



LUNCH BOX

ISLAMIC METALWORK FROM THE WEST BOHEMIAN MUSEUM, PILSEN

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Lunch box. Egypt.

Copper and brass, the bottom vessel is hammered from sheet metal, the lid is cast and both are tinned. Decoration engraved.

Size: High of the complete vessel: 13 cm
 Bottom vessel – diameter of underside: 25 cm, high: 9.3 cm, diameter of opening: 23.7 cm, width of the rim: 0.9 cm
 Lid – diameter: 23 cm, the handle – outer

diameter: 8 cm, high: 1.2 cm, width of the rim: 0.5 cm

Acquisition: Bought in 1901 from Mr. Jindřich Kautsch,² Paris.

Condition: Good. The tinning partly removed. The handle with holes on the periphery probably due to defective welding.

Photographed by: Ivana Michnerová
 Unpublished.

The collection of Islamic art in the West Bohemian Museum, in Pilsen, was constituted at the beginning of the twentieth century. Islamic metalworks included in this collection consist of items produced mostly in the nineteenth century, but a few objects seem to be older, e.g. a lunch box identified in the museum records as an eighteenth century product, might be, as claimed in this paper, much older, probably made in Egypt within the Mamlūk period (1250–1517).

The art production of the Mamlūks

Mamlūk Egypt and Syria were important centres of art production because they became the asylums for craftsmen displaced from Iran and Iraq after the attack by Mongols in 1220s. Most of the Mamlūk rulers were rich patrons therefore art and crafts were flour-

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² Born on 28th January 1859, other dates unknown. This medallist and goldsmith studied in Prague, Vienna and Paris. He was a teacher at School of Applied Art in Prague (1881–1887), from 1887 he worked as conservator in museum of applied art in České Budějovice. In 1888 he published his work *Goldschmiedearbeiten des XV.–XIX. Jahrhunderts* in Germany and France. From 1889 he lived in Paris, and after the start of World War I he escaped to Vienna.

ishing in Egypt at their time. The major art branches were architecture in stone and the art of book. But carving in wood, glassware, pottery and especially metalwork were famous as well. Mamlūk metalwork is famous for copper alloy³ vessels inlaid with precious materials as gold and silver. It is possible to say that the Mamlūk metalwork, especially the inlay one, is continuation of the famous Mosul (Al-Mawṣil) school in Iraq⁴. In the thirteenth century the variety of shapes of the vessels was reduced: lamps, basins, candlesticks or dishes.⁵ The casting of favourite shapes was also used more frequently in contrast to previous time. The price of gold and silver increased during the fifteenth century and inlaid metalwork became rare. Vessels made from copper alloys were tinned and the surface was decorated with engraving. We can say that during the thirteenth century brass replaced bronze.⁶ The craftsmen also started with majority of production of engraved monochrome metalwork. Tin reminding silver in its appearance became widely used because of its lower price and also to protect against verdigris in case of utensils, e. g. lunches boxes. The major part of decoration of Mamlūk objects was that with thulūth inscriptions⁷ and blazons. Within the blazons various inscriptions were used such as: calligraphy, names, titles, praise or blessing.⁸ For the Mamlūk military rank titles were very important therefore they depicted them in their symbolic way, e. g. a cup for the butler, a bow for the bowman, a penbox for the secretary etc. The blazon was a logo of identification and it was in shape of a roundel with a thick horizontal strip at the centre with the inscription or the symbol. The blazon was not used only by amīr⁹ but by anybody and for anything within his household.¹⁰ Blazons were used as decoration on buildings, mosque lamps, candlesticks, bottles and other objects.¹¹

Description

The lunch box consists of two parts. It is of cylindrical shape with sloping walls and has a flat lid. The bottom vessel is circular in plan with the flattened rim at the top. The lid is flat with oblique border and with ring shaped handle, which is welded into the centre of the lid. There are little defects in shape of tiny hollows around the handle that probably appeared in the process of welding. This kind of lid was used as a lunch tray when it was turned upside down. Surface of the vessel is richly decorated with engraving. The lid is decorated on both, inner and external side. The reverse is decorated more intricately. This type of ornamentation imitates exterior of the lid with latitude. The decoration of the bottom vessel is quite simple. The surface of the inner part of the bottom vessel is decorated with a pointed rosette.

³ They used above all brass from the thirteenth century (Hillebrand, p. 152).

⁴ This town is known for using inlay technique from the thirteenth century (Ward, p. 80).

⁵ Hillebrand, p. 152.

⁶ Hillebrand, p. 152.

