

COWRIES

You live near a tropical beach. Every time it rains thousands of little shells wash up on the shore. They're lovely little things, shiny, domed ovoids with a serrated cleft on the bottom. They feel good in the hand, clink agreeably when you shake a bunch of them, they make snazzy neckwear done up in strings. The hill people's women like them so much that if you bring a double handful up to them you can bring back a pottery cup, or a chicken, or a six inch piece of copper wire, or half ounce of gold, depending on where and when this is happening.

Trading seashells is an ancient and ubiquitous human pastime, much older than trade in bits of metal. Of the hundreds of types of shells and shell products that served as symbols of standard value, cowries, particularly the species *cyprea moneta* and *c. Annulus*, have seen the widest use. They have remained popular throughout history, one reason being perhaps that they are impossible to counterfeit, another perhaps that they make great jewelry.



There is a running debate as to whether *c. moneta* and *c. annulus* are truly separate species. They exhibit intermediate types, the extremes being the distinct shoulders of *c. moneta* and the smooth egg shape of *c. annulus*. Size varies from 0.5 to 1.5 inches. The ranges of the two types overlap, *c. annulus* growing from the east African coast to the Red Sea and Iran, and *c. moneta* from the Red Sea, along the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean to Sri Lanka, and on through the China Sea to Indonesia and the Philippines. In general no distinction was made between them in trade, and throughout Asia and Africa the two types are often found together. A major "factory" was in the Maldiv Islands, the gathered shells being traded to Bengal, from whence they were wholesaled out to the rest of the world.

Cowries have been found in tombs of pre-dynastic Egypt, c.5000 BC, likewise in those of Shang China, c.1500 BC. They circulated throughout Africa, India, Afghanistan, Iran, Southeast Asia, China, and Melanesia. They are found in use throughout the Pacific Islands, though they did not constitute a standard of value, as they did in Asia and Africa. Cowries were placed in graves as far afield as prehistoric Latvia and Anglo-Saxon England, and were known and sought by Native Americans before the European Invasion.

The value of the cowry varied widely with time, place, demand, and supply. A few examples can indicate the range:

Togo, 1896	4000	= 1 German mark
Inland Tanzania, 1880s	4-5000	= 1 Maria Theresia thaler
Congo, c. 1900	30-60,000	= a male slave
New Guinea highlands, 1924	5	= 1 small pig

Though single cowries have served as small change and gambling chips throughout their range, most trade was conducted in bulk. In 17th century Bengal 12,000 shells wrapped in a coconut leaf was the standard bundle, worth about 1½ rupees. The English put them up in small barrels for the Guinea trade. In early 20th century Nigeria 2000 were a "head." On the east African coast and elsewhere they were done up in strings of 100, the backs of the shells being broken or ground down for easy stringing. These strings, tied together, were often measured in fathoms, the space between a man's outstretched arms. Another method of stringing was to pierce the shell twice so they could be mounted "sideways" with the cleft facing outward. Long, decorative belts were made thus in Melanesia.

Cowries have been frequently imitated. Bone cowries are not uncommon antiquities in China, and it is generally assumed that the "ant and nose" coins are cowry derivatives. There is a school of thought that sees a cowry model for the original lumpy Greek coinage. Gold cowries have been found in Ancient Cypriot graves, bronze specimens from Etruscan tombs. This writer has seen stone examples (provenance unknown) and a lead cowry from Thailand.

In the second half of this century, with the inauguration of global telecommunications and a virtually unitary planetary economy we have seen the eclipse of the cowry, as the next century may see the end of token currency entirely. The cowry now has no "value," and is simply a beautiful creature, as it always has been.

Information for this was taken mostly from *A Survey of Primitive Money*, by Alice Quiggin. Originally printed in NI Bulletin. This article has been extracted and modified from Bob Reis's Web site:

www.anythinganywhere.com