University of Tehran Press

Journal of Archaeological Studies

P. ISSN: 2251-9297 - **E. ISSN:** 2676-4288

Vol. 18, No. 2, Serial No. 39 / Summer-Autumn, 2026

https://jarcs.ut.ac.ir/



The Comprehensive Perceptual Horizon of the Urban Society of Nishapur in the 9–10th Centuries Based on Kufic Inscriptions on Pottery

Hossein Sedighian[1]

1. Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Humanities, Lorestan University, Khoram-Abad, Iran.
Email: Sedighian.h@lu.ac.ir

Article Info

Pp: 225-247

Article Type:
Research Article

Article History:

Received:
2026/05/08

Revised:
2026/07/16

Accepted:
2026/07/19

Published online:
2026/10/23

Keywords:
Inscribed Pottery, Nishapur, Material Culture, Cognitive Archaeology, Discourse Analysis.

Abstract

Inscribed pottery from ninth- and tenth-century Nishapur constitutes one of the most significant bodies of material evidence for the social and intellectual life of early Islamic Iran. Although these vessels served utilitarian purposes, their Kufic inscriptions also communicated ethical, social, and spiritual ideas. Their potential for reconstructing the perceptual and moral horizons of Nishapur's urban society, however, has received comparatively little systematic attention. This study examines sixty Kufic inscriptions from Nishapur through qualitative discourse and content analysis, comparing their themes with contemporary textual traditions associated with futuwwa (chivalric ethics), the Malāmatīyya, Sufism, and other intellectual and religious currents. Drawing on material culture studies and cognitive and perceptual approaches to archaeology, it treats inscribed vessels as media through which ethical concepts circulated in everyday urban life rather than simply as decorated objects bearing texts. The analysis finds the strongest correspondence with themes associated with futuwwa and the Malāmatīyya, alongside varying degrees of correspondence with Sufism, the Ahl al-Hadith, courtly literary culture (adab-i dīvānī), the Karrāmiyya, and the Muʿtazila. This pattern points to an intellectual landscape characterized by overlapping ethical and spiritual vocabularies rather than sharply bounded sectarian traditions. The inscriptions suggest that concepts associated with distinct religious and intellectual currents circulated together within the material culture of Nishapur. The prominence of futuwwa and Malāmatī themes, therefore, need not indicate the religious affiliation of the vessels' makers or users. Instead, it may reflect ethical ideals that held particular currency among urban groups connected with commerce and craft production. Nishapur's inscribed pottery thus provides evidence for a shared moral vocabulary through which diverse intellectual traditions entered everyday material and social life.

Cite this The Author(s): Sedighian, H. (2026). The Comprehensive Perceptual Horizon of the Urban Society of Nishapur in the 9–10th Centuries Based on Kufic Inscriptions on Pottery. *Journal of Archaeological Studies,* 18(2), 225–247. https://doi.org/10.22059/jarcs.2026.414004.143413

Publisher: University of Tehran.
Copyright © 2026 The Authors. Published by University of Tehran.
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). Non-commercial uses of the work are permitted, provided the original work is properly cited.

Homepage of this Article: https://jarcs.ut.ac.ir/article_107927.html?lang=en

1. Introduction

Inscribed pottery from Nishapur constitutes one of the most significant sources of material culture from the 9-10th centuries. Beyond their artistic and archaeological value, these objects carry layers of thought, ethics, and cultural language belonging to the urban society of Khurasan. These artifacts, particularly within the context of Nishapur as one of the major urban and intellectual centers of the Islamic world, make it possible to examine the connection between material culture and systems of meaning. A distinguishing feature of this pottery is the widespread presence of Kufic inscriptions bearing ethical, religious, and aphoristic content, which elevates these objects beyond the level of everyday utilitarian wares and transforms them into media for the transmission of meaning.

During this period, Nishapur experienced a highly dynamic, multi-discursive environment in which various intellectual currents, including Sufism, futuwwa, Malamatiyya, Karramiyya, Muʿtazilism, as well as the traditions of the ahl al-hadith and the administrative (dīwānī) class, coexisted and shaped the social and cultural life of the city. Rather than producing rigid boundaries, this intellectual coexistence gave rise to a network of ethical and behavioral concepts that were reflected across different levels of urban society.

Despite the considerable volume of historical and textual scholarship on the intellectual currents of Khurasan and Nishapur, comparatively little attention has been paid to the capacity of material-culture data, particularly inscribed pottery, for reconstructing the intellectual and perceptual horizons of urban society. In most studies, these inscriptions have been examined either descriptively or treated merely as linguistic, religious, or literary evidence, even though such data can play an important role in understanding the relationship between thought, ethics, and everyday life. A systematic analysis of these inscriptions within a discursive and perceptual framework can therefore address an important gap in the study of Nishapur's urban culture during the early Islamic centuries.

Within this context, ceramic inscriptions may be regarded as one of the few available material sources for reconstructing systems of meaning. Through the use of condensed language, rhetorical concision, and aphoristic structures, these inscriptions articulate concepts such as asceticism (zuhd), contentment (qanāʿat), reliance on God (tawakkul), generosity (jūd), magnanimity (murūwwat), silence, and self-restraint, concepts that also occupy a prominent place in the prevailing intellectual discourses of the period.

The necessity of undertaking this research can be justified from several perspectives. First, the inscribed pottery of Nishapur represents one of the few surviving material sources of Khurasan's urban culture in the early Islamic centuries; a systematic analysis of these objects can yield information beyond what textual sources alone provide. Second, given that a substantial portion of the written sources from this period is oriented toward the religious and intellectual elite, material culture offers access to broader strata of urban society. Third, the integration of a cognitive-archaeological approach with discourse analysis in the study of Islamic-period Iranian pottery remains at an early stage, and this research can offer a methodological model for similar studies.

The present study aims to reexamine the Kufic inscriptions on Nishapur's slip-painted pottery as cultural-semantic data. Its main objectives are as follows: (a) to identify the ethical and intellectual themes present in the inscriptions on Nishapur pottery; (b) to analyze the relationship between these themes and the intellectual discourses prevailing in Nishapur during the ninth–tenth centuries CE; (c) to reconstruct part of the perceptual horizon of Nishapur's urban society through material-culture data; and (d) to examine the degree of overlap and interaction among the discourses of futuwwa, Malamatiyya, Sufism, the ahl al-hadith, Karramiyya, Muʿtazilism, and administrative (dīwānī) literary culture as reflected in this data.

In light of the objectives stated above, this research seeks to answer the following two questions: (a) What ethical and intellectual themes do the Kufic inscriptions on Nishapur pottery convey, and to what extent do these themes correspond to the intellectual discourses prevailing in Nishapur during the ninth–tenth centuries CE? (b) Which discourses are most prominently represented in these inscriptions, and what does this imply about the intellectual structure of urban society?

Research Method: The present study is fundamental in purpose and descriptive-analytical in nature and method. Employing an interdisciplinary approach grounded in the principles of cognitive archaeology and discourse analysis, it examines the perceptual horizon of Nishapur's urban society during the 9-10th centuries on the basis of Kufic pottery inscriptions. To this end, the texts of the inscriptions were first classified into semantic clusters and then assessed through comparative analysis against the intellectual discourses prevailing in the period under study, not with the aim of definitively attributing them to a particular sect, but in order to identify the degree of conceptual overlap between the inscriptions and each discourse. The interdisciplinary approach of the present study is likewise formed through the integration of archaeology, intellectual history, and cultural semiotics; that is, the themes of the inscriptions are classified through comparison with the intellectual discourses of the period under examination, and the material data are then interpreted using the tools of discourse analysis within the framework of cognitive archaeology.

Data Collection Method: The present study collected its necessary data through library-based and documentary research. In the first stage, the primary corpus of the study was assembled, comprising 60 Kufic inscriptions recorded on slip-painted pottery from Nishapur dating to the 9-10th centuries. The texts of these inscriptions were extracted primarily from specialized publications on Nishapur pottery, in particular the two works "Inscriptions on Nishapur Pottery" by ʿAbdullah Qouchani (1985), and "Nishapur Pottery by Wilkinson (1973), an article titled "Serving Wisdom: The Contents of Samanid Epigraphic Pottery" by Pancaroğlu (2002), and other related studies.

In this regard, only inscriptions whose full text was legible were selected, and repeated inscriptions were excluded; consequently, the sample constitutes a purposive selection from the available population, rather than a random sample or one representative of the entirety of Nishapur's ceramic production during the 9-10th centuries. It must be emphasized that these 60 inscriptions were not derived from direct field study of the vessels themselves, but were extracted through documentary compilation from published specialized sources. Accordingly, the number

of parent vessels bearing these inscriptions is not necessarily known, and certain inscriptions, such as "برکه لصاحبه" (blessing to its owner), may be repeated across several different vessels.

From the outset, this research has adopted a textual-discursive approach rather than a statistical-quantitative one; its aim has been to analyze the content of the inscriptions as semantic units, not to examine the frequency of their distribution among vessels. The inscriptions were first transcribed as texts and then classified into semantic clusters on the basis of qualitative content analysis. In the analytical stage, the method of comparative conceptual analysis was employed; that is, the themes of the inscriptions were assessed against the intellectual and ethical discourses prevailing in Nishapur during to the 9-10th centuries, including futuwwa, Malamatiyya, Sufism, the hadith tradition, and rationalist literary culture. This assessment was carried out not as a definitive attribution, but on the basis of the degree of conceptual overlap and discursive similarities.

