

MY ENCOUNTER WITH ARABIC NUMISMATICS AND SOME NEW THOUGHTS ON RASULID COINS

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Arabic numismatics is a field relatively neglected by scholarship and is very rarely included in university teaching programs in Europe and beyond. Both the lack of courses and the small number of Arabists researching the field – as well as an unstated but obvious rejection by classical numismatists who consider Arabic numismatics, and Oriental coins in general, as exotic oddities – have over time resulted in a lack of knowledge. Yes, there are many Arabists, but they are not numismatists, and there are many numismatists, but they do not know Arabic: to advance the knowledge of Arabic coins both competences are required.

Numismatics, and numismatic-related evidence, represents a proper field of research in itself encompassing the cataloguing of major collections, still without any printed record (D'Ottone Rambach 2017 and 2017b)² and the constitution of corpora of individual dynasties – and as source for many related fields. History, art history, archaeology, grammar, palaeography, political and religious studies, material studies, museum history and collecting history studies, are just a few disciplines that benefit from numismatics. Despite the extreme value of the numismatic evidence, Arabists have progressively lost their interests for coins: some of the major publications – such the ten volumes of the British Museum catalogue of oriental coins by Stanley Lane-Poole (1854-1931) – date back to end of the 19th century/early 20th century. This limited interest in coins has occasionally led to using distorted coin-like objects as decorative book-covers to convey a message that is unrelated to the numismatic evidence (Ahmed 2016)³.

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² D'Ottone Rambach, A. (2017). *Collezione di Vittorio Emanuele III: Monete arabe*, Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato; ead. (2017b). 'Fatimid coins in the National Museum of Damascus. An Overview': in *Bulletin du cercle d'études numismatiques* 54, 1, pp. 18-39.

³ Ahmed, Sh. (2016). *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton and Oxford:

I personally first encountered Arabic numismatics in 2003, when the Coin Cabinet of the Capitoline Museums in Rome re-opened to the public. This event was a turning point for my scientific interests: I was then a PhD student investigating the codicology of Yemeni manuscripts (D'Ottone 2006)⁴ and had no knowledge of Arabic coins or numismatics in general. However, the presence of a large and unpublished collection of Arabic coins in the Capitoline Museums gave me the chance to initiate numismatic research on the Stanzani collection. The collection formed by the Italian architect Ludovico Stanzani (d. Odessa 1872) – who had worked and collected coins in Russia in the 19th century includes approximately 9,250 coins of which 4,500 are Oriental. I started cataloguing and studying some dirhams that were most likely acquired in the Ukrainian region since they are typical of the many Viking-age hoards – made up of thousands of Arabic dirhams from the eastern lands of the Caliphate – attesting the link between the Islamic empire and the Scandinavian regions through the Volga-Bulgarians. Through the first results of my work, as an autodidact, on the Stanzani collection, I received the Nicholas Lowick Grant of the Royal Numismatic Society (London) that allowed me to travel to Stockholm and have the privilege to meet Gert Rispling of the Royal Coin Cabinet of Sweden. Rispling introduced me to the study of Viking-age hoards and to Arabic numismatics in general. This was the beginning, but I wanted to know more.

In 2006 as a post-doc grant holder I attended the course on Islamic numismatics given by Lutz Ilisch at the Forschungsstelle für Islamische Numismatik (FINT) in Tübingen, and I was given access to the rich library and coin collection of that institution. I was still working on the Stanzani collection – in particular on the Golden Horde coins – but my interest for Yemen and Yemeni culture was still alive. In the following years, in parallel to my work on Yemeni manuscripts (D'Ottone 2014 and 2015)⁵, I

Princeton University Press. Ahmed ignored the basic, and yet fundamental difference, between a coin and a medallion. In his erudite work, he neither read nor cited the only relevant numismatic reference (Whitehead 1929) though it would have helped him to understand the object he defines as a 'gold coin' (p. 72, fig. 2) and that is, in reality, a medallion: Whitehead, R.B. (1929). 'The Portrait Medals and Zodiacal Coins of the Emperor Jahanjir': *The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society* 5th s., vol. 9, no. 33, pp. 1-25.

⁴ D'Ottone, A. (2006). *I manoscritti arabi dello Yemen: una ricerca codicologica*, Roma: Sapienza – Istituto Italiano di Studi Orientali

⁵ D'Ottone, A. (2014). 'Damascus-Sana'a: The Case of the Manuscript Sana'a, Dar al-mahtutat, Mustalah al-hadith 216': *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 5, pp. 154-169; ead. (2015). 'The

visited the FINT a number of times and, in agreement with L. Ilisch, I obtained the photos and the relevant data (such as weight and diameter) of the Rasulid coins preserved there in order to study them (D'Ottone 2015b)⁶. The project of a volume dedicated to the Rasulid capitals of Taiz and Tha'bat, pushed me to expand the study of the Rasulid specimens struck in those cities to include the specimens preserved in other major institutions such as the British Museum, the State Hermitage Museum (St Petersburg), and The Museum of Islamic Art of Doha (Qatar).

