“MIHRAB AND ‘ANAZA” OR “SACRUM AND SPEAR”? A RECONSIDERATION OF AN EARLY MARWANID SILVER DRACHM

This paper is an attempt to understand the imagery of an important early Islamic silver coin that belongs to the so-called series of transitional coinage, issued in the period AH 72–77 (691–697), during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan. As Michael Bates’s fundamental article on early Islamic coinage showed, this five-year period, which immediately preceded the introduction of nonfigural epigraphic coinage in AH 77–79, witnessed an extraordinarily rapid process of monetary change throughout the early Marwanid state, and especially in Syria, the metropolitan province.1 Whereas in the reign of Mu’awiya and his two successors the precious metal coinage of Islamic Syria had largely followed patterns established by Byzantine practice, after ‘Abd al-Malik’s defeat of the Zubayrids the capital mint at Damascus produced several novel figural types. These included the “Shahada” solidus (AH 72?) (fig. 1a) and the Standing Caliph dinar (AH 74–77) (fig. 1b), both gold, and the Damascus Arab-Sasanian drachm (AH 72–74) (fig. 2a), the Standing Caliph drachm (AH 75) (fig. 2b), and the Mihrab and ‘Anaza drachm (AH 75–77?) (fig. 2c), all silver.2

Of all these coins, it is the Mihrab and ‘Anaza drachm that has been most studied by Islamic art historians since its first publication half a century ago. My purpose is to reexamine Miles’s analysis of the iconography of the type in the light of several new specimens that have become available since his day and to analyze the methodologies that he and his successors have deployed in their search to uncover the meaning of the early figural coinage.3

Over half a century ago, George Miles published a unique silver coin in the collection of the American Numismatic Society, which he identified as one of the transitional types struck by ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan in the mid-70s AH (mid-690s). The coin attracted his attention because it differed from the ordinary format of the Arab-Sasanian drachm in both the details of the obverse bust and the unique reverse image, from which Miles derived the name “Mihrab and ‘Anaza” (hereafter MA), by which the type has been known ever since (see below, for an illustrated catalogue).4 While Miles did not have a great deal to say about the obverse image, which he read as a crude and unsuccessful portrait of the caliph, he was obviously intrigued by the complex reverse image, which John Walker, his counterpart in the British Museum, had several years before interpreted as a rendition of the mihrab and lance.5 Miles added a further dimension to Walker’s brief catalogue description by identifying the upright structure between the two columns of the mihrab as the Prophet’s ‘anaza, or spear.

Miles’s paper appeared in a memorial volume for the great German archeologist, Ernst Herzfeld. The choice of subject could hardly have been more appropriate for its dedicatee. Among his many and various contributions to Islamic archeology, Herzfeld had been responsible for publishing the Khassaki mihrab of Baghdad, which he claimed was the earliest surviving example of the mihrab mujawwaf, or niche mihrab.6 Miles’s description of his coin as “a very valuable little archaeological document” shows that he wished it to be seen as a part of the archeological record, even though, as he freely acknowledged in his paper, the coin had no provenance beyond having belonged to a private collector, E. T. Newell, before its arrival in the collection of the A.N.S.7 Miles’s theory was that the numismatic image of the mihrab must have been introduced after the full-size mihrab had been established as a standard element of mosque architecture, because the numismatic image would only have been comprehensible to a coin user who was already familiar with it. The coin therefore provided the earliest secure date for the introduction of the mosque mihrab. This was the first contribution that the numismatic argument offered, but it was not the only one. Miles also suggested, in a more tentative vein, that the two-dimensional numismatic image may have been intended to represent the three-dimensional form of the niche mihrab (mihrab mujawwaf).
Unlike the earlier mihrab type, which was superimposed upon the surface of the qibla wall, the niche variant was constructed around a cavity that penetrated the surface of the wall. The textual evidence states that ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, Walid’s governor of Medina, was the first person to introduce the mihrab mujawwaf. He is said to have incorporated it in the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina when he renovated and extended the interior of the building in the late 80s AH (700s). Miles’s argument from the coinage suggested that the niche mihrab was already known in the mid-70s AH (690s), thus predating its appearance in Medina by a least a decade.

As was appropriate for a piece of research that broke much new ground, Miles did not hide the fact that he considered his conclusions to be provisional in nature. For example, he expressed his doubts about the two ‘alams, the pennants or banners, that hung down under the blade of the upright spear that stood under the arch of the mihrab (see below, cat. no. 1). Having identified the spear as the ‘anaza of the Prophet, he admitted that he was puzzled by its pennants, because he could find no reference in the texts to the ‘anaza being decorated in this fashion. More important, although he believed that he had made a solid case for his reading of the image, he did not consider that the coin, as he had described it, fitted smoothly into the series of Damascus silver coinage of the mid-690s (mid-70s) to which it belonged. He continued to regard this piece, and related issues like the Standing Caliph drachm, as anomalous.

In spite of the number of scholars who have discussed his ideas, it cannot be said that Miles’s interpretation has generated the level of debate among art historians or numismatists that his ingenious and thorough treatment merited. Gaube was the only scholar who attempted to reassess the problem in its numismatic context, but he worked without the help of several new specimens that are available for study today. The consensus of non-numismatic opinion is summed up by O. Grabar, who in both editions of his seminal work on the origins of Islamic art wholeheartedly accepted Miles’s view, describing ‘Abd al-Malik’s transitional coinage as “curious” (Standing Caliph), “odd” (Orans), and “extraordinary” (the MA type) (see figs 1–3).

Grabar’s admission of numismatic bewilderment reflects a general perception among students of early Islamic material culture that the coinage evidence, however tantalizing in prospect, can in the end offer
little reward to the nonspecialist. Grabar declares himself to be unsure of the value of coins as a window through which historians of art might study the iconography of the early Muslim community. He considers numismatic imagery as being of limited importance because it serves to illuminate only the policy of the ruling stratum and says little about the development of religious belief. In spite of his skepticism, however, Grabar does place considerable weight on the transitional coinage, and particularly on the Mihrab and ‘Anaza drachm, when seeking to explain the crucial significance of ‘Abd al-Malik’s introduction of epigraphic coinage in AH 77–79. In his 1964 article “Islamic Art and Byzantium,” he outlined what he considered to have been ‘Abd al-Malik’s insoluble dilemma in the project to create a new Muslim coinage. In his view, the caliph was faced with the choice of either using and adapting the existing numismatic vocabulary of Byzantine origin, which would inevitably fail to convey the unique qualities of the new religion, or trying to invent a new iconography, which would fail because it would be so far outside the known canon that it would not be universally comprehensible. Grabar identifies the MA type as the only coin of ‘Abd al-Malik’s that fits in the latter category of “new iconography” and suggests, by implication, that the epigraphic coinage was introduced soon afterwards because the imagery of the MA type was as confusing to coin users in seventh-century Syria as it was to him.

There is, however, a problem with this conception of the transitional coinage that needs to be addressed. Throughout all periods of history, precious metal coinage has usually been an extremely conservative medium. The primary function of the numismatic image has been to guarantee to the coin user that the metal flan on which it is stamped holds a consistent value. This is best achieved by minimal alteration of numismatic imagery, and usually only at anticipated intervals, such as the inauguration of a new ruler or the introduction of a new denomination. Coins have by and large been designed as bearers of simple messages that are meant to convey big ideas, such as the dominant authority and longevity of the dynasty and the all-encompassing truth of the religion espoused by the ruler. In periods of rapid reform, such as ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign, numismatic imagery did of course change more frequently and more radically than was customary. But the underlying principle that the coin issuer should attempt to establish a sequence of comprehensible images linked by common themes that would aim to create reassurance in the market place still obtained: even more so, one might argue, in a period of frequent iconographic variation than in less disturbed times.

Could it really be that ‘Abd al-Malik’s transitional coinage included such glaring exceptions to the general rule as the Mihrab and ‘Anaza drachm? In an earlier discussion of the Iraqi “Orans” drachm, I tried to show that the “Orans” coinage was a considered response to a particular set of historical circumstances encountered by its issuer, ‘Abd al-Malik’s brother, Bishr b. Marwan, when he became governor of southern Iraq after the Marwanid reconquest of that region. In the following pages, I will suggest that the Mihrab and ‘Anaza drachm was neither a random leap in the dark nor an iconographic novelty, but rather the outcome of an attempt to resolve the specific monetary problem that arose when ‘Abd al-Malik attempted to assimilate the existing Sasanian-style silver coinage of Damascus into the iconographic program of the Standing Caliph type. I begin with a descriptive catalogue of known specimens, followed by a commentary on the salient features of the coins. This is followed by a description of the numismatic context behind the MA type, and in particular a close analysis of the Standing Caliph drachm to which it is closely linked. Having set the scene, the paper proceeds with an analysis of the obverse and reverse images on the MA type that hinges on a close reading of Miles’s work and that of his successors and concludes with an alternative interpretation of the all-important reverse image that draws heavily on the work of A. Grabar and J. Raby.

CATALOGUE OF MIHRAB AND ‘ANAZA SPECIMENS

Type 1a
Cat. no. 1. American Numismatic Society (A.N.S.) Collection, 1944.100.612: Miles, “Mihrab and ‘Anazah,”
pl. 28, no. 3; and J. Walker, *A Catalogue of the Arab-Sasanian Coins*, 24, no. 5, pl. 31. Weight: 3.33–3.36g.

**Obverse**: Right-facing bust of recognizable Arab-Sasanian style but with several nonstandard features. The bust lies within two dotted circles. Outside the circles, following a clockwise direction starting from 12:30, an Arabic legend, divided four times by a crescent-and-star motif, runs around the margin: *bism illa/i  / laha illa Allahu / yadhu Muhammad ra / sul Allahu*, followed by a triangle of pellets. To the left and right of the bust are the standard Middle Persian (MP) inscriptions *GDH AFZUT* (may his sovereign glory increase!) / *khusraw*. The face of the bust is tall and thin by comparison with other Arab-Sasanian types. The bust wears a diadem that terminates in three pellets behind the head. The diadem supports a tall, rounded headcovering formed of three concentric arches with a vertical shaft in the center. A crescent and star are located in front of the cap. Above the cap sits a round shape with an infill of indeterminate character (probably vertical lines) that breaks through the double circle framing the image. Between the round shape and the top of the cap, two ribbons fall backwards and downwards to end in small pellets. The hair is gathered in a bunch over the bust’s right shoulder. Above the left shoulder is a small crescent. Pennants or fillets rise from both shoulders. A plain dotted circle lies at the base of the neck. The chest area is filled with crosshatching. The bust’s arms are visible, held upwards in front of the chest. In his right hand, the bust holds the hilt of a sword whose blade is concealed within a scabbard (see the following coin for a clearer image) that runs downwards towards the bottom right corner of the frame.

