Methodology in Islamic Numismatics

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Signore signori, ladies and gentlemen,

Given the topic "Coins," with the focus "The Present State of Studies," and thirty minutes to speak, it was not so easy to decide what the content of my lecture should be. Certainly in the time allotted, I can't undertake a general survey of Islamic coinage. I would hardly dare to give you a dry survey of current work in progress, for fear of facing a room full of nodding heads, if indeed I would not see a room that gradually emptied as I spoke. A third alternative is to speak about how Islamic numismatics should be done, how it should be approached, what are the new ways of studying and understanding coinage in the Islamic world, and especially how non-specialists should approach and utilize numismatic evidence in their work.

But because any such discussion must necessarily reflect the speaker's own opinions, and since I have strong and controversial opinions on the subject, there is another danger here, that of egotism or the perception of egotism. Those who know me will perhaps not be surprised that I have selected this third alternative nevertheless. My lecture will reflect a purely personal point of view, but I hope at least it will be an interesting one, and one which has its importance not just for the study of Islamic coins but also for the study and understanding of any body of Islamic artifacts and of Islamic history as a whole. I will take for granted, before this audience, the importance of numismatics as a specialized subdiscipline of Islamic history.

Almost as soon as coinage was invented, rulers and cities realized the utility of coins not merely as a means of exchange but as bearers of messages. Coins circulate outside the boundaries of the state that issues them; they continue to circulate or at least to exist long after their making; and as such, although they are small objects, they are an ideal medium for saying something about those who issue them: who they were, what they believed, and where and when they held power. In the ancient world before Islam the nature of the messages on coins evolved steadily. They began with simple inscriptions naming the people or ruler who authorized their issue, coupled with symbols that in some sense served the same function of identification. In the Roman imperial period, the messages expanded to comprise complicated visual scenes referring to events or policies, images that have often been called "propaganda" though it is not at all certain who the intended audience was or what they could make of it. By the end of the classical era, that is, by the time Islam arrived on the scene, it was normal for the messages to include the name of the ruler, his honorific titles, an idealized portrait, religious symbols and inscriptions, the monetary unit represented by the coin, and the date and place of minting.
Islam's response to this established tradition, when it came time for Muslims to think seriously about what kind of coinage the new religious community should have, was, after a brief period of experimentation, to reject not only the images which had till then been so important a component of coin design, but also the issuance of coin in the name of an individual ruler. Instead, the earliest truly Islamic coins had nothing but religious inscriptions, indicating that they were issued not under human authority but that of God and the community of believers. In less than a century, however, the tradition reasserted itself that a coin should bear the name of the individual responsible for its value—or, put another way, that coins were a good way of proclaiming royal power. Although the religious inscriptions were preserved, it became customary for Islamic coins to bear also the name of the ruler and of his overlords if any. God continued to appear on the coin in the shahada la ilah illah Allah, but as the supreme overlord (by this reasoning we can assert that the side of the coin with the shahada, when it exists, is to be regarded as the face of the coin, regardless of which side of the coin was impressed by which die). The appearance of the ruler's name on coins became so normal that it was considered one of the two indications of sovereignty in a territory, along with the call for blessings on the ruler in the Friday prayer service.

Before Islam, coins were dated most commonly with the years of rule of an emperor. Along with the abandonment at the beginning of the ruler's name and portrait, Islam also replaced regnal dating by a chronology based on the years of existence of the community, that is, the Hijra year, resulting in the first use of a continuous universal calendar for dating coins. The practice of putting the name of the city of minting on coins was continued from pre-Islamic times and made general. The absence of images left more room for longer and more explicit inscriptions. As a result of these practices, every Islamic coin is a miniature document, telling us who ruled at a given place and time, what he called himself, and something of his beliefs.

