



## Abbasid Gold Coins at the Bangladesh National Museum: A Numismatic and Historical Analysis

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### Abstract

This article examines the numismatic and historical significance of eight unpublished Abbasid gold coins housed in the Bangladesh National Museum, focusing on their identification, inscriptional analysis, and historical relevance within the context of early Arab-Bengal trade relations. Discovered in 1996 and 2002 in the Chandpur and Brahmanbaria districts, adjacent to the historically significant archaeological site of Samatata, these coins have received little scholarly attention beyond basic acquisition records. The study employs a historical-numismatic approach, integrating primary sources such as the coins themselves and museum records with relevant secondary literature. It uncovers key numismatic details, including issuing authorities, minting origins, physical characteristics, and inscriptions affirming Islamic monotheism and venerating the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Through analysis of these inscriptions, the study highlights notable features of Abbasid gold coinage and offers insights into the religious and political dynamics of the period. These coins serve as important material evidence within the broader historical context of early Arab interactions with ancient Bengal, particularly in the sphere of maritime commerce. References in Arab-Persian geographical texts further suggest Bengal's prominence as a commercial hub integrated into early Islamic trade networks. The discovery of these coins substantiates such accounts, illustrating the extent of Arab-Bengal trade relations from the eighth to the tenth centuries. Ultimately, the research situates these coins not merely as monetary instruments, but as artefacts of transregional connectivity and ideological dissemination during the early Islamic period.

Keywords: Bangladesh National Museum; Abbasid Coin; Bengal; Samandar; Early Arab-Bengal Trade.

## 1. Introduction

The Bangladesh National Museum stands as one of the foremost institutions in South Asia dedicated to the collection, preservation, and study of historically significant coins.<sup>1</sup> As of June 30, 2024, the museum's collection included 57,992 coins, made from gold, silver, copper, and other metals, within a broader collection of 93,901 artifacts.<sup>2</sup> Among these, Muslim coins are particularly prominent, offering important insights into the historical, cultural, and political landscape of the regions they represent. These coins not only functioned as currency but also symbolized the power and legitimacy of Muslim rulers. In the 690s, the Umayyad dynasty (661-750) introduced the first purely Islamic coinage system, issuing *dirham* (silver coin), *dinar* (gold coin), and *fals* (copper coin), marking a departure from pre-Islamic traditions and setting a new standard for Islamic monetary systems.<sup>3</sup> The Abbasid dynasty (750-1258) adopted similar coinage system, modifying the inscriptions on the Umayyad coins and introducing new ones. Particularly noteworthy are their gold dinars, which played a significant role in the vast trade network of the Abbasid Caliphate.<sup>4</sup>

Among the museum's collection are eight previously unpublished Abbasid gold coins, which are of particular importance for understanding the early connections between Arab and Bengal,<sup>5</sup> especially in the context of trade. These coins, discovered in 1996 and 2002 in the Chandpur and Brahmanbaria districts near the historically significant archaeological site of Samatata<sup>6</sup>, are unique within Bangladesh, as no other region in the country has found a comparable collection of Abbasid gold coins. Despite their historical value, little is known about these coins beyond basic details of their discovery and acquisition. Their inscriptions, written in Kufic script,<sup>7</sup> provide valuable information, yet details such as their issuing authorities, minting locations, issuing years, and other physical characteristics remain largely unidentified and unexplored. Preliminary analysis suggests that many of these inscriptions prominently feature Quranic verses, underscoring the religious and political significance of the coins.

Coins serve as invaluable archaeological artifacts that provide a window into the past, offering insights that written records cannot.<sup>8</sup> The Abbasid gold coins found in Bengal are particularly

<sup>1</sup> F. Fairouz et al., "Role of Bangladesh National Museum in Preservation of History, Culture and Heritage of Bangladesh," *Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Legal Studies* 5, no. 6 (2023): 277-290, <https://doi.org/10.34104/ajssls.023.02770290>.

<sup>2</sup> Bangladesh National Museum (BNM), *Annual Report of the Bangladesh National Museum for the Fiscal Year 2023-2024*, 2024, retrieved from [https://bangladeshmuseum.gov.bd/site/annual\\_reports/304c7a75-2463-4cb1-a268-2e31dd14c400/Annual-Report](https://bangladeshmuseum.gov.bd/site/annual_reports/304c7a75-2463-4cb1-a268-2e31dd14c400/Annual-Report), pp. 04-53.

<sup>3</sup> G. W. Heck, *First Century Islamic Currency: Mastering the Message from the Money: (Issues of Historiography: An Alternate Hypothesis)*, in *Money, Power, and Politics in Early Islamic Syria*, 97-124 (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> M. L. Bates, "Islamic Numismatics," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 13, no. 1 (1979): 3-21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026318400006908>

<sup>5</sup> Bengal refers to the area situated roughly within 27° and 21° latitudes and 92.5° and 87° longitudes. It encompassed the current territories of independent Bangladesh and West Bengal, as well as parts of Orissa and Bihar in India, and indeed, once it represented a group of four principal sub-regions: Pundravardhana, Vanga, Samatata-Harikela and Radha. In historical sense, Bengal has been used here to denote the territories comprising the present Bangladesh and the Indian state West Bengal (Paschim Vanga).

<sup>6</sup> "Samatata was a well-demarcated ancient sub-region of South-East Bengal. It was formed of the trans-Meghna territories of the Cumilla-Noakhali plains jointly with the bordering hilly region of Tripura in the east, while the Bay of Bengal flanks its southern boundary. It must have been somewhere in the vicinity of the archaeological remains of Mainamati-Lalmai area", S. Islam, *New Light on the History of Ancient South-East Bengal* (ASB, 2014), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Kufic script is an early and distinctive style of Arabic calligraphy that originated in the city of Kufa, Iraq, during the 7th century. Characterized by its angular, geometric, and linear form, Kufic script was the predominant script used in early Islamic manuscripts and inscriptions.

<sup>8</sup> A. Sharma, "Importance of Coins in Tracing Economic History," *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research* 4, no. 3 (2015): 16-22.

