Recently published historical studies give more and more attention to the use of material evidence. This trend corresponds only apparently to the stance of 19th century criticism of sources, which assigned a special role to coins, inscriptions and remains, as they were considered free from ideological manipulation. Since then, the concept of reliability has been greatly refined, as a forged text is considered genuine with respect to the author's intention. Furthermore, it is now taken for granted that both documents and remains communicate in explicit or implicit forms the ideology of the society which generated them.

Today artefacts, monuments and any other objects produced by human activity do not supplement poor written documentation, but supply parallel data for the reconstruction of the complex structure of a civilization.

According to Jacques Le Goff the ruling classes or individuals control memory and oblivion through the endless process of selecting documents, as memory is one of the ways which ideology acts through. It is through their representation of the past that the ruling classes justify their present status and plan their future in a social perspective.

Even when there is not a written text, the remains or the monument will communicate ideas, values and beliefs voluntarily expressed by the social

* Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”.
group made up of the patron, the craftsmen and the public, and the elements of this communication are the shape, the dimensions, the materials and the colours, according to the socio-cultural conventions shared by the group.

With reference to coins, Bates pointed out that “almost as soon as coinage was invented, rulers and cities realized the utility of coins not merely as a means of exchange, but as bearers of messages. Coins circulate outside the boundaries of the state that issues them; they continue to circulate or at least to exist long after their production; and as such, although they are small objects, they are an ideal medium for saying something about those who issue them: who they were, what they believed, and where and when they held power”. Information about the issuing dynasties can come from legends, the type – referred to the layout of the text on the flan or the use of visual symbols –, the weight and the alloy, but we will focus on the first two elements. As for symbols, according to Marshall G. S. Hodgson, they originate “from the perception of vital and cosmic correspondences”, but symbols live, change and die when their original meaning is not perceived anymore and their use is restricted to their aesthetic form.

Since the very beginning, the information conveyed by Islamic coins was intended for the propaganda of the ruling authority over a territory. So the content of their legends included the name of the ruler with his honorific titles, the date and the place of minting and often the name of the monetary unit. But on the first Islamic coins an idealized portrait of the caliph and religious symbols appeared too.

Given that coinage is basically conservative, an evident example of connection between ideology and iconography is given by the transformation that Islamic coins underwent in the first century of the Hijrah, that is the formative period of the Islamic Empire, until the adoption of the epigraphic type ordered by the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān.

It is necessary to recall briefly the three distinctive phases that Islamic coinage went through before ‘Abd al-Malik’s monetary reform because they represent a sort of recurring pattern in the transition from a leading coin type to the next that aims at taking its place.

---


When the Arabs stated their history, they did not have a coinage of their own and were limited to adopting the Byzantine gold and copper coinage in Syria and North Africa and the silver coinage in Mesopotamia and Persia. Since the caliphate of ‘Alī, the supplies of these coins were sufficient to meet the limited local demands. Later the coins were adapted with slight modifications. The first dirhams were modelled upon Yazdigird IV’s issues, but after a few years the Arab-Sasanian coins followed the style of Khosrau II’s coins with the ruler’s bust wearing a winged headdress on the obverse and the Zoroastrian fire altar with attendants and Pahlavi legends on the reverse. A religious Islamic formula in the obverse margin as well as the name of the mint were added in Kufic characters. The dates, at first in Yazdigirdian and post-Yazdigirdian eras, adopted the Hijrah chronology. An important step further in the search for an Islamic iconography is represented by a dirham preserved in the American Numismatic Society discussed by G. C. Miles: it replaced the fire altar with a niche, enclosing the prophet’s lance and pennant, and added the legend: *nasara-hu Allāh* (May God grant him victory!). This phase witnesses the passage from imitation to the adaptation of the foreign iconography in order to accomplish a self portrayal. The same transition can be observed in the Syrian minting begun under ‘Abd al-Malik. The first issues imitate earlier Byzantine or Sasanian coins and are dated between 72 and 74 H. The first dinars have three standing figures on the obverse and imitate issues by Heraclius with his two sons, but alter Christian iconography. Byzantine imperial costume has been changed into an Arab dress, the crosses on the crowned heads are eliminated, and the globes that the figures hold in their right hand are transformed into staffs. On the reverse

