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The Inscriptions on the Rings of the Fatimid Caliphs:Their Symbolism and Political-Religious Significance

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Abstract
This study explores the inscriptions engraved on the rings of the Fatimid caliphs, examining their symbolic, political, and religious significance. These inscriptions, often characterized by their brevity and rhetorical precision, encapsulated key ideological and theological concepts. The ring, with its engraved inscription, functioned as a potent symbol of authority, adopted by rulers and political leaders since antiquity. The tradition was continued by Muslim caliphs, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who wore a ring inscribed with the words "Muḥammad *Rasūl Allāh*" (Muhammad is the Messenger of God). Fatimid caliphs adopted this practice, commissioning both official and personal rings bearing eloquent and meaningful phrases that reflected their faith, trust in God, and devotion to divine will. The study is divided into two main sections. The first provides a critical analysis of the inscriptions, tracing their heritage-based sources, thematic content, stylistic features, and the political, religious, and literary messages they conveyed. It also enumerates the inscriptions attributed to each Fatimid caliph. These inscriptions reflect the caliphs' religious conviction, their sense of divine mission, and their role as protectors of the faith and the community. They serve as concentrated expressions of their personal and political identities. The second section compiles and documents the surviving inscriptions, organizing them chronologically according to the reigns of the respective caliphs. It includes detailed documentation, variant readings, and visual interpretations of the inscriptions.

Keywords: Fatimid inscriptions, political symbolism, political legitimacy, Ismaʿili identity, religious symbolism, Fatimid Imamate, comparative Islamic art.

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Introduction

The tradition of inscribing signet rings represents a distinctive form of Islamic epigraphy. Beyond its historical, political, and administrative significance, this practice holds literary and linguistic value, displaying the Arabic language's ability to convey profound meanings through concise, rhetorically rich expressions. The use of signet rings (*takhattum*) dates back to ancient civilizations, where rings were employed for official, religious, and personal purposes. They symbolized authority, social status, and marital bonds (Kunz 1917, 1–32). Pre-Islamic Arabs

also utilized rings for adornment and document authentication. The practice gained religious and political authority when the Prophet Muḥammad adopted a ring inscribed with "*Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh*" to seal official correspondence and prevent forgery (Ibn Rujab n.d., 26, 111, 143). This precedent was continued by the Rāshidūn, Umayyad, and ʿAbbāsid caliphs, who used rings bearing powerful symbolic inscriptions (Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih 1940, vol. 1; Al-Qāḍī, 1933).

The Fatimid caliphs followed this tradition, commissioning official signets engraved with distinctive phrases that reflected each caliph's political and religious identity. These rings served as formal seals on state and personal correspondence, and the practice remained in use throughout the Fatimid caliphate in both the Maghreb and Egypt. Often, there is little distinction in historical sources between official and personal rings, making it difficult to classify many of the inscriptions precisely.

However, unlike the ring inscriptions of other Islamic dynasties, those of the Fatimids received minimal attention from pre-modern Muslim historians and modern scholars alike. Many early Islamic sources documenting ring inscriptions—such as *Khātim al-Khulafāʾ* by al-Haytham ibn ʿAdī, *Ḥulī al-Khulafāʾ* by al-Madāʾinī, and *al-Khawātīm* by al-Sahmī—are now lost (Al-Safadī n.d., 27:238; Yāqūt 1907, 2:115; Ibn Rujab n.d., 26). Other authors, such as Ibn al-Kāzarūnī, al-Qalqashandī, and Ibn ʿArabī, included relevant material in their broader works (Al-Qalqashandī 1913; Ibn ʿArabī n.d.). One likely reason for this neglect is the theological and political opposition many Sunni scholars expressed toward the Fatimid claim to legitimate caliphal authority. Consequently, scholarly focus was directed toward documenting the inscriptions of the Rāshidūn, Umayyad, and ʿAbbāsid dynasties, largely ignoring those of the Fatimids (Sharif 1898; Sharif 1903; Maʿlūf 1913; Al-Jamīl 1989). This academic bias has persisted into the modern era, as even contemporary researchers—both Arab and Western—have rarely engaged in sustained studies of Fatimid sigillography. This research, therefore, seeks to fill a significant gap by gathering the surviving Fatimid inscriptions, analyzing their meanings, stylistic elements, and symbolic values, and situating them within the broader context of Islamic epigraphy and political-religious discourse.

Research Question

What are the political, religious, and symbolic meanings of the inscriptions on the rings of the Fatimid caliphs, and what stylistic and literary features characterize these inscriptions, based on historical and literary sources?

