

Interview with Jan Lingen 12.07.2024

Keywords

JL: Jan Lingen

SG: Shreya Gupta

SG: Hello, I'm Shreya Gupta. I'm a third year PhD researcher at the University of Exeter and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, working on an AHRC funded collaborative doctoral project, titled decolonizing collections, investigating knowledge formation networks in colonial India with special reference to numismatics. The project looks at the history of four collections of Indian coins that are currently held in the Ashmolean, the British Museum in London, and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. While these collections are named after four European male coin collectors, we know very little about the Indian dealer scholars and collectors who helped them in assembling these collections. My aim is to uncover their role in creating these coin collections, and in producing expert knowledge about Indian history and numismatics on their basis. This interview was conducted as part of my PhD research under the topic afterlife of South Asian coin collections in UK museums. Here, I'm interviewing coin collectors, curators and scholars who work with Indian coins to inquire about the afterlives of these collections after they're acquired by UK museums, as well as understanding the interests and motivations of coin collectors and curators in collecting, studying and working with coins from South Asia.

Today I am interviewing Jan Lingen. Jan can I ask you to introduce yourself.

JL (1:28): I am Jan Lingen, from Netherlands, born the 15th of September, 1942. Well, professionally, I've been working as building engineer / architect and in that respect, I was asked in 1968, or actually 1967, whether I would [like] go to India to look after the construction of the Netherlands embassy

SG: Lovely.

JL: And that changed my life

SG: in better ways?

JL: Oh, yes, definitely.

SG: Yeah.

JL: I stayed there for about four and a half, almost five years to look after building of the Chancery, other houses and also the [restoration and renovation of the] residency of the ambassador, which was in Delhi very well known as Jinnah's Kothi.

SG: Oh, yes, I know that.

JL: And it was nice to work on such a historical building.

SG: Must be

JL (2:58): And then, after I came back in 1972 August, 1972, well, I joined the architect's office again and was a project manager for the [design of the] Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The new Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague. Now, they have moved from there and presently it [houses] our parliament, because the old part of the Parliament in the Netherlands is completely, going to completely overhauled and yeah, restore it in the old way and that will take a few years. So, for the time being they remodelled the old Ministry of Foreign Affairs into a parliament building. And when I finished that project up till the invitation for tenders, then I left the architect's office and went to ABN AMRO Bank as project developer for various projects for [the bank]. And I retired from there in 2002.

SG: Okay, lovely.

JL: After that I spent more time on my interest, particularly Indian coins.

SG: Lovely, lovely. That's a great segue into my next question, which is what sparked your interest in studying coins?

JL (4:55): I had always an interest in archaeology. But why you should study, you think how to earn a living with that. Just practically, so I opted for building construction, building engineering and architecture and I did that [after finishing my study] till I went to India, and when I was there, I had much more time to look around. Sometimes you feel like walking around as Alice in Wonderland because so many things are different.

SG: I agree

JL (5:50): And you come into contact with many other people. One was an employee of the French Embassy, a military attaché and he was already for a couple of years [in India] and he asked me, [when] I was at his residence and showed what he has collected over the years and of course, Flintlock rifles etc but he had also a nice showcase, a glass top showcase with coins and I was really fascinated by it. As a boy you do collect all kinds of things, one of my favourite was at that time pins from various firms, advertisement pins, but for the rest not much of interest. Well, when you go on holidays you go to archaeological sites here and there.. But now when you see these things, and there were also coins of the Dutch East India Company among them, which during your study you are not aware of the activities of the Dutch East Indies in India, because it was in Indonesia, Batavia. Where did you find these (I said)?, well, here just in the market. So and he asked me at the same time, that was about May 1968, that he asked me: do you also have coins?. I said well, recently, while I was in in Agra, and I went to Fatehpur Sikri and there were some hawkers on the roadside, they had some objects they are round flat and the show nice images on it. May I have a look at them?

