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## Veneto-Saracenic Metalware, a Mamluk Art\*

The provenance of the so-called Veneto-Saracenic metalware has been a subject of controversy ever since it attracted scholarly attention in the last century.<sup>1</sup> The bronze vessels known by this label include several stylistic sub-groups, which have in common the frequent use of European shapes combined with a new style of linear silver inlay displaying an unconventional style of arabesque. Their workmanship is characterized by extreme fineness. An important number of Veneto-Saracenic vessels bear craftsmen's signatures, most of which include the title *mu'allim* or master. The most frequently signed names are Zayn al-Dīn, Muḥammad, and Maḥmūd al-Kurdī, who signed his name with or without the *nisbah* al-Kurdī. The appellation Veneto-Saracenic has been coined to categorize this particular group of vessels because they were first thought to be the product of a Muslim workshop in Venice during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. On the basis of socio-historical grounds, however, Hans Huth in an article published in 1972 discarded the possibility of a Muslim workshop operating in Venice at that time.<sup>2</sup> This argument has not been challenged ever since.

A number of authors, among them A. S. Melikian-Chirvani and James Allan, have related the Veneto-Saracenic vessels to late Mamluk metalwork, which is also the common attribution adopted in most art catalogues. Although there are

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\*I am very grateful to James Allan (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), Anna Ballian and Mina Moraitou (Benaki Museum, Athens), Claus-Peter Haase (Islamic Museum in Berlin), Federica Manoli (Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan), Nahla Nassar (Khalili Collection), and Tim Stanley (Victoria and Albert Museum) for their generous support of my research in their respective collections and for the illustrations of this article. I thank Manijeh Bayani for her inspiring comments on the epigraphy. This article is based on a paper presented in the conference "Metals and Metalworking in Islamic Iran" organized by Elaine Wright and James Allan in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin in September 2004.

<sup>1</sup>James W. Allan, "Venetian-Saracenic Metalwork: The Problem of Provenance," in *Venezia e l'oriente vicino: atti del Primo simposio internazionale sull'arte veneziana e l'arte islamica* (Venice, 1986), 167–83; idem, *Metalwork of the Islamic World in the Aron Collection* (London, 1986), Ch. 5; A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, "Venise, entre l'Orient et l'Occident," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 27 (1974): 1–18; L. A. Mayer, *Islamic Metalworkers and their Works* (Geneva, 1959), 56–58. For the history and bibliography of the debate see Melikian-Chirvani, "Venise," 1–2; Allan, "Venetian," 67–68.

<sup>2</sup>Hans Huth, "'Sarazenen' in Venedig?" in *Festschrift für Heinz Landendorf* (Cologne/Vienna, 1972), 58–68.



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DOI: [10.6082/M16W987H](https://doi.org/10.6082/M16W987H). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M16W987H>)

DOI of Vol. IX, no. 2: [10.6082/M1Q52MQP](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Q52MQP). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/4TK1-MA23> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

still some diverging opinions on that matter, it is widely agreed that one of the sub-groups of the Veneto-Saracenic family can definitely be attributed to a late Mamluk production. Syria is believed to be the provenance of the objects characterized by a dense knot-work that is also found on vessels of uncontested Mamluk origin (fig. 1).

The Mamluk provenance of the mainstream of the Veneto-Saracenic metalware, however, which includes objects signed by Maḥmūd, Zayn al-Dīn, and Muḥammad, has been contested. Rachel Ward attributed the Maḥmūd al-Kurdī vessels to Western Iran and in a more recent monograph Sylvia Auld argued in favor of an attribution of the Maḥmūd al-Kurdī group to Aq Qoyunlu lands in southeast Anatolia or western Iran. She moreover places Zayn al-Dīn's work in an Ottoman context.<sup>3</sup> Neither author, however, has provided any visual evidence for a connection between the Veneto-Saracenic and Iranian or Aq Qoyunlu homologues. This article presents new evidence to confirm the Mamluk attribution, and more particularly James Allan's arguments, which established a stylistic connection between the Maḥmūd al-Kurdī group and the decorative arts of the reign of the Mamluk Sultan al-Ashraf Qāyrbāy (872–901/1468–96).

Among the multiple features which connect the Veneto-Saracenic style with late Mamluk metalware are some shapes. A variety of shapes have been decorated in this style, many of which are European while others are Mamluk. The rounded, lidded bowl, which is not of European origin, has been used across all stylistic sub-groups, with some variations, and can be considered as the most characteristic form of Veneto-Saracenic vessels. The profile of these bowls is common in late Mamluk vessels, which are not associated with a lid, however (figs. 2, 3). Likewise, the spherical hand-warmer or incense-burner (see fig. 1), another characteristic utensil produced in the Veneto-Saracenic style, is common in the mainstream style of metalware of the entire Mamluk period. Also the shallow basin, of which there is a remarkable Veneto-Saracenic specimen in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Inv. 741-1898), is a shape adopted in a number of luxury vessels, sometimes in a faceted version, attributed to the reign of Sultan Qāyrbāy. Among these is the basin in the Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi (TIEM) in Istanbul bearing the sultan's name.

