



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Documents of History, Symbols of Authority: The Coinage of the Fatimids Alnoor Merchant

Introduction

The Fatimid caliphate was established in 297/909 in North Africa, and soon extended into Sicily, Egypt, Palestine and Syria, reaching the peak of its power during the long reign of the eighth Fatimid imam-caliph al-Mustansir bi'llah (d. 487/1094).¹ This period of almost two centuries is often referred to as a ‘golden age’ in Ismaili history.

The Fatimids placed a high value on intellectual activities and Cairo, as the capital city, became a flourishing centre of scholarship and learning. The Fatimid period was also noteworthy for its patronage of artistic activities (over 200 categories of artisans existed) and some of the finest works of art in the history of Muslim civilisation were produced during this period. The examples of carved woodwork, textiles, ceramics, stone and ivory, glass, metalwork and jewellery that have survived from this period provide a glimpse of the magnificence that once surrounded the Fatimid court. Fatimid art combined originality with the influences of various older artistic traditions and “was both the culmination of the past and the forerunner of future developments.”² It is in recognition of these intellectual achievements and cultural contributions that the French Orientalist Louis Massignon designated the tenth century as the ‘Ismaili century’ of Islam. Not only did the Fatimid period mark a glorious age in Ismaili history, but also “one of the greatest eras in Egyptian and Islamic histories [and] a milestone in the development of Islamic civilization.”³

The Fatimids established a vast network of trade and commerce, with Egypt as the focal point of trading activities that extended as far as Spain in the west and India in the east (and beyond the Muslim regions as well). Describing the markets in Fatimid Cairo, Nasir Khusraw writes:

“I estimated that there were no less than twenty thousand shops in Cairo... Every sort of rare goods from all over the world can be had there: I saw tortoise-shell implements such as small boxes, knife handles, and so on. I also saw extremely fine crystal, which the master craftsmen etch most beautifully... I saw the following fruits and herbs, all in one day: red roses, lilies, narcissus, oranges, citrons, limes and other citrus fruits, apples, jasmine, basil, quince, pomegranates, pears, melons of various sorts, bananas, olives, myrobalan, fresh dates, grapes, sugarcane, eggplants, fresh squash, turnips, radishes, cabbage, fresh beans, cucumbers, green onions, fresh garlic, carrots, and beets... In Old Cairo they make all types of porcelain, so fine and translucent that you can see your hand behind it when held up to the light. From this porcelain they make cups, bowls, plates, and so forth... They also produce a glass so pure and flawless that it resembles chrysolite, and it is sold by weight.”⁴

This remarkable economic vitality led to the development of complex administrative and financial systems comprising a number of *diwans*, ministries or departments, including the *diwan al-insha'* (the chancery of state), and the *diwan al-amwal* (ministry of finance).

¹ Dates are given according to the lunar years of the Muslim calendar followed by the corresponding Common Era date.

² Oleg Grabar, “Fatimid Art, Precursor or Culmination”, in *Isma‘ili Contributions to Islamic Culture*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Tehran, 1977), p. 221.

³ Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis: Traditions of a Muslim Community* (Edinburgh, 1998), p. 66.

⁴ Nasir Khusraw, *Nasir-i Khusraw's Book of Travels (Safarnama)*, ed. and tr. by Wheeler M. Thackston, Jr (California, 2001), p. 57 and pp. 69-70.



