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Arabic Documents from Medieval Nubia

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6. COINAGE

The standard unit of currency mentioned in the letters is the *dīnār* and various fractions of it. The term *qīrāt* is used to refer to the 24th part of a *dīnār*. Letter 29r:16 mentions “a quarter of a *dīnār*, in the form of a small coin (*tikk*).” Silver dirhams are also frequently mentioned.

The accounts (42 and 43) list the costs of commodities in dirhams, *waraq* (i.e., ‘black dirhams’; 42r, left, 10), *dīnārs* and the fractions of *dīnārs*, *qīrāt* (1/24) and *ḥabba* ‘grain’ (1/72; 42r, left, 10).

When interpreting references to monetary amounts in the documents, one must be aware that in some cases the terms used may have been referring to money of account rather than physical coins, i.e., a notional standard rather than a medium of exchange (Grierson 1978, 10). This must have applied to fractions of a *dīnār* such as a *qīrāt* or a *ḥabba* ‘grain’. Such amounts would have been paid in silver dirham coins according to the going exchange rate. It is possible that references to payments in full *dīnārs* in the documents also did not involve in reality gold *dīnār* coins but rather were made with the equivalent value of silver dirhams.

Payments of monetary amounts that are recorded in legal documents are in *dīnār* coins. The documents specify that the *dīnār* coins are of the standard weight and alloy, and also that they are ‘in cash’ (*‘aynan*), e.g.,

ثلاثة دنانير مثاقيل ذهباً عينا وازنة صحاحا امرية مصرية جيادا

‘three dīnārs, of standard weight, in gold, in minted coin of full weight, valid Egyptian coins of al-ʿĀmir, of good alloy’ (44:5–6)

خمسة عشر دينارا مثاقيل ذهباً عينا وازنة صحاحا عاضدية مصرية جيادا

‘fifteen dīnārs, of standard weight, in gold, in minted coin of full weight, valid Egyptian coins of al-ʿĀḍid, of good alloy’ (45:10–11)

بدينار واحد متقال من الذهب العين الوزان الصحيح الوزان الحافظى المصرى
الجيد

‘for one dīnār, of standard weight, of gold, in minted coin, valid full weight, according to the Egyptian weight of al-Ḥāfiẓ, of good alloy’ (46v:14–16)

دينار واحد والنصف دينار الذهب العين الوزان الامرى المصرى الجيد

‘one dīnār and half a dīnār, gold, minted coin, full weight, in the Egyptian coinage of al-ʿĀmir, of good alloy’ (47r:4–5)

ربع دينار وثمان الذهب العين الوزان الامرى

‘a quarter of a dīnār and an eighth of gold, in coins of full weight, of al-ʿĀmir’ (47v:3–4)

ثلاثا [ثة] وعشرين دينارا مثاقيل ذهباً عينا وازنة صحاحا مستنصرية مصرية جيادا

‘twenty-three dīnārs, of standard weight, gold, in valid minted coins of full weight, Egyptian (dīnārs) of al-Mustanṣir, of good alloy’ (48r:3–4)

اربعة دنانير ونصف دينار من العين الوزان الجيد

‘four and a half dīnārs, coins of full weight and good alloy’ (48v:3–4)

اربعة دنانيرا ذهبيا عينا مستنصرية جيادا

‘four *dinārs*, gold, of minted coin, of al-Mustansir, of good alloy’ (49r:5–6)

These various terms reflect the value of the amount indicated corresponding to the standard coinage that was controlled by the ruler. The attribution of coins to particular Fatimid rulers in the formulas indicates that the coins must be those minted in the current ruler’s name, since rulers sometimes changed the standard weight (*miṭqāl*). Again, however, it is possible that these formulas were only money of account and the actual payments may have been made by an equivalent in debased coinage.

During the Fatimid period, the gold *dīnār* was the standard of currency. At the beginning of the Ayyubid period, however, due to the shortage of gold, Saladin made the silver *dirham* the standard and the *dīnār* was considered only as a commodity (Balog 1961a). Many coins of debased alloy and less than full weight were in circulation in medieval Egypt (Bates 1991).

The merchants frequently refer to *dīnārs* (gold coins) and *dirhams* (silver coins) in the letters of the corpus without any specification of their quality. Letter 9 refers to ‘pieces’ of *dirhams*:

I have sent to you *dirhams*, two pieces in cash (*ḥaqq ‘ayn qit‘atayn*), two boxes, a leather bag and bitumen. (9v:19–20)

The documents attest to considerable fluctuations in the exchange rate of *dirhams* to the *dīnār*. We learn from the following statement in letter 9 that there were 160 *dirhams* to a *dīnār*:

He bought for a *dīnār* four balls of sugar, at a price of forty *dirhams* each. (9r:14–15)

In the account **42** it is stated:

The total in black dirhams: three hundred and sixteen. Its exchange value in (gold) coinage: eight dīnārs and a half, minus a grain and a *qīrāṭ*. (42r, left, 7–11)

This would be roughly 40 dirhams to the dīnār.

Fluctuations to the dīnār are mentioned in the following passage:

Let them send to me in this final hour of mine these nineteen dīnārs and eight dirhams, at the rate of five for every dīnār. I have made inquiries about the exchange rate on my side and I found it to be seven, but I traded them at the better rate of six and a half. If I do not go ahead with this transaction, the exchange will be more, and you will lose due to a higher exchange rate.... Cash is something that we cannot control (i.e., we have no control over its value). (25r, margin-v:5)

The value of a coin in relation to coins of other metals was not fixed (Bates 1991, 59–60). The rate of exchange of dīnārs and dirhams was in constant fluctuation in Fatimid Egypt. Some of the reasons for this include the deterioration of the silver content of dirhams, the shortage of silver in Egypt necessitating the import of most silver dirhams, the hoarding of dirhams, political crises and varying degrees of economic hardship.