There are, moreover, a number of objects of evidently late Mamluk provenance on grounds of their shape, inscriptions, and blazons which are decorated in a style

<sup>3</sup>Rachel Ward, *Islamic Metalwork* (London, 1993), 102; idem et al., "Veneto-Saracenic Metalworks: An Analysis of the Bowls and Incense Burners in the British Museum," in *Trade and Discovery: The Scientific Study of Artefacts from Post-Medieval Europe and Beyond* (London, 1995), 235–57; Sheila Canby, *The Golden Age of Persian Art (1501–1722)* (London, 1999), 21; Sylvia Auld, *Renaissance Venice, Islam and Mahmud the Kurd: A Metalworking Enigma* (London, 2004), 11–35.



akin to the decoration of conventional Veneto-Saracenic vessels, including those with European shape. Two basins with Mamluk inscriptions, one in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan (1657) (fig. 4)<sup>4</sup> and the other in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Lyon (E 538), could have been manufactured by the same hand that produced the uninscribed Veneto-Saracenic jug with a European body in the Poldi Pezzoli collection (1656) (fig. 5).<sup>5</sup> They share the same engraved patterns displaying a sequence of curved cartouches of alternating format with flowers in the background.

Two late Mamluk caskets, one in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York<sup>6</sup> and the other in the Victoria and Albert Museum, both inscribed with their patron's name, are decorated with curved interlocking cartouches of linear inlaid silver on a background of scrolls, which recall the work of Maḥmūd al-Kurdī on the lid of his bowl in the Victoria and Albert Museum (2290-1855) (figs. 6, 7). Although these caskets have not been considered Veneto-Saracenic because of their inscriptions and shape, the design of their decoration is hybrid, combining conventional late Mamluk with Veneto-Saracenic features.

Although inscriptions are rare on published Veneto-Saracenic vessels, the few inscribed pieces we know bear texts which belong to the late Mamluk epigraphic repertoire. Melikian-Chirvani has identified one benedictory poem, which starts with the words "*balaghta min al-'ulyā*" on a Veneto-Saracenic footed bowl and a salver in the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>7</sup> Another poem, inscribed on the cartouches of a Veneto-Saracenic bucket in the Islamic Museum in Berlin (Inv. B72), which Auld wrongly interprets as a pseudo-inscription,<sup>8</sup> can be read on many mainstream late Mamluk vessels (fig. 8). This poem starts with the phrase "*man tama'nā fī jamālī*" meaning "who examines my beauty."<sup>9</sup> It is inscribed on a

<sup>4</sup>Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "Cuivres inédits de l'époque de Qāyṭbāy," *Kunst des Orients* 6, no. 2 (1969): 99–133; J. M. Rogers, catalogue entry no. 95, in *Circa 1492*, ed. Jay A. Levenson (London, 1991), 203; Esin Atıl, *Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Mamluks* (Washington, DC, 1981), 102, cat. no. 35; Allan, "Venetian," fig. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Melikian-Chirvani, "Cuivres inédits," fig. 8; Paola Torre, "Metalli Islamici," in *Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Tessuti-Sculture, Metalli Islamici* (Milan, 1987), cat. nos. 5 and 9; Melikian-Chirvani, "Cuivres inédits," fig. 1.

<sup>6</sup>Atıl, *Renaissance of Islam*, 105, cat. no. 36.

<sup>7</sup>Melikian-Chirvani, "Venise," 112; see also J. W. Allan, "Later Mamluk Metalwork" (I and II), *Oriental Art* 15, no. 1 (1969): 38–43, and 17, no. 2 (1971): 156–64, showing the use of this text on late Mamluk vessels.

<sup>8</sup>Auld, *Renaissance Venice*, 284, cat. no. 7.22; *Islamische Kunst, verborgene Schätze* (exhibition catalogue) (Berlin, 1986), 114, cat. no. 195.

<sup>9</sup>The word "*tama'nā*," from *ma'nā*, has an unusual form, comparable to *tafalsafa*. I am copying and transliterating the inscribed texts according to their spelling as it is, not as it should be.



lunch box in the British Museum<sup>10</sup> and a covered tray in the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich in the name of Taghrībirmish, the great *dawādār* and vizier of Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī (see Appendix).

Both poems, the one starting with "*balaghta min al-'ulyā*" and the other starting with "*man tama'nā*," appear among the multiple texts inscribed on a lidded box in the Khalili collection and on a spouted bowl in the Benaki Museum in Athens, both of which are common late Mamluk ware (figs. 9, 10). These two vessels are interesting reference pieces because they display a whole set of inscriptions, which appear individually on various other late Mamluk objects.

In addition to shape, decoration, and inscriptions, which associate them with late Mamluk metalwork, a decisive argument, so far disregarded, for attributing the Veneto-Saracenic vessels to late Mamluk craftsmanship is the use of the title *mu'allim* in the majority of their signatures. The title *mu'allim* is a characteristic feature of Mamluk craftsmen's signatures. It is also regularly used in literary sources from Egypt and Syria from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods in association with craftsmen and in fact down to the present. It was not used in the Iranian world and it was not common on craftsmen's signatures elsewhere. Considering its close association with Mamluk culture it is unlikely that contemporary craftsmen from other lands would have used this title unless they would have liked to be mistaken for Mamluk.

Some signatures by Maḥmūd and Zayn al-Dīn include the phrase *yarjū al-maghfirah* following the name. This phrase appears on other late Mamluk metal vessels following either the name of a craftsman or the patron. All vessels mentioned in Gaston Wiet's catalogue in connection with this particular phrase are late Mamluk.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the tripartite disc used by Maḥmūd al-Kurdī as a frame for his signature on a tray in the British Museum (1895 5-21) is clearly reminiscent of Mamluk royal blazons, thus signaling a Mamluk context at the same time as it is a demonstration of the craftsman's pride.<sup>12</sup> The title *ra'īs* is used on another Veneto-Saracenic lidded bowl in the Victoria and Albert Museum before the name of the craftsman Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥājj 'Alī Ibn *al-mu'allim* Khaḍr *al-naqqāsh*.<sup>13</sup> The title *ra'īs* was commonly used in Mamluk chronicles to qualify the head of a guild. It is not exclusively Mamluk, however.<sup>14</sup> This *ra'īs* Muḥammad could be

<sup>10</sup>Ward, *Islamic Metalwork*, 119.