---


5 G.C. Miles, “Miḥrāb and ‘Anazah: A Study in Early Islamic Iconography”, in *Arcaeologica Orientalia in Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld*, op. cit., pp. 156-171, identified the niche with a *miḥrāb*, as it symbolizes the prophet’s place in the mosque, while the ‘anazah, the lance, stands for his power or that of his successors i.e. the caliphs. Oleg Grabar objected to Mile’s identification of the *miḥrāb* demonstrating that it is not acceptable because the *miḥrāb* occurs in architecture about ten years later. O. Grabar, *Arte islamica. La formazione di una civiltà*, Milano 1989, p. 108. A further discussion can be found in L. Treadwell, “Mihrab and ‘Anaza or Spear-in-Sacrum?: A Reconsideration of the Iconography of an Early Marwanid Silver Drachm”, in *Muqarnas*, 22 (2005), pp. 1-28.
the cross-on-the steps is reduced to a vertical stick ending with a pommel. A circular legend in Arabic around the flan gives the kalimah: “In the name of God, there is no god but God alone, Muhammad is the messenger of God”. Early copper issues from Damascus bear on the obverse an emperor either enthroned or standing or else two standing imperial figures. The reverse has in the field a large uncial M (sign for the denomination forty nummia) flanked by legends at first in Greek and later in Arabic, sometimes in both languages.

A second phase recording the birth of adaptive dinars shows on the obverse a single standing figure portraying the caliph wearing a Bedouin kūfiyyah and a mantle, or burdah, over the Arab dress and holding a sword in a scabbard, instead of the cross, within a circular legend consisting of the kalimah, now in key position. Some dinars also have besides the caliph’s name, his titles, that is “ʿabd Allāh” (the servant of God) and “Amīr al-muʿminīn” (Commander of believers), a synonym for caliph.

These types lingered on until ʿAbd al-Malik’s coinage reform, which took place in Damascus in 75/695 and in other mints in 79 H., while in Bishāpūr, one of the eastern mints, dirhams of Arab-Sasanian type were struck up to 83 H. These attempts at modifying visual symbols in order to create an Islamic iconography able to rival those of the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires ended unexpectedly in 77 H. in gold and in 79 H. in silver issues with a new epigraphic type. The dinar had a new weight standard that is 20 Arab carats, about 4.25 grams.

The developments occurring in the legends and iconography can be properly read in relation to other official inscriptions ordered by ʿAbd al-Malik, that is the inscriptions on milestones and on the Dome of the Rock, stressing the Umayyad policy directed to the foundation of an Islamic Empire which had to counter the Christian propaganda. But having no hope to equal the heights attained by the visual arts of the rival empires, Umayyad rulers opted for a different path. Hence the choice of Arabic writing as the shared visual symbol of the Islamic community, the stress on the tawḥīd against the Trinitarian dogma, and the prophetic mission of Muhammad. They are all

---

6 J. Walker refers to this image as the traditional attitude of the imām reciting the khuṭbah. Op. cit., p. 240.

7 The title was adopted for the first time by ʿOmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and since then it was used by the caliph or by those who claimed to fulfil such a function.


part of ‘Abd al-Malik’s policy aimed to contrast with Christian power and overcome the sense of uneasiness in front of the display of its powerful visual signs.

These preliminary observations give the frame for our attempt to analyze the iconography and the texts bearing Arabic inscriptions in some Medieval coins from Sicily.

Aghlabid coinage in Sicily follows the types struck in Ifrīqiyya. Issues in gold are mintless and silver coins were minted after the fall of Palermo: from 220/835 half dirhams, then quarter dirhams, and between 273 and 277 A.H. the \textit{kharrūbah}, a sixteenth dirham. Ziyādat Allāh I’s issues in silver attributed to 210 H. are mintless, but Lagumina reads Siqilliyah\textsuperscript{10} on a dirham dated 220 H\textsuperscript{11}. On the obverse the profession of the oneness of God – \textit{lā ilāh illā / Allāh wahdahu / lā šarīk lahu} (There is no god, but Allah, He alone without associates) – and the proper name in four lines within a double circle with pellets and a circular legend with the mint-date formula. On the reverse the same pattern in five lines shows the second part of the \textit{kalimah} with the name of the Aghlabid emir. There was no modification of the standard `Abbasid inscriptions apart from the dynastic motto in the first line of the reverse, which was at first read as ‘\textit{ghalaba}’: he conquered, sized or achieved supremacy over someone or something, but later the reading ‘\textit{gālib}’, present participle of the verb, was put forward and interpreted as an attribute of the ruler, whose name was placed on the last line\textsuperscript{12}. In order to support this reading, it was observed that Kufic writing often omit the notation of the \textit{alif} when it performs the function of elongating the vowel sound ‘a’. The names of the officers responsible for the mint occur on some coins and testify to the high reputation they enjoyed in Aghlabid society. In effect, the relative conservativeness of Aghlabid coins could be interpreted as an attempt to gain autonomy as stressed by the dynastic motto, but within the frame of a formal acknowledgement of Abbasid caliphate. That could explain why Aghlabid coinage does not go beyond the beginning of the adaptive phase.

