



# MAMLUK PLAYING CARDS

BY

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Most historians are agreed that the European playing cards are of Oriental<sup>(1)</sup> and according to some, more specifically, of Saracenic origin, or that—although invented in the Far East—they were received by the Europeans from Saracenic hands<sup>(2)</sup>. It is surprising, therefore, that—unless I mistake—not a single pack of Arabic playing cards has ever come to light<sup>(3)</sup>. This very

<sup>(1)</sup> We need not discuss theories about cards having been invented in the Ancient East, e. g. NICOLAS DE LA MARE, *Traité de la Police*, Paris, Jean et Pierre Cot, 1705-1735, vol. I, p. 447; or LE GENDRE, *Mœurs et coutumes des François*, Paris, Collombat, 1712, p. 247, both of whom believed that cards were first made by the Lydians, nor argue about the Egyptian origin of playing cards, as exposed by COURT DE GEBELIN, *Monde Primitif ou Dissertations mêlées*, t. I, Paris, 1781, Diss. VI, p. 365-410, as few scholars seem to take them seriously. Among the few contemporaries, however, who apparently do, mention should be made of Emiliano di PARRAVICINO, *Three packs of Italian tarocco cards* (in *Burlington Magazine*, vol. III, Dec. 1903, pp. 237-251, 4 pls.); Lord DESBOROUGH in *The Times* of 3rd March, 1938, and—if I understand him rightly—ZOVELLO, *History and Origin of Playing Cards*, New-York, 1935, a work I have not seen myself.

<sup>(2)</sup> To quote a small selection only: BENETON DE PEYRINS, *Dissertation sur l'origine des jeux de hasard* (in *Mercure*, Septembre 1738, pp. 1908-1925, reprinted in C. LEBER, *Collection des meilleures dissertations*, t. X, Paris, G. A. Dentu, 1838); Joh. Gottl. Imman. BREITKOPF, *Versuch,*

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*den Ursprung der Spielkarten, die Einführung des Leinenpapiers, und den Anfang der Holzschneidekunst in Europa zu erforschen*, Leipzig, 1754; James BARRINGTON, *Observations on the antiquity of card playing in England* (in *Archæologia*, vol. VIII, 1787, pp. 134-146); William Andrew CHATTO, *Facts and speculations on the origin and history of playing cards*, London, John Russell Smith, 1848, VIII + 343 p., 32 pls.; Paul LACROIX, *The Arts in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, trsl. from the French by James Dafforne, London, Chapman and Hall, 1870, 9th section; E. EITELBERGER v. EDELBERG, *Über Spielkarten* (in his *Gesammelte Kunsthistorische Schriften*, vol. III, Wien, Braumüller, 1884, pp. 262-322); HIMLY, *Morgenländisch oder Abendländisch* (in *ZDMG.*, XLIII, 1889, p. 415); Mrs. John King van RENSSELAER, *The Devil's picture-book*, London, 1892, VIII + 207 p.; *Enciclopedia Italiana*, s. v. Carte da giuoco; GARY, *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch*, 1938, p. 38.

<sup>(3)</sup> I have searched for them in many museums and private collections, as well as in the best works on the subject. But all I could find by way of Oriental cards were Persian or Indian packs, nothing Egyptian or Saracenic.

absence has been used as a challenge by those who believe in the European origin of cards<sup>(1)</sup> as opposed to the protagonists of the Oriental theory. The more important, therefore, is the almost complete pack of cards which is exhibited to-day in the treasury of the Top Kapu Saray in Istanbul<sup>(2)</sup> as models of late medieval design, along with other Egyptian works of art. These cards were discovered among various other articles of the Palace, and nothing is known of their previous history. They are in a fairly good state of preservation, as one can see from the selection shown on pls. X-XIV. Mice have nibbled at them, but not too destructively; to a certain extent the paint has crumbled away owing to time and rough handling, but only one card is so badly torn as to preclude any guessing as to what it represented. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether these cards were used for any length of time, unless we assume that in those days players had unusually clean hands and did not leave any of those greasy and dirty fingermarks with which we are familiar on our own packs after they have served a while. Like the best of early European cards they are hand-drawn and painted. The pack consists of two different sets, the cards shown on pls. X-XII, XIII *a*, XIV *a*, representing the main set, and a few others (cf. pls. XIII *b*-XIV *b*) which are drawn by a much cruder hand, probably made merely to replace the missing cards of the main set<sup>(3)</sup>.

