Abstract

The present paper tries to provide a rough overview over lead coins roughly dating to the Umayyad period (ca. 700-750 AD). Lead coins can be either issued alongside copper coins like in Baalbek or Jurjan as part of the regular petty coinage, they can be a local currency like in the Persian Gulf region, or they can have been produced in unofficial local workshops as a remedy against a need for petty cash. Some examples for these three categories are presented and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Let us start this short contribution with a definition of the words used in the title. While defining lead in theory poses no problem, in practice it can be quite problematic to find out from which metal a coin was struck. With black and white photos in publications, a clear distinction is impossible for everyone without access to the actual coins. Sometimes, the greyish patination of some copper pieces makes one believe that this might be a lead coin, and in fact several late Umayyad fulus contain a lot – up to 25% – lead, which might explain a similar patination.\(^1\) In this paper, however, we shall be dealing only with coins made entirely of lead. In the case of coins in private collections (assuming the owner agrees), the most reliable way to find out

\(^1\) GOUSSOUS 1996: p. 137.
whether a coin was made of lead or not is scratching the rim to see whether it is soft enough, and whether the typical silverish colour comes out.

The two other words – “Umayyad” and “Coins” – are more difficult to define. I use “Umayyad” here for the period from the final monetary reform of ‘Abd al-Malik in 77 AH (696/7 AD) to roughly speaking the middle of the 8th century. Some of the coins discussed here were undoubtedly produced a few years after 750, and thus already belong to the Early Abbasid period, but still the majority belongs to the historical and cultural context of the Umayyad period. As regards some of the unofficial specimens which we shall discuss below, it goes without saying that their absolute dating is uncertain, but few – if any – of the coins shown here seem to be later than the 3rd quarter of the 8th century.

Also the word “coin” is more problematic than one might think at first glance. It is much easier to state what is excluded here, i.e. what should not be labelled as coins: Seals always have a fathom channel (fig. 1), and Umayyad lead bullae have a part resembling a nail, but being cast together with the entire object, at the back portion (fig. 2). Here, functionality offers sufficient prove for the designation. Also uniface objects, to which the ancient name “tessera” might be applied, are basically excluded (fig. 3, 4). Fig. 4 is modelled after an Abbasid fals type from Egypt (fig. 5) which originally was two-sided, so that the uniface form certainly was intended. It is clear by the outer appearance that such pieces were intended for other purposes than regular fulus. As opposed to these tesserae, we might define coins as objects which we at may assume to have been intended to serve monetary purposes. Due to the lack of descriptive or archaeological sources, we cannot tell for sure whether these objects were regarded as coins which could circulate freely and were universally accepted, or as tokens with only local circulation. Perhaps the latter idea is more probable. Another distinction which will be discussed in detail later on distinguishes official products of regular mints and irregular and unofficial products.

To sum it up: I shall discuss here shortly lead objects dating from ca. 700 to ca. 750 which could have been used as money. In John Walker’s monumental catalogue of post-reform Umayyad coinage, about 600 Umayyad copper fulus are listed, but not a single lead piece. Only during the last one or two decades did early Islamic lead objects turn up more frequently, which is in accord

3 Schindel 2007/2.
4 Walker 1956.
with the general trend – Steve Album has estimated already more than 20 years ago that since Walker’s times, the number of Umayyad fulus has multiplied twentyfold. In keeping with this, also lead coins and coin-like lead objects have become increasingly available for study. The area from which the highest number of Umayyad base metal coins originates in general is Bilād al-Shām, and the same is true also of the lead objects.

If not indicated otherwise, the coins depicted here are taken from a private collection of about 1200 Umayyad fulus which I hope to publish in the not too far future.

OFFICIAL ISSUES – SYRIAN REGION

The clearest case in this category is lead fulus from Baalbek in jund Dimashq. The first such specimen was published by Nitzan Amitai-Preiss more than 20 years ago. The obverse shows the first half of the shahāda, the reverse in three lines the formula: ضرب/هذا الفلس/يعملک. Coins of the same type, but struck in bronze, are known from Damascus, a very common issue (fig. 9), much less frequently from Amman (fig. 10), and also from Baalbek itself (fig. 8); a very similar design was used at Adri’at. Lutz Ilisch dates the Amman and Adri’at issues to the beginning of the 2nd century AH. He is followed in this by Harry Bone, even if we have to bear in mind that this dating at the present state of research is only approximate. The typological parallel, in my opinion, clearly proves that we are dealing with actual coins, struck in the official mint of Baalbek, and intended for regular monetary circulation. Amitai’s specimen weighs 7,21 grams. Two more coins from the private collection mentioned above can be presented here: The first (fig. 6) has a weight of 6,25 grams; it shares both obverse and reverse die with Amitai’s specimen, and is of a thickness unusual for Syrian fulus. The second coin (fig. 7), the flan of which is much thinner, weighs only 3,29 grams, but is also quite