The coins struck by the Fāṭimid caliphs, who first ruled in Ifrīqiyya and later moved to Egypt, are fairly innovative, although their first coinage does not differ from that of their Aghlabid predecessors. Al-Mahdī’s victory was the beginning of a real revolution not only because the new rulers were not subservient to the eastern caliphal overlord, but their government represented the restoration of the Alid family, the Prophet’s true

\textsuperscript{10} The mint name “Sicily” is generally written with \textit{sīn} instead of \textit{ṣād} on Aghlabid coins.


\textsuperscript{12} \textsc{Muhammad Abūl-Faraj al-‘Ush}, \textit{Monnaies aģlabides}, Damas 1982, pp. 39-41.
descendants, as legitimate successors to the leadership of the Muslim community against the Umayyad and Abbasid usurpers. Since the beginning of al-Mahdī’s rule it was clear that Fāṭimids were planning an empire which was far beyond the conquest of Ifrīqiyā and Sicily and the dā‘īs, propagandists of the Ismāʿīli doctrine, worked for a selective conversion of Sunnis as well as Christians and Jews far away from their state in order to have a widespread recognition of Fatimid suzerainty all over the Islamic world.

Fāṭimid coinage\textsuperscript{13} consisted of the gold dinar and its fractions and the silver dirham and its fractions or multiples, few copper or bronze coins have been found, and according to Nicol, they circulated as fractional dirhams\textsuperscript{14}. In Sicily the quarter dinar and the \textit{kharrūbah} – which did not mention the mint name – were struck, while the half dirham was almost unknown. The first two caliphs’ coinage retain the design and inscriptions of Aghlabid coins, they simply substituted the names and dynastic motto.

The first Fāṭimid coin attributed by Balog to the mint of Palermo is an anonymous coin dated 297\textsuperscript{15}, where new inscriptions appear: on the obverse balaghat \textit{huğğat Allāh} (the proof of God has come) and on the reverse tafarrqa \textit{a’dā’ Allāh} (the enemies of God are dispersed), perhaps an allusion to the illegitimate successors of the Prophet Muhammad. The next coin struck in Sicily (337 H.) appears during the reign of al-Manṣūr, who was compelled to send the governor of Tunis, Ḥasan al-Kalbī, to Palermo in 335/947-8 in order to put down a revolt. His issues do not bear his name until \textit{dhū’l-qa’dah} 336 H. after he defeated the kharijite rebel Abū Yazīd. The two types struck on the island, from 337 to 339 H. the former and from 339 to 342 H. the latter, present the Shī‘i title “imām”, as it was in use since al-Mahdī's issues, with the mint name “Ṣiqilliyyah” at first and then “Madīnat Balarzm” or “Madīnat Ṣiqilliyyah”. It is well known that the term \textit{imām} means not only the ruler or head of the Muslim community, but also the true interpreter of the Qur’an charged with the explanation of the hidden meanings of the revelation through esoteric exegesis. However, the term \textit{huğğah} (proof) too has a specific

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item N.D. Nicol, \textit{A Corpus of Fāṭimid Coins}, Trieste 2006, p. XII.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
meaning according to the Ismāʿīli gnosis. In particular, it was used by the Fāṭimids to name the chief dā‘ī - dā‘ī al-du‘āt- who directed the ordinary ones and presided over the twelve districts\textsuperscript{16}, so both the terms have a distinct shī‘i implication.

The fact that their system of thought runs along the double track of literal meaning (ẓāhir) and esoteric interpretation (bāṭin) gives us a hint of the way we must approach Fāṭimid inscriptions and symbols.

Even the profession of the oneness of God, the tawḥīd, that could be considered an inscription imitating the previous ones, is far from being the monotheism professed by the Sunnis, as the esoteric tawḥīd, broadly discussed in Ismāʿīli literature, through the dialectic of the double negative sentence – “There is no God except God”– aims at avoiding agnosticism and the identification of the Divinity with his manifestations\textsuperscript{17}.

