

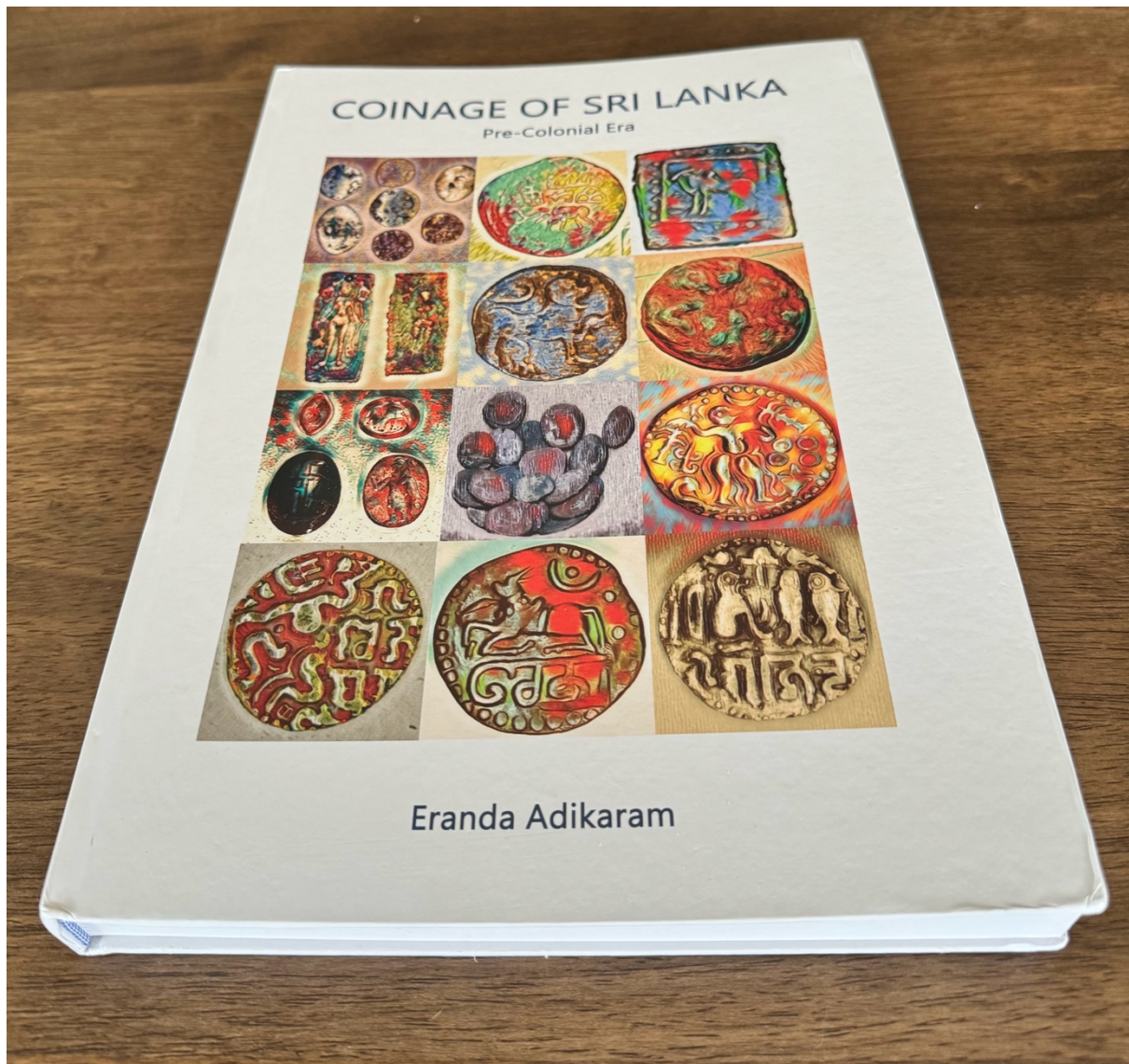
COINAGE OF SRI LANKA

Pre-Colonial Era



Eranda Adikaram





I have authored a book on the coinage of Sri Lanka (coffee table book/catalogue). This hardcover edition consists of 260 pages and features colour photographs. This book offers an in-depth exploration of Sri Lanka's numismatic history.

