

# Coinage in Middle-earth

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In a well-known letter, Tolkien lists the many demands made on him by readers asking for more details of the world he had created. "...many want Elvish grammars, phonologies and specimens... Musicians want tunes, and musical notation; archaeologists want ceramics and metallurgy. Botanists want a more accurate description of the mallorn, ... and historians want details about the social and political structure of Gondor..." (*Tolkien 1981, 248*). While numismatists do not figure in the list, I should like to consider what we know, or can deduce, about coinage in Middle-earth. The works published in Tolkien's lifetime supply few details, and refer only to the Third Age. It is therefore fruitless to speculate on the possible use of coins by the Elves or the Númenoreans, though it may be pertinent to note that several ancient civilisations (notably Egypt) managed without coins.

The crucial passages occur in "The fellowship of the Ring", in which Frodo has to buy a new pony at Bree for twelve silver pence, which was three times its value (*Tolkien 1974a, 177*), and Gandalf at the Council of Elrond remarks that the news that Strider had accompanied the hobbits was "worth a gold piece" (*Tolkien 1974a, 253*). There are two other passing references to pennies in use in the Shire, and one or two others to money in general there. In particular, Bilbo gave "a few pennies" to children before the Party. (*Tolkien 1974a, 33*).

This is enough to tell us that even in such backwaters as the Shire and Bree, people habitually used both gold and silver coins, and that among the latter were 'pennies'. One of the unpublished drafts in 'The return of the Shadow' is more specific, because it tells us that "Silver pennies were very valuable in those days" (*Tolkien 1988, 164*), a phrase which suggests that Tolkien really was thinking not just of silver coins in general, but of the comparison with the mediaeval English penny, with which his academic work would have made him familiar. "Very valuable" is an understatement. I am told that an unpre-

tentious male pony might nowadays be bought for about £200, which would equate Frodo's penny with £50 now. The early mediaeval penny had about the same diameter as our present "copper" penny, but, being thinner, less than half its weight. (*Sutherland 1973, 68*).

Other references in the same volume are even more illuminating. For a while, a transcript of Bilbo's will was envisaged as appearing in the story. It included "all monies in gold, silver, copper, brass or tin" (*Tolkien 1988, 247*) and we may therefore suppose that all these metals must have been in use for coinage somewhere (incidentally, a coinage of pure tin would be very unusual in the real world). Moreover, in an early draft it is said that Bilbo spent "his last fifty ducats" (*Tolkien 1988, 16*) on the Party. This denomination may well have been rejected in the end because its name had a specifically Christian reference. The originals were struck in the twelfth century for the Duchy of Apulia, with the legend:

*"Sit tibi, Christe, datus  
Quem tu regis, iste Ducatus",*  
which means:

"O Christ, may this Duchy, which Thou rulest, be given to Thee". But the ducat was later the standard gold coin of Venice for many years, and was accepted throughout Europe. It had about the same diameter and weight as our penny (*Chamberlain 1960, 50*). I think an analogous standard gold coin – very likely struck outside the Shire – was implied here. In a later rejected draft, the Party cost Bilbo "Five hundred double-dragons (gold coins of the highest value in the Shire)". (*Tolkien 1988, 252*). No doubt this was rejected because the dragon, a symbol of evil, was unlikely to be depicted on the coins of any reputable country. However, the passage makes it likely that Tolkien envisaged gold coins of more than one value. In numismatics, the word "double" would usually imply double the weight of another coin, rather than that the design showed two dragons.

But the most valuable reference we

have occurs in 'The peoples of Middle-earth', where a footnote to the etymology of 'Farthing' as a division of the Shire declares: "In Gondor *tharni* was used for a silver coin, the fourth part of the *castar* (in Noldorin the *canath* or fourth part of the *mirian*)". It is explained that *tharni* was an old word for 'quarter', like the English 'farthing'. (*Tolkien 1996, 48*). In the light of this, it is tempting to suppose that the denomination translated 'penny' was indeed the *castar*. The names of the two coins are clearly related to Noldorin (Sindarin) entries in the "Etymologies". Under the heading *Kanat* (four) we find the Noldorin equivalent *canad* (*Tolkien 1987, 362*) and under *Mir* we find Noldorin *Mir* meaning "jewel, precious thing, treasure". (*Tolkien 1987, 373*). We cannot make any direct connection with the English etymology of 'Penny': the Oxford English Dictionary declares the word to be Germanic, but of uncertain meaning (*OED 1989, 482*).

