

Four Undeciphered Arab Coins: *Historical Derivatives and Calligraphic Niceties*

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Introduction

In course of my spot survey of the Muslim coins of various times and dynastic rules preserved in the coin-cabinet of the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi a few days back, four Arab coins which are still undeciphered arrested my attention for their novelty in fabric and symmetry in moulding. A glance in the nature of their coin-fabric and treatment of calligraphic setting prompted me to ascribe the coins bearing VRM Accession Numbers 2601 and 2602 to the Umayyad dynasty (661-750 C.E.) and the Accession Numbers 2603 and 2604 to the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258 C.E.). For the proper understanding about the particulars and whereabouts of the coins understudy it needs to be prefixed a historical backdrop of the issuance of purely Arabic and islamized coins under the Umayyad caliph Abdul Malik b. Marwan (685-705 C.E.) within the time span of his rule.

Backdrop

Islam had its start in Arabia with the birth of Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) in Makkah in the later part of the sixth century of the Christian era. But it is true that the Arabs had no coin of their own, rather they used the coins of the neighbouring two empires - the Byzantine in the west and the Sassanian in the east-for procurement of their necessities of life and for conducting business transaction.¹ Even with the rise of Islam i.e. 610 C.E. (the year in which the Prophet received first *wahyi* or revelation) this mode of using the coins with slight alteration and modification continued till the accession of caliph Abdul Malik b. Marwan to the throne of the Umayyad dynasty in 685 C.E.² Abdul Malik brought manifold reforms in the administrative system. He made Arabic the state language and arabicized the whole administration along with the coin-reform. So long the Byzantine coins consisting of gold in the name of *dinar* and copper in the name of *fals* and the Sassanian silver coin in the name of *dirham* with the effigies of Byzantine emperors in case of the Byzantine coins and with fire-altar and the attending priests in the case of the Sassanian coins had been in use all over the territorial expanse of Muslim

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rule.³ In the reformation of the coins Abdul Malik took drastic measure. Islam does not approve the representation of human figure or any other animate objects in any form on any article of daily use or for the purpose of embellishment.⁴ Hence all the effigies and figurative art along with the Latin alphabetic symbols were eliminated from the coin-prints, and in their places the *kalimah* or the Muslim profession of faith and the Quranic verses bearing the monotheistic and apostolic conviction of Islam were engraved on the obverse and reverse sides of the reform-coins.⁵ Thus Abdul Malik performed the stupendous task of islamizing the coins and made them circulated all over his caliphate. There is a historical tale regarding the coin-reform of Abdul Malik, and it is as underneath.

The *paperi* were exported to the Byzantine empire from Egypt which was under the Umayyad rule, and in lieu of this export the Muslim used to receive the Byzantine *solidus* or gold coin for their monetary exchange. On his making Arabic as the state language and arabicizing the whole administrative machinery Abdul Malik tried to implement this scheme in some of his foreign relations. This is why to ensure the purity of the *paperi* exported to the Byzantine empire he put the official protocol of Muslim profession of faith inscribing the religious formula لا اله الا الله وحده محمد رسول الله (there is none worshipping except Allah Alone, Muhammad is Apostle of Allah) along with Greek-imprint. This caused to evoke the enragement of Justinian II, the Byzantine emperor, and he threatened to retaliate by putting the abusing words to their Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) in the gold *solidi* given to them in exchange of the *paperi*. Correspondence of letters and exchange of envoys between the two rulers could not solve this problem, and ultimately a breach of diplomatic relation embittered their friendly ties. Taking the opportunity of this unwelcoming situation Abdul Malik stopped taking the gold *solidi* of the Byzantines and completed the reformation of the coins with Islamic formulae.⁶ Though the veracity of this statement is not above question yet it is true that Abdul Malik is credited for arabicizing the administration along with the coinage system.

An examination of various opinions regarding the date of minting the reform-coins makes it reasonable to fix the date A.H.76/696 C.E. for new *dinar* A.H. 79/698 C.E. for the new *dirham* and A.H. 81/700 C.E. for the *fals*.⁷ Henceforth no language other than Arabic could be found engraved on the coins. This reform-model of coins continued to be minted during the period of the Umayyads, and even the Abbasid caliphs followed the same track with slight changes in the legends retaining all other features of the previous types.⁸ Following this standard model of the reformed coins the sundry dynasties that sprang up under the Abbasid caliphate in central Asia continued to mint their coins sometimes with introducing new formulae in the legends to suit the demand of the time.⁹

Description and decipherment of the coins

In the light of these preliminaries we like to study the coins as underneath. Of the four coins understudy two belong to the Umayyad period and other two belong to the

Abbasid period. These coins are now preserved in the coin-cabinet of the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi. No provenance of them is recorded in the Accession Register. Only it is mentioned that the coins were procured from Karachi on purchase tentatively in mid fifties of the 20th century. All are the silver coins with the denomination of *dirham*. They are lying uncatalogued and undeciphered in the coin-cabinet. Hence an attempt is taken to decipher them, and the results of their decipherment are individually delineated below.

