

The Look of Language

Bernard O’Kane

The status of Arabic as the language in which the Quran, the word of God, was revealed, privileged it in Islamic lands. Even in non-Arabic speaking areas it remained for many centuries the only language that appeared on works of art and architecture in the Muslim world, from Andalusia to India. When and how did this begin to change? In parts of the early Islamic Empire Arabic almost completely supplanted local languages such as Aramaic, Egyptian and Berber. The major exception was Iran, where the older language of the Sasanians, Pahlavi or Middle Persian, was replaced by what is called New Persian, a language of which forty percent now consisted of loan words from Arabic, and which was written in the Arabic alphabet.¹

Among the first parts of the early Islamic empire to break away were those in eastern Iran, and it was at the courts of these dynasties, such as the Tahirds and Saffarids in the ninth century, that we first hear of court poets who composed in Persian.² Although another dynasty in North Eastern Iran, the Samanids, ruling from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, were vassals of the Abbasids, they greatly fostered Persian culture, and in fact it is clear from historical reports that at an early stage Persian translations of the Quran were made for the benefit of their subjects who knew no Arabic. The Samanids also commissioned an official commentary on the Quran in Persian,³ and these translations mark an effective break whereby Islam ceased to be a purely Arab religion. Persian was now elevated to a level from which the privileged position of Arabic could be examined and even undermined.

Linguistic Autonomy: The Beginnings

What might be the earliest example of Persian on a work of art has been attributed to late ninth or early tenth century Transoxiana, indicating that it was most likely made within Samanid dominions.

On the rim of the interior is a poem that reads:

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¹ G. Lazard, ‘The Rise of the New Persian Language,’ in *The Cambridge History of Islam*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), Vol. 4, pp. 595-632. An expanded consideration of matters in the earlier part of this paper can be found in Bernard O’Kane, *The Appearance of Persian on Islamic Art* (New York: Persian Heritage Foundation, 1969).

² S. Meskoob, *Iranian Nationality and the Persian Language*, trans. M. Hillman, ed. J. R. Perry (Washington, DC: Mage, 1992), p. 37.

³ Meskoob, *Iranian Nationality*, p. 56.

In shogh'l-e nushe haram râked kâm ravâst del berâmesh dâr
[For this affair, pleasant and forbidden which is allowed you, be joyful].⁴

Interestingly, this closely recalls a later verse of the famous Persian poet Hâfez:

Khun-e piyâle khor ke halâl-ast khun-e u
Dar kâr-e yâr bâsh ke kâri-st kardani
[Drink the blood in the cup for its blood is licit

Be at the service of the Beloved One for such service is worth engaging in].⁵

The association between wine drinking and poetry is found on another silver cup, perhaps slightly later, that has good wishes in Arabic and two verses in Persian proclaiming that the holder of the cup will have good fortune.⁶ Here again, the beginning of the verse, *ân kas ke be-kaf bar sitad in jâm*, “He to whose hand this drinking cup reaches,” is also remarkably similar to a later hemistich of Hâfez, beginning *ân kas ke be dast jâm dârad*, “he who holds a drinking cup in his hand.”⁷ This is the beginning of a long tradition that names the function of the object within its inscription. In both of these early uses of Persian, however, it may be noticed that the script used is undifferentiated from that used for contemporary Arabic.

It is also worth mentioning here some of the themes that connect wine and Persian poetry; for they form an enduring component of subsequent Persian literature, not only because of the role that wine played in the *bazm*, the royal feast,⁸ but even more because of its many-faceted symbolism in the poetry of Sufis, Islamic mystics, which is found in abundance on later works of art. The motifs of the wine cup and the Zoroastrian and Christian tavern keepers are already apparent in Arab poetry in the first centuries of Islam. The Zoroastrian or Christian tavern is transmuted into the place of the enthronement of the

⁴ Boris Marshak, *Silberschätze des Orients: Metallkunst des 3.-13. Jahrhunderts und ihre Kontinuität* (Leipzig: Seemann, 1986), pp. 96-98; *Masterpieces of Islamic Art in the Hermitage Museum*. Exhibition catalogue (Kuwait: Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah 1990), p. 12.

⁵ Marshak, *Silberschätze*, figure 118, p. 50.

⁶ Marshak, *Silberschätze*, figures 135-137, pp. 106-107.

