

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

Aesthetic and Symbolic Dimensions of Arabic Writing New Perspectives on Manuscripts, Epigraphy, and Numismatics

Wolfson College, University of Oxford, 4–5 July 2024

As the disciplines of Islamic history and Arabic palaeography make steady progress, many questions concerning the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of Arabic writing remain unanswered. This symposium will bring together fourteen scholars working on Arabic calligraphy, epigraphy, palaeography, numismatics, and diplomatics in different regions of Afro-Eurasia, from the seventh to the sixteenth centuries. The aim is to showcase brand new research on a wide range of artifacts (Qur'anic manuscripts, chancery documents, monumental epigraphy, inscribed objects, coins...), grounded in material evidence but also engaged with textual sources (historiography, biographical dictionaries, philosophical treatises, *fatwas* and legal compendia, chancery manuals, *adab*...). Each contribution will shed light on previously unnoticed paradigms and practices, proposing new frameworks and approaches to Arabic writing that could be applied on a macro level, and unveiling the processes by which meaning was conveyed not just textually, but also visually. The symposium will lay the foundations for a methodological shift in the way we understand calligraphic and epigraphic styles, as it will mainly focus on the 'why' and 'how' such styles originated, developed, transformed, and became extinct, exposing or disproving their links with doctrinal notions, dynastic claims, aesthetic discourses, cultural identities, or the self-representation of distinct professional groups.

These are some of the questions that will be tackled: Why were specific scripts and layouts employed in some Arabic manuscripts, documents, and inscriptions on various media, instead of others? How did such scripts and layouts originate and develop, and how can the available literary sources help us understand these processes? Through what channels did calligraphic and epigraphic styles travel and spread? What role did different social groups (Quranic calligraphers, book copyists, chancery scribes, stone carvers, die engravers...) play in these processes, and to what extent did they affect each other's work? What influence did certain patrons, intellectual elites, and religious scholars have on the adoption and canonisation of specific calligraphic and epigraphic styles? What meanings were conveyed by calligraphic diagrams, calligrams, or by epigraphy that followed distinctive configurations or colour schemes? How did contemporary viewers and users perceive calligraphy and epigraphy beyond their textual content? How did they engage with their visual properties and material qualities?



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Day One: 4 July 2024

Venue: The Buttery, Wolfson College (Linton Rd, Oxford OX2 6UD)

- 9:30 Breakfast for all attendees in the Haldane Room
- 10:00 Introductory words
- 10:15 **An Early Genealogical Treatise in Kufic Script**
Alain George | University of Oxford
- 11:00 **The Rise & Fall of Kufic: Political Power & Religious Anxieties**
Alya Karame | Collège de France
- 11:45 **Kātib or Warrāq? Scribal Modes and Aesthetic Trends in Early Abbasid Bookhands**
Umberto Bongianino | University of Oxford
- 12:30 Lunch for all attendees in the Haldane Room
- 14:00 **The Perfect Way of Writing: The Journey of *Muḥaqqaq* between Theory and Practice**
Nourane Ben Azzouna | Université de Strasbourg
- 14:45 **Epigraphic Round Style: Early Evidence from the Eastern Islamic Lands**
Martina Massullo | Musée du Louvre
- 15:30 Tea break for all attendees in the Haldane Room
- 16:00 **Scribal Knowledge or Calligraphy? The Performance of *turki likhi* in Multilingual Hindustan**
Vivek Gupta | University College London
- 16:45 **Visualising Power: *Ṭughrās* as Graphic Symbols in the Chanceries of the Islamicate East**
András Barati | Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften
- 17:30 **First respondent's intervention**
Finbarr Barry Flood | New York University
- 17:45 General discussion
- 18:15 End of session
- 18:45 Informal dinner in hall for the speakers

Please note that you must register to attend the event. To register and purchase your tickets, please visit: <https://tinyurl.com/mvhjn43r>
Tickets include breakfast, lunch, and tea on both days. For further details, you can contact the KRC administrator: kate.kwok@ames.ox.ac.uk



