Other titles of interest from NYU Press

ISLAMIC ORNAMENT
Eva Baer

SINAI
The Site and the History
Essays by Morsi Saad El-Din, Gamal Mokhtar, Fouad Iskandar, Gawdat Gabra, Samir Sobhi, Ayman Taher

RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX
Paul Jordan

THE GENIUS OF ARAB CIVILIZATION
Source of Renaissance
Third Edition
Edited by John R. Hayes

The cover illustration shows a detail of the foundation inscription decorating the facade of the tomb complex (1283-85) for the Mamluk Sultan Qala’un in Cairo (Photo: Jonathan Bloom)

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
Washington Square
New York, NY 10003
http://www.nyupress.nyu.edu
Jacket design by: M Squared Design
The first object created by God, according to early Muslim commentators, was the pen, which he used to chronicle events to come. The word, in its various manifestations, is central to the Islamic faith. Surely a reflection of this centrality, profuse inscriptions mark countless Islamic objects, from the humblest oil lamps and unglazed ceramics to the finest and most expensive rock crystals and jades. The inscriptions serve numerous functions: decorating, proclaiming ownership and patronage, prefiguring good wishes and proverbs, and spreading religious texts throughout the world. Aside from their aesthetic worth, these inscriptions provide a fascinating window into a distant culture.

In Islamic Inscriptions, Sheila S. Blair offers the seasoned researcher a wealth of stunning images and incisive

(continued on back flap)
commentary, while also providing the newcomer to Islamic civilization with a key to unlocking the mysteries of Islamic epigraphy. In addition to chapters devoted to the main types of inscription, detailing the development of their content and style, inscriptive techniques, and the motivations behind them, the book provides practical knowledge on finding, identifying, interpreting, researching, and recording inscriptions. The variety and clarity of information presented makes *Islamic Inscriptions* an ideal reference for historians, curators, archaeologists, and collectors.

An independent scholar of Islamic art and architecture, SHERA S. BLAIR has taught and lectured at many universities in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. She is the author of *The Monumental Inscriptions from Early Iran and Transoxiana, Islamic Arts*, and, with Jonathan Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800*.

Printed in Singapore
ISLAMIC INSCRIPTIONS
Contents

List of Illustrations vii
Acknowledgements xi
Abbreviations xii
Note on Transcription xii

PART I INTRODUCTION
Chapter 1 Why Read Inscriptions? 1
Chapter 2 The Languages Used in Monumental Inscriptions 3
Chapter 3 Foundation Inscriptions 19
Chapter 4 Other Types of Monumental Inscriptions 21
Chapter 5 Regional Studies 29
Chapter 6 Inscriptions on Various Building Types 43
Chapter 7 Stylistic Development 53

PART II MONUMENTAL INSCRIPTIONS
Chapter 8 Introduction 68
Chapter 9 Metalwares 76
Chapter 10 Woodwork 68
Chapter 11 Ceramics 76
Chapter 12 Textiles 68
Chapter 13 Other Portable Arts 76
Chapter 14 Types of Objects 68

PART III INSCRIPTIONS ON PORTABLE OBJECTS
Chapter 15 Sources, Methods and Conventions 95

Bibliography 205
Index 207

234
238
### List of Illustrations

1.2 Silk known as the Shroud of St. Josse. Two pieces, 52 x 94 cm, 55 x 65 cm. Iran or Central Asia, before 967. Paris, Louvre, 7033.  
1.3 Silver-covered wooden box made for the Umaysad al-Hisham. 77 x 38 x 24 cm. Spain, 976. Treasury Museum, Genoa Cathedral.  
1.5 Slip-covered earthenware bowl. Diameter 39.5 cm. Iran, tenth century. Washington DC, Freer Gallery of Art 57.34.  
1.6 Interior of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, showing the mosaic inscription at the top of the inner face of the octagonal arcade, 692.  
1.7 Inscription around the dome of the mosque in the terminal of the King Khalid International Airport built at Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 1984.  
1.8 Tomb tower at Laja in northern Iran, with foundation texts in Pahlavi at the top and in Arabic below, late tenth or early eleventh century.  
2.1 Interior of the tomb at Salkhid in the Farghiana Valley, Uzbekistan, with the first datable inscriptions in Persia, 1005.-66.  
2.2 Foundation inscription in Arabic over the portal to the Selimiye mosque at Edirne, giving chronograms with the dates of foundation (976/1568-9) and completion (983/1574-5).  
2.3 Detail of the foundation inscription in Turkish on the fountain near Topkapi in Istanbul, early eighteenth century.  
2.4 Detail of the inscription band around the outer face of the arcade in the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, with the name of the patron.  
2.5 Copy of van Berchem's drawing of the patron's name in the outer face of the arcade in the Dome of the Rock. The area between the dots is al-`Abbas's restoration.  
2.6 Foundation inscription across the façade of Qal`a'un's tomb complex in Cairo, 682-4/1283-5.  
2.7 Detail of the foundation inscription across the façade of Qal`a'un's tomb complex.  
2.8 Foundation inscription around the portal of the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah in Isfahan, dated 1012/1603-4 (after restoration).  
2.9 Detail of the inscription of the portal of the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah, showing the date 1012/1603-4 and the signature of the calligrapher `Ali Riza `Abbasi.  
2.10 Umayyad milestone in the name of `Abd al-Malik recording the distance of 109 miles to Damascus. Istanbul, Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art 2517.  
2.11 Funerary inscription around the interior of the Imamzada Yahya b. Zayd at Sar-i Pal in northern Afghanistan.  
2.12 Commemorative text carved at Persepolis in the name of the Buyid ruler `Adud al-Dawla in 342/955-6.  
2.13 Cottage of the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah showing the mihrab.  
2.14 Wadayn Gate, Rabat, late twelfth century, with an unread inscription on the frame.  
2.15 Foundation text on the Khairpur Gate at Daryaarkah dated 597/1197.  
2.16 Stone plaque recording the foundation of the Bl`at al-Watwatt in Cairo by the Ikhshild al-`Umar at Fustat in 555/966.  
2.17 Flurry's chart of the letter shapes used in the inscription on the mosque at Na`in, mid-tenth century.  
2.18 Beginning of the Koranic band with Chapter 89 (Surat al-Fajr) on the east side of the gateway to the Tih Mahal al-Aqsa, completed 1057/1647.  
2.19 Stucco mihrab added to the Friday Mosque in Isfahan in Safar 710/I July 1307.  
2.20 Beginning of the Koranic inscription with Chapter 48.5-6 around the courtyard of the madrasa of Sultan Hasan in Cairo, completed 767/1362.
Acknowledgements

