

The larin: trade money of the Arabian Gulf

by

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INTRODUCTION

The peculiar shape of the larin has undoubtedly been one of the main reasons why numismatists have neglected this type of coin. Most people considered it to be a kind of "primitive money" and called it fishhook-money, or wire-currency, or even hairpin-money (1). Closer study of the larin coinage reveals that it is not what is usually called primitive money but as much a coin as for example a ducat or a mouton d'or. It is not the intention in this paper to define a coin but only to stress the fact that the shape of an object cannot be a criterion of whether it should be called a coin. Most numismatists agree that money is any generally accepted medium of exchange. A coin, on the contrary, is a piece of metal made into money by being stamped with an official device that secures its value. In most cases the device is applied with the aid of a die giving the name of the guarantor and often other data such as the place of issue, the date or the value. All this is as true of the larin as of any other "normal" coin of the same period.

METHOD OF PRODUCTION

The strange shape of the larin is primarily the result of the production process. The first western coins of traditional type were made by impressing a stamp on a pellet of electrum, or later gold or silver, of fixed weight. The result was a more or less regular oblong coin. Gradually the flans used to make coins took a more circular shape. This had a lot of advantages but until modern metal-working techniques were developed it had the big disadvantage that it was difficult to adjust the weight of these circular flans without deforming them. Western European mints tried different methods of making circular flans to the correct weight but it was not until the introduction of modern methods of rolling metal that the problem was solved (2).

Russian mintmasters tried a different solution. They replaced the circular flans by short lengths of wire but failed to adapt their dies to the new type of flans. The result is not very attractive and from the second half of the fourteenth to the end of the seventeenth century the greater part of the Russian coinage consisted of thin irregular and mostly oblong coins on which only a part of the legend can be read (3).

The same technique was used in minting larins; the only difference being that the wire was thicker, longer and less easy to flatten completely during the process of coining. To coin a larin one has to make a metal wire of about 2mm diameter and then cut it to the desired length. The wire is then folded once and in some cases slightly flattened by hammering (4). Then it is struck between two dies just as any other "normal" coin. In some cases it is eventually bent a second time.

NAME AND ORIGIN

It is generally accepted that the larin takes its name from a city called Lar, but while there is no reason to doubt this theory this does not mean that this city Lar is necessarily the capital of the semi-independent state of Laristan. There are in fact several places called Lar in Iran. It is even possible to connect Lar with "lard" which means "flat tract of land". All things considered there are a number of Lar (i) that have a claim on the origin of the larin. In fact the monetary techniques used in coining larins point to a more northern origin yet European travellers are explicit and there is only circumstantial evidence to contradict them (5).

An older theory, that considers the toweelah as the original larin is still accepted by some (6). This theory is based solely on Palgrave who wrote, on the toweelah: "Along one of its flattened sides run a few Cufic characters, indicating the name of the Carmathian prince under whose auspices this choice production of Arab numismatics was achieved; nothing else is to be read on the Toweelah neither the date nor motto". (7) A more plausible attribution of this type of larin exists (8) and while there is no complete consensus on the exact dating of toweelahs they are generally accepted to be of the late 18th or early 19th century, a much later date than the Carmathian dynasty. In contrast, the first larins that can be dated with any degree of certainty were minted by the Safavid ruler Isma'il (I) (907-930 AH) some 4 centuries earlier than the toweelah.

TYOLOGY

Classifying larins is difficult. The legends are often incomplete and illegible. They may be imitation or fantasy legends or in some cases, a completely unintelligible copy of an older or contemporary coin. Sometimes older coins or European coins were used as dies to mint larins (9). It is therefore apparent that a classification of larins based solely on the content of their legends as is used for circular coins, is hardly practicable in most cases. The typology suggested here is based upon the different shapes that a larin can take; but this "formal" classification should only be used when a more traditional classification is impossible. Three main types of larins can be distinguished; the hairpin larin, the fishhook larin and the Indian larin. It is assumed that each of these types was manufactured to be used within a limited area and during a limited period e.g. the reign of a sultan.

Type A: the Hairpin-Larin

This type is probably the original version from which both type B and type C were derived. Type A larins are made from a silver wire with a diameter of approximately 2mm and a length of about 120mm folded over in the middle and struck on one or both sides with a die producing a larin some 60mm long. The oldest datable larins are all of this kind. In its original shape it survived until the second half of the eighteenth century. Because of their supposed origin they are often called Persian larins although type A larins were also coined in other countries. Type A larins of the Ottoman Empire however tend to be longer and it is not unusual to find Ottoman larins up to 80mm.

