Un tesoro de monedas en la costa siria: Estudio arqueológico

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RESUMEN: Recientemente se han encontrado varios depósitos de monedas de oro pertenecientes a diferentes períodos históricos en Siria.

Uno de los hallazgos más recientes, que comprende 57 monedas, fue descubierto en 2015 durante el trabajo agrícola en al-Muntar, un pequeño suburbio de Tartous cerca del antiguo sitio de Amrȋt (actual Siria).

El examen preliminar revela que estas monedas se remontan al periodo bizantino. La escasez de monedas encontradas en esta área en particular, cuyos restos datan de los siglos VI y VII CE, hace que este descubrimiento sea muy significativo y arrojará luz sobre los acontecimientos históricos en esta región. Nuestro enfoque principal será analizar estas monedas desde una perspectiva arqueológica e intentar vincular las monedas a un posible propietario y plantear las circunstancias bajo las cuales fueron ocultadas y, por lo tanto, preservadas. También intentaremos delimitar el área en la que circularon estas monedas. Las conclusiones preliminares sugieren una cone-
Several caches of gold coins belonging to different historical periods have recently been found in Syria. One of the most recent findings, comprising 57 coins, was discovered in 2015 during agricultural work in al-Muntar, a small suburb of Tartous near the ancient site of Amrīt (present day Syria).

Preliminary examination reveals that these coins date back to the Byzantine period. The scarcity of coins found in this area in particular, the remains of which date to the 6th and 7th centuries CE, makes this discovery very significant and will shed light onto the historical events in this region. Our primary focus will be to analyse these coins from an archaeological perspective and to attempt to link the coins to a possible owner and posit circumstances under which they were concealed and thus preserved. We will also attempt to delimit the area in which these coins were circulated. Preliminary conclusions suggest a connection between this treasure and a possible ancient byzantine church where this cache was hidden.

KEYWORDS: Coins, Byzantium, Syria.

I. INTRODUCTION

Unequivocally, the history of Amrīt indicates this area epitomized the complexity of the ancient culture of the Levant. Everywhere we may observe the remains of many aspects of the archaeological landscape of this fascinating region. Further, beneficial to our analysis is a look into the political fate of the nearby island city-state of Arwad (Phoenician Qrn, ‘rwd refuge, Greek Arados) in order to gain greater insight into the area’s history. Thus, we review the geographical and political characteristics of this region.

The area extending from the northern Nahr el-Kebir to the Eleutheros River (the southern Nahr el-Kebir) in the south was probably Aradian territory.1 The site of Amrīt (ancient K-r-t M-r-t, Greek Marathus) is situated on the Syrian coast six kilometres south of the

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1 Al Maqdissi, 1993: 445.
modern city of Tartous. Archaeological evidence and historical documentation indicate extensive maritime activity at the Amrīṭ site from as early as the Bronze Age. The site of Amrīṭ itself has been identified as typical of the Phoenician culture. (That is, the present-day Syrian coast.) The site is believed to be an outskirt of the city of Arados on the neighbouring island, today known as Arwad, and is primarily known today for its temple, necropolis, isolated tombs and many more aspects of its material culture.

![Fig. 1. Site of the discovery.](image)

The Roman period of this region started precisely in 64 BCE, at the same time the epicentre of the area moved to Marathus. The

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2 Al Maqdisi and Benech 2009.
3 Besancon et al. 1994.
4 Claude and Bonnet, 1992.
5 Bader 1997: 218.
7 Mustafa and Chávet Lozoya 2016: 214.
8 De Jong 2007: 3.
Byzantine Empire, which convention states began in the 6th century during the reign of Anastasius (491-518 CE), comprised two important traditions—the imperial Roman and the Christian.9 This difficult coexistence spanned more than three centuries. Byzantine civilization consists of the traditions of the Roman and Christian Empires.10 This co-existence, with its concomitant difficulties, lasted for more than three centuries.

Information concerning the early Byzantine period in the Levant area has not been well-disseminated in literary and other sources forming the so-called "Arab-Byzantine" coinage.11 Fortunately, the recent discovery of these Byzantine gold coins12 can provide important information regarding the history of Amrît during the Byzantine Empire and of the rulers during the period under discussion. Prior to this discovery, other caches of gold coins had been discovered in the Mediterranean area, but the information that could be gleaned from them was very sporadic.13 Indeed, one of the main problems with the Byzantine Empire was the series of disputes over the throne; the empire could not be organized as such as it was believed to be ruled by divine wisdom. Yet we find the Justinian and Heraclids dynasties still attempting to force solutions14 to questions of succession based on family lineage.

