Types of Objects

Tombstones and Other Grave Markers

Despite orthodox prohibition against venerating the dead, the graves of Muslims are usually marked by upright slabs (stele or stele), longitudinal or prismatic blocks, empty rectangular boxes (coneotaphs) or other forms of grave marker. These grave markers are made of different materials, depending on what was available locally. The most exotic was the huge block of nephrite that the Timurid prince Ulugh Beg dragged from Moghalistan in 828/1424 to mark the grave of his father Timur at Samarkand (Semjonov 1948; Masson 1948). Virtually all of the fancier pieces are inscribed. As the epitaphs include the date of the deceased’s death, they provide important social and historical information about conversation, classes, titulature and sectarianism as well as the development of writing styles.

The speed with which tombstones were introduced depended in part on the strength of local customs of burial. Only a few rare examples date to the first two centuries of Islam, but the year 174/790 marks the start of a continuous series of more than 4,000 limestone and marble stele from the Egyptian cemeteries at Aswan and Cairo. Most of them were published in ten massive volumes as part of the Catalogue du Musée arabe du Caire (vols I and II by Hawary and Rashid 1932-9; vols III-V by Wiet 1936-43). A few other examples taken to other museums have been published separately by Walker [1951], Miles [1957], Sourdelle-Thomine 1964 and others.

Tombstones were gradually introduced to other areas in the western Islamic lands. The first surviving example of a grave marker from Qaryawan dates from 233/849, that from Spain, 334/944. The series of tombstones from Dabulak, the coral archipelago in the Red Sea opposite Eritrea, begins around the same time (Schneider 1983). Tombstones were introduced more slowly to the eastern Islamic lands. In Syria, while texts mention cemeteries, the first tombstones survive only from the Fatimid period. Iran had no pre-Islamic tradition of erecting grave markers, and the first surviving tombstone, recently discovered in the Imamzade Jafar at Damghan, dates from around the year 900 [Adle 1984]. It is a rare specimen, and the first series begin later. Recent excavations at Sufat on the Persian Gulf have brought to light sixty inscribed fragments from grave covers (see Figure 14.84) dated between 363/975 and 735/1334 [Lowick 1985], and a series of forty-two stele from Yazd date from the mid-eleventh to the late twelfth century (Ashkar 1983-73, 1973). From medieval times, the number of surviving grave markers increases dramatically, and most studies divide this vast range of material geographically. Some, like the pioneering works by Amari [1875] and Levi-Provençal [1923] on Sicilian and Spanish epitaphs or the more recent one by Zbins [1955] on Tunisia, include chapters on epitaphs in compilations of Arabic inscriptions encompassing whole countries. The majority of studies cover homogeneous collections of tombstones from individual cemeteries, towns or regions—such as the works by Bourry and Lautot [1927] on Sale and Rabat, Deverdun [1956] on Marrakesh, Roy and Poinssot [1960-8] on Qaryawan, Sourdelle-


One of the most complete publications is that by Mozai and Ory [1977] on the epitaphs from Bab al-Saghir, the cemetery outside Damascus. The work contains a chronologically catalogue of the eighty-five tombstones with copious measurements, descriptions, drawings and photographs. The authors summarise their conclusions in several tables that cut across the chronological arrangement, classifying the tombstones by material conditions [shape and material], decoration, formulas inscribed, people commemorated, and palaeography or graphics. The work could well stand as a model for future studies.

Given both the range of material and its heterogeneity, it is no surprise that little attempt has been made to survey and synthesise this vast corpus of epitaphs. One rare exception is Sourdelle-Thomine’s article “Kabe’ (‘Grave’)” in the second edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam.
Grave markers from some areas of the Islamic world, especially North Africa and Egypt, but now also Turkey, are more heavily documented, while those from elsewhere are treated more summarily. Most of the work on grave markers from Iran or Central Asia is hidden in hard-to-find journals (especially Epigraphia Voscolana) or relatively obscure works in Persian or Russian, and there are few syntheses or overviews of it.

