

# Syrian Cenotaph

## Fact Sheet and Frequently Asked Questions

The Syrian Cenotaph will be on display at the U-M Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum in April, May and June, 2007. Please note that the Conservatory admission fee applies, except on Friday afternoons when admission is free. For more information, please contact the Matthaei Botanical Gardens & Nichols Arboretum at 734-647-7600 or through our web site:

[www.mbgna.umich.edu](http://www.mbgna.umich.edu)

Location: 1800 N. Dixboro Road, Ann Arbor, MI, 48105

## About the cenotaph itself

- **What is a cenotaph?**

In its broadest sense, a cenotaph is a memorial that honors a person or group of people buried somewhere else. The original and literal meaning of the word is “an empty tomb.” Most ancient cenotaphs were just that – a second and thus empty ceremonial tomb.

Through the millennia, many cultures have created distinct cenotaphic art and architectural traditions; these are especially well developed in Islamic contexts. This Syrian cenotaph is an important representative of an art form with religious significance, and is considered one of the finest examples of its type in North America.

Most Americans are familiar with secular (non-religious) cenotaphs. War memorials to the fallen, as seen at many Civil War sites, are one type. The Hiroshima Cenotaph in Japan, and the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC, are modern examples.

In all cases, cenotaphs invite the visitor to reflect.

- **How old is the cenotaph?**

We don't yet know. There is a date on the cap stone: “Saturday, in the middle of Jamaadiya Al-Awwnal after 500 hijra”. That is no earlier than 1079 in the western calendar, but we don't know what this date signifies – birth, death, or some other event. Art historians had deduced that this cenotaph was probably made in the twelfth to thirteenth century based on the style of calligraphy.

- **Where was it made?**

The style of the cenotaph and its calligraphy is consistent with works produced near Damascus, historically one of the great cultural and trade centers in the Middle East and today the capital city of Syria.

- **Why was it made in this shape?**  
The overall shape of the cenotaph is that of a rectangular house with a gabled roof. There is at least one missing course (or level) between the cap stone and the base. This shape was common for cenotaphs made in Syria and neighboring regions in the 11th through 13th centuries.
- **Who is memorialized?**  
The expense of labor required to make this cenotaph suggests that the person memorialized was a member of the political or religious elite, but we do not know his or her name. The cenotaph is incomplete, and it is possible that the missing stone(s) named the person memorialized.
- **Where is the grave of the person memorialized here?**  
No information on the gravesite is given in the cenotaph's inscription.
- **What kind of stone is this?**  
The material is limestone. It is relatively easy to carve, but the very softness of the stone makes it vulnerable to wind and rain. The carvings on this cenotaph are now very fragile.
- **How much does the cenotaph weigh?**  
The moving company that transported the cenotaph to Ann Arbor in 1960 estimated the total weight at about 6,500 pounds, or well over three tons. The largest piece weighs over 700 pounds, and it was hollowed out when it was carved, or it would have weighed much more.

One U-M undergraduate engineering student worked on a special project with the engineering faculty and estimated the mass of every piece (that is how we know the weight of the largest piece) as well as the load-bearing capacity of all floors along the installation route. There is a hidden service tunnel between the display site and the exterior doors: we needed to guarantee that the floor wouldn't crack, or workers, equipment and the cenotaph plunge to the service level below.

- **Why are pieces of the gable roof missing?**  
The pieces of the cenotaph arrived in Michigan in 1960 in separate crates, without any diagrams or information about their original layout. An effort was made to reconstruct the cenotaph in 1996, when it was installed in the garden of Inglis House. It was only in 2006, in preparation for the cenotaph's display at the Matthaei Botanical Gardens, that the cenotaph's inscription was translated and it became certain that pieces are missing. The reconstruction shown here represents the best judgment of an interdisciplinary team at U-M, based on the inscription on the base of the monument. It is not known how many courses (or levels) were present between the cap and the base.

- **Where are the missing pieces?**  
We don't know. It is most likely that the cenotaph was damaged and incomplete long before it was offered to the U-M in 1960.
- **Was there a mummy in it?**  
No. This stone monument never contained a body; cenotaphs are, by definition, memorial monuments, not tombs or coffins.

The rectangular shape of the cenotaph (but not its gabled roof) bears some resemblance to the shape of stone sarcophagi (coffins) from classical Greek and Rome, if not to those of ancient Egypt, which may cause confusion for the modern viewer. Islamic funeral practice calls for the body of the deceased to be buried without embalming, and preferably without a coffin, as soon as possible after death. This is in stark contrast to Egyptian mummification, which was designed to preserve the tissues of the body for the afterlife. Mummification ceased to be practiced in Egypt about 1000 years before this cenotaph was carved in Syria.

### **About the message and symbolic meaning of the cenotaph**

- **What does the inscription say?**  
Around the rectangular portion of the cenotaph is carved the most famous single verse from the Qur'an, the Ayat Al-Kursi, verse 255 from the second chapter or *Surah*. Known in English as the Verse of the Throne, it is an eloquent hymn of praise to Allah. A standard translation of the Verse is given below, note that the inscription on the cenotaph is only the first part:

*Allah! There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there can intercede in His presence except as He permitteth? He knoweth what (appeareth to His creatures as) before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge except as He willeth. His Throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth, and He feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them for He is the Most High, the Supreme (in glory).*

There is a second inscription on the gabled roof of the cenotaph, but because of missing pieces and greater damage to the stones, it has not yet been deciphered. The opening phrase may be rendered as "A person impoverished to God," an expression of humility in the presence of God's omniscience. Those with further information on possible readings for the inscription are invited to contact us at <http://www.mbgna.umich.edu>.

