community at Kollam. (Travancore Archaeological Series Vol 2 and 3 1908 62).

The Chinese Coins

Thousands of Chinese coins have been recovered from the coastal areas of Kollam port as a result of dredging in 2014. The sea route between India and China was actively used during the early centuries of Christian era. But the direct sea route has come into common use by the 5th century CE. The trade became in full swing in the 6th and 7th CE onwards. Religion, trade and politics played an important role in this (Sarasan B 2014 9). Coinage began in China when general barter was replaced by the use of certain products or objects to affect an exchange. These products include natural and man-made products like cowries, grain, textiles and tools. They continued to be served as money over a long period of time (Thierry F 1998 15). The use of copper coins started after a long process of different exchange practices. The evolution of Chinese currency was fundamentally different from the evolution of western coin systems including that of India. According to the western coinage system, the commercial tariff of the coins had a relationship with the intrinsic value of the metal with which the coins were composed; such a relationship did not exist in the case of early Chinese coinage. Their

commercial tariff was based on the form and general size of the specimens. The intrinsic value of the metal had no role in the circulation of coins. The weight and the various patterns were regulated by the State, and everyone, including guild merchants of private and town communities, subject to these rules was at liberty to issue his own coins, bearing his distinctive symbol (written characters) or name (Lacouperie 1892 28). Gold, silver, copper, tin, bronze, lead, iron, and tutelage were the various metals which were employed in China as mediums of exchange. Although the country is rich in metals mining operations have never been allowed to any large extent. The rudeness of the mining processes and the dearth of metal which ensued caused the metallic currency to suffer greatly in several instances. The shortcomings of metallurgy in China have had a sad and lasting influence on her coinage (Lacouperie T 1892 28). Chinese started by using cowrie shells for money. Inscriptions and archaeological evidences points out that cowrie shells were regarded as objects of value in Shang dynasty (1766-1154 BC). By the end of the Shang dynasty bronze coins appeared which started an era of metal coinage (Sarasan 2014 17). The first Chinese currency appeared in the shape of spades and knives, these shapes were derived from their common work implements of everyday use. By 4th BC round coins replaced spades and knives. These round holed coins were easy to carry. Round holed coins in turn gave way to square holed coins.

Method of Manufacture

Unlike the western coins that were usually die struck; Chinese coins were produced by casting. This was a simple and inexpensive way of producing low value coins. From 6th CE onwards moulds were used for casting of coins, moulds were made of sand imprinted with mother coins. The mother coin was prepared by casting or by engraving a pattern of the coin in some easily workable material such as tin. The moulds were bound together tightly and molten metal was carefully poured into the moulds, when the molten metal is cooled down the coins would be removed from the coins. After polishing in tubs of chaff or sand, the coins were strung together. Each coin was threaded together on a cord to make strings.

Normally a string consisted of 1000 coins. The Chinese have made slow progress in metallurgic art. Their methods have remained undeveloped and stationary in many respects, and the manufacture of their coins was not improved until the Han period. The casting process, which has always been followed by them, afforded incessant facilities to false coiners, and compelled the Chinese authorities, in order to baffle their projects, to make frequent changes in the designs of their coins (Lacouperie 1892 28). The style of writing the legends was altered as a whole or in parts, and numerous instances are known of two or three characters out of four written each in a different style. In other cases the sole difference between issues consists in the length or thickness or arrangement of one single stroke of a character. The Chinese coins were cast in units or in clusters, and the arrangement of these clusters in the shape of a tree, which still obtains in China. The shapes of ancient Chinese metallic money belong to three classes, the Knife, the Spade and the Ring.

