



The Islam Research Group

Who Wrote the Qur'an?

VII Coins



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Six periods of early Arab coinage

At the time of Muhammad no coins were minted on the Arabian Peninsula. The Byzantine Empire to the north and west of Arabia, and from time to time controlling directly or indirectly the territories of Palestine, Syria and Jordan that were then known to the Romans as Arabia, issued coins in gold called denarius or solidi and in copper, tending to show a stylised representation of the issuing emperor. The Sassanian empire to the north and east used a silver coin, the dirham, showing the Sassanian emperor on one side and a fire alter with attendants on the other. These coin types remained the basis of the coinage used in the territories of the Arab conquests and they might best be considered in parallel.

In an internet post, *Viewing the Early Muslim State Through Its Coinage*¹, Ali Minai suggests viewing the early Islamic state's coinage use in six periods. His characterisations of these period is reproduced here, with some additional information, including pictures of coins, taken from other sources, including from *Arab Byzantine Coins*, Clive Foss, written as a guide to the collection of coins held in the Dumbarton Oaks (a Byzantine-specialist museum and research centre near Washington DC), *Signs of sovereignty: The Shahada, Quranic verses and the coinage of Abd al-Malik*, Jere L Bacharach, *Crossroads to Islam, the Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*, Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, and *From Ugarit to Samarra, an Archaeological Journey on the Trail of Ernst Herzfeld*, Volker Popp, in *Early Islam*.

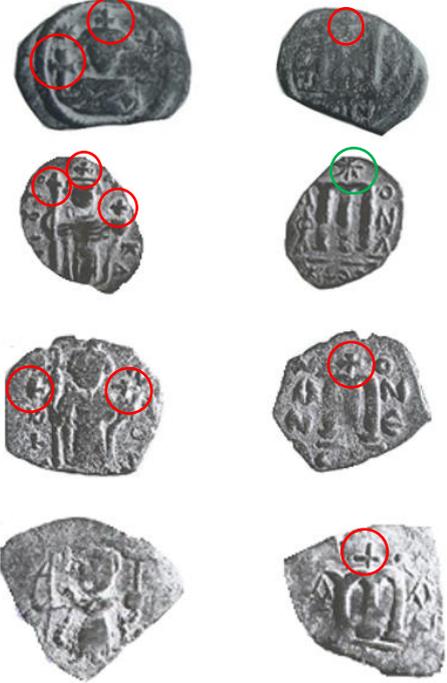
I. The Early Period (from Inception to 651): Arab- Byzantine coins

the decades following the conquests, coins continued to be minted as previously using Christian/Byzantine imperial iconography or the unchanged Zoroastrian depictions. Whilst their minting methods remained the same, in the west, in particular, coin quality deteriorated, with coins became progressively smaller, thinner, more irregularly shaped and less detailed. In this very early period 'half follis' were sometimes created.

Nevo, citing Grierson, identified five types:

- (a) Three standing figures (Heraclius-type)
- (b) Facing bust (Constans II-type)
- (c) Seated figure holding sceptre,
- (d) Standing figure (Constans II-type)
- (e) Two seated figures

¹ Posted on www.3quarksdaily.com.

Arab post-Byzantine coinage	Arab post-Sassanian coinage
 <p data-bbox="300 1077 823 1323">Only copper coins are produced in the first two decades after the Arab takeover, invariably including prominent crosses [circled in red], although in one instance replaced by a palm tree [circled in green] (Popp suggests to reflect the Qur'an's account of Jesus's birth, {19.23}², 'M' = 40.</p>  <p data-bbox="300 1648 785 1787">Foss sees in this coin the date written according to the Islamic calendar: '17' (ie seventeen years following the Hijrah) (outlined in blue)</p>	

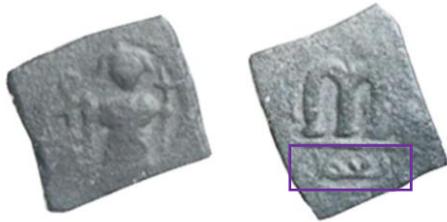
² From Ugarit to Samarra..., page 44

II. The Islamic Imprint (651 – 660)

From 651 coins began to bear Arabic writing, and some words or phrases associated with Islam.

