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A Period of Transition: Early Islamic and Umayyad Coinage

Anna Tiner

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John Wilson, dean emeritus and professor of religion at Pepperdine University, has accumulated a collection of over 1200 coins from the Holy Land dating from the Persian Period (c. 5th century) to the time of the Crusaders (c. 14th century). Wilson's interest in these coins has given many Pepperdine undergraduate students the opportunity to study and research the coins' significance in historical, religious and artistic context. From Wilson's generosity, I, a senior art history major at Pepperdine, have been given the opportunity to analyze four coins from his collection dating from 620 AD to 680 AD. These four coins provides a meager yet insightful glimpse into the coinage minted by Islamic rulers during their conquest over the Holy Land and the transition of rule from the Byzantine Empire to the Islamic Caliphate. With the help of an innovative technology called Reflective Transference Image (RTI) that enables the coins to be observed in high-resolution images that can be adjusted with respect to light and reflectivity. Creating RTI images of the coins administers a deeper alternate perspective giving light to aspects of the coin that cannot be seen by the naked eye. Using the RTI technology alongside research of the coins' historical context verifies that the coins not only serve an economical purpose but also have a strategic political, social and religious agenda.

The first coin to display these certain political, social and religious agendas is coin CN_PU32120. (FIG 1A,B) This coin is a silver dirhem with the weight of 3.78 grams and the diameter of 3 centimeters. CN_PU32120 is an early Umayyad, Arab-Sassanian coin minted in the year 620 AD in Istakir – the ancient Persepolis – in southern Iran.¹

The obverse side of the coin depicts the bust of the Zoroastrian king, Khusrau II (FIG 1A). To the right and left of Khusrau II's portrait is an inscription in Pahlavi exclaiming, "Khusrau; may his glory increase." Within the margins of the coin, on the

¹ Richard Plant, *Arabic Coins and How to Read Them* (London: Seaby, 1980), 38.

obverse, depicts four crescent and star motifs aligned to the cardinal points of a compass. In between the second and third crescent and star motif is an inscription in Arabic, *bismallah*, meaning “In the name of God.” On the reverse side is the depiction of a fire altar, the religious symbol used by Zoroastrians, and two figures standing on either side (FIG 1B).

Coin CN_PU32120 marks a significant point in both Christian and Islamic history. This coin was minted in year 620 AD, before the establishment of the Umayyad Dynasty under Mu’awiya – the first Islamic dynasty.² The coin’s significance shows that even before the official configuration of the Umayyad dynasty, Mu’awiya was strategically gaining control of the land around him and implementing Islamic verse, themes and language into the then, already existing mints. This is evidence showing the political power Mu’awiya was obtaining, marking the critical period of transition and more importantly the transformation of the Byzantine Empire and its southern provinces to that of the Umayyad Dynasty.

The Sasanian Persians were already executing military incursions against Byzantium trying to gain control of the imperial lands, when Mu’awiya stepped up and took advantage of the situation, bringing in his forces and wresting territories from the Byzantine Empire.³ Soon the Orthodox Church of Constantinople lost its authority over the outer regions surrounding the heart of Byzantium placing the new Islamic rulers in charge of grain source and taxes. At this point Mu’awiya begins implementing Islamic themes and ideologies onto coins, but this proves to be a slow and methodological process leaving lasting effects.

² Helen C. Evans and Brandie Ratliff, *Byzantine and Islam: Age of Transition 7th-9th Century* (New York: Yale University Press, 2012), 6.

³ Evans and Ratliff, 4.

Mu'awiya took cautious steps to ensure a smooth transition from Christian to Islam, Greek to Arabic. He had to be methodical in his approach. Mu'awiya could not make drastic changes to the coinage for fear of rejection. He had to make it a slow adaptation for his newly conquered subjects. Many of the same languages that were used in the Byzantine era continued in the first generations of Muslim rule, as seen in coin CN_PU32120.⁴