⁷ A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, ‘The Wine Bull and the Magian Master,’ in *Studia Iranica: Cahiers 11: Recurrent Patterns in Iranian Religions: From Mazdaism to Sufism*, ed. P. Gignoux (Paris, 1922), p. 109.

⁸ See A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, ‘Silver in Islamic Iran: The Evidence from Literature and Epigraphy,’ in *Pots and Pans: A Colloquium on Precious Metals and Ceramics*, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art, ed. M. Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Vol. 3, pp. 95-100; A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, ‘The Iranian *Bazm* in Early Persian Sources,’ *Res Orientales*, vol. 4 (1993), pp. 95-120 and Abbas Daneshvari, ‘Cup, Branch, Bird and Fish: An Iconographical Study of the Figure Holding a Cup and a Branch Flanked by a Bird and a Fish,’ in *The Iconography of Islamic Art: Studies in Honour of Robert Hillenbrand*, ed. Bernard O’Kane (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 110-116.

saints in heaven, where they are served by angelic cupbearers and bow down before an ‘Idol’ in the form of a Youth of incomparable beauty, a metaphor for God. This explains how Persian poetry created a singular form of lyricism in which the erotic and bacchanalian elements became almost inextricably linked with the mystical and initiatory one.⁹

Adjacent to the Samanid realm were the Turkish steppes, a territory frequently raided for its inhabitants who provided many early Islamic dynasties with slave troops. In turn they became Islamicised, and the first two architectural monuments with Persian inscriptions are from the Qarakhanid dynasty, ruling in Central Asia in the period shortly after the Samanids, from the eleventh to the twelfth centuries. A mausoleum in Kirgystan dated to 1055 has, remarkably, a foundation inscription in Persian verse,¹⁰ and a caravanserai between Samarqand and Bukhara, datable to 1078, has another partially deciphered rhyming Persian foundation inscription.¹¹

It is perhaps not surprising that these earliest surviving architectural examples are on the frontiers of Islam, in territory which had previously been ruled by the Samanids, at whose court literary Persian first flourished. Even though the Qarakhanids were a Turkish dynasty, Persian was the literary language of their court, while they were unlikely to have been able to speak Arabic. While a Persian dynasty had no need to establish its Persian-ness with its subjects, Turkish dynasties may have thought it expedient to be seen to be using publicly a language that was the vernacular of many or even the majority of their subjects. Here again, the script and letters of these two examples are undifferentiated from Arabic.

Also among early Turkish rulers were the governors on behalf of the Samanids of the town of Ghazna in eastern Afghanistan, who later gained independence as the Ghaznavids. The ruler Mas’ud in 1112 built a palace at Ghazni whose courtyard was surrounded by over five hundred marble slabs. A poem was written on the top of the slabs, near eye-level, in gold letters on a dark-blue ground, and in the same metre as that of the *Shahname*, the Book of Kings, which was the Iranian national epic, a mythical and historical saga that was initiated by the Samanids and completed under the patronage of the Ghaznavids. The poem in the palace not only reviewed the sovereigns who had

⁹ Alessandro Bausani, *Religion in Iran from Zoraster to Baha’ullah*, trans. J. M. Marchesi (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 2000), p. 254.

¹⁰ V. N. Nastich and B. D. Kochnev, ‘K atributsii mavsoleya Shakh-Fazil,’ *Epigrafika Vostoka*, no. 24 (1988), pp. 69-77.

¹¹ Alessio Bombaci, *The Kufic Inscription in Persian Verses in the Court of the Royal Palace of Mas’ud III at Ghazna* (Rome: Istituto italiano per il medio ed estremo Oriente, 1966), p. 37; O’Kane, *The Appearance of Persian*, figures 1.5-6.

succeeded to the throne of Ghazna, from the founder of the dynasty onwards, but also provided a fictitious genealogy connecting them with the pre-Islamic past.¹² Again, for the Ghaznavids, Persian was the literary language of the court as well as being that of most visitors, and clearly the courtyard facades here were perceived as a first-rate opportunity to advertise the royal credentials of the patron. When scholars first tried to decipher this inscription they found it incomprehensible – because they assumed it was in Arabic. This ambiguity of script may mitigate against modern legibility, but the lack of differentiation in itself may be telling, suggesting that Persian inscriptions may have been much more common than the surviving artefacts suggest, and that the viewer, especially in a secular context, would have been encouraged to scrutinise the inscription for clues to its language before attempting a reading.

