

Textual Embodiments of the Sacred: Analyzing the Qur'anic Inscriptions in Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque of Quanzhou-China

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the carefully curated Quranic inscriptions adorning the Al-Ashab Mosque in Quanzhou, China, illuminating how these epigraphic elements reflect the local Muslim community's religious beliefs and practices, while also articulating key architectural and devotional concepts that shaped the experiential qualities of the sacred space. Through rigorous on-site documentation, textual analysis, and examination of the inscriptions' aesthetic qualities, the research offers a nuanced understanding of how the Quranic verses and their strategic placement conveyed religious and spiritual meanings, mediated liturgical activities, and contributed to the mosque's overall aesthetic expression. By situating the inscriptions within the broader discourse on Islamic epigraphy and architecture, the study reveals how the carefully selected passages and calligraphic styles articulated pivotal religious concepts, such as the centrality of prayer and the significance of orientation. This in-depth examination contributes to understanding cultural exchanges and religious dynamics in premodern China.

INTRODUCTION

The Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque in Quanzhou, China stands as a remarkable architectural testament to the rich history of Islamic cultural exchange and the enduring presence of Muslim communities in premodern China. As the sole surviving example of its kind, this venerable mosque has long been recognized for its historical significance. Yet, the wealth of information contained within its intricate Qur'anic inscriptions remains an understudied aspect. This study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the mosque's epigraphic program, illuminating how these carefully crafted inscriptions reflect the local Muslim community's religious beliefs and practices and articulate key architectural and devotional concepts that shaped the experiential qualities of the sacred space.

While previous scholarship (Dasheng & Weiji, Quanzhou Qinzhen Si Shiji Xinkao, 1983), (Dasheng, 1984), (Wenliang, 1983), (Wahbi, 2000), (Cheng, 2003), (Wang, 2009), (Bianting, 2011), (Chen, 2015), (Guiping, 2017), (Hagras, 2021) and (Hagras, 2023) has acknowledged the existence and historical importance of the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque's inscriptions, this paper offers a more nuanced and contextualized examination of their thematic content and functional integration within the architectural framework. By closely analyzing the Qur'anic verses, dedicatory inscriptions, and their strategic placement throughout the mosque, the study uncovers insights into how the epigraphic elements conveyed religious and spiritual meanings,

mediated the liturgical and ritual activities of the congregants, and contributed to the overall aesthetic expression of the structure.

Furthermore, this research situates the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque's inscriptions within the broader discourse on the interplay between Islamic epigraphy, architecture, and devotional practices, illuminating how the careful selection of Qur'anic passages and calligraphic styles articulated key religious concepts, such as the centrality of prayer, the significance of orientation towards the qibla, and the notion of moderation in faith. In doing so, the study provides a window into the intellectual and spiritual world of the medieval Muslim community in Quanzhou, revealing how patrons (Ameen 2019) and artisans manifested their religious identity and aspirations through the built environment.

By thoroughly examining the inscriptions of the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex cultural exchanges and religious dynamics that shaped the Islamic presence in premodern China. It also highlights the need for further research on Muslim communities' material and textual evidence in various regions of China, which remains an understudied area in Islamic studies and architectural history.



Fig. 1 A map shows the location of the Quanzhou city (Niziolek, 2015)



Fig. 2 Location of the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque.
(Google Maps)



Fig. 3. General view of the Mosque

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a multifaceted approach to investigate the Arabic inscriptions adorning the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque in Quanzhou, China. This involved detailed on-site documentation and photographic analysis to contextualize the inscriptions within the architectural framework, rigorous textual analysis to elucidate the thematic content and religious significance of the Qur'anic verses, and examination of the inscriptions' aesthetic and calligraphic qualities to gain insights into the artistic sensibilities and skilled craftsmanship that produced them. The placement of the inscriptions in relation to the mosque's key liturgical and ritual elements, such as the miḥrāb and qibla orientation, was critically analyzed to shed light on how they reinforced the sacred purpose of the space and mediated the religious experiences of the congregants. Situating the inscriptions within their broader historical context and drawing comparisons with other examples of Islamic epigraphy in China and beyond further revealed their role as products of cultural exchange, knowledge transmission, and the evolution of Islamic artistic and religious practices in a transnational setting.

THE MOSQUE AND ITS INSCRIPTIONS

Quanzhou's Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque, a testament to the vibrant Islamic presence in medieval China, was originally constructed in 1009-1010 AD during the Northern Song Dynasty. Extensive renovations were undertaken in 1310-1311 AD by Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Qudsi al-Shirazi, ensuring its preservation. This unique architectural relic, one of the “Top Ten Famous Religious Architectures in China,” offers invaluable insights into the religious, cultural, and

architectural aspects of the Muslim community in medieval China. Its Arabic inscriptions, in particular, provide a rich historical and religious narrative, making it a significant resource for scholars studying Islamic history and Sino-Islamic relations. In addition to the construction inscription, The Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque has 12 Arabic inscriptions carrying Qur'anic verses (Fig. 4).

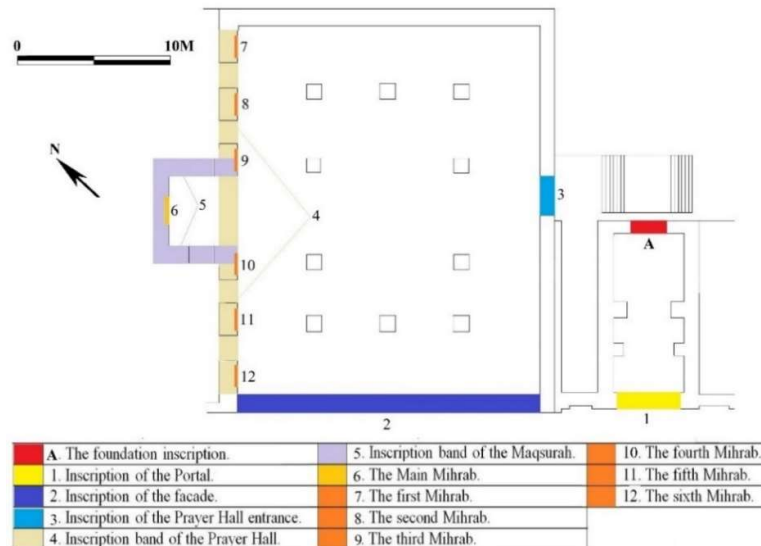


Fig. 4 Shows locations of the inscriptions in the mosque.

