

Bernad O'Keefe

# *Ferdowsi, the Mongols and the History of Iran*

ART, LITERATURE AND CULTURE FROM  
EARLY ISLAM TO QAJAR PERSIA

*Studies in Honour of Charles Melville*

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# 32

## *A tale of two minbars: woodwork in Egypt and Syria on the eve of the Ayyubids*

Bernard O'Kane

The *minbars* of the Jami' al-'Amri at Qus (550/1155–6)<sup>1</sup> and the Jami' Nuri at Hama (559/1163–4)<sup>2</sup> (Plate 20 and Fig. 32.1) were built within a decade of each other. The first is in Egypt, the product of a Fatimid patron, the second in Syria, commissioned by a Zangid patron. Each deserves a closer look, not only for their intrinsic artistic qualities, which are even more impressive than they have been given credit for, but also for what they reveal of trends in ornamentation at the time.

The *minbar* of Qus was a gift of the Fatimid vizier al-Malik al-Salih Tala'i', probably at the time of a major reconstruction by him of the mosque.<sup>3</sup> He had been governor of Qus and several other towns in Upper Egypt before his accession to the vizierate in 549/1154, which he maintained until his death in 559/1161.<sup>4</sup> Tala'i's predecessor, al-'Abbas, had in 1154 engineered the death of the caliph al-Zafir and then put al-Zafir's five-year-old son, al-Fa'iz, upon the throne; the outraged population invited Tala'i' to intervene and the result was that he was able to rule with almost complete autonomy.<sup>5</sup> He was thus certainly able to commandeer the finest artisans for the major products of his reign, his mosques at Qus and Cairo.<sup>6</sup>

Prisse d'Avennes was especially impressed with the Qus *minbar*, devoting no less than one complete plate (Fig. 32.2) and five details to it.<sup>7</sup> He was also able to draw it when it was ostensibly in a more intact state than it is now, showing it with doors, balustrades and a dome. Fortunately, since the rest has survived virtually intact, we can use it as a control for the accuracy of those parts we have lost.

Unfortunately, a close scrutiny quickly reveals Prisse d'Avennes's inconsistency in his rendering of details (Figs 32.2–32.3). In the spandrel of the entrance, for instance, it is clear that he regularised all elements of the pattern, creating absolute symmetry (probably by reversing one side of his drawing) where the original shows variations in size and finish normal in hand carving. Some of the differences may be due to the deteriorating condition of the wood, such as the pearl band that now shows in only a few parts of the design, the rest having been lost, perhaps by repeated applications of paint or varnish. More problematically, Prisse d'Avennes altered the proportion of the various elements, most noticeably towards the lower vertical extensions of the spandrel.

A comparison of his drawing of the side of the *minbar* with the original is even more cautionary. The angle of the stairs is not one that coincides with the basically hexagonal pattern of the lower part, resulting in irregular geometric elements on the stair rail. Prisse d'Avennes has completely fabricated the irregularities at this point (Fig. 32.4). It is hard to think why, since this must have been much more difficult than just copying the original. The conclusion must be that many elements were drawn in great detail on the spot, while mere notes were made on other parts, to be added later in the studio. More disturbing in this comparison is



FIG. 32.1 *Minbar* of the Jami' Nuri at Hama (559/1163–4).

that, above this area, the border that remains of the balustrade seems to be original work,<sup>8</sup> yet it does not correspond at all with the border in the drawing (Fig. 32.4), raising the possibility that the elaborate balustrade of Prisse d'Avennes is a complete fabrication. This is a great pity, since parts of the drawing of the main pattern on the sides of the *minbar* are extremely accurate reproductions of what survives. But sadly in other areas there are so many inconsistencies that we should be extremely cautious in accepting any of his work as clear evidence of what we are now missing.<sup>9</sup>

Another element that betrays Prisse d'Avennes's work as emanating from the studio is the use of identically repeated patterns in the geometrical elements of the sides of the *minbar*. The hexagon and six-pointed star are the basic elements of the design; there are nine complete hexagons on each side and four six-pointed stars on each side. There are two other main geometric figures: one is a cartouche formed by elongating the sides of a hexagon; six of these radiate from each six-pointed star (there are 35 complete examples on each side). The other main figure is an irregular six-pointed star in which two sides are elongated (11 complete examples are on each side). The remaining geometric figures are V-shapes and lozenges which contain a continuous scroll, and form the borders to the main figures. The surprising feature

