

A GIFT OF LIGHT: GLASS LAMPS AND THEIR ILLUMINATION OF THE MAMLUK
STATE

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I. Introduction

Housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Islamic Art collection is an ornate glass lamp from Egypt (fig. 1). Although not currently on display at the museum's physical location in New York City, it is available for online viewing on its website.¹¹ It is dated between 1329 and 1335; when this is taken into consideration with its Egyptian origin, the lamp can be interpreted as a Mamluk object, and can be placed into historical and cultural contexts as such. Made of blown glass and adorned with enamel and gilding, it is as much of an aesthetic object as it is a functional one.



Figure 1

¹¹Accessed at <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/447006>, September 2021. The Metropolitan Museum's Islamic Art collection contains several preserved Mamluk lamps, of which this one is available for online viewing through the museum's Open Access Policy.

Much of its decorative program consists of bands of inscriptions in Arabic that circle its neck and body, and it is the nature of these inscriptions that compelled me to continue studying it. On this particular lamp — referred to as the Mosque Lamp of Amir Qawsun — the enameled script praises its namesake, a member of the Mamluk court and patron of the mosque in which the lamp was hung. Also present is the royal emblem of Amir Qawsun’s office, in addition to a verse from the Qur’an known as the Light Verse. I wondered if this lamp was singular in its design and patronage; a search of the rest of the Metropolitan’s collection, as well as the Islamic art departments of other institutions, revealed a substantial number of similar lamps from the same time period and geographic region. Most, if not all, are made in the same style: a round body with a flaring neck and bands of inscription executed in enamel against patterns of non-figural imagery and natural motifs placed directly on the glass. Where they really differed was in the nature of their decorative programs and inscriptions. Based on these differences, I categorized Mamluk lamps into three types: those that contain Mamluk court emblems and the Verse of Light; those with heraldic devices and Qur’an verses different from the Light Verse; and those with royal insignias and non-Qur’anic inscriptions.

Existing scholarship and research on Mamluk glass lamps that I have encountered thus far emphasize their significance as material remnants of the sultanate; in an overview of Islamic glass-making practices throughout history, they are described as objects intended for illumination and to serve as status symbols for members of court.² This conception is echoed by most scholars², and I have found little to no writing that focuses on the intentionality of the decorative programs of these objects, or their social and cultural implications. I thus seek to explore the role these lamps

² Stefano Carboni, Eros Baldiserra, “Glass from Islamic Lands,” *Quaderni Di Studi Arabi*, vol. 20–2. Accessed through the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Publications, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/enag/hd_enag.htm, January 2021

played as objects of meaning, symbolism, and representation while reiterating their practical and material nature. As vessels of both illumination and transmission these lamps and their decorative programs can offer much insight into the spiritual, cultural, and sociopolitical nuances that informed Mamluk sovereignty, and I elucidate the ways this is accomplished by focusing on both the physical and figurative qualities of the bands of inscription present in their decoration. In the analysis of the lamps that comprise this essay, I present three primary chapters that focus on individual lamps as case studies; each lamp embodies one of the three decorative schemes mentioned previously. After conducting a visual analysis, I discuss the implications of each of the three decorative schemes and the meaning they convey via their respective lamps. Other lamps are also discussed in each chapter to serve as supplementary and comparative material to the argument I make for each primary object. Incorporated throughout the essay are sections on the history of the Mamluk sultanate, the development of their art and aesthetic, and court culture and customs. These are intended to further contextualize the use and existence of the lamps. The overarching argument that I present entails a discussion of how each of the three decorative modes can be equated to an approach taken by members of the state to reiterate their presence and authority through public acts of patronage; establishing state power in spiritual settings; and establishing presence in secular settings.

I. The Light Verse and Mamluk Heraldry

The Mamluk Sultanate (AD 1250-1517) came into being following a period of discord and the weakening of its predecessors, the Ayyubids (1171-1260). The Ayyubid court utilized a system of enslavement to populate its military; the soldiers, known as *mamluks*, were young men of Turkic

descent whose formative years were spent training for military careers.³ The name Mamluk is Arabic for “*slave of,*” though soldiers were not enslaved in the traditional sense of the term; once they completed training, they were paid and often performed civil duties. Soldiers could also be released from their duties and assume positions in the court hierarchy.⁴ Thus a Mamluk influence in state affairs was already gaining momentum by 1250 AD; during the next decade, in the aftermath of the Seventh Crusade and attempted invasions by Mongol forces, a loose confederacy of free Mamluk soldiers was able to overthrow the crumbling Ayyubid dynasty and establish their own government. As new sovereigns in the Islamic world, Mamluk sultans and emirs had to establish their legitimacy and authority. One way this was achieved was through the cultivation of a new visual language. A distinct Mamluk aesthetic was built on existing Ayyubid practices and artistic techniques, which emphasized the decorative arts and purposeful ornamentation. Textiles, metalwork, and glassware became ubiquitous in addition to the construction of monumental public edifices.⁵



Figure 2

³ Robert Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate, 1250-1382*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.)

⁴ Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate, 1250-1382*.

⁵ Suzan Yalman. “The Art of the Mamluk Period (1250–1517).” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.) http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/maml/hd_maml.htm, accessed October 2021

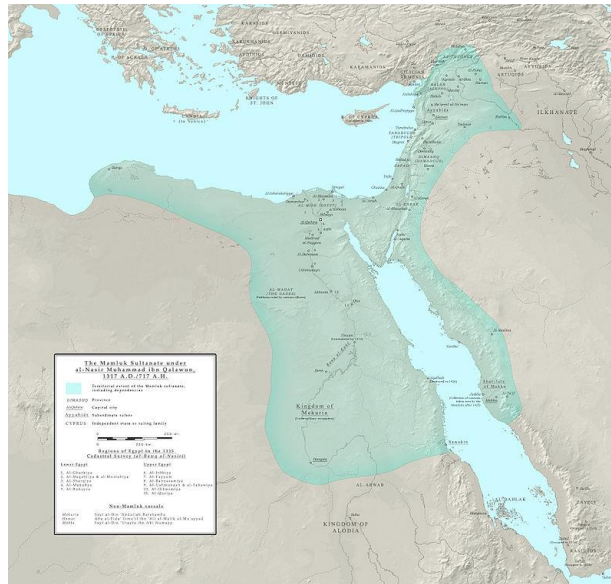


Figure 3

Glassware in particular experienced a sort of renaissance in Egypt and Syria; enameled and gilded glass became prized and took on many forms, most conspicuously as lamps. Glass lamps usually illuminated the interiors of mosques, schools, hospitals, and tombs, and almost always resembled a rotund bowl or vase with a wide, flaring neck and a small foot or base. The composition of glass used typically included soda, lime, and silica, which in turn consisted of the elements sodium, calcium, oxygen, and silicon.⁶ Syrian and Egyptian artisans excelled at blowing the glass into shape and then applying enamel and gilding. Most enamels present on Mamluk lamps were colored red, yellow, or blue; these were composed of hematite (an iron compound), lazurite (a silicate mineral), and a mixture of lead and tin, respectively.⁷ The glass bodies of lamps tended to be left uncolored, while the enamel was applied to a range of epigraphic and decorative elements.

⁶ Marilyn Jenkins. "Islamic Glass: A Brief History." *Bulletin - Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 44, no. 2, pp.9-10 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1968).