2. Literature Review

Studies related to inscribed Nishapur pottery have primarily focused on the introduction, classification, and artistic and epigraphic analysis of these works. Such studies have presented Nishapur pottery as one of the most important ceramic productions of Iran in the early Islamic centuries, with attention given to their technical characteristics, typology, decorative motifs, and place within the history of Islamic art (see for example: Fehervari, 1973; Allan, 1991; Watson, 2004). Likewise, in certain works such as "Nishapur Pottery", these objects have been examined within the broader framework of locally produced or imported Nishapur wares recovered through archaeological excavation (Wilkinson, 1973). In other studies, such as "Inscriptions on Nishapur Pottery" and the article "Serving Wisdom: The Contents of Samanid Epigraphic Pottery," the focus has been limited to the transcription of the inscriptions and brief commentary on their relationship to hadith, Arabic poetry, or proverbs (Qouchani, 1985; Pancaroglu, 2002). Nevertheless, the predominant orientation of these studies has been descriptive and typological, with comparatively little systematic analysis of the inscriptions' themes in relation to the intellectual and social structures of urban society. Certain studies, in addition to transcribing a number of inscriptions, have also examined the themes employed within them. For example, the article "Identifying the Elements of Futuwwa in Nishapur Pottery Inscriptions" examined several inscriptions derived from the sayings of Imam ʿAli and interpreted them as connected to futuwwa thought current in that period (Zakariya-ye Kermani *et al.,* 2013).

The second group comprises studies concerned with the intellectual and religious currents of Nishapur during the 9-10th centuries. These extensively conducted studies have examined the formation and development of currents such as Sufism, futuwwa, Malamatiyya, Karramiyya, and Muʿtazilism within the social context of Khurasan, analyzing their roles in the society of that period. In addition, matters such as the characteristics or distinguishing features of these sects and their comparison with one another are among the other issues addressed in this body of research. At the same time, primary religious texts, such as futuwwat-nāmas and the historical-religious works of this period, have also assisted the researcher in arriving at a more accurate understanding

of these sects. Accordingly, primary historical sources have been drawn upon in analyzing the themes related to Malamatiyya, Sufism, and futuwwa. Among the most important of these sources is "al-Malāmatiyya, al-Ṣūfiyya wa Ahl al-Futuwwa" by Abū al-ʿAlāʾ ʿAfīfī, in which the principles and foundations of the Malamati current are explained by one of the leading scholars in this field; concepts such as the avoidance of ostentation (riyāʾ), the concealment of virtue, the internalization of spiritual conduct, silence as an instrument of self-vigilance, and the subordination of outward appearance to inner reality are directly reflected in this work (Afifi, 1997: 98–110). Likewise, "al-Lumaʿ fī al-Taṣawwuf" by al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī, one of the most authoritative primary sources for understanding Khurasani Sufism, explains concepts such as asceticism (zuhd), reliance on God (tawakkul), patience (ṣabr), sincerity (ikhlāṣ), and the seven principles of Sufism within the social context of this same period, thereby providing a direct basis for comparison with the themes of the inscriptions. In particular, in the section "Discourse on Sincerity", al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī states explicitly that Sufism rests upon five principles: fasting, prayer, performing prayer in congregation, sincerity in deeds, reliance on God, contentment with God's knowledge, and silence (Siraj Tusi, n.d.: 91). Furthermore, "Talbīs Iblīs" by Ibn al-Jawzī, which contains documented, firsthand critiques of the intellectual currents of this period, including the Sufis and ascetics, offers valuable information regarding the deviations and behavioral characteristics of these currents and allows for a more critical assessment of the inscriptions' themes. Among other matters, in the chapter on Iblīs's deception of the Sufis, traits such as false claims of reliance on God, the renunciation of wealth, avoidance of gainful work, and pretensions to asceticism are criticized, criticism that, in turn, indicates the prevalence of these concepts in the general culture of the period (Ibn al-Jawzi, 2015: 163–175). The use of these primary sources alongside various secondary sources has enabled a more precise assessment of the degree of correspondence between the inscriptions' themes and the prevailing intellectual discourses. Among these secondary sources, particular mention should be made of Bulliet's valuable work "The Patricians of Nishapur", which examines the social, religious, and familial structure of Nishapur and the connections among the urban elite, Sufism, futuwwa, and social culture (Bulliet, 1972). Nevertheless, the principal weakness of this category of primary and secondary sources is that they rely predominantly on textual and historical material and have given comparatively little attention to the reflection of these discourses in material culture and everyday objects.

The third group comprises studies related to cognitive archaeology, semiotics, and discourse analysis. In this connection, Foucault (1969), in "The Archaeology of Knowledge", and Eco (1975), in "A Theory of Semiotics", emphasized the multilayered nature of meaning and the role of social context in the production and interpretation of signs. Miller (1987), in "Material Culture and Mass Consumption", likewise characterized objects as bearers of signs with communicative and identity-related functions within social contexts. Renfrew and Bahn (2023), in "Archaeology: Theory, Method, and Practice", further introduced the concept of the "perceptual horizon" as a framework for understanding how past societies perceived and interpreted the world. Nevertheless, in the existing applications of these approaches, comparatively little attention has been paid to

specific bodies of data such as inscribed Islamic pottery, and, in particular, the corpus of slip-painted Nishapur ware, and the direct relationship between these theoretical frameworks and the concrete data of material culture has been rarely formulated.

Taken together, the review of previous research indicates the existence of three fundamental gaps in the existing scholarship: first, the predominance of descriptive, classificatory, and comparative approaches in studies of Nishapur pottery; second, the separation of historical analyses of intellectual currents from material-culture data; and third, the absence of a coherent application of cognitive-archaeological approaches to the analysis of Kufic inscriptions. The present study seeks to address these gaps by integrating these three domains, thereby making it possible to reconstruct the intellectual culture of Nishapur through material-culture data.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study rests on the view that material culture is not merely a passive reflection of social structures but an active component within systems of meaning production and reproduction. In contemporary material-culture studies, objects are regarded as bearers of signs that, within specific social contexts, possess communicative and identity-related functions (for further discussion, see: Miller, 1987). On this basis, the inscribed pottery of Nishapur can be analyzed not merely as utilitarian artifacts but as media that convey ethical and spiritual themes in a concise, aesthetic, and representable form. Within this framework, the inscriptions are treated as "text" and the pottery vessel as "medium," and the act of consumption is understood as a meaning-generating process.

The principal analytical foundation of this study is the approach of "cognitive archaeology," which examines the modes of perception of past societies on the basis of their material remains. The key concept within this approach is the perceptual horizon, that is, a set of mental frameworks, cultural expectations, and interpretive patterns that determine which signs are meaningful, comprehensible, and acceptable to a given society (Renfrew & Bahn, 2023: 435). The aim of this research is not to reconstruct individual beliefs or to establish definitive sectarian affiliations, but rather to identify those ethical and spiritual statements that were recognizable and reproducible within the perceptual horizon of Nishapur's urban society during the 9-10th centuries.

The framework of discourse analysis is likewise employed to analyze the themes of these inscriptions. Discourse here refers to a network of concepts, values, and semantic rules that confers meaning upon phenomena and organizes them into a comprehensible form (Foucault, 1969: 130). Within the context of 9-10th centuries Nishapur, the discourses associated with Sufism, futuwwa, Malamatiyya, Karramiyya, the ahl al-hadith, and Muʿtazilism are treated as semantic fields. One of the important principles within this framework is the acceptance of discursive overlap: in the intellectual milieu of Nishapur during this period, the boundaries between intellectual currents were fluid and permeable, and a single ethical statement could carry meaning within several discourses simultaneously (Eco, 1975: 54-56). Accordingly, the relationship between the

inscriptions and the discourses is assessed not in terms of definitive attribution, but in terms of degree of semantic correspondence.

Within this framework, the concept of the "economy of meaning" is employed to explain the distribution of themes. By economy of meaning is meant the system governing the distribution and circulation of concepts within the cultural space of a society, a system in which, analogous to a material economy, certain "semantic goods" are produced, exchanged, and consumed more than others (Thompson, 1971). Within this system, concepts possessing three characteristics, concision (the capacity for compression), ethical weight (the capacity to convey values), and material representability (the possibility of being inscribed upon an object), appear more frequently in material culture. From this perspective, concepts prominent in the discourses of Sufism, futuwwa, and Malamatiyya, such as humility, contentment, the avoidance of ostentation, and chivalry (jawānmardī), readily lend themselves to becoming aphoristic phrases suitable for inscription on pottery, whereas discourses such as Muʿtazilism, which are concentrated on abstract theological debates, possess lesser capacity for material representation.

