

COINAGE AND HISTORY IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY NEAR EAST

2



**EDITED BY
ANDREW ODDY**

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PREFACE

This volume contains all but one of the papers presented at the 12th meeting of the Seventh Century Syrian Numismatic Round Table held in Cambridge in April 2009. The Round Table is a forum for the presentation of new, and not always complete, research, and, as such, for many years was not formally published. Many of the papers given at these meetings were subsequently published in the *Newsletter*, subsequently the *Journal of the Oriental Numismatic Society*. In fact, the first six meetings at the British Museum in April 1992, July 1993, December 1995, December 1996, April 1998, March 2000 were held under the auspices of the Oriental Numismatic Society. By the London meeting of March 2000, however, the Round Table was operating independently and went on to hold the next meeting, also in London, in October 2001. The meeting of November 2002 was held in Birmingham and was spread over two days, as have been all the subsequent meetings in November 2003 at Oxford, April 2005 in Cambridge, May 2007 in Birmingham, and the meeting reported here in Cambridge.

The study of the so-called Arab-Byzantine coinage struck in Syria (modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, The Palestinian Territories and Jordan) has made great strides forward in the last 30 years with the publication of catalogues of collections in the Ahli Bank in Amman, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the Khalili Collection in London, the Dumbarton Oaks Collection in Washington DC, and the University Collection in Tübingen. These monographs, together with innumerable papers in journals, have revolutionised the study of the coinage struck in Syria following the fall of the Byzantine Empire in that region. Most rewarding is the increasing attempts to relate the coins to the known history of the early Islamic State and the Umayyad Empire.

Not least, a number of die studies have shown that the coinages of Scythopolis/Baisan, Baalbek, Emesa/Hims, and pseudo-Damascus were prolific and clearly produced in well organised mints. For instance, only a few years ago the coins of Scythopolis were regarded as very rare with only about 30 recorded. Now that number is well into three figures with new specimens appearing all the time.

Of course, the growing popularity of Arab-Byzantine coins has its downside in the appearance of modern forgeries, as exemplified by one paper in this volume. Forgeries of the earliest Islamic gold dinars have been known for decades, but now numismatists are having to contend with modern copies of bronze coins, and very convincing some of them are too.

The one great lacuna in the subject is the dearth of coins from excavations or with secure provenances as a result of field walking. Sadly, most coins available for study can only be localised according to the origin of the dealer offering specimens for sale, and that is far from reliable as the number of Arab-Byzantine coins currently offered by a dealer in Dubai testifies. Hence it is not safe to assume that coins have not crossed modern frontiers before being offered for sale in Europe or the USA.

On a practical note, I must express my heartfelt thanks to Ingrid and Wolfgang Schulze who carefully read the 'final' text and discovered numerous mistakes and inconsistencies. Those that remain are the fault of the editor.

Andrew Oddy

28 June 2010

The Standing Caliph-Type - The Object on the Reverse

Stefan Heidemann ¹

1. Introduction ²



Fig. 1 - Anonymous, dīnār, without mint [Damascus], year 77 H (696 AD); Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 303-A02 (4.45g; ex coll. Soret, ex coll. Peretier). (Scale x2)

No other coin type marked the turning point of the formulation of the representation of the Islamic³ universal empire better than the famous standing caliph-type, minted between 74/691-2 and 77/696 (fig.1). It stands between those coin types without any recognisable imperial iconography and those with the Word of God as iconic symbol of the Islamic empire and religion on the reformed epigraphic coinage of the years 77/696-7 to 78/697-8. Although the standing caliph was not the definite answer to the question of an appropriate representation of the new empire and its state religion, he represents for the first time the power of this empire like the Byzantine *basileos* or the Sasanian *shāhānshāh* on their coins before him. The accompanying inscriptions on this series proclaim the ‘Commander of the Believers’ (*amīr al-mu’minīn*) to be the rightful *khalīfat Allāh* or ‘Deputy of God’. The iconographic symbols on the opposite sides of the standing - or in the case of the *dirham* half-figure - caliph vary: a ‘globe on a pole on steps’, a ‘portrait of the *shāhānshāh*’, a ‘lance under an arch’, or a *phi*-shaped object on steps. While the meaning of the standing figure is sufficiently confirmed by inscriptions as the representation of ‘Abd al-Malik; the related enigmatic objects on the reverse of the gold and copper coins are barely treated in the literature.⁴ In 1999, Nadia Jamil was the first who treated this subject in

