

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM SYMBOLISM ON COINS OF THE EARLY ARAB EMPIRE (7 – 8th century CE) AN ATTEMPT AT A NEW APPROACH

Marcin GRODZKI

Oriental Faculty, University of Warsaw
Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927 Warsaw, Poland
marcin.grodzki@uw.edu.pl

This paper attempts to apply to the field of early Arab-Muslim numismatics chosen elements of a sceptical approach concerning the genesis of Islam developed recently in the field of Islamic studies in. First, the theory itself is being presented in a general sense (giving its proper place within the field of Islamic studies). Then, its theses are contrasted with the commonly accepted scholarly views on Muslim numismatics of the 7th – 8th centuries CE. A special attention is paid to the issue of intertwining of Christian and Muslim symbols on coins of the early Arab-Muslim Empire.

Key words: numismatics, early Islam, coin symbolism, Islamicist revisionism

The article presents an interpretation of the symbols depicted on Christian-Muslim coins minted at an early stage in the development of the Arab empire in the seventh century and the beginning of the eighth century CE. Sketching out of a new perspective is possible as a result of an innovatory, albeit niche theory developed several years ago by German Orientalists revising the current state of scholarly knowledge concerning this historical epoch. The theory fits into the broadly understood mainstream of Islamicist revisionism, evolving in the West with particular intensity in the last several years. And though the theory still remains largely in the research phase and is subject to disputes and controversies, one can already pre-attempt to apply it in the field of numismatics. Analysing the historical process of changes of symbolism and characters appearing on coins from the seventh and eighth centuries CE allows us to keep track of the way in which the political and religious doctrine of the nascent Arab empire was gradually shaped, alongside its dogmatic theology

and the religious identity of the followers of the great new monotheistic religion.

From Tradition to Criticism – at the Crossroads Methodology

In the light of the Muslim tradition, Islam appeared in the Middle East unexpectedly at the beginning of the seventh century and in only twenty years fully formed itself to become a great monotheistic religion. To a large extent, this image of the beginnings of Islamic history has for centuries been conditioning the studies on the origins of this religion undertaken by Western scholars of Islam. However, the Western Islamic studies offer no uniform normative methodological approach, or so-called *apparatus criticus*, to the early Islamic period. Over the years, a number of scientific schools have developed, with their own assumptions and objectives, their own methodological workshops and instruments of scientific criticism.

From the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, the works of the Western Orientalists were dominated by anti-Muslim polemical attitudes, characterized by a low interest in the substantive content of the sources of Muslim historiography.¹ This trend began to change gradually at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when researchers started to notice the scholarly value of the early Arab-Muslim literature and searched for it with more attention. This approach (sometimes referred to as descriptive)² was guided by three main methodological assumptions: that the text of the Qur'an possesses a documentary value relating to the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad; that the multitude of information contained in early Muslim chronicles (*alḥbār*) provides reliable material for the reconstruction of the course of historical events; and that – in contrast to the *alḥbār* – many hadith attributed to Muhammad have to be regarded as religious literature of a limited historiographic value (the latter assumption differentiates the descriptive approach decisively from the methodology of the traditional Muslim scholars who consider the hadith historiographical material of a value equal to or greater than the chronicles). The early historians and Orientalists included in this school, among others Edward Gibbon (1737 – 1794) and William Muir (1819 – 1905), thus initiated the traditional stream of Islamic studies existent till the

¹ For more on the polemical attitudes towards the traditional Muslim literature and an overview of that period of time, see the works of TOLAN, J.V. *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam: A Book of Essays*, 2000; and also DANIEL, N. *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, 1993.

² DONNER, F.M. *Narratives of Islamic Origins. The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, p. 6. The following historical classification of Islamicist schools is based on this work by F.M. Donner.

present day, followed with modifications also by many contemporary authors (including Philip Hitti,³ Marshall G.S. Hodgson,⁴ Hugh Kennedy⁵ or Albert Hourani).⁶ The descriptive approach, attractive because of the abundance of rich collections of the Arab-Muslim tradition, has been widely recognized by academia as normative for the study of early Islam. It also lay at the basis of the modern common knowledge on this historical period.

The mid-nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth brought in another change in the methodology of research. The scope of the source materials (mainly narrative ones) used in the studies of early Islam was extended: the Western reader discovered and could read in print (translations often with critical commentaries), many crucial works of the early Islamic writers, including the *Sīra* by Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, the *Ṭabaqāt* by Muḥammad ibn Saʿd and the *Futūḥ al-Buldān* by Al-Balāḏūrī. This process also picked up momentum thanks to the popularization of print in the Arab world. European scholars, confronted with the influx of new information, became increasingly faced with the problem of mutual contradictions in the historiographic material, anachronisms, inconsistencies and logical shortcomings of the studied texts, often in addition to their political and religious bias. Drawing on the experience of the European positivist historiography, scholars have chosen the objective of editing these materials through juxtaposing them critically with each other, following the rules of comparatistics (also using Greek and Syriac works of the same period). The assumption was that the historiographic sources, containing a multitude of detailed and often conflicting information, must go back to earlier common literary sources; and hence, to some extent they still reflect the historical truth, distorted and contaminated by external factors. This critical-scholarly approach to the sources, shared two features with the descriptive one, namely, researchers were still recognizing the Quran as a credible material documenting the early Islamic period, while rejecting almost entirely the historiographic usefulness of the hadith. Among the pioneers of this approach were M.J. Goeje,⁷ Julius Wellhausen,⁸ and among the contemporary authors are Gordon Newby⁹ and Fuat Sezgin¹⁰ (who attempted to reconstruct the hypothetical

³ HITTI, P. *History of the Arabs*, 1937.