Coin No. VRM 2601 (Plate 1)

The coin is made of silver with the denomination of *dirham* and is *mudawwara* or round in shape having thin fabric. Due to the wear and tear of time the original shape of the coin is a bit hampered with slight cuts in the margin. The central and marginal legends of the coin on the obverse are placed within three raised circles having crescent like stars three times outside the border at equal distance. The arrangement of the legends on the reverse of the coin is a bit different. The central legend is placed within a single raised circle while the marginal legend is placed in between the two raised circles. The coin belongs to the reign of al-Walid b. Abdul Malik (705-715 C.E.). The coin was struck in A.H. 92/ 711 C.E. The coin as deciphered is as follows.

Obverse

Central legend in three lines

لا اله الا
الله وحده
لا شريك له

Trans: None is worthworshipping except Allah Alone. He has no partner.

Marginal legend around the central legend

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم بواسط اثنتين وتسعين

Trans: In the name of Allah this *dirham* was struck in the mint of Wasit in 92 A.H./ 711 C.E.

Reverse

Central legend in four lines

الله احد الله
الصمد لم يلد و
لم يولد و لم يكن
له كفوا احد

Trans: Allah is One, Allah is eternally Besought of all. Neither He begot nor was He begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him.

Marginal legend

محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله و لو كره المشركون

Trans: Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah whom He sent with guidance and true religion so that He would make it victorious over all other religions although the polytheists desist it.

Coin No. VRM 2602 (Plate 2)

The coin is made of silver with the denomination of *dirham* and is *mudawwarah* or round in shape having thin fabric. In spite of wear and tear of time the coin is in good shape. The central and marginal legends of the coin on the obverse are placed within three raised circles having crescent like stars three times outside the border at equal distance. The arrangement of the legends on the reverse of the coin is a bit different. The central legend is placed within a single raised circle while marginal legend is placed in between two raised circles. The coin belongs to the reign of Hisham b. Abdul Malik (724-744 C.E.). The coin was struck in A.H. 110/728 C.E.

Obverse

Central legend in three lines

لا اله الا
الله وحده
لا شريك له

Trans: None is worshipped except Allah Alone. He has no partner

Marginal legend around the central legend

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم بواسطة سنة عشر و مئة

Trans: In the name of Allah this *dirham* was struck in the mint of Wasit in the year 110 A.H. /728 C.E.

Reverse

Central legend in four lines

الله احد الله
الصمد لم يلد و
لم يولد و لم يكن
له كفوا احد

Trans: Allah is One, Allah is eternally Besought of all. Neither He begot nor He was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him.

Marginal legend

محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله و لو كره المشركون

Trans: Muhammad is Apostle of Allah whom He sent with guidance and true religion so that He would make it victorious all over other religions although the polytheists desist it.

The two other silver coins of the Abbasid period as deciphered are described below. The silver coin with the denomination of *dirham* bearing the VRM No. 2603 belongs to the reign of Abu Jafar Abdullah al-Mansur (754-775 C.E.) while the other bearing the VRM No. 2604 belongs to the reign of Abu Jafar Abdullah al-Mamun (813-833 C.E.). The former was struck in 151 A.H./ 768 C.E. and the latter was struck in 198 A.H. / 813 C.E.

VRM No. 2603 (Plate 3)

Obverse

Both the central and marginal legends are placed within a raised circle of the border.

The central legend arranged in three lines is as follows.

لا اله الا
الله وحده
لا شريك له

Trans: None is worshipped except Allah Alone who has no partner.

The marginal legend encircling the central legend is like this.

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم بمدينة السلام سنة احدى و خمسين ومئة

Trans : In the name of Allah this *dirham* was struck in the mint of Mandiah al-Salam i.e. Baghdad in the year 151 A.H. / 768 C.E.

Reverse

Like the obverse both the central and marginal legends are placed within a raised circle of the border.

The central legend divided in four lines is as underneath.

