

Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān (Brill, volume 2), s.v. “Epigraphy” by Robert G. Hoyland.

Epigraphy is the study or science of inscriptions, i.e. texts traced upon some hard substance for the sake of durability, as on a monument, building, stone, tablet, medal, coin, vase, etc. The use of the Qur'ān in the corpus of Muslim inscriptions will be the focus of this article.

Background

The durability of inscriptions was observed by pre-Islamic Arab poets who compared them to the traces left by their own desert encampments, both of which seemed able to defy the ravaging effects of time. For that purpose inscriptions had long been used by Greco-Roman and Near Eastern peoples to record their deeds and resolutions, their hopes and aspirations, their prayers and supplications. Often a fine monumental script was developed in order to convey these messages, imparting dignity and authority both to the text and to the medium into which it was carved. For certain civilizations little else remains of their literary heritage but the epigraphic record. This is particularly true of the people of pre-Islamic Arabia, whether the spice traders of ancient Yemen or the pastoralist tribes of the desert regions, who scribbled on the rocks around them with alacrity. The visibility of inscriptions meant that they were all, to a greater or lesser degree, public texts. Many were officially so, a proclamation by a representative of the political or religious establishment on behalf of the whole community, expressing the principles by which it was governed and conducted itself. Others were deliberately so, a declaration by a wealthy patron vaunting his magnanimity and virtue. Still

others (notably epitaphs and graffiti) were more subtly so, a personal statement by individuals seeking to demonstrate their credentials, thereby affirming their membership in a community and their adherence to its moral precepts and guiding tenets. Given this intention and the need for ease of comprehension, inscriptions tend to draw upon a common repertoire of phrases which, though each genre and cultural group has its own particular expressions, remain fairly limited and exhibit to a high degree the recurrence of set formulae.

Muslims not only continued but also expanded this tradition, and inscriptions are found on most kinds of objects created by Muslims wherever they lived, in all periods and in a number of different languages (chiefly Arabic, but also Persian and Turkish, as well as other languages). They are borne by the humblest of materials such as oil lamps and other unglazed ceramics as well as by the finest and most expensive, such as rock crystals and jade (see [material culture and the Qur'ān](#); [calligraphy](#)). This predilection for the written word in Islam is paralleled by the central role that the concept of writing plays in the Qur'ān. The verb “to write” (from the root letters *k-t-b*) occurs, in its various forms, 58 times, and the noun therefrom is attested some 260 times, most often in the sense of scripture (see [book](#)). In what Muslim scholars have considered to be one of the earliest passages revealed by God is found the statement, “He who taught by the pen” (q 96:4). Sūra 68 is entitled “The Pen” (Sūrat al-Qalam) and opens with the asseverative oath: “By the pen and that which they inscribe.” Those who have received a revelation from God are referred to as People of the [Book](#) (q.v.). Humankind's every deed is said to be written down so that at the last [judgment](#) (q.v.) one will be given “his/her book,” on the basis of which that individual's [fate](#) (q.v.) will be decided (q 69:19-26). This predilection together

with a pronounced preference for non-figurative expression, especially in the religious sphere, meant that in Islam inscriptions were not only a means of communication and of visual propaganda but also an art form.

The portrayal of the Qur'ān in inscriptions

Though cited directly or alluded to innumerable times, the Qur'ān is not specifically mentioned in inscriptions as a distinct entity until at least a century after Muḥammad's time. On a second/eighth century graffito from northern Arabia there appears the expression, “he believes... in every messenger he has dispatched and book he has sent down” (Muaikel, *Jawf*, no. 12). In the inscription of 135/752 commissioned by the caliph al-Saffāḥ (d. 136/754) for the refurbished mosque of Medina, believers are called upon to act in accordance with “the book of God” (Combe et al., *Répertoire chronologique*, no. 38). A more explicit statement is given on a tombstone from Egypt dated 195/810: “[The deceased] testifies that the book is truth, which God sent down with his knowledge. Falsehood does not come to it from before it nor from behind it, a revelation from [one who is] wise, praiseworthy. He believes in what is in it, the sure and the doubtful (see [difficult passages](#)), the abrogating and the abrogated (see [abrogation](#)), from its beginning to its end” (Combe et al., *Répertoire chronologique*, no. 89). The second sentence is q 41:42, one of the comparatively few verses in which the Qur'ān offers an insight into its own character and status. On another epitaph from a slightly later period, this time from Mosul, the owner bears witness that “the Qur'ān is the speech of God, sent down, uncreated” (Combe et al., *Répertoire chronologique*, no. 117). The last word alludes to the virulent early medieval debate over the nature of the Qur'ān, whether it was to be considered

co-eternal with God and thus uncreated, or created by him at a fixed point in time (see [createdness of the Qur'ān](#); [inquisition](#)). The former opinion won out and became part of the standard Muslim creed (see [creeds](#)). Evidently inscriptions reflected this creed and present us with the generally accepted view of the nature of the Qur'ān.

The citation of the Qur'ān in inscriptions

Given that Muslims considered the Qur'ān to be the “book of God” (*kitāb Allāh*), God's final and definitive revelation to humankind (see [revelation and inspiration](#)), it was natural that they should have turned for inspiration to this scripture when they came to write inscriptions. Qur'ānic phrases or passages added gravity and prestige to the medium onto which they were inscribed and underlined the piety and probity of the owner of the inscriptions in which they appeared. The Qur'ān's words imparted new meaning and significance both to the text incorporating its verses and to the building or object bearing its imprint. Qur'ānic inscriptions on buildings are sometimes situated too high to be read or in places poorly lit. In such instances a Qur'ānic text's purpose might often be chiefly symbolic, bearing witness to the sacred nature of the building itself (see [house, domestic and divine](#)). The literal message of the text, however, was usually important, too. Some scholars have argued that many inscriptions were too ornate to be legible (see Ettinghausen, *Communication*), but a fair proportion of people knew the Qur'ān by heart, as its memorization was often the principal mode of primary education. They thus needed only to decipher a word or two in order to identify the verse being quoted, especially as the repertoire of verses (q.v.) used was very limited. Moreover, the frequency with which inscriptions conclude with a blessing

(q.v.) for “the one who reads [this text]” and then “says amen” (e.g. Imbert, *Jordanie*, nos. 1, 5, 11, 22-3, 72, 82, 106, 151, 156; Moraekhi, *Medina*, B11, L4a, L17, R8; Baramki, al-Bādiya al-sūriyya, nos. 22, 33, 56, 65, 71, 77) conveys the impression that they were usually meant to be understood. Often it would seem that they were recited out loud as is suggested by such expressions as “Oh God, forgive... the one who reads [this text aloud] and the one who hears, then says amen” (Nevo, *Negev*, EL200C, GM389). Lastly, one should bear in mind that the lettering was generally highlighted by some bright substance so that, as Abū l-Raddād tell us in the account cited below, the text “could be read from a distance.” The authors of a thorough study of qur’ānic texts inscribed on buildings conclude that “the verses chosen to decorate Islamic monuments show the greatest possible variety and invention both in the selection of the verses and where they were placed in relation to the architecture of the building” (Dodd and Khairallah, *Image*, i, 61-3). The reason for this lack of conformity is that the choice of verses did not depend upon any one factor but rather might be determined by the type of material or object involved, the space available, the nature of the occasion, the personal intentions and tastes of the author/commissioner, the prevailing fashion or dominant tradition, religious and political considerations, the effect intended and so on (for magical protection see the section on “seals and amulets” below; see also [amulets](#); [magic, prohibition of](#)). But whatever the occasion, the choice was usually deliberate, as is illustrated by the following account:

