

## AN EGYPTIAN KURSI

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**D**URING the year 1923 the MUSEUM added to its Arabic collection an exceptionally fine *kursi*, or table, of brass inlaid with silver, which was made for the Mameluke Sultan of Egypt, En-Nāsir Mohammed, in the fourteenth century. Not only is this *kursi* an exquisite thing in itself, but as an example of Saracenic metalwork it typifies the best period of that craft in Egypt.

After the Mohammedans, in their wars to extend the power of Islam, conquered Egypt in 641 A.D., they ruled it for the succeeding three centuries from Damascus and Baghdad, through governors, one or two of whom, able to assert their independence, were successful in establishing brief local dynasties. In the tenth and eleventh centuries the Fatimite khalifs from Tunis ruled and founded Cairo. Then in 1172 Saladin was sent by the Sultan of Damascus into Egypt to foment revolt; he succeeded in deposing the last Fatimite sultan and, ascending the throne, founded the Ayyūbid dynasty, which was so important in European history at the time of the Crusades.

About the time of the Crusade of St. Louis, to protect himself against invading Franks and rival kinsmen, Sultan Es-Sālih imported from the north of Asia Minor numbers of Turkish soldier-slaves, the *Mamelukes* (i.e. "owned"), who, fearless warriors and loyal servants, frequently rose to positions of wealth and importance in the Egyptian court, and in the middle of the thirteenth century finally usurped the Sultanate.

So began the most brilliant period of Egypt's history under Mohammedan rule, the age when Turkish and Tartar sultans, boasting of their servile descent, ruled Egypt in a ruthless military despotism and fostered to its richest flowering every branch of art. The seventh Mameluke sultan in the first thirty years of Mameluke rule was one El-Mānsur Seff-ed-din Kalāūn, who had been a slave of the old Ayyūb sultan Es-Sālih and never failed in his inscriptions to claim the title of "el Sālehi" which might be translated "liegeman of Es-Sālih." The En-Nāsir for whom our *kursi* was made was Kalāūn's son and reigned intermittently



Kursi made for the Mameluke sultan Melik en-Nāsir in the fourteenth century.

from 1294 to 1341 A.D. Kalāūn in the Mongolian language means "duck," and so we find the house of Kalāūn using the duck as a blazon, and groups of beautifully inlaid silver ducks such as appear in the corners and in medallions on our kursi at once identify a piece of metalwork as having belonged to the family of Kalāūn.

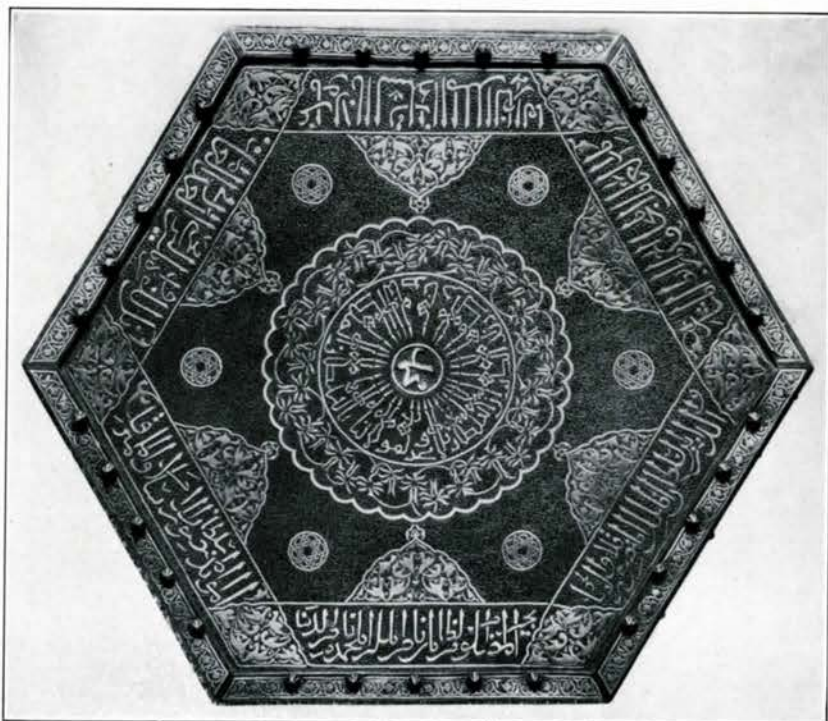
Very little metalwork of the periods in Egypt previous to that of the Mamelukes has survived, so that it is difficult to say whether the superb examples of inlaid brass produced in Cairo in the fourteenth century followed the traditions of older native Egyptian craftsmen, who in turn inherited their style and technique from Greek and Byzantine artists, or whether it is a local development of the ancient Persian craft which must have been imported by the governors of Egypt from Damascus and Baghdad.

