Another epigraphic feature that distinguishes these fourteenth-century bowls from Fars is a two-tiered inscription, with a small repeating text in Kufic inserted in the stems of the tall thuluth letters. This bowl in the Freer Gallery (see Figure 9.54), for example, has a repeated phrase that seems to read ad-du'wa al-kabīra (perfect favour) inserted in the stems of the thuluth text offering blessings to an anonymous sultan. These pieces were clearly mass-produced, for the texts contain generalised titles and often break off in the middle of words or phrases, and the Kufic texts are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to read.

Inscriptions delineate the chronological range of the Fars school of metalwork. It was in operation from the beginning of the fourteenth century, to judge from a bowl in Modena made in 705/1305 by 'Abd al-Qadir Shirazi. The school continued to flourish under the patronage of the Muzaffarids, for the cover of the so-called Nisan Tasi, a huge basin in the mausoleum of Jalal al-dīn Rumī at Konya, mentions Shah Sultan, who was appointed governor of Shiraz in 755/1354 by his uncle, the Muzaffarid ruler of Fars (Reih 1973–4). Corrected in Molkias-Chirvani 1982: 155 and n. 50. Inscriptions also tell us that the clientele for these pieces was quite broad. A candlestick in the Louvre, for example, was made for and probably also designed by the noted calligrapher Ahmad Shah (Reih 1981a).

The rulers named on two extremely large pieces suggest that Ardashir was another centre of metalworking production in fourteenth-century Iran. The inscriptions on the inlaid basin of the Nisan Tasi invoke glory on the Ilkhanid ruler Abu Sa'id [r. 1331–72], and those on a basin endowed to the shrine of Shaykh Safi at Ardabil [Y. Godard 1935] say that it was part of what was ordered by the Jalayirid ruler Shuykhab Uwain [r. 1336–72]. The two basins use the formulas of commissioning standard under the Mamluks, suggesting that Mamluk protocol set the standard for Iranian metalwares.

Other inscriptions on fourteenth-century Iranian metalwares contain Persian poems alluding to the object's function. Verses in praise of wine-drinking occur on several stem cups [for example, Arts of Islam 1976, no. 204], and alliterative verses about the relationship between the pen and the inkwell appear on pen-boxes. A quatrain about the moth seeking the candle flame, an allegory for the human soul seeking God, is used on candlesticks [for example, Museum für Islamische Kunst Berlin 1971, no. 1 3577].

Metalwares made in the Maghrib during this period also feature inscriptions as a major element of decoration. Pieces made for the Nasrids, rulers of Spain from 1330 to 1492, were often inscribed with the dynastic slogan wa lā ghallih ilā lāh [there is no conqueror but God]. This is found, for example, on the huge bronze chandelier made for the Nasrid sultan Muhammad III in 705/1305 [Arts of Islam 1976, no. 172; Dodds 1995, no. 57]. The pierced inscription there is complete and legible, but over time the slogan was distorted and shortened into a stylised motif, as on a magnificent gilt bronze bucket and several swords made in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries [Arts of Islam, no. 176; Dodds 1995, nos 59–64]. Many of these objects were probably made at the capital, Granada, but the only Spanish metalwares on which the site of production is mentioned are armaliles.

The finest pieces of metalwork produced in North Africa during this period are chandeliers. In addition to the huge one given to the Great Mosque in Taza by the Marinid ruler Abu Ya'qub in 694/1294, there are several other examples in mosques and madrasas in Fez. The earliest known was given to the Mosque of the Andalusians in Fez by the Almohad caliph Muhammad al-Nasiri [r. 1194–1232]. Others were donated by the Marinids in the fourteenth century. The inscriptions show that the important point was the munificence of the ruler in donating these large chandeliers, for the inscriptions contain the ruler's name and titles and sometimes the date, but never the artist's name or place of production. Other metalwares made in North Africa during this period are cast bronze bowls. In contrast to the chandeliers, they are decorated exclusively with inscriptions detailing their function [Vicente 1942].

Late Period

Broad epigraphic bands naming the patron continued to characterise Mamluk metalwares in the fifteenth century, but a new form of calligraphy was introduced, in which the vertical shafts of the thick thuluth letters rise up in pairs and cross to form pincers. This style of script can be seen on inlaid brass bowls and other objects commissioned by sultan Qa'itbay [see Figure 9.55]. After Qa'itbay's reign [r. 668–696], the quality of metalwork declined, and the inscriptions become less legible. Some objects of copper, tinned copper and tinned bronze have composite emblems with circular shields divided horizontally into three fields filled with assorted cups, napkins, pen-boxes and powder horns, and inscriptions indicating that they were made for anonymous amirs. Other pieces bear anonymous benefactor inscriptions that are almost illegible.

The popularity and profusion of inscribed Mamluk metalwares meant that the style was revived for a generation or so at the turn of the twentieth century to meet the demand of European tourists. Like the models, these 'Mamluk-revival' wares are usually decorated with Arabic inscriptions containing epigrams and polite phrases, but some pieces have engraved or gold-inlaid inscriptions in Hebrew.

Late Mamluk metalwares were also popular in other contemporary circles, both Christian and Muslim. Many Mamluk metalwares from the end of the fourteenth and the fifteenth century have European coats of arms or shields left empty to receive such arms on arrival at their European destinations. One curious inlaid bowl in the Hermitage [Petsopoulos 1983, fig. 14] bears the name and titles of the Ottoman sultan Murad II [r. 1323–51 with interruption]. It was intended for the Ottoman court, but it is unclear whether it was made by Mamluk craftsmen working in a

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Mamluk or an Ottoman city. The bowl stands out as an exception to the vast majority of Ottoman metalwares, which are anachronistic, as the Ottomans preferred metalwares with plain surfaces or all-over decoration encrusted with jewels. Although many Ottoman metalworkers are recorded in court registries, only one is known from signed works: the goldsmith jeweller Mehmed b. ‘Imad of Ionia. He signed three objects made for Murad III and preserved in the treasury of Topkapı Palace: a binding for the sultan’s poems dated 966/1559-60, a box for the Prophet’s mantle dated 1001/1592-3, and a lock and key for the khaṣa dated 1005/1598-9.

Inscriptions play a much more important role on metalwares made in Iran, and dates and signatures on some twenty-five metalwares provide a framework for localising a Timurid style. Eleven objects dated between 1415/1559 and 960/1559 outline the heyday of production. Fourteen pieces are signed. The most common signature begins with ‘ātmal (‘work of’), but sometimes a more specialised terminology is used, indicating that the artisan wrote, decorated and inscribed the object (kastabatu wa nāqisabatu wa gairibahu). None of the pieces mentions a place of production, but eight of the artificers’ names include zīshah, all relating to places in Khurasan such as Bahraman, Bārjan and Qazishān. These inlaid wares were expensive and obviously made for the finest households. Most pieces are anonymous, but a few bear princely names. One jug in Berlin (Komroff 1923, no. 31) was made in 862/1456-7 for an unidentified Timurid prince, and two others dated 900/1495-6 and Sha‘ban 901/April 1498 (ibid., no. 131) are inscribed with the name of the Timurid sultan Ḥusayn Bāyqara. Tinned wares had a wider clientele: a bowl in the Hermitage, for example (ibid., no. 28), was made for İsmā‘īl Qābāri, perhaps a member of the Kayān clan that emigrated from Sistan to Herat during the reign of Ulugh Beg.