Type A larins also occur in the shape of a compressed Y. It is, at least for the moment impossible to state with absolute certainty when or where this sub-type, which we shall call-type A1 originated but they are nearly always made of copper and are usually called toweelah. Their use is not clearly attested before the 19th century but seems to have persisted till the beginning of the 20th century in that part of the Arabian peninsula which is called Hasa (Ahsa') and probably also in the Najd desert. Metal, distribution and use till relatively recent times all seems to point to the fact that the toweelah is not an ancestor of the larin but rather a last degenerate survival probably of the silver plated copper or low grade silver Ottoman larins. No silver or gold toweelahs are known today but private coin collections in the Gulf area may still contain surprises.

Type B: the fishhook-larin

Type B larins are similar to type A larins but after coining they were doubled over again acquiring thus the shape of a fishhook similar to a J or a U. In fact some of the native names of larins in Ceylon mean silver hook (10). Fishhook larins evolved out of type A larins at the end of the 16th century when spice trade with the Europeans greatly extended. They were last reported to be in use during the beginning of the 19th century but in the more remote parts of Ceylon they probably continued in use for quite some time. They have peculiarities which neither type A nor type C larins show probably resulting from the fact that they do not seem to have been minted by the central authority. It seems that no fixed standard was adopted in making type B larins. Some travellers even claim that larins were cut to the desired length, or rather weight, from a roll of silver wire carried by people in the market. Whatever the cause it is astonishing how many fishhook-larins have saw and other test marks made to test the purity of the silver. These facts indicate that the Ceylonese larin had degenerated into a kind of primitive money which may have been structurally related to wire-currency.

Type C: the Indian larin

Type C larins were similar to type A larins but the wire was thicker - a diameter of about 2mm - and shorter, about 90mm. It is not always easy to distinguish between them especially in the case of larins from Bijapur where both types were minted at the same time. Generally speaking one may claim that to the west of Iran larins tended to become longer and thinner and to the east they seem to become shorter and thicker.

The relationship between the tang coinage of Java (classified here as type C1) and the larins is far from clear since neither their inscription nor weight agrees with that of known larins (11). Beyond doubt larins circulated in the Indonesian archipelago, at least from the second half of the sixteenth century on but in most cases they were type B larins (12).

In addition to these three main types other subtypes or hybrid forms are attested. One specimen bore clear indications of having been restruck. In its present state it belongs to type B since it is bent twice and has saw marks. However there are traces of three or four legends, two of which were obviously added after the larin had been bent a second time. There is a strong possibility that it was of type C and was later restruck completely to make a larin of type B. Larins also bear countermarks of great variety.

DISTRIBUTION

It seems that during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries the larin was the trade money par excellence of the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the contiguous areas roughly delimited by Baghdad, or even Tiflis to the north and the Maldives to the south, Java to the east and the Arabian Peninsula to the west. It was always used where local rulers had enough power to compel European traders to accept local currency.

Type A larins primarily come from countries around or in direct and frequent contact with the Persian Gulf whereas type B larins come from Ceylon and type C larins, from India.

If the word larin is derived from Lār, the capital of the semi-independent province of Lāristan near the eastern end of the Persian Gulf, one may conclude that the first major coinage of larins took place in that city (13). At the beginning of the 16th century AD the province was incorporated into the empire of the Safavid shahs, and minting ceased there. The shahs however continued to coin larins at other places. Airawan, Baghdad, Isfahan, Kashan, Khanja., Nakhjawan (?), Nisa (?), Qazwin, Qumm (Dar al-Momenin), Shiraz, Tabriz and Tiflis have all been suggested as larin mints. To what extent this is true remains an open question. It can be safely admitted that the mint of Shiraz struck larins to be used on the Persian Gulf and in foreign trade, but it is doubtful whether other provincial mints struck larins on large scale. If they did so, it was probably not for local use since the use of larins is not attested in the interior of Persia. Indeed there is no evidence that they were used in any part of Iran other than on the Persian Gulf littoral; the northern limit of their circulation seems to have been the spur of the Zagros.

At Hormuz, an Island off the Persian coast near the mouth of the Gulf, a dynasty allied to the shahs issued larins for a short period from the beginning of the 16th century AD. Several sultans of the Maldives (14) struck larins at their capital Male possibly under direct Persian influence and round coins minted from the second half of the 17th century AD until the present are called "larins". Claims that the adjacent Lakkadive Islands also produced larins have now been dropped.

The larin was especially popular on the north west coast of the Persian Gulf in the area called al-Hasa and in the adjoining region of Najd. A mint seems to have existed at al-Hufuf. No mints are attested in the southern half of the peninsula and few finds have been reported. Probably all the toweelahs (type A1 larins) were minted at al-Hufuf. Walker assigned to this mint some late larins struck in the name of the Ottoman Ahmad III ibn Muhammad, but it is not always clear who controlled this mint (15). Most of the coins minted at al-Hufuf seem to have been destined for local use only and the local man in power may have had sole command of the mint.

Both Safavids and Ottomans minted larins in Baghdad although they were never really popular under Ottoman rule. It seems that larins were also struck at Basrah on the authority of a local ruler (16). The use of larins extended throughout the vilayet of Basrah to Baghdad in the north but remained closely linked to the trade with the Gulf area.

