

MDINA HOARD OF MUSLIM COINS: 1698

Anthony T. Luttrell

The discovery of a hoard of Arabic gold coins in 1698 was an outstanding event in the history of Maltese numismatics if only because the coins and their discovery were so fully recorded.¹ From the time of the earliest surviving written documents, that is in effect from the fifteenth century, there is evidence of coin hoards being sought and discovered in Malta, but they were treated as treasure and there is little indication of what kind of coins were found.² In addition to these hoards there must also have been occasional random discoveries of monies. In 1647 the historian Gian Francesco Abela had some pieces with Arabic lettering:

*... facendo gl'Arabi scolpire lettere Arabiche nelle monete, delle quali fin hoggi se ne conservano tuttauia alcune presso di noi, nelle quali da vna parte si mostrano le sopraccenate note, e dell'altra la Croce, e nome di Christo Signor nostro, in significato, e dimostrazione del Dominio comune.*³

Given their Christian markings, these were probably Norman coins from twelfth-century Sicily.⁴

After the great earthquake of 1693 work was undertaken not only to rebuild the cathedral in the old capital of Mdina but also to enlarge the piazza to the front and side of it. On 12 April 1698 a small boy working on the site hit a metal pot from which gold coins spilled out.⁵ The exact spot where the money was found is marked

¹ This study constitutes part of a joint investigation of coin collections in Malta and Gozo which resulted in Helen Brown's article "The Coins of Muslim Malta" (*supra*); Thomas Brown examined more than 800 Byzantine coins, but since only one or two have an assured provenance it seems unwise to base any conclusions on them.

² Details in G. Wettinger, "The Gold Hoard of 1538", *Melita Historica*, vii no. 1 (1976).

³ G.-F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta* (Malta, 1647), 256.

⁴ Brown (*supra*), 15-16; Norman gold coins from the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, but without provenance are illustrated in G. Wettinger, "The Arabs in Malta" (2nd ed.), in *Malta: Studies of its Heritage and History*, ed. Mid-Med Bank (Malta, 1986).

⁵ This article is largely based on the act of 13 April 1698 in Valletta, Notarial Archives, Acts of Giovanni Domenico Gatt R. 281, vol. 36, f. 521-523, and other texts in Mdina, Cathedral Archives, Misc. 10, 11, 63, 156, 174. C. Ciantar - G.-F. Abela, *Malta Illustrata*, 2 vols. (Malta, 1771-1780), i. 97-99, cited other acts of Giovanni Gatt and of Giambattista Dorbies dated 13 June and 13 and 15 July 1699 then said to be in the Atti Civili of the Inquisition; these cannot at present be traced in the Notarial or the Cathedral Archives; they are summarized in Misc. 174, f. 857-858, but are of little relevance. Wettinger (1986), 101 n. 30, also cites Valletta, Notarial Archives, R. 281, vol. 36, f. 34-35 et seq., and R. 282, vol. 38, f. 177-178; Valletta, National Library of Malta, Biblioteca, Ms. 21 (*Relazione del tesoro ...*); and Mdina, Cathedral Archives, Ms. 169, pp. 1227-1230, 1308-1309. Much gratitude goes to the Cathedral Archivist, Canon John Azzopardi, for his help in searching out and interpreting documents.

on an ancient map of Mdina +*luogo del tesoro rinvenuto* at a point immediately in front of the present front door of No. 1 Archbishop's Square.⁶ The initial description of the event was given the next day in the act drawn up by Notary Giovanni Domenico Gatt. The discovery was made on the site of the house which had been purchased from Signora Eufrazia Tonna and had been demolished. At about 5 o'clock in the afternoon one of the workmen's boys struck the pot. Several canons of the cathedral at once ran to the spot and found at six or seven *palmi* below street level:

un Vaso, o sia Vrna di rame in forma più tosto Ovata, che tonda col suo Collo, alta in tutto da un palmo ed un quarto, e larga nel Ventre uerso due terzi di palmo, e nel Collo circa un quarto di palmo;⁷ quale urna era situata col Collo in giù, e con un Colpo di Zappa datoui da un altro figliuolo pure degli operarij gli era stato leuato il fondo in guisa di Cranio, con essersi uersata in terra qualche poca quantità di Moneta di oro di cui era piena essa Vrna. Et allora raccolta da gli stessi deputati la moneta uersata in terra...