The epitaph, known in Arabic as khiṣb ("inscription"), is usually in Arabic, although in later periods Arabic was replaced by or mixed with indigenous languages. Nineteenth-century stelae from Central Asia, for example, are bilingual, Russian and Arabic. The text is usually in prose, but Arabic poetry occurs on a group of ninth-century stele from Sicily, and cartouches with Persian or Turkish verses are characteristic of later examples from Iran, India, and Turkey. At first, the text was carved in lines, often enclosed by a rectangular frame. Later the text was written in panels, cartouches or bands. Over time, both the script and the framing decoration become more elaborate.

These inscriptions were done in a simple Kufic script, but in the eighth and ninth centuries the script was embellished with such decorative devices as the hatch, hook, arc and palmette. The bevelled stems of the letters evolved into floral ornament, often set on an undulating scroll ground. The Egyptian tombstones are particularly important in documenting these changes, as few monumental inscriptions survive from this period.

Cursive scripts were introduced slowly from the tenth century, and bands of angular and cursive were often juxtaposed. In the fourteenth century when the Mongols ruled Iran, inscriptions in square Kufic, resembling Chinese seal script, became popular. The inscription sometimes took on such a decorative shape that it was virtually unreadable, as when Kuran 3:137, the verse containing fasay'd al-thaham, the longest word in the Koran, was sculpted in the shape of a polysyllabic arch [Miles 1939].

The epitaphs had a dual purpose—to record the name of the deceased and to bear witness to his faith. From the earliest known examples, they seem to follow a standardised formula. They begin with the invocation or bezlama. This is followed by several introductory phrases, either set phrases such as familiar Koranic verses, the benediction on the Prophet (jalalu l-dīn), or the hamdala, or sometimes freely composed verses. The texts deal mainly with judgment, resurrection or the transmigration of life's transience with God's everlastingness. Next comes the name of the deceased with his genealogy or titles and the date of his death. The deceased's name is followed by several eulogies, either in his honour or "transferred eulogies", which offer blessings to the person who reads the epitaph. Sometimes the inscription closes with a formula of resurrection, saying that with this testimony the deceased has lived, with it he has died, and with it he shall be resurrected to life.

As the function of these tombstones was to attest or witness, the most common verb to introduce the deceased was shahāda ("testified"). Later this was replaced by tawaffaf ("deceased"). Both of these were ultimately supplanted by a third variant, ḥaḍīla qafir ("this is the grave of"). This form occurs on about one-third of the examples from Egypt and Arabia and then becomes the ubiquitous formula for later epitaphs from all the Islamic lands.

Supplementary texts were often added to this basic statement of testimony. One of the most common is the profession of faith (al-šahādāt), which was often put in the mouth of the deceased. Certain well-known Koranic verses were also popular. They include Koran 112, the final chapter about God's uniqueness and the denial of the Trinity, and a clear rebuke to Christianity. Also popular in all places and periods was the so-called Throne Verse (Koran 2:255), the eloquent statement about the God's dominion over heaven and earth. A similar sentiment is evoked by Koran 5:18, saying that God, His angels, and wise men attest to the one God and that the true religion before God is Islam ("submission"). With its emphasis on atonnement, the quotation is particularly apt on tombstones whose inscriptions used the same verb, saying that the deceased atonned.

Other Koranic texts became popular at different times. Koran 5:32-6, which says that all is permissible except God's face in majesty and magnificence, would seem to be a natural quotation for tombstones, but in fact the first extant example dates only from 1040/1634, after which time it became increasingly popular. It is the main function, for example, on the crested grave cover from Fustat made for Ibrahim b. Ali in 1375/1921 (see Figure 1.4A). Similarly, the phrase that every soul shall taste of death (taken from either Koran 3:185 or 5:90) became widespread from the twelfth century onwards. Other Koranic verses enjoyed local popularity: Koran 3:35 about the vanity of earthly life, for example, is typical of Andalusian tombstones.

Tracing the changing formulas and Koranic quotations in epitaphs from a given area can show us changes in faith and doctrine, as has been done for example on the large corpus of material from Egypt (Wiet 1959, Bloom 1987) and nearby areas (Schneider 1985). For example, a phrase that the worst of the misfortunes for Muslims was the loss of the Prophet occurs more than 500 times in the ninth century but was replaced under Fatimid rule by the Throne Verse 2:255 followed by a phrase evoking God's mercy on the deceased through Muhammad and his pure family.