At any rate, England did, from the reign of Edward I, have silver farthings and halfpennies. Before that, these denominations had been supplied by breaking the penny along the lines of the cross which was its reverse design. However, we should note that Edward also introduced the groat of four pence: previously, the penny had been the largest denomination in silver (*Mitchell & Reeds 1997, 97*).

We have no knowledge of how the 'gold piece' related to the silver. If Tolkien was thinking of English analogies, he might have had in mind Henry III's unsuccessful gold penny, worth twenty silver ones. It weighed twice as much as the silver penny (or about the same as our present 5p) and had a diameter about the same as our pound coin. (*Sutherland 1973, 64*). Another possibility would be Edward III's more long-lasting noble (worth eighty pence). In most cases, mediaeval coins were fairly simple multiples or fractions of others. We cannot know what most of the multiples would have been in Middle-earth. On the one hand, Tolkien tells us that "The Eldar preferred to reckon in sixes

and twelves as far as possible" (*Tolkien 1974b, 353*), and on the other hand, the Númenorean reckoning, of length at least, was decimal (*Tolkien 1980, 285*). In the real world, decimal coinage in the modern sense was unknown until Peter the Great introduced it in Russia, so I doubt if it would have prevailed in Middle-earth.

We do not know who struck the coinage of Middle-earth. Given the minimal level of government in the Shire, I feel it is unlikely it could have produced its own coinage. It was common enough in the mediaeval period for the more remote countries to employ foreign currency for lack of their own. For many years the Byzantine *solidus* was thus the standard gold coin over much of Europe. In Middle-earth the predominant coinage must surely have been that of Gondor, which we know did have one (see above). Another likely candidate is Rohan, the civilisation of which is in many ways based on that of the Anglo-Saxons, who had an extensive coinage, mainly of silver pennies.

One would like to know what designs the coins of Middle-earth might have had. Even here, there are one or two clues. Most importantly, in *Unfinished Tales* it is stated that "Gondor after the Kings declined into a 'Middle Age' of fading knowledge, and simpler skills" (*Tolkien, 1980, 403*). This surely means that we ought to be considering parallels from the mediaeval period, rather than the classical coinage with which Tolkien's education would have made him familiar. In that era, the majority of coins bore a very stylised image of a king or other ruler on the obverse, and the reverse was often a cross of some kind, or sometimes the figure of a saint. Heraldic devices appear in the late Middle Ages. Going

back into the Anglo-Saxon period, we find also monograms, inscriptions, swords, crude representations of buildings and, interestingly, in a few cases in the pagan era, a beast that might have been a dragon! (*Mitchell and Reeds 1997, 43-44*). This range of designs poses a problem. Clearly the cross is out of the question for Middle-earth, and in view of the reticence of *The Lord of the Rings* concerning religion, I think any representation of the Valar must also be excluded. Again, since the Stewards of Gondor were so modest as to have no device on their banner, surely they would not have put their own heads on the coinage. What are we left with?



There might have been coins with mere inscriptions – albeit artistically engraved – as was usually the case with Islamic coins. But one finds also in *The Lord of the Rings* and elsewhere occasional references to quasi-heraldic devices (badges rather than coats of arms in the correct sense), as for instance on the Gates of Moria (*Tolkien 1974a, 291*) and I think these are quite likely to have been used on coins. The

reference to dragons mentioned above does at least make it clear that Tolkien thought figurative art, and not just inscriptions, might have been employed.

There is one tantalising reference which allows us to go further. In *Unfinished Tales* it is stated that the seal of the Stewards of Gondor bore the letters "R.N.D.R." surmounted by three stars, signifying 'King's Servant' (*Tolkien 1980, 297*) and a similar device used by King Elendil is actually depicted (*Tolkien 1980, 316*). As the devices on mediaeval coins were quite frequently not dissimilar to those on seals, I think this is our strongest candidate for a Gondorian coin design. Apart from overcoming the difficulty about not depicting the Steward directly, it also suggests that the inscription (no doubt giving the ruler's titles) would be in Sindarin, which would have been used rather than the Common Speech, just as mediaeval coins were inscribed in Latin. Dates and denominations, by the way, were hardly ever inscribed on mediaeval coins, being no doubt of little use in an age of illiteracy.

To conclude, I have ventured to illustrate the design of the Steward's Seal. We do not know how the stars were represented: I have used as a model the three stars which occur, in an analogous position, on top of the coat of arms of the Republic of Latvia. This was a common design on the coins and stamps of that country, and Tolkien could well have seen it.

I believe this is all that can be said to date about the coinage of Middle-earth, unless more can be found in works as yet unpublished. I hope that readers may agree that these scattered references, when brought together, supply us with more information than might have been supposed.

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*Other information from Mrs Ann Cairns.*