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Day Two: 5 July 2024

Venue: The Buttery, Wolfson College (Linton Rd, Oxford OX2 6UD)

- 9:45 Breakfast for all attendees in the Haldane Room
- 10:15 **Framing Text: An Evaluation of Early Islamic Visual Strategies**
Marcus Milwright | University of York
- 11:00 **Coin Scripts before the Mongols: The Evolution of the Standard Numismatic Script**
Luke Treadwell | University of Oxford
- 11:45 **Placement and Perceptibility: Legal Opinions on Inscribing 'the Written Signs of Islam' on Buildings and Coins**
Ruba Kana'an | University of Toronto
- 12:30 Lunch for all attendees in the Haldane Room
- 14:00 **Navigating the Labyrinth: Visual Performance of Script in Metalwork from Medieval Mosul**
Zahra Kazani | University of Oxford
- 14:45 **An Aesthetic Approach to the Kufic Calligraphy from Selected Scrolls at TIEM: Connections and Purposes**
Sergio Carro Martín | Universitat Pompeu Fabra
- 15:30 Tea break for all attendees in the Haldane Room
- 16:00 **A *Majlis* of Scripts: Epigraphic Discourse and Visual References in the Complex of Sultan Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī in Cairo**
Carine Juvin | Musée du Louvre
- 16:45 **Ottoman Calligraphy across Media, c. 1400-1500**
Patricia Blessing | Stanford University
- 17:30 **Second respondent's intervention**
Eloïse Brac de la Perrière | Sorbonne Université
- 17:45 General discussion
- 18:15 Closing words & end of conference
- 19:00 Formal dinner in the Levett Room for the speakers

Please note that you must register to attend the event. To register and purchase your tickets, please visit: <https://tinyurl.com/mvhjn43r>
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ABSTRACTS

Day One: 4 July 2024

An Early Genealogical Treatise in Kufic Script

Alain George | University of Oxford

In the early Islamic period, Arabic writing witnessed a functional division: the angular scripts later known as Kufic were used for the Qur'an, as opposed to a range of less formalised scripts, mostly but not solely cursive, for all other texts. To date, only one non-Qur'anic manuscript is known to have been written in a Qur'anic style of calligraphy: a genealogical treatise from around the late eighth century of which fragments are preserved in Paris (BnF, Arabe 2047) and Berlin (Staatsbibliothek, Or. 379). Why this exception to the rule, and why no others? By contextualising the fragments, this paper will initiate an investigation of these questions.

The Rise & Fall of Kufic: Political Power & Religious Anxieties

Alya Karame | Collège de France

The Qur'an was copied in the Kufic script for at least three centuries. The term 'Kufic' is widely used in modern scholarship to indicate a group of calligraphic scripts that developed in the eighth century, based on rules of proportions and geometry. Kufic emerged with regional variations, on various media, from the eastern to the western parts of the Islamic world. It looked very different from the everyday round scripts and often appeared as if blurring the boundaries between script and ornament, due to the treatment of letters and their layout, be it in Qur'anic manuscripts or on architectural surfaces. While it complemented the Umayyad architectural programme, it also echoed the political unification of the empire. Never have we questioned why Kufic reached such an 'abstract' aesthetic, and what it responded to in religious terms. And never have we asked why a script that once homogenised the aesthetic of Muslim sacred scripture was abandoned for copying the Qur'an, starting from the tenth century. This paper addresses the rise and fall of Kufic by approaching it through the entanglement of the oral and written dimensions of the Qur'an, and through the continuous negotiations between various practices and authoritative discourses. Shaped by literacy, sacrality, and textual diversity, Kufic emerged as a form of artistic writing that visualised a canonised text. Coinciding with the disintegration of the Abbasid central power and enabled by social change, its abandonment as Qur'anic script was the result of failed attempts to control 'deviates' and maintain aesthetic hegemony.

