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Aniconism in Early Islamic Culture: A Socio-Theological Reading of Ring Engravings

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Abstract

This article offers a thematic classification of traditions attributed to the Companions (*ṣaḥāba*), the Successors (*tābi'ūn*), and early Islamic scholars and rulers concerning ring engravings, situating these inscriptions within the framework of aniconism in early Islamic culture. It should be stressed at the outset that the evidence examined here consists of later hadith compilations and *ṭabaqāt* (biographical) works rather than dated artefacts; the study therefore analyses how the Companions, Successors, and early authorities were remembered and portrayed within a textual tradition committed to writing in subsequent generations, not the objective material history of the earliest Muslim community. The study argues that such engravings were not merely expressions of individual preference, but rather constituted a cultural practice shaped by the aesthetic constraints generated by hadith literature's cautious stance toward figural representation, a practice that became a shared, collective idiom. The inscriptions are examined under four thematic headings: religious expressions, reminders of death and the transience of worldly life, inscriptions conveying identity and moral counsel, and figural symbols. The expressions and symbols found on rings are then subjected to a sociological reading drawing on the concepts of collective memory, symbolic capital, and productive constraint, within the paradigm of material religion. The findings indicate that figural motifs were at least partially present in the early period, and that written inscriptions subsequently came to occupy a dominant position. This transformation demonstrates that the aniconism in hadith did not merely suppress visual imagery, but functioned as the generative force behind a distinctive symbolic idiom centered on the letter and the word. Furthermore, drawing on Birgit Meyer's notion of *sensational forms*, it argues that the ring bound the sacred to sensory experience through legally regulated matter: the prophetic preference for silver over gold, copper, and iron; the Abyssinian stone; the turning of the bezel toward the palm; and the pressure of the seal into clay. Aniconism thus operated not only as a rule about images but as a regime governing the material, tactile, and even olfactory life of a wearable object. While scholarship on Islamic aniconism has focused primarily on monumental art, architecture, and manuscript illustration, this study redirects attention to ring inscriptions as an underexplored domain of material culture, showing that ring inscriptions, though largely overlooked, are informative witnesses to Islamic culture and theology at the most intimate scale of everyday devotional and political life.



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1. Introduction

Throughout virtually every period of human history, the ring has transcended its function as mere ornament, becoming a symbolic object bearing within itself identity, authority, memory, and belief. Across the vast geography stretching from ancient Egypt to Mesopotamia, from Rome to Sasanian Iran, the ring first assumed the role of a seal—rings as bodily ornament are of course far older, reaching into prehistory, so that what changed across these civilisations was less the ring’s existence than its administrative and legitimating employment as a seal—and subsequently became the visible marker of social status, political legitimacy, and personal belonging. In Islamic culture, too, this object underwent its own distinctive transformation, emerging as a bearer of meaning that must be understood in both its material and symbolic dimensions. At the foundation of the ring’s central position in Islam lies the practice of the Prophet himself. As transmitted in hadith literature, the Messenger of God acquired a silver ring engraved with the inscription *Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh* (“Muḥammad is the Messenger of God”) for the purpose of sealing official correspondence, and he explicitly prohibited anyone else from bearing that same engraving. (al-Bukhārī 1993, no. 65; al-Tirmidhī 1975, vol. IV, p. 229) This prohibition established from an early period that a particular form of inscription could carry an exclusive meaning—and that the surface of a ring was not merely a decorative field but a normative one. Accordingly, biographical traditions concerning caliphs, the Companions (*ṣaḥāba*), the Successors (*tābi‘ūn*), and scholars show a notable preoccupation with ring engravings. The *ṭabaqāt* literature (biographical dictionaries) and hadith compilations offer rich material in this regard, with engraving content functioning sometimes as a biographical datum and sometimes as testimony to a person’s character (Ibn Sa‘d 1990, vol. III, p. 22).

Taken together, this body of traditions reveals a remarkable diversity in ring engravings: the range extends from professions of faith (*shahāda*) and devotional formulae to reminders of death and the transience of worldly life, from inscriptions bearing a person’s name or identity to maxims of wisdom, and from animal and plant motifs to allusions to Qur’ānic verse. This diversity makes it necessary to read ring engravings not merely as aesthetic choices but as a practice in which individual and collective meaning-making takes concrete form. It must be kept in view throughout that this “diversity” is one preserved and transmitted by later hadith and *ṭabaqāt* literature: the sources give us a record of how ring engravings were reported and evaluated—shaped by debates over figural representation that themselves crystallised only gradually—rather than a direct inventory of what the earliest Muslims wore. For the surviving material record, and for the rings of the Iberian Peninsula in particular, see Labarta (2017).

The attitude toward visual representation in Islamic culture defines the central question of this study. The cautious stance toward the figural depiction of animate beings—rooted above all in the constraints derived from hadith literature, and sustained throughout the Islamic legal and ethical tradition—oriented Islamic aesthetics toward non-figural modes of expression, of which calligraphy, geometric composition, and aphoristic inscription became the principal products (Nasr 1987, p. 19). The central argument of this study is that the same dynamic proved determinative in the specific domain of ring engravings. In Islamic culture, the ring inscription developed an alternative symbolic idiom shaped by the aesthetic constraints generated by debates over figural representation—an idiom that privileged script, condensed symbol, and semantically dense formulae over figural depiction, and that gradually consolidated into a recognizable cultural sign.

The source base of this study consists primarily of *ṭabaqāt* literature (biographical dictionaries), hadith compilations, *rijāl* literature (the tradition of critical evaluation of hadith transmitters), and historical and literary works. The traditions examined are restricted to those in which engraving content is explicitly stated and contextual information is pro-

vided. A further delimitation should be made explicit: the traditions gathered here concern, almost without exception, the rings of men. The signet ring as an instrument of sealing, authority, and public self-presentation belonged in this period predominantly to the male sphere, and it is this documented practice that the sources preserve. Women's rings, which the legal tradition associates more readily with gold and which may well have carried a different repertoire of ornament and inscription, raise distinct questions of material and meaning that lie beyond the scope of the present study and merit separate treatment. These data have been subjected to thematic classification and subsequently analyzed through theoretical frameworks drawn from the sociology of religion—in particular the paradigms of material religion and symbolic capital—in order to illuminate the process by which the ring, as a small object of material culture, became a carrier of meaning within Islamic society.

