

Coins without Illustrations – Islamic Money

"You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind," says the Old Testament. This directive has been interpreted in different ways by the religions that recognize the Ten Commandments as their moral foundation. While most Christian churches don't observe the ban on depicting images, Jews and Muslims largely follow it. This is why Islamic coins bore verses from the Koran for centuries. Today, however, this has changed in many Islamic countries.

Islamic World, Arab-Byzantine Issue, Fals, after an Archetype from Cyprus, about 639 AD



Denomination:	Fals
Mint Authority:	Undefined
Mint:	Undefined
Year of Issue:	639
Weight (g):	4.6
Diameter (mm):	270.0
Material:	Bronze
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

This the earliest Islamic copper coins, a fals supposedly issued under of one of the first Caliphs (c. 630-660 AD). It is a crude copy of a Byzantine follis from Emperor Heraclius (610-641), showing the Byzantine imperial family.

By the end of the 7th century the fals (also fels or fils; plural falus or fulus) was used throughout the Arabic world. It is a subunit of several Arabic currencies until today, for instance in Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Arab-Sassanids, Anonymous Ruler, Dirham 30 AH (650 AD)



Denomination:	Dirham
Mint Authority:	Arab-Sassanids
Mint:	Darabjird
Year of Issue:	650
Weight (g):	4.06
Diameter (mm):	30.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Unlike the coppers, the Islamic silver coins derived from Sassanid, and with this indirectly from Greek, coinage.

The realm of the Sassanids stretched over the territories of modern Iran and Iraq and over parts of Syria and Saudi Arabia. In 651 however, his Arabian vassals, who had just recently converted to Islam, swept the last Sassanid monarch off his throne. For the time being, the Arabs adopted Sassanid coinage without major changes; all they did is apply an Arabic legend around the rim of the coins.

Umayyad Empire, Abd al-Malik (685-705), AE Fals undated, Jerusalem



Denomination:	Fals
Mint Authority:	Caliph Abd al-Malik
Mint:	Ilya (Jerusalem)
Year of Issue:	685
Weight (g):	23
Diameter (mm):	25.0
Material:	Bronze
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Abd al-Malik was the most eminent Caliph of the Umayyads, the second Islamic dynasty. He consolidated and expanded Islamic rule, made Arabic the state language in his realm, and established the first Islamic coinage system. This reform was realized in 79 AH, the year of 698 AD thus, with the introduction of golden dinars, silver dirhams and copper falus. The new coins did not bear images any more, but featured religious formulas.

Umayyad Empire, Abd al-Malik (685-705), Dirham 79-123 AH (699-741 AD)



Denomination:	Dirham
Mint Authority:	Caliph Abd al-Malik
Mint:	Undefined
Year of Issue:	699
Weight (g):	1.93
Diameter (mm):	23.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

The Islamic silver dirham was modeled after the drachm of the Sassanid empire. As a unit of account it was introduced already in 632, shortly after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. Issued, however, were dirhams only under Abd al-Malik, the fifth Umayyad Caliph. It was this Caliph who decreed the religious ban on the pictorial representation of God and his creations. From then on, images were no longer possible on coins; they now quoted verses (suras) from the Koran.

The dirham spread throughout the Caliphate from Bactria to Spain and was produced in many mints. It underwent its greatest dissemination from about 800 to 1000 AD. The term "dirham" lives on to this day in the currencies of Morocco and the United Arab Emirates.

Umayyad Dynasty, Abd al-Malik (685-705), Dinar 83 AH (702), Damascus



Denomination:	Dinar
Mint Authority:	Caliph Abd al-Malik
Mint:	Damascus
Year of Issue:	702
Weight (g):	4.23
Diameter (mm):	19.0
Material:	Gold
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Legend has it that Abd al-Malik issued the first dinars because the Byzantine emperor had threatened to add an anti-Islamic slogan to the Byzantine solidi, which were the international currency in the entire Mediterranean at that time. For this reason the Caliph created a new gold coin.

Abd al-Malik's dinars were entirely epigraphic. The central inscription on the obverse was "There is no god except Allah. He has no partner." The legend around it read "Mohammed is the messenger of Allah, he was sent with guidance and the religion of truth to make it prevail over every other religion." On the reverse the text in the middle went "Allah is one, Allah is eternal, He begetteth not and is not begotten." And the marginal legend read "In the name of Allah was this dinar struck in the year eight and three."

