Inscriptions on Various Building Types

A third method of dividing the vast corpus of monumental inscriptions that survive from the Islamic lands is to consider the inscriptions by the type of building or construction on which they were written. Whereas a functional typology brought out linguistic differences and a regional division brought out stylistic ones, looking at the inscriptions by building type brings out societal and institutional changes. Mosques, madrasas, and minarets are considered the distinctive types of Islamic buildings, and studying the inscriptions on them can help us follow the development of Islamic society and its institutions. The fourth type of building analysed here, city walls and gates, is not distinct to Islamic civilisation, but is extensively studied as a case study. A similar study might be made of other types of buildings, such as hospitals or fountains, as studying the inscriptions on them can help trace the changing nature of pious and communal life.

Inscriptions on mosques have been treated most thoroughly. Inscriptions were a prominent part of mosque decoration from earliest times, and the Umayyad mosque at Damascus built by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid I c. 715 had an extensive epigraphic programme in blue and gold mosaic. Although destroyed, the text can be reconstructed from medieval descriptions. It included piouss almas, Koranic citations and the foundation inscription with the caliph’s name (Finster 1970).

Mosque inscriptions were almost invariably written in Arabic, presumably because of the sanctity accorded to Arabic as the language in which the Koran was revealed. The mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah erected by Shah ‘Abbas at Isfahan in the early seventeenth century (see Figure 4.19), for example, has an extensive programme of Arabic texts (Hunarfar 1977: 201-204). The band below the dome, signed by the calligrapher ‘Ali Riza ‘Abbasi in 1035/1626-7, contains a Prophetic hadith about the rewards for pious Muslims and ‘Alid traditions about activities in mosques. The band around the walls, signed by Bajir the builder, contains Arabic poems asking the Fourteen Innocent Ones to intercede for Shaykh Lutfallah in the hereafter.

There is no single survey covering the historical and religious inscriptions used in mosques in different places and times throughout the Islamic lands, but Blair compiled a brief survey of mosque inscriptions up to the eleventh century in The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East (1996, vol. 4, pp. 58-60). It shows that foundation inscriptions in mosques are useful historical documents to measure political allegiance, for just as al-Mu'tadid or sermon in the congregational mosque was a sign of authority, so the foundation inscription was a testament to official policy. The inscriptions in the earliest mosques seem to illustrate general or pan Islamic themes, such as God’s glory and greatness, but with the splintering of the Islamic community from the tenth century onwards, the inscriptions became more sectarian in nature. The Fatimids, for example, seem to have chosen verses with key phrases about the Shi’ite da’wa to decorate the mosques in their capital Cairo (Bloom 1987b).

Using the corpus of Koranic inscriptions compiled by Dodd and Khattaballah (1981), Robert Hillenbrand (1986) and Thackston (1994) investigated the Koranic inscriptions used on mosques. The most common is Koran 5:1-8, undoubtedly chosen because it is one of only three Koranic references to God’s mosques (masjid al-‘alā), a special term distinct from any masjid or place of prayer. Other common Koranic citations on mosques include the so-called Throne Verse [2:255] extolling God’s majesty, the Light Verse [2:251] in which God is eloquently described as the light of the heavens and the earth, and verses from the Chapter of Victory, Surat al-Fath [48], about God’s granting a manifest victory. Some Koranic verses became associated with parts of mosques because of individual words referring to specific practices. Verses 17:78-9 about prayer and vigil, for example, are often found on minbars. Another popular verse used to decorate mosques, 2:285, refers to the inviolability of endowments.

From the eleventh century, hadith were inscribed alongside Koranic quotations on mosque furnishings and furniture. Most of the hadith used are not recorded in Wensink’s extensive Concordanse et indices de la tradition musulmane (1938-48), which lists traditions from canonical sources. These other hadith may well have been coined for the occasion to present specific viewpoints and are therefore important evidence for popular belief. They deserve more systematic study.