The dated and signed pieces can be used to define a distinctive style of Timurid metalware in which the figurative style of earlier times is replaced by floral and vegetal motifs and inscriptions. Instead of the good wishes and anonymous titulature in Arabic characteristic of earlier metalwares, the inscriptions contain Persian verses drawn from a wide repertory of classical poets, such as Daqiqi, Firdawsī, Sa’di and Haftīz, and contemporary Khurasani poets, such as Qasim al-Anwarī, Jami and Sa’di. The text usually refers to the vessel on which it is inscribed. Inscribed jugs, for example, were inscribed with verses about mawlabāḥa (‘jug’), suggesting their use as wine vessels. The texts are usually well written and accurate and are some of the earliest records of contemporary writings. The inscriptions are written in a wide variety of cursive scripts, including nasta’liq, typical of contemporary calligraphy, and point to the increasingly important role of the calligrapher in contemporary epigraphy.

Signatures also help us to distinguish some sets within the problematic group of contemporary metalwares in the Corpus of Veneto-Saraceni. Male of brass (or bronze), engraved with arabesques and inlaid with silver and a black organic compound, these objects were traditionally ascribed to Muslim craftsmen working in Venice in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but it is unlikely that they were produced within the Venetian guild system. Ten pieces are signed by the master Mahmūd al-Kurdi, including a covered bowl in the Courtauld Institute with a bilingual Latin script násharaddun shāhī. Mahmūd al-Kurdi’s work contains features common to the Mamluk and Timurid styles, and he may have worked for the Aq Qoyunlu ruler Uṣūn Hasan (r. 1453-77), who had the support of the semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities and maintained links with Venice from 1453 to 1475. Seven other objects can be assigned to another master, who signed himself Zayn al-Dīn, Zayn al-Dīn ‘Umar and Zayn al-Dīn b. al-māṭīlim (‘the teacher’).

On them, a round-bottomed box and cover in the Kargheza, belonged to the collection of Ferdinando I de’ Medici from 1589, so the piece must date from before that time. Zayn al-Dīn may have been among the metalworkers removed from Tabriz to Ottoman Turkey in 1514 when Selim I conquered the Aq Qoyunlu capital in north-west Iran.

Inscriptions help to distinguish metalwares made in eastern Iran in the early sixteenth century from those of similar shape and technique made in the fifteenth century. Persian verses give way to Arabic prayers invoking ‘Ali and the twelve imams, as on an inkwell in the V&A dated Rabi’ II 919/May 1519 (Melikian-Chirvani 1985b, no. 128). First inscribed on coins struck in the name of the Safavid shah Ḵᵛāja (r. 1501-36), this prayer to ‘Ali became popular on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century metalwares, and Komroff (1979-80) has suggested that it may be a way of distinguishing Safavid pieces from their Timurid prototypes. Decoration continues to evolve towards a dense, overall patterning in which the epigraphic cartouches are barely discernible, as on a bowl dated 916/1510-11 in the V&A (Melikian-Chirvani 1982b, no. 127). The verses by Hilāli written in nasta’liq script are signed by Sultan Muhammad by the type of signature used on calligraphic exercises, māṭīlim (‘teacher’), identifying the writer as one of the calligraphers who had been attached to the Timurid court.

Lorenzo-shaped cartouches with poetic inscriptions in nasta’liq continue to characterise metalwares made under the Safavids, but the inscriptions stand out more clearly as they are typically written on a scrolling leaf ground. Some poems were apparently composed for the occasion, as on a trice of cylindrical dome-covered inkwells signed by Mīrzā Ḥusayn Yazdi, two in the V&A (Melikian-Chirvani 1985b, nos. 119-20) and one in the Benaki Museum, Athens (Savoury, plate 1397a). Shaped like the tomb tower designed for Shaykh Sād al-Dīn at Arslābād, they are inscribed with Persian verses eulogising the sultan to open the inkwell and conquer the black-hearted enemy. Based on the zealous tenor of the dictches, Melikian-Chirvani suggested that these q̱īṣ̱āʾ were composed during the reign of Ḵᵛāja ‘alī
when the Safavid state was struggling against the Uzbeks in the east and the Ottomans in the west. Other objects bear poems related to their function. The typical Safavid pillar-shaped torchstand, for example, is often inscribed with verses about the moth and the candle. Dated examples show that the form became popular in the second half of the sixteenth century. The earliest to survive, in the shrine at Mashhad, was made by the founder Da'ud in Lahore on 3 Jamad al-Awal 928/1522 October 1528. Melikian-Chirvani (1982b: 263) suggested that he was an Iranian working for Humayun, who may have given the torch-stand to the shrine when he passed through Mashhad en route to Qazvin in 1544. Another example in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad (Melikian-Chirvani 1982b, fig. 65), was endowed to the shrine at Samarra’ by an otherwise unknown poet, Shams al-Din Kafta Kashi, in 960/1553-5. Other important dated torch-stands include one in the Metropolitan dated 986/1578-9, another in the Hermitage dated the following year (Inzov 1960), and a third in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, dated 996/1587-8.

In addition to the Persian verses and dates, the inscriptions sometimes give the name of the owner. It is usually written at the end, introduced by the word shahsh (‘owned by’). On many pieces, the cartouche with the owner’s name is blank, showing that such inscriptions were added after the object was purchased. A range of people is named in these inscriptions. For example, a bowl dated Raij 245 (November-December 1538 in the V&A) (Melikian-Chirvani 1982b, no. 124) was made for a Shāhī dervish, Mardanshah b. Ghawathshah. The Hermitage torch-stand dated 987/1579-80 was owned by Hajji Chalabi. He may be the same Hajji Husayn b. Hajji Hasan Chalabi who ordered a wine bowl which is in the V&A (Melikian-Chirvani 1982b, no. 131), and who may be identified with the Safavid envoy Husayn Chalabi. Several engraved bowls and candlesticks also bear inscriptions in Armenian naming the owner (Melikian-Chirvani 1982b, annex II). These people were probably prominent members of the Armenian community established by Shah ‘Abbas in New Julfa, south of the capital Isfahan.

These owners’ names are often the only clues to provenance, for most pieces from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries do not contain artists’ signatures. One exception is a group of cut steel begging bowls signed by Haji ‘Abbas. One in the Nahad al-Said collection (Alam 1982a, no. 30) has šabābš inscriptions in the cartouches, including the date 1053/1645 and the signature of the artisan, Haji ‘Abbas, who is identified as the son of Aqa Rahim the armourer. Some begging bowls signed by Haji ‘Abbas, however, are eighteenth- or nineteenth-century copies. One in the Hermitage, for example [Masterpieces 1990, no. 118], has inscriptions in nasta’īq and the date 1207/1793-4. Another type of inscribed metalware produced under the Safavids comprises pierced steel plaques and medallions. The inscriptions often contain pious verses and phrases (for example, Atti et al. 1985, nos. 38 and 30).

Timed copper and brass wares in the Safavid style were also produced in the Indian subcontinent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and inscriptions help to differentiate the two groups. The Indian pieces are also decorated with Persian verses, but the texts sometimes contain variant readings, words are sometimes split between cartouches, and the relationship between text and object is missing. Kashmir is one possible site of production, as a wine bowl dated 1026/ 1617 in the V&A [ scarce and Elwell-Sutton 1971: Dibay 1974: Melikian-Chirvani 1982b, no. 165] was made for Khwaja Muhammad Rajiv Kashmiri. Lahore is another possible site. Historical inscriptions are occasionally found on Mughal weapons, as on a knife with a blade of forged steel and meteorite iron in the Freer [Attii et al. 1985, no. 50]. A poem inscribed on the side of the handle recounts how Jahangir ordered two swords, this knife and a dagger made from a meteorite that descended like lightning in 1600/1601. In general, however, most precious metalwares made in India under the Mughals did not include inscriptions as a major part of the decoration, for the Mughals, like their counterparts the Ottomans, preferred objects of precious metal encrusted with jewels.

