Notes et documents

Who is “The Warrior” on Western Islamic Copper Coins?
(A Quranic Key for an Unidentified Icon)

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J. Walker (1956: 22) included\(^1\) in his corpus of primitive Arab-Bizantine, and Umayyad Islamic coins a fals, i.e. a copper coin, apparently from the Iberian Peninsula, that displayed as a relevant trait a figurative icon on one of its two sides. Walker described the icon as follows: “Within a small circle, helmeted head facing r[ight]”.

The coin, as can be seen in the example\(^2\) (figure 1), displayed also the usual Arabic legends, consisting in the double Islamic credo. On the other side of the coin, probably the obverse, we read: Lā ilāh illā Llāh wahdāh lā šarik lāh

\(^1\) We would like to thank Maribel Fierro and Manuela Marín for their comments on the last draft of this article.

\(^2\) Fals, s.l., s.d.; weight: 3.00 gr., width: 15.72 mm., thickness: 2.33 mm. Private collection. Photograph: the authors; previously published in Vega, Peña and Feria (2002).
(No God except Allah, He alone, no partner to Him), and around the helmented head, *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh* (Muḥammad the Messenger from Allāh). No name for the young man depicted was included. The series has been described and studied several times by numismatists, who have adopted the convention of calling the man depicted “the warrior”, probably because of the helmet, the main issues discussed being: (1) Islamic attitudes towards figurative icons, and (2) the formal, iconographic origin of this “helmented head”. But, as far as we know, no attempts to interpret the symbolic value of the icon or to identify the person depicted on those primitive Western Islamic coins have been done yet.

The first point to be considered is what the immediate context of the image of the helmented man is. It must be stressed that the only semiotic content of this copper coin, apart from the personage depicted is, as we said, two phrases from the Quran and the Sunna expressing the holiest beliefs about God and His Prophet. In such a formal and respectful context only the image of a person involved in Islamic holy history is to be expected. This is the first clue we had followed. The second one is a question: do we know of more coins bearing human iconography in the broader context of the Western Islamic numismatics? As far as we know, only one somewhat similar coin has been recorded. We mean another fals or piece of copper, from the Umayyad Governors period as well (late decades of the first century-first decades of the second century H/first half of the eighth century CE), but this time struck in the Algerian city of Tilimsān (present-day Tlemcen). This one displays, as can be seen in the example (Figure 2), the rudimentary image of a bearded man facing the viewer, with two helicoidal shapes on the top of his head. The coin was registered by Walker (1952: 240) in his already-mentioned corpus of Umayyad coins, and the figurative icon displayed described as follows: “Within a circle, bearded head facing, with long hair falling on either side of head (copied from bearded head of the Punic Baal on coins of Tingis).”

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4 *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh* appears in Quran 48: 29. As for the declaration *Lā ilāh illā Allāh waḥdah lā šarīk lah* has been several times reported in Prophet Muḥammad’s speeches or prayers (see, for instance, Ibn al-Ṣayḥ al-Balawi, *Kitāb Alif bā*, I, p. 250).
5 *Fals*, Tilimsān, *s.d.*; weight: 1.76 gr., width: 16.00 mm. Tonegawa Collection. Photograph taken with kind permission from the website *Coins of al-Andalus: Tonegawa Collection* (www.alandaluscoinstonegawacollection.50g.com) [last visit: February, 3rd 2006].