Overall, Sicilian issues were in line with those of North Africa. In 357/969, during the reign of al-Mu‘izz, the Fāṭimids moved from Ifrīqiyya to Egypt and continued on to Palestine and Syria, which were later lost. In 363, in the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the khūṭbah was pronounced in the name of the imam-caliph al- Mu‘izz. During his reign the production of gold coins increased greatly and his coin types are fairly innovative as concerns the disposition of the legends into four concentric rings with or without a pellet in the centre. Fāṭimids used the symbol of concentric rings as a visual propaganda of their ideology\textsuperscript{18} in the public space, which could be decoded at different levels by common Muslims (al-‘āmmah), Christians and Jews or Ismāʿīli initiates (al-khaṣṣah). This symbol occurred in all the prerogatives of the office of ruler, besides the khūṭbah, that is the coinage (sikkah), the ṭirāz textiles woven at government establishments as well as on public buildings. As it was customary, the textile used for the veiling of the Ka‘ba during the ḥaǧg was fabricated in Egypt, but in 362 H. it was first displayed in al-Mu‘izz’s


\textsuperscript{17} H. CORBIN, supra., pp. 90-93.

\textsuperscript{18} Four concentric circle diagrams used to keep in mind the system of esoteric truths based on the correspondences among hierohistory, nature, universe and human being can be found in the Kitāb al-yanābī’ by Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sīğistānī (10\textsuperscript{th} c.), one of the main theorist of Ismāʿīli thought at the time of al-Mu‘izz. See P. E. WALKER, The Wellsprings of Wisdom. A Study of Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sīğistānī’s Kitāb al-yanābī’ including a complete English translation with commentary and notes on the Arabic text, Salt Lake City 1994, pp. 70, 82-83. 95 and 99.
palace, before its consignment. It showed a šamsah\(^{19}\) consisting of concentric circles on a ground of red brocade with the centre circle in gold with pearls and precious stones\(^{20}\). The whole textile was stuffed with musk perfume, a very expensive item. In effect this attempt to support Ismāʿīli ideology in a dominantly Sunni population had started earlier in Ifriqīyā, when al-Muʿizz commissioned the jurist Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān to write his Daʿāʾīm al-İslām ("The Pillars of Islam"), where there occurs a memory device, ascribed to the imām Ǧaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, in the form of a bull-eye, emblematic of the relationship between Islam and Belief/\(\text{imān}\) i.e. Ismāʿīlism: Belief embodies Islam, while Islam does not embody Belief. In other words, Islam is the outside, al-zāhir, while the \(\text{imān}\) is the inside, al-bāṭin, in the heart. Ismāʿīlism was represented on the coins and on the šamsah respectively by a raised dot and the ball filled with pearls and gems. Even the choice of precious stones was not casual, as clarified by the \(\text{Maṣḥaf Fāṭimah}\), known through Arabic sources of the 10\(^{th}\) and the 12\(^{th}\) centuries\(^{21}\). But if we go back earlier, the very city plan of al-Manṣūriyyah, built in 948 A.D. near Qayrawān, was round and al-Manṣūr’s palace was in the center. Only Ismāʿīli members of the government, the army and the chief Ismāʿīli qāḍī were allowed to live there\(^{22}\).

Obviously the sign of the heterodox creed could show in all the representations of power only when the Fāṭimid government was firmly established over the conquered lands, even if the Fatimid ceremonial was retained into the last phase of al-Mustaṣfir’s reign in order to mask the weakness of royal power. This might explain why the format of al-Muʿizz’s coins changed from the adaptive phase, in which Shiʿi key-words were inserted in the legend of coins basically imitating Umayyad-Abbasid tradition,

---


to an innovative phase. It was also emphasized by Ehrenkreutz that an increase in fineness of his issues corresponded to the change of format, but Oddy's analyses (1980) proved the statement false.23

In Sicily, from 344 to 361 H two parallel types in gold circulated, of which one continues to 365 H., both having a format with two marginal inscriptions within three concentric rings and a dot in the centre. The text reads “Da‘ā al-imām Ma‘add li-tawḥīd Allâh al-ṣamad” (the imām Ma‘add summons for the unique Godliness of God the Everlasting) and the kalimah is completed with “‘Alī afḍal al-waṣiyyīn” (‘Alī is the best of the heirs), these inscriptions openly advocate the Ismā‘īli summons and the Fāṭimid mission in support of the imamate. A half dirham dated 360 H. shows three concentric inscriptions.

But the concentric circle type was not the only format circulating in Sicily, a bull-type format within linear and dotted circles is also to be found. This is the case of both quarter dinars or kharrūbas, unfortunately undated.