The research and writing of this book were undertaken in large part thanks to the generous support of the Fondation Max van Berchem in Genève. The foundation, whose goal is to promote the study of archaeology, history, geography, the history of art, epigraphy, religion, and Islamic and Arabic literature, is named in honour of the Swiss scholar who founded the study of Islamic epigraphy just over a century ago. Van Berchem became the unsurpassed master of the field. He was, in the words of his colleague R. A. C. Creswell, who dedicated the first volume of his massive bibliography on the arts and crafts of Islam to van Berchem, 'a perfect friend and a perfect scholar'. His material and methods continue to serve as inspiration, and it should come as no surprise that van Berchem's name occurs more often than any other in this book.

Many other friends and scholars have patiently and steadfastly answered my stream of queries and requests for information. In particular I would like to thank Catherine Asher, Carol Bier, Stefano Carboni, Robert and Carole Hillenbrand, Linda Komaroff, Wheeler Thackston, Anne Wardwell, Estelle Whelan and David Whitehouse. Most of all, it is my colleague and husband Jonathan Bloom who kept me from faltering along the long, and sometimes rocky, road.
Abbreviations

CII = Corpus Inscriptionum Eritrcaeum
EI = Encyclopaedia of Islam
El= Encyclopaedia Iranica
MCIA = Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum
RCIA = Répertoire chronologique d’épigraphie arabe
Survey = A. U. Pope and P. Ackerman [eds], A Survey of Persian Art

Volumes in the MCIA


Egypt 2 = Gaston Wiet, Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum, part I: Égypte, tome 2: Egypte, Mémoires de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale du Caire XIII (Cairo, 1919-20).


Alep = Ernst Hefeld, Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum, part II: Syrie du Nord, inscriptions et monuments d’Alep, tome I [2 vol.]: text; tome II: plates, Mémoires de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale du Caire LXXVI-LXXVIII (Cairo, 1944-5).

Asie Mineure = Max van Berchem and Halil Edhem, Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum, part III: Asie Mineure, tome 1: Siwa, Destei, Mémoires de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale du Caire XXIX (Cairo, 1916-17).


Note on Transcription

The system of transcription used in this book follows that of the second edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam, with a few modifications (k, d, dh, kh and gh are rendered as q, j, d, k, and sh respectively).
Chapter 1

Why Read Inscriptions?

Inscriptions, like geometric designs and Arabesques, are some of the most distinctive and persistent motifs used to decorate works of art and architecture made in the Islamic lands. The use of inscriptions is not unique to Islamic culture. There was a long tradition in the classical world of using inscriptions, particularly to decorate the façades of monumental structures, and modern collections fill several large volumes of the Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum and the Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum. The word ‘epigraphy’, the study or science of inscriptions, is derived from the Greek epi graphhein (‘to write on’). The Romans recognised the artistic possibilities of monumental inscriptions and developed a system of clear and simple lettering in which the letters and the spaces between them were made to conform to the architectural structure. This innovation had a major impact on Western art, for the Roman system of monumental script is still the basis for modern lettering and book-printing.

The Romans used inscriptions to underscore the authority and dignity of their monuments, themselves often vehicles of visual propaganda. A prime example is the Roman triumphal arch, which has a bold band at the top of the arch recording the patron’s name. The arch for the emperor Titus (d. AD 81) in Rome, for example, bears a large four-line band of finely cut letters that were originally gilded. The emperor died during its construction, and the text, which is set over a relief in the vault showing his apotheosis, states ‘The Roman Senate and People to Deified Titus, Vespasian Augustus, son of Deified Vespasian’.

A tradition of monumental inscriptions accompanying wall reliefs also existed in ancient Iran. The most famous example is the carved cliff at Bisutun (or Behistun) near Kermanshah in south-west Iran. The site lies on the north side of the caravan trail and military route from Babylon and Baghdad over the Zagros Mountains to ancient Ecbatana and medieval Hamadan. Darius I ‘the Great’, Achaemenid king of Persia from 522 to 486 BC, had the cliff decorated with a monumental relief showing his triumph over the usurper Gaumata and the nine rebels. Around the relief is a trilingual inscription in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian. The inscription is probably the most important document of the entire Ancient Near East, for it was the key to deciphering cuneiform writing and thus comparable to the Rosetta stone for Egyptology.

