

Medium and Message in the Monumental Epigraphy of Medieval Cairo

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ABSTRACT

We have in Cairo an unbroken sequence of inscriptions on major and minor religious monuments from the 9th century onwards. The size of this corpus enables us to discuss a wide variety of topics, and in particular the ways in which religious monuments advertised their presence through the medium of writing, an art form that has been regarded as the most intrinsically Islamic of them all. Areas that could be analyzed include the visual aesthetics of texts, their relative lengths, the sizes of the scripts used, issues of legibility or the lack of it, and the make-up and design of the inscriptions from their textual contents to the non-literary uses that they served.

Leaving behind a building for fellow Muslims after one’s death was one of the surest ways to earn spiritual benefit, and the inscriptions on them announced the munificence of the patron, proclaiming his name and titles, and ensuring that the endowments he set up for the building would be honored. Attention could be drawn to them in various ways, through their size, through repetition, and through the care taken with their calligraphy and with intrinsic or surrounding decorative details. However, a large number of inscriptions high up on buildings, even if brightly colored, but always have been difficult if not impossible to read. Most of these are of God’s word, the Quran, and had another purpose, that of sanctifying the building on which they were placed. Most foundation inscriptions were meant to be read and were accordingly placed in locations which made this easier.

Inscriptions were an essential component of religious monuments in Medieval Cairo. They could convey information in many ways, directly by their content, indirectly as indicators of prestige and even as assurances that God’s word was being proclaimed from on high.

Keywords: epigraphy, inscription, Cairo, Egypt, Islamic

1 INTRODUCTION

We have in Cairo an unbroken sequence of inscriptions on major monuments from the 9th century onwards. Given the hundreds of monuments and thousands of inscriptions that have survived,¹ this permits us to analyze them in a variety of ways, such as the visual aesthetics of texts, their relative lengths, the sizes of the scripts used, issues of legibility or the lack of it, and the exploration of the make-up and design of the inscriptions from their textual contents to the non-literary uses that they served.

¹ The most complete publication of these is still van Berchem, 1894-1903. I was the director of a project to record Cairo’s monumental inscriptions to 1800 on a database, whose publication is imminent, and which has been used widely in the research for this paper: O’Kane, in press.

A striking example of the power and importance of the written word in this context is demonstrated by that the inscription on the façade of the mausoleum fronting the *khānaqāh* complex of Baybars al-Jāshinkīr (1309) (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Mausoleum of Baybars al-Jāshinkīr (1309), detail of foundation inscription

At the right hand corner most of the writing in the initial cartouche has been scratched out, although the part that remains begins with the name of the founder of the institution, Rukn al-Dīn Baybars. Just before the *khānaqāh* was erected, Baybars had usurped the throne from the previous reigning sultan, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. The historian Maqrīzī, so often the key to our understanding of monuments in Cairo, informs us that when Baybars abdicated, the sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, having returned to power in 1310, had him executed, closed his *khānaqāh* and effaced the name of Baybars from the inscription band on the façade above the windows.² As shown by van Berchem,³ since his name is actually still on the façade, the most likely interpretation is that his royal titles of *al-malik al-muẓaffar* were effaced, leaving the legal requirement of Baybars' ownership of the building intact, but obliterating his pretensions to royalty.

One major problem today in assessing the impact that inscriptions had on the viewer is the extent to which their legibility would originally have been much greater. In addition to the degradation caused by natural abrasion, wind erosion, and layers of dust, we should remember that the originals would have been enhanced by the application of color. Painted inscriptions on flat wooden surfaces have this as an essential ingredient, but it is not usually realized that probably almost all stone and stucco inscriptions were also painted. The recent restoration of the Mamluk complex of Umm al-Sultan Sha‘ban⁴ shows this clearly. Remains of gold painted letters on a green background were found on the large inscription band that goes around the courtyard. The same color scheme was found on the inscription on the base of the mausoleum domes (Fig. 2).

² al-Maqrīzī, 1888-9.