The book is organized into 12 chapters, detailing the evolution of Sri Lankan coins from ancient times through to the Colonial Period. Additionally, it includes three appendices that provide insights into the broader context of global trade, politics, and weight standards, highlighting Sri Lanka's role in these areas during the ancient and medieval eras.

I believe this book will be of interest to everyone, even if coins are not your primary focus. In addition to the detailed coin catalogue, the three appendices offer a unique perspective on essential historical knowledge that everyone should be familiar with.

(I believe this book will be invaluable for new coin collectors, providing the essential knowledge needed to embark on this rewarding hobby).

Eranda Adikaram

Contents...

Chapter 1	Kahapana (punch-marked coins)	...	1
Chapter 2	Copper coins – railed swastika series (early Anuradhapura period)	...	15
Chapter 3	Copper coins of Anuradhapura between the first and fifth centuries	...	33
Chapter 4	Lakshmi coins or plaques	...	41
Chapter 5	Copper coins with an influence of South Indian coin designs (late Anuradhapura period)	...	53
Chapter 6	Inscribed coins from Ruhuna	...	63
Chapter 7	Seals and sealings	...	85
Chapter 8	Roman coins and imitations found in Sri Lanka	...	93
Chapter 9	Gold coins of Sri Lanka	...	99
Chapter 10	Massa coins (post Anuradhapura period)	...	131
Chapter 11	Coins of the Tamil rulers of Jaffna	...	147
Chapter 12	Foreign coins used in Sri Lanka	...	157
Appendix 1	History of Sri Lanka	...	183
Appendix 2	World trade and trading empires	...	209
Appendix 3	Coins and weight standards	...	241
Glossary of numismatics		...	253
Acknowledgement		...	259

Foreword

Numismatics or the study of ancient coins is one of the fast-growing sub-disciplines in archaeology. Ancient coins are considered the most striking artifact among the antiquarians since the European Renaissance. The significance of studying coins, had even been well-understood since the mid-19th century. For instance, Charles Medd in his pioneering work titled 'Value of Numismatics in the study of Ancient History' published in 1864 by McMillan in Oxford, states;

"... Antiquity has left no monuments of its living form and character at all comparable in number and variety to its coins and medals".

The practice of using material items of any form in the means of economic transaction can be traced back to the prehistoric period. Metallic coinage was preceded by nonmonetary and semi-monetary currencies. In the early period, the system of barter played a pivotal role in the contemporary economies. The different choices in their medium of economic exchange mark a great diversity. It ranges from cowrie shells to the stone disks of the Yap Islanders in the Pacific Ocean and to the modern credit card. Familiarization of the use of metals provided several advantages in economic transactions. The metallic coins' divisible, portable, and durable characteristics soon captured the popularity. Ancient Egyptians used gold bars of set weight for their economic exchanges in the fourth millennium BCE.

The early use of metallic coins in Sri Lanka is reported from the archaeological levels of 250 BCE. They are the coins known as Punch Marked Coins (PMC) originally minted in Northern India. PMC was brought by merchants who frequently travelled between Sri Lanka and mainland India. Some of the archaeological finds suggest that PMC was manufactured even in Sri Lanka in the late centuries of the first millennium BCE. Since then, distinct varieties of coins have circulated in the society. Those included both indigenously minted specimens and the coins that have a foreign origin.

Dr. Eranda Adikaram has attempted to provide a comprehensive description of the sample he studied in this volume. Even though the prevailing de-contextualized nature of the majority of coins presented in this volume, he has devoted much energy to describing them in a satisfactory academic frame of reference. If the absence of this type of endeavour some of the important coins might have disappeared forever from the concerns of the academic community. Without a doubt, I trust that this work may benefit the students of Sri Lankan numismatics a great deal. I wish the author great success in future in his academic career.