Kātib or Warrāq? Scribal Modes and Aesthetic Trends in Early Abbasid Bookhands

Umberto Bongianino | University of Oxford

This paper focuses on a group of non-Qur'anic manuscripts produced in Iraq and Iran during the tenth century, showing remarkable scribal skills but profoundly different aesthetic choices. The aim is to try and explain these choices through the reassessment of some contemporary sources (such as Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*) and a closer look at the biographies of copyists and scribes from the period. The collation and ownership notes featured in these manuscripts help us understand their context of production and circulation, and they can be used to cast new light on the cultural values of their makers and readers. By combining palaeography with visual analysis, this paper seeks to nuance our understanding of Arabic penmanship in this formative period, and to establish a correlation between distinct scribal modes and specific milieus such as copyists' workshops, religious or scientific circles, and royal chanceries.



The Perfect Way of Writing: The Journey of *Muḥaqqaq* between Theory and Practice

Nourane Ben Azzouna | Université de Strasbourg

The term *Muḥaqqaq* evokes accuracy and perfection. It appears in Arab-Islamic literature on calligraphy no later than the tenth-eleventh centuries, under the pen of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī who defines four classes (*aqsām*) of calligraphy (*khatt*): *Muḥaqqaq* written with a thick, medium, and thin *qalam*, and finally, presumably, the other styles. In later texts, *Muḥaqqaq* generally occupies the first place as the fundamental style (*asīl*) both in the history of calligraphy, as the first rounded script after 'Kufic', and in the learning of this art. An examination of *Muḥaqqaq* works, however, reveals a wide variety of practices, sometimes within the same regional school, such as that of Yāqūt al-Musta'simī in Iraq and Iran. This presentation will explore this dialectic of theory and practice. Why is *Muḥaqqaq* identified as a kind of ideal style? What are the formal and functional characteristics of this ideal? And how is this ideal transcribed into reality, both before and after the process of canonisation of the so-called 'six styles' in the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries? The presentation will pay particular attention to the question of the purely visual reception of *Muḥaqqaq* in regions where neither transmission from master to pupil nor the theory of calligraphy are de rigueur, as is the case in pre-modern China.

Epigraphic Round Style: Early Evidence from the Eastern Islamic Lands

Martina Massullo | Musée du Louvre

The curvilinear script in Arabic epigraphy is attested at the court of the Ghaznavids, in present-day Afghanistan, since the early eleventh century. Although it was not intended to replace the widely used angular Kufic scripts, this new 'Round Style' spread rapidly throughout the Islamic world and was adopted in a variety of contexts and media. The aim of this paper is to examine the earliest known evidence for the use of this epigraphic style in the Eastern Islamic lands and to raise some key questions about its material and visual dimensions. The discussion will focus on inscriptions found on buildings and tombs, as well as on possible comparisons with texts on coins, artifacts, and manuscripts. Attention will be given to the relationship between style, content, and placement, as well as transmediality, the way calligraphers or craftsmen planned inscriptions, and the stylistic features of the 'Round Style', challenging common theories about its legibility or practical use.

Scribal Knowledge or Calligraphy? The Performance of *turki likhi* in Multilingual Hindustan

Vivek Gupta | University College London

Scribes writing in Arabic, Persian, and Hindavi moved between languages and media from at least the fourteenth century in South Asia. Through case studies from the long fifteenth century, this paper aims to invert the study of 'calligraphic style' to one that focuses on scribes—their bodies, skills, performed knowledge, laboured practices, and social orientations. While studies of South Asian painted and built traditions have recognised the agency of intelligent makers, scholarship on calligraphy still tends to hail the great canonised styles by masters of the pen. If in a single codex we find evidence of varied styles, the tendency is to ascribe them to the teamwork of different hands, not the experiments of a single scribe. As such, I define scribal knowledge as the range of skills a scribe practiced, not often apparent in a finalised calligraphy. By marshalling a range of new evidence, especially from Deccan manuscripts and epigraphy, but also from unpublished non-elite books used in performance and scholarly milieus, I attend to what Maulana Da'ud calls "*turki likhi*" in his *Chandayan* (1379 CE). For, this was what he called the vernacularised Arabic script in Hindustan.



