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EARLY ARAB COINS OF TUNISIA

Part I - The Governors of Ifriqiyah, 85-184 AH (704-800 A.D.)

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Historical Introduction

That part of North Africa which is today called Tunisia has a rich and complex history which is reflected in the coins minted there. Prior to the period of Arab influence the history of the region includes a Punic or Carthaginian period from the 3rd century BC to 146 BC, a short period of Numidian influence in the first part of the 2nd century BC, then Roman domination with Roman coins from 146 BC to 439 AD, Vandal rule from 439 to 533, and a Byzantine period from 533 to the end of the 7th century AD. From then until the establishment of the Turkish Protectorate in 1574, the region was under the control of a series of Arab dynasties, at first as a province - "Ifriqiyah" -, ruled by governors appointed by the 'Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphs, and later by local independent rulers. During the period of transition between the end of Fatimid rule in 459 AH (1066 AD) and the beginning of the Hafsid period in 625 AH (1227 AD) the region was ruled by other dynasties, mainly the Almoravids and the Almohads from the western Maghreb, but including the Normans who occupied Mahdia, on the eastern coast, between 1156 and 1160 AD.

The entire period of Arab supremacy in the region is characterized by an almost continuous succession of internal strife, military campaigns and shifting allegiances. Available historical evidence is limited, and sometimes controversial or contradictory, so that any attempt to present a condensed and coherent summary involves a certain amount of simplification and personal interpretation and is therefore open to criticism.

Part I of this paper is intended as an introduction to the coins minted in the region in question between the beginning of the Arab presence in the second half of the 7th century AD and the establishment in 184 AH (800 AD) of the first local dynasty; the Aghlabids. During this period the territory under Arab influence and called Ifriqiyah from the old Roman term "Africa", was gradually extended from the gulf of Sirte to the Kabilia and the Aures mountains in the west including the former Byzantine provinces of Byzacene (southern Tunisia), Zeugitana (northern Tunisia) and part of Numidia (eastern Algeria).

In their westward expansion, the first Arab raiders, meeting practically no opposition in their progress along the southern shore of the Mediterranean, reached the southern limits of the Byzantine possessions in 27 AH (647 AD), at the time of the third Caliph, 'Uthman, and for a short time occupied Sufetula (Sbeitla) after the Byzantine exarch Gregorius had been killed there in battle. Following an expedition in 45 AH (665 AD), a third raid led by Ukba ibn Nafi' in 50 AH (670 AD) may be considered to be the start of a permanent Arab and Moslem influence. The new Arab capital of the region Kairouan (al-Qayrawan) was founded by Ukba ibn Nafi' in 670 AD. In 695 AD, Hassan ibn Nu'man al Ghasani occupied Carthage and founded Tunis nearby; Carthage was abandoned and a long period of Byzantine supremacy came to an end. The establishment of an Arab presence in the region was gradual and marked by a succession of Berber revolts, with the help at times of the Byzantines who for a while remained in control of the ports and of parts of the coastal areas.

The most famous of these revolts was that of the Kahina, a Berber woman who led her people against the Arabs, defeated them and controlled the region for a few years before being eventually killed in battle. Under Musa ibn Nusair, 78-96 AH (697-714 AD), the region was brought under more stable government and became a new province, separated from Egypt, and a new stepping stone for the continuing westward expansion. It was during this period that the Arabs reached the Atlantic coast and crossed into Spain.

The transition from the 'Umayyad to the Abbasid Caliphate in 132 AH (750 AD) was marked by a period of internal strife in Ifriqiyah, characterised by the development of "Kharijism" and by the Kharijite revolts in the west and south of the region. In 126 AH (744 AD), at the time of the first revolts which led to the establishment of the Abbasid dynasty, 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib al-Fahri, a descendant of Ukba ibn Nafi', declared his independence in Tunis, but was killed in 138 AH (755 AD). Shortly thereafter, Kairouan was overrun by Berber tribes and then occupied by Kharijite Arabs from Tripoli and ruled in their name by 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Rustam from 141 to 144 AH (758-761 AD). In 144 AH (761 AD), the Abbasids under Caliph Abu Jafar 'Abd Allah al-Mansur occupied Kairouan and the province was ruled by Abbasid governors till 184 AH (800 AD), all those appointed after 151 AH (767 AD) being members of the same prominent Arab family, the Mahlabi, or Mohallabid. Increasing internal unrest and military revolts eventually led to the end of direct Abbasid rule and to the establishment of virtual autonomy and of a new dynasty when Caliph Harun al-Rashid appointed in 184 AH (800 AD) Ibrahim al-Aghlab as Amir of Ifriqiyah.

