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ORNAMENTS ON FUNERARY STELAE OF THE 9TH–12TH CENTURIES FROM EGYPT — JOSEF STRZYGOWSKI'S PUBLICATION ANEW

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Abstract: In 1911, Josef Strzygowski published in the journal *Der Islam* drawings of ornaments from several dozen tablets from 846–965, as well as undated tablets from Egyptian cemeteries in Cairo and Aswan. Today scholars seldom reach for such older publications, but Strzygowski's article entitled "Ornamente atlarabischer Grabsteine in Kairo" is worth recalling, particularly because it is also documentation in a sense.

Keywords: Josef Strzygowski, Islam, Egypt, tombstones, stelae, ornaments

As in so many other cultures, in Islam also, funerary stelae commemorating the dead pass on to the living his or her name with the words of a prayer and sporadically date of death. In medieval Muslim Egypt stelae commonly took on the form of rectangular slabs of stone set vertically, bearing an inscription which was either engraved or carved in relief. These plaques are referred to as *shuhud* (or *shawahid*) *al-qubur*. Funerary stelae presenting, as they do, the art of calligraphy and ornamentation belong in the religious domain of the believer's life and are subject to the rules governing Muslim religious art in general. Their decoration is consequently always aniconic and the calligraphed text is an artistic element of key importance.

Among the earliest stelae is a limestone slab [*Fig. 1*] from the cemetery in Aswan, giving the date of passing of the deceased as 652 (31 H), which was the twelfth

year of Arab dominion in Egypt after the establishment of the caliphate province called Misr (Wiet 1930: 1; O'Kane [ed.] 2006: Cat. 32). In terms of the form and content of the epitaph, it constitutes historical evidence for the organization of a Muslim community within just a few years following the conquest of Egypt. It also testifies to the setting down of rules governing burial practices of Islam believers in a land dominated by Christians congregated in the Melkite and Monophysite churches.

There is no ornamentation on the said stele. The lettering demonstrates certain awkwardness, but attests to the growing popularity in Egypt of the *kufi* script developed just a little earlier in the milieu of Iraqi calligraphers in Al-Kufa and refined in the following decades. Until the 12th century this script was commonly believed to be the most appropriate for all

kinds of commemorative texts recorded on buildings, tombstones, textiles and books. Calligraphy in this script became neater over time and the letters achieved characteristic proportions. Varied letter forms, differentiated mainly by the ornamental endings of tall letters, came into use. Floral *kufi* was a popular variant with the letters topped with stylized plants. Embellishing the calligraphy had a distinct influence on the development of the ornamentation which was limited initially on stelae to the borders of the epitaph. By the middle of the 13th century, ornaments

started to include also images, mainly representation of a lamp. The interlinear margins were decorated occasionally with leafy forms which should be perceived in connection with the rules of calligraphy, because some of the letters of the Arabic alphabet require one, two or three dots above or below them. In monumental script these dots were omitted; the freely positioned ornaments constituted a certain reminiscence, complementing the composition.

The funerary stela in its form of a vertical rectangle recalls the page of a book.



Fig. 1. Stela from Aswan, dated to AD 652, with the name of Abd al-Rahman ibn Jabr al-Hujri (After Wiet 1930: 1)

Execution of stelae of this shape already in the 7th century refers to the earliest manuscripts of the Quran known today, originating from the early 8th century and discovered in 1972 in Sana, in Yemen. These books measured approximately 30 cm by 20 cm with the longer side positioned vertically. They were written in calligraphed *hijazi* on parchment, the script being typical of Arabia and characterized by letter proportions different than in *kufi* and a distinct leaning of the letters to the right.

In the 9th century the format of Quranic books was changed to elongated. In this form it survived in most lands of *dar al-islam* through the beginning of the 11th century. Despite changes in book art, the vertical form of funerary stelae in Arabic culture has lasted into the modern age. Deeply rooted traditionalist trends were manifested in the art of the followers of Islam undoubtedly at the same time. This must have been at the root of the separation of ways between book art and funerary stelae at a certain point in their development.