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology, combining accurate documentation of surviving inscriptions with analysis of their political, religious, and literary meanings. The inscriptions are interpreted within their historical and cultural contexts, drawing connections between symbolic expression and Fatimid ideology. In addition, the study employs a comparative method, juxtaposing Fatimid ring inscriptions with those of other Islamic dynasties—namely the Rāshidūn, Umayyads, and ʿAbbāsids—to highlight the unique stylistic and rhetorical features of Fatimid epigraphic practice.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Fatimid inscriptions encompasses a rich array of sources, from medieval chronicles to modern academic studies, each offering insight into the symbolic, political, and religious functions of inscribed signet rings. This review synthesizes both primary and secondary sources, highlighting key scholarly contributions while clarifying their points of convergence and divergence.

The foundational Sunni chronicle *Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ bi-Akhbār al-Aʾimma al-Fāṭimiyyīn al-Khulafāʾ* by Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī (d. 1441) offers the most comprehensive medieval documentation of Fatimid ring inscriptions. Although critical of the Fatimid claim to legitimacy, al-Maqrīzī records the inscriptions of eleven caliphs, providing preliminary interpretations that link their content to political and sectarian conflicts, especially with the ʿAbbāsids (al-Maqrīzī 1967). His work is indispensable for tracing the historical presence and theological overtones of Fatimid epigraphy.

In a similar historiographical vein, Ibn Taghrībirdī's *al-Nujūm al-Zāhira* (d. 1470) contributes biographical detail and historical context on the Fatimid caliphs. However, unlike al-Maqrīzī's relatively neutral tone, Ibn Taghrībirdī demonstrates a more overt Sunni prejudice, interpreting the ring inscriptions as ornamental rather than ideologically charged, thereby downplaying their doctrinal importance (Ibn Taghrībirdī 1992). This contrast illustrates the tension between documentation and sectarian framing in medieval Sunni narratives.

Turning to modern Ismāʿīlī scholarship, Farhad Daftary's *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines* (1990) offers a markedly different perspective. Unlike the previous chroniclers, Daftary emphasizes the inscriptions' function as doctrinal affirmations of the Fatimid caliph's divinely guided *imamate*. He interprets ring inscriptions as symbolic devices intended to reinforce religious legitimacy and dynastic continuity (Daftary 1990). In contrast to the skepticism of Sunni sources, Daftary presents these epigraphic elements as central to Ismāʿīlī self-definition.

Complementing Daftary's ideological reading, ʿAlī Muḥammad Ḥasan's 2005 article investigates the symbolic value of Islamic rings more broadly. While his scope spans multiple dynasties, Ḥasan isolates the Fatimid usage of *al-imām* in inscriptions to show their emphasis on divine authority. His analysis highlights the ring as a political-theological contract between ruler and subject—a motif that aligns with Daftary's conclusions but expands upon the ring's semiotic role across Islamic history (Ḥasan 2005).

Paula Sanders's *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (1998) shifts the discussion from ideological to ritual-symbolic frameworks. Unlike Daftary and Ḥasan, Sanders focuses on how inscriptions—including those on rings—functioned as performative tools in Fatimid political theatre. She argues that phrases such as *tawḥīd* on rings helped position the caliphs as guardians of Islam vis-à-vis their ʿAbbāsid rivals (Sanders 1998). This approach introduces the concept of epigraphy as public ritual, broadening the scope beyond elite self-definition.

In a similar interdisciplinary vein, Jonathan Bloom's *Arts of the City Victorious* (2007) brings an art historical lens to the study of Fatimid inscriptions. Bloom, like Sanders, analyzes ring inscriptions as cultural texts, but places greater emphasis on calligraphic form and artistic integration. He notes that the use of titles like *al-imām* and *al-walī* on rings reinforced Ismāʿīlī

Shiʿi identity in visual and tactile ways (Bloom 2007). His work deepens our understanding of how aesthetic expression intersected with sectarian theology.

Delia Cortese's *Arabic Ismaili Manuscripts* (2013) complements Bloom by drawing attention to the rhetorical economy of Fatimid epigraphy. While focusing primarily on manuscripts, Cortese includes analysis of ring inscriptions, arguing that their brevity (e.g., *bi-naṣr Allāh*) served as ideological slogans aimed at cultivating loyalty and projecting divine endorsement (Cortese 2013). Her interpretation echoes Sanders's view of epigraphy as symbolic performance, yet is more concerned with brevity as a rhetorical strategy.

In contrast, Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Munʿim's 2010 article centers specifically on the invocation of *asmaʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā* (Beautiful Names of God) in Fatimid inscriptions. He argues that epithets like *al-ʿAzīz* and *al-Samīʿ* were used to legitimize the caliph's role as God's earthly deputy (ʿAbd al-Munʿim 2010). While Cortese emphasizes economy and propaganda, ʿAbd al-Munʿim highlights theological depth, offering a complementary but distinct interpretation.