INSCRIPTION A: ARABIC FOUNDATION INSCRIPTION

The Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque is the only mosque in Quanzhou that has preserved its foundation inscription, which provides the date of construction, the founder's name, and titles. It is placed above the northern entrance, which leads to a staircase facing the prayer hall's entrance. The foundation inscription is in Arabic, executed in engraved *thuluth* script over two lines (Fig. 5). It reads as follows:

”إن أول مسجد للناس في هذا [هذه] الأرض كان هذا المسجد المبارك المسمى العتيق والمقدس ... بالجامع والشارع الملقب مسجد الأصحاب وكان ذلك في تاريخ سنة أربعمائة من الهجرة النبوية وبعد ما مضى من تاريخه المذكور ثلثمائة سنة / عمره وجدده ... وأسس هذا الطاق العالي والرواق الرفيع والباب الكريم والشبابيك الجديدة أتمه في تاريخ سنة عشر وسبعمائة للهجرة طلبا لمرضات الله تعالى أحمد بن محمد القدسي المعروف بحاجي ركن الشيرازي غفر الله له ولمن عاونه بمحمد وآله“

“The first mosque for people on this area (I think the translation of *الأرض* here should be ‘area’ or ‘place’ since the Arabic context doesn’t refer to earth but rather this specific land in China) was this blessed mosque called the archaic and sacred ... with the mosque and street called the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque. That was in the year four hundred of the Prophet’s Hijra. It was renovated and renewed three hundred years later than the date above... The high Iwan-Arch, the magnificent portico, the elegant portal, and the new windows were built by Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Qudsi, known as Hajji Rukn al-Shirazi, who completed it in the year seven hundred and ten after the Hijra, seeking the pleasure of Allah Almighty. May Allah forgive him along with those who collaborated with him for the sake of Muhammad and his family”



Fig. 5 The construction inscription 710 AH/ 1310-1311 AD

THE QUR'ANIC INSCRIPTIONS IN AL-AŞĤĀB MOSQUE

There are 12 Qur'anic inscriptions in Al-Aşĥāb Mosque in terms of place. From the exterior, along with the direction towards the qibla side, the first qur'anic inscriptions were engraved above the leading portal of the mosque. The second one is placed on the upper part of the mosque's main facade. The third qur'anic inscription is located above the entrance to the prayer hall. The other nine qur'anic inscriptions decorate the qibla wall, including an inscription band that runs horizontally on the upper part of the qibla wall. A similar qur'anic inscription frieze adorns the arch of the miĥrāb's conch, and seven qur'anic quotations executed in horizontal one-line strips occupy the miĥrāb's niches and hoods. Selected Qur'anic quotations demonstrate understanding and full immersion in Islamic culture. Qur'anic verses are engraved on stone in the *thuluth* script. The mastery and quality of executing the inscriptions indicate that the person(s) who engraved them was experienced in this art and had a perfect command of Arabic, thus we case assume that he was one of the Arab craftsmen there (Hagras, 2021).

Inscription 1: The portal's inscription

The entrance opening is crowned with a type of pointed arch; atop this arch is a horizontally rectangular stone inscriptiion panel (Figures 7-8). Engraved on this panel the *Surat* (Qur'anic chapter) *Al-Imran* verses 18 to the first part of verse 19 (All transliterations and translations of qur'anic verses included are after (Qur'an, n.d.): It reads:

Arabic Qur'anic Text	Transliteration	Translation
<p>"شَهِدَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُو الْعِلْمِ قَائِمًا بِالْقِسْطِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ (18) إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الإِسْلَامُ ... (19)"</p>	<p><i>Shahida Allāhu 'Annahu</i> <i>Lā 'Ilāha 'Illā Huwa Wa Al-</i> <i>Malā'ikatu Wa 'Ulū Al-</i> <i>Ilmi Qā'imāan Bil-Qisṭi</i> <i>Lā 'Ilāha 'Illā Huwa Al-</i> <i>'Azīzu Al-Ĥakīmu (18)</i> <i>'Inna Ad-Dīna 'Inda Allāhi Al-</i> <i>'Islāmu ... (19)</i></p>	<p>"Allah 'Himself' is a Witness that there is no god 'worthy of worship' except Him—and so are the angels and people of knowledge. He is the Maintainer of justice. There is no god 'worthy of worship' except Him—the Almighty, All-Wise. [18] Certainly, Allah's only Way is Islam ...[19]"</p>

Inscription 2: The façade's inscription

The upper part of the mosque's prayer hall's exterior façade is characterized by a qur'anic inscription horizontal band that quotes the entire verses of *Surat Al-Insan* (The Human) (Figures 9-10). *Surat Al-Insan*, also known as *Ad-Dahr* (The Time), the 76th chapter of the Qur'an, elucidates the significance of prayer (*ṣalah*) within the broader context of the human condition and the path to spiritual fulfillment. The verses highlight the creation of humanity, endowed with the faculties of perception and cognition, as a test of faith wherein the individual is guided towards gratitude and righteous conduct. The Qur'anic passages explicitly reference the spiritual devotion of the righteous, manifested through night-long prostrations and standing in prayer, as a means to attain the ultimate reward of Paradise. This direct association between the practice of prayer and the eternal consequences in the afterlife underscores the centrality of *ṣalah* as a pivotal spiritual discipline that encapsulates humans' relationship with Allah, their response to divine guidance, and their quest for eternal salvation.

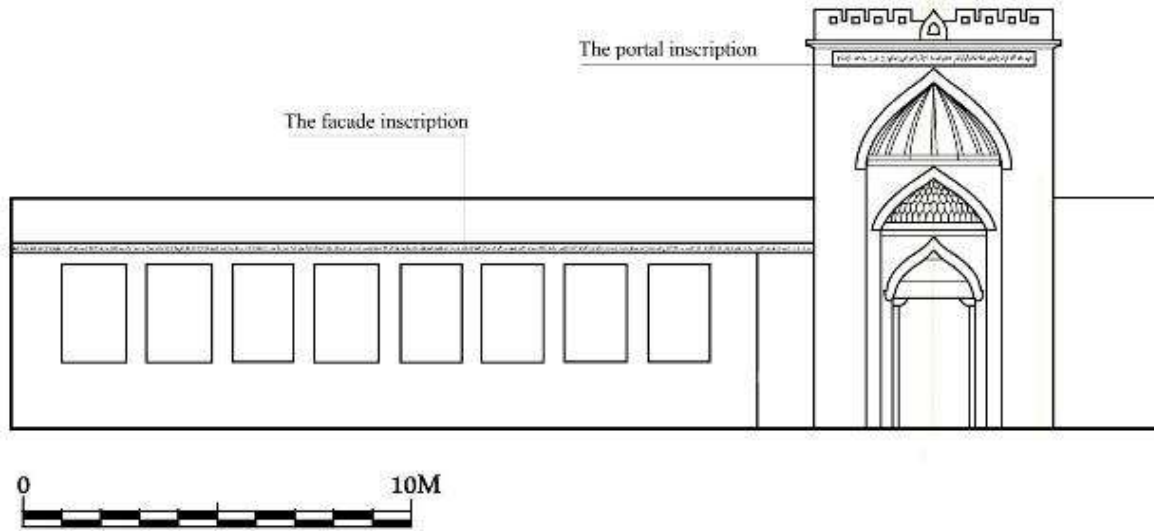


Fig. 7 Locations of inscriptions of the Façade



Fig. 8 Inscription of the entrance



Fig. 9 The Main façade of the Mosque



Fig. 10 Inscription of the façade

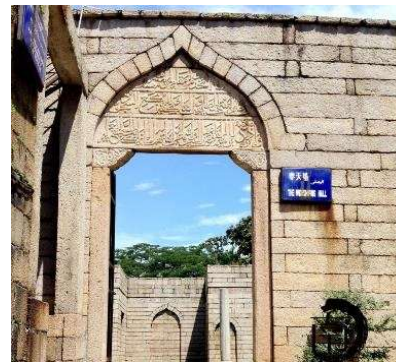


Fig.11 Entrance of the Prayer Hall's inscription

Inscription 3: Above the entrance leading to the prayer hall

Above the entrance leading to the prayer hall we have carved verses 125 and 127 of *Surat Al-Baqarah*. It is written in a beautiful style over three strips within the humped pointed arch above the entrance leading to the *muşalla*, i.e., prayer hall (Figure 11). It reads:

