#### «A mari usque ad mare»

Cultura visuale e materiale dall'Adriatico all'India a cura di Mattia Guidetti e Sara Mondini

# **Reading Inscriptions on Seljuk Caravanserais**

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**Abstract** This essay concerns the foundation inscriptions of caravanserais built during the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the territories of the Anatolian Seljuk sultanate. It starts by examining their content and relates that to the hierarchy of the Seljuk sultanate in terms of building size and siting. It then addresses the idea of these inscriptions not as markers of patron, date, and other synchronic data, but as symbols of the power of the dynasty in a land where the language in which they were written, Arabic, was not widely read. Finally, this essay entertains the idea that there were circumstances for certain caravanserai inscriptions being read (and understood), proposing some instances in which Seljuk caravanserai inscriptions can be thought of as having had a readership beyond that of those who commissioned or wrote them. In conclusion, it reexamines one caravanserai inscription, proposing a new reading and date.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Hierarchies. – 3 Inscriptions. – 4 The İncir Han. – 5 Other Caravanserais from the Reign of Ghiyath al-Din Kaykhusraw II. – 6 What was the Function of Caravanserai Inscriptions?

**Keywords** Rum Seliuk caravanserais. Inscriptions. Hierarchy. Sertavul Han.

#### 1 Introduction

The stone caravanserais of medieval Anatolia are perhaps the best known of this kind of Islamic commercial architecture. And yet the patrons of these buildings, the rulers and grandees of the Anatolian Seljuk dynasty, traced their ancestry to the lands of Iran and Central Asia, where equally impressive caravanserais were built of less durable materials, brick and mud brick, in the previous centuries by their Seljuk cousins and other dynasts. Had these earlier caravanserais been built of stone themselves, they would have rivaled or surpassed their later Anatolian Seljuk cousins in today's accounts of Islamic architecture.

The topic of caravanserais, which links the Mediterranean through Anatolia with the greater Iranian world, can be seen as germane to a volume dedicated to the memory of a scholar who himself studied, lived in, and travelled between these worlds. Like most medieval Islamic inscriptions, those of the Anatolian Seljuks were in Arabic. Be that as it may, Persian,

the administrative language of the dynasty, intrudes into the epigraphic record from time to time, another thing that binds Anatolia with lands further East. I hope this modest contribution will contribute to the celebration of Gianclaudio Macchiarella's accomplishments in so many arenas of teaching and research in the Persianate world and beyond.

#### 2 Hierarchies

The building of caravanserais in Seljuk Anatolia, like other kinds of building, seems to have followed a logic that was both natural and social. The inscriptional programmes of the city and citadel walls of Seljuk cities reserved the most prominent spaces, next to or above gates, for the inscriptions of the sultan, with more important emirs' inscriptions featured nearby, and lesser ones further away. The expense of repairing or building these walls also dictated this hierarchy, as emirs seem to have paid for these constructions out of their own pockets.

The largest caravanserais, those called today 'Sultan Han' in Turkish, lay at the intersections of major routes, and therefore can reasonably be assumed to have been built to accommodate the traffic on both of them. Their size demanded the resources of a sultan. However, sultanic caravanserais not only reflected the patronage of the sultan in terms of their size, but also their decoration, and the presence of features like bathhouses, kiosk mosques, and special suites of rooms.

Seljuk emirs and sultanic wives built smaller caravanserais on major routes. These caravanserais shared the two unit, open and closed, format. At the bottom of this geographical and typological hierarchy lay the smaller caravanserais built on smaller routes through the Taurus Mountains, routes that were less travelled, and whose caravanserais were built by emirs of lesser status. These caravanserais were smaller still. Some had courtyards, and some did not.

The building of caravanserais in Seljuk Anatolia took place in a short period of time, beginning in the last decades of the twelfth century and continuing in the first three quarters of the thirteenth century, a period that covered the period of greatest prosperity, which roughly corresponded to the reign of Sultan 'Ala' al-Din Kayqubadh (r. 1219-1237). However, it also continued during the years the vassalage and decline of the Seljuk sultanate of Anatolia following its defeat by the Mongols at the battle of Köse Dağ in 1243. Therefore, the 'rules of the game' outlined above can be observed in action during the reigns of Seljuk sultans during the Seljuk Blütezeit, as well as in violation of these rules after the weakened Seljuk state, after its defeat by the Mongols in 1243, could not prevent transgressions on this hierarchy of size and placement by members of the elite vying for built expressions of their power and ambition.

