A Late Mamluk Lidded Tray with Poetic Inscriptions

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Although a number of lidded boxes of diverse size and function survive from the late Mamluk period, a lidded tray in the collection of the Museum of Ethnology in Munich is so far singular.9 The circular tin-lined copper tray with a lid bears the name of the Mamluk emir al-Sayfi Taghrirwimish. The name of the patron, the blazon and the style of the tray attribute it to a late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century production, either from Egypt or Syria.

The tray is engraved inside and outside; its vaulted lid is engraved on its entire exterior surface (PLATE 108-109).

The Patron
The blazon engraved on the tray was common in the late Mamluk period from the reign of Sultan Qaytbay to the Ottoman conquest in 1517. The inscriptions of the tray identify the patron Taghrirwimish as the “Secretary of the Great Secretary”, dawādīr al-dawādīr kābi, mentioned once, and dawādīr al-dawādīr, mentioned twice. This title, which is not common in Mamluk epigraphy, obviously refers to an office in the household of the Great Secretary, who at that time was the major executive authority at the Mamluk court after the sultan. This office is regularly mentioned in Mamluk chronicles.9 The first emir to bear this title during the reign of Sultan Qaytbay was Yaqub bin Mahdi (d. 1470),9 described by Ibn Iyad as the second executive authority in the state after the sultan. His successors until the fall of the Mamluk sultanate in 1517 were: Asbarabi bin ‘Ali Bay, Jamhur al-mish Yaqub, followed again by Asbarabi, Qasim Abu Swid, Tamhan Bay, Qasim al-Ghawi, Misri Bay al-Sharif, Asmaro bin ‘Ali Bay, Allam bin Qarja.9 Although the office was maintained for a short period after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt under the first governor installed by the Ottomans, who was the Mamluk emir Khayrbak (1517-22), it is unlikely that the tray with the Mamluk blazon would have been commissioned at that time. Being of secondary importance, the secretary of the Great Secretary is not likely to be mentioned in the chronicles or biographical encyclopedias unless his career ascended to a higher position. In fact, no person combining the name Taghrirwimish with the titles al-Sayfi or Sayf al-Din and al-dawādīr is recorded in the sources during the
FIG. 108
LIDDED VESSEL WITH ROYAL TITLES AND POETIC VERSES
Egypt or Syria, late 15th/early 16th century

The tray engraved inside and outside with numerous inscriptions bears the name of its donor al-Šayfi Taghrîbî who held a high office at the Mamluk court.

FIG. 109
INTERIOR SURFACE OF THE TRAY WITH DECORATIVE PATTERNS AND INSCRIPTIONS
period suggested by the style of the blazon. The only eligible candidate to be the patron of the tray might be Taghribirmishī (Koca-
bay al-Dhishmani al-Ma'ayyadi), also known as al-Ramīnah, who
became wazīr during the reign of Sultan al-Ghawri in the month of
Shawbān 918 H./February 1513 CE. He held this position for many
years with interruption and died in Safar in 919 H./April 1513 CE at
an advanced age. The title wazīr had lost much of its significance at
the end of the Mamluk period; its office holder was no longer the
highly powerful great vizier of earlier periods, but rather a financial
official in the sultan's household. If this emir is the one mentioned
on the lid tray, this vessel would have been commissioned prior
to his appointment as wazīr in 1513. As this identification is rather
uncertain, one may extend the period in question to 1517, the date
of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt.

The Tray
The interior of the tray is engraved with a segmented circle consis-
ting of six registers alternating with medallions. Two of the registers
are epigraphic; the four others display alternating decorative pat-
terns. Two of the decorative registers display a row of three zosta-
ted medallions, and the other three in the same overall weave pattern.
The epigraphic registers include an inscription partly published by
Gaston Wiet (fig. 110). Two opposite roundels include composite
blazons, two are filled with 3-shaped over-all pattern, and two are
filled with the weave pattern. An interface with a blazon on its
middle occupies the centre of the tray. The inscriptions read as
follows:

Mīmmā 'umīl bī rāsm al-maqṣūr al-sharaf al-kārīm al-‘āli
al-mawlawī al-amīr al-kabīr
al-sayyīf Taghribirmishī al-dawādār kāhir al-maqṣūm
al-sherīf Izzuddin

One of the (things) made for the most noble authority, the
honourable, the lofty, the lordly of the Great Emir, the
patron, the well-served, Sayyīf al-Dīn Taghribirmishī, the secretary of the
secretary of the Noble Majesty, may his victories be glorified.

A similar text is inscribed on the exterior wall of the tray, occupy-
ing four registers, however, rather than two, the whole composition
being doubled to form twelve registers and medallions decorated
with the same patterns as on the interior (fig. 111). The precious titles
inscribed in the exterior include two items that are not inscribed
inside: al-mālik and makhādhim.

