



Introduction to Islamic Coins

by Neal Evans

The term “Islamic” is associated with the Empires, Sultanates, Khanates, Caliphates, and territories associated with the followers of Islam. While it is not necessary or generally practical to formally study Islam or the Arabic language in order to identify a coin as Islamic, some degree of background historical information will be useful in understanding the context within which these coins were issued. The general time frame discussed in this introduction is approximately from 632AD to 1453 AD. The condensed history of Islamic civilization is a story with three main chapters: (1) the initial rise of an immense empire rivaling Charlemagne's, (2) a period of cataclysmic struggles between the Crusaders and their opponents, and (3) the capture of Constantinople in 1453.

Conventions

It is important to understand several basic differences between Islamic and Western coinage. First, Islamic coins are almost always written in Arabic and are nearly impossible for a person not fluent in Arabic to read, determine which side is the obverse, or even tell which way is “up”. Second, the years referenced within Islamic civilization and on their coins are based off of a different yearly calendar cycle and use a different baseline reference point to establish a starting point for their history than do western societies. Western civilizations base our yearly “names” off of the life of Jesus Christ (i.e. 2009 AD means “2009 years since the **Anno Domini**" - "Year of Our Lord"), as opposed to Islamic calendar convention basing their yearly identifiers off of Mohammed’s journey from Mecca to Medina (known as the **Hegira**), in the Christ referenced year of 622AD.

Islamic years are referenced in the Islamic "AH" form, which can be converted to AD by subtracting three percent (to convert from Islam's shorter lunar year) and adding 622 (the year of the Hegira). To convert from AD to AH, subtract 622 and add three percent. The results of these computations will not be exact, but will be close enough for most purposes.

It is interesting to note that the English 12345 numbering system utilizes Arabic numerals and the Arabic base 10 system for mathematics. As with most forms of written communication, the symbols, icons, and characters can be represented in different but equivalent formats, stylizations, and fonts. These different, but equivalent, forms of each unique character do not faze a person familiar with that particular language, but may be a source of profound befuddlement and frustration to someone trying to interpret the writing of an unfamiliar character set for both letters and numbers.

The names of two of the more common denominations of Islamic coins, "Fals" and "Dirham", are directly derived from Western types, with Fals being derived from the Roman "Follis" and Dirham from the Greek "Drachma".

Basic History of Islamic Civilization As Shown In Coins

During the lifetime of Muhammad, the followers of Islam took control of the entire Arabian peninsula. Under the four Orthodox Caliphs (632-661 AD), their territory was extended westward to Tripoli, half way along the northern coast of Africa, and eastward as far as Balkh in Afghanistan. Under the Umayyad dynasty (661-750 AD), this territory was extended further west to the Atlantic Ocean and into Spain. In the east, the borders were pushed beyond the Indus River into India and well east of Kabul and Samarkand, deep into Central Asia. Under the Abbasid dynasty (749-1258 AD), this territory was held intact (with the exception of Spain) for about 50 years, then suffered the inevitable fragmentation that has beset other large civilizations in a predictable pattern. It's a lot easier to create a large civilization than it is to hold it together.

The earliest Arab coins imitated those of the Persians (the Sassanians) and the Byzantines. The **Arab-Sassanian** series goes back as far as 31 AH, just 21 years after the death of Muhammad.. Sassanian coins are recognizable by their extremely oversized flans. In contrast to most Islamic coins, Sassanian coins almost always depict human images. The Sassanian type was resumed a century later by the Arab governors of the province of Tabaristan (on the southern border of the Caspian Sea). The **Arab-Byzantine** coins imitated the copper 40-nummia pieces of the 7th-century Byzantine Emperors.

Arab-Sassanian



'Umar b. 'Ubaydallah b. Mi'mar
Governor of Fars (686-689 AD)
Ardashir-Khurra mint, 69 AH
Dirham, silver, 30 mm.

Arab-Byzantine



Damascus mint
Type of Heraclius (around 641 AD)
Anon. fals, copper, 21 mm.
DAMACKOC right of caliph.
Note: use of western character set.
See discussion on blended cultural
traits in section pertaining to the
Zengid dynasty.

The Arab coinage was reformed in 77-79 AH (696-698 AD), creating the main **Umayyad** series. Its copper denomination, the fals, exhibited a wide variety of types, but the silver coin, the dirham, used a single calligraphic type at all of the mints of the Caliphate. This coin, with its religious inscriptions and its consistent use of a date and a mint name, set a pattern that was followed for the next few centuries throughout the Islamic world.

Umayyad



Hisham (724-743 AD)

Cites Egyptian finance dir.,
Al-Kasim b. 'Obaidallah
Egyptian mint, 116-124 AH
Fals, copper, 18 mm.

(Silvered example below)



Al-Walid I (705-715 AD)

Damascus mint, 90 AH
Dirham, silver, 27 mm.

The **Abbasid** series is similar to the Umayyad, but the script takes on a distinctive form that exaggerates the horizontal letters and makes the others microscopic. The Caliph's name is absent on the early issues (as on the Umayyad dirhams), but it appears on some coins of al-Mahdi (775-785 AD) and becomes a standard feature on all later issues. During the early 900's AD, the Abbasid Caliphs came under the power of the Buwayhid rulers and lost their temporal authority. Their coins came to an end, but their names were often placed on the coinage of other rulers, citing them as Islam's spiritual head. Some non-Abbasid coins can be deceptive when they include the Caliph's name but happen to omit the name of the temporal ruler.