Beside the numismatic material, I also considered other relevant sources such as historical chronicles and literary texts, inscriptions, and manuscripts produced in Rasulid times, in order to have a wider view of the historical and cultural context linked to the coin production. This choice proved to be fruitful since it was possible to check, combine and complete information provided by different evidence and to shed light on some peculiarities linked to the Yemeni written culture in the widest sense. Here, I will update the results published in the *Rivista Italiana di Numismatica* (RIN) (D'Ottone Rambach 2020)⁷, with some new observations.

Yemeni coins in Rasulid times (626–858 AH/AD 1129–1454) and the monetary reform of al-Mujahid 'Ali

The Rasulid coinage is singled out in the wider context of the Arabic medieval numismatic issues by the pictorial devices that distinguish some of its types, ranging from human beings – knights with falcons in their hands and seated men, for example – to animals: fish, falcons catching ducks, birds, ostriches and peacocks – to objects: chalices and scimitars (Fig 1 overleaf).

The links between a particular iconographic choice and the town which is symbolised by the iconographic device depicted on coins have not been researched in depth and careful work on historical and literary sources is still necessary to understand the numismatic evidence. In this respect it is interesting to recall a puzzling case linked to the monetary reform

Pearl and the Ruby: Scribal Dicta and Other Metatextual Notes in Yemeni Medieval Manuscripts' in *The Yemeni Manuscript Tradition*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, pp. 82-100.

⁶ D'Ottone, A. (2015b). 'The Mint of Ta'izz in Rasulid Times' in *Per Enzo: Studi in memoria di Vincenzo Matera*. Firenze: Firenze University Press, pp. 93-103

⁷ D'Ottone Rambach, A. (2020). 'The Mints of Ta'izz and Tha'bat in Rasulid Times: Literary Sources and Numismatic Evidence': *Rivista italiana di numismatica* 121, pp. 213-268.



Figure 1

- a) Rasulid dirham struck in Aden with fish (cf. Nützel 1891/1987, no. 28) (Nützel, H. (1891/1987). *Coins of the Rasulids Comprising a Synopsis of the History of that Yemenite Dynasty*. Berlin: W. Pormetter 1891/Augmented by the description of a newly discovered (sic) *Rasulid dirham hoard*, translated by A. Kinzelbach. Mainz: D. Kinzelbach 1987.) – private collection
- b) Rasulid dirham struck in Zabid with bird (cf. Nützel 1891/1987, no. 27) – private collection
- c) Rasulid dirham struck in Aden with a chalice (cf. Nützel 1891/1987, no. 52) – private collection

promoted by al-Mujahid ‘Ali (r. 721-764/1322-1363) in the year 736/1335-36 that introduced a new coin type.

Al-Khazraji refers to this reform in his well-known work *al-‘Uqud al-lu’lu’iyya fi ta’rikh al-dawla al-rasuliyya* but his text mentions ‘the appearance (in circulation) of this new *riyahi* dirham’ (Redhouse ed. 1907).⁸ This raised more questions than it answered since this excerpt was given a number of interpretations and various hypotheses were made about the identification of the image(s) to which the text is believed to refer. The first editor of al-Khazraji’s text, James William Redhouse (1811-1892), suggested, for example, that the term *riyahi* was a surname of the die-sinker, i.e. someone who engraves the metal piece used for stamping the coins (die) (Redhouse ed. 1907, vol. III, 2, p. 264).

More recent editions offered a different understanding of this word and, thus, a different meaning for the term was brought into the discussion (al-Hibshi 2009). According to al-Hibshi the reading of the adjective qualifying the new dirhams was: *rawabasi*. Recalling al-Hamdani’s text *Kitab al-jawhratayn* al-Hibshi defines *rawabasi* as a worker of very low social status who dyes the metal in a melting pot (*man yasbighu al-fidda fi-l-*

⁸ Redhouse, J.W. ed. (1907). *The Pearl Strings: a history of the Resuliyy dynasty of Yemen*. Leiden: Brill, 4 vols: III, 2, p. 52.



Fig. 2 Private collection: Rasulid *riyahi* dirham struck in al-Mahjam 735/1334-35 – date recorded in numbers – on the reverse lion or baboon sitting to left with facing head

rawbas: al-Hibshi 2009, vol. II, p. 575, footnote 3).

A further reading of the very same word was suggested by Muhammad Qasim ‘Abdallah al-Duba‘i. According to al-Duba‘i the word in question must be read as *al-rubahi* – that is ape and, in particular a species of baboon native to the Horn of Africa. This reading would have been connected, following al-Duba‘i’s hypothesis, with the animal depicted on the issues struck in the town of al-Majham in 735/1334-35 (fig. 2) – yet, that animal was considered until then to be a lion. Moreover, in connection with the reading *al-rubahi* Stephen Album proposed a different explanation suggesting that the reference to a baboon had to be a popular way for denoting the seated figure depicted on Tha‘bat issues (fig. 3).



