Carved Gardens: A Syrian Cenotaph in Michigan

Lisa Çakmak and Christopher Blauvelt

Fig. 1. Syrian cenotaph, twelfth century CE, sandstone/limestone, 2.34 × 1.63 × 1.12 m, 6,500 lbs./2,948.35 kg. Gift of Mr. Thomas Curtis, UMMA 1960/2.2a–p. UM Staff Photo.
In 1960 the University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA) acquired a medieval Islamic stone grave marker (fig. 1). The monument is comprised of fifteen pieces; thirteen form a rectangular base and two pieces form the triangular prismatic capstone. When the monument was received, only two of the blocks were placed on display at the museum due to the object’s large size and significant weight. The remaining twelve blocks were placed in off-site storage. In 1992 the blocks of the monument were reunited in the gardens of Ingalls House, the University of Michigan presidential guesthouse. This allowed for the first public viewing of the monument in a partially restored form. In 2004 David Michener, Associate Curator of the Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum, proposed that UMMA, the Gardens, and the University of Michigan Museum Studies Program collaborate to study and display the monument at the Gardens. The project resulted in the temporary display of the cenotaph in the Warm Temperate House of the Botanical Gardens Conservatory from April 2007 to June 2007. Here, for the first time, the cenotaph was fully reconstructed, a process that was aided by the identification and decipherment of the inscription that encircles the base. The current authors were involved in different stages of this process, and we are publishing this essay to introduce the monument and the results of its study to a broader audience.

In its current state, all of the pieces of the cenotaph have sustained mild to significant damage along the molded edges; in some cases, large chunks of blocks have been broken off (fig. 2). When properly assembled, the thirteen pedestal blocks create a rectangle with a hollow interior space that the capstone is not large enough to span. This necessitated an artificial inner support when the cenotaph was reconstructed in 2007. It is unclear how this structural issue would have been addressed in the cenotaph’s original design. It is clear, however, that to call the tent-shaped capstone a “lid,” implying that the stone covered a coffin or body, would be a misnomer. As will be elaborated upon below, Islamic burial practices involve placing

The Cenotaph and All Its Pieces

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1 Two of the blocks of the base were omitted in an attempt to fit the irregularly sized blocks together. These structural issues will be discussed below.
the body directly into the ground; objects such as the UMMA cenotaph were then placed above ground to mark the location of the burial, thus distinguishing this object from a sarcophagus, or coffin.

The cenotaph carries two inscriptions; the first runs along the exterior of the rectangular pedestal in a single register, with interruptions at each corner. It is this Qur’anic inscription, an excerpt from Ayat al-Kursi, or the Throne Verse (2.255), that facilitated the accurate reassembly of the cenotaph upon installation at Matthaei Botanical Gardens.\(^2\) The Throne Verse is a relatively common inscription to find on Islamic funerary markers. The capstone bears the second inscription, an epitaph for the deceased, which wraps around both sloped and both short sides in two registers. Both inscriptions are in a type of Arabic script called foliated Kufic, so named because of the vegetal motifs that surround and grow out of individual letterforms.

The pedestal blocks exhibit little uniformity in their shape; though they are all the same height, widths and depths vary between the blocks (fig. 3). Despite these differences in dimension, each block has been smoothly carved on its exposed horizontal surface and has a simple molding or lip at both the top and bottom of the exposed side. The inscription

\(^2\) Upon examining the cenotaph when it was on display at Ingalls House, Dr. Yasser Tabbaa was immediately able to identify the Throne Verse and to discern that the blocks were not properly set up; in addition to the two omitted blocks, several of the blocks were upside down.
is recessed into the center of each side. The spaces above and below the inscription are smooth and free from ornament, with the result that the inscription is highlighted. The corner blocks have additional carving and adornment. As mentioned above, the inscription and the recessed space stop several inches short of the corners, and these corner zones, which are flush with the plain surfaces of the exterior, are adorned with curling vines, trilobed leaves, and small buds. The true corner is decorated with a twisting cable. Atop each of the corner blocks is a finial-like element common to such monuments, called a bobéchon (Sauvaget 1938, 46). These finials have been badly damaged, with only one preserved almost in its entirety. Carved as part of the block, each finial begins with a square base, raised an inch off the surface of the cenotaph. Atop the square base is a circular layer, which at one point may have had some sort of exterior embellishment. Rising from the circular layer, an acorn-shaped dome emerges. In their original state, these finials may have served to give the impression of large candles or squat minarets marking the outermost corners of the burial (fig. 4).