Mīmmā 'umīl bī rāsm al-maqṣūr al-sharaf al-kārīm al-‘āli
al-mawlawī al-amīr al-kabīr al-mālik
al-makhādhim al-sayyīf Taghribirmishī al-dawādār
al-dawādār al-maqṣūm al-sherīf Izzuddin

One of (the objects) made for the most noble authority, the
honourable, the lofty, the royal of the Great Emir, the patron,
the well-served, Sayyīf al-Dīn Taghribirmishī, the secretary of the
secretary of the Noble Majesty, may his victories be glorified.

The Lid
The vaulted lid is engraved with a rossette radiating from the apex,
surmounted by a handle in the shape of a small cup. The thirty-
two petals of the rosette cover most of the lid's surface, and are
engraved with two alternating patterns in two alternating colours,
tinned white and bare red cooper. A segmented band surrounds
the rosette at the edge of the lid; it is composed of twelve registers
alternating with medallions; four segments are inscribed and the
eight others bear the alternating patterns applied elsewhere on the
same tray (fig. 112). The number of the rosette petals thus does not
correspond evenly to the division of these surrounding segments.
Four of the twelve medallions that cut the registers include a blazon;
the eight others are decorative like the previous ones.

The inscription around the rosette reads:

Mīmmā 'umīl bī jām al-maqṣūr al-sharaf al-kārīm al-‘āli
al-mawlawī al-amīr al-kabīr al-sayyīf Taghribirmishī
al-dawādār kāhir al-maqṣūm
al-sherīf Izzuddin

One of (the things) made for the most noble authority, the
honourable, the lofty, the royal of the Great Emir, the patron, the
possessing, the well-served, the successor, the treasure, Sayyīf al-Dīn
Taghribirmishī, the secretary of the Great Secretary of the Noble
Majesty, may his victories be glorified and may God perpetuate
your happiness and well-being.
This inscription includes the titles al-īdādī, al-dhakhrī and al-sayyīd, which do not figure on the tray, and it ends with a good wishing formula addressed to the second person to the owner. We thus have three inscriptions with honorary titles of slightly diverging content. The series of titles inscribed here is multi-layered: the titles of Taghhrimirsh are the ones that precede the words al-amīry al-kabīr referring to the Great Secretary, meaning the secretary of the sultan. The following titles refer to the Great Secretary. The sultan is referred to by the title al-maqarr al-sharf, followed by praise. The lid bears a second inscription, which is along the lower vertical wall that runs parallel to the upper wall of the tray when it is covered (fig. 119). This inscription is included in six registers within a band of sixteen registers, the twelve others being engraved with the two aforementioned alternating decorative patterns, knotted medallions and a weave pattern. Eighteen medallions alternate with the registers, six of them filled with the composite blazon, the others with decorative motifs. The inscribed text consists of a poem in the first person praising the beauty of the vessel and addressing good wishes to the beholder, whose face is compared with the shining moon and body with a slender young stem.

May you, my owner, be at continuous ease, your mind free from all sorrow, oh you are (like) the ascendance of the shining and dazzling moon, oh you whose figure is like a supple branch.

All inscriptions are written in thinlith script and engraved against a cross-hatched ground. It is interesting to note that the script style of the historical inscriptions is not identical with that of the poem, its vertical letters being more slender and elongated. They may have been the work of different hands.

The Artistic Context
Although the shape of this lidded tray appears so far to be singular in the repertoire of published Mamluk metalwork, its decorative design and the content of its inscriptions are very common on late Mamluk vessels made of tinned copper. A related lidded cylindrical box made of copper in the Nasser D. Khalili Collection bears extensive inscriptions including the same poetical text as this tray. It is anonymous, however (fig. 143). The tray of Taghrimirsh is typical of the revived Mamluk metalwork that emerged in the second half of the fifteenth century, after almost a century during which very few Mamluk metal vessels are documented. By that time the silver-inlaid brass vessels with inscriptions containing princely titles and names, which were characteristic of the Babri Mamluk period of the fourteenth century, had gone out of fashion. The revival introduced a variety of new styles of vessels made of tinned copper with engraved decoration. Although many of the vessels of the style represented by the Meuseh tray bear the names of high-ranking emirs of the late Mamluk establishment, the quality of their craftsmanship indicates that their use must have been practical rather than ceremonial. A dish of that type bearing the name of the emir Tahshum bin Muhallib al-Dawadar is inscribed with a text indicating that it was made a religious endowment (waqf) for his mausoleum in Cairo. This explains that this category of vessels, which exist in large numbers, were made for the practical use of religious foundations, and most likely also for Mamluk barracks and military camps, rather than for the emir’s personal or ceremonial use. Some of this production, which is anonymous and sometimes crude, may have continued after the Ottoman conquest in 1517. It is not clear whether Egypt or Syria was the centre of this production. The craftsmanship of the Taghrimirsh tray conforms to the mass production of this type of metal ware. As mentioned above, the division of the rosette that decorates the lid into thirty-two petals does not geometrically correspond to the division of the framing band into twelve registers or the division of the vertical wall of the lid into eighteen segments. As a result, the design of the covered tray appears inconsistent and flawed when seen from the side. Moreover, the difference in the script between the poem and the emir’s name and titles suggests that the tray may have been pre-fabricated with the poem already inscribed on it, leaving the cartouches empty for the patron’s name to be inscribed later.