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5 ALBUM 1989: p. 22.
6 AMITAI-PREISS 1990/91: p. 98, no. 6, pl. 16, no. 6.
8 WALKER 1956: p. 275, no. 907.
12 BONE 2000: p. 211.
NIKOLAUS SCHINDEL

corroded. Its mint name cannot be read, but it was struck from the same obverse die as the two other specimens, and thus also can be attributed to Baalbek. Amazingly enough, we thus know three lead fulus from this mint which were all struck from the same obverse die, a clear indication that the issue was no way substantial. Bone has suggested that due to the high weights, Amitai’s specimen was no coin, but rather a weight. However, what Bone thought to be an argument against the designation as a coin in fact proves that in fact it really is one: The weight peak of the Damascus copper fulus of the same type lies around 2,20 grams; the weight of the lead coins is about three to four times higher. This makes perfect sense if we assume that Umayyad fulus were no mere token coinage, but that their exchange rate with dirhams or dinars depended on their actual weight, and thus on their metal value. Since lead is of much lower value than copper, the lead fulus had to be considerably heavier to represent the same or in any case a very similar value to copper coins.

Apart from these three Baalbek lead fulus, there is another coin from the private collection (fig. 11). It weighs 6,89 grams, once again a remarkably high weight, and again is very thick. The obverse features the second rather than the first half of the shahāda. The style is perfectly regular, and the state of preservation is much above average for a lead coin; there are no indications, however, that we are confronted with a modern forgery. I have to confess that I am unable to make sense of the mint name. It seems to consist of two different words since the fifth or sixth letter in my opinion can only be read as a final ٨. The second letter must be a ل. The second word begins with ج/خ/ح, followed by ٦٠٩. One guess would be that some administrative entity is mentioned; one wonders whether also this coin originates from Baalbek since this is the only mint for which official lead fulus are attested so far. All these lead fulus discussed so far show high-quality engraving and execution, and thus there is no reason to assume that they are not the products of official Umayyad mint(s). Since the basic type “[mint name] ضرب/هذا الفلس” is not attested outside jund Dimashq, the issue of official Syrian lead fulus was obviously restricted to this region, and judging from the small number of examples known – only two obverse and three reverse dies are attested so far –, it cannot have been very substantial, even if without doubt many more specimens will turn up in due time. Hopefully, readers of this paper will provide a correct attribution of the interesting and apparently unique coin fig. 11.

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13 Bone 2000: p. 211.
Numerically more common are a lead coins from the Syrian region which are not official issues, but rather locally produced emergency issues; they will be discussed below.

OFFICIAL ISSUES – JURJĀN

Another area where official lead coins are attested rather frequently is Jurjān, ancient Hyrcania and Sasanian Gurgan. Not a single coin from this mint was known to Walker in 1956, but during the last decade or so, several different fals types have turned up in auction sales: The years attested so far, to the best of my knowledge, are 107 (fig. 12), 110, 112, 121 (fig. 13), 126, and 130 AH; also undated pieces exist. In two years, viz. 107 and 110 AH, the fulus were made from lead rather than bronze (fig. 12). What is even more interesting is the fact that on the 107 AH type (for 110 AH, I have no photos at hand), the exchange rate of dirham to fals is given as 1 to 60. This rate is a common one in Umayyad Khurāsān, but there it was applied for bronze issues. Even in their case, it seems likely that the reason to inscribe the exchange rate was that these were fiduciary coins. In the case of the Jurjān lead coins, there can be no doubt that this was a token currency which grossly over-valuated them. With all probability it was also for this reason that the officials in the Jurjān mint chose to strike these coins from lead, and

