

Islamic Coins during the Umayyad, Abbasid, Andalusian and Fatimid Dynasties

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ISLAMIC COINS DURING THE UMAYYAD, ABBASID, ANDALUSIAN AND FATIMID DYNASTIES

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The Umayyad Coins (661-750CE)

During the early years of their reign, the Umayyads continued to use silver Sassanian coins in Iran and Iraq, and gold and copper Byzantine coins in Syria and Egypt (figure 1). As part of his policy to unify the various regions under Islamic rule, Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (685-705CE) introduced the first Umayyad gold coins at a time of discord between the Umayyads and Byzantines over the merits of Islam and Christianity. The early coins were struck either in 691 or 692; the Byzantine emperor was angry and refused to accept the new Arab gold currency, renewing the war between the Arabs and the Byzantines. The new Islamic currency that was first coin to carry an Arabic inscription was called a dinar and was similar, in both size and weight, to the Byzantine solidus. On the obverse, there were three standing figures of unknown identities, as on the Byzantine coin, which had on its obverse the figures of Heracles, Heraclius Constantine, and Heraclonas; on the reverse, the Byzantine cross was replaced by a column placed on three steps topped with a sphere. In the margin surrounding the design the testimony of Islam was written in Arabic: "In the name of God, there is no deity but God; He is One; Muhammad is the messenger of God." The new Arab-Byzantine coin stressed the unity of God to counter the Christian Trinitarian doctrine, and made no mention of the caliph. The Byzantine emperor Justinian II responded to this challenge by striking a new solidus with the head of Christ on the obverse and on the reverse an image of himself robed and holding a cross.



Figure 1. Early Umayyad coins, 691/692CE.

Caliph Abd al-Malik's response was to issue a new dinar in 693 (figure 2). On its obverse was the upright figure of the caliph, wearing an Arab headdress and holding a sword, with the testimony of Islam inscribed in the margin. The reverse bore the same column on three steps and the sphere, but a new legend appeared around the margin: "In the name of God this dinar was struck in the year four and seventy" Only eight of these early Arab-Byzantine dinars, dated according to the new Islamic calendar, have survived. Once more, the Byzantine emperor responded by striking a new coin similar to that of the Arabs, which greatly displeased Abd al-Malik. In 697 the caliph decided to abandon all traces of iconography and introduced the first Islamic coin devoid of figurative representation (figure 3). On both sides of the new dinar were inscribed verses from the Qur'an, expressing the message of Islam and making each piece an individual missionary of the faith. After he introduced this coin, Abd al-Malik issued a decree making it the only currency to be used throughout Umayyad lands. All remaining Byzantine and Arab-Byzantine pieces were to be handed to the treasury, to be melted down and re-struck. Those who did not comply faced the death penalty. The new gold dinars weighed a bit less than the solidus and the state controlled the accuracy of its weight along with the purity of the gold. Umayyad gold coins were generally struck in Damascus, while silver and copper coins were minted elsewhere.



Figure 2. Umayyad coins, 693CE.



Figure 3. Umayyad coins, 697CE.

During the rule of the caliphs who followed, coins of one-half and one-third of a dinar were struck; they were smaller than the dinar in size and weight, and carried shorter inscriptions in the margin denoting the value of each coin. After conquering North Africa and Spain, the Umayyads established new mints in their western provinces where dinars similar to the early half-dinars were struck; these included the name of the city and date of minting.

According to the Qur'an, which commands, "When you measure, give an exact measure and weigh with an accurate scale" (Surah 17:35), the caliphs were responsible for ensuring the purity and weight of the coins, established by the shari'a as seven mithqals of gold to ten dirhams of silver. Obsolete coins, whether from foreign countries or previous governments, and gold and silver bullion were brought to the mint to be refined and struck into a new currency. At the mint, the bullion was first examined to determine its purity, and then it was heated and refined to conform to the established alloy standards. After smelting and casting, the ingots were rolled out and cut into discs. Each disc was then placed on the obverse die and the reverse die placed on top. Finally, the top side of the die was struck one or more times with a mallet so that the design was impressed clearly on both sides of the coin. This method is called die-sinking; these dies were usually made of bronze and could manufacture several thousands of coins before they had to be discarded.