One of the main sources of larins nowadays is Sri Lanka (17). As explained above it is probable that the bulk of the fishhook-larins were not struck officially. The absence of a clear standard and the enormous number of variants in the legend points to widespread private minting rather than to central government control. The very few gold larins that exist have a fishhook shape and probably also came originally from Ceylon.

Larins were minted in profusion at Bijapur (18) during the reign of the Ali Shahis, but other Indian emissions of a local nature must have existed. Use of larins extended at least to Bengal; however as no traces have been found in the interior it is likely that the larin was used only in the coastal parts of the subcontinent as a result of international sea trade.

A few pewter and copper pieces from Java have come down to us. The Dutch, who knew these coins as "tang" (type C1 larins), reported their existence on the island from the beginning of the 17th century. They have a rather peculiar shape and all bear the same design, possibly the sword and laurel wreath of the Batavian arms (19). It is not clear to what extent they are official issues nor under whose authority they were minted. There is evidence that type B and type C larins circulated on Java and it is reasonable to conjecture that there were tang coins of other Indonesian islands, such as Sumatra.

CHRONOLOGY

Discounting Palgrave's attribution of the toweelah to Mohammed al-Sasod' who lived about 920 AD the first larins were coined before the beginning of the 16th century AD since they are mentioned in a document of 1507 AD. Some kind of primitive wire currency may have existed in Persia at an earlier date although no examples of it have so far been identified. At first circular dies were used but later rectangular dies were employed by some mints in Persia, India and the Maldives. This technical evolution normally points to a long tradition in minting larins. In Persia larins were minted from the time of Isma'il I (1502-1524 AD) until the first years of the reign of Nādir Shāh (1736-1747) being especially popular during the reign of Tahmasp I. Nadir's Persian larins are extremely rare. In Hormuz larins were coined by Tūrān Shāh (c 1543-1563 AD) and Farrukh Shāh (c 1564-1601 AD) and probably by other rulers as well. On the Maldivé islands Muhammad 'Imād-ad-Dīn I (1620-1648 AD) was probably the first to mint larins. His successor Ibrāhīm Iskander I (1648-1687 AD) continued the minting of hairpin shaped larins but c. 1070/1659 introduced the first circular larins, a denomination still current.

Murād III (1574-1595 AD) was probably the first Ottoman to strike larins at Baghdad (20). The last Ottoman larins that can be dated with some certainty come from the reign of Ahmad III (1703-1730 AD). The mint at Basrah also produced larins during the 17th and probably the beginning of the 18th centuries but exact dates cannot be given. The activities of the mint at al-Hufuf are even more difficult to date but it has been conjectured that a semi-autonomous minting took place around the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries.

Type B larins are very difficult to date due to the fact that very few have intelligible inscriptions. Even where they exist they indicate only a terminus post quem for the import into Ceylon rather than the date at which the larin was transformed into a type B larin. Larins were used from the 16th to the beginning of the 19th centuries and it is safe to presume that they were produced in one way or another during the same period.

Most, if not all Indian larins come from the 'Ādil Shāh dynasty of Bijapur. It seems that larins were the only silver coins struck by the dynasty and specimens can be attributed to all but the last ruler. First struck during the reign of 'Alī 'Ādil Shāh I (1557-1580 AD) the most common larins of this series date from the reign of 'Ādil Shāh II (c 1651-1672 AD).

METROLOGY

Most larins are of silver with gold or copper being used only exceptionally. Some contemporary counterfeits were made from copper, debased silver or copper plated with silver but these would have circulated within a limited area only. It is hard to explain why the larin should have developed into an international trade currency but one reason was certainly the quality of its silver. Tavernier asserts, furthermore, that local authorities forbade the use by foreigners of other kinds of money (21). It seems that the use of the larin was closely linked with European powers, and that the larin was accepted on all coasts affected by this trade.

The silver used was reputed to be of high quality, about 900 fine. The frequent occurrence of test and saw marks on type B larins seems to show that the quality of at least this type needed to be tested regularly, whereas the absence of such marks on types A and C suggests that the authority issuing those larins saw no need to debase the metal. There are however some indications that more recent Ottoman larins were made from very low quality silver and perhaps even from silver plated copper.

The theoretical weight of the silver larin was approximately five grams. Some numismatists have proposed 4.8 grams but as a large number of larins weigh more, it is likely that the standard aimed at was five grams. More recent larins tend to be lighter and this is clearly marked in the case of the toweelah with an average weight of about 3.2 grams. From a metrological point of view it is difficult to consider the javanese tangs as larins since they all weigh at least 7 grams.