In the medieval West, images often replaced the written form in classical times to decorate the façades of major buildings. On Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals, for example, façades are typically decorated with figural reliefs explaining elements of church belief in visual terms. The tympanum over the main (south) portal to the Romanesque church at Moissac, a Cluniac priory built in the early twelfth century on the road to Santiago, for example, shows Christ in Glory, surrounded by seraphim and the symbols of the evangelists and atop the adoring twenty-four elders. Depictions of St Peter and St Paul and the prophets Jeremias and Isaiah on the door jambs and trumeau (the central post supporting the lintel) support this vision literally (as architectural elements) and figuratively (as representatives of...
the Old and New Testament). The main (west) façade of the Gothic cathedral at Chartres has a similar scene, with the Old Testament kings and queens of Judah supporting Christ, the Virgin and the vision of the Second Coming.

In the Islamic lands, by contrast, the earlier tradition of monumental writing not only continued but expanded. What sets Islamic epigraphy apart from its precursors is its extent in time, place and media, for inscriptions are used on virtually all kinds of objects created throughout the Islamic lands in all periods. Inscriptions occur on objects of all media and materials, from the humblest, such as oil lamps and other unglazed ceramics, to the finest and most expensive, including rock crystals and jade.

Inscriptions were even added in media where the technical limitations of the material make it extremely difficult to incorporate a running text. Take, for example, silk textiles. It is comparatively easy to set up short texts that repeat in mirror reverse, as on a group of compound silk twill bands woven as trimmings for tunics. These tunic bands are generally attributed to eighth- or ninth-century Syria, which had been a centre of silk production since Byzantine times. Many pieces were found in Egyptian graves, especially at Akhmim in Upper Egypt. Some bear Greek or Coptic names, showing that they were made for the Christian market, but others, identical in style, have Arabic inscriptions (for example, Artis of Islam 1976, no. 2). The inscriptions often make no sense. The letters may have been stylised to fit the constraints of weaving, the meaning may have been lost in the repetition of the pattern, or the weavers may not have known how to read Arabic.

The demand for inscribed textiles was so great, however, that silk weavers in the Islamic lands soon overcame the confines of the technique, and by the tenth century Persian weavers had figured out how to incorporate long bands of inscriptions on their elaborately patterned silks woven on drawlooms. One of the finest examples to be preserved is the silken shroud of St Josse in the Louvre, reused in medieval times to wrap the bones of St Josse in the abbey of St Josse-sur-Mer, near Caen in northern France (see Figure 1.3). Two fragments are preserved, one large (52 x 94 cm) and one small (24 x 63 cm), and the complete piece can be reconstructed as a square measuring 1.5 metres on a side, with a carpet-like design of borders surrounding a central field. The borders contain a train of two-humped or harnessed camels, and the field would have had two identical bands of elephants with inscriptions written upside down underneath the elephants’ feet. The text invokes glory and prosperity to the commander, Abu Mansur Bakhtrikin [RCEA 1937, Bernos et al., 1972; Artis of Islam 1976, no. 4]. Using textual sources, he can be identified as a Turkish commander in the province of Khorasan in north-eastern Iran who was arrested and executed on orders of his Samanid sovereign ‘Abd-al-Malik b. Nuh in 194/950-1. The inscription on the silk asks for blessing on a living person and thus provides a terminus ad quem for the piece, which must have been made for Abu Mansur Bakhtrikin when he was still alive. Although the only example to survive, this silk must have been one of many identical pieces, for it was extremely time-consuming and expensive to set up the drawloom to weave this complicated design in seven colours, and the cost would have been amortised by weaving the silk squares in multiples.

We do not know how silks like the shroud of St Josse were used, but a likely possibility is as saddlecloths. This type of embroidered silk saddle-cloth is mentioned by the Persian traveller and Ismaili ‘spy’ Nasir-i Khusraw, who journeyed from his home in north-eastern Iran to the Fatimid court in Cairo in the mid-eleventh century. He describes the saddlery with the 3,000 horses in the retinue of the Fatimid caliph during festivities for the opening of the canal in Cairo in the spring of 1045. Nasir-i Khusraw specifically comments that the saddle-cloths were woven of brocaded silk that was neither cut nor sewn but woven to shape and had inscriptions with the name of the sultan along the borders. It must have been a stunning sight indeed to see the lines of horses, each bedecked with the ruler’s name along its flanks, and the

---

1.1 Silk known as the Shroud of St Josse. Two pieces. 52 x 94 cm. 25 x 62 cm. Iran or Central Asia, before 963. Paris, Louvre, 7460.
opposite end of the Islamic lands, a casket made in Islamic Spain (see Figure 1.2). The wooden box, probably designed to hold small and precious materials such as spices or jewels and now preserved as a treasured relic in the Cathedral at Gerona, is covered with hammered plaques of silver decorated with gilt and niello (a black alloy of sulphur, lead and silver). A large inscription, worked in niello that contrasts with the gold ground, encircles the base of the lid. The text first invokes blessings on al-Hakam, the Umayyad caliph of Spain who ruled from AD 961 to 976, and then continues that the box was among the things ordered for Abu Walid Hisham, his son and heir-apparent, under the direction of the official lawdah. Since Hisham was only declared heir-apparent on 5 February 976 and succeeded his father on 1 October of the same year, the inscription allows us to date the box precisely to eight months of the year 976. The inscription further shows that the box was a specific commission, perhaps to commemorate the prince’s elevation to the status of heir-apparent. In addition to the main inscription on the lid of the Gerona casket, another small inscription tucked on the underside of the clasp (see Figure 8.46) gives the signature of the artisans, al-Hakam’s servants Badr and Tarif.