⁴ HODGSON, M.G.S. *The Venture of Islam*, 1974.

⁵ KENNEDY, H. *Muḥammad and the Age of the Caliphates: the Islamic Near East from the sixth to the eleventh century*, 1986.

⁶ HOURANI, A. *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 1991.

⁷ DE GOEJE, M.J. *Mémoires sur la conquête de la Syrie*, 1864.

⁸ WELLHAUSEN, J. *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten: Prolegomena zur ältesten Geschichte des Islams und Das Arabische Reich und Sein Sturz*, 1899.

⁹ NEWBY, G.D. *The Making of the Last Prophet: a Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*, 1989.

works of the Muslim authors of the first century A.H. whose works are known only from quotations of later authors).

On the brink of the 20th century the Hungarian Oriental scholar Ignaz Goldziher initiated another methodological school devoted to the early period of Islam. For the purpose of this article it can be described as the critical-traditional school (school critical of the Muslim tradition). Goldziher dealt mainly with the hadith. He developed a number of methodological tools by which he demonstrated the fragility of the historiographic value not only of the hadith, but also of other narrative source materials of the early Muslim tradition drawing on the isnāds: chronicles, *aḥbār*, *Sīra* etc. The critical-traditional approach assumes that there is no way to extrapolate from the entirety of the tradition historiographically reliable or unreliable materials, because during the first three or four centuries the oral and written traditions were fluid and intertwining with each other, subject to modifications and redactions, due to political, doctrinal, social and other factors. It is therefore utopian to reconstruct the non-extant hypothetical source materials of the earliest Islamic period. This approach was developed over the years by such scholars as Geo Widengren,¹¹ Harris Birkeland,¹² Rudolf Sellheim,¹³ Meir J. Kister,¹⁴ Albrecht Noth¹⁵ and Harald Motzki.¹⁶

The growing scepticism towards the early Muslim literature has become an integral feature of Western Islamic studies. In the second half of the twentieth century, it found its expression in the works of the precursors of the modern historical revisionism – Henri Lammens¹⁷ and Joseph Schacht.¹⁸ This sceptical methodological approach precludes the possibility of reconstructing the historical truth about the origins of Islam on the basis of the source materials of the Muslim tradition. Both the *Sīra* and the Qur'an itself are for the sceptics collective compilations of later editors. At the end of the 70's this methodological school was joined by Islamicists not limiting themselves only to the deconstruction of the traditional image of Islamic origins, but offering

¹⁰ SEZGIN, F. *Geschichte des arabischen Schriftums, Qur'anwissenschaften, Hadit, Geschichte, Fiqh, Dogmatik, Mystik*, Vol. 1, pp. 53 – 84

¹¹ WIDENGREN, G. *Muhammad, the Apostle of God, and his Ascension*, 1955.

¹² BIRKELAND, H. *The Lord Guideth: Studies on Primitive Islam*, 1956.

¹³ SELLHEIM, R. *Muhammeds erstes Offenbarungserlebnis*, pp. 1 – 16.

¹⁴ KISTER, M.J. *Studies in Jāhiliyya and Early Islam*, 1980.

¹⁵ NOTH, A. *Quellenkritische Studien zu Themen, Formen und Tendenzen früh-islamischer Geschichtsüberlieferung*, 1973.

¹⁶ MOTZKI, H. *Die Anfänge der islamischen Jurisprudenz: Ihre Entwicklung in Mekka bis zur Mitte des 2./8. Jahrhunderts*, 1991.

¹⁷ Inter alia: LAMMENS, H. *Le berceau de l'Islam: l'Arabie occidentale à la veille de l'hégire*, 1914.

¹⁸ SCHACHT, J. *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, 1950.

instead their own scholarly counter-theories: Günter Lüling,¹⁹ John Wansbrough,²⁰ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook,²¹ Suliman Bashear,²² Moshe Sharon²³ and Yehuda Nevo.²⁴ The assumptions of the sceptics can be summarized in the following points: the Qur'an was not canonized in its ultimate form until the late second/early third century A.H. and cannot be considered a direct historiographic source for the reconstruction of Islamic origins (it cannot be excluded that the Qur'an could have been compiled chronologically at the same time or even later than the essential corpus of the Prophet's sunna);²⁵ other written Arab-Muslim source materials are contaminated by religious polemic, politicization and literary fiction, and so they possess only a literary value, but not a historiographic one; the sources for Muhammad's biography bear the hallmarks of exegetical works, and hence cannot be regarded as authentic source material reporting about the life of the prophet of Islam. For sceptics, the centre of gravity in the search for the truth about the origins of Islam moves, therefore, to a large extent into the field of non-Arab and non-Muslim writings of the 8th and 9th centuries CE. A lot of arguments of the school of Islamic scepticism, though generally regarded as radical (as in the cases of H. Lammens or P. Crone), have not been clearly refuted till today by supporters of the traditional Islamicist mainstream.