Visualising Power: *ṭughrās* as Graphic Symbols in the Chanceries of the Islamicate East

András Barati | Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften

Throughout their extensive history, *ṭughrās* have always had a discernible symbolic aspect as the calligraphic signatures of rulers, their family members, and even high-ranking bureaucrats of the administration. These symbols were frequently either embraced or rejected by the chanceries in the Islamicate East, depending on the visual representations and associations they conveyed. In my presentation, I aim to examine the *ṭughrā's* inception as a graphic symbol on state documents and its later evolution into a complex aura-generating mechanism during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and to discuss the notable influence that the aesthetic and stylistic features of the *ṭughrā* exerted on its application in Egypt and India. In addition, I will explore how the inflow of Turco-Mongol linguistic elements and political traditions throughout the post-Mongol period impacted the calligraphic design of these symbols. It will be demonstrated that as later dynasties in the late mediaeval and early modern periods adopted the *ṭughrā*, specific meanings were conveyed through their stylistic and calligraphic characteristics rather than the textual content. Furthermore, I will provide instances where innovative elements were assimilated into the pre-existing aesthetic and symbolic framework of *ṭughrās*.

Day Two: 5 July 2024

Framing Text: An Evaluation of Early Islamic Visual Strategies

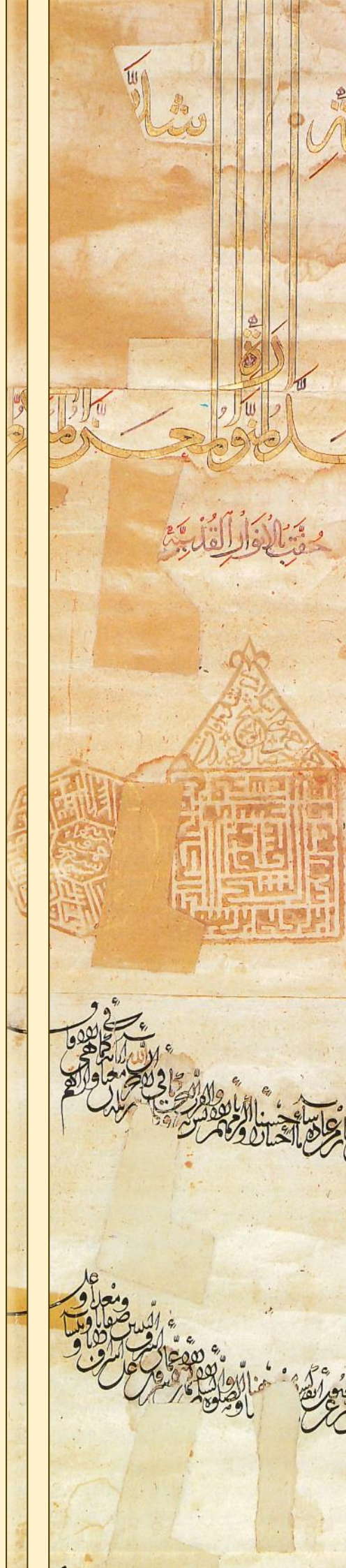
Marcus Milwright | University of York

From tentative beginnings in the second quarter of the seventh century, Arabic rapidly developed formal scripts appropriate for use in manuscripts, portable objects, and monumental inscriptions. An interesting phenomenon that appears during this phase is the employment of decorative frames around sections of text. The practice of enclosing words within frames was, of course, well known in Late Antiquity, particularly in regions around the Mediterranean. These frames varied in visual complexity and could be employed to surround a shorter text, such as a foundation inscription, or to separate off an important section from a longer passage. The demarcation of the boundaries of a piece of writing might simply function as a visual accent, though it is apparent that frames could also carry a distinct symbolic charge. This paper examines a selection of framed texts – including graffiti, monumental inscriptions, coins, and Qur'an manuscripts – from the first century of Islam to establish the main approaches and the extent to which these appropriate and adapt Late Antique sources. Finally, provisional conclusions are offered about the ways in which frames contribute to the meanings communicated by script.