The vase with the greater part of the money still in it was carefully locked away for inspection the next day, when it was described as an:

Vrna piena nella maggior parte di Moneta con altre moneta sfusa tutta d'oro consistente in diuerse specie di Moneta d'oro di diuerse grandezze per lo più piccole come aspri torchischi, e forse minore con alcune assai poche quanto un ungaro tutte antiche credute arabe, hebraiche [etc.]⁸

The coins weighed 35 *libbre* and 9 *uncie*, the gold being of varying *carata*; after 3 *uncie* had been deducted on account of the dirt and earth attached to the monies, the value was estimated at 8733 *scudi*.⁹

⁶ This map is in private hands.

⁷ Assuming a *palmo* of 26.2 cm, the pot was 32.75 cm high and nearly 17.5 cm across with a neck about 6.5 cm (high?); the broken copper urn preserved in the Cathedral Museum which is traditionally said to have contained the coins is now 17 cm high (but has lost its bottom which apparently projected downwards "in the shape of a skull") and 14.5 cm across with a neck 6.8 cm high and 11.5 cm wide. It has a bulbous body (*più tosto Ovata*) and a long straight neck. This pot has been described as "rather nondescript" but possibly parallel in shape to an eleventh-century Fatamid jug in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. The tradition might be correct. The presumed pot is illustrated in colour in G. Wettinger, "The Arabs in Malta" (1st ed.), in *Mid-Med Bank Limited: Report and Accounts, 1984* (Malta, 1984), 33.

⁸ The "etc" is represented by a suspension sign.

⁹ Act of 13 April 1698 cited in note 5.

The subsequent inquest showed that Gatt's account was incomplete. Domenico Mamo of Siggiewi testified that the boy Ignatio Pernis of Rabat gave a *colpo di zappone*, struck a *Vaso tondo* and let out a shout; Salvo Galea came and called the canons who had been by the church door and who carried the money to the sacristy; a great crowd, and "all the little boys" who worked there, searched and grubbed for coins but found no more. Domenico Mamo did not actually see the hoard or the vase, but Canon Mangion gave him a brief glimpse of some gold pieces the size of a *picciolo*. Domenico Xuereb of Rabat spoke of a *vaso di rame* which was *pieno di monete d'oro*; he said that the initial blow at the vase had scattered money around; that Salvo Galea had a hand full of money; Xuereb also had a handful, which he put under his *pettorale*, and so did Ignatio Pernis and another boy called Domenico. Xuereb and Galea and the two boys had surrendered their pieces, but the crowd picked up others; Xuereb admitted that two pieces had remained in his breeches and he had sold them to two clergy at four *tari* each.¹⁰ It is clear that some pieces escaped.

One account of the vase, described as *plena auro monete uetustissime, et numismatis omnino ignoti*, told how the crowd ascribed its discovery to the miraculous intervention of St. Paul who thus provided for the completion of his church: *audita est vox populi clamantis – Miraculum miraculum Diui Pauli Patroni pro fabrica complenda*. The Bishop hurried up from Valletta: the money was weighed, being 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ *rotoli*, or 35 *libbre* and 9 *uncie*; and a *Te Deum* was said in thanksgiving. The Grand Master thought differently and invoked his regalian rights so that the quarrel over the ownership of the coins went to be settled in Rome, with the Bishop and Chapter claiming them because they were found on Church land, and also arguing that they belonged to the Church *quia vox Populi vox Dei*.¹¹ Part of the evidence submitted to Rome stated that the vase was found at *da sette in otto pali di fondo* and described it as *un vaso sive urna di rame antichissima, piena di Moneta e Medaglie di St. Elena d'Oro al peso di R[otuli] 14 e mezzo*.¹² Eventually the coins were divided between the government and the Church. The Master gave away his half to the Monte di Pietà with instructions that it should be made into *zecchini*.¹³ He kept one pear-shaped piece to put in his crown as his name was Perellos:

Si diceva che l' Illmo. Gran Maestro Fr. D. Raimondo Perellos aueua applicato la Somma tocata a lui al Monte della Pietà; ed essendosi oltre altre medaglie ritrouate tra detta moneta un Pero d'oro esso Illmo, G.