A few studies discuss the style of carving on grave markers. Ocatia Jimenez (1964), for example, treated a specific local style, that of the 'Almerian' tombstones from Spain. One of the pioneers in the tracing of the stylistic developments of epitaphs is Janine Sourdel-Thomine. Following the method of epigraphic analysis developed by Samuel Flury (1930, 1931) for the inscriptions from Amida, Dinarbekr, she designed alphabetical tables so that one can quickly compare the forms of individual letters and grasp stylistic evolution. For example, in analysing the first 400 tombstones from Egypt, dating from the beginning of the 'Abbasid period before the move to Samarra' in the late eighth century to the establishment of Tulunid power in Egypt in the mid-ninth century, Sourdel-Thomine (1957) sketched six concurrent styles. She has also offered penetrating analyses of later, more elaborate Kufic inscriptions, particularly those of Syria (1957). In her work on the epitaphs from Bab al-Sa'igh, she treated Ayubabi Kufi, the period of the last flowering of Kufic in Syria (1950). In other cases, she analysed not only palaeographic development but also the evolution of decoration, as with the geometric medallions and borders on epitaphs from northern Syria (1951). Careful palaeographic analysis can help to trace the movement of artisans, their status, and the introduction of new styles of script. Schneider (1986), for example, showed how the stonecutter Mubarak al-Makki, who signed several ninth-century tombstones in Cairo, was probably a native of the Hijaz.

Arms and Armour

Perhaps surprisingly, much of the arms and armour produced in the Islamic lands, particularly the finest pieces, is inscribed. Inscriptions occur on everything from helmets, body armour, belts and shields to swords. Texts include a variety of marks of ownership, with inscriptions showing who commissioned the piece, who owned it, or to whom it was entrusted. In addition, many pieces bear Koranic inscriptions and poems related to their function, both practical and symbolic. Most surviving pieces date after 1400, and inscriptions provide one of the few means of localisation as styles of weaponry, particularly those used by successful warriors, spread quickly to become international.

The largest amount of material is now in Istanbul. The Ottomans maintained their royal treasury in the Topkaps Palace, and their royal pieces, including a few early examples of Islamic arms and armour, are preserved as part of the relca collected by the Ottoman sultans and stored in the Pavilions of the Holy Mantle. The Topkaps Collections is now being catalogued, and a forthcoming publication by David Alexander, Ludwik Kulak and Hulya Tescen will include information on the inscriptions. In addition to the royal collection in the Topkaps Palace, the Ottomans also amassed a large collection of utilitarian weaponry, including booty from campaigns against the As Qoyunlu, the Safavids, the Mamluks, and the Europeans in the Balkans. Much of this was stored in the palace arsenal in the converted Byzantine church
of St Irene. In this way, Istanbul became the major repository for Mamluk weapons, many of which were inscribed with the names of the last sultans, as well as European weapons that had been kept in the arsenal at Alexandria. Kalus (1982) has published the inscriptions on many of these pieces.

Other Islamic weapons were captured in campaigns in Europe and are scattered in military and art museums and private collections in Europe and America. Catalogues provide the best introduction to the inscriptions on this material. One of the most recent publications that includes detailed information on the inscriptions on individual pieces is David Alexander’s 1992 catalogue of some of the arms and armour in the Khalili collection. This luxury volume includes not only glossy colour photographs and drawings in which the inscriptions are usually legible, but also a separate appendix giving the inscriptions and translations on each piece and a lengthy bibliography. Kalus (1982) has also published many of the pieces in European collections, such as those in the Tower of London. Many Nasrid weapons were captured in the battle of Lucena in 1482 when the troops of Diego Fernández de Córdoba defeated Muhammad XII, known as Boabdil. These spoils remained in the hands of Fernández’s family until the beginning of the twentieth century when they were divided between the Museo del Ejército and the Real Armería in Madrid. Some of the finest pieces were included in the 1992 exhibition Al-Andalus (Dodd 1992). Similarly, the Hermitage possesses many of the weapons captured in the Russian campaigns in Central Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and several of the finest examples were exhibited in the late fifties to the seventeenth century. Their steel blades were inscribed with poems in various metres describing the war and the dedications inscribed on many of these pieces are important evidence for dating these European swords.