Arabic Qur'anic Text	Transliteration	Translation
"... وَأَتَّخِذُوا مِنْ مَّقَامِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ مُصَلًّى ... أَنْ طَهَّرَ بَيْتِي لِلطَّائِفِينَ وَالْعَاكِفِينَ وَالرُّكَّعِ السُّجُودِ" (125)	"... <i>Wa Attakhidhū Min Maqāmi 'Ibrāhīma Muṣallan ... 'An Ṭahhirā Baytiya Lilṭā'ifina Wa Al-`Ākifīna Wa Ar-Rukka`i As-Sujūdi</i> " (2: 125)	Use the shrine of Abraham as a place of prayer. Sanctify My House for those who circle around it, and those who seclude themselves in it, and those who kneel and prostrate.
"وَإِذْ يَرْفَعُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ الْقَوَاعِدَ مِنَ الْبَيْتِ وَإِسْمَاعِيلُ رَبَّنَا تَقَبَّلْ مِنَّا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ" (127)	<i>Wa 'Idh Yarfa`u 'Ibrāhīmu Al-Qawā`ida Mina Al-Bayti Wa 'Ismā`īlu Rabbanā Taqabbal Minnā 'Innaka 'Anta As-Samī`u Al-'Alīmu</i> (2: 127).	As Abraham raises the foundations of the House, together with Ishmael, "Our Lord, accept it from us, You are the Hearer, the Knower.

The direct function and meaning of the selected verses and their specific quotes concerning prayer, the mosque building, and the patrons' prayers and supplications to Allah to accept their construction of this mosque are clear.

Inscription 4:

Another set of nine qur'anic inscriptions beautifies the qibla wall. The second example of the entire qur'anic *surah* is found on an inscription band that runs horizontally on the upper part alongside the qibla wall, displaying the Surat An-Naba'' (The News), the 78th chapter of the Qur'an (Figure 12). The central mihrāb protrusion "*maqṣurah*" cuts this inscription band into two halves, flanking it.

The verses of Surah An-Naba'' underscore the centrality of prayer (*ṣalah*) within the broader framework of the imminent Day of Judgment and the eternal dichotomy of outcomes for the righteous and the wicked. The passages highlight the skepticism and disagreement among the disbelievers regarding the Afterlife, positioning prayer as a means to cultivate a firm belief in Allah's providence and the inevitability of reckoning. Furthermore, the Qur'anic depiction of the contrasting fates of the virtuous and the sinful reinforces the significance of prayer as a spiritual discipline that facilitates the attainment of righteousness and the securement of salvation in the Hereafter. Ultimately, the verses of this chapter establish a direct correlation between the believer's engagement in prayer and their accountability before the divine, emphasizing the pivotal role of *ṣalah* in the Islamic tradition.



Fig. 12 Inner inscription band of the prayer hall

Inscription 4: Inscriptions of Mihrāb's Maqsurah (Iwan)

The *Mihrāb's maqsurah* has an inscription band that runs horizontally on the upper part alongside its three walls, displaying verse 143 of Surat Al-Baqarah (Figure 13a, b). This inscription runs starting from the northern wall forming the Π shape and reads:

Arabic Qur'anic Text	Transliteration	Translation
<p>وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا وَمَا جَعَلْنَا الْقِبْلَةَ الَّتِي كُنْتَ عَلَيْهَا إِلَّا لِنَعْلَمَ مَنْ يَتَّبِعِ الرَّسُولَ مِمَّنْ يَنْقَلِبُ عَلَيَّ عَاقِبَةً وَإِنِ كَانَتْ لَكَبِيرَةً إِلَّا عَلَى الَّذِينَ هَدَى اللَّهُ وَمَا كَانَ اللَّهُ لِيُضَيِعَ إِيمَانَكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بِالنَّاسِ لَرَءُوفٌ رَحِيمٌ (2: 143)</p>	<p>“Wa Kadhalika Ja `alnākum 'Ummatan Wasaṭāan Litakūnū Shuhadā'a `Alā An-Nāsi Wa Yakūna Ar-Rasūlu `Alaykum Shahīdāan Wa Mā Ja `alnā Al- Qiblata Allatī Kunta `Alayhā 'Illā Lina`lama Man Yattabi`u Ar- Rasūla Mimman Yanqalibu `Alā 'Aqibayhi Wa 'In Kānat Lakabīratan 'Illā `Alā Al-Ladhīna Hadā Allāhu Wa Mā Kāna Allāhu Liyudī`a 'Īmānakum ' Inna Allāha Bin-Nāsi Lara`ufun Raḥīmun” (2: 143).</p>	<p>Thus We made you a moderate community, that you may be witnesses to humanity, and that the Messenger may be a witness to you. We only established the direction of prayer, which you once followed, that We may distinguish those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels. It is indeed difficult, except for those whom God has guided. But God would never let your faith go to waste. God is Kind towards the people, Merciful.</p>

The selection of these qur'anic verses suits the *Mihrāb's Maqsurah* in terms of place and function; it delineates the Islamic principle of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and its manifestation in the practice of orientation towards the Qibla, underscoring their deeper significance within the framework of faith and devotion.



Fig. 13a. Inscriptions of the Maqsurah



Fig. 13b. Inscriptions of the Maqsurah

Inscriptions of the Main Mihrāb

The niche of the main mihrāb, the focal point of the *maqsurah* and the whole prayer hall, has seven inscription friezes carved to read from the hood towards down, starting with the *shahada*, the first pillar of Islam, then six different and not sequenced qur'anic inscriptions; among them the fourth and seventh strips have two different verses sequenced without any kind of separation in the same panel (Figure 14), also the qur'anic quotation of the sixth strip ends with the second part of the *shahada* “Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”. They read as follows:

