

# AN EPIGRAPHIC AND NUMISMATIC ANALYSIS OF MAMLUK COINAGE

## ANÁLISE EPIGRÁFICA E NUMISMÁTICA DA MOEDA MAMELUCA

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### Abstract

As historical material, coinage—an indicator of human communities entering the process of statehood—serves as a crucial symbol of sovereignty. Numerous elements, such as the political status of a newly established state, its economic condition, the scope and duration of its hegemony, its interactions with other polities, and even its artistic and aesthetic sensibilities, are among the invaluable data derived from numismatic evidence. Mamluk coinage cannot be mechanically attributed to all spheres of sovereignty in a uniform manner. However, as the data acquired through coins found at various times—albeit in a scattered fashion—is remarkably rich, we can utilize them to identify signs of how different sultans and economic practices harmonized or, at the very least, how their main outlines overlapped. Furthermore, these findings allow us to demonstrate the typical values, objectives, and competencies inherent in the economy of the medieval Islamic world. To understand the economic legacy inherited by the Mamluks, one must analyze the coinage of their predecessors. In this study, we shall endeavor to demonstrate once again how a coin discovered at an arbitrary moment can instantaneously bring to light historical information that may not be found in volumes of textual sources.

**Keywords:** Money. Mamluks. Egypt. Damascus. Dirham.

### Resumo

*Como material histórico, a cunhagem de moedas — um indicador de que as comunidades humanas estão entrando no processo de formação do Estado — funciona como um símbolo crucial de soberania. Inúmeros elementos, tais como o status político de um Estado recém-criado, sua condição econômica, o alcance e a duração de sua hegemonia, suas interações com outras entidades políticas e até mesmo suas sensibilidades artísticas e estéticas, estão entre os dados inestimáveis derivados das evidências numismáticas. A cunhagem mameluca não pode ser atribuída mecanicamente a todas as esferas da soberania de maneira uniforme. No entanto, como os dados obtidos por meio de moedas encontradas em vários momentos — embora de forma dispersa — são notavelmente ricos, podemos utilizá-los para identificar sinais de como diferentes sultões e práticas econômicas se harmonizavam ou, no mínimo, como suas principais características se sobrepunham. Além disso, essas descobertas nos permitem demonstrar os valores, objetivos e competências típicos inerentes à economia do mundo islâmico medieval. Para compreender o legado econômico herdado pelos mamelucos, é preciso analisar a moeda de seus antecessores. Neste estudo, nos empenharemos em demonstrar mais uma vez como uma moeda descoberta em um momento aleatório pode instantaneamente trazer à luz informações históricas que talvez não sejam encontradas em volumes de fontes textuais.*

**Palavras-chave:** Dinheiro. Mamelucos. Egito. Damasco. Dirham.



## 1 INTRODUCTION

It is known that during a certain period of Turkish history, “barter,” or more precisely, “exchange,” was prevalent. The concept of “money”-that is, the use of a valuable metal or commodity as a medium of exchange-is a later development. It is believed that “money,” or “coins,” first reached the Turks from neighboring major countries where trade had developed earlier and more extensively. The Islamic monetary system, however, drew from both the Byzantine and Sasanian Iranian traditions. After the 11th century, gold coins were referred to as “dinar” under Byzantine influence, while silver coins were called “dirhem” (=direm) under Iranian influence. Copper coins were also called “fuls/fals” or “mangır.” Silver coins, which were widely used instead of gold, came to be known as “akhce/asper” due to their white-silver color. The Turkish term “akhce/asper,” meaning “white coin” or “money,” was widely known in Turkish lands. In the Turkish State, silver coins were generally minted, and “akhce/asper” became the general term for currency due to the prevalence of these silver coins. Additionally, terms such as “tenge,” “tıyn,” and others were also in use (Baykara, 2001: 146-147).

Understanding the nature of money and the mechanics of its circulation is paramount for a broader economic history of the medieval Mediterranean world and the contemporary Indian Ocean basin. Extant Mamluk coinage-the material remains of the Mamluk monetary system-serves as a vital source for various avenues of historical inquiry. These coins are frequently examined to extract data regarding epigraphy, heraldry, dynastic claims of legitimacy, and political chronology (Schultz, 1999: 183).

Islamic numismatics is generally characterized as aniconographic, meaning the coins do not feature images of living beings. Instead, they are inscribed with various names and formulae. A typical gold or silver coin generally comprises the following elements: The names and titles (laqab) of the issuing ruler, the name of the mint city, the date of coinage and religious inscriptions<sup>1</sup> most frequently the Kalima al-Shahada (the profession of faith). Given that these inscriptions are often only partially legible, the assistance of specialized reference works is required for their decipherment (Humphreys, 2004: 77). The science of numismatics has undoubtedly made its greatest contribution in the fields of political and administrative history. Coins have provided invaluable evidence for determining the reigns of rulers whose histories

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<sup>1</sup> Over time, straight lines gave way to curves, and angles to arcs. The thuluth script found on Mamluk coins is derived from the naskh script. From the 7th century AH / 13th century AD onwards, naskh emerged as the official script-or calligraphic style-in applied arts; it then rose to a dominant position in its own right during the 8th and 9th centuries AH / 14th and 15th centuries AD. See (Hwaidak, 2019, 821).

have remained obscure, as well as the territorial extent of their rule. Coins have also made significant contributions to clarifying the administrative status of numerous urban centers. Finally, these coins have been very useful in defining the relationships linking local rulers to the caliphate (Humphreys, 2004: 79).