⁷ Johanna Salvant et al., "Investigation of an Enameled Glass Mosque Lamp: A 13th–14th-Century Mamluk Example or 19th-Century European Version?," *Heritage Science* 4, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-016-0073-6>. Accessed February 2022

Lamps were usually fashioned from molten glass that was arranged on one end of a blowpipe; craftsmen would then shape it without manipulation in a technique known as free-blowing. Glassblowing had been in practice in western Asia and the Mediterranean since before Islamic times, and continued to be developed in the medieval period. The evolution of the shape and style of Mamluk lamps can be seen in the multitude of objects that have been collected and preserved from medieval Egypt.⁸ An example in the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin from the 9th century exhibits an extended body that tapers to a separately attached stem⁹; it is completely colorless and free of decoration, and somewhat resembles a goblet (fig. 4).



Figure 4

⁸ C. Lilyquist, R. H. Brill. “Studies in Early Egyptian Glass. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, n.d. doi:10.1086/468586. Accessed February 2022

⁹ Lilyquist and Brill, “Studies in Early Egyptian Glass”

Lamps begin to show the characteristic three-part design from the 10th century onwards; another one kept in the Islamische Kunst Museum's collection looks nearly identical to Mamluk lamps, with a flared neck and rotund body, in addition to attached handles through which chains would have been looped (fig. 5). This form became ubiquitous in most architectural settings in the coming centuries, especially in Egypt.¹⁰



Figure 5

¹⁰ Lilyquist and Brill, "Studies in Early Egyptian Glass"

The lamp at the Metropolitan Museum that first sparked my interest in these objects is titled the *Mosque Lamp of Amir Qawsun*. It is dated between 1329 and 1335 AD, and bears the signature of its maker Ali ibn Muhammad al-Barmaki on its base. The lamp stands almost 36 centimeters tall, and is a little over 26 centimeters in diameter at its widest point. The decorative program may be divided into three sections, each corresponding to the neck, body, and base, respectively. The neck itself consists of three horizontal bands encompassing its entire circumference; the upper and lower bands contain a repetitive pattern of arabesques and floral motifs in a shade darker than the tint of the glass, while the central panel, known as an epigraphic band, contains an inscription and an emblem. The epigraphic band is colored with blue enamel, while the text is left colorless for contrast. The emblem is that of a cup set in a rondel surrounded by the same interlocking floral pattern seen in the upper and lower sections of the neck. When translated from Arabic, the inscription reads¹¹:

*That which was made for his excellency, the exalted, the lord, the royal, the well-served
Sayf al-Din Qawsun, the Cupbearer of al-Malik al-Nasir*

The body also contains its own epigraphic band, but here the blue enamel is placed on the script itself against the glass background. This is interspersed with what appear to be singular flowers of some sort, done in yellow and red enamel. The script is the beginning of the 35th verse of the 24th chapter of the Qur'an, known to many as the Light Verse. Translated from Arabic, it reads in part:

¹¹ Retrieved from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/447006>. Accessed September 2021; original Arabic text was not available for any of this lamp's inscriptions in the catalogue entry for this object.

*God is the light of the heavens and the earth, the likeness of his Light is as a wick-holder
[wherein is a light (the light in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star)]*

The verse is interspersed with rhomboid segments containing no color or script; these are reserved for suspending chains, and there are six such spaces around the circumference of the lamp's body. Between the neck and body, and immediately above the body, are small rondels and geometric arabesques emphasized in blue enamel, and these form a repeating pattern around the top of the body against the all-over floral pattern already present on the glass (fig. 6)



Figure 6

The foot of the lamp tapers from the body to form a short base. It continues the repeating floral pattern seen in the other sections, and also contains arabesques placed at intervals around the circumference of the base. These motifs contain some enamel coloring in yellow, blue, and red that is minimal and contrasts with the uncolored glass and patterning. The Arabic inscription around the base is colorless and almost indistinguishable from other designs. It reads:

The work of the poor slave [of God] Ali ibn Muhammad al-Barmaki, may God safeguard him.

According to the dedicatory inscription around the neck of the lamp, its patron was Sayf al-Din Qawsun, an *emir* (or prince) who served under three Mamluk sultans: al-Nasir Muhammad, al-Mansur Abu Bakr, and al-Ashraf Kujuk¹². The lamp was made in the time of al-Nasir Muhammad's third reign (who was sultan with interruptions between 1293 and 1294, 1299-1309, and 1310-1341), during which Qawsun was the royal Cupbearer at court. Historian Jo Van Steenberg notes that he was originally from present-day Mongolia and traveled to Egypt as a merchant, where he came into contact with Sultan Muhammad and joined his court as a *mamluk*, or slave. Historical records show that afterwards, the sultan promoted Qawsun to the position of royal cupbearer, which then led to his becoming an emir. As an emir, Qawsun also became commander of a division of troops under the sultan¹³. The sources indicate that the sultan was quite partial to Qawsun, treating him almost like a son; this allowed him to function as a face of the empire in public, which is significant given his Mongol origins, and the capital of the empire being in Cairo.

As a public figure and member of the court, Amir Qawsun integrated himself into the culture of his newfound home. This included engaging in acts of philanthropy for the common good, and dedicating spaces of healing and worship, among others. Public philanthropy was undertaken by members of the court during their respective administrations; their generosity typically took the form of an architectural commission, such as mosques, *madrasas* (a school

¹² Jo Van Steenberg. "Caught between Heredity and Merit: The Amir Qūṣūn and the Legacy of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn (d. 1341)." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 78, no. 3 (2015): 429–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24692223>. Accessed November 2021

¹³ Van Steenberg, "Caught between Heredity and Merit: The Amir Qūṣūn and the Legacy of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn (d. 1341)."

dedicated to the teaching of the Qur'an and/or Islamic theology that was usually joined to a mosque), tombs, hospitals, and hospice centers. These buildings were constructed as the result of a *waqf*. A *waqf* as a “charitable and religious trust” with both political and pious dimensions. An amount of land or an establishment could be set aside such that any compensation or income earned from the use of these places could then be put towards charity. The guidelines for the trust and its function were outlined in the *waqfiya*, or endowment deed.¹⁴ During the Mamluk period, the practice of establishing *waqfs* by members of the court became normalized and standardized in its process. Patrons would also commission the objects inside of these buildings, such as lamps.

The Mamluk court employed a hierarchy in which specific coats of arms corresponded to specific ranks and positions. Each position conducted its own set of responsibilities that contributed to the overall functioning and maintenance of customs at court. It has been suggested that the highly structured nature of this hierarchy was in place to promote a degree of uniformity among members of the court, who were of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds¹⁵. Emblems functioned as images that represented their respective offices, and also alluded to the duties of each station. Amir Qawsun, for instance, held the title of Royal Cupbearer, or *as-Saqi*, which corresponds to the cup emblem that is part of his lamp's decoration (fig. 7). The cup-bearer was responsible for overseeing the preparation and handling of food and drink made specifically for the Sultan; it was considered a high-ranking office due to the nobleman's constant and close proximity to the sultan himself.¹⁶ Other high-ranking offices included that of the Royal Wardrobe Master, *al-Jamdar*, who was responsible for the maintenance of the sultan's clothing. The

¹⁴ Amalia Levanoni, ed. “Egypt and Syria under Mamluk Rule: Political, Social and Cultural Aspects.” Book. *Islamic History and Civilization*; 181. (Leiden; Boston: BRILL, 2021.)

¹⁵ Karl Stowasser. “Manners and Customs at the Mamluk Court.” *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): pp. 13–20. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1523052>. Accessed April 2022

¹⁶ L. A. Mayer “Saracenic Heraldry, a Survey.” Book. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).

Wardrobe Master's emblem is a white rhombus set against a red band which is a nod to the *buqja*, a piece of cloth used to wrap the wardrobe master's own regalia.¹⁷ There were also more military-oriented positions within the court, such as that of the Royal Bowkeeper, *al-Bunduqdar* (fig.8), whose emblem is two interlocked bows that represent the sultan's hunting apparatus, which the bow keeper was in charge of. *Al-Silahdar* was the title given to the Royal Arms-bearer (fig. 9), who oversaw the maintenance of the sultan's weaponry as a whole, and whose coat of arms entails a curved sword set in a horizontal gold band.¹⁸ These are examples I return to later in this essay.



