

ISLAMIC HERALDRY

An Introduction

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Introduction

The scope of this presentation concerns the heraldry the Muslims in the late Middle Ages – that is to say, it concerns the heraldry of the Ayyubid and Mamluk dynasties of Egypt and Syria from roughly the late 12th Century A.D. through the very early 16th Century. It will be limited to clearly delineated heraldic charges. That is to say, “heraldry” consisting of script or calligraphy, names, titles, praise, pious sayings (“There is no victor but God”) or appeals to Allah for blessings on the armiger will not be considered beyond a brief mention here.

The terminology used will be adapted from standard Norman-English heraldic blazon wherever possible. Muslim emblazons generally consisted of the *ard* (field, or “ground”) divided into three *shatfas* or *shatabs* (what might be described as “tierced per fess”), but since in so many of the colored emblazons still extant the chief and base portions are the same tincture, with the central one of a contrasting tincture, it will be a little more comprehensible to blazon them as having a “fess”, even in those cases where the “fess” is the same tincture as the chief or base portion of the field, resulting in a complete lack of contrast.

The Period and Background of Muslim Heraldry

Thy Ayyubid dynasty, beginning with Yusuf ibn Ayyub, better known to the world by his *laqab*, Salah al-Din (Saladin), may be roughly dated from 1171 A.D., the year he overthrew the Fatimid caliphate of Egypt. The Ayyubid dynasty came to an end 79 years later in 1250 A.D. with the murder of Turan Shah.

The Mamluk dynasty, if it can be termed such, dates from 1250 A.D., when the Bahri Mamluks elected Shajar al-Durr, Turan Shah's mother, as their Sultana, until 1517 A.D., when the last Mamluk Sultan, Tumanbay II, was killed at the hands of the victorious Ottoman armies.

The Mamluks were a military aristocracy with a limited membership, whose participants came directly from among the slaves imported from non-Muslim territories as the soldiers and bodyguards of the sultan or amirs, who themselves had begun their careers as slaves. Since under Islamic law the child of a Muslim slave is a freeman, for the most part the children of the Mamluks, *awlad al-nas* or the “sons of respectable people”, were thus ineligible for positions among the ruling class and became scribes and administrators or commanders of non-Mamluk *halqa* troops. The only exceptions to this general rule were the sons of the sultans, who sometimes succeeded their fathers in the post of chief Mamluk. Hence there was not so much an hereditary “dynasty” as a state in which a person rose according to his ability, skill and, at times, ruthlessness.

Since all of the members of the ruling nobility came from the ranks of slaves, there was no shame attached to having held a “lowly” position as a slave. Indeed, such positions could be used to trace person's rise in power, and even become a part of their titles, as in the case of the Sultan Baybars al-Bunduqdari:

Pillar of the world and of the faith, sultan of Islam and of the Muslims, lord of kings and sultans, slayer of infidels and polytheists, supporter of the truth, helper of mankind, ruler of the two seas, lord of the qibla and servant of the Holy Places, reviver of the illustrious caliphate, the shadow of God on earth, partner of the Commander of the Faithful, Baybars, son of 'Abd-Allah, [the former slave of al-Salih](#), may God strengthen his authority.

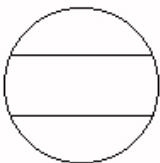
As a consequence of this social milieu, the charges on the arms of Mamluk leaders frequently represent or refer to the office or offices held when the person was raised to the rank of amir.

The arms, with their distinctive emblazons, were not so much to identify in battle and the tournament (as we have been told, not necessarily correctly, were the origins of European heraldry), but to “assert the personal vanity, pride and power of the Mamluk warrior”. Given the diverse backgrounds of the Mamluks, and their lack of shared traditions, it is not surprising that they developed a strictly hierarchical system with careful attention to rank and status, dress and appearance, complex protocol and ceremonial; in other words, one in which the use of heraldry could flourish. All of these would help demonstrate to all the rank and function of the amirs and their place in the Mamluk hierarchy. Emblazons of arms have been found decorating buildings, doorways, banners, cloaks, blankets, saddlecloths and other horse trappings, mosque lamps, candlesticks, basins, rose water sprinklers, bottles, and many other “everyday” items.

