



Photograph by Walter Bird, 1939

JOHN WALKER, C.B.E.

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1900–1964

JOHN WALKER was born on 4 September 1900 at Glasgow whither his father had migrated from Banffshire. He was the youngest of seven children and his father, for whom he was named, was a master carpenter and an elder of the Kirk, strict, forthright, and sparing of speech ('I thought ye had more sense' was his only comment when young John broke to him the news of his conversion to Rome). Yet he was a fine craftsman with artistic gifts especially in music, an authority on the Strathspey and other reels, loving to play his fiddle. In short he was Scottish to the core and his son entered fully into this inheritance. His quiet and unobtrusive manner concealed a steadfastness and depth of faithful integrity, not merely intellectual: he, too, was a competent draughtsman, and though he had no instrument, an amateur of the Italian and French opera. I well remember one evening soon after he joined the British Museum when we went together to the Russian Ballet. It was a classical programme and he sat through a beautiful performance of *Sylphides* without any obvious sign of appreciation or delight. It was not till some time afterwards that I found he had been quite swept away. Another perhaps more unexpected facet of his character was his practical interest in good food and drink, how to prepare it and, no less, where to find it. Indeed his knowledge of the last was extensive and unusual. But in general the determining factors in his life were his Scottish background, especially Banffshire where he loved to spend his holidays, and his religion which lay at the foundation of it all.

Walker was educated in Glasgow; first at the John Street and Whitehill Schools, then at the University, to which after serving for a brief space in the Army he was released in 1918. Here he became a Lanfine Bursar (1919–22) and subsequently a John Clark Scholar (1922–6). In 1922 he took his Master's degree with a First Class in Semitic languages (he had obtained the same class in the preliminary examinations); and after taking the diploma of the Jordanhill Training College he went in 1924 for three years to Egypt to teach at St. Andrew's Boys School in Alexandria, where he was First Assistant. In 1927 he came home to Glasgow for a year as Assistant Lecturer in Arabic, then went back again in 1928 to Egypt to work in the Ministry of Education.

When he returned again to this country three years later the Department of Coins and Medals in the British Museum was on the look out for an Arabist to undertake special responsibility for the Islamic section of its collections where little work had been done since the initial Catalogue of Oriental Coins begun by Stanley Lane-Poole. Walker, though above the normal age of entry, was chosen for the post. So far, his studies had not touched numismatics, though apart from contributions to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the *Gresham Encyclopaedia*, the *Moslem World*, and *Folklore*, he had written one book of a more popular nature: *Bible Characters in the Koran* (published at Paisley in 1931, but actually written in 1926), and was now engaged on another: *Folk Medicine in Modern Egypt* translated from the Tibb-al-Rukka of Abd-al-Rahman Ismail, London, 1934. To this period also belongs his *Latin-Arabic Glossary* compiled from marginal glosses of Isidore of Seville (Codex of Toledo). He now threw himself with great enthusiasm into his new work, and rapidly found his place in the Department, while in 1937 he was appointed an additional lecturer in Arabic language and epigraphy at the School of Oriental Studies of London University.

1941 found him swept by the war into Air Staff Intelligence; here for five years his knowledge of modern Arabic and of the Nearer East proved of special value. But his life-work like that of most others was sadly interrupted, nor when he returned to civil life was sustained study easy for him and his colleagues. Those were the difficult days of make-good and mend. The old Medal Room of the British Museum had been destroyed by enemy action with most of its library, and remained for nearly ten years in ruins, but the Departmental machine with all its activities must be started up again, under shifting conditions, in temporary quarters, and Walker had at times a heavy correspondence with students at home, and especially abroad, to carry on. (One American colleague says he found in his files more than ninety letters mostly in Walker's own hand in reply to special queries or on matters of mutual concern.) In addition he had been elected Secretary of the Royal Numismatic Society in 1948, and in 1952 he took over the laborious business of chief editor of the *Numismatic Chronicle*, continuing to serve the Society faithfully and well in both capacities till his last illness. Meanwhile in 1949 he had been appointed Deputy Keeper, and he succeeded to the Keepership in 1952. The date coincided with the rebuilding of the restored Medal Room and his first and major task was to supervise its rehabilitation, the return of the

collections to their old home, and their reorganization on arrival. In the midst of all, his studies in Islamic numismatics had been steadily advancing and, already a member of the Institut d'Égypte and a corresponding member of the Swedish Kunglige Vitterhets Akademie, he was elected a member of the British Academy in 1958. I am indebted for the appreciation of his work which follows to the Chief Curator of the American Numismatic Society, Mr. George C. Miles, for whose achievements in the same field Walker had the highest regard.

John Walker was a dedicated scholar, dedicated above all to a cause and a task which he came to see as the prime obligation of his scholarly career. From the time he entered the British Museum he had committed himself to a lifetime undertaking, a completely revised and up-to-date edition of Stanley Lane-Poole's monumental ten-volume *Catalogue of Oriental Coins in the British Museum*. Lane-Poole's Catalogue, begun in 1875 and completed in 1890, was, and still is, an indispensable work of reference for numismatists, archaeologists, and historians in any way concerned with the mintage of the Muslim dynasties in the vast area between the Indus and Spain; but in the half century following the publication of the final volume the British Museum acquired a quantity of additions to its Islamic collections. This great standard catalogue was neither complete (though more comprehensive by far than that of any other collection) nor did it in many respects meet the requirements of modern scholarship. Although Lane-Poole had prefaced some of his volumes with useful comments on problems relating to certain aspects of the coinage of particular dynasties he had made no attempt to deal definitively with the numismatic history of each dynasty, nor had he, except very occasionally, made any reference to comparable or supplementary material in other collections.

