INTRODUCTION

This paper expands the symposium theme of “Coinage in Transition: The Numismatics of Dynastic Change in the Islamic World,” for it does not address a change in coinage due to dynastic turnover, but rather one brought about during a tumultuous struggle to rule within a regime. This regime was the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt and Syria (c. 648-922 H/1250-1517 CE), where rulership was often vigorously contested. In the year 815/1412, a new type of silver coinage was introduced in the Mamluk domains in the midst of one such episode. This new style of dirham proved to be long-lasting as it endured beyond the end of the sultanate and into the Ottoman era. Despite this longevity of this style, the coins of this caliph/sultan have been understudied, no doubt in part due to their relative scarcity. Several new specimens are now available for study, which provide additional information about this important and rare coinage.

Abū-l-Faḍl al-‘Abbās b. Muḥammad al-Musta‘īn bi’llāh was the tenth ‘Abbasid Caliph of the line of so-called “shadow” ‘Abbasid caliphs in Egypt.¹ This caliphate was established in Cairo by the Mamluk sultan al-Ẓāhir Baybars (658-676/1260-1277) shortly after the Mongol capture of Baghdad brought an

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* History Department, De Paul University, Chicago, Illinois (USA).
end to the more than 500-year presence of the ‘Abbasid caliphs in Iraq. The power and influence of these caliphs in Cairo was restricted by Baybars and subsequent Mamluk sultans, who mainly limited these caliphs to a ceremonial role in court affairs and matters of foreign diplomacy. The case of al-Musta’in is slightly different, however. His caliphate lasted a little longer than eight years, from 1 Sha’ban 808/22 January 1406, when he succeeded his father al-Mutawakkil I, to 16 Dhū-l-Hijja 816/9 March 1414, when he was removed from the caliphate by the sultan al-Mu’ayyad Shaykh (r. 815-824/1412-1421). Shaykh then installed al-Musta’in’s brother al-Mu’tadid II as caliph. Subsequently, in 819/1417, al-Musta’in was sent to Alexandria, where he spent the rest of his life, dying there of the plague in 833/1430. He would be of little interest to us today, however, if not for the fact that for five months in 815/1412 (from 25 Muḥarram/7 May to 1 Sha’ban/6 November), al-Musta’in was placed on the sultan’s throne. This was during the chaotic era of the revolt against the Mamluk Sultan al-Nāṣir Faraj b. Barqūq (r. 801-808/1399-1405 and 809-815/1406-1412) which led to the deposition and eventual assassination of Faraj and a power struggle between the two powerful Mamluk amirs Nawrūz and Shaykh, which ended only with the victory of the latter who assume rule as sultan al-Mu’ayyad Shaykh.

During al-Musta’in’s short tenure as sultan, he exercised little real power. He was essentially a stakeholder occupying that position while Shaykh and Nawrūz struggled for preeminence. Nevertheless, since sikkah was a royal prerogative, coins were minted in his name, and he was thus the only one of the shadow caliphs for which this was done. Gold, silver and copper coins are now known to have been minted bearing al-Musta’in’s epithets. Specimens in the first two metals were identified and classified by Paul Balog in his corpus, The Coinage of the Mamluk Sultans of Egypt and Syria. Balog was not aware of any new specimens when he published his “Additions and Corrections” article six

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3 Al-Mutawakkil I held the caliphate three times: 763-779/1362-1377; 779-785/1377-1383; and 791-808/1389-1406.

4 The fact that Mamluk-era chronicles sometimes called these coins the Nawruz dirhams, indicates that these coins were produced while the influence of the Amir Nawruz was preeminent.

years later, nor was he aware of any copper coinage of this Caliph/Sultan. Specimens of these copper coins have since come to light, however.

