

Gold Coins from Khlong Thom: An Update

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ABSTRACT. This update on my earlier article presents a third denomination of the gold coins from Khlong Thom. Previously, two denominations—of eight and four *rattī*—had been identified and discussed. The third denomination has a weight of one *rattī*. Its tiny flan has been struck on one side only with a *śrīvatsa* motif.

This is an update on my article, “The Gold Coins from Khlong Thom”, published in a previous issue of this journal.¹ It dealt with a number of small struck gold coins found in Khlong Thom, Krabi Province. Nine of these small coins, published in 1985, had been acquired in 1981 by Michael Mitchiner, the British numismatist, from a dealer in the United States. Apparently, a very large number of them had been discovered by locals at the Khuan Lukpad site in 1981, or slightly earlier. According to unofficial information received by Mitchiner at the time, it seems that they formed part of a hoard of gold artefacts, consisting mainly of gold beads, but also including about 100 or more small gold coins. Some of the coins were quickly sold by dealers in Bangkok and elsewhere, while others found their way into local private collections and museums. It seems likely that their discovery caused a kind of gold rush, which sadly brought about the near destruction of the site. Mayuree Veraprasert of Silpakorn University deplored the heavy looting of the site in 1981. When she conducted a test excavation at Khuan Lukpad in 1983, she stated that – from the perspective of the archaeologist—already “over eighty percent of the total area of the site had been destroyed”.²

When publishing the nine gold coins in his possession, Mitchiner identified their weight standard as being based on the Indian *rattī*. This weight unit, based on the seed of a climber plant (*Abrus precatorius*)—known in Thailand as *ma klam ta nu* (มะกล่ำตาหนู) and under several other locally differing names³—oscillates around, and slightly above, 0.1 gramme. In modern times, it has been standardised as 0.12125 gramme. When weighing a number of natural *guñja* seeds from a jeweller’s shop in Kathmandu, an average of 0.114 gramme was ascertained by Harry Falk, whereas some seeds collected

¹ B. Borell, Gold Coins from Khlong Thom. *JSS* 105 (2017), 151-177.

² M. Veraprasert, Khlong Thom: An Ancient Bead Manufacturing Location and an Ancient Entrepôt. In: *Seminar in Prehistory of Southeast Asia, SPAFA Final Report*, SEAMO Project in Archaeology and Fine Arts, Bangkok, 1987, 323; M. Veraprasert, Khlong Thom: An Ancient Bead-manufacturing Location and an Ancient Entrepôt. In: I. Glover, P. Suchitta, J. Villiers (eds.), *Early Metallurgy, Trade and Urban Centres in Thailand and Southeast Asia*. Bangkok 1992: White Lotus, 149.

³ See <https://www.thailandnatureproject.com/abrus-precatorius.html> (accessed 14 August 2019).

by me from a plant growing wild in Thailand gave an average weight of 0.09875 gramme.

The weight of these small gold coins with conch motif, some with blank reverse, others with a *śrīvatsa* or *svastika* motif on the reverse, corresponds to four *rattī*. In addition to the nine coins published by Mitchiner, I was able to present in my article twenty-one more conch coins and to refer in the postscript to an additional twenty-three in private collections in Thailand. To these may be added one in the British Museum,⁴ and two offered at a sale in Bangkok in 2015.⁵ Numerous die links among them suggest a local production within a relatively short period.

One of the aims of my article had been to point out the close connection to another type of gold coin, from the same site, based on the same weight standard. These are three coins with twice the weight, namely eight *rattī*. One is in the Wat Khlong Thom Museum,⁶ two others in the Suthiratana Foundation in Bangkok, the latter two having been struck with the same pair of dies. On the obverse, they show a head in profile to right, and on the reverse they have an inscription, which could be identified as Brāhmī script. The inscription is the same on all three coins and was read by Harry Falk as *śr(ī)-viṣuvagoda*, the honorific *śr(ī)* followed by a personal name, “Śr(ī) Viṣuvagoda”. On palaeographic grounds, he favours a date in the 2nd century CE, though not excluding a possibly later date in the 3rd/4th century CE. In many respects, this was an important result, indicating also a date range for the conch coins of four-*rattī* weight, for which previously much later dates had been suggested.

Here I wish to present three examples of a third denomination, which come from the same site. One is in the Suthiratana Foundation, the other two are in a private collection in Krabi Province (Figures 1-3). They were made from a small gold flan and measure approximately 5-6 millimetres in diameter. Their obverse is stamped with a *śrīvatsa* motif of somewhat angular design. Apparently, the same die was used for all three examples. The gold flan is not very thick, therefore, some marks caused by the obverse die are noticeable in faint relief on the otherwise plain reverse. Their weights correspond nicely to the approximate weight of one *rattī*.

