The final element in a standard foundation inscription is the date. Typically this is expressed as 'in the year [fi suna] or 'in the months of the year' [fi shahrta sina], sometimes preceded by the additional phrase bi-ta‘árkh 'darded', and the number of the year written out in units, decades and centuries. Thus the foundation on the Dome of the Rock gives the date 'in the year seventy-two', which ran from 4 June 670 to 3 May 671. Sometimes the date is more precise, with a specific month given. Thus, the restorations to the Dome of the Rock carried out under al-Ma'mun took place in the month of Rabi' II of the year 216, corresponding to May-June 831.

Historians are usually glad to find a date and often satisfied with foundation inscriptions because they are dated. We must, however, also interpret what the date means, for it usually took more than a single month or even a year to construct a major building. It is possible to interpret the Dome of the Rock in radically different ways by considering the year 72 as either the date when the building was ordered or the date when it was completed. Most modern historians, however, follow the form of the Arabic, which is the correct interpretation of the foundation inscription. The date 72 is written using the term asma (to order). Here, I believe this to be the correct interpretation of the Dome of the Rock as well (Blair 1993a).

Usually only one date is given, but occasionally a foundation inscription is more specific, giving both the beginning and the end of construction. The typical form uses faraqa 'began' and rama 'finished'. Thus the foundation inscription on the façade of Qal'a’s funerary complex says that the work began in the months of the year 683 (which ran from 12 March 682 to 8 March 683) and finished in the months of the year 692 (which ran from 21 March 683 to 26 February 684). Such specificity in date is unusual and demands explanation.

In the case of Qal'a’s complex, we know from textual evidence that the patron was extremely proud of the speed with which his order was executed, and texts confirm that the whole complex was constructed within two years. Combining inscriptions and chronicles, Creswell [1927a; 1927b], vol. 3, p. 310 was able to establish an exact chronology for the building programme. On 13 December 682/December 679, the sultan used money from his private purse to buy the land and buildings from the occupants of the site, once part of the western, or smaller, Fattimid palaces. Construction on the hospital was begun in Rabi’ II 685/June-July 1284 and finished in Ramadan 685/November-December 1284. Builders then turned to the mausoleum, and dated inscriptions tell us that it was begun the next month (Shawwal 685/December 1284-January 1285) and finished four months later (Jumada 685/April-May 1285). The madrasa was begun that month and finished four months later in Jumada 686/July-August 1285.

Before citing a date as indispensable evidence for the foundation of a building, it is imperative to verify the text. Since foundation texts in Iran were often inscribed in a frame around the projecting portal or pidentay of a building, the date often falls at the lower left, near ground level where the brick band is susceptible to damage from rising ground water, salination and the like. Part of the text may be illegible, and it is often a prime spot for repair, sometimes by ignorant or incorrect date. The foundation inscription on the portal of the khanqah at Natanz in central Iran, for example, now reads 'in the year seven hundred and twenty-five' (1354-5). This restoration is clearly wrong, for earlier photographs show that the first letter after the word sana 'year' 'began' with a sin-shin, dictating a date that begins with six sixty or seven-seventy. Based on a combination of historical and constructional evidence, the correct date for the khanqah should be restored as 707/1307-8 (Blair 1986).

Sometimes, particularly when space is at a premium, the year is squeezed in at the end of the inscription in numerals. They are often written above the word sana or slotted in above other vertical strokes. At the end of the foundation inscription on the mosque of Shykh Lutfallah, a small band written vertically at the left edge of the main foundation inscription gives the signature of the calligrapher and the date in numerals, 1013, which ran from 17 June 656 to 29 May 664.

One of the main reasons to erect a monumental inscription was propaganda and advertising, to broadcast a ruler’s good name and works or to mask his sovereignty. This is already clear in the earliest monumental inscriptions such as the milestones erected by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik along routes leading to his capital Damascus [IUEA 14-17] and along a difficult pass near Lake Tiburtia [Sharab 1966]. All of the texts are similar. Following the basmala and blessings on the Prophet, the inscriptions record that the work was ordered by God’s servant, ‘Abd al-Malik, Commander of the Faithful. The milestones found at Khil al-Hadara [IUEA 14], a ruined caravanserai between Jerusalem and Jericho, is a good example [see Figure 1.16]. The top line or two with the opening basmala and most of the blessing on the Prophet has been destroyed, but the last word is preserved. The text then records that ‘Abd al-Malik ordered the construction of this route [lerta] and the making of these milestones [umayy]. Only the last of the original nine or ten lines actually states the distance from this milestone [mil] to Damascus, 109 miles. The milestones were erected not as a convenient sign for weary travellers but, like the caliph’s new epigraphic coins, as a sign of his presence and power (Iuea 1985: 45; Blair 1993b).

One of the most famous examples showing how an inscription marks sovereignty was discovered by van Berchem in the foundation text on the Dome of the Rock [MICHA Jerusalem, no. 313]. The text now reads that this dome was built by God’s servant, ‘Abdallah, the imam al-Ma’mun, Commander of Believers, in the year 72 (Kesler 1970; Blair 1993b) but van Berchem showed that the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun had simply had his name inserted in place of that of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik. This change was evident on stylistic grounds, for the letters in the replaced area are more cramped and written on a darker blue ground. The date at the end of the text, however, was not changed to accord with that of al-Ma’um’s reign more than a century after the building was constructed, and van Berchem argued that the intention in altering the inscription was not to change the origin of the building, which everyone knew had been built by ‘Abd al-Malik, but to substitute the name of reigning caliph for that of a deceased caliph who represented a rival and
Other Types of Monumental Inscriptions

Foundation and restoration inscriptions, although by far the most common inscriptions on buildings and the ones that set the standard, are not the only type of monumental inscriptions. There are several other types that use variant forms and give different information. Endowment texts are the ones closest to foundation inscriptions. They contain extracts from waqfīyyas, legally attested charters or constitutions and guarantees of their endowments. These deeds could be drawn up only when the building was complete, and after legal attestation a copy was registered at the judiciary or appropriate state office.

There are two types of endowment inscriptions. In the first type, a religious building such as a mosque, madrasa, zawiyah, tomb or similar kind of building is endowed to a well-known group or religious sect. In the second, the inscription enumerates the property, buildings or objects to be used as support for the pious foundation. Two different verbs are used: waqafā (to endow) and habbāsā (to tie up inalienably). The two verbs have different shades of meaning, and the former was more common in the first type of endowment inscription and the latter in the second. There were also regional distinctions: waqafā was used in both types of endowment inscription in the eastern Islamic lands, while habbāsā was used in both types in Spain and North Africa. In both types, the verb is followed by the name and titles of the giver and the type of gift, which can be a single object or a long string of properties.

The two types of endowment inscription often come together and follow a foundation or restoration text. A good example is the endowment text on the mosque at Sidl Bu Medeneh, the shrine complex for the Sufi saint Abu Madyan Shu'ayb (d. 1197) in the village of al-Ukba, 2 km east of Tiemcen in Algeria (BCEA 576). The thirty-six lines of text are inscribed on a marble tablet encased in the column to the left of the mihrab (van Berchem 1937, plate 1). The inscription opens with a standard foundation text saying that the congregational mosque and adjacent madrasa were ordered by the Marinid sultan Abu'l-Hassan 'Ali, who receives the usual titles and epigrams. The text continues with the first type of endowment text, saying that the sultan inalienably endowed the madrasa for the pursuit of science and instruction. The text then continues with the second type of endowment text, enumerating a long list of gardens, orchards, houses, windmills, baths, and land that the sultan bought and inalienably endowed to the mosque and madrasa. In both cases, the verb is habbāsā.

