

The Transmutation of Kufic Script in the Mediterranean: Artistic Appropriation and Institutional Identity (10th to 15th Centuries)

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This paper examines the transformation of Arabic Kufic script and its Pseudo-Kufic derivatives in Byzantine and Italian art between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, arguing that this transmutation was not a merely decorative phenomenon but a conscious act of cultural translation and symbolic appropriation. Drawing on frameworks of cultural hybridity and aesthetic appropriation, and employing a comparative iconographic methodology complemented by epigraphic and stylistic analysis, the study examines representative works from Norman Sicilian, Byzantine, and Italian contexts, including the Arabic epigraphic program of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, the decoration of Monreale Cathedral, and Italian paintings depicting Pseudo-Kufic motifs on sacred garments and halos by Giotto, Masaccio, and Mantegna. The analysis identifies luxury textiles and portable objects as the primary vectors through which Kufic forms migrated into Christian artistic media, and demonstrates that the boundary between authentic inscription and ornamental imitation functioned as a variable and deliberately exploited threshold rather than a fixed distinction. Through processes of imitation, stylisation, and reconfiguration, Kufic script became a visual idiom of sanctity and institutional legitimacy. The paper concludes that Pseudo-Kufic ornamentation constituted a deliberate ideological strategy through which medieval institutions negotiated power and identity across the multilingual and multi-confessional societies of the medieval Mediterranean.

Keywords: *Kufic script; Pseudo-Kufic; cultural appropriation; Norman Sicily; Byzantine art*

Introduction

The ceiling of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, commissioned by the Norman king Roger II in the twelfth century, presents one of the most arresting visual puzzles of the medieval Mediterranean. Painted by Muslim craftsmen and decorated with Arabic inscriptions, the ceiling of this royal Christian chapel does not conceal its Islamic character but rather displays it with evident pride and deliberateness. The Arabic texts that run across its surface proclaim the glory of a Christian king in a script whose authority derived from its intimate association with the Quran and with centuries of Islamic political power. That a Norman ruler, governing a predominantly Christian kingdom, would commission such a program was not an act of confusion or aesthetic indifference but a carefully considered institutional strategy, one whose logic extended far beyond the walls of a single royal chapel.

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The appearance of Kufic and Pseudo-Kufic script across the medieval Christian Mediterranean raises questions of enduring scholarly interest. From the mosaics of Monreale Cathedral to the painted halos in the frescoes of Giotto, Masaccio, and Mantegna, Arabic script forms migrated across artistic media, geographic boundaries, and religious traditions between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. In each of these contexts, the script underwent a process of visual and semantic transformation: from a vehicle of Quranic authority and Islamic political legitimacy to an ornamental idiom associated with sacred antiquity, cultural sophistication, and institutional prestige. Understanding this transformation requires attention not only to the formal properties of the script itself but also to the institutional contexts in which it was deployed and the cultural logics that made its appropriation both possible and desirable.

Existing scholarship has made substantial progress in documenting the presence of Kufic and Pseudo-Kufic forms in Christian art. Scholars working on Norman Sicily, Byzantine visual culture, and Italian painting have each illuminated important dimensions of this phenomenon. Yet the scholarship remains largely compartmentalised, with studies of Norman epigraphic programs, Byzantine ornamental decoration, and Italian painting rarely brought into sustained comparative dialogue. The semiotic and political dimensions of this transformation across these three traditions have not been examined together within a unified analytical framework. This paper addresses that gap by arguing that the transmutation of Kufic script into Pseudo-Kufic ornament was not a merely decorative phenomenon but a conscious act of cultural translation and symbolic appropriation, reflecting a broader and geographically differentiated process of intercultural communication across the medieval Mediterranean.

The argument proceeds in several stages. The paper first establishes the visual and symbolic authority of Kufic script within Islamic artistic tradition, providing the foundation necessary for understanding what was at stake when Christian artists and patrons adopted and transformed these forms. It then examines the Norman Sicilian context in detail, focusing on the Cappella Palatina and the Cathedral of Monreale as sites where the deployment of Arabic epigraphy constituted a deliberate program of institutional legitimation. From there, the analysis moves to Byzantine contexts, where Pseudo-Kufic ornament served different but related functions within ecclesiastical and imperial visual culture. The paper then turns to Italian painting, tracing the later migration of Kufic-derived forms into the work of Giotto, Masaccio, and Mantegna. A dedicated section examines the material vectors through which Kufic forms travelled across the Mediterranean, with particular attention to the role of luxury textiles and portable objects as agents of visual transmission. The concluding discussion draws these strands together to argue that Pseudo-Kufic ornamentation functioned across all of these contexts as a deliberate aesthetic and ideological strategy, one through which medieval institutions asserted sacred antiquity, negotiated cultural boundaries, and projected authority in ways that drew their power from the visual prestige of Islamic script.

Literature Review

The scholarly study of Arabic script in Christian artistic contexts has a history stretching back to the mid-nineteenth century, though it was only in the latter decades of the twentieth century that the field began to develop the comparative and theoretical

sophistication that the subject demands. The foundational contribution came from Adrien de Longperier, whose article in the *Revue Archeologique* first drew systematic attention to the widespread appearance of Arabic-looking inscriptions in medieval Western Christian art.¹ Louis Courajod extended this observation, noting the recurrence of pseudo-Arabic forms across a range of European artistic media.² The survey by Spittle of Kufic lettering across a range of Christian artistic media extended this early documentation to additional geographic and material contexts, reinforcing the case for a widespread rather than isolated phenomenon.³ These early studies, while pioneering in their identification of the phenomenon, were limited by the absence of a conceptual framework capable of explaining why Christian artists and patrons would adopt the visual conventions of Islamic script.

The decisive step towards a more analytically rigorous approach was taken by George C. Miles, whose study of Byzantine relations with the Arab world in Crete and the Aegean demonstrated that the presence of Arabic script-like motifs in Byzantine contexts was not a marginal curiosity but a widespread and historically significant phenomenon rooted in the sustained material and diplomatic contacts between the two civilisations.⁴ Richard Ettinghausen developed this line of inquiry in his influential essay on what he termed Kufesque ornament in Byzantine Greece, the Latin West, and the Muslim world. Ettinghausen established the foundational analytical distinction between genuine Kufic inscriptions incorporated into Christian objects through trade or diplomatic exchange and imitative Pseudo-Kufic forms independently generated by non-Islamic artists, arguing that these two phenomena required different explanatory frameworks.⁵ His work set the agenda for much of the subsequent scholarship and remains an indispensable point of reference.