⁷ Barbara Brend presents that frequent using of calligraphy by the Bahri Mamlūks is under Persian and Saljūq influence and because a number of objects were dedicated to religious institutions (Brend, p. 108).

⁸ Auda, D. ibn.

⁹ Army commander or prince (Hillebrand, p. 283).

¹⁰ Hillebrand, p. 150.

¹¹ Auda, D. ibn.

Decoration theme

The surface of the whole vessel is tinned and decorated with engraved inscriptions¹² alternating with floral and geometrical design. The background of the decoration is filled with black composition on the hatched ground. At the first sight the decoration of both, the bottom vessel and the lid, is the same one. But when we observe the details, we find out that the decoration of the lid just imitates the decoration and style of the bottom vessel, as we will see below.

The decoration themes on the bottom vessel are located into wide band on the periphery. The lower border of the band is made with two parallel-engraved lines, a fillet. Down to the lower line there are two types of alternate pendants appended. The first one is in the shape of roundel with a rosette in the middle. The second one is in the shape of a half-polylobed rosette filled with the continuous interlacing pattern based on a Y-shaped motif of architectural origin¹³ or with group of three flowers that is framed by engraved twin fillets (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). These eight pendants are situated directly below cartouches and roundels in the main band. Between these two doubled pendants we can find two inscriptions (Fig. 2). The first one is a bold inscription as a part of the decoration and it is divided into two parts. The second one is written in cursive script and it is enclosed into simple cartouche. Both of them give information about their owners. The first one is probably original from the same period like the bottom vessel. The original information is that this vessel was made by metalworker *Yūnus al-Ḥazmī*.¹⁴ The second inscription is an information about later owner probably *Jamālī ibn al-Naṭāc*.¹⁵ The main decoration themes are engraved into wide band. The band is divided into eight medallions of different size. The medallions are in pairs and differ by type of the decoration. The medallions alternate in the following way: two of them depict the blessing thulūth script, another pair contains the intricately interlaced floral scrolls, the next one has the interlacing pattern of geometrical Y-shaped motif and the rest pair depict blazons with the title of the original owner or patron. The blazon and the geometrical pattern are situated in roundel-shape decoration of the same size. The pattern of floral scrolls and thuluth inscriptions adorn wide horizontal cartouches enclosed with lotus blossoms with split stalks. These two cartouches contain blessing inscriptions to the owner.

The blessing inscriptions in the cartouches¹⁶

First cartouche (Fig. 2):

First line: بلغت من العلياء أعلا (sic!) المراتب فانك وراء

Balaghta min al-^cUlyā'a a^clā al-Marātib fa'innaka warā'a

¹² I wish to thank to Rudolf Veselý, Charles University, Prague for kindly help with reading all of the inscriptions on the vessel.

¹³ Melikian-Chirvani 1982, p. 347.

¹⁴ مما عمل برسم يونس الحزمي يرجو المغفرة: *Mimmā 'amala bi-rasmi Yūnus al-Ḥazmī yarjū 'l-Maghfara* – From this what was commissioned made by Yūnus al-Ḥazmī, he wish to be remitted a sins. This script is similar to the one in cartouches, but we cannot say that is pure thuluth script.

¹⁵ صاحبه الفقير جمالي بن ابن لقطاع: *Ṣāhibu-hu al-Faqīr Jamālī ben ibn' Naṭāc* – His owner is al-Faqīr Jamālī bin ibn' Naṭāc.

¹⁶ Literary and historical analyses in details are the challenge for the future. I decided only for representation of transliteration of Arabic and Latin script.



Fig. 1. Lunch box



Fig. 2. Lunch box, another part of the periphery.

You reached from the Highness the highest Rank, you are behind

Second line: التوفيق من كل جانب و لا زلت مرغوبا

At-Taufīq min kulli jānib wa lā zilta marghūban.

the Success from all sides and be still in demand.

Second cartouche (Fig. 1):

First line: و اليك باسطا و يمينك الدنيا في بيتك المطالب

Wa-ilayka bāsīṭan wa yamīnuka' d-dunyā fī bajtika 'l-MaṭāḤlib

And shall be the right hand of this world reached out to you; there are Desires in your house

Second line: واشرب شفا نوراً و كن صبوراً

Wa ishrab shafā'an nūran wa kun ṣabūran.

and drink cure of light and be patient.

These inscriptions is probably just incidental blessing text composed for this kind of opportunity with content associated with a using of the lunch box.

The upper limit of the band is encircled with two hammered lines and with scrollwork within the narrow horizontal band. On flattened rim we can find some highly stylised inscriptions, which are almost impossible to read. The inner bottom of the vessel is decorated with pointed rosette in the centre (Fig. 3).