The tablet form of funerary stelae could have been influenced also by images referring to descriptions of the day of the Last Judgment in Muslim eschatological texts. According to these texts, every man on the day of the Last Judgment would “receive a tablet with a record of his deeds. Some will have them laced on their chest, others will have them before the eyes, while the evil and the condemned to damnation

will have them hanged on their back” (Sarwa 2003: 79). The most proper shape for these tablets would be a vertical rectangle,¹ hence their adoption for an object connected with death and commemoration of the deceased.

The link between the book of the Quran and a religious epitaph on a funerary tablet is obvious, primarily because of the recorded content. The epitaph could be a profession of faith, a prayer or a quotation selected from the holy book. It testified to the faith of the deceased and served to protect him or her in the future life.² Sometimes the epitaph on a medieval tombstone was complemented with a witticism or charming poem (Halevi 2007: 17).

In 1911, Josef Strzygowski published in the journal *Der Islam* drawings of ornaments from several dozen tablets from AD 846–965 as well as undated tablets from Egyptian cemeteries in Cairo and Aswan (Strzygowski 1911: 305–336). Today scholars seldom reach for such older publications, but Strzygowski’s article entitled “Ornamente altarabischer Grabsteine in Kairo” is worth recalling.

Josef Strzygowski (s.v., *DictArt* 29, cols 795–796) was an Austrian scholar born in Poland, in Biała, in 1862; he died in Vienna in 1941. Strzygowski studied classical archaeology at the universities in Vienna, Berlin, Munich and Rome. In the 1890s he found himself in conflict with scholars from Vienna who accused him of a superficial approach to his studies and using sources of little credibility. Strzygowski left

¹ None of the surviving iconographic sources from the time of the domination of Arabic art in Islamic civilization (7th–early 16th century) can verify the nature of Muslim beliefs regarding the Last Judgment. Sources of this kind are known from later Turkish art, including, among others, miniatures from the 17th century, depicting the raising of the dead from their graves. The dead hold in their hands sheets of paper or rolls, which are either white or black, depending on their deed, whether good or evil (after Metin And 1998: 241–242).

² A catalogue of Egyptian Muslim funerary stelae entitled *Stèles funéraires* was published by Gaston Wiet (1887–1971) in Cairo in the 1930s and 1940s. Access to it is possible unfortunately only in very few libraries.

Austria and went East. In Turkey, Armenia and Iran he studied the culture of the inhabitants of Asia from the migration period, their aesthetic tastes in particular. He described them in comparison to ancient aesthetics. The differences he noted led him to a negative opinion of the oriental art of the Near East, which to his mind had not introduced anything of value comparable to the art of classical antiquity. Nonetheless, he documented in his works many objects of art from Egypt, Iran and the Altai mountains and these are now a valuable source for research (Strzygowski 1917). Late in life he embraced Nazi ideology and became a propagator of the “Nordic myth”, weighing negatively on his life achievement.

Josef Strzygowski stayed in Egypt in 1894–1895, at a time when a concerted effort was being put up in effect of the *nahda* revival to collect from various locations artifacts of Islamic material culture. The objective was to preserve them for the future and to store them in museum conditions. Pending the erection of the Islamic Art Museum in Cairo, which was completed in 1903, objects were kept in the restored Al-Hakim mosque (11th century). The collection included funerary stelae illustrated and described by Strzygowski, who saw them in the company of the curator, Max Herz Bey, an architect in the court of the Khedive of Egypt Abbas II Hilmi Tawfiq (governed 1892–1914).

The Austrian scholar took an interest in 55 tablets with ornamental borders commemorating 31 women and 24 men, which however proved later not to be a decisive factor with regard to tablet

ornamentation.³ The invocations in the epitaphs were for the most part Muslim confessions of faith (*shahada*) and verses from the Quran referring to various aspects of the Islamic religion. The most common quotation was a fragment of verse 7 from Sura 22 of the Quran entitled “Pilgrimage”, evoking the resurrection of the dead:

And verily the Hour will come:
There can be no doubt
About it, or about (the fact)
That God will raise up
All who are in the graves.⁴

