Although funeral rites in Islam are very clearly defined, there have always been regional differences which reflect traditional customs. This can be observed in Egypt, for example, where a mixture of Islamic and ancient Egyptian funeral ceremonies has evolved. Interesting in this context is the relationship between death and life as understood by Arabs in pre-Islamic times. Reference to this is made in sura 102, “Rivalry in worldly increase”; from this sura it can be assumed that at that time pride constituted a central aspect of Arabs’ attitude toward death. This had to do with the relatively small number of the dead, in particular of soldiers of one’s own tribe killed compared with other tribes, or that the most important leaders of one’s own tribe were still alive, or if they had already died, one was proud that one’s own dead were more important than those of other tribes. What counted under all circumstances was to use the relationship to the dead to increase one’s own standing. This mindset, so foreign to us today, which sees the dead purely in terms of statistics and evaluates the death of someone to the advantage of the living, suggests that the human relationship of the living to their deceased relatives ended with their funeral. The dead were commemorated in order to emphasize one’s own success and thus one’s own power.

With the introduction of Islam, this view received an additional dimension derived from the conviction that life begins in the grave after death. Based on this assumption, people began to build majestic graves intended to impress visitors and reflect the status of the deceased. The graves of the wealthy were now constructed like palaces with courts. A tradition of decorating graves with verses from the Qur’an evolved in the hope that this would bring relief to the deceased in the grave. The selection of verses from the Qur’an played an important role here. Very widespread were those verses concerning forgiveness and God’s mercy, for example sura 8:77-79, “The dawn”, and the famous “throne verse” (2:253) in the modern era (see p. 109). Another quotation for this purpose, particularly popular in the ninth century, is the eighteenth verse of the third sura located on the last of the tombstones discussed here. Men let the deceased testify what God himself testifies, namely that
there is no God but Him. As a rule, this verse, like all five tombstones discussed in this essay, is followed by the Islamic profession of faith; the thought here was the statement by the Prophet to the effect that those whose last words were the profession of faith would go to paradise.

Below are presented in chronological order some tombstones from the collection of the Museum of Ethnology in Munich. The intervals between their dates of origin differ greatly. Between the first and the second lie five and a half decades; between the second and the third only sixteen years; the third and fourth, in contrast, are separated by over five centuries, and the fifth is not dated. Most likely they originated in the Near East, but the museum has no more detailed information about their origin.

The first stone (fig. 77) bears the following inscription:

Bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim
Ima fl Allah 'azza min kulli muqadda
Wa halaf min kulli hali la wa darak
Il-mujadd wa anna azamal-masih-
Yb la-musibat an-nabi Muhammad salallahu A-
'lih 'alayhi wa salallahu baraka qabru Ahmad
b. 'Abd b. a. al-Qadr al-Bazziti a-
Maghribi shahida auli ila ila al-aal
wa alah li sharika fahru wa anna Muhammadan 'abdu-
hu wa rasuluhu sallallahu alayhi wa salallahu tsuruffiyya fi
jumalaq al-walal sunnet sitt wa mahfiyya

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.
Verily in every misfortune one finds consolation in God
and compensation for all that is transitory
and attainment of the missing; and the greatest misfortune was
the one caused
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(by the death) of the Prophet Muhammad;
may God bless him and grant him salvation. This is the grave of
Ammad
b. b. a. al-Qa'ar al-Bazzar a-
I-Maghribi. He testified (to the fact that) there is no God but
Allah,
who is single, without partner; and Muhammad is his servant
and messenger; may God bless him and grant him salvation?
He died in the month
Jumada al-awwal in the year 206 H [822/22 CE]

The stone measures 58.5 cm in height and 51 cm in width. The
inscription consists of eleven lines, 54 cm long, and is written in
Kufic script. It suggests that the calligrapher was experienced; he
distributed the text well over the area available except for the last
line where he misjudged the space left and was forced to write
smaller. The text begins as customary with the basmala (that means
the phrase, “In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate”) and
with a statement seldom encountered on tombstones, namely
that it is only in God that one finds consolation, compensation
and attainment of the missing. This message comes from the Sunna
(i.e. the tradition of the Prophet) and therefore has an authority
which permits it to replace the Qur'anic verses otherwise custom-
ary here. Normally it is used at funerals to express condolences
because the words are those spoken at the death of the Prophet
and therefore appear appropriate for such situations. Apparently
an attempt was made to avoid using verses from the Qur'an on
tombstones by selecting a suitable substitute from the Sunna; in
the period attested by the date of death, the feeling for the binding
character of the prohibition of such inscriptions was still strong.
Characteristic of the time of origin is the following inscription
where the relatives of the deceased are consigned by an allusion to
the death of the Prophet. This thought, which comes from a hadith
(sayings of the Prophet?), was particularly topical since the death
of the Prophet was experienced as relatively recent at the time. As
customary, the name of the deceased follows with additional infor-
mation about his origin and profession, which distinctly exceeds
what was considered acceptable from an Islamic viewpoint. The
profession of faith forms the conclusion.