Studies of Norman Sicily produced some of the most detailed and methodologically sophisticated contributions to the field. Jeremy Johns devoted sustained attention to the Arabic epigraphic program of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, demonstrating that the Arabic inscriptions commissioned by Roger II and his successors were not merely decorative but constituted a coherent and politically charged visual program designed to project royal authority across the multilingual and multi-confessional population of the Norman kingdom.⁶ Umberto Bongianino further illuminated the Norman Sicilian context through his detailed analysis of the Arabic opus sectile inscriptions from the palaces of Messina and Palermo, demonstrating strong stylistic affinities with North African epigraphic traditions and showing that Sicilian craftsmen sometimes reproduced

¹De Longperier A (1845) De l'emploi des caracteres Arabes dans l'ornementation chez les peuples chretiens de l'occident. *Revue Archeologique* 2: 696-707.

²Courajod L (1876) Notes sur des inscriptions arabes ou pseudo-arabes. *Bulletin de la Societe nationale des antiquaires de France* XXXVII: 127-129.

³Spittle SD (1954) Cufic Lettering in Christian Art. *The Archaeological Journal* 111: 138-152.

⁴Miles GC (1964) Byzantium and the Arabs: Relations in Crete and the Aegean Area. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18: 1-32.

⁵Ettinghausen R (1976) Kufesque in Byzantine Greece, the Latin West, and the Muslim World. In *A Colloquium in Memory of George Carpenter Miles (1904-1975)*. New York: American Numismatic Society, pp. 28-47.

⁶Johns J (2014) Arabic Inscriptions in the Cappella Palatina: Performativity, Audience, Legibility and Illegibility. In Kaye W (ed) *The Mediterranean and the World in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 122-145.

Arabic letter forms through visual copying rather than scribal competence.⁷ The textile dimension of Norman Arabic epigraphy has been examined by Ilse Dolezalek, whose study of Arabic inscriptions on the royal garments of the Norman court showed that inscribed textiles served as markers of dynastic prestige and intercultural authority.⁸

Within Byzantine studies, Silvia Pedone and Valentina Cantone provided the most sustained attempt to address Pseudo-Kufic ornament as a coherent phenomenon within Byzantine art, establishing analytical categories for understanding how these motifs appeared across architecture, manuscript decoration, and applied arts.⁹ Nicholas Melvani extended this analysis through his investigation of Late Byzantine sculpture, arguing that Pseudo-Kufic motifs were deliberately positioned at liminal architectural points where their script-like appearance conveyed apotropaic and protective functions.¹⁰ The work of Alicia Walker on a Byzantine bowl in the treasury of San Marco in Venice demonstrated with particular clarity that Byzantine patrons were active and sophisticated consumers of Islamic aesthetic authority, deploying pseudo-Arabic forms as deliberate visual statements rather than as confused imitations of a foreign tradition.¹¹

The question of how Kufic forms were transmitted into Christian artistic contexts has received sustained attention from scholars working on material culture and luxury object circulation. Maria Vittoria Fontana argued that many instances of Pseudo-Kufic decoration in Italian and Byzantine wall painting can be traced to the visual conventions of woven textiles bearing Kufic inscriptions.¹² Emanuela Napolitano demonstrated that many forms previously dismissed as meaningless ornament contain recoverable Arabic words and phrases, suggesting that the transmission of Arabic epigraphic content was more semantically aware than earlier scholarship had assumed.¹³ Anna Fein reached analogous conclusions through her examination of Kufic epigraphy in Norman Sicily and Ifriqiya, showing that inscriptions long categorised as Pseudo-Kufic are in fact authentic Kufic texts whose apparent illegibility results from the technical conditions of their manufacture.¹⁴

The theoretical frameworks through which scholars have approached cross-cultural artistic exchange in the medieval Mediterranean have also evolved considerably. The concept of cultural hybridity, introduced into medieval art historical discourse through the work of scholars such as Anthony Cutler and Antony Eastmond, has provided

⁷Bongianino U (2023) Le iscrizioni arabe in opus sectile dei palazzi normanni di Messina e Palermo. In *Le iscrizioni in arabo del palazzo di Ruggero II a Messina*, pp. 80-101.

⁸Dolezalek I (2017) *Arabic Script on Christian Kings: Textile Inscriptions on Royal Garments from Norman Sicily*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

⁹Pedone S and Cantone V (2013) The Pseudo-Kufic Ornament and the Problem of Cross-Cultural Relationships Between Byzantium and Islam. *Opuscula Historiae Artium* 62 (Supplementum): 120-136.

¹⁰Melvani N (2018) Apotropeia and Ornament: Late Byzantine Sculpture and the Migration of Pseudo-Arabic Writing. *Accademia Roveretana degli Agiati* IX(VIII): 159-193.

¹¹Walker A (2008) Meaningful Mingling: Classicizing Imagery and Islamicizing Script in a Byzantine Bowl. *The Art Bulletin* 90(1): 32-53.

¹²Fontana MV (2016) Kufic Ornamental Motifs in the Wall Paintings of Six Churches in Southern Italy. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 21(12): 56-73.

¹³Napolitano EG (2019) *Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art*. Bamberg: opus.

¹⁴Fein A (2024) *Kufic Epigraphy between Norman Sicily and Ifriqiya*. *Muqarnas* 40.

productive tools for moving beyond the implicit hierarchy of earlier scholarship.¹⁵ Stephen Houston's contribution on pseudo-scripts in comparative perspective situated Byzantine and Italian Pseudo-Kufic within a broader human practice of invoking the authority of writing without making specific linguistic claims.¹⁶ Notwithstanding this substantial body of scholarship, the semiotic and political dimensions of the Kufic-to-Pseudo-Kufic transformation have not been examined together across all three traditions within a unified analytical framework. The present paper addresses this gap by tracing the transmutation of Kufic script across these three interconnected contexts.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis developed in this paper draws on three interrelated theoretical frameworks, each of which addresses a distinct dimension of the phenomenon under examination. Taken together, these frameworks provide the conceptual tools necessary for understanding how and why Kufic script was appropriated, transformed, and redeployed across such diverse institutional and geographic contexts in the medieval Mediterranean.

