

Research Paper

Elephant Image on British-era Currency: A Symbol of Colonial Influence and National Heritage

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ABSTRACT

The use of elephant images in archaeological places and various artefacts can be traced to the different periods of Sri Lankan history. Elephants have consistently occupied a significant role in the artistic expressions of past cultures, manifesting in paintings, sculptures, carvings, and even currency. Notably, the elephant symbol has been featured on coins and banknotes circulated in Sri Lanka across various eras. This research focuses on using the elephant image in British currency during the British colonial period in Sri Lanka. The research problem is investigated to what socio-political reasons motivated the British colonial administration to depict images of elephants on coins and banknotes during that time? The Currency Museum in the Central Bank of Sri Lanka and the National Museum provided access to British period coins and banknotes for this study. A comprehensive sample of 224, comprising 75 denominations of coins and 149 denominations of banknotes, was meticulously analysed. The findings revealed that 22% of coins and 30% of banknotes issued annually during the colonial period featured the elephant image. Elephants have been consistently featured as symbols on various coins, dating back to Sri Lankan oldest coinage, the punch-marked coins. The elephant image persisted on coins and banknotes during the British era. From 1801 to 1821, elephants were the main symbol on the obverse of coins, while banknotes from 1827 to 1853 featured elephants on the obverse. From 1941 to 1949, the elephant remained a prominent feature in coin obverses. The reverse of banknotes from 1925 to 1939 depicted decorative elephants, and from 1885 to 1939, elephants served as watermarks. The choice of the elephant image might have been strategic, as elephants were historically revered in Sri Lankan society. By incorporating this image on banknotes, the British administration aimed to strike a balance between showcasing their imperial might and acknowledging and assimilating local cultural elements to foster acceptance and compliance among the Sri Lankan populace.

Keywords: British Period, Coins, Banknotes, Elephants, National Museum

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1. Introduction

The profound influence of the British Empire on Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon, left an enduring mark on various facets of the island culture and history. One significant area where this influence can be observed is the currency used during the British colonial period. A distinctive feature of

British-era currency in Sri Lanka is the depiction of elephants, serving as a symbolic representation of colonial governance and the island abundant natural heritage. The elephant symbol was a prevalent motif in all Sinhalese art. The portrayal of elephants holds significant cultural significance in Sinhalese art from prehistoric times to the

present. These majestic creatures have been depicted in diverse artistic expressions, including ancient cave art, paintings, sculptures, carvings, and architectural elements such as moonstones, guard stones, stupas, walls, balustrades, staircases, and ponds.

The elephant image gained prominence during the British colonial era, debuting on a postal stamp in 1935. This symbol was also adopted as the logo for various government institutions and is enduring today. Institutions such as the Ceylon Police, Ceylon Government Railway, Royal College Colombo, and Hatton National Bank proudly feature the elephant in their logos, with minimal alterations over the years.

The significance of elephants extends to Sri Lankan currency, where images of these majestic creatures have been present since ancient times. Elephants were recognised as symbols on punch-mark coins and featured prominently on Swastika-type coins and Lakshmi plaques during the Anuradhapura period. Inscribed lead coins from Ruhuna also bear the image of elephants. Remarkably, this symbolic representation continues to grace modern banknotes. The elephant in the guard stone to the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic appears on Rs 500/- banknotes issued in 1981 in the eight and nine banknotes series. The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic tusker and decorated elephant with casket appear on Rs 1000/- banknotes issued in 1991 in the tenth banknotes series. The Rs 2000/- banknotes of the same series have a smaller image of the decorated elephant with the casket.

This study explores utilising the elephant image in Sri Lankan British banknotes circulated up to 1951 and coins circulated up to 1963. By examining the intricate details and symbolism embedded in the depiction of elephants on British currency, the research seeks to unravel the historical, cultural, and numismatic dimensions and socio-political reasons for using elephants that contribute to the enduring legacy of these symbols in Sri Lankan monetary history.

1.1 Literary Review

The existing body of research on numismatic studies in Sri Lanka has primarily concentrated on coins from the early periods of the country history, from 1505 CE to the present day. However, there has been a notable dearth of comprehensive research on coins during the intervening centuries. The predominant focus of the available research has been detailing the imagery, legends, and symbols found on both obverse and reverse sides of these coins.