The capstone is a triangular prism 0.64 m wide at its base and 1.5 m long, approximately two-thirds the length of the rectangular pedestal. On the UMMA cenotaph, the prism does not begin to slope immediately from the bottom but is elevated by a small, plain socle. The socle and capstone are all carved from one large block of stone (today broken in two). The epitaph runs along all four sides of the capstone in two registers. A 2-cm-wide line separates the two rows of inscription on all sides of the capstone. On the long sides of the capstone, the inscription is contained in a recessed, trapezoidal space. The short sides of the trapezoid are made up of a combination of curves and angles, creating a decorative serrated border. Two triangular spaces are formed at the ends of the trapezoid; these spaces are
The Inscription

The inscription on the base of the cenotaph is made up of the first half of the Throne Verse, or Ayat al-Kursi, which is the 255th verse in the second chapter of the Qur’an. The excerpt inscribed on the UMMA cenotaph reads:

**ARABIC:**

 الله لا إله إلا هو الحَيُّ الْقَيِّمُ لَا تَأخَذُهُ سَبِيلً وَلَا نَوْمً لَهُ مَا في السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الأَرْضِ مِن ذَٰلِكَ الَّذِي يَشْفَعُ عَنْهُ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِ يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِ وَمَا خَلْفِهِ

**TRANSLITERATION:**

Allahu la ilaha illa huwa, Al-Ha’iyl-Qaiyum La ta’khudhuhu sinatun wa la nawm lahu ma fi-as-samawati wa ma fil-‘ard Man dhal-ladhi yashfa’u ‘indahu illa bi-idhnihi Ya’lamu ma bayna aydihim wa ma khalfahum
ENGLISH:
Allah! There is no God but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting, the Eternal. No slumber can seize Him, nor sleep. All things in heaven and earth are His. Who could intercede in His presence without His permission? He knows what appears in front of and behind His creatures.

The Throne Verse is considered to be one of the principal verses of the Qur’an dedicated to refuge and protection (Esposito 2003, s.v. “Ayat al Kursi”; see also Sahih Muslim 1994, 1:566). It is believed to protect an individual from evil and is often recited before sleep to keep house and family safe. It is also recited after other prayers to “pave a way to paradise.” Its role as a protective prayer makes it a popular choice for amulet inscriptions (Esposito 2003, s.v. “Ayat al Kursi”). Given the verse’s association with protection, it seems particularly relevant to the funerary context, as a way of safeguarding the deceased during the sometimes treacherous journey to paradise.

The cap of the cenotaph contains an epitaph for the deceased, written in the same Kufic style. The epitaph begins in the upper right corner of Side A (fig. 5) and wraps around the sides of the cenotaph to Side B, Side C, and Side D (figs. 6, 7, 8) from right to left. The first line is read first, followed by the second. The epitaph reads:

ARABIC:

top line:

هذا قبر الفقيرة إلى الله تعالى عائشة ابنت عبد الله ورحمها الله

bottom line:

عليها توفي يوم السبت في النصف من جمادى الأولى سنة

خمس مانة والحمد لله وحده وصلواته على محمد

TRANSLITERATION:

top line: Hadha qabr al-faqeer ila-Allah ta’ala ‘Aisha bint ‘Abdillah wa rahimaha-Allah wa rahim man tarrahama…

bottom line: …’alayha tufiyat yawm as-sabt fi an-nisf min ja-maadi al-ula sanat khams mia’ wal-hamdulilah wahdahu wa salawatuhu ‘ala Muhammad.

ENGLISH:

top line: This is the grave of the destitute [fakir] of God Most High, Aisha the Daughter of Abdullah and may God have mercy on her and have mercy on whoever asks for mercy . . .

3 According to al-Tabarani, ibn as-Sunni, ibn Hibban, and others.
bottom line: . . . on her. She died on a Saturday in the middle of (the Islamic month) Jamaadi Al-Ula, the year five hundred (1106/7 CE) and all praise belongs to God alone and may His blessings be upon Muhammad.