Within the theoretical framework of "consumption and identity," the selection of objects is understood as reflecting not only functional needs but also social values and identities (Bourdieu, 1979: 180). On this basis, the choice of inscriptions bearing specific ethical themes, such as generosity, magnanimity, contentment, or the avoidance of ostentation, as in phrases like "من ایقن بالخلف جاد بالعطیه" (he who is certain of recompense gives generously) or "العلم اشرف الاحساب و المروه اشبک الانساب" (knowledge is the noblest of merits, and magnanimity the most intertwined of lineages), may be regarded as a form of ethical-identity representation. That is to say, through the selection of an object bearing such themes, the consumer defines himself in relation to a particular set of values. Consequently, inscribed pottery constitutes not merely a reflection of existing discourses but also an instrument for their reproduction and consolidation within the social sphere.

4. The Historical and Discursive Context of Nishapur

During the 9-10th centuries, the city of Nishapur was one of the most important cultural, political, and economic centers of Khurasan. Owing to its economic standing, the presence of craft guilds, and its extensive commercial networks, the city provided a favorable environment for the formation and interaction of diverse intellectual and religious currents. The intellectual atmosphere of the city was shaped not by the isolated presence of distinct sects, but by the coexistence and interaction of discourses, each of which represented a portion of the perceptual horizon of urban society. Among these, Sufism, futuwwa, Malamatiyya, and Karramiyya were counted among the most influential currents in the intellectual life of Nishapur.

Sufism spread throughout Khurasan from the 8-9th centuries, onward, and Nishapur became one of its major centers (Mousavi Bojnourdi, 2014: vol. 13, 107–116). The prevalence of Sufism in Nishapur was not confined to specific mystical circles but gradually became part of the city's urban culture and its ethical mode of life (Zarrinkoub, 1984: 12). Teachings such as asceticism,

humility, tolerance, and attention to the inner dimensions of religion contributed to the penetration of Sufism into urban culture (Garazhian *et al.,* 2021: 114; Golpınarlı, 2004: 23). Nevertheless, Khurasani Sufism during this period was not uniform. One strand of the Sufi tradition, influenced by the "Baghdad Ṣaḥwiyyūn" (the sober school), emphasized severe asceticism, withdrawal from society, and abstention from economic activity—an orientation that, according to Shafiʿi Kadkani, failed to secure a lasting position within Khurasani urban society (Shafiei Kadkani, 2022: 22–23). By contrast, from the 9th century onward, an alternative outlook developed among a group of Sufis who regarded commerce, trade, and professional occupation not as reprehensible but as a means of serving the people (Kulabadi, 1992: 364–365). This latter orientation created common ground between Sufism and both futuwwa and Malamatiyya. The influence of Sufism among certain prominent families and groups of craft guilds likewise attests to its connection with the city's social structure (Bulliet, 1972: 134-138).

Futuwwa, or traditional chivalry, was an ethical code grounded in generosity, mutual aid, and social responsibility that was prevalent among urban craftsmen and guilds (Mousavi Bojnourdi, 2014: vol. 13, 116). This current gradually became linked with Sufism, and particularly with Malamatiyya, giving rise to a form of social-mystical ethics within the marketplace and the everyday life of the city (Alizadeh *et al.,* 2024: 103). In this connection, some scholars hold that futuwwa in Nishapur was a multilayered current, connected both to the Sufi tradition and to the city's social and professional structure (Bulliet, 1972: 44-45). From this perspective, futuwwa may be regarded as the practical, social manifestation of a portion of Sufi ethical teachings (Souqandi et al., 2020: 79). Within this same context, Malamatiyya, which emerged in Nishapur during the second half of the 9th century, emphasized the internalization of religion, the avoidance of ostentation, the concealment of virtue, and active participation in society (Mousavi Bojnourdi, 2014: vol. 13, 118). Unlike certain ascetic tendencies, the Malamatis were generally engaged in trade and professional occupations and regarded such engagement as part of their ethical conduct (Ahangaran *et al.,* 2018: 4). By dressing as ordinary people and taking part in the guilds and the marketplace, they sought to keep their spiritual life free from display and pretension (Sulami, 2010: 27–28). These characteristics brought Malamatiyya into close connection with futuwwa and the urban craftsmen (Abolbashari *et al.,* 2016: 6). Some scholars have also regarded the emergence of this current as, to some extent, a reaction to the spread of Karramiyya in Nishapur (Ahangaran *et al.,* 2018: 4). Karramiyya, founded by Muhammad ibn Karrām al-Sijistānī in the 9 century CE, was another of the major religious currents of Khurasan (Mousavi Bojnourdi, 2014: vol. 13, 118). Emphasizing asceticism, simplicity of living, and reliance on God, this current gained influence among the lower classes and in the rural districts of Khurasan, with its khānaqāhs (Sufi lodges) playing an important role in disseminating its teachings (Madelung, 2002: 75; Rouhi, 2012: 25). Although some Karramis maintained a cautious attitude toward gainful occupation, this negative view of commerce shifted among certain followers of Karramiyya, particularly from the 10th century onward, as craftsmen and merchants gradually began joining the movement (Isfarayini, 1995: 99; Bahranipour and Kāzemi, 2024: 82). Alongside these currents, the Muʿtazila were also

present in Nishapur, though they were unable to achieve wide influence within the city's social and cultural strata. Following the decline of the Muʿtazila's standing within the Abbasid caliphate from the first half of the 9th century onward, adherents of this school were present in certain Iranian cities, including Nishapur; however, opposition from traditionalist currents, the ahl al-hadith, and segments of the Sufi community prevented their extensive spread within the city (Moftakhari and Ghobadpour, 2004: 64). Furthermore, the rationalist and theological nature of Muʿtazilī teachings, compared with the ethical and popularly accessible discourses of Sufism, futuwwa, and Malamatiyya, possessed less capacity for presence in everyday culture and for representation in the form of concise, aphoristic expressions.

Taken together, the intellectual atmosphere of Nishapur during the 9-10th centuries, resulted from the interaction of discourses that, despite their doctrinal differences, shared considerable common ground in many ethical and ascetic concepts; the connection of certain of these currents, particularly futuwwa and Malamatiyya, with the marketplace, the guilds, and urban life, nevertheless appears to have been more pronounced. Shafiʿi Kadkani has likened this situation to four colored paintings that all depict the same landscape, yet each accentuates a different color (Shafiei Kadkani, 2022: 27). From this perspective, the Kufic inscriptions on Nishapur pottery may likewise be regarded as a reflection of this shared semantic space, a space in which the boundaries between discourses remained continually fluid and interactive.

5. Findings

The data for this study comprise a corpus of Kufic inscriptions recorded on slip-painted pottery recovered from Nishapur, dating to the 9-10th centuries (Table 1). This corpus is treated as a textual body within the framework of material culture and is analyzed as a source for reconstructing the semantic and perceptual patterns of the urban society of that period.

The research corpus consists of 60 varied inscription samples, which in terms of content comprise ethical, religious, and aphoristic expressions (Table 1 and Figure 1). It must be emphasized that this figure refers to the number of inscriptional texts, not the number of ceramic vessels; as noted in the Method section, the number of parent vessels bearing these inscriptions is not necessarily known, owing to the documentary (rather than purely field-based) nature of the data collection, and certain texts, such as "برکه لصاحبه" (blessing to its owner) or "برکه و یمن و سرور لصاحبه" (blessing, prosperity, and joy to its owner), appear on more than one vessel.

Rather than articulating a systematic body of theological or juristic doctrine, these expressions are predominantly formulated as short, condensed, slogan-like statements possessing a high capacity for conveying ethical meaning within everyday contexts. Formally, all of the samples are rendered in Kufic script, indicating a degree of standardization in the production and inscription of these works within Nishapur's pottery workshops. This corpus is regarded not merely as a collection of discrete texts but as a coherent whole, within which the recurrence of linguistic and semantic patterns makes it possible to identify dominant discursive structures. Accordingly, each

Table 1: Corpus of Kūfic inscriptions extracted from Nishaburian slip-glazed pottery (Author, 2025).

