11 Knotted Kufic Basmalah on Persian lustre tiles, late 13th century. The inscription begins with the last letter of the word ‘Allah’, and continues, ‘the Merciful, the Compassionate. There is no God but He, the Mighty, the Wise.’

12 Zoomorphic Basmalah used as a talisman on a Persian marriage contract, dated 1700.

13 Thuluth Basmalah (in the lower section) with the added words ‘My trust in Him’, on a tile, probably from Persia, late 17th century.
The Styles

MASHQ

Early Mashaq was first developed at Mecca and Medina during the first century of Islam (7th century AD) when the town of Kufah was also developing its own Kufic calligraphic style. The complex rules which governed the early Mashaq were gradually simplified until the developed Mashaq came to resemble the Kufic script. The examples show a particular characteristic of Mashaq: the perfectly balanced dispersal of the script on the page, in varied degrees of density.

Mashaq densely applied, from a Qur’an, Sūrat al-Baqarah, “The Cow” (2:141–3). Copied in Kairouan, 10th century

The Kufic script not only replaced most of the earlier scripts and reached perfection during the second Islamic century (9th century AD), but had the most profound effect on Islamic calligraphy generally. In contrast with its low verticals, its horizontal lines are extended, and it was deliberately written on oblong surfaces, the width being considerably more than the height, which gave it a certain dynamic momentum. Early Kufic Qur’ans, mostly on vellum, were rather austere in appearance, but from the beginning of the 9th century they became more ornamented, with illuminated decorative devices, many of which also served specific functions.


17 Kufic script with occasional letter-pointing and diacritical dots, and with an illuminated Sūrah heading and verse mark, from a Qur’an, Sūrat al-Baqā', 'The Pilgrimage' (XXII, 1). Probably copied in Kairouan, 9th century.

18 Kufic script with occasional diacritical dots, Sūrah heading and verse divisions, from a Qur’an, the end of Sūrat al-Sajdah, 'The Prostration' (XXXII, 39). Probably copied in Kairouan, 9th century.
Muslim artists made extensive use of ornamental Kufic, which they applied most effectively to marble, stone, metal, glass, textiles, ivory, wood, and parchment or vellum.

19 Ornamental Kufic inscription carved in marble, from the tomb of the Ghaznavid Sultan Ma'ymid al-Shār ji, Ghaznāw, Afghanistan, 1030
Ornamental Kufic developed many widely different forms, such as the foliated, the floriated, the pointed, the knotted, the interlaced and intertwined, and the animated. It was also manipulated to form geometric or maze-like patterns.

20. Foliated Kufic carved on a tombstone dated 991, probably from the Gulf (above).

21. Foliated Kufic engraved on an ivory casket. The inscription includes the words Amir al-Mu'minin – 'Commander of the Faithful', one of the titles of the Umayyad caliphs who ruled Muslim Spain. Cordoba, late 10th century.


23. Woven ornamental Kufic, a benedictory statement on a silk and cotton cloth from Persia, late 10th century.

24. Calligraphic band of copper and silver inlay with the verticals rising above the characters and interlacing into a knotted motif, then escaping upwards to create the delightful motif of a row of human faces, six to each unit. The text consists mainly of benedictory phrases. Brass ewer from Khorasan, Persia. c. 1200.