Radiating Inscription on Mamluk Metalwork

الكتابات المشعة على المنتجات المعدنية المملوكية

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ملخص

يتميز الفن الإسلامي عن غيره من الفنون باستخدام الخط كعنصر زخرفي، ويتضمن المعادن بصفة خاصة عن غيرها من المنتجات باستخدام الكتابات كعنصر أساسي في زخارفها. ومن الكتابات الملازمة للفن ما يُعرف بالكتابات المشعة، والتي ظهرت بصفة خاصة على المنتجات المعدنية. ويتضمن هذا النوع من الكتابات الزخرفية بانتظام الكتابات داخل شكل دائري، وتتعدد هما الحروف بطريقة واضحة تتجاوز المركز فيدبو بشكل الشمس المشعة.

لذا يهدف البحث إلى دراسة هذا النوع من الكتابات الزخرفية، لتعرف على نوع الخط المستخدم، ومحتوى النصوص، ونوع الزخارف التي تحلق مركز الدائرة، ونوع الزخارف التي تحيط بالكتابات، بالإضافة إلى الوقوف على الفترة الزمنية التي شاع فيها استخدام هذا النوع من الكتابات على المعادن. وقد اعتمد البحث على دراسة مجموعة من القطع المعدنية ذات الزخارف المشعة (26 قطعة) حيث تم قراءة نصوصها، وتحليل محتواها، وتحرير زخارف بعضها، والمقارنة بينها.

وقد أُلتح من الدراسة أن الكتب المشعة ظهرت على المنتجات المعدنية المملوكية، وتحديداً بداية من عصر الناصر محمد بن قلاوون. وقد شاع استخدامها بشكل واضح في عصر الناصر محمد وخلفائه، ثم تضاءل وجودها، إلا أنها لم تخف، بل ظلت في الاستخدام حتى نهاية العصر المملوكي الحركسي.

وقد كان خط النسخ خط الثلث هما الأكثر استخداماً في هذا النوع من الكتابات، في حين لم يستخدم الخط الكوفي إلا فيمثال واحد. وقد حرص الفنان على التأكد على استخدام هما الحروف بحيث تغلف حوالي ثلث الدائرة، بينما باقي الحروف تزدهم في ثلثها السفلي. وقد أُلمت من الدراسة أيضاً أن الكتابات المشعة ظهرت في خمس صور أو طراز تختلف باختلاف مركز الدائرة. كما أُلمت من لغة النصوص أن القطع المملوكية للسلاطين كانت نصوصها دعائية، وبعضها عدد من الأقباط السلطان وقد يُلم مسمى في النص، أما القطع المملوكية لأمراء أو شخصيات كبرى فقد يُلم عليها أيضاً نص لتعظيذ السلطان أو عبارات دعائية للأمير تضم بعض ألقابه، وعادة ما يخلو النص من اسم صاحب القطعة.

وأفاد الفن الدراسة أيضاً أن الكتابات المشعة صاحبتها في بعض الأحيان زخارف البطاط وآزهار الولوتوس والوريدات، وقد تكون ورقة أسباب ظهور هذه الزخارف وتفسيرها. كما تناول البحث مناقشة تفسير الكتابات المشعة إجمالاً من حيث سبب ظهورها وانتشارها والفرصة الزمنية التي ظهرت فيها.
The extensive use of inscriptions is one of the distinguishing features of Islamic art. Calligraphy occupied a place and gained importance in Islamic art unparalleled in any other culture. It gained its importance from the Muslims’ need to write down the Quran and preserve it. Then calligraphy developed as a discipline with its own precise and strict rules to which proportion was mandatory. The art of calligraphy was not confined to the Quran or to books, it was rather used to adorn all kinds of objects and buildings. The Muslims developed within the art of calligraphy an unsurpassable variety of styles and ornamental inscriptions that became an essential element of decoration. That led Welch to describe Arabic script as ‘the central form of Islam’s arts and the foremost of its characteristic modes of visual expression.’

Doris Abouseif considered the extensive use of inscriptions on objects of daily use as a reflection of the taste of the Muslim society that regarded knowledge as of foremost value although literacy was widespread, especially among urban populations. She added that the use of inscription in the arts freed the calligrapher’s imagination to create ornamental devices and to transform the letters into ornament.

Metal objects carrying inscriptions are certainly common all over the Islamic world. In the early period, Islamic metalworkers followed, and further developed pre-Islamic, particularly Roman and Byzantine traditions. Metal objects of the early period were usually decorated with a single line of inscription without dots and in many cases bear the date of manufacturing the object. By the tenth and eleventh century, inscriptions played a more important role in the decoration of Islamic metalwork. Inscriptions usually invoked blessings and good wishes on the owner or expressed dedication to him. It was in the twelfth or early thirteenth century when the practice of decorating metal objects with long inscriptions giving the name and titles of its owner have spread from Upper Mesopotamia to Syria and Egypt, and reached its peak in the Mamluk period. In contrast to the Mesopotamian practice of using narrow, inconspicuous and well-integrated inscription bands, on the Mamluk metal objects, dedications often form the main, if not the only decoration.

One of the ornamental inscriptions that were widely used on Mamluk metal objects is the radiating inscription. This form of inscription is used within a circular arrangement or medallion, in which the hastae or shafts of the letters point towards the centre of the medallion. This type of ornamental inscription was usually used in metal work, and despite its beauty and extensive use, no detailed study was devoted to it. Therefore, the present study will focus on the radiating inscription in an attempt to clarify its appearance, development, usage, meaning and the decorative motifs related to it. The study at hand will be divided into two main parts; the first will present various examples of metal objects with radiating inscription and the second will analyze these examples to shed light on the artistic features of that type of ornamental inscription.

