

## **A Numismatic Journey Through Egyptian History**

**By Gamal Amer, Ph.D.**

This article represents an overview of Egyptian Islamic history based on a journey through gold Islamic coins minted in Egypt. The journey begins in 170 AH (786 AD) and ends at the fall of the Ottoman Empire and their rule of Egypt during World War I in 1335 AH (1916 AD), approximately 1200 years of the most interesting times in Egypt and the Mediterranean basin. Although gold coins are no longer used in trade, they are still being minted in Egypt strictly for the collectors' market.

The Muslim Arabs conquered Egypt in 20 AH (642 AD). At the time the nascent Islamic nation did not have a monetary system and did not strike gold coins, instead the conquering Arabs used the Byzantine monetary system already existing in Egypt and the Sassanian monetary system already existing in Iran with minor modifications. In 77 AH (699 AD) Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan the Umayyad caliph instituted a monetary system and began striking the first Islamic coins including the gold Dinar. The dinar weighed 4.25 grams, or one mithqal, of the highest purity gold possible. At the time the center of power and the main gold coin mint was located in Dimishq (current day Damascus in Syria). However, gold coins were not struck in Egypt during the Umayyad reign.

In 116 AH the Abbasid revolt began and resulted in ending the Umayyad rule in 132 AH. This ultimately moved the center of power to Madinat al-Salam (current day Baghdad in Iraq). Relocation of the center of power and the fact the Islamic empire now extended from Spain in the west to India and China in the east necessitated that additional mints be established in other parts of the empire to support the vibrant economy which was developing at the time. In addition, at that time substantial amount of the gold was mined in West Africa and a considerable amount of it was brought east to the Abbasid center of power through the Sahara and up the Nile. The Caliphs, needed to strike coins to satisfy the Egyptian economy started a mint in Fustat to strike Dinars initially and other coins eventually.

### **ABBASIDS**

170 AH (786 AD) – The caliph Harun Al Rashid minted the first gold dinars in Misr/Egypt. These were struck without mint name and anonymously, but normally they had the name of the governor of Egypt or were dedicated to the caliph on the bottom of the obverse. The gold coins have no likeness of human or animal figures in keeping with Islamic shari'ah (religious norms). The only decoration on the coins was in the writing, which was in the Kufic calligraphy. See *Figure 1*.



*Figure 1:* Gold Dinar, 171 AH, Anonymous for Harun al-Rashid with name of Musa the governor of Egypt cited, no mint name.

196 AH- Al-Ma'mun, the son of al-Rashid struck gold dinars in Egypt with his name despite the fact that he was not the official Caliph. His brother al-Amin was the Caliph at the time. Al-Ma'mun killed his brother al-Amin in 198 AH and ascended the throne. He established the rights of Sikka (the right to be named on coinage) and of Khutba (the right to be mentioned in the Friday prayer sermon) for the ruler/Caliph. At that time some of the coins minted in Egypt were labeled Duribh Fee Misr, where Misr is current day Fustat, the older part of Cairo. In 214 AH including the mint name on the coins became the norm and was used from then on.

232 AH- The caliph Al-Mutawakkil started the custom of adding the name of the heir apparent to the coins. See *Figure 2*.

240 AH- The strict weight standard (4.25 grams) for gold dinars was abandoned around that time and the weight of the dinar was allowed to fluctuate. Coin exchange became based on weight rather than count. Gold coins were viewed as ingots of gold and the name of the ruler on the coin was a certification as to the quality of the gold. This lasted until the times of the Mamluk sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay.



*Figure 2* Gold Dinar, 239 AH, al-Mutawakkil, citing the name of his heir Abu ‘Abd Allah, minted in Misr.

### **TULUNIDS**

266 AH (868 AD) - Ahmed Ibn Tulun became the ruler of Egypt and gained the right of having his descendants rule after him from the caliph in Baghdad. He struck the first coins in his name as ruler of Egypt in 266 AH. These coins were similar to the Abbasid coins prevalent at the time. The gold coins were of the highest quality and became accepted in the Mediterranean basin as legal tender. Ahmad’s gold coins are rather common and excellent examples exist. See *Figure 3*.



*Figure 3:* Gold Dinar, 270 AH, Ahmad Ibn Tulun, citing the Caliph al-Moufou’ad Eila Allah, minted in Misr.