16 MORTON AND EDEN auction 46, 11. 11. 2010, lot no. 58 (2 pieces, no photos).
17 BALDWIN’S Islamic coin auction 14, 8. 7. 2008, lot no. 66; BALDWIN’S Islamic coin auction 15, 17. 3. 2009, lot no. 99; MORTON AND EDEN auction 46, 11. 11. 2010, lot no. 58 (2 pieces, no photos).
18 MORTON AND EDEN auction 46, 11. 11. 2010, lot no. 58 (2 pieces, no photos).
19 BALDWIN’S Islamic coin auction 14, 8. 7. 2008, lot no. 66;
20 BALDWIN’S Islamic coin auction 14, 8. 7. 2008, lot no. 66;
21 BALDWIN’S Islamic coin auction 14, 8. 7. 2008, lot no. 66; ST. JAMES auction 20, 18. 11. 2011, lot no. 660; MORTON AND EDEN auction 46, 11. 11. 2010, lot no. 58 (no photo).
24 SCHINDEL 2010: pp. 75-82.
not from bronze, to further cut costs in the production process. Other than in Syria, these Jurjān lead fulus show no markedly higher weight than their bronze counterparts, so the weights of individual pieces were not intended to close the gap in value between these two metals. The fact that lead fulus were produced only in the earliest years for which petty currency from Jurjān is attested might be an indication that these fiduciary lead pieces met little, or no, success.

OFFICIAL ISSUES – GULF REGION

In 1996, what seems to be the first lead coin from the Gulf region was published in a general treatment on the currency of Baḥrayn, the type features one side the legend الله أكبر which is otherwise not attested on Umayyad fulus. A real explosion of material happened in 2010 when the first large group of 17 lead coins was offered in an auction sale by Steve Album. He stated for most of these coins that they were “reportedly acquired by an oil worker in al-Bahrain in the 1950s or 1960s”. Regrettably, as it happens so often, the group was dispersed in trade without proper documentation, certainly a severe loss.

Some of these coins bear the mint name بحرين (fig. 14), and thus enable us to locate these issues. The majority, however, bears no mint name (fig. 15), but might be provisionally also attributed to Baḥrayn because of the reported provenance. No copper coins of these types seem to be attested so far, and taking into account that the survival of lead is less likely than that of copper, it seems that in this region, only lead fulus were produced and put into circulation. Some few specimens bear governors’ names, and these seem to hint at a late Umayyad date. Also the calligraphy is in favour of such a dating, even if it is clear that in the absence of archaeological data, all this must remain somewhat uncertain.

Apart from Baḥrayn, no other mint names are attested so far on the coins traded by Album. However, among the coin finds from the important trading town Sīrāf on the Iranian side of the Persian Gulf, Nicolas Lowick has

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25 Recorded weights of lead fulus: 3,99 g; 3,76 g; of copper fulus: 4,38 g; 3,09 g; 2,93 g; 2,81 g.
26 Darley-Doran 1996: p. 34, no. 55.
27 Album auction 8, 26. 6. 2010, lots nos. 57–73.
28 In Album auction 8, 26. 6. 2010, on lot no. 72 the governor is identified as “Hassān b. Sa‘(id?), fl. 741”.

published no less than 149 lead coins. Several of them clearly belong to the Abbasid period and thus are beyond the chronological scope of this contribution, but a large group showing clearly earlier lettering was catalogued by him as “Uncertain Umayyad or ‘Abbāsīd”. Since it seems unlikely that so many coins of one single type – and not of any of the other Bahrayn types! – should have travelled from Bahrayn to Sirāf, it seems plausible to assume that they were produced locally in this town. In any case, lead coins were used both on the Arabian as well as on the Persian side of the Gulf. Also a Sasanian copper coin of the late 4th/early 5th century might have been struck at Sirāf. Some Sasanian lead coins exists, but on the one hand, the latest known specimens date to the 5th century AD, and on the other hand, there is no indication that the Sasanian pieces were produced or used in the Gulf region.