2. Theoretical Framework: Aniconism and the Alternative Symbolic Idiom

Before turning to the ring material, the aesthetic frame of this study must be stated with care. As Jamal Elias has shown, there was never a single, blanket “prohibition of images” in Islam; attitudes to figuration were plural, context-bound, and shaped by theologies of perception and practice rather than by one timeless rule (Elias 2012). The material orientation adopted here finds a close counterpart in Adam Bursi's work on early Islamic relics, which argues that Muslims defined religious practice less through abstract theological controversy than through the objects and spaces they touched and “thought with,” using such material *āthār* to mark their simultaneous continuity with, and difference from, the surrounding Christian and Jewish communities (Bursi 2024, p. 6). Tellingly, the inscribed ring surfaces in Bursi's own material precisely as a bearer of identity and confession: in one tradition a martyr's corpse is recognised by the ring on its hand, engraved *rabbī Allāh* (“My Lord is God”) (Bursi 2024, p. 102). The signet ring examined in the present study belongs to the same economy of consecrated, legible matter, in which theological commitment is rendered at once tactile and readable at the scale of the body. What the present study invokes is aniconism—the marked preference for non-figural modes of expression—understood as arising from two theological facts: the impossibility of representing God figuratively and the prohibition of idols, together with the supremacy of the word as the privileged mode of knowing the divine. It is within this frame, and largely within hadith literature and its later reception, that the normative attitudes toward figural representation took shape. The Qur'ān does not contain an explicit and comprehensive ruling on figural depiction, yet it employs the term *muṣawwir* (مُصَوِّر, “the fashioner of forms”) as one of the divine attributes (Q. 59:24). This usage reflects a projection of the monotheistic principle—which reserves the act of creation exclusively for divine will—onto the aesthetic domain. This inference should not be pressed too far, however. The Qur'ān applies many divine names to acts that human beings also legitimately perform, so the mere existence of the name *al-muṣawwir* does not by itself yield a prohibition; the reading of the term as an aesthetic interdiction is a later exegetical and juristic development, first deployed in hadith commentary rather than stated in the Qur'ān itself. In hadith literature, however, the prohibition is articulated far more explicitly. In a tradition transmitted on the authority of 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd and recorded in both *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, the Prophet is reported to have said: *—إِنَّ أَشَدَّ النَّاسِ عَذَابًا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ الْمُصَوِّرُونَ—* “Those who will suffer the most severe punishment before God on the Day of Resurrection are the *muṣawwirūn* [image-makers]” (al-Bukhārī 1993, no. 5606; al-Hajjāj 1955, no. 2109). In another tradition, God is reported to have said: *—وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنْ ذَهَبَ يَخْلُقُ كَخَلْقِي؟ فَلْيَخْلُقُوا ذَرَّةً أَوْ لِيَخْلُقُوا حَبَّةً أَوْ شَعِيرَةً—* “Who could be more wrongful than one who sets out to create as I create? Let them create an

atom, or a grain, or a seed of barley.” (al-Bukhārī 1993, no. 5909; al-Ḥajjāj 1955, no. 2111). The underlying concern animating these traditions is clear: the act of creation belongs to God alone. The transgression of the *muṣawwir* is not merely a technical act but a claim to a prerogative reserved for God alone—the giving of life. What the tradition guards against is not artistic making as such—abstract ornament and the depiction of soulless things such as plants remained licit—but the depiction of living, animate beings: because in Qur’ānic usage the act of creating (*bara’a*) and the act of giving form (*ṣawwara*) converge in meaning, to reproduce the likeness of a living creature was held to imitate God, and this path of resemblance was therefore avoided (İpşiroğlu 2005, p. 9).

At this point, however, a prior observation is in order. A prohibition is rarely issued into a vacuum: the very insistence of these traditions implies that image-making was a live and continuing practice, since to forbid a thing is already to presuppose that it was being done—and, in all likelihood, continued to be done. This alone cautions against reading the emphatic tone of the hadith as evidence that figural depiction was absent in the early period. The picture presented by Oleg Grabar in *The Formation of Islamic Art* proves highly illuminating. Grabar demonstrates that the aniconic tendency in Islamic art—that is, the avoidance of figural depiction—can neither be derived directly from the Qur’ān nor shown to have (Grabar 1973, pp. 75–103). It was, moreover, Grabar himself who introduced the term “aniconic” into the academic literature in 1973. In a similar vein, Terry Allen, in his study “Aniconism and Figural Representation in Islamic Art,” argues that the figural prohibition was never a universal or uniform practice, and that a more precise approach to the question is required in light of the existence of court painting, the miniature tradition in manuscript illustration, and various practices involving figural objects (Allen 1988, pp. 17–37).

Mika Natif’s essay in *Idol Anxiety* (Natif 2011) carries this discussion further still. On her account, the discourse of prohibition directed against figural art is best read not as a universal and timeless Islamic principle but as a discourse shaped over time by shifting attitudes—attitudes governed in the first place by specific theologies of the image and of divine creativity, and only secondarily by political conjunctures, so that an account foregrounding politics risks importing a Eurocentric frame onto materials whose primary logic is theological. This argument extracts the aniconism from the domain of purely religious-normative inquiry and situates it within the dynamics of social power relations, the pursuit of political legitimacy, and the processes of cultural negotiation. From the perspective of the sociology of religion, this approach opens the way to understanding the prohibition not as a static rule but as a dynamic social reality.

A prohibition does not leave a void in its wake. A further chronological qualification is due here: Arabic script did not attain its mature calligraphic forms until well after the Prophetic era, so that the aesthetic ascendancy of the letter described below is a development of later generations rather than a feature of the earliest community. Islamic aesthetics gave calligraphy, geometric patterning, and arabesque their central place not simply because figuration was constrained, but because the supremacy of the word as the mode of knowing the divine, together with the theological refusal to depict God or to fashion idols, positively favoured non-figural expression. This transition is, from a sociological standpoint, no mere accident—it is the operation of an alternative meaning-making mechanism that moved to occupy the figural void.

At the center of this mechanism stands the letter and the word. Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues that what defines the essence of Islamic art is the divine word (*kalām*), and that calligraphy must be understood as the embodiment of that word in the visual domain. For Nasr, the *kalām* in Islamic civilization is the vehicle of a descent from sound to form, and from form to meaning; the letter constitutes the visible register of that descent (Nasr 1987,

pp. 17–35). From this perspective, calligraphy is not merely a substitute resort in the absence of figural representation; it is rather the product of a profound transformation of meaning—one that begins with the Qur’ān’s first revealed word, *iqra’* (“read” or “recite”), and goes on to reorganize the entire visual practice of a civilization. This transformation is particularly evident in the passage where Nasr traces, from the example of the Córdoba *mihrāb*, the gradual turn of mosques toward script: the Prophet’s mosque contained no calligraphic inscription whatsoever; in the early mosques it begins to appear in proximity to the *mihrāb*; in subsequent periods it permeates the entire structure (Nasr 2008, p. 111). This gradual rise of calligraphy may be read as a collective and productive response to the void generated by the aniconism. Two qualifications must accompany Nasr’s account. First, it articulates a mature, classical and modern philosophy of Islamic art and thus describes a settled tradition, not the sensibilities of the Companions and Successors to whom the ring traditions are ascribed. Second, his own Córdoba example—script absent from the Prophet’s mosque, emergent near the *mihrāb* in early mosques, and pervasive only later—is itself evidence of gradual, post-Prophetic development rather than of an original norm.

