

A MARBLE TILE WITH THE NAMES OF THE TEN COMPANIONS PROMISED PARADISE (INVENTORY NO. 2097, MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ART IN CAIRO) REDATING AND RECLASSIFICATION

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Abstract:

The main aim of this study is to re-date and reclassify one of the masterpieces in the Museum of Islamic art in Cairo. It carries the names of the Ten companions promised paradise applied in a type of Kufic script, which is octagonal in form. It has, so far, been dated back to the Mamluk period. It was originally found in the mosque of al-Sayyida Nafisah. In this study, I prove that it dates back to the Ottoman period, specifically during the restoration works in the same mosque carried out by the Ottoman sovereign 'Abdalrahman Kathudā. I have based my conclusion on a comparative study between the present plaque and another identical one preserved beside the Ottoman mihrab in al-Azhar Mosque having the same text, which is considered amongst his works in al-Azhar dated 1167 AH./1753 AD. In this paper, I conduct an analytical study of the style and text of the examined artifact compared with the one preserved in al-Azhar mosque and another preserved in the mosque of al-Burdīnī (1025-1038 AH.-1616-1629 AD). The study concluded that the artifact dates back to the Ottoman period, not the Mamluk, as supported by 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ġabartī, who mentioned that 'Abd al-Rahman Kathuda restored the mosque of al-Sayyida Nafisah and added a new qibla wall in al-Azhar mosque.

1. Introduction

This research paper presents an analytical, descriptive, and comparative study of a marble tile preserved in the museum of Islamic art in Cairo (Inv. No 2097). It carries the names of the *Ten Companions Promised Paradise* and is dated to the Mamluk era. It is written in the geometric octagonal Kufic that mainly takes various forms and shapes, such as square, rectangular, and octagonal [1,2]. Many theories have discussed the origins of this type of angular writing. For example, Flūry suggested that the origin of this type of angular letters remains obscure and that Chinese art plays a vital role in the occ-

urrence of this type of script used to adorn several monuments in Iran [2]. Hautecoeur and Wiet believed that this type of geometric letters appeared in Seljuk arts [3]. Shimmel suggested that this type of angular Kufic script was innovated by the Safavid architects of Isfahan, who wrote the names of Allah, His Prophet, and Imām 'Alī in colorful tiles decorating the walls and entrances to mausoleums [4]. Shimmel agrees with Ḥasan that the first example of this type of rectangular script was carved in the Mosque of Isfahān (481 AH./1088 AD.) [5]. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm assumed that this script originated in Iranian

and Seljuk arts [5]. In Egypt, the first example of the geometric Kufic was found in the southern wall of the Mamluk mausoleum of al-Mansur Qalāwūn 678-689 AH./1279-1290 AD. [6,7]. However, recent studies have demonstrated that the origin of this type of script goes back to Seljuk Iran and its surrounding areas. A recent study by Šāfi‘ at Alexandria University backed up and demonstrated the Iranian theory being the main center from which the square Kufic originated [8]. The study sheds light on the octagonal geometric Kufic style applied in black incrustation on a white background and its compatibility with other similar prototypes dating back to the Ottoman period.

2. Methodology

Both descriptive and analytical methods were followed through a comparative study with similar objects dating to the Ottoman period in an attempt to re-date and reclassify an octagonal marble tile bearing the names of the *Ten Companions Promised Paradise* preserved in the museum of Islamic art in Cairo (Inv.2097). The museum of Islamic art in Cairo houses hundreds of glamorous artistic pieces of art and masterpieces dating back from the beginning of Islam until the modern age [9,10]. The Mamluk collection is huge and covers great sections ranging from woodwork [9,11,12], metalwork [13], ceramics, pottery, textiles, stones, and marble [9,10,12]. The arts of the Mamluks were perfected in carving techniques of both marble and stone. Mamluks paved the ground of their religious monuments with polychrome marble using different techniques [14]. According to Mamluk documents and endowment deeds, the artists adopted various methods, such as engraving, paneling [15], assembling the small polychrome marble pieces *ḥurdah* [16, 17], and incrustation *ḥafr wa tanzīl*, *ḥafr wa dafn*^(a) [18]. Ottoman artisans applied the same methods (used earlier by their Mamluk predecessors). The Ottomans decorated marble fragments with various motifs, including epigraphic ornaments. The geometric Kufic

script became one of the main characteristics used in Ottoman arts [19] despite the wide spread of the Nashī script at the same time [20].

