Calligraphy on Islamic Coins

STEFAN HEIDEMANN

Introduction
Western coinages in the Hellenistic tradition are praised for the beauty of their images complementing perfectly the circular space. The art of the portrait flowered in particular in the Hellenistic world, the early Roman Empire, and then again a millennium later in the Renaissance. Since the Renaissance, Greek and Roman coins have been understood in the antiquarian mind as objects of art comparable to sculpture or painting. The Italian sculptor Pisanelli (c. 1535-1495) invented the art of the medal, imitating Roman coins. Western numismatics developed in the Renaissance and numismatics became part of art history. In the tradition of Johann Winckelmann (1717–68) it focuses on portraits, human depictions, and architecture. While art historians trained in the classical Western tradition rarely appreciated the almost aniconic aesthetics of Islamic art in general and that of coins in particular, the beauty of written and embellished documents made of metal has become more accessible to modern viewers, who have learned to appreciate aesthetic concepts others than those measured by Greek and Roman ideals.

Islamic and Chinese cultures developed different aesthetics in the design of coins than western Europe. Both cultures created outstanding numismatic artefacts. In the late seventh century, Islamic authorities initially created coins as text documents. Early coins are anonymous, containing parts of the Qur’an, the divine revelation, and the necessary administrative information. Later, names of caliphs, sultans, kings, governors and even the names of the dieengravers were added. The art of the coin in the Chinese and in the Islamic world focused on the beauty of the designed characters and a proportionate distribution of text on the available limited, mostly circular space. The roots of coin design in the Islamic world lay nevertheless in the Hellenistic tradition, whereas Chinese coinage drew on a different past. The early Islamic Empire covered the old Hellenistic world from western North Africa to Central Asia.

What sets Islamic coins apart from their Western counterparts? Early Islamic coins can be described above all as bearers of texts of up to 150 words. The texts on coins during the first six and a half centuries of Islam reflect the entire hierarchy of power...
The style of the calligraphy on these coins is closer to the common curvilinear script of the Persian Pahlavi writing or the earlier private and official letters than to the elegant angular Kufic of monumental inscriptions such as are found at the same time on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

The coinage of later decades of Umayyad rule, the style of writing on coins shifted to elegant, angular Kufic such as that also used for Qur’ān manuscripts and monumental inscriptions.

Even after the Abbasid coup, calligraphy on gold coins retained certain features of Umayyad gold—less emphasis on the vertical and rectangular letters, and the word’s base line moulded into the round of the coins.

The Written Word of God as Representation of Islam and its Empire

The Zubayrid and Kharjījite challenges of the early Umayyad Caliphate between 681 and 697 CE – the years of the Second Fitna – created the political context for the definitive creation of epigraphic coin design. The activities of the caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705 CE) that followed the Second Fitna can be seen as embracing the defeated moderate Zubayrid and the more extremist Kharjījī propagandists as far as possible in order to reunite the Islamic elite. It was at this point in history that the latest of an Islamic universal empire in its own ideological right emerged. In 72 H/691-92 CE Abd al-Malik built the present Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as the stage of the imperial religious cult. Between the years 72/691-92 and 73/696-97 the Umayyad government experimented with new symbols of religion and imperial power, not all of which are well understood today. However, the recurrent theme of all experiments in coin design was the inclusion of the name of the Messiah in God as the putative founder of the empire (Muhammad rasūl Allāh), and sometimes also the profession of faith, of the shahids. Finally, the definitive iconic representation of Islam and the Islamic Empire on coinage was launched. In 77/696 new dinars (fig. 82) – probably minted in Damascus – bear the new religious symbol of Islam: the shahids, encircled by the niṣābūn, the prophetic mission of Muhammad (sunnah) and on the opposite side, as a symbol of the ultimate sovereignty of the empire of the Word of God, a variation of the sûra ‘al-‘iklās (variety of Qur’an 112), and the date of minting. Late in 78/697-98, the governor of the East ordered the reform of the dirham design in his realm, almost similar to the new dinars, but adding the mint name. These coins are among the oldest surviving text carriers of the Qur’an. Until the time of the Abbasid caliph al-Mansūr (r. 754-75 CE) precious metal coinage remained anonymous. The reform of ‘Abd al-Malik constituted a historically unprecedented breach with Hellenistic coin imagery going back about a millennium in the Roman west and the Iranian east. The aniconism, the non-use of images, of the precious metal coins is the result of the character of the ‘iconic’ new symbols the Qur’ānic Word of God as an expression of sovereignty and the empire and the profession of faith as an expression of the religion. Anonymity on coins did not mean modesty, because the new Islamic universal emperor claimed to be nothing less than khawāFIT Allamah, “deputy of God.” This presupposes an entirely new understanding of the role of the Islamic Empire and its religion, and led to coins becoming objects of calligraphy.

