

Original Research Article

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کتیبه‌نگاری بناهای قرون اولیه اسلامی ایران از منظر تاریخی-نگری، براساس آرای شیلا بلر

## Inscriptions of Early Islamic Buildings in Iran from a Historical Perspective, Based on Sheila Blair's Viewpoints

### Abstract

**Problem Definition:** There are different approaches in the study of Islamic art, each of which offers different interpretations of Islamic art. Among these, the historical approach emphasizes the two components of contextualization and interpretation and seeks the genealogy of Islamic art by referring to the characteristics of the historical sequence. Influenced by this point of view, «Sheila Blair» investigates Islamic studies, and the most important orientation of her thought, when dealing with Islamic art, is to pay attention to the historical context in which the work is formed. Therefore, the current research seeks to answer the following question: «How can Sheila Blair's method and perspective reveal the understanding and acceptance of Islamic artworks?»

**Objective:** This research aims to pinpoint the historical perspective of Sheila Blair in the identification and reading of inscriptions in Islamic architecture.

**Research Method:** The current research was carried out using a descriptive-analytical method and qualitatively analyzed library information and documents.

**Results:** The results show that by using this type of study, it is possible to achieve a specific pattern of establishing the structure of the inscriptions, which is effective in identifying the date of anonymous works. Based on the historicist method, Blair considers Islamic art and architecture as a phenomenon that is the product of historical truth. Based on this, what is important in the first stage of his research method, including in the book entitled «The first inscriptions in the architecture of the Islamic period of Iran», are material and mostly tangible evidence, and mystical, spiritual, and transcendental interpretations have no place in her attitude. Blair considers the main reasons for the presence of religious inscriptions to be their preaching message and, in examining the content of religious inscriptions with an emphasis on historical aspects and a formalistic view, she obtains comprehensive information in this regard. Her research, including the book under review, besides providing a list of the most important inscriptions of the Islamic era of Iran, is a very useful reference for learning how to deal with inscriptions. In general, Blair records the inscriptions with a historical perspective and provides researchers with detailed information on the description of each inscription in terms of content, history, and geography, as well as formal and calligraphic analysis, which reveals a wide range of Islamic artworks for researchers in this field.

### Keywords

Historicism, Sheila Blair, Islamic art and architecture, inscriptions

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### **Introduction**

The historicism method is based on liberating man from understanding the world based on timeless and absolute truths. In this method, the researcher's opinion is that a phenomenon such as a work of art and even the interests and tastes of the artist or his imagination came into existence under the influence of the specific contexts of the era or the elements and factors of his predecessors, in such a way that the historical context determines the identity of the work of art. Among these researchers, Sheila Blair is one of the most prominent researchers who is currently working in Islamic art studies, and in the way of study, she continues the path that «Grabar» opened for the researchers of this field for the first time in modern studies of Islamic art. «Grabar» considers the method of general discussion about Islamic art to be wrong and pointless in details. He believes, The research of Islamic arts should be dedicated to specific periods and actually be based on the distinction of time and region. Although it is possible to use different methods in examining Islamic art, these methods sometimes provide different interpretations of Islamic art. It should also be acknowledged that even among historians, there are differences of views and attitudes, and since the most important factor in the disagreement of Islamic art thinkers is based on perspective and method, therefore, it is necessary to examine this approach in understanding Islamic art. The purpose of the current research is to pinpoint the historical perspective of Sheila Blair in identifying and reading inscriptions in Islamic architecture, and seeks to answer the following question: «How can Sheila Blair's method and perspective reveal the understanding and acceptance of Islamic artworks?» Therefore, by examining these works, a clear understanding of Blair's historical approach to Islamic art is obtained.

### **Research Method**

The present research method is descriptive-analytical and its data was collected by searching library sources and documents through photography. To achieve this goal, Sheila Blair's book entitled «The First Inscriptions in the Architecture of the Islamic Era of Iran» has been chosen as an example of one of Blair's valuable works in identifying inscriptions and examining their content and historical and geographical analysis. Therefore, the statistical community of this research includes several inscriptions of early Islamic buildings that Blair examined in 79 entries. It should be mentioned that among these works, according to the purpose of the research, some works have been examined by the method of qualitative analysis to determine the indicators of Blair's point of view and method in the analysis of inscriptions.

