

Jaroslav Martykán: Dr. Michael Meinecke's Contributions to the Research on Muslim Vexillology

Abstract: *A famous German orientalist contributed to the research on the heraldic devices that were used as a prominent feature of Mamluk architecture and objects of art, including flag finials and (probably) flags. The most frequent emblematic devices (i.e. inscriptions for sultans and signs of office for the emirs) were also found on the Mamluk flag finials deposited in Istanbul and their traces are evident on the Ottoman flags until the 19th century. Thus, the Mamluk heraldry represents the origin of traditional form of Muslim flags and banners.*



As we are gathered in Berlin, the capital of Germany, I would like to use this opportunity to draw your attention to a famous German orientalist and historian of fine arts whose merits on the field of vexillology have not yet been appreciated enough by ourselves.

At first, let me quote from the Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie ¹⁾: *Michael Meinecke (born 6.11.1941, Wien, died 10.1.1995, Berlin) Meinecke schloß sein Studium 1968 mit einer Dissertation über "Fayence-Dekorationen an*

seldschukischen Sakralbauten in Kleinasien“ ab und habilitierte 1978 an der Universität Hamburg. Anschließend am Deutschen Archäologischen Institut in Kairo tätig, seit 1979 als Leiter der Außenstelle Damaskus, wurde er 1988 Direktor des Museums für Islamische Kunst in Berlin. International bekannt wurde er vor allem durch Grabungen in der Residenz des Kalifen Harun ar-Raschid in Raqqa am Euphrat.

Moreover, Dr. Meinecke also contributed to the research on the heraldic devices that were used as a prominent feature of Mamluk objects of art and of Mamluk architecture. In his famous work *Zur mamlukischen Heraldik* ^[2] from 1972 and lectures given at the University of Cairo, Faculty of Archaeology between 1974-1975 he presented the results of his research on existing forms of heraldry inside the boundaries of the Mamluk Empire, i.e. in Egypt and Syria.

The extremely rich variety of Mamluk heraldry is due to three factors ^[3]. The main element of the Mamluk heraldry are **emblematic devices**. Altogether there are about 50 of these devices known, which were used as heraldic emblems.



In addition to later relinquished animals (lion, horse, eagle), various symbols (rosette, fleur-de-lys, crescent), signs of various offices (cup, polo-stick, sword, bow) and *tamgas* – the Turkish tribal marks – are the main images used. Although these numerous devices enable by themselves quite a broad scope of variation, they could even be combined into so-called *composite blazons*. The mottos with the names of the ruling sultan, the so-called *written blazon* should be added to the emblematic devices.

The second main factor of variation is based on the **colours** displayed on every blazon. Various colours can appear on a single blazon, when the coloured emblem is put on a field of a different colour. Even more colours could be displayed by dividing the field in different parts which could be coloured in a different way.

Third factor of the Mamluk heraldry is the form of the **shield** which the emblematic device has been put on.

The combination of the main elements of Mamluk heraldry – emblematic devices consisting predominantly of an inscription-bearing blazon (known as “written blazons”) and the colors, respectively,



reminds us of a characterization of the Muslim flags done by another scholar, our esteemed colleague and friend Dr. Whitney Smith in his famous work: *Muslim flags rely on graphic design and calligraphy rather than on the beasts and flowers which tend to predominate in Western European heraldry* [4]. Is it already the Mamluk heraldry where those premises of the Muslim vexillology are rooted? The earliest literary evidence for the use of a