Introduction to the Coinage

Arab coins were minted in the three metals which for a long time provided the basis for most monetary systems, i.e. gold, silver and copper or bronze. In the occupied territories, the Arabs used at first the money which they found already in circulation, mainly Sassanian (persian) coins in the East, Byzantine coins in the West. The earliest coins issued by the Arabs were imitations of these types modified to suit their faith. It was not until the reform of the fifth 'Umayyad Caliph', 'Abd al-Malik c.a. 76 AH (695 AD) that a purely Arab coinage appeared. In conformity with the Moslem views on the representation of living forms, the coins were to have Arabic legends only, most of them of a religious nature. However, coins of the pre-reform type continued to be issued in Ifriqiyah for about 20 years after the reform itself had been promulgated, even, in the case of the fractional gold coins, overlapping with the new types between 92 and 98 AH. The existence of this overlap could possibly raise doubts on the correct attribution of fractional dinars of this time.

In addition to adapting existing types of coins to Moslem principles, the Arabs also used denominations borrowed from the cultures with which they had come in contact. The new gold coin, similar to the Byzantine solidus, was called Dinar, from the old Latin term "denarius", originally meaning "piece of ten" and corresponding to 10 asses, but which had gradually acquired the more general meaning of money, both in its Latin form and in the Greek "denarion". The name for the silver coin, dirham, was that of the measure of weight used by the Arabs and corresponding to $\frac{2}{3}$ of the Attic drachma, itself corresponding to 4.40 grammes, or 67.5 grains, the dirham therefore being equal to 2.92 g or 45 grains. The name itself was an adaptation of the Greek "drachme", originally meaning "handful". Finally, the term "fals" (plural - fulus) adopted for the copper coins and which was also to acquire later the meaning of money in general, was derived from the "follis", the 40-nummia copper coin of the Byzantines which was imitated by the Arabs for their own issues in the East. The word itself comes from the Latin word for "bag", and it had first been utilized to designate a copper coin by the Roman emperor Diocletian in 296 AD.

Pre-reform Coins to 98 AH (716 AD)

According to the available evidence, the first coins struck by the Arabs in Ifriqiyah were issued under Musa ibn Nusair, 'Umayyad governor from 78 to 96 AH (697-714 AD). They were pre-reform types in copper and gold, the latter being known for dates from 85 to 98 AH (716 AD). No silver coins have been recorded. Coins of the pre-reform type show a gradual transition in appearance from that of Byzantine coins to coins with legends only. Basically two types can be recognized, an early one in which human figures are still present on the obverse and a later one in which the human figures have been replaced by legends. A pattern of gradual evolution can be seen in the case of coins of the second or "portraitless" type.

Both gold and copper coins with human figures are known. The crosses, a constant feature of Byzantine coins, have been altered; those above the heads on the obverse being replaced by ornaments and on the reverse the characteristic Byzantine cross resting on horizontal lines representing steps losing its transverse arm. A horizontal bar remains at the upper end of the vertical axis on the dinars and the 1/3 dinars, but in the case of the 1/2 dinars this bar is replaced by a globe. A further difference between the denominations in gold seems to be provided by the number of horizontal lines under the cross; three for the dinars and for most of the 1/2 dinars, but in general only two for the 1/3 dinars.

The circular legends, in Latin letters, usually consist of an abbreviated Latin translation of the Moslem profession of Faith, the "kalimah" (Koran XLVII¹ and XLVIII, 29) on the obverse and an abbreviated translation of the formula used as an introduction to Moslem writings, or "bismillah" (In the name of God...) on the reverse which may be followed, on coins of later types, by the place of minting and the date. All abbreviated Latin legends consist of continuous sequences of single letters from different words, often poorly engraved and difficult to read, and there is a certain amount of variation in these formulae and in their interpretation. Examples of typical legends are given in Annex I. These gold coins are assumed to have been minted prior to 85 AH when dated "portraitless" types appear.

Copper coins of this type are basically similar to the gold coins of the same period, but in addition some of them have the name of the local governor (Musa) and/or the name of the mint of Tripoli. Others without mint name may be assumed to have been minted in Kairouan. On all these coins, the reverse has a modified cross, on three steps and with a bar at the top, similar to that of the gold dinar. Other coins with a single bust on the obverse instead of two and a modified cross (with a globe) on the reverse, bearing the name Nu'man and dated 80 AH have been attributed to North Africa. This name and date do not correspond to the known chronology of Ifriqiyah governors and the fact that they are of a different style with legends in Arabic only make this attribution questionable.