### **Research Background**

In describing the background of the research, the following studies can be mentioned, which mostly deal with the methodological foundations of Islamic art: «Pazuki» (2004) in «Historicism and its relationship with the theoretical foundations of art history», examines the theoretical foundations of art historiography, especially Historicism, and then discusses phenomenology as a reaction against this point of view. «Blair & Bloom» (2008) in an article entitled «Mirage of Islamic Art; Reflections on the study of a fluid domain», looked at Islamic art from a historiographical perspective and examined the works of researchers in this field from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until today in Islamic art studies. «Mousavi Gilani» (2011) has discussed method issues in the book entitled «Introduction to the method of Islamic Art». In general, detailed studies have not been done in Blair's historical perspective in the study of Islamic inscriptions. The current research studies

Sheila Blair's historical perspective in Islamic studies and how it is understood and received from Islamic works, and it has the innovation.

### **Historicism**

«Historicism» or «Historism» is the translation of the German word «Historismus», which in Persian has been translated into «تاریخی نگری» or «تاریخی گری». This is a term that German historians coined in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by which they called their school (Pazuki, 2004). The position of historicism according to the teachings of Hegel's philosophy of history, in Orientalism, based on the characteristics of historical sequence, seeks the genealogy of Islamic art and architecture. Hegel's philosophy of history deals with specific historical events that were the beginning of a new way in Western philosophy because none of the great philosophers before him considered history or the philosophy of history as important. Hegel calls the evolution of history a dialectical process or «historical dialectic». In a sense, his philosophy is considered a kind of philosophy of history (Jalali, Tahori, & Etesam, 2021). Historicism or historical authenticity is based on this reading and understanding of the world that all phenomena are determined historically and depend on their era and the set of social, cultural, etc. elements of their time. His own history (Hauser, 2003, 149) always enclosed and limited the artist in special historical conditions and can never go beyond the limits of his time, and in fact, every person and every work is made and dealt with. Among the historians of Islamic art, people like «Andre Godard», «Eleg Grabar», «Terry Allen», «Richard Ettinghausen», etc. have a Historicism tendency toward Islamic art. They consider Islam as a cultural phenomenon born of their historical background and do not accept its trans-historical and psychic issues that a certain background can influence. «On the other hand, Considering Islamic art as trans-historical and the inability of historical analysis to explain the nature of art is one belief of the traditionalist group in Islamic art, which is pointed out by people such as «Burckhardt». He believes that Islamic art has been influenced by Byzantine, Iranian, and Hindu-Mongolian elements from a historical point of view, but more attention should be paid to the religious components and orientations that have caused these different elements to come together in a single composition. Burckhardt believes that the root and origin of Islamic art must be found within Islamic concepts and that the religious approach has elements beyond history and time that do not fit within the scope of historicism and its perceptions» (Faghfour, Bolkhari Ghahi, 2015). Historicism historians stand in opposition to such opinions, and at the same time they believe in the connection of religious artworks and even some non-religious works of Islam, they consider it a historical matter and avoid general, fixed, and trans-historical attribution to these works. In general, the Historicism view is an effort that leads to the classification of works and the stylistic framework of works through the collection of evidence and documentation. Therefore, «historicism is dealing with the cultural past that, in addition to presenting the past, has interpreted it, and by placing cultural works and belongings in a broader context, besides stating what factor caused the creation of these works, it should also state its meaning. It is in this explanation and interpretation of the mind that a lot of previous beliefs and knowledge, theories and viewpoints are raised and understanding is done based on the mind» (Taheri & Zarifian, 2019). Influenced by this point of view, Blair also conducts research in Islamic studies, and therefore, the most important orientation of her thought in dealing with Islamic art is to pay attention to the historical context in which the work is formed.