<sup>11</sup>Gaston Wiet, *Catalogue Général du Musée Arabe du Caire: Objets en Cuivre* (Cairo, 1932; repr. 1984), 128, 145, 146, appendix nos. 416, 430, 480.

<sup>12</sup>Auld, *Renaissance Venice*, 13, pl. 5 a-d.

<sup>13</sup>Auld misread the signature; *ibid.*, 156, cat. no. 2.12.

<sup>14</sup>Mayer, *Islamic Metalworkers*, 14.



the same who signed as *mu'allim* Muḥammad on a ewer published by Christie's.<sup>15</sup>

Another most interesting signature occurs on an unpublished Veneto-Saracenic bowl in the Khalili collection. It has in its interior two unframed signature cartouches, inscribed in Mamluk *naskhī* script. The first includes the words "*amal Zayn al-Dīn*." This name appears elsewhere sometimes in conjunction with "*ibn 'Umar*" or "*ibn al-mu'allim 'Umar al-naḥḥās*."<sup>16</sup> The second inscription, separated from the first, includes only the patronym "*Ibn Zambū'ah*," (fig. 11), which sounds rather like a nickname. I assume that Ibn Zambū'ah refers to Zayn al-Dīn and not to a second craftsman. The style of the bowl suggests that he is most likely the same Zayn al-Dīn known from other signed vessels. In any event, the name *zambū'ah* with the letter *'ayn* can obviously not be Persian or Turkish. In the Mamluk dictionary of Fīrūzābādī the word *zunbā'ah* means the tip of a shoe.<sup>17</sup> *Zambū'ah* might be a colloquial transformation of *zunbā'ah*, but this is speculation. This signature, however, suggests that the cultural environment of Ibn Zambū'ah is a traditionally Arabic-speaking one. This type of four-radical word sounds rather colloquial Egyptian.

James Allan has rightly compared the style of the Maḥmūd al-Kurdī objects with the architectural decoration of the Qāyṭbāy period in Cairo; in his arguments he includes the remarkable marble inlaid spandrels of the mosque of Qijmas al-Ishāqī built in 1479. The spandrels of the windows and, notably, the mihrab are decorated in the same novel style and they are signed by the craftsman 'Abd al-Qādir *al-naqqāsh*, who also signed similar work in the mosque of Abū Bakr ibn Muzhir built in 1489–90.<sup>18</sup> The mihrab of Qijmas' mosque is of particular interest here because it displays in the space beneath the conch a central rosette radiating in a complex deployment of arabesque towards the edges (fig. 12). The central rosette bears a striking resemblance to the patterns used on the lids and bottoms of Veneto-Saracenic bowls (fig. 13). This type of marble inlay was a novelty, which might explain the craftsman's multiple signatures in the mosque. Most interestingly, the signature of the mihrab is placed in the very center of the rosette and consequently of the mihrab itself, which is an unprecedented, almost blasphemous place for a craftsman's signature. Maḥmūd al-Kurdī is known to have placed his signature in such a central position on several pieces, including the lid of his bowl in the Victoria and Albert Museum, another one published in Sotheby's catalogue, a tray

<sup>15</sup> Christie's catalogue *Islamic Art and Manuscripts* October 2001, 173, cat. no. 320.

<sup>16</sup> Auld, *Renaissance Venice*, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Fīrūzābādī, *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* (Beirut, 1952), 3:34.

<sup>18</sup> Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo, an Introduction* (New York and Leiden, 1982), 148.





in the Louvre, and another tray in the Hermitage Museum.<sup>19</sup> One of Auld's arguments against a Mamluk origin of Maḥmūd al-Kurdī is this very central position of this signature. She argues that "It would be tantamount to an insult to the Mamluk hierarchy," and that there is no other instance where a craftsman puts his name so prominently in the place normally reserved for the name of the sultan.<sup>20</sup> The signature of 'Abd al-Qādir *al-naqqāsh* in the center of a mihrab contradicts this view and reveals at the same time the pronounced craftsman's pride during the reign of Sultan Qāyrbāy.

A key-piece for my attribution of the Veneto-Saracenic metalware to the late Mamluk period is an unpublished bowl in the Khalili collection (MTW 1542), signed by *al-mu'allim* Maḥmūd (fig. 14). It has a Mamluk shape and is entirely silvered. An inscription on the rim, which compares the whiteness of the bowl to that of the full moon, confirms that although the present silver is of a later date, its white appearance is original. Many Veneto-Saracenic vessels have a gilded or silvered interior, which might well be original.

The decoration of this bowl is of remarkable delicacy, hardly visible to the naked eye, displaying a variety of juxtaposed patterns that surpasses the common practice on Veneto-Saracenic objects, where the interlace network is often set against a rather uniform background of scrolls. This juxtaposition of several alternating patterns is one of the characteristic features of luxury vessels of the reign of Sultan Qāyrbāy.<sup>21</sup> In spite of its monochrome appearance, which distinguishes it from the characteristic inlaid work of this group, the design of this bowl is in the Veneto-Saracenic style. Its background scrolls are similar to those of the lidded bowl at the Courtauld Institute Art Gallery signed by Maḥmūd with the *nisbah* al-Kurdī.<sup>22</sup> The general layout of the design with interlacing curved lines, which divide the surface in cartouches, is basically a derivation of the traditional interlocking bands with cartouches and medallions, which are common on some late Mamluk basins and bowls (fig. 17).