Compared to other fields of medieval Islamic numismatics, the coinage of the Mamluk sultans has been extensively studied. At the center of these scholarly endeavors lies Balog's seminal work<sup>2</sup>, *The Coinage of the Mamluk Sultans*. The product of years of meticulous collection and research, this study identified and systematically classified over 900 Mamluk coin types. (In numismatic terminology, a "type" refers to groups of coins that are distinguished by their specific design and simultaneously categorized by that shared design). The value and impact of this work cannot be overstated. Balog rendered a body of knowledge-which until then had been fragmented and often inaccessible-available to a wider audience of researchers. As *CMS* has become the indispensable starting point for any research into Mamluk monetary history, it merits detailed consideration. In classifying Mamluk coinage, Balog followed a methodology that was prevalent in numismatic publications until recently. He first categorized the coins according to the reigns of the sultans; within each reign, he further classified the coins into three groups based on their metallic composition. Subsequently, he refined these categories according to their stylistic features. For instance, coins bearing heraldic motifs (armas) were treated as a distinct group from those featuring purely epigraphic designs (Schultz, 1999: 188).

The number of known Mamluk coin types today exceeds one thousand. Some of these are known from only a single specimen, while others have survived to the present day in hundreds of copies. As a result, the fundamental parameters of the Mamluk monetary system are now well understood. However, certain important issues that directly affect the use of this numismatic material remain on the agenda. Among these are the nature of coin survival and various factors affecting the formation and accessibility of coin collections. The issue of coin survival has numerous implications. Many factors influence the survival of ancient coins to the present day, and therefore, it is not sound to draw comprehensive economic conclusions based solely on the small number of coins that have survived. Factors affecting the preservation of ancient coins include the total quantity produced, the type of metal used, alternative demands for that metal, and simply luck. Although a large number of Mamluk coins have survived to the present day, their distribution is not uniform in terms of metal type, mint of origin, and coin types (Schultz, 1999: 190).

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<sup>2</sup> Balog, P. (1970). *The Coinage of the Mamluk Sultans: Additions and Corrections*, *American Numismatic Society Museum Notes*, 16.

## 2 THE FINANCIAL ASPECT OF WRITTEN REPRESENTATION: COINS AND EPIGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Coins have served as an excellent record of the specific political and economic conditions prevailing in a particular region at a specific time. For this reason, it is considered essential to extract as much information as possible from a newly discovered coin. The most important prerequisite for such studies is the availability of coin drawings, which enable the reconstruction of dies and the investigation of die connections (Puin 2000: 75-76).

As a historical material, a coin bearing the ruler's name, the date of minting, and the Shahada on its other side, is among the signs of the sultan's accession to the throne—the regalia of sovereignty. The coin, with one facet spiritual and the other material, is a symbol of dominion. Through it, one can ascertain the ruler's titles and epithets, economic status, and political standing. According to the tradition of minting coins in the Medieval Islamic States, which is our area of research, the name of the caliph of the era was first inscribed on coins as a symbol of sovereignty, followed by the suzerain sultan if there was one, and finally the name of the sultan who had the coin minted. Early Mamluks initially had the names of the Cairene Caliphs inscribed on one side of the coin. However, they later used the title “Kasim Amīr al-Mu'minīn” (Partner of the Commander of the Faithful), similar to the Seljuks, but during the reign of al-Malik al-Ashraf Sha'ban (1290-1293), they abolished this as well, leaving only their own names (al-Maqrīzī 1946: 62-63; al-Maqrīzī, 1953: 383). As for the dates, we are unlucky if they are illegible. To some extent, a metal coin can be dated based on its stylistic features (calligraphy, ornamentation, etc.), but this is, frankly, a precarious venture (Humphreys, 2004: 78).

### 2.1 Fals-copper coin

The copper coin, known as a fals, dating to the period after the victory of Qutuz's army against the Mongols between 1259-1260, a name etched in the annals of history, is divided into two distinct types. In its general form, the fals consists of four concentric circles radiating outwards from the center. One of these circles is composed of non-contiguous dots. The inscriptions (*kitābāt*) were recorded in Naskh script, which shows similarities to the calligraphy on the Ayyubid coins and those of al-Malik al-Mansur Nur al-Din 'Ali from that era. The obverse (*al-wajh*) features inscriptions in four lines, while the reverse (*al-zahr*) has three lines. The text on the coins is as follows: On the obverse (Figure 1), it reads “al-Muzaffar al-Sultan

al-Malik Sayf al-Dunya,” and on the reverse (Figure 2), “wa al-Din Qutuz Fatih Bilād al-Islām” (Hwaidak, 2019: 821).