SG: Yeah

JL: And when I showed him, he was laughing, he said these are not coins. These are temple tokens. 'Ramatankas'.

SG: Yeah, Ramatankas.

JL (8:36): Okay, they look nice to me but I hadn't any knowledge about it but you're stimulated to know something more about it and the next day when I was at Connaught Place, in a bookstore, and there was a book of Parmeshwari Lal Gupta..

SG: Coins.

PL: Coins, yes. I bought that and I read that just in one row

SG: Sorry, just checking it
Go on, go on, this is recording.

JL (9:22): and then you see there are lots of plates in it, in the book of Parmeshwari Lal Gupta. At the Tibetan market, on Janpath, in New Delhi, there, you find various coins. Tried to find them in the book of Gupta, a couple of them you could find. I remember [that one of] the first coins was of the token coinage of Muhammad Tughlaq. And yes, Tughlaqabad was the favourite place to go there on a Sunday afternoon. And so, you keep on collecting more and more coins. But after a while you have a handful of coins that you can't attribute, they are not illustrated in the book, you'll buy other books. The next book was the Pathan kings of Delhi by Thomas.

SG: Yes.

JL (10:39): [With] this book I could attribute again a couple of coins than other books. But ultimately, you're still left with a handful of coins which you can't attribute and then you're forced to try to learn the language on it.

SG: Yes

JL: There was a lady at that time, a Dutch lady who spoke, in my opinion, very nice Urdu and I asked her whether she was able to teach me Urdu. She said, you need to have a native speaker for that because what I know is also learned at school. So, she sent me a someone from Nizamuddin and he didn't spoke much of English but taught me the alphabet and I remember his first lesson when he showed the whole alphabet and he said well it's no use for me to come back until you know from ...

SG: Alif to

JL: Alif to Hey and back
Okay, then we make an appointment after 14 days. He was looking at me.....

SG: He didn't expect you to learn in 14 days.

JL (12:31): No, but you see you're motivated to do so. From then on you keep on trying with, his help, the combination with letters, combining them and the fun of it, from the coin side you had a few coins I know, one is struck in Arcot, I am looking at 'Alif', 'Rey', 'Kaaf', 'tey', yes Arcot! It's there! So coins serve as kind of homework.

SG: That must be very fun.

JL (13:12): Yeah, that is and by that way you do sometimes discover new things, new mints, new names and that makes it attractive, fascinating and motivating to go on.

SG: I can imagine. That sounds really interesting actually, your time in learning the language. So, what kind of Indian coins did you start specializing particularly in, what did you what attracted your interest?

JL: I collected all Indian coins from the very beginning up till [Indian] independence.

SG: Okay.

JL (13:59): But during the years, I focused much more on the Islamic series because I could read that better. Well Brahmi is, if it is very well written you can read it, Kharoshti and all the other languages, but with Urdu, Persian that I could read better, ...

SG: of course

JL: .. and that makes it more attractive. And also specially the Indian princely states is also a very interesting series. I did find a lot of new and interesting things. And the most complicated series, among the princely states are the coins of Jodhpur, Marwar.

SG: I'm not far away. My hometown is in Udaipur.

JL: Udaipur.

SG: Yeah. Little far but,

JL: Yeah

SG: Okay

JL: I've been several times in Udaipur.

SG: I am sure, yeah.

JL: But Marwar. I initially did a book together with Ken Wiggins.

SG: Coins. Sorry, Marwar Jodhpur

JL (15:40): No, the first was the 'Coins of the Sindhias'. And when that was completed, we had a plan to update Webb, that was the 'Currencies of Hindu States of Rajputana'. We started with that, but Ken passed away. Hans Herrli did some work for it but he is also old nowadays and once there is not that motivation to go on with it, but then Stan Goron, probably a name you have also heard, he said, 'well, Jan, Jodhpur, you must finish'. So, he said, 'you can send me the drafts, I edit it wherever it is necessary'. So, I finished that part. What is the most complicated series of Jodhpur, that a couple of mint towns use the same mint name, and to distinguish them from one another you need a lot of material.

