

## CUFIC LETTERING IN CHRISTIAN ART

By S. D. T. SPITTLE

The appearance in the arts of the Christian world of the early form of Arabic lettering known as Cufic has been noted by various writers in the past, but although certain forms of decoration have been recognized as being based on the Cufic script, the fact that many of these patterns are really translatable inscriptions has been less often observed. As early as 1846 de Longpérier<sup>1</sup> showed how closely some of these patterns were derived from Arabic lettering ; subsequently Mr. Christie published an article on the subject<sup>2</sup> and Dr. Hildburgh made many references to it in his work, ' Medieval Spanish Enamels '. The purpose of this paper is to make a general survey of the instances where decoration is based on the Cufic script, and to show that many of the so-called ' pseudo-Cufic ' inscriptions are in fact translatable. There are, of course, a great many patterns and bands of decoration which are clearly derived from the Cufic alphabet but which are not decipherable ; considering that to simulate Cufic lettering was the normal practice in Islamic art, it is to be expected that Christian craftsmen would copy both the correct and the simulated inscriptions. In this paper references to the Cufic lettering that appears in South Italy, Sicily and Spain have been purposely omitted as these places were outposts of Moslem culture in Europe, and are here considered as major centres of an influence. It is in the arts of Byzantium on the one hand and of France and England on the other that Cufic is found more unexpectedly as a decorative motif, and hence this essay has concentrated on the appearance of the lettering in these areas.

In various branches of Byzantine art Cufic lettering was used for decorative purposes, and in Greece in particular it occurs on works of art essentially Christian. There remains a group of Greek churches dating from the 11th century where the wall surfaces have ornamental panels containing patterns derived from Cufic letters. This decoration was either carried out in shaped bricks embedded in mortar or in terra-cotta panels with lettering in relief and the background filled in with mortar, in the *champlevé* manner. Mr. Megaw has made a detailed study of these churches and has published drawings of the decorations.<sup>3</sup> Although some of the patterns may be identified with known Cufic letters, the majority are purely imitations of letters. However, the similarity between these patterns and contemporary inscriptions of Islamic origin is clear enough ; the illustrations (fig. 1 and Pl. XV A) show some ornament

<sup>1</sup> de Longpérier : ' De l'emploi des caractères arabes dans l'ornementation chez les peuples Chrétiens de l'occident ', in *Revue Archéologique*, 1846.

<sup>2</sup> A. Christie : ' The development of ornament from Arabic script ', in *Burlington Magazine*, July, 1922.

<sup>3</sup> H. Megaw : ' The Chronology of some

Middle-Byzantine churches ', in *Annual of the British School at Athens*, xxxii.

Talbot Rice : *Legacy of Persia* (Oxford, 1953), chap. 2, Persia and Byzantium ; p. 55 ff. He states that the Cufic script was in vogue from the 10th to the 14th century, but was less common after 1050, and that ' later examples are mainly confined to the ornament of brickwork façades '.



A. The Church of the Apostles, Athens. Early 11th-century brick inlay decoration



B. Manuscript illustrated by Ademar de Chabannes. Early 11th-century  
(By courtesy of Leyden University Library)



C. Retable, Westminster Abbey. Figure of St. Peter. Third quarter of 13th-century  
(Photograph by Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England). Crown Copyright reserved)



D. The Dover Bible. Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Late 12th-century  
(Photograph by courtesy of the Courtauld Institute of Art)



Plaque of Limoges enamel. Early 13th-century  
(*Photograph by the Victoria and Albert Museum. Crown Copyright reserved*)

in brick from the Athenian church of H. Apostoloi, and (fig. 2) a spandrel decoration from a window in the church at Daphni. These typical examples may be compared with an inscription from a Fatimid textile of the first part of the 11th century (fig. 3).<sup>1</sup> At the church of the Panagia Lykodemou there is a fine frieze with a pattern formed by repeating some Cufic letters first one way then in reverse (fig. 4). This type of repetitive decoration is well known in Islamic art, but it became especially favoured by the Fatimid tiraz weavers throughout the first part of the 11th century. One of their textiles is shown as fig. 5 for comparative purposes. The church of H. Theodoroi in Athens which belongs to the latter part of the 11th century, has across the narthex a row of terra-cotta panels with a repetitive Cufic script fashioned in the champlevé manner. One of these panels contains a 'mirrored' version of the words 'Al Malik Allah' ('المالك الله') meaning 'kingdom of God' (fig. 6), although incorrectly spelt; it too may be compared with the textile shown as fig. 5.

