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The pseudo-kufic ornament and the problem of cross-cultural relationships between Byzantium and Islam


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Dealing with a much debated topic, not only in recent times, as that concerning the role and diffusion of ornament within Byzantine art, one has often the impression that virtually nothing new is possible to add so that you have to repeat positions, if only involuntarily, by now well established. This notwithstanding, such a topic incessantly gives rise to questions and problems fueling the discussion of historical and theoretical issues: a debate that has been going on for longer than two centuries. This situation is certainly due to a combination of reasons, but ones having a close connection with the history of the art-historical discipline itself. In the present paper our aim is to focus on a very specific kind of ornament, the so-called pseudo-kufic inscriptions that rise interesting pivotal questions – hitherto not so much explored – about the “interference” between a formalistic approach and a functionalistic stance, with its semantic and cultural underpinnings. Our strategy here will be to move from the general to the particular, from an overall sketch of the historical and critical reception of the topic to the analysis of a single case study, trying to underline and problematize from a specific point of view the different dimensions of cross-cultural connections between Byzantium and Islam, both the structural endogenous elements and the historically conditioned components, the causal and the casual features.¹

### 1. The form and the ornament

Ornament could not but be an ideal object of study from the point of view of the scientific and methodological needs of the newborn art-historical discipline, at least in its theoretically strongest version, aiming at combining Kunstgeschichte and Kunstwissenschaft. The ornamental – both by definition and by tradition free from the mimetic constraints of classic visual arts – perfectly fit the demand for purely formal analysis of the purely optical dimension of artistic production that fostered the researches of Eu-

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¹ The aim of the paper is to analyze pseudo-kufic ornament in Byzantine art and the reception of the topic in Byzantine Studies. The pseudo-kufic ornamental motifs seem to occupy a middle position between the purely formal abstractness and freedom of arabesque and the purely symbolic form of a semantic and referential mean, borrowed from an alien language, moreover. This double nature (that is also a double negation) makes of pseudo-kufic decoration a very interesting liminal object, an object of “transition”, as it were, at the crossroad of different domains. Starting from an assessment of the theoretical questions raised by the aesthetic peculiarities of this kind of ornament, we consider, from this specific point of view, the problem of the cross-cultural impact of Islamic and islamicizing formal repertory on Byzantine ornament, focusing in particular on a hitherto unpublished illuminated manuscript dated to the 10th century and held by the Marciana Library in Venice.

Keywords: pseudo-kufic; ornament; Byzantine art; Byzantine manuscript, Byzantine sculpture; art historiography.

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European scholars between the end of nineteenth and early of twentieth centuries. That demand, on the other hand, was widespread through the aesthetic attitudes of the period and it was shared by cultural trends and personalities otherwise very differently oriented. Furthermore, the nature of the ornamental feature, its direct, autonomous and abstract evidence – sans intermédiaires, as Valery wrote in Eupalinos – was in itself suitable for a double purpose: the one hand, to establish something like a historical grammar of visual arts, on the other hand, to undermine the gap, in terms of value judgment, between representational and non-representational arts, between high and low art forms, between advanced and decadent artistic ages and cultures. It is such a strategic project that guided the work of some of the pioneers of the art-historical discipline starting from the end of nineteenth century, in particular Alois Riegl, which was hailed as the Kant of the modern art history, the maker of a new Copernican revolution whose effects are still detectable in the base lines of the discipline. Not fortuitously, the most recent researches have been discovering similar ideological and cultural interests in studying the ornament, even if in accordance to the updated lexicon and standards of visual studies, nor is it surprising that the scientific legacy of Riegl and the Wiener Schule have gained a new attractiveness in the last decades.3

But, as always in history, there is also the other side of the coin, and ornament too has a double face. For the price for its purity in terms of representational content is its dependence in terms of material self-sufficiency. Every piece of ornament is actually a piece of applied art, hence the need to distinguish and to give a double name to that double face. A need that is made already explicit in the foundational text of the modern aesthetic Copernican revolution, the Kantian Critique of Judgment. Though for Kant the arabesque on a wallpaper is a perfect example of pulchritudo vaga, of free beauty (§ 16), ornaments – Zieraten in Kant’s words – are parerga, after all, only “an addendum” to the unity of the whole work of art, and then they always risk to be reduced to mere “decoration” or “finery” – Schmuck – that “detracts from genuine beauty” (§ 14).4 Double name also means double judgment. Thus, if the work of Riegl marks a possible development of one of these parallel Kantian lines, on the other side, the opposite extremity is the famous work of Adolf Loos, Ornament and Crime. Such an inner tension between a free play of forms and a redundant addition went through the theory and practice of art history during the twentieth century, and also the most recent scholarship devoted to the topic is somehow heir of that conflicting scene, so that often the most philosophically oriented studies are still conceived as a “defense” of the aesthetic rights of ornament. Yet, the possibility to tell ornament and decoration apart – or ornament and ornamental – proved to be a far cry from a really viable solution. Indeed, even the scientific formalization of formalistic approach to ornament, fostered by the progresses of mathematics and crystallography, could only provide a more rigorous analytic description of material, for “mathematics answers the question: ‘which ornaments are derived’, but not ‘how they are derived’ or why?”.