### **Sheila Blair's view on Islamic inscriptions**

Sheila Blair has so far written valuable books in Islamic art studies that show her method and perspective on examining Islamic artworks. One of these works is the book entitled «The first inscriptions in the architecture of the Islamic era of Iran», which includes the introduction and analysis of a collection of the oldest Islamic inscriptions of Iran. In fact, this study covers the first five centuries of Islam, from the beginning of Islam in Iran to 500 A.H., which coincides with the middle of the Seljuk dynasty. Blair considers the reason for choosing this time range to be the relatively smaller number of inscriptions compared to after the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and from a historical point of view, she believes that «the examination of inscriptions after this time, in smaller geographical areas, is more reasonable» (Blair, 2015, 14). In order to better understand and identify her study method in Islamic inscriptions, this book has been selected, and among the examined inscriptions, a number of those that show Blair's method and perspective in the study of Islamic art were selected for the analysis in this research. In the first part of the book, the author has written a detailed introduction about the identification of inscriptions, which contains key points in epigraphy and provides the reader with Blair's perspective and methodology in identifying and dealing with Islamic works of art. In the table of contents, there are 79 entries that examine each of the inscriptions separately in an entry in chronological order. Blair's purpose of examining these inscriptions historically is to reach a specific pattern for writing different texts and a way to follow the evolution of the style of the inscriptions. In fact, «Max van Berchem» was the first person to collect such a collection of inscriptions based on the geographical region. He first went to Egypt, then to Syria and Asia Minor, and in the fourth part, he examined the inscriptions on the Arabian Peninsula. This book deals with the fifth geographical area, i.e. Iran. In relation to this type of regional approach, Blair has given explanations in another article entitled «Mirage of Islamic art, reflections on the study of a fluid domain» (2008), and points out: «One of the usual approaches is to deal with Islamic art temporally; i.e., as an art, it is a period in a certain region. In this view, the broad spiritual classification of «Islamic art» loses meaning in comparison with more focused regional terms such as «Iranian», «Turkish» or «Egyptian» art» (Blair & Bloom, 2008). She further points out that the geographical limitation to the political borders of today's Islamic Republic of Iran fades away compared to its extraordinary glory, and this limitation has caused the architecture of some periods that are outside the borders of today to be ignored. Therefore, by considering this problem in the regional approach, Blair has considered cultural Iran, «apart from today's political and geographical borders; That is, from the middle of the rivers to the headwaters and from the Caspian Sea to the Caucasus» (Blair, 2015, 14), and besides geographical boundaries, a historical scope (the first five centuries of Islam) has also been assigned to this research. Blair's purpose in choosing this method is to achieve general principles in the form's evolution and content of inscriptions and to apply these principles in the examination and dating of undated and illegible inscriptions. In addition, with this method of distinguishing different inscriptions, it is also clarified in terms of content, and with the obtained criteria, the function of anonymous buildings can be recognized. However, in order to get a more complete list of the first Islamic inscriptions in Iran, we can add to this list the inscriptions found in the Saveh Grand Mosque, the minaret inscription of the Saveh Meydan Mosque, and the Robat Ziarat inscription in the mountains south of the road from Zavareh to Khaf, which the author has not mentioned. In addition, there are inscriptions in the museums of Iran and the world, some of which can be considered from the first five centuries of the Islamic era of Iran. An example of these works

is a stone tablet in the Pars Museum of Shiraz, which seems to have belonged to the Atiq Mosque in Shiraz before that.

### **Classification of inscriptions texts**

Since the beginning of the Islamic period, Muslim artists and rulers has always considered the art of inscriptions to provide religious, historical, and cultural identity. Regarding religious inscriptions and the reasons for their presence in Islamic architecture, different theories can be extracted from the works of Islamic art historians. According to the caliphs proposed the theory of Historicism, including Grabar, the use of Islamic inscriptions after the political and social stability of Muslims in the Umayyad period. In the early years of the formation of Islamic civilization, emphasis was put on promoting Islamic culture and familiarizing other conquered nations and civilizations with the religious concepts of Islam and the verses of the Holy Quran in the form of religious inscriptions to make ideological comments on the buildings of that period. According to the researchers, «With the establishment of Islamic rule in different regions of Central Asia, decorative inscriptions gradually gained a dominant role. Inscriptions in the Arabic language that had religious, moral, or educational content and followed a specific goal, because of the impressive beauty that was used in their construction and decorations, had a very useful effect in promoting and expanding the religious principles of Islam» (Manzo, 2001, 20). In general, in each of the Islamic buildings, we face different inscriptions, which are diverse in terms of language, theme, type of writing, and implementation. In the mentioned book, Sheila Blair divides the inscriptions into two categories, historical and religious, and believes that each of these was a subset of memorial texts, funeral texts, endowments, verses, hadiths, and supplications. This classification became a model for researchers. For example, in the book entitled «Arabic Calligraphy in Architecture» (1999), in the fourth chapter namely «Functional Classification of Inscriptions», a similar classification of the content of inscription can be seen, which was compiled by Sheila Blair regarding the book «Islamic Inscriptions» (1998). Therefore, in this research derived from Blair's method, to achieve a specific goal and pattern, the inscriptions are divided into four categories: historical texts, religious texts, language, and style.