Persian from Anatolia to Central Asia

In subsequent centuries the use of Persian is found increasingly in central Iranian lands. The finest monument from medieval Azerbaijan, the tomb tower of Mo'mene Khâtun at Nakhchevân has two inscriptions above the entrance, the upper one in Arabic giving the date, equivalent to April 1186, and the lower the signature of the builder. Each of the ten sides of the monument is framed with Qur'anic inscriptions in Kufic. Running above them all is a tall Kufic inscription distinguished by turquoise tiles that gives, on the first eight sides, the names and titles of the patron and the deceased in Arabic. It is followed (indistinguishable from it in form) by a prayer in Persian:

We shall pass but time remains

We shall die, but may this remain in commemoration

Lord, keep us from the evil eye.¹³

The increasing use of Persian is also to be noted further west in Saljuq Anatolia. The importance of Persian culture there may be gauged from the names adopted by several of the sultans, such as Key Khosrow, Key Kâ'us and Key Qobâdh, all drawn from the Iranian heroes of the *Shahname*. Persian was the literary language of the court, and although now destroyed, we know from a contemporary historian that the walls of the capital Konya and nearby Sivas had verses from the *Shahname* prominently displayed on them.¹⁴

¹² See Bombaci, *The Kufic Inscription*.

¹³ Hartmann in Eduard Jacobsthal, *Mittelalterliche Backsteinbauten zu Nachtschewân im Araxesthal, mit einer Bearbeitung der Inschriften von Martin Hartmann* (Berlin: Deutschen Bauzeitung, 1899), p. 21; O'Kane, *The Appearance of Persian*, figure 2.6.

¹⁴ Alessio Bombaci, 'Die Mauerinschriften von Konya,' in *Forschungen zur Kunst Asiens: in Memoriam Kurt Erdmann*, ed. O. Aslanapa and R. Naumann (Istanbul: Istanbul Universitesi Edebiyat Fakultesi Yayinlari, 1969), p. 69.

In a theological college dated 1242-43 in Konya we find the signature of a craftsman from Tus in eastern Iran,¹⁵ probably a refugee from the Mongols, with an accompanying medallion of Persian poetry which, proclaims: “I have made this the like of which occurs nowhere else in the world. I do not last, but it remains, a memento of myself.”¹⁶ The newfound confidence of the craftsman is best seen in the poetry which graces a ewer made in 1181 in Herat. There are Arabic blessings on the neck, but the great bulk of its inscriptions consists of ten bands which contain distiches in Persian celebrating its maker’s creation, of which I quote just the first two:

A beautiful ewer - most beautiful - I possess
 Who has the like of this in the world today?
 Everyone who saw it said it is very beautiful
 Nobody has ever seen its equal, as it is matchless
 Look at the ewer, it animates the spirit.¹⁷

The much greater number of craftsmen’s signatures known on architecture from this period is also a reflection of their new found confidence in their importance within society - what better way to advance this than by advertising their work in the language of most of their customers? The pride shown by the makers of metalwork and architecture in their work was expressed in Persian poetry.

However, it is in pottery and tiles of the late twelfth and thirteenth century (mostly lustre-painted and underglaze-painted examples),¹⁸ that we find that Persian verses occur more often than in any other medium, sometimes sharing the epigraphic program with Arabic, but often appearing alone. This is an example:

I wished to take the veil off from your moonlike face
 I wished to have a bite of those lips sweet as sugar
 She said, “when like a candle you talk of biting
 Are you not afraid that your head might be cut off in the attempt?”¹⁹

This reflects a change in Sufi poetry that occurred in the twelfth century that has been characterised by Annemarie Schimmel as follows:

¹⁵ O’Kane, *The Appearance of Persian*, figure 2.13.

¹⁶ See figure 29 in Michael Meinecke, *Fayencedekorationen seldschukischer Sakralbauten in Kleinasien*, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Istanbul Mitteilungen, 13 (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1976), Vol. 2, p. 259.

¹⁷ Vladimir Loukonine and Anatoli Ivanov, *Lost Treasures of Persia: Persian Art in the Hermitage Museum* (Washington, DC: Mage, 1996), pp. 136-137.

¹⁸ Persian inscriptions on plates and bowls of both luster and underglaze-painted types are published extensively in Abdallah Quchani, ‘Sofalinaha-ye zarrin fam va naqqashi shoda-ye zir-e lo’ab,’ *Majala-ye Bastanshenasi va Tarikh* 1 (1987 [1366]), pp. 30-41.

