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# THE TRANSFORMATION OF ARABIC WRITING: PART 2, THE PUBLIC TEXT[1]

BY YASSER TABBAA

IN THE FIRST PART OF THIS WORK[2] I DISCUSSED THE TWO-phase transformation of Qurʾānic writing from angular to cursive, phases that were associated with the calligraphers Ibn Muqla (d. 940) and Ibn al-Bawwāb (d. 1022). I also presented an evaluation and an interpretation of this highly important change, relating it to contemporary ideas about the nature of the Qurʾān, which was definitively proclaimed as the eternal and uncreated word of God. These ideas were themselves shown to be closely linked with the newly emergent movement of the Sunni revival, a movement that sought to reaffirm the legitimacy of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate and the traditionalist basis of Islamic thought while opposing and undermining contrary beliefs and political systems, in particular those of the Fāṭimids.

In this paper I will discuss the parallel transformation of monumental inscriptions from angular to cursive—a transformation that postdated the Qurʾānic one by nearly a century but that seems to have been, at least in part, propelled by similar conditions. Extending the discussion from the sphere of Qurʾān manuscripts to that of public inscriptions proved to be far more difficult than I had envisioned. Despite the greater accessibility of the material, in the form of a large number of dated public inscriptions from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, at least two major hurdles pose themselves before this quest. The first is that, whereas substantial textual material exists on scribal and Qurʾānic calligraphy, and of course on the Qurʾān itself, nearly nothing is known about the makers and the making of monumental inscriptions before the Ottoman period. Even when monumental inscriptions do end with the name of an artisan, this signature often refers to the architect or the building supervisor, not to the calligrapher.[3] The second is that, although public inscriptions often contain Qurʾānic passages, they are not usually exclusively Qurʾānic. Indeed, a sizeable portion of monumental inscriptions is quite secular in nature, being primarily concerned with titulature, patronage, and *waqf* and somewhat less so with poetry and mystical evocations.

Is it, then, legitimate to use the findings of the preceding article, which were exclusively based on Qurʾānic material, to interpret the transformation of Arabic monumental writing generally? This question will concern us in this paper, but we can tentatively say at this point that, whether religious or secular in content, most monumental inscriptions were public and official, thus reflecting some of the ruling dynasty's concerns, which were always theocratic in nature. In a largely aniconic artistic culture, these public inscriptions were by necessity one of the primary visual means for political expression (often tied up with religious concepts) and one of the few effective ways for a dynasty to distinguish its reign from that of its predecessor. While it is true that most dynasties also resorted to other more symbolic means of political expression, such as gates, minarets, or domes (and in fewer cases sculpture), public inscriptions remained throughout much of the medieval Islamic period the chief means for transmitting political and religious messages and for portraying these messages in a dynastically distinctive manner.

The dual nature of monumental inscriptions—informative and symbolic, denotive and connotive—has been examined in a number of recent and penetrating studies.[4] Despite their differing research objectives, the authors of these studies have attempted to move beyond traditional epigraphic documentation, in which their work is ultimately grounded, into questioning some of the premises associated with the visuality and receptivity of public inscriptions. Richard Ettinghausen, pointing out the great complexity and limited legibility of some inscriptions (written in floriated or plaited Kufic, for example), has suggested that the reading and comprehension of such inscriptions was "reserved for a limited number of persons."[5] Even for those select few, Ettinghausen adds, the "reading" of these texts was "nearly always based on previous knowledge and not on direct word by word reaction," while "for the vast majority of the congregation and passers-by the inscription remains incomprehensible as a verbal communication in the modern sense."[6] In

other respects, the high placement of some of these inscriptions, their complexity, and the existence of serious epigraphic mistakes among them lead him to conclude that "readability was only a secondary concern"—a concern that was superseded by "the *Gestalt* of the inscription as a whole and the inclusion of the caliph's name."[7]

While Ettinghausen questions the informative aspect of at least some Arabic inscriptions, Erika Dodd takes this discourse one step further to suggest that the reading of inscriptions was unnecessary or redundant in view of the immanent and transcendent nature of the word of God in Islam.

> A verse from the Koran does not have to be read for it to have meaning. It exists eternally, of and for and by itself, and it does not exist in the reader, nor does it depend on the reader and it does not even have to be read to be appreciated. For the ordinary Muslim layman, the simple presence of a Koranic verse was as evocative as an icon for a Christian worshipper, and produced a similar emotional response.[8]

Although Dodd does not specifically address the duality of meaning in Arabic public inscriptions, it is perhaps implicit in her distinction between "reading," by which she probably means decipherment, and "emotional response," which seems to result from the symbolic or connotive aspects of the text. Thus, in her passionate search for a deep and pervasive meaning in Islamic art, Dodd collapses the duality of public inscriptions into their symbolic, internalist aspects while neglecting their formal specificity and manifold variations. In short, Ettinghausen grapples with the formal complexities of some monumental inscriptions only to suggest that such inscriptions were not intended to be read, whereas Dodd ignores the question of form altogether.

More recently, Irene Bierman has dedicated a series of detailed and penetrating studies to Fāṭimid inscriptions, examining them in terms of their public impact, the ambiguities inherent in the Kufic script used, and the content of the inscriptions. Regarding the "*kufic* script as inherently difficult to decipher, for reading any *kufic* text requires a more supportive context to help distinguish the graph (letter) shapes than reading a text written in one of the other Arabic scripts where all twenty-eight letters are differentiated," Bierman asks "how and why certain scripts were employed in certain contexts to express certain connotations."[9] More specifically, Bierman's analysis of some of the most distinctive forms of floriated Kufic, such as the *lām-alif* and the word *Allah*, leads her to conclude that "the unusual knotting of these upright letters seems . . . to resonate with those Ismāʿīlī beliefs that reveal, by means of letter symbolism, an aspect of the esoteric (*al-bāṭin*) meaning of the Qurʾan behind the plain (*al-ẓāhir*) religious message of the written text."[10]

In a long and complicated essay on Islamic calligraphy, Oleg Grabar has presented a number of brilliant observations that reflect on his long-term involvement in the field while pointing out new avenues for research. Rejecting the large-scale and indiscriminate application of the term *calligraphy*, or "writing with the intent of being beautiful," to all manner of Arabic writing, Grabar prefers postponing the use of this term until after the tenth-century reforms of Ibn Muqla and Ibn al-Bawwāb,[11] or more generally, until after Arabic writing had developed sophisticated and overtly described systems of replication, aesthetics, and criticism. While such a degree of textual self-consciousness is often desirable for validating the emergence of a particular art form, it is by no means necessary, and one might postulate alternate means for the creation of aesthetic standards in calligraphy or other medieval art forms, standards that reflect an internalist appreciation of early Qurʾānic scripts, not their externalist criticism.

Of perhaps greater interest for this paper are Grabar's hypotheses concerning the role of public inscriptions in Islamic society, specifically the various dichotomies they establish between literalist reading and formalist appreciation; private understanding and the conditions of public display; and single-gaze or "monoptic" perception and time-consuming decipherment. At the risk of greatly oversimplifying Grabar's complex discourse, it seems that most of his dichotomies are variations and elaborations of the main one that we have established above, namely, the distinction between the denotive and connotive aspects of official Arabic writing. Indeed, the chief importance of Grabar's essay resides not so much in his sustained historical analysis of this important problem but in his various attempts to place these distinctions within a sociocultural context, specifically to locate this problem within the matrices

of political power and religious knowledge. He therefore draws attention to the distinction between official and populist currents in public inscriptions, contending that the former were "fostered by the courts . . . and practiced by highly skilled professionals" as "a means to control and distinguish," while the latter had much more flexible standards and displayed greater variety.[12] In official writing, which is the only kind that concerns us here, Grabar suggests that aesthetic values—such as skill, complexity, and ambiguity—were inextricably linked with questions of power and status, such that the ability to build, own, or fully appreciate objects or monuments with complex inscriptions becomes one of the criteria for justifying the power of a social or political elite. We shall see below how this important equation of knowledge and power was played out during the transformation of public writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

With the possible exception of Bierman, there are two main problems with these otherwise outstanding attempts to reach a symbolic understanding of Arabic public calligraphy: a synchronic, nonhistorical, or, in Grabar's case, multihistorical perspective that does not address specific factors of historical change; and an overall reluctance to engage the question of complexity in calligraphic styles. For Ettinghausen, complexity is, more than anything, a hindrance to understanding; for Dodd, it is an insignificant feature, since the inscriptions were not intended for reading; for Grabar, it is an important indicator of social and political privilege; while for Bierman, the complexity and ambiguity of the floriated Kufic script stand out as specific embodiments of Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlī theology.

This paper places questions of complexity and historical change at the center of discussion as it explores the transformation of Arabic public inscriptions in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In order to provide a context and a point of contrast for this transformation, I will begin by reviewing the problem of the creation of the floriated Kufic script under the Fāṭimids, suggesting in the process some of the political and theological issues associated with its development. Second, I will trace the subsequent development of cursive scripts from their rather vernacular origins in Iran to their definitive formulation in twelfth-century Syria, pointing out the role of Nūr al-Dīn in promoting this process. Third, I will follow the spread of highly standardized cursive scripts in twelfth-century Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Fourth, I will examine the differing situation in Fāṭimid Egypt, where the use of floriated Kufic writing persists for several decades after the perfection of monumental cursive writing elsewhere and where the ultimate introduction of cursive scripts in the last quarter of the twelfth century coincides with the establishment of the Ayyūbid dynasty.

## *Floriated Kufic*

Of all the varieties of monumental Kufic, floriated Kufic is perhaps the most elegant, combining as it does angular characters with curvilinear plant forms. Indeed, in its fully developed form, exemplified by the inscriptions of the Fāṭimid mosques al-Azhar and al-Ḥākim or the late-eleventh-century minaret at the Great Mosque of Aleppo, floriated Kufic may be considered the peak of achievement in early Arabic epigraphy. The beauty and inherent complexity of the script have attracted the attention of numerous scholars, both European and Arab, who have gone a long way toward analyzing its characters and ornamental forms and proposing theories for its origin and development.[13] Although Flury argued at one point for an Anatolian origin of this script,[14] most paleographers today concur that ʿAbbāsid Kufic underwent subtle and inconsistent changes between ca. 830 and 960, which led to the creation of the so-called foliated Kufic, before being definitively transformed into floriated Kufic in the second half of the tenth century.[15] The main point of difference among these authors centers on whether floriated Kufic developed gradually out of foliated ʿAbbāsid Kufic over a period of a century or whether it was suddenly created in the early Fāṭimid period. Grohmann, arguing for a gradual multicentered development,[16] concluded that

> three neighboring countries have participated decisively in the evolution of floriated Kufic: Palestine, with the first traceable connection of a floral element with a letter; Egypt, where in the middle of the third century of the Hijra the decoration of letters with palmettes had already reached a high perfection and where the decoration of the aspices had been invented possibly in connection with, or imitation of, Coptic forerunners;

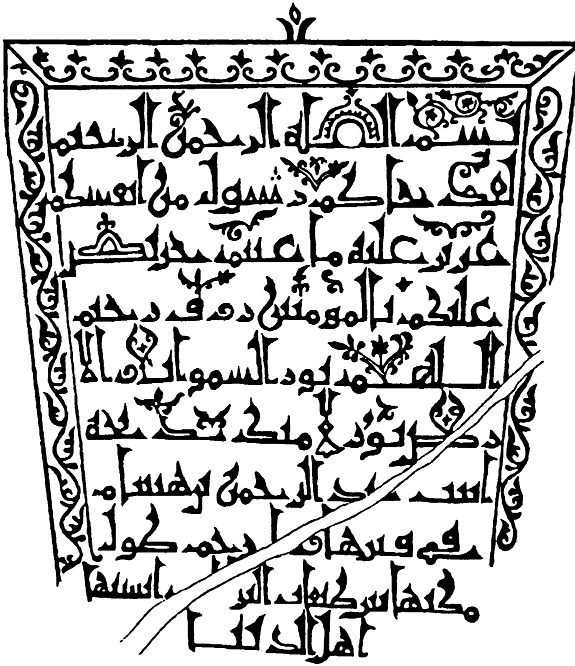

FIG. 1. Ḥijāz (Arabia). Gravestone, 250/864.
Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo.
From Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie*, 2:fig. 32.

and the Hijaz, where the tombstone of 250 H [fig. 1] shows genuine floriated Kufic definitely established.[17]

There are several problems, however, with this view of gradual development from foliated to floriated Kufic. The first is that Egyptian inscriptions that postdate the early attempts at floriation but predate the Fāṭimid takeover of Cairo in 969 have a more traditional form, suggesting that "this initial phase of floriated Kufic was not able to impose itself fully, not even in Egypt."[18] The second is that nearly all the early foliated inscriptions come from funerary stelae, not from official inscriptions, of which the few that remain tend to maintain a sober and austere Kufic style. This is evident from the complete absence of foliation in the ʿAbbāsid and Ṭūlūnid inscriptions at the *miqyās* (Nilometer)—dated 247/861 (reign of al-Mutawakkil) and 259/873 (reign of Ibn Ṭūlūn) (fig. 2).[19] Apparently, then, early developments toward the floriated script were restricted to funerary stelae and other nonofficial inscriptions and had no impact on the official inscriptions of the period, whose style in any case seems to have been derived from Iraq.