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Senior Professor in Archaeology & Consultant Archaeologist *FSLCA, MSOSAA*,
Charles Wallace Fellow 95' (Institute of Archaeology) London
University of Kelaniya.

Introduction-An Insight into the history of Sri Lanka through its unique coinage

For over thousands of years, coins have been used as a means of exchange. The design, production, and circulation of coins provide important clues about the economic, political, and cultural history of the region in which they were used.

Looking at the history of coin usage, we can see how trade played a crucial role in the development of coin production. In ancient times, bartering was the primary method of trade, and this involved exchanging goods or services directly, without the use of currency. But as trade networks expanded and became more complex, the limitations of bartering became increasingly evident. For example, it became difficult for merchants to carry around all the goods they needed for exchange. So, a standardised and widely accepted unit of exchange – such as coins which were also easy to carry and store – was adopted. And the efficient exchange of goods and services with the usage of coins resulted in the growth of trade and commerce.

Trade also had a positive impact on the cultural and social interaction within societies and became a driving force behind the emergence of empires. The exchange of ideas, beliefs, practices, and technology facilitated by trade led to the creation of new cultural identities and the assimilation of diverse cultures, shaping the course of human history.

It is interesting to see how coins differ from region to region in design, minting technique, and even the material used to produce them. Quite often, the designs reflect the cultural and artistic traditions of each society. Studying coins can therefore provide insights into the religious, social and cultural aspects of a society, as well as its economic and political systems.

Over the years, numerous books have been written about the coins of Sri Lanka (referred to as Ceylon prior to 1972). Among the earliest works is the 1877 publication *Coins and Currency of the Island of Ceylon* by T.W. Rhys Davids. However, the most comprehensive and commonly used reference book on the subject is *Ceylon Coins and Currency* by H.W. Codrington, which was published in 1924. Despite its usefulness, this book fails to reflect the current status of knowledge and can be challenging for beginners due to its lack of clarity in how content is organised. Apart from these two books, several others have been written on specific areas of the numismatic history of Sri Lanka. For instance, Dr. R. Krishnamurthy's books on South Indian coins and O.M.R. Sirisena's book on Ceylon's gold coins provide valuable information on their respective topics. Dr. P. Pushparatnam's book about the coins of Tamil rulers is a good reference for coin discoveries related to the Tamil rulers of Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, the information available on the Lakdiva coins website, although not comprehensive, can be useful.

Through this book, I have attempted to provide numismatists with some insight into the coinage system of Sri Lanka. The three appendices give an overview of the development of world trade, politics and weight standards, as well as Sri Lanka's involvement during the ancient and medieval periods. The twelve chapters offer a detailed account of the coins of Sri Lanka, starting from the earliest times and continuing up to the Colonial Period.

It is worth noting that my interpretations are based on the available evidence at the time of writing which may be subject to change as new discoveries are made. So, I would ask readers to approach the information presented in this book critically and remain receptive to alternative perspectives.

In conclusion, this book is also intended to serve as a reference for individuals who are interested in the history of global trade, politics, and currency in a Sri Lankan context.

Eranda Adikaram

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(page 12)

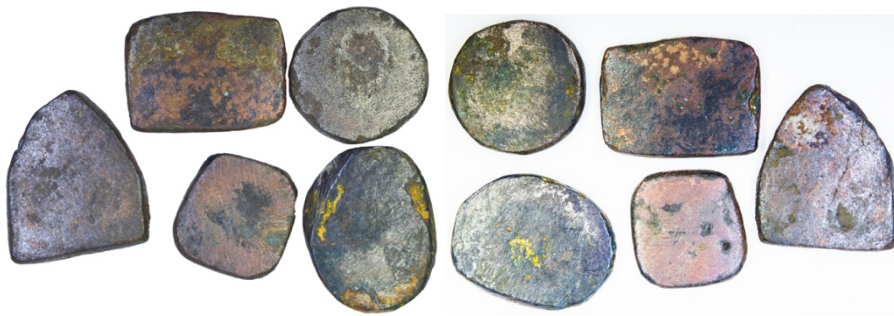
1.4 Copper punch-marked coins¹

Sri Lanka has yielded only a limited number of copper punch-marked coins, which were mainly discovered in the fortress of Mahagama (Tissamaharama).² Among these finds, the majority consists of locally crafted copper pieces, while a small portion comprises Indian copper PMCs. These coins serve as valuable artifacts, offering insights into the historical utilisation of copper as a medium of exchange during specific periods in Sri Lanka's history, or possibly representing mere copper imitations.