¹⁹ Oya Pancaroglu, *Perpetual Glory: Medieval Islamic Ceramics from the Harvey B. Plotnick Collection* (New Haven and London: Art Institute of Chicago, 2007), p. 124.

Mystical love, first directed exclusively towards God ... was now sometimes blended with the admiration of a beautiful face in which God's beauty reveals itself to the loving mystic; the oscillation between heavenly and earthly love became then, a standard feature of Persian and related poetry.²⁰

The most cogent argument for the interpretation of these quatrains as being symbolic of divine rather than earthly love is that they also frequently occur on lustre tiles which decorated the walls of religious buildings, such as those on a village mosque in central Iran, the Masjed-e 'Ali, dated between 1303-1307.²¹

These linkages of poetry, Sufism and wine drinking earlier are found in several fourteenth century wine cups.²² The following verses are found verbatim on them:

O sweet beverage of our pleasures
O limpid fount of mirth
If Alexander had not seen you
O world-revealing cup of Mani
How could his mind have conceived
The notion of the Water of Life?

The mention of Mani, always cited as an exemplary painter, relates to the beautiful images that the cup reflects and which incline the owner, like Alexander the Great, towards the search for the fountain of youth, another metaphor for the Sufi's quest for God.²³

Persian Epigraphy in India

At this stage we need to turn towards India. It differs from the other Persian-speaking areas on the periphery of the Islamic world mentioned earlier in that the majority of its population, was not only non-Muslim but also non-Persian, non-Arabic and non-Turkish speaking.

The Ghurids had brought most of Northern India under Muslim rule in the early thirteenth century, after which successive local dynasties maintained power until the coming of the Mughals in the sixteenth century. A recently published gazetteer of historical inscription in Western India permits a

²⁰ Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (London and the Hague: East-West Publications, 1978), p. 6.

²¹ Oliver Watson, 'The Masjid-i 'Ali, Quhrud; an Architectural and Epigraphic Survey,' *Iran*, no.13 (1975), pp. 59-74; O'Kane, *The Appearance of Persian*, figure 2.18.

²² A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, *Le bronze iranien* (Paris: Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1973), p. 61; A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, *Islamic Metalwork from the Iranian World 8th-18th Centuries* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1982), figure 53, p. 147; Rachel Ward, *Islamic Metalwork* (London, British Museum, 1993), p. 94. Another with so-far unidentified Persian verses is in the Art Museum of Georgia, Tbilisi. See Loukonine and Ivanov, *Lost Treasures of Persia*, p. 156.

²³ Melikian-Chirvani, *Islamic Metalwork*, p. 188.

breakdown of inscriptions in each of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: from the thirteenth century: three Persian, thirty-one Arabic, one Arabic and Persian; from the fourteenth century: seventy-three Persian, fifty-nine Arabic, seven Arabic and Persian, two Persian and Sanskrit, one Arabic and Marathi, one Persian, Gujarati and Sanskrit; and from the fifteenth century: one-hundred-one Persian, seventy-five Arabic, seventeen Arabic and Persian, five Persian and Sanskrit.²⁴ There is thus an enormous difference between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but not so much between the fourteenth and fifteenth.

Two early examples are from Bengal, and they are remarkable in that they are both foundation inscriptions in verse. The first, can be ascribed to a sultan who reigned in the early thirteenth century. It is in three lines, each containing two distiches, with slight extra spacing between each hemistich, but otherwise no indication that the text is poetry rather than prose, a feature consistent with an early date.²⁵ The second is in the name of the ruler Khan Balkâ Khan, a rebel chieftain who ruled between 1228 and 1230. This is the foundation inscription of a mosque, and now for the first time, and like most subsequent examples, indicates that we are looking at verse by dividing the text field into frames for each hemistich. Since Arabic poetry is almost never found at this time, this is also an indication to the viewer that he was looking at verses in Persian.²⁶

Like many great city mosques, the main early mosque in Delhi, the Qowwat al-Eslâm, was restored and added to over the centuries, and in 1311 'Alâ' al-Din erected a monumental gateway to it. This in itself has nine Persian foundation inscriptions.²⁷ They are both the largest and most visible of all on the gateway, forming the vertical frame on the jambs in white marble and also the two inscriptions of the central arch, the outer in marble and the inner in sandstone. All in all, this is by far the most extensive use of Persian yet on any foundation inscription. Why should it have suddenly merited this emphasis at this time? The personality of the founder 'Alâ' al-Din may be particularly

²⁴Z. A. Desai, *Arabic, Persian and Urdu Inscriptions of West India: A Topographical List* (Delhi: Sandeep Prakashan, 1999).