EXCHANGE RATES

The larin was extensively used by European traders in Western Asia, and it is interesting to examine its exchange value vis-a-vis various European coins. As Codrington (22) has dealt thoroughly with the relationship with Portuguese currency—one tanga de prata or larin was valued at 60 to 70 reis - this paper is limited to the relationship with English, French and Dutch coins. Published and reliable source material for the economic history of the larin is scarce (23) and the casual data provided by travellers tends to lack both chronological and statistical accuracy.

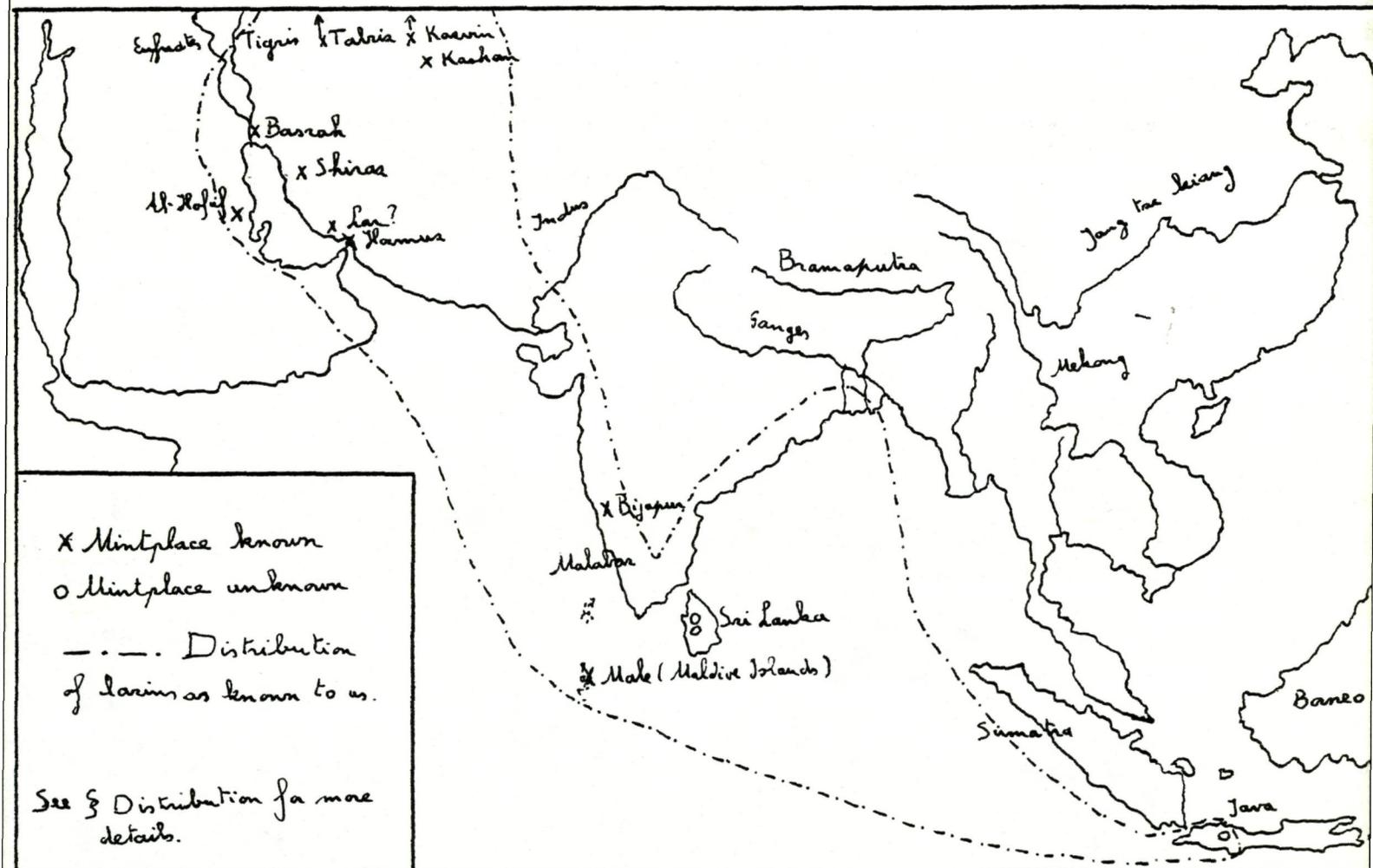
Knowledge of the costs of exchanging larins and European coins is dependent entirely on these imprecise sources of information. It seems that in Goa charges of 33% or more are mentioned, although in 1764 a more reasonable 6.7% is noted. During the second half of the 17th and the first half of the 18th century the French sous was worth 1/12 of a larin and the Dutch stuiver, at least in theory, 1/10 of a larin. The value in terms of the Ceylonese larin varied between 1/9 and 1/12 owing to its fluctuating weight.

