



Early World Coins and Early Weight Standards, by Robert Tye, Early World Coins, York, 2009 ISBN:0952414430, 9780952414438, 189 pages

This book will be difficult for some but an enjoyable read for many. Researchers have already come to appreciate Robert Tye's fastidious, painstaking thoroughness of observation and analysis, shown to such good result in his classic and invaluable book *Jitals* (1995). There is also a dedicated following for his whimsical, acerbic and invariably alternative insights encapsulated in his occasional papers, mostly on variations of an economic theme: the meaning of money, its social nature, and the political and power relationships which have shaped and influenced it throughout history. This book brings many of these hitherto difficult-to-access essays together, making them available to a wider audience.

The book is divided into five sections:

1. "Catalogue of coins", giving line drawings and details for 1,248 selected coins from most epochs and parts of the world;
2. "Coin Types, their Spread and Development", a collection of thirteen essays exploring a number of monetary themes which the author believes are significant, interesting or just poorly understood;
3. "Short Accounts of Some Important Coin Types", offering short commentaries on some 174 types of coins catalogued in section 1, elucidating why the author feels each of them was influential in its time and place;
4. "Denomination Sets", another essay on a particular monetary theme; and
5. "Coin Weights and Historical Metrology", a booklet of some seventeen sections exploring in some depth the antiquity, continuity and evolution over millennia, of systems of weights associated with coinage.

Thus as presented, the book is a smörgåsbord of topics about a central theme: coins as money shaped by tradition, politics and the needs of different constituencies. While this structure serves admirably to bring together Tye's writings within a single cover, it does pose challenges for the reader, who might wish that a sharper editing had knit the sections into a more homogenous entity. It is not clear, for example, why the third section did not immediately follow the first, which it expands upon. Nor, for example, why section four was not a part of section two. A broader introduction, elucidating the book's purpose and giving a rationale for the selection of individual essays, would have put the reader in a more receptive frame of mind.

These minor quibbles aside, there is much in this volume that gives food for thought. For example, Tye's focus on "common" coins is highly welcome. As he states, "Rare coins tell us about obscure individuals and lost causes. Common coins bring us into contact with the past as it was lived." He addresses a larger problematique here: classically, numismatics has been fatally fascinated with rarity, a propensity which has tended to draw disproportionate attention to a tiny fraction of coins, to the detriment of a better understanding of the overwhelming numbers of common coins¹. Indeed, even museum coin cabinets tend to over-represent the rarities, since there is often a specific limit of one or two specimens per coin type in museum collections. Tye does not give much explanation as to why he values common coins, but it is clear from his illustration selections and the tone of the explanatory essays that it is because the most common coins were the most *influential*. The Athenian owl, the Alexander tetradrachm, the Chinese cash, were the universal currencies of their days, having the same wide influence in their times as the American dollar today. What present-day economist would attempt to explain global financial trends through the lens of the Mauritian rupee or Mongolian tughrík? Yet in a way, that is the distorted lens that much numismatic literature has given to the historical fraternity to examine past monetary issues. Tye has set about to remedy this, by offering one person's perspective on what coins have been plentiful, and therefore influential, in the past.

Robert Tye is courageous in his opinions. While occasionally his healthy scepticism is misapplied in *ad hominem* assaults on the scholarly profession, it is sufficiently often focussed on insightful interpretations of monetary phenomena to allow us to forgive the lapses. For example, his essay on "denomination sets" deals with some of the toughest nuts in economic history: who chose the forms of coinage, and for what purposes? Whose interests was coinage meant to serve? Indeed, why was it invented in the first place?

Tye notes that while dealing with the most common coins, one is often struck by the absence, in many places and many times, of the lowest denomination, i.e. copper coins or their analogues. Why was there often no coinage available for the mass of the people? Taking an example from Tudor England, he observes that the dearth of low-value denominations protected the interests of sedentary retail guilds against price competition from the itinerant unorganised sector. He concludes that political action by the guilds prevented the crown from issuing an adequate copper coinage for the poor.

Similarly, Tye addresses the conundrum of the invention of coinage, virtually simultaneously in Asia Minor, South Asia and East Asia in the middle of the first millennium BC. Economic historians commonly explain that coinage invention marked the transition from barter economies to market economies. But Tye notes markets had existed long before in urban civilisations, as had both commodity money-forms and moneys of account. In the light of these facts, he poses the question contrarily: "Why did people take so long to invent coins?" His answer is based on the emergence of reform movements in the three civilisations, during roughly contemporary episodes of conflict and stress, which sought popular support against traditional oligarchies by supporting the development of anonymous (coinage-based) market transactions, which enabled citizens to escape traditional aristocracy-dominated systems of material exchange.

A significant portion of the book is devoted to an in-depth study of metrological systems throughout history. None can deny that weight, equally with metal content, is a key parameter of coinage design and use. Indeed, adherence to a reliable and predictable weight standard is part of the core definition of coinage. Tye explores in detail the evolution of weight systems over great periods of time, concluding that: "...traditional weight systems were often maintained... for millennia. They are, at least sometimes, amongst the most extraordinarily enduring of all human institutions". The very structure of these systems, the common tendency to decimal units but binary fractions, he convincingly attributes to the universal use of the balance, which favoured those multiplicands and divisors.

His horizons in this metrological review are broad: in succession he treats of the weight standards of the ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Sasanian empires; of the medieval Islamic, Carolingian, Scandinavian, English, and other European kingdoms; of the ancient Hindu and medieval Indo-Moslem realms; finishing with a review of Burmese and Chinese weights. In the section on India, he makes an admirable effort to correlate metrology as far back as the Indus civilisation with more recent articulations, drawing upon Marshall's excavation reports and contemporary accounts by such as Kautilya, Manu and Alberuni. He relates the metrology to the coinage systems, drawing together into a coherent structure such traditional measures as the *ratti*, *masha*, *dharana*, *suvarna* and *tola*. I fear I lack the capacity to comment on the finer points of his metrological exposition, and will leave that to another reviewer. Suffice to say that the book has spawned broader interest in the subject; those intrigued with the congruence of coins and metrology may access the internet group <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/numismet>.

In summary, this book is provocative, thought-provoking (not the same thing), challenging, exhaustive, highly detailed, and to this reader at least, thoroughly worthwhile. Marked by careful scholarship throughout, there is also a certain amount of personal opinion which stokes the thought processes while leaving the reader to sort wheat from chaff. Most importantly, it is not just a useful reference work, but a compelling read in many parts. Readers, depending on their proclivities, will find much to praise or condemn, but they will not be disappointed by dullness.

1 A significant exception to this trend has been the rich and highly-productive tradition of hoard analysis

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