THE EVOLVING REPRESENTATION OF THE EARLY ISLAMIC EMPIRE AND ITS RELIGION ON COIN IMAGERY*

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The Crucial Early Decades

How did the theology of Islam and its idea of empire evolve, based on a Hellenistic Roman-Iranian foundation and in the face of Christianity, Judaism, Neo-Platonism, and Zoroastrianism? Since the 1970s, this much debated question has inspired skeptical polemics against what had until then been taken to constitute “established” knowledge. The extremely divergent points of view taken in this controversy at large are possible to maintain because there are few undis-

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1 There is no expression for “empire” or “state” within medieval Islamic sources. Dār al-Islām was used to refer to the “territory of Islam” or, more specifically, to the geographic area where Islamic jurisdiction was applied, as opposed to dār al-ḥarb, the territory outside Islamic jurisdiction. Early Islam obviously never needed an expression for “empire,” probably because it considered itself to be universal. The government of the caliph, with Islam as the state religion, can nevertheless be defined as “imperial”; see Münkler, Imperien.

2 For a résumé of the past discussion see Sivers, “The Islamic Origins Debate Goes Public.” The recent German debate was initiated by Ohlig/Puin, Die Dunklen Anfänge. In the paradigmatic first section Volker Popp attempts to prove an Arab Christianity and the Christian character of the early “Islamic” empire by using numismatic evidence. Three years earlier, he had used the same idea as a leitmotif for a novel published under the pseudonym Mavro di Mezzomorto, Mohammed auf Abwegen: Entwicklungsroman (“Mohammed Goes Astray: A Coming-of-Age Novel”) and in a series of articles: “Bildliche Darstellungen,” “Bildliche Darstellungen II,” “Bildliche Darstellungen IV,” “Bildliche Darstellungen V.” Ohlig has restated his and V. Popp’s theory in an article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (November 21, 2006), which received replies in the same newspaper by Nicolai Sinai (December 28, 2006) and the present author (February 28, 2007).
puted Arabic sources on the first decades of Islam. Yet since the beginning of that discussion, in the 1970s, much progress has been made. Although there has been a growing interest in sources from outside the Arabic-Islamic tradition, it was only in 1997 that Robert Hoyland undertook a systematic examination of parallel literary evidence from non-Muslim sources that predated the existing Arabic texts. In 2003 Jeremy Johns surveyed the extant archeological, epigraphic, and numismatic sources for the first seventy years of Islam, portraying ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign as the most significant turning point of early Islamic history. In 2006 Hoyland added new epigraphic material to the discussion and stressed the important role that Mu‘awiyah played in this process. It is against this background that the imagery and text messages to be found on coins became more important than ever, as knowledge of early Islamic coinage has grown tremendously since the 1990s. Much new information is scattered in small articles and auction catalogues. Coins offer the only continuous and contemporaneous independent and primary source for the period of the genesis of the new religion and its empire from Spain to Central Asia. Frequently, interpretations of Islamic coin imagery by students of political history or the history of art disregard the proper numismatic context of the seventh century CE. The present contribution attempts to provide a brief overview of the development of early Islamic coin imagery according to the present state of research. Yet new discoveries in this rapidly evolving field might significantly change the picture. The present contribution is necessarily built on the research of many colleagues which I gratefully acknowledge.

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4 Johns, “First Seventy Years,” has replied to the views of Judith Koren and Yehuda Nevo, published in a series of articles during the 1990s. In 2003 their views were summarized in *Crossroads to Islam*. The two authors make extensive use of numismatics in their arguments (pp. 137–154), but because they do not take the rich research literature of the past twenty years into account, their treatment of the coin evidence and their conclusions may at best be called naive. Their main source of numismatic inspiration was the seminal article by Michael Bates, “History.” Much progress has been made since then. Unfortunately, they seem to have neither personal acquaintance with numismatic sources nor any interest in the appropriate methodology. As a result the delight they take in their “discoveries” is unrestricted by any methodological constraints. For an outspoken review see Foss, “Unorthodox View.”
5 Hoyland, “New Documentary Texts.”