## Chapter 10

**Woodwork**

In many areas of the Islamic lands, timber was scarce, and wood was not used for frame construction but was reserved for decorative building elements such as ceilings, linteils, doors and screens where its inherent structural advantages would be put to best use. Domestic wooden furniture was limited to small low tables and chests, as cushions and rugs replaced chairs and benches, and the finest wood was saved for furnishings in mosques and shrines, including mihrabs, mihrabins, mazārins [screened enclosures for the ruler], bookcases, Koran-stands and Koran boxes. These expensive wooden objects designed for religious settings were boldly inscribed with Koranic verses and historical texts giving the donor’s name and date, and the dates on them are often the key to studying the chronological evolution of woodworking styles. A dry climate, which counters the inherent perishability of wood, also aids preservation, and many of the finest examples of Islamic woodcarving are preserved in Egypt, some in situ and others in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo. Scholars quickly recognised the importance of the Cairo collection, and several catalogues were prepared in the 1930s. Pauty (1935) catalogued carved examples up to the Ayyubid period, and David-Weill (1931) prepared two volumes on the inscribed pieces, the first volume on inscriptions up to the Mamluk period and the second on those of the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. The entries are arranged according to the museum accession number, but the plates are arranged chronologically so that one can quickly follow the evolution of epigraphic style, which is summarised in a brief introductory essay.

The vast store of information presented in these catalogues allowed further studies of the general stylistic evolution of woodwork, as with Lamm’s 1936 study on Fatimid woodwork, French connections with Egypt have meant that the Louvre has also amassed a fine collection of Islamic, particularly Egyptian, woodwork, and the pieces there and their inscriptions are available in the 1982 catalogue by Elie Anglade. Mayer’s 1938 list of woodcarvers and their works is based on the signed pieces known at that time, but many have been added since then. These are the major works for studying the inscriptions on Islamic woodwork, for most other articles treat individual masterpieces or periods.

**Inscriptions** on wood can be carved in relief or incised, and paint was often added to enhance legibility. At the end of the eleventh century, the technique of marquetry, in which small pieces of wood and other precious substances are closely fitted in interlocking patterns, was introduced, and long bands with inscriptions carved in relief were used to frame and enclose marquetry fields on mihrabs and mihrabins. These fancy objects were expensive gifts, and the inscriptions on them show that they were often made as part of a full decorative and pointed campaign. These pieces of inscribed wood are therefore useful for studying the art of the period developed within the Islamic lands during medieval times.
Early Period

Inscriptions were not used on the earliest pieces of woodwork carved in the Islamic lands, to judge from several dozen carved panels from the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem or the many pieces carved with a bevelled or slanted cut associated with Iraq. Inscribed woodwork became popular under the Tulunids, governors of Egypt from 868 to 905. The largest and most famous example is the Kufic inscription that ran around the interior arcade just below the roof of the mosque that Ahmad b. Tulun built in Cairo between 876 and 879. The Kufic letters measure some 15–19 cm high but an astounding 1,888 metres long. They are meticulously carved in high relief with a rounded upper surface and sober curves. The stems of the letters rise only a little above the line of writing to create squat letters that are deliberately stretched out horizontally.

Other similarly inscribed pieces can be ascribed to Tulunid Egypt on stylistic grounds. One is a rectangular panel, probably teak, from a frieze found in the Ayn al-Sirra cemetery near Cairo (Arts of Islam 1976, no. 42), narrow bands with a Koranic inscription in a squat Kufic script border a central field with compartments enclosing lobed arches and ram's horns. Another piece is a panel of thin teak veneer (ibid., no. 43) with blessings to its owner in a bevelled style.

The care with which these friezes and similar pieces have been carved is evident when they are compared to an unusual group of contemporary Egyptian panels inscribed with the titles to houses and other property (David-Weill 1931, plates IV-VI, Anglade 1968, no. 20). These property deeds are carved in much flatter relief, and the letters are often crowded. They typically contain several lines of Kufic text, with the invocation and blessings to God followed by a description of the house with shops and dependencies and the owner's name and profession. Dated examples range between 548/1152 and 589/1192, and these wooden property deeds are important evidence for domestic life in Egypt in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. They are apparently an Egyptian specialty, although similar examples carved on limestone are known from Jerusalem.

From the mid-tenth century in Egypt, new types of wooden fittings for tombs and shrines, such as small portable mihrabs and doors, were carved in a new style (David-Weill 1931, plates IX-X). Many of these pieces were clearly intended for Shi'ite buildings, for the mihrabs contain the names of the twelve imams and the door belonged to a tomb for a member of the 'Alid Tabataba'i family who died in 486/999. In style, the inscriptions show the embryonic development towards stylized script; the letters are taller and more elongated, the ends thicken and divide into bilobes, and a few tails curve like swan's necks. The foliated style turns into full-blown foliated script on a pair of doors (David-Weill 1931, plate XI) added to the Azhar Mosque by the caliph al-Hakim in 490/1099.

From the end of the eleventh century to the beginning of the thirteenth, a splendid group of large wooden furnishings were endowed to mosques and shrines in Egypt and Syria. They constitute some of the finest examples of the marquetry technique found in the Islamic lands, and the many inscriptions on them not only provide fixed dates for these wooden pieces but also help us to understand why these pieces were commissioned. The earliest extant example is the minbar that the Fatimid vizier Badr al-Jamali ordered for the shrine of Husayn at Aesalon in 584/1189-91 and later transferred to Helbon (RCEA 2790-91). Other fine pieces in Egypt include two portable mihrabs and a cenotaph added to the shrine of Sayyida Na'ida and Sayyida Rayaya by the caliph al-Mustadi (RCEA 3543 and 3560) and a minbar ordered by the vizier al-Salih Tala'i for the 'Amri mosque at Qasr in 550/1155-6 (RCEA 3567). Even finer pieces were made for the Zangid ruler Nur al-Din in Syria, including the mihrab which he added to the Maqam Ibrahim in the citadel of Aleppo in 563/1167-8 (MCJA Alep, plates XVI-VII) and the minbar which he commissioned the following year for the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem (RCEA 3528). Perhaps the finest example of this school of woodcarving (see Figure 10.56), it was destroyed by arson in 1969.

Rich wooden furnishings continued to be commissioned under the Ayyubids, as attested by the wealth of woodwork in the mausoleum.

10.56 Detail of the wooden minbar ordered by Nur al-Din Zangi in 563/1167-8 for the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem (after van Niechen, MCJA Jerusalem, plate XX).
that the Ayyubid sultan al-Kamil built in 608/1211 over the grave of the Imam al-Shafi’i in the southern cemetery of Cairo (Wiet 1935). Lintels and doors were inscribed in naskh with the name of the patron, and the unique system of wooden beams and brackets from which lamps were suspended has Kufic inscriptions on a vegetal ground. The fine Kufic inscription continues in a band around the top of the walls with Koran 36 (see Figure 10.57).