Irene Bierman's *Writing Signs* (1996) presents perhaps the most comprehensive theoretical framework. She views Fatimid inscriptions—including those on rings—as part of a larger "public text" system intended to disseminate Ismāʿīlī ideology across multiple media: architecture, coinage, documents, and adornment. Bierman contends that the ring evolved from a bureaucratic tool into a symbolically saturated object of religious-political communication (Bierman 1996). Her work ties together ritual, theology, and visual rhetoric in a unified analytical model.

Finally, Heinz Halm's *The Fatimids and Their Traditions of Learning* (1997) contributes an intellectual-historical dimension. He touches on ring inscriptions as part of a broader culture of daʿwa (religious mission) and learning, where keywords like *imām* and *ḥujja* served to reinforce the caliph's dual identity as political leader and spiritual guide (Halm 1997). Halm's contribution, while less focused on material culture, situates the inscriptions within the Fatimids' epistemic framework.

Synthesis and Gaps

Collectively, these studies affirm that Fatimid ring inscriptions were not ornamental but strategic tools for asserting legitimacy, disseminating ideology, and embodying spiritual-political authority. However, significant divergences persist. Sunni sources tend to document but downplay their theological resonance (e.g., Ibn Taghrībirdī), while Ismāʿīlī and Western scholars emphasize their doctrinal and symbolic dimensions (e.g., Daftary, Sanders, Bierman). Notably, few studies undertake a comparative analysis between Fatimid ring inscriptions and those of other dynasties such as the ʿAbbāsids or Ayyubids. This study aims to address that critical gap.

Sources of the Inscriptions on the Signet Rings of the Fāṭimid Caliphs

This study draws on a diverse range of historical sources, with *Ittiʿāẓ al-ḥunafāʾ bi-akhbār al-aʾimma al-Fāṭimiyyīn al-khulafāʾ* by al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1441) standing out as the most comprehensive and indispensable Arabic source for the inscriptions on the signet rings of the Fāṭimid caliphs. The work provides a rare and detailed record of these caliphal inscriptions,

rendering it a foundational reference for scholars of early Islamic epigraphy. Al-Maqrīzī's text carefully records the inscriptions of nearly all Fāṭimid rulers, from al-Mahdī (al-Maqrīzī, *Ittiʿāẓ*, vol. 1, 73) to al-ʿĀḍid li-Dīn Allāh (vol. 3, 303), with the notable exception of al-Ẓāhir li-Iʿzāz Dīn Allāh's seal. Additionally, the text includes inscriptions attributed to prominent non-caliphal Fāṭimid figures (vol. 3, 163). These inscriptions often appear in the biographical entries of the rulers, though they are presented without rigorous documentation—a common pattern across most early Arabic sources dealing with signet ring epigraphy.

Beyond this seminal source, a small number of additional inscriptions attributed to Fāṭimid caliphs are scattered throughout both Eastern and Western Islamic sources. Among the most notable are: *The Wellsprings of Knowledge* (ʿUyūn al-maʿārif) by al-Quḍāʿī (pp. 257, 259), *The Delight of the Elegant* (Bulghat al-ẓurafāʾ) by al-Rūḥī (p. 304), *Accounts of the Extinct Dynasties* (Akhbār al-duwal al-munqaṭiʿa) by Ẓāfir al-Azdī (vol. 1, pp. 182, 213, 216), *Accounts of the Kings of the Banū ʿUbayd* (Akhbār mulūk Banī ʿUbayd) by Ibn Ḥammād (pp. 92, 94, 105), and *The Clear Statement on the History of al-Andalus and the Maghrib* (al-Bayān al-mughrib fī akhbār al-Andalus wa-l-Maghrib) by Ibn ʿIdhārī (vol. 1, p. 159). Other relevant sources include *The Ultimate Aim in the Knowledge of Arab History* (Nihāyat al-arab) by al-Nuwayrī (vol. 28, pp. 152, 202, 243), *The Complete Record of the Deceased* (al-Wāfī bi-l-wafayāt) by al-Ṣafadī (vol. 22, p. 149), and *The Repository of the Erudite and the Innovation of the Brilliant* (Mustawdaʿ al-ʿallāma wa-mustabdaʿ al-ʿallāma) by Ibn al-Aḥmar (p. 23). Further mention can be found in *Admonitions and Considerations* (al-Mawāʿiẓ wa-l-iʿtibār) by al-Maqrīzī (vol. 4, pp. 69, 81), *The Wellsprings of Reports* (ʿUyūn al-akhbār) by al-Dāʿī Idrīs (vol. 6, p. 210), and *The Shining Stars in the Dynastic Chronicles of Egypt* (al-Nujūm al-zāhira) by Ibn Taghrībirdī (vol. 5, p. 174).