محمد رسول الله
مما امر به الامير
منصور امير المؤمنين
جعفر

Trans : Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah. With which the commander ordered - he is Mansur, the Commander of the faithful. Ja'far.

The marginal legend encircling the central legend is like this.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله و لو كره المشركون

Trans : In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Muhammad is Apostle of Allah whom He sent with guidance and true religion so that He would make it victorious over all other religions although the polytheists desist it.

VRM No. 2604 (Plate 4)

Obverse

Both the central and marginal legends are placed within a raised circle of the border.

The central legend arranged in three lines is as follows.

لا اله الا
الله وحده
لا شريك له

Trans : None is worthworshipping except Allah Alone who has no partner.

The marginal legend encircling the central legend is as underneath.

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم بمدينة السلام سنة ثمان و تسعين ومئة

Trans : In the name of Allah this *dirham* was struck in the mint of Madina al-Salam i.e. Baghdad in the year 198 A.H./ 813 C.E.

Reverse

The central legend is placed within two milled circles while the marginal legend is placed in between the milled circles and the border circle.

The central legend arranged in five lines is as underneath.

الله
محمد رسول الله
مما امر به الامير
المامون امير المؤمنين
الفضل

Trans : For Allah. Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah. With which the commander ordered. he is al-Mamun, the Commander of the faithful. al-Fazl.

The marginal legend is like this.

بسم الله محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله و لو كره المشركون

Trans: In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah whom He sent with guidance and true religion so that He would make it victorious over all other religions although the polytheists desist it.

Historical Derivatives

The issuance of coins is the prerogative of kings and monarchs since originated tentatively in the seventh century B.C. both in the east and west.¹⁰ The coins of the Muslim rulers in all ages and times have some specialties which are scarcely noticed in the coins of kings and emperors of other countries of the world. Let us study the coin-prints of these four specimen belonging to the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates of Islam. These are akin each other with difference to a few points. The points of semblance and difference are delineated as underneath.

First, the coin-fabric of the above specimen is thin and broad to accommodate the central and marginal legends in a nice way having their Arabic denomination *dirham*, a silver unit of coinage in imitation of the silver *drachem* of the Sassanian emperors of Persia. Secondly, all effigies and portrayal representations of the Byzantine and Persian coins were discontinued, and in their places the *kalimah* or the Muslim profession of faith and the phraseology containing the apostleship of Muhammad were inscribed on both obverse and reverse sides of the coins. Possibly behind this device the Muslim rulers of the period under review had the objective of propagating the cardinal tenets of Islam through the coin-media, a transaction of every day use. Moreover, to comply with the tradition of the Prophet (peace be on him) "every saying and doing which is not begun with the name of Allah and His praise remains incomplete in its efficacy" they inscribed 'bismillah' in the start of the minting formulae. Hence there is every reason to believe that the caliphs of both the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties apparently were the ardent upholders of pristine Islam in their words and deeds.

Thirdly, the coins understudy of both the dynasties recorded the mint towns, in case of the Umayyad al-Wasit¹¹ and in case of the Abbasids Madinah al-Salam¹² i.e. Baghdad were inscribed as. Mints. The numismatic evidence shows the importance of Wasit as a famous emporium of the Umayyads after the capital city Damascus and Madinah al-Salam i.e. Baghdad as the capital city of the Abbasids and the great seat of learning and culture in the hey days of the Muslim upheavals. Fourthly, the Umayyad coins did not have the name of the reigning caliphs recorded; the inscribed date in the Hijrah year as in the case of these two *dirhams* indicate the particular caliph in whose time the particular coin was struck. The Abbasid coins, on the other hand, recorded both name of the reigning caliphs and the date of coin-striking. The coins understudy bear witness to this fact. It is, Therefore, reasonable to presume that the Abbasid coins went a step further from the Umayyads in their particularization with mentioning the rule's name and the date as well. Fifthly, the coin-prints show that the Abbasid coins in addition to the caliphs

name inscribed 'Ja'far' in case of al-Mansur's coin and 'Fazl' in case of al-Mamun's coin. This 'Ja'far' may mean either a part of al-Mansur's surname Abu 'Ja'far' or a prominent person of his nobility. But 'Fazl' refers particularly to al-Mamun's minister 'Fazl' be Saj; a Persian *vizir* who rendered valuable services to the state affairs of the time. To inscribe the name of *vizir* i.e. minister is an important feature of the Abbasid coinage.

