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*The world's most curious money? Huge  
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## THE WORLD'S MOST CURIOUS MONEY?

Huge stone discs used on the Micronesian island of Yap

A summary of field studies by THOMAS LAUTZ, Cologne (Germany)



**Fig. 1.**

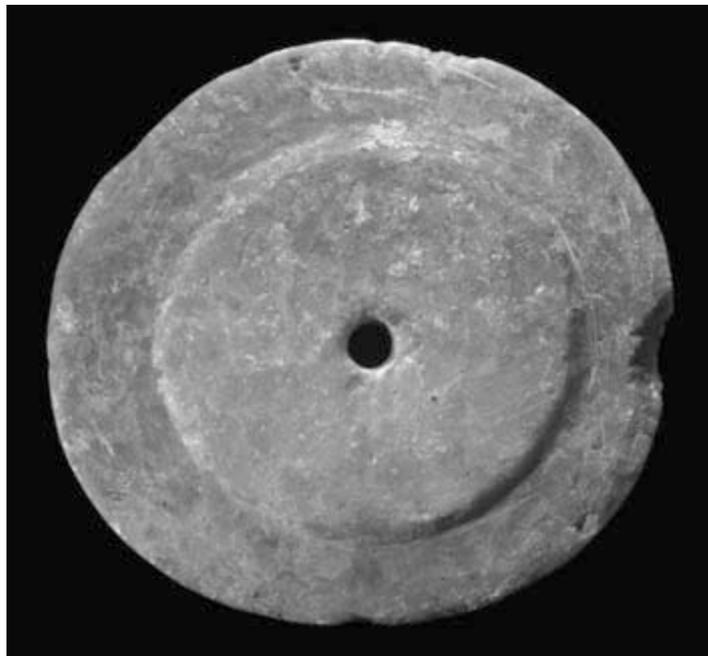
*Don't miss the infamous Yap Stone – a large donut shaped stone  
from the Island of Yap that was once used as currency.*

*([www.ottawa.worldweb.com/SightsAttractions/Museums](http://www.ottawa.worldweb.com/SightsAttractions/Museums)).*

Surfing in the Internet you can find this advice for sightseeing in Ottawa/Canada. Indeed the stone “coins” of Yap are among the most spectacular and interesting items in some museums worldwide, especially museums of monetary history. They

represent the largest “coins” of the world, are unique and quite mysterious. As examples, I mention:

- one piece in the Currency Museum of the Bank of Canada, in Ottawa ([www.currencymuseum.ca](http://www.currencymuseum.ca)), **(Fig. 1)**,
- one in the Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum Hannover, Germany (Department Science and Collections, Ethnological branch; [www.NLMH.de](http://www.NLMH.de)), **(Fig. 2)**
- and two smaller stones on show in my museum, in the permanent exhibition of the Money Museum of the Cologne Savings Bank, Germany (Geldgeschichtliches Museum der Kreissparkasse Köln).



**Fig. 2.**

Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum Hannover, Dep. Science and Collections, Ethnological branch, Collection Konietzko, 1927, Inventory number 7735.  
(Photo: Ursula Stämme, Hannover, 2006).

Not only in museums, but even on the island of Yap, the stone money is nowadays considered a tourist attraction. Yap and Palau are on the tentative list for the Unesco World Heritage since 2004:

- Yapease Disk Money Regional Sites  
([www.whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1994](http://www.whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1994))

- Yapease Quarry Sites on Palau  
([www.whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1932/](http://www.whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1932/))

Museum visitors frequently ask:

- How was it used?
- How did people carry it?
- How did people get the “crazy” idea of using stones for money?

Yap Island, about 30 kilometres (20 miles) in length, is one of the many small islands of Micronesia. Yap State, including Yap Island and several other islands is since 1986 part of the Federated States of Micronesia. Today, there are about 6,000 or 7,000 pieces of stone money left on Yap Island, after the Japanese destroyed many of them during the occupation between World War I and World War II to punish the people of Yap. Now, the US dollar is used as the “normal” currency there.



Fig. 3.

