

Sankam Age Coins Found in Sri Lanka

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Numismatics is one of the most valuable archaeological sources to rewrite the ancient history of a country. In recent times there is a spurt in historical research in Sri Lanka by employing the evidences, obtained through numismatic sources. Various types of ancient and medieval coins found at various places of Sri Lanka like Anurathapura, Akkurugoda, Polanaruwa, Matottam, Kantharodai, Vallipuram and Punakari. These were ancient historical places. The foreign coins found here help to assess the political and commercial relations that existed between the Sri Lanka and other countries.

Before focusing the attention on the significance of Sankam age coins found in Sri Lanka, The writer wishes to point out some literary and archaeological evidences regarding the political, cultural and commercial relations that existed between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka during the Sankam period. Though there is no unanimity among historians regarding the date of Sankam period, we can take the period from 3rd century B.C. to 3rd century A.D., is the period of Sankam age. This is as suggested by those scholars who have corroborated the evidence from Sankam classics with the evidence from the cotemporary Megalithic culture which in the Sankam Literature (Krishnamurthy 1997:11).

Sri Lanka because of its geographical location naturally had very close relations with South India particularly Tamil Nadu from pre historic times. During the Sankam period there are enormous evidences testifying to the closer historical relations that Sri Lanka had with Tamil Nadu than with the rest of South India. Pali literature refers to the migration of people from Tamil Nadu especially the Pandya territory to Sri Lanka. Thereafter there was state formation in Sri Lanka. According to Mahavamsa Sri Lanka had been ruled by ten Tamil kings for more than eighty years before Christian

era. They had come from Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka as traders priests and invaders during the contemporary of Sankam period. It is also mentioned that the Chola prince called Ellalan had ruled more than forty four years during the 2nd century B.C. and another five Tamil kings named Pulakaththan, Pakiyan, Panayamaran, Pilayamara and Tadikan who came from Pandya territory ruled in Sri Lanka for 14 years and 7 months during the 1st century B.C... Mendis has said that they had had relations with Mara and Pandya Maran who was defeated Chola king during the Sankam period. Krishna Iyar says that Tamil Prakatan and Pulakatan is one and the same person.

Trade relations could have been the usual medium through which the culture of Tamil Nadu flowed into Sri Lanka. The Megalithic antiquities of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu share many common features, which lead one to conclude that until the introduction of Buddhism, Sri Lanka must have been culturally a part of Tamil Nadu. Megalithic antiques such as beads and potsherds are evidences of the early stage of Sri Lanka-Tamil Nadu trade contacts (Begley 1973:191-6). A recent excavation at a Megalithic site in Anurathapura yielded potsherds with the figure of ship dating back to the third century B.C. This type of potsherd of the same period was found at Alakankulam in Tamil Nadu. This evidence would establish the sea-route contacts between these two countries during the Megalithic period.

Brahmi inscriptions in Sri Lanka are valuable sources regarding trade during the Sankam period. The inscriptions belonging to the period between 3rd century B.C. and 3rd century A.D. speak of trade and guilds. The term Vanija (trade) occurring in the inscriptions in places such Anurathapura, Periyapuliyamkulam, Uruvela, Kuduivil and others can be taken to denote Tamil Vanikar(Tamil Traders). A Brahmi inscription refers to the word Barata to denote a horse supervisor. In another Brahmi inscription from Polannaruwa a figure of a ship is found front of the term Barata The chronicle Mahavamsa refers to Senan and Kuththikan , the first Tamil rulers in Sri Lanka and their father a horse trader bringing the horse from Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka. The horse was one of the principle items in the trade of the Sankam Parathavars. Maduraikkabchi speaks of a widespread horse trade in the Pandya country.