The stelae presented by Strzygowski originated from the rule of the Tulunids (868–905), Ikhshidids (935–969) and Fatimids (969–1171) in Egypt. Some of these were dated to the 9th century, others could be placed between the 9th and 12th century based on decoration style and execution. Emphasizing the issue of the ornamentation on the stelae, Strzygowski presented drawings of fragments of several dozen borders surrounding the epitaphs. No classification or typology of ornamental motifs developing in the Muslim art of Egypt of the period can be generated on this basis, but it is possible to discern workshop differences especially in the quality of execution of the decoration, attesting on one hand to the skills of individual artisans and on the other to the affluence of the family of the deceased. One also notes motifs of symbolic significance, set in Muslim mysticism and eschatology. There is also an apparent evolutionary process of the ornaments discernible for the chronological horizon represented

³ Strzygowski (1911: 325) had made a note of the neater execution of tablets made for women.

⁴ *Kur'an*, translation and commentary by Abdallah Yousuf Ali (Libya 1973): 852.

by the stelae and an evident interaction of motifs integrally connected with the development of Islamic art as a whole.

Borders composed of wavy motifs, single and multiple, occasionally with small dots added in the bays, are the most numerous in this set [Fig. 2]. This linear ornament is universal. The essence of its expression, which draws on rope plaits, has remained unchanged over the ages. On many Arab stelae the wave motif was complemented with trefoil or cinquefoil leaves. Leaves of this kind are part of the arabesque, and an extremely characteristic ornament in Islamic art. The shape of these leaves demonstrates an evolution of the leaf motif from *rumi* arabesque ("Roman", Byzantine), which was widespread in the Mediterranean area to *khatayi* (Chinese) arabesque which developed in Central Asia. The latter ornament was brought to Iran, Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean by peoples from Asia for whom China was at various stages in their history a closely related and highly developed civilization and its art became a source of inspirations. This arabesque was greatly prized in *dar al-islam*.

Vegetal motifs based on Byzantine stylistics and characterized by a certain dose of realism predominated initially in the art of Muslim Egypt. They represented the *rumi* variant of the arabesque. Fundamental changes of style occurred in Egyptian ornamentation about the middle of the 9th century, that is, from the times of Ibn Tulun (868–884). Under the influence of ornamentation developed in Iraq (from whence came Ibn Tulun and his personal guard) leaf patterns changed to heavily stylized, virtually abstract forms. Leaf

laminae were transformed into elongated tripartite linear forms with pointed ends representing the *khatayi* arabesque. Over the ages the two variants of the arabesque constantly intermingled.

The arabesque achieved perfection in the decoration of Andalusian architecture of the 10th century. The idea behind this developed plane ornament was to compose stylized vegetal ornaments with a tendency toward endlessness in real or apparent symmetry (Kühnel 1977). Thus, the vegetal arabesque intimates divine harmony and infinity. In the case of funerary stelae in which the epitaph was of essential importance, the artistic borders with leaf motifs may have presumably added this mystique. There was also a formal uniformity between the patterns in the borders around the epitaph and the ornaments of the tall letters of the Arabic alphabet.

In the 9th–11th century analogous borders filled with wavy patterns commonly decorated wooden members of interior architectural decoration, mainly wall paneling. The uniformity of the decoration is proof of the interactions of motifs decorating various artifacts made of wood and stone (Pauty 1931: Pl. III, Cat. 3581, 4695, 4773). Similar wavy motifs were present also in the ornamentation of Near Eastern mats of the 10th century and Egyptian textiles from the 12th century (*Tissus d'Égypte* 1993: 132–133, Cat. 66, 268, Cat. 162). It is proof of the intermingling of motifs composed in ornamental bands and borders. Equivalently, these borders, which close an inner composition, arrange its order and form its scheme, according to people's taste.⁵

⁵ The tendency to embellish wares with ornaments has been studied by a number of scholars, including E.H. Gombrich (2009).

