

Elephants in Lankan Numismatics

Kavan Ratnatunga

ABSTRACT

Images of elephants have been used in Sri Lankan coins from the earliest times. It was one of the symbols easily recognized on silver Kahapana (Punch Mark coins). In the classic large multi-strike copper coin known as Elephant and Swastika presumed to be issued to commemorate the visit of Mahinda Thero during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa in the 3rd century BCE, elephant represents the conception of the Buddha. A pair of elephants with a water pot and a trunk is seen bathing with a standing lady on coins that have been called as "Lakshmi Plaques". Elephants are also seen on many inscribed lead coins found in Ruhuna. In the early British era from 1801 to 1821, the elephant was the main symbol on the obverse of most Ceylon Government coins both in silver and copper minted both locally (dumps) and in the UK. Subsequently, the elephant was used on many tokens used to pay labor on coffee plantations in the era from 1843 to 1880's. In the post 1972 Sri Lanka era, elephants appear on few commemorative coins.

The Government Treasury Sterling currency notes issued from 1827 to 1853 has an elephant with Britannia. In the currency notes issued from 1885 to 1939 the primary watermark is the elephant and Dagoba and is still used in the Sri Lanka Railways and Post Office logos. The gargantuan elephants with coconut trees are used in the official armorial ensign which appear on the back of currency notes from 1925 to 1939. A mahout on an elephant appears on the one rupee note from 1941 to 1949. The elephant in the guard stone to the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic appears on Rs500/- notes from 1981 to 1990, and the late Maligawa Tusker on the Rs1000/- notes from 1991 to 2006.