

## Umayyad Glass Fals Weight Issued in Egypt and Found in Barsinia /Jordan

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### *Abstract*

*This paper intends to present an Umayyad glass weight, found in Barsinia, Jordan, and probably made in Egypt during the 8th century AD, supposedly by the office of weights and measures (dar al-'iyar). This glass weight mentioned the name of Usama, who was well known, from historical sources, as the finance director of Egypt (96-9 H./ AD. 714-17) and interim governor also (102 H./ A.D. 720-1). It also aims at shedding light on this glass weight by clarifying the Arabic words that appeared on the glass weight. The paper attempts to link this information to each other in such a manner that the tax policy adopted by Usama ibn Zaid will be displayed.*

*Keywords: Umayyad, Glass Weight, Egypt and Jordan.*

### **Introduction:**

The researcher had the idea to write about this subject when he and his colleague Dr. Lamia El-Khourī recently discussed archaeological excavations at Barsinia site in Jordan which was carried out by her during the summer of 2007. The researcher assumes that finding an object like a glass weight may be inspiring to write a paper about. Describing it and interpreting the style of Arabic writing that appeared on it can lead us to know the purpose of manufacturing such a piece, and the historical context in which it was made and what for.

This glass weight has been found in the rural site of Barsinia (JADIS 2221030) which is located in north-western Jordan, 15 km west of the modern city of Irbid, (Fig. 1) during the excavation season of 2007 which was carried out by my colleague Dr. El-Khourī, and it is worth noting that this site is rich in archaeological remains and continuously occupied from the Early Bronze Age until the Ottoman period. According to Khouirī's results of the first season of excavation, the site of Barsinia provided a wealth of information about the nature of occupation within the site, especially during the classical and early Islamic periods, since the archaeological remains included imported objects at the site, according to El-Khourī's observations and notes, which indicated that at least some of the inhabitants were engaged in

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activities other than agriculture and trade for instance (El-Khoury 2009: 61-63).

**Fig. 1:** Map of Jordan showing the archaeological site of Barsinia.



### **Description of the Glass Weight:**

This pale green glass weight was found in the course of the Barsinia excavation in 2007 and it was in a good condition and it weighed 5.81 grams, 2 cm. diameter, with 7.7cm circumference and 0.4cm. thickness. The obverse side of it carries three lines of Arabic text inscribed within a circle in early simple Kufic script; it was possible to read the words that appeared as follows:

اسامة / الايام / شهد

Witnessed/ the Days/ Usama

While the reverse side of this glass weight carries nothing, (Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2.** Umayyad Glass Fals Weight.



This kind of Islamic glass weights was common during the early Islamic periods, and from its weight it can be referred to a glass fals weight. The glass fals weights issued in Egypt in denominations from probably nine to thirty-six kharru'bas and it could be, has been noted, an exception to the fact that Arabs issued only one standard copper or bronze coin – regardless of size or weight – without any denominational differentiations.

Also, according to the epigraphical style we can date the object with fair certainty to the early Islamic period, more probably the Umayyad. With reference to the Arabic inscribed text, this glass weight mentioned three words that showed that the manufacturing and issuing of it has been witnessed (šāhid in Arabic) by Usama, and the second word appeared as Ayyam which means days in English and misreads as Imam, but the fourth letter looks Yá-in Arabic- more than Mīm, so the word is obviously reads Ayyám in Arabic and not Imam, since the word Imam appears on Abbasid era. The third word was -the name of- Usama; so, who is Usama? Why does his name appear on this glass weight? The following discussion will try to address these questions and answer them.

### **Discussion:**

The systems of measures and weights were developed by the Umayyad authorities, and the spread of Islam with the strength of the economy of the Umayyads in their territories led to reliance on the standards of weights and measures that were used in Egypt, the Levant, Mesopotamia and Persia; As a result, there were many forms and systems of weighing, and the Umayyad authority modified these weights and measures in accordance with the financial legislation that the Umayyad state established and imposed on the regions under its rule (Balog, 1976). In the sphere of Islamic influence, the Qur'ānic injunction "to give full measure and to weigh with the right scales" (Qur'ān 17:35), led - in the long run -to systems of measuring that were subjected to the authority and control of politics and law.

