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Hidden Treasure - The Oriental coin Collection in Jena

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Jena's manifold treasures remained long hidden, often not only to the public but also to specialists. One of them is the oriental coin collection.

The University of Jena possesses the third largest public collection in Germany of oriental coins - 8600 items. In the 19th century the Orientalisches Münzkabinett represented a unique centre for Islamic numismatics in Germany. Until shortly after the first world war the Münzkabinett worked closely with the Orientalischen Seminar. Only with the renewal of Semitic and Islamic studies at the Friedrich Schiller University, Jena, two years ago has the collection once again been professionally curated.

The Beginnings

The history of oriental numismatics in Jena is older than the oriental collection itself. The beginnings go back 220 years. In 1775, the same year that Goethe came to Weimar, the newly appointed professor for oriental languages, Johann Gottlieb Eichhorn, made his scientific debut in Jena (1775-1788) with a lecture on the beginnings of the Arabic coinage: *De rei numariae apud Arabas initiis*. He thereby introduced Islamic numismatics as one of the first as a component of the subject at a German university.

Building up the collection

Johann Gustav Stickel is the actual founder of the grand-ducal oriental coin collection. For 69 years in Jena he was a lecturer in theology, then, from 1827 until his death, professor of oriental languages and literature. Stickel was both a theologian and well versed in Semitic studies, as was not uncommon in the 18th century. His understanding of science was still completely rooted in the previous century. He did not follow in the footsteps of his own generation in the first half of the 19th century, when they separated oriental studies from theology and established it as philology, in a similar way to classical philology. The most important patron of oriental numismatics was the versatile daughter of the tsar, the Grand Duchess Maria Pawlowna in Weimar. At the same time, there lived at the court as an educator for the princes, a further person who was to make a decisive impression on Islamic numismatics in the 19th century. This was the Swiss Frédéric Soret.

The opportunity to acquire an important collection of oriental coins for Jena arose in March 1839. It belonged to the Thuringian pastor and former Herzhut missionary, Heinrich August Zwick, who had lived for 18 years at a missionary station on the Volga. It contained around 1500 pieces. These were above all coins of the Golden Horde, the Mongol dynasty in Russia during the 13-15th centuries, and coins of the Samanids, an East Iranian dynasty of the 10th century.

Stickel managed to persuade his patron, Maria Pawlowna, to acquire the Zwick collection for Jena. She was also instrumental in the further development of the collection. She provided the Münzkabinett with an annual budget. Through her Russian relatives many Islamic coins came to Jena. In 1846, on behalf of Maria Pawlowna, Soret bought the oriental part of the famous Moscow Sprewitz collection for Jena. Even after her death in 1859, the family relations between the House of Weimar and Russia remained fruitful for the collection.

Islamic coins from eastern European hoards of the 9th and 11th centuries are richly represented in the Jena collection and form a focal point for the research into the history of Armenia, Georgia, the Caucasus, East Europe and Eastern Iran. Large quantities of these coins reached Russia via the Viking trade between the Caspian Sea and the Baltic.



Illustration 1 shows a silver dirham of year AH 119/AD 737. It came as a present to Soret from the Russian General Bartholomaei and later with his collection to Jena. The mint is *al-Bab*, "The Gate". This name refers to Darband in the Caucasus. According to legend, near this town lay the gate that Alexander the Great had closed to protect the world from the giants, Gog and Magog.

Islamic coins came not only to eastern Europe but were also imitated there. The Arabic script was not understood so far north and, on many coins, degenerated into a succession of strokes and crosses (see illustration 2)



The most important accession was the purchase of the Soret collection by the grand-ducal family. On 17 October 1865 Frédéric Soret died in Geneva. He had maintained a life-long friendship with the House of Weimar and with J G Stickel. He left behind a collection of over 5500 coins, one of the largest and best known private collections of his time. The grand-ducal family shared the for that time enormous purchase price of 25000 gold francs. Many of the important pieces had been published by Soret, himself.

The most important piece from an art-historic point of view and the item that hitherto has been most quoted is the gold dinar from the early part of the year 77 Hegira (AD 696). This is illustrated alongside.



It stands at the interface of Arabisation of the coinage and administration, which, out of the Byzantine area under the control of Bedouins first formed an Arabic-Islamic state. The form of the coins still adheres to that of the Byzantines, although the legends are in Arabic and instead of a Byzantine ruler, the caliph, himself, is depicted.



In 1873, the acquisition policy of the Münzkabinett was broadened to embrace far-eastern coinage. From the famous German explorer of Japan, Heinrich von Siebold, Grand Duke Carl Alexander, stimulated by what he had seen at the World Exhibition in Vienna, acquired a specialist collection of 343 rare Japanese amulets and coins and passed them on to the grand-ducal oriental collection. An example is illustrated here.

Many famous names contributed to the development of the collection through donations and purchases, amongst them the orientalist, father and son, Mordtmann, Martin Hartmann, Henri Sauvaire, Josef von Karabacek, the Africa explorer G Rohlfs, the oriental traveller Hermann Burchardt, the numismatists Grotefend, H Lavoix, Imhoof-Blumer and H Nützel.

At the age of 91, after a short illness, JG Stickel died on 21 January 1896. Aware of the far-reaching importance of his life's work he had already in 1885 written: *Here, in the middle of Germany, in the little town of Jena, where some 40 years ago there was not a single oriental coin to be seen, I have succeeded in creating a collection which, for a long time, will provide an unexhausted source for oriental research" [ZDMG 39 (1885) 39].*

The Keeper, Karl Vollers

After the death of Stickels arose the question of a successor. The choice of the university fell upon the prominent Arabist and dialectologist Karl Vollers (1896-1909). The 13 years of his work on the collection was characterised less by publications than by the ordering of the collection and a skilful widening of the content, which comprised 13500 pieces in 1906. Karl Vollers died in 1909. His successor was Arthur Ungnad, an expert in Semitic studies and the ancient orient.

The collection is scattered

After the departure of Ungnad in 1919, the Großherzogliche orientalische Münzkabinett was orphaned for over seven decades. In the following period, the collection was separated, the lead and tin coins degenerated, the inventories were transferred to the main state archive of Thuringia. Inappropriate means of transport mixed all the coins up. On 15 May 1939 four fifths of the Soret collection were given back to the grand-ducal house and have not been seen since 1945.

Starting afresh

In 1993 the chair of Semitic Philology and Islamic Studies at the Friedrich Schiller University was filled by Prof. Dr. Norbert Nebes. In 1994 Dr Stefan Heidemann joined him as assistant. Thus did the Orientalische Münzkabinett gain a new lease of life. It provides not only one of the foundations for 19th century knowledge about Islamic numismatics but also conceals within its still unordered contents the potential for a modern, historical research instrument.

As little as a year ago, the collection was a torso of 8600 coins, without aims, without inventory, without documentation. Since then the restoration has begun. All coins now have a catalogue number. The old files, believed to have disappeared, have been discovered in the Thuringian state archive. Information about the whereabouts of the Soret collection are being followed up. The first foreign, scientific visitors have already been able to inspect the collection. The task of the Münzkabinett for the future is to re-create a modern, scientific work facility for historic research in collaboration with other large German collections.

Literature:

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