

Arab-Byzantine and Umayyad coins from Marea/Philoxenite: preliminary observations



Abstract: Archaeological research at Marea/Philoxenite, conducted by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw in collaboration with the Archaeological Museum in Kraków since 2000, has focused mainly on the site of the Great Basilica — one of the largest Christian basilicas of Egypt — and some other parts of the city. Research to date has shown that the city reached its peak development during the Byzantine period. It was one of the most important centers along the route leading from Alexandria to the sanctuary of Saint Menas at Abu Mina. To date, the site has yielded more than 8000 coins, the majority of them Late Roman *minimi*. Among the finds are a small group of Arab-Byzantine coins struck after the Arab conquest of Egypt in AD 640, as well as Umayyad coins introduced after the monetary reform of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān in AD 696/7. This article presents preliminary observations on the Arab-Byzantine and Umayyad coins discovered thus far in the course of fieldwork at Marea/Philoxenite.

Keywords: Marea, Philoxenite, Egypt, Arab-Byzantine, Early Islamic period, Umayyad

Marea/Philoxenite is located on the coast of Lake Mareotis, about 50 km from Alexandria. In the Byzantine period, it was a key stopover point on the route from Alexandria to the sanctuary of Saint Menas at Abu Mina. In Hellenistic and Roman times, the site was

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known for its wine and amphorae production, the latter corroborated by remains of a large pottery kiln found in the northern part in the city, under the apse of the Great Basilica — one of the largest basilicas in Egypt. Marea/Philoxenite was also a transshipment port. Previous research conducted in this urban center has identified several structures including *xenodochia*, baths, latrines, tombs, and churches. The city presumably functioned until the mid-8th or 9th century (Babraj and Szymańska 2013; Gwiazda, Derda, and Barański 2022; Gwiazda 2023; Jaworski 2023: 37).

The identification of the city has been a contentious issue for many years. Mahmud El-Falaki, who created a map of Alexandria and its environs in the 19th century, used the name Marea (cf. El-Falaki 1872). Subsequently, however, Mieczysław Rodziewicz (1983; 2010) identified the city as Philoxenite on the basis of historical sources (cf. Grossmann 2003; Szymańska and Babraj 2010; Wipszycka 2012; Derda 2020: 61–62; Jaworski 2023: 37).

Archaeological research at Marea/Philoxenite has been conducted by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, since 2000. Archaeologists from the Archaeological Museum in Kraków have been investigating the Great Basilica for nearly two decades. Thus far, excavations have focused on the main part of the church, many surrounding utility rooms, as well as tombs and drainage channels. An older church, possibly dating from the 4th century, was discovered within the basilica. Work was also conducted on the lakeshore jetties (cf. Babraj and Szymańska 2013; Babraj 2018; Babraj, Drzymuchowska, and Ta-

rara 2020). A project launched in 2019 by the University of Warsaw has enabled the reconstruction of the urban layout including the main streets. Excavations have been carried out in various structures including churches, tombs, baths, and latrines (cf. Gwiazda and Pawlikowska-Gwiazda 2019; Derda, Gwiazda, and Pawlikowska-Gwiazda 2020; Derda et al. 2020; Gwiazda and Derda 2021; Gwiazda, Derda, and Barański 2022; Gwiazda 2023).

Since 2020, numismatic research has been conducted at Marea/Philoxenite under the supervision of Piotr Jaworski. A team of numismatists and a conservator (P. Jaworski, S. Jellonek, M. Mozyński, W. Weker, and B. Zając) have been engaged in cleaning, identifying and photographing the coins found during past and current field seasons. Unfortunately, due to the high salinity of Lake Mareotis and its shores, the state of preservation of many specimens is extremely poor. Some of them have no metal core at all, and the images are very often preserved only on the corrosion. For this reason, identifying the finds is sometimes a challenge (Jaworski 2023: 38).

A small number of coins from Marea/Philoxenite were published in 2008, in a volume devoted to research at Marea, as well as in a later article. The work of Barbara Lichocka (2008; 2020) focused on Roman and Byzantine coin finds, and 12 Umayyad coins were identified by Dorota Malarczyk (2008).