The shroud of St Josse, made for a Samanid commander in the mid-tenth century, and the Gerona casket show how precious objects made in medieval Islamic interiors were inscribed with bands proclaiming the name of the patron or owner. Inscriptions, come with a different message in a different style of script, are also found on less expensive wares, as can be seen on a deep flaring bowl made in the Samanid domains at the same time as the shroud (see Figure 1.3). Made of buff-coloured earthenware covered with a fine white slip, the bowl is painted in red and dark brown slips and covered with a transparent colourless glaze. In the centre is an abstracted plant motif, but the major decoration is a wide band of elegant angular script encircling the inside walls.

In contrast to the historical texts on the shroud and the casket, the inscription on the bowl contains good wishes to the owner and a proverb. A small decorative motif set at about four o’clock indicates the beginning of the text, which, like all inscriptions written in Arabic script, reads from right to left. The text begins with a phrase offering ‘Blessing to its owner’, a phrase that can be transcribed in Latin characters.
as baraka li sahlahi. A small teardrop motif set at about eight o'clock on the bowl marks the beginning of a proverb, yiqla qa d khatarez man istaghaniya bait-yah, which translates as ‘It is said that he who is content with his own opinion runs into danger’. Assuming that the bowl was intended to be held and appreciated with the stem of the plant at the bottom, closest to the viewer, then the most important part of the inscription, the blessing to the owner, is set immediately below the plant motif. To read the following proverb, the viewer has to rotate the bowl completely around in a counter-clockwise direction. The inscription thus invites the holder to handle and turn the bowl.

The inscriptions on this bowl and other comparable ceramics are carefully thought out, and the script truly deserves to be called calligraphy, literally ‘beautiful writing’. Whereas the inscriptions on the shroud and the casket were designed for clarity and immediate comprehension, the inscription on the bowl was designed for aesthetic impact. The dark brown letters are attenuated, and the tall vertical strokes extend high above the bodies of the letters in the lower zone. To fill the empty space, the artist surrounded the letters with a broad band reserved in the white of the slip ground and filled the remaining ground with spots and four-petalled flowers. He encircled the rim with alternating red and black scallops and deliberately skipped a space at the top so that a scallop would not impinge upon the descending tail of the letter min in the word man.

As with the shroud, we can only speculate about how this inscribed bowl was used. One of the largest and finest ceramics of its type to survive is a bowl about 32 cm in diameter; it was probably a serving vessel that was presented to a communal party of diners and filled with food. As the diners reached in and emptied the bowl, the letters would slowly be revealed. Only when they had finished could they pick the bowl up and turn it around to read the text. Even then, the inscription is difficult to read, especially with the stylized letters and lack of dots. Deciphering the inscriptions of these ceramics is something of a specialty today. It is almost as though the inscriptions on these bowls and plates were composed as puzzles, whose unravelling was designed to entertain the satisfied diners after their meal.

The widespread use of inscriptions on these ceramics and other objects from the tenth century has wider implications for more general questions about medieval Islamic society. One is the rate of literacy, for the widespread use of inscriptions suggests that many members of the upper classes were literate. The rate of literacy obviously fluctuated, and literacy and verbal skills were prized at some times or in some places more than others. The Samanid period, when written puzzles dominated the decoration of tablewares, for example, was a time of cultural florescence, and the Samanid court was renowned for its patronage of scholarship and learning.

Much of the literature composed under Samanid patronage, however, was written in new Persian, and several scholars, beginning with Yolow [Golembek] [1966], have addressed the apparent paradox of why ceramics with inscriptions in Arabic were popular at the time that literature in new Persian developed. She suggested that the paradox may be more apparent than real and that the Persian renaissance that took place under the Samanids may have been part of a more general flowering of culture in Iran. Certainly, Samanid administration was modelled on that of the Abbasid caliphs at Baghdad, where earthenware bowls were often painted with Arabic inscriptions written in cobalt blue on the opaque white glaze in the centre of the bowl (see Figure 1.64).

Yolow also suggested that the Samanid ceramics with Arabic inscriptions might have appealed to a specific segment of the community, and Bulliet [1992] took the argument one step further. Adopting the Annales technique of writing material culture to other areas of historical enquiry, he connected this type of inscribed ware with the elitist members of the society, descendants of comparatively early converts to Islam who persisted in supporting the legal, theological and spiritual traditions that had been dominant at the time of their ancestors' conversions. Although somewhat speculative, his analysis is worthy of attention, for it shows how inscribed objects can shed light on medieval society.

Three examples of inscribed wares – the shroud, the box and the bowl – all date from the tenth century, but inscriptions are found on objects created throughout the history of Islamic culture, from the earliest times to the present. The earliest Islamic building, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik in 705/69, already shows a sophisticated use of inscriptions executed in mosaic on the interior (see Figure 1.4). Two long bands of inscriptions, written in gold letters that sparkle against the deep blue ground, encircle the inner and outer faces of the octagonal arcade. Although the bands are similar in technique and style, the texts differ in organisation and content. The band on the inner face has a continuous text.
that begins in the south west corner and runs counter-clockwise around the open central space. Following the invocation to God, the text describes the omnipotent power of God and extols Muhammad as His Prophet and Jesus as His messenger but not His son. The band on the outer face, by contrast, is divided into six sections by rosettes. The first sections contain Koranic verses and pious phrases of a similar tenor about God’s omnipotence and Muhammad’s prophetic mission, but the sixth is a historical text with the name of the patron and the date of construction.