Endowment inscriptions can be quite close to foundation texts, and sometimes a foundation text can even include the information about endowment. This is the case with the foundation inscription on the Salāhiyya Madrasa in Jerusalem (BCEA 545). The text is written in five lines on a marble slab above the entrance door on the west façade. It opens with a brief identification of the building as the 'blessed madrasa' (al-madrasa al-nawabīkha) and then says that it was endowed (waqafā) by the Ayyubid ruler Salah al-Din Saladin as a madrasa for the Shafi‘i sect in 588/1192. Most of the space is given to the patron's name and titles, including several compound honorifics (dā'īb), his patronymic Aḥī 'Abd al-Munawwar, his personal

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name Yusuf, his genealogy (b. Ayyub b. Shadil), his caliphal title Reviver of the Empire of the Commander of the Faithful, and eulogies asking God to glorify his victories and amass for him the benefits of this world and the next. The only difference from a standard foundation inscription is the verb waqf and the inclusion of the group to which the building is given. In Saljuq Anatolia, it was rare to include extracts of endowments on buildings, and Rogers (1976) has suggested that the foundation inscription served as a substitute to bridge the gap between the time the building was finished and the endowment deed drawn up.

In other cases, the endowment inscription was distinct from the foundation inscription. The distinction could be made clear by a different form, with the foundation inscription on a large band over the portal and the endowment text written on a marble plaque. The distinction could also be made clear by different styles of script. This is the case in the lengthy inscriptions on the domed sanctuary of the congregational mosque in Qazvin, Iran (Soucek-Thomine 1976). A long and elegant foundation inscription in cursive runs around the arches of the zone of transition. It says that the mosque was ordered during the reign of the Saljuq ruler Muhammad b. Malik-shah by the governor of the city, Khurramshah, and that construction took nine years, from 500/1106-7 to 508/1114-15. A second and larger inscription in floriated Kufic runs around the top of the walls of the square chamber. Clearly an abridgment of the endowment decree, it enumerates the properties endowed to the mosque and attached madrasa as well as other endowments for indigents in Melike, the upkeep of a new underground channel (jadid qad) to supply water to the residents of Qazvin, and other purposes that are unclear because of lacunae in the text. The endowment text continues on several panels on three walls of the sanctuary, enumerating Khurramshah’s endowments for the upkeep of several other pious foundations, including a Sufi convent in Mecca, a caravanserai in the village or quarter of Damghan, a well and oratory in the village of Ghisrawan, and a small Sufi convent near the door of the mosque in Qazvin. A fourth text on the west wall at the same height as the previous ones adds new stipulations about how the water in Khurramshah’s underground channel is to be apportioned. This text ends with the date 505/1116-17, a year after the date mentioned in the foundation inscription, perhaps indicating the time needed to complete the interior decoration. This is one of the few endowment texts to survive from medieval Iran, partly because the brick used there for construction meant that such texts did not survive. Far more are known from Syria and Egypt, particularly from Mamlik times, because the stone used there ensured better preservation.

Like foundation inscriptions, endowment inscriptions have a propagandistic aim. They were meant to show who endowed what, when and why, and much of the space is given over to the titles and generosity of the patron. Endowment inscriptions are also important economic and social documents, for they give details about villages, upkeep, nourishment, water supplies and living conditions. The same sort of details about daily life are given in decrees which supply information about administrative procedures, events of local history, and economic and fiscal policy. These types of monumental inscriptions are especially important in filling in the lives of the common people, a subject often ignored in traditional chronicles.

Most decrees known date from Mamlik times. Many are found in Syria, and the major scholar associated with their publication is Jean Sauvaget (1928b, 1933, 1947-8). Decrees were clearly set up before this period, but very few have survived. Decrees were also set up in other areas. The longest Mamlik decree inscribed on stone, for example, is a fifteen-line fiscal decree abolishing taxes on objects imported and used in Mecca. Issued by al-Ashtar Shu’ban on Monday 3 Jumada II 766/35 January 1365, it was set up three or four pairs of columns in the Haram at Mecca [MCLA Arabic, nos 25-5, RCEA 766/607]. Many similar decrees on stone plaques were also set up in Iran in the later period. The congregational mosque in Nishapur, for example, has three decrees (usually called fara’id in Iran) mounted in the wall. Dated 1051/1613, they give tax relief to the citizens of Nishapur. Few of these later Iranian decrees have been published systematically.

Like endowment inscriptions, decrees were often written on marble plaques. The Mamlik examples were typically set up near the market or on the walls or columns of porticos in congregational mosques. As official proclamations, they were thus installed right under the eyes of those who would benefit. Yet at the same time, as Sauvaget pointed out, many of them were poorly written. Mamlik examples are generally done in low relief, with defective writing, omitted letters or even words, orthographic and grammatical mistakes, unknown vocalisations and errors of editing. The fact that they were set up seems to have been more important than their readability to passers-by.

Typical decrees from the early period often with the basmaa followed by some form of anna, either bi-am or khaabu al-am. By the fourteenth century, the basmaa was replaced by the phrase al-ban ‘al-wilīh (‘Praise to God”). The text usually opened with the exact date of day, month and year written out in words following the phrase man kana bi-‘sītah ‘on’. Next came the phrase yasta al-masām (‘emerged the decree of’), which was followed by the name and titles of the patron. The details of the decree took up most of the text. At the end was the date, if it had not been used at the beginning, and various maldecitions to anyone who violated the conditions of the decree. The maldecitions invoke God’s anger and punishment on Judgement Day. They often include Koran 26:128, saying that the unjust will soon know the vicissitudes that their affairs will take. Koran 31:73, saying that God is sufficient and disposes of affairs best (hasbuna allâh wa n-nâma al-wald), indicates the end.

A third type of inscription, funerary inscriptions, is intended to show for whom a tomb was consecrated and always contains the name of the person buried there. The simplest way to introduce his name was the phrase ‘this is the grave of’ (shabat ‘qabr). This phrase was often used on tombstones [see Chapter 14]. The word qabr could be replaced by the variant, feminine form magbara or by different words. Similar texts on cenotaphs, for example, use magdī (‘screen’) or dartbī (‘cenotaph’). Other synonyms include turba and qubba. The word qabr was common on the tomb towers in Iran, as on the Gunbad-i Qabus, the extraordinary tomb tower near the Caravanserai built by the amir Qabus b. Washirgr in 507/1110-17 and the tomb tower at Radkan built for the Rawanduz amir Abu Ja’far in 470/1076-7 [Blair 1990a, nos 179 and 311]. Sometimes the name could be introduced by a more elaborate sentence with two nouns, saying that ‘this thing/place is the tomb of so-and-so’, as in the funerary inscription around the tomb tower known as the Pīr-i Almarād, built in Damghān in 416/1026-7, which uses the phrase ‘this qubba is the qabr of...’ [Blair 1990a, no. 14]. Given the importance of family, the part of the funerary inscription naming the deceased includes a long genealogy (nasab) and details about his death. On an inamzāna, or shrine built particularly in Iran to honour members of the Prophet’s family, the genealogy often goes back to the Prophet or his immediate family. A good example (see Figure 4.17) is the funerary inscription on the Imamzāna Yahya b. Zayd at Sar-i Pul in northern Afghanistan, built to honour an early ‘Aliid martyr, Yahya b. Zayd. The large band around the top of the walls below the zone of transition gives Yahya’s genealogy four generations back to the Prophet’s nephew ‘Ali b. Abi Talib and relates that Yahya was martyred at Argūy on a Friday in the month of Safar of the year 135 [June 745] during the government of Nār b. Sayyar during the reign of the Umayyad caliph al-Walid, who is cursed [Blair 1992a, no. 75]. Similarly, the funerary inscription of the splendid wooden cenotaph for the Imam al-Shafti gives his genealogy ten generations back to the Prophet’s grandfather as well as the dates of Imam al-Shafti’s birth (1976-83) and death (Friday, the last of Rajab 204/30 January 820) and burial the same day [RCEA 3353]. The same information is repeated on a nearby marble column [RCEA 3353].