Prior to Muhammad's death in 632 AD, Arabs were primarily confined to the Arabia peninsula.⁵ Unlike the West, the Arabs did not have a monetary economy based on coins.⁶ It was not until after the death of Muhammad that the Arab Muslims began venturing out of the Arabia peninsula and into the Western World, Byzantium, and other outlying regions.⁷ Conquering such civilizations, which depended so heavily on a monetary economy of coins, forced the Muslims to issue their own coinage. In turn, this forced the Muslims to study and observe the coinage of their conquests. Ingeniously, they took their time. As David Wasserstein states, "They temporized, they took their time, they took on the ways of their predecessors."⁸ Eventually, the Muslim rulers realized that they could take the coinage into their own hands, and that change was possible, necessary and even desirable.⁹ These coins were minted not only as monetary use for the Muslims, but they were minted to convey a message, even multiple messages. Wasserstein explains, "Beyond the more mundane types of information conveyed by the coins text, the names and titles of a ruler, the name which he gives the town where he mints his

⁴ Evans and Ratliff, 4.

⁵ David J. Wasserstein, "Coins as Agents of Cultural Definition in Islam," *Poetics Today* 14 (1993): 305.

⁶ Wasserstein, 305.

⁷ Wasserstein, 305.

⁸ Wasserstein, 305.

⁹ Wasserstein, 305.

money and other such words may convey other messages, including claims to authority, going far beyond the reality such as claims to spiritual as well as political authority.”¹⁰ Adopting a handful of ways of the previous ruler and interweaving it with their own Muslim influence created a far more impactful, long lasting grasp on the Western World.

As previously discussed, coin CN_PU32120, is a valuable example pertaining to the slow integration of Islamic language and culture as well as the adoption and adaptation of previous Byzantium, Christian influence. It is obvious from textual evidence that Mu’awiya had started implementing Arabic onto the coins he minted, but he maintained the original imagery of the region. In this case, coin CN_PU32120 retained the portrait of the previous ruler of the Pahlavi Dynasty in Istakir, Iran. Another notable fact is the Arabic name for a silver coin such as this, dirhem, coming from the Greek word *drachma*.¹¹ Since the Arabs came from a society without coins, they did not have proper names, therefore adopting and adapting the existing form of the Greek word into their own. Lastly, Richard Plant points out, “Despite the Greek origin of the word ‘dirhem’ the broad, flat flan and layout of the design make it a fairly obvious imitation of the Sasanian – Persian – silver coins, though they are much lighter in weight.”¹² This is yet another example how the Arabs took a preexisting society’s ideologies and applied them to their own principles creating a new system of coins.

The next two coins to be discussed provide a prime example of the slow transition of Byzantium coins to more Islamic coins under the rule of Mu’awiya. The first coin, CN_PUCONST was minted circa 629-31 AD under the rule of Heraclius (r. 610-641 AD). (FIG 2A,B) CN_PUCONST was minted during the rise in power of Mu’awiya

¹⁰ Wasserstein, 306.

¹¹ Plant, 40.

¹² Plant, 40.

but before he established the Umayyad Dynasty. Minted in Jordan, the coin plainly gives reverence to Heraclius, the King, and Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium. Made from gold, the weight of coin CN_PUCONST is 4.31 grams and the diameter is 2 cm. On the obverse are three figures thought to be Heraclius in the center crowned with a long moustache and long beard, Heraclonas crowned on the right and Heraclius Constantine crowned, beardless on the left, all of them wearing priestly robes and holding a cross on a globe (FIG 2A).¹³ The reverse depicts the symbol of the True Cross held up on top of three steps (FIG2B).¹⁴ Circumambulating the depiction of the cross and steps are the words, all in Greek, “Victory of the Emperors; fine gold, Constantinople.”

The second coin, coin CN_PU32150, was minted circa 660-80 AD, when the Umayyad Dynasty became a stable empire under Mu’awiya. (FIG 3A,B) This coin is from the region of Tiberius – Arab-Byzantine II. Minted on copper this coin weighs 3.31 grams with a diameter of 2 cm. The obverse depicts three figures similar to that of coin CN_PUCONST (FIG 3A). The reverse depicts the Greek ‘M’ and two inscriptions – Tiberius in Greek and Tabariyah, another name for Tiberius, in Arabic (FIG 3B).

Both similarities and differences between coin CN_PUCONST and coin CN_PU32150 convey the transition from Byzantine rule to Islamic rule. One such difference is the material used to mint coins. The Byzantine Empire operated a money economy striking an abundant amount of coins made from gold and copper but not silver – silver was adopted from the Sasanians.¹⁵ Mu’awiya adopted the use of copper because it was commonly used in Tiberius prior to Muslim rule just like he adopted the use of

¹³ “Ancient Coins for Sale,” last modified 2012, <http://www.ancientresource.com/lots/ancient-coins/gold-coins.html>.