With that all-too-brief information on the Byzantine empire as background, we now turn our focus on the recent discovery of the subject cache of coins. This and other archaeological discoveries in the Arandinse coast15 provide evidence for the importance of the history of this particular region of the coast of present-day Syria.

9 Grierson, 1999: 1.
10 Shahîd, 2009: 263.
11 Foss, 2002.
12 Kiwan and Morrisson 2015: 345.
13 Schulze, 2013: 3; Gandila, 2018; Caramessini-Oeconomides & Drossoyianni, 1989.
14 Kennedy, 1999: 80.
15 Mustafa, 2014: 129.
2. CIRCUMSTANCE OF DISCOVERY

The coins of Tartous were found on the 7th of August 2011 in al-Muntar, a small town that is part of the city of Tartous, located approximately eighteen kilometres to the south of that city. The ruins of the well-known city of Amrit lie only twelve kilometres to the north of the site of this discovery. (Fig. 1) During agricultural work, a geometric mosaic on a parcel of land, so-called Bermael, was discovered, subsequently dated to approximately the 4th century and the first half of the 5th century CE.16 In this area, the workers were uncovering a wall, thought to be the ruins of an ancient Byzantine church. A piece of rock dislodged and fell from the bottom of the wall revealing a small pottery object containing fifty-six or fifty-seven coins. (N.B. It is possible that a consular solidus of Phocas was counted twice, once as an obverse and another as reverse.) (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2. Byzantine mosaic of al-Mintar (modified from Chok).

Fortunately, when the pottery vessel was detected the workers stopped immediately. The news of the discovery was announced to the

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16 Chok, 2012.
scientific community by the Directorate of Antiquities in Tartous, which subsequently assembled a team of specialists responsible for the excavation, preservation, and contextualization of the find. They documented the vessel and coins, along with the archaeological context of the discovery and removed the treasure to a secure location.

The cache of coins in this discovery consists of 57 gold pieces. These were found well protected inside a nine-centimetre tall pottery vessel, stacked inside the vessel seven centimetres high. A further description of the environment is difficult, as our knowledge of the history of the region during the Byzantine period is limited due to fact that the exact nature of the civilization on the shores of the Levant during the Byzantine period have not been comprehensively studied. Unfortunately, today this is an even more difficult task, given the difficulties of the political instability in this region.

3. MATERIALS

All the pieces are similar but there are slight and notable differences in terms of weight and diameter. Each coin weighs between 4.0 and 4.9 ounces. Each is between 2.0 and 2.2 centimetres in diameter. The coins themselves do not display any special features beyond the expected minor variations of the early Byzantine dinars. On 39 coins in this collection, (68.4%) we find the image of the Emperor Phocas, a Byzantine emperor who ruled from 602 until 610 CE. (Incidentally, we may note that he was one of the most violent and bloodiest Byzantine monarchs.) Of the remainder of the cache, twelve coins (21.05%) that represent the Emperor Mauritius who reigned 582 until 602 CE and six coins (10.52%) display a representation of the Emperor Tiberius who ruled from 574 until 582 CE.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE COINS

All the coins are solidus coins, well-known during the Byzantine period, having on their obverse the image of an Emperor. Among the coins in this discovery, we describe the following three distinct types:

4.1 PHOCAS Solidus

OBVERSE
The bust of Emperor Phocas is wearing a garment covering his left shoulder. He sports a beard and long hair. His head is covered with a helmet and crown, at the top of which appears a cross. He is also carrying a crucifix in his right hand. The inscription reads DN FOCAS PERP AVG. (Our Lord Phocas is eternal.) (Fig. 3)

![Fig. 3. Phocas, gold solidus](Image)

**REVERSE**

On the reverse is pictured the Goddess Victoria (Goddess of Victory) standing, holding in her right hand a paw and in the left hand a crucifix. Engraved around this figure we read in Latin VICTORIA AVCC CONOB. (Reinvented gold Constantinople victory)

**4.2 TIBERIUS Solidus**

**OBVERSE**

We see a standing figure of King Tiberius wearing a crown and holding a crucifix in his right hand. Parts of the clothing cover the upper part of the chest, some of which are engraved with D N TIb CONSTANT P P AVI. (Our Lord Tiberius Constantinople eternal) (Fig. 4)\(^{17}\).