The funerary text was often followed or accompanied by the foundation inscription saying

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who ordered the tomb. It could be the person who was buried there, as with the tomb towers at Gurgan and Ibadh. It could be a close relative, often a son, as in the case of the Pir-i ‘Alamdar. Female relatives were also patrons. The tomb tower at Lajir was built for a Rawanduz prince by his daughter (Blair 1932a, no. 32), and Ma‘mina Khurun, widow of the Saljuq sultan Tughril b. Muhammad, had a tomb tower built in Nakhchivan for her son Muhammad Jahan Pahlavan, who died in 582/1186 (RCA 440-14). For the grave of a revered person or saint, the patron was usually a different person, who may have ordered the work years, decades or even centuries after the saint died. The Imamzada at Sar-i Pal, for example, was built c. 1300, some 350 years after Yahya b. Zayd was martyred. The patron’s name, Abu ‘Abdallah Muhammad b. Shaddar al-Farisi, is recorded in the smaller inscription around the arches. Similarly, the inscription for Imam al-Shafi‘i was ordered by Salah al-Din in 574/1178-9. He also built an accompanying madrasa and tomb, which were destroyed and replaced by the present structure, built by Salah al-din’s nephew al-Kamil in 608/1213 in his honour of his mother. Thus, it is important to note that the date of death recorded in a funerary inscription is not necessarily the same as the date of foundation of the tomb.

A fourth type of monumental inscription comprises commemorative texts. They are found all over the Near East, but particularly in the Arabian peninsula, where there was a strong pre-Islamic tradition of commemorative texts. Similarly, many are found in Iran, where monumental rock reliefs had been carved since Achaemenid times. Techniques often distinguish commemorative texts from other types of monumental inscriptions: commemorative texts are often incised or painted, not carved in relief. Incising is significantly faster and hence cheaper than relief carving, where the background around the letters has to be cut away.

Commemorative inscriptions were often carved near ruins. In Arabia, many were carved in early Islamic times along the Darb Zubayd, the pilgrimage route connecting ‘Iraq with the holy shrines (al-Ra‘is 1980, pp. 247-51). Several others are carved in the rock wall of a dam near Ta‘if around the foundation text recording Mu‘awiyah’s order for its construction in 58/677-8 (Miles 1948).

In Iran, it was a popular practice to carve one’s name at major pre-Islamic sites in Fars province. Several commemorative texts are found, for example, at Naqsh-i Rustam, the Sassanian rock relief showing the investiture of Ardashir I, and at Bahramkush, a rocky bluff near the pool known as Khuwariz and Shirin, after the famous story, later popularized by Nitrami, in which Khusraw watched Shirin bathing (Blair 1932a, no. 11). A series of commemorative inscriptions was also carved from the tenth century onwards at the Achaemenid site of Persepolis. Known to the Persians as Tahk-i Jamshid [‘the throne of Jamshid’], after the legendary king of Iran who created the crafts, the site served as a sort of ‘Muslim memorial’ (Melikian-Chirvani 1971b). One of the first is an eight-line text (see Figure 4.18) in the name of the Buyid ruler ‘Adud al-Dawla (Blair 1932a, no. 7).

Commemorative inscriptions from early Islamic times usually request God’s mercy or forgiveness for a particular person. They often contain a religious formula, such as the invocation to God [bismillah] or the profession of faith [shahadah], or a common Koranic verse, such as 53:16 saying that God and his angels bless the Prophet and that believers should bless him and salute him as well. Some texts also have the name of the person and a verb, typically hidara [‘was present’], nasafa [‘descended’] or kataba [‘wrote’]. ‘Adud al-Dawla’s text at Persepolis, for example, uses hidara. Texts from later times, particularly in Iran, are often in verse. Many of the people named in these commemorative texts are unknown figures, who are not recorded in major chronicles.

The people mentioned in the commemorative texts took prestige from being connected with the sites where their names were inscribed. Thus, Buyid rulers carved their commemorative texts at Persepolis in the palace built by Darius, Both the placement and the text of ‘Adud al-Dawla’s inscription were meant to underscore the connections between the struggling Buyid amir and his illustrious predecessors. ‘Adud al-Dawla’s inscription is carved on the door jamb between the portico and the main hall of the palace. The stone palace also has a trilingual inscription in Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian identifying Darius, the great king, the king of kings, the son of Hystaspes, as its builder, and the entrance jamb is decorated with reliefs showing the Achaemenid king and two attendants proceeding from the hall. Almost a millennium later, two inscriptions in Parsi praising the Sassanian monarch Shapur II (r. 309-79) were added beside the east jamb. ‘Adud al-Dawla’s text, added just to the left of the Parsi inscriptions, was obviously meant to associate him not only with Darius, founder of the Achaemenid line, but also with Shapur II, the victorious Sassanian king who had the longest reign.

Similarly, the text of ‘Adud al-Dawla’s inscription was planned to reinforce the connection between the Buyid amir and his pre-Islamic predecessors. It says that the Buyid amir was present at the site in 349/955-6 on his return, victorious, from the conquest of Ishahan, his capture of the Daylamite Ibn Makan, and his court of the army from Khurasan. The references to these victories are meant to echo those of Shapur II, who subdued the Romans on the west and the Kushans on the east. The Buyid amir carries not only his Arabic title, ‘Adud al-Dawla (literally, ‘Tercom of the State’), which the ‘Abbasid caliph had awarded him in 349/955, but also his Persian name Fannakhusraw (literally, ‘the refuge of Khursaw’, a popular Daylamite name that evoked the memory of the Sassanian king Khursaw I (r. 533-79), also known as Arashkwan the just. ‘Adud al-Dawla’s ambitions, evident in the commemorative text at Persepolis, culminated in his inscription of the old Persian title shahanshah (‘King of kings’), used on his coins from 370/981.

Sometimes we do not know why a commemorative text was inscribed. This is the case with one carved in 433/1041 on the Warah Gorge.
connecting Isara and Wanzuh in the Farghana Valley of Uzbekistan (ECEA 4298-9, Blair 1932, no. 41). The text says that it was ordered by the local governor to honour [ārātrfān] the Qarghanids ruler Arslan Tīkīn, who received a long list of titles and his full name, with kadhī Mu’izz al-Dawla, kunya Abū’l-Fadl, inn [Abbas, and rūṣāb b. Mu’ayyad al-Ādī b. Naṣr b. ‘Ādī], a genealogy that traced his descent four generations back to his great-grandfather who had founded the ‘Ādī or western branch of the Qarghanid line. This was the time when Arslan Tīkīn’s father was struggling to consolidate power (the Qarghanids had a particularly fractious political history), and the inscription may indicate that he had assigned this area to his son. Whatever the reason, carving such an inscription was a significant event, and thus these texts are useful in supplementing official written sources, which are often composed post facto, after events had been resolved.

Shorter commemorative texts can be dated only on stylistic grounds, but longer texts include the date, which is sometimes given not according to the Muslim hegira calendar but in other ways. A commemorative inscription carved by the Buyid Abu Kalījīr at Persepolis in 438/1046, for example, gives the day and the month in the Persian solar calendar (Blair 1932, no. 41). The Qarghanid inscription at the Warche Gorge uses three calendars: the Muslim lunar calendar, the Persian solar calendar and the Syriac Christian calendar, presumably because there were many Nestorian Christians in the region. Foundation inscriptions, particularly on religious buildings, and chronicles are usually dated in the Muslim year to show the piety and official nature of the record, but commemorative texts show us that several calendars were used concurrently during medieval times, probably for agricultural activities, religious festivals and other seasonal events.

A final type of monumental inscription discussed here comprises signatures of architects, builders and other workmen. Inscriptions are particularly important in preserving the names of these people and establishing their careers, for craftsmen are rarely mentioned in traditional histories and chronicles, which usually ignore architecture and builders. The pioneering work in collecting these names was done by L. A. Mayer, whose list of Islamic architects and their works (1956a) contains 318 names compiled from signatures as well as texts. Wilber (1974) added a similar list of more than 100 builders and craftsmen known to have worked in Iran before the Timurid period. Craftsmen’s signatures do not occur regularly on buildings throughout the Islamic lands. They were much more common in Iran and adjacent regions than elsewhere. Only a handful, for example, are known from Mamluk Egypt and Syria, despite the hundreds of buildings that have survived (Meinecke 1932).