With these problems in mind, it is then not surprising that the historical and theoretical investigation of ornament had a no lesser role in the field of Byzantine studies, where the issues of realism and abstraction, mimesis and stylization were so relevant for the understanding of the relations between Western and Eastern aesthetic traditions. Ornamental motifs turned out to be not only a useful tool for “internal”, philological knowledge – as far as chronology, provenance and stylistic taxonomy are concerned – but also a resource to evaluate the amount and the importance

1 – Enamelled casket, In: Adrien De Longpéríer (note 26), 1846, pl, 45.
of exchanges, intersections, contaminations, reinterpretations and misunderstandings across different artistic languages and cultures. All this thanks to the somehow omnipresent nature of ornament, through the most different media, and to its structural “stability”. Even the most original decorative creation, in its absolutely aniconic quality, is much less conditioned than representational art genres, at least from a formal point of view, as we have noted above, and therefore also much more easily “transmissible” through different and even ideologically opposing contexts. On the other hand, it is not less true that the infection of an artistic culture by an external not endemic agent is never so inert as an extremely formalistic theory seems to believe, even when the infectious element, as it were, has a harmless and neutral appearance.

These critical features are particularly clear – as for the Byzantine context we want here to deal with – if we examine the case of that specific kind of ornament that has been called pseudo-kufic or kufesque decoration, widespread starting from the beginning of ninth century and that exhibits interesting peculiarities, worth not only of philological but also methodological scrutiny. Such a decoration exploits the formal and geometric properties of Arabic kufic script, with its combination of vertical, angular and horizontal segments that makes it especially fitting for architectural and monumental settings, but also trans-

forms the characters so to have an actually meaningless or “false” writing. In this way, in the same form that should be purely ornamental we find together both the elimination of sense and the remains of sense. Even in the more decorative abstract patterns – and then more distant from the semantic dimension of a form of writing proper – the overall structure and disposition of pseudo-kufic ornament never completely rejects the appearing (or the fictional appearing) of a real script. The recursivity, modularity, and compositionality of “characters”, together with their spatial distribution in linear frieze-like sequences, make pseudo-kufic ornament a highly adaptable decoration, for the most different settings, but they also lend it the unmistakable visual likeness, although superficial, of real calligraphy, of Islamic calligraphy, moreover. So the essential questions are not only which is the value of this script-like likeness?, and how much did this likeness influence the preference for such a decoration form?, but also why Byzantine artists found suitable for their purposes an alien pseudo-script?

Whence the problem of the interpretation of the possible reasons for this process of cross-contextual defunctionalization and refunctionalization. The idea that this kind of misuse of Arabic script could be due to the lack of linguistic competences by Western artists seems too simple, if only because pseudo-kufic ornamentation is found also in several Islamic artistic productions. Furthermore, we have to take into account the scope and persistence of the contagion phenomenon, from both a geographic and chronological point of view, with examples that range from medieval art to Renaissance painting and sculpture, where we find these ornamental motifs substantially unchanged in a variety of contexts (representations of embroideries, textiles, halos and so on), all the stylistic novelties notwithstanding.

Perhaps just in order to bypass the difficulties or the shortcuts of contextual interpretations, some scholars have favored an “aesthetic” account, if not even an extremely formalistic explanation, drawing attention to the “ternopioietic” feature – to use the term fashioned by Grabar – of calligraphic elements, so characteristic of Arabic script, and to the taste for the exotic allure, although more or less indeterminate. Others, instead, supposed that beyond aesthetic preferences there might be also cultural reasons of more specific functional kind, like an archaizing intent, a religious apotropaic value, or the visual suggestion of some ancient occult power, so that pseudo-Arabic inscriptions may have been seen as ritual formulas by the beholders, not unlike the Ephesia Grammata of Greek magic tradition, thus turning the exotic appeal in esoteric charm. In fact, it is not so easy to verify such hypotheses, especially
3 – Robert W. Schultz – Sidney H. Barnsley, Drawing of the champlevé decoration in the Katholikon of Daphni Monastery (Greece), pencil, ink and watercolor 1888. British School of Athens
when taking into account a reader-response approach, but it is reasonable to suppose that in different circumstances there may have been a concurrence of several factors. By and large, there is also an aesthetics of opacity and “otherness” as such, and pseudo-kufic ornament was actually “an opaque signifier that signified ‘alien signifier’”, as Christopher Wood has recently put it, so that “whereas to the ignorant eye all scripts were equally opaque, now some were more opaque than others.”