This stone money is typically disk-shaped with a hole in the centre. The largest specimens measure up to some 4 metres in diameter. More commonly, they range in size from half a metre to about 2 metres in diameter. There are two main types:

- Thick and heavy stones with a rough surface: All very large and most average-sized stones belong to this class (**Fig. 3**).
- The second type is more elaborate: These stones have a smooth surface, which is often stepped, two or three steps being most common (**Fig. 4**).

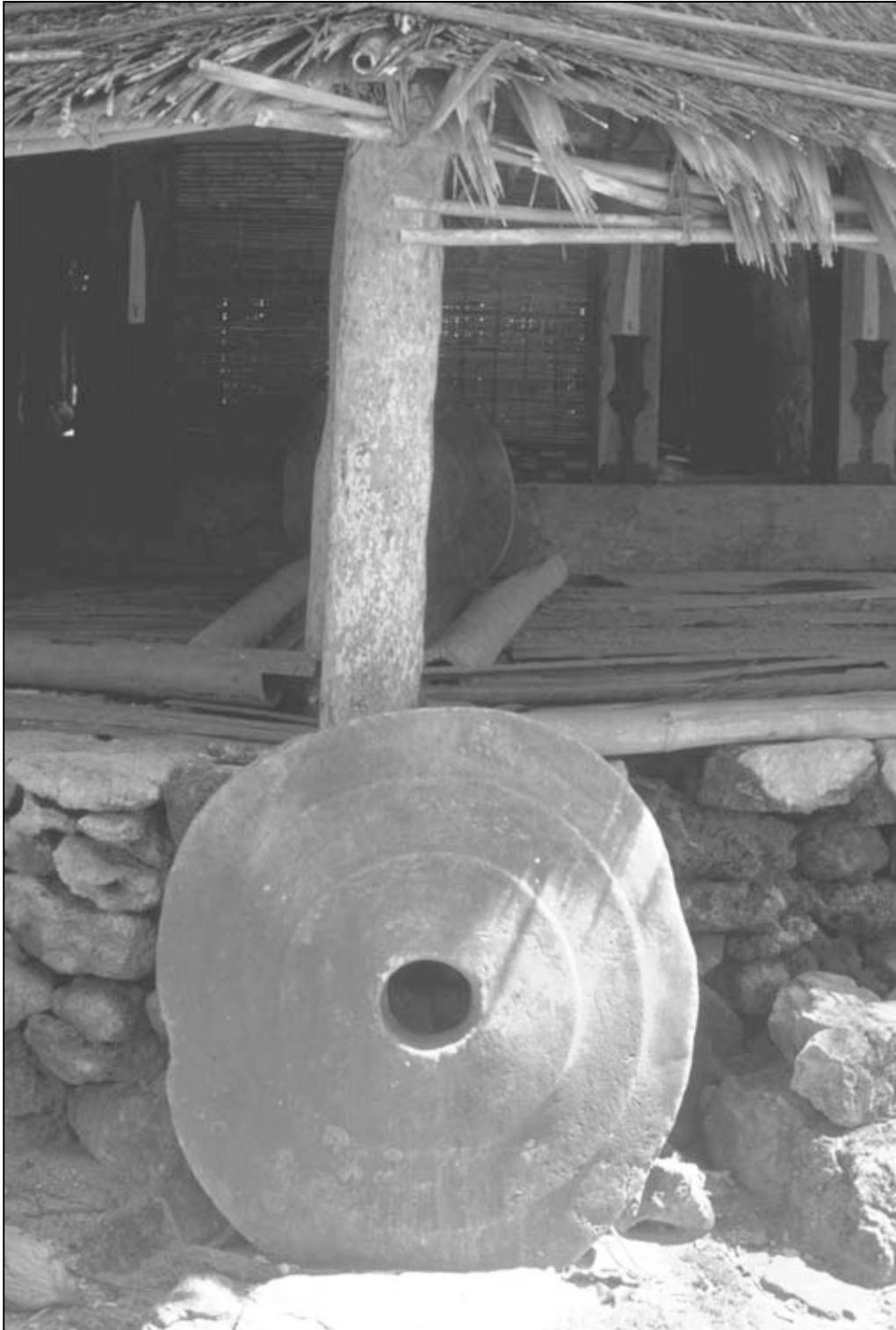


Fig. 4.