It should be noted that a feature of the old Kufic script is
retained, namely syllabification, which later was not considered
admissible; this is a convention which is found in older Qur'an man-

The second tombstone (Fig. 78) is inscribed as follows:

Bismillah al-rahaban ar-shahid hada moshkin bihi wa 'alayh
mawla' Ya'qub b. Ismail al-Moqaddasi
alayh alayh wadiesh la shahika latahah al-awliya
ahadon samadon lam yattahsh sabilibotan wa la waladon wa anna
Muhammadon al-dalil al-ma'sho Shaykh Firdausi wa dinn
al-haqq li-yu'shah 'alai ad-dini kullih wa low karia
al-mushrak
salil al-awliya 'alayhi wa saliem wa anna al-mawta wa al-baita
haqq wa
Al-jumala wa an-nar haqq wa anna Allah huwa al-haqq al-
mushin lusulikum fi
Yawmi al-jumila fi 'ashr min shahri ramadhan sindal takt
Wa istin va mal'asbin

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful! This
is what my master Ya'qub b. Isma'il al-Moqaddasi attests: That there
is no God but Allah, who is single, without partner; he is one,
unique, eternal; he had neither begotten a son nor had a consort.
Muhammad — may God bless him and give him salvation — is his
servant and messenger. He sent him with night guidance and with
the true religion, to establish it above all religions, though the
infringement of this; and death, resurrection, heaven and hell do truly
exist; and he is Allah, the obviously truthful. Died on Friday,
the twentieth Ramadan, in the year 263 H [877 CE]

The stone measures 75 cm in height and 49 cm in width. The
inscription in Kufic characters consists of ten lines, 70 cm long. The
script is carved in relief by a practised hand and ornamented with
some playful elements. The minaret in the ligature of the letters lam
and alif has not been executed consistently but only in the places
which the inscriber liked; apparently he was aiming for variety,
although specific reasons for his decision in each case cannot be
detected. His dealing with space clearly shows his aesthetic idea; he
reduces the size of certain ligatures like those of kaf in order to
make room to centre the closing line, thus separating the date of

FIG. 70
TOMBSTONE WITH INSCRIPTION IN KUFIC SCRIPT
Near Eṣṣa; dated 263/877 CE

After the basmala, the tombstone inscription from a practised hand gives the name of the deceased and the
creed followed by a prayer then a short verse from the Qur'an and religious truths which go back to a tradition
of the Prophet Muhammad.
The third tombstone (FIG. 79) bears the following inscription:

(...) Allah bi-r-rob'il
Muhammad sahl Allah 'alayhi
wa sallam hadd al-qabr
l-labbil b. al-Lahq wa
huwa shahda ala ala fi-lad
alilah wahdahu id shanka
ladi bismu'lla i-samati
wa sa'itina wa ma'atayn

... Allah, by the Prophet
Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him salvation.
This grave is for
Ibrahim b. al-Lahq, and
he attested that there is no God but Allah,
who is single, without participator.
Died in the year 279 H (892-893 CE)
The stone measures 44 cm in height and 28 cm in width. The inscription consists of eight lines in Kufic script. This tombstone has been damaged in several places. The beginning of the text is missing. The Kufic script here is playful, with many minaret-like figures and suggestions of leaves. The first line begins with two illegible words which have been entirely obliterated; presumably a line above is missing, namely the nosnina line with which tombstone inscriptions usually begin. Apparently the inscriber was not an experienced craftsman, a master of his craft. This can be seen by the proportioning of space, for which he lacked a trained eye. This is most obvious in lines 4 and 5, where he writes so closely that he is even forced to write one word above the line. This explains why the graphemes in the middle are distinctly smaller and closer together than in the upper and lowest three lines, where they appear relatively oversized. Noteworthy are the graphemes H, K und D, which are written slanted and very long. The inconsistent and thus confusing appearance of certain graphemes is also striking. The text is typical for tombstone inscriptions with the usual dates and the Islamic profession of faith.