As with inscriptions on monuments and other objects, the primary language used to inscribe Islamic arms and armour was Arabic. It was used for Koranic texts, which were chosen to fit the garment and occasion. Body armour, for example, was often covered with Koranic inscriptions that reflected the wearer’s piety while engaged in jihād. Taliçamic shirts worn under the armour were covered with Koranic verses, prayers and sequences of numbers or letters meant to protect the wearer through spiritual efficacy. These texts also had apotropaic power. Both armour and shields, for example, are often inscribed with the phrase from Koran 6:173 asking for help from God and a speedy victory (azur min allah wa fath ghariib) or with the opening verses of Koran 48 (Surat al-Fath), the chapter of Victory. Ottoman taliçamic shirts preserved in the Topkapi Palace collection (see Figure 14.85) are almost completely covered with Koranic inscriptions, prayers and magic squares and numbers. Several shirts attributed to Safavid Iran, by contrast, are inscribed with the names of the Twelve Imams. By donning such a shirt, the wearer symbolically clothed himself in the ‘mantle of righteousness’ (jihād al-taṣawwur) mentioned in Koran 7:26.

Arms and armour made for kings and courts were often decorated with the owner’s name or his dynastic mark. A belt buckle in the L. A. Mayer collection, for example, is inscribed with the name of the Ayyubid prince Abu Fadl Isma’il 1173. One of the earliest identifiable pieces of mail and plate armour is a shirt inscribed with the name of the Timurid prince Ibrahim Sultan (Lentz and Lawry 1986, no. 31). Pieces made for the Nasrids (many illustrated in Dodds 1992) often have the Nasrid slogan or stylised patterns derived from it. Ottoman pieces often have the title or calligraphic emblem of a particular sultan. Pieces belonging to the royal collection were engraved with a circular mark with several bars or strokes to show that they belonged to a particular sultan. Drawings of several examples are illustrated in Alexander (1992).

Sometimes the name or titles naming the owner are inscribed on this type of weapon in another in a set of armour. This is the case, for example, with a pair of leg guards in the Metropolitan. The inscription on a Timurid face mask (Alexander 1992, no. 35) may have been designed to be read together with letters and words on a now-lost helmet that would have overlapped the mask in several places. In some cases, particularly of royal armour such as the shirt made for Ibrahim Sultan, the inscription was probably drawn up by a master calligrapher. In other cases, however, the fragmentary words or individual letters may be the result of copying by illiterate armourers, suggesting that the sanctity of script was more important in warding off injury than the actual message. In some cases, the script used for these inscriptions naming the owner in archaic, perhaps used to invoke the noble lineage of the wearer and associate him with glorious warriors of the past. Several helmets and other objects datable to fifteenth-century Anatolia, for example, are inscribed in a stylised Kufic of the type that had been common two centuries earlier.

In later times, Arabic texts were accompanied or replaced by poems in vernacular languages. Language alone is not a key to provenance, for Persian verses were inscribed not only on weapons made in Iran but also on those made for the Ottomans and the Moghals. Sādī’s verses were popular with Iranian armourers, and many pieces have survived from the Qajar period. Other Persian verses invoke renowned heroes from literature, such as Rustam’s father Sam, Farramaz or Isfandiyar. Turkish was also used on arms made for the Ottomans, as on a dagger in Edinburgh [Arts of Islam 1976, no. 233] dated to the turn of the sixteenth century which is inscribed with the first couplet of a ghazal by the Ottoman poet Mecnaz (d. 1769).

In addition to verses by famous poets, other poems were written for the occasion. Some name the type of weapon, as with the daggers published by Ibrano or the axes by Melikian-Chirvani. Other verses refer to the object’s function. Inscriptions on Ottoman guns, for example, contain generalised verses referring to the power of the weapon and sometimes to the specific enemy.
The Turkish verse on one gun in the Khalili collection [Alexander 1993, no. 76] says that 'the new type of weapon that I hold in my hands is an enemy of the German [that is, Hapsburg] court'.