Having recognized the importance of coins as message bearers, I think it is necessary to caution against taking these intended messages too seriously. One often finds the notion in Islamic numismatic and historical writing that coins were made exclusively for the purpose of bearing messages, as if the large trucks on our highways travel from place to place only to display advertising for the companies that own them. I would lay down as a maxim that coins were manufactured for one reason only: because someone had bullion or non-legal-tender coins and wanted to transform this raw material into money. The idea that a ruler might issue coins solely to proclaim his authority or commemorate some event is to me a misguided one. Such motives might explain a change in coin design or inscriptions, but it is essential to remember that the coins themselves were made only because someone needed money and could get it more cheaply by bringing bullion to the mint than in any other way. The someone who needed money was, often, the ruler or the government, taking bullion from the public or private treasury, but this is only a special case of a general phenomenon and it is not to be assumed that the government was the dominant or even the largest customer of the mint.

The misconception that coins might have been issued for political or egocentric reasons, or that rulers took care to insure an adequate supply of coinage to their subjects, is related to a general error that I will discuss again later, that of the "top-down"
approach to Islamic numismatics. Ancient coins in collections today are essentially the relics of an economic system, surviving examples of money, and in seeking reasons for their evolution we ought always to keep economic motives in first place. Economic factors were not the only forces resulting in changes in coins, but they must always have been pre-eminent.

The evidence coins provide for monetary history in the form of their weight and alloy is only part of what we might call the unintended messages borne by coins which are often more interesting than the messages that were intentionally impressed upon them. Technology, administration (mints, geographical centers, centralization vs. decentralization), epigraphical style, artistic quality, semiotics of inscriptions and design, are among the features of coins that tell us something about the people, societies, and governments that produced them. Such unintentional messages also have the virtue of authenticity: rulers may exaggerate, conceal, or lie in the inscriptions they order on coins, but the coins themselves and their manufacture reflect a reality often beyond the control of any cognizant intelligence.

One important maxim for the extraction of evidence from coins is that a single coin tells us little by itself. Just as students are warned in any numismatic course not to try to extrapolate the weight standard or fineness of an issue from one coin, we cannot interpret the evidence of a single coin without looking at the entire issue of which it was a part, and at what other coins were being issued and used in the same region, and at the coinage of that regions neighbors, and at the coinage of preceding and subsequent times. It is for this reason that scholars must defend themselves against seduction by the thrill of the search for unique novelties which is so much a part of traditional numismatics, a field which is dominated, more than any of the others we have dealt with in this conference, by the enthusiastic amateur collector. Most, almost all, of the work done today and in the past on Islamic numismatics is produced by amateurs (as opposed to academically trained scholars). This is a blessing and a curse; a blessing, because there is far more work to do than the handful of curators and professors in the field can ever hope to accomplish, but a curse because the valuations of amateurs determine too much what work is done and how. Unique coins are not really very interesting; they are by definition freaks, and are of little use as evidence until they can be integrated into the overall pattern of minting in a given region and era. Or, to put it another way, facts are useless without a theory to explain them. For the collector or dealer, unique or rare coins are not only exciting but usually profitable, but there is no profit in knowledge from concentrating on rarities while ignoring the broad mass of coinage and the pattern of its issue and circulation.

For me, the key to thinking rightly about Islamic coins and to understanding their evolution and their importance as evidence for other aspects of Islamic history lies in the recognition that coins were not issued by dynasties nor struck by rulers; they were produced by small groups of skilled craftsmen who were paid by their customers according to the volume of their production, working under the supervision of mint officials who also, according to all the evidence we have, were recompensed by a charge on the volume of production of the mint. In sum, a mint was a business, operated collectively by craftsmen and specialized officers who shared in the profits of the enterprise. It enjoyed a government monopoly and for that reason was sub-
ject to a social interest in limiting profits and guaranteeing quality; because this was the ruler's responsibility according to medieval theorists, medieval as well as modern writers say metaphorically that a ruler struck coins or that the coinage was his. Another aspect of the royal connection to coinage was the ruler's share in the profits, which underlies the insistence on royal or state monopoly of minting and the concept of legal tender. Legal tender, at its minimum enforceable level, means that taxes had to be paid in officially sanctioned currency; in this way, the ruler can force the populace to use his monopolistic mints and pay his mint charges. Nevertheless, in our modern world one can name a number of countries that have one legal tender, but where many transactions take place in another currency, usually dollars. In earlier times this "universal" currency was the British gold sovereign, and still earlier it was even more difficult for the state to force people to use its currency as "legal tender for all debts, public and private," as U.S. currency states. Because people could not be prevented from using foreign or old coins in their private transactions, rulers had a selfish interest in maintaining the standard of their currency, apart from any concern they may have had for the public welfare.