Part I:

The first group of examples includes objects of metalwork -with radiating inscriptions- attributed to sultans of the Bahari Mamluk period. The earliest example of metal work with radiating inscription is the hexagonal table of al-Nasir Muhammad (dated 728 A.H./1328 A.D). It is made of brass inlaid with gold and silver and preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo. The upper surface of the table is hexagonal in shape and its centre is occupied with concentric arrangement (fig. 1-A). The centre has a small circle bearing the word ‘Muhammad’ written in ‘naskh’ script on a pierced background. It’s surrounded with radiating inscription in kufic script that reads:  عز لمؤلانا السلطان الملوك الناصر ناصر الدنيا
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‘Glory to our lord the Sultan, al-Malik al-Nasir, Nasir al-Dunya w’l-Din, son of the sultan Qalwun’

Each two of the vertical shafts of the radiating inscription are plaited together in knots and the upper parts of the shafts are pointed. The medallion is encircled with a ribbed frame which contains lotus flowers on a pierced background.

Four of the sides of the table are also decorated with radiating inscription (fig. 1-B). Each side bears a circular arrangement of four concentric circles: the central one bears the word: محمد ‘Muhammad’ written in naskh script, surrounded by radiating inscription also in naskh script and reads:

‘Glory to our lord the Sultan, al-Malik al-Nasir, Nasir al-Dunya w’l-Din, son of the sultan Qalwun’

This circle is surrounded by a narrow circle with floral decorations and then a wide ribbed one containing lotus flowers.

Another object attributed to al-Nasir Muhammad is a brass candlestick preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo. The body of the candlestick is decorated with a wide band of thuluth inscription which is interrupted by two large medallions, with radiating inscription written in thuluth script. It reads:

‘Glory to our lord the sultan, al-Malik al-Nasir, the learned, the just, the defender (of Faith) the warrior of the frontiers Muhammad son of the Sultan Qalwun’

The centre of the medallion is occupied with a cartouche.

The candlestick of al-Nasir Muhammad in Museo Artistico Industriale in Rome was also decorated with radiating inscription (fig. 2-A). The base of the candlestick is decorated with a medallion that has a six-petaled whirling rosettes surrounded by radiating inscription on a floral background and it reads:
The horizontal band of inscription on the cylindrical body of the incense burner is also interrupted by two lobed medallions with radiating inscription written in naskh script that reads:

‘Glory to our lord the sultan, al-Malik al-Nasir, the learned the diligent the defender (of Faith) the warrior of the frontiers, the warden of the marches, Nasir al-Dunya w’l-Din, Muhammad son of Qalawun’

The radial inscriptions on both the lid and...
body were inlaid with gold and set against a floral background inlaid with silver. The centre of each medallion is occupied with a circle with the phrase: عز لعولمة السلطان ‘Glory to our lord the sultan’ and it is inlaid with gold.\(^{15}\)

Some objects decorated with radiating inscriptions bear the name of Sultan Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Qalawun (742-743 A.H./1342 AD). A metal lamp (fig. 3-A) preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo is one of these objects.\(^{16}\) The bulb of the lamp is decorated with a wide band of naskh script interrupted by three medallions with radiating inscription written in naskh script without dots and reads:\(^{17}\)

عز لعولمة السلطان الملك الناصر... the sultan, al-Malik al-Nasir.

‘Glory to our lord the sultan, al-Malik al-Nasir... the sultan, al-Malik al-Nasir’

What is unique about this lamp is that the inscriptions glorify both the sultan al-Nasir Ahmad and his father al-Nasir Muhammad.

The second object that was attributed to the same sultan and was decorated with radiating inscription is a brass tray-stand.\(^{18}\) Each of the two conical parts of the stand were decorated with two ribbed medallions with radiating inscription set on a floral background and surround the epigraphic emblem of the sultan that reads: عز لعولمة السلطان الملك الناصر ‘al-Malik al-Nasir’.\(^{19}\)

A candlestick in the Keir collection also bears the title: ‘al-Nasir’ in its radiating inscription who could be al-Nasir Muhammad or his son al-Nasir Ahmad. The body of the candlestick is decorated with a large band of naskh script against a scroll background and interrupted by two large medallions with a rosette in its centre and radiating inscriptions that read:

عز لعولمة السلطان الملك الناصر ‘Glory to our lord the sultan, al-Malik al-Nasir’.

Al-Salih Isma’il ibn Muhammad ibn Qalawun (743-746 A.H./1342-1345 AD) also had his share of metal objects with radiating inscriptions. The first object is a cylindrical container with a pointed cover\(^{21}\) preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo (fig. 3-B). The body of the container is decorated with a band of naskh inscription interrupted by three large lobed medallions bearing radiating inscription that reads:

عز لعولمة السلطان الملك الصالح العالم العادل المجاهد المرابط عمام الدنيا والدين... the sultan, al-Malik al-Salih, the learned, the diligent, the defender...
(of Faith), the warrior of the frontiers ‘Imad al-Dunya w’l-Din’

This inscription radiates from the praise of the sultan that reads: ‘Glory to our lord the Sultan’.22 The second object attributed to al-Salih Ismail is a rose water sprinkler with a bulbous body.23 The body is decorated with a band of inscription, interrupted by three large medallions with radiating inscription and reads:

‘Glory to our lord the sultan, al-Malik al-Salih ‘Imad al-Dunya w’l-Din Isma’il’