- **Why is this text used on a cenotaph?**  
Across time and the many regional cultures of Islam, many different verses from the Qur'an have been chosen to add meaning to mausoleums and cenotaphs. Often these verses ask for mercy on behalf of the deceased, or speak of paradise. Here, however, the verse focuses solely on the glory of Allah. According to Islamic teaching, recitation of the Verse of the Throne brings divine blessings.
- **Why aren't the roof stones translated?**  
Too much is obscure or missing for the fragments to make sense – the students are confident of about half their translation work. Having examples of other cenotaph caps, and their translations, may help us understand the conventions used in phrasing and the expected sequence of information.
- **Where is the script? All I see are leaves and swirling lines!**  
The Arabic script used here is a form called floriated Kufic, an elaborate and decorative script that was in use in Syria and Iraq by and after the 1100s. It is often difficult to read, and in the case of this cenotaph, made more difficult by the deterioration of the stones. Floriated Kufic is found in architectural inscriptions and in calligraphic decoration on luxury objects. Here, the artist has integrated the calligraphy into abstract plant forms. This inter-twining of garden and verse may be taken as an allegory of the Garden of Paradise.
- **How was it transcribed and translated?**  
Several members of the Ann Arbor community as well as U-M students who read Arabic and who are familiar with the Qur'an have studied the stone carvings. Once certain words were deciphered, it became easier to recognize the text as the familiar Verse of the Throne. The U-M students who worked so diligently on deciphering the inscription both sketched the text as they saw it and used digital images to discuss and confirm their work. No rubbings of the cenotaph were made, as the surface of the stone is too fragile to withstand the rubbing process without some damage.

The transcription is all the more difficult due to the writing convention used by the artist: there are no vowels, just consonants. Even the consonants add to the challenge – some are present in more than one form in order to be integrated into the floriated design.

## **About the display of the cenotaph at the University of Michigan Matthaei Botanical Gardens & Nichols Arboretum**

- **Why is it here?**  
The MBGNA collaborates with all academic units related to its mission of 'Caring for nature, enriching life'. The cenotaph project began several years ago as part of our programs related to "peoples, plants, and cultures." Since this section of the Conservatory features plants from Mediterranean and subtropical

regions, we are interested in displaying and interpreting thematically-related cultural objects. This cenotaph, with its stone garden—an allegory of the Garden of Paradise—became the initial piece to interpret.

- **Why is it placed diagonally across the display space?**  
The cenotaph is oriented along its length towards Mecca so that it faces the holy city for the Day of Resurrection. The direction towards Mecca is by the shortest distance over the globe – exactly how an airplane would fly the route. The direction is 52 degrees east of true north (not magnetic north).
- **Isn't this promoting religion in a public garden?**  
No. Respect for the values of every culture and its art is a basic civility in a university.
- **How long will it be on display here?**  
The cenotaph will be on display at the Matthaei Botanical Gardens' Conservatory in April, May and June, 2007.

### **Ownership & recent history**

- **Who owns the cenotaph?**  
The cenotaph came to the University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA) as a gift in 1960. At that time, there were no legal restrictions on international trade in ancient cultural artifacts.
- **Who gave it to the University, and why?**  
Mr. Thomas Curtis gave the cenotaph to UMMA, in part because at that time Oleg Grabar, one of the leading scholars in Islamic art in the United States, was on the U-M faculty. Mr. Curtis had no obvious prior affiliation with the U-M.
- **Where has the cenotaph been since 1960?**  
The enormous weight and size of the cenotaph made it impossible to display in entirety at the Museum of Art, although individual stones have been shown there on occasion. Most of the cenotaph stones were stored in a secure off-campus location until the spring of 1996, when it was moved to the garden of Inglis House, the University's guest house.

## Cenotaph Credits

This project required the collaboration of many units and individuals across several years. The following parties merit special recognition.

First must be the Muslim Students' Association     <http://www.umich.edu/~muslims/>

Essential contributions were provided by (alphabetical order):

Center for Near Eastern Studies	<a href="http://www.umich.edu/~neareast/">http://www.umich.edu/~neareast/</a>
College of Engineering	<a href="http://www.engin.umich.edu/">http://www.engin.umich.edu/</a>
Museum Studies Program	<a href="http://www.umich.edu/~ummsp/">http://www.umich.edu/~ummsp/</a>
Museum of Art	<a href="http://www.umma.umich.edu/">http://www.umma.umich.edu/</a>
Office of the President	<a href="http://www.umich.edu/pres/welcome.html">http://www.umich.edu/pres/welcome.html</a>

Key individuals planned the project, deciphered the text, and maintained the project's momentum.

Special recognition to these U-M students:

Christopher Blauvelt  
Lisa Cakmak  
Guillermo Salas Carreño  
Shumaisa Khan  
Zakiyah Sayyed  
Maie Seif  
Kathryn Stine  
Amjad Tarsin

The following members of the University and our communities provided assistance, guidance, opinions, perspectives, and their collective wisdom.

Sheikh Yousuf Abdullah  
Rose Abercrombie  
Dr. Sussan Babaie  
Kevin Canze  
Dr. Maribeth Graybill  
Dr. Alexander Knysh  
Lori Mott  
Christopher A. Rickards  
Denise Schroeder  
Dr. William Schultz  
Dr. Ray Silverman  
Dr. Ruth Slavin  
Dr. Yasser Tabbaa  
Dr. Brad Taylor  
Debbie Taylor