### **1. Historical Texts**

Such inscriptions are inscriptions with historical importance and contain information such as the name of the building, date of construction, signature of the architect, introduction of rulers, etc. In this section, in addition to historical inscriptions, this study also includes mementos; In Iran, it has been common to write their names on the magnificent ancient ruins. She believes these inscriptions are a kind of declaration and claim of the connection of the current official with that brilliant past, and this feature of meaning, which is of special importance from the political and social point of view, justifies the presence of the mementos in this collection. Blair seeks to find a specific pattern in the text of these mementos and identifies key and recurring words in them. After examining this group of inscriptions, she comes to the structure of the construction inscriptions: «The structure of all these inscriptions is: the introduction, the verb, the title that represents the building, the name of the founder or supporter, the date. Sometimes the name of the ruler of the time comes after the name of the building, and sometimes the name of the artisan is added to the end of the inscription» (Blair, 2015, 16). She believes that identifying these official principles and rules is beneficial in identifying and investigating disputes. Then she

discussed the verbs that were common in this category and pointed out that the official verb in the first Islamic inscriptions of Iran is «Amr Bešana (أمر ببناء)» (command to build). Another verb is «Amara (عَمَرَ)», which she believes was used to build up the building. This verb (command to build) can be seen in various inscriptions of works, including a part of the inscription of the wooden tablet of the tomb of Imam Ali (AS) near Kufa (Najaf), which is one of the most important actions of Azd al-Dawlah in 363 A.H. (Fig 1). The text of the inscription: امر بعماره بقعه الشريفه تاج الملله الشاهنشاه ابى شجاع فناخسرو و لا زال عضدالدوله سنه ثلث و ستين و ثلث مائه Translation: Taj-ul-Mulleh, the emperor Abu Shuja' Fana-Khusro, who remains the assistant and helper of wisdom, ordered the development of his cherished tomb in 363 A.H. (Blair, 2015, 68-69).



**Fig 1.** The wooden tablet of Imam Ali's tomb, Cairo Arab Museum. Source: O'Kane, 2006, 272.



**Fig 2.** Dome of Nezam al-Molk Mosque of Isfahan. Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>.

«Max van Berchem» in the first volume of the book namely «A corpus of Arabic inscriptions» entitled Egypt, which is Blair's model for examining the collection of inscriptions in this book, considers the meaning of this verb (أَمَرَ، عَمَرَ) to build up, enrich, and bring to life. In addition to the buildings, she has spoken about its use for the institutions and foundations in which the buildings are located. By carefully examining these verbs, it is clear that the widest circle of words belongs to tomb buildings. Mentioning the examples of the words Mausoleum (Boghe), Mashhad, Torba, Tomb (Maghbare), Dorm (Persian inscription), Blair extracted Grave (Ghabr) and Palace (Ghasr) from the tomb buildings. Then she examines the attributes that are mentioned along with the names of people. From the names, attributes, and titles in these inscriptions, it can be seen that over time, the titles of Iranian officials have become more detailed and elaborated, and the use of titles in the inscriptions is so precise that their presence can be considered as the basis for dating the inscriptions. She used the same method to date the dome of Nezam al-Molk mosque in Isfahan. In the inscription at the base of the dome of Nezam-ul-Molk (Fig 2), it is mentioned that during the reign of Malik Shah, his vizier, Nizam-al-Mulk, ordered the construction of this dome. Khargerd school was also built between 465 and 470 A.H. by Nizam al-Mulk, and there he was called: «(امام عادل نظام الملك قوام الدين ابوعلی حسن بن علی بن اسحاق رضی امیرالمومنین)» Honorable Imam, Nizam al-Mulk Qawam al-Din Abu Ali Hasan bin Ali bin Ishaq Radi Amirul Momineen, may God prolong his life». But here it is read like this: «(الفقیر الی رحمہ الله حسن بن علی بن اسحاق) Al-Faqeer Ali, may God have mercy on him, Hasan bin Ali bin Ishaq» (Blair, 2015, 251). Not mentioning titles in the inscriptions of dedicated buildings is common and it can be attributed to the piety of the vizier who built the city mosque. However, with a historical view and considering all the ruling dimensions, Blair believes

