

The cowry shell as money

By Colin Narbeth (Banknote Specialist), 20 Cecil Court, Leicester Square, WC2N 4HE. [email: Colin.Narbeth@btinternet.com](mailto:Colin.Narbeth@btinternet.com)

The use of cowry shells as a medium of exchange goes back to the dawn of Chinese civilization. One of the earliest written references is that of an historian, S su-ma Ch'ien, of c. 145-86 BC. He mentions cowries as being used as money in the Shang and Chou periods. In the Shang Dynasty the character PEI was part of the Chinese language. The earliest form, the archaic script which developed into Seal Script, was merely a rough picture of the ventral side of a cowry. It was so important that PEI was adopted as one of the 214 radicals — the foundations characters of the language. Today, 84 Chinese characters have PEI as the main foundation. Finds of cowry shells, sometimes in very large quantities, have come to light in tomb excavations and the opinion of most Chinese archaeologists today is that they were there as money



Figure A: Ancient cowries as currency from the Shang and Chou periods, c. 1500BC.

In the Shang dynasty (1766 - 1122BC) literature there is a reference in the Shang-shu - Book of Documents - to the King P'an-keng reproaching his ministers for coveting cowries and jade instead of doing their duties. He said referring to cowries and jade, "You shall not accumulate the huo and the pao and make profits for your own use." Huo means "money" and pao means "treasure". We find references to cowries on oracle bones and bronze inscriptions which clearly indicate the high value placed on them: "upon his return the king rewarded him with one p'eng of the cowries which were captured in the expeditions against Yung." That payment was made in cowries is clearly shown in the inscription on a bronze vessel of the Chou period: "Lord of Chuy, Yuan, had this precious vessel made. He used fourteen p'eng of cowries". The shells used were *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea annulus* - the latter has a yellow ring round the dorsal area.. Both species live in large numbers in the Indian Ocean and are also found in other parts of the world.



Figure B: Recent specimens of *C. moneta* [right hand pair] and *C. annulus* [left hand pair]

It is not difficult to see why cowries were chosen as a medium of exchange. Money needs to be portable, durable, divisible and recognizable, and most important, difficult to counterfeit. Precious metals have fulfilled these criteria better than anything else - except perhaps the humble cowry shell which fulfilled those criteria with the added advantages that the cowry could be used for decoration, charms, divination and games. Cowries are still used today to represent pawns in the game of chess in certain countries.

Scarcity of cowries caused the Chinese to make imitations of them in wood, stone, jade, other semi-precious stones, bone, bronze, and even gold and silver. This led to a major coinage in imitation of the cowry - the 1 Pi Ch'ien (Ant Nose money) of the Sung dynasty. The name originates from the characters' resemblances to an ant and a human nose. These coins were used at a burial, being inserted inside the nose of the deceased to keep out the ants.

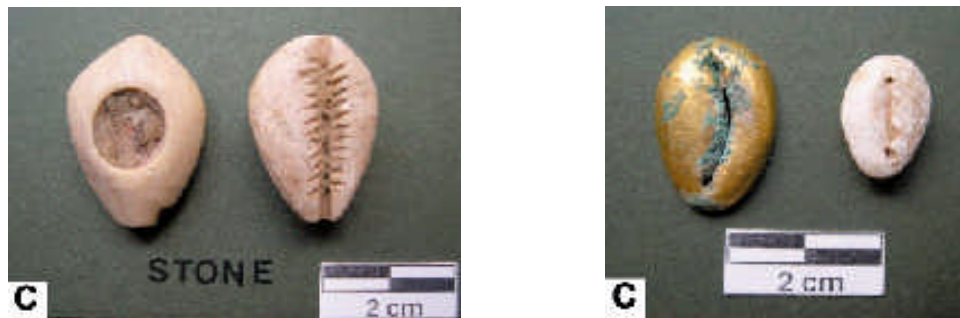


Figure C: Examples of imitation cowries in jade, gold and stone. Note that a hole has been made in the stone example for authenticity.

These coins have also been called Kuei-lien ch'ien meaning Ghost Face money, again from the appearance of the character. The place of these imitation cowries in Chinese culture has been marked by the issue of postage stamps



Figure D: Ant Nose Coin



Figure E: Rare Ghost Face coin from the Chou Dynasty

Some authorities claim that cowries were used as a medium of exchange as early as 2000BC. We know from numismatists that in 335BC cowries were forbidden as they conflicted with copper coins. Marco Polo recorded that cowries had been brought from India to the Yunnan Province of China. European traders called them 'porcelains' (little pigs). One major problem was that as *Cypraea moneta* and *C. annulus* were considered to be of equal value, very large quantities were needed for certain transactions. This led, in some cases, to larger species being used to represent higher values, such as the Tiger Cowry, *Cypraea tigris* and the Turtle Cowry, *Cypraea testudinaria*. Ironically, although cowries were banned in 335 BC, a few centuries later it was the debased coinage which was banned, and cowries were restored as the official coinage of China. Up to the 14th century taxes could be paid in cowries.



