

Mamluk Candlestick 14C



In Egypt, the Fatimids who had come to power in 762, where, in 1174, pushed out by the Ayyubids lead by Saladin the Great, who had themselves been forced out of Syria and Palestine by the Crusaders, during the 11 century. For centuries, Islamic leaders had used slave troops (called the Mamluks) to help fight their battles. The Mamluks were bought as young slave children, mainly from Turkey, and trained in fighting and religion to become an elite fighting army. Once trained, they gained their freedom. Because they knew no family or clan they had no allegiance except than to each other and the Sultan or Caliph.

In 1250, the Mamluks took control of Egypt from the Ayyubids. The Mamluks proceeded to defeat the Mogols coming from the North and finally drove out the crusaders from Palestine by the end of the 13th century. The Mamluks themselves were finally ousted by the Ottomans in 1517.

Because they were not of the same blood as the indigenous population, they took steps to try and win them over by building roads and canals and they were great patrons of the arts. Their metalworking and Bronze work was of particular importance and European traders would commission pieces for specific families in europe. Because of the stricture against precious metals, bronze was a favored material.

The body of this candlestick is dominated by a central band of 'Naskhi' style arabic script and Mamluk heraldic emblems that describe (including the rank), the patron who commissioned it. The script contains things like “the great, the mighty, the lofty....” – these refer to the Sultan and higher officials (Islamic names have meanings and using the name associated his allegiance to that person, like being a jacobite or a stuart), so the man who commissioned the candlestick was from a lower rank. The fine floral background is inlaid with silver and niello. Niello is a technique of decorating an incised design with black inlay (from the Latin nigellus = 'black'). The grooves of an engraved design are filled with powdered copper, silver, lead and sulphur with the addition of flux. When heated the alloy melts, runs and becomes fused in the grooves. Many such candlesticks were often presented to a mosque – used in pairs on either side of the mirab, or four would be used on each corner of a shrine, or they might be given to the religious schools.