¹⁴ “Ancient Coins for Sale”

¹⁵ Evans and Ratcliff, 136.

silver for coin CN_UP32120 because silver was the metal used in the region of Istakir, which was part of the Persian Empire.

Another similarity is the depiction on the obverse side for both coins. They have three figures dressed in priestly robes and holding staffs. The difference between the two depictions can be seen from the Tiberius coin, which has three figures dressed in robes of eastern influence. They are more fitted and have different textile pattern. Whereas the coin minted in Jordan still plainly depict loose robes typically worn by Christian priests. The rulers depicted themselves as a sovereign ruler and spiritual ruler. Another difference lies in the staffs each figure is holding. The Jordan coin has the rulers holding staffs with the sign of the cross, while the Tiberius coin depicts the rulers holding staffs that clearly have lost the shape of the cross. The reverse side of the coin contains the most significant difference between the two coins. The reverse, minted in Tiberius, completely loses any sign of the cross. Instead it depicts the Greek 'M', which, according to Helen C. Evans and Brandie Ratcliff, it is at this point in Muslim rule that the 'M' no longer represents the Greek currency value of 40 nummi.¹⁶

The timeline of these coins outline the path of conquest for the Muslims, especially Mu'awiya. CN_PUCONST was minted around the time of Muhammad's death, before the rise of Islam began to spread and conquer their surrounding territory. Moreover, this coin was minted in Jordan, an outlying territory of the Byzantine Empire, and it does not have any trace of Muslim influence. On the contrary, CN_PU32150, minted in Tiberius during the official reign of Mu'awiya under the Umayyad Dynasty, transmits not only how far Mu'awiya has expanded his empire but how much influence he is beginning to have with in their society politically, socially and religiously.

¹⁶ Evans and Ratcliff, 136.

The Roman vassal, Herod Antipas, originally founded Tiberius.¹⁷ It was erected with a municipal framework like that of a Greek *polis*, giving it a distinct urban nature.¹⁸ In 636 AD, Tiberius came under Muslim ruler and was then identified as Tabariyah.¹⁹ Tabariyah was chosen to become the provincial capital of the Jund al-Urdun and continued to prosper as much as it had under Byzantine rule.²⁰ It is at this moment that Tabariyah became a significant mint for Mu'awiya and his successors. An extensive number of coins were minted under the Umayyad caliphs at the Tabariyah location.²¹ Mu'awiya had begun to successfully adopted, adapt and transform his conquered territories into a prosperous Muslim state.

Lastly, coin CN_PU32160 marks a significant leap of transformation in early-Islamic coins. (FIG 4A,B) From Jerusalem, coin CN_PU32160 is an Arab-Byzantine coin minted in the 7th century during the reign of Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705), the fifth caliph of the Umayyad Dynasty. Made from copper, it is 3.04 grams in weight and 2 centimeters in diameter. According to Evans and Ratcliff, “the first decade of the reign of Abd al-Malik was a time of experimentation which saw the beginning of a truly Islamic coinage.”²² It was under his reign that there was the first appearance of the profession of the Muslim faith in Arabic.²³ Gold, copper and silver were all metals of choice for Islamic coins, and Abd al-Malik began replacing the emperor with the face of the caliph, while the Byzantine ‘M’ still marks the reverse.²⁴ Additionally, the cross disappears from the gold

¹⁷ Timothy P. Harrison, “*The Early Umayyad Settlement at Tabariyah: A Case of Yet Another Misr?*” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51(1992): 52.

¹⁸ Harrison, 52.

¹⁹ Harrison, 52.

²⁰ Harrison, 53.

²¹ *Coins of The Holy Land*, 71.

²² Evans and Ratcliff, 141.

²³ Evan and Ratcliff, 141.

²⁴ Evans and Ratcliff, 141.

coins and the figures wear Arab dress.²⁵ Eventually, under Abd al-Malik, there was a canon established that imparted a stronger sense of authority with the image of the caliph.²⁶ Christianity was no longer the primary, dominate religion, Islam had taken a hold of that position.

