— Part III —

Inscriptions on Portable Objects
Introduction

Like buildings in the Islamic lands, many of the portable objects made there were inscribed. These inscriptions share many features with monumental inscriptions, and they can be discussed under some of the same rubrics used to discuss monumental inscriptions, such as language and types of text. In addition, the demands and restrictions of the individual medium meant that certain kinds of inscriptions were common on a particular kind of object, and the general introduction will therefore be followed by a lengthy description of the inscriptions on a particular medium or type of object. Chapters on the inscriptions on four major media (metalwares, woodwork, ceramics and textiles) are followed by a chapter on the inscriptions on various other minor media (glass, ivory, rock crystal and jade) and one on various types of objects (tombstones, seals, talismans and amulets, and arms and armour). The chapters are arranged in order of importance, beginning with the medium (metalwares) whose inscriptions are best known. In each chapter, a general introduction with basic bibliography is followed by a division into broad chronological groups.

The major sources for learning about inscriptions on portable objects made in the Islamic lands are exhibition catalogues. One of the most comprehensive is the catalogue of the exhibition held at the Hayward Gallery in 1976, *Arts of Islam*. The exhibition comprised more than 600 objects, including many of the masterpieces of Islamic art. The objects are arranged by medium and then by chronology, and the individual entries contain transcriptions of the inscriptions on most pieces.

Other useful catalogues cover the inscriptions on objects from a particular country. These include *Arts de l'Islam des origines à 1700*, with pieces from French national collections exhibited at the Tuileries in 1974; *Masterpieces of Islamic Art in the Hermitage Museum*, with pieces from the Hermitage exhibited in Kwartu in 1990, and Curatola (1991), *Fiditii dell'Islam*, with pieces from Italian collections exhibited in Venice in 1993-4.

Yet other catalogues cover objects from a particular dynasty or region. One of the most important of this group is *Arts of the Mamluks*, for inscriptions were a major decorative feature of Mamluk art and the catalogue records the inscriptions on most of the 128 pieces exhibited. Similarly, Jerrillynn Dodds' catalogue *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain* (1993) records the inscriptions on the masterpieces from that area. Catalogues that cover a particular medium will be discussed in the relevant sections below.

As with monumental inscriptions, Arabic was the major language used for inscriptions on objects made in the Islamic lands. It was the preferred language for foundation texts that give the name of the patron and the date, but, as with some buildings in Iran, some objects made there in Islamic times are inscribed in other languages. Pahlavi was used in a few rare cases, particularly in the early period when local rulers had not converted to Islam. Metalwares produced in the Caspian region during early Islamic times...
consciously aped the forms and techniques of Sassanian times; and some pieces are inscribed in Pahlavi. One example is a set of three silver bowls found in Mazandaran and now in the Iran Bastan Museum in Tehran; they are engraved on the exterior in Pahlavi with the name of a local ruler in the late eighth century, Windad Ohrmazd of the Karesans, and the weight in drachmas (Chamisso 1957).

As with buildings, Persian was introduced in medieval times for use on some objects. The earliest known example of a Persian inscription on an object occurs on a hemispherical bowl with a happy found in 1909 at Persepolis and now in the Hermitage [Masterpieces of Islamic Art 1946, no. 11]. Persian verses inscribed in Kufic around the inner rim refer to the joyful and forbidden pleasures of wine-drinking. The bowl is undated, and, on the style of the harpy, Marschak (1986) attributed it to the ninth or tenth century; the style of the text (Kufic with rising tails) lends weight to the latter.

Persian verses became standard decoration on many other types of art made in Iran from the twelfth century onwards. Persian verses are a hallmark of luxury ceramics, particularly lustre and enameled wares, of which dated examples survive from the 1375/1379 onwards. Many texts have been read and recorded by Bahrami [1937, 1949] and Ghouchani [1958, 1986, 1992]. Some verses were taken from well-known poets, others were composed for the occasion. The poems generally deal with the agonies of love, and, although not necessarily of the highest literary quality, they are important evidence for popular taste in medieval times.

Persian verses were also used on textiles. The intricacies of weaving made it difficult, if not impossible, to incorporate a long text while weaving on a loom, but textile weavers overcame the difficulty by using another technique, resist dying. A silk dated to the late twelfth century in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (no. 15.815), for example, has a Persian quatrains [Minovi 1937]. Composed for the occasion, the verse is written in the first person as though the textile were speaking. It extols the beauty of the silk, comparing it to the sun in a garden. The final hemistich gives the name of the workshop, that of Amirak the dyer.

Persian foundation inscriptions appear on a few dated metalwares made in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries in Khurasan, the north-eastern province of Iran. The most famous example is the Bobrinsky bucket [see Figure 9.30], which has a Persian inscription around the rim giving the details of its commission and manufacture in Muharram 559/December 1165 [Masterpieces of Islamic Art 1946, no. 50]. Similar ly, an elaborately aquamanile in the shape of a zebu with a sucking calf and a lion attacking her back in the Hermitage [ibid., no. 59] has a Persian foundation text around its neck and head with the date Muharram 563/August-September 1170. In both cases, the texts contain many Arabic words, phrases and even constructions.

These metalwares from Khurasan are exceptional, and in most cases we can distinguish, as we could with monumental inscriptions, between foundation inscriptions in Arabic and poetic texts in Persian. A good example is the well-known lustre plate in the Freer Gallery (see Figure 8.45). The long foundation inscription around the rim giving the name and titles of the patron, the date Jamadi II 607/November 1210, and the signature of the artist is in Arabic, while the verses on the interior and exterior of the sides are a combination of Persian and Arabic poetry.

Persian poetry became increasingly popular on objects from the fifteenth century onwards. The best known are metalwares produced under the Timurids, and Komoroff has devoted several studies to their inscriptions. The Persian verses were drawn from a wide repertory of classical poets, such as Daqiqi, Fordwisi, Sa'di and Hafiz, and of contemporary Khurasani poets, such as Qasim al-Anwar, Jamii and Sa'di. The texts, usually well written and accurate, are some of the earliest records of contemporary poets. The texts also refer to the vessels on which they are inscribed. Inlaid jars, for example, were inscribed with verses about a mahdith ["taj", suggesting their use as wine vessels. The inscriptions are thus important sources for contemporary terminology and function, and Melikian-Chirvani [1982b]. Annex II has compiled a list of the words used for these objects.

These types of Persian verses continue to decorate lampstands and many other metalwares made under the Safavids. The verses on lampstands often contain the well-known image of a moth seeking a candle, a mystical metaphor for the beloved seeking God. A lampstand in the Hermitage dated 587/1197-80 [Masterpieces of Islamic Art 1946, no. 87], for example, has verses in this vein by Karimi Turshizi, Sa'di and Hayrati Tuni as well as a quatrain by Ahli Shirazi referring to the object's function as a chahght ["lamp"].

Persian love poetry of the sort used on medieval luxury ceramics was also inscribed on some ceramics made in the later period. An underglaze-painted dish in the Hermitage [ibid., no. 76] Blair and Bloom 1994, Plate 90] has a Persian verse around the rim about the futility of love. It is followed by a sentence in Persian with a foundation inscription, saying that this plate [tahaf] was made at Mashhadi in 879/1444-5. A similar verse about love is inscribed around a dish in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Ferrier 1989: 587) decorated with a pair of fish painted in black under a green glaze.

Many of these verses remain unread or unpublished. A good example is a damaged blue- and-white pilgrim flask in the V&A (Rogers 1985, no. 112). The date written above the foot in Arabic, 'in the months of the year 911 (1515-6), is well known, and the piece is often cited as the earliest dated Safavid ceramic, but the Persian verses around the rim are unpublished. Collecting and recording these verses would be useful in documenting popular taste. Such a study might also help in assigning workshops, dates and provenance, a problematic area in later Persian ceramics. The taste for poetry in the vernacular passed to the Ottoman court, and luxury objects made there were inscribed with both Persian and
Turkish verses. The general trends are clear from several objects made for Sultan Saluyan and included in a recent travelling exhibition. (The inscriptions are treated more fully in the catalogue from the London venue by Rogers and Ward [1988].) A metal mirror with jade handle and gilding and bejewelled decoration, for example, is decorated with Persian verses in nasta‘iliq script comparing the mirror to the haughty beauty who revishes the soul of whoever looks upon it. In contrast, an ivory mirror has a carved border with three couples of Ottoman verse and a dedication to Saluyan by the craftsman Chani and the date 963/1554. Arabic was retained for formal foundation inscriptions, and Saluyan’s sword has a long inscription along the blade in chu’dh with the sultan’s name and titles and the date 923/1517-18. The blade’s spine is inscribed in nasta‘iliq with Persian verses and the signature of the craftsman, Ahmed Tekeli.