Also in Greece is a series of stone and marble monumental panels ornamented with Cufic lettering in relief. M. Soteriou attributes these reliefs to a date subsequent to the fall of Crete to the Byzantines in A.D. 960.<sup>2</sup> The island had been in the hands of the Arabs since its capture in 826 from Michael II of the Amorian dynasty. It is assumed by M. Soteriou that, as a result of the skirmishes during the recapture of the island, captives had been brought to the mainland of Greece where they were eventually absorbed into the population of the country. Without doubt there were considerable movements of populations throughout the Near East, especially after the expansion of the Empire by the strong Macedonian rulers and the recapture of the old Byzantine possessions lost under the weak Amorian dynasty. Through the agency of travellers and merchants things such as textiles, metal objects and perhaps even illuminated manuscripts doubtless found their way into Byzantine countries where they were used as models.<sup>3</sup> Another explanation is advanced by Dalton who writes: 'Floriated Cufic appears to have come in towards the end of the first millenium possibly introduced by Moslem artists who followed the Bulgarian armies into Greece'.<sup>4</sup> If we accept M. Soteriou's explanation, it would seem that some of the craftsmen accepted Christianity in the later stages of their settlement; the fact that some objects have Christian symbols in conjunction with stylised Cufic lettering would be added evidence. For example, in the

<sup>1</sup> The purpose of illustrating some examples of Cufic lettering on Islamic objects is to show the similarity between the style of the letters produced by Moslem and by Christian workmen; no other special connection is intended, although things of parallel date have been chosen wherever possible.

<sup>2</sup> Soteriou: 'Αραβικά Λείψανα ἐν Ἀθήναις (Athens, 1929), also 'Αραβικά Διακοσμητικά . . . (Athens, 1935), also Dalton: *East Christian Art* (Oxford,

1925), p. 199, where Soteriou's dating is confirmed.

<sup>3</sup> Talbot Rice: 'Byzantine Polychrome Pottery' in *Burlington Magazine*, lxi (Dec., 1932), p. 281.

E. Wiegand: 'Die helladische Schule in der mittel-byzantinischen seidenweberei', in *IIIe Congrès Byzantin* at Athens, 1930, p. 222.

<sup>4</sup> O. M. Dalton: *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* (Oxford, 1911), p. 712.



