

ARC '16

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Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Pillar

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5339/qfarc.2016.SSHAOP3016>

New Lights on Mamluk Cartouches and Blazons Displayed in the Museum of Islamic Arts, Doha: An Art Historic Study

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The Mamluk dynasty ruled in Egypt and Syria from the overthrow of the Ayyubid dynasty in 1250 until the Ottoman conquest in 1517. The Mamluk sultanate developed a system of pictorial heraldic blazons and inscribed cartouches bearing the sultans' names alongside with mottos, epithets and blessings dedicated to them. One of the well-known pictorial blazons of Mamluk sultans is the panther in the act of walking. It's attributed to the Sultan Baybars al-Bunduqdārī (r. 1260–1277). According to the chronicle of Ibn Iyās (d. 1522), "... Baybars attained the panther (sab') as emblem representing his equestrian and extreme power ...". He used, for instance, to depict it in architecture and objects made of various materials as well as on his own coins. Two masterpieces attributed to Baybars are displayed in the Museum of Islamic arts (Doha). One of the museum objects is a bronze candle stick inscribed by a eagle as a personal emblem of the Mamluk sultan Muḥammad Ibn Qalā'ūn (reigned three times; 1293–1294, 1200–1309, and 1309–1341). It appears in two varieties – one-headed and the two-headed – and features both on one or two-fielded shields, and at times even without a shield.

In addition to the pictorial emblems, Mamluk sultans had also their own inscribed shields (cartouches) depicted in an oval or circular form. The early shields of this type were simple and started during the early Mamluk period constituting three fields or horizontal stripes, of which the middle one bears the sultan's name. Such shields appear alone or besides emir emblems as seen inscribed in a stick candle in Doha museum of Islamic arts. Sultan emblems developed during the Late Mamluk (Circassian) Burjī period (1382–1517) constituting three fields documenting the sultan's name and epithets accompanied by blessings as mentioned below.

The Mamluk Dynasty developed a heraldic science for emirs as well. Each prominent emir had his own blazon, mostly circular and decorated with the heraldic device reflecting his official post. They inscribed them in their buildings and also depicted them on every possible product dedicated to them, such as vessels, tools and weapons.

Cite this article as: Sadeq M. (2016). New Lights on Mamluk Cartouches and Blazons Displayed in the Museum of Islamic Arts, Doha: An Art Historic Study. Qatar Foundation Annual Research Conference Proceedings 2016: SSHAOP3016 <http://dx.doi.org/10.5339/qfarc.2016.SSHAOP3016>.

The heraldic blazons of the early Mamluks (baḥrī mamluks) were simple and characterized with their circular undivided shield depicting, for instance, the “pen-box” for the post of the sultan’s executive secretary (dāwādār) and the “two polo sticks” representing the polo master (jūkandār). In a later period the blazon became divided into three fields (or bars) and occupied in the middle by the heraldic emblem of the emir while the other fields left blank. In the Late (burjī) Mamluk period the emir blazon developed to become composite and occupied by various emblems showing the earliest official post of the emir in the lower field (bar) and ends up with the last one.

In light of his ongoing micro art historic study of Mamluk masterpieces displayed in the museum of Islamic Art, Doha, the presenter endeavors to present the results of the recently examined cartouches of Mamluk sultans’ and heraldic blazons of high ranking emirs and discuss them in historic, art historic and hierarchical contexts.