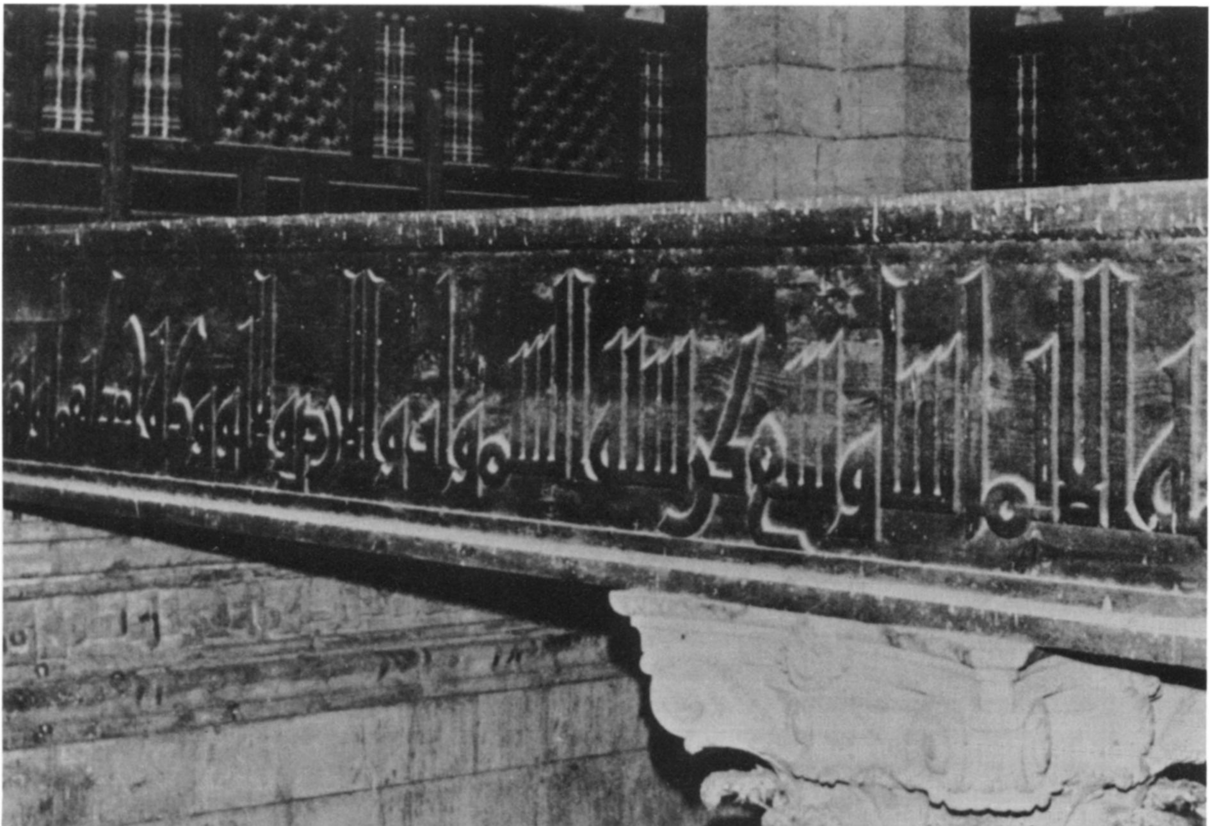

FIG. 2. Cairo. Nilometer: Ṭūlūnid inscription (Qurʾān, 2:256), 247/861.
From Dodd and Khairallah, *Image of the Word*, 1:fig. 22.

The third and most serious challenge to Grohmann's scheme of gradual development is that the inscriptions of the early Fāṭimid period, namely those at al-Azhar (361/972) and al-Ḥākim mosques (before 403/1013), differ completely from the ʿAbbāsid Kufic inscriptions of the preceding century and even from the earlier foliated inscriptions. Whereas only a small proportion of the characters of pre-Fāṭimid foliated Kufic sprout ornamental leaves, nearly every character in the inscriptions at al-Azhar and more emphatically at al-Ḥākim is embellished with leaves that completely transform the letter form and the overall appearance of the script (fig. 3).

Jumʿah was the first definitively to reject the likelihood of a continuous development of floriated Kufic style and to embrace the opposing view of a sudden transformation. After having painstakingly analyzed the earliest inscriptions at al-Azhar mosque, located around the hood of the *miḥrāb* and elsewhere in the sanctuary, he concluded that "these inscriptions cannot be said, whether in terms of their writing style or decoration, to be a natural development of third century Egyptian writing." He added further that this "style of writing . . . differs in its totality from the developed writing styles of Egypt in the third century, a matter that makes us wonder whether the Fāṭimids may have brought with them upon their departure from North Africa a special style of writing which had developed greatly and rapidly during half a century."[20] This interesting hypothesis is, however, very difficult to prove since no immediately pre-Fāṭimid official inscriptions remain in Egypt and since no early Fāṭimid inscriptions have survived from al-

FIG. 3. Cairo. Mosque al-Azhar: Alphabet of inscription in the *maqsūra*, 361/972. From Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie*, 2:fig. 248.

Mahdiyya or other Fāṭimid cities in North Africa. But this does not change the fact that the Fāṭimid inscriptions at al-Azhar represent a totally original style in floriated Kufic and that they are the earliest official inscriptions to utilize this ornamented script.

The inscriptions at al-Ḥākim mosque, executed over a long period extending from 370/972 to 403/1013, demonstrate the prevalence of the floriated Kufic in official Fāṭimid inscriptions and the adaptability of the script to a variety of media, including stone, stucco, and wood. The stucco inscriptions at the springing of the *miḥrāb* dome and the stone friezes that encircle different levels of the minarets exhibit the basic aesthetic feature of the script: "a quite particular connection of writing and floral tendril growing out of the letters and forming with them an organic unit, serving at the same time to fill the space ideally"[21] (figs. 4 and 5). Ambiguities between text and ornament, foreground and background are thereby created, and these ambiguities are enhanced by the fact that the characters of the script are themselves internally transformed by means of "curvatures, counter-curvatures, knots, and indentations."[22] A splendid example of this kind of virtuosity can be seen in the cenotaph of Fāṭima at the Bāb Ṣaghīr cemetery in Damascus, dated 439/1037, in which Sourdel-Thomine noted ten different types of the *lām-alif* character (fig. 6).[23]

Following its development under the Fāṭimids, floriated Kufic spread outside of Egypt in the eleventh century, at first to regions directly controlled by the Fāṭimids, especially Palestine and southern Syria, or subject to their propaganda (*daʿwah*), such as western Iran, and subsequently to other parts of the Islamic world. Outstanding specimens of floriated Kufic, generally dating ca. 1050–ca. 1150, survive in southern Anatolia (e.g., the Great Mosque of Diyarbakr [1085, 1126, and 1156]);[24] Aleppo (e.g., the minaret of the Great Mosque [1090] [fig. 7] and Qastal al-Shuʿaybiyya [1150–51]);[25] Damascus (e.g., cenotaphs of Fāṭima [439/1047] and Sukaina [early twelfth century] at the Bāb Ṣaghīr cemetery);[26] Palestine (e.g., the *minbar* at Ascalon); Spain and North Africa (e.g., the Great Mosque of al-Qarawiyyin at Fez [1135]);[27] and Iran (e.g., Masjid-i Ḥaydariyya at Qazvīn [twelfth century]).[28] There is little possibility that these were autonomous developments, and one would have to agree with Grohmann that "it is certainly from here [Egypt] that its development has advanced to Mesopotamia on one side and to North Africa on the other"[29] (table 1).

TABLE 1. The Development of Monumental Scripts.

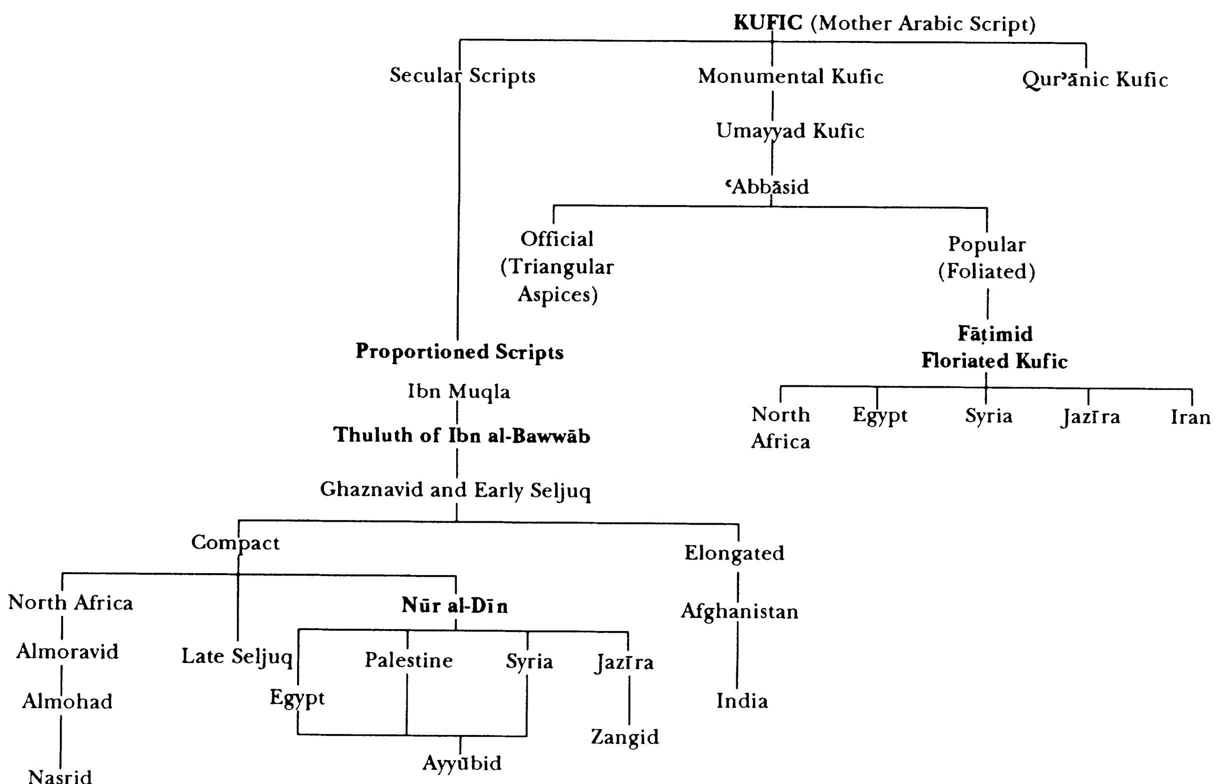

FIG. 4. Cairo. Mosque al-Ḥākim: Inscriptions in the *maqṣūra*, late tenth century. From Flury, *Hakim und Ashar*, pl. IV, 1–4.

FIG. 5. Cairo. Mosque al-Ḥākim: Inscription on casing of northwest minaret, 403/1013. Photo: author.

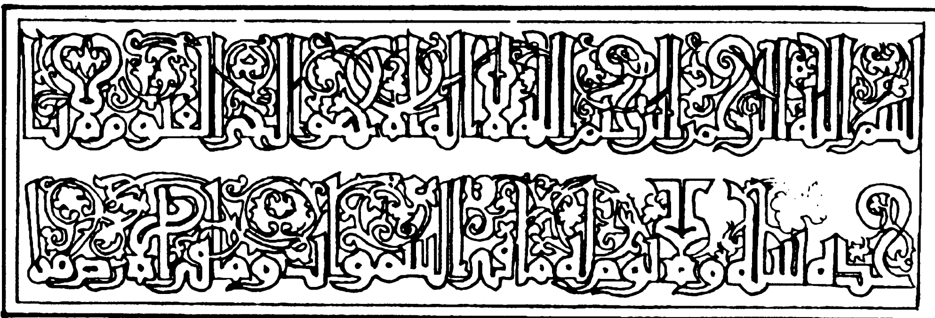

FIG. 6. Damascus. Cenotaph of Fāṭima: Inscription on northern face, 439/1037. Author's drawing after Moaz and Ory, *Bāb al-Saghīr*, pl. IVb.

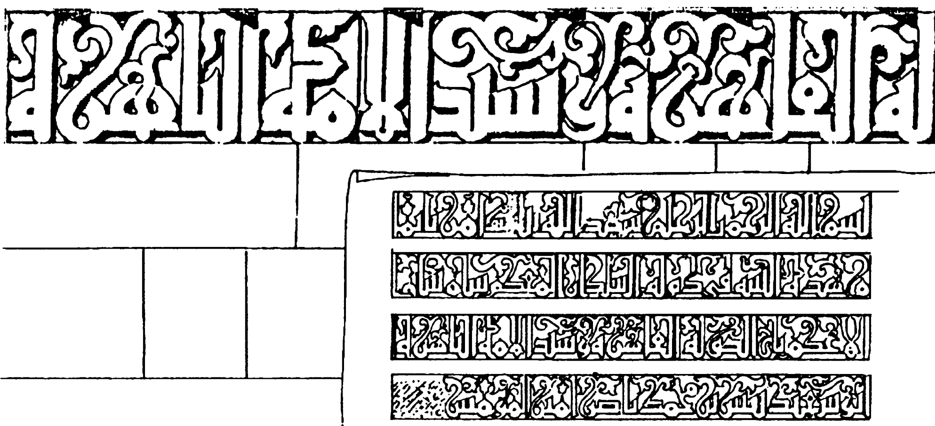

FIG. 7. Aleppo. Minaret of the Great Mosque: Uppermost inscription, 483/1090. From Herzfeld, *Alep*, 2:pl. LIII.

