

ROMAN COINS OF SRI LANKA: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Recent discussions on Greek and Roman contacts with ancient Sri Lanka have on the whole tended to emphasize the significance of archaeological material in preference to foreign literary sources. The latter, it is urged, is fragmentary and lacks precision and reliability, not being based on first-hand evidence. Moreover, they often repeat what was said by their hallowed predecessors without taking count of recent or contemporary information. Archaeology, on the other hand, is claimed to provide precise and reliable evidence which has been gaining in significance with the most recent findings.¹

It must, however, be pointed out that the foreign literary sources, poor and fragmentary though they may be, are readily accessible, for the most part in scholarly editions and authoritative translations, for those wishing to examine them. Archaeological evidence, on the other hand, though subjected to tremendous publicity, has on the whole not always been systematically reported or adequately published; and is thus not easily within the reach of serious students and discerning scholars.

This is especially the case with regard to Roman coins from Sri Lanka. Our knowledge of this subject derives mainly from the reports of J. Still and H.W. Codrington, both of whom wrote very early in the present century.² But there are no

-
- ¹. This was the prevalent view, for instance, at the international conference on "Sri Lanka and the Silk Route by Sea" held in Colombo 12 th-14th December, 1990.
 - ². J. Still: "Roman Coins Found in Ceylon", *JRAS CB* 19, (1907), p. 161-190; idem, *Catalogue of Coins exhibited in the Colombo Museum*. Colombo, (1908), p. 13-26; H.W. Codrington: *Ceylon Coins and Currency, Memoirs of the Colombo Museum*, Series A, no. 3, Colombo, (1924), ch. IV, p. 31-50 and Supplement 249-50. For references, cf. H.A.I. Goonetilleke: "A Bibliography of Ceylon Coins and Currency", *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, VI. 2, (1963), p. 496-499, 187 ff. For discussions, cf. E.H. Warmington: *The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India*, Cambridge, (1928), p. 20-125; M.G. Raschke, "New studies in Roman commerce with the East", in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II, 9. 2, Berlin, (1978), 604 ff. esp. 665 ff. passim; P.J. Turner: *Roman Coins from India*, London, (1989), p. 20 and 90-91; D.W. Mac Dowall: "Finds of Roman Coins in South Asia: Problems of Interpretation", *Ancient Ceylon* no. 9, (1990), p. 49-64, esp. 60 ff.; O.Bopearachchi: "An Unknown Indo-Roman Coin Hoard from Sri Lanka", *Palma II: Commemoration Volume of the Classical Association of Ceylon Golden Jubilee (1935 - 1985)*, (1985), p. 81-87; idem, "Some observations on Roman Coins found in recent Excavations at Sigiriya", *Ancient Ceylon* no. 8, (1990), p. 20-37; idem, "Le commerce maritime entre Rome et

comprehensive records of Roman coins found since the publication of Codrington's book, which first appeared in 1924; and even in this work the information is lamentably inadequate: nothing is said concerning the find-spots of early Imperial coins in general and of silver coins in particular. The recent work of R. Walburg is in German, and is not easily accessible;³ and the publication of Bopearachchi's forthcoming study is eagerly awaited.⁴

S. Paranavitana has mentioned several copper coins, Roman or Indo-Roman, found at excavations in Anuradhapura, but practically all of them are said to be too corroded to permit identification.⁵ A find of 2828 Roman coins was reported from Debaraveva in the Magampattu; but the details of 276 identified coins have not been published.⁶ The coin hoard found at Galvehera, Kosgoda in 1952 has been published

Sri Lanka d'après les données numismatiques", *Revue des études Anciennes*, (1992), p. 107-121; idem, "La circulation des monnaies d'origine étrangère dans l'antique Sri Lanka", *Res Orientales V*, (1993), p. 63-87; idem, "Seafaring in the Indian Ocean: Archaeological Evidence from Sri Lanka", International Seminar on "Techno-Archaeological Perspectives of Seafaring in the Indian Ocean (4th century B.C. to 15th century AD), New Delhi, NISTADS, 28 February -3 March 1994 (in print), (1994); idem, "Recent discoveries of ancient foreign coins, hitherto unknown in Sri Lankan context", *Sesquicentennial Commemorative Volume, Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka 1845-1995*, Colombo, (1995), p. 127-139, pl. I & II.

- ³. R. Walburg: "Antike Münzen aus Sri Lanka / Ceylon, Studien zu Fundmünzen der Antike", *Studien zu Fundmünzen der Antike*, ed by M.R. Alfoldi, vol. 3, Berlin, (1985). I wish to express my thanks to O. Bopearachchi for his valuable assistance in consulting this work.
- ⁴. According to personal communication, Bopearachchi has been able to examine about 50 000 coins discovered, as hoards or in excavations, after the publication of Walburg's work. Except for the Kalutara find of around 800 imitations, they were mostly authentic Roman coins, mainly third brass of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., with mint marks including those of Alexandria, Rome, Constantinople and Antioch. For instance, out of the 8 000 coins procured by the Dept. of Archaeology, Colombo, from a total of 30 000 from Godavaya, all but four coins are genuine. The same is true of other hoards such as those from Pidurangala and Panduvasnuvara.
- ⁵. S. Paranavitana: *Excavations in the Citadel of Anuradhapura*, Colombo, (1936), p. 9, 21 and 31-32.
- ⁶. S. Paranavitana: "Roman Coins", *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Report*, (1950), p. G. 32.

by Walburg.⁷ It consisted of 141 Indo-Roman imitations and one genuine Roman coin. A collection with a similar structure (115 Indo-Roman imitations and one genuine Roman coin of Valentinian I, Valens and Gratian belonging to A.D. 367-375) which appeared in the London market in 1978 and supposed to have been found in Sri Lanka, has been published by Bopearachchi.⁸ This scholar has also catalogued and commented on the Roman coins found during the excavations at Sigiriya (see below) conducted under the Cultural Triangle Project during the 1982 and 1983 campaigns.⁹ He has also published a good number of rare and exceptional Roman coins in two private collections and the ones found in the Jetavanarama excavations.¹⁰ Damayanti Gunasekara has described the Roman coins in the Leslie de Saram collection at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.¹¹ The latter collection consists of later Roman coins and Indo Roman imitations. The emperors represented include Constantine (five coins) Honorius (five coins) Arcadius (four coins) Valentinian (three coins), Constance (two coins), Gratian (one coin) and Theodosius I or II (one coin). The mint marks include those of Constantinople, Antioch, Cyzicus and Nicomedia. Out of a find of 1600 coins in the Rekava Girawapattu in 1957, 1581 coins were identified as Roman.¹² Other coin finds (such as a large one from Godavaya, an ancient port in southern Sri Lanka) are often mentioned in discussions, talks, the popular press and media, but details are not readily available.¹³ In the circumstances, all one can undertake is to observe the main features

-
7. S. Paranavitana: "A Hoard of Indo-Roman Brass Coins Found at Galvehera, Kosgoda", *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Report.*, (1952); R. Walburg, *op. cit.*, p. 193-195.
8. O. Bopearachchi: In *Palma II*, (1985).
9. O. Bopearachchi: In *Ancient Ceylon*, (1990), p. 20-37.
10. O. Bopearachchi: In "Recent discoveries of ancient foreign coins", (1995). Dr. Bopearachchi is now preparing an exhaustive catalogue of all the coins found in the excavations at Jetavanarama conducted under the Cultural Triangle Project.
11. D. Gunasekara: "The Roman Coin Hoard Exhibited at the Peradeniya University Archaeological Museum: the Leslie de Saram Collection" *Perspectives In Archaeology: Lilananda Prematilleke Festschrift Dept. of Archaeology*, University of Peradeniya, (1990), p. 101-105.
12. R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 77-90.
13. Dr. O. Bopearachchi has very kindly supplied me with the following list of coins found either since the publication of Walburg's book or not recorded in his publication:

revealed by this imperfect and incomplete evidence and to draw conclusions which can only be provisional and tentative.

I

In discussing finds of Roman coins from Sri Lanka, it has been customary to compare them with the more extensive finds from southern India.¹⁴ This is not at all surprising in view of geographical proximity and long-standing relations. What is interesting however is the realization that, while there is a certain similarity in the finds of Roman bronze coins of the fourth century and beyond, finds of earlier periods show hardly any resemblance.

