Religious Inscriptions in Islamic Architecture

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In the first room of the permanent exhibition, visitors to the Islamic Department of the Museum of Ethnology in Munich immediately encounter an impressive sight: one entire wall is occupied by the tiled façade of a mid-seventeenth-century mosque from the city of Multan in what is today Pakistan (ca. 1721). Along with the colour contrast and the elaborately shaped arches, what most strikes the eye are the inscriptions on this portal wall. The calligraphy contributes in large measure to the decorative appearance of the ensemble. However, the texts found here are by no means unknown: “Therefore remember Me, I will remember you. Give thanks to Me, and reject not Me!” is written in the panel above the left door in a quotation from the Qur'an (2:152). The tondo to the right and left of the panel also cite the Qur'an: “Say: He is Allah, the One! Allah, the eternally Besought of all! He begets not nor was bebegotten. And there is none comparable unto Him” (sura 112) — a sentence which may be considered the core of the uncompromisingly monothestic Muslim creed.

Above the door on the right-hand side is a maxim in similarly sweeping calligraphy which is attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: “The believer in the mosque is like a fish in water. The hypocrite in the mosque is like a bird in a cage!” The tondo to the right shows Allah repeated four times, on the tondo to the left Muhammad is written four times. Inscribed on the moulding of the façade are the words “O Muhammad” and above them “O God!”

The panel above the middle door contains a maxim which does not appear in this form in the Qur'an: “The best remembrance is: There is no God but Allah; and Muhammad is the Messenger of God — God bless him and give him salvation.”

The Muslim declaration of faith (the shahada; occasionally also kalima) is thus emphasized by the preceding eulogy. The surrounding band again cites the Qur'an:

Allah! There is no God save Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. Unto Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth. Who is he that intercedes with Him save by His leave? He knows that which is in front
of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of His knowledge save what He will. His Chair includes the heavens and the earth, and He is never weary of preserving them. He is the Sublime, the Tremendous. (Sura 2:255)

This 'throne verse' which describes the omnipotence of God is one of the most frequently quoted passages from the Qur'an in the form of inscriptions.

What do these inscriptions mean here? Is a devout Muslim not very well acquainted with the Qur'an and the principles of the faith? Why, then, are certain parts of the text presented here? Is the believer to be led in prayer? Perhaps this is too directly formulated. Surely the spoken prayers of the believer were at all times of far greater significance than inscriptions of formulas on the mosque itself. Still, the inscriptions have one advantage over the spoken word: they are durable, albeit not entirely everlasting. Under these circumstances, the repetition of well-known texts on a building could be interpreted as performing the same function as the display of familiar pictures. If we compare the façade of the mosque with similar structures in Occidental art, do quotations from the Qur'an perhaps perform the same function as biblical scenes depicted in and around sacred buildings? Such statements are naturally exaggerated and do not do full justice to the subject matter. Nevertheless, after such considerations it seems too simplistic to disregard these texts as nothing but appropriate decoration for a mosque.

At any rate, inscriptions with religious content abound on buildings in the Islamic world. If we take the mosques and minarets, madrasas and convents, as well as the fortifications and private residences between Morocco and India, between the Aral Sea and Yemen, in which religious texts have been inscribed since the seventh century CE, usually in Arabic, they would no doubt constitute the largest collection of inscriptions any civilization has ever produced. 8

Inception in the Dome of the Rock

The oldest monumental inscription in Islamic art history is preserved in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (157, 82). Its content is religious, so the text provides information about the articles of faith of early Islam. The inscription is one of the few text sources from the first century of Islamic history. Only one hundred years after its construction, chroniclers report on the Umayyad period in which the Dome of the Rock was built. The Dome of the Rock inscription is also of immeasurable importance for the history of the Qur'an text. It contains some passages which also appear in the Qur'an, whereas so far no Qur'an manuscripts have been located which could definitively be dated to the first Islamic century. Moreover, the inscription is important for the history of Arabic script since it already contains diacritical marks for vocalizing the text. 9 In translation, the beginning of the inscription reads:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate! There is no God but God alone, there is none comparable unto him. His is the rule and to him is the praise. He gives life and He causes to die. He has power over everything. Muhammad is the servant of God and His messenger. God and His angels pronounce blessings upon the Prophet. O you, who believe, pronounce blessings upon him and the salutation of peace. O people of the book, do not go beyond bounds in your religion, and do not utter anything concerning God save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was only the messenger of God, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not "Three"; cease! It will be better for you. God is one only – for He is removed from having a son. He is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. God is sufficient as a protector. 8