The first and most fundamental framework is that of cultural hybridity, as developed within postcolonial theory and subsequently adapted for the study of medieval artistic exchange. Applied to the study of Pseudo-Kufic decoration, this framework draws attention to the ways in which Christian artists and patrons did not passively receive or mechanically imitate Islamic visual forms but actively transformed them, producing something that belonged fully to neither tradition but constituted a distinctive visual language specific to the intercultural contact zones of the medieval Mediterranean. This perspective resists the implicit hierarchy of earlier scholarship, in which the Islamic tradition was treated as the active source of influence and the Christian tradition as its passive and derivative recipient. Instead, it foregrounds the agency of Christian institutional actors, royal courts, ecclesiastical patrons, and workshop traditions alike, as creative participants in a dynamic and multidirectional process of cultural exchange.

The second theoretical framework concerns the semiotics of script and the visual authority of writing. Scholars working at the intersection of art history and visual culture studies have increasingly recognised that inscriptions and script-like forms function not only as texts to be read but as visual objects to be seen, whose meaning and effect depend as much on their formal properties, material qualities, and spatial placement as on their linguistic content. This insight is particularly relevant for the study of Pseudo-Kufic decoration, where visual appearance clearly takes precedence over specific textual meaning. Where legible Kufic inscriptions communicated specific textual content to those who could read them, Pseudo-Kufic forms communicated a more diffuse but no less powerful set of associations with Islamic learning, sacred antiquity, and institutional authority to audiences who could not. Stephen Houston's

¹⁵Eastmond A (2015) *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶Houston S (2018) Writing that Is Not: Pseudo-Scripts in Comparative View. *L'Homme* 227-228: 21-48.

broader comparative framework for understanding pseudo-scripts across cultures further illuminates this dynamic.¹⁷

The third framework concerns the relationship between aesthetic appropriation and institutional legitimation. The concept of aesthetic appropriation, understood as the deliberate adoption of visual forms from one cultural tradition by institutional actors belonging to another, provides a more precise analytical tool than the broader concept of influence, since it directs attention to the intentionality and purposefulness of the process and to the specific institutional contexts in which it took place. When Roger II commissioned Arabic inscriptions for the Cappella Palatina, or when Giotto depicted Pseudo-Kufic script on the garments of sacred figures, these were not casual borrowings from an admired tradition but calculated visual strategies through which specific institutional claims were made and specific audiences addressed. These three frameworks, cultural hybridity, the semiotics of visual script, and aesthetic appropriation and institutional legitimation, are complementary and mutually reinforcing, providing a conceptual architecture within which the specific historical and artistic evidence examined in the following sections can be interpreted as a coherent and geographically differentiated process of institutional identity construction.

Kufic script in Islamic art: origins, development, and visual authority

Any adequate account of the transmutation of Kufic script in Christian artistic contexts must begin with an understanding of what Kufic was, what it meant, and why it commanded the visual authority that made its appropriation so culturally significant. Kufic script, named after the city of Kufa in present-day Iraq, represents one of the earliest and most distinctive forms of Arabic calligraphy, characterised by its angular, rectilinear letterforms and its natural affinity for monumental inscription and decorative elaboration. From the earliest centuries of Islam, Kufic served not merely as a vehicle for written communication but as a powerful visual symbol of divine authority, religious identity, and political legitimacy. Its most prestigious application was the transcription of the Quran, a function that invested the script with a sacred character extending far beyond its linguistic content and that made the very appearance of Kufic letterforms a signal of divine presence and Islamic sanctity.¹⁸

The ornamental potential of Kufic script was recognised and systematically exploited by Islamic artists from an early period. As Sheila Blair has demonstrated in her landmark study of monumental inscriptions from early Islamic Iran and Transoxiana, the visual structure of Kufic letterforms invited elaboration and abstraction, with individual letters becoming increasingly stylised and interwoven with geometric and vegetal motifs to produce complex decorative programs that operated simultaneously as readable text and as pure visual ornament.¹⁹ This dual function, at once linguistic and aesthetic, is central to understanding why Kufic forms proved so attractive to

¹⁷Ibid, 57-78.

¹⁸Ekhtiar MD (2018) *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹⁹Blair S (1992) *The Monumental Inscriptions from Early Islamic Iran and Transoxiana*. Leiden: Brill.

artists working in non-Islamic contexts. The script offered something that few other visual idioms could provide: a form that carried the weight of religious and political authority while simultaneously functioning as a highly adaptable decorative system whose formal properties could be appreciated independently of any knowledge of its linguistic content.

Kufic calligraphy was not a static or uniform tradition. Between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, it underwent significant and regionally differentiated formal development, producing a range of distinct epigraphic traditions whose visual character varied considerably across different parts of the Islamic world. Early angular Kufic gave way to increasingly elaborate variants: foliated Kufic, in which the terminals of letters sprout vegetal ornaments; plaited or interlaced Kufic, in which the vertical strokes of letters are woven into complex geometric patterns; and floriated Kufic, in which the entire inscription is embedded within a dense field of scrolling vegetation. Regional traditions developed their own distinctive characteristics, with Fatimid Egyptian epigraphy, Seljuk Anatolian inscription, North African Maghribi script, and the epigraphic conventions of Norman Sicily each displaying recognisable formal features.²⁰ This internal diversity has important implications for the study of Pseudo-Kufic decoration in Christian art, since it means that the visual models available to Christian artists were not uniform but varied considerably depending on the geographic location of the borrowing and the specific channels of transmission through which Kufic forms reached them.

The widespread use of Kufic script on Islamic luxury objects, including textiles, ceramics, metalwork, and ivory carvings, ensured that its visual authority extended far beyond specifically religious contexts. Kufic inscriptions on these portable objects frequently conveyed formulaic blessings, good wishes, and invocations of divine favour, phrases such as *al-mulk* (power or sovereignty), *baraka* (blessing), and *al-yumn* (good fortune) that recurred with remarkable consistency across different media and geographic contexts.²¹ The circulation of these objects across the Mediterranean through trade, diplomacy, and gift exchange meant that Kufic script became familiar to Christian audiences not primarily through direct encounter with Islamic monumental architecture or manuscript production but through the handling and viewing of luxury goods within church treasuries, royal collections, and aristocratic households.