The lid is flat with splayed periphery. In the centre (Fig. 4) of the lid is a rosette bordered with ring shaped handle. The rim of the handle is decorated with floral scrolls. At the border of the handle there is a band divided into eight cartouches with inscriptions alternating with floral scrolls. The main band consists of eight medallions or cartouches similar to the decoration on the bottom vessel. There are four pairs of medallions in this band. Two of them are cartouches with inscription, another pair of round-shaped medallions is decorated with Y-shaped motif, the next one is pair of cartouches with floral scrolls and the last one is the blazon. All of the medallions and cartouches are enclosed with two blossoms radiating from a centre. The outer band is also divided into eight cartouches containing identical inscriptions alternating with floral scrolls.¹⁷ The splayed periphery is decorated with scrollwork. The decoration of the reverse of the lid (Fig. 5) is similar to this decoration but not the same. The craftsman used the same themes but the composition differs in details. Both pairs of cartouches, on the obverse and the reverse contain the same part of the inscription taken from the cartouche on the bottom vessel. It is the first sentence of one of these blessing inscriptions divided into two parts.¹⁸

The lid seems to be decorated in the same way but when we observe the surface of the lid in details we can see that it is made in less elaborated way. The craftsman intended to

¹⁷ Inscriptions in cartouches on the margins of the lid are difficult to read and have not been read yet because they are not legible.

¹⁸ First sentence of the first cartouche on the bottom vessel (Fig. 2) is divided into two parts and - written to two cartouches on the right side (Fig. 4) and the reverse of the lid (Fig. 5):

بلغت من العلياء علا / المراتب مانك وراء

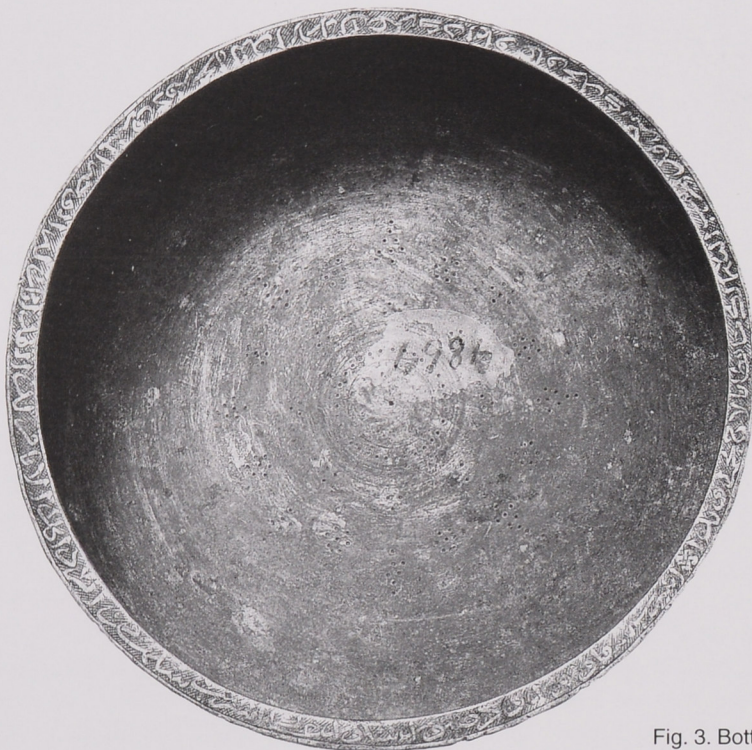


Fig. 3. Bottom vessel from the top.

imitate the decoration of the bottom vessel. He succeeded in depicting the same type of floral or geometrical patterns but the thulūth inscriptions in the medallion contains only a part of the inscription depicted on the bottom vessel. Therefore it gives no further meaning but a decoration inscription. The rest of the lid decoration imitates the original decoration of the bottom vessel with eight alternating medallions and inscriptions and depicts them on both, the front and reverse of the lid. The rosette in the centre of the lid and floral scrolls on the oblique border of the lid represent a new type of decoration in contrast to the bottom vessel.

There is no human or animal figure on this vessel that is typical of the orthodox Sunnī Mamlūk decoration. This type of decoration is similar to type of decoration of the fourteenth or fifteenth century vessels from Mamlūk Egypt.¹⁹

The most interesting part of the decoration is the blazon (Fig. 6). The blazon is of roundel shape with band of floral scrolls as a border. The roundel shape remains a shield.²⁰ The title *dawadar* means a secretary of a lower rank. There is a symbolic depiction of his status in the centre. It introduces a penbox with two receptacles for reeds on the left, receptacle for thread, starch paste pot and sand pot and an inkwell on the right.²¹ The same blazon is engraved on the lid (Fig. 4). It looks almost identical but there are two differences. There are two squares situated above and under the penbox. These two squares

¹⁹ See Martin, Pl. 8.