When I [Abū l-Raddād, supervisor of the nilometer in Egypt] wanted to engrave texts on the nilometer, I consulted Yazīd b. ‘Abdallāh, Sulaymān b. Wahb and

al-Ḥasan the eunuch as to what was most appropriate. I informed them that the most fitting, in my opinion, would be to inscribe verses of the Qurʾān and the name of the Commander of the Faithful (see [caliph](#)), al-Mutawakkil [r. 232-247/847-861], together with that of the governor al-Muntaṣir since he would be responsible for the work. The three disputed about that and Sulaymān b. Wahb, on his own initiative and without our knowing, sought out the opinion of the Commander of the Faithful. The latter then wrote that verses in conformity with the matter of the nilometer should be inscribed as well as his name. I therefore extracted from the Qurʾān the verses that best suited this subject and had them engraved wherever possible on the marble on the outside of the structure. The letters, the thickness of a finger, were firmly embedded in the body of the marble and tinted with lapis-lazuli and so could be read from a distance (Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, iii, 112-3).

Verses might be selected for their applicability to the function of the building or object. A good example is provided by the four pieces picked by Abū l-Raddād for the nilometer, all of which maintain that [water](#) (q.v.) is a boon of divine origin: “We sent down blessed water from the sky with which we bring forth gardens and the harvest grain” (q 50:9); “you sometimes see the [earth](#) (q.v.) barren, but no sooner do we send down rain upon it than it begins to stir and swell, putting forth every kind of radiant bloom” (q 22:5); “do you not see how God sends down water from the sky and covers the earth with vegetation” (q 22:63; see [agriculture and vegetation](#)); “it is he who sends down rain for them when they have lost all

hope (q.v.), and spreads abroad his blessings” (q 42:28). Regarded as particularly pertinent to [mosques](#) (q.v.) was q 9:18: “none should visit the mosques of God except those who believe in God and the last day, attend to their prayers and pay the alms-tax and fear none but God. These shall be rightly guided” (see [almsgiving](#); [prayer](#)). For prayer niches q 17:78 was a popular choice: “Recite your prayers at sunset until nightfall, and the recitation at dawn, indeed the recitation at dawn has its witnesses” (see [day, times of](#); [recitation of the qur’ān](#); [witnessing and testifying](#)). And on tombstones humankind's common fate was deemed a suitable topic as touched upon in q 2:156: “We belong to God and unto God we shall return”; q 21:35: “Every soul will taste death”; and the like (see [death and the dead](#)).

Apart from such considerations, the particular aims of the author/commissioner might direct the choice of verses. Quite common was the desire to make some sort of declaration of [faith](#) (q.v.) and affirmation of allegiance to the one true God. This might be a personal statement, as in graffiti and epitaphs, or a public proclamation, as in official texts on monuments, milestones, coins, seals, etc. The texts most often used to this end were q 2:255 (known as the Throne Verse), of which it was often considered sufficient to cite just the first few words: “God, there is no God but he, the living, the everlasting,” and q 3:18: “God is witness that there is no god but he, as also are the angels (see [angel](#)) and men of knowledge; he acts with justice, there is no god but he, the mighty, the wise” (see [god and his attributes](#); [knowledge and learning](#)). Almost as popular and of similar content, stressing God's unity and majesty, was q 112: “Say: God is one, the eternal God. He does not beget, nor was he begotten. None is equal to him.” With their emphasis on God's oneness, such verses betray a certain polemical thrust

(see [polemic and polemical language](#)), an assertion of Islam's validity as against those who practice a corrupt form of monotheism, associating others with God, the chiefly intended object of such words being the Christians (see [christians and christianity](#); [debate and disputation](#)). This is much more blatant in another very frequently quoted verse, q 9:33: "It is he who has sent his [messenger](#) (q.v.) with guidance and the religion of [truth](#) (q.v.) to make it prevail over all [religion](#) (q.v.), even if the associators are averse."

The personal whims and preferences of the author / commissioner could also play an important part in determining which verses might be favored. In most cases this cannot be detected. Very occasionally, however, it will come to light, as when a qur'ānic phrase is adopted as a play on the patron's name. Thus the coins of al-Ḥakam b. Abī l-ʿAṣ, governor of Fars and Khuzistan in 56-58/676-78, mostly bear the legend, "God is the lord of judgment (*ḥukm*)," echoing numerous qur'ānic verses. ʿAbd al- ʿAzīz b. ʿAbdallāh, governor of Sistan in 66/685-86, liked to have the slogan, "in the name of God the all-mighty (*al-ʿazīz*)," a popular qur'ānic epithet for God, stamped on the coins of his province. Such puns on names were very popular, like officials with the name Maḥmūd opting for q 17:79, "Your lord may exalt you to an honorable station (*maqām maḥmūd*)," and so on. They could often be worked in very subtly as in the text commemorating an addition to the congregational mosque at Isfahan in 480/1087, which cites q 23:1-6, the concluding words of which ("what their right hands possess," *mā malakat aymanuhum*) allude to the name of the reigning Sultan (Malik Shāh) and his official title ("right hand of the caliph," *yamīn al-khalīfa*).

Individual discretion and creation are present to some degree in inscriptions but inevitably — as with dress, architecture and

the like (see [art and architecture and the qur'ān](#)) — the influence of fashion would also make itself felt. What was in vogue in one generation might be regarded as outmoded by the next. On early Egyptian tombstones, for example, q 22:7 was very popular: “The hour is coming, of that there is no doubt, and God will raise those who are in the graves,” a verse which subsequently lost ground to q 55:26-7: “All who live on earth are doomed to die, but the face of your lord will abide forever in all its majesty and [glory](#) (q.v.)” Trends were presumably often set by political elites. Certainly this seems to be borne out by the frequency with which the earliest dated occurrence of a phrase in graffiti follows, by a couple of decades, its earliest dated occurrence in an imperial inscription. And it is more frivolously confirmed by the following anecdote: “When people met in the time of al-Walīd [founder of many mosques and palaces] they would talk about nothing but building and construction; next (the debauched) Sulaymān came to power... and they would ask one another about copulation and slave girls; and then when [the pious] ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz held office, people would meet and discuss their night prayers, their memorization and recitation of the Qur’ān and their [fasting](#) (q.v.)” (Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, ii, 1272-3).