### Figure 1

*Obverse of a Coin from the Reign of Sultan Kutuz*



### Figure 2

*Reverse Side of a Coin from the Reign of Sultan Kutuz*



Reference: (Hwaidak, 2019: 821).

The inscriptions on the obverse of the coin contain the following titles: The title “al-Muzaffar” is derived from the root “zafar” (victory/triumph), signifying triumph and conquest. Beyond its military connotation, it also carries a religious meaning, implying divine support due to the ruler's piety. This title was bestowed upon Qutuz after his victory against the Mongols in the Battle of Ain Jalut. Another title on the first line is “al-Sultan,” meaning “dominance,” “power,” and “supremacy.” This title was previously granted to Saladin Ayyubi as an honorific; however, it had never appeared on the coins of Mamluk sultans who ruled in Egypt before him. This title was not seen on coins until the re-establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate in Cairo in 659 AH / 1261 CE, after which it became customary on Mamluk coinage. Specifically, the revival of the Caliphate granted them symbolic legitimacy of suzerainty/sovereignty over the entire Islamic world. The title “al-Malik,” located on the second line, is an epithet given to the highest authority in

temporal power. During the Ayyubid State, Saladin retained this title, which was later adopted by other rulers of the Ayyubid dynasty; the paramount leader of the dynasty, however, was distinguished by the title “Sultan.” The third and fourth lines contain a part of a title annexed to the word “al-Din” (the faith). This title, completed on the first line of the reverse, is “Sayf al-Dunya wa al-Din” (Sword of the World and the Faith). This is a composite title signifying power and strength. Following this is the Sultan's name, “Qutuz.” In Kipchak Turkic, the language spoken by the Mamluks, “Qutuz” means “wild bull.” The subsequent two lines on the reverse bear the honorific title “Fatih Bilād al-Islām” (Conqueror of the Lands of Islam). The greatest significance of this fals stems from the existence of this title, which is not mentioned in historical sources. In reality, it would have been impossible for Qutuz to receive this title before he inflicted a crushing defeat upon the Mongols in the Battle of Ain Jalut and cleared Bilad al-Sham of Mongol garrisons. The presence of honorific titles on Mamluk coins was a common practice, serving as a source of pride and distinction for the coin's owner. For instance, titles such as “Saladin, Nasir al-Millat al-Muhammadiyya, Muhyi al-Dawlat al-Abbasiyya” (Reformer of the Faith, Helper of the Muhammadan Community, Reviver of the Abbasid State) appeared on the coins of al-Ashraf Khalil ibn al-Mansur Qalawun after he completely eradicated the Crusader presence from Damascus and his jihad showed similarities to that of Saladin Ayyubi. The general form of this fals differs from the coins of previous Mamluk sultans who ruled in Egypt. It is probable that this coin was minted in one of the cities of Damascus, owing to the central inscriptions being within a square frame and surrounded by a margin. Specifically, in its general form, it shows similarities to most of the anepigraphic (without inscription) coins of al-Nasir Saladin, the Sultan of Damascus. This fals of Qutuz does not align with the coins of the Egyptian sultans in terms of its general form (Hwaidak, 2019, 822).

Regarding copper coinage, developments are not as well-known as those in gold and silver, and there is much work to be done in this area. Mamluk fulūs are generally considered to have served solely as a local medium of exchange. This is largely evident when comparing the coins minted by the respective mints. Despite significant gaps in numismatic records, it is understood that Syrian copper coins differed considerably from those of Egypt in terms of appearance and minting methods. In Cairo, intensive series of copper coin minting are known only in the second half of the eighth/fourteenth century

and during the reigns of al-Ashraf Qaytbay (872-901 AH / 1468-96 CE) and al-Ashraf Qansuh al-Ghawri (906-22 AH / 1501-16 CE). Existing records from Baybars to the third reign of al-Nasir Muhammad (709-41 AH / 1309-40 CE) are extremely fragmentary. In Alexandria, copper coinage appears to have occurred only in the last three decades of the 8th/14th century. Thanks to the work of Lutz Ilisch, curator at the Tübingen Research Centre for Islamic Numismatics, the copper coinage series of four major Syrian mints during the first 150 years of the Mamluk Sultanate have been identified and elucidated. Nevertheless, significant gaps exist among the known issues of these mints from the ninth/fifteenth century. Mamluk copper coinage developments in the 9th/15th century have attracted considerable attention from modern researchers. Copper coins from this period are closely associated with the accounting unit known as dirham min al-fulūs, which appears with increasing frequency in Mamluk chronicles. This term, a subject of serious debate in modern scholarship, should be most accurately understood as copper coins equivalent to the value of a silver dirham . Information regarding the coins of Mamluk sultans identified in Balog's work is provided below (Kuşçu 2009: 177):