²⁰ Mamlūk used also other shapes like pentagonal, oval, four or six petalled rosettes (Auda, D. ibn).

²¹ Mayer, L. A., p. 12.



Fig. 4. Lid, right side.

mean napkins for *jamdar*, the master of the wardrobe.²² This is the one of two common representation of the blazon with a penbox.²³ The depiction of the penbox in the blazon is known from the first half of the fourteenth century.²⁴ This blazon represents the later presentation of the same type of the previous title. The first types of blazons were simple in depiction; the later presentation is a complex of more than one charge.²⁵ The decoration depicting the title of owner or patron is typical for the Mamlūks. The sultan probably granted the blazon, but the choice of the emblem was up to the amīr. Two different depictions of the same title on the lunch box prove that the bottom vessel and the lid do not originate in the same time.

There are three inscriptions that are not a part of the decoration of the vessel. Two of them are engraved on the lid and one on the surface of the bottom vessel (as I mentioned above). These are an information about the owner or the patron written in cursive script. We can read on the lid that it was commissioned by *Amīr Sheykh* for beloved *Lady Ḥabīb Jān*.²⁶

²² See Hillebrand, p. 151. The napkin of square or oblong shape was used to wrap clothes.

²³ The second one is with depiction of a napkin on the upper field and with a cup between a pair of trousers of nobility on the lower field.

²⁴ Meinecke, M., 1972, p. 250.

²⁵ Auda, D. ibn.

²⁶ برسم امیر شیخ: *Bi-rasmi Amīr Sheykh* – Commissioned by *Amīr Sheykh*. It is possible it is sultan

Mu'ayyad Sheykh, Burji Mamlūk (1412–1421). برسم خند ابنت حبیب جان: *Bi-rasmi khund Ibnat Ḥabīb Jān* – Commissioned by *Lady Ibnat Ḥabīb Jān*.



Fig. 5. Lid, reverse.

Technical notes

The bottom vessel of the lunch box is hammered from the copper sheet and finished on a spinning lathe. The lid was cast from brass. Both parts are tinned and decorated with engraving.²⁷ The lid and the vessel are made from different materials.

Table 1: Metal Analysis.²⁸

	Cu	Fe	Zn	Pb	Ag	Sn	Sb
Bottom vessel	75.63			4.1	0.02	23.2	0.05
Lid	78.68	0.4	12	5.2	0.1	3.4	0.22

Dating²⁹

There is a lot of various vessels with similar surface decoration in literature.³⁰ Lots of them were made in Egypt under the Mamlūk rule. The entire above-mentioned informa-

²⁷ Tin is not a part of the alloy but it is on the surface.

²⁸ Tests were made at the Nuclear Physics Institute, Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic.

²⁹ The previous owner, Mr. Jindřich Kautsch, dated the lunch box in his letter addressed to the director of the West Bohemian Museum, to eighteenth century (a letter from 28th February, 1901, record of the West Bohemian Museum, 1901, box No. 52).

³⁰ See Martin.



Fig. 6. The blazon. The detail from the bottom vessel.

tion makes the dating of the vessel by the Mamlūk time likely. In Eva Baer's opinion the Mamlūks made the oval shaped lunch boxes with handles on the lids also as a foot when turned upside down. To prevent food poisoning, they were made of tinned bronze.³¹ These boxes usually consisted of one to three separated units. The proof of different origin of the bottom vessel and the lid are the blazons. The older type of the Mamlūk blazon is on the bottom vessel and it represents a rank of the secretary in the Mamlūk administration. The later type of depiction of the blazon with two little squares is on the lid. Only Ayyūbids and Mamlūks in Egypt and Syria used these blazons from the late twelfth century to the very early sixteenth century.³² The decoration of the lid is a diligent copy of the decoration of the bottom vessel. For example a part of the inscription on the vessel was copied on the lid with no further sense but with just a visual aspects. As we can see in details, the engraving is less elaborated then on the bottom vessel. The bottom vessel and the lid are made from different materials, as we can see in the table. Cast objects were usually made as a copy of masterpieces from past. The lid was probably lost and the new owner commissioned a copy of it. The important part of the decoration is inscriptions and the analysis of them can ratify my theory about history of this lunch box in the future.

³¹ Allen, J.

³² Auda, D. ibn.

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