

REVISITING THE MYSTERY OF THE

Missing Gold Coins

Two ancient gold coins, probably from Aceh, were discovered in Singapore in the middle of the 19th century. Unfortunately, they disappeared a few decades later.

By Foo Shu Tieng

Around 1840, some convict labourers made a startling discovery while building a road to New Harbour (present-day Keppel Harbour) – now Telok Blangah Road and Kampong Bahru Road. While clearing land belonging to Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim near the village of Telok Blangah, they uncovered two ancient gold coins with Jawi inscriptions on them.¹

In 1849, these two coins were presented to the Singapore Library – predecessor of the current National Library and National Museum of Singapore – by Straits Settlements Governor William J. Butterworth on behalf of the Temenggong, who had purchased the coins from the convicts.²

In the Singapore Library report of 1849, the lawyer and scholar James Richardson Logan (who founded the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* in 1847³) believed that the two coins were probably from Aceh Darussalam on the island of Sumatra.⁴ The kingdoms of Aceh and Johor had long vied for economic and political hegemony in the Malay world, with Aceh invading Johor at least six times between 1564 and 1623.⁵

Gold coins in the collection of the National Museum of Singapore. Clockwise from left: From 17th-century Johor (accession no. N-3717); from 18th- to 19th-century Terengganu (accession no. N-3716); and from 15th-century Kelantan (accession no. N-3090). Similar to Aceh in North Sumatra, the coins from Johor and Terengganu have Jawi inscriptions that identify the ruler, while the coin from Kelantan has a deer motif. The coins are 11 mm in diameter. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*



Map of New Harbour (1840–43) prepared at the request of W.H. Read, Office of the Surveyor General, Federated Malay States and Straits Settlements, 23 July 1886. The map shows the “Tumangong’s Ground”, which was allotted to Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim of Johor in 1823. *Singapore Land Authority Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

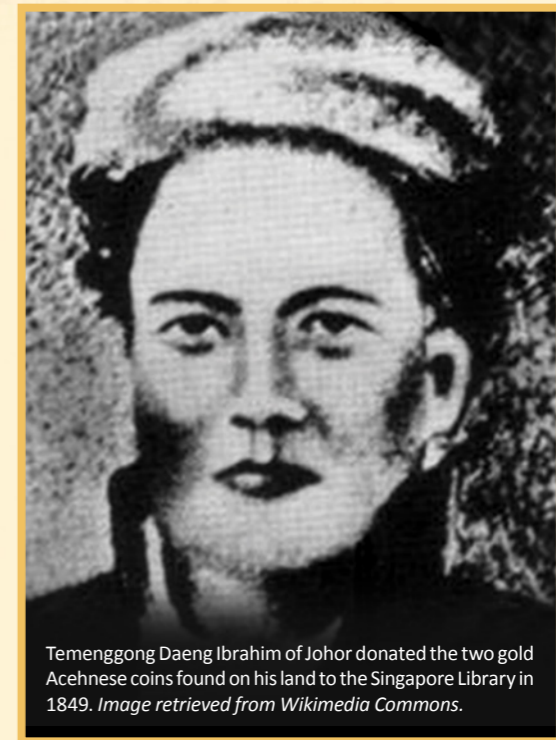
Acehnese coins may have been a widely accepted foreign currency in Johor from the mid to late 16th century after its conquest by Aceh in 1564.⁶ During this period, the island of Singapore was under Johor’s jurisdiction and gold coins were most likely used for high value trade or as a marker of status.

The 1849 Singapore Library Report published Logan’s transliteration of the Jawi text inscribed on the coins into Rumi (Romanised Malay). However, the text in the published report does not match any of the recent studies on Acehnese gold, which suggests that the initial reading of the text could be inaccurate.⁷ At this point, one would need to examine the original artefacts to confirm if the original transliteration was accurate. This, however, is a problem, because the two Singapore Library coins have vanished.

By 1884, the coins were no longer listed in an exhibition catalogue of the Raffles Museum.⁸ Karl Richard Hanitsch, the first director of the Raffles Library and Museum, wrote an article on the history of the museum published in 1921 where he mentioned that there was a list of artefacts initially associated with the Singapore Library that could no longer be found.⁹ The coins may have been included in this list.

Based on this information, it appears likely that the coins were lost when the Singapore Library experienced a period of financial difficulties (1861–74).¹⁰ (The Crown Colony government subsequently took control of the Singapore Library and established the Raffles Library and Museum in 1874, which eventually became the current National Library and National Museum of Singapore.¹¹)

A check with the National Museum of Singapore in December 2022 confirmed that the two coins are not in their collection.¹² The coins are not with the National Library either.



Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim of Johor donated the two gold Acehnese coins found on his land to the Singapore Library in 1849. *Image retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.*

Identifying the Gold Coins

To establish if the coins were really from Aceh, new readings of the inscriptions on the coins should be made and, more importantly, tested to see if these are reasonable alternatives. To do this, I sought help from colleagues, Librarian Toffa Abdul

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Wahed and Senior Librarian Mazelan Anuar, who transliterated Logan's Rumi text back into Jawi and then compared the Jawi text with those from other Acehese coins. In doing this, we tried to see if we could find a plausible alternative reading for the Singapore Library coins, based on the assumption that the original transliteration in the report was an inaccurate but still a best-guess effort that relied on the shape of the words.

Sultan Iskandar Muda was the first ruler from Aceh Darussalam to bear the title of Johan Berdaulat, which is inscribed on coins minted during his reign.

Using this method, Toffa suggested that the obverse side (the side with the principal design) of one of the coins could have been inscribed with the words "Sri Sultan Iskandar Muda" (سري سلطان اسكندر مودا), which means "Auspicious Sultan Iskandar the Young".¹³ The Singapore Library's original transliteration was "Sultan Sri Sikandar Mahbud". The reverse side possibly had the text "Johan Berdaulat bin Ali" (جوهن برداولت بن علي), which means "Sovereign Champion son of Ali".¹⁴ (In the Singapore Library report, it was "Tuhan Nardubah bin Ali"). If our alternative transliteration is correct, this would suggest that the coin, which we will call Coin A, was minted during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–36) of Aceh.

During Sultan Iskandar Muda's reign, Aceh's empire was at its peak – extending as far as Padang along the west coast and Siak along the east coast of Sumatra, and stretching all the way to Kedah, Perak, Pahang and Johor on the Malay Peninsula.¹⁵

The coins could have ended up in Singapore at some point after Aceh invaded Johor in June 1613 and November 1615.¹⁶

As for the second coin (Coin B), according to Mazelan, a plausible alternative transliteration for the text on the obverse side is "Sri Sultan Perkasa Alam" (سري سلطان فرکاس عالم), which means "Auspicious Sultan Courage of the World". The Singapore Library report had the text as "Sri Sultan Sha Alam Mirsab". The inscription on the reverse side also bears an inscription that could again be "Johan Berdaulat bin Ali" instead of "Tuhan Nardubah bin Ali". One of the names that Sultan Iskandar Muda used during the earlier years of his reign was Sri Sultan Perkasa Alam.¹⁷ This alternative transliteration suggests that the second coin was also minted during Iskandar Muda's reign.

However, it should be noted that there are also several other coins that are similar to Coin B, inscribed with "Alam" on the obverse and variations of "Johan Berdaulat" on the reverse.¹⁸ Further research is required before we can ascertain the identity of the sultan whose name has been inscribed on Coin B. In order to narrow down the time period of Coin B, researchers may be required to study the primary sources of the lineage of Acehese rulers which are often complex and contested, while keeping in mind the gaps between the written word and material evidence for early Islamic kingdoms in the region.¹⁹

Studies do suggest that Sultan Iskandar Muda was the first ruler from Aceh Darussalam to bear the title of Johan Berdaulat, which is inscribed on coins minted during his reign. If Coin B was indeed Acehese, his reign would present the upper time limit for when the coin would have been minted.²⁰

Transliterations of Coin A

Coin A	Original Rumi transliteration by James Richardson Logan (published in the 1849 Library Report)	Transliteration of the Rumi text into Jawi	Possible alternative Jawi text (based on text on Acehese coins)	Transliteration of alternative Jawi text into Rumi
Obverse	Sultan	سلطان	سري سلطان	Sri Sultan
	Sri Sikandar	سري سيکندر	اسکندر	Iskandar
	Mahbud	محبوب	مودا	Muda
Reverse	Tuhan	توهن	جوهن	Johan
	Nardubah	نردويه	برداولت	Berdaulat
	bin Ali	بن علي	بن علي	bin Ali

Note: The transliterations of the original Rumi text back into Jawi and the alternative transliterations were provided by Toffa Abdul Wahed with inputs from the writer. These were reviewed by Mazelan Anuar. In the Acehese context, "Iskandar" is the more likely transliteration instead of "Sikandar".

Transliterations of Coin B

Coin B	Original Rumi transliteration by James Richardson Logan (published in the 1849 Library Report)	Transliteration of the Rumi text into Jawi	Possible alternative Jawi text (based on text on Acehese coins)	Transliteration of alternative Jawi text into Rumi
Obverse	Sri Sultan	سري سلطان	سري سلطان	Sri Sultan
	Sha Alam	شاه عالم	فرکاس عالم	Perkasa Alam
	Mirsab	مرسب		
Reverse	Tuhan	توهن	جوهن	Johan
	Nardubah	نردويه	برداولت	Berdaulat
	bin Ali	بن علي	بن علي	bin Ali

Note: Transliterations of the original Rumi text back into Jawi were provided by Toffa Abdul Wahed. Alternative transliterations were provided by the writer with the assistance of Toffa and Mazelan Anuar.