An inscription from Anuradhapura refers to how the Tamil traders functioned as a guild. This further says that two traders called Ila Barata and Tamil Sumana jointly made a hall for holding periodical meetings on trade. Professor Paranavitana surmised

that this could be the place where the trades assembled and had their meetings. The seating places used by those traders are identifiable and are at different height, with inscriptions. The term "Naviha" mentioned in the above inscription denotes a ship-captain is engraved on a highly raised seat. He has chief of the guild (Paranavithana.1970:94)

Seven Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions have the name Samuda, Maha Samuda referring to the Ocean. These might refer to an individual, but have the connotation of Ocean also. Alakakulam potsherds of Tamil Nadu have the names Samuta and Samutaha. Mahadevan takes these words to denote the Samuda found in Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions. These two words can be treated equally with Kadalán, Kadalán Valuty the local chiefs of the Pandya territory during the Sankam period.

The Pattinapalai speaks of the unloading of the Sri Lankan edible items in Kaverippaddinam. A Brahmi inscription found at Tirupparamkunram in Tamil Nadu speaks of a donation made by a Sri Lankan merchant to a Jain monk. An inscription from Periyapuliyankulam in Northern Sri Lanka refers to an individual called Visaka. He might be a Tamil trader. The Kodumanal excavations in Tamil Nadu had yielded one potsherd with a term Visaki (Rajan 1994:82). There is a similarity between these two names. This perhaps testifies to mutual trade relations between Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. All these above mentioned evidences prove that the inhabitants of Sri Lanka had a close cultural, political and commercial contact with Tamil Nadu during the Sankam period. The coins finds further confirm the close political and trade contacts between these two countries.

Sankam Age Coins in Sri Lanka

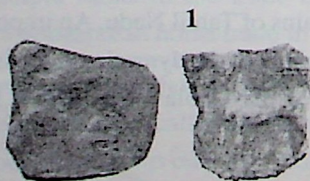
The foreign coins of Sri Lanka numerically and chronologically have a marked continuity. These were chiefly issued by the Tamil dynasties. Here one may first consider the coins of Sankam age. The coins were issued not only by the three major kingdoms but also the chieftains of Tamil Nadu. An important feature of them is that the reverse has the totem symbols of the dynasties who issued them. The stylized fish symbol for Pandyas, tiger for the Cholas, bow-arrow for the Chera, Reverse for Malayaman.

There are various types and numerous coins of Sankam age found at Anurathapura, Mathottam, Kantharodai, and Punakary in Sri Lanka. Scholars have a conclusive view that most of the punch-marked coins in Sri Lanka were imported from North India. In Tamil Nadu these coins from North India and the coins Tamil Kingdom were in circulation at the same period. Both of them must have been brought in for circulation in Sri Lanka as it had trade relations with Tamil Nadu from the remote past. Cera coins are not found in Sri Lanka to date. Only Chola and Pandya coins of Sankam age are found in Sri Lanka to date. With regard to types and numbers Pandya coins are in the greatest number. A numismatist Seyone claimed that he had found Cera coins from Kantharodai. But so far, no details and photographs of them are published. Therefore, only Chola and Pandya coins were taken up for a detailed study in this article.

Coins of Chola

The Chola of Sankam age reigned from two capital towns Uraivur and Kaverippumpattinam. When compared to the Padya coins of the Sankam age, the number of Chola coins are rarely available in Tamil Nadu (Krishnamurthy 1997:111). So far, no coins are found with the name of any Chola king. Sankam literature describes that Cholas had tiger in the flag as the royal emblem. Chola coins could possibly be identified to this effect. They were rarely found in Thailand and Sri Lanka out side Tamil Nadu.

For the first time, Seyon reported that he had discovered a small number of Sankam age Chola coins at Mathottam and Kantharodai in Northern Sri Lanka (Seyone 1998: 58). All the coins are described in his publications but the descriptions of symbols are sometimes incorrect and confusing except two coins. Recently, the writer has found two Chola coins at a village named Pallikuda in the Punakary area of Northern Sri Lanka. Symbols and shape both are same. For example the details of these coins are given below:



- Place : Pallikuda (Punakary region) , Shape: Square - Metal: copper-
Size: 1.7cm X 1.7 c.m.
Weight : .9 gm
Obverse : elephant figure, wheel of car.
Reverse : standing tiger faces westward with open mouth. Its tail is turned
upward.

2



- Place : Mathottam- Shape: Square - Metal: copper- Size: 1.6cm X 1.6
c.m.-Weight: .6 gm
Obverse : double chank standard
Reverse : Chola tiger (Seyone 1998: 31)

The description of above said coins found in Sri Lanka has a parallel in the Chola coins found in Tamil Nadu.