The epitaph follows the standard formula, giving the name and patronymic of the deceased, the date of death, and a prayer for God’s mercy.4

Richard Ettinghausen, former curator at the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., first suggested Syria, specifically Damascus, as the possible origin of the UMMA cenotaph, and surviving grave monuments in Damascus seem to confirm this. A number of cemeteries are known to have existed in Syria in the twelfth century, particularly in Aleppo and Damascus; few have been systematically published. Khaled Moaz and Solange Ory (1997) have published a catalogue of funerary stelae and their inscriptions from the Al-Bab al-Saghir cemetery in Damascus. Four pieces in their catalogue (nos. 4, 5, 57, and 58) are close to the UMMA cenotaph in both style and date; due to limited space, we will focus on one in particular: the cenotaph of Altunas.

The cenotaph of Altunas is located in the southern zone of the cemetery, which is the largest area of the cemetery and contains the highest percentage of ancient graves. The authors describe the form of the cenotaph as a “cénotaphe prismatique en pierre sur socle parallélépipédique” (Moaz and Ory 1977, 170). This is precisely the same form as the UMMA cenotaph.5 The base is made up of fourteen limestone blocks, each with a molded lip at the top and bottom (fig. 9). Like the UMMA cenotaph, the cenotaph of Altunas has an inscription set in a recessed rectangular space within each side, and the corners of the base are decorated with vegetal motifs. But unlike the UMMA cenotaph, it has a base whose exterior panels are entirely decorated. Below the inscription, a regular pattern of

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4 Hillenbrand (1994, 254) remarks of a similar epitaph: “Its formulaic inscriptions began with bismillah, gave the name, patryonymic, and date of death of the deceased, and ended with a prayer for God’s mercy. Sometimes a quote from the Qur’an was added.”

5 At the time of publication, the two pieces had not been reassembled. While the capstone had been previously studied and published by Sourdel-Thomine (1950, 195-202), the rectangular base was not excavated until 1973 and subsequently published by Moaz and Ory. Upon examination, it was noted that the Qur’anic verse inscribed on the base was abruptly cut short at precisely the point where the same Qur’anic verse inscribed on the capstone began. Thus scholars concluded that they were part of the same monument (Moaz and Ory 1977, 32).
five-tipped leaves runs from corner to corner. The center of each leaf is hollowed out, and the stem spreads out to encircle each leaf. The area above the inscription is decorated with an irregular pattern of trilobed leaves, flowers, and vines. Finials, circular in shape, embellish the corners of the cenotaph, although only the one at the northeast corner is partially preserved. Only one level of the finials is visible in the published photos.

The triangular capstone has been broken into two pieces and preserves traces of red and blue paint (fig. 10). There is no socle; the sides immediately begin to slope from the bottom of the capstone. On the long sides of the capstone, the inscription is set within a recessed trapezoid with serrated short sides similar to the UMMA cenotaph. There are three lines of text
within the trapezoid and additional text in the corner spaces. The short sides of the capstone have only one register of text each, which is also recessed. Moaz and Ory (1977, 32) observed that the quality of the inscription varies between the base and the capstone, with the base inscription being of higher quality. This led them to conclude that the carving was done by two different craftsmen, possibly master and pupil.

Like the UMMA cenotaph, the cenotaph of Altunas has an epitaph and a section of the Throne Verse. Using a style of Arabic calligraphy described as Atabeg or Burid Kufic, the epitaph begins on the capstone, whereas the Throne Verse begins on the base and continues onto the capstone (Moaz and Ory 1977, 31; Sourdél-Thomine 1950, 195). The epitaph commemorates an emir, Abu Mansur Altunas b. Abd Allah al-Tagi, who died on 12 May 1120. According to Sourdél-Thomine, the name Altunas appears to be foreign, though she offers no supporting evidence; furthermore, the honorific titulature belongs to a military class of Turkish origin, the Seljuqs, who presided over Damascus in the eleventh century. Sourdél-Thomine has suggested that Altunas could have been a foreign dignitary in the court of the Toghtegin, the Atabeg ruler of Damascus from 1103 to 1128 CE and founder of the Burid dynasty at Damascus (Sourdél-Thomine 1950, 195).6

