

## STYLES OF CALLIGRAPHY USED IN INSCRIPTIONS OF ISLAMIC METALWORK IN MEDIEVAL IRAN

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### Abstract

The study delves into Islamic metal artwork inscriptions, a vital facet of calligraphy's evolution. Examining pieces from medieval Islamic periods in Iran's major museums, it explores works employing Kufic, Thuluth, and Naskh scripts. Its aim is to analyze calligraphic styles, letter designs, and content within medieval metal art. Inscriptions underwent classification based on script, design, and adornments. Kufic scripts revealed two variations: an earlier version maintained uniform thickness using a single pen, featuring leafy, knotted, or human-headed styles. Later, a prevalent post-12th century variation saw letters adopting varied thicknesses, following word context. This Kufic type employed geometric patterns, favoring circular, leafy, and knotted forms. Naskh, a rigid script in official documents, is lauded for its simplicity and legibility due to concise lettering, common in informational texts. Sülüs, an early Islamic script akin to Kufic, stands out with slender, elongated letters, evolving post-Seljuk era with diverse motifs. Animated letter inscriptions notably associate Alif and Lam endings with human or animal heads, nearly bordering on pictorial representation. These inscriptions epitomize the fusion of writing, miniatures, and contemporary thought in the realm of metal art.

**Keywords:** Islamic metalwork, Inscription, Kufi, Naskh, Thuluth.

### *İRAN'DA ORTA ÇAĞ İSLAM MADEN SANATI KİTABELERİNDE KULLANILAN HAT TÜRLERİ*

### Özet

İslam maden sanat eserlerinin kitabeleri, seneler boyu hat sanatında gerçekleşen gelişiminin en önemli örneklerinde sayılmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, İran'ın iki büyük müzesinde sergilenen, Orta çağ İslami döneme ait olan maden sanat eserlerin kitabeleri incelenmiştir. Çalışmamızda ele alınan eserlerin kitabelerinde, Kufi, Sülüs ve Nesih hatları, farklı üslup ve tekniklerle kullanılmıştır. Bu makalenin amacı, Orta çağ maden sanatında görülen hat sanatının, yazı karakterleri ve içeriklerinin incelenmesidir. Çalışmada yer alan kitabeler hat türü, harf tasarımı ve kullanılan süslemelerine göre ayrılıp tasnif edilmiştir. Kufi yazılı kitabelerde genellikle iki tür "kufi yazısına" rastlıyoruz; daha erken dönemlere ait olan birinci türde harfler, kalınlıklarında bir değişiklik olmaksızın aynı kalem kullanılarak işlenmiştir. Bu tür kufi, yapraklı, düğümlü yapraklı ve düğümlü veya insan başlı olan biçimlerde kullanılmıştır. 12. yüzyıldan sonra yaygınlaşan ikinci kufi türü yazısında, her harfin kelimedeki aldığı yer ve durumuna göre farklı kalınlıklarda tasarlanması söz konusudur. İkinci tür Kufi farkı geometrik düzenle tasarlanıp, dairesel formlar daha sık kullanılmıştır. Bu grup kufi hattı

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dairese, yapraklı ve düğümlü olarak üç ana biçimde yazılmıştır. Nesih adı altında tanınan yazı, daha çok resmî yazılar ve belgelerde kullanılan sade ve sert karaktere sahip bir türdür. Kısa boylu harf tasarımından dolayı rahat ve hızlı yazılıp, daha rahat okuna bildiğinden, bilgi içerikli metinlerde kullanımı söz konusudur. Kufi gibi İslamiyet'in ilk yazı türlerinden olan sülüs yazısı ise ince ve uzun boylu harfleriyle dikkat çekmektedir. Sülüs hattı Selçuklu döneminden sonra takip eden dönemlerde gelişmeye devam edip, çeşitli motifler ile birlikte kullanımı söz konusudur. Konuşan harfli kitabe kompozisyonlarda ise elif ve lam harflerinin sonu, insan ve hayvan başlarıyla bağdaştırılmış ve adeta resimleme sınırlarına dayanarak, maden sanatının kitabelerinde, yazı, minyatür ve dönemin düşüncelerinin bileşimini göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İslam Maden Sanatı, Kitabe, Kûfi, Nesih, Sülüs.