The tomb for the Imam al-Shafi’i also contains several large wooden cenotaphs. The finest is the one commissioned by Saladin in 572/1178 (RCGE 3573-3). Another one was ordered in 608/1211 by Saladin’s nephew al-Kamil in honour of his mother (RCGE 3568). Large cenotaphs were made to mark many other graves in the region, as, for example, the one made for the amir Ibn al-B. Tha’lab in 613/1215 (RCGE 3588).

These wooden furnishings were costly gifts. They were made of small pieces of wood intricately inlaid in strapwork patterns, and Nur al-Din’s minbar adds ivory and mother-of-pearl to the repertoire of materials used. They were also important symbolic gestures. Nur al-Din’s minbar was ordered in anticipation of his taking Jerusalem from the Crusaders and was moved there by his nephew Saladin when he regained the city two decades later.

The inscriptions underscore the polemic use of these expensive wooden furnishings. The long historical texts include the names and titles of the donors, which are composed with lengthy honorifics, epithets and eulogies suited to the occasion. The foundation inscription on Nur al-Din’s minbar, for example, asks God to glorify Nur al-Din’s victories, extend his power, heighten his signs, spread his emblems and standards to the two ends of the world, glorify the friends of his empire, and disgrace those who disregard his grace. The inscription on the cenotaph ordered by Saladin for al-Shafi’i’s tomb lists the Imam’s genealogy twelve generations back to the Prophet in imitation of the lengthy genealogies given on Shi’ite pieces.

The non-historical texts on these wooden furnishings were also chosen to suit the occasion. The text on Bedr al-Jamali’s minbar for the shrine of Husayn is a careful composed message that ends with a hadith in which the Prophet declares his two legacies to be the Koran and his family. One of the earliest examples of an inscribed hadith, it clearly was a vindication of Shi’ite claims to legitimacy and cited consciously as a justification for refurbishing the shrine (Wiet 1924).

Koranic verses were similarly polemic. The text around al-Shafi’i’s cenotaph begins with Koran 5:33–41, saying that man achieves nothing without striving but that should be done, he will achieve a complete reward. The citation was surely chosen to refer to Saladin’s successful campaigns in Egypt. A more extensive programme of Koranic verses occurs on a splendid wooden cenotaph from the Mosque of al-Husayn in Cairo. The inscriptions on it, all Koranic, account for more than half the surface decoration and present a coherent programme of Shi’ite esoteric dogma (Williams 1967).

The inscriptions on these wooden furnishings were crafted to enhance legibility. Many of the texts are carved with thick rounded letters that rise above the flat background plane, which is decorated with a thin undulating scroll. Slightly different styles of script were used to differentiate different types of text. On the minbar added to the shrine of Sayyida Ruqayya, for example, the Koranic frame bands are done in Kufic on a scroll ground, while the two-line historical text is in floriated Kufic. Cursive, introduced in the mid-twelfth century, made historical texts easier to read. The best example is the foundation text on Nur al-Din’s minbar, which is not only written in thick cursive letters that project above the delicate arabesque scroll in the background, but also painted in white to enhance visibility from afar. Colour was also used to pick out letters, as on a Koranic frieze from the cenotaph for al-Kamil’s mother in which the letters were painted red.

Different styles, techniques and texts were deliberately juxtaposed. An impost from the tomb of Sayyida Naﬁsa, for example, contains a five-line historical text in typical Ayyubid cursive, a frame band with Koranic verses in cursive set against a floral ground, and two lines from another Koranic verse in large square Kufic inlaid with thin bands of ivory and set on a fine ground of mafrashgiyya, the lattice-like screen of turned wood that became typical of later woodwork in the Islamic lands. In the tomb for the Imam al-Shafi’i, different scripts (cursive and Kufic on a floral ground) contained different types of text (historical and Koranic).

The numerous signatures on these wooden furnishings also show us the high status of woodcarvers and the pre-eminance of an Alepian family in this craft. The minbar ordered by Nur al-Din for the Mosque of Ibrahim is signed by Marlali b. Salam (RCGE 3576), and the minbar which he ordered for the Aqsa mosque is signed by four craftsmen (from Aleppo) (RCGE 3582). One of them, Salam b. Marlali, was probably the son of the craftsman who signed the minbar, and the three others, two of whom were brothers and sons of a certain Yahyia, were also from Aleppo. The cenotaph ordered by Saladin for the tomb of Imam al-Shafi’i is signed by the woodcarver Djallul al-najatī ‘Uhayd known as Ibn Marlali, clearly another son of the craftsman who had made the other minbar in Aleppo a decade before.

The Maghrib had a particularly strong tradition of endowing fine wooden furnishings to mosques, in part because of abundant timber available in forests there. These fine pieces, especially minbars, were signs of sovereignty and were continually repaired and refurbished, and the inscriptions on these pieces are important evidence in tracing the changing sectarian schisms and political struggles in the region. The earliest minbars are known only through texts, such as the one ordered by the Rustemid ruler Idris I in 742/764 for the mosque at Tiemcen (RCGE 354) and reinscribed by his son Idris II in 769/1364 (RCGE 97). The oldest extant example, the minbar added to the congregational mosque of Jaraywana, Tunisia in 248/863–65, was imported from Iraq and contains no inscriptions, but one from a century later, the minbar for the Andalusiyin Mosque in Fez (Doddès 1993, no. 417), shows how these minbars became potent symbols of sovereignty.
Tarrasse (1942) and Bloom (in Dodds 1932: 249-57) untangled the complicated history of this minbar, which charts the changing fate of Fez, the key city in the struggles between the Shī‘ite Fatimids of Tunisia and the Sunni Unaysyads of Spain. Two rectangular cedar panels with foliated Kufic are inscribed with the date 359/968 and Koran 3:46, an allusion to the minbar’s function as the site not only of the weekly sermon (jumu‘ah) but also of the second call to prayer (iqmār). These panels were part of the original minbar ordered by the local ruler, Muhammad b. Ziri, who served as client of the Fatimids at this time. Buluggin’s name, however, must have been removed when the backrest of the minbar was reused, for panels from the backrest are inscribed with the name of al-Mansur, chamberlain to the Spanish Unaysyad caliph Hisham, and the date Jumada II 367/459H. The new historical text, carved in a similar style to that on the rectangular panels, was added just after the Unaysyads retook the city. The Unaysyads were content to leave the rectangular panels with the earlier date and Koranic verses, but the original historical text on the backrest, which probably contained not only Buluggin’s name and titles but also those of his Fatimid suzerain as well as Shī‘ite formulas and benedictions, was anathema. The original backrest may have been sent back to Cordova as a trophy, as was done sixty years earlier with the backrest from another minbar in Asia. Prominently displaying the ruler’s name on fine wooden furnishings in the major congregational mosque continued to be an important symbol of sovereignty in this disputed region in the eleventh century. This is clear from the minbar at Qayrawan, where the Zirid ruler al-Mu‘izz b. Badis [r. 1016-62] erected a splendid wooden maqsura (see Figure 10.58) to the right of the earlier minbar, which may have been restored at this time. A bold inscription below the cresting at the top of the maqsura names the patron and says that he paid for the work from the alms tax (mākār) since God will not neglect to reward those who do such good things. Work was carried out under the vizier Abu'l-Qasim. The band closes with a long Koranic text [62:1-5], saying that everything in the heavens and the earth declares the praises of the sovereign, the sovereign, who bestows goodness on whomever he wishes. The work can be dated to 413-14/1023-34, for the vizier mentioned in the inscription was only in office for one year (RCEA 3133, date corrected in vol. 16, p. 271). No mention is made of the Fatimids, and the inscription does not contain the titles bestowed on al-Mu‘izz by the Fatimid caliph, who sent an embassy in 414/1023-5 rewarding al-Mu‘izz with sumptuous presents and the high caliphal title, Sharaf al-Dawla wa‘Adhuda ('Nobility of the State and its Right Arm'). Rather, the maghira is probably part of al-Mu‘izz’s efforts to distance himself from the Shī‘ite Fatimids and placate the population who were staunch Maliki Sunnis.