These inscriptions radiate from the central circle with the epigraphic emblem of the sultan which reads:24

Similar to the metal lamp of al-Nasir Ahmad another metal lamp was attributed to al-Kamil Sha’ban25 (746-747 A.H./ 1345-1346 AD). It followed the same tradition of the lamp of Sultan Ahmad in glorifying both the ruling sultan; al-Kamel Sha’ban, and his deceased father al-Nasir Muhamad. The bulb of the lamp was decorated on its upper part with a band of inscriptions bearing the name of al-Nasir Muhammad interrupted by small medallions with his first name. While, the lower part of the bulb is decorated with a wide band of inscriptions bearing the name of al-Kamil and interrupted with three large medallions with radiating inscription that reads:

‘Glory to our lord the sultan, al-Malik al-Kamil, the learned, the just, Seif al-Dunya w’l-Din, Sha’ban’

The centre of the medallions bears the words: ‘Glory to our lord the sultan’ written in naskh script.26

Al-Kamel Sha’ban had another object with radiating inscription which is a unique brass tray27 (fig. 4-A). It’s one of the most sumptuous of its kind because of its elaborate work and unique layout of the decoration. The whole surface of the tray is occupied with concentric circles; the central one with radiating inscription, surrounded by interlacing circles forming a large petaled flower, surrounded by a circular band of inscriptions, surrounded by another wide band of inscriptions that is broken with three medallions with radiating inscriptions. The central lobed medallion has a flower in its centre, surrounded by radiating inscription set on a floral background and reads:

‘Glory to our lord the sultan, al-Malik al-Kamil, the learned, the just, Seif al-Dunya w’l-Din, Sha’ban’

The other three medallions with radiating inscriptions bear the same text but the medallion has the epigraphic emblem in its centre and it reads: ‘al-Malik al-Kamil’. Each medallion is surrounded by a circular band of flowers and a lobed frame.28

(Fig. 4-A) Tray of Al-Kamil Sha’ban.
The well-known rose water sprinkler that was attributed to al-Nasir Hasan (748-752 A.H./1348-1351 AD and 755-762 A.H./1354-1361 AD) is also decorated with radiating inscription (fig. 4-B). Its bulbous body is decorated with a band of naskh script interrupted by three lobed medallions with radiating inscriptions in naskh script reads:

‘Glory to our lord the sultan, al-Malik al-Nasir, Nasir al-Dunya w’l-Din’

The frame of the medallion is wide and its centre is occupied by a circle containing a flower. The radiating inscription is inlaid with gold and set on a floral background inlaid with silver.

The pen box of al-Mansur Muhammad (762-764 A.H./1361-1363 AD) also bears radiating inscriptions on its interior (fig. 5-A). It bears four lobed medallions with radiating inscription set on a floral background and it reads:

‘Glory to our lord the sultan al-Malik, the learned, the diligent the just, the defender (of faith), the warrior of the frontiers’

The centre of the medallion contains a whirling rosette. Each medallion is framed with a wide lobed frame and the inscriptions are inlaid with gold.

Another object was attributed to al-Malik al-Mansur who could be al-Mansur Muhammad or al-Mansur Ali (778-783 A.H./1377-1381 AD). It’s a brass tray inlaid with silver and preserved in Victoria and Albert Museum (fig. 5-B). It followed the decorative style of the tray of al-Kamil Sha’ban. The whole surface of the tray is occupied with concentric circles; the central one with radiating inscription, surrounded by interlacing circles forming a large petaled flower, surrounded by a circular band of inscriptions, which in its turn is surrounded by another wide band of inscriptions that is broken with three medallions with radiating inscriptions too and the frame of the tray or the rim is floral.
The radiating inscription on the central medallion reads:

عز لمولانا السلطان الملك العالم العادل الغازى المجاهد

‘Glory to our lord the sultan al-Malik, the learned, the diligent, the just, the vanquisher, the defender (of Faith)’

And the radiating inscription on the three medallions reads:

عز لمولانا السلطان الملك العالم العادل الغازى المجاهد المراقب المدافع

‘Glory to our lord the sultan al-Malik, the learned, the diligent, the just, the vanquisher the defender (of Faith), the warrior of the frontiers, the warden of the marches’.

The radiating inscription is surrounded by a wide circular band of lotus flowers and a lobed frame.35

The second group of examples represents objects of metalwork -with radiating inscriptions- that belong to amirs of the Bahari Mamluk period. Among these examples is a bowl in the Aron Collection.36 The bowl has a round base which is decorated from the outside with a central whirling rosette and radiating inscriptions surrounding it. The inscription reads:

المقر العالي الأميرى العالي الملكى الناصرى

‘His exalted excellency, the lordly, the learned, the warrior of the frontiers, al-Nasiri’

The radiating inscription is set against a floral background. It’s surrounded by six pointed shapes that made the whole design look like a large flower with six petals. The petals were decorated with arabesques and between each two petals there is a whirling rosette surrounded with flying ducks.37

A lamp stand38 in the same collection also bears radiating inscription. The tray of the lamp stand is circular and slightly concave. It had a small circle in its centre surrounded by radiating inscription that reads:

المقر العالي الأميرى الكبيرى الملكى الناصرى

‘His exalted excellency, the great amir al-Malaki al-Nasiri’

The radiating naskh script is set against a floral background.39

Another object also attributed to one of the officers of al-Mailk al-Nasir is the tray preserved in The Freer Gallery of Art40 (fig. 6-A). The centre of this tray is occupied with a six-petaled rosette surrounded by radiating inscription in thuluth script. It reads:

المقر العالي الملكى العالي العادلى الملكى الناصرى

‘His exalted excellency, the lord, the high, the just, al-Malaki al-Nasiri’

Around it is a band divided into eight units, filled with large lotuses flanked by five-petaled blossoms alternating with two pairs of flying ducks.41

A cylindrical brass box (fig. 6-B) attributed to an officer of al-Malik al-Nasir was also decorated with
Radiating inscription. The lid of the cylindrical box has a six-petaled whirling rosette that is surrounded by radiating inscription in thuluth script. It reads:

‘His exalted excellency, the lord, the learned, the efficient’

The inscription is set against a floral background.