One seminal contribution to understanding Sri Lankan monetary system and coin circulation comes from H.W. Codrington’s seminal work, ‘Ceylon Coins and Currency’, published in 1924. This noteworthy publication delves into ancient coins within Sri Lanka and the prevalence of foreign coins circulating in the region. While the book touches upon coins in circulation during British rule, it falls short of providing an in-depth analysis of this specific period. In particular, Codrington’s work offers insights into the coins circulating during British colonial rule, yet it refrains from presenting a comprehensive and detailed examination of this era. Notably, the book lacks an extensive exploration of the coins utilised during this pivotal period in Sri Lankan numismatic history.

Furthermore, Leelananda Kaldera’s ‘*Lankawe mila mudal*’ (1959) and ‘*Lankawe kasi saha mudal vivaharaya*’ by Pandit Medauyangoda Wimalakitti Thero (1969) offer additional resources, albeit with a limited scope. These works briefly describe coins and banknotes circulating during the British colonial era but fail to deliver a comprehensive and exhaustive account.

G.P.S.H. De Silva’s comprehensive publication, ‘History of Coins and Currency in Sri Lanka (3rd Century BC to 1998 CE)’ (2000), provides a brief overview of the various coins circulating in Sri Lanka, ranging from the early Anuradhapura period to more recent times. The book is enriched with illustrative materials, offering valuable insights into the evolution of currency in the region.

In addition, B.W. Fernando’s work, ‘Ceylon Currency British Period (1796-1936)’ (1939), is an informative resource on the coins and banknotes from the British colonial era. This publication delivers a concise historical account of the currency used in Sri Lanka during the British period from 1796 to 1936. While informative, it is important to note that this work has certain limitations. The coverage concludes in 1936, omitting the period from 1936 to 1948, and features only a limited number of currency illustrations. Notably, Fernando’s book lacks an in-depth exploration of the images, symbols, and legends on the coins and banknotes. The study does not adopt a numismatic and archaeological approach, missing the opportunity to delve into the intricacies of these features.

Despite the valuable contributions of De Silva and Fernando, a significant gap persists in the scholarly exploration of British-era coins and banknotes issued in Sri Lanka. Specifically, a detailed investigation into the features depicted on the obverse and reverse sides of these historical artefacts has been conspicuously absent from existing studies.

2. Aims and Methodology of the Study

This research paper analyses the portrayal of the elephant image depicted on British currency during the colonial period in Sri Lanka. The primary objective is to uncover the rationale behind using elephants in British currency during this historical era. The research methodology employed involves a comprehensive field survey. To gather data and information for this study, a thorough study of British currency was conducted on display at both the Central Bank of Sri Lanka and the National Museum of Sri Lanka. The focus was on coins and banknotes of various denominations issued by the British for circulation in Sri Lanka between 1796 and 1948 CE, the designated period of British colonial rule. The research sample comprises 224 coins and banknotes representing different years, sourced mainly from the National Museum in Sri Lanka and the Currency Museum in the Central Bank of Sri Lanka. The official websites provided additional visual resources for this analysis. The scope of this study is confined to the coins and banknotes issued during the British colonial period. A meticulous observation and identification process was undertaken for both the obverse and reverse features of the selected sample, employing visual analyses to discern distinctive elements. In addition to the field survey, a comprehensive review of literary sources, journal articles, and professional websites related to British colonial coins and banknotes was conducted. Primary sources such as Ceylon Administrative Reports, Ceylon Almanacs, Ceylon Blue Books, Ceylon Government Gazettes and Sessional Papers were also consulted to provide a robust historical context. By integrating visual analyses with insights from historical records, this research aims to unravel the significance and symbolism embedded in portraying elephants on British currency during the colonial period in Sri Lanka. The multifaceted approach seeks to contribute a nuanced understanding of the cultural, historical, and symbolic dimensions associated with using elephants in British currency in this specific geographical and temporal context.