Symbols found on these copper pieces are varied and sometimes similar to those of Imperial PMCs.

1.5 Silver gilt copper pieces³



These coins are encountered in limited quantities and are believed to be imitations or contemporary forgeries. Made of copper but coated with a layer of silver gilt, they give the appearance of silver coins.

1.6 Punch-marked coins of the other Mahajanapada

These are rare finds in Sri Lanka and likely incidental. Symbols found on these silver and copper pieces are varied

¹ Ex Ajith Nishantha collection.

² <https://sirimunasiha.wordpress.com/about/copper-punch-marked-coins-found-in-sri-lanka>.

³ Ex Ajith Nishantha collection.

(page 23)

2.3.1a Elephant – right facing (rectangular/square)⁴



Obverse – Elephant facing right.
Reverse – Railed swastika.
0.9-1.74g

2.3.1b Elephant – left facing (rectangular/square)⁵



Obverse – Elephant facing left.
Reverse – Railed swastika.
0.59-0.75g

2.3.2 Elephant – right facing (round)⁶



Obverse – Elephant facing right.
Reverse – Railed swastika.
1.5g

2.3.3 Elephant – left facing (oblong)⁷



Obverse – Elephant facing left.
Reverse – Railed swastika.
1.3g

2.3.4 Elephant-right facing (copper)⁸



Obverse -Elephant facing right. Linear frame
Reverse – Railed swastika.
0.49g

⁴ Late Chula De Silva collection.

⁵ Late Chula De Silva collection.

⁶ Late Chula De Silva collection.

⁷ Late Chula De Silva collection.

⁸ MalwatuOya riverbank

(page 38)

3.2.1a Bull and vase⁹



Obverse – Bull facing right, a fire altar in front.

Reverse – Vase.

3.45g, 26mm

3.2.1b Bull and vase¹⁰



Obverse – Bull facing left, a pot in front, four symbols above.

Reverse – Vase.

7.71g

3.2.2a Bull and circle with dots



Obverse – Bull facing left, no object in front.

Reverse – Circle with three or four dots.

3.52g, 20mm

3.2.2b Bull and circle with dots¹¹



Obverse – Bull facing right, no object in front.

Reverse – Circle with three or four dots.

0.32g, 11mm

⁹ Purchased from a dealer in Anuradhapura.

¹⁰ Purchased from a dealer in Anuradhapura.

¹¹ Purchased from a dealer in Anuradhapura.

(page 50)

4.2.6 Railed swastika revolving left¹²



Obverse – Female figure standing, bathed by two elephants.
Reverse – Railed swastika revolving left.
3.4g, 10X24mm

4.3 Square-shaped Lakshmi coins

The square-shaped coins are a unique group featuring a female figure standing on an eight-petaled lotus, accompanied by two elephants also positioned on lotus flowers. In another similar variation, the female figure is depicted standing on a boat.

The reverse side of the coin displays a railed swastika.

4.3a Lakshmi coin (lotus)¹³



Obverse – Female figure standing on a lotus flower, bathed by two elephants also standing on lotus flowers
Reverse – Railed swastika on stepped platform and other symbols.

4.3a Lakshmi coin (lotus)¹⁴



Obverse – Female figure standing on a lotus flower, bathed by two elephants also standing on lotus flowers
Reverse – Railed swastika on stepped platform and a boat.

4.3b Lakshmi coins (boat)¹⁵



Obverse – Female figure standing on boat like platform, bathed by two elephants.
Reverse – Railed swastika and other symbols.