But, to be true, any arbitrary set of visual marks would be equally opaque, so we need an extra explanation for the choice of a sign system resembling and derived from a real writing system. It might be that the process has also psychological and perceptual causes. Independently of the meaning of the words and of the intrinsic iconicity of single elements, the graphic structure of Arabic script could be better suitable for the geometric permutations and transformations that are required in the “syntax” of ornament. As observed by Owen Jones in *The Grammar of Ornament*, the repetition of the same motifs sequentially ordered allows a visual “reading” that composes and decomposes the single units according to variable formal rhythms and “rhymes”. The regular but not monotonous recursivity of graphic elements is the essential feature of this kind of decoration, like that of similar repertories based on the stylization of phytomorphic or purely geometrical forms. The alphabetic repertory could thus provide a regulated pattern, or a ready-made grammar, from which to develop a free series of variations and, as Gombrich would have said, it is much easier to work from the constraints of a given scheme than to start from scratch. If so, we may say that the recognizable script-like appearance of pseudo-kufic ornament is something like a “residual” feature or, to use a more technical term, a skeuomorph, not a completely useless scrap but a by-product useful for ancillary functions.

Such functions are salient, for instance, in architectural application of ornament, where the obvious visual reference to the eurhythmic disposition of writing makes
the pseudo-kufic motifs particularly apt to fill frieze-like bands for building decoration. In the Byzantine artistic context the architectural use of pseudo-kufic found a specially fitting application within the so-called “champlevé” sculptural technique. Thanks to its material properties this method is perfectly suitable to transfer in durable forms and on a monumental scale the graphic intricacies of kufic ornamentation. The planarity of surfaces and the sharp chromatic contrast between the color of the ground, filled with dark mastic, and the optically outlined sign of characters enhanced the clarity and the geometric graphic finesse of the champlevé. And these were the qualities that Byzantine artists and viewers probably most appreciated in the polished refinement of Arabic calligraphy. At least from the point of view we have sketched here behind the taste for pseudo-kufic script there was a cross-cultural, anthropologically rooted Schmucktrieb, as German theorists called it, and the sense of order of Byzantine craftsmen was not so much different from that of Islamic artists. Nonetheless, to what extent Byzantine artists were also actually aware of the ideological, political or cultural implications of the forms they were reusing is another question, and a much more difficult one to answer.

Be that as it may, the problem of pseudo-kufic ornament marks a crucial point within the broader issue of the complex relationships between the Byzantine artistic culture and Islamic civilization. A multifaceted relationship not only due to a dynamic and instable interaction of spatial and temporal factors – as in every kind of cultural connection – but also because the interpenetration between Byzantine and Islamic culture became an object of historical inquiry in its own right only from a specific disciplinary point of view, with its presuppositions and aims. To better understand the current remarkable interest for such a topic, we have briefly to trace the origin and historical developments of that perspective.

2. A brief look at nineteenth-century studies

It is from the start of nineteenth century that the forms of islamicizing ornamentations begin to gain a new appeal in Europe, when the first systematic surveys of artistic styles were conducted and art works coming from outside the Western artistic culture began to be classified and evaluated for their peculiarities. This produced a double trend, on the one hand, the increase of field surveys and archaeological excavation campaigns on sites of historical interest, on the other hand, a progressive work of systematization of the materials, in order to have a chronological and geographical reference system to frame artistic phenomena, in particular the exotic ones, according to a taxonomic, genealogic and evolutionary approach, either conceived as linear or cyclic (for the recurrence of naturalistic and non-naturalistic periods). The new interest in great repertories, including those devoted to ornament, originated from these scientific efforts. The concern for Byzantine art was then at its beginnings, perhaps slightly in advance of the study of Islamic art, that became more popular in the second half of the century with the spread of orientalizing fashions. But notwithstanding the constraints of a largely incomplete knowledge of original materials, the classification work began to point out forms that we may call “of contact”, the outcome of a reciprocal stylistic influence between artists of different cultures. The islamicizing ornamental motifs are among the most impressive witnesses of such artistic exchanges.

The study of ancient and medieval sources contributed in that time to a more deeply rooted awareness of the Western artistic tradition, raised by the insert of classical heritage in the great development of religious Christian art. But this improved knowledge defined also the “distance” from forms external and “alien” to that tradition. On the other hand, the historical researches in the field of Islamic art showed not only the high level of quality of Muslim art productions, especially in Spain, but revealed also the unmistakable signs of a contact, the consequences of a contagion. If that contagion had been ubiquitous in medieval and Byzantine art, at least for a while, it had no lesser effects, in a sense, on the aesthetic inclinations of nineteenth-century beholders, that entertained a real passion for Orientalism. For historical reasons, such an attitude was fostered especially in those countries that, like France and Great Britain, cultivated politic, economic and colonial interests in the Near and the Far East.