Figure 7 (above) and Figure 8 (right)



¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Figure 9

The patron or donor of a mosque or a lamp could thus be identified by the emblem that would be present as part of the decoration on a lamp or architectural commission, while his name would also be present in dedicatory inscriptions. Returning to Amir Qawsun's lamp as a case study, we can observe the Cupbearer's emblem repeated throughout its decoration in addition to the monumental epigraphy proclaiming him to be its donor. Royal Cupbearer to the Sultan was a lofty position in court, and as such Qawsun wielded power and influence both materially manifested through his patronage of buildings and objects. There are two documented architectural commissions by him in Cairo: a mosque and a tomb-hospice complex, and his lamp would have hung in either of these locales.¹⁹ Qawsun's emblem is repeated three times around the neck, reminding viewers of the person who held the cupbearer position at the time this lamp was made and donated.

The mosque lamp of Amir Qawsun can be seen and studied as a model of Mamluk lamps that were meant to hang specifically in mosques; out of all the objects I surveyed in my attempt to distinguish the most common types of decorative schemes, lamps with a combination of Mamluk heraldry and the Verse of Light from the Qur'an vastly outnumbered the other kinds of vessels that I discuss later in this essay. The Verse of Light was a popular choice for inscribing on mosque lamps as it directly analogizes God's light to that of a candle or lamp.²⁰ The verse identifies God as the light of all creation (both "the heavens and the earth"), and also likens His presence to light emanating from behind glass, such as the light of a lamp. In the Qur'an, one of the names used to refer to God (of which there are 99) is *al-Nur*, or Light. Thus God is identified as not only a

¹⁹ Information taken from catalogue entry of object through the Metropolitan Museum's Open Access Policy. Accessed through <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/447006>, September 2021

²⁰ Stone, Nicholas. "*Symbol of Divine Light: The Lamp in Islamic Culture & Other Traditions*," pp. 8-16, 50-63 Book. Library of Perennial Philosophy. (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2018).

manifestation of light itself, but also a possessor and purveyor of light. Applying the Verse of Light to a mosque lamp in this way invokes God's remembrance and acknowledges His constant presence as the light that physically illuminates the prayer space. The lamp itself also possesses a two-toned identity: it is placed inside of a mosque — a holy and sacred space — and the inscription of a Qur'anic verse upon its physical body also elevates it to a religious object. It retains its practical nature as a vessel that provides illumination, but it also comes to represent a source of spiritual enlightenment as well.

The placement of the dedicatory inscription to Amir Qawsun adds another dimension of symbolism to the literal and figurative light that would have emanated from the lamp. As it was made in his name, and also perhaps placed in the mosque that he commissioned via a *waqf*, this lamp can be interpreted as a representation of Mamluk state power in a religious context. It is a physical reminder of not just God's presence, but the presence of the Mamluk Sultanate as well. Moreover, it provides a reminder that worship of God in this illuminated physical space [the mosque lit by lamps] would not have been possible without Qawsun's patronage. It is almost as if the message is "worship and remember your Lord and Creator, but also remember me, and my facilitation of your worship." In a similar vein, the lamp can be seen as the Mamluk government promoting Islam as the state religion.

II. Non-Qur'anic Inscriptions

An example of a lamp containing Mamluk heraldry and non-Qur'anic inscriptions is the *Lamp for the Mausoleum of Amir Aydakin al-Ala'i al-Bunduqdar* (fig.10). Housed in the

Metropolitan Museum of Art,²¹ it is dated shortly after 1285. Unlike Amir Qawsun's lamp, this object bears no inscription naming its maker. It stands a little over 26 centimeters tall, and is 21 centimeters wide around its rim. The body of the lamp is almost rotund and tapers a little to the foot, which is continuous with the body and not separately applied. The neck is characteristically wide and flared.



Figure 10

²¹ Accessed through the Metropolitan Museum's Open Access Policy. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/online-features/metkids/explore/447000>, Accessed December 2021

The lamp's decorative program consists of two registers of epigraphic bands, one around the neck and the other around the body. There are four additional bands of vegetal patterning around the rim of the neck, the base of the neck, the mouth of the body, and around the foot. The patterning is etched in brown against the colorless glass, and there are three suspension loops for chains attached to the body at intervals that interrupt the epigraphic band. The band around the neck contains inscriptions colored with blue enamel and set against a swirling pattern colored with white enamel. Both the neck and body also contain the same blazon, a roundel containing an image of two gold linked crossbows against a red background. This inscription circling the neck reads in follows, in Arabic:

مما عمل برسم تربة المقر العالي / العلاني البندقدار / قدس الله روحه

The English translation reads:

*From [the objects] that were made for the tomb of His High Excellency al- 'Ala'i al-Bunduqdar
(the keeper of the bow), may God sanctify his soul*

What is interesting and unusual about this lamp is that the exact same inscription, indicating that it was made for Amir Aydakin al-Bunduqdar, is present around the body of the lamp as well, resulting in an instance of epigraphic repetition. No other inscriptions are incorporated into the decorative scheme of this lamp, which comes as a surprise since one would expect a verse from the Quran to be present. As the text indicates, this lamp was present in the tomb of its patron. Amir Aydakin al-Ala'i al-Bunduqdar (born Aydakin ibn Abdallah), began his rise at court as a mamluk under Ala' ad-din Aqsunqur, who served as royal cup-bearer in the first half of the 13th century.²²

²² L.A. Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry*

Aydakin then served as Governor of Egypt for some time before being relegated to the position of commander in the army. As royal *bunduqdar* or bowkeeper, Aydakin was responsible for the maintenance of bows used primarily for hunting. There is some indication that the position overlapped with that of the royal armourer, *al-silahdar*, but for the most part functioned as its own office in the court hierarchy.²³ The title belonged to Aydakin until his passing in 1285, and is included in the dedicatory inscriptions that decorate the façade and interior of his mausoleum. Built around 1284 as the final resting place for the amir and his daughter, Aydakin's mausoleum remains standing in Cairo today. It is part of a complex that included a *khanqah*, which were shelters for traveling Sufi dervishes or the less fortunate. The *khanqah* and the mausoleum are additionally joined to a corner of a palace built by Amir Sayf al-Din Taz.²⁴ The palace was built in 1352 as part of Amir Taz's marriage to one of Sultan al-Nasir Mohammad's daughters.²⁵ As Aydakin's mausoleum predates the palace by more than six decades, Amir Taz's residence was likely merged with the tomb as it was being built (fig. 11). The mausoleum is in essence a single room in the complex, marked with a domed roof overhead. A marker designating Aydakin's burial site is placed directly in the center below the curve of the dome, and it is thought that the lamp commissioned in his name would also have hung from this point over the gravesite. Scholars uphold that it would have been the only consistent light source in the mausoleum, although there are open windows encircling the perimeter of the space.²⁶

²³ Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry*

²⁴ Taken from object's catalogue entry through the Metropolitan Museum's Open Access Policy. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/447000>. Accessed December 2021

²⁵ "Amir Taz Palace," The Official Portal of the Cairo Governorate, 2018.

<http://www.cairo.gov.eg/en/Culture/Pages/Cairo-Palaces-details.aspx?ID=4>. Accessed April 2022

²⁶ Information obtained from same source as in Note 24.

