EARLY ISLAMIC COINAGE IN THE LIGHT OF NUMISMATIC EVIDENCE

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Abstract

This study is devoted to the coinage status prevailing in the early Islamic period, in particular from the time of the prophet Muhammad to that of cAbd al- Malik ibn Marwan, (A.H.1 - 86/A.D.622-705).

The importance of the study lies in the fact that modern numismatists, depending on some Arab medieval chronicles such as Maqrizi and Baladhuri, are in disagreement regarding the caliph who first struck the Islamic dinar and the year of its full arabization as well as the first year of the full arabization of the dirham. This study proves that the statements made in the chronicles should not be accepted uncritically. Furthermore, the study discusses the incentives and goals of arabization.

There was no independent local coinage in the Arabian peninsula at the time of Muhammad, the Apostle of Allah, or in the period just preceding him. The coins in circulation in the earliest Arab Muslim markets were of the following types:

a- The Persian silver dirham: a Unit of the sasanian coinage derived from the Greek drachma (Miles, 1965, p. 319).

b- The Byzantine gold solidus: a Byzantine gold coin with a standard weight (4.265 grams) and fineness which was the mainstay of late classical and medieval commerce (Doty, 1982, P. 305).

c- The copper fals (pl. fulus, also a term of Greek origin): copper coins were no doubt introduced to facilitate small everyday transactions. Because of their low

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status, such coins were probably circulated within restricted areas (Udovitch, 1965, p. 768). These coin types derived from neighbouring regions Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Palestine.

Iraq was under Persian domination, while Egypt, Syria and Palestine were under Byzantine control in the ages preceding the Muslim conquest. There were Himyaric coins in circulation, but these were imitations of Greek models (al-Husayni, 1969, p. 15). The trimetalic system of coinage (dirham, solidus or dinar, Fals; Silver, gold, copper) characteristic of the period before the advent of Islam doubtless continued during the prophet's era as well as during the time of the Orthodox Caliphs; the Muslims at first lacked both the experience and the technical equipment to issue coins of their own (Miles, 1958, p. 471). The earliest Muslims exploited, adopted and adapted many elements of the Byzantine and Persian civilization, coinage being one among them.

The Persian dirhams in circulation were of three types. (A) the Baghli dirham (also known as the khusrau dirham after the Sasanian royal name "chosroes" or as the Wafi dirham because it maintained the full weight of the standard dirham) was so called because it was said that a Jew named Ras al-Baghli first struck this dirham for the caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (A.H. 13-23/A. D. 634-644). The Baghli dirham weighed eight danaqs or twenty carats; the danaq is a unit of weight equal to $\frac{2}{5}$ unshelled barley grains (Persian danaq grain, (al-Sharabisi, 1981, p. 149), while the carat is a weight of 0.19 gram (the term is more often used to designate each of the twenty-four fractional parts of the degree of fineness of gold (Gricson, 1975, p. 193). The Baghli dirham equalled in weight the mithqal, the unit to which the dinar was struck; the mithqal as a gold unit with a standard of weight and fineness formulated by Muslim Jurists served as the standard for accounting; it maintained the same weight as the Byzantine solidus until the reforms of Abd al-Malik (Ehrenkreutz, 1959, p. 132). (B) the Tabari dirham, derived from Tabaristan, weighed four danaqs or ten carats or one-half mithqal; it was thus half the weight of the Baghli dirham. (C) There was a third kind of dirham, which weighed twelve carats or 8.4 danaqs (Walker, 1941, p. cxlviii).

