

‘Standing Caliph’ coins from Syria: looted and on the market

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For the many years I have known Jonathan, he has been actively involved in initiatives aimed at protecting and documenting threatened archaeological heritage alongside his research and curatorial work. I am pleased to be able to recognise his valuable contributions to archaeological preservation with this piece on looted and trafficked Syrian coins.

Archaeological sites in Syria have been badly plundered since the start of the civil conflict there in 2011.² Various reports have emphasised the looting and trafficking of ancient coins,³ though there have been few systematic studies of looted Syrian coins appearing on the open market.⁴ It seems surprising that more studies have not been published, but there are serious obstacles that discourage prospective researchers. Coins in antiquity circulated widely so that the place and even country of modern discovery (or looting) of a coin on the market today is often uncertain. Many coins entered circulation legally many decades ago and are not the product of recent looting. Finally, both the size and visibility of the coin market have been increasing since the early 2000s, and against that background it is difficult to identify extraordinary increases due to the market penetration of looted coins.

The development of the Internet and the associated emergence of E-commerce in the late 1990s increased market interconnectivity, thereby extending the market’s reach, improving its profitability, and increasing the volume of coins – just like everything else – traded.⁵ At the same time, Internet sales and auctions facilitated on-line archiving of sales results, making them more visible and available for research. Coins that previously would have been recorded in printed catalogues are now not always accessible for viewing. These processes have unfolded gradually, with both the size and the visibility of the market growing in parallel through time, so that when analysing long-term sales results it is hard to separate out the effects of one from the other. The line graph on Figure 1, for example, reproduces annual statistics prepared by Sargent *et al.* from the sales archive of a major US

dealer, showing how the number of lots sold annually increased from 2003 to 2017.⁶ Perhaps this graph shows the market growing in size, sales migrating on-line, or a mixture of both. A simple long-term tabulation of the numbers of Syrian coins appearing annually on the market since 2011 would likely reveal a similar increase, with or without looting. The histogram on Figure 1, for example, shows annual offerings of a single Syrian coin type, with what looks to be a corresponding increase in volume through time. Thus, any increasing availability of coins from Syria might simply be due to general changes in market size and visibility, and without further information cannot be attributed with any certainty to post-2011 conflict-associated looting. While it is easy to demonstrate increasing coin sales through time, it is harder to isolate unusual increases due to looting of the type that has occurred in Syria since 2011.

Online sale archives generally contain the results of auctions by larger dealers, selling higher-denomination or precious metal coins that are valuable enough today to be sold singly or in small lots. Lower-denomination coins that were minted in greater quantities in antiquity generally fetch lower prices today and thus are less likely to be sold by such dealers and recorded in the archives. Unfortunately, lower-denomination coins with limited circulation in antiquity, that are easier to match to a place of modern discovery or looting are better suited to a market investigation of looted coins.⁷ Thus, ideally, in order to study the possible entry of looted coins onto the open market, what is needed is a low-denomination coin type of limited circulation which was minted in sufficiently small quantities as to be comparatively rare today and thus worth selling singly by larger dealers, thereby appearing in their sales archives. What would also be further desirable is a ‘control’ group of similar but non-looted coins which could be used to provide general background changes in market size and visibility. The preliminary study presented here suggests that 7th century Umayyad copper ‘Standing Caliph’ coins meet these criteria and offer a suitable corpus for studying the entry of looted Syrian coins onto the open market.

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² Brodie 2022; Casana and Laugier 2017; Cunliffe 2021.

³ Brodie 2022: 31–34.

⁴ e.g., Topçuoğlu and Vorderstrasse 2019; Wartenberg Kagan 2015.

⁵ Brodie 2022: 31–34; Wartenberg and Dmitričenko 2022: 194–97.

⁶ Sargent *et al.* 2020: 75, fig. 5.4.

⁷ Elkins 2022.