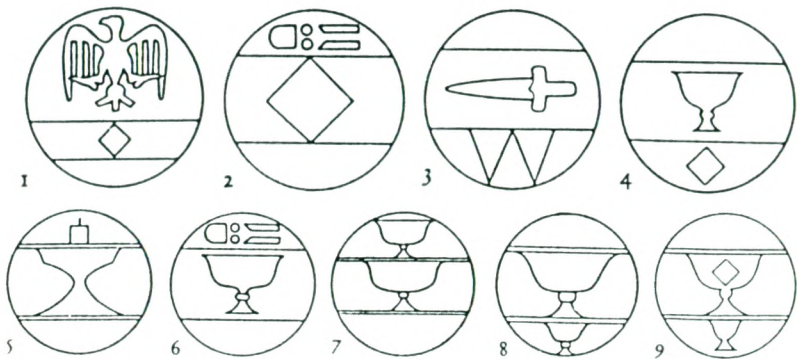
blazon dates back to the last days of the Ayyubid Empire in the beginning of the so-called Bahri period of the Turkish Mamluks, i.e. 1250-1390, when the Mamluk Aibak at-Turkumânî, a taster on the royal court and later even a member of the Mamluk bodyguard of the last Ayyubid ruler Sâlih Najmaddin Ayyub, replaced his master as the first Mamluk sultan with the title al-Malik in 1250 [5]. In the absence of any literary and numismatic evidence it is hard to believe that the history of heraldry in Egypt and Syria goes further back. There is no evidence in the neighboring Muslim countries for the use of heraldry before 13th century.

Meinecke himself admits the use of emblematic devices on numerous objects of art and buildings which belonged to the blazon holder or were dedicated or consecrated to him, including military standards carried on military campaigns and showing the blazons of the commander-in-chief or other high ranking officers. There again only very little evidence is available to support this theory, as no original Mamluk flag has survived. But there exist some pieces of metalwork which can be identified as heads of banners – or the flag finials – sometimes even showing this blazon. “The reason for placing the blazon on the head instead of the banner itself might have been the size, which was too small to carry the blazon,” states Meinecke ¹⁶¹. “But bigger flags very possibly carried the blazons themselves.” For this he cites a chronicler Qalqašandī when describing the insignia of the Mamluk sultan and naming flags among them: ...*one of them is a big flag of yellow silk, embroidered with gold; this flag displays the titles of the Sultan (alqâb) and his name; this flag is called al-išâba*” ¹⁷¹. Obviously, this Mamluk source describes the written blazon of the Mamluk sultans on a flag. The same author furnishes even more arguments in favour of this theory in his account of the Rasulides dynasty in Yemen (*What the emblem of the sultan is concerned ... the emblem of the sultan of Yemen is a red flower on white ground*) ¹⁸¹. Taking into consideration the strong political and cultural connections of the Yemeni Rasulide dynasty with the Mamluks, the last quotation might demonstrate a custom quite parallel to the use in Egypt and Syria. Again, in this case it is possible to conclude that Mamluk sultans were characterized by their heraldic devices on their flags, too.

There are 43 Mamluk flag finials deposited in the collection of weapons of the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul. As forty of them are made of steel, two of iron and one of tombac, the indications for the colours of the blazons used are difficult to obtain. In most cases carved outlines are sufficient to show the form of the emblematic device or the inscription, though without any hint for the original colours of the blazon. Sometimes, the colors are indicated by other incrustated metals, by gold, silver and red copper, but giving only a limited range of the colours possible on Mamluk blazons.

Two Turkish scholars, Dr. Hülya Tezcan and Turay Tezcan, examined those Mamluk finials and classified them thoroughly according to their special features, techniques of manufacture and decoration used and to the motifs used on them. As these two researchers also exploited tables of illustrations depicting the Mamluk emblematic devices by Dr. Michael Meinecke I would like to present some pictures of the finials from their book *Türk Sancak Alevleri* with the reference to Meinecke's remarks.

Generally spoken, the most frequent type of decoration of the Mamluk finials is the **inscription** and the **shield**, almost always round and twice divided, charged with **signs of offices**.



Various floral and abstract patterns (*Rîmî* design, palmettos, rosettes, geometric motifs etc.) form a decorative background of these blazons when placed on the finial [9].

According to Meinecke, **inscriptions** are the most eminent and the most frequent blazons of the Mamluk sultans, a special type of blazon not paralleled in any non-Muslim heraldry, where the emblematic devices are replaced by phrases praising the ruling sultan [10]. While the first three sultans displayed traditional heraldic charges of the English lion (Baibars, 1260-1277) [11], the Bourbon fleur-de-lys (Mansûr Qalâ'ûn, 1279-1290) [12] or the German eagle (Nâsir Muhammad bin Qalâ'ûn, 1293-1341) [13] assumed under influence of the Crusaders whom they faced in Syria, the third of them - Nâsir Muhammad - in the later part of his interrupted rule around 1320/1330 changed his blazon