**Reverse**: The central field is enclosed within three dotted circles, beyond which is a margin containing four crescent-and-star motifs, each with a pellet on either side. To the right of the uppermost crescent and star, in Middle Persian (MP), is an inscription which Miles read as *AF*, an abbreviation of the word *AFD*, meaning “praise,” commonly found on the margins of Sasanian coins. Beyond this margin is another dotted circle. The central field includes the image of two columns with spiral patterning, resting on roughly rectangular-shaped bases with rounded edges, with two pellets/circles within each rectangle. The capitals above the column are shaped like the bases and also have two pellets/circles within (see cat. no. 5 for a clear image). The capitals support a ribbed arch. Within the frame formed by the arch and columns is a vertical structure, apparently representing a spear, the tip of whose blade touches the underside of the arch and has two barbs that face downwards. Below the left barb are two wavy lines, probably denoting pennants, which are attached to the spear and fall to the left. Two large pellets are visible, one to either side of the blade. The spear rests on an inverted *v* structure, which Miles suggested was a “bifurcated shoe” supporting the spear. Below the columns is a dotted line that runs horizontally across the bottom of the field. Inscriptions in Arabic: to the left of the left-hand column, running downwards, *amir al-mu’minin* (Commander of the Faithful); to the right of the right-hand column *kh-l-f-t* (for *khalifat*, but with *y* omitted and *t* instead of *ta’ marbutsa*) *Allahu* (Deputy of God). To the left of the spear is the word *nasr*
and to the right Allāh (nasr Allāh or nasara Allāh: “Victory of God” or “May God give assistance”), each word followed by a pellet.

The reverse of this coin was struck from the same die as cat. no. 2.

Cat. no. 2. Azizbeglou Collection: G. C. Miles, “Some Arab-Sasanian and Related Coins,” 192, no. 7, pl. 24. Weight: 3.50g.

Obverse and reverse: as preceding. The reverse of this coin was struck from the same die as cat. no. 1.

Cat. no. 3. Damascus hoard: M. A. al-‘Ush, The Silver Hoard of Damascus (Damascus: Mathaf Dimashq, 1972), 167, pl. 32, no. 13. Weight: 3.87g.

Obverse and reverse: Poor photo, some details are not visible. Al-‘Ush describes the globe above the cap as “enclosing fire” and having a pellet below and above it. He notes that the bust appears to hold a “semi-sword” that “goes down to the [bust’s] left.” The spelling of the MP inscription on the reverse margin is similar to cat. no. 1 and was read by al-‘Ush as AF. Pennants on the spear fall to the right. No pellet is visible after nasr or Allāh. He describes the weapon with the arch as a “semi-arrow” and suggests that the Arabic inscription to the right of the right-hand column is to be read khalaftu Allāh (which he translates as “I am acting for God”).

Cat. no. 4. Sotheby’s (London), Sale of Renaissance
Medals, Ancient, Islamic, English and Foreign Coins, July 12th 1993, lot no. 167. Weight: 3.41g.

Obverse and reverse: As preceding. Tiny inverted v shape is partially visible at the top of the arch in the central field of the reverse. The slight double striking makes a secure identification of the v shape impossible. The reverse has the pennants below the spearhead hanging to the right. Prominent pellets appear beneath the Arabic words nasr and Allâh.

Cat. no. 5. Azizbeglou Collection: Miles, “Some Arab-Sasanian and Related Coins,” 192, no. 8. Weight: 3.70g.

Obverse: Similar to preceding except for different distribution of marginal legends, viz. bism ʾillâh lâ ilâha / illâ Allâh wa / ḥdahu Muhammad ra / sâl allah.

Reverse: There appears to be an inverted v shape at the top of the arch in the central field: its two terminals begin within the arch and its apex juts out above the top of it. Miles’s description has the pennants on the spear falling to the left, but the illustration suggests they might be to the right. The word muʾminin is misspelled as muʾmîn. The marginal inscription (۰۰۰) is different from the MP inscription on preceding catalogue specimens: it appears to represent the Arabic letters bâ (or tâ, yâ, thâ, or nûn) and wâw.

Cat. no. 6. Royal Coin Cabinet, Stockholm: C. J. Tornberg, Numi cuifici Regii numophylacii Holmiensis quos omnes in terra Sueciae repertos digessit et interpretatus est (Uppsala:

Obverse: Marginal legend...hu Muḥammad / rasūl...
In the field, the fillet rising above the right shoulder, the hair bun, the MP inscription, the three points at the rear of the diadem, and the ribbons lying behind the cap are all that are visible of the bust.

Reverse: No two-letter combination is visible to the right of the crescent and star at 12:00. In the field all that is visible is the left section of the arch (its interior apparently smooth in contrast to the ribbed infill of all other specimens, perhaps through excessive wear) with a pronounced inverted  v at the apex (like cat. nos 4, 5, and 7), the tip of the spear and pellet, and the left-hand capital supporting the arch (apparently smooth like the arch itself). To the left of the arch, where all other coins have the word  amīr, this coin has a pellet, followed by what is apparently the word  Allāh, but written from the bottom upwards.

Type 1b
Cat. no. 7. Bibliothèque nationale, 1967.209. Weight: 3.76g.

Obverse: Marginal legend distributed in an order slightly different from cat. nos. 1–5: bism illāh īā / lāḥa illā Allāh wa / ḥdahu Muḥammad / rasūl Allāh. These dies appear to have been more carefully exe-
cuted than the preceding dies. The head of the bust is wider than usual, and the cap is delineated by a beaded line. A pellet lies behind the head. The bust is holding the hilt of his sword in his left hand, not his right. The scabbard is represented as an undulating line running between two parallel lines, with pellets in the spaces (see enlargement, fig. 4c).

Reverse: As preceding, with the same misspelling of word al-muʿminin as on no. 5, although the photograph shows that the first mim of al-muʿmin on this specimen has been rendered not as a loop but as a single vertical stem (or nabira). Also as on cat. no. 5, there is an inverted v shape fully visible at the top of the arch. The title to the right of the field appears to be spelled kh-l-f (lacking the tāʾ at the end of the word). Single pellets appear before and after caliphal titles. The pennants on the spear appear to hang one to either side, although the right pennant seems to be divided into two. Like the head, the arch-on-columns is wider and fuller than on previous examples and fills the central field so that the titles amīr al-muʿminīn [sic] and kh-l-f Allāh are written following the curve of the innermost circle surrounding the field. The marginal inscription is similar to cat. no. 5.

Summary of catalogue

The catalogue includes three recently discovered additions to the record (coin nos. 4, 6, and 7) that allow us to describe the series in detail. The most significant feature of the obverse image identified since Miles’s time is the sheathed sword, whose hilt the bust holds in his right hand. Al-ʿUsh’s tentative identification of this object as a “semi-sword” can now be refined by comparing the decoration of the scabbard in which the sword is lodged with that of the scabbard of the Standing Caliph dinar. The lower obverse of al-ʿUsh’s specimen (cat. no. 3) from the Damascus hoard is certainly clearer than Miles’s coin: this may well account for al-ʿUsh’s important discovery. It will be argued below that the presence of the sword is the crucial feature that links the iconography of the bust with the Standing Caliph and enables us to place the coin in its proper numismatic context.

In contrast to the broad features of the standard bust on Arab-Sasanian coins (fig. 5b), most specimens of the MA bust have a long, thin face that towers over a compact chest (fig. 5a). On the MA bust the placement of the ear directly below the diadem, high up at the back of the head, gives added force to the impression of facial length, whereas in the standard model the top of the ear begins behind the corner of the eye. On cat. nos. 1–5, the styling of the bust and the relative length of head and torso differ markedly from the proportions of standard Arab-Sasanian coins.

The catalogue shows that the imagery of the MA type displays a considerable degree of variation. Apart from the transfer of the sword from the right to the left hand of the figure (cat. no. 7), there are also several smaller variations in the details of the reverse image: these include the number of pellets in the image; the location of the pennants attached to the spear; and perhaps the occasional presence of the inverted v at the top of the arch, which is only fully visible on cat. nos. 5–7. A small but significant degree of variation is also detectable in the design of most of the transitional silver types struck in ʿAbd al-Malik’s reign (the “Orans” and the Damascus drachms as well as the MA type). This is a surprising feature in a new coinage: one might have expected that the designers would have been keen to maintain uniformity in order to convince a nervous market that their new coin should be trusted. The degree of variation noted in all cases suggests that the die engravers were not always closely supervised in their work and that, in the case of both the “Orans” and the MA type, they were at liberty to make improvements to the image as they saw fit.

There is less variation in the inscriptions of the MA type than in its imagery. The one exception is cat. no. 6, the Swedish hoard specimen, which appears to lack the two-letter monogram on the reverse margin and to have transposed and inverted the caliphal titles to
either side of the reverse image. The word Allâh to the left of the arch is presumably the second element in the title khalîfât Allâh. This coin is likely to have traveled northwards from its region of origin before being deposited in a hoard buried on Swedish soil.25 The disarrangement of its inscriptions strongly suggests that it was not struck in Damascus but in some other region, perhaps in a mint beyond Dar al-Islam. It therefore makes sense to regard it as an imitation rather than a genuine MA specimen and to exclude it from the following discussion.

Despite the variants noted here, the main features of the imagery are sufficiently stable for the coins to be considered as constituting a single type. The only major variant encountered in the series is the repositioned sword. For this reason, the series has been divided into two subtypes: subtype 1a (cat. nos. 1–6) and subtype 1b (cat. no. 7) which, I will argue, is the latest in the series.

While on the subject of cat. no. 7, a brief digression is required on its authenticity. A careful observer of the illustrations in the catalogue will notice that the alignment of the sword and the fullness of the bust’s face and the columns are not the only features that distinguish cat. no. 7 from the others. It is also very well preserved, and its inscriptions are formed with an abnormally thick ductus. Its legibility and completeness are so exceptional that its authenticity has to be questioned. On reflection, it can be said with confidence that in spite of its pristine condition and exceptional appearance, it is most unlikely to be a modern fake.

The evidence is as follows: first, the proven modern copies of ‘Abd al-Malik’s transitional types are, to a coin, crude attempts at imitation, whereas cat. no. 7 is well executed. Second, modern coin forgers generally try to copy the features of the prototype very closely in order to secure a purchase, often from a collector or less frequently from an institution known to have
an interest in acquiring such material. It is highly unlikely that a modern forger would be sufficiently skilled to produce an object of this quality, or well enough informed about the MA type to introduce a new feature (realignment of the sword), which, as the following argument seeks to prove, serves to explain how the coin fits into the context of the transitional coinage.

The number of dies identified in the catalogue (7 obverse and 6 reverse dies for only 7 specimens) indicates that the issue of the MA drachm was a substantial one, of which only a small proportion survives to this day. This suggests in turn that despite the absence of both mint and date legends—a feature that sets it apart from contemporary issues in all three metals—the MA type was not a special, or presentation, issue but a regular issue of brief duration, like the “Orans” drachms of Bishr b. Marwan in southern Iraq.

Finally, the metrological data available for the six whole specimens of the MA type presents compelling new evidence in support of Miles’s contention that these coins were struck in Damascus. There are of course too few surviving specimens to permit an accurate estimation of the weight standard to which the series was struck: several times as many coins would be needed in order to make this calculation. Nevertheless, the range of weights among these six coins of the MA type, which runs from 3.33 to 3.87g, suggests a lower average (3.6g) than the average weight estimated for the Arab-Sasanian coin series as a whole (4.1g). Only one other small group of Islamic silver coins, also from the transitional period, was struck to a light weight standard, corresponding closely to that of the MA type. The common weight standard of the Damascus drachms and the MA type forms an exception to the general rule, and is not shared by any contemporary silver coinage. For example, the average weight of Bishr b. Marwan’s “Orans” drachms, which were struck in Iraq in 73–75 (692–95), is just under 4.1g and clearly adheres to the standard of the Arab-Sasanian series. Although the legends of the MA type make no mention of the mint in which they were struck, the metrological evidence presented here strongly supports Miles’s conjecture that these coins, like the Damascus drachms, were issued by the Damascus mint.