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² On April 5, 2009, this contribution was given at the ‘Round Table’ in Cambridge. I am very grateful to the organizer Andrew Oddy for inviting me to this inspiring symposium. The text elaborates on certain aspects on coin design and the representation of the Islamic Empire which are treated briefly in a more general context in Stefan Heidemann: ‘The Development of the Representation of the Early Islamic Empire and Its Religion on Coin Imagery’, in **The Qur’an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’anic Milieu, Text and Studies on the Qur’an 6**, edited by Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx, 145-196, Leiden, 2010.

³ ‘Islamic’ is used here as a term parallel to Roman or Byzantine. It does not denote the religion but the empire and its civilization.

⁴ For the dirham see Luke Treadwell, ‘Mihrāb and ‘Anaza’ or ‘Sacrum and Spear’? A Reconsideration of an Early

depth and suggested an interpretation.⁵ These objects, however, were obviously not of the same central importance as the depiction of the ‘Deputy of God’ or the invocation of the messengership of Muḥammad and the unity of God which can be found on all of these coins. The present contribution focuses on the reading of the symbol on the reverse of the *dīnār* and the copper *fals*: the ‘bar/globe on a pole on steps’ with and without an ellipse crossing the pole on the coppers. An interpretation can only be achieved in the context of an analysis on coin imagery. I will show

- first, the separation of image and text in seventh century coin design and the use of the image as mark of value in the first place.
- second, the role of the cross as mark of value and as symbol of the opposing Byzantine Empire will be explored.
- and third, after setting these venues of thought, I attempt an interpretation of the ‘bar/globe on a pole on steps’ as a mark value in the first place, and a possible meaning as column and symbol of urban pride in the second place.

2. The Separation of Image and Text

In seventh century’s coin design, image and text separated from each other increasingly. Coin design was meant to be a recognisable mark of value in the first place. The text contains usually the necessary administrative information and in the case of the Islamic Empire also the representation of the new faith.



Fig. 2 - Heraclius and Heraclius Constantine, nomisma, Constantinople, without date [c. 616–625], Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena, inv. no. 2007-04-001 (4.21g; gift of F. and G. Steppat) (Scale x2)

Islamic armies swiftly conquered three major zones of monetary circulation and took over much of their fiscal and monetary organisation: in the centre the former eastern Byzantine territories, in the east the Sāsānian empire, and in the west Germanic North Africa and Spain. In Syria, the workhorse of the fiscal cycle, of taxation and state expenditure, was the gold *solidus* or *nomisma* weighing about 4.55g (fig. 2). The money used for daily purchases, the copper *follis* (plural *folles*), was issued by the treasury and sold to money changers. In Spain and western North Africa the monetary economy had been in decline since the fifth century. Byzantine coinage in use was much more diverse than in Syria. A system of *solidi*, *semisses* and *trientes* were struck. The third of the *solidus*, the *triens* or *tremissis* (c. 1.5g) was the main coin struck in Spain and the rest of western Europe. In North Africa, Carthage was the only mint to continue striking petty

Marwanid Silver Drachm.’ *Muqarnas* 30 (2005) 1-28; and Heidemann. “Development,” p. 178.

⁵ Nadia Jamil, ‘Caliph and Quṭb. Poetry as a Source for Interpreting the Transformation of the Byzantine Cross on Steps on Umayyad Coinage’, in *Bayt al-Maqdis. Jerusalem and Early Islam*, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art IX,2, edited by Jeremy Johns, 11-57, Oxford, 1999.

coinage. In the Sāsānian Empire the coinage of the fiscal cycle was the uniform silver *drahm* of about 4.2g which was struck during the reign of Khusrū II (590, 591–628) in about 34 mints.