In the new world of weakened sultans and emboldened emirs that followed the Mongol victory, the Seljuk regent emir Jalal al-Din Qaratay took over a sultanic caravanserai on the Kayseri-Elbistan road built by two previous sultans, now known by his name as the Karatay Han. While later thirteenth century sources confirm his identification with this building, and his *waqfiyya*, or deed of endowment for it, has survived, it is interesting to note that neither of the surviving inscriptions, one by each sultan, mentions Qaratay (Turan 1948, pp. 49-71 and pp. 90-128; Denktaş 2007).

A former wife of Seljuk Sultan Ala' al-Din Kayqubadh, 'Ismat al-Dunya wa'l-Din, built a sultanic-sized caravanserai in the mid 1240s complete with kiosk mosque north of Antalya, at the intersection of the northern route leading to Antalya from Burdur and the coastal route leading East to Alanya, while building a small mountain caravanserai in the midst of the relict Seljuk state in southern Anatolia. And later in the century, the powerful emir Sahib Ata erected a caravanserai of sultanic type at Ishakli in the west of the Seljuk realm, where he carved out his own mini-realm, far from the watchful eyes of the Mongols.

## 3 Inscriptions

At present, the first Anatolian Seljuk caravanserai dated by inscription is the Tepesi Delik or Öresun Han east of Aksaray. The recent discovery of its brief inscription is the only positive outcome from a disastrous 'restoration' of this previously half-ruined structure. This inscription dates the caravanserai to 584/1188. It consists of a marble tablet with an Arabic inscription three lines long recording the name of the patron, Sultan Shah, one of the sons of Sultan Qilij Arslan II, and the date of construction (Baş 2001; Redford 2016).

The Tepesi Delik caravanserai inscription establishes the importance of marble for caravanserai inscriptions. Marble continues to be preferred for these inscriptions, as it is on other Anatolian Seljuk buildings. The inscription also displays a hierarchy of text, beginning with names, titles, and genealogy of the sultan followed by the names the patron or other functionaries, and a date. This particular inscription is so brief that it does not contain another typical feature, a benediction, usually one for the sultan, and another for the patron, if the building is not a sultanic construction.

The inscriptions of Seljuk caravanserais also participated in the hierarchy of building size, type, and location and its breakdown alike. However, this was far from an unthinking, rigid hierarchy: it is important to establish the responsiveness of inscriptional content to individual rulers, political events, and the location of buildings. As an example of difference between rulers, Sultan 'Ala' al-Din Kayqubadh employed standard titles derived from the Great Seljuks, while his son and successor Ghiyath al-Din

Kaykhusraw II used more colourful and non-standard ones. This is evident by a comparison of the titles used on two caravanserais which date to the same decade, the Alara Han, built by 'Ala' al-Din Kayqubadh and dated by inscription to 629/1231-32, and the İncir Han, dated by inscription to 636/1238-39, which was the first new sultanic caravanserai of the reign of the new sultan. While the Alara Han inscription is boastful, it is boastful in the usual way, adjusting titles to circumstances. This caravanserai, located on Anatolia's Mediterranean coast not far from territories controlled by the Kingdom of Armenian Cilicia and the Lusignan Kings of Cyprus, lays inscriptional claim to mastery of the Armenians and the Franks as well as the usual inscriptional suspects in this respect, the Arabs and non-Arabs (Erdmann 1961, p. 187).

#### 4 The incir Han

In contrast, the inscription of the Incir Han introduces titles not previously employed by the Anatolian Seljuks, and ones seemingly unrelated to political or military events or location. Here, along with other standard-issue titles, the sultan styles himself 'the second Alexander (the Great)' and 'The Dhu'l Qarnayn of the Age', using the Persian and Arabic names for the same person (Erdmann 1961, p. 110; Ünal 2007, pp. 309-310) (figs. 1-2).