¹² Purchased from a dealer in Anuradhapura.

¹³ Purchased from a collector in Kandy.

¹⁴ Purchased from a dealer in Anuradhapura.

¹⁵ Purchased from a collector in Kandy.

(page 54)

CE.¹⁶ The differing perspectives of these respected historians remain topics of continued scholarly interest and analysis.

5.1.1a Lion and pot-type coin^{17,18}



Obverse – Lion facing right with its front right paw raised and the tail curved over its back. A circle of dots around the rim.

Reverse – A pot with lotus buds. A circle of dots surrounding the rim.

4.35g, 19mm

5.1.1b Lion and pot-type coin¹⁹



Obverse – Lion facing right.

Reverse – A pot with lotus buds.

2.3g, 18mm

5.1.1c Lion and pot-type coin²⁰

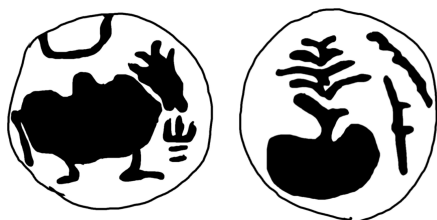


Obverse – Lion facing right.

Reverse – A pot with lotus buds.

2.3g, 17mm

5.1.2 Bull and pot-type coin²¹



Obverse – Bull facing right, beside a small altar. A crescent above the bull. This entire design is enclosed within a circular border of dots.

Reverse – A pot positioned between two lamps, enclosed within a circle of dots.

¹⁶ Krishnamurthy, (2016), *The Pallava Coins, Appendix II, Coin no. 10–13.*

¹⁷ Late C.S.G. Fernando collection.

¹⁸ Jayasinghe C. (1997), *Studies in Silk Road Coins and Culture. No.28.*

¹⁹ Purchased from a dealer in Mannar

²⁰ Ex M Falleel collection

²¹ Jayasinghe C. (1997), *Studies in Silk Road Coins and Culture. No.27.*

(page 66)

Coin No. 2.



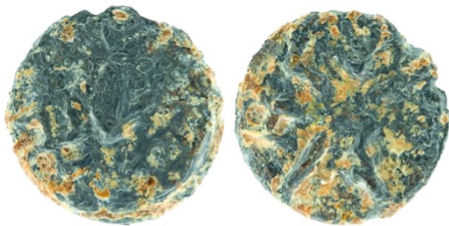
Obverse – Srivatsa.
Reverse – Brahmi script "Ti Sa Ya".
1.48g, 12.4mm

Coin No. 3.



Obverse – Swastika and another symbol.
Reverse – Brahmi script "A Sa Ha".
2.25g, 17.3mm

Coin No. 4.



Obverse – Fish, swastika and another symbol.
Reverse – Brahmi script "Da Ma Ra Jha Ti Sa"
fish in middle.
2.99g, 16.5mm

Coin No. 5.



Obverse – Fish.
Reverse – Brahmi script "Ma Ha Va Sa Ha".
2.79g, 15mm

Coin No. 6.



Obverse – Three fish and a bow.
Reverse – Brahmi script "Pu Sa De Va Ha".
1.26g, 12.5mm

(page 87)

7.1.2b Agate seal²²



Lion facing right.

7.1.2c Agate seal²³



Vertical fish

7.1.2d Agate seal²⁴



Dragon

7.1.2e Agate seal²⁵



Dome-like object

7.1.3 Carnelian seal²⁶



Two dragons

²² Purchased from a villager/dealer in Akurugoda.

²³ Purchased from a villager/dealer in Akurugoda.

²⁴ Purchased from a villager/dealer in Akurugoda.

²⁵ Purchased from a villager/dealer in Akurugoda.

²⁶ Purchased from a villager/dealer in Akurugoda.

(page 97)
Naimana imitations



(page 116)

9.1.8a-4Tb8D²⁷



Obverse – Four annulets. Chank and five-petal flower as the finials of the lotus stalk.