Coins of Pandyas

Among the royal dynasties of the Sankam age, the Pandyas were the first to issue the coins. But, the name of Pandya dynasty who issued them is not known. The name Peruvaluty is only engraved on the available coins. It is said that these were issued by the kings who belonged to the Valuty clan. Other coins identified by the fish symbol engraved on the reverse were also issued by the Pandyas.

In Sri Lanka, Paul Peires reported the discovery of some of these coins at Kantharodai as early as 1917-1919 (Peires 1919:73). Codrington, who described some of the coins illustrated by Peires, in 1924, identified them as "Early Pandyan" issues. The symbol found on the reverse of these coins was usually described by the most of Sri Lankan numismatists as "cakram". Codrington also described these coins under the heading "Buddhist Cakram Type". However he had rightly pointed out that the symbol was "a conventional fish, well known Pandyan badge" (Codrington 1924:19-

20). His attribution of these coins to the old Pandyas was well accepted by the other scholars.

Pandya coins found in Sri Lanka were analyzed by Peires (1919), Codrington (1924), Krishparajha (1983), Seoynne(1988), Krishnamurthy(1987), Pushparatnam (1993) and Bopearachchi. (1998). Recently more than twenty coins were described by Professor .Shanmukam (2004) under the heading “Sankam Pandya Coins in Sri Lanka”. In 1993, the writer had seen more Pandya coins from well-known coins collectors in Jaffna named Kalaijani, Ponnampalam and Tiruvalluvar. Unfortunately their collections are not available not to include them in this article.

Now, 33 coins found in Sri Lanka are taken up for study in this article. They areclassified under three major categories based on totem symbol, obverse symbols and shape. These coins are very significant not only for a study of the history of Sankam age of Tamil Nadu but also contemporary history of Sri Lanka.

First Type of Coins

This type of coins are further classified under five groups based on size, weight, shape and symbols. Except two coins, others that the writer found during his archaeological exploration at the Punakary region in Northern Sri Lanka. Stylized fish symbol is on the reverse in all the coins. But the symbols engraved on obverse differ from coin to coin. Their details are given below:

No 1



Place : Elavur (Punakary region) - Shape: Square - Metal: copper-Size:
2.3cm X 2.1 c.m.

Weight : 7.7 gm

Obverse : Upper line: A fenced tree with turtle-left side an unclear figure-
centre arched hill- right side. Lower part flag pole- left side
elephant facing the right-centre arched hill- right. elephant figure,

Reverse : Fish symbol

No. 2



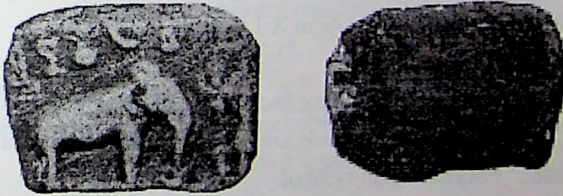
.Place : Kantharodai (Codrington 1924:19)- Shape: Rectangular - Metal:
Copper-Size: .88 in X .78 in -

Weight : 138.2 gr

Obverse : In rectangular frame at bottom small elephant standing l., trunk
pendent, above, in centre (?) basket, in high relief, between
enclosed tree to l. and caitya to r. plain at bottom projects beyond
die.

Reverse : In double line frame cakram. (Stylised fish symbol)

No.3



Place : Mannithalai (Punakary region)- Shape: Rectangular- Metal:
copper-Size: 2.4cm X 2.0 c.m.-

Weights : .7.9 gm

Obverse : Elephant standing facing right; in front of the elephant there is
a trisula with axe; next to trisula, a human figure on right; above
the elephant from left to right the following symbols are found;
1) tree -in-railing; 2) drum, 3) pot with four leaves, Srivatsa, 6)
conch, 7) wheel.