Although Alexander the Great was, by the thirteenth century, a well-established figure of Islamic literature and lore, it may be possible to read an interest in him that is pertinent to the Seljuks of Anatolia. In his Perso-Islamic persona, Alexander is half Persian and half Greek. Rustam Shukurov has established that all of the mothers of Anatolian Seljuk sultans known to us from the historical record were Orthodox Christians, so their sons were also of dual heritage. Ghiyath al-Din Kaykhusraw II's mother was a Chalcedonian Armenian whose tomb in a mosque of her own construction in Kayseri, dated 644/1246-47, also uses a double frame of reference. The long inscription on her cenotaph there calls her 'the Maryam of her age' and 'the Khadija of her time'. Once again, Mary, mother of Jesus, figures in the Qur'an, but quite obviously has a Christian affiliation, while Khadija was the Prophet Muhammad's first wife and convert. As such, this inscription makes reference to her Christian origins as well as an Islamic index of female piety. Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Kaykhusraw II was no Alexander; just a few years after this inscription, he was defeated by the Mongols, and seems to have lived out the rest of his days in the southern regions of his reduced realm, but this, an early inscription, establishes an unorthodox and boastful epigraphic profile different from that of his father and predecessor that may contain a personal referent. The fact of having a Christian mother is not unusual, quite the opposite, it is the possible referent to it that is (Blessing 2014, pp. 491-493; Shukurov 2013).



Figure 1. The Portal of the İncir Han, nearby Burdur, Turkey (photo: Ben Claasz Coockson, with permission)



Figure 2. The Lion and Sun boss on the portal of the İncir Han, nearby Burdur, Turkey (photo: Ben Claasz Coockson, with permission)

This personalised reading of the unusual titles on the Incir Han caravanserai can be carried over to its decoration. To either side of the entrance portal to the covered, back part of the caravanserai, two bosses prominently represent a striding feline with a personified sun rising over its back, the astrological sign of Leo that, once again unusually for the Seljuks of Anatolia, is featured on the silver coinage of the same monarch, and seems to be his personal emblem (fig. 2). In fact, the design of the entire portal of this caravanserai constitutes a radical departure from that of previous Anatolian Seljuk caravanserais.

# 5 Other Caravanserais from the Reign of Ghiyath al-Din Kaykhusraw II

As mentioned above, after his defeat at the hands of the Mongols, Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Kaykhusraw II spent the remaining years of his reign on the South coast of Anatolia. Marble inscriptions from the walls of Antalya and Alanya show that he spent time and money building the fortifications of these two port cities. However, it seems that there were insufficient craftsmen, or perhaps insufficient funds to pay them to furnish the caravanserais in the same region with the same decorations and inscriptions lavished on the İncir Han and the neighbouring Susuz Han caravanserais (in fact the current ruinous state of the courtyards of both of these caravanserais may be an indication that they were never entirely completed).

The other caravanserais built in this region of southern Anatolia, the Kırkgöz Han, the Kargı Han, and the Şarapsa Han all have undecorated portals. The Kargı Han has no inscription at all, despite being complete. The Şarapsa Han and the Kırkgöz Han caravanserais both have inscriptions, but, unusually, they are carved out of limestone, and not marble.

Above, I mentioned that the Kırkgöz Han, in size and location a building worthy of being a sultanic caravanserai, was actually built by a dowager queen. I have argued that she, married against her will to her cousin Sultan 'Ala' al-Din Kayqubadh, may have been part of the plot against him that ended in his death by poisoning in 1237. Although the evidence from the inscription of this building is circumstantial, her importance, and the weakness of the reigning sultan are both reflected in the inscription of this caravanserai, which bestows on her exalted titles, and a benediction much longer than that of the sultan himself. In the Kırkgöz Han's size, placement, and lack of decoration, and in the contents of its long inscription, we observe not the power of the reigning Seljuk sultan, but his weakness. A fragmentary inscription from a small caravanserai high in the Taurus Mountains also bears the name of this queen: a further indication of this breakdown of hierarchy, as a high status individual should not have been building small, isolated mountain caravanserais (Redford 2009; 2013).

### 6 What was the Function of Caravanserai Inscriptions?

Christian agriculturalists and pastoralists and Türkmen nomads must have been the main inhabitants of the countryside of the Anatolian Seljuk sultanate. State building of caravanserais along the major routes of the sultanate, linking them to the Black Sea to the North and the Mediterranean to the South, as well as neighbouring states to the East and South, must have had a profound impact on that countryside, projecting the power and presence of the state along all of its major thoroughfares. We know that lands adjacent to these caravanserais were linked to them through the Islamic legal institution of *waqf* (charitable endowment), tying the agricultural and pastoral economies to these buildings, and the settlements that grew up around them (Redford 2016).