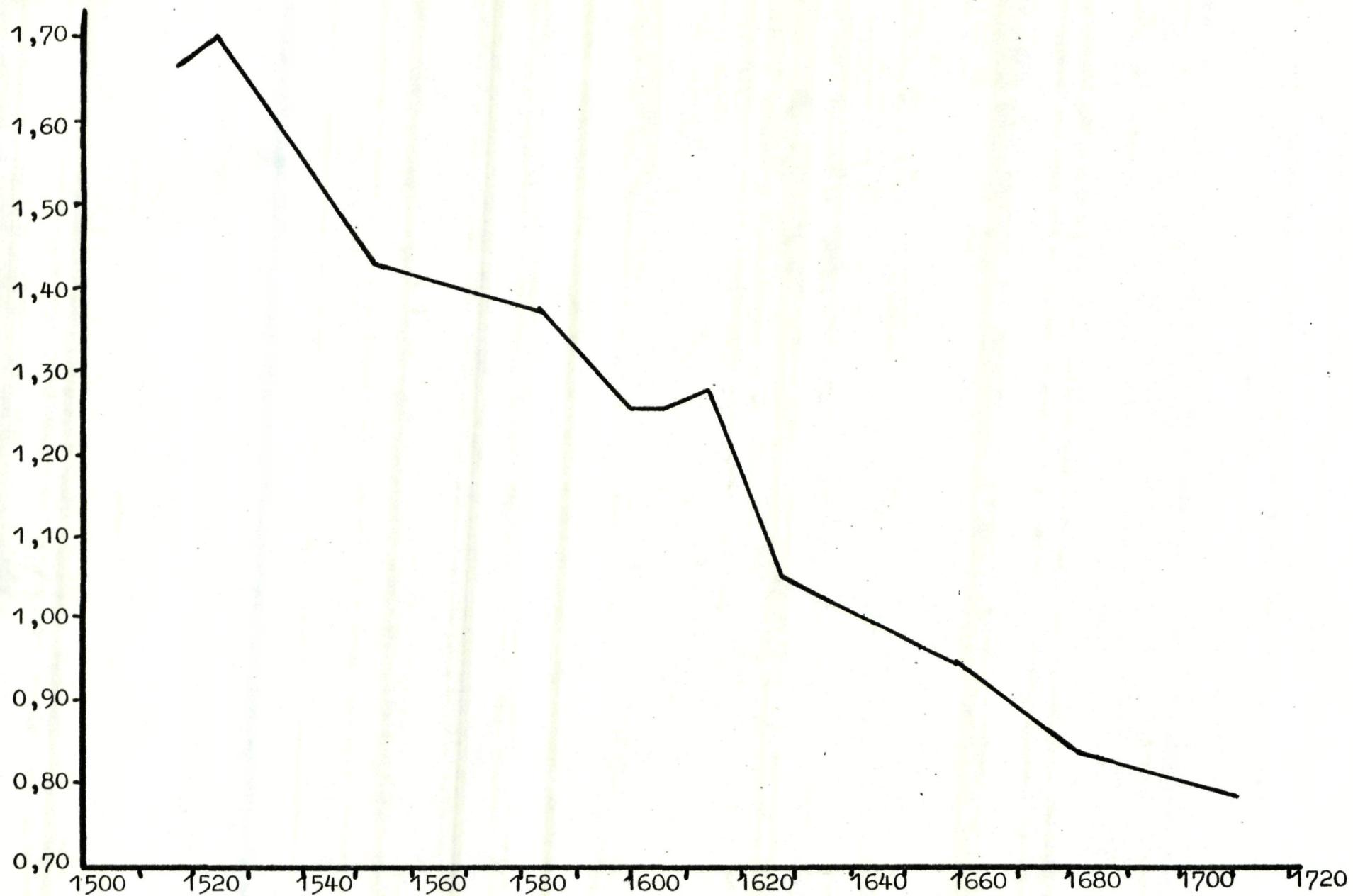
For British currency more data is to hand. The first record of an exchange involving larins dates from 1558. Calculations based on the value of cowries leads to an exchange rate of approximately 10.8 pence to the larin although a much higher exchange rate of 15 to 16 pence was recorded at the end of the 16th century. However the latter figure may be exaggerated owing to the high cost of exchange at the time. After a decline at the beginning of the 17th century the value of the larin reached 12 pence in 1733. By the beginning of the 19th century its value had dropped to 7 pence. The latest survivor of the larin family, the copper toweelah, was valued at three farthings in 1865 and by the beginning of the current century only 2.6 French centimes.

For the relationship of the larin to Dutch coins during the period 1624-1639 we can be much more precise. Against a theoretical value of 160 Dutch penningen its actual value increased from 147 to 156.9 penningen by 1636.