Zara Salim Kazani has further illuminated the symbolic dimensions of Kufic script through her analysis of geometric script patterns in medieval Islamicate societies, demonstrating that the formal properties of Kufic calligraphy were understood within Islamic culture itself as carriers of meaning that operated independently of legibility.²² The geometric arrangement of Kufic letterforms was associated with cosmological order, divine harmony, and in some contexts with magical and talismanic functions, associations that were sufficiently widely understood across cultural and religious boundaries to have informed the ways in which Christian artists and patrons perceived

²⁰Bonfante-Warren A, Clark C, Ratliff B, Evans HC and New A (2012) *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 7th-9th Century*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

²¹Ekhtiar MD (2018) *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

²²Kazani ZS (2022) *Thinking in Lines and Circles: Geometric Script Patterns and Visualization of Knowledge in Medieval Islamicate Societies (1100-1250 AD)*. PhD Thesis, University of Victoria.

and responded to Kufic-derived visual forms. When Pseudo-Kufic ornament appeared in Byzantine churches at liminal architectural points or on the garments of sacred figures in Italian painting, it drew on a reservoir of associations with divine authority, sacred power, and cosmic order that had been built up through centuries of Islamic artistic practice and that retained their evocative force even when the script had been transformed beyond the point of linguistic legibility.

Figure 1. *Qur'anic Inscription in floriated Kufic Script, Great Mosque of Cordoba, 10th Century*



Source: by author

The significance of this background for the argument of the present paper can hardly be overstated. When Christian institutional actors in Norman Sicily, Byzantium, and Italy appropriated Kufic-derived visual forms, they were not borrowing an empty ornamental system but engaging with a visual idiom whose authority was deeply embedded in the religious, political, and aesthetic culture of the Islamic Mediterranean. The transmutation of Kufic into Pseudo-Kufic was therefore never a simple matter of decorative imitation but always involved the selective mobilisation and reorientation of a complex set of cultural associations, a process whose specific character and institutional logic varied considerably across different Christian contexts and will be examined in the sections that follow.

Norman Sicily: The Cappella Palatina, Monreale, and the Politics of Epigraphic Identity

Among the various contexts in which Kufic and Pseudo-Kufic script appeared in Christian art between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, Norman Sicily occupies a

position of exceptional historical and analytical importance. The Norman kingdom of Sicily, established in the eleventh century through the conquest of an island that had been under Arab Muslim rule for over two centuries, was from its inception a political entity defined by the coexistence and negotiation of multiple religious, linguistic, and cultural traditions. Arabic, Greek, and Latin were all in official use at the Norman court, and Muslim, Byzantine, and Western Christian craftsmen worked side by side in the service of rulers who recognised that the management of cultural diversity was not merely a practical necessity but a potent instrument of political power. It was within this exceptional institutional environment that the deployment of Kufic script in Christian artistic contexts reached its most systematic, deliberate, and politically sophisticated expression.

The Cappella Palatina in Palermo, commissioned by Roger II and consecrated in 1143, remains the most celebrated and analytically productive site for the study of Arabic epigraphy in a Christian institutional context. The chapel brings together Byzantine mosaics, Norman architectural forms, and an elaborately carved muqarnas ceiling painted by Muslim craftsmen with scenes of courtly life and Arabic inscriptions that celebrate the glory of the Norman king. The Arabic epigraphic program of the Cappella Palatina has been examined in detail by Jeremy Johns, whose analysis demonstrated that the inscriptions were not decorative afterthoughts but a coherent and carefully conceived visual program designed to address the multilingual and multi-confessional population of the Norman kingdom simultaneously.²³ The inscriptions proclaim royal authority in terms drawn from Islamic political vocabulary, presenting Roger II as a sovereign whose power extended across religious and cultural boundaries and whose court commanded the artistic and intellectual resources of multiple civilisations.

Figure 2. *Muqarnas Ceiling with Arabic Inscriptions, Cappella Palatina, Palermo, 12th Century*



Source by author

²³Johns J (2014) Arabic Inscriptions in the Cappella Palatina. In Kaye W (ed) *The Mediterranean and the World in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 122-145.

The relationship between authentic Kufic inscription and Pseudo-Kufic ornament within the Cappella Palatina itself is more complex than a simple binary distinction would suggest. While the ceiling inscriptions constitute genuine Arabic texts legible to those with the requisite linguistic competence, other areas of the chapel decoration display script-like forms whose relationship to specific textual content is considerably more ambiguous. This ambiguity was not accidental but reflected the deliberate exploitation of a visual threshold between the readable and the purely ornamental, a threshold whose productive indeterminacy allowed the same decorative program to communicate different things to different audiences. To the Arabic-literate members of the Norman court and the Muslim craftsmen who produced the inscriptions, the ceiling texts conveyed specific statements of royal authority. To Christian audiences without Arabic literacy, the same inscriptions communicated a more diffuse but no less powerful set of associations with Islamic learning, cultural sophistication, and the cosmopolitan ambitions of the Norman kingdom.²⁴

The analysis of Kufic epigraphy in Norman Sicily has been further enriched by Umberto Bongianino's study of the Arabic opus sectile inscriptions from the palaces of Messina and Palermo, commissioned by Roger II between 1130 and 1154. Bongianino demonstrated that these inscriptions display strong stylistic affinities with the funerary stelae produced by the Khurasanid dynasty of Tunis during the same period, pointing to a direct channel of epigraphic transmission between the North African court and the Norman royal workshops.²⁵ Of particular significance for the argument of the present paper is Bongianino's observation that the Sicilian craftsmen who executed these inscriptions were in some cases evidently unfamiliar with the conventions of Arabic orthography, producing errors in diacritical placement and letter formation that reveal a process of visual copying rather than scribal competence. This finding illustrates with particular clarity the mechanisms through which authentic Kufic inscription could begin its transformation into Pseudo-Kufic ornament: not through ignorance or indifference but through the specific technical and institutional conditions of cross-cultural artistic production.

²⁴Johns J (2015) Muslim Artists and Christian Models in the Painted Ceilings of the Cappella Palatina. In *Romanesque and the Mediterranean*. London: British Archaeological Association, pp. 59-89.

²⁵Bongianino U (2023) Le iscrizioni arabe in opus sectile dei palazzi normanni di Messina e Palermo. In *Le iscrizioni in arabo del palazzo di Ruggero II a Messina*, pp. 80-101.

Figure 3. Palermo, Regional Gallery of Sicily “Palazzo Abatellis”: Fragmented Slabs with Arabic Inscriptions in Praise of Roger II, originating from the Royal Palace of Palermo; Opus Sectile in Red and Green Porphyry on White Marble: a) 191 × 32 × 6.5 cm; b) 184.5 × 32.7 × 4.8 cm. Source: (Longo, 2025, p. 272).