From Hellenistic antiquity to the seventh century the image and the accompanying text on coins were usually almost concurrent. The portrait of the ruler stood as most meaningful representation for the kingdom or empire and the reverse tended to depict a meaningful imperial, royal or religious symbol. In the course of the seventh century the symbolic iconic design and the accompanying administrative text separated continuously from each other in the Byzantine and in the Sāsānian Empire. The image lost increasingly its purpose to serve as symbol of empire and religion. The separation began slowly in the period of Heraclius (610–641) and Khusrū II. The design, the image, became its foremost function as recognisable mark of value. As mark of value, images became static, frozen, immobilized whereas inscriptions in general provide administrative data. In the period of the Second *fitna* (681-693) also Islamic religious devices were added. Even some words or characters could serve just as iconic parts of the design, like the Pahlavī name of *Khusrū* or the Greek numeral **Ϟ** on Early Islamic coinage. This separation became a standard feature in the decades prior to the reforms of ‘Abd al-Malik (65-86/685-705) which finally led to the epigraphic coin design. Few examples should suffice to illustrate this development.

In Syria the separation is most obvious in the copper coinage. For example, the so-called ‘Imperial Image’ coppers which can be assumed to be struck between the 40s-50s/660s-670s and the years 72 to 74/691 to 694 depict clearly recognizable Byzantine emperors, mostly commonly Constans II (641–668) with crosses, while the administrative Arabic and Greek legends indicate the actual mint and add some validating expressions. These inscriptions established Arabic as the new language for regulating and validating of the issuing authority. No attempt was made to represent the new state or religion on coins. Petty coinage, first and foremost, served as a means of exchange.

In the Sāsānian Empire the immobilization of coin design, meaning the transformation of the imagery to a mere mark of value, began in the time of Khusrū II and his successors. The last portraits of the *shāhānshāhs*, and the design of the reverse with fire altar and two attendants became almost indistinguishable from one ruler to the other. Under Arab sway the iconic image of the *shāhānshāh* had become independent from the text and was continued even until the series of the standing caliph. The immobilized portrait of the *shāhānshāh* provided for the nickname of these Sasānian *drahms* in Arabic chronicles. These were generically called *baghliyya*, ‘mule-like’, an allusion to the wings of the crown as mule ears.⁶ In the period of the Second *fitna* and the caliphate of ‘Abd al-Malik until his coinage reforms, only the legends were meaningful acknowledging the governor’s authority and serving as epigraphic symbols of Islam.

3. The Cross as Mark of Value und Imperial Symbol

After having generally established images as iconic marks of value in the first place, I will turn to the meaning of the different forms of the crosses and their derivatives, with reference to the North African and Syrian circulation zone.

The mints in Constantinople and Carthage continued to mint different gold denominations which are distinguished by the form of the crosses. The symbol of the Byzantine *nomisma* was the cross potent on a stepped platform. The symbol for the Byzantine *semissis* was the cross potent on a globe. The symbol for the Byzantine *tremissis* was a cross potent frequently surrounded by a

⁶ I owe this plausible explanation of the word to a conversation with Michael Bates.

wreath or a circular inscription. The *semisses* and *tremisses* needed distinguishing marks because of their small weight difference (figs. 3-5).

Decades after ‘Abd al-Malik’s reforms in Syria, this system of denominations was continued with the first Latin series of gold coins in North Africa. For the *dīnār* as a heavy coin there was no specific mark necessary. The *semissis* was indicated by a ‘globe on a pole on steps’ continuing the ‘cross on a globe’. The mark of the *tremissis* was transformed into a ‘bar on a pole on steps’ with a circular inscription indicating the value of a *thulth*, a third of a *dīnār*. The ‘bar on a pole’ might even be intended to be seen as a **T** for *tremissis* (figs. 06-08).



Figs. 3 to 5. Byzantium, Heraclius, nomisma, Carthage, mark of value: cross potent on steps (Spink. Auction 7018 [27 June 2007]: no. 488); semissis, Constantinople, mark of value: cross potent on a globe (Dr. Busso Peus Nachfolger. Auction 396 [5 November 2008]: no. 682); tremissis, Constantinople, mark of value: cross potent within a circular legend (Classical Numismatic Group. Mail Bid Sale 66 [19 May 2004]: no. 1727)(Scale x1.5)