While relatively rare and little studied, al-Musta'in's silver coinage is important since it represents the first major change in Mamluk silver dirhams since the reign of al-Zahir Baybars, the effective establisher of the Mamluk sultanate. From Baybars through Faraj, Mamluk silver had been remarkably consistent. These dirhams were overwhelmingly epigraphic in nature, as only the felines of Baybars and his sons, and the occasional circular frames surrounding names found on the coinage of Barqūq and Faraj, interrupted this appearance. They were consistently of two-thirds purity and irregular in weight. As has been argued elsewhere, it is hard to comprehend how these dirhams could circulate in any way but by the value of the total weight, not number, of the coins changing hands, as determined by a unit of account.

The silver coinage of al-Musta'in, however, is immediately recognizable as different from that which preceded it. Despite some chronicle evidence to the contrary, it appears to be the first-known example of the higher silver content and thinner-flan design of silver coinage which was to dominate the ninth/fifteenth century. While the later silver reforms of al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh and especially al-Ashraf Barsbay (825-841/1422-1437) have attracted

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7 The first copper specimens identified were published by Lutz Ilsch, "Beiträge zur mamlukischen Numismatik IV: Inedita des AbbasidenKalifen al-Musta’in bi’llah aus syrischen Münzstätten", Münstersche Numismatische Zeitung XIII.4 (1982): 39-41, numbers 2 and 3. An additional copper specimen is known at the Orientalisches Münzkabinett Jena. I am indebted to Stephan Heidemann for this latter information. The gold dinars of al-Musta’in remain rare, and are outside of the scope of this study.


10 See the important study of J-L. Bacharach and A.A. Gordus, "Studies on the Fineness of Silver Coins", JESHO 11 (1968), pp. 298-317 for an overview of the purity of Mamluk silver coins across the course of the sultanate. Perhaps due to the scarcity of these dirhams, no silver of al-Musta’in was tested.
more attention, it should not be forgotten that the first reforms in silver happened in the reign of al-Musta‘in.

Balog’s Typology of These Dirhams

Balog sorted the seven examples of al-Musta‘in’s dirhams known to him into the following four type numbers in his corpus:

«Number 673: Silver dirham, mint missing but must be Cairo, 815 H. (1 specimen)
Number 674: Silver dirham, mint missing, but must be Cairo, date missing. (1 specimen)
Number 675: Silver dirham, Damascus mint, 815 H. (4 specimens)
Number 676: Silver dirham, Damascus mint, 815 H. (1 specimen)»

Balog further described these four types as follows. Type 673 is non-heraldic with the border on both sides missing. One side features a central field defined by a circular line, which contains the name Muḥammad plus two dots. The clockwise marginal legend reads: al-Sulṭān al-Malik al-Musta‘īn bi’llāh Abū-l-Faḍl al-‘Abbās ‘azza naṣrāhu. The second side contains a field halved by a horizontal line. Above the line is written: lā ilāh illā Allāh. Below the divide are two lines of writing: Muḥammad rasūl Allāh above ẓuriba and a partial date of: khams. Only one example of this type was cited by Balog.11

Type 674 was also classified as non-heraldic. One side of this type also featured a central circle containing the name Muḥammad albeit with out mention of the dots found on 673. The clockwise marginal inscription is said to read: al-Sulṭān al-Malik al-ʿAbbās amīr al-muʿminīn. The outer border is missing on this side of the solitary specimen which unfortunately was not included in the plates.12 The other side features a “field divided by a central horizontal twisted cable and two horizontal lines; only the central part on the flan”. The two line inscription in this field provides the shahāda: lā ilāh illā Allāh / Muḥammad rasūl Allāh. Despite the absence of a mint name on the coins, Balog attributed both these types to Cairo, presumably because they were so different in appearance from the two subsequent types from Damascus.

