

The Inscriptions on 'Abd al-Malik's All-epigraphic Coinage

النقوش على العملات الكتابية لعبد الملك

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ملخص:

يُعد تقديم عبد الملك للدنانير الكتابية في 77 هـ والدرهم الكتابية في 78 هـ نقطة تحول كبرى في تاريخ العملات الإسلامية. ويمثل استخدام المعلومات الكتابية فقط ذروة الاتجاه الذي كان قد بدأ في وقت سابق. وكان الابتكار الأعظم استخدام حاكم مسلم لأول مرة آية قرآنية على العملات. وقد عكس اختيار الآيات المستخدمة الهدف السياسي والعسكري لعبد الملك في جذب بيزنطة وتأكيد الاختلاف في المعتقدات الدينية بين المسلمين والمسيحيين. واستمر ظهور الآيات على الدنانير والدرهم الخاصة بالمسلمين، ومنها آية استمر نقشها على العملات حتى ثمانمائة عام بعد ذلك، على الرغم من نسيان الأسباب الرئيسية التي أدت إلى استخدام هذه الآيات في المقام الأول.

Abd al-Malik's introduction of all-epigraphic dinars in 77 and dirhams in 78 represents a major turning point in the history of Islamic numismatics. The use of only inscriptional information is the culmination of a trend that had begun earlier. The mostly remarkable innovation was the use of Qur'anic ayah for the first time on coinage by a Muslim ruler. The specific choices of which ayahs were chosen reflects Abd al-Malik's political and military goal of engaging Byzantium and emphasizing the differences between Muslim and Christian beliefs in God. Once included on the coinage, the ayah continued to appear on regular Muslim dinars and dirhams, including one ayah that was still found inscribed on gold coins over 800 years later, although the original reasons for the inclusion of these specific ayah were long forgotten.

Text:

The Marwanid caliph 'Abd al-Malik (65-86 AH/ CE 685-705) is most famous as patron of the Dome

of the Rock, the oldest commemorative building in Islamic history still retaining a substantial portion of its original decoration and for the introduction of an all-epigraphic coinage, first in gold in 77 AH, and then in silver in 78 AH.¹

These new style dinars and dirhams quickly became the model for virtually all future coinage issued by Muslim rulers. While the new coinage is described in every catalog covering Umayyad coinage, to the best of my knowledge, none of these scholars has analyzed what were the specific circumstances for the introduction of the new style coinage and why specific pious phrases and *ayah* from the Qur'an which had not appeared on earlier Muslim coinage were used.

In addition to having a monetary role as a form of exchange, each time a new coin type is minted, it is also a piece of information or 'propaganda' appropriate for that specific time and place. I use the term 'propaganda' in a neutral sense, that is, whatever

is new on the coin such as a new image, inscription or design, carried a political, social, religious, and/or economic message appropriate for that specific place and date. This does not apply to the appearance of a new date, or, in most cases, a new mint. The new messages are meaningful for only a very short period of time and if they appear on future issues, they do not necessarily have the same meaning or any meaning other than that is what one expects to find on a coin.

I will use a modern example to illustrate my point with the reverses of modern Egyptian coins. The designs were not picked because they were pretty, but because someone in the Egyptian government wanted them to convey a specific political and/or religious message. Engraving the pyramids, the Muhammad Ali mosque which some Egyptians and a few foreigners recognize, or a mosque lamp which is associated with Islam but not necessarily Egypt, sends a different message about what the Egyptian government wished to emphasize at the time that specific new coin type was issued.

Figure 1: The reverses of three modern Egyptian coins

My second assumption is that the ruler of a country is ultimately responsible for what appears on this coinage. The ruler’s action may be direct or indirect but no mint master is going to put an image or inscription on a coinage which the ruler would disapprove of. Therefore, when the Egyptian government in 2006 struck one-pound and 50 piaster coins with the images of the Pharaoh Tutankhamen and Queen Cleopatra on them, respectively, President Mubarak is ultimately responsible for these choices. If he disapproved of them, I am very confident that those in charge of the Egyptian mint would never have appeared. His actual approval may have only been silence, but that doesn’t negate his being the final source of authority.