A tray stand in the Nuhad Es-Said Collection (fig. 7-A) was also attributed to an officer of al-Malik al-Nasir. Each of the two conical parts of the tray stand is decorated with a band of naskh inscription interrupted by two medallions with radiating inscriptions. The circle in the centre of each medallion contains an inscription that reads: ‘al-Malik al-Salih’ surrounded by radiating inscriptions in naskh script that reads:

‘The generous authority the high the lordly, the great amir, the conqueror, the defender (of the...
A cylindrical brass box attributed to Aydemir al-Ashrafi was decorated with radiating inscription. The centre of the lid is occupied with the emblem of the owner. It’s a three-fielded emblem with a cup charged with a napkin in the middle field and a red cup in the lower field. The blazon or emblem of the amir is surrounded by radiating inscription (fig. 13) that reads:

‘His excellency, the most noble, the high, the lordly, the royal, the well-served, ‘Izz al-Din Aydemir al-Ashrafi, the governor of the noble province of Aleppo’

The inscription is surrounded, on the bevel, by a circle of flying ducks, flowers and whorls.

The ninth example is a bronze mirror preserved in Topkapi Sarayi Museum (fig. 8). The example is unique in bearing the name of the amir, to whom the

The tray of amir Tybugha preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo is another example of the use of radiating inscription on objects made for amirs. The layout of the decorations on the tray is very similar to that of the tray of al-Kamel Sha’ban. It is decorated with concentric circles; the central one bears graffito surrounded by radiating inscription, surrounded by interlacing circles forming the shape of petals, surrounded by a wide band of inscription interrupted by three medallions. The difference between this tray and that of Sha’ban is that the radiating inscription was used only in the central medallion and not in the other three medallions and the inscription in the wide band is set inside lobed compartments.
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A tray was made, in the central circle of the tray. This circle contains the word: ‘Alaa al-Din’. The radiating inscription surrounding it reads:

‘The honorable authority, the high, the lordly, the royal, the well-served, the learned, the efficient, the just, the treasure house (of excellence), the helper, the savior, made by the master Muhammad ibn al-Waziri’.53

The circular band around the previous one contains prowling animals interrupted by four whirling rosettes. It’s surrounded by a wide circular band containing circles with the signs of the Zodiac and their associated planets.54

The third group of objects represents metal objects dating to the Circassian Mamluk period. One of these examples is the remains of a metal lamp attributed to Sultan Khushqadam (865-872 A.H./1461-1467 AD).55 The lamp bulb is decorated with a wide band of inscriptions interrupted by three medallions with radiating inscription that read:

‘Glory to our lord the sultan al-Malik, the learned, the diligent, the just, al-Malik al-Ashraf’

The centre of the medallion contains the phrase: ‘al-Malik al-Ashraf’ which is written in naskh script.56

The second example is a basin in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo.57 The basin is decorated with a wide band of naskh script interrupted by four lobed medallions; two of which bear radiating inscription and the other two have lotus flowers. The radiating inscription is written in naskh script and reads:

‘Glory to our lord the sultan al-Malik, the learned, the diligent, the just, the warrior at the frontiers, al-Malik al-Zahir Abu Said Khushqadam, May his victory be glorious’

(Fig. 9) Center Styles: 1.

The third example is a lamp of Sultan Al-Ghawri (906-922 A.H./1501-1516 AD) which is also decorated with radiating inscription.59 The lower tray of the lamp is decorated with a central large star shape surrounded by fourteen circles, four of which contain radiating inscription. It’s written in naskh script without dots and reads:60

‘Glory to our lord the sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf Abu al-Nasr Qanswa al-Ghuri, may his victory be glorious’
Part II: Analysis

From the above mentioned examples we can realize that ornamental radiating inscriptions were widely used to decorate metal objects during the Mamluk period. We have no evidence that this style of inscription was used earlier than the reign of al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun, particularly his third reign 709-741 A.H./1310-1340 AD.

The design:

In all the examples of radiating inscriptions, the words were arranged inside a circular shape or a medallion and the shafts of the letters, which were elongated, pointed towards the centre. The comparison between the centers of these compositions betrays five main trends or styles:

- In the first style (fig. 9), the centre of the medallion contains a circle with the name of the object owner. Al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun is the only sultan whose name 'Muhammad' is written in the centre of the radiating inscription on his hexagonal table and one of his candlesticks.

- In the second style (fig. 10), the centre of the medallion contains a circle with rosette or a whirling rosette. The whirling rosette was more frequently used. It was sometimes a six-petaled whirling rosette such as that on al-Nasir Muhammad’s candlestick in Museo Industriale in Rome, the bottom of a bowl of one of his amirs and the lid of a cylindrical box of another. Moreover, the simple flower was used in the centre of radiating inscription such as that on the centre of the tray of al-Kamil Sha'ban and the rose water sprinkler of al-Nasir Hassan.