Religious and political conditions might also have a part to play (see [politics and the qur'ān](#)). The devolution of the caliphate into discrete polities in the third-fourth/ninth-tenth centuries, many of them headed by Shī‘ī dynasties (see [shī‘ism and the qur'ān](#)), meant that sectarian concerns assumed a greater role in the choice of qur’ānic verses (for Fāṭimid Egypt see Bierman, *Writing signs*). In Syria during the Crusades, “holy war” was championed in stone as well as in deed (Tabbaa, *Monuments*; Hillenbrand, *Jihad*; see [jihād](#)). The use of q 43:88-9 (“And his [i.e. the Prophet's] saying: ‘Oh my lord,

these are a people who do not believe”) in a graffito has been interpreted as a criticism of the notoriously dissolute ruler al-Walīd II, who had stayed in a palace in the immediate vicinity before his assassination in 126/744 (Imbert, Coran). And the blanket use of qur’ānic texts on monuments, coins, papyrus protocols, milestones, etc., by ‘Abd al-Malik from 72/691 onward was chiefly a response to the divisive effects of the second Arab civil war (65-72/684-91). In this he was not totally innovative, for certain of the participants in the civil war had already been testing this idea. One claimant to the caliphate, the Khārijī (see [kharajīs](#)) leader Qaṭarī b. al-Fujā’a, minted coins bearing the rallying cry “judgment belongs to God alone” (cf. q 6:57; 12:40, 67; 28:88; 40:12; 42:10). And coins bearing the legend “Muḥammad is the messenger of God,” part of q 48:29, were issued by a governor of Fars loyal to another contender, ‘Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr, of whom it was said that “he had come out of zeal for the house of God, and he was full of threats against the westerners (i.e. ‘Abd al-Malik's supporters), alleging that they were transgressors of the law” (see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 550-4).

The manipulation of the Qur’ān in inscriptions

An inscription may simply cite one or more qur’ānic verses, whole or in part, without interfering with the wording or order in any way and with very little additional information save the name of the author/commissioner and a date. Onto a rock face near Mecca, for example, is etched q 65:3: “God is all-sufficient for whoever puts his trust in him. He will surely bring about what he decrees. He has set a measure for all things. Umayya b. ‘Abd al-Malik wrote this in the year 98/716” (Rāshid, *Makka*, ‘Asila 2). And a tombstone from the region south of Mecca simply quotes the Throne Verse (q

2:255) followed by the name of the deceased (Zayla‘ī, *Ḥamdāna*, no. 1). Sometimes the qur’ānic text is presented alone, unencumbered by any other data. Thus a first-second/seventh-eighth century basalt tombstone from southern Syria tells us nothing of the persons interred below except perhaps that they had stood by, or had done so in the eyes of their companions, the words of q 37:61: “For the like of this [i.e. the joys of paradise] let all men strive” (Ory, *Hawran*, no. 1).

Very often a subtle amendment to the text is introduced for the sake of clarity. On ‘Abd al-Malik's coinage of 77/696 and on most inscriptions thereafter, q 9:33 (“It is he who sent his messenger with guidance...”) is slightly filled out (from q 48:29) to read: “Muḥammad is the messenger of God whom he sent with guidance....” Alteration may also be made to personalize the quotation, in particular changing the subject of a verb from “they” to “I.” Most of the discrepancies between the inscribed qur’ānic text and the official qur’ānic text, however, suggest that the inscriber, especially in the case of graffiti, would be working from memory. Subtle variants would, therefore, be likely to creep in. A graffito from the environs of Mecca slightly adjusts q 38:26 from “Oh David, we have made you a deputy on the earth, so rule (*fahkum*)...!” to the more straightforward “Oh David, we have made you a deputy on earth in order that you may rule (*li-taḥkuma*)...” (Fahmī, *Makka*, no. 2). Another graffito from the same area (Rāshid, *Makka*, no. 2) attempts to render q 2:21: “Men, serve your lord (*u‘budū rabbakum*), who has created you and those who have gone before you, so that you may guard yourselves against evil (*la‘allakum tattaqūn*)”; the graffito, however, introduces variants from q 4:1 (*ittaqū rabbakum*) and q 2:189, 3:130, 200 and 5:100 (*la‘allakum tufliḥūn*).

More commonly still, especially in the case of graffiti, an inscription will be an eclectic blend of phrases taken from different verses of the Qur'ān. The words may still be faithfully conveyed. Thus an Egyptian marriage contract inscribed on silk begins with snippets from q 11:88 (“my success lies only with God and in him I trust”) and q 9:129 (“And he is lord of the mighty throne”), unchanged except for the insertion of an “and” (Ragib, *Contrat*, 32; see [contracts and alliances](#); [marriage and divorce](#); [trust and patience](#)). Very often the phrases will be slightly modified and/or supplemented as required or desired. For example, the text “My lord, lord of the heavens and earth and what is between them, there is no God but he, and so I adopt him as a protector” (Rāshid, *Medina*, no. 21) is assembled from q 26:24 (or q 37:5; 38:66; 44:7, 38) and q 73:9, with a small amendment to personalize the quotation (“I adopt him” rather than “you adopt him!”). The text “My lord is God and my religion is Islam, in him I trust and unto him I turn, and all shall return to him” (‘Ushsh, *Jabal Usays*, no. 87, dated 119/737) borrows from q 40:28, 11:88 (cf. q 42:10) and 5:18 (*wa-ilayhi l- maṣṭr*, cf. q 40:3 and 64:3), and inserts the phrase “my religion is Islam” which, though not strictly qur’ānic, plays on q 5:3 (“I have approved for you as a religion Islam”) and q 3:19 (“religion with God is Islam”). The text “I believe that there is no god except him in whom the Children of [Israel](#) (q.v.) believed, [believing as] a Muslim [ḥanīf](#), nor am I among the associators” (Donner, *Hanakiyya*, W1) quotes verbatim part of q 10:90, then adapts a statement about Abraham (q 3:67) to suit the inscriber. Finally, the text “Provide for him from your bounty, and enter him into your [mercy](#) (q.v.), and perfect upon him your favor, and make him one of the prosperous” (Nevo, *Negev*, SC301) takes from q 24:38 (paraphrased), 7:151, 48:2 (or 5:3), and adds the Qur’ān-

like closing request to be made “one of the prosperous.”

The media on which qur’ānic texts appear

Muslims have carved inscriptions onto most of the kinds of objects that they have produced, at all times since the death of their Prophet and in all the lands that they have inhabited (so not just the Muslim world, but also China, America, etc.), and a substantial proportion of these inscriptions incorporate qur’ānic verses, whole or in part, reported verbatim or paraphrased. Our task here is limited to noting some of the most common media onto which Qur’ān-bearing texts have been inscribed.

Buildings

Public edifices and grand residences would almost always be adorned with some sort of inscription. By far the most numerous are those recording the foundation or renovation of a structure. They might say no more than what was done, when and at whose command. The patron would, however, very likely take the opportunity, by including appropriate qur’ānic verses, to indulge in a little self-glorification by adding titles and eulogies and underlining the majesty and significance of his work. How much care sometimes went into this latter aspect can be observed from the example of the tomb and college of Sultan Ḥasan (757-64/1356-62) in Cairo. At the great entrance, which opens onto the sunlit streets and leads inside to where enlightenment may be found, the famous Light Verse (q 24:35) is encountered, which begins: “God is the **light** (q.v.) of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of his light is as a niche wherein is a **lamp** (q.v.), the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star.” The prayer niche, indicating the direction of **Mecca** (q.v.), is adorned with the highly relevant

verse: “We have seen you turn your face towards heaven [for guidance, O Muḥammad]. Now we will make you turn in a direction that will please you. Turn towards the holy mosque; wherever you are, face towards it. Those to whom the scripture was given know this to be the truth from their lord” (q 2:144). On the eastern walls, which are sacred by virtue of their alignment towards Mecca and [paradise](#) (q.v.), letters larger and more elaborate than elsewhere speak of [victory](#) (q.v.) and eternal reward (see [reward and punishment](#)): “We have given you a glorious victory so that God may forgive your past and future sins and perfect his goodness upon you... He has caused you to do as you have done that he may bring the believers, both men and women, into gardens watered by running streams, there to abide forever...” (q 48:1-6). And in the adjoining tomb of the Sultan there is quoted the Throne Verse, a basic statement of the Islamic faith to which any Muslim could assent.