Again, the Tulunid coins struck in Egypt were marked as “Durib fee Misr.” Three of Ahmed’s descendants succeeded him Khamaraweyah, Jaysh and Harun. The only rare coins from that era are those struck by Jaysh ibn Khamaraweyah ibn Ahmad (Jaysh son of Khamaraweyah son of Ahmad) who ruled for less than one year during 282 AH.

### **ABBASIDS (again)**

292 AH (905 AD) - The Tulunid dynasty ended and the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad regained Egypt once more. Gold coins of the Caliph al-Qahir struck in Egypt are rather scarce.

323 AH-The Caliph al-Radi, struck the last Abbasid gold dinars in Egypt around that time.

### **IKHSHIDID**

325 AH (937 AD) - Muhamad Ibn Tughj was granted the right to rule Egypt and for his descendants to rule after him from the Caliph in Baghdad. He began minting coins in his name, around 331 AH, and took the title Ikhshid (Prince/Ruler). The design of Ikhshidid gold coins was similar to the Abbasid coin design and, again, was struck in Misr and Felestine (current day Palistine).

355 AH- Kafur, a slave in the Ikhshid court became the actual ruler of Egypt and struck coins in the name of the young heir of the Ikhshidid throne with the letter “ك” (Kaf) on the obverse and omitted the word Ikhshid. These coins are rather scarce since his actual rule was rather short.

### **FATIMIDS**

358 AH (968 AD) - The Fatimids conquered Egypt in 358 AH and established their coinage. The Fatimid coins were of a new design and departed from the Abbasid coin design. In order to establish legitimacy for their dinars in their North African Empire, the Fatimid dictated that taxes are to be paid with Fatimid dinars and no longer be paid with Abbasid and Ikhshidid dinars. This resulted in the existing dinars losing value in the market. See *Figure 4*.

The Fatimid built their new capital city in Egypt and called it al-Qahira (Cairo). Fatimid coins continued to be struck in Misr and added a mint in Alexandria. Additionally, late in al-Mustansir’s rule coins began showing al-Qahira as mint name in addition to Misr and al-Askandaryah (Alexandria). Many of the coins struck in Cairo (al-Qahira) bore a modifier to the name of the city. These were adjectives such as Al Mahrousa (the guarded) and Al Mu’azzia (the respected).



*Figure 4:* Gold Dinar, 519 AH, al' Amer bi Ahkam Ellah (known as Al Imam al-Mansur), minted in al-Mu'izziya al-Qahira (Cairo).

427-487 AH- Al-Mustansir, the Fatimid Caliph ascended the throne at the age of one year old and ruled for 60 years. Al-Mustansir gold dinars are one of the most common Islamic gold coins struck in Egypt, with many high quality examples surviving to date. His reign represents one of the most stable and prosperous times in Egypt. Art and economy flourished and the coins of this time were of excellent quality and considered the standard in the Middle East.

495 AH- Al-Amer times saw many problems and increase in the influence of the grand viziers. The European crusades occupying Palestine began issuing counterfeit gold dinars, which looked like al-Amer's dinars. These dinars were of debased gold and much lower weight, which resulted in compromising the international gold standard based in Egypt at the time.

524 AH An Interregnum period ensued where the Grand Viziers took over the power, imprisoned the heir to the Caliph and struck coins in the name of the expected and the expecting. These coins normally struck in al-Qahira al Mu'aziah or al-Qahira al-Mahrousa are very rare and valuable.

526-567 AH The later days of the Fatimid rule were days of weakness where the grand Viziers had the most influence and the Caliph was a puppet. These last Caliphs' gold coins were of lower quality in general and are less common than those of the earlier Fatimid Caliphs.

### **AYYUBIDS**

567AH (1171 AD) - The Seljuq of West Persia used Turkish Commanders in their army. One of them Zangi bin Aq Sonqur established the Zangid dynasty in Basra. Nur al-Din Muhammad bin Zangi took Damascus from the crusaders and assisted al-

Adid, the last of the Fatimid Caliphs in warding off the invasion of Egypt by the Christian king of Jerusalem. The Zangid army invaded Egypt then, and established Shirkuk, the Kurdish commander of the Zangid army as vassal. Shirkuk died in a short period and his brother Salah al-din ibn Ayyoub (known as Saladin to the Europeans) becomes the vassal for the Zangid king. Saladin struck gold dinars in the name of Mahmud ibn Zangi. These are very rare gold coins.