No.	Inscription Text (Arabic)	English Translation	Theme (Initial)
1	الحیاء شعبهٔ من الایمان و الایمان من الجنهٔ	Modesty is a branch of faith, and faith [leads] to Paradise.	Modesty / religious ethics
2	الطائم الشاکر بمنزلهٔ الصائم الصابر	The grateful eater ranks with the patient faster.	Gratitude / reliance on God
3	من کثر کلامه کثر سقطه	He who speaks much, errs much.	Control of speech
4	اشرف الغنی ترک المنی	The noblest form of wealth is the abandonment of desires.	Asceticism / contentment
5	التدبیر قبل العمل یؤمنک من الندم	Deliberation before action spares you from regret.	Deliberation
6	الحر حر و ان مسه الضرر	The free man remains free, even if harm touches him.	Dignity / futuwwa
7	الحرص علامهٔ الفقر	Greed is a sign of poverty.	Ethics of wealth
8	الرزق مقسوم	Sustenance is [already] apportioned [by God].	Reliance on God
9	من ایقن بالخلف جاد بالعطیه	He who is certain of recompense gives generously.	Generosity / giving
10	من صبر قدر	He who is patient gains the power [to prevail].	Patience
11	الصبر مفتاح الفرج	Patience is the key to relief.	Patience
12	من کسا الحیاء ثوبه خفی عن العیون عیبه	He who clothes himself in modesty conceals his faults from [others'] eyes.	Modesty
13	یا طالب الدنیا و الموت یطلبه	O seeker of the world, while death seeks you.	Asceticism / admonition
14	قد خاطر من استغنی برایه	He takes a risk who relies solely on his own judgment.	Practical reason
15	اتق توقا	Fear [God] as He should be feared.	Piety / prudence
16	اذا کان المال لا محاله ذاهب فافضله ما اورث الحمد	Since wealth is inevitably transient, its best use is that which earns praise.	Ethics of wealth
17	الاخلاص یحصن العمل	Sincerity safeguards one's deeds.	Sincerity
18	الاناه قبل الرأی	Deliberation precedes judgment.	Deliberation
19	الجود من اخلاق اهل الجنه	Generosity is among the virtues of the people of Paradise.	Generosity / giving
20	الحر لا یخلف	The free man does not break his word.	Dignity
21	الحر بر	The free man is righteous.	Dignity
22	الحلم اوله مر مذاقه لکن اخره احلی من العسل	Forbearance is bitter in its first taste, but sweeter than honey in its end.	Forbearance
23	الحمد یبقی ذخره للفتی و المال لا یبقی لاربابه	Praise remains a lasting treasure for the young man, while wealth does not remain for its owners.	Dignity
24	الزم العفاف تکن	Hold fast to chastity, and you shall be [worthy].	Chastity / self-restraint
25	العلم اشرف الاحساب و المروه اشبک الانساب	Knowledge is the noblest of merits, and magnanimity the most intertwined of lineages.	Knowledge / futuwwa
26	العلم زین للفتی و العقل تاج من الذهب	Knowledge is an adornment for the young man, and reason a crown of gold.	Knowledge / reason
27	المال ما تنفقه لا ما تجمعه	Wealth is what you spend, not what you hoard.	Ethics of wealth
28	المنه الاذی	TO remind [others] of a kindness done is itself from of injury.	Social bond
29	الوفاء عزیز و قلیل فاعله و الجفاء موجد و کثیر فاعله	Faithfulness is precious and rarely practiced, while unfaithfulness is common and widely practiced.	Faithfulness
30	ان التفکر فی المقال حکمه و القول من بعد التفکر اجمل	Reflection before speech is wisdom, and words following reflection are more fitting.	Practical reason
31	ان السلامه ما صمت و انما یبدی بطانه ذی العیوب کلامه	Safety lies in silence; it is speech that reveals the inner faults of the flawed man.	Silence
32	ان الکریم اذا ارقصته خدعته و تیق اللئیم مجرب لایخدع	The noble man, when flattered, may be deceived, while the wary, experienced ignoble man is not [easily] deceived.	Dignity
33	ان الکریم و ان تغیر حاله فالقلب منه لایزال شریفا	Indeed the noble man, even if his circumstances change, his heart remains noble.	Dignity
34	توکل تکفا	Place your trust in God, and you shall be sufficed.	Reliance on God
35	من کثر مزاحه حقر قدره	He who jests excessively diminishes his own worth.	Gravity / dignity

No.	Inscription Text (Arabic)	English Translation	Theme (Initial)
36	حیاؤک فاحفظه علیک فانما یدل علی فعل الکریم	Guard your modesty, for it indicates noble conduct.	Modesty
37	خالص الکرام و ارغب النهم و ارع النفس	Be sincere among the noble, restrain [excessive] desire, and watch over the self.	Sincerity
38	سل تعط	Ask, and you shall be given.	Invocation
39	کل هنیاً مریاً حلالاً طیباً من طس قناعه	Eat in health and delight, lawfully and wholesomely, from the bowl of contetment.	Contentment
40	لا الجود یفنی المال قبل فنائه و لا البخل فی مال الشحیح یزید	Generosity does not exhaust wealth before its natural end, nor does miserliness increase the miser's wealth.	Generosity
41	لفرح الادیب بالادیب کفرح المرید بالمرید	The joy of the cultivated man in [meeting] another is like the joy of the disciple in [meeting] a fellow disciple.	Social bond
42	لیس الفتی المعطی علی الیسر وحده و لکنه المعطی علی العسر و الیسر	The truly chivalrous man is not one who gives only in ease, but one who gives in both hardship and ease.	Futuwwa
43	لیس جود الجواد من فضل مال انما الجود للمقل المواسی	The generosity of the generous is not [merely] from surplus wealth; true generosity is that of the poor man who still shares.	Generosity
44	من ایقن بالخلف جاد و کیفما عودت النفس تعتاد	He who is certain of recompense gives generously, and however the soul is habituated, so it becomes accustomed.	Generosity / certainty
45	من ایقن بعطفه قنع باحواله	He who is certain of [God's] compassion is content with his circumstances.	Contentment
46	من عز بر	He who attains honor is [also] dutiful.	Dignity
47	من قنع قدر	He who is content, gains capability.	Contentment
48	من کان منطقه ناطقا من فضه فالصمت در انه الیاقوت	He whose speech is [as precious] as silver, his silence is a pearl — indeed a ruby.	Silence
49	و الجود و الجنه للابرار ... الکفر و البخل بنی النار	Generosity and Paradise belong to the righteous ... [while] disbelief and miserliness belong to the people of Hellfire.	Generosity / religious ethics
50	و عاجز الرأی مضیاع لفرصته؛ حتی اذا فات امر عاتب القدرا	The man weak in judgment squanders his opportunity; and when the matter has passed, he blames fate.	Practical reason
51	لا مصیبه اعظم من جهل	There is no calamity greater than ignorance.	Knowledge
52	بری البخیل جدیل المال واحده ان الجواد یری فی ماله سبلا	The miser sees wealth as a single, unbending path, while the generous man sees in his wealth many avenues [for good].	Generosity
53	الملک لله الواحد القهار	Dominion belongs to God, the One, the Subduer.	Monotheism
54	برکه لصاحبه؛ یا برکه و یمن و سرور لصاحبه	Blessing to its owner; O blessing, prosperity, and joy to its owner.	Blessing
55	برکه و نعمت لصاحبه	Blessing and bounty to its owner.	Blessing
56	اذا صرف قلب الرجل الجهاله اهلک ماله و بدنه	When ignorance turns a man's heart, it destroys both his wealth and his body.	Practical reason
57	احسن الصبر و خذ العلا	Practice patience well, and attain the heights.	Patience
58	لا فتی الا علی لا سیف الا ذوالفقار	There is no youth but ʿAlī, no sword but Dhū'l-Fiqār.	Futuwwa
59	الجود حارس الاعراض و الاموال	Generosity is the guardian of honor and wealth.	Generosity
60	الوفاء عود و قلیل الفاعله و الوفاء موجد و کثیر فاعله	Faithfulness recurs [as a virtue] though rarely practiced, while [its neglect] is common and widely practiced. [Wording close to entry 29; possible OCR variance in source.]	Faithfulness

inscription is analyzed as a semantic unit situated within a broader system of ethical and cultural representation.

From the standpoint of material context, the inscribed slip-painted Nishapur pottery, in terms of the variety of its script rendering and decorative execution, glaze quality, and refinement of workmanship, ranks among the second-tier ceramic productions of this period. On this basis, it can be argued that these objects were predominantly available to the middle and upper strata of

urban society, since the lower strata typically used simpler and less expensive vessels (Watson, 2004: 72; Wilkinson, 1973: 14). This fact, on the one hand, limits the interpretive scope of the research corpus, since the perceptual horizon reconstructed through these inscriptions does not necessarily reflect the whole of Nishapur's urban society, but rather represents more specifically the value and ethical system of the class that could afford to consume such semi-luxury goods. On the other hand, this very limitation can itself serve as valuable interpretive data: that is, the ethical themes reflected on these vessels are more likely to be connected with the intellectual discourses prevailing among the guilds, craftsmen, and urban elite of Nishapur than with the culture of the lower or rural strata. This point is also worth noting in interpreting the predominance of futuwwa- and Malamatiyya-related themes within the research corpus, since both currents had a well-documented historical connection with the craftsman and urban classes (Bulliet, 1972: 88–90). The research corpus therefore reflects not only workshop production but also represents a form of cultural selection within the process of consumption. Taken as a whole, this dataset, as a cultural-textual corpus, makes it possible to analyze simultaneously the linguistic level (the text of the inscriptions), the material level (the pottery as a cultural object possessing symbolic value, utilitarian function, and a workshop context of production), and the social level (the pattern of consumption and its audience), and thus constitutes the principal basis for reconstructing the perceptual horizon of that segment of Nishapur's urban society which, during the period under study, was able to acquire and use these vessels. It should finally be noted that, at this stage, the inscriptions were recorded and compiled solely as textual units, and any semantic classification or discursive attribution was carried out in subsequent stages of analysis.

