

MUSLIM HERALDRY AND VEXILLOLOGY: ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENTS AND CONTROVERSIES

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The Controversial Subject

The precise origin of Muslim/Islamic heraldry ('*alā'im*) is foggy at best. What is sure is that emblems on shields or emblazons have a military origin born from the need for the amīr/khān/sultān/malik to be recognizable. Like the Christian Franks who painted crosses on their shields, the Muslim warriors (sing. *ghāzī*), waging jihad against the crusaders, also identified themselves by displaying badges and insignia. Definitely, in the pre-Ayyūbid era, a *ghāzī* was free to choose his own badge or emblem ('*alāmat*), but after the anti-Fāṭimid coup d'état, the multiplication of arms resulted in systematization of the practice so that the new custom was regulated as in Christian Europe.

Many medievalist western historians reject the whole concept of Muslim heraldry, and almost all Muslim historians of the European Middle Ages ignore this controversial subject. There are many reasons for such approaches. It is an extremely difficult task to delineate a heraldic tradition without basic historical sources. And there are no Muslim heraldic archives, no rolls of arms and practically no illustrated Muslim references in Arabic, Turkic, Farsi, Urdu or Malay. Only Aḥmad al-Qalqashandī indicates the existence of an unregulated tradition of blazoning in his *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā* (Counsel to Civil Servants), written in c. 815 AH (1412 CE). He informs us that every Mamlūk *amīr* of low or high rank brandished his colored emblem, which was displayed above the gate of his house or office, embroidered (*yu'lim*) on horse and camel, on his coats or marked on harnesses, swords and bows.¹

¹ See Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā fi ṣinā'at al-inshā*, ed. Muhammad A. Ibrahim (Cairo, 1913), p. 43.

However, the two fundamental criteria of heraldry, i.e., armor and heredity, are relatively well documented in the Muslim history. There are also enough rich archeological evidences in the form of stone inscriptions and engravings on silver, copper or glass lamps, which allow us to reconstruct the badges, arms and insignia of the Muslim military elite. The proper description of the tinctures of Islamic blazons is problematic indeed, because the carved stones, metalwork and coins are mostly colorless. Muslim-manufactured glass and ceramics from the ages of Mamlūk conquests still preserve vibrant glazes, but the tinctures of blazons displayed on tiles and jugs are rather more decorative than heraldically proper. However, Jean Sire de Joinville, Latin chronicler of the late *al-hurūb al-ṣalībīyah*—bigoted, audacious and fanatical in the worst tradition of medieval Christendom—is reasonably helpful in our reconstruction of heraldic and vexillological colors of the “Saracens”.

Islamic Streamers (alwiyat, rāyat, a'lām, bayarik): Their Origin and Development

The Sunnah and early Muslim biographers provide scant yet sufficient information about Islamic pennons and banners used in the first battles against the Quraysh oligarchy and pagan tribes of Arabia. The Prophet Muḥammad owned a small white flag (*'alam*) which was named ‘the Young Eagle’. The major banner of the Prophet was known as *al-'Uqāb*. According to authentic ḥadīths preserved in the two major collections (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*), *al-'Uqāb* was made of a black *ḥijāb* that belonged to ‘Aishah, one of the Prophet’s wives. It was a vertically hoisted rectangle with a pure sable field framed with an argent line and was without any symbol or device.² The Messenger of Allāh had a shield with an engraved

² During the siege of Khaibar, the Prophet gave his flag to ‘Alī, who, troubled by severe irritation of eyes, hoisted it on the tower of the conquered Jewish stronghold. The victorious black flag of Islam was carried during the military expedition to Muta in the Byzantine-occupied southern Syria. Three banner-bearers were martyred (Shāhid Zaid, Shāhid Ja‘far, Shāhid Ibn