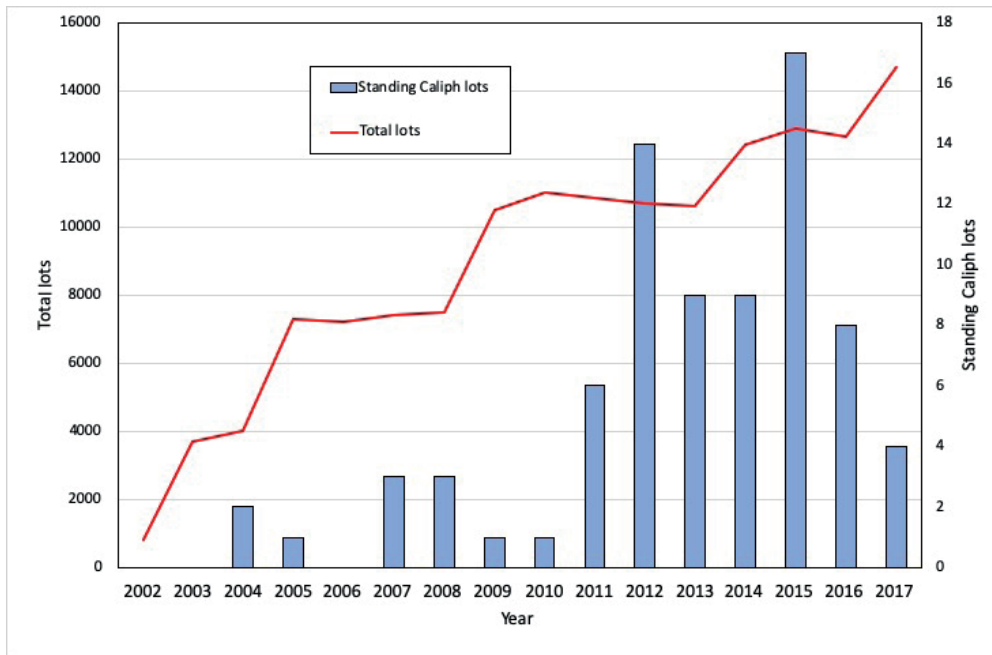


Figure 1. Annual coin sales by a US dealer from 2002 to 2017, with the line graph showing total sales and the histogram showing numbers of a Syrian coin type offered annually. (Data for line graph from Sargent *et al.* 2020: 75, fig. 5.4)



Figure 2. Bilad al-Sham, showing approximate boundaries of junds (in red) and locations of known 'Standing Caliph' mints (after Foss 2008: 158, map 1; Goodwin 2018: 41, fig. 2)