³ Van Berchem, 1894-1903, 164-7.

⁴ Undertaken by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture with the support of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities: see Bakhom 2009.



Figure 2 : Complex of Umm al-Sultan Sha‘bān (1368-9), detail of inscription at base of northern mausoleum dome.

The latter inscription was accessed only by placing scaffolding from floor to ceiling. It is unlikely that this was done at any other time after the mausoleum’s foundation, therefore ruling out possible later interventions. Dina Bakhoum, who has published on the recent restoration works there, also mentions the uncovering of many varied original colors on the stone carvings of the portal of the complex, which had been previously commented on by the Comité.⁵

The earliest monumental inscriptions that survive in Cairo, those on the Nilometer, are instructive on several levels (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: The Nilometer (861), detail of inscription above arch.

Here, unusually, we have detailed information from historians on the method used to select the content of the inscriptions. The calligrapher, AḥmadibnMuḥammad al-Ḥāsib, consulted among others Yazīdibn ‘Abd Allah (the ‘Abbasid governor of Egypt) and SulaymānibnWahb (the financial intendant of

⁵ Bakhoum, 2009.

Egypt), but they couldn't agree on what was appropriate.⁶ Sulaymān ibn Wahb wrote to the caliph al-Mutawakkil, who specified that his name along with appropriate verses from the Quran should be used. Aḥmad al-Ḥāsib then mentions the verses he used on the four sides of the pit at the level of the 17th cubit which, as he says, would be at the level of the water at the average height of the flood. He specifically underlined his concern for legibility, noting that he made the background of lapis lazuli, “so that they could be read from a distance” – a rare historical confirmation of the use of color on stone. On the cornice that surrounds the pit at the top he mentions the Quranic verses and the foundation inscription in the name of al-Mutawakkil; but what remains there now are all Quranic verses. The most likely explanation for the omission, as deduced by earlier scholars, is that Ibn Ṭūlūn, who is known to have carried out repairs to the monument in 259/872-3, substituted the Quranic verses that are now to be seen on the west and south sides of the cornice; their style is identical to the original, but is executed with little less crispness. So here again we have the a ruler despoiling his predecessor's inscription, although in this case he removed altogether the name of the caliph against whose suzerainty he had rebelled. Finally, the content of the Quranic verses should be noted, for they are among the earliest whose meaning referenced the function of the monument; they all pertain to the magnanimity of God who sent down water that causes food and greenery to flourish on the earth.⁷

Ibn Ṭūlūn's own mosque is the only part of his urban foundation of al-Qaṭā'i' that still stands. According to legend, the mosque had all of the Quran inscribed on the wooden friezes that run throughout the mosque under the ceiling. Much of this has disappeared, but the space available can be divided by the length of the remaining part, which shows that there would have been room for only a third of the Quran. Nevertheless, this would still have been a striking display of the word of God; the remaining text displays the same simplicity as that of the Nilometer inscriptions, but now lacks the paint that would have made it more conspicuous. With Quranic inscriptions one also needs to remember that the common practice of memorization of the text would have made identification of it a much simpler task than with non-Quranic inscriptions.

The monumental size of its Quranic inscriptions is in stark contrast with its original foundation inscriptions. Parts of three identical copies of the foundation inscriptions that survived earlier were published in the *Description de l’Egypte*; now half of one of the lone surviving panels, found in repairs in the 19th century, has been erected on a pier in the main prayer hall (Fig. 4).



⁶ The main account is translated in Creswell 1932-40, 2:297-8.

⁷ They are noted in van Berchem, 1894-1903, 19-20.

Figure 4 : Mosque of IbnTulūn (265/878-9), foundation inscription.

Their original location is not known, but they would have needed to be at a low level to be legible. Like the mosques of Samarra on which IbnTūlūn's is based, it has numerous undifferentiated entrances, and there was as yet no tradition in the Islamic world of associating foundation inscriptions with doors, so perhaps they were, as now, erected on piers.