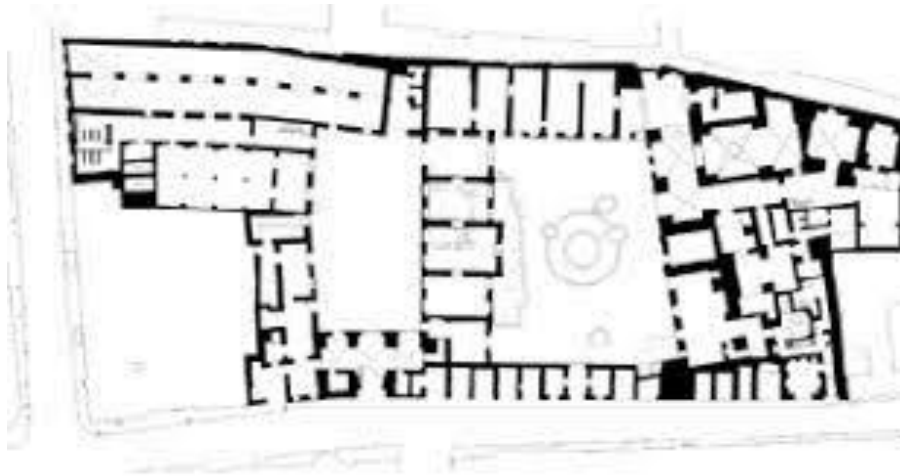


Figure 11

A *mihrab*, or niche indicating the direction of prayer, is also present, ensconced in a wall opposite the gravesite. Although some Mamluk mausolea with prayer spaces were religious in nature, this tomb's proximity to Amir Taz's palace (a building with no immediate religious connotations) allows it to be perceived as a non-religious space, especially if it was treated as a continuation of the palace in its time. It is possible that members of the household for instance may have walked through or past the structure in their daily movements, and would not have stopped to offer prayer inside. Inscriptions present on the exterior walls display the bowkeeper's blazon alongside the calligraphic script; a visitor would thus be aware that the mausoleum was for the recently deceased Amir even before they entered the space. Once inside, the eye would be immediately drawn to the centrally positioned gravesite, further emphasized by the lamp suspended above it.

Although the overwhelming majority of Mamluk-period lamps contained spiritual epigraphy as part of their decoration, this particular object predates the ubiquity of enameled Qur'anic verses. As the interior of Aydakin's tomb is not like that of large public mosque, this lamp's placement is very appropriate; the bands of non-Qur'anic inscription identify the lamp as

being made for the tomb, and seem to be intended for memorial purposes. Gravesites and public tombs by nature are places used to preserve the memory of loved ones and public figures alike, in both corporeal and intangible forms; in a Mamluk context they become a space to facilitate reminders of state sovereignty as well. As a visitor approaches the tomb, inscriptions and heraldic devices on the exterior wall identify it as that of the royal bowkeeper²⁷; even without knowing who was actually interred in the tomb, viewers would know that the patron had been a member of the Mamluk court. Once inside the space, the visitors' attention would be immediately directed to the single lamp casting its glow over the centrally placed wooden cenotaph. In addition to the inscriptions present on the lamp, the grave marker would most likely also contain text that designated it as the final resting place of Amir Aydakin.

In considering the lamp more closely, what caught my attention is that both of the primary epigraphic bands display the same inscription. The text indicates that the lamp was made specifically for Amir Aydakin's tomb, and is repeated around the neck and body of the object. The script around the neck is covered in blue enamel, and the script around the body is done in gold (fig. 12). The glass of the neck is left uncolored, and the glass around the body that surrounds the script consists of a band of blue enamel. This creates a visual contrast that, when lit from within, produces an illuminated effect that would have further defined the rich coloring of the script and the red blazons as well. The physical emphasis placed on the inscriptions and heraldic devices as a result of light from within the lamp itself establishes the object and the space it illuminates as Mamluk entities. In turn, the dedicatory inscriptions and the blazons can be perceived as imbuing the spiritualized light with their own authoritative dimensions. This creates an effect with layers of significance that are both tangible and subliminal; the dedicatory inscriptions and court blazons

²⁷ Information obtained from object's catalogue entry through the Metropolitan Museum's Open Access Policy. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/447000>. Accessed December 2021.

confer a Mamluk identity upon the lamp, which transforms it. It is no longer a vessel that transmits only God's light, but a vessel that also conveys the presence of Mamluk sovereignty. Although the carrier of the title of Royal Bowkeeper — Amir Aydakin himself — has passed, his memory, as well as the authority associated with his title, live on.



Figure 12

As I considered this lamp and the way it acts as a public memorial, I saw parallels with another well-documented aspect of Egypt's culture and history. Ancient Egyptian religious practices are known and remembered for the elaborate and structured funerary rituals they entailed; although the embalming and mummification process used to preserve bodies is particularly well-

documented, ancient craftsmen also created sculptures out of stone.²⁸ Certain statues were made specifically to be placed inside of tombs next to the deceased; these statues were thought to take the place of the physical body so that a deceased person's soul could inhabit this new "substitute" body and utilize it as a vessel to successfully move on into the afterlife.²⁹ In a less spiritual context, the statue could also stand for a physical manifestation of the deceased that was more permanent than the actual body, as stone is more durable and resistant to decomposition than human organs and tissue. The practice of building a statue to stand in for a person thus suggests a desire to preserve the memory of that person, to insert their life into a larger history. Capturing the ephemeral in a physical cast carries with it the intention to prove that this person existed, and their presence persists even if their physical form is no longer extant. In medieval Islamic Egypt however, the creation of icons and use of figural imagery was discouraged as per Islamic practices; under these circumstances a glass lamp, inscribed with the name and insignia of its patron and his state, becomes like a statue. This particular lamp stands as a manifestation of Amir Aydakin's life and career, and continues to hold constant vigil over his grave (fig 13). Its light shines only above the amir's grave marker to designate where he is buried, and perhaps also reminds visitors that the illumination of that space is made possible by the piety and generosity of a member of the Mamluk court. I see Amir Aydakin's mausoleum lamp functioning both as an incorporeal reminder and a physical memorial; its presence over his grave and its light remind visitors that Mamluk sovereignty and charity live on despite the finality of a physical death. As a tangible object, the lamp is also a testimonial to the life and patronage of a member of court. And although the

²⁸ "The Sculptor in Ancient Egypt." The Australian Museum, updated November 21, 2018. <https://australian.museum/learn/cultures/international-collection/ancient-egyptian/the-sculptor-in-ancient-egypt/#:~:text=The%20Egyptian%20expression%20for%20stela, various%20gods%20of%20the%20dead.> Accessed March 2022

²⁹ The Australian Museum, "The Sculptor in Ancient Egypt"

Mamluks are most commonly memorialized in religious contexts, this mausoleum lamp demonstrates their intent to insert themselves into other spheres of public memory and history.



Figure 13

Mamluk lamps with similar non-religious inscriptions are present in other museum collections as well. One such object in the Brooklyn Museum’s Arts of the Islamic World department features the archetypal rounded body and flared neck, as well as six suspension loops around the circumference of the body.³⁰ Made sometime between the 13th and 14th centuries, it is likely a contemporary of Amir Aydakin’s mausoleum lamp. It does, however, differ from most surviving Mamluk lamps in several ways: it still has its wick intact; its enamel is colored blue and green in addition to the more standard red, white, and yellow; and a repetition of polychrome floral motifs set in roundels take the place of heraldic devices (fig. 14). Its decorative program also contains a singular epithet emphasized against panels of blue enamel and repeated around the body of the lamp three times: “العالم.” Transliterated as “*Al-alim*,” it is the Arabic term for “the Wise.”