Ser.	Arabic Qur'anic Text	Transliteration	Translation
1	لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله	Lā 'Ilāha 'Illā Allāh Muḥammadun Rasūlu Allāh	There is no God but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah
2	"وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ" (الأنبياء، 21: 107)	" <i>Wa Mā 'Arsalnāka 'Illā Raḥmatan Lil`ālamīna</i> " (Al-'Anbyā', 21:107). " <i>Innamā Wa Līyukumu Allāhu Wa Rasūluhu Wa Al-Ladhīna 'Amanū Al-Ladhīna Yuqīmūna Aṣ-Ṣalāata Wa Yu'tūna Az-Zakāata Wa Hum Rāki`ūna</i> " (Al-Mā'idah, 5: 55).	We did not send you except as mercy to mankind.
3	"إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَهُمْ رَاكِعُونَ" (المائدة، 5: 55)	<i>Wa Rasūluhu Wa Al-Ladhīna 'Amanū Al-Ladhīna Yuqīmūna Aṣ-Ṣalāata Wa Yu'tūna Az-Zakāata Wa Hum Rāki`ūna</i> " (Al-Mā'idah, 5: 55).	Your allies are God, and His Messenger, and those who believe""those who pray regularly, and give charity, and bow down.
	"وَمَا مُحَمَّدٌ إِلَّا رَسُولٌ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلِهِ الرُّسُلُ... " (آل عمران، 3: 144)	" <i>Wa Mā Muḥammadun 'Illā Rasūlun Qad Khalat Min Qablihi Ar-Rusulu</i> " ('āli `Imrān, 3: 144)	Muhammad is no more than a messenger. Messengers have passed on before him
4	"مَا كَانَ مُحَمَّدٌ أَبَا أَحَدٍ مِّن رِّجَالِكُمْ وَلَكِن رَّسُولَ اللَّهِ وَخَاتَمَ النَّبِيِّينَ... " (الأحزاب، 33: 40)	" <i>Mā Kāna Muḥammadun 'Abā 'Aḥādīn Min Rijālikum Wa Lakin Rasūla Allāhi Wa Khātama An-Nabīyīna</i> " (Al-'Aḥzāb, 33: 40).	Muhammad is not the father of any of your men; but he is the Messenger of God, and the seal of the prophets. God is Cognizant of everything.
5	"وَإِذْ قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ مُّصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ وَمُبَشِّرًا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِي مِن بَعْدِي اسْمُهُ أَحْمَدُ ... " (الصف، 61: 6)	" <i>Wa 'Idh Qāla `Īsā Abnu Maryama Yā Banī 'Isrā'īla 'Innī Rasūlu Allāhi 'Ilaykum Muṣaddiqāan Limā Bayna Yadayya Mina At-Tawrāati Wa Mubashshirāan Birasūlin Ya'tī Min Ba`dī Asmuḥu 'Aḥmad ...</i> " (Aṣ-Ṣaf, 61: 6).	And when Jesus son of Mary said, "O Children of Israel, I am God's Messenger to you, confirming what preceded me of the Torah, and announcing good news of a messenger who will come after me, whose name is Ahmad ...
6	"هُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُ بِالْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ الْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُ عَلَى الدِّينِ كُلِّهِ وَكَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ شَهِيدًا" (الفتح، 48: 28)	" <i>Huwa Al-Ladhī 'Arsala Rasūlahu Bil-Hudā Wa Dīni Al-Ḥaqqi Liyuḥhirahu `Alā Ad-Dīni Kullīhi Wa Kafā Billāhi Shahīdāan</i> " (Al-Faṭḥ, 48: 28).	It is He who sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, to make it prevail over all religions. God suffices as Witness.
	مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ	Allāh Muḥammadun Rasūlu Allāh	Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah
7	"وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يَشْرِي نَفْسَهُ ابْتِغَاءَ مَرْضَاتِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ رَءُوفٌ بِالْعِبَادِ" (البقرة، 2: 207)	" <i>Wa Mina An-Nāsi Man Yashrī Nafsahu Abtighā'a Marḍāati Allāhi Wa Allāhu Ra'ūfun Bil-'Ibādī</i> " (Al-Baqarah, 2: 207).	And among the people is he who sells himself seeking God's approval. God is kind towards the servants.
	"ثَانِي اثْنَيْنِ إِذْ هُمَا فِي الْغَارِ إِذْ يَقُولُ لِصَاحِبِهِ لَا تَحْزَنْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَنَا" (التوبة، 90: 40)	" <i>Thāniya Athnayni 'Idh Humā Fī Al-Ghāri Fī Al-Ghāri 'Idh Yaqūlu Liṣāḥibīhi Lā Taḥzan 'Inna Allāha Ma`anā</i> " (At-Tawbah 90:40)	he was the second of two in the cave. He said to his friend, "Do not worry, Allah is with us."

When analyzed collectively, the *shahada* and the Qur'anic verses of the central *mihrāb* illuminate the significance of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the practice of

ṣalah (prayer) within the Islamic tradition. Surat Al-Anbiya, verse 107, establishes the Prophet Muhammad's universal mission of mercy. In contrast, Surat Al-Ma'idah, verse 55, underscores the intimate relationship between believers, Allah, and the Prophet Muhammad, which is manifested through *ṣalah* and *zakat*. Surat Aal-Imran, verse 144, emphasizes that the Prophet is a messenger like other prophets, while Surat At-Tawbah, verse 40, highlights the divine protection and support granted to him during the pivotal migration. Additionally, Surat Al-Ahzab, verse 40, affirms his unique status as the final Prophet. By considering the double affirmation of the *shahada*, which emphasizes belief in Muhammad's prophethood alongside the aforementioned verses, one might refer to this central prayer niche as the Prophet Muhammad's *mihrāb*.

Surat Al-Fath, verse 28, conveys the divine purpose of establishing the true religion of Islam, while Surat As-Saff, verse 6, warns against the discrepancies between beliefs and practices that are inherently linked to *ṣalah*. Surat Al-Baqarah, verse 207, praises the believers' wholehearted dedication. These verses weave together a comprehensive framework that highlights the intricate connections between the Prophet Muhammad, the practice of *ṣalah*, and the direction to the *qibla*, elements fundamental to the expression and understanding of the Islamic tradition.



Fig. 14 Inscriptions of the Main Mihrāb



Fig. 15a Mihrābs of the Prayer Hall

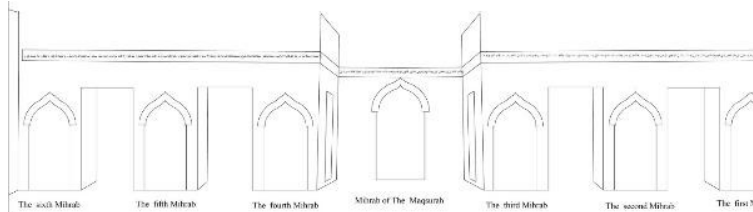


Fig. 15b Mihrābs of the Prayer Hall

Inscriptions of the prayer hall *mihrābs*

The qibla wall features two sides that flank the *mihrāb maqsurah*, or iwan; each side has two large rectangular windows, accompanied by three lateral *mihrābs*. In total, there are six lateral *mihrābs* on both sides (Figure 15-a,b), each adorned with epigraphical strips containing qur'anic quotations. The three northern niches contain five inscription strips, while the southern side includes four calligraphic panels. (figs 16-21)

The inscriptions from the north side, in order, are as follows:

The first *Mihrāb*

This *mihrāb* has four lines each in a panel engraved with four qur'anic verses of Surat 'Al' Imrān (Qur'an, 3: 189–192).

Ser.	Arabic Qur'anic Text	Transliteration	Translation
1	وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاللَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ	Wa Lillāh Mulku As-Samāwāti Wa Al-'Ardi Wa Allāhu `Alá Kulli Shay'in Qadīrun ('āli `Imrān: 189).	To God belongs the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth. God has power over all things.
2	إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ لآيَاتٍ لِأُولِي الْأَبْصَارِ	'Inna Fī Khalqī As-Samāwāti Wa Al-'Ardi Wa Akhtilāfi Al- Layli Wa An-Nahāri La'āyātin Li'wli Al-'Albābi ('āli `Imrān: 190).	In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the alternation of night and day, are signs for people of understanding.
3	الَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ قِيَامًا وَقُعُودًا وَعَلَى جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَاطِلًا سُبْحَانَكَ فَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ	Al-Ladhīna Yadhkurūna Allāha Qiyāmān Wa Qu`ūdān Wa `Alá Junūbihim Wa Yatafakkarūna Fī Khalqī As-Samāwāti Wa Al-'Ardi Rabbanā Mā Khalaqta Hādha Bāṭilāan Subhānaka Faqinā `Adhāba An-Nāri ('āli `Imrān: 191).	Those who remember God while standing, and sitting, and on their sides; and they reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth: "Our Lord, You did not create this in vain, glory to You, so protect us from the punishment of the Fire."
4	رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ مَن تُدْخِلِ النَّارَ فَقَدْ أُخْزِيتَهُ وَمَا لِلظَّالِمِينَ مِنْ أَنْصَارٍ	Rabbanā 'Innaka Man Tudkhili An-Nāra Faqad 'Akhzaytahu Wa Mā Lilẓẓālimīna Min 'Anṣārin ('āli `Imrān: 192).	"Our Lord, whomever You commit to the Fire, You have disgraced. The wrongdoers will have no helpers."