FIG. 1



FIG. 4

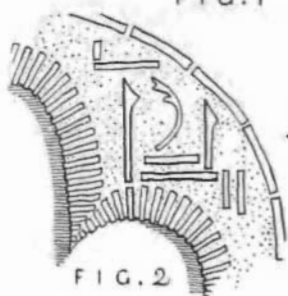


FIG. 2



FIG. 3



FIG. 5

Scale for figures 1, 2, 4, 6 and 8  
0 1 2 Feet



FIG. 6 املك لله

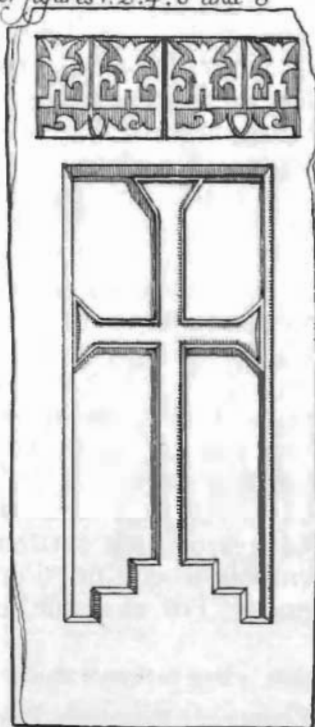


FIG. 9

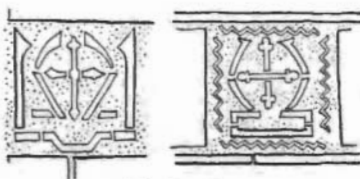


FIG. 8



FIG. 7



FIG. 12



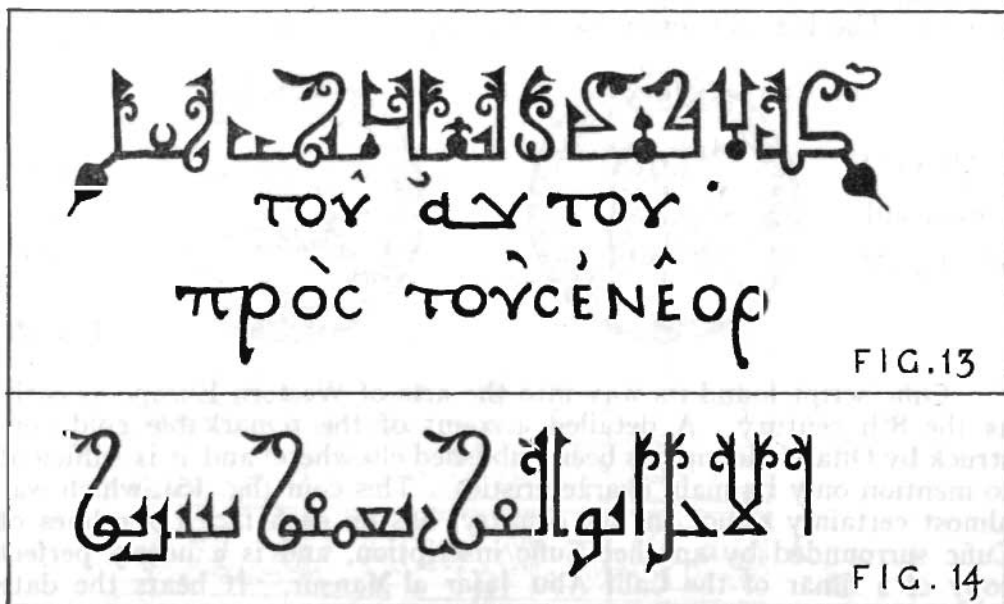
FIG. 10



FIG. 11 diam 3/4

Byzantine Museum in Athens is a marble panel with a band of decoration composed of a cross flanked by the sacred initials between the uprights of Cufic characters (fig. 7). There is a considerable number of these relief panels, and they show the same characteristics (fig. 9), but the inscriptions are mostly imitative.<sup>1</sup> Further, brick inlaid patterns in walls sometimes show a similar combination of Christian symbols and Cufic decoration (fig. 8).

Dalton remarks that the decorative use of Cufic script occurs only in connection with Byzantine monuments in Greece and is apparently not represented in Constantinople.<sup>2</sup> There are, however, some ceramics with borders of Cufic which were produced in Constantinople in addition to the pottery of much the same type that was made in Greece. Talbot Rice considers that the dish fragment (fig. 10) belongs to the 12th century;<sup>3</sup> for the sake of comparison an inscription from a 'Samarkand' plate of somewhat earlier date is shown adjacent to the Byzantine fragment (fig. 11). Talbot Rice adds that this patterning was brought to the west through the medium 'of drawings, of textiles and perhaps a very few actual vessels', but he does not suggest that the pottery was made locally by workmen of Arab stock.



Elsewhere in the Eastern Byzantine Empire examples exist of Cufic lettering being used for decoration. In Cyprus, for instance, is a 12th-

<sup>1</sup> Soteriou : *op. cit.* A number of the panels are illustrated, although some would appear, on epigraphic and stylistic grounds, to be comparatively recent and to date from the Turkish

occupation of Greece.

<sup>2</sup> O. M. Dalton : *op. cit.*, p. 712.

<sup>3</sup> Talbot Rice : *op. cit.*, *Burlington Magazine*, lxi (Dec., 1932).

century mural painting in the church of the Holy Apostles at Perachorio depicting the Feast of the Apostles.<sup>1</sup> On the altar is a sacramental bread basket (fig. 12) with a Cuficized border round the body. Bowls of a comparable form were common products of the Syrian and Persian workshops, and it is reasonable to suppose that the artist had selected some metal bowl of Islamic origin as a model for his painting.

In Byzantine manuscripts, too, Cufic was borrowed as a decorative motif. During the Ducas dynasty of the second half of the 11th century, when some manuscripts were being ornamented to a degree of great splendour, Cufic played a part in the elaboration. In the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom which was commissioned for Nicephoras III (reigning from 1078 to 1081) is a heading based on the Cufic script (fig. 13).<sup>2</sup> There are interesting indications of how the Arabic letters took on variations when written from left to right; for example, the arrow-like heads of the short letters frequently face to the right, while many of the terminals of the taller ones have a clockwise curve; neither of these features is usual in a true Islamic inscription. Fig. 14 shows an inscription from a Fatimid textile of slightly earlier date than the manuscript and demonstrates the type of lettering aimed at by the Christian illuminator, especially in respect of the flowered heads of the letters. The lam-alif letter has been copied with particular care.



