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## COINAGE FROM THE DAWN *of* ISLAM

*Early coins of the caliphates offer today's collectors several fascinating series of historical interest.*

**T**HE DEVELOPMENT and spread of Islam in the 7th century A.D. is perhaps the single most important historical event between the fall of the Western Roman empire in A.D. 476 and the beginning of the Renaissance in the 14th century. The Islamic era is considered to have begun with the prophet Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 622. Throughout the 7th century, Islam spread with astonishing speed, quickly over-

whelming the earlier Sasanian Empire and reaching from the northern shores of Africa to the edge of Central Asia. This geographical range encompassed innumerable cultures and what had been several major civilizations. The coinage of the early Islamic era through the end of the Umayyad caliphate (A.D. 750/A.H. 132) reflects the challenges that faced the new faith, as well as the latter's remarkable ability to centralize economic power within a century of its birth.

*While the Muslims' use of these coins was expedient, it was but a temporary solution. New coins eventually had to be produced.*



▲ **A SASANIAN DRACHM** (left) and an Arab-Sasanian drachm (right). The latter features the Arabic marginal legend *bism Allah* (“in the name of God”).

Approx. Size: 32-35mm

At first, the early Muslims made do with existing Sasanian and Byzantine coins, these being the two dominant political powers in the regions where Islam took root. Both empires had long-established coinages that were respected and accepted across many lands. Byzantine coins tended to circulate in Egypt and Syria (then part of the Byzantine empire), while Sasanian coins circulated in the area of Iran and Iraq. While the Muslims' use of these coins was expedient, it was but a temporary solution. New coins eventually had to be produced. At first, these simply mimicked the ubiquitous Sasanian and

Byzantine pieces; soon, however, the Muslims began striking these coins in modified form, creating what we now know as the “Arab-Sasanian” and “Arab-Byzantine” series.

The Arab-Sasanian pieces generally are silver drachms that record both a date and mintmark in Pahlavi script. Pahlavi isn't a language per se, but rather a system of inscription for various Middle-Iranian languages. The dating system used on the earliest of these coins is based on the regnal years of earlier Sasanian rulers, mainly those of Yazdegerd III, though some dates have evaded correlation with other dating systems.

What makes these coins *Arab-Sasanian* is the inclusion of Arabic legends in the outer margins of the obverse. The language is closely tied to Islam, and its appearance on these pieces is significant: it marked a major transition in the world's religious and political landscape. The most common marginal legend is *bism Allah*, meaning “in the name of God.” Other examples of marginal Arabic legends on Arab-Sasanian coins include *jayyid* (“good”), *lillah* (“for God”), *bism Allah rabbi* (“in the name of God, my Lord”) and *lillah al-hamd* (“God be praised”).

Because of their Pahlavi inscriptions, Arab-Sasanian coins can be difficult to attribute, especially for novices who might not have an adequate library on

PHOTOS: BEN SCOTT (MAPS) & DAVID FANNING



*Overtly Christian iconography commonly found on Byzantine coins was gradually modified on Arab-Byzantine issues to reflect the change in religion.*

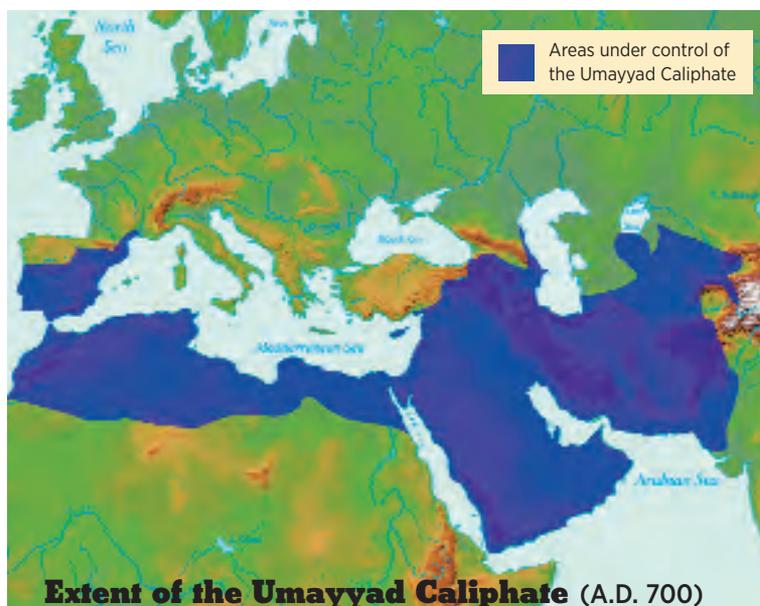
Islamic numismatics. That said, it is a fascinating series to collect. Many issues feature the names of early Islamic governors and other officials, making them important historical documents in their own right. A number of people who played key roles in early Islamic history are recognized on these coins, whose somewhat crude, yet intriguing iconography provides a numismatic transition from the pre-Islamic period to the later era of purely Islamic pieces.