The textile dimension of Kufic appropriation in Norman Sicily provides a further dimension of the institutional strategy under examination. Ilse Dolezalek's study of Arabic inscriptions on the royal garments produced in the Norman palace workshops of Palermo demonstrated that the royal mantle of Roger II, with its prominent Kufic inscription proclaiming royal authority in Arabic, was not an isolated curiosity but part of a broader and systematic program of Arabic epigraphic decoration extending across the full range of Norman royal regalia.²⁶ These inscribed garments served multiple institutional functions simultaneously. They projected authority to the Muslim subjects of the Norman kingdom by demonstrating the king's command over the visual language of Islamic political power. They displayed cultural sophistication to Byzantine and Latin Christian audiences by associating the Norman court with the prestige of Islamic artistic traditions. And they established a visual precedent for the use of Kufic-derived forms in specifically sacred and ceremonial contexts, a precedent whose implications would extend far beyond the specific political circumstances of the Norman kingdom.

The Cathedral of Monreale, constructed under William II between 1174 and 1189, represents a later and in some respects more complex expression of the Norman epigraphic strategy. The cathedral brings together Byzantine mosaic programs of exceptional grandeur with architectural elements that reflect the absorption of Islamic decorative conventions into a distinctively Norman artistic synthesis. The Monreale evidence thus illustrates a stage in the transmutation of Kufic script at which the specifically epigraphic dimension of the appropriation has receded and the ornamental dimension has come to predominate, while the associations with Islamic cultural prestige and sacred authority remain fully operative.²⁷ The Norman Sicilian evidence as a whole points to three conclusions that will inform the comparative analysis

²⁶Dolezalek I (2017) *Arabic Script on Christian Kings: Textile Inscriptions on Royal Garments from Norman Sicily*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

²⁷Longo R (2025) *Lo scrigno di re Ruggero. La Cappella Palatina di Palermo e le sue funzioni*. Roma: Edizioni Efesto.

developed in the sections that follow: the deployment of Kufic and Kufic-derived forms was in every case a deliberate institutional strategy; the boundary between authentic inscription and Pseudo-Kufic ornament was a variable and productively exploited threshold; and the Norman court functioned as a crucial point of transmission and transformation in the broader Mediterranean circulation of Kufic-derived forms.

Byzantine Contexts: Pseudo-Kufic Ornament and Ecclesiastical Identity

The Byzantine engagement with Kufic and Pseudo-Kufic forms presents a picture that is in many respects distinct from the Norman Sicilian case, yet no less deliberate in its institutional logic. Where the Norman deployment of Arabic epigraphy was shaped by the specific political circumstances of a multilingual kingdom whose rulers sought to project authority across religious and cultural boundaries, the Byzantine appropriation of Kufic-derived ornament was embedded within a different set of institutional imperatives, rooted in the theological and aesthetic traditions of the Orthodox Church and in the specific conditions of Byzantine contact with the Islamic world across the broad and geographically diverse frontier zones of the medieval Mediterranean.

The channels through which Byzantine artists encountered Kufic script were varied and geographically differentiated. Trade networks connecting Byzantium with the Islamic world had operated continuously since the early centuries of Islam, creating a sustained circulation of luxury textiles, metalwork, ceramics, and other portable objects bearing Kufic inscriptions that entered Byzantine treasuries and church collections through commercial exchange, diplomatic gift-giving, and military acquisition. Anthony Cutler has argued that the exchange of luxury objects between Byzantine emperors and Islamic rulers was not merely a political gesture but a mechanism for the transmission of artistic knowledge, since the objects exchanged carried with them the visual conventions and technical practices of their places of origin.²⁸ In Cappadocia, as Muge Kaya has demonstrated, Islamic and Sasanian artistic influences penetrated deep into the Anatolian heartland of the Byzantine Empire through the specific demographic and political conditions of the frontier zone, producing Pseudo-Kufic decorations in rock-cut churches that reflect a very different process of visual transmission from those operative in the Greek heartland or the Italian borderlands.²⁹

The work of Silvia Pedone and Valentina Cantone on Pseudo-Kufic ornament in Byzantine art identified a consistent pattern in the formal characteristics and spatial placement of these motifs across a range of media and geographic contexts. Their analysis demonstrated that Pseudo-Kufic forms in Byzantine architecture and decorative arts were typically positioned at visually prominent locations, on facades, on templon screens, on the borders of mosaic programs, and in the decorative bands of manuscript illuminations, where their script-like appearance would have been immediately legible as a reference to the visual authority of Arabic writing even to

²⁸Cutler A (2009) *Image Making in Byzantium, Sasanian Persia and the Early Muslim World*. London: Routledge.

²⁹Kaya M (2018) Reflection of the Islamic and Sassanid Art on the Aniconic Decoration of Byzantine Wall Paintings in Cappadocia. *Nis and Byzantium* 18: 339-346.

viewers who could not have identified specific letters or words.³⁰ This placement reflects a sophisticated understanding of the communicative potential of script-like ornament, one that exploited the recognisability of Kufic formal conventions without committing to the specific textual content that authentic inscription would have required.

The apotropaic dimension of Pseudo-Kufic deployment in Byzantine contexts has been examined with particular care by Nicholas Melvani, whose study of Late Byzantine sculpture demonstrated that script-like ornamental forms were consistently positioned at liminal architectural points, including doorways, templon barriers, funerary monuments, and on the exterior facades of pilgrimage churches such as Hosios Loukas, where their presence was understood to serve a protective function.^{31,32} This apotropaic interpretation draws on a broader understanding of the perceived mystical authority of Arabic writing in the medieval Mediterranean world, an authority derived not merely from the aesthetic prestige of Islamic calligraphy but from the widespread belief that Arabic script possessed inherent spiritual power. The adoption of Kufic-inspired forms in Christian apotropaic contexts can therefore be understood as a form of cultural translation in which the perceived spiritual power of Islamic script was appropriated and redeployed within a different religious framework.

Figure 4. *Pseudo-Kufic Decoration on Byzantine Church Facade, Hosios Loukas Monastery, Greece, 11th Century*



Source: (Spittle, 1954, p. 139)

³⁰Pedone S and Cantone V (2013) The Pseudo-Kufic Ornament and the Problem of Cross-Cultural Relationships Between Byzantium and Islam. *Opuscula Historiae Artium* 62 (Supplementum): 120-136.