The study was limited to the British period coins and banknotes. The images on the obverse and reverse of the coins and banknotes were observed and identified separately. The obverse and reverse features of the selected sample were visual analyses. Literary sources, journal articles, professional websites relating to British period coins and banknotes, and primary sources such as Ceylon Administrative Reports, Ceylon Almanacs, Ceylon Blue Books, Ceylon Government Gazettes and Sessional Papers were referred to.

3. Results and Findings

Between 1796 and 1815, British currency held legal sway exclusively in the maritime regions of the island under British control. Subsequently, from 1815 to 1948, British currency became the predominant form of currency across the entire island. The Sri Lankan currency during the British era can be categorised into two distinct periods, with varying coins used from 1796 to 1872 and the rupee and its decimal divisions fixed in the same coin from 1872 to 1948. In paper currency, treasury notes of Rix Dollars and sterling denominations were issued from 1800 to 1884, followed by the exclusive issuance of Government banknotes in rupee denominations from 1884 to 1948.

From 1801 to 1825, the circulation of Rix dollar and Stiver coins was prominent in early British-era Sri Lanka, featuring elephant images. The elephant symbol prominently adorned the obverse of most locally minted (dumps) Ceylon Government coins in silver and copper, including those struck in the United Kingdom, spanning denominations of 1/192, 1/96, 1/48, 1/24, 1/12, and 1 Rix Dollars. Except for the one Rix Dollar coin, all these denominations featured the image of an elephant on the obverse, while the one Rix Dollar coin showcased the elephant on the reverse. Stiver-type coins were also issued in denominations of 96, 48, 24, 2, 1, and 1/2, with the 96, 48, and 24 Stiver coins featuring the elephant on the obverse and the 2, 1, and 1/2 denominations displaying the image on the reverse.

Government Treasury Sterling banknotes of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, and 50 pounds, issued from 1827 to 1855, featured an elephant with Britannia on the obverse. Notably, the official armorial ensign on the reverse of 2, 5, 10, 50, and 1000 rupee banknotes from 1925 to 1939 showcased large elephants amidst coconut trees. An elephant also appeared on the reverse of one rupee banknote from 1941 to 1949. Furthermore, banknotes between 1885 and 1939 utilised the elephant as a watermark. From 1843 to 1880, the elephant found its place in many tokens¹ used for compensating

¹. Ceylon tokens were predominantly minted during the prosperous times of coffee cultivation. The sum to be paid for a certain fixed task in coffee picking determined the value. In the period between 1825 and 1869, Ceylon currency system was sterling-based, yet the availability of actual coins was insufficient. The growth of coffee estates in the 1820-1850 presented challenges in labor payment methods. In these upcountry areas where banks were non-existent, and the supply of metal currency was irregular, an even more pressing issue emerged – the absence of a sterling-scale denomination that could correspond to the local wage rate in a single payment. Consequently, numerous copper tokens were issued by Coffee Mills in Ceylon, particularly during the years preceding 1870 when there was a scarcity of small change.

Table 1: The Iconography of Elephant in British Period Coins

| Unit | Denomination | Issued Year | Side of the coin | Facing side | Mint |
|------------|--------------|--------------------------|------------------|-------------|------------|
| Rix dollar | 1/192 | 1802 | Obverse | Left | Handsworth |
| Rix dollar | 1/96 | 1802 | Obverse | Left | Handsworth |
| Rix dollar | 1/48 | 1802 | Obverse | Left | Handsworth |
| Rix dollar | 1/48 | 1801 - 1816 ² | Obverse | Left | Ceylon |
| Rix dollar | 1/24 | 1801 - 1816 ³ | Obverse | Left | Ceylon |
| Rix dollar | 1/12 | 1801 - 1815 ⁴ | Obverse | Left | Ceylon |
| Rix dollar | 1 | 1821 | Reverse | Left | Royal mint |
| Striver | 96 | 1808 - 1809 | Obverse | Left | Ceylon |
| Striver | 48 | 1803 - 1809 ⁵ | Obverse | Left | Ceylon |
| Striver | 24 | 1803 - 1809 ⁶ | Obverse | Left | Ceylon |
| Striver | 2 | 1815 | Reverse | Left | Royal mint |
| Striver | 1 | 1815 | Reverse | Left | Royal mint |
| Striver | 1/2 | 1815 | Reverse | Left | Royal mint |