In the context of the Holy City of Jerusalem, which was conquered by the Muslims in the years 636–638, this text expresses a special concern. It makes a clear distinction between the newly founded sanctuary of the Dome of the Rock on the former Temple Mount and the Christian sanctuaries of the city – in particular the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which lost its significance as a religious centre under the new rulers. The rejection of the Christian 'trinitarian belief' illustrates the Muslim viewpoint on the relationship between God and the world and the understanding of Jesus as a prophet. 8

The key formula of the inscription specifies the years 691/92 CE (the year 72 according to the Islamic, or Hijri lunar calendar, H) and the builder of the Dome of the Rock (the name of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik, which was written here, was replaced 120 years later by that of the Abbassid caliph al-Ma'mun). Thus the inscription not only signals 'timeless' values and beliefs, but places them in a historical context. The restoration of the unity of the empire under
FIG. 53

INSCRIPTION IN THE DOME OF THE ROCK/JERUSALEM

This religious text above the octagonal arcade (dated 70 H/690-691 CE) of the ambulatory is one part of the oldest extant monumental inscription of Islamic art history whose length measures altogether 240 metres (cf. fig. 6). Except for the name of the builder, its character is purely religious and consists primarily of quotations from the Qur'an.

'Abd al-Malik after the bloody conflicts of the Second Civil War in the Islamic empire was surely a suitable occasion to construct the Dome of the Rock as a monument for the reign of Islam and simultaneously to restate the old Temple Mount in its role as the prime sanctuary of Jerusalem.1

In the context of the structure of the Dome of the Rock, the inscription is especially significant for the formation of Islamic art. In terms of technique and motifs, the decoration on the building is in keeping with the tradition of Byzantine Syria. The marble columns and gilt capitals covered with gold-leaf, the marble-faced piers and walls, and the glass mosaics on the wall above the cornice were part of the repertoire of late Classical art in the eastern Mediterranean world. In the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, however, non-figurative motifs have taken the place of biblical scenes and images of saints: acanthus tendrils, grapevines and palm trees as well as crowns and garlands of jewellery.2 The inscription on the octagonal ambulatory completes the decoration as an encircling band. Thus Arabic script already embellishes Islam's first extant architectural monuments, even though initially it does not figure very prominently.

In the early centuries of Islamic history, Arabic inscriptions on buildings were relatively sparse. In the Great Mosque of Cairo (now Tunisia), the prayer niche (mihrab) was covered with marble panels decorated with reliefs (presumably during construction under Emir Ziyadat Allah in 636 or in course of expansion under Abu l-Bakr Ahmad b. Nuh in 662).3 Halfway up, the ornamentation is divided by a band of script containing the core of the Islamic creed:

Say: He is Allah, the One! Allah, the eternally Besought of all! He begot not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him (Qura 112). Muhammad is the Messenger of God - God bless him and give him salvation.

The inscription is so small as to be barely visible in the overall picture of the mihrab or even the qibla wall. Apparently, those inscriptions in which the builder immortalized himself, in other
NILometer IN CAIRO

At the southern tip of the island as-‘RNA stands the most important nilometer of the Islamic period, which was used to measure the level of the Nile every year. The photo shows the well with the measuring column and the notches on it as well as inscriptions on the walls [147] [864 CE].

PORTAL NICHE OF THE AL-AQM AR MOSQUE IN CAIRO (519 H/1125 CE)

A detail of the façade of this Fatimid building shows a late Antique Coptic muntz motif in whose middle the names Muhammad and 'Ali are written inside an ornamental medallion.
words those without religious content, are generally larger. This was customary on secular edifices such as an indoor market built around 738 in Baisan in Palestine (today Beit Shean, Israel) under the Umayyad caliph Hisham. The masonic inscriptions which decorated the façade contain the name of the caliph. To these were added the quotation from the Qur'an 9:33:

He is it who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the Religion of Truth, that He may cause it to prevail over all religions, however much the idolaters may be averse.

