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The Kufic Inscriptions of Kisimkazi Mosque, Zanzibar, 500 H. (A.D. 1107)

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OUR knowledge of ornamental Kufic inscriptions is chiefly based on the materials which have been found in Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, and Upper Mesopotamia. Although they are fairly numerous, a comparative study of the origin and general development of the different types of Kufic writing is not yet possible. Such a work would have to include the countries further East, and unfortunately they have not been thoroughly explored hitherto. But the few landmarks we possess show clearly that the outlying Eastern provinces produced a greater variety of decorative inscriptions than the West ever did.¹

This small stock of epigraphic documents from the Eastern part of the Muhammadan world has received a very remarkable addition through a discovery recently made by Major F. B. Pearce, British Resident in Zanzibar. In the course of his researches on the Muhammadan antiquities of this island, he has found several Kufic inscriptions in the Mosque of Kisimkazi,² which are all the more valuable as they bear an exact date. They are carved in stone, and decorate the qibla-wall and the mihrâb.

A transcription and a translation of the two larger inscriptions have already been published in the Supplement to the Official Gazette, Zanzibar, vol. xxx, No. 1526. The one on the right of the mihrâb is koranic, and contains chapter ix, 18 (cf.

¹ Cf. Islam, viii, 1918, p. 214 seq.; E. Diez, "Churasanische Baudenkmäler," arab. Inschriften von M. van Berchem"; and H. Viollet, "un monument des premiers siècles de l'hégire en Perse," *Revue Syria*, 1921, pl. xxxii-xxxiv.

² A description of this mosque is to be found in *Zanzibar, the island metropolis of Eastern Africa*, by F. B. Pearce, pp. 418-9.

Plate I), the other on the left is historical (cf. Plate II).
M. A. Patricolo renders the historical text as follows:—

الشيخ الر حنا السيّد ابى عمران

مفهمو الحسن بن محمد الله عمره واهلك عدوه

ببناء هذا المسجد في يوم الاحد ث القعدة سنة خمسائة

This version requires some additions and corrections. The beginning of the text reads: هذا ما امر, part of هذا is covered by a border of plaster,¹ which surrounds the two bands of writing. The words after الشيخ are partly defaced.

The first must be الرئيس,² as the two *yās* and the outline of

the *sīn* are still visible. The second word is الاجلّ; the three vertical shafts of *alif lām-alif* are to be seen in the left top corner of the second slab. The *nūn* read by Patricolo is merely an excrescence for ornament alone, an embellishment frequently used in Kufic script of this kind; the last letter is not *alif*, but a final *lām*, the tail of which ends under the *lām* of the following السيّد مفهمو. ('Mfahume'), which the

Cairo transcription reads after عمران, neither agrees with the number of the letters nor with their forms, it should be replaced by موسى بن. The little ornamental excrescence between *bā* and *nūn* occurs here again.

The first word of the second line is also partly hidden by the plaster border, and all that is entirely clear is a final

¹ It may be due to the restoration of 1184 H. (A.H. 1770) recorded by a naskhi inscription of the mihrāb, cf. loc. cit. inscription 3.

² This word has been kindly suggested by Mr. W. Marçais.

mīm. The next word is طَوَّل. The band ends with

[مِر] مِنْ شَ, but again the last two letters are covered by plaster. The rest of the date affords an interesting example of boustrophedon writing. The first letters of the month القعدة [ذِي] are cut off by the border. Between [ذِي] القعدة and سنة is visible a badly written فِي in a vertical position.

Translation: This is what has ordered the high and very great Shaikh es-Saiyid Abû 'Imrân Mûsâ, son of el Hasan, son of Muḥammad . . .—may Allāh grant him long life and destroy his enemies—about building this mosque on a Sunday of the month Dhû-lqa'da in the year five hundred (A.D. 1107).

A Kuranic inscription of a somewhat simpler style than the one of Plate I, is reproduced on Plate III. It contains chapter xvii, 80–82.

On the right of Plate III: أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لَدُلُو [ك]

In the middle: مَقَامَا مُحَمَّدَا وَقُلْ رَبِّ ادْخُلْنِي

on the right of the naskhi inscription already mentioned:

و اجْعَلْ لِي

The last word on the left must be نَصِيرَا; it has probably been restored, as its style differs much from the rest.

Plate IV gives the deep recess of the miḥrâb with the whole of verse 81. The circular inscriptions within the two rosettes over the miḥrâb arch (cf. Plate III) have been read with the kind assistance of Aly Bey Bahgat. The rosette on the right

contains K. xiii, 24, as far as فنعم, the one on the left عقبى الدار.¹ It has not been possible to decipher the rest, the only word quite clear is سلام.