It is worth noting that sectarian motives may have influenced some of these authors in their effort to preserve and transmit the surviving inscriptions of Fāṭimid signet rings. This ideological drive likely contributed to the survival of what remains of this culturally significant yet partially lost heritage. The transmission of these inscriptions, many of which would otherwise have vanished, owes much to this religiously motivated preservation.

In total, the study successfully identifies and verifies fifteen inscriptions belonging to eleven of the fourteen Fāṭimid caliphs. No inscriptions could be found for three rulers: al-Ḥāfiẓ, al-Ẓāfir, and al-Fāʾiz. This number should not be regarded as exhaustive. The researcher posits that additional inscriptions likely existed but are either unrecorded in the extant sources or lost to history.

Themes of the Inscriptions on the Signet Rings of the Fāṭimid Caliphs

The inscriptions adopted by the Fāṭimid caliphs on their signet rings were centered around a set of core theological and political themes. Foremost among these was the affirmation of divine support and legitimacy—a concept that dominated most of the Fāṭimid inscriptions. These statements were crafted to convey that the caliph's authority derived directly from God's support for the Ismāʿīlī mission and leadership. This central theme is most prominently observed in the inscriptions of the early Fāṭimid caliphs, whose formulae exhibit a remarkable uniformity in both structure and meaning.

Examples include the inscription of al-Mahdī: *"*With the victory of the Glorified God, triumphs the Imām Abū Muḥammad" (al-Maqrīzī, *Ittiʿāẓ*, vol. 1, 73), and the corresponding formula of al-Qāʾim bi-Amr Allāh: "With the victory of the Everlasting One, triumphs the Imām Abū al-Qāsim" (ibid., vol. 1, 87). Similar inscriptions are found for al-Manṣūr: "With the victory of the Hidden and Manifest, triumphs the Imām Abū Ṭāhir" (ibid., vol. 1, 91), and for al-Muʿizz li-Dīn Allāh: "With the victory of the Almighty, the All-Knowing, triumphs the Imām Abū Tamīm" (al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, vol. 28, 152; al-Maqrīzī, *Ittiʿāẓ*, vol. 1, 235). Al-ʿAzīz bi-llāh similarly inscribed: "With the victory of the Mighty, the Compeller, triumphs the Imām Abū Nizār" (al-Quḍāʿī, *ʿUyūn al-maʿārif*, 269; al-Maqrīzī, *Ittiʿāẓ*, vol. 1, 292), while al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh's ring read: "With the victory of the Most High, the Patron, triumphs the Imām Abū ʿAlī" (al-Azdī, *Akhbār al-duwal al-munqaṭiʿa*, vol. 1, 213; al-Maqrīzī, *Ittiʿāẓ*, vol. 2, 94, 122). Finally, al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh's inscription stated: *"*With the victory of the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing, triumphs the Imām Abū Tamīm" (al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, vol. 28, 243; al-Maqrīzī, *Ittiʿāẓ*, vol. 2, 334).

These inscriptions exhibit a fixed structural pattern: a central phrase invoking divine victory (*"bi-naṣr"*), followed by a variation of divine names and attributes, and concluding with the caliph's honorific and name (*"yantaṣir al-imām..."*). The only shifting elements were the divine attributes and the kunya of the respective caliph. This standardized formula reinforced the Fāṭimid claim that their rule was divinely sanctioned and that their imāmate was sustained through God's explicit support.

A secondary theme evident in some inscriptions is the affirmation of *tawḥīd* (divine unity), a foundational concept in the Fāṭimid religious doctrine. Two inscriptions of al-Muʿizz li-Dīn Allāh exemplify this emphasis: "To the Unity of the Eternal God, the Imām Maʿadd called" (al-Quḍāʿī, *ʿUyūn al-maʿārif*, 267; al-Maqrīzī, *Ittiʿāẓ*, vol. 1, 116), and "To the Unity of the Great God, the Imām Abū Tamīm called" (al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, vol. 28, 152). Both inscriptions reflect a consistent ideological message: the Fāṭimid caliph presented himself as a divine emissary whose mission was to propagate the oneness of God—a principle at the heart of their *daʿwa* (mission).

A third, less frequent theme in the inscriptions is gratitude and praise to God. This is most evident in the inscription of al-Ẓāhir li-Iʿzāz Dīn Allāh: "Praise be to God; thanks for His grace" (al-Azdī, *Akhbār al-duwal al-munqaṭiʿa*, vol. 1, 216; al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfī bi-l-wafayāt*, vol. 22, 149), and in the inscription of al-Mustaʿlī bi-llāh: "Praise be to God for His blessings" (Ibn Ḥammād, *Akhbār mulūk Banī ʿUbayd*, 105). These inscriptions convey the spiritual sensibility of the caliphs, who recognized their elevated status and political success as divine favor, thus expressing their gratitude through pious inscription.