Different styles of script were often used on the same Ottoman piece to distinguish the various languages. Persian verses are generally written in nasta‘iliq in cartouches, on a tile panel with a verse recording the completion of the beledere (tehminet) in the sultan’s bath in 962/1554-5. Square Kufic was reserved for Kufic passages and pious phrases, as on a wooden Koran box or a silk mulberry shirt. The inscriptions sometimes show the hand of a skilled calligrapher, but on many ceramics the inscriptions are awkwardly composed and executed. Rogers and Ward [1988] dubbed one script ‘naive naskhi’.

Like buildings, many luxury objects made in the Islamic lands contain foundation inscriptions announcing who commissioned them. These inscriptions follow the same form as foundation inscriptions on buildings, with the same five basic elements (invocation, verb, object, name of the patron, date). Foundation inscriptions on royal or courtly objects sometimes include the name of the supervisor as well. Since space was usually at a premium, shortened forms were often used. The invocation is frequently reduced to bism allah (‘in the name of God’), the date is usually in numerals, and only the most important titles are given. Finding the invocation is particularly useful in dealing with inscriptions on objects. It tells which way the object was meant to be seen. On a circular text, it also helps us to find the date, which is often at the end of the text.

A fair example of a foundation text on an object is the one inscribed around the base of the lid on the Gerona casket (see Figure 8.2). The inscription begins at the right side of front of the casket with the shortened basmala and then invokes blessings on the reigning caliph al-Hakam, the Umayyad caliph of Spain (r. 961-76). The foundation text proper begins on the back. As with buildings, the verb is often some form of anma (‘ordered’). In this case, the form is inmamun anma bi-amalihi (‘of the things that he ordered to be made’), and the object is identified only by the pronominal ‘it’.

The text continues with the name of the recipient, his son Hisham, who is identified by his kunya or patronymic Abu Walid and by his caliphal title wali ‘abd al-amir ‘al-‘amr ‘ala minat (‘heir apparent to the Commander of the Faithful’). The inscription continues that work was accomplished (tamall) under the direction of Jawdar. The phrase ala yad (literally ‘under the hands of’) identifies the supervisor, not the artist, and Jawdar is known from texts as the chief enam of the caliphal household. He must have been in charge of the royal workshop and have supervised the distribution of precious materials, such as the silver and gold used to decorate this box. In this case, the foundation inscription does not contain a date, but it does allow us to date the box precisely to eight months of the year 976, since Hisham was only declared heir-apparent in 5 February and succeeded his father on 1 October of the same year.

As with buildings, artists’ signatures can accompany foundation texts, coming either in the middle of the foundation text before the date or right after the foundation text. Signatures can also occur in another inconspicuous place. On bowls, for example, they are often found on the plain outside or under the foot. On a box, they can come between the straps or under the clasp, as on the Gerona casket (see Figure 8.46). The inconspicuous location was deliberately chosen to show the humility of the artist, particularly in contrast to the lofty patron or recipient, whose name is usually inscribed earlier or in a more prominent place and often written in a different script. Titles show the same juxtaposition, and the artist is typically identified as a ‘low slave’ in contrast to his lofty patron. This identification should often be taken metaphorically: these workers were not necessarily slaves and were often quite well-known individuals who worked in high-status professions.

Signatures on objects are typically introduced by the word ‘amal (‘work of’). The verb sana‘ was used for higher-status or more meticulous work. Artists who signed their names with ‘amal on metal bowls and other objects, for example, used ‘amal on astrolabes and other scientific instruments. From medieval times, when objects became more elaborate and crafts more hierarchically organised, different verbs could indicate different parts of the process. This was true particularly for metalworkers, woodwork and ceramics. The signatures found on these pieces are often the best source of information about people and craftsmen in medieval times, for this subject is generally not mentioned in written texts.

The Gerona casket again provides a good example of a standard signature from medieval Islamic times. The names of the artisans Badi and Tarif are incised on the underside of the clasp (see Figure 8.46), following the standard verb ‘amal (‘work of’). Technique reinforces the lesser status of the artisans, for the signature is incised, a faster and cheaper technique than the relief used in the broad band around the base of the lid naming the reigning caliph al-Hakam, his son Hisham and the supervisor Jawdar. Badi and Tarif are identified as ‘his [the caliph’s] servants’, meaning that they worked in the caliphal workshop. Like the placement and the words used, the style of script point out the distinction between the foundation text and the signature: the band around the rim is done in a larger Kufic.
often associated with monumental inscriptions, while the signature of the artisans is incised in a script that resembles handwriting.

Some objects are also inscribed with endowment inscriptions. This was the case, for example, with minbars, lampstands and other large furnishings made for the holy shrines in Mecca and Medina and other smaller shrines. These pieces were expensive gifts, and the patron wanted to have his generosity recorded. In the early period, these inscriptions are generally in Arabic, but by the fourteenth century Persian had come to be used for endowment texts. Melikian-Chirvani (1967) has published several Persian texts on candeliars and lampstands. A tall oil lamp in an American private collection, for example, is inscribed with Arabic and Persian verses alluding to God as the light of the heavens (Koran 24:35) and an endowment text in Persian stating that it was given by the Qaj Qoyunlu sultan Umur Hasan (r. 1435-78) to the tomb of a mystic known as Bayram Baba Veli. As with foundation inscriptions, the names and titles in these endowment inscriptions can be helpful in dating works of art.

These large endowment inscriptions are the same size as foundation inscriptions and are well integrated into the overall decoration of the object. Clearly planned in advance, these inscriptions show that the objects were commissioned with a specific purpose in mind. These endowment inscriptions should be distinguished from other smaller inscriptions, often scratched into a plain area on the object, saying that it was endowed to a certain place. Clearly added after an object was made, this type of smaller inscription provides a secure terminus ad quem, or date by which point an object must have been made. Such dates are particularly useful in dealing with objects that cannot be readily dated on stylistic or typological grounds.

This is the case, for example, with the large corpus of European swords with Arabic inscriptions that are preserved in the arsenal of Alexandria and later in the Ottoman arsenal of St. Irene in Istanbul. The Arabic inscriptions are a cornerstone in establishing a chronological typology.

Even if these endowment texts were added at a much later date and cannot be taken to show the provenance or date of an object, nevertheless these small texts can be used for other purposes. This is the case, for example, with the Chinese porcelains that the Safavid shah ‘Abbasi donated to the shrine at Ardabil in 1608. The 1,463 pieces comprise celadons, white wares and blue-and-white wares and almost all of them have an endowment text engraved into the glaze in a rectangular cartouche. The text says that ‘Abbasi, slave of the shah of Sovereign power [Ali, the first Shi’ite imam] endowed [θiθiθ to the threshold of Shah Safi (bandayi shah-i wiliya) ‘Abbasi waqf bar āštāna-yi shah safi namid].’ These endowment texts are not helpful in establishing the provenance or date of the porcelains, which were all made in China but range in date from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth. The texts are, however, useful historical documents. In the case of the porcelains, for example, they are important evidence for royal Iranian taste in the early seventeenth century, showing what imported wares were available and what Persian royalty of the time deemed fancy. The words used in the endowment inscription also provide clues as to why ‘Abbasi made the expensive donation, for the text associates Shah ‘Abbasi with the dynasty’s eponym Shah Safi and with ‘Ali, who is lauded as the shah-i wiliya.