valuable, as they feature commercial symbols that represent as crucial evidence of early Arab trade interactions with ancient Bengal. Bengal's rich resources and favorable climate historically made it an attractive destination for foreign traders.<sup>9</sup> The Arabs were professional and experienced merchants since ancient times at the very least. Despite their early conquests in Sindh and Multan during the early eighth century, their influence did not reach deep into the heart of the Indian subcontinent, not to speak of her eastern regions like Bengal.<sup>10</sup> However, indirect references in the historical texts from Arab-Persian geographers regarding early Arab-Bengal trading contact suggest that Bengal was well-linked with early Arabs through sea trade routes a very long time before the conquest of Lakhnawti by Bakhtiar Khalji in 1204 CE. During the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, from the eighth to the twelfth century, international trade both in the East and the West flourished under the dominance of these caliphates.<sup>11</sup> The Abbasid Caliphate, in particular, fostered a vast global trade network that extended across continents. The port of Chittagong played a crucial role in this trade, making the southeastern regions of Bengal, especially east of the Meghna River, an important commercial hub.<sup>12</sup> Based on indirect references by geographers, it is inferred that Arab maritime traders and travelers established initial contact with Bengal for trade and commerce purposes during the eighth century.<sup>13</sup> Although these historical accounts do not specify exact dates or years, their nuanced references suggest several factors that are speculated to have initiated Arab-Bengal trading interactions in that period. The discovery of Abbasid gold coins from the eighth to tenth centuries in Bengal, particularly from the *Samatata* region, provides solid archaeological evidence supporting these historical claims of Arab presence and trade in Bengal during this period.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive numismatic analysis of eight unpublished Abbasid gold coins discovered in Bengal, with particular attention to the meticulous identification of their issuing authorities, minting locations, inscriptions, measurements, and other distinguishing features. In addition, it seeks to interpret the inscriptions on these coins, highlighting the notable characteristics of Abbasid gold coinage. Beyond the scope of numismatics, the article explores the historical significance of these coins within the broader framework of early Arab-Bengal trade, drawing on literary accounts by Arab-Persian geographers and other scholars to enhance our understanding of the commercial exchanges that linked the Abbasid Caliphate with ancient Bengal.

## 2. Method

This study adopts a historical approach to numismatics, integrating both primary and secondary sources to explore the numismatic and historical significance of the Abbasid gold coins housed at the Bangladesh National Museum. The primary sources consist of the Abbasid gold coins themselves, along with the museum's registers and accession records. The research began with a comprehensive inventory process, during which eight previously unpublished Abbasid gold coins were identified in the museum's coin cabinet. Each coin was then subjected to a detailed examination

<sup>9</sup> A. K. M. Yaqub Ali, "Arabic and Persian Studies under Bengal: An Appraisal," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Hum.)* 52, no. 1 (2007): 1, <https://www.bmri.org.uk/articles/Arabic-Persian-Studies-Sultanate.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> A. Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal*, 3rd ed. (Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitya Prakash, 2014), 17.

<sup>11</sup> M. A. Kaba, A. Bamba, and A. M. Kromah, "Coinage and Ancient Commercial Transactions Methods in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Reading in the Islamic Influences," *Journal of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkla University* 13, no. 2 (2022): 158–187, <https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/JOIS/article/view/264703>.

<sup>12</sup> S. H. Jahan, *Maritime Ports in Bengal 6th Century BCE-16th Century CE*, 124–145 (Dhaka: Centre for Heritage Studies in association with Tagon Publication, 2021), ISBN 978-984-95643-8-6.

<sup>13</sup> S. Islam, ed., *Banglapedia (English Version)* (Dhaka: The Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003), 240.

in the museum's laboratory using advanced non-destructive analytical techniques, such as X-ray fluorescence (XRF) and scanning electron microscopy (SEM), to precisely measure their dimensions and metal composition. This technical analysis provided essential data regarding the coins' physical characteristics, which were instrumental in establishing their typological and chronological classifications. To investigate the provenance and historical context of the coins, detailed information regarding their discovery and accession was retrieved from the museum's inventory register. The Arabic inscriptions on the coins were carefully transliterated into Latin script according to the Library of Congress (LC) standard transliteration system, and subsequently translated into English. These inscriptions revealed significant details regarding mint names, issuing authorities, dates of issue, and embedded theological or political messages. The numismatic data was then cross-referenced with literary texts from historical geographers, Islamic historians, and other secondary scholarly sources, including books, journals, catalogues, and reputable websites, to place the coins within a broader historical narrative. This comparative analysis not only corroborated the findings but also enhanced the understanding of the coins' historical and cultural significance, particularly in relation to Arab-Bengal trade interactions during the Abbasid period. The integration of these diverse sources provided a holistic perspective on the coins' roles in both numismatic history and the socio-political landscape of the time.

### **3. Numismatic Analysis of Abbasid Gold Coins Discovered in Bengal**

This study centers on the Abbasid gold coins housed in the Bangladesh National Museum's collection. Before delving into the numismatic analysis, it is important to provide an overview of the history behind the discovery of these coins. This contextual foundation is crucial for a thorough understanding of the research and its broader implications.

#### ***3.1 Discovery History of the Coins***

As of June 30, 2022, the Bangladesh National Museum held a collection of 747 gold coins among its total of 57,952 coins.<sup>14</sup> During the cataloging process of these gold coins in 2023, we found eight previously unpublished Abbasid gold coins preserved in the museum's cabinet. These coins were collected from the Chandpur and Brahmanbaria districts, near the historic Samatata archaeological site, in 1996 and 2002. According to the museum's inventory records, a hoard of twelve early Arab gold coins was discovered in 1996 by a local farmer while excavating land at Warukbazar in the Hajiganj area of Chandpur. These coins were first collected by a local goldsmith named Md. Fazar Ali and were later purchased from him by a local coin collector, Md. Oli Miah of Chandpur, who subsequently sold them to the Bangladesh National Museum in 1996. The collector reported that the hoard originally contained over twenty coins, some of which were fragmented during excavation and later melted by Fazar Ali. Additionally, a few gold coins were sold to private collectors. Of the twelve coins, seven have been identified as Abbasid. In 2002, the museum collected two more early Arab gold coins from the Brahmanbaria District. The collector of these two coins, who later sold them to the Bangladesh National Museum, mentioned that he had collected them from a jewelry shop in Brahmanbaria. The shop proprietor informed the collector that these coins had been discovered by a farmer during excavation in an elevated area of the district in 2002. One of these two coins has been

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<sup>14</sup> Bangladesh National Museum (BNM), *Coin Verification Report Submitted by the Department of History and Classical Art of the Bangladesh National Museum* (2023).

identified as Abbasid. All eight coins—seven from Chandpur and one from Brahmanbaria—are in excellent condition of preservation.

### 3.2 Identifications and Descriptions of the Coins

The eight Abbasid gold coins discovered in Bengal are circular in shape and adorned with inscriptions in early Arabic script, crafted in the classic Kufic style. In contrast to contemporary Arabic writing, these inscriptions lack dots and diacritical marks such as *jabara*, *jera*, and *pesha*. This deliberate omission was a common feature in the scripts used during both the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. The following is detailed identification and description of the coins mentioned below:

**01.** The obverse of the first coin features the following inscription within the inner circle: لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له (*Lā ilāha illāllāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu*), and around the inner circle: محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله (*Muḥammad rasūl allāh arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuḏhirahu ‘alāddīni kullīhi*). On the reverse, the inner circle contains the inscription: محمد رسول الله (*Muhammad rasūl allāh*), with the surrounding text: بسم الله ضرب هذا الدين سنة ثلث و ثلثين و مئة (*Bismillāhi ḍuriba hadhā ddīnar sanah thalatha wa thalathīna wa miah*).