Umayyad Empire, Abd al-Rahman III (912-961), Dirham 334 AH (946 AD), Cordoba



Denomination:	Dirham
Mint Authority:	Caliph Abd al-Raman III
Mint:	Cordoba
Year of Issue:	946
Weight (g):	2.83
Diameter (mm):	24.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

In 750 AD the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad dynasty and erected their own Abbasid Caliphate. The Umayyads remained in power only in Spain, in the Caliphate of al-Andalus with the capital of Cordoba.

In Cordoba the Umayyads continued to issue their traditional coins. Especially the golden dinars were something new in the West, however, as gold was scarce in the western Mediterranean. Accordingly, silver dirhams were the major current coins in the Caliphate in Cordoba.

Abbasid Empire, al-Saffah (749-754), Dirham 132 AH (750 AD), Kufa



Denomination:	1 Dirham
Mint Authority:	Caliph al-Saffah
Mint:	Kufa
Year of Issue:	750
Weight (g):	2.98
Diameter (mm):	245.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

The Abbasids were the third Caliphate dynasty of the Islamic empire. Their coins differed only slightly from those of their precursors, the Umayyads. Both gold and silver coins bore on the reverse the short legend "Mohammed is the prophet of Allah." This legend had been used on Umayyad silver coins as part of the marginal inscription for a while, and had long been the legend on bronze coins. This dirham bears the traditional formula on the obverse, the Kalima: "There is no god except Allah, he has no partner."

Abbasid Empire, Governorate of Tabaristan, Suleyman ibn Musa (787-789), Half Drachm, 137 PYE (168 AH, 787 AD)



Denomination:	1/2 Drachm
Mint Authority:	Governor Suleyman ibn Musa
Mint:	Tabaristan
Year of Issue:	787
Weight (g):	2.16
Diameter (mm):	25.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Tabaristan was a landscape in northern Persia, on the south coast of the Caspian Sea. Divided from the Persian heartland by an almost impenetrable mountain range, the region long preserved independent cultural and political movements.

In the 8th century, when this half drachm was struck, Tabaristan was part of the Abbasid empire and reigned by Arab governors. The coins issued in Tabaristan, however, were still half drachms, the currency of the Sassanid Great Kings who had been disposed by the Arabs almost 140 years earlier. Several attempts to replace the old-fashioned coins of the Sassanids by modern Arabic dirhams had failed.

Abbasid Empire, Harun al-Rashid (786-809 AD), Dinar 788, Fustat



Denomination:	1 Dinar
Mint Authority:	Caliph Harun al-Rashid
Mint:	Fustat (Cairo)
Year of Issue:	788
Weight (g):	4.22
Diameter (mm):	176.0
Material:	Gold
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Harun al-Rashid from the Abbasid dynasty is the probably best known Caliph in the western world. His name stood for the Golden Age of Islam, for he was the ruler mentioned in the folk tales known as the "Tales of a Thousand and One Nights."

When al-Rashid ascended to power, his realm stretched from the Atlas Mountains in the west through Egypt and Syria to Afghanistan in the east. The centre of the Caliphate was Baghdad, a city that had been founded only a few decades earlier. This dinar was struck in Fustat, the first Arab settlement in Egypt, established in the 640s. Until the foundation of Cairo in 969, Fustat was the administrative center of the country. Today it is part of Old Cairo.

Northern Iraq, Zengid Dynasty, Qutb ad-Din Mawdud (1149-1170), Dirham AH 555 (1159), Mosul



Denomination:	Dirham
Mint Authority:	Emir Qutb ad-Din Mawdud
Mint:	Mosul
Year of Issue:	1159
Weight (g):	12.12
Diameter (mm):	29.0
Material:	Bronze
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

From the 9th century power gradually slipped from the hands of the Abbasid Caliphs. Their realm was hamstrung by constant internal disputes and at the same time, the army cost enormous amounts of money. To come into cash, the Caliphs began to accord fiefdoms to commendable generals. As a result, fast parts of the Abbasid empire came under the control of independent feudal dukes. One of the most powerful of these local dynasties was that of the Zengids in Mosul.

The coins of the Zengids are of a particular interest as they were not designed purely inscriptional but, unlike most other Islamic coins, bore images. The obverse of this dirham shows a bust with two Victories above; they hold palm branches in their hands. The Cufic inscription on the reverse gives the names and titles of the issuer, Emir Qutb ad-Din Mawdud.

Egypt, Mamluk Sultanate, al-Malik al-Zahir Rukn al-Din Baibars al-Bunduqdari (1260-1277), Dinar 662 AH (1264 AD), Alexandria



Denomination:	1 Dinar
Mint Authority:	Sultan Baibars al-Bunduqdari
Mint:	Alexandria
Year of Issue:	1260
Weight (g):	5.15
Diameter (mm):	23.0
Material:	Gold
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

The Mamluks originally were mercenary troops who grew ever more powerful in the course of time. In Egypt they gained so much influence that, by the middle the 13th century, they took over power themselves. It was the beginning of the Mamluk empire in Egypt, which existed until 1517, when the Ottomans conquered the land.