The Manufacture of Fatimid Coins

Coinage are visible expressions of the wealth of the state and often signify the “unique vestige of movements of people and goods which are themselves gone.”⁵ As with coins of other lands and of other cultures, the coinage of the Fatimids lies at the juncture of a multitude of historical, political, economic, artistic and cultural concerns. Fatimid coins were manufactured under government control in state-run mints (the control of the mint, as well as the bureau of weights and measures, fell under the domain of the *qadi*). Among the mints that have been identified are: ‘Akka (Acre), ‘Asqlan (Ascalon), Baghdad, Barqa, Damishq (Damascus), Fez, Filastin, Halab (Aleppo), Iskandariyya (Alexandria), al-Mahdiyya, al-Mansuriyya, Masila, Mecca, Medina, Misr (Cairo), Qayrawan, Sana'a, Sijilmasa, Siqilliya (Palermo), Sur (Tyre), Tabariyya (Tiberias), Tripoli in Syria, Tripoli in Libya, Zabid and Zawila. Fatimid coins were a means of visual communication to a vast public, sometimes exhibiting signs of the power and authority of a particular ruler and, at other times, signifying major political or ideological changes. Their high gold content and purity – which was sustained throughout the Fatimid period – testified to the wealth and economic prosperity of the Fatimid state, as well as influenced the way people viewed the Fatimids’ power and prestige.⁶ Most Fatimid coins are dated, and as such are important documents providing unique chronological and historical details.⁷

Stylistic Details of Fatimid Coins

Coinage minted in the names of the first two Fatimid imam-caliphs ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi (297-322/980-934) and al-Qa’im bi-Amr Allah (322-334/934-946) followed the coinage style used by the Aghlabid rulers of Tunisia with a marginal inscription around a central field with horizontal inscriptions. For example, a gold *dinar* dated 331/942-943 and minted at al-Mahdiyya in the name of imam-caliph al-Qa’im has, on its reverse, a five-line inscription in the centre field, which includes *al-Imam al-Qa’im billah Amir al-Mu’mimin*, with an inner marginal inscription with the mint name and date and an outer marginal inscription citing verse 115 from Chapter 6 (*Sura An’am*) of the Holy Qur’an. The obverse of this coin also has a five-line inscription in the centre field, which includes *Muhammad Abu'l-Qasim al-Mahdi bi'llah*, with an outer marginal inscription citing verse 33 from Chapter 9 (*Sura Tawba*) of the Holy Qur’an.

A more open design was adopted in the coinage of the imam-caliph al-Mansur bi’llah (334-341/946-953). In the year 335/946, imam-caliph al-Mansur gave the order to begin construction of a new palace city half a mile to the southeast of Qayrawan. A gold *dinar* dated 341/952-953 and carrying the mint name of this city – officially called *al-Mansuriyya* meaning ‘The Victorious City’ – has, on its reverse, a four-line inscription in the centre field, which reads *‘Abd Allah Isma’il al-Imam al-Mansur bi'llah Amir al-Mu’mimin*, surrounded by two concentric circles, the inner circle, which is blank, and the outer circle with the marginal inscription containing the mint name and date. The Muslim testimony of faith (the *shahada*) is contained in a three-line inscription in the centre field on the obverse, and the outermost margin has an inscription citing verse 33 from Chapter 9 (*Sura Tawba*) of the Holy Qur’an.

A distinctive style, wherein the horizontal field is dropped altogether in favour of three concentric circular bands of calligraphy, is to be found on coins minted during the reign of the imam-caliph al-Mu’izz li-Din Allah (341-365/953-975). A gold *dinar* of the first Fatimid coinage struck in Egypt and dated 358/969 reflects this development. The innermost circle on the reverse reads *al-Mu’izz li-Din Allah Amir al-Mu’mimin*, with the outermost circle containing the mint name and date. The obverse of the coin contains the *shahada* in the innermost circle, with phrases that are of a specifically *Shi'a*

⁵ Oleg Grabar, *Centuries of Gold: The Coinage of Medieval Islam* (London, 1986), Introduction, p. 6.

⁶ See Irene A. Bierman, *Writing Signs: The Fatimid Public Text* (Berkeley, 1998), p. 68: “Fatimid dinars came to be valued in the market for their purity and that purity guaranteed that the coins would pass readily into neighbouring as well as distant lands. Then as well as now, sound coinage strongly suggested a sound economy and a strong government.”

⁷ For an overview of the importance of coinage in the reconstruction of Fatimid history, see Paul E. Walker, *Exploring an Islamic Empire: Fatimid History and its Sources* (London, 2002), pp. 94-99.



nature in the middle circle, and an inscription of verse 9:33 from the Holy Qur'an in the outermost circle.