**Table 1**

<b>Copper fals</b>	al-Zāhir Baybars	Place of publication has been erased. 6xx AH	2.74 gram. 18 mm.
<b>Copper fals</b>	al-Zāhir Baybars	The place of publication has been erased. The date has been erased or the publication is undated	2.01 gram. 17 mm.
<b>Copper fals</b>	al-Zāhir Baybars	The place of publication has been erased. The date has been erased or the publication is undated	2.01 gram. 17 mm.
<b>Copper fals</b>	al-Zāhir Baybars	[Damascus?] <sup>3</sup> The date has been deleted	2.14 gram. 18 x 16 mm.
<b>Copper fals</b>	al-Zāhir Baybars	[Damascus?]. The date has been deleted	2.13 gram. 17 mm.
<b>Copper fals</b>	al-Zāhir Baybars	No place of publication. Undated	2.35 gram. 21 mm.

<sup>3</sup> Although the place of minting of this coin is not certain, it is generally associated with Damascus. Given that many examples have been found in Fustat, there is very little doubt as to whether it originates from Egypt.

<b>Copper fals</b>	al-Zāhir Baybars	No place of publication.	1.58 gram. 20 mm.
		Undated	
<b>Copper fals</b>	al-Zāhir Baybars	No place of publication.	1.47 gram, holed. 22 mm.
		Undated	
<b>Copper fals</b>	al-Nāsir Muhammad	Cairo 710 AH	2.76 gram. 19 mm.
<b>Copper fals</b>	al-Nāsir Muhammad	Damascus 735 AH.	2.55 gram. 20 mm.
<b>Copper fals</b>	al-Mansūr Abū Bakr Anonymous (attestation of the issuing authority is uncertain)	Damascus 741 AH.	3.33 gram. 20 mm.

During the reign of Sultan Barquq, we observe that upon Mahmud b. Ali's appointment to the position of *ustadar* (major-domo) and his subsequent charge with the administration of the *al-Amwāl al-Sultāniyya* (Sultanic funds), he became ambitious in acquiring wealth. As *fulūs* (copper coins) became abundant, he requested to purchase copper (*nuḥās*) from European countries. He leased the mint in Cairo with a certain amount of money. *Fulūs* continued to be minted throughout his tenure in this office. Furthermore, he also acquired the mint in Alexandria. As a result, *fulūs* became excessively abundant in people's hands. It spread so widely throughout the country that it became the most important currency of the realm. The *dirham* lost its value for two reasons: firstly, it was not minted at all. Secondly, as sultans, their entourages, and the populace grew wealthy and indulged in activities such as wearing elegant clothes, they melted down these *dirhams* to use as jewelry. Concurrently, gold, which was previously not accessible to everyone, became widely available. This was due to Sultan al-Zahir Barquq bestowing a large amount of gold (*in'ām*) upon emirs and statesmen. Payments made for wars and expeditions, as well as aid provided during times of famine, also contributed to this situation. When Sultan Barquq died, three types of currency were in circulation among the people: *fulūs* was the most common, gold was less common, and silver had become extremely rare, to the extent that it was no longer used for transactions due to its value. One *dinar* was equivalent to 30 *dirhams*<sup>4</sup>. Gold had become so abundant

<sup>4</sup> The *dinar* is divided into six parts, each called a *daniq*; each *daniq* is divided into 4 *tassuj*, and each *tassuj* into 4 barley grains (*sha'īrah*). A barley grain is sometimes divided into six parts, each called a *mustard seed* (*mustard*). Similarly, a *tassuj* is sometimes divided into three parts called *habba* (grain). Some divide the *dinar* into sixty parts, each called a *habba*; accordingly, a *habba* represents one-sixth of one-tenth (one-sixtieth of a *dinar*). A *dinar* is equivalent to 6 *dawāniq*, 20 *qarārī* (carats), 24 *tasāsij*, or 240 *aruzzāt* (rice

in the hands of the populace that it was found even among the lowest strata of society. In this environment, fulūs proliferated excessively. All business and transactions were now conducted with fulūs. A mithqal of gold was worth 150 fulūs. Each dirham measure of silver was valued at five dirhams in fulūs, and each dirham was equivalent to 24 fals. In Alexandria, one dinar had reached a value of 300 dirhams in fulūs. Information regarding the coins of Mamluk sultans identified in Balog's work is provided below.

### Figure 3

*Dinar from the reign of Sultan Berkuk (784-791/1382-1389), Cairo, 3,58 gm, 19 mm.*



Reference: <https://www.numisbids.com/searchall?searchall=mamluk>

The inhabitants of some towns in the Said region used coins known as 'el-kevde' (sea shells), which were called 'Mısırul-ved', for their small purchases. These were similar to the coins used by the people of Egypt in their transactions (al-Maqrīzī, 1957: 60).