¹⁰ Mdina, Misc. 156, f. 3v-5v. Xuereb admitted: *ad ogni modo mi sono rimaste due dentro le Calzette, quali hier mattina hò vendute à persone esenti tari quattro l' una.*

¹¹ Mdina, Misc. 11, f. 382-384=Misc. 174, f. 859-860.

¹² Mdina, Misc. 174, f. 856.

¹³ Valletta, National Library of Malta, Archives of the Order of St. John, Cod. 264, f. 194v-195 (29 July 1699).

*Maestro l'auvea preso ed attaccatolo nella sua Corona trecatoria [?] uulgo Paternoster. ed io l'ho veduto piu volte.*¹⁴

The Church's share was finally worth 4743 *scudi* and 1 *tari* and weighed 17 *libbre* and 11 *uncie*. Before it was melted down *due Sante Elene con altre medaglie* weighing $2\frac{3}{4}$ *uncie* and 1 *sedicino* were taken out to send to the Pope while a handful of pieces weighing 4 *uncie* and $1\frac{1}{2}$ *sedicini* was shared out among the Bishop, the Vicar, the Assessor, the Treasurer, the Prior of Venice, the Knight *di Noientes* and the Master of the Mint. What was left weighed, after refining, 14 *libbre*, 4 *uncie* and 2 *sedicini*, and it made 1319 *zecchini*.¹⁵ According to a later writer, twelve of the largest and finest pieces went to the Pope.¹⁶

The most precise calculation of the coins' value, a part of the evidence sent to Rome, was as follows:

La quantità dell'Oro in moneta e Medaglie ritrovato, perche non era dell'istessa bontà intrinseca, ne dell'istessa perfezzione, è stato dal sudetto Orefice Rosselli valutato uno per altro confondendo il buono col migliore e più fino à ragione di scudi 20. di Malta l'Oncia, onde che quel tanto rimase conservato in Cassa, che ascende à libre 35. et Oncie sei nette, fatta la deduzione delle tare, importata scudi 8796. di rame, salvo più vero calculo alla ragione di sopra accennata.

*E ciò oltre l'Oro suolazzato nel colpo ò colpi dati con la Zappa dal ragazzo nell'atto che lo ritrovò, et anche nel mentre che il vaso ò urna di rame in che era rinserrato l'Oro del Tesoro con viva forza si svelse è distaccò da terra, e pietre, ovè era da molti Secoli fortemente attaccato, e quasi incorporato, come riferiscono quelle persone che sopra giunsero, e cooperor[o]no al detto distaccamento et alla ricuperazione dell'Oro disperso in tal contingenza; E si giudica che l'Oro mancante tolto, et usurpato da persone incognite eccede la somma di scudi mille, et il giudizio è fondato nella publica voce del popolo, et in considerazione della capacità del pezzo dell'urna rotta.*¹⁷

The revised value was a little higher than the original estimates and these figures imply that the total amount of gold originally in the vase weighed about 40

¹⁴ Mdina, Misc. 63, f. 212-213.

¹⁵ Mdina, Misc. 10, f. 412-416.

¹⁶ According to Ciantar, ii. 99; these coins have not been traced in the Vatican collections.

¹⁷ Mdina, Misc. Ms. 174, f. 857. The figures of 18 *libri* $1\frac{1}{4}$ *uncie* etc., in Ciantar, ii. 97, 99, are evidently incorrect.

libbre. It is clear that some of these coins, apparently about ten percent of them, were taken at the moment of discovery; perhaps twelve, including two pieces of *Sant' Elena*, were sent to Rome; the Master put a *Pero* in his crown; and a handful of coins was shared out before the Church's portion was melted down. Contemporaries were unsure if the monies were Islamic or Hebrew, while references to *Sant' Elena* suggest that there may have been some late Byzantine coins or possibly Arabic counterfeits of Byzantine types.¹⁸ In the eighteenth century Gioacchino Navarro saw two well-preserved Islamic gold coins from the Mdina find in the collection of Carlo Antonio Barbaro,¹⁹ who himself claimed that there were some Byzantine coins in this hoard.²⁰ Others were in some way known to Count Giovannantonio Ciantar whose account of them, published in 1771, stated that none of the coins remained, but he was able to describe them as being of six types. Some were the size of an Islamic *sceriffo*, a little smaller than a Venetian *picciola*, and others the size of a *mezzo grosso della moneta Romana*. The coins were inscribed in Arabic and Ciantar gave an Italian translation of these inscriptions which suggests that they dated between 1038 and 1087.²¹