Coin Scripts before the Mongols: The Evolution of the Standard Numismatic Script

Luke Treadwell | KRC & St Cross College

The standard numismatic script for precious metal coinage made its first tentative appearance in the mint of Bishapur in 76–7/696–7 and was canonised a decade later in the coinage of the newly-established mint of Wasit (from 86 AH onwards; see George 2010). After a period of experimentation under the early Abbasids, Ma'mun's reforms ushered in a 'New Style' of coin script which recalled the standard script of the Umayyad era and formed the basis for Islamic numismatic epigraphy of the third-fifth centuries AH. From the fourth century onwards, as the institutional capacities of the unitary caliphal state declined, this script was subject to variation and elaboration by local die engravers, whose work sometimes reflected innovations in public scripts. The 'silver coin famine' (late fourth to late sixth century AH) created a break in the production of silver coinage. When a dirham coinage was re-established by the Ayyubids, new coin scripts reflected distinctive



regional variations that owed less to the caliphal standards of the Abbasid era. With rare exceptions (the most striking being the Almohad curvilinear script), however, the underlying continuities of these later scripts form a contrast to the radical changes in coin design that appear periodically from the Fatimid era onwards. The documentary status and emblematic value of Islamic coins were two important factors that worked to maintain consistency in numismatic epigraphy before the advent of the Mongols.

Placement and Perceptibility: Legal Opinions on Inscribing ‘the Written Signs of Islam’ on Buildings and Coins

Ruba Kana’an | University of Toronto

Inscriptions on buildings and portable objects have long been a subject of study and debate amongst historians and art historians. These studies predominantly focused on the historical aspects of the text including its content and philological evolution or art historical focusing on scripts, styles, and techniques across different media. The last three decades also saw specialised studies that identified regional schools and changes therein across time. They also addressed the function of inscriptions as carriers of political and religious agendas, both secular and confessional. Many of these studies engaged with *hisba* manuals and listed their rules and prohibitions related to the use of inscriptions. Yet Muslim scholars engaged with ‘writing’ in more diverse and at times surprising ways. While discussing the rules for taxing gold and silver coins that are found buried under ground (*rikāz*), for example, jurists differentiated between coins that have writings that include ‘the signs of Islam’ like Qur’anic verses or the *shahāda* written on them and coins that display ‘signs of polytheism’ like idols (*aṣnām*) or the cross (*al-ṣalīb*). The two types of coins were placed under different tax brackets, and indeed different categories of state levy altogether, even if they came from the same hoard! This paper examines how public writing in the form of inscriptions that contain Qu’anic text or the *shahāda* is addressed in Muslim legal sources including *fiqh*, *fatwas*, and *hisba*. It specifically focuses on two different aspects of the legal debates. The first explores the repeatedly discussed topic of ritual purity of the inscribed objects and their placement. The second—a less examined subject—explores legal discussions of the perceptibility of inscriptions addressing notions of embodied visual, aural, and the haptic experiences of the observer (rather than the reader) of public inscriptions.

Navigating the Labyrinth: Visual Performance of Script in Metalwork from Medieval Mosul

Zahra Kazani | University of Oxford

Arabic script in a variety of styles is ubiquitous on silver-inlaid brass objects from Mosul in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This research focuses on the knotted Kufic-style script on these objects: elongated vertical segments of the letters paired with interlacing designs that run across the upper portion of the script. In this script style, the letterforms are visually relegated and significant emphasis is placed on the interlacing features of the script. This labyrinthic pattern creates a deliberate visual obstacle to the reading of the script. The viewer is, instead, captivated by the intricately crafted script designs. This paper demonstrates that the visual performance of script in this labyrinthic fashion was meaningful for the medieval viewer: the knotting of script resonated with the knotted designs pervasive in materials associated with magic in the region and were therefore understood as apotropaic. The knotted designs also amplify the (primarily) benedictory content of the inscriptions and instantaneously signal a magical affiliation, irrespective of the readability of the text. By focusing on the shape of the script, the paper raises the issue of legibility, especially as the knotted script patterns are juxtaposed with more easily readable styles of script on the same object. The paper also sheds light on the evolution of the knotted style design in Mosul and on specific workshops that adopted the design more consistently in their works.