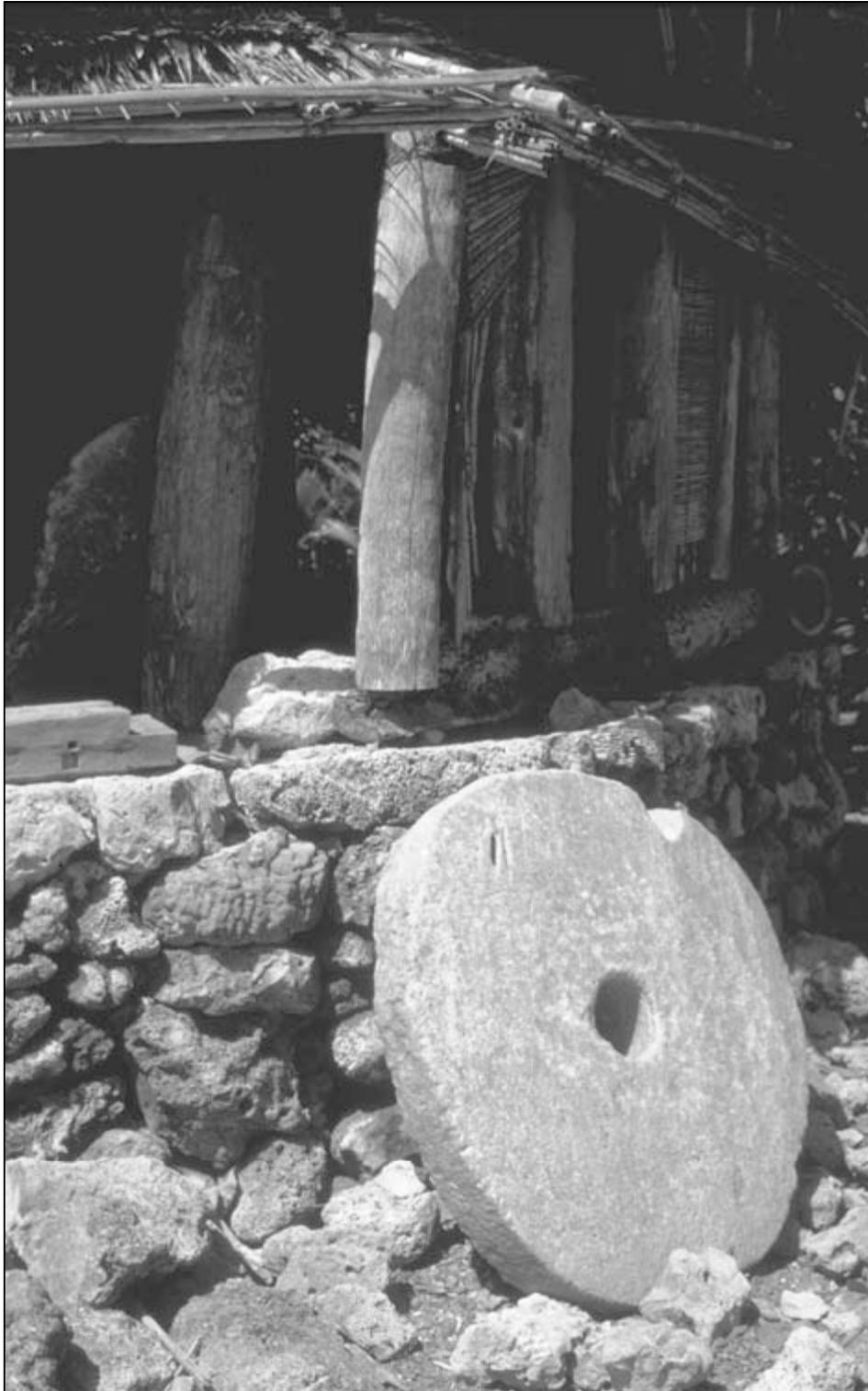


Fig. 4 a.