Kufic Script in the Early Islamic Period

The models for the calligraphic art on coins later always vacillated between the styles of the chanceries, the art of Qur’ānic calligraphy and epigraphic inscriptions on monumental architecture. Although the Umayyad Empire was far from being a centralized state, Umayyad and early Abbasid coinage shows a high degree of uniformity owing to its Sasanian heritage. The style of script used on early refined gold and silver coinage maintained a curvilinear appearance, probably a legacy of early die-engravers trained to engrave the much rounder Palmyran script (figs. 82-83). At the same time – in contrast – the calligraphy of the inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock shows a highly artistic elegant rectangular Kufic of a quite different – although currently unknown – tradition. During the more than fifty years following the introduction of the epigraphic coins, the style of script gradually changed, from an ordinary scribe’s script to the style of monumental inscriptions and Qur’ānic veilt manuscript figures (fig. 84). Like the calligraphers of early Qur’ānic editions, engravers exploited the inherent tendencies of the Arabic script. The letters became more rectangular shape and elongated, and the Kufic style. They exaggerated the vertical characters and the horizontal lines between the letters. Rectangular letters were also horizontally elongated. Letters consisting of one or more short vertical lines or which were rounded or had an oblique component were reduced in size to highlight the exaggerated components. The end-nun or the tail of the end-yn could result in accentuated crescents, dipping sometimes far below the line. Although the script had to be placed in the circle, on dirhams the elongated base line of each word remains still and straight and does not bend to the circular shape of the coin (figs. 85, 86). The peak of these exaggerated elongations of vertical and horizontal lines was reached in the period from Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809) until the style reform of al-Mahmūn (r. 810-33). The more text had to be crammed into the limited space, the more unlikely it looks (fig. 87).

There were differences in the calligraphic treatment of gold and silver. The tendency to exaggerate vertical and horizontal lines applied to both. But until the reform of al-Mahmūn the style on gold coins remained closer to the more archaic curvilinear early Umayyad coins. This is evident in those mints which produced gold and silver at the same time, such as Madinat al-Salam (the palace city of Baghdad), and al-Raṣīfa (the garrison and palace city of Harun al-Rashid on the Euphrates). The reasons for this preference for an old, almost archaic style for the gold are not known. The old style probably symbolizes trusted values. Coin hoards from Iran show that Early Abbasid dinars remained in circulation at least for hoarding purposes until the first half of the tenth century. The devastating war of succession between the caliphs al-Amin (r. 809-13) and al-Mahmūn marked a turning point. After his decisive victory, the latter initiated a coinage reform which went along with a re-organization of the system of mints. In 20/166-77, the reform started by adding more text to the coin design (fig. 87) and achieved its definitive form in 206/827-29 (fig. 88). The new style was adopted over the next few years in almost all mints.
words of two marginal inscriptions now bend to the circular shape of the coin, becoming neat curvilinear and enhancing legibility. The new style of coinage of al-Mu‘tamid reverted to anonymity. The return to simple curvilinear script, the anonymity of coinage and the innovation of the added Qur’anic phrase on the outer margin was an attempt by al-Mu‘tamid to regain political credibility by pointing to traditional values and designs.

In 219/834, al-Mu‘tadid billah (r. 833–42) abolished anonymity again and added his name to the coin reverse. In the last third of the third/ninth century occasionally new embellishments were added in coin design: on some coin issues the tops of the vertical letters became slightly split (fig. 89). This feature soon spread all over the empire until it became almost a common feature. At the same time, what was called "floral" arabesques with split endings for nūn, dā‘, or wāw appeared as the Samarran style spread. About the 290s/900s, "swirling" arabesques were a regular feature on Samanid dirhams in eastern Iran and Transoxiana. Painted tops of circular letters such as ǧīm, bā‘, mīm, and wāw were added early in the fourth/tenth century (fig. 90). In the central lands of the caliphate, namely in western Iran, Kufic calligraphy on coins reached its artistic zenith between the 350s/960s and 370s/980s when Buyid die-engravers marked their products with their names in minuscule script.

