THE EMERGENCY COINAGE OF GERMAN EAST AFRICA - THE TABORA SOVEREIGN

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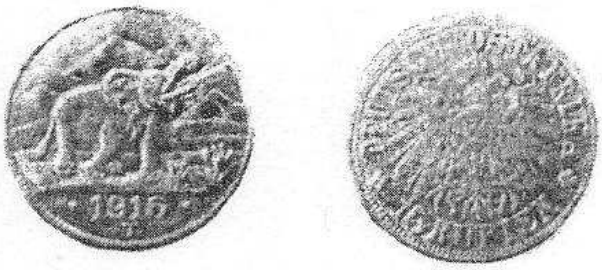
Tabora was well known during the 19th century as a stopping place for Arab caravans going inland from Zanzibar in search of slaves and ivory. During the establishment of German East Africa, Tabora became an administrative center on the Central Railway.

During the 1st World War the British naval ships effectively blockaded the coast of German East Africa. There was hoarding of the silver rupee and the other silver coins. To alleviate the shortage the Germans printed bank notes amounting to 20 million rupees, of various denominations.

The Germans also minted the 5 and 20 Heller coins in brass and copper. They really showed their initiative when they struck a 15 rupee gold coin at Tabora in 1916. By this time Tabora had became the administrative capital of German East Africa.

The English sovereign was legal tender in Zanzibar and British East Africa during the 1st World War. The Tabora 15 Rupee gold coin quickly came to be called sovereign although properly speaking it is not a sovereign at all, in that it does not display the head of the ruler.

The tradition of the German gold coinage was broken, in that the head of the ruler was not displayed.



The coin is described as follows:

Obverse: Within a plain circle and a circle of dots an elephant with extended trunk passing a range of mountains showing six peaks, the bottom separated by a line, date and mintmark for Tabora beneath.

Reverse: Within a plain circle and circle of dots the Imperial German crowned eagle, charged with the arms of Prussia, surrounded by the legend DEUTSCH OSTAFRIKA * 15 RUPIEN *.

Rim: Plain.

The history of the coin is fascinating. In 1915 the German government asked for men from the ship of a firm called M/S H. M. Malis de Silva in Dar-es-Salaam to go to Tabora to operate a mint. Their principal office was in Zanzibar.

A Sinhalese named Vithaire had worked with M/S H. M. Malis de Silva in Zanzibar and had come to Dar, in 1910, when the German government held a fair. Vithaire, as foreman, and three others went to Tabora. Their names were Mr. Simion, Mr. Charleshamy and Mr. L. B. Charleshamy.

The enterprising Germans had already made a minting machine from the wrecks of Kronberg and Tabora (1).

The gold used for making the coin was from Sekenke mines which is not far from Tabora. This gold contained a proportion of silver. As minted, the pieces were of 18Kt. gold, i.e. fineness .750/1.000. (Remick and others give the gold content as .600) (2).

Vithaire was responsible for stamping while his three colleagues were employed in smoothing the pieces of roughness.(3) The machinery was crude and most probably the first die broke necessitating a second die.

Working dies are themselves normally "struck" from a master die, but this was not so regarding all the emergency coins of Tabora. The dies were directly engraved and used.

Why did the Germans take so much trouble to mint the gold coins? There is no doubt that there was a shortage of silver coins and banknotes and the Germans had already issued the rupee notes, of different values. To boost the confidence in their issue, the Germans used the local Swahili language on the notes.

Up to 1914, the Germans had used the gold coins of the fatherland, when needed. Among the Arab and Indian traders, who were the main people in commerce, any gold coin was good, and the army, so ably led by General von Lettow Vorbeck, thought of the right idea to get the goods from the producers and dealers. Dr. Schnee (4) writes that bullion worth one million gold marks was available and this bullion was useless unless coined in some way.

The reason why the Germans issued the 15 Rupee coin was that in Zanzibar and British East Africa, where the Indian rupee was the legal tender, 15 Rupees were equal to 1 sovereign. The sovereign was very popular and to boost the confidence of the local traders, the Germans issued a coin which would ensure that they would receive the goods from the traders, to enable them to fight the war.

It has been remarked that the pieces were struck with dies made by an engraver of great skill and artistic ability. In fact it was thought at one time that the dies were made in Germany and smuggled into East Africa by submarine.

The reverse of the coin has an Imperial German eagle, same as the obverse of the 1 Pysa and German silver mark which were in general usage in German East Africa.

The obverse is something different. The design suggests an oriental quality.

However, I feel that the engraving is very poor on the obverse side. The left foreleg of the elephant is badly drawn. Most probably the engraver could not produce a good likeness of the Imperial portrait and used his own initiative. The engraver was from Ceylon, with great attachments with elephants and Tabora was at the time the Centre of Ivory Trade, so the choice of an elephant was not bad. Regarding the six mountains at the back much can be theorized but little proved.

16,198 pieces were made before the Belgians captured Tabora on 18 September 1916. There were two die varieties as follows:

(1) Right Arabesque ends under A of OSTAFRIKA, mintage 6,395.

(2) Right arabesque ends under TA of OSTAFRIKA, mintage 9,803.

According to translation in *Tanganyika Notes and Records* of Jaegar (5), the die which has scroll beneath the letters TA of OSTAFRIKA is a false reverse die, so according to him it means that more than half of the Tabora sovereigns are false.

I believe that the second die was not a forgery. The machinery used for minting was crude. In fact, according to the *Handbook of Tanganyika* (6), the stamping machinery broke down and the whole of July output of gold coins was stamped at the factory of the Ostafrikaniscene Olfatrik Geselchaft at Lulanguru, with the aid of an oil press placed at the disposal of the government free of charge.

So the die must have broken making necessary another reverse die.

The Tabora sovereign held the fascination of all goldsmiths and collectors since the day it was minted. After the end of the war it became very popular with the British soldiers as a souvenir item. It reached the value of 200/- around 1924. Around this time the tale was spread by certain money lenders in Zanzibar that Vithaire had forged them in considerable quantities in Zanzibar and was sentenced to imprisonment in Zanzibar. However, this was not true but it served the purpose of the money changers undermining confidence in the inflated value as currency. One of the advantages of the popularity has been that very few were melted down for the gold.

However, tales do not die quickly and whenever I have inquired for a Tabora sovereign, I have been asked "Can you differentiate between the original and the counterfeit?".

Has anyone done light chemical analysis of the two varieties of the coins? Both the varieties have the same weight. So, if someone did forge the Tabora sovereign, what gold did he use, and how did he get the original obverse die?

References:

(1) KRONBERG, a German ship, was sunk off the coast of Tanga, while TABORA was sunk in Dar-es-Salaam harbor.

(2) Remick and others - *Catalogue of British Commonwealth Coins*, 3rd Edition.

(3) Dr. G. S. P. Freeman Grenville, *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, p.50 Number 50, June 1958.

(4) Dr. H. Schnee (then German governor of German East Africa). *Deutsch - Ostafrica in West Krige*, p.280 ff.

(5) K. Jaegar, *Die Reichmunzen seit 1871* - Translation in *Tanganyika Notes and Records, p.133, Number 52, March 1959.*

(6) 1st Edition (Ed. G. F. Sayers).

(7) Dr. G. S. P. Freeman Grenville, op. cit.

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