

How Coins Reveal Ancient Trade Routes

A

In the field of archaeology, coins are more than just remnants of economic activity; they are vital historical artifacts that can illuminate the paths once taken by traders, empires, and civilizations. Unlike more perishable materials, coins made of durable metals like silver, gold, and copper can survive the centuries, sometimes found far from their places of origin. Their inscriptions, materials, and iconography offer clues to the political, economic, and cultural exchanges of the past. Increasingly, historians and archaeologists have turned to numismatics—the study of coins—to trace the networks that once connected distant parts of the ancient world.

B

The primary value of coins lies in their precise origin. Unlike pottery or other artifacts that may be widespread and difficult to date, coins often carry exact information: the ruler's name, a year or regnal date, and the place of minting. This allows researchers to determine not only where a coin came from, but also approximately when it was created. When a coin minted in Rome is found in India or China, it provides compelling evidence of long-distance trade, even in the absence of other documentation. These "stray finds" tell stories about commerce and cultural contact that would otherwise be lost.

C

One of the clearest examples of coins mapping ancient trade routes is found in the Roman Empire. Roman coins have been uncovered in India, Sri Lanka, and even as far east as Vietnam. Scholars believe these coins arrived through maritime trade routes across the Indian Ocean, stimulated by Roman demand for luxury goods like spices, pearls, and textiles.

Ancient writers such as Pliny the Elder lamented the amount of Roman gold leaving the empire to pay for exotic imports. The discovery of Roman coins in South Asian port cities supports these accounts and suggests a complex network of intermediaries, merchants, and marketplaces connecting the Mediterranean to Asia.

D

Similarly, in Central Asia and China, coins from far-flung origins reveal the reach of the Silk Road. During the Tang dynasty, Chinese officials recorded the arrival of Sassanian coins from Persia and Byzantine currency from Constantinople. These coins circulated among traders, sometimes repurposed as jewelry or amulets, rather than currency in the modern sense. In some cases, local imitations of foreign coins were struck, indicating not only admiration for the foreign powers but also a desire to align with their prestige and perceived legitimacy. Such imitations also complicate efforts to trace coin origins precisely, though they still reflect cultural diffusion.

E

The significance of coins extends beyond the commercial sphere. Their symbolism, often including depictions of rulers, deities, or national symbols, served political purposes. By examining the spread of particular iconography, scholars can infer the influence of specific states or empires. For instance, Hellenistic coinage bearing the image of Alexander the Great continued to appear across a wide geographic area long after his death, reflecting the enduring power of his legacy and the continuation of trade patterns forged during his conquests. The spread of Islamic coins bearing Arabic inscriptions across North Africa and into Europe similarly reflects both conquest and commerce.

F

In recent decades, advances in technology have made it possible to analyze coins more precisely. Techniques like X-ray fluorescence (XRF) can determine the metallic composition of coins without damaging them. This allows researchers to identify the sources of metals and even detect fraudulent or debased coinage. When combined with geographic mapping software, scholars can now create visual reconstructions of trade networks based on coin distributions. These maps not only highlight main arteries of trade but also reveal secondary routes and unexpected connections, such as the appearance of Greek coins in early Japanese sites, suggesting contact through intermediate cultures.

G

Despite these breakthroughs, interpreting coin finds remains challenging. Coins are mobile by nature, and a single coin far from its origin might be the result of travel, hoarding, migration, or even modern looting. Therefore, archaeologists must analyze coin distributions in aggregate, not individually. Context is essential: coins found in a sealed burial chamber or a shipwreck tell a different story than those collected from a disturbed surface layer. Still, when carefully interpreted, coins remain among the most compelling sources of evidence for reconstructing ancient trade and communication routes. Through these small objects, modern scholars gain insights into the vast and interconnected world of antiquity.

Questions

Questions 1–5

Match each statement with the correct paragraph (A–G).

You may use each letter only once.

1. Coins can often be dated more precisely than other types of archaeological finds.
 2. Technological methods help researchers identify the composition and origin of coins.
 3. Roman coins have been found across the Indian Ocean region.
 4. The context in which a coin is found influences its interpretation.
 5. Coins were sometimes replicated by other cultures, reflecting admiration or political motives.
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Questions 6–8

Do the following statements agree with the views expressed in the text?

Write:

YES – if the statement agrees with the views of the writer

NO – if the statement contradicts the views of the writer

NOT GIVEN – if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this

6. Pottery is more useful than coins for identifying ancient trade routes.
7. Roman coins were commonly used as currency in ancient India.
8. Some coins were turned into ornaments rather than being used as money.

Questions 9–12

Complete the summary using words from the passage.

Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** for each answer.

Coins are an important source for understanding the spread of ancient trade networks. In contrast to other objects, coins often include specific details such as the name of a (9) and the location where the coin was minted. In some cases, coins have been found far from their place of origin, such as Roman coins discovered in South Asia. These finds support written accounts describing the (10) of goods to the Roman Empire. In East and Central Asia, foreign coins found along the (11) show how far different empires interacted. Some coins were even (12) locally to resemble coins from other states.

Question 13

Choose the correct letter, A, B, C or D.

13. What is the main idea of the passage?

- A. Coins are more valuable than written records for understanding ancient economies.
- B. Coin discoveries help archaeologists identify burial sites and hoards.
- C. Coins provide crucial evidence about trade routes and cultural exchange in the ancient world.
- D. Ancient people rarely used coins as currency and preferred barter systems.

Answer Key

1. B
2. F
3. C
4. G
5. D
6. NO
7. NOT GIVEN
8. YES
9. ruler
10. import
11. Silk Road
12. imitated
13. C