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The Fineness of Dinar, Dirham and Fals during the Mamluk Period

1Wan Kamal Mujani

1Department of Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the fineness of the dinars (gold coins), dirhams (silver coins) and fulus (copper coins) and factors that affected its purity during the Mamluk period. The discussions are based on modern analysis, numismatic evidence and textual sources. In order to explore the issue in detail, the article starts by explaining their history from early Mamluk period. This is followed by a discussion of the diminution of fineness of dinars, dirhams and fulus. Finally, an analysis of the factors that affected the fineness of these coins will be given. The article finds that the coins during Mamluk era were frequently in an unstable situation. Numismatic evidence attests to the fact that there were reduction of the purity of coins and their weight and also manipulation of the exchange rates due to the increasing financial needs of the government which had to cover various expenses including some for their own personal benefits. Another reason which affected the monetary system during that time was the adulteration of the coinage.

Key words: Fineness, purity, Dinar, Dirham, Fals, Mamluk.

Introduction

The Mamluk sultans maintained the traditional Islamic coinage and their currency consisted of dinars, dirhams and fulus (plural of fals). Thus, they continued the currency of their predecessors, the Ayyubids, taking pride in their relationship with that famous dynasty. The numismatic evidence confirms Al-Maqrizi’s (1967) statement that the coins of the first Mamluk sultans resembled those of the last Ayyubid. The dinars of al-Mu’izz Aybak, al-Mansur ‘Ali and al-Muzaffar Qutuz were struck and engraved in the same style as those of Salih Ayyub. The Mamluk rulers minted these coins at the two establishments of the Dar al-Darb (the Mint), one of which was in Cairo and the other in Alexandria. The mint in Cairo, however, was the most important in the realm (Schultz, 1999).

The Dinar, Dirham and Fals during the Mamluk period:

The Dinar:

It is well-known that the first truly Islamic coinage, established after the reforms of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. al-Marwan (in 696) were the dinar which weighed a mithqal (4.25 grams) and the dirham which weighed the equivalent of 2.97 grams. The Mamluk dinar, however, was produced in different weights and it was used as a money of account. One dinar was usually worth about 20 to 28 dirhams (Schultz, 2003; Ziadeh, 1970). Among the dinars that circulated during the Mamluk period were:

1) The salimi dinar which was issued by Amir Yalbugha al-Salimi (d.1408), a majordomo of the Sultan al-Nasir Faraj, on 6 January 1401, during the latter’s absence in Damascus. It was minted in Cairo and weighed a full mithqal i.e. 4.25 grams. In addition, a quarter, a half, a one-and-a-half, and a two and a three mithqal coins were produced. The salami dinars were not circulated for long, being withdrawn from circulation in 1411 (Broome, 1985; Shoshan, 1978).

2) The nasiri dinar. This was of two types. The first was coined by Sultan al-Nasir Faraj in 1405-1406 and weighed about 3.55 grams. It was the first Egyptian dinar weighing less than the traditional standard dinar. The second, a sequin-type gold coin, was issued in 1407 and weighed only 3.40 grams (Popper, 1957; Balog, 1964).

3) The ashrafi dinar which was introduced by Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay on 28 December 1425 and weighed about 3.45 grams. It was made of the finest gold and continued in circulation throughout the century as the preferred gold coin in trade. Indeed, it was able to drive out the ducat (Ibn Tulun, 1973; Ashtor, 1976).

4) The zahiri dinar which was struck by Sultan al-Zahir Jaqmaq during 1438-1453 and its weight was similar to that of the ashrafi dinar.

Corresponding Author: Wan Kamal Mujani, Department of Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.
E-mail: inamal@yahoo.com; Tel: +603-89215622; Fax: +603-89213152.
5) The mansuri dinar which coined during the reign of Sultan al-Mansur Uthman in February-March 1453 and weighed only 3.186 grams (Al-Nabarawi, 1993).

Besides the above dinars which were issued by the Mamluk rulers, there were also foreign gold coins circulating in Egypt. The ifranti is the ordinary Arabic word for the foreign gold coins current in Egypt at the time, including both the ducat and the florin. Al-Qalqashandi (1987) says that this gold coin had one face with the picture of the king in whose time the coin was struck and the picture of two men on the opposite side.