570 AH- Mahmud ibn Zangi died and Saladin usurped the Zangids and declared himself Sultan of Egypt. He struck coins in his own name. The gold dinars, which had the same design as the late Fatimid dinar, are fairly common especially those struck in al-Qahira. Saladin's claim to fame was defeating the crusaders in Hattin and entering into several treaties with them, thus allowing some times of peace in Egypt.

575-648 AH- Upon Saladin's death his descendants were unable to maintain peace with the crusaders and the Ayyubids period proved to be difficult economically. The wars against the crusades pressured the economy. The Ayyubids continued to maintain mints in Egypt at both Al-Qahira and Al-Askandaryah.

In 625 AH al-Kamel Mohamed initiated the use of Naskhi calligraphy for all gold coins and did away with the Kufic calligraphy, which had been the standard since the beginning of Islamic coins minting in 77 AH by the Umayyad. Naskhi calligraphy is still very common and is used throughout the Arab world today. See [Figure 5](#).



Figure 5: Gold Dinar, 631 AH, al-Kamel Mohammad I, Naskhi calligraphy, minted in al-Qahira.

## MAMLUKS

648 AH (1250 AD) The Mamluks, who were slaves, usurped their masters the Ayyubids. The first woman to rule Islamic Egypt was Shajaret al-Durr widow of the last Ayyubid ruler. She took over governing and began striking coins with her own title instead of the Ayyubid ruler's name. Shajaret al Durr ruled Egypt alone for approximately 3 months. Her coins are some of the rarest Islamic coins of Egypt.

When the Caliph in Baghdad showed his displeasure with the fact that a woman is ruling Egypt, Shajaret al Durr married Izz al-Din Aybak. Shajaret al Durr and Izz al-Din Aybak ruled Egypt together and used a puppet ruler from the Ayyubid dynasty by the name of Al Ashraf Musa. Coins struck in the name of al-Ashraf Musa are very rare (almost as rare as Shajaret al Durr's).

The Mamluks were Turkish and Circassian soldiers enslaved by the Ayyubids and used to run the military. They ruled Egypt and most of Palestine and Syria for over 250 years until the Ottoman invaded their territories. There were two branches of mamluks who ruled consecutively, these were the Bahari and the Burji presumably named as such based on the location of their barracks within Cairo. The Bahari, or the sea or river dwellers ruled from 648 AH until 783 AH (1250 to 1382 AD), while the Burji, or the tower dwellers ruled from 783 until 923 (1382 AD to 1518 AD).

The mamluk period was defined by a few of the kings having prosperous rules with large wealth accumulating in the state coffers, while most had short rule and violent death due to internal strife and intrigue between the various mamluk factions. Due to the short rule of many of the kings/sultans their coins are rare due to the limited times of striking. In general terms most of the coins were poorly struck and quality control of the gold coinage was practically non-existent especially in the later years.

The Mamluks or slave kings wielded quite a bit of power even during the Ottoman rule of Egypt. Their power was finally terminated when Mohammed Ali killed the last of them in the early 1800 at the Cairo Citadel, in what is known as Mazbahatt al Qala'a or the massacre of the citadel.

658 AH Al Zahir Baybars, the Bahari Mamluk ruler, used a heraldic Lion Passant on all of his coins. This represents the first time the likeness of a living creature is seen on gold Islamic coins in Egypt. Baybars times were of great prosperity and Egypt's location on the routes of spice commerce between the west (Europe) and the east (India) resulted in the Egyptian coffers being filled with tax and duty moneys collected on the commerce crossing through Egypt. See *Figure 6*.



*Figure 6:* Gold Dinar, 664 AH, al-Zahir Rukn al-din Baybars, Heraldic Lion, minted in al-Qahira.

801 AH Faraj and his successor Shaykh reigns represented difficult economic times in Egypt with monetary problems. In addition, the problems associated with the world's economy, especially the onset of what is referred to sometimes as the "Great Bullion famine" where the world's known mines were supposedly unable to provide enough gold and silver to meet the demand in Europe, resulted in the monetary chaos in Egypt. Shaykh then assigned Al Maqrizzi to study the monetary history in Egypt and ways past problems were addressed, resulting in the publication of "Shezur al 'auqud fee zikr al nuqud" one of al-Maqrizzi's foremost numismatic works.

During the reign of Shaykh, the use of the mint in Alexandria stopped. All coins struck in Egypt, from then on, were struck in al-Qahira (Cairo) or Misr.