Reverse : Stylised fish symbol

No.4



- Place : Mathottam -Shape: Rectangular - Metal: copper- Size: 2.5cm X 2.0 cm.
Weight : .0.51192 gm (7.9grain)
Obverse : Elephant standing facing right; in front of the elephant there is a trisula with axe above the elephant from left to right the symbols are found; but not clearly identifiable.
Reverse : Stylised fish symbol

No. 5



- Place : Kalmunai (Punakary region)- Shape: Rectangular- Metal : copper-Size: 1.6cm X 1.4 c.m.-
Weight : .1.7 gm
Obverse : Elephant standing facing left; above the elephant from left to right the symbols are found; but not clearly identifiable
Reverse : Stylised fish symbol

No 1 coin with elephant and temple like symbols are found at the various places in Sri Lanka. Professor Ousman Boparachchi reported that this type of coin discovered one of the recent archaeological excavations in Anuradhapura. Two years back our Department colleague Professor Krishnarajha has also collected this type of coins from Kantharodai in the Jaffna Peninsula. Eminent numismatist Mr.R.Krishnamurthy has studied this type of coin found in Tamil Nadu (Krishnamurthy 1977:36). But in Sri Lanka these coins are found in great numbers. The symbols found in nos. 3 and 5 on the obverse and reverse of coins closely resemble those symbols found on the coins of the Sankam Pandyas from Tamil Nadu. Other coins nos. 2 and 4 show some variations from Sankam age Pandya coins found in Tamil

Nadu. Another interesting information is that these types are not found in Tamil Nadu. Professor Shanmukam has suggested that these indicate new type of coins issued by the Pandyas.

Second Type of Coins

Along with the coins of Sankam age, two different types' coins were unearthed in the places such as Elavur, Kalmunai, Virapandiyanmunai, Pallikuda, Kantharodai and Mathottam Anurathapuram, Akkurugoda in Sri Lanka Seoyne (1988), Pushparatnam (1993) and Boppearachchi. (1998). The symbols and other features of these coins were found different from the coins of Tamil Nadu. The details are given below:

No.1



Place : Pallikuda (Punakary region) - Shape: Square - Metal: copper-
Size: 1.5cm X1.3 c.m.

Weight : .2.3 gm

Obverse : In double line frame roof temple supported by five pillar in the form of upside down crescent.

Reverse : Stylised fish symbol

No.2



Place : Mannithalai (Punakary region) - Shape: Square- Metal: Lead -
Size: .9cm X0.7 c.m.

Weight : 1.4 gm

Obverse : In one line frame elephant standing facing right

Reverse : Stylised fish symbol

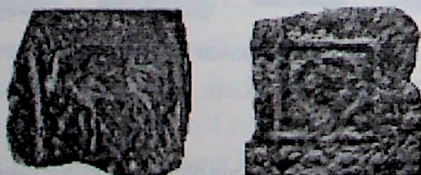
The fish symbol found on the reverse of the first coin tends to suggest that this might have been issued by the Pandyas of the Sankam age in Tamil Nadu. But, the figure of roofed temple is found alone in front of the fish. This figure is found along with others on the coins of Tamil Nadu, but not alone. So far, no such coin from Tamil Nadu has been found (Shanmugam 2004:230), or elsewhere in India.

The symbols elephant and fish found on obverse and reverse of the second type of coins might have been issued by the Sankam age Pandyas. But the size and metal of the coins are different from those of the Sankam Pandya coins found in Tamil Nadu. Most of the Pandiya coins were made of copper and that size varies from 1cm x 1cm to 2 cm x 2 cm. But these coins were made of lead and its size below 1cm. They are found in Sri Lanka only and no similar one was reported in Tamil Nadu. At the time these similar shapes of coins belonging to the Sankam period were in circulation in such places as Punaky, Kantharodai, Vallipuram, Mathottam, Anurathapuram, Akkurugoda in Sri Lanka Codrington (1924), Seoynce(1988) and Pushparatnam (1993). But swastika with pedestal symbol on the reverse of these coins are found instead of fish symbol of the above said coins.