Finbarr Barry Flood illuminates a still more distinctive dimension of this transformation. In his study focused on epigraphic erasure and “the image of the word,” Flood demonstrates that script in early Islamic architecture did not merely serve a decorative function but came to occupy a position rival to figural representation as an instrument of political and theological declaration. Taking the inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock as his primary example, Flood argues that in this structure script did not simply substitute for the image but assumed its social functions as well: the declaration of identity, the proclamation of authority, and the delineation of communal boundaries (Flood 2019, pp. 46–71). In other words, script could do everything the figural image could do—and more besides. This claim, however, requires an important qualification. Calligraphy did not wholly displace the figure, for script could itself assume figural form: zoomorphic and anthropomorphic compositions in which the letters resolve into the shape of a bird, a lion, or a human face are a recurring feature of Islamic calligraphic art. Such hybrids do not weaken the argument advanced here; they confirm it. The point is not that the figure disappeared, but that it was drawn into the letter and subordinated to it—the figural impulse surviving only as it was absorbed into, and disciplined by, the written word. A comparative observation reinforces the point. This movement of the sacred from figure to word was not unique to Islam. Within Christianity, the Protestant Reformation—and Calvin in particular—severed the image from the sacred and relocated the burden of mediating the divine onto the word, so that the Word of God, rather than the icon, became the mirror through which God is seen, and images ceased to function as hints to the divine (Ferrer-Ventosa 2024, p. 8). The Islamic case is instructive by contrast: here the same shift occurred not through a later iconoclastic rupture but from within, as the generative effect of the aesthetic constraint traced above. A parallel dynamic can be observed elsewhere in Islamic visual culture: in his study of Ilkhanid painting, Ayğın shows that where a settled figural iconography had not yet formed, religious images remained plain and closely bound to the text—a formal naturalism that only later gave way to a codified theological idiom, a transformation he too reads in sociological rather than individual terms (Ayğın 2023, pp. 418–19). The convergence is telling: across distinct materials—the signet ring and the illustrated manuscript—the same logic obtains, whereby aesthetic and doctrinal constraint, rather than suppressing meaning, reorganizes it into a new symbolic register.

The consolidation of this aesthetic alternative into a collective idiom invokes one of the foundational questions of the sociology of religion: how do individual religious dispositions become social patterns of meaning? Viewed through the sociology of knowledge as developed by Berger and Luckmann, this process is nothing other than the projection

of the institutionalization mechanism onto the aesthetic domain: the repeated practices of individuals gradually solidify into habits; habits become institutionalized and acquire an objective character as social reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966, pp. 70–85). The preferences for calligraphy, geometry, and arabesque generated by the aniconism in Islamic aesthetics are the products of precisely this process. What began as an individual religious sensibility was transformed, over time, into an aesthetic norm operating at the scale of a civilization.

A further dimension of this transformation deserves attention: its consistency across geographical and cultural boundaries. Across the vast expanse of the Islamic world—across the Muslim world—calligraphy, geometric patterning, and abstract arabesque motifs are observed to have assumed a central role. What made a shared aesthetic idiom possible across a geography encompassing different languages, ethnic origins, and local artistic traditions was a shared normative framework. Grabar accepts this consistency as the defining characteristic of “Islamic art,” yet he attributes it not to a single legal ruling but to a long and complex process of social negotiation (Grabar 1973, pp. 165–85).

A further point warrants emphasis here: the aniconic tendency never signified an absolute absence. Figural representation continued to exist, above all in court environments, in the art of manuscript illustration, and on everyday objects. As Allen underscores, the issue is not the total disappearance of figural representation but rather its retreat to particular channels within the hierarchy of social legitimacy, and the reorganization of sacred spaces in favor of script and geometry (Allen 1988, pp. 17–37). While the figural persisted in everyday, non-devotional settings, sacred spaces and objects—mosques, the *muṣḥaf* (the physical codex of the Qurʾān), and devotional objects—were reserved for calligraphy and abstract symbols. This divergence shows how devotional and administrative registers were distributed across different objects and spaces without ever being sealed off from one another.

A tradition from Buraydah has the Prophet reject a ring of yellow copper (*shabah*) for its “odour of idols” and one of iron as “the adornment of the people of the Fire,” directing him to silver instead (Abū Dāwūd 2009, no. 4223; al-Nasāʾī 1986, no. 5195). Later critics doubted its transmission, and it is cited here not as legal proof but for its evaluative logic: the metal is judged by smell and by the heat of the hereafter, not by anything inscribed upon it. Aniconism thus reaches the ring already bound to a sensory grammar of permitted and forbidden substances. Silver is no neutral term in that grammar—cool, tarnish-prone, and needing periodic polishing to keep an inscription legible—so upkeep became a recurring bodily habit. The stone completes the profile: the Prophet’s ring is described as silver set with an Abyssinian stone (Abū Dāwūd 2009, no. 4216), worn with the bezel (*faṣṣ*) turned toward the palm (al-Bukhārī 1993, no. 5538)—an inscription withheld from the observer and pressed against the wearer’s own skin, at once private presence and discretionary disclosure. Sealing realizes this doubleness: cut in mirror image, the engraving is semantically inverted on the ring itself and attains positive form only when pressed into moist clay (*tīn*), the medium of the surviving Umayyad and early Abbasid *bullae*. The word is thus not merely carried but repeatedly actualized under pressure, so that authentication is inseparable from a gesture of the body. The surviving material record is, admittedly, thin and hard to date precisely: early Islamic seals and administrative *bullae* seldom carry secure dates, so the argument for a gradual movement from figure to word rests primarily on the internal chronology of the textual tradition rather than on a firmly dated artefactual sequence—a limitation this study acknowledges openly.

As will be examined in detail in the Section 3, ring engravings gradually moved away from figural motifs under the indirect pressure of aniconism, with written formulae, brief devotional phrases, and symbolic motifs coming to occupy the dominant position. This

transition displays a structural parallel with the rise of calligraphy in Islamic aesthetics at the larger scale. What Nasr says of monumental Islamic architecture holds equally for the ring engraving: the settlement of the letter and the word in the visual domain is not the compensation for an absence but the expression of a deepening of semantic density (Nasr 1987, p. 17). Every choice—which word is selected for the constrained surface, which formula is reproduced, where and how the figural element persists—constitutes a refraction of the aniconism in the specific domain of ring engravings, and these refractions merit reading in both their individual and collective dimensions.

3. Ring Inscriptions: Thematic Classification and Sociological Analysis

Central to the reading that follows is Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*—the set of durable dispositions that individuals acquire within a social field and enact, most often without conscious awareness, so that choices which appear personal in fact reproduce internalized social norms (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53). A society can be read by attending to the objects on which it confers meaning. Every object carries the map of values of the society that produced it; every symbol is a window opening onto the universe of meaning inhabited by the individual who chose it. The ring engraving may in this sense be approached as a social text. What must be kept in mind, however, is that in Islamic culture the ring engraving was not merely an individual preference but a collective production of language shaped within an aesthetic constraint circumscribed by aniconism. The cautious attitude toward figural depiction brought the word and the symbol to the fore on this small surface; over time, the ring engraving was transformed into a distinctive narrative space in which Islamic society gave expression to its fundamental concerns—faith above all, and then identity, ethics, death, and—secondarily—political legitimacy. In this section, these engravings will be examined under four principal themes: religious expressions, reminders of death and the transience of worldly life, inscriptions conveying identity and moral counsel, and figural symbols.