**Figure 1:** Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)

**Ruler:** Not mentioned, **Mint:** Not mentioned, **Date:** 133 AH (750 CE)  
**Diameter:** 20.16 mm, **Weight:** 4.11 gm, **Provenance:** Chandpur  
**Accession No.** 01.01.003.1996.00070

**02.** The obverse of this coin contains the following inscription within the inner circle: لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له عبيد الله بن السرى (*Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu Ubādullāh bin al-Sarī*), and around the inner circle: محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله (*Muhammad rasūl allāh arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuḏhirahu ‘alāddīni kullīhi*). On the reverse, the inner circle contains the inscription: الخليفة محمد رسول الله المامون (*Al khalīfah muhammad rasūl allāh al-Māmūn*), with the surrounding text: بسم الله ضرب هذا الدين بمصر سنة عشر ومنتين (*Bismillāhi ḍuriba hadhā ddīnar bimīṣr sanah ‘ashara wa miatán*).



**Figure 2:** Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)

**Ruler:** Caliph Al-Mamun (813-833), **Mint:** Egypt, **Date:** 210 AH (827 CE),  
**Diameter:** 17.00 mm, **Weight:** 4.19 gm, **Provenance:** Chandpur  
**Accession No.** 01.01.003.1996.00071

03. The obverse of this coin contains the following inscription within the inner circle: لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له (*Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu*), and around the inner circle: محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله (*Muhammad rasūl allāh arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuẓhirahu ‘alāddīni kullihi*). On the reverse, the inner circle contains the inscription: محمد رسول الله عمر (*Muhammad rasūl allāh Umar*), with the surrounding text: بسم الله ضرب هذا الدين سنة ثلاثة وسبعين ومئة (*Bismillāhi ḍuriba hadhā ddīnar sanah thalatha wa sab‘īna wa mīah*).



**Figure 3:** Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)

**Ruler:** Not mentioned, **Mint:** Not mentioned, **Date:** 173 AH (789 CE)

**Diameter:** 18.16 mm, **Weight:** 4.23 gm, **Provenance:** Chandpur

**Accession No.** 01.01.003.1996.00076

04. The obverse of this coin bears the inscription within the inner circle: لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له (*Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu*). The text surrounding the inner circle is not legible due to damage. On the reverse, the inner circle contains the inscription: محمد رسول الله (*Muhammad rasūl allāh*), while the surrounding text is also unreadable due to damage.



**Figure 4:** Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)

**Ruler:** Unidentified, **Mint:** Unidentified, **Date:** Unidentified

**Diameter:** 19.46 mm, **Weight:** 3.87 gm, **Provenance:** Chandpur

**Accession No.** 01.01.003.1996.00125

05. The obverse of this coin contains the following inscription within the inner circle: لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له جعفر (*Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu ja‘far*), around the inner circle: بسم الله ضرب هذا الدين بمدينة السلام سنة ثمان وخمسين ومائتين (*Bismillāhi ḍuriba hadhā ddīnar bimadīnat as-salām sanah thamāni wa khamsīna wa mīatān*) and in the margin: لله الامر من قبل ومن بعد و يومئذ يفرح المؤمنون بنصر الله (*Lillāhi alamru min qabli wamin ba‘di wa yawma‘izin yafrahul mu‘minūna binasrillāh*). On the reverse, the inner circle contains the inscription: محمد رسول الله المعتمد على الله (*Lillāhi muhammad rasūl allāhi al-Mu‘tamid alāllāh*), with the surrounding text: محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله ولو كره المشركون (*Muhammad rasūl allāh arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuẓhirahu ‘alāddīni kullihi walaw karihal mushrikūn*).



**Figure 5: Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)**  
**Ruler:** Caliph Al-Mutamid (870-892), **Mint:** Madinat-as-Salam (Baghdad),  
**Date:** 258 AH (871 CE), **Diameter:** 21.22 mm, **Weight:** 4.24 gm,  
**Provenance:** Chandpur, **Accession No.** 01.01.003.1996.00128

**06.** The obverse of this coin contains the following inscription within the inner circle: لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له ابو عبد الله (*Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu abū abdullāh*), around the inner circle: بسم الله ضرب هذا الدينار بمصر سنة ثمان وثلثين ومانتين (*Bismillāhi ḍuriba hadhā ddīnar bimiṣr sanah thamāna wa thalathīna wa mīatān*) and in the margin: لله الامر من قبل ومن بعد و يومئذ يفرح المؤمنون بنصر الله (*Lillāhi alamru min qabli wamin ba'di wa yawma'izin yafraḥul mu'minūna binaṣrillāh*). On the reverse, the inner circle contains the inscription: لله محمد رسول الله المتوكل على الله (*Lillāhi muhammad rasūl allāh almutawakkil alāllāh*), with the surrounding text: محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله ولو كره المشركون (*Muhammad rasūl allāh arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuḏhirahu 'alāddīni kullīhi walaw karihal mushrikūn*).



**Figure 6: Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)**  
**Ruler:** Caliph Al-Mutawakkil (847-861), **Mint:** Egypt, **Date:** 238 AH (852 CE)  
**Diameter:** 20.95 mm, **Weight:** 3.98 gm, **Provenance:** Chandpur  
**Accession No.** 01.01.003.1996.00127

**07.** The obverse of this coin contains the following inscription within the inner circle: لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له (*Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu*), and around the inner circle: محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله (*Muhammad rasūl allāhi arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuḏhirahu 'alāddīni kullīhi*). On the reverse, the inner circle contains the inscription: محمد رسول الله (*Muhammad rasūl allāh*), with the surrounding text: بسم الله ضرب هذا الدينار سنة ثمان وستين ومئة (*Bismillāhi ḍuriba hadhā ddīnar sanah thamāna wa sittīna wa mīah*).



**Figure 7: Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)**  
**Ruler:** Not mentioned, **Mint:** Not mentioned, **Date:** 168 AH (784 CE)  
**Diameter:** 18.29 mm, **Weight:** 4.15 gm, **Provenance:** Chandpur  
**Accession No.** 01.01.003.1996.00126

**08.** The obverse of this coin contains the following inscription within the inner circle: لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له (*Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu*), around the inner circle: بسم الله ضرب هذا الدينير بفلسطين سنة ثلاثة وتسعين ومائتين (*Bismillāhi ḍuriba hadhā ddīnar bifilistīn sanah thalathah wa tis'īna wa miatān*) and in the margin: لله الامر من قبل ومن بعد ويومئذ يفرح المؤمنون بنصر الله (*Lillāhi alamru min qabli wamin ba'di wa yawma'izin yafraḥul mu'minūna binaṣrillāh*). On the reverse, the inner circle contains the inscription: لله محمد رسول الله المكتفى بالله (*Lillāhi muhammad rasūl allāh almuktafi billāh*), with the surrounding text: محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره (*Muhammad rasūl allāhi arsalahu bilhudā wa dīnil haqqi li-yuzhirahu 'alāddīni kullīhi walaw karihal mushrikūn*).