Acehnese Gold Coins

In 17th-century Aceh, gold coins were known as *mas*, with one gold coin being equivalent to one *mas*.²¹ During Sultan Iskandar Muda's reign, four *mas* were the equivalent of one Spanish dollar (a silver coin; also known as a "Piece of Eight").²² The sultan was known to have issued a decree recalling older gold coins so that they could be minted into new coins bearing his name. The new coins were issued at a debased rate, meaning that the amount of precious metal in the coin was decreased by adding base metals even though the coin was meant to be worth the same amount. As a result, traders in Aceh were initially reluctant to use them.²³

During the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda's daughter, Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah (r. 1641–75), there were further orders for the gold coins of preceding sultans to be collected and reissued at a further debased rate.²⁴ Debasing coins was a common practice meant to control production costs, particularly if the price of the precious metal that the coin was made of had increased dramatically. It was also done to increase the amount of currency in the market when there was a shortage of such coins for transactions. The cumulative effect of collecting old coins, minting and reissuing coins over time means that coins from Sultan Iskandar Muda's reign are likely to be rarer than those from later rulers.

In addition, imitations of Acehese gold coins that were underweight and irregular were also circulating at one point. Unfortunately, without being able to examine the two gold coins found in Singapore, we cannot establish if they were originals or imitations.²⁵

XV. SOELTAN PERKASA ALAM en dien later verwisseld VOOR Soeltan ISKANDAR MOEDA (1607—1636).



Seventeenth-century Acehese coins bearing the words "Sri Sultan Perkasa Alam" and "Sri Sultan Iskandar Muda". Image reproduced from J. Hulshoff Pol, "De gouden munten (mas) van Noord-Sumatra," *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Nederlandsch Genootschap voor Munt-en Penningkunde XVI* (1929), 18.

But whether or not they were original, the gold coins unearthed in Telok Blangah are significant. For a long time, these gold coins were the only known Islamic gold coins reported to have been found in Singapore until the discovery of a Johor gold coin recovered during a 2015 excavation at Empress Place.²⁶

One-, two- and 10-*qian* coins dating to the reign of Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song dynasty (Daguan period, 1107–10). Images reproduced from Patricia Buckley Ebrej, *Emperor Huizong* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 334. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. R 951.024092 EBR).



Chinese Coins in Singapore

As exciting as they are, the two Acehnese gold coins are not the oldest coins to have been found in Singapore. Chinese coins that date as far back as the Tang dynasty (7th to 10th centuries) have been discovered here, such as at the Parliament House Complex excavation conducted in 1994–95.²⁷

Indeed, Chinese coins were among the first ancient coins to be uncovered. In 1819, Acting Engineer Henry Ralfe stumbled upon a cache of ancient Chinese coins while clearing an elevated spot of a wall surrounding the ancient city of Singapura, thought to be along present-day Stamford Road.²⁸ Reverend Samuel Milton of the London Missionary Society in Singapore identified one of the coins to have come from the reign of Emperor Huizong (宋徽宗, r. 1101–25) of the Northern Song dynasty.²⁹ The other coins had crumbled to dust, likely due to severe metal oxidation and corrosion. Coinage dating to Emperor Huizong's reign was notable for the increased production of higher denominated (the three-*qian* and ten-*qian* coins) and increasingly debased coins, a sign of worsening inflation during his reign.³⁰

Ralfe's coin find was presented to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta on 10 March 1820. According to an 1822 publication, Ralfe subsequently donated the coins to the Museum of Asiatic Society in Calcutta. Unfortunately, the Huizong coin may have been stolen from the museum in 1844.³¹

In 1822, John Crawford, the second British Resident of Singapore, discovered three more ancient Chinese coins on Fort Canning Hill, all from the Song dynasty: one dating to the reign of Emperor Taizu (宋太祖, r. 960–76), another to Emperor Yinzong (宋英宗, r. 1063–67), and the final coin to Emperor Shenzong (宋神宗, r. 1067–85).³² These coins were deposited in the Royal Asiatic Society.³³

Studies of coins recovered from archaeological excavations at the civic district – specifically, the Parliament House Complex (1994–95), Singapore Cricket Club (2003) and St Andrew's Cathedral (2003–04) sites – have identified at least 30 more coins dating to the reign of Emperor Huizong, and they complement other coin finds reported in the colonial period.³⁴ The research into these archaeological finds suggests that the majority of coins used in Singapore in the 14th century appear to be of Chinese origin, largely from the Northern Song period. However, artefacts from other excavations in Singapore are still being processed, and the small sample size from the three excavation sites may be quite different from the eventual larger data set.