(Fig. 1) The reverse of three modern Egyptian coins (author).

Figure 2: The obverse of the two new Egyptian coins

My third assumption is that the meanings behind the new images and designs are rarely recorded in the historical sources and are usually forgotten. Perhaps future scholars will find in the Egyptian archives records of why each of the five images –a mosque lamp, the Muhammad Ali mosque, the pyramids, Tutankhamen, and Cleopatra– were chosen, but for almost all medieval and ancient coinage, there are no historical records. Therefore we as scholars of Islamic numismatics must ask what messages did the ruler wish to send at that specific time and place when he introduced a new style coinage recognizing that the medieval Arabic texts will rarely tell us why.

In examining the coins struck during the first eight decades of Islamic history, I make a few other assumptions. First, the caliph was concerned with what was engraved on the gold and silver coinage as these reflected types of money mentioned in the Qur’an. Therefore, my remarks only relate to gold and silver issues. Second, by 77 AH ‘Abd al-Malik had successfully defeated the supporters of ‘Abd Allah

ibn Zubayr and had put down a number of Kharijite rebellions, so that he and his governors controlled Egypt, Bilad al-Sham, most of Mesopotamia and additional lands to the East. Therefore, by 77 AH 'Abd al-Malik was preparing his armies to fight against the most powerful challenge to Muslim hegemony in the Eastern Mediterranean, Rum, that is, the Byzantine Empire. This new priority, the fighting of a Christian enemy beyond the borders of the Dar al-Islam, is the critical background for understanding the issuing of the all-epigraphic coinage.



(Fig. 2) The obverse of three modern Egyptian coins (author).

But there is a problem in how to express an anti-Byzantine theme on Islamic coinage. 'Abd al-Malik had already struck Arab-Byzantine style coins which included Arabic inscriptions in their margins but without any of the Christian symbols such as a cross.² He had then dropped these imitations of Byzantine *solidi* in order to create new Muslim images such as an armed figure whom we identify as the caliph either standing or as a bust. I have argued elsewhere that these images and the accompanying text in Arabic were used to counter the claims of some Kharijite leaders to be the *amir al-mu'minin*. 'Abd al-Malik wanted the new coinage to carry messages that would distinguish Muslim understandings of God from that of the Christians as a way of emphasizing their differences with the Byzantines. I cannot think of another image which would carry such an anti-Byzantine message but words could.

Before turning to the new all-epigraphic coinage, it is necessary to examine the Arab-Byzantine *solidi* that were circulating in Bilad al-Sham just before the new all-epigraphic coinage was struck in order to determine what was new on the coinage of 77 AH and 78 AH and what was not. In the accompanying picture, it is clear that there is a standing caliph type figure in the center of the obverse and a stepped platform with a pole on it on the reverse. Obviously both of these images will disappear on an all-epigraphic coinage. On the margin of the obverse, written in Kufic Arabic, is an inscription which reads *بِسْمِ اللَّهِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَحْدَهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ* while the margin on the reverse reads *بِسْمِ اللَّهِ ضَرَبَ هَذَا*. Therefore, the appearance of these 20 words on the all-epigraphic coinage does not represent an innovation or something new. In fact, under 'Abd al-Malik there had been an increasing use of Arabic inscriptions on his gold and the silver coins minted in Bilad al-Sham and Mesopotamia and, it is possible, that the move to an all-epigraphic coinage was the natural conclusion of this trend in addition to being the best way to express opposition to Byzantium. Unfortunately no medieval Arabic source tells us anything about his thoughts on this issue.

Figure 3: An Arab-Byzantine 'standing caliph' *solidi*.

As stated above the first all-epigraphic dinars appeared in 77 AH and the first dirhams in 78 AH and both sets of coins have the same basic inscriptions except that the ones on the silver are longer and, we assume complete, because the size of the flan, that is, the blank piece of metal on which the inscriptions were struck, was bigger on the dirhams than the dinars. Therefore, the inscriptions on the dinars and dirhams will be treated as reflecting a single policy. What follows is the description of the first dirhams from 78 AH but in this case the one without a mint name, which we believe was struck in Damascus.