11 The coin is identified as L 982 (17 mm, 1.48 gr), from H. Lavoix, Catalogue des monnaies musulmanes de la Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, 1896. Technically the date should have been listed as (81)5, as the digits eight and one are not legible. See plate XXIX of Balog.
12 The coin is in the ANS, accession number 1917.216.2599 and its measurements are (16, 1.02).
Types 675 and 676 were classified by Balog as heraldic, with 675 labeled “A” and 676 labeled “B”. Both feature a “linear diamond, with concave sides” containing: bin Muhammad on one side, and a large linear square containing the shahāda in three lines on the other. The linear diamond mentioned by Balog may be a buqja, or “napkin”, a symbol with possible heraldic ramifications, although it may also just have been a design element used to define a field in the center of the coin. (al-Musta‘in, after all, was neither a Mamluk nor a son of a Mamluk, and thus would not have emerged from the amiral ranks to which Mamluk heraldic emblems are usually linked). Each side of both types provide four peripheric segments for the surrounding legends, as the four corners of the central box or diamond/buqja touch the surrounding linear circle. The peripheric legends on both types are the same – it is in the arrangement of these legends, specifically in which peripheric segment the legend begins on the diamond/buqja side, where the differences occur. On this side the legend is: Abū-l-Fadl / al-‘Abbās / amīr / al-mu‘minīn, running counter-clockwise. For 675, this legend begins in the right segment, for 676 it begins in the top. On the box side, the legend reads: ḍuriba / bi-Dimashq / khams wa-‘ashr / wa-thamānīmi’a. For both 675 and 676 this legend begins in top segment.

As is usual in the case of numismatic scholarship, the available source material has expanded since the publication of Balog’s important works, and the typology he established no longer adequately describes the wider variety of known specimens of Mamluk coins. In the case of the silver dirhams of al-Musta‘in, the first published specimen to fall outside of Balog’s schema was a dirham struck in Aleppo (Halab). This type contains a central diamond/buqja on one side, and two specimens are known, both now preserved at the

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14 Balog knew of four examples of type 675. Three were from M. Hartmann, “Drei unedierte Silbirstück des Chalifen und Sultans Abūl-Fadl Al-Abbas ibn Mohmamad und einige Mamluken Dinare,” Zeitschrift für Numismatik, IX (1882), pp. 85-89, measuring 23, 1.49; 19, 1.335; and 18, 1.448 respectively. The fourth, measuring 15 mm and now known to weigh 1.32 grams, was in his personal collection, now at the Israel Museum. He knew of only one example of 676, preserved in Beirut, and while it is illustrated on plate XXIX, no diameter or weight information was provided.
Forschungstelle für Islamische Numismatik in Tübingen\textsuperscript{15}. The peripheric legend is the same as found on the diamond/\textit{buqa}\textit{j}a side of 675 and 676 above (\textit{Abū-l-Faḍl} / \textit{al-`Abbās} / \textit{amir} / \textit{al-mu`minīn}). It begins in the top right segment. The second side has three lines of writing with a row of dots between second and third lines, and a decorative squiggle above the third line: \textit{ḍuriba bi-Ḥalab / lā ilāh illā Allāh / Muhammad rasūl Allāh}.

There are six other coins of al-Musta`in now at FIN T that need be mentioned as well. Three are examples of type 675 and will be discussed below. The fourth, a pierced specimen weighing 1.17 grams, has the same appearance and design of 673 of Cairo, yet the top line of the horizontal legends on the non-circle side reads: \textit{ḍuriba bi-Ḥalab}\textsuperscript{16}. This raises an intriguing possibility. Balog knew of only one example of type 673, which, as mentioned above, he attributed to Cairo, presumably since its style and format were so different from the \textit{buqaj}a coins known from Damascus. As was common for most Mamluk silver coins, the flans of these coins were smaller than the dies used to strike them. On the specimen known to Balog, the upper portion of the die is off flan, while the bottom section bearing the partial date is on the coin. On the FIN T coin, the opposite is true. The upper portion of the die is on the flan and reveals the mint name (there is also the hint of a scalloped linear border), but the bottom section where the date would presumably be is cut off. It is my suspicion that future discoveries will reveal that type 673 should be reattributed to Aleppo.