One of the earliest examples is found on a wooden minbar removed from the mosque at Iskodar in the Farghana Valley of Central Asia and dateable to stylistic grounds to the early eleventh century (Blair 1992, no. 57). The hadith describes the inestimable advantages of guarding the front line, a text suitable for the site on the eastern frontier of Islam. The earliest dated example of a hadith occurs on the minbar that Bakt al-jamali donated in 484/1091 to the sanctuary built to hold the miraculously discovered head of Husayn in Ascalon and later moved to the haram in Hebron (van Berchem 1935, Wort 1952, RCEA 2792). The traditions inscribed there, in which the Prophet declares his two legacies to be the Koran and his family, are a vindication of Shi’ite claims to legitimacy and must have been consciously used as a justification for the shrine. Hadith soon became more popular in decorating mosques and their furnishings. The minbar added to the congregational mosque at Isfahan in Safar 710/July 1310 following Ulujum's conversion to Shi’ism (see Figure 6.35), for example, cites a hadith of 'Ali b. Ali Tabib that whoever frequents a mosque will receive one of eight benedictions (van Berchem 1909, Hunarfar 1977: 116-20). Such a hadith must have been cited specifically to win over the population in this troublesome sectarian city.

An even more pointed example is found in the Shuh Zinda, the cemetery that grew up in old Samarqand around the purported grave of the Prophet’s cousin, Qutham b. ‘Abbas. The door leading from the domed crossing at the north end of the corridor to the mosque adjoining the tomb of Qutham b. ‘Abbas is inscribed with a hadith stating that according to the Prophet, the person most like his appearance and character is Qutham (Shishkin 1970, no. XVII; Golombek and Wilber 1988, no. 21). Inscriptions on madrasas are less well known than those on mosques, although it is often the word used in the foundation inscription that distinguishes the building as a madrasa rather than a mosque. This was the case, for example, with the Ghurid building discovered in 1970 on the banks of the Murghab River in north-west Afghanistam (Casimir and Glätzer 1971). A large building measuring some 40 metres on a side with a central court and iwans, it has a foundation inscription around the portal identifying it as a madrasa endowed by a woman in Ramadan 17/ March-April 1176 (date corrected from the published 1561/1166 in a personal note from the author). The same situation holds for the large madrasa at Zawar, located some 60 km south of Khow in eastern Iran. It was originally thought to be a mosque, but closer examination of its inscriptions yielded the date 1616/June 1218 and the identification as a Hanafi madrasa (Blair 1987b). The inscriptions used on madrasas can also help show us what role the founders envisaged they
Islamic Inscriptions

would play. These institutions were instrumental in the promulgation of Islam, particularly as part of the šibād against the Crusaders in Syria, and many of the inscriptions on examples from Syria and the Levant deal with this subject (see Elsheieff 1952–5; Tabbaa 1966; C. Hillenbrand 1994). Notes and references to the inscriptions on many other madrasas are included in R. Hillenbrand’s article on madrasa architecture in the second edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam. He points out, for example, that many madrasas in Syria included tombs and are often designated as funerary madrasas. The inscriptions referring to Koran recitation underscore the funerary nature of these ensembles, but the foundation texts distinguish the madrasa and the tomb (zahrba) as distinct parts.

Inscriptions show that the two parts of the funerary madrasa continued to be distinct in Mamluk times. This was the case with Qal‘at ‘un’s funerary complex (see Chapter 3) and also with the largest and finest tomb complex in Cairo, the huge one erected by Sultan Hasan in the mid-fourteenth century. The large foundation inscription running around the courtyard uses the word madrasa, while the band around the tomb calls the structure a jāhil (RCEA Egypt 1: 203–4, 1715; RCEA 764, 003–5). Inscriptions also distinguish other parts of the complex, such as the four madrasas for the four schools of law (RCEA 764, 004–10). Sultan Hasan’s madrasa is also decorated with several imposing Koranic inscriptions (see Figure 6.26), which have been analysed at length.

6.25 Stucco mihmāb added to the Friday Mosque in Isfahān in Safar 710/July 1310.

6.26 Beginning of the Koranic inscription with Chapter 48:1–6 around the courtyard of the madrasa of Sultan Hasan in Cairo, completed 764/1362.
by Dodd (Dodd 1969, substantially incorporated as Chapter 4 of Dodd and Khairallah 1984, see also the criticisms by Blair 1984).

