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THE ORIGINS OF ARABIC INSCRIPTIONS ON GOLDEN HORDE MIRRORS DISCOVERED IN UKRAINE

In 1910, during archaeological excavations of burial mounds near the village of Tatarbranka, Novomoskovsk povit (modern Oril'ka, Novomoskovsk raion, Dnipropetrovsk oblast'), led by Dmytro Ivanovych Yavornytski, a fragment of a bronze mirror featuring "oriental decoration" and a Kufic signature in Arabic was discovered. Alongside it were remnants of a two-wheeled chariot and the skeleton of a woman adorned with rich jewelry, likely a member of the nomadic nobility, dating approximately the XII–XIII centuries BC [1, p. 49]. The mirror fragment was added to the collection of the Alexander Pol Ekaterinoslav Provincial Museum under the catalog number 581 [2, p. 101]. After World War II, the item was reassigned catalog number A-5067 and placed in the archaeological collection at the D. I. Yavornytski Dnipropetrovsk National Historical Museum (DNIM). The artifact was initially attributed by a museum worker as a Golden Horde bronze mirror, potentially an import from Iran. However, the object's exact origin and stylistic classification remain unclear, as only a fragment of the artifact was available for study at the time.

Another example of a similar type of mirror was discovered by an archaeological looter by the username «Zakharych» (Russian: Захарыч) in March 2017. The mirror was reportedly found «somewhere in the lands of Bessarabia» and was published on the looter's forum 'Arkaim,' where the user sought assistance in identifying the artifact [3].

Later research revealed that a complete mirror, though broken into two parts, was discovered near Kharkiv in 1854 by Krivorotov, a student at Kharkiv University. It was stored in the university museum under museum number 561 and later researched by N. Katanov and D. Aynalov. Unlike

Yavornytsky, who identified the calligraphic script as the kufic, they attributed it to naskh, transcribed it, and provided a translation:

العز الدائم، والعمر السالم، والإقبال الشامل، والظفر الناصر، والجذ الصاعد، والدهر المساعد،
والأمر الساعد والبقاء أبدا

Romanization:

al-‘Izz al-Dā’im, wāl‘mr al-Sālim, wāl’qbāl al-shāmil, wa-al-ẓafar al-Nāṣir, wa-al-jadd alṣā’d, wāldhr al-musā‘id, wāl‘mr al-Sā‘id wa-al-Baqā’
abadan

Translation (adaptation by Katanov & Aynalov):

Steadfast glory in a carefree life, all-encompassing happiness with saving victory, growing success with aiding fate, and favorable condition for the continuation of existence (so it may be) for eternity! [4, p. 108-110]

The inscription on the mirror is clearly a verse which employs eloquent language and belongs to the tradition of *saj* (Arabic: *سجع*), a medieval Arabic literary genre of rhymed prose with origins in pre-Islamic Arabian culture [5, pp. 101-103]. The rhymes in the text are constructed in accordance with the principles of *saj*, which could also be observed in certain parts of the Qur’an [5, pp. 125-128].

Arabic inscriptions are commonly found on multiple mirrors dated back to the XII–XIV centuries, associated with the presence of the Golden Horde and discovered across Ukraine and farther to the East. One notable example is a type of mirror featuring a depiction of Al-Buraq (known as «Al-Buraq mirrors») – a mythical creature in Islamic tradition described as the steed that carried the Prophet Muhammad during his miraculous night journey (Isra and Mi’raj) from Mecca to Jerusalem [6]. These epigraphs received little attention from researchers, usually being referred to as «a blessing inscription», although a proper semantic and literary analysis could provide deeper insights into the cross-cultural influences in medieval Ukrainian lands and help trace the origins of these artifacts.

Although mirrors of the type found in Tatarbranka are relatively rare, Al-Buraq mirrors are commonly discovered across territories formerly controlled by the Mongols or along the trade routes connecting Asia and Europe. The Metropolitan Museum attributes the origins of such mirrors to the XII–XIII century Seljuk Empire, suggesting that the motif either originated in Persia or was heavily influenced by its culture [7]. The frequency and abundance of such mirrors can be attributed to a relative simplicity of production, as they were typically sand-cast by smiths in local workshops. These mirrors were often replicated from original castings or higher-quality copies, which inevitably affected the quality of the final products. As a result, subsequent copies were of much lower quality, both in terms of casting precision and the alloy used in their manufacture [8, pp. 281-282].

It is notable that inscriptions following the same pattern were discovered on the doublure covers of six manuscripts from the Principality period (XI–XV centuries) in Anatolia. These manuscripts are housed in the libraries of Amasya, İnebey, Kastamonu, and Süleymaniye in Turkey and were studied by Fatma Şeyma Boydak. She discovered that the phrase *al-'izz al-dā'im wa'l-iqbāl* (العزّ الدائم والإقبال), meaning "everlasting power and prosperity/high position," was not only present on the Seljuk book bindings but also widely featured in contemporary Islamic art across different countries. This phrase appeared on ceramics, coins, and architectural inscriptions, reflecting its cultural significance. Notable examples include a XIV century metal cup stored in The Metropolitan Museum and a bronze plate from the Louvre Museum [9, pp. 292, 309-310].

The exact origin of the verse remains uncertain, as no references to it have been identified in the existing literature. The elevated language style and the tone it conveys suggest that it may have been composed by a highly educated court poet whose native language was Arabic and who possessed a profound knowledge of the Qur'an. This composition likely dates back to the Abbasid Caliphate. It is proposed that the original mirror was crafted for a person of high status, such as a noble, a high-ranking official, or an army commander [4, p. 110], and later replicated for mass production. The fact that many such mirrors were discovered in graves suggests that they could possess a magical and ritualistic significance to its owners [8, p. 281]. The inferior quality of the cast mirrors found in Eastern Ukraine suggests that they were locally produced rather than imported directly from Persia or Anatolia. This indicates their popularity and high demand among the population. However, it remains uncertain whether the meaning of the epigraphy held any significance for the owners of such mirrors. This raises the question of whether the owners possessed advanced knowledge of Arabic to understand the meaning of the inscription or whether they viewed it purely as decorative, much like the stylized writings found on modern branded products nowadays.

Appendix



Fig. 1. The fragment of a bronze mirror found by D. I. Yavornytski's expedition in a mound near Tatarbranka in 1910 (DNIM A-5067)

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