Cufic script found its way into the arts of Western Europe as early as the 8th century. A detailed account of the remarkable gold coin struck by Offa of Mercia has been published elsewhere<sup>3</sup> and it is sufficient to mention only its main characteristics. This coin (fig. 15), which was almost certainly struck in this country, has on each face three lines of Cufic surrounded by another Cufic inscription, and is a nearly perfect copy of a dīnār of the Calif Abu Jafar al-Mansur. It bears the date

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Megaw, Director of Antiquities in Cyprus, has kindly supplied the information about this painting.

<sup>2</sup> *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom* (Paris. Bib. Nat. Gr. 660, 350).

Ebersolt: *La Miniature Byzantine*, Pl. LIII, no. 2.

Talbot Rice: *Byzantine Art* (Oxford, 1935), p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> Carlyon-Britton: 'The Gold Mancus of Offa, King of Mercia', in *Brit. Numis. Jour.*, v (1908), illus. opp. p. 55.

R. L. Kenyon: *Gold Coins of England* (London, 1884), fig. 13.

J. H. Kramers: 'Geography and Commerce', in *The Legacy of Islam* (Oxford, 1931), p. 106.

156 Higara, which is equivalent to 774 A.D. Offa, it seems, was in close touch with the Near East and had received gold presents and coins from the Calif. One may assume therefore that a coin in his possession was used as a model. Arabic coins were circulating in some numbers in Anglo-Saxon times, and in Norway and Sweden in particular considerable quantities of them have been found ; it is possible that Offa had received Islamic coins from these sources. The suggestion has been made that this coin was expressly struck as tribute money for the Pope, in which case it is curious that it should bear the words : ' Mohammed rasoul Allah . . . ' ( محمد رسول الله : ' Mohammed is the Apostle of God ').<sup>1</sup> The only part that would have been understood are the words ' Offa Rex ' which were inserted upside down between the lines of the inscription. The second half of the 8th century was a time when the controversy over the question of image worship was at its height in the Christian world ; a prohibition against the practice had just been renewed by Constantine V, yet the seventh council of Nicaea which was held in 787 authorised the worship of images ; Charlemagne took the opposite view to the Council (*Libri Carolini*, 790 A.D.). It is perhaps possible therefore that in the Offa coin Christian iconography was rejected on doctrinal grounds but was replaced unwittingly by formulae of an entirely different faith. Subsequent to the date of this coin of King Offa a number of Christian coins were produced that had Arabic inscriptions. The so-called dinars of St. Louis issued in the middle of the 13th century at Acre and certain coinage from Castille contain the words in Arabic : ' God is one ' and ' The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost ' and other Christian phrases. Many Sicilian coins have Arabic inscriptions, such as those of Roger II which contain the date reckoned from the Higara and the name of the mint in Cufic characters.

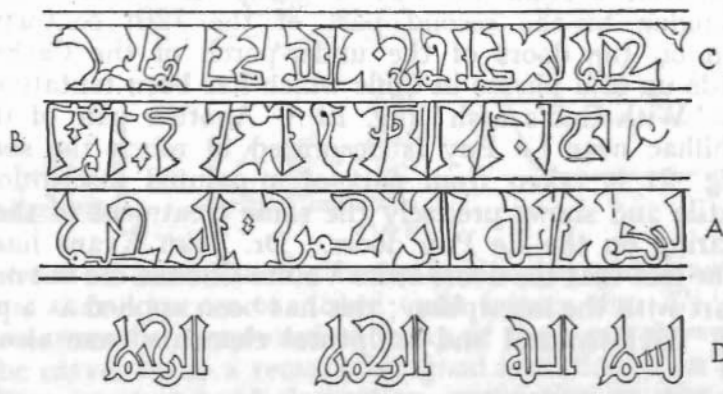


FIG.16

One of the most remarkable instances of Cufic being used partly in a readable form is found on a page of a MS. illustrated by Ademar de

<sup>1</sup> R. L. Kenyon : *op. cit.*, p. 12.



