

## **COINAGE IN EGYPT**

### **Pre-Islamic Period**

In spite of its high level of civilization, Egypt lacked coinage until a relatively late date. The concept of coinage was probably introduced by Greeks, who were employed as mercenaries as early as the seventh century B.C. and later established as traders at Naucratis. After about 525 B.C., a series of hoards attests to extensive trade with the Greek world that is underscored by the almost total absence of Persian silver. Both the variety and the condition of the contents indicate a premonetary context.

The most important of the hoards, which comes from Asyut and dates from the first quarter of the fifth century B.C., shows a wide diversity of imported coins, many of them hacked—presumably to determine whether they were of pure silver throughout—or fragmented, as if to “make change.” By the end of the fifth century, Athenian coinage, which dominated eastern Mediterranean currency, became prevalent in Egypt as well, and many large hoards have been recorded.

The famous gold stater with *nefer nub* (fine gold), certainly of Egyptian manufacture, belongs to the fourth century B.C., a period that also saw extensive imitation of Athenian silver; it has even been suggested that some coins heretofore taken as Athenian were, in fact, produced in Egypt. The regular production of official coin began at Alexandria in 326-325 B.C. with tetradrachmas of Alexander the Great, and continued when [Ptolemy](#) I assumed control of this portion of Alexander’s empire. The Ptolemaic silver at first imitated the coins of Alexander, but by 305 it bore the portrait of Ptolemy I. In its latest form the portrait of Ptolemy became the invariable obverse on silver tetradrachmas; the eagle of Zeus was the reverse. The system was completed by occasional issues of large gold coins (octodrachmas, or eight-drachma pieces) and large, heavy coppers.

The Egypt of the Ptolemies was a closed economy and its coinage circulated only there and in possessions in North Africa and Cyprus; nor was foreign coin any longer found in Egypt. The Ptolemaic system survived without appreciable change until the first century B.C., when it underwent rapid debasement.

Egypt fell to Octavian (later Augustus) after the [death](#) of Cleopatra VII (30 B.C.), and from the beginning the province was treated as the private fief of the emperor. Augustus never felt compelled to produce silver, and there were several experiments with [copper](#)-based currency, which was struck only in small [quantities](#) through the first century.

The regular production of the tetradrachma, a nominally silver denomination of about 25 percent fineness and perhaps equal to a denarius, began in A.D. 20. A single hoard and frequent references in the papyri show that the Roman tetradrachma was regarded as the lineal descendant of the Ptolemaic. Except for occasional interruptions, coinage was virtually annual until A.D. 296. From the time of Domitian there was substantial coinage in [copper](#)—large drachmas, hemidrachmas, diobols, obols, and chalkoi (quarter obols).

The mint, located at Alexandria, was the empire's most prolific after [Rome](#) itself. The principal elements of its coins were the imperial portrait; a legend identifying the ruler or member of his house, generally formulaic and ignoring current offices but including honorifics; the date, calculated in regnal years from 1 Tut; and a variable reverse type.

The variety in these images is reminiscent of practice at the mint of Rome, but the repertoire of types was different. Perhaps because of remoteness from the center of power, Alexandrian types seldom reflected current events; rather the types were simple and [broadly](#) conceived, embodying a mixture of Greek, Roman, and local influences.

They included Hellenized [versions](#) of Roman personifications (e.g.,

Elpis=Spes, Eleutheria=Libertas); purely Roman deities such as Roma alongside Sarapis, Isis, and Ammon; and figures of local origin such as the Agathodaemon serpent, canopic jar, and hemhem crown. The Antonine period (138-180) displayed the widest variety of types and represented the closest the coinage ever came to artistic excellence—the large “Labors of Hercules” series was a conception worthy of [Rome](#) itself.

Taken as a whole, the coinage of early imperial Egypt owed much to its Ptolemaic antecedent in denomination and fabric, and the most frequently encountered reverse type was the very eagle that had been all but universal on Ptolemaic silver. But in 296 Egypt was integrated into the currency system that prevailed in the empire at large and that Diocletian had begun to reform elsewhere in 293; there is no good evidence for any overlap in time between the reformed coinage of Diocletian and the traditional, Greek-style coinage, which disappeared immediately from hoards.

The new imperial coinage was marked by instability and frequent reform, and its vicissitudes were reflected by the coinage of Egypt. Alexandria’s output consisted almost exclusively of argentiferous copper (later virtually pure copper) coins, with gold solidi being produced only rarely and silver hardly at all.