Dimensions of Religious Inscriptions
Combining Qur'an quotations and 'historical' information on the date of construction and the builder subsequently became widespread. When the minaret in Cairo was rebuilt in 866, written order came from the caliphal court in Baghdad on how the inscriptions should read on this construction, which indicated the level of the Nile (1595–545). Apart from the name of the caliph al-Mutawakkil as the patron, the name of the architect and the date of construction, verses from the Qur'an particularly suited to the minaret are quoted, highlighting the significance of water for life in Egypt, the grain harvest, and thus for the functioning of the entire Egyptian society:

And We send down from the sky blessed water whereby We give growth unto gardens and the grain of crops (55:19).
Do you not see how Allah sends down water from the sky and then the earth becomes green upon the morrow? (55:20).

As with the Dome of the Rock, an inscription with religious content is located in the Great Mosque of the Tulun in Cairo (completed in 876/99 CE) as a final frieze above the arcades in the prayer hall. It contains several lengthy passages from the Qur’an. Unlike in Jerusalem, however, the inscription is carved in wood. As it appears today, it is barely legible for ordinary observers, although the total length of the frieze measures several hundred metres. Even if one assumes that the frame was originally coloured, as a narrow band high under the ceiling of the prayer hall, it did not appear in a prominent position.

It seems as if the potential of monumental religious inscriptions on buildings was only exploited over the course of time. This was due in part to the political-religious disputes in which the caliphate of the Abbassids was contested by rival dynasties. Inscriptions on the façades of Fatimid buildings in Cairo were integrated into the three-dimensional decorations where they assumed a central position. The names Muhammad and 'Ali in the centre of the medallion decorating the portal niche of the al-Aqmar Mosque (192 CE) reveal that the Fatimids held the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet in equal esteem as the Prophet Muhammad himself and ranked them equally as political figures (1595.545). When the signs of Fatimid power were obliterated under the new ruler Saladin, the façade of the al-Aqmar Mosque was spared. However, a chronicler reported that the silver fittings were removed from the mihrab at the Friday Mosque on which the names of the Fatimid caliphs were inscribed. The political character is demonstrated both in the use of certain formulas and in the removal of inscriptions as 'domestic memorials in connection with changes in trends in religious policy. These examples show that where inscriptions are concerned, there are no clear boundaries between the secular and the religious.

While the Fatimids already made use of inscriptions in public space, the visual presence of religious inscriptions continued to grow in the period thereafter. In the thirteenth century, inscriptions were used for the first time as the dominant element in decorating façades. The madrasa established by the caliph al-Mustansir in Baghdad (completed in 1233) was embellished with a monumental band of writing on the side facing the Tigris. The inscription was not incorporated into a scheme of decoration but dominates the entire appearance of the façade.

Monumental bands of inscription extending over the entire façade became customary in subsequent years. In Syria the earliest examples are found in Aleppo at the tomb of al-Add al-Ali (before 1224) and on the al-Firdaus madrasa (begun in 1252). Slightly later, this trend appeared in Egypt, as can be seen on the monumental buildings whose façades line the broad avenue through the former palace quarter. The large madrasa of Sultan Nasir al-Din Ayyub ibn al-Cafrun in Cairo (begun in 1242) still does not use this type of decoration. Only with the construction of the madrasa of Sultan Qaybari in 1264 did the tomb madrasa of al-Mansur Qalawun (1284) still make large-scale bands of inscriptions become common here as well. The largest complex of buildings in Cairo dating from the Mamluk era, the mosque-madrasa of Sultan an-Nasir Husayn (1336), displays a particularly interesting ensemble of inscriptions (159, 160) while 'historical' inscriptions are written in cursive script in a relatively small format above the doors to the courtyard, a stucco band.

**FIG. 136**

**Calligraphy on the Mosque-Madrasa of Sultan An-Nasir Hasan in Cairo**

The Kufic inscription on the main tower of this large building complex from the Mamluk period quotes the first verses of sura 48 ("The Victory") of the Qur'an.
of inscriptions running around the side of the iwan facing the qibla marks the base of the vault as an especially prominent element of decoration. The sharply contoured Kufic letters are often set against a richly detailed background of tendrils. The inscription is emphasized over other elements of design, both by the wealth of forms and its large dimensions. The Qur’ānic quotation (49:1-6) underscores the omnipotence of God over sinful human beings to whom the joys of paradise have been promised, and the tortures of Hell have been threatened.