It is against this cultural background that the work of Adrien de Longpérier (1816–1882) stands out. The pioneering researches of the French archaeologist and numismatist play a very important role in the history of pseudo-kufic scholarship. In 1846 Longpérier published an essay on the Revue Archéologique, in which he examined several European epigraphic records, analyzing the forms of “false” Arabic writings, [fig. 1] “qui ne donnent aucun sens”, as he put it, and exploring their relations with authentic kufic scripts, also thanks to the possibility to draw on a more detailed knowledge of original Islamic calligraphic inscriptions, both in manuscripts and in epigraphic art and decoration. But the relevance of Longpérier’s essay is not only technical, in the philological sense of the term. In a letter published on a later issue of the same journal – in reply to a communication of a reader – the French scholar took the opportunity also to take a stand against some (no better qualified) critics of his original essay. Showing a keen foresight, he stressed the historical importance of his subject because “la question n’est pas tout à fait sans importance; elle constitue un petit chapitre d’esthétique qui doit trouver sa place dans l’histoire de l’art”. To the critics complaining...
that such an approach could “rabaisser l’art national” and to those “qui trouvant fort humiliant pour l’Occident l’emploi des caractères arabes dans quelques monuments chrétiens”, Longpérier ironically reminds that rather surprisingly the same people have no difficulty to profess a religion actually “founded on Mount Sinai and on the shores of the Jordan”. 30

The “observations” of Longpérier, however peripheral and incidental, are nevertheless symptomatic of the perception of a much deeper and wide-ranging problem, in which scientific interests, aesthetic preferences, and also political and ideological reasons inextricably intertwine. In a sense, the ancient, arcane power that perhaps medieval and Byzantine artists vaguely felt in the “alien signifier” of pseudo-Arabic scripts was somehow still effective after more than a millennium and still aroused an apotropaic reaction.

Obviously, the empirical evidence at hand for Longpérier was still lacking and his observations took into account only Western samples, moreover without a systematic distinction between the technical peculiarities and constraints of different media. However, at the end of the nineteenth century the great archaeological surveys of Byzantine sites allowed a much more detailed knowledge of pseudo-kufic ornaments, both in terms of media and in terms of geographical and chronological distribution. In regard to architectural decoration, the best known examples are to be found in Greece [fig. 2] and reveal a clear Islamic inspiration. 31

Important studies were dedicated to the analysis of Greek pseudo-kufic ornament, notably those of George C. Miles, therefore, for reasons of space constraints, and rather from a historical perspective, we may be content to cite here as a telling example only the work of Robert Weir Schultz (1860–1951) and Sidney Barnsley (1865–1926), 32 that devoted their researches to the monastic complex of Daphni. In their painstaking description and graphic survey of the monument, hitherto only partly published, 33 Schultz and Barnsley made also an accurate drawing of the champlévé frieze with pseudo-kufic characters running along the cornice of the bema, just under the semi-dome of the apse. 34 [fig. 3] The plate depicts the two kufic letters tied together, sharply showing up on the dark mastic of the ground, partly still visible on the cornice. 35 [fig. 4]

During the twentieth century the knowledge of these aspects of Byzantine art considerably increased, taking into account a broad typology of forms, from painting and sculpture 36 to monumental art, furthermore on a wider geographical area. As a further example, we may consider the survey carried on in 1928 by the Swiss scholar Ernest Mamboury (1878–1953), projected to illustrate the volume of Guillaume Jerphanion devoted to the churches of Cappadocia. 37 [figs. 5a–b] The pioneering work of documentation of the then still little known treasures of the Byzantine cave churches is enriched by some watercolors depicting the or-
oration of the so-called column churches of Göreme, dating from the half of eleventh century. The case of Cappadocia – that is a peripheral but economically strategic region for the trade through the eastern line of the empire – reveals a particular phenomenon of orientalizing influence, probably affected by returning fashions already widespread in the Byzantine capital.

However, just in Byzantium, in spite of the historical sources speaking of buildings directly inspired by oriental models – as the famous Bryas Palace, erected by the emperor Theophilos (813–842) – the pseudo-kufic ornament seems to have been not so appreciated, at least for monumental art or architecture, and was rather relegated to a lesser and marginal role, as the decoration of manuscripts, of the ceramic ware coming from the Monastery of Constantine Lips, or very particular objects such as the bowl of San Marco in Venice. Should we think that in Byzantium the pseudo-kufic architectural decorations were “rejected” for some specific reasons? Is it reasonable to suppose that this kind of ornament was too much overtly indebted to a Muslim cultural milieu? (in spite of the statements of Theophanes speaking of “imitation”). Under the Macedonian dynasty the Islamic presence in Constantinople was represented not only by diplomats and ambassadors but also by merchants and prisoners, but, in fact, the force and direction of forwing influence were fragmetary and hindered. The highly specialized artistic workshops of Byzantium rather developed a specific version of islamicizing ornaments, putting together two different stylistic lines, inspired, on the one hand, by traditional forms and motifs, and on the other hand by a new taste, from which unique and completely original creations originate, like the architectural sculpture and ceramic decoration from Constantine Lips complex.