The elaborate or stepped stone money pieces are normally smaller than the rough ones, and I have never seen an example of this type larger than about 1.50 metres in diameter. The crystalline structure of these smooth stones often reveals itself. The smooth stones look newer than the rough ones, but no information is available concerning their age, or even their relative age. The Yapese people, even their old chiefs, have forgotten much about the history of the individual stones. Asked about the ages of their stones, the knowledge is simply lost.

Besides the above-mentioned two main types of stone money, there are many variations. Some are shaped like millstones (**Fig. 4 a**), others are elegant thin ones with a flower-like pattern around the hole (**Fig. 4 b**), or even with an old inscription of *ZIGZEN*, which even the owner could not explain. On Yap, I found only four stones bearing old inscriptions. In one case, the owner told me an American soldier made the inscription during or after World War II, although it looked much older.

There is no explanation of the meaning of the different types, shapes, and variations thereof. Some people say, they were only intended as a joke, or just "to produce something special". Nevertheless they are part of the cultural and historical identity of Yap.



Fig. 4 b.



Fig. 5.

This is also the case with the three samples I found, with two holes, instead of only one. The local people consider them as something special. The first one is quite big, about 1.5 metres in diameter. It was a monument, the price for a peace treaty between two villages (**Fig. 5**). The second one is 1 metre high. Its history could not be explained. The third one is quite different in shape. It looks like a “Siamese twin” stone, like two stones grown together. It lies in the jungle, overgrown by plants. The last time I went to Yap, I had to show its location to young people walking along the road, because none of them knew about it any more.

There are also broken stones which were not discarded, some of which likely broke during shaping or while the hole was being drilled. Simply drilling a second hole into the remainder of the stone allowed it to be used (**Fig. 5 a**).



**Fig. 5 a.**



Fig. 5 b.



Fig. 5 c.

More questions may be asked:

- Where is this money stored?
- Where can you find it?

Quite different from our usage of money, the owner of the stone money keeps it in front of his house, even today. So everybody can admire his wealth and power. Other stones, especially the large ones, belong to the entire village. Often they are placed in front of a “men’s house” or a community building (**Fig. 5 b**). Many pieces have been arranged in long rows along the road (**Fig. 5 c**). The money might even simply stand in front of a shop in Colonia, the small capital of Yap (**Fig. 6**). Today, many pieces lie overgrown in the jungle (**Fig. 6 a**).

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Yap had an estimated population of about 30,000 people. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, only 2,000 people lived there. Now, some 8,000 people are living on Yap. As a result, many villages were deserted, but the heavy stone money still stands near the old house platforms. Though it is said that the owners of these stones are known to the inhabitants, legal disputes demonstrate that precise ownership knowledge has often been lost. A bigger stone could not be transported as easily as a small one. Normally it would remain in the same place, even when its owner changed. People in this small society were expected to know about the change.

A series of not very realistic advertising pictures from the German Liebig Meat Extract Company from 1901 shows how easily the people handled their heavy stone money (**Fig. 6 b**). I measured one of the biggest stones: It was nearly 4 metres in diameter, and I estimated its weight to be 6,000 kilograms (more than 12,000 pounds). These huge stones are not so easy to handle as people do it on the Liebig pictures – even today (**Fig. 6 c**).



Fig. 6.



Fig. 6 a.



Fig. 6 b.



Fig. 6 c.

The stone used is Aragonite, a mineral (calcium carbonate,  $\text{CaCO}_3$ ) related to limestone, chalk, and marble. The visible differences of these minerals are based on the invisible crystal lattice. Aragonite can be found naturally in almost all shells. It is sensitive to acid. Aragonite is not available on Yap. On Palau it occurs in dripstone caverns. Young people were sent by their village chiefs to the islands of Palau, 400 kilometres west of Yap, to “make money” there. They got permission from the local chiefs on Palau to work in a quarry, but they had to pay for the privilege – perhaps with the glass beads that represent the money on Palau and that are still highly prized there? Another form of payment was *ma*, a mortar made of the shell of *Tridacna*, a giant mussel in the Indo-Pacific area. It was used as a form of money on Yap, too.