Reverse – Figure holding a crescent. Eight divisions in treasure enclosure.

9.1.8b-4Tb10D²⁸ – (OMR No. 21)



Obverse – Four targets. Chank and five-petal flower as the finials of the lotus stalk.

Reverse – Figure holding a crescent. Ten divisions in treasure enclosure.

9.1.8c-4Tb12D – (OMR No.22)



Obverse – Four targets. Chank and five-petal flower as the finials of the lotus stalk.

Reverse – Figure holding a crescent. Twelve divisions in treasure enclosure.

Type 2 Kahavanu coins

On the obverse side is a standing figure of Kuvera with an oblong head facing to the right. The crown is represented by a curved line behind the head, with a small horizontal line below it. Behind the crown there is a triangle of linked dots. The reverse side of type 2 Kahavanu coins features the Kuvera with the head facing right. The crown on the reverse is similar to that on the obverse but without the horizontal line. Kuvera is shown squatting upon an asana, a bed-like throne. The dhoti is represented by two lines with the upper ends appearing at either side of the body. The Nagari legend is coarser than type 1 coins, but the 'Sri' letter is complex as in type 1 coins, with two parallel curved lines on the upper right edge. These have a gold content ranging from 25–50 per cent or 6 to 12 karats, with a standard weight of 4.3g.

9.2.1 Type 2 Kahavanu – Lotus and Crescent Moon (Adahanda)

Obverse – Kuvera is depicted standing on a lotus stalk ending in a chank on the left and a five-petal flower on the right (b), or an adahanda on the left and a chank on the right (f). The left hand is bent

²⁷ Late Chula De Silva collection.

²⁸ Krishantha Gunathilake collection.

(page 133)
Terracotta moulds



Cove and a funnel



Modern forged mould



(page 154)

11.2.2d Sethu type 2 (peacock)²⁹



Obverse – Same as above.

Reverse – A peacock in front and a dwarf figure above the Nandi bull.

Dotted border.

11.2.2e Sethu type 2 (Tamil letter)³⁰



Obverse – Same as above.

Reverse – Tamil letter 'Oom' in front and a dwarf figure above the Nandi bull.

Dotted border.

Sethu chain-like border

Likely issued by Cankili I, whose name means chain -like pattern in Tamil similar to the border of the coin

11.3a Sethu coin³¹



Similar design as 11.2.1 but smaller figure and the bull with linear frame and chain-like double border.

2g half coin?

11.3b Sethu coin³²



Similar design as 11.3a but smaller diameter.

1.8g half coin?

²⁹ Pushparatnam, (2002). *Ancient Coins of Sri Lankan Tamil Rulers*, Fig. 3 p.133.

³⁰ Purchased from a dealer in Atalugama. Allegedly found in Nallur, Jaffna.

³¹ Ex-Ajiith Nishantha collection.

³² Ex-Ajiith Nishantha collection.

(page 175)

CE. The introduction of the Gajapati pagodas and similar fanam coins by Western Ganga is believed to have occurred during the eleventh century after their re-emergence from Chola.

12.8.1 Gajapati Pagoda coin



Obverse – Elephant (Gajapati) Pagoda depicts a decorated elephant facing right.
Reverse – Ornamental floral scroll (possibly a peacock).
3.7g.

12.8.2 Gajapati Fanam coin

The Elephant (Gajapati) Fanam circulated alongside the pagoda coin in Sri Lanka. The weight of these coins is around 0.4g (10 fanam to pagoda). Fractions of the fanam coin also exist.