Most interestingly, the bowl bears two epigraphic cartouches on the body and four on the rim, all of which contain poetry (see Appendix). One of the cartouches of the rim bears the *mu'allim's* signature at the end of the poem. The first cartouche starts with the words *anā ṭāsaḥ* meaning "I am a bowl," a common phrase in the epigraphy of late Mamluk metalwork (figs. 15 a, b, c, d). Inscriptions on the rim are one of the characteristic features of late Mamluk tinned copper bowls. The

<sup>19</sup>Allan, "Venetian," fig. 3; Sotheby's catalogue 30.4.1992, no. 49; Auld, *Renaissance Venice*, 18, pl. 9.

<sup>20</sup>Auld, *Renaissance Venice*, 26.

<sup>21</sup>Melikian-Chirvani, "Cuivres inédits," figs 16, 17, 23, 24.

<sup>22</sup>Auld, *Renaissance Venice*, 146f., cat. no. 2.1.



two inscriptions on the body of the Maḥmūd bowl are repeated on another late Mamluk bowl of a more ordinary type in the Khalili collection (see fig. 3).

As on many vessels of the later Mamluk period, the inscriptions on both bowls do not follow the calligraphic esthetics nor the epigraphic conventions established in the Bahri period. Rather the text meanders up and down, which makes it difficult to read. Each of the two bowls has spelling mistakes, as often happens on late Mamluk vessels. Fortunately, the mistakes on the two bowls are not identical so that I was able to read most of the text (see Appendix). The text, which belongs to what can be called vernacular craftsman's poetry of poor quality, praises the beauty and the craftsmanship of the bowl and includes good wishes to the owner. It also indicates that the bowl was made for drinking.

The design of the decoration conforms with that of other vessels signed by Maḥmūd, who is likely to have himself composed the poem on the rim, which ends with his name. The shape of the bowl is typically and exclusively Mamluk. Both the shape of the bowl and the inscriptions identify Maḥmūd's work with Mamluk art.

Maḥmūd's Mamluk provenance does not define his ethnic origin, however. The *nisbah* al-Kurdī, which he included in his signature elsewhere, can be misleading and does not justify an association of Maḥmūd's work with the Aq Qoyunlu kingdom. There is a Mamluk madrasah in Cairo known by the name of an amir called Maḥmūd al-Kurdī, who cannot be our craftsman and who was not even a Kurd.<sup>23</sup> A *nisbah* might refer to the place where someone originated, or migrated to or spent a period of time, as it could also refer to an affiliation with a patron or even with a Sufi order. Mamluk biographical literature mentions scholars with multiple *nisbahs* because they studied in several cities. Maḥmūd might have been a Kurd from Mamluk territory, which, it should be recalled, included southeast Anatolia and Cilicia. The Mamluk army included Kurds, who, together with the Turcomans, dominated the region of Aleppo in the fifteenth century.<sup>24</sup> On a salver in the British Museum (1878 12-30 711) Maḥmūd signed his name as "*Maḥmūd ibn al-Kurdī ibn al-mu'allim li-amr mawlāh*," the last two words meaning "on the order of his lord." This signature suggests that his father might have been the one who migrated and was therefore known as al-Kurdī.

The Mamluk attribution of the work of Maḥmūd or other craftsmen working in the Veneto-Saracenic style is not challenged by the presence of Iranian elements

<sup>23</sup>Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā'iz wa-al-I'tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār* (Bulaq, 1270/1853–54), 2:395 f.; K. A. C. Creswell, "A Brief Chronology of the Muḥammadan Monuments of Egypt to A.D. 1517," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 16 (1919): 39–164, here 117.

<sup>24</sup>David Ayalon, "The Auxiliary Forces in the Mamluk Sultanate," *Der Islam* 65, no. 1 (1988): 13–37.



in this style noted by several authors including Melikian-Chirvani and Allan. It is well known that the Mamluk decorative arts of the fourteenth as well as the fifteenth centuries show many features in common with their Iranian homologues; this is true also for other stylistic groups of late Mamluk metalwork. The number of Iranian refugees escaping the Timurids was so high in fifteenth-century Cairo that orders were repeatedly issued to evict them (without success, however).<sup>25</sup>

Another sub-group of Veneto-Saracenic vessels shows parallels with our Maḥmūd bowl as well as with some mainstream late Mamluk copper vessels. A copper bowl in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (1982.6), inscribed and adorned with a Mamluk blazon (figs. 16, 17), has the same shape as the Maḥmūd bowl of the Khalili collection. Its engraved decoration, however, is of a different style, and very similar to that of a bowl in the Bargello Museum in Florence (Bg. B 839), which has been identified by G. Curatola as of Veneto-Saracenic style, but of Italian craftsmanship.<sup>26</sup> The decorative composition of this bowl is simpler than that of the Ashmolean piece, without inscriptions or blazon, consisting of continuous patterns filling three horizontal registers. Like the bowl of the Ashmolean Museum, the engraved decoration of fine scroll patterns is raised against a cross-hatched ground. This engraving style characterizes a group of late Mamluk vessels, most of which, however, are of rather coarse work. An exceptionally fine specimen in the Benaki Museum (13068) shows parallels with these two bowls (figs. 18, 19).<sup>27</sup> Its cartouches are inscribed with the Mamluk votive inscription mentioned earlier, which starts with "*balaghta min al-'ulyā*" alternating with a pattern of knot-work, which can also be seen on the bowl of the Ashmolean Museum.

The body of this bowl, which bears traces of gilding, has two main inscribed cartouches in the middle and four smaller ones in the upper and lower registers that divide its external surface. The rim is entirely inscribed with a benedictory inscription common on late Mamluk bowls, referring to drinking. The cartouches of the body also include multiple references to drinking. One of the phrases can also be found among the set of texts inscribed on the spouted bowl in the Benaki Museum mentioned earlier. This includes the words "*asāka tustaqā bi-kās mizājuhā kaf . . .*" referring to the Quran verse 76:5.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyādah and Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Āshūr (Cairo, 1970–73), 3:962, 1058, 4:436, 1206.