The style of the carving underscores the message on the Qayrawan maqsura. To enhance legibility, the woodcarver headed the edges of the Arabic letters and rounded their upper surfaces so that the bold inscription is set off from the richly floriated ground and the name of the patron is visible from afar. Unlike contemporary inscriptions by al-Mu‘izz’s overlord, the Fatimids in Egypt, which were done in floriated Kufic, this inscription is done in Kufic with knotted stems. As Pluot (1928, 1936) noted, it is a rare and early example of this style of script which is usually associated with the eastern Islamic lands. In both text and style, then, the inscription separates al-Mu‘izz from the Fatimids, a trend that would culminate two decades later when al-Mu‘izz’s replacement the name of the Fatimids with that of the ‘Abbasids in the khatba.

The tradition of fine inscribed minbars continued in the Maghrib under the Almoravids and Almohads. The former were strict and conservative followers of the Maliki sect, who governed the Maghrib from 1050 to 1147. Yusuf b. Tashfin, the real founder of the empire [r. 1061-1106], donated one to the mosque at Nador sometime before 1079/1676 (RCEA 3508). Another in the mosque of Algiers, signed by a certain Muhammad, is dated 1 Rajab 480/14 June 1087 (RCEA 2386). The finest is the one ordered from Cordova by Yusuf’s son ‘Ali (r. 1106-62). Perhaps modelled on one in Cordova itself made for the Unaysyads, it was designated for the mosque which ‘Ali built in Marrakesh c. 1120 but was later transferred to the Kutubiyya mosque there (Dodds 1992, no. 115). It is decorated with strapwork bands executed in marquetry of precious woods and ivory, and is comparable to the contemporary one made in 538/1143 for the Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fez (Tarrasse 1948). A fifth Almoravid minbar was made for the congregational mosque at Tlemcen in Ramadhan 535/May 1143 (RCEA 3509). The fine quality of the five surviving examples and their elaborate inscriptions with the patron’s name and date show that these minbars continued to be significant signs of sovereignty. One type of inscribed wooden furnishing is distinct to congregational mosques in the Maghrib: the ‘amsha, an auxiliary wooden mihrab erected in the centre of the court façade of the prayer hall. Set in the doorway of the axial nave leading to the mihrab, it was used by worshipers in the court. The front side facing the court was traditionally the most elaborately decorated, and the earliest ones were inscribed with the date. According to the Rewal al-Qatib, for example, one in the Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fez bore an inscription saying that this ‘amsha was made (majat) in Sha‘ban 234/July 843 (RCEA 3531), thus under the Almoravids, and the ‘amsha in the Andalusian Mosque there bears an inscription at the top saying that it was finished in Muharram 608/July 1210 (Tarrasse 1943), thus under the Almohads. The outer face of the ‘amsha, the one exposed to rain and the elements, has often deteriorated so that the ‘amsha had to be replaced. The one in the Qarawiyyin Mosque, for example, was replaced in 1189 by the Marinids, and although preserved, the outer face of the replacement has also deteriorated.

Inscribed wooden furnishings for mosques were also made in the eastern Islamic lands, but they do not seem to have formed such a concerted programme, and most of the examples that
survive were made for small villages and endowed by local patrons. The Maydan Mosque in Ahvaz, a village west of Nishabur in central Iran, for example, preserves a wooden minbar dated 466/1073 and a wooden mihrab dated 476/1170 (Bingham 1993). Four columns from the congregational mosque of Khiva in the Khwazun oasis are inscribed in simple Kufic with the name of the patron, the jurist Tadjil Ali b. Tadjil Ali b. Tadjil Ali, who states that he paid for them himself, and a wooden mihrab from the village mosque at J Solidar in the upper Zereshk Valley is similarly inscribed with a hadith about guarding the frontiers (Blair 1992, nos 56 and 21). A minbar ordered in 549/1155 for the 'Amadiyya mosque in Mosul (Arts of Islam 1976, no. 453) is inscribed along the handrail with the name of the patron, the amir Hisham al-Din, and along the rail parallel to it with the names of the three Georgian craftsmen, 'Ali b. al-Nahl, Ibrahim b. Jamil and 'Ali b. Salama.

Wood was more important in the eastern Islamic lands for furnishing tombs and shrines. Presenting a fancy cenotaph or other fittings to the tomb of a saint or local hero was a way of annexing his popularity. Five wooden plaques (Blair 1992, no. 10) bear blessings to the Twelver Imams and a short text recording the restoration of a shrine (al-baq'a) by the Buyid amir 'Adud al-Dawla in 365/973-4. They may have been part of his restoration of one of the Shi'ite shrines near Kufa. A bier in the Israel Museum is inscribed in simple Kufic with eschatological texts about the deceased's testimony and faith in the Twelve Imams. This rectangular piece (see Figure 10.56) from the centre of one of the long sides, for example, contains the end of the text about the deceased's testimony that death and the grave are real, that the interrogation by Munkir and Nakir in the grave is real, that the resurrection, the arising, the assembling, the accounting, the weighing, the way, Paradise and hellfire are real.

This is my belief, in it I died and in it I will be resurrected (baq'a wal-l'ma-bhath wa'al-nashir / wa'l-husna wa'l-bhi-bihal wa'l-mizan / wa'al-nizam wa'l-nilam / waq'a hadha t'iqad-ali ala'la-yi mutw' wa'alayhi al-sRadi).

The bier is one of the problematic Buyid objects reportedly found at Rayy but whose authenticity has been doubted. Shephard had the bier tested in several ways, and it seems plausible. It is made of Pinus brutia, a tree no longer native to Iran, and radiocarbon dating produced a result in the tenth century (Shephard 1994, Appendix A-6). This makes it an important piece for the history of Iranian epigraphy. Chilman (ibid.) noted, for example, that it used an unnecessary support for the bands, an orthographic feature which he often found in early Arabic texts written by Persians. One would want to compare this text with that on a grave cover in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, with a similar invocation to the Twelve Imams in foliated Kufic script.

Several cenotaphs were also endowed to the tomb of the seventh imam, Musa al-Kadhim, at Baghdad. One large example of multiply wood (RCEA 1976, Arts of Islam 1976, no. 453) was given by the 'Abbassid caliph al-Mustansir in 624/1227. The lid is inscribed with Koran 3:153, the verse vividly depicting the rights of the Shi'ites as 'people of the house' (abi al-bayt), followed by the patron's name and date. The main decoration, a large inscription around the sides in Kufic with knotted stems, gives the imam's name and genealogy back to the Prophet.

These tombs and shrines were not always dedicated to Shi'ite saints. The finest ensemble surviving from the period is a set of folding doors from the tomb of Mahmud of Ghazna in Afghanistan (Blair 1994, Survey, plate 1463). Transferred to the Fort of Agra in 1842, they are now in the Agra Museum. The inscription (RCEA 3378) invokes God's blessing on Mahmud, who died in 'Rabia II 421/29 April 1032, but the doors are not necessarily contemporaneous with his death, and the style of the script, Kufic on a scroll ground, suggests that the doors might have been added in the twelfth century during a revival of interest in his cult.