that this difference in titles is the result of the difference in the financial resources of the work. It seems that Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk built the Khargerd school from his personal property and the financial source for the construction of the Isfahan mosque dome was the government treasury. In any case, the possibility of Sheila Blair as the reason for not including the titles in the inscription seems more logical considering Nizam al-Mulk's statement. «Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk» mentions the importance of titles in the book namely «Politics (SiasatNameh)» and writes: «The titles have become many and the more they have become, it should be appreciated and there should be no danger. The kings and caliphs have always been narrow in terms of titles, while is one of the honors of the country to keep everyone's title, rank, and influence since the title of a businessman and a peasant is the same as the title of a leader and famous man, there was no difference between the high-status and honored people in the famous or unknown places. Sometimes, the title of an Imam or a scholar or a judge was «Mu'in al-Din» and the title of a Turkish student or a Turkish alderman who had no knowledge of science and Sharia and did not know how to read or write, was also «Mu'in al-Din», so what is the difference? It was supposed that between the scholars and the ignorant, the judges and the students of the Turks, the title of both should be the same, and this was not permissible. Also, the titles of the Turkish rulers were «Hesam al-Dawlah», «Saif al-Dawlah», «Yamin al-Dawlah», «Shams al-Dawlah» and the like, and the eunuchs' titles were «Ain al-Dawlah Amidan», «Motaserefan Amid al-Dawlah», «Zahir al-Mulk», «Qawam al-Mulk», «Nizam al-Mulk». However now, the distinction has been made, and the Turks call themselves eunuchs, and eunuchs are the title of the Turks, and it has always been a cherished title ... The purpose of the title is to recognize the man by that title» (Nizam al-Mulk, 1969, 229). Blair believes that inscriptions are not the only instruments in finding the official titles of very famous personalities, and texts and coins can also be used. Kakuye, Al-Ziyar, etc. are very helpful; however, the study of the first inscriptions is very helpful in understanding the history and titles of not-so-famous people in small dynasties such as Hasanwayhids, Kakuyids, Ziyarid dynasty, etc. In fact, Blair's aim in examining and explaining Islamic inscriptions is to discover their forms and structure based on the process of historical evolution. Her opinions are based on the principles of historicism and the understanding of the world based on the facts in the context of time. She emphasizes that all historical phenomena depend on the set of social, political, and cultural components of their time are determined in the context of history, and cannot exceed the boundaries of their time. This historical perspective of Blair can be seen in all her works, including in the book entitled «Ilkhanate Architecture in Natanz» which focuses on the social status and the type of activity and the influence they have on the creation of architectural collections and inscriptions. Her main goal is to show how private commitments and economic investments affect Islamic art activities.

## **2. Religious Texts**

In the scope of Islamic art, architecture has always been a place for divine verses and the words of prophets, and Islamic buildings can be considered the most obvious works that Islamic thought has been influential in their construction and decoration. One of the most used decorations in these buildings is inscriptions. Religious inscriptions contain religious themes and they can be considered as having decorative and functional aspects like some other decorative arts in Islamic architecture. Religious texts include Qur'anic verses, hadiths, prayers, and invocations. Although it is common to ignore inscriptions with repeated texts, sometimes these same repeated texts reveal signs in the recognition of the

building's use. «One of the important goals of inscriptions is to create a spiritual atmosphere by using the Quranic verses, as Martin Lingsahawje has interpreted it as a Quranic view, and according to him, «It should not be forgotten that one of the important goals of the Qur'an script is to create visual sanctity, looking attentively in the Quranic inscriptions to seek mercy and blessings from them». In hadiths, looking at Quranic verses is also mentioned. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) said: «Looking at the lines of the Qur'an without reading is also worship» (Makinezhad, 2009). On the other hand, Blair has examined religious texts with a formalistic view and it can be said that she does not give much importance to their place and meaning among Muslims since religious inscriptions in Islamic works have different aspects that depend on the beliefs of Muslim artists, including the protective aspect that can be seen in the works of Islamic architecture. For example, there is this belief among Muslims that reading and carrying the Ayat al-Kursi will save you from evils and calamities, and there are various hadiths in this regard. «Among others, Imam Sadiq (PBUH) said: "When the height of the roof of the house is over four meters, write the Ayah al-Kursi around the house to protect yourself from the evil of the jinn and the devil» (Abdullahiyan, 2009). Therefore, the frequent use of Ayah al-Kursi in buildings has a direct connection to the opinions of artists and those who commissioned Islamic buildings, which Blair did not consider. For example, she considered the phrase «Al-Mulk Allah (الملك الله)» which is repeated in many buildings such as Pir Alamdar and Damghan's Chehel Dokhtaraan, as merely a tool to fill empty spaces (Blair, 2015, 21) (Fig 3), while this phrase is one of the divine names that Muslims believe that its repetition causes the exaltation and ascension of the soul and «is among the invocations that refer to the absolute power of God and the commandment of the heavens and the earth» (Faghfour & Balkhari Qahi, 2015). In «Kashf al-Mahjub», in the description of this name, "Hajwiri" points out: «The dominance of the name of the Lord (الملك) over the servant is such that the obligation of the servant falls from it, and against this domination, the servant's efforts are fruitless» (Hajwiri, 2013, 548). In «Ruh al-Arwah», in the chapter on the description of God's ownership, «Samaani» talks about the misery and slavery of the servant and «the severity of the mastery of the true owner, which compels him to put his will before his own and to remove pride and dignity from himself» (Samaani, 1989, 14). Therefore, the repetition of this name in original buildings was not just for filling the space and had a meaningful value for the builder or the customer that cannot be easily ignored.