New Developments from the East

The success of the naskh, the copyist’s script, would not have been possible without the new medium of the chanceries, paper, and the attendant spread of literacy. The art of Chinese papermaking entered the Islamic world before 700 CE and was first mentioned for Samarkand in Transoxiana. During the eighth century, the use and manufacture of paper spread to Iran and Iraq. The availability of paper as an affordable writing material was the basis of the extraordinary success of Islamic civilization in the ninth and tenth centuries, the blossoming of theology and law, of historical writing and literary production, of translation and natural sciences. It served as a driving force for the remarkable centralization and bureaucracy of the state. Paper changed the style of writing.

In the early Islamic period, the copist’s handwriting of the chanceries does not seem to be refined enough for Qur’anic manuscripts and representative epigraphic inscriptions including texts on coins. In about the 290s/900s, naskh was first applied on coins in the remote but prosperous east of the empire in Samanid Transoxiana. The coins continued the style of ‘Abbāsid dirhams in the tradition of al-Mu‘tamid’s reforms; inscriptions and protocol remained written in angular Kufic script, but the Samanids and some of their vassals used naskh for the first time to emphasize the name of the actual issuing local ruler (fig. 91). It took more than a century until a refined version of the naskh became used for ceremonial and sacred functions. The famous calligrapher Fār Bawwāb (d. probably 423/1033) in Baghdad is much revered for his refinement of naskhī. The earliest surviving Qur’ān manuscript in naskhī by his hand is dated to 391/1000-01.

The ascendancy of naskhī in the decades around 400/1000 marks the final apogee of Kufic calligraphy on coinage in the east, probably because the rise of naskhī allowed for more artistic playfulness. Surprisingly, the most outstanding results were not achieved in the old central lands of Islam but in Central Asia, the realm of the Turki Qarakhanids (first period 991–1040), especially in regions which had recently come under the sway of Islam: citi- es such as Bāshagur (present-day Bursa near Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), Uzkand (present-day Oskemen, Uzbekistan), and others produced extraordinary calligraphic art. At the same time, to the south in eastern Iran, in the realm of the Ghaznavids, calligraphic art on coins also reached a high level, using different-sized letters, swirling arabesque tails and triangular fins at the tip of the vertical characters (fig. 92).

The production of dies was nevertheless subject to the division of labour and the rationalization of work flow: the rulers demanded more elaborate titles; and more religious inscriptions had to be squeezed onto the limited space available on the dies. Prefabricated punches came into use, mostly ringlets for circular letters (fig. 93), but sometimes whole words were just punched with a single tool onto the die.
FIG. 90

AD DIRHAM
Buwayd, Iran/Iraq; dated 600 H/1204–12 CE

At the end of the 7th and 10th centuries, the monetary system of the Islamic Empire deteriorated. Nevertheless, from time to time, some rulers attempted to reform the system of coinage in their regions, but without permanent success. The Buwayd in the province of Fars in south-western Iran introduced a new coin (dirham) based on the model of the popular coins from the period before al-Ma'mun's reforms. They only used a single inscription on the margin of the obverse side of the coins and decorated the coins with excellent calligraphy.

FIG. 91

DIRHAM
Banjurd, Balkh/north Afghanistan; dated 732 H/1334–35 CE

This dirham is one of the earliest examples for the use of naskhī script. On the obverse side, the name of the Banjurd ruler is in naskhī. The Kufic script in this composition is highly artistic, for example the ligature of three letters "ta" "ya" and "ka" in the third line on the obverse side is designed as an abstract flower.

FIG. 92

DINAR
Ghaznavids, Ghazni/Afghanistan; dated 406 H/1015–16 CE

The playful element in calligraphic art on coins is continued under the Ghaznavids in eastern Iran with the importance of the inscriptions emphasized by differently sized letters. The name of the caliph, who resided far away in Baghdad without real power, is always acknowledged in a very small script on the obverse side as sultan. The arabesques, swooping initials and three triangular fins on the ends of the verticals find their counterparts for example in contemporary metalwork in eastern Iran.