Fig. 3 FINT, Inv. BD-10-F3: Rasulid *riyahi* dirham struck in Tha‘bat, 736 – on the reverse a seated man in the centre

To sum up: one word in al-Khazraji’s text offered three different possible readings (*riyahi*; *rawabasi* and *rubahi*) and an equal number of meanings (a *nisba*, a name related to a low-class job and a local species of baboon) linked to four different scenarios. The first two readings (*riyahi*; *rawabasi*) refer to people somehow involved in the minting process with different tasks whilst the third option (*rubahi*) is instead connected to two different coin types minted respectively in al-Mahjam and in Tha‘bat – one carrying the image of an animal (of questionable appearance) and the other one illustrated with a seated man.

However, as Daniel M. Varisco pointed out recently, the *nisba al-Riyahi* is a well-established one in the Rasulid era: al-Khazraji, for example, devotes a section of his *al-‘Aqd al-fakhir* to the Qadi Muhammad b. ‘Ali b. ‘Umar b. Muhammad al-Riyahi (d. 682/1284), who was a prominent jurist and teacher in the Muzaffari madrasa in Taiz (al-‘Abbadi ed. 2009)⁹. The question is, then, the nature of the connection between a new coin type and a religious judge.

The chronicle of the Rasulid dynasty, nowadays known as *al-Kitab al-zahiri fi ta’rikh al-dawla al-rasuliyya bi-l-Yaman*, only recently identified as the work of Jamal al-Din Muhammad b. ‘Ali al-Hasib al-Misri al-Yamani (d. 840 AH/AD 1436) (al-Hibshi ed. 1431/2010), helps to elucidate this matter.

The chronicle informs us, for example, that new dies, created after the accession to power of a new sultan, were realized in the *Dar al-darb* / mint in Taiz and subsequently brought to the *Dar al-‘adl* / House of Justice where they were examined. Moreover, the al-Hasib al-Misri refers to other moves of the dies from the mint to the House of Justice in Taiz: in one passage, for instance, we read that in the year 831/1428-29 al-Malik al-Zahir (r. 831-842/1428-1439), captured in Tha‘bat, was rescued by the army and succeeded al-Ashraf Isma‘il who was killed in a turmoil that took place in the *Dar al-‘adl* / House of Justice in Taiz. After al-Malik al-Zahir’s accession to power, the dies were carried from the *Dar al-darb* / mint to the *Dar al-‘adl* / House of Justice, in a solemn, traditional parade in which the army, a prince and a religious judge were involved.

In the light of the central role of the *Dar al-‘adl* / House of Justice in the process of production of new dies in Rasulid Yemen, it seems likely that the correct reading of al-Khazraji’s text mentioning *al-Riyahi*, has to be understood as the *nisba* of a prominent *qadi*. This appears coherent with the meaningful presence of a religious judge / *qadi* in the official ceremony bringing the dies from the mint to the House of Justice.

One can wonder, in particular, if the judge *al-Riyahi* might have been responsible for giving his legal opinion regarding the lawfulness of use of

⁹ Al-‘Abbadi, ‘A. Q. ed. (2009): Al-Khazraji, *Al-‘Aqd al-fakhir al-hasan fi tabaqat akabir ahl al-Yaman*. San‘a’: Maktabat al-jil al-jadid. Moreover, Ibn al-Dayba‘ (866-944 AH/AD 1461-1537) in his work entitled *Qurrat al-‘uyun bi-akhbar al-Yaman al-maymuun* (al- awali ed. 1971-1977) records that al-Malik al-Mansur minted the first dinars in his name in 630/1232-1233) after conquering several fortresses, including one in al-Harish al-Riyahi, near Kuhlaan ‘Affar in the North of Yemen. Al-Awali, M. ed. (1971-1977): Ibn al-Dayba‘, *Kitab qurrat al-‘uyun bi-akhbar al-Yaman al-maymun*. Al-Qahira: al-Maktabat al-yamaniyya, 2 vols.: II, p. 6 –

images on dies / coins – since the *riyahi* dirhams are illustrated with human beings and animals. This would not have been an isolated case. It seems useful to recall, for example, the legal opinion of Ibn Hajar (d. 974/1567) about the use of western paper, with watermarks representing animals, circulating in Yemen between the end of the 15th and the 16th centuries as a product imported by Portuguese merchants (D'Ottone 2006, p. 45).

As for the link between the mint activity and the juridical-religious authority, Rasulid Yemen is not an exception since the connection between coins and judges is also attested in Marinid times (mid-13th-mid-15th century) in North Africa. In this case witnesses/notaries were present in the mint to control the use and the number of dies that were kept in a safe of which they had the key.

Bringing together the written sources with the numismatic evidence proves to be a win-win method since through coins it is possible to shed light on the meaning of a puzzling textual excerpt and through texts one is able to put the numismatic evidence in a wider, cultural perspective. Moreover, Rasulid Yemen offers interesting hints concerning the ceremonies linked to the creation of new dies, on the occasion of the accession to power of a new sultan, and this opens up new lines of research linked to the functioning of a medieval Arabic mint, the people involved in these ceremonies and, last but not least, the relation between political and religious power.