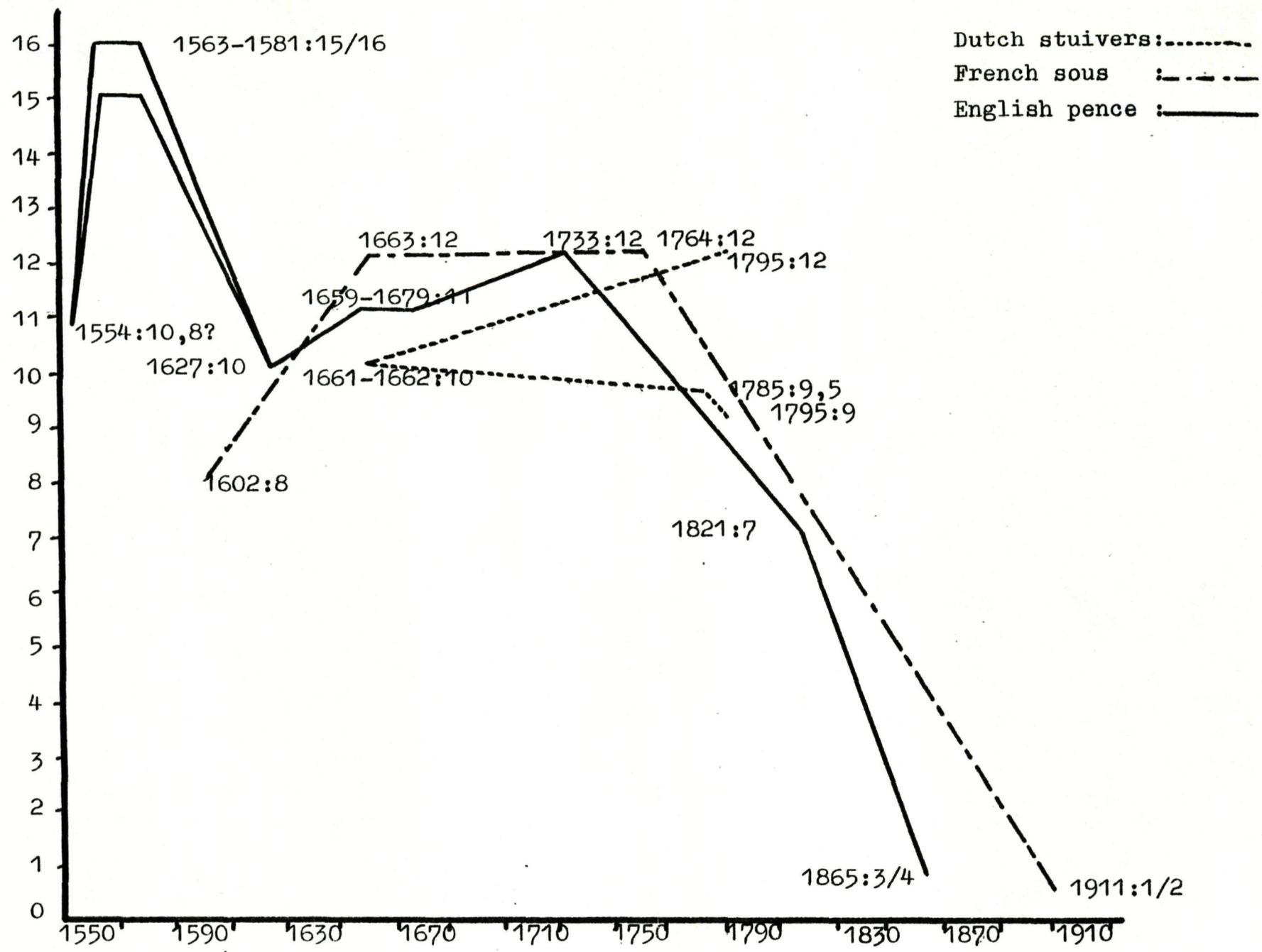
Overall it seems that an extremely high rate of exchange at the end of the 16th century was slightly depressed at the start of the 17th century but recovered by the start of the second quarter of the 17th century. The exchange rate then remained fairly stable until the beginning of the 19th century, when the value of the larin fell sharply. Both the extremely high value of the larin at the end of the 16th century and its fall-off at the out-set of the 19th century are most probably due to conditions arising from trade with European powers.

These conclusions are based on limited data but it is hoped that more detailed study (24) will lead to an improved classification and dating of the series. In particular, comparison of the legends with those on Persian and Ottoman coins, especially those of larger denominations is likely to yield useful results.