A craftsman’s signature can be found in various places. It can be included within the foundation text before the date, but more often it follows the date at the end of the foundation text. The calligrapher ‘Ali Rūsūbī’s signature signed the Mosque of Sāykh Lutfallah in a small vertical band at the end of the foundation inscription on the portal [see Figure 3.15] and again at the ends of the upper and lower bands around the zone of transition in the interior of the building.

A craftsman’s signature can also be written in another inconspicuous place, usually within a panel or cartouche. The builder’s signature on the Mosque of Sāykh Lutfallah, for example, is found on a small panel to the left of the tile mosaic mihrab in the interior. Written in two lines of white nasta’liq letters on a blue ground, it gives the name of the builder, Muhammad Rūsūb b. Ustād Hūsān, the builder of Isfahān (bimānī-yi ʿisfahānī), and the date in numerals 1028/1618-19. The builder Baqīr also signed the large band framing the arches around the interior (Hunzafar 1977, 301–3).

The standard verb used for these signatures is ‘anāl (‘work off’). Other variants ‘anāla (‘made by’) or mimān ‘anāla (‘part of what was made by’) are used. Other verbs include ‘anala (‘made’ or ‘crafted’) and kātaba (‘wrote’). Over time, as building trades became increasingly specialised, a single building might bear several signatures of different types of craftsmen. The Mosque of Sāykh Lutfallah, for example, is signed by the calligrapher and two builders.
The craftsman’s signature with ‘nimāl should be distinguished from the supervisor’s name with ‘ādā yādgh‘ (under the hand[s] of). The latter is often included in a foundation text and indicates the master-of-works who was in charge of payment and accounts. The foundation inscription marking ‘Abd al-Malik’s levelling of a difficult pass near Lake Tiberias, for example, says that it was carried out under the hands of ‘ādā yādgh‘ Yahya b. al-Hukam, who was the caliph’s paternal uncle and the master-of-works (Sharon 1966). The phrase ‘ādā yād was particularly common in caliphal inscriptions from the early Islamic period, whereas craftsmen’s signatures appear more frequently from medieval times onwards.

The verb in a signature is followed by the name of the craftsman, who is sometimes identified by a nisba. This epithet can indicate his profession, The most frequent is al-bāstā‘ (‘builder’), but other examples from the construction trade include al-mi‘īr (‘architect’), al-muhabid (‘engineer’), and al-ustād; and al-ma‘ālā (both ‘master’). The epithet indicated the relative esteem or importance of the different trades, and we have signatures of several smiths (al-ḥusālā) and carpenters (al-nabīlā). The epithets also indicate the increasing specialisation of craftsmen in the later periods.

Like the different words for types of building, these epithets designating trades must be interpreted within context. Their meaning varied over time and space. Furthermore, the same person could bear different epithets on the same building. Muhammad b. Husayn al-Damghani, a craftsman who worked on the tomb complex for Bayazid Bastami in the opening decades of the fourteenth century, for example, is called builder (al-bāstā‘), engineer (al-muhabid) and stucco worker (al-ḥusālā) in different signatures (Riz, s.v. ‘Damghān’).

Some epithets designating a trade were used to show the humility of the worker, particularly in face of the lofty titles of the ruler, and should be read not literally but metaphorically. A good example is the Timurid architect Qavam al-Din Shīrzānī, who worked for Shah Rukh and his wife Gawhar Shād and built the Friday Mosque within the shrine of Imam Riza at Mashhād.

Qavam al-Din is probably the most famous Iranian architect, yet in his signature on a panel below the main inscription ringing the sanctury (see this), he carries the epithet al-tayyib ‘(a worker in mud brick)’, although no mud brick was used in the construction of this elegant building. Qavam al-Din was not always so modest: in his signature on the madrasa at Khurār, he is called ustād (‘master’).

A craftsman’s epithet can also indicate a geographical location, specifically the craftsman’s hometown. The al-Damghani family, comprising Muhammad, his brother Haji and their father Husayn b. Abī Talib, all signed work on the shrine of Bayazid Bastami. Since Haji also signed a mosque in Damghan, it is likely that they were, as their nisba suggests, a family from Damghan that was recruited to work on the shrine at Bastam some 85 km away.

Sometimes, however, even a geographical nisba must be interpreted metaphorically. This is the case with the nisba al-Shīrzānī carried by three architects in the Timurid period, Qavam al-Din, Shīrzānī al-Din and Haji Mahmud (Golombek and Wilber 1986: 143–4). They all built in a similar style at about the same time in the mid-fifteenth century in the same region of eastern Iran and Transoxiana, and their work can be interpreted as a school of architects. But it is historically improbable that they all had come from Shiraz. Rather, the nisba probably indicates that they had been trained in the tradition of Shiraz or were descendants of the original Shirazi builders who had been recruited by Timur several generations earlier.

Craftsmen’s signatures are important social documents. In addition to identifying the work of individual builders, they help us to establish the careers of craftsmen. Like other high-status professions, the building trades were apparently local specialities, often passed down in families over a long period. The tenth-century geographer al-Maqdisi, for example, mentions Biyar, a village to the east of Damghan, as a town of architects where the men were skilled in building and planning. He tells of a man from Biyar who went to Bukhara and built a fine castle in the second
quarter of the tenth century. The town was still producing architects a century later, for Ibrahim b. Idris, the architect who signed the tomb tower built in 920/1029-37 at Miftamidin, some 15 km east of Damghan, carries the nbisb al-Biyari [Blair 1992a, no. 66]. The frequent coincidences of surviving signatures with the rare textual references suggests that other undocumented notices in textual sources may also be accurate and are worthy of note.

Similarly, signatures help us trace the careers of the al-Munif family of architects from Sfax, Tunisia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Mayer 1956a). 'Ayyub al-Munif and Ahmad al-

Munif, both sons of Ibrahim, rebuilt a tower in the southern wall in 1041/1630-1, and Ahmad, 'Umar and 'Abd al-Latif reconstructed a gate in 1056/1646. Their professional esteem is clear, since they are all designated master [mar'ullin]. The family's reputation was widespread, for Ahmad along with a compatriot named al-Darif al-Sifaqi ('from Sfax') restored the qasba of the nearby city of Gafsa in the mid seventeenth century. The family continued to practise as architects for several generations, for Tahir, son of the late Ahmad, along with his brothers and cousins, restored another gate in the city walls of Sfax in 1748.

Regional Studies

Another way of looking at inscriptions in the Islamic lands is to follow regional developments. Artists and patrons drew inspiration from the things around them, and local examples and traditions often served as the main inspirations and models for later work. Furthermore, scholars studying inscriptions have traditionally grouped them geographically, by country, city or region. This was van Berchem's original idea in setting out his magnum opus, the Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Archiacketum (MCIA), and much of the gathering and recording of inscriptions is still done on a geographical basis. The main bibliographic sources on inscriptions, the bibliographies in the article 'Kitsahih' ('Inscriptions') in El 2 and the second supplement to the Creswell bibliography, are also grouped geographically, by country. They are the essential reference tools for finding comprehensive bibliographies of the inscriptions in various areas of the Islamic lands, and they should be consulted to find the broadest range of citations about inscriptions in a particular area.

This chapter has a more critical aim. It picks out a few of the most important articles, volumes or series in order to show the different kinds of information and problems raised by the inscriptions from different regions - here subdivided as the Maghrib, the central Islamic lands, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent - and the different kinds of analysis that have been attempted. It also points to areas where more work is clearly needed.

