

## Anslem de Silva

# An account of a Mauritian giant tortoise on a 19th century Sri Lankan coin

### Introduction

Historical and archaeological evidence reveal that currency has been in circulation as a form of money transaction in Sri Lanka from about the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC (GEIGER 1960). Some of these coins had figures of animals (including turtles) struck on them. The present communication is on a giant tortoise (possibly *Cylindraspis inepta* GÜNTHER, 1873; fig. 1) and a coffee token struck with the figure of this tortoise which was used in Sri Lanka around 1860's (DE SILVA 2007).

### Historical aspects

According to HALY (1894) and DERANIYAGALA (1960) a live specimen of a giant

tortoise (possibly *Cylindraspis inepta* GÜNTHER, 1873) had been brought by the Dutch from Mauritius during the Dutch Period (this is a term used synonymously for the period, and the area of Ceylon or Sri Lanka that was controlled by the Dutch from 1685-1796). According to FERGUSON (1877), this tortoise had been at Uplands, Mutwal (near Colombo) for 150 years. FERGUSON (1877) further reports of an interesting account of this tortoise which had appeared in the *Ceylon Observer* of 25 April, 1870, that one C.E.H. SYMONS had exhibited this tortoise at an exhibition organized for the Duke of Edinburgh when he visited Ceylon (Sri Lanka), further the



Fig. 1. Mauritius giant tortoise (*Cylindraspis inepta*), Colombo National Museum.



Fig. 2. Uplands Mills Coffee token, reverse the Mauritius giant tortoise.

news report states that this tortoise had lived at Uplands compound for 150 to 200 years. The news report adds that the tortoise got rid of seven men sitting on it to keep it down. When the British took over the Maritime Provinces from the Dutch, they had found this tortoise in 1796. In 1894 the British removed the tortoise to *Victoria Park*, Colombo where it died a week later on 23 March 1894. Apparently, the shell was kept in the *Colombo Museum* (fig. 1). ALBERT GÜNTHER had sent an interesting letter regarding this tortoise, which was published in the *Monthly Literary Register* of 1894. I quote parts of his letter “(...) this tortoise was the last

survivor of one of the 4 or 5 species once inhabited Mauritius which have become extinct many years ago. (...)”. “(...) I directed the attention of then the Governor [of Sri Lanka] that they possessed a treasure of great scientific interest (...)” (GÜNTHER 1894, DERANIYAGALA 1960). The grounds where the tortoise lived were known as ‘*Arma Tortuni*’ or tortoise garden (HALY 1894).

#### Some details of the shell

The measurements of the shell were: curved carapace length 136 cm, curved carapace width 133 cm and the shell height 49 cm. Vertebrales 5, nuchal is absent, cos-



Fig. 3. Uplands Mills Coffee token, obverse K. D. & Co. in monogram within a beaded circle (ANSLEM DE SILVA collection).

tals 4. The measurements and scales and the shell shape given by GÜNTHER (1877; fig. 4; see GERLACH 2004) indicate that it may possibly be *Cylindraspis inepta* GÜNTHER, 1873.

#### The early coffee cultivation in Sri Lanka

According to VILLIERS (1940) the Dutch had grown coffee (*Coffea arabica*) in the low country even as early as 1740. However, it was in the year 1824 that the British began to cultivate coffee on a large scale in Sri Lanka. By the year 1878, approximately 89,100 hectares of land (excluding the land taken for small holdings) were planted with coffee (FORREST 1967).

LOWSLEY (1895) reports that tokens were mainly struck in the prosperous times of coffee cultivation in Ceylon. The sum to be paid for a certain fixed task in coffee picking determined the value. This amount was generally 4 ½ d. (In Sri Lanka during British rule time equivalent English currency was used £ = pound sterling; s = shilling and d = pence.), or about 18 to 19 cents for picking half a cwt. of clean coffee, and a store-woman was expected to do this as a day's work (LOWSLEY 1895).

#### The Uplands Mills Coffee token depicting this tortoise

According to LOWSLEY (1895) Captain C.E.H. SYMONS had designed three tokens for *K. D. & Co* which stands for *Keir, Dundas & Co.*, one of which was the Tortoise token for Uplands Mills, Mutuwall, Colombo where the celebrated tortoise is said to have been living for a few centuries.

