# 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 ʿAbdalraḥman Katḥudā. 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 ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm, who mentioned that ʿAbd al-Raḥman Katḥuda restored the mosque of al-Sayyida Nafisah and added a new qibla wall in al-Azhar mosque.

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**Keywords:**
- Octagonal tile
- Mamluk period
- Ottoman works
- Ottoman period

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## 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, Flüry suggested that the origin of this type of angular letters remains obscure and that Chinese art plays a vital role in the occurrence 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 ʿAlī 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]. ʿAbd 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 Šafī’ 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 jardah [16, 17], and incrustation ḥafr wa tanzīl, ḥafr wa dafī’[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:** 54x54 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:


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- مهد
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 incrusted 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 ʿAbd al-Rahman Katḫudā in the Qibla wall of al-Azhar mosque, fig. (2) [19,21]. The Initial letter bāʿ in الزبي – أبو بكر is a small horizontal line embedded within two vertical bars, tab. (1).

Table (1) The alphabetic analysis of the marble tile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Medial</th>
<th>Final</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alif</td>
<td>ول</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Haʾ</td>
<td>ماربعة</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taʾ</td>
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<td>Daʾ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baʾ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zaʾ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nāʾ</td>
<td>عثمان</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sād</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taʿ</td>
<td>عثمان</td>
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<td>Ayn</td>
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<td>Kāf</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lām</td>
<td>عثمان</td>
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<td>Mīm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nūn</td>
<td>عثمان</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hāʾ</td>
<td>عثمان</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Waw</td>
<td>عثمان</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This form is also used in the tile belonging to the works of ʿAbd al-Rahman Katḫudā [19], fig. (2). The final tāʾ marbūṭah in طلحة is seen like a square with two emerging perpendicular lines above. The middle ʿāʾ in عثمان is seen like a small horizontal line set within two perpendicular strokes. The initial letter ḥaʾ in عثمان is represented as an incomplete rectangle with its lower line shorter than the upper one. The middle ḥāʾ in طلحة is in the shape of an incomplete square opened on the lower part. The medial ḥāʾ in عثمان is also seen in the shape of an incomplete rectangle opened towards the left (like that represented in) Kat xuḍā's example fig (2).

The final dāl in عبد الرحمن - عبد الرحمن - عبد الرحمن 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 Bašā al-Ḥādim 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 (2) Shows a, the marble tile in the Qibla wall at al-Azhar Mosque from the works of ʿAbd al-Rahman Kat xuḍā (After: ʿAbd al-Āl, 2010). b, a drawing of the previous tile.

Figure (3) Shows a. A marble slab in the mosque of al-Burdīnī. (After: ʿAbd al-Āl, 2010). b. a drawing of the names of the Ten Companions in the previous tile (After: ʿAbd al-Āl, 2010).
The initial letter ʿāyn in عید الرحمن و عید وصی is either an incomplete square or a rectangle open towards the left, resembling a reversed letter ḍāl and similar to those found in the Mamluk prototypes [3,7,19]. The medial ʿAyn in عید is represented as an elongated square attached downwards to a vertical neck. It also resembles Mamluk models [5,7]. The medial kāf in ابن 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. 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 میم or the medial in میم، and عویش 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 Katḥudā in al-Azhar, fig. (2-b), and in the mosque of al-Burdīnī, fig. (3-b). The second form is represented in the word الرحمن 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 Katḥudā, fig. (2) and al-Burdīnī, fig. (3). The final hāʾ 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 لله 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 وابن بكش وعوس وعثواني وابن الله وعبد الله والضبش.

The head of the letter is shaped like a rectangle, a square, or a triangle. The second is the final as in the word ابن formed as a square head twisting downwards. This form had been in use on most Mamluk models [5,7,19]. The letter yāʾ is represented as in الزبير shaped as a rectangle, or as in the words:

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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-Rahman Katḥudā and that of al-Burdıñī, 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 ʿAbd al-Rahman Katḥudā in the Mosque of al-Sayyida Nafisah, where it was discovered. As mentioned by al-Ǧabartī, the Ottoman sovereign ʿAbd al-Rahman Katḥudā 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, ʿAbd al-Rahman Katḥuda 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-Burdıñī 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 registries. 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 ʿAbd al-Rahman Katḥudā, fig. (2-a). The second was an octagonal marble slab preserved in the mosque of al-Burdıñī, 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-Ǧabartī, ʿAbd al-Rahman Katḥudā, the sovereign of Egypt during the Ottoman period, carried out restorations in the mosque of al-Sayyida Nafisah [24,25]. Mubārak also reported that al-Ǧabartī said that the same sovereign had made restorations and additions in the mosque of al-Sayyida Nafisah and wrote a poem on the door of the tomb [28]. Therefore, this artifact dates back to the Ottoman period. Al-Ǧabartī pointed out that ʿAbd al-Rahman Katḥudā 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-Burdıñī, fig. (3-a), showing that it had the same style of calligraphy and the manufacturing technique as the octagonal tile understudy. 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-Ǧabartī, ʿAbd al-Rahman Katḥudā, 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:

عشر الحقائق مهبط الأسرار * قبر النفيسة بنت

ذي الأزور

حسن بن زيد بن الحسن نجل الإمام علي ابن عم

المصطفى المختار

The throne of facts, land of secrets * grave of Nafisah, daughter of dhu al-Anwār

Hasan ibn Zayd ibn al-Hasan * Son of the Imam ‘Alī, the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH

عبد الرحمن لعفو قد ترجي * قد نناها روضة للازنين

فلذا ارتختها يا زانوريها * أدخلوها بسلام أميين

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]

**References**