An Aesthetic Approach to the Kufic Calligraphy from Selected Scrolls at TIEM: Connections and Purposes

Sergio Carro Martín | Universitat Pompeu Fabra

The certificates from the TIEM collection in Istanbul have attracted the attention of scholars, both for the documentary typology they represent and for their materiality. While they have been studied from various perspectives, their calligraphies still require in-depth examination for several reasons: they combine different styles (both handwritten and printed) with micrography and illuminations in an unusual vertical format for (legal) documents like these. The challenges in studying these scrolls are also evident, primarily due to the scant or non-existent information in Arabic sources about their production context, which still requires further exploration. Among these documents, a few Ayyubid specimens with very distinctive Kufic calligraphy stand out, closely related to the epigraphy developed on specific monuments in the Mesopotamian region. These certificates could shed light not only on foliated and knotted Kufic scripts but also on the production and consumption contexts associated with this type of document. This paper addresses the collective study of the format and calligraphy of these certificates through a comprehensive analysis of their forms, contrasting them with other similar calligraphic and epigraphic evidence from the regions of Iraq and Iran. This comparative approach aims to provide answers to some of the questions posed.

A *Majlis* of Scripts: Epigraphic Discourse and Visual References in the Complex of Sultan Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī in Cairo

Carine Juvin | Musée du Louvre

Many major monuments of the Mamluk period stand out by their highly elaborated epigraphic programme. The complex of Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī in Cairo, mainly completed in 909–10/1503–4, is certainly the richest and the finest example of this epigraphic tradition, though it has not received the attention it deserved as such. Beyond a general presentation of the content and the spatial organisation of its inscriptions, this paper aims to consider them in the special context of Sultan al-Ghawrī's reign and cultural interests. It will explore the relations with other contemporary monuments and artefacts within and outside of the Mamluk sultanate, and will use different textual sources (historical chronicles, *waqfiyyas*, calligraphic treatises amongst others), allowing to better understand the aesthetic, symbolic and political intentions at work in this late Mamluk royal foundation, conveyed through its epigraphy.

Ottoman Calligraphy across Media, c. 1400–1500

Patricia Blessing | Stanford University

Over the course of the fifteenth century, Ottoman architecture slowly shifted from wide-ranging, targeted experimentation to a unified artistic idiom closely tied to Ottoman imperial identity what would be consolidated by c. 1500. Profiles marked by sleek stone surfaces, large domes for mosques, joined by smaller domes in courtyard arcades, palace structures, and hammams increasingly dominated the monuments built for Ottoman elites. Within these buildings, calligraphy abounds in inscriptions (both indoors and outdoors) and on objects such as mosque lamps and candlesticks made to furnish them. All these inscriptions, at various scales, have in common that they were designed on paper by calligraphers, including masters of the time such as by Şeyh Hamdullah (d. 1520), a close associate of Ottoman sultan Bayezid II. The inscriptions were also, however, adapted to their use in architectural decoration and on objects, in both form and materiality. The texts were scaled up to the monumental size of foundation inscriptions, and transposed from the flat surface of paper to the rounded one of objects. They were also translated from paper into stone carving, metal, and underglaze painting on ceramic. These processes required the work of experts in these various media and take the art of calligraphy from paper into a multi-media environment. This paper investigates these modes of material translation and scale, and thus offers new insights into modes of labour and production in Ottoman calligraphy. It argues that more than an art on paper, calligraphy is one that crosses materials, scales, and dimensions; calligraphers alone did not do this work, but rather provided a starting point for other, often unknown and underappreciated artists to do their work.

