

CONCH AS CURRENCY AND SYMBOL ON COINS

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ABSTRACT

The magnificent snow-white gastropod shell *Xancus pyrum* or *Turbinella pyrum* (Linnaeus), popularly called as chank, is termed as *caḍku* in Tamil and *Sankha* in Sanskrit. This marine shell has had its social importance right from the Harappan (Indus Valley Civilization) period. Archaeological excavations conducted at the Indus valley region of India and Pakistan have revealed innumerable artifacts made of chank. So far an exclusive study on the role of chank (henceforth conch) as a symbol on the coins and as a medium of exchange value has not been undertaken. This paper is an attempt towards such a study.

Keywords: Conch, Maritime Archaeology, India, Numismatics

The magnificent snow-white gastropod shell *Xancus pyrum* or *Turbinella pyrum* (Linnaeus), popularly called as chank, is termed as *caḍku* in Tamil and *Sankha* in Sanskrit. It is also called as 'conch' when the apex of the chank is broken to form a hole and used as a musical instrument. This marine shell has had its social importance right from the Harappan (Indus Valley Civilization) period. Archaeological excavations conducted at the Indus valley region of India and Pakistan have revealed innumerable artifacts made of chank. In the global context, the chank shell is available in abundant only in the Gulf of Mannar region, save for a moderate source from the Gulf of Kutch and the adjoining regions in Gujarat. Because of its attractive nature and rarity, this shell has found its place of importance in the Indian society. Chank shell was not only used as a raw material for the manufacture of bangles, rings and ornaments, but also held an esteemed position in the religious and social arena, and was also used as a medium of exchange. This was also considered as a valuable object to be stored in the treasury of the kingdoms. Having achieved a religious status in the earlier period, symbols of chank shell appeared on the coins around the caḍkam/Early Historic period in South India.

So far an exclusive study on the role of chank (henceforth conch) as a symbol on the coins and as a medium of exchange value has not been undertaken. This paper is an attempt towards such a study. The published materials on coins are used as a source for this study. The Tamil literature over the period and the early South Asian texts like *Artasāstra* and *Mahāvamsa* are also referred to. Besides, a few of the British records are also used. The data from private collections, have also been consulted.¹

Conch as a symbol on coins

In South Indian context, we come across conch as a symbol on the coins of the Pāḍḍiyas. A Caḍkam Age Pāḍḍiya king Peruvaḍuti's coin dated to third century BCE has been collected from Tamil Nadu.² On this coin, symbols consisting of a tortoise, an elephant, an ox, a hilly terrain and a conch shell are found. Similar kind of Caḍkam Age Pāḍḍiya coins with conch as one of the symbols have been collected from Tamil Nadu (Fig. 1). Another silver coin of the same period, typologically akin to the Mauryan coins with conch as a symbol, has been found from the Amaravati river bed near Karur.³ The Cōḍas, who were contemporary to the Pāḍḍiyas, also used conch as one among the symbols on their coins (Fig. 2). However, conch as a symbol is not noticed on the

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Caḍkam age Cēra coins; interestingly conch shells have not been reported from the excavations at Pattanam in Kerala.⁴ In North India, a solitary punch marked coin with conch as one of the symbols, dated to 3rd century CE, has been found (Fig. 3). However, the name of the king, who issued this coin, is not known and the originality of the coin is doubted by the scholars.⁵ There is a view that this may be an imitation coin. Nevertheless, it is a significant find.⁶



Fig. 1 Caḍkam Pāḍḍiya coin with conch (Image on the Left)
(Courtesy: Arumuga Seetharaman)

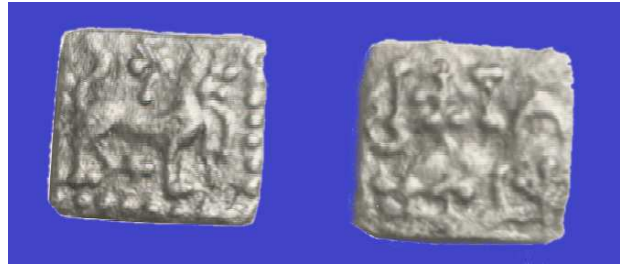


Fig. 2 Caḍkam CōḶa coin with conch (Image on the Right)
(Courtesy: Arumuga Seetharaman)



Fig. 3. Punch Marked Coin with Conch symbol (Image on the Left)
(Courtesy: Chattopadyaya 1977)