To date, more than 8000 coins have been recorded at the site, with Late Roman *minimi* constituting the dominant group (about 50%). A small number of finds come from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, while larger subsets consist

of cast blanks (about 20%) and Byzantine coins (about 20%) mostly struck in Alexandria. Among the finds is also a small group of Arab-Byzantine coins struck after the Arab conquest of Egypt in AD 640, as well as Umayyad coins introduced after the monetary reform of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (65–86 AH=AD 685–705) in AD 696/7 (Jaworski 2023; Fig. 1).

Egyptian Arab-Byzantine coinage is currently represented by five coins, but since part of the material has yet to be cleaned, their number is likely to grow (cf. Jellonek and Zajac forthcoming). Arab-Byzantine coins struck in Egypt in the second half of the 7th century lack Arabic legends and other elements typical for Islamic coinage. Published scholarship highlights the rarity of such finds (cf. Metlich and Schindel 2004: 13; Foss 2008: 102–105). Due to their similarity to Byzantine *dodecanummia*, however, these coins may also be misclassified or, given their state of preservation, simply unrecognized. The Egyptian Arab-Byzantine coins from Marea/Philoxenite include two coins of the ABAZ type [Fig. 1],¹ one of the MACP type [Fig. 2],² and two of the ΠAN type [Fig. 3].³ The depictions on the obverses are based on imagery attested on coins of Heraclius or Constans II, but with some significant modifications. The legends in the lower sections of the reverses probably indicate officials or mints. The ABAZ legend has now been linked to 'Abd al-'Azīz, brother of 'Abd al-Malik and governor of Egypt in AD 685–704 (cf. Foss 2008: 103–104; Goodwin 2015: 206, 208). The

MACP type has been assumed to refer to Miṣr, the Arabic name of the city of Fuṣṭāṭ (cf. Walker 1956: 53; Domaszewicz and Bates 2002; Foss 2008: 102; Goodwin 2015: 209). However, according to David Woods (2021: 252) it could be an abbreviated transliteration of Maslama, for Maslama ibn Mukhallad, administrator of Egypt in AD 669–682. Coins of the ABAZ and MACP types were both issued by the mint at Babylon/Fuṣṭāṭ. As for the ΠAN type coins, the mint may have been located in Antinoöpolis in Middle Egypt, where 61 coins of this type have been discovered (Castrizio 2010). Another suggested location was Panopolis, about 100 km to the south, in which case the legend ΠAN might refer to its name (Kubitschek 1897; Metlich and Schindel 2004: 12; Goodwin 2015: 211). However, Woods (2018: 205) put forward a different suggestion, interpreting the legend as an abbreviation of *pantocrator* related to the religious nature of the rest of the reverse.

The Egyptian Arab-Byzantine coins from Marea/Philoxenite have so far been discovered mainly in Rooms 16, 24, and 39 of the Great Basilica. Parallel finds have been recorded at sites such as the monastery of Apa Jeremias at Saqqara, Kom el-Dikka (Alexandria), Fuṣṭāṭ (Old Cairo), Abu Mina (cf. Foss 2008: 102–104; Picard and Morrisson 2012: 314; Goodwin 2015: 206–207), and Antinoöpolis (Castrizio 2010).

Among the finds are at least two copper coins of the standing caliph type from Syrian mints. On the obverse, the

1 BMC Heraclius 304, MIB Constans II X35, Domaszewicz and Bates AII, DOC 140–141, Goodwin II.

2 MIB Constans II X36, SICA 732 and 733, Domaszewicz and Bates AIII, DOC 131–139, Goodwin III.

3 MIB Heraclius X48, Domaszewicz and Bates UII, DOC 142–143, Goodwin V.



Fig. 1. Arab-Byzantine coin, AE, 17 mm, ABAZ type, Fustāt?, after AD 684/5 (University of Warsaw, Marea Numismatic Project | photo P. Jaworski)



Fig. 2. Arab-Byzantine coin, AE, 18 mm, MACP type, Fustāt, about AD 670–690? (University of Warsaw, Marea Numismatic Project | photo P. Jaworski)



Fig. 3. Arab-Byzantine coin, AE, 15 mm, ΠΑΝ type (University of Warsaw, Marea Numismatic Project | photo P. Jaworski)



Fig. 4. AR dirham of Sulaymān ibn 'Abd al-Malik 97–99 AH (AD 715–717), 23 mm, Ardashir Khurra, 97 AH (AD 715–716) (University of Warsaw, Marea Numismatic Project | photo P. Jaworski)

coins bear a figure of a standing caliph holding a sword. The reverse carries a symbol, which has been variously interpreted as a cross on steps, the Greek letter Φ as an indication of value, a globe on a field, a knobbed staff, and a Roman monumental column surmounted by a globe. Dinars and/or *fulūs* of this type were struck in at least 18 mints about 74–77 AH (AD 693–697) (Walker 1956: xxii–xxiv, xxxi–xxxvii; Heidemann 2010; Schulze 2010; Goodwin 2017).