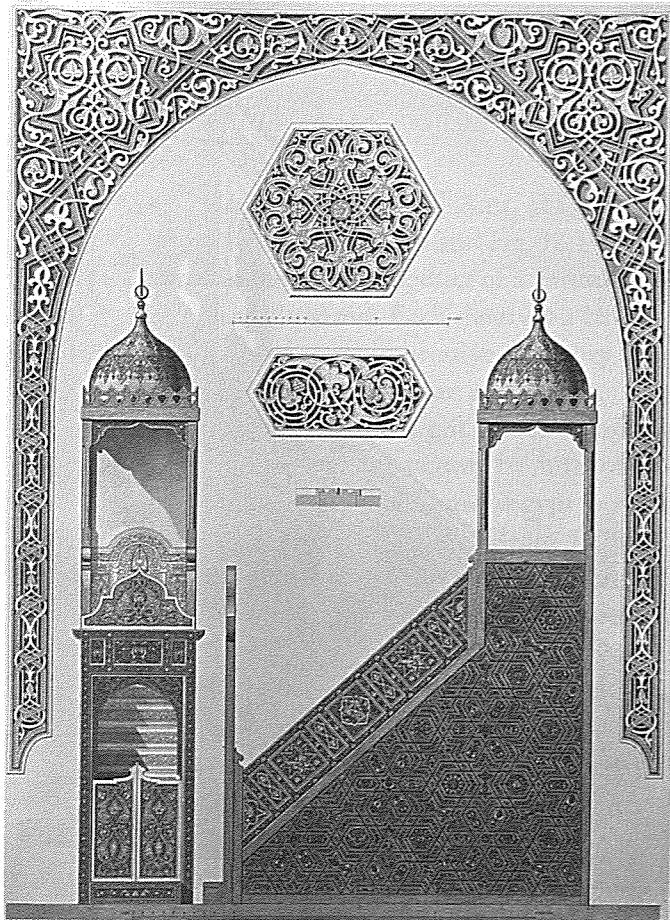


FIG. 32.2 Prisse d'Avennes, *minbar* of the Jami' al-'Amri at Qus (550/1155-6).

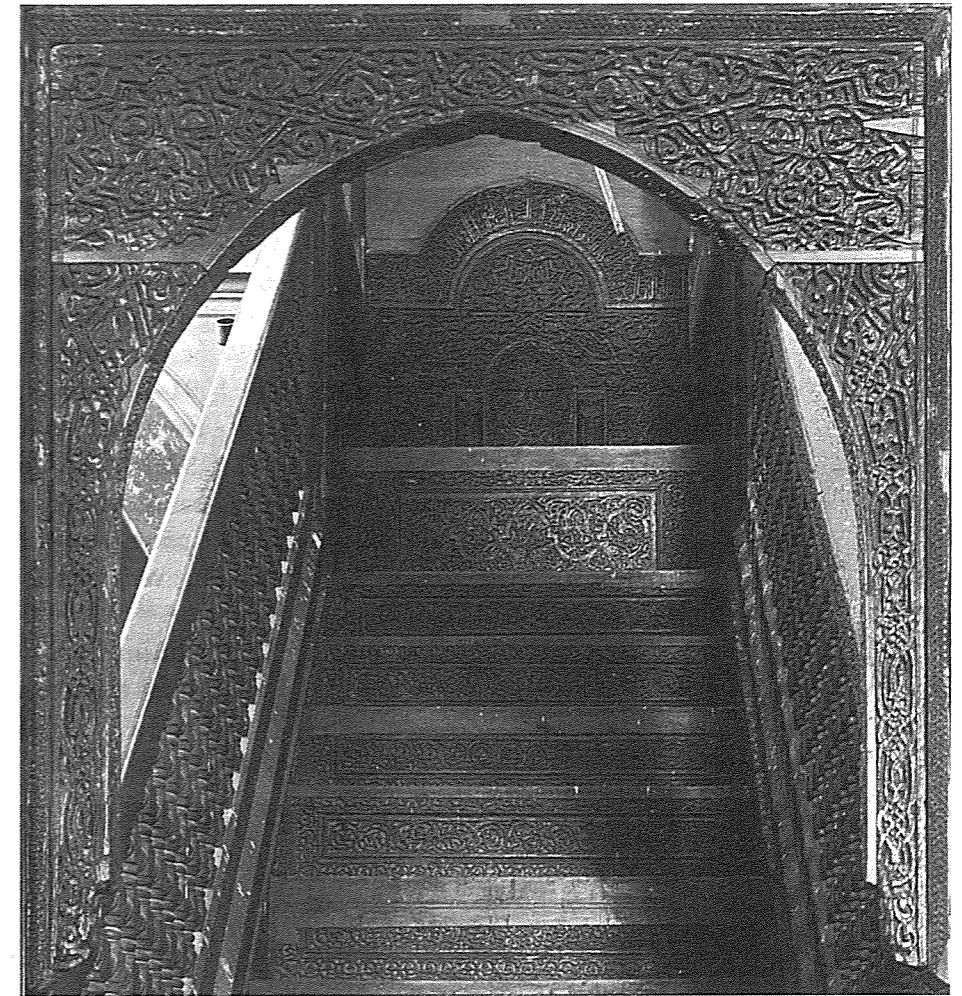
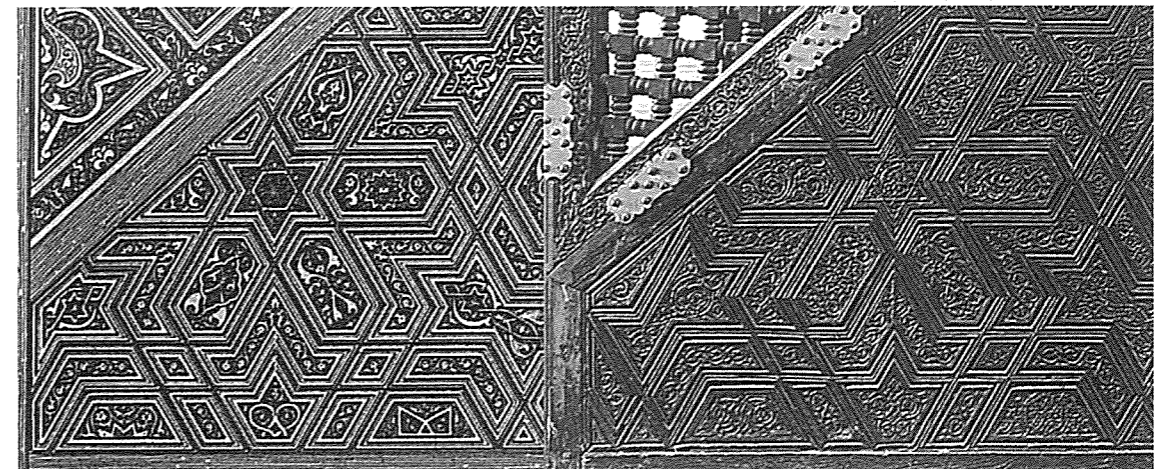


FIG. 32.3 Detail of spandrels of entrance of Qus *minbar*.