Less common than foundation inscriptions, though socially more important, are endowment (see [inheritance](#)) texts and decrees. The latter record the assignment of buildings to a religious body, whether to be owned by it or to be used for its support (see [maintenance and upkeep](#); [property](#)). The format of the inscription might be much the same as for a foundation (identification of the building, date, name and titles of the benefactor), but the choice of qur’ānic verses would generally be different, the most popular being the very apt q 2:181: “Whoever alters a will after hearing it shall be accountable for his crime (see [sin and crime](#)). God hears all and knows all” (see [breaking trusts and contracts](#)). The text of a decree will, of course, chiefly be taken up with details of the issuing authority's resolutions, as also with the name and titles of that authority and the date of issue. The Qur’ān may well intrude,

however, in the customary warning to potential violators of the decree, particularly q 26:227 (“Wrong-doers will come to know by what a great reverse they will be overturned”), and in the concluding phrase, most often taken from q 3:173: “God is sufficient for us and most excellent as a protector.”

Tombstones and rocks

Inscriptions on tombstones (epitaphs) and on rocks (graffiti), though they are visible to passers-by, are, unlike texts on monuments and the objects of state, not so much concerned with addressing the public as making a personal statement. They begin by invoking God, starting with a simple exclamation (*Allāhumma*) or calling upon his name (*bi-smi llāh*, see [basmala](#)). Then some sort of petition will usually be made, most often for [forgiveness](#), mercy, [blessing](#) or approval, concepts that form an important part of the qur’ānic worldview. It may also be asked that favor be conferred on other parties, such as relatives, the Muslim community, prophets (see [prophets and prophethood](#)) and angels, and often, in conclusion, the reader of the inscription and/or somebody else says “amen, amen, lord of the worlds” or just “amen” (e.g. Abbott, Kasr Kharana, dated 92/710; Cantineau, *Palmyre*, no. 39, 110/728; Couroyer, Beit Gibrin, first/seventh-eighth century). For this purpose the phrase, “invoke a blessing upon” (*ṣalli ‘alā*, lit. “pray for”), will frequently be used, especially for the prophet Muḥammad, as in q 33:56 (e.g. Kessler, Inscription; Miles, Ta’if, 241), but also for others (e.g. Ory, ‘Ayn al-Garr, no. 1: “May God bless all the Muslims”).

Supplicants will also put forward many more elaborate entreaties. They wish to be admitted into [paradise](#) (q.v.), the terms here being *janna*, *jannāt al-na‘īm* (literally, gardens of bliss; see [garden](#)) and *madkhal* (esp. q 4:31; cf. Grohmann,

Arabic inscriptions, Z11: *adkihilhā madkhalan karīman*), attested 137, ten and three times respectively in the Qurʾān. And they desire to be united with their Prophet (e.g. Hawary-Rached, *Steles*, nos. 3-4, 13; Imbert, Qastal al-Balqaʾ, nos. 2, 7-8, 14, 16), an idea not found in the Qurʾān, though the expression *alḥiqhu bi-nabiyyihi* is reminiscent of q 26:83 (*alḥiqnī bi-l-ṣāliḥīn*, “unite me to the righteous”). They seek to be preserved from the torment of the day of reckoning, to be spared God's punishment, to be saved from [hell](#) (q.v.) and to receive succor on the day of resurrection, all concepts crucial to the qurʾānic theory of divine retribution (see [resurrection](#); [retaliation](#); [reward and punishment](#)). They, or the deceased at least, beg to be instructed in his [proof](#) (q.v.; e.g. Hawary-Rached, *Steles*, nos. 3, 10, 13, etc.; Imbert, Qastal al-Balqaʾ, nos. 2, 6-8, 10), presumably a reference to q 6:83 (“This is our proof which we bestowed upon Abraham”) and q 6:149 (“To God belongs the conclusive proof”). Finally, we find inscriptions where supplicants advance the more positive requests of being rewarded for the best of their [deeds](#) (see [good deeds](#); [evil deeds](#)), having their devotions and good actions accepted, receiving God's favor and guidance and being granted good health, virtue and prosperity, all again bristling with qurʾānic thinking and terminology.

The other major objective of inscribers of epitaphs and graffiti is to convey some of the essentials of their faith and to pronounce their adherence to it, to give a summary of the principles by which, as is so often written of the deceased, “he has lived, by which he has died and by which he will be raised alive, if God wills.”



[ii]

3rd/9th century Egyptian carved stone panel containing the *basmala* and Q 3:18: “In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful. God is witness that there is no god save him. And the angels and the men of learning [are also witnesses]. Maintaining his creation in justice, there is no God save him, the almighty, the wise.” No individual's name is inscribed on this panel. Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (S1993.8).



[iii]

Portion of stone-carved band with Q 9:18 on the south face of the southwest minaret of the Mosque of al-Hākim in Cairo, early 5th/11th century. The verse, which begins “the mosques of God shall be visited and maintained,” is the most common inscription found on mosques throughout the Muslim world. Photograph courtesy of Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair.



[iv]

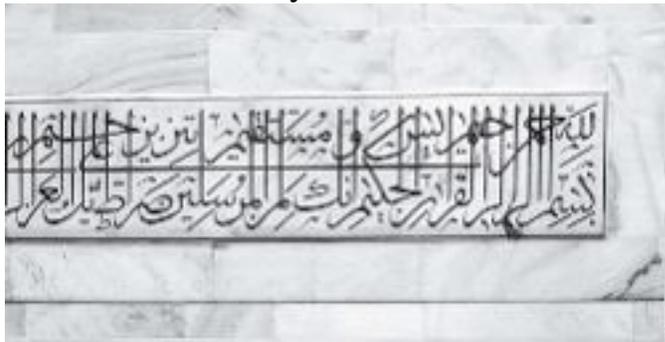
Top row: Nishapur dinar, 450/1058-9 (under the Seljuk Tughril Beg). Obverse center is the same as that of the ‘Umayyad dinar of 77/696-7 (see plate i), with *‘adl* inscribed above, and *al-qā’im bi-amr Allāh* below; outer margin is inscribed with a passage from Q 30:4-5 (“*lillāhi l-amr min qabl wa-min ba‘d wa-yawma’idh yafrāhu l-mu’minūn bi-naṣri llāhi*”). Reverse margin reads *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh arsalahu bi-l-hudā wa-dīn al-ḥaqq li-yuḏhirahu ‘alā l-dīn kullihi wa-law kariha al-mushrikūn* (cf. Q 48:29; 9:33); center is inscribed with *lillāh Muḥammad rasūl Allāh al-Sultān al-A‘zam Shāhānshāh Ajall Rukn al-Dīn Tughril Beg*. Bottom row: Mosul copper,

585/1189-90, under the Zengid prince of Mosul, Mas‘ūd, and his overlord, the Ayyubid Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. Obverse contains an allegorical figure of the moon. Reverse center begins with the *shahāda*. Images courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Numismatic Collection, Douglas Mudd. Identification and transcription courtesy of Michael Bates of the American Numismatic Society.