The Mamluk sultans initially adapted the coins of their forerunners unchanged. Only Baibars al-Bunduqdari, the fourth sultan and the issuer of this dinar, established new designs for his coinage. He was the first Mamluk to refer to himself as Sultan on his issues – a habit that most of his successors maintained. Additionally, Baibars put a lion on his coins, his personal emblem.

Ottoman Empire, Mehmed II. (1451-1481), Altun 885 AH (1481 AD), Constantinople



Denomination:	Altun
Mint Authority:	Sultan Mehmed II
Mint:	Constantinople
Year of Issue:	1481
Weight (g):	3.52
Diameter (mm):	199.0
Material:	Gold
Owner:	

This altun goes back to Mehmed II, yonder Ottoman Sultan who in 1453 conquered Constantinople and thus brought the Byzantine Empire to an end. After the take-over Mehmed moved his capital from Edirne to Constantinople.

Mehmed instituted a new Turkish gold coin after the archetype of the Venetian zecchino. This was the altun, the first secular Islamic gold coin. The altun omitted the religious formulas that had been standard until then, and instead gave the names and titles of the Sultan together with the date and the mint. It soon developed into a highly accepted trade coin that was predominant particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Abdülaziz (1861-1876), 10 Para 1283 AH (1875 AD)



Denomination:	10 Para
Mint Authority:	Sultan Abdülaziz
Mint:	Cairo
Year of Issue:	1875
Weight (g):	6.22
Diameter (mm):	29.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	andere

This beautifully unadorned silver coin of the Ottoman Sultan Abdülaziz shows just the Sultan's tughra and on the reverse the place and date of mintage: Misr 1283 for Cairo 1875 AD. The coin is an onluk, a piece of 10 paras, issued for the Ottoman dominion of Egypt.

The tughra of the Ottoman sultans served as signature and seal, comparable to the coat of arms of European princes: an official document was valid only with the tughra. This is why the tughra was often used on coins, too. It was composed of the calligraphic first letters of the reigning sultan's name and title, and had taken on an entirely formal form in the course of time. The tughra of Sultan Abdülaziz was made up from the words "Abdülaziz han bin Mahmud el-muzaffer daima:" Abdülaziz, son of Mahmud, the ever Victorious.

Ottoman Empire, Abdülhamid II (1876-1909), 100 Piaster Year 22 (1315 AH/1896 AD)



Denomination:	100 Piaster
Mint Authority:	Sultan Abdülhamid II
Mint:	Constantinople
Year of Issue:	1896
Weight (g):	7.2
Diameter (mm):	22.0
Material:	Gold
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

When Abdülhamid II ascended to the throne in 1876, the Ottoman Empire stood on the brink of abyss. The new Sultan could not prevent the fall any more; the time of the Turkish Empire was up. Abdülhamid was the last Ottoman Sultan to rule with absolute power. He was deposed in 1909 and replaced by his brother Mehmed V, who was a puppet in the hands of the antimonarchist powers.

This gold coin of 100 piasters was struck in 1896: Beneath the Sultan's tughra stands the figure 22, the number of years that Abdülhamid was in power at the time of coinage. The date of his ascension to the throne is indicated on the reverse. The dates are given according to the Islamic calendar AH, which begins on July 16, 622, the day of the Hijra, the emigration of the prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina.

Iran, Qajar Dynasty, Fath Ali Shah (1797-1834), Toman 1231 AH (1816 AD), Isfahan



Denomination:	Toman
Mint Authority:	Fath Ali Shah of Persia
Mint:	Isfahan
Year of Issue:	1816
Weight (g):	4.56
Diameter (mm):	239.0
Material:	Gold
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

The toman was the gold currency of the Persian Qajar dynasty. Its first issuer was Mohammed Khan Qajar, the founder of the dynasty. Mohammed Khan united the whole of Persia in his hand and made Teheran, an insignificant village at that time, his capital. His successor was Fath Ali Shah, the issuer of our coin. The Qajar dynasty ruled Persia until 1925. Then it was overthrown by Reza Shah Pahlavi, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, which in turn was removed from power by the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Tomans were minted until the end of the Qajar dynasty, although with rapidly sinking weights: While the earliest pieces had weighed a whole 8.2 grams (0.29 ounces), the weight dropped down to 3,2 grams (0.11 ounces) in the 20th century. Our piece was struck in 1816 and weighs somewhat over 4.5 grams (0.16 ounces).