The coins without human figures or "portraitless" issue are known only in gold, and are of three types. In the first, the human figures on the obverse are replaced by the word SIMILIS, a continuation of the circular legend, which may at times be abbreviated or reversed. On dinars, the modified cross of the reverse is replaced by an indiction formula with numbers in Roman numerals, although the undated fractional coins retain the modified cross. These coins are all assumed to have been struck between 85 and 95 AH, on the basis of the indiction numbers on the dinars (II, III, VIII, VII, IX and XII).

On these coins the mint, when present, is AFRICA, variously abbreviated, and appears in the circular marginal legend of the reverse.

Indiction numbers were a dating system used in the Middle Ages, originally based on the interval between censuses first ordered by the emperor Diocletian for taxation purposes and taken every 15 years. The dates were expressed as the place of the year in the cycle of 15 years, starting with 312 AD (the accession of Constantine to the throne). In order to obtain the indiction year, 3 is added to the year (AD) and the resulting figure is divided by 15. The remainder is the indiction number. For the period in question, the indiction cycle started in 703 AD (84/85 AH) and the indiction numbers which have been described for coin of this series i.e. II, III, IIII, VII, IX and XII, correspond to 704, 705, 706, 709, 711 and 714 AD.

The second type is represented only by fractional dinars dated from 95 to 98 AH with the Hejira date in Roman numerals on the circular legend of the obverse, together with the mint. These coins are otherwise similar to those described above and maintain the modified cross on the reverse. Finally, the last of the pre-reform coins are dinars dated 97 and 98 AH and having legends only, both in Latin and in Arabic. The marginal circular legends are in Latin, with the mint, AFRICA, and the date in Roman numerals on the obverse. The central inscriptions are in Arabic and consist of the first part of the kalimah on the obverse and of the second part on the reverse, in two horizontal lines on each side:

Obverse

لا اله الا الله
There is no god but God

Reverse

محمد رسول الله
Muhammad is the a/
postle of God

Post-reform 'Umayyad Coins 98-132 AH (716-750 AD)

After 98 AH (716 AD) coins issued in Ifriqiyah by the Arabs conform with the new standards and show legends only in Kufic script. 'Umayyad dinars without mint-name are known for all dates from 77 to 132 AH and it is assumed that they were struck in Damascus. They are uniform in type with the following inscriptions:-

"Eastern Type"

Obverse

Central legend: first part of the kalimah on 3 horizontal lines

لا اله الا الله
There is no god but
الله وحده
God (He is) alone
لا شريك له
there is no associate to Him

Marginal legend: Prophetic mission (Koran IX 33) more or less complete.

محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق
يظهره على الدين كله ولو كره المشركون

(Muhammad is the prophet of God sent with guidance and the religion of truth to make it prevail over every other religion averse though idolaters may be).

Reverse

Central legend: 3 horizontal lines, Koran CXII

الله احد الله
God is alone God
الضمد لم يلا
is eternal He begets not

ولم يولد
and He is not begotten

Marginal legend: "Bismillah" with date only.

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدين سنة...
(In the name of God was struck this dinar in the year.....)

A few dinars with mint-names have been described, Ifriqiyah, al-Andalus (Cordova) and "Ma'dan amir al-mu'minin bi-'l-Hijaz". Dinars with the name Ifriqiyah are known for 100 to 103 AH and have the following legends which are also found on the earliest dinars from Spain:-

Dinar "western" type

Obverse

Reverse

Central legend:

Central legend: first part of the "bimillah".

لا اله الا

There is no god b/

بسم الله in the name of God

الله

ut God

الرحمن the compassionate

وحده

He is alone

الرحيم the most merciful

Marginal legend: Koran IX, 33, but less complete.

Marginal legend: continuation of the above

ضرب هذا الدينار سنة

(was struck this dinar in the year...)

Later dinars issued in Ifriqiyah are similar to those of the "eastern" type which have been described above, but have the mint-name on the reverse. Coins of this type are known dated 114, 117 and 122 AH. All known fractional dinars of this period have legends of the "western" type and are therefore assumed to have been minted either in North Africa or in Spain. The third dinar differs from the dinars and halves in that the central legend on the obverse, consists of two lines only. The number of lines thus corresponds with those originally representing the steps of the cross on the different denominations of the pre-reform gold coins.