Inscriptions continue to play an important role in the decoration of modern buildings in the Islamic lands. A good example is the mosque in the terminal of the King Khalid International Airport built at Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 1984 (see Figure 1.5). As at the Dome of the Rock, the inscription is written in a large band that encircles the base of the dome. This one sets above a band of gold decorated with black geometric patterns and below the light and airy dome constructed of tiers of concrete. The tall white letters written in thuluth script are set against a blue ground. A cartouche at one side encloses the husnulqi, or invocation to God. The rest of the band is a continuous Koranic text containing the first seven verses of Chapter 57, Surat al-Hadid [Iron]. They state that whatever is on the earth or in the heavens declares the glory of God, the almighty who has power over all things. They conclude that whoever spends money on a pious work will be justly rewarded.

The Koranic text in the mosque was consciously chosen to fit the site. The opening verses are some of the most lyric evocations in the Koran of God’s majesty and power on heaven and earth. The final verse about pious gifts is undoubtedly an allusion to the patron’s construction of a mosque in the city where modern pilgrims would first set foot in Saudi Arabia en route to Mecca while performing the hajj. Technique and placement reinforce the meaning of the inscription around the base of the dome. The band is set so that it appears to mediate between the earth below, represented by the gold and black band, and the heavens above, represented by the lighted dome.

Sometimes the desire to have writing was as important as the execution, and the need to have a specific text outweighed considerations about its style. A good example here is the Massachusetts Avenue entrance to the Islamic Center built in Washington DC in 1968/1949 (Ethinghausen 1974, fig. 8, Thackston 1994: 45). The façade is decorated with a broad band of Koranic text containing part of verse 36 from Chapter 24, Surat al-Nur [Light]. The text, which follows the celebrated Light Verse (24:35) in which God is exalted as the light of the heavens and the earth, refers to houses whose construction is permitted by God and in which his name is honoured. Like the verses around the dome of the airport mosque, this verse was specifically and appropriately chosen for its location, the mosque in an Islamic centre. The style of neokufic, however, is awkward. The tooth of the letter ‘r’ in binyan, the second word, is so tall that it looks like the letter ‘jitu’, and most passers-by, even those fluent in Arabic, would stumble in reading the text.

It is not difficult to understand why writing is such a ubiquitous feature of Islamic art and architecture. There were already strong precedents in the Ancient Near East and the classical world for using written texts with the name of the patron to mark important sites and buildings. More importantly, the word plays a pivotal role in the religion of Islam. The central miracle of the faith is that in the early seventh century God sent down a revelation to the Prophet Muhammad, a revelation that was later written down as the Koran (literally ‘reading’ or ‘recitation’). The first words that God revealed to Muhammad were the opening five verses from Chapter 96, Surat al-Alaq [The Clot].

Recite in the name of thy Lord who created,
Created man from a clot,
Recite in the name of thy lord,
Who taught the pen,
Taught man what he knew not.

These verses are interpreted in various ways, either that writing was relatively new to Arabia or that man is able to learn from writing (that is, from reading books) what he does not otherwise know. Whichever interpretation is correct, these verses underscore the central role of writing and by extension language in Islamic culture and art. The central role of writing runs through the Koran. Chapter 68, another early revelation known as Surat al-Qalam [‘The Pen’] or Surat al-Nun [‘The Letter Nun’], opens with the words, ‘Nun. By the pen and what they write on it’. Later commentators suggested that the pen was the first thing created by God so that he could write down events to come, and the sentence has inspired poets and mystics throughout the centuries. The Koran puts man’s whole life under the sign of writing. According to another revelation from slightly later, verses 17–18 of Chapter 59, Surat al-Qaf [‘The Letter Qaf’], two noble scribbling angels (kalamītān) sit on man’s shoulders to record his action and thoughts,
the one on the right noting down his good deeds and the one on the left his evil ones. On Judgment Day, man's every deed will be tallied up in the Book of Reckoning for the final accounting (Chapter 69, Surat al-Haqq, verses 18-19).

Given the importance of writing in the revelation, it is no surprise that writing became such an important feature of Islamic culture. Books and book production became major art forms. Inscriptions became a major motif of decoration.

The prolific use of inscriptions in Islamic culture has been noted at least since the eighteenth century by Western scholars, for they recognised the importance of inscriptions in dating objects and works of art. Inscriptions on coins were some of the first to be studied, perhaps because their decoration, unlike that on European coins, was exclusively epigraphic. In the early Middle Ages, Islamic coins had been traded extensively in Scandinavia, northern Germany and Russia, and the large collections in northern Europe stimulated scholarly interest. George Jacob Keppel's monograph, Monarchiae Asiae Sacrae et Terrae Status quibus VII. et VIII. saeculo fuit. ex nummis argenteis priscis Arabum scriptura kilika ... casis et naper ... effossis illustratus, published in Leipzig in 1774, included correct readings of the Kufic inscriptions on the coins and commentaries on them. It has been called the first scholarly book on Islamic numismatics and on Islamic archeology in its widest sense.

From this point on, catalogues of other major European collections of Islamic coins were based on an accurate reading of the inscriptions. Perhaps the most famous example of this group was C. M. Fähn's classification of the coins in St Petersburg, published in 1821 as Das mohammedanische Münzkabinett des asiatischen Museums der kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu St Petersburg.