3. The twentieth-century contributions

The interest in the artistic exchanges between Byzantine Empire and Islamic world was particularly lively throughout the twentieth century, but for the specific case of pseudo-kufic decoration some remarks are in order. In an early period the attention of the international scientific community toward the topic of Byzantine ornament was sporadic, despite the precocious researches of Alois Riegl and the contribution of Alison Frantz, however confined to illuminated manuscripts. In fact, the gathering and classification of pseudo-kufic motifs pertaining to the Greek monumental architecture represent a marginal aspect of a specific field of investigation, that of the Byzantine ornament. Nevertheless, some scholars soon realized the relevance of the topic. During the 1920s and 1930s, after the important discoveries early in the century, the role of Byzantine art within the Mediterranean area was revaluated and redefined. From this point of view, the early concerns
of Georgios Sotiriou and André Grabar⁴⁷ for pseudo-kufic ornaments helped to make clear the spread of islamicizing decoration throughout the Greece. However, it was only in the 1950s that the Byzantine pseudo-kufic motifs became an object of some scientific relevance and of shared interest. After the publication of Grabar’s important essay devoted to the success of oriental arts in Byzantium under the Macedonian dynasty – published in 1951 on the second issue of the Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst⁴⁸ – the theme of the relationship between Byzantium and Islam was no more considered as a peripheral aspect, chronologically and geographically restricted, of a subtopic of Byzantine art, that is the ornamental.

Grabar was interested in the problematic dimension of the question. He was in search of the reasons of the diffusion of ornamental forms inspired by Arabic models in regions marred by the raids of pirates; for he rejected the hypothesis of mediation through Arabic sumptuary arts, rather stressing the direct contacts between monumental models and Greek artists. According to Grabar, the pseudo-kufic ornaments and the islamicizing decoration earned a remarkable reception in Constantinople, in the very moment in which the revival of ancient art reaches a climax of classicizing refinement, under Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. During the 1950s such an idea must have seemed quite radical, if we consider the way in which Grabar himself suggested and restated it several years later,⁴⁹ for the hypothesis undermined the alleged monolithic classicism of Macedonian age, all to the good of a more comprehensive view of Byzantine art, in keeping with the methodological approach of the French scholar, aiming at integrating in a historical perspective all the different elements – even if seemingly contradictory – contributing to the formation of art.

The half of the century thus marks a significant turn in the understanding of the complex relationships between Byzantium and Islam, particularly as far as artistic and cultural exchanges are concerned. And this not only thanks to the methodological contribution of André Grabar, but also by virtue of new studies on Islamic arts, assessing the variety and chronology of works circulating in the Mediterranean area.⁵⁰ These researches were crowned by an important symposium, dedicated to The Relations between Byzantium and the Arabs, held in May 1963 at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Center of Washington. The proceedings of the conference were published a year later, on the number XVIII of Dumbarton Oaks Papers (1964), in the same year when

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11 – Fragment of a shawl with pseudo-kufic inscription, 9th or 10th, from Upper Egypt. New York, Metropolitan Museum
Miles published his classification of pseudo-kufic elements in Greek architecture.\(^3\)

During the next decade the researches aimed at reconstructing the complex whole of the relationships between Byzantium and Islam, in a historical, sociological and artistic perspective. After the Washington conference the topic of the exchanges between Greek world and Islamic culture gained a new attractiveness,\(^4\) that has by no means vanished today. From the 1990s on the studies devoted to the vitality of the cultural and artistic contacts between the shores of Mediterranean greatly flourished,\(^5\) also thanks to museum collections\(^6\) and the scholarly contributions of studies and translations of Arabic sources that shed new light on the rhetorical devices of medieval authors. Arabic writings are often characterized by a kind of self-apologetic verve, not uncommon in Greek sources, masking under a religious pretext the continuity of social and cultural relationships, in spite of a no less continuous state of war.

From this historical point of view the Byzantine manuscripts offer a useful contribution in order to clarify the process of circulation of Islamic arts within the Mediterranean that however still remains unclear in many respects.\(^7\) The pseudo-kufic ornaments reveal the reception of the repertories inspired by Islamic world in manuscripts commissioned by aristocratic patrons for liturgical use. Byzantine codices give us a not marginal example of the relationships connecting Byzantine culture and Islamic world during the tenth century. This could help defining some central critical questions pertaining to Byzantine art, that is to say the history of ornamental and the interaction of classical legacy, Constantinopolitan aristocratic patronage and Islamic art in Macedonian period. To this end we can profitably consider here a manuscript book now held in Venice, whose ornamental elements have hitherto never been studied by art historians, although familiar to paleographers, but display, not unlike a lot of other codices, a repertory shared by other types of artistic objects. The manuscript is a clear example of the aesthetic coexistence of a classic ornamental repertory and pseudo-kufic elements. The codex thus testifies to the assimilation, with equal dignity, of a language of forms of “Others” into the Byzantine ornamental world, and that could be seen as a symptom of the controversial exchanges that occurred in the contemporary Byzantine social world, when Arabs, forced to be baptized, were integrated into Greek aristocracy making brilliant careers as officials, soldiers or courtiers.\(^8\)

The manuscript Greco II, 4 (=832) of the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana of Venice\(^9\) is decorated with thirty-three ornamental initials the mark the incipit of each of the homilies on Genesis by John Chrysostom\(^10\) contained in the book. The elegant Perlschrift with which the text is written betrays a Constantinopolitan provenance, around tenth century,\(^11\) what is confirmed also by the stylistic analysis of the illuminations.