The letters and background of the script on the Nilometer and mosque of IbnTūlūn were unadorned. A major development in script came in the next century with the introduction of floriated Kufic. This is seen first on a mid-ninth century funerary stele,⁸ although whether it might have appeared first on earlier no longer extant architectural examples cannot be known.

The arrival of the Fatimids signals major changes in the use of monumental inscriptions. Although the mosque of Muḥammadibn al-Khayrūn at Qayrawān (252/866-7) is the earliest known Islamic monument to display a foundation inscription on the exterior of the building, this quickly became standard on Cairene examples. The mosque of al-Azhar no longer has its original portal, but the mosque of al-Ḥākim had inscriptions on its portal and, for the first time, its minarets. All are in the new floriated style. Those on the minarets are particularly interesting in their content and locations. The minarets are of different shapes, both from each other, and in having tiers that change from square to circular in the case of the northern one, and square to octagonal in the case of the southern. The lowest inscriptions visible on the northern minaret were in two circular medallions containing *Allah*. Further up on the northern minaret were two other circular medallions on the West and North faces. Only that on the north side is legible; it contained Quran 5:58 arranged anti-clockwise on its perimeter, and the phrase: "from the darkness into the light," which occurs in several Quranic verses, in two horizontal lines within the circle.

Both the content and design of these inscriptions are worth examining in more detail. As Irene Bierman has remarked, the design of the medallion resembles that of the radically new coinage, itself possibly echoing Isma'ili doctrine, that had been introduced by al-Ḥākim's father al-'Azīz, and had been continued by al-Ḥākim.⁹ Whereas the outer Quranic inscription mentions pan-Islamic concerns of prayer appropriate for a mosque, the inner displays a concern with light that is an abiding subject of Isma'ili *'wīl*, as evidenced, for instance, by the epithets related to light for their major mosques: al-Azhar (the resplendent), al-Anwar (the shining; the original name for the mosque of al-Ḥākim) and al-Aqmar (the moonlit).

These are the first inscriptions surviving in Egypt to include the name and titles of the founder, which are situated on large friezes both on the northern and western minaret. That on the northern is 68cm tall, and located around 10m from the ground. It is canted slightly outwards, and it has been suggested that this was to make it more legible,¹⁰ but it is not clear that designers were ever that viewer friendly: since the width of the inscription panel's upper dimension on each side is just over 0.02% greater than the lower, any resulting increase in legibility much have been similarly miniscule. On the western minaret there were two foundation inscription friezes; a smaller one 40 cm in height, located 8.1m from the ground, and another, almost twice as tall (c. 75cm), 12.45m above the ground. It is indeed likely that these were designed to be read and to advertise the founder's munificence, a factor that may well have hastened the decision, extraordinary as it was, to hide the minarets behind bastions in Šafar 401/September-October 1010. The only rational explanation for this action is that the minarets, being more than one, and built in tiers of different shapes, were specifically designed to remind viewers of those of the Hijaz, and when al-Ḥākim's relations with the rulers Mecca soured, he wished to cover up this association.¹¹

⁸ On a tombstone dated 243/859, illustrated in O'Kane, 2006, Fig. 36.

⁹ Bierman, 1998, 82.

¹⁰ Bierman, 1998, 84-5.

¹¹ The argument was first put forward by Jonathan Bloom, although renounced by him when he later denied that the towers were minarets to begin with: O'Kane, 1992, 108.

The inscription on the western bastion (the only one that remains) is smaller, only 43cm high, than the largest on the minarets, but since it is solely Quranic and reasonably close to the ground it still could probably have been read without great difficulty. A word of caution should be mentioned here: the interpretative weight that some previous authors brought to bear here upon the choice of Quranic verses was based on a mistaken attribution.¹²

At a later Fatimid neighborhood mosque, that of al-Aqmar (519/1125-6) we have the most comprehensive scheme of inscriptions on the façade to date. The largest runs all the way along the façade, just below the top, another, slightly smaller, is just above mid-height. Surprisingly, both are virtually identical, consisting of foundation inscriptions in the name of the Fatimid caliph al-Musta‘lī and his vazir al-Ma‘mūn, although variety is provided by the style, with the upper being floriated, and the lower plain with a foliate scroll behind. Here too care was taken with the placing of the name of the caliph: on the top line it was at the beginning of the panel on the top right of the *pīshṭāq*;¹³ on the lower band it is right in the middle, immediately above the entrance doorway. Directly above the caliph’s name is the roundel mentioned above (Fig. 5).