*Figs. 6 to 8. Islamic Empire, North African Latin series, anonymous, Afrika (Qayrawān), c. 90-93/708-711, nomisma/dīnār, indiction 13, no mark of value (Baldwin's. Auction 26 [9 May 2001]: no. 1587); Semissis/nisf, mark of value: globe on a pole on steps (Hess-Divo AG. Auction 309 [28 April 2008]: no. 254); tremissis / thulth, mark of value: bar on a globe on steps or simply a **T** (Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena, inv. no. 305-B02)(Scale x1.5)*



Figs. 9 to 11: Anonymous, dīnār, Ifrīqiya (Qayrawān), date 101/719-20, mark of value: written dīnār (Tonegawa coll.; 4.22g; 19mm); nisf [Qayrawān], date 100/718-9, mark of value: written nisf and pellet on the reverse (Baldwin's. Islamic Coin Auctions 15 [17 March 2009]: no. 82); thulth, [Qayrawān], date 96/714-5, mark of value: written thulth (Dr. Busso Peus Nachfolger, Auction 388 [1 November 2006]: no. 1260, ex. coll. F Steppat)(Scale x1)

Beginning in 91/709-10, the gold denominations of the first North African Arabic series retained

one traditional Byzantine feature, although the denominations are all written in Arabic as *dīnār*, *nisf* and *thulth* on the coins. The *semissis* / *nisf* is distinguished from the *tremissis* / *thulth* by a globe or pellet under the reverse legend (fig. 09-11).

The currency situation was different in Syria. The main gold coin in circulation and the only gold coin struck was the *nomisma* / *dīnār*. *Semissis* and *tremissis* were usually not circulating here. The different representations of the derivatives of the ‘cross potent on steps’ as being a bar on a pole, or globe on a pole on steps must be considered as a group. A mark for distinguishing different denominations was not that necessary but a recognisable design which connects generically the *dīnār* with the previous Byzantine *nomisma*. This situation of only one gold denomination allowed greater latitude in the appearances of a symbol on the reverse in Syria than in North Africa. The ‘pole on the stepped platform’ derived from the Byzantine cross potent seemed to be the most distinct design element of the reverse which seemingly could hardly be changed.



Fig. 12 - Anonymous, *nomisma*, without mint [Damascus?], without date [c. 660-680 CE] (Baldwin's - Arabian Coins and Medals. Islamic Coin Auctions 11 [13 July 2006]: no. 13] (Scale x1.5)



Fig. 13 - Anonymous, *nomisma*, without mint [Damascus?], without year [c. late 60s-72/late 680s—691-2]; obverse, crosses on the crowns of the emperors; reverse, altered cross or ‘bar on a pole on steps’ (Spink, Zurich. Auction Sale 18 [18 February 1986]: no. 86) (Scale x1.5)

The early Syrian gold series shows a tampering with the cross at least on the reverse of the gold coins in contrast to the invariable appearance of the Zoroastrian fire altar with two attendants on silver *drahms*. The early imitations of Byzantine *nomismata* left the iconic features of that coin design in place: on the obverse recognizable emperors sometimes with and sometimes without altered crosses in their attires. On the reverse, however, the cross’ top was always removed to become a ‘bar on a pole on steps’ (figs. 12, 13).⁷

⁷ The ‘bar on a pole’ is also known as a *Tau* cross or *crux commissa*. In western iconography it is usually associated with the Egyptian Saint Anthony (251-356 CE). Modern research regards the *crux commissa* even as a possible instrument for the crucifixion of Christ. Evidence for an intended interpretation as *crux commissa* by the Muslim authorities on the early Syrian Umayyad coins is missing from contemporary visual and material culture. For the *crux commissa* see Erich Dingler, “Kreuz.” In *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* vol. 2, Rome et al. 1970, here col.