Each of these gold coins weighed about 3.5 grams. The ifranti, especially the ducat, dominated Egyptian markets from the end of the fourteenth century. Al-Maqrizi (1972) in his al-Suluk under the year 1415, states that the European coins had been circulating since 1388. The ifranti became the most preferred coin in transactions in many cities and regions of the world, such as Cairo, Fustat, Syria, Asia Minor, the East, and Yemen. For the next 25 years, literary references to European coins are frequent. A large quantity of ifrantis spread to Egypt when the European merchants brought their coins during their trade with the Mamluks. One ifranti was worth 17 dirhams (Bacharach, 1994).

Some of the Mamluk rulers tried to counteract the domination of the ifranti by issuing dinars with various weights. Thus, the salimi dinar was struck in 1401 and had a standard weight of a mithqal, but failed to displace the ifranti. The nasiri dinar also failed to meet the challenge (Bacharach, 1973). Eventually, the ashrafi dinar which was issued by Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay and contained the finest gold was successful in replacing the ifranti. From that time, the ifranti almost disappeared from Mamluk chronicles.

The present writer disagrees with the statement of Rabie (1972) that the ashrafi dinar failed to displace the Italian gold coin. Indeed, many scholars and numismatics such as Boaz Shoshan and Jere L. Bacharach conclude that the ashrafi dinar was a success in replacing the ducat for the reasons given. At the same time, the limited reports in the Mamluk chronicles about the circulation of ducats after the issue of the ashrafi dinar show that this foreign coin was not as well known as before.

The Mamluk historians say that the failure of the dinar (before the issue of ashrafi dinars) to meet the challenge of the ifranti was due to the gold coins being under weight (Al-Maqrizi, 1972; Al-Qalqashandi, 1987). The well-known numismatist Bacharach (1994) says that the domination of the ifranti was due to its high quality and distinct shape, this giving it a good reputation among merchants, shopkeepers and money exchangers. It was also available in large quantities and was in circulation for a number of years. At the same time, the people and merchants also lost confidence in the government’s coinage and the overvalued foreign currencies.

The ashrafi dinar was successful in facing the challenge of the ifranti because the government had enough financial resources and absolute political power to force the money markets to reverse an existing relationship between currencies. Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay was able to flood the markets with large numbers of ashrafi dinars because he had enough gold to issue them. Eventually, however, there is a report that the weight of the ifranti decreased from 3.5 grams to about 3.30 grams during the fifteenth century when it ceased to be the dominant currency (Shoshan, 1978).

The Dirham:

The dirham was a silver coin and its legal weight was 2.97 grams. During the Mamluk era, the standard Mamluk dirham weighed about 2.975 grams i.e. seventy per cent of a mithqal of 4.25 grams. It was originally composed of 2/3 silver and 1/3 copper. This was a continuation of the Ayyubid practice. There were many silver coins produced during the Mamluk era, but these individual dirhams were issued in different weights (Al-Maqrizi, 1967; Popper, 1957). Among the dirhams that circulated during the Mamluk period were:

1) The zahiri dirham which was issued by Sultan al-Zahir Barquq in 1387, and was of the earlier standard weight (Al-Nabarawi, 1993).

2) The nawruzi dirham which was struck by Amur Nawruz in Damascus in 1412. It weighed 1.48 grams i.e. one-half the weight of the old standard dirham (St-Eli, 1939; Bacharach, 1971).

3) The mu’ayyadi dirham which was coined by Mu’ayyad Shaykh in December 1414 and was introduced into circulation on 5 May 1415. It weighed 2.6 grams and its silver content was 90 to 95 per cent. Besides the full mu’ayyadi dirham, Sultan Mu’ayyad Shaykh also struck halves (1.3 grams) and quarters (0.64 grams) (Balog, 1964).

4) The ashrafi dirham which coined by Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay in November-December 1403 and weighed 2.47 grams. It was 94.5 per cent silver and was intended to replace the then current foreign silver coins. In general, the silver content of Barsbay’s coins was high. During his reign the dinar was worth 28 1/2 dirhams (Popper, 1957; Balog, 1961).

5) The zahiri dirham which was issued by Sultan al-Zahir Jaqmaq in May 1440. It was 94.5 per cent silver. Half and quarter zahiri dirhams were also issued (Al-Maqrizi, 1972; Shoshan, 1978).

6) The inali dirhams which were produced in two different issues during the reign of Sultan Inal between 1453 and 1461. The first was struck in Aleppo and Damascus, and also circulated in Egypt. This dirham...
contained only 1 ½ of silver or less. The second issue, which was chiefly of half dirhams and some quarter
dirhams, contained 96 per cent good silver (Balog, 1964).

In addition to the above dirhams which were introduced by the Mamluk rulers, there was a foreign silver
coin that circulated in Egypt, i.e. the Venetian dirham or bunduqi. This had a high silver content and weighed
between 1.85 and 2.00 grams (Al-Maqrizi, 1967; Bacharach, 1971).

