

An unusual Umayyad overstrike and its implications

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An Unusual Umayyad Overstrike and its Implications

Overstrikes, that is to say, coins that are struck on flans, which are actually previously struck coins of another type, began to be made soon after coins were first invented, though primarily after the development of coins minted in pure silver. This is because coins were struck in silver-rich areas as a way of exporting silver in a value-added way (i.e., at a slight premium over bullion). If, in addition, the original coin was struck on a weight standard that was the same, or nearly the same, as that of the city, which needed bullion for its own coinage, the coin could be overstruck without any serious modifications. Thus, the many S. Italian incuse staters of the later 6th century BC that are overstruck on contemporary or slightly earlier Corinthian staters; or the Syracusan tetradrachms struck over northern Greek issues from Olynthos or Akanthos; and there are a considerable variety of other examples¹. But, since Greek mint workers often seemed to be perfectionists, undertypes are usually hard to identify (we can tell that a coin is over-struck, but not on what). One of the best known series of coins that is based in virtually its entirety on the use of earlier or contemporary coins as flans for newly struck pieces is, of course, the coinage of Bar Kokhba Revolt in Judaea², which is almost invariably overstruck on Roman or Provincial silver coins, and Provincial bronzes: some undertypes are so clear that they can be identified with 100% certainty, others are less so.

What the vast majority of overstrikes have in common is that the overstrike is *ipso facto* later; thus facilitating their relative chronology. The best example of the way undated coins can be arranged into both a relative order, and an absolute one, must be the so-called 'Anonymous Bronze Folles', struck in Constantinople (and elsewhere) during the period from John I (969–976) to the reform of Alexios I (1092)³. The study of these overstrikes, first by A. Bellinger, then by M. Thompson with additions by S. Bendall among others, enabled these coins to be finally understood and be properly organized.

Of course, when overstrikes are found on coins, which were ostensibly struck **after** their overtypes, they are almost certainly *modern forgeries or inventions*⁴.

Aside from the counterfeit, which was unmasked by its chronological inconsistencies, almost all the overtypes mentioned here were overstruck on earlier coins that were usually chronologically close in date to the new ones. Many other examples can be cited if need be.

However, there is another, much rarer, kind of overstrike; one appearing on a coin that is very considerably older than the new type overstruck upon it. This curious phenomenon is primarily known from a few very surprising issues of the later 7th century CE, one of which is the coin under discussion here. This is a bronze fals of the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (AH 65–86/CE 685–705), minted in Homs (ancient Emesa) c. AH 72–77/692–697, which shows the Caliph standing, facing on the obverse, accompanied by the Arabic legend

- 1 For overstrikes in Greek coinage, see C.M. KRAAY, *Archaic and Classical Greek Coins* (London 1976), p. 12 *passim* and, in general, D. MACDONALD, *Overstruck Greek Coins* (Atlanta 2009). For a specific, late Hellenistic example see F. DE CALLATAY, *Abydos sur Aesillas*, in: Charaker, *Studies in honor of Manto Oikonomidou* (Athens 1997), pp. 81–91.
- 2 See L. MILDENBERG, *The Coinage of the Bar Kokhba War*, *Typos VI* (Aarau 1984).
- 3 For a simple and accurate introduction to the anonymous bronze series, see D. R. SEAR ET AL., *Byzantine Coins and their Values*. 2nd Edition (London 1987), pp. 375–380.
- 4 A perfect example of one of these is found as Bank Leu 47, 25 October 1988 (Virgil M. Brand part 2), lot 2003, a Regensburg Goldgulden of 1554. When it was very carefully examined, traces of an under-type were seen: interestingly enough the under-type was recognizable as a goldgulden issued by Ferdinand Maria of Bavaria (1652–1679). More disturbingly, the overtype of Regensburg was struck using the original dies, that had long kept – and still are kept – in a German museum. It is, thus, what might be termed an *unofficial novodel*.

'*abd allah 'abd al-malik amīr al mu'minīn*; and, on the reverse, a tall Φ on a base and three steps, with the surrounding legend *lā ilaha illā allah waḥdahu muḥammad rasūl allah* and the mint name, *bi-himṣ* in the field (figure 1, below, provides a 2:1 enlargement of this coin)⁵.

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Fig. 1: Overstruck orientation.

While the figures of the Caliph and the Φ on steps (= the denomination, *fals*) are clear enough, much of the legend is obscured because of the very much incomplete overstriking that allowed much of the original coin's legends and types to show through (the obverse of the coin used as a flan appears under the present reverse and its reverse is under the present obverse – see below, the 2:1 enlargement in figure 2).



Fig. 2: Undertype orientation.

Shown in the alignment of the original coin, it can be easily identified as a follis of Constantine I, struck in Rome in 317⁶, with the head of Constantine on the obverse and a standing figure of Sol on the reverse. The original coin was only slightly worn. Intriguingly, another Standing Caliph fals, also minted in Homs, is also known to have been overstruck on a follis of Constantine I (minted in Arelate in 316⁷). This suggests that the minting authorities in Homs had access to a then recently found hoard of Constantinian folles, which they decided to use as ready-made flans for the coins they were striking. What is curious is that the coins used as flans were minted in the West, rather than being from any of the Imperial mints closer to Homs (it is worth noting that in c. 316/317 the reverse types used for Constantine and Licinius in the West basically differed from those used for the contemporary issues in the East⁸). This could just be due to chance – if more Standing Caliph fulus minted in Homs had legible Constantinian under-types some might prove to be from Eastern mints, but it could indicate that the

5 Nomos Auction 17, 26 October 2018, lot 315. 20 mm, 3.08 g, die axis 6°. See T. GOODWIN, *The Standing Caliph Coinage* (London, 2018), catalogue pp. 16–17, 182–183 (for the types) and cf. pp. 40–41, 437 (for the undertype). The author would like to thank Tony Goodwin for both his great kindness in responding to my queries about this coin, and for writing such clear and accessible articles and books on various aspects of the Arab-Byzantine coinage. For anyone seeking to understand these issues, Goodwin's work is essential.

6 RIC VII, p. 307, 78.

7 This coin published as GOODWIN (fn. 5), 437; undertype cf. RIC VII, p. 241, 89–90 and pp. 242–243, 96–103

8 Compare the issues of Rome c. 314–317, RIC VII, pp. 298–308, with those from Cyzicus, RIC VII, pp. 643–644, Antioch, RIC VII, pp. 677–680, or Alexandria, RIC VII, pp. 704–706.

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hoard from which these coins originally came was actually amassed as circulating currency in the West, transported to the East during the second decade of the 4th century, and then, during the civil wars in the 320s, buried for safekeeping in the neighborhood of ancient Emesa.

Most intriguingly, not only were bronze coins of the contemporary Byzantine emperor Leontius (695–698) overstruck on earlier Byzantine issues (often cut down), but they were also overstruck on what appear to be Tetrarchic radiate fractions minted c. 297–298⁹! Again, these were apparently struck in Western mints, and we probably should assume that they came from a hoard that was discovered in the area of ancient Byzantion/Constantinople and brought into the mint for re-use.

9 As the Rome issues, RIC VI, p. 359, 74 ff. See “G.D.R.”, Three Overstrikes of Leontius, NCirc 79, 1 (1971), p. 7 = MIB 3, p. 182, fn. 8.

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