The foundation or endowment inscriptions on the finest wares show that they were made for or endowed by a specific patron, but such inscriptions are not found on objects made for the open market. Instead, these more ordinary wares were often decorated with short repeating texts of the type known in Arabic as dārās, a prayer formula invoking God’s blessing. These prayers may have evolved from the pious invocations consistently appended to the names of caliphs, high officials and governors on glass weights and measure stamps made in Egypt (Balog 1977). Examples include asbuhu allah (‘may God set him in the way of righteousness’), abuquhu allah (‘may God grant him long life’) and akrumahu allah (‘may God honour him’). These invocations functioned like honorifics (alabab), and a particular formula remained with a person until he was awarded a new one with higher prestige.

The act of offering supplicatory or petitionary prayers is one of the main manifestations of Muslim piety. Although these prayers can be in any language, those in Arabic, being hallowed by practice, are usually preferred. The importance of these prayer formulas is already attested in the Koran. The first sura (al-Fatiha) counts as a dārās, and many other verses contain supplicatory prayers, often beginning ‘Our Lord.’ These prayers were also included in the traditions ascribed to the Prophet and the Imams and became particularly popular with Sufis. In folk religion, these formulas were often invoked to secure protection against various evils, especially the evil eye and the malevolent jinn, and the act of writing such charms on amulets has been common for centuries in Iran. Such charms, spells and magical incantations were already used in ancient Iran, and with the Muslim conquest the Koran replaced Zoroastrian texts as the chief source of the charms and spells.

Metalwares preserve our earliest evidence for the growing popularity of dārās in medieval times. One of the earliest dated examples is an inlaid
bronze aquamanile in the form of a bird in the collection of the Hermitage (see Figure 8.47). A band in simple Kufic around the bird’s neck opens with the invocation to God [‘in the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate’] and the supplicatory prayer, ‘Blessing from God’ (baraka min allāh). The text then records that the piece was made by Suyyaman at a certain city, fortunately unreadable, in the year 790/796-7. Another aquamanile in the shape of a bird in the Monastery of St Catherine at Sinai (Baer 1983, Fig. 167) has a similar-style inscription across its breast invoking God’s blessings to its owner (baraka min allāh bi-ṣabīḥah). The same type of prayer formulas occur on other undated bronzes ascribed to Iran in the first centuries of the Islamic period. A bronze oil lamp attributed to the ninth-century (ibid., Fig. 168), for example, is engraved in simple Kufic with the same blessing to its owner.

The number of words in these supplicatory prayers was soon multiplied. Several examples on medieval Iranian metalwares are recorded and discussed in Melikian-Chirvani’s catalogue (1983b) of the bronzes in the V&A. A bronze lobed cup attributed to tenth-century Khorasan in the Herat Museum, for example, is inscribed around the rim in flourished Kufic with five or six words: baraka wa yumm wa surat wa sa’āda wa ni’ma wa ḍalālah (‘blessing and good fortune and joy and felicity and benevolence and [good luck]’). A bronze tripod stand in the Kabul Museum, recovered from a cache at Maimana east of Herat in Khorasan and attributed to the tenth or eleventh century, is inscribed with similar blessings in plated and flourished Kufic in several places, including the ribs of domed base, the cylindrical element that tops the base, the baluster and the tray. The longest and most complete text on the tray contains eight requests (‘Blessing, good fortune, joy, felicity, well-being, benevolence, victory and mercy’) for its owner (baraka wa yumm wa surat wa sa’āda wa salama wa ni’ma wa āma wa sa’āda wa ni’ma bi-ṣabīḥah). These words of petition are often split, with extra letters, particularly ‘īns and ‘āla, inserted between or among words. Melikian-Chirvani (1983b) has read mystical esoteric significance into these extra letters, but his interpretation is not generally accepted (see, for example, the devastating comments by Terry Allen 1985), and the explanation of an illogical or careless craftsman truncating or blindly repeating a text is far more plausible.

These supplicatory prayers were often invoked for an anonymous owner (bi-ṣabīḥah), but the name of a specific person could be included after the proposition bi-l’(for). A silver cup in the Hermitage (Masterpieces of Islamic Art 1905, pl. 11), attributed to eastern Iran in the eleventh century, for example, invokes good fortune, blessing, joy, felicity, well-being, generosity, beneficence and happiness on its owner [al-yumm wa-l-baraka wa-l-surah wa-l-sa’āda wa-l-salama wa-l-ki’tima wa-l-n‘ima wa-l-ṣabīḥah bi-ṣabīḥah]. A comparable silver bottle, found near Toholok on the east side of the Urals and also in the Hermitage (van Berchem 1905b), is inscribed with similar blessings around its sides. A larger inscription around the flat shoulders continues that the blessings are for Abu ‘Ali Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Shadhan. He served as vizier for the Saljuq rulers Chaghri Beg and Alp Arslan and preceded the well-known vizier Nizam al-Mulk.

Over time, the supplicatory prayers inscribed on metalwares became increasingly elaborate. The script became more highly decorated, and the prayers were often written in plated and flourished Kufic set against a scroll ground. The list of requests grew steadily until a single inscription could include as many as twenty-five or thirty nouns, often arranged in rhyming pairs. Adjectives were also added. A good example is found on the well-known silver wine service comprising three bowls, two small dishes, a large dish, a ewer, two jars, a bottle and a cup, inscribed with blessings for the amir Abu’l-‘Abbas Valjin (RCMA 2114-60, Arts of Islam 1976, nos. 158-9, Melikian-Chirvani 1983b). Discovered in Iran between the First and Second World Wars, the set can be attributed to Iran in the early eleventh century based on the style of script and the amir’s caliphal title, ‘chief of the Commander of the Faithful’. The inscription on the large dish invokes at least eleven requests, many with corresponding adjectives: God’s entire blessing, abundant felicity, complete well-being, unimpair’d health, enduring beneficence, growing good luck, waxing influence, happiness, power, good fortune, joy... to the amir ‘[baraka min allâh tâmmâ wa sa‘âda aṣâfeghâ wa salâmâ shâmî’Jud wa ‘ṣi‘yâ sâ‘a wa ni‘ma baqiyâ wa dâwâ nâmîyiyyâ wa imra tâ‘l‘a wa ‘ṛiṣtâ wa ‘lizâ wa yumm wa surah [bi-ṣâhirî ‘Abd Allâh]. These prayer formulas with repeated requests, often with mistakes or extra letters, became the standard text inscribed on metalwares made in the greater Iranian world in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Their short, repetitive texts also made them suitable for decorating textiles (Blair 1997b). Despite their profusion, the formulas have never been studied systematically. There was an evolution from shorter, simpler texts to longer, more complicated ones, and the words used also varied over time and space. Thus they offer important evidence for the evolution of popular taste. These texts may nay also reflect regional variations, and thus they may be significant indicators of regional styles and a helpful tool for establishing attributions. A survey of the prayer formulas inscribed on objects made in medieval Islamic times is clearly needed.
Metalwares

There is no overall survey of the inscriptions on metalwares. The best introduction to the subject is the section on epigraphic decoration in Baer's survey of early Islamic metalwork (1983: 187-217). It is a brief but balanced discussion of style and content on pieces manufactured up to the mid-fourteenth century. Some eighty of the finest Islamic metalwares, again mainly from the earlier periods, were published in the *Arts of Islam* exhibition held at the Hayward Gallery in 1976. The entries in the catalogue include a transcription and translation of the inscriptions on each piece, although there is no overall essay in which to fit the individual entries.

Most studies are devoted to the inscriptions on metalwork from a particular period or region. By far the area best covered is Iran, due in part to the pioneering studies by Ivanov since the 1960s. His 1967 article on an Iranian brass tray of the fourteenth century in *Epigraphika Vostochnaia* is a landmark in using non-historical inscriptions (in this case, the Persian words used to invoke blessings on the owner) to date and attribute an object, and his 1966 article in *Soobshchennia Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha* attempts to localize the production of a type of object (in this case, two candlesticks) based on the identification of the verses in the inscriptions (in this case, by the poet Salih). These two articles establish a methodology which has been followed by many others in the field, including Melikian-Chirvani and Komaroff.