The decorations of the book are characterized by classicizing foliages, palmettes and interlaced ribbons. Two initials, on the folios 153v and 207v [figs. 6–7] are instead decorated by pseudo-kufic motifs, constituted of linear and angular elements, partially modular, on which rigid lanceolate leafs, turgid palmettes and symmetric hooked motifs are inserted. A third initial, on the fol. 229r, [fig. 8] shows a different elaboration of graphic models, a kind of variation on the theme, fruit of the creativity of the limner but coherent with a internal principle of varietas, according to which each of the thirty-three initials shows a version of the geometric, foliated or ribbon-like motifs that are typical of middle-Byzantine “carved” repertory [figs. 9–10], a repertory that includes also the kufic.\(^12\) This ornamental graphic stylization of Arabic calligraphy stems from the “floral” kufic of the period,\(^13\) so called for the foliated ends of the letters, treated as in a phytomorphic alphabet, from which also the Arabic pseudo-kufic originate. [fig. 11]
Without pretending to be here exhaustive, we may briefly consider the works that seem more closely related to the illuminations of the Venetian codex, not only as far as formal features are concerned, but also from the point of view of dating (around tenth century). These too are examples that show the reception of pseudo-kufic ornament in the capital of Byzantine empire and the regions governed by aristocracy, under the Macedonian dynasty.

As it is well known, the church of the Holy Apostles, in the Agora of Athens, is likewise inspired by Constantinopolitan models and preserves extended parts of the original walls, although it was largely rebuilt after 1954. The pseudo-kufic decorations date to the same period of some marble slabs, now in the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens, that reveal how these motifs were used also in the chancel screens of sacred buildings. Within the heterogeneous repertory of marble spolia that characterizes the so-called “Little Metropolis” of Athens, or Panagia Gorgoepikoos, we find a fragment decorated with pseudo-kufic inscriptions that in their overall pattern seem not unlike that of the Venetian manuscript. [fig. 13] This kind of ornament was employed not only in religious building, but also in secular art. A gilded silver and niello bracelet decorated with pseudo-kufic characters, in Benaki Museum, [fig. 14] and the ceramic ware from Corinth and Cherso, now in the Byzantine collection of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, are evidence of the early reception of this exotic style within the provincial élites dur-

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23 – Main portal, architrave – marble fragment with pseudo-kufic ornaments, 10th century. Panagia Gorgoepikoos, Athens

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130 Opuscula Historiae Artium / 62, 2013, Supplementum
ing tenth and eleventh century, probably well acquainted with Islamic productions of the period, using the same ornamentations on ceramic ware and textiles. [fig. 11]

This widespread presence is due not only to a fashion, but has also a historical and sociological cause. Under the reigns of Basil I (867–886), Nikephoros II Phoka (963–969), John I Tzimisces (969–976) and Basil II (976–1025), that is to say for more than 150 years, the political relations between Byzantines and Muslims were by and large favorable, as a consequence of social and military transformations well documented by the historical sources. So, the appreciation of the islamicizing ornament could be also a byproduct of an overall exotic taste seeped through the Constantinopolitan court thanks to the mediation of Arabic influences on Byzantine aristocracy, in a moment, between ninth and tenth century, when human, economic and artistic exchanges were continuous, the state of war notwithstanding. The decoration of Venetian codex reproduced on parchment a repertory esteemed by the aristocracy of the capital during the tenth century, and thus gives us an evidence of a Constantinopolitan fashion, together with other well-known artworks, like the illuminations of the Menologion of Basil II, the ivory triptych of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste in the Hermitage, and the glass cup of the Treasure of San Marco in Venice.

[V. C.]
5. Conclusions

The pseudo-kufic ornament seems to occupy a middle position between the purely formal abstractness and freedom of arabesque and the purely symbolic form of a semantic and referential mean. This double nature (that is also a double negation) makes of pseudo-kufic decoration a very interesting liminal object, an object of “transition”, as it were, at the crossroad of different domains. It defies an extreme formalistic treatment by virtue of its preserved mimetic semblance of writing proper, but at the same time it excludes also every immediately cognizable conceptual content and resists a straight semantic interpretation. As ornament, pseudo-kufic script obeys the geometric regularities of ornamental patterns, and thus seems to represent a universal cross-cultural formal “language”, ruled by intrinsic rules and law-like constraints, understandable and appreciable in these terms by any sort of viewers. But its language, within Byzantine context, is cross-cultural also because it is obviously borrowed from a foreign culture, the culture of “the Other”, of the historical enemy, moreover.