**Figure 8:** Obverse (left) and Reverse (right)

**Ruler:** Caliph Al-Muqtafi Billah (902-908 CE), **Mint:** Palestine, **Date:** 293 AH (906 CE)  
**Diameter:** 22.76 mm, **Weight:** 4.25 gm, **Provenance:** Brahmanbaria  
**Accession No.** 01.01.003.2002.00274

The collection of the eight Abbasid gold coins described herein represents the largest hoard of such coins ever discovered in Bengal. No comparable collection of these coins has been found in any other region of Bangladesh. Each coin is verified as genuine based on its dimensions and metal composition, leaving no room for doubt regarding their authenticity. These coins bear the names of caliphs or rulers, the years and places of issuance, declarations of monotheism, and some laudatory text in honor of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). It is noteworthy that the recitation of the caliph's name during the Friday congregational prayer's sermon and the issuance of coins were considered significant symbols of the caliph's recognition and two prerogatives of sovereignty in the Islamic administrative system.<sup>15</sup> Mentioning the ruler's name in sermons and coins meant accepting the sovereignty and suzerainty of that ruler, and it was considered the principal criterion of sovereignty for an Islamic ruler.<sup>16</sup> As part of his policy to unify the various regions under Islamic rule, Umayyad caliph Abdul Malik ibn Marwan (685-705) introduced the first Umayyad *dinar* (gold coin) at a time of discord between the Umayyad and the Byzantines over the merits of Islam and Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Following the introduction of purely Arabic gold coin, the *dinar*, in 77 AH/696 CE, he subsequently introduced the *dirham* (silver coin) in 79 AH/698 CE, and the *fals* (copper coin) in 81 AH/700 CE.<sup>18</sup> Subsequent Umayyad rulers, in conjunction with the Abbasids, followed Abdul Malik by adopting a similar coinage system comprising three types of coins primarily utilized for transactions. During both the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, the minting and circulating of the *dinar* became a

<sup>15</sup> A. D. Lokmanoglu, "Coin as Imagined Sovereignty: A Rhetorical Analysis of Coins as a Transhistorical Artifact and an Ideograph in Islamic State's Communication," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44, no. 1 (2020): 52–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1793458>.

<sup>16</sup> F. Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, trans. M. J. Lakeland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 71–73.

<sup>17</sup> W. Ali, *Islamic Coins During the Umayyad, Abbasid, Andalusian, and Fatimid Dynasties* (Manchester, UK, 2004), 2, PDF file, retrieved from <https://www.muslimheritage.com/uploads/Islamic%20Coins.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> M. Mitchiner, *The World of Islam: Oriental Coins and Their Values* (London: Hawkins & Publications, 1977), 59.

standardized practice.<sup>19</sup> The Umayyad *dinar* was directly derived from the Byzantine *solidus* (gold coin) and continued to be used under the name *dinar* throughout both the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. These *dinars* typically weighed around 4.25 grams, similar to the weight of the Byzantine *solidus*.<sup>20</sup> This standard weight for the *dinar* remained largely unchanged throughout the Umayyad and Abbasid eras. The weight of the Abbasid gold coins discussed in this paper aligns with the aforementioned standard.

### 3.3 Inscriptural Analysis of the Coins

The information gleaned from the inscriptions on the obverse and reverse of the Abbasid gold coins encompasses declarations of monotheistic Islamic belief, laudatory statements directed at the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), the years of issuance, the names of the mints, and the names of the rulers who ordered their minting. The inscription declaring the oneness of the Almighty, “*Lā ilāha illallāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu*” (There is no deity but Allah alone; He has no partner), first appeared on Umayyad coins and was subsequently adopted by the Abbasids. This proclamation is present on all the coins mentioned in this paper. The exaltation of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) by Allah is expressed in the inscription “*Muhammad rasūl allāh*” (Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah), which appears on the reverse of all Abbasid coins. The Abbasids innovated by inscribing this text in three rows on the obverse of their coins, replacing the verse of Surah Ikhlas that was used on Umayyad coins. Another significant Quranic verse venerating the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is: ‘*Muhammad rasūl allāhi arsalahu bilḥudā wa dīnīl haqqī li-yuḥirahu ‘alāddīni kullīhi walaw karihal mushrikūn*’ - Al Quran, 61:09, (Muhammad is Allah’s messenger, sent with guidance and the true religion to ensure its supremacy over other all religions though those who engage in polytheism dislike it). This verse appeared partially on all Abbasid gold coins prior to 214 AH/829 CE. The Umayyads were the first to inscribe this verse in full on their silver coins and partially on gold coins (up to *alāddīni kullīhi*). The early Abbasids followed the Umayyad and they also inscribed this verse partially on their gold coins. Caliph Al-Mamun (813-833) initiated the complete inscription of this verse (from beginning to *walaw karihal mushrikūn*) on dinars in 214 A.H., and subsequent Abbasid caliphs adopted this practice.<sup>21</sup> The prophecy that inspired Muslims to firmly believe in the command of Allah is ‘*Lillāhi alamru min qabli wamin ba’di wa yawma’izin yafraḥul mu’minūna binaṣrillāh*’ - Al Quran, 30:04, (The ultimate authority to decide the outcome of the affair, both before and after, lies only with Allah, and on that day the believers will experience great joy at the victory willed by Allah). Caliph Al-Mamun was the first to feature this verse on his coins in 207 AH /822 CE, and subsequently, all Abbasid caliphs followed him.<sup>22</sup> It is likely that the Abbasids included this verse on their coins as the victory reverberation of them against the Umayyad. This verse is found on our coins of Caliph Al Mutamid Billah, Caliph Al Mutawakkil, and Caliph Al Muktafi Billah.

Seven of the eight coins exhibit distinct years of issuance. The first coin is dated to 133 A.H. (750), the second coin to 210 A.H. (825), the third coin to 173 A.H. (789), the fifth coin to 258 A.H. (871), the sixth coin to 238 A.H. (852), and the eighth coin to 293 A.H. (906). The year of issuance of

<sup>19</sup> Bates, “Islamic Numismatics,” 3-21.

<sup>20</sup> A. Abdullah, “The Islamic Monetary Standard: The Dinar and Dirham,” *Uluslararası İslam Ekonomisi ve Finansı Araştırmaları Dergisi* 6, no. 1 (2020): 1-29, <https://doi.org/10.25272/ijisef.659330>.

<sup>21</sup> A. K. M. Yaqub Ali, *Muslim Mudra O Hastalikhān Shilpa* (4th ed.) [In Bengali], Dhaka: Book Choice Publication, 2010, 119.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

the fourth coin remains undetermined due to the erosion of its edge inscriptions through abrasion.