Revisionism à la *Inârah* and the Religious Symbolism of early Islam

The sceptical school generated over time even more radical stances. Historical revisionism (to which the remaining part of this article is devoted), sometimes drawing near to negationism, undermines the fundamental historical pillars of the traditional account of Islamic origins.²⁶ The representatives of this stream

¹⁹ LÜLING, G. Über den Urkanon: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion der vorislamisch-christlichen Strophenlieder im Koran, 1974.

²⁰ WANSBROUGH, J. Qur'anic Studies. Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation, 1977; and WANSBROUGH, J. The Sectarian Milieu. Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History, 1978.

²¹ CRONE, P., COOK, M. Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World, 1977.

²² BASHEAR, S. Muqaddima fī ta'rīḥ al-'āḥar. [Introduction into the Other History], 1984.

²³ SHARON, M. The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land, pp. 225 – 235.

²⁴ NEVO, Y. D., KOREN, J. The Crossroads to Islam, The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State, 2003.

²⁵ WANSBROUGH, J. Quranic Studies, p. 52; and WANSBROUGH, J. The Sectarian Milieu, p. 42.

²⁶ More on this topic see GRODZKI, M. Przegląd współczesnych teorii naukowych zachodnioeuropejskiej szkoły rewizjonizmu islamistycznego. [Review of Modern Scholarly Theories by the West European Revisionist Scholarship on Islam], 2012.

include, among others, the French monk Bruno Bonnet-Eymard²⁷ and numerous Islamicists linked to the West European research institute on early Islam – *Inârah* (“Institut zur Erforschung der frühen Islamgeschichte und des Koran *Inârah*”),²⁸ in large part associated with the University of Saarland in Germany and several other research centres of the Western Islamic scholarship (including France, Canada and the USA).²⁹

According to the scholarly ideas presented by the *Inârah* Institute, the formation of the basic tenets of the Muslim religion was – contrary to traditional judgments – a fluid and long-term process extending over a timespan of at least 150 – 200 years after the mission of the Prophet Muhammad.³⁰ Doctrinally, the precursors of the Muslims were a specific community of unreformed Syro-Arab Christians (Arabs brought up in the Syro-Aramaic cultural environment of Greater Syria) who became gradually detached from the mainstream doctrine of the Byzantine church, starting maybe from the fourth and fifth centuries CE. In the seventh century, the Syro-Arab faith was already characterized by a clear anti-trinitarianism, akin to the beliefs of the Arians, and by strong monotheism.³¹ Its followers gradually began taking over the power over subsequent areas of Greater Syria, after the Emperor Heraclius abandoned in the 620’s CE the formal administrative authority over the eastern Byzantine provinces. The Syrian Arabs considered themselves politically the rightful heirs of the Byzantine dominions in the East; religiously they believed in the new chosenness of the Arabs – sons of Ishmael as the spiritual inheritors of Abraham and heirs of the Mosaic law.³²

²⁷ BONNET-EYMARD, B. *Le Coran. Traduction et commentaire systématique*, n.d.

²⁸ *Inârah* means in Arabic “enlightment”.

²⁹ Among the members *Inârah* are, inter alia, Karl-Heinz Ohlig, Gerd-Rüdiger Puin, Markus Gross, Volker Popp, Christoph Luxenberg (author of the known theory of the Syro-Aramaic reading of the Qur’an), Ibn Warraq, Claude Gillot. Since 2005, the Institute issues (through the Hans Schiler publishing house) a series of collective publications devoted to the alternative research on the oldest history of Islam.

³⁰ A similar theory, albeit constructed on the basis of a different set of methodological evidence, was put forward in the late 1970s by the American historian and sceptical Orientalist John Wansbrough in his landmark work “*Quranic Studies. Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*”, 1977.

³¹ This idea is akin to the theory of the Israeli archaeologist Yehuda Nevo (school of Islamicist scepticism). According to him, the progressive development of the Muslim faith began with a stage of “*indeterminate monotheism*”, and not earlier than at the end of the 8th century CE can one speak of the establishment of the dogmatic pillars of Islam, similar to those we know today. NEVO J., KOREN J. *Crossroads*, pp. 195 – 196 and 243 – 244.

³² More on the historical vision of the genesis of Islam as seen through the eyes of the researchers from the *Inârah* Institute, can be found in the article OHLIG, K.-H. *Vom Ostiran nach Jerusalem und Damaskus. Historische Probleme der Quellenlage, Entstehung und Geschichte der koranischen Bewegung*, pp. 10 – 34.

From the fourth century CE, such a theological current was gradually drifting away from the teachings of Constantinople and Rome, and turning slowly into Islam as a separate non-Christian religion. Still in the first half of the 8th century, the last of the great Eastern Fathers of the Church working in the Umayyad administration in Damascus – John of Damascus (675 – 750 CE) perceived the faith of “*the sons of Ishmael*” (as the to-become-Muslims were called by then) as one of the Christian heresies influenced by Arianism. According to researchers from *Inârah*, it was not until the turn of the eighth and ninth centuries that the new evolving Arab faith ceased to be seen as an offshoot of Christianity, taking on the full-fledged characteristics of a separate non-Christian religion.³³

The school of the historical revisionism suggests, therefore, that the formative process of the basic foundations of the Muslim faith could have been much longer and smoother than is commonly believed. One can find the reflections of the liquidity of this process in, among other places, the evolution of the symbolism on the early Arab coins, but also in archaeological evidence, writings and epigraphy from that period.