Table 2: The Iconography of Elephant in British Period Banknotes

| Unit | Denomination | Issued Year | Side of the coin | Facing side | Issued | Printed |
|--------|--------------|-------------------------|------------------|-------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Pound | 1 | 1827 | Obverse | Left | Ceylon Government Treasury | Silvester & Co. sc 27, Strand, London |
| Pound | 1 | 1844 | Obverse | Right | Bank of Ceylon | Perkins Bacon & Petch, London |
| Pound | 1 | 1850-1855 | Obverse | Right | Ceylon Government Treasury | Perkins Bacon & Petch, London |
| Pound | 2 | 1827 | Obverse | Left | Ceylon Government Treasury | Silvester & Co. sc 27, Strand, London |
| Pound | 2 | 1845-1849 | Obverse | Right | Bank of Ceylon | Perkins Bacon & Petch, London |
| Pound | 2 | 1850-1855 | Obverse | Right | Ceylon Government Treasury | Perkins Bacon & Petch, London |
| Pound | 5 | 1845-1849 | Obverse | Right | Bank of Ceylon | Perkins Bacon & Petch, London |
| Pound | 5 | 1850-1855 | Obverse | Right | Ceylon Government Treasury | Perkins Bacon & Petch, London |
| Pound | 10 | 1845-1849 | Obverse | Right | Bank of Ceylon | Perkins Bacon & Petch, London |
| Pound | 20 | 1845-1849 | Obverse | Right | Bank of Ceylon | Perkins Bacon & Petch, London |
| Pound | 50 | 1845-1849 | Obverse | Right | Bank of Ceylon | Perkins Bacon & Petch, London |
| Rupees | 1 | 1941-1948 ⁷ | Reverse | Left | Board of Commissioners of Currency | Indian Government Security Press |
| Rupees | 2 | 1925-1939 ⁸ | Reverse | front | Board of Commissioners of Currency | Thomas De La Rue & Co. Ltd., London |
| Rupees | 5 | 1925-1939 ⁹ | Reverse | front | Board of Commissioners of Currency | Thomas De La Rue & Co. Ltd., London |
| Rupees | 10 | 1925-1939 ¹⁰ | Reverse | front | Board of Commissioners of Currency | Thomas De La Rue & Co. Ltd., London |
| Rupees | 50 | 1929-1939 ¹¹ | Reverse | front | Board of Commissioners of Currency | Thomas De La Rue & Co. Ltd., London |
| Rupees | 1000 | 1929, 1934 | Reverse | front | Board of Commissioners of Currency | Thomas De La Rue & Co. Ltd., London |

². Coins issued in 1801, 1803, 1805, 1809, 1811, 1812, 1813, 1814, 1815, 1816

³. Coins issued in 1801, 1802, 1803, 1804, 1805, 1811, 1812, 1813, 1814, 1815, 1816

⁴. Coins issued in 1801, 1802, 1803, 1804, 1805, 1809, 1811, 1812, 1813, 1814, 1815

⁵. Coins issued in 1803, 1804, 1805, 1808, 1809

⁶. Coins issued in 1803, 1804, 1805, 1808, 1809

⁷. Coins issued in 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948

⁸. Coins issued in 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939

⁹. Coins issued in 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939

¹⁰. Coins issued in 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939

¹¹. Coins issued in 1929, 1931, 1934, 1936, 1939

labour on coffee plantations (in this paper, only coins and banknotes will be discussed).

The detailed exploration of the annual depiction of the elephant image on various coin types is outlined in the table 1, elucidating the representation across different denominations and years. Further, the table 2 outlines the depiction of the elephant image on annual banknotes.

Between 1885 and 1939, the Board of Commissioners of Currency incorporated the image of an elephant as one of the symbols utilised as a watermark on banknotes across various denominations, including 2, 5, 10, 50, 100, and 1000 rupees. This elephant image is frequently featured alongside a stupa in the upper left corner of these banknotes.