Figure 1: Obverse Side of First Twelve Coins

Figure 2: Reverse Side of First Twelve Coins

Figure 3: Obverse side of Coins from Thirteen to Twenty four

Figure 4: Reverse side of Coins from Thirteen to Twenty Four

Figure 5: Obverse Side of Coins from Twenty Five to Thirty Six

Figure 6: Reverse Side of Coins from twenty five to Thirty Six

Figure 7: Obverse Side of Coins from Thirty Seven to Forty Four

Figure 8: Reverse Side of Coins from Thirty Seven to Forty Four

Analysis of Chinese Coins

From Thangassery 44 Chinese coins (Figures 1 to 8) were obtained as a result of exploration. These coins were studied (Table 1) in a systematic manner in order to obtain inferences. The coins were initially classified into different groups in order to make an easier approach towards the study. Then coins were measured and their features like weight, diameter, breadth and length were recorded. These coins were compared with different other Chinese coins obtained from Thangassery which were studied and analyzed earlier by various scholars. The obverse and reverse of these coins were recorded and classification was made according to the final results.

Out of the 44 coins only 43 coins could be analyzed to get chronological and historical details since one of the coins were badly eroded and no inferences could have drawn from that coin. Coins were classified into three categories on the basis of their chronology. They are coins belonging to Tang Dynasty, coins of Southern Song Dynasty and coins of Northern Song Dynasty. Tang dynasty coins are the earliest; it is dated between 618 CE to 907CE. The Northern Song Dynasty coins belong to the second category; it is dated between 960 CE to 1127 CE. 36 coins are reported from this section. The last category is Northern Song Dynasty coins. They are dated between 1127 CE to 1279 CE. Only two coins were reported from this section. Most of the coins are lightweight in nature. Among the total collection 13 coins weighs in between 3-4 gm. 11 coins are in the range of 2-3 gm and 7 coins are in the range of 5-6 gm. Only 3 coins have reported to weighs more than 7 gm (Figure 9). The weight of the coin is directly linked with the amount of metal in it. The diameter and thickness has no particular relation with the weight of the coin. The study indicates that there is no unanimous relation between the size and weight of the coins; this could be due to the differences in methods of production as well as the amount of materials used by different dynasties.

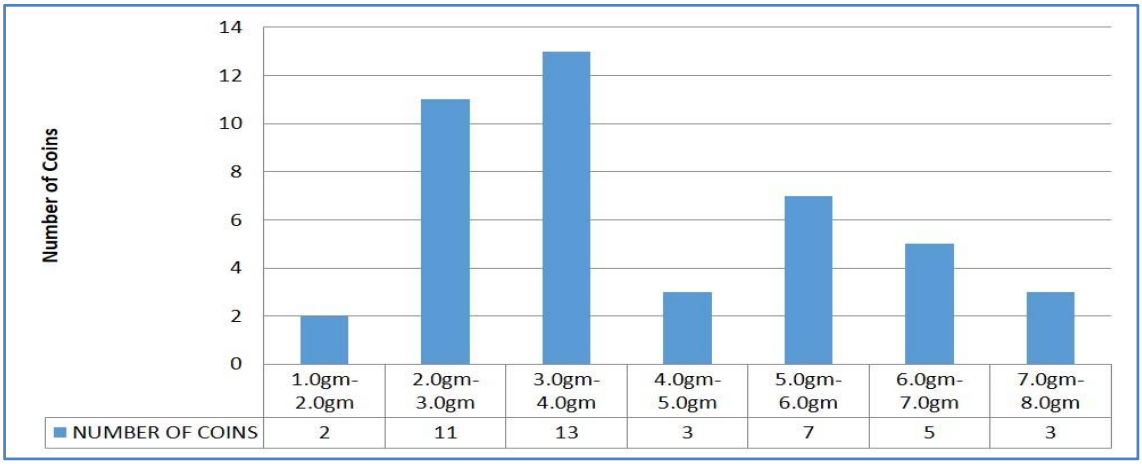

Figure 9: Weight of Coins

Diameter of the coins ranges from 23mm to 35 mm (Figure 10). Most of the coins are perfect round and had small diameter range. Among the total collection 17 coins belongs to the 24- 25mm range and 8 coins belongs to the 23-24mm range. The coin with 34.73 mm has the largest diameter, and the coin with 23.48 mm has the shortest diameter. The diameters of coins represent no large scale fluctuations. About 93% of the coins are below 30mm. The coin with largest diameter also has the largest weight.