Striking of coin in Egypt, as in other provinces, slowed considerably through the fifth century, and the absence of Alexandria from the reformed mints of Anastasius (491-518) probably indicates that it had ceased to coin by 491. Byzantine currency was introduced at Alexandria under Justin I (518-527). At first it was limited to copper; and while the rest of the empire employed the *follis* (40 *noummia*) and its fractions (20, 10, 5, and occasionally 2 *noummia*) for small change, the Alexandrian system was different.

The mint struck thick, dumpy coins; at its fullest the system consisted of denominations of 12, 6, and 3 *noummia*, and under Heraclius (610-641) a

large coin of 33 *noummia*. The system was unique, and these coins were seldom found in company with the standard denominations of the eastern Byzantine mints, although they appeared occasionally in western Africa.

It has been suggested that 12 *noummia* was the tariff of surviving base-bullion tetradrachmas, but this is only a guess; against it is the lack of evidence for survival of the third-century tetradrachma into the sixth. Their reversion to a formerly familiar shape may simply be a vestige of the earlier economic isolation of Egypt, now reinstated; there is simply no evidence on the point. The individuality of the denominational system is reflected in the types as well: the profile bust, characteristic of the earliest Byzantine coppers at all mints, was maintained at Alexandria long after its abandonment elsewhere under JUSTINIAN (527-565).

Gold with the mint mark ALCIOB was certainly struck in or for Egypt under JUSTIN II (565-578), but other attributions are more controversial. Some coins originally identified as Alexandrian on the basis of fabric and findspot have been regarded as aberrant Constantinopolitan issues or even as barbaric productions, while others have been assigned to Cyprus, which always had close economic connections with Egypt. The most certain case is provided by solidi of the revolt of Heraclius (608-610), which are unusual in bearing indictional dates.

The seventh-century [copper](#) coinage continued the tradition of the dodecanoummium and more rarely its fractions; the reverse continued to consist principally or exclusively of the mark of denomination and, on the dodecanoummium, a cross on steps. The obverses finally abandoned the profile bust in favor of a facing one or, later, one or more standing figures. When the Arabs took Egypt their earliest coinage seems to have consisted of crude imitations of the latest dodecanoummia.

The legacy of the Ptolemies was one of independent coinage, and except for the relatively brief interlude from 296 through the fifth century, the Egyptian coinage represented a clearly identifiable tradition, never

entirely integrated into any other. It was never fully illustrative of the culture at large, but rather reflected the idiom of foreign rulers imposed on a society that remained curious and unfamiliar to them.

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## **Islamic Period**

When the Arabs conquered Egypt in 641 the Byzantine mint in Alexandria apparently continued to issue [copper](#) dodecanoummium coins without any essential change in appearance, except a cruder design that leads numismatists to assign them to the Arab period. There were several varieties, of which one is certainly Arab: it bears, instead of the usual A E, the mint name MACP, pronounced *Masr* (Misr), the Arabic word for Egypt and its capital al-Fustat, indicating that the mint had been moved from Alexandria.

Byzantine-style coinage was replaced by copper *fals* coins with Arabic

inscriptions sometime after the invention of Islamic coinage in Damascus (699) and surely by the time of the governor Qurrah ibn Sharik (709-714), when Arabic glass weights for [copper](#) coins were introduced. The new Arab *fals* was not different from the Byzantine coins in weight or fabric and probably not in value, but instead of imperial portraits, crosses, and a Greek inscription it was anonymous, with brief religious inscriptions in Arabic. Starting sometime between 734 and 742, all [copper](#) issues carried the governor's name.

These coppers were the only coins minted in Egypt until 787, but imported Byzantine and Arab gold and silver coins circulated there earlier as shown by numerous references in the papyri and by the existence of Egyptian glass weights for these denominations. The Arab glass weights for coins (which are closely related to glass weights for ounces and pounds and stamped glass measuring vessels) are the most interesting feature of Egypt's eighth-century monetary history. Officially made Arab glass coin weights began during the administration of 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abd al-Malik (705-709) and continued until the end of the century.