Since Ivanov publishes in Russian, however, his work is sometimes overlooked, and more people are familiar with the prolific contributions of Melikian-Chirvani, including his short essay about inscriptions on Iranian metalwares (1976: 155-176) and his catalogue of inscribed bronzes and brasses from the Persian-speaking world in the Victoria and Albert Museum (1985b). The catalogue contains extensive work on inscriptions, not only on the pieces there but on comparative material as well. Since Melikian-Chirvani uses a broad definition for medieval Iran and attributes an unusually large number of pieces to him, his work should also be consulted by those interested in metalwares from other parts of the Islamic lands. Komaroff has written extensively on the inscriptions on Timurid wares, and Allan's catalogue (1982b) of the wares excavated at Nishapur presents inscriptions from simpler, more quotidian wares from an earlier period.

Inscriptions on metalwares from other areas, particularly the central Arab lands, were studied by D. S. Rice. Unfortunately, he died before completing his book on the subject, so the reader must delve among his many articles, especially the series entitled 'Studies in Islamic Metalwork' that appeared in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental (and African) Studies* in the 1970s. He also wrote a group of articles and monographs on metalworks associated with Mosul (1949, 1951, 1957a) and another group on Mamluk metalwares, particularly the so-called Baptisiterio de St Louis (see Figure 4.48), the large inlaid basin in the Louvre that is perhaps the most famous piece of Islamic metalware (1940, 1953b, 1957b). In addition to the information in these studies, Rice's work is notable for his superb drawings of the pieces and their inscriptions.

Other places to seek information on inscribed metalwares are catalogues that record the texts on particular pieces. One of the first was Wiet's volume *Objets en Cuivre* (1932), which lists 566 copper and bronze objects with historical or other significant inscriptions in the Islamic Museum in Cairo. A pioneering work in the field, it is somewhat outdated and the inscriptions should be treated cautiously. Other good catalogues of major public collections include the 1955 catalogue of metalwork in the Pecor Gallery by Attilio Chesi and Bett (1956) and the 1990 catalogue of the travelling exhibition from the Hermitage, Masterpieces of Islamic Art in the Hermitage Museum.

Good catalogues of private collections include Pélavin (1976) on the Reiter collection and Allan (1982a, 1986) on the Nishad al-Said and Aron collections. Metalwork was one of the major arts under the Mamluk dynasty of Egypt and Syria, and Attilio Chesi's catalogue of the travelling exhibition on Mamluk art, *Renaissance of Islam*, includes the inscriptions on the thirty-four masterpieces exhibited there. Most catalogues illustrate the finest wares, and so learning about the inscriptions on metalwares used by ordinary folk in daily life is difficult.

Several recent essays deal with the inscriptions on a particular type of metalware. Sourdel-Thomine's 1971 essay on keys and locks to the Ka'ba is a good example of the kinds of information that can be derived from such a study. She divided the twenty-one examples from the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul into three chronological periods, dating from the late 'Abbasid, early Mamluk and high Ottoman periods. By looking at the objects as a group, she was able to trace the evolution of ritual, politics and imperial aspirations. She also found that certain Koranic verses referring to Mecca, especially 3:100-1 about God's house, were standard on these keys, thereby showing that other keys with similar verses might well have been made for the same purpose.
Other significant essays on a particular type of metalware include Molaviyan Cherifian’s (1986b) article on inlaid bowls from Iran and his 1992–3 article on beak’s bowls (Persian kashkaf). Using inscriptions on the pieces and evidence from poetry and historical texts, he traced the evolution of these types of objects over the centuries. Like much of his work on metalwares, these articles are extremely informative for the reading of inscriptions and texts, even if some of his conclusions remain unsubstantiated.

The most frequent type of text written on metalwares from the Islamic lands contains blessings, good wishes and prayers, usually invoked on an anonymous owner (il-adhibbi). There are relatively few surveys of these texts, although analysing the changing words might well help us to distinguish metalwares from different regions or periods. Eugen Müntzwoch compiled a preliminary list based on pieces in Sarre’s collection (Sarre 1906: 67–83), and Beer (1958: 209–12) gives a general summary. The most common word was bazaka (‘blessing’), which appears on the earliest pieces. Other popular terms introduced in the middle period were al-‘umran (‘good fortune’) and ‘izz wa isqab (‘glory and prosperity’). The list of attributes grew steadily over time, until a single beneficent inscription could include as many as twenty-five or thirty attributes, often arranged in rhyming pairs.

Metal objects, particularly those made of precious metals or with inlay, were expensive and prized possessions, and the owner’s name was often added after the piece was made. One of the earliest examples is a set of three silver bowls and two forks found in Mazandaran and now in the Iran Bastan Museum in Tehran (Chishman 1997). Inscriptions engraved in Pahlavi on the crosses decorating the exterior of the bowls give the name of a local ruler in the late eighth century, Windad Ommanz of the Karzas, and the weight in drachms. Similarly, a large hemispherical silver bowl decorated with a harpy found in Perse in 1909 and now in the Hermitage (Masterpieces of Islamic Art 1968, no. 29; Marschak 1986, figs 114–15) has a short inscription in simple Kufic on the exterior saying that the bowl was for [lit] the treasurer [al-hizaz] Khumurtakhin, a name

home by several Turkish military slaves serving in various medieval courts.

In both these cases, the owner’s name is independent of the rest of the decoration, but, beginning in the late tenth century, patrons’ names were included as part of the beneficent inscription so that the blessings inscribed on metalwares were invoked upon specific individuals. Identifying these people can help to date groups of metalwares, as scholars have paid a great deal of attention to these pieces and the names on them. They are often the fanciest objects, made of precious metals or having extensive inlay, and were specific commissions, as distinct from the majority of anonymous pieces which may have been made for the market. The people named on the earliest pieces are usually rulers or court officials, but from the twelfth century the range of patrons who ordered fine metalwares expanded to include merchants, religious leaders and tradesmen. The earlier form of Il ‘il‘ was also replaced by bi-

ware [‘intended for’ or ‘on the order of’], used on a bronze lion in Berlin attributed to twelfth-century Egypt (Museum für Islamische Kunst 1971, no. 345).

The desire to have one’s name inscribed on a metal object reached its apogee under the Maniloks, rulers of Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517, when the inscription giving the patron’s names and titles, usually arranged in alternating cartouches and rounds or radiating bands, was the major and sometimes the sole form of decoration. Having one’s name inscribed in glittering letters on elaborately decorated metalwares became a significant sign of rank, and these fancy objects were often presented as gifts to the court.

Given the importance of having one’s name in lights, as it were, it is all the more curious that we are unable to identify some of the patrons named on the most splendid wares, despite the plethora of texts about the Manilok period. A good example is a stunning inlaid mirror in the Topkapi Museum (see Figure 9.40), made by the master Muhammad al-Waziiri and decorated with signs of the zodiac (RCEA 6105; Kokologi 1987, no. 199). The band in the centre gives the patron’s name, ‘Ala’ al-Din, and the large radial inscription identifies him as a high Manilok official [al-panab al‘al]. Despite his lengthy title, he has not yet been identified with any known historical figure. Patrons’ names on these magnificent Manilok metalwares were not only written in words in dedicatory inscriptions but also represented by emblems or signs of office. The first emblems were pictorial, with polo-sticks designating a polo-

master, a pen-case a secretary, and the like. The first example to survive is a cup on a candlestick made c. 1350 for the amir Kibiugha, who was cup-bearer to the sultan al-Nasir Muhammad [Arts of Islam, 1976 no. 213; Ahd 1981, no. 16]. A four-petalled rosette served as the emblem of the Basults, rulers of the Yemen contemporary with the Maniloks. From the mid-fourteenth century, several different charges were combined in a composite emblem, as in the eagle over the cup used by the amir Taquziумur (d. 1345) on an inlaid bronze basin in the Islamic Museum, Cairo. These pictorial emblems were eventually replaced by epicorphic ones. The Manilok sultan al-Nasir Muhammad [1334–1530 with inter-

ruptions] used a roundel with the phrase [glory

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to our master, the sultan, inscribed in the central band, and this anonymous phrase was soon replaced by the name of the specific ruler or amir. The text grew in size and length, so that the names of the sultans Qaradji and Qaradji (1277-1304) fill all three registers of the emblem.