to the written mottos in a three-fielded shield. Several quite similar mottos in heraldic appearance of medallions are known dating to the last decades of his reign. They contain three different praising phrases on the sultan. This rather revolutionary change determines the following picture of the whole Mamluk imperial heraldry. All the twelve descendants of Sultan Nâsir Muhammad who ruled till 1382 continued to use the written blazon introduced by their predecessor and never again were characterized by personal figurative emblems. Since the introduction of the written blazon by Sultan Nâsir about 1320/1330, the sultanic heraldry shows a persistent uniformity: all the following sultans up to the Ottoman conquest of the Mamluk Empire in 1517 were characterized only by blazons containing praising phrases with their names and/or titles [14]. This close connection between this type of heraldry and the Mamluk sultans explains why the written blazons were reserved for the imperial use only. Later on, the same principle was accepted by all Ottoman sultans and other Muslim rulers all over the Middle East.

Example 1

A flag finial belonging to the Sultan Kansûh el-Gavrî (1501-1514) is a good example of such a written blazon used on a vexillological object.



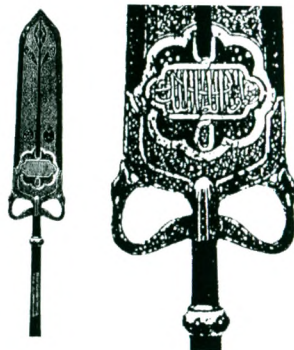
An inscription “*‘Izzun li-Mevlânâ es-Sultân el-Melik al-Eşref Kansûb. ‘Azze našrubu.*” (Glory to our lord Sultan King Sublime Kansûh. May his victory be glorious!) is perforated in the duct *sülüs*. The remaining part of the blade is filled up with an abundant composition of *ajourée* consisting of curled twigs with leaves that have dim contours [15].

Example 2

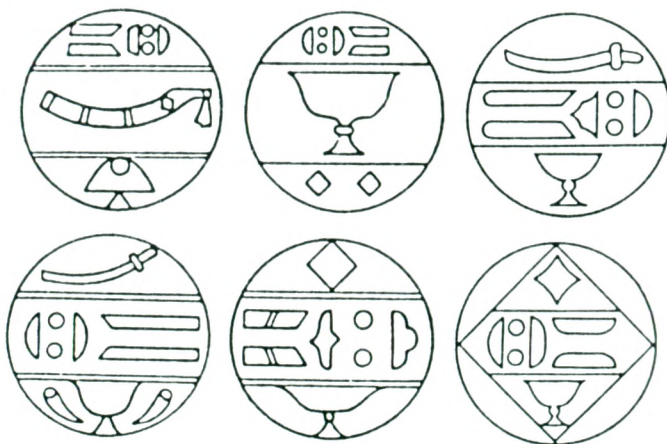
A finial with golden inscription and gilding, decorated with the technique *ajourée* is an example of the highest workmanship

manufactured for Sultan Kayıtbay (1468-1496) in the second half of the 15th century.

The writing inside the cartouche placed in a large medallion is made on the gilded background with a thin black contour and reads as follows: “*Izzun li-Mevlânâ el-Sultân el-Melik el-Eşref Ebû ’n-Naşr Kâytbây. ’Azze našrubu.*” (Glory to our lord Sultan King Sublime Ebû ’n-Nasr Kayıtbay. May his victory be glorious!) This inscription – almost identical with the previous example dated to the 16th century - starts on the obverse and continues on the reverse side of the finial ^[16].



Signs of offices are the most frequent emblematic devices in Mamluk heraldry.



These objects are characteristic marks of offices at the imperial court and were carried when on duty or during ceremonies by the members of the sultan's personal guard. As these court offices were reserved to the Mamluks (= slaves) of the ruling sultans, the holders of blazons with this type of emblems are usually recognizable as officers or *amîrs*. An explanation for the choice of these objects is indirectly furnished by Ibn Tagribirdî when stating that the amîr Aibak – who later became the first Mamluk sultan in 1250 – “accompanied his master, the last