Maghrib

Inscriptions from the western Islamic world, although less frequent than those from the East and often detached from their original context, were some of the first to be studied. One of the pioneers in the field was Michele Amari. He compiled an inventory of inscriptions on buildings in Sicily. It first appeared as a series of articles in Rivista Sicule in the years 1869-70 and was then printed as a separate volume in 1875. Its fundamental importance is clear from the fact that it was reprinted almost a century later (1971).

Another early work was Levi-Provençal's two-volume monograph on Spanish inscriptions (1933). It was conceived in a spirit close to that of the MCIA, using material collected since the early nineteenth century and additional inscriptions that the author had gathered during three trips to Spain in the 1920s. It is a good example of the value of regional studies and the kinds of social conclusions that can be drawn from them. The inscriptions are arranged geographically by province, then chronologically within the province, but the introductory essay cuts across these categories and summarises Levi-Provençal's findings. Most of the texts come from the major cities of the Iberian peninsula (Almeria, Toledo, Cordova, Granada, Murcia, Badajoz and Seville), although some of the capitious cities of the Parth Kings preserve no inscriptions, and a few inscriptions, such as foundations of castles or epitaphs of minor figures, come from isolated sites. The 127 inscriptions are mainly foundation texts and epitaphs, at the end is a summary list of inscriptions on portable objects, particularly ivory and marble. Following van Berchem, who omitted many of the Ottoman inscriptions from Cairo as poetry,
Lévi-Provençal omitted the poetic inscriptions from the Alhambra palace in Granada, as he considered them less interesting for history, but this omission has been filled by García Gómez’s recent study [1983]. Lévi-Provençal’s 237 inscriptions range in date from the ninth century to just before the Reconquista in 1492. Despite their small number, the inscriptions illuminate the brilliant period of Muslim Spain – from the reign of the Umayyad Abd al-Rahman II (832–52) through the Umayyad and the Almoravids. Two-thirds of the texts are epitaphs, the remaining one-third is divided between foundation inscriptions and inscriptions on portable objects, mainly ivories and marble. The balance changed over time. In the tenth century under the Umayyads, foundation texts outnumbered funeral texts and those on portable objects. This is not surprising, for this was a time of cultural florescence when new mosques and other buildings had to be erected to meet the demands of the new faith. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the proportion of epitaphs increased until almost all the texts were funerary.

Lévi-Provençal’s work is the foundation for continuing work on inscriptions in Spain and adjacent areas. Those from individual provinces are treated in volumes by Oscura Jiménez [1964] on Almería, Rosselló Bordoy [1975] on Balear, and Valderama Martínez [1975] on Tetuán. Cleaning and restoration has brought to light a great deal of new information about the inscriptions of the Alhambra, much of which is published in the Cuadernos de la Alhambra and García Gómez’s 1983 volume on the Arabic poems there. Many of the relevant articles and books are cited in the bibliography to Fernández-Puertas’ useful overview of Spanish Islamic epigraphy [1992].

The material from North Africa is less well published, and most of the work concentrates on charting the development of inscriptions in a particular province or city. A survey of the inscriptions of Algeria, Corpus des inscriptions arabes et turques d’Algérie, was begun at the turn of the twentieth century, with volumes in the provinces of Algiers (Collin 1902) and Constantine (Mercier 1902), but the work was never continued. There are useful notes in van Berchem’s old but still valuable article on Islamic epigraphy in Algeria [1905].

A similar series for Tunisia, Corpus des inscriptions arabes de Tunisie, was undertaken in the 1950s, with different volumes on individual cities. Roy and Poinsot compiled a two-volume work on the inscriptions of Qayrawan [1950–8], and Zirah published three volumes on the inscriptions of Tunis [1971], Gafsa [1965], and Monastir [1963b]. Similar works on the inscriptions from individual cities in Morocco include a series of five articles (the fifth is an index) by Alfred Bel on inscriptions in Fez published in several issues of Journal Asiatique between 1917 and 1919. Rosselló collected the inscriptions from Tlemcen, which were published in a series of articles in Revue Africaine in the 1950s and 1960s. More recently, Desceulin [1991] compiled a volume on the inscriptions of Marrakesh.

There is little synthetic material on the inscriptions of North Africa, and many of the scholars working in that country are unaware of work done elsewhere. This is a pity, for many of the inscriptions are handsome. Good photographs and details of some are published in Hill and Colvin’s [1976] photographic survey of the region. Even the inscriptions on the best-known and well-photographed monuments remain outside the general domain. This is the case, for example, with the inscription on the Gate of the Wayades/ Ouadlas in Rabat (see Figure 5.20) generally considered the finest of the Almohad gates. More work on inscriptions in North Africa would also lend evidence and insights into local history, a clear boon, since, unlike the eastern Islamic lands, there are few local chronicles from the west.

Central Islamic Lands

Of all regions, the rich epigraphic material from the central Islamic lands has been the subject of the most wide-ranging investigations. This is largely because many inscriptions from the central area were well-documented early in the twentieth century, not only in the first volumes of the MCA but also in other seminal studies.
Haji (1979) as well as other individual texts (for example, Sharon 1997, Burjainy 1982). These have been included in the handlist and maps of Arabic inscriptions from Jerusalem prepared by Walls and Abul-Haj (1980). The subject has grown so vast that Sharon (1974) announced preparation of a new corpus of inscriptions from Palestine in three volumes, one on Jerusalem and two on other regions. Similarly, Gaube (1978) compiled a list of some 250 inscriptions from Syria in the later periods.

The material compiled by van Berchem at the beginning of the twentieth century was used by Samuel Flury to conduct his own series of landmark studies on the evolution of epigraphic ornament in these superab columns. Flury’s work on the eleventh-century inscriptions of Deyr al-Bakir appeared both as a book in German (1920) and as a series of three articles in French published in the journal Syria in 1920 and 1921. In another series of articles (1922, 1928, 1936) Flury used the information made available in van Berchem’s volumes of the MCGA on Egypt to trace the extraordinary evolution of floriated Kufic under the Fatimid rule (979–1171). Flury’s work is notable for its visual documentation. His fine drawings of the inscriptions bring out their artistic merits, and his charts showing the different forms of the same letter (see Figure 5.5 below for an example from the eastern Islamic lands) enable the reader to distinguish the imaginative decorative motifs.

Gashman (1957) moved to a more theoretical level, tackling the problem of the origin and early development of floriated Kufic, which he considered the culmination of Arabic script. By comparing examples of lapidary styles on tombstones and buildings as well as manuscript hands, he concluded that there was a gradual development from simple Kufic to foliated script (in which the ends of letters were decorated with half-palmate or leaves) to floriated script (in which flowers grow from the ends, or even the middle, of letters). He showed how the upthrust

al-Din’s campaign. Carole Hillenbrand (1994) showed how the inscriptions, both historical and Koranic, on monuments and buildings erected in Syria in the first half of the twelfth century already reflect the preoccupations with idhād there. One of the key monuments from this region, already published by Savvyet in 1939, is the cenotaph of the Arshad prince of Aleppo, Nur al-Dawla Bakar, one of the most formidable adversaries of the Crusaders, who was killed outside Manbij in 1118/1119.

More recently, other scholars have opened a new line of enquiry, trying to connect the stylistic changes themselves with political ones. Berman (1989, 1997), for example, argued that the Fatimids were the first to create a public text by making writing in Arabic the dominant visual programme on buildings, by suppressing other distracting decoration, and by placing the texts in focal areas. She connected the elaboration of script to Fatimid symbolism and other popular beliefs, suggesting, for example, that the interlaced lamin alii reflects the interior (batan) hidden or esoteric meaning behind the outside (zahr) appearance.

Tabba (1994), following her work and that of Jami’il (1969), argued that the development of floriated Kufic was not a gradual transformation from simple to foliated and then floriated script but a sudden transformation under the Fatimids, who created the script to reaffirm dynastic claims to legitimacy and distinguish their line from competitors. In the same vein, he argued that cursive script was introduced to Syria by the Zangid ruler Nur al-Din for political reasons as part of the Sunni revival in opposition to the heterodox Fatimids, who were associated with floriated Kufic.