Overall, these themes—divine support, propagation of tawḥīd, and gratitude—form the backbone of Fāṭimid ring inscriptions. Their brevity was shaped by the physical constraints of the gem surface and by the limitations of Arabic calligraphy within such a confined space. Yet these inscriptions also reflect the ideological priorities of the Fāṭimid regime: to assert their legitimacy as temporal rulers and as divinely endorsed imāms and religious guides.

Distinctive Features in the Inscriptions of the Fāṭimid Caliphs' Signet Rings

An examination of the surviving inscriptions from the signet rings of the Fāṭimid caliphs reveals several noteworthy features that merit scholarly attention. These elements offer insight into the ideological, theological, and political messages conveyed through these inscriptions and illuminate the broader aesthetics and symbolic framework employed by the Fāṭimid rulers.

The first and most prominent feature lies in the consistent use of the Divine Names and Attributes (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*) within the inscriptions. This rhetorical strategy appears to have been deliberately adopted to reinforce the religious aura surrounding the caliphs and to emphasize their perceived divine support and legitimacy. Although the practice of including the name of God (*Allāh*) was already established in the inscriptions of earlier Muslim dynasties—such as the Rāshidūn, Umayyads, and ʿAbbāsids—the Fāṭimid inscriptions demonstrate a more developed and elaborate use of Divine epithets. They did not limit themselves to the name *Allāh*, as many of their predecessors did. Rather, the Fāṭimids included a variety of other Names and Attributes. These included *al-ilāh* (the God), *al-mumajjad* (the Glorified), *al-dāʾim* (the Everlasting), *al-ẓāhir* (the Manifest), *al-bāṭin* (the Hidden), *al-ṣamad* (the Self-Sufficient), *al-ʿazīz* (the Almighty), *al-ʿalīm* (the All-Knowing), *al-jabbār* (the Compeller), *al-ʿalī* (the Most High), *al-walī* (the Patron), and *al-samīʿ* (the All-Hearing) (al-Maqrīzī 1967, vol. 1, 73, 87, 91, 116, 235, 292; al-Nuwayrī 2004, vol. 28, 152; al-Quḍāʿī 1970, 269).

Some of these names appear only once, while others recur in multiple inscriptions, particularly *al-ilāh*, *al-ʿazīz*, and *al-ʿalīm*, suggesting a conscious preference for specific theological connotations that align with Fāṭimid claims of divine favor and spiritual authority (al-Maqrīzī 1967, vol. 1, 116, 235, 292; vol. 2, 334).

A second striking feature is the Fāṭimid caliphs' insistence on the inclusion of the religious title *al-imām* in their inscriptions. This title carries significant theological weight within the Fāṭimid and broader Shīʿī contexts, denoting both religious leadership and political legitimacy. The title appears in several inscriptions, including those of *al-Mahdī*, *al-Qāʾim bi-Amr Allāh*, *al-Manṣūr*, *al-Muʿizz li-Dīn Allāh* (in three separate inscriptions), *al-ʿAzīz bi-llāh*, *al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh*, *al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh*, and al-*Āmir bi-Aḥkām Allāh* (al-Maqrīzī 1967, vol. 1, 73, 87, 91, 116, 235; vol. 2, 94, 122, 334; vol. 3, 133; al-Nuwayrī 2004, vol. 28, 152).

The prevalence of the title *al-imām* among Fāṭimid inscriptions suggests a consistent rhetorical strategy, particularly given its absence in the inscriptions of Rāshidūn, Umayyad, and ʿAbbāsid caliphs. Notably, this title appears just once in the inscription of the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Qāhir bi-llāh: *"bi-llāh Muḥammad al-imām al-Qāhir bi-llāh amīr al-muʾminīn yathiq"* (Miskawayh 1921, vol. 1, 290). Similarly, the inscriptions of the Twelver Shīʿī imams do not include this title (ʿAqīl 2005, 43–79).

In some later Fāṭimid inscriptions, the title *al-imām* is paired with the caliph's formal title, as in the inscriptions of al-Mustaʿlī (*"al-imām al-Mustaʿlī bi-llāh"*) and al-Āmir (*"al-imām al-Āmir bi-Aḥkām Allāh amīr al-muʾminīn"*) (al-Maqrīzī 1967, vol. 3, 133). The phrase *amīr al-muʾminīn* ("Commander of the Faithful") appears only in the latter example, indicating its rare usage among Fāṭimid rulers, in contrast to the dominance of the term *al-imām*, which remained the preferred and ideologically charged designation.

