

THE FIRST EVIDENCE OF A MINT IN MIKNĀSA: TWO UNPUBLISHED ALMORAVID COINS, A DIRHAM AND A DINAR, OF THE YEAR 494H/1100

TAWFIQ IBRAHIM

The plain of Miknāsa is a strategic zone that lies between the Middle Atlas and the river Sebu. It takes its name from a Zanāta group, the Miknāsa, that is thought to have settled it sometime in the 10th century or a little earlier. This last group was distinguished in the early Arabic sources as the Miknāsa al-Zaytūn to differentiate them from the Miknāsa Tāzā to the east. The area is endowed with a moderate climate, a good water supply and excellent soil. At present it is one of the best agricultural districts of Morocco - an area with a city of the same name, of very probable Almoravid foundation, which gradually developed in importance until it became during early Alawid rule the capital of the kingdom.

With the above-mentioned qualities it is interesting to note very briefly that the Roman domination of North Africa seems not to have touched in any significant way the geographical area of Miknāsa, and furthermore nothing much, if anything, is known of the area during the immediate centuries that follow. Also, very little is known of the early Islamic domination except that in the period that followed the recently established Miknāsa put a stiff and effective resistance to the Idrisids.¹ It is not really until the Almoravid period that we begin to get more precise historical information.

The area of Miknāsa, as historical sources indicate, was taken over by the Almoravids ṣulḥan, that is peacefully by pact, in 466H/1073. This occurred very soon after the demise of Al-Mahdī ibn Yūsuf al-Gaznāī, the emir of the Miknāsa al-Zaytūn. This same Emir had sought and got the effective help of the Almoravids in his fight against his Magrawi enemies in nearby Fās. His successor Al-Khair ibn Khazar, after accepting the terms dictated by Yūsuf ibn Tāshfīn, was invited to reside permanently in Marrākush, where, it is recorded, he was treated very generously.²

Following this Yūsuf ibn Tāshfīn rapidly had a fort built in the area and established a permanent garrison there. Yāqūt, writing much latter, confirms this when he tells us that the small city of Miknāsa has a fort built by Yūsuf ibn Tāshfīn.³ It is probably this very fortress that became the nucleus around which the city of Miknāsa would grow.

It is from this secure military vantage that the Almoravids besieged and finally retook the important double city of Fās in 467H/1074 - the first temporary occupation was reportedly in the controversial early date of 461/1069-. It should be recalled that it was Yūsuf ibn Tāshfīn who first unified the conflicting and physically divided double city into a single walled one. So in view of the possible instability of the newly and forcibly unified city it was probably thought prudent by the Almoravid commanders to place a permanent strategic garrison in Miknāsa which happened to be, conveniently, just one journey's distance from Fās.

It seems this garrison city must have grown in importance, to the point of meriting, nearly three decades later, the minting of the following two coins, a dirham and a dinar:

¹ Although practically nothing is said about the Miknāsa in the early period, the fact that there is a town by the name of Mekinenza in Zaragoza and references to a now lost 'Miknāsa al-Asnām' in Extremadura may be indicative of the early participation in the conquest of the Iberia Peninsula

of this particular Zenata Berber group.

² Ibn 'Idhari 1983, vol 4, pp. 26-28.

³ Yāqūt 1979, vol. 5, p. 181.

Dirham of Yūsuf ibn Tāshfīn; mint: Miknāsa; year: 494H/1100; 12mm, 0.92g.⁴



Obverse

Centre:

لا إله إلا
الله

Margin:

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم بمكناسة سنة أربع و تسد

Reverse

Centre:

محمد ر
سول الله

Margin:

أمير المسلمين و ناصر الدين يوسف بن تاشفين

Of interest in the above coin on the margin of the reverse is the use of the epithet *nāsir al-dīn* before the name of the ruler. In the centre of the same side the division of the word *rasūl* in two lines is unusual if not unique for the period and, to our knowledge, not found again on Almoravid coinage. On the obverse under the word Allah there are two dots, while crossing the same word is a stem with two leaves and on either side of same three dots in triangular form.

⁴ This coin is from the Toneyawa Collection see:
<http://www.andalustonegawa.50g.com/almoravids/s4.jpg>.

Dinar of Yūsuf ibn Tāshfīn; mint: Miknāsa; year: 494H/1100; 24mm, 4.04g⁵.



Obverse

Centre:

لا إله إلا الله
محمد رسول الله
الأمير يوسف بن
تاشفين

Margin:

و من يبتغ غير الإسلام دين فإلن يقبل منه و هو في الآخرة من الخاسرين

Reverse

Centre:

الإمام
عبد
الله
أمير المؤمنين
ك

Margin:

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدينار بمكناسة سنة أربع و تسعين و أربع

Of note on the obverse centre of this last coin are the two diacritical points under the ي of ريم and that of نين مؤملا; also at the bottom of this same centre is a ك (or perhaps ذ or د). The earliest date for the appearance of this single letter in this position seems to be in a dinar of Aghmat dated 487H (Hazard 59). It further appears sporadically in later dates in other mints, both North African and Peninsular. Since no primary documentation exists as to how the Almoravid mint functioned we have no clue as to why this letter, or any of the others, was placed in this central position.

