

Call for papers: Wages and currency: global and historical comparisons

Event: Symposium Amsterdam/Leiden, Netherlands, 23-25 May 2002

Convenors: International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam and the National Collection of Coins and Medals (KPK: Koninklijk Penningkabinet), Leiden
(in cooperation with ALabour 1500-2000)

Money in the form of coins can be used for many purposes. The literature tends to concentrate on their use in trade. But there are good reasons to assume that coins have been essential for wage payments for thousands of years.

On the basis of an exploratory study into the situation in the Netherlands between 1200 and 2000 (see appendix), we distinguish between three types of coins:

- (1) large-denomination coins (generally, gold and large silver), used mainly for trade;
- (2) small-denomination coins (generally, base metals or low-grade silver), used mainly as change and to pay for daily purchases;
- (3) between these two, medium-denomination coins (generally, high-grade silver but of a low average value), used mainly for wage payments.

For the last two centuries, several forms of paper money can be added to this list.

On this basis we can distinguish, in those societies which have free wage labour, five different cases in terms of the use of specific currencies (see table).

Table

Different uses for coinage in general and for wage payments in particular

Denomination/Case	1	2	3	4	5
large	O	X	X	O	O
medium	O	O	X(W)	X(W)	O
small	O	O	X(W?)	X(W?)	X

Key:

O = no coin circulation

X = coin circulation

X(W) = coin circulation, in particular for wage payments

X(W?) = coin circulation, possibly also for wage payments

Case 1: long-distance trade and wage payments exist, but there is no currency; instead payments in kind (Mesopotamia, pre-Ptolomaic Egypt and possibly other cultures, e.g. pre-Columbian America).

Case 2: long-distance trade uses coins, free wage labour does not exist or is paid in kind (early phases of monetization in general, e.g. early Middle Ages in Europe)

Case 3: both long- and short-distance trade use coins, wage labour is widespread and paid in coins (Western Europe 1300-1500, colonial and semi-colonial Asia).

Case 4: long-distance trade uses bills of exchange or giro-based systems, short-distance trade uses coins, wage labour is widespread and paid in coins (worldwide until 1950, Southern Europe from 1200, Western Europe from 1500, Asia from 1800).

Case 5: trade and wage payments use giro-based systems, only shops need small change (Western Europe and North America 1950-2000).

From these starting points it should be possible, with the help of the transition from case 2 to case 3 in particular, to determine the incidence of free wage labour on the basis of specific patterns of money circulation or vice versa. Or, to put it somewhat more dynamically: substantial increases or decreases in free wage labour should be reflected in the changing pattern of money circulation in the middle range of denominations.

In the transition from case 2 to case 3, it should be borne in mind that under certain circumstances not only medium but also small denominations may play a role in wage payments. After all, the required circulation of small-denomination coins per head is determined by the following conditions, which differ by region and period:

- (a) the frequency of wage payments: when wages are paid weekly rather than a daily, the demand for small-denomination coins is much smaller; in weekly payments, firstly, the employer needs far less small change, and secondly, a system of credit will automatically develop between shopkeepers and wage labourers, so that the latter pay a large part their consumption at the end of the week in medium-denomination coins;
- (b) the distribution of small change: when small change can be distributed easily to meet demand, something which depends mainly on the quality of the transport network and on cultural factors, far less is needed per head than in situations where local shortages or surpluses develop;
- (c) the denominations in which the medium-sized coins are available: to take the Dutch situation, if only silver coins worth NLG 2.50 are available, then more small change is needed per head than if one- or half-guilder pieces are also widely available.

In this way the history of money could play a larger role in the development of global labour history, in particular where sources on labour relations are scarce. Conversely, labour history could also enhance our understanding of monetary history.

We are arguing, then, for an interdisciplinary approach within areas of research which thus far have had barely any contact.

In the workshop ‘Wages and currency: global and historical comparisons’ we want to bring together specialists from all parts of the world to examine on the basis of concrete case studies to what extent the arguments set out here and elaborated for the Netherlands cut any ice, and above all whether a refined set of hypotheses can be developed from this work.

We are therefore calling for the submission of proposals in the following three areas.

(1) Long-distance trade and wage payments exist, but there is no currency; instead payments in kind. Contributions on the practice of wage payments in Mesopotamia, pre-Ptolomaic Egypt and other cultures with free wage labour before coins were used as currency. A variant on this is the situation where coins are used for long-distance trade but not for free wage labour.

(2) Both long- and short-distance trade use coins (increasingly replaced in long-distance trade by bills of exchange and giro-based systems) and wage labour is widespread and paid in coins.

In this area we are aiming for a wide range of papers on wage payments. In any case we are hoping for contributions on:

- the Graeco-Roman and Byzantine periods (500BC-1500AD);
- China (500BC-1900AD);
- India (500BC-1900AD);
- the Islamic world (600-1900AD);
- different parts of Western Europe (1000-1900AD, especially Italy, Britain, France and Germany) and other parts of the world not specified here.

(3) Trade and wage payments use giro-based systems, only shops need small change.

We are thinking here in the first instance of North America and Western Europe since 1950, and increasingly other parts of the world.

We are aiming for an exchange of views at the symposium on the basis of around 15 papers, broadly evenly divided between the areas indicated above.

Proposals for papers (around 500 words) may be submitted to the convenors by 1 October 2001. Responses to the submissions will be made within several weeks of the closing date. Accepted proposals should be worked up into papers by 1 May 2002, and will then be distributed to symposium participants.

If you are uncertain whether your idea fits into the workshop's frame of reference, please contact us. We also welcome suggestions on possible contributions by others. So please do not hesitate to inform others of this call for papers or to pass it on to them.

If your proposal is accepted and you prepare a paper on those lines, your travel and accommodation costs will be reimbursed (further details to follow).

The intention is to publish the symposium's proceedings in English. English will also be the meeting's working language.

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Appendix:

Abbreviated English translation of Jan Lucassen, 'Loonbetaling en muntcirculatie in Nederland 1200-2000', due to appear in *Jaarboek voor Munt- en Penningkunde*, 86 (1999), 1-70.