Nothing different appears during the reign of al-‘Azīz, while a new puzzling type of quarter dinars was minted exclusively in Sicily during the reign of al-Ḥākim. This type seems to be unknown to Islamic coinage, as far as I am concerned, it has been called “windmill”- from Arabic ṭāḥūnah – or “stellate” with a six-pointed star formed by the union of two equilateral triangles and a pellet in the centre. The six-pointed star, which already occurs on the gold solidus struck by Justinian I, seems to have a cosmological meaning. In the quarter dinars, legends are arranged along the rayed segments external to a circle, where the lines form a sort of Solomon’s seal. Consequently each sentence is divided into two parts even when this occurs with a single word, but the splitting of the sentences or words changes from issue to issue. According to M. Bates “as the coins even of a single ruler may vary considerably from city to city, there was no bureaucracy specialized for

---

23 N.D. NICOL, op. cit., p. xii. However, Oddy’s Neutron activation analysis showed that some dinars have a high fine content which equal or surpass the best medieval gold coins.

24 The pentagram had already appeared on early Islamic coinage, as it is shown in J. WALKER, op. cit, p. 237, and together with the hexagram, it is considered a prophylactic symbol. Their use is widespread on Islamic tombstones especially in the Nile Valley dated from the second to the fourth century H. Cfr. G. OMAR, V. GRASSI, A. TROMBETTA, The Book of Khor Nubt. Epigraphic Evidence of an Islamic-Arabic Settlement in Nubia in the III-IV centuries A.H./X-XI A.D., I, Napoli 1998, pp. 175-178. See also HASSAN HAWARY-HUSSEIN RACHER-GASTON WIET, Catalogue Général du Musée Arabe du Caire, Stèles funéraires, Le Caire 1932-1942, 10 vols.

the purpose of controlling all the mints in a realm, so local mints were responsible to local governors.”

The search of the possible reasons for such an iconography is so far without an adequate response. The data available in Nicol’s catalogue show that the issue of the first stellate quarter dinar occurs in Sicily during the reign of the Fāṭimid caliph al-Hākim in 404 H., followed by a second type in 405 and 406 H. They anticipate four years earlier the appearance of the stellate type in respect to the dates presented by Balog in 1979.

On the one hand, the unusual disposition of the legends distributed in twelve points might induce us to search for a meaning in the caliph-imām’s ideology because the Fāṭimids built “a complex, mystic and philosophy symbolical system, based on the fundamental rhythm of the universe, observed in some coincidences of different numbers” charged with their mystical value. In effect, the splitting of the words in groups of letters recalls the ǧāfr or Science of the letters, widely used for the making of talismans, that in a broad sense affected Fāṭimid thought. On the other hand, it could be a mere evidence of the flourishing of mathematics and astronomy at the court of al-Ḥākim as the triangular grid yields six-pointed stars. But if we consider the stellate as a local product, according to Bates’s suggestion, it seems rather strange to look for a display of the imām’s ideology. Moreover it

26 M. L. Bates, Methodology ..., op. cit.
27 The type listed as X 8, op. cit., p. 131, refers to a coin in a private collection presented in Sotheby’s auction catalogue dated 2-3 October 1986.
28 Ibidem, p. 130, Type X 3 referring to a quarter dīnār in a private collection dated Ğumādā 405 and to two specimens dated 406 H., one in the numismatic collection of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo and the other in the collection of the National Museum of Qatar at Doha, published in 1992 by Ibrāhīm Ğābir al-Ǧabra.
29 “La monetazione della Sicilia araba ...”, op. cit., p. 615.
30 I was told by P. Walker of Chicago University that, according to his colleague Tahera Qutbuddin, expert in Fatimid studies, the twelve points could be connected with the twelve ǧazīras and the imām’s hegemony over them, as in ta’wil works stars are used as a symbol for the imām and his divinely guiding light. She argues that the two combined could perhaps mean the imām’s light illuminates the entire world.
31 The 34th wellspring of Siğistānī’s work deals with the perfect qualities of the number six as “[The sum of] its divisors does not exceed itself nor does it fall below itself”. The eras from Adam to Muhammad are six as well as the divisions in each era. God’s creation had been accomplished in six days. Nature’s powers are six and they work in six directions. Six are the members of the human being. The hierarchy of the Speaker-Prophets, Imams and Adjuncts is represented by the number six reaching a total number of twenty-one. Cfr. P. E. Walker, op. cit., pp. 98-99.
is well known that at the time of Ġa‘far’s rule over Sicily (388-410 H.) the Kalbite emirs acted as independent rulers and the Fāṭimid caliph did not exercise his authority on the island nor on his wālī. No significant event is recorded in the Arabic sources listed in Amari’s “Biblioteca arabo-sicula” concerning the year 404 H and those immediately following. The emir Ġa‘far ruled wisely and rightfully over the island up to 405 H., when his brother ‘Alī, with the support of Berbers and Black slaves rebelled against him, but was defeated on the 7th ofSHA’BĀN (31 January 1015)32. The decline of the Kalbite emirate began later from 410/1019 and in 404 H., the island still enjoyed a flourishing period in respect to Ifrīqiyya, where famine and pestilence burst forth in 395, driving many inhabitants from Qayrawān to take refuge in Sicily. Since then, turmoil, famine and civil wars were intermittent on the North African soil and 406 (1015-1016), 409 (1018-1019) and 413 (1022-1023) were critical years. With the moving of the Fāṭimids to Egypt a restoration of Sunni orthodoxy took place in North Africa, while al-Wāḥikī started a policy of religious purges in Egypt. In 409, a group of Shi‘is, who took refuge in Sicily, was brutally slaughtered33. The historical background does not offer any hint about the adoption of the stellate type.