On the reverse margin of this dinar one can note the three dots in triangular form at exactly three o'clock which seem to mirror the set we noted before in the obverse of the dirham. It is also impossible to tell if this was just the decorative whim of the same die-cutter or if it had, then, some intelligible visual function within the mint system.

Although these two coins are the earliest known Islamic coins registered for Miknāsa, it would of course be necessary to find more coins of different dates to be able to affirm the establishment of a permanent mint there, as opposed to strikes in the sole year of 494H. A look at the admittedly sparse sources reveals no special event in Miknāsa or in its surroundings on this date that would

⁵ This coin is in a private collection, Madrid, Spain.

clarify the reasons for such a punctual strike. In fact for the whole of the next half century of continuous Almoravid rule in Miknāsa we have only very scant numismatic evidence of any further coinage, in the form of two small silver quirats struck in the reign of ‘Ali ibn Yūsuf (Vives 1673 & 1707; Hazard 906 & 907)⁶ and a single known dinar struck in Miknāsa in the very last year of Almoravid rule when it was a tightly besieged city.⁷

With the rise of Almohad power Miknāsa stood unwavering in its fidelity to the Almoravid cause, to the point of naming a new emir after the execution by the Almohads of Iṣḥāq ibn ‘Ali (see note 7). For this fidelity it paid a very high price. It would first suffer a prolonged, intermittent siege of seven years till it finally fell in 543H/1148 (Let us recall that Marrākush, the Almoravid capital, had already fallen in 542H/1147). The city was then thoroughly sacked, the garrison slaughtered and only its military fort left standing.

As a further mint, under the new rulers, the Almohads, we have only very sporadic strikes of rare half dinars under ‘Abd al-Mu`min (Vives 2052 & 2053; Hazard 464 & 465) and anonymous square silver dirhams (Vives 2110; Hazard 1099), but the first do confirm that the city was either quickly reconstructed, or in continuous use during the Almohad period.

As a fitting epilogue we can recall that very few coins, and not all verifiable, are attributed to the mint of Miknāsa for the Merinid, Wattasid and Sa’dian periods.⁸ Perhaps it was just too close to the politically and economically much more dominant city of Fās. So it is only under the Alawites, who initially made Miknāsa their capital, that we get more regular coinage.⁹ However, none of the last would stand up to anything near the quality of the rare Almoravid coinage that we have just described. But certainly this last is an unfair comparison, for the Almoravid mint, at least in gold, was an incredible institution, not only for the vast quantity and excellent quality of the coinage struck but also the very large number of mints in which this was done, some 28 at the last count, 13 in the Maghrib and 15 in al-Andalus. It undoubtedly must have been a true organizational marvel and it is very much a grave pity we know so very little about it.

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⁶ Both very rare coins, with Vives 1893 (re-ed. 1978), n° 1672 = Hazard 1952, n° 907, still representing a single known coin. These coins passed unnoticed by Zambaur 1968, p. 248.

⁷ This very important dinar in the name of Yahya ibn Abu Bakr ibn ‘Ali ibn Yūsuf ibn Tāshfīn was struck in Miknāsa 543H. This would indicate that, being aware of the execution by the Almohads of the last Almoravid amir Iṣḥāq ibn ‘Ali, the authorities in Miknāsa desperately attempted a dynastic continuation by proclaiming a new amir in Miknāsa. I am fully indebted to Dr. Houcine Chraïbi for pointing out the existence of this coin and for a reading and picture of the same.

⁸ Lavoix 1891, n° 1056, p. 489, lists a dubious coin possibly struck by the Sa’dian Al-Wāthīq bi-Allah struck in Marrākush with also a possible overstruck Miknās on one of its segments. This last may be a countermark.

Brethes 1939, under Merinids, lists for this mint a square dirham, n° 1320, but this is not verifiable in the deficient plates. More probable is his reading of n°1434, attributed to the Sa’dian Abū Muhammad ‘Abd Allah I. Mitchiner 1977, under Marinids, n° 492 & 501, p. 110, gives us for this mint two square dirhams, the first attributed to Abu Ya ‘qub Yusuf and the second to ‘Abd al-Haqq II. In his plates only the last three letters of the mint are visible in the first coin. Diler 2009, p. 1200 includes most of the above and adds a dirham to the Wattasids and two to the Sa’dians.

⁹ Diler 2009, p. 1200, under ‘Alawi Sharīfs lists nineteen entries for Miknāsa, eleven gold and nineteen silver, many with dates extending from 1091 to 1193H/1680-1779. For more precise information see Eustache’s corpus.

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