THE NUMISMATIC CONTEXT

In order to understand how the MA coin fits into the contemporary numismatic environment, it is useful at this point to summarize the evolution of the coinage of Greater Syria in the mid-70s AH (690s). In 74 (693–94) the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik had instituted a radical reform of his coinage with the introduction of the Standing Caliph type as a uniform type for all Syrian coinage (fig. 6).

The Standing Caliph figure was exceptional in several respects. Although the origin of the image and some of its main features, like the headcovering and the knotted cord hanging to the figure’s right side, were resistant to Miles’s attempts at interpretation and remain uninterpreted to this day, it was clear from the accompanying inscriptions that the figure was intended to represent the caliph, and that it was ultimately derived, in its form if not its details, from the familiar numismatic image of the Byzantine Standing Emperor. Similarly, the reverse of the coin bore an image derived from the Byzantine repertoire, a modified cross-on-steps that had already been used as the reverse of the earlier “Shahada” solidus (see fig. 1a). The Standing Caliph series was the first regalian coinage known in Islam, proclaiming as it did through word and image the primacy of the caliphal office. In monetary terms, ‘Abd al-Malik’s attempt to create a uniform type for all the coinage of Greater Syria was an ambitious innovation that had no precedent in earlier phases of Islamic monetary history.

The rapid ascendency of the Standing Caliph type is demonstrated by the annual striking of gold coins in Damascus and the operation of some sixteen mints that produced copper coins of this type. But although the Standing Caliph image could be applied without difficulty to the gold and copper coinage, ‘Abd al-Malik’s advisers faced a problem when they tried to place the same image on the preexisting Syrian silver drachm of Damascus AH 72–74 (691–94), which bore the image of the Sasanian emperor on the obverse and the fire altar on the reverse. How were they to integrate a Sasanian-style silver coin into the Standing Caliph series? The following paragraphs offer a speculative reconstruction of the process by which they initially tried to solve this dilemma.

In the Standing Caliph drachm, the bust of the Sha-
hanshah was retained on the obverse, while the image of the Standing Caliph replaced the traditional fire altar (fig. 7). The modeling of the standing figure on this drachm is close to the version on the gold dinars from which it was copied, but not exactly similar. On the drachm the head is treated more simply and lacks the hair (or material of the headcovering) that falls on the shoulders; the sides of the robe are parallel and do not flare towards the bottom; and the cord hanging from the right-hand side of the waist, a feature common to both gold and copper coins of the type, is missing. In all three surviving specimens the scabbard falling to the figure’s left flares out slightly towards its tip, suggesting the shape of a club rather than a sword. Confirmation of the caliphal identity of the modified figure on the silver was ensured, however, by the inclusion of the caliphal titles *amir al-muminin* and *khalifat Allah* to either side of it. The Arabic date legend, which had been introduced on the reverse of the Damascus drachms of 72–74 (691–94), was transferred to the obverse, where it flanked the bust of the Shanshah, and was extended by the addition of the new phrase that had appeared on the Standing Caliph gold coinage in 74 (*duriba fi sana*... (“struck in the year...”). Unlike the earlier silver coinage of Damascus, however, this legend omitted mention of the mint name, perhaps because it was assumed that precious-metal regalian coinage of this type could only have been issued from the capital mint.

This drachm was instantly recognizable as belonging to the new Standing Caliph series that the caliph introduced in 74. But it is hard to escape the impression that the coin was an unwieldy and clumsy hybrid concoction that disregarded the customary format of Late Antique coinage. It did not adhere to the traditional numismatic formula that located the ruler on the obverse and a religious symbol on the reverse. Instead it contained two conflicting images of rulership. Granted, the Shanshah’s bust served to identify the new drachm as a variant of the established Sasanian-style drachm, which derived its popular name, *alkhusraw*, from the imperial bust. But it is the Shanshah’s imposing bust on the obverse that dominates the imagery of the coin, not the cramped figure of the caliph on the reverse. The image of the caliph needed to be given greater prominence on the coin if it was to succeed as a symbol of the supreme authority of the caliphate. The MA bust was, in my opinion, constructed with precisely this aim in mind. Before analyzing the MA bust, however, we will review Miles and Gaube’s approaches to the problem.

**THE OVERSE IMAGE ON THE MA TYPE**

**Miles and Gaube’s views**

Miles addressed the question of the context from which the MA type emerged but concentrated his attention on the inscriptions and had relatively little to say about the form of the bust. Although he understood that it was based on the Sasanian model, he judged it to be a unique image because of its curious headgear and chest covering. Having failed to find suitable prototypes for either the top or the bottom of the bust, he resorted to the hypothesis that it must be a “portrait” of the caliph, that is, an attempt to render his personal features in addition to his regalia, as might be found in a cameo, or as a Renaissance medalist might have depicted an Italian prince in the fifteenth century. Miles surmised that the engraver of this coin, like the engravers of its Sasanian prototypes, “lacked the skill... to draw a true likeness of the Caliph.”

It is true that portraiture, as an attempt to represent...
the physical characteristics of the subject rather than the symbols of his office, was practiced to a limited extent on seventh-century Byzantine coins, but it was uncommon in the wider field of representational art. Yet contrary to Miles’s assumption, it seems improbable that a die engraver should have been set the task of creating a portrait of the caliph in such a tiny space as the face of a coin, which offered him a canvas measuring less than two square centimeters. Of course, it may be argued that the die engraver was given a pattern or model on which he was to base his “portrait.” But it is difficult to imagine why the coin designer should have wanted to produce a second distinctive caliphal image so soon after the Standing Caliph had been introduced as the standard type for Syrian coinage of all three metals in 74 (693–94).

Once Miles had established the identity of the bust to his own satisfaction, he set about finding a prototype for the unique elements of regalia that adorned it. As already mentioned, he admitted that he was baffled by the lower section of the bust, which made no sense to him. Instead he focused on the headgear, which he described as “a sort of night-cap with two tassels hanging down to the left.” However, try as he might, he was unable to find a prototype, or even an approximate parallel, in the numismatic record of Late Antiquity. He concluded that the headgear may have been intended to represent either a crown (tāj) or a turban. Both suggestions fitted his conception of the public identity of the Umayyad caliphs, the first being an expression of their pretensions to monarchy, the second of their claim to religious leadership of the community. Miles ended with the cautious suggestion that the engraver may have found a non-numismatic model for the “crown” in the crown worn by the Visigothic kings, as depicted on the Toledan gold coinage of Visigothic King Wamba (r. 672–80). He also pointed to the portrait of the Visigothic Roderic on the famous fresco of Qusayr ‘Amra as evidence that such images of royalty were known to, and used by, the Umayyads in non-numismatic contexts.

The only other Islamic numismatist to give serious consideration to the bust was H. Gaube, who dedicated two dense pages of analysis to the problem in his *Arabosasanidische Numismatik* of 1973. Gaube was also intent on finding a prototype for the new elements of the bust’s apparel. As a student of the Sasanian numismatist R. Göbl, with a knowledge of the numismatic record of ancient Iran, Gaube was intimately familiar with the smallest details found in numismatic representations of imperial Sasanian regalia. These were accurately depicted in the exhaustive tables compiled by Göbl in his many publications, most accessibly in his general introduction to Sasanian numismatics, *Sasanidische Numismatik*, which had been published only five years before Gaube’s own book. Close observation of the top of the bust’s head revealed to Gaube that there was one element of the standard Sasanian headgear retained in the MA bust, namely the diadem (Stirnkranz) consisting of two horizontal bands depicted by dotted lines and ending in three pellets behind the head. Gaube suggested that the absence of the winged crown in the MA bust showed that the bust was modeled on the drachms issued in the first year of the reign of Khusraw II (590/1–628) (fig. 8). This early drachm of Khusraw II was the only type struck during his long reign that lacked the characteristic winged crown.

Gaube conceded that the match with the Khusraw prototype was not exact, admitting that the MA head lacked one significant feature shared by all Khusraw issues, including the wingless first-year type: the turrets that stood in a line above the diadem. He argued that the omission of the turrets was most likely an unintentional oversight on the die engraver’s part. But he did not rule out the possibility that the die engraver had intentionally omitted the turrets in order to give a particular meaning to the image. He speculated that the image could be interpreted, on the lines that Miles had already suggested, as a mixed crown (Mischkrone) that drew on elements of both Eastern (Sasanian) and Western (Byzantine and Visigothic) imperial regalia to produce a shape that proclaimed the crowned caliph as the Lord of the East and the West. But Gaube was reluctant to invest tiny details with such weighty significance. In the end he came down in favor of his original hypothesis of the Khusraw Year One prototype, but he did not explain why the engraver might have chosen this coin as his model. Gaube also noted that the fabric on the bust’s chest was different from the fine, smooth material worn by the Shahanshah. He suggested that it could have been intended to represent either the folds in the material of his tunic or an armored breastplate (Schuppenpanzer).

The Khusraw Year One coin does provide a reasonably close match to some of the main elements of the MA bust, including the tall, thin face as well as the headcovering, but it does not get us much closer to understanding why the bust image was derived from this model. The real merit of Gaube’s approach is that...
it suggests a different way of looking at the problem altogether. Whereas Miles had assumed, on the basis of the caliphal titles found on the reverse, that the engraver must have wanted to portray the caliph in the obverse bust, and had then tried to see what sense he could make of the bust in the light of textual descriptions of caliphal regalia, Gaube by contrast pursued a functional approach that attempted to understand the process of the construction of the image from the point of view of the coin designer. Gaube’s insistence on persevering with the minute examination of the object in front of him, rather than succumbing to the temptation of seeking parallels in a textual corpus that had very little to say about caliphal apparel and even less about early Islamic coins, represents an important methodological advance in the study of the MA and contemporary coin types.

A NEW READING OF THE BUST IMAGE

The new reading of the bust image presented here begins not with a search for specific prototypes but with a consideration of the monetary environment from which it emerged. As we have already noted, the first attempt to integrate the silver coinage of Damascus into the Standing Caliph type had created a strange hybrid coin, the Standing Caliph drachm, which bore the images of two rulers. Here it is argued that the creation of the MA type was intended to overcome the shortcomings of the Standing Caliph drachm by restoring the traditional binary numismatic formula of ruler and religious symbol to the silver coinage of Damascus.