<sup>26</sup> *From the Medicis to the Savoias, Ottoman Splendour in Florentine Collections* (exhibition catalogue) (Istanbul, 2004), 177; *Islam Specchio d'Oriente* (Florence, 2002), 133, cat. no. 109; M. Spallanzani, "Metalli Islamici nelle raccolte medicee da Cosimo 1 a Fernando 1," in *Le Arte del Principato Mediceo* (Florence, 1980), 95–115.

<sup>27</sup> Atıl, *Renaissance of Islam*, 107, cat. no. 38; Allan in "Later Mamluk Metalwork" publishes lunch boxes and trays of similar style and inscriptions; Wiet, *Objets en Cuivre*, Pls. LXVI, LXVIII, LXIX. See fig. 12 here.





The poetical inscriptions on the main cartouches start with the phrase “*anā ṭāṣah*” like the inscription on the rim of our Maḥmūd bowl; however, this one is followed by a different text. The composite blazon with a cup and powder horns has an unconventional quatrefoil profile and the minuteness of the engraving is of Veneto-Saracenic quality. Whereas traditional Mamluk blazons are circular, the blazon with a lobed profile has also been used on the basin in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Lyon discussed by Melikian-Chirvani and on the basin of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum of Figure 4. In spite of its inscriptions and the patterns of its engraving connecting it with Mamluk art, this bowl is unusual and represents another variation in the spectrum of late Mamluk metalwork.

Another point connecting the Maḥmūd bowl in the Khalili collection with the Ashmolean bowl as well as with late Mamluk metalware is an engraved medallion in the center of their respective inner bottoms. It consists of concentric circles around the spin mark including a circle of smaller circles (figs. 20, 21). The circles in the Ashmolean and the Khalili bowls are similar with the difference that the first is centered by a whirling rosette. Many late Mamluk bowls of the more crude type have such circles, which replace the circle of fishes common in Bahri vessels. The late Mamluk bowl of Figure 3, which shares the same inscription as our Maḥmūd bowl, has also an inner circle with a whirling rosette (fig. 22). These similar circles attribute the vessels in question to a common late Mamluk workshop. Considering its strong similarity with the bowl of the Ashmolean Museum, the Bargello bowl should also be attributed to Mamluk craftsmanship. It is possible, however, that the bowls were produced in one workshop and decorated in another.

The genre of inscriptions engraved on the Maḥmūd bowl of the Khalili collection and the bowl of the Ashmolean Museum is a characteristic feature of late Mamluk tinned copper bowls. These inscriptions display a variety of texts, which begin with “*anā ṭāṣah*” and continue with words spoken in the first person praising the beauty and the craftsmanship of the vessel.<sup>28</sup> The term *ṭāṣah* is the Arabic colloquial form of *ṭās*, which is used in classical Arabic and is a word of Persian origin. Mamluk anthologies refer to a poetical genre which praises the *ṭāṣah* in connection with wine drinking. The Mamluk poets Burhān al-Dīn al-Qīraṭī, Ṭaqī al-Dīn ibn Ḥujjah al-Ḥamawī, and al-‘Afīf al-Tilimsānī are reported to have composed verses in praise of the *ṭāṣah* alongside other drinking vessels, such as the ewer and the cup or *kās*.<sup>29</sup> Their poetry must have inspired the vernacular and often awkward poems inscribed on late Mamluk vessels, including the two bowls discussed here.

<sup>28</sup>I am currently working on a study of these inscriptions.

<sup>29</sup>Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Nawāḥī, *Hulbat al-Kumayt fī al-Adab wa-al-Nawādir al-Muta‘alliqaḥ bi-al-Khamrīyāt* (Cairo, 1299/1981–82), 171 ff.; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal al-Ṣāfi*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn (Cairo, 2003), 10:73.



These poems, which do not belong to classical literature, are unlikely to have circulated outside the cultural environment where they were composed, or to have been inscribed on Iranian or Anatolian objects, unless as part of a premeditated scheme to imitate Mamluk work.

It is interesting to note that, according to their inscriptions, these metal bowls were dedicated to drinking. Some of them refer to water and others to water and flowers, whereas others mention wine and love. The use of these bowls for drinking seems to be confirmed by two eyewitnesses in Cairo. Leo Africanus, who visited Egypt during the Ottoman campaign in 1517, writes about shops in Cairo selling drinks made of water flavored with various flower essences in artfully made metal bowls.<sup>30</sup> Also Evliya Çelebi in the seventeenth century mentions shops serving clear water to prominent clients in beautifully decorated bowls and cups (*kâseler ve taslar*) which looked like pure gold. He also mentions various fruit drinks sold by peddlers in tinned bowls.<sup>31</sup>

The fact that most recorded Veneto-Saracenic vessels, unlike the mainstream of Mamluk ware, are not inscribed and that they were found in European collections suggests that they were produced for a European clientele. However, the bowls of the Khalili and the Ashmolean collections, with their traditional Mamluk shapes and inscriptions referring to their use for drinking, are likely to have been made for a local market.