Third Type of Coins

Symbols of bull and lion on the obverse on the coins were collected from different places such as Elavur, Kalmunai, Virapandiyanmunai, Pallikuda, Kantharodai, Jaffna, Vallipuram, Mathottam, Anuradhapuram and Akkurugoda in Sri Lanka (Codrington 1929: 25, Seyon 1988: 32, 44), Bopearachchi 1999:91), Pushparatnam 2002:76-81). The places of their distribution would prove wide spread circulation of the coins. The bull coins are of copper and square in form. The lion coins are of copper and the square and circular in form. The details are as follows.

No.1



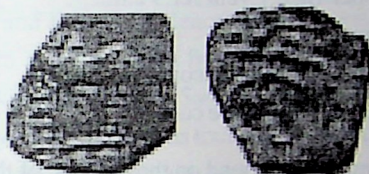
Place : Virapandiyanmunai (Punakary) -Shape: Square - Metal: copper-
Size: 1.6 cm X 1.3 c.m.-

Weight : .2.3 gm

Obverse : In one line frame bull standing facing right, a vessel before the
bull.

Reverse : In two line frame a circle with four dots. Two square lines -
within some dots.

No.2

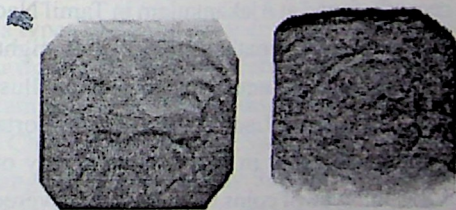


Place : Virapandiyanmunai (Punakary region) - Shape: Square -Metal:
copper- Size: 1.1 cm X .9 c.m.-Weight: .2.0 gm

Obverse : In one line frame bull standing facing right, a Purnakumpam
before the bull.

Reverse : In two line frame a circle with four dots. Two square lines -
within some dots.

No.3.



Lion

Place : Pallikuda (Punakary region) - Shape: Square- Metal: copper-
Size: 1.8cm X 1.9 c.m.

Weight : 1gm

Obverse : In the circle maneless lion standing facing right.

Reverse : In similar circle four dots in the shape of a star.

No.4



lion

Place : Mannithalai (Punakary region) - Shape: Circular - Metal: copper-Size:1.7cm X1.9 c.m.

Weight : .9 gm

Obverse : Similar with above coin

Reverse : Similar with above coin

The bull and lion symbols are found on the obverse of these coins is the general phenomenon of the coins of Sankam age and Pallava period. So some scholars are of the opinion that these coins were minted by Pandyas of Sankam age or Pallavas. Due to their commercial and political intercourse with Sri Lanka these were brought to the Island. The Pallava coins were mostly circular in shape. The square coins were in circulation much earlier than the Pallava period. The symbols on reverse which appear in Sri Lankan coins are not found in the Pallava coins. The bull mark in Sri Lankan coins and those found in the Cankam, Pandya and Cola coins have common characteristics. A coin recently found at Alakanakulam in Tamil Nadu illustrates a bull with a purnakumbha below its face (Kasinathan 1995:21). It might be a reproduction of the Sri Lankan model. The Alakanakulam coin in its reverse illustrates a circle with dots or a square instead of fish as in Sri Lanka. This is an important deviation. The Sri Lankan emblem is not found either in Tamil Nadu or any other part of India. Recently clay tablets of the bull type of coins have been discovered in the south most part of Sri Lanka (Bopearachchi 1999:90-91, pls. 22-24, Nos. J22-K32). Had these coins been minted in India there was no need for the moulds to be found in Sri Lanka.

The lion has been employed as an emblem or insignia in the Sinhalese tradition since very ancient time. In medieval times the Sinhalese rulers inscribed their names along with the lion in their coins (Seyone 1998:39). The lion is associated with the Sinhalese history in early Pli sources. So the bull could not have got the same

importance as lion in the Sinhalese Buddhist tradition. But the bull is a sacred animal for the Tamils as it is the Vahana (vehicle) of Siva who is worshipped by most of the Tamils. In medieval times, the Tamil rulers of Sri Lanka inscribed their dynasty name called Setu along with the bull in their coins. So the Sri Lankan Tamils had the bull insignia in the royal umbrella, the government seal and coins.

Conclusion

From above discussion, the following conclusions are worthy of note.