Arab post-Byzantine coinage	Arab post-Sassanian coinage
 <p>In the west coins are overstruck with the Arabic words: 'jayyid', 'ṭayyib' (framed in blue), 'wafā' or 'jayyiz' but still with a cross crowned emperor.</p>	 <p>Following the death of the last Sassanian emperor, Yazdegird III, in 651 (year '20' after Yazdegird's accession), silver coins in the east continue to bear Yazdegird's image name but also receive the first 'Islamic' addition: the bismillah ('in the name of God') in Arabic (outlined in green).</p> <p>Shortly afterwards they would revert to using the image of the previous emperor Kusrow II</p> <p><i>'From the 650s until the 690s, silver drachma coins' inscriptions included different dates, different mints, and the names of almost fifty Muslim governors, all written in Pahlavi, as well as a limited range of short phrases in Arabic that followed the model of the first Arab-Sassanian issues by beginning in the second quadrant (three o'clock) of the obverse.'</i>⁵</p>

⁵ *Signs of sovereignty: The Shahada, Quranic verses and the coinage of Abd al-Malik*, Jere L Bacharach



محمد
'Muhammad'

The pictured square includes the word 'Muhammed' (purple) beneath a cross bearing figure. Foss suggests a date between 636 and 660 which, if correct, would be the earliest known written occurrence of the word outside of the Qur'an.

As Foss comments:

*'The identity of 'Muhammad' has not been established. If the figure were intended to represent the Prophet of Islam, it would offer a real iconographic anomaly for it is portrayed holding a cross. In the present state of uncertainty about early Islam though, almost anything seems possible.'*³

Popp on the other hand suggests that the figure is Jesus, with 'Muhammad' used as an honorific epithet meaning 'the chosen one'

'The inscription downwards on the obverse in the style of the Sassanians reads 'Amman' Thus this could be the an early indication of the distribution of the notion of Jesus being the Muhammad from the East of Iran to Transjordanian regions The distribution of coinage naming the 'chosen one' (Muhammad is proof of Abd' al-Malik's movement from the East to the West'.⁴

³ *Arab Byzantine Coins*, Clive Foss

⁴ *From Ugarit to Samarra...*, page 70

III. 'Early Umayyad Period' (660 – 680)

Umayyad coinage in the West	Umayyad coinage in the East
 <p data-bbox="400 719 740 750"><i>Imperial Heraclian gold coin</i></p> 	 <p data-bbox="871 772 1334 909">In the silver coins of the first Umayyad caliph, Muawiyah, oddly, the head of Yazdegird was replaced by that of his predecessor, Kusrow II.</p> <p data-bbox="871 952 1377 1160">The Arabic bismillah around the edge of the coin (outlined in green) is now sometimes accompanied by reference in Pahlavi script in the centre circle (outlined in purple) alongside Kusrow's head: 'Muawiyah, Commander of the Believers'</p>
<p data-bbox="300 1274 823 1482">In the west a series of gold coins of type (a) (<i>per</i> Grierson, ie Heraclian-type) on the obverse ('heads' side) but replacing the customary cross on a stepped platform on the reverse with a 'T' or a small sphere on a pole.</p> <p data-bbox="300 1525 799 1592">On a copper penny, a cross topped with a crescent (red) appears.</p> 	

IV: The Second Fitnah (680 – 692)

Umayyad coinage in the West	Umayyad coinage in the East
	 <p data-bbox="869 1500 1364 1601">During the twelve years of the civil war a variety of religious mottos are added (See separate chart below).</p> <p data-bbox="869 1646 1364 1780">Whether the coins of this period include one dated '66' and mentioning '<i>Muhammad rasul Allah</i>' is disputed, see below.</p>

V. Umayyad Consolidation (692 – 696)



Standing caliph gold coins

After the suppression of ibn Zubayr's revolt, the coinage of Abd al-Malik portrays distinctively Arabic sword-bearing figures: the 'standing caliph' or 'twin caliphs'.

The former 'ecumenical' title '*commander of the believers*' is now replaced with the Quranic word '*khalifa*' ('caliph': meaning '*successor*', '*deputy*' or '*viceroys*')

The reverse ('tails' side) continues to us a variety of cross replacement symbols.