FIG. 32.4 Comparison of detail of Fig. 32.2 with actual side of Qus *minbar*.



of the main figures is that no two are identical, almost even from side to side. The carpenter or carpenters seem to be flaunting their innovation and imagination, where even the close variations serve as a call and response rather than as mere repetitions. Even though the basic framework is hexagonal, for instance, we see the incorporation of not just 6- and 12-, but also 5-, 7-, 8-, 9- and 14-pointed stars into the designs (and, for good measure, an 11-pointed star at the back of the seat) (Fig. 32.5). Adding to this variety, the quality of the individual panels can be seen in the second layer of a carved floriated scroll added to the leaves of the arabesques and palmettes (Fig. 32.6). The hexagon was also the starting point for the earliest example to use intersecting geometric forms based on star patterns for the main design, the *minbar* made for the shrine of the head of Husayn at Asqalon (484/1091–2), now at Hebron.<sup>10</sup> There, however, the area under the seat was separated by a border from that under the stairs, and repeated itself in the main triangular part of the design (Fig. 32.7).<sup>11</sup> At Qus the whole area is a seamless composition. In both cases the pattern of the area under the seat is a geometric whole, but surprisingly in both the horizontal extension of the pattern towards the front is cut off irregularly, not just by the differently angled balustrade, but vertically at an asymmetrical point in the pattern (Fig. 32.4).

The Qus *minbar* has been characterised as ‘intrusive’ in the Fatimid oeuvre,<sup>12</sup> so it is worth stressing what the research of Pauty and Garcin also found,<sup>13</sup> that it fits seamlessly into the series of the major works of the time, the portable *mih̄rābs* of Sayyida Nafisa (532/1137–8 or 541/1146–7)

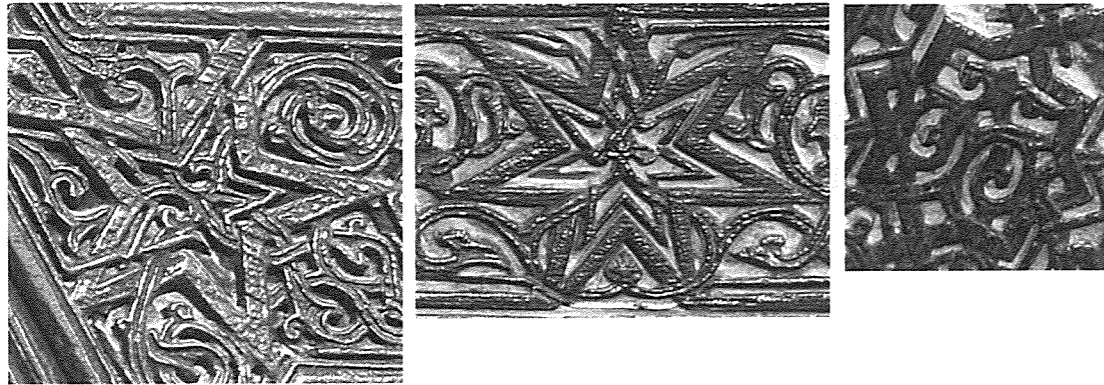


FIG. 32.5 Details of sides and back of Qus *minbar* showing 5-, 7-, 8-, 9-, 11- and 14-pointed stars.

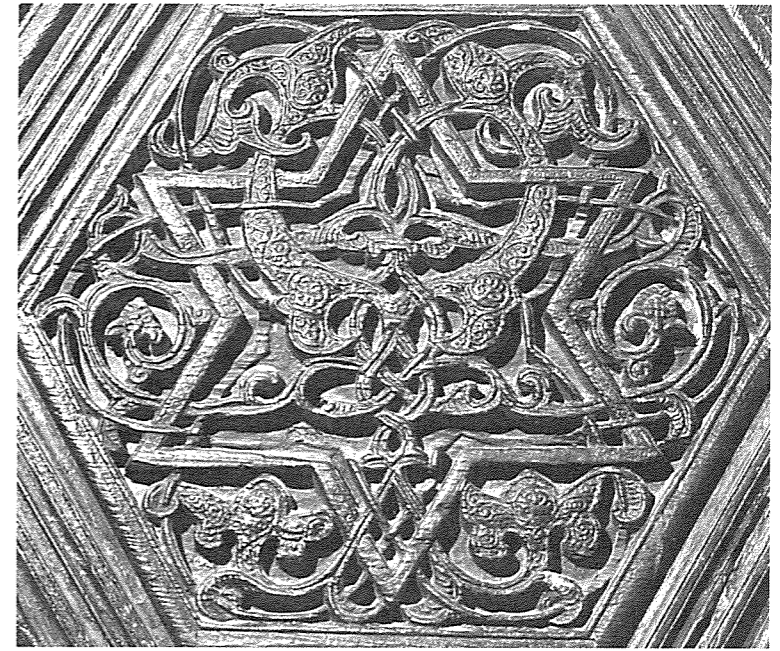
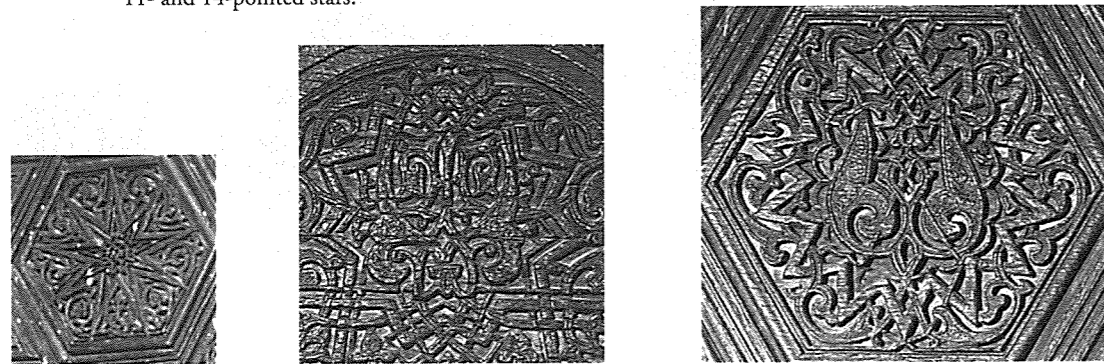