From the 13th century, inscriptions on metalwares name not only the person who ordered the piece but also the person for whom it was intended or the place to which it was endowed. A key piece, as for so many other innovations, is the Bobrinsky bucket, a stunning inlaid bronze bucket in the Hermitage (see Figure 9.50). The text around the rim (Eichthausen 1944, Arts of Islam 1978, no. 180; Masterpieces of Islamic Art 1990, no. 30) tells us that it was ordered by 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Abdullah for the merchant Rashid al-Din 'Azizi b. Abu'l-Husayn al-Zanjani. The lengthy inscriptions allow us to make further deductions about the people involved and the object's function. The person who ordered the bucket was apparently in service to the person to whom he gave it, since the commissioner, 'Abd al-Rahman, is identified as al-Rashidi, and the person to whom he gave it is called Rashid al-Din. The commissioner may well have been a mansibite slave, since no personal name is given for him or his father. The recipient was clearly a successful merchant, for he is identified as an exalted khanite and style of merchants (fadak al-tajjat). He was also a religious man, for he is identified as pillar of the faith (rahn al-din), most trustworthy of Muslims (amni al-muslimin) and ornament of the pilgrimage and the two shrines (that is, Mecca and Medina) (zayn al-bajj wa'l-bastamiyyin). The bucket was ordered to commemorate a specific event, for it is precisely dated to the month of Muharram 559/December 1163, the same month mentioned on five enamelled bowls of the same period (see below, Chapter 11). The event may have been the recipient's successful completion of the pilgrimage to Mecca, which would have taken place at the beginning of the previous month, Dhul-Hijja.

Inscriptions tell us that from the fourteenth century onwards one of the standard acts of piety by rulers and courtiers was to donate large metalwares to major mosques and shrines. These patrons wanted to have their munificence remembered, and the inscriptions naming the donor are the most significant decoration. Many of these objects were light fixtures. A large candlestick base in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Blair and Bloom 1994, fig. 356, for example, is decorated with four cartouches inlaid with the dedicatory inscriptions recording that it was endowed to the shrine of the mystic Bayazid Bastami by a vizier of the Ilkhanid sultan Uljaytu in 706/1306-9 (Melikian-Chirvani 1987)). The largest candlestick to survive from Islamic Iran (it measures almost half a metre in diameter), it was a splendid [and expensive] present from the vizier to honour his favourite Sufi master. Similarly, the Mamluk sultan Qaradji had his name inscribed on several candlesticks that he endowed to the mosque of Medina in 887/1482-3 (Art 1981, no. 34). Another example comprises a pair of large gilt brass candlesticks in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, Istanbul (no. 130) inscribed with Persian or Ottoman Turkish poems praising the light emitted from the candlesticks, apparently a paraphrase of a poem by Jami. The inscriptions further state that the candlesticks were made for the Ottoman sultan Bayazid II at Edirne and were probably intended for the mosque complex which he had built there beginning in 1474.

Other large metalwares donated to mosques and shrines were large cauldrons for water. A huge cast-bronze example standing in the courtyard of the congregational mosque at Herat (Melikian-Chirvani 1987) was commissioned by Uljaytu in 702/1304-5 under the Kait rulers of the city by a dervish (galandar). An even larger one (see Figure 15.87) was commissioned by Timur for the shrine of Ahmad Yasawi at Turkestan City on 20 Shawwal 801/25 June 1399 (Komaroff 1992, appendix I).

The inscriptions naming the patron are usually incorporated into the overall decorative scheme; sometimes, however, an owner's name was inscribed long after the metalware was made, and the name identifies a collector. The most famous example from Iran is Muhammad Muqin, whose name is incised in nasta'liq script within a shield shape on the base of several fourteenth-century bowls in the Georgian State Museum in

Tbilisi, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and elsewhere [Mekhitarian-Chravuni 1986a]. Judging from the style of script, the inscriptions seem to have been added in the Safavid period, two or three centuries after the pieces were made, but so far it has been impossible to identify this particular individual among the many with the same name mentioned in Safavid sources. Collecting the objects that bear his name tells us about taste in Safavid times and establishes that these objects were gathered at one time, adding indirect weight to the suggestion of a common provenance in the same area.

Beginning in the eleventh century, maxims were introduced into the repertoire of inscriptions on metalwares. Given the unpointed texts, they are exceedingly difficult to decipher, and only a few have been read. Melikian-Chravuni [1986a] deciphered one that is found on several pieces attributed to the patronage of the Ghressavids, including a bowl in the Metropolitan made by Abu Nasr the designer [al-naqsh].

Keep your tongue by saying little. Verily calamity is linked with discourse. For every time there is a writing. For every deed a retribution. For every deed appropriate men.

Careless mistakes in writing the inscriptions on metalwares are common. A small box in the V&A decorated with the ordination service of a Christian church (no. 150-1856, illustrated in Rice 1957, plate 35) is inscribed with a corrupt rendering of two verses by the pre-Islamic poet al-Nahgha al-Dhubayni from an apology and panegyric which he composed for Nu'man b. Munderi, King of Herat. The text is a rare if not unique example of a pre-Islamic poem inscribed on Islamic metalwork, but mistakes in the metre and reading show that the artist was careless or ignorant when inscribing the text. Similarly, the inscriptions on some of the fine metalwares made for Badr al-Din Lu'lu', atabeg of Mosul from 1210 to 1235, contain mistakes and misspellings in different parts of the patron's name, including his titles, patronymic [kunya] and even personal name [jinn], yet these objects were still accepted for use in his household. Many mistakes in the inscriptions on later metalwares seem to be akin to scrivels errors.

The poems inscribed on metalwares in Arabic or Persian often refer to the object's function. One example is a gold bowl belonging to a hoard found at Nihavan near Hamadan and now in the British Museum [Ward 1993, no. 38]. The exterior rim bears verses by the tenth-century poet Ibn al-Tammur from Wasit:

Wine is a sun in a garments of red Chinese silk. It flows, its source is the Black Drink, then, in the pleasure of time, since our day is a day of delight which has brought dew.

The reference to wine-drinking shows that the bowl was part of a wine service, probably for the amir Abu Shuja' [Injiktin], whose name is inscribed on a buckle found in the hoard. Similar verses about the forbidden pleasures of drinking, but in Persian rather than Arabic, are inscribed around the inside rim of the hemispheric silver bowl decorated with a harpy in the Hermitage [Masterpieces of Islamic Art 1990, no. 11].

The tradition of inscribing verses on metalwares became particularly popular in Iran. Several verses with good wishes from Sadir's Dastan to were used from the fourteenth century, and the range broadened considerably in the Timurid period. Developing the methodology established by Ivanov, Komorov [1992a, 1992b] showed how fruitful it can be to identify these verses. The repetition of the same verse on different pieces can help us to identify the production of a single artisan or workshop and, more generally, identifying and analysing these poems sheds light on the cultural milieu in which these pieces were produced. The verses on Timurid metalwares, for example, are some of the earliest or most accurate versions of poems by such local poets as Qasim al-Anwar, Salih and Jamil, and metalwares are thus an unexpected resource for the history of Persian literature.

Although less common, Arabic verses were also inscribed on metalwares made elsewhere in the Islamic lands during the later period. A good example is the enormous bronze chandelier suspended from the central bay of the great mosques in Taza [Rice 1957, plates 119 and 120; see figure 9.35]. Composed of nine circular tiers of diminishing size arranged like a wedding-cake and measuring 3.5 metres in diameter, the chandelier could hold 154 glass oil lamps and is the largest extant example of a type found throughout North Africa. It is decorated with delicate arabesques and inscriptions, including verses in bawit metre inscribed on the interior and written as though the lamp were speaking. Obviously composed for the occasion, they encourage the viewer to behold the chandelier's magnificence and record that this wondrous lamp was offered to the mosque by the Mamluk ruler Abu Ya'qub in 694/1294 [Terrasse 1945: 13-17].

Many of these metalwares with inscriptions naming the patron were specific commissions, intended as a gift or as part of a personal set, and the inscriptions often include the date. It is usually written out in words, either at the end of the text naming the patron or in an inconspicuous place, such as under the clasp on a box or on the handle of a jug. Although though they are rare, dated pieces are particularly important to art historians, since the date is a key to attribution. Many people look first for the date, but it is important to remember that dated pieces are the exception rather than the rule, and that adding the date implies that the piece is exceptional rather than the standard anonymous issue made for the market. Finding the date on several ewers from the early period, for example, implies that they too were specific commissions.