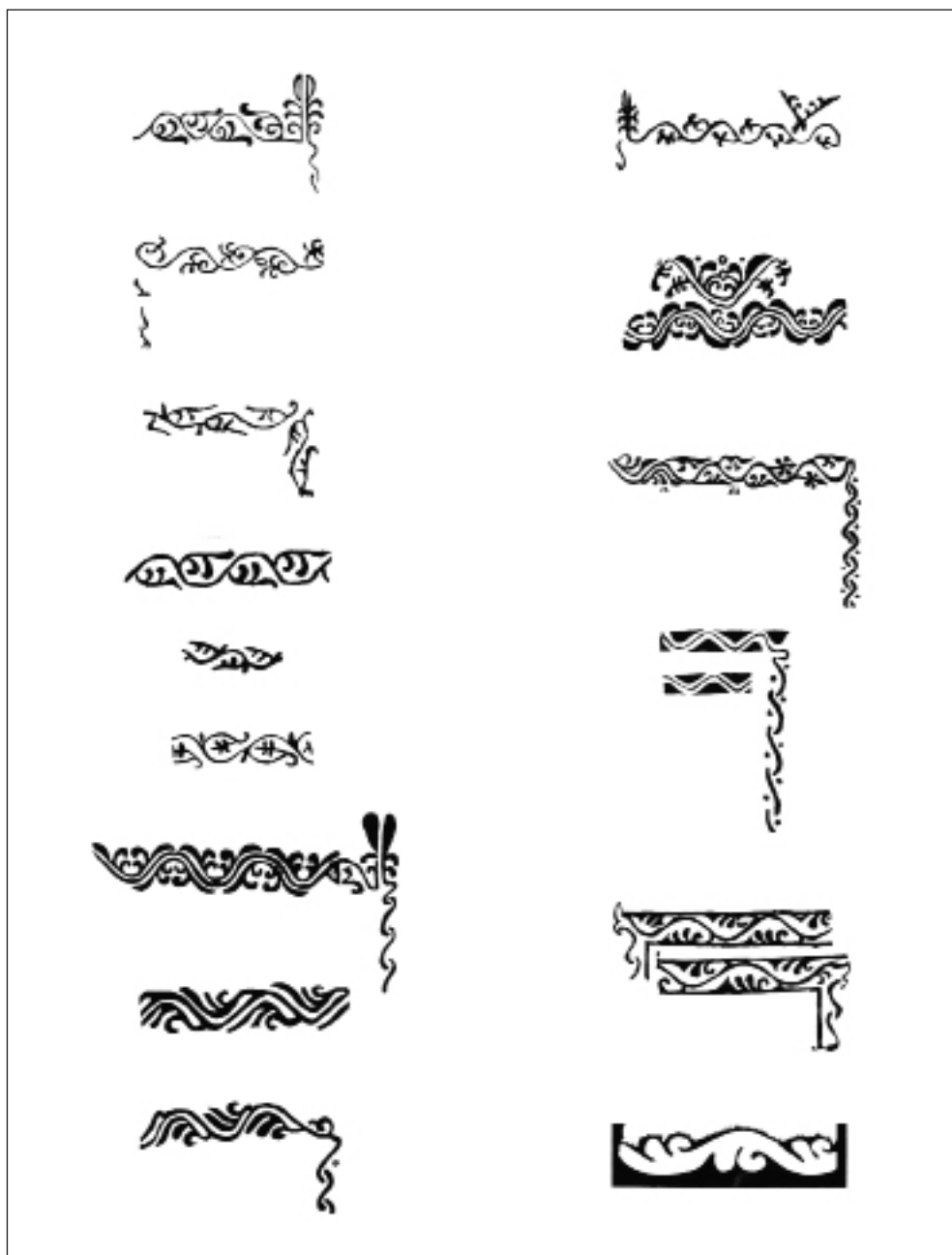


Fig. 2. Examples of wavy borders from funerary stelae
(After Strzygowski 1911)

