

PORTRAYING POWER: THE ABSTRACTION OF INDIVIDUALIZED ATTRIBUTES IN ARAB-BYZANTINE COINAGE FROM EGYPT (641-705).

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Abstract

The introduction of all-epigraphic Arabic issues at the hands of 'Abd al-Malik (696-7) gave Islamic coinage its definitive form. In the about 60 years that preceded the reform, Islamic numismatics was imbued with visual symbolism derived from or inspired by Late Antique models. Royal and religious emblems of authority like the winged crowns of the Sassanian King of Kings, the sceptre and the globe of the Byzantine emperor, and even the Christian cross and the Zoroastrian fire-altar all became an integral part of the Early Islamic Empire's official visual language. Adapted to the new socio-political context, these symbols lost their original connotation of individualized attributes of the ruling monarchs and evolved into more abstract signifiers of power and sovereignty.

Background

Seventh- and eighth century Egypt operated a separate system of copper coinage unlike those found in the other provinces of the Caliphate.

Like Arab-Byzantine coins minted in Syria and North-Africa the first Islamic coinage from Egypt

- Imitated local Byzantine prototypes at first
- Adapted the Byzantine visual language for new representative needs

and distinguished itself by:

- The thick fabric of its coins
- The lack of transitional issues (i.e. pre-reform issues exhibiting explicit signs of the development of an Arab-Muslim normative ideology)



Fig. 1 *MACR* coin. Anonymous, no date, al-Fustāt. Prototype: *MIB* Constans II X 36.
Obv.: standing "imperial" figure holding a long cross
Rev.: *globus cruciger* enclosed by Greek capital **I** and **B** (the numeral for 12).
Mintmark: *MAC[R]*, a Greek rendering of Arabic *miṣr* used to indicate the Muslim garrison city and military headquarters of al-Fustāt (< gr. *to fossaton*).
The insertion of the novel mintmark identified *MACR* coins as the official product of the new provincial authority.

Discussion

In the pre-Islamic Near and Middle East the portrayal of rulers and symbols on coins stood as the most meaningful representations of a political entity. The frozen Byzantine figures on Arab-Byzantine coinage from Egypt, on the contrary, had *ipso facto* lost their connotation of individual portraits and rather functioned as image-based signs of sovereignty and, more pragmatically, as visual markers of the coins' value. Christian symbolism was equally stripped of its confessionally defined religious meaning and reduced to an emblem of authority *lato sensu* (fig. 1). In due time, the insertion of novel visual elements and the removal of Christian symbols further decontextualized Byzantine iconography and eased its symbolic projection onto the new rulers (fig. 2). It is noteworthy, however, that Arab-Byzantine coinage shows no distinctive emblems of the Muslim state or of the Islamic religion.



Fig. 4 *ABAZ* coin. 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Marwān (?), no date (685-705?), no mint (al-Fustāt?). Prototype: *MIB* Constans II X 35.
Obv. De-Christianised Imperial bust; palm-branch on the right.
Rev. Capital Greek **M** enclosed by capital **I** and **B**. "Mintmark": *AB(δάλ)AZ(ις)* i.e. the governor 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Marwān (in office 685-705).
Through the removal of all Christian symbolism and the insertion of the governor's name *ABAZ* coins provided an explicit visual cue for the beholders to reinterpret the emblems of power of Byzantine ascendancy in the light of the new Arab-Muslim rule.

Epilogue

At an unknown date (probably after 'Abd al-'Azīz's tenure, 685-705), the introduction of all-epigraphic coppers brought Arab-Byzantine coinage to an end in Egypt. By removing both figurative and textual references to the issuing authority, all-epigraphic issues de-personalized the coinage's visual language, favouring the iconic associability of Arabic writing with imperial Arab authority and Islam over the search for figurative emblems of power (fig. 2).



Fig. 3 All-epigraphic *fals* (<gr. *folllis*). Anonymous, no date (after 705), no mint (al-Fustāt?).
Obv.: لا اله الا الله وحده / There is no god but God alone.
Rev.: محمد رسول الله / Muḥammad is the Messenger of God.

Concluding Remarks

The use of a derivative visual language in early Islamic numismatics had profound implications in redefining the visual semantic of the coinage. As shown by the example of 7th century Egypt, Arab-Byzantine coinage created a hiatus between the coins' imagery and their new representative function. Through a process of abstraction, late Antique "individualized" symbolism and layouts were shaped into iconic emblems of the Arab-Muslim sovereignty.

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