The contrast between the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’ inscriptions in the courtyard of the madrasa, emphasized by their execution and style, could be interpreted to mean that the temporal nature of the royal commission to build—however elegant and permanently the cursive script in inlaid marble may be executed—stands opposed to the eternal word of God.

Yet a further increase in dimensions can be seen in the inscriptions which decorate the façades of Timurid edifices in Iran and Central Asia. The smooth surfaces of the walls are covered with glazed bricks bearing highly stylized inscriptions, most of which are short religious formulas such as Allāhu akbar. The strictly geometricized letters, all of which are rectangular and are placed within a square block, result from fitting the script into the texture of the brickwork. Thus the Persian designation for this script is Khūt-i bānī (‘storey-mason’s script’) while it is frequently referred to as ‘square Kufic’ in the literature. The earliest examples are found in structures of the Seljuq period such as the dome chamber in the Great Mosque of Gulpaygan (1114-15) (H 57, CB 49) on the minaret of Masud III in Ghānī (Afghanistan). At this time, it was still deemed sufficient to delineate the letters by letting them stand out in relief against the wall or arranging the interstices accord-

ingly. Execution in glazed bricks only became widespread under the Mongol rulers when for the first time entire façades were ornamented with square Kufic. One example is the façade of the Do Minar Darbāsh complex in Isfahan (1295), in which diagonally twisted bands of inscription cover both the wall next to the portal and the shafts of the minaret. On the buildings erected under the Timurid dynasty in Samarkand, the surface effect of square Kufic is exploited yet further: on Timur’s tomb (built in 1424), diagonally interlocking fields with the words Allāh and Muhammad cover the cylindrical drum of the dome, while the cylindrical tambour is decorated with a cursive inscription; the entire lateral façades of the madrasa of Ulugh Beg on Registan Square are covered with the words al-ḥamdullīh – ‘Praise be to God’. From the perspective of the observer today, these brightly coloured, strictly geometrical facades almost resemble contemporary billboards. Not only do they illustrate the religious function of the buildings on which they appear, but they highlight the importance of the script, although the readability of the formulas is reduced by the geometric stylization.

The significance of the script from the perspective of Muslim observers is also apparent in unexpected places. Ottoman authors even believed they detected the word Allāh in the silhouette of the Rumel Hisar fortress built in 1452 by Mehmed II on the Bosporus with its walls and towers of different sizes. This perception of a structure whose form is only geared to military purposes and above all resulted from the toposography proves one thing in particular— that lines of script with short religious formulas are excellently suited as symbols for the presence of Islamic religion and rule.

Legibility and Symbolic Content of the Script

In the overall appearance of monumental Arabic inscriptions, the ornamental shaping of the letters is so exaggerated in some places that the letters have become very difficult to read. The decorative effect is paramount here. One example is the interlacing of upper lengths, seen for the first time in the tenth century. The geometric types of script known as Kufic are apparently particularly well-suited for combination with ornaments. But in curvilinear written texts with letters layered over each other and decorative grouping, legibility takes second place to the general aesthetic effect. Richard Ettinghausen has remarked with regard to such inscriptions that the contrast between the ‘information’ content and the ‘symbolic affirmation’ through ornamentation cannot be decided in favour of one side. Ultimately, it is difficult to say which associations were or are aroused in an observer by an inscription so interlaced as to be illegible or executed in square Kufic. Taking for example a line of script in the dome chamber of the Gulpaygan Friday Mosque in central Iran (built in 1145-15), it is clear that the Islamic declaration of faith (shahādā) was converted into an ornament in itself. The upper lengths are knotted in pairs and form a dense network of stars and octagons. Above, elongated vertical stems fill the upper zone, which can still be recognized as parts of letters by themselves.

It must be emphasized that the content of inscriptions whose decorative effect takes precedence over legibility is almost always of a religious nature. It could be concluded that their purpose is permanent praise of God. They speak directly to heaven, without
being read or understood by humans. This would correspond to the eternally character of the Qur’an, as Dodi and Kairinah suggest: “A verse from the Koran does not have to be read in order for it to have meaning. It exists eternally, of and for and by itself.” (1981, p. 25).