Many minarets bear inscriptions, often bands ringing the circular shafts. Van Berchem (MICEA 8, p. 483 and further in Dibaj 1918: 105-16) first addressed the philological problem of the minaret, and Bloom (1969) analyzed how the different words such as mlhulu, sawada, manor or manara reflect the emerging role of the minaret as a symbol of Islam. Erecting minarets became a popular form of piety in medieval Iran, where a group of almost seventy towers were built. Prominent bands encircling the shaft often contain the foundation text, for the patron was anxious to proclaim his work and establish his dominion. This is the case, for example, with the minaret erected by Abu Harb Bakhtiyar in Damghan and Simnan upon his accession as governor in the early eleventh century (Blair 1992, nos. 35, 37; Adle and Melikian-Chirvani 1977, Adle 1975). It was also the case with the minaret erected in 508/1110-9 at Dawlatabad near Balkh in Afghanistan (see Figure 6.29). The broad band at mid-height with tall cursive letters on an arabesque scroll ground gives the name and titles of the patron, Abu Ja’far Muhammad b. ‘Ali, who can be identified as the grandson of Nizam al-Mulk and vizier to the Saljuq sultan Sanjar (Jouredel-Thomine 1953).

Minarets erected in Egypt, particularly in Mamluk times, were also inscribed (Behrens-Abouseid 1987: 27-30, 191-7). While a few texts contain the sponsor’s name, Koranic verses became more popular. Although the verses cited may suit the construction which they adorn (for example, Koran 2:288, a text about pilgrimage, used by a sponsor who was in charge of supplying the kiswa to the Ka’ba), most come from a limited repertory of Koranic texts with generalised meanings [Koran 31:35, 37:90-1, 34:31-8], referring to God as Creator of Heavens and Earth; summoning believers to prayer, or recalling the passage of hours, night to day, darkness to light; and, times of prayer.

These inscription bands were often set at the top of the minaret shaft, but despite their distance they were meant to be read or at least recognised. This was particularly true in earlier periods, when legibility was enhanced by colour. The first method used was glazed tiles, first seen on the Iranian minaret erected at the end of the eleventh century in the congregational mosque at Damghan (Blair 1992, nos. 73; Adle 1987) and in 526/1132 at Sin (Smith 1959). Glazed tile was later replaced by tile mosaic. Minarets of fourteenth-century Iran often have inscriptions bands in tile mosaic set against an overall ground with repeating words executed in barqad’s ‘(builder’s)’ technique in which glazed bricks repeatedly spell out names or phrases against a ground of plain buff brick. The Mamluk considered the Iranian technique of tile mosaic so effective that at the beginning of the fourteenth century the Mamluk sultan al-Nasir Muhammad had a craftsman brought from Tabriz to execute inscriptions in tile mosaic (see Figure 6.28) to decorate the stone minarets on his mosque on the citadel (Meinecke 1976-7).

The desire for legibility is also clear from the position of the inscription. Those on Cairoine minarets, for example, usually have the basmala visible from the street below so that a literate person could read the first few words and identify the Koranic text. This was true even in the fifteenth century when the inscriptions on Cairoine minarets became somewhat stylised and assumed more of a talismanic or ritualised function.

Long bands of beautifully carved inscriptions also adorned the walls and gates of many cities in the Islamic lands, particularly in early and medieval times. The inscriptions are best preserved in areas where stone was the main material of construction, as for example, at Divarbekir (see Figure 5.31) and Cairo (see Figure 6.58). Texts suggest that cities with brick walls, such as Isfahan or Yazd in Iran or Bukhara in Central Asia, also had inscriptions, although the iron gates are often the only parts to survive (Blair 1992, nos. 41, 49). The construction or restoration is often mentioned only in general terms such as ‘this is what was ordered by (waziru annata bil)’, and the inscription alone is insufficient to figure out exactly what work was done. The reason is that the inscription is meant not to record details of construction but
rather to mark political sovereignty. The texts usually include the name of the ruler, the vizier in office at the time, the overseer of accounts, who could be a government official such as a finance officer (‘alimah) or local judge (qadi), and the master builder in charge of the work.