Surat Al Imrān, Verses 189-192 articulate key Islamic cultural tenets related to *ṣalah* (prayer), emphasizing Allah's sovereignty over the heavens and the earth, which underpins the believer's devotion. The verses invite contemplation of the natural world as a means of fostering mindfulness in prayer, asserting that creation serves a higher purpose rather than being aimless. Moreover, they highlight the necessity of remembering Allah in various states of existence, suggesting that prayer is a continuous state of consciousness rather than a mere ritual. Collectively, these elements underscore the integral role of *ṣalah* in cultivating a profound and multifaceted relationship between the believer and Allah.



Fig. 16 The first mihrāb



Fig. 17 The second mihrāb



Fig.18 The third mihrāb

Fig.16-18 Mihrābs of northern side of the Prayer Hall

The second *mihrāb*

The second lateral mihrāb has three qur'anic verses of Surat Luqmān (Qur'an, 31: 29–31) engraved over four inscriptive line-panels, and read:

Ser.	Arabic Qur'anic Text	Transliteration	Translation
1	أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُولِجُ اللَّيْلَ فِي النَّهَارِ وَيُولِجُ النَّهَارَ فِي اللَّيْلِ وَسَخَّرَ	'Alam Tarā 'Anna Allāha Yūlijū Al-Layla Fī An-Nahāri Wa Yūlijū An-Nahāra Fī Al-Layli Wa Sakhkhara Ash-Shamsa Wa Al-Qamara Kullun	Have you not seen how God merges the night into the day, and merges the day into the night? That He subjected the sun and the moon, each running for a stated term? And
2	الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ كُلٌّ يَجْرِي إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ (29) ذَلِكَ	Yajrī 'Ilā 'Ajalin Musamman Wa 'Anna Allāha Bimā Ta`malūna Khabīrun (29). Dhālika Bi'anna Allāha Huwa Al-Ĥaqqu	because God is the Reality, and what they worship besides Him is falsehood, and because God is the Exalted, the Supreme (30)
3	بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْحَقُّ وَأَنَّ مَا يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ الْبَاطِلُ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْكَبِيرُ	Wa 'Anna Mā Yad`ūna Min Dūnihi Al-Bāṭilu Wa 'Anna Allāha Huwa Al-`Alīyu Al- Kabīru (Luqmān: 30).	
4	أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ الْفُلْكَ تَجْرِي فِي الْبَحْرِ بِنِعْمَةِ اللَّهِ لِيُرِيَكُمْ مِنْ آيَاتِهِ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّكُلِّ صَبَّارٍ شَكُورٍ (31) (لقمان، 31: 29-31)	'Alam Tarā 'Anna Al-Fulka Tajrī Fī Al-Baḥri Bini`mati Allāhi Liyuriyakum Min 'Āyātihi 'Inna Fī Dhālika La`āyātin Likulli Ṣabbārin Shakūrin (Luqmān: 31).	Have you not seen how the ships sail through the sea, by the grace of God, to show you of His wonders? In that are signs for every persevering, thankful person (31)

The third mihrāb

The third lateral mihrāb has the most famous qur'anic quote, *ayat al-Kursī*, the 255th verse of Surat Al-Baqarah (Qur'an, 2: 255) engraved in a panel in four lines, and reads:

Ser.	Arabic Qur'anic Text	Transliteration	Translation
1	اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ لَا تَأْخُذُهُ سِنَّةٌ وَلَا نَوْمٌ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ	<i>Al-Lahu Lā 'Ilāha 'Illā Huwa Al- Ĥayyu Al-Qayyūmu Lā Ta'khuduhu Sinatun Wa Lā Nawmun Lahu Mā Fī As-Samāwāti</i>	God! There is no god except He, the Living, the Everlasting. Neither slumber overtakes Him, nor sleep. To Him belongs everything in the heavens
2	وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَشْفَعُ عِنْدَهُ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِ يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَلَا	<i>Wa Mā Fī Al-'Arḍi Man Dhā Al-Ladhī Yashfa`u 'Indahu 'Illā Bi'idhnihi Ya`lamu Mā Bayna 'Aydihim Wa Mā Khalfahum Wa Lā</i>	and everything on earth. Who is he that can intercede with Him except with His permission? He knows what is before them, and what is behind them; and they cannot
3	يُحِيطُونَ بِشَيْءٍ مِنْ عِلْمِهِ إِلَّا بِمَا شَاءَ وَسِعَ كُرْسِيُّهُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ	<i>Yuhīṭūna Bishay'in Min 'Ilmihi 'Illā Bimā Shā'a Wasī'a Kursiyuhu As- Samāwāti Wa Al-'Arḍa</i>	grasp any of His knowledge, except as He wills. His Throne extends over the heavens and the earth,
4	وَلَا يَئُودُهُ حِفْظُهُمَا وَهُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْعَظِيمُ (البقرة، 2: 255)	<i>Wa Lā Ya'ūduhu Ḥifẓuhumā Wa Huwa Al-'Alīyu Al-'Aẓīmu (Al-Baqarah, 2: 255).</i>	and their preservation does not burden Him. He is the Most High, the Great.

Ayat al-Kursī is an important verse in the Quran that describes key beliefs in Islam. It emphasizes Allah's Oneness and power, showing that He is unique and has no intermediaries. These beliefs are essential for a believer's devotion and prayers. After each obligatory prayer, reciting ayat al-Kursī helps strengthen the believer's faith and connection to Allah, who sustains all existence.

The fourth and fifth mihrābs

The fourth and fifth lateral mihrābs have three qur'anic verses: four verses quoted from the Surat An-Nūr (Qur'an, 24: 35–38) engraved in nine lines, five belong to the fourth mihrāb, and four continue on fifth niche ending with the line the quotes the 56th verse from Surat Al-Ahzab. They read as follows:

Ser.	Arabic Qur'anic Text	Transliteration	Translation
Inscriptions of the 4th lateral miḥrāb			
1	اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مِثْلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ	<i>Al-Lahu Nūru As-Samāwāti Wa Al-'Arḍi Mathalu Nūrihi Kamishkāatin Fīhā Mişbāḥun Al- Mişbāḥu Fī Zujājatin</i>	God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The allegory of His light is that of a pillar on which is a lamp. The lamp is within a glass.
2	الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ مُبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونِيَةٍ شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ	<i>Az-Zujājatu Ka'annahā Kawkabun Durrīyun Yūqadu Min Shajaratin Mubārakatin Zaytūniatin Lā Sharqī yatin Wa Lā Gharbīyatin</i>	The glass is like a brilliant planet, fueled by a blessed tree, an olive tree, neither eastern nor western.
3	يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ أَلَمَ تَمَسَّهُ نَارٌ نُّورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ يَهْدِي اللَّهُ	<i>Yakādu Zaytuhā Yuḍī'u Wa Law Lam Tamsas/hu Nārun Nūrun `Alá Nūrin Yahdī Al-Lahu</i>	Its oil would almost illuminate, even if no fire has touched it. Light upon Light. God guides
4	لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ (35)	<i>Linūrihi Man Yashā'u Wa Yaḍribu Allāhu Al-'Amthāla Lilnnāsi Wa Allāhu Bikulli Shay'in 'Alīmun (24:35)</i>	to His light whomever He wills. God thus cites the parables for the people. God is cognizant of everything.
5	فِي بُيُوتٍ أُذِنَ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَرْفَعَ وَيُذَكَّرَ فِيهَا اسْمُهُ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ فِيهَا	<i>Fī Buyūtin 'Adhina Allāhu 'An Turfa`a Wa Yudhkara Fīhā Asmuhu Yusabbiḥu Lahu Fīhā</i>	In houses which God has permitted to be raised, and His name is celebrated therein. He is glorified therein,
Inscriptions of the 5th lateral miḥrāb (Inscriptions of the 4th miḥrāb continued)			
1	بِالْغُدُوِّ وَالْأَصَالِ (36) رَجَالٌ ۚ لَا تُلْهِهِمْ تِجَارَةٌ وَلَا بَيْعٌ	<i>Bil-Ghudūwi Wa Al-'Aşāli (An- Nūr: 36). Rijālun Lā Tulhīhim Tijāratun Wa Lā Bay`un</i>	morning and evening. (36) By men who neither trading nor commerce distracts them
2	عَنْ ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ وَإِقَامِ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءِ الزَّكَاةِ يَخَافُونَ يَوْمًا تَتَقَلَّبُ	<i>`An Dhikri Allāhi Wa 'Iqāmi Aş- Şalāati Wa 'Itā'i Az- Zakāati Yakhāfūna Yawmāan Tataqallabu</i>	from God's remembrance, and from performing the prayers, and from giving alms. They fear a Day
3	فِيهِ الْقُلُوبُ وَالْأَبْصَارُ (37) لِيَجْزِيَهُمُ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنَ مَا عَمِلُوا	<i>Fīhi Al-Qulūbu Wa Al- 'Abşāru (An-Nūr: 37). Liyajziyahumu Allāhu 'Aḥsana Mā 'Amilū</i>	when hearts and sights are overturned. (37) God will reward them according to the best of what they did, and He will increase them
4	وَيَزِيدُهُمْ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَاللَّهُ يَرْزُقُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ (38)	<i>Wa Yazīdahum Min Faḍlihi Wa Allāhu Yarzuqu Man Yashā'u Bighayri Ḥisābin (An-Nūr: 38).</i>	from His bounty. God provides for whomever He wills without reckoning. (38)
End of the An-Nūr verses (Qur'an, 24: 35–36) quoted on the 4th – 5th miḥrābs Then continued with a new Qur'anic quote, the 56th verse from the Surat Al-'Aḥzāb			
5	إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَمَلَائِكَتَهُ يُصَلُّونَ عَلَى النَّبِيِّ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا صَلُّوا عَلَيْهِ وَسَلِّمُوا تَسْلِيمًا	<i>'Inna Allāha Wa Malā'ikatahu Yuşallūna `Alá An-Nabīyi Yā 'Ayyuhā Al-Ladhīna `Amanū Şallū 'Alayhi Wa Sallimū Taslīmāan (Al-'Aḥzāb: 56).</i>	God and His angels give blessings to the Prophet. O you who believe, call for blessings on him, and greet him with a prayer of peace. (33:56)

These Qur'anic verses emphasize the same issues discussed above, including the significance of prayer (ṣalah) and the remembrance of Allah in Islam. But the verses of Surat An-Nur metaphorically depict divine light, highlighting prayer's transformative capacity in guiding believers towards spiritual illumination, and they are linked with a symbolic meaning of the mihrāb in Islamic art and architecture. Additionally, the emphasis on continuous devotion and the obligation to invoke blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as noted in Surat Al-Ahzab, corresponds with the epigraphic program of the mihrābs especially those of the main central mihrāb.



Fig. 19 The fourth mihrāb



Fig. 20 The fifth mihrāb



Fig. 21 The sixth mihrāb

Fig. 19-21 Mihrābs of the southern side of the Prayer Hall

The sixth mihrāb

The sixth lateral mihrāb has three Qur'anic verses: the first is the last verse of Surat *Al-Baqarah* (2: 286) engraved in panels in three lines, and partially on a fourth one. They continue on the fourth and fifth strips of the niche with the 193rd -194th quoted from the Surat *Al 'Imrān*. They read as follows:

Ser.	Arabic Qur'anic Text	Transliteration	Translation
1	رَبَّنَا لَا تُؤَاخِذْنَا إِن نَسِينَا أَوْ أَخْطَأْنَا رَبَّنَا وَلَا	<i>Rabbanā Lā Tu'uākhidhnā 'In Nasīnā 'Aw 'Akhṭa'nā Rabbanā Wa Lā</i>	"Our Lord, do not condemn us if we forget or make a mistake. Our Lord, do not
2	تَحْمِلْ عَلَيْنَا إصْرًا كَمَا حَمَلْتَهُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِنَا رَبَّنَا وَلَا تُحْمِلْنَا	<i>Tahmil `Alaynā 'Iṣrāan Kamā Ĥamaltahu `Alā Al-Ladhīna Min Qablinā Rabbanā Wa Lā Tuḥammilnā</i>	burden us as You have burdened those before us. Our Lord, do not burden us
3	مَا لَآ طَاقَةَ لَنَا بِهِ وَاعْفُ عَنَّا وَاعْفِرْ لَنَا وَارْحَمْنَا أَنْتَ مَوْلَانَا فَانصُرْنَا عَلَى	<i>Mā Lā Ṭāqata Lanā Bihī Wa A fu `Annā Wa Aghfir Lanā Wa Arḥamnā 'Anta Mawlānā Fāṣurnā `Alā</i>	with more than we have strength to bear; and pardon us, and forgive us, and have mercy on us. You are our Lord and Master, so help us against the disbelieving people."(2: 286) "Our Lord, we have heard
4	الْقَوْمِ الْكَافِرِينَ. (البقرة، 2: 286) رَبَّنَا إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا مُنَادِيًا يُنَادِي لِلْإِيمَانِ أَنْ آمِنُوا بِرَبِّكُمْ فَآمَنَّا رَبَّنَا فَاعْفِرْ	<i>Al-Qawmi Al-Kāfirīna (2: 286). Rabbanā 'Innanā Samī'nā Munādīāan Yunādī Lil'īmāni 'An 'Āminū Birabbikum Fa'āmannā Rabban ā Fāghfir</i>	a caller calling to the faith: 'Believe in your Lord,' and we have believed. Our Lord! Forgive
5	لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا وَكَفِّرْ عَنَّا سَيِّئَاتِنَا وَتَوَفَّنَا مَعَ الْأَبْرَارِ (آل عمران، 3: 193) رَبَّنَا وَآتِنَا مَا وَعَدْتَنَا عَلَى رُسُلِكَ وَلَا	<i>Lanā Dhunūbanā Wa Kaffir `Annā Sayyi'ātinā Wa Tawaffanā Ma `a Al-'Abrāri (3: 193). Rabbanā Wa 'Ātinā Mā</i>	us our sins, and remit our misdeeds, and make us die in the company of the virtuous." (3: 193) "Our Lord, and give

<p>تُخْزِنَا بِيَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّكَ لَا تُخْلِفُ الْمِيعَادَ (آل عمران، 3: 193)</p>	<p><i>Wa`adtaṅā `Alā Rusulika Wa Lā Tukhzinā Yawma Al- Qiyāmati 'Innaka Lā Tukhlifu Al-Mī`āda (3:194)</i></p>	<p>us what You have promised us through Your messengers, and do not disgrace us on the Day of Resurrection. Surely You never break a promise." (3: 194)</p>
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These Qur'anic verses highlight the significance of supplication (*du'a*) in *ṣalah* (prayer) within Islam. Surat *Al-Baqarah*, verse 286, reflects the believer's humility and dependence on Allah for forgiveness, protection from burdens, and divine guidance. Surat *Al 'Imrān*, verses 193-194, emphasizes the prayerful expressions of faith, requests for forgiveness, and the desire to be among the righteous, while invoking divine promises. Reciting these verses during *ṣalah* enhances the believer's spiritual connection, fostering humility, contrition, and trust in Allah's compassion and guidance.