What data are to be gathered from the inscriptions of Kisimkazi? It seems that the historical text does not yield much evidence as to the person and quality of the founder of the mosque. The epithets of Abû 'Imrân Mûsâ are not sufficient to determine his exact position in the settlement of Kisimkazi or to ascertain whether he was connected with one of the provinces of the Asiatic continent. The political history of Zanzibar about the year 500 H. is still in the dark, as the historical sources are very scanty.²

The chief interest of the unique inscriptions of Kisimkazi,³ therefore, lies in the many palæographical facts which they contain. At first sight the three inscriptions seem to differ considerably in their style of writing. The two bands of Plate I are decidedly more elaborate than those of Plate II and Plates III and IV. This is due to the fact that the former possess several specimens of the so-called "plaited Kufic" (*coufique tressé*). In the three Allâhs of Plate I all the vertical shafts are interlaced and form a compact and intricate mass, which covers the whole surface to be decorated (cf. Plate V, bottom line), scarcely leaving any space for ornamental foliage. But a close examination of the alphabetic table of the different inscriptions⁴ clearly shows that their characters belong to

¹ According to Aly Bey Bahgat this verse is frequently to be found in tombs of saints.

² Kind communication of Mr. R. Guest and Professor Snouck Hurgronje.

³ Cf. F. B. Pearce, loc. cit., p. 419 top.

⁴ A, B represent the characters of Plates I and II, C those of Plates III and IV.

one family. As a rule the same elements of foliage are used to fill up the open space between the letters, and it will be noticed that the tendency to interlace the shafts is a characteristic feature of all these bands.

The manner in which the calligraphist treats the article *alif lām* forms one of the best criteria for judging the style of his script. It is very remarkable that in the Kisimkazi inscriptions *alif lām* is always once or twice plaited (cf. Plate V, 1a, b). In this respect the contemporary inscriptions of Cairo form a striking contrast. Perhaps the finest specimen of Egyptian "floriated Kufic" is to be found in the qubbat Ikhwat Saiyidnâ Yûsuf.¹ It contains the same Kuranic inscription as Plate I, and therefore offers the best material for comparison. But although the Kufic characters of the Cairo monument are carved in stucco and about 20 years later than those of Kisimkazi, they are much more severe in style, and do not contain a single plaited *alif lām*.

The calligraphist of Kisimkazi not only interlaces the shafts within one word, he even connects two words by plaiting their final and initial letters (cf. Plate V, 1b end and the last but one Allâh, and Plate III on the left: *Aj'al li*). But the most striking feature of his script will be found in the letters with horizontal limbs: *dāl*, *sād*, *tā*, and *kāf* (cf. Plate V, 4, 7, 8, and 11). These letters differ so much from their canonic models as to be hardly recognizable. Instead of two horizontal bars, he sometimes uses four, and not content with this radical alteration of the original type, he further plaits them and adds little decorative loops at the top and bottom of the letters (cf. 4a, 4b, 7a, 7c, 8b, 11a, and 11c).

Another feature of this Kufic script, which, at first sight, does not strike the observer, but which is none the less very characteristic of it, must still be mentioned: the calligraphist of Kisimkazi, as a rule, does not try to displace the graphic

¹ Cf. Flury, *Die Ornamente der Hakim und Ashar Moschee*, pl. xviii, and A. Creswell, *A brief Chronology of the Muhammadan Monuments of Egypt*, pl. iv, A.

accents from the lower zone of the band towards the upper one. The bevelled shafts of *alif* and *lām* just touch the top edge of the band, but they are neither bent nor broken there to end in a horizontal direction or to be turned down again. *Dāl*, *tā*, *kāf* (cf. 4, 8, 11), and the tails of *rā*, *mīm*, *nūn*, *wāw*, and *yā* (cf. 5, 13, 14, 16, and 17) never reach the top edge, and no vertical shafts are used as mere ornaments. Obviously the artist wanted to have large gaps in the lettering to give free play to his scroll work.

From Plate VI, which shows some typical specimens of the floriated Kufic of Kisimkazi, it will be seen what a prominent place ornamental foliage holds in this script. Long, slender-stemmed scrolls spring from the letters, forming graceful involutions, and ending in three or five-lobed leaves (cf. Plate VI, *a*, *b*, and *d*), sometimes they are arranged symmetrically (*c*, *d*); but in either case great care is taken that the ornamental elements should be regularly distributed over the ground to be decorated. A very rare specimen of Kufic script, combined with elaborate ornaments detached from the characters, is reproduced in Plate VI, *e* (cf. Plate II, second band). The different floral elements, growing from the central, heart-shaped figure, blend into a remarkably well-balanced composition. This detail alone would suffice to prove that the calligraphist of Kisimkazi was a perfect master of his art.