A further feature pertains to the inclusion of *kunyas* (patronymic identifiers) and names within the inscriptions. Several caliphs' *kunya*s are documented, such as *Abū Muḥammad* for al-Mahdī, *Abū al-Qāsim* for al-Qāʾim, *Abū Ṭāhir* for al-Manṣūr, *Abū Tamīm* for both al-Muʿizz and al-Mustanṣir, and *Abū ʿAlī* for al-Ḥākim (al-Maqrīzī 1967, vol. 1, 73, 87, 91, 116; vol. 2, 94, 122, 334). This practice stands in contrast to the general absence of *kunya*s from the inscriptions of Rāshidūn, Umayyad, and ʿAbbāsid caliphs. The only known exception among the ʿAbbāsids is the *kunya* of al-Muʿtaṣim, and even this is debated among sources (Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih 1940, vol. 5, 121; al-Quḍāʿī 1970, 217; Ibn Rujab n.d., 127).

This recurring emphasis on *kunya*s in Fāṭimid inscriptions may represent a deliberate rhetorical divergence from ʿAbbāsid epigraphic norms, reinforcing the Fāṭimid identity and asserting symbolic distinction. As for proper names, they appear less frequently in the inscriptions. For instance, the name *Maʿadd* is recorded in al-Muʿizz's inscription: *"li-tawḥīd al-ilāh al-ṣamad daʿā al-imām Maʿadd"* (al-Maqrīzī 1967, vol. 1, 116), and the name *Nizār* appears in that of al-ʿAzīz bi-llāh: *"bi-naṣr al-ʿazīz al-jabbār yantaṣir al-imām Nizār"* (ibid., vol. 1, 292). In the case of al-Muʿizz, we even find variation between inscriptions that mention his kunya and others that include his personal name.

Finally, one observes a notable semantic correspondence between the formal title of the caliph and the wording of the inscription. This intentional harmony suggests a careful alignment of title and epigraphic message. For example, al-Mahdī's inscription cites the Qurʾānic verse: "Is then he who guides to the truth more worthy to be followed, or he who finds no guidance unless he is guided? What is the matter with you? How do you judge?" (Qurʾān 10:35), a verse whose theme of divine guidance resonates deeply with his title *al-Mahdī* ("the Guided One") (Ibn ʿIdhārī 1948, vol. 1, 159). Similarly, al-Manṣūr bi-Naṣr Allāh's inscription—*"bi-naṣr al-bāṭin al-ẓāhir yantaṣir al-imām Abū Ṭāhir"*—reflects and reinforces his title, which emphasizes divine victory and support (al-Maqrīzī 1967, vol. 1, 91).

These correspondences between epigraphic formulae and formal titles underscore the sophisticated symbolic economy at work in Fāṭimid signet culture. Inscriptions were not merely functional identifiers but instruments of ideological communication, theological affirmation, and dynastic distinction.

Stylistic Features of Fāṭimid Caliphal Ring Inscriptions

A close reading of the stylistic features in the inscriptions engraved on the signet rings of the Fāṭimid caliphs reveals both continuity with the broader tradition of Islamic epigraphy and distinct innovations that set them apart. Chief among the shared characteristics is the feature of *brevity*, which serves as the unifying hallmark of Islamic ring inscriptions in general. Despite the tendency of Fāṭimid inscriptions to include extended formulae involving epithets, *kunyas*, and rhymed structures, conciseness remained the prevailing stylistic constraint. Some inscriptions, such as that of al-ʿĀḍid li-Dīn Allāh—*"Allāh is my Lord"*—consist of only two words (al-Maqrīzī 1967, vol. 3, 303), while most fall within a range of six to seven words (ibid., vol. 1, 73, 87, 91, 116, 235, 292; vol. 2, 94, 122, 334). A minority of inscriptions extend beyond ten words, particularly those including direct citations from the Qurʾān (Ibn ʿIdhārī 1948, vol. 1, 159).

This predilection for succinctness is naturally attributable to the limited surface area of the ring bezel, which necessitated linguistic economy and discouraged verbosity. In this spatially constrained medium, the inscriptions relied on condensed, slogan-like phrasing to express complex theological or ideological positions with maximum efficiency. Thus, lexical precision and semantic density were critical, with each word carefully selected to carry deep symbolic significance.

One of the most distinctive stylistic features in Fāṭimid inscriptions is the consistent use of rhymed prose (*sajʿ*)—a feature not universally present in earlier Islamic inscriptions. This rhetorical ornamentation often takes the form of harmonious sound pairing between one of the Divine Names and the caliph's *kunya* or personal name. The phenomenon is first observed in the earliest inscription of the first Fāṭimid caliph, al-Mahdī: *"By the victory of the Glorified God, the Imām Abū Muḥammad triumphs"* (al-Maqrīzī 1967, vol. 1, 73). The rhyme between *al-mumajjad* (the Glorified) and *Muḥammad* was clearly intentional, chosen over other divine epithets such as *al-mājid*, which, though accurate, would not have achieved the same phonetic resonance.