Iberian Peninsula, Kingdom of Castile, Alfonso VIII (1158-1214), Maravedi 1222 SE (1184 AD)



Denomination:	Maravedi
Mint Authority:	King Alfonso VIII of Castile
Mint:	Toledo
Year of Issue:	1184
Weight (g):	3.83
Diameter (mm):	27.0
Material:	Gold
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

The maravedi was a gold coin issued in the 12th and 13th centuries by Christian rulers in Spain and Portugal. These gold coins were the most important currency for trade between Christians and Muslims. They were imitations of the gold dinars issued by the Arabs in southern Spain and northern Africa at that time./

King Alfonso VIII of Castile, whose brilliant victory in 1212 at Las Navas de Tolosa in the Sierra Morena sealed the ultimate fate of Islamic rule in Spain, adhered to the Arabic type in his issues too. His maravedis bore Cufic inscriptions, yet with a Christian content. The obverse showed a Christian cross and the abbreviation of the king's name ALF in Latin letters.

Mughal Empire, Shah Alam II (1759-1806), Rupie, c. 1800, Poona



Denomination:	Rupie
Mint Authority:	Mughal Shah Alam II
Mint:	Poona
Year of Issue:	1800
Weight (g):	11.2
Diameter (mm):	21.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

When the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great conquered north and central India around the middle of the 16th century, the most important coin circulating there was the rupee. It had been introduced by the old potentates shortly before their downfall. Akbar adopted this silver coin – "rupiya" means "worked silver" –, and made it the imperial currency.

This rupee dates from the second half of the 18th century, when India was reigned by Shah Alam II. At that time the standard weight of the rupee lay around 11.4 grams (0.40 ounces), and the silver content was as high as was technically possible. The coins bore Arabic scripts on both sides, the usual design on Islamic coins.

Sultanate of Zanzibar, Barghash bin Said (1870-1888), Riyal 1299 AH (1882 AD)



Denomination:	Riyal
Mint Authority:	Sultan Barghash bin Said of Zanzibar
Mint:	Undefined
Year of Issue:	1882
Weight (g):	27.21
Diameter (mm):	38.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Off the east coast of Africa, in the Indian Ocean, lies the small island of Zanzibar. In the 16th and 17th centuries the island was a Portuguese colony and then was conquered by Omani Arabs. Zanzibar was lucrative because it was a center of international slave trade; besides, it traded with ivory and cloves.

In 1856, Zanzibar became independent from Oman. Together with some neighboring islands it was turned into the Sultanate of Zanzibar and Pemba. The sultans of Zanzibar issued their own coins. This riyal was made during the rule of Sultan Barghash bin Said. It is modeled after the Maria Theresa taler, the trade coin par excellence in the Islamic countries until the 20th century.

In 1890, the Sultanate of Zanzibar and Pemba became a British protectorate and in 1897 part of British East Africa.

Republic of Syria, Lira 1369 AH (1950 AD)



Denomination:	1 Lira
Mint Authority:	Republic of Syria
Mint:	Undefined
Year of Issue:	1950
Weight (g):	9.65
Diameter (mm):	28.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Syria was conquered by the Arabs and integrated into the Islamic empire shortly after the foundation of Islam in 622. In the year of 750, the first Umayyad Caliph moved the imperial capital from Medina in Arabia to Damascus, and thus made Syria the heartland of the Caliphate. From then on Syria remained an important linchpin of the Islamic empire.

In the early 16th century Syria came under the authority of the Ottomans, and thus now used Turkish currency: at first the kurush (piaster), later the lira that equaled 100 kurush. According to the Islamic ban on pictorial representations, these coins were always nonpictorial. Since the foundation of the Republic of Syria in 1946, however, the Syrian coins bear a hawk on the reverse. It is a symbol of the Quraish tribe to which the Prophet Mohammed belonged, and can be found on many coats of arms on the Arabian Peninsula.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Saud (1926-1953), Riyal 1354 AH (1935 AD)



Denomination:	1 Riyal
Mint Authority:	King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia
Mint:	Undefined
Year of Issue:	1935
Weight (g):	11.58
Diameter (mm):	30.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Even Saudi Arabia, once the starting point of the Islamic conquest, does not strictly observe the ban on pictures on its coins. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 by Abd al-Aziz II ibn Saud; since then the Saudi Arabian coins bear the kingdom's coat of arms, a palm tree between two crossed swords. The swords represent the two regions Hijaz and Najd that were united by King ibn Saud.