Chabannes in the first part of the 11th century (Pl. XVb and fig. 16). It is now in the Leyden University Library (Ms. Voss. Lat. 0.15 f. 210 v).<sup>1</sup> There are three lines of Cufic, the centre one of which is turned upside down forming a boustrophedon pattern. The inscription starts at line 'A' which can be read clearly as 'Bis-millah ar-rahman ar-rahim' بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم ('In the name of God the Compassionate and the Merciful'). For the sake of comparison the same phrase from a pierced circular medallion on a wall of the mosque of al-Aqmar in Cairo (519 A.H. 1125 A.D.) is shown (fig. 16 'D'); the words have been intentionally separated to correspond with the same words in the MS.<sup>2</sup> The other two lines do not seem to be translatable although they consist of parts of words. For instance, the first word in the top line ('C') on the extreme right is practically the same as the last word in the lower line (ar-rahim) (الرحيم), except that it omits the first three letters. The first word in line 'B', on the left as it appears in fig. 16, is probably 'Na'ma' (نعمة) meaning 'favour'. It would seem that the artist copied the first line faithfully from a chapter heading of the Koran or a benedictory inscription on metal, ivory or some other material; later, instead of arduously reproducing each sentence correctly a few words were chosen at random to make up the pattern. Another manuscript containing a number of decorative bands based on Cufic lettering is the famous Apocalypse of St. Sever which was written in the middle of the 11th century. The St. Sever version<sup>3</sup> was made while the Spaniard Gregory of Montana was abbot, so the appearance of Cufic in the ornament of this MS. is perhaps due to the abbot's personal connections with Moslem Spain. The Cufic decoration (fig. 17) is not decipherable, but its similarity to true Cufic is clear enough when compared with the name 'Mohammed' from an Islamic textile of approximately the same date (fig. 18).

In the district around Le Puy a group of wooden doors has survived belonging to the second part of the 12th century. The border-pattern on the doors of the under-porch of the Cathedral of Le Puy is made up of a phrase in Cufic which has been tentatively read by Fikry as: 'With God's wish' (fig. 19).<sup>4</sup> Another pair of doors at La Voulte-Chilhac near Le Puy is decorated in much the same way (fig. 20). Fig. 21 is taken from part of a painted inscription on a Yemenite textile and shows precisely the same treatment of the letters as that appearing on the Le Puy doors. Dr. Joan Evans has drawn attention to the fact that the doors at La Voulte-Chilhac did not originally possess the part with the inscription; this has been applied as a patching subsequently. Architectural and sculptural elements were also carved

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Mr. Christopher Hohler for the reference to this MS. 'Catalogue de l'Exposition: L'Art Roman à Saint Martial de Limoges' (1950).

<sup>2</sup> K. A. C. Creswell: *The Moslem Architecture of Egypt. Ikhshids and Fatimids* (Oxford, 1952). Pl. 83d.

<sup>3</sup> Willemin: *Monuments français* (1839).

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Fikry: 'L'art roman du Puy et les influences islamiques', in *Études d'art et d'archéologie* (Paris, 1934).

Noel Thiollier: *L'architecture romane dans l'ancien diocèse du Puy* (Paris, 1900), p. 66.

Fikry: *op. cit.*

with Cufic patterning during this period in France: a capital in the Toulouse Museum (fig. 22) and another like it at Guilhem-le-Desert, a capital at Moissac (fig. 23)—like borders in the St. Sever Apocalypse (fig. 24)—a door lintel in the church of St. Pierre-de-Reddes (fig. 25) are some examples of the 11th and 12th centuries. The ornament on the St. Pierre-de-Reddes lintel is of the same general form as that on a Syrian brass salver (fig. 26). An accomplished bas-relief, which originally



FIG. 17

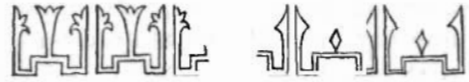


FIG. 25

FIG. 26

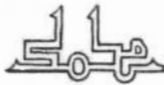


FIG. 18



FIG. 19



FIG. 20



FIG. 21



FIG. 22



FIG. 23



FIG. 24



FIG. 27

came from an archivolt in a house in Bourges and is now in the Lyons Museum, has a border of incised Cufic letters (fig. 27).<sup>1</sup> Certainly the letters cannot be deciphered as many of them are shown back to front, but the carver made a remarkably good imitation of an inscription.

This same sort of decoration originating in the Cufic alphabet appeared on a variety of materials. A bookbinding of English work-

<sup>1</sup> Focillon : *L'art des sculptures romanes* (Paris, 1931), Pl. XXXVII.