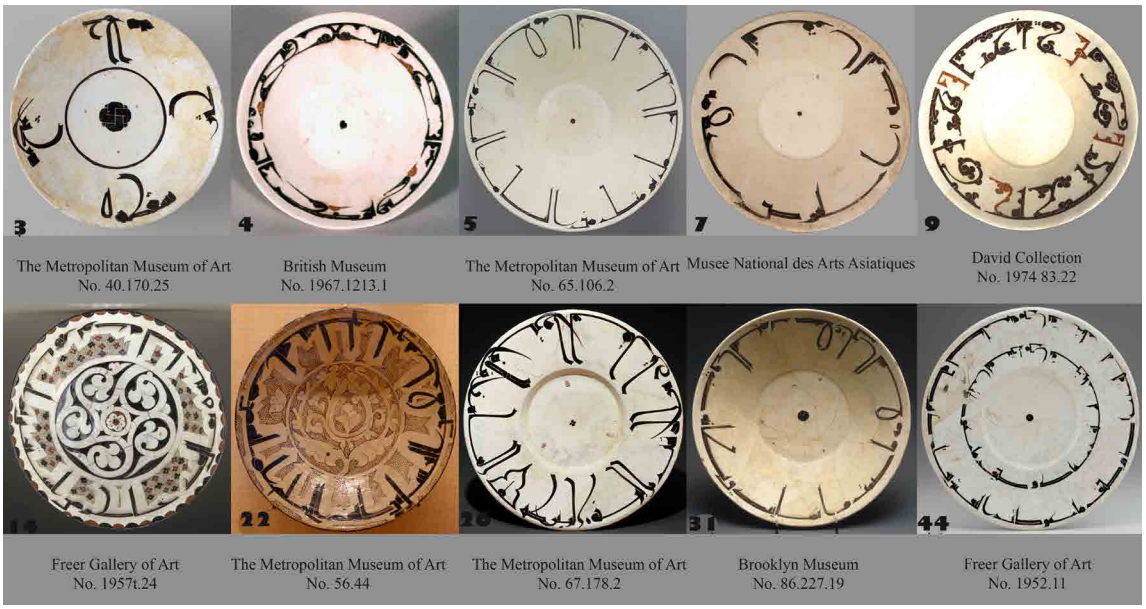


Fig. 1: A selection of inscribed Nishapur vessels, with the number of each inscription (per Table 1) indicated in the lower-left corner of each vessel (Author, 2025).

6. Analysis of Findings

Examination of the content of the 60 Kufic inscriptions on Nishapur slip-painted pottery, as set out in Table 2, shows that the themes of these inscriptions are predominantly ethical, pedagogical, and

social in character and, unlike many theological and religious texts of this period, rarely involve explicit doctrinal or sectarian discussion. In fact, what is reflected in these inscriptions represents less the specific teachings of a particular sect than a form of "urban ethics" that took shape within the social and economic life of Nishapur during the 9-10th centuries. This urban ethic stood at the point of intersection of the discourses of futuwwa, Malamatiyya, Sufism, Karramiyya, and, to some extent, rationalist literary culture, and it reproduced a set of shared values within the cultural space of the city. It must be emphasized that all inferences in this section are limited to the social stratum of the consumers of these vessels, and their generalization to Nishapur's society as a whole would require additional evidence, such as data derived from archaeological excavation or statistical data, which are not available in the present study.

Table 2: Semantic clustering and discourse alignment of the research findings (Author, 2025).

Row	Semantic Cluster	Inscriptions (No. per Table 1)
1	Invocation and blessing	38, 53–55
2	Control of speech and silence	3, 30, 31, 35, 48
3	Sincerity and self-vigilance	17, 32, 37, 44
4	Generosity and the ethics of wealth	9, 16, 19, 27, 40, 42, 43, 49, 52, 59
5	Chivalric (futuwwa) identity	6, 20, 21, 23, 25, 26, 33, 46, 58
6	Modesty and gravity	1, 12, 24, 36
7	Patience and faithfulness	10, 11, 22, 29, 57, 60
8	Asceticism and contentment	4, 7, 8, 13, 39, 45
9	Reliance on God and certainty	2, 34, 47
10	Practical reason and deliberation	5, 14, 15, 18, 50, 51, 56
11	Social bond	28, 41

One of the most important and frequently recurring themes in the inscriptions is the concept of generosity, giving, and the proper attitude toward wealth. Inscriptions such as "من ایقن بالخلف جاد بالعطیه" (he who is certain of recompense gives generously), "الجود من اخلاق اهل الجنه" (generosity is among the virtues of the people of Paradise), and "المال ما تنفقه لا ما تجمعه" (wealth is what you spend, not what you hoard) all emphasize the virtue of almsgiving, generosity, and the priority of the ethical value of wealth over its accumulation. The frequency of these themes indicates that the question of moral economy was one of the principal components of the perceptual horizon of Nishapur's urban society. Within this intellectual system, the value of wealth was defined not by accumulation but by ethical expenditure, generosity, and the generation of spiritual credit. Such an outlook, which is essentially addressed to a broad audience regardless of occupational or social standing, bears a close affinity with the futuwwa tradition, which emphasized self-sacrifice and social support. The more prominent reflection of this outlook within the context of the guilds and the Nishapur marketplace stems simply from the fact that everyday economic transactions provided a suitable setting for the concrete display of these values, rather than indicating that the teaching of generosity and giving was confined to this particular stratum. At the same time, certain of these themes, particularly inscriptions that present giving as a consequence of certainty and reliance on God, also overlap with the teachings of Sufism and Malamatiyya.

Alongside these concepts, a considerable portion of the inscriptions is devoted to representing the ethical identity of the "fatā", or chivalrous young man. Inscriptions such as "لا فتی الا علی لا سیف الا ذوالفقار" (there is no youth but ʿAlī, no sword but Dhū'l-Fiqār), "الحر حر و ان مسه الضر" (the free man remains free even if hardship touches him), "الحر لا یخلف" (the free man does not break his word), "العلم اشرف الاحساب و المروت اشبک الانساب" (knowledge is the noblest of merits, and magnanimity the most intertwined of lineages), and "ان الکریم و ان تغیر حاله فالقلب منه لایزال شریفا" (indeed the noble man, even if his circumstances change, his heart remains noble) present an image of the ideal human being whose principal qualities are fidelity, dignity, magnanimity, freedom, and rationality. These concepts show the greatest conceptual overlap with the futuwwa tradition and indicate that the ethic of chivalry (jawānmardī) had a prominent presence in the cultural life of Nishapur. On the basis of the themes found within this limited corpus of inscriptions, it may be said that futuwwa among the consumers of these vessels was not based solely on valor or self-sacrifice, but also encompassed a form of culture centered on refinement and courtesy (adab); although the generalization of this finding to Nishapur's society as a whole would require further evidence.

Among these, the inscription "لا فتی الا علی لا سیف الا ذوالفقار" occupies an exceptional discursive position within the research corpus. Unlike the other inscriptions, which employ ethical, aphoristic, and cross-discursive language, this inscription explicitly names a historical figure and carries an overt identitarian-doctrinal weight. Within the futuwwa tradition, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib was regarded as the progenitor of chivalrous men and the supreme exemplar of futuwwa, and Dhū'l-Fiqār was regarded as the ideal symbol of chivalry. This inscription likewise acquires deeper meaning within the Sufi tradition of Khurasan, since Sufi lineages traced their spiritual descent to ʿAlī through Salmān al-Fārisī and regarded him as their spiritual pole (quṭb). From the Malamati perspective as well, ʿAlī served as a model of concealment and sincerity. The relative absence of this type of explicit identitarian inscription within the research corpus, represented by only a single example among the 60 inscriptions, is itself an analytical finding. It suggests that the culture of pottery inscription in Nishapur employed a language that was predominantly ethical and cross-discursive rather than identitarian and political. Where an exception does occur, it points directly to the heart of the futuwwa tradition.

Another category of inscriptions emphasizes concepts such as modesty, self-restraint, silence, and guarded speech. Among the various discourses current in Nishapur, these themes show the greatest conceptual overlap with Malamati ethics, although their definitive attribution to this particular current is neither possible nor the aim of this study. Expressions such as "man kathura kalāmuhu kathura saqaṭuhu" (he who speaks much, errs much), "ان السلامه ما صمت" (safety lies in silence), and "من کان منطقه ناطقا من فضه فالصمت درّ" (he whose speech is like silver, his silence is pearl) all reflect a form of inward, self-watchful ethic in which the restraint of speech, the avoidance of self-display, and the preservation of sincerity are of fundamental importance. These concepts show the greatest overlap with the Malamati spirit, which emphasized the concealment of virtue, the avoidance of ostentation, and the internalization of spiritual conduct. Nevertheless,

these themes cannot be regarded as exclusive to Malamatiyya alone, since a significant portion of them also has an extensive precedent in Islamic ethical literature and in the hadith or Karrami traditions. For this reason, it is preferable to understand these concepts within a shared discursive field, rather than as definitive markers of sectarian affiliation.

Another group of inscriptions reflects the themes of asceticism, contentment, reliance on God, and the transience of the world. Expressions such as "اشرف الغنی ترک المنی" (the noblest form of wealth is the abandonment of desires), "الحصر علامه الفقر" (greed is a sign of poverty), "یا طالب الدنیا و الموت الیطلبه" (O seeker of the world, while death seeks you), and "توکل تکفی" (place your trust in God and you shall be sufficed) all emphasize the unreliability of the world, contentment, and trust in God. These themes correspond considerably with the ascetic and Sufi traditions of Khurasan, and in some instances traces of Karrami and hadith-oriented attitudes can also be discerned within them. Nevertheless, the presence of these concepts is less pronounced than that of themes related to generosity, magnanimity, and social ethics. This indicates that the semantic space reflected on Nishapur pottery emphasized a form of social and urban ethics more than it did an isolationist asceticism or the complete renunciation of the world.