On the ring, the relation between the devotional and the administrative is not fixed once and for all but continually redrawn upon its surface. Following Meyer's account of religion as *mediation* rather than as a stable content (Meyer 2011, pp. 26–29), the same object that carries the name of God also authenticates administrative and fiscal documents: sealed clay *bullae* and papyrus protocols of the early Islamic chancery show devotional formulae performing bureaucratic work. What might be taken for a firm classificatory divide appears in this material as a frontier under continuous negotiation. The ring engraving accordingly functions as an instrument that carries the transcendent into the everyday body, converting abstract belief into tangible bodily experience without setting it apart from the ordinary business of daily life. The engraving of God's name, formulae of divine unity (*tawhīd*), or expressions of supplication onto the surface of a ring allows abstract belief to become embodied in a material object. Over time, this practice transcended its expression as individual piety and evolved into an institutional norm through which belief was brought onto the social stage by means of an object and thereby acquired collective legitimacy.

The most densely represented category consists of brief inscriptions drawn from the *shahāda* and from the names or attributes of God. On the ring of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib was engraved الله الملك—*Allāh al-malik* ("Sovereignty belongs to God") (Ibn Sa'd 1990, vol. III, p. 22). In another tradition, the same engraving is transmitted in the expanded form علي عبده الملك الله—*al-mulk li-llāh, 'Alī 'abduh* ("Sovereignty belongs to God; 'Alī is His servant") (Ibn al-A'rābi 1997, vol. I, p. 302). This variant is particularly significant, for the engraving bears at once a profession of faith and a declaration of identity; the naming of 'Alī here, moreover, would later become a marker of Shī'ī affiliation, so that the same formula could carry a sectarian as well as a devotional charge. What is discursively decisive here is the or-

dering: God comes first, the individual follows. This ordering is not incidental. It reflects the Islamic conception of the human person, in which the primary reference that defines the individual is divine.

The ring of Abū Bakr bore the engraving *نعم القادر الله*—*ni‘ma al-qādiru llāh* (“How excellent a Determiner is God”) (Ibn Sa‘d 1990, vol. III, p. 158); that of Tāwūs b. Kaysān bore *لا إله إلا الله*—*lā ilāha illā llāh* (“There is no god but God”) (Tāwūs b. Kaysān, d. 106/725, a prominent Yemeni Successor and traditionist) (al-Ṣan‘ānī 2015, vol. I, p. 454); and the ring of Masrūq b. al-Ajda‘ bore the *basmala* (Abū Yūsuf n.d., p. 232). The engraving of Imām al-Shāfi‘ī, however, occupies a distinctive place within this category. The formula *الله ثقة محمد بن إدريس*—*Allāh thiqqat Muḥammad b. Idrīs* (“God is the surety of Muḥammad b. Idrīs”)—fuses an abstract religious expression with the bearer’s own name, rendering the engraving something close to a personal covenant (Ibn Abī Hātim al-Rāzī 2003, p. 211). This choice is a striking illustration of how belief and identity become intertwined.

Viewed sociologically, the function of these engravings was not limited to the expression of individual faith. Considered through Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital, these inscriptions served as a symbolic certificate of identity, positioning the bearer as a legitimate member of a particular moral and religious community (Bourdieu 1986, p. 241). A person who carried the name of God on their ring thereby aligned themselves, through that choice, with a system of values in the social field. The engraving is a visible declaration of belonging.

At this juncture, it is worth recalling the aniconism once more. To choose script and the word over figural depiction is not mere legal compliance. This choice is the natural consequence of the semantic primacy accorded to writing. In Islamic aesthetics, the letter is not simply a medium of communication but a form laden with meaning and possessed of sacred dimensions. The central position of calligraphy in Islamic civilization draws on precisely this understanding (Nasr 1987, p. 17). The religious expressions found in ring engravings are a small-scale refraction of this accumulated tradition. The aniconism constrained visual imagery; that constraint in turn generated a powerful impetus that brought the letter and the word into the visual domain.

A further theme that comes to the fore in ring engraving traditions is death. No society can sustain itself without regulating its relationship to death. Every culture develops practices that give death meaning and that bring the individual into continuous confrontation with that meaning. The ring engraving is perhaps the most intimate of these modes of address: a reminder of death, when carried on the finger, no longer represents an external warning but an internalized consciousness.

The most widely attested and most frequently transmitted example in this category belongs to ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. His ring bore the engraving *كَفَى بِالْمَوْتِ وَاعْظَا يَا عُمَرُ*—*kafā bi-l-mawti wā ‘iẓan yā ‘Umar* (“Death suffices as a counsellor for you, O ‘Umar”) (Ibn ‘Asākir 1995, vol. 44, p. 260). Several dimensions of this formula merit consideration together. Grammatically, the inscription addresses the second person singular. This structure removes the engraving from the status of a passive object and places it on the ground of an inner dialogue that is reactivated with every glance. When the bearer looks at his ring, the warning is transformed into a summons directed at himself. Considered in terms of Weber’s theory of social action, this is an instance in which value-rational action-conduct oriented to an intrinsic value held to be binding for its own sake, irrespective of its consequences-permeates an everyday object (Weber 1978, pp. 24–26). The engraving functions as an internalized reference point that regulates conduct.

The traditions concerning Umayyad caliphs add a striking political-theological dimension to this picture. The ring of al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik bore the engraving *يَا وَلِيدُ إِنَّكَ مَيِّتٌ*—*yā Walīd innaka mayyit* (“O Walīd, you are mortal”) (Ibn ‘Asākir 1995, vol. 63,

p. 176). The ring here operates as an instrument that constrains power and brings the ruler into confrontation with divine reckoning. The ring of Marwān bore *الْعِزَّةُ لِلَّهِ*—*al-‘izza li-llāh* (“Glory belongs to God”) (Ibn Hibbān 1973, vol. II, p. 315); that of al-Muhtadī bi-llāh bore *مَنْ تَعَدَّى الْحَقَّ ضَاقَ مَذْهَبُهُ*—*man ta‘addā al-ḥaqqā dāqa madhhabuluh* (“Whoever transgresses what is right finds his path narrowed”) (Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih al-Andalusī 1983, vol. V, p. 381). Although these inscriptions do not invoke death directly, they belong to the same semantic universe as the themes of limit, reckoning, and justice.

The traditions concerning Abbasid caliphs belong equally to this series. Transmitted are the engravings of al-Mutawakkil—*عَلَى إِلَهِي اتِّكَلِي*—*‘alā ilāhī ittikālī* (“My reliance is upon my God”) (Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih al-Andalusī 1983, vol. V, p. 378); of al-Mu‘tazz—*فِي الْإِغْتِبَارِ غِنَى*—*fi l-i‘tibārī ghinan ‘an al-akhbār* (“In drawing lessons from experience lies a wealth that renders the receiving of reports superfluous”) (Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih al-Andalusī 1983, vol. V, p. 380); and of al-Wāthiq—*اللَّهُ ثِقَةُ الْوَائِقِ*—*Allāhu thiqqat al-Wāthiq* (“God is the surety of al-Wāthiq”) (Ibn Hibbān 1973, vol. II, p. 330). What these engravings share is the placement of death and finitude at the very center of political power. To use Peter Berger’s term, the “sacred canopy”—the religious system that protects and legitimates a society’s universe of meaning—is here stretched over political authority as well (Berger 1967, p. 29). However powerful the ruler, the engraving on his ring binds him to a transcendent reckoning.