On all silver coins of this period, the mint, Ifriqiyah, is given in addition to the date. The earliest known specimen is dated 98 AH (716 AD) and was issued under the governor Muhammad ibn Yazid. The central legends of these silver coins are essentially the same as those of the eastern dinars, but the reverse legend is longer and on 4 lines.

الله احد لله
الصمد لم يلد و
لم يولد له لم يكن
له كفوا احد

God is alone God

is eternal He begets not and

He is not begotten nor is there

like unto Him anyone

The marginal circular legends are those appearing on the gold coins, but the "prophetic mission" (Koran IX, 33) is on the reverse and the "bismillah", which gives the mint in addition to the date, is on the obverse

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم بافريقيه سنة ...

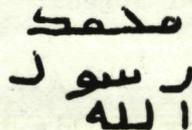
(In the name of God was struck this dirham in Ifriqiyah in the year.....)

Most coins show annulets in an outer circle surrounding the above legend; four or five groups of two under Bishr ibn Safwan (102-110 AH), four for coins issued under 'Ubaid ibn 'Abd al-Rahman (110-116 AH), three for those of 'Abd Allah ibn al-Habib (116-123 AH), three or four for Hanzalah ibn Safwan (124-127 AH), and five at the time of 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib (126-138 AH).

Copper coins which may be assumed to belong to this period and region on the basis of their general appearance usually lack adequate evidence such as date, mint-name, name of the governor, and very often they have legends which are difficult to read or which are missing in part. In some cases, the provenance of these coins can provide a tentative attribution. Coins of this group show a considerable amount of variation and some of them have ornaments, in addition to a few words of the kalimah. A few have been attributed with a certain degree of accuracy to three governors of the region, Muhammad ibn Yazid (96-99 AH), Yazid ibn Abu Muslim (101-102 AH). and 'Ubad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman (110-116 AH).

Coins issued under the Abbasid Caliphate, 132-184 AH (750-800 AD)

Abbasid gold coins of this period are similar to the "eastern" type of the 'Umayyads but with the reverse showing the second part of the kalimah, on 3 horizontal lines:

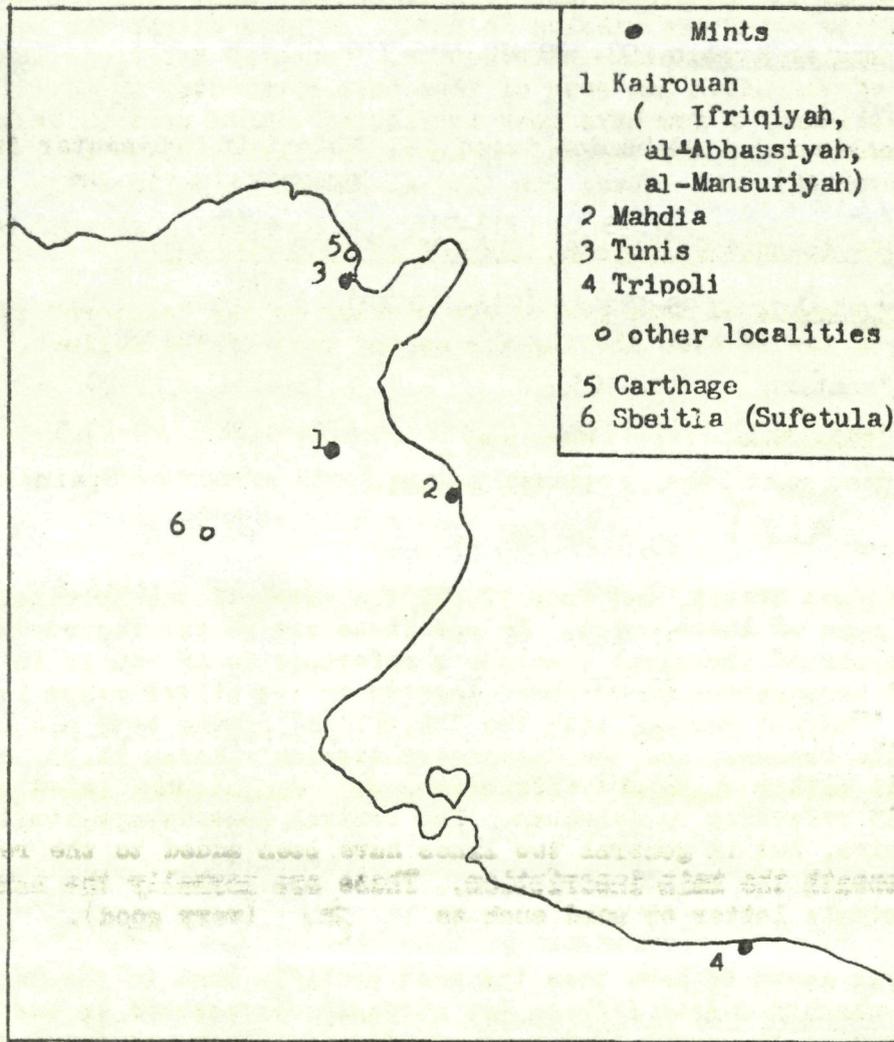
	Muhammad is the apostle of God
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The mint is not stated, but from 170 AH the names of the provincial governors appear on some of these coins. No specimens are so far recorded with the name of any governor of Ifriqiyah (Zambaur's reference to AH 140 is in fact a copper coin). The arrangement of marginal legends on the silver coins is the same as that of the 'Umayyad series, with the "bismillah" giving both place and date of minting on the obverse, and the "prophetic mission" (Koran IX,33) on the reverse. The mint is either إفريقية (Ifriqiyah) or العباسية (al-Abbasiyah), both names presumably referring to Kairouan. The central legends are similar to those on the gold coins, but in general two lines have been added to the reverse, one above and one beneath the main inscription. These are normally the name of the governor and a single letter or word such as بخ (very good).