The MA bust (fig. 9b and cat. no. 5) retains the left-facing profile of the Shahanshah but has lost the wings of his crown and the turrets above his diadem, the two features that clearly denoted his status as a Sasanian monarch (see fig. 9a). At the same time, the bust holds in his hands a miniature version of the scabbard that is held in the right hand of the Standing Caliph (fig. 9c). How do we explain this combination of features? It seems that the MA bust is an amalgam of the two contrasting images of rulership present on the Standing Caliph drachm. In fact it is the result of the conflation of a modified form of a Sasanian-style bust with the defining feature of the standing figure—his sword. This conflated bust was clearly intended to represent the caliph. The removal of the standing figure from the reverse of the Standing Caliph drachm left that side of the coin free to receive an image that represented the religion practiced and upheld by the caliph. By this means, the MA type solved the main problem presented by the imagery of the Standing Caliph drachm.

The MA bust did not remain static throughout its brief life. In one specimen (cat. no. 7), the hilt of the sword was placed not in the bust’s right hand, but in his left, and the alignment of the sword-in-scabbard was reversed. It seems likely that this was the work of a new engraver, because both obverse and reverse images on the sole surviving coin on which this realignment can be seen have proportions slightly different (thicker face and thicker reverse columns) from the other coins. The realignment is best explained as an attempt to improve the caliphal image. The conflation-ary process that produced the first MA bust had maintained the familiar profile of the Sasanian prototype, with the face turned towards the figure’s left side. However, this left-facing bust appeared to be drawing his sword, or at least handling it, on his right side, while his gaze was firmly fixed in the opposite direction. The posture lacks focus: its physical energies, represented by the sword hand, are directed away from the ruler’s line of vision. But cat. no. 7 dissolves the tension in the image by directing the caliph’s sword hand in the same direction as his line of sight, creating a refined image that is unilateral in movement and suggestive of the ruler’s potency and alertness.

Two outstanding problems with the MA obverse remain to be dealt with: first, the absence of any reference to the date or place of manufacture and, second, the bust’s curious headgear.

Miles argued that the MA type was roughly con-
The omission of a date legend does mean that there is no documentary proof that the MA type followed the Standing Caliph drachm. It is logically possible that the two types were contemporary trial issues, both designed as replacements for the Sasanian-style drachms of AH 72–74 (691–94). But given that 'Abd al-Malik introduced the Standing Caliph type as a uniform coinage for Greater Syria, it is unlikely that he would have ordered two different silver issues to be struck simultaneously in his capital mint, because this would have caused confusion among coin users. Since the dating of the Standing Caliph drachm to AH 75 (694–95) makes it most improbable that the MA type could have intervened between the Damascus drachms of 72–74 and the Standing Caliph drachm, we are left with the sequence proposed above as the more likely option. The two types may have overlapped chronologically to some extent, but the MA type was conceptually dependent on the Standing Caliph.

The second problem with the bust concerns the shape of the headgear and the crosshatched covering of the breast. The “cap” and the circle above it do resemble the shape of the headcovering of the Year One Khusraw II drachm that Gaube suggested as the prototype for the bust (see fig. 8). But as Gaube admitted, only some features of Khusraw’s crown are incorporated here, notably the rounded “cap” and the globe above it. The presence of the globe suggests that the designer of the MA bust did mean to refer to an
early type of Sasanian crown, but it is impossible to say whether he saw the globe as a symbol of world domination, as had the Sasanians, or as a simple marker of the Sasanian provenance of the headcovering. Since the globe did not form part of the headcovering of the full-size Standing Caliph figure, it is unlikely that it was part of the caliph’s regalia. It follows that its incorporation into the MA bust was probably intended as a way of highlighting the regnal character of the image and underlining the link between the imperial bust and the MA bust that replaced it.

By contrast, the crosshatched breast covering finds no precedent in the Sasanian numismatic repertoire. However, if the construction of the bust is considered from the point of view of the designer, the crosshatching can be seen as a formal solution to the problem created by the need to introduce the caliph’s arms into the image. The crosshatching pattern provided a contrasting background against which the caliph’s arms, although disproportionately small, would be clearly visible. In subtype 1a (see cat. nos. 4–5 for the clearest examples) the crosshatching was also applied to the scabbard, though in most specimens the scabbard is too thin to allow the pattern to be seen clearly. The modification of the scabbard in type 1b created a distinct contrast to the crosshatching of the chest and marked out the scabbard, with its pattern of wavy lines, as a close analogue of the scabbard on the standing figure.

If one accepts the argument proposed here, it follows that it is impossible to identify with confidence the type of material that the designer intended to represent, if indeed he had any particular material in mind. Gaube’s idea that it represented the scales of an armored breastplate suggests an intriguing link with the scabbard. An armored breastplate, if such was intended, would add force to the image of a militant caliph. But it would be unwise to insist that the engraver intended to show the caliph dressed in armor, just as it would be rash to insist that the engraver intended the bust’s headcovering to be seen as a helmet rather than a cap. The militant aspect of the caliphal figure was signaled by his association with the instruments of war, the sword and spear, rather than by his clothing.

The preceding reconstruction of the origins of the MA obverse type finds support only in the evidence of the coinage itself: the textual record tells us nothing about it. However, since accurate textual references for ‘Abd al-Malik’s pre-reform coinage are entirely lacking, the stark choice facing the historian is either to leave aside the topic of the evolution of the coinage altogether for want of familiar sources of evidence, or to reconstruct these processes on the basis of the numismatic evidence alone. The reconstruction offered here tries to examine the process through the eyes of the administrators and craftsmen who were responsible for producing the coinage and to locate the process in the context of the coinage record.

**THE REVERSE IMAGE ON THE MA TYPE**

*Miles’s interpretation*

Miles’s main interest lay in the reverse, which he described as “extraordinary and entirely anomalous.” He claimed that the MA image was a replacement for the fire altar and attendants of the Sasanian prototype, in terms of both the tripartite form and, more important, its meaning. Miles imagined that the designer of the coin was instructed to find “an alternative to replace the distasteful gabri (Zoroastrian) symbolism of the fire-altar.” At first sight, this appears to be a reasonable reconstruction of the process. The fire altar was indeed the symbol of a disempowered, and to Muslim eyes repugnant, religion. Its substitution by an image representing Muslim worship would have been a logical step in the formulation of an Islamic numismatic iconography. I have recently suggested that a similar process obtained in the creation of the “Orans” drachms of Iraq, struck from 73 to 75 (692–95). On this coin, the Zoroastrian fire altar was replaced by a representation of the Muslim musallā. The depiction of a niche mihrab, as Miles provisionally identified the arch-on-columns, was appropriate because it alluded unequivocally to the replacement of the fire temple by the mosque.

Miles supported his case for the mihrab with the suggestion that the spear within the structure was the Prophet’s short spear (*anaza*), the device with which he indicated the direction of prayer and created around himself a taboo space, the sutra, which remained inviolable during the conduct of prayer. Miles interpreted the image as a double allusion to the Muslim place of prayer that contained references both to the mihrab as an architectural feature of the mosque and to the *anaza*, which was its functional predecessor. He pointed out that the Umayyad
caliphs had continued to use the Prophet’s spear as a symbol of religious authority and suggested that the ribbons that hung from its top represented the pennants or banners (sing. ‘alam) of the caliph that were tied to the Prophetic ʿanaza. Miles claimed that while the textual evidence dated the building of the first niche mihrab to AH 89 (707–8), during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik’s son, Walid, the numismatic evidence suggested that the niche mihrab had already become an established feature of mosque architecture before Walid’s reign.

Two points should be made about Miles’s argument before considering the reception of his ideas by later scholars. First, over the half century since he put forward his views, some progress has been made in understanding the archeology of the early mosque, although the evidence is both scanty and contentious. While there is no consensus on the matter, the archeological record does not appear to support Miles’s hypothesis that the mihrab had already become a standard feature of mosque architecture in the mid-70s AH. Although two sites in Egypt and Jordan have been tentatively identified as having early niche mihrabs, neither has been securely dated to the 70s AH. However, even if these small provincial structures could be proven to have been mosques with mihrabs, the important point is that not a single large mosque, or indeed a public monument of any kind, has been securely dated before the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik. In other words, there does not appear to be any archeological evidence for the early appearance of the mosque that the numismatic mihrab might have copied.

Second, when he addressed the question of the origin of the numismatic image of the arch-on-columns, Miles insisted that the designer of the coin must have had a numismatic prototype to copy. He stated that this prototype must have been “a physical model appropriate to the specific Islamic concept chosen as the symbol.” It is hard to understand why Miles believed that the designer must have worked from a numismatic prototype when he had already established to his satisfaction that an adequate model already existed in the mosque mihrab. The same designer, according to Miles, had after all attempted the creatively demanding task of engraving a “portrait” of the caliph on the obverse. Yet Miles insisted on a numismatic model for the structure. He found one in a local coinage, the Greek imperial series. The chronology of this prototype presented a problem for Miles’s theory, because this type of coinage had ceased to fulfil the role of a common currency in Syria several centuries before the Muslim conquest. Miles came forward with the analogy of the Turcoman bronzes of the Jazira and neighboring regions (fifth to seventh centuries AH) that copied the imagery of Byzantine and other ancient coins, some of which were dated several centuries earlier. Using the evidence of the Turcoman coins, he argued that the MA type was not the only Islamic coin to borrow the imagery of ancient coins and claimed that both the early Muslims of Syria and the later Turcoman communities of the Jazira would have been equally familiar with very old coins. But his analogy with the Turcoman copper coinages of the Jazira and Southeast Anatolia does not stand up to scrutiny, ignoring as it does the very different conditions under which both coinages were issued.

THE SECONDARY LITERATURE ON THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE MIHRAB

In a paper on Arab-Sasanian coins written just five years after his piece for the Herzfeld volume, Miles declared himself satisfied that his identification of the structure as a mihrab mujawwaf and ʿanaza had been accepted by most scholars. But subsequent opinion has not been so favorable to his theory. Although Fehérvári and Melikian-Chirvani have accepted it, A. Grabar, Gaube, O. Grabar, Whelan, and Raby have all expressed their doubts.

Fehérvári used the numismatic mihrab as supporting evidence for the very early date of the first extant mosque mihrab, which he identified as the Mihrab of Sulayman in the Haram in Jerusalem. But recent analyses of the Mihrab of Sulayman have dated its construction much later than the first century, probably in the third.

Melikian-Chirvani endorsed Miles’s reading enthusiastically, claiming that the coin offered “incontrovertible evidence...that the mihrab was indeed substituted for the fire-altar as a state symbol around 75/696–697.” His argument is based on a fundamental reinterpretation of the meaning of the image of the fire altar that appears on the reverse of the standard Arab-Sasanian coinage. He surmised that the only possible explanation for the survival of the numismatic image
of the Zoroastrian fire altar, an objectionable symbol in Muslim eyes, was that the Muslims had incorporated the fire altar within their own religious practice, perhaps using it as an orientation point to indicate the direction of prayer. On this basis, he interpreted the fire altar on the Arab-Sasanian coinage as a symbol of the mihrab, and the attendants flanking the altar not as mohads but as imams conducting the prayers. He argued that in AH 75 (694–95) 'Abd al-Malik deemed the fire altar no longer suitable and replaced it with “an actual mihrab.”