2.1. The marble panel (Case study)

The study covers a marble tile with the names of the *Ten Companions Promised Paradise*

- **Place:** Located in museum of Islamic art, Cairo from the mosque of al-Sayyida Nafisah [9].
- **Inventory Number:** 2097, fig. (1).

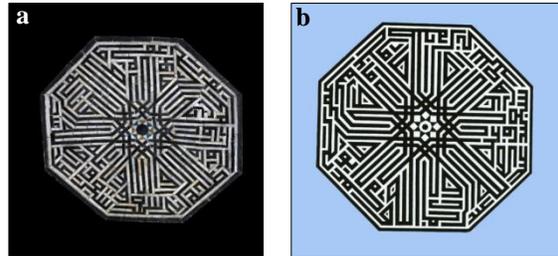


Figure (1) Shows **a.** the octagonal marble tile (After: the museum of Islamic art, Cairo; Inventory No.2097), **b.** q drawing of the previous tile Inventory.

- **Dated:** Mamluk period according to the registries of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo to the.
- **Measurements:** 54×54 cm.
- **Material:** Marble; Technique: Carving - incrustation with black paste-blue and red marble mosaics^(b).
- **Description:** An octagonal marble tile with carved decoration of interlaced geometric Kufic showing the names of the *Ten Companions Promised Paradise* reads:

(الله ومحمد و ابو بكر وعمر وعثمان وعلي وطلحة والزبير
وسعد وسعيد وعبد وصي وعبد الله وعبد الرحمن)
Allah-Muḥammad-Abu Bakr-‘Umar-
‘Uṭmān, ‘Alī, Ṭalḥah, al-Zubayr, Sa‘d, Sa‘īd,
‘Abd Waṣy, ‘Abd al-Allah, ‘Abd al-Raḥman.

The writing runs clockwise, starting with **Allah** (الله) and his prophet **Muḥammad** (PBUH). The endings of the letters like *alif* and *lām* go inwards, forming an octagonal star motif in the center encrusted with blue and red colored marble mosaics. The endings of the two letters *alif* and *lam* in - الله محمد

ابو بكر - عثمان - طلحة - الزبير - عبد الله - عبد الرحمن are slightly interlaced into star polygons bearing rectangles and lozenges, forming another central fluted star made of marble incrustations.

3. Commentary (Analytical study)

The text under consideration was written in a type of geometric Kufic script incrustated within an octagonal marble frame. The text reads clockwise, starting with the Almighty word of Allah الله. The initial *Alif* in the Almighty الله is an elongated stroke that reaches a central star. The type of letter was applied on several Mamluk examples) on architecture and artefacts [3,5-7]. Under the Ottomans, this form was extensively applied on Ottoman tiles, demonstrating the same shape as the marble tile from the works of emir ‘Abd al-Raḥman Kathudā in the Qibla wall of al-Azhar mosque, fig. (2) [19,21]. The Initial letter *bā’* in ابو بكر - الزبير is a small horizontal line embedded within two vertical bars, tab. (1).

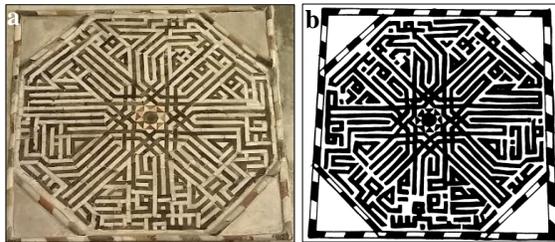


Figure (2) Shows **a.** the marble tile in the Qibla wall at al-Azhar Mosque from the works of ‘Abd al-Raḥman Kathudā (After: ‘Abd al-‘Āl, 2010), **b.** a drawing of the previous tile

