

CHAPTER – 9**ANCIENT COINS IN TAMIL NADU**

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Introduction

There are literary, archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic sources of ancient Tamil history. The foremost among these sources is the Sangam literature, generally dated to the last centuries BC to early centuries AD. The poems in Sangam literature contain vivid descriptions of the different aspects of life and society in Tamilakam during this age; scholars agree that, for the most part, these are reliable accounts. Greek and Roman literature, around the dawn of the Christian era, give details of the maritime trade between Tamilakam and the Roman empire, including the names and locations of many ports on both coasts of the Tamil country. During the later half of the 20th century, several inscriptions of the Sangam age have been discovered in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Most of them are written in Tamil-Brahmi script and are found in rocks or on pottery. The information obtained from such inscriptions have been used to corroborate some of the details provided by the Sangam literature. Another important source of studying ancient Tamil history are the coins that have been category of Sangam age Tamil coins are the punch-marked silver, copper and lead coins dated 200 BCE–200 CE and assigned to the Sangam age Tamil kings.

The coins belonging to the first two categories mostly attest to the trading relationships that the Tamil people had with the kingdoms of found in recent years in the excavations, megaliths, hoards and surface. The coins belonging to the Sangam age, found in Tamil Nadu are generally classified into three categories. The first category consists of punchmarked coins from Magadha (400 BCE–187 BCE) and the Satavahanas (200 BC–200 AD). The second category is made up of coins from the Roman Empire dated from 31 BC to 217 AD, coins of Phoenicians and Seleucids and coins from the Mediterranean region (c.300 BC).[1] The third northern India and the outside world. But they do not offer much information regarding the Sangam age Tamil polity. The third category of coins, however, have provided direct testimony to the existence of ancient Tamil kingdoms and have been used to establish their period to coincide with that of the Sangam literature.[2]

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Pandyan coins

Among the many coins attributed to the early Pandyas, are a series of punch-marked coins made of silver and copper, that are considered to belong to the earliest period. Six groups of silver punchmarked coins and one group of copper coins have been analysed so far. All of these punch-marked coins have a stylised fish symbol on their reverse, which is considered the royal emblem of the Pandyas. On the obverse of these coins are a variety symbols such as the sun, the sadarachakra, the trishul, a dog, stupa etc. The first group of silver coins was found at Bodinayakanur, in a hoard containing 1124 coins all belonging to the same type. The remaining coins in the five silver group and the copper group were all found in the Vaigai river bed near Madurai. Four of the six silver groups have been assigned a date close to the end of the Mauryan rule, c. 187 BC. Since Tamilakam was deficient in metallic silver and since Roman silver did not become available in abundance until later, around 44 BC, it has been postulated that the Pandyan kings melted silver from the coins brought in by trade with Magadha or some foreign location other than Rome. The names of the Pandyan kings who issued this series of coins is not clear.[4]

Another series of coins, all made of copper and found near Madurai, have the fish symbol on the reverse and among other symbols on the obverse, have the legend Peruvaluthi written in the Tamil-Brahmi script. They have been a nandhipada. More coins with animal symbols such as the tortoise, the elephant and the bull have been found and assigned to the Pandyan kings. Some of them even have a human portrait, possibly of the king who issued those coins, on their obverse. There are also Pandyan coins belonging to the 1st century BC that have symbols depicting pearls, signifying the importance of pearl fishery to the Pandyan kingdom.[5] The assigned a date of around 200 BC and are considered to have been issued by the Pandyan king Peruvaluthi. These coins are represent some of the few instances where the names of Sangam kings appear in non-literary sources. Sangam literature mentions the importance attached to Vedic sacrifices by Tamil kings including the Pandyan Mudukudumi Peruvaludhi. This fact is also corroborated by the discovery of several Pandyan coins that are referred to as the Vedic sacrifice series. These coins have symbols on their obverse that depict the sacrifices, such as a horse tied to the yuba-stambha, a yagna kunta and excavations at Algankulam, near Madurai,

recovered two copper coins of the early Pandyas along with Northern Black Polished Ware. These coins have been assigned a broad time period ranging from 200 BC to 200 AD.[6]

Chera Coins

Many of the coins assigned to the Chera kings of Sangam age with a portrait and the legends “Makkotai” or “Kuttuvan Kotai” have been found near the Amaravathi river bed in Karur and elsewhere in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu state.[7] They depict the royal emblem of the Cheras, the bow and arrow symbol, on the reverse. It was generally believed that the Satavahanas were the first indigenous monarchs to issue silver portrait coins. That has been disproved by the discovery of Makkotai and Kuttuvan Kotai coins belonging to the 1st century AD or a little later. Silver coins issued by Augustus and Tiberius have over a period of time been discovered in large numbers from the Coimbatore-Karur region.[8] Among the Chera coins, the “Makkotai series” bears a unique pattern not found in other Tamil coins of its age.