There are several problems with this thesis. First, as already noted, numismatic imagery is generally conservative and not prone to radical change except in rare cases. This is because the primary purpose of numismatic design is to persuade the coin user that the coin holds a particular value: this purpose is more often than not best served by maintaining a strong visual and inscriptional resemblance to currently circulating coinage. It is clear that this was the principle that lay behind the Muslims’ decision to retain the appearance of Sasanian coins on the new Arab-Sasanian silver coinage that they initiated in the early 30s. The same principle of continuity operated in Syria in the first century after the conquest. There is no sign that the early Syrian Muslims objected to images of the cross and the Emperor on the gold and copper coins of Constantinople that circulated in Greater Syria in the Sufyanid period. The caliph Mu‘awiya’s abortive attempt to introduce gold coins without crosses was abandoned when he realized that his (mainly non-Muslim) subjects were not prepared to accept changes to the original Byzantine imagery. Second, had Muslims indeed objected so strongly to the fire altar, it is difficult to understand why they would have sanctioned the continuation of its numismatic representation in exactly the same form as it had appeared on the Sasanian prototype, since most coin users, being non-Muslims, would have been unaware of the change in its function. Third, the suggested function of the “Muslim” fire altar would have entailed the construction of new buildings around the fire altars, for which there is no archeological evidence. Had these buildings been constructed, it is hard to imagine how they could have served to direct the faithful towards Mecca, given the lack of any prominent architectural feature in these buildings (such as a mihrab) that might have indicated direction. In short, there is every reason to believe that the early Muslim attitude towards coinage aimed to maintain economic prosperity by retaining the monetary mechanisms inherited from Late Antiquity. Muslim sensitivity towards numismatic imagery only emerged in consistent fashion after the civil war that divided the Sufyanid from the Marwanid period, as the transitional coinage demonstrates. For these reasons, the notion that the mihrab was intended as a substitute for the fire altar is not sustainable.

A. Grabar

The earliest reaction to Miles’s essay appeared in André Grabar’s L’iconoclasme byzantin (1957). Grabar examined the prehistory of Byzantine iconoclasm in the first part of his book and dealt with the representation of the cross and the figure of Christ in all media. One of his principal conclusions was that the symbol of the cross played a crucial role in the public, as well as the private, iconography of the Byzantine emperors in the sixth and seventh centuries. Grabar saw the introduction of the cross-on-steps on Byzantine coinage, first for a brief period under Tiberius II (578–82), and then for a much longer period beginning early in the reign of Heraclius (610–41), as a central feature of an imperial project to portray the seventh-century emperors as the heirs of Constantine and the restorers of the glory of early Byzantium. Under Heraclius, the cross, which adorned the banners of the Byzantine army that attacked Sasanian Iran, became a symbol of the Emperor’s campaign to restore the relic of the True Cross of the Holy Sepulcher (Golgotha), which had been stolen by the Persians after the conquest of Jerusalem in AD 614.

Grabar conceived the idea that Justinian II and 'Abd al-Malik conducted a “war of images” as part of their competition for hegemony in the Near East. He believed that this conflict acted as a determining influence on the evolution of church and mosque decoration, prompting a series of reciprocal developments as each ruler tried to outdo his opponent by creating an ever more potent visual and inscriptive program. Grabar’s preoccupation with the numismatic representation of the cross led him to disagree with Miles’s interpretation of the arch-on-two-columns of the MA type. Where Miles imagined a mihrab, Grabar saw the sacram in Jerusalem, which sheltered the Constantinian cross that he believed was the prototype alluded to on the coinage. Grabar interpreted the replacement of the cross within the arch by the spear, accompanied by the phrase nasr Allāh (in his
translation, “Victory of God”), as a message that highlighted the triumph of Muslim arms in the Holy Land and the physical and spiritual replacement of Christianity by the new religion of Islam.

Despite the limitations of the numismatic evidence in his day—the coinage records of both Byzantium and the early Marwanid period have been considerably enlarged since he wrote—Grabar’s thesis had the advantage of placing the MA coin within the numismatic tradition of Syrian coinage and deriving its interpretation of the reverse from a local context.66 Further evidence in favor of his identification of the arched structure as the sacrum has been independently adduced by Raby from his study of Jerusalem pilgrim flasks and jars, a point to which we will return below.67

O. Grabar

The first Islamic art historian to react to Miles’s ideas was O. Grabar. In his Formation of Islamic Art (1973), Grabar accepted the identification of the spear as “one of the formal symbols of Prophetic and caliphal power,” but, like Gaube, he expressed doubts about the framing structure. He stated, “It is less certain that the niche represents an actual mihrab.... It could have been simply a motif of honor without concrete Muslim significance.”68 Grabar’s reluctance to identify the structure as a mihrab is explained by his acceptance of the textual evidence for the construction of the earliest niche mihrab during the reign of Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik. Grabar nevertheless agreed that the structure was three-dimensional—he referred to it as a “niche”—presumably because he accepted Miles’s identification of the ancient numismatic prototype for the MA coin. He made no comment on A. Grabar’s idea that the frame was intended to represent the sacrum that normally stood over the cross. His reluctance to speculate on the MA type is matched by his cautious attitude towards all the major types that make up the transitional coinage.69

Whelan

In 1986 Estelle Whelan set the MA type within the wider context of her revisionist thesis concerning the significance of the mihrāb mujawwaf as a feature of mosque architecture.70 Her contention was that ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz’s introduction of the mihrāb mujawwaf into the Medinan mosque, whence it quickly became a standard feature of mosque architecture throughout the Umayyad world, was only one feature of an architectural program carried out by order of Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik. This program aimed to commemorate the Prophet’s leadership of the Muslim community by incorporating architectural memorials to him in the fabric of the mosque. The physical commemoration of the Prophet was, in her view, an innovation of Walid’s reign.71

Her approach relies heavily on the literary evidence for the function of the mihrab before Walid’s reign.72 She concludes that the early mihrab was similar to the maqsūra in that it consisted of an area abutting the qibla wall of the mosque that was reserved for the caliph or his representative. This royal enclosure was usually formed of a short bay, delineated by two rows of columns that jutted out at right angles from the qibla wall, in which the caliph would sit during worship and from where he would conduct his business as ruler after prayers had been offered. She argues that mihrab and maqsūra both served as locations from which the imam led the prayers. The only difference between them was a formal distinction between an enclosed space (maqsūra) and an open space (mihrab).73

Having clarified the function of the early mihrab, Whelan dismisses Sauvaget’s thesis that the later maqsūra was nothing more than a feature of Late Antique palatine architecture, the ruler’s throne niche, which was transposed from the palace into the mosque. She argues that if the old mihrab already provided a designated zone for the ruler, there would have been no need for Walid to create a second space that served the same function. Instead she proposes that the mihrāb mujawwaf played a very different role, serving as a reliquary that marked the sacred space (the sutra) in which the Prophet would have stood to lead the congregation in prayer. In other words, the niche mihrab was a new feature of mosque architecture that was invented in order to accommodate a new development within the Muslim liturgy. The mihrab served to focus the congregation’s attention on the “the intangible presence of the Prophet,” because the sutra was conceived of as “the symbolic ‘qiblah’ of the Prophet.” Walid wanted the Prophet’s life to serve as a model for his subjects and chose to implant a physical memorial to the Prophet in the mosque as a perpetual reference to his presence.74

Whelan’s argument is colored by a critical attitude
towards past Western scholarship, particularly Jean Sauvaget’s book on the Prophet’s mosque in Medina. She attacked Sauvaget for casting the Umayyads as passive recipients of Late Antique culture who were incapable of creating their own religious identity. By contrast, Whelan’s explanation of the origin of the mihrab cast it as an inspired product of Muslim creative energy.75

This is not the place to comment at length on Whelan’s ideas, although it should be noted that her analysis ignores the traditional idea that the early mihrab may have played the role of a qibla marker.76 She concludes instead that the two types of mihrab were completely distinct elements of mosque architecture, in both formal and functional terms. What is relevant here is her use of Miles’s arguments from the coinage. While she rejected Miles’s tentative suggestion that the reverse image represented the miḥrāb mujawwaf, on the grounds that it could not have preceded the architectural mihrab, she agreed with him on two counts: that it was a mihrab and that the spear standing inside it was the Prophet’s spear.77 It is clear that Whelan welcomed the numismatic evidence as confirmation of her theory of the role of the mihrab as Prophetic reliquary. But Miles’s thesis presents an obstacle to her interpretation of the niche mihrab that she does not confront. On the one hand, Whelan accepts that Walid created the niche mihrab in AH 89 (707–8) in order to give visible emphasis to a new feature of Muslim liturgy, while on the other hand, she sees the numismatic image of the spear standing within an old-style mihrab on the coin of AH 75 (694–95) as the very instrument that the Prophet used to demarcate the sutra. The question arises why Walid should have introduced a new form to demarcate the function of the mihrab as a reliquary in AH 89, if the mihrab was already recognized as a reliquary on a caliphal coin? It will be suggested below that the solution to this puzzle lies in the fact that the numismatic image had nothing to do with the mihrab, but was in fact, as A. Grabar had first suggested, a reference to the sacrum.

Raby

In a 1999 article on the glass pilgrim vessels from Jerusalem, Raby analyzed an important source of evidence for seventh-century Syrian iconography. Among the images appearing on the Jewish and Christian vessels, two stand out as relevant to the MA type. These are, first, the arch-on-columns on the Jewish vessels and, second, the sacrum enclosing the cross on the Christian vessels.78 The Jewish arch-on-columns is understood to represent the Temple: in some cases it is occupied by a menorah, in others it is left empty (figs. 10b and 10c). Both versions no doubt symbolize Jewish hopes for the restoration of the Temple. In the Christian vessels, the arch does not appear to have been as widely used as the cross (in one of three forms) and the lozenge, which are the most commonly used symbols. However in class A.VII, the arch-on-columns is depicted as the sacrum, or protective covering that shelters the cross (fig. 10a).79 As Raby demonstrates, although not common on the surviving pilgrim vessels, the cross within the sacrum appeared frequently on other objects in the sixth and seventh centuries AD. It can be found on pewter ampullae made for pilgrims (fig. 11a) and on a glass chalice (fig. 11b); it appeared in the same form on silver book covers and on Axumite coins of unspecified date (figs. 12a and 12b).80

The Cross of Golgotha itself, which supplied the model for the cross-on-steps on Byzantine coinage, was covered by a sacrum that, it has been suggested, may have been hexagonal in shape, thus giving rise to the hexagonal shape of Christian pilgrim vessels.81 Having drawn attention to the ubiquity of the Christian image in both popular and elite culture, a fact unknown to Miles, Raby suggests that the MA image was constructed in order to provide a Muslim version of the arch, in which the familiar cross was replaced by the image of the spear.82 In doing so, Raby takes forward A. Grabar’s conjecture of the “war of images” between Byzantium and the caliphate but focuses his attention on the local context of Greater Syria, rather than on the two contending imperial courts.83

A NEW READING OF THE REVERSE OF THE MA TYPE

As both A. Grabar and Raby point out, the Christian form of the cross within the arch was well known in seventh-century Syria. Raby’s evidence is particularly pertinent because the pilgrim vessels he discusses were relatively small and suitable for a domestic, rather than a sacred, context. Pilgrim souvenirs and the coins that used similar imagery, including the modified cross and the Standing Caliph, as well as the spear within the sacrum, would have had wide distribution throughout
Fig. 10a. Motifs on Christian glass pilgrim vessels, class A.VII. Figs. 10b and 10c. Motifs on Jewish glass pilgrim vessels, classes B.I and B.III. (From Raby, "In vitro veritas," 116–17)

Fig. 11a. Cross under arch, detail from a pewter ampulla of Jerusalem (Monza Cathedral). (From Raby, "In vitro veritas," 146, fig. 40) Fig. 11b. Glass chalice, Syria, 6th century AD, in Dumbarton Oaks Collection. (From Ross, Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities, detail from pl. liv A)

Fig. 12a. Reverse of Axumite silver coin. (From Munro-Hay and Juel-Jensen, Aksumite Coinage, no. JJ 257) Fig. 12b. Silver book cover from the sixth-century AD Sion Treasure. (From Boyd and Mango, Ecclesiastical Silver Plate, S22.4–5)
the eastern Christian world. The image would have been familiar to all sectors of the population, not just the elite. In an age when the mass media were unknown, these objects played an important role in disseminating and popularizing a common symbolic repertoire.