²⁵ Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, 'Calligraphy and Islamic Culture: Reflections on Some New Epigraphical Discoveries in Gaur and Pandua, Two Early Capitals of Muslim Bengal,' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 68 (2005), pp. 26-27; O'Kane, *Appearance of Persian*, figures 3.3-4.

²⁶ Idem, 'An Epigraphical Journey to an Eastern Islamic Land,' *Muqarnas* 7 (1990), figure 3.9, p. 105.

²⁷ M. A. Husain, *A Record of all the Quranic and Non-Historical Epigraphs on the Protected Monuments in the Delhi Province*, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no. 47 (Calcutta, 1936), inscriptions nos. 7-9, 25-7, 44-6.

relevant here: he is described in the sources as being unlettered and antagonistic towards the ulama, two characteristics that would surely have cemented his preference for the common spoken language of the sultanate, Persian rather than Arabic. It may also have prompted the inclusion of another set of titles on the main (southern) arch naming him as “the strengthener of the pulpits of religious instruction and mosques, the confirmer of the rules of the colleges and places of worship, the fortifier of the foundation of Muslim laws.”²⁸

It may also be noted that in the fourteenth century emigration to India was greatly encouraged: in 1333 Mohammad Shah Toghloq send an invitation to Transoxania inviting seyyeds, shaikhs, ulama, bureaucrats and soldiers to enter his service, an initiative that was evidently very successful.²⁹ The arrival in great numbers of non-Arabic speaking Muslims would have reinforced Persian as the major language of communication at the time.

The spread of Persian in India at this time is also commented upon by Hindustan’s greatest Persian poet, Amir Khosrow Dehlavi:

But the Persian speech (*goftâr*) is uniform in Hindustan from the banks of the river Sind to the shores of the sea. Such a great language is our medium of expression... The Hindustani dialects differ at every hundred yards, but the Persian language is the same over an area of over thousands of miles.³⁰

As mentioned above, there is not a great difference in the rate of adoption of Persian for foundation inscriptions on buildings in India from the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries; the main difference being one of style, as in an example from Bengal dated to 1446, recording the erection of a mosque. The design has been organised around three of the groupings of the letter *ef* and *i*, *fis*, contrasted with the regular uprights. The resemblance to ducks of the three *fis* has been noted, and while it may be objected that such anthropomorphism would be unlikely in the context of a foundation inscription of a mosque, the fact that the calligrapher has added the eye-like dots in the otherwise unlikely place of the circle of the *fâ*’ makes this more credible.³¹

²⁸ See also Sunil Kumar, ‘Assertions of Authority: A Study of the Discursive Statements of Two Sultans of Delhi,’ in *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture: Indian and French Studies*, eds Muzaffar Alam, Françoise Delvoye and Marc Gaborieau (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2000), p. 43.

²⁹ Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 233-234.

³⁰ K. A. Nizami, ‘The Significance of the Turkish Conquest,’ in *A Comprehensive History of India*, eds M. Habib and K. A. Nizami (Delhi: Indian History Congress, 1970), Vol. 5, p. 189.

³¹ Wayne A. Begley, *Monumental Islamic Calligraphy from India* (Villa Park, Ill.: Islamic Foundation, 1985); O’Kane, *The Appearance of Persian*, figure 3.26.

A fresh infusion of Persian culture was provided in the following century under the Indian Timurids, better known in the West as the Mughals. They introduced one feature, which as we will see parallels developments further west in Iran, Turkey and the Arab world: namely the use of a new type of script, *nasta’liq*, one in which the letters have exaggerated lengthenings, and swellings, which at a glance would enable to viewer to deduce that this was a Persian foundation inscription rather than an Arabic Quranic one.

In sum, India holds a special place in the history of Islamic epigraphy. Its Persian inscriptions are rare until the fourteenth century, but are then embraced with an enthusiasm unmatched in any other part of the Islamic world. Why was this the case? Two reasons in particular stand out. India occupied a special position on the periphery of the Persian speaking world. The Muslim population was solidly Persian speaking, but unlike the territory from Anatolia to Afghanistan, it was an Islamic state with a majority of non-Muslims, many of whom were eventually employed in government office. For them Arabic was even further removed from their daily lives. The second cause was one that was also particularly responsible for the growing use of Persian on lustre pottery and tiles in thirteenth and fourteenth century Iran, namely the poetry-loving ethos of Sufism. India’s respect for holy men, both Muslim and non-Muslim, which is exemplified for instance in the frequent visits by the Mughal rulers Akbar and his son Jahangir to Hindu holy men, meant that this was doubly important for Muslim rulers of the subcontinent.