(Fig. 3) An Arabic-Byzantine 'standing caliph' gold *solidi* (With permission of the friends of the American Numismatic Society, New York)

Figure 4: An all-epigraphic dirham for 78 AH without mint)

Obverse:

Margin:

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم في سنة تسع الدرهم في
سنة تسع وسبعين

Center:

لا اله الا
الله وحده
لا شريك

Reverse:

Margin:

محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى و دين الحق ليظهره
على الدين كله ولو كره المشركون

Center:

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

On the center of reverse are *ayah* from Surah Ikhlas (112). This is very important in that this is the first time any Muslim ruler had put *ayah* from the Qur'an on coinage. While there are

pious phrases found on Muslim coinage from the very first use of *بسم الله* to the longer phrases given above, none of these are considered *ayah*, that is, they don't evoke in the mind of the reader or listener a specific surah from the Qur'an. 'Abd al-Malik was doing something very radical and therefore, which Qur'anic *ayah* he picked must have been very important and they must have carried meanings that in 77 AH he thought were important.



(Fig. 4) An all-epigraphic dirham, without mint and dated 78 (Reprinted from Michael Klat, *Catalogue of The Post-reform Dirhams. The Umayyad Dynasty* (London, 2002), 27.

Surah Ikhlas is one of the first *ayah* all Muslims memorize. It is also included in the inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock where one interpretation is that these *ayah* emphasize the differences between what Muslims and Christians believe. Christians are monotheists, that is, they are people of the Book, but they also hold beliefs about the nature of the Prophet Jesus which are not acceptable to Muslims. Surah Ikhlas highlights what beliefs Christians hold that Muslims do not accept and in that sense it is critical of Christians, but, by itself, it is not anti-Byzantine.

On the obverse there are the same pious phrases found on earlier Muslim gold and silver coins minted by 'Abd al-Malik but with a few differences. For the first time, these pious phrases are found in the center of the coin, which means that 'Abd

al-Malik was giving them a greater prominence than they had had earlier. There are some other differences from earlier Muslim coins where the same words could be found. Instead of beginning with *بِسْمِ اللَّهِ* as had been done in all the margins of most previous Muslim issues, the Arabic in the obverse center begins with *لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَحْدَهُ*. We don't know why. It is possible it was done to save room for a new third line which reads *لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ*.

This particular phrase had appeared in the Dome of the Rock but not on any previous Muslim coinage. Therefore the purpose of this phrase was, again, to emphasize the differences between Muslims and Christian beliefs, in that, although both religions believe in a single God, Christians believe in the concept of the Trinity. Both centers of the dinars and dirhams carry messages which stress God's oneness, but also how Muslims and Christians differ in their beliefs.

The obverse margin on the new dinars includes a formula giving the date the coin was struck while the dirhams carries a parallel message but because it has more room or because it had been the practice on Arab-Sasanian *drachma* the new dirhams include both the date and, in all but the illustrated case, the name of the mint. The inclusion of date (and mint) formula was not new on the all epigraphic dinars and dirhams. Therefore it is not an innovation for the coinage of 77 AH and 78 AH.

However the reverse margin on the dinar and the obverse margin on all dirhams after 78, include another Qur'anic *ayah* and this is again something very new. Not only is it the second Qur'anic *ayah* on the coinage, it is from a Qur'anic surah that was not recorded on the Dome of the Rock and so far has not been found on any building, tombstone, graffiti or any other place which can be dated to before 77. It is also interesting that

this particular *ayah* appears not once but three times in the Qur'an. In picking this *ayah*, 'Abd al-Malik could have been confident that some Muslims who knew their Qur'an by heart and a growing number of must have, would recognize the *ayah* even if they didn't remembered which one of the three places it appeared. As scholars we always list it as Qur'an 9:33 by which we mean Surah al-Tawbah, *ayah* 33. I think we do this because the other two times it appears, Surah al-Fath, *ayah* 25 and Surah al-Saff, *ayah* 9 come later in the Qur'an.