Generally, Islamic coins indicate the place and date of their mint, the name of the ruler, his father's name, and that of his heir-apparent or envoy. When a new caliph came to power, he had a new coin struck in his name to make the change of rule official. When a revolt took place in some part of the Islamic empire, the leader of the uprising would establish himself by immediately substituting his own name on newly minted coins. Through the study of Islamic coins historical events could be traced with a certain amount of accuracy.

The Abbasid Coins (750-1258CE)

It is likely that the earliest Abbasid gold dinars, minted in 750 and extremely rare, were struck either in Damascus before the Umayyad mint was closed down, or in Kufa, the first Abbasid capital (figure 4). When Caliph al-Mansur built Baghdad (762), the gold mint was moved to the new capital, and it was in this period that names of persons responsible for the coins first began to appear on silver coins called dirhams.



Figure 4. Early Abbasid Dinar, AH135/AD752-53.

When Caliph Harun al-Rashid came to power in 786, he minted dinars with the names of the governors of Egypt. During this period, at least two mints were active in the empire, one in Baghdad and the other in Fustat, the seat of the governor of Egypt. The Egyptian mint was particularly active, and the dinars bearing the names of governors and a dedication to the caliph must have come from there.

Caliph al-Ma'mun (813-33), Harun al-Rashid's son, experimented with different kinds of coins. With his highly developed artistic taste, he improved the appearance of the coins by using a more elegant form of Kufic script. New gold mints were opened, viziers' and governors' names appeared on coins, and the legends and the size of the legends on the dinars were changed. The new dinars were struck on broader and thinner discs so that they could include two marginal legends (figure 5). The style begun in this period continued to be used for several centuries under the Abbasids and other dynasties that followed.



Figure 5 Abbasid Dinar, Struck under Al-Ma'mun, AH 207/AD 822.

From 833 to 946, no important changes in calligraphy or style occurred on the Abbasid dinar. Because of the weakening of the caliph's authority and the carelessness of the local officials responsible for the mint, the weight and quality occasionally deviated from the high standard of the early Abbasid years. As the power of the caliph weakened, he was forced to add to his coins the names of those governors, heirs apparent, powerful brothers, commanders-in-chief of the army, or strong viziers who imposed their will upon him. Semi-independent dynasties such as the Tulunids in Egypt, the Saffarids (867-c.1495) and Samanids (819-1005) in Iran, and the Ikhshidids (935-69) in Egypt and Palestine all minted coins independently, yet they followed the Abbasid model, acknowledging the nominal leadership of the caliph. Thus, through the coins of the period, we get more detailed information about the weakening of the caliphal power and the development of the different small dynasties all over the empire.

From 946 to 1055, the Abbasid caliphs lived in Baghdad as hostages of the Buwayhids, who had occupied the capital. Following them, the Seljuks marched in and took over, while in Egypt, the Fatimids formed an independent dynasty. Although only a few coins were minted in the name of the caliph during this time, true Abbasid coins could only have been minted in Baghdad, which was the sole city where the caliphs enjoyed any authority. The legends on all the coins were the standard text of al-Ma'mun's dinar, except for a blessing upon the Prophet and his family added on the reverse.

Toward the end of the Abbasid reign, from 1160 to 1258, a series of poorly struck, light-weight coins were issued in Baghdad. Most of these coins were, in effect, no more than coin ingots and were not consistent with any definite monetary standard. Some of them bore attractive decorations, while all their legends followed previous texts (figure 6). The only addition was a longer blessing upon the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) on the reverse side.



Figure 6 Late Abbasid coin, 1160.

The Andalusian Coins (711-1494CE)

In contrast to earlier Arab conquests, where coins from previous regimes continued to be used, the Muslims minted their first gold coins when they entered Spain in 711. The new coins were modelled in size and design after the Arab-Byzantine coins of North Africa struck by the Muslims shortly after the second conquest of Carthage in 699, and were similar to those already in use by the Byzantines. Their inscriptions are in Latin and, like the ones from North Africa they translate Muslim religious formulas, often in blundered adaptations of the shehada, and give the name of the mint and the date. A large star in the centre of the obverse field distinguished the Islamic Spanish coin from the Arab-Latin one. A new, handsome, bilingual dinar was struck in 716 bearing an Arabic legend on the obverse that read "Muhammad is the Apostle of God," and in the margin around it, "This dinar was struck in al-Andalus in the year eight and ninety"; its reverse bore a Latin legend.