On the basis of chemical analysis of the metal, which shows that the Maḥmūd al-Kurdī group includes less nickel than the rest of the Veneto-Saracenic and the common Mamluk metalware, Ward has argued that this production should be attributed to west Iran. The analysis she refers to is based on a comparison with three western Iranian specimens.<sup>32</sup> Considering the recycling possibilities of metalware in the past as in the present, as can still be seen in the practices of metalworkers in the bazaars of the Middle East today, the variation of the metal composition is not a compelling argument. The metal composition which, according to Ward, differs even between a bowl and its lid, is one of many divergences between the sub-groups of the Veneto-Saracenic family. Late Mamluk metalwork altogether displays quite disparate features that might well have included the use of different materials or even imported vessels to be locally decorated. Differences in style appear not only between Veneto-Saracenic sub-groups signed by different craftsmen, but also within a group signed by the same craftsman. This is apparent even in the craftsmen's signatures themselves, in their wording as well as in the style of their engraving. Maḥmūd's signature is occasionally but not always set

<sup>30</sup>*Wasf Ifrīqiyyā*, trans. Muḥammad Ḥājī and Muḥammad al-Akhḍar (Beirut, 1983), 2:204.

<sup>31</sup>Evliya Çelebi, *Siyahatnamesi X, Misir, Sudan Habeş* (Istanbul, 1938), 360.

<sup>32</sup>Ward et al., "Veneto-Saracenic Metalworks."



against a cross-hatched ground, sometimes including the word *'amal* and sometimes *naqsh*, and even his name was presented in different manners. With his inscribed silvered bowl Maḥmūd demonstrates yet another variation within his own production. These inconsistencies suggest that the names might not refer to the artisan who engraved the bowl, but perhaps to workshops, which produced various styles, or to designers responsible only for the patterns. The *ra'īs* Muḥammad, who signed a lidded bowl in the Victoria and Albert Museum, was the grandson of a *naqqāsh*, who is not to be understood necessarily as metalworker since the decorator of the mihrab of Qijmas al-Ishāqī was also a *naqqāsh*. He could be merely a designer. Al-Maqrīzī mentions in the early fifteenth century two markets for designers (*rassāmīn*), who produced patterns, in the central bazaar of Cairo.<sup>33</sup>

In spite of their variety of styles the Veneto-Saracenic vessels have a common origin, i.e., they were produced in the same artistic environment, which as a matter of fact earned them their label.<sup>34</sup> They all share a significant feature, which is a conceptual one: They represent a new esthetical approach to forms and to arabesque decoration without entirely departing from tradition and they display a taste for extremely minute engraved design, which is among the finest Islamic metalwork ever produced. Whether the European style bodies were imported or produced locally is a question that still needs to be answered. As I demonstrated elsewhere, there is some evidence that European expertise permeated Mamluk craftsmanship during the reign of Qāyṭbāy.<sup>35</sup> The new esthetics displayed in the Veneto-Saracenic metalwork conforms to the renaissance of the decorative arts during this period, which produced a remarkable and fascinating variety of styles and techniques in Mamluk metalwork with some surprising specimens, such as the gold inlaid basin in the Türk ve Islam Eserleri Müzesi with the sultan's name or the ewer in the Victoria and Albert in his wife's name.<sup>36</sup> Other crafts, like ceramics and glass also attest to innovative initiatives. An underglaze-painted blazon with Qāyṭbāy's name shows a high quality unprecedented in Mamluk ceramics.<sup>37</sup> A singular lamp in the Islamic Museum in Cairo also inscribed with this sultan's name reveals the attempt during this period to revive the lost art of enameled glass, perhaps with the help of European craftsmen working in Cairo.

<sup>33</sup>Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2:101,105.

<sup>34</sup>Some vessels, however, have been identified as Venetian imitations of the Veneto-Saracenic. Most of these attributions seem justified.

<sup>35</sup>Doris Behrens-Abouseif, "European Arts and Crafts at the Mamluk Court," *Muqarnas* 21 (2004): 45–54; Gaston Wiet, *Catalogue Général du Musée Arabe du Caire: Lampes et bouteilles en verre émaillé* (Cairo, 1929; repr. 1982), 100, cat. no. 333.

<sup>36</sup>Wiet, *Objets en Cuivre*, 116; Ward, *Islamic Metalwork*, 118; Tim Stanley, *Palace and Mosque: Islamic Art from the Middle East* (London, 2004), 90.

<sup>37</sup>Marilyn Jenkins, *Islamic Art in the Kuwait National Museum* (London, 1983), 85.



The Mamluk carpets known from European collections are also likely to have been produced on Qāyrbāy's initiative.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, architectural decoration during the reign of Qāyrbāy produced new combinations of designs and techniques in marble, stone, and stucco. The creation of the so-called Veneto-Saracenic metalware in this innovative environment could well have continued in the following decades and perhaps further after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt and Syria.

While multiple and compelling arguments associate Veneto-Saracenic metalwork with Mamluk art, so far no comparable metalwork from the Islamic world has provided parallels to contend the Mamluk attribution. As to the question of a more exact provenance of the Veneto-Saracenic metalwork, i.e., Egypt or Syria, this still needs further investigation.

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<sup>38</sup>A large Mamluk carpet found in the Alhambra and recently exhibited in the Alhambra Museum is attributed to the reign of Qāyrbāy. This has been communicated to me by Dr. Purificación Marinetto Sanchez, who is currently preparing a publication on this subject.



## APPENDIX

I. INSCRIPTION ON THE BERLIN VENETO-SARACENIC BUCKET<sup>39</sup>

Four cartouches on this bucket include a poem common on late Mamluk vessels, written in *naskhī* script and alternating with cartouches of good wishes written in Kufic. I am including here the text of this poem. A fifth cartouche in *naskhī* includes the sentence "*al-ṣabr 'ibādah.*" The text is not distributed in the cartouches according to the sentences, but haphazardly.