### Introduction

The purpose of this research is to identify the calligraphic styles used in inscriptions in medieval Islamic metal art and to examine their contents. At the same time, the classification of inscription contents in terms of calligraphic style and script language is aimed. The significance of our presentation is to correlate the calligraphic styles with the language and content of the inscription texts, facilitating their reading and classification. In this context, the data obtained from the examination of metal artifacts in the collections of the "Iran National Museum" and the "Reza Abbasi Museum" in Tehran, Iran, have been evaluated. The artifacts studied in our research were analyzed and concluded using quantitative methods.

### Calligraphic Styles in the Inscriptions of Medieval Islamic Metal Art in Iran

**Kufic:** Considered the first script of the Islamic period, was primarily used in Qur'anic inscriptions until the 10th century. "Although Kufi is described as "*Hurufu is both unadulterated and enlightened*", it is obvious that it has a predominantly geometric, upright and angular structure" (Yazır, 1974, p.79). Kufic script has various styles such as pre-Islamic Kufic, the Kufic of the asr-ı saâdet (Makki, Madani), celi Kufic, decorative and floral Kufic, braided Kufic, and ma'kil Kufic (Serin and Zenûn, 1982, p. 36). It is claimed that the six basic script types known as "Aklâm-ı sitte" are derived from Kufic script. For this reason, Kufic script is also called "ümmü'l-hutut," meaning the mother of scripts (Özkafa, 2008, p. 27).



**Picture 1:** Golden goblet, 10th century, Reza Abbasi Museum (Inv.no.2616), first group kufi), (Photo: Author's Archive).

Annemarie Schimmel states that this script type was named after the first Quran written by Ali bin Abi Talib in the city of Kufa during the early Islamic period (1990, p. 2). Although Kufic script was initially written plainly without diacritics and dots, later, with the efforts of calligraphers, it took various forms suitable for the surface and material to be applied. In the metal artifacts discussed in the article, two main groups of Kufic types can be identified.

**First Group Kufic:** These are Kufic-scripted inscriptions, referred to as “simple Kufic,” with consistent letter thickness and generally flat surfaces. They are mostly executed using carving and engraving techniques and are easier to read compared to other Kufic types (Picture 1-2).

**Second Group Kufic:** Starting from the mid-11th century, calligraphers experimented with variations in letter thickness and lengths in Kufic scripts, embellishing them with floral and geometric patterns (Picture 3).



**Picture 2:** Silver plate, year 1009, Reza Abbasi Museum (Inv. no.978), first group kufi) (Photo: Author’s Archive).



**Picture 3:** Bronze basin, 12th century, National Museum of Iran (Inv. no. 8343), second group kufi) (Photo: Author’s Archive).

**Sülüs:** In the dictionary, “sülüs” meaning “one-third” is accepted as the source (umm al-hat) of Islamic period writings, like Kufic. Also known as “Qalam-i Sülüs,” it is suggested that Sülüs got its name due to being one-third the thickness of a bamboo pen or having flatness in two-thirds of its letters and roundness in one-third. Sülüs script, which developed significantly as a form of artistic writing, lost its straight lines over time, leaving only the dots, and the lines forming the letters became rounded. This script, which gained great importance with the advent of Islam, can be observed spreading rapidly, especially in official institutions and book writing where Kufic was not used. The idea is proposed that when it became the basis for the development of calligraphy as an art form, it