Fig. 4. Coin of Vishōukuḍḍi , (Image on the Left) (Courtesy: Arumuga Seetharaman)

After the Caḍkam age, the coins of Vishōukuḍḍi, and Pallavas were cast with the conch symbol. In one of the coins of Vishōukuḍḍi, a symbol of conch with two lamp-stands on both the sides is found (Fig. 4).⁷ In some cases twin conch shells are depicted around a *kumba* (sacred pot) (Fig. 5).⁸

On the coins of the Pallava dynasty, a large conch shell on one side and on the reverse the symbols of a bull, a crescent and a snake are depicted (Fig. 6).⁹ It is interesting to note that the coins made from various types of dies of Pallava period, depicting conch as a major symbol have been found. The size of the conch symbol in relation with the other symbols is comparatively larger and this suggests that conch received special attention under the Pallavas. Other than the conch, the *cakra*, lotus and other symbols of Vishōu were also given equal importance in that period. During the Vishōukuḍḍi, and Pallava period the five armaments of Vishōu found their place in their coins. A coin inscribed with the title of Narashima I 'māmalla' along with conch symbol has also been noticed (Fig. 7).¹⁰

During the 9th century, the Yātavas who had their political base in Maharashtra and other areas of western Deccan minted their coins with conch symbol, which was their royal emblem.¹¹ In the medieval Cōḍa period too, conch symbols are found to occur on a large number of coins (Fig. 8). In most of the coins, figure of a man blowing the conch is depicted (Fig. 9). In these coins the name 'laḍka vāḍā' is also inscribed. Since the conch shells are available in the Gulf of Mannar of Sri Lanka and Indian border region, Rājarāja I would have minted the coins to commemorate his victory over Sri Lanka.¹² Contemporaries of the Cōḍas, the Cāḍukyās also used conch as a symbol on their coins.¹³

Medieval Pāḍḍiyas also used the conch symbol on their coins along with the other possessions of Lord Vishōu¹⁴. The tradition of using the conch as currency continued even in the period of Vijayanakara and the Nāyaks of Madurai and Thanjavur (Fig. 10, 11).¹⁵ In the 15-16th centuries, the chieftains of Ramanathapuram and Kongu region also minted the coins with conch as a symbol.¹⁶ Conch was also used as the emblem of the Travancore State (Kerala) and often this was used a symbol in flags and coins (Fig. 12).¹⁷

Conch as a symbol on seals

Being a rare and valuable commodity, the conch was used in symbolic forms not only on the coins, but also on the seals. In the excavations at Hastinapur, a terracotta seal with an inscription dated to 2nd-3rd centuries CE has been unearthed. On the top of the seal, is a symbol of conch (Fig. 13).¹⁸ Besides, in Keen Gang museum of Vietnam, there are two seals having conch figure made of carnelian beads, of medieval period, and they are considered to be from South India (Fig. 14).¹⁹ In the merchant guild inscriptions of South India, there are number of occurrence of conch as one among the symbols. Therefore, the specimen from Vietnam can be taken as the seal of a merchant guild of South Indian origin.

Conch as a symbol of wealth

Conch is valued as one of the nine items/objects of wealth in the Indian tradition.²⁰ It is one among the twin wealth of Kubēra.²¹ Hence it is termed as *caḍkaniti*, which means "Conch treasure" in Sanskrit; it is quoted often along with the *patmaniti* (lotus treasure). *Mahāvamsa* mentions conch as one among eight auspicious items.²² The Tamil text of *cilapatikāram* (1:34) talks about the father of Kōvalan, the hero of the epic, as a man in possession of twin wealth, namely, *caḍkaniti* and *patmaniti*.²³ This is the first occurrence of the term *caḍkaniti* in Tamil literature. The Tamil Jaina literature *Peruḍkatai* states in two occasions about the *caḍkaniti*.²⁴ Such a reference occurs in the Medieval (ca. 7th-9th

centuries) Tamil texts of *Tēvāram* (306.10:1) hymns too.²⁵ In the literature of medieval period, these *nitis* are often quoted to express the possession of the wealth. For instance in *Cāvakacintāmaṣi* (139) and in *Pāṣṭikōvai* (61:3) it is quoted, as the heroes of the themes were in possession of these *nitis*.²⁶ *Caḍkaniti* is known as everlasting treasure.²⁷ Since it is considered to be the object of wealth, the Kubērā sculptures holding lotus and conch are depicted in the entrance of many of the Hindu temples of South India.