The first Arab-Byzantine coins to be produced were copper *fulus* (singular, *fals*), which generally are undated, but are commonly accepted as having been produced from the A.H. 50s (A.D. 670s). These are fairly common and often include some indicator of mint. The first gold *dinars* were struck around A.H. 71-72 (A.D. 691-92). These coins, which are very rare, mimic the appearance of Byzantine *solidi*. Again, what makes both the copper and gold pieces Arab-Byzantine is the inclusion of Arabic words or legends.

While most Arab-Byzantine and Arab-Sasanian coins closely resemble their pre-Islamic predecessors, some designs were adopted to send a political message to the new religion's neighbors. The Standing Caliph type of Arab-Byzantine fals pictures an aggressive caliph with hand on sword, along with Islamic legends clearly distinguishing the coin from its Byzantine prototypes. In addition, overtly Christian iconography commonly found on Byzantine issues (the crucifix, for example) was gradually modified on Arab-Byzantine coins to reflect the change in religion.

Numismatists today are accustomed to coins that bear both a date and a mintmark or other indication of their place of manufacture. Yet the inclusion of this information was uncommon before the Islamic era. While ancient Greek and Roman coins sometimes bear mintmarks or other indications of where they were struck, they are inconsistent and only occasionally accompany a date. When these coins carry a year of issue, it is not stated according to a consistent and long-lasting dating system, but rather in terms of a regnal year or the year of a consul or other office.

The current dating system used throughout most of the Western world derives from a calendar devised by Dionysius Exiguus, based on the calculated birth of Christ (*Anno Domini*, or A.D., the "Year of Our Lord"). Though Exiguus developed his calendar by A.D. 525, initially it was used only for liturgical purposes; the dates were not applied to other historical events. While the early historian Bede used the A.D. system in his 8th-century works, widespread adop-



tion of the calendar did not come about for quite some time, and the earliest known A.D.-dated coin has been traced to 1234.

The Hijri calendar, based on the date of Muhammad's emigration to Medina, involves a lunar year usually lasting 354 days. It achieved widespread use in the Muslim world fairly quickly, and by the end of the 7th century A.D. was generally accepted. *Anno Hegirae* (or A.H.) dating begins with Year 1, corresponding to A.D. 622.

The early years of Islam following the death of the prophet Muhammad in A.H. 10 (A.D. 632) are considered the period of the Orthodox (or *Rashidun*) caliphs. These were the first four caliphs (or *khalifah*), or rulers of the Islamic community as successors to Muhammad. In A.H. 40 (A.D. 661), Muawiya I ibn Abi Sufyan became the first caliph under the Umayyad dynasty, which would rule Islamic lands for the next 90 years or so (and Spain until about A.D. 1030).

The most significant event in early Islamic numis-



▲ A MARGINAL ARABIC LEGEND on an Arab-Sasanian drachm.

*Learning to read Kufic is probably the most formidable challenge when beginning to collect early Islamic coinage.*



PHOTOS: DAVID FANNING

▲ **SIMILARITIES ARE EVIDENT** between a Byzantine follis of Constans II (top) and an Arab-Byzantine “Standing Caliph” fals of the period of ‘Abd al-Malik.