In this context, the relationship between death-themed engravings and aniconism becomes still clearer. While figural symbols convey meaning through visual impact, words are capable of transmitting semantic density in a far more direct and personal manner.

A further prominent concern in the engraving traditions is the declaration of identity. Some engravings bear a person’s name, lineage, or *kunya* (honorific epithet), declaring identity in a direct and unadorned manner. Others fuse this identity with a declaration of values, rendering the bearer not merely the representative of a name but of a particular moral position.

Among engravings serving a purely identificatory function, several distinct forms are noteworthy. The ring of ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar bore his full name (Abū Yūsuf n.d., p. 232). Al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad engraved only his own name, while ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Qāsim engraved both his name and his father’s (Ibn Sa’d 1990, vol. V, pp. 145, 367). Muḥammad b. Sirīn preferred his *kunya*, Abū Bakr (Ibn Sa’d 1990, vol. VII, p. 152). The identificatory function, however, sometimes became intertwined with a moral declaration. The ring of Sa’id b. Jubayr originally bore the inscription *akramānī rabbī wa-qawwānī* (“My Lord has honoured me and granted me strength”), but when ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar saw this engraving, he told him to change it, whereupon Sa’id replaced it with his own name (Ibn Sa’d 1990, vol. VI, p. 269) (see Figure 1). This tradition demonstrates that the choice of ring engraving was not a purely private matter—social oversight extended even into this small domain.



Figure 1. Silver ring with a semi-precious stone bearing a personal name inscription in Raqa’ calligraphy script: ‘Abdo Ḥusayn bin Muḥammad bin Arfaj. 132–656 AH (750–1258 AD). Eastern Province. Islam and Arabia Gallery. The attributed range (132–656 AH/750–1258 AD) is admittedly very broad; the object is offered here as illustrative of the epigraphic type rather than as securely dated evidence.

Among engravings conveying moral counsel, the tradition concerning Mālik b. Anas is of particular distinction. The ring of Imām Mālik bore the inscription حَسْبِيَ اللَّهُ وَنِعْمَ الْوَكِيلُ — *ḥasbiya llāhu wa-ni‘ma l-wakīl* (“God suffices me, and how excellent a Guardian He is”). When Muṭarrif b. ‘Abd Allāh asked him about this choice, Mālik recited a passage from Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān and cited the Qur’ānic figures mentioned therein as his reason for preferring it: “Those to whom the people said, ‘The people have gathered against you, so fear them,’ but it only increased them in faith, and they said, ‘God suffices us, and how excellent a Guardian He is.’ So they returned with favor from God and bounty, no harm having touched them, and they pursued the pleasure of God. And God is the possessor of great bounty” (Q. 3:173–174). Having heard this reply, Muṭarrif had his own engraving effaced and replaced it with the same inscription (Ibn Sa‘d 1990, vol. V, p. 466). That Muṭarrif had his existing engraving effaced and recut matters beyond the anecdote: transmission here required the physical destruction of one inscribed surface and the labour of cutting another. This is a concrete instance of what Meyer terms *sensational forms*—authorized, repeatable configurations of matter and practice through which a religious community is bound together and made sensorially present to itself (Meyer 2009, pp. 13–16; 2011, pp. 29–31). This tradition offers a concrete illustration of how the ring engraving operated as a channel of social communication and a field of moral influence. The engraving circulates not as a detached text but as a form requiring metal, tools, an artisan, and a wearer’s hand; one man’s choice reshaped another man’s ring and, with it, his daily bodily practice, so that individual preference was materialized into a collective sign. The engraving addressed not only its bearer but everyone who saw it, such that individual preferences were transformed into a collective sign. Viewed through Geertz’s definition of culture as “webs of significance,” these engravings are living patterns that contribute to the fabric of meaning in society (Geertz 1973, p. 5).

The inscription on the ring of Usāma b. Zayd—حِبُّ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ—*ḥibb rasūl Allāh* (“the beloved of the Messenger of God”)—occupies a distinctive place within this category (Ibn Ḥibbān 1991, p. 30). This engraving is neither a reminder of death nor a religious formula; it is the direct expression of the fundamental bond of belonging that defined who this person was. Usāma b. Zayd—son of the Prophet’s freedman and close Companion Zayd b. Hāritha, himself raised in the Prophet’s household and appointed by him to lead an army while still young—was known as *ḥibb rasūl Allāh*, “the beloved of the Messenger of God.” Given Usāma’s closeness to the Prophet, this inscription carries the character of a symbolic summary that encapsulates the whole of his identity.

A tradition transmitted by Ibn Qutayba presents a remarkably compelling scene in which engraving content serves as a measure of social competence: Hārūn al-Rashīd, in the course of evaluating candidates for the position of judge (*qāḍī*), asks each of them about their ring engravings, and rejects both candidates on account of the unusual nature of the inscriptions they had chosen (Ibn Qutayba al-Dīnawarī 1997, vol. II, p. 335). The content of an engraving here becomes a test of character. The words a person has engraved on his ring reveal his cast of mind, his hierarchy of values, and his fitness for social function. This scene places the sociological dimension of ring engravings on display in perhaps its most unadorned form. The engraving is not a private object; it is a public form of expression that has become an instrument of social evaluation.

It is well established that aniconism did not operate in Islamic aesthetic thought in a single, homogeneous manner, and that historical practice at times relaxed its application. The traditions concerning ring engravings offer a small-scale reflection of this same picture. Figural motifs did not disappear entirely, but they were pushed into a secondary position relative to the word.

Animal motifs occupy the widest representational space within this category. The ring of Anas b. Mālik bore a figure of a crouching lion, or a lion surrounded by animals it had hunted (Ibn Sa'd 1990, vol. VII, p. 13). The engraving of Shurayh depicted two lions with a tree between them (Ibn Sa'd 1990, vol. VI, p. 188; al-Jarrāh 1947, vol. II, p. 219). Among further examples in this category are the two-headed crane on the ring of Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī (al-Azdī 1982, vol. X, p. 394), the two cranes on the ring of Hudhayfa b. al-Yamān (al-Baghawī 2000, vol. II, p. 23), and the peacock attributed to Ziyād (Ibn Sa'd 1990, vol. VII, p. 69). The engraving of Nu'mān b. Muqarrin depicted a camel with one leg raised and the other planted on the ground (al-Ṭahāwī 1994, vol. IV, p. 263). This level of detail suggests that the figure was not chosen as a generic animal symbol but was selected to convey a particular movement and, in all probability, a particular meaning. That such animal traditions were themselves objects of scholarly scrutiny is evident well beyond the engraving material; for a parallel assessment of animal-related reports as received and evaluated in a non-legal genre, see the analysis of al-Jāhīz's *Kitāb al-Hayawān* in Bozkurt (2026).