Why was the cross altered? What made it so different from the emperor as such, or the image of the *shāhānshāh* or fire altar as religious symbol? The rejection of the cross potent as a symbol on coins can be seen in a comparatively limited series of early imitative gold coins, probably struck in Damascus in the period of Mu‘āwiya, closely copying a *nomisma* of Heraclius and his son Heraclius Constantine with slightly blundered Greek legends (fig. 12).⁸ The ‘bar on a pole on steps’ had probably appeared here for the first time. Without any parallel inscription or related symbol, it is not possible to interpret it other than a de-Christianised or de-Byzantinised object on a stepped platform.⁹ Similarly, on a rare imitation of a *nomisma* of Phocas (602-610) crosses were altered into ‘sticks’ with a small pellet on the top. Miles suggested that the latter coin was struck at about the same time as the previous one.¹⁰

At this stage of the development and in this iconographic context the new design was probably regarded by the contemporaries first of all as an altered cross. The cross might have been perceived as more than merely a Christian religious symbol and identified also with the rival Byzantine Empire. As John Moorhead explains, in Byzantium the cross had become almost an imperial symbol which denotes the victory of the emperor over his enemies.¹¹ Thus the mutilated cross could also be better termed a de-Byzantinised cross.

Why was the fire altar not altered? As political and religious symbols, cross and fire altar are different. The cross was not only a political symbol of the power of the rival emperor, but also a worshiped object like the icon of Christ, so it was seen as an object of idolatry from the Islamic vantage point.¹² On early Islamic *drahms* the fire altar was never altered, probably because it never became a symbol of Sāsānian power in the same way as the cross did and it remained a mere ritual object. The de-Byzantinised cross on steps became then a conservative iconic symbol for the value of the coin in the first place.

570-571.

⁸ Hoard evidence suggests for these imitations a date not much later than 680 CE, about the time of Mu‘āwiya. G C Miles, ‘The Earliest Arab Gold Coinage’, *American Numismatic Society Museum Notes* 13 (1967) 205-229, pl. xlv-xlii, here p. 203 (Daphne hoard); W E Metcalf, ‘Three Seventh-Century Byzantine Gold Hoards’, *American Numismatic Society Museum Notes* 25 (1980) 87-108, pl. 12-13, p. 96, pl. 12 no. 2.66 (Nikertai hoard; now American Numismatic Society, inv. no. ANS 1983.122.1). Baldwin’s Auctions - Arabian Coins and Medals, *Islamic Coin Auctions* 11 (13 July 2006): no. 13. C Foss, ‘A Syrian Coinage of Mu‘āwiya’, *Revue Numismatique* 158 (2002) 353-365, pl. xxxvii-xxxviii, suggested a dating into the time of Mu‘āwiya; compare W L Treadwell, *The Chronology of the Pre-Reform Copper Coinage of Early Islamic Syria*, Supplement to Oriental Numismatic Society Newsletter 162, London, 2000, pp. 5-6.

⁹ A passage transmitted by the Maronite chronicle discusses the minting of gold and silver coinage by Mu‘āwiya, and their rejection by the population, because these coins did not bear crosses: “(...) but it was not accepted, because it has no cross on it” (trans. A W Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, Translated Texts for Historians 15, Liverpool, 1993, p. 32). This text emphasizes the cross as mark of value and thus the conservative character of precious metal coins. The Maronite chronicle was completed after 664 CE. If the passage refers to the mentioned gold issues, it suggests that gold and silver may have been struck by the order of the caliph whereas the issue of copper was organised on a *jund* level. Nevertheless the dating of this passage remains problematic because the minting of silver began in Syria probably not before 72/691-2 and the text might be considered as a misplaced reference to the reforms by ‘Abd al-Malik; L Ilisch, *The Muhammad-Drachms and Their Relation to Umayyad Syria and Northern Mesopotamia*, Supplement to the Journal of the Oriental Numismatic Society 193 (Autumn 2007) 17-24, here p. 17.

¹⁰ Miles, ‘Gold Coinage’, p. 207 no. 1. This coin is known from only a single example.

¹¹ J Moorhead, ‘Iconoclasm, the Cross and the Imperial Image’, *Byzantion* 45 (1985) 165-179, esp. p. 178.

¹² S H Griffith, ‘Images, Islam and Christian Icons’, in *La Syrie de Byzance à l’Islam VII^e-VIII^e siècles*, Actes du colloque international Lyon - Maison de l’Orient Méditerranéen Paris - Institut du Monde Arabe 11-15 Septembre 1990, edited by Pierre Canivet and Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais, 121-138, Damascus, 1992.