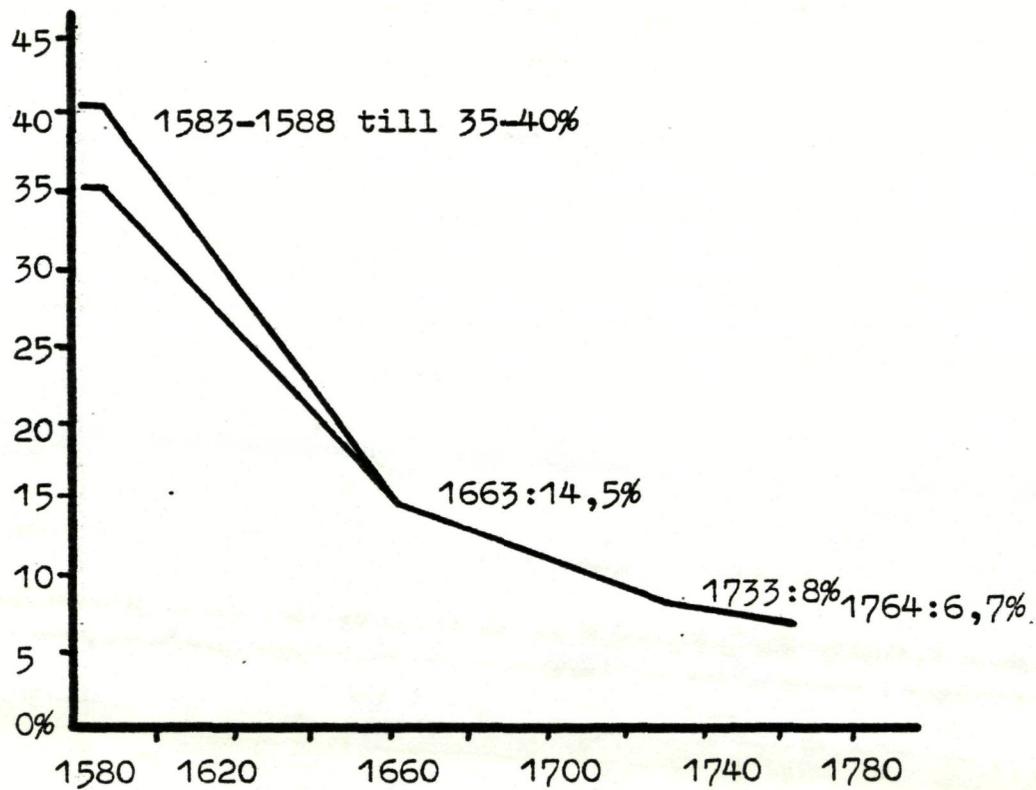




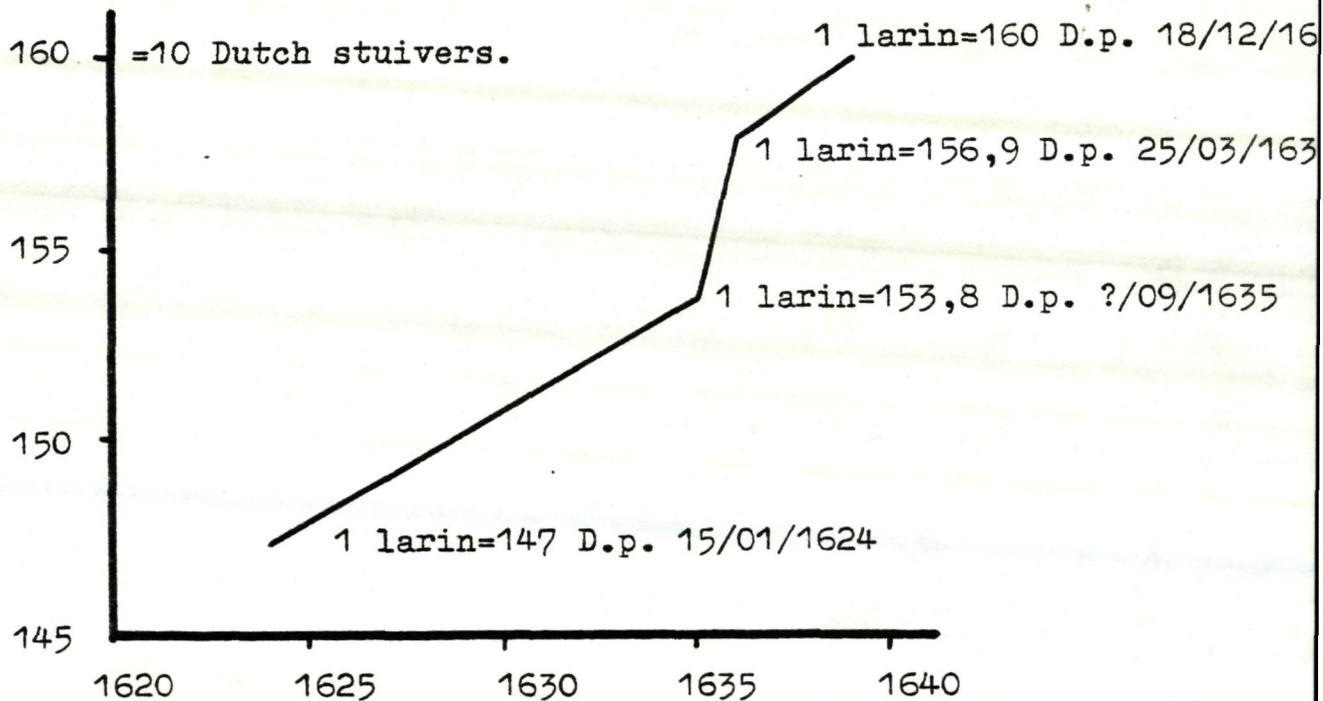
The value of the Persian larin expressed in "Gold Mark" according to W.Hinz,op cit.