These attempts to impute political motivations to stylistic changes, however enticing, are wrong, for they are not grounded in an accurate knowledge of the epigraphic material. They overlook significant specimens, omit material that does not fit with preconceived hypotheses, and disregard events that occurred elsewhere. There are, for example, several ‘public texts’ that pre-date the Fatimid period, such as the one on the Aghlabid Mosque of the Three Doors in Raqqa, erected
This type of reasoning also points up the dangers of arguing from a few prominent examples that have survived, such as the Azhar and Hakim mosques in Cairo, although we know that many more inscriptions were made. Virtually no monumental inscriptions are left from the Abbasid capitals in Iraq, but we cannot take this to mean that the Abbasid did not use inscriptions on their buildings. The Abbasid use of inscriptions is well known from contemporary textual sources, such as the detailed account of the rules and regulations of the ‘Abbasid court entitled Rasūl dār al-khāliq written by the secretary and director of the chancellery at Baghdad, Ḥīlal al-Sabī`. He described, for example, how the ‘Abbasids meticulously inscribed all sorts of textiles that made up the setting for their investiture – everything from banners and the poles that supported them to the leather cushions for the seat of honour – with what the ‘Abbasids considered appropriate slogans, including Koranic verses and the names and titles of the caliph [1977: text pp. 229–30, trans. p. 78].

The case of Diyarbekir shows that styles of script developed gradually and that stylistic changes did not always coincide with dynastic ones. The inscriptions in floriated Kufic there – considered by Plum to be the finest examples of the script, some of the most beautiful inscriptions of their time, and more sophisticated than those done in contemporary Egypt under the Fatimids – were added under the Marwanids and Saljuqs (neither an overtly Shi‘ite, let alone Isma‘ili, dynasty). Cursive was introduced there in the end of the tenth century. The first extant inscription in cursive script at Diyarbekir records the opening of a postern in the rampart near Tower LVII by the ‘Nasir al-dīn al-Hilī al-Dīn in 357/969. This type of sober cursive became a hallmark of inscriptions added under the Ayyubids, who took the city in 1183, but the script was already used at least a year before the Ayyubids conquered the city. Thus, it is clear that epigraphic changes were not the result of dynastic ones. Rather, politicians in the twelfth century were quick to seize upon stylistic changes and could turn epigraphic style to their advantage, transforming a new but already developed script into a dynastic hallmark, as with floriated Kufic under the Fatimids in Egypt or cursive under the Zangids and Ayyubids in Syria.

As with Egypt, van Berchem was one of the pioneers of epigraphic study in Anatolia, and the tradition began by van Berchem and Eflim in their volume of the MCIA on Asia Minor of recording the inscriptions from Anatolia city by city has continued. Several Turkish scholars, such as Uzunçarşılı and Konyali, have compiled the inscriptions from smaller towns, but their studies are often difficult to find outside Turkey and somewhat uncentred in their approach. The French have continued the same urban compilations. The architect-archaeologist Albert Gabriel, for example, gathered much valuable documentation of inscriptions in his journeys through Anatolia in the 1929s, 1939s and 1940s. Sometimes this work was included within his studies of Anatolian buildings, such as his two-volume work on Kayseri, Niğde, Amasya and Tokat (1931–40) or his book on Bursa (1938). Sometimes the material was presented separately, as in Sauvaget’s appendix on Arabic inscriptions in Gabriel’s study (1940) of monuments in eastern Anatolia. The French historian Robert Mantran (1953–6, 1959) catalogued both the Arabic and the Turkish inscriptions from Bursa.

One recent example of this genre is the catalogue of the Ottoman inscriptions of Edirne edited by F. Th. Dikken (1977). The volume presents a critical edition with translations and commentaries of the 176 monumental inscriptions in Arabic script that survive in the town [see Figure 2.5]. Only inscriptions with historical value are included; poems texts, poetry, dates, signatures, inscriptions on portable objects and tombstones are not. The critical readings were verified by on-site surveys in 1969 and 1972. The inscriptions are arranged not by monument, as in the volumes of the MCIA, but by date, with an index of monuments for cross-reference. Such an arrangement emphasises the epigraphic and palaeographic value of the inscriptions over their importance for the history of architecture.

Dikken’s volume is most useful for its record of individual inscriptions, and the brief introduction
only hints at possible broader conclusions. The author notes, for example, that almost all the inscriptions are enclosed in carvings of ten different shapes, each particular to a certain period. Hence, it is sometimes possible to determine the date of an unedited inscription or to demonstrate that an inscription is a later copy of an earlier text. The evolving medallion shapes might well be applied for dating objects in other media, as in Raby’s 1936 study on the forms of medallions used in Ukaj carpets.

The rich data compiled by Diktena could be exploited for many other analyses. One could investigate, for example, urban developments and the changing nature of patronage. Most of the inscriptions from the fifteenth century, for example, record the construction of mosques, whereas public taps (çeznel) and drinking fountains (çafid) were more common in later times. Another subject is linguistic change. The first inscriptions are written in Arabic. Turkish was introduced in the mid-sixteenth century (nos 28 and 29) and quickly became standard, although Arabic was still used occasionally, particularly for mosques, and Persian was used exceptionally on several public taps and tanks (zişhevin). This fits the overall picture known from Anatolia, where Turkish remained a lingua franca longer than did other languages elsewhere.

One of the few essays that attempts to exploit the scattered data from individual cities in Anatolia is Rogers’s 1976 article, in which he used Satışq foundation inscriptions from thirteenth-century Anatolia as a source to illuminate architectural practices in medieval Islamic times. In it, he analysed the four standard components of foundation inscription, the titles of the reigning sultan, the name of the individual patron, and the date. He used the epigraphic evidence to argue that among both founder and the craftsmen who put up his building, there was a staff of officials headed by a Clerk of the Works who took the major architectural responsibility out of the founder’s hands. Another area of recent interest is the Gulf, and Italian scholars have been active in publishing the inscriptions from Muscat and Oman. Baldissera has published several books and articles in Quaderni di studi arabi, a journal published by the University of Venice, on the monuments there, most of which belong to the seventeenth century or later, and is preparing a fuller monograph on the subject.

Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia

Works about the epigraphy of Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia are scattered and diverse. Following the type of work begun by the MCIAC, Blair (1952b) catalogued the seventy-nine earliest inscriptions from the region, up to the year 500/1100, and the introductory essay is one of the few overviews of the epigraphic tradition there. The work, however, was done mainly from published sources; on-site verification was not always possible, and some of the transcriptions are inaccurate.

Most works address Iranian inscriptions by area. The series published by the Iranian government on various cities and provinces, Astab-i mili, often includes inscriptions with the descriptions of individual monuments. Although the texts are not always translated and the readings sometimes bizarre. A much more rigorous study of the inscriptions from the city of Isfahan and its environs is the fat and informative volume by Husein (1957) which not only describes and records the inscriptions building by building but also sets the particular building in its historical context. Drawings and translations of the inscriptions from several sites and objects published in the Survey of Persian Art are published by Ghulam (n.d.), although the text is not critical.

A very few inscriptions from Islamic Iran have also been published in volume IV of the Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum (CII) dealing with Persian inscriptions down to the early Safavid period. Only two publications have appeared to date. Portfolio I of volume II on the province of Khurasan, edited by William Hamarly, contains twenty-four plates from three buildings in Mashhad and Nishapur. Portfolio I of volume VI on Mazandaran, edited by A. D. H. Bivar and E. Yarbakri, contains seventy-two plates from several sites in the eastern part of the province. These

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hard to find and expensive volumes offer superb plates but only listened transcriptions, translations or commentaries of isolated examples.