The next major change in Cairo’s epigraphy is the introduction of cursive script (*naskh*). The cenotaph from the shrine of al-Ḥusayn, now in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, was formerly considered, solely on account of the presence of *naskh*, an Ayyubid work, but Caroline Williams has convincingly demonstrated that a Fatimid date is much more likely.¹⁴ It has been argued that the rejection of *naskh* of the Fatimids was an ideological reaction to its promotion as a sign of Sunnism by the Zangids,¹⁵ but these examples, as well as other in Fatimid decorative arts, show that this was not the case.

A more even distribution of *naskh* and Kufic is seen on the slightly later cenotaph that Salāḥ al-Dīn provided (in 574/1187-9) for the tomb of Imām al-Shāfi‘ī. The rectangular base contains Kufic only, the pyramidal top *naskh* only. Both the upper and the lower parts have Quranic verses followed by the full name and genealogy of the deceased, al-Shāfi‘ī, but significantly, this is followed in the upper part by this sentence: “(It is) the workmanship of ‘Ubayd the carpenter known as IbnMa‘ālī. He made it in the months of the year 574/1178-9, may God have mercy upon him and upon whoever prays for mercy for him and upon all those who have worked with him of carpenters and designers, and all believers.” This is one of the earliest examples of a craftsman’s signature, commonplace on many other parts of the Islamic world, but a rarity in Cairo. The craftsman came from an Aleppan family, where it was more common to find craftsmen’s signatures. In the context of the inscription as a whole, more attention is called to the craftsman’s achievements by the lengthy phrase after his name calling for blessings upon him and his co-workers, and it is therefore no surprise to find that he used the more legible *naskh* for his name.

Naskh quickly replaced Kufic as the default script for monumental inscriptions, with the latter usually reserved for easily readable religious phrases. The most noticeable advance took place almost exactly a hundred years later, on the façade of the complex of Qalawūn (683/1284-5). Two aspects, both of which contributed to greater legibility, are prominent: size and location. Firstly, it is at the height of roughly one third that of the façade, making it much closer to eye-level. Secondly, it is just over one metre high, and runs the whole length of the façade. While it is true that the foundation inscription of al-Aqmar also ran across the whole façade, that was a length of c. 20m; Qalawūn’s façade is c. 72m. The content is also remarkable, for, apart from the *basmala* at the beginning, it consists almost entirely of Qalawūn’s titles, advertising his prowess in ringing phrases such as “the king of the two continents and the two seas...king of kings of the Arabs and non-Arabs...possessor of the Egyptian lands, the Syrian territories, the Euphratiandistricts and the Hijazi provinces...treasure of the poor and dispossessed...” One slight miscalculation may however be noticed: the name of Qalawūn is to be found

¹² For example in Bierman, 1998, 94-5, caused by applying the numbering system from the Flügel Quran to the standard Egyptian edition now in use.

¹³ It is now missing but from what follows its placement is certain.

¹⁴ Williams, 1987.

¹⁵ Tabbaa, 2001.

not on the carved marble over the main entrance, as one might expect, but on the limestone of the bay of the mausoleum before it.

The letters themselves of Qalawūn's foundation inscription are simply carved with a flat upper surface, as is the case with most Mamluk stone inscriptions. They were originally painted in gold which would have added to both their legibility and opulence, but occasionally we come across some inscriptions where much greater care was taken in the design and execution of the carving. The ensemble of inscriptions on the complex of Aslām al-Silāhdār (745-6/1344-5) is worth examining in this respect. There are two portals, the lowest inscription of each having an inscription on which particular care was taken with the carving. That on the southern portal is Quranic; it has a spiral foliate scroll behind the letters (Fig. 5).