Codrington has recorded eight Republican silver coins (denarii) from Sri Lanka. We do not know where they were found and whether they were found individually or in a hoard. They range in date from 144 to 49 B.C. This contrasts sharply with the situation in southern India, where the rarity of Republican denarii is a marked feature. Sewell knew of fifteen Republican denarii from the whole of India, but of these only two very worn specimens were from south India. They came from the hoard from

Roman Coins Found in Sri Lanka

2042 (hoard)	Baragama, Borahinda (1985-86)
320 (hoard)	Kuliyapitiya (1986)
500 (one or two hoards)	Panduvastuvara (1986 ?)
20000 ? (hoard)	Hungama (1990 ?)
30000 to 50000 (hoard)	Godavaya (1987 or 1985)
2000 (hoards and stray finds)	Sigiriya (from 1985)
50 (stray finds)	Jetavanarama excavations, - Anuradhapura (from 1982)
40 (stray finds)	Abhayagiriya (excavations), - Anuradhapura (from 1982)
20 (stray finds)	citadel (excavations), Anuradhapura - (from 1988-90)
200 (one or two hoards)	Negombo (1989 ?)
1500 (several hoards)	Kalvāra (1987-1994)
25000 (hoard)	Pidurangala (1986 ?)
2000 (hoards and stray finds)	Ridiyagama (1985-1994).

¹⁴. R. Sewell: "Roman Coins Found in India", *J.R.A.S.*, (1904), p. 591-637; S. Bolin: *State and Currency in the Roman Empire up to 300 A.D.*, Stockholm, (1958), p. 73; C. Rodewald: *Money in the Age of Tiberius*, Manchester University Press, (1976), p. 47-51 n. 389; P.J. Turner: op. cit., p. 6, 14, 18.

Kalakkinar in the Coimbatore district and belonged to 50 and 39 B.C. respectively.¹⁵ Although, as late as the Flavian times, the greater part of Roman coins in circulation outside India appears to have consisted of Republican denarii, they do not appear to have found their way to southern India, despite the now widely accepted possibility that Roman trade with this area may have existed from as early as the beginning of the empire. Thus the occurrence of so many Republican denarii in Sri Lanka cannot be explained in terms of Roman commerce with south India at this early date.

Mac Dowall is of the opinion that these Republican denarii, like those of India, will only have reached South Asia in the first half of the second century A.D.¹⁶ As he points out, large quantities of denarii were issued during the last two centuries of the Republic, and remained in circulation inside the empire until the second century A.D. In hoards from within the empire buried in Flavian times (A.D. 70-96) Republican denarii constitute on average 64. Concerning the Republican denarii found in India Mac Dowall observes that they "could have been exported from Rome at any time during the period when they continued to circulate in the West i.e. from the time of their issue up to the middle of the second century A.D.". According to Mac Dowall, "finds of Republican denarii provide no evidence for early trade links unless it can be demonstrated that they were exported at a particular time."¹⁷ Unfortunately, no such evidence is available for the Republican coins from Sri Lanka.

The same impression is given by the Imperial coins of the first three centuries A.D. In Sri Lanka the silver denarii, though few in number, spread quite evenly throughout the period. Codrington mentions fourteen silver coins: Tiberius (A.D. 14-37) (two specimens), Domitian (81-96), Hadrian (117-8), Lucius Verus (161-169), Marcus Aurelius (161-180), Faustina the Younger (d. 175) (two coins), Commodus (180-193), Geta (211-217), Julia Domna (d. 217), Julia Mamaea (d. 235), and two Antoniani of Philip the Elder (244-249). Still cites Sir Alexander Johnston to the effect that at Mantai

¹⁵ Turner also refers to the Iyyal hoard (whose Roman coins covered a long period from Republican times to Trajan) and the so-called Laccadive hoard, which include Republican coins, as well as to other Republican coins in the Madras Government Museum, and expresses the view that the presence of these coins "may support the possibility that coins began to arrive in India rather earlier than the Julio-Claudian hoards, which are well attested in large numbers, suggest." In Turner's opinion these coins "from a small body of numismatic evidence for pre-Augustan trade with south India." Turner however admits that the evidence is really too limited for any constructive speculation. Mac Dowall has challenged Turner's view (see below).

¹⁶ D.W. Mac Dowall: *op. cit.*, p. 60

¹⁷ D.W. Mac Dowall: "The Export of Roman Republican Denarii to South Asia", *Ancient Ceylon* no. 8, (1990), p. 63.

a great number of Roman coins, particularly of the Antonines have been found.¹⁸ There remains no detailed record of them. There are no records of any aurei or gold coins from this period. However Sri Lanka provides no parallel to the contemporary south Indian hoards of well preserved full weight gold coins, or of silver coins with their two preferred types of Augustus and Tiberius.¹⁹

The structure of later coin hoards from southern India demonstrates that, of the Roman coins issued after Nero's debasement of the denarius in A.D. 64, the aurei were preferred in the Roman-Indian trade to the virtual exclusion of the denarii.²⁰ Raschke is however of the opinion that the preference for aurei was the result of the two preferred types of denarii of Augustus and Tiberius beginning to be in short supply, and had nothing to do with Nero's debasement.²¹ However that may be, in Sri Lanka, where no aurei whatsoever have been reported, twelve of the fourteen recorded silver coins are post-Neronian. This is admittedly a small number; but their presence on the island contrasts remarkably with their scarcity in the wider geographical area of southern India.²²

Mac Dowall has demonstrated that, while hoards of gold and silver coins from India are indicative of the volume of trade in bullion and not of the volume of trade with Rome, individual finds of silver and copper coins can provide evidence for trade links unconnected with trade in bullion. They thus constitute "an important but neglected source of evidence for the geographical and chronological pattern of trade contacts with Rome".²³ Codrington's list of single finds from Sri Lanka has been described by Mac Dowall as "If anything more impressive than any list of single finds that has been drawn up for any region of India".²⁴

¹⁸. J. Still: in "Roman Coins Found in Ceylon", (1907), p. 170.

¹⁹. P.J. Turner: *op. cit.*, p. 20-24.

²⁰. S.Bolin: *op. cit.*, p. 75.

²¹. M.G. Raschke: *op. cit.*, p. 669.

²². "Roman coins of the second century A.D. are beginning to appear in more significant numbers in Indian contexts." - P.J. Turner: *op. cit.*, p. 27-28. Observing that the second century hoards are smaller and less significant than the first century ones, Turner nevertheless considers them as evidence of a steady but diminished trade over a wide area.

²³. D.W. Mac Dowall: In *Ancient Ceylon*, (1990), p. 59.

²⁴. D.W. Mac Dowall: *op. cit.*, p. 60.

With regard to these coins too, we know very little about the circumstances in which they were discovered. The coin of Geta was purchased in Colombo by H.C.P. Bell.²⁵ Of the two coins of Tiberius, which are of the same type,²⁶ one seems to have come from a hoard; for it was the only legible coin out of 28 silver pieces which came from a find at Panadura, on the coast south of Colombo, "unearthed by a native while digging a grave".²⁷ Barrow suggested that the coins may have been part of a collection of some Dutch gentleman curious in such matters. However, it may not altogether be a coincidence that the one legible coin in the find should have been of the type of Tiberius known to have been preferred in southern India, i.e. the Pontifex Maximus type (see below). This coin is said to have weighed about 59 grains, i.e. nearly 3.81 grams. (These coins were struck at 3.85 grams.) Bolin has drawn our attention to the remarkably high weight of Augustan and Tiberian denarii found in south India. Coins of Tiberius found at Karur, for instance, weighed on average 3.76 grams.²⁸ Could the Panadura find then represent a hoard of the south Indian type which, if not originally destined for the island, might have been brought from south India at some time or other? Walburg cites a coin of Tiberius from the Biddell collection and thinks that it came from south India, where denarii of Augustus and Tiberius have been widely attested.²⁹ Mac Dowall believes that the coin of Tiberius will probably have been exported from Rome during the Flavian period (A.D. 70-96), as were the Tiberian denarii found in the south Indian hoards.³⁰ Raschke, however, thinks that "the importation of denarii of Augustus and Tiberius into India is highly unlikely after Nero, because of the shortage of such coins within the Roman empire, and impossible by the late Flavian period".³¹

²⁵ J. Still: *op. cit.*, p. 172.

²⁶ Most recent writers however recognize only one coin of Tiberius, namely the one from Panadura described below.

²⁷ G. Barrow: *Ceylon Past and Present*, London, (1857), p. 82-5, cited by D. Ferguson: "Roman Coins found in Ceylon", *JRAS (Great Britain & Ireland)*, (1905), p. 156-157.

²⁸ S. Bolin: *op. cit.*, p. 73 thought that coins of the two popular types were exported straight from the mint, representing a sample of the metallically best denarii. But D.W. Mac Dowall: *op. cit.*, p. 55-56 has pointed out that, in the hoards available for study, there is none of the die linkage one should find in a consignment straight from the mint, and that the denarii show substantial loss of weight through wear.

²⁹ R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³⁰ D.W. Mac Dowall: *loc. cit.*

³¹ M.G. Raschke: *op. cit.*, n. 1485

The rarity of Republican denarii in southern India and the predominance of pre-Neronian gold and silver coins, especially of two fixed types of Augustus and Tiberius respectively,³² and the frequency of post-Neronian aurei to the virtual exclusion of denarii has been taken as indications that, in their trade with this part of the world, the Romans exported coins of the highest value.³³ It is also widely accepted that this money was received by India as bullion rather than for its currency value. What, then, can we make of the situation in Sri Lanka where, apart from the two Tiberian coins mentioned above, there are no pre-Neronian Imperial coins of high value, and where the only Roman coins of precious metal are the Republican and post-Neronian silver coins which are so rare in the hoards from south India?