Four of the coins explicitly bear the names of four caliphs: Caliph Al-Mamun on the second coin, Caliph Al-Mutamid Billah on the fifth coin, Caliph Al-Mutawakkil on the sixth coin, and Caliph Al-Muktafi Billah on the eighth coin. The remaining four coins do not feature the name of any caliph. However, their years of issue, along with stylistic and contextual analysis, allow for plausible attributions. The year of issuance on the first coin is 133 AH/750 CE, suggesting it was struck during the reign of Caliph Abul Abbas al-Saffah (750–754). The third coin is dated to 173 AH/789 CE, with the name “Umar” inscribed on the lower segment of the reverse. This date corresponds to the period of Caliph Harun al-Rashid (786–809). He issued five distinct types of coins, and the second type featured only the name of a provincial administrator or vizier.<sup>23</sup> It is probable that Umar was a provincial governor under Caliph Harun al-Rashid. The seventh coin, dated 168 AH/784 CE, is attributed to Caliph Al-Mahdi (775–785). The margin and ruler’s name on the fourth coin are obscured, making it impossible to determine its year of issue or the ruler’s identity. This coin appears similar to the third coin, suggesting it was also minted during the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid. Notably, Abbasid gold coins did not bear the names of caliphs before 190 AH/805 CE.<sup>24</sup> Caliph Al-Mahdi introduced the practice of inscribing the caliph’s name on *dirham* in 161 AH/777 CE,<sup>25</sup> while Caliph Harun al-Rashid implemented this practice on *dinar* in 190 AH/805 CE in the history of Muslim coins.<sup>26</sup>

Some coins feature both the names of the caliph and the governor or successor. On the second coin, the inscriptions include the name of Caliph Al-Mamun and Governor Ubaidullah bin Al-Sari. Ubaidullah served as the governor of Egypt from 822 to 826 CE. Another coin, issued under Caliph Al-Mutamid Billah, names his successor as ‘Jafar’. Jafar, the son of Al-Mutamid Billah, was appointed as governor of Egypt and the Maghreb, with the title Al-Mufawwaj (designating a position of authority). However, in 279 AH/892 CE, Al-Mutamid Billah revoked Jafar’s succession and removed his name from the coins. Similarly, the coin of Caliph Al-Mutawakkil features the name Abu Abdullah, his son, who is better known by his regnal title, al-Mu‘tazz Billāh (866–869). It is significant to note that the practice of inscribing the name of a successor (*wali ahad*) on coins was first initiated by Caliph Al-Mansur during the Abbasid period in the history of Muslim coins. Although Al-Mansur himself did not inscribe his own name on the coins, he did feature the name of his son, Al-Mahdi, on *fals* in 151 AH/768 CE<sup>27</sup> and on *dirham* in 153 AH/770 CE.<sup>28</sup>

The word *Lillah* (الله) is inscribed at the top of the reverse side of three of our coins. This inscription was first introduced by Caliph Al-Mamun in 198 AH/813 CE, and it was subsequently adopted by his Abbasid successors.<sup>29</sup> The Abbasids engraved the term *dinar* as دينار (without *alif*) on their coins, as seen on all of our coins, while the Umayyad used دينار (with *alif*). The term *Al-Khalifa* (الخلافة) is inscribed on the coin of Caliph Al-Mamun (coin no. 02), symbolizing the leader’s religious and political authority within the Islamic realm. This word not only reinforced the ruler’s legitimacy but also underscored his connection to the Islamic faith. The presence of this title on coins fostered a sense of unity among Muslims under a singular leadership, thereby strengthening the notion of a cohesive Islamic community. Notably, Caliph Al-Mahdi was the first to inscribe the word ‘*Al-Khalifa*’

<sup>23</sup> Ali, *Muslim Mudra O Hastalikhana Shilpa*, 112.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>25</sup> Mitchiner, *The World of Islam*, 71, see coin no.159.

<sup>26</sup> N. S. M. Al-Naqshabandi, *Al-Dinar al-Islami Fi al-Mithaf al-Iraqi* (Al-Qalqashandi, Baghdad, 1953), 37

<sup>27</sup> Mitchiner, *The World of Islam*, 70, see coin no. 153.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 70, see coin no.148.

<sup>29</sup> Ali, *Muslim Mudra O Hastalikhana Shilpa*, 118.

on the dirham minted at Madinat as-Salam in 161 AH/778 CE,<sup>30</sup> while Caliph Harun al-Rashid was the pioneer in doing so on the dinar.<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, Caliph Al-Amin adopted the term for his coins starting in 195 AH. Following the conflict between Caliph Al-Amin and Al-Mamun in 195 AH/810 CE, relations deteriorated, prompting Al-Mamun to issue dinars from 196 AH/811 CE, in which he presented himself as both Al-Imam and Al-Khalifa.<sup>32</sup> The title 'Al-Khalifa' was subsequently adopted by all succeeding caliphs.

Three mint names are inscribed on four of our coins. The second and sixth coins bear the mint name Egypt (Misr), the fifth coin is marked with Madinat-as-Salam (Baghdad), and the eighth coin features Filistin (Palestine). The first, third, fourth, and seventh coins do not bear any mint name. The first coin, issued by Caliph Abul Abbas al-Saffah, was likely minted in Kufa. The third coin, issued by Caliph Harun al-Rashid, and the seventh coin, issued by Caliph Al-Mahdi, were both probably minted in Madinat-as-Salam (Baghdad). It has been previously mentioned that the Umayyad did not include the caliph's name on their coins and rarely mentioned the mint name on their gold coins. The practice of inscribing the mint name on *dirhams* was initiated by Abul Abbas al-Saffah in 133 AH/750 CE,<sup>33</sup> and on *fals* by Al-Mansur.<sup>34</sup> Caliph Al-Mamun was the first to initiate the practice of inscribing the mint name on *dinars* in 198 AH/813 CE in the history of Muslim coins.<sup>35</sup> This practice was subsequently adopted by all following caliphs.

#### 4. Historical Significance of the Coins in the Context of Early Arab-Bengal Trade Relations

The Arabs were traditionally traders from the very beginning because the Arabian Peninsula lacked sufficient arable land and most of its territory was desert. Throughout ancient times, they were the most widely recognized navigators in the world. Prior to the rise of Islam, the Arab territories had a crucial role as a pivotal connecting point in the trade routes that linked the Eastern and the Western regions through the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. These sea passages encompassing the Arab Sea, the Pacific, and the Indian Ocean were under the absolute dominion of Arab Muslims after the advent of Islam.<sup>36</sup> During the Umayyad, Muslim rulers conquered many kingdoms and their empire was elongated into an enormous area including Europe, Asia, and Africa. Their conquest of Sindh and Multan in 712 CE and 713 CE, greatly contributed to the expansion of Arab maritime trade in the coastal area of South and Southeast Asia. The Abbasids came to power overthrowing the Umayyad in 750 CE, and they reigned for most of the caliphate as caliphs from their capital at Baghdad in modern-day Iraq. The geographical location of Iraq made it a land bridge between Iran, India, Central Asia and China on one side; and the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Egypt and the West on the other.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, under propitious circumstances, the people of Iraq became capable to develop into proficient intermediaries of global business, as they were situated at the confluence

<sup>30</sup> Mitchiner, *The World of Islam*, 71, see coin no. 159

<sup>31</sup> Al-Naqshabandi, *Al-Dinar al-Islami Fi al-Mithaf al-Iraqi*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Ali, *Muslim Mudra O Hastalikhana Shilpa*, 114