In addition, at least 364 post-reform Umayyad coins have been recorded at the Marea/Philoxenite site (cf. Jaworski 2023: Fig. 1). So far, only one silver coin is known from this period [Fig. 4]. The other coin finds are only bronze issues. The discovered dirham was struck in the name of Sulaymān ibn 'Abd al-Malik (AD 715–717) at Ardashir Khurra (southwest Iran) in the year 97 AH (AD 715/6) (Walker II 263; SICA II 381; cf. Malarczyk 2008: 153). Post-reform dirhams were minted there in 80–99 AH (AD 698–718) (Walker 1956: lxxi, 107–109). The coin was a surface find from the baths (Malarczyk 2008: 153). A large number of the *fulūs* are undated copper coins lacking a mint name, with only a short *kalima* on the obverse and reverse (cf. Walker II 638–640; Miles 1; SNAT III 95) or with a star in the center (Walker II 712; Miles 2; SICA II 1258–1259; SNAT III 100–110). The issues published in 2008 were coins without a date and mint name, mainly discovered in the baths area (Malarczyk 2008: 153, 158). They are probably some of the earliest coins minted soon after the monetary reform, about AD 700 [Figs 5–8]. Perhaps coins of this type were minted at Fustāt

(SNAT III, 16–17). Among the finds are *fulūs* of Finance Directors of Egypt, such as a *fals* of al-Qāsim ibn ‘Ubaydullāh, Finance Director of Egypt in 116–124 AH (AD 734–742) (SICA II 1253–1255; SNAT III 114–122; cf. Malarczyk 2008: 154, Cat. 88). These coins are the earliest attributable copper coins in Egypt (Bacharach and Awad 1974: 185, cf. SNAT III, 18). Among the dated coins is a *fals* from 132 AH (AD 750) of Marwān II, the last Umayyad Caliph in 127–132 AH (AD 744–750), and of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān, Finance Director of Egypt (Rağab 131 – Ġumādā I 132 AH), struck in Fustāt (SICA II 1238–1239; SNAT III 132) [Fig. 9]. One side carries the word *Miṣr* in the center, and the other bears the name of the Fustāt mint. Mohammad Younis (2022: 171) has suggested reading this legend as “*Miṣr al-Fustāt*” — the military city of Fustāt. Among the coins recorded on the site is also a *fals* from the Damascus mint (Malarczyk 2008: 154, Cat. 87). Unfortunately, in the case of this coin, as well as many others, the legends on the margins are illegible, making it difficult to retrieve more important information. So far, the latest dated coin is the Abbasid *fals* of Muḥammad ibn Sa‘īd, Finance Director of Egypt in 152–157 AH (AD 769–773) (SICA II 1575–1578; SNAT III 146–147) [Fig. 10].

Umayyad coins were discovered in the Great Basilica area, as well as in House H₁ to the east of the basilica. During the Early Islamic period, the house underwent a series of architectural changes that included transformation of the courtyard into a food processing space with a hearth, demolition

of the walls, overhaul of the drainage system, and replacement of the floor with tamped earth. Among the finds from this period are objects of marl clay as well as Nile silt kitchenware such as lids of pots, pans, jugs, and bowls, which find parallels at Abu Mina, Kellia, and Fustāt. Umayyad coins have also been recorded at these sites (Gwiazda and Wielgosz-Rondolino 2019: 267–269, 270–271; Noeske 2000: 140–144; King 2013: 267; Bacharach 2002: 54–55).

Lastly, among the finds from Marea/Philoxenite is a distinctive coin from the Islamic period — a Byzantine issue countermarked with an Arabic word — which will be the subject of a separate study (Zajac forthcoming, cf. Goodwin 2005).