Islamic eschatology includes a belief in the resurrection of the body, judgment of the soul, and the existence of heaven and hell.7 Resurrection is a particularly important tenet of Islamic theology because Muslims believe that the body of the deceased is resurrected in the form in which it was buried so that it can be reunited with the soul; thus Muslims do not practice cremation. Upon death, the body is first washed and wrapped in a white shroud. Once this process has been completed, the body is taken by procession to the burial site. At the burial site, prayers are said, and the body is placed directly into the ground without a coffin, with the head oriented toward Mecca.8 The grave is to be a simple pit, without any

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6 Atabegs were originally a class of Seljuk slaves who oversaw the care, education, and training of the children of princes and other elite Seljuk officials. Often, at the death of the father, an Atabeg would marry his ward’s widowed mother and assume regency. Eventually the title of Atabeg was used to refer to officials of the Seljuk and Mameluk dynasties, who occupied a variety of administrative roles.

7 For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Smith and Haddad (1981), which examines Islamic eschatology in both classical and modern periods.

8 In modern times, the law often required that the body be buried in a coffin. In such situations, the body is placed in a very simple
lime, brick, or wood (Tritton 1938, 657). The practice is the same for both men and women.

The first generation of Muslims was generally against any ostentation regarding mourning, death, and burial; women were excluded from the procession and barred from the gravesite, and dramatic acts of grief, such as wailing or beating of the breast, were forbidden. This early generation also eschewed grave markers, believing that “the grave itself should be level with the ground and no structure of any kind was to mark it. This leveling of tombs symbolised the equality of all believers in death as in life.” This sentiment is documented in various hadith, but the Qur’an is virtually silent regarding the matter (Hillenbrand 1994, 253). It is recorded that in early Islamic times tents were sometimes erected over a new burial to protect the body of the deceased from harsh elements or to mark the grave of a person of high religious status.9 According to Hillenbrand (1994, 269), “the places where those of high religious status were buried might be marked by a canopy, a tent, or some similar form of covering. The notion embodied here was that of affording shade to the deceased; and this shade was interpreted, following in this the Qur’an, as one of the blessings of paradise.” The prophet Muhammad himself protested against any special distinction to mark his grave, but in the generation after his death his burial site was marked by a special structure. Shortly after that his tomb was enshrined within the Umayyad Mosque of the Prophet (Hillenbrand 1994, 253).

The story of Muhammad’s grave monument conveys the tensions once inherent in the practice of marking graves. On the one hand, some believed that burials ought not to be commemorated with any type of monument; on the other hand, the fact that there are cemeteries, both modern and ancient, filled with marked tombs indicates that others felt that marking graves was an acceptable and desirable practice (Hillenbrand 1994, 271–272). These contradictory beliefs have led to the characterization of grave markers and mausolea as “a problematic form of architecture for Islam, being, on the one hand, interdicted by the Prophet himself and, on the other, enjoying great popularity, especially in certain periods” (Leisten 1990, 12–13). Thus, the practice of marking tombs has become a subject of much debate among scholars. The main argument centers on when monumental funerary architecture began. There are those who argue that funerary architecture began in the ninth century, for two

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9 Leisten (1990, 14, 16) remarks upon a common belief among Muslims that the body of the deceased was mentally and physically present in the grave and therefore any structure placed on the grave could crush it.
reasons: first, the absence of funerary buildings throughout the Near East, resulting from a widespread injunction against the practice of marking graves; and second, the celebration of saints and martyrs, mainly by Egyptian Shiites, who were influenced by the prevalence of earlier cemeteries in Egypt (Grabar 1966; Creswell 1982; Williams 1985; Bloom 1987). Others argue for a date prior to the ninth century for the development of commemorative funerary architecture, suggesting that the ninth-century date is based upon “an unnecessarily narrow definition of architectural function,” which “seriously restricted the scope of their investigation and created unnecessary barriers to a more flexible understanding of the functional nature and origin of commemorative funerary architecture in the Islamic world” (Taylor 1992, 4; see also Raghib 1970; Leisten 1990).

An alternative to both of these arguments has been suggested by Leisten in an article regarding interdictions against tombs in the hadith. Leisten outlines the contradictory nature of Islamic attitudes toward funerary architecture and suggests that the early hadith were not preventative but rather reactions to an “already existing and widely practiced cult of the dead in the Arab peninsula that had been found objectionable.” These interdictions, then, could explain the absence of mausolea in the early Islamic period (Leisten 1990, 13).

