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Coin circulation in the Byzantine and Umayyad Marea/North Hawwariya: studies in the monetary economy of Mareotis region in the hinterland of Alexandria

Marea/North Hawwariya is an archaeological site approximately 40 km west of Alexandria, on the southern shore of Lake Mareotis, in a region bearing the same name. 'Golden Age' of Marea falls on the Byzantine period, which is related to the development of a famous Christian pilgrimage centre in neighboring Abu Mena. Probably in the 6th century it was built in Marea, which was a convenient transfer point for the stream of travellers between Alexandria and Abu Mena, an impressive urban layout, with a perfectly designed sewage system and water supply, as well as accommodation and service infrastructure for pilgrims, and a church. The latter was soon rebuilt into a monumental basilica, which at that time was the second largest Christian temple in Egypt. Even today, although in ruins, it remains the dominant feature of Marea's cultural landscape. After Alexandria was handed over to Arab rule just before the mid-7th century, the city operated for the next hundred years under the new rulers of Egypt, the Umayyad dynasty, and was abandoned under unclear circumstances.

Since 2000, comprehensive archaeological research at key sites for understanding the history of Marea/North Hawwaria has been carried out continuously by the University of Warsaw, in cooperation with the Archaeological Museum in Krakow. The excavations covered, among others, the aforementioned basilica, baths and other selected fragments of urban buildings. During the exploration, a huge amount of coins, mainly bronze, dating from the mid-5th until mid-8th c., was discovered, numbering around 7,400 specimens. This is one of the most numerous sets of coins discovered in Egypt during excavations, and at the same time almost completely unknown. One can find among them both, loose finds (single losses) and collective finds (deposits and abandoned remains of pouches, once filled with small coins). When it comes to the latter, a special place between them, due to their large number, seems to be played by unofficial imitations cast in clay forms, in which original coins were earlier imprinted. Until now, they have been ignored often enough in the publications of coins discovered during excavations in Egypt. Meanwhile, it seems that these small coins are the key to understanding the monetary economy in the Byzantine and Umayyad Marea, but also – in a broader perspective – the entire region of Mareotis, and most likely also Alexandria itself and Egypt.

The first, complete study of all the monetary finds from Marea, planned as part of this project, will allow for the creation of a credible, because well-grounded in archaeological reality, picture of the basic functions that officially (and unofficially) coins had in the economy of a large Byzantine city and later also the Umayyad, located in the hinterland of Alexandria. The research results will be published in a book containing a series of numismatic studies and providing a catalogue of all coin found in Marea. It is to be hoped that the published results of research on the monetary circulation in the large city of Mareotis will be an important point of reference for many years to come for all researchers who study the history of the Egyptian money economy at the end of antiquity.