The walls of Diyarbakir present a good example of the typical inscriptions from ‘Abbasid times. The one erected to the right of the northern or Khurat Gate (see Figure 5.21) says that the work, simply designated as ‘it’, was part of what was ordered by the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir billah in 397/1009 (RCEA 892). The text continues on the left side of the gate (RCEA 893) that it was carried out under the supervision of Yahya b. Ishaq al-Janjarasi, the ‘aziz who was in charge of expenditure (al-nafaq), and Ahmad b. Jarml al-Muqtadiri the engineer (mashandan) who was in charge of the work (al-ward al-thabib). Another longer inscription over the gate (RCEA 891 corrected in V, p. 191) adds that the vizier Abu’l-Hasan ‘Ali b. Muhammad, better known as Ibn al-Furat, supervised the project.

These ‘Abbasid inscriptions set the standard, but over time the texts became longer, as the titles of the people involved grew. We can thus use the inscriptions on the walls of Diyarbakir to trace the evolving concept of the city. Van Berchem’s 1910 monograph showed how the inscriptions could be used to document the changing political circumstances. Sauvaget’s additions in Gabriel’s travelogue through eastern Anatolia (1920) collected more inscriptions, making it possible to trace forty-four consecutive reconstructions to the same set of city walls and showing the evolution of the city over seven centuries.

With the increasing divisions of the Islamic polity in the medieval period, inscriptions on city walls came to reflect sectarian differences. The Fatimid inscriptions set up on the walls of Cairo by the Armenian general Badr al-Jamali between 484/1092 and 486/1093 are a good example (MCEGA Egypt 1, nos. 33, 37, 37, 380, Wiet 1914–2, 1961). The inscriptions begin with the invocation to God, the Shi‘ite profession of faith, and the Throne Verse (Kor 2:255) and then report that

the walls were restored by a servant of the caliph al-Mustansir, the commander Badr al-Jamali. The texts set forth the Fatimid adherence to Shi‘ism and allude to contemporary events, such as the famine and crises that brought Badr to power. Wreckily composed with frequent plays on words and allusions, the texts must have been drawn up in the chancellery. The inscriptions are also carefully laid out, so that key phrases lie in prominent positions. The name of the caliph, for example, falls over the top of the arch at the centre of the Bab al-Nasr (see Figure 6.29), so that anyone entering the gate would ride beneath the caliph’s name. Exquisite carving enhanced the effect, and the inscription on the Bab al-Futuh is carved in relief on a long 59-metre band of marble blocks held in place by gilded bronze nails.

6.28 Detail of the tile mosaic inscription with the profession of faith on the north-west minaret erected by al-Nasir Muhammad in his mosque on the citadel in Cairo, 733/1333.

6.29 Bab al-Nasr in Cairo, begun Muharram 489/April-May 1087 (photo S. R. Peterson).
Monumental inscriptions, designed for rhetorical and decorative purposes and executed in a clear sober script, had long been used in the classical world, and the first Islamic dynasty, the Umayyads of Syria, continued the epigraphic traditions of the region by ordering inscriptions in stone and mosaic, among many of the same formulas and styles but substituting Arabic for Latin. This angular monumental script used in early Islamic times is often known as Kufic, as it was once thought to have originated in the Iraqi city of Kufa. Although the derivation from Kufa is unwarranted, the name Kufic is useful in designating this script which is characterised by simple geometric shapes, harmonious proportions and wide spacing. The juxtaposition of horizontal and vertical strokes lends the inscription a strong internal rhythm, which is subtly enhanced by the elongation of such horizontal letters as dal and kaf. Good examples of Kufic script from the early Islamic period are the inscriptions in the name of the Umayyad caliph `Abd al-Malik on milestones (see Figure 3.16) and in the Dome of the Rock (see Figures 4.4, 5.10, 5.11 and 7.30).

Although these early Kufic inscriptions give the impression of being unpointed, they actually use diacritical marks sparingly. Some ten words are pointed in the rock-cut inscription recording the construction of a dam near Ta’il by the Umayyad caliph Mu’awiyah in 56/677-8 (Miles 1948). The dots were added to clarify the reading of names and dates and to distinguish letters in words with two or even three consecutive teeth, as in lam (built at 81 and dal/batahu('strengthen him')). Diacritical strokes are also used on the milestone found at Bab al-Wad [RCEA 15] to distinguish the tooth of the letter dal in the word da’mimiya (‘eight’) in the phrase recording that the milestone was set up to mark the distance of eight miles from Jerusalem. In these cases, then, diacritical marks were added to enhance readability and avoid confusion in significant words.

The inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock suggest that already in early Islamic times diacritical marks were used for other purposes as well. Kessler (1976) recorded ninety-two separate examples of diacritical marks in the mosaic inscriptions there. None of them occurred in the historical part of the text, and only three diacritical marks were used in a single word in the rest of the band running around the inner face of the arcade (see Figures 3.10-11). The eighty-nine others occurred in the band on the inner face of the arcade (see Figure 4.4), which contains a single continuous text with Koranic excerpts and paraphrases and pious phrases extolling God, Muhammad and Islam, denouncing the Trinity, and expounding the view of Jesus as God’s servant and messenger.

Kessler suggested that diacritical marks were used in the inscription on the inner face to enhance the polemic message of the text, but much of the text is similar in content to that on the outer face.

Another, and probably more important, reason for adding diacritical marks to the inscription around the inner face of the arcade in the Dome of the Rock was aesthetic; to highlight the writing. The gold strokes glitter against the blue ground and call attention to the band in the same way that glittering pieces of mother-of-pearl enhance the mosaics below, which depict diadems, pectorals and other jewellery. When the spotlights on the dome are extinguished, the inner inscription sparkles noticeably and would have done so even more before the sixteenth century when Sulyman the Magnificent introduced the present window grilles with their double walls. Diacritical marks were thus added at the Dome of the Rock to increase the aesthetic impact of the text. This example shows that from the earliest Islamic times, the artists who drew up inscriptions were well aware of the artistic possibilities of writing.

The inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock are also important for palaeographic reasons. Kessler noted that both the diacritical marks and the letter shapes used in the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock follow those used in the earliest manuscripts of the Koran. She cited such examples as the pointed beginnings of the letters dal and kaf, the pointed endings of dal and kaf, and the long backward-turning ending of the letter y’. (see Figure 7.50).

7.30 Detail of the mosaic inscription in simple Kufic on the inner face of the octagonal arcade in the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem.
Gate at Diyarbekr (see Figure 5.21). It is difficult to follow this development over the next few centuries in inscriptions on buildings, since few have survived in Mesopotamia, the capital province of the Abbasid caliphate. Luckily we have another source of monumental inscriptions at hand: the tombstones from Egypt. Beginning with the year 174/790, a series of more than 4,000 limestone and marble stelae survive from cemeteries in Aswan and Cairo. The tombstones provide fixed dates for the introduction of such decorative devices as the beveled stem, arc, barb, palmette and rising tail and show that as these ornaments filled the upper zone, the script became more cramped.

In the ninth and tenth centuries, artists in Egypt, the Hijaz and the Western Islamic lands continued to embellish the upper ends of the letters. Foliated script evolved into a floriated one in which flowers, tendrils and scrolls seem to grow from the terminal or medial forms of the letters. Floriated Kufic was in full bloom by the mid-twelfth century, and magnificent bands of floriated Kufic sculpted in stone became a hallmark of the Fatimids, the wealthy and sophisticated rulers of Egypt from 969 to 1171. The band running across the façade of the Qamr Mosque in Cairo (see Figure 7.32), constructed in 310/1125-6, shows how skillfully Fatimid artists sculpted these texts (JECS 10:12).

Sometimes the trend toward decorating the ends of the letters with palmettes, floriation and other devices obscured the readability of the text, which devolved into a decorative pattern. This type of script is called pseudo-Kufic or Rufosque, a term coined by Miles (1964a) from Kufic, the angular script typical of early Islamic times, and arabesque, the unending geometrically scroll typical of most forms of Islamic art from the tenth century. While individual letters in pseudo-Kufic may be recognizable, words are not, and the texts are unreadable. This style of script was popular from the tenth century to the twelfth, and Miles collected many examples from the Byzantine period in Greece. One of the most famous is the Theotokos church (see Figure 7.32) built c. 950 at the monastery of Hosias Loukas in Phocis (A. Grabar 1971).
script was also used on the portable arts, such as a ruby glass bowl with mythological scenes in the treasury of San Marco at Venice (Curtier 1974).