This deliberate matching is echoed in several subsequent inscriptions: *al-dāʾim* (the Everlasting) and *al-Qāsim* in al-Qāʾim's inscription (ibid., vol. 1, 87); *al-ẓāhir* (the Manifest) and *al-Ṭāhir* in al-Manṣūr's (ibid., vol. 1, 91); *al-ṣamad* (the Self-Sufficient) and *Maʿadd* in al-Muʿizz's (ibid., vol. 1, 116); *al-ʿaẓīm* (the Great) and *Tamīm* (al-Nuwayrī 2004, vol. 28, 152); *al-jabbār* (the Compeller) and *Nizār* in al-ʿAzīz's (al-Maqrīzī 1967, vol. 1, 292); *al-walī* (the Patron) and *ʿAlī* in al-Ḥākim's (ibid., vol. 2, 94, 122); and *al-ʿalīm* (the All-Knowing) and *Tamīm* in al-Mustanṣir's inscription (ibid., vol. 2, 334).

This use of *sajʿ* aligns with the broader stylistic tendencies of fourth/tenth-century Arabic prose, in which rhetorical embellishment through rhyme and balance became increasingly prevalent, particularly in literary and ceremonial texts (al-Nuwayrī 2004, vol. 28, 152). Its appearance in ring inscriptions reflects this cultural aesthetic, albeit condensed into miniature textual units. In the Fāṭimid case, however, the pursuit of rhyme appears to have acquired a strategic role: not merely decorative, but as a means of enhancing symbolic congruity and memorability.

While the incorporation of direct Qurʾānic citations is rare, it does occur in one of the early inscriptions of al-Mahdī, which quotes verse 10:35 in full—*"*Is then He who guides to the truth more worthy to be followed...*"* (Ibn ʿIdhārī 1948, vol. 1, 159). Nonetheless, later Fāṭimid inscriptions largely abandon full citations in favor of personalized formulae that integrate Divine Names with the caliph's identity markers (name, title, or *kunya*), though those Names themselves are drawn from Qurʾānic vocabulary.

Another striking stylistic characteristic is the high degree of formulaic repetition, particularly following the model of al-Mahdī's original inscription. Subsequent caliphs frequently emulated this structure, repeating the general syntactic framework while adjusting specific elements to fit their own name or title. The typical formula is composed of:

1. A prepositional phrase beginning with *"bi-naṣr..."* (by the victory of...),
2. A verbal clause *"yantaṣir al-imām..."* (the Imām triumphs...),
3. Followed by the caliph's *kunya* (e.g., *Abū Muḥammad, Abū al-Qāsim*).

This formulaic structure led to a remarkable **uniformity in syntactic design**, resulting in inscriptions that, while varied in content, remained linguistically homologous. The prevalence of this pattern suggests both dynastic continuity and a stylistic conservatism rooted in reverence for the founding caliph's rhetorical choices.

In contrast, some of the later inscriptions break from this Fāṭimid template and instead reflect external influences. The final Fāṭimid caliph, al-ʿĀḍid li-Dīn Allāh, inscribed on his ring the simple phrase: *"Allāh is my Lord"*—a formula more characteristic of the inscriptions used by early Islamic caliphs such as ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, Yazīd ibn Muʿāwiyah, and the ʿAbbāsid caliphs al-Hādī and Hārūn al-Rashīd (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1911, vol. 1, 51; al-Masʿūdī 1894, 281, 314; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih 1940, vol. 5, 116; al-Ṣafadī 1931, vol. 27, 119; al-Quḍāʿī 1970, 157, 203).

In conclusion, while Fāṭimid inscriptions reflect the broader conventions of Islamic epigraphy—particularly in their brevity and use of Divine Names—they also exhibit unique stylistic evolutions. These include the incorporation of deliberate rhyme, the emphasis on *kunyas*, and a high degree of formulaic consistency. The inscriptions thus functioned not only as identifiers but also as concise proclamations of theological legitimacy and dynastic identity, articulating in miniature the ideological vision of the Fāṭimid caliphate.

Inscriptions in Context: Material Culture and the Aesthetics of Power

While signet rings served as intimate, personal instruments of authority, their inscriptions formed part of a broader visual and textual language of power articulated across multiple media during the Fatimid period. Coins, monumental architecture, and Qurʾanic manuscripts all participated in a cohesive program of epigraphic propaganda, reinforcing the caliphs' religious legitimacy and public image through repeated motifs, formulae, and titles.