Fig. 14 - Anonymous, *nomisma*, without mint [Damascus], without date [ca.72-74/691-694] (Spink, Zurich. Auction Sale 18 [18 February 1986]: no. 87) (Scale x1.5)

After 72/691-2 the new *dīnār*-type of ‘Abd al-Malik shows ‘three emperors’ and Arabic formulas (fig. 14). It became part of a newly designed set of gold and silver coins. The design maintained the recognisable iconic marks of value: for the gold coins the pole on steps, now as ‘globe on a pole on steps’ throughout the whole series. In 74/693-4 the image of the ‘three emperors’ was replaced by the standing caliph (fig. 1). On both types the Arabic legend praises the unity of God and Muḥammad as his messenger, the essence of the new imperial state religion. The inscriptions, however, bear no connection to the iconographic design. The first design of Syrian silver coinage still showed the *shāhānshāh* as mark of value and the standing caliph, but this unsatisfactory design was soon replaced by a representation of the caliph resembling Sāsānian profile portraits on coins.¹³

4. The meaning of the ‘bar/globe on a pole on steps’

After having established the ‘bar/globe on a pole on steps’ as mark of value in the first place, now its symbolic value can be explored as a probably meaningful object in the second place. The iconographic significance of the ‘bar/globe on a pole on steps’ and its varieties are no longer known to us in Islamic tradition, narrative sources, or by parallels in the growing corpus of Islamic art. Various interpretations have been suggested, but none is entirely satisfactory because of the lack of parallel non-numismatic sources.

In 1967, George C. Miles addresses the ‘globe on a pole on steps’ cautiously as a staff,¹⁴ and in 1973, Oleg Grabar just described it without further investigation into its meaning.¹⁵ In 1999, Nadia Jamil was the first to focus in depth on this enigmatic object.¹⁶ While there is no parallel in Islamic art she looked at early Arabic poetry as an independent source for ideas, symbols and meaning. She found evidence for an interpretation of the item as *quṭb* or *omphalos*, the lynchpin of the world, and stressed the importance of the *quṭb* in early world view. Such *quṭb* would have been a suitable parallel to the cross of Golgatha which is seen on the Byzantine gold *nomismas*, and which also signified the centre of the world. Such interpretation would point to Jerusalem, the centre of the imperial religious cult at the Dome of the Rock and the navel or omphalos of the world in Christian, late Roman, early Islamic and western medieval thinking.¹⁷ According to her, the object on copper coins, a pole on steps crossed by an ellipse, represents a pivot with a

¹³ Treadwell ‘Mihrāb and ‘Anaza’.

¹⁴ G C Miles, ‘The Earliest Arab Gold Coinage’ p. 208.

¹⁵ O Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, New Haven, London, 1987, p. 90.

¹⁶ See fn. 5.

¹⁷ P S Alexander, ‘Jerusalem as the Omphalos of the World. On the History of Geographical Concepts’, *Jerusalem its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. by Lee I Levine, 104-119, New York, 1999. S M Yeager, *Jerusalem in the Medieval Narrative*, Cambridge, 2008, p. 118. For an Islamic theological approach on Jerusalem as navel see O Livni-Kafri, ‘Jerusalem. The Navel of the World in Muslim Tradition’, *Der Islam* 84 (2008) 46-72.

millstone or metaphorically the rotation of the (Islamic) world around its axis. This image would correspond to the imperial standing caliphal figure as deputy of God on the obverse. The suggested foreshortening perspective of an abstract millstone, though, raises serious doubts against such a theory.¹⁸ In 2007, Robert Hoyland saw in the object of the reverse a *qaḍīb al-nabī* or *‘aṣā l-nabī*, the ceremonial staff of the Prophet. None of the surviving early Islamic images of caliphs, however, show any staff.¹⁹



Fig. 15 - The *Bāb al-‘Amūd* in Jerusalem on the Madaba map. Photo: Piccirillo, Michele. *The Mosaics of Jordan*. Amman, 1997, ill. 63 (detail).