The Fals:

The fals was a copper coin and its standard weight was a mithqal i.e. 4.25 grams. This currency was coined
for use in small commercial transactions. Its purchasing power was very limited and exclusively served the
needs of daily life. The fals circulated generally by weight (Al-Maqriz, 1957; Tarawnih, 1994). The copper
coins during the Turkish Mamluk period remained similar to those of the Ayyubids. Initially, the engraving was
of high quality and the minting was well done. After a certain period, however, the quality of the copper coins
decreased, especially towards the end of the Turkish Mamluk period. These later fals coins were issued in large
numbers and were very poorly manufactured. Their weight became completely inconsistent. During the Turkish
Mamluk period also, the sultans flooded the markets with new copper coinage and manipulated its exchange
rates. In the early fifteenth century, the weight of the fals ranged between only 1.50 and 3.00 grams (Balog,
1964; Shoshan, 1978).

The Debasement of the fineness of Dinar, Dirham and Fals:

There was a decrease in the fineness of coins at each successive striking. For example, neutron activation
analysis indicates that there was the debasement during Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay’s reign and this is supported
by textual sources and numismatic evidence (Bacharach and Gordus, 1968). The rulers issued gold, silver and
copper coins but they did not necessarily follow a minting policy in regard to weight. The usual procedure of the
government was to try to keep the weight and value relatively constant and to decrease the degree of fineness.
This and other problems with the Mamluk monetary system naturally had an adverse effect on the economy.
This was understood by contemporary historians who blame the monetary policy of the rulers for the frequent
disorder of the country and for its bankruptcy (Alouche, 1994).

Al-Maqrizi (1957), for example, considers the monetary policy of the Circassians to be one of the factors in
the economic difficulties of his time and remarks that Egypt’s chaotic condition was the result of the widespread
circulation of copper fulus. Al-Sayrafi (1970), Ibn Iyas (1963) and Ibn Tulun (1962) also refer to the disorderly
monetary system during the period under consideration as a cause of hardship for the populace and as affecting
the economy. A modern scholar is of the opinion that the policy of the Mamluk sultans to manipulate the weight
of the coinage, its purity and exchange rates for their own interests caused the economic difficulties. Indeed, the
monetary system during the period under review can be described as ‘frequent disorder’ (Qasim, 1994).

The Dinar:

As was the case with other coins, there was a debasement of dinars during the Mamluk period. For instance,
during the reign of Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay, the weight of dinars was less than 3.40 grams, but this declined
even more to 3.20 grams at the end of the Mamluk sultanate. The percentage of gold in the dinar also dropped to
below 95 per cent. The value of gold was determined by the silver dirham, a currency which gradually lost some
of its purchasing power. As a consequence, the rate of exchange for gold rose (Bacharach, 1973).

The Dirham:

There were some examples during the Mamluk period which shown that the weight and purity of the silver
coins decreased from the legal standard. The many endeavours to encourage the circulation of dirhams
according to their face value failed and therefore the dirhams continued to circulate by weight only. For instance, in December 1476-January 1477, the silver coinage had become very light and could only be traded by
weight because of the continual filing and cutting around the edges of the coins (Ibn Iyas, 1963). During the
reign of al-Nasir Muhammad b. Qaytbay the weight of the dirham decreased from 1.50 to 1.42 grams, while
during the reign of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri the weight was further reduced to 1.20 grams. This occurred
because of the poor administration of the government.

The Fals:

The history of late Mamluk copper currency can be described as a succession of recoinages. A large number
of fulus were struck in Egypt, but the value of these copper coins was low because of their debasement and
adulteration. Moreover, the weight of the individual copper coins was not based on a specific standard. Sometimes the weight of the whole fals was very low at 2.10 grams or even less. The reduction in the weight of copper coins caused this currency to be used by weight rather than by number (Bacharach, 1976).

Contemporary historians frequently mention the lightness of copper coins, their reduced purity and their devaluation. Examples of this can be seen in September-October 1469, April-May 1475, October-November 1481 and July-August 1498. During the reign of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri, Ibn Iyas (1963) reports on the frequency of the striking of new copper coins such as in August-September 1501, January-February 1502, May-June 1502, February-March 1512 and February-March 1513.