The top borders of epitaphs from funerary stelae presented by Strzygowski in more than a dozen drawings are especially impressive [Fig. 3]. As stated in his essay, the triangular finial on the upper border of the epitaph recalled a *tabula ansata*, that is, an ancient Roman inscriptional tablet with handles (Strzygowski 1911: 309).⁶ An essential difference consisted, however, in the arrangement of the text – horizontal on the proper *tabula ansata*, vertical on Islamic funerary tablets. In this position, the triangular finial was converted into a palmette motif, introducing almost like a heading religious Islamic symbolism. Palmette compositions made up of two leafy branches appear above the ornamental border containing a scrolling vegetal motif. There is an intrinsic reference to the “tree of life” in this representation, intimating the symbolism of rebirth, resurrection, associated also with paradisiacal vegetation in the shade of which the deceased will rest after death. Of additional symbolic significance was the arrangement of the branches in the form of the number “seven”. In Islam it is the “first perfect number”, which bears a multitude of meanings, both symbolic and mystic, referring to the celestial domain, the climates of the earth, the seas, days of the week, planets, protective verses of the Quran, names of God starting with the seven holy letters, the same number of angels and good spirits. The decorativeness of the borders with palmettes came primarily from the shape of the leaves forming it, presenting arabesque motifs in both the *rumi* and *khatayyi* variants of style [Fig. 3].

An interesting example of the use of the “seven” palmette motif as a beneficial symbolic sign is a fragment of embroidered linen cover from Egypt of the 13th century, held in the collection of the Musée d’art et d’histoire in Geneva (Martiniani-Reber 1986: 86–87, Cat. 8). The textile served presumably as a cover for beds, which were piled up during the day and spread out for the night. The palmette motif also occurs here among many magic signs: stars, tripartite plants and other geometric figures.

Strzygowski’s drawings presented yet another arrangement of the motifs including ancient astral signs placed next to the crowning palmette [Fig. 4]. In Islam, these signs enjoy a rich symbolism, introducing references to God the Creator. Therefore, the presence of a star motif on funerary stelae of Muslims bears deep religious meaning. The rays and center of the star express the believer’s striving for the essence of being, pursuing the goal of the journey.

Here is how the Quran praises God the Creator (Sura VI, “Herd”, verse 97):

It is He who maketh
The stars (as beacons) for you
That ye may guide yourselves,
With their help,
Through the dark spaces
Of land and sea.

And the Prophet Muhammad was recorded as saying: “My companions are stars: whomsoever any one of you follow, you will be rightly guided” (cited after Critchlow 1992: 150; collection of aphorisms by an anonymous compiler).

⁶ Inscriptional stone slabs in the form of a *tabula ansata* were popular also in Islamic culture, especially for building foundation texts. Drawings of an *ansata* finial found on a stele from Al-Fustat (AD 801) have been published by Amal Ahmad Al-Amri 1986: 3, 60, 69.

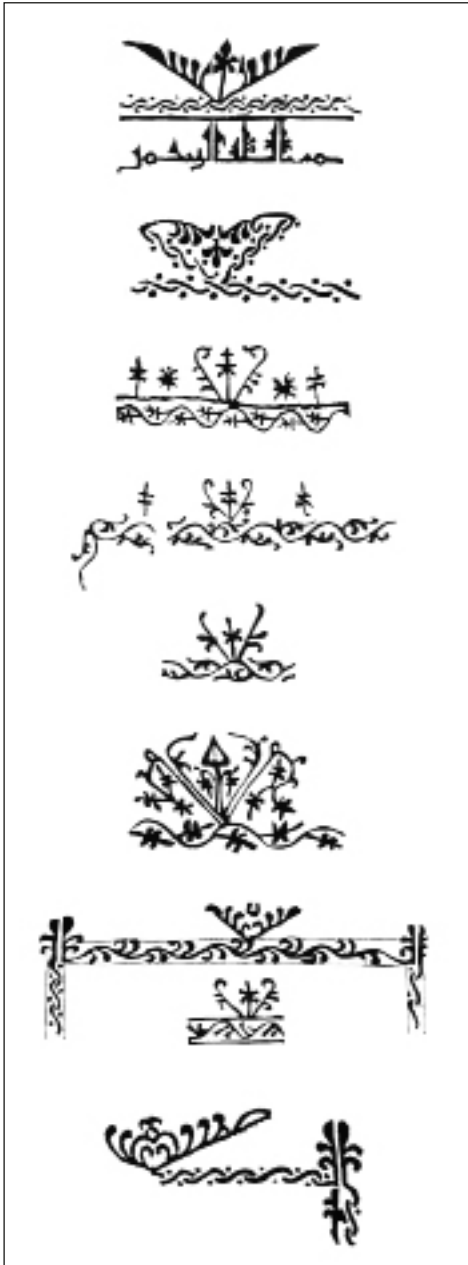


Fig. 3. Example of palmette composition at top of upper border of a funerary stela in rumi style (after Strzygowski 1911)