It may also be mentioned regarding post-Neronian coins in general that in the whole of India Sewell knew of only a few score dating from between A.D. 69 and 217, and about a dozen from between 217 and 364. Turner has observed that Roman coins of the second century A.D. are beginning to appear in more significant numbers in Indian contexts; but the second century hoards are described as "smaller and less significant than the first century ones".³⁴ By contrast, the Roman silver coins found in Sri Lanka, though few in number, are out of all proportion with regard to the smaller geographical area of the island. Not knowing the circumstances of the finds, however, one cannot draw positive conclusions; but the likelihood is that a substantial quantity of Roman coins did reach the island during the first centuries of the empire. Why is it then that more coins have not turned up?³⁵

If we leave aside all considerations of the accidental nature of the finds and the possible reluctance to part with precious metal, we have two explanations from J. Still for the rarity of Roman precious metal finds in Sri Lanka.³⁶ One is that trade may have been carried on by barter, "as the natives were not used to seeing large quantities of coined money". The second explanation is that gold and silver coins no longer current (as distinct from the silver eddlings which remained in use for a long time) were melted down for making ornaments or for religious dedications, especially in the

³². The Gaius and Lucius Caesares type of Augustus (R.I.C (2) 206 ff) and the "seated lady" Pontif Maxim type of Tiberius (R.I.C. (2) 25 ff).

³³. It has however been pointed out that "the particular Augustan and Tiberian types involved are of no greater fineness than other coins of both emperors.. Cf. MG. Raschke: *op. cit.*, p. 666.

³⁴. P.J. Turner: *op. cit.*, p. 27-28 and 43.

³⁵. (As far as I am aware, no Roman coins of precious metal have turned up in the most recent excavations either.)

³⁶. J. Still: *op. cit.*, p. 155.

troubled times of foreign invasion. Still refers to the rarity of genuine specimens of the Sinhala gold and silver coinage of the 12th and 13th centuries, and suggests that like them their more ancient Roman predecessors might also have been melted down.

Warmington, while accepting Still's explanations as part of the truth, gives another reason which he thinks is the chief explanation for the scarcity in Sri Lanka of coins of the first two centuries of the empire as opposed to their abundance in nearby south India during the same period.³⁷ According to him, the Greeks were content to find the products of the island in west Indian ports and the marts of the Pandyas and Colas to which they brought money. "When a ruler of Ceylon", he adds, "saw Romans and good Roman money, he was surprised". The incident referred to here is of course the famous one reported by Pliny, to which we shall turn presently. To explain the absence of any indications of direct trade in valuable items between the Roman Empire and Sri Lanka, it has been suggested further that the south Indian kingdoms effectively prevented the Romans from trading directly with the island.³⁸ This suggestion is confirmed by the fact that the northern parts of the island were invaded and ruled by south Indians several times during its ancient history.

For Turner, the scarcity of early Roman Coins in Sri Lanka is an indication that the circumnavigation of the island was not regular in the first century at the time when the major hoards of coins were reaching the mainland.³⁹ Turner points out that the areas of India closest to Sri Lanka are not densely filled with hoards either. The large number of fourth and fifth century copper coins shows the new rise of eastern trade "conducted on a much less opulent scale than that of the early Imperial period". Therefore, Turner thinks, "there is little material evidence for Roman trade with Sri Lanka, though the story about the King of Sri Lanka being impressed by the consistent fineness and weight of the denarii suggests that there was some contact, if not direct contact." Turner's conclusion is that "it is difficult to speculate on the nature of Roman contacts with Sri Lanka with so little numismatic evidence, beyond saying that the contacts were presumably of less importance to the Romans than those with the south Indians".⁴⁰

This conclusion has been refuted by Mac Dowall who points out that the export of Roman aurei is not a sort of barometer for measuring trade, but an indication of trade

³⁷. E.H. Warmington: *op. cit.*, p. 122-123.

³⁸. R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³⁹. P.J. Turner: *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁴⁰. P.J. Turner: *op. cit.*, p. 91.

in bullion.⁴¹ (I might also add that the type of metal is no clue to the quality of trade, opulent or otherwise.) He refers to Pliny's statement (VI. 89) that gold and silver were held in high esteem in Sri Lanka and to Ptolemy's statement (VII. 4. 1) that the island has mines of every sort - of gold, silver and other metals. "An island with good supplies of gold and silver", he goes on to say, "does not import further gold and silver bullion in return for whatever it may export. But this does not mean that it did not trade directly or indirectly with Rome and the West".

It should be pointed out in this connection that it is not just Roman coins that are rare in Sri Lanka in early times. Very few foreign coins of any nation, including India, were recorded until recent times. Codrington mentions two Greek copper coins, one from Acharmania Leucas (circa 330-250 B.C.) and the other of Seleucus IV (187-175 B.C.). A roughly circular silver coin weighing 3.52 grams and bearing the head of Dionysus is identified by Paul E. Pieris as a Naxos issue of circa 500 B.C.⁴² It is not mentioned by Codrington and must therefore be suspect. Two Parthian drachmae are mentioned as well as an Indo-Parthian coin of Azes II (circa A.D. 10). Of three Indian coins found at Vallipuram, one seems an Andhra issue of the second or third century A.D., and the other seems to be Kushan. A late second century Kushan coin of Vasudeva has been identified. A copper coin from Attikuli in the Mannar district bearing a legend in Brahmi characters is dated to the third century A.D.

Osmund Boppearachchi has recently brought to light a certain number of North Indian coins, found in the island, so far unrecorded in the Sri Lankan context. Insisting on the importance of these findings, he says:

A large number of "Karshapana" found either in hoards or individually in archaeological sites, reflect the first cultural, religious and commercial relationship of Sri Lanka with north India. They may have first entered the circulation during the reign of the Mauryan king Asoka who introduced Buddhism to the island. It is now accepted by many numismatists that no punch-marked coins were issued in India after the decadence of the Mauryan empire. India's earliest coins, were then replaced by issues of the Indo-Greeks followed by the Indo-Scythians, the Indo-Parthians and the Kushans who occupied the north-western provinces of the Mauryan empire. A certain number of coins belonging to these dynasties of different political and cultural origins are now known in Sri Lanka. No doubt, as far as Sri Lanka is concerned, compared to thousands of "Karshapana", these coins issued by the successors of Mauryas, are quite rare. Yet one cannot deny

⁴¹. D.W. Mac Dowall: *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁴². P.E. Pieris: "Three Rare Coins", *Spolia Zeylanica VIII* pt. 3, (1912), p. 145; cf. H.A.I. Goonatilleke: *op. cit.*, no. 67.

their economic implications".⁴³

Among these findings the most remarkable ones are: the Indian standard drachm of Indo-Greek Menander, about ten coins of Soter Megas, a coin of Kanishka II of the Kushan dynasty and a coin of Viradaman (c. 234-239) of the Western Ksatrapas both found in the excavations conducted at Jetavanarama, and a coin of Nahapana restruck by Gautamiputra of the Satavahanas.⁴⁴

If the scarcity of foreign coins were an indication of the absence of foreign trade, it would be hard to reconcile it with the literary evidence, particularly with regard to the second century A.D. For Ptolemy has not only been able to name the main products of the island, but his description even leads us to believe that the entire coast had been circumnavigated. Some of the more southerly ports have Greek names derived through Hellenistic analogy.⁴⁵ Moreover, such a conclusion would also conflict with the avowed provenance at some sites in Sri Lanka of Arretine ware and other foreign articles datable to the first century of the Roman empire.⁴⁶

A similar observation has been made regarding the Persian coins of the subsequent period:

"The paucity of described Sasanian coins from Sri Lanka is surprising when considering the extent of the historical and ceramic evidence of Sasanian Persian Gulf ties. Codrington, however, notes that small Sasanian coins are often included among the Roman fourth-fifth century coins. Furthermore, he comments that a Yazdegird I type (late fourth-early fifth centuries) can be confused with the Roman soldiers-and-standard type may, in fact, be small Indo-Sasanian ones.⁴⁷ These two facts imply some strength in the Persian Gulf

⁴³. O. Bopearachchi: *op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁴⁴. O. Bopearachchi: *op. cit.*, p. 127-130.

⁴⁵. D.P.M. Weerakkody: "Some Observations on Ptolemy's Description of Sri Lanka", *Kalyani*, 1, 1&2, (1982), p. 31-47.

⁴⁶. Among recent finds at the Jetavana Vihara at Anuradhapura were Roman, Indian and other foreign coins. Of the two carved carnelian seals, one depicts a Roman head while the other shows a Roman figure. A lion's leg in bronze, about 4 cm in height, is thought to be part of a small stand or tripod of West Asian or Roman origin. Cf. H. Ratnayake: "The Jetavana Treasure", *Sri Lanka and the silk Road of the Sea*, (1990), p. 45-63.