من تمننا في جمالي نزهة العين يراني  
لي طرز من الخير قد حوى كل المعاني  
كيف لا يسمو جمالي و النفوس تهوى وصالي

Who contemplates my beauty will find me a delight to the eye  
I have a form which includes all the essence of good  
How would my beauty not be outstanding when the souls long for  
my love?

## II. INSCRIPTIONS OF THE BOWL SIGNED BY MAḤMŪD IN THE KHALILI COLLECTION

Because of the vernacular character of the text and the unconventional writing, the reading of these inscriptions remains problematic and to some extent conjectural. The text on the rim is clear; the inscriptions of the body, however, which occupy four lines, pose a problem as to the sequence of their words. The same inscription on the late Mamluk bowl in the Khalili collection (MTW 1349) ends with an additional phrase: "*al-ṣabr 'ibādah,*" probably to fill a space at the edge of the cartouche that would have been otherwise empty. The inscriptions of the rim of the Maḥmūd bowl, however, are according to my knowledge so far unparalleled.

## A. The Rim (Numbered by Cartouche):

١. انا طاسه كماله البدر شكلي وبياضي يحكى القمر في السمو و كزهى (كزهى؟)
٢. الرياض صنعة نقشي و على الكف التجلى كالعروس الفناعه
٣. تواضع تكبرا كالنجم لاح لباصر (؟) على سفحات الما و هو رفيع ولا
٤. تكو كالدخان يعلو بنفسه الى طبقات الجو و هو ضيع عمل المعلم محمود

<sup>39</sup>See note 7.





1. I am a bowl which looks like the full moon, my whiteness resembles the moon in the sky like the flourishing (like the flowers?)
2. In gardens is the art of my decoration, I appear in the palm like a perfumed bride
3. Be humble to be great pride like a star shining to the viewer on the surface of the water while it is high and
4. Do not be like smoke which raises itself in the air and then is lost. Work of master Maḥmūd.

B. Cartouche 1 on the Body:

فكر اللبيب تحير في اوصافي و بديع نقشي مدعش [كذا]<sup>40</sup> للنواظر منهل عذب و ورد صافي و باخر  
ضبط في (?)<sup>41</sup> لعينك خافي

The mind of the thoughtful wonders about my looks, my decoration is magnificent and stunning to the viewer, (like) a sweet stream and clear water, in finest (?) work hidden to your eye.

C. Cartouche 2 on the Body:

يكاد ظاهري ينظر من باطني لصفائه والحسن ليس بخافي فانظر الى حسني ومحكم صنعتي و اشرب  
هنيا صحه وعوافي

My exterior almost looks through my interior for its clearness, beauty is not hidden, look at my beauty and the excellence of my craftsmanship and drink in happiness, health, and strength.

<sup>40</sup>The correct form "mudhish" is used on the Khalili bowl with the same inscription.

<sup>41</sup>The placement of "fi" ("in" or "in me") is not clear.





Fig. 1. Spherical hand-warmer or incense burner, Khalili Collection (MTW 1520)



Fig. 2. Lidded box, Veneto-Saracenic style, signed by Zayn al-Dīn Ibn Zanbū‘ah, Khalili Collection (MTW 527)



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Fig. 3. Late Mamluk bowl in the Khalili Collection (MTW 1349)



Fig. 4. Basin in Veneto-Saracenic style with Mamluk inscriptions and blazon, Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan (Inv. 1657)



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Fig. 5. Jug of Veneto-Saracenic style, Poldi Pezzoli in Milan (Inv. 1656)



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Fig. 6. Detail of a late Mamluk casket, Victoria and Albert Museum (Inv. 377-1897)



Fig. 7. Detail of the lid signed by *al-mu'allim* Maḥmūd in the Victoria and Albert Museum (2290-1855)



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Fig. 8. Inscribed cartouche of the Veneto-Saracenic bucket in the Islamic Museum in Berlin (B72)



Fig. 9. Late Mamluk lidded box, Khalili Collection (MTW 527)



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Fig. 10. Late Mamluk spouted bowl, Benaki Museum in Athens (33701).



Fig. 11. Signature of Ibn Zanbū'ah on the lidded bowl (fig. 2), Khalili Collection (MTW 527)