Table (1) The alphabetic analysis of the marble tile

Letter	Singular	Initial	Medial	Final
Alif				
Bā’		ب	ب	
Tā’ <i>marbūṭah</i>				ا
Tā’			ط	
Ḥā’		ح	ح	
Dāl				د
Rā’				ر
Zāy				ز
Sīn		س	س	
Ṣād				ص
Tā’		ط	ط	
‘Ayn		ع	ع	
Kāf			ك	
Lām		ل	ل	
Mīm		م	م	
Nūn				ن
Ḥā’				ه
Wāw	و			و
Yā’			ي	ي

This form is also used in the tile belonging to the works of ‘Abd al-Raḥman Kathudā [19], fig. (2). The final *tā’ marbūṭah* in طلحة is seen like a square with two emerging perpendicular lines above. The middle *tā’* in عثمان is seen like a small horizontal line set within two perpendicular strokes. The initial letter *ḥā’* in عبد الرحمن is represented as an incomplete rectangle with its lower line shorter than the upper one. The middle *ḥā’* in طلحة is in the shape of an incomplete square opened on the lower part. The medial *ḥā’* in محمد is also seen in the shape of an incomplete rectangle opened towards the left (like that represented in) Kathudā’s example fig (2). The final *dāl* in عبد الله - عبد الرحمن - سعد - سعيد is represented either as half a square or half a rectangle opened (towards) the left side. This style of lettering was extensively applied to most Ottoman arts and architecture, especially in the mosque of Sulaymān Bāṣā al-Ḥādīm 935 AH./1528 AD., the mosque of al-Burdīnī 1025-1038 AH./1616-1629 AD. [19] such as the octagonal marble tile in the Mosque of al-Burdīnī [19,22], fig. (3).

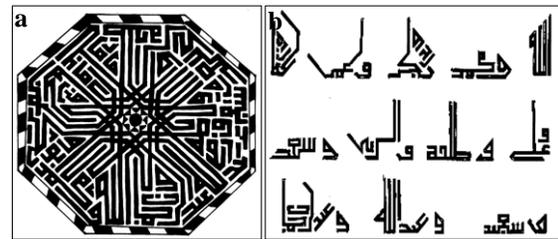


Figure (3) Shows **a.** A marble slab in the mosque of al-Burdīnī. (After: ‘Abd al-‘Āl, 2010), **b.** a drawing of the names of the Ten Companions in the previous tile (After: ‘Abd al-‘Āl, 2010)

The final *rā’* in عبد الرحمن - الزبير - عمر takes three forms; the first is in الزبير which is represented in the form of a two-sided triangle, the second takes the shape of a small tiny bar curved upwards, and the third, as in عبد الرحمن is presented in an irregular form with two lines set perpendicularly that curve upwards. The three letters are accordingly applied by the calligrapher to fit inside the octagonal frame and save spaces between letters. The

final *zāy* looks like the letter "Z" with a dot in *الزبير* typically represented in the tile of the emir 'Abd al-Raḥman Kathudā, fig. (2), and that of al-Burdīnī, fig. (3) [19,22]. The initial letter *sīn* in *سعد - سعيد* is free to the right and has a tail to the left to connect with the letter after it, and it is represented in a serrated form as in most of the Mamluk monuments [5-7]. It was widely adopted by the Ottomans, such as the marble tile of Kathudā, fig. (2-a), and in the mosque of al-Burdīnī fig. (3) [19]. The initial *ṣād* in *وصي* is an irregular rectangle with its tail curving towards the right. This style of writing was only used in Ottoman models [19,22]. The initial *ṭā'* in *طلحة* is a rectangle tangent to a vertical stroke adjoining the medial *lām*. Its vertical stroke reaches the central star, forming an interlaced pattern. The initial *'ayn* in *عبد الرحمن وعبد وصي* is either an incomplete square or a rectangle open towards the left, resembling a reversed letter *dāl* and similar to those found in the Mamluk prototypes [3,7,19]. The medial *'Ayn* in *سعد - سعيد* is represented as an elongated square attached downwards to a vertical neck. It also resembles Mamluk models [5,7]. The medial *kāf* in *ابو بكر* is displayed as an irregular rectangle. Its extension runs to the middle of the panel and is connected to the central star with long interlaced strokes of the other letters. The letter *lām* is seen in two forms; the initial and medial in the word of almighty *Allah* *الله*. It is represented as a vertical elongated stroke. The initial letter *lām* extends to the central star and interlaces with the other letters. The letter *lam* in the text resembles all Mamluk models, whether initial, medial, or final [5,7,19]. An identical panel preserved in the mosque of al-Burdīnī carries the same inscription with an identical text of the *Ten Companions Promised Paradise*, fig. (3). The letter *mīm*, whether the initial in the word *محمد* or the medial in *محمد* and *عمر* is