It seems clear, therefore, that despite sporadic earlier developments of the Kufic script, floriated Kufic was effectively created under the Fāṭimids, who were also the first to use it for official inscriptions. What were the motives for the creation of this script, and what did the new privileged script mean within the context of early Fāṭimid propaganda? In a theocratic state embroiled from the start in political and sectarian controversy, it would seem likely that the creation of a new public form of expression was intended to reaffirm the dynasty's claims to legitimacy while distinguishing it from earlier dynasties. A more specific religious meaning has been proposed by Bierman, who suggested that "the unusual knotting of the upright letters seems . . . to resonate with those Isma'īlī beliefs that reveal, by means of letter symbolism, an aspect of the esoteric (*al-bāṭin*) meaning of the Qur'ān behind the plain (*al-ẓāhir*) religious message of the written text."[30] Indeed, this reading is consistent with one of the fundamental tenets of the Ismā'īlī doctrine, namely the distinction between the exterior or exoteric and the inward or esoteric aspects of religion. "The *ẓāhir* consists in the apparent, generally accepted meaning of the revealed scriptures and in the religious law laid down in them. It changes with each prophet. The *bāṭin* consists in the truths (*ḥaqā'iq*) concealed in the scriptures and laws which are unchangeable and are made apparent from them by the *ta'wīl*, interpretation, which is often of cabalistic nature relying on the mystical significance of letters and numbers."[31] It is this duality of meaning and the valorization of *bāṭin* over *ẓāhir* that was to be challenged by the transformed scripts of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

## *Precursors to the Transformation (1030–1150)*

In view of the dominance of the monumental floriated Kufic script during the eleventh and first half of the twelfth century, it is not surprising that the demise of this luxurious script and its ultimate supplantation by cursive writing have attracted some attention. What is surprising is that from the start this transformation has been associated with the Sunni challenge to Fāṭimid Ismā'īlī authority, or the so-called Sunni revival or reaction. The broad outlines of this process were laid out a century ago by van Berchem:

> I have demonstrated that around the middle of the sixth century A.H. the square script, called *Kufic*, hitherto universally used in inscriptions, was replaced by the cursive style, commonly called *naskhi*. This phenomenon seems to be connected with the Sunni reaction which, leaving Iran in the fifth century, gradually invades Baghdad, Mesopotamia, northern Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, being conveyed by the Seljuqs, the Zangids, Nūr al-Dīn, and Saladin. The relationship of the two phenomena . . . is readily explained by bearing in mind that the Sunni reaction, which in Syria coincided with the Mongol invasion and the Crusades, was accompanied by religious, political, military, and administrative changes. This revolution naturally extended to architecture and to the arts and crafts that depend on it.[32]

Van Berchem's far-reaching proposals were taken up by none other than Ernst Herzfeld, who in a series of epigraphic and architectural studies succeeded in elaborating his mentor's highly suggestive thesis and in attributing the bulk of the transformation to Nūr al-Dīn.[33] Curiously, the matter has been nearly totally forgotten since then, as most art historians and epigraphers shifted their focus from the documentation and formal analysis of inscriptions to their iconography.[34] But van Berchem's central thesis is too important to ignore and yet too problematic and incomplete to accept uncritically. In the following section I shall therefore point out some of these problems and fill in some gaps in the earliest development of official cursive inscriptions.

In a slightly earlier publication van Berchem had noted that cursive scripts appear sporadically on the coinage of the late Samanids and the Ghaznavids, making them the earliest instances of cursive inscriptions in a public context.[35] Actually, this contention is only partly correct since the cursive inscription in all Samanid and early Ghaznavid coinage is restricted to the name of the reigning prince (e.g., Naṣr ibn Nūḥ), whereas the rest of the inscription is in Kufic script (fig. 8).

FIG. 8. Khurāsān (Iran). Left: Samanid dirham minted at Balkh, 292/905. Note cursive signature of Aḥhmad ibn Muḥammad. American Numismatic Society 1927.179.69. Right: Samanid dinar minted at Nisabur, 340/951. Note cursive signature of Nūḥ ibn Naṣr. American Numismatic Society 1963.173.2.

FIG. 9. Ghazna (Afghanistan). Cursive inscription on cenotaph of Maḥmūd ibn Sebüktekin, 420/1030. Author's drawing after photograph in Flury, "Ghazna," fig. 9.

What we have here, therefore, is not the earliest instance of the transformation of the official script but simply the use of cursive script for the "signature" of the ruling sovereign.

The earliest official cursive inscriptions *are*, however, from the eastern Islamic world, where they seem to begin sometime near the end of the reign of the great Ghaznavid sultan Maḥmūd (998–1030).[36] The well-known cenotaph of Maḥmūd of Ghazna, dated 421/1030, consists of a large rectangular platform surmounted by a triangular grave cover, all made of marble of possible Indian origin.[37] It contains six inscriptional bands: one in the middle of each of the four rectangular sides and one in each of the sloping pediments. Only one of these inscriptions, located on the northern side of the upper grave cover, is written in a cursive (or at least non-Kufic) script; the other five are written in an Eastern Kufic script, with typically tall uprights and restrained floriation (fig. 9). The cursive inscription, which consists of six lines within a trilobed arch, reads as follows:

Has died, may God's mercy
be upon him, and may He illuminate
his chamber[38] and brighten his face, the evening of
Thursday, seven [days] remaining of the month of
Rabīʿ the Latter in the year one
and twenty and four hundred, may he be forgiven.[39]

Although more cursive than angular, this extremely peculiar script has no known parallels in monumental inscriptions. It seems to stand midway between Ghaznavid Eastern Kufic and the early *thuluth* script, combining the elongated uprights and some of the character forms of the former with the cursiveness of the latter. The script has other tentative or "transitional" features, including elongated U-shaped fillers (commonly seen in floriated Kufic inscriptions),[40] inconsistent use of orthographic marks, and variation in the size of characters, such that the words on the third and fourth lines are larger than those of the first and last lines. In view of its transitional character, further underlined by its location within an entirely Kufic context, this was quite likely one of the very earliest official cursive inscriptions.[41]

Although no other inscriptions seem to imitate the calligraphic style of Maḥmūd's cenotaph, a number of later Ghaznavid and Ghūrid inscriptions employ perfectly cursive scripts. These exist in two basic varieties: a compact script, which is subsequently seen in the central and western Islamic world, and an attenuated, monumental script, which is most commonly seen in the Ghūrid monuments of Afghanistan and India.[42] The latter script, which might be related to the script on Maḥmūd's cenotaph, will not concern us here. Among the earliest specimens of the compact style are two fragmentary inscriptions, the first bearing the name of the Ghaznavid ruler Abu'l-Muẓaffar Ibrāhīm (1059–99) and the second containing the words Yamīn al-Dawla, which was the *laqab* (attribute) of the late Ghaznavid sovereign Bahrām Shāh (1118–52) (fig. 10a–b). This

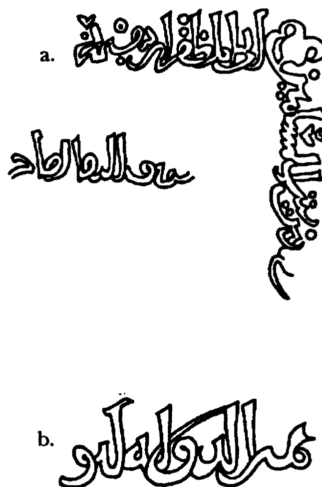


FIG. 10. Ghazna (Afganistan). a) Fragment of inscription with name of Ibrāhīm, 1059–99. b) Fragment of inscription with name of Yamīn al-Dawla, late eleventh–early twelfth century. Author's drawings after photographs in Flury, "Ghazna."

script, which is almost always written on a bed of arabesque, is characterized by its legibility, squatness, high degree of cursiveness, and near absence of diacritical marks. In all these respects, this script closely resembles the *thuluth* of Ibn al-Bawwāb as seen in the verse counts and chapter headings of his unique manuscript—a script that, as I have demonstrated previously, spread in the eleventh and twelfth centuries among the calligraphers of the eastern Islamic world.[43] Indeed, this early monumental cursive script emulates an even more specific feature of the great master's style, namely interconnection—the tendency to connect normally independent characters by a thin, sinuous line. This particular hallmark of the master's script was rather slavishly copied by many of his students and followers.[44] Its use in the earliest cursive official inscriptions as well as in later inscriptions in Syria and North Africa suggests close affinities between Qur'ānic and monumental writing and points once again to the pivotal importance of the reforms of Ibn Muqla and Ibn al-Bawwāb and their patrons, the ʿAbbāsid caliphs.[45] I will return to this important connection later.

It is somewhat surprising that the earliest official cursive inscriptions are not from Baghdad, where one would expect them given the Bahgdadī origin of Ibn Muqla and Ibn al-Bawwāb, but from one of the easternmost regions of the Islamic world. In the absence of any supporting evidence, it is difficult to say whether cursive official inscriptions were used by the ʿAbbāsid caliphs in the first half of the eleventh century. But in view of the large-scale destruction of most early and medieval Islamic monuments in Baghdad, it is possible that such inscriptions once existed and may have provided a model for the Ghaznavid development. It is also possible that the early cursive Ghaznavid inscriptions were directly based on the manuscript hand of Ibn al-Bawwāb, which became instantly popular in the eastern regions of the Islamic world.

Whatever the conduit may have been, the borrowing by the Ghaznavids of an official ʿAbbāsid form of expression fits well with their cultural affiliation with the caliphate. Like the ʿAbbāsids, the Ghaznavids were staunch Sunnis at a time when it might have been more advantageous to accept some form of Shiʿism. They were also loyal supporters of the ʿAbbāsids and bitter opponents of their arch-enemy the Fāṭimids, who under the caliphate of al-Ḥākim (996–1021) were ever more active in their Ismāʿīlī propaganda. Maḥmūd of

FIG. 11. Isfahan. Masjid-i Jāmī: Fragment of inscription on north face of south dome, 478/1086–88. From Grabar, *Isfahan*, fig. 24.

Ghazna wasted no opportunity in courting the favor of his exact contemporary, the caliph al-Qādir (991–1031). For his immediate recognition of the caliphate of al-Qādir (whose succession was vexed by another pretender), Maḥmūd was awarded a *manshūr* (charter) for Khurasan, a *khilʿa* (robe of honor), and his first caliphal titles Yamīn al-Dawla (the right arm of the state) and Amīn al-Milla (the defender of the community [i.e., the orthodox]). Other titles, such as Niẓām al-Dīn and Naṣir al-Ḥaqq, were awarded him in 403/1012–13 when he executed the Fāṭimid propagandist Taharti in Bust.[46]

By the early decades of the twelfth century, cursive monumental inscriptions had become fairly commonplace, both as architectural friezes and in epitaphs, but they did not supplant Kufic inscriptions until much later. Indeed, quite commonly cursive and different varieties of the Kufic script were used in the same monument—an exercise of virtuosity common in a large number of Seljuq monuments.[47] The Seljuq script seems to develop straight out of the compact *thuluth* style first seen at Ghazna in the second half of the eleventh century, as a comparison of one of the earliest monumental cursive Seljuq inscriptions (on the exterior of the *miḥrāb* dome of the Great Mosque of Isfahan, dated 1086–87) with the slightly earlier Ghaznavid fragments will demonstrate (cf. figs. 10 and 11). Both scripts are highly cursive, especially for monumental inscriptions, betraying in this respect their likely origin in paper calligraphy. Their character forms are not sufficiently distinct: specifically, the *alif*s are not pointed, the knots or "eyes" are not always open (e.g., the *mīm* in the Seljuq inscription), and some of the characters (e.g., the *rāʾ* and the *nūn*) seem to flow imperceptibly from the preceding character. These "deficiencies" are corrected in the inscriptions of the twelfth century, which begin to differ from the earlier style in their pointed uprights, open "eyes," uniform and fairly

FIG. 12. Western Iran. Marble gravestone, 549/1154. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 48.16.

distinct characters, and in the separation between the inscription and the arabesque ornament beneath it. These features are quite amply illustrated by a related group of gravestones from western Iran or the Jazīra that show remarkable virtuosity in their different varieties of cursive and Kufic scripts.[48] One of the finest of these is a splendidly carved marble gravestone, dated 549/ 1154, with three types of Kufic scripts and an equal number of cursive scripts, all of especially high quality (fig. 12). It is worth noting, however, that despite the overall development of the cursive scripts, especially the *shahāda* in the upper rectangular panel, none of them is dotted or vocalized.[49]

Commenting on these calligraphic changes, van Berchem has noted that in the east the development of cursive writing, and especially its supplantation of the Kufic script, is very gradual indeed: Kufic inscriptions continue in historical epigraphy until the end of the twelfth century, become increasingly rare during the thirteenth century, and practically disappear by the end of that century. This led him to conclude that "in the east the change was a purely practical and autonomous process: cursive writing from daily life slowly and without plan or design supplanted a monumental script that no one could read."[50] While it is true that the transformation was gradual and at times sporadic and that the mixed use of Kufic and *thuluth* in the same building does pose some problems of interpretation, it may be precipitous to conclude that the change was "purely practical and autonomous" and "without plan or design." It is perhaps more prudent to suggest that in certain instances, for example under the early Ghaznavids and in the first Seljuq monuments, the use of a cursive script for monumental inscriptions was indeed purposeful and was motivated by external forces whose nature is just beginning to be understood. But it remains problematic that the new cursive writing took so long to establish itself and that for more than a century it was used simultaneously with a totally different calligraphic style, the floriated Kufic. This matter requires further investigation and cannot be settled within the scope of this essay.

## *Nūr al-Dīn, 1146–74*

Several scholars have commented on the decidedly different situation in Syria, specifically under the reign of Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn Zangī (1146–74). Van Berchem was the first to note that the change from angular to cursive scripts in Syria was as sudden as it was quick, having been put into effect within just a few years by the orders of Nūr al-Dīn as an "intentional act for the achievement of a vast plan, part of a reform."[51] Herzfeld stated the matter even more emphatically by placing this transformation "at a point almost exactly defined by the year 548 [1153]," when Nūr al-Dīn abandoned the form and content of earlier Seljuq protocols and embraced the changes produced by "the deep movement of the Sunnite reaction."[52] Most recently, these observations have been reiterated by Sourdel-Thomine, who concluded that "Nūr al-Dīn ordered the adoption of the cursive script in official inscriptions, to the detriment of the angular script, which without disappearing completely, was reduced to repetitions of ancient types."[53]

Despite the plausibility, even overall veracity, of the conclusions drawn by these eminent scholars, the chronological sequence of inscriptions in Syria from the late eleventh to the middle of the twelfth century presents two important problems. The first is that one early cursive inscription does exist in Syria: the third inscriptional frieze on the

minaret of the Great Mosque of Aleppo, dated 483/1090 (fig. 13). Curiously, while the four other inscriptional bands on the minaret are written in floriated Kufic of the highest possible quality, the cursive inscription is comparatively mediocre, perhaps displaying the mason's lack of experience in the new style. Like other contemporary Seljuq inscriptions, it is written on a bed of arabesque and contains no dots or vowel marks. Even more curiously, it is a Shiʿi inscription giving the names of the Twelve Imams preceded by a *taṣliya.* Two possible (but perhaps insufficient) explanations can be offered for this apparent discrepancy. The first is that this minaret was erected during the period of Seljuq control of Aleppo and represents a local attempt to imitate the Iranian Seljuq practice of using both styles of calligraphy in the same monument. The second is that the minaret was begun by Ibn al-Khashshāb, member of a Shiʿi patrician family, who continued as supervisor (*mutawalli*) of its construction after the Seljuq takeover of the city.[54] Could the inscription, then, be seen as an act of rapprochement between the Seljuqs and the Shiʿi majority in Aleppo?[55] Or was the inscription Ibn al-Khashshāb's idea, a way of making a legible Shiʿi statement with a cursive inscription? The last possibility would also seem to explain later instances of the Twelver Shiʿi use of the cursive script, seen above in the Freer gravestone of 1154 (fig. 12).

