

# From Shells to Copper

Currency and  
Coinage Shaping  
History



HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH

## Cowrie Shells

The cowrie shells on exhibit illustrate one of the earliest forms of global currency and invite us to consider the earliest history of money and currency. Centuries before the first recorded coins were minted in Lydia in 600 BCE, and before gold, silver, and other metals were standardized, other materials functioned as currency. All forms of currency have three functions: a medium of exchange, measure of value, and store of value. As a form of easily transferable currency, all money has certain characteristics: it must be possible to attach a certain value to it, divisible into measurable units, recognizable, portable, and durable. The cowrie shell fits the criteria of money and of currency.

The cowrie shells on display (object 1) are identified as *Monetaria moneta*, a species of marine gastropods in the family *Cypraeidae*. A majority of the *Monetaria moneta* traded internationally were harvested west of India in the Maldives Islands, where they occurred naturally in dense concentrations. The value of cowries was maintained by the balance of supply and demand, varying in value from region to region and from time to time. Naturally, their value was lower in coastal regions where they were more abundant. Cowries were transferred and acquired in individual pieces as well as large amounts that were strung together. Strings of cowrie shells were often more valuable than individual ones to factor in the wages of those who strung the shells together.

The earliest documented use of cowries as money dates to the first millennium BCE in South Asia (India, China, Thailand, Pacific Islands). In China, cowries were one of the earliest and most common forms of money, dating back to the second century BCE (Han Dynasty). The shells were traded alongside gold and bronze coins, as well as knife-shaped and spade-shaped money.

For hundreds of years, cowries were central to the lives of many Africans and were often symbols of female fertility. Prior to the sixteenth century, the *Monetaria moneta* was almost exclusively used in West Africa until it entered global circulation through the transatlantic slave trade. Smaller cowries were favored in the slave trade since they were valued by count rather than weight and small shells could be transported more cheaply and efficiently. In the eighteenth century, Europeans

traded more than ten billion shells to West Africa across an area they named the “Cowrie Zone.” Shells used in the transatlantic slave trade were collected locally in the Indo-Pacific region and sold through middlemen to European markets, where they were cleaned, sorted, and packaged for shipment to West African ports. Traders would then exchange cowries and other goods for human cargo to be sent to New World plantations, as well as West African goods such as tropical woods and ivory. Slave ships carried a surplus of shells from West and Central African ports back to England, and cowries even circulated in some American colonies, including Virginia. Shell money was not new to the colonies in mainland North America. Shells had widespread circulation among Native Americans, who used them in networks of local and long-distance exchanges (including Wampum). However, cowries never achieved the same recognition as currency that Wampum received in the colonies, despite the proposal of their usage by the colonial elite as an alternative to English currency.

## King George IV 1826 Half Penny

The Hood coin on display (object 14) illustrates the use of classical imagery by British monarchs on modern British coinage. Britannia first appears on the reverse of a farthing minted in 1665 under Charles II (r. 1660–1685). On the Charles II coinage she is seated, draped in classical robes, and facing left. A shield bearing the British flag is at her side, and she is holding a spear in one hand and an olive branch in the other. Her appearance coincides with the Second Dutch War (1665–1667), a conflict in which England challenged the Dutch over the seas and trade routes.

The image of Britannia on coinage dates back over one thousand years to the second century CE. On bronze coinage of Hadrian, she is featured on the reverse, opposite a portrait of the emperor on the obverse. The Romans personified gods, imperial virtues, and even their conquered territories. The original portrayal of Britannia depicted her seated, facing left, draped in classical robes, with a spear in her left hand. The classicizing personification of Britannia clearly represented the conquered



British Isles. The seated Britannia was featured on the coinage of at least three Roman emperors: Hadrian (r. 117–138), Antonius Pius (r. 138–161), and Commodus (r. 180–192).

From Charles II to George III (r. 1760–1820), Britannia was featured on two types of British coins (farthing and half penny). By contrast, during George III's reign she appears on four types of coins (farthing, half penny, penny, and two pence). In the later part of his reign, her spear is replaced by a trident, associating her with the sea. George III led Britain through numerous wars, including the Seven Years War, an Irish rebellion, the American Revolution, and wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. The increased use of a personified Britain, imagined as a classical figure, made her more accessible and recognizable, perhaps increasing nationalism in times of instability.

The image of Britannia changed again under George IV (r. 1820–1830). Within the last weeks of 1810, George III had relapsed into a state of mania for a third and final time. Ministers quickly put together proposals for a regency under the Prince of Wales (later George IV, who assumed the full powers of the royal prerogative). His regency was

a period of social and artistic elegance, fashion, and the display of wealth. However, as king, he was unpopular due to his personal debt, weak relations to his cabinet, lack of concern for royal duties, marriage difficulties, and extravagant lifestyle. The 1826 half penny on display reveals many remarkable changes in Britannia's appearance. She remains draped with a shield bearing the British flag at her side, consistently holding a trident. She is now facing right, wearing a Corinthian helmet and chest plate. The olive branch has disappeared as she is reimagined in militaristic form. While George IV did not fight any wars during his reign, he may have placed Britannia in a militarized light to reflect the toughness of the nation and of himself as the new king.

Cowrie shells and coinage have played significant roles in shaping the economies and societies of different cultures throughout history. Currency evolves over time, and in so doing reflects the changing needs and values of societies. As new forms of currency emerge, it will be interesting to see how the world changes.

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## Checklist

String of cowries, New Caledonia, 1943, cowrie, red seed, and string. Gift of Mrs. Chester Beede; 170.31.24687

Half penny, George IV, London, 1826, copper alloy. Gift of W. Clark Harrington, Class of 1928; 164.8.31346

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Cover: String of cowries, New Caledonia, 1943, cowrie, red seed, and string

Inside left: Half penny, George IV, London, 1826, copper alloy (reverse)

Inside right: Half penny, George IV, London, 1826, copper alloy (obverse)

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