manship, which was enriched with blind stamping (fig. 28), was made for Henry, son of Henry VII of France, some time before 1146 and shows the characteristic triangular-headed terminals of the tall letters.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Weale has proved that this binding and another like it were made at either Durham or Winchester.<sup>2</sup> Therefore it is interesting to note the appearance in the Winchester Bible, although a little later in date than the binding, of decoration apparently based on repetitive Cufic (fig. 29).<sup>3</sup> One finds the similar decoration in the early 13th-century Psalter of Ingeborg (fig. 30) which may also be of English origin. The triangular-headed letters used on the binding stamp and in the decoration of the Ingeborg Psalter are typical features of true Cufic; part of an inscription on a Fatimid textile of the late 12th century (fig. 31) serves as an example for comparison. Again, at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, is an English bible, known as the Dover Bible (MS. 4, f.58), belonging to the second half of the 12th century, which has a capital letter enriched with Cufic lettering (figs. 32, 33 and Pl. XVD).<sup>4</sup> The patterning is almost certainly founded on the word 'Nasr' (نصر), meaning 'victory', a word which is so commonly repeated on late Fatimid and Ayyubid objects. An Islamic textile (fig. 34) in the Victoria and Albert Museum<sup>5</sup> of about the same date as the Corpus manuscript illustrates the same tendency to curve the terminals of the letters first one way then the other to form a repeating pattern. One element of the manuscript's pattern can be compared with the word 'Nasr' from a Fatimid textile (fig. 35).

It is to be expected that a fusion would occur between Islamic and Gothic decorative motifs, and this can well be seen in a border found in the Psalter of St. Isabelle (fig. 36) written some time before 1270. Again one sees the same vertical letters with flowered heads flanking a smaller round letter in the centre with a fleur-de-lis finial. A similar feature occurs in the patterns on the door of La Voûte Chilhac (fig. 20). Almost contemporary with the Psalter of St. Isabelle is the retable at Westminster Abbey. Certain figures on this retable are shown wearing garments which have borders embroidered with Cufic letters in gold thread (Pl. XVc, fig. 37).<sup>6</sup> The patterning is clearly very close to the St. Isabelle Psalter (fig. 36), the only major difference being in the way each alternate group has been turned upside down. Was it intended that the robes should be given a special eastern flavour by the inclusion of Cufic decoration in order that their wearers could be recognised as belonging to an eastern country? The same thing had been done by

<sup>1</sup> Christie: *op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> W. H. J. Weale: *Bookbinding and Rubbings of Bindings in the National Art Library, South Kensington* (London, 1894-98, i, Pl. xxiii, and ii, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Christie: *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> M. R. James: *Camb. Ant. Soc. Proc.*, vii (1893), Pl. VIII.

T. S. R. Boase: *English Art*, 1100-1216

(Oxford, 1953), pp. 167-169, Pl. 57b.

<sup>5</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum: *Catalogue of Muhammadan textiles of the medieval period* (London, 1924), Pl. VII and p. 28, no. 922.

<sup>6</sup> M. Rickert: *Painting in Britain: The Middle Ages*. (London, 1954). Pl. 115b.

W. R. Lethaby: *Westminster Abbey and the King's Craftsmen* (London, 1906), p. 264.



FIG. 28



FIG. 29



FIG. 30



FIG. 31



FIG. 32

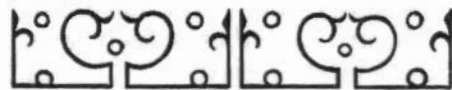


FIG. 33



FIG. 36



FIG. 34



FIG. 37



FIG. 35



FIG. 39



FIG. 38 a.



FIG. 38 b.



c.



d.

Nicholas de Verdun whose enamelled retable at Klosterneuberg (1181) shows many of the figures wearing cloaks with Cufic-lettered borders. On ivory figures, especially of the Virgin, the robes were often ornamented with these Cufic patterns. In the Wernher collection, for example, are two early 14th-century ivories (Cat. nos. 123 and 130) with painted border-designs almost identical with those shown on the Westminster retable except that the groups of letters are not alternating. Yet again, some frescoes in Yugoslavia show these same characteristics; the late 13th or early 14th-century church of Arilje has a representation of the 'Kiss of Judas' where the soldiers and the bystanders are wearing tunics with border-decoration ultimately derived from Cufic. It is interesting to note that here the robes worn by Christ and the Apostles are not so ornamented and are therefore in exact contrast to the system practised in western Europe.<sup>1</sup> The robes with Cufic-pattern borders were the forerunners of those worn by the more important persons depicted in so many Italian paintings from the late 14th to the early 16th century; these border-patterns are frequently and erroneously called 'pseudo-Cufic', but they are in fact much closer to the more cursive Naskri alphabet which was in current use throughout Islam during that later period.