served as the source for refined script styles. Among the artists representing the developments in calligraphy during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, Ibrahim al-Siczi (al-Shajari) stands out. He determined the name “sülüs” for the pen he attributed to the bamboo pen, thereby establishing one of the main styles of original and refined scripts (Serin, 2010, pp. 128-130). It is suggested that the scripts of tevki and nesih emerged from sülüs, and the script of rika’ emerged from tevki. In calligraphy treatises, information such as “Nesih is similar to Sülüs; the width of the pen tip is one-third of Sülüs; Nesih has taken two-thirds of Sülüs and adapted to one-third” is found. Due to their fundamental characteristics within the “Aklam-i sitte” (six scripts), sülüs and nesih formed a group and were commonly used in the writing of poems, anthologies, plaques, and Qur’an manuscripts, especially in contexts with high artistic value. Since sülüs was written in special compositions, it was not used in daily life or official affairs. It was predominantly employed in emphasizing important words, couplets and book titles, beautiful writing albums, Qur’anic inscriptions, sülüs celisi plaques, and various inscriptions. The sülüs script, one of the first writing styles of Islam along with Kufic, is distinguished by its thin and tall letters. In medieval Iranian metalwork artworks, sülüs script is often featured prominently in the most visible sections, elaborately crafted in inscriptions containing prayers, good wishes, or poetry (Picture 4-5).



**Picture 4:** Brass bowl, 13th Century, Reza Abbasi Museum (Inv. no.444) Seljuk Sülüs (Photo: Author’s Archive).



**Picture 5:** Brass Ewer, 12th Century, Reza Abbasi Museum (Inv. no.442) Photo: Author’s Archive).

Nesih: The word “nesih” in the dictionary, carrying meanings such as “to abolish a ruling, to transcribe a work,” is a script widely used in calligraphy, especially in the transcription of books and printed works. The word “nessâh,” derived from the same root, is seen in sources as “nessâhân-i

hattâfîn” (those who write nesih). Described as “a script that is short and thin, and at the same time has a simple and rigid character” (Upham Pope, 1938, p.1707), nesih script has been commonly used in medieval Iranian metalwork artworks for texts written in Persian, poems, or inscriptions indicating the artist, patron, and date<sup>1</sup> (Picture 6).



**Picture 6:** Brass Candlestick, 13th century, Reza Abbasi Museum (Inv. no.1032), Nasih) Photo: Author’s Archive).

Talking Letters: It is a type of writing where the letters Alif and Lam, sometimes Dal and Vav, have human or animal heads attached to them, and occasionally eyebrows and eyes are added (Picture 7). Although many researchers define the origin of the script type with talking letters as Horasan, it is not definitively known where and when this script type was first designed.

The “talking tree” or “vak-vak tree” (a tree with leaves in the shape of humans or various animals) is considered the origin of headed or talking letters. It was first introduced in the 9th century in the work “Mesalik al-Memalik” by Hurdad Beh. Later, Ebu Reyhan Muhammed bin Ahmet al-Biruni mentioned in his work “Tahkik Ma li’l-Hind” that this tree grew in the Komar Island within the borders of India and bore fruits in the shape of human heads. The expeditions to India during the Ghaznavid period and the acquired spoils influenced Iranian artists, leading to an incorporation of the culture and motifs of this region into their works (Kamandlo and Rajabi, 2015, p.77-78)

“The ‘Shahnameh’ prepared in the year 1010 upon the order of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni is thought to have played a significant role in the spread of the depiction of the talking tree” (Mohammad Hassan, 1949, p.39). In the Shahnameh, which provides an immense visual source for painters and artists, the story of “Alexander reaching the talking tree” is narrated: The tree, with each leaf resembling a human face with mouth, nose, and eyes, starts to speak and emit vak-vak sounds when a strong wind blows; it advises Alexander to stay away from misfortunes and warns him of an early death. In Yakup Ajend’s book “Vak Temeli,” it is suggested that the disapproval of the depiction of human and animal figures during the Islamic period led artists to design the “talking tree” figure. “As a result, the fruits of an unrealistic and story-like tree, shaped like a human face, were used in the ornamentation of miniature and illumination pages. Later, with the addition of this type of design by metal artists to letters, inscriptions with talking letters emerged” (Ajend, 2009, p.7). German Iranologist and Islamic-Sufi researcher Annemarie Schimmel, believing that the original idea of these inscriptions was widespread among medieval writers, explains this script type as follows: “Every human is a letter written with a divine pen on delicate and fragile paper; inevitably, it is related to other letters” (1990, p.622). Richard Ettinghausen describes the inscriptions on metal objects: “Inscriptions on works speak to people and express feelings as if they were human” (2001, p.770). The most remarkable

<sup>1</sup> The nesih script is primarily a script used in very small sizes for inscriptions and document writing; the inscriptions referred to as nesih on metal artifacts are actually a type of short sülüs script, but since they are prepared in smaller sizes and resemble handwriting, they are commonly referred to as nesih script, as seen in many sources.

innovation in this field is the various animal and human-like script forms seen on metal objects during this and subsequent periods (Picture 12).