Hanswulf Bloedhorn directed my thoughts towards another plausible direction.²⁰ On the famous mosaic map of Jerusalem in the church of Madaba²¹ which was consecrated after 542 CE a monumental Roman column is depicted as a pole on stepped platform with something on top (capital, globe?) standing on the plaza before the northern gate within the city (today called the Damascus Gate) (fig. 15). In the early Islamic period this column was still a landmark. Al-Muqaddasī (d. 381/991)²² and other writers knew the nearby gate as that of the ‘column’, as *Bāb al-‘Amūd*²³. The column on the coin could hint to Jerusalem, the place of the Imperial cult under ‘Abd al-Malik.²⁴ Such monolithic columns, however, symbolized urban and civic pride and were a common feature in late Roman and even Umayyad cities, and therefore understandable even without a specific allusion to Jerusalem.²⁵

¹⁸ Nadia Jamil, ‘Caliph and Qutb’, Luke Treadwell, ‘Mihrāb and ‘Anazah’, p. 28, fn. 86, also acknowledges the merits of Jamil’s approach, but raises also the numismatic problems coming with it.

¹⁹ Miles, ‘Gold Coinage’, p. 224. R G Hoyland, ‘Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad’, *History Compass* 5/2 (2007) 581-602, p. 601 fn. 67.

²⁰ Short personal communication, e-mail dated 3 March 2007.

²¹ On the recent discussion of the dating of the mosaic see C Arnould, *Les arcs romaines de Jérusalem. Architecture, décor et urbanisme* (Novum testamentum et orbis antiquus 35) Fribourg, Göttingen, 1997, p. 251; and M Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, Amman, 1997, pp. 26-29.

²² Muqaddasī (d. 381/991): *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī ma‘rifat al-aqālīm*. Edited by Michael Jan De Goeje, *Description Imperii Moslemici*, 2nd edition, Leiden, 1906, p. 167.

²³ ‘Amūd is a singular form (*fa‘ūl*) and not plural, as it is sometimes read.

²⁴ Perhaps the group of milestones of ‘Abd al-Malik giving the distance to Jerusalem might also hint to the ideological geographical centrality of Jerusalem, last K Cytryn-Silverman, ‘The Fifth Mīl from Jerusalem. Another Umayyad Milestone from Southern Bilād al-Shām’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70 (2007) 603-610.

²⁵ Peter Baumann, ‘Ein spätantikes Säulenmonument am Jerusalemer Nordtor? Zu einem Detail auf der Mosaiklandkarte von Madaba/Jordanien’, *Das Münster: Zeitschrift für christliche Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft* 53 (2000) 38–46, attempts to show that the column on the Madaba map of Jerusalem serves as a mere *topos* in the depiction of late Roman cities in the Middle East. The rich material he presented, however, makes the opposite conclusion likely, that such a column in Jerusalem did indeed exist, although the final archaeological proof is still missing. Arnould stresses the monumentality and emblematic character of the Roman gate in Jerusalem, but considers the existence of the column hypothetical; C Arnould, *Les arcs romaines*, esp. p. 151, idem, ‘Remarques sur la place et la fonction de la porte de Damas (porte romaine) dans la cite d’Aelia Capitolina’, *Zeitschrift des*



Fig. 16. – Mosaic of the Lions' church, Umm al-Raṣāṣ, Jordan; column on a plaza topped with a cross behind the city gate in *Kastron Mefaa* (c. 574 CE), present day Umm al-Raṣāṣ. Photo: Piccirillo, Michele. *The Mosaics of Jordan*. Amman, 1997, ill. 337.

Fig. 17. – Mosaic of St. Stephen's church, Umm al-Raṣāṣ, Jordan; column on a plaza behind the city gate in *Kastron Mefaa* (756 CE). Photo: Photo: Piccirillo, Michele. *The Mosaics of Jordan*. Amman, 1997, ill. 347.

Similar columns can be seen on the mosaics depicting *Kastron Mefaa*, present-day Umm al-Raṣāṣ in Jordan. The mosaics in the pre-Islamic church of the Lions completed in 574 CE (fig. 16) and in the 'Abbāsid St. Stephen's church, dedicated in 756 CE (fig. 17) show a representation of the walled city. Most prominent figures a column on a stepped platform in the middle of a plaza behind the city's gate. On the top of the column on the sixth century mosaic there is a rhombus with four pearls at the points, a representation of a cross. This cross is lacking in the later more schematic mosaic of St. Stephen's church where only a pin seems to have survived.²⁶