Al-Abbasiyah seems to have been the most prolific mint in the Caliphate at this time as its characteristic dirhams are strongly represented in eastern hoards and it is tempting to assume that a new source of silver was found around AH 150 which would make it necessary to keep two mints in operation. One specimen is known of the rare denomination of half-dirham for AH 180 from al-Abbasiyah.

The remarks made in connection with 'Umayyad copper apply equally to the Abbasid issues and the often simplified legends are at times difficult to read. A few of these coins have the place of mint (Ifriqiyah or al-Abbasiyah) and some may be attributed by the date or by the name of the governor which may appear with the central legend of the obverse (Habib) but more often on the reverse (Warthamah, al-Mahlabi, Hatim, Rawh, Nasir, Fadl). Some of these coins also have the word بخ on the reverse.

Sketch Map of Ifriqiyah (part of western North Africa)



Summary of coins from Ifriqiyah

I Pre-reform coins, minted from about 80 - 98 AH (699 to 716 AD)

a. with human figures, presumably from about 80 to 85 AH (699 to 704 AD)

Metal	Denomination	Recorded Dates	Weight in grammes	Diameter in mm
Gold	Dinar	-	4.26-4.32	12.5-14
	1/2 Dinar	-	1.95-2.12	11.5-13
	1/3 Dinar	-	1.30-1.44	10-13
Copper	Fals	-	1.76-4.05	12-15

b. "portraitless", legends in Latin only, 85 to 98 AH (704-716 AD)

Gold	Dinar	704, 705, 706, 711 and 714 AD (85, 86, 87, 93, 96AH)	4.19-4.33	13-14
	1/2 Dinar	95, 96, 98 AH (713, 714, 716 AD)	1.56-2.50	10-11.5
	1/3 Dinar	95 AH (713 AD)	1.30-1.90	10-11.5

I Pre-reform Coins (Continued)

c. legends in Latin and in Arabic 97, 98 AH (715-716 AD)

Metal	Denomination	Recorded dates	Weight in grammes	Diameter in mm
Gold	Dinar	97, 98 AH (715-716 AD)	4.20-4.27	14

II Post-reform 'Umayyad Coins, 98-132 AH (716-750 AD)

Gold	Dinar ("western")	100-103	4.12-4.31	19-20	
	("eastern")	(111)114, 117, 122	4.21-4.28	19-20.5	
	Fractions, mint-less, presumably from North Africa or Spain				
	1/2 Dinar	90, 91, 92, 96, 97 100, 101,	1.98-2.29	14-16.5	
Silver	Dirham	1/3 Dinar	91, 92, 94, 96, 97, 99, 100, 101, 103, 106	1.32-1.50 12.5-15	
			98, 101-106, 107? 109-118, 124, 125, 128, 131 (132? 134?, 136?, - these coins may be Abbasid)	2.11-3.02 (Average 2.78)	25-29
Copper	Fals	(Muhammad ibn Yazid, 96-99)	3.6	16-23	
		(Yazid ibn Abu Muslim, 101-102)	3.8	11	
		('Ubaid ibn 'Abd al-Rahman, 110-116)	4.0-4.1	12-15	

III Abbasid coins 132-184 AH (750-800 AD)

Gold Dinars are known for all dates from AH 132-184. None bear a mint name and presumably none were struck in Ifriqiyah.