A further category of inscriptions emphasizes the themes of patience, forbearance, dignity, and faithfulness. Expressions such as "من صبر ظفر" (he who is patient prevails), "الصبر مفتاح الفرج" (patience is the key to relief), "الحلم اوله مر مذاقه لکن اخره احلی من العسل" (forbearance is bitter in its first taste, but sweeter than honey in its end), "احسن الصبر و خذ الاعلاء" (practice patience well and attain the heights), and "الوفاء عزیز و قلیل فاعله و الجفاء موجد و کثیر فاعله" (faithfulness is precious and rarely practiced, while unfaithfulness is common and widely practiced) all express a form of ethics centered on steadfastness and endurance in the face of life's hardships. These themes stand at the point of convergence of several discourses: within futuwwa, patience and faithfulness were core pillars of chivalry, and the breaking of a pledge, even under the most difficult circumstances, was regarded as disgraceful. Within the hadith tradition as well, patience possessed strong scriptural backing and was linked to concepts such as acceptance of divine decree. A noteworthy point within this cluster is the inscription "احسن الصبر و حذ الاعلاء," which presents patience not as passive acceptance but as an instrument for attaining eminence and honor. This active, dynamic conception of patience aligns more closely with the spirit of futuwwa and magnanimity in Nishapur than with an isolationist asceticism. Alongside this, the inscription "من کثر مزاحه حقر قدرته" (he who jests excessively diminishes his own worth) likewise indicates that dignity and gravity of conduct formed part of this same ethical constellation, since excessive levity was regarded as incompatible with social standing and credibility. The frequency of these themes within the research corpus indicates that the people of Nishapur, regardless of their social standing, were familiar with the bitter reality of faithlessness and hardship, and through these inscriptions reproduced a form of ethics of steadfastness within the material space of daily life.

Among the other important themes is attention to reason, prudent judgment, and practical wisdom. Inscriptions such as "التدبیر قبل عمل یوئمنک من الندم" (deliberation before action spares you regret), "الاناه قبل الرای" (patience precedes judgment), "ان التفکر فی المقال الحیکم" (reflection

upon speech is wisdom), and "و لا مصیبه عظیم من جهل" (there is no calamity greater than ignorance) indicate that, alongside ascetic and mystical teachings, a form of rational, refinement-oriented ethic was also present in Nishapur's urban culture. The inscription "اذا صرف قلب الرجل الجهاله اهلک ماله و بدنه" (when ignorance turns a man's heart, it destroys both his wealth and his body) likewise belongs to this cluster; this expression regards ignorance as dangerous not merely at the epistemic level but also at the practical-economic level. The emphasis on the "destruction of wealth and body" shows that practical wisdom in Nishapur during this period carried tangible worldly consequences and was not merely an abstract recommendation. It should be noted that these themes cannot be directly attributed to the Muʿtazila; nevertheless, they undoubtedly reflect an environment in which practical reason, deliberation, and measured conduct were regarded as values. Such concepts were probably connected less to theological disputation than to the literary and cultural tradition of urban and administrative (dīwānī) circles.

In addition to ethical and aphoristic themes, a portion of the inscriptions in the research corpus is devotional, votive, and monotheistic in character. Expressions such as "برکه لصاحبه" (blessing to its owner), "برکه و نعمه لصاحبه" (blessing and bounty to its owner), "سل تعطا" (ask and you shall be given), "کل فیها هنیا مریا" (eat from it in health and delight), and "الملک لله الواحد القهار" (dominion belongs to God, the One, the Subduer) belong to this group. Quantitatively, this cluster represents another major category of inscription on Nishapur pottery, and its omission from analysis would yield an incomplete picture of the perceptual horizon of urban society. The phrase "برکه لصاحبه" may, at first glance, appear to be merely a conventional blessing, yet closer analysis reveals that it carries several layers of meaning simultaneously. From the perspective of futuwwa, this phrase signifies the complete transfer of good to the owner of the vessel; the giver relinquishes not only the material object but also its spiritual blessing to another, an act that itself exemplifies futuwwa-style self-sacrifice. From the perspective of Malamatiyya, the removal of "من" (from me) from the equation, and the attribution of blessing solely to the "owner," accords with the principle of concealment and the negation of self-display: the one who gives or makes the vessel does not mention his own name. From the standpoint of common usage as well, this phrase represented the simplest and most universally accessible message, comprehensible to an unlettered market-goer and yet possessing depth of meaning for the learned scholar. The phrase "الملک لله الواحد القهار" likewise occupies a distinctive place within this cluster; unlike the other examples, which employ ethical language, this inscription constitutes a direct declaration of monotheistic faith, indicating that Nishapur's material culture, alongside its practical ethics, also carried its own doctrinal underpinning. Taken together, the presence of this cluster within the research corpus shows that inscribed Nishapur pottery served not only as a medium for conveying ethics but also as an instrument of blessing, invocation, and the affirmation of social relations, a function that rendered these objects ritual as well as utilitarian.

In sum, the analysis of the themes of Nishapur's Kufic inscriptions shows that these works reflect a shared perceptual horizon within Nishapur's urban society, a horizon in which the boundaries between futuwwa, Malamatiyya, Sufism, Karramiyya, and the hadith tradition remained

continually fluid and interactive. Among these, the discourses of futuwwa and Malamatiyya show the greatest overlap with the themes of the inscriptions, since many of the recurring concepts, such as generosity, dignity, sincerity, self-restraint, modesty, and mutual support, converge at the intersection of these two currents. Nevertheless, the inscriptions cannot be regarded as the direct reflection of any single sect; rather, they should be understood as part of the material and ethical culture of Nishapur's urban society, one that represented desirable values and behavioral models in the form of short, aphoristic expressions. From this perspective, these inscriptions may be regarded as a reflection of part of the shared ethical culture of Nishapur's urban society, particularly that segment which was able to acquire and use these semi-luxury vessels, although demonstrating their active mediatory function in the transmission and reproduction of meaning would require corroborating evidence beyond this corpus.

7. Discussion

The findings derived from the analysis of the 60 Kufic inscriptions on Nishapur pottery show that the discursive distribution within this corpus takes the form of a multilayered, overlapping field. According to Table 3, the discourses of futuwwa, Malamatiyya, Sufism, the ahl al-hadith, administrative (dīwānī) literary culture, Karramiyya, and Muʿtazilism are each present to varying degrees within the semantic structure of the inscriptions, while certain concepts overlap with several discourses simultaneously. It must be emphasized that the figures presented in Table 3 do not indicate the exclusive attribution of each inscription to a single discourse, but rather express the degree of conceptual overlap between each discourse and the corpus of inscriptions. This is particularly notable with regard to themes aligned with dīwānī literary culture, since concepts such as deliberation, practical reason, and measured conduct are inherently intermediate in nature and may simultaneously overlap with the discourses of the ahl al-hadith, Sufism, or the broader Arabic wisdom-literature tradition. Accordingly, the attribution of this category of inscriptions to dīwānī literary culture as an independent discourse has been made with caution, and reflects primarily their dominant conceptual aspect rather than a definitive assignment to a specific intellectual current. Consequently, the sum of the figures in the table exceeds 60; this is not a contradiction but rather a reflection of the fluid, multilayered nature of Nishapur's discursive field, a field in which sectarian boundaries, at the level of material culture, are represented as a network of shared concepts. This distribution indicates that what is encountered is not a single, uniform intellectual system, but rather the urban discursive field of Nishapur, within which several ethical and theological traditions stood in interaction and convergence.

Among these, the predominance of futuwwa (41 instances) can be explained in direct connection with the economic and guild structure of Nishapur's urban society. During this period, futuwwa was not merely a matter of individual ethics but a system for regulating social relations within the context of the marketplace and craft occupations. The themes related to generosity, self-sacrifice, and livelihood ethics found in these inscriptions indicate that futuwwa had become the dominant language of urban economic ethics and had succeeded in becoming established within

material culture in the form of concise ethical statements. In the author's view, what renders this numerical predominance significant in relation to the other discourses is not mere frequency but the coincidence of these themes with the communicative function of the pottery itself: a vessel that passed from hand to hand in the course of a transaction or as a gift could itself carry a message about generosity and self-sacrifice, and this alignment between object and message made futuwwa more suitable than more abstractly oriented discourses for inscription on everyday goods. This interpretation accords with the identification of these themes as prominent markers of the futuwwa code in the historical sources (Pourjavadi, 2006: 115–116; Mousavi Bojnourdi, 2014: vol. 13, 119).

Table 3: Relative distribution of discourses in the corpus of 60 inscriptions studied (Author, 2025).