The rosette, an ancient solar sign, is reminiscent of a rose to believers of Islam, a rose which symbolizes the blood of the prophet Muhammad and his grandsons Al-Hussein and Al-Hassan. Quranic symbolism also imbues the rosette with a similar meaning as the number seven (Dziekan 1997: 90).

Symbols of the star and rosette at the top of funerary stelae are of evidently protective nature. They were positioned symmetrically on either side of the palmette ornament. Both motifs were also common in the decoration of Egyptian glazed ceramic wares, from the early lead glazed type (ELG) produced in the 8th–10th to ceramics made of a quartz body painted underglaze with a predominance

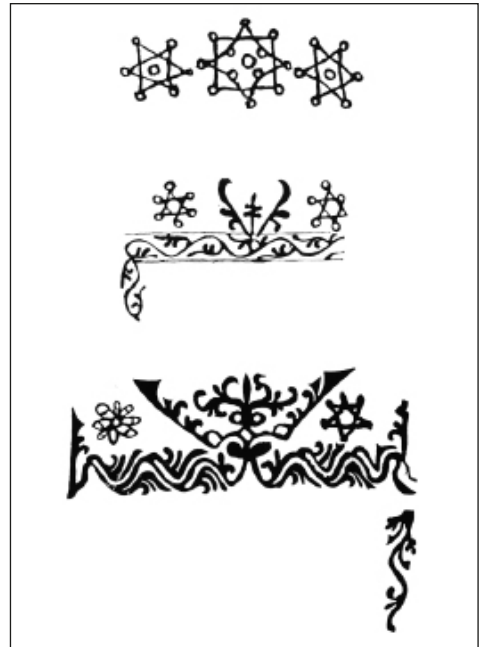


Fig. 4. Examples of palmette compositions at top of upper border of a funerary stela in khatayyi style (after Strzygowski 1911)

of cobalt blue (Blue-Black-White type, BBW), manufactured in the 14th–15th centuries.

Geometric patterns were also used to fill the borders of epitaphs on funerary tablets [Fig. 5]. These consisted foremost of diamonds tip-to-tip and forming a kind of plaiting. The role of geometry as a science in Islamic culture is commonly known and with it the skill to form ornamental patterns based on mutual superposition and rotation of various geometrical figures. Sharp-angled and straight linear ornaments were combined with wavy forms and with stylized vegetal motifs, which is not considered a disharmony of forms in Islamic art, but on the contrary, manifests the diversity of the world, of everyday phenomena and events. The rhythm and harmony of combined alternating motifs gave the desired artistic effect.

Apart from purely aesthetic considerations, the choice and common use of geometric patterns were dictated by the knowledge that some figures symbolized in Islam the mutual correlation between the heavens, earth and humankind. Thus, it was necessary to visualize them. And so:

- the hexagon denoted the heavens, six days of divine creation of the world, God's perfection;
- the square illustrated the earth and physical elements;
- the triangle represented human nature, the three stages of approaching God: that which has been learned, that which is being learned, and that which is learning.

Ornamental bands filled with diamond figures are known also from fragments of wooden polychrome wainscoting constituting the interior decoration of Tulunid-era houses and mosques. Textiles from a later age when the Mamluks ruled

Egypt (1250–1517) indicate that the same motifs were commonplace also in weaving and carpetmaking.