Wide fluctuations are attested in the Genizah documents, which are contemporary with the Qaṣr Ibrīm corpus (Goitein 1967, 368–92). The average exchange rates listed by Goitein in his study of the Genizah documents datable to the Fatimid period range from approximately 30 to 40 dirhams to the dīnār.

The rate of 40 dirhams to the dīnār in the account **40** would be compatible with this. The rates of 160 to the dīnār (**9**) and five to the dīnār (**25**), on the other hand, are noteworthy.

Balog (1961b) has shown that in the late Fatimid period huge quantities of debased dirhams, known as *waraq* 'black dirhams', were struck due to the shortage of silver. These were small, roughly square chunks, cut carelessly from narrow ribbons of low-grade silver. Assays of some extant *waraq* dirhams have shown that they contain no more than 25 to 30 percent pure silver. The cut 'pieces' (*qiṭ'atayn*) of dirhams mentioned in 9v:19–20 are likely to be referring to the cut-up black dirhams. An exchange rate of 140 to the dīnār could be due to such a pronounced debasement of the silver content of dirhams in the late Fatimid period.

An exchange rate in the range of 30–40 dirhams to the dīnār itself reflects a certain debasement of the silver content of the dirhams. The rate in pure silver dirhams, known as *nuqra*, would be at least three times less. One finds statements in the Genizah letters such as the following (CUL Or. 1080J.130):

I received from the people ten dīnārs, three of which were coins of poor alloy (*bahārij*) and seven were in dirhams at a rate (*ṣarf*) of 3½ while the rate was 4¹

Here the writer indicates that seven of the ten dīnārs that he received were paid to him in silver dirhams, so the term dīnār refers to money of account rather than coins. The rate is the rate of the debased silver coins that he received to pure silver coins,

¹ This translation of mine is somewhat more accurate than the one given by Goitein (1967, 388).

not to the rate of silver to gold, i.e., $3\frac{1}{2}$ of the dirhams corresponded to one *nuqra*. It is feasible, therefore, to interpret the statement in **25** cited above in this light. When the writer said “Let them send to me in this final hour of mine these nineteen dīnārs and eight dirhams, at the rate of five for every dīnār,” he possibly meant nineteen dīnārs in silver, as in the passage from the Genizah document, the dīnārs being money of account rather than gold coins. So, the statement “at the rate of five for every dīnār” would mean for each dīnār in debased silver dirhams, five of the dirhams would correspond to one pure silver *nuqra*. This is more than the rates of debased silver coins to a single pure silver coin that are specified in or inferrable from the Genizah documents. These range from three to four (Goitein 1967, 388–90). The rates of five, six and a half and seven that are mentioned in **25** presumably reflect the dramatic debasement of the silver content of coins in the late Fatimid period that was identified by Balog.

Letter **35** refers to dirhams paid in pure coins (*quḥaḥ*):

As for other matters, O brother, what he needed has been conveyed from what remained from the price of the two baskets of cotton, which were with our brother Mufliḥ, namely thirty-two dirhams. If he has brought pure coins (*quḥaḥ*), then receive them and convey to me a share. If you cannot obtain pure coins, then send to me their value. (35r:4–6)

The term *quḥaḥ* here is apparently used as an equivalent to the more common term *nuqra*. The term *quḥḥ* appears also in the fragment 1978_B09_01A-02, which has not been included in the

edited corpus: بقا قح ثلاثة دراهم من اثنين دينارين ‘There remains three pure dirhams from two dīnārs’.

Ruffini (2012b, 171–206; 2019) has presented evidence from the medieval Nubian documents discovered at Qaṣr Ibrīm that the Nubian economy had been monetised with Egyptian Islamic minted coinage at exchange rates of gold and silver values directly in keeping with those current in medieval Egypt. This is reflected by the many references to dīnārs and dirhams in documents relating to transactions between Nubians. Lists of payments in gold and silver reflect an exchange rate of around 40 silver dirhams to a gold dīnār. It is significant that Old Nubian borrowed the word dirham but not the word dīnār. According to Ruffini (2012b, 177), this was probably because payments were more frequently made in silver dirham coins in Lower Nubia than in gold dīnārs. This would be evidence in support of the hypothesis discussed above that dīnārs mentioned in the Arabic letters of merchants may have been money of account rather than coins and actual payments may have often been made with the corresponding value of silver coins.

Relatively few Islamic coins dating before the Mamluk period have been found in archaeological excavations between the first and second cataracts. Those discovered at Qaṣr Ibrīm and identifiable are datable to the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.² Glass coin weights from the Fatimid period have been found at Qaṣr Ibrīm. These include a Nubian weight bearing the title of ‘Eparch of Nobadia’. A glass weight has also been found in Soba

² These are listed in a log of coin discoveries in Qaṣr Ibrīm, which was shown to me by Pamela Rose.

from this period. This provides further evidence that the Nubians were dealing in coins south of the second cataract (Edwards 2019, 969). Ruffini (2019) has argued that the lack of archaeological finds of coins can be explained by the hypothesis that currency originating from Egypt circulated in Nubia but eventually returned to Egypt by various means, such as the frequent travel of Nubian kings and members of the elite to Egypt.