## 2.2 Dirham - silver coin

Following the fulūs during the Mamluk period, the dirham was used. One-third of this was fiḍḍa (silver) and one-third was nuḥās (copper). A dirham is eighteen kharrūbas. One kharrūba is three qamḥs. One mithqāl is twenty-four kharrūbas. A dirham is equivalent to forty-eight fals. The "army dinar" (dīnār jayshī) is thirteen dirhams. The army dinar is generally also referred to as "forty black dirhams," where this dirham is one-third of the previously mentioned dirham. It should be noted here that in the land of Egypt, there were no black dirhams except for those called "lalayān." In Alexandria, however, there were black dirhams, and every two of them constituted one dirham. The

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grains). The daniq of a dinar is equal to 3 qarārīt and 1 habba; a qirat is equal to 3 habbāt; a habba is equal to 4 aruzzāt, and an aruzz is equal to 2 freshly plucked mustard seeds (Sauvaire, 1882, 72- 73).

people of Alexandria did not use any currency other than the dirham called “al-warīq (al-Qalqashandī, 1922: III/439, 462; Dahmān, 1990: 77).

**Table 1**

*Silver Coins of the Mamluk Sultans Identified in Balog’s Work*

Coin	Sultan	Place-Year	Dimensions
Silver dirham	al-Malik al-Manṣūr ‘Alī	655 AH [Cairo]	2.93 gram. 19 mm.
Silver dirham	al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn	Cairo Date removed	2.95 gram. 19 x 21 mm.
Silver dirham	al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl	Damascus 74 [5].AH	2.71 gram. 20 mm.
Silver dirham	al-Ashraf Sha‘bān	Place of printing has been erased Date removed	1.51 gram. 15 x 11 mm.
Silver dirham	al-Zāhir Barqūq	Cairo Date removed	3.14 gram. 20 mm.
Silver dirham	al-Ashraf Ināl	Dīmaṣk. 8[6]1. AH	1.42 gram. 14 mm.
Silver dirham	al-Ashraf Qāyṭbāy	[Aleppo] Date removed	1.43 gram. 15 mm.

Reference: (Kuşçu 2009: 179-180).

A silver coin from the reign of Sultan Qalawun contains significant information (Figures 4 and 5). This is not merely a document for Sultan Qalawun’s important conquests but also allows for certain conclusions regarding changes in monetary policy. Beyond their value as documentary objects, these coins present works of art on a minimal surface, and thus their calligraphy, as well as their scriptural and ornamental inventories, are described in detail. However, Mamluk coinage in this respect does not easily disclose its aesthetic appeal. Although mosques, madrasas, and mausoleums established during the reign of Qalawun or other Mamluk sultans possessed unprecedented beauty and perfection, there is a deficiency concerning the coins. Practically every coin has an irregular shape, even though it is difficult to decipher due to the weak and imperfect die. It is understood that only when unexpected artistic qualities emerged in calligraphy and ornamentation from the originally conceived coin designs were the dies and types restructured (Puin 2000: 75-76). The transformation of coins into works of art allowed for the visual expression of political power and economic wealth; this magnificence reached colossal proportions, especially during exceptional ceremonies such as dynastic weddings. When Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun married his daughter to Amir

Qawsun, Amir ‘Izz al-Din al-Khatiri had two [giant] dinars, each weighing 400 mithqals of gold, and 10,000 silver dirhams minted to be used as gratuities distributed by the bridegroom during the sultan’s daughter’s wedding procession (Sauvaire, 1882: 71-72).

Coins found in later periods indicate the Mamluks’ attempt to integrate the administration and economy of the newly conquered coastal regions by establishing new mints there. It is even possible to find coins dating from 684-685 AH to the mid-9th century AH. However, it is thought that traditional mints did not produce a sufficient volume of coinage. Due to the narrowness of the coastal regions of Damascus, mints were established in areas relatively distant from the coast. In other words, as a result of the expansion of Mamluk territories, politically and economically developed cities were strategically much better suited for the establishment of mints. Indeed, coins minted only a short time after the death of Sultan Qalawun (689 AH / 1290 CE) have been found at both coastal Mamluk frontiers (Puin, 2000: 128).