Wood was also plentiful in Anatolia, and with the opening up of the region to Islam following the battle of Manzikert in 465/1071, wood was commonly used to construct and furnish the many new mosques and shrines needed there. Doors, shutters, Korans stands, boxes and other pieces were often inscribed with the names of the patron and woodcarver. As elsewhere, minbars were particularly elaborate, and many are preserved either in their original mosques or in the Ethnography Museum, Ankara. Oral (1969) catalogued a series of twenty-four examples dating from the eleventh to the sixteenth century. The typical Anatolian example was heavily inscribed, with inscription bands along the rails bordering the stairs, large panels on the doors and frieze at the bottom, and smaller panels with signatures of craftsmen on the sides. Texts include popular Koranic verses, hadith and long historical inscriptions with the names and titles of the patron. One of the earliest is the marquetry minbar ordered by Mas'ud I for the 'Ali al-Din Mosque at Konya in 530/1135 and carved by the master Makkh, the pilgrim from Akhtash (RCEA 3300-11). The tradition continued under the amirates. The mosque that the Ereboghi amir Sulayman built at Beybeh in the end of the thirteenth century, for example, contains fine carved woods doors dated 689/1290-1290 (RCEA 5081), forty-eight wooden columns with muqarnas capitals, and a fine minbar (see Figure 10.60). A line of cursive directly over the doorway gives the foundation inscription in the name of the amir Sulayman (RCEA 5083). The names of God and the four orthodox caliphs (Muhammad, Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Usman) are written in blond wood in a panel of square Kufic set on a screen at the top, and the whole is framed by a cursive band with the Throne Verse (Koran 2:255).

Foliated wooden stands for the Koran (Turkish rahle) were also in use, often inscribed with Koranic texts, hadith or foundation inscriptions naming the donor. One of the most exotic is a lacquered wooden lectern given to the shrine of Jalal al-Din Rumi at Konya in 678/1280-1280 (RCEA 4769, Ettinghausen and Grabar 1987, fig.
The interior face where the Koran was set is painted with a double-headed eagle and a lion on a background of arabesques. The exterior bears an elegant cursive inscription with the foundation text naming the donor, Janal ad-Din, who was in the service of the Sultan vizier Salah Aţa.

Wooden cenotaphs were often covered with inscriptions including prayers, Koranic verses, hadith and historical texts naming the deceased, the donor and/or the artisan. Several fine examples in the shrine museum at Konya were made for the mystic and his disciples. Rumi's cenotaph [RCEA 468:1] bears the typical decoration of a long text with his florible titles, name, genealogy and date of his death [613/1217 Dec 1273], and the signature of the artisan, ‘Abd al-Wahid b. Salim, who is identified as the architect (mix’at). Other examples, such as one from the mausoleum of Sayyid Mahmud Khayrani in Akşehir [Anatolian Civilizations 1983, no. 160], are inscribed with poems by Rumi.

There has also been a long tradition of woodworking in the Yemen, although few examples survive from the early period. Ceilings, in particular, were elaborately coffered affairs with rich painted decoration, but to judge from the tenth-century one preserved in the Great Mosque at Sana’a, they were generally anepigraphic. Cenotaphs furnish better examples of inscribed woodwork. The most notable is the one made for al-Sayyida Arwa, consort of the Sulayhid ruler al-Mukarram ‘Ali b. Ashgar [1016–91] and his successor. Under her auspices, the capital was moved from Sana’a to Dhar al-Hiba, north of Ta’izz, and the old palace there was converted into the city’s congregational mosque in 483/1090–91. The queen was buried in the north-west corner of the mosque, and her large wooden cenotaph is inscribed with a lower band of richly foliated Kufic using the same style of script that is found on the plaster mihrab in the mosque (Lewcock and Smith 1974, plate 11).

Late Period

Wood continued to be the favoured material for fixed and portable furnishings, minbars and Koran-stands in the many mosques and tombs built in Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks (1250–1250). The precedent was clearly the tomb that the Ayyubid sultan al-Kamil had built over the grave of the Imam al-Shafi‘i in 608/1212 [Wiet 1933]. It remained an important shrine in Mamluk times, and the magnificent wooden dome was restored in 885/1480 by the Mamluk sultan Qa‘ibiyah, as noted by several small wooden and marble plaques, and again in 1186/1772 by the Ottoman ‘Ali Bey, later pasha of St Jean d’Acre, as commemorated by the long inscription painted in gold around the base of the dome. The earliest and finest woodwork ensemble preserved from Mamluk Egypt is that in the mausoleum of Sultan Qala‘un on the main street of Cairo. Wood was used for the ceilings, windows, doors, screens and cenotaph there (see Figure 10.61), and many wooden plaques and lintels are boldly inscribed with the sultan’s name and titles [MCIa Egypte 1, nos 855–9]. The centrepiece of the tomb is the sultan’s wooden cenotaph. The historical text [MCIa Egypte 1, no. 63] partly masked by later marble plaques, is inscribed with the Throne verse [Koran 2:253] and Qala‘un’s name and titles. The cenotaph is surrounded by a superb screen of turned wood [mashabbiyya] inscribed with the name of Qala‘un’s son, al-Nasir Muhammad (MCIa Egypte 1, no. 911). It was probably added in 703/1301–4 when al-Nasir rebuilt the minaret of the complex [MCIa Egypte 1, nos 88–90, RCEA 5160–99]. Many other funerary complexes built under the Mamluk sultans of the Bahri line (1250–1389) were similarly furnished with fine ensembles of inscribed woodwork.

Thanks to David Weill’s 1931 catalogue of the woodwork in the Cairo Museum, we can follow the stylistic evolution of wooden inscriptions under the Bahri Mamluks. The naskh script is similar to that used under the Ayyubids, and the closely set, thick letters lend an impression of massiveness and solemnity. One of the finest examples is the carved frieze from the congregational mosque built in 719–20/1320–30 on the Darb al-Ahmar by Al-‘Adil Mu‘ayyad, cup-bearer and son-in-law of al-Nasir Muhammad. Like the carved frieze associated with the splendid mosque of the Bahri sultan Qalâ‘un in Aleppo. It contains Koranic verses set in cartouches.
separated by rounds and is comparable in grandeur to the Kufic frieze made to decorate the mosque of Ibn Tulun some four and a half centuries earlier. Painted inscriptions were also introduced in the mid-fourteenth century. Another Koranic frieze from al-Mandali's mosque, for example, has white letters outlined in black against a red ground.

Fine woodwork continued to be made for mosques and shrines under the Burji or Circassian Mamluk s (1389–1517). Most Mamluk buildings to survive date from that period, and so do most pieces of inscribed woodwork. They include Koranic and other religious texts, foundation inscriptions, and cartouches with the sultan's name. Most are carved in relief, but painted inscriptions, which are cheaper, became increasingly popular.

The mosque complex built by al-Mu'ayyad (r. 1413–31) presents a good example of the range of inscribed woodwork in a later Mamluk building (MECA Egypte 1, no. 150–9). It had a lavishly decorated wooden ceiling, a fine wooden minbar inlaid with ivory, a wooden grille over the fountain, and a dikeba or lectern for Koran readers. The cenotaphs in the necropolis have splendid inscriptions in foliated Kufic, a deliberate revival of an earlier style.