SG: Yes, I can imagine

JL (17:07): And particularly the 'daroga' marks are important for that. And much of luck, we found also an old Gazetteer from the 1800s (VS1940; 1883-84) and that we could translate, Shailendra [Bhandare] has done work on it and [also] the Indian Institute [of Research in Numismatic Studies] in Nasik, because there were charts in bankers shorthand, and, but there was somebody at the Institute in Nasik who could translated this. [Fortunately] the whole thing is documented now.

SG: Amazing.

JL (18:11): I know many of the people will use the book only for coins and see whether it is in the book or not. But most important thing is that the old Gazetteer there is translated and can be used by

SG: anyone who needs it.

JL: Yes, and by researchers.

SG: That's great. Yeah, exactly. So, and the first book, how did you start writing that, the one on the Sindhias?

JL (18:45): The first book was also because it was a complicated series, the coins of the Sindhias, [Mahaji] Sindhia was one of the Maratha generals and a very important one. Presently I'm with Maheshwari, the other author of the first book on ~~Maratha coins and mints~~ [correct: Maratha Mints and Coinage], which he did with Ken Wiggins, but now it needs to be updated and he asked me to cooperate with that. But, so, if you see the importance of Mahaji Sindhia in Northern India and finally, well, he created his own state in Gwalior but there were so many mints and mint towns where activities of the Marathas took place. We, both, Ken Wiggins and I had a nice collection of these coins, but too many questions. So, we joined together. Ken went to BM, to Oxford, to Fitzwilliam, Cambridge. So, we could make a good inventory of it and we wrote a book. Well, of course, over the years, that that was done in the 70s, of last century, over the years, additions are there. Still. I can say the book is still useful.

SG: I would agree. Yeah, I'm sure it is. And it sounds great. Interesting process behind how you collaborated with other people to write it. So you've mentioned that you worked

with Ken Wiggins, of course, and you mentioned Stan Goron, who are some of the other people that you, that formed your numismatic community, so to speak.

JL (21:14): You see, I was fascinated by Parmeshwari Lal Gupta. So, he lived at that time, at the Institute in Nasik. So, I went there, met him on a few occasions and he also came once or twice to our house in the Netherlands because he did some work that time for the British Museum.

SG: Yes.

JL: And on the way he passed by and so are so many others. Whether it was Hans Herrli who was with us, who knows a lot about Indians coins, he travelled very much in India. Ken Wiggins. People like Pridmore, hardly anybody can remember them, only by name. I went there with Ken Wiggins together. Just mention any at present, whether that is Nicholas Rhodes and I have been so much in contact with these. Yeah, you're exchanging information.

SG: Yes. And you talk about your collecting interests, and your interpretations and theories.

JL: Often you see people, daily, I get a number of questions from India.

SG: I am sure, via email, etc. Yeah.

JL: Yeah. Facebook and emails and WhatsApp. It's a daily process. "What is this, what's that, can you help me with this?" And so, we help each other.

SG: Yeah, yeah.

JL (23:31): And I think I attended all the international numismatic conferences, which are held every six years. And there you meet also so many. The first one I went to was in London, later on in Glasgow, Berlin, Brussels. So. when the international conference in Brussels was, that was in nineteen ninety-one.

SG: Okay.

JL: I was the president of the Royal Dutch Numismatic Society, and it celebrated in the next year 1992 its centenary. So, it was also a combined event in 1991 and 92. Because the Dutch Society was founded actually, on the occasion of the [Royal] Belgium [Society]. The Belgians were 50 years older, to us. And then the Dutch people attended the first congress in Brussels, (1891), whether we should have such a Society in the Netherlands. So, in 1892 Royal Dutch Numismatic, or actually, initially the Dutch Numismatic Society was founded. And a couple of years later (1898), they were allowed to call themselves Royal. So, in that environment you meet so many people.