#### **Figure 4**

*Obverse of a Coin from the Reign of Sultan Al- Qalāwūn*



#### **Figure 5**

*Reverse Side of a Coin from the Reign of Sultan Al- Qalāwūn*



One of the subsequent accounts regarding the settlement after the destruction of Arsuf by the Mamluks was provided by Abū al-Fidā, who noted in 1321 that the site remained in ruins and uninhabited. A small number of Mamluk coins have been recovered from the site. Thirteen of these are definitively dated to the reign of Baybars (658-676

AH / 1260-1277 AD); however, the remainder date to either the 13th or 14th century, with some being too illegible to permit a precise dating to either century. These coins may have been used by the Crusaders or by a Mamluk garrison subsequently stationed in the region. Alternatively, there is a possibility that they were dropped by individuals scavenging the ruins for construction materials—namely, spolia (reclaimed stone). The Mamluks intentionally left the coastline in a state of ruin to prevent renewed Christian incursions. Following the Ottoman conquest in 1517, a gradual process of resettlement began along the coast. A small community of farmers settled in the Sayyidunā ‘Alī locality, approximately 800 meters south of the Arsuf castle. The coin hoard was discovered beneath a fallen stone outside the southern city wall, contained within the broken neck of a ceramic amphora. The hoard consists of 80 silver Mamluk and Ottoman coins, as well as two gold and one silver Venetian coins. Seven of the coins are holed (Figure 6). (Tal-Baidoun, 2010: 485-486).

### Figure 6

#### *Perforated Coins Found at Arsuf*



Reference: (Tal-Baidoun, 2010: 486).

It can be inferred that the most probable cause of the exchange rate fluctuations between 1398 and 1400 was the cessation of silver flow from Europe to Egypt due to the silver famine in Europe. An interesting point to note here is that one of the triggers for this European silver shortage was the exorbitant ransoms paid to the Ottomans for the release of knights captured at the Battle of Nicopolis, such as John the Fearless (*Jean sans Peur*). Consequently, this presents a “Butterfly Effect” scenario: an Ottoman victory in Central Europe created a perceptible volatility in the Mamluk markets of Egypt (Özdal, 2018: 201-202).

The most significant phenomenon observed in the economic life of Egypt and Syria during the early Burjī Mamluk period was the rapid depletion of dirhams. In response to this situation, arising from difficulties in procuring silver bullion, the silver

dirhams were devalued (reduced in size/weight). While the 1/20 ratio between the dirham and the dinar had been maintained throughout the 132-year Bahrī period, this ratio shifted to 1/25 and subsequently to 1/30. By the early 15th century, the minting of silver coinage ceased, being replaced by fulūs (copper coins) and copper dirhams. From this point forward, copper currency began to be used as the primary basis for indexing prices and values. Thus, the era of copper currency commenced in the monetary history of Egypt and Damascus (Yiğit, 2008: 240).

Furthermore, the extent to which the currency maintained its value during the 132-year Bahrī period is clearly evident from the following list:

**Table 2**

*The Value of the Currencies of the Bahri-Era Sultans*

Sultans	Weight	Number of Dirhams in the Sample Used for the Average
al-Mu‘izz Aybak (648-655 / 1250-1257)	2.75 gram	18
al-Zāhir Baybars I (658-676 / 1260-1277)	2.76 gram	91
al-Sa‘īd Barakah Qān (676-678 / 1277-1279)	2.77 gram	21
al-Manşūr Qalāwūn (678-689 / 1279-1290)	2.82 gram	46
al-Ashraf Khalīl (689-693 / 1290-1293)	2.87 gram	15
al-Nāşir Muḥammad 693-694, 698-708, 709- 741 / (1293-1341)	2.93 gram	43
al-Şālih Ismā‘īl (743-746 / 1342-1345)	2.63 gram	27
al-Muzaffar Ḥājjī (747-748 / 1346-1347)	2.63 gram	11

Reference: (Balog, 1970: 382).

### 2.3 Dinar-gold coin

Dinars were distinguished from other currencies by such designations as Mişrī, Mithqāl, Mahtūm, Mashqūq, and Harjah. The weight of these coins minted in Egypt decreased over time, eventually dropping to a ratio where ten dinars equaled seven

dirhams<sup>5</sup> (1 dirham = 3.186 grams). Furthermore, there was the *Dīnār al-Ifrantī*, a currency imported from European countries and variously referred to as *al-Franj*, *al-Iflūrī* (Florin), *al-Ifrantī*, *al-Bunduqī* (Ducat of Venice), *Iṭālī*, or *al-Dukā*. This currency, also known as *al-Mushakhkhaṣ* due to having inscriptions on one side and a figure (effigy) on the other, began to circulate widely in Egypt after 793 AH / 1388 AD. Initially, the weight of one hundred of these coins was 81.4 mithqāls. However, they were lightened by clipping or scraping the surfaces, reducing the weight of one hundred coins to 78 1/3 mithqāls. Due to the high demand for the Frankish dinar, counterfeiting of these coins also commenced (Koprman 1980: 159).

In the Mamluk Sultanate, the currency associated with the cavalry is referred to as the *Dīnār al-Uṣṭulī*. Initially, it was valued at half the rate of a standard dinar; however, its value later increased to reach parity with the dinar (al-Qalqashandī, 1922: III/439, 462; Dehmān, 1990: 77).