These poems often contain puns and plays on words. The Persian verse on a seventeenth-century Ottoman seal in the Khalili collection [Alexander 1993, no. 68], for example, contrasts the tiny size of the gun to its ability to bring down even the greatest of heroes. The play on words revolves around the word guniqla, which means both 'swaddling-clothes' and 'stock of a gun'. The texts are sometimes written in the first person, as though the weapon were speaking. A fluted steel helmet decorated with gold wire made for the Ottoman sultan Bayazid II and now in the Musée de l'Armée, Paris (Arts of Islam 1976, no. 250), is inscribed with an Arabic text saying that 'I [that is, the helmet] am the head-piece (udhil) for the head of the imam 'Sultan Bayazid.

Seals, Talismans, Amulets and Other Small Ornaments

Sigilography, the study of seals, is an important branch of Islamic epigraphy, for in contrast to pre-Islamic examples, seals made in Islamic times are almost exclusively decorated with inscriptions, especially during the first eight or nine centuries of Islam. Many Islamic seals are made of gemstones, which are also used for talismans and other ornaments, but seals are usually carved in intaglio, whereas talismans and other ornaments are carved in relief. The seals were usually used to record an owner's mark and hence were designed to be readable yet distinct. They are therefore useful for studying the general evolution of palaeography. Most seals made before the sixteenth century, however, lack dates or identifiable names, and as the seals are often dated by the style of inscription, the argument can become somewhat circular. To date these early examples, it is often useful to compare the inscriptions to those found on tombstones and coins.

Serious study of Islamic seals began in the early nineteenth century with Reinaud's publication [1838] of the seals and talismans in the collection of le Duc de Blacas. The two-volume work included many examples as well as a general introduction to engraved stones, their inscriptions and their uses. Hammer-Purgstall's handbook [1849] on seals appeared shortly thereafter. Given the large number of seals and their wide geographic currency, later publications concentrated on seals from a particular time or place, as with Rabino di Borgomale's book [1945] on Iranian seals from the Safavid period onwards and Uraunütz's book [1949] on Ottoman seals in the Topkapi Palace. In the late twentieth century, museums have begun to publish their collections of seals, as for example the catalogue [1973] by al-Naqshbandi and al-Hariri on the seals in the Baghdad Museum or Kalus's catalogues on seals in the Cabinet des Médailles in the Bibliothèque nationale [1981] and on seals and rings in the Ashmolean Museum [1986]. Seals, rings and gems are a favourite of rich private collectors, and the recent glossy publications of the pieces in the hands of such private collectors as Benjamin Zucker (Content 1983) and David Khalili [Wenzel 1995] often contain material on the inscriptions. Kalus's article on seals in the Dictionary of Art (vol. 16, pp. 542–51) gives a good summary of the texts and scripts used on Islamic seals and is the basis for this article.

Seals from the pre-Mongol period generally contain brief, sober texts with three kinds of information. Some are religious in content, with Koranic quotations, prayers to God, Muhammad or 'Ali, or moral aphorisms. Others have the owner's name accompanied by a set religious expression indicating his relationship to God and his humility and resignation. Still others have only the owner's proper name, usually in the traditional Islamic pattern of 'A son of B', making it almost impossible to identify the individual concerned.

These seals from the pre-Mongol period are usually engraved in Kufic. The earliest seals made between the seventh and ninth centuries show a horizontal base line, and this style was consciously revived in later periods when owners wished to imitate the earlier style in order to add magical power to the usual, signatory function of the
Seals dating from the thirteenth century show a new style that becomes more pronounced by the fifteenth century. Inscriptions became considerably longer. Decoration, hitherto limited to a few schematised motifs such as a six-pointed star formed by three short crossed strokes, became more naturalistic and filled the area more completely, including the spaces between the characters. The variety of gematone used was restricted, with cornelian becoming by far the most popular. The range of languages widened, and in addition to Arabic, the inscriptions, usually short poems, could be written in Persian, and later in Turkish. From the sixteenth century, many inscriptions include the year in which the seal was made, but these dates are sometimes difficult to read. The summarily executed figures can be confused with the overall decoration, and the cipher for 'thousand' is often omitted as obvious and has to be supplied where appropriate.