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The majority of lead coins known to date is of Syrian origin, but clearly cannot be labelled regular products of official Umayyad fals mints. The material is thus quite diverse, and this overview cannot be comprehensive, especially as the single most important piece of information – archaeological evidence – is altogether missing. As far as I know, only one lead fals is published in an excavation report so far, unfortunately without photo so that is impossible to tell whether we are dealing with an official or an unofficial issue, even if my guess is the latter. We rather have to rely on coins from the coin trade and private collections. There are specimens (fig. 16) which can be traced to an Egyptian prototype (fig. 21). Since it was bought from a dealer in Israel, it seems highly likely that it originates from Bilād al-Shām. The same is certainly true of fig. 17: It features a late Umayyad model from Egypt (fig. 22), but is of drastically decreased diameter and weight. The reason for this is the fact that the moulds were with all probability made of clay; an actual original coin was pressed into soft clay which shrank when drying. Using such a coin with

31 Schindel 2004: vol. 1, pp. 119-120.
33 Walker 1956: pp. 206-207, nos. 610–615 (without mint attribution; weight, thickness and calligraphy betray an Egyptian origin).
reduced diameter to produce another mould leads to a still smaller coin in the melting process, and so on. Both coins are of types which occur very frequently among these Syrian cast bronze coins; fig. 17 is the first example I know that is cast in lead rather than in copper (fig. 18). The surface of coins such as fig. 16 and 17 allows no certain distinction between the two possible production techniques, viz. striking and casting, but the parallel with the cast copper fulus certainly advocates the latter.

As regards dating, my idea is that the widespread devastation brought about by the earthquake in 749 AD lead to the closing down of most mints in Bilād al-Shām – especially in its Southern parts –, and that in this highly monetized area, the cast coins represented one attempt to bring in a modest number of new coins into circulation to meet local demand. With all probability, these were token coins, as their often very low and generally quite erratic weights prove. Interestingly enough, some of the Abbasid fulus issued from around 200 AH onwards are also cast, so we might ask ourselves whether casting coins based on mainly late Umayyad types was a practice that lasted for half a century from 749 AD to ca. 800. Further research on this is certainly needed.

Some pieces were made from heavily barbarized moulds or dies produced at some unofficial workshops: Fig. 19 features on both sides the second part of the šahāda, while in the case of fig. 20, it is difficult to make out at all that the legends are Arabic. As long as no such issues are found and published from reliable archaeological contexts, we cannot say for sure where exactly they were produced and circulated. My impression, however, is that they turn up more frequently in the southern parts of Bilād al-Shām (jund Filasṭīn and al-Urdunn) than in the North, even if the different situation of tourism and antiquity trade in Israel, Jordan and Syria might distort this image.

Finally, there are some truly strange objects: No. 23 features a perfectly regular calligraphy; judging from it, one certainly would label this an official issue. The legend says ضرب/يدم électrique/ناجز (“Struck in Damascus. Current”), but the piece is uniface, and thus resembles a tessera like fig. 3. The type itself so far is attested only on two coins: One is a strange, hybrid issue, the other one is cast. Thus, there are so far no regular attestations for this type. Bone dates it tentatively to “ca. 130+/747+”. Fig. 23 could in theory represent a trial

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35 Ilisch 1994: p. 14, nos. 91-95, 102, p. 16, no. 114, p. 22, nos. 175-180, p. 24, nos. 219-221, p. 26, nos. 252-253, p. 34, nos. 377-380, p. 38, nos. 411-412 (I have included only coins which are described as being cast by Ilisch himself).
36 Bone 2000: p. 195-196, nos. 92-93; the latter was first published by Schindel 1999: p. 52, no. 2.
strike, even if it would require them an almost unbelievable stroke of luck to survive. Alternatively, it might have been a tessera like no. 4.

MODERN FORGERIES

Finally, there is a group of coins which have turned up during the last five or so years, mostly from one single seller in Israel (fig. 24, 25). They feature the shahāda divided on obverse and reverse, generally speaking a very common regular fals type. However, there are some rather impossible writing errors – on the reverse, رسول is apparently misspelled as رسول –, they show no patination at all, and are generally very well preserved – the flans actually look as if freshly made – so that the conclusion is, I think, inescapable that we are dealing with modern forgeries, even if several different dies were used to produce them.

