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Egyptian Arab-Byzantine Coins discovered in Marea / Philoxenite*

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Abstract: Marea/Philoxenite flourished in the Early Byzantine period. One of the largest Christian basilicas in Egypt was erected there in the 6th century. The city performed a crucial role as a stopover on a pilgrimage route between Alexandria and the sanctuary of Abu Mina.
Approximately 9,000 coin finds have been registered during comprehensive archaeological research conducted by the University of Warsaw in cooperation with the Archaeological Museum in Krakow since 2000. The main purpose of the project 'Coin circulation in the Byzantine and Umayyad Marea / North Hawwariya: studies in the monetary economy of Mareotis region in the hinterland of Alexandria', directed by P. Jaworski, is to analyse the discovered coins.
Most of the 9,000 specimens were issued in Late Roman and Early Byzantine times. However, there is an addition of issues struck after the Arab conquest of Egypt in the 640s. Among them is a peculiar group of so-called Arab-Byzantine coins, which can contribute to our understanding of the transition period.

Keywords: Egyptian Arab-Byzantine coinage, Early Byzantine Empire, Byzantine Egypt, Umayyad Egypt.

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On the southern edge of Lake Mareotis lay the Byzantine city known as Marea/Philoxenite. It functioned as a hub for pilgrims making their way from Alexandria to the St. Menas sanctuary in Abu Mena. The city's imposing architecture is a testament to its golden age in the 6th century.

Since 2000, the Polish Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology has conducted archaeological

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research here.[1] While the Archaeological Museum in Krakow focuses its research on the basilica – the second largest discovered Byzantine church in Egypt after Abu Mena – and its surrounding area (Szymańska, Babraj 2012, 59–71; Babraj, Szymańska 2013, 169–194; Babraj 2018, 203–224; Babraj et al. 2020, 11–34), the team from the University of Warsaw (UW) has investigated important aspects of the city plan (Derda et al. 2020; Derda et al. 2020; Gwiazda et al. 2022, 3–41). Both the city's modular urbanism and the main street grid have been identified (Gwiazda, Derda 2021, 1–8; Gwiazda 2023, 196–214). Furthermore, additional churches and baptisteries were found in the southern portion of the city during the most recent seasons (2021–2022) (Gwiazda et al. 2022, 333–373). Research devoted to numismatic issues has been conducted since 2020 under the supervision of P. Jaworski.

Over 9,000 coins have been found since then. Among them, late Roman minimi predominate (ca. 50%). There is also a significant representation of Byzantine coins (~10%). The majority of the coins minted in Alexandria during the Byzantine era (AD 497–645) are known as dodecanummia. Post-reform Umayyad coins represent about 6% of the total amount. Byzantine coinage was in use under the Umayyads until at least the middle of the 8th century, according to archaeological discoveries (Jaworski 2023, 44). Intermediate coinage, i.e. issues struck after the Arab conquest and before the reform of 'Abd Al-Malik in AD 696/697, called Arab-Byzantine coins, circulated with them. These include coins issued in Egypt, which do not have the elements or Arabic legends typical of these issues.

The first issues minted in the conquered territories by the Arab resembled Byzantine coins (Pottier, Schulze, Schulze 2008, 87; Schulze 2013, 245). There is no consensus among researchers on the terminology used for these coins. Terms such as Arab-Byzantine, Pseudo-Byzantine, Byzantine-Muslim transitional coinage, Proto-Umayyad, etc. appear (Schulze, Oddy 2012, 190–191). There appears to be a general agreement only in the instance of the 'standing caliph' type, and even in this case there are critics (Schulze, Oddy 2012, 188). Either way, all coins from the early Arab period in the Middle East were modelled on Byzantine originals (usually folles). Similarly, in Egypt, the first Arab coins were modelled on Alexandrian dodecanummia. Despite the controversy around terminological inaccuracies, the authors of this article have chosen to adopt the most widely used term: Arab-Byzantine coins.