[vii]

Top row: Granada dirham. Anonymous and undated (ca. 596-853/1200-1450), under the Naṣrids. Obverse is inscribed with the *shahāda*. Reverse reads *lā ghālib illā llāh t‘ Gharnāṭa* (t‘ presumably abbreviates *ta‘ālā*, “exalted be he”). Bottom row: Lahore gold mohur, 1015/1606-7. First regnal year of Jahāngīr: Obverse is inscribed with “*Allāh lā ilāh illā Muḥammad rasūl Allāh hūr darb 1115 Lā*” (cf. Q 37:35; 48:29). Reverse reads *ghāzī Jahāngīr Bādishāh Muḥammad Nūr al-Dīn sana 1*. Images courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Numismatic Collection, Douglas Mudd. Identification and transcription courtesy of Michael Bates of the American Numismatic Society.



[viii]

Beginning of the inscription in *thuluth* by the hand of Amānat Khān Shīrāzī

that frames the south archway of the Taj Mahal, 1048/1636-7: “In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful. Yā Sīn. By the wise Qur’ān. Lo! You are of those sent on a straight path. A revelation of the mighty, the merciful...” (Q 36:1-5). The south archway contains the first 22 verses of Q 36 and continues on the west, north and east archways. Photograph courtesy of Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair.



[ix]

Band with Q 9:108 inscribed vertically in *thuluth* by ‘Alī Riḍā-i ‘Abbāsī, 1025/1616-7 at the beginning of the inscription in tile mosaic framing the entrance portal to the Imām Mosque (formerly the Shāh Mosque) in Isfahān. The verse mentions a mosque whose foundation was laid the first day. The inscription continues with a Shī‘ite ḥadīth quoted on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās that ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is the Prophet's successor. Photograph courtesy of Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair.

Always in first place is some declaration about God. Very commonly various epithets and predicate phrases will be assigned to him, almost all corresponding to portions of qur'ānic verses: “the clement, the generous,” “praiseworthy, glorious,” “the forgiving, the compassionate,” “the mighty, the wise,” “the lord of the worlds,” “the manifest truth,” “to him belongs sovereignty and praise,” “he gives life and brings death,” “in his hand is the sovereignty and he is able to do all things” (q 67:1; e.g. ‘Abd al-Tawab, *Nécropole*, no. 1). Very frequently his unity will be affirmed, both by simple assertions that he is one and by recourse to pertinent qur'ānic verses, especially q 6:163 (“He has no associate”; used on Umayyad papyrus protocols), q 72:3 (“He has taken no companion nor offspring”; e.g. Hawary-Rached, *Steles*, no. 18) and q 2:255 and 3:18 as cited above. Next in line is the prophet **Muḥammad** (q.v.), whose importance to humankind is highlighted with the aid of such qur'ānic texts as the aforementioned q 9:33 (first appearing on coinage from 77/696), q 37:37 (“He brought the truth and confirmed those already sent”), q 36:70 (“to warn whoever lives and that the word may be fulfilled against the unbelievers”), and q 33:45 (“a summoner to God by his permission and a light-giving lamp”; Hawary-Rached, *Steles*, nos. 20, 28-9).

Objects and furnishings

This is a very broad category, comprising a vast range of artifacts and fittings fashioned out of many different materials: metal, glass, wood, clay, ivory, textiles, rock crystal and jade, to name but the most common. At the more basic end of the spectrum inscriptions might be rare or record no more than the place of manufacture, the name of the craftsman responsible, and perhaps a very brief blessing or prayer for the future

owner. Items at the luxury end of the scale, by contrast, could bear quite effusive texts, containing praise for the commissioner, moral maxims, profane poems and qur'ānic quotations. The last-mentioned of these would most likely be featured on objects of a religious nature (e.g. wooden Qur'ān-stands, glass mosque lamps) or those found in a religious context (e.g. the cloth covering the Ka'ba [q.v.] in Mecca, carved wooden panels in mosques), and especially on those being donated to mosques and shrines. There would seem to have been considerable diversity in the choice of verses and only very occasionally was a particular text linked to a particular object (keys to the Ka'ba were usually inscribed with q 3:96-7, which refers to Mecca and its sanctuary; mosque lamps often bore q 24:35, the Light Verse; bronze water-cauldrons might bear q 9:19, which alludes to giving drink to pilgrims; see [pilgrimage](#)).

Coins

The qur'ānic legends that appear on the earliest purely epigraphic coins, the gold dinars and silver dirhams struck by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik in the 70s/690s, served as a statement of the essence of the Islamic message and the difference between Islam and the other monotheistic religions. The dinar of 77/696-7 is a conflation of three verses to this effect: 1) "There is no god but God alone. He has no associate" on the obverse center ("associate" [*sharīk*] occurs in q 6:163; 18:111; 25:2); 2) "Muḥammad is the messenger of God, who sent him with guidance and the religion of truth to make it prevail over all religion, even if the associators are averse" (q 48:29; 9:33) in the margin; and 3) "God is one, the eternal God. He begot none, nor was he begotten" (q 112) in the margin. On dirhams is added the last phrase of q 112: "None is

equal to him.”

These phrases remained unchanged on coins up to the end of the Umayyad caliphate in 132/750, and they stayed in use under the ‘Abbāsids (the main reverse inscription was changed to the simpler “Muḥammad is the messenger of God”). Yet while these basic phrases tended to predominate, certainly until the breakup of the caliphate, different qur’ānic verses were used at different times as slogans. To mention but two examples here: The leaders of the ‘Abbāsīd revolution, wishing to emphasize their links to the clan of the Prophet, adopted q 42:23: “Say, for this I ask of you no recompense other than love of kin” (Bates, *Islamic coins*, 18). The Almoravids, seeking to stress their zeal for [holy war](#), used q 3:85: “He who chooses a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him and in the world to come he will be one of the lost” (Bates, *Islamic coins*, 28). Sectarian aspects are underlined by the addition of certain non-qur’ānic phrases to the standard profession of faith. For example, on coins of the Fāṭimids in Egypt and the Ṣulayḥids in Yemen (both Shī‘ī dynasties) is found “ ‘Alī is the friend of God” (Lowick, *Dinars*, 263); and on a coin of the Fāṭimid caliph al-Mu‘izz (341-65/953-75) is inscribed the longer, more emphatic expression, “‘[Alī b. Abī Ṭālib](#) (q.v.) is the nominee of the Prophet and the most excellent representative and husband of the radiant chaste one” (Bates, *Islamic coins*, 31; see [family of the prophet](#)).

A wide variety of qur’ānic texts appears on coins from across the empire, used by different rulers in different circumstances and at various times. On the whole these demonstrate certain basic themes: aspects of government and God's role in its execution (see [politics and the qur’ān](#)), the victorious nature of Islam, its position in respect of unbelievers, and so on.

