

SEASHELLS WERE USED AS MONEY

Shell money was used all over the world, although the specific type of shell varied greatly. Usually, shells would be crafted into money before going into circulation — such as wampum, which were beads made from clam and whelk shells by Indigenous peoples in the northeastern U.S. Rings made from sea snail shells called Tabu are still used in Papua New Guinea today.

Long before the gold standard came and went, seashells were a hot commodity — so much so that they were the preferred currency in various civilizations around the world. Cowrie shells, which come from small sea snails, were particularly widespread. While there's some disagreement among historians about when cowries evolved from valuable items to functional currency, it's likely that it happened during the Zhou dynasty in China (around 1046 to 256 BCE). The shells declined in use in the 19th century, but were still used as money in Bengal and some parts of West Africa up until the early 20th century.

In ancient times, there was no color more luxurious than Tyrian purple, and some Roman emperors even threatened punishment by death to any non royals caught wearing the color. Not that anyone else could afford it, anyway: The deep reddish-purple shade was made from snail mucus, and it took around 10,000 snails to make a single gram of dye. The process for turning the snails into pigment was a closely guarded secret, and around the 15th century, that knowledge was lost, despite modern archaeologists trying to piece it back together.

Unlike most shell money, cowrie shells were used whole and unaltered. In addition to their intrinsic value as an adornment, cowries are durable, portable, and hard to counterfeit. They were also exceedingly difficult to harvest — except in the Maldives, a remote archipelago in the Indian Ocean that, until relatively recently, was extremely difficult to visit.

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