Along with interest in the inscriptions on coins came recording of the inscriptions on buildings. The German traveller and historian Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815) was one of the first to do so. He joined the scientific expedition sent in 1761 by Frederick V of Denmark to explore Egypt, Arabia and Syria. Niebuhr was the sole survivor of the rigorous six-year expedition, and the record of his journey became a classic on the geography, people, antiquities and archaeology of the lands he had traversed. The first volume, Beschreibung von Arabien, published in Copen- hagen in 1772, was accompanied by abundant illustrations, including drawings of some of the inscriptions he had recorded. Two other volumes, published under the title Reisebeschreibung von Arabien und anderen umliegenden Ländern, appeared in 1774 and 1778, and a fourth was published posthumously in 1837.

Niebuhr's drawings of the inscriptions were some of the first Islamic inscriptions to be published, but they had been collected in a rather piecemeal fashion, and a next step was a more systematic survey of the inscriptions from a particular location. This was one result of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt carried out between 1798 and 1801. Published in Paris between 1809 and 1828 as the Description de l'Egypte, the scientific record of the expedition was one of the greatest achievements of the encyclopaedic tradition of the French Enlightenment. The work comprised nine volumes of text, ten elephant folios of plates, and an atlas. Although somewhat of a hodge-podge, covering everything from Egyptian antiquities to popular music, it included reproductions of inscribed objects and monumental inscriptions, some now destroyed. The plates are still so useful that they were reprinted in 1944, almost two centuries after the original date of publication. They contain, among other things, the Kufic texts engraved on the Nilometer on Rawda Island (plate 744-5) and the long wooden frieze from the Mosque of But Talun in Cairo (plates 746-8). Scholars next broadened the field of enquiry to inscriptions on other works of Islamic art. The first catalogue of an entire collection of Islamic decorative arts, the two-volume Monuments arabes, persans et turcs, du cabinet de M. le Duc de Blacas et d'autres cabinets, published by the French orientalist J.-F. Reinaud in Paris in 1838, included a significant amount of material on inscriptions. It was the first work on Islamic seals and contains a general introduction to seals and taliaments and their inscriptions (see also Chapter 14). Since the collection also contained one of the most important examples of inscribed Islamic metalware, the Blacas Ewer in the British Museum (see Figure 353), the only inlaid brass on which the metalworking centre of Mosul is identified, the catalogue remains a landmark for the study of Islamic epigraphy.

Several other scholars of Islamic epigraphy emerged in the early nineteenth century as well. The Viennese historian Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774-1856) published several inscriptions, including the Kufic inscription on the Hakim Mosque in Cairo in 1856, and his lecture on seals was published as a handbook in 1849. The Italian abbot Michelangelo Lanzi (1779-1867) wrote a book on Arabic tombstones, published in 1840, and a three-volume work, Trattato delle simboliche rappresentazioni arabe e delle varie gerarchie di esseri animali e caratteri sopra diversi materei operati, published in Paris in 1845-6, that treats various types of inscriptions on objects. The Austrian Joseph von Karabacek (1825-1914) wrote the first study of inscriptions on Islamic textiles, the Arabic inscriptions on the liturgical vestments of the Marienkirche in Danzig (1870). Karabacek recognised the importance of epigraphy in interpreting an object, and as the librarian director of the Hofbibliothek in Vienna and secretary to the Vienna Academy he had a wide impact on other scholars, although most of his own work remained unpublished.

It was only at the turn of the twentieth century, however, that the study of Islamic inscriptions was put on a scientific basis. The real founder of the subject was Karabacek's Swiss contemporary Max van Berchem (1863-1931). Trained as an orientalist, especially a historian, and imbued with a deep knowledge and love of Islamic art, van Berchem became the unsurpassed master of the field of Islamic epigraphy. Upon returning from his first trip to Egypt, he began to put together the idea for a manual of Arab archaeology and a corpus of Arabic inscriptions. In a series of articles that appeared in the Journal Asiatique beginning in 1887, van Berchem developed his idea of Islamic archeology as the study of its monuments in the widest sense, including architecture, the decorative arts, inscriptions, numismatics and seals. By this he meant all the objects and documents, with the exception of manuscripts, that furnish some historical data, either by their forms or by the texts that they present. He laid out a double task for students of Islamic archaeology: to collect the inscriptions of Egypt and Syria so that they can constitute the basis of a corpus of Arabic inscriptions, and to deduce from the study of the monuments a manual of Arab archeology.

Taking the first task upon himself, van Berchem persuaded the Académie Française to sponsor the series known as Mémoires pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum (typically abbreviated to MCIA or simply CIA), and the first fascicle on the Arabic inscriptions from Egypt appeared in 1894. In the introduction, van Berchem enumerated three main reasons for studying inscriptions: their value for writing, language and history. The first two, their palaeographic and philological value, he judged less important. For van Berchem, the main reason for studying inscriptions lay in their value as historical documents, able to shed light on religious, political, administrative, judicial, military and commercial institutions, customs, ideas, and moral and material civilisation.

Van Berchem recognised that while any single inscription could be analysed and could supply specific historical information, a corpus of inscriptions would allow the unusual to be discerned amid the standard. Noting that Arabic inscriptions were most common in a central area - the region bounded by the Mediterranean Sea, the Persian Gulf and the mountains of Persia, Armenia and Cilicia - he limited his Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum to this central zone, which was subdivided into four areas: Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor and Arabia. Van Berchem himself compiled the volumes on Cairo (1894-1903), later revised and expanded by Wiet, 1939-1943, and Jerusalem (1930-31) and collaborated with Fritz Edelmann on a volume on eastern Anatolia (1930-1975). Inscriptions from several cities in northern and southern Syria
were collected by Soberheim (1909) and Heuzfeld, either in the form of articles (1923) or separate volumes of the corpus (1934–5). A volume on Mecca compiled by El-Hawary and Zeit was published in 1935 under the editorship of Nikita Flensel.