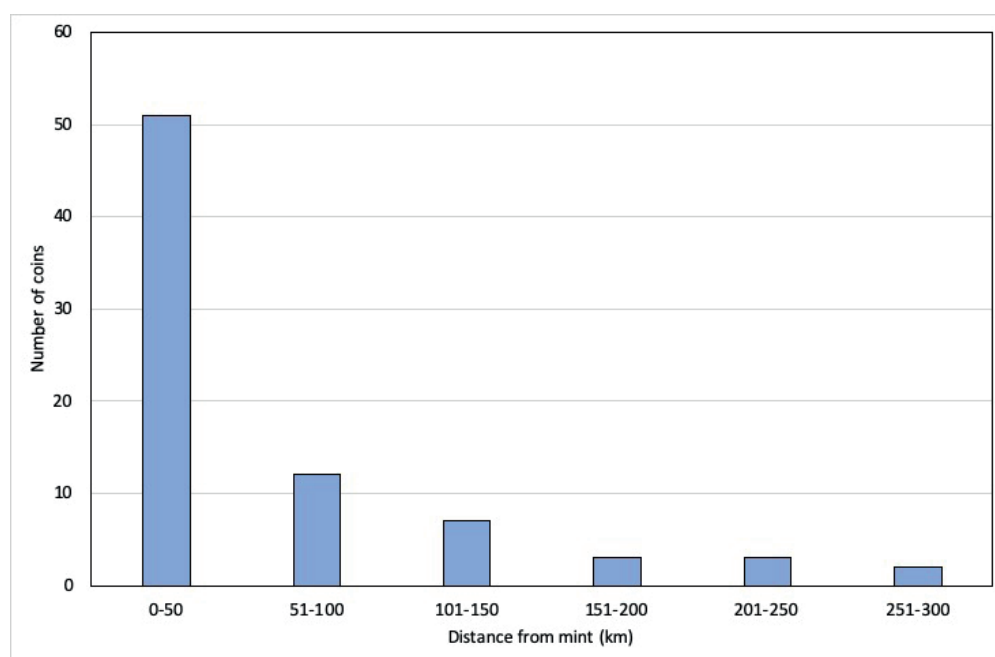


Figure 3. Distance from mint (km) of 'Standing Caliph' coins with archaeological findspots

Copper 'Standing Caliph' coins were produced at various locations throughout Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria) during the rule of the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik, over a period of about five years sometime between AD 692–699 / 72–80 AH.⁸ There are 19 mints presently-known that were located throughout the junds (military regions) of Filastin, Dimashq, Hims and Qinnasrin, and the province of al-Jazira (Figure 2). The reverse of a coin normally carries the name of its mint and the overall design of the coins is reasonably consistent within a jund and distinctive between junds. So, from images provided in sales archives, it is usually possible to identify a mintmark, and, if that is not legible, to attribute the coin to its jund. As a last resort, for badly corroded, worn or patinated coins, those minted in Jund Filastin, decorated with a large **m** on their reverse, can be distinguished from those minted in other junds that are decorated with a Greek Φ -like symbol on steps, except those from the Amman mint in Jund Dimashq which carry an **M**. When coins are sold together in a lot, when an image is provided, it is possible to ascertain the mint or jund of each included coin.

Most 'Standing Caliph' coins are known almost exclusively from the market or from collections assembled from the market, as very few have been found archaeologically. Table 1 presents an overview of archaeological findspots compiled from secondary sources. Figure 3 uses information from Table 1 to show the distance excavated coins had travelled from their place of production, with the overwhelming majority

(65%) having travelled less than 50 km. Coins minted in Jund Filastin have been found only on sites located in what were the junds Filastin and al-Urdunn, roughly corresponding today to the territories of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the north-western area of Jordan. (Jund al-Urdunn did not produce any 'Standing Caliph' coins of its own). No coins from Jund Filastin have been found in what is today Syria. Even the metropolis of Antioch, which would be expected to have exerted a distorting gravitational pull on patterns of coin circulation, and where indeed long travelled coins have indeed been found, has not so far yielded any coins from Jund Filastin. Within the present-day borders of Israel, the only coins not minted in Jund Filastin are from mints in Jund Dimashq.⁹ There are none from the more distant mints of Hims, Qinnasrin or al-Jazira. Thus, it is possible to divide the coins into a 'Filastin' group minted in Jund Filastin and found mainly within present-day Israel and Palestine, and a 'not-Filastin' group, minted in other junds and found mainly in Syria (but also the immediately neighbouring territories of Lebanon and southern Turkey).

Archaeological looting has been widespread in Israel and Palestine since at least the 1960s,¹⁰ with ancient coins an especially attractive commodity. For a long time, licensed dealers inside Israel were able to sell looted objects, with the majority going to visiting tourists.¹¹ Since 2000, however, a series of legislative changes and improved enforcements has reduced (though not

⁸ Foss 2008; Goodwin 2018.

⁹ Bijovsky 2015.

¹⁰ al-Houdalieh 2012.

¹¹ Ilan, Dahari and Avni 1989; Kersel 2006.