Although the assemblage of Arab-Byzantine and Umayyad coins from Marea/Philoxenite is currently small, it is likely to grow in the future as cleaning of the material from previous years progresses and ongoing fieldwork yields new discoveries. The presented finds add to our knowledge of the coins attested in Egypt and offer insights into the monetary circulation in the late 7th and 8th centuries. In the case of the Marea/Philoxenite coins, it is noteworthy that both Arab-Byzantine and Umayyad issues have been found in contexts with Byzantine coins, which lends support to the hypothesis of their joint circulation (cf. Jaworski 2023: 41, 44). Unfortunately, a large number of coins from various sites in Egypt still remain unpublished. Published material, in turn, is not always accompanied by photographs, which hinders verification of catalog descriptions (cf. Noeske 2000; Metlich and Schindel 2004: 12). It is to be hoped

that future publications of numismatic material from other sites will allow for a more in-depth analysis of this category of finds. The Islamic-period coins from

Marea/Philoxenite will be published in a comprehensive monograph devoted to coin finds from this site (Jaworski et al. in preparation).



Fig. 5. Umayyad coin, anonymous, *Æ fals*, 11 mm, Miṣr (Egypt), about 77–80s AH (AD 696–699) (University of Warsaw, Marea Numismatic Project | photo P. Jaworski)



Fig. 8. Umayyad coin, anonymous, *Æ fals*, 16 mm, Miṣr (Egypt), undated (University of Warsaw, Marea Numismatic Project | photo P. Jaworski)



Fig. 6. Umayyad coin, anonymous, *Æ fals*, 12 mm, Miṣr (Egypt), about 77–80s AH (AD 696–699) (University of Warsaw, Marea Numismatic Project | photo P. Jaworski)



Fig. 9. Umayyad coin, Marwān II, Umayyad Caliph, 127–132 AH (AD 744–750) ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān, Finance Director of Egypt (Rağab 131 – Ġumādā I 132 AH), *Æ fals*, 20 mm, Fuṣṭāṭ, 132 AH (AD 750) (University of Warsaw, Marea Numismatic Project | photo B. Zając)



Fig. 7. Umayyad coin, anonymous, *Æ fals*, 12 mm, Miṣr (Egypt), undated (University of Warsaw, Marea Numismatic Project | photo P. Jaworski)



Fig. 10. Abbasid coin, Muḥammad ibn Sa‘īd, Finance Director of Egypt, 152–157 AH (AD 769–773), *Æ fals*, 16 mm, Miṣr (Egypt) (University of Warsaw, Marea Numismatic Project | photo M. Mozyński)

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Abbreviations

BMC	Wroth, W.W. (1908). <i>Catalogue of the imperial Byzantine coins in the British Museum I</i> . London: British Museum
DOC	Foss, C. (2008). <i>Arab-Byzantine coins: An introduction, with a catalogue of the Dumbarton Oaks collection</i> . Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection
Domaszewicz and Bates	Domaszewicz, L. and Bates, M.L. (2002). Copper coinage of Egypt in the seventh century. In J.L. Bacharach (ed.), <i>Fustat finds: Beads, coins, medical instruments, textiles, and other artifacts from the Awad collection</i> (pp. 88–111). Cairo: American University in Cairo Press
MIB Constans II	Hahn, W. (1981). <i>Moneta Imperii Byzantini: Rekonstruktion des Prägebraufbaues auf synoptisch-tabellarischer Grundlage III. Von Heraclius bis Leo III</i> . Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften
Miles	Miles, G.C. (1958). The early Islamic bronze coinage of Egypt. <i>American Numismatic Society Centennial Publication</i> , 471–502
SICA I	Album, S. and Goodwin, T. (2002). <i>Sylloge of Islamic coins in the Ashmolean I. The pre-reform coinage of the early Islamic period</i> . Oxford: Ashmolean Museum
SICA II	Nicol, N.D. (2009). <i>Sylloge of Islamic coins in the Ashmolean II. Early post-reform coinage</i> . Oxford: Ashmolean Museum
SNAT III	Younis, M. (2017). <i>Sylloge Numorum Arabicorum Tübingen III. Egypt</i> . Tübingen: Wasmuth Verlag
Walker	Walker, J. (1956). <i>A catalogue of the Arab-Byzantine and post-reform Umayyad coins</i> . London: British Museum

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