Figure 5 : Inscriptions from portals of Aslām al-Silāhdār (745-6/1344-5): upper: south, lower: west.

It also has a flat upper surface, but this is further engraved with scrollwork. The northwest portal has a foundation inscription; it too has a foliated spiral behind the letters, but in this case the letter themselves are carved in the round, and the finials of the uprights are delineated with a double border and further carving of spirals at the end (Fig. 5).

The monument has recently been restored, and the restorers have called attention in the mausoleum to a common feature of Cairene epigraphy: its illegibility. Despite the great height of the mausoleum relative to its width, an inscription was placed at the inside base of the drum, where it is all but invisible to anyone standing within the mausoleum. A plaster cast of a quarter of the inscription was placed on the floor of the mausoleum to enable the beginning of the Quranic verse to be appreciated. The “symbolic

affirmation” of inscriptions, particularly Quranic ones, is a feature that has been commented by earlier scholars,¹⁶ and is much in evidence in Cairo where height must have been an insuperable barrier to legibility before such visual aids as binoculars and telephoto lenses.

The single most impressive Mamluk building in Cairo is the complex of Sultan Ḥasan (1356-63), which also contains some of its most unusual inscriptions. Prominent among them is the Quranic inscription on the qiblaiwān that starts at the southwest corner of the courtyard, runs through the three walls of the iwān, and ends on the southeast corner of the courtyard. The inscription is in a style variously known as Eastern Kufic or broken cursive that was common earlier as a script used for the main body of Qurans, but which by the Mamluk period was normally relegated to the script of choice for Quran headings only. It is also found running around the courtyards and single iwāns of the four madrasas in the complex. On the inscription in the Ḥanafīmadrasa courtyard the name MuḥammadibnBīlīk al-Muḥsinī is found, identifying him as the calligrapher (*katabahu*) and the supervisor of construction (*shādd imāratihī*).¹⁷ Muḥammad al-Muḥsinī was a well-known member of the *awlād al-nās* who had served first Sultan Ḥasan’s father al-NāṣirMuḥammad, before becoming a prominent member of Sultan Ḥasan’s administration. Muḥammad al-Muḥsinī’s father and brother were also prominent in Mamluk administrative circles; his brother Aḥmad was an author and poet and a calligrapher who signed a copy of the Quran in 739/1338-9 that has Eastern Kufic headings.¹⁸ Muḥammad al-Muḥsinī himself is also known to have calligraphed a Quran with Kufic headings, and it has been noticed how much of the stone-carved ornamentation of the complex resembles that of contemporary Quranic illumination.¹⁹

The interior of the funerary dome chamber also has a large inscription, identifying it as a *qubba*, this time in *naskh* of carved and painted wood that runs around all the walls above dado height. Given the high quality of the inscriptions elsewhere in the building, the surprise here is that legibility seems to have won out over aesthetics, as the letters seem too large for the space they occupy within the frame, lacking the elegant uprights that are normally present (Fig. 6).