³⁰ Obtained from <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/12543>. Accessed February 2022

No other epigraphy is present, nor are there any indications as to who the maker was, or its patron. The lack of heraldry is also a very noticeable departure from what is seen on virtually all lamps made during this period. This makes it difficult to determine what specific purpose and place the lamp was made for; the lack of any Qur'anic inscriptions gives the impression the object was used in secular contexts, although "the Wise" is also another name used to refer to God. If this lamp is considered a non-religious object this moniker may be referring to the patron of the lamp; as a secular object, this lamp could have been suspended in any space or public building other than a mosque. And although it does not display any direct visual vestiges of the Mamluk court, that it adheres to the build of a holotypic Mamluk glass lamp perhaps would have been enough of a reminder for anyone who perceived it. If anything, the absence of a specific name and patron imbues this lamp with an all-encompassing nature; it comes to represent the continuity of the Mamluk state as a whole, both in the recurrence of its conspicuous form and in the continuity of the physical light that it emits.



Figure 14 (above)

Another specimen also in the Metropolitan Museum's collection can be seen almost as a successor to the Brooklyn Museum's object. As is the case with every other lamp described thus far, its globular body and flared neck exhibit bands of monumental calligraphy in combination with emblems that are emphasized with colored enamels. Like the Brooklyn lamp, the calligraphy encircling this object's neck reads "*The wise*" in Arabic, repeated six times. The same repeated moniker appears around the foot of the object as well. Unlike its contemporary, however, the epigraphic band around this vessel's body contains a dedicatory inscription. The translation from Arabic reads³¹:

*Of what was made by order of his Excellency the Exalted, the Lord, the Great Amir, the
Honorable, the Master, the Wise, the Exalted, the Prince*

This epigraphy comprises the most noticeable band of text forming the lamp's decorative program. It is the widest band of decoration, and the blue enamel background creates a distinct contrast with the calligraphy, which is left colorless against the glass and stands out almost in relief. Interestingly, although this set of inscriptions is dedicatory in nature, there is no mention of a specific Mamluk figure or patron to whom they are dedicated. It should be noted that a repetitive emblem-like motif is present on the neck as well; it interrupts the epigraphic band at three points and consists of two undulating rectangle-like structures that interlock. One rectangle is colored with red enamel, the other in pale green, and both are set in roundels containing smaller floral motifs in the background (fig. 15). Although there is some scholarship that has been able to categorize Mamluk heraldic devices and identify the positions at court that they symbolized, this one remains unidentified, as is the case for the repeating floral motif seen on the Brooklyn

³¹ Original Arabic text was not available in the object's catalogue entry for any of the inscriptions on this lamp.

Museum's lamp³². Despite an unknown patron with an unknown status at court, this particular lamp is undoubtedly a Mamluk object. Although referred to as a mosque lamp in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's catalog, the object's lack of Qur'anic inscriptions indicates it was probably intended to hang in a public school, tomb, or hospital — in essence, a non-religious setting. And in such a setting, this lamp inserts a Mamluk presence into everyday secular spaces. Although the heraldic device present on the lamp is an unknown one to present-day researchers and scholars, anyone who saw the lamp when it was in use would most likely have recognized the emblem, as well as the person at court who held the office it represented. If this was the case, then the absence of a patron's name in the epigraphy becomes less significant, at least for the time in which it was made. From a historical perspective, the lack of an identifier does not allow for any contextualization or further understanding of the sociopolitical and cultural circumstances under which the lamp was made. Despite this, the ambiguity does convey a sense of endurance similar to what is seen in the epigraphy of the Brooklyn Museum's lamp; there is a feeling of timelessness, as if the praises to Mamluk elite that the epigraphy entails could have addressed the state as a whole, and transcends time in this way. "The Prince" mentioned in the dedicatory inscription then becomes a metonymy for all the patrons who were members of court, and as a result one may remember the court itself as embodying excellency, honor, and wisdom and thus being worthy of exaltation, remembrance, and preservation in public memory.

³² Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry*, pp. 8-10



Figure 15

A third lamp in the Metropolitan Museum's collection is more comprehensive in its epigraphy, although it does not display any Mamluk heraldry. In addition to the instantly recognizable segmented glass body, this particular lamp possesses two primary bands of calligraphy with an additional set of inscriptions encircling the base of the body where it tapers to the foot. Surrounding the epigraphic band around the neck on either side are two thinner bands

displaying a pattern of interlocking vines, set against blue enamel. The inscription around the body is bookended by individual floral motifs set in roundels, colored in red, white, blue, yellow, and green enamels. The rest of the body contains an all-over floral pattern that is left colorless against the glass.³³

The monumental calligraphy around the neck proclaims that the lamp was made in the name of Malik Al-Nasir, who ruled as sultan of the Mamluk empire between 1293 and 1340. It has been dated to around 1340, which is an indication that it could have been made after his death as a sort of memorial object. Translated from Arabic, this set of inscriptions reads:

Glory to our Lord the Sultan, the King (Malik), the Victorious (Al-Nasir), the Wise, the Just, the Warrior for Religion, the Defender of Frontiers, the Protector.

Clearly dedicatory in nature, this proclamation is interrupted at three points by shields that resemble inverted teardrops. These are the heraldic devices reserved for the position of the sultan; they deviate from the traditional Mamluk herald, which uses icons, and are epigraphic in composition (fig. 16). The teardrop shields all contain the same inscription: “*Glory to our Lord, the Sultan, the King.*” The epigraphy around the body is set against a panel of swirling patterns and irregular shapes that are outlined in red, white, blue, yellow, and some green enamels, while the calligraphy itself is colored in blue. This is a departure and a reversal from the standard practice of leaving the bodily inscriptions colorless and setting them against blue enamel. The text echoes what is present on the neck of the lamp: “*Glory to Our Lord, the King, the Wise, the Just, the Defender of Frontiers.*” The calligraphy surrounding the base of the body that tapers to the foot — although not easily visible due to its placement and the fact that it is left colorless and only outlined

³³ Accessed via <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/444718>, March 2022

in red enamel against the glass of the lamp — provides what is perhaps the most surprising addition to the historical and social context that the lamp elucidates. In its English form, the text reads:

*The 'waqf' [inalienable property] of the blessed and praiseworthy convert al-Karimi in al-Karafa.
Allah receive him who established this wakf and conclude his life with goodness and mercy, and
forgiveness of his sins. O Lord of two worlds!*

It is revealed that the lamp was dedicated to the Sultan by a patron whose endowment deed would have facilitated its creation and its maintenance.³⁴ I was not able to locate any records on who exactly al-Karimi was, but from this epigraphic band we learn that he was a convert to Islam, and established a *waqf* in his name that also honored the memory of Sultan Malik al-Nasir. It is also unclear what exactly the *waqf* was established for. Based on the mostly secular nature of the decorative scheme and epigraphy present on this lamp, it may have hung within a tomb or a hospital complex. In either of these spaces the object would have functioned to not only illuminate its surroundings but also establish the remembrance of the ruler of the Mamluk Empire; proclaiming Sultan Malik Al-Nasir to be a wise and just ruler who defended both the faith [Islam] and the Mamluk frontier serves to not only memorialize him but also emphasize the sovereignty and fortitude of the court and dynasty as a whole. In the case of this object, a lack of image-based heraldry does not take away from the message that it conveys to viewers. Rather, the monumental calligraphy takes center stage and asserts the sultan's and his court's authority and role as protectors of the empire. Incorporating secular inscriptions alongside Mamluk epigraphic heraldry made this lamp, and the other objects discussed in this chapter, most suitable for display in spaces

³⁴ Information obtained from object's catalogue entry, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/444718>. Accessed March 2022

and public institutions besides mosques. In these locales, they were able to establish the presence and authority of the Mamluk state in addition to providing physical illumination.