The cards vary slightly in size, but we can consider 0 m. 252 × 0 m. 95 as a safe average. Those of the main set are of discreet colours - blue, black, gold and pink of delicate tints, the writing being invariably in gold on a blue background. The others are not only cruder in design, but also louder in colour, with a predominating touch of green. All have plain backs.

<sup>(1)</sup> There are at least two distinguished Arabists among them, cf. DOZY et ENGELMANN, *Glossaire des mots espagnols et portugais* (2nd ed.), 1869, p. 385; CARRA DE VAUX in the *Encyclopædia of Islām*, s. v. *ķimār*: "It is said without any good reason to have come from the Arabs".

<sup>(2)</sup> I take this opportunity of thanking Mr. Tahsin Öz, Director of the Top Kapu Saray Müzesi, for all the facilities afforded me when

studying these cards as well as many other objects in his museum.

<sup>(3)</sup> The other possibility, that they belong to a different and independent pack and only happen to have been found together, is less likely, in view of the fact that they are of exactly the same size as the cards of the main set, and show only such figures and numbers as are missing among the others.

The pack consists of at least five suits : the cup, the coin, the sword, the polo-stick and the staff. It is obvious that pl. XIV *b* (of which we have two specimens in this set) is only a variation of the staff, as conceived by the other designer, a shape which became typical for the Italian cards. There is also an odd card, with a crescent as its only figure. This may or may not have been the Islamic equivalent of the joker. The two best preserved suits are those of the cup and the coin, and by putting them together, we can surmise that each suit originally consisted of four court-cards and ten numerals. The court-cards represent a King (*malik*), a Governor (*nā'ib*), a Second-Governor (*nā'ib thānī*) and one of his Helpers (*aḥad al-arkān*). They are indicated not by actual drawings of these persons, but by inscriptions which are placed, invariably, at the bottom of each court-card. As a rule the mark of each suit appears on the court-cards only once and occupies practically all the space available, notable exceptions being the Governor of cups, displayed on a card showing two cups, and the Governor of swords, on a card showing nine swords, but the Second-Governor of cups is shown with one cup only. In the case of the Kings and the Helpers, the mark appears over an ornamental panel, identical on all the cards before us; in the case of the Governor of swords, and Governor and Second-Governor of polo-sticks, without any distinguishing panel<sup>(1)</sup>; in the case of the Governor and Second-Governor of cups, with an ornamental band across the stalk. In the top register of all court-cards as well as of some numerals, we find other inscriptions, warning, encouraging or exhorting. We would have to know something substantial about Saracenic card games in order to understand the real meaning of these phrases. The pack of the Top Kapu Saray Museum is obviously not complete; it is composed of forty-seven cards (including the crude secondary ones) and is to be described as follows :

CUP : Governor (*Qushquli, nā'ib malik at-tūmān*), Second-Governor (*Qarājā, nā'ib thānī at-tūmān*), Helper (*aḥad al-arkān malik at-tūmān*), and ten numerals showing one to ten cups.

COIN : King (*malik ad-darāhim*), Second-Governor, and six numerals, viz. one, three, four, five, seven and eight coins.

<sup>(1)</sup> It should be borne in mind that in our pack the Second-Governor of polo-sticks belongs to the secondary and not to the original set.

SWORD : King (*malik as-suyūf*), Governor, and seven numerals, viz. one, three, four, five, six, seven and eight swords, usually arranged in pairs with the odd one dividing the pairs from above. It is perhaps of some importance that the odd one appears as a straight sword on some cards and as a scimitar, like all the rest, on others.

POLO-STICK : Governor, Second-Governor, Helper, and two numerals showing one and four polo-sticks.