In this alternative scholarly approach, reassessment is needed for a number of symbols and inscriptions appearing on coins hitherto conventionally classified as belonging to the Muslim era, or allegedly bearing evidence of the religious tolerance of the rulers from the early Arab-Islamic Empire.³⁴ They include the figure of the so-called *standing caliph* and motifs of the *bethel* (house of God) and *yegar sahadutha* (stone of witness), the long cross, the sacrificial lamb, the palm branch, the dove, the judge’s sword (sword with a mandorla), the aureole, the globus cruciger, as well as the Arab words “*muḥammad*”, “*abd Allāh*”, “*manṣūr*”, “*abd ar-raḥmān*” etc.

According to the German numismatist and historian of religions Volker Popp (belonging to the *Inârah* Institute), the emerging dogmatics of the new Arab church focused around a number of concepts and symbols highlighting at every step their distinctiveness from the faith of the Byzantine Emperor. The key concept here is the word “*muḥammad*” referring still in the seventh and eighth centuries – according to Popp’s theory – not to the name of the Muslim prophet Muhammad, but specifying theologically one of the attributes of the person of

³³ OHLIG, K.-H. Wieso dunkle Anfänge des Islam?, p. 10.

³⁴ The idea of the existence of a wide Islamic tolerance towards non-Muslims in the conquered areas is common in the traditional Muslim literature, both old and modern. The saving of Christian churches by Muslim rulers, or even minting new coins with Christian religious symbols is interpreted as an expression of this tolerance. For example, Thomas Arnold writes that “*On the whole, unbelievers have enjoyed under Muhammadan rule a measure of toleration, the like of which is not to be found in Europe until quite modern times.*” ARNOLD, T. The Preaching of Islam, p. 420. See also ABOU EL-FADL, K. The Place of Tolerance in Islam, pp. 13 – 22.

the Messiah Son of God.³⁵ Similarly, “*abd Allāh*” was supposed to mean “the servant of God” and not the name of the father of Muhammad,³⁶ “*muslim*” – a follower of a traditionalist pre-Nicaean exegesis of the Holy Scripture,³⁷ and “*islām*” – the compliance of the faith dogmas with the transmission of “*al-Kitāb*” – the Holy Scripture.³⁸

According to Popp, starting from the seventh century and the rule of the Umayyad dynasty, the Arab faith was promoted by the ruling caliphs as a counterweight to Christianity represented by the hostile Byzantine Empire. The Arab Umayyad rulers and the first Abbasid caliphs were still *not considering themselves Christian rulers, claiming to cling to the non-deviated spirit of the faith of their forefathers – Abraham and Moses. At the same time, there began the process of the gradual liberation of the autonomous Arab state from under the religious sovereignty of Constantinople. According to the concept of the Arab rulers, the new Arab empire – as the guardian of the untainted, primary message of the Abrahamic faith – was supposed to have its own separate independent religion, its own dogmatic theology and religious symbolism associated to this theology,³⁹ including its immortalization on coins.

³⁵ POPP, V. Von Ugarit nach Sāmarrā. Eine archäologische Reise auf den Spuren Ernst Herzfelds, p. 81. Volker Popp is convinced that the first written evidence of the word “*muḥammad*” as a proper name dates back to the year 67 Arab era in Harat, and refers to the name of an Arab emir. Earlier, it is supposed to be have been used only as an epithet.

³⁶ POPP, V. Von Ugarit nach Sāmarrā, p. 77, and GYSELEN, R. Arab-Sasanian Copper Coinage, p. 70. Reading the word “*muḥammad*” in this sense was suggested already in 1895 (and therefore long before V. Popp and Ch. Luxenberg) by Martin Hartmann when identifying Abbasid copper coins. See HARTMANN, M. Mittheilungen aus der Sammlung Hartmann. Kupfermünzen abbasidischer Statthalter, 2004.

³⁷ POPP, V. Biblische Strukturen in der islamischen Geschichtsdarstellung, pp. 54 – 55.

³⁸ According to the French researcher associated with the *Inārah* Institute – Claude Gillot – from the Université d’Aix-en-Provence, in the period before Islam the words “*muḥammad*” and “*abd Allāh*” were not used as proper names, but were created at a later date as theophoric names. In this perspective, “*muḥammad*” is not a historical figure, but one of the theological concepts of the above mentioned group of Syro-Arab Christians. These concepts were the axis of development of the new Arab church dogmatics, emphasizing at every step its distinctiveness from the faith of the Byzantine Emperor. The historization of the concept of “*muḥammad*” to the person of the prophet of a new religion took place only after the advent of the Abbasid dynasty, within a backward projection of the history of Islam, for the purposes of legitimizing the power of the Abbasids. During that time also the Arabic biography of Muhammad was written down. GILLOT, C. Zur Herkunft der Gewährsmänner des Propheten, p. 166.