The second problem is that Nūr al-Dīn did not use the new cursive style from the beginning of his reign. In fact, his earliest known inscription at the *mashhad* al-Dikka in Aleppo, dated 1146, is written in a rather simple Kufic style that closely resembles his father's (Zangī) inscription of 1128 on the same building.[56] The poor quality of the inscription, its derivative style and titulature, and the fact that it commemorated a building act on a Shiʿi monument are all symptomatic of the precarious start of Nūr al-Dīn's career.[57] His very next dated inscription (Shawwāl 543/February 1149) at the portal of the *madrasa* al-Ḥallāwiyya, however, is written in an excellent *thuluth* script that closely resembles some of the better specimens of late Seljuq cursive writing on brick or stucco (fig. 14). It is a pleasing and legible style characterized by compactness, pointed uprights and generally open knots, and full use of diacritical and orthographic marks. The character forms are uniform in appearance and begin to display characteristic tapering in the thickness of the line (easily visible in the *lām-alif*), a feature already seen in the earliest Ghaznavid inscriptions and even earlier in the Qurʾānic calligraphy of Ibn al-Bawwāb and his successors.[58] The cramped space forced the mason-calligrapher to overlap some of the letters; except for that problem, the inscription is very easy to read.

This inscription, in effect, initiates the total transformation of monumental calligraphy for Syria and ultimately also for Egypt. With two exceptions, to which I will return, all the succeeding inscriptions from the period of Nūr al-Dīn and his Ayyūbid successors are written in the cursive *thuluth* script. We are led to inquire, therefore, what exactly took place in the early career of Nūr al-Dīn that led him to embark on this fundamental transformation. Although later sources, written under the patronage of Nūr al-Dīn and Ayyūbid sovereigns, are deliberately vague about Nūr al-Dīn's early years, a close reading of one of the very few preserved Shiʿi histories of the period, Ibn abī Ṭayyiʿ, suggests that, like his father, he was initially far more tolerant of Shiʿism and quite ambivalent in the pursuit of Sunni orthodoxy.[59] His personal and public transformation is a complex process, discussed elsewhere by myself and others. It suffices to say here that two major factors contributed to this momentous change in direction: early and somewhat unexpected successes against the Crusaders, and improved links with the ʿAbbāsid caliphate. Between 1146 and 1149 Nūr al-Dīn was able to recapture the north Syrian city of Edessa, to aid in defeating the Second Crusade, and to deal a major defeat to prince Raymond of Antioch (who perished in battle). According to Gibb, "in the eyes of all Islam, he had become the champion of the faith and he now consciously set himself to fulfill the duties of this role."[60]

The ʿAbbāsid caliph wasted no time in recognizing the victories of Nūr al-Dīn by bestowing on him various honorific titles, the most important of which was *al-mujāhid* (the fighter for the faith). This title appears for the first time on the *madrasa* al-Ḥallāwiyya and becomes subsequently one of his most common epithets. But the caliphate had other concerns than the Crusades, namely the restoration of Sunni orthodoxy all over the Islamic world, particularly in Egypt, where the Ismāʿīlī Fāṭimids had long posed a political threat and theological challenge to the ʿAbbāsids. The chief apologist for the ʿAbbāsid cause at the time was the powerful theologian and vizier Ibn Hubayra, whose call for the unification of Sunni Islam and for the destruction of the Fāṭimids seems to have

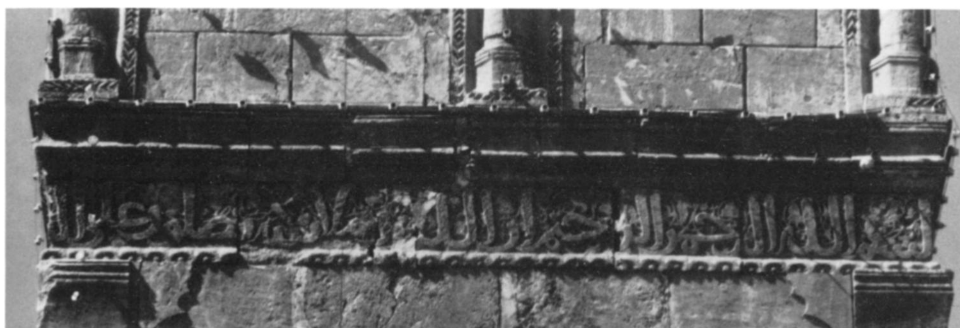

FIG. 13. Aleppo. Minaret of the Great Mosque: Inscription on the third zone, 483/1090. Photo: author.

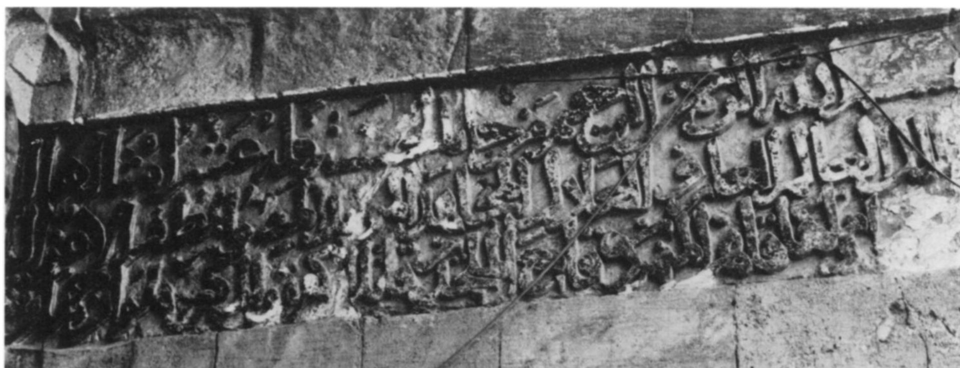

FIG. 14. Aleppo. *Madrasa* al-Ḥallāwiyya, 543/1149: Inscriptions on the portal. Photos: author.

struck an immediate chord with Nūr al-Dīn. The two are known to have corresponded about these matters, and it was at the vizier's urging that Nūr al-Dīn finally attempted in 1163 to wrest Egypt from the hands of the Fāṭimids and retake it in the name of the caliphate.[61] Thus, early triumphs against the Crusades, the machinations of Ibn Hubayra and the ʿAbbāsid caliphs, and undoubtedly a personal proclivity toward orthodoxy and asceticism, all motivated Nūr al-Dīn's pursuit of Sunnism, making him the primary force behind the Sunni revival.

Beginning as a subsidiary theme to the more pressing problem of the counter-Crusade, the revival of the *Sunnah* soon became the central motive of Nūr al-Dīn's policy, and it is therefore legitimate to view all his major acts through this traditionalist reaction. The calligraphic transformation was one of the most visible signs of this broad movement, which had lain dormant in Syria during the turbulent decades of the first half of the twelfth century but was now being propagated by the ʿAbbāsid caliphs and Nūr al-Dīn. At its most basic, the use of cursive writing for public inscriptions declared, by virtue of its total difference from earlier public inscriptions, the end of the Fāṭimid period and the beginning of a new era. More specifically, the use of a script with demonstrable links to the ʿAbbāsid caliphate was intended to reinforce the legitimacy of Nūr al-Dīn's rule in Syria and in all other territory conquered in the name of the caliph. Finally, by virtue of its legibility and unambiguousness, the new public writing shattered the cherished duality of meaning implicit in Fāṭimid inscriptions.

Before further exploring the implications of

FIG. 15. Ḥama (Syria). Mosque of Nūr al-Dīn: Inscription on back of *minbar*. Drawing: author.

these issues, I would like to investigate this calligraphic transformation in Nūrid Syria and in other parts of the Islamic world. The next dated inscription by Nūr al-Dīn, at the Qasṭal al-Shuʿaybiyya in Aleppo (545/1150), immediately presents a problem, since it is written in a highly elaborate script that recalls the late-eleventh-century floriated Kufic on the minaret of the Great Mosque. I have elsewhere investigated this important monument, proposing that it was rebuilt by Nūr al-Dīn as a commemorative structure intended to celebrate his triumphs against the Crusaders while evoking the earlier victories of ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who had conquered Aleppo in 16/637.[62] The use of an archaizing script seems to comport well with the deliberately archaizing appearance of the architecture and the commemorative nature of the monument.[63]

With the exception of this inscription and a decree in Damascus dated 551/1156, whose floriated Kufic may have had to do with the bureaucratic nature of the inscription, all the other inscriptions of Nūr al-Dīn are written in monumental *thuluth*.[64] Two other specimens from his period and one from the closely related era of his young son Ismāʿīl will suffice to establish the overall character of the mature *thuluth* script before the Ayyūbids. The first inscription comes from a wooden *minbar* commissioned by Nūr al-Dīn in 559/1164 for his mosque at Ḥama (central Syria).[65] This inscription, which simply states the *shahāda*, is written within a cartouche in a large and clear *thuluth* (perhaps originally highlighted with paint) on a bed of arabesque scrolls (fig. 15). Fully cursive and entirely legible, the script is also characterized by pointed and highly tapered uprights (e.g., *alif* and *lām-alif*), open knots, and interconnection, seen here in the way that the *rāʾ* and *sīn* of the word *rasūl* are joined.

FIG. 16. Aleppo. Maqām Ibrāhīm in the citadel: Inscription of Nūr al-Dīn, 563/1168. Drawing: author.

FIG. 17. Aleppo. Maqām Ibrāhīm in the citadel: Inscription of Ismāʿīl, 575/1180. Drawing: author.

The inscriptions of Nūr al-Dīn and his son Ismāʿīl at the *maqām* of Ibrāhīm in the citadel of Aleppo, dated 563/1168 and 575/1180 respectively, are among the best executed *thuluth* inscriptional plaques of the twelfth century (figs. 16 and 17). The script can best be described as a fleshier version of the first cursive Nūrid inscription of 1148, a dense and rather short script whose squatness is relieved by the tapering of the beginning and end of its letters and by the judicious use of interconnection. Comparing the inscription of Nūr al-Dīn with that of his son, we note more overlapped letters and greater reliance on interconnection, but without an undue loss of legibility. Both scripts are of course fully vocalized and equipped with all the required orthographic marks, making them the most easily legible and unambiguous inscriptions of their time.

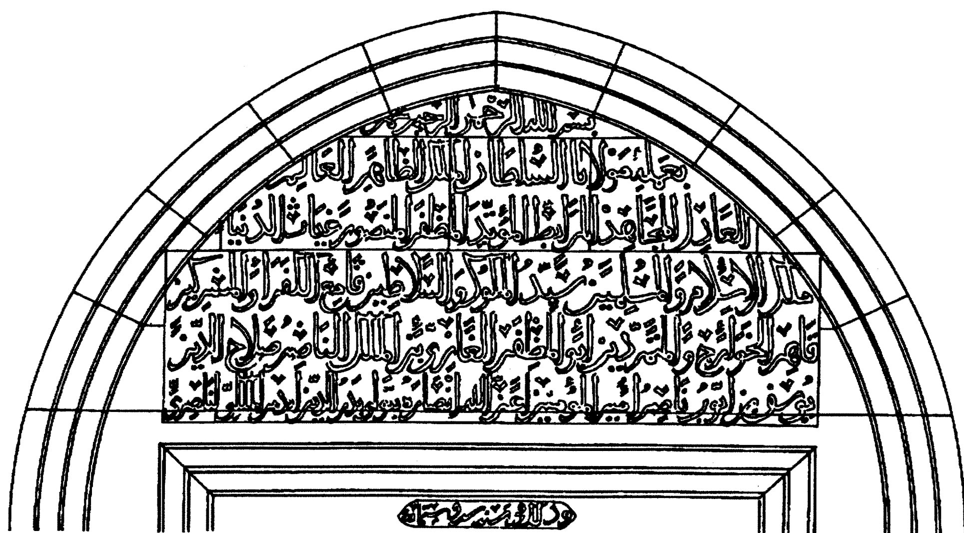

Fig. 18. Aleppo. Citadel, Lion's Gate: Inscription of al-Ẓāhir Ghāzī, 606/1210. From Herzfeld, *Alep*, pl. 38.

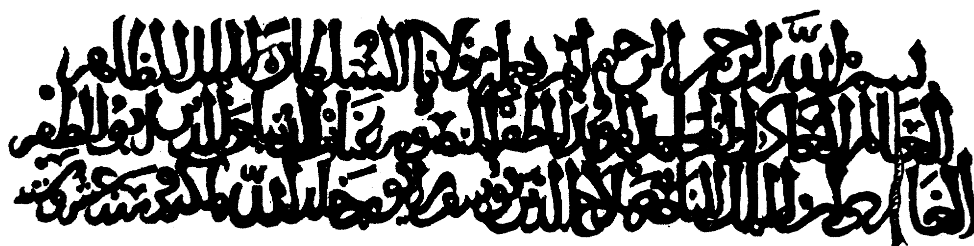

Fig. 19. Aleppo. Mosque in the citadel: Inscription of al-Ẓāhir Ghāzī, 610/1213. Drawing: author.

## *The Canonization of the Thuluth of Ibn al-Bawwāb: 1170–1260*

By the time of the death of Nūr al-Dīn in 1174, the monumental cursive script that he had helped introduce into Syria had become standard for all public inscriptions, not just in Syria but also in Upper Mesopotamia, Anatolia, North Africa, and Spain (see table 1). Although it is unlikely that every dynast in all these regions was following the example of Nūr al-Dīn, some of them may have been, while others may have received their cultural clues from the ʿAbbāsid caliphate itself. We will, therefore, examine the situation in each of these regions, beginning with Syria under the Ayyūbids.