Prior to the reign of al-*Zāhir* Baybars (658-676 AH / 1260-1277 AD), the coins minted in Egypt and Syria<sup>6</sup> were a continuation of the Ayyubid monetary system (Schultz, 1999: 186). The initial period, which lasted through the reign of Sultan al-*Zāhir* Barqūq (792-801 AH / 1390-1399 AD), is characterized by high-purity gold coinage; however, these coins possessed highly irregular weights, indicating they were explicitly weighed during each transaction (Schultz, 1999: 186). It is noted that the finest dinar is one that changes color from red to green as it ages. Early economists stated that a pure dinar was tested by the duration it adhered to hair or a beard, whereas the counterfeit dirham-termed

<sup>5</sup> The dirham has also been referred to as the “weight of seven mithqāls” (meaning 10 dirhams = 7 mithqāls). In the lands conquered by Muslims, the dirhams - much like the dinars-were equal to the mithqāl in weight until the period of al-Ḥajjāj; it was he who first introduced the “weight of seven” standard into circulation (Sauvaire, 1882: 50).

<sup>6</sup> 1 mithqāl = 1 5/12 dirhams = 24 qirāṭs = 85 ḥabbahs. If the dirham is calculated based on a standard value of 3.125 g, a result of 4.427 g is obtained for the Syrian mithqāl. However, in this case, it is more probable that the canonical mithqāl value of 4.46 g was taken as the basis. Proceeding from this (based on the ratio of 1 to) we arrive at a value of 3.14 g for the Syrian weight dirham. For the 19th century, the Aleppo weight dirham is even cited as 3.167 g. Regarding the weight system of Damascus, we operate on more reliable grounds. Here, the mithqāl had a slightly smaller value than that of Egypt; so much so that 100 Damascus mithqāls equaled only 98 1/2 Egyptian mithqāls, yielding a value of 4.62 g for the Damascus mithqāl. Given that 600 Damascus dirhams equaled only 592 1/2 Egyptian dirhams, we calculate a value of 3.086 g for the Damascus dirham. This closely corresponds to the value (3.0898 g) consistently employed by H. Sauvaire in his studies (Hinz, 1955: 4-5).

al-dīnār al-mubahraj/nabahraj-was tested by its weight and lightness (al-Maqrīzī, 1957: 59).

### Figure 7

*The Lion-headed Fels Coin of Sultan Baybars (AH 658-676 / AD 1260-1277). (2.38 g, 17 mm)*



Reference: <https://www.numisbids.com/searchall?searchall=mamluk>.

The coinage of the reign of Sultan al-Ashraf Khalīl was unique in the history of Mamluk numismatics. New titles were inscribed on his coins; these included “al-Sultān al-Malik al-Ashraf Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Nāṣir al-Milla al-Muḥammadiyya Muḥyī al-Dawla al-‘Abbāsiyya” (Sultan al-Ashraf Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, the Supporter of the Muhammadan Ummah and the Reviver of the Abbasid Caliphate) and “al-Sultān al-Malik al-Ashraf Ṣalāḥ al-Dunyā wa-al-Dīn Qasīm Amīr al-Mu’minīn” (Sultan Malik al-Ashraf, the Reformer of the World and Religion and the Partner of the Commander of the Faithful). Notably, “Amīr al-Mu’minīn” (Commander of the Faithful) was the official title of the Abbasid caliph. His father, Qalāwūn, was also commemorated on al-Ashraf’s coins with the title “Mawlānā al-Sultān al-Malik al-Manṣūr” (Hwaidak, 201: 822).

### Figure 8

*Obverse and Reverse Sides of a Coin from the Reign of Sultan Melik al-Ashraf*



Reference: <https://www.mintageworld.com/media/detail/13356-coinage-mamluk-sultan-al-ashraf-khalil>.

**Figure 9**

*The obverse and reverse of a dinar dating from the third reign of Sultan Muhammad (709-741/1310-1341)*



Reference: <https://www.numisbids.com/sale/10487/lot/1953>.

The economic intervention of Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay (825-41 AH / 1422-38 CE) has become emblematic of his reign, whether used as evidence for the impact of his character on his administration or as a means to contend with economic deterioration. Barsbay's involvement in the spice trade, as the most destructive of his policies, provoked "the ruin of the upper stratum of the Levantine bourgeoisie." Taking a different approach to this issue, Jean-Claude Garcin argues that the Sultan's spice trade policy enabled him to consolidate his political position. This policy involved a two-pronged strategy: securing the Hijaz to control the passage of trade through Jedda, and invading Cyprus to control European access to Eastern Mediterranean shipping (Meloy 2005: 85). Historians<sup>7</sup> have often portrayed Barsbay as having a completely free hand in the opposition of the "ambār" (warehouses/merchants) and depicted his interventions despite this opposition (Meloy 2005: 100-101).