Sometimes they will be brief snippets of generic pious import (see [piety](#)), such as “our sufficiency is in God” on Mongol coins of Abū Sa‘īd, “the kingdom belongs to God” on coins of Ibrāhīm of Ghazna (Lane Poole, *Catalogue*, 6.219, 2.556), “might is God's” on a Fāṭimid coin of al-Mu‘izz (Bates, *Islamic coins*, 31), and a host of others (see Codrington, *Muselman numismatics*, 23-30; Lane Poole, *Catalogue*, indices). At other times most or all of a verse will be used. On coins of the Naṣrid Yūsuf I in Spain and of the Mongol chief Hūlāgū, for instance, one finds q 3:26: “Say: ‘Lord, sovereign of all sovereignty, you bestow sovereignty on whom you will and take it away from whom you please; you exalt whomever you will and abase whomever you please. In your hand lies all that is good’” (Lane Poole, *Catalogue*, 2.171, 6.8). The expression, “Victory comes only from God, the mighty, the wise” (q 3:126), was popular and appears, for example, on the obverse of coins of the Mamlūk ruler Nāṣir Muḥammad, and on the reverse in a form adjusted to suit the sovereign: “There is no victory except with the Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir...” (Lane Poole, *Catalogue*, 4.499). Reference to the Qur’ān being “the words of God (see [word of god](#))” occurs on medieval North African gold coins from Fās (Lane-Poole, *Catalogue*, 5.211). And in a message against the unbelievers we find most of q 48:29 cited on a Mongol coin of Uljaitū: “Muḥammad is the messenger of God. Those who are with him are hard on the unbelievers but merciful to one another. You see them adoring on their knees, seeking the grace of God and his good will. Their marks are on their faces, the traces of their prostration” (Lane Poole, *Catalogue*, 6.129; see [bowing and prostration](#)). A notable exception to this practice of using qur’ānic phrases is encountered on the coinage of the Ottoman sultans who, with the exception of a few examples inscribed with the standard

profession of faith, favored ostentatious formulae highlighting their greatness and the perpetuation of their reign (Lane-Poole, *Catalogue*, 8.xlii, 427-8).

Seals and amulets

In private and public collections are found many thousands of Islamic seals and amulets from the early Islamic period up to the present day. These are made from a variety of stones or metals (see [metals and minerals](#)). This section discusses, first, early Islamic seals inscribed with qur'ānic verses or other pious phrases and, second, amulets that use qur'ānic phrases or make allusion in other ways to God and the Qur'ān. The terms amulet and talisman are often used interchangeably; in Arabic there is no single word, but a variety (*hirz*, *ṭilasm*, *ḥijāb*, etc.). The preferred term in the present context is “amulet,” defined as an object “often worn on or close to the human body, and used for protective purposes” (Ruska and Carra de Vaux, *Tilsam*; see also Maddison and Savage-Smith, *Science*, 133, where amulets are additionally defined as “made out of lasting materials... apparently made to function over a long period”). Seals and amulets have certain basic differences: The seal is engraved in reverse and made with the intention of stamping onto something, such as a document, to validate it, whereas the amulet is generally engraved in positive and made for a variety of purposes: to bring good luck, to protect from the evil eye, and so on. As will be discussed, however, they both draw upon the same body of pious expressions of Islamic belief for the tone and content of their inscriptions.

The phenomenon of using pious phrases for sealing has its roots in the pre-Islamic tradition. There are close parallels with Sasanian seals which appeal to deities for protection. As has been argued, not only was the presence of the religious text an

expression of a person's direct link with God, but it also provided a mark of authenticity for the object being sealed (Kalus and Gignoux, *Les formules*, 138). Where specific phrases from the Qur'ān are used on early Islamic seals, these generally consist of just a few words, sometimes supplemented by non-qur'ānic phrases. Particularly popular is the phrase "God is sufficient for me" from q 9:129 and 39:38, which also appears on early Islamic coins and glass stamps (Walker, *Arab-Sasanian*, 102; Morton, *Glass stamps*, 156). Other popular phrases include "as God wills" (sometimes compounded with "there is no power except in God" from q 18:39 and "I ask forgiveness of God"), "the kingdom belongs to God" from q 40:16 (also as "[glory](#)" and "glory belongs to God" from q 4:139 and elsewhere) and the standard profession of faith (Kalus, *Ashmolean*, I.1.1.1; see [witness to faith](#)). Longer qur'ānic phrases also feature, such as q 9:127 (Kalus, *Bibliothèque Nationale*, I.1.1.22) and q 112 (Kalus, *Ashmolean*, I.1.1.4). A commonly recurring theme is the inevitability of death: "Obey your Lord before that day arrives which none can defer against the will of God. For on that day there shall be no refuge for you, nor shall you be able to deny your sins" from q 42:47 (Naqshabandi and Horri, *Iraq*, no. 61). A seal in the British Museum (Porter, *Catalogue*, Marsden collection 4) includes a mention of its owner having learned the *sabʿ al-mathānī*, thought to refer to the whole of the Qur'ān or to the seven verses of the first sūra (see [fātiḥa](#)). Chroniclers and historians (see [history and the qur'ān](#)), in particular al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956), Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418), document the use by the caliphs of the phrases, qur'ānic or otherwise, that they affixed on their seals in place of a signature (collected in Gignoux and Kalus, *Les formules*). The authors do not always agree,

however, on which phrases were used by which caliphs. For example, al-Mas‘ūdī relates that the seal of Mu‘āwiya b. Yazīd (64/683-84) was engraved with “In God is the trust of Mu‘āwiya” (*Tanbīh*, 307), while according to al-Qalqashandī his seal bore “This world is a deception” (*al-dunyā ghurūr*, *Ṣubḥ*, vi, 354), an abbreviated form of q 3:185 and 57:20. The pious phrases used on these caliphal seals correspond to those inscribed on documents, such as “Praise be to God, lord of creation” from q 1:2, used by the Fāṭimid caliphs, and “The sovereignty belongs to God,” used by their viziers. These phrases, both on documents and seals, served the same function as a modern signature, identifying and authenticating the author, and are known as an *‘alāma* or motto (Stern, *Fatimid decrees*, 127-8).

The nature of these phrases, however, with their expressions of belief or trust in God, lends an added dimension which goes beyond the simple act of validation, especially in the case of seals which personalize the inscription, emphasizing that the owner “believes in God” (Kalus, *Bibliothèque Nationale*, 17). Hence the seal, because of both the words it bears and the stone types from which it is made, which are themselves believed to have protective powers and other beneficent properties, overlaps in function with the amulet. This is most clearly illustrated by the following observation of the ninth-century Muslim scholar al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868): “When a believer takes off his signet ring to affix his seal upon some piece of business and the seal has on it ‘God is sufficient for me’ or ‘I trust in God,’ then he surely suspects that he has left the shelter of God, mighty is his name, until he returns the signet to its place” (al-Jāḥiẓ, *Book of Misers*, 42).