The final two are silver-plated copper flans featuring a design resembling that which Balog provided for type 674, which he ascribed to Cairo\textsuperscript{17}. The similarity breaks down on the non-circle side, where the two FIN T specimens have nothing resembling the “horizontal twisted cable” found on Balog’s 674. While found separately, the two FIN T coins were both struck by the same dies, which do not appear to be forgeries. No mint name is legible, but Lutz Ilisch has attributed them to the mint city of Aleppo, and I support this attribution for these puzzling objects\textsuperscript{18}.

\textsuperscript{15} LUTZ I LISCH, “Beiträge zur mamlukischen Numismatik IV: Inedita des AbbasidenKalifen al-Musta‘in bi’llah aus syrischen Münzstätten”, Münstersche Numismatische Zeitung, XIII,4 (1982): 39–41, number 1. The specimen measures 18mm and weighs 1.24 grams. The second acquired later weighs 1.30 grams. I would like to thank Lutz Ilisch for his permission to use these and subsequent coins from the FIN T collection.

\textsuperscript{16} The FIN T reference number is CJ1DS

\textsuperscript{17} The FIN T reference numbers LI-2209 (1.35 gr) and 2000-18-2 (1.41 gr), respectively.

\textsuperscript{18} Personnel communication, 9/2/08.
In addition to these coins from FINT, I am aware of ten additional silver dirhams of this caliph/sultan. One has been published in an exhibition catalogue, two made available on the websites from private collections, and the seven remaining coins are preserved in the collection of the Jordan National Bank Numismatic Museum (henceforth JNBNM). These coins provide additional examples of types 674, 675, and a new addition to the Damascene coin types.

The JNBNM contains one example of type 674 or a slight variant thereof. Unfortunately, it does not answer definitively the question of origin, as the mint city is once again missing. The central circle contains the name Muhammad as in 674, but also the word bin, along with two dots, which are not found in Balog's description. On the other side, the horizontal twisted cable is quite clear, as is the partial date (8)15 in the bottom section of the coin, separated from the last line of the shahāda by a solid line. (See Illustration 1)

As mentioned above, Balog charted two types from Damascus. These coins featured the diamond/buqja design and differed only in the peripheric segment in which the legend: Abū-l-Raḍāl / al-ʿAbbās / amīr / al-muʿminīn began. For 675, the legend begins in the right segment. There are at least nine additional specimens to add to the known corpus of this type. One was published by Ariel Berman in 1976. Another was posted to web site for the personal collection of Mr. Fawzan Barrage. Three are preserved at Fint. Four other examples of this type are preserved at JNBNM. One is a remarkably complete specimen which reveals practically entire breadth of the dies used to strike the coin. We thus learn that the border on both sides of this coin is a linear circle itself surrounded by a circle of dots. (See

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19 I would like to thank the curator, Dr. Nayeef Goussous, for permission to use these seven coins in this study. His help and the assistance of the assistant curator Mr. Hassan al-Zoud, were most appreciated during my stay in Jordan in September 2007.

20 There are no official registration numbers for these JNBNM coins. This coin measures (15, 1.33).

21 Ariel Berman, Islamic Coins (exhibition catalogue), Jerusalem, The L.A. Mayer Memorial Institute for Islamic Art, 1976, number 295 (17, 1.95).

22 See URL http://islamiccoins.ancients.info/mamluk/b675.JPG (recorded May 1, 2009). Barrage's reference number for the coin was MK3001.

23 The coins are LI-633 (1.41), CI2A3 (1.96), and CI2A2 (1.09). This last coin is pierced.

24 This coin measures (20, 1.38). The next two coins with the traces of scalloped border of this type measure (15, 1.30) for the coin illustration 3, and (17, 1.48) for coin illustration 4. The example in illustration 5 measures (14, 1.49).
Illustration 2) The first two of the remaining three specimens, however, reveal traces of a scalloped border surrounding the linear circle. Whether this die variant is significant is impossible to tell at this time. (See illustrations 3, 4, 5).