We may ask, however, how directly, and continually, this royal interest was exercised. These two aspects, the directness of control geographically from the center to the provinces, and the continuity of interest over time, are the two aspects of the discussion in which I hope to show that dynasties and reigns are not valid units of description and study for Islamic numismatics.

The sources, that is the theoretical or practical descriptions of the ruler's relationship to the mint, are ambiguous on the point of direct royal control of the coinage. They do not say that there was any bureaucracy that connected provincial mints directly to an authority in the capital; on the other hand they do not say that there was no such bureaucracy. They normally speak of "the mint" in the singular, implying either that they are writing about only the royal mint, the mint in the ruler's capital where he would have his own bullion minted when needed and where he would presumably have direct control of the officials who supervised the mint; or that they have in mind an abstract mint and an abstract ruler, who might be a local governor instead of the sovereign. Better evidence is provided by the coins, which often reflect, within the coinage of a single ruler or dynasty, considerable diversity from province to province and city to city. To cut a long argument short, it seems safe to assume, in the absence of contrary evidence for any Islamic dynasty, or for any state before the industrial age, the absence of any bureaucracy specialized for the purpose of controlling all the mints in a realm. On the contrary, local mints, it should be presumed, were responsible to local governors. Royal orders about minting were transmitted through the chain of territorial authorities, from the caliph or sultan through regional or provincial governors to the governors of cities and districts. Indeed, it seems to have been taken for granted that different realms under the authority of the same sovereign would have different money, to a greater or lesser degree.

For specific examples, let us look first at the Umayyad caliphate. Each of the five main regions of the caliphate had a different system of minting and different currency. Syria, the metropolitan province, had abundant gold, silver, and copper coinage, with the first two metals struck only in Damascus and the latter at numerous mints scattered throughout the province and issuing quite diverse
types. The northern provinces, Jazira, Adharbayjan, Armenia and the lands to the north, had copper coinage more or less like that of Syria in the areas of the Jazira adjacent to Syria, and a single mint for silver dirhams that moved from place to place with the governor of the region. The East, Iraq and Iran, had quite varying minting systems in the different provinces in the period before the introduction of the standard reformed Arabic dirham, while in the era of the reformed dirham fluctuated from periods when minting of dirhams was extremely decentralized at as many as forty locations to periods when all minting was concentrated at the capital Wasit. Egypt had no gold or silver coinage of its own but used imported gold dinars in abundance; locally minted coins were limited to coppers with a special thick dumpy fabric and heavy weight quite different from anywhere else. North Africa, followed closely by Spain, issued distinctive thick dinars with Latin inscriptions twenty years after Damascus began striking Arabic dinars; even when Arabic was adopted for dinars, the inscriptions were different from those of Damascus for another decade. North Africa and Spain also had dirhams, but only after about 720, and copper coins also different from other provinces.

Since this is an art historical crowd, I will speak mainly of differences in the appearance of coins. Take for example the reformed Arabic dirham, a coinage that was completely uniform in its inscriptions and general design from Spain to Khurasan. Nevertheless, looking at this series of dirhams, one can see obvious differences in inscriptional style and perhaps, even on the slides, in the relative proportions of the different elements of the design.