The weighty tomes of the RCEA went far beyond van Berchem’s initial idea for a corpus listing Arabic inscriptions in chronological order, but forty years after he had proposed it, his original idea was realised with the publication of the Repertoire chronologique d’Epigraphie arabe (commonly abbreviated to RCEA). Begun in 1912 under the editorship of Etienne Combe, Jean Sauvaget and Gaston Wiet, this multi-volume work aims to analyse a corpus of datable historical inscriptions in Arabic. It thus includes inscriptions on portable objects as well as those on buildings. Each volume of the RCEA contains 400 entries, arranged chronologically by year and then geographically, west to east.

The original editors of the RCEA envisaged that sixteen volumes would be sufficient to contain inscriptions up to the year 1500/1852, and the volumes appeared sporadically but steadily over the next three decades. With inscription no. 6400 at the end of volume 16, however, publication had only reached the year 765/1361, about halfway to the cut-off date originally planned. It was clear that the number of recorded inscriptions was far greater than the original editors had imagined and was growing rapidly.

At this point, therefore, publication of the RCEA was halted to allow time for review of the project. The first addition, published in 1977, was a geographical index with an alphabetical list of sites mentioned in the first sixteen volumes. The original format was also amended and standardised, although the total of some 400 inscriptions per volume was maintained. To date, two volumes in the new format have appeared, covering inscriptions up to the year 800/1498.

The RCEA, the basic reference work for dealing with Islamic epigraphy, is simply a list of inscriptions without commentaries. One of the few attempts to synthesise this wealth of material is Gauß’s chapter on epigraphy in the Grundriss der Arabischen Philologie (1982). Given the subject of the volume, he limits his survey to inscriptions in Arabic and concentrates on form and vocabulary to the exclusion of style. He discusses several types of monumental inscriptions as well as inscriptions on eleven different types of portable objects, giving the common Arabic forms used for each type. A table at the end of the essay gives an alphabetical list of Arabic phrases and a numerical list of Koranic citations keyed to the different types of inscriptions. Gauß’s essay is a useful and clear overview of the language used in Arabic inscriptions, but by its reliance on the RCEA it deals mainly with earlier material, and it is unillustrated.

Van Berchem had already recognised that inscriptions would vary from region to region and designed his corpus to concentrate on the central Islamic lands. With the increase in knowledge about inscriptions, this regional focus has grown larger, and most works today treat the inscriptions of a particular area. This is clear from the article ‘Khitāb’ [‘Inscriptions’] in the second edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam. The article begins with a general introduction to the subject by the doyenne of epigraphic studies in the mid-twentieth century, Janine Sourdel-Thomine. This is a thoughtful piece about the history of the subject, some of its advantages and disadvantages, and the general state of epigraphic study in the Islamic lands.

This general introduction is followed by nine articles by specialists on the different geographical areas: Solange Otro on the Near East, M. Ocatr on the Islamic Spain, Lucien Golin on north Africa, A. D. H. Bivar on west Africa, G. S. P. Freeman-Greenville on east Africa, F. Th. Dijkema and A. Alparslan on Turkey, L. Ch. Dormais on south-east Asia, A. D. H. Bivar on Iran and Transoxiana, and J. Burton-Pace on India. All the articles are useful for their bibliographies and references to individual studies, but the individual articles vary considerably in the quality and quantity of information presented. Some are extremely schematic, others thoughtful and synthetic. This unevenness results not only from the interests and expertise of the authors, but also from the varying nature of the data and the different questions raised by the material from distinct regions.

The increasing trend towards regional studies is also clear from the main bibliographic source on Islamic art in general and on inscriptions in particular, K. A. C. Creswell’s A Bibliography of the Architecture, Arts and Crafts of Islam. The original volume, published under Creswell’s editorship in 1961, included some 500 references [columns 671–714] to articles on monumental inscriptions in the section entitled ‘Calligraphy & Palaeography: Specimens on Stone, &c.’ This arrangement was continued in the first supplement (1973), which included some seventy-five additional entries [columns 235–239] under the same rubric. By the second supplement, which appeared under the editorship of Pearson, Meinecke and Scammon in 1984, the field had grown so much that the editors changed the heading to calligraphy and epigraphy and subdivided the 700 entries in the section entitled ‘Inscriptions on Stone, &c.’ [columns 235–53] under regional headings. These include not only recent titles but also many that had been omitted from the first two volumes of the bibliography.

These works form the standard references for the field of Islamic epigraphy. This book draws upon them, but is somewhat different. It is designed to present the subject to a wide spectrum of people who want to learn about Islamic inscriptions on buildings and objects. It introduces the topic to beginners in the study of Islamic civilisation and history. It shows historians who know texts where inscriptions are recorded and how inscriptions can supplement or even correct the information found in documents. It tells museum curators who possess inscribed objects how to read the inscriptions and what kind of information the inscriptions might provide. It provides archaeologists and researchers with a basic standard on how to record inscriptions. Finally, it includes a lengthy bibliography that provides directions for further reading on many aspects of Islamic epigraphy.