As Raby’s paper demonstrates, the arch, unlike the cross, was a form that was appropriated in turn by all three monotheist religions, its confessional identity being signaled by the object (or empty space) that was found within it. In the Muslim version, the upright weapon (whether a spear or a different weapon) was recognizable as an implement of war and was surrounded on either side by Arabic inscriptions that declared it to be an instrument of God’s wrath against the nonbelievers, and thus a replacement for the cross.

The use of the sacrum to refer to the absent cross also served to integrate the MA type within the iconographic program of the preceding issues of transitional coinage struck by ‘Abd al-Malik. The reverses of these earlier coins had all borne the image of the modified cross-on-steps, which resembled the familiar Byzantine cross-on-steps motif but lacked the horizontal bar of the prototype. The problem facing the designer of the MA type was that the modified image was not susceptible to further manipulation: to remove any of its constituent parts, whether the ball on top of the staff, the staff itself, or the steps, would have severed the visual link between this shape and the prototype to which it referred, thus rendering it unintelligible. The designer was therefore left with the option of retaining the modified cross in its original form or replacing it with an analogous image. He chose the latter option. Although invisible in this image, the cross, which as a symbol of resurrection was itself the focal point of Muslim disapproval of Christianity, is suggested by the arch. By reintroducing a reference to the cross, invisible but present through inference, the MA type reverted to the iconographic program of the transitional coinage and reestablished the theme commonly found on the reverse, which had been excluded from the Standing Caliph drachm.

This was an image that would have been recognized as a triumphal declaration of the Muslims’ victory over their predecessors and their appropriation of the former territories of the Byzantine Empire in Greater Syria. Whether the same image might also have been understood by some observers as a reference to the Dome of the Rock, which by AH 75 (694–95) would have been well on the way to completion, is open to question. Given the immense renown of that great building as the earliest monumental religious structure constructed by the Muslims, it is possible that the designer of the coin realized that his image might be read in this way by those who were familiar with it. Similarly, it cannot be denied that some observers may have seen a reference to a mihrab, if such a structure did exist at the time, even though it cannot yet have become a ubiquitous feature of mosque architecture. But the primary reference of this image is likely to have been to the modified cross that had already become an established feature of ‘Abd al-Malik’s transitional coinage.

CONCLUSION

The MA drachm was thus a Syrian coin whose metrology and iconography allow it to be placed within the contemporary environment of Syrian coinage. Its anomalous character arises not from the choice of imagery and inscriptions, but because it was the first Muslim coin of Syria that attempted to integrate Persian and Syrian numismatic imagery in order to create a form in which silver coinage, largely absent from the Syrian monetary stock for several centuries, could once again be produced in the region. Given the complexity of the images that were chosen for the coin, it is possible that seventh-century Syrians were as confused by the MA type as modern observers have been. Whether for this reason or because the decision had already been taken to introduce the epigraphic coinage, the MA type signaled a terminus, rather than a new beginning, in the numismatic iconography of early Islam.

Although the MA type does not yield answers to all the questions to which it gives rise, this coin type, as well as the other transitional types of ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign, does allow us to observe the decision-making process that accompanied the pursuit of a suitable numismatic iconography by the early Marwanids. Although coins were humble, mass-produced artifacts, the historical value of coinage lies in the provision of a datable sequence of choices, compromises, and innovations in a single medium, revealing the mistakes made, as well as the successes achieved in the process. The same cannot be said of a great monument like the Dome of the Rock, whose evolution is
clouded by so many unknown factors, including the architect’s interpretation of the original commission, limitations in the availability of resources and skilled manpower, and the changing political scene during the long campaign of construction, to say nothing of later additions and renovations. In the field of early Islam, where the material evidence is so sparse and poorly documented and textual records so often misleading, no type of evidence, however problematic its interpretation, should be ignored.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. The weights of the whole and undamaged “Orans” drachms of Kufa and Basra. (References from the catalogue in Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachms of Bishr ibn Marwân,” 261–67)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coin no. (Kufa)</th>
<th>Weight in grams</th>
<th>Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>Pierced, plugged, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>probably clipped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A6</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>Clipped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A8</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A9</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A10</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>Clipped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A11</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A12</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A13</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A14</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean weight of 7 Kufa specimens: 4.07g

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coin no. (Basra)</th>
<th>Weight in grams</th>
<th>Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B5</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>Damaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B6</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B7</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B8</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>Very worn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean weight of 5 Basra specimens: 4.14g
Table 2. Weights of the whole and undamaged Damascus and related Arab-Sasanian drachms (AH 72–74).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Weight (g)</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Remarks / Condition</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>BN 1968.863</td>
<td>Undamaged</td>
<td>Miles, &quot;Arab-Sasanian and Related Coins,&quot; 191, no. 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>Ashmolean</td>
<td>Clipped?</td>
<td>Album and Goodwin, The Pre-Reform Coinage, no. 278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Warden Collection</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Oral communication from S. Album, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72 (Hims mint)</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>Shamma Collection no. 487</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Album and Goodwin, The Pre-Reform Coinage, no. 305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>BN 1965.471</td>
<td>Undamaged</td>
<td>Gaube, Arabosasanidische Numismatik, pl. 2, no. 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>Shamma Collection no. 520</td>
<td>Probably clipped</td>
<td>Album and Goodwin, The Pre-Reform Coinage, no. 279; Spink Zürich Auction 34, 6/19/1990, no. 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Königsberger Collection</td>
<td>Mint/date not secure</td>
<td>Walker, Arab-Sasanian Coins, 23, N.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Konst Meyer collection</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Peus Auktion 363, 4/26/2000, no. 5649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>BN 1965.472</td>
<td>Condition unknown and date not seen by author</td>
<td>Unpublished?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>Peus 2004, 1203</td>
<td>Undamaged</td>
<td>Peus Auktion 378, 4/28/04, no. 1203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>Dickson Collection</td>
<td>Apparently undamaged</td>
<td>Walker, Arab-Sasanian Coins, 23, DD.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Clipped</td>
<td>Sotheby’s Auction 10/14/1999, no. 256</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES


3. With its stress on the minute examination of the surviving numismatic evidence combined with a systematic reassessment of past scholarship, this article follows a formula similar to the approach that I adopted in an earlier article on another coin type belonging to this series, the “Orans” drachm of Kufa and Basra: see W. L. Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachs of Bishr ibn Marwan and the Figural Coinage of the Early Marwānids,” in J. Johns, ed., Bew al-Maqālis: Jerusalem and Early Islam, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art 9, 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 223–70.

4. G. C. Miles, “Mihrāb and ‘Anazah: A Study in Early Islamic Iconography,” in Archaeologia orientalia in memoriam Ernst Herzfeld (Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin, 1952), 156–71. Although this paper disagrees with Miles’s theory at several points, there is no denying that Miles’s work on the Mihrab and ‘Anaza type, as well as other figural Islamic coins, laid the foundations for subsequent analysis of the iconography of Islamic coinage. See, for example, Miles, “A Portrait of the Buyid Prince Rukn al-Dawlah,” American Numismatic Society Museum Notes 11 (1964): 283–93, pls. 45–47.

5. See J. Walker, A Catalogue of the Arab-Sasanian Coins, vol. 1 of idem, A Catalogue of the Muhammadan Coins in the British Museum, 2 vols. (London: British Museum, 1941, 1956), 24, pl. 31/5. Walker describes the reverse image as follows: “New type of reverse; within triple circle in place of usual Sasanian fire-altar and attendants there is an arch surmounting two pillars no doubt representing a mihrab or Muhammadan prayer-niche; in the centre of the arch rises a lance with two streamers falling to l.”


10. See Miles’s review of Walker’s two British Museum catalogues: G. C. Miles, “The Iconography of Umayyad Coinage: Review
of John Walker, A Catalogue of the Muhammadan Coins in the British Museum," Ars Orientalis 3 (1959): 208. Here he describes both types as anomalies and appears to include within the same anomalous category the “Orans” type and the figural silver coin of Yazid b. al-Muhallab; for the last coin, see J. Walker, “Some New Arab-Sasanian Coins,” Numismatic Chronicle 12, 6th ser. (1952): 106–10, pl. 9, no. 3. Yazid’s coin would repay further study. It was struck nearly ten years after the first issue of the MA type and bears an obverse bust that is derived from the Sasanian prototype and, like the MA bust, lacks the wings above the crown. The reverse image shows a figure in armor, holding the hilt of his sword in his right hand and an upright spear in his left.

11. O. Grabar, The Formation of Islamic Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, orig. publ. 1973), 90. The “Orans” type retains the obverse bust of the Shahanshah but replaces the fire altar and attendants on the reverse with the figure of the praying imam, from which the coin takes its name, and two fellow worshippers. For the specimen of the “Orans” drachm, illustrated in fig. 3, that was struck in ‘Aqula (al-Kufa) in AH 75, see Album and Goodwin, The Pre-Reform Coinage, pl. 1, coin no. 5; and Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachms.”

12. The non-numismatist’s skepticism regarding the viability and value of numismatic research is understandable, in the light of both the inadequate provision of up-to-date catalogues and the patchy quality of the secondary literature, which is largely confined to the traditional numismatic activities of attribution and taxonomy. Two multivolume catalogues of Islamic coins now being written (the Sylloto numorum arabico-rum Tübingen and the Sylloto of Islamic Coins in the Ashmolean) aim to provide primary numismatic material in accessible form for nonspecialists.

13. Grabar (Formation, 91) writes that the coins “reflect only the preoccupations of the center of a culture; they are not necessarily indicative of the total creativity, even at the level of formal symbols, of a given moment.” Grabar does not tell us why historians should ignore a source of evidence for the history of the “cultural center,” meaning the Marwanid elite, on the grounds that it fails to say anything useful about developments on the periphery. For one series of coins struck during the transitional period that can be used to shed light on early Marwanid provincial history, see Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachms.”


15. It should be noted that in the following pages all references to changes in numismatic iconography are attributed to an anonymous “designer.” It is probable that ’Abd al-Malik and his senior advisors were involved in making decisions regarding the development of their precious metal coinage, its metrology as well as its iconography. But since the true identity of those responsible is unknown, it seems wise to use the general term “designer” rather than to refer directly to the caliph or his vizier.