Though there were three types of dirhams, they shared a basic format. On the obverse is the bust of the king, his head bearded and surmounted by a winged headdress, right-facing; at the right, that is, in front of his face, appears his name in Pahlavi, while in
the margin there is a Pahlavi legend, on the reverse is a fire altar, flanked by attendants; on the left is the date of issue and on the right a mint signature in Pahlavi (Miles, 1975, p. 364). See plate 1A. It was customary to buy and sell with the dirham (as with the dinar) by treating the coins as bullions; in other words, they would be checked by weight and not by tale or count during mercantile transactions. (al-Baladhūrī, 1924, p. 264). In religious matters it was otherwise 14 carats, the average of the three current dirham weights (10, 12, and 20, carats) was taken as the standard for the payment of the zakāt (al-Mawirdī, 1966, p. 154). It has been suggested that it was the caliph ʿUmar who established the 14-carat standard for the dirham (al-Naqshabandī, 1953, p.2) 

During the time of the prophet Muhammad the dirham in circulation was that of the persian type with full characteristic features, standard weight and fineness. In the time of the Orthodox Caliphs, in particular that of ʿUmar, coins were issued in the regions newly conquered by Arab Muslim troops using Byzantine and Persian stamps, which had been modified by the addition of some Arabic words, written in remarkably clear Kufic script (this is Walker's Arab-Sasanin type). The added inscriptions are usually religious in character, e.g. "My lord, " "In the name of God", "Praise God", "Apostle of God", "God is the Almighty" (Al-Maqrizī, 1940, p.52). See plate 1B.

The momentous decision to arabize the coinage fully came late in the first Islamic century. Some historians assign the event to A.H. 76/A.D. 695(al-Maqrizī, 1967, p.10, al-Ṭabarī, 1885, p.796) but we so far do not have any coinage unit that would point to that precise date as the year of full arabization. The first arabized dirham was struck under ʿAbd al-Malik(A.H. 65-86/A.D 685-705) in A.H. 78 (al-Naqshabandī, 1974, p. 22). Since this Umayyad dirham was to serve as the basic model for several centuries to come, it will be well to describe it in some detail. In admirably legible Kufic characters the obverse carries an Islamic confessional formula, "There is no God except Allah alone...he has no associate".Around the central formula there is a circular legend in which the phrase "In the name of Allah" is followed by the mint name and the date of striking (1).The reverse bears the following verse of the Qur'an: "Allah is one, Allah is eternal, He does not beget nor is he begotten, none is like unto Him". The circular legend around this text reads, "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, who sent him with guidance and the religion of truth, that he might make it over all other religions, even though the polytheists may object". See plate 1C. The text used on the reverse
directly confronts the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, perhaps in reaction to the depiction of Christ on Byzantine coinage (Bates, 1982, p. 14).

Gold coins were known as dinars (from denarius aureus). Like the dirham the dinar (or solidus) of the previous times continued in circulation after the advent of Islam; during the time of the Prophet and of the Orthodox Caliphs the dinar in circulation had Byzantine characteristics and features. The standard weight of the earliest dinars that Muslims used appears to have been the same as that of the solidus. The weight relationship of the dirham to the dinar was 10:7, a ratio which the prophet confirmed and thereby established as the legal standard (Abu Ubayd, 1981, p. 467; al-Mawardi, 1966 p. 154). On the reverse of these early dinars appear Christian symbols and signs like the cross on steps, the obverse is devoted to portraiture, showing, e.g. Emperor Heraclius in the center flanked by his sons Heraclius Constantine and Heraclonas or the couple Justin II and Sophia; the obverse also records the mint name in Greek letters (Walker, 1956, p. 17). See plate 2A.

It is reported that the first change in gold coinage took place under Muawiya (A.H. 41-60/A.D.661-680), the first Umayyad ruler, whose image (shown with a sword) was first used on the dinar (al-Maqrizi, 1967, p.q). Modern scholars call these early Umayyad dinars coins of the "standing caliph" type; this type dominates the period of transition between iconographic and epigraphic coinage (Miles, 1967, p. 212).