What may be more surprising was the wide variation in weight standards and alloy from region to region. The dinars of Damascus weighed 4.25 grams; judging by the very precise glass weights of Egypt by which payments in foreign dinars were measured, the standard there was 4.23 grams; and in North Africa and Spain the standard appears to have been 4.29 grams. These minor, but real, variations were paralleled by greater variations in the standard weight of silver dirhams. In Egypt, the standard weight for the dirham was two-thirds the weight of the Egyptian dinar, or 2.85 grams, as explicitly attested by glass weights. In Damascus, the weight standard for dirhams was a little over 2.90 grams; we do not know what the intended relationship to the dinar weight was. In the East, the usual relationship was seven-tenths of the weight of the mithqal, but the mithqal of the East was not the weight of the gold dinar as in Syria and Egypt; it was the weight of the standard dirham inherited from the Sasanians, about four grams, and there is concrete evidence that the weight of this mithqal varied from place to place, resulting in dirhams of 2.7 to 2.9 grams, mostly about 2.8.

Dirhams varied also in alloy. The normal alloy in the East until the year 100 was about 96%, but in that year it was conspicuously and suddenly raised to as close to 100% as the technology of the time would permit, and maintained at that standard until the end of the dynasty. At Damascus, the alloy also increased with time, but gradually beginning also about 100 H. In North Africa and Spain, the alloy of 96% was maintained to the end.

This brief sketch, completely ignoring the many provincial and district variations within the large regions, shows clearly that there was no general mint bureaucracy in the Umayyad caliphate extending directly from Damascus to local mints. Each region, each province, and one may even say,
each city (with its district), had its own monetary system. We cannot speak of Umayyad coinage, but rather Umayyad coinages, or better still, of the coinage of the various countries of the Islamic world in the seventh and the first half of the eighth century. We will see later to what extent one is justified in speaking of an Umayyad era at all in a chronological sense.

For another example, let us consider the coinage of the Fatimid caliphate. Coins with the name of the Fatimid caliph were issued at mints here in Sicily, in North Africa, in Egypt, and in Syria. Some authors have described the Fatimid gold dinar as the "dollar of the Middle Ages," a currency absolutely uniform throughout their realm and their timespan, and indeed, once the Fatimid coinage system came fully into action, it is difficult to distinguish the products of any mint from those of another at the same point in time without actually reading the mint name. Nevertheless, there were differences. A contemporary document from the Geniza speaks in the mid-eleventh century of Egyptian and Syrian dinars as two different currencies, with a value for the Syrian dinars slightly less than for the Egyptian. Another indicator of the absence of any central bureaucracy controlling these wide-spread mints is the time lag in North Africa and Sicily for the adoption of the frequent changes in design that were ordered in Egypt. As the tenth century passed to the eleventh, there were frequent variations in North Africa from the standard types of the Egyptian mint. The first standard type of the caliph al-Hakim was adopted in North Africa with a minor variation at first, and brought into conformity with Egypt only six years later; it was then continued until 408, during which time Egypt had adopted two successive new designs. Al-Hakim's third design, with the name of his designated heir, was not adopted in North Africa until four years after it was introduced in Egypt, was changed in North Africa but not in Egypt two years later, and continued until the year after al-Hakim's death. The North African mints then adopted the first standard type of the next caliph, al-Zahir, and kept it until two years after his death, ignoring two major changes in type in Egypt. These variations evidently reflect the increasing autonomy of Ifriqiyya under the Zirid governors, who ultimately asserted their independence with coinage in their own name, but they show that uniformity in coinage, such as existed between Egypt and Syria during the same period, depended upon the loyalty that caliphs and sultans could merit or command from their provincial governors, not on a separate bureaucracy that controlled the mints bypassing the political hierarchy. I should speak here also of our host island, Sicily, which, unlike the rest of the caliphate, never issued dinars but only quarter-dinars.