CONCLUSIONS

It goes without saying that this was just a rough overview; building up a corpus is not possible as long as the material basis will not drastically be improved by the publication of more coins from public and private collections, but more importantly from archaeological excavations. I merely wanted to address this topic since it is, I believe, of great potential interest especially for the monetary history of the Early Islamic period. What becomes clear is that lead generally was little used in Umayyad coinage. There are three different phenomena reflected in the lead fulus assembled here:

1) The Baalbek lead coins show that sometimes the mint authorities decided to attempt issuing petty coins in lead rather than in copper; the high weight of these lead fulus implies that a certain relationships between the different base metals existed, and that because of the lower value of lead, such lead fulus had to be markedly heavier than copper coins. This observation, borne out by the weights of the specimens listed here, is another indication that Umayyad fulus in Syria still were a value, and not a token currency. Things seem to have been different in Jurjān, because there the weights of lead and copper coins are not distinguishable from each other, so that there the lead fulus certainly represent a token currency. With all probability, this can be explained with a basic difference in character between Byzantine and Sasanian base metal coinage.\(^\text{37}\)

\(^{37}\) For the character of Byzantine copper coinage HAHN-METLICH 2000: p. 13-20; for
2) Lead coins were, for unknown reasons, the petty currency in the Gulf region in the Late Umayyad and Early Abbasid periods.

3) In times of lack of small change, a kind of emergency coinage in lead could be produced. It is certainly easier to cast coins in lead than in copper. Probably because local coin production came to an end in many parts of Bilād al-Shām around 749, the need for coins, or tokens with a rather local character, was met to some extent also by producing lead fulus. While official Umayyad copper fulus circulated quite freely in Bilād al-Shām,38 we might guess that the lead coins were only used in local markets and basically did not circulate beyond their production area; perhaps one might cite as a parallel later crusader-period lead “coins”.39 Notwithstanding the lower survival rate of lead objects, producing lead coins was still a not very common and widespread phenomenon. In the future, with more material available, we will certainly see clearer.

Sasanian base metal issues we have no reliable information, Schindel 2004: vol. 1, pp. 116-118; the very low exchange rate between silver and copper postulated by Göbl 1959: p. 309, seems highly improbable to me, Schindel 2010: p. 81.


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PARANUMISMATIC LEAD OBJECTS

1. Lead seal, Schindel 2008: no. 2

2. Lead bulla, Schindel 2008: no. 3

3. Lead tessera, uniface; Schindel 2007/2

4. Lead tessera, uniface, modelled after no. 5

5. AE fals, Muhammad b. Sayyid, Misr, 152 AH, Miles 1958: no. 15,
   www.zwno.ru/showphoto.php?photo=44621
LEAD COINS

OFFICIAL ISSUES – SYRIAN REGION

BA’ALBAK

6. Pb. 6,25 g. 16 mm. 12 h. Same obverse die as no. 7

7. Pb. 3,29 g. 17 mm. 12 h.

8. AE. Seen in trade ca. 2005

DIMASQ

9. AE. 2,02 g. 27 mm. 3h. Walker 1956: pp. 251-252, nos. 829-834
‘AMMĀN

10. AE. 2.23 g. 15 mm. 10 h. Walker 1956: p. 275, no. 907

UNIDENTIFIED MINT

11. Pb. 6.89 g. 18 mm. 7 h.

OFFICIAL ISSUES – JURJĀN

JURJĀN

12. Pb. 3.76 g. Baldwins’ Islamic coin auction 17, 26. 10. 2010, lot no. 181

13. AE. 2.93 g. 23 mm. 3 h.
OFFICIAL ISSUES – GULF REGION

BAHRAIN

14. Pb. 2,60 g. Album list 260, 2011, lot no. 92814

NO MINT (BAHRAIN)

15. Pb. 2,50 g. Album list 256, 2010, lot no. 92285

UNOFFICIAL ISSUES – SYRIAN REGION

UNCERTAIN MINTS

16. Pb. 5,05 g. 19 mm. 10 h. Reverse modelled after no. 21

17. Pb. 2.47 g. 14 mm. 5h. Modelled after no. 22

18. AE. 1.54 g. 12 mm. 12 h. Modelled after no. 22

19. Pb. 4.94 g. 16 mm. 2 h.

20. Pb. 4.17 g. 17 mm. 2 h.

**MIŞR**

21. AE. 4.20 g. 18 mm. 11 h. Walker 1956: pp. 206–207, nos. 610–615

22. AE. 6.22 g. 19 mm. 12 h. Walker 1956: pp. 275–276, nos. P.140–910
DIMAŠQ

23. Pb. 3.41 g. 17 mm. Uniface, Bone 2000: pp. 195-196, no. 92-93

MODERN FORGERIES

24. Pb. 2.30 g. 13 mm. 3 h.

25. Pb. 3.42 g. 16 mm. 6 h.