⁴⁷. H.W. Codrington: *op. cit.*, p. 50.

trade network influences, even despite the Roman coins. The intermixing of small fourth-fifth century Sasanian coins with the Roman ones is suggestive that the Roman ones may have been coming through Syria and in the Persian Gulf networks, rather than through the Red Sea".⁴⁸

By publishing three Sasanian coins of Xusro I (A.D. 531-579) of the year 16, mint AYR, Hormizd IV (A.D. 579-590), of the year 10, mint BBA and of Xusro II (A.D. 591-628), of the year 6 hitherto unknown in Sri Lankan context, Osmund Bopearachchi pointed out that there is much hope to find more specimens of these types in the island.

Moreover we cannot, overlook the fact that indigenous sources for this period from Sri Lanka indicate familiarity with coined money. The Mahavamsa and its commentary refer to large amounts of money spent by kings of the island in the erection of religious edifices as well as in personal remunerations. It is true that the Mahavamsa, though it uses earlier materials, was probably written in the fifth century A.D. at a time when the use of coins was familiar, so that the author may have read into the past the familiar conditions of his own day. It has also been suggested that the sums represent the total cost of the undertaking rather than the actual quantity of money. Perhaps it is not altogether without significance that the first historical reference concerns Elara, the south Indian usurper who ruled northern Sri Lanka for forty years during the second century B.C.⁴⁹ Elara's conqueror Dutthagamani is represented as spending large sums of money in religious works. Similar expenditures are attributed in the third and fourth century A.D. to Jetthatissa and Mahasena.⁵⁰ The sums mentioned are extremely large, but this may be due to poetic exaggeration. More reliable perhaps are the figures given in inscriptions which have the added merit of being contemporary documents.⁵¹ The earliest are those of Vasabha and Gajabahu (2nd century A.D.)

Accordingly, it is possible to suggest yet another explanation for the disappearance of precious metal coins. There are some grounds for thinking that they were re-exported in some quantity, either in their coined form or, more probably, as metal. This can be deduced from a few hints scattered throughout our literary evidence. It is not only the Pali chronicles that speak of the island's wealth of gold and silver.

⁴⁸. M. Prickett: "Sri Lanka's Foreign Trade before A.D. 600: Archaeological Evidence" in *Asian Panorama: Essays in Asian History, Past and Present*, edited by K.M.de Silva, S. Kiribamune and C.R.de Silva. (1990), p. 172.

⁴⁹. Mahavamsa IX. [Tr. W. Geiger], p. 26.

⁵⁰. Mahavamsa: xxxvi. p. 124-5, xxxvii. p. 45.

⁵¹. H.W. Codrington: op. cit., Appendix D.

Among western authors, the idea goes as far back as Megasthenes, who thought that the gold of Taprobane was more abundant than that of India.⁵² Reference has already been made to Pliny's statement that gold and silver were much esteemed on the island. However, it is Ptolemy who expressly mentions gold, silver and other minerals among the products of Taprobane. Perhaps the reference merely stems from association, since the island was known to produce pearls and gems, or concerns gold and silver handled in transit trade. But if, as is generally supposed, Ptolemy's list of products represents what was exported from Taprobane, then it follows that foreign merchants were able to obtain gold and silver there; and melted down coins must have formed at least part of the supply, since the island is not known to have produced these metals in significant quantities.

Apart from the silver coins already mentioned, Sri Lanka also has a few early Imperial coins struck in the less valuable metals. The earliest is a second brass of Augustus (27 B.C.-A.D. 14). There is also a Greek coin of Tiberius from the Roman protectorate of Judea (A.D. 24-25). The others are mainly second or third brass. Among the emperors and empresses represented are Claudius (A.D. 41-54), Hadrian (117-138), Faustina the elder (d. 141), Elagabalus (218-222), Maximus, Maximinus I (235-237), Posthumus (259-267), Tetricus the Elder (268-273), Diocletian (284-305), Maximianus II (Caesar 292-305), Maximinus II (308-313), Maxentius II (306-312) and Licinius (307-324). Some of the latest coins mentioned here were found in the large hoards of fourth- and fifth-century bronze coins discussed later in this paper. The coins of Posthumus and Tetricus the Elder (rulers of the short-lived empire of Gaul) are curious, but difficult to explain. In Codrington's list these coins are mentioned as "purchased at the Kandy bazaar".

Among these coins of inferior metal, there is an interesting series of Alexandrian tetradrachms of the Ptolemaic standard, mostly struck in billon.⁵³ The

⁵². Pliny VI. 81.

⁵³. According to M.G. Raschke: *op. cit.*, p. 668 the striking of these coins began under Tiberius. Initially they contained 25% silver, but were steadily debased. Although usually said to have been acceptable only within Egypt, they are in fact found singly and in hoards at a considerable number of cities on the northern limes. The troops stationed in Egypt were at least in part paid in this currency. According to Raschke "The vast majority of all of the coins found in Egypt from the period before A.D. 296, when Diocletian gave Egypt the same coinage as the rest of the empire, was struck at the mint in Alexandria and almost all of the papyri, both Greek and Latin, attest only to the use of Alexandrian tetradrachms." Raschke thinks that these coins arrived in Sri Lanka from Egypt during the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 37 however argues that the fact that the three kinds of money (middle bronze, large bronze and tetradrachms) were preserved clearly separate from

emperors include Nero (A.D. 54-68), Vespasian (69-79) (two coins), Hadrian (117-138) (three coins), Lucius Verus (161-169), Commodus 180-193), Aurelian (270-275) (three coins), Probus (276-282), Diocletian (284-305) (four coins) and Maximian (292-305). The coins of Nero and Vespasian were found at Kurunegala, and one of the coins of Aurelian was found in the river at Badulla. Alexandrian billon coins of Hadrian and Trajan have also been found on the west coast of India.⁵⁴ Osumund Boppearachchi published in 1995, three more tetradrachms of this series, found in Sri Lanka. All three of them were struck in the mint of Alexandria of Egypt: the first is in the name of Agrippina of the 4th year of Nero (= 57/8 A.D.); the second is of Lucius Verus of the year 7 (= A.D. 166/7) and the third is of Aurelian of the year 6 (A.D. 274/5).⁵⁵

Warmington, who doubts the possibility of Roman coins entering the island at this time through direct trade, thinks that these debased tetradrachms were passed on by south Indian Tamil merchants in order to get rid of them.⁵⁶ However, most of these coins bear the date of issue, and it is interesting to observe that in the majority of cases these coins come from the early years of each emperor's reign. Thus we have coins from Nero's third year, Vespasian's first year, Hadrian's third and fourth years and the first three years of Diocletian. The coins are too few to permit generalization, but it seems likely that care was taken to introduce as early as possible the coins (and the figure) of a new emperor to their destination in the East.

According to Pliny, it was the integrity of Roman money that first attracted Sri Lanka to diplomatic relations with the Roman empire. The King of the island decided to send an embassy after perceiving that the denarii captured from the Roman ship turned out to be all of the same weight, although their types indicated that they were issued by different persons.

Two inferences follow this: firstly, the coins were seized (*captiva pecunia*), no doubt in keeping with an ancient right which the state is known to have enjoyed with regard to the cargo of ships wrecked or cast on its territory.⁵⁷ We have some literary and epigraphical evidence for this. In the second century B.C. we hear of the King of

one another indicates that at the beginning of the fourth century they were not universally recognized legal tender.

⁵⁴. H.W. Codrington: *op. cit.*, p. 231.

⁵⁵. O. Boppearachchi: In "Recent discoveries ...", (1995), p. 132-3.

⁵⁶. E.H. Warmington: *loc. cit.*

⁵⁷. B.J. Perera: "The Foreign Trade and Commerce of Ancient Ceylon" 4 parts, CHJ I Jan. 1952, nos 1 & 2, (1952), p. 109-119, 192-204, no 4 April. 1952, 301-320, July - August 1952, p. 14-22.

Mahagama who, on hearing of the miraculous arrival of a ship laden with precious things, "bade them bring (the precious things) to him",⁵⁸ while as late as the 12th century A.D., king Parakramabahu I in his Nainativu Tamil Inscription says: "If merchant vessels are wrecked, a half share shall be taken by the treasury and the other half left to the owner".⁵⁹ It is therefore very likely that these coins were similarly confiscated as part of the cargo from the Roman ship.

Secondly, it is clear that the coins were weighed, no doubt because they were destined for the royal treasury. Wheeler and Bolin have suggested that the Roman coins of precious metal exported to the East at this time were intended for use as bullion rather than as currency.⁶⁰ But if these coins were taken for their metal value, they would have been weighed in bulk. The fact that their individual weights were taken into account might be taken as an indication that their use as currency was known and appreciated.