- In the third style (fig. 11), the centre of the medallion have a circle with three fields; the upper and the lower are plain while the middle contains the phrase: ‘Glory to our Lord, the Sultan’. That style was used on the incense burner of al-Nasir Muhammad, the cylindrical box of al-Salih Isma’il, the lamp of al-Kamil Sha’ban, the candlestick of...
an officer of al-Nasir Hasan72 and the lamp of Khushqadam.73

- In the fourth style (fig. 12), the centre of the medallion contains the epigraphic emblem of the sultan. It is in the form of a circle divided into three fields; the upper and lower are plain while the middle contains the title of the sultan. It’s worth noting that whether the owner of the object was a sultan or an amir, the title inscribed in the centre was that of the ruling sultan. The title ‘al-Malik al-Nasir’ was inscribed in the centre of the radiating inscription on the tray stand of Sultan Ahmad,74 while the title ‘al-Malik al-Salih’ was inscribed on the rose water sprinkler of al-Salih Isma’il75 and on the tray stand of an amir.76 In the same treatment, the title ‘al-Malik al-Kamil’ was inscribed on the tray of al-Kamil Sha’ban77 and ‘al-Malik al-Ashraf’ on the basin of the Qaytbay’s wife.78 In the latter example, the metalworker followed the traditions of that style rather than using the common form of the epigraphic emblem of Qaytbay.79

The only exception of that rule is the use of the title of an amir, who was called ‘Alaa al-Din’, in the centre of the radiating inscription on his tray.80

- In the fifth style (fig. 13), the radiating inscription contains in its centre the emblem of the owner. The example of that style could be seen on the lid of the cylindrical box of Aydumer which contains a cup in its middle field.

The Inscriptions

Naskh or thuluth scripts were generally adopted in radiating inscriptions, while kufic script was used only once in the radiating inscription on the top of the hexagonal table of al-Nasir Muhammad. In that example, plaited kufic was adopted and the letters alif and lam were knotted. The upper top of each shaft takes the form of a pointed spear. The single strokes were also knotted at one side of the shaft, except for the letter lam of the word li-mawlana which bears two knots and ends with two pointed ends. (fig. 9)
The naskh and thuluth scripts used in the rest of the examples are extremely creative. The shafts of the letters are elongated and point towards the centre of the medallion. The number of strokes, or shafts, is usually an even number varying between eighteen up to forty-eight. Sometimes an additional letter, alif, is added at the end of the text to form an upright stroke that matches the lam of li-mawlana at the beginning of the text. This practice is used in the radiating inscription of the incense burner of al-Nasir Muhammad, his candlestick in Museo Industriale in Rome and the cylindrical box of al-Salih Isma’il.

The shafts of the letters alif, lam, taa, kaf occupied most of the space inside the medallion, leaving only its lower part for the rest of the letters. Sometimes, important words, usually the name of the sultan, were written above the rest of the words intersecting with the strokes. The word ‘Muhammad’ intersects the strokes of the radiating inscription of the incense burner of al-Nasir Muhammad and the same practice was used with the word ‘Sha’ban’ on the tray of al-Kamil Sha’ban and the word ‘Aydumer’ on the lid of a cylindrical box. Moreover, words were sometimes crowded in part the text such as the word ‘Qalwun’ in the radiating inscription on the sides of the hexagonal table of al-Nasir Muhammad. Also the word ‘seif’ was crowded with ‘al-Dunia wa al-Din’ on the tray of al-Kamil Sha’ban.

Not only are the layouts inventive, but also are the letter forms themselves. The eye of the letter sad, for example, was pierced by the upright of the letter alif like a ring on a skewer. This practice could be seen in the word ‘al-Nasir’ on the hexagonal table, the incense burner and the candlestick of al-Nasir Muhammad.

The analysis of the texts of the radiating inscriptions revealed several facts. First: all the radiating inscriptions on metal objects made for a sultan started with ‘Glory to our lord, the Sultan al-Malik…’ followed by various titles of the sultan. No particular titles were chosen and no particular order was adopted for the titles. Probably the metalworker chose titles that could provide a large number of strokes -usually alif and lam- such as al-‘alim, al-‘amil, al-‘adil…. Titles added to al-Dunya w’l-Din were also frequently used such as ‘Seif al-Dunya w’l-Din’, ‘Nasir al-Dunya w’l-Din’ and ‘Imad al-Dunya w’l-Din’. The name of the sultan was not necessarily mentioned. In few cases the name of the sultan together with the name of his deceased father were mentioned in the text such as the radiating inscription on both the top and sides of the hexagonal table of al-Nasir Muhammad and that on his incense burner.

Second: the radiating inscription on metal objects owned by amirs or other dignitaries could be classified into two types of inscriptions. The first represents inscriptions that glorified the sultan not the owner and in that case the text started with the phrase ‘Glory to our lord the Sultan al-Malik…’. That could be seen on the basin in the third group of examples. The second type of inscriptions included honorific titles of the owner himself that started with ‘His exalted excellency’ or ‘The most Noble and High Excellency’ or other titles depending on the rank of the owner. Although the text glorifies the owner, the centre of the radiating inscription could be the prayer for the ruling sultan: ‘Glory to our lord the Sultan’ or his title.

The name of the amir was not mentioned in most of the metal objects with radiating inscription.

The frame and related motifs

The medallions with radiating inscriptions were either framed with a simple circular frame
or a polylobed one. Sometimes the ribbon of the outline is twisted at the top and bottom of the medallion and connected with the upper and lower bands of decorations.