Table 1. Published archaeological find spots of 'Standing Caliph' coins

<i>Modern site</i>	<i>Site Jund</i>	<i>Mint (number of coins found)</i>	<i>Mint Jund</i>	<i>Linear distance between site and mint (km)</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Balis	Qinnasrin	Halab	Qinnasrin	84	Foss 2008: 168
Dehes	Qinnasrin	Qinnasrin (2)	Qinnasrin	24	Foss 2008:168
		Sarmin (1)	Qinnasrin	26	
		Al-Ruha (1)	Jazira	228	
Qalat Siman	Qinnasrin	Halab (1)	Qinnasrin	31	Foss 2008: 169
		?Ma'arat Misrin (1)	Qinnasrin	39	
Catal Hoyuk (Turkey)	Qinnasrin	Hims (1)	Hims	175	Goodwin 2018: 113
		Qinnasrin (1)	Qinnasrin	54	
		Halab (1)	Qinnasrin	54	
		MM (1)	Qinnasrin	33	
Antioch	Qinnasrin	Dimashq (2)	Dimashq	300	Foss 2008: 167; Goodwin 2018: 113
		Hims (1)	Hims	171	
		Halab (5)	Qinnasrin	89	
		Ma'arat Misrin (1)	Qinnasrin	51	
		Tanukh (1)	Qinnasrin		
Apamea	Hims	Hims (1)	Hims	83	Foss 2008: 168
Amman	Dimashq	Amman (18)	Dimashq	0	Foss 2008: 173
Mount Nebo	Dimashq	Amman (1)	Dimashq	28	Goodwin 2018: 113
Tiberias	al-Urdunn	Iliya (1)	Filastin	117	Foss 2008: 172; Schulze and Schulze 2020: 178
Baysan	al-Urdunn	Dimashq (2)	Dimashq	135	Schulze and Schulze 2020: 178
		Amman (1)	Dimashq	72	
Jerash	al-Urdunn	Amman (1)	Dimashq	35	Foss 2008: 173; Schulze and Schulze 2020: 178
		Dimashq (2)	Dimashq	144	
Neve Ur	al-Urdunn	Dimashq (2)	Dimashq	124	Goodwin 2018: 113
Jericho	Filastin	Amman (17)	Dimashq	46	Goodwin 2018: 113
Bet Guvrin	Filastin	Iliya (3)	Filastin	37	Bijovsky 2012
		Yubna (4)	Filastin	32	
		Dimashq (2)	Dimashq	250	
Jerusalem	Filastin	Iliya (1)	Filastin	0	Foss 2008: 171
Shiloh	Filastin	Dimashq (1)	Dimashq	187	Foss 2008: 172; Goodwin 2018: 113
		Yubna (1)	Filastin	56	

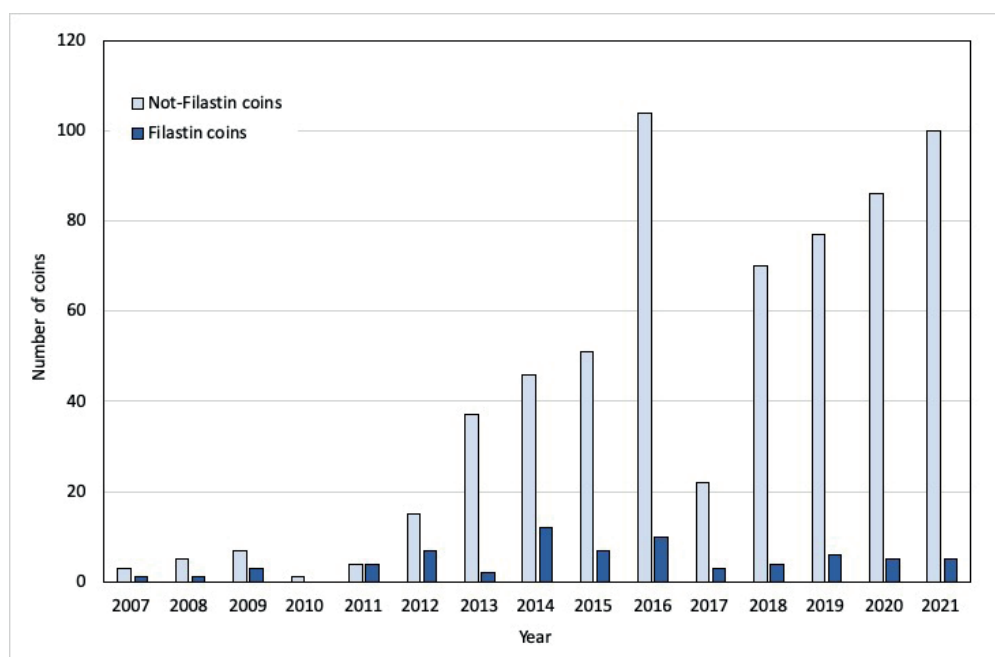


Figure 4. Numbers of unique 'Standing Caliph' coins without previous verifiable sales history offered annually from 2007 to 2021