Another possible answer is to consider Solomon’s seal, a potent talisman of Jewish origin formed by two interlocking triangles symbolizing the close relation of the upper and lower worlds,34 whose underlying idea may be that the points of the star pierce the invisible enemies. It could have been used on coins as a protection from the disorders of those years. In this sense, even the text could be arranged to form a magical star whose numerical coefficients are the sum of the letters found in the twelve rays35. Sicilian minting had been using this model in the name of al-Wāḥikī for five years, but later it was revived under al-Mustansīr’s reign, likewise on quarter dinars whose first appearance is dated 43x H.36, but the majority range from 442 to 465 H.,

32 IBN AL-ATHĪR, Kāmil al-tawārīkh, in Biblioteca arabo-sicula., I, Torino-Roma 1880, p. 442. The same report is also included or abridged in the works of later historians as in al-Bayān al-Muġrib by IBN ‘IḌĀRĪ, B.A.S., II, 1881, p. 31.
35 The numbers were derived by calculating the sum of the numbers corresponding to the value of each letter according to the correspondences used in the Maghreb. The verification of this possibility should be done through a linear equation in which the possible permutations of the twelve net numbers are equal to twelve factorial, but this goes far beyond my actual abilities.
36 N. D. NICOL, op. cit., p. 265.
with one, three or more pellets in the central area. Issues in silver are unfortunately undated and introduced a new weight unity called five-\textit{kharrūbah}.\textsuperscript{37} It is noteworthy that the stellate type is documented in this period also out of Sicily, as a silver stellate coin minted in Ḥalab is dated 454 and N. Lowick published a dateless stellate with mint Mahdiyyah found in Agrigento, under no. 104. He underlined that two stellate quarter dinars with mint Palermo bear the dates 460 and 461 H., when the Zirid army took possession of the capital city. This fact could explain the minting of the stellate coin in Mahdiyyah, probably issued to pay the Zirid soldiers stationed on the island. Eighteen out the 43 dateless stellate quarter dinars without mint name, could come from Mahdiyyah too, as they show a \textit{dāl} under the beginning of the word “al-mu‘minīn” likewise no.104\textsuperscript{38}. A large number of pale stellate quarter dinars found in the storeroom of Cassibile was at first attributed to the rebel emirs of Sicily by Balog on the assumption made previously by Luigi Cora. However, as concerns our investigation, the fact that the stellate type was not limited to Sicily is not particularly significant, as al-Mustanṣir’s issues are just a revival of a previous type.

The Norman conquest started a process completed under the Hohenstaufen dynasty that could be called “un-islamization,” notwithstanding the undeniable fascination they felt for the Islamic culture. A process developing on a contrary way to what we have described at the very beginning appears on the coinage that likewise proceeds from an imitative phase to the proposal of a type reflecting the ruler’s cultural identity. The rulers’ program was implemented at first as Christianization and only later it took the form of Latinization and it happened also by means of the immigration of Greek and Latin speaking people from the Italian peninsula. The Normans had to operate within a predominantly Muslim country where many Greeks had converted and agreed to keep the administrative structures managed by a Greek elite during most of Roger II’s reign. The Latin culture was shared by a minority limited to the army and clergy who followed Count Roger to the island. A firm kingdom could be established only by taking into consideration the tripartite composition of Sicilian society and balancing each ethnic, linguistic and cultural group to

\textsuperscript{37} The coins were classified by L. \textsc{Cora}, “Uno sguardo alla monetazione degli Arabi in Sicilia”, in \textit{Bollettino del Circolo Numismatico Napoletano}, 31 (1946), pp. 17-49 and P. \textsc{Balog}, “The Silver Coinage of Arabic Sicily”, in \textit{Atti della Seconda Settimana di Studi Italo-Arabi}, Spoleto 9-12 ottobre 1977, pp. 16-21.