16. Abbreviations used in the catalogue are “MA” for “Mihrib and ‘Anaza” and “MP” for “Middle Persian.” All illustrations are approximately double size, with the exception of coin no. 6, which is more than double size. In this catalogue and the subsequent discussion in the text, left and right are seen from the coin observer’s perspective, except in the case of the human representations, including the bust and the standing figure. Here, in line with numismatic convention, left and right are understood from the perspective of the figure.

17. See Treadwell (“The ‘Orans’ Drachms,” 257–58) for the similarity between the decoration of the scabbard in cat. no. 7 and the scabbard in the hands of the standing figure.

18. The lower part of the bust on Miles’s specimen (Miles, “Mihrib and ‘Anaza,” pl. 28, no. 3) is poorly engraved. The elements that make up the torso are very small by comparison with the head and are tightly compressed. The right hand appears to lie close to the left and masks the outline of the scabbard.

19. Miles (“Mihrib and ‘Anaza,” 158) stated of the scabbard: “There are a pair of zig-zag lines and another zig-zag between two bars, which I will not attempt to interpret.”


21. In very approximate terms, the Arab-Sasanian bust can be divided typologically between the standard model with a broad-featured bust and the revised model of the later Basran drachms (AH 70s), which has a slightly narrower top, a more sweeping curve to the line of the beard, and a greater area of exposed chest. (See for example, the “Orans” issues of Basra dated 75, in Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachms,” 267.)

22. The pennants lie to the left on cat. nos 1–2; to the right on cat. nos. 3–5; to either side of the spear on cat. no. 7.

23. The Damascus drachms of AH 72–74 (691–94), of which more than a dozen specimens are now known (see above, Appendix: Table 2), are inconsistent in the location of the mint and date inscriptions, which appear on either side of the fire altar attendants on the reverse. On roughly half these specimens, the mint is found on the left side while the date is on the right: on the others the date and mint are transposed. See the comments in Peus Auktion 363, 26 April 2000, Münzen aus den Sammlungen Konsul Meyer, Prof. Dr. Robert Göbl und andere, no. 5649. See also Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachms,” for the variation in the imagery of the “Orans” series.

24. For the theory that the change in alignment of the sword on the MA bust (cat. no. 7) was dictated by a desire to make the bust image a more coherent depiction of caliphal authority, see above, 13. Unlike the case of the “Orans” type, where it seems that at least three engravers were employed (see Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachms,” 240), it is not possible to ascertain the numbers involved in the production of the MA type. Cat. no. 7 certainly appears to be exceptional in terms of overall style and may well have been the product of a different engraver.

25. I am grateful to Dr. Gert Rispling of the Numismatic Institute, Stockholm, for allowing me to include this coin in my discussion. Rispling has pointed out to me that even though its provenance is not recorded, the fragment was probably retrieved in the nineteenth century from one of the very numerous hoards of early Islamic silver coins deposited in Sweden. When C. J. Tornberg described it in his catalogue (Numi cufici, 124, no. 20), the Royal Swedish Coin Cabinet

26. In addition to the two reasons given in the text, there are further numismatic arguments that support its authenticity. Had a modern forger created it, cat. no. 7 would undoubtedly have been copied from cat. no. 5, which is the only other specimen to have the Arabic reverse marginal inscription. The legend is not distributed in exactly the same way on these two coins, however, and the fact that the caliphal titles on cat. no. 7 contain spelling mistakes attests to its authenticity, since a careful forger would not have made such an error. The similarity between the design of the scabbard on cat. no. 7 and that of the Standing Caliph dinar of 74–77 (fig. 4) can hardly have been intended by a forger. In general, the standard of forgery in early Islamic coinage is not as sophisticated as in the Ancient coin market, because the customer base has always been so much smaller. See vol. 1 of D. Hill, Beeker the Counterfeiter, 2 vols. (London: Spink, 1924–25), on the career of Carl Becker (born 1772), one of the most successful early counterfeiters of Greek coinage. The present-day publication, Bulletin on Counterfeits, published by the International Bureau for the Suppression of Counterfeit Coins, provides illustrations of counterfeiters of mainly Greek and Roman coins, as well as some medieval, early modern, and ancient Iranian examples, but includes very few Islamic pieces. (See the false dinar of AH 77, Bulletin on Counterfeits 23, 1–2 [1998]: 17, described as “easily the most counterfeited Islamic coin.”) Islamic forgers have even been offered for sale at public auction, but their quality is on the whole inferior. Alteration of genuine coins, involving a change of mint and/or date legend, is also known in the Islamic field, but this is not a consideration for the rare figural coinage discussed here.

27. See Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachms,” 228 for comparative die totals for the “Orans” issue: Kufa (14 specimens, 13 obverse and 13 reverse dies) and Basra (8 specimens, 6 obverse and 7 reverse dies).

28. The theory that the MA type was not produced in the Damascus mint but rather in the Mashriq (eastern provinces of Iraq and Iran) has recently received support from some British numismatists who work on the early Islamic period, although it has not to my knowledge been published.

29. Album (Album and Goodwin, The Pre-Reform Coinage, 38) gives the weight standard of Arab-Sasanian drachms, which were struck in AH 31–85 (651–704), as 4.10–4.13g.

30. See above, Appendix: Table 2. Taking the weights of the five undamaged specimens, adding that of BN 1965.472, which we presume to be undamaged (all selected coins are marked by an asterisk in Table 2), and dividing by six gives the figure of 3.68g. Unfortunately there are too few surviving specimens of the Standing Caliph drachm (only three known: see below, n. 36) to calculate the weight standard of this group.

31. It is theoretically possible that the range of weights of the Damascus silver issues is greater than the existing figures for our small sample suggest. If that is so, it might be argued that these coins were not struck to any weight standard and were exchanged in the market place by weight, not by piece. However, this is most unlikely. The mint authorities in Damascus would presumably have been unwilling to treat their new silver coinage in such a lax fashion and would have wished to set a value for the silver coins in relation to the gold coins from the same mint. The puzzle is how to determine the provenance of the new weight standard: was it a proportion of the Arab-Sasanian standard, or a local Syrian standard? Although it is pointless to speculate on this matter with the inadequate data at hand, it is clear that the weight standard of both silver and gold during this transitional phase was different from that introduced with the epigraphic coinage of AH 77–79 (696–99). Although there is some dispute about the standard weight of the epigraphic dirham in the early Marwanid period, the canonical standard of the later Marwanid period was 2.97g, which was 7/10 of the weight of the dinar (4.25–4.26g).

32. See Appendix: Table 1. It is strange that two of the “Orans” drachms weigh more than 4.3g, an exceptionally high weight for Sasanian-style coins. These heavy coins were both struck in the first year of minting in their respective mints and were perhaps produced before proper attention was paid to the weight standard.

33. Miles, “Mihrāb and ‘Anazah,” 170–71. Although the metrological data clinches Miles’s attribution of the MA type, it should be noted that some of the numismatic imagery that originated in Damascus in the transitional period of 72–77 was adopted in later years by a few Iranian mints. But these Iranian coins were copper, not silver or gold, and the most recent research suggests that they were only issued after the end of the transitional period, in other words after the introduction of epigraphic coinage in AH 79. For a provisional chronology of the Iranian Arab-Sasanian copper coinage, see Album in Album and Goodwin, The Pre-Reform Coinage, 45–49. For examples of Iranian coppers bearing the image of the Standing Caliph, see Gyselen, Arab-Sasanian Copper Coinage, types 39a, 39b, and 40 (all from the mint of Susa).


35. See Goodwin in Album and Goodwin, The Pre-Reform Coinage, 91–99.

36. The three known specimens of the Standing Caliph drachm are: 1. the specimen from the Zubov Collection, now in the State Historical Museum, Moscow (Walker, A Catalogue of the Arab-Sasanian Coins, 25, Zub. 1); 2. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, 1967.208 (Gyselen, Arab-Sasanian Copper Coinage, pl. 15, 7); 3. Gaube, Arabosasaniuserische Numismatik, pl. 14. The three specimens are struck from two obverse and three reverse dies; nos. 2 and 3 were struck from the same obverse die.

37. On Standing Caliph gold dinars, this inscription was placed in the more spacious margin, where there was sufficient space for its extended form: bism Allāh durūba hādhā al-dīnār sanāta…


40. P. Grierson, Phocas to Theodosius III, 602–712, 2 vols., Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Col-
lecion and in the Whitemore Collection (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1968), vol. 1, Phocas and Heraclius (602–641), 89 states that individualized portraiture began to reappear on Byzantine coinage in the seventh century but was not equally evident in the coinage of all emperors. Portraiture in this sense did not exist in the Sasanian numismatic tradition: see the plates in R. Göbl, Sasanidische Numismatik, Handbücher der mittelasiatischen Numismatik, bd. 1 (Braunschweig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1968).


42. See Göbl, Sasanidische Numismatik, tables 1–16.

43. For the turrets on Khusraw II Year One crowns, not clearly visible in fig. 8, see Göbl, Sasanidische Numismatik, table 12.

44. Gaube, Arabosasanidische Numismatik, 17.

45. For a different analysis of the cross-hatching pattern on the bust’s chest, which stresses its function as a distinctive background against which the bust’s arms could be seen clearly, see above, 15.


47. Miles believed that the epigraphic coinage began in AH 75 (694–95), presumably following Walker (A Catalogue of the Arab-Sasanian Coins, biv), who also gives ca. AH 75 as the date of ‘Abd al-Malik’s reform. It is now generally accepted that the epigraphic dinar was introduced in 77, the first type of epigraphic dirham in 78, and the second type of epigraphic dirham (which remained the standard thereafter) in AH 79 (698–99).

48. It should also be noted that the Byzantine silver hexagram, issued by Heraclius, was similar to the MA type in that it, too, lacked a dating legend. It is unlikely, however, that the MA type followed the example of the hexagram, since Byzantine silver coinage did not form a major component of the circulating monetary stock in Greater Syria.

49. The crosshatching on the scabbard of cat. no. 1, although not visible in Walker’s plate reproduced above (see illustration of cat. no. 1) was visible to Miles (see above, n. 18).


55. Miles (“Mīhrāb and ‘Anazah,” 161) pointed to the “distyle shrines or ciboria, with spiral columns, which appear on many Greek imperial coins of Syria, Phoenicia and Asia Minor” as the numismatic model for the arch-on-columns. Miles presumably inclined towards the idea that the numismatic mihrab was in the shape of a niche because he had concluded that its numismatic prototype was the ciborium protecting a hero or god on Greek imperial coinage.

56. The Turcoman coins were local issues of restricted circulation, whereas the MA type was an imperial coinage. The choice of imagery for the two series was therefore dictated by completely different considerations. The designers of the Turcoman coins chose images from several different sources (ancient and contemporary coins, book illustrations, and decoration on metalware, among others), more or less at random. The main principle behind the choice of an image was that it should be visually distinct from the type that had immediately preceded it in the same mint. The selection of contrasting images for each successive issue allowed the amirs to recall and reissue the coinage periodically for their own financial benefit. The numismatic record shows that some amirs reissued their copper coinage several times within a single reign, thus giving rise to the wide variety of numismatic images that characterizes the series. See W. F. Spengler and W. G. Sayles, Turkoman Figural Bronze Coins and Their Iconography, 2 vols. (Lodi, WI: Clio’s Cabinet, 1992, 1996) for a thorough survey of this material.