It is usual to deduce from this story that up to that time the king of Sri Lanka had never seen the Romans or their money. But Pliny's words do not necessarily carry this implication: It was the variety of the types, contrasted with the uniformity of standard, that impressed him. We know that gold and silver coins exported to India at this time consisted mainly of two well-known types, one each of Augustus and Tiberius. But the freedman's cargo, which was not destined for India, may well have contained denarii of many types, including, perhaps, even coins of the consulate which, outside India, were in use well into Flavian times. The several people who struck them, and whose images were on them, are not specifically designated as emperors. However, the likelihood is that the coins in question must have been silver denarii of Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, and Cladius, the first four Roman emperors.⁶¹

We know that these coins were minted at a regular weight of 3.85 grams. Incidentally, this evidence also supports the dating of the event during the reign of Claudius rather than of Augustus, as has been proposed by many recent scholars.

The fact that some hoards from southern India contain only coins of Augustus and Tiberius may well be an indication that in the time of the latter emperor the flow of Roman coins to India had already begun. This is perhaps supported by the reported

⁵⁸. Mahavamsa XXII. p. 64.

⁵⁹. K. Indrapala: "The Nainativu Tamil Inscription of Parakramabahu I" *University of Ceylon Review* XXI, 1, (1963), p. 63-70.

⁶⁰. R.E.M. Wheeler: *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers*, London, (1954), p. 361-2; S. Bolin: op. cit., p. 73.

⁶¹. D.W. Mac Dowall: In "The Export of Roman Republican.....", (1990), p. 70.

discovery at Chandravalli in Mysore of two denarii, one each of Augustus and Tiberius, in a stratum which also produced two fragments of Arretine ware and a sherd of the black rouletted pottery which was popular in India chiefly during the Arretine and pre-Arretine period, i.e. before 50 A.D.⁶² Moreover, Tiberius himself deplored the sending of Roman money "to peoples outside our domains, or even to our enemies" in payment for precious stones.⁶³ Thus the draining of Roman money was already a matter for growing concern during his reign. Knowing how close the island was to India, geographically as well as politically and commercially, one would find it very strange indeed if Roman coins did not find their way to the island in some quantity at this time.

It was during Pliny's own lifetime, in A.D. 54 and 64, that the emperor Nero debased the Roman denarius by reducing its silver content. One apparent result of this was that the Indians began to prefer gold coins and pre-Neronian silver coins. Thus in recounting the reaction of the king of Sri Lanka, Pliny may have given voice to the disillusionment of thoughtful Romans who could still remember the good old days when the integrity of Roman money was the key to international prestige.

For the subsequent period we have the evidence of Roman coins found in various parts of the island. In particular, the sudden abundance of "third brass" coins of the fifth century, which are also plentiful in southern India, may be attributed to intensified South Indian interest in Sri Lanka as a source for the commodities for which demand (from both China and the West) had now increased. The policy of the foreign rulers (possibly of the Kalabhra dynasty and therefore Buddhists) who ruled the island from A.D. 433 to 460, and that of the Sinhala kings who followed them, appears to have been one of competition on the one hand with the Axumite middlemen, and of conciliation on the other hand with their Roman customers. Palladius thought that this policy was the result of respect and fear for Roman power and military skill.⁶⁴ But Cosmas, more prudently, attributes it to their time-honoured admiration for the integrity of the Romans, as reflected in their money.⁶⁵

⁶². R.E.M. Wheeler and others: "Arikamedu: an Indo-Roman trading station on the east coast of India", *Ancient India* no. 2, (1946), p. 2-125, 45 ff.

⁶³ Tacitus, *Annales III*, p. 53.

⁶⁴. Palladius, *De Gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus I.* 10 [W. Berghoff]; D.P.M. Weerakkody: "Adventures of a Theban Lawyer on his way to Sri Lanka", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Sri Lanka Branch*, XXVI, (1982), p. 23-42.

⁶⁵. Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographia Christiana XI.* p. 17-19 [W. Wolska-Connus]; F.F. Schwarz: "Kosmas und Siedleiba", *Zive (Antiquite Vivant)* 20, (1-2), (1975), p. 469-490; D.P.M. Weerakkody: "Ancient Sri Lanka as Described by Cosmas" *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities VII, 1 & 2*, (1981), p. 107-127.

He reports how, probably sometime in the latter part of the fifth century A.D., Sopatros, a Roman merchant from Adoulis, once again impressed the king of Taprobane with the superiority of the Romans and their coinage, this time in opposition to the Persians and their money.⁶⁶

The authenticity of this story has sometimes been questioned, and it has even been described as "a mournful reflection of what really happened in days gone by".⁶⁷ But the regard for Roman gold, to which Cosmas attests, is amply corroborated by the provenance, both in Sri Lanka as well as on the Indian subcontinent, of gold pieces of the later Roman and Byzantine emperors.

Gold coins of the later emperors, especially those of Byzantium, are reported from Sri Lanka as well as from India. Coins found in India include those of Theodosius II, Marcian, Leo, Zeno, Anastasius and Justin.⁶⁸ The gold coins from Sri Lanka, like the silver coins from an earlier age, cover a somewhat wider span and include those of Valens (364-378), Arcadius (395-408), Theodosius II (408-450), Basiliscus, Leo I (457-474), Zeno (474-476), Justinian I (527-565) and Heraclius I (613-641). It is also recorded that during the last century a pot of gold coins inscribed Konob obruza were found in the north of Sri Lanka, apparently in the Jaffna Peninsula. As Codrington has observed, these may have been solidi of the Byzantine period.

Codrington also mentions eighteen coins bought from a man in Colombo, which may or may not have been found in Sri Lanka.⁶⁹ If they constituted a hoard, it must have been a very extraordinary one. For, together with coins of Constantius II, Valentinian I (two coins), Valens, Honorius (three coins), Theodosius II, Anastasius, Justinian (two coins), and Maurice Tiberius, there was a coin of Titus (A.D. 79-81). The occurrence of this early coin in a collection largely consisting of Byzantine solidi is not easy to explain. We perhaps have a parallel in two medieval hoards of Chinese coins, one found in the royal precincts of Polonnaruva and the other from Yapahuva.⁷⁰ Both these hoards, while containing mainly coins of Chinese emperors from Tai-tsung (976-988) to Lai-ss'ung (1225-1265) are also said to contain coins of Kao-tsu, the first Tang emperor (618-627), who ruled more than 300 years before Tai-ts'ung.

⁶⁶. Cosmas XI, p. 17-19.

⁶⁷. E.H. Warmington: *op. cit.*, p. 294-5.

⁶⁸. H.W. Codrington: *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁶⁹. H.W. Codrington: *op. cit.*, p. 252-253.

⁷⁰. C.W. Willets: "Ceylon and China pt. 3" *Ceylon Today* X. 2, (1952), p. 19-20.

The presence of solidi indicates that gold was the precious metal now preferred in India and Sri Lanka. The south Indians had indeed preferred the Roman aureus to the denarius ever since Nero reduced the silver content of the latter. As there are no aurei from Sri Lanka, and few denarii for that matter, we cannot say whether a similar preference was shown on the island too. However, from the fifth century onwards the preference for gold coins is evident. Like the bronze coins to be discussed later, these gold coins were also imitated. An imitation half-solidus was found between Veyangoda and Mihirigama.⁷¹ Mention is also made of four specimens of a thin gold coin with a bust on the obverse and a cross on the reverse. Though evidently based on later Roman types, the bust "displays oriental features".⁷² According to Walburg, this coin is not an imitation of a solidus of Valentinian I or Valens, as Codrington has suggested, but of a bronze type "Restitutor Reipublicae" of those two emperors.⁷³ Walburg also mentions another Indo-Roman imitation in the Perera collection in Kandy; but he thinks that this coin, a fourth century medallion, apparently reached the island only at a later date.⁷⁴ Indigenous sources dealing with the later Anuradhapura period also refer to gold coins (suvanna) whereas in earlier times the coin mentioned was the kahapana. In the Polonnaruva period the Sinhala kings issued their own gold coins, for which the prototype, according to Codrington, was the Gupta coinage, of which a few specimens are recorded from Sri Lanka. On the other hand, Paranavitana thinks that the Sinhala kalanda could have been based on the Roman solidus. According to him, a gold coinage with the kalanda as standard and fractional pieces of half, quarter and eighth was in circulation in the ninth and tenth centuries.⁷⁵ Whatever the factual basis of this statement, it is well known that inscriptions of the later period generally mention sums of money in terms of kalandas of gold.⁷⁶

To get back to the Byzantine period, it appears that the preference for gold coins was exploited by the Roman merchants and their middlemen. We learn from Cosmas that the best gold coins were picked out for export to the east, and that they

⁷¹. H.W. Codrington: *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁷². H.W. Codrington: *op. cit.*, p. 42; idem, "A Pseudo-Roman Coin", *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register*, I. 3, (1916), p. 202-203.