\(^{17}\) The images of solidus in Figures 2, 3 and 4 have been processed using ImageJ and Gimp software applying mathematical algorithms of scale, brightness/contrast modification, high pass filter, sharpen and enhancement to obtain better definition of images.
REVERSE

On this side is depicted a large cross over a four-step hierarchical base with an inscription around the bottom of the stand, which reads CONOB (VICTORIA AVGGA). For a translation, see the previous example.

4.3 MAURITIUS Solidus

The third type comprises twelve coins representing the Emperor Maurice (Fig. 5)

Fig. 4. Tiberius, gold solidus

Fig. 5. Maurice, gold solidus.
3.3 OBVERSE

We note on the face the same picture as in the previous coins with the same Latin script.

3.4 REVERSE

On this side appears the Goddess Victoria, as reflected in the coins of Phocus. The same Latin phrase is repeated.

4. DISCUSSION

During the Byzantine Empire, solid gold coins spread throughout much of the Mediterranean coastal region throughout the various periods of time. In the cache discovery of Tartous, the coins belonged to the reigns of the emperors Mauricius (who ruled almost 40 years), Tiberius (who ruled almost 8 years) and Phocas (who also ruled almost 8 years). However, most of the coins (64.8%) belong to the reign of Phocas, who ruled for a relatively short time with respect to the other emperors, perhaps indicating the increase of economy, trade and manufactures of Phoenician society at the time of this emperor. (Fig. 6)

![Bar chart showing percentage of coins in each reign](image)

Fig. 6. Percentage of coins in each reign.
As the cost of armies and other defence expenditures increased during the rule of the unstable Byzantine Empire, the quantity of Syrian coins also increased greatly, which heavily burdened the Byzantine society in the Syrian territory.\(^\text{18}\) Indeed, we find especially in the Syrian coastal regions during this period the number of military personnel increased, as did the production and distribution of Syrian-Byzantine coins. We may attribute this to strong economic power as a result of the lengthy heritage of the Phoenician society\(^\text{19}\) and the large workshops in this area of the Levant.

The Empire's coins, known locally as the solidus, were also used in the Orient under the name of *Namisma*.\(^\text{20}\) They were widely traded throughout the empire and beyond during a period of at least four centuries. The purity of gold was expressed in terms of carats as is common today in the Arab as well as the Western world. Authorities used a standard system to calculate the weight and value of the various coins, a system that remained in use throughout the Byzantine Empire\(^\text{21}\) and even extended into the Roman Empire.

Coins from the Byzantine Empire were often engraved to identify of the mint from which a coin was produced, so tracking and tracing the history of these pieces may be possible. However, dating with any reasonable accuracy remains one of the most difficult tasks for any historian or researcher. This problem is epitomized by having no reliable methods by which a precise age can be given to metal, such as may be possible with carbon-14 dating or other objective methods.

The interpretation of instrument marks and numerals comprising dates is generally simple, but signs or figures sometimes serve to mislead the dating process. Moreover, copying or repeating meaningless signs, or signs that have lost any precise meaning, in some instances only causes more confusion.\(^\text{22}\) In the case under study, we observe the term CONOB, which is exclusive to the gold coins that were struck by a particular mint in or around Constantinople. In some cases, however, the inscription depicting Emperor Phocas is attributed


\(^{19}\) Al-Makda, *op. cit.*: 439.

\(^{20}\) Grierson, 1982: 8.

\(^{21}\) Morrisson, 1989: 150.

\(^{22}\) Hahn and Metlich, 2013: 25.
to mints in Cyprus or Jerusalem. Thus, the source of this particular Byzantine coin may be from one of those cities rather than Constantinople.

The coins on which is represented the head of Emperor Maurice became well known because of the great use of the images of the cross, crown, wreath and sceptre. As noted earlier, the coinage of this emperor displays the symbols of Christianity in addition to the king himself. Therefore, it is reasonable to postulate that these coins may have originated in the period between 584 and 602 CE. When, on a coin, the cross appears above four solid steps, we may date it from the beginning of the 7th century, as this symbology was introduced by Tiberius II, although some researcher seems imprecise in this context.