**Fig 3.** Inscription of Damghan's Chehel Dokhtaraan with the phrase «Al-Mulk Allah». Source: Authors.

Also, she seeks to relate and connect Quranic verses with the use of buildings. Based on this, she examined the verses and mentioned, for example, verses 78 and 79 of Surah «Isra». Translation of the verses: Perform the prayer from the beginning of the sun's inclination towards the Maghrib [which is the beginning of the Islamic noon] until the end of the



darkness of the night, and [also] perform the morning prayer, because it is observed by [the angels of the night and the angels of the day], and stay awake for a part of the night for worship and servitude, which is special for you in addition to the obligation, it is hoped that your god will raise you to a place of praise [because of this special worship]. Blair considered these verses to be a good choice for altars because of the theme of prayer and vigil. However, she does not find a logical answer for these verses in the soiled dome of Jame Mosque in Isfahan and calls its use in a place other than the altar inappropriate (Blair, 2015, 22). While this verse has many applications for Muslims, its importance becomes clearer by studying hadiths and its connection with the location seems logical. «In a hadith from Imam Sadiq (PBUH), it is said that he said: Every servant of God who recites this Surah (Isra) on Friday night will realize Hazrat Qaim (PBUH) during his lifetime and will be one of his companions» (Abdullahi Fard, Oladaghobad, & Shekarpour, 2019). Blair introduces the most common verse in the first Islamic inscriptions of Iran, verse 18 of Surah Al-Imran, and believes that this verse's testimony to the superiority of Islam has made it a suitable slogan for mosques. Translation of the verse: While God is the upholder of justice [with the logic of revelation, with the sound system of creation and with the language of all creatures], he testifies that there is no god but him, and the angels and the possessors of knowledge testify that there is no god but him; a god who is powerful, invincible, and wise. This verse contains the purest monotheistic beliefs and points out that God and the angels and scholars who stand up for justice bear witness to the oneness of God and further consider Islam as the true religion. The Prophet of Islam mentions the importance of this verse in various hadiths. For example: «Whoever writes these verses (testimony verse) and carries them with him is safe from God and the angels protect him from calamities and disasters» (Majlesi, 2009, 217). This verse can be seen in various buildings such as «The Facade of Jurjir Mosque», «Shirkabir Altar in Dehistan», «Rotunda of Jame Nazanz Mosque», «Minar Altar in Zavareh» and «Minaret of Robat Malik». Therefore, Blair considers the biggest factor in the presence of religious inscriptions to be their preaching message, which even through their identification, one can see a picture of sectarian conflicts and boundaries in them (Blair, 2015, 23), and this is effective in recognizing the attribution of monuments to different periods. For example, verse 33 of Surah «Ahzab» (purification verse) is about the Prophet's family. This verse became the banner of the Shiites. This verse can be seen in Yahya's tomb in Sarpul Khatib in Afghanistan, and if there were no other signs in this building, this inscription was enough to attribute it to the Shiites and Imamzadeh. Another Shiite slogan is «Al-Taybin Al-Taherin» whose example can be seen under the dome of Naeen's Grand Mosque. Certainly, these slogans were not exclusive to the Shiites and the Sunnis also had similar tools. One of the Sunni themes used on the altars of the Seljuk period is the hadith «Ashrah Mubashara<sup>1</sup>». This hadith is attributed to the Messenger of God (PBUH) and is one of the most important and famous texts in the hadith and theology of Sunnis, in which the Prophet prophesied that ten of his companions would reach heaven. This hadith can be seen in various buildings, such as the altar of Golpayegan's Jame Mosque and the inscription of Naeen's Muhammadiyah Sarkoche Mosque. It is worth mentioning that to investigate the influence of the Fatimids in Egypt, they also followed the signs of the use of the same expressions (Blair, 2015, 23).