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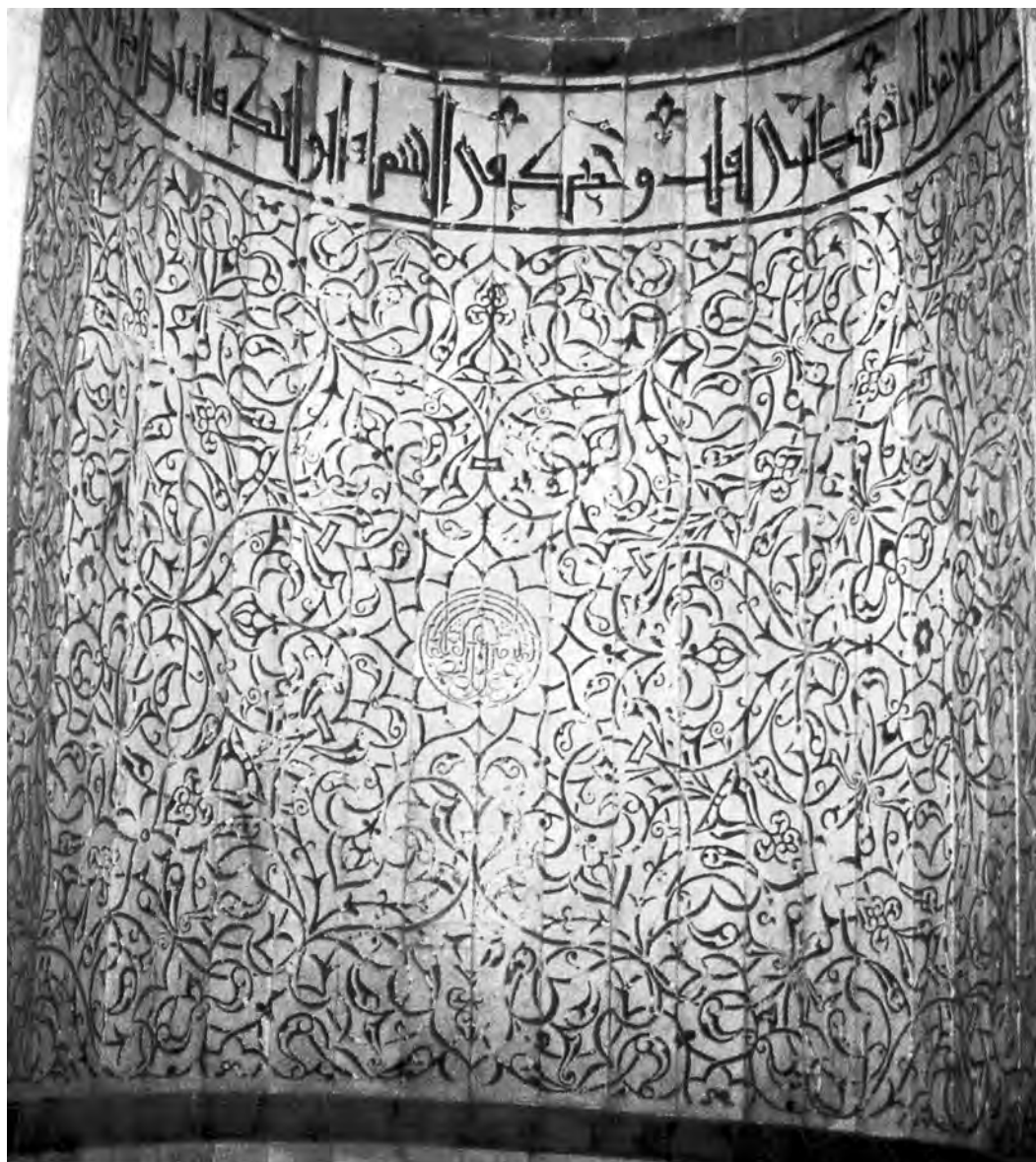


Fig.12. Inlaid marble decoration with the signature of 'Abd al-Qādir *al-naqqāsh* in the mihrab of the mosque of Qijmas al-Ishāqī in Cairo



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Fig. 13. Bottom of the bowl of Zayn al-Dīn Ibn Zanbū‘ah, Khalili Collection (MTW 527)



Fig. 14. Bowl signed by *al-mu‘allim* Maḥmūd, Khalili Collection (MTW 1542)



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Fig. 15. Inscriptions on the rim of the bowl signed by *al-mu'allim* Maḥmūd in the Khalili collection (MTW 1542)



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Fig. 16. Copper bowl in the Ashmolean Museum (1982.6)



Fig. 17. Detail of copper bowl in the Ashmolean Museum



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Fig. 18. Late Mamluk basin in the Benaki Museum (13068)

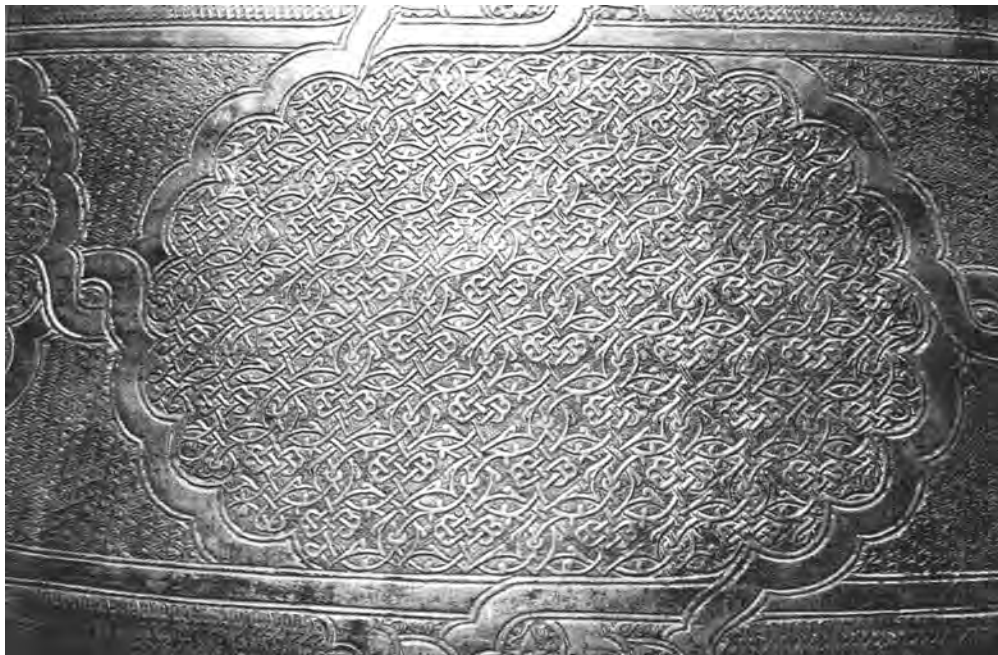


Fig. 19. Detail of the late Mamluk basin in the Benaki Museum



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Fig. 20. Engraved circle in the bottom of the Maḥmūd bowl in the Khalili Collection.



Fig. 21. Engraved circle in the bottom of the bowl in the Ashmolean Museum



Fig. 22. Engraved circle in the bottom of the late Mamluk bowl of fig. 3.