Some motifs appeared together with the radiating inscriptions such as the lotus flower. The flower pattern was repeated in a wide circular band that surrounded the frame of the medallion on the top and sides of the hexagonal table of al-Nasir Muhammad, two of his candelsticks,\footnote{in addition to the tray of Freer Gallery.} The lotus flowers had eight petals and the flowers were arranged facing inwards and outwards alternately and were connected with scrolls (fig.9). Generally speaking, the use of lotus flowers represents one of the Far Eastern, particularly Chinese, influences that left a marked imprint on the flora of the Islamic decoration.\footnote{The lotus flower brought by the Mongols to Iran were later introduced to Syria and Egypt and made their appearance on metalwork in Egypt at the beginning of the fourteenth century.} The lotus flowers survived, together with other motifs, until the end of the Mamluk period.

The second motif that appeared together with some medallions with radiating inscriptions is the flying ducks. The ducks were represented in pairs, usually affronted and with their wings spread. That motif was seen around the central medallion on the tray of al-Kamil Sha’ban and around the central medallion of the tray in Freer Gallery and in both cases, the ducks were alternating with flowers.\footnote{The flying ducks were also seen close to the radiating inscriptions, not surrounding it, on other metal objects such as the top of the hexagonal table of al-Nasir Muhammad and the rose water sprinkler of al-Nasir Hasan.} The flying ducks were also seen close to the radiating inscriptions, not surrounding it, on other metal objects such as the top of the hexagonal table of al-Nasir Muhammad and the rose water sprinkler of al-Nasir Hasan.

The association between the Qalawun family and the flying ducks was discussed by many scholars. Some scholars wrongly considered the duck one of the emblems of Qalawun family, based on the suggestion that the word Qalawun itself means duck in Turkish. But other scholars proved that the representation of ducks was never associated with the name ‘Qalawun’. The ducks were also represented in various forms and numbers which deny that they were an emblem. Moreover, the representations of ducks were used before and after the Qalawun family’s reign and that proves that it was a mere decorative element and has no specific association with the Qalawun family.

The third motif that was frequently seen with radiating inscriptions is the rosette which was used in the center of the radiating inscriptions. The rosette was among the plants that were used as emblems such as the five-petaled rosette adopted by the Rasulids of Yemen and the six-petaled rosette adopted by the Qalawun family.\footnote{But none of the rosettes that were used in the center of the radiating inscriptions could be considered an emblem. They were either a six-petaled whirling rosette or an eight-petaled one, as previously discussed. Even the rosette on the tray of al-Kamil Sha’ban and that on the rose water sprinkler of al-Nasir Hasan were both with five petals and therefore cannot represent the emblem of the Qalawun family.} The astrological images and representations of the Signs of the Zodiac were present in Islamic art since the twelfth century and were more popular in the eastern regions extending from the Jazira to Khurasan.\footnote{They generally signify protection for the owner of the object in addition to good fortune.} But it...
is obvious that this was not a theme frequently associated with radiating inscriptions.

The meaning of radiating inscriptions: symbolism or decoration

Radiating inscription with elongated letter shafts pointing to the center of a circular medallion evokes the image of the sun. The circular center resembles the sun disk and the elongated shafts of the letters resemble the rays of the sun. That visual effect was emphasized in many cases by the use of gold for inlaying the inscription, contrasting with the use of silver for other decorative elements on the object.

Some scholars suggested a symbolic meaning for the radiating inscriptions. Eva Baer suggested that the radiant letters which spell out the names and titles of the sultan were symbols intended to call up the light that emanated from the ruling personage.106 Esin Atil added that the circular inscriptions, rosettes, lotuses and ducks are associated with solar symbolism. She suggested that those motifs may have had astrological meanings and were used as charms for their magical and protective values.107 James Allen agreed with Atil in considering the lotuses and ducks as solar symbols.108 As for the radiating inscription itself, he suggested that the artist and the patron desired the viewer to conceive some sort of similarity between the ruler and the sun. The sun disk bears the first titles of the sultan and symbolizes him as the sun.109

To the sultan’s officers of state, to his mamluks and all who were ushered into his august presence, such objects with radiating inscriptions proclaimed the presence before them of the Sun himself.110 Allen went even further when he mentioned that al-Nasir Muhammad attributed to himself divine eminence by using the radiating inscription. He explained that in the circular inscription in the Quran box, al-Nasir Muhammad God entitles himself ‘al-Malik al-Qudus’ and in the radiating inscriptions on his objects the sultan entitles himself ‘al-Malik al-Nasir’.

Therefore, the sultan deliberately was setting himself and his own greatness against that of his creator.111

In fact, I disagree with the above-mentioned points of view suggesting symbolic meaning to radiating inscriptions or suggesting intended equation between the ruler and the sun. This disagreement is based on certain reasons which are:

1- The sun motif was used in Islamic art as early as the twelfth or early thirteenth century in Iran112 and was used on Mamluk metal objects produced in Egypt or Syria by the end of the thirteenth century and during the fourteenth century.113 It was also used at the bottom of many metal objects surrounded with fish.114 That means, the sun motif was frequently used in Islamic art and its appearance was prior to the radiating inscriptions and its usage continued till the fourteenth century. The shape of the sun motif made it appropriate to be used as a central motif around which decorations were arranged in circular bands. Therefore, the radiating inscriptions could have been an alternative to the sun motif. It must have been an innovative motif that looks like the sun but using letters for its rays. It must have gained appreciation too and that explains its spread together with the still existing pictorial motif of the sun.