\textsuperscript{38} N. \textsc{Lowick}, “Un ripostiglio di monete d’oro islamiche e normanne da Agrigento”, in \textit{Bollettino di Numismatica}, 6-7 (1986), pp. 148-149.
reinforce Hauteville power. Christian and Latin elements were, of course, more evident on copper coinage, which was intended for local circulation, especially in the areas where a Christian population either of Greek or Latin rite was present. An early innovation appears on Roger I’s trifollaro where the count appears as a Norman knight. Even the conventional image of the Virgin with the Child does not follow the traditional Byzantine iconography.

The Norman conquerors retained an imitative coinage as long as the prestige of the Fāṭimid coins was recognized in the Mediterranean area and there were profitable conditions for their preservation in view either of their expansion over North African coasts or of the role played by the Muslims in the composite Sicilian society. I presume they want to represent a new conception of Western empire free from the obedience to papacy, at least until they were recognized as legitimate kings, and that was as the true heir of the Holy Roman Empire. This probably explains why they searched for the representation of their royal power in the inscriptions and symbols of Byzantine and Islamic culture, a semiologic language that could be decoded by the contemporary audience. They chose the Fāṭimids as a model of Arab royal power because they offered the nearest and most magnificent display of absolute power of their time. The choice of adopting Islamic and Byzantine models and symbols was aimed at legitimating the Norman royal power and can be better understood in the light of their imperialistic plans which reached Ifrīqiyā and went far beyond Southern Italy.

The first quarter dinars issues show a Tau, later transformed with foliated branches until the early 1130s by Roger II, that is a type of cross. In addition, the part of the kalimah referred to the prophetic mission of Muhammad was dropped since 506 H./1112.

Differently from his father, Roger II, chose his visual symbols from Byzantine iconography, as it is showed by the Christ Pantocrator present this time on the reverse on his first concave follaro, modelled, according to Grierson, on the Greek trachy. But also the Christ seated on a high-backed or backless throne, the figures of the Virgin, or of St Demetrius and of St Nicolas present on his copper coinage are not very different

---

40 M. Gelfer-Jørgensen, Medieval Islamic Symbolism and the Paintings in the Cefalù Cathedral, Leiden 1986, pp. 153-165 on the way Roger II chose to legitimize his role of “new basileus” and “sole legitimate heir of all previous princes” through art and Late Antiquity and Byzantine symbolisms.
from Byzantine coins\textsuperscript{41}. Nevertheless, the very first concave copper coin bears in the field of the reverse the vernacular legend CESVS in the place of the Greek IC XC and Travaini no. 161\textsuperscript{42} shows the overturning of Byzantine conventions as the secular portrait occurs on the convex face. As Grierson and Travaini stressed, “from at least the late 1120s onwards, Roger himself is shown wearing an imperial crown with pendilia and chlamys and holding a globus cruciger”, but not an akakia, the most characteristic Byzantine imperial ornament, as it was never adopted in Latin Christendom\textsuperscript{43}. Both scholars think that the adoption of these imperial ornaments does not imply that Roger styled himself basileus, however, the recourse to this iconography cannot be meaningless. Of course there is no clear intention to self-assign such title, but one can detect the will to attribute to himself the same status of the Byzantine Emperor.

The Christian symbol of the cross became manifest on the coinage of Roger II between the acquisition of the royal title in 1130 and the monetary reform in 1140. After Roger’s coronation the production of documents in Latin rose as a consequence of the institution of a Latin system of administration that was completed in 1140\textsuperscript{44}. We know that Roger II was crowned in 1130 in Palermo by the antipope Anacletus II and only after 1140 his relations with the Roman Catholic Church were normalized, owing to Pope Innocent II’s acknowledgement of Roger’s sovereignty. From this ensued political and social reforms that led to the creation of a new form of state, and such a transformation was faithfully mirrored in new models of coins.