825 AH Al Ashraf Barsbay initiated monetary reform and created the Ashrafi, a gold dinar based on the Venetian Ducat, which represented the monetary standard in Mediterranean basin. The ashrafi was a coin of standard measurement; 15-18mm in diameter, standard weight of 3.3-3.5 grams, and standard appearance. Both obverse and reverse had four lines of writing with the reverse having the words "La ullah Ella Allah, Mohammad Rassul Allah, Arssaluh, Bill Huda", while the obverse has the name of the Sultan, the mint and date. See *Figure 7*.

906 AH By the times of Qansuh al Ghouri, Europe identified an alternate route around the horn of Africa to move commerce back and forth to India and the East. Trade through Egypt dropped significantly and the country fell on hard economic times. Coins were made of debased gold and silver and the ashrafi was no longer accepted as a coin for world trade.



*Figure 7:* Gold Ashrafi, (8)35 AH, al-Ashraf Abdul Naser Barsbay, minted in al-Qahira

### **OTTOMANS**

923 AH (1518 AD) Selim I invaded Egypt and defeated the last of the Mamluk sultans, Qansuh II.

926 AH Suleyman I (Suleyman the magnificent) ascended the throne. He maintained the ashrafi weight standard of 3.3 – 3.5 grams, with a larger diameter (about 19-21mm). These coins are referred to as Ashrafi, Altin or Sultani, with the name Sultani being the most commonly used. The coins had the name of the sultan, the mint name (Misr) and his accession date to the throne on the obverse, but no indication of the date it was actually struck. See *Figure 8*.



*Figure 8:* Gold Sultani, 926 AH, Suleyman I, minted in Misr.

1003 AH Muhammad III took the title of “Sultan al Barain wa Khaqan al Bahrain, Al Sultan Ibn Al Sultan” literally translated to “Sultan of the two lands (presumably Iraq and Turkey) and ruler of the two seas (presumably the black sea and the Mediterranean) sultan son of sultan.” The title was struck on the reverse of the gold coins, while the name of the Sultan, his lineage, mints and accession date were on the obverse.

1106 AH Mustafa II introduced the “Toughrah” or the sultan’s signature or seal in a decorative calligraphy on the obverse instead of writing out the Sultan’s name.

1115 AH Ahmed III reformed the monetary system and introduced the first “Zeri Mahbub” (beloved gold). These coins weigh 2.6 grams. See [Figure 9](#).



[Figure 9](#): Gold Zeri Mahbub, 1143 AH, Mahmud I, with Toughrah, minted in Misr.

1187 AH Abdul Hamid I introduced the year of reign (regnal year) to define the year the coin was struck. The regnal year was normally located on the obverse over the “ن” (the letter noon) in the word Ibn. See [Figure 10](#).

Rulers such as Murad III, Selim III and Mustafa III, who reigned for extended period of time, have struck coins with different designs or decoration. Such rulers’ coins represent interesting collecting challenges and offer the opportunity for a collector to focus on their coins exclusively.

1255 AH Abdul Majid issued gold coins in 5, 10, 50 and 100 piaster denominations. The 100 piaster or one pound weighed 8.5 grams of 87.5% purity gold and had a diameter of 21 mm. These coins were used extensively in the cotton trade in Egypt. The coins also maintained the Toughrah and denomination on the

obverse; while the reverse was a simple description of the mint, accession date and year of reign of the Sultan.



*Figure 10:* Gold Zeri Mahbub, 1187 AH, Abdul Hamid I, year 2 of his reign noted over noun on obverse, minted in Misr.

1300 AH (1882 AD) The British invaded Egypt and the descendants of Mohamed Ali, who ruled Egypt under the protection of the British continued to use the Ottoman coins as legal tender. The Ottoman gold coins continued to be struck in Egypt (Misr) with the name of the Ottoman Sultan, his accession date, and year of reign.

1335 AH (1916 AD) During WWI as the fall of the Ottoman empire became apparent, the British named Hussain Kamel as Sultan of Egypt and struck the first gold coins in his name in England. These were of the 100 piaster or one pound denomination. Smaller denominations were struck of silver and base metals. From then on, gold coins struck in Egypt or on behalf of Egypt were struck as commemorative coins in limited quantities and strictly for the collecting market. Such coins were no longer considered useful for trade and payment of debt. See *Figure 11*.

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*Figure 11:* Gold 100 piasters, 1335 AH, Hussain Kamel, minted in England but indicate Misr Sultanate (Egyptian Sultanate).