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 3: Within a beaded circle between two plain circles, an elephant facing left, the year 1802 below in obverse (Source: Currency Museum, Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 1: Within a beaded circle between two plain circles, an elephant facing left, the year 1802 below in obverse (Source: Currency Museum, Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 4: Within a beaded circle between two plain circles, an elephant facing left, the year 1803 below in obverse (Source: National Museum, Colombo, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 2: Within a beaded circle between two plain circles, an elephant facing left, the year 1802 below in obverse (Source: Currency Museum, Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 5: Within a beaded circle between two plain circles, an elephant facing left, the year 1805 below in obverse (Source: National Museum, Colombo, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 6: Within a beaded circle between two plain circles, an elephant facing left, the year 1811 is below in obverse (Source: National Museum, Colombo, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 9: An elephant face to the left with a perspective ground within a circle of dashes. The year 1808 is below a line in the obverse (Source: National Museum, Colombo, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 7: Within the plain rim, the elephant to the left within the wreath, above, in three lines CEYLON ONE RIX DOLLAR and below 1821 in reverse (Source: Currency Museum, Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 10: Within a beaded circle between two plain circles, an elephant facing left. The year 1805 is below in obverse (Source: Currency Museum, Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 8: An elephant to the left with a perspective ground within a circle of dashes. The year 1808 is below a line in the obverse (Source: Coinshome Catalogue, KM-79; Pr 1, 2023).



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 11: Within plain rim, an elephant facing left and above, CEYLON around the rim; TWO STIVER in a single line; and below 1815 in obverse (Source: National Museum, Colombo, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse

Reverse

Figure 12: Within plain rim, an elephant facing left and above, CEYLON around the rim; ONE STIVER in a single line; and below 1815 in obverse (Source: Currency Museum, Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse of the banknote (1843-1847)

Figure 15: Britannia with an elephant standing right in obverse (Source: notes.lakdiva.org, 2023).



Obverse

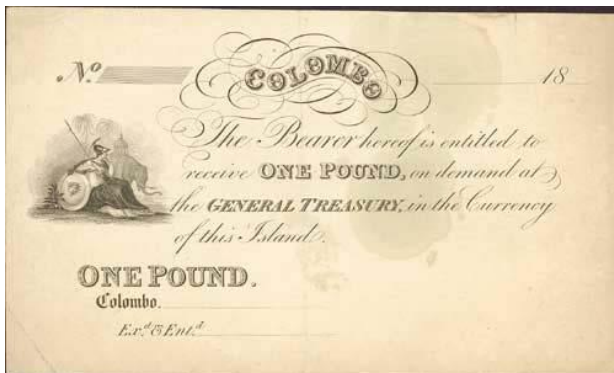
Reverse

Figure 13: Within plain rim, an elephant facing left and above, CEYLON around the rim; HALF STIVER in a single line; and below 1815 in obverse (Source: National Museum, Colombo, Field Survey 2022).



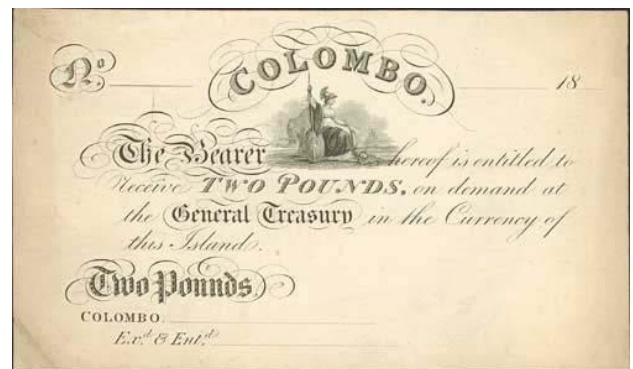
Obverse of the banknote (1850-1855)

Figure 16: Britannia with an elephant standing right in obverse (Source: National Museum, Colombo, Field Survey 2022).



Obverse of the banknote (1827)

Figure 14: Britannia with an elephant standing right in obverse (Source: notes.lakdiva.org, 2023).



