

AN INSCRIBED MAMLŪK SHERD

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Among the many inscribed objects found in the four seasons of excavations at Tell Ḥesbân is an Arabic inscribed sherd from the 1974 campaign. It is not properly called an ostrakon because the inscription was added at the time of manufacture and not after the vessel was broken.

The fragment is a portion of the base of a bowl, measuring $7.0 \times 3.8 \times 2.9$ cm., whose ware is white, coarse, granular, and very soft. The interior surface (and slightly on the exterior) is decorated with black-painted designs with a cobalt-blue spot under a colorless, crackled, decaying, transparent glaze, over a white slip, with an unglazed ring base, which has the diameter of 9 cm. (Fig. 25). The Arabic inscription, also in black under the glaze, is incomplete due to the break. Its position on the outside body, just above the ring base, is upside-down (Fig. 26).

The extant portion of the inscription is to be read as: . . .*wa arba'ah* ("and four"). That it should be read as "forty" is impossible, since it would then have to be *arba'ūn* (in colloquial Arabic, *arba'in*). The last letter is unquestionably the final *hā* often used for the *tā marbūta* (the "tied" *tā*). The numerals 3 through 10 have *tā marbūta* in the masculine case and none in the feminine. This reversal of normal gender endings is found in other Semitic languages and is called polarity. The gender of the singular of the counted noun determines the gender of the numeral.¹ Why is "and four" on the base? It could be a date or a commemorative number, or perhaps, a number of measurement; however, the latter seems unusual on so ornate a piece.

As for dating, the sherd comes from a dominant Ayyūbid/Mamlūk context. Its locus is described as being possibly the

¹ My thanks to Dr. James Kritzeck, Professor of Islamic History at the University of Notre Dame, for his very gracious help with the translation of the inscription.

patio to rooms of that period.² This particular sherd is typical of Syrian ware from the Mamlūk period.

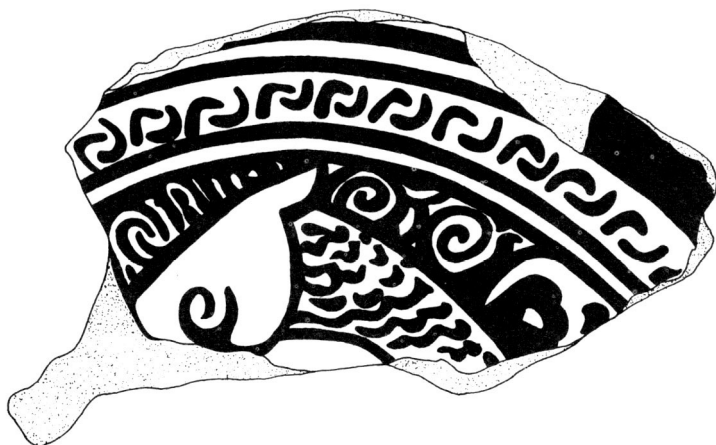
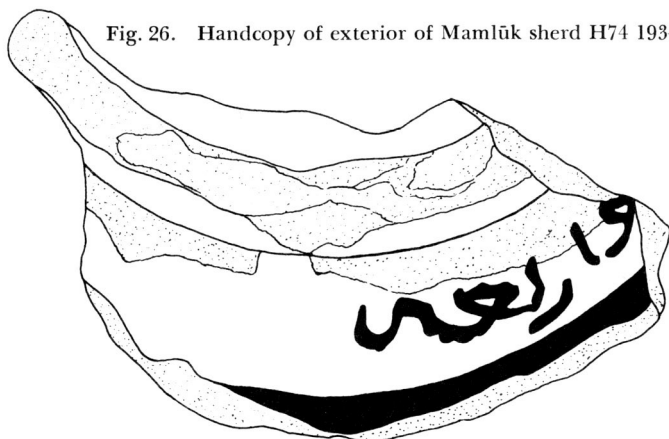


Fig. 25. Handcopy of interior of Mamlūk sherd H74 1934.



Fig. 26. Handcopy of exterior of Mamlūk sherd H74 1934.



² The sherd was found on July 23, 1974, in Area C, Square 6, Locus 16, Pail 29, with the dominant associated pottery coming from the Ayyūbid/Mamlūk period; there were also some Byzantine sherds. Its registration number is H74 1934, and it now belongs to the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.