Cufic decoration was also employed by the glass painters during the first quarter of the 13th century. At Westminster Abbey there are some pieces of 13th-century 'grisaille' glass with decorative borders, which Prof. Lethaby recognized as 'developments of Arabic characters' (fig. 38a).<sup>2</sup> Again we find the pattern made up of two vertical letters flanking a shorter one which has a clover leaf or fleur-de-lis finial. At Canterbury, too, are a number of panels of glass with decorative borders of Cufic very similar to examples already noted on other materials (figs. 38b, c and d); the panels are mostly dated *c.* 1200, although some other glass shows that the pattern survived in a more clumsy form for about twenty-five years. Mr. Rackham has already recognized the presence of the Cufic and has listed the glass where it occurs,<sup>3</sup> but his suggested reading of the letters as 'alafia' would seem unlikely. Originally this pattern was probably founded simply on the word 'allah' (الله—'God') repeated over and over and subsequently contorted and subdivided to form a balanced repetitive pattern. This arrangement of two uprights on either side of a smaller letter became a very common border decoration in many branches of Islamic art: a section from a textile (fig. 39) is typical. On one of the Canterbury panels representing St. Thomas of Canterbury appearing in a dream to Louis VII of France, Cufic is used to complete a line of an inscription where the first part is in Latin characters (fig. 38d).

<sup>1</sup> Arts Council: *Catalogue of Yugoslav Medieval Frescoes Exhibition*, Tate Gallery (1953), p. 40, no. 38.

<sup>2</sup> A. Christie: *op. cit.*

W. R. Lethaby: *op. cit.*, pp. 300, 301, fig. 100.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Rackham: *The Ancient Glass of Canterbury Cathedral* (London, 1949), Pls. 12, 13, 15, 17, 20, 34, 37, 42-47, V, VI, XI.

A 13th-century manuscript with a great variety of unintelligible Cufic is a French missal in the Mantua Library (fig. 40); it shows all the characteristics of real Cufic such as the triangular-headed and looped letters.<sup>1</sup> In the 15th century, in France especially, there appeared on manuscripts, usually to fill up a line at the end of a sentence, a type of decoration composed of short uprights with triangular-shaped heads and linked at the base by a line which tailed off at the left-hand end. How directly this decoration was derived from Cufic is not immediately obvious, but later in the century an imitation of Naskri was quite clearly used for enriching manuscripts in France and Italy.

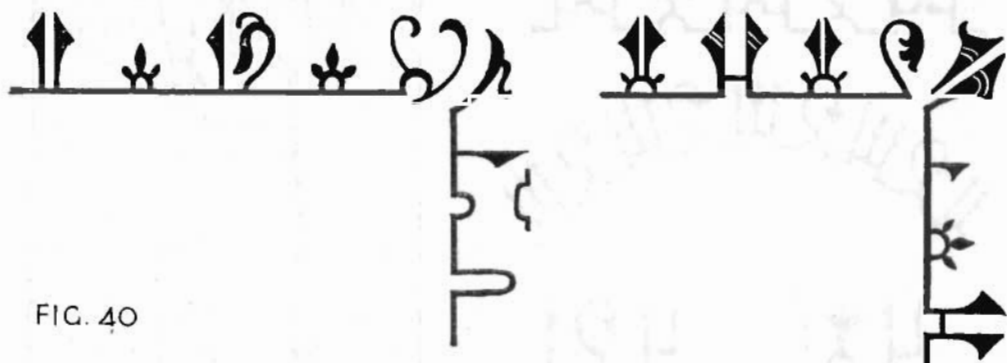


FIG. 40

An individual version of Cufic frequently appeared as ornament on medieval enamels. There are, for instance, the two almost identical ciboria, one now in the Louvre and the other in the British Museum, both decorated with Cufic lettering round the lip of the bowl. The Louvre ciborium<sup>2</sup> originally belonged to the Benedictine Abbey of Montmajour and is usually described as having an imitation of an inscription. In fact it is composed of a repetition of the words 'Al Malik' (المالك — 'The kingdom') (fig. 41); the terminals of the letters have clockwise curves at the top, which is a rare feature in a true Cufic inscription of Islamic origin, and it is perhaps possible therefore that the reverse side of an Islamic textile with the word 'Al Malik' woven in it was taken as a model by the engraver. The reverse side of a Fatimid textile (fig. 42)<sup>3</sup> in the Boston Museum containing this word shows precisely the same system of pattern. The early 13th-century ciborium in the British Museum, which was found near Sudbury in Suffolk, has a decorative band round the lip very like that on the Montmajour ciborium, although it does not appear to be translatable (fig. 43). The curious letters with the curved terminals ending in a flower or a leaf-like form occur on both ciboria and, for example, on a bowl in the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig. 44), and on the gable-end of the

<sup>1</sup> Michel: *Histoire de l'Art* (Paris, 1905), i, 2e partie, pp. 894-895.