deutschen Palästina-Vereins 114, no. 2 (1998) 179-183; and idem 'La porte de Damas (porte romaine) à Jerusalem: Quelques questions d'urbanisme', *Revue Biblique* 106 (1999) 101-111, esp. p. 109. I am very grateful to David Woods who kindly made his forthcoming article available to me; 'The Cross in the Public Square: The Column-Mounted Cross c. AD450-750', in *Salvation in the Fathers of the Church*, edited by D Vincent Twomey and Dirk Krausmüller, Dublin (forthcoming). While solitary columns often topped with statues are known since Hellenistic times, Woods stresses their function in late antiquity as Christian monuments in the Middle East with crosses on top. Nevertheless the persistence of urban columns proves that their association with Christianity is secondary and restricted to the crosses as symbol of Christ's victory.

²⁶ M Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, Amman, 1997, pp. 36-37 fig. xxi, xxii, p. 210, ill. 337 and p. 219, ill. 347.



Fig. 18 – Forum opposite the city gate in Jerash, Photo: M. Disdero, 2007, in Wikipedia, Jarash (2009).

A column may have also stood in the centre of the forum of Jerash. Its base was about 2×2 m. The Jordanian Antiquity Authority had erected a column on that spot (fig. 18).²⁷

On a mosaic in the Church of the Holy Martyrs in a late Roman settlement, present day al-Ṭayyibat al-Imām, in northern Syria, 14 km north of Ḥamāh, again a column with a globe placed on a capital is depicted behind a large building. The mosaic is dated to 447 CE. It is unlikely that the image represents a particular building, but it visualizes monumental columns as landmarks in cityscapes.²⁸

This survey of urban columns in Syria allows to suggest an interpretation of the pellet on the top of the pole might represent a globe without cross and the bar an empty platform or capital. The urban column would then be a non-religious symbol of urban pride and close enough in the iconography to the Byzantine Christian ‘cross potent on steps’ to serve as recognisable mark of value.

²⁷ L Harding, ‘Recent Work on the Jerash Forum’, *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* **81** (1949) 12-20, here p. 14. Although Harding thought it could only support a statue, Alan Walmsley leaves this undecided at present. I am grateful to Alan Walmsley for his comment.

²⁸ Abdul-Razzaq Zaquq and Michele Piccirillo, ‘The Mosaic Floor of the Church of the Holy Martyrs’, *Liber Annuus* **49** (1999) 443-464, pl. 7-36, here p. 462, fig. 19.



Fig. 19 – Detail of the floor mosaic in the Church of the Holy Martyrs, north of Ḥamāh, Syria. Photo: ‘A. Zaquq in Zaquq – Piccirillo. “The Mosaic Floor”, fig. 19.



Fig. 20 - Anonymous, fals, Dimashq, without date [74-77/692-696]; Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 303-E10 (4.34g) (Scale x1.5)

Close in design to the gold are the coppers coin where the pole with a globe on top is crossed by an ellipse or an oval (fig. 20). On some rare *fals* we even see a spear on steps. This stresses the fact that the pole crossed by an ellipse or circle is the most significant visual symbol on the coin and not its top. This symbol also has no parallel in the known literature or in Islamic art. The ‘*phi*-shaped symbol on steps’ replaced the Greek **M** or **m** as mark of value for the copper coins in most mints except for Palestine where the **m** was retained. Thus the primary function of the ‘*phi*-shaped symbol on steps’ is being mark of value. It may also be seen as a column as symbol of urban pride or as a spear of victory in the second place. But it might also be regarded as representing the Greek letter *phi* for *follis* as John Walker alluded in a brief remark.²⁹ In this case it would have a possible parallel in the **T**-shaped object on the reverse on the *tremissis* in North Africa.

²⁹ J Walker, *A Catalogue of the Muhammadan Coins in the British Museum II, A Catalogue of Arab-Byzantine and Post-Reform Umayyad Coins*, London, 1956, p. xxiii.

4. The meaning of the ‘bar/globe on a pole on steps’

Whatever the original symbolic meaning of these images might have been, it was obviously secondary to their function as marks of value and fell into oblivion after ‘Abd al-Malik’s reforms. The lance and the ‘globe or capital on a column on a stepped platform’ should be seen as a non-venerated object of pride, power and victory and as a substitute for the symbols of the other religions, but they do not stand for Islam as a religion.