2- The association between rosettes, lotuses and ducks and solar symbolism is not proven in Islamic art. Neither Atil, nor Allen who adopted that idea explained that association or mentioned what these motifs symbolize. Moreover, if these motifs were truly associated with solar symbolism, they should have been present in all objects with radiating inscription. But on the contrary, they were present only on few of them, disproving such association.

3- The idea that al-Nasir Muhammad was setting himself and his greatness against that of his
Creator is denied based on another Quranic text on the same Quran box. The box bears the verse:

\[
\text{"ئِلَّا الْهُوَ الْقَابُلُ فِي الْمَلَكِ وَبَعُودُ المَلَكِ مَنْ نَسَى وَلَنْ تَضُرُّهُ إِلَّا مَنْ قَدَرَ."
\]

This Quranic text asserts the omnipotence of God and that only God gives, or takes, sovereignty. That means the ruler is assuring the ultimate power to God and not to himself.

Moreover, many other sultans used their titles in the center of the radiating inscription such as al-Malik al-Salih, al-Malik al-Nasir and al-Malik al-Ashraf. And its hard to believe that they all were setting themselves against God.

4- The above mentioned opinions were probably based on the study of one or few objects with radiating inscriptions. But the present study proved that radiating inscriptions were used on objects made for sultans, amirs of various ranks and other dignitaries. Therefore, it’s hard to believe that they all were setting themselves against God.

If the idea of associating a great sultan -such as al-Nasir Muhammad- with the sun could be accepted, how can we explain that association for a young sultan who ruled for a year or two?115

And how can we explain such association for an amir? And if the amir was intending to associate himself with the sun, emphasizing his personal prestige, why would he write the name of the ruling sultan in the center of the radiating inscription?

The answers to such questions would probably lead us to believe that the radiating inscription was an ornamental inscription that looks like the sun motifs but carries no symbolic meaning. It was probably appreciated by al-Nasir Muhammad and frequently represented on his metal objects. His successors; his sons and grandsons, followed his tradition and used the same motif to decorate their metal objects. Also high officials, who were generally fascinated to imitate their ruler, followed the same practice. The radiating inscription was probably a fashionable motif at that time. Moreover, the workshops usually produced objects for the sultans together with other objects, which were mass produced ones, to fulfill the demand of the high officers.116 Such workshops used similar motifs for the objects of the sultan and those of the amirs. The radiating inscriptions were less frequently used during the Circassian Mamluk period but they never disappeared.

To sum up, the radiating inscription is an ornamental inscription that appeared in the fourteenth century and continued to be used till the beginning of the sixteenth century. It was adopted to decorate metal objects of sultans and amirs. The radiating inscription was set inside a circular or polylobed medallion and the shafts of the letters were elongated and point to the central circle which bears a rosette, the title of the sultan or a praise for him or the emblem of the amir. The naskh or thuluth scripts were generally adopted for the radiating inscription.

Notes

1 A. Walch, Calligraphy in Arts of the Muslim World (New York, 1979), 22.
2 Doris Behrens-Abouseif, Beauty in Arabic Culture (Princeton, 1999), 139.
3 Doris Abouseif, Beauty in Arabic Culture, 140.
4 Eva Baer, Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art (Albany, 1983), 209.
5 Sheila Blair, Islamic Inscriptions (Edinburgh, 1998), 117-118.
6 Baer, Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art, 209; Blair, Islamic Inscriptions, 118.
7 Baer, Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art, 211.
8 David Rice, ‘Studies in Islamic Metal work IV’, BSOAS XV/3 (1953), 498; Geza Fehervari, Islamic Metalwork of the Eighth to the Fifteenth Century in the Kier
Heba Saad


9 Height 70 cm., diam. 39 cm.


11 Height 34 cm., diam. 30 cm.

12 Wafiyaa 'Izzi, ‘Objects Bearing the Name Of An-Nasir Muhammad and his Successors’, Collque international sur l’histoire du Caire (Cairo, 1969), 235-236, pl. 1. She probably means by the cartouche the epigraphic emblem of the sultan which was غـرـمـلـاـةـ السـلـطـان. But the reading proved to be al-'adil not al-Ghazi, See also: عبد الروؤف، مسعود، الفن الإسلامي، هيئة الآثار المصرية (القاهرة، 1983)، 14.

13 D. Rice, ‘Studies IV’, 497, fig.8, but he didn’t mention the reading of the radiating inscription.

It’s worth mentioning that Rachel ward mentioned another candlestick attributed to al-Nasir Muhammad the base which was also decorated with two circular medallions with radiating inscription. The centre of each medallion contains the word ‘Muhammad’, surrounded with radiating inscription. Followed by a circular band of lotus flowers: Rachel Ward, Islamic Metalwork, (1993), 26, n.14.

14 It’s made of brass and inlaid with gold, silver and a black compound, h. 36.5 cm., diam. 16.5 cm.

15 Wiet, Objets en cuivre, 204, n.195; James Allen, Islamic Metalwork: the Nuhad Es-Said Collection (London, 1982), 86, n.15; Baer, Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art, fig.170; Islamic Ornament, fig. 89.

16 Dimensions of the bulb: h. 50 cm., diam. 40 cm.


18 Height of the stand 29cm, diam.31cm.

19 Wiet, Objets en cuivre, 160,n.445, pl. LXXIV but he didn’t mention the text of the radiating inscription.

20 G. Fehervari, The Keir Collection, 129, n.159, pl.56.

21 A brass cylindrical container inlaid with silver and gold, h. 26cm., diam. 17cm.

22 'Izzi, Collque international sur l’histoire du Caire, 237, pl. 2. 4. but she didn’t mention the text of the radiating inscription.