The main 'signifiers' of Anatolian Seljuk caravanserais, like other large elite stone buildings of the time, was their portal or portals. The lion's share of decoration was found here. This decoration often carried a symbolism associated with rulership, although it is often difficult to identify particular patterns or figural representations with particular meanings, as several scholars have done for the lion and sun motif and Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Kaykhusraw II (Önge 2007, pp. 57-63).

Either crowning it, or at its centre, the inscription or inscriptions of caravanserais, in white marble, often with this writing picked out in sultanic crimson, were important parts of the portal. I have argued that it was the sultanic chancery that was the ultimate source of templates for these inscriptions, but that individual scribes, attached not only to sultanic but also to emirial retinues, would have drawn up inscriptions for caravanserais and other buildings (Redford 2009, pp. 351-352; 2014, pp. 80-81). The interposition of a layer of emirial scribes helps to account for differences in quality of scripts, but also gaucheries of style and placement, and basic faults in Arabic grammar and orthography found in some Anatolian Seljuk inscriptions. Because all caravanserais seem to have been endowed, there certainly was a relationship between an inscriptional text (however short) and a foundation document, as, for instance, the inscription of the Kırkgöz Han indicates, in calling the structure 'mawqufa' or endowed by waqf (Redford 2009, p. 354).

Caravanserais were open to all travellers, whatever their religion. But the inscriptions over the doorways, and the presence of small mosques in them, marked them as products of an Islamic state. Due to levels of literacy and primary knowledge of Persian and Turkish, the majority of Muslims in medieval Anatolia likely did not read Arabic. Nevertheless, the symbolism of inscriptions was evident. Still, there are small pieces of information that lead to the conclusion that there was some thought put into the idea that these inscriptions would actually be read by more than members of the Seljuk elite and their retinues, especially in the South



Figure 3. The Sertavul Han, nearby Mut, Turkey (photo: Göksu Archaeological Project, with permission)

and East of the Anatolian Seljuk realm, which was more likely to contain people who could read Arabic.

The Hekim Han, built North of Malatya in 615/1218, is the only surviving caravanserai not built by a member of the Seljuk elite. In fact, the patron of this caravanserai was a non-Muslim; a Syriac Christian deacon. The Hekim Han's architecture is not original, having been rebuilt in the seventeenth century. However, the original trilingual foundation inscription survives. The central, longest inscription is in Arabic, and is flanked by shorter inscriptions in Syriac and in Armenian. In content if not form, the Arabic inscription is conversant with Seljuk epigraphic norms. Notable is the care that has gone into choosing those titles of the ruling sultan that are not overtly hostile towards Christians, like the widely used *qatil al-kafara wa'l-mushrikin*, slayer of infidels and polytheists. The absence of this title from the Arabic inscription of the Hekim Han displays a knowledge of Seljuk inscriptions not, presumably derived from the court, but from personal experience of them by an educated Arabic speaker, and, once again presumably, of a Christian audience literate in Arabic (Erdmann 1961, pp. 63-67).



Figure 4. The inscription of the Sertavul Han, nearby Mut, Turkey (photo: Prof. Rahmi Hüseyin Ünal, with permission)

What then of caravanserais built on the Anatolian plateau, whose Christians were largely Greek speakers? There is only one bilingual Arabic-Greek Anatolian Seljuk inscription that has survived to the present day. This is the 1215 inscription on the front of the tower housing the main gate of Sinop citadel. Sinop lay at the extreme North of the Seljuk domains, at the edge of the Black Sea, a Greek speaking *terra incognita* for the Seljuk conquerors. The inscription introduces to the inhabitants of Sinop the man who likely stayed in town as the governor. Medieval Arabic texts called ports 'thaghr', literally 'frontier'. This word is a standard one, but the liminal position of Sinop and its distance from Seljuk centres of power, may lie behind the concession to inscriptional protocol of this inscription, more than its content (Redford 2014, pp. 166-167; Saunders 2014, pp. 235-242).