So the liminality of pseudo-kufic is perhaps also in this overlapping of appropriation and deprivation, something more than an accidental misunderstanding of the original and rather something like an “intentional” mis-reading, maybe a way out of the anxiety of influence, just to cite Harold Bloom. This is not to contend (at the least is not easily to contend) that Byzantine craftsmen or their patrons were transparently aware of such a deep psychological move, and to evoke the “unconscious” here is surely not a recommended move. Nonetheless, we might also ask which kind of response a “false” or “mock Arabic”72 script could elicit in a Muslim viewer, if only not to shrink our perspective solely to Byzantine beholders. Can we imagine that pseudo-kufic inscriptions were intended to be, and to be viewed as, a “debased” Islamic script? Or we should instead see in this phenomenon a kind of homage, even if involuntary, to the great culture of writing and calligraphy? It is difficult to settle the question. To be sure, there was a contact and then a transmission or “transition” of forms, that even as an anonymous phenomenon, always involves technique and taste, that is to say material and social dimensions. Perhaps the pseudo-kufic ornament is to be better explained as a case of “exaptation” than as “adaptation”, if we want to adopt (and to adapt) here the term famously introduced by Stephen Jay Gould73, a process in which more than a “function shift” occurred. From this point of view, the migration of ornament is neither a sealed formal event nor a simple redundant mirror of major social, political, economical events. It rather emerges as an evidence of the multiple-shaped feature of every historical cross-cultural contact, indeed it is itself a dynamic evolving shape in which we can perceive a contact and a transition.


Notes

1 We would like to thank Ivan Foletti for his generous encouragement, and the anonymous reviewers for their productive suggestions. Many thanks also to Michele Di Monte for helpful comments on text and translation.
Historiographical (re)construction


6 This is the distinction suggested by Theodor Hetzer, according to which the "ornamental" is a “selbständiger Organismus”. See Das deutsche Element in der italienischen Malerei des 16. Jahrhunderts, Berlin 1929, reprinted in Schriften Theodor Hetzers, III, Das Ornamentale und die Gestalt, ed. by Gertrude Berthold, Stuttgart 1981, pp. 15–286.


8 The role of the morphological analysis and comparisons resting on ornamental materials is clearly exemplified by the debate about the origins of and influences between Oriental and Western art, that at the beginning of the twentieth century opposed the "defenders" of pro-Hellenic or pro-classical positions to the vehemently polemical attacks against the alleged "Romzentrum" of art-history orthodoxy of such scholars like Josef Strzygowski, aiming at demonstrating an oriental origin of European art. See, for some telling examples, the contentious essays by Strzygowski, Orient or Rom: Beiträge zur Geschichte der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst, Leipzig 1901. – Kleinser: Ein Neuland der Kunstgeschichte, Leipzig 1903. – Moschatz II: kunstwissenschaftliche Untersuchung, Jahrbuch der Preußischen Kunstsammlungen 25, 1904, pp. 235–373. – Die Stellung des Islam zum Geistigen Aufbau Europas, Abo 1922. On the other side of the trench, see, among others, Dmitri Maximinov, Illustrierte Geschichte asoyny vissantinskoj ikony, St. Petersburg 1900 (English trans., Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Art, New Brunswick 1961).


23 In this sense, it is symptomatic the number of studies devoted in the nineteenth century to the “grammars” of ornament. See, for instance, in addition to the best known volume of Owen Jones, Jules Bourgoin, Grammaire élémentaire de l’ornament, Paris 1880, or Johann E. Jacobsthal, Die Grammatik der Ornamente, Berlin 1824.


26 Longpré (note 26), p. 703.


29 Adrien de Longpré, Observations, Revue Archéologiques 5, 1, 1846, pp. 408–411, the quotation from p. 408. On the problem of eastern influences on French art, at the beginning of the twentieth century, see Jean Ebersolt, Orient et occident, Actes des conférences sur les influences byzantines et orientales en France avant et pendant les Croisades, Paris 1928. For a critical assessment, see Pedone (note 22) 2012.


31 The earliest example of use of pseudo-kufic elements on a monumental scale is that of the church of the Panagia at Hosios Loukas, where kufesque characters are abundantly present in the architectural decoration, in the famous fresco of Joshua, and in some fragments of the long champlevé cornice running on the exterior of eastern side. The latter, constituted of broken fragments, presents three type of kufic motifs, from a close imitation of original Arabic lettering to a more radical stylization, isolating the visually most conspicuous segments, that is the vertical lines of the letters šām and alef. See Pedone (note 22) 2006, 2012.

32 Some years later they published the first detailed study on the Monastery of Hosios Loukas in Phocis, in which they carefully recorded also the several pseudo-kufic forms of the internal and external decoration. Robert Weir Schultz – Sidney Howard Barnsley, The Monastery of Saint Luke of Stirs in Phocis, London 1901 (see in part. pls. 11, 15, 28).