### **3. The language of inscription**

In the language section, Blair examines the languages of the inscriptions used in the buildings, using a regional study method. The official language of Iranian inscriptions was Arabic, and they were arranged based on the established rules of Arabic inscriptions.

However, the examination of the inscriptions according to the dating shows the influence of the Persian language. First, it was seen the mementos, had a lower ceremonial status than the inscriptions of the construction and foundation of the buildings. Blair introduces the first use of the Persian language in the inscription as a memento of Azad al-Dawla in Persepolis<sup>2</sup> (Blair, 2015, 52) (Fig 4). In fact, the Persian language was first used in the founding inscriptions of eastern Iran, and even from the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century in eastern Iran, Persian inscriptions became common on vessels and other objects. On the other hand, in more independent areas such as around the Caspian Sea, where older traditions existed, the Pahlavi script was used alongside the Arabic script, and these works were first attributed to the Sassanid era. However, now, they are considered to belong to the early Islamic era (Blair, 2015, 24). Bilingual inscriptions are abundantly found in these areas; Such as «Radkan Tower» (Fig 5), «Lajim Tower», and «Rasget Tower». Blair believes that the structure of the foundation inscriptions and the use of Pahlavi language and script are all the result of conscious imitation of the older buildings of the same region, and it seems that in these remote areas, pre-Islamic traditions were still alive until the middle of the Islamic era (Blair, 2015, 25).



**Fig 5.** Pahlavi inscription on the Arabic side of Radkan East Tower.  
Source: <https://iranmonument.com>.



**Fig 4.** Azad al-Dawla memento inscription in Persepolis, 322 A.H.  
Source: Blair, 2015, 57.

## 4. Inscription Style

In the style section, the author deals with the technical examination of the scripts and the stylistic evolution of the inscriptions. The first inscriptions in Iran were in a straight-angled (Rast Gooshe) script, and its example can be seen in the Dome of the Rock (Qoba Sakhra) and other Umayyad buildings. Blair believes that leafy and floral calligraphy was developed in the west of the Islamic world and from there it made its way to the east of Islam. There are different opinions about the origin of decorative Kufic. Contrary to the theory of people like Blair and Hertzfeld, «Grohman» considers the origin of this script to be in Central Asia and believes that the origin of the decoration and arrangement of the Arab tombstones in Cairo is attributed to samples of Iranian textiles. She says: «The issue of the origin of decorative Kufic script is attributed by some to Tunisia, from where it was taken to Egypt, however, «Martin Hartman» has stated about the tombstone that is in the Cairo Museum of Art and has a date of 243 A.H. It is an outstanding example of a new style that actively appeared in Fatimid writings after 470 A.H., and it has been said that this decorative floral Kufic script came to Egypt from the east» (Grohman, 1957, 185). Blair considers the knotting of the script to be characteristic of the East of the Islamic world. The first knots were formed in the name «Muhammad» and at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, it also appeared in the names of rulers, and in the 410s A.H., it also appeared in the inscriptions on the margins of coins. Blair believes that intertwining the letters was contrary to the readability of the text, and for this reason, only the letters of the words were written on the coins in such a way that their readability was simple; like Muhammad. It seems that with a

formalistic point of view, by emphasizing and paying attention to the surrounding factors, she ignores the religious and belief factors in creating works that can cause special attention to this title, and she has investigated the issue regardless of the belief and religious dimensions. While the name «Muhammad» is the manifestation and expression of prophecy and the second part of the motto of the Islamic religion after «There is no God but God « لا اله الا الله». During different periods, artists with special love and interest, besides writing and symbolizing the meaning and concept of monotheism, have designed and symbolized the name of the Prophet of Islam in most religious buildings and other parts of Islamic art and have written it in the most delicate and beautiful way possible (Fig 7 & 8). The visual role of «Muhammad (PBUH)» in the universe of Islamic art is the carrier of the most original form of «sacred art». In fact, artists showed the greatness and superior status of the Prophet of Islam with more decorations» (Khazaei, 2018). However, Blair examines the style of the scripts of the inscriptions with a formalistic and technical point of view and believes that one problem of this simple Kufic was that most of the letters were in the lower half of the strip, and this caused an imbalance in the script. Therefore, the scribes created decorative tools to fill the upper part of the inscription, and these decorations led to the appearance of the floral Kufic script in the west of Islam, and then the floriated Kufic also appeared (Fig 6). The traditionalists consider the reason for the existence of decorative motifs to be a higher matter and believe, «plant and Islamic motifs are basically re-creators of creative cosmic processes through nature. Just as rhythm is the foundation of nature, Arabesque scripts also have the meaning of rhythm. Every Arabesque script is a representation of movement that is showed by the regular repetition of features, elements, and phenomena; Therefore, it has consistency» (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 2000, 43). According to traditionalists, including «Anne Marie Schimmel», the many decorative motifs in the inscriptions, the magical feature of the letters, and their illegibility were a sign of the holiness and blessing hidden in their meanings and concepts. According to her, «the more incomprehensible the text of these works, the more the ray of its holy quality reflects» (Schimmel, 2010, 38).

