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The Early Islamic Menorah Copper Coin as a Material Case of Co-Production

Sometime during the last fifty years of the Umayyad's reign, a unique copper coin was issued in one of the western regions recently conquered by the first dynasty of Islam. On the reverse side of the coin is the second part of the *šahāda*, the Islamic profession of faith, which reads, "Muḥammad is the messenger of God", while on the obverse is the first part of the Islamic creed, "There is no god but God, alone", a formula commonly found on Islamic coins of the period. However, the obverse also features the Jewish symbol *par excellence*, the menorah, making this coin a fascinating case of co-production.

Fig. 1: post-reform fals, 2.51 g, undated (ca. 77-132 AH/697-750 CE), no mint name (source: MKIC Auction n°5, Lot 43, October 13th, 2018: https://www.numisbids.com/n.php?p=lot&sid=2774&lot=43)

In his description of the obverse of the rare coin type shown above, one of the most eminent specialists in Islamic numismatics, Stephen Album, wrote that "turned upside-down, this design resembles the dome of a mosque, which may have been the engraver's intention" (Album, 44). Since the publication of his *Checklist of Islamic Coins* in the 1990s, the idea that the image on the copper coin was most likely intended to represent the dome of a mosque, or even the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, has gained momentum. Auction house descriptions of this coin, for example, often consider the "dome" as a "more likely" solution than what would otherwise seem to be the most obvious depiction: a menorah. As we shall see, there is no doubt that the original intention was to depict the quintessential Jewish symbol on an otherwise unambiguously Muslim coin, which makes this an intriguing case of co-produced religious symbols between Judaism and early Islam.

Although the copper coin (*fals*, plural *fulūs*, in Arabic – from the Latin Byzantine *follis*) in the image is undated, its inscriptions allow us to place it within the timeframe of the rapidly evolving design of copper coins under the first dynasty of Islam, the Umayyads (41-132 AH/661-750 CE). During the early days of the dynasty, the Umayyad rulers reused Christian Byzantine copper coins (*folles*), leaving their depictions of Byzantine emperors and crosses untouched, and sometimes simply adding Arabic validating words alongside Greek ones. Then, around the year 73-74 AH/692-694 CE, the fifth Umayyad caliph, ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 65-86 AH/685-705 CE), introduced a new model dubbed the "standing caliph" type, which removed crosses, replaced the image of the emperor with his own, and introduced religious formulae (see https://coproduced-religions.org/resources/sources/the-standing-caliph-copper-coinage). This model was short-lived, however, and in 77 AH/696 CE ʿAbd al-Malik initiated a monetary reform that removed all figurative depictions from gold and silver coins and replaced them with Arabic religious formulae and/or verses from the Qurʾān. Although the pictorial design of copper coins was not directly affected by these measures, their inscriptions became standardized. Because the production of *fulūs* was not controlled by the central Umayyad power, but rather left to the discretion of provincial governors or city officials, after this reform and until the demise of the Umayyads in 131 AH/750 CE, copper coins could either be fully epigraphic or depict a variety of objects, animals, or vegetation, but all of them bore the same religious formulae (called the *kalima*, or "expression (of faith)" in Arabic): "There is no god but God, alone [sometimes supplemented with: "He has no associates"], Muḥammad is the messenger of God".

The margin legend on the obverse of the menorah *fals* reads: “There is no god but God, alone” (*lā ilāha illā Llāh waḥdahu*) and the central legend inscribed in a linear circle on the reverse has: “Muḥammad is the messenger of God” (*Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*), which allows us to say without a doubt that it belongs to the post-reform Umayyad copper coinage. As is often the case with petty coinage, this *fals* also does not give the name of the city in which it was struck. During the Umayyad era, the majority of copper coins were struck in the Bilād al-Šām, or Greater Syria (a handful of exceptions are located in al-Andalus, Ifrīqīya, Egypt, and present-day Iraq). It is therefore likely that this *fals* type was minted somewhere in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, or Palestine, the latter two locations being more plausible given that documented Late Antique depictions of the menorah are overwhelmingly from these regions (Hachlili, 252-263).

On the obverse, in the center of the coin, is the image of what numismatists have always been reluctant to describe in terms other than the simple, straightforward “menorah”, using paraphrases such as “five-branched candlestick mounted on stand showing three feet” or “5-branch candelabra”. While the menorah is in effect a candelabrum with a central shaft and six (or more, or less) arms extending from its sides, it is interesting to note that scholars have refrained from using the appropriate term. The reason for using an evasive vocabulary to describe an otherwise obvious object is evident: how could an explicitly Islamic coin possibly depict the most recognizable and important Jewish symbol, the menorah?

Arguments against the interpretation of the image as a menorah insist on two points: a menorah has seven arms, while the one depicted here has only five, and the branch ends of the image on the *fals* are connected by a line, making it look more like the base of a dome (when turned upside down) than a menorah. These points are easily refuted since there are indeed known examples of similar post-reform Umayyad *fulūs* depicting the menorah with seven branches (type 163A, Album, 44), and since late antique Jewish depictions of the arms of the menorah are not necessarily limited to seven, but actually range from five to nine (Hachlili, 115-117). Moreover, similar late antique Jewish depictions of the menorah on various media show that it was not uncommon for it to be depicted with a line connecting its branches. A striking example combining both five branches and a connecting line is found on one of the Zoar (modern Ghor es-Safi, in Jordan) Jewish tombstones (dating from the mid- 4th to the late 6th century CE), which is compared to the obverse of the *fals*, below.