<sup>33</sup> Mitchiner, *The World of Islam*, 69, see coin no.135

<sup>34</sup> Ali, *Muslim Mudra O Hastalikhana Shilpa*, 114.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 114

<sup>36</sup> Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (Routledge eBooks, 2013), 285, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203706886>

<sup>37</sup> A. A. Duri, *Tārīkh al-'Irāq al-iqtisādī fi al-qarn al-rābi' al-Hijrī* (Economic History of Iraq in the 4th Century A.H.) (Beirut: 1974), 119.

of the various seas and land trade routes, making it a transit trading hub for neighboring areas.<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that Caliph Harun-or-Rashid was the first Muslim ruler who established an alliance with the Chinese Tang dynasty sending embassies to China.<sup>39</sup> He was called ‘A-lun’ in the Chinese Tang Annals.<sup>40</sup> He also built up an alliance with the King of India. Major new port facilities were built at Basra under his reign, serving as thoroughfares for commercial transportation, while Ubul, a nearby port city of Basra on the Arabian Gulf, functioned as the gateway for maritime trade to India and China. Arabian merchant vessels used to ply all oceans in the east from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, exporting and importing goods to and from various countries.<sup>41</sup> Significant Arab trading settlements were all along the south and the west coastlines of the Indian Subcontinent, as well as in Sri Lanka, throughout both the Umayyad and the Abbasid periods. Therefore, Bengal along India’s coastline probably developed into one of the most significant global commercial hubs, where Arab traders had to stay to conduct trade from West Asia to Southeast Asian nations as well as up to far eastern China. The Abbasid enhanced their trading activities throughout the whole South Asian coastline, including Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia and China. As a result, the coastlines of India and Bengal served as a transit point for commerce between the West and the far east of China.<sup>42</sup> Bengal was a flourishing trade zone at the time that definitely enticed the early Arab traders because of its geostrategic position, congenial climate, and useful products. However, no written records exist regarding early Arab-Bengal trading interactions. Therefore, it is essential to examine the accounts of geographers and the archaeological discoveries in Bengal to gain insights into this relationship.

#### 4.1 Arab-Persian Geographers’ Account about Early Arab-Bengal Trade Contact

Early Arab-Bengal trading contact was first indirectly mentioned in the writings of Arab-Persian geographers. A few indirect references are outlined below:

Sulaiman al Tajir was the first Arab geographer to write on various aspects of Arab trade and trade routes. He wrote a book in 851 CE titled *Silsilat-ut-Tawarikh* and in that book, he discussed a kingdom named Ruhmi, which was engaged in conflicts with Balhara and Jurz. He also noted that commercial transactions went on using cowries, which were the country’s existing currency at the time.<sup>43</sup> Hodivala proposes that the kingdom of Ruhmi might correspond to the kingdom of Dharmapala (770-810), as Sulaiman’s *Jurz* references the Gurjara-Pratihara kings of Kanauj, while *Ballahara* refers to the Rashtrakuta king Ballahraya Roy of the Deccan.<sup>44</sup> King Dharmapala involved in prolonged conflicts with these kingdoms, known collectively as the ‘Tripartite Struggle’ or ‘Kannauj Triangle Wars’. Thus, Dharmapala of the Pala Dynasty was a contemporary of Sulaiman’s *Silsilat-ut-Tawarikh*, suggesting that Ruhmi may well be associated with Dharmapala’s realm, i.e. Bengal.<sup>45</sup> The presence of elephants, fine cotton textiles, rhinoceroses, and the use of cowries for trade all point to Bengal as the region in question. This identification is further supported by the consistent accounts provided

<sup>38</sup> A. D. Arif, *Trade and Commerce during the Islamic Golden Age*, *The Review of Religions*, 2023, <https://www.reviewofreligions.org/41191/trade-and-commerce-during-the-islamic-golden-age/>.

<sup>39</sup> H. A. Giles, *Confucianism and Its Rivals* (London: Forgotten Books, 1926), 139.

<sup>40</sup> M. Broomhall, *Islam in China: A Neglected Problem* (London: Morgan & Scott Ltd, 1910), 25-26.

<sup>41</sup> Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal*, 38.

<sup>42</sup> G. F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (Expanded ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 61-78.

<sup>43</sup> H. M. Elliot and J. Dowson, *History of India as Told by Its Own Historians* (London: Trübner, 1867), 5

<sup>44</sup> S. H. Hodivala, *Studies in Indo-Muslim History* (Bombay, 1939), 4.

<sup>45</sup> Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal*, 40.

by subsequent chroniclers, including Minhaj, Ibn Battuta, Thomas Bauri, and nearly all European travelers, who described Bengal in remarkably similar terms.

Ubaidullah ibn Khurdabih (825-912) once served as the Director-General of the Post and Intelligence Department (Diwan-al-Barid) of the Abbasid caliphate at the province of Jibal in Baghdad and subsequently at Samarra. While in service, he authored *Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik* around 870 CE, a seminal work detailing trade routes and kingdoms. In this book, he first outlined the trade routes utilized by Muslim merchants from Arabia to China.<sup>46</sup> Among his observations on trade routes, locales, commercial connections, distances, and trading practices of Arabs along the Indian Ocean coast, he noted a Bengal port named Samandar. This port was notable for its rice production and the importation of aloe wood, which was transported from Qamrun and other regions via a 15-day journey through sweet water channels.<sup>47</sup>

Another Arab scholar, Al-Idrisi, composed his account in the mid-12th century, synthesizing information from various travelers and sailors for his work, *Nazhatul Mushtak*. In his narrative, he described the port of Samandar as a large, affluent, and commercially flourishing town where good profits to be made. It is a town dependent upon Kanauj. Aloe wood was brought hither from the country of Kamrut in 15 days' distance, by the river of which the waters are sweet. To the north at seven days' distance from Samandar, is the city of Kashmir the inner, celebrated throughout India: which was under the rule of Kanauj. It took four days from Kashmir to Kamrut and about seven days from Kashmir to Kanauj. This was a fine commercial city which gave the name to the King of the country.<sup>48</sup>

A 10<sup>th</sup> century geographic book titled *Hudud al-Alam* ("Boundaries of the World" or "Limits of the World"), was authored in Persian by an anonymous writer from Guzgan (modern northern Afghanistan). The text references 'Bahr Harkand,' alongside Nimyas, Urnshin (Orissa), S.m.nd.r (Samandar), and Andras. It also mentions Qamrun, a kingdom in the eastern part of Hindustan, known for its rhinoceroses and abundant gold mines. This region was renowned for its super quality aloe wood.<sup>49</sup> The Persian term "Bahr" translates to "sea," and Harkand is believed to correspond to the historical region of 'Harikela,' which encompasses Chittagong and its adjacent areas, including the port of Samandar, situated within and around present-day Chattogram.