Ettlingenhausen (1976) noticed that one group of inscriptions in pseudo-Kufic is composed of two framing uprights set to the right and left of an arch-like unit. He suggested that this tall-short–tall pattern had evolved from the word *alḥāb*, which was often embellished with a bump between the two *luḥm* or tombstones from ninth-century Egypt. The meaning of the design had been lost, and this simple and pleasing pattern was repeated on a number of buildings and objects where the use of the name of God would have been particularly inappropriate. These include not only Christian monuments, such as the marble cornice of the church at Hosias Loukas, but also other types of Islamic objects, notably ceramics, textiles and glassware.

In the eastern Islamic lands, artists developed another decorative device, interlacing, to meet the same need of filling the upper zone of the inscription. Whereas in the western Islamic lands elaboration of the stems of the letters had led from bevelling to foliation and then to floriation, in the east the tendency toward elongation and distortion of horizontal lines led to internal modifications and superimposed ornament. The use of interlacing developed over the course of the ninth and tenth centuries and was already quite sophisticated by the early eleventh. The most famous example is found on the tomb tower built by the Buyid ruler Abu al-Mu’tadid al-Mahmud at Raykin in the mountains of northern Iran and completed in 1111/1021. Flury’s chart of the letter shapes shows a complex use of knots and plaiting in and around the letter shapes. Such plaiting was particularly suitable for inscriptions in brick.

By the eleventh century, this plethora of decorative devices threatens to obscure the readability of Kufic inscriptions. Symbolic affinities may have superseded communication, and inscriptions were probably recognized visually rather than read literally. The growing complexity and elaboration of the script took place at the same time as the proliferation of small semi-independent dynasties and the rapid expansion of rulers’ titularates so that even petty princes had long strings of flower epithets attached to their names. Designers of monumental inscriptions faced a dilemma: how to reconcile the conflicting demands of the basic unreadability of many highly decorated but unpointed Kufic scripts and the increasing number of titles in any historical inscription.

One solution was to move the decorative devices to the upper zone, so that only the stems of the letters, not their bodies, were knotted. This type of Kufic with interlaced stems developed in the eastern Islamic lands in the eleventh century. One of the earliest examples to survive occurs on the minaret erected at Tirmidh in 425/1035-36, probably to mark the appointment of a new Mamluk governor for the Ghaznavids (Blair 1992a, 80-82). The minaret shaft is encircled by four bands of Kufic with interlaced stems. In the one at the top (see Figure 7.33), the designers have not only plaited the bodies of the individual letters but also added a complementary group of knots in the stems of the upper zone to balance the weight of the letters’ bodies to the lower zone.

Designers soon recognized that they did not have to depend upon the stems of the letters for the interlacing, but could add knots wherever they wanted to create a regular, if arbitrary, knotted pattern in the upper zone. This is the case in the foundation inscription in the dome chamber in the mosque at Barazinj, built by the Saljuq vizier ‘Ez al-Mulk Banyardī in 533/1139 (Blair 1994). The stems of the letters are knotted at regular intervals, and whenever a suitable vertical lacked, an extra knot was inserted. Painting allowed the designer more freedom in creating complex knotted patterns, and the inscription painted around the interior of the mausoleum of Sādāf al-Mulk in Damascus, built in 504/1109-11, has three virtually separate zones: a lower zone with the bodies of the letters, an intermediate zone in which the stems cross to form stars, and an upper zone in which the stems of the letters ends in pairs of half-palmettes (illustrated in Soudai and Soudai 1968: 560).

This type of bordered Kufic, in which an upper zone of decoration balances the lower zone containing the letter bodies, was particularly popular in the eleventh and twelfth centuries when the Ghaznavids and Saljuqs were the major powers in the eastern Islamic lands. The uppermost band with the signature on the minaret erected at Dowlatabad by the Saljuq vizier Sad al-Din in 527/1132-3 (see Figure 7.34), for example, is done in Kufic with an interlaced or plaited border.