Aside from this functional group of metal ware there were other styles of late Mamluk vessels created for the more exclusive princely use. They display unprecedented techniques of engraving and inlay, and novel decorative designs and shapes. Among the striking specimens of this luxurious metalwork are a silver inlaid brass basin in the name of Sultan Qaytbay at the Victoria and Albert Museum and another splendid one with gold inlay at the Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi in Istanbul. Another group of mostly anonymous vessels, labelled in the past as “Veneto-Saracenic,” characterized by a distinctive style of intricate arabesques and inlay work combined with new, often European shapes, is most represented in European collections. As in the case of the famous Mamluk carpets, these vessels seem to have been produced largely for export. Most of them are not inscribed, although a sub-group of them with more conventional Mamluk forms displays names of emirs inserted in cartouches within the decoration. Among the inscribed exceptions is a remarkable bowl in the Khalili Collection, signed by Master Mahmud, with cartouches on the body and the rim containing typical late Mamluk self-praising texts.

Poetry on Metal Vessels
The tradition of inscribing poetical texts in the first person praising the inscribed object goes back to earlier periods and is documented elsewhere in the Muslim world (cf. the contribution by Shain in this volume). Already in the early Abbasid period, love poems and other acròs poems were inscribed on various objects used by galant cavaliers (sarf), such as furnishings, vessels, instruments, and textiles. Some rare cases of Mamluk metal vessels of the fourteenth century and enamelled glass vessels, either Ayyubid or Mamluk, attest to the continuity of this tradition. A Mamluk enamelled glass bucket, recently sold at Sotheby’s, bears an inscription that is unique on glassware but quite common on Mamluk metal bowls and basins. Formulated in the first person, the text describes the
FIG. 112 (left)
INSCRIPTION ON THE LID WITH HONORIFICS AND A WISH

FIG. 113 (above)
INSCRIPTION ON THE WALL OF THE LID WITH A POEM ON THE VESSEL'S BEAUTY
LIDDED VESSEL WITH A POEM

Egypt or Syria, 12th century

This late Mamluk vessel is decorated with poems praising its beauty and wishing its owner well.

WATER BASIN WITH POETIC INSCRIPTION

Syria or Iraq, around 1400 CE

The creator of this work of art, Master Ahmad al-Hakam, whose signature is found on the rim of the basin, has engraved an inscription indicating the basin's function. In it, the object itself speaks: "The ten fingers have formed me into a vessel, I hold cool water."

The text on the Taghrivaanish tray is quite common not only on late Mamluk vessels of the tinined copper mass production, but is also found on a European-shaped pail of the so-called Veneto-Saracenic style in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin (fig. 116). There, it fills cartouches integrated in the intricate design of the vessel. The quality and clarity of the inscription attribute the pail to a late Mamluk workshop, not to Venice, as indicated in the catalogue. 24

In some late Mamluk vessels of the common type, as in the Taghrivaanish tray, the poetic inscriptions are combined with the name and titles of the patron. This development took place in the later Mamluk period: the metal vessels of the time of the Bahri-Mamluks (1279–1382) were inscribed either with names and titles or with poetic epigraphy. However, they did not combine names with poetry. The majority of silver-inlaid brass vessels of this period are inscribed with names by anonymous titles and only few bear poetic inscriptions, whereas the majority of tinined copper vessel of the same period, which are mostly anonymous, are inscribed with poetic, self-praising or votive inscriptions, occasionally also with love and wine poetry. They were obviously of lower status than the inlaid ones. In the fifteenth century, the use of poetic inscriptions becomes a characteristic feature of the prevailing tinined copper production.

Unlike contemporary and later Iranian vessels, which mostly cite classical Persian poetry, the poems on Mamluk metal ware are not easily read. Often fragments of diverse texts are juxtaposed on one vessel. Many of the inscriptions are of vernacular character with misspellings or grammatical errors, and some may have been compiled by the craftsmen themselves. We know, however, that some Mamluk poets wrote poetry to adorn vessels. 25 An inscription on a late Mamluk bowl in the collection of the Islamic Museum of Qatar can be identified as the work of the fifteenth-century poet.
Taghji al-Din ibn Hujja al-Hamawi. A corpus of the poetic inscriptions of Mamluk metalwork still needs to be published to elucidate this interesting aspect of Mamluk culture.

While it bears features of princely patronage, such as the inscription with the patron's name and titles, the tray of Taghlībīḫīnished waṣ was an object of daily use, and probably of mass production. The juxtaposition of the patron's princely titles with the praise of the vessel's beauty, which conveys pleasure (mawla) to the eye, emphasizes the craftsmanship of the metalworker and raises him to a high status. The references to the “beautiful meanings”, encapsulated in the vessel's form (harj), and to the “souls longing for love” bear mystic connotations. Although not a masterpiece of Mamluk metalwork, this tray reveals a noteworthy development in late Mamluk material culture.