As a final example, I will mention the great Mediterranean Muslim empire of modern times, the Ottomans, without going into detail because every specialist is aware that the monetary systems of the different countries under Ottoman rule varied greatly. Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, the provinces in the Caucasus taken from the Persians, and the core regions, Anatolia and the Balkans, all had their own distinctive coinages. Generally, after their conquest these regions maintained the system of the predecessor states for some time, then were brought more or less, but never fully, into conformity with Constantinople, and then diverged more and more in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This will come as no surprise to those who know that the empire itself was disintegrating in those latter centuries and its constituent parts falling under the control of local warlords or European powers, but this
historical development is completely obscured by the numismatic practice of cataloging Ottoman coins sultan by sultan, arranging the mints in alphabetical order under each of the three coinage metals as if the Ottoman sultanate were a unitary centralized bureaucracy that for some reason chose to issue quite different coins at each of the mints it controlled.

Having dwelt upon the diversity of coinage within the territories of a single dynasty, for which I could multiply examples indefinitely, I should also speak of examples of uniformity extending beyond the boundaries of a dynasty's authority. One such is western Iran and Iraq in the tenth century, the era of the Buyids. Though the evolution of the coinage of this period has not been well studied, one can say that in appearance, the coinage of all the mints in the area and of each mint varied little, using a standard design and inscriptions continued from the time of undivided caliphal authority and differing only in the names of the caliphs and the local rulers in each place. These names changed rapidly, as various members of the Buyid family and other dynasts such as the Sajids, the Saljuqids, the Ziyarids, the Bawendids, the Sallarids, the Justanids, and Hasanwayhids, and the Kakwayhids won and lost power in each city. These names changed rapidly, as various members of the Buyid family and other dynasts such as the Sajids, the Saljuqids, the Ziyarids, the Bawendids, the Sallarids, the Justanids, and Hasanwayhids, and the Kakwayhids won and lost power in each city. The present numismatic treatment of this period is so chaotic that no general conclusions can be drawn about any aspect of the coinage, because the coins with the names of each of these dynasts are catalogued separately. The coins of a single city in the same year may be found in as many as three separate places in a single catalogue as the city changed hands, and yet these are essentially the same coins, with the same inscriptions (except for the names), the same style (at any one place), the same weight standard and alloy. By isolating the various issues of a single time and place from one another, the historical development of the coinage is completely obscured and its utility as evidence for other disciplines is vitiated. None of these dynasties, even the Buyids, had a distinctive coinage of its own; and as for royal control, we can imagine that the mint officials went to each new warlord in turn to verify the spelling of his name and then proceeded about their business. There may have been substantive changes in the coinage in this era, and substantive differences between provinces, but they will not be recognized until the coinage is studied in a more historical fashion.

Yet another example of uniformity beyond dynastic frontiers is found in Syria in the thirteenth century, when the standard dirham of the period—introduced, it is true, by Salah al-Din—was issued at mints under the control of Ayyubids, Artuqids, Rum Seljuqs, marauding Khwarizmis, and the Crusaders. There was more diversity of design within the Ayyubid principalities than there was between these and their neighbors under different sovereignties.

Having made the argument that geographical diversity within the body of coins of a single ruler or dynasty is an indication of absence of direct bureaucratic control of provincial mints from the center, the objection may be raised that there are many instances of broad changes in the coinage taking place almost simultaneously across wide extents of territory, crossing provincial boundaries. This is certainly true; one cannot neglect the important role of royal intervention in the evolution of coinage. This point brings us to consideration of the other aspect of my argument, that of continuity of royal interest over time; because the notable feature of all the major coinage reforms in Islam that established the coin types that we think of as dis-
tinctive for various dynasties is that these changes never coincide with the foundation of dynasties but rather postdate the foundations by decades or generations.