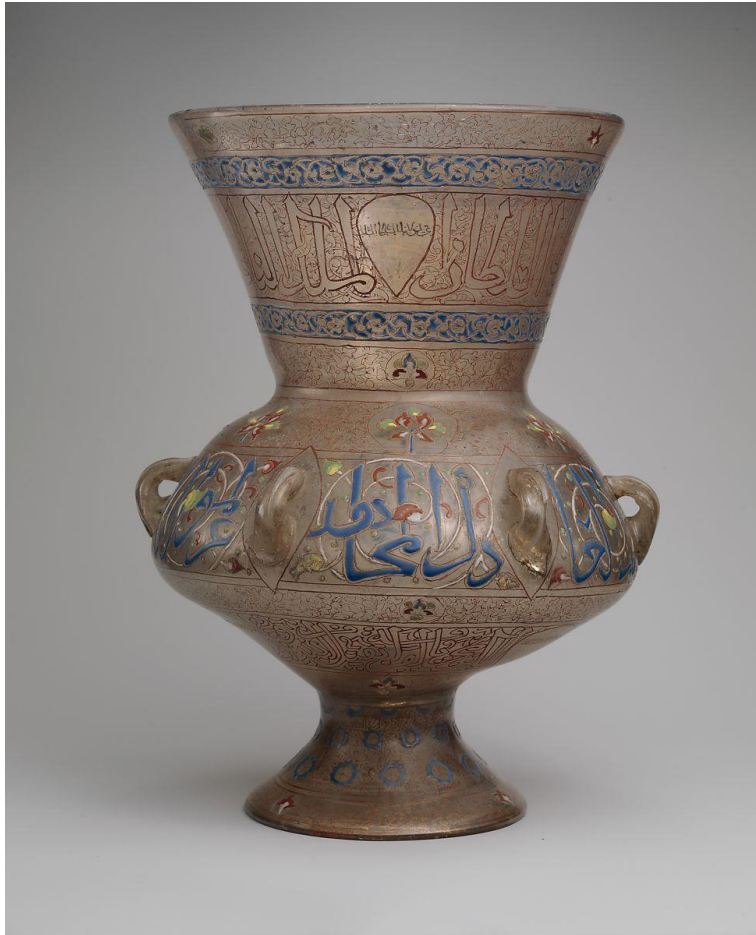


Figure 16

III. Qur'anic Verses Different from The Light Verse

The third type of Mamluk lamp displays decorative programs that incorporate verses from the Qur'an that differ from the Light Verse (24:35). As I will demonstrate, the verse that was used often corresponded to the specific context of a given lamp; that is, a verse could confer a particular identity or context to a lamp in relation to where it was physically placed. In this vein many of the

lamps that display this sort of decorative scheme are indicative of Mamluk acts of patronage that are particularly situational.

One vessel that embodies the heraldry and Qur'anic verse combination is a mosque lamp currently in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection. Referred to simply as a Mosque Lamp, this object is dated to around 1340.³⁵ Although its maker is unknown, it most likely originated from Egypt or Syria. The lamp bears all the hallmarks of a Mamluk-era object: the tripartite design with a flared neck; a globular body with six handles or suspension loops; and a disk that serves as the foot or base. It stands 33.5 centimeters tall and 26.7 centimeters at its widest point. Two bands of monumental epigraphy dominate both the neck and the body, and are bordered by additional bands of decoration that do not incorporate any calligraphy. The epigraphy around the neck is surrounded by two strips of an all-over floral pattern that is colorless and interspersed with roundels containing individual flowers. These flowers are also colorless but set against a blue enamel background. The section where the base of the neck widens to meet the body of the vessel is emphasized with a set of roundels shaped like flowers that contain more repetitive floral and curlicue patterning. In between these roundels are a series of leaf- and petal-shaped motifs that are painted in green, yellow, blue, red, and white enamels. The glass that tapers from the body to the foot is decked in another all-over floral and vine pattern that is colored with enamels, as well as a thin band of the colorless repetitive pattern and a thinner band of an undulating, linked series of vines set against blue enamel (fig. 17).

³⁵ Obtained from object's catalogue entry via <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93/mosque-lamp-unknown/>. Accessed March 2022



Figure 17

The inscriptions around the neck of this lamp are directly colored with blue enamel, and are set against a background of swirls, petals, and leaf motifs that is mostly colorless. When translated from Arabic, the text spells out a verse of the 24th chapter of the Qur'an. This is the

very same chapter from which the Light Verse is taken (chapter 35), although this particular lamp exhibits the verse that directly follows it, the 36th one. It reads as follows³⁶:

[Shining out] in houses of worship. God has ordained that they [mosques] be raised high and that His name be remembered in them, with men in them celebrating His glory morning [and evening].

This verse is interrupted at three points by the same emblem, a dark red or brown horizontal rectangle set with a white rhombus at the center. This is in turn set in a roundel that consists of a circular band of the same floral pattern seen in the rest of the lamp. The emblem is also present at points along the foot of the lamp as well. This emblem is the coat of arms of the Mamluk sultan's royal wardrobe master, or *al-Jamdar*; the white rhombus in its center is a napkin, which represents the position in the Mamluk court. Known as a *buqja* in Arabic, the symbol of the napkin stands in for the actual piece of cloth known by the same name (fig 18).³⁷ A *buqja* would typically be square or rectangular in shape, and was used to wrap clothing and other regalia that the wardrobe master himself would have worn. The wardrobe master's primary responsibilities included the maintenance and oversight of clothing reserved for the Sultan.



³⁶ Original Arabic text was not available for any of this lamp's inscriptions, so only the English translations are provided here.

³⁷ Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry* pp. 6, 14, 67

Figure 18 (above)

Historical records indicate that at the time this lamp was made, the wardrobe master to the sultan would have been Sayf al-Din Aqbugha; this is corroborated by the inscription around the body of the vessel, which is a dedicatory one and names Aqbugha as the patron. Aqbugha served as a member of Sultan al-Malik al-Nasir Muhammad's court from 1310 to 1340, and held several different offices during this time. After entering court as a slave-soldier under the sultan, Aqbugha was promoted to wardrobe master, which is when he came to be associated with the *buqja* emblem. In the last half of his tenure at court he became an inspector of buildings and construction in the sultanate (his specific title under this position was *shadd al-ama'ir*, or the overseer of buildings); this lamp was commissioned and made during this phase of his administration. It is interesting to observe that even with his new responsibilities regarding the oversight of building construction, Aqbugha retained his original position as wardrobe master, and that this was the office by which he was identified.

The specific Qur'an verse inscribed upon this lamp, as seen above, directly references the construction of buildings; mosques, it says, should be built solely for use in worshipping God such that the faithful can gather in their interiors to engage in remembrance throughout the day. A surviving *waqf* and historical records indicate that this lamp was made for placement in the *Aqbughawiyah*, a *madrasa* or Qur'an school attached to the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo.³⁸ Al-Azhar was constructed as the first congregational mosque in Cairo in 970, and was formally established two years later. Over time, with the addition of school buildings and the recruitment of scholars, Al-Azhar also became a university dedicated to the study of Islamic theology. Under Mamluk sovereignty, madrasas dedicated to specific schools of Islamic jurisprudence began to be

³⁸ <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93/mosque-lamp-unknown/>. Accessed March 2022

incorporated into the architecture of the original mosque. The *Madrasa al-Aqbughawiyya* was added to the northwestern wall of the existing structure, but had its own entrances and prayer spaces³⁹. Although the *madrasa* itself is not a mosque, its physical and spiritual proximity to a mosque — one of the very first Islamic houses of worship in the capital of the Mamluk sultanate — really contextualizes the placement of the specific Qur’an verse (24:36) on the madrasa lamp. God’s requisition that mosques be built is quite literally embodied by the lamp, which was also made for a mosque-school complex. In this way the lamp functions as a testament to the work done by the Mamluk state to fulfill a divine expectation; it is also a manifestation of the Mamluk state facilitating the perpetuation and growth of Islamic knowledge and practices. If the interpretation and meaning of the line “*God has ordained that they [mosques] be raised high...*” is taken one step further then *mosques* becomes a symbol for the Islamic faith as a whole. With the extension of the Al-Azhar Mosque to incorporate an Islamic school that would facilitate not only prayer and worship but also the continuation of Islamic teachings, Sayf al-Din Aqbugha and the Mamluk court as a whole become the medium through which the faith lives on and is passed down to the rest of the Islamic world. Aqbugha’s commissioned lamp, whose very form and design speak to this continuity, simultaneously bears witness to and literally sheds light on, this physical and spiritual expansion.