Inscriptions from several sites in Central Asia are treated in articles in Epigraphica Vostoka, a journal begun in 1927 under the editorialship of the noted Russian epigrapher V.A. Khachkovskaya and devoted to inscriptions found in the former Soviet Union. After a hiatus in the 1970s, publication resumed, reaching volume 34 in 1988. A summary and analysis of the most important articles dealing with Islamic inscriptions in the first eight volumes was made by Grabar (1957) in the journal Arts Orientais, and, beginning with volume 3, English summaries of the Russian articles are included in each volume. Many of the articles deal with coins and other objects in museums, but there are also articles on individual buildings or their furnishings, such as Semenov and Masson (1948) on the Gur-i Mit, Timur’s tomb in Samarqand. There are also several important surveys, such as Khachkovskaya’s 1949 article on the evolution of Kufic script in Central Asia. The articles present information that is not published elsewhere and is often inaccessible to outsiders. Many are informed by the authors’ superb knowledge of Central Asian history, but, like many works of traditional Soviet scholarship, they often suffer from unfamiliarity with work done outside the traditional borders of the Soviet Union and from an unwillingness to make general conclusions or put the inscriptions in a broader context.

Many monumental inscriptions have been recorded in Afghanistan during the second half of the twentieth century, and our knowledge of epigraphic developments during medieval times there is rapidly changing. Probably the most exciting discovery was the monument of Jam (see Figure 15.86), hidden in a remote valley in central Afghanistan (Marjici and Wiet 1950). The intact, three-storey monument is covered with inscriptions, including all 376 words of Chapter 19 of the Koran, Surat Maryam, and a bold band in blue tile gives the name of the patron, the Ghurid sultan Qiyah Chilmam. The monument has been consciously chosen, and analysis of it should shed light on the function of this epigraphic building. Even though much of the building still maintains its epigraphic secrets: the minaret is also said to contain a dated inscription over the doorway, but the inscription has never been published and the date has been read variously as 570/1174 or 580/1189-90.

Other inscribed buildings recently discovered in the region include the small brick tomb known as that of Sultan Khalil or of Baba Hatin 60 km west of Mazur-i Sharif in northern Afghanistan (Melkian-Chirvani 1966; Sourdel-Thomine 1971; Bivar 1977; Schneider 1984). A large mausoleum dated 571/1176 at Shah-i Mashad in Gargistan in north-western Afghanistan (Cardim and Glazier 1957), and the inscriptions of Yahiya b. Zayd at Sar-i Pul (see Figure 4.17) in the province of Turkistan in northern Afghanistan (Bivar 1966, Blair 1975a, no. 75). Elsewhere in Afghanistan, inscriptions have been uncovered beneath later work in well-known buildings. This happened at the Friday Mosque at Herat, where much of the Ghurid work has recently been published, including an elaborate inscription dated 597/1200 uncovered under a Timurid portal in the north-east corner of the mosque (Melkian-Chirvani 1970). Sometimes new discoveries have been made by rereading well-known inscriptions from remote sites. Such is the case with the minaret at Ghazna popularly attributed to Mahmud (r. 988-1030). In one of her earliest and most important articles (1953), Sourdel-Thomine redated the minaret to a century later by correctly reading the name of Mahmud’s successor Bahram Shah (r. 1115-32) spelled out in relief bricks at the top of the lower storey. Similarly, the tomb at Safid Boland in the Farghana Valley of Central Asia (see Figure 3.7) was dated by Cohn-Wiener (1939) to the tenth century on stylistic grounds, but when Nastich and Kochner (1968) read the foundation inscription, they showed that the tomb could be dated a century earlier (r. 953-9/1053). Reletters and the inscription on the building at Zawzan, Blair (1978) confirmed its date in the early thirteenth century and established its function as a mausoleum.

Correctly reading the patron’s name or the date on a building is particularly important for
establishing fixed points in the development of epigraphic styles, a subject that has received considerable attention in the study of epigraphy from the eastern Islamic lands. The choice of this topic is not surprising, as this area was a major centre of artistic creativity in medieval times. As in other regions, the pioneer scholar in studying the varied styles of scripts used in the medieval Iranian world was Samuel Flury. He published superb drawings of the fine foliated Kufic inscriptions on the congregational mosque at Na’im [see Figure 5.33], attributed to the mid-tenth century [Violet and Flury 1921; Flury 1930, Blair 1992a, no. 9], and, working from photographs brought back by Godard, analysed many of the monuments from Ghazna [Flury 1923a].

As in the central Islamic lands, in the eastern Islamic lands floral elements continued to develop until foliated Kufic turned into floriated Kufic in which floral motifs, tendrils and scrolls grow from the ends and even the middle of letters. Fine floriated Kufic is already attested on the portal at Tim dated 365/977 [Blair 1992a, no. 21], and the style blossomed under the Saljuqs. Good examples are found on the early twelfth-century Friday mosque and Malik-i Haydariyya at Qazvin. Soudel-Thomine (1974) recorded and analysed the text of the extraordinary inscriptions there, and her students Bergeot and Kalus (1977) analysed the epigraphic and floral decoration of these inscriptions.

While foliated and floriated decoration are found throughout the Islamic lands, one type of script—interlaced Kufic—is tied more closely to Iran and Central Asia. Again Flury was a pioneer in bringing the script to public attention, with his superb drawing of the interlaced Kufic used on the tomb tower built in the Radkan valley south of Sari for the Buyid ruler Abu Jafar Muhammad and completed in 411/1021. His drawing highlights the exuberant use of interlacing in, above and between single letters and groups, and the tomb tower is often cited as the classic example of interlaced script.

Interlaced script was not confined to buildings in north-eastern Iran. The tomb covers recently discovered at Sinaf [see Figure 14.84] present further examples of how this script was used in monumental inscriptions in the late tenth and eleventh centuries [Lowick 1985]. Interlaced script was also used on slip-painted ceramics [see Figure 1.3] attributed to the Samanid dynasty, who ruled Transoxiana from 819 to 1005. Based on her analysis of the script on these wares, Voller [Goldemberg 1996] traced a formal development, dividing the script into three series based on successive transformations to the letters through natural distortion, internal modification and superimposed ornament.

In addition to formal considerations, the content of the inscription also affected the style, for interlacing interfered with legibility [Blair 1984]. Interlaced Kufic was therefore more popular for pious or Koranic inscriptions than for foundation inscriptions, where it is essential to be able to read the patron’s name. The tomb tower known as the Pir-i Alamdar at Damghan, dated 417/1026-7, shows how various styles of scripts were combined on the same building depending on the context of the text and the technique: the foundation inscription around the exterior in cut brick is much simpler than the Koranic text painted around the interior [Adle and Mehlkian-Chirvani 1972, Blair 1992a, no. 34].

In order to make interlaced script more readable, the interlacing was often removed from the body of the letter and restricted to the upper zone. This type of Kufic with interlaced stems can already be seen in the inscriptions around the minaret at Tirmidh dated 253/1061-2 [Blair 1992a, no. 38]. Eventually the interlacing was removed altogether from the letters below into an independent upper hand, as in the foundation inscription across the south wall of the dome chamber in the mosque at Barujird datable c. 513/1120 [Blair 1994] or on the top of the minaret at Dawlatabad in Afghanistan [see Figure 8.23]. Various types of interlaced Kufic continued to be used in the Mongol period, but were somewhat of an anachronism, as on the tomb tower erected in the first decade of the fourteenth century for the Ilkhanid prince behind the congregational mosque at Bastam [Blair 1983].