Grierson (1979) points to the frequent presence of glass weights in Egypt, which bore the names of governors or finance directors. Grierson explains the abundance of glass weights in Egypt due to the use of Egyptian carat (0.196 grams), which differs from the Syrian carat (0.212 grams) used in the House of Caliphate (Grierson, 1979: 254). Copper coins were being used domestically and were struck according to conventional weights in that region. We find that engraved on some copper coins that identify and confirm the amount of carat weight of that region, as in the glass weight issued by the finance director of Egypt Usama ibn Zaid (96-9 H./ A.D. 714-17) and interim governor (102 H./ A.D. 720-1) (Bates, 1989: 196-198; Morton, 1985: 46).

The issuance of most of the official weights in Egypt was special for the Islamic movement in the eighth century AD (Morton, 1991: 19-22), and began to mint gold and silver in Egypt only at the end of that century. This explains why the weights of dinars and dirhams were spread in Egypt, because all the gold and silver coins were imported for there was no special mint house for the production of precious metals. Therefore, their production was a localized benchmark for comparison and calibration.

During that period, there were three types of glass weights: Dinar, Dirham and Fals. The glass-making industry continued in the form of sealed disks until after the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluks. The important thing about these glass weights was that many of them had a writing that showed how much and for what reason they were made. In some cases, the names of those who issued such glass weights and scales were recorded on them, and this was not important because the official authorities were monitoring the markets, so there was no need to write the name of the governor who issued them (Balog, 1977: 62-63; Morton, 1985: 46).

Sometimes because of the abundance of these weights, it is difficult, though, to understand some of the characters of their words. However, they provide researchers with information on how weights and scales were supervised and how to organize these weights and scales in a state such as Egypt, which used weights different from those in the Levant (Miles and Mason, 1948: 65; Morton, 1991).

Miles and Mason (1948) said, that the unusual quality of the glass used in the Umayyad and the beginning of the Abbasid periods was the main reason for preserving the polished face of these sealed pieces and thus not to distort the inscribed text. In the beginning of the eighth century AD, the type of glass made and used was less rigid and the presence of good pieces became scarce (Ibid: 65).

It is noteworthy that a few Egyptian glass weights were dated, but the date of some of them became known due to the name of the ruler that was inscribed on them. The presence of the caliph in Damascus

during the Umayyad period and in Baghdad during the Abbasid period was the reason for the lack of names of governors on the glass weights. Their names were rarely recorded on the seals or weights of trade, although the caliph was responsible for appointing such governors and finance directors who were always from outside Egypt and whose names appeared on these weights (Miles and Mason, 1948: 4-5; Fahmi, 1957: 27).

In the Umayyad period, governors or finance directors were not left in office for more than a year or two to be replaced by other staff, by an order of the Caliph. In some cases, the authority of the finance director exceeds the authority of the governor. One of the finance directors, who was called 'Ubayd Allāh b. al-Ḥabḥāb, took over Egypt for about 14 years, 721-734 AD/102-116 H. During this period, five rulers ruled Egypt and al-Ḥabḥāb played a major role in isolating some of them and appointing others. (Fahmi, 1957: 8) The issuance of the glass weights and the Umayyad scales and stamping them with the official seal constituted a constant source of income for the Umayyad state (Rebstock, 1989: 229-232; Balog, 1976: 294).

Whenever a new official arrives, new weights and scales were issued with his name and the state charges for distributing them. In this case, the previous old glass weights had to be turned to the authorities and destroyed, or simply thrown by traders and getting new weights from the office of weights and measures (dar al-'iyar). Indeed, this is evident from the remaining fragments of these weights, which were obviously deliberately destroyed. This is why there are few models in good condition in the museum collections (Balog, 1980: 55-56).

### **Umayyad Tax Policy Pursued in Egypt:**

The historical sources that related to the Islamic rule of Egypt during the first fifty years confirmed that the Muslims' policy towards the Copts was characterized by tolerance and peaceful coexistence. This policy has changed with the rise of the Marwanid branch of the Umayyad dynasty, with the assumption of power by Marwān ibn 'Abd al-Malik in the year 684 AD / 65 AH (Marsham, 2009: 134- 136).