Aqbugha’s lamp is additionally indicative of the role many Mamluk court members took on as patrons. Establishing a *waqf* served many purposes: often, it contributed to the welfare of the general public in the form of a *madrasa*, hospital, or hospice; in most cases, it helped facilitate the daily practice of the faith through the founding and maintenance of mosques; and of course, *waqfs* allowed for the remembrance and the memorialization of the members of the Mamluk hierarchy

³⁹ <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93/mosque-lamp-unknown/>, Accessed March 2022.

who established them. Lamps placed inside commissioned spaces functioned almost like modern-day lighted signs; they not only provided light but also illuminated the epigraphic bands that circled their bodies, which would typically contain the name of the patron of a given institution. Viewers would thus recall not only the person and the Mamluk state, but their acts of patronage as well. A lamp serves as a reminder of the generosity and piety of a patron; the lamp, and the architectural commission in which it is hung, are gifts to the public that are offered out of the court's sense of civic responsibility, but also its spiritual righteousness. A lamp that speaks to an act of faith-based patronage (such as Aqbugha's lamp) is particularly powerful, as it would have conveyed the sense that a patron was helping to facilitate the practice of religion for members of the public through the building and maintenance of mosques. Thus he becomes not only a patron of the people, but also of their deliverance through such places of worship.

Although this act of public donation may appear unilateral, a Mamluk patron may have intended for a degree of reciprocity to be present as well. In order to expand on this idea of reciprocity and see how it unfolds through the epigraphic bands on Aqbugha's lamp, it is useful to begin with a discussion of the concept and practice of supplication in Islam. In addition to the obligatory daily prayers known as *salat*, the practice of performing supplicatory prayers (as well as the prayers themselves) is referred to as *du'a*. The term itself can be directly translated as "calling out" to God, and thus involves any invocation or request that is made directly. The practice of offering *du'a* is mostly a verbal one, although there may be physical components as well, such as kneeling after an obligatory prayer and supplicating with the palms facing upwards. *Du'as*

essentially are a direct address to God; “...the content of that address is ordinarily human need and distress (although it can and should contain elements of celebration and praise).”⁴⁰

Asking for the wellbeing, success, or good fortune of another Muslim, especially a saintly person, constitutes a *du'a*, and is considered a genuine expression of love and deference. The general consensus is that any Muslim would want the *du'as* of others upon themselves, and thus would conduct themselves in a manner that would be deemed worthy of receiving such *du'as*. Acts of patronage that benefited the public, for instance, could certainly compel members of said public to wish well upon the patron. Such may have been the case for Sayf al-Din Aqbugha; as he extended and added to the construction of Al-Azhar with his own *madrasa*, he may have wanted recognition and remembrance for this good deed. Having dedicatory inscriptions in his name on the lamp(s) that would have hung inside the *madrasa* would serve to establish the identity of the patron, and by extension invite viewers to keep him in their thoughts and prayers — to make *du'a* for him. In this way these lamps come to facilitate a bilateral symbolic and spiritual transaction: a member of the Mamluk court presents an architectural commission as a gift to the public with the implicit expectation that citizens would reciprocate by praying for his temporal and spiritual prosperity.

Lamps in other museums also display decorative programs that emphasize the patronage and generosity of the Mamluk court, and they supplement my interpretation of Aqbugha's *madrasa* lamp. One object, also in the Victoria and Albert's collection and similarly referred to as a mosque lamp, is marked with the emblem of the royal armorer (*al-silahdar*), which is composed of a black and white sword set against a gold-stained band which in turn is set inside a reddish-orange

⁴⁰ Marion Holmes Katz. “Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice.” Book. Themes in Islamic History, pp.10-30; 6. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.) Accessed online via <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1139657>, March 2022.

roundel⁴¹. Again, this lamp is typified by a wide, conical neck and rotund body supported by a disk-like base. There are two primary bands of inscription around both the neck and body, and the band around the neck is interrupted by a repetition of the royal armorer's coat of arms, namely a sword (fig. 19). The epigraphy around the body accommodates the six handles that would be used to suspend the lamp, and the coloring of both sets of inscriptions visually contrast one another. It is dated between 1310 and 1330; as per historical records, the royal armorer at court would have been Saif ad-Din Qijlis an-Nasiri, who served under Sultan Nasir ad-Din Muhammad just as Aqbugha did.⁴² Qijlis began his tenure at court in 1317 as royal leader of the pilgrimage to Mecca, and was promoted to arms-master in 1321. In this role he was responsible for the maintenance of weapons, and he kept this office until his passing in 1321. It should be noted that while Qijlis would have been based in Cairo, which was the capital of the sultanate, his lamp was reported to have been found in Deir Saidnaya, a monastery near Damascus in Syria.⁴³

⁴¹ Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry*

⁴² Obtained from object's catalogue entry, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1502/mosque-lamp-unknown/>. Accessed March 2022

⁴³ Ibid.



Figure 19

Deir Saidnaya is currently known as Our Lady of Saidnaya Monastery; it is part of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch (fig. 20), and has been standing since at least 547 AD.⁴⁴ A Greek Orthodox monastery is obviously not an Islamic institution, so I was initially surprised to learn that a Mamluk lamp would have possibly hung inside one. I was unable to find substantial records on this specific monastery or any Christian-Mamluk interactions that would have informed its history, but did learn that while many Christian houses of worship were demolished or

⁴⁴ *Monasteries of Antiochian Orthodox Patriarchate*, (Balamand: University of Balamand Publications, 2007. Accessed via <https://antiochpatriarchate.org/en/page/our-lady-of-saydnaya-patriarchal-monastery/146/>, March 2022

appropriated, Deir Saidnaya was not. There are exist records that it was a stop for Muslims on the way to hajj. If we take this information at face value, we can infer that Muslims and Christians in Mamluk realms enjoyed a degree of harmony; this makes it possible that the lamp could have been gifted to the Syrian monastery from Cairo.