They contain both the portrait of a king (facing right) and a written legend, in this case the word “Makkotai” written in Tamil-Brahmi script. These coins exhibit similarities with the Roman coins of emperors Augustus and Tiberius; like the Roman coins, the portraits on the Makkotai series do not show any jewellery on the king.[9]

They are thought to be made of two separate pieces joined by lead, a practice prevalent elsewhere in India at that time. Official seals of the bearing the name “Makkotai” have also been recovered from the river bed; these seals contain the portrait facing left and the legend “Makkotai” written backwards (right-to-left). The reverse of the seals is blank. The Makkotai coins and the seals have been assigned a date range of 100 BC to end of 100 AD.[10] Another aspect of the portraits on the Makkotai coins are that they do not have identical head sizes and some facial features also vary from one coin to another, even though they all have the same written legend. Such an observation has been made of coins assigned to the Western Kshatrapas of Gujarat, which are thought to be another inspiration for the Chera coins. Scholars who analyzed the varying portraiture on the Kshatrapa coins have advanced several theories to explain the phenomenon: that the coins could be of different kings who chose to keep the name of an ancestor on their coins or the coins all belong to one king with portraits depicting him at his different ages. Based on such theories, the Chera coins could either belong to a series of rulers or to a single king called Cheraman Makkotai.[11]

Another series of Chera coins depicts various animals along with symbols on its obverse and the Chera emblem on its reverse. Elephant, Irumporai, as he was known as the victor of Kolli in literature. Another coin of roughly the same period of 100 AD with the legend “Kolirumporaiy” and a warrior portrait has been found; it has not been assigned to a single king, but based on the legend, there are at least six Chera kings who could be associated with it horse, bull, tortoise and lion are the animals depicted in this series, along with snake and fish. Symbols of inanimate objects include arched hills, battle axe, conch, river, swastika, trident, flowers and the sun.[12] A few other coins that contain a portrait and a legend have been unearthed; a coin assigned to certain Kuttuvan Kotai with his portrait and the legend “Kuttuvan Kotai” is notable

for the occurrence of the “pulli” in the legend. Based on paleography of the script, it has been assigned a date of late 1st century to early 2nd century AD.

A coin belonging to 100 AD with the legend “Kollipurai” and a full-body portrait of a warrior has been assigned to the king Kopperum Cheral.[13] A Chera coin with the portrait of a king wearing a Roman helmet was discovered from Karur. The obverse side of the silver coin has the portrait of a king, facing left, wearing a Roman-type bristled crown helmet. This coin may belong to the 1st century BC and may be earlier to Makkotai and Kuttuvan Kotai coins. With a flat nose and protruding lips, he has a wide and thick ear lobe but wears no ear-ring. The person depicted appears to be elderly. Unlike other Chera silver portrait coins, the king’s portrait on this coin faces left. The coin points to Romans having had trade contacts with the Chera kings and establishes that the Roman soldiers had landed in the Chera country to give protection to the Roman traders who had come there to buy materials.[84] Archaeological investigations conducted unearthed square or circular Chera coins made of copper from near Cochin. This was for the first time, from a stratigraphic context, coins of Sangam Chera period have been found in Kerala. The coin, which is almost a square in shape, has an elephant facing to the right and some symbols towards the top of the coin. The symbols could not be identified as the upper part of the coin was partially corroded. A drawn bow and arrow was visible on the other side. Below the arrow is an elephant goad (a prod used to control elephants).

These coins bear a striking resemblance to the ones excavated from Karur in Tamil Nadu, said the archaeologists. Chola coins The number of Chola coins discovered so far are not as many as those of Pandyas; most of them have been found from archeological excavations at Puhar and Arikamedu, and also beds of rivers Amaravathi near Karur and South Pennar near Tirukkoilur. An early Chola coin has also been found in Thailand. The Chola coins do not contain a portrait or a legend and all of them depict symbols of animals and other inanimate objects like the animal series of the Cheras. But, all of them carry the symbol of a tiger, the Chola emblem, on their reverse. One of the coins has been assigned a date earlier than 200 BCE and some others to about the time of Roman influence, which is around the dawn of the Christian era.[14]

Coins of Chieftains

Parts of the Sangam age Tamil country were ruled over by several independent chieftains, alongside the three crowned monarchs.

Among them, coins belonging to the chieftains of the Malayaman clan have been found in Tamil Nadu. Many of them contain a written legend on the obverse and all of them have the image of a flowing river on their obverse. Based on the legends some of these coins have been assigned to specific rulers such as Tirukkannan, also known as Malaiyan Choliya Enadi Tirukkannan, and Tirumudi Kari. A series of coins without a legend but with a horse as the principal motif on the obverse have been assigned to the Malayaman chieftains, because of the river symbol on the obverse. Numismatist R. Krishnamurthy, dates these coins to the period between 100 BCE and 100 CE.[15]

Eelam Tamil coins

Excavations in the area of Tissamaharama in southern Sri Lanka have unearthed locally issued coins produced between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, some of which carry Tamil personal names written in early Tamil characters, which suggest that Tamil merchants were present and actively involved in trade along the southern coast of Sri Lanka.[16]

Conclusion

There are a few benchmarks in our knowledge of the ancient Tamil speaking people of South India, popularly referred to as the “Sangam Age” of the Tamils and approximately spanning the period between 300 B.C to 300 A.D. They are the discovery of the literature of this age ; the reading of the names of some kings of this period in the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions ; the identification of some coins assignable to this age ; the definite attribution of a coin with the legend Peruvaluthi embossed in Tamil-Brahmi script to the Pandya King of the Sangam Age by R.Krishnamurthy, the author of this monograph .This book is the result of his painstaking effort over a decade to collect , classify and understand the coins of this age and bring out in English a comprehensive study in a single volume and attempt to present enough material to substantiate the view that the coinage of the ancient Tamil land was fairly well developed and the State was strong enough to contribute to this development process, probably due to its trans-Indian and trans-Oceanic trade contracts Illustrated with line drawings and attractive multicolour photographs of coins, the monograph is likely to remain as a standard reference work to historians, numismatics, coin collectors, and the general readers interested in the Sangam Age of the Tamils and their coins in particular.

END NOTES

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- 16 Ibid