On the other hand, it should be noted that the calligraphy of inscriptions related to a specific time and containing ‘information’ was often highly sophisticated and is by no means always easy to read. This is true for inscriptions on buildings which mention the patron of the building and the date of construction; other beautiful examples include the magnificent endowment inscriptions and those in which the rulers had their decrees immortalized in mosques or on the portals of mosques – in other words texts which document legal matters. Here too it was not merely a question of placing a text as visibly as possible. The appearance of the script was designed to be aesthetically pleasing, and many of these inscriptions are prominently located so that their beauty contributes significantly to the appearance of the building.

The ‘symbolic affirmation’ in religious inscriptions whose artistic design makes them particularly difficult to read is exemplified by inscriptions in square Kufic. As already mentioned, this monumental script is first documented in the early twelfth century in Iran and its environs and can be followed up to the impressive large-scale decorations of the Ilkhānids and Timurid period. Later as well, square Kufic elements are repeatedly used to decorate buildings in various parts of the Islamic world. More spectacular examples for the use of this particular script include the large stucco panels of the Suli mausoleum of Pir-i Bakran near Isfahan (shortly after 1508), in which the imams of the Twelve Shia are listed, and the Safavid decorations in the Friday Mosque in Isfahan (sixteenth century).

In Mamluk Egypt, panels with square Kufic inscriptions inlaid in marble were integrated in the sumptuous interior decoration of mausoleums and mosques. In all cases, the inscriptions are of a religious nature, with short formulas such as Allāhu akbar – “God is great” – predominating. Easy legibility was not the main criterion for these inscriptions because the look of the script, once recognized, could be memorized and recognized again. The constant repetition, as in the temples of Timurid and Shabandar buildings in Central Asia, demonstrates, is well-suited to litany-like usage. One is inclined to recognize an element of ‘eternal adoration’ for which no reader is required: “It follows, too, that even if inscriptions are visible they do not need to be legible” (Hillerbrand 1986, 171).

However, caution is advised with such interpretations. Some distinctly longer texts are inscribed in square Kufic which do indeed invite deciphering by the reader. They include not only the stucco inscriptions of Pir-i Bakran, which clearly stem from a Safavid context, but also the medallions with inscriptions in the Friday Mosque in Isfahan, which can be attributed to the redecoration of the buildings under the Safavids. Here, the text is not immediately readable; rather, the observer must immerse himself in the shape of the letters in order to approach the text (Fig. 58).

Whether in this way a kind of mystical experience was intended is a question which cannot be answered at present. The same applies to the inscriptions written in large letters on the pillars in the Ulu Cami in Bursa in the late Ottoman period. The prominent huwa (“He” meaning God) can stand for a permanent dhikr, the continually repeated uttering of the name of God, as was practiced by Islamic mystics.

The painted inscriptions in Bursa prove that religious texts in Arabic script existed not only in stone, brick or tile decoration but often in more perishable material, which might include wood or stucco, murals, banners or posters. The dimensions here could always vary: The plaque in the shape of a ship with numerous religious inscriptions on the hull, sails and flags which hangs in the portal of a saint’s shrine in Bukhara is a contemporary example of a tradition which has continued uninterrupted and remains alive to the present day.

The Aim of Religious Inscriptions

A kind of canon apparently evolved very early for religious texts on Islamic ediﬁces. Already in the ninth century, formularies had established themselves which appear repeatedly in subsequent centuries. They were as widespread in the centre of the Islamic world as in distant provinces. A particularly revealing example is the painted interior of a cave in Şuusů Şehr in what is today south-eastern Turkey; presumably it was used as a mosque. The basma and die shahada can be found here together with the saying “There is no power nor strength but in God, the exalted, the mighty, what God wills, will be” (Fig. 59.7).

In many instances the selection of quotations from the Qur’an can be understood programatically. Erica Dodi and Shireen Khairallah have called attention to a veritable ‘iconography’ of inscriptions which can serve as evidence for the interpretation of a building. It seems logical that a conscious selection was made when it came to placing texts on buildings which had been so meticulously
designed. Popular 'standard quotations' can be seen on many build-
ings, and of these texts in turn is often certain ones which are
inscribed on prominent places on the building, such as over the
portal or on the minābāb.