One piece from the Mdina Hoard seems to have survived in Malta, but Maltese collections also contained coins from other sources many of them probably outside the island. The Maltese scarcely admitted to a Muslim past but there were a few references to Arabic coins. Gian Francesco Abela's collection was disastrously plundered and finally it passed from the Jesuits to the Knights of Malta and ultimately to the Public Library and the modern National Museum.²² Gioacchino Navarro, Librarian of the Public Library, wrote of the *monete Arabe di bronzo, che qui sovente si trovano*,²³ and Carlo Antonio Barbaro had many Arabic coins,

¹⁸ The *moneta di Sant' Elena* was commonly found in Malta: Wettinger (1976), 27-33. T. Bertelè, "Costantino il Grande e S. Elena su alcune monete bizantine," *Numismatica*, 4-6 (July-December 1948), shows that such coins were thought to be a cure against epilepsy in the middle ages. See especially Michel Italikos, *Lettres et Discours*, ed. P. Gautier (Paris, 1972), 208-210, and the references there given. This belief survived in Malta where a seventeenth-century Maltese doctor denounced it: Giovanni Francesco Buonamico, *Dissertatio de Graecis Numismatibus, quae Sanctae Helenae, magnoque Constantino vulgo tribuuntur, atque adversos Epilepticos insultus commendantur* (lost but cited in Valletta, Biblioteca, Ms. 2, f. 131-133).

¹⁹ G. N[avarro], *Dissertazione sopra tre Bassi-rilievi di Marmo Bianco ...* (Palermo, 1778), 68.

²⁰ ... *alcune delle quali erano Bizzantine, e tutte le altre Saraceniche ...*: C. Barbaro, *Degli avanzi d'alcuni antichissimi edifizj, scoperti in Malta l'anno 1768* (Malta, 1794), 40-45, 76 n. 125.

²¹ Ciantar, i. 692-693; Ciantar's text and the identifications based on it are given by Brown (*supra*), 7-12.

²² I.S. Mifsud, *Biblioteca Maltese* (Malta, 1764), 249-254; R. Bonnici Call, "Gian Francesco Abela: the Father of Maltese Historians and Antiquarians," *Scientia* (Malta), ix no. 2 (1953), 83-89; A. Bonanno, "Giovanni Francesco Abela's Legacy to the Jesuit College", *Proceedings of History Week 1983*, ed. M. Buhagiar (Malta, 1984).

²³ Navarro, 67.

including gold pieces: *Tanto più, che spesso in Malta si trovano monete Saraceniche ne' luoghi da que' barbari frequentati, anche del più prezioso metallo, molte delle quali si conservano nel mio medagliere.*²⁴ Though one small thin "brass" Arabic coin said to be datable roughly to the tenth century was found somewhere at Marsa at the head of the Grand Harbour,²⁵ no Muslim coin, and indeed no coin datable later than 829 at the latest, was recorded in the hoard found in the Marsa excavations of 1768;²⁶ this may suggest that this port area went out of use around the time of the earliest Arabic attacks on Malta possibly in 836 and well before the definitive Muslim conquest of 870.²⁷

In 1883 the Librarian A.A. Caruana recorded that there were 5 gold and 15 silver Islamic coins in the Public Library, and probably there were others of bronze among the thousands of coins not then described; he also noted "wholesale pillage", empty cabinets and suchlike.²⁸ In 1899 Caruana mentioned that the Library had two gold Muslim coins, the fate of the other three being obscure, but he mentioned four gold pieces then in the collection of S.L. Pisani.²⁹ The published catalogue of Pisani's collection listed 5 gold, 1 silver and 2 bronze Islamic coins in 1896, saying that they were found in Malta: *trovate in paese.*³⁰ They may have included pieces which had migrated from the Library or been acquired elsewhere in Malta, but Pisani was a well-travelled medical man who could also have collected pieces outside Malta.