Only one coinage type is known from the time of the imam-caliph al-'Aziz bi'llah (365-386/975-996), with the inscriptions arranged in double concentric circles on both the obverse and reverse.

From 386/996 onwards, all coins carried the "quintessential Shi'i legend attesting to the *wilaya* of [imam] 'Ali b. Abi Talib by use of the phrase '*Ali wali Allah*'.⁸ An example of this coinage type is a gold *dinar* from the time of the imam-caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (386-411/996-1021), which is dated 394/1003-1004 with the mint name al-Qahira al-Mahrusa.

There were three coinage types during imam-caliph al-Hakim's reign, and both the obverse and reverse of this coin – an example of the second type – have two-line inscriptions in the centre field and three concentric circles, with inscriptions in the outer and inner circles. The appearance of *al-Qahira al-Mahrusa* ('Cairo the Protected') as the mint name is extremely rare and significant, and it is likely that this coin was a special issue to commemorate the completion of the walls of the city of Cairo in the same year. Another significant event that occurred during the reign of imam-caliph al-Hakim was the inauguration, in 395/1005, of the *Dar al-'Ilm* (House of Knowledge), an institute of learning which attracted some of the foremost scholars and scientists of the time. In his historical work *al-Khitat*, which remains one of the main sources for the history of the Fatimids, the 15th-century Egyptian chronicler Taqi al-Din al-Maqrizi provides an account of how some of the endowment for the *Dar al-'Ilm* was to be used:

"For the purchase of mats and other household effects, 10 dinars; for paper for the scribe, i.e. the copyist, 90 dinars – that is the greatest single item –, for the librarian 48 dinars; for the purchase of water 12, for the servant 15, for paper, ink and writing reeds for the scholars studying there 12; for repairing the curtains 1 dinar; for the repair of possibly torn books or loose leaves 12; for the purchase of felt for blankets in the winter 5; for the purchase of carpets in the winter 4 dinars."⁹

During the rule of the imam-caliph al-Zahir li-I'zaz Din Allah (411-427/1021-1036), there were three different coinage styles used, and during the reign of the imam-caliph al-Mustansir bi'llah (427-487/1036-1094) there were two main types, one of which was identical to that issued by imam-caliph al-Mu'izz, except for the regnal title. Although the concentric circle format was a characteristic of Fatimid coinage, an unusual and distinguishing design appeared on the coins produced in Palermo, which was not only the capital of Sicily but also its commercial centre. An example is a gold quarter-*dinar* from the time of imam-caliph al-Mustansir, which is dated 457/1064-1065 with the mint name Siqilliya. On the obverse of this coin, the centre field consists of the *shahada* and the phrase '*Ali wali Allah*', and the marginal field has an inscription of verse 9:33 from the Holy Qur'an. On the reverse, the centre field has the name and title of the imam-caliph, and the marginal inscription provides the mint name and date. The inscriptions in the centre field of this small-sized coin have a distinctive ornamental arrangement, and are distributed within diametric segments that divide the surface into a series of spaces reminiscent of the appearance of a star; as such, these coins are often referred to as the 'stellate' or 'windmill' type.

The fine, elegant epigraphy and precisely engraved inscriptions, the more open design characterised by its circular emphasis, and the stylistic and artistic variations of Fatimid coins make them particularly fascinating, for both researchers and collectors. Significant numbers of Fatimid coins, especially gold *dinars*, are in museums and institutional holdings, including The British Museum,

⁸ Paul E. Walker, *Exploring an Islamic Empire*, p. 96.

⁹ From the *Khitat* of al-Maqrizi; as quoted by Heinz Halm, *The Fatimids and Their Traditions of Learning* (London, 1997), p. 76.



London, the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris and the American Numismatic Society, New York, as well as in various private collections.¹⁰

¹⁰ A complete corpus of all known Fatimid coinage – in terms of dates, types of issue, and mints – is currently being prepared by Doug Nicol.