Muslim heraldry was not regulated by the government, although the right to bear such insignia was originally granted by the Sultan. It appears that under the Ayyubids and early Bahri Mamluks that amirs were specifically granted their blazons, while under the later Circassian Mamluks the amirs were allowed free choice.

Armorial Display

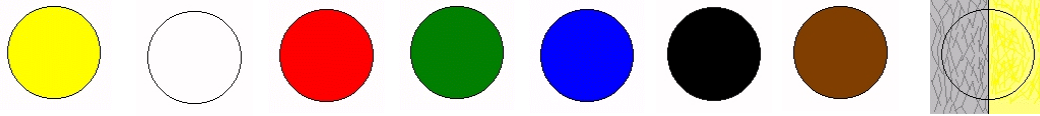
The display of armorial emblazons was not restricted to one field shape, nor to any given class of persons (unlike, for instance, European heraldry limiting ladies' arms to lozenges). In fact, it is possible to find the emblazon of a single person appearing on differing field shapes adorning the same building.



That said, the single most common form by far was *al-Da'ira*, the “Circle” or roundel, based on the round shields carried by so many Islamic men-at-arms (here, divided into the three *shatfas*, or divisions, commonly used). Other shapes seen include the delf, modified “heater” and “kite” shield shaped fields, and various geometrics, including pentagonal, oval, and four or six petalled rosettes.

Tinctures

In the colored examples which remain, Muslim heraldry limited itself to seven tinctures, Or, argent, gules, vert, azure, sable, and brown, plus “self-colored” (the color of the material on which the emblazon was placed. If on stone, “stone-colored”; if on brass, brass colored; etc.).



Field Treatments and Charges

Aside from the divisions of the *ard* [field] into three *shatfas* [divisions], other field divisions are treated like charges in Islamic heraldry. Found only rarely, they are “checky”, “barry”, and “bendy”. The best known use of bendy is on the arms of the aforementioned Baybars, *Per fess gules and bendy sinister Or and sable*.



Shi'ar (charges) may be classified into several categories. The first is that of animals. Though rare in Muslim heraldry, three animals do appear. They are: the lion passant; the eagle (or falcon) displayed wings inverted; and the horse passant. Some historians do not count the horse as a charge, believing it to be only the bearer of another charge, the ceremonial saddle (for which, see below).



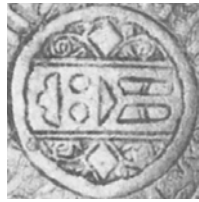
The second category are those charges which are familiar to American and European heralds: the fleur-de-lis, the crescent, and, rarely, the bend. Some controversy exists regarding the first two charges and their meaning. The Islamic fleur-de-lis is what we think of as a “true” fleur-de-lis (you know, like in the arms of France), but no one seems to be sure how it came into Muslim heraldry or what it means. (There is no evidence to indicate that it was adopted from the Europeans.) What can be said about it is that when it appears in a complex, or “composite”, blazon, it always appears in base.

There is some discussion regarding the symbolism of the crescent in Islamic heraldry, but regards whether or not the “crescent” is in actual fact a representation of the middle Eastern horseshoe (and thus a symbol of office for the *amir akhur*, the master of the stable), or is rather a cant on certain names such as that of 'Ali ibn Hilal al-Daula, as *hilal* in Arabic means “crescent”. (The horseshoes used to this day in the Middle East look very much like the true heraldic crescent, and not at all like what we as modern Americans think of as horseshoes.)

The third, and largest, category of *shi'ar* is that of symbols of office. These are purely Islamic charges, and often relate directly to the office which the bearer held when elevated to the rank of amir. A list of some of these charges and the offices to which they relate may be found below.



Cup
Sari
(Cup-bearer)



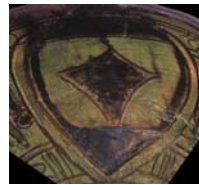
Penbox
Dawadar
(Secretary)



Sword
Silahdar
(Armor-bearer)



Pellet Bow
Bunduqdar
(Bowman)



Ewer
Tishtdar
(Superintendent of
Stores)



Polo Sticks
Junkadar
(Polo Master)

Round Table
Jashnigir
(Taster)



Banners
'Alamdar
(Standard-bearer)

Trumpet
(Trumpeter)

Shoe
Bashmaqdar
(Shoe-bearer)



Axe
(Axe-bearer)



As you can see by comparing the axe in the emblazon with the “real McCoy” next to it, the charges used in Mamluk heraldry were closely modeled on the actual items.