Another instance of this amuletic aspect of Islamic seals is offered in a sardonyx seal of the Ḥimyarite period (ca. third-

sixth century) in the British Museum (Walker, South Arabian gem). It was originally engraved with the name Nadīm in south Arabian script (see [arabic script](#)) and an eagle grasping the tail of a serpent, then re-engraved probably in the eighth century with the qurʿānic verse q 3:191: “Give us salvation from the punishment of the [fire](#) (q.v.),” the first word having been amended to “give me” in order to personalize the phrase. The seal may also have been believed by its Arab owner to have amuletic properties on account of the south Arabian script engraved upon it, which was regarded as one of a series of Kabbalistic alphabets by Ibn Waḥshiyya (fl. fourth/tenth cent, although concrete proof of his existence has yet to be found; Porter, *Magical*, 140). This seems to be corroborated by a seal inscribed in Arabic with the words “We have repented to God” set into a Carolingian cross brooch found in Ireland (Porter and Ager, *Carolingian*, 212-3), where again it is presumably the script that is chiefly responsible for the amuletic value of the seal.

The overlapping function of seal and amulet has its roots in the ancient Near Eastern tradition: “Early stamp seals probably derived from amulets and it is likely that seals, whether stamps or cylinders, never lost their amuletic meaning and were always invested with magical powers in the eyes of their owners” (Finkel, *Magic*, 7). In the Islamic world amulets are most commonly inscribed in positive, to be read straight off, though they can also be rendered in negative, like seals. In this case their power does not become active “until the inscription has been stamped onto a surface where it can be read in the correct sequence” (Maddison and Savage-Smith, *Science*, 133). On amulets there will also often be imprinted a symbol or motif, such as a zodiacal figure, drawn from a vast number of possibilities.

The use of a verse from the Qurʾān on amulets is seen as a powerful tool in magic (Hamès, *Le Coran*, 129-60), for “it is a guide and a healing to those who believe” (q 41:44). Moreover, the Qurʾān as a whole was believed to be a source of protection, and the number of extant miniature Qurʾāns indicates that they were frequently carried for this purpose (Canaan, *Decipherment*, 72; Kalus, *Bibliothèque Nationale*, 71; Donaldson, *Koran*, 254-66). On amulets complete qurʾānic verses may be inscribed or just short extracts therefrom, such as appear on the early seals discussed above. By far the most popular verses for amulets are the Throne Verse (q 2:255) and the short chapters at the end of the Qurʾān, especially q 112 (Canaan, *Decipherment*, 71-6). These two were often combined with other popular verses (Kalus, *Bibliothèque Nationale*, III.1.1.8: q 2:255 and 13:13). One example blends q 112, 12:64 and 61:13 (“help from God and a speedy victory”), the last a common feature of talismanic shirts probably worn in battle (Porter, *Catalogue*, OA+1334; Maddison and Savage-Smith, *Science*, 118). The names of the seven sleepers of Ephesus (see [men of the cave](#)), whose story is told in q 18:1-25, also appear on amulets (Reinaud, *Monumens*, ii, no. 25) as do “the most beautiful names of God” (drawn from or inspired by the Qurʾān), sometimes inscribed in their entirety (99) in tiny script (Kalus, *Bibliothèque Nationale*, III.1.4) or with just one or two added to qurʾānic quotations. The most frequently recurring “names” on amulets are “pardonner” and “preserver,” the latter said by Redhouse (Names, no. 85) to be “often employed as a written preservative, spell or charm, on houses etc. against danger of every kind.”

Such is the prevalence and multi-purpose nature of verses such as q 2:255, the Throne Verse, that only a very general impression of their function and significance on amulets now

long separated from their owner can be garnered. Some verses, however, are more specific. For example, there are six, all containing words from the root “to cure,” traditionally believed to be very efficacious against illness (Canaan, Decipherment, 75). Two of these verses — q 10:57: “and a healing for the diseases of your hearts” and q 16:69: “from its [the bee's] belly comes forth a fluid of many hues, a medicinal drink for mankind” — are engraved in reverse on an amulet in the British Museum (Porter, *Magical*, 144). Alongside the verses on this particular amulet are magical squares, known as *wafq* or *budūh*. This is a 3×3 square consisting of letters or their number equivalents, which is so named because in each corner are the letters which make up the artificial word *budūh* (Macdonald, *Budūh*; Maddison and Savage-Smith, *Science*, 106-7, and its bibliography for magical squares) and which was deemed to have a favorable influence on childbirth, stomach complaints, the expediting of letters and so on. Sometimes included are the “mysterious letters of the Qur’ān” (Schuster, *Magische Quadrate*, 20 [fig. 2](#); see [letters](#) and [mysterious letters](#)), which appear singly or in groups at the beginning of twenty-nine sūras of the Qur’ān and which are widely used on amulets. The widespread use of these letters on amulets results from the belief that “they represent the heavenly language used by the Almighty from whom they derive their natural power... or that they are the names of the Almighty himself” (Canaan, *Decipherment*, 94).

Strong qur’ānic associations are also present in a group of esoteric symbols with an essentially protective function which as with the magic squares, frequently appear on amulets, bowls, mirrors, manuscripts and other media and are known as “the seven magical signs.” They include the five- or six-pointed star called “Solomon's seal” (see [Solomon](#)), though

sometimes the whole group of symbols are referred to as Solomon's seal. Al-Būnī (d. 622/1225), one of the most important Muslim writers on occult sciences, argued that the signs stood for the seven letters omitted from the first sūra of the Qurʾān and that “every letter contains one of the names of God” (Būnī, *Shams*, 93). It was also believed that the combination of signs stood for the greatest name of all (Anawati, *Le nom supreme*, 26-7). Al-Būnī's text, which principally contains prescriptions for a wide variety of conditions and ailments, includes magical squares, the “seven magical signs,” “the most beautiful names of God,” as well as the exhortation to recite qurʾānic verses, in particular the Throne Verse (see further Fodor, *Notes*, 269-71).

The Qurʾān hints at the existence of amulets made from perishable materials rather than stone: “If we sent down to you a writing inscribed on real parchment and the unbelievers touched it with their own hands, they would still say ‘this is nothing but plain magic’” (q 6:7). Still, in Islam pieces of papyrus or paper inscribed with qurʾānic verses, again particularly q 2:255 and 112:1-4, did serve as amulets (Bilabel and Grohmann, *Texte*, 416; Fodor, *Notes*, 272). Early block-printed amulets on paper (ca. tenth-eleventh century c.e.) called *ṭarsh*, of which about fifty are known, have been found in Egypt (Kubiak and Scanlon, *Fustat*, 69; two are on parchment, see Schaeffer, *Schneide tarsh*, 408). After being stamped with qurʾānic verses, names of God and other texts deemed powerful, they are rolled up inside amulet holders ready to be worn about the person. In the case of the Schneide *ṭarsh* there are at least seven separate qurʾānic passages as well as invocations to **jinn** (q.v.) and angels (Schaeffer, *Schneide tarsh*, 416). The stamps, which do not appear to have survived, are thought to have been made in the following way: the text

was engraved onto a flattened, moist clay tablet and, after this tablet dried, either molten tin was poured onto the tablet or a thin sheet of malleable tin was pounded into it so that the grooves of the letters appeared on the metal (Bulliet, Tarsh, 435). Modern paper amulets, too, have qur'ānic verses as well as magic squares and other symbols (Fodor, Notes, 273).