The so-called Phocus coins, on which are represented the head of the Byzantine Emperor Phocas (602-610 CE), whose reign was marked by violence throughout its entirety, may be dated with some degree of certainty to 602-608 CE. In the year 602 CE, after his rise through the ranks of the army, Phocas benefited from the military's displeasure, to say the least, and in particular with Emperor Maurice. Phocas committed regicide and declared himself the new emperor. Initially, he was a popular ruler, but his mismanagement of the empire resulted in his acquiring a great number of mortal enemies. Phocas responded by executing thousands in an attempt to spread fear and maintain power. Thus, tyranny became more and more of a strain on the empire; only eight years after taking the throne Phocas was executed by his successor, Heraclius. During his short reign, Emperor Phocas ordered gold coins struck, but the minting process was short-lived, terminating in 608 CE. Given this history, we may

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25 Hahn and Metlich, op. cit.: 33.
26 Grierson, 1999: 36.
27 Kennedy, 1999.
safely say the coins on which this emperor is represented date from the period 602–608 CE.29

Many examples of this particular type of Byzantine coin,30 found in Syrian coastal areas, are still extant, confirming that their presence and use in this region was common. They also appear to have been common in several other areas of Syria and the Palestinian coast. From Palmyra, we have 27 coins; from Damascus (Syria), 50; the Hama (Syria) and Nablus (Palestine) collection comprise 29 coins. All have been dated between the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 7th centuries CE,31 roughly the same period as the emperors Tiberius and Phocas.

Inscriptions on coinage serve two fundamental purposes. First, the coin is identified as belonging to and used by a specific population of users. Second, inscriptions indicate by which state authority coins32 were issued and were responsible for guaranteeing the weight and purity of the metal. The designs of most of Byzantine coins focus primarily on representations of the ruler at the time the coin was minted, religious images, and "functional" information consisting mainly of indications of physical value.

The representation of an emperor on coins is common in ancient times, but in the Byzantine era we find the emperor’s representation having a unique quality, related to his relationship with the idea of immortality and divinity.33 Further, we find possible elucidations to the uncertainty of imperial succession which, at the time these coins were minted, was not entirely determined. Imagery on a coin served to pictorially explain possible solutions to this issue: the successor would likely be a respectable man who was deemed selected by God. (e.g., Manus Day indicated that he was indeed chosen by God.) The basic idea of the new doctrine was that the emperor was the image of the heavenly king, whose kingdom must be fulfilled on earth. Thus, the emperor became a deputy of the Lord and was therefore the Lord’s choice to fulfil His kingdom on earth. For this reason, the imagery on

29 Al-Makdad, 2017: 444.
31 Al-Makdad, 2017: 455
32 Grierson, 1999: 23.
these Byzantine Empire coins expresses the idea of divinity through the religious symbols of the cross, the crown and the sceptre.

One further important question is, how can we explain the appearance of this vessel containing coins within a religious setting (possibly the ruins of a church) in the town of Al-Mantar? We know from the inscriptions on the coins themselves that they were minted between the late 6th and the early 7th centuries CE. But why would this treasure have been buried in this location? One possible explanation is that a burial site next to a church may have been considered a safe place. Perhaps the owner of the coins quickly secreted them with the hope and expectation of returning to the cache one day. The location suggests the treasure may have belonged to a monk in the region. As many Byzantine military groups were concentrated in this area at this period on the ancient Syrian coast, the lack of political openness and this well-known presence of many military contingents in the region reinforce this initial interpretation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Coins reflect the economic and social manifestations of a historical period and are a reliable source of information concerning daily life of the ancient culture. They are therefore one of the most important sources of information concerning a civilization’s material culture and one of the most accurate tools at our disposal in the interpretation and analysis of historical data. We may see each coin as a virtual archaeological document on which specialists may rely to glean accurate and important information. The discovery of this cache of coins in this particular area of the Syrian coast confirms once again the importance of this region in the history of the Byzantine period in the Aradian coastal region.

Without doubt, the date of minting of the coins in this treasure dates to the end of the 6th and beginning of the 7th centuries, the period of the emperors Tiberius and Phocas. The large number of coins bearing the image of the emperor Phocas indicates the most likely period of the burial of the cache is the beginning of the 7th century, the period immediately subsequent to Emperor Phocas' ascent to power. We may further speculate that the coins were buried in response to the unstable politico-military conditions during the period of the reigns of
Emperors Maurice and Phocas in the region of Amrît. Further, these Byzantine period coins were probably minted in the Constantine-related states, most likely from one or both mints located in Cyprus and Jerusalem. The coins bear inscriptions and images that pay homage to the religious traditions of this period and region and indicate to us through their iconography the importance of the emperors and the living tradition of Christianity in this period in the region of the Aradian coast.

This cache of coins found in this particular area is a very significant event and provides new information for a better understanding of historical events as well as bringing to light hidden elements of the archaeological patrimony of Syria.

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