In our attempt to address the issue of funerary practices in the Islamic world we inevitably come across the two main categories of Islam: Sunni and Shia. Within each sect there are several discrete schools of belief, but the primary distinction between Sunnism and Shiism focuses on the successors of Muhammad. Upon his death, a series of four caliphs succeeded Muhammad in the leadership of the Islamic community. Sunnis, who comprise approximately 80 percent of the Muslim population, recognize the legitimacy of these four caliphs. The name Sunni derives from the Arabic word sunna, which refers to the normative example of the prophet Muhammad; the first four caliphs and Companions of the Prophet are also sources of sunna (Gibb et al. 1954, s.v. “Sunna”). Shiites, on the other hand, believe that the sunna of Muhammad—that is, his religious leadership, spiritual authority, and divine guidance—were passed on to his descendants, beginning with his son-in-law Ali, his daughter Fatima, and their two children, Hasan and Hussein (Esposito 2003, s.v. “Shii”). Thus, according to Shiism, the first three caliphs after the death of Muhammad are usurpers of the fourth and rightful caliph, Ali, son-in-law of Muhammad; and they are united in the belief that the leader of the Muslim world should be a member of the prophet’s family (Gibb et al. 1954, s.v. “Shia”). In the medieval period of Islam, due to their theological differences, Sunnis and Shiites recognized different political dynasties.
This resulted in a rough geographical division between east and west, with the Sunnis acknowledging the authority of the ‘Abbasid caliphate, which was centered in Baghdad, and the Shiites recognizing the Fatimid dynasty, which controlled North Africa from its capital at Cairo.

Contextualizing the Cenotaph

In the period leading up to the twelfth century, Damascus, and Syria in general, underwent a time of instability, with different dynasties and different sects of Islam vying for control of Syria and its major cities, Damascus and Aleppo (fig. 11). Once the center of the Umayyad dynasty (661–750 CE), Syria became a provincial backwater in the mid-eighth through tenth centuries, after the ‘Abbasid caliphate moved its capital from Damascus to Baghdad. As ‘Abbasid hegemony waned in the early eleventh century, control over Syria was contested, and it became a locus of religious conflict (Burns 1992, 10). Aleppo eventually came under the control of Shiites, as a protectorate of the Fatimids in Cairo. Meanwhile, rival caliphates were established at Damascus, one nominally loyal to the Sunni ‘Abbasid caliphate at Baghdad and the other loyal to the Fatimid Shiite caliphate at Cairo. In 1075, the Seljuk Turks, who were ostensibly loyal to the Baghdad caliphate, wrested control of Damascus and southern Syria from the rivaling caliphates and blocked the Fatimid dynasty’s attempt to control southern Syria and its major city. On the eve of the First Crusade (1096–1099 CE), however, both Fatimid and Seljuk leaders found themselves completely unprepared to defend Syria from this new external threat, leaving a political vacuum into which a series of charismatic warrior kings were able to insert themselves. The Seljuk
Atabeg Zengi, the eponymous founder of the Zengid dynasty, was appointed Atabeg of Aleppo in 1128, and he created a temporary alliance with the Burid dynasty in Damascus (1104–1154 CE) in order to create a united resistance to the Second Crusade in Syria. Zengi’s son Nur al-Din officially unified Syria in 1154 CE. Loyal to the Baghdad caliphate, the Zengids (1128–1174 CE), and the Ayyubids (1174–mid-twelfth century CE) after them, continued the Seljuq policy of restoring Sunni orthodoxy. Damascus became the center of the Sunni revival, having been under the control of the Seljuq Turks and the Burids, both Sunni, for the generation leading up to the rule of Nur al-Din. The Sunni revival reached its height under the leadership of Nur al-Din, who, though initially tolerant of Shiism, began “to practice a more strident Sunni doctrine and to undermine local Shi’i power” (Tabbaa 2001, 21). At the same time an ideological and theological conflict was taking place in Syria between Sunnis and Shiites, which effectively divided the country between Damascus in the south and Aleppo in the north; “this controversy was also echoed in the populist practice of tomb inscriptions” (Tabbaa 2001, 17). It is to this time of tension before the height of the Sunni revival and the unification of Syria that the UMMA cenotaph dates.