Another type of information written on Islamic metalwares is the artist's signature. The first place to investigate the signature of a particular metalworker is L. A. Mayer's handbook, Islamic Metalworkers and Their Works (1950), which, although outdated, gives the largest repertory of signatures. Signed pieces outnumber dated ones, and the fairly large number of signed pieces shows that metalworking was a high-status craft in the Islamic lands. Artists' names were among the first pieces of information inscribed on metalwares. They are found on several ewers from the early period [see below], and the smiths who made the iron gates at Yazd and Ganga in the sixteenth century [Blair 1910, nos. 42, 49] are some of the first craftsmen known from Islamic Iran. The high status of metalworkers is further indicated by the epithets which they bear from the medieval period onwards. Some are called metal 'ala 'aladīn (teacher) or usūdī (master), others pupil tilmid or servans/hireling (ghulām). These ranks indicate a hierarchical organisation of labour, and the different verbs used in signatures confirm the increasingly elaborate organisation of the metalworking crafts in medieval times.

The most common word to introduce the craftsman's signature is amīn ("servant") or hadīl ("assistant"). In the 12th century, an artist's signature was used with a metallic wusa to make an amānī ("amulet"). Bliss [1904] recorded a seal with a "god of heaven" in a silver dish, bearing the name of a master of a master of metalmetal.
made in Herat. This is certainly possible, but without other confirmation it is not necessarily true. In the case of Herat, texts tell us that Herat was the centre of a metalworking industry, and so the assumption is logical. In other cases, it is patently wrong to assume that the artisan’s epigraph shows the place of production. The epigraph al-Mawalli (‘from Mosul’), for example, is found on at least thirty metalwares dating from the thirteenth to the early fourteenth century. According to the inscriptions on the pieces, at least one, the Blacas ewer in the British Museum (see Figure 9.3) was made in Mosul (RCEA 4048, Arts of Islam 1976, no. 158), but others were made in Damascus or Cairo. This nishba does not refer to a geographical site, but rather to a product or technique associated with that city or to a group of artisans who traced their lineage back to metalworkers in Mosul. Metalworkers with the nishba al-Mawalli are just like builders with the nishba al-Shirazi (see Chapter 4).

There are also different kinds of signatures on metalwares. Formal signatures are more prominent and written in the middle of the inscription, sometimes at the end of the commissioning or dating text or in an isolated place, often with the date. They can be contrasted with informal signatures of smaller size and often contain visual puns. The difference between the two types can be seen in the so-called Baptiste of St Louis in the Louvre. The artist was justly proud of his masterpiece and signed the large brass basin in six different places. The formal signature ‘work of the master [mustallit] Muhammad b. al-Zayn, may [God] forgive him’ is engraved on the outside rim below the rim and centered above a roundel with a rider spearing a bearet (see Figure 9.48). The position, the prominent size and inclusion of a benediction show that this is a formal signature. A shorter signature, ‘work of Muhammad b. al-Zayn’, is found on five other representations of metal objects and chapters within the scenes. These informal signatures are visual puns, referring to Muhammad b. al-Zayn’s talent as a masterworker who made things, cups and other objects. The punning nature of these signatures is even clearer on another of his pieces, the Vassalot bowl in the Louvre (ArtI 1981, no. 30), where a short signature ‘work of Ibn al-Zayn’ is found on the bowl held by one of the courtiers and similar to the object itself.

Inscriptions on metalwares are written in a variety of ways using a variety of scripts, and the method and style of text affects the content. The easiest is to incise the text. This technique allows the most latitude in style and content. Inlaying the inscription is more difficult, but it has the advantage that the coloured inlay can be set off against the ground, thereby highlighting the words. A few, repetitive inscriptions are cast in relief, as on a group of medieval bronze ewers with a high spout (al-Uthay 1972). Since these objects were cast from molds, the texts are usually confined to bird blessings to an anonymous owner. The same sorts of short texts could also be hammered in relief, as on a group of silver bottles, jugs and other objects from medieval Iran, or pierced, as on lamps, incense burners and other objects that required an openwork surface. Very often, different techniques were used on the same metal object for different types of text. One of the high-spouted ewers in the Musée de l’Armée, for example, has other inscriptions done in the champlévé technique, including the signature of the artisan.

Within the limitations imposed by the techniques of manufacture, the inscriptions on metalwares follow the same general stylistic developments as do scripts on buildings and other objects. There is the same general progression from angular scripts to cursive ones and from simple to elaborate, with foliation, floriation and knotting. One style of script, however, is specific to metalwares: animated inscriptions, in which the letters or parts of them assume animal or human forms. With one exception (the so-called Baylov Stone), a stone frieze retrieved from a fortress on an island in the bay of Baku and now exhibited in the palace of the Shirvanshahs there, animated script is found only on metalwares. Animated script seems to have evolved from ornithomorphic writing in which letters are transformed into birds or end in birds’ heads. This type of bird-writing is found not only on metalwares (for example, a bronze bowl in the Metropolitan Museum, illustrated in Bier 1983, fig. 177), but also on slip-painted ceramics attributed to the patronage of the Samanids, rulers of eastern Iran in the tenth century. The repertory of creatures used in animated script gradually expanded, and the ends of the letters were transformed into the heads of other types of animals, both real and imaginary, or humans.

The key object for dating the introduction of zoomorphic and human-headed scripts is the Bobrinsky bucket (see Figure 9.50). In the upper band, the letters are zoomorphic, either ending in cow, dragon or bird heads or shaped like birds. Atop these zoomorphic letters are human figures. In the bottom band, the letters are human-headed. The artist’s delight in playing off different scripts is clear, and he separated these two types of animated script with a middle band of interlaced script. These hard-to-read inscriptions contain blessings to an anonymous owner. When the artist wanted to convey historical information, including the names of the patron, the artists and the recipient and date, he used a much simpler and more readable script for the texts along the handle and rim.

An inlaid brass pen-box in the Freer Gallery (see Figure 9.51) shows how metalworkers in eastern Iran in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries were able to combine legibility and decoration in different types of plain and animated script (Herzfeld 1936, RCEA 1371). The inscription around the lid, written in a legible naskh, conveys the historical information, with the names and titles of the owner, Mad al-Mulk, grand vizier to the penultimate Kharraznush ‘Ala’ al-Din Muhammad. The large inscription
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around the base, also in naskh but with human heads, contains lengthy blessings to an anonymous owner. The inscription on the back between the hinges, although smaller and thinner, is a dramatically balanced and refined human-headed Kufic: it records the name of the artist, Shadhi, and the date 607/1210-11. Artists and objects using these zoomorphic and human-headed scripts apparently moved westwards with the Mongol invasions, for these scripts appear on wares made in the central Arabic lands in the second quarter of the thirteenth century. The first dated example is a ewer in Cleveland made by Ahmad b. ‘Umam al-Mawsili in 630/1233 (Bicq 1973, Arts of Islam 1976, no. 205). These were used on many wares made in the mid-thirteenth century, but became increasingly repetitive and stylised until they were finally abandoned at the end of the thirteenth century or the beginning of the fourteenth. Zoomorphic and human-headed scripts are still read, albeit with difficulty, for only the ends of the letters are transformed into animals or humans, and the bodies of the letters below the heads are still decipherable as letters. The next step, in which the letters themselves (and not just the ends) are transformed into animals or birds, renders the inscription virtually unreadable. This script was restricted to the most generalised texts, with repeating blessings, but even these are hard to decipher. The animated inscription with good wishes on a large lidded censer in the Freer (Art et al. 1985, no. 17) was only deciphered recently, and the inscriptions on the Blacas ewer in the British Museum (see Figure 9.53) have never been deciphered. Animated scripts were probably not meant to be read, but rather represented the good life characterised by the hunters, revellers and other figures depicted in it (Bloom 1987a).

Metalwares

The lengthy inscriptions on astrolabes are important evidence for centres of metalware production. A series of Andalusian astrolabes, for example, were made at Seville, Murcia (one dated 650/1253-5), Granada (three dated 664/1265-6, 704/1304-5 and 707/1309-10) and Guadix (one dated 710/1310-1). Astrolabes are also important in documenting the use of abjad, the alphabet system of dating (see Chapter 15) which is used for the numbers around the rete.