³⁹ It seems that Popp’s idea of the gradual doctrinal evolution of the Arab faith and the late date of the final canonization of the Muslim religious tradition coincides in part with the conclusions reached in the 70’s by the American Orientalist-sceptic John Wansbrough. In his understanding, the Muslim tradition is not so much the result of an intentional editing by a group of people in a short time after the death of Muhammad,

The iconography of the coins is therefore supposed to show the smooth transition of the doctrinal changes (political and religious) occurring in the early Arab empire. Arab coins from the seventh and eighth centuries CE contain a whole range of religious symbols and signs traditionally associated with the Christian culture. According to Popp, only after some time are these symbols modified and adapted to the needs of the emerging Arab monotheistic religion, gradually moving beyond the doctrines of Christianity.⁴⁰

Mu‘āwiya “the Christian” and the Symbolism of the Shrine of St. John *the Baptist in Damascus

The Arabs began minting their own coins not earlier than in the 640’s CE. According to Popp’s theory, it must have been related to the expiry of the transitional period of 20 years since the abolition of the Byzantine administrative sovereignty over Greater Syria agreed with Constantinople. The liberation from the chains of the treaty obligations towards Constantinople coincided with the death of the Emperor Heraclius (641).⁴¹

The founder of the Umayyad dynasty, Mu‘āwiya I (661 – 680 CE), formerly an ally of the Byzantines and their confederate in Syria, was striking coins still in the Byzantine type. From the period of his rule come Damascene coins depicting the relics of the head of John the Baptist. Mu‘āwiya (in the revisionist theory – still a Christian ruler) was attempting to paint himself as the guardian of the St. John the Baptist’s sanctuary in Damascus, a highly respected sanctuary among the Arabs. The tomb of the prophet was located in the crypt of the Damascus church, containing the relics of the head of John the Baptist. The coins from Damascus present in the obverse a standing figure of the ruler, with a lance in his right hand; next to him is a bird (dove?). The left hand of the ruler rests on the vessel containing the relics of John the Baptist. The juxtaposition of the dove and the relics brings to mind the Gospel story of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist (Plate 1).

Other iconographic elements on coins from the period of Mu‘āwiya’s reign include the globus cruciger (in the Middle Ages, in the Christian cultural milieu it meant the royal power and the ruler’s love for the Christian faith), a branch

“but rather a product of an organic development from originally independent traditions during a long period of transmission.” WANSBROUGH, J. *Quranic Studies*, p. 47.

⁴⁰ POPP, V. *Die frühe Islamgeschichte nach inschriftlichen und numismatischen Zeugnissen*, pp. 118 – 121.

⁴¹ In the theory of the German revisionist, the transformation of the coin symbolics can be traced by analysing the numismatic collections of early Arab coins containing the first references to the tenets of the new faith. See inter alia: WALKER, J. *A Catalogue of the Arab-Sassanian Coins*, 1941.

of a palm tree, the crowned head (the head of John the Baptist?), the cross, the sacrificial lamb (*agnus Dei*). All these symbols are historically associated with the cult of John the Baptist, for example, the sacrificial lamb is attested as his iconographic attribute from the sixth century on (in the Byzantine church the use of the symbol of the lamb of God as the Christ's pre-representation was ultimately replaced by the image of Christ by the canon 82 of the Council in Trullo in 692) (Plate 2).⁴²

In the opinion of Karl-Heinz Ohlig, a historian of religion from the *Inârah* Institute, the symbolism of coins minted during Mu'āwīya's reign testifies to the fact that his rule was marked by John the Baptist. He was to become in the 1st half of the 7th century the central figure of the new Arab church in the new Arab empire. Performing the custody of the sanctuary was supposed to predispose Mu'āwīya to rule over the Arab tribes of Greater Syria (Plate 3).⁴³

What is more, the Damascus crypt with the reliquary corresponded in sanctity to the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, of which the traditional guardians were the Byzantine Emperors as administrative viceroys of Christ on Earth. However, after the loss of Damascus with the sanctuary of St. John the Baptist into the hands of the Arabs, Byzantium lost the symbolic continuity of its sovereignty over the sites recorded by the salvation history in the Gospels. Without John the Baptist as "preparing the way of the Lord" the message of Christ becomes incomplete. And so, the Arabs under Mu'āwīya's rule, symbolically took over from Byzantium the Old Testament's heritage of faith of the patriarchs, the prophets and the fathers of the church (Plate 4).⁴⁴

Currently, some of these coins are commonly interpreted following the account of the Islamic literature as depicting the Caliph 'Umar and the commander of his troops Ḥālid ibn al-Walīd⁴⁵ who is remembered in the Muslim tradition as the conqueror of pagan idols and the chief of the victorious Arab march from Mecca through Ur of the Chaldeans to the land of Harran and that of Damascus in Syria.

'Abd al-Malik and the Rise of Islamic Symbolism

With the death of Mu'āwīya and the takeover of power in the Arab empire by 'Abd al-Malik (685 – 705 CE) the doctrinal fundamentals of the state changed

⁴² See inter alia: PERCIVAL, H.R. *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church. Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees*, p. 401.