### Syria

In Aleppo, inscriptions produced under al-Ẓāhīr Ghāzī (1195–1216), the greatest architectural patron in the medieval history of the city, build on the high calligraphic tradition established by Nūr al-Dīn.[66] The two best preserved and most accomplished inscriptions of Ghāzī are located in the citadel: a foundation inscription, dated 606/1210, at the end of the entrance block on the tympanum of the Lion's Gate and another foundation inscription, dated 610/1213, above the entrance to the mosque. The first and aesthetically superior inscription proved too difficult to photograph and draw, and Herzfeld's otherwise excellent drawing of the gate deprives the inscription of all its calligraphic flair (fig. 18).[67] In truth, this is a magnificent inscription, a masterpiece that balances monumentality with fluidity and legibility with embellishment. Thinner and somewhat more attenuated than its Zangid predecessors, it still manages to maintain the tapered appearance of the uprights and the interconnection of some of the letters, as in the way the *zāy* and the *yāʾ* of al-Ghāzī are linked. The second inscription is nearly identical to the first, possibly even made by the same calligrapher, but differs from it primarily in being more cramped—a condition that forced the calligrapher to overlap some of the words and to rely a little too much on interconnection (fig. 19).

Altogether, the calligraphic script created under al-Ẓāhir Ghāzī may be seen as the first truly monumental cursive style in stone. It is therefore not surprising that it continues with minor changes to the very end of the Ayyūbid period. A series

FIG. 20. Aleppo. *Madrasa* al-Firdows, 633/1235–36: Inscription in courtyard. Photo: author.

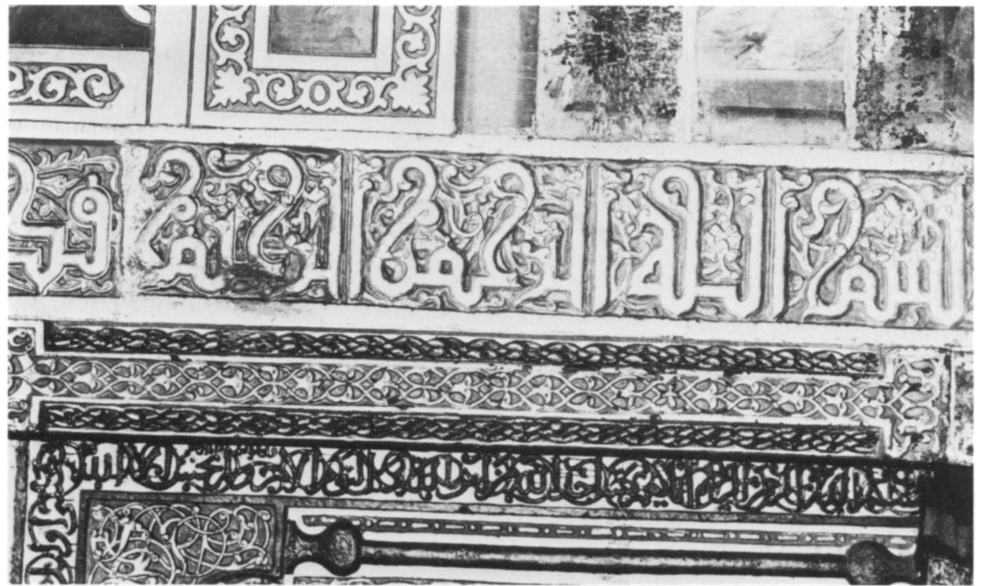

FIG. 21. Mosul. Mosque al-Nūrī: *miḥrāb*, 543/1148. Originally in the now destroyed Umayyad mosque in Mosul. Photo: author.

of long inscriptional friezes from the *madrasa* al-Firdows, dated 633/1235–36, attests to the continuity and subtle development of the early Ayyūbid script, which becomes less tapered, a little more attenuated, and minimally interconnected (fig. 20). Interestingly, inscriptions in the rest of Syria and in Palestine, which never achieve the superior quality of the Aleppo inscriptions, undergo a similar process of development between the twelfth and the first half of the thirteenth century. In Jerusalem inscriptions dated 575/1180, 587/1191, and 589/1193 closely resemble the heavy *thuluth* style of the Zangid period. An inscription dated 604/1208, on the other hand, is closer in its thinness and attenuation to the inscriptions of al-Ẓāhir Ghāzī and his successors.[68]

## UPPER MESOPOTAMIA

No early cursive monumental inscriptions have been preserved in Baghdad, which unfortunately precludes an examination of the impact of Ibn Muqla and Ibn al-Bawwāb on their native city. Indeed, the earliest preserved monumental inscriptions do not occur until the period of the Caliph al-Nāṣir (1180–1225).[69] The situation is a little more encouraging in Mosul, where, outside of a handful of early-twelfth-century tombstones inscribed in a crude cursive style, the earliest monumental cursive inscription is the one surrounding the inner frame of the *miḥrāb* of the mosque al-Nūrī, dated 543/1148 (fig. 21).[70] The inscription is written on a bed of arabesque and seems to stand midway in terms of development between early Iranian inscriptions and the Zangid inscriptions of Aleppo. Indeed, the entire composition of this flat *miḥrāb* with friezes of floriated Kufic inscriptions framing an inner cursive inscription is clearly modeled after a Seljuq Iranian prototype. Interestingly, the *miḥrāb* is signed by a certain Muṣṭafa al-Baghdādī, whose *nisba* suggests that he originally came from Baghdad. This is one of the very few references to the existence of mason-calligraphers in the ʿAbbāsid capital.

As in Syria, monumental cursive writing seems also to have been introduced *en masse* into Mosul under Nūr al-Dīn, who though never its actual ruler, exercised considerable control over it during the latter part of his reign.[71] The mosque that he founded there between 1170 and 1172 contains numerous inscriptions on the capitals of its massive piers (fig. 22). Although bearing a general resemblance to the Nūrid inscriptions in

FIG. 22. Mosul. Mosque al-Nūrī: Inscriptions on capitals, 1170–72. Drawings: author.

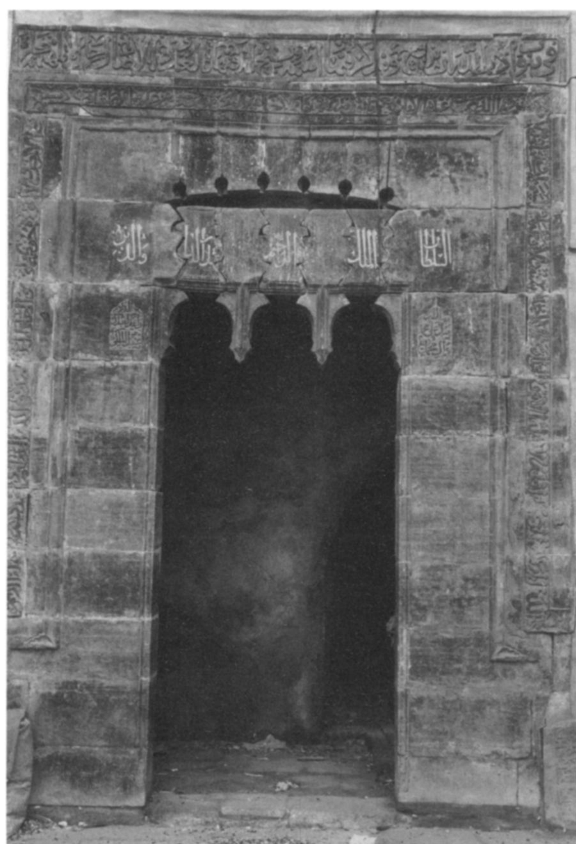

FIG. 23. Mosul. *Mashhad* of Imām ʿAwn al-Dīn, 646/1248: Portal to the *masjid*. Photo: author.

Aleppo, they still retain two features of early Seljuq cursive inscriptions, namely the absence of diacriticals and the presence of an arabesque background. Other inscriptions from this mosque, possibly dating from the first Nūrid phase, consist of long friezes in white marble inlaid with black marble.[72] These are somewhat closer to contemporary Aleppine inscriptions in their character form, their use of diacriticals, and their minimal background ornamentation.

Other than these twelfth-century inscriptions, the only pre-Mongol monumental inscriptions in Mosul are those decorating the various shrines erected during the reign of Badr al-Dīn Luʾluʾ (1222–59). Two of these shrines, the *mashhads* of Imām Yaḥya Abu'l-Qāsim (637/1239–40) and Imām ʿAwn al-Dīn (646/1248), preserve a number of excellent cursive inscriptions on marble, which are comparable in quality to the best inscriptions in Aleppo.[73] The portal to the mosque of the later shrine displays to advantage the great variety of cursive scripts used in Mosul in the few decades preceding the Mongol invasion (fig. 23). The uppermost frieze, serving the function of a cornice, is in monumental *thuluth* (or *thuluth jaliyy*), a large and slow-moving script with minimal overlapping of words and practically no interconnection.[74] Another large script, rendered in white marble on bluish alabaster, presents the name and titles of Badr al-Dīn across the lintel. It is a highly attenuated script that brings to mind the late Ayyūbid inscriptions of Aleppo. The third, and for us most interesting, calligraphic style in this portal is represented by a long frieze that enframes the portal on three sides. The inscription, which gives the fairly common *Ayat al-Kursī* (Verse of the Throne), is written in a splendid compact *thuluth* style that recalls, even surpasses, the twelfth-century inscriptions in Aleppo. With no less than twelve instances of interconnection, this inscription might appear to have sacrificed legibility for the sake of cursiveness and artistic nuance (fig. 24).

FIG. 24. Mosul. *Mashhad* of Imām ʿAwn al Dīn, 646/1248: Portal to the *masjid*, detail of inscription. Photo: author.

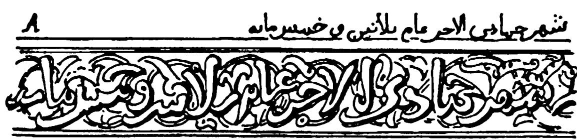

FIG. 25. Tlemcen (Algeria). Great Mosque: Inscription on the *miḥrāb* dome, 530/1136. From Marçais, *Occident*, fig. 150.

Remarkably, however, it remains perfectly legible throughout—a feature that must be attributed to the excellence of its calligraphy and the unobtrusive nature of its interconnections, whose extreme thinness further enhances the tapering of the letter forms. It is astonishing that a calligraphic nuance first introduced in the late tenth century, and whose ultimate origin may have been quite accidental, should still find considerable resonance in monumental writing two and a half centuries later.

## NORTH AFRICA

In North Africa, including Sicily, the floriated Kufic script remained dominant until about the middle of the twelfth century, when it was challenged, both in coinage and on monuments, by the cursive script.[75] Appearing first in some Tunisian tombstones from the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, the style is initially seen within a monumental context late in the period of the Almoravids (1056–1147).[76] The earliest cursive monumental inscription in North Africa is a long frieze that encircles the base of the famous ribbed filigree dome of the Great Mosque of Tlemcen (Algeria), dated 530/1136 (fig. 25).[77] The script closely resembles other "Seljuq" *thuluth* inscriptions that we have so far seen in Ghazna, Isfahan, Aleppo, and Mosul. Undotted, unvocalized, and displaying some of the characteristic tapering of letters, this historical inscription is also written on a bed of arabesque. On the basis of the published photographs and drawings, it is impossible to determine whether it contained any interconnected letters.

A more extensive cycle of early cursive inscriptions is found farther west, at the mosque of al-Qarawiyyīn at Fez. The inscriptions belong to the major Almoravid building phase, in which the entire axial nave of the mosque was rebuilt in 531/1137 with a series of *muqarnas* vaults.[78] The cursive inscriptions coexist with a plethora of highly complex floriated Kufic inscriptions, resembling in this respect a group of Qurʾānic manuscripts written in the Maghribī script but utilizing the *thuluth* script of Ibn al-Bawwāb for their chapter headings.[79] Seemingly restricted to a medallion above the *miḥrāb* and to short friezes framing the cells of the two *muqarnas* vaults nearest to the *miḥrāb*, these inscriptions are almost identical to the Tlemcen inscription, except that some of them are written on an unadorned background (fig. 26). The foundation inscription above the *miḥrāb* consists of four short lines of slightly more developed *thuluth*, which attempts, though not very successfully, to utilize to the

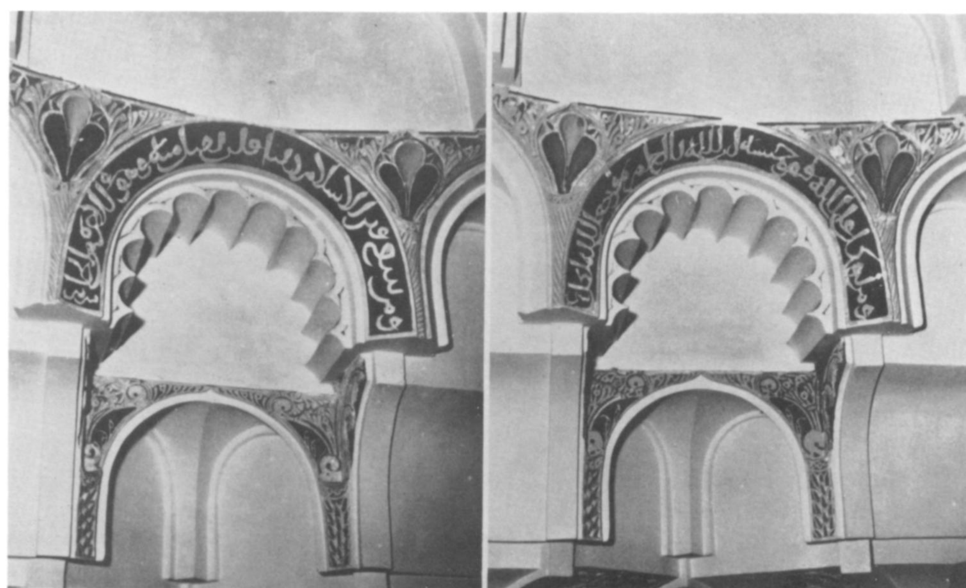

FIG. 26. Fez. Mosque of al-Qarawiyyīn: Inscriptions in the cells of the *miḥrāb* dome, 531/1137. From Terrasse, *al-Qaraouiyin*, pl. 53.

FIG. 27. Fez. Mosque of al-Qarawiyyīn: Foundation inscriptions above the *miḥrāb*, 531/1137. Author's drawing after Terrasse, *al-Qaraouiyin*, pl. 51.

fullest the feature of interconnection. Nearly every word is connected with the following one, and that, combined with links that are nearly the same thickness as the script itself, results in a dense and hard-to-read inscription (fig. 27).