SG: Yes, I'm sure

JL: From institutions and

SG (26:04): And I'm sure you met others in museums, in the British Museum, in Ashmolean and Fitzwilliam

JL: At Cambridge. Glasgow, Hunterian

SG: Yes, Hunterian, definitely. Okay.

JL: And in the Netherlands, of course, the Rijksmuseum

SG: Yes. I'm curious, are there other people interested in Indian coins in Netherlands?

JL: Yes, because of the historical background

SG: Colonial connections

JL (26:40): Yes, particularly colonial connections. And, there was a certain stage when the Royal Coin Cabinet was still, well, not joined with the Mint Museum, which became the Money Museum which ultimately had to close the doors and is now the National Numismatic Collection (NNC) with the Dutch Bank. But well, when it was still the coin cabinet, the royal coin cabinet. There, we had a serious discussion that they would take over my collection because that would not overlap too much of their collection. But since everything went another way, the museum was closed the Money Museum was closed and the collection [of the museums] was taken over by the Dutch bank.

SG: So that's where your collection is now

JL: My collection is for most part is in the Netherlands.

SG: I can imagine

JL: It's only the two parts. One is the Gupta collection which went over to Sanjeev Kumar, the writer of this book on the Guptas. And I had a Jahangir Portrait Mohur, one of the greatest rarities

SG: Yes

JL (28:46): They were well after me for a long, long time. And so, well it's not for sale and then they were offered to stop unless someone comes with an offer of a crore of rupees I will come and bring it, and then it was silent for a while, another offer came, and then, all of a sudden, ... "Sir when can you come?", I said okay, as they had agreed to pay a crore of rupees for it. That's a lot of money.

SG: That is.

JL: Yeah, that I, yeah. So, I thought well, so I brought it back to it India

SG: That's amazing though. It's a rare piece, no doubt.

JL: Yeah

SG: Yeah, I see.

JL: So, for the rest I still keep on adding to my collection from time to time.

SG: So, you're still collecting, exchanging? Yeah.

JL (30:06): I do work also for Heritage Auctions Europe, only, a day, one day a week, approximately. And then you come across so many other interesting things. Not that much of Indian coins, Indian coins, you do come across, that is not exceptional, but [also] the whole field of South Asia, Southeast Asia. And with the help that you understand more of the Islamic language, you can interpret various coins of the Indonesian archipelago, and also so many sultanates. And I've been able to locate, to attribute some coins to certain Sultanates, Boné [on Sulewesi] and that's where, just you, you [discover] new things. That's also fascinating.

SG: Yes. And it keeps you connected to the, to this interest that you have. That's great. Yeah, it's a way to sustain it. So, you'd mentioned the International Numismatic Congresses, you're also involved with the ONS?

JL: Yes.

SG: How? How useful have you found the ONS as a community of

JL (31:54): I have been always stimulating. I was secretary for, for the ONS in Europe, from, I think 1994, say around about 25 years. I have been, a secretary for Europe, twice a year at a Coin Fair we [managed] a promotion stand for the ONS, did a number of advertisements in numismatic magazines.

SG: Yes.

JL: We still have free advertisement in "De Beeldenaar", Dutch [Numismatic] magazine.

SG: Okay.

JL (32:59): So, since 2019, Patrick Pasmans has taken over the secretary for Europe. Because it is very difficult to find, good, active people to drive a society. Consumers, there are enough, but people who will do the work. So, when Patrick came by, by that he said, well, he had started Institute in Belgium. And he said, well, I stop now being director of it, somebody else will take it over. So well, then I have a good job for you. And he does it, I think very, very well.

SG: Okay. Lovely

JL: So absolutely active and has other contacts with in France and also in Austria. So that's, that's good.