The above-mentioned shahīdah inscription from the Golpayegan
Mosque uses a very conventional text. It could be written anywhere,
but at the same time, it is not out of place in a mosque. In this case,
the question is why the decorative inscription was located at this
particular spot while the other pillars and walls - with the exception
of the qibla wall - remained empty. Originally, an important element
of the building which no longer exists today may have been located
under the inscription. A door may have existed there leading to the
minaret. Today the minaret is only a stump and below the inscrip-
tion there is a blind niche in the wall. A fundamental but unspecific
religious text, decoratively executed, marks this location.

Conversely, rare, unusual quotations suggest certain intentions.
At times veritable 'messages' can even be found. The boundaries
between religious content and political propaganda can be blurred
here - the example of Fatimid edifices in Cairo has already been
mentioned. One example which is less legible is a wall in the Great
Mosque of Golpayegan that runs from the left side of the qibla wall
around the corner, extending above the shahīdah inscription. At
first glance, the inscription is not distinguishable as such because
it is embedded in the geometric decoration. The interlaced pat-
tern forms stars in which the letters have been inserted. However,
the words are distributed over several stars. The text specifies the
'ashāra al-mubāshchara, ten companions of the Prophet Muḥa-
mad, to whom he had promised paradise (āra. 360). 26 However,
the striking placement of the panel raises the question as to why this
part of the building was distinguished with this text instead of oth-
ers. Surely the selection of the text can be explained by the religious
situation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The sultans of the
Saljuq dynasty attempted to suppress Shi'ite tendencies. Mention
of the 'ashāra al-mubāshchara stood in contrast to the names of 'Alī's
descendants who were used by the Shi'ites to position themselves
vīs-à-vīs the Sunnis. To this day, it is interpreted in some circles as

FIG. 59 (left)
CRED IN A CAVE MOSQUE (297 H/909–910 CE) IN ŞUAYF ŞEHIR,
SOUTH-EASTERN TURKEY
The inscription painted on the wall with the simplest technique nevertheless shows calligraphic design.
No doubt it dates back to more artistic models such as those for example in the neighbouring town of Haran
which was important at the time.

FIG. 60 (below)
INSCRIPTION WITH THE NAMES OF THE PROPHET'S COMPANIONS
IN THE GRAND MOSQUE OF GOLPAYEGAN, IRAN
The inscription embedded in the geometric design on the south-eastern wall of the interior of the dome
gives the names [Abd al-Rahman ibn] 'Auf and Abu Ubaida ibn al-Jarrah in the first two rows in the section
shown here.
FIG. 67
The first verses of sura 20 of the Qur'an cite Moses, who experienced divine presence in the desert in
the form of a burning bush. Similarly, the Dome of the Rock represents a place from which creation began and
is specially linked to divine presence on earth.

a Sunni statement. In Saljuq Iran, it expressed acknowledgement of
the state's religious policy. This interpretation is also supported by
short sentences which appear further above in the dome: "Who-
ever defames the Siddiq, is a heretic" refers, for example, to the
caliph Abu Bakr ibn as-Siddiq, and the practice common under the
Shi'ites of condemning the caliphs before 'Ali.

Thus the selection and placement of religious inscriptions
could be linked to distinct icons which contemporaries indeed saw
as referring to their situation. In many cases, the current reference
of the texts would have to be determined by the reader, for example
in quotations from the Qur'an. In this respect, Robert Hillenbrand
noted that an "Iconography of inscriptions" involves problems
because the text from the Qur'an often appears unspecific: just
how a quotation should be interpreted cannot always be estab-
lished. In addition, the particularly frequent use of certain verses
from the Qur'an as "standard quotations" makes specific interpreta-
tions difficult.

The inscription on the mausoleum in Damascus from the thir-
teenth century, for example, begins with the following words:\r
Every soul will taste of death. And you will be paid on the
Day of Resurrection only that which you have fairly earned.
Who is removed from the Fire and is made to enter Paradise,
his death is to be triumphant. The life of this world is but comfort of
illusion (Q 3:185).