Calligraphic Niceties

The four coins belonging to the Umayyad and Abbasid Dynasties are the best specimen of Arabic calligraphy in their alphabetic arrangement and symmetrical moulding. The early *Kufic* mode of writing was followed in all the coins under study, yet the Umayyad coins have got the legends inscribed in bold Arabic character of the letters and the Abbasid coins in letters with sloping ends catching the imagination of the onlookers for their aesthetic beauty.

Concluding Remarks

As a tiny archaeological unit, the Muslim coin plays a vital role to the addition of new facts in filling the gap of historical events or helps reconstruct the old fact in a new dimension along with its aesthetic beauty and calligraphic nicety. The deciphered and studied coins of two dynastic rules put above can fairly be set to substantiate the assumption.

SOURCE: Obtained directly from the author

Obverse

Reverse



Plate 1

Obverse

Reverse



Plate 2

Obverse

Reverse



Plate 3

Obverse

Reverse



Plate 4

Notes and References

- ¹ Mahmudd Naqshbandi, *al-Dinar al-Islami fi Mithf al-Iraqi*, Vol. 1. (Baghdad, 1953), p. 10 (Henceforth *al-Dinar al-Islam*); Ahmad be. Yahya al-Baldhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan* (Cairo, 1319 A.H.), p. 471.
- ² John Walker, *A Catalogue of the Arab-Byzantine and Post-Reform Umayyad coins* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1956), P. Introduction Liv. (Henceforth *Arab-Byzantine coins*).

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- ³ A K M Yaqub Ali, "Coins introduced by the Muslim rulers of the sub-continent", *Journal of the Asiatic society of Bangladesh* (Humanities) Vol. 54, No. 1. P. 29, June 2009. Dhaka. (Henceforth *JASB*).
- ⁴ For details see T.W. Arnold, *Painting in Islam* (NewYork: Dover publications, Inc, 1965), pp. 4ff.
- ⁵ A K M Yaqub Ali, *Muslim Numismatics and Calligraphy* in Bengali (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1989, Book Choice edition Dhaka 2008), p. 23, (Henceforth *Muslim Numismatics*); *Arab Byzantine Coins*, p. Introduction Liv.
- ⁶ *Arab- Byzantine Coins*, p. Introduction Liv.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, p. Introduction iv.
- ⁸ Michael Mitchner, *The World of Islam: Oriental Coins and Their Values* (London: Hawkin Publications, 1977), p. 70. (Henceforth *Oriental Coins*.)
- ⁹ For detail see *Muslim Numismatics*, pp. 130-133, p. 158-159; pp. 186 ff.
- ¹⁰ Stanley Lanepoole (ed), *Coins and Medals in History and Art* (Chicago: Argonaut, Inc. Publishers, 1968), p. 6 (Henceforth *CMHA*.); *Muslim Numismatics*.
- ¹¹ During the time of the Umayyad caliph Abdul Malik, his viceroy of the eastern provinces Hajjaj be. Yusuf founded this city of Waist as an army cantonment in between Kufa and Basra in A.H. 83/703 C.E. As it was in the middle station of Kufa and Basra so it was named as Wasit. Hajjaj be Yusuf built the *Darul Ijarah* of the Governor's residence, The Jami Mosque and embellished the city with all other amenities for its inmates. Thenceforth it emerged as a Mint and since its inception till the fall of the Umayyad dynasty in 750 C.E. only the post reform *Umayyad dirham* and *fals* were struck from this Mint. Like the capital city Damascus of the Umayyads this Mint of Wasit had its importance at the last phase of the Umayyad dynasty. Cf. al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan* (Cairo, 1319 A.H.), p. 298; A K M Yaqub Ali, *Muslim Numismatics*, p. 99; A K M Yaqub Ali, *Muslim Architecture and Art* in Bengali (Dhaka: Adhuna Prakashana, 6th edition, 2006), p. 76.
- ¹² Madinah al-Salam (The city of Peace) was a famous Mint of the Abbasid Caliphate. The second Abbasid caliph Abu 'Ja'far' al-Mansur searched a suitable place for his capital and selected Baghdad, on the western shore of the Tigris River. The foundation of the city was laid in 762 C.E. and completed in 766 C.E. As this city was circular so it was called *Madinah al-Mudwwarah* and also *Medina al-Mansur*. But its official name was *Madinah al-Salam* as the evidence of the coins testifies. The *dirham* was first struck from this Madinah al-Salam Mint in A.H. 151/768 C.E. Then the later caliphs of this dynasty struck the *dinar*, *dirham* and *fals* coins from the Madinah al-Salam Mint. Cf. A K M Yaqub Ali, *Muslim Numismatics*, p. 134.