FIG. 32.6 Detail of hexagon on side of Qus *minbar*.

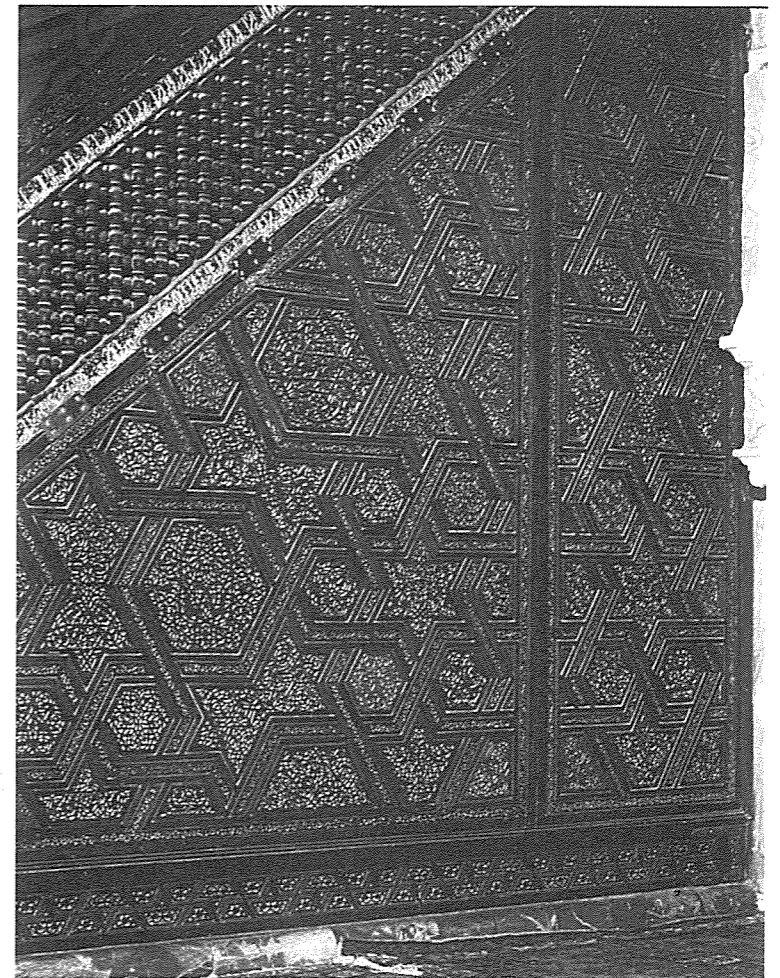


FIG. 32.7 *Minbar* made for the shrine at Asqalon (484/1091–2), now in the Maqam Ibrahim, Hebron.

and Ruqayya (1154–60),<sup>14</sup> the cenotaph of al-Husayn (c.555/1150),<sup>15</sup> and the door of Tala'i's own mosque in Cairo (550/1155–6).<sup>16</sup> For instance, both the Nafisa and Ruqayya *mihṛābs* feature the revival, surprising for the time, of the cornucopia amidst their scrollwork; it occurs too at Qus (Fig. 32.9).<sup>17</sup> A more common motif is the use of cinquefoil palmette, with a grape bunch at its centre, found on all five.

The pattern at the base of the seat at Qus of six-pointed stars surrounded by irregular hexagons is identical to that of the lower niche of the Ruqayya *mihṛāb*.<sup>18</sup> Another link with the Ruqayya *mihṛāb* is a pattern on the top riser of a reciprocal pearl band of semicircles joined by a stepped motif. It is found on one of the panels at the back of the Ruqayya *mihṛāb*, and even earlier, on the screen from the Musalla al-Idayn at Damascus.<sup>19</sup> Despite the location of the Qus *minbar* in what is now a provincial backwater, it is clearly a metropolitan product, as one would expect of its patron, the most powerful individual in Egypt at the time.

