

Duit Ayam (Chicken coins)

At goldsmiths' and antique shops in Sumatra, Borneo, and Sulawesi, one still finds small copper coins with a cock on one side and a *jawi* (Arabic), or very occasionally Bugis inscription on the other. As one of the more striking messages from the everyday life of a vanished era, these must have intrigued others besides myself.

These were not the official coinage of any country. They were the product of that period, between 1824 and the 1850s, when Singapore was the commercial centre for a vast array of virtually independent states throughout the Indonesian Archipelago, to which the Netherlands laid ineffective claim. The Singapore merchants needed a base coinage to fuel their growing commerce with these areas, so they imported their own from factories in Birmingham. In the 1840s more than 40 million such coins were imported each year, to a value sometimes exceeding 100,000 Straits dollars.

The predecessors of the chicken coins were simply counterfeits of the popular Dutch quarter-stuiver coins known as *duit* to the Dutch and *kepeng* to Malay-speakers, or of the similar copper coins issued by the British during their occupation of the Indies. The most widely counterfeited were an East India Company "Island of Sumatra" coin of 1804 (which probably never existed except in counterfeit) and the Dutch quarter-stuiver of 1826. A curious variant of the former is the 1804 "Island of Sultana" coin, which was manufactured for the Singapore merchants in the 1830s to soften Dutch hostility towards coinages which appeared to impugn their sovereign claims over Sumatra.



(1) obv. "Island of Sultana, 1804"; rev. "satu kepeng, 1219" [1804 AD].

In 1844 Dutch complaints finally bore fruit. The British seized counterfeit coins and the dies for them from the Birmingham factories, and subsequently suppressed the counterfeiting of any official coinage. The Singapore merchants thereafter relied exclusively on the "chicken coins" (already circulating since about 1831), which exploited the popularity of the cock symbol throughout the islands without resembling any official government coinage. The most common have "tanah melayu" in Arabic script above the cock, and on

the reverse "satu kepeng" and the Hijra date — often 1247 (1830-1 AD).



(2) obv. "tanah melayu"; rev "satu kepeng, 1247" [1830-1].

There are numerous varieties however with the tanah melayu replaced by Pulau Percha (i.e. Sumatra) or the *jawi* names of various specific states: negeri Aceh, negeri Siak, negeri Deli, Minangkabau, negeri Perak, negeri Selangor, negeri Terengganu. Many coins had on the side opposite the cock, an inscription in Bugis characters, reading either "tanah Ugi" or "wanua tanah Ugi, sedi kepeng" [the land of the Bugis, one kepeng].



(3) obv. "tanah melayu"; rev. "wanua tanah ugi, sedi kepeng, 1250" [1834].

Similar coins were cast for the Thai trade, with "Muang Thai" in Thai script and the Buddhist date 1197 (1835 A.D.), but on these the elephant replaced the cock. They did not meet with the same success.

In the peak period 1841-51 over 300 million of these copper coins, or tokens, passed into use in Southeast Asia through Singapore. Their effect on the stimulation of commerce must have been considerable.

A. Reid

FURTHER READING: F. Pridmore, *Coins and Coinages of the Straits Settlements and British Malaya, 1786 to 1951* (London, Spink & Son, 1968); G. Scholten, *The Coins of the Dutch Overseas Territories, 1601-1948* (Amsterdam, J. Schulman, 1953).