The question of the origin of the Zanzibar Kufic is not easy to answer. One fact seems to be established by the analysis of the inscriptions: they exhibit such a degree of technical skill and feeling for style that they are not likely to be the work of a provincial craftsman, who knew no art beyond that of his native place.¹ A remark of Major F. B. Pearce hints at the country the script may come from: "The

¹ The same observation applies to the architectural features of the mihrāb (cf. Plate III); they at once recall a well-known series of mihrābs, one of the oldest of which is to be found in the mosque of Ibn Ṭāḥūn at Cairo.

main fabric of the outer walls (of the mosque) affords unmistakable evidence that the building is of Shirazian origin."¹ Unfortunately decorative Kufic inscriptions of cities near the Persian Gulf have not been published hitherto. Some fragmentary bands with a few letters, scrolls, and leaves might settle the question of origin at once.

As suitable materials for comparison are not available in Arabia, southern Persia, and 'Irâq, only the products of remoter art-centres can be compared with the Kufic script of Kisimkazi. And if its origin still remains in the dark, it will at least be possible to make clear its distinctive characteristics.

The capital of the Fatimite empire has already been mentioned. But among its many Kufic inscriptions there is not one which affords an indication of a possible connexion between Cairo and Kisimkazi. The Fatimite art of Egypt is characterized by a certain severity of style, traceable both in architecture and in ornamentation. The Kufic script of Cairo, accordingly, makes a sparing use of plaited characters.²

In this regard the inscriptions of Amida differ widely from those of Cairo and provide several details, which recall the alphabet of Plate V. The inscription of Sultan Malik Shâh, for instance, dated 484 H.,³ has a considerable variety of plaited *alifs* and *lîms*, their shafts are decorated with loops and knots in the form of a heart, and the tails of *ra*, *nûn*, *wâw*, and *yâ* end in three-quarter circles. But in spite of these common features there exists a fundamental difference. The calligraphists of Amida distribute their lettering over the whole surface of the band, and accordingly keep the floral scrolls in the background, whilst the artist of Kisimkazi reserves the upper zone as much as possible for foliage; the few specimens of pure plaited Kufic, of course, form an

¹ Cf. loc. cit., p. 418.

² Cf. Flury, *Islamische Schriftbänder, Amida-Diarbekr*, p. 31; translated into French in the *Revue Syria*, vol. ii, p. 61.

³ Cf. loc. cit., pl. x.

exception (cf. Plate V, 1b end and the two Allâhs of the last line). The latter, as well as the plaited *dāl*, *ṣād*, *ṭā*, and *kāf* (cf. Plate V, 4, 7, 8, and 11), cannot be derived from the contemporary epigraphic monuments of the Jazīrah province.

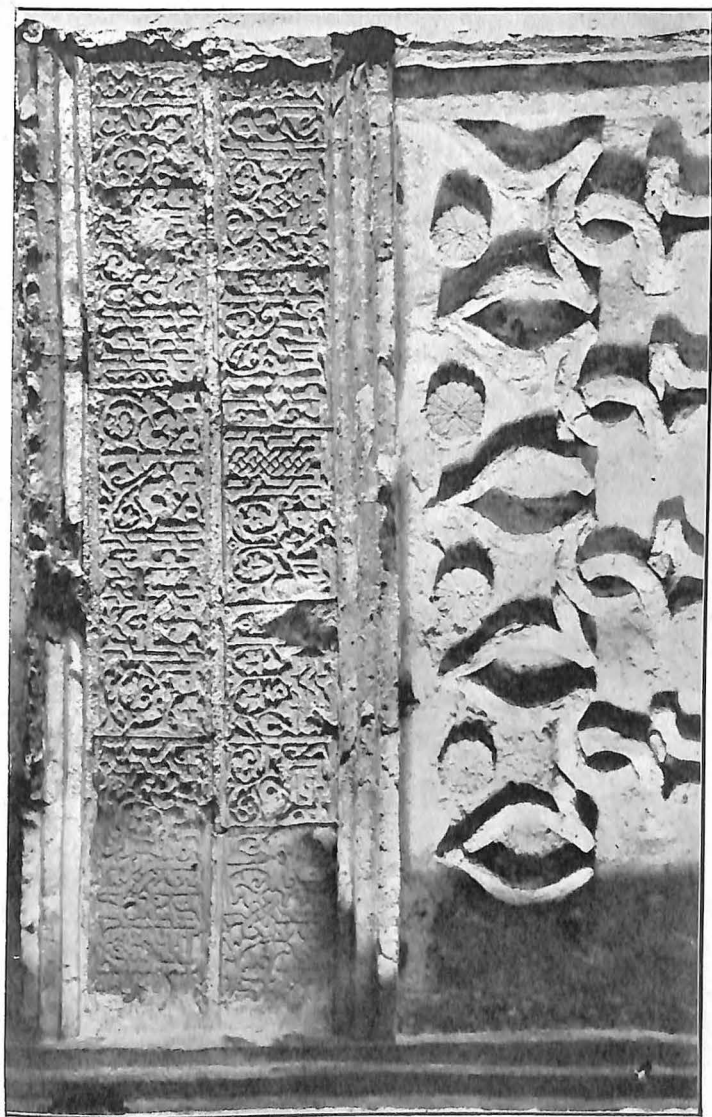
The highly developed script of Kisimkazi is not only unique on the African coast, but also on the Asiatic continent. So far only one prototype has been published, the inscription on the tower of Râdkân, near the Caspian Sea, dated 411 H.¹ The comparative analysis of the two scripts,² which are separated by such a great distance and a space of over eighty years, clearly shows that they belong to one and the same line of evolution, although the connecting links are still missing. Hitherto it has only been possible to follow the migration of the plaited characters from the North-East to the West,³ but now there is reason to believe that already in the course of the fifth century they had spread over the South as well.