The *minbar* of Hama has been overshadowed by that ordered five years later by Nur al-Din for the Aqsa mosque, understandably given the former's poorer state of preservation when they were initially studied. Its base has been lost, apart from the inscription surrounding the

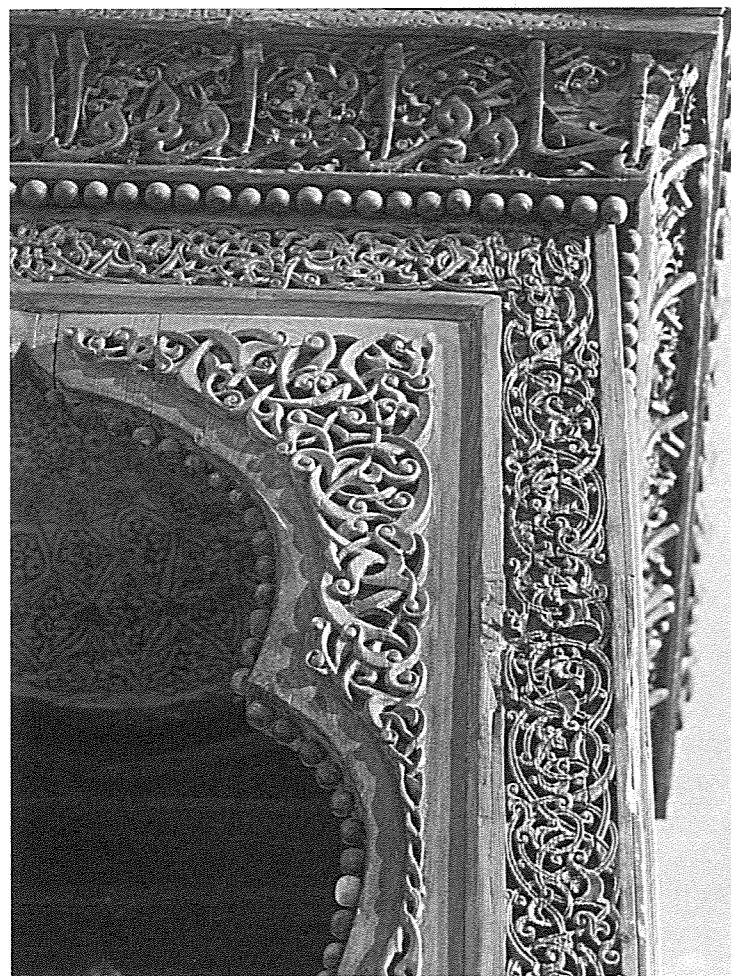


FIG. 32.8 *left* Detail of top of the *minbar* of the Jami' Nuri at Hama (559/1163–4).

FIG. 32.9 *below* Detail of panel with cornucopia on side of Qus *minbar*.



balustrade on one side, and one can only guess what the pattern there, including the area beneath the seat, would have been. But what remains still displays outstanding craftsmanship.

Herzfeld has already commented eloquently on two categories of arabesque found there, one in which the shallow-cut arabesques are separated by a geometric border, resembling Samarra type C patterns; another in which much deeper-cut stems cross over and under the border 'which is no longer a boundary but a melody running through a fugue'.<sup>20</sup> However, the artist was also aware of this distinction, placing the deep-cut version conspicuously on the two sides below the seat in a horizontal panel broader than the others. The shallower-cut panels are found on the top step, near the bottom of the backrest and, shallowest of all, in the most inconspicuous place, the inner spandrels of the arches supporting the dome. Pride of place, on the outer spandrels of all three arches, is yet a third kind of arabesque, one composed of deeply cut leafy stems crossing under and over one another, where the leaves often end in a curlicue leading to a suggestion of a sphere, an almost three-dimensional reduction of the arabesque to its essential element (Fig. 32.8). The motif is sometimes known conventionally as a '*rūmī*' arabesque owing to its popularity in Anatolia, where Seljuq Qur'an stands display some of its finest examples,<sup>21</sup> but it was equally prominent in the Jazira in the twelfth–thirteenth centuries, appearing literally in three dimensions in metalwork on a geomantic tablet (perhaps Damascus, 639/1241–2),<sup>22</sup> on a bronze door knocker from early thirteenth-century Iraq,<sup>23</sup> and on a twelfth-century marble carving.<sup>24</sup> Spherical elements are unusually prominent on the decoration of this *minbar*, appearing on the soffits of the arches, just below the cornice of the inscriptions above the arches, in the *mashrabiyya* work on the front and sides of the seat, and finally, on the lobes of the cinquefoil palmettes that make up the crenellations.

The cursive inscription that runs on three sides below the crenellations (Fig. 32.9) is Qur'an 25:61 and part of 62, reading: 'Blessed is He who made constellations in the skies and placed therein a lamp and a moon giving light; and it is He who made the night and the day.'

Sylvia Auld has argued with respect to the inscriptions chosen for Nur al-Din's Aqsa mosque that the light symbolism of the motifs (including its Qur'anic inscriptions, one of which is the Surat al-Nur) was deliberate,<sup>25</sup> and this is surely the case here, especially with its resonances with the name Nur al-Din, literally the Light of Religion. The cursive script of the *shahāda* found at the back of the chair is extremely elegant, but it is not, as has been suggested,<sup>26</sup> characterised by interconnection – the *rā'* and *sin* of *rasūl* are in fact quite separate (Fig. 32.10).

One feature of the *minbar* that has not been mentioned before is the painting on the interior of the dome (Plate 21). It is certainly not as accomplished as the woodwork, and also shows many signs of having been substantially repaired. Could it be original? The designs consist of a thin foliated scroll in black, almost like a Chinese waterweed, within irregular pentagons and, towards the bottom, irregular six-pointed leaves. Small circles are added in the lower areas. Connecting them in red is a loose arrangement of trefoils, circles and abstract leaves. I have not found any exact analogues in the same medium, but similar thin foliated scrolls can be found in the background of the ceramics produced in Syria around the same period.<sup>27</sup> Despite the extensive restoration, it seems likely that the design at least is original.