The relationship between texts and its locations

There is no doubt that the text has the authority and ability to influence the audience and create an intended cultural and aesthetic impact. The distinction between texts on arts and architecture is only made to dispute that concept; which gives us explanations about the strength of the authority of religious and historical texts on the one hand, and their impact on their recipient audience across many eras on the other hand. The reason for the survival of these texts is attributed to their authority and power, through which they seek immortality, survival, and the achievement of their goals across successive eras; therefore, the text is the most influential element that expresses thought, culture, and religion, and it is nothing but a translation of them. As for the relationship between the text and architecture, it is a transmitter of the goal of that architecture on the one hand, and it is also the best decorative means on the other hand.

However, the inscription above the main entrance to the mosque includes the message of Islam and the concept of monotheism, and it was placed in a location that serves as a beacon for all, to emphasize their religion in a country where most of its inhabitants are infidels who worship idols, according to the expression of Ibn Battuta when he visited China (Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, 1997).

As for Surat *Al-Insan*, which is engraved on the main facade of the mosque, this surah includes important meanings. It deals with the creation of man and his freedom, then explains what Allah has prepared for the righteous and good, and how to nurture the human soul. While, the plaque on the door of the prayer house carries verses that indicate that its area is designated as a prayer area and must be purified for prayer. It also highlights the virtue of building mosques, following the example of Abraham and Ishmael.

As for the texts of the House of Prayer (what is this part, do you mean the qibla iwan?), Surat *An-Naba'* is engraved on the western wall. The Surah begins with a question that provokes the reader and listener to be amazed, astonished, and to exaggerate the truth: "About what are they asking one another about the great news, about which they differ?" Then the Surah moves on to draw attention to the power of Allah and the blessings He has created for people. Then, both the scene of torment and the scene of bliss are presented. The Surah concludes with a description of a near punishment on the Day when a man will observe what his hands have put forth and the disbeliever will say, "Oh, I wish that I were dust.

Likewise, the inscriptions of the *miḥrāb* emphasize faith and belief in the change of the qibla, which occurred in 624 AD, and started the turning is when Muslims faced the *Ka'ba* instead of *Al-Aqsa* Mosque in their prayers. Here, the artist was keen to link the text to the function of the *miḥrāb*, as it indicates the direction of the qibla towards Mecca. As for the six lateral *miḥrābs* of the mosque's qibla wall, the inscriptions emphasize the steadfastness of faith and Islam, as well as the greatness and power of Allah and the many blessings He has bestowed

upon people. Most of the texts are religious texts including supplication (*du'a*) that call for forgiveness, repentance, prayers, and peace upon the Prophet Muhammad, and encourage zakat, charity, and good morals. All of these are Islamic teachings and a religious approach that are among the constants and pillars of faith.

DISCUSSION

The epigraphical content found within the historical building serves a multifaceted purpose, encompassing functional, aesthetic, and socio-philosophical dimensions. This content often reflects the societal, philosophical, and Sufi concerns of its patrons, while also offering insights into educational, cultural, and historical contexts, as well as the perceptions of both patrons and the community.

It is evident that a comprehensive understanding of Islamic religious beliefs and fiqh was crucial for the individuals responsible for the epigraphical program of the mosque. The existing foundation inscription suggests that the individual responsible for the mosque's epigraphic scenario was likely Ahmad bin Mohamed al-Qudsi, also known as Haji Rukn al-Shirazi, the patron of the mosque's reconstruction. The inscription further implies the existence of a supportive team assisting him in this endeavor.

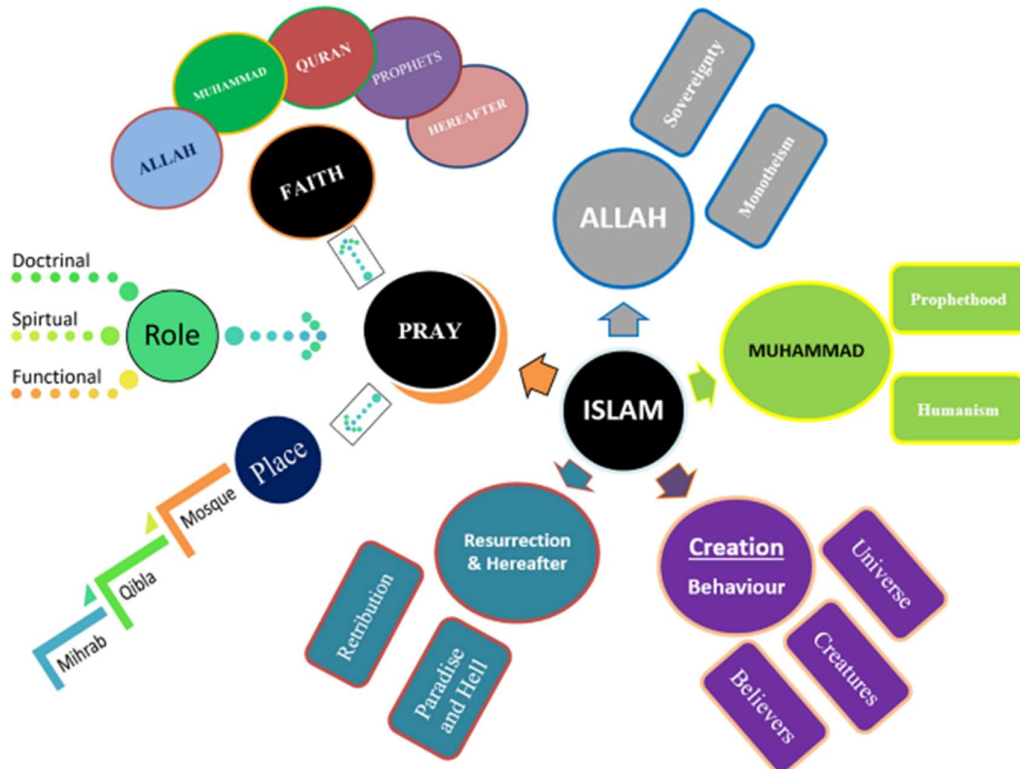


Fig. 21 A conceptual diagram illustrates how mosque inscriptions communicate vital messages to Muslims, emphasizing the significance of prayer and its impact within Islamic belief.

The qur'anic inscriptions within al-Aṣḥāb Mosque provide a comprehensive overview of key elements and interconnections between Islam and prayer. These inscriptions encapsulate the essence of Islam, including its Pillars, the declaration of faith (Shahada), the oneness of Allah, and the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him). Additionally, they emphasize the belief in Allah, His angels, His revealed books, His messengers, and the Day of Judgment. Notably, prayer, as the second of the five pillars of Islam, is intricately woven into these inscriptions, underlining its significance and unique position as the only actional pillar that is never excused, except for specific and limited days for women. Furthermore, the other pillars

of Islam, namely Zakat, Sawm (fasting), and Hajj (pilgrimage), are also echoed in the mosque's inscriptions.