57. G. C. Miles, “Some Arab-Sasanian and Related Coins,” American Numismatic Society Museum Notes 7 (1957): 187–209, 193, wrote: “...there has I think been agreement on the part of the majority with the thought that we have here a mihrab, or prayer-niche, signifying Islam and replacing the Zoroastrian fire-altar, and the ‘anazah, or short spear, of the Prophet Muhammad... .”


59. Fehérvári (“Mīhrāb”) stated his belief that the MA type must have copied the Mīhrāb of Sulayman.


61. Melikian-Chirvani, “The Light of Heaven and Earth,” 113. Melikian-Chirvani described the weapon within the mihrab as an arrow, as did al-Ush.

62. See Album in Album and Goodwin, The Pre-Reform Coinage, 1–73, for the only thorough modern introduction to Arab-Sasanian coinage.


65. Grabar did not believe that the numismatic cross-on-steps was a representation of the Cross of Golgotha, a view that is now widely accepted (see Raby, In vitro veritas, 137, 155–56). As already mentioned (see above, n. 55), Miles identified the ciborium that supplied the numismatic prototype
for the structure on the MA type as a feature of Greek imperial coinage but did not take up the idea of the sacrum as a structure with contemporary significance.

66. It is surprising that until very recently A. Grabar’s ideas about the reverse of the MA type, as well as his theory of an iconographic war between the two rival empires, have been ignored by most scholars who have dealt with the period. The only scholar to come out in favor of the theory of tit-for-tat exchanges of this kind was P. Crone, in “Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm,” Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 2 (1980): 59–95.


68. Grabar, Formation, 90.

69. See above, 2–3.


71. For a further elaboration of Whelan’s idea, which draws on several other features of mosque decoration including discs and stone slabs and emphasizes the systematic nature of the commemoration of the Prophet, see Flood, “Light in Stone.”

72. Whelan argues in favor of readmitting into the category of A native coinage than had earlier scholars. The inspiration behind the reverse provincial, in the late antique civilisation over which she claims that by showing the Muslims as “participants, how- ever passive” on the part of early Arab leaders. In light of her reluctance to acknowledge the influence of Byzantium on early Islamic material culture, it is perhaps no surprise that Whelan fails to comment on A. Grabar’s idea that the framing structure on the reverse of the MA is the sacrum that sheltered the cross.


74. See Whelan (The Origins of the Mihrab Mujawwaf,” 215–16) accepted that the arch on the coin was a mihrab of a type that preceded the niche type, but she avoided the question of the form that this earlier structure took on the coin by endorsing Miles’s conclusion that the prototype of the numismatic mihrab lay in Greek imperial coinage.


76. See Whelan (“The Origins of the Mihrab Mujawwaf,” 216) for the very sparse textual evidence supporting the function of the mihrab as a reliquary. It consists of an early-fourth-cen- tury AH report by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi of his visit to the Great Mosque in Medina, where he saw a staff, said to have belonged to the Prophet, standing in the mihrab. Whelan also deploys the linguistic argument that connects harba (another word for spear) with mihrab and recalls that ‘anaza is a term still applied to exterior mihrabs in the Maghrib. More recently, Flood has taken up Whelan’s theory of the mihrab as reli- quary and argued that the stone discs found in early mihrabs (like the onyx disc in the Mihrab of Sulyman in the Haram) and other objects positioned near the mihrab were intended to commemorate the Prophet. Like Whelan, Flood (“Light in Stone,” 355) accepts Miles’s identification of the spear as belonging to the Prophet, stating: “As George Miles showed, the so-called Mihrab and ‘Anaza dirham...reflects the practice of placing the Prophet’s spear within the mihrab.”

77. Whelan (“The Origins of the Mihrab Mujawwaf,” 205) does not disguise the intention behind her attempt to recast the origins of the mihrab. In the first paragraph of her paper she claims that by showing the Muslims as “participants, how- ever provincial, in the late antique civilisation over which they eventually came to rule” she is able to provide us with an “inherently more plausible reading” of early Islamic mate- rial culture than had earlier scholars. The inspiration behind her quest to reexamine old wisdoms was Edward Said’s Ori- entalism, which by 1986 had forced “every Western student of the Near East...to examine afresh the assumptions underlying even the most respected historical studies.” See also Whelan, “The Origins of the Mihrab Mujawwaf,” 216, for her attack on Sauvaget’s assumption of “intellectual simplicity and cultural passivity” on the part of early Arab leaders. In light of her reluctance to acknowledge the influence of Byzantium on early Islamic material culture, it is perhaps no surprise that Whelan fails to comment on A. Grabar’s idea that the framing structure on the reverse of the MA is the sacrum that sheltered the cross.

78. Raby, “In vitro veritas,” 116–17, classes A.VII (Christian) and B.I, B.III–VI (Jewish). Raby provisionally reattributes class BB.1, which Barag identified as belonging to the Jewish ves- sels, to the series of Muslim glass vessels (145–50).


82. Raby, “In vitro veritas,” 182. The inverted o found at the top of the arch in the MA type in at least three if not four (see cat. nos. 4–7) of the seven specimens listed in the catalogue is an enigmatic feature. A small peak at the apex of the arch suggests what might be a vestigial gable or some other element of a three-dimensional arch, such as a keystone. Nei- ther of these appears to be a feature of the early mihrab. Per- haps a search through the iconography of the sacrum would reveal an analogue to the numismatic version.

83. O. Grabar (“Islamic Art and Byzantium,” 88) suggests that the arch-on-columns was a classical, not a Byzantine, motif. He asks (but does not answer) whether the language of Antiqui- ty was “wider in spirit, more abstract and more adaptable to new needs than the engaged art of Christian Byzantium.” But the evidence displayed in figs. 10–12 shows that while it
may have been classical in origin, the motif had been thoroughly integrated into the Byzantine canon by the end of the seventh century.

84. The empty arch in the Jewish tradition was instantly recognizable as Jewish in origin, given that for so much of the seventh century the Jews were banned from worshipping on the site of the Haram.

85. If the arch-on-columns in the MA type is to be seen as a sacrum rather than a mihrab, this would suggest that the spear within, identified as the Prophet’s spear (‘anṣaṣa) by most commentators, was probably not understood as such by the majority of coin users. As noted above (n. 7), although Miles did opt for the identification of the object as the Prophetic ‘anṣaṣa, he expressed his reservations about this identification on account of the pennants attached to the shaft below the blade, since he knew of no description of Muhammad’s ‘anṣaṣa that included any reference to its having borne such attachments. The primary significance of the spear with pennants is as an instrument of war and a symbol of caliphal triumph. The close association between the image of the spear and the caliph’s titles may have suggested to some coin users that this was the caliph’s own weapon. Since the Umayyads, like their successors as caliphs, set much store by their ownership of Prophetic relics such as Muhammad’s cloak (burdā) as well as his weapons, it could be argued that any such item of caliphal property might be understood by Muslims as originating with the Prophet. But the association would be by inference alone and is not of primary significance. Reference to the Prophet does of course occur in the obverse marginal legend (the long shahāda), which announces his mission (Muhammad rasūl Allāh: Muhammad is the Prophet of God). But there is no feature of the spear or its neighboring inscriptions that directly demonstrates its Prophetic identity.

86. The modified form of the cross had been used on the Shahada solidus (see fig. 1a, above) of ca. AH 72 (691–92) and the Standing Caliph type, which began in AH 74 (693–94). The thesis that the ellipsis surrounding the stem of the modified cross on the Standing Caliph copper coinage should be read as a multivalent symbol of the caliph’s central importance to his community—the caliph as the qubā or celestial axis around which his subjects revolve—is an intriguing one but does not sit easily with the monetary evidence (see N. Jamil, “Caliph and Qubā: Poetry as a Source for Interpreting the Transformation of the Byzantine Cross on Steps on Umayyad Coinage,” in J. Johns, ed., Bayt al-Maqdis: Jerusalem and Early Islam, 11–58). Had the image been as complex and innovative as this, it would surely have appeared on the precious metal coinage, which was regarded as the caliph’s, as well as on the copper coinage, which had traditionally been regarded as a low-value municipal issue. Furthermore, monetary considerations provide a practical explanation for the ellipsis: it may well have been placed on the copper coins in order to distinguish them clearly from the gold Standing Caliph issues, which they resembled, in order to prevent the counterfeiting of gold issues by placing a thin layer of gold on the surface of the coppers. The evidence is not conclusive, but for the purposes of this paper, the reverse of the Standing Caliph coppers will be considered the same image as that on the gold coinage, i.e., a variant of the modified cross.

87. The sacrum and spear of the MA type also supplied a thematic link between the imagery of the transitional coinage series of which it was the final issue and the reverse inscription that appeared on the aniconic coinage introduced by ‘Abd al-Malik in AH 77–79 (696–99). This inscription—“God is One, God is Eternal, He was not born, nor did He give birth, and there is no other like Him” (Qurʾān 112:1–4)— contained a blunt rejection of Jesus’s divine status, and thus implicitly of the resurrection.

88. Even if one accepts the date of AH 72 (691–92) that appears in the foundation inscription of the building as the date of construction commencement rather than completion, the outward form of the building would surely have been recognizable within three years. On the question of dating, see S. S. Blair, “What is the Date of the Dome of the Rock?,” in J. Raby and J. Johns, eds., Bayt al-Maqdis: ‘Abd al-Malik’s Jerusalem, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art 9, 1, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 59–87. If one accepts that 72 was the year in which the building was completed, the site would have begun to attract great numbers of visitors by the middle of the decade. A. Elad, “Why did ‘Abd al-Malik Build the Dome of the Rock? A Re-examination of the Muslim Sources,” in Raby and Johns, eds., Bayt al-Maqdis: ‘Abd al-Malik’s Jerusalem, 33–58, 48, favors 72 as the date of completion. He points out, first, that the Umayyads’ “extraordinary investment of material and human resources in the city [Jerusalem] leaves no doubt that [they] considered Jerusalem to be their capital,” and, second, that there is corroborating evidence for the account of the pro-Shiʿi al-Yaʿqubi, which says that ‘Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock as a means of diverting the pilgrimage from Zubayrid Mecca. See Johns, “Archaeology and the History of Early Islam,” 426: Johns regards 72 as the date of completion, citing the evidence that ‘Abd al-Malik began to impose heavy taxes on his subjects very soon after his accession in AH 66 (685–86) and suggesting that he did not lack the funds to build such a structure.

89. However, the numismatic image may have been incorporated into the repertoire of the pilgrim glass vessels after its disappearance from the coinage. Raby (“In vitro veritas,” 146–49) suggests that one of the motifs found in class BB.I of the pilgrim vessels, previously identified by Goodenough as a betyl within an arch and thus part of the Jewish series, may in fact be a representation of the spear under an arch.

90. All coins in this table were struck in the mint of Damascus, with the sole exception of the drachm dated 72 (691–92), struck in the mint of Hims. Those marked with an asterisk are presumed to be undamaged (see n. 30, above).