FIG. 93

DINAR
Eastern Saffaids, north Afghanistan; dated 433 H/1042 CE

Although the floral Kufic script does not appear especially fine, this coin shows how much text can be accommodated in miniscule script: the hierarchy of three rulers with their detailed titles, the location of the mint and the month of minting, and finally parts of three different verses from the Qur’an, and a sword as a symbol with heraldic character. The die-engraver used punches for specific letter forms such as a ringlet punch for circular letters to ensure efficient production.

Calligraphy on monumental architecture also influenced coin design. In eastern Iran beginning with the seventh/thirteenth century we find an odd rectangular Kufic on broad thin, debased falsi- ary dirhams in Central Asia (1116–14). The broad band of script has its closest parallel in contemporary decoration and inscriptions set in bricks on mosques, minarets and mausoleums.

The Era of the Scribe's Script – Naskhī

Although Kufic remained the predominant style until the seventh/eighth century, the introduction of Naskhī into the Islamic world, naskhī had occasionally been used on coins from the end of the third/beginning of the fourth century. In the West it probably occurred for the first time in 692/1096–97 on a unique issue of a Fatimid dirham in Egypt. After 558/1162–63 Nur al-Din Mahmud (r. 1127–46) introduced naskhī on the coins of his copper and silver dirham. It is a decorative style, with the introduction of the first silver coinage with a regulated weight of 5/71/1177.5–78. The dirham itself remained in a pleasing Kufic c.f. 950, while the half-dirham was entirely in naskhī without distinguishing dots. The Caliph also began to introduce the use of Kufic script into the minting of other coins, providing more standard administrative information on the weight and ratio. The Almohads in the western part of the caliphate adopted a newly standardised variant of naskhī on their coins (cf. 1457, 1460).

FIG. 94

SISANDARI DIRHAM
Ahvaz, Iran/Iraq; dated 649 H/1252–54 CE

A strangely formed Kufic often appears on large, strongly alloyed dirhams from Central Asia in the 7th–10th centuries; it is angular and instead of playing with elongated verticals or with balanced proportions of breadth and, usually, make an impression of broad enameled with some rounded letters. Model for a script of this type can be found in the bands of inscription on brick architecture of the period.

FIG. 95-96

DIRHAM (Zangids, Aleppo/Syria; dated 573 H/1177 CE)

Half dirham (Zangids, possibly Aleppo; undated, possibly 1225–80 CE)

Successful introduction of a weight regulated dirham coinage in Syria in 571/1175 under the rule of the Zangids led to two different patterns, one for the dirham (fig. 95) and another for the half dirham (fig. 96). The first was struck in an attractive Kufic style with suggestions of floral Kufic. On the second, all inscriptions – for the first time in a regular coin series – were written in naskhī with vocalization marks such as fatha, damma, sukun and shadda.

From the Mongols to the Gunpowder Empires

In 1258, with the Mongol conquest of Baghdad and the fall of the Islamic Empire, the coinage of Islamic coins for the coinage changed in Mongol Iran and Central Asia. Political authority was
now derived from the family of Genghis Khan which governed an
empire from the borders of Sileia to Korea. New scripts and lan-
guages, such as Uighur, Pahlavi, and Chinese entered Islamic coin
design to address the new authorities (1193, 1215). Uighur script
developed from Avestic-Syriac script and Pahlavi developed from
Tibetan at the court of the Great Khan Qubilai in 1268–69.
It was used on coins in the Mongol Ilkhan and Chaghatay realms.
The weight-regulated, almost pure silver coinage, which was
already established in Syria and in Asia Minor and other territories,
was now firmly adopted in the Mongol realm. An almost regular
deviation of the coinage was achieved by slightly reducing the
weight of the standard denomination. Different designs had to
be created in order to distinguish one coin issue from the other
(figs. 101–103). Some designs were taken from architectural ele-
ments, such as the prayer niche (fig. 102), the square-lobed (fig. 103, ovoid),
and the ‘brick’-lobed (fig. 103, reverse). The inscriptions
frequently the easily recognisable shahādah - is spirally scrolled,
mostly from the outside inward.