Ancient Coins in Southeast Asia

Coins can be important primary sources of history. They can provide information on the people living in Singapore at the time, its trade relations and distribution networks, the economic climate and even power structures within society. The presence of gold coins in Telok Blangah, for instance, adds to the evidence of human activity in the area in the 17th century.

This material evidence complements an account by Jacques de Coutre, a Flemish gem trader, who mentioned seeing vessels used by the *orang laut* (“sea people”; an indigenous people who fish and collect sea products) at the entrance of the straits near Isla de Arena (now the island of Sentosa) in 1595. He also talked about the activities of the Shahbandar, an official who supervised the collection of customs duties, the warehousing of imports, and who looked after the ruler's investments in the area.³⁵

The academic study of coins and other forms of money is conducted mainly by anthropologists, archaeologists, monetary historians and numismatists, who approach the materials in different ways to make

sense of the artefacts and their history. While coins are generally used as a method of payment, they have also been used as tokens, commodities and even for magic purposes and/or as part of rituals.³⁶

While coinage is a well-studied subject in South Asia and East Asia, the situation is different in South-east Asia. In this region, many questions still remain regarding the supply, time period and distribution of coinage. According to Zhou Daguan (周达观), a Yuan-dynasty diplomat who visited the capital city of Angkor in 1296–97, the Khmer Empire (9th to 15th centuries) did not use coinage. Instead, items such as rice, grain and Chinese goods were used for small transactions, cloth for medium-sized transactions, and silver and gold for large transactions.³⁷

One theory why coinage was not popular in Angkor during that period is that surplus wealth may have been redistributed through religious rather than political networks. Another probable reason was the high cost of production and the cost of maintaining mints.³⁸

The Kingdom of Srivijaya (7th to 14th centuries) based in South Sumatra, however, may have used coins with a sandalwood flower design and “chopped off lumps of silver” for business transactions during certain periods.³⁹ Since the founder of Singapura, Sang Nila Utama, was said to be a prince from Palembang, the capital city of Srivijaya, it is possible that ancient Singapore also used coins for transactions in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Interestingly, the Chinese trade sources that describe ancient Singapore did not mention the use of coins for trade. One of the commodities mentioned instead was “red gold” (紫金), which may refer to gold treated with a liquid called *sepuh* (a mixture of “alum, saltpetre, blue stone, and other materials that can turn gold into a darker colour”).⁴⁰ Other commodity items used for trade included blue satin, cotton prints, porcelain, and iron items such as cauldrons or pieces of iron.⁴¹

Coins provide information on the people living in Singapore at the time, its trade relations and distribution networks, the economic climate and even power structures within society.

This trading arrangement, however, could have been different for merchants who traded in Javanese goods, or for merchants after the Majapahit invasion of the island in the mid-14th century. The Majapahit Empire (1293–1478/1519) based in East Java was known to have used imported Chinese coins and most likely introduced these coins to Singapore for official use and trade.⁴²

Chinese coins were exported to island Southeast Asia in small quantities during the reign of Emperor



Telok Blangah Village, 1870s. Land belonging to Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim is located near the village. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

The East and Southeast Asian demand for Chinese coinage became so great that commodities were sold at “one-tenth of their value” in order to obtain the coins.

Renzong (宋仁宗, r. 1020–63) of the Song dynasty. After an export embargo was lifted in 1074, Chinese copper coins began circulating in ports along the Strait of Malacca in larger quantities.⁴³ The Song government had first priority on the purchase of foreign goods and paid foreign merchants with Chinese coins through

a system called *bomai* (博买). Once the coins found their way to Southeast Asia, they were often used to trade for Javanese products.⁴⁴

At one point, the East and Southeast Asian demand for Chinese coinage became so great that commodities were apparently sold at “one-tenth of their value” in order to obtain the coins.⁴⁵ This eventually caused a severe shortage of copper and copper coins in China. An edict by Emperor Ningzong (宋寧宗, r. 1195–1224) in the 13th century, for example, banned the use of metal currencies for government purchases, and goods such as silk, porcelain and lacquer were used as substitutes.⁴⁶ (This ban was subsequently lifted.)

The Missing Gold Coins

While Chinese bronze alloy coins were used as small denomination currency in the 14th century, 17th-century Islamic gold coins in Singapore were probably used as a high-denomination currency for large trades. Alternatively, these Islamic gold coins could also have functioned as status symbols or even as grave markers.

Unfortunately, many vital questions still remain regarding the gold coins of Telok Blangah. Were they indeed Acehnese coins? How did they disappear and where are they now? These coins could be in a dusty drawer or forgotten safety deposit box somewhere in

Singapore, waiting to be rediscovered. Or they may have already left our shores like the Chinese coins from the discoveries by Ralfe and Crawford. We do not know the answers to these questions, but with further research, maybe someday, we will be able to find out more. ♦

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