SG: And you go to all the meetings and conferences. You're going to one tomorrow,

JL: Well, it's not a conference, but anyway, it is after so long ... it is sometimes good to refresh the contacts. You can do much on Zoom and everything but to meet each other in discussion. We could have done this on Zoom. But

SG: It won't be the same.

JL: Absolutely not. The way we can talk to each other.

SG (34:59): It's it's much better. I do agree. You've mentioned some of the people that you're in touch with from Europe and from UK. From India, you mentioned Shailen of course and you mentioned Sanjeev Kumar who you gave your [Gupta] collection to.

JL: Yeah, but in India, there are, I have so many, now Kamal Maheshwari, the one, the author of the Maratha book and he did his PhD for, on the Indian Sassanian coins.

SG: Yes

JL (35:55): I am acquainted with, ...whether it is ... and other people, unfortunately, couple people have passed away, but at the Institute in Nasik I had good contacts, in Hyderabad, and [as] well with collectors, the Indians are not much writing

SG: They are not necessarily academics and scholars, yeah, I am aware.

JL: The, the, the one that lives in Chandigarh writes on tribal coins.

SG: Oh, uh, the name [Devendra Handa] is not coming to me but it will

JL (37:18): I sent him [images of] all my ancient coins, tribal coins I and everything, so, and I met him also at his residence in Chandigarh. That's also the fascination of studying coins, to go to the places where they were produced where they were used, feel the

SG: The city, the surroundings. Was it, were these, also the places that when you were forming your collection would you try to go as much as possible to the

JL (38:07): Every free weekend. Well, I would go traveling to Rajasthan, Malwa and then you meet Daulal Johri, Mr Bhatt in Indore. Now, they are old, but still at that time they were active. And

SG: And you were in touch with them.

JL: Yeah. You mention anybody in India? I may have met him.

SG: Yes. I'm certain that might be the case. Yeah. It's a close knit community.

JL (38:50): Yes, yes and it was a big surprise that a couple of friends with I had met before, they came from Gujarat, Rajkot and these places. I met them in Ahmedabad, and later on a tour, went to from Rajkot to Diu, and then there was, sipping a wine, then one of them say let me have a picture, so when you getting 75 we produce a medal for you like that they won't it, just talking.

SG: Sounds like

JL: I became almost, it was three, four weeks before I would celebrate my 75th birthday. Then I got a call, ... message So will you come on the 15th of September? I said, yeah, but that's my birthday. Yes, but we have something for you.

SG: Okay.

JL (40:25): And they had produced a medal with my effigy.

SG: Oh. That's so sweet, amazing.

JL: And Shailendra did the design, the calligraphy and Sanjay Garg, did the, what is it, the Persian couplet

SG: Persian couplet, yeah. That's really sweet, very thoughtful of them.

JL: So, then you know that you have good friends who would do that.

SG: Yeah, of course.

JL: They produced one piece in gold and 101 in silver and one copper.

SG (41:16): That's great. I mean that also shows that they really respect you and thought about you, and they enjoy working with you.

JL: This well, before I was rewarded with the, the Royal Honor of Member of the House of Orange, but this was much more..

SG: Much more personal.

JL: Yes, yes. Yes.

SG (42:05): I can understand. So, are you working on a book right now or anything? Or you're mostly spending your time one day a week at Heritage auctions and building your collection? Do you still go to India?

JL: Both are correct, but I am now updating the book on the Marathas, together with Kamal Maheshwari and he's all, every day after me, can you send me this or that

SG: Keeping you busy.

JL: Yes. And perhaps you have learnt of Jan Lucassen

SG: No, I haven't.

JL (42:51): He is an economic historian and doing much research work at the national records in Delhi

SG: Okay.

JL: He is the author of a recent publication, The World's, yeah, The World at Work [<https://www.bol.com/nl/nl/f/de-wereld-aan-het-werk/9300000043256069/>].

SG: Okay.