Even finer woodwork was used in the tomb complex completed by Qayyibay in 879/1474 in the northern cemetery (MECA Egypte 3, no. 295–99). Painted and gilded friezes ring the walls (Blair and Bloom 1994, fig. 118), and wooden plaques reiterate the sultan's name. Fine wooden furnishings include a Koran stand dated Rabi' I 878/ August 1473 and the sultan's cenotaph within a wooden screen. The script used on these later pieces became increasingly crowded, and on many pieces made for Qayyibay the letters are so tightly packed that the background is almost obscured.

Of the various inscribed wooden furnishings, the most elaborate were minbars. Donating minbars to mosques and shrines continued to be an important act of piety under the Mamluks, and the donor's name was usually inscribed on the doors at the bottom of the steps and on the back beneath the bullion dome. The minbar ordered by the first Mamluk sultan Baybars I for the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina has been destroyed, and the earliest Mamluk minbar to survive is the one ordered by Sultan Lajin for the Mosque of Ibn Tulan on 10 Safar 692/8 December 1296 (RCEA 2019–20). Another contemporary minbar was ordered by the amir Qasumunqur, governor of Aleppo, for the Great Mosque there (RCEA 5702–3) at the same time that he restored the miṣqatn in the mosque (RCEA 5260 and repeated 48 2364). Sending a minbar and other fancy woodwork to Arabia was a sign of sovereignty over the holy shrines. The Mamluk sultans Khoshqadam and Qayyibay, for example, sent minbars there in 867/1465–6 and 879/1476–7. In the later fifteenth century, the quality of these minbars declined, as seen by the one ordered by Qayyibay for his complex inside the city walls (MECA Egypte 7, no. 3710). Many of these minbars are signed, and the signatures show that woodworking continued to be a high-status craft in the Mamluk period. The minbar ordered by Baybars for Medina was made by Abu Bakr b. Yusaq. Qasunqur's minbar in Aleppo was made by Muhammad b. 'Ali, a craftsman from Mosul who introduced ivory inlay, a feature that was slowly incorporated into Cairene examples. Teams of workers sometimes executed these large and intricate minbars.

The minbar ordered by the amir Kibbugha for the congregational mosque of Harran and completed in mid-Sha'ban 701/25 April 1302 (RCEA 1756) was made by 'Ali b. Makki and 'Abd Allah Ahmad, inlaid by Abu Bakr b. Muhammad and decorated by 'Ali b. Uthman.

The inscriptions also show us that these woodcarvers often had long careers. Ahmad b. 'Isa b. Ahmad al-Danqyati, for example, made minbars over a twenty-five-year period in the mid-fifteenth century: he made one, later transferred to the complex of al-Ashraf Barsbay, for the mosque of al-Ghamri when it was restored by 866/1466 and another for the madrasa of Abu Bakr b. Mustir in 885/1480–1. The names of Mamluk woodcarvers, however, do not indicate a family relationship between craftsmen, as had happened occasionally in earlier times.

The abundant timber available in the Maghrib meant that wood continued to be an important decorative element in the later period. The typical building from the Marinid period in the region

16.61 Wooden screen added around the cenotaph in the tomb of Qala'an in Cairo in 709/1303–4.
had a tiled dado, carved plaster along the top of the walls, and extensive decoration in carved wood for cornices, lintels, eaves and ceilings. In addition, there were turned wooden screens, grilles and balustrades. Almost all of these wooden pieces contain carved and painted inscriptions, but despite their profusion, the inscriptions play a relatively minor role [see Figure 10.62]. The texts are usually set in cartouches and barely stand out from the dense background of floral and vegetal ornament. The scripts are heavily stylised, and the phrases often repeat or read in mirror reverse. The inscriptions seem to have been used more for aesthetic or decorative reasons, to play off different scripts or to fill the ground, than to communicate information. The one exception is the main foundation inscription which often rings the courtyard beneath the awning. It is usually written in a thick nastal script and is distinguished from the repeating cartouches as a band containing a continuous running text.

The most spectacular wooden pieces to survive from the later period in the Maghreb are elaborately coffered ceilings done in the technique known today as astazouara, in which supplementary laths are interlaced into the rafters supporting the roof to form decorative geometric patterns. These ceilings, which had developed under the Almohads, became extremely popular in the region from the thirteenth century to the fifteenth. Many of them contain small inscriptions, but the texts are repetetive and the words are almost swallowed up by the intricate interlaced patterns. A square ceiling that once covered the Torre de las Damas of the Partial palace at the Alhambra (Doddns 1953, no. 116), for example, bears small Kufic inscriptions in the octagonal zone and cartouche inscriptions with the Nasrid motto in the sixteen-sided zone. Similar small inscriptions in different scripts decorate many of the other wooden ceilings still in situ. Doors, shutters and other portable furnishings were often done in marquetry, and here too inscriptions play a relatively minor role. Fine cabinet doors for the Alhambra (ibid., no. 115), for example, are anepigraphic.

As in Morocco, wooden beams, consoles and eaves in Spanish buildings were decorated with cartouches crowded with thick letters set on a densely carved floral ground. One of the finest ensembles to survive decorates the magnificent Cuarto Dorado, the façade of the Comares Palace in the Alhambra (Torres Balbás 1949, fig. 201). These wooden inscriptions resemble those carved in stucco for the Nasrids. Wooden beams were often decorated with carved and painted inscriptions, including Kuranic verses.

The typical Marinid madrasa in Morocco had been decorated with inscribed wooden lintels, eaves and awnings, and the same style was repeated in two centuries later at the Ben Yusuf Madrasa in Marrakesh, the finest example of Sahid architecture, the largest madrasa in the Maghreb, and the only surviving example of one built under Sahid patronage. The foundation text around the court tells us that it is not, as commonly thought, a restoration of a Marinid madrasa, but a new building ordered by 'Abd Allah al-Ghālib in 972/1564-5. Good details of these wooden inscriptions and their stucco counterparts are published in Hill and Golvin’s (1976) photographic survey of Islamic architecture in North Africa.

In addition to the standard repeating inscriptions in cartouches, patrons in the Maghreb wanted to record their major donations to mosques, and fine wooden furnishings were often inscribed with the patron’s name and the date. The minbar added to the mosque at Tanza by the Marinids, for example, is inlaid with ivory and ebony and bears traces of a dedicatory inscription. The ‘amara continued to be inscribed in the Centre of the front side, as on the one in the mosque at Fez al-Ja’did, founded by the Marinid sultan Abu Yusuf in 1376. Abu Hafs, son of the Marinid sultan Abu Sa‘id, had a large cedar mazār placed in front of the mihrab in the Qaraawiyyn Mosque in Fez in the early fourteenth century. Measuring nine spans high by thirty spans across by twenty-five spans deep, it was decorated with carvings, presumably including an inscription bearing the patron’s name. Pious believers, however, considered the new mazār an embarrassment, and the prince had to have it moved near the doorway. No trace of it survives [Terrasse 1968].
Wooden inscriptions are important evidence in reconstructing the history of venerated congregational mosques in the region. Several wooden inscriptions, for example, record restorations to the Andalusyasr Mosque in Faz (Tunis, 1992). The Marmid Abu Seid Uthman had a plaque with his name inscribed on it set over the door to the library (makhzanaya) which he added to Bab ‘l 8 July 1443, and the Shari‘an Mawlay Imsal had his name and the date 1093/1682 inscribed in a poem on a new wooden awning which he had erected over the Marmid fountain in the corner of the courtyard.