They were very precisely made and show an official gold dinar standard of 423/24 grams and a series of differing silver *dirham* standards, beginning with a standard of two-thirds the weight of the dinar (2.83 grams), followed by two different standards for a "*dirham* of 13 *kharrubas*" at 2.50 and 2.62 grams, returning to the "*dirham* of two-thirds" and ending with a "*dirham kayl*" (about 2.95 grams). Only the latter, to be assigned to the ninth century and perhaps to a different workshop from the earlier glass, approached the theoretical Islamic standard dirham of seven-tenths *mithqal* (2.975 grams).

The glass weights for [copper](#) coins, *fals*, changed even more frequently in a sequence that is not yet clear. Some of the surviving glass stamps for commodity-measuring vessels specify that the vessel was to contain "one *fals*'s worth" of the commodity named (the commodities were everyday

groceries and cosmetics, not pharmaceuticals as was once thought). On some of the glass *fals* weights, the number of *kharrubas* is specified with Coptic numerals instead of Arabic words, and other weights name Coptic artisans as the makers (the names are Kha'il and Sawirus, written in Arabic script; the third name recorded is Kamil, of uncertain ethnicity).

In the year 786-787, coinage in precious metals, gold, and silver began. Egypt immediately became a major producer of gold dinars and continued to be until the early twentieth century. From 786 until 830, Egyptian dinars bore the name of the governor: from 834 they usually had only the name of the caliph, but the Tulunid and Ikhshidid governors asserted the privilege of putting their names on the coins along with that of the caliph. Starting in 815 all Egyptian dinars are identified by the inscription "this dinar was struck in Egypt," but the Arabic word for Egypt, *Misr*, is also to be understood as the designation of the capital, al-Fustat, site of the country's mint.

The earliest known silver *dirham* of Egypt is dated one year after the earliest gold, but it is likely that silver and gold coinage began simultaneously. Silver minting, however, does not seem to have caught on in Egypt, as its *dirhams* are extremely rare until the Fatimid conquest (969). Evidently, since *dirham* transactions are frequently mentioned in the papyri and hoards of foreign *dirhams* are found in Egypt, the country was able to meet its needs for silver coinage by imports.

[Copper](#) coins issued after the beginning of gold and silver minting were much smaller than previous issues and more regular in weight. Evidently the importance of copper in the currency system was much reduced. Several issues of copper took place between 802 and 827, and another followed early in the administration of Ahmad ibn Tulun, in 871-873, the last issue of copper coins in Egypt until the thirteenth century. Small transactions were apparently carried out with cut bits of *dirhams* or by running an account with local merchants.

The Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 969 brought with it their different monetary system, developed in North Africa. The gold dinars of the conqueror, al-Mu'izz, had three concentric inscriptions on each side in place of the horizontal legends surrounded by a circular inscription that characterized the classical Abbasid Sunni type.

Each subsequent caliph had one or more [distinct](#) designs in succession, probably marking minor changes in alloy or weight standard, or perhaps only corresponding to more substantial changes in the silver coinage. In general, however, the Egyptian dinar maintained its full weight and high alloy until the end of the eleventh century. A new gold denomination, the quarter dinar or rub', was introduced into Egypt by the Fatimids.

The Fatimid gold coinage enjoyed considerable prestige in the Mediterranean world. At any given time, their coinage was substantially uniform from Sicily into Syria, and was imitated or adapted in Spain, Yemen, and Afghanistan, as well as by the Crusaders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Fatimid silver coinage in contrast was usually small and increasingly debased in the tenth and eleventh centuries, stabilizing finally at the end of the eleventh century at 30 percent silver. These little coins served as small change in place of [copper](#) coinage. Despite the low weight of the actual coins, the weight standard for a payment of a full *dirham* continued to be nearly three grams.

The Fatimids also revived official glass coin weights for dinars and *dirhams*, including fractions and multiples of the two denominations. These have been cataloged but their evolution is still not clearly understood.

Throughout the early Islamic centuries, as probably also before Islam, the relative values of gold, silver, and [copper](#) coins were not fixed but fluctuated according to the market, from day to day and place to place.

The papyri and Geniza documents often refer to the exchange rate (*sarf*) between dinars and *dirhams*. As the early glass weights show, the weight standard of the *dirham* could change substantially and often, with five changes in the eighth century.

At other periods, without the evidence of the glass weights, we can only assume that such changes were possible. These would naturally affect the normal dinar-*dirham* exchange rate as well as prices. There is also evidence for changes in the alloy of gold and silver coins. The research to support precise statements has not yet been done, but enough is known to inspire caution in comparing prices and exchange rates from the documents over long spans of time.

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