usually a square with an extension to join the following letter. The letter *nūn* at the end of the word *عثمان* takes two forms. The first is curved at the end in a unique form applied only on Ottoman models, such as the panel of Kathudā in al-Azhar, fig. (2-b), and in the mosque of al-Burdīnī, fig. (3-b). The second form is represented in the word *الرحمان* and looks like a rectangle opened upwards, which appeared earlier under the Mamluks, such as in the inscriptions of the Sultaniya Dome [5], but it's more of a square. In the panel under consideration, the letter *nūn* is rectangular in shape and is identical to examples found in the panel of Kathudā, fig. (2) and al-Burdīnī, fig. (3). The final *hā'* at the end of the word Almighty *الله* comes at the beginning of the text, formed as a square inclining downwards. However, in the word *عبد الله* it is shaped as a triangle with an elongated top reaching the center of the panel. Such shapes of letters were used earlier under the Mamluks. The letter *wāw* takes two forms; individual and final. The individual form is represented as the conjunction *wāw*, such as in the words:

محمد وابو بكر وعمر وعثمان وعلي وطلحة والزبير
وسعد وسعيد وعبد الله وبد الرحمن .

The head of the letter is shaped like a rectangle, a square, or a triangle. The second is the final as in the word *ابو بكر* formed as a square head twisting downwards. This form had been in use on most Mamluk models [5,7,19]. The letter *yā'* is represented as in *الزبير* shaped as a rectangle, or as in *الزبير* where the shape is not quite clear; seen either as a slanting line or an upper line of a trapezoid. The other form of the same letter is the final in the word *عبد وصي* shaped as a square opened from the left side and curving downwards. This curve was made by the calligrapher to fill in the space for the remaining text. The alphabetic analysis of the tile discussed in this paper indicates that it is Ottoman, not Mamluk

because the shape of its letters is identical to the other letters displayed on those of al-Azhar, fig. (2-a) belonging to the works of ‘Abd al-Raḥman Kaṭḥudā and that of al-Burdīnī, fig. (3-a). In order to save space, the artisan wrote only the first name of the Companion. The writing style was already used in Mamluk panels of the Bahari or Circassian monuments and religious institutions [3,5-7]. Such tiles were placed inside religious institutions in honor of the greatest men of Islam. The inscription reads clockwise, starting from the right to the left, whereas the endings of the elongated letters *alif* and *lam* run towards the center of the panel.

4. Results

According to the previous analysis, this artifact dates back to the Ottoman period. It is considered from the works of the Ottoman sovereign ‘Abd al-Raḥman Kaṭḥudā in the Mosque of al-Sayyida Nafīṣah, where it was discovered. As mentioned by al-Ġabartī, the Ottoman sovereign ‘Abd al-Raḥman Kaṭḥudā did carry out restorations in that mosque, as a strong point in favor of its Ottoman origin, and not the Mamluk as had been previously attributed and mentioned in the registries of the Museum of Islamic Art. Additionally, ‘Abd al-Raḥman Kaṭḥudā accomplished obvious works in al-Azhar among which was a similar panel flanking the main mihrab of the additional Qibla riwaq constructed by the same sovereign. Furthermore, this same writing style adorning the octagonal marble tile under consideration became a significant characteristic of the Ottoman arts, as demonstrated on another marble prototype preserved in the mosque of al-Burdīnī dating to the Ottoman period.