The Umayyads were excelled in the trade sector, in the pre-Islamic period and at the beginning of the Islamic period in the Arabian Peninsula. In addition, they were in charge of managing and managing many trade caravans for the Quraysh tribe from Mecca to the Levant and Yemen , especially the seasonal trade caravans during the winter and summer seasons . This commercial activity resulted in the formation of close relations with all Arab tribes, especially the Christian Arab tribes in the Levant, and these relations were greatly strengthened during the reign of Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, and

these relations later helped the Umayyads to consolidate their system of rule in the Levant and their decision by choosing the city of Damascus as the capital of their state (Serjeant, 1990: 472-474; Mackintosh-Smith, 2019: 224-225).

As a result of the shift of power within the ruling Umayyad dynasty, which was represented by Caliph Marwān ibn 'Abd al-Malik assuming the reins of power, an unfair poll-tax policy was adopted by the Caliph. This policy stipulated that every non-Muslim man must pay one golden dinar at the end of the year to the Umayyad authority. A census was also conducted for non-Muslims residing in the land of Islam, and the movement of Coptic monks was restricted. The property of the Coptic Church in Egypt was also confiscated, and other fees were imposed on the properties belonging to non-Muslims residing in the territories under the rule of the Umayyads (Athamina, 1997: 103; Lane-Poole, 2008: 19-20).

The Umayyad tax policy has reached a great extent of injustice and prejudice against the Coptic Church and its parishioners in Egypt, especially during the reign of the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd ibn 'Abd al-Malik (705-715 AD). According to this unfair tax policy; every monk was forced to wear a metal bracelet on his hand, including the name of the monk and the monastery he belongs to, and the date on which the tax is due. The penalty for the monk not wearing this bracelet was up to the amputation of the hand. The Copts were forced - out of fear - to carry the tax receipts with them in case they were arrested by the ruling Umayyad authority in Egypt. Usama ibn Zaid al-Tanūkhī was assigned to follow up on the implementation of this harsh tax policy (Lepidus, 1972: 256-257; Rebstock, 1989: 230-233; Athamina, 1997: 101-105).

Al-Maqrīzī mentioned in his book "al-Khitat", (1987) that the period of Usama ibn Zaid al-Tanūkhī's rule over Egypt between the years 722-723 AD witnessed great injustice and a frantic pursuit of the movement of Coptic Christians. The Copts were dealt with harshly to the extent that if the Coptic traveler did not have papers proving that he had paid imposed tax, the employee of the tax authority fines him an additional 10 golden dinars (Al-Maqrīzī, 1987: 230-231).

In his chronicle - which covers Egyptian history from the Arab conquest (seventh century) to 1469- the Muslim well-known historian Ibn Taghrībirdī, (d. 1470) mentioned that Usama ibn Zaid carried on a peculiarly oppressive tax policy in Egypt, acting on the caliph's instructions to do so, "milk till the udder be dry, and let blood to the last drop ." (Lane-Poole, 2008: 686-689; Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992: 91). This taxation policy was very rough and reflected the way that the Umayyad caliph Sulaymān ibn 'Abd al-Malik enforced taxation system on Egypt's people.

However, those normal ordinary taxes were not excessive since a non-Muslim used to pay one golden dinar on an annual basis as a poll-tax, and pay the same amount (one golden dinar) for each cultivated acre (Feddān). Nevertheless, the tax collector was not satisfied with the taxes imposed by law, and rather was extorting people with more taxes and fees that were imposed on merchants and markets. This taxation policy led to inflation of the revenues of the Umayyad state from the tax (Morton, 1991; Lane-Poole, 2008: 686).

There is no doubt that the Coptic Egyptians were persecuted by the ruling Umayyad authority just because they were not Arabs. They were treated unfairly and exploited with various taxes; In fact, the Umayyads dealt with Egypt on the basis that it is a land full of wealth, milk and honey, and they confiscated many land properties for the benefit of the Umayyad state and applied a completely unfair tax system against Egypt and its people, not just the Copts (Ibid: 686, 688; Ibn Taghribirdī, 1992: 91-94).