⁷³. R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁷⁴. *ibid.*

⁷⁵. C.W. Nicholas and S. Paranavitana: *Concise History of Ceylon*, Colombo, (1961), p. 165.

⁷⁶. H.W. Codrington: In *Ceylon Coins*, (1924), Appendix D.

competed successfully with the silver coins of the Persians.⁷⁷ Taken literally, the story of Sopatros reveals that the king of Sri Lanka was already familiar with Roman and Persian coins. The way Sopatros tells the king "you have both kings here" and "you have the money of both kings", and also the fact that the king ordered the coins to be produced implies that he already possessed money of both nations. One need not therefore assume, as has sometimes been done, that he was unfamiliar with foreign coins or that he was looking at them for the first time. What Sopatros invites the king to do is to look at the coins in a new way, that is, to compare them with each other and draw his own conclusions about the culture, wealth and power of the two empires, which the king duly does.

However, when Cosmas (XI. 22) says later that the king of Sieldiba values elephants at so many nomismata per cubit of height, this need not imply that the king did his transactions in Roman (Byzantine) money only. Cosmas is speaking in terms familiar to his Greek readers, and all that can be inferred is that money, Roman or otherwise, was offered in payment for elephants. As Cosmas does not tell us where the elephants came from, (and the implication clearly is that they were caught locally), we do not even know whether the payments were made to foreigners at all.

There can be no doubt that Persian drachmae and Byzantine solidi reached the island in quantities during the fifth and sixth centuries and perhaps even later. Their disappearance may not be due entirely to melting down. We have also to think of the large-scale plunder and destruction that must have accompanied the many foreign invasions during the later Anuradhapura period. All the same, the chronicles continue to mention lavish sums of gold spent by the kings on religious works. In the eighth century, for instance, Aggabodhi I is said to have spent 26,000 suvannas (gold coins) in repairing the dilapidated structures at the Cetiya Pabbata.⁷⁸ Melting down is perhaps also attested in the Mahavamsa account of king Mahinda I (9th century). We are told that out of his great wealth he also made an image of the teacher out of 60,000 of pure gold.⁷⁹

⁷⁷. Cosmas, *loc. cit.*

⁷⁸. Mahavamsa LXVIII. P. 7

⁷⁹. Mahavamsa LXVIII, P. 137.

Codrington, following Wickramasinghe, believes that the term *ridi tiram* occurring in the Anuradhapura Ruvanveli Dagaba Inscription of Nissankamalla is a reference to the silver drachma of the Greeks.⁸⁰ The inscription states that this king, with his chief queen and the heir apparent, mounted the scale pans and caused great showers of gifts to fall by throwing down in the King's Street unlimited quantities of wealth, including the "seven kinds of jewels"⁸¹ and silver *tiram*. If *tiram* represents the drachma, it should be observed that the Sinhala form derives, not from Skt. *dramma* but from *diram*, the Persian and Arabic form, through the Tamil form *tiramam* found on several Pandya and Cola inscriptions of the 11-13th centuries.⁸² The term may therefore have been used for a Persian, or more probably Arabian, coin rather than for one of the Byzantine Greeks.

II

The Roman and Indo-Roman bronze coins of the fourth and fifth centuries have been the subject of much discussion. In Sri Lanka these coins occur not only as single finds but also as "hoards". Most of the coins are extremely worn, but it has been possible to read them with sufficient accuracy, and many of them bear the mint marks of famous cities of the Roman empire.⁸³

The most abundant issues range from the coins of Constantine the Great (A.D. 306-337) to Arcadius (395-408) and Honorius (395-424), while the coins of these last two emperors are probably the most frequent, occurring in almost every hoard. Similar bronze coins have also been found in large quantities in the "Madura district" of southern India and along the Coromandel coast, although, as far as I am aware, no one has published them adequately.

⁸⁰. H.W. Codrington, "Ridi Tiram", *JRAS CB*, XXIV, notes and queries pt. 5, (1916), p. 79-80; cf. *E.Z.* vol. II, p. 81.

⁸¹. For this expression cf. X. Liu: *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges A.D. 1 - 600*, Delhi, (1988), esp. 92-103.

⁸². H.W. Codrington: (1916), *loc. cit.*

⁸³. J. Still: *In Roman Coins ...*, (1907), p. 166.

Walburg has arranged 1155 precisely datable genuine Roman coins into seven chronological periods and given their distribution within those periods as follows:⁸⁴

Period	Number of Coins
P0 (A.D. 324-330)	1
P1 (330-363)	49
P2 (363-383)	28
P3 (383-408)	682
P4 (408-424)	150
P5 (425-450)	45
P6 (450-476)	1

(146 coins are not precisely datable, although some of them can be assigned to the emperors or authorities under whom they were minted.) From this it is clear that the largest number of coins are those minted between A.D. 386 and 408.

Apart from the genuine Roman coins, a large number of imitations have also turned up in Sri Lanka as well as in South India. It has, however, been observed recently that genuine Roman coins constitute a much larger proportion in the finds from Sri Lanka than has hitherto been imagined, and that many of the specimens once described as Indo-Roman are in reality genuine Roman coins.⁸⁵ Codrington divided these so-called Indo-Roman coins into two classes, while observing that the line of demarcation between the two is not always clear. The first class consists of those coins which adhere closely to the original, with the exception of the lettering "which baffled native minters". The second class, far less skillfully executed than the first, is called, following John Still's suggestion, the "Naimana type" after a place in southern Sri Lanka where a large find of these coins was made.⁸⁶ These coins, while imitating the portrait head of the emperor on the obverse, reproduce on their reverses, with varying degrees of crudeness, imitations of the types common to the Roman coins which are most frequent. There are also attempts to reproduce the effect of the legend.

The great number of Roman bronze coins found on the island belong to the latter half of the fourth century A.D. Their extremely worn state indicates that they must have been in use for a long time. Codrington has suggested that the latest limit for their use was probably the first half of the 7th century. He has based this suggestion on two considerations: Firstly, that the direct western trade ceased with the fall of Alexandria in A.D. 638, and secondly, that only one coin has been found in

⁸⁴ R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁸⁵ O. Bopearachchi: In "some Observations", (1990), p. 31.

⁸⁶ H.W. Codrington: In *Ceylon Coins and Currency*, (1924), p. 35.

Polonnaruva, a city first mentioned in connection with Aggabodhi I and used as a royal residence at least as early as the time of Aggabodhi IV (A.D. 658-674). Thus, if we allow the widest limits, the coins would have been in use for some 300 years. This is not at all surprising in the ancient world where coins enjoyed a very long period of circulation. Within these broad limits, however, is it possible to assign a more precise date for the introduction of these coins to Sri Lanka, and to ascertain the historical background of their introduction?

At Sigiriya, out of a total of 1697 coins reported by Still and Codrington, 1685 are Roman or Indo-Roman. The excavations of 1982-1983 yielded 157 coins, out of which 60 were identified: 25 genuine Roman coins, 7 Roman or Indo-Roman coins and 28 Indo-Roman imitations.⁸⁷ Thus, against approximately 130-140 coins from Anuradhapura and from the district of Anuradhapura, there are around 2511 from Sigiriya.⁸⁸ This place was the capital only under Kassapa I (A.D. 479-497) and it was handed over to the monks at his death. The earliest Roman coins from the site are those of Constantine. The latest Roman coins known to Codrington were those of Arcadius and Honorius, but the 1982-1983 excavations unearthed a coin of Marcian (A.D. 450-457). Now, even at the earliest reckoning Sigiriya did not become the capital until well over twenty years after the death of Marcian, and the coins of Constantine would have enjoyed nearly one-and-a-half centuries of circulation before they were finally abandoned.

In the largest hoards described by Still and Codrington, such as those from Colombo, Balapitiya and Boragoda, the latest coins include those of Arcadius and Honorius. These hoards therefore could not have been deposited until well into the fifth century A.D. Moreover, according to the same authorities, some hoards contain, in addition to the above coins, those of Theodosius II, whose reign ended only in A.D. 450. Examples are Vatapuluva, Kapuhenvala (Tangalle district) and Valaichchenai (Eastern Province). These hoards, therefore, like those of Sigiriya, must have been deposited during the second part of the fifth century at the earliest.

⁸⁷. Bopearachchi: In "Some Observations ...", (1990), p. 20. On 28 Bopearachchi gives information on other coin finds at Sigiriya as follows: "Many other coins were also found from time to time at Sigiriya. In 1935, four separate batches comprising of 605 Roman and Indo-Roman coins found in that area were given to the Colombo National Museum. In 1945, a hoard of 200 small copper coins were discovered in a semi-broken pot by a villager in Sigiriya jungle. I once learned from the competent authorities of the Sigiriya museum that an important coin hoard containing hundreds of coins was discovered, in 1979, during the construction of a tourist hotel situated a few hundred yards from the Sigiriya rock."