Fig. 7.

Sometimes people from Yap had to construct roads on Palau in place of other forms of payment. Yapese people were very badly treated, and in 1871, they were not even allowed to walk upright in the streets of Koror, the capital of Palau. There were many quarries on the small islands of Palau, but the locations of most of them are now unknown. One is situated close to the shore, not far from Koror, and another one is high up in the jungle (**Fig. 7**). One of the few old photos taken by the German ethnologist Wilhelm Müller-Wismar (1881–1916) around 1900 shows how the stone money was crafted. The stones were transported to the shore and loaded on rafts. Some, maybe too heavy to be transported, remained near the quarries on Palau (**Fig. 6 c**). A book written by the German businessman and ethnologist Franz Hensheim (1845–1909) in 1883 contains an early lithograph showing how the money was transported on rafts. The size and weight of the stone money was limited by the means of transportation (**Fig. 8**).

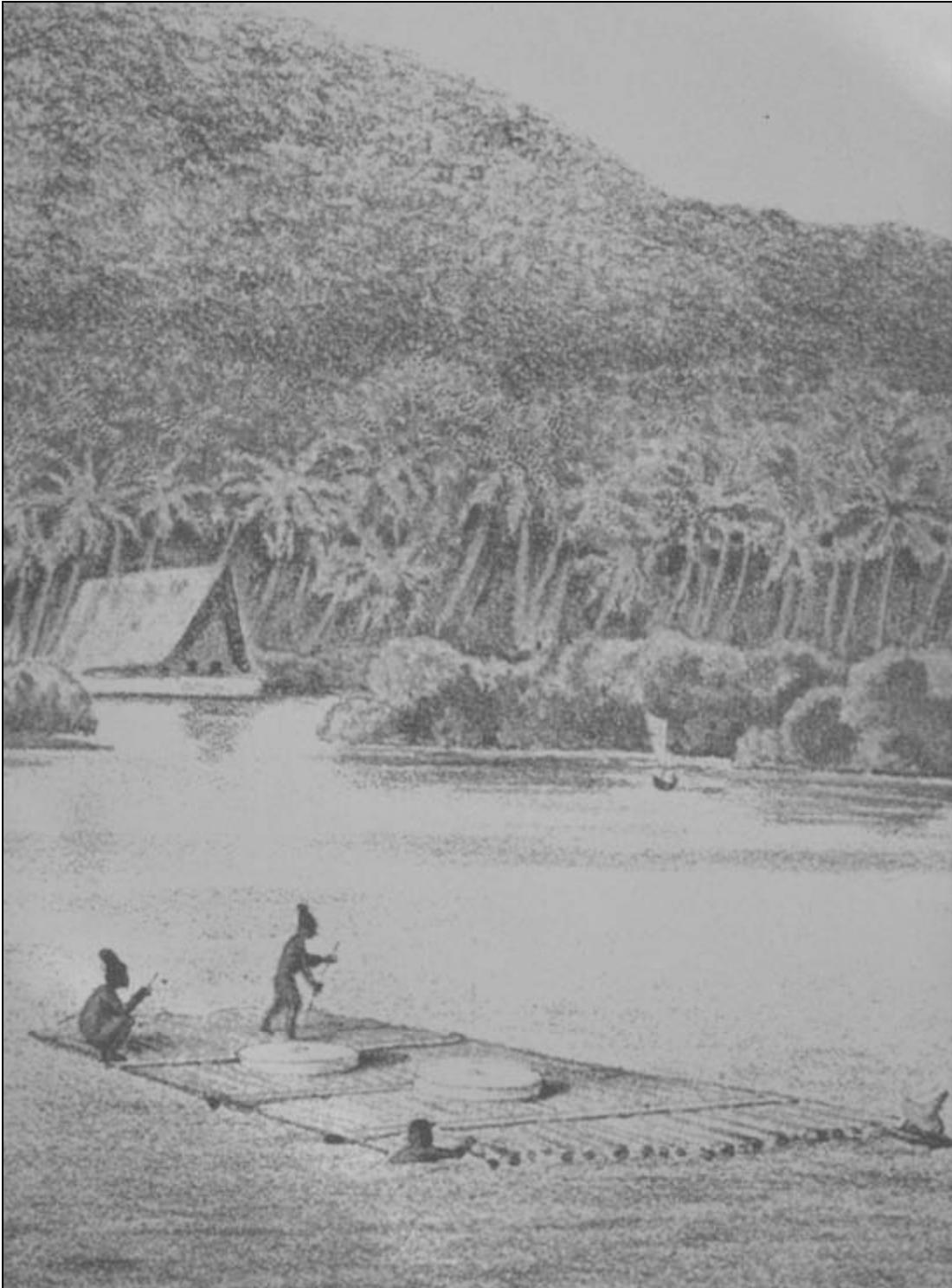


Fig. 8.

There was a big change in the Yapese economy in 1871, when an adventurous captain, the legendary David Dean O'Keefe from Savannah, Georgia, USA, was shipwrecked on Yap. He recovered and learned about the importance of the stone money. Later, he came back with an old *lurcha*, a type of Chinese junk. He founded a trading company on Yap and began to transport stone workers from Yap to Palau and stones from Palau to Yap. He was paid in copra (dried meat, or kernel, of the coconut) and became very wealthy.

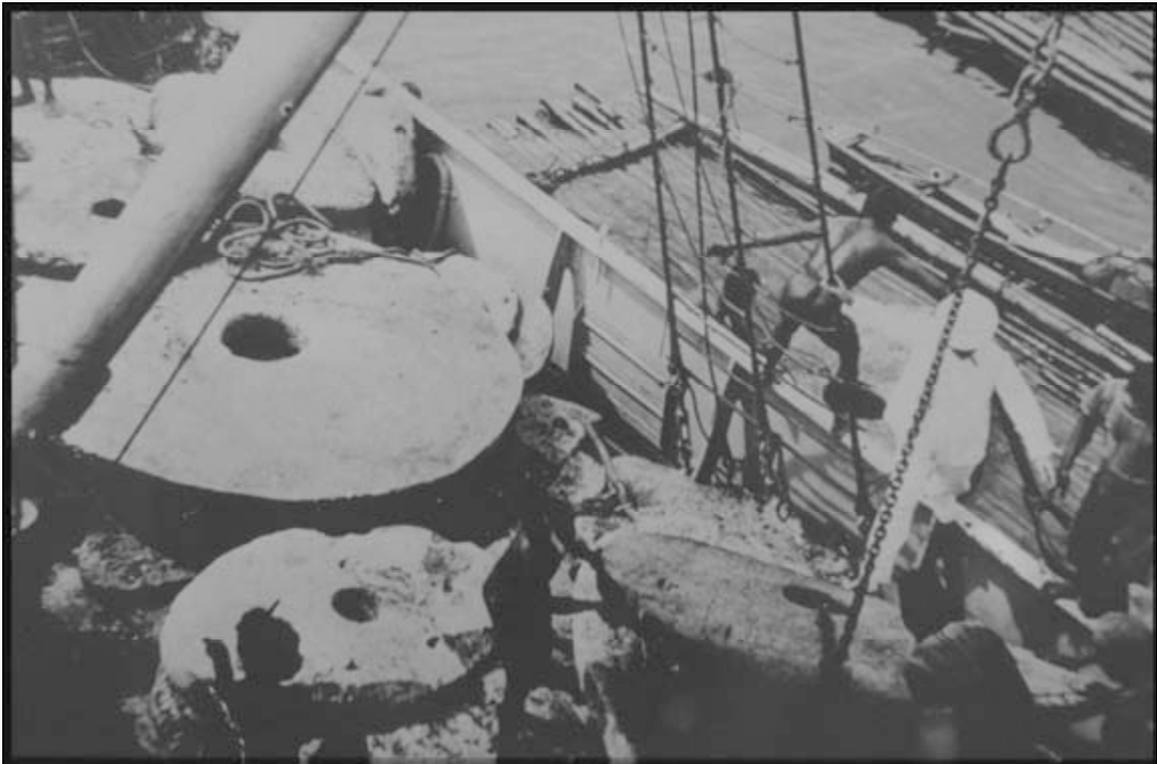


Fig. 9.