Ornamental Kufic characters seem but a small field when compared with the range of the great monuments that Muhammadan art has produced; but, when thoroughly explored, they furnish a very sensitive instrument, enabling some hidden currents of Muhammadan civilization to be detected and estimated.

¹ Cf. E. Diez, *Churasanische Baudenkmäler*, Plates II and III.

² Cf. Flury, *Islamische Schriftbänder*, Plates XIV, 1, 4, 7, 15, 16 f., and *tām-alif*.

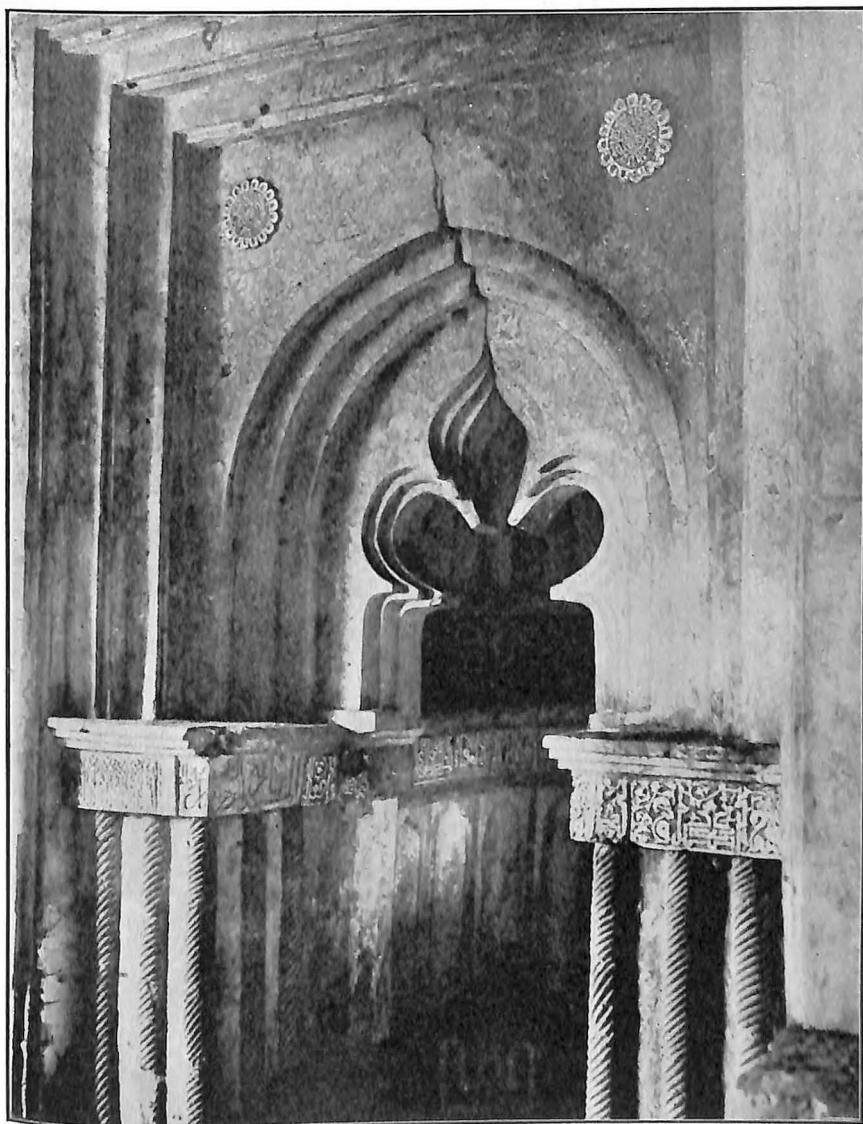
³ Cf. loc. cit., p. 51.



Kufic inscription in Kisimkazi Mosque, Zanzibar.



Kufic inscription in Kisimkazi Mosque, Zanzibar.



Mihrâb of Kisimkazi Mosque, Zanzibar.



Interior of the Mihrab of Kisimkazi Mosque, Zanzibar.