This coinage was used down to the sweeping coinage reforms of 'Abd al-Malik, which took place in A.H. 77-78/A.D.696-697. Its distinctive mark is the standing caliph (hence the type title) shown on the obverse; the caliph holds the hilt of a sword with his right hand and his left grasps the scabbard; there are no Christian emblems on the obverse (Walker, 1956, p. xxxi). The reverse has an Arabic religious legend the "shahadah" and almost all vestiges of Christian symbolism are gone except for the modified cross. See plate 2B.

This type is of interest for the way it reflects the efforts on the part of Muslims to create an iconography of their own (Miles, ibid, p. 212). The insignia of the caliph, religious and political head of the Muslim community, a community which integrated both state and religion, were the sword, the mantle, and the seal; thus on the dinar we see the caliph holding the sword, standing with his robe open. The caliph also wears a
native headdress, its folds falling down both sides of his head (Walker, 1935, p. 7) Furthermore, speech or Friday sermon in which the prayers ask God's blessing on the ruler, and the appearance of the caliph's name on the coinage were the prerogative of the caliph as the two essential marks of independent sovereignty.

There remains, it must be noted, the question as to the identity of the caliph portrayed on these coins. Unfortunately the written sources do not supply us with reliable data, and since we are not in possession of sufficient convincing numismatic material indicating the caliph's name, we are dependent on the scattered references which happen to survive in the Arabic chronicles. Al-Maqrizi (d.A.D. 1442) claims that the caliph Muhammad issued gold coinage depicting himself with a sword. On the other hand, al-Baladhuri (d.A.D. 892) states that ʿAbd al-Malik first issued gold coins in A.H. 74/A.D. 693/4. Walker, basing himself on al-Maqrizi and on a Syriac chronicle believed that although no numismatic confirmation of Muhammad's role has come to light, he may have been the originator anyway (Walker, 1956, p. xxxi). Walker's arguments are not convincing, and since they lack tangible numismatic evidence, they may be set aside. Miles, Bates and Grierson believed that the "standing caliph dinar" started under ʿAbd al-Malik.

The earlier debates seem to be settled since we now have numismatic evidence in the form of two gold dinars bearing the date A.H. 74, one preserved in the ANS Collection and the other in the National Museum in Pakistan. These coins corroborate al-Baladhuri's report (Miles, ibid, p. 212).

The association with ʿAbd al-Malik is no surprise. It was under him that the great coinage reform, the best known event in the monetary history of the early Islamic period, took place.

Trimetalic Arab coinage was introduced as part of ʿAbd al-Malik's exhaustive arabization of the government adminstration (Ehrenkreutz, 1972, p. 102). The images of the Byzantine emperors and Christian symbols, as well as the figure of the Persian kings, were obliterated, and replaced by ʿAbd al-Malik's image and Arabic religious legends. Since, however, Islam did not promote at that time the use of images as vehicles for religious devotion, the islamization of the coinage was not yet complete...it was necessary to invent a new kind of coinage in greater harmony with the Islamic spirit.
as well as the prevailing Arab power. The iconographic type of early Umayyad coin was eventually superseded by a purely epigraphic type of coin, which became the model for all later Islamic coinage. By issuing such coins a new era in monetary history was begun in A.H. 77/78 (Ehrenkreutz, 1977 p. 29). This further development is well documented by two items in the ANS collection, where we find a purely epigraphic gold dinar and a purely epigraphic silver dirham dated A.H. 77 and 78 respectively. Walker had assigned the year A.H. 79 as the time of the first purely epigraphic silver dirham. The Arab chroniclers, including al-Ṭabarî, Maqrîzî, and Ibn Qutaybah are in disagreement over the exact date of full arabization (Walker, 1956, p. lxxi; Salmân CIsa, 1971, pp. 147 - 152). The numismatic evidence again shows that statements from medieval chroniclers cannot be accepted uncritically.

The new arabized dinars bear the shahadah on the obverse, while the reverse reflects Muhammad’s mission; the religious concerns are repeated through the entire body of the issue, regardless of the fractions. (See plate 2C). In fact, the dinars struck under ʿAbd al-Malik were not universal; those struck in the eastern territories of the Islamic empire differ from those issued in the western parts in terms of epigraphy. Further, the fractions of the dinar (the quarter, the third, and the half) were produced only in North Africa (Fahmi, 1965, p. 49).