Discourse	Number of Instances	Approximate Percentage
Futuwwa	41	68%
Malamatiyya	36	63%
Sufism	26	45%
Ahl al-hadith	15	26%
Dīwānī literary culture / practical reason	9	16%
Karramiyya	3	5%
Muʿtazila	2	4%

Malamatiyya, with 36 instances of correspondence, constitutes a complementary yet fundamental layer within this semantic system. This discourse emphasized the negation of ostentation, self-restraint, and the internalization of ethics (Mousavi Bojnourdi, 2014: vol. 13, 118–119). The extensive presence of themes related to silence, the avoidance of self-display, and guarded speech indicates that an important part of the perceptual horizon of Nishapur's society rested upon internalized ethics. Here, Malamatiyya functions not as an independent sect but as an intra-discursive ethical logic operating alongside futuwwa. One important reason for the predominance of futuwwa- and Malamati-related themes in Nishapur's pottery inscriptions should be sought in the social and economic structure of the city. During the 9-10th centuries CE, Nishapur was a city with a developed economic and social structure, active guild networks, and extensive marketplaces. In the author's view, such an environment, in which exchange, gift-giving, and everyday social interaction flowed continuously among the city's inhabitants, provided fertile ground for the circulation of inscriptions that recalled the ethic of earning credibility through generosity and trustworthiness, not as a value confined to a single stratum, but as a general standard of social judgment: a mode of evaluation in which an individual's standing was organized, in part, through the connection between his economic conduct and his moral credibility (Bulliet, 1972: 88-90). Within such an environment, concepts such as generosity, faithfulness, contentment, magnanimity, and the preservation of honor were not merely abstract teachings but constituted part of the practical ethics of urban life.

Sufism, with 26 instances of correspondence, places greater emphasis on asceticism, renunciation of the world, and reliance on God. In Nishapur, this discourse moved from an early individual asceticism toward a more socially embedded form of Sufism, interwoven with urban

life (Qushayri, 1966: 132; Kulabadi, 1992: 365). Themes related to contentment, reliance on God, and indifference to the world indicate that Sufism, alongside futuwwa and Malamatiyya, played a role in shaping general ethics, though it operated more at the level of spiritual orientation. The ahl al-hadith, with 15 instances of correspondence, represent a layer of religious ethics grounded in prophetic tradition, submission, and reliance on God. Concepts such as apportioned sustenance (rizq), patience, and reliance on God are prominent within this discourse. Unlike futuwwa and Malamatiyya, the ahl al-hadith played a lesser role in shaping social ethics and a greater one in consolidating individual doctrinal and behavioral frameworks. For this reason, its presence in the inscriptions is more limited but consistent. Dīwānī literary culture, with 9 instances of correspondence, reflects a rational-administrative layer of urban culture. Themes related to deliberation, practical reason, and behavioral management indicate that, alongside the ethical-religious discourses, a form of administrative rationality was also active within Nishapur's cultural sphere. This discourse is more closely associated with the tradition of scribes (dabīrān) and administrative written culture, and shows that urban ethics was not purely religious but also possessed a rational dimension. Karramiyya, despite its modest share within this corpus, is historically noteworthy. In the author's view, this limited presence should not necessarily be taken as evidence of Karramiyya's absence from Nishapur's urban culture, but may instead be understood as resulting from a certain mismatch between the doctrinal language of this current and the representational capacities of pottery as a medium. Emphasizing verbal profession of faith and a form of extreme asceticism, Karramiyya was a discourse whose influence, according to the historical sources, was reported mainly among the lower social strata (Madelung, 2002: 73–75; Mousavi Bojnourdi, 2014: vol. 13, 150), strata which, based on the same technical classification of this pottery, were less likely to be the principal consumers of these vessels. The limited presence of Karramiyya in the inscriptions therefore indicates that this discourse corresponded less well with the logic of urban material culture and the moral economy grounded in symbolic consumption. The Muʿtazila, with the least presence of all, operated mainly at the level of theological and abstract discourse. The theoretical, argumentative nature of this current made it less amenable to conversion into concise, aphoristic ethical statements. From this perspective, its relative absence from the inscriptions does not indicate its social non-existence, but rather reflects the limitations of its capacity for material representation.

At the macro level, the overlap among futuwwa, Malamatiyya, and Sufism shows that these three discourses functioned as a single ethical continuum, while the ahl al-hadith and dīwānī literary culture formed two complementary doctrinal and rational layers. Karramiyya and the Muʿtazila lie at the margins of this field, and their limited presence indicates their incomplete correspondence with the representational logic of inscribed pottery. Ultimately, Table 3 shows that Nishapur's pottery inscriptions carry a multilayered ethical system in which economic ethics (futuwwa), inward ethics (Malamatiyya), spiritual asceticism (Sufism), religious belief (ahl al-hadith), practical rationality (dīwānī literary culture), and two more marginal discourses (Karramiyya and the Muʿtazila) are simultaneously present. This situation confirms that what

predominated in 3 and 4th-century CE, Nishapur was not rigid sectarian boundaries, but a fluid, interwoven discursive field represented through material culture.

8. Conclusion

The present study, through the analysis of 60 Kufic inscriptions on Nishapur slip-painted pottery, sought to answer two principal research questions. In response to the first question, the findings show that the themes of these inscriptions can be classified predominantly into six semantic clusters: generosity and moral economy, chivalric (futuwwa) identity, self-restraint and silence, asceticism and contentment, patience and faithfulness, and reason and practical deliberation. These themes are not theological or sectarian in nature but ethical-social, formulated in the form of concise, aphoristic statements possessing broad comprehensibility and acceptance. In response to the second question, futuwwa, with 41 instances of conceptual overlap, and Malamatiyya, with 36, show the greatest presence within this corpus. This predominance carries an important implication for the intellectual structure of Nishapur during this period: in 9-10th century Nishapur, the social-economic ethics of futuwwa and the inward, self-watchful ethics of Malamatiyya functioned as a complementary continuum, forming the core of a set of shared values that, given the concise and aphoristic nature of these inscriptions, were accessible to the understanding and acceptance of the general population rather than any single group or class. Sufism, the ahl al-hadith, and dīwānī literary culture constituted complementary layers of this system, while Karramiyya and the Muʿtazila show a lesser presence owing to the limitations of their capacity for material representation. The principal theoretical contribution of this study is that Nishapur's material culture during this period reflects not rigid sectarian boundaries but a fluid discursive field, within which shared ethical values circulated beyond sectarian affiliation. This finding further demonstrates that the cognitive-archaeological approach, in combination with discourse analysis, holds considerable potential for reconstructing the intellectual and social history of Islamic cities through material culture, and may offer a methodological model for similar research within the field of Islamic-period archaeology. Finally, it must be emphasized that the findings of this study are limited to the social stratum of the consumers of these vessels, and their generalization to Nishapur's society as a whole would require supplementary evidence from more diverse material sources.

Acknowledgments

The author extend their sincere gratitude to the anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful critiques and constructive suggestions, which significantly enhanced the clarity and scholarly rigor of this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

Author declared no conflict of interest.

References

- Abolbashari, P., Vakili, H., & Nazemian-Fard, A. (2016). "The genealogy of early Malamati beliefs in Sufi texts". *Ancient Persian Literature Studies,* 7(3), 1–18. https://classicallit.ihcs.ac.ir/article_2581.html (in Persian)

- Afifi, A. al-'A. (1997). *Malamatiyya, Sufis and futuwwa* (N. Forouhar, Trans.). Tehran: Nasha-r-e Ilham (in Persian).

- Ahangaran, A., Shahrokhi, S. A., & Nazari, D. (2018). "The Karramiyya and the political and social developments of Nishapur in the Middle Ages". *Journal of Greater Khorasan Studies,* 32, 1–14. https://doi.org/20.1001.1.22516131.1397.8.32.1.5 (in Persian)

- Isfarayini, A. al-M. (1995). *Al-Tabsir fi al-Din wa tamyiz al-firqa al-najiya min al-firaq al-halikin.* (M. Z. ibn al-Hasan al-Kawthari, Ed.). Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthanna (in Arabic).

- Alizadeh, M., *et al.* (2024). "The reflection of Malamati thought in Sufi futuwwat-namas up to the 5th century AH". *Journal of Persian Prose Studies,* 27(56), 97–115. https://doi.org/10.22103/jll.2025.24192.3166 (in Persian)

- Allan, J. (1991). *Islamic ceramics.* Oxford: Ashmolean Museum.

- Bahranipour, A., & Kazemi, S. (2024). "Economic views of the Karramiyya sect: From the denial of kasb to confiscation of property in the early Ghaznavid period". *Journal of Iranian Economic History Research,* 13(2), 71–85. https://doi.org/10.30465/sehs.2023.43956.1883 (in Persian)

- Bourdieu, P. (1979). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.

- Bulliet, R., W., (1972). *The Patricians of Nishapur: A Study in medieval Islamic social history*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Eco, U. (1975). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press.

- Fehervari, G. (1973). *Islamic pottery: A comprehensive study based on the Barlow collection.* London: Faber and Faber limited.

- Foucault, M. (1969). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Pantheon Books.