In the continuation and amplification of Lane-Poole's numismatic work Walker saw, in a way, a personal challenge to which he felt obliged to respond, and to which he devoted the best years of his life. The two volumes of his *Catalogue of the Muhammadan Coins in the British Museum* are a lasting monument to his meticulous scholarship and patient industry. Their scale and the lines along which they were conceived, planned, and executed, went far beyond the normal compass of a catalogue of objects in a museum collection. Each is virtually a corpus of the known coinage of a given period, and while the core of the work is the British Museum's collection, the gaps in the collection are filled in by thousands of references to published and unpublished material scattered about the world. It is no wonder in the circumstances that this great plan had proceeded no further than the end of the Umayyad period by the time of Walker's untimely death. To have covered the entire field of Islamic coinage on this scale, even excluding India, would have demanded a lifetime of work not by one man alone but by a team of collaborators.

The first volume of this *magnum opus*, *A Catalogue of the Arab-Sassanian Coins*, appeared in 1941 at a time of great stress and crisis, and the exigencies of the day must have added heavily to the technical difficulties inherent in the production of a work of this sort. Problems of typography alone were formidable (not only normal founts of Arabic, but numismatic Kufic, Pahlevi, Ephthalite, etc., as well as numerous line drawings must be provided). Behind all the intricacies of composition and editing lay years of research in one of the most difficult and in many respects obscure fields of numismatics. Lane-Poole had not dealt with the Arab-Sassanian coinage at all, and although a number of erudite scholars of the nineteenth century, both British and continental, had made important contributions toward the solution of some of the problems with which Pahlevi numismatics bristles, Walker was the first to attempt a comprehensive treatment of the subject. Not the least of his many original contributions, discussed in the introductory essay of over 160 pages, is the largely successful attempt to resolve the chronological puzzles presented by the several dating systems used on these coins. Equally important was his identification of many of the Sassanian mint monograms which continued in use under the Arab governors, a valuable service to students of the coinage of the Sassanian Empire, and a field to which Walker had hoped eventually to turn his full attention. In recognition of this volume he was given the degree of D.Litt. by the University of Glasgow.

The second volume, *A Catalogue of the Arab-Byzantine and Post-Reform Umayyad Coins*, even larger than the first, again accompanied by a long and definitive introductory essay, was published in 1956, and has become, like its companion, the indispensable handbook of scholars concerned with this fascinating transitional period of early Islamic coinage. The usefulness of this work, and indeed of the first volume, is by no means restricted to the numismatist: students of iconography, of epigraphy, of political history and geography, of administrative organization, and of cultural and ideological exchange and controversy between Islam and Byzantium on the one hand, and between Islam and Zoroastrian Iran on the other, have found in Walker's volumes a mine of raw as well as of well-digested material of prime importance in their own fields of research. It was characteristic of Walker's modesty and of his patience and perseverance in the face of adversity that no mention is made in the preface to his second volume of the fact that all his notes for the study of the Arab-Byzantine coinage were lost with the Departmental Library in the great air-raids of 1941, and that the completion of this large and laborious work was delayed and made even more difficult by his war service, and by the removal of the Museum collections on the outbreak of war to a place of safety in the country.

Walker's reputation rests securely upon these two volumes, yet there is much to be added to them. Besides the contributions to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, and other publications already referred

to, he published a number of articles important for the new ground which they broke. Some dealt with the epigraphy and philology, or the numismatics, of pre-Islamic Arabia; notably one on the remarkable Hadramautic pieces obtained by Miss Freya Stark in South Arabia, which are cast in bronze and resemble Roman *Aes Grave* of the third century B.C. rather than anything in the second century A.D. to which Walker rightly concluded that they must belong (*Numismatic Chronicle*, 1937); or again his decisive attribution to Hatra of a struck bronze coinage of about the same period, with types also imitating the Roman but with Estrangelo legend, which had hitherto been given to Emisa (*Num. Chron.*, 1958). Other pioneering articles covered later periods, especially his studies of the coinages of the second Saffarid dynasty in Sistan (*American Numismatic Society: Notes and Monographs*, 72, 1936), of the Sultans of Kilwa in East Africa (*Num. Chron.*, 1936 and 1939), and his discovery of the coinage of the Amirs of Crete (*Num. Chron.*, 1953).

Walker had been created C.B.E. in 1963, but some time before the end his health began to fail, and after periods of increasing illness, which he bore with exemplary patience and cheerfulness, he died in Chelmsford Hospital on 13 March 1964. He was unmarried.

In preparing this memoir, besides the indispensable help received from Mr. Miles, I am much indebted to Mr. R. A. G. Carson of the British Museum. A full bibliography of Walker's work compiled by him with Miss Helen Mitchell of the Ashmolean Museum, is attached to their obituary which appears in the *Numismatic Chronicle* for 1965 (published in 1966). I have also to thank Messrs. A. S. Fulton, late of the British Museum, and A. G. Tritton of the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies for their assistance; and on the personal side especially Mr. J. Harrison Ball, the friend with whom Walker shared his life.

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