The Triumph of the Vernacular

By the middle of the fourteenth century therefore, the position of Persian in Indian epigraphy was firmly entrenched, with even foundation inscriptions in Persian being unexceptional. But this was by no means the case yet in the Iranian heartlands. In Greater Iran the only media up to the fall of the Mongols which used Persian consistently were lustre pottery and tiles.

The greatest change there came with the dynasty from which the Mughals in India were descended, the Timurids. This is best exemplified in an inscription on the citadel at Herat, which had succeeded Samarqand as the Timurid capital, dating from 1418. A fragment of a tiled inscription survives on one of the towers (although not enough to see if was an any way differentiated from Arabic)³² and it is likely that the inscription here is part of the panegyric in thirty-seven couplets which the court historian Hâfêz Abru composed for the

³² Illustrated in colour in Bernard O’Kane, ‘The Development of Iranian *Cuerda Seca* Tiles and the Transfer of Tilework Technology,’ in *And Diverse Are Their Hues*, eds Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), figure 121, p. 189.

building's inauguration and which, according to him, was written in tiles on its walls. In addition to praising Shah Rokh, it mentions his sons, although the praise they are given is designed to reflect on their progenitor. The poem ends as follows:

The engineer placed within it and without it
Muqarnas mansions and round towers
From the top to bottom it is beautiful and decorated
its corners are golden and bejeweled
Its essence is like life in the pillars of the universe
Its splendors are like light in the eye of the stars³³

More historical texts survive from this period, and they sometimes give details of inscriptions on now lost buildings, such as the houses of Yazd in central Iran.³⁴

However even under the Safavids, ruling Iran from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, most inscriptions, even foundation ones, continued to be in Arabic, and it was not until the nineteenth century that Persian foundations became standard there.

What was the case further west in Turkey and Arab lands? The first known Turkish monumental inscription dates from as late as 1411.³⁵ A survey of the historical inscriptions of Edirne, the capital of the Ottoman state before the capture of Istanbul, is revealing.³⁶ The first twenty-seven in the corpus, covering the period from 1400 to 1530, are all in Arabic. For the period 1535 to 1685 there are six in Arabic, one in Arabic and Turkish, one in Persian, one in Persian and Turkish, and the remaining twenty-four in Turkish. Many of these used the same *nasta'liq* script that had been first developed in Iran, as in these examples from Edirne dating from the second half of the seventeenth century show, and here again, as with the Mughal examples mentioned previously, it signalled a likely use of a language other than Arabic. Turkish is even more prominent on the examples listed from then until the nineteenth century, occurring on eighty-nine out of ninety seven examples. Turkish in the seventeenth century therefore holds the same place than Persian did in the Mughal period in India, having a near monopoly of foundation inscriptions. It may be asked why did this change take place in the Ottoman empire, when other Turkophone courts, such as the Mughals, the Uzbeks and the Safavids, used only Arabic and Persian - never Turkish. It has been suggested that the

³³ Bernard O'Kane, *Timurid Architecture in Khurasan* (Costa Mesa: Undena Publications, 1987), pp. 116-117.

³⁴ Bernard O'Kane, *The Appearance of Persian*, pp. 124-125.

³⁵ Sheila Blair, *Islamic Inscriptions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 25.

³⁶ See Appendix II in F. Th. Dijkema, *The Ottoman Historical Monumental Inscriptions in Edirne* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

increased prestige of the Ottoman Empire following its conquest of Arabia and elsewhere in the sixteenth century was a major factor.³⁷

One of the most impressive examples of epigraphic design is seen in a foundation inscription at the entrance to the mosque of the Ottoman Sultan Ahmad in Istanbul (dated 1616). The inscription, in Turkish, begins on the right hand side of the portal in a vertical panel, continues in a much larger horizontal panel in the centre, and ends in another vertical panel on the left. By far the largest and most conspicuous panel is the central one [Figure 1]. Even for one with no knowledge of the Arabic alphabet, the repeated elements of the design are immediately apparent. The genius of the calligrapher was to incorporate on this panel words that read the same, whether the other parts of the inscription were in Arabic or Persian, instead of its actual Turkish. The repeated words are *al-sultan ibn*, ‘the sultan, son of...’ with the name of the founder of the monument, Ahmad, appearing at the top right, and the name of the founder of the dynasty, ‘Othman, shown, after fourteen generations, at the bottom left. Thus at a glance, in any one of the three languages, the eye can take in the ruler’s extended genealogy.