The arabization of copper coins followed apace, but without any metrological and design innovations, perhaps, because they were regarded as tokens issued under local authority. The reformed fulus, made of either pure copper or of bronze, were used in dissemination of Islamic tenets so are the dinars and dirhams.

The financial reforms of ʿAbd al-Malik, which took place during the four years from A.H. 74 to 77, constituted a substantial step toward standardizing monetary units, itself a crucial step on the way to a stabilized economy (Fahmi ibid, p. 52). The coinage reform was carried out not only by ʿAbd al-Malik himself but also by al-Hajjaj Ibn Yūsuf, his dynamic viceroy, who may truly be said to have been the mainstay of the Umayyad dynasty. Al-Hajjaj was able to impose the new system on the many mints in the former Sasanian territory. (Grierson, 1960, p. 244). It was one year after arabization that al-Hajjaj began minting coins at al- Kūfah.
The reform in coinage did not take place simultaneously throughout the empire. There was a transitional period before the old coins disappeared forever, first from the mints and then from circulation. The last coin issued by the Umayyads of the Arab-Sasanian type is dated A.H. 84. This is understandable; it must have required time for the new designs to spread to the remote confines of the vast Muslim realm (Grierson, Ibid., p.246).

The Arabs, by developing their own distinctively Islamic coinage, were able to emancipate themselves from monetary dependence on their Byzantine and Sasanian predecessors (Miles, 1967, p.226). The standard weight of the Arab dinar is 4.25 grams, that of the dirham, 2.97 grams (Ehrenkreutz, 1977, p. 93). The new coins drove out the Byzantine and Sasanian coins and thus accomplished the goal of Abd al-Malik had intended. The success of the coinage was directly linked to the glass weights developed by 'Abd al-Hajjaj in 'Iraq to secure the standard of weight for gold and to prevent cheating. The weight was made of glass since glass is not affected by heat or moisture. Indeed, the Umayyad dinars displayed a high standard of fineness ('Iyāz)² (Ehrenkreutz, 1959, p. 163). Because the Umayyad caliphs kept the minters and money changers under close surveillance and because Islamic law could be used to punish severely those who cheated (penalties included cutting off the hand and branding the flesh), the dinars maintained their high quality.

The overall aims of 'Abd al-Malik's reforms included discontinuing the tribute the caliph used to pay the Byzantine emperor and thereby proving that the Umayyad state was an independent and sovereign entity, able to challenge successfully the institutions of its old rivals. The Coinage reform in particular sought to produce a workable monetary system and to replace Christian symbols with epigraphic manifestations of the new religious identity. The reforms also served to reduce the number of mints, particularly those associated with the silver dirhams, so that the caliph and his deputies could better control the process of production and attain uniformity in style, fabric and weight (Ehrenkreutz 1977, p93).
Notes

1- Although the Arabic sources are not consistent in indicating which face of the coin is the obverse and which the reverse, for the period in question we take it that the obverse is the side bearing the shahadah and the reverse is the other side of the coin, (al-Hamadani, 1968, p. 345, Bacharach, 1973, pp. 184-191). The obverse is shown to the left of the plates while the reverse is shown to the right. This also applies to the preceding periods represented here.

2- Iyār is the term the Arabs used for the standard of fineness of gold dinars; it refers to the quantitative ratio of the precious metal to the components in the alloy. (Ehrenkreutz, 1963, p. 244).

Abbreviations:

ANS American Numismatic Society
ANSMN American Numismatic Society Museum Notes
JAOS Journal of the American Oriental Society
JESHO Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient.
NC Numismatic Chronicle
References


"Dirham El, 1965
"Some Early Arab Dinars". ANSMN 3, 1984


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