Approx. Size: 15mm

matic history was the coinage reform effected by ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, who was the Umayyad caliph from A.H. 65 to 86 (A.D. 685-705). The repercussions from those changes, which took place around A.H. 77-78 (A.D. 696-97), continue to affect Islamic coinage today. First, precious-metal coins would be purely epigraphic in design, with no figural representations. (Copper coins were exempt and generally continue to be.) Second, precious-metal coins would be dated using the Hijra calendar. This marked the first time in history that coins were dated in a consistent manner across many different lands for what has turned out to be more than a millennium.

Umayyad silver *dirhams*, in addition to recording the date of striking, also consistently included the full name of the mint of manufacture, giving us the first coins consistently carrying the date/mint combination we are so accustomed to today. (Few gold dinars bore a mint name, as nearly all were struck in Damascus. Early base-metal coins were much cruder than precious-metal pieces and were rarely dated, though after about A.H. 85 they often included the mint name.) The name of the caliph was nearly always omitted from early Islamic issues, perhaps to keep the emphasis on the new religion and culture rather than on an individual.

Umayyad gold dinars are fascinating and include some notable rarities. Last year, a very rare specimen struck in gold from the “Mine of the Commander of the Faithful” sold at auction for £3.72 million (about US\$6 million), the second-highest price ever realized for a coin sold at auction. On the other hand, many others are readily available to collectors.

For beginners, Umayyad silver dirhams are perhaps the easiest to collect. The legends usually are clearly engraved and very formulaic; only the date and mint name tend to vary from coin to coin. They also are relatively common as a group, though numerous rarities exist. For these reasons, they are

reasonably popular and a good place to start.

The silver dirhams began to be struck after ‘Abd Al-Malik’s coinage reform, which means they are entirely epigraphic: no images are depicted, only writing and occasional decorative devices, such as annulets, in the outer margins. The text is in Arabic, with the script being an early form of Arabic orthography called *Kufic*. Angular and less flowing than modern written Arabic, it was developed for use in inscriptions and was easier to engrave in dies than more rounded script. Most significant, it does not include the diacritical marks (dots and other accents) that indicate many of the subtleties of the Arabic language, including most vowel sounds. Without the diacritical marks, letters like “b,” “n,” “t” and “th” can look the same. Learning to read Kufic is probably the most formidable challenge when beginning to collect early Islamic coinage, but good resources are available. (Umayyad Kufic is far easier to read than some later versions of Kufic or other Arabic scripts.)

The Umayyad silver dirhams were struck from A.H. 79 until 132 (A.D. 698 to 749), when the dynasty was overthrown by the Abbasids. These coins are known to bear nearly 100 different mint names. While some of these refer to the same place, it is clear the pieces were struck at an astonishing number of mints over a very wide geographical area, much like the Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian drachms that preceded them. Stylistic differences are evident, and some of the pieces made by remote provincial mints feature charmingly crude orthography when compared to the more skillful products of the larger mints.

Despite being produced in so many different places, Umayyad silver dirhams are essentially identical in design and epigraphy. Generally, they are of good silver and consistent weight. The obverse features part of the *Kalimah Shahaadat*, or Islamic declaration of faith: *La ilaha illa Allah, wahdahu, la sharika lahu* (“There is no God but Allah, He is alone, He has no partner”). This, or a slight variant, appears on most Umayyad coinage and can be

found on many other Islamic coins throughout history. Around the margin is the following formula: *Bism Allah, duriba hadha’l-dirham bi* [mint name] *sana* [date] (“In the name of God, this dirham was struck in [mint name] in the year [date]”).

In the conventional Arabic form, the date is expressed in words, with the smallest units first, so that



▲ **UMAYYAD GOLD DINAR.**

Approx. Size: 19-20mm

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the year “125” would be spelled “five and twenty and one hundred.” As only the mint name and date vary in this formula, the collector quickly learns to focus on these first.

The reverses of Umayyad dirhams are nearly identical, with minor variations. They feature two Qur’anic verses. In the field is *Allah ahad Allah samad lam yalid wa lam yulad wa lam yakun lahu kufuwan ahad* (“He is Allah, the one and only; Allah, the eternal; He does not beget nor is He begotten; and there is none like unto Him”) [*Qur’an*, Sura 112].