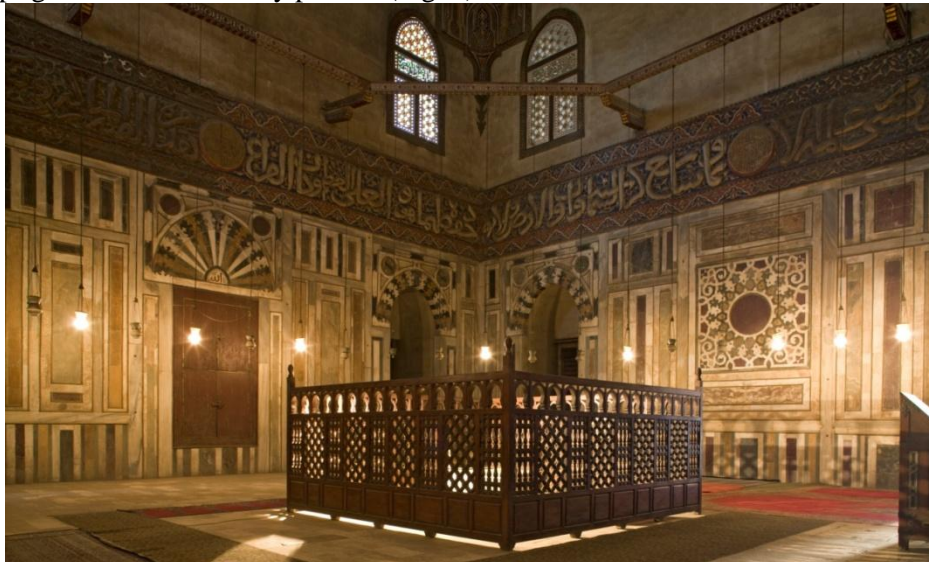


Figure 6 : Inscription above dado in mausoleum of Sultan Ḥasan (1356-63). Note the difference in legibility between the older and recently repainted parts of the inscription.

¹⁶ Ettinghausen, 1974.

¹⁷ Kahil, 2006.

¹⁸ Kahil, 2006, 159-62.

¹⁹ Kahil, 2006, 161-70.

A building complex that borrowed much from that of Sultan Ḥasan and its near neighbor, that of Qalawūn, is Sultan Barqūq's (1384-6), situated on the main artery of the medieval city. Sultan Ḥasan's portal, surprisingly, does not have a foundation inscription,²⁰ but we have seen the use that Qalawūn made of the whole façade to advertise his name and titles. So too did Barqūq, and this time the layout of the inscription was more carefully planned to accommodate the name of the sultan on the visually most important part of the façade, the right-hand side of the projecting portal – a feature that both the complex of Qalawūn and the intervening complex of his son al-NāṣirMuḥammad also lacked. This also meant that, like the Southern portal of Aslām al-Silāhdār mentioned earlier, the inscription at the lower level could be Quranic, and like that of Aslām, this is also one distinguished for its unique aesthetic qualities. The uprights and the ends of letters are braided into a repeating knotted medallion that forms the upper border of the inscription (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Detail of inscription on entrance portal of complex of Sultan Barqūq (1384-6).

Another form of inscription whose primary concern was aesthetic was a form of Kufic that appeared first the late 15th century on top of dadoes, usually employing bitumen inlaid in marble. The letters are uniformly thin, which allows for deep projections both below and above the base line; they are also often accompanied by decorative motifs such as knotting of the stems and by floral or spiral elements in the upper margin. The closest parallel are the decorative headings of contemporary manuscripts.

2 DECORATIVE SCRIPTS

Yet another variety of script prized primarily for its aesthetic qualities is square Kufic, first seen in Cairo in the mausoleum of Qalawūn, where it is used on panels of semi-precious inlaid stone displaying *Muḥammad* four times in a square; several squares are then superposed. Because the letters are geometricized and without diacritical marks, many forms can be read as more than one letter, making it difficult to read. Because of this it the content was usually reserved for common religious words or phrases, such as the *shahāda*, Allah, and sometimes for Quranic verses. Two unusual examples for Cairo are seen in the mausoleum of ShaykhZayn al-Din Yusuf, in the form of the name of 'Alī repeated three times within a hexagon, a motif that was used later in the mosque of Amir Husayn. This particular form is one that was very popular in Iran, particularly in tiled decoration. In one building, the late Mamluk complex of Abu'l-'Ilā, the *shahāda* in square Kufic on a panel at the base of the minaret is surprisingly followed by the name Ḥusaynibn 'Alī, although since he is buried within the building and was its

²⁰ The portal was unfinished, but there is no obvious space for one that might have been added after the building's completion.

dedicatee, the name would have been familiar to its those in the neighbourhood.²¹ Two other more complicated square Kufic panels are known from the Ottoman period century, one in the extension by ‘Abd al-RaḥmanKatkhudā to the mosque of al-Azhar (1751); the other, now in the Cairo Museum of Islamic Art, originally from the Shrine of SittaNafīsa. In a stunning example of design they display, inlaid within an octagon in black and white stone, the names of God, of Muhammad, and the ten companions of Muhammad who were promised paradise, those who were amongst his earliest followers.