Obverse – Elephant facing right.
Reverse – Ornamental floral scroll
0.37g

12.8.3 Gajapati Fanam fraction coin



Obverse – Elephant facing right.
Reverse – Ornamental floral scroll
0.18g

12.8.4 Gajapati Fanam fraction coin

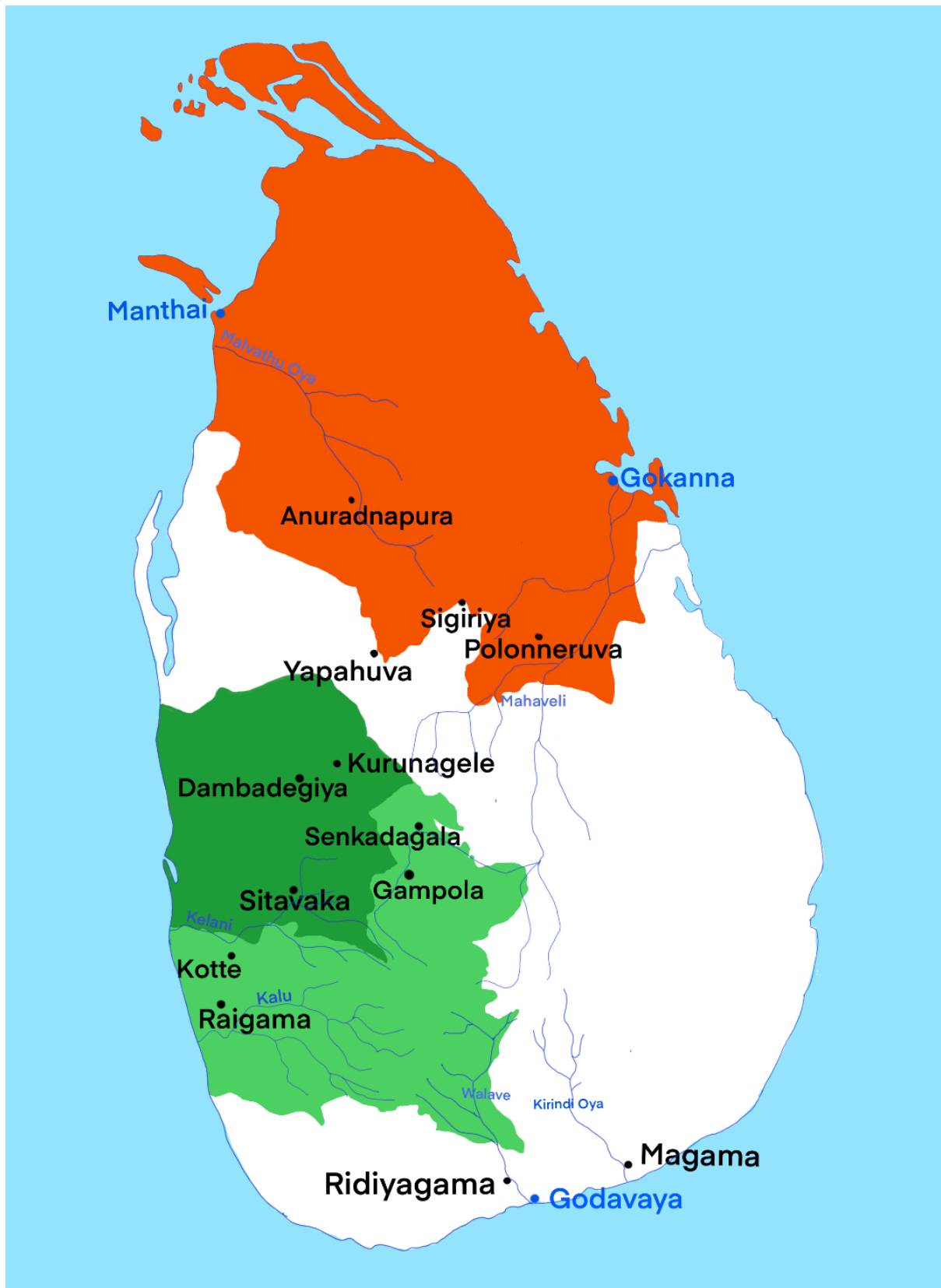


Obverse – Elephant facing right.
Reverse – Ornamental floral scroll
0.09g

12.8.5 Gajapati Fanam fraction coin



Obverse – Elephant facing right.
Reverse – Ornamental floral scroll
0.05g



Jaffna and Dambadeniya kingdoms during 1215-1236 CE

Era, evolved at the dawn of the Classical period with the introduction of precious metals, like electrum gold or silver, for the exchange of goods.

