Why did the import of dirhams cease?

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1. Introduction
The minting of post-reform Islamic silver coins (Kufic dirhams) started under the Umayyad period in 78 AH (697/698). Kufic dirhams were minted using a more or less stable design pattern for more than three centuries until around the middle of the 11th century. The most common are Abbasid and Samanid dirhams of mid-8th to mid-10th centuries. The later coinages are those of the Buyid, Ziyarid, ‘Uqaylid, Marwanid and Qarakhanid dynasties.

2. Inflows of dirhams under the Abbasid period (750–945), and their silver content
The inflow of Kufic dirhams from the Caliphate northwards started as early as around 750. By the beginning of the 9th century the first waves of early Islamic coined silver reached Gotland and Uppland in Sweden, where the oldest grave finds with coins have been discovered. The largest volumes of collected and deposited silver are particularly well recorded in Eastern Europe for the 850s to 860s, 900s to 910s, and 940s to 950s. Of importance is the fact that, as visual examination and many analyses of coins show, from the early 8th to the early 10th centuries an initially established silver content in coins was normally maintained at 92 to 96 per cent. In the first half of the 10th century the same or even higher fineness was typical of the early Samanid dirhams from Central Asia. Such fineness is also evident from colour and metal surface.

3. Silver content of post-Abbasid dirhams: later Samanid and Buyid coins. The case of the hoard of Malaja Pustomerža 2011, t.p.q. 999
According to the results of chemical analyses conducted by Mike Cowell of the British Museum, some debasement became evident as early as about 340 AH (early 950s). That applies both to later Samanid and Buyid coinages. This development led to a new standard of fineness at about 60 to 75 per cent. This debasement will be illustrated and plotted on the basis of a comparatively large hoard from the very end of the 10th century found in 2011 and now kept in the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. It contains some 450 coins and fragments, later Samanid, Buyid and Ziyarid dirhams are represented in equal proportion. The results are discussed.

4. Inflow of ‘Uqaylid and Marwanid dirhams into Eastern Europe, c. 996–1013, and its connection with the route to Byzantium
The largest parcels of the dirhams in question are recorded in early 11th century hoards from Estonia and North-West Russia. The chronological distribution of the import of ‘Uqaylid and Marwanid dirhams from Upper Mesopotamia can be compared to the import of Byzantine miliareia of Basil II and Constantine VIII of the group 2 (989–1025). The correlation of these groups still needs to be explained.

5. Fineness of post-reform Qarakhanid dirhams, c. 1000–1040.
Post-reform Qarakhanid dirhams represent the third (out of three) latest groups of Kufic coins in Viking-Age currency. In Estonia, Finland and North-West Russia, they are known from hoards and particularly common in graves from the 11th century. Their dates are 390s AH (c. 1000–1010). A total amount of 590 specimens from the Hermitage systematic collection has been analysed. The picture of debasement from 96 to less than 20 per cent silver over forty years of minting is discussed.

6. The hypothesis of tolerance threshold: Scandinavia vs. Eastern Europe
The main distinction in compositional patterns of dirham circulation in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe is that of absence vs. presence of coins minted in the second half of the 10th and early 11th centuries. The youngest Kufic dirhams in the North recorded so far are those from the years 404 and 405 AH (1013/1014 and 1014/105 respectively). The silver coinages of the later Buyids, Kakuyids, Shaddadids and Ghaznavids (the latter is particularly massive in terms of volumes of production) are not represented in international dirham circulation because of their low silver content (at 30 to 40 per cent).
This leads us to the assumption that, as import of dirhams must have been dependent on their silver content, there were two tolerance thresholds in silver content. The first one, particularly relevant for Northern Europe, lies between 75 and 90 per cent and dates back to the mid-10th century in accordance with the date of debasement and taking into consideration general absence of later dirhams in Scandinavian circulation. The second one, relevant for Eastern Europe, lies between 40 and 60 per cent and dates back to the 1010s.