In Ottoman colonies we also see increasing use of Turkish as foundation inscriptions on monuments erected by Turkish patrons, from the eighteenth century onwards. An example is that on a public water dispensary (*sabil*) of Bashir Agha in Cairo dating to 1718 [Figure 2]. Even though it is in *thuluth* rather than the *nasta’liq* usually used for Turkish inscriptions, the way in which it is placed in a small panel displaying couplets would have been an immediate indication for any literate observer that this was not an Arabic inscription.

Different Alphabets in Play

Another factor comes into play in those Muslim societies that have more recently seen a move from the Arabic alphabet to a different one. This has happened both in Turkey and Southeast Asia. In Turkey the language reform of Atatürk in 1928 mandated the use of Latin script. For instance, on the Şakirin Mosque in Istanbul, finished in 2009, the foundation panel includes, under a heading naming the mosque in Latin Turkish and English, not only the Latin Turkish inscription, but also one beautifully calligraphed in Arabic script in a more archaic Ottoman-inflected Turkish, and in addition an English translation at the bottom [Figure 3].

This feeling that custom still dictated the used of Arabic script was also apparent in southeast Asia, where Latin scripts were used by the British and Dutch colonial overlords for administration, and their use has continued after

³⁷ Blair, *Islamic Inscriptions*, p. 25.

Malaysian and Indonesian independence. While Arabic continues to be the invariable language and script for religious inscriptions inside post-colonial mosques in Southeast Asia, foundation inscriptions can vary. Traditionally, inscriptions were not prominent in mosques in this region, and foundation inscriptions are unknown earlier than the twentieth century. However, near the beginning of the twentieth century, in 1908 under British rule, the foundation of the Masjid Jamek in Kuala Lumpur was commemorated with a small foundation plaque written in Jawi, i.e. the Malay language using the Arabic alphabet [Figure 4].

Even in more recent mosques in Malaysia, the design and placement of foundation inscriptions shows them in an ambivalent relationship with the buildings they adorn. That of the Masjid Putra (1999), at Putrajaya, is not on its impressive entrance portal, but on a relatively inconspicuous wall of the courtyard opposite its main dome chamber. Like the Şakirin Mosque in Istanbul, the inscription (in Jawi) is beneath one that also gives the name of the mosque in English [Figure 5].³⁸

At the Masjid Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah mosque at Shah Alam (1988) there are paired foundation inscriptions, one in Jawi and one in English [Figure 6]. Both are, like the Masjid Putra, on polished marble plaques, and are set rather inconspicuously on the side entrance (this side entrance is, however, also the one from the main car park). Its near contemporary at Melaka, the al-Azim mosque (1990), which is also the state mosque of the province, adopts a slightly different approach. Here too the side entrance is the main ceremonial one, but the engraved bronze foundation plaque (again in Jawi), is framed in traditionally carved wood and set at an angle [Figure 7].

Even from these few examples it is clear that, despite the ubiquity of Latin in Southeast Asian daily life after independence, Arabic script is still seen as the most appropriate vehicle for inscriptions on mosques, even though most of the population is now unlikely to be able to read it.³⁹

³⁸ It is interesting that the Jawi foundation inscription on the Putra mosque [Figure 5] uses western numerals rather than the Eastern Arabic numerals used earlier in traditional Arabic inscriptions.

³⁹ For most of the population, Quranic verses may be easier to recognise than foundation inscriptions. In India we have seen that Persian, since Mughal times, was the chief language for foundation inscriptions. From the twentieth century onwards Urdu, the vernacular of the majority of Muslims there, has replaced Persian for foundation inscriptions. I am grateful for Amna Jahangir, Abdul Rehman and Kamil Khan Mumtaz for information on this matter.