Until now, I could not find a picture of *His Majesty O'Keefe* (also the title of a novel and a 1954 movie, starring Burt Lancaster) – as he was called. His use of steamers made it possible to transport very large and heavy stones. This caused inflation, as the number and size of stone “coins” was no longer limited by the difficulty of transportation, but only by the difficulty of making them. By 1880, more than 400 Yapese people were reportedly shaping stones and “making money” on Palau. It was not O'Keefe who caused the inflation, as is often maintained, but rather the people of Yap themselves. On an old photo, we can see a traditional raft, from which the stones are loaded on a steamer (**Fig. 9**).

In 1885, the Spaniards landed on Yap to claim the island for Spain. At the same time, the Germans also claimed it. The dispute was settled by the Pope: The

Roman Catholic country of Spain got the island as a colony. Neither O'Keefe nor the people of Yap were asked. In 1899, Spain finally sold the Micronesia for 4.5 million dollars to Germany, as it needed money after losing the Spanish-American War (1898), where it lost the last important colonies. Probably the only German relics on Yap are three concrete blocks on which a huge wireless radio mast, destroyed during World War I, was fixed. Between the wars, the League of Nations authorized Japan to occupy Yap. The last piece of stone money was produced in 1931. Even this piece was destroyed by the Japanese, who used the material as gravel for construction work.

Let us now come to the most puzzling questions:

- How did the people of Yap get the idea of using these stones as money?

Actually, there is no answer to this question. It remains one of the world's mysteries.

- When did they start using stone money?

The earliest source describing Yap dates from the 1770s, telling about a chief with a throne made of silver. In the 1840s, the seats of the chiefs were reportedly made of highly esteemed white stones. Even today, you can find seats of chiefs made of Aragonite stone. To me, the argument *seat-stone is valuable – let us make money from stone* is not very convincing. A different theory claims that the pieces of stone money are formed like huge beads and hence are inspired by shell or stone beads. Indeed, most of the traditional money of the Pacific region started as jewellery: for example, bracelets of Tridacna shell from the Solomon Islands (east of Papua New Guinea), weighing more than 10 kilograms and hence much too heavy to wear, or small shell beads from New Britain (Bismarck Archipelago of Papua New Guinea).

I doubt this theory. There are small disks (less than 8 centimetres in diameter) of stone money in various German and other museums, collected before World War I. However, very old Yap inhabitants told me that their smallest *rai* – as they call their stone money – would be not less than some 25 centimetres (10 inches) in diameter. They laughed, when I showed them a picture of the small stones, and told me that they made things like these for tourists in the 1950s. When I told them that these small stones were collected in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they could not explain it. Maybe in this earlier epoch their ancestors, too, made souvenirs?

The Ethnographic Museum of Berlin displays the only piece of evidence of the bead theory, a string of red shell beads collected in 1886. Among the beads made from red Spondylus (English: Spiny Oyster) shells, there are two disk-shaped beads made of Aragonite stone (**Fig. 10 a**). However, they do not occupy a prominent place on the string, and to me they look rather like a substitute for shell, not like a highly prized piece of money. These strings of red shell beads, called *gau*, represent a different kind of Yapese money, even more valuable than stone money (**Fig. 10 b**).



Fig. 10 a.



Fig. 10 b.



Fig. 11.

Much more could be said about this stone money and about other types of money used in Micronesia – such as the pearl shells representing the “small change” on Yap (**Fig. 11**). Nowadays, the stone money is rarely used for paying fines or buying land, as was done before. Yet the people of Yap proudly depict it on their car licence plates, in advertisements, and as the seal of state – or simply sit on it when it is time for a rest.

**For further reading:**

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