³¹Melvani N (2018) Apotropeia and Ornament: Late Byzantine Sculpture and the Migration of Pseudo-Arabic Writing. *Accademia Roveretana degli Agiati* IX(VIII): 159-193.

³²Walker A (2015) Pseudo-Arabic Inscriptions and the Pilgrim Path at Hosios Loukas. In Eastmond A (ed) *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 177-204.

The Byzantine bowl now in the treasury of San Marco in Venice, analysed in detail by Alicia Walker, offers one of the most illuminating individual case studies of how Byzantine patrons and artists engaged with Islamic visual culture. The bowl combines classicising figurative imagery drawn from ancient Greek mythology with pseudo-Arabic inscriptions on its interior rim, a juxtaposition that Walker interprets not as evidence of cultural confusion but as a deliberate and sophisticated act of visual synthesis.³³ Walker's argument that Byzantine patrons were active and informed consumers of Islamic aesthetic ideas, rather than passive recipients of foreign influence, has important implications for the broader argument of the present paper, since it demonstrates that the appropriation of Kufic-derived forms in Byzantine contexts reflected genuine cultural agency rather than accidental borrowing or artistic ignorance.

The Byzantine evidence thus reveals a pattern of deliberate and institutionally grounded aesthetic appropriation that parallels the Norman Sicilian case while differing from it in important respects. Where Norman patrons deployed authentic Kufic inscriptions as explicit statements of political sovereignty within a multilingual institutional environment, Byzantine patrons and artists characteristically favoured Pseudo-Kufic ornament whose script-like character was visually evident but whose specific textual content remained indeterminate. This preference for visual indeterminacy was not a symptom of ignorance but a deliberate aesthetic strategy that allowed the prestige and authority of Islamic script to be invoked without the institutional complications that explicit Arabic inscription would have entailed within an Orthodox Christian ecclesiastical context.

Italian painting: Giotto, Masaccio, and Mantegna

The appearance of Pseudo-Kufic forms in Italian painting between the late thirteenth and late fifteenth centuries represents the final and in some respects most culturally complex stage in the transmutation of Kufic script examined in this paper. Where the Norman Sicilian deployment of Arabic epigraphy was shaped by the specific political circumstances of a multicultural kingdom and the Byzantine appropriation of Pseudo-Kufic ornament was embedded within the institutional traditions of Orthodox ecclesiastical culture, the Italian painters who incorporated Kufic-derived forms into their work were operating within a very different set of artistic, religious, and commercial contexts. The Italian evidence is distinctive in several respects: the artists involved were working within a Latin Christian tradition that had no organic institutional connection to Arabic script; the Kufic-derived forms they deployed appeared primarily in specifically sacred contexts, on the garments, halos, and book covers of holy figures; and the period in question witnessed a progressive transformation of these forms from relatively close approximations of Arabic script towards increasingly abstract and stylised ornamental patterns.

The earliest and most influential figure in this tradition is Giotto di Bondone, whose frescoes in the Arena Chapel in Padua, completed around 1305, include some of the most discussed examples of Pseudo-Kufic ornament in Italian painting. In

³³Walker A (2008) Meaningful Mingling: Classicizing Imagery and Islamicizing Script in a Byzantine Bowl. *The Art Bulletin* 90(1): 32-53.

several of the Paduan frescoes, the borders of the garments worn by sacred figures, including the Virgin Mary and various apostles, are decorated with bands of script-like ornament whose formal properties clearly derive from Kufic calligraphic conventions even as their specific letter forms have been transformed through a process of stylisation that renders them linguistically illegible.³⁴ The significance of Giotto's deployment of these forms has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate. Some scholars have interpreted the Pseudo-Kufic borders as a straightforward expression of the high commercial value and cultural prestige associated with Islamic textiles in late medieval Italy. Others have argued that the script-like character of these borders was itself deliberately chosen as a marker of sacred antiquity, evoking associations with the Holy Land and the Oriental origins of Christianity.³⁵

The analysis of Emanuela Napolitano has added an important methodological dimension to this debate by demonstrating that at least some of the script-like forms in Italian painting that have been categorised as Pseudo-Kufic contain recoverable Arabic words and phrases, including the formulaic blessings and invocations that recurred on Islamic luxury textiles.³⁶ This finding complicates the simple narrative of progressive abstraction and ornamentalisation, suggesting that even in contexts where Kufic-derived forms appear highly stylised, some degree of semantic awareness may have informed their selection and deployment.

Figure 5. Giotto di Bondone, detail showing Pseudo-Kufic Border on sacred Garment, Arena Chapel, Padua, c. 1305



Source: by author

Masaccio, working in Florence in the early decades of the fifteenth century, represents a more developed stage in the Italian engagement with Pseudo-Kufic forms. In the Pisa Altarpiece of 1426 and in the Brancacci Chapel frescoes in Florence,

³⁴Napolitano EG (2019) Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art. Bamberg: opus.

³⁵Mack R (2001) Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600. Berkeley: University of California Press.

³⁶Napolitano EG (2019) Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art. Bamberg: opus.

Masaccio deployed Kufic-derived ornamental forms with a sophistication that reflects both the accumulation of a well-established artistic tradition and a more self-conscious awareness of the cultural meanings these forms carried.³⁷ The Pseudo-Kufic borders and decorative bands in Masaccio work are characterised by a greater degree of formal elaboration than those found in Giotto, incorporating interlaced and plaited patterns that draw on the more complex variants of Kufic calligraphy, including the foliated and interlaced forms that had developed within the Islamic tradition between the tenth and thirteenth centuries.

The work of Andrea Mantegna in the latter half of the fifteenth century represents perhaps the most intellectually self-conscious engagement with Pseudo-Kufic forms in the Italian painting tradition. Mantegna, whose career was centred on the humanist court of the Gonzaga family in Mantua, was deeply interested in questions of historical authenticity and in the visual evocation of the ancient and oriental world within which the events of sacred history had taken place. His deployment of Pseudo-Kufic forms on the halos, garments, and book covers of sacred figures reflects this broader antiquarian interest, using script-like ornament as a visual signifier of historical distance and oriental origin.³⁸ The Italian painting tradition as a whole illuminates the remarkable durability of Kufic-derived forms as a visual idiom of sacred authority and cultural prestige across a period of nearly two centuries, and underlines the central role of luxury textile circulation in the transmission and transformation of Kufic forms into Christian artistic media.