5. Discussion

The study addressed an octagonal tile with the name of the *Ten Companions Promised Paradise* dated to the Mamluk period, as mentioned in the museum of Islamic art reg-

istries. It illustrated the importance of this object made of colored marble incrustation exhibiting a style of Kufic, i.e., octagonal Kufic. Oman dated this tile to the Mamluk period [23]. The present study analyzed and compared this artifact with other similar panels dated back to the Ottoman period. The first example was a marble tile located flanking the Ottoman qibla wall at al-Azhar Mosque, built by the Ottoman sovereign ‘Abd al-Raḥman Kaṭḥudā, fig. (2-a). The second was an octagonal marble slab preserved in the mosque of al-Burdīnī, fig. (3-a). This study succeeded in clarifying that the artifact under consideration dates back to the Ottoman period, not the Mamluk, because, according to al-Ġabartī, ‘Abd al-Raḥman Kaṭḥudā, the sovereign of Egypt during the Ottoman period, carried out restorations in the mosque of al-Sayyida Nafīṣah [24,25]. Mubārak also reported that al-Ġabartī said that the same sovereign had made restorations and additions in the mosque of al-Sayyida Nafīṣah and wrote a poem on the door of the tomb^(c). Therefore, this artifact dates back to the Ottoman period. Al-Ġabartī pointed out that ‘Abd al-Raḥman Kaṭḥudā added a Riwaq to al-Azhar mosque [24], where an identical panel to our example was transferred from his mausoleum and is shown flanking the Ottoman mihrab, fig. (2-a). The study also compared this tile with a third prototype preserved in the Mosque of al-Burdīnī, fig. (3-a), showing that it had the same style of calligraphy and the manufacturing technique as the octagonal tile under study. It is worth mentioning that nothing similar to this tile has been found dating to the Mamluk period.

6. Conclusion

According to both the descriptive and analytical study of this artifact, fig. (1-a), it dates back to the Ottoman period due to following reasons: *) **Firstly**, according to the historian al-Ġabartī, ‘Abd al-Raḥman Kaṭḥudā, the sovereign of Egypt during the Ottoman period, made some

restorations and additions in the Mosque of al-Sayyida Nafisah where this fragment was discovered. *) **Secondly**, 'Abd al-Rahman Kathudā, who renovated al-Azhar Mosque, added an extra riwāq with an elegant marble niche influenced by the Mamluk mihrabs. Flanking the Ottoman mihrab, he added an identical octagonal tile with the names of the Ten Companions Promised Paradise, fig. (2-a). These reasons demonstrate that the artifact studied here, fig (1-a), is from the above-mentioned works of the emir 'Abd al-Rahman Kathudā in the Mosque of al-Sayyidā Nafisah. There is no evidence that it dates back to the Mamluk period. *) **Thirdly**, the writing style in an octagonal form occurred in the Ottoman period, as seen in the tile preserved in the Mosques of al-Burdīnī and al-Azhar by Kathudā. This reason proves that this tile dates back to the Ottoman period and from the works of 'Abd al-Rahman Kathudā in the Mosque of al-Sayyidah Nafisah.

Endnotes

- (a) For details on this process, see [16, 18]
- (b) The term is mentioned in most Mamluk documents, which means carving spaces on the metal surfaces and putting the black paste in the spaces [18].
- (c) He also notified that when 'Abd al-Rahman Kathudā accomplished the restorations in the mosque of al-Sayyida Nafisah, he recorded some poems on the door of the mausoleum saying:
- عرش الحقائق مهبط الاسرار * قبر النفيسة بنت
ذي الانوار
حسن بن زيد بن الحسن نجل الإمام *م علي ابن عم
المصطفى المختار
*The throne of facts, land of secrets *
grave of Nafisah, daughter of dhu al-
Anwār*
*Ḥasan ibn Zayd ibn al-Ḥasan * Son
of the Imam 'Alī, the cousin of the
Prophet Muhammad PBUH*
عبد الرحمن لعفو قد ترجي * قد بناها روضة للزائرين
فلذا ارحتها يا زائريها * ادخلوها بسلام آمنين
*For 'Abd al-Rahman, who asked for
Allah's forgiveness * Built it as a garden
for visitors. Oh: My visitors, that's why
I dated it * Enter it in Peace and
Secure. [25]*

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