- Garazhian, A., Delbari, S., & Asadbeigi, A. (2021). "A comparative study of the activities of Sufis and the Karramiyya in the spread of Islam in eastern Iran: 3rd–5th centuries AH". *Journal of History and Culture,* 53(2), 99–121. https://doi.org/10.22067/jhistory.2022.75193.1110 (in Persian)

- Golpınarlı, A. (2004). *Sufism in one hundred questions and answers.* Tehran: Gostareh Tehran Publications (in Persian).

- Ibn al-Jawzi, A. al-F. (2015). *Talbis Iblis.* (O. Madadi Khusfi, Trans.). Tehran: Center for University Publishing (in Persian).

- Kulabadi, A. B. M. (1992). *Al-Ta'arruf.* (M. J. Shari'at, Ed.). Tehran: Asatir Publications (in Persian).

- Madelung, W. (2002). *Islamic sects.* (A. Sarri, Trans.). Tehran: Asatir Publications (in Persian).

- Miller, D. (1987). *Material Culture and Mass Consumption.* Blackwell.

- Moftakhari, H., & Qobadpour, A. (2004). "The intellectual and cultural revival of the Mu'tazila in the 4th century AH". *Quarterly Journal of Islamic History,* 5(20), 63–98. https://hiq.bou.ac.ir/article_8023.html (in Persian)

- Mousavi Bojnordi, K. (2014). *Comprehensive history of Iran.* (Vols. 1–20). Tehran: Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia (in Persian).

- Pancaroglu, O. (2202). "Serving wisdom: The contents of Samanid epigraphic pottery". *Studies in Islamic and later Indian art from the Arthur M. Sackler museum,* Cambridge: Harvard university art museum: 59-75.

- Pourjavadi, N. (2006). *Mystical studies: A search in early sources.* Tehran: Nashr-e Ney (in Persian).

- Qouchani, A. (1985). *Pottery inscriptions of Nishapur.* Tehran: Reza Abbasi Museum Publications (in Persian).

- Qushayri, A. al-Q. (1966). *Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya.* (A. H. ibn A. Uthmani, Trans.; B. al-Z. Forouzanfar, Ed.). Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications (in Persian).

- Renfrew, C., & Bahn, P. (2023). *Archaeology: Theory, method, and practice.* (J. Hosseinzadeh et al., Trans.). Tehran: Neday-e Tarikh Publications (in Persian).

- Rouhi, A. (2012). "The Karramiyya in Khorasan". *Journal of Greater Khorasan Studies,* 3(8), 23–37. https://doi.org/20.1001.1.22516131.1391.2.8.2.6 (in Persian)

- Shafiei Kadkani, M. R. (2022). The Qalandariyya in history: Transformations of an ideology. Tehran: Sokhan Publications (in Persian).

- Siraj Tusi, A. N. A. ibn Ali. (n.d.). *Al-Luma' fi al-tasawwuf* (H. Rabiti, Ed.). Tehran: no publisher (in Persian).

- Souqandi, M., *et al.* (2020). "An analysis of the influence of futuwwa and malamatiyya on the economy of Nishapur in the 3rd and 4th centuries AH". *Journal of Historical Studies,* 15(59), 75–92. https://sanad.iau.ir/Journal/history/Article/942116 (in Persian)

- Thompson, E. P. (1971). "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century". *Past & Present,* 50, 76-136.

- Sulami, M.-ibn H. (2010). "Principles of malama and the path of futuwwa". (A. Goudarzi & M. Zare, Trans.). *Journal of Hikmat and Ma'rifat,* 5(12), 27–33. http://noo.rs/91kFD (in Persian)

- Watson, O. (2004). *Ceramics from Islamic lands.* Thames and Hodson, London.

- Wilkinson, C., K. (1973). *Nishapur: Pottery of the early Islamic period.* New York: The Metropolitan Museum of art.

- Zakariya-ye Kermani, e., Shafiee Sararudi, M., & Panahi, Gh. (2013). "Recognizing the Themes of Futuwwa in the Inscriptions of Nishapur Pottery from the Samanid Empire Period, with Emphasis on the Manifestations of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib". *Journal of Islamic Art Studies*, no. 21, pp. 81–94. https://www.magiran.com/p1409537 (in Persian)

- Zarrinkoub, A. H. (1984). *A search in Iranian Sufism.* Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications (in Persian).



مـطالعات باسـتان‌شـنـاسی

شاپای چاپی: ۹۲۹۷-۲۲۵۱ - شاپای الکترونیکی: ۴۲۸۸-۲۶۷۶

| شمارهٔ ۳۹ | دورهٔ هجـدهم | تابستان و پاییز |

https://jarcs.ut.ac.ir/

University of Tehran Prees

افق ادراکی جامعهٔ شهری نیشابور در سده‌های ۳-۴هـ.ق. برپایهٔ کتیبه‌های کوفی سفال

حسین صدیقیان[۱]

۱. گروه باستان‌شناسی، دانشکدهٔ ادبیات و علوم انسانی، دانشگاه لرستان، خرم‌آباد، ایران.

رایانامه: Sedighian.h@lu.ac.ir

چکیده

سفال‌های کتیبه‌دار نیشابور در سده‌های ۳-۴هـ.ق. یکی از مهم‌ترین داده‌های فرهنگ مادی جهان اسلام و ایران در سده‌های اولیهٔ هجری به‌شمار می‌آیند که علاوه‌بر کارکرد مصرفی، حامل مضامین اخلاقی و معنوی نیز بودند. با این‌حال ظرفیت تفسیری این کتیبه‌ها به‌عنوان داده‌هایی برای بازسازی افق ادراکی جامعهٔ شهری نیشابور، تاکنون به‌طور نظام‌مند موردتوجه قرار نگرفته است. برهمین‌اساس، هدف این پژوهش بازسازی بخشی از افق ادراکی جامعهٔ شهری نیشابور از خلال تحلیل انطباق مضامین این کتیبه‌ها با گفتمان‌های فکری رایج مانند فتوت، ملامتیه و تصوف است. روش پژوهش مبتنی‌بر تحلیل محتوای کیفی-گفتمانی ۶۰ کتیبهٔ کوفی است که براساس مقایسهٔ مفهومی با منابع متنی و چارچوب نظری فرهنگ مادی و باستان‌شناسی ادراکی صورت گرفته است. در این چارچوب، کتیبه‌ها نَه صرفاً متون تزئینی، بلکه به‌مثابه رسانه‌های معنایی درنظر گرفته شده‌اند که امکان بازخوانی ساختارهای ذهنی و اخلاقی بخشی از جامعهٔ شهری را فراهم می‌کنند. یافته‌های پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که فتوت و ملامتیه بیشترین سهم را درمیان گفتمان‌های قابل‌انطباق دارند و در کنار آن‌ها تصوف، اهل حدیث، ادب دیوانی، کرامیه و معتزله نیز با درجات متفاوتی حضور دارند. این توزیع بیانگر آن است که فرهنگ فکری جامعهٔ شهری نیشابور در این دوره ماهیتی چندلایه و هم‌پوشان داشته و مرزهای فرقه‌ای در سطح فرهنگ مادی به‌صورت شبکه‌ای از مفاهیم اخلاقی و معنوی بازنمایی شده است. نتایج حاصل از پژوهش پیشِ‌رو مشخص می‌کند که سفال‌های کتیبه‌دار نیشابور بازتاب فرهنگ مادی جامعه‌ای بوده‌اند که در آن مرزهای فرقه‌ای، به‌جای تقابل، در قالب زبانی مشترک از فضایل اخلاقی بازنمایی می‌شده است؛ غلبهٔ فتوت و ملامتیه در این‌میان، بیش از آن‌که بیانگر وابستگی مذهبی صرف باشد، احتمالاً بازتاب اولویت‌های اخلاقی اقشار میانی و بالای شهری مرتبط با تجارت و پیشه‌وری است.

تاریخچه مقاله

صص: ۲۴۷-۲۲۵
نوع مقاله: پژوهشی

تاریخ دریافت:
۱۴۰۵/۰۲/۱۸

تاریخ بازنگری:
۱۴۰۵/۰۴/۲۵

تاریخ پذیرش:
۱۴۰۵/۰۴/۲۸

تاریخ انتشار:
۱۴۰۵/۰۸/۰۱

کلیدواژگان:
سفال کتیبه‌دار،
نیشابور، فرهنگ مادی،
باستان‌شناسی ادراکی،
تحلیل گفتمان.

ارجاع به مقاله: صدیقیان، حسین، (۱۴۰۵). افق ادراکی جامعهٔ شهری نیشابور در سده‌های ۳-۴هـ.ق. برپایهٔ کتیبه‌های کوفی سفال. مطالعات باستان‌شناسی، ۱۸(۲)، ۲۲۵-۲۴۷. https://doi.org/10.22059/jarcs.2026.414004.143413

حق انتشار این مستند، متعلق به نویسندگان آن است. ۱۴۰۵ ©. ناشر این مقاله، دانشگاه تهران است.
این مقاله تحت گواهی زیر منتشرشده و هر نوع استفاده غیرتجاری از آن مشروط بر استناد صحیح به مقاله و با رعایت شرایط مندرج در آدرس زیر مجاز است.
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

صفحهٔ اصلی مقاله در سامانهٔ نشریه: https://jarcs.ut.ac.ir/article_107927.html