Early Period

The earliest metalwares made in the Islamic lands did not include inscriptions as a part of their decoration, only gradually were inscriptions added. The novelty of inscribing pieces is evident from the inscription on a bronze vessel in the form of a bird in the Hermitage (see Figure 8.47). The all-over decoration in silver and copper inlay includes a band in simple Kufic around the neck. The text (Masterpieces of Islamic Art 1990, no. 1, with references to earlier publications) begins with the invocation and blessings to God and then records that the piece was made by Sulayman at a certain city in the year 1380/796-7. The craftsman's unfamiliarity with writing inscriptions is clear from the awkward layout and style. He ran out of space at the end of the text and had to write the numbers of the date below the name of the city. Unfortunately, the name of the city where he made the vessel is unreadable. Suggestions have ranged from Kusam in Central Asia to the Fazz quarter in Nishapur and Kashan in Iran, but none fits the letters, which seem to read all, lilm, 'in', si, 'it'. Since this ewer is a key piece in localising other pieces, such as another bird in the Monastery of St Catherine at Sinai with a similar-style inscription invoking blessings to its owner (Baer 1953, fig. 167), the question of the inscription on the Hermitage bird is all the more important.

The difficulty in reading the unpointed inscriptions on these early ewers is clear from another ewer in the Georgian State Museum, Tbilisi, which is inscribed in a single line around the rim (see Figure 9.53). Since the work of Orel and Trever (1945) and Diakonov (1947), scholars have recognised the importance of the inscription for dating and localising other ewers of a similar shape, but just about every word in the text has been debated, even where to begin reading, for the choice of beginning affects the grammar of what follows. Assuming that the text is a single sentence, and by analogy with the inscription on the bird ewer, which begins with blessings and ends with the date, then we should start reading on the right side of the rim just beyond the thumb rest. The text begins with blessings to its maker (literally, 'he who fashioned it'), Ibn Yazid.

Next is a phrase usually read as 'part of what was made at Basrā' (mināmat 'amāla fi'l-Bāṣrā'). Such a reading forms the basis for assigning this group of ewers to Iraq, but Melkian-Chirvani (1976, n. 4) suggested alternative [and somewhat less plausible] readings of the last word as al-Baḥra, bi'l-ḥirīn 'cast in one' or even bi'l-bukhra 'for enjoyment'.

The inscription of the Tbilisi ewer ends with the date written out in words in units and tens, first read as 'the year seven [or nine] and sixty', meaning 69/686-7 or 69/688-9. Reading the 'units' digit is a minor problem. Either seven or nine is possible, although the slight slant of the
teeth might add weight to the former. Interpretation of the rest of the date is more problematic. Marshak (1972) suggested that the engraver might have dropped the 'centuries' digit due to insufficient space and that the other should therefore be dated to 1936-9 or 1939-46 (corresponding to 763 or 764). The thin letters contrast with a broader band set against the shoulder with thick Kufic lettering set against a floral scroll ground. The inscription names the patron, Abu 'Ali Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Shaddad, who served as vizier at Balkh for the early Saljuqs at the beginning of the eleventh century. Other inscriptions in a similar thick Kufic on a scroll ground on a silver flake [Ys. 800, Masterpieces of Islamic Art 1990, no. 277] offer blessings to the shaykh, Abu Fadl Salih b. 'Ali.

Inscriptions on other precious metal vessels, including a handful of small gold jugs and silver dishes and candlesticks, name contemporary rulers and officials in western Iran, particularly the Buyids. The authenticity of many of these pieces is contested, and oddities in the wording and style of the inscriptions underscore the uncertainties about these pieces. The most (in)famous example is the so-called Alp Arslan salver in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. A large, thin, Kufic inscription in the centre contains the words, the sultan 'Adud al-Din, and a Kufic band around the rim states that it was offered to the illustrious sultan Alp Arslan, ordered by a queen of the age, and made by Hasan of Kishan in 459/1066-7 (RCEA 1965; Survey, plates 134-4). The unusually lengthy inscription, its tumbled titulature and its peculiar style cast doubt on the authenticity of the piece. For inscriptions on objects from the tenth and eleventh centuries usually follow standard titulature and forms. The inscription of the Saljuq sultan Alp Arslan, for example, is 'Adud al-Dawla, not the 'Adud al-Din inscribed prominently on the piece. The form of the text, indicating that it was made as a gift, is unprecedented, and the style of the Kufic with curvaceous ascenders is distinct. The unusual inscription adds weight to the doubts raised about this piece and connects it to many other objects purportedly made in medieval Iran that appeared on the art market at this time (Kühnel 1956; Blair et al. 1992).

Gold and silver medallions with figurative decoration are also inscribed with the names of Buyid rulers. According to the historian Ibn al-Athir, on 1 Muhammmad 371/1 April 988 (New Year's Eve) the vizier Ibn 'Abbas presented Fakhr al-Dawla, the Buyid ruler of Rayy, with a gold dinar weighing 4.25 kg. It was inscribed on one side with seven lines of Arabic poetry extolling the piece as a sun and the ruler as king of kings and on the other with Chapter 113 of the Koran (Surat al-Ikhlas), the names of the 'Abbasi caliph and the Buyid ruler, and the place where it was struck (Gurgan).

No such enormous piece survives, but smaller ones in both silver and gold are known (Miles 1964b, 1975; Ettinghausen and Grabar 1987, fig. 255). Like many of the other objects naming the Buyids, the authenticity of some of these pieces has been questioned.

Inscribed names are also the key to attributing a group of cast-bronze lions, probably used as aquamarines or fountain heads, to Fatimid Egypt. One in Berlin (Museum für Islamische Kunst 1971, no. 225) bears the name of the person who ordered the governor of Egypt Shams al-Din. Another in Kassel (Arts of Islam 1976, no. 168) is inscribed with the name of the maker, Abdullah the sculptor [al-mashhul], and a cast-bronze lampstand (ibid., no. 171) is the work of Ibn al-Mulki. The dependence on a recognisable name in an inscription for attributing a metalwork from the early period to a particular locale is clear from one of the largest pieces of Islamic metalwork to survive: the Pisa griffin, so called because it was installed atop the cathedral in Pisa during the late eleventh or early twelfth century and remained there until 1938 (Dodd 1992, n. 15). A huge statue of cast bronze, it is inscribed over almost all the surface with textile-like patterns. A band of Girtari Kufic around the body invokes blessings to an unspecified owner. While there is general agreement about an eleventh-century date, attributions range from Iran to Sicily, Egypt, North Africa and Spain. The generalised blurring and the invention of the inscription into the overall decoration accord well with the dating, but investigation of the style of script and the particular words used in the blessing might cast further light on the provenance of this enigmatic piece.

The inscriptions also show us the wide market for these inlaid bronzes. No patron is named on the Thilisi ewer, so it might have been made for the market, but the other pieces used for historical texts and more complicated, animated ones for good wishes. On the Feer pen-box, for example, the inscription around the top with the patron’s name and flowing titles is written in naskh, the good wishes around the base in human headed naskh, and the artist’s signature between the clasps on the back in animated Kufic. Even without reading the inscriptions, someone looking at the pen-box could distinguish three types of information from the three styles of script. Shahid’s artistic talents are clear from his signature: the words ending his name and beginning the date are neatly arranged as two birds’ heads confronting each other over the central knot.

Fine metalworks were also made in western Iran during this period, and the inscription on one of the rare pieces to survive, a parcel-gilt cup now in the Khavari Collection of the University of California (1937, p. 17), corrected in Melikian-Chirvani 1983a, is the key to localising production there. The text engraved around the rim invokes good wishes on the amir Bade al-Din Qaram. He can be identified from textual sources as an amir who served as governor of the Hamadan area in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The Khur cup exemplifies a common methodology used in studying Islamic metalwork: by reading the patron’s name inscribed on a piece and then identifying him in the written sources, we can localise production to a place and a time period, in this case to western Iran on the eve of the Mongol invasions.