Abd al-Malik's time of experimentation and transformation is markedly evident in coin CN_PU32160. On the obverse the traditional three figures have been removed replaced by the depiction of the reigning caliph (FIG 4A). Circumambulating the caliph is an inscription, solely in Arabic, expressing "Muhammad, is the apostle of God", giving rise to the profession of Islam's faith on coinage. Arabic is the only language found on coin CN_PU32160, giving proof that Abd al-Malik was growing in power and influence. He not only controled the monetary economy but additionally Arabic is now the official language of the land and Islam the official religion. On the reverse, there is a depiction of the Greek 'M', underlined and on each side of the 'M' there contains another inscription, in Arabic, stating the mint – Iliya Filastin (FIG 4B).

Evans and Ratcliff stated that Abd al-Malik kept the Greek 'M' as the design for the reverse of his coinage, but there is continual debate as to why he chose to continue using the depiction of the 'M'. Sixty years after the Jewish revolt, Hadrian rebuilt the city of Jerusalem by making it into a Roman colony, named Aelia Capitolina.²⁷ It was not until around 614 AD that the city would revert to the name Jerusalem and reopen its mints.²⁸ Jerusalem continued to be a significant mint during the Umayyad period, but, once again, Jerusalem's name changed to the Arabic word for Aelia Capitolina, which is

²⁵ Evans and Ratcliff, 141.

²⁶ Evans and Ratcliff, 142.

²⁷ David Hendin, *Cultural Change: Jewish Christian and Islamic Coins of the Holy Land* (New York: Abraham D. and Marian Sheuer Collection), 79.

²⁸ Hendin, 79.

Iliya Filastin.²⁹ Consequently, the Greek ‘M’ is now used alongside the Arabic inscription naming the mint at Iliya Filastin. Abd al-Malik decided to keep Greek and Roman influences, albeit these symbols lost their traditional meaning, and he chose to disregard any Christian influence. Abd al-Malik was making a powerful political and religious statement. Abd al-Malik did not disappear all mint design of non-Islamic standing because he wanted to make a strategic statement showing Islam as the official religion and proclaiming his power and authority over the lands he conquered. Abd al-Malik is expressing that he has taken over the empire of what used to belong to the ‘invincible’ Romans and Greeks.

There are few sources from the ancient world that scholars can study and conclude with a decisive answer as to what exactly happened throughout particular periods of time. One of the most important items that contribute to the contemporary study of the ancient world is the coinage of that certain era.³⁰ Evans and Ratcliff state, “Coins, for their part, are products of a government, their images can feature illustrations of official policies and ideologies.”³¹ They are prime sources of cultural continuity and most importantly cultural change. It was believed that the Arab conquest was one of barbaric violence executed by merciless rulers.³² On the contrary, because of the coins found, such as these in Dr. Wilson’s collection, scholars have now come to the conclusion that the Arab conquest was a slow methodical endeavor – evident from the slow transformation of the coins. Additionally, due to the study of these coins, a conclusion can be made regarding certain ideologies the ruler wanted to convey. Both

²⁹ Hendin, 79.

³⁰ Evans and Ratcliff, 136.

³¹ Evans and Ratcliff, 136.

³² Harrison, 51.

Mu'awiya and Abd al-Malik were patient. They made intelligent decisions to each generation of new coins. They slowly integrated their own religious and political ideologies while simultaneously dissolving their newly conquered subjects' old political and religious ideologies. Mu'awiya and Abd al-Malik were aware of the consequences and rejection if they proceeded too fast, therefore they took a societal interest to gradually adopt, adapt and transform the local mints into their own monetary process.

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Figure 1A: Coin CN_PU32120_OBV, from the collection of Dr. John Wilson



Figure 1B: Coin CN_PU32120_REV, from the collection of Dr. John Wilson



Figure 2A: Coin CN_PUCONST_OBV, from collection of Dr. John Wilson



Figure 2B: Coin CN_PUCONST_REV, from the collection of Dr. John Wilson



Figure 3A: Coin CN_PU32150_OBV, from the collection of Dr. John Wilson



Figure 3B: Coin CN_PU32150_REV, from the collection of Dr. John Wilson



Figure 4A: Coin CN_PU31260_OBV, from the collection of Dr. John Wilson



Figure 4B: Coin CN_PU32160_REV, from the collection of Dr. John Wilson