Although, as has been remarked,<sup>28</sup> it is probable that a star-based pattern occupied the now missing lower part of the *minbar*, the only geometric pattern that survives (apart from the simple ones of the *mashrabiyya*) is one based on hexagons on the backrest, interrupted by two

cartouches with the *shahāda*. It is therefore not the case that 'interlaced geometric patterns [...] are prominently displayed' on it.<sup>29</sup> Even if the missing lower section of the Hama *minbar* had a geometric design, its variety and prominent use of vegetal arabesques on its upper parts suggest that these were equally important.

What do these *minbars* and the associated pieces mentioned above tell us of the trends in ornamentation at the time? The idea of a dichotomy in the use of geometric ornamentation in the Islamic world in the eleventh–twelfth centuries was first propounded by Gülru Necipoğlu, who suggested that it was to be associated with the legitimacy of the Seljuq successor states that revived the 'Abbasid *khutba*, and that 'geometric patterns [...] were not typical of the predominantly vegetal Fatimid decorative vocabulary'.<sup>30</sup> The notion was taken further by Yasser Tabbaa, who claimed that the Qus *minbar* was 'intrusive' in the Fatimid examples,<sup>31</sup> and that whereas the '*giriḥ* mode was largely absent from Cairene imperial monuments, it had decisively made its way into subimperial monuments or those outside the capital'.<sup>32</sup> However, this is a distortion of imperial patronage under the Fatimids, since, from the time of Badr al-Jamali onwards, the power of the vizier was just as important, and sometimes more so, than that of the nominal rulers, the Fatimid imams. The *minbars* at Asqalon and Qus, made by viziers at

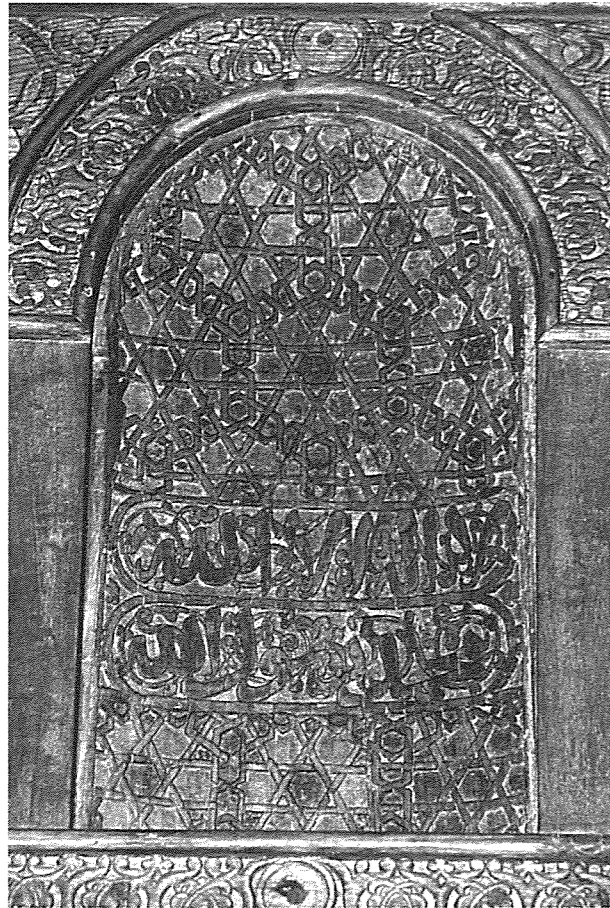


FIG. 32.10 Detail of inscription on backrest of Hama *minbar*.

the height of their power, are fully representative of the Fatimid state, as much as the *mihṛābs* of Sayyida Nafisa and Sayyida Ruqayya in the capital, and the doors of al-Salih Tala'i's mosque in Cairo, all of which prominently display geometric patterns.