The written word occupies an exalted place in the Islamic visual arts. Whereas in earlier traditions of epigraphy word and image had often gone hand in hand, in Islamic art the inscription frequently stood alone as the only element of decoration. Given the importance of calligraphy as a decorative motif, it can be no surprise that Islam developed a variety of highly stylized scripts and calligraphy; two of these styles are very closely related: foliated and floriated Kufic (fig. 12). The former, foliated Kufic, is distinguished from the latter, floriated Kufic, in the following ways. Foliated Kufic is characterized by the decoration of the terminations of the letters with half-palmettes, and bi- or trilobed leaves. Floriated Kufic employs the same decoration but supplements the letters with floral motifs and scrolls, growing from the terminations or the centers of the letters (Grohman 1957, 183). The curvilinear vegetal motifs create a sharp contrast to the angular letterforms, which is another
characteristic of both foliated and floriated Kufic (Blair 1999, 107). It is this angularity that made the Kufic form of calligraphy well suited for inscriptions; many of the letters can be written using only vertical and horizontal lines.

Distinguishing foliated from floriated Kufic can be confusing even for experienced scholars. The tendrils, floral motifs, and scrolling vines, which emerge from the ends and middles of individual letters in floriated Kufic, need to be distinguished from those “growing from the upper edge of the band of writing, or forming the floral background of the inscription” (Grohmann 1957, 183). Furthermore, early studies of epigraphy and calligraphy, spearheaded by the French, often used the ambiguous term “coufique fleuri,” which could refer to either the foliated or floriated styles of Kufic (Grohmann 1957, 184). Thus, the differences between foliated and floriated Kufic are extremely subtle, making a distinction of limited usefulness. Furthermore, neither term is indigenous to Arabic or Islamic calligraphy; they are externally applied labels that facilitate the discussion and development of calligraphic typologies.

On the UMMA cenotaph, the Arabic letters are woven into a background of curvilinear floral motifs. The letters themselves do not have the requisite floral growths of floriated Kufic, and, except in one or two places, the floral background and the letters remain separate. The vegetal motif is centered on three-pointed ivy leaves, spaced about every 15 cm, from which sprout tendrils that coil around the central ivy leaf and wrap in and out of the letters. The same style of calligraphy is used for the base and cap of the cenotaph, but the letters on the base are slightly bigger and thicker than those on the cap. Whether foliated or floriated is used, however, the overall effect remains similar. The floral and vegetal motifs, whether purely background or growing out of the individual characters, obfuscate the legibility of the inscriptions while at the same time enhancing the overall visual aesthetics of the cenotaph.

A similar style of Kufic also appears on several other cenotaphs from the Bab al-Saghir cemetery, which all seem to belong to the last period of Kufic epigraphy in Syria before the spread of the use of cursive Arabic scripts in monumental epigraphy (Sourdel-Thomine 1950, 142). The cenotaph of Fatima dating to 439 AH/1048 CE contains two inscriptions that encircle the rectangular cenotaph, similar in shape to the base of the UMMA cenotaph, and the complicated floral background weaves in and out of the letters. An extensive analysis of the letterforms and vegetal motifs shows that while the two elements

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10 The identification of the calligraphy on the UMMA cenotaph as floriated was first made by Dr. Yasser Tabbaa.
are very closely related and work together to create a visually pleasing ensemble, they are two distinct entities: “le précédé décoratif ne peut donc être caractérisé comme un ‘fleurissement des caractères’ mais comme l’adjonction à ces caractères d’un ornament floral continu” (Sourdél-Thomine 1950, 148–150). Furthermore, floral decorations similar to the types visible on the UMMA cenotaph are used, including multilobed leaves and the scrolls of vines with small leaves. Generally, the floral decoration is contained in the upper half of the field of the inscription, a logical placement given the open space created by the tall, angular strokes of certain Arabic letters.11

In light of this contextual and historical information, what conclusions can we draw regarding the UMMA cenotaph? The style of the cenotaph and its inscriptions seems to be consistent with comparable examples from the twelfth century, but in Syria this monument type seems to wane in popularity in the succeeding centuries. Comparative material also sheds some light on the issue of the visibility of the socle of the capstone. By comparison with the anonymous cenotaph (fig. 4), it seems likely that the socle was indeed meant to be visible rather than sunken into the base of the monument. The issues of the hollow inner core of the cenotaph and the support of the capstone require further study.