Abbasid



Al-Saffah (749-754 AD)

Al-Kufa mint, 135 AH
Dirham, silver, 25 mm.

There is another major tradition in figural bronzes in Islamic kingdoms extending over a period of several centuries in the part of Western Asia we now call Turkey - from the **Zengid** (or **Zangid**) and **Artuqid** (or **Uturquid**) dynasties - the "Turkoman Figural Bronzes" all of which have representations of humans (or, in a couple instances, animals) on their obverses, while the reverses are strictly epigraphic. These can all be traced back to Western coin prototypes, some predating the Turkoman era by as much as 1000 years.

The **Zengid** (or **Zangid**) dynasty was a Muslim dynasty of Turkish origin, which ruled parts of Northern Iraq and Syria during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The **Artuquids** ruled the Eastern part of Anatolia(modern day Turkey) and northern Iraq. One part of the dynasty made its capital in Mardin, located in what is now southeastern Turkey, adjacent to Syria. By this time the use of animated figures in Islamic art had been almost eliminated by prohibitions from Muslim clerics. However, for awhile, the Turkoman areas ruled by the Artuquids, Ayyubids, and Zengid dynasties, plus the Seljuks of Rum continued to mint "figural" bronze coins. This was due to these dynasties having very diverse religious and cultural populations, which resulted in their coinage combining the traditions of classical coins showing various western rulers from times past, with a reverse of the Islamic script coins which were becoming the norm.

Zengid



Zangids of Sinjar - Imad al Din Zengi 2

Zangids of Sinjar Imad al-Din Zengi,
1170-1197 A.D. AE Dirham,
22mm, 5.79gm, axis: 7:00
Obv: 2-headed eagle standing facing.
Rx: Kufic legend in 5 lines.

Uturquid Dynasty



Uturquids of Mardin - Nasir al-Din Artuq Arslan

Uturquids of Mardin Nasir al-Din Artuq Arslan,
AH 597-637, AD 1201-1239
AE dirham 24mm, 7.95gm, axis: 3:00
Obv: Squatting or kneeling figure facing, holding orb, within
circular border. Rx: Kufic legend in 6 lines.

The confluence of Islamic and Hindu cultures in India produced hybrid coins that could be considered part of both cultures. With the character sets and script stylization for Arabic and Hindu appearing nearly identical to persons unfamiliar with those languages, identifying any particular coin from Islamic India to a level more detailed than "probably Islamic" will be a daunting challenge.

Indo-Islamic



Familiar "Samanta Deva" jital reclining bull, but with tamgha on rear flank. Instead of the expected, Picasso-esque horseman on the reverse, there is an inscription in 4 lines within a circle surrounded by a legend (mostly illegible or off-flan). Billon, 16mm, 3.23gm, axis: 12:00

Basic Trends in Islamic Coins encountered through ACE

Islamic civilizations produced a staggering variety and range of coins that rival the seemingly endless permutations and numismatic variations found in western Civilization coinage. While the higher value coins tend to be brilliant works of art, the Islamic coins encountered in the ACE program are almost always the low value crudely minted offerings that were intended for general commerce.

Mints

While the Romans used perhaps a hundred geographically separate mint facilities, the Islamic civilizations used more than a thousand. Often these were marginally controlled or documented, which adds yet even more identification challenges for the casual collector.

Islamic coins are made from a similar range of metals and alloys as are Roman coins. Many smaller Islamic coins show evidence of being cast in strips. The coins were then clipped apart, which gives many coins more of a squarish shape. Most tend to be irregularly shaped, and are thinner than equivalent diameter Roman coins. Many Islamic coins are smaller than the die size whether they were cast or struck, which means the coins only contain some portion of the die pattern. This causes additional identification challenges due to incomplete reference marks and text.

Pattern

Except for the Arab-Byzantine, Arab-Sassanian, and Turkoman dynasties, Islamic coins almost never contain human images. They are generally covered on both sides with some combination of writing and geometric artwork. Arabic writing resembles exotic calligraphy, which can sometimes be difficult to discern from the artwork. Islamic coins can be found in a wide range of stylistic and economic variety. While the high end Islamic coins will rival the most coveted western civilization coins for artistic brilliance and aesthetic mastery, the vast majority of the Islamic coins ACE students and teachers will encounter will be more garden variety coins that were circulated among the general population. Flan consistency, strike accuracy, aesthetic quality, and artistic detail are reduced in the lower end "general circulation" coins, just as they were in Western civilizations.

Identification

Islamic coins can generally be recognized as such very quickly based on the stylized writing on both sides of the coin.

Sassanian coins are easily recognized by their greatly oversized flans.

Arab-Byzantine coins can be recognized by the combination of Byzantine “M” on the reverse, plus Arabic stylization on one or both sides of the coin.

More exact identification beyond “Hey! I think this one is Islamic” is effectively impossible if the person is not fluent in reading Arabic. Many excellent guides to identifying Islamic coins are available, though should not be considered light reading.

Samples of other Islamic Coins (Not shown to scale):