I would like to conclude my essay by reexamining a caravanserai inscription published several decades ago. It is a fragmentary inscription found at the ruined Sertavul Han, a small caravanserai in the Taurus Mountains in South central Turkey first published by Rahmi Hüseyin Ünal (Ünal 1973). The Sertavul Han is located on a route between the town of Karaman (La-

rende) and the valley of the Calycadnus/Gök Su River, which linked the central Anatolian plateau with the Cilician plain and the Mediterranean. In Cilicia, the Kingdom of Armenian Cilicia, with its ports connecting it to Cyprus and elsewhere in the Mediterranean, had been founded at the turn of the century (fig. 3).

Rahmi Hüseyin Ünal dated this caravanserai to the early fourteenth century. His dating criteria derived in part from the style of the fragmentary inscription he found there, following the advice of M.K. Özergin (Ünal 1973, fn. 26), and partly for historical reasons.

The text reproduced in Ünal's article conforms to Seljuk norms. It names the emir who built the caravanserai, as well as the person who implemented the construction (fig. 4). The top part of that section of the inscription that Ünal published reads as follows:

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...Banak bin 'Abd Allah...
...(al-muht)aj ila rahmat rabbihi Yavi...
...Banak son of 'Abd Allah...
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...in need of the mercy of his lord, Yavi...

This is part of the end of an inscription. The complete inscription would have begun with a selection of the names, titles, and genealogy of the ruling sultan, a benediction, the name of the patron, Banak bin 'Abd Allah, and then the supervisor, Yavi, followed by the date.

In general, the reading given above follows Özergin's reading reproduced by Ünal, except that I change his reading from Bennak to Banak, and do so with assurance, and not provisionally, as Ünal did.

Here, I propose to date this inscription, and with it the caravanserai, to the reign of Sultan 'Ala' al-Din Kayqubadh. I base my argument on onomastic similarities between the Sertavul caravanserai inscription and an inscription dated 624/1227 bearing the name of Banak on the walls of the Ehmedek citadel of the Mediterranean port town of Alanya. I have proposed the reading of his name as Benek, which means 'freckle', because of a tendency to name emirs of slave origin by a physical feature. So, the name Benek would have been a nickname in origin, meaning something like 'Freckle Face' in English (Redford 2010, pp. 304-306).

The Sertavul caravanserai inscription, which I did not know when I proposed an alternative reading of the Ehmedek inscription, confirms the slave origin of Benek, because here his patronymic is given as 'son of 'Abd Allah', a convention for converts to Islam. Neither the style nor the content of this fragmentary inscription is unusual for thirteenth century Seljuk Anatolia, even though there is a considerable gap in quality between the two inscriptions. However, this difference in quality should not, I think, be attributed to chronological factors, but rather to hierarchical ones given

at the beginning of this paper. For this reason, I would like to propose that the emir Banak named on the Sertavul caravanserai inscription and the emir Banak named on the Alanya Ehmedek inscription were one and the same person, and therefore I date this caravanserai not to the fourteenth century but to the late 1220s or 1230s.

The architecture of the Sertavul caravanserai is also similar to other mountain caravanserais dated to the Seljuk period like the Tol Han: it consists of a rectangular structure with two ribbed barrel vaults running the length of it (e.g. Albek 1970). Historically, a date in the late 1220s or early 1230s also fits with the high point of caravanserai building, and a heightened interest in trade with the Kingdom of Armenian Cilicia due to the recent establishment of this more-or-less unitary state and its recently-concluded commercial treaties with the Genoese and Venetians.

The final reason to discuss this caravanseral, however, is not to date it, but to remark a feature of the inscription noted by Ünal in his article, namely the presence on it of a Greek inscription at the very bottom of the surviving block. Unfortunately, we only have Prof. Ünal's photograph to work with; a later survey, the Göksu Archaeological Project, led by Hugh Elton, then Director of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, did not find the fragmentary inscription when it surveyed the site (personal communication, Hugh Elton) and as far as I know, the inscription is now lost. The words of the Greek part of this inscription, while not as deeply carved as the Arabic, follow the same orientation, and are not effaced by it. Indeed, in the middle of the top line of the Greek inscription, a line delineated the top of the inscriptional bed can be seen. Alas, nothing more can be said about the Greek inscription. If it is part of a reused inscriptional block, as Ünal thought, then it continues the Seljuk tradition of displaying spoliated blocks, including epigraphic ones, in prominent locations on buildings. If it is part of a newly made inscription like the Sinop bilingual inscription, then, like that inscription, its presence here could be related to the liminal status of the caravanserai, at the edges of the Seljuk state, and even Benek's own biography as a convert.

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