Ayyubide malik Sálíh Najmaddin Ayyub, on his campaign to the East till he made him his taster (*ğaşnikâr*); that is why, when dubbing him amír, he chose the picture of a small table (*havânğâ*) as his blazon."¹⁵¹ This very instructive quotation indicates that the court office as a taster motivated the choice of the round table as emblematic device. More court offices and the connected emblematic devices are listed by Dr. Meinecke when describing the officials of the court – the **pen-box** for the sultan's secretary (*davâdâr*), the **sword** or **scimitar** for the armour-bearer (*silabdâr*). The **bow** with or without arrows was reserved for the bowman (*bunduqdâr*). The **ewer** was emblematic device of the superintendent of the stores (*tıştdâr*), the **napkin** – a piece of cloth to wrap objects up, is usually represented by a rhomb - for the masters of the robes (*ğamdâr*), the **horseshoe** as the emblem of the marshal (*amír abûr*). Other pictures of objects employed on heraldic shield can also be connected to different court offices – the **cup** was identified as the sign of the cup-bearer (*sâqî*), the **polo-stick** with or without balls belonged to the polo-master (*ğúkandâr*)¹⁷¹. All the devices named and many others were usually placed on a simple or horizontally divided shield together with other emblems, which obviously had only a decorative purpose. As the sultanic heraldry had a rather static appearance since the invention of the written blazons, the development is carried on mainly by the amírial blazons, which show a very rich variety of forms. This variety is due to the fact that every officer could carry a blazon, but each blazon had to differ decisively from all other contemporary blazons. Consequently, as the right to carry a blazon was granted in the moment a person was dubbed *amír* and thereafter this blazon was kept unchanged, the same form was used for a considerable long period of time, depending on the lifetime of the holder.

Example 3

There are two fine examples of flag finials decorated with the signs of offices in the Topkapı collection. The first one belonged to the Emir Inal (1453-1461) and was manufactured in the middle of the 15th century.

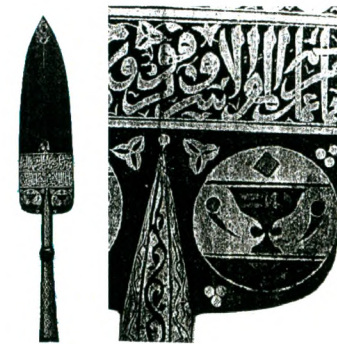


There is a round sliced medallion placed in one part of the interior stripe. Inside of the medallion, there is a well-known device with a cup (or goblet). The round shield is divided into three horizontal sections - the central one is charged with a goblet and two horns situated by each side of the cup. The upper part shows a napkin above the goblet while another goblet is placed in the lower part. The reverse side of the blade has the same arrangement. There is a medallion bearing the word "emir" while other words are almost completely rubbed out [18]. However, according to the Meinecke's overview of the emir's blazon development, there is a stylized fleur-de-lys in the lower part of the shield instead of a cup mistakenly ascribed by the Tezcan couple to Inal [19].



Example 4

The last flag finial represents a very nice and important object of art, bearing both phrases praising the name of Sultan Berkok (1328-1398) and a round shield with a cup. The flat inscription in two lines differs on each side of the blade. The Quranic inscriptions are written by gilding in gold: upper line, obverse: half of the verse XLVIII/1-2 of the surah al-Fath; lower line, obverse: verse LXI/13 of the surah as-Saff; upper line, reverse: continuation of the verse XLVIII/2 of the surah al-Fath; lower line, reverse: "Mimmâ' umila bi resm 'el-Mu 'iz el-E,şref Barkük. Kafil el-Mamlaka as Sâciya. 'Azze našrubu." (One of those /things/ manufactured under orders of Mighty and Sublime Berkok, Governor



of the Kingdom of Syria. May his victory be glorious!) The inside of two shields is divided into three sections. The central one is charged with a goblet decorated with the pen-box and two horns or powderhorns situated by each side of the cup. The upper part shows a napkin, while the lower one is charged with another cup. Blank area around the shield is decorated with the motif of either

three balls or of elegant flowers with three perianth leaves [20]. Dr. Meinecke shows the same [21].

Both flag finials and flags bearing the above-mentioned characteristic clues of the Mamluk heraldry outlasted the fall of the Empire in the 16th century. There exists trustworthy evidence that all flags of the Ottoman sultans used on land were covered with writing devices or mottos praising the ruler in form of embroidered, painted or appliqué calligraphic inscriptions. After Nizam-i Cadid reforms in 1793, they were replaced by the Sultan's calligraphic signature known as *tughra*.