A new numismatic era began in Malta with the opening of the National Museum, but it is not known whether it received the 5 gold and 15 silver pieces listed in 1883. Among materials recorded by Themistocles Zammit as passing to it from the Public Library were "1 envelope with 79 Arabic and other coins",³¹ and another list mentioned as item 945: "23 Arabic Coins in Case."³² The Grenfell Collection of antiquities donated in 1904 included a "Collection of Arab Glass, found in the dust

²⁴ Barbaro, 41; L. de Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta*, i (London, 1805), 12, stated that Barbaro had two gold Arabic coins.

²⁵ *Report on the Working of the Museum Department 1955-56* (Malta, 1956), 8.

²⁶ Barbaro, 39-40, lists the finds.

²⁷ T.S. Brown, "Byzantine Malta: A Discussion of the Sources", in *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta Before the Knights*, ed. A. Luttrell (London, 1975), 82.

²⁸ Valletta, Biblioteca, Ms. 1030 pt./1, pp. v, xix, xxv.

²⁹ A.A. Caruana, *Frammento Critico della Storia Fenicio-Cartaginese, Greco-Romano e Bisantina, Musulmana e Normanna-Aragonese delle Isole di Malta* (Malta, 1889) 25-26; cf. Brown (*supra*), 5-6.

³⁰ S.L. Pisani, *Medagliere di Malta e Gozo dall'Epoca Fenicia all'Attuale* (Malta, 1896), p. ix.

³¹ Msida, University of Malta Library, Ms. 120.

³² Valletta, National Museum of Archaeology: DAG 16.400 Ms. 49, p. 37 (written in Zammit's hand).

heaps of Cairo" but no mention was made of coins.³³ The Pisani collection was received in 1909 but its Islamic holdings were omitted from the published list;³⁴ presumably they included the 5 gold, 1 silver and 2 bronze pieces mentioned in his catalogue of 1896, since the catalogue said that one gold piece was illegible and the other four are now in the Museum.³⁵ Other accessions in 1908/9 included "16 Arabic coins found in Malta" which came from Mr. Abramo Gatt and "6 silver and 130 copper Arabic coins" from Dr. Alfredo Caruana Gatt, a naturalist and a member of the local nobility.³⁶

Many of the Arabic coins in Maltese collections may have been imported. Very few, even of those in the museums, have a secure provenance and a considerable number are not available for study. These coins often date long after the Muslim period in Malta; thus three "Saracenic" coins whose discovery was recorded and which were drawn by Themistocles Zammit between 1921 and 1924 are Ottoman or Mamluk.³⁷ Nothing is known of the origins of the National Museum Hoard, except that the notes now accompanying the coins make it clear that they were in the National Museum by 1956; it seems likely that these are the coins presented to the Museum in 1908/9 and that they represent a hoard with a Maltese provenance. The Mdina coins have a unique importance in that their discovery is exceptionally well documented; five of the varieties were described in such detail that they can be identified, and apparently one coin still survives. A hoard of perhaps some 5000 or more gold coins hidden in the centre of Mdina in "the late 1080's" or possibly at the time of Roger the Norman's invasion of Malta in 1091 points to a considerable wealth in the hands of someone in the island's chief city. The small hoard of silver pieces deposited in the mid-twelfth century and now in the National Museum and another comparable hoard also probably concealed on Malta may have represented the takings of small tradesmen, and they suggest that at that point the Maltese economy was still very much part of the Sicilian commercial world.³⁸

³³ Ms. inventory in Valletta, National Museum of Archaeology: DAG 16.450, Ms. 48.

³⁴ *The Annual Report of the Curator of the Museum for the Financial Year 1908/9* (Malta, 1909), p. E2.

³⁵ Brown (*supra*), 2.

³⁶ *Annual Report ... 1908/9*, p. E2.

³⁷ Valletta, National Museum of Archaeology: DAG. 16.400, Ms. 21, vol. 6, pp. 41, 53; vol. 8, p. 10.

³⁸ Cf. Brown (*supra*), 6-7, 12, 13. Brown, 7, notes that the survival of only four tenth-century coins might indicate that Malta's economy operated without coinage. It might also indicate depopulation: cf. A. Luttrell, "Steves and Captives on Malta: 1053/4 and 1091," *Hyphen [Malta]*, vii no. 2 (1992).