Among plant motifs, a tree is transmitted as the engraving on the ring of 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd (al-Azdī 1982, vol. X, p. 395). The engraving of 'Imrān b. Ḥuṣayn depicted a human figure bearing a sword (al-Ṭahāwī 1994, vol. IV, p. 266)—one of the rare cases attesting to the actual use of the human figure. The sun-and-moon motif appears on the ring of Ḍamra b. Ḥabīb in combination with a written inscription (al-Iṣfahānī 1998, vol. II, p. 592).

How are these figural practices to be assessed sociologically? First, the concentration of figural engravings in traditions attributed to the Companions and the *tābi'ūn* indicates either that aniconism had not yet been fully established as a social norm in this early period, or that its application presented a more layered and context-sensitive character. The choices of animal and plant in the figural examples are not incidental. The lion evokes strength and courage, the crane grace, the peacock magnificence, the camel patience and endurance—these are universal symbols that also carry meaning pertaining to their bearer. The ring engraving likewise served as a symbolic idiom shaping the social image of its wearer. Two qualifications enrich this picture. First, the Qur'ān itself reports that the jinn fashioned for Solomon "whatever he wished of sanctuaries, statues (*tamāthīl*), and basins" (Q. 34:13)—a verse repeatedly invoked in later debates as a counter-weight to any blanket prohibition of figural craft, and a reminder that the tradition itself preserved dissenting materials. Second, the conjunction of aniconism with animal engravings inevitably recalls the talismanic rings of classical Islamicate (and earlier Greek) occult literature, in which engraved figures were credited with protective and astral powers; this parallel body of practice, together with the distinct Shī'ī ring-inscription tradition—most fully documented for the Ismā'īlī–Fāṭimid caliphs by Sindawi et al. (2024), and on the Shī'ī practice of wearing the engraved ring on the right hand, see also Sindawi (2012)—lies beyond the present scope but marks a clear avenue for further inquiry.

It is apparent, however, that this figural practice gradually contracted over time, and that in later periods figural motifs yielded their place almost entirely to written formulae. This transition is not merely the product of normative pressure; it is the reflection of a broader intellectual transformation that reinforced the semantic primacy of script and letter in Islamic aesthetics. The aniconism accelerated this transformation—the visual impact of the figure ceded its place to the semantic density of the word.

To understand a community's symbolic practices is to understand how that community orders its world. Symbols are not merely meaningful objects; they are also instruments that weave social bonds, draw boundaries, and make identity possible. Proceeding from the understanding of culture as the webs of significance that human beings themselves have spun (Geertz 1973, p. 5), ring engravings constitute one of the small yet exceptionally

dense nodes of this web. The question that must be answered here is the following: are these engravings a reflection of individual preferences, or are they the products of a social process of production? The answer renders either option insufficient on its own. Ring engravings transcended the bounds of individual declaration over time and became a sign bearing the collective universe of meaning of Islamic society.

The “material religion” approaches within the sociology of religion that place the object at their center conceptualize the process by which belief does not remain a purely mental assent but is transformed into physical reality as “the materialization of the invisible” (Meyer 2013, p. 7). Meyer’s fuller argument locates this materialization within an aesthetic register: religious mediation works through the senses, and objects persuade because they are felt before they are interpreted (Meyer 2009, pp. 6–10). Applied to the ring, this shifts the analytic question from what an inscription means to how it is registered—the weight on the finger, the coolness of the metal, the abrasion of an intaglio-cut surface against the palm, the intermittent glint that catches a bystander’s eye. David Morgan’s account of the *sacred gaze* makes the corresponding point for vision: looking is a disciplined practice shaped by convention rather than a neutral reception of images (Morgan 2005, pp. 3–8). A ring worn with its bezel inward trains a particular gaze, one directed first at oneself. When this framework is applied to Islamic material culture, the ring and seal engravings that developed around the constraints of figural representation become a particularly productive object of analysis. Abstract qualities that cannot be directly observed—piety, trustworthiness, professional authority—are materialized through texts engraved on millimetric stones and brought onto the social stage. It is well established that the jurisprudential limits placed on visual representation in religious traditions, rather than producing a condition of aesthetic deprivation, initiated an entirely new process of mediation by transferring the work of identity construction to textual instruments. (Meyer 2013, p. 11). This transformed communicative idiom can be read in terms of how individuals communicate their social standing through visible, bodily signs. As Erving Goffman observes, the “personal front”—the totality of visual and bodily signs through which an individual communicates their status to their social environment—was, in an Islamic society where figural representation was constrained, drawn into the micro-field of the ring engraving, though with an intensification of its symbolic density (Goffman 1956, pp. 14–15). The necessity of rendering abstract or juridical authority visible through “dramatic signs” so that it may be recognized by others finds a clear empirical correlate in the practice of seal and engraving (Goffman 1956, p. 21). A seal impression pressed onto paper, or a dignified engraving worn on the finger, functions as tangible evidence of status.

The act of remembrance never occurs in isolation. Memory is always produced within social frameworks and upon a collective foundation (Halbwachs 1992, p. 38). Societies reproduce their collective identities by transmitting particular formulae, symbols, and inscriptions from generation to generation. Ring engravings offer a particularly illuminating example of this transmission mechanism.

This process of reproduction brings ring engravings into dialogue with Assmann’s concept of “cultural memory.” Distinct from Halbwachs’s broader notion of collective memory, Assmann holds that cultural memory depends on formalized and materially fixed carriers, which sustain a *connective structure* binding a community across generations (Assmann 2011, pp. 26–27, 72). The ring is precisely such a carrier: small, durable, worn continuously, and capable of accompanying its bearer into the grave. The silver ring bearing a Kufic inscription read as *il-la-lāh*, recovered from a ninth-century furnished burial at Birka, illustrates how far such objects travelled beyond the polities that produced them (Figure 2; Wärmländer et al. 2015). The excavators advance no claim about the religious identity of the interred woman, and none is needed here: what the find attests is the mobil-

ity and burial-durability of the inscribed form itself—the material conditions under which a connective structure can persist and circulate. The formulae found in ring engravings are, in precisely this sense, material carriers of cultural memory. The religiously inflected expressions in the engravings are not the products of individual preferences alone; they are fragments of symbolic heritage that transmitted the ethos of Islamic society across generations. This same portability underwrites the entanglement of the devotional and the administrative traced above: a ring that seals correspondence and signals office does not cease to be an instrument of administration when it is engraved with a divine name. Cultural memory in this domain is transmitted not through objects set apart for devotion but through objects handled daily.



Figure 2. A silver ring set with a coloured glass stone bearing an Arabic Kufic inscription, interpreted as reading *il-la-lāh* (“For/to Allah”). Found in a 9th-century woman’s grave (Bj 515) at the Viking Age trading centre of Birka, Sweden (c. AD 850). Swedish History Museum, Stockholm (SHM 34000). Photographs by Ragnar Saage and Christer Åhlin (Wärmländer et al. 2015, pp. 131–37). This much-travelled object is included not as a typical specimen but precisely because its find-context dramatises the mobility and burial-durability of the inscribed form; the majority of the epigraphic evidence discussed in this article, by contrast, derives from rings reported within the Islamic world itself.