From the examples discussed above we have seen that, far from it being intrusive in their oeuvre, the Fatimids were leaders in the development and use of geometric ornamentation, embracing it with enthusiasm before any other dynasty. Until any new evidence for the theory of ideological explanations for the use of geometry in Islamic art in this period comes along, it must remain, on the basis of our present knowledge, unsubstantiated.<sup>33</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Max van Berchem, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum, Pt. 1* (Cairo, 1894–1903), pp.716–18; Edmond Pauty, 'Le minbar de Qoûs', in *Mélanges Maspéro, III: Orient islamique*, Mémoires de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 68 (Cairo, 1940), pp.41–8.
- 2 Ernst Herzfeld, 'Damascus: studies in architecture, II', *Ars Islamica* 9 (1942), pp.43–5, Figs 73–4; Jean Sauvaget, 'Notes sur quelques monuments musulmans de Syrie: à propos d'une étude récente', *Syria* 24 (1944–5), pp.211–31; Nikita Elisséeff, 'La titulature de Nur al-Din d'après ses inscriptions', *Bulletin des Études Orientales* 14 (1952), pp.160–1 (text of the inscriptions); Yasser Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival* (Seattle, 2001), pp.91, 93; Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (Edinburgh, 1999), Pls 3.32–4.
- 3 Jean-Claude Garcin, 'Remarques sur un plan topographique de la grande mosquée de Qûs', *Annales Islamologiques* 9 (1970), pp.97–108.
- 4 For the historical background see Jean-Claude Garcin, *Un centre musulman de l'haute Égypte médiévale: Qus* (Cairo, 1976), pp.87–8; idem, 'Remarques'; Thierry Bianquis, 'Tala'i b. Ruzzik', *EF*.
- 5 One of the few checks on his power was the decision (at whose behest is unknown) to house the head of Husayn b. 'Ali, which Tala'i had moved from the shrine at Asqalon with the intention of housing it in his mosque outside Bab Zuwayla, to a purpose-built shrine adjacent to the Fatimid Palace.
- 6 For the Cairo mosque see K.A.C. Creswell, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt, 1: Ikhsidids and Fatimids, AD 939–1171* (Oxford, 1952), pp.275–88.
- 7 Prisse d'Avennes, *L'art arabe d'après les monuments du Kaire depuis le VII<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup>* (Paris, 1807–79), vol.2, Pls LXXVII–LXXXII. Prisse d'Avennes's general view of the *minbar* (my Fig.32.3) is reproduced, without comment, also in Jonathan Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious: Islamic Art and Architecture in Fatimid North Africa and Egypt* (New Haven, CT, 2007), p.166, Fig.134 and idem, 'Woodwork in Syria, Palestine and Egypt during the 12th and 13th centuries', in Robert Hillenbrand and Sylvia Auld (eds), *Ayyubid Jerusalem: The Holy City in Context 1187–1250* (London, 2009), p.139, Pl.7.14.
- 8 It is only preserved on this one, right or southern (taking the *qibla* as east), side, although, as Pauty, 'Le minbar de Qoûs', Pl.II shows, it survived earlier on the other side.
- 9 The captions to some of the plates of Prisse d'Avennes of the *minbar* provide further confirmation of this. Pl.LXXVIII reads 'Ornementation du Minbar. Assemblage arbitraire'. Pl.LXXX reads 'Porte du Minbar. Arrangement fictif'. Pl.LXXXI reads 'Détails du Minbar. Assemblage arbitraire'.
- 10 L.H. Vincent, *Hébron, le Haram el-Khalil: sépulture des patriarches* (Paris, 1923), pp.219–50, Pls XXV–XXVIII; Max van Berchem, 'La chaire de la Mosquée d'Hébron et le martyrium de la tête de Husayn à Ascalon', in G. Weil (ed.), *Festschrift E. Sachau* (Berlin, 1915), pp.298–310.
- 11 Previous illustrations of this have shown only the left side – understandably, since a pillar on the right side obscures the front of the *mihṛāb*. But the rear of the left side is recessed within a niche, something that only becomes clear when the complete pattern is seen from the right (Fig.32.8). Thus the 'narrow vertical panel beneath the platform' (Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, p.135) is not as narrow as it seems.
- 12 Tabbaa, *The Transformation*, pp.81, 101.
- 13 Pauty, 'Le minbar de Qoûs'; Garcin, 'Remarques', p.105.
- 14 Edmond Pauty, *Catalogue général du musée arabe du Caire: les bois sculptés jusqu'à l'époque ayyubide* (Cairo, 1931), Pls 75–6, 80–88; Bernard O'Kane (ed.), *Treasures of the Islamic Museums in Cairo* (Cairo, 2006), pp.57–9, 88–9.
- 15 This is not securely dated; see C. Williams, 'The Quranic inscriptions on the *tabut* of al-Husayn', *Islamic Art* 2 (1987), pp.3–13, but the most plausible argument is that it was ordered by a Fatimid patron shortly after the shrine for Husayn was built, probably also by Tala'i'. The only argument for dating it to the Ayyubid period was its use of cursive as well as Kufic script. One supporting piece of evidence for a pre-Ayyubid date that seems to have been forgotten in this debate is a cupboard from the Tala'i mosque in Cairo that has been moved to the Museum of Islamic Art. The piece is clearly contemporary with the mosque, and displays panels inscribed with good wishes in both cursive and Kufic; Pauty, *Les bois sculptés*, Pl.95.
- 16 Pauty, *Les bois sculptés*, Pls 89–90.
- 17 I have not found any examples on Syrian woodwork so far, but the carved stone *mihṛāb* of the *māristān* of Nu' al-Din at Damascus (549/1154–5) does display an example: Herzfeld, 'Damascus: studies in architecture, II', Fig.55.
- 18 As Pauty has already pointed out: 'Le minbar de Qoûs', p.47. The pattern is interesting in that the irregular hexagons can be read as belonging to the circle of the six-pointed star either above or below them.