One can cite many examples. The major changes under the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik, changes that created Islamic coinage as a distinct series, began thirty-one years after the beginning of the Umayyad caliphate with Mu'awiyah and seven years after the start of 'Abd al-Malik's reign. The advent of the Abbasid caliphate, it is true, brought an immediate change in the reverse inscription on dinars and dirhams that clearly marks off their coins from Umayyad issues, but the changes that created the classic 'Abbasid type did not occur until seventy-five years later in the reign of al-Ma'mun. The Fatimid conquest of Ifriqiyya was marked by conspicuous changes in the subsidiary inscriptions of the coins, at first comprising revolutionary religious slogans and then the distinctive titles and honorifics of the imams, but the coinage emphasizing concentricity that we think of as characteristically Fatimid was not introduced until the beginning of the reign of al-Mu'izz, forty-five years after the establishment of Fatimid political authority. Here in Sicily we can observe the Christian Normans continuing Islamic gold quarter-dinar coinage for at least a century after their conquest of the island, changing only the names at first and then gradually introducing other features such as crosses and Latin inscriptions. The coinage of the early Mamluks, until the second year of Baybars' reign, is identical to the previous coinage of the Ayyubids except for the names. Distinctive and uniform Ilkhan coinage, replacing a plethora of local monetary systems, is not begun until the time of Ghazan and his wazir Rashid al-Din, forty years after the capture of Baghdad.

One can multiply such examples. The sum of the matter seems to be that new rulers, new dynasties, new dominant peoples at the beginning of their rule have more important things to think about than coinage. Their power may be contested, the structures of power and administration may have to be revised, and probably more important, conquerors and revolutionaries are perhaps not the sort of people to take much interest in mundane monetary problems. Indeed, one may pose the question whether medieval rulers in general, exception made of the great reformers, took much interest in the coinage as long as the system operated without critical problems. One may say axiomatically that few rulers, and hardly anybody else, takes coinage with anything like the same importance that numismatists do.

I have tried to show, through argument and example, that the geographical and chronological limits of dynastic power are not appropriate divisions for the study and understanding of Islamic coinage. Instead of studying Islamic numismatics from the "top down," we need to study the coins from the "bottom up." The natural geographic unit for the study of coins is the mint, for that is where they were made and introduced into circulation; the natural chronological unit is the lifespan of coin series, from one great monetary reform to another. Once we trace the development of each mint (although this process should not take place in isolation for each mint, because comparison of one mint to another nearby yields useful clues for the understanding of both), we can then see what changes in coinage were general or widespread and what was the system of official and unofficial rules within which the mints operated. If, on the contrary, we classify coins primarily according to the rulers named on them, relegating their mint-places to second-
ary importance or even ignoring them, we will in fact not be able to recognize the intervention of the very rulers on whom we focus.

The principles I propose for the study of coinage and monetary history have their implications for other fields of inquiry into Islamic history, and accord with the direction of thinking in recent years of many scholars in those fields. Just as there was no Umayyad mint bureaucracy and no Umayyad coinage, there was apparently no universal Umayyad military organization and no general Umayyad taxation system; these aspects of administration must be studied province by province and even district by district where the sources allow, and we should hold back from generalization until a body of comparative material has been built up sufficient to show general trends in contrast to local conditions.

Similarly for the specialist in the history of other kinds of objects, that is for art historians. It seems to me as an outsider, and on the basis of my own experience in my field, that art historians speak much too much of Timurid minatures, Fatimid textiles, Seljuq architecture, Atabeg metalwork, and the like. It is useful to step back a bit and remind oneself that the Timurids painted no miniatures, the Fatimids wove no textiles, the Seljuqs laid no bricks and the Atabegs shaped no vessels. These objects were designed and constructed by craftsmen, by the people of eastern Iran, of Egypt, of Anatolia, of Mesopotamia, or rather by people living in the cities of these countries at particular times in history. It would perhaps be a good idea to say more concretely what one means: not Fatimid textiles, but Egyptian textiles of the eleventh century, or better still, Alexandrian textiles of the first quarter of the eleventh century, or the like.

Aside from the methodological benefit of beginning with the concrete and specific and building from there to broad generalities, or in other words, of studying Islamic coins, art objects, and history from the bottom up, there is also a moral or ethical dimension to this question. By remembering who made the objects we study, by shaping our theories and speculations around real people in real places doing real things, we restore to these people, our predecessors and for many of us our ancestors, something of their essential humanity, and thereby broaden our own.