Moreover, Strzygowski presented in his article a drawing of an undated stela with the epitaph framed by a typical Islamic pointed arch rising on columns [Fig. 6]. The construction clearly resembles a *mihrab*, the Muslim prayer niche, which is in memory of the Prophet Muhammad, his teaching about a single God and the principles of Islam. The motif became extremely popular in different fields of

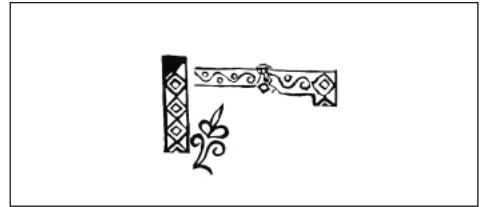


Fig. 5. Examples of geometric patterns on the borders of funerary stelae (after Strzygowski 1911)



Fig. 6. Example of an epitaph framed by a pointed arch (after Strzygowski 1911)

Islamic art (especially in carpet-making and weaving, but also in sepulchral practices and decoration of funerary tablets. Strzygowski's drawing shows a stele executed probably in the second half of the 9th century or later⁷, in the rule of the Shiite Fatimids in Egypt, as indicated by the style of arabesque motifs, that is to say, the form of the leafy branches and palmette scroll. The cinquefoil palmette derives from the scrolling vine motif frequent in ancient and Byzantine art, as well as from the floral motifs of Samarra A style developed in the 9th century in Iraq. In the art of Egypt the two styles were intermingled.

The summary review of ornamentation typical on Egyptian funerary stelae of the 9th–12th century presented by Josef Strzygowski emphasizes the shared characteristic, which is a common use of vegetal ornaments in different forms of stylization, depending on the state of the decoration arts at a given historical time. The compositions in the border bands,

which were uniform in terms of subject content, could be differentiated in terms of their form. This is attested, among others, by two marble funerary slabs of the 9th century found in Alexandria and held once in the collection of the city's University of Fuad I. They were published in 1950 by Zaky M. Hassan (1950: 113). The upper borders on the two slabs manifest a spiraling vegetal scroll on one [*Fig. 7, right*] and a wavy motif supplemented with a palmette centerpiece on the other [*Fig. 7, left*].

In keeping with the principles of aniconism of religious Islamic art, floral motifs became an important ornament of epitaphs on funerary stelae. The blossom as a variously understood symbol of farewell to the dead is present also in many cultures of the world, being attested in pharaonic cemeteries as well as modern burial grounds. In Islam, however, it has clear connotations as paradisiacal vegetation, a representation of paradise as a reward



Fig. 7. Funerary stelae from Alexandria from AD 858 (left) and AD 861 (After Hassan 1950: No. 113, left, and No. 114)

⁷ Gaston Wiet published several such stelae dated to a period between 860–1240 (after Fehérvári 1972: 241).

for a pious life. Hence the multitude of floral motif stylizations in Islamic art, which together with the writing became a distinctive trait of religious art in *dar al-islam*.

A fragment of a marble sarcophagus slab from the tomb of Hamza Ibn Ali, a Persian propagator of Isma'īlic Shi'ism who lived in Cairo at the beginning of Fatimid rule (10th/11th century), presents sophisticated ornamentation [Fig. 8]. Here the ornamentation crept into the text in an exceptional way: a chrysanthemum rosette replaced the letter *mim*, from Sura 112 of the Quran, entitled "Honesty of Faith". The calligrapher identified the letter with the flower, which was a rare phenomenon compared to the commonly applied elaborate ornaments of tall letters in Arabic. Rosettes of this kind were frequently used as ornamental motifs in books, especially books of the Quran, marking the beginnings of succeeding verses. It is worth noting in this respect the suggested connection between pages from a book and funerary tablets.

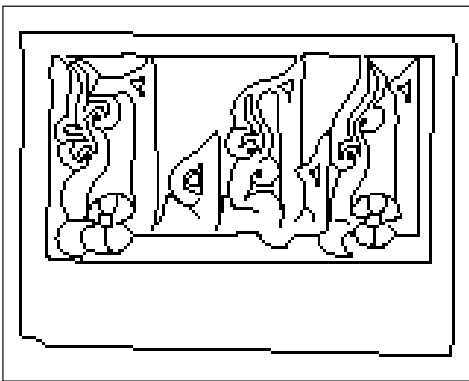


Fig. 8. Fragment of a marble stele of Hamza Ibn Ali from the Islamic Art Museum in Cairo (After *Schätze der Kalifen*, Vienna 1998: cat. 132, digitizing M. Momot)