This Tortoise token depicts on the obverse *K. D. & Co.* in monogram within a beaded circle and on the reverse a tortoise within a beaded circle (figs. 2 & 3) and the token is bored for suspension. This brass token weighs approximately 6.9 g

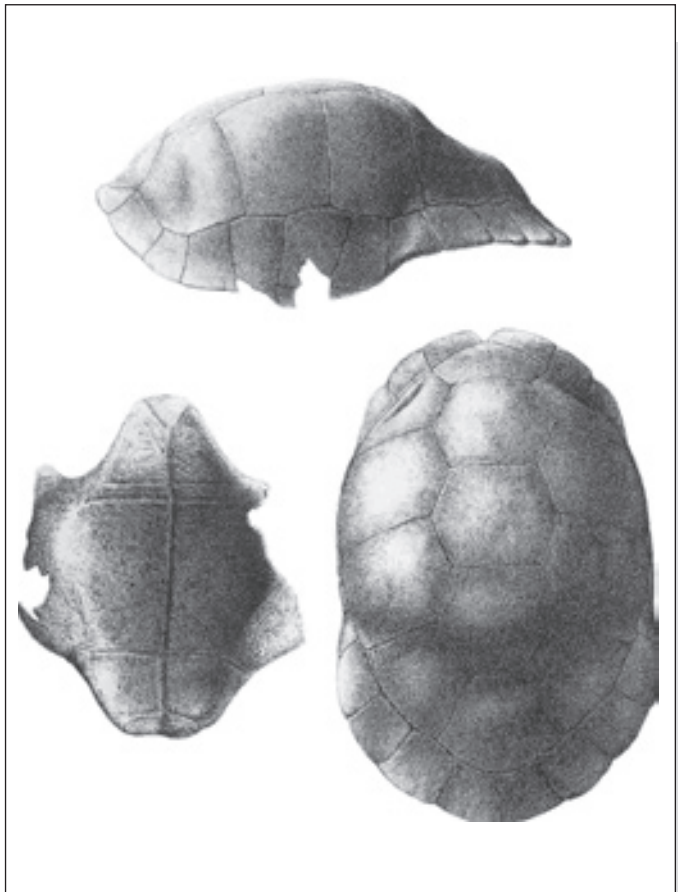


Fig. 4. Illustration from GÜNTHER (1877).

with a diameter of 26.7 mm (for more details see the Internet resources).

### Keir, Dundas & Co

An interesting mercantile story surrounds the *Keir, Dundas & Co.* and the famous tortoise coffee token. According to VILLERS (1940) the *Keir, Dundas & Co.* Kandy was established in Kings Street, Kandy in 1854 by SIMON KEIR, who was a planter in 1850, G. H. DUNDAS and Captain JOHN KEITH JOLLY. The *Keir, Dundas & Co.* or rather the owners were known as the “Kings of Kandy” as the firm was General Merchants and Forwarding Agents for many other estate companies.

In 1856, JOHN GAVIN, a shrewd businessman and a hardworking man joined *Keir, Dundas & Co.* By 1862, GAVIN became the sole partner of the *Keir, Dundas & Co.* and disposed the business to G.D.B. HARRISON, JOHN DUNCAN and WILLAM MARTIN LEAKE.

During the financial crises period (1864-1866) in England and end of Civil War in USA many estates could not manage and was up for sale. Thus *Keir, Dundas & Co.* brought many estates including the Uplands and San Sebastian Mills in Colombo to protect their claims. Thus virtually overnight *Keir, Dundas & Co.* who was mainly a business agency became owners of many estates and mills. Due to these purchases *Keir, Dundas & Co.* was in considerable debt to their investors in London, ultimately *Keir, Dundas & Co.* – the “Kings of Kandy” had to transfer the whole business, assets and liabilities to London. In 1866 JOHN DUNCAN and Lieutenant C.E.H. SYMONS under *Duncan Symons & Co.* carried out the business until its liquidation in 1880 (VILLIERS 1940).

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**Internet resource**

[www.lakdiva.org/coins/coffee/1866\\_kdco\\_tortoise.html](http://www.lakdiva.org/coins/coffee/1866_kdco_tortoise.html) (accessed on 4th January 2009)

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