



Malta
Classics
Association

MELITA CLASSICA

Vol. 3
2016

*Journal of the
Malta Classics Association*

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Melita Classica

Vol. 3, 2016

Text © Malta Classics Association
Design and layout © Book Distributors Limited

ISBN: 978-99957-847-4-4

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***Ḍuriba bi-Mālṭa* ‘Minted in Malta’: deciphering the Kufic legend on the Fāṭimid quarter dinar**

Martin R. Zammit

Until the acquisition, by the Central Bank of Malta in 2010, of the gold Fāṭimid quarter dinar, it was inconceivable that Arab Malta could have had its own coinage. Helen W. Brown, in her article about the coins of Muslim Malta, states that “It is not, on the basis of present evidence, suggested that any Muslim coins were struck in Malta itself.”¹ Quite obviously, this acquisition was bound to revive memories of the ‘great Mdina hoard’ of gold coins found in 1698 and known from the descriptions of Ciantar’s *Malta Illustrata* in 1771.

It is indeed amazing that the Arab Fāṭimid quarter dinar minted in Malta, whose circumference hardly exceeds 38 millimetres, and weighing 1.30 grams, is inscribed with about 80 letters on its obverse, and more than 70 letters on its reverse. The reservations concerning the obverse side of the coin stem from the fact that here the coin is somewhat less well preserved, and therefore much less legible than the reverse. This write-up tackles the central and marginal legends inscribed on both sides of the quarter dinar.

One cannot but admire the engraver’s skill, faced as he was with the task of inscribing a considerable number of words within the extremely limited area of the Fāṭimid quarter dinar. He achieved this by producing an inscription which is best described as a miniscule form of Kūfic.² A most conspicuous characteristic of Kūfic script is the angular form of most of

¹ H.W. Brown (1992), 11.1.3.

² Kūfic script is one of earliest Arabic scripts which emerged in Arabia around the 3rd century A.D. Unlike the cursive *naskhī* scripts used on such soft materials like papyrus, parchment and paper, hard metallic mediums needed a rigid, angular script. For this purpose, Kūfic was considered the ideal choice. The term Kūfic refers to the southern Iraqi

its letters and the frequent omission of the diacritical dots distinguishing one letter from the other. Given that in the Arabic alphabet there are nine groups of letters which depend on diacritical dots to be read distinctly, it becomes immediately evident that the omission of these dots renders reading Kūfic a difficult task. To complicate matters, vowel marks, and very often the letter *'alif* (ا), were also omitted. The omission of the *'alif* can be observed in the word *Māliṭa* 'Malta' as attested in the Fāṭimid quarter dinar. In Arabic, the word *Māliṭa* can be written, or inscribed, either with two *'alifs*, one after the letter /m/ and a final *'alif* (مالطا), or with an *'alif* after /m/ and a final *tā' marbūṭa* (مالطة). The second version is the one adopted in the quarter dinar, with the *'alif* after the letter /m/ omitted, i.e. ملطه (m - l - ṭ - a). However, in the case of the word *dīnār*, the *'alif* is not left out, hence دينار. At times, engravers did insert a kind of 'point' above or below certain letters, but apparently such points indicated marks of genuineness, or the engravers' marks, and therefore had no orthographic function.

The legends on Muslim coins:

Muslim coins, in general, contain three kinds of religious legends:

a. The dogmatic formulae: *bi-smi llāh* 'in the name of *Allāh*', *la ilāha illā llāh* 'there is no god but *Allāh*'; *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh* 'Muhammad is the messenger of *Allāh*',

b. Koranic verses, and

c. pious expressions, such as *ṣallā llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* 'May *Allāh* bless him and grant him peace'; *al-'amru kulluhu li-llāh* 'the whole matter belongs to *Allāh*', *lā quwwata illā bi-llāh* 'there is no power except with *Allāh*', etc.

Moreover, regal titles, such as *'amīr al-mu'minīn* 'the prince of the believers', names of the cities in which the mints were located, as well as the dates of minting were also included. Till the thirteenth century, numerals referring to the year of minting were inscribed in words.

city of Kūfa, but it has not yet been satisfactorily proven that the script actually developed in that city.

In his manual of Muslim numismatics, Codrington lists 15 dogmatic formulae, 62 different Qur'ānic verses, 202 pious expressions, and 1,068 Asian and North African placenames minting Muslim coins.³ In Codrington's list of placenames, reference is made to a city called Malatya (in Arabic ملطية and ملاطية), a placename which resembles *Māliṭa*. However, Malatya is a city in Armenia which, in the past, minted Seljuk coins. Malta is not among the enlisted cities.