In Arabic *belles-lettres* there is no lack of themes referring to funerals and tombs of brave heroes and lovers and to visits in burial grounds. Romantic poems about doomed love ending in the death of the lovers were hugely popular from the first ages of Islam. It was said that "he who loves, remains pure and dies, dies as a martyr" (Bielawski 1995: 78). One of the earliest book illustrations, preserved fragmentarily, comes from a manuscript containing a still unidentified romantic poem. The miniature was painted in Egypt in the 9th–10th century and was found in Madinat al-Fayum. It is now in the collection of the Nationalbibliothek in Vienna (Rice 1959: 213; *Schätze der Kalifen* 1998: 96, Cat. 37) [Fig. 9]. It depicts two stepped tombs superstructures situated on either side of a branching tree with red ribbons tied to the branches (embodying a tradition of invoking mercy, still popular today). The tombs were decorated with a wavy ornament of a kind similar to that found on the discussed funerary stelae. These were in all likelihood ornaments cut in the plaster coating the tomb superstructure.

Another important iconographic source depicting tombs are miniatures contained in a few illustrated manuscripts of "picaresque stories" entitled *Maqamat* (*Assemblies*). Surviving manuscripts of stories by Al-Hariri (*floruit* 11th century) were copied in Syria, Iraq and Egypt in the 13th and 14th centuries. A manuscript now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (no. 3929), undated and copied most probably in Damascus, illustrates in an interesting way one of the episodes of the adventures of the hero Al-Harith, a traveling merchand (Rice 1959: 218; Grabar 1976: Pl. XI, Fig. 14; 1984: 8, 43–47). It pictures his visit to the

cemetery in Sava in Iran [Fig. 10]. The Syrian painter's objective naturally was not to show an Iranian necropolis, but to illustrate his theme in narrative fashion. The hero is depicted walking alone in the cemetery, in a sorrowful mood, seeking a remedy for the sorrow in his heart. He walks among tombs which surround him on all sides. Most of the three- or four-stepped tombs built of stone blocks have a semicircular or vertical structure, flat or convex, attached at one side. This contraption is difficult to interpret for it may be a funerary stela seen in profile, but if so, then the practice of orienting tombs toward Mecca would have engendered the positioning of all stelae on the same side of the tomb. This is not the case here, but it should be kept in mind that artists were



Fig. 9. Miniature depicting tombs in the shade of a tree, Egypt 9th–10th century (After *Schätze der Kalifen* 1998: 96, Cat. 37)

illustrating a literary narration, not reality, and it was the narrativeness of stories that shaped the principles of Arabic painting. From this point of view, the artist was actually representing Al-Harith thinking about any devotional matters. The painter was showing an event and consequently, all of the mysterious constructions attached to the tombs could be stelae.⁸

In conclusion, it seems that Egyptian medieval sepulchral ornamentation introduced a few important elements into Islamic art in general.

Firstly, it is important today to note that analogous ornamentation existed in Egypt in manuscript painting, which has not been preserved. Ornamentation from book pages was easily transferred to utilitarian objects of everyday use.

Secondly, vegetal motifs of different degrees of stylization were used in sepulchral ornamentation, considered as remaining in the spirit of religious practice



Fig. 10. Miniature depicting Al-Harith visiting the cemetery seeking a remedy for the hardness in his heart, from Al-Hariri's "Maqamat" (After Grabar 1976: Fig. 14)

⁸ A semicircular structure seen on the miniature presents probably the bricked closing of a grave.

in Islam. These motifs enlarged the set of patterns assigned for use in religious Islamic art and were instrumental in shaping in later ages the “landscape” compositions proper to wall painting, ceramic mosaics and reliefs known from mausolea all over the *dar al-islam*.

Thirdly, borders of epitaphs filled with floral and geometric patterns helped to establish in Islamic art the category of border ornamentation which was drawn upon freely by miniature painters, decorators of architecture and handicraft artisans.

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