⁴³ POPP, V. *Von Ugarit nach Sāmarrā*, pp. 60 – 64.

⁴⁴ POPP, V. *Die frühe Islamgeschichte*, pp. 45 – 46

⁴⁵ Such a traditional interpretation of the iconography and symbolism of these coins can be found, inter alia, in the catalogue by MILSTEIN, R. *Hoard of Umayyad Damascus Coins*, 1988/89.

clearly. The changes were followed by modifications of the symbolism on new coins. The new symbol of the emerging Arab statehood became the “*bethel*” – “house of God” (Genesis 28, 15 – 19) depicted on coins in the form of “*yegar sahadutha*” (the stone of witness – Genesis 31,45 – 47) (Plate 5).⁴⁶

Both symbols are historically derived from the Book of Genesis. In the spirit of ‘Abd al-Malik’s religious doctrine, they refer to the belief in the chosenness of the Arabs by God as the new heirs of the covenant given to Abraham, after the Jews failed to fulfill it. Israel, as the chosen people – descendants of Abraham and Sarah, disappointed the hopes put in them by contradicting God, and therefore, God’s promise of salvation passes to (the law-abiding in spirit) sons of Abraham and Hagar – the Arabs (Plate 6).

Hence, the stone of witness becomes the symbol of the new, permanent covenant between God and mankind. Its symbolism reaches (through the Byzantine coinage tradition) the Old Testament Semitic tradition. Starting from the period of the rule of ‘Abd al-Malik, the stone of witness replaced the symbol of the raised cross on steps, hitherto ubiquitously present on the coins of Mu‘āwiya and other Syrian Arab princes, following the Byzantine coins (Plate 7).

According to the conventional interpretation, the disappearance of the sign of the cross from the Arab coins of the end of the seventh century, resulted from the fact of rejection by Muslims of the Christian symbol of the cross as a means of salvation, as accounted by the traditional Muslim literature. But if so, why did it happen only at the end of the seventh century CE with the advent of ‘Abd al-Malik reign? The attempt to explain the presence of this symbol on coins preceding the 680s by the argument of the Muslim religious tolerance, or that this much time was needed by the Muslims to develop their own Islamic minting practice is not very convincing (Plate 8).⁴⁷

In the spirit of the above mentioned alternative scholarly theory, presenting the “*bethel*” in the form of “*yegar sahadutha*” on the obverse of Palestinian and Syrian gold and copper coins of the 7th century, is a manifestation of an ongoing ideological dispute with the Byzantine Empire at that time.⁴⁸ The reverse of this type of Arab coin bears the eschatological figure of Christ the Messiah with a (disproportionately long) sword of the righteous judge (the sword surrounded by mandorla of fire, the Christ with a beard) (Plate 9).

The back side of the Arab coins is occupied by the stone of witness – “*yegar sahadutha*”. The idea of “*bethel*” in the form of “*yegar sahadutha*” is located on the back side of all ‘Abd al-Malik’s coins (including those minted in North Africa) depicting – according to revisionists from *Inārah* – the figure of Christ,

⁴⁶ POPP, V. Von Ugarit nach Sāmarrā, pp. 92 – 95.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁸ POPP, V. Die frühe Islamgeschichte, pp. 67 – 71.

and – according to the traditional interpretation of numismatists – a figure of an unspecified Arab ruler.⁴⁹ According to Popp, the disproportionately long sword of Christ may be a reference to the tradition of the Sassanid coinage. The reverses of early Sassanid drachmas bore figures of guardians (wielding long swords) standing at the altar of the temple of fire. In the revisionist's theory, the Arab coins from the 7th century portrayed Christ as “*muḥammad*” – a blessed guardian of the covenant between God and men, in the spirit of the theology of the Arab state.⁵⁰

This symbolism may correspond with the contemporary Byzantine gold solidi of the Emperor Justinian II (685 – 696, and 705 – 711 CE) representing: on the obverse – a bust of Christ as *rex regnantium* and on the reverse – a cross on steps, and also: on the obverse – a bust of Christ in the Syrian type with long hair and beard, the book of the Gospels in his hand, behind his head a motif of the cross, and on the reverse – the Byzantine emperor as the servant of God (*servus Christi*) standing with a long cross in his right hand (Plate 10, Plate 11).

To give a contrast, the conventional numismatics (relying on the transmission of the Muslim tradition), including Clive Foss and Heinz Gaube,⁵¹ tends to interpret these types of Arab coins as portraying the Prophet Muhammad. However, this explanation gives rise to certain doctrinal issues, because from the point of view of the Islamic theology, imaging the person of the Prophet was and remains absolutely excluded.⁵² In the theory of Popp and Ohlig from the *Inârah* Institute, the traditional numismatists are misled here by the word “*muḥammad*” (written vertically) appearing on coins alongside the standing figure of a man, in this case mistakenly identified with the prophet of Islam. Hence, some numismatists suggest that he might rather represent the so-called standing caliph with the traditional Bedouin kufiya (scarf) on his head. However, still other numismatists, as George C. Miles, had already earlier

⁴⁹ It should be added that, according to some modern numismatists (including Clive Foss), the figure of an Arab rulers on these coins may be the representation of the prophet of Arabs. FOSS, C. *Anomalous Arab-Byzantine coins. Some problems and suggestions*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 74 – 75.