Designers in the eastern Islamic lands also recognized that in addition to knots other decorative motifs could be added to the upper part of the inscription band to balance the bodies below. One superb example of such a type of bordered Kufic with floral elements (see Figure 7.34) is the foundation inscription that once graced the madrasa founded by Nizam al-Mulk
at Khargird in eastern Iran and now in the Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran [Blair 1934, nos. 57]. Herzfeld called the inscription the masterpiece of Kufic epigraphy from Iran. The band was made in three sections. The lower third contains the bodies of the letters outlined with a beaded edge. This is balanced by an elaborately carved floral ornament in the upper third. The two are connected by a medial zone in which the stems of the letters are set against a background of floral arabesques. Bordering Kufic thus solves the problem engendered by the increasingly elaborate plated Kufic; it removes the ornament to the upper zone, leaving the letter bodies in the lower zone clear and readable and providing a balanced composition.

In the superb inscription from Khargird, the designer has ingeniously varied the height of the letters to enhance the aesthetic effect. The letters themselves are 11 cm thick, but projects only 7.5 cm from the surface as they are embedded 3.5 cm into the wall. This allows the arabesque to swirl along the background of the middle zone, disappearing behind the stems of the letters and adding an organic element to the stately stems which march rigidly across the band. The inscription is at the same time legible and lively.

The eleventh and twelfth centuries were a time of extraordinary epigraphic creativity in the eastern Islamic lands, as designers vied to create new and ingenious methods of writing out their messages in fancy varieties of Kufic script. One script that survived the longest, probably because it is so effective in brick construction, is popularly known as square Kufic. Just as Kufic is a convenient if erroneous term for the common angular script used in early Islamic times, so square Kufic is a common and convenient term for this script. Herzfeld felt that the script was derived from naskh, so he proposed that it be called square naskh, although he never articulated his exact reasoning. Following him, Myers Bement Smith [1936] adopted the term mas’qilt ['square'] or bannā’ī/’builder’s (technique)’.

The earliest example of square Kufic to survive [see Figure 7.35] occurs on the minaret erected at Ghazna by the Ghurid ruler Mas‘ud III c. 1078 –1106. The cylindrical upper storey of the minaret has disappeared, leaving the lower section with a stellar octagonal plan [Pinder-Wilson 1985]. An inscription in bordered Kufic in the uppermost panels [RCEA 3106] gives the patron’s name, titles and genealogy: (1) Ism-allah al-sahman al-qarib (2) al-sultan al-’o’oom (3) mulik al-USlam ‘alâ al-dawla (4) al-‘ubd al-mas’ud (5) ahzir al-dawla (6) abu naṣir al-mazāfra (7) mowl pilgrim (8) al-muwaffak khâlid ush bâsmâl, al-sultan, king of Islam, ‘Alâ al-Dawla Abu Sa’id Mas’ud b. Zakhrir al-Dawla Abu Harb Mas’ud, the assistant of God’s caliph, the commander of the faithful, may God extend his power’. The second tier of panels above the ground contains another inscription written in square Kufic set on a diagonal. The texts repeat the sultan’s name and titles. The ones illustrated in this detail [see Figure 7.36], for example, contain the words ‘alâ’ al-dawla (on the right) and abu sa’d mas’ud (on the left).

The inscription on the minaret of Mas’ud III was probably one of the first inscriptions in square Kufic to have been designed. The text is difficult to read, as the letters are formed by small pieces of terracotta sandwiched between larger bricks laid vertically in stepped bond. It must have been labour-intensive to design and set out the inscription. The text is also unusual as one of the only examples of an inscription in square Kufic giving historical information. Most contain sacred names or short pious phrases of a generalised nature.

Mas’ud III’s minaret was designed at a time when builders were experimenting with various methods of spelling out inscriptions in square Kufic on baked brick constructions. Another technique is to set the bricks in relief so that the letters of the inscription project from the brick bonding of the structure. This technique was used on the minaret built beside the congregational mosque at Sana in 509/1110–11 [Miles 1965]. Like many of its contemporaries in Iran, the minaret is decorated with bands in which the builders delighted in setting up different bonding patterns that complement and contrast with each other and catch the light in different ways.

7.35 Minaret of Mas’ud III at Ghazna c. 1100 (photo Catherine B. Ashur).