The construction of specialised merchant ships from 600 BCE greatly facilitated long-distance trade along sea routes, enabling a surge in cultural interaction that allowed for the flourishing of diverse practices, languages, religions, and art across trade regions. This increase in international trade also resulted in the establishment of trade emporia which, on occasion, developed into colonies. However, the competition for resources and access to lucrative trade routes often intensified, leading to conflicts and wars, as rulers sought to seize the riches of rival states and empires.



The Achaemenid Persian Empire can be considered the world's earliest empire to thrive through an expansive trade network. Founded by Cyrus the Great of the Achaemenid Dynasty in 550 BCE, it is also referred to as the First Persian Empire. Its influence stretched from the Balkans and Egypt in the western territories to Central Asia and the Indus Valley in the eastern expanse.³³ The Persian Royal Road, a vital trade route during the early Classical period extended from Susa, located near the Persian Gulf (modern-day Iran), to the Mediterranean Sea in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The Royal Road featured postal stations along the way, allowing envoys to quickly deliver messages throughout the empire with fresh horses. It eventually became a key artery of the Silk Road.

³³ Golden, Peter B. (2011). *Central Asia in World History*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-971367-7.

³⁴ *Trade in ancient Egypt* – Joshua J. Mark, June 2017, worldhistory.org.

(page 242)

Lydia 1/3 stater



Obverse – Head of lion roaring, right.
Reverse – Incuse punch
Weight 4.74g

The royal lion symbol was stamped on the first Lydian coins to express the issuer's authority. It is worth noting that the Lydian Lion coin was not standardised in terms of weight or size compared to modern coins. Instead, their value was determined by their metal content and the reputation of the issuing authority. However, the average weight of a Lydian Lion coin was around 4.7g which appears to be 1/100th of the mina. This weight is one-third of the stater weight of Lydia, which is 14.2g.

Ancient coins were not immediately used for commerce and trade among common people because even the smallest denomination of electrum coins would have been too valuable for buying daily needs. These coins were mainly issued by the non-Greek Lydians for personal use or to pay Greek mercenaries who preferred to be paid in precious metals to authenticate their payments.

During the reign of King Croesus of Lydia, the electrum coins were replaced with pure gold and silver coins known as Croeseids. Croesus was the King of Lydia and ruled from 585 BCE until he was defeated by the Persian King Cyrus the Great in 547 or 546 BCE.³⁵

Ionia miletos diobol³⁶ (525–475 BCE)



Obverse – Forepart of left-facing lion head.
Reverse – Stellate design within incuse square.
Weight 1.40g

The second oldest coin in the world was struck in Cyme or Cumae, an Aeolian city that was geographically and politically close to the Kingdom of Lydia. The Aeolians were one of the four major ancient Greek tribes, and Cyme was the largest and most important of their twelve cities located on the coastline of Asia Minor. Cyme's horse-head silver fractions, specifically the Hemi obol which weighed 0.36g, was the first to be used for large-scale retailing by the Ionian Greeks.³⁷

Persian coins and weight standard

Coins were introduced to the Persian Empire during the First Persian Empire (Achaemenid) by Cyrus the Great (550–530 BCE) after his conquest of Lydia and the defeat of King Croesus. Darius the Great (522–486 BCE), who expanded Persepolis as a ceremonial capital and reinforced the empire, revolutionised the economy by introducing bimetallic monetary standards of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, which had fixed the gold to silver ratio at 13.3:1. The gold Persian Daric had a standard weight of 8.4g (60 to

³⁵ Kurke, Leslie, (1999), *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece*, pp.6–7, ISBN 0691007365.

³⁶ Purchased on eBay Nov. 2022

³⁷ M. Mitchiner, (2004), *Ancient Trade and Early Coinage*, Hawkins Publications, London, p.214.