⁵¹ GAUBE, H. *Arabosasanidische Numismatik*, 1973.

⁵² Clive Foss describes this problem in the following way: “This raises the curious possibility that these coins portray not the caliph, but the prophet Mohammed. At first sight, this seems highly implausible, for Islam is well known for its prohibition of images, and the Prophet himself is never portrayed until the late middle ages, and then veiled. Yet, so little is known of early Islamic iconography, that the possibility may remain open. As Prof. Oleg Grabar informs me, there was apparently no formal prohibition against representing the Prophet in early Islam, but a general avoidance of images begins under ‘Abd al-Malik.” In FOSS, C. *Anomalous Arab-Byzantine coins. Some problems and suggestions*, p. 9.

pointed to the convergence of this symbolism with the portrayals of the person of Christ on Byzantine coins.⁵³

According to *Inârah*, when considering this problem from the point of view of the Syro-Arab eschatology and apocalyptic representations of Christ related to it, the earlier guesses draw near to certainty. For Popp and Ohlig, the so-called “*standing caliph*” of the Muslim numismatics is the Syrian apocalyptic representation of Christ – taking on the attitude of a victorious warrior, according to his imagery in the apocalyptic vision of the Book of Daniel (Plate 12).

The Arabic coins, having on their reverse the stone of witness, which symbolized the establishment of Israel, and on the obverse the figure of the eschatological Christ, fasten together doctrinally the idea of statehood professed by ‘Abd al-Malik: the back side of the coins points to the symbolic making of the covenant with God, and the front side presents the apocalyptic vision of the expected, imminent coming of the Messiah, the righteous judge. For Popp, the entire reign of ‘Abd al-Malik was proceeding theologically under the sign of the expected Second Coming of the Messiah.⁵⁴ This expectation found its reflection on coins which symbolically depict the beginning and the end of the history of salvation according to the doctrine of the new Arab state. Thus, this type of coins has from the perspective of the contemporary Arab eschatology a specifically timeless dimension: a look at their back side reminds us of the establishment of the chosenness of Israel, and a look at the front side announces the close coming of the Messiah filling the promise from the covenant. In this way, the history of salvation completes itself: Israel was expecting the Messiah since the conclusion of the covenant with God (Plate 13).

According to this alternative interpretation, the expected imminence of the end of the world also found its reflection in the fact of the building by ‘Abd al-Malik of the Jerusalem temple – the Dome of the Rock, the inscription of which (preserved to this day), according to Popp, was urging the Christians to a peaceful accord (*islām*) among themselves in the matters of faith as set out in the Book (the Holy Scripture).⁵⁵ The imminent Second Coming of Christ was,

⁵³ George C. Miles points to the similarities between the imagery of Arab rulers on Muslim coins and the portrayal of Christ on Byzantine coins. MILES, G.C. *The Earliest Arab Gold Coinage*, p. 216.

⁵⁴ POPP, V. *Die frühe Islamgeschichte*, pp. 96 – 99.

⁵⁵ The revisionist thesis that the Dome of the Rock was built as a Christian church, was put forward by V. Popp. Meanwhile, according to academically recognized conventional interpretation, the Jerusalem temple was erected by ‘Abd al-Malik as a mosque sealing the hegemony of the Umayyad dynasty and expressing the splendour of the golden age of Islam (though probably erected by Christian builders and planners from Syria or Palestine). According to the Muslim geographer Al-Ya‘qūbī, ‘Abd al-

according to ‘Abd al-Malik, predictable as to time and place: it was to be Jerusalem, the year 77 of the Arab era.⁵⁶

After Mu‘āwīya’s death, the theme of the cross was replaced with the sign of a palm tree. It symbolizes events described in the Qur’an connected to the birth of Christ under a date palm (Qur’an 19:23). For ‘Abd al-Malik who took over the helm of power, this symbol was taking on particular theological significance – in the place of Christ’s death on the cross.⁵⁷ In this way, ‘Abd al-Malik makes clear that the eschatology of the faith of the Arabs and the traditional eschatology of the Byzantine Church eventually split up.⁵⁸

Along with ‘Abd al-Malik’s rise to power, yet another symbol deriving from the Judeo-Christian tradition is being transformed. It is the seven-lamp temple lampstand (menorah) found, among others, in Palestine on copper coins minted by Mu‘āwīya, with the writing: “*Lā ilāha illā Allāhu waḥdahū*” (*There is no deity but One God*). During the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik the menorah theme got slightly modified – it lost two branches (to become a five-lamp stand). And so, after making a minor change to this symbol, ‘Abd al-Malik continues the tradition of his predecessor, promoting in parallel the faith in the new “*Arab Zion*” and the legacy of the Arabs as the true heirs of Israel. By keeping this iconographic element of the lampstand, ‘Abd al-Malik continues the tradition

Malik built the Dome of the Rock at the time of his rivalry with ‘Abd Allah ibn az-Zubayr in order to attract to Jerusalem the pilgrimage traffic heading already to Mecca. Yet another hypothesis is that the Dome of the Rock was intended by ‘Abd al-Malik to be the crowning of the victorious march of Islam with a simultaneous emphasis on the universality of this religion drawing upon the monotheistic heritage of Judaism and Christianity. “Qubbat al-Sakhra.” In *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, 2013. [online]

Available at http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.nd.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/kubbat-al-sakhra-COM_0533; GRABAR, O. The Dome of the Rock, p. 62; ELAD, A. Why Did ‘Abd al-Malik Build the Dome of the Rock? A Re-examination of the Muslim Sources, pp. 48 – 52.