Geographical references to Kamrut or Qamrun are unequivocally identified with Kamrup (currently part of Assam), renowned for its aloe wood and the sweet water rivers, likely the Meghna and the Brahmaputra. The reference makes it very evident that aloe wood was exported to the Arab world after being transported from Kamrup to Samandar through the inland river network. Ahmed Hasan Dani endeavored to locate Samandar, positing that it was situated somewhere on the Bengal coast, "most likely at the mouth of Maghan" i.e Meghna.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, the port of Samandar's location is inferred to be near the island of Sandhvip. Two prominent historians, Mohar Ali and Abdul Karim, have suggested different identifications: Mohar Ali proposed it as the present-day

<sup>46</sup> S. M. Ahmad, *Arabic Classical Accounts of India and China: Book One - Al-Masalik Wa'l Mamalik and Book Two - Akhbar al-Sin Wa'l-Hind* (Translated with commentaries; Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1989), 22-25.

<sup>47</sup> M. H. Nainar, *Arab Geographers' Knowledge of Southern India* (University of Madras, 1942), 89.

<sup>48</sup> Elliot and Dowson, *History of India*, 93-94.

<sup>49</sup> V. Minorsky, ed. and trans., *Hudud al-Alam* (London, 1937), 87.

<sup>50</sup> A. H. Dani, "Early Muslim Contact with Bengal," in *The Proceedings of the All Pakistan History Conference, 1st Session*, ed. S. Moinul Haq (Karachi, 1951), 191.

Chandpur,<sup>51</sup> while Abdul Karim identified it with the Chittagong port.<sup>52</sup> Regardless of whether it was Chandpur or Chittagong, Samandar was indisputably defined as a Bengal port located in the eastern area of present Bangladesh.

## **4.2 Abbasid and Other Arab Coins as Archaeological Evidence of Early Arab-Bengal Trade Relations**

The geographers' accounts as secondary sources hint indirectly at the existence of early Arab-Bengal trading contacts beginning from the latter half of the eighth century. However, these accounts lack specific dates or precise years and none of the geographers visited Bengal themselves. Consequently, archaeological evidence is crucial to corroborate and validate these historical accounts. The Abbasid gold coins found in Bengal may serve as valuable archaeological evidence for these accounts. These coins, dated from the mid-eighth century to the early tenth century, offer significant insight into the trading history between early Arabs and Bengal. It is hypothesized that some of these coins arrived in Bengal during the latter half of the tenth century. Historical practices reveal that traders and others often buried commercially acquired coins for safekeeping. Such hidden treasures are periodically unearthed from various locations. It is likely that the collector or custodian of these coins in Bengal remained alive into the tenth century and preserved them during that time. In addition to the Abbasid gold coins discussed in this paper, other early Arab coins discovered in Bengal are also mentioned here as archaeological evidence to support and authenticate the geographers' accounts.

Ten Umayyad and twelve Abbasid silver coins are housed in the Bangladesh National Museum. These coins were collected by M.F.C. Martin, a British military major, writer, and official collector for the Dhaka district during the early twentieth century.<sup>53</sup> They span a historical range from the reign of Umayyad Caliph Abdul Malik (685-705) to Abbasid Caliph Al-Mahdi (775-785). The precise location where these coins were found remains unknown, and it is uncertain whether they were discovered within Bengal or imported from elsewhere.

The Bangladesh National Museum reserve collections contain five early Arab gold coins. These coins were discovered by a local farmer during land excavation in the Chandpur District in 1996. The collections include:<sup>54</sup> A gold coin from the Sajid dynasty of Azerbaijan. The rulers of this dynasty ruled Azerbaijan and parts of Armenia with its capital at Ardabil from 889 to 929 CE. This coin bears the name of Sajid Emir Yusuf bin Abu Saaj (901-928) alongside Abbasid Caliph Al-Muqtadir Billah (908-929), and was minted in Armenia in 301 AH/913 CE. Two Aghlabid gold coins from the Aghlabid dynasty are stored in the collection. The Aghlabid, an Arab ruling family, governed North Africa, particularly Ifriqiya, nominally under the Abbasid Caliphs from 800 to 909 CE. These coins feature the names of the Aghlabid Emirs Ibrahim II (875-902) and Ziadatullah III (903-909) respectively. Two Sulukid gold coins from the Sulukid dynasty are also in the collection. The Sulukid, a minor pre-Seljuq Iranian family, briefly controlled Rayy (Al-Muhammadiya). These coins bear the names of Sulukid ruler Ahmad bin Ali and Abbasid Caliph Al-Muqtadir Billah, and were minted at Al-Muhammadiya in 921 and 923 CE respectively.

<sup>51</sup> M. M. Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal* (Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud Islamic University, 1985), 34.

<sup>52</sup> Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal*, 43.

<sup>53</sup> *Special Accession Register no. 09*, Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.

<sup>54</sup> *Accession Register, 1996*, Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.

Three silver coins of the Abbasid Caliphs have been unearthed by archaeologists. One was found during the 1937-1938 excavation at the ancient Buddhist site of Paharpur in the Nawgaon district of North Bengal. This coin bears the Muhammadia mint name and is dated 788 CE, corresponding to the reign of the renowned Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid.<sup>55</sup> The other two coins were discovered during the excavation of Shalban Bihara in Mainamati, Cumilla District.<sup>56</sup> Regrettably, rust has severely eroded the inscriptions on these coins, rendering them unreadable. Nevertheless, they are presumed to be from the Abbasid era and likely arrived through trade by early Arab merchants in the eighth or ninth century.

Two more early Arab silver coins were discovered during excavations at Shalban Bihar in Cumilla between 2014 and 2015.<sup>57</sup> Inscriptions on these coins are largely obscured, but the visible segments suggest that they are Abbasid silver coins from the ninth century. It is likely that the ruler mentioned on these coins is Al-Mutamid Billah. A Samanid gold coin, which was collected from the Brahmanbaria District in 2002,<sup>58</sup> is also part of the reserve collections at the Bangladesh National Museum. This coin, minted in Samarkand in 908 CE, features the names of Samanid Emir Ahmad bin Ismail and Abbasid Caliph Al-Muktafi Billah. Recently ten Abbasid silver coins have been collected by the Bangladesh National Museum through purchasing from a coin collector of Noakhali.<sup>59</sup> These coins are now housed in the museum's cabinet. They have been identified as being minted under Abbasid Caliph Al-Mahdi (775-785), dating from 160 AH to 165 AH. The collector reported that a cache of over twenty Abbasid silver coins was discovered by locals during the excavation of abandoned land in Chattogram, and they sold ten of them to a goldsmith and ten to him.