5.23 Flury’s chart of the letter shapes used in the inscription on the mosque at Na’im, mid-tenth century.
Assigning dates to particular epigraphic styles used in the eastern Islamic lands is tricky. The problem is particularly acute when dealing with scripts used under the Ghaznavids and Ghurids, and the same monument can be assigned to different centuries on stylistic grounds. One example is the tomb recently discovered 60 km west of Mazar-i-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, Melikum-Chirvani (1668) and Bivar (1977) considered it Ghaznavid, Soudrel-Thomine (1971) Ghurid. Soudrel-Thomine was also one of the principal investigators of the palace at Lashkari Bazar/Bust (Schlumberger and Soudrel-Thomine 1978), assigning the decoration of the main south palace there on stylistic grounds to the late eleventh or twelfth century in opposition to Schlumberger’s dating of the palace on archaeological grounds to the reign of Mahmud. Based on her analysis, Soudrel-Thomine also reassigned various other buildings and monuments in the area, such as the tomb at Sanghab (Soudrel and Soudrel-Thomine 1979) and the cenotaph of Mahmud (Flury 1963, Soudrel-Thomine 1987) to the twelfth century, arguing that much Ghurid architectural decoration, including the inscriptions, was a conscious revival of Ghaznavid work. Soudrel-Thomine’s stylistic analyses, however, are not universally accepted. Allen (1986), for example, challenged her twelfth-century dating of the south palace at Lashkari Bazar, arguing that the archaeology of the site supported Schlumberger’s earlier dating and that Soudrel-Thomine weighted her argument by unfairly choosing all her comparative material from the later date.Revised the date of the south palace at Lashkari Bazar would weaken Soudrel-Thomine’s arguments for dating other monuments to the twelfth century. Obviously a review of all the material working from clearly dated examples is needed to establish a reliable chronology of epigraphic styles in the region.

Indian Subcontinent

There is a long tradition of publishing the rich epigraphic material from the Indian subcontinent. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Archaeological Survey of India established a separate section for epigraphy and began to publish a specialised series, Epigraphia India. This was soon converted into an even more specialised work, Epigraphia Indica: Moslemica (often abbreviated EIM), which was published from 1907 until the partition of India and Pakistan, when its name was changed to Epigraphia Indica: Arabico-Persian Supplement (EIAPS). EIM along with its successor EIAPS is the fundamental work for the study of Islamic inscriptions from the Indian subcontinent. Anything published earlier can be found in the list compiled by Horsley in 1909–10 containing 1,249 pre-EIM inscriptions which date between 589/1193, the year in which Qutb al-Din Aybak conquered Delhi, and 1274/1857. Another major source for the inscriptions of the subcontinent is the Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy (ARIE), published since the late nineteenth century. All of these works are mainly descriptive rather than analytical, but are extraordinarily rich in historical data. Bendre (1944), for example, used the epigraphs published in EIM to set the monuments of India in chronological order, but, as he knew neither Arabic nor Persian, his survey missed some significant points.

The key role played by the Archaeological Survey of India in recording the buildings there means that its members are some of the prominent figures in the field of Indian Islamic epigraphy. The first was Ghulam Yazdani, who was superseded by Ziauddin A. Desai, formerly head of Persian and Arabic epigraphy at the Archaeological Survey of India. The second supplement to the Creswell bibliography (Pearson 1982), for example, records thirty-three articles by him, mainly recording and transcribing individual inscriptions from the subcontinent. Desai has also written several overviews on the problems of Islamic epigraphy in India, such as his essay in the volume on Indian epigraphy edited by Asher and Gai (1985). This volume also contains studies of the inscriptions on individual buildings by Anthony Welch M. C. Joshi, Catherine Asher and Wayne Begley. The vast scope of the subcontinent, not to mention the current religious, ethnic and political divisions there, has given rise to several problems within the overall study of Indian Islamic epigraphy. One is the differing amounts of publication accorded to different areas of the subcontinent, depending in part on accessibility. A second problem is the lack of availability of the publications, for not all materials are always available to all scholars working on a particular area. Works published in India, for example, are not always available in Pakistan, let alone in the West. This means that subsequent studies do not always build on the back of previous work. A further problem is the isolation of Indian Islamic studies: most of the scholars working in the field know the subcontinent (or parts of it) very well, but are less familiar with other areas of the Islamic lands, and they tend to draw conclusions on the basis of only the Indian material without considering the use of similar texts elsewhere.

Inscriptions from several cities and areas in the subcontinent have been published, such as Tirumal (1968) in Ameer, or Desai (1971) in Rajasthan, but the area whose inscriptions are best recorded is Bengal. Dani (1957) published a bibliography of the inscriptions there as an appendix to volume 2 of the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and Shamsul din Ahmed’s Inscriptions of Bengal (1956) included texts and translations of the 214 inscriptions issued by the Muslim rulers of Bengal between 1333 and 1855. In 1999, Abdul Karim published a corpus of 370 inscriptions from Bangladesh and west Bengal, with texts, translations and analysis of historical context as well as supporting photographs and rubbings. Even Karim’s corpus is not complete, and, in reviewing the book, Mehrdad Shokohy (1995) noted that Karim did not have access to the AKIE and listed some sixty other inscriptions, mostly from the Mughal and post-Mughal periods, published there. Shokohy further pointed out that by covering only historical texts, Karim omitted Koranic inscriptions, which are important not only for dating purposes but also for the development of style. Siddiqui’s essay (1995) surveys the distinctive epigraphic style that developed in the region, but he was apparently unaware of (or at least did not refer to) previous works by Dani, Ahmad and Karim.

Another well-researched area of epigraphic study is central India, particularly the imperial Mughal cities of Agra, Delhi and Fatehpur Sikri. Hussain’s volume (1956) on the Koranic inscriptions of Delhi has been used by Anthony Welch for several essays analysing the meaning of the Koranic inscriptions on buildings there, such as two sultanate tombs (1965). The survey which he made with Howard Crane on Tughlaq architecture in the Delhi sultanate (Welch and Crane 1968) also contains a section on religious epigraphy. Nash (1970) has taken up the broader subject of the role of calligraphy in Mughal architecture, although his analysis concentrates more on interpreting the symbolic meaning of the texts rather than on describing their artistic merits. The sourcebook on Fatehpur Sikri compiled by Braid and Lowry (1985) also contains a section on the inscriptions by Z. A. Desai. The building whose inscriptions have received the most work is, not surprisingly, the Taj Mahal (see Figure 2.4). Begley and Desai (1989) compiled and translated the inscriptions on the building as part of an anthology of seventeenth-century Mughal and European documentary sources on the building. In a straightforward historical article (1978), Begley used the inscriptions as a source for the life of the calligrapher Amanat Khan. In another, more speculative article, Begley (1979) used the Koranic inscriptions and other evidence to argue that the Taj Mahal was a symbolic replica of the heavenly Throne of God. One of the most imaginative articles about interpreting Koranic texts, Begley’s work has generated a certain amount of criticism. Some conservative Muslims find his idea distressing or even blasphemous; some Western scholars might criticize its lack of subtlety and dogmatism, for it over looks the multivalent meanings of Koranic texts and the different ways in which they could be interpreted by different audiences.

Epigraphy is particularly useful in documenting the coming of Islam to the Indian subcontinent, a subject of continuing controversy, and inscriptions from some of the oldest Islamic monuments there have elicited ready publication. Studying them also shows some of pitfalls of interpreting
Indian material without considering the broader Islamic context. A good example is provided by the inscriptions on two stone slabs found during the excavations of the mosque at Banbore near Thatta in Sindh province, now in Pakistan. The excavators (Khan 1965) dated one of the slabs to 109/737–8, making the building the earliest mosque in the region and important evidence for the presence of Islam there. The text, however, uses the phrase mova, omr al-mu'minin, a title that did not appear until the mid-eighth century, and the final word in the inscription should probably be read not mu'a ['hundred'] but mu'um [two hundred], making the date 309/824–5. This would put the construction of the mosque closer to that of another mosque recorded in an Arabic–Sanskrit inscription dated 243/857 from the Tochi valley of Waziristan (Quraishi 1935–6; Bosworth 1965).

Another group of inscriptions from medieval Islamic times that have received significant publication are those found at Badreshvar on the Gulf of Kachi in the coastal region of Gujarat. First published by Desai (1965), the inscriptions are also analysed in Shokoshy’s monograph (1988). Blair (1994) noted that al-Sirafi, the epithe

5.24 Beginning of the Kiosque band with Chapter 80 (Sirat al-Fati) on the south side of the gateway to the Tai Mahal at Agra, completed 1057/1647.