eradicated) looting.¹² By way of contrast, until 2011 there was stronger regulation in Syria and antiquities sales were prohibited, so that there was a much lower incidence of looting before 2011 than after.¹³ Thus, it should be expected that Filastin coins found in the present-day territories of Israel and Palestine should have been more readily available on the market and to collectors prior to the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, but that since then non-Filastin coins should have shown a disproportionate increase in availability.

To test this hypothesis, all 'Standing Caliph' coins offered for sale from 2007 to 2021 and recorded in the aggregator archives of Sixbid¹⁴ and CoinArchives Pro¹⁵ were tabulated, together with those registered on the archive of a European dealer not utilising these resources. In total, 714 unique 'Standing Caliph' coins with no verifiable previous sales history were offered for sale. Figure 4 shows how the number of Filastin coins offered annually remained fairly constant, averaging out at about five per year. After 2011, however, the numbers of non-Filastin coins increased markedly. This increase could not have been due to the general growth in market size and visibility, which would have applied equally to Filastin coins, so must indicate in part, and probably large part, the entry onto the market of looted coins from non-Filastin (Syrian) junds. (Of course, this does not exclude the possibility and even the likelihood

Table 2. Major sellers of 'Standing Caliph' coins (2007–2021)

Country	Dealer	Number of unique coins offered with no identifiable previous sale	Number of unique coins offered with identifiable previous sale
USA	US1	107	5
USA-UK	US-GB1	86	9
UK	GB1	52	0
UK	GB2	40	0
UK	GB3	37	1
UK	GB4	22	4
Switzerland	CH1	74	11
Germany	DE1	40	2
Denmark	DK1	32	0
Canada	CA1	14	0
Spain	ES1	11	1
France	FR1	11	0

that many of the Filastin coins had also been looted, though to a lesser extent). Over the period in question, 12 dealers offered more than 10 'Standing Caliph' coins each, between them totalling 559 coins. Of that total, 526 coins had no verifiable sales history. The dealers are listed anonymously in Table 2. The importance of the United Kingdom for this market, accounting for a minimum of 28% of all coins offered, is evident.

¹² Klein 2014; Klein and Hadad 2019.

¹³ Abdulrahman 2001; Cunliffe 2012: 12–22.

¹⁴ <https://www.sixbid-coin-archive.com/#/en>

¹⁵ <https://pro.coinarchives.com/>

Conclusion

If the Filastin statistics are used as a control, then the divergence through time between the incidence of Filastin and non-Filastin coins on the market might offer an approximation of the numbers of looted coins from Syria reaching the market after 2011. From 2007 to 2011, nine Filastin coins were offered for sale against 20 non-Filastin coins, with non-Filastin coins outnumbering Filastin coins by a ratio of 2.2:1. From 2012 to 2021, 61 Filastin coins were offered for sale. Using the pre-2012 2.2:1 ratio, it would be expected that 134 non-Filastin coins would have been offered. In fact, there were 608. The difference between the hypothetical and actual not-Filastin coin statistics represents the number (474) of coins that arguably were recently looted. Over the same time period (2012–2021), a total of 722 ‘Standing Caliph’ coins from all junds were offered for sale, including coins that had been sold previously and were not fresh to the market. Overall then, during this period, something like 474 out of 722 or 66 per cent of ‘Standing Caliph’ coins offered for sale were likely to have been looted and trafficked out of Syria. If this percentage is extrapolated across sales of all ancient coins most probably from Syria, it produces an extraordinary figure.

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