STAFF : No court-cards. All we have are seven numerals showing between them only three numbers but different with regard to the ornamental dragon-heads (cf. pl. XIV a). There are three cards with four, six and eight staffs respectively, without any dragon-heads<sup>(1)</sup>; three cards with four, six and eight staffs, with one dragon-head each; and one card showing eight staffs with two dragon-heads. Of the second type of staff there are only two cards, one with nine and one with ten staffs.

The odd card is a crescent with two dragon-heads, although it might be interpreted as a variation of the polo-stick.

Judging from their design, these cards are obviously of Mamluk origin, and we shall probably not go wrong in attributing them to the 15th century. Their ornamentation has numerous parallels in Circassian decoration, especially in illuminated Egyptian manuscripts.

This pack, fragmentary as it is, is invaluable for the history of playing cards. It provides us with the first and most valid confirmation of the so often quoted statement of Giovanni di Iuzzo di Covelluzzo that “in the year 1379 was brought into Viterbo the game of cards, which comes from the country of the Saracens, and is with them called *naib*”<sup>(2)</sup> and forms an illustration of the “*carte Saracene*” which existed side by side with the “*carte di Lombardia*”<sup>(3)</sup>. They explain the origin of the name of this game : two out of the four court-cards being called *nā'ib* (the “Governor” and the “Second-

<sup>(1)</sup> But cf. *supra*, p. 115, l. 2-5.

<sup>(2)</sup> *Anno 1379 fu recato in Viterbo el gioco delle carti, che venne de Seracinia e chiamasi tra loro Naib* (Feliciano Bussi, *Istoria della città di Viterbo*, p. 213). But the *Proviggione Fiorentina* dated the 23rd March 1376 speaks already

of the *naibi* (cf. *Enciclopedia Italiana*, ib., after L. ZDEKAUER, *Il giuoco in Italia nei secoli XIII° e XIV°*, Firenze, 1886).

<sup>(3)</sup> *Enciclopedia Italiana*, s. v., from an inventory of the dukes of Orléans, dated 1408, without any further reference.

Governor”), and make it most probable that either the cards as such or a particular game played with them were called thus in the country of origin and retained the name in Italy for some time and in Spain (*naipes*)<sup>(1)</sup> to this very day.

Furthermore, both early Italian and Spanish court-cards have no queen, a feature better understood in a Saracenic than in an Italian game, but the Italian *tarots*<sup>(2)</sup> differ from the Saracenic cards inasmuch as in some of their packs there are three court-cards only. The four Italian suit-marks (*coppe, danari, spade, bastoni*) are identical with the Saracenic ones, and so are the Spanish ones (*copas, oros, espadas, bastos*), except that the Saracenic cards have an additional one, the polo-stick, the emblem of the most popular among the aristocratic sports in the Mamluk Empire.

In view of the connection of Venice with the Near East during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, the opinion of WILLSHIRE that the *tarots* of Venice or Lombardy are the parent game is worthy of consideration<sup>(3)</sup>. In any case the Istanbul pack weakens considerably the theory of the Chinese origin of European playing cards. As long as Saracenic cards remained unknown,

<sup>(1)</sup> The identity of the Spanish and Arabic word was seen as early as 1505 by Pedro DE ALCALA, *Arte para ligeramēte saber la lēgua arauiga*, New-York, 1928, s. v. *naypes* (as Dr. S. Reich very kindly points out to me). The Arabic origin was recognized by François LOPEZ TAMARID, *Diccionario de los vocabulos que tomo de los Arabigos la lengua española*, by François SANGHEZ BROCEMENSIS, and by COVARRUVIAS, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana*, 1671; SALVINI in his notes to the *Fiera* by BUONAROTTI thinks it is possibly Arabic (all four quoted by MERLIN, *R. Arch.*, 1859, p. 197, and n. 2, 3). To consider the word *naipes* as a corruption of the Arabic (or Hebrew) *nabī* (“prophet”) is bad enough (BREITKOPF, *o. l.*, p. 15, several times repeated since), but to seek in this designation a reason for the popularity of card games (as does the author of the article *Cards* in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*) amounts almost to blasphemy. Muḥammad’s aversion to hazardous games is

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too well known to need any proof, cf. e. g. *Sūra* II. 216, V. 93, and gambling never ceased to be a crime in the eyes of later Moslem codifiers. Engelmann’s sneer at Mahn, who guessed that *naipes* derives from *nā’ib*, but explained the connection wrongly “et encore M. Mahn aurait-il dû démontrer que les Arabes ont eu des cartes qu’ils nommaient naïb” (*l. c.*, p. 385), finds its best answer in the pack from the Top Kapu Saray Museum. But in view of Covelluzzo’s statement, known since 1742 and repeated by Leber exactly a century later, the sneer was not justified even in Engelmann’s days.