The gold coins from Khlong Thom are here interpreted as three different denominations: full, $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{1}{8}$ value, based on the weight standard of the *rattī* (Figure 4). This clearly supports their suggested use as a medium of exchange. Additional support for such a use is a full value coin, cut in half, to create such a half denomination of four *rattī*. The evidence available suggests a local production of the coins. In this case, the profile head presumably represents the portrait of the local ruler and the inscription gives the Indianised name adopted by him. Including the three small denominations

⁴ J. Cribb, Dating South East Asia’s Earliest Coins. In: G. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Deyadharmā: Studies in Memory of Dr. D.C. Sircar*. Delhi 1986: Sri Satguru Publications, 116, 123 no. C 19 pl. 3 (unfortunately, on plate 3 the images of obverse and reverse of C 19 are interchanged with those of no. B 10). It was acquired from a dealer and said to have been found in southern Thailand. It has a conch of the type of group C on one side, whereas the reverse is blank. The design and its weight of c. 0.45 gramme clearly relate it to the four-*rattī* group C.

⁵ Ronachai Krisadaolarn, personal communication, June 2017.

⁶ This coin had erroneously been identified as a Roman coin, see *Sārānukrom Watthanatham Phāk Tai* (Encyclopaedia of Southern Thai Culture), 10 vols., Bangkok: Toyota Foundation, 1986, vol. 2, 441 (colour); 691 (black-and-white).



Figure 1. Suthiratana Foundation, KLP 293.2. Small gold coin from Khlong Thom. 7 mm x 5.5 mm. Weight: 0.13 g. Photo: Brigitte Borell.



Figure 2. Private Collection, Krabi Province. Small gold coin from Khlong Thom. 6 mm x 5 mm. Weight: 0.11 g. Photo: Courtesy of the collector.



Figure 3. Private Collection, Krabi Province. Small gold coin from Khlong Thom. 6 mm x 5 mm. Weight: 0.08 g. Photo: Courtesy of the collector.

presented here, as well as the three additional conch coins mentioned above, we have a total of sixty-two gold coins found at Khlong Thom.

As a place minting its own coinage, Khlong Thom gains a new prominence. Its role as an important trading centre had already been established on the evidence of artefacts from distant lands found at the site. In all likelihood, the small gold coins were intended for use in trade transactions. Two small gold coins, apparently belonging to the class of conch coins of four-*rattī* weight, were found at Oc Eo in southern Vietnam, adding to the evidence of trade links across the Gulf of Thailand.⁷ The notion that Khlong Thom issued its own gold coinage at some time within the period of the 2nd to the 4th century CE adds a new quality to its character as a hub for maritime trade and intercultural contacts. Its role as a trading place and a regional, or perhaps supra-regional, centre might have been of greater importance than hitherto assumed.

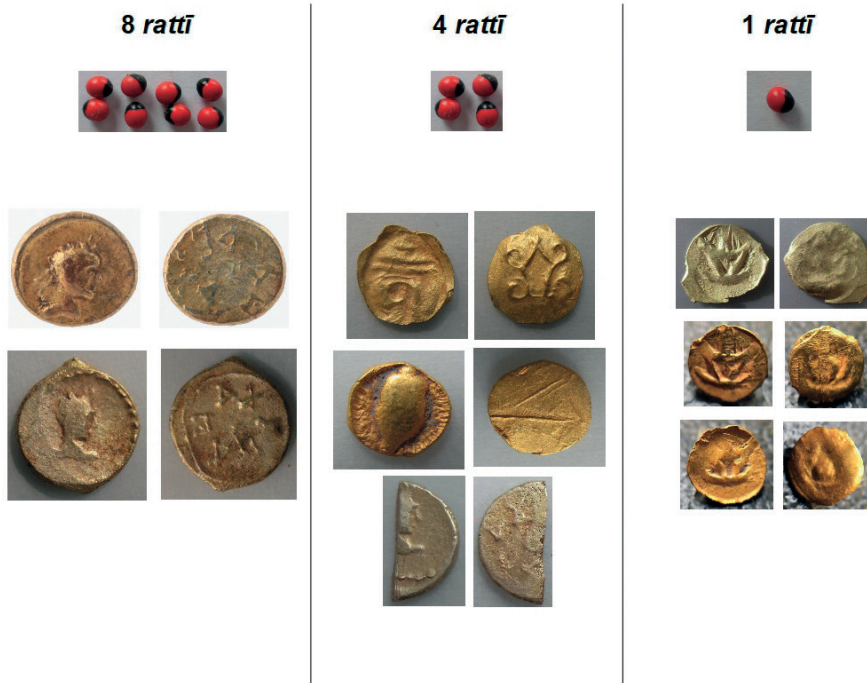


Figure 4. Three denominations of gold coins from Khlong Thom, probably locally minted within a period between the 2nd and the 4th century CE.

⁷ Borell, *Gold coins* 170, 174.