The aforementioned archaeological discoveries reveal substantial evidence of interactions between the early Arabs and Bengal. The Abbasid gold and silver coins, along with other early Arab gold coins unearthed from various prominent archaeological sites, are invaluable for reconstructing the history of vibrant trade in ancient Bengal. Beyond Bengal, Abbasid coins have been discovered across the Indian Ocean region, underscoring their broad circulation. Notably, two Abbasid coins were found in the ancient Thai city of U-Thong and at the Laem Pho site, bearing dates of 184 AH (800 CE) and 203 AH (818 CE). These coins are inscribed with the names of Caliph Harun al-Rashid and Caliph Al-Mamun.<sup>60</sup> An Abbasid gold coin found in an archaeological site of Vietnam dated 291 A.H (903-904) was issued by Caliph Al Muktafi Billah. This coin is preserved at the Tra Kieu Site, Quang Nam Province.<sup>61</sup> In North Sumatra, eight Abbasid silver coins were unearthed through excavation at Bongal Hill, an administrative area within Jagojago Village, Badiri District. Among these, four coins are housed in the Sumatra Money Museum, two are in the Museum of Uang, Sumatra, and two are in the private collection of a resident of North Sumatra.<sup>62</sup> The rulers mentioned on these coins include Caliph Abu Jafar al-Mansur, Caliph Al-Mahdi, Caliph Al-Amin, and Caliph Al-Mamun.

<sup>55</sup> N. Ahmed, *Mahasthan Mainamati Paharpur* (2nd ed.; Dhaka, 1979), 9.

<sup>56</sup> F. A. Khan, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries in East Pakistan: Mainamati* (Pakistan Publication, n.d.), 11.

<sup>57</sup> *Pratna Carca*, Vol. 09 (Published by the Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs [MOCA], Bangladesh, 2021), 54.

<sup>58</sup> *Accession Register, 2002*, Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.

<sup>59</sup> *Accession Register, 2023*, Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.

<sup>60</sup> S. Chutamas, "Arab-Islamic Coins in Thailand: Inscription Analysis and Dating," *Damrong Journal of the Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University, Thailand* 20, no. 2 (2022): 49-50.

<sup>61</sup> John Guy, "Rare and Strange Goods: International Trade in Ninth Century Asia," in *Shipwrecked Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds* (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2020), 26.

<sup>62</sup> E. Soedewo and N. Ahmad, "Abbasid Coins in North Sumatra: Evidence of Interactions with Islamic Civilization in the 8th-9th Century A.D.," *AMERTA* 40, no. 1 (2022): 73-86.

The coins mentioned above are the traces of Arab maritime trade to the east left by Arab merchants. These coins collectively demonstrate that the Arabs engaged in trade with South and Southeast Asia, particularly with Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Bangladesh. Analysis of Arab coins, coupled with indirect references from Arab and Persian geographers about the early Arab-Bengal trade contacts, suggests that the Samandar port, as noted by these geographers, was used widely by early Arab between the eighth and tenth centuries. Most likely, it became a prominent port in the eighth century following Tamralipti's decline. It was linked to South India, Ceylon, and West Asia.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Samandar was unquestionably linked to the landward river port of the Samatata Sub-region. It should be noted that Samatata was a well-heelled trade zone in ancient times as evidenced by the region's regular issue of gold coins. The commercial activities of early Arab traders were intricately connected to both Samandar and the Samatata-Harikela regions, as the majority of Arab coins have been discovered in these areas. The Arab traders might have arrived at Cumilla or Chattogram by the river of Meghna from the eastern coast of Bengal.

The accounts of Arab-Persian geographers and the discovery of Abbasid gold coins in Bengal provide undeniable evidence of the extensive and sustained trade interactions between early Arabs and Bengal. Furthermore, early Arab Muslims were actively engaged in commerce with Southeast Asia, including regions such as China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand. It is likely that Bengal served as a crucial transit route to China, facilitating the acquisition and trade of forest products along the lengthy coastal stretch of the Bay of Bengal. Additionally, they probably sourced precious and rare products brought down from remote places of eastern India, Assam, Kamarup, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts to the coastal ports at diverse.

The Abbasid gold coins discovered in Bengal date from the mid-2nd century to the mid-4th century A.H. (mid-8th to mid-10th century CE), a period that represents the heyday of the Abbasid dynasty. The consistency in the metal content, dimensions, and weights of these coins reflects the prosperous and stable economic conditions of the Abbasid Empire at that time. These coins are crucial artifacts that substantiate Arab-Bengal trade relations, as they bear distinct trademarks and provide direct archaeological evidence supporting the geographers' literary accounts. They also suggest that Arab-Bengal trade activities were widespread from the eighth to the tenth centuries. Additionally, these coins carry ideological messages through their inscriptions, which proclaim the oneness of the Almighty and include laudatory references to the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), adding another layer of significance beyond their commercial context.

Evidence from Abbasid gold coins, some Arab gold coins from the Abbasid era, alongside Abbasid silver coins, discovered in Bengal and records from Arab and Persian geographers, demonstrates that Arab-Bengal trade relations commenced in the eighth century and expanded significantly throughout the Abbasid period. These coins offer concrete proof that Bengal was intricately entangled in a commercial network with early Arabs from the eighth to the tenth century.

## **5. Conclusion**

The numismatic study of eight previously unpublished Abbasid gold coins preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum has illuminated several key aspects of Abbasid coinage and its broader historical, cultural, and economic significance. Through analysis of the inscriptions of these coins, the

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<sup>63</sup> R. Chakrabarty, *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002), 166.

names of four Abbasid caliphs—Al-Mamun (813–833), Al-Mutamid Billah (870–892), Al-Mutawakkil (847–861), and Al-Muqtafi Billah (902–908)—have been identified on four of the coins. Although the names of caliphs are not inscribed on the remaining four coins, their dates of issue provide a basis for attribution to specific rulers: Abul Abbas al-Saffah (750–754), Al-Mahdi (775–785), and Harun al-Rashid (785–809). Seven of the eight coins have been identified with specific years of issuance, while the fourth coin’s date remains undetermined due to inscriptional abrasion. Three mint names—Egypt (Misr), Madinat al-Salam (Baghdad), and Filistin (Palestine)—have been identified on four of the coins, while the remaining four have been attributed to probable mints based on historical context. The inscriptions on these coins reveal important Islamic ideological messages. Beyond their commercial role, early Arab coins may have served as subtle instruments for disseminating these messages, particularly to non-believers. Furthermore, these coins provide material evidence of Bengal’s integration into early Arab maritime trade networks, which experienced significant expansion across the Indian Ocean—particularly in the Bay of Bengal—during the Abbasid period. These coins corroborate literary accounts by geographers and serve as archaeological evidence of early Arab-Bengal trade relations. It is evident that Bengal emerged as a vital trading hub in the extensive Arab trade network from the eighth to the tenth centuries. Historical sources indicate that early Arab merchants passed through Bengal on their return journeys from Southeast Asia, bringing back forest products and other valuable commodities obtained from the region.

This research not only addresses a gap in the existing literature but also underscores the importance of continuing to explore and document lesser-known numismatic materials. The findings from this research pave the way for further investigations into Abbasid numismatics and underscore the need for ongoing scholarly attention to the vast array of historical artifacts that continue to shape our understanding of the past. Future discoveries of early Arab coins, particularly those from the pre-Abbasid period or the latter half of the tenth century, are expected to further illuminate early Arab-Bengal trade relations, offering new insights into this historical interaction.

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