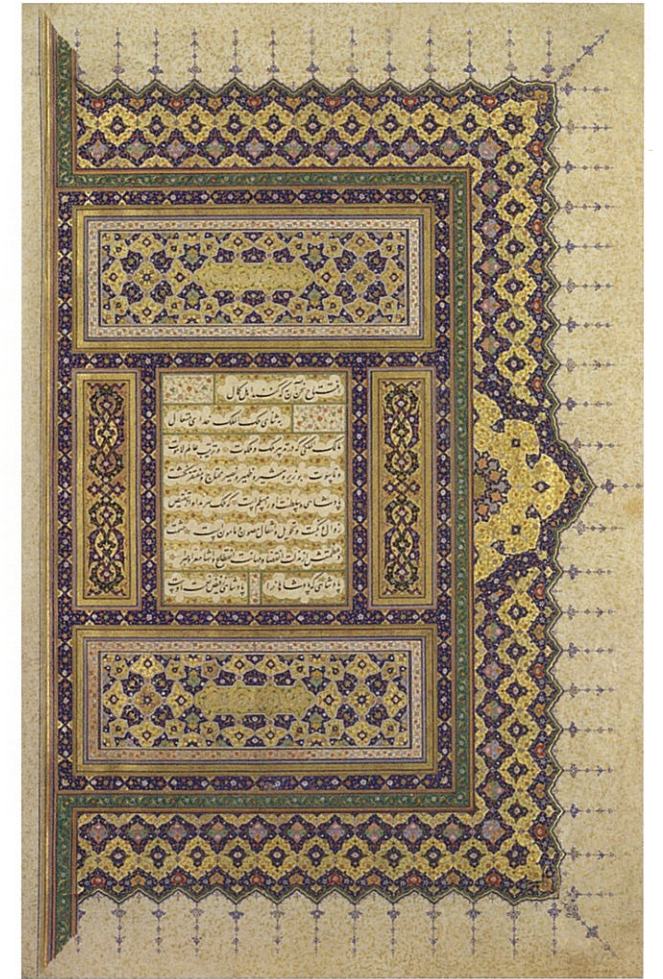
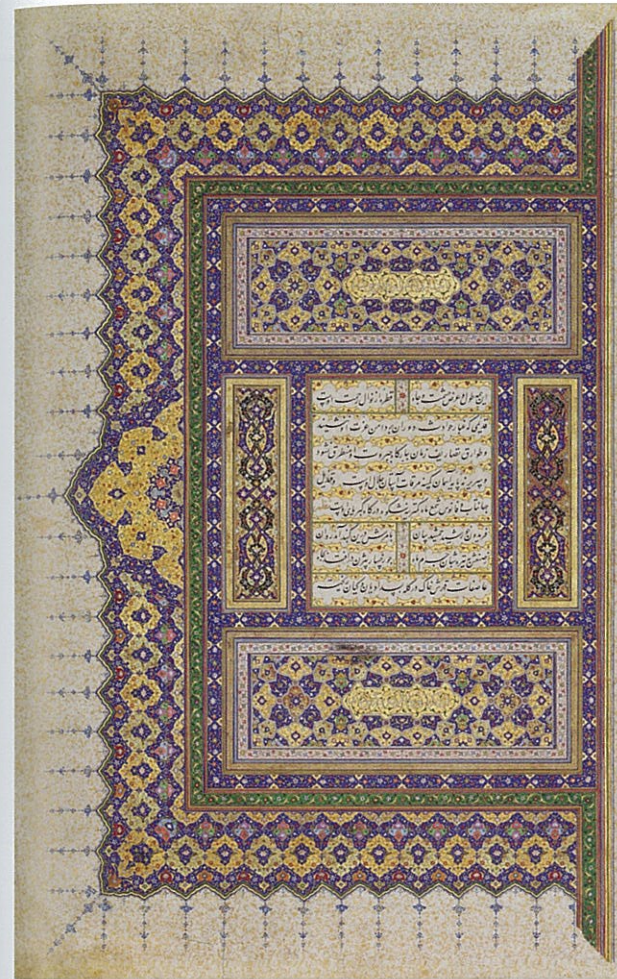
- 19 Now in the National Museum at Damascus: M. Abūl-Faraj al-'Ush, *Musée National de Damas: Département des Antiquités Arabes Islamiques* (Damascus, 1976), p. 219 (I have retained the printed pagination which begins at 153). However, it would be hasty to deduce on this evidence that 'in this period woodworkers or woodwork moved relatively easily between Damascus and Cairo' (Bloom, 'Woodwork in Syria', p. 141); the statement may well be true, but the other elements of the woodwork of the Musalla al-'Idayn (ibid., Fig. 123), show motifs close to the earlier Samarra style C-inspired Fatimid woodwork, as one would expect from the date of the piece (497/1103–4). A variation of the pattern can also be found on the stone carving of the Nur al-Din's Madrasa al-Shu'aybiyya at Aleppo (535/1150–1): Ernst Herzfeld, *Inscriptions et Monuments d'Alep, Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionarum Arabicarum. Pr. 2, Syrie du Nord I-II* (Cairo, 1955–6), p. 222, Fig. 73.
- 20 Herzfeld, 'Damascus: studies in architecture, II', p. 44, Fig. 74.
- 21 David Roxburgh (ed.), *Turks: A Journey of a Thousand Years, 600–1600* (London, 2005), no 89; Oktay Aslanapa, *Turkish Art and Architecture* (London, 1971), Fig. 210.
- 22 Between the tablet itself and the ring from which it was suspended: Roxburgh, *Turks*, no 57; for another example, now detached, see *L'Orient de Saladin: l'art des Ayyoubides* (Paris, 2002), p. 209, no 221.
- 23 Kjeld von Folsach, Torben Lundbæk and Peder Mortensen (eds), *Sultan, Shah, and Great Mughal: The History and Culture of the Islamic World* (Copenhagen, 1996), Fig. 32.
- 24 *L'Orient de Saladin*, p. 45, no 32.
- 25 Sylvia Auld, 'The minbar of al-Aqsa: form and function', in Robert Hillenbrand (ed.), *Image and Meaning in Islamic Art* (London, 2005), pp. 42–60, at pp. 58–9.
- 26 Tabbaa, *Transformation*, p. 132 and Fig. 15.
- 27 *L'Orient de Saladin*, p. 132, bottom left; p. 160, cat. no 145.
- 28 Tabbaa, *Transformation*, p. 91, who considers it 'certain'.
- 29 Gülrü Necipoğlu, *The Topkapi Scroll – Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (Los Angeles, 1996), p. 100.
- 30 Ibid., p. 100.
- 31 Tabbaa, *Transformation*, p. 81.
- 32 Ibid., p. 82.
- 33 Other studies critical of this theory include Terry Allen, 'Islamic art and argument from academic geometry', <http://www.sonic.net/~tallen/palmtree/academicgeometry.htm#dOe1127>; and Bloom, 'Woodwork'.

## The Arts of the Book



20 *Minbar* of the Jami' al-'Amri at Qus (550/1155–6).

21 Detail of painting on dome of Hama *minbar*.



22–23 Double-page illuminated frontispiece (*sarlawh*), fols. 2v and 3r, *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp, Tabriz, 1524–35.