33 The beautiful plates in china ink and watercolor, in part still unpublished, are held by the archive of the Byzantine Research Fund (BRF) of the British School of Athens. I thank Andrea Paribeni for having pointed out to me this fund.

34 The watercolor dating is dated “April 28, 1888”. The caption reads: “Monastery of Daphne. Detail of wall lining to upper part of apse of bema. The string is […] with ornament incised and filled in white and black composition. The mosaic pattern and lining generally of coloured marbles”.


38 I thank dr. Teresa Falcone for having drawn my attention on the only three occurrences of pseudo-kufic elements of big dimensions in the churches of Göreme (Karanlık kilise and Çarlık kilise) and Aşçılar (Yusuf Köş kilise), datable around the half of eleventh century. See Teresa Falcone, La Pittura ornamentale nella Cappadocia medio-bizantina, MA Thesis, Sapienza Università di Roma, a.a 2011/2012. It is noteworthy that also in Byzantine tradition pseudo-kufic ornaments are often represented in textiles and clothes. In Cappadocia we cite the decoration of the veil of the Virgin and her maidervent in the fresco of the Qarabab Kilise (cfr. Jerphanion note 37) with the Baptism of Christ. On the Islamic element in the artworks of Cappadocia, see J. Eric Cooper – Michael J. Decker, Life and Society in Byzantine Cappadocia, New York 2012, esp. pp. 206–208.


40 The construction of the palace in a suburb of the city, along the shores of the Bosphorus, is recorded by Theophanes Continuatus, Historia byzantina, edited by Fr. Leontius, St. Petersburg 2012, pp. 73–77. According to his well known account, the ambassador John the Synkellos, returning from Baghdad and fascinated by the beauty of the Arab city persuaded the Byzantine emperor to build a palace in imitation of the Abassid palaces. See Cyril Mango, The Art of the Byzantine Empire. 312–1453. Sources and Documents, Englewood Cliffs 1972, p. 160. The remains of the Bysal Palace were initially identified with those in the Maltepe area, near Küçükale, but further excavations and a better interpretation of the available sources have made possible to confirm the hypothesis, already suggest-
ed by Claudia Barsanti in 1977, that the remains are to be identified with the foundations of Satyros Monastery. See Claudia Barsanti, Le architettura “ad limen” del Menologio di Basilio II (Cod. Vat. Græc 1633) e la miniatura con la commemorazione del patriarca Ignazio, Commentari 28, 1977, pp. 3–15.


53 As Alicia Walker has recently emphasized (note 16, 2012, p. XV), “it is impossible to contend that there exists a unified ‘corpus’ of exotizing works of middle Byzantine art”. For a wider analysis of the interaction of emulation and rivalry in the context of the relationships between Byzantine art and Islamic models during the Macedonian age, in addition to Walker’s emulation and rivalry in the context of the relationships between Byzantine works of Middle Byzantine art and Islamic models during the Macedonian age, it is still difficult to trace a major source or clearly to individuate a direct cause-effect relation.

54 On the pivotal role of sculptural decoration of Lips Monastery (in particular that of the Theotokos Church) within the context of the relationships between Byzantine art and Islamic models during the Macedonian age, it is still difficult to trace a major source or clearly to individuate a direct cause-effect relation. However, it seems more reasonable to think of a stylistic use of pseudo-kufic scripts as starting model some Islamic artifacts probably brought to Constantinople by diplomats. Such easily transportable objects could have been, for instance, textiles, ceramic ware and ivories. As for the role of manuscripts, it is doubtful that there may be a direct relation between pseudo-kufic ornament and Qur'anic scripts, as Robert Nelson (note 53) has pointed out, given the demonic interpretations of Islamic holy books.


56 As Alicia Walker has recently emphasized (note 16, 2012, p. XV), “it is impossible to contend that there exists a unified ‘corpus’ of exotizing works of middle Byzantine art”. For a wider analysis of the interaction of emulation and rivalry in the context of the relationships between Byzantine art and Islamic models during the Macedonian age, in addition to Walker’s emulation and rivalry in the context of the relationships between Byzantine works of Middle Byzantine art and Islamic models during the Macedonian age, it is still difficult to trace a major source or clearly to individuate a direct cause-effect relation. However, it seems more reasonable to think of a stylistic use of pseudo-kufic scripts as starting model some Islamic artifacts probably brought to Constantinople by diplomats. Such easily transportable objects could have been, for instance, textiles, ceramic ware and ivories. As for the role of manuscripts, it is doubtful that there may be a direct relation between pseudo-kufic ornament and Qur'anic scripts, as Robert Nelson (note 53) has pointed out, given the demonic interpretations of Islamic holy books.

57 I would like to thank M. me Vera Zalesskaya (State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg) for her help in identifying the objects illustrated in this paper.