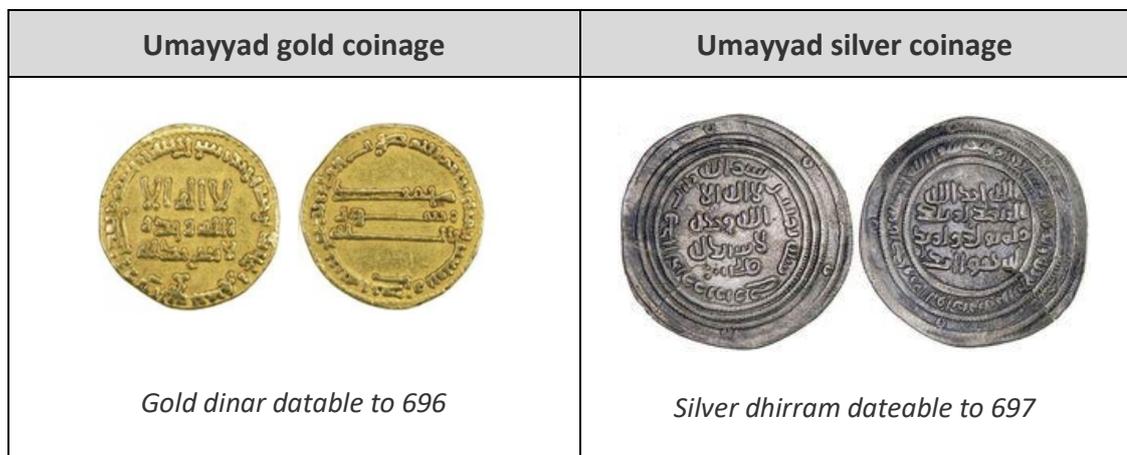


Standing caliph copper coins

'*Muhammad rasul Allah*' appears on silver coins from 692 at the latest.

VI. The Reform Coinage (from 696/7 onwards)

From 696 there is no more figurative art and the coins become purely epigraphic (text only).



Symbols

What is most curious about these coins is the early arab conquerors' willingness, despite their supposedly ardent monotheism, to continue using coin designs involving crosses, Zoroastrian worship and infidel rulers. The insertion of Arabic words from 650 demonstrates that they could have imposed a statement of their own choosing had they wished so to do. Minai plausibly suggest that the conquerors did not assert their own realm but sought to 'borrow' the sovereignty of the emperors that they had driven out.

In the west this may have been compelled by circumstances. Bacharach writes:

'An eighth-century Christian document known as the Maronite Chronicle records that

*('In ... [Byzantine Emperor] Constans' 18th year, many Arabs gathered at Jerusalem and made Muawiya king...) He also minted gold and silver, but it was not accepted, because it had no cross on it.'*⁶

The problem was not just that this series of gold Arab-Byzantine solidi lacked crosses but that there was nothing visually obvious on them that would tie them to Mu'awiya, any other Muslim ruler, or even to Islam, since they lacked an inscription in Arabic.

*It is possible that to contemporaries they looked like bad forgeries of Byzantine gold coins and would have been rejected in the market. Mu'awiya, or those in his court responsible for these pieces, apparently understood what images were inappropriate for a Muslim gold coin, but not which ones would be suitable.'*⁷

This no doubt explains the mysterious pseudo-crosses: upright poles ending with first a T bar, then spheres or circles, and in copper a cross and moon arrangement, which may have been attempts to compromise between either including or excluding a cross.

⁶ *The Seventh Century in the West Syrian Chronicles*, Palmer, p.31; cited in *Arab Byzantine Coins*, Foss, p39.

⁷ *Signs of sovereignty: The Shahada, Quranic verses and the coinage of Abd al-Malik*, Jere L Bacharach

Islamic-type religious mottos

Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren produces a chart of the earliest use of 'Islamic'-type mottos on the silver coins:⁸

' <i>bism Allāh</i> ' (<i>'In the name of Allah'</i>), year '20'	652 or 272, depending whether this refers to 20 years after the accession in 632, or death in 651, of Yazdegird III. (NB Bacharach dates this to 652 ⁹)
' <i>bism Allāh rabbī</i> ' (<i>'In the name of Allah my Lord'</i>)	Not known
' <i>bism Allāh al-malik</i> ' (<i>'In the name of Allah, the king'</i>)	Either 662 or 683
' <i>rabbī Allāh</i> ' (<i>'My lord is Allah'</i>)	Either 668 or 688
' <i>Allāh wa-rabbī 'wr</i> ' / ' <i>bism Allāh rabbī</i> '	Either 692 or 712
' <i>Muḥammad rasūl Allāh</i> ' / <i>bism Allāh</i> ' (<i>'Muhammad is the messenger of God...</i>)	At the latest from 691 (see below)

Nevo expresses a doubt concerning the date of first mention of Muhammed on a coin:

The earliest dates on coins mentioning the Prophet Muhammad are '66' (a coin of the governor Abd al-Malik bn Abd'allah) and '71' (a coin of the governor Xalid bin Abd'allah in power intermittently, 70-75 AH [692-697]).

The latter was issued in Damascus by a Marwanid official. The era must be AH [i.e. 71 years after the hijra date of 622] to accord with the governor's period in office and this presents no historical difficulty: 71 AH was after Abd al-Malik had defeated most of the Zubayrite opposition in the province of Iraq and only a year before the date of the Dome of the Rock.