3 CONTENT

The most common type of inscription by far that has survived on Cairo’s monuments is Quranic. This is to be expected on religious buildings, but even on secular buildings they are very common. Another text with religious connotations that was also common first in religious²² and later in domestic architecture was al-Busiri’sBurda; although composed in the 13th century, it was especially popular in the Ottoman period.Waqf inscriptions are rare; one notable exception is that of the complex of al-AshrafBarsbay within the walls of the old city. Its waqf inscription begins in one of the most prominent places in the building, on a band running around the qiblawān at mid-height, which continues in the west iwān. It delineates in great detail the major properties that were endowed to the complex, including *wakālas*, shops, markets, baths, apartments, mills, and land in many provinces.²³ We are not informed about any prior speculation that may have inspired setting out the waqf in stone in this instance, but the inscription makes it clear that (like most in Cairo) the beneficiaries included not just the madrasa personnel but also the sultan’s descendants, who in a case like this make well also have been appointed overseers of the endowment.

There is one example of a non-religious literary inscription, written on two stucco bands within the mausoleum of the amirSunqur al-Sa’dī (1315-21). They are extracts from the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī, one of the most popular medieval Arabic texts, and that which most frequently illustrated. The passages are eloquent admonitions to turn away from worldly pleasures before it is too late.

One other unique example may be mentioned, a *ḥilya*, which is a description of the physical features of the Prophet Muḥammad. The earliest monumental example known is probably one from 14th century India.²⁴ One is found on the sides of the cenotaph of ‘Abd al-RaḥmanKahkhudā, dated 1190/1776-7, adjoining the mosque of al-Azhar.²⁵ Only in the early Ottoman period did *ḥilyas* become common in Islamic art, in the form of calligraphic versions on paper.

4 CONCLUSION

The material on inscriptions on Cairo is so rich that it has been possible in the space available here only to summarize some of its outstanding features. It is clear, first of all, that inscriptions really mattered in medieval Cairo. They could convey information in many ways, directly by their content, indirectly as indicators of prestige or even as assurances that God’s word was being proclaimed from on high.

Leaving behind a building for fellow Muslims after one’s death was one of the surest ways to earn spiritual benefit, and the inscriptions on them announced the munificence of the patron, proclaiming his name and august titles, and ensuring that the endowments he set up for the building would be honored.

Attention could be drawn to them in various ways, through their size, through repetition, and through the care taken with their calligraphy and with intrinsic or surrounding decorative details. However, a large number of inscriptions high up on buildings, would always have been difficult if not

²¹ O’Kane, *Documentation*, inscription number 340.14.

²² Its earliest extant use in Cairo was in the mosque of al-Ghawrī (1505-6): O’Kane, in press, , inscription nos. 189.33-5; 189.52).

²³ Van Berchem, 1894-1903, 353-60.

²⁴ O’Kane, 2009, 103-4.

²⁵ O’Kane, in press, inscription no. 97.19.

impossible to read. Most of these are of God's word, the Quran, and had another purpose, that of sanctifying the building on which they were placed. With regard to foundation inscriptions however, admittedly not all, but most were meant to be read and were accordingly placed in locations which made this easier.

Another way of attracting attention would have been through color, which brings us back to one of the chief caveats mentioned at the beginning of this paper, namely, that evaluations of what was legible and what was not are risky on the basis of today's evidence, especially given the lack of these painted colors that would have affected so many inscriptions on stucco and carved stone. Even in their monochromatic form today they provide a feast for the eye, so we can be sure that their impact in earlier times was much greater.

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