The value of the larin according to H.Wood, op cit.



The costs of exchange.



The value of the Persian larin expressed in Dutch penningen.

NOTES

- (1) e.g. A.HINGSTON QUIGGIN, A survey of primitive money, New York & London 1970, p.194-198 and P.EINZIG, Primitive money in its ethnological, historical and economic aspects, Oxford etc., 1966 who does not mention larins in the Index except as fishhooks (p.553).
- (2) A general survey of the development of minting techniques can be found in P. GRIERSON, Numismatics, London and Oxford & New York 1965, pp 94f.
- (3) See e.g. M.MITCHNER, Oriental coins and their values. The World of Islam, Sanderstead 1977, p.319 and p.320. See also Georgian coins p.324. Technically the so-called Central Asian "bar" fals (p.287) seem also to be related to larins, but chronology seems to exclude any direct relation.
- (4) A good description of the process of minting larins can be found in HOWLAND WOOD, The Gampola larin hoard, American Numismatic Society 1934 (61), pp 28f. This study remains fundamental and has not been replaced. Mr. Ilich (Münster) is expected to publish shortly a large hoard of larins, comparable in size to the Gampola hoard.
- (5) R. VAN LAERE, Note sur les larins du Cabinet des medailles de Paris, Revue numismatique 6th ser. 18 (1976), p.144, n.2.
- (6) QUIGGIN, op.cit., p.197.
- (7) W.G. PALGRAVE, Narrative of a year's journey through Central and Eastern Arabia (1862-1863), London & Cambridge 1866, vol. II, p.179.
- (8) J. WALKER, The Arabian larin, Islamic Culture 10 (1936), p.94-96 and M.K. HUSSAIN, Copper taweelah of Hasa, Indian Numismatic Chronicle 8 (1970), p.40-44.
- (9) WOOD, op.cit., passim.
- (10) To quote only a few names, koku ridi, koku mahu, koku kasi, mahu angutu and of course lariya.
- (11) QUIGGIN, op.cit., p.195, n.2; there is perhaps a parallel since it is reported that the $4 \frac{3}{4}$ stuiver bars minted by the VOC at the Colombo mint were sometimes called half larins. This can only have been inspired by their shape and not by the exchange ratio. So it may well be possible that a local coinage with the shape of a larin was also called larin in Java for no other reason than a formal resemblance.
- (12) J.C. VAN LEUR, Indonesian trade and society, The Hague and Bandung 1955, p. 136.
- (13) See the article of D. AKHAVAN ZANDJANI, The description of some larins struck in Iran, in Honar-o-mardom 16 (2536=1967) No. 184/185 p.86 - 97, ill. (in Persian). I wish to express my gratitude to Mrs. M. Tehrani who made this article accessible to me.

NOTES (Continued)

- (14) R. VAN LAERE, Le monnayage des Iles Maldives, Revue belge de numismatique 124(1978), p. 181-184. C.H.B. Reynolds (London) has rightly suggested that my interpretation of the inscription on the Maldivian larin is not the only possible one.
- (15) loc. cit.
- (16) SALMON, De huidige staat van Turkije....., Amsterdam 1733 p.229.
- (17) WOOD op.cit., M.K. HUS(S)AIN, The silver larins, Journal of the numismatic society of India 29, 1967, p.54-72 and M.K. HUSSAIN Fishhook money of Ceylon, Indian Numismatic Chronicle 6,2 (1968), p.59-62.
- (18) See now MITCHINER, op.cit., p.315 and M.MITCHINER, Oriental coins and their values. Non-islamic states & Western colonies AD 600 - 1979, Sanderstead 1979, p.179.
- (19) C. SCHOLTEN, De munten van de Nederlansche gebiedsdelen over zee, Amsterdam 1951, No. 20. The inscription reads: ~~+~~ 
- (20) Mr. N. Lowick kindly advised me that the British Museum has recently acquired some of these 'early' Ottoman larins struck at Baghdad.
- (21) J.B. TAVERNIER, Les six voyages de Jean Baptiste Tavernier....., Paris 1679, vol.II p.590.
- (22) H.W. CODRINGTON, Coins of some kings of Hormuz, Numismatic Chronicle 4th ser. 14 (1914).
- (23) See however W. HINZ, Die spatmittelalterlichen Wahrungen im Bereich des Perzischen Golfes, Iran and Islam 1971 (=Festschrift Minorsky) p.303-314.
- (24) A first draft of this paper was read on 14th April, 1976 during the Colloquium on Islamic coins in the service of research held in the School of Oriental and African studies, London.