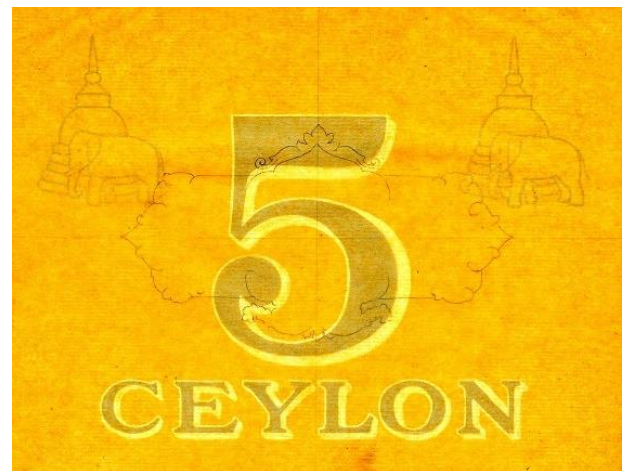
Obverse of the banknote (1827)

Figure 17: Britannia with an elephant standing left in obverse (Source: notes.lakdiva.org, 2023).



Obverse of the banknote (1843-1847)

Figure 18: Britannia with an elephant standing right in obverse (Source: notes.lakdiva.org, 2023).



Watermark on banknote (1928)

Figure 21: Elephant and Dagaba on higher on the left side as a watermark of the banknote (Source: notes.lakdiva.org, 2023).



Reverse of the banknote (1941)

Figure 19: Pictorial at centre with caption ELEPHANT HEAD with a Mahoot riding, Coconut Palm behind, and foliage in the background (Source: RealBanknotes Catalogue, 2023).



Reverse of the Rs. 5 banknote (1926)

Figure 20: At the centre, a floral design in Green, including the Coat of Arms of British Ceylon of an Elephant facing forward with four coconut palms on each side and mountains in the background (Source: Currency Museum, Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Field Survey 2022).

4. Discussion

4.1 Elephants in Sri Lankan Culture

Elephants hold a revered and distinctive position in the rich tapestry of Sri Lankan culture and history. In the predominant religion of Buddhism on the island, elephants are deemed sacred beings, embodying qualities of strength, wisdom, and gentle nature. Their symbolic significance extends to various religious ceremonies, processions, and cultural festivals, serving as powerful symbols of prosperity and harmony. Across centuries, elephants have been integral to traditional and religious activities, gracing important ceremonial occasions with their presence. Elephants continue to play a pivotal role in contemporary Sri Lankan culture, prominently featured in processions throughout the country. Notably, the annual procession in Kandy, a tradition dating back nearly 220 years, exemplifies the enduring connection between elephants and cultural celebrations. Their participation in these events symbolises power and is a testament to their revered status in Sri Lankan society. Delving into ancient Sri Lankan history, elephants served as indispensable assets during the Anuradhapura period. Deployed in battles against Ceylon adversaries, these majestic animals were strategic assets used to disrupt enemy formations, terrify horses, and dismantle structures such as forts, walls, and houses. Elephants wielded their tusks as formidable swords, and their limbs, capable of kicking in all directions, were employed to crush adversaries. Beyond the battlefield, elephants played a multifaceted role in the royal context during the Kandy period. In addition to their symbolic significance, they were utilised for royal punishments, adding another layer to the complex and varied roles these

revered animals have played in shaping the cultural and historical narrative of Sri Lanka.

4.2 British Colonial Influence

In 1796, the British Empire established its presence in Ceylon, gradually extending its control over the island. As part of their administration, the British introduced a standardised currency system, replacing the diverse range of coins used by the local kingdoms. In 1825, the British Pound Sterling became the official currency of Ceylon. The British period currency in Sri Lanka prominently featured the image of an elephant, reflecting the colonial influence on the island economic and political structures.