The coin dated 66 however raises several problems. If this date means 66 AH [ie 688] it is a unique example of a Mohammedan inscription from any source, numismatic or other, prior to the 70s AH. Moreover 66 AH, the second year after Abd al-Malik's accession, was a most inopportune moment to introduce a major religious change. The new caliph was pre-occupied with interregnum wars and in his worst situation vis-à-vis his many opponents. His grip on his realm was at its weakest. Besides, the coin was struck at Bišapūr in the province of Fars. But after 64 AH the provinces bordering the

⁸ *Crossroads to Islam...* page 250-251

⁹ *Signs of Sovereignty...* Page 4

*Persian Gulf from Basra at the head of the gulf to Kirman and Zaranj north of the Straits of Hormuz were controlled by anti-Marwanid [ie anti-Abd al-Malik] factors ... Between 64 and 71 AH no Umayyad governor was firmly enough in control to mint coins in this area. The mint towns in the vicinity of Bišāpūr were held by the Zubayrites... Bišāpūr itself was held by the Zubayrites from at least 67 to 70 AH. Finally the governor named on this coin, Abd al-Malik ibn Abdallah is mentioned in al-Tabari's **Annals** as having been appointed governor of Basra in 64/65 AH after Ubaydullah bn Zaiyad was driven out. But he can have held office only very briefly for two governors, an Umayyad and a Zubayrite had succeeded him and been replaced in their turn by 65 AH. ... Clearly he was governor of Fars when he minted this coin but the question remains whether he held this office in 66 AH when Khuzestan, Fars and Kirman were all Zubayrite controlled or in 66 YE [i.e. the 66th year following the accession of the last Persian Shah, Yazdigird] (ie 78 AH) when the area was firmly controlled for Abd al-Malik by Hajjaj. ... It is difficult to believe that a Marwanid official could have struck any coins let alone coins with a radically new religious formula in Bišāpūr in 66AH. ¹⁰*

Bacharach, however, feels confident enough to date this coin to 686:

Our understanding of the circumstances under which Arab-Sasanian drachms were struck by specific governors with new inscriptions in Pahlavi and/or Arabic is still limited. For this study, the most important numismatic innovation took place in Bishapur during the governorship of 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Abd Allah.

The drachms are dated to AH 66 (685) and AH 67 (686) and include after 'bism Allāh' the phrase Muhammad rasūl Allāh ('Muhammad is the Prophet of God'). This was the first time that a reference to the Prophet had been made on coinage. The Arabic inscription, as in other contemporary numismatic examples, was written in a clockwise direction in the second and third quadrants of the obverse. The claim to the caliphate made at this time by Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr (r. AH 64–73 [683–92]) as amīr al-mu'minīn (Commander of the Faithful) would also appear on a few Arab-Sasanian issues, but was inscribed in Pahlavi.¹¹

By the time of the 'reform' coinage, the rejection of Christianity is pointed. The 696 gold dinar pictured above carries the same passage 'Allah is one. Allah is eternal. He did not beget and was not begotten' from **surah 112** that Abd al Malik had inscribed in mosaic upon the dome of the Rock. at about the same time. Around it is:

'Muḥammad [is] the messenger of Allah, whom He sent with guidance and the religion of truth that He might proclaim it over all religions even if the associators are averse',

{61.9}, a verse that also appears on one of two copper plaques on the Dome of the Rock, that are not independently dated but may form part of Abd al-Malik's original decorative scheme.

It should be noted that the Dome of the Rock contains a passage that is not a quote from the canonical Qur'an, and that **Surah 112** would have been the final words of Ibn Masud's variant Qur'an

¹⁰ *Crossroads to Islam ...* pages 252-252

¹¹ *Signs of Sovereignty...* page 6

(which rejected **Surahs 113 and 114** as inauthentic). These two factors together suggest that Abd al-Malik was not working from what is now regarded as the canonical archetype Qur'an.

Conclusion

- 1. The poor quality of Byzantine-style coinage produced immediately after the Arab takeover suggests that this takeover was not the conquest of a powerful, centrally commanded regime, but a transition into a declining sub-Roman culture**

One may draw a comparison with the struggling sub-Roman society in Western Europe after the withdrawal of Roman armies and civilian administration in the fifth century.

- 2. The continued minting of coins with Christian (in the west) or Zoroastrian (in the east) iconography, albeit increasingly ambiguous, supports the thesis that what authority existed wished to be seen as continuing to borrow the symbols of pre-existing religious authority. Although this becomes increasingly Arabised and ambiguous, these coins are inconsistent with the state's promotion of a distinctive religion such as Islam until at least 696.**

Whether or not specifically religious zeal had in the recent past motivated Arab fighters, by the time that his movement spread out across the Middle East, North Africa and Persia, by the time of the establishment of a polity capable of minting coins, this enterprise was predominantly concerned with the mundane matters of the establishing control of territory rather than proselytization to a new religion.

- 3. The question of when the prophet Muhammed is recognised through the coinage is unclear, but the phrase '*Muhammad rasul Allah*' appears, at the latest, from 691 and the square Muhammad coin is positive evidence that shortly after the Arab takeover, the word '*Muhammad*' in connection with a religious figure was not understood as inconsistent with the Christian cross.**