Vectors of Transmission: Portable Objects, Textiles, and the Migration of Kufic Forms

The preceding sections have repeatedly touched on the question of how Kufic script reached Christian artists and patrons in Norman Sicily, Byzantium, and Italy. The present section addresses this question directly and systematically, arguing that the migration of Kufic forms across the medieval Mediterranean was not the result of random or incidental contact but a structured process shaped by specific material channels and institutional networks whose character varied considerably across different geographic contexts and historical periods.

The most important single vector of Kufic transmission into Christian artistic contexts was the circulation of luxury textiles bearing Arabic inscriptions. Islamic *tiraz* textiles, produced in state-controlled workshops and bearing inscriptions that identified their place and date of manufacture and frequently included formulaic blessings and invocations of divine favour, occupied a position of exceptional prestige within the material culture of the medieval Mediterranean world. These textiles entered Christian collections through multiple channels: as diplomatic gifts exchanged between Islamic rulers and their Byzantine and Western counterparts, as commercial goods purchased through the extensive trading networks that connected Italy, Sicily, and Byzantium with Egypt, Syria, and the broader Islamic world, and as military trophies

³⁷Napolitano EG (2019) *Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art*. Bamberg: opus.

³⁸Mack RE and Zakariya M (2009) The Pseudo-Arabic on Andrea del Verrocchio's David. *Artibus et Historiae* 30(60): 157-172.

and ecclesiastical donations that found their way into church treasuries across the Christian Mediterranean.³⁹ Once within Christian institutional contexts, these textiles served as visual models for artists seeking to depict sacred figures in prestigious fabrics or to decorate ecclesiastical spaces with ornamental forms associated with the cultural authority of the Islamic world.

Maria Vittoria Fontana's study of Kufic ornamental motifs in the wall paintings of southern Italian churches provided compelling evidence for the centrality of textile transmission in the specific Italian context, demonstrating that the Pseudo-Kufic borders and decorative bands found in these paintings reproduce formal conventions most closely associated with woven textile inscriptions rather than with Kufic epigraphy in its monumental or manuscript forms.⁴⁰ The physical properties of woven textiles also had important consequences for the formal transformation of Kufic script, since the constraints of weaving technology encouraged the angular and geometric simplification of letterforms in ways that made the transition from legible inscription to purely ornamental pattern a natural and technically motivated process.

Metalwork and ceramic objects bearing Kufic inscriptions constituted a second important vector of transmission, particularly in contexts where Islamic luxury goods entered Christian collections as diplomatic gifts or commercial acquisitions. The Byzantine bowl in the treasury of San Marco, examined in detail by Walker, represents a well-documented example of how an Islamic object bearing script-like ornament could enter a Christian institutional context and serve as a model for subsequent artistic appropriations.⁴¹ The role of diplomatic exchange and royal gift-giving in facilitating the transmission of Kufic-bearing objects deserves particular attention in the Norman Sicilian context, where the Norman court maintained extensive diplomatic contacts with the Islamic courts of North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, and the exchange of luxury goods between these courts was a regular feature of Norman foreign policy whose cultural consequences extended well beyond the immediate diplomatic purposes it served.⁴²

The movement of craftsmen and artistic models across political and religious boundaries constitutes a third vector of transmission whose importance has sometimes been underestimated in scholarship focused primarily on the circulation of finished objects. Bongianino demonstrates that Sicilian craftsmen working in the Norman royal workshops sometimes reproduced Arabic letter forms through visual copying rather than scribal competence reveals a mode of transmission in which the transformation from authentic inscription to Pseudo-Kufic ornament was embedded within the specific technical conditions of cross-cultural workshop practice.⁴³ The cumulative picture that emerges from this analysis of transmission vectors is one of a

³⁹Dolezalek I (2017) *Arabic Script on Christian Kings: Textile Inscriptions on Royal Garments from Norman Sicily*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

⁴⁰Fontana MV (2016) Kufic Ornamental Motifs in the Wall Paintings of Six Churches in Southern Italy. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 21(12): 56-73.

⁴¹Walker A (2008) Meaningful Mingling: Classicizing Imagery and Islamicizing Script in a Byzantine Bowl. *The Art Bulletin* 90(1): 32-53.

⁴²Johns J (2002) *Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily: The Royal Diwan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴³Bongianino U (2017) The King, His Chapel, His Church: Boundaries and Hybridity in the Religious Visual Culture of the Norman Kingdom. *Journal of the Transcultural Mediterranean Studies* 4(1-2): 3-50.

Mediterranean-wide material culture in which Kufic-bearing objects circulated continuously through multiple channels, reaching Christian artists and patrons in a wide range of institutional contexts and providing them with visual models of varying degrees of formal complexity and semantic legibility.

Discussion

The evidence examined in the preceding sections points consistently towards a set of conclusions that cut across the conventional disciplinary boundaries separating the study of Norman Sicilian art, Byzantine visual culture, and Italian painting. Taken together, the Norman, Byzantine, and Italian cases reveal a coherent and geographically differentiated process through which the visual authority of Kufic script was repeatedly mobilised, transformed, and put to work in the service of Christian institutional purposes across five centuries of Mediterranean history. The present section draws out the broader implications of this comparative analysis, addressing three interconnected themes that emerge from the evidence as a whole: the relationship between authenticity and imitation in the transmutation of Kufic script; the institutional logic of aesthetic appropriation; and the semiotic transformation through which Kufic forms acquired new layers of meaning as they migrated across cultural and religious boundaries.

The evidence reviewed in this paper consistently undermines the assumption, implicit in much earlier scholarship, that authentic Kufic inscription and Pseudo-Kufic imitation represent categorically distinct phenomena requiring fundamentally different explanatory frameworks. The findings of Napolitano and Fein demonstrated that many forms previously categorised as meaningless Pseudo-Kufic ornament contain recoverable Arabic textual content, suggesting that the boundary between the readable and the purely ornamental was in practice far more permeable than categorical distinctions imply.⁴⁴ Bongianino's analysis of Norman opus sectile inscriptions showed that even within a single artistic program, the same craftsmen could produce forms ranging from relatively faithful reproductions of Arabic letterforms to highly stylised ornamental patterns. And the analysis of the Cappella Palatina program by Johns demonstrated that authentic Arabic inscription and script-like ornamental decoration coexisted within a single visual environment designed to address multiple audiences with different levels of Arabic literacy simultaneously.⁴⁵ Across all three cultural contexts, the boundary between authentic inscription and ornamental imitation functioned not as a fixed threshold but as a productive zone of visual ambiguity whose deliberate exploitation was central to the communicative and institutional effectiveness of Kufic-derived decoration.