On the reverse of the last type of quarter dinar struck in the name of Roger II, King of Sicily, a Greek cross or equal-armed cross bears the Christus vincit abbreviated Greek formula. Many of Roger’s coins follow the Islamic prototype: his title, like that of his successors, was modelled on those of the Fāṭimid rulers, the legends on one face are in Arabic and adopt Islamic chronology, but from this time onwards they also introduce increasingly Christian elements. It is quite obvious that the


\textsuperscript{42} L. TRAVAINI, La monetazione dell’Italia normanna, Roma 1995.

\textsuperscript{43} PH. GRIERSON- L. TRAVAINI, Medieval European Coinage ..., op. cit., p. 106

adoption of the bulls-eye type on the obverse of taris was made without understanding the implicit religious meaning of the Fāṭimid coins we discussed above. Travaini treated the post-1130 coinage as “transitional”, as Roger was in search of a Greek equivalent for “ruler”. The Greek title ρηξ present on two follari is clearly borrowed, according to Grierson-Travaini, from the Latin “rex”.

As it is easy to guess, references to Byzantine iconography are largely found on the Mainland and even the language is influenced to such an extent that in a follaro struck at Bari, the mint-date formula in Arabic use the verb ‘umila, instead of ḍuriba, moulded on the Greek “égineto”.

Evidence of the fact that Islamic imitative coinage was conceived within the advancement of Norman hegemony in the Mediterranean, and that the Christian symbols were used only for a Christian interface, is given by the two dinars struck at Mahdiyyah in the name of Roger II, dated 543/1148-49, modelled on al-Zāhir’s dinars, and clear of all the Christian symbols used on Sicilian taris.

In 1140 the cross with equal arms was replaced by a smaller one on a long shaft with the traditional IC XC NI KA formula. After 1140, with the monetary reform, two new denominations were introduced: the ducalis, concave and Byzantine in design, but with Latin legends and the tercia ducalis, which bears the Arabic mint and date formula on the obverse and the name of the monetary unit in Latin with Christian symbols on the reverse. As for the ducalis, the type with Roger’s son shows the passage from imitative to adaptive phase, as the engravers of dies searched Byzantine models for elements that could suit the need and adapted them in order to create an iconography expressing the values of the dynasty.

A slow and progressive Latinization of the island is witnessed by the introduction of Latin legends and abbreviations, and the use of the Latin cross as early as William I’s coinage.

As the power of the Norman feudatories grew, so the Latin component began to prevail on the rest of the population: the Muslim emigration increased and the Basilian monasteries having fewer and fewer donations passed to the Benedictine rule. Towards the end of the Norman dynasty, the Greek population was assimilated into the Latin Christendom.

---

47 See I. Peri, op. cit., p.75.
William II’s follaro, a large and heavy legendless coin, bearing a lion head on a face and a palm tree with dates on the other, perhaps recalls Roger II’s cloak, called erroneously a coronation mantle, where a palm-tree, setting the location, is flanked by a lion 48, symbol of Christ and of the sovereign, seizing a camel, that is the Muslim population, 49 a political program that was concluded under Hohenstaufen rule. In their coinage, the Greek and Arabic elements were replaced by the western ones, as the political and economic interests of their kingdom turned increasingly to the north 50.

48 The symbolism of the lion is particularly rich as we can infer mainly by religious literature. It is above all the symbol of Christ and Christians, but also of strength, courage and noble-mindedness. See Dom Pierre Miqael, Dictionnaire symbolique des animaux. Zoologie mystique, Paris 1991, pp. 183-188. The last qualities are strictly linked to the figure of the ruler. Concerning the animal combat between a lion and a harmless beast as a symbol for royal power see also M. Barrucand and al., L’Art du Moyen Age, Occident, Byzance, Islam, Paris 1995, p. 480.


50 The progressive Christianization of the island is witnessed, for instance, as regards material culture by the marked difference between Sicilian and North African pottery from the second half of the 12th century and the “Latinization” of ceramics in the first half of the 13th century due to the increasing contacts between Sicily and the South of Italy. See A. Molinari, “The Effects of the Norman Conquest on Islamic Sicily (11th–13th centuries), in Colloque international d’archéologie islamique, ed. By R.-P. Gayraud, Le Caire 1998, pp. 260-262. Examples of different nature and a rich bibliography on the topic can be found in V. Grassi, “Le stele funerarie islamiche di Sicilia. Provenienze e problemi aperti”, in Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome, Moyen Âge, 116 /1 (2004), pp. 354-355, 359-360.