1. The archaeological and literary evidences suggest very close trade relationship between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka from the Megalithic period. The coins of Chola and Pandya kings during the Sankam period found in Sri Lanka have a parallels in the Pandya and Chola coins found in Tamil Nadu. They further confirm the close trade contacts between these two countries.
2. The above said some Sankam age Pandya coins were unearthed in Sri Lanka have on the reverse the Pandya totem symbol the fish, though the symbols on the obverse differ from Pandya coins found in Tamil Nadu. Scholars are of the opinion that the new type of coins of the Pandyas, hitherto are not reported for the Sankam Pandyas. But it is very difficult to understand this. Since the Tamil Nadu numismatists (Mr.R.Krishnamurthy 1997, A.Seethuraman 1994, P.Shanmuham 2003, Nagaswamy 1981, Nadana Kasinathan 1995 and others) have reported that the various types and more numbers of Sankam age Pandya coins are found in Tamil Nadu during the last two decade. But in Sri Lanka the coins which belong to Sankam age are very rarely discovered. Except a few types and number of Pandya and Chola coins others of Sankam age and rulers are not discovered so far. It is strange to note as to why Sri Lankan Pandya type of coins are not found in Tamil Nadu while they are found widespread in Sri Lanka. Had the Sankam rulers issued them, they would have been found in Tamil Nadu. If not so, the Tamil and Sinhala counterparts of the Sankam rulers in Sri Lanka might have issued these coins.

There are enormous evidences to say that Sri Lanka had close contact with the Pandya country than other part of Tamil Nad from ancient times. The Pali literature

refers to the migration of the people from Tamil Nadu especially the Pandya territory to Sri Lanka. This paved the way for the emergence of state during 5-4 century B.C. Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions of 3-2 B.C speak of Pandya dynasty and some places in the Pandya country. Some inscriptions have the words palaya, mara when they refer to the Pandya dynasty. The Pali chronicle Mahavamsa says that the Tamil rulers called palaya, palayamara and pilayamara were reigning their respective localities in Sri Lanka during 2century B.C.

Sixteen Brahmi inscriptions from Southern Sri Lanka, dated in the 3rd-2nd century B.C refer to a fish king and his ten brothers (Paranavithana 1970: 556-568.) In Pali majemaharaja means fish-king. Further all these inscriptions have an engraved figure of fish. This can be taken to represent the Pandyas or Pandyan clan. An Eminent historian in Sri Lanka G.G.Mendis while refereeing to the figures of fish in Sri Lankan inscriptions has said that figures of fish are the indications of the migration of Tamil people into the Island. Further, he says that they ruled independently without being dominated by the Sinhalese. As far as Sri Lankan history is concerned, at the initial stage local chieftains later on became the kings. So one can say that above new type of Pandya coins found in Sri Lanka only are issues of Sri Lankan rulers in memory of their Pandys ancestors.

Most of the ancient coins discovered in Sri Lanka were brought by merchants from India. These coins provided the models for the coins minted in the Island later. Mitchiner considers that the earliest coins of Sri Lanka are the outcome of Sankam Pandyas and Satavahana inspiration. Recently one of the Sri Lankan scholars Osmund Boparachchi discovered various types of ancient coins with coins moulds at Akkurugoda in Southern Sri Lanka. He has described these coins and coins moulds under the heading "Local Coins and Coins Moulds". Previous by these types of coins moulds found in Anuradhapra and Kantharodai in Sri Lanka. These are provide evidence for the minting of the coins in Sri Lanka in the early period. Pali sources specify the Tamil king Ellalan who reigned for forty four years continuously in the 2nd century B.C. He was perhaps he first Tamil king to ruled for such a long period. Mahavamsa refer the Ellalan donated 15000 kahapana (coins) for renovating Buddha Vihara. In Pali Kahapana mens a square copper coins(Geiger 1960:144)

Coins Moulds



So, the above said third type of coins emblems of bull and lion on obverse on the coins found in Sri Lanka are similar to those of the Sankam age Chola and Pandya coins found in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. These coins might have been minted by Tamil and Sinhala rulers of Sri Lanka due to the inspiration of Sankam Chola and Pandya coins.

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