Out of the 44 coins only one coin has an eroded obverse side and rest of the coins have clear and identifiable obverse side. The obverse side could be classified because each dynasty has different symbols on the obverse side. Out of the 44 coins 21 different categories could be classified based on their obverse side. The Legend XI NING ZHONG BAO has largest amount of coins. Most Legends on the basis of their

classification resulted in a number of different categories; even a same King has issued different Symbols and legends on their coins. Out of the 44 coins 3 coins have eroded reverse side, 41 coins have no features on the reverse side. Only one coin is reported to have three dot marks on the reverse side which indicates San 3rd Year, which is an indication of the regnal year of the King.

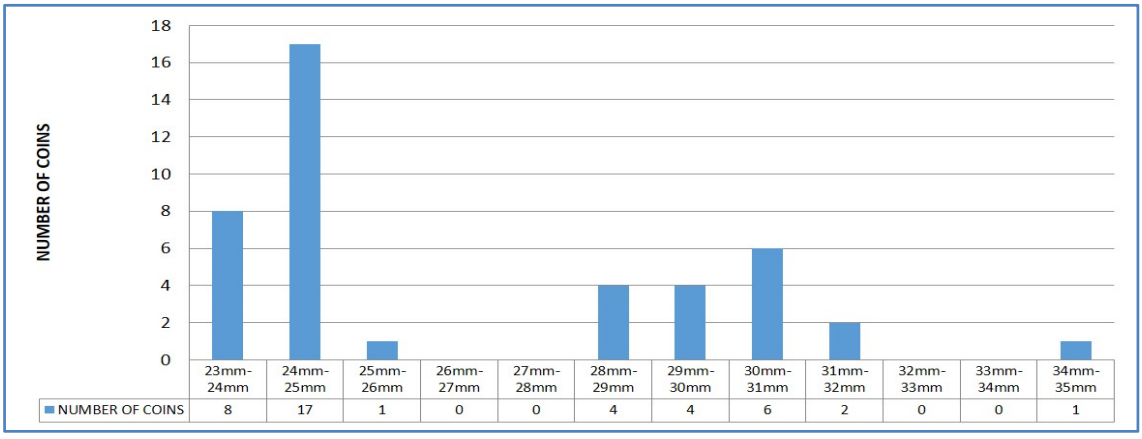

Figure 10: Diameter of Coins

Five different types of scripts were identified from the total collection of the coins (Figure 11). Out of 44 coins six coins have unidentified script. 14 coins belong to the category of Regular script another 14 coins belong to the category of Seal script. Other identified scripts were running script, Li script and Grass script. Only one coin has Grass script inscribed on it.