23 A brass qum-qum, h. 22cm. and diam. 8cm. It is preserved in the Museum of Islamic art in Cairo.

24 'Izzi, Collque international sur l’histoire du Caire, 238, pl. 6.

25 A mosque lamp preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art, h.36 cm., diam. 37cm.

26 Wiet, Objets en cuivre, 110-111, n. 4082, pl. X.

27 A brass tray inlaid with silver and gold and its diameter is 96 cm.

28 Ward, Islamic Metalwork, 9, pl.1.

29 Brass rose water sprinkler inlaid with gold and silver, h. 22.5 cm., diam.9 cm. It’s preserved in the Museum of Islamic art in Cairo.


31 It’s preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo and made of brass inlaid with gold and silver. Its height is 8cm., w. 9cm., l. 31cm.

32 Islamic Art in Egypt, 89, n. 80; The Arts of Islam, 194, n. 224; Wiet, Objets en cuivre, 123-125, pl. III, IV. But Wiet mentioned the text of the radiating inscription as غـرـمـلـاـةـ السـلـطـان السـلـتـان الـعـالـم الـعـالـم الـفاـزـي. See also: عبد الروؤف، مسعود، الفن الإسلامي، هيئة الآثار المصرية (القاهرة، 1983)، 14.

33 Diameter of the tray 78.8 cm.


35 Allan, Sha’ban, Barquq, note n. 1, 92.

36 Cast quaternary alloy inlaid with silver. h. 9.8 cm. and rim diam 17.3 cm.


38 Quaternary alloy inlaid with silver, h. 29.8cm., diam. of tray 12.9 cm.

39 Allan, The Aron collection, 90, n. 11.

40 Brass tray inlaid with silver and gold, diam. 28.9 cm, h. 3.2 cm.
A brass tray stand inlaid with silver, gold and a black compound, h.22.6 cm., diam. 24.4 cm.

A brass cylindrical box inlaid with silver and gold and preserved in the Kuwait National Museum. h. 11.6 cm., diam. 10.6cm.

A cylinder brass box inlaid with silver and gold and preserved in Louvre, h. 17.6cm, diam. 15 cm.

A bronze mirror inlaid with gold and silver. It was first preserved in Victoria and Albert Museum and now in Topkapi Museum and its diameter is 78.8 cm.

A brass tray was originally in the Collection of Yousif Kamal and its diameter is 45 cm. Wiet, *Objets en cuivre*, 161, n.446, pl. LXXIII. But he didn’t mention the text of the radiating inscription.

Wiet suggested the year 736 A.H. as a date for this tray but the comparison between it and the tray of Sha’ban, which reveals clear influence on the second, suggests that it was not made earlier than 746 A.H.

Cylindrical brass box inlaid with silver and gold and preserved in Louvre, h. 17.6cm, diam. 15 cm. Aydemir held the post of dawadar under al-Malik al-Nasir Hassan and became the governor of Aleppo in 773 A.H./1371 AD: Rice, *Studies IV*, 490.

A bronze mirror inlaid with gold and silver. It was first preserved in Victoria and Albert Museum and now in Topkapi Museum and its diameter is 78.8 cm.

He is Ala’ al-Din Altanbugha (d. 1342 AD), viceroy of Syria and cup-bearer to Sultan al-Nasir Muhamad. Hillenbrand, *Art and Architecture*, pl. 119.


The height of the bulb is 46 cm. and its diameter is 59.

A brass tray with a height of 21 cm. and diam. 45cm. The basin is attributed to Khuan of sultan Qaytbay who must be Fatema bnt Khas Bek the only wife of the sultan.

A bronze lamp preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, its height is 142cm and its diameter is 85cm. The diameter of the tray is 108cm.

See texts in page 98-99.

See fig. 2-B and fig.11.

See fig. 4-A.

See fig. 13

See fig. 1-B and the same practice could be seen on the incense burner in fig. 11.

See fig. 4-A

Eva Baer, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Cairo, 2006), 337.

See fig. 1, 2-B, figs. 10 and 11.

See page 105.
92 The candlestick of an officer of al-Malik al-Nasir; See fig. 7-B
93 The tray stand of an officer of al-Malik al-Nasir but the centre of the radiating inscription bears the title ‘al-Malik al-Salih’ who must be the ruling sultan when the stand was made; See fig. 7-A.
94 See fig. 2-B, 3-B, 4-B.
95 See fig. 2-A for the candlestick of Museo Artistico Industriale at Rome and another candlestick in: Ward, *Islamic Metalwork* , fig. 14.
96 See fig. 6-A.
98 *Simple Calyx Ornament in Islamic Art* (1957), 15.
100 See fig. 4-A and 6-A.
101 See fig. 1-A and 4-B.
103 Ahmad Abd-al-Rahim, al-Tawakul, 92–89; محمد عبد الوؤود, الكتابات والخارف, 253–251.
113 Nurban Atasoy et al., *The Art of Islam* (1990), 128; Carboni, *The Zodiac and their associated planets*, 8, 12, 14, 40.
114 Baer, ‘Fish-pond’ ornament on Persian and Mamluk Metal Vessels’, *BSOAS* 31, 1968, pl. VI, VII, VIII, IX, XI.
115 Such as al-Nasir Ahmad, al-Kamil Sha’ban and al-Mansur Muhammad.
116 That explains the lack of the name of the patron in most of the objects made for amirs.