One of the most direct parallels to the ring inscriptions is found in Fatimid coinage. As noted by Bloom (2007) and Walker (2016), gold dinars and silver dirhams minted in al-Mahdiyya and later in Cairo often featured inscriptions invoking *al-imām* alongside divine names such as *al-ʿAzīz, al-ʿAlīm,* and *al-Ṣamad*—phrases also common on signet rings. The repetition of phrases like *"Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh, ʿAlī Walī Allāh"* and *"bi-naṣr Allāh yantaṣir al-imām"* across both media indicates a conscious epigraphic standardization designed to reach both elite and popular audiences (Bloom 2007, 121–24; Walker 2016, 58–65).

Similarly, Fatimid architecture, especially in Cairo, served as a monumental canvas for inscriptions that mirrored the ideological content of rings and coins. The façade of al-Azhar Mosque (founded 970 CE) and al-Ḥākim Mosque (completed 1013 CE) both feature inscriptions in Kufic and floriated Kufic scripts that invoke God's attributes, affirm the imamate, and reflect Fatimid doctrinal themes (Bierman 1996, 43–57). These inscriptions are carved at large scale but echo the same rhetorical tone and theological lexicon found on signet rings: concision, divine legitimacy, and the title *al-imām* are all present. This architectural epigraphy transformed the urban fabric into a textually inscribed space of Fatimid sovereignty and sacred authority.

A third vector of comparison lies in Fatimid Qurʾanic manuscripts, which represent some of the most refined examples of Islamic calligraphy and visual theology. As Cortese and Calderini (2002) and Déroche (2000) have shown, many Qurʾans produced under Fatimid patronage—such as those associated with the Dār al-ʿIlm—exhibit stylistic markers also visible in signet

ring inscriptions: rhythmic phrasing, sajʿ, and selective emphasis on particular divine names (e.g., *al-ʿAlīm*, *al-ʿAzīz*). Furthermore, the use of gold Kufic script in both Qurʾans and on precious objects like rings and coins reveals a unifying aesthetic of sanctity and legitimacy, in which the written word is both ornament and ideology.

By tracing this intertextual epigraphic language across various media—rings, coins, mosques, and manuscripts—it becomes clear that the Fāṭimid caliphs orchestrated a multi-modal discourse of sovereignty. The signet ring was not an isolated artifact but a node within a wider ecosystem of material culture wherein writing functioned as power—sacred, visual, and enduring.

Conclusion

This study has presented a comprehensive analysis of the inscriptions found on the signet rings of the caliphs of the Fāṭimid dynasty, relying primarily on core Arabic sources—most notably *Ittiʿāẓ al-ḥunafāʾ* by al-Maqrīzī, a foundational reference in this field—alongside other historical sources that enriched the research. The investigation centered on four main axes: the sources of the inscriptions, their content, stylistic features, and their historical documentation according to the chronological sequence of the Fāṭimid caliphs.

The study revealed that the inscriptions consistently emphasized the Fāṭimid caliphs' claim to divine legitimacy through expressions such as *"naṣr Allāh"* (God's victory) and *"tawḥīd"* (monotheism). These inscriptions served to integrate the religious principles of the Fāṭimid daʿwa with its political aims, functioning as tools to garner public support and affirm the caliphs' dual status as both religious and political leaders. The inscriptions frequently highlighted the caliphs' unique titles and *kunyas*, which were closely aligned with the textual content of the engravings.

Moreover, the inscriptions were characterized by their stylistic brevity and rhetorical density, with a notable emphasis on rhyme (*sajʿ*), and demonstrated clear patterns of imitation among successive rulers. This formulaic repetition illustrates the presence of a unified artistic and ideological tradition within the Fāṭimid epigraphic practice. The study also showed that Fāṭimid inscriptions contributed to the broader development of Islamic art—particularly during the Ayyubid and Mamlūk periods—by integrating geometric ornamentation with Arabic calligraphy, making them a model of aesthetic and propagandistic creativity.

The research further noted the diversity in inscriptions attributed to a single caliph—such as al-Mahdī and al-Muʿizz—reflecting a tradition of adaptation that echoed earlier Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid practices. Nevertheless, this diversity maintained a consistent symbolic structure rooted in Fāṭimid religious motifs and political slogans across two and a half centuries.

The study concludes that these inscriptions were not mere decorative elements, but textual artifacts that embodied the Fāṭimid identity by blending religion with politics. The signet ring, in this context, became a symbol of authority and a means of affirming legitimacy, echoing earlier Islamic traditions established since the time of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). These texts also demonstrate the expressive power of the Arabic language, especially in its capacity to condense profound meanings into highly crafted rhetorical formulations that merged Divine attributes (such as *al-ʿAzīz* and *al-ʿAlīm*) with formal political titles.

In sum, the Fāṭimid ring inscriptions represent a unique cultural heritage that encapsulates the dynamic interplay between art, religion, and power. They highlight the Arabic language's capability to embody layered meaning in concise expression, and they offer a window into the Fāṭimid worldview—underscoring the importance of preserving this legacy as a bridge between past and present.

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