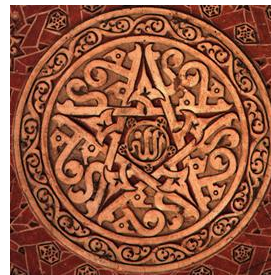


**Fig 6.** Kufic Movraq inscription in Khargerd School, Khorasan.

Source: Makinezhad, 2018.



**Fig 7.** The inscription of the name of Muhammad (PBUH), the discovery site of Jurjan (Kavos Dome), 4<sup>th</sup> century A.H., Source: Authors.



**Fig 8.** The inscription of the name of Muhammad (PBUH) in the Zanjan's Sultanie dome, Ilkhanid period. Source: <http://azarbeuty.ir>.

In the following, she examines the origin of the inscription script and points out that the most evidence of the origin of the inscription script can be found in the monuments carved in Persian Achaemenid sites, such as the monument of Azad al-Dawlah in 344 A.H. By examining the inscriptions according to the historical course, at the end of the fifth century

A.H., all the main currents of Iranian inscriptions become clear. The main types of inscriptions include mementos and inscriptions of the construction of various buildings, including mosques, tombs, palaces, minarets, towers, and ramparts. The official language of the inscriptions was Arabic, but the increase in the importance of Persian can be seen, and in terms of style, it shows the evolution of the Kufic script and the emergence of Movraq, Mozahar (floriated), and Maqad Kufic until introducing the Naskh script.

### Conclusion

Blair's purpose in studying these inscriptions was to investigate the general structure of inscriptions, obtain general principles in the form's evolution and content of inscriptions, and apply these principles to the examination and dating of undated and illegible inscriptions. Influenced by Grabar's view and Hegel's philosophy of history, Blair pays attention to historical documents and the role of social, political, and geographical issues. Based on the historicist method, Blair considers Islamic art and architecture as a phenomenon that is the product of historical truth. Accordingly, what is important in the first stage of his research method, including in this book, is material and mostly tangible evidence, and mystical, spiritual, and transcendental interpretations have no place in her attitude. Blair considers the biggest reason for religious inscriptions to be their preaching message and in examining the content of religious inscriptions with emphasis on historical aspects and a formalistic view, she obtains comprehensive information in this regard. Her research, including the book under review, besides providing a list of the most important inscriptions of the Islamic era of Iran, is a very useful reference in learning how to deal with inscriptions. In the end, it can be concluded that Blair carefully records the inscriptions with a historical perspective and provides researchers with detailed information on the description of each inscription in terms of content, history, and geography, as well as formal and calligraphic analysis, which reveal the broad and detailed dimensions of Islamic artworks for researchers in this field.

### Appendix

1. According to this hadith, the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) gave the good news of heaven to ten people, and even with the presence of many sins, they will never go to hell. These ten people, according to the traditions of Tirmidhi, are the following people: "Our Hadith Qutaiba told us Abdul Aziz bin Muhammad, from Abd al-Rahman bin Hamid, from Abiyyah, Abd al-Rahman bin Awf heqrd that the Messenger of God (PBUH) said: "Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, Ali, Talha, al-Zubayr, Abd al-Rahman bin Auf, Saad bin Abi Waqqas, Saeed bin Zayd, and Abu Ubaidah bin Al-Jarrah are in heaven.
2. In this inscription (344 A.H.), Amir Deylami gave his Persian name Fana Khosrow (Panah Khosrow) next to his Arabic name (Blair, 2015, 24).

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