The social field is an arena of power in which different forms of capital compete, and symbolic capital—as the objectified accumulation of social legitimacy and prestige—may equally be read through ring engravings (Bourdieu 1986, p. 241). A person who inscribes on their ring *al-mulk li-llāh* (“Sovereignty belongs to God”) or *Allāhu mālik kull shay’* (“God is the sovereign of all things”) renders visible a commitment to the religious domain, and this commitment contributes to their standing in the social field. In the formula *الله ثقة محمد بن إدريس*—*Allāhu thiqqat Muḥammad b. Idrīs*—on the ring of Imām al-Shāfi‘ī, identity and religious belonging are concentrated into a single sentence (Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī 2003, p. 211). This choice offers a concrete illustration of how symbolic capital is accumulated. The person defines himself as one who relies upon God, and places this definition in continuous circulation within the social field.

The tradition concerning Hārūn al-Rashīd’s inquiry into the ring engravings of *qāḍī* candidates places the practical dimension of symbolic capital on display with exceptional clarity (Ibn Qutayba al-Dīnawarī 1997, vol. II, p. 335). According to the tradition, al-Rashīd had a list of ten candidates drawn up from among the notables, scholars, and men of distinction of society for the purpose of appointing a chief judge for Iraq, and then summoned these candidates one by one into his presence, reading their faces and bearing. Having discerned signs of virtue and learning in two of them, he called the first forward and asked him his name, his *kunya*, and his ring engraving. When it emerged that the candidate’s name was Māshūq (“the beloved”), his *kunya* Abū l-Hawā (“father of desire”), and his ring engraving “Love endures as long as it endures; its completion is left to God,” al-Rashīd dismissed him from his presence without a word of explanation and without further speech. Turning to the second candidate, in whom he had detected a similar quality, the caliph

put the same question, and this time was met with the response: “Why do I not see the hoopoe? Is he among the absent?” (Q. 27:20). This answer too resulted in the candidate’s elimination. The content of an engraving here becomes not merely a personal preference but a concrete measure of social competence. In this scene, the ring ceases to be a passive ornament or an inert surface of reflection and assumes instead the role of an active *actant*—directing social decisions, determining hierarchy, and bearing direct influence upon the process of elimination (Latour 2005, p. 71). Read through Actor-Network Theory, the ring’s agency here is inseparable from its physical presence: it is asked after, produced, and read aloud, entering the deliberation as evidence alongside the candidates’ faces and bearing. The methodological gain of Latour’s framework, however, lies less in labelling the object an *actant* than in redescribing how the norm itself was enacted. Aniconism did not descend from a hadith onto practice; it was assembled through repeated associations among engravers (*ḥakkāk*), available metals and stones, the technical limits of intaglio cutting at millimetric scale, chancery requirements for legible impressions, and the evaluative gaze of superiors such as al-Rashīd (Latour 2005, pp. 63–86). On this account, the gradual recession of figural engravings examined above need not be read as a norm at last taking hold, but as the progressive stabilization of a network in which script proved the more durable ally. The discourse of love and desire on the first candidate’s ring stands in direct opposition to the qualities sought in a judge: gravity, impartiality, and detachment from worldly appetites. The second candidate’s engraving, drawn from a Qur’ānic verse, might at first appear to be a religious reference, yet it reveals how a Qur’ānic expression wrenched from its context and reduced to the level of an ordinary decorative object had become, in al-Rashīd’s eyes, a sign of frivolity—even levity. Thus, while an appropriate engraving rendered its bearer a legitimate candidate, an unconventional one became the direct cause of his elimination. That al-Rashīd, after rejecting these two candidates, turned to Yaḥyā al-Barmakī in anger and said, “You have presented me with the names of madmen!” reflects how definitive and final the assessment had been. This small detail points to a far deeper structure of mind: the *qāḍī* is not merely someone who knows the law but a person who, in his daily life as well, embodies a judicious bearing and maintains symbolic consistency. The ring engraving is a window onto the most intimate and most candid domain in which this integrity may be tested—namely, the word that a person has chosen for himself.

In other words, engraving content had become one of the symbolic conditions of entry into a particular social field—in this instance, the field of judiciary and power. This picture is precisely where the *habitus* introduced at the outset of this section operates: the engraving is enacted as an internalized disposition rather than as a deliberate choice. The fact that engraving preferences exhibit such pronounced patterns indicates that they are not the products of deliberate assessment but of internalized social norms.

It is well established in the sociological and semiological literature that constraints do not merely limit meaning but actively produce new forms of it. Aniconism did not merely subtract the figure; it positively cultivated the word, geometry, and abstract symbol as the proper vehicles of a word-centred theology. The cautious attitude toward figural representation, far from impoverishing visual expression, prepared the ground for the emergence of a remarkably rich and distinctive aesthetic idiom through letter, geometry, and abstract symbol.

This mechanism of productive constraint is most concretely observable in ring engravings. A culture that preferred to engrave words on a surface rather than draw human or animal figures had in fact developed an exceptionally powerful aesthetic and social instrument. It can address its bearer directly, convey a moral admonition, carry identity in both its private and public dimensions, and establish an instant communion of meaning between the bearer and all who behold it.

Nasr argues that Islamic art embraced the absence of the figural not as a deficiency but as a deliberate choice, and that this choice conferred extraordinary power upon the letter, geometry, and abstraction (Nasr 1987, p. 17). The preponderance of the word in ring engravings confirms this argument at a small scale. Where the figure withdrew, the word and symbol took up residence—and this settlement was not mere substitution but a deepening in terms of semantic density. The aniconism operated in this sense not merely as a constraining force but as a religious rule that made an alternative symbolic idiom necessary and thereby brought it into being.

It is equally apparent, however, that figural motifs did not disappear entirely: figures of lions, cranes, camels, and peacocks persist in traditions attributed to the Companions and the *tābi‘ūn*. This indicates that aniconism was established not through homogeneous and instantaneous normalization but through a gradual process of lengthy social negotiation. In later periods, nevertheless, figural motifs diminished and written formulae came to occupy the dominant position. This transition, while reflecting the deepening hold of aniconism, is indebted not to aniconism alone but also to the religious and aesthetic meaning accorded to script and letter.

When social relations of power are at issue, the classical question of the sociology of religion comes into play: is religion an instrument that legitimates power, or a force that constrains it? Peter Berger’s metaphor of the “sacred canopy” offers a productive framework for addressing this question: religion is a canopy that protects and legitimates a society’s universe of meaning. This canopy both sustains power and sets limits upon it (Berger 1967, p. 29).

The traditions concerning the engravings of Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs exhibit this dual function with exceptional clarity. That the inscription on the ring of al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik—“O Walid, you are mortal”—was not merely a sign of individual submission is evident (Ibn ‘Asākir 1995, vol. 63, p. 176). In a similar fashion, the formula on the ring of al-Muhtadī bi-llāh—“Whoever transgresses what is right finds his path narrowed”—is a declaration of self-restraint through which a holder of power circumscribes his own conduct within a normative limit (Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih al-Andalusī 1983, vol. V, p. 381). This picture gives concrete form to the dual-function position of divine authority—simultaneously sustaining and constraining worldly power.