During the Mamluk period, it was quite common for the reigning sultan to be referred to by an epithet on the coins. A "dinar" bearing the name "Ashraf" from al-Ashraf Barsbay (825-41 AH / 1422-37 CE) perhaps represents the best-known example of this practice. This custom has, at times, been adopted by modern numismatists. It is not unusual for some of these laqab-labeled coins to be mentioned in chronicles, as gold and silver coins were rarely withdrawn from circulation in the Mamluk Sultanate. However, the multiplicity of these terms and the ambiguity they present constitute one of the

<sup>7</sup> Meloy, adopting a different approach in numismatics, compares the findings obtained from copper coins with Ibn Iyas's detailed reports on the copper coinage policy of the late Mamluk sultans, thereby defining the place of these coins within the monetary system. The resulting conclusion serves as a preferred model for numismatic studies, supported by abundant literary/textual evidence for this period (Ilisch, 2002, 484).

greatest challenges encountered in the field of Mamluk monetary history (Schultz, 1999: 186)

The aforementioned Ashrafi dinars, extending until the end of Barsbay's reign, are quite consistent in terms of appearance, size, and weight. However, in their final stages, their purity began to decline. The first three decades of the ninth/fifteenth century represent one of the periods of transition during which several short-lived gold coins with varying size, design, and weight were minted (Schultz 1999: 186). The Ottoman acquisition of the abundant gold reserves of Egypt and Sudan was realized with the conquest of Egypt. Tax revenues from Egypt largely consisted of coins called "sharīfī", which were an adaptation of the "sultānī" and replaced the Mamluk "ashrafi". The conquest of Egypt also brought to the Ottomans silver coins, such as the "medin" and "nişf fidḍa", which were minted in the early 15th century (Erkoçoğlu 2013: 251).

### Figure 10

*A gold Eshrefī coin from the reign of Kansu al-Gawri (1500-1516) of the Burji Mamluks (3.43g).*



Kaynak: <https://www.numisbids.com/sale/10505/lot/1951>

### 3 CONCLUSION

Many of the challenges encountered by those dealing with coinage are entirely technical in nature—such as the decipherment of inscriptions, the calculation of weight frequency, the identification of die-link tables, and the determination of fineness (alloy standards). A well-trained numismatist must be able to perform these tasks reliably. On the other hand, the application of the results obtained thus far, and even deciding which data should be collected in the first place, is not a matter of technical skill but of historiography. General studies on the potential roles of numismatic knowledge in Islamic

historical research are nearly non-existent. The problem stems from the fact that profound numismatic expertise has been applied to very few aspects of Islamic studies. The progress of monetary history has suffered significantly because Islamic researchers have generally failed to develop a sound theory regarding the function and nature of money in medieval Islamic society.

In the medieval Islamic world, the basic vocabulary of currency became increasingly noteworthy over time. While the local usage of names for specific coins could vary immensely, the following terms remained essentially constant: gold coins are generally called dinars; silver coins dirhams; and copper coins are referred to as fulūs (singular: fals). However, it must be emphasized here that the myriad of coins to which these terms were applied exhibited immense diversity. The failure to address this reality has been the source of many modern misinterpretations of Islamic currency. In Mamluk coinage, dinar, dirham, and fals are the standard terms encountered for gold, silver, and copper coins. Yet, there are significant differences. What is observed among the coins bearing these labels are variations in appearance, weight, and fineness. Variations in fineness are particularly significant. Adding to the potential complexity are the sources where other terms for these coins are frequently found; for instance, dirhams were sometimes called al-wariq, terms whose meanings were not fixed.

Numerous hoards of Mamluk coins have been discovered; however, very few have been analyzed in depth. Part of this is undoubtedly due to the realities of today's coin market. A few Mamluk remains have been found during official archaeological excavations. Consequently, it is concluded that a Mamluk-period hoard has rarely been studied in situ, in an untouched and holistic state. While other uses of Mamluk coins are not addressed, research has concentrated on the field of monetary history, examining extant coins and other sources to reveal how money circulated and was valued in Mamluk domains. The direction of this focus needs to be slightly shifted. For, apart from interesting numismatic legends, the primary purpose of money as a store of value and a medium of exchange is economic.

Subsequently, the state of the Mamluk monetary sphere should be investigated. The history should begin with a discussion of the surviving numismatic evidence and the issues affecting its use, moving to commentaries on literary and documentary sources related to Mamluk currency, and concluding with a general assessment. Researchers of

Mamluk history have provided numerous references to economic events. These range from brief sentences to entire chapters and studies, covering price quotations, exchange rate listings, confiscations (musādara), discussions of gifts or inheritances, the mention of a new coinage, or even critiques of monetary policy. These narratives have provided the raw material for Mamluk monetary history. While there is no alternative to the practical, hands-on examination of Mamluk coins -which is not always easy- the general learning curve for a historian's use of monetary data should not be considered so steep. Mamluk numismatic information is as full of surprises as it is important, and as a venerable auxiliary field, numismatics deserves more.

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