Later, after c. 1500 CE, in Iran, calligraphy became more refined
on coins even in provincial mints where the dies were probably
supplied by central workshops. The style of the script on the coins
became dependent on the now dominant ceremonial style, the
‘hanging’ or tafli script, for official documents and poetry. Epi-
graphic friezes in monumental architecture of that time achieve a
kind of transparency by using glazed tiles or opus sectile (mosaic
from segmented tiles); the inscription is laid upon differently
coloured scrolling foliage often on a dark or blue background. A
similar effect is achieved on coins by exploring for the first time
the coin’s potential as a three-dimensional relief. This aspect of
the coin as a sculptural object was never previously exploited for
calligraphy and marked a major step forward in the coin’s artistic
appearance. A tafli inscription sometimes suggesting the rhyth-
m of the pen’s movement in different heights of the relief is set on
spirally scrolling foliage in the background. Safavid coinage often
not only gives the name of the ruler, his titles, religious inscriptions,
and administrative information but frames the ruler’s name in cou-
plet: “Throughout the world imperial coinage came, struck by God’s
grace in Tahmasp Tāhir’s name; mint of Tabriz 1319.” is written on
the reverse of the coins of one of the last Safavid rulers Tahmasp II
(r. 1722–32) (fig. 104). This style of double-layered calligraphy
was continued by the following Iranian dynasties (fig. 105). Similar in
calligraphy are coins of the Mughal Empire from the seventeenth
to the nineteenth century where we find tafli, but usually without
scrolling foliage in the background (fig. 106). The third ‘Gunpowder
Empire’, the Ottomans, applied a conventional proportionate naskhi
on its coins. In contrast to the other two post-1520 empires of the
Islamic world, the Ottomans used a calligraphic tughra as imperial
symbol, sometimes as the only symbol of state on the coins. The
Tughra is a heraldic device and a calligraphic version of the sultan’s
name, with his titulature and blessing for him (figs. 107).

Conclusion
The brief survey of calligraphy on coins explores a field of Islamic
art which is hardly known although often admired, and commentary
is sometimes given about the calligraphy of single issues. The art of
writing on coins established itself at the moment when the Qur’ānic
message became an iconic symbol for Islam and its empire. The
small form set certain limits; coins as documents required certain
formulae, and their production as an absolute medium of exchange,
meaning money, required techniques of mass production. As mini-
ature official inscriptions of the Islamic Empire and its successor
states, calligraphy on coins is always orientated towards the cur-
rent forms of representation of these states, be it the art of Qur’ānic
calligraphy, the style of monumental architecture, or the fine art of
courty poetry rendered in calligraphy or finally the sultan’s name in
calligraphy.
FIG. 162
DOUBLE DIRHAM
Ilkhan, Rustam (Arab), dated 714 H/1314–15 CE
This type of coin was struck for two years under Ilkhan Abu Sa'id. It is derived from building decoration - geometric Kufic with the profession of faith on the obverse side and 'cut-brick' Kufic on the reverse side (cf. fig. 94).

FIG. 164
YEN SHAH
Safavids, Tabriz, dated 1335 H/1917–19 CE
In 1335/1917 upon his accession to the throne, Shah Tahmasp had large coins minted in several cities of his extensive empire, including in Tabriz, the ceremonial capital of Iran. The name of the ruler is contained in a rhyming poem on the reverse side which is written in a script similar to fig. 105. The obverse side shows the profession of faith and the names of the twelve Shi'ite imams.

FIG. 165
TUMAN
Qajars, Tehran, dated 1239 H/1822–23 CE
This inscription in n=1/8 lies on a background ornamented with tendrils. The broad empty edge contrasts with the dense calligraphy in the middle.

FIG. 166
200 RUPEES
Mughals, Shahjahanabad (Delhi), dated 1083 H/1673–74 CE
The coin is partly struck and partly engraved. This is noticeable particularly at the end on those places on which the pressure of striking failed to produce a satisfactory result. On special occasions at the court, the Mughal rulers presented dignitaries with such huge coins of gold and silver. The calligraphy is in the attractive n=tig script. The central panels on the front and back sides contain Awrangzeb's name and titles together with the mint and the date. On the edge are written verses praising this money and the mild and glorious rule of Padishah Awrangzeb.

FIG. 167
QUARTER ALTIN
Ottomans, Istanbul, dated 1293 H/1876–77 CE
The calligraphic cagir Đà with the name of Selim III and his titles serve as a unique imperial symbol on the obverse side. The coin's beauty is achieved by the balance between free space and dense calligraphy.