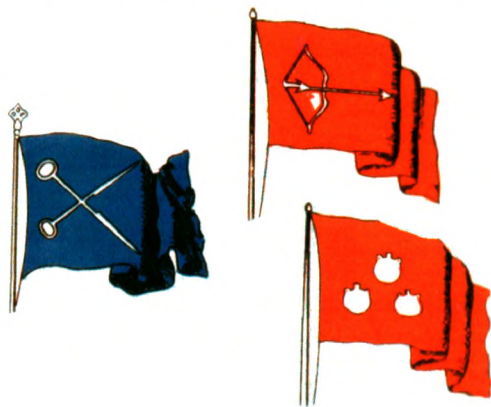


After the conquest of Egypt and Syria, the same "inscriptional" pattern was applied to military flags in the Ottoman Empire. These Ottoman flags reflected exclusively religious iconography and were decorated predominantly with the Quranic quotations, surahs from the Holy Book and with the names of Allah, Muhammad and four caliphs. Figure shows such a typical example - a trophy acquired by the Polish King Jan III Sobieski at

Vienna in 1683 and now exhibited in the Cracow castle, Wawel.

As quoted in my papers delivered at the 17th ICV in Cape Town, a similar design was applied to regimental colours of the infantry, introduced in the Ottoman Empire after 1826 (with the Sultan's seal – *tughra* – on reverse) [22]. Also the "Amirial blazons" of the Mamluks, as characterized by Meinecke, found their echo in the Ottoman vexillology after the Hayrettin's reform in 1518 – many objects of the same character appeared on flags of the military corps, their commanders or the beys as administrators of district (*sanjak*) in the rank of Pasha (general) – a double-bladed sword known as *zülfiķar*, a cannon, mortar, key, anchor, ship, minaret etc [23]. Similarly to the practice in the Mamluk Empire, when the beys were promoted to the rank of beylerbeys (i.e.

administrator of province) or vizier (i.e. minister), their previous flags were augmented with various inscriptions (mainly surahs from Qur'an). In the land forces, this symbolism was abandoned after the Asakiri Mansure-i Muhammediye reform in



1826. Some traces were still visible in the Navy. When international customs of simple, easily visible and recognizable flags excluded any use of Quranic quotations known from the regimental colors. Thus, a variety of rather strange objects – not appropriate to the Navy – like scissors, bow with arrows, earthen coffers appeared on the Ottoman naval flags in the late 19th century until 1876 [24].

Finally, the europeanization, followed by the nationalist movements and the secularization of the Turkish society in the 19th and 20th centuries led to a total extinction of those traditional elements from contemporary Turkish symbolism.



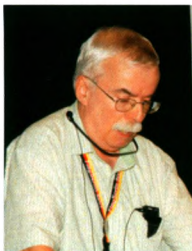
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18. TSA, p. 36.
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Acknowledgements:

To Petr Exner who has provided me with the graphical support for this paper and its presentation I extend my most sincere thanks.

About the author



Born 14 July 1948 at Uherské Hradiště (Czechia), living in Praha (Prague) he graduated as M. Econ. (finances and credit) at the College of Economics in Prague (1972). Since 1973, he has worked in a foreign trade company in various positions. Between 1990 and 1994, he stayed in Turkey on business purposes.

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Vexillological activities: A founding member of the Czech Vexillological Society (CVS, then Vexillological Club) since 1972, member of its Board (1976-1990, 1995-), Vice-President (1980-1990 and 1995-2004), President (2004-). He attended ICV in Zurich (1993), Cape Town (1997) and York (2001).

His vexillological interests: flags of municipalities, sports clubs and other entities in the Czech Republic, as well as Turkish historical flags. He publishes mainly in the bulletin *Vexilologie*, of which he was executive editor between 1975 and 1983. Since 1997, he has also been editor of the annual publication *Vexilokontakt* written in English.

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Conversation at Bazaar (A. Brožek, J. Martykán, G. Mattern, E. Dreyer, P. Exner)

Photo: Mante