The form of the capstone of the cenotaph, reminiscent of a tent, could be a monumentalization of the practice of covering graves in the early Islamic period.12 Aisha, the occupant of the grave that the cenotaph would have marked, was most likely Sunni, given her name, the date of the monument, and the overall style of the cenotaph. The size and grandeur of the cenotaph also speak to the woman’s high status, either socio-economic or spiritual. The use of the term fakir in the epitaph calls attention to Aisha’s piety. Fakir denotes a person with a

11 According to Sheila Blair, it is the attenuation of Kufic letters that resulted in the development of foliated and floriated Kufic: “In the eighth and ninth centuries, Kufic script became increasingly attenuated, and the upper terminals of the letters were lengthened. This attenuation created an imbalance between the densely packed lower part of the band, which contains the bodies of the letters, and the spare upper part of the band, which contains only the occasional upright. To correct this imbalance and fill the upper zone, artists developed an array of decorative devices, including bevels, arcs, barbs, palmettes, and rising tails. Artists then added new elements to the decorative repertory, including the half-palmettes or leaves characteristic of foliated script, and then flowers, characteristic of floriated script” (Blair 1999, 116).

12 Although early Islamic graves were not marked, Tritton (1938, 658) remarks that in “ignorance” a tent was sometimes placed over the grave.
deep respect for and dependency on God, indicating the deceased was a very righteous person, perhaps even a female saint or a relative of one. Furthermore, comparison to other monuments suggests that the size and style of the UMMA cenotaph, while not extremely common, were at least familiar to twelfth-century Syrian populations and that such monuments usually marked the graves of important religious and political individuals. Thus, we can safely conclude that the Aisha named in the inscription of the UMMA cenotaph was a member of an important twelfth-century Syrian family.

The project of researching, exhibiting, and publishing the UMMA cenotaph began in the winter of 2005 as an assignment for a trio of students enrolled in the University of Michigan Museum Studies Certificate Program. The pairing of two graduate students studying archaeology with a graduate student from the School of Information resulted in a truly interdisciplinary approach to the interpretation and presentation of the UMMA cenotaph. The exhibit design presented as the final project for the Museum Studies seminar then served as a guideline for the installation of the cenotaph at the Matthaei Botanical Gardens. The original exhibit design was later revised and modified by the staff of the Gardens; certain elements, such as the placement of the cenotaph, needed to be reassessed in light of physical constraints of the building. For example, while the original exhibit design called for the cenotaph to be placed within one of the beds of the Warm Temperate House, insufficient drainage and weight issues led to its relocation onto an area of pebble-paved pathway.

In the spring of 2005, the cenotaph was finally removed from its previous location, the lawn of Ingalls House, so that the monument could be cleaned and readied for display by the UMMA conservators. At this time, David Michener, Assistant Curator of the Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum, reached out to the Muslim Students’ Association, in hopes that the local Islamic population could shed light on funerary customs, possible inaccuracies in the content of the exhibit signage, and the decipherment of the inscriptions. At the same time, it was necessary to call upon an engineering student to perform the technical analysis regarding the weight of the cenotaph blocks and the load-bearing capacity of the floor and steam tunnels in the Warm Temperate House at the Gardens.13

The process of relocating and exhibiting the cenotaph from Ingalls House to the Botanical Gardens was a truly collaborative effort, drawing together students and faculty from

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13 The authors thank undergraduate Zakiyah Sayyed for her work that allowed the cenotaph to go on display at the Gardens without fear that its weight would cause the floor to collapse.
widely different disciplines, thus demonstrating the potential museum objects can have in fostering civic dialogue. This is particularly important as museums, especially art museums, find themselves competing with other forms of entertainment. The innovative cooperative effort between the Matthaei Botanical Gardens and the University of Michigan Museum of Art, which paired living collections with man-made art, served to bring the UMMA cenotaph to a potentially new audience, and it enhanced the interpretive power of the art object. Situating the cenotaph with plants and elements from its original climate context enhanced the viewer’s experience of the cenotaph as both a beautiful example of Syrian stonework and a functional memorial to a woman named Aisha.


Sauvaget, J. 1938. Les monuments ayyoubides de Damas, vol. 1: Le tombeau de Safwat-el-Molk; Le dâr al hadith de Noir ad-Din; Le tombeau de Farroukh-Châh et de Bahrâm-Châh; La madrasa Djahârâsìya. Paris: E. de Boccard.