The overall naiveté of these inscriptions seems perfectly consistent with the newness of cursive writing in North Africa and with the apparent desire to steer close to an imported model with all its idiosyncrasies. This model, as suggested above, was the new calligraphic style in the ʿAbbāsid capital—a style that had been formulated by Ibn al-Bawwāb and popularized by his many students. Copying one of the most important cultural symbols of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate was perfectly consistent with the Almoravids' strong links with the ʿAbbāsids, whom they recognized from early on as the spiritual heads of Islam, and who in turn recognized them as rulers of al-Maghreb in the name of the caliph and Sunni Islam.[80] The numerous letters exchanged between Yūsuf ibn Tāshufīn and his son ʿAlī and the various ʿAbbāsid caliphs attest to the Almoravids' veneration for the ʿAbbāsids, whose name was included on their coinage and pronounced during the Friday *khuṭba*.[81] The appropriation of this cultural symbol and its incorporation within the most important mosques of the Almoravids was therefore intended as a sign of homage to the ʿAbbāsids and as a means to enhance the legitimacy of the Almoravid state.

## *Egypt, from Fāṭimid to Ayyūbid*

In discussing the inscriptions of the mosque of al-Ṣāliḥ Ṭalāʾiʿ, dated 555/1160, van Berchem concluded that they demonstrate that the Kufic script was used in historical inscriptions until the end of the Fāṭimid dynasty.[82] Commenting on this transformation, Creswell declared that "henceforth the beautiful decorated Kufic script, the glory and pride of Fāṭimid art, was to be used no more for historical inscriptions but employed solely for decorative bands of quotations from the Qurʾān, and that to an ever decreasing extent."[83] Despite relatively minor recent objections to these conclusions, they remain as sound today as they were a century ago.[84] Indeed, the earliest public cursive inscription in Cairo is Ayyūbid: it is dated 575/1179 and once belonged to a *madrasa* built by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn next to the shrine of Imām Shāfiʿī.[85] Although this inscription was not available for analysis, it seems perfectly appropriate that the earliest cursive inscription in Egypt should belong to the shrine of the most important theologian of Sunni Islam, and one that the Ayyūbids in particular held in special regard.[86] Commemorating the building of the shrine of Imām Shāfiʿī and his wooden cenotaph by cursive inscriptions reinforces the fundamental transformation undergone by Egypt under the early Ayyūbids.

As was the case in Syria and Upper Mesopotamia, this transformation was to a large extent initiated by Nūr al-Dīn, who had in 1164, 1167, and 1169 sent three expeditions to Egypt intended to retake it from the Fāṭimids and bring it back into the orthodox fold. All three forays were led by Shirkūh and his nephew Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, who, after the death of his uncle in 1169, assumed real authority in Egypt. But despite his relative independence and the increasing tension between him and Nūr al-Dīn, it should be emphasized that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn ruled Egypt in his mentor's name until the latter's death in 1174.[87] Religiously and ideologically, the legacy of Nūr al-Dīn extended much farther than that, for Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, true heir of his suzerain, became the champion of orthodox Islam and recaptured Jerusalem in the name of the ʿAbbāsid caliph.

FIG. 28. Cairo. Citadel: Inscription of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn on the Mudarraj Gate, 579/1183. Photo: author.

A much better known inscription from the period of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn still remains *in situ* in the Mudarraj Gate of the Cairo citadel (fig. 28). Dated 579/1183–84, it commemorates the completion of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's work on his foremost military installation, which in fact had become his official palace after he had abandoned his earlier residence in the Fāṭimid city.[88] Made nearly a full century after the Seljuq inscriptions in Isfahan and Aleppo, fifty years after the Almoravid inscriptions in North Africa, and thirty-five years after the formulation of a monumental cursive style under Nūr al-Dīn, this inscription is quite astonishing in its crudeness and carelessness.[89] With a spindly line, inconsistent letter forms, and neither points nor vowel marks, the script displays none of the refinements that had long been established in cursive monumental calligraphy. A similarly naive writing style is employed in another inscription bearing the name of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, a fragment preserved at the Islamic Museum in Cairo (fig. 29). Though considerably thicker, the script is stiff and untapered, and the letter forms are nearly indistinguishable from one another. Both inscriptions reflect the inexperience of local calligraphers in this new calligraphic style, which is quite surprising given the royal nature of the texts. Indeed, not until the latter part of the Ayyūbid period did any monumental cursive inscriptions approach in quality those seen in Syria and Iran.[90] By the time of the last important Ayyūbid sultan, Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb (1240–49), cursive monumental calligraphy in Cairo had already reached a level of development at least comparable to that in Syria and Iran (fig. 30).

## *Conclusion*

With their conquest of Egypt in 969, the Fāṭimids introduced, or perhaps reinvented, the floriated Kufic script and facilitated its propagation in most of the Islamic world. Characterized by many writers as the most elegant variation of Kufic calligraphy, if not Islamic calligraphy as a whole, this script was gradually supplanted between ca. 1075 and ca. 1175 by cursive monumental scripts of the *thuluth* variety. This process began sporadically and rather indefinitely under the Ghaznavids and their successors the Great Seljuqs, from whose time we have the earliest *in situ* cursive inscription on a monument. Used at first simultaneously with floriated Kufic on the same monument, cursive calligraphy began to achieve its ultimate dominance during the reign of Nūr al-Dīn in Syria. Under his guidance, not only did the cursive script replace the floriated Kufic in nearly all Syrian monumental inscriptions, but a truly monumental *thuluth* script was developed for the first time in stone. Simultaneous with the reforms of Nūr al-Dīn was the tentative introduction of cursive official writing into central and western North Africa under the Almoravids. This independent development notwithstanding, there is ample evidence to suggest that it was Nūr al-Dīn who catalyzed, if not directly mandated, the switch from Kufic to cursive public inscriptions in Syria, various parts of the Jazīra, and ultimately in Egypt, the last stronghold of the floriated Kufic script.

Although it has often been difficult to provide early examples of official cursive writing from Baghdad, I have stressed the central role of the

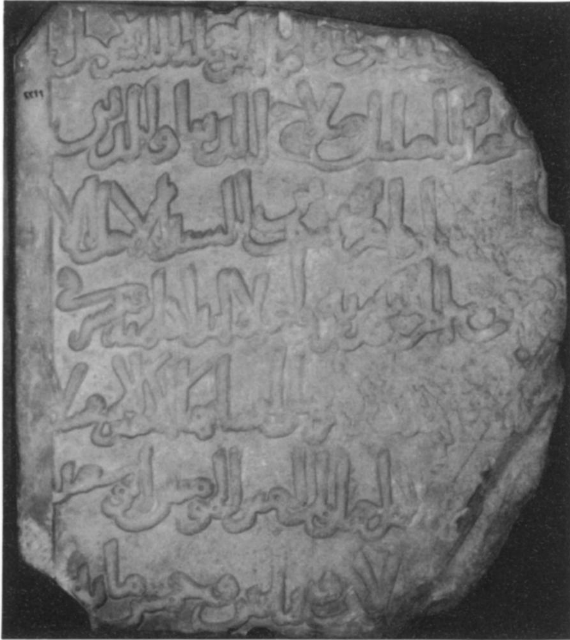

FIG. 29. Cairo. Fragmentary inscription of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, 583/1187. Photo: author.

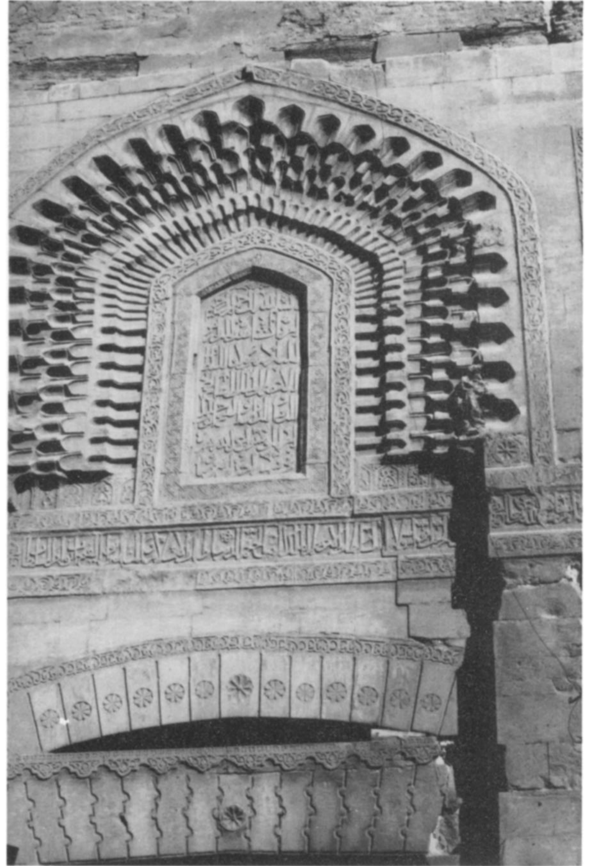

FIG. 30. Cairo. *Madrasa* of al-Ṣaliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb, 641/1243: Foundation inscription above the portal. Photo: author.

ʿAbbasid caliphate throughout this article and the preceding one. It was in Baghdad that the earliest semi-Kufic and fully cursive Qurʾāns were produced, and it is quite possible that some of the earliest monumental cursive inscriptions were also made there. More likely, however, the earliest monumental cursive inscriptions in Iran were direct imitations of calligraphic specimens produced by the master calligraphers of Baghdad during the eleventh century—Ibn al-Bawwāb and his circle. Indeed, early cursive monumental writing, with its excessive cursiveness and its penchant for interconnection, betrays a direct dependence on paper calligraphy and specifically on the hand of Ibn al-Bawwāb.

The appropriation and public display of the Qurʾānic script of Ibn al-Bawwāb by the newly emergent Sunni dynasties strongly suggest a degree of awareness of the religious and political implications of the new calligraphic style. Religiously, the supplantation of the highly ambiguous floriated Kufic script by clear and legible cursive scripts implied the acceptance and endorsement of the Sunni belief in the single and unambiguous nature of the word of God, whether in Qurʾāns or in public texts. The long-held duality in the meaning of the Qurʾānic message, which had been transformed by the Fāṭimids into an esoteric cult,[91] was visibly challenged by a script whose legibility and accuracy left little room for variant readings and therefore variant interpretations. Without completely doing away with the dual nature of early Arabic official writing, especially as exemplified by the floriated Kufic, the new cursive script shifts the balance decisively in favor of the denotive over the connotive aspects of writing. Subsuming the mystical within the informational and the *bāṭin* within the *ẓāhir*, the new public inscriptions perfectly embodied and eloquently propagated the exoteric and encompassing tendencies of the Sunni revival.

Politically, the public display of a calligraphic style with indisputable links to the ʿAbbāsids was intended to recognize the spiritual reign of the caliphate as well as symbolically affirm the legitimacy of the dynasty paying homage. This process is paralleled in the diplomatic sphere by the caliph's bequest of titles and official garments in return for gifts received and the inclusion of his name on the coinage and in the *khuṭbah*. Practiced by most dynasties of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries—including the Great Seljuqs,

Zangids, Ayyūbids, Almoravids, and Almohads—this reciprocal process aided the greatly weakened but newly assertive caliphate while providing some basis of legitimacy for these *arriviste* dynasties. Indeed, two of these dynasties, the Turkish Zangids and the Kurdish Ayyūbids, finally brought down the Fāṭimid state and restored Egypt to Sunni orthodoxy.

This symbiotic relationship between a center possessing legitimacy but lacking power and a periphery lacking legitimacy but wielding real power had existed for several centuries, but it seems to have acquired a symbolic level of representation in the eleventh century. I have argued here and elsewhere that the late ʿAbbāsid caliphate was engaged in the production of symbolic forms (e.g., the *muqarnas* dome) and that these forms found wide acceptance in much of the Sunni Islamic world.[92] Often originating in the nonofficial, even vernacular sphere, these forms were systematized in the tenth and eleventh centuries according to geometric processes,[93] producing elegant types that were then used in highly significant contexts. Thus iconically charged, these forms became the veritable symbols of the Sunni revival and the resurgent caliphate and were as a result adopted and further developed by Sunni dynasties in various parts of the Islamic world. Neither cursive monumental writing nor the *muqarnas* dome[94] entered official usage in Egypt before the end of the Fāṭimid period, but they became quite common once Egypt had joined the ranks of the Sunni world and declared its allegiance to the caliphate.

Decentered during the tenth and eleventh centuries, the deeply fragmented Islamic world of the twelfth century was groping for legitimate political authority and a spiritual center. Real unity, which was impossible to achieve and for the most part undesirable, was replaced by ceremonial allegiance, and the caliphal symbols were introduced in order to mitigate the gap between reality and myth. The "semiotic contract"[95] struck between the ʿAbbāsid caliph and his distant and largely independent subjects ensured the wide dissemination of these symbols in a remarkably short time and their further development in the succeeding centuries. But the iconographic life of artistic forms was shortened by the absence in medieval Islam of an institution or an ecclesiastical body that would engage in a sustained textual interpretation of them. Thus, increasingly elaborate forms came to convey only a generalized Islamic meaning.

## Notes

1. The concept of the public text in Arabic inscriptions was first discussed by Irene A. Bierman, "The Art of the Public Text: Medieval Islamic Rule," in *World Art: Themes of Unity in Diversity*, ed. Irving Lavin, Acts of the XXVIth International Congress of the History of Art (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 283–90.

2. Yasser Tabbaa, "The Transformation of Arabic Writing: Part 1, Qurʾānic Calligraphy," *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1992): 119–48.