So far, only five coins of this type have been registered in Marea. However, cleaned material from previous years, as well as new finds from current investigations may increase this number (cf. Jaworski 2023, Fig. 1). Among them, there are three types of coins, including ABAZ, MACP and ΠAN, similar in terms of the images on the obverses to the Heraclius or Constans II coins. Individual legends were placed on the reverses of the coins in the lower sections, hence the type names. Their interpretation is not entirely certain. At the beginning, it was believed that the ABAZ legend was a blundering of the Byzantine ΑΛΕΞ, while ΠAN was read as ROM, thus pointing to coin prototypes. Scholars usually refer to the new Arab Egypt's capital, Fustat (*misr-* fort) when discussing the MACP type (cf. Walker 1956, 53; Domaszewicz, Bates 2002, 97, 103; Foss 2008, 102). Nevertheless, D. Woods has lately put out the theory that MACP might have been an acronym for Maslama ibn Mukhallad, the administrator of Egypt from AD 669–682 (Woods 2021, 252). Moreover, the legend of ABAZ was associated with 'Abd al-'Aziz, the brother of 'Abd Al-Malik and governor of Egypt between AD 685–704 (Woods 2021, 247–249). This type of coin, as well as MACP issues, were struck in the mint in Babylon/Fustat. The hypothesis regarding the incorrect spelling of the name ΠAN as ROM was also rejected. It is also worth noting that most of the known examples were cast (Metlich, Schindel 2004, 12; Foss 2008, 102–103; Goodwin 2014, 211). Sixty-one coins of this type were discovered at the site in Antinoöpolis in northern Upper Egypt, indicating the possible production of these coins there or in the vicinity of the city (Castrizio 2010). Another possible centre that could issue this type of coin is Panopolis, located approximately 100 km to the south (Kubitschek 1897; Metlich, Schindel 2004, 12; Goodwin 2014, 211).

[1] Excavations have been carried out by the University of Warsaw and the Archaeological Museum in Krakow.

Coins of the ABAZ, MACP, and ΠAN types can generally be dated to the second half of the 7th century AD. Unfortunately, it is not entirely possible to determine a more precise chronological range. Perhaps the earliest dates are the late 640s and the latest ca. 700 CE. In turn, if the interpretation of the ABAZ legend as related to ʻAbd al-Aziz is correct, then coins of this type can be dated to the period after AD 684/685 (Album, Goodwin 2002, 107; Goodwin 2014, 213).

Among the five Egyptian Arab-Byzantine coins discovered during archaeological research in Marea, two are ABAZ type coins (BMC Heraclius 304, MIB Constans II X35, Domaszewicz, Bates AII, DOC 140–141, Goodwin II), another two are of the ΠAN type (MIB Heraclius X48, Domaszewicz, Bates UII, DOC 142–143, Goodwin V), and one is of the MACP type (MIB Constans II X36, SICA 732 and 733, Domaszewicz, Bates AIII, DOC 131–139, Goodwin III).

Egyptian Arab-Byzantine coins from Marea have so far been registered mainly in the area of the great basilica excavated by the Archaeological Museum in Krakow, in rooms 16, 24, and 39. It should be emphasised that these issues were found in contexts with Byzantine as well as Umayyad coins, which confirms their common circulation in these periods (cf. Jaworski 2023, 44).

Coins of this category were also recorded at sites such as Apa Jeremias at Saqqara, Kom el-Dikka (Alexandria), Fustat, Abu Mina (cf. Foss 2008, 102–104; Goodwin 2014, 206–207), and Antinoöpolis (Castrizio 2010). Unfortunately, a large portion of the coins from various sites in Egypt still remains unpublished. The published material in turn is not always accompanied by photographs, which makes it difficult to verify individual descriptions in catalogues (cf. Metlich, Schindel 2004, 12).

Despite the currently small number of Egyptian Arab-Byzantine coins from Marea, there may be more finds of this type, both due to the material from previous years being cleaned on an ongoing basis as well as new discoveries. The new finds expand our knowledge of these types of coins recorded in Egypt and therefore reflect the monetary circulation at the end of the 7th and beginning of the 8th century AD. Let us hope that new publications of numismatic material from various sites will be able to deepen our analysis in the future.

Fig. 1. Arab-Byzantine, AE, ABAZ Type, Al-Fustat?, after AD 684/685, photo by Piotr Jaworski.

Fig. 2. Arab-Byzantine, AE, ABAZ Type, Al-Fustat?, after AD 684/685, photo by Piotr Jaworski.

Fig. 3. Arab-Byzantine, AE, MACP Type, Al-Fustat, ca. 670–690, photo by Piotr Jaworski.

Fig.4. Arab-Byzantine, AE, ΠAN Type, photo by Piotr Jaworski.

Fig. 5. Arab-Byzantine, AE, ΠAN Type, photo by Piotr Jaworski.

Abbreviations

BMC = Wroth, W., 1908. Catalogue of the Imperial Coins in the British Museum: 1. British Museum, London.

Domaszewicz, Bates = Domaszewicz, L., Bates, M., 2002. Copper Coinage of Egypt in the Seventh Century, in: Bacharach, J. (ed.), Fustat Finds: Beads, Coins, Medical Instruments, Textiles, and Other Artifacts from the Awad Collection. American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 88–111.

DOC = Foss, C., 2008. Arab-Byzantine Coins: An Introduction, with a Catalogue of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC.

MIB Constans II = Hahn, W., 1981. Moneta Imperii Byzantini: 3: von Heraclius bis Leo III., Alleinregierung (610–720). Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna.

SICA = Album, S., Goodwin, T., 2002. Sylloge of Islamic Coins in the Ashmolean: 1: The Pre-Islamic Reform Coinage of the Early Islamic Period. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

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