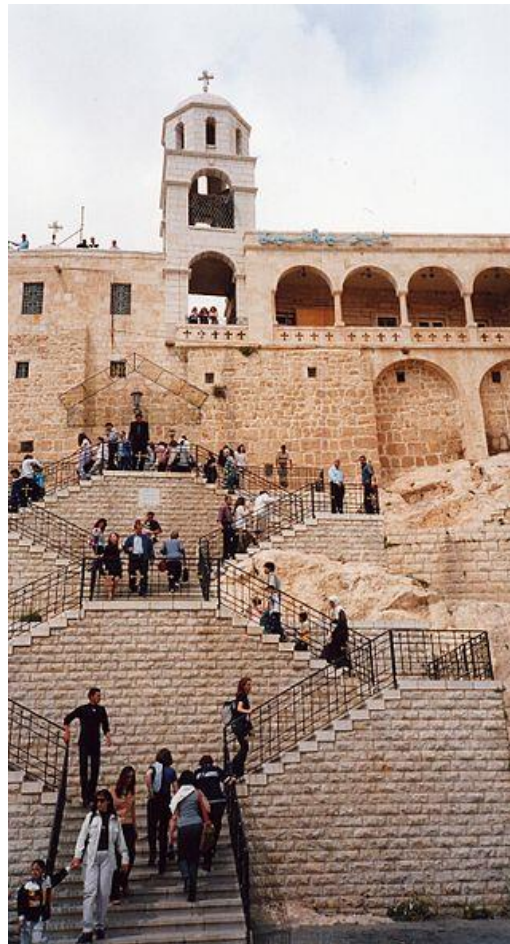


Figure 20

There is a degree of disconnect between this hypothesis and the verse from the Qur'an that is present on the lamp's neck, however. It is verse eighteen from the ninth *sura* and reads as follows:

إِنَّمَا يَعْمُرُ مَسَاجِدَ اللَّهِ مَنْ ءَامَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَأَقَامَ الصَّلَاةَ وَءَاتَى الزَّكَاةَ وَلَمْ يَخُنْ إِلَّا
اللَّهَ فَعَسَىٰ أُولَٰئِكَ أَن يَكُونُوا مِنَ الْمُهْتَدِينَ

“The mosques of Allah should only be maintained by those who believe in Allah and the Last Day, establish prayer, pay alms-tax, and fear none but Allah. It is right to hope that they will be among the ‘truly’ guided.”

It appears somewhat contradictory that a verse pertaining to the maintenance of mosques as the responsibility solely of Muslims would be present on an object meant for an orthodox Christian monastery. The intent, interpretation, and intricacies behind this phenomenon constitute a discussion that is perhaps better saved for another time; for the purposes of this study, I propose the possibility that this choice of Qur’anic verse represents an acknowledgement and a distinction being made by the Mamluk court. That is, that while the Syrian Christian community was now a subject of the Muslim sultanate, their religious identity was respected and upheld. They could practice their faith within the physical space of the monastery with the reminder that Muslims could do the same within the physical spaces of their mosques. If this truly was the message being conveyed by the gifting of this vessel, then as a patron, Saif ad-Din Qijlis would have been deserving of praise and remembrance for this singular act of religious tolerance. The dedicatory inscription around the body of his lamp reads:

“This is what was made a waqf by the servant yearning for God, the Exalted, hoping for the pardon of his generous Lord, Qijlis, of al-Malik al-Nasir”

While this certainly does not and should not take away from the fact that religious intolerance and persecution against non-Muslims prevailed during Mamluk times, it is possible that members of the monastery would have looked upon Qijlis's lamp and thought of him (and the Mamluk court to some degree) somewhat favorably, which would speak to the integrity and magnitude of his act(s) of patronage.

Both Aqbugha's and Qijlis' lamps represent a body of Mamluk vessels in collections across the globe that incorporate different verses from the Quran into their decorative schemes. The choice of verse seems to be intentional in each case, and adds both spiritual and situational context as to where each lamp would have been hung and perceived. And although these two objects represent different contexts, they both help to establish and reinforce the status of members of the Mamluk court as patrons of their people, both Muslim and Christian.

V. Conclusion

Although the advent of electricity resulted in the gradual obsolescence of oil-based lamps, the image of and symbolism associated with the Mamluk glass lamp persisted through time, and can be observed in the present day as well. Many congregational mosques in Cairo and throughout Egypt continue to have lamps fashioned in the Mamluk style hanging in their prayer halls and courtyards, though these are sometimes for decorative purposes only. Modern prayer rugs, which are laid down and used for prostration during the obligatory *salat*, often incorporate the silhouette of a hanging lamp, with a flared neck and rotund body suspended by chains, into their decoration (fig. 21).⁴⁵ And, of course, surviving pieces from the Mamluk period are preserved and displayed in museum collections throughout the world, where they continue to inform both scholarly and

⁴⁵ Stone, *Symbol of Divine Light* pp. 120-125

public understanding of medieval Islamic architecture, decoration, and visual culture. These lamps additionally are an invitation for continued interpretation and reinterpretation of the messages their inscriptions conveyed, both to medieval and modern-day viewers.



Figure 21

This study used a framework that allowed me to categorize a sizable number of objects based on differences in decoration and inscriptions. This approach resulted in a somewhat generalized analysis of each type of lamp that still accommodated the individual context of each object under discussion. I am fairly confident that the research and interpretations that I presented here can be applied to any lamp from the Mamluk period, although there will certainly be exceptions. Exploring these exceptions and how they may change my understanding of these objects would make for an exciting (and dare I say, illuminating) continuation and expansion of

this preliminary research. It has been truly rewarding to piece together the cultural and sociopolitical histories these objects have to offer. And it has also become clear that they present new questions and new stories to each new set of eyes that look upon them.

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Figure 2: Hopfer, Daniel (ca 1470-1536). *Etching, Three Mamelukes with lances on horseback*. The British Museum, London.

Figure 3: Map of the Mamluk sultanate during the third reign of al-Nasir Muhammad, 1317 AD, showing its political subdivisions and cities. Borders are approximate only. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mamluk_Sultanate_of_Cairo_1317_AD.jpg

Figure 4: Maker unknown. *Lamp*, ca. 9th-11th century. Egypt. H. 20.5 cm, diam. 15.5 cm. Purplish free blown glass from two gathers and applied. Museum für Islamische Kunst Berlin

Figure 5: Maker unknown. *Hanging Lamp*, ca. 10th-12th century. Near East. H. 8 cm, diam. 6.3 cm. Colorless, free-blown glass. Museum für Islamische Kunst Berlin

Figure 8, 10, 12, and 13. Maker unknown. *Mosque Lamp for the Mausoleum of Amir Aydakin al-'Ala'i al-Bunduqdar*, ca. 1285. Egypt. Glass; blown, folded foot, applied handles, enameled, and gilded. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. 17.190.985

Figure 9 and 19: Maker unknown. *Lamp made for the Mamluk official Qijlis*, ca. 1320-1330. Egypt. Enameled glass and gilt. H. 28.9 cm, W. 25.4 cm. The Victoria and Albert Museum, accession no. 580-1875.

Figure 11: Ground floor plan of the palace of Amir Taz. *Conservation of Amir Taz Palace*, the Committee of Historic Cairo Conservation/ Abd al Moneim.

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.archnet.org/system/publications/contents/1647/original/FLS1891.pdf?1384750981>

Figure 14: Maker unknown. *Mosque Lamp*, ca. 13th-14th century. Mamluk. Colorless glass; blue, green, red, yellow, and white enamels; and gold; free blown, applied, enameled, and gilded; tooled on the pontil. The Brooklyn Museum, **ACCESSION NUMBER** 21.484

Figure 15: Maker unknown. *Mosque Lamp*, 14th century. Egypt or Syria. Glass; blown, enameled, and gilded. H. 31.8 cm, W. 23.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. **Accession Number:** 91.1.1539

Figure 16: *Mosque Lamp Bearing the Name of the Mamluk Sultan al-Malik al-Nasir*, ca. 1340. Attributed to Syria. Glass, colorless with brown tinge; blown, applied blown foot, applied handles; enameled and gilded. H. 13 in. (33 cm)
Diam. of rim 8 5/8 in. (21.9 cm) **The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession Number:** 17.190.987

Figure 17 and 18: Maker unknown, *Mosque Lamp*, ca. 1340. Egypt or Syria. Enameled glass and gilt. H. 33.5 cm, W. 26.7 cm. The Victoria and Albert Museum, accession no. 1056-1869

Figure 20: Deir Sayadnaya Monastery, Syria. Photo obtained from Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syria283.jpg>

Figure 21: Prayer carpet with lamp motif, Cairo, late 16th century. Al Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait, LNS 29 R.

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