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The First E.I.C. Copper Coins for Bengal

Nick Rhodes

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The first copper coins struck by the East India Company for Bengal are of considerable rarity, so it is a pleasure to be able to publish two specimens that recently turned up in Calcutta¹. As noted by Fred Pridmore², these pieces were first struck in 1757, in order to provide small change to pay the labourers employed in the building of Fort William. In an order dated 24th October 1757, Mr Frankland was instructed to strike a number of copper tickets of various values for this purpose. The only denomination specifically referred to in the early documents is the anna, but it was implied that other smaller denominations were also struck. In April 1760, there were complaints that the copper tickets were not being accepted in the bazar for the full value at which the Company paid them out, and an order was then issued that they should be accepted at 54 *pans* of Cowries or 1 rupee for 16 copper annas.

Fred Pridmore tentatively suggested that two copper coins in the British Museum, with the Company's balemark on one side and a large numeral "1" on the larger one, and "6" on the smaller one, may be the pieces referred to. They presumably continued to be used until replaced by a new type, struck in the name of the Emperor Shah 'Alam, and with the mint name "Kalkutta" written in Arabic.

As far as I am aware, the examples in the British Museum were the only pieces of the first issue to have been published, until the late Partha Banerji showed me the two pieces illustrated here. They are similar to the larger coin in the British Museum, weighing 28.7 g and 29.2 g compared with 28.6 g of the BM specimen. The diameter, however, is much smaller, being only between 25 & 27 mm, rather than 33.2 mm. The dies used are also different, with the "C" in the balemark on No.1 not leaning backwards, while on No.2, although the "C" leans backwards, the whole balemark is shown in mirror image.



The appearance of these two new specimens in Calcutta, supports the attribution to Bengal, and the fact that they are struck with different dies and are different in diameter from the previously recorded example, indicates that the issue must have been reasonably substantial, and that they were issued in more than one batch. Their rarity can presumably be explained because copper was not

generally accepted as coinage in Bengal, so that the coolies who received them as payment, and the money changers or other traders, who accepted them as payment for goods or converted them into cowrie shells, would have redeemed them with the Company as soon as possible, rather than risk demonetisation. Also, it is likely that pieces of this original type were withdrawn from circulation when the new type of 1763-4 was issued, and they may have been demonetised either then, or later in the century when further efforts were made to introduce copper coins throughout Bengal.

1. My thanks to the late Partha Banerji for allowing me to publish these two specimens.
2. The Coins of the British Commonwealth of Nations, Part 4 India, Vol.1: East India Company Presidency Series c.1642-1835, Spink & Son, London 1975, pp. 198 & 244

ons@onnumis.org

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