3. L. A. Mayer, *Islamic Architects and Their Works* (Geneva: A. Kundig, 1956), 6.

4. Richard Ettinghausen, "Arabic Epigraphy: Communication or Symbolic Affirmation," in *Near Eastern Numismatics, Iconography, Epigraphy and History: Studies in Honor of George C. Miles*, ed. Dickran Kouymjian (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1974), 297–318; Erika Dodd, "The Image of the Word: Notes on the Religious Iconography of Islam," *Berytus* 18 (1969): 35–62; Erika Cruikshank Dodd and Shereen Khairallah, *The Image of the Word: A Study of Quranic Verses in Islamic Architecture*, 2 vols. (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981); Bierman, "Art of the Public Text." Although Oleg Grabar's earlier studies, in particular "The Umayyad Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem," *Ars Orientalis* 3 (1959): 33–62, were primarily concerned with the informative and iconographic value of inscriptions, he has in his most recent work paid considerable attention to the formal and symbolic aspects of writing in Islamic art. See Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

5. Ettinghausen, "Arabic Epigraphy," 303.

6. Ettinghausen, "Arabic Epigraphy," 306.

7. Ettinghausen, "Arabic Epigraphy," 307.

8. Dodd and Khairallah, *Image of the Word*, 1:25–26.

9. Bierman, "Art of the Public Text," 284.

10. Bierman, "Art of the Public Text," 285.

11. Grabar, *Mediation*, 60 and 66–69. Grabar eliminates early Kufic Qurʾāns from the realm of calligraphy, since in his view they do not demonstrate an adequate level of elaboration, or, perhaps more importantly, since their elaboration does not seem to be based on a set of well-defined rules and standards of aesthetics. While it is true that early Qurʾāns are rather austere in their frugal use of gold and of fully illuminated folios, their worth and artistic merit resided in their exclusive use of vellum, an expensive medium that would have restricted their patronage to the upper stratum of society, and in their exacting and highly uniform calligraphic style. As for the absence of codes of beauty and manuals of calligraphy for the early scripts, there is little doubt that they once existed, although they probably differed considerably from the later manuals, with their step-by-step instructional approach. It would otherwise be impossible to explain the sudden development of a monumental script under the Umayyads from what must have been a very poorly developed system of writing. Grabar, *Mediation*, 94–95 and 103–4.

12. Grabar, *Mediation*, 113–14.

13. Max van Berchem, "Notes d'archéologie arabe. Monuments et inscriptions fatimites," *Journal Asiatique*, 8ᵉ sér., 17 (1891): 411–95, 18 (1891): 46–86; Sam Flury, *Die Ornamente der Hakim—und Ashar—Moschée* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1912); Sam Flury, *Islamische Schriftbänder Amida-Diarbekr XI. Jahrhundert. Anhang: Kairuan, Mayyāfāriqīn, Tirmidh* (Basel: Frobenius, 1920); partly translated as "Bandeaux ornamentés à inscriptions arabes: Amida-Diarbekr, IX siècle," *Syria* 1 (1920–21): I, 235–49, 318–28 and II, 54–62; Sam Flury, "La mosquée de Nayin," *Syria* 11 (1930): 43–58; Sam Flury, "Le décor épigraphique des monuments fatimides du Caire," *Syria* 17 (1936): 365–76; Adolf Grohmann, "The Origin and Early Development of Floriated Kufic," *Ars Orientalis* 2 (1957): 183–213; Janine Sourdel-Thomine, "Le coufique alépin de l'époque seljoukide," *Mélanges Louis Massignon* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1957), 3:301–17; Aida S. Arif, *Arabic Lapidary Kūfic in Africa. Egypt—North Africa—Sudan* (London: Luzac, 1967); Ibrahim Jumʿah, *Dirāsa fī taṭawwur al-kitābāt al-kūfiyyaʿalā al-aḥjār fī miṣr fī al-qurūn al-khamsa al-ūla lil-hijra* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-ʿArabi, 1969); Muḥammad Kāmil Fāris, "al-Khaṭṭ al-kūfī al-muwarraq fī maʿālim Ḥalab al-athariyya," *Majallat ʿĀdiyyat Ḥalab* 1 (1975): 237–80.

14. Flury, *Islamische Schriftbänder*, 11.

15. Grohmann, "Floriated Kufic," 207–8. William and Georges Marçais proposed that the floriated Kufic script may have come from North Africa to Egypt with the Fāṭimids (*Les monuments arabes de Tlemcen*, [Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1903], 88). Grohmann, however, has convincingly refuted this position by pointing out that no true floriated Kufic existed in Tunisia during the early Fāṭimid phase. His fig. 2 depicts a tombstone from Qayrawan, dated 341/

952, whose script has some foliated letters but cannot be called floriated.

16. Grohmann, "Floriated Kufic," notes the existence of a number of ninth-century funerary stelae in Egypt and Palestine that contain early specimens of floriated Kufic. One inscription in the Ḥaram of Jerusalem dating between 301–4/913–17 does indeed show a Kufic script that had begun to sprout leaves.

17. Grohmann, "Floriated Kufic," 212.

18. Grohmann, "Floriated Kufic," 209. This important point is amply illustrated and discussed in Jumʿah, *Dirāsa*, 209–14, who concludes that the inscriptions of the first three-quarters of the fourth/tenth century tend to be of poorer quality and simpler ornamentation than those of the preceding century.

19. Etienne Combe et al., *Répertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1932–40), vol. 2, no. 461; hereafter *RCEA*.

20. Jumʿah, *Dirāsa*, 230–31.

21. Grohamnn, "Floriated Kufic," 209.

22. Janine Sourdel-Thomine, "Kitābāt," *EI2*, 5:217. Lisa (Volov) Golombek was, however, the first to note the process of the internal transformation of Kufic characters in "Plaited Kufic on Samanid Epigraphic Pottery," *Ars Orientalis* 6 (1966): 107–34.

23. Golombek, "Plaited Kufic," fig. 8.

24. Flury, *Islamische Shriftsbänder*, pls. III–XIII.

25. Ernst Herzfeld, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum, Inscriptions et monuments d'Alep* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1954), vol. 2, pls. 56–63 and 86–91.

26. Khaled Moaz and Solange Ory, *Inscriptions arabes de Damas: les stèles funéraire* (Damascus: Institut français, 1977), pls. 4–5 and 43–44.

27. Henri Terrasse, *La mosquée al-Qaraouiyin à Fès* (Paris: Librarie Klincksieck, 1968), figs. 39–50.

28. For excellent specimens of Iranian floriated Kufic see Sourdel-Thomine, "Kitābāt," figs. 22–25.

29. Grohmann, "Floriated Kufic." Indeed, Max van Berchem, "Notes d'archéologie arabes," 18:72, was the first to note the central role of the Fāṭimids in creating and disseminating the floriated Kufic: "it developed under the Fāṭimids of Egypt, the ʿAbbāsids, the last Umayyads of Spain, and other Muslim dynasties until the introduction of cursive script. One finds it in all the Fāṭimid texts of Egypt, in a large number of the inscriptions of Syria, the Caucasus, Iran and Mesopotamia, Sicily, North Africa, and Spain" (my translation).

30. Bierman, "Art of the Public Text," 285–86.

31. W. Madlung, "Ismāʿīliyya," *EI2*, 4:203–5.

32. Max van Berchem, "Recherches archéologiques en Syrie. Lettre à M. Barbier de Meynard," *Journal Asiatique*, 9e sér., 6 (1895): 499; my translation.

33. See, for example, Ernst Herzfeld, "Damascus: Studies in Architecture, III," *Ars Islamica* 11–12 (1956): 38.

34. I was not immune to this trend, and in my doctoral dissertation, "The Architectural Patronage of Nūr al-Dīn, 1146–1174" (New York University, 1983) I paid very little attention to the transformation of the script of official writing under Nūr al-Dīn.

35. Van Berchem, "Notes d'archéologie arabe," 18:73.

36. In her recent compendium, *The Monumental Inscriptions from Early Islamic Iran and Transoxiana* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), Sheila Blair has proposed a number of tenth-century Buyid commemorative inscriptions from Persepolis as specimens of early cursive writing (p. 13 and figs. 11–13 and 32–33). In fact, however, there is nothing cursive about these inscriptions, and they do not resemble or even "betray the shift toward" the fully cursive style of Ibn al-Bawwāb. Furthermore, they are far more angular in the photographs than in the transcriptions, which considerably soften the ligatures, shorten the uprights, and increase the space between words. The original (e.g., fig. 31, an inscription dated 392/1001–2) is quite angular, resembling an unornamented version of contemporary floriated Kufic. This kind of informality is to be expected in inscriptions that stand midway between graffiti and foundation inscriptions.

37. Excellent color slides in the University of Michigan collection indicate that both cenotaph and triangular cover are made of the same material—a slightly translucent pinkish-gray marble or alabaster—and that both employ the same size slabs.

38. I have suggested reading the first word in the third line as *ḥujratuhu* (his chamber, possibly even alluding to the *hujra* of the Prophet in Medina) rather than the pejorative and therefore very unlikely

*ḥufratuhu* (his hole). According to Lane's *Lexicon,* there is no possibility of translating *ḥufra* as "sepulcher."

39. Sam Flury, "Le Décor épigraphique des monuments de Ghazna," *Syria* 6 (1925): 61–90, esp. 87–89; *RCEA*, vol. 6, no. 2377.

40. See, for example, Sourdel-Thomine, "Kitābāt," fig. 22: tomb of Muḥammad b. Wandarin, 407–411/1016–21.

41. Flury, "Ghazna," 87–89, has argued that the entire pyramidal tomb cover, with its floriated Kufic and early cursive inscriptions, must postdate the tomb, suggesting that it may have been added to the original cenotaph after the fall of the Ghaznavids, as a sign of veneration to a great Islamic hero. His argument for this late date rests on three objections, one archaeological and two paleographic. Archaeologically, Flury (on the basis of André Godard's observations) has argued that the pyramidal top is uncommon for Ghaznavid tombs and that it is poorly connected with the rectangular cenotaph beneath it. Yet Flury himself shows a cenotaph (pl. XX, 1–2) for an unknown Ghaznavid dignitary with exactly the same composition. See also n. 37 above. Paleographically, Flury notes first that the Kufic inscription departs significantly from other Ghaznavid inscriptions. But, once again, an examination of just the Ghaznavid inscriptions he illustrates in his article suffices to demonstrate the wide variety of Kufic writing under the Ghaznavids, which is precisely the conclusion that Flury reaches at the end of the article (p. 90). Perhaps a better explanation for the uniqueness of Maḥmūd's Kufic inscription is technical: it is more deeply carved and modeled than other Ghaznavid inscriptions. The second paleographic objection has to do with the cursive inscription, which indeed does not resemble any other cursive inscription, Ghaznavid or otherwise. But this perhaps indicates its early rather than late date, suggesting that it may have been produced at a time when calligraphers were not yet able to break away from the long and powerful tradition of the floriated Kufic. To assume, as Flury did, that this inscription was made in the late twelfth century, we would have to demonstrate that a model existed for this script, either in the early eleventh century or during the time of its alleged manufacture in the late twelfth century. Since neither of these postulates is at all likely, we would have to accept that this inscription was made around the time of Maḥmūd's death in 1030. Janine Sourdel-Thomine, "A propos du cénotaphe de Mahmūd à Ghazna (Afghanistan)," in *Essays in Islamic Art and Architecture in Honor of Katherina Otto-Dorn*, ed. Abbas Daneshvari (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1981), 127–35, has also questioned the early date of the cenotaph on the basis of stylistic and paleographic evidence. But the stylistic peculiarities of the carving that she notes are most likely attributable to the fact (or at least great likelihood) that most of these stone cenotaphs were carved by Indian masons since Iranian artisans would have been quite unskilled for the task. Paleographically, Sourdel-Thomine presents absolutely no comparisons or possible models for the cursive inscriptions and no explanation as to how, indeed why, they could have been produced in the late twelfth century.

42. For early specimens of this script, see Sourdel-Thomine, "A propos du cénotaphe," fig. 26 (minaret near Balkh, dated 502/1109–10) and Adolph Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie*, 2 vols. (Vienna: Herman Bohlaus Nachforschungen, 1967 and 1971), 2:fig. 19.

43. Tabbaa, "Qurʾānic Calligraphy," 135–36.

44. Tabbaa, "Qurʾānic Calligraphy," figs. 19–21.

45. While the connection of Ibn Muqla with the ʿAbbāsid caliphate cannot be questioned, the same is not true of Ibn al-Bawwāb, who never achieved Ibn Muqla's official status and who briefly served as keeper of the Buyid library in Shiraz. Indeed, his connection with the Buyids and the fact that the eulogy in his one preserved Qurʾān includes a reference to the "Pure Family of the Prophet" has led David Storm Rice (*The Unique Ibn al-Bawwāb Manuscript in the Chester Beatty Library* [Dublin: E. Walker, 1955], 13) to conclude that "Ibn al-Bawwāb shared the Shiʿite persuasion of his patrons, the Buwayhids." There are many problems with this unfounded assertion. First, the Buyids themselves were only Shiʿis "in some vague sense." Their ambivalence toward Shiʿism was manifested in their numerous concessions to the Ḥanbalī caliphs; Roy Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 28. Second, the ʿAbbāsids, as direct descendents of the Prophet and as Ḥanbalīs, were loath to relinquish their claims to the family of the Prophet. Finally, there is absolutely no possibility that Ibn al-Bawwāb was Shiʿi, since his biography in Ibn Khallīkān (*Wafiyyāt al-aʿyān*, 3:342) states that "he died in Baghdad and was buried next to the imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal." He was, therefore, most likely a Ḥanbalī and, as such, theologically opposed to Shiʿism. Indeed, his employment by the Buyids as librarian and calligrapher, rather than proving his Shiʿism, might be one indication that the weakened Buyids of the early eleventh century were quite willing to soften,

or even abandon, some of their Shi'i positions. See, in particular, Henri Laoust, "La pensée et l'action politique d'al-Māwardī," *Revue des études islamiques* 36 (1968): 11–92. Laoust demonstrates (pp. 65–66) that between 1007 and 1008 (almost the exact date of the Qur'ān of Ibn al-Bawwāb) the Buyid Bahā' al-Dawla was forced to banish the famous Shi'i theologian Shaykh Mufīd and replace him with the Ash'arī theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Isfarā'īnī, primarily because the former had persisted in using the Qur'ān of Ibn Mas'ūd.

46. C. E. Bosworth, "The Imperial Policy of the Early Ghaznavids," *Islamic Culture* 1 (1962): 50. Bosworth cites Jurbadhaqani's description of this event: "When the news of the execution of the envoy from Egypt reached Baghdad, and the firmness of the Sultan's faith became known, the tongues of calumniators and the reproofs of censorious ones were silenced, and his name was always mentioned with praise and honour at the court of the commander of the Faithful."