The qur'anic inscriptions of the mosque not only elucidate the fundamental principles and obligations of Islam but also elucidate how the worshipper should enact these principles. Prayer (*Ṣalah*), as the fundamental act of worship and the primary pillar in Islam, symbolizes submission and humility towards Allah. It establishes a direct connection between worshippers and their Creator, reflecting the spirit of servitude to Allah. The obligation to pray and to perform it correctly stands as a prominent sign of a person's adherence to the Islamic faith. Through prayer, the believer's faith in Allah's power, greatness, and the human need for Him is exemplified. Moreover, the qur'anic epigraphic content emphasizes that Muslims who fulfill the obligations of prayer and, in sequence, believe in fundamental related topics such as creation, resurrection, reckoning, and the attributes of Paradise and Hell, will be rewarded with Paradise. Conversely, Hell is the destination for those who neglect prayer due to their denial of the aforementioned beliefs.

Investigating inscriptions within the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque in Quanzhou reveals profound insights into the complex religious and cultural dynamics of the medieval Muslim community in China. The intricate tapestry of visual, aesthetic, and cultural considerations is worthy of in-depth examination.

The inscriptions, executed in the elegant and highly calligraphic thuluth script, with a Chinese twist to it, exemplify the technical mastery and artistic sensibilities of the artisans involved. This elevated calligraphic style conveys a sense of grandeur and reverence that is befitting a sacred edifice. The deliberate placement of the inscriptions strategically located above key architectural features such as entrances, the *miḥrāb*, and the qibla wall, creates a harmonious visual experience that accentuates the religious significance of the space. The abundant Qur'anic verses, including entire Surahs An-Naba' and Al-Insan, which gracefully wrap around exterior and interior walls, foster a sense of immersive enveloping that submerges the worshipper in the divine narrative. The profusion of inscriptions adorning the mosque's surfaces contributes to a striking visual opulence, asserting a distinct Islamic identity that distinguishes it from the more reserved architectural styles prevalent in local Chinese religious structures.

The extensive display of Qur'anic inscriptions serves as a compelling visual assertion of the Muslim community's religious and cultural identity amid Quanzhou's diverse religious landscape through the lavish adornment of the mosque with calligraphic inscriptions, patrons and artisans aimed to establish a visual counterpoint to the iconography of local Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian temples, which typically feature elaborate imagery, sculpture, and ornamental symbolism. The strategic positioning of inscriptions, most notably the prominent display of Qur'anic verses on the mosque's exterior façade and the *miḥrāb*, can be interpreted as asserting the importance of Islamic teachings and practices within the public sphere, vying for recognition alongside other religious institutions. This emphasis on epigraphic embellishment reflects the Muslim community's aspiration to carve out a distinct and prominent visual presence, thereby affirming the significance of their faith in the local context and potentially enticing new adherents through the evocative nature of the inscriptions.

While the inscriptions remain closely aligned with established Islamic calligraphic and textual conventions, their presence within the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque also illustrates the capacity of the Muslim community to adapt and integrate within the broader cultural milieu of medieval China. The selection and placement of specific Qur'anic verses, particularly those underscoring the importance of prayer and the centrality of the qibla, reflect an acute awareness of the religious needs and practices of the local congregation. The inclusion of dedicatory inscriptions

commemorating the mosque's construction and renovation underscores its role as both a physical manifestation of the community's religious identity and its integration within Quanzhou's overarching social and political landscape. This synthesis of Islamic artistic traditions with local architectural features highlights the dynamic cultural exchanges that shaped Islam's visual and material expressions in premodern China, meriting further scholarly exploration.

In summation, the inscriptions of the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque serve as powerful visual and textual testimonies to the vibrant Islamic presence in medieval Quanzhou. By employing a rich tapestry of Qur'anic verses and sophisticated calligraphic styles, the mosque's patrons and artisans have ingeniously crafted a sacred space that not only facilitates religious practice but also asserts the community's distinct identity, engaging thoughtfully with the broader religious and cultural milieu of the region.

CONCLUSION

The epigraphic program of the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque in Quanzhou stands as a remarkable testament to the enduring presence and religious vitality of the medieval Muslim community in China. Through a comprehensive analysis of the mosque's carefully curated Qur'anic inscriptions, this study has illuminated how the textual elements reflected the patron's and artisans' deep religiosity and functioned as critical components in shaping the architectural experience and articulating key religious concepts.

From the foundation to the Qur'anic verses adorning the mihrāb and prayer hall, the inscriptions collectively convey a multifaceted understanding of Islamic belief and practice. The strategic placement of these inscriptions in relation to the mosque's functional and ritual elements, such as the qibla orientation and the central mihrāb, underscores their role in reinforcing the space's sacred purpose and mediating the congregants' religious experiences. The careful selection and calligraphic execution of the Qur'anic passages further reveal the artistic sensibilities and theological sophistication of those responsible for the epigraphic program.

By situating the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque's inscriptions within the broader discourse on Islamic epigraphy and architecture, this study has contributed to a nuanced understanding of how textual elements functioned as both devotional aids and aesthetic embellishments in the medieval Islamic world. The inscriptions' thematic content, which emphasizes the centrality of prayer, the significance of orientation, and the notion of moderation, not only reflects the patrons' religious worldview but also illuminates the intellectual and spiritual currents that shaped the Muslim community's engagement with the built environment.

The enduring preservation of the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque's inscriptions serves as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Islamic cultural and religious practices in the face of geographic and cultural distance. This study's examination of the epigraphic program thus provides a valuable window into the complex dynamics of cultural exchange, knowledge transmission, and the evolution of Islamic artistic and devotional traditions within the unique context of premodern China.

As the sole surviving architectural remnant of Quanzhou's rich Islamic heritage, the Al-Aṣḥāb Mosque and its inscriptions deserve continued scholarly attention. Further research on Muslim communities' material and textual evidence in various regions of China will yield valuable insights into the multifaceted and understudied histories of Islam's transnational trajectories. This paper's in-depth analysis of the mosque's inscriptions represents a crucial step in this direction, inviting future investigations that expand our understanding of the diverse cultural and religious landscapes that have shaped China's past.

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التوظيف البصري للنص القرآني: تحليل النقوش القرآنية في جامع الأصحاب في مدينة تشوانتشو بالصين

الملخص

يعرض هذا البحث تحليلاً شاملاً للنقوش القرآنية المصممة بعناية والتي تزين جامع الأصحاب في مدينة تشوانتشو الصينية، مما يوضح كيف تعكس هذه الكتابات المنقوشة الفكر الديني ونمط حياة المجتمع المسلم المحلي، بالإضافة إلى تجسيد المفاهيم المعمارية والقيم الدينية الرئيسية التي ميزت جودة بناء الجامع عالية الإتقان. تقدم الدراسة عبر التوثيق الدقيق للموقع، وتحليل مضمون الكتابات، وتبيان السمات الجمالية للنقوش، فهماً متعمقاً عن الآيات القرآنية وموضعها الاستراتيجية، ودور ذلك في إبراز معانيها الدينية والإيمانية، وارتباطها بشعائر الصلاة، ومساهمتها التعبير عن البعد الجمالي للجامع في المجمع. في هذا السياق تكشف هذه الورقة البحثية، من خلال وضع النقوش محل الدراسة ضمن الإطار الأشمل المتعلق بالنقوش والعمارة الإسلامية، كيف عبرت الآيات القرآنية المنتقاة بعناية، وتنفيذها بأنواع محددة من الخط العربي، عن جوهر الثقافة الدينية، مثل مركزية الصلاة وأهمية التوجيه. ويساهم هذا الفحص المتعمق في فهم التفاعل الثقافي والحياة الدينية الفاعلة في الصين قبل العصر الحديث.

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