The fourth tombstone (fig. 80) bears the following inscription:

Tuwwafiy al-marhum al-tahab al-fa'il ilah il-alil Allah bi'lil
Jawwad 'izz ad-Din Muhammad Atir ad-Din b.
Muhammad b. Shihab ad-Din Ahmad ad-Damajwani
[fahim min Jawwad al-dhir shawm wa tamanih wa sabrima]

The servant showered with grace, who is in need of God's mercy,
had died.

Jawwad 'izz ad-Din Muhammad Atir ad-Din b.
Muhammad b. Shihab ad-Din Ahmad ad-Damajwani,
on twentieth Jamad al-Aakhir 722 H (1322 CE)

This stone measures 36 cm in height and 26 cm in width. The inscription consists of four lines. This is a later work from the fourteenth century which was made by a very professional stonemason, as we see from the reliefs and the proportioning of the stone with its four uniform lines which are executed in divan script with some thuluth elements. It was intended to erect the stone vertically, 50 rays of light would fill the recesses. This explains why the relief was designed optically wide, when viewed from a distance of some three meters it looks as if seen under a microscope. As usual, the text contains vital information about the deceased. Striking is the omission of the profession of faith which was characteristic for the late Middle Ages and the modern era, and the appearance of the designation marhum (literally “object of mercy”) which is generally used for the deceased today. This particle replaces the phrase rahimah Allah “God have mercy on him”, since the optative of the simple past, which is now obsolete, was already on the wane.

The last tombstone (fig. 81) bears the following inscription:

Bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim
shahidah Allahah an-nahid li ilah illa huwa wa al-malik ilahu wa
liallah illa huwa wa huwa al-sala-al-hakim
baad mi shahidah 'alayhi
Muhammad b. Hasan b. Ghulam
al-Ghamdi tashahhodah alla ilah illa allah wahdah
llah shahid lahi wa amin Muhammad
‘alayhi wa rasuluhu salall Allah 'alayhi wa salam

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.
Allah (himself) is witness that there is no God save Him, and the angels and those who have the knowledge (are witness, too).
He provides justice. There is no God save Him, the Powerful, the Wise. [Sura 3:18]

This is what Muhammad b. Hasan b. Ghulam al-Ghamdi bears witness to:
He attests that there is no God save Allah, who is single, without
participant, and that Muhammad is his servant and messenger.
May God bless Him and grant him salvation.

The stone measures 50 cm in height and 28 cm in width. The inscription consists of twelve lines framed by a simple ornament.
The space containing the script is 38 cm long and 23 cm wide.
A triangle, which presumably contains the date, is found in the middle of the frame. This cannot be seen on the stone but is assumed since next to the name of the deceased the date of death was one of the indispensable elements of every tombstone inscription.
The script used is simple archaic Kufic lettering without punctuation which is difficult to read and is even closer to ancient Kufic because it retains the figure of the sill, in order to point to its possible lid.
fig. 21
TOMBSTONE WITH INSCRIPTION IN ARCHAIC KUFIC SCRIPT
Near Sura, after the 9th century

In early Islam, epitaphs with verses from the Qur'an were still not customary and even not admissible; this changed only in the 9th century. The use of the verse 3:18 on this stone, whose inscription is written in a decidedly archaic style, therefore suggests that it dates from a later period.

To the right, a phenomenon which completely disappeared in the course of the later development of Kufic script. This does not mean that the object was created at the time ancient Kufic was in use, but merely reveals the writer's ignorance. The fact that the stone was made later than the archaic script would suggest is shown by the use of the verse 3:18 from the Qur'an; originally in Islam inscribing tombstones was forbidden and the use of Qur'anic verses for such purposes was completely inadmissible. This changed only in the ninth century.

Particularly noteworthy here is the selection of the type of stone. It is a piece of rock which is not suited to inscription. The inscriber's lack of experience, which made it difficult for him to perform his task, is obvious; he was unable, for example, to maintain a regular space between the lines. While he understood how to execute the script, he lacked an eye for distributing the text over the lines. Also noteworthy is the fact that he forgot to indicate the date of death after specifying the name of the deceased. Apparently he attempted to insert it subsequently, but it is barely legible as he used figures instead of letters, as was customary. The origin of the stone is completely unknown; the text gives no indication, since it is formulaic and has no regional features such as dialectical characteristics which would permit a corresponding attribution.