The metalwork of Egypt in the fourteenth century, while showing the influence of the craftsmen of Syria and Persia, has a style all its own which, once seen, could never be confused with the other styles. The Persian craft, of which Mosul was the centre, is characterized by multitudinous figures of human and animal forms, elaborately chased, whereas the more orthodox Egyptian work shows a predominance of inscriptions, rosettes, and floral or vine motifs and arabesques. The best work of the two schools can be studied and compared in the Arabic room of the MUSEUM where near the kursi of En-Nāsir stands a superb ewer of the thirteenth century from Mosul.

The patience of the Saracen craftsman, famous in the middle ages from Spain to India for his fine works in metal, is almost beyond our comprehension today. For a table such as the one in the MUSEUM collections, designs would have to be drawn by a first-rate artist and transferred to the sheets of brass of which the table is composed. After patient chiselling had reduced the large panels of the table to the transparent delicacy of fine lace and engraving tools had covered every inch with minute floral patterns, whorls, vines, and arabesques, the work was ready for the silver inlay. This tedious task was accomplished by chiselling out the design to be inlaid and undercutting the edges, after which the silver inlay was hammered into the recesses thus prepared for it and was burished with agate or jade. Even the inlay itself, except in inscriptions, was elaborately and minutely chased.

This kursi, which is hexagonal and supported on six feet, stands two feet eight inches high and measures nine inches on each side.

The elaborately pierced and engraved plates of which the sides are composed are held in place by heavy tooled and inlaid upright supports studded with ornamental nails at the corners, and by five horizontal bands engraved with the names and titles of En-Nāsir. These bands divide each side into four panels, two small and two large. In the upper larger panel of one side is an exquisitely wrought and hinged little double door which opens into a compartment inside the table. The tray forming the floor of this compartment



Top of the kursī.

is engraved with letters which owing to their position cannot be read. The table was probably used as a support for a fine engraved and inlaid tray on which the food of the owner would be served to him, while a charcoal fire in the little compartment would keep the dishes warm.

The top of the kursī, which is solid and entirely covered with minute engraving, contains the finest work. In the centre of it, in large silver letters, is the name of the Prophet Mohammed. Encircling this is an inscription in beautiful Cufic characters giving the names and titles of En-Nāsir. Outside of this and completing

the large central medallion is a circle of ornamental inlay in a delicate vine pattern.

An inscription runs around the outer edge, parallel with the sides, and interrupted at each angle by charming groups of ducks inlaid in silver. Beginning at the side above the door the inscription reads:

Glory to our Lord the Sultan, Melik en-Nāsir,  
 The just ruler, fighter for the Faith, warden of Islam, celebrated in poetry;  
 Having posterity (i.e. to succeed him), son of the Sultan, the Melik Mānsur  
 Kalāun Salehi,  
 Protector of the oppressed from the oppressor,  
 Defender of the Mohammedan Faith, aid of the State,  
 The blessed, the victorious Sultan of Islam and of the Moslems, slayer of  
 the infidels and idolators, upholder of justice in the world.

A similar inscription appears inlaid in the two narrower panels of the sides and is repeated on the narrow horizontal bands which hold the sides together:

Glory to our Master, the Sultan, the Melik en-Nāsir, defender of the State and of the Faith, son of the Sultan, the Melik el-Mānsur, the exalted Kalāun Salehi.

On the doors and in the larger compartments of the sides are medallions containing names or titles from the above inscriptions, delicate little echoes of the main design on the top.

The style of metalwork of which this kursi is such a splendid example seems to have developed mainly in the reign of En-Nāsir, to which period the few finest specimens known belong. There are several very similar kursi in the Arab Museum in Cairo, one of which, almost a duplicate of ours, bears practically the same inscriptions. The British Museum possesses a deep bowl made for En-Nāsir, and the South Kensington Museum has a splendid inlaid tray such as must have been used in connection with our kursi.

En-Nāsir ascended the throne when only a child of nine years upon the assassination of his elder brother, El Ashraf Khalif, who had distinguished himself by capturing Acre, last stronghold of the Crusaders in Palestine, and had finally expelled the Franks from the Holy Land. En-Nāsir had a difficult and hazardous career, like most of the Mameluke sultans. He was once deposed and once he abdicated, but from 1310 until his death he ruled suc-

cessfully and magnificently. Like most of the Mamelukes he was treacherous, unscrupulous, and relentless towards his rivals and his enemies and never hesitated to employ assassins or poison to rid himself of a danger. But to the great majority of his subjects he was just and magnanimous. Taxes were lightened and many public works were executed. Besides some thirty mosques he is said to have built numerous canals, fountains, baths and schools, the existing remains of which attest the high pitch of art that architecture attained during his reign.

The magnificence and extravagance of his court seem almost incredible to us today. He kept a standing army of twenty-four thousand Mameluke cavalry, each one having his own fief and vassals very much as did mediæval European barons.

En-Nāsir was insignificant in appearance and so lame that he was obliged to use a stick when walking. He was himself no soldier but so astute a politician that he made himself respected throughout the Moslem East and Southern Europe. He left his throne so firmly established that it remained in the hands of his descendants for forty years after his death—a very long time for the turbulent age of the Mamelukes.