⁵⁶ A few words of explanation regarding the reckoning of time. Researchers affiliated with the *Inārah* Institute regard the term *era of the hijra* as historically later than the Caliphate of ‘Abd al-Malik, and so avoid it in their theory. Instead, they use the term *Arab era*, which also starts from the year 622 CE, but follows the solar calendar and not the lunar one. Hence, according to the calculations by Popp and Ohlig, the year 77 of the Arab era (in which in both researchers’ theory the Second Coming of the Messiah was expected) corresponds to 698 CE (however, according to the standard conversion of the lunar calendar it gives us the year 697/698 CE). More on ‘Abd al-Malik’s eschatology and the thread of the Second Coming of the Messiah, see POPP, V. *Biblische Strukturen*, p. 91.

⁵⁷ In turn, more on the traditional interpretation of numismatists regarding the symbolism of the cross on early Islamic coins, can be found in JAMIL, N. Caliph and Qutb. Poetry as a source for interpreting the transformation of the Byzantine cross on steps on Umayyad coinage, pp. 11 – 57.

⁵⁸ POPP, V. Von Ugarit nach Sāmarrā, p. 95.

of Israel, however not in the Jewish sense but in a new Arab-Christian one.⁵⁹ The later traditional Muslim literature recognizes the five-lamp stand symbol as an element of the religious tradition of Islam (Plate 14).

Further symbols of the “*new Zion*” on ‘Abd al-Malik’s coins are liturgical utensils associated with the Dome of the Rock – thought to be the new Arab temple of Solomon. Since its construction by ‘Abd al-Malik on the Temple Mount – the site of the former Temple of Solomon, the Jerusalem temple took from the shrine of St. John the Baptist in Damascus (promoted by Mu‘āwiya) the status of the main sanctity of the new Arab church. While the symbolism of the Damascene coins was referring to the person of the prophet (John the Baptist), the coins of ‘Abd al-Malik are related to Jerusalem and the temple compound of the “*new Zion*”.⁶⁰

The modification of the coin symbolism also meant a continuation of the ongoing ideological dispute with the Byzantine Empire. One of the tools for leading this dispute was the numismatic iconography. In the contemporary interpretation of the Byzantines, they no longer regarded themselves as heirs of a world empire on the model of the ancient Rome, but as a chosen Christian people surrounded by a sea of enemies of Christ. The symbolism of the Arab coins was opposing this view by promoting the idea of the “*new Arab Zion*”, “*the Arabs as legitimate heirs of Israel*” and guardians of the original monotheistic faith.⁶¹ The Arab symbolism related to the “*true Israel*” was a reaction to the iconography of Byzantine coins from the end of the 7th century CE, as in the case of the above mentioned theme of establishing Israel by Jacob – the stone of witness in the form of the biblical “*yegar sahadutha*”.

The coin iconography also includes Arabic text quite often accompanying these symbols on coins. Popp holds that in addition to the recurring theme of “*muḥammad*” appearing next to the portrayed figure of the Christ, other Christological epithets used by the rulers of the new Arab state include, among others, “*‘abd ar-Raḥmān*” (Arab. servant of the Merciful) and “*Ḥalīfat Allāh*” (Arab. the viceroy of God),⁶² “*manṣūr*” (Arab. triumphant) and “*‘abd Allah*” (Arab. servant of God).⁶³ Referring to the person of Christ, these epithets are an inherent element of the contemporary religious doctrine of ‘Abd al-Malik and his successors. The epithet “*‘abd ar-Raḥmān*” appears, for example, on a copper coin from Sarmin (today in Syria) representing, according to Popp, the standing apocalyptic figure of Jesus with the sword of justice.⁶⁴ Until the year

⁵⁹ POPP, V. Die frühe Islamgeschichte, pp. 86 – 87.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 87.

⁶² POPP, V. Von Ugarit nach Sāmarrā, p. 113.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 129.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 113.

702 CE, ‘Abd al-Malik’s portrayals are accompanied on the reverses of many coins by the epithet “*amīr al-mu’minīn*” referring to the reigning ruler, while the obverse sides are occupied by, for Popp, the image of Jesus (as the viceroy of God on Earth) with the inscription “*Ḥalīfat Allāh*”.

Finally, it is worth adding that the research carried out by the Western school of Islamicist revisionism is not limited only to the field of Islamic history or numismatics of the early Muslim period. The mainstream interests of the revisionists also include alternative studies in the fields of archaeology, pre-Islamic history (and historiography), Christian and Muslim dogmatics, history of art (including, in addition to coins, also other material evidence of the Arab culture), Middle Eastern literature of early Islam, palaeography and other academic branches related to the genesis of Islam in the Middle East.

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