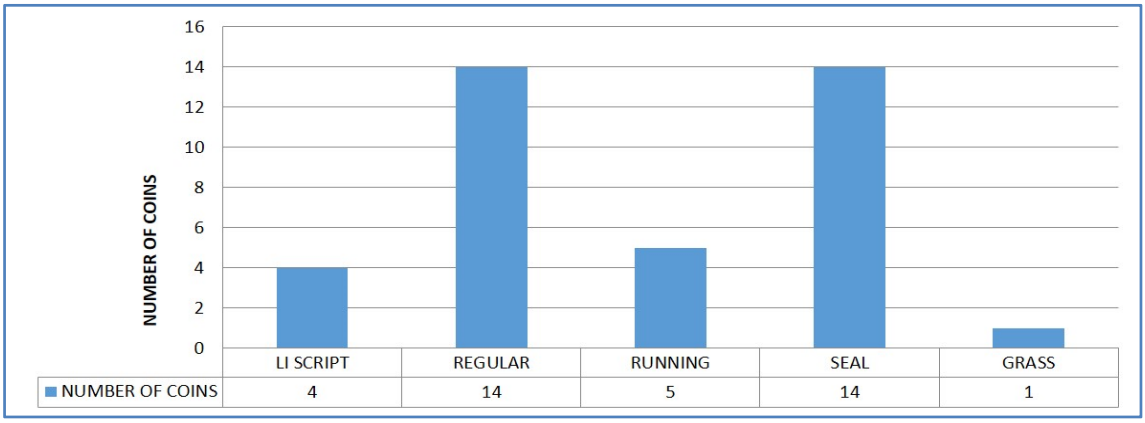

Figure 11: Script of Coins

The coins could be categorized under three Dynasties namely, Northern Song, Southern Song and Tang Dynasty. Out of the 44 coins 36 of them belongs to the Northern Song Dynasty. Only two coins belong to the Southern Song dynasty and five coins belong to Tang dynasty. Different emperors belonging to different dynasties have issued coins and a wide range of coins belonging to different category of emperors have been obtained. Out of 44 coins 10 coins belong to the emperor Shen Zong, Nine coins were issued by Ren Zong and five coins are issued by Tai Zong.

Table 1: Features of Coins from Thangassery

COIN NO	WEIGHT	DIAMETER	MAX.THICK	MN.THICK	HOLE LENGTH
1	3.35	24.1	1.16	1.04	5.82
2	4.01	24.59	1.32	1.23	6.03
3	3.26	24.44	1.46	1.07	5.76
4	2.57	24.47	1.14	1.04	5.52
5	3.42	24.52	1.28	1.14	7.03
6	3.03	23.64	1.36	1.16	5.39
7	3.4	24.75	1.4	1.28	7.42
8	3.65	24.31	1.3	1.18	5.46
9	3.33	24.5	1.34	1.16	5.94
10	3.27	23.67	1.32	1.14	6.67
11	3.04	23.96	1.24	1.04	6.64
12	2.96	25.11	1.27	0.84	6.1
13	2.96	24.4	1.32	0.79	5.84
14	5.06	29.28	1.46	1.34	7.92
15	5.88	29.75	1.78	1.36	6.48
16	5.76	31	1.32	1.11	8.23
17	6.67	29.41	1.6	1.3	6.96
18	6.66	28.82	1.94	1.44	6.67
19	3.56	24.63	1.27	1.16	6.96
20	2.46	23.6	1.02	0.95	6.67
21	3.75	24.96	1.27	1.18	6.79
22	2.88	24.75	1.5	1.28	6.4
23	2.77	24.07	1.14	1.04	6.88
24	2.97	23.72	1.11	1.07	6.39
25	1.86	24.76	1.3	1.16	6.51
26	1.64	23.86	1.16	0.95	5.91
27	2.98	23.48	1.4	1.3	5.94
28	2.68	24.13	1.21	1.01	5.91
29	2.99	24.55	1.28	1.12	5.83
30	3.21	23.51	1.45	1.39	6.65
31	3.27	24.88	1.08	1	6.26
32	2	24.62	0.96	0.8	6.69
33	4.4	28.15	1.4	1.2	6.18
34	5.9	28.84	1.54	1.14	6.57
35	7.7	30	2.13	1.95	6.69
36	5.5	28.66	1.96	1.45	7.78
37	5.2	30	1.52	1.03	7.22
38	5.7	30.33	1.42	1.25	7.78
39	7.2	30.1	1.54	1.4	6.17
40	6.8	29.38	1.6	1.38	6.59

41	6.6	30.88	1.55	1.42	6.26
42	4.8	30.93	1.29	1.04	7.02
43	6.4	31.84	1.56	1.23	7.19
44	7.8	34.73	2.06	1.35	7.61

