

ABSTRACT

From the sea to the shore and beyond: Examining the role of Cowries in ancient and medieval trade networks in India.

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Cowries commonly refer to shells of marine gastropods belonging to the family Cypraeidae, in the phylum Mollusca that inhabit marine ecosystems. In the past due to their distinct shape, ornamentation, designs, colors, etc., cowries were one of the most frequently used shells across the old world. These had been used for adornment, to ward off evil, as fertility charms, in exchange and as currency. Archaeological cowries are now recognized as good indicators of ancient religious beliefs, trade and exchange networks particularly such as the African slave trade. In the Indian subcontinent they first appear during the Indus valley civilization and become common by the medieval periods. Different taxa such as *Cypraea annulus*, *Cypraea arabica*, *Moneta moneta*, *Erosaria lamarcki*, have been recorded however studies regarding them are limited being restricted to only their taxonomic identification. In this lecture by taking into account archaeological and literary evidences for cowries from Indian archaeological sites an attempt has been made to study aspects of their past utilization. The study reveals a long history of cowrie use in India as beads, sacred objects, items of exchange and currency during the ancient and medieval times, initially as early as the mid third millennium BC. Cowries being of marine origin were procured mostly from the Indian west coast but later with increasing demand particularly for the money cowrie (*Moneta moneta*) they were obtained from as far as the Maldives in the Indian ocean. These ancient Indian cowries therefore are a strong testimony to complex interactions that had spanned across the Indian subcontinent and the ocean surrounding it.