In this region, during the early period, the transformation of the Arabic alphabet, considered sacred and inviolable due to being the script of the Quran, into human and animal forms with the progress of language and culture is a clear indicator of the change and development in the perspective and perception of artists and craftsmen during this period (Kamandlo and Rajabi, 2015, p.79) (Picture 7-8).



**Picture 7:** Bronze Ewer, end of the 12th century, National Museum of Iran (Inv. no.3530), talking letter inscription) (Photo: Author's Archive).



**Picture 8:** Detail of bronze basin, 13th century, National Museum of Iran (Inv. no.3525) left: knotted kufic, right: thuluth) (Photo: Author's Archive).



**Picture 9:** Detail of the brass chest: nasih) (Photo: Author's Archive).

### **Inscriptions on Islamic Metal Artifacts in the Middle Ages Iran**

The inscriptions on the everyday objects we have discussed in our study have three different contents: A- Texts containing good wishes, prayers, or praises for the owner of the artifact; B- Poems and instructive texts; C- Texts providing information about the patron, master, or the place and date of production of the artifact. The inscriptions are designed by selecting a suitable script type based on factors such as the commissioner of the work, the type and form of the object, and the period and geography. Inscription texts with the mentioned contents can be found on Islamic metal artifacts from medieval Iran, including lamps and candle holders used for illumination, ewers, pitchers, and cups valued for their function as water carriers, trays and plates designed for individuals, and boxes, chests (Picture 9), pen holders, and inkwells designed as personal items.”

### Inscriptions with Benevolent Wishes and Prayers for the Owner of the Artifact

Most of the inscriptions on the metal artifacts we have examined in our study contain texts with benevolent prayers, wishes, and praises for the owner of the artifact. These are typically crafted using the contemporary Arabic language in Kufic or Sulus scripts, prominently adorned with various techniques in easily visible parts of the artifact. Rachel Ward mentions that these inscriptions containing benevolent wishes and prayers for the owner are often adorned with zodiac and astrology symbols to bring good luck (2014, p.78). These phrases usually start with the letters “alif” and “lam” and end with the letter “ha,” with “waw” letters interspersed, creating harmonious and rhythmic words. They are crafted inside bands or medallions, embellished with various ornaments. These harmonious texts are visually cohesive; the vertical letters, such as “alif” and “lam,” become the pillars of the composition, independent of meaning, forming a repeated decorative element in the inscription. Sometimes, to enhance visual harmony, the artist may add additional vertical letters like “alif” or design horizontal letters in a vertical manner as needed. Occasionally, inscription bands are divided into a specific number of segments by decorative elements, independent of the meaning and sentence structure, to repeat the visual rhythm for ornamentation purposes. In addition to inscriptions containing benevolent wishes and prayers, there are also inscriptions praising the owner of the artifact. These are usually found on works produced specifically for private individuals or presented as gifts. The inscription section of the silver tray exhibited at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is considered one of the best examples of this type. The inscription in large letters at the center of the tray reads ‘Es-Sultan Azzud Din,’ and the inner edge of the tray contains praises for Sultan Alp Arslan: “*Governed by Allah, the magnificent sultan, as a gift for Sultan Alp Arslan, ordered by the glorious sultan, an example for all married women. Made by Hasan al-Kashani in the year 459 H (1067)*” (Picture 10).



**Picture 10:** Sultan Alparslan’s silver tray, Boston Fine Arts Museum (Inv. no.34.68), First group kufi) (Photo: Boston Museum’s website).