There are two coins from the JNBNM which are clearly from Damascus, feature the diamond/buqja design, but are clearly neither 675 nor 676. On these dirhams, the legend: Abū-l-Faḍl / al-‘Abbās / amīr / al-mu’mīnīn, “al-mu’mīnīn” begins in the left peripheral segment, not the bottom (675) nor the right (676). (See illustrations 6, 7) A third specimen of this variant has been posted at the Zeno website of oriental coins.

The Metrology of These Coins

The wider political context during which these coins appeared has been established by Bacharach. As is often the case, however, Mamluk-era authors disagree on the details of this coinage. As Bacharach demonstrated, there is a confusing narrative that emerges when you compare the accounts of al-Maqrizi (d. 845/1442), Ibn Hajar (d. 852/1449), al-Asadi (writing in 855/1451) and Ibn Taghri Birdi (d. 874/1470). The first three mentioned an earlier coin of low quality silver minted in Syria in 813/1410, of which no known specimens have come to light (unless these reference apply to the two puzzling coins from FINT mentioned above), and then all agreed that a pure silver coin was struck in 815/1412. Ibn Taghri Birdi alone wrote that this last coin was half silver and half copper. While we must await testing on actual al-Musta’in dirhams to confirm their metallic purity, given the chronological distance between the events of 815/1412 and the composition of Ibn Taghri Birdi’s chronicle, I am inclined to think that Ibn Taghri Birdi had his details wrong. This is a case where given al-Maqrizi’s familiarity with monetary developments – he wrote his opuscule on money Shudūr al-‘Uqūd for al-Mu’ayyad Shaykh – and the corroboration of other chroniclers, his account is preferable.

In addition to purity, the other component of metrological analysis is weight. As Bacarach mentioned, al-Maqrizi wrote that these coins of 815/1412

25 One coin is (16, 1.61), see illustration 6; the other is (17, 1.41), see illustration 7.
26 See the URL www.zeno.ru #44040. This coin weighs 1.42 grams.
27 See note 8 above.
weighed half of a dirham. While the dirham weight unit for coins is frequently stated as 2.97 grams, an analysis of relevant numismatic data has suggested that the Mamluk dirham weight unit in use in Egypt was slightly higher than this normative value, and the unit in use in Syria was slightly less\textsuperscript{29}. When Balog compiled his corpus, he had access to only seven specimens, and provided weight information for only five. These were type 673 (1.48 grams); type 674 (1.02); type 675 (1.49, 1.335, and 1.448); and no weights for type 676. This study has accumulated weights for fifteen additional coins, disregarding the two unusual silver-plated coins preserved at FINT, which yields a sample of 20 weights which are plotted on the frequency table below. While objections can be raised about lumping these coins from perhaps three different mints together in one sample, it can also be argued that the differences in style may not have been significant to those who used the coins. Thus this table is for illustrative purposes only, and too much should not be taken from its results. These coins range in weight from 1.02 to 1.96 grams, with a clear peak falling in the interval from 1.30 to 1.50 grams. The average weight of these specimens is slightly less than 1.42 grams, which is clearly lower than half of a dirham, whatever its exact value was. If these coins were indeed of higher silver content (approaching purity), however, a half-dirham coin of this type, even at this (under) weight would contain more silver than a half-dirham’s worth of the older Mamluk silver before this reform. The math is straightforward. The bulk of the surviving numismatic evidence for pre-al-Musta’\textsuperscript{in} Mamluk dirhams indicates that these coins were prepared at two-thirds purity. Thus one dirham’s worth of this older coinage would contain two grams of silver, since two-thirds of three is two. One-half dirham’s worth of this coinage would contain only one gram of silver, as two thirds of one and one half is one. Working with the average of 1.42 grams derived from the small sample, one of the new (half) dirhams of al-Musta‘\textsuperscript{in} would contain approximately 0.40 grams more silver than a half-dirham’s worth of the previously used coinage. The repercussions of this change in terms of prices, exchanges rates etc., require further study. What is clear, however, is that we must pay close attention to each new specimen of this coinage which becomes known.