Fig. 5. Coin of Vishōukuṭi , with two conch shells
(Courtesy: Arumuga Seetharaman)



Fig. 6. Coins of Pallava Dynasty
(Courtesy: Arumuga Seetharaman)



Fig. 7. Coins of Narashima with *māmalla* name
(Courtesy: Arumuga Seetharaman)



Fig. 8. Coin of Medieval Cōḻa
(Courtesy: Arumuga Seetharaman)

Conch as coin

Generally, the marine shells had exchange value where the availability was very rare. It is interesting to note from the literary and the archaeological evidences that in China, the cowries (marine shells) were used as coins even from the 22nd century BCE to third Century BCE.²⁸ In the later days, increasing demand resulted in widespread production of imitation cowries in various materials like bone, nacre, stone, clay, lead, bronze, gold and silver. But the imitations in different materials had the different purpose rather than the exchange value.²⁹

In the tribal region of India (Northeastern India), it was valued as a medium of exchange. In Tibetan tribal region, conch shell had the exchange value even during the end of 19th century.³⁰ Some sects of the Nagas in the Assam valued conch as money. During the middle of nineteenth century, the slaves were valued in terms of number of conch shells and other domestic animals. A male slave was sold for one cow and three conch shells and a female slave was sold for either three cows or four to five conch shells.³¹ It seems, the value varied from time to time and place to place. Sometimes a cow was sold for ten conch shells and a pig for two conch shells.³² The beads made of nacre of the conch shell were made in Bengal and were taken to the North Eastern hills even during the end of 19th century.³³ For some time, the British had to collect the tax from the tribes only in terms of conch and other cowry shells. The paper money could replace these coins only later.³⁴

Arthasāstra mentions that conch is one among the variety of treasure to be entered into the treasury of government.³⁵ So the antiquity of conch as a medium of exchange could be traced even from the Maurya period.

Discussion

In South Indian context, the use of conch on the coins could have been influenced due to two factors. During the Caḍkam period, when the northerly influence was about to begin, the symbol of conch was already present. It signifies that even before Vaishḍavisam came to South India, the importance for conch existed. The megalithic sites of Sanur and Odugattur have produced conch from the megalithic burials. Conch was part of daily life of the South Indian communities. This has been used as sounding instruments for various purposes, e.g. announcement of war, sunrise, religious ceremonies and processions. We have ample evidence to such a tradition in Caḍkam literature. Added to that, the bangles and rings made of conch were major ornaments of South India, particularly in the Tamil speaking region. Conch is available in plenty in the

Gulf of Mannar region and hence the access to the raw material was easy. Therefore, the use of conch as a symbol in the coins of the Caḍkam kings is not surprising.

Secondly, in the North Indian context, conch was considered as a sacred object to be stored in the treasury. This implies the rarity and the precious value of the material. Among the early Tamil texts, the term *caḍkanithi* first appears only in *cilappatikāram* implying the currency value given to the conch in the later part of the Caḍkam period. It started appearing on the coins, when coinage received much importance. The kings who patronized the Vaishḍavism (Vishḍu cult) used the conch as a symbol, as it is a possession of lord Vishḍu; besides, conch was one of the war-time accessories. When the northern influence was firmly established in Tamil country, the use of conch as a symbol on the coins began. The use of conch symbols on the seals could be attributed to the merchant guilds, as they always carried them along with other armaments for their protection.



Fig. 9. Coin of Medieval CōḶa depicted a man blowing conch
(Courtesy: Arumuga Seetharaman)



Fig. 10. Coin of Madurai Nāyaks
(Courtesy: Arumuga Seetharaman)



Fig. 11. Coin of Thanjavur Nāyaks
(Courtesy: Arumuga Seetharaman)



Fig. 12. Coins of Travancore state (Courtesy: Arumuga Seetharaman)



Fig. 13. Terracotta Seal with Conch Symbol ca. first century C.E. (Hastinapur)³⁶



Fig. 14. Ink impression of conch symbol on coins displayed at Kien Giang Museum, Vietnam (Courtesy Y. Subbarayalu)

End Notes

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- ⁸ Sri. Arumuga Seetharaman's personal collections.
- ⁹ Arumuga Seetharaman. 2002. *Coin of Pallavas*. Thanjavur:Dhanalaksmi Pathippakam.
- ¹⁰ Arumuga Seetharaman, Thanjavur, gave me the photograph of the coin.
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