The inscription on the ring of Mu‘āwiya—لَا قُوَّةَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ—*lā quwwata illā bi-llāh* (“There is no power save through God”) (al-Khatlī 1994, p. 72)—demonstrates the continuation of this pattern. Power perpetually bears upon itself the divine will that makes power possible. The sociological reality that traditional authority derives its legitimacy from the bond it establishes with the sacred (Weber 1978, pp. 215–16) finds a practical correlate in the rendering visible of this bond on the ruler’s engraving. The ruler’s engraving makes this bond visible—serving as a continuous reminder not only to society but to the ruler himself.

The content of the symbolic idiom produced reveals how personal power is legitimated through social values. The tendency of individuals, at the moment of interaction, to suppress their own ambitions or power and instead foreground and “idealize” the moral truths held in high regard by society (Goffman 1956, p. 45) corresponds to the character of the texts engraved on rings. The reminders of mortality and the expressions alluding to human frailty and servitude before divine omnipotence that are frequently encountered on rings serve as the medium through which the seal—itself an object of power and authority—is presented through a filter of humility. The person derives legitimacy by concealing their social standing behind these modest engravings. This deliberate visual modesty, designed to prevent ostentation and to mask social hierarchy, reflects a broader ethos in Islamic material culture, one equally evident in the plain, egalitarian exteriors of traditional domestic architecture (Akyüz 2023, p. 459). This practice constitutes a distinctive

domain of mediation in which abstract moral virtues are rendered worldly through the object and, as “the invisible is materialized” (Meyer 2013, p. 7), opened to social negotiation.

The relationship of political engravings to aniconism deserves separate consideration in this context. A figural symbol—an eagle or a lion, for instance—would express power through visual display. Such symbols were widely employed in the Byzantine and Sasanian traditions. In Islamic political culture, the fact that the ruler’s ring bore a divine name or a sentence of wisdom in place of a figure fundamentally differentiates the claim to legitimacy that power advances. Power here expresses itself not through spectacle but through an invitation to reflection. This difference is the reflection of a political-theological transformation far deeper than a mere preference for word over figure—and it simultaneously manifests a mode of identity production distinctive to Muslims.

Taken together, these observations reveal that ring engravings served four sociological functions. The first is an *identity function*: the engraving identifies its bearer with a particular community, value system, and historical tradition, rendering them meaningful both to themselves and to society. The second is a *moral regulation function*: inscriptions of death and counsel engraved on an object perpetually carried on the person constitute an internalized mechanism of conscience that continuously regulates individual conduct. This self-regulation mechanism—through which the individual instrumentalizes the object in order to discipline their soul, desires, and actions according to a moral ideal—may be read as a practice of what Foucault calls “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988, p. 18). The third is a *social communication function*: engravings convey a message to all who encounter their bearer, a message that functions sometimes as a declaration of identity, sometimes as a moral invitation, and sometimes as an index of position in the social field. The fourth is a *legitimation function*: as is particularly evident in the engravings of political actors, the ring assumes the role of a certificate of legitimacy, symbolically declaring the source and limits of power.

These four functions constitute evidence that the engraving idiom transcended individual declaration and became a collective sign. These signs were shaped within the aesthetic constraint circumscribed by aniconism, and brought script and symbol to the center of visual expression. Where figural representation was constrained, the word gained in force; where the word gained in force, meaning deepened. In Islamic culture, the ring engraving in this sense exceeds its status as an object of material culture—it constitutes one of the smallest yet most concentrated examples of a rich and distinctive symbolic idiom produced, by indirect means, through aniconism.

4. Conclusions

Every society inscribes its values onto objects. Whether stone, wood, textile, or metal—whatever the material—an object bears the traces of the world-conception of the person who made and carried it. In Islamic culture, the ring engraving is in this sense no trivial decorative detail. On the contrary, this small surface presents itself as an exceptionally dense field of meaning in which belief, the consciousness of death, the search for identity, and the claim to political legitimacy are worked together. This study has aimed to thematically classify the ring engraving traditions scattered across classical Islamic sources and to evaluate these engravings within a sociological framework organized around aniconism. The findings strongly support the following central thesis: in Islamic culture, the ring engraving took shape within the aesthetic constraint circumscribed by the cautious attitude toward figural representation—rooted above all in hadith—and was transformed over time into a distinctive symbolic idiom bearing the individual’s religious, moral, and social world. The sociological dimension of this transformation manifests itself at several key points.

First and foremost, ring engravings transcended individual preference and became a collective sign. The formulae that recur across a wide spectrum—from ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb to the Abbasid caliphs, from the Companions to later generations—demonstrate that these signs were transmitted across generations. The tradition of Mālik and Muṭarrif, in which one person’s choice of engraving transformed another’s, and the scene in which Hārūn al-Rashīd evaluated *qāḍī* candidates by examining their ring engravings, place this social dimension on display in a manner that leaves no room for doubt. The engraving had ceased to be a private preference and become a sign of social competence and moral identity.

Second, it is apparent that figural motifs yielded their place to written expressions through a transformation extended across time. In traditions attributed to the Companions and the *tābi ‘ūn*, one encounters animal figures—lions, cranes, camels, peacocks—and plant motifs. This indicates that aniconism was the product not of homogeneous and instantaneous normalization but of a long and contested process of social negotiation. In later periods, however, figural motifs diminished progressively and written formulae came to occupy the dominant position. This transition is the result not of mere legal compliance but of a deepening of the religious and aesthetic meaning accorded to the letter and the word. The prohibition of figural representation accelerated this deepening; the space occupied by the figure was filled by the word.

Third, this transformation is not merely a loss or a restriction but the production of a new and distinctive idiom of meaning. The figural symbol implies; the word states directly. In respect of its moral weight, its capacity to bear the name of the person it addresses, and its evocation of the divine reckoning that constrains power, these inscriptions functionally surpass figural representation. The aniconism in this sense operated not merely as a prohibiting force but as a religious rule that—through its very absence—made a new idiom necessary and thereby brought it into being.

Fourth, the four fundamental social functions assumed by ring engravings offer a concrete summary of the theoretical framework invoked throughout this article. In the construction of identity and legitimacy, the ring is the symbolic “personal front” with which the individual presents themselves on the social stage, and the instrument through which power is “idealized” in accordance with moral values (Goffman). The moral regulation function refers to the transformation of the object into a “technology of the self” (Foucault) that disciplines the body. In its social communication function, the ring assumes the role of an active *actant* (Latour) that directs social decisions and determines hierarchy. Taken together, these functions make clear that the ring engraving is not merely a seal object but a constitutive sociological ground on which belief, status, and authority are re-mediated and the invisible is “materialized” (Meyer). Fifth, and cutting across these functions, aniconism in this domain governed matter as much as imagery. The metals a believer might wear, the stone set into the bezel, the orientation of that bezel toward the palm, and the pressure required to transfer an inscription into clay were each regulated or conventionalized, and each carried its own sensory charge. Approached as a *sensational form* in Meyer’s sense, the ring bound its wearer to the transcendent through touch, weight, and disciplined looking rather than through reading alone. It is on this material and sensory ground—where a seal of office also names God, and a reminder of death is worn against the skin—that the devotional and the everyday in early Islamic culture prove not to be separated but continuously folded into one another.

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