⁸⁸. R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 32.

As R.A.L.H. Gunawardena has rightly observed, "finds of Roman coins provide an important corrective to the prevailing views on the relative importance of ports in the south-western, southern and eastern parts of the island in the period between the fourth and the seventh century".⁸⁹ The occurrence of these well worn bronze coins at almost every port as well as at various places in the interior has led to the very plausible supposition that, at the time they were in use, these coins formed the currency of the island. Consistent with this is the fact that few other coins of the period, whether local, Indian, or of other foreign nations, have been found.⁹⁰ Relevant also I think is the fact that some of the recent finds contained coins in round numbers: 30,000 from Godavaya, 400 from Kalutara, two other hoards of 200 each and one of 600. These must represent quantities of currency.

It was once thought that the presence of third brass in large quantities at Madura in south India was a possible indication of the presence of a colony of resident Roman agents in the Pandya capital.⁹¹ In Sri Lanka, these coins are not confined to one locality. Codrington believed that, in both Madura and Sri Lanka, the introduction of "third brass" was possibly a successful commercial speculation on the part of the western merchants, who could not have failed to notice the practical absence of small change. That this currency met with popular favour is evident, he says, from the fact that it was imitated.

Although in the earlier centuries of the Roman empire Graeco-Roman merchants (especially from the province of Egypt) may have penetrated into South Asia in significant numbers, our literary evidence suggests that by the fifth century the situation had changed. The narrative of Palladius concerning the adventures of the Theban lawyer shows that it was not easy for the Romans to get into the eastern waters.⁹² Similarly, the 11th book of *The Christian Topography of Cosmas* gives the impression that the Romans had been made to recede very much into the background by the activities of the

⁸⁹. R.A.L.H. Gunawardena: "Seaways to Siedidiba: Changing Patterns of Navigation in the Indian Ocean and their Impact on Pre-colonial Sri Lanka", *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road*, (1990), p. 35.

⁹⁰. The Roman hoards sometimes contain Sassanian or Indo-Sassanian coins. Two coins of Yasdagerd I (A.D. 397-417) have been recognized. Codrington also mentions some gold coins purchased in Colombo belonging to the Guptas and to Harsha, the 7th century ruler of Kanauj. Some copper coins of the small lion or dog type, found at Anuradhapura, are thought to belong to the Pallavas of south India with whom Sri Lanka had close contact during the later Anuradhapura period. (J. Still: In *Catalogue of Coins...*, (1908), nos. 219-224.)

⁹¹. H.W. Codrington: , (1924), ch. 4 section 5.

⁹². Palladius, I. p. 3-10.

Axumite middlemen and the Persians. Thus the provenance of Roman coins at this date cannot be taken as a definite indication of the presence of settled western merchants in this area.

According to Warmington, the abundance of coins at this time is due partly to the revival of western energy through Axumite, Himyarite, and Persian middlemen after the foundation of Constantinople as the seat of the empire, and partly to the gradual shifting of the focus of trade from the Malabar coast southward to Sri Lanka, which appears as the main centre of trade in the Indian seas by the sixth century.⁹³ Warmington therefore thinks that the Roman coins were brought by the middlemen. He also believes that the abundance of the coins of Arcadius and Honorius is due to the fresh demand for pearls, spices and precious stones created by the barbarians who harassed and invaded the western empire. IN his opinion, it was the Indians themselves who produced the imitation coins, and the cessation of the Roman coins after Honorius is due to the fact that the middlemen, considering the supplies to be adequate in view of the local imitations, ceased to import.

Mac Dowall believes that the copies of 4th and 5th century Roman coins found in Sri Lanka were almost certainly made locally on the island itself.⁹⁴ He points out that there are no copies of comparable type manufactured within the Roman empire. In a note he adds: "There are copies of some of these issues found in the empire, but the Sri Lankan copies are quite distinctive".⁹⁵ "The Indo-Roman coinage", MacDowall concludes, "is in effect a locally produced coinage of Sri Lanka, albeit inspired originally from Roman prototypes. This coinage clearly does reflect Roman contact, but only to the extent that genuine Roman coins are found and have been employed as prototypes".

This view apparently does not take into account the provenance of imitations with characteristics of Codrington's first group, together with genuine Roman coins, at Madura and along the Coromandel coasts. Moreover, the question raised by Bopearachchi still remains unanswered, namely the coexistence of two monetary types, one genuine and the other an imitation, with technical, iconographical and specially metrological differences.⁹⁶

Codrington was of the view that the Indo-Roman coins commenced from the second half of the fifth century A.D. By way of confirmation he cited the opinion of Harold Mattingly that the local imitations of the Roman "third brass" may be due to the

⁹³. E.H. Warmington: *op. cit.*, p. 123-124.

⁹⁴. D.W. Mac Dowall: In "Finds of Roman Coins ...", (1990), p. 61.

⁹⁵. *ibid* n. 14.

⁹⁶. O. Bopearachchi: In "Some observations", (1990), p. 33.

fact that very few of this species were issued by the Roman mints after the reign of Theodosius II.⁹⁷ Bopearachchi, however, has pointed out that at Sigiriya Indo-Roman coins were found together with the genuine coins which served as prototypes for them, and that both genuine coins and imitations are characterized by varying degrees of wear. If the Indo Roman series began during the latter half of the fifth century, those found at Sigiriya should have been in good condition as the city was founded only in A.D. 479, i.e. less than thirty years from the supposed commencement of minting.⁹⁸

As for the so-called Naimana type, it has been observed that some hoards of imitations contain no genuine Roman coins at all, while in others Roman coins constitute only a minute proportion. It has also been pointed out that sites such as Anuradhapura and Mihintale, which have yielded a large number of imitations, have produced few genuine Roman coins, or none at all.⁹⁹ The suggestion has been made, therefore, that the imitations were made where authentic coins were insufficient to satisfy the need. This suggestion, if acceptable, would also point to local sources (i.e. in Sri Lanka) for these coins, as distinct from the Indo-Roman coins of Codrington's first type. It would follow from this that their fabrication must have commenced with the termination of the flow of Roman (and Indo-Roman) bronze coins to the island through south Indian intermediaries, possibly by the time of king Moggallana I around the beginning of the sixth century A.D. It is thus clear that the imitations are not the cause of the cessation in the flow of Roman coins to the island, as Warmington supposes, but rather its undoubted consequence.

Several scholars have suggested the possible relevance of Egypt to the study of these late Roman bronze coins from Sri Lanka, as Egypt was the one province that was in closest touch with the island. Mattingley found the existence of these coins not all surprising, since Egypt was also the province where gold and silver coinage came to an early end.¹⁰⁰ Raschke has observed that the prevalence of Imperial bronze from a large number of mints reflects the pattern of circulation which developed in Egypt in the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁰¹ Walburg has compared the finds from Sri Lanka and Egypt in some detail.¹⁰² In both countries coins minted in the eastern cities of the

⁹⁷. H.W. Codrington: In *Ceylon Coins and Currency*, (1924), p. 240.

⁹⁸. Bopearachchi: (1990), *loc cit.*

⁹⁹. R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁰. H. Mattingley: *Roman Coins from the Earliest Times to the Fall of the Western Empire*, London, 1st and 2nd ed., (1928-1960); cf. R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁰¹. M.G. Raschke: *op. cit.*, p. 672.

¹⁰². R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 33-35.

empire (such as Constantinople, Nicomedeia, Cyzicus, Antioch, Alexandria, and, to a smaller extent, Heraclea) are more numerous than those from western cities. Again, hoards from both countries contain foreign coins of comparable date. With regard to chronological distribution, Roman bronze coins begin with a few specimens issued between A.D. 324 and 330, increase between 330 and 363, decrease between 363 and 383, reach their peak between 383 and 408, decrease between 408 and 424 and further between 424 and 450. However, whereas Roman bronze coins from Sri Lanka practically cease after A.D. 450, they continue in Egypt for some time, though in smaller numbers. Walburg accordingly thinks that the flow of Roman coins to Sri Lanka must have ceased after A.D. 450, and, on all this evidence, concludes that the Roman coins found on the island were part of the coins circulating in Egypt.¹⁰³

I am however inclined to believe that both the Roman and Indo-Roman coins may have been circulating in south India for a considerable time before reaching Sri Lanka in the latter half of the fifth century, and that their introduction to the island occurred against the background of well-known historical events.

In mid fifth century, Sri Lanka was under foreign rule, having been invaded by a certain Pandu from south India. Pandu, who is now believed to be of Kalabhra origin,¹⁰⁴ set up a dynasty at Anuradhapura which, according to the Mahavamsa ruled for 27 years (A.D. 433-460) until it was uprooted by Dhatusena. The Roman and Indo-Roman coins may have been introduced to Sri Lanka from south India at this time by these invasions. (The case of the "Naimana" type coins is, I think, different; they were probably minted on the island, as argued above.)