JL: How people are paid, and together, we did four publications and the fifth is now sent for editing

SG: Oh great

JL: And that will come, in a book, (which) will be in a series with Sanjay Garg,.. This publication that will be, money of the poor, how labor is paid for

SG: Okay interesting

JL (44:05): And what, the very couple of articles we did together, the first one was about .. paisa, then copper circulation in Northern India roundabout 1830, then 1804, the capture of Deeg by the British and now the last one is, the capture of the fort of Barharia in Bihar,

SG: Okay.

JL: Very near to Patna. The interesting thing there is what loot the British found in the fort, in Bharatpur (State), in Deeg, they mentioned a couple of rupees and 50 Bindrabund rupees, why mention 50 "Bindrabund" rupees and 1000s of other rupees, both, differentiating them?

SG: Interesting, what's the answer?

JL (45:39): The "Bindrabund" rupees were debased rupees for charity they were not, had not the value of the actual rupee [The rupees bear the mint-name 'Bindrabun', but were struck at Bharatpur].

SG: I see, I see, okay.

JL: So, therefore, they were separately mentioned. So, this, all this information which you can get from the records which hardly, sorry to say, hardly any Indian, except really few do study the records

SG: Yeah, yeah.

JL (46:18) : I will, for the ONS shortly also an article over a report of a Britisher [G.H. Barlow] at the mint of Banaras. It is known as Barlow's report. It is not an unknown report, but he has so much information and it is fascinating to see that the mint at Banaras was called, Muhammadabad Banaras. The British took it over, but separate besides there was another series of rupees, also Muhammaabad Banaras. Was there another mint at the same place? No. At the very moment that the British took over Banaras, Awadh shifted its capital from Faizabad to Lucknow.

SG (47:26): Oh, yes.

JL: And continued to produce these rupees

SG: Interesting story.

JL: So, well these are all these kind of things

SG: Still going on

JL: Sometimes detective work

SG: It is, history writing is

JL: But it's fascinating

SG: Yes, it keeps you on your toes

JL: Yeah

SG: Yeah, definitely

JL (47:54): Same thing happened that we had a coin which, you could read Akbar on it. But when I was in Mumbai and some dealer showed it to me, [he said] this Muhammad Akbar Second.. So the mint name was Allahabad, Muhammad Akbar second, even in his earlier reign, had nothing to do with Allahabad. So, nevertheless, I bought the coin, not knowing what it was. And I started reading the history of Awadh of this period and what was the thing, that Safdarjung was the

SG: Governor

JL: The prime minister under Ahmad Shah. But he had quarrel, and he was taken off all his, his titles, all the status. So, he was nothing. What he did, he put a small boy, nobody knows exactly who the boy was, put him on the throne, given him the title and that boy promoted him again, about three or four [rupees] are known were struck by that

SG: by the boy

JL (49:43): [in the name of] that boy at the mint at Allahabad, which was the only mint in the control of Safdarjung

SG: Fascinating story

JL: And then you, that person is gone complete in the mist [of history], but we put, Paul Stevens and I put, yeah, reconstructed the whole history of it. I'd said to my wife, I said if anyone can find the text, something like that, then I will be happy then.

SG: You found it. That's so amazing, how from one coin you found you found such interesting titbits of history

JL: That makes collecting but particularly the studying of it [so fascinating], it is not collecting, putting things in order and marking your catalogue, it's

SG: The story behind them

JL (50:52): study these things, and I remember when I came back from India to join the architect's office, there was a colleague and he wanted to see some of the coins, so one evening when he came, I showed him a tray of coins, he look at it, ah nice buttons, it didn't say anything to him. Then I picked up one, I said, look here, 'Aah interesting'

SG: Right, so when you dived into the story, it interested him.

JL: Without the history is just 'dead' metal.

SG: Yeah, it's just a coin.

(51:43) That's lovely. That's a beautiful note to end the conversation on. It's been really interesting talking to you.

JL: Oh, pleasure was mine.