Even the Copts who converted to Islam were not exempted from paying a lot of exorbitant taxes. Except during the short months of the rule of the Umayyad caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, who stopped the unfair tax system through a decree he issued for this purpose, which prompted the ruler of Egypt, Ḥayyān ibn Shurayḥ, to warn the caliph of the consequences of such a decision and that it would reduce the revenues of the tax collection that would be sent to the headquarters Caliphate in Damascus. Caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz reaction to this warning was strict. The caliph sent a letter of rebuke to Ḥayyān, emphasizing that God Almighty "sent His Messenger Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, as a prophet and did not send him to people as a tax collector" (Lapidus, 1972: 262; Athamina, 1997: 103-106, 10).

The Umayyad rule of the conquered territories was characterized by an arrogant policy in dealing with non-Arabs, and they were dealt with unfairly. To justify this policy, the Umayyads invented the term "people of the Dhimma or Dhimmīs," which they called the non-Arab and non-Muslim population who embrace religions other than Islam. The caliphs and the common people used this word to describe non-Arabs and non-Muslims. This term is still used in many Arab Islamic countries until the present time. In complete contrast to the behavior of the Umayyads with the non-Arab population and the way in which they governed them, the Abbasids behaved with respect and fairness with the non-Arab population, treating them as equals and accommodating their presence within the territories they ruled (Yarbrough, 2012: 12-14; Salamey et al. 2017: 21-24; Sirry, 2011: 187-190).

This policy and the inferior view adopted by the Umayyads towards Christians of non-Arab origin (such as the Copts) violated the

values of equality among all people regardless of their origins and religions, which were mentioned in the Holy Qur'ān (Qur'ān 49:13) because Islam and its teachings urged Muslims to respect Non-Muslims, especially Jews and Christians .

In order for the Umayyads to reinforce their unfair policy towards non-Arabs, they used many of Prophet Muḥammads traditions (Ḥadīths) and its religious interpretations although these types of Ḥadīth was characterized to be weak and inaccurate. Some Muslim jurists and imams adopted the Umayyad point of view. Moreover, the texts of the Holy Qur'ān and the Qur'ānic discourse that was urging Muslims to treat the People of the Book (both Jews and Christians) kindly were ignored; as well as conducting dialogue with them on the basis of respect and religious tolerance (Qur'ān 16: 125) . One of the facts that some unjust imams neglect in the Umayyad period is that God Almighty commanded the Messenger Muḥammad to return to the People of the Book (Christians mainly) if he had doubts about some matters (Qur'ān 10:94) .

It is worth noting, that God described the Christians as the closest religiously to the Muslims who believed in the Qur'ān. God also described Christians as being distinguished by faith, piety, and kindness. It is important to respect Christian monks and treat them humanely (Qur'ān 5:82) . The Holy Qur'ān as well, clearly clarified that Muslims should eat the food of Christians, Jews and vice versa, and the Qur'ān allowed the marriage of a Muslim man to a Christian or Jewish woman, and respect her religious beliefs (Qur'ān 5:5) .

Many of the great values of the Qur'ān have disappeared due to the insistence of the Umayyads in particular, the Marwani branch of the Umayyad dynasty, to use the term dhimmi. This insistence was reflected in the policy the Umayyads followed in dealing with non-Arab Christians, as well as the case with non-Arab Jews. This policy was characterized by cruelty, persecution, and discrimination in dealing with the non-Arab population.

## **Conclusion:**

The idea of writing about this glass weight, reading and analyzing the writing that appeared on it, led the researcher to come up with several points, including the most important, how such a small object could tell us about a part of the economic history of Umayyad Egypt. In addition, to identify the mechanisms used at those times to monitor the weights and prices in the markets. The tax system that prevailed in Egypt in the Umayyad era and how finance directors of Egypt - including Usama - and the tax collectors treated and dealt with the people of Egypt and the Copts in particular, where this tax system was unfair to them, especially since the policy of the Umayyads towards



the Copts characterized the cruelty; despite the fact that the Umayyads practiced trade as a profession in the pre-Islamic period and in the beginnings of Islam as well, and they supervised and managed the trade caravan trips of Quraysh tribe during the winter and summer seasons. It must be noted that this type of travel and the intention of trade helped them to strengthen their relations with the Christian Arabs residing in the Levant. Perhaps this reason is logical enough to explain the tolerant relationship with Arab Christians as their equals, while they dealt with Coptic Christians of Egypt with some harshness, since they are not Arabs.

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