The Economic Effects of the Debasement of Coinage:

Documentation on the economic implications of the problems of the unstable coins is very limited, and the primary sources do not give information beyond stating, for example, that “this caused difficulties among the populace”. Contemporary historians similarly provide no information about the effect of the diminution of coinage on imports and exports and government taxation. Probably as a result of this lack of information, modern works are more focused on metrology and numismatic aspects and there is no extensive research discussing the economic consequences. There can be little doubt, however, that problems with the monetary system had a pronounced effect on the economy. Indeed, contemporary historians mention that the markets were frequently inactive in buying and selling because of the new coins. There were also riots and protests from the populace on the minting of ‘new currency’, and merchants and shopkeepers often closed their stores and shops to avoid losses. These situations in turn inevitably disrupted the smooth running of the economy (Al-Sayrafi, 1970; Ibn Iyas, 1963).

Factors Leading to the Debasement of Coinage:

Some of the major factors that affected the coinage during the Mamluk period were:

1) The Increasing Financial Needs of the Government:

One of the reasons which caused problems with the monetary system during the Mamluk period was the government’s increasing financial needs. During the period under review, the government needed extra funds to cover the costs of military campaigns, the Nafaqa (payment) of the armies, the demand for new Mamluks, and the increasing scale of pensions paid to the unemployed, out-of-service and retired Mamluk officers and soldiers. At the same time, the government had to cover the cost of the extravagant tastes and requirements of the imperial court and the households of great amirs (Ayalon, 1958).

The revenues from the agricultural, industrial and commercial sectors were not sufficient to cover all state expenses. This caused the Mamluk sultans to manipulate the currency in order to achieve fiscal advantage in the short term. Thus they found it necessary to lower the weight of the individual coins as well as to debase them. Meanwhile, the sultans saw that setting of official exchange rates could bring them an immediate profit on the difference between the old rates and the new ones by calculating salaries in a coin with a low exchange rate and then paying with a coin which had a higher exchange rate. This policy demanded constant interference in the market (Ibn Iyas, 1963).

2) The Adulteration of the Coinage:

The practice of adulterating coins with low value material was another factor that affected the monetary system during the Mamluk period. At the same time, the reduction of the weight of individual coins was also quite common. An example of the adulteration of individual coins and the debasement in their weight or fineness that caused difficulties to the populace and affected economic activities can be seen during the reign of Sultan al-Zahir Barquq (1382-1389). The Mamluk chroniclers report that the decrease of the weight of copper coins as well as their fineness interrupted the commercial activities in markets during his era. Meanwhile during the reign of Sultan al-Nasir Faraj (1399-1412), the weight of fals as well as its quality became low. This was because it was struck illegally outside the Dar al-Darb. The fals during the reign of Sultan Mu’yyad Shaykh (1412-1421) also contained a high percentage of inferior metals (iron and lead) and very little copper (Al-Zahrani, 1993).

In 1472, the master of silver coins in the Damascus mint was imprisoned in Cairo because he had been accused of mixing a 0.05 dirham weight of other metals with each silver dirham. In 1484, a high ranking officer called Mithqal al-Tawashi was exiled to Mecca because he had set up a private mint at his home and produced debased dirhams. A little later in 1496, a group of eight men who forged adulterated coinage were apprehended, the authorities cutting off their hands as punishment. In 1507, the viceroy of Damascus, Sabay, arrested Ibn al-
Dimashqi, the chief of the counterfeiters together with other counterfeiters because debasement had been on the increase in Damascus at that time (Al-Sayrafi, 1970; Ibn Iyas, 1963; Ibn Tulun, 1962).

Conclusion:

The main factor behind the financial problems in the Mamluk kingdom was that the Mamluks did not have a standard coin in circulation. This loosely organised monetary system seems to have been responsible for an increased adulteration of the coinage. Every sultan struck his own coins of a different weight and with a different degree of purity. They tried to achieve fiscal advantages on every issue of coins by reducing their weight or fineness or manipulating the exchange rate. Al-Sayrafi, who showed his dissatisfaction with the monetary system during his days, describes the dishonest officials who worked at the mint as "devils". At the same time, the Mamluk sultans were sometimes unable to control the illegal coins struck by forgers, and the circulation of these adulterated coins disturbed economic activities in Egypt.

Numismatic evidence attests to the fact that the rulers reduced the weight of coins and their fineness and manipulated the exchange rates. One of the main reasons for this was the increasing financial needs of the government which had to cover various expenses including some for their own personal benefits. This manipulation of the monetary system understandably caused difficulties for the merchants and shopkeepers and therefore affected economic activities. The markets were often inactive in buying and selling because of the new coins. There were also riots and protests from the populace against the re-minting of "new currency".

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References