Figure F: Postage stamps depicting Ant Nose Money and replica cowries.

The Maldivian Islands were to become the main source of supply of cowries which were shipped to India and from there across the vast regions of China, gaining value as they distanced themselves from the seas. They had the advantage over metal coins that it was almost impossible to forge them - and even then the cost of doing so would outweigh the value of the shell! Even so, the early use of cowries showed astounding profits. Arab traders would buy the best part of a million of them for 1 gold dinar from the Maldives. When they got them to Nigeria they resell them at 1 gold dinar for a 1000. At one time it took only two cowries to buy a woman (Uganda) but as traders made the shells more accessible it was not long before the price of a woman rose to 10,000. Aware of the enormous profits to be made from the sale of cowries, the French and English became involved in the business - exchanging cowries for slaves who were then sold to America.

From the Arab merchant Sulayman (851 AD) we learn that at one time, in the 9th century, the Maldives had a very beautiful and wealthy Queen. Having used up her Treasury of cowries she resorted to sending the Maldivian maidens to collect large palm leaves from the coco-nut trees. These were then laid in the shallow water. Soon thousands of cowries would crawl onto the leaves - to be suddenly pulled out of the water and left high and dry to die before being sent to replenish the Queen's Treasury. This account was confirmed by Masudi of Baghdad, famous Arab historian of the 10th century.

In the 17th century Pyrard de Laval was wrecked on the Maldivian islands and stayed there for two years. He wrote: "They called them (cowries) Boly and export to all parts an infinite quantity, in such wise that in one year I have seen 30 or 40 whole ships loaded with them without other cargo. All go to Bengal for there only is there a demand for a large quantity at high prices. The people of Bengal use them for ordinary money although they have gold and silver and plenty of other metals; and what is more strange, kings and great lords have houses built expressly to store these shells and treat them as part of their treasure."

Another 17th century writer, Barbot, the Agent-general of the Royal Company of Africa at Paris gives an interesting description of the cowry. "The Boejes or Cauris, which the French call Bouges, are small milk-white shells commonly as big as small olives and are produced and gathered among the shoals and rocks of the Maldivian (sic) islands. These Cauris are of many different sizes, the smallest hardly larger than a common pea; and the largest, as an ordinary walnut, longish like an olive."

In India the cowry was an important currency - and even large transactions like the building of a property were paid in millions of cowries. Not unnaturally, the cowry became scarce in its home waters and traders found that they could exploit *Cypraea annulus* because it was so similar to *C. moneta*. These could be found in huge quantities off the Zanzibar coast. The resulting inflation of the cowry led to an odd situation in the Sudan where once they had been highly prized. About 71b weight of cowries would fetch a shilling but the Arab slave driver found that slaves carrying cowries over the vast distances of the Sudan would eat the value of the load in a few weeks and it became an unprofitable business.

By 1851 inflation was undermining the trade. Cowries were so plentiful and so cheap that counting them became a very time consuming matter. Town governors packed them in sacks - 20,000 to the sack. But when used between private individuals they had to be counted, in fives. Barth wrote: "The general custom is to count them in fives, in which operation some are very expert, and then to form heaps of 200 or 1000 each. The counting of 500,000 shells is a really heroic work".

The use of cowries as money became common place in most African countries at one time or another and in some, like Ethiopia, cowries are still used in remote corners of the land. As far as we can tell cowries were never used as currency in the United States. They have been found in mounds and early burial sites and were sacred emblems among the Ojibwa and the Menomoni tribes (west of the Great Lakes), and were also used in initiation ceremonies. But there has been no evidence of their monetary use in North America.

The above is a summary of the complex subject of cowries used as money. For those readers who would like to study the subject in more depth the following books are recommended:

Dance, S.P. 1966. *Shell Collecting*. Faber and Faber.

Hingston Quiggin, A. 1949. *A Survey of Primitive Money, the Beginnings of Currency*. Methuen & Co. Ltd., London.

Wang Yu-Ch'uan 1980. *Early Chinese Coinage*. Sanford J. Durst Numismatic Publications, New York. (Regarded as the most authoritative work on the subject, it contains a 35-page chapter dealing with "Money Before Coinage - cowries and their imitations".)

Saul, M. 1974. *Shells*. Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd.

All the items figured in this article are in the personal collection of the author.