Fig.2: Left: five-armed menorah on a Late Antique tombstone from Zoar (source: Hachlili, Figure 4.7, 116) and right: obverse of the post-reform Umayyad menorah fals

Having established that the post-reform Umayyad *fals* indeed depicts a menorah, we can ask what this rare example can tell us about religious co-production in the early days of Islam. The copper coin being inscribed with both the Islamic *kalima* and the Jewish menorah, we are clearly faced with the simultaneous use of distinct religious symbolism. After the Second Temple period, i.e., following the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the menorah was gradually transformed from a “limited official emblem into the identifying Jewish symbol” (Hachlili, 1), appearing prominently on various types of

objects from the 4th century CE onward, at a time when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and Judaism developed a distinctive self-representation. Similarly, the fully epigraphic coins struck by the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik at the end of the 7th century CE responded to the need to religiously distinguish his growing empire from earlier religious traditions, especially Christianity. Therefore, the Arabic formulae (whether the *kalima* or Qurʾānic verses) inscribed on the post-reform coins translated into words the earlier Christian symbolism found on Byzantine coinage, most notably the cross, by polemically engaging with Trinitarian ideas. The words "There is no god but God, alone [He has no associates]" can be understood as a response to Christian claims of Jesus' divinity. Such formulae were inscribed not only on coins, but also on buildings and a variety of objects in order to unambiguously express a new and distinctive religious self-expression. Thus, the menorah and the *kalima* are similarly defining expressions of a distinctive and independent religion in response to the 'Other' (in both cases, Christianity). It is all the more surprising that these two symbols should be used together on a coin.

Another curious fact is that the menorah had not been depicted on coins since the 1st century BCE (on rare bronze coins of the last Hasmonean king, Mattathius Antigonus), making its sudden appearance seven centuries later on a Muslim coin all the more remarkable. Because of its absence from coinage for such a long period, it seems highly unlikely that the Umayyad provincial governors or local officials decided to 'recycle' a circulating Jewish coin and to restrike it with the Islamic *kalima*. Moreover, the menorah did not seem to have any meaning to the early followers of Muḥammad, since it is completely absent from Muslim Scripture (both the Qurʾān and the Sunnah). Thus, the menorah *fals* was certainly struck with the intended purpose of combining Jewish and Islamic symbols in a unique case of material religious co-production. Could this post-reform Umayyad *fals* then provide us with an indication that the early community of Muḥammad's Believers was indeed "ecumenical", welcoming Jewish (and Christian) members into its midst, as Fred Donner has famously suggested (Donner, 68-74)? After all, even if ʿAbd al-Malik and the elites wanted to distinguish their new religion from earlier 'Abrahamic' traditions, this certainly did not mean that these measures had an immediate effect at the local level, which is the level we are talking about when we discuss copper coins and their depictions.

However, one detail seems to indicate that the Muslim authorities did in fact reappropriate the Jewish menorah on the *fals*. As noted above, no contemporary coins depicting the candelabrum are known, but there is a lead token from the 5th or 6th century CE produced in Judaea that depicts the menorah. The obverse of this token, shown below, like many other Late Antique images of the Jewish symbol, is flanked on either side by a variety of objects whose exact meanings are debated. On the obverse, the menorah is flanked by both a *lulav* ("palm frond") and an etrog (citrus fruit). The post-reform Umayyad fals eliminates these flanking objects, but interestingly, it seems to reinterpret them epigraphically, since the Arabic negation لا (*lā*) that begins the first half of the *kalima*on the obverse of the *fals* takes on a more elongated shape, reminiscent of the *lulav*, and the Arabic letter ه (*hāʾ*) that ends the first half of the *kalima* has a circular shape reminiscent of the etrog.

Fig. 3: Left: obverse of a lead token, 2.76 g, ca. 5th-6th centuries CE, Judaea (source:https://www.vcoins.com/en/stores/athena_numismatics/18/product/menorah_of_seven_branches__5th6th_centuries_ad__lead_token/1085381/Default.aspx), and right: obverse of the post-reform Umayyad menorah fals

Whether the replacement of the Jewish symbols flanking the menorah with the Arabic letters of the Islamic *kalima* was intentional or not can only remain a matter of speculation. It is also unclear why the most recognizable and important Jewish symbol was engraved on a coin inscribed with the profession of faith of the new Islamic religion. Was the menorah used here not for its religious significance but rather for its apotropaic qualities? It is indeed interesting to note that the most common everyday use of the menorah symbol during Late Antiquity was as a charm with magical powers, as it appears prominently on amulets, rings, and other portable objects (Hachlili, 115).

Whatever the case may be, the post-reform menorah *fals* should invite us to rethink the dynamics and interactions between different religious groups during the early decades of Islam, when the new religion was still in the process of defining itself in opposition to and alongside the 'Other'. Looking at the material culture that emerged from this formative period allows us to witness the co-production of religious symbols and meanings. This example should also lead us to reconsider other understudied pre-reform Umayyad *fulūs* which share less obvious symbols with Judaism, such as the amphora (Wacks, 79-80) or the double cornucopia and pomegranate.

Further reading

Stephen Album, *Checklist of Islamic Coins. Third Edition* (California: Stephen Album Rare Coins, 2011)

Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers. At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, Ma. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010)

Rachel Hachlili, *The Menorah. Evolving into the Most Important Jewish Symbol* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018)

Mel Wacks, *The Handbook of Biblical Numismatics* (California: Mel Wacks, 2021).