Rare, beautiful and easy to work, gold has been valued above all other metals in many societies over the last six thousand years. With its resistance to chemical reactions – it never corrodes or tarnishes – it is often called a ‘noble’ metal. The fascination with, and demand for, gold made it an attractive medium for political symbols of power and status, or to provide standards of value and means of exchange.

This display provides global perspectives on the use of gold for currency and coins, from late 6th century BC to the 20th century. The sources and trading networks of the raw material reflects colonialism and exploitation, technological change and the discovery of new sources.
Gold coinage and ancient states

Gold was one of the earliest metals used by humans, as it usually occurs in nature in a pure metallic form.

Where it all began

The first gold coins appeared on what we now known as the western coast of modern Turkey.
Islamic coinage and the gold of Africa
From the 8th century to the 13th centuries, Islamic dinars coined using West African gold bullion dominated long distance trade. Almohads, Yusuf I (1163-1184), half dinar. Found at Wattisham, Suffolk.

Discovery, empire and exploitation
The exploitation of gold sources in South America led to the introduction of iconic coins on a large scale, produced for both domestic and international use. Brazil, Joao VI (1706-1750).

Gold rushes and international currencies
The discovery of gold in California in 1848 caused successive gold rushes and led to the introduction of a new gold denomination, the $20 coin.
Behind the scenes at the Museum
Meet Dr Adrian Popescu,
Keeper of Ancient Money
Adrian research interests include ancient coinages, coin production and circulation, and the analysis of coin finds. He is also co-director of the Noviodunum Archaeological Project.