However, even though modeled on the actual implement, that these charges could be emblazoned in a number of variants may be shown in one of the most common, the penbox. An example of an actual Mamluk penbox is at left. In its typical emblazoned form, it consists of four elements: the first, containing the ink-pot; the second, the sand-pot and the starch paste pot; the third, a receptacle for thread (used for cleaning pens); and the fourth, two (or three) receptacles for reeds. You will be able to see a number of variants of the penbox in some of the emblazons used

as illustrations throughout this handout (e.g., there are penboxes in both the “penbox” and “axe” emblazons immediately above).

A fourth category of *shi'ar* is that of charges which have a solely Islamic use and meaning, but which were not symbols of office. The most common of this category are the *sarawil al-futuwwa*, the “trousers of nobility”. No clear consensus has been (nor perhaps can be) achieved as to just exactly what these represent, either literally or figuratively. An argument has been made recently that they are actually drinking horns. However, much of the argument is based upon little more than speculation, and it has not been widely accepted. In any case, the “trousers of nobility” are a very common charge, and always appear in pairs, frequently “framing” another charge (as in the example with this paragraph).



Another charge in this category is the *gubbah* or “ceremonial saddle”. Again, no consensus has been reached as to the *gubbah*'s meaning or significance, aside, perhaps, from the obvious one of a gift from a Sultan, not unlike the “robes of honor” which were frequently given out.



A fifth category of *shi'ar* are *tamghas*, charges which were adopted from the Mongols or Turks, and of whose significance we remain ignorant. One example of a *tamgha* appears at the left.

Lastly, there are a few individual *shi'ar* which cannot be classified in any of the above groups. Used rarely, they include such charges as the letter *aliph* (the “a” of the Arabic alphabet).

The Evolution of Islamic Heraldry

Much like European heraldry, Muslim heraldry began with simple coats and, as more and more “armigers” made use of the limited number of charges, it became more and more complex. These later, “complex” coats are frequently referred to as “composite” blazons.

The earliest coats usually consisted of a field and a single charge. Among the oldest of which we are is a field with a rosette, usually six-petalled but sometimes eight-petalled, which was used by the early Ayyubids. The six petalled rosette later came to be the badge of the Rasulid and Rasid dynasties.



Through the course of the 15th Century A.D., the early simple coats gave way to those more complex, as may be demonstrated by the examples shown below. The first is an early emblazon: *A fess and in base a cup*. Later, additional complexity was added: *An eagle, a chief, and in base a cup*. Eventually, things became quite complex: *On a fess between in chief a napkin and in base a cup, on a cup between a pair of trousers of nobility a penbox*.



Bibliography (and a caveat)

There are at this time, in English, only two books which discuss at any length Mamluk heraldry. They are:

Mayer, L.A., *Saracenic Heraldry, A Survey*, Oxford University Press, 1933, repr. Sandpiper Books Ltd., 1999

Leaf, William, and Sally Purcell, *Heraldic Symbols: Islamic Insignia and Western Heraldry*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1986

Mayer is by far the more complete (and thankfully available again in reprint); Leaf and Purcell, though they spend more pages in their small volume discussing European heraldry than they do Islamic insignia, are the more interesting. Much of what they do discuss of Islamic insignia, however, recapitulates Mayer.



Something to be aware of, however, is that while Mayer has many plates showing many examples of Islamic blazons in the back of his book, not everything there can be safely assumed to be from an emblazon, as opposed to simply being decoration. It should be noted, for example, that many of the rosettes found in Middle Eastern pottery, such as this one [left] from a bowl, are simply decorative elements, and are not necessarily armorial bearings. In other words, sometimes “a rosette is simply a rosette”, and not the insignia of someone.

The same is true of some of the other designs, sometimes quite complex, which may be found in a roundel. The fact that a Mamluk design is found in a roundel does not make it an Islamic emblazon, as is the case of the example below taken from a piece of Mamluk inlaid brasswork.