The comparative analysis developed in this paper reveals that while the appropriation of Kufic script was a widespread and geographically diverse phenomenon, it was never uniform in its institutional logic. In Norman Sicily, the deployment of authentic and near-authentic Kufic inscription was shaped by the specific political imperatives of a multilingual kingdom whose rulers needed to address simultaneously Muslim, Byzantine,

⁴⁴Napolitano EG (2019) *Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art*. Bamberg: opus; Fein A (2024) *Kufic Epigraphy between Norman Sicily and Ifriqiya*. Muqarnas 40.

⁴⁵Johns J (2014) *Arabic Inscriptions in the Cappella Palatina*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 122-145.

and Latin Christian audiences. In Byzantine contexts, by contrast, the preference for Pseudo-Kufic ornament over authentic inscription reflected the different institutional imperatives of Orthodox ecclesiastical culture, which sought to associate its sacred spaces and objects with the prestige and authority of Islamic visual culture without the institutional complications that explicit Arabic inscription would have entailed. In Italian painting, finally, the incorporation of Kufic-derived forms into the depiction of sacred figures served yet another institutional logic, one rooted in the pictorial conventions of Latin Christian devotional art and in the specific social and commercial environment of late medieval Italian urban culture.

The semiotic transformation through which Kufic forms acquired new layers of meaning as they migrated across cultural and religious boundaries was not a simple process of semantic emptying but a more complex process of semantic redistribution, in which the authority and prestige associated with Kufic script in its original Islamic context were preserved and reoriented within new institutional frameworks.⁴⁶ Where legible Kufic inscriptions communicated specific textual content to those with the linguistic competence to read them, Pseudo-Kufic forms communicated a set of more diffuse but no less powerful associations with Islamic learning, sacred antiquity, divine authority, and cultural sophistication to audiences who could recognise the script-like character of the forms without being able to decode their specific content. This redistribution of semantic authority from the textual to the iconic, from the specific to the general, from the linguistically legible to the visually evocative, was not a degradation of the original but a transformation of its mode of operation that made Kufic-derived forms available for a much wider range of institutional and artistic purposes than authentic Arabic inscription could have served.

The comparative perspective developed in this paper also reveals important continuities and connections between the three cultural contexts examined, connections that suggest a degree of mutual awareness and cross-cultural dialogue that the compartmentalisation of existing scholarship has tended to obscure. The Norman Sicilian court, as the most intensive and institutionally organised site of Kufic appropriation in the Christian Mediterranean, played a crucial role not only in producing some of the most sophisticated examples of the phenomenon but also in establishing models and precedents whose influence extended into both Byzantine and Italian artistic traditions. This connectivity does not mean that the Byzantine and Italian appropriations of Kufic script were simply derivative of the Norman Sicilian model, since each tradition developed its own distinctive institutional logic and formal conventions. But it does suggest that the transmutation of Kufic script in Christian art was a genuinely Mediterranean-wide phenomenon whose individual manifestations were shaped by a common fund of material models, artistic conventions, and cultural associations that circulated continuously across the political and religious boundaries of the medieval Mediterranean world.

⁴⁶Kanellopoulos C and Tohme L (2008) A True Kufic Inscription on the Kapnikarea Church in Athens. *Al-Masaq* 20(2): 133-139.

Conclusions

The transmutation of Kufic script across the Christian Mediterranean between the tenth and fifteenth centuries was neither a marginal curiosity nor a simple story of artistic borrowing. As the evidence examined in this paper has demonstrated, it was a sustained, geographically differentiated, and institutionally grounded process through which the visual authority of Islamic epigraphy was repeatedly mobilised, transformed, and redeployed in the service of Christian institutional purposes whose specific character varied considerably across Norman Sicilian, Byzantine, and Italian contexts.

Across all three traditions, the appropriation of Kufic script was a purposeful act of cultural translation rather than a product of artistic ignorance or passive imitation. The Norman court of Sicily deployed authentic Arabic inscription as an explicit instrument of royal sovereignty; Byzantine ecclesiastical patrons favoured Pseudo-Kufic ornament as a marker of sacred authority and apotropaic power; and Italian painters incorporated Kufic-derived forms into the depiction of sacred figures as a visual signifier of holy antiquity and oriental origin. In each case, the effectiveness of these appropriations depended on a sufficient degree of cultural awareness to make the association with Islamic visual authority legible to its intended audiences. The boundary between authentic Kufic inscription and Pseudo-Kufic ornament, far from representing a fixed categorical distinction, functioned across all three contexts as a variable and deliberately exploited zone of visual indeterminacy, one whose productive ambiguity allowed the prestige of Arabic script to be invoked without committing to its specific linguistic content. The findings of Napolitano and Fein further confirm that existing scholarship has drawn this boundary too sharply, and that a more adequate analytical framework must treat the spectrum from full linguistic legibility to complete ornamental abstraction as continuous and contextually variable rather than categorical.

The material foundation of this process, rooted in the Mediterranean-wide circulation of luxury textiles, metalwork, and ceramic objects bearing Kufic inscriptions, ensured that Christian appropriations of Arabic script were shaped primarily by its most ornamental and formally elaborated forms, dissociated from their specifically Quranic and political functions and already embedded within a broader aesthetic of luxury and prestige. This material channel of transmission had important consequences not only for the formal character of Christian Pseudo-Kufic but also for the cultural associations it carried, which were primarily those of cosmopolitan sophistication, sacred antiquity, and institutional authority rather than the more specifically religious meanings of Kufic in its original Islamic contexts.

In the halos of Mantegna's sacred figures, the ceiling inscriptions of the Cappella Palatina, and the Pseudo-Kufic borders of Byzantine ecclesiastical decoration, we can read not the story of a dominant tradition imposing itself on a passive recipient but the more complex and more interesting story of how medieval institutions actively constructed their identities through the creative appropriation and transformation of the visual resources of the wider Mediterranean world. These forms stand as testimony to the creative vitality of medieval Mediterranean intercultural exchange and to the capacity of visual authority to migrate across political, religious, and linguistic boundaries in ways that transformed both the forms themselves and the institutional

contexts that received them. Whether comparable processes of deliberate epigraphic appropriation operated in other peripheral zones of Islamic cultural contact, including the Crusader states, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Armenian world, remains a question that invites further comparative investigation and that the evidence assembled here suggests would repay systematic scholarly attention.

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