Venturi: *Storia dell'arte italiana*, iii, fig. 419.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Evans: *Art of Mediaeval France*

(Oxford, 1948), p. 56, Pl. 59.

<sup>3</sup> N. P. Britton: *A study of some early Islamic textiles* . . . (Boston, 1938), p. 68, fig. 85.



FIG. 41



FIG. 42



FIG. 43



FIG. 44



FIG. 45



c.

d.

e.



FIG. 47



FIG. 46



FIG. 48



reliquary known as the Châsse de Saint Calmine (Église de Mosac) (fig. 45a to e) as well as on many other pieces. The enamels ornamented in this way are usually dated to the second quarter of the 13th century. An ultimate Spanish origin for the decoration seems probable and it is possible that Jewish craftsmen<sup>1</sup> were partly instrumental in spreading the idea of using these non-Christian characters. The actual patterns vary very little, although some have engraved letters with a tooled background; the panel in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Pl. XVI) serves as an example of this latter technique. Others have an enamelled background to the letters, like the crozier head (fig. 46) and a plaque (fig. 47); fig. 48 is taken from a panel on which the Cufic letters are slightly embossed.<sup>2</sup>

What then was the reason for this extraordinarily widespread and persistent use of Cufic as a decorative motif on objects of Christian manufacture? About Europe in medieval times there were a number of Islamic objects enriched with Cufic lettering which could have acted as models. From Palermo came the Nürnberg tunics and other German state robes. From Spain came numerous objects, such as the ivory casket of St. Domenic of Silos. In Venice were the rock crystal jugs and bowls, and at Pisa the great bronze griffin; these have been in Italy since Fatimid times. There was, too, the rock crystal ring bearing the name of the Caliph al-Zahir in Cufic letters which was later incorporated in a monstrance.<sup>3</sup> All these were conspicuously ornamented with Cufic inscriptions but, above all, the great numbers of Islamic textiles in medieval Europe left their mark on the decorative repertory of the time. There were, among many others, the so-called veil of St. Anne in Apt Cathedral, the textile from the tomb of St. Josse and that from the reliquary of St. Saturnin, all of Egyptian or Mesopotamian manufacture with Cufic inscriptions on them.<sup>4</sup> A door-lintel at Dijon Cathedral once painted with roundels with eagles adorsed surrounded by a Cufic inscription is an example of the adoption of a typical Islamic textile pattern.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of the introduction of this form of ornament, objects intimately connected with Christian ritual, such as reliquaries, ciboria, and croziers, came to be embellished with Moslem lettering and Moslem phrases. Were the western craftsmen attempting to produce objects

<sup>1</sup> W. L. Hildburgh: *Medieval Spanish Enamels* (London, 1936), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> The enamels shown in figs. 45, 46, 47 are illustrated fully in Gauthier: *Emaux Limousins des XIIIe, XIIIe and XIe siècles* (Paris, 1950).

<sup>3</sup> Young: *Near Eastern Culture and Society* (Princeton, 1951), Pl. III.

Lamm, C. J.: *Mittelalterliche Glaser und steinschnittarbeiten aus dem Nahen Osten* (Berlin, 1929-30), i, p. 213, no. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Dalton: *Byzantine Art and Archaeology*, pp. 604, 605. He says: '... on account of their portability textiles at various times

exerted an important influence upon other arts'.

Willemin: *Monuments français* (1839), i. On p. 9 and Pl 15 is shown an Islamic textile from the tomb of l'abbe Ingon (d. 1025-6) with a Cufic inscription; on p. 70 and Pl. 119 is reference to the textile brought back by St. Louis containing the name of al-Hakim (caliph A.D. 996-1020).

<sup>5</sup> Gélis-Didot: *La peinture decorative en France du XI-XVIe siècle* (Paris, 1888-1891), Pl. XXXI (4).



with a special oriental flavour through the symbolism of a lettering which they knew was associated with eastern works of art? Dr. Hildburgh has suggested that this might be so.<sup>1</sup> Did they consider that these curious angular letters which look so incongruous in their western setting belonged to an alphabet peculiar to the Holy Land, believing perhaps that it was a writing practised in Biblical times? Possibly by adding these letters or by copying a complete word it was thought that the object became more closely associated with the Holy Land and the value consequently enhanced. This may be a fanciful explanation for the anomaly that Christian art accepted phrases from a faith to which Christendom was militantly opposed.

<sup>1</sup> Hildburgh : *op. cit.*, p. 42 ff and footnote p. 81. footnote p. 81.