In contrast to Egypt, Syria or the Maghrib, where much of the inscribed woodwork is associated with court patronage, the furnishing and fittings for mosques and tombs in Iran and Central Asia reflect a broader range of patrons from a cross-section of society. Exquisite pieces from this period are scattered in a variety of sites and collections, and little work has been done on the inscriptions beyond Leo Bronestein’s survey of decorative woodwork from the Islamic period in the Survey of Persian Art. Most of the pieces are furnishings, such as minbars, cenotaphs and doors, but a unique sandalwood box inlaid with polychrome marquetry, gold fittings and silver lining is preserved in the treasury at Topkapi Palace (Lentz and Lowry 1989, no. 40). Grube 1989). Its cover is inscribed with cartouches bearing the name of the Timurid prince Ulugh Beg and his titles of shah (royal rank) and sulthan. The box is exquisitely carved with arabesques and a writhing dragon set between the cartouches, and the full use of the prince’s name and titles on the cover shows that such a fine wooden object was valuable enough to grace the household, perhaps made, like the famous jade ewer in Lisbon (see Figure 13.8), to mark his assumption of the sultanate in 850/1442.

Only a handful of wooden minbars are preserved from the later period in Iran, and they reflect a lower rank of patronage than those from other regions. A minister and merchant, Jamal al-Din Husayn b. ‘Umar, for example, donated a new minbar in the mosque at NA in central Iran in 711/November-December 1311 (RCEA 5935, Survey, plate 1464). It was made by the master Mahnis al-Shah b. Muhammad, the designer (nadjdi) from Kirmanshah. A comparable minbar endowed to the Friday Mosque at Isfahan in the early fourteenth century reflects contemporary innovations in calligraphy and epigraphy, such as inscriptions in square Kufic beside naturalistic leaves in high relief (Noci 1983). A rare Timurid example is the small but fine minbar made for the congregational mosque in the village of Khwaih Rud near Kharjind in north-eastern Iran (O’Kane 1987, no. 38; Golombek and Wilber 1988, no. 86). The panel at the back (now in the Shrine museum in Mashhad) says that the minbar and an elegant kanz were donated to the mosque in 908/1502-3 by Majd al-Din Muhammed al-Khwafi. He can be identified as a vizier of the Timurid sultan Husayn Bayqara who had been removed from office in the 1400s, retired to his home town, and presented this minbar as a memento to the congregational mosque there.

By contrast, a large number of wooden cenotaphs are preserved in the eastern Islamic lands, and the inscriptional evidence that they convey is fascinating. In the thirteenth century, Ulugh Beg at Bukhara built the shrine (thuluth) of Abu Ashtam b. Mubarak in the same city in 707/1305-6 by Yusuf al-Shahidi. The text at the top of the box has the large text of a wide range of people. A group from the area around Sultaniyya, the capital of the Ilkhanids in north-western Iran, date from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries (Curatola 1987). Many were made for the tombs of local imams or shaykhs, but an extraordinary example is the cenotaph of Esther (from the so-called mausoleum of Esther and Mordecai at Hamadan. Although typically Ilkhanid in style, it is inscribed in Hebrew. Large cenotaphs were made for the graves of noted Sufis and their descendants. One in the Bukhara Museum, for example, was made for Yahya b. Ahmad, a grandson of the noted mystic Sayf al-Din Bakharzhi who died in 536. Smaller cenotaphs with incised inscriptions were made for local patrons: two examples, one dated 754/ 1355-6, are preserved in the isolated shrine of Tabshar near Radkan in eastern Mazandaran. More examples survive from the fourteenth century, particularly from the Caspian region. Biyar and Yarshater catalogued several still in use in remote villages in eastern Macedarad (919, 1952), and others have been looted and are now in museums abroad. A large one in the Rhode Island School of Design (Survey, plate 1473; Lentz and Lowry 1989, no. 101), for example, was ordered for the shrine of Abu‘l-Qasim in Ramadan 977/February 1475 by Goshthahm, a ruler of the local Badushan line.

Finely carved wooden doors were also considered suitable furnishings for shrines and tombs. One pair was donated in the early fourteenth century to the mosque in the shrine of the noted mystic Bayazid at Bastam (Survey, plate 1465). Two pairs of doors, one at the main portal (Survey, plate 1467; Blair and Bloom 1994, fig. 73) and another at the entrance to the mausoleum, decorate the shrine that Timur built for the mystic Ahmad Yasavi at Turkistan at the end of the fourteenth century. A set of marquetry doors inlaid with ivory was made for Timur’s tomb, the Guri Mir, at the beginning of the fifteenth century (Survey, plate 1470; Lentz and Lowry 1989, fig. 133), and a contemporary set was made for the entrance to the shrine of Qutb ibn ‘Abbas at the Shahr-i Zinda in the same city in 807/1405-6 by Yusuf al-Shahidi. The hand at the top has a large text in a thuluth with a hadith: the doors of Paradise are open for the poor, mercy aights upon those who are merciful (al-walal al-insan al-fatihah ‘alâ al-faqih’ u’l-islâm na’ma al-mal al-rasmi). Fine wooden doors were also made for local buildings: two sets of doors were donated to an unidentified shrine in Afshtah near Natanz in central Iran by a local notables Sayyid Hani al-Husayni in Ramadan 811/June-July 1408 (A. Godard 1936). Many other examples from the fourteenth century survive in shrines in Mazandaran.

The layout of these wooden doors from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Iran and Central Asia derives from contemporary bookbinding, with a larger central panel sandwiched between two smaller panels. The top panel was almost always inscribed. Sometimes the lower one was too, and occasionally there were other inscriptions running along the central edge. The main texts were usually hadith or maxims in Arabic, Persian or a mixture, with plays on words about doors. One common text, often repeated in miniature paintings from the same period, refers to God, the opener of Gates. The doors to Ahmad Yasavi’s tomb are inscribed: The gate of Paradise is never ajar; Muhammad came through it (bâb al-sâdat mîbarîn al-sâdat). The bronze knockers (Lentz and Lowry 1989, fig. 68) are inlaid with a well-known hadith that the world is only an hour to use it obediently, the same text found on the cenotaph in Rhode Island. The doors to the Guri Mir are inscribed with a similar hadith that the world is transitory. The doors from Afshtah are inscribed with Persian verses about God, the opener, and the well-known Arabic phrase invoking happiness and long life as long as the pigeon coos. These inscriptions might well repay systematic study, for they are important evidence for the development of popular religion and the transition from Arabic to Persian.

The woodworkers of these expensive wooden doors were important craftsmen, who often signed their work, sometimes in prominent places. They were often designated master craftsmen (ustad) and had sometimes completed the pilgrimage to Mecca (mawlid). They are also called woodworker or carpenter (najat) and carver (najati). The craft was handed down from father to son through several generations. Ahmad of Sari, his sons and his grandson, for example, signed several works surviving in shrines in Sari and Babel. The woodcarvers in these small shrines were often local experts. The Afshtah door, for example, is signed by the master Husayn b. ‘Ali, a carpenter and carver from the nearby village of ‘Ubbeh. The names of the woodcarvers of the most elaborate pieces, however, suggest that they may have been recruited from afar. The cenotaph in the Imamzada at Qazvin is signed by Muhammad b. Abdullah b. Abu‘l-Qasim from Isfahan, and the doors to the tomb of Qutb ibn ‘Abbas at the Shahr-i Zinda are signed by Sayyid Yusuf of Shiraz.

These wooden inscriptions also show the latest in epigraphic and calligraphic styles, juxtaposing several styles and mixing styles of script. Square Kufic is used already on the doors from Bastam and appears on several other wood pieces. A second inscription in Kufic was sometimes inserted in some of the main texts in thuluth.