COIN NO	HOLE WIDTH	OBVERSE	REVERSE	CRESCENT
1	5.64	ERODED	PLAIN	ABSENT
2	6.48	TIA SHENG YUAN BAO(1022-63)	PLAIN	ABSENT
3	5.71	XI NING YUAN BAO(1068-77)	PLAIN	ABSENT
4	5.62	ZHI DAO YUAN BAO(976-97)	PLAIN	ABSENT
5	7.06	CHONG NING ZHONG BAO(1102-06)	PLAIN	ABSENT
6	5.56	XIANG FU YUAN BAO(1008-16)	PLAIN	ABSENT
7	6.91	TIA SHENG YUAN BAO(1023-31)	PLAIN	ABSENT
8	5.56	CHUN HUA YUAN BAO(990-94)	PLAIN	ABSENT
9	5.52	SHENG SONG YUAN BAO(1098-1100)	PLAIN	ABSENT
10	6.68	SHENG SONG YUAN BAO(1098-1100)	PLAIN	ABSENT
11	6.78	YUAN YOU TONG BAO(1086-93)	PLAIN	ABSENT
12	6.2	XIANG FU YUAN BAO(1008-16)	PLAIN	ABSENT
13	5.68	CHUN HUA YUAN BAO(990-94)	PLAIN	ABSENT
14	7.63	KAI XI TONG BAO CE 1207	SAN 3RD YEAR	ABSENT
15	6.84	YUAN YOU TONG BAO(1086-93)	PLAIN	ABSENT
16	7.88	XI NING ZHONG BAO(1071-77)	PLAIN	ABSENT
17	7.28	SHENG SONG YUAN BAO(1101-06)	PLAIN	ABSENT
18	7.15	YUAN FENG TONG BAO(1078-85)	ERODED	ABSENT
19	7.31	HUANG SONG TONG BAO(1039-54)	PLAIN	ABSENT
20	6.6	QIAN YUAN ZHONG BAO(759-62)	PLAIN	ABSENT
21	6.99	TIA SHENG YUAN BAO(1023-31)	PLAIN	ABSENT
22	6.6	KAI YUAN TONG BAO	PLAIN	ABSENT
23	6.84	KAI YUAN TONG BAO	ERODED	ABSENT
24	6.1	KAI YUAN TONG BAO	PLAIN	ABSENT
25	6.64	YUAN YOU TONG BAO(1086-93)	PLAIN	ABSENT
26	5.94	TAI PING TONG BAO(976-97)	PLAIN	ABSENT
27	6.04	ZHI PING YUAN BAO(1064-67)	PLAIN	ABSENT
28	6.24	YUAN FENG TONG BAO(1078-85)	PLAIN	ABSENT
29	6.25	XIAN PING YUAN BAO(998-1022)	PLAIN	ABSENT
30	6.49	XI NING YUAN BAO(1068-77)	PLAIN	ABSENT
31	6.31	ZHI DAO YUAN BAO(995-97)	PLAIN	ABSENT
32	6.77	KAI YUAN TONG BAO	PLAIN	ABSENT
33	6.13	ZHENG HE TONG BAO(1111-17)	PLAIN	ABSENT
34	7.04	ZHENG HE TONG BAO(1111-17)	PLAIN	ABSENT
35	6.4	ZHENG HE TONG BAO(1111-17)	PLAIN	ABSENT

36	7.81	SHAO XING YUAN BAO(1131-62)	ERODED	ABSENT
37	7.27	XUAN HE TONG BAO(1119-25)	PLAIN	ABSENT
38	7.81	XI NING ZHONG BAO(1071-77)	PLAIN	ABSENT
39	6.27	SHAO SHEN G YUAN BAO(1094-97)	PLAIN	ABSENT
40	6.71	YUAN FENG TONG BAO(1078-85)	PLAIN	ABSENT
41	6.62	XI NING ZHONG BAO(1071-77)	PLAIN	ABSENT
42	7.43	XI NING ZHONG BAO(1071-77)	PLAIN	ABSENT
43	7.7	XI NING ZHONG BAO(1071-77)	PLAIN	ABSENT
44	8.02	CHONG NING ZHONG BAO(1102-06)	PLAIN	ABSENT