Another group of metalworks which have been attributed to twelfth-century Iran comprises silver dishes or shallow bowls with a band of good wishes engraved around the rim. Most of these are anonymous, but one dish in the Los Angeles County Museum (M 7.5.1.240) invokes good wishes on a noble lady, who is identified as queen of the era [nūḥlāt al-ar] and mother of Shams al-Ma’ali. She is one of the few women named on an Islamic metalwork, and identifying her would shed light on the group.

Inscriptions also help us to identify another major centre of metalworking in the Jazira (northern Mesopotamia) and Syria in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The inlaid bronzes produced there are notable for their superb surface decoration which includes a wide variety of figurative subjects and bold inscriptions. As with the Khurasani wares, the numerous inscriptions are the key to localising the group and tracing its evolution and working methods. These wares are often called Mosul metalwork, for twenty-three artisans used the epithet al-Mawilli [from Mosul]. The key piece is the Blacas ewer in the British Museum (see Figure 9.53). The inscription around the neck (RC 54046) says that Shuja’ b. Mans’ al-Mawilli engraved (jaqazqah) it in Tus (May 1331) in Mosul. Mosul was probably the main centre of production and the starting point, but some pieces were made elsewhere. Several artisans bear the epithet al-Sint (‘from Sint‘), and Damascus and Cairo are mentioned on several pieces made in the second half of the thirteenth century. The earliest dated piece is a key to the Ka‘ba made in Baghdad (1156/November–December 1160) by Soudel-Thomine 1975, p. 3). Production increased steadily in the first half of the thirteenth century, as shown by a large group of dated objects, and continued in the second half of the century under the patronage of the Mamluk rulers of Syria and Egypt.

Most pieces of Mosul metalware are anonymous, so we can assume that they were made for the market. The suggestion of a flourishing open market is confirmed by the layout: on many pieces the inscriptions are fitted into the decoration, rather than having the decoration designed around them. These anonymous pieces include some of the finest and most famous objects, such as the Blacas ewer and the Feer casket. The lack of named patrons has led to varying attributions. The Wade Cup in Cleveland, for example, was first attributed by Rice (1935) to Mosul in the 1320s, but more plausibly reattributed by Ertinghausen (19577) to Khurasan c. 1300.

Despite the anonymity of many wares, inscriptions show that local rulers played an important role in fostering the metalworking industry in Mesopotamia and the Jazira. Local rulers are named on several pieces, usually with the phrase ‘izzu l-mawalid ‘glory to our lord’. Five pieces name Ibad al-Din, atabeg of Mosul from 1230 to 1235, and sixteen extant pieces bear the names of Ayubid sultans. Other local rulers named on inlaid bronzes include Artuq Arslan, Artuq ruler of Mardin and Mardinistan from 1200 to 1235, whose name is inscribed on a candlestick base in the Haram al-Sharif Museum, Jerusalem, and Abu'l-Qasim Mahmud b. Sanjar Shah,atabeg of the town of Jazirah ibn ‘Umar (now Cizre, Turkey) in the first half of the thirteenth century, who ordered a ewer and basin (Allan 1983a, no. 6). Only a handful of objects name lesser officials, such as a ewer in the Feer Gallery (no. 55.32) made in 1259/1232 for Shihab al-Din Tughril, gun-bearer and Turkish regent for the Ayubid ruler of Aleppo, al-Malik al-Aziz, and a bowl in the Museo Civile, Bologna (Arts of Islam 1976, no. 192) made for Naim al-Din ‘Umar, an officer of Badr al-Din Lut’u. In contrast to Khurasani wares, very few objects were commissioned by members of other social groups.

Inscriptions show that metalworkers enjoyed high status during this period, when signatures are more prominent than patrons’ names. As in Iran, the metalworking tradition was becoming increasingly complex. It was organised hierarchically, with some artisans identified as masters, craftsmen and others as pupils or hirelings. Some pieces are signed by two artisans, and some metalworkers, such as Muhammad b. Khurshik, made several types of objects, including scientific instruments.

The prominence of inscriptions, already evident on wares made for the Ayubids, becomes even more marked under the Mamluks. Almost all Mamluk metalworks name local rulers with inscriptions, and after the 1330s inscriptions become the main decorative theme. Metalworkers continue to enjoy high status, and signatures allow us to identify seventeem metalworkers who worked under the Bahri line (1350–1390) and five or six
who worked under the Buyids (1282–1317). Most craftsmen sign themselves al-mawsili [from Mosul], indicating not that they worked in Mosul but that they wanted to link themselves to that tradition. One craftsman who did not was Muhammad b. al-Zayn, probably the finest metalworker from the Mamluk period and the person who made the Baptisterie de St Louis (see Figure 9.48). Signatures also allow us to suggest that metalworking, like such other fine crafts as lustre pottery, was a family profession. Muhammad b. Sunqur al-Baghthadi, the craftsman who made the splendid inlaid Koran box in Berlin [Arts of Islam, 1976, no. 224] and a hexagonal table for the sultan al-Nasir Muhammad [Islamic Art in Egypt 1969, no. 61] may have been the brother of Mahmud b. Sunqur who made a pen-box now in the British Museum dated 680/1281 [Arts of Islam 1976, no. 203, Atl 1981, no. 15].

In contrast to earlier wares, however, signatures on pieces from the Mamluk period are less important than the names and titles of the amirs and other patrons. The major decoration on many pieces is a large epigraphic band in muqarnas script bearing the owner’s name and titles. The earliest dated piece with such a bold calligraphic band is a ewer in the Louvre (no. 7420), made in Damascus in 691/1292 by Husayn b. Muhammad al-Mawsili for the last Ayubid sultan, Salah al Din Yusuf, and the style can be traced through a series of dated pieces to its florescence in the early fourteenth century. The large band sometimes contained another text, as with the Koranic verses encircling Koran boxes in Berlin and Cairo [Atl 1981, no. 205], but pieces made for the royal or an amiral household usually had the name and titles of the patron. Objects made for other members of the court typically begin with the commissioning phrase minnana ‘umala bi-rasmi [one of the things made on the order of].

These large epigraphic bands are often interrupted by roundels with the owner’s emblem, either pictorial or epigraphic. The most striking are the epigraphic roundels arranged like a sunburst, with the tall stems of the elongated letters pointing towards the centre. Initially the prepotency of the sultan, as on an incense burner made for the sultan al-Nasir Muhammad [Allan 1982, no. 15], this design was gradually taken over by other members of his court, as on the mirror in the Topkapi Palace collection made for an unidentified officer (see Figure 9.49).

Inscriptions tell us that some Mamluk metalwares were made for export. A bowl sold at Christie’s in 1966 and a basin in the Louvre bear the name and titles of Hugh IV of Lusignan (Rice 1956). The commissioning inscriptions beginning ‘part of what was ordered by’ show that this Christian king of Cyprus and Jerusalem (r. 1324–59) was considered on the rank of an amir. Other objects were made for Muslim rulers. A large group of objects [for example, Atl 1981, nos 14 and 32], including two specifically made in Cairo, bears the names of four Rasulid sultans, rulers of the Yemen from 1350 to 1377, or their officers of state. Unlike the inscriptions on the pieces for Hugh of Lusignan, the inscriptions on the pieces for the Rasulid sultans invoke ‘glory to our lord’ implying that the Rasulid ruler was considered the equal of the Mamluk sultan.

The Mamluk style of metalwork decorated with a broad band of muqarnas interrupted by roundels and text invoking glory to our lord was also used on a large number of hemispheric bowls, but several distinguishing features, including the inscriptions, allow us to attribute these bowls to Iran, particularly Fars province. The roundels on the Iranian pieces usually contain figures rather than emblems, and the thirteenth inscriptions arc often in the name of an anonymous sultan. The key to the Fars attribution lies in the inscriptions on two inlaid vessels in the Hermitage: a bucket [Masterpieces of Islamic Art 1990, no. 51] ordered by the amir Suyavush and made by Muhammad Shah al-Shirazi, who is identified as a servant of the I贾n ruler of Fars, Mahmud Shah, and a bowl made for Mahmud’s son Abu Ihsan, who became ruler of Fars in 1343. Both pieces contain the phrase warz dīsī s al-sayyaviḥ, ‘heir to the kingdom of Solomon’, a phrase that Melikian-Chirvani [1969b, 1971a, 1971b, summarised in