Metal	Mint	Recorded Dates AH	Weight in grammes	Diameter in mm
Silver dirhams	Ifriqiyah	132?, 134?, 136?, 144-5, 147, 148, 155-158, 160-183	2.70-2.91	23-26
1/2 dirham	"	180	1.43	
dirham	Al-Abbasiyah	150-180, 182, 183, 184	2.35-3.43	24-26.5
Copper	Ifriqiyah	140, 142, 146, 147, 162, 171, 175, 177, 180	1.35-1.95	15-22
"	al-Abbasiyah	162, 163, 165, 167, 171-173, 177, 178		

III Abbasid coins (Continued)

Metal	Mint	Recorded Dates AH	Weight in grammes	Diameter in mm
Copper	No mint	No date		
	(Habib)	(141-144?)		
	(al-Mahlabi)	(?)		17
	(al-Hatim)	(171-174 ?)		
	(Nasir)	174-177)	2.70	18
	(al-Fadl)	(177-179)	0.59-1.70	17-19.5
	(Harthamah)	(179-180)	3.25	11

Types of Latin Legends on Pre-reform Coins from Ifriqiyah

ANNEX I

NON EST DEUS NISI IPSE SOLUS CUI SOCIUS NON EST
 NON EST DEUS NISI UNUS CUI NON EST ALIUS SIMILIS
 NON EST DEUS NISI UNUS DEUS CUI NON SOCIUS ALIUS
 NON DEUS NISI DEUS SOLUS NON DEUS SIMILIS ALIUS
 DEUS TUUS DEUS ET ALIUS NON EST
 DEUS TUUS DEUS ^{us} ET ALIUS NON EST
 DEUS UNUS NON EST ALIUS DEUS
 DEUS ETERNUS DEUS MAGNUS DEUS OMNIUM CREATOR
 IN NOMINE DOMINI MISERICORDIS SOLIDUS (NUMUS) PERITUS
 IN AFRICA (AFRIKA) ANNO.....

The following letters are usually inscribed as shown:

S = S or 2

D = d or 6

L = ^

U = v

so that an actual legend may read: NONESTASNISIIPSESOLCISN (NON EST DeuS
 NISIIPSE SOLus Cui Socius Non est) or NNE2ANIZVN2CVNN2AAI (NoN EST DeuS
 NISI ^{us} Cui NoN Socius ALIus)

Governors of Ifriqiyah - 'Umayyad

	AH	AD
Mu'awiyah ibn Hadij	45-49	665-669
Uqba ibn Nafi'	49-67	669-686
Zahir ibn Qayas	67-69	686-688
Hasan ibn Nu'man	69-78	688-697
Musa ibn Nusair	78-96	697-714
Muhammad ibn Yazid	96-99	714-717
Ismail ibn 'Abd Allah	99-101	717-719
Yazid ibn Abu Muslim	101-102	719-720
Muhammad ibn 'As al-Waslari	102	720
Bishr ibn Safwan	102-110	720-728
'Ubaid ibn 'Abd al-Rahman	110-116	728-734
'Abd Allah ibn al-Habib	116-123	734-741
Kulthum ibn 'Ayad	123-124	741-742
Hanzalah ibn Safwan	124-127	742-745

Transition Period

'Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib	126-138	744-755
Habib ibn 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Rustam	141-144	758-761

Abbasid

Muhammad ibn al-Tha'ath	143-148	760-765
'Ayas ibn Yusuf	148	765
al-Aghlab ibn Salem	148-149	765-766
al-Hasan ibn Harib	149-150	766-767
Bani al-Mahlabi:		
'Umar ibn Hafs	151-154	768-771
Yazid ibn Hatim	154-170	771-786
Daud ibn Yazid	170-171	786-787
Rawh ibn Hatim	171-174	787-790
Nasir ibn Habib	174-177	790-793
al-Fadl ibn Rawh	177-179	793-795
Harthamah ibn A'yan	179-180	795-796
Muhammad ibn Muqatil	180-183	796-799
Tamam ibn Tamim	183-184	799-800
Muhammad ibn Muqatil	184	800