Conclusions

The choices of language available to artists and patrons were many. We have seen how the use of Persian on works of art started with Turkish dynasties on the periphery of the Iranian world. It first appeared in quantity on pottery that was more widely distributed than other artefacts. Gradually, in the following centuries, under the influence of Sufism with its growing number of adherents, it predominated on those media such as pottery and metalwork that regularly carry inscriptions, and acquired an increasingly important role on architecture. In Hindustan, after a slow start, Persian quickly competed with Arabic even as the main language for foundation inscriptions. After an even slower start Turkish replaced Persian as the literary language of the Ottoman court in the sixteenth century and soon replaced even Arabic as the favourite language for foundation inscriptions. In southeast Asia, only in the twentieth century did Malay in Arabic script begin to appear on buildings, but it has been retained for foundation inscriptions even when the bulk of the population has difficulty reading it.

The choice of language was a powerful tool, capable of a wide variety of significance. Inscriptions could convey many meanings simultaneously, proclaiming the grandeur and the cultural sophistication of a munificent patron, extolling the beloved in worldly or otherworldly terms, delighting the eye with dazzling calligraphy; all in languages targeted to specific groups.

It is impossible to do justice to all of these meanings in this short paper, such as the aesthetic appeal of different calligraphies, or the possible relationships between the triumph of form over content in poetry and the visual arts in certain periods. I hope to have given, however, some sense of how changes in the use of language on artefacts reflected the far reaching changes in fabric of the Muslim societies in which Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Malay was understood.

Images

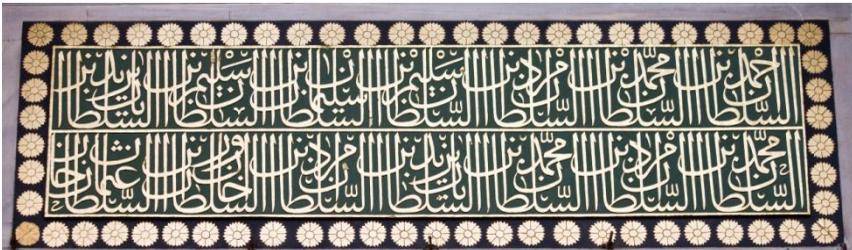


Figure 1: Sultan Ahmad Mosque (1616), Istanbul, Turkey, central part of foundation inscription (Photo: Bernard O’Kane)

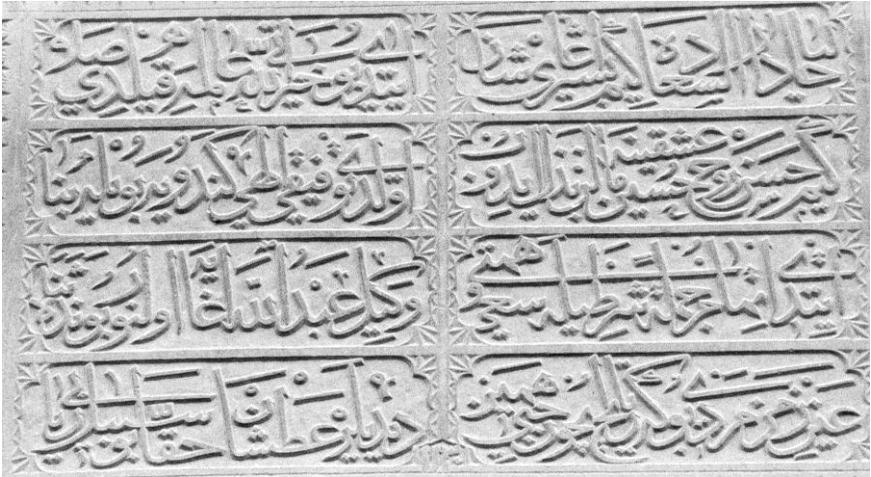


Figure 2: Water dispensary (*sabil*) of Bashir Agha (1718), Cairo, Egypt, foundation panel (Photo: Bernard O’Kane)



Figure 3: Şakirin Mosque (2009), Istanbul, Turkey, foundation panel (Photo: Ali Svabodda)



Figure 4: Masjid Jamek (1908), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia foundation panel (Photo: Bernard O'Kane)



Figure 5: Masjid Putra (1999), Putrajaya, Malaysia, foundation panel (Photo: Bernard O’Kane)



Figure 6: Masjid Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah mosque (1988), Shah Alam, Malaysia, twin foundation panels (Photo: Bernard O’Kane)



Figure 7: Masjid Al-Azim (1990), Melaka, Malaysia, foundation panel
(Photo: Bernard O’Kane)