Finds of Roman and Indo-Roman coins in Sri Lanka have occurred mainly along the coast, and their greater concentration has been on the western and southern shores. Few have turned up in the north, and these have come mainly from places of politico-economic importance as well as religious significance such as Anuradhapura, Mihintale, Sigiriya, Kantarodai, Udappu, and Mantai. From a comparison of this pattern of coin finds with the distribution pattern of inscriptions of the 4-7th centuries A.D. (which provides a rough indication of the distribution of population) it becomes clear that outside the main cities and ports such as Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, Rohana and Mantai, where there is a correlation such as one expects to find, the regions of dense population have yielded fewer coins, while the heavier finds are concentrated in thinly populated regions. Districtwise Kurunegala, Anuradhapura, Badulla, Matale, Trincomalee, and Hambantota

¹⁰³. Owing probably, according to Walburg, to an edict of 356 or 352 forbidding the export of all types of money. The edict allows merchants to take with them 1000 folles for personal use. The object was to prevent speculative trading of coins (i.e. as merchandise) within the empire; but Walburg (*op. cit.*, 33-35) thinks that the prohibition also fell on the transport of money outside the frontiers of the empire.

¹⁰⁴. C.W. Nicholas and S. Paranavitana: *op. cit.*, p. 122 ff.

have yielded both Roman coins and inscriptions; while Galle, Matara, Colombo, Baticaloa, Ampara and Puttalam have produced Roman coins but hardly any inscriptions from the period in question.¹⁰⁵

The ancient settlements of Sri Lanka were largely centered round the production of food crops under irrigation, and were mainly concentrated in the dry zone, which was ideally suited for this purpose. The wet zone of the south-west, on the other hand, was largely covered with jungle, and produced not only the so-called cash crops such as ginger, turmeric, pepper and (later) cinnamon, but also ivory and precious stones which were so important for the island's foreign trade.¹⁰⁶

The ports and harbours along the south-western coast, where so many Roman and Indo-Roman coins have turned up, must have acted as outlets for the commercial products of the wet zone. Accordingly, the sudden outburst of coin hoards of the fifth century must be connected in some way with the island's capacity to produce these valuable items of foreign commerce. There is also a marked change in the constitution of the coin hoards of Sri Lanka at this time. Whereas the earlier hoards of punch-marked coins (of the third and fourth centuries A.D) are associated with other coins such as elephant, bull, lion and swastika, no other coins are generally found in the fifth century Roman hoards. Such a drastic change in the coin pattern must reflect some important political development.

Reference has already been made to the increased demand for these luxuries in the West created by the barbarian invasions. The south Indians who traditionally supplied these commodities to western merchants and their middlemen were doubtless pressed for increased supplies, and were naturally compelled to explore and exploit fresh sources. It is probably here that one should look for the background and the purpose of Pandu's invasion of Sri Lanka in mid fifth century, and the possibly consequent introduction of the Roman and Indo-Roman coins. The foreign dynasty ruled from Anuradhapura; but their interest penetrated far beyond the northern territory. We learn

¹⁰⁵. This comparison was carried out with the aid of the lists of find-sites of Roman and Indo-Roman coins given by H.W. Codrington: *Ceylon Coins and Currency*, (1924), p. 31-50 and R. Walburg: op. cit., p. 31-32 plotted on a map of Sri Lanka, and the locations of 4-7th century inscriptions given in the map accompanying the article by C.W. Nicholas: "Sinhalese Naval Power", *University of Ceylon Review* XVI. 3-4, (1958), p. 20-27, updated from *Epigraphica Zeylanica* vols. V (1955-66) and VII (1984) p. 107-119. I wish to thank Miss R.M.K.K. Ranatunga for assistance in carrying out this comparison.

¹⁰⁶. S.F. de Silva: "The Historical Geography of Some of the Capital Cities of Ceylon", *CHJ*, 1, (1951), p. 13-23.

from inscriptions that they patronized Buddhist shrines in the south.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps, their patronage even took the form of coin donations.

Several of the finds from Sri Lanka are actually from sanctuary sites, and probably represent offerings made to the Buddhist clergy by these foreign rulers of the mid-fifth century as well as by their local predecessors and successors. The comparatively small number of coins from Anuradhapura must, in that case, be attributed to the plunder and devastation which accompanied the frequent foreign invasions during the later Anuradhapura period.¹⁰⁸ A stupa deposit from Sigiriya contained six bronze coins in association with jewelry, precious stones, pearls and emeralds, indicating the high value ideally attributed to these coins, and hence their value as offerings to the Buddhist clergy. Donations of coins to Buddhist clergy are attested at other times in history and in other geographical areas. Two fifth-century inscriptions from Sanchi, for instance, record the donation of coins (though of precious metal, namely, dinara), the interest from which (presumably through lending or investing by the monastery) was to be used for feeding monks and keeping lamps burning.¹⁰⁹

The burying of coin hoards is a desperate measure adopted in troubled times, which may also lead to considerable abandoning of property. In the present instance, the Sinhala rebellion under Datusena may have been the immediate occasion for such losing or abandoning of hoards. The possibility that the movement of bronze coins, unlike silver and gold, may actually represent the movement of merchants and travelers has been suggested;¹¹⁰ but I am inclined to believe that the hoards from Sri Lanka most probably represent, first and foremost, temple donations and the payments made to soldiers. These bronze coins must have been introduced to the island by the invaders in large quantities, and their use as currency must have continued for a considerable period thereafter.¹¹¹ It is now generally accepted that these coins formed the currency

¹⁰⁷. W.A. Jayawardhana: "Successors of Mahasena", *University of Ceylon: History of Ceylon* vol. 1 pt. 1 Colombo, (1959), p. 293-294.

¹⁰⁸. R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁹. X. Liu: *op. cit.*, p. 131.

¹¹⁰. M.G. Raschke: *op. cit.*, n. 1593, referring to the views of L. Robert and G. Le Rider.

¹¹¹. Osmund Boppearachchi has however pointed out to me that the coins from Panduvasnuvara and Pidurangala are in mint condition, and that the latter hoard contains mainly coins of Constantine and his sons (early fourth century). Thus the coins were hoarded as soon as they came into circulation, and cannot have been introduced in mid fourth century as I have suggested. On the other hand, this observation, together with the fact that these coins have also been found in

of Kassapa's short-lived capital at Sigiriya. The scattered finds throughout this site are perhaps testimony to the commotion that must have followed Moggallana's invasion and the defeat and death of Kassapa. We know that at least one of the contending parties (albeit the winning one) received military support from India.

It has been observed that no gold coins known so far are earlier than the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth, and that their appearance coincides roughly with the end of the minting of bronze coins. A parallel situation exists in India and Afghanistan, where later gold coins begin with those of Theodosius II, while finds of earlier coins end with Constantine I. Thus there are no gold coins from the period between Constantine I and Theodosius II. Walburg therefore concludes with some confidence that the Roman bronze coins found in Sri Lanka can only be considered as part of the small coins in the bulk of coins in circulation - a mixed bulk of gold and bronze from which the precious metal was withdrawn for melting either in antiquity or in modern times.¹¹² He goes on to suggest that the important part bronze coins played in commerce was the consequence of a decree of A.D. 374 forbidding the export of gold to barbarians.

It must however be pointed out that, although bronze coins could, and most probably did, circulate alongside coins of more precious metal, the suggestion that they were introduced instead of the latter is unacceptable. Rather, I prefer to follow Warmington and others who believe that they were used as small change, though the lack of local copper deposits must have given the coins a value considerably higher than we are tempted to imagine today. This is also borne out by the Chinese sources of the 5th century which Walburg himself has cited, and which reveal that Chinese copper coins were much appreciated in Sri Lanka and that they were brought to the island in large quantities, perhaps to compensate for unequal value of merchandise.¹¹³ Roman bronze coins and imitations may have played a similar role once they were introduced from southern India. (Their introduction may even be connected with the increasing importance of the trade with the Chinese, whose own coinage was largely copper. We know that at an earlier age the Kushans used their thickly made copper coins in trading with the Chinese).¹¹⁴

Bopearachchi has rightly underlined the significance of the recent coin finds from Sigiriya: "It is not an exaggeration to say that this is the first time that we have at

the post-Kasyapa layers in the Bodhigara at Sigiriya, serve to strengthen Codrington's hypothesis that they were in circulation for about three centuries.

¹¹² R. Walburg: *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* p. 41.

¹¹⁴ X. Liu: *op. cit.*, p. 79-80.

our disposal a well documented series of coins found in a scientific archaeological excavation conducted in Sri Lanka".¹¹⁵ One can only hope that similar scientific evidence regarding Roman coins will come forth from excavations at other sites on the island. What I have presented here, I wish to stress once again, are only tentative inferences drawn from imperfect evidence, pending the publication of more systematic reports by qualified numismatists.

D.P.M. WEERAKKODY

¹¹⁵. O. Bopearachchi: In "Some Observations", (1990), p. 27.