The legends on both sides of the Fāṭimid quarter dinar:

In the quarter dinar under consideration, one can immediately notice the concentric circles which characterize Fāṭimid coins. The legends are inscribed inside the inner circle and along the outer marginal circle of the coin.

The observe: the central area contains the following Muslim doctrinal formulae:

لا إله إلا الله - محمد رسول الله

lā 'ilāha 'illa llāh - muḥammad rasūl allāh

'There is no god but *Allāh* - Muhammad is the messenger of *Allāh*.'

Unlike the central inscription, which does not pose any deciphering problems, the marginal inscription is a very hard nut to crack. Almost half of the inscription is illegible, because it seems that when the coin was struck, the die did not hit the gold piece exactly in the centre. Hence, some letters on the die did not leave their mark on the piece. Moreover, a few letters are also slightly crushed, rendering the inscription almost illegible. On the basis of evidence from other Muslim coins, one would expect this space to contain a verse from the Qur'ān. Brown considers a particular coin kept at the National Museum in Valletta, minted in 1086/7, that is just six years later than our coin, as "... one of the few specimens to have survived the melting down of the hoard."⁴ This coin can perhaps afford some hints as regards a possible Qur'ānicverse for our coin. Brown

³ O. Codrington (2010).

⁴ H.W. Brown (1992), 11.

refers to verse 33 from chapter 9 (*sūrat al-tawba*), which is also attested in verse 9 of chapter 61 (*sūrat al-ṣaff*), namely:

هُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُ بِالْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ الْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُ عَلَىٰ الدِّينِ كُلِّهِ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ الْمُشْرِكُونَ

Huwa lladhī 'arsala rasūlahu bil-hudā wa-dīni l-ḥaqqi li-yuḏhirahu 'alā d-dīni kullihī wa-law kariha l-mushrikūn.

'It is He who hath sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, to proclaim it over all religion, even though the pagans may detest (it).'⁵

The underlined section of the above transcription seem to be reproduced on the Fāṭimid quarter dinar, but the graphic similarity characterising many letters of the Kūfic script, on the one hand, and the imperfect state of preservation of the coin, on the other, severely hamper the deciphering exercise.⁶



The obverse of the Fāṭimid quarter dinar

⁵ A. Yūsuf 'Alī (1989).

⁶ Such deciphering problems involving Kūfic are not uncommon. Thus, for example, the final section of the inscription on the Maymūna tombstone, housed at the Archaeology Museum in Gozo, has not yet been satisfactorily deciphered.

The reverse: fortunately, this side of the coin does not pose any problems of identification. It is on this side that one comes across the reference to Malta, as well as the date of minting. The central section carries the following legend:

الإمام المستنصر بالله – أمير المؤمنين

al-’imām al-mustanṣir bi-llāh - ’amīr al-mu’minīn

‘The Imām al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh - Prince of the believers’



The reverse of the Fāṭimid quarter dinar

Obviously, the marginal legend is the most interesting section of the coin, with its references to Malta and the year of minting. The letters of the words *bi-smi llāh* ‘In the name of *Allāh*’, in the upper marginal section, are only partially visible due to the minting problem mentioned above. Thus:

بسم الله – ضرب هذا الدينار بملطه سنة إثنين وسبعين وأربعمئة

bi-smi llāh -ḍuriba hādhā d-dīnār bi-mālīṭā sanat ithnayn wa-sab’in wa-’arba’umī’a

‘In the name of *Allāh*- this dinar was struck in Malta in the year two and seventy and four hundred (AH472 / AD 1079-80)’



The coin turned 90 degrees clockwise



The coin turned 180 degrees

It should be stated that, although the value of the coin is of one quarter dinar, nevertheless, it is referred to as a 'dinar' in the legend. This is in line with the common Muslim coinage practice of rarely mentioning the actual value of coins.⁷

The historical importance of the Fāṭimid quarter dinar struck in Malta cannot be stressed enough. It sheds new light on the otherwise very obscure Arab period in Maltese history, in general, and on Maltese numismatics, in particular. The need for the minting of coins obviously implies some form of commercial exchange between the Maltese islands and the neighbouring countries during the last quarter of the 11th century. The tiny proportions of this coin are counterbalanced by the significant historical implications which should prompt historians to reconsider much of the hypotheses put forward till now about Malta's Arab period.

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For references see pages 205-208

⁷ 1, ½, and ¼ dinars were minted.