The text points to coming events in which the deceased will be
made to answer for his deeds on earth. It is certain that everyone
will be called to account. The outcome of the judgement, however,
is anything but certain. With the tenor of memento mori and the
added sentence about the vanity of this world, the text admonishes
the living to conduct themselves irreproachably. The quotation is
ideally suited for a mausoleum. Whether the admonitions refer in
particular to the biography of the deceased cannot be definitively
established from what we know today – it seems rather unlikely.
The first words kullu nafsah shihhat ul-maut are part of a standard
formula which was used on tombstones throughout the Islamic
world. Moreover, the entire verse cited is found on numerous tomb-
stones from the ninth to the seventeenth century.\r

Of interest are the unusual quotations from the Qur'an which
at first glance do not appear suited to the edifice on which they
are inscribed. The rotunda of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem
contains a mosaic inscription which, judging by the style of writing,
must date from a period after the recapture of the city by Salu-
din in 1187. The caliph had wrested the city from the crusaders
in 1187. The inscription – executed in gold mosaic at an expense
which was commensurate with the significance of the building –
quotes the first verses of sura Taha (20:1-21). The verses describe
how Moses on the way through the desert was spoken to by God
for the first time next to the burning bush. The quotation ends with
God's command to Moses to throw down his staff, whereupon it
turns into a snake.

The citation from the Qur'an raises questions in many aspects,
for example the reference to Moses in a location where accord-
ing to tradition many prophets had dwelt – but not in particular
Moses. The selection of the verse is probably best explained by the
parallels to the sacred spot at which the presence of God was
revealed. This is true for the burning bush, but also for the Dome
of the Rock: as the place from which creation began, the rock is
venerated in Jewish tradition; it is also here that the Jewish temple
was located. These ideas were transferred from the Jewish to the
Muslim tradition. Along with the "dwelling of God," other points
can be found which link the text of the inscription to the role of the
shrine in Saladin's time and give it current significance. However,
these aspects are not explicit in the inscription which is restricted
to the pure citation.

Religious Inscriptions on Secular Edifices

As a result of the penetration of religious and state authority
through the many centuries of Islamic history, the two spheres could
not always be strictly separated in inscriptions either. Nasir ad-Din
Mahmud, the Artuqid ruler of Amid (today Diyarbakir in south-eastern
Turkey), who expanded the citadel of the city of Amid into
a fortified residence around 1205/6, had the interior door leading
to the residential quarters inscribed with the words al-muk Lahib
shahdu – "Rule belongs to God alone". Even if humility before God
may have induced him to decorate the portal to his residence with
this formula, Nasir ad-Din was nevertheless proud enough to have
this disclaimer mounted only in a very small size – especially if the
script is compared with the large-scale band of script directly next
to it, which is offset from the wall in bright limestone and along
with the date of construction gives the name and title of the ruler
in large cursive letters.

Religious formulas probably served at all times to legitimize
secular rule. This use of religious texts in inscriptions can be observed in many palaces and public buildings in cities in which the rulers resided. An extreme escalation of this practice of underscor-
ing the legitimacy of one's own rule through essentially religious inscriptions is found in the Alhambra in Granada.35 The motto of the emirs of the Nasrid dynasty, wa-lidhādī bi-lil-lāh — "There is no victor but God" — is ubiquitous in the Alhambra; it appears promi-
nently on shields with bent, or almost hidden in the dense relief tendrils of the wall decoration (fig. 62). In this way the rulers over the emirate could continually warn that their power was finite — or was the motto rather comforting support in view of the steadily growing strength of the Christian kingdoms on the peninsula?

The reference to God's ultimate victory, which in Arabic script could almost be considered as the motto for the situation of Mus-
lims on the Iberian Peninsula, was also acceptable for the Christian side. This is attested by the façade of the Alcázar of Seville. The part of the palace to which it belongs was built for the Castilian King Pedro de Cruel between 1362 and 1369, in part with the assist-
ance of Muslim master builders from Granada. The decorative band running above the windows on the top floor over the width of the façade appears at first glance to be a geometric pattern. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the right part contains the motto of the Nasrids of Granada (fig. 63). The upper lengths continue in a pattern with angles and crosses. In the left half, the inscriptions appear mirrored so that the Kufic script is dispersed in the overall appearance. It can, however, be assumed that the owner of the house was indeed aware what was concealed behind the pattern on the façade and concurred with the spirit of the inscription.

Inscriptions with religious content were by no means rare in secular contexts. However, material from the first centuries of the Islamic period is sparse. In contrast, many examples from later cen-
turies, such as from the Mamluk era in Egypt and Syria (1250-1517) are still extant. One of them is the elegant private home in Homs (Syria) which today bears the name Mufid al-Amir. In its reception room, displayed at the base of the vault in stucco relief, are the

Quranic words nasum min Allāh wa-fathun qarib - “Help from God, and present victory” (sura 61:13).