### Inscriptions with Poetic Content

Inscriptions with Arabic or Persian poetry often convey meanings that are harmonious with the object or contain advice. In the examined examples with Arabic poetry, Kufic or Sulus scripts are commonly used, while Persian ones exhibit the use of Sulus or Nesih scripts. An example is the brass candlestick displayed at the Reza Abbasi Museum (Inventory no. 1032). The Farsi Nesih inscription on the upper and lower parts of the body of the candlestick consists of two couplets of poetry providing information about the constellations, and four quatrains of poetry related to the function of the candlestick and the use of candles, in harmony with the decorative motifs of the candlestick. Another instance is the brass cup exhibited at the Iranian National Museum (Inventory no. 21706). The Sulus-scripted inscription, prepared with silver inlay on the rim of the cup, comprises a three-couplet Persian poem describing the elixir of life (‘âb-ı hayat’) in connection with the cup.”

### Inscriptions Providing Information about the Master, Patron, or Production Date

In the examined examples, inscriptions providing information about the master, patron, or production date are often placed on surfaces that are not immediately visible, such as the inner and outer parts of the objects. These inscriptions are crafted with a simple Nesih script, making them easier to read (Pic: 9). An example is the bronze bowl displayed at the Iranian National Museum (Inventory no. 4820), which states that its master was Fahreddin Sheikh Ahmed Saffar “( Picture 11).



**Picture 11:** Bronze bowl, 14th century, National Museum of Iran (Inv. no.4820), Naskh inscription) (Photo: Author's Archive).

The inscription on the bronze basin found in the Hamedan region, currently exhibited at the Iranian National Museum (Inventory no. 3524), indicates that the object was prepared for ‘Al-Buhari Shams al-Din’s son Shihab al-Din.’ The inscription on the brass ewer in the Riza Abbasi Museum inventory (Inventory no. 989) provides the name of the master as ‘Hasan (E) ba Sehl Sijzi.’ Another object containing information about the patron, master, and production date is the pitcher exhibited at the Iranian National Museum (Inventory no. 25980). The Nesih-script inscription inside the basin specifies that the owner is ‘Ali’s son, Mahmud Maskan,’ the master is “*Habsekan Isfahani’s son Osman’s son Muhammad,*’ and the date is ‘*the blessed month of Allah, the first days of Ramadan, the year six hundred and eighty-six (1288)*”.



**Picture 12:** Bronze jug, 1268, National Museum of Iran (Inv. no. 25980) speaking letters) (Photo: Author's Archive).



## Conclusion

The inscriptions on medieval Islamic metal artworks in the Iranian region, written in the contemporary Arabic or Persian, are primarily executed in Kufic, Sulus, and Naskh scripts using techniques such as engraving, chasing, embossing, damascening, and inlaying. In the examined pieces, Arabic inscriptions consist of prayers, wishes, or poetic texts and are typically rendered in Kufic or Sulus scripts. From the early periods to the Seljuk era, the surviving works predominantly feature simple Kufic script, while during the Seljuk and subsequent Ilkhanid periods, Kufic, characterized by variations in letter thicknesses and curls, and the flowing Sulus script coexist in these inscriptions. Upon closer examination of Arabic inscriptions, it is observed that Kufic is more frequently employed for prayers and wishes, while Sulus is used for texts containing praise and poetry. Persian inscriptions, on the other hand, are primarily rendered in Sulus or Naskh scripts. These inscriptions convey poetic, advisory, or information about the artwork's creation. An in-depth analysis of Persian inscriptions reveals that those with documentary characteristics are typically prepared in a clear, firm, and easily readable Naskh script. Persian poetry and advice, distinguished by their graceful and elongated characters, are often inscribed using the more ornate Sulus or Naskh scripts. Consequently, it can be suggested that Kufic is used for all Arabic inscriptions, while Naskh is predominantly employed for Persian inscriptions. Sulus script, which gained prominence in the late 11th century, was widely adopted for both Arabic and Persian texts. Building on the information obtained, it is feasible to infer the language and content of these inscriptions, determining their historical periods and regions by considering the type of script used. Thus, by examining the script type, it becomes possible to derive meaningful insights into the language and content of these inscriptions, contributing to the accurate identification of their historical periods and regions. In conclusion, inscriptions on medieval Iranian Islamic metal artworks serve not only as documents providing details about the master, patron, place of creation, and date but also as texts showcasing literary, artistic, and cultural qualities, playing a crucial role in these artifacts.

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