What makes this particular *ayah*, in all three cases, important is that in it God speaks of the triumph of the truth of his final revelation over the *al-mushrikun*. But who are the *al-mushrikun*? For most tafsir commentators and modern scholars, *al-mushrikun* are pagans or polytheists, that is, those who believe in many gods. However, the *tafsir* scholar al-Quturbi (d.672CE/1273 AH) wrote that the *al-mushrikun* can also be the followers of the Prophet 'Isa, that is, Christians.³ I believe that 'Abd al-Malik meant *al-mushrikun* to be Christians because he also put on his coinage the phrase *لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ* and both come from the same root, *sha, ra, kaf*. In terms of the world of 77 AH the most important Christian state was Byzantium and 'Abd al-Malik was about to go to war against them. This coinage announced the eventual triumph not only of Islam over Christianity, but the success of Muslim armies under 'Abd al-Malik over the Byzantine Empire. The new all-epigraphic coinage was issued at a particular time, in a particular place and with specific messages and not because of a sudden desire on the part of 'Abd al-Malik, his advisors or even leading members of the ulama that coins struck by Muslim rulers should not have human images on them. If this view was held by any of

these individuals in 77 AH and 78 AH, we don't have any written records which can be securely dated to these years.

Once the new all-epigraphic dinars quickly dominate Bilad al-Sham and other areas in the Umayyad world where gold coins circulated and in 79 AH almost 50 mints from Damascus eastward begin minting all-epigraphic dirhams, the old Arab-Sasanian and Sasanian style silver coins eventually disappear from circulation. The success of 'Abd al-Malik's new coinage and its wide spread acceptance changed its status from a coin issued as preparation for war against Byzantium into a symbol of Islam. With minor exceptions regular dinars and dirhams issued by Muslim rulers into the late 19th and 20th century would be characterized by the use of Arab script and the absence of human and animal representation. Again, copper would be an exception as would the relatively few times before the late 19th century Muslim rulers would strike presentation or commemorative pieces which were not subject to the same societal expectations as regular dinars and dirhams. Finally, the actual *ayah* inscribed on the coins of 77 AH and 78 AH would be carried in time having lost any relation with the original reasons for their inclusion. The use of Surah Iklas would disappear with the triumph of the 'Abbasids when they replaced that *ayah* with *Muhammad rasul Allah* (محمد رسول الله) in order to highlight their relationship to the Prophet. The phrase *la sharika lahu* (لا شريك له) would end in Egypt with the conquest of the country by the Shi'ite Fatimid dynasty. Finally, references to the *ayah* from Surah al-Tawbah (9) in the form of the word *arsalahu* (ارسله) could still be found on the dinars of the last mamluk sultans of Egypt and Syria over 800 years 'Abd al-Malik's introduction of the Qur'anic words.

The appearance of the all-epigraphic dinars and dirhams in 77 AH and 78 AH represents a major turning point in the history of Islamic numismatics and has been treated as such by all who have studied Muslim coinage. What has not been given adequate attention is why such a coinage was introduced at that time, which words were innovations as opposed to continuing older phrases, and why these specific Qur'anic *ayah* and one new phrase chosen. This contribution has sought to answer these questions.

Notes:

- 1 The literature on the Dome of the Rock and the all-epigraphic coinage is massive as more has been written on the former than on any other Islamic architectural topic while more has been written on the coinage of 'Abd al-Malik than for any other Islamic numismatic topic. For readers of English, a good place to begin is Ch. Robinson, *'Abd al-Malik* (London, 2005).
- 2 The best introduction to pre-all epigraphic coinage is S. Album, T. Goodwin, *Sylloge of Islamic Coins in the Ashmolean: Volume 1 - The Pre-Reform Coinage of the Early Islamic Period* (Oxford, 2002). A more detailed analysis of the political background to the pre-all-epigraphic coinage can be found in Jere L. Bacharach, *Signs of Sovereignty: the shahada, Qur'anic verses, and the coinage of 'Abd al-Malik (65-86 AH/685-705 CE)*, (Forthcoming).
- 3 Abu 'Abdallah al-Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*, (Surah 9, ayah 33) (<http://quran.al-islam.com>).