<sup>(2)</sup> The same applies to the *tarots* of Besançon, Geneva and Marseilles which follow closely the Venetian ones (Roi, Cavalier, Valet), MERLIN, *l. c.*, p. 288.

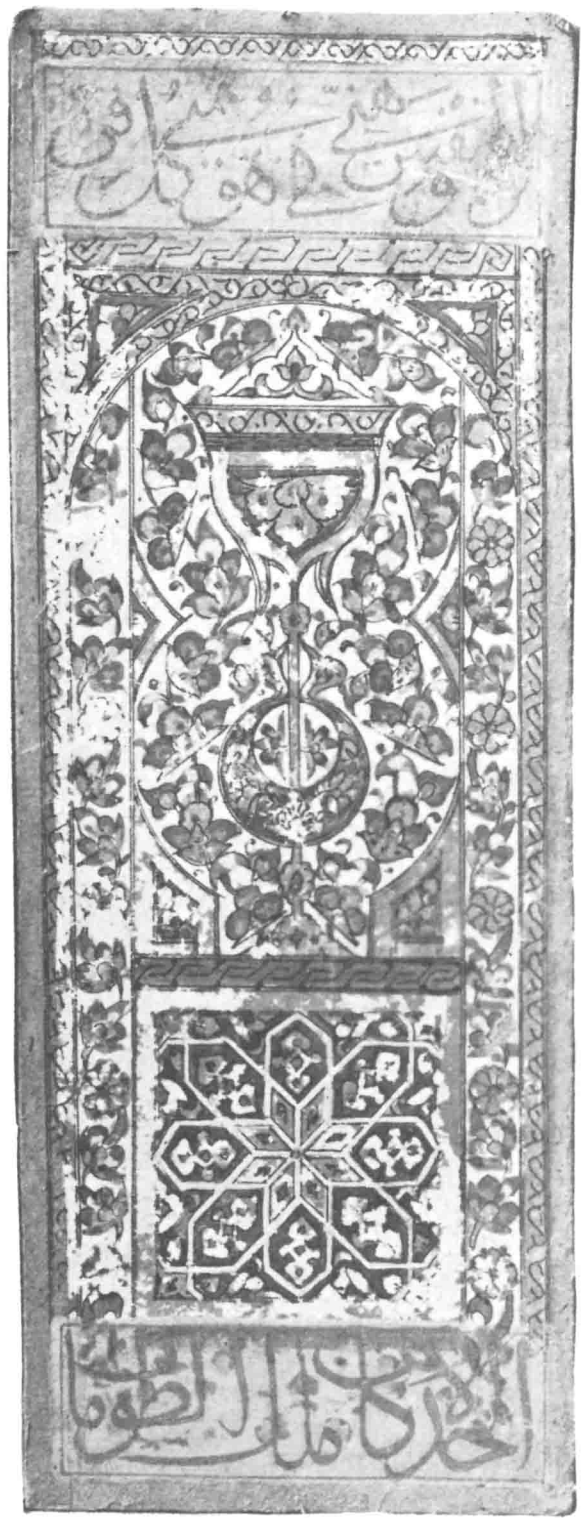
<sup>(3)</sup> *A descriptive catalogue of playing and other cards in the British Museum*, 1876. This statement is still uncontested.

we were at liberty to assume that they represented the intermediaries between the Far Eastern and the European games; the Istanbul pack proving, as it does, the close affinity, not to say identity, between the Saracenic cards on one side and the Italian and Spanish ones on the other, makes it extremely improbable that there ever was a link—now missing—between them.

L. A. MAYER.



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L. A. MAYER, *Mamluk playing cards*.





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L. A. MAYER, *Mamluk playing cards.*



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