This book is divided into four parts, of which this introductory chapter forms Part I. Parts II and III are interpretive essays covering the two major types of inscriptions found in the Islamic lands: monumental inscriptions and inscriptions on portable objects. The chapters in each part treat the development of content as well as style and include specific examples and illustrations. The techniques for putting inscriptions on buildings and objects and the reasons for doing so differ. Hence, the two parts are organised differently. Part II, on monumental inscriptions, is divided into chapters dealing with different approaches and methodologies used to study the vast corpus of monumental inscriptions, including linguistic, typological, geographical and stylistic considerations. By contrast, Part III, on portable objects, is divided by media [metalworks, woodwork, ceramics, textiles and other arts] and by types of objects [jewellery stones and other grave markers, arms and armour, and seals, talismans, amulets and other small ornaments]. The chapters in both parts introduce the reader to the general literature and the work that has been done. They give examples of the kinds of information that can be gleaned from the inscriptions. They also point out areas where more work needs to be done (or redone).

The reader may be surprised to find that two topics are not included in this handbook of Islamic epigraphy: inscriptions on coins and inscriptions on paper and other written surfaces. This is not to deny the importance of these topics, rather, the reverse. Both topics are so important that they demand separate studies. As the inscriptions on coins and paper offer information about other kinds of Islamic epigraphy, these two subjects are mentioned tangentially in these chapters, and a few general notes about how to use numismatic epigraphy and calligraphy are worthwhile here.

The inscriptions on coins issued in the Islamic lands are exclusively epigraphic. Pictures, images and other symbols are the exception rather than the rule. Since coins are almost always dated, numismatic epigraphy is a useful source for dating the introduction of various titles and scripts, particularly
on other undated material. The interlaced Kufic script found on slip-painted ceramics associated with the Samanids in tenth-century Central Asia and exemplified by the bowl illustrated in Figure 1-3, for example, can be dated in part based on the introduction of interlaced script on coins.

When using numismatic evidence for dating stylistic innovations in epigraphy, it is essential to bear in mind that coins are exceedingly conservative. No-one issues a coin that might be rejected. Hence, the date when any new style or motif appears on a coin must be considered the date of common acceptance, not that of innovation.

Another factor to remember in using numismatic evidence for epigraphy is that coins represent the official view. Since they were issued by the state, coins are important evidence in arguments about how bureaucracies purposefully manipulated styles of script. For example, scholars such as Tabbaa [1991, 1994] have speculated about the relationship between the introduction of cursive scripts into epigraphy and attempts to buttress Islamic orthodoxy, but coins are often overlooked as evidence in the argument. Cursive script was used on coins issued in eastern Iran and Central Asia from an early period. A dirham minted at Balkh in 303/914-5, for example, has the name of the Buyid governor Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Ahmad written in a cursive hand. Similarly, a coin issued at Nishapur in 305/917-18 uses cursive script for the name of the Samanid ruler Na`ib b. Ahmad. As elsewhere, cursive hands were probably used for ordinary business correspondence, but the use of cursive on coins to highlight the name of the local ruler shows that cursive was accepted for official purposes in Central Asia at a very early date.

Many times there is also a close connection between styles of handwriting and styles of epigraphy. Sometimes the same artists were responsible, and calligraphers designed inscriptions on buildings and other objects. This was probably the case already in early Islamic times, as attested by the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock and on milestones issued in the name of the Umayyad caliph `Abd al-Malik (see Chapter 5). It was certainly the case in later times, for some inscriptions are signed by a person who calls himself al-hālī (the scribe). Endowment inscriptions on buildings are usually abridgements of longer endowment deeds that were registered at the judiciary. In some cases, inscriptions on dated monuments can help us date undated manuscripts, and monumental inscriptions are often used to date the large body of fragmentary parchment manuscripts of the Koran made in the early centuries of Islam.

As with coins, however, the reader must be careful in using epigraphic evidence to date calligraphy and styles of handwriting. Reasons for writing a document were different from those for creating an inscription, particularly a monumental one. Documents and inscriptions may have been intended for different audiences. Each had its own tradition, and traditional rules or customs may have affected common practice.

The different media also placed different demands on the artist. In general, it is far easier and faster to write a text with a reed pen than to inscribe it, be it on a building or an object. Indeed, the texts that are closest to calligraphy are the ones inscribed on medieval Iranian ceramics, which were painted with a brush.

Part IV (Chapter 1) of book is more practical. It begins by showing the reader how to use the basic reference materials. These include the Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum (MCA) and the Répertoire chronologique d’épigraphie arabo-islamique (RCEAI) for historical texts. It also shows how to find, identify, and interpret other types of inscriptions, including Koranic texts, hadith and pious phrases, and dates. The second part of Chapter 15 shows how to record inscriptions and what conventions are commonly used.

The bibliography does not claim to be comprehensive, for just as there are too many inscriptions to be mentioned individually, there are also too many studies to be cited singly. Rather, the bibliography contains the most important and the most accessible studies. The criteria for inclusion were usefulness and availability. Longer and fuller bibliographies can be found in Creswell’s bibliography on the arts and crafts of Islam and its various supplements. To facilitate reading, only short references giving the author’s name and appropriate pages, catalogue number or illustration will be included in the text, but the interested reader can find the full citation in the bibliography.

Finally, a long and detailed index should help the reader, who is invited to skip about and jump from chapter to chapter. The field of Islamic epigraphy is vast. Thanks to photographs and books, we know more about it today than any patron, scribe or epigrapher did in earlier times, when knowledge was probably limited to what a person could see around him. What pertains at any one time or place may not hold at another. Nevertheless, the reader may draw inspiration and method from other contexts. This book is intended to be both an introduction and a provocation: to encourage the reader not only to look at and read inscriptions, but also to analyse and interpret them in order to understand better the rich material and visual world of the Islamic lands over the past 1,400 years.