A valuable store of inscriptions has survived on the doors of stately homes in the oases of Oman. The door panels with sev-
eral lines of script contain not only "historical" data but also verses from the Qur’an. The Bait Aula’d Barakat, constructed in 1762 in Ibra, still has its original entrance door. The inscription on the two upper door panels begins with the words: "Lo! We have given you a signal victory. That Allah may forgive you of your sin that which is past and that which is to come, and may perfect His favour unto you, and may guide you on a right path” (48:1-2). These words are fol-

lowed by the name of the master builder, the home owner and the date of construction. Apparently, the owner had selected a popu-
lar Qur’an text to decorate his home.36 Another elegant house in the same quarter bears a less familiar quotation: on the Bait al-
Mujaddara built in 1768-69 the inscription begins with the words (116:44): “Say: Lo! My prayer, my sacrifice, my living and my dying are for Allah, Lord of the Worlds; He has no partner. This am I com-
manded, and I am the first Muslim” (6:162-163). There is nothing else to indicate why the builder of this house chose this quotation. Perhaps, for reasons which we can no longer understand today, it had become a kind of motto for him. Then it could be considered a personal hallmark which also suitably embellished his private residence. In any case, the door was the point at which the house most strongly communicated with the outside world and thus an appropriate location for a message which expressed the builder’s personal religious belief as well as his membership in the Muslim community.

Regardless of whether or not in mosques, shrines (cf. Figs. 65-66), palaces, private residences or utilitarian buildings — inscriptions are there to be read and interpreted. Their religious content reveals cer-
tain intentions and emphasizes that they are part of a civilization influenced by Islam. Their Arabic letters are a component of the artistically designed appearance and the aesthetics of these build-

ings, and they visibly proclaim their ‘Islamic’ identity.
In traditional architecture in the Muslim world, doors and portals are frequently provided with religious inscriptions. The photo shows a door of the Bait al-Mujaddara with a carved quotation from the Qur'an (sura 6, verses 163–165).
SHRINE OF THE ISMAILI SAINT NASIR KHUSRAW IN YUMGAN/BADAHKSHAN

View from the south-east. The mausoleum stands on a promontory above the village of Hazrat Sayyid in the Jam Valley. The small complex consists of the tomb chamber, a khānqāh room for prayer and, in front, two porticoes.

FIG. 85 (opposite)

INSCRIPTIONS ON THE CEILING OF THE SHRINE OF NASIR KHUSRAW

Calligraphy decorates all visible sides of the ceiling girders and all the lower side of the ceiling beams. It consists, along with the Most Beautiful Names of Allah and two dedications, mainly quotations from the Qurʾan. The selection of auras suggests the cult of a Sufi brotherhood.

FIG. 86 (right)

Inscriptions at the shrine of the saint Nasir Khusraw in north-eastern Afghanistan

The shrine of Nasir Khusraw was reconstituted in 1209 H/180 CE. Earlier construction phases, one of them presumably around 820 CE, a second in 926 CE, have been proven. In September 2012, the site was inspected and photographic documentation was made.

The shrine has an extensive inscription programme. Above the entrance to the tomb chamber is a wooden board with a dedication and the date (699 H/1300 CE). Carved on a wooden column in the portico of the southern khānqāh mosque on the one side are the names of the patrons building workers for the renovation in 1209 H/180 CE. On the second side is a poem of dedication.

In the large northern portico leading to the actual tomb chamber (mazar) are the remains of Persian inscriptions on the wall. They probably date from the 11th century. The few extant sentence fragments suggest that they are passages from Nasir Khusraw’s book of travels (Durfāʾnāmā).

The tomb has the most (extant) inscriptions. They are in extraordinarily good condition thanks to the dry high mountain climate. The inscriptions, in black nastaʿlīq calligraphy, are located on all visible sides of the ceiling girders and over the whole area of the ceiling beams. Two lines attest that the ceiling calligraphy was added at the same time (1209 H/180 CE) as the extension when the two pillared halls in front were built. The text consists of a selection of Qurʾan suras, for example: 1:18, 6:28, 10:112, 2:285–86, 36, 78, 97 and 53.

Marcus Schaff