In 720, the first purely Arab gold coins appeared. The style and wording of the legends were copied from the North African Arab dinars struck the year before. They were a copy of the half-dinar minted in Damascus in 719 and included the name of the mint in al- Andalus. Those coins, which were issued regularly until 728, and the ones that followed until 732 are extremely rare. No gold coins have reached us from the time of Abd al-Rahman I, most probably because he continued to use the same coins minted earlier. The first new Umayyad gold coin appeared during the reign of Abd al-Rahman III in 929, after his break from Abbasid authority. From then until the end of the Umayyad period in Spain, each caliph placed his name and titles on the reverse field along with the name of the mint and the year. In addition to the dinar, Abd al-Rahman III minted quarter-dinars following Aghlabid and Fatimid models.

The weight of the Andalusian Umayyad coin was less accurate than that of the classical eastern Umayyad dinar, and the dies were rather careless. The names of subordinate officials in the government appeared below the obverse and reverse fields. After 1010, during the years of Umayyad decline, various local rulers began to mint their own coins. Many of them copied those of the Umayyads, including the names of former caliphs. Later on, some of the more powerful dynasties of the Taifa Kings (1030-1086), such as the Abbadids in Seville, placed their own names and titles on the coins. These were mostly fractions of a dinar of low quality gold, which indicates the deteriorating economic and political conditions of the time.

Almoravid (1088-1145) coins saw an unexpected flowering. From the plentiful and well-struck series of dinars from that time, we gather that the Almoravid reign must have been a period of great prosperity for both Morocco and al-Andalus. Their first Andalusian mint was in Cordoba, followed shortly after by one in Seville. Between 1096 and 1116, mints expanded rapidly into practically every important town under Almoravid rule.

What is of interest during the Almohad period (1145-1232) is the coin struck by King Alfonso VIII of Castile, who wanted to challenge the Muslim rulers of Spain. He issued a Christian coin with Arabic script, and instead of copying the coins of the Almohads, he chose those of their rivals, the recently conquered Amirs of Murcia. These remarkable dinars were minted in Toledo, the first Islamic city to fall to the Christians. As we see below, their close resemblance is remarkable.

The remarkable feature is that the Christian coin has Arabic characters rather than Latin ones, and King Alfonso, in imitation of Prince Abd Allah, calls himself Prince of the Catholics and invokes the assistance of

God. Both coins are called 'dinar' and mention their mint centre and date. The Pope is given the Arabic religious title Imam. Finally, the Bible verses quoted imitate the use of Qur'anic verses on the Islamic coin. Such coins were called maravedis, the name in Spanish of the gold dinars of the Almoravids.

The last Islamic gold coins to be minted in al-Andalus were made in Nasrid Granada (1238-1492) (figures 7 & 8). Relatively heavy, they were carefully struck and bore long legends containing passages from the Qur'an and genealogies of the rulers. None of the Nasrid coins show a date, but they are identifiable by their motto "None victorious save God." Meanwhile, in the Christian kingdoms of the north, Arab and French currency were the only ones used for nearly four hundred years, from the early thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries.

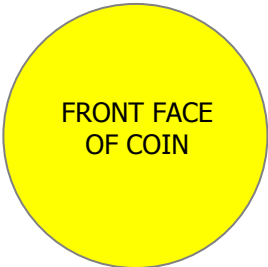



Figure 7. Silver Nasrid Dirham of Muhammed I, Granada.



Figure 8. Gold Nasrid Dirham of Muhammed XII, Granada.