COIN NO	**DOT**	**SCRIPT**	**DYNASTY**	**EMPEROR**
1	ABSENT	_	_	_
2	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	REN ZONG
3	ABSENT	RUNNING	NORTHERN SONG	SHEN ZONG
4	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	TAI ZONG
5	ABSENT	LI SCRIPT	NORTHERN SONG	HUI ZONG
6	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	ZHEN ZONG
7	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	REN ZONG
8	ABSENT	RUNNING	NORTHERN SONG	TAI ZONG
9	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	HUI ZONG
10	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	HUI ZONG
11	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	ZHE ZONG
12	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	ZHEN ZONG
13	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	TAI ZONG
14	ABSENT	REGULAR	SOUTHERN SONG	NING ZONG
15	ABSENT	RUNNING	NORTHERN SONG	ZHE ZONG
16	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	SHEN ZONG
17	ABSENT	RUNNING	NORTHERN SONG	HUI ZONG
18	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	SHEN ZONG
19	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	REN ZONG
20	ABSENT	_	TANG	SU ZONG
21	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	REN ZONG
22	ABSENT	_	TANG	_
23	ABSENT	_	TANG	_
24	ABSENT	_	TANG	_
25	ABSENT	RUNNING	NORTHERN SONG	ZHE ZONG
26	ABSENT	LI SCRIPT	NORTHERN SONG	TAI ZONG
27	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	YING ZONG
28	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	SHEN ZONG
29	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	ZHEN ZONG
30	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	SHEN ZONG
31	ABSENT	GRASOUTHERN SONG	NORTHERN SONG	TAI ZONG

32	ABSENT	_	TANG	_
33	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	HUI ZONG
34	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	HUI ZONG
35	ABSENT	LI SCRIPT	NORTHERN SONG	HUI ZONG
36	ABSENT	REGULAR	SOUTHERN SONG	GAO ZONG
37	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	HUI ZONG
38	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	SHEN ZONG
39	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	ZHE ZONG
40	ABSENT	SEAL	NORTHERN SONG	SHEN ZONG
41	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	SHEN ZONG
42	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	SHEN ZONG
43	ABSENT	REGULAR	NORTHERN SONG	SHEN ZONG
44	ABSENT	LI SCRIPT	NORTHERN SONG	HUI ZONG

Observations and Conclusion

After the detailed and systematic typological analysis it is observed that the coins showed similarities as well as differences. The weight and thickness show no major fluctuations in the results. The weight of the coins varies from 1gm to 8gm. The copper coins are lightweight in nature. Most of the coins are in perfect round shape with small diameter. However some fluctuations could be seen in the diameter of cons as it varies from 23mm to 35mm. Even though only 44 coins were analyzed large varieties of legends as well as dynasties were identified. Out of the 44 coins 21 different categories of obverse signs were identified, but only one coin have a reverse side symbol. The coins are classified into three dynasties and on the basis of this classification the chronology of the coins could be identified. About 36 coins belong to the Northern Song dynasty; other dynasties were Tang dynasty and Southern Song dynasty. These dynasties belong to different time periods. This clearly indicates that Kollam had long trade relation with china. Earliest Chinese coins reported from the site belong to Tang Dynasty, this dynasty ruled china between 618CE to 907CE. This clearly indicated that trade between china and Kollam must have started during this period. But there are no unanimous viewpoints between the scholars about whether these coins had any circulation value in the local scenario, considering the fact that Chinese were one of the major stakeholders of trade in Kollam, it should be recognized that these coins had no materialistic value and it might not have used in large volume of trade, there would have been alternative measures used in the trade exchange. However Chinese trade suffered many halts and difficulties owing to internal problems in Venad.

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