In conclusion one might draw attention to an interesting group of amulets bearing qur'ānic texts that are made of strips of lead about six to ten cm (two to four inches) long. Found in Andalusia and dating to the early medieval period, they have inscriptions in angular script. One clear example has the whole of q 112 (Ibrahim, Evidencia, 708-9). Some show evidence of having been rolled. The fashioning of lead amulets in strips which are in some cases used for exorcism, is an extension of an ancient Near Eastern tradition, examples being known from Mandaic, Hebrew and Greek contexts.

Epigraphy without the Qur'ān

Though the Qur'ān features in a fair proportion of Muslim inscriptions, it is by no means ubiquitous. Carving texts onto hard surfaces requires time and care, especially if it is to be clear, well-formed and even esthetically pleasing. In all cases, save simple graffiti, the services of a professional engraver would generally be called upon, but this could prove expensive, and so there would be reason to minimize the length of the text. A long qur'ānic citation in a well-executed inscription is, therefore, a sure indication of wealth or influence or fame. A study of cemeteries in a region of southern Syria provides some confirmation of this. Tombstones in the luxury material of marble are invariably inscribed, in fine style, with one or more qur'ānic verses. These would only rarely, however, grace tombstones in the

cheap local stone of basalt, which would usually bear, in rough letters, just the *basmala* (“in the name of God”), the name of the deceased, and sometimes, though not always, a date (Ory, *Hawran*, 15-6).

Even when the author/commissioner could afford an extensive text, he might feel a qur’ānic quotation unnecessary. The Umayyad caliph al-Walīd b. ‘Abd al-Malik constructed many wondrous monuments bedecked with Qur’ān-laden inscriptions, but on his desert lodge in east Jordan, a place he frequented when heir apparent, he simply recorded that “he built these residences in the year 81” (Combe et al., *Répertoire chronologique*, no. 12). And the foundation inscriptions of roadside hostels, intended for housing and feeding travelers, were rarely deemed worthy of a qur’ānic citation (none in Sauvaget, *Caravanserais*; Mayer, *Satura*, mentions one in Palestine that cites q 25:11). Water installations (drinking fountains, cisterns, etc.), on the other hand, were very often furnished with a qur’ānic text, probably because *water* (q.v.) was seen as a gift from God and described as such in the Qur’ān on a number of occasions.

Otherwise, a qur’ānic verse might be considered inappropriate to the context. The most blatant example is gold or silver drinking vessels (see *cups and vessels*), the use of which was condemned by the prophet Muḥammad and for which poetry was felt to be a more suitable adornment. Thus a gold bowl belonging to a hoard discovered at Nihāwand and part of a wine service is embellished with some lines of the fourth/tenth-century Iraqi poet Ibn al-Tammār: “Wine is a sun in a garment of red Chinese silk. It flows, its source is the flask. Drink, then, in the pleasure of time, since our day is a day of delight which has brought dew” (Ward, *Metalwork*, no. 38). In poetic graffiti dedicated to the themes of being away from home and a

victim of fate, a qur'ānic quotation would have been an anomaly; or at least that is what we are led to believe by a tenth-century collector, whose texts include the following lines: “The calamities of **time** (q.v.) have driven me from place to place, and shot me with arrows that never miss. They have separated me from those that I love, ah woe to my love-smitten and infatuated heart. Alas for the happy time that has passed as if it were a dream” (Iṣfahānī, *Strangers*, no. 8).

It would also appear that the use of the Qur'ān in inscriptions varied in popularity according to dynasty, region, era, and so on. The Mamlūks of Egypt and a number of other dynasties were very fond of honorific titles and these were often so numerous as to crowd out qur'ānic verses in the inscriptions of themselves and their agents. Iran saw itself not only as a Muslim country, but as a land possessing its own national culture. The Qur'ān therefore had to jostle for position with indigenous poetry, especially extracts from the Persian national epic, the *Shāhnāme*. Thus Kāshān in central Iran churned out ceramic tiles both with qur'ānic legends and with such lines as “Last night the moon came to your house. Filled with envy I thought of chasing him away. Who is the moon to sit in the same place as you?” (Porter, *Tiles*, no. 34). In Ottoman times there seems to have been a move away from the Qur'ān altogether, its verses disappearing from the coinage and building inscriptions and many epitaphs favoring poems composed specially for the occasion (though sometimes with qur'ānic allusions and snippets). The following is an unpublished example from the citadel of Maṣyāf in Syria: “This place derives its glory from its inhabitants, and the truth resides in total fidelity. A man created this blessed place who is called Muṣṭafā [i.e. the founder]. He hopes from the generous God pardon before the chosen Prophet, and for

kindness out of God's beneficence, for protection and a just victory: and [he hopes too for] a good end of all things, by his grace, on the day of resurrection. The palace of Kisrā has vanished, and this gift of his [i.e. of the founder] must suffice (1268/1852).” Many conclude with a relevant phrase, which provides the date when the numerical values of its letters are added up (a chronogram). Thus on one of the walls of Qayrawān there is inscribed a poem which begins with “This rampart announces to us the days of felicity,” and ends with “Its date is ‘thanks to the seigneur felicity has come’ [i.e. 1123/1712]” (Roy and Poinssot, *Kairouan*, no. 44).

Moreover, in addition to poetry, the Qur’ān had to compete with an amorphous body of oral material. Most important were prayers of supplication (*du‘ā*, pl. *ad‘iyya*). For example, a graffito dated 64/683 found near Karbalā in Iraq opens with one of the prayers said at the Festival of the ‘Īd (compare Sanduq, Hafnat, with Nawawī, *Adhkār*, 156; see [festivals and commemorative days](#)). Numerous epitaphs repeat the prayer to be spared the punishment in the grave (compare Hawary-Rached, *Steles*, no. 4, with Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, iv, 199). The graffito of an Umayyad official contains the prayer to be reunited with someone in the hereafter (compare Musil, Arabia Petraea, no. 1, with Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, ii, 353, uttered by Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī before his death in 61/680). Otherwise there are found pious sayings, such as “Any friend who is not [a friend] in God, then his friendship is aberrant, lifeless, empty, and his attachment ephemeral” (Sharon, Rehovoth, no. 1), and “in God is a consolation for every disaster and a compensation for every loss” (Hawary-Rached, *Steles*, no. 29). An additional category is wise maxims, such as that engraved on a bowl of the Ghaznawids beginning with “Keep your tongue by saying little, verily calamity is linked with discourse.” And also

popular sayings of Muḥammad, such as “The Prophet, may God bless him and give him peace, said that whoever builds a mosque, though it be only like the hollow of a sand grouse, God will build for him a house in paradise” (Da-sheng and Kalus, *Chine*, no. 10, on a mosque in Quan-Zhou).

Finally, one should note that, though the vast majority of Muslim inscriptions draw from a common pool of source texts and from a shared stock of expressions and phrases, one encounters texts that break out of this mould. In such cases the author/commissioner decides to drop the public façade so as to speak in a more personal vein, using his own words. A good example is the following: “This is the grave of the slave girl of Mūsā b. Ya‘qūb b. al-Ma‘mūn, surnamed Umm Muḥammad. She died leaving behind twenty children and grandchildren. All of them and she herself were afraid of her death in a distant foreign land, anxious about it. And indeed she died while on her way to Jerusalem, in this place, and none of them was present with her except some stranger” (Elad, Epitaph; cf. Sharon, *Corpus inscriptionum*, ‘Aqabah 4).

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