47. Among the Iranian Seljuq monuments that bear both floriated Kufic and *thuluth* inscriptions are the following:
1. Isfahan, Masjid-ī Jāmī: *miḥrāb* dome (interior inscription Kufic, exterior cursive), dated 478/1086–87: fragment illustrated in Oleg Grabar, *The Great Mosque of Isfahan* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), fig. 34.
2. Qazvīn, Masjid-ī Jāmī, dated 509/1116: A. U. Pope, *Survey of Persian Art* (Ashiya, Japan: SOPA, 1964), 8, pl. 305; hereafter *SPA*.
3. Qazvīn, Masjid-ī Ḥaydariya, first half twelfth century; *SPA*, 8, pl. 315.
4. Buzūn, Imām-zāde Karrār, *miḥrāb* inscription, dated 528/1133-34; *SPA*, 8, pl. 311.
5. Tombstone, dated 533/1138; *SPA*, 8, pl. 520.
6. Ardistān, Masjid-ī Jāmī, dated 555/1160; *SPA*, 8, pls. 522–24.

48. Some of these are illustrated in *SPA*, 7, pls. 518c, 519e (dated 1141), and 520 (dated 1138).

49. Although this particular tombstone contains the Twelver Shi'i formula, not all the other tombstones in this group were Shi'i. Indeed, those illustrated in *SPA* (n. 47) are quite straightforword in their Sunni pious formulas.

50. Max van Berchem, *Matériaux pour un corpus inscriptionum arabicarum, Syrie du Sud, Jerusalem*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1922–27), 1:85 ff. and 254 ff.; my translation.

51. Van Berchem, *Jerusalem*, 1:87. The same idea is restated in "Notes d'archéologie arabe I," 18:73–75; and "Inscriptions arabes de Syrie, VI, Les inscriptions de Nūr al-Dīn et l'origine du charactere arrondi dans l'épigraphie syrienne," *Mémoire de l'institut égyptien* 3 (1897): 34–39.

52. Herzfeld, "Damascus-III," 38, and *Alep*, 1:210–11. See also my "Monuments with a Message: Propagation of Jihād under Nūr al-Dīn, 1146–1174," in *The Meeting of Two Worlds: Cultural Exchange between East and West during the Period of the Crusades*, ed. Vladimir Goss (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1986), 223–40.

53. "Kitābāt," *EI2*, 5:217.

54. On Ibn al-Khashshāb's involvement with the minaret, see Herzfeld, *Alep*, vol. 1, pt. 1, 160–62.

55. This would seem to fit in with the later Seljuqs' ambivalence toward Sunni orthodoxy. Indeed, the Seljuq prince Ridwān went so far as briefly to pronounce the *khuṭba* in the name of the Fāṭimid caliph; see Kamāl al-Dīn ibn al-'Adīm, *Zubdat al-ḥalab fi tārīkh ḥalab*, ed. Sami Dahhan (Damascus: Institut français de Damas), 2:127–29.

56. Herzfeld, *Alep*, pl. LXXIXa.

57. Tabbaa, "Propagation of Jihād," 224.

58. Tabbaa, "Qur'ānic Calligraphy," figs. 20–21.

59. Claude Cahen, "Une chronique Chiite du temps des Croisades," *Comptes rendus, Academie des inscriptions et belles lettres* (1935), 263–64.

60. H. A. R. Gibb, "The Career of Nur al-Din," in *A History of the Crusades*, ed. K. M. Setton, vol. 1, *The First Hundred Years*, ed. M. W. Baldwin (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 515.

61. On Nūr al-Dīn's links with Ibn Hubayra, see Nikita Elisséeff, *Nūr ad-Dīn, un grand prince musulman de Syrie au temps des Croisades (511–569 h./1118–1174)* (Damas: Institut français de Damas, 1967), 3:350–51; Herbert Mason, *Two Statesmen of Mediaeval Islam* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1972), 14 and 23; and Tabbaa, "Nūr al-Dīn," 178–81.

62. Tabbaa, "Propagation of Jihād," 227–29.

63. Such deliberate archaisms, though quite uncommon, are not unknown in Islamic art and architecture. See Terry Allen, *A Classical Revival in Islamic Architecture* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1986), passim, where the author, however, speaks instead of a self-conscious revival of classical

architecture. See also my "Survivals and Archaisms in the Architecture of Northern Syria, ca. 1080–1150," in *Essays in Honor of Oleg Grabar*, ed. Margaret Ševčenko *Muqarnas* 10 (1993): 29–41.

64. For a complete inventory of these inscriptions, see Nikita Elisséeff, "La titulature de Nūr al-Dīn d'après ses inscriptions," *Bulletin des études orientales* 14 (1952–54): 155–96.

65. See Tabbaa, "Propagation of Jihād," 229–31. The *minbar* contains three other long friezes in splendid *thuluth* carved on a deep bed of arabesque: two surrounding each side of the balustrade and a third just below the crenellated cornice. A non-royal inscription from the now destroyed mosque of Shaykh Muḥammad, dated 558/1163, displays an astonishing degree of development, particularly in the use of interconnection. This tendency has here been taken to an extreme without straining the legibility and elegance of the script. Each line contains several examples of interconnection, and some of the lines are even connected with one another vertically—a feature not encountered in any other inscription of the period.

66. The numerous inscriptions of al-Ẓāhir Ghāzī have been collated in Gaston Wiet, "Une inscription de Malik Ẓāhir Gāzī à Latakieh," *Bulletin de l'institut français d'archéologie orientale* 30 (1931): 273–92.

67. Herzfeld, *Alep*, cf. the photograph of the inscription (pl. XXXVIIb) and the elevation drawing of the gate (pl. XXXVIII).

68. Van Berchem, *Jerusalem*, nos. 118, 150, 38, and 155.

69. Monumental inscriptions from the period of this energetic caliph are quite plentiful. One of his longest and finest inscriptions once existed in the Bāb al-Ṭilasm (Talisman Gate) in Baghdad, which was destroyed early in this century. Another fine inscription carved in wood frames the door to the so-called Bāb al-Ghaibah (Gate of Disappearance) in Samarra, part of the Shiʿi sanctuary dedicated to the two *imāms* ʿAlī al-Hādī and Mūsā al-ʿAskarī. See Anonymous, *Bab ul Ghaibah at Samarra* (Baghdad, 1938).

70. This inscription was first discussed by Max van Berchem in F. Sarre and E. Herzfeld, *Archäologische Reise im Euphrat- und Tigris-Gebiet*, 4 vols. (Berlin: Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 1911-20), 1:17. On the basis of the *miḥrāb*'s early date and the assumption that it was made for the mosque of al-Nūrī Herzfeld (*Reise*, 2:224–27) proposed that the mosque was begun more than twenty years before Nūr al-Dīn, a contention that is not supported by any textual evidence. The truth is that this *miḥrāb* was brought to the mosque al-Nūrī in the first decades of this century. It may have been originally intended for the Umayyad mosque of Mosul, which is now destroyed. I addressed the various chronological problems of this mosque in "Nūr al-Dīn," 147–51.

71. Elisséeff, *Nūr ad-Dīn*," 2:657–62.

72. These and other fragments of the mosque al-Nūrī in Mosul are now preserved at the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad. I discussed them in "Nūr al-Dīn," 153–54, fig. 289.

73. These two unusual and sumptuously decorated mausoleums are discussed in Sarre and Herzfeld, *Reise*, 2:249–70. Although built for alleged descendants of various Shiʿi *imāms*, these shrines do not represent the revival of political Shiʿism. Indeed, the official veneration of Shiʿi shrines in the late twelfth century was even practiced by the contemporary ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Nāṣir, whose policy of rapprochement with the Shiʿis was intended to strengthen his power base with the local population. See Mason, *Two Statesmen*, 99 and 116.

74. Examples of this large *thuluth* are quite common in Mosul:
1. Qara Sarai, the palace of Badr al-Dīn Luʾluʾ, 630/1232: a large inscription carved in stucco.
2. Shrine of Imām Yaḥya Abu'l-Qāsim (637/1239–40): exterior inscription above the portal, a short frieze above the corner *miḥrāb*, and a long frieze at the springing of the dome.
3. Shrine of Imām ʿAwn al-Dīn (646/1248): inscription above the portal to the shrine.

75. This development has not been studied in depth; meanwhile, see Georges Marçais, *L'Architecture musulman d'occident* (Paris: Art et métiers graphiques, 1954), 250, and Terrasse, *al-Qaraouiyin*, 51 and 80. For the parallel development in Sicily, see ʿAbd al-Munʿim Raslān, *Al-ḥaḍāra al-islāmiyya fī ṣiqilliya wa junūb ʾīṭāliya* (Jeddah: al-Kitāb al-Jāmiʿī, 1980), 80–82.

76. L. Golvin, "Kitābāt," *EI2*, 221. Golvin adds that "it is in fact impossible, in the absence of precise documentary evidence, to propose an Andalusian influence, as it seems that cursive writing did not appear in Andalusia until much later." This is an important observation, for it underlines a switch in the prevailing cultural influences on al-Maghrib, from Andalusia to the central Islamic world.

77. This highly original dome, the first in North Africa to use *muqarnas* in its squinches, has been studied

by Marçais, *L'Architecture musulman*, 195–97 and figs. 125–26.

78. Terrasse, *al-Qaraouiyin*, chaps. 2–7, discusses different facets of the Almoravid reconstruction. In the Capella Palatina—a monument that attempts to combine the latest in Byzantine, Norman, and Islamic art—the use of cursive calligraphy may be seen as just another example of an up-to-date borrowing from the Islamic world.

79. See, for example, Tabbaa, "Qur'ānic Calligraphy," fig. 27.

80. Links between the Almoravids and the ʿAbbāsid caliphs have been alluded to by several writers, including Muḥammad A. ʿAnān, *Duwal al-ṭawā'if mundhu qiyāmihā ḥattā al-fatḥ al-murābiṭī*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: al-Khanji, 1988), 314 ff. and more recently, Salāmah M. S. al-Hirfī, *Dawlat al-murābiṭīn fī ʿahd ʿAlī b. Yūsuf b. Tāshufīn* (Beirut: Dar al-Nadwa al-Jadida, 1985), 168–75.

81. Al-Hirfī, *Dawlat al-murābiṭīn*, 170–72. The author mentions no fewer than seven exchanges of letters between the Almoravids and the ʿAbbāsids, between 1059 and 1118, covering the reigns of Abū Bakr ibn ʿUmar (1056–73), Yūsuf ibn Tāshufīn (1061–1106), and ʿAlī ibn Yūsuf (1106–42). In the correspondence of 479/1086, Yūsuf received the ʿAbbāsid caliph's approval of his newly assumed title *amīr al-muslimīn* along with a lengthy letter from Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī, in which the great theologian praises Yūsuf as one of the great heroes of Islam.

82. Van Berchem, "Notes d'archéologie arabe I," 18:69.

83. K. A. C. Creswell, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 2:35.

84. Caroline Williams, "The Qur'anic Inscriptions of the *Tabut* al-Husayn in Cairo," *Islamic Art* 3 (1987): 3–14, has made a strong case for a Fāṭimid dating of this commemorative cenotaph despite the fact that it contains both floriated Kufic and cursive inscriptions. But Williams's argument, which largely rests on the improbability that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn would have ordered a cenotaph with such vividly Shiʿi inscriptions, is not completely foolproof. Indeed, the decline of political Shiʿism in the late twelfth century seems to have brought about a renewed tolerance of its pietistic aspects. One of the prime movers in this ecumenical policy was the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Nāṣir (1180–1225), who was known for his tolerance of Twelver Shiʿism and for his patronage of some Shiʿi shrines, including Bāb al-Ghayba in Samarra. This policy may have sanctioned similar acts of tolerance in Mosul under Badr al-Dīn Lu'lu' (see n. 73) and under al-Ẓāhir Ghāzī of Aleppo, who restored two important Shiʿite shrines in Aleppo, one of which was dedicated to al-Husayn (see n. 66). In her recent book, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo: An Introduction* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 77, Doris Behrens-Abouseif has noted in passing that one of the window grilles in this mosque contains a cursive inscription. Since she does not illustrate this inscription, it is impossible to determine the veracity of her observation. But even if such an inscription does exist, its inconspicuous location would seem to undermine its importance. Could it have been a subtle attempt by a craftsman to introduce a feature that was not part of the intended decorative program?

85. Creswell, *Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, 2:64.

86. Imām Shāfiʿī lived in Cairo for the last fifteen years of his life, where he died in 820. Although a small shrine had always existed at his burial, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn began building a new one with a magnificent wooden cenotaph (also bearing cursive inscriptions) and an associated *madrasa* the very same year that he had declared the end of the Fāṭimids and his own sovereignty.

87. Elisséeff, *Nūr ad-Dīn*, 2:573 ff.

88. Nasser Rabbat, "The Citadel of Cairo, 1176–1341: Reconstructing Architecture from Texts" (Ph.D. diss., Massachusetts Institute of Techonology, 1991), 17 ff.

89. *RCEA*, no. 3380. Even the *Répertoire*, which is not noted for its aesthetic judgment, described this inscription as "d'un trait lache et peu soigné."

90. A quick survey of the photographs in Creswell, *Muslim Architecture in Egypt*, vol. 2, suggests that this began during the reign of al-Malik al-Kāmil (1218–38).

91. See, for example, Marius Canard, "Fāṭimids," *EI2*, 2:859; and W. Madelung, "Ismāʿīliyya," *EI2*, 4:203–5, who provides a detailed presentation of Fāṭimid esoteric theology.

92. Yasser Tabbaa, "The Muqarnas Dome: Its Origin and Meaning," *Muqarnas* 3 (1985): 61–74.

93. The basic outline of these processes has been preserved for calligraphy by the treatise of Ibn

Muqla, and for geometric ornament by Abu'l-Wafā' al-Buzjānī and others.

94. See Jonathan Bloom, "The Introduction of the Muqarnas into Egypt," *Muqarnas* 5 (1988): 27, where the author concludes that "muqarnas squinches belonged to vernacular architecture in the Fāṭimid period, and would have been inappropriate for buildings commissioned by the court."

95. I owe this idea, like many others, to Professor Grabar; see his "The Meaning of History in Cairo," in *The Expanding Metropolis* (Cambridge, Mass: Aga Khan Publications, 1985), 12.