4.3 The Symbolism of the Elephant Image

From 1802 to 1825, all Rix dollar coins issued for Sri Lanka had the image of an elephant on the obverse. In those coins, the elephant figure is shown facing left. Among these, the elephant figures on the coins of 1/192, 1/96, and 1/48 denominations minted in England show high artistic characteristics. But the elephant figure on the coins of 1/48, 1/24, and 1/12 denominations minted in Sri Lanka is less creative. Coins of 96, 48, and 24 Stivers denominations were minted in Ceylon. Elephant figures on those coins also display fewer artistic features. Because the coins were minted in Sri Lanka, they represent the low technical stage of coin mint technology. However, the elephant figures in the 1/2, 1, and 2 denominations issued in 1815 show high artistic quality because they were minted in England. The Asian-type muscled elephants were mostly depicted on Rix dollar and stiver types of coins. Small ears, short bent tusks, small eyes, heavy legs, and short tails characterise this animal species. Elephant figures with such body features are depicted in these coins.

Britannia accompanies the elephants depicted on the pound banknotes. Britannia is a female figure used as a symbol of British strength. She is depicted as a helmeted female warrior holding a trident and a shield (The Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). The casket is shown on the elephant image of the one-pound banknotes issued in 1927 as an elephant carrying the tooth relic casket in processions. The one-rupee banknotes issued from 1941 - 1948 featured an elephant head with a man riding on the reverse of the currency. The elephant head symbolises great intellect and wisdom. The denominations of 5, 10, 50, and 1000 rupees banknotes issued from 1925-1939 have an elephant on the reverse. The coat of arms of Ceylon also carried the image of an elephant facing forward in the middle of two coconut trees. It was the coat of arms of the Portuguese era, and

later, in the early stages of British rule in Ceylon, it was reused as their coat of arms with some modifications.

4.4 Symbolism and Design

The depiction of elephants on British-era currency in Sri Lanka served multiple purposes. Firstly, it represented the British Empire authority and dominance over the island. The elephant, an iconic symbol of Sri Lankan culture, reinforced the idea of British control while simultaneously incorporating a familiar element from local traditions. Using these images, the British administration sought to resonate with the local populace and show respect for local traditions and symbols. This strategy helped the British to gain a measure of acceptance and legitimacy among the Sri Lankan people. The administration attempted to incorporate British and Sri Lankan cultural elements by blending a significant local symbol with British colonial currency. This strategy created continuity between pre-colonial and colonial governance and decreased resistance, which helped colonial administration go more smoothly. The elephant image conveyed a sense of stability and strength, attributes that the British wanted to associate with their rule. By featuring this majestic animal on their currency, the British aimed to project an image of a prosperous and orderly colony under their governance. Lastly, including elephants in currency also paid homage to Sri Lankan natural heritage. The island was renowned for its abundant wildlife, including a significant population of wild elephants. By showcasing these magnificent creatures, the British currency acknowledged and celebrated the island unique biodiversity, albeit through a colonial lens.

4.5 Legacy and Modern Interpretation

Elephant images on British-era currency in Sri Lanka have impacted the island numismatic history. Today, these currencies are priced collectables sought after by numismatists and history enthusiasts. They serve as tangible reminders of the colonial past and are valuable artefacts that tell the story of the Sri Lankan journey toward independence and self-determination.

In a broader context, the elephant images on British period currency symbolise the complex interplay between colonial influence and the preservation of cultural identity. While the British Empire sought to establish its authority, the elephant motif on the currency also served as a subtle affirmation of Sri Lankan rich heritage, reminding its people of their deep-rooted connection to the land.

5. Conclusions

The depiction of elephant images on British period currency in Sri Lanka is a poignant testament to the intricate interplay between colonial influence and the island cultural heritage. Symbolising both the aspirations of the British Empire and the enduring significance of elephants in Sri Lankan culture, these majestic creatures on banknotes carry profound symbolic weight. Delving into the historical context behind these banknotes provides valuable insights into the complexities of Sri Lanka colonial past and its people’s resilient spirit. The inclusion of elephant imagery in British period currency left an indelible mark on the psyche of the Sri Lankan people. As coins and banknotes featuring these majestic animals circulated across the island, the elephant became more than a mere symbol and evolved into an emblem of national identity and pride. Even post-independence in 1948, with the transition to the Sri Lankan rupee as the official currency, the tradition endured, with the elephant maintaining its prominent place on coins and banknotes, now infused with a distinctively Sri Lankan touch. This continuity reflects not only the lasting impact of colonial legacies but also the cultural importance symbolically attributed to the elephant in the nation collective identity.

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