Around the margin is *Muhammad rasul Allah arsalahu bi’l-huda wa din al-haqq liyathhirahu ‘ala al-din kullihi wa law karaha’l-mushrikun* (“Muhammad is the messenger of God, who sent Him with guidance the religion of truth that He might make it supreme over all the other religions even though the polytheists may detest it”) [*Qur’an*, Sura 9, Ayah 33].

As mentioned, the only decorative design elements are annulets or similar markings between the two marginal lines. On most reverses, these are simply five, small, regularly spaced circles. The obverses vary quite a bit more, especially after A.H. 100. During this time, and from many mint locations, annulet patterns of various sizes and configurations emerged, with couplets, concentric circles, triangular arrangements and other patterns. The reasons behind this variation were not well understood until the early 1970s, though earlier numismatists, such as John Walker and Stanley Lane-Poole, considered them with interest. In the 1974 volume of *Numismatic*

*Chronicle*, A.S. DeShazo and Michael L. Bates demonstrated that the patterns correspond to changes in governor, at least for pieces struck in al-‘Iraq after A.H. 99.

This discovery highlighted one of the challenging aspects of Islamic coins. Since they are almost entirely epigraphic, even small differences between issues can be significant. Their relative lack of design elements forces the numismatist to more closely examine differences in the style of the inscription, and whatever small design flourishes exist can take on considerable importance.

Umayyad dirhams were struck for a little over a half century. In the early years, they were produced by a wide variety of mints throughout Muslim-controlled areas. However, with the establishment of a large mint at Wasit in southern Iraq in A.H. 84, production became more centralized, with Wasit and the major mint of Dimashq (Damascus) accounting for most of the dirhams produced. While many provincial mints resumed striking dirhams for a period in the A.H. 90s, their output continued to be dwarfed by that of the two main mints.

Collectors of Umayyad dirhams might want to assemble pieces from as many mints as possible. This



▲ **UMAYYAD SILVER** dirhams are essentially identical in design. Both the obverse (top) and reverse (bottom) are remarkably consistent from mint to mint and from beginning to end of the era.

Approx. Size: 27mm

*A handful of larger mints dominated dirham production and distribution to such an extent that the products of smaller facilities are harder to find.*



▲ **DIRHAMS FROM PROVINCIAL MINTS** exhibit interesting stylistic differences and frequently are cruder than those produced by the main mints of Wasit and Dimashq. Pictured (clockwise, from top left) are pieces from Sijistan, Irminiya, Balkh and Ifriqiya. Approx. Size: 27mm

provides a nice geographical range and allows examination of pieces for stylistic differences. However, with about 100 mints to collect, this approach could prove more challenging than expected. A handful of larger mints dominated dirham production and distribution to such an extent that the products of smaller facilities are harder to find and more expensive to purchase. Many Umayyad mint names are only rarely encountered.

The early coins of the Islamic caliphates offer today's numismatists several fascinating series of considerable historical interest. Produced in many different areas by many different people, they had a wide geographical and cultural range, yet maintained a uniform identity in religion and culture. While the beginning collector may be apprehensive because of the seeming complexity of the language and script, the regularity of legend and design, as well as the coins' relative affordability, makes them very

approachable. They comprise a truly fascinating branch of Middle Eastern numismatics. ■

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Collectors new to this area of numismatics will want to read some books on the subject. Michael Broome's *Handbook of Islamic Coins* (2006, ANA Library Catalog No. KA50.B7h) provides an excellent introduction. Stephen Album's *Checklist of Islamic Coins* (2011, KA50.A2) is a handy, comprehensive listing of types and issues. Richard J. Plant's *Arabic Coins and How to Read Them* (1980, KA50.P4) is a classic reference providing invaluable information about mint names, dates and other parts of the legends.

For collectors of Umayyad silver dirhams, Michel G. Klat's *Catalogue of the Post-Reform Dirhams: The Umayyad Dynasty* (2002) is the standard work. Earlier references by John Walker, such as his catalogs for the British Museum, still are cited extensively, though these can be difficult to find and rather expensive. Many other books exist for more advanced collectors.



► **THE STYLE OF THE ANNULETS** (or rings) surrounding the legends on these A.H. 126 silver dirhams struck in Wasit vary, indicating they were produced during different governorships. Approx. Size: 27mm



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