Comparison between Muslim and Christian coin inscriptions:

ISLAMIC COIN		CHRISTIAN COIN	
			
OBVERSE FIELD: There is no god but God Muhammad is the Apostle of God the Prince Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Sa'id May God protect him.		OBVERSE FIELD: The Prince of the Catholics Alfonso son of Sanja May God assist him.	
MARGIN: In the name of God this dinar was struck in Mursiya in the year six and sixty and five hundred.		MARGIN: This dinar was struck in the city of Tulaytula {Toledo} in the year twelve and two hundred and one thousand safar.	
REVERSE FIELD: The Imam Abd Allah Commander of the Faithful the Abbasid.		REVERSE FIELD: The Imam of the Church Commander of the Faithful of the Messiah, Pope of Rome the Great.	
MARGIN: And whoso seeketh as religion other than Islam it will not be accepted from him and he will be lost in the Hereafter. <i>Sura 3:85</i>		MARGIN: In the name of the Lord and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the One God, whosoever believes in Him and is baptized will be saved. <i>Mark 16:15</i>	

The Fatimid Coins (909-1171CE)

The first three caliphs, who ruled from their respective capitals, Quayrawan, al-Mahdiya, and Sabra-Mansuriya, issued gold and silver coins that carried purely orthodox Sunni' legends. The early dinars of al-Mahdi followed the Aghlabid model in size and design, and only the mint name of Quayrawan was added to it. After 912, slightly larger dinars with a distinctive Kufic script were introduced. In 922, the mint was moved to al-Mahdiya and later to al-Mansuriya. Other mintless dinars were struck either in Sijilmasa, Fez, or a transient army base.

The name of the mint and the date were omitted from quarter-dinar denominations. In 934, al-Qa'im was the first caliph to totally change the design and adopt a handsome monumental Kufic script (figure 9). Quarter-dinars were also struck in Sicily, probably in Palermo, and carried the mint name 'Sicilliya' Early Fatimid coins (909-53) are much rarer than those from later periods.



Figure 9. Early Fatimid coins, Al-Mahdiya, 949.

In contrast to coins of the first three Fatimid caliphs, the later ones emphasized their Shi'i identity by declaring their bond to Ali. In 953, Caliph al-Mu'izz issued dinars with a clear Shi'i message and a new design: a short, one-line legend was ringed by three concentric circular legends reading from the inner to the outer bands. The wording, which read "And Ali ibn Abi Talib is the Nominee of the Prophet and the Most Excellent Representative and the Husband of the Radiant Chaste One [i.e., Fatima, daughter of the Prophet]," expressed the essence of the Isma'ili doctrines; but as it offended the Sunni population it had to be abandoned (figure 10). The second and more lasting type of coin omitted the field inscriptions entirely and moderated the strength of the Isma'li idioms. The coins issued under later caliphs varied between three and two circular legends and single and double marginal lines. Between 1014 and 1020, the caliph's heir apparent's name was added to the dinar.

After al-Mu'izz, Caliph al-Mustansir was the first to change the design of his coins. His dinars were similar to al-Zahir's, but with the unit and date formula put in the reverse margin. Between 1048 and 1077, he adopted the three-circle type first used by al-Mu'izz. They are such close copies that it is difficult to tell one from the other. After 1078 the standard of die-sinking became of poorer quality and remained so until 1094.

During the third period of the Fatimid dynasty (1094-1171) an experimental dinar was minted that kept the design of al-Mustansir's last coins. Although their marginal legends were still in Kufic, the field legends

were in a flowing Naskhi script. This was the first time in Egypt that a long Naskhi script appeared on a coin, and it did not reappear until 1227. In 1096 al-Musta'li (1094-1101) introduced a style that remained in use for the next 120 years: a handsome adaptation of al-'Aziz's two-circle type with brief inscriptions in the small field in the centre of the die. On the obverse the words "ali ghaya" were placed to indicate the coin's 'extremely high' quality.



Figure 10. Fatimid coin with Isma'ili Doctrine, Egypt, AH386/AD 996.

On the reverse was the caliph's title and given name along with his other titles of honour. Toward the end of the Fatimid period, when child caliphs succeeded one another and the viziers took over the actual power, coins were struck in 1130 and 1132 in the name of a nonexistent Fatimid prince. In 1133, a coin was struck in the name of the long-awaited imam, al-Mahdi, who according to Shi'i belief should appear at an undisclosed date in the future.

Fatimid coins were of such high quality and so abundant that they became the most wide-spread trade coins of the Mediterranean world. When the Crusaders captured Palestine, they copied the contemporary Fatimid coins instead of striking their own. The Crusader coins ranged from excellent imitations of the original to crudely engraved and sloppily struck pieces that shared **only** their overall design with their Islamic prototypes.

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