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/



Unraveling "Aḥmad"; Meaning and Function of a Recurring Inscription on Samanid Slip-painted Pottery

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Article Info

Pp: 201-223

Article Type:
Research Article

Article History:

Received:
2026/06/19

Revised:
2026/07/17

Accepted:
2026/07/21

Published online:
2026/10/23

Keywords:
Samanid Ceramics; Kufic Inscriptions; Aḥmad ; Potter's Signature; Nishapur; Islamic Epigraphy.

Abstract

Samanid slip-painted ceramics represent some of the most significant examples of the conjunction of text and object in Islamic art. In these works, Arabic inscriptions, primarily featuring ethical and sapiential themes, function not merely as decorative elements but as integral components of the vessel's semantic structure. Despite numerous studies on the inscriptions of these ceramics, the repeated appearance of the word Aḥmad at the center of certain groups of these wares continues to be a subject of interpretative debate. Previous research, lacking consensus, has variously identified this word as a personal name, a potter's signature, or a benedictory or auspicious phrase, yet without offering a systematic and simultaneous analysis of its placement, the themes of encircling inscriptions, and their formal characteristics. This article, focusing on a collection of ceramics inscribed with Aḥmad, re-examines the meaning and function of this word on these wares. It employs a semantic analysis of the encircling inscriptions, a paleographic examination of the script, and a comparison with the tradition of potter's signature (Raqam) in Islamic ceramics. The findings indicate that these ceramics exhibit a tendency towards a limited and repetitive set of themes and are formally restricted to approximately two distinct styles of Kufic script. These structural commonalities, along with supplementary evidence from inscriptions featuring nisba (genealogical attributions) on similar wares, strengthen the possibility that this group is linked to a small workshop or a network of familial production associated with an individual named Aḥmad. Consequently, Aḥmad functioned as an identity marker, subtly connecting the maker's individuality with workshop identity. It simultaneously evoked layers of spiritual or ethical associations linked to this name in the contemporary viewer's mind.

Cite this The Author(s): Ataie, M. (2026). Unraveling "Aḥmad" Meaning and Function of a Recurring Inscription on Samanid Slip-painted Pottery. *Journal of Archaeological Studies,* 18(2), 201–223. https://doi.org/10.22059/jarcs.2026.416868.143425

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Homepage of this Article: https://jarcs.ut.ac.ir/article_108016.html?lang=en

1. Introduction

Within scholarship on the epigraphy of Islamic-period ceramics, slip-painted wares—sometimes also referred to as "Samanid Epigraphic Ware"—occupy a distinctive position and rank among the most prominent examples of the interrelation between text and object in Islamic art. The inscriptions on these works, owing to their visual and semantic characteristics, have consistently attracted scholarly attention. Executed exclusively in Arabic, in Kufic script, and most often in a dark pigment on a light,[1] relatively uncluttered ground, these inscriptions convey a range of themes, including Arabic proverbs and maxims as well as benedictory formulas. The third and fourth centuries AH, the period when production of these ceramics appears to have reached its height, seem to present a paradoxical situation: while Arabic script and language enjoyed broad and official use across Islamic lands, semi-independent dynasties such as the Samanids, characterized by Iranian cultural orientations, were emerging, and Persian, drawing on a rich repository of indigenous counsel and wisdom literature, was widely current; nevertheless, the inscribed ceramics of this period are not only written exclusively in Arabic, but in terms of content also draw largely on Arabic ethical and sapiential traditions (see: Volov, 1966: 107, 108; Pancaroğlu, 2002: 65; Hillenbrand, 2015: 57–58).

Despite the wide distribution of such wares -from Greater Khurasan, Transoxiana, and Gurgan to Sistan and Kerman (Ataie *et al.,* 2012: 80–82)- our knowledge of their production system, workshops, and artisans remains limited. The scarcity of excavations at production sites for this category of ceramics, together with the very small number of surviving potters' signatures, are among the principal reasons for this uncertainty. Among the diverse inscriptions found on these wares, the word Aḥmad, which repeatedly appears on ceramics attributed to Nīshāpūr, raises questions about its nature and function. The word is often placed alone, as an independent element at the center of bowls and plates, whereas other inscriptions are written in a circular band along the inner rim of the vessel.

A potter's signature on Islamic ceramics is not in itself a rare phenomenon, and numerous examples of potters' signatures survive from different periods of Islamic ceramic production. Yet, contrary to common practice in Islamic material culture, the name Aḥmad on Samanid ceramics is never accompanied by a term such as ʿamal (work of), which signals manufacture and would serve as an explicit marker of a potter's signature (Watson, 2004: 211). This circumstance has led some scholars to interpret the word not as a proper name or a potter's signature, but rather as a descriptive expression derived from the superlative Aḥmad, in the sense of "most praiseworthy" (see: below for a detailed discussion and references). The absence of a systematic analysis that simultaneously considers the written form, placement, and thematic context of this word has left its nature and function disputed. The corpus examined in this study consists of 36 slip-painted ceramic vessels: 34 bearing the inscription Aḥmad and two bearing related inscriptions, namely ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad and bin Aḥmad. The corpus was compiled from published literature and online museum and collection databases and comprises objects in museum collections, auction catalogues, and documented private collections, most of which are attributed to Nishapur (see:

Table 1). Focusing on this corpus, the present study seeks to examine the nature and function of this word by 1) analyzing the semantic context of the encircling inscriptions; 2) conducting a formal and paleographic analysis of the script; 3) examining its compositional position within the vessel's decorative structure; and 4) comparing it with documented examples of potters' signatures in other Islamic works, in order to clarify its place within the production system and the epigraphic culture of slip-painted ceramics.

2. The Meaning and Function of the Word Aḥmad: A Critical Review of Previous Scholarship

The word Aḥmad, derived from the root ḥ m d, appears in lexicographical sources both as a proper name and in the sense of praise and commendation (Ibn Manẓūr, 1404: 155–158, s.v. ḥ m d). Morphologically, the word is formed in the elative pattern (afʿal al tafḍīl) and may have two possible meanings: "more/most praised," derived from maḥmūd, or "more/most praising," derived from ḥāmid. Although, according to the analogical rules of the Grammarians of Baṣra, the second interpretation is structurally more consistent, a number of lexicographers and scholars of religion, setting aside strictly grammatical considerations, have preferred the first meaning, namely "most praised." By contrast, some commentators, citing a Prophetic tradition stating that on the Day of Resurrection praises will be revealed to the Prophet that had never before been revealed to anyone and that with those praises he will praise his Lord, have regarded the interpretation "most praising" as preferable (Pakatchi, 2020).

The word Aḥmad appears on numerous slip-painted ceramics, written as an isolated element at the center of the vessels. In most examples, Arabic inscriptions encircle the inner rim of the vessel, enclosing the word Aḥmad, while the space between the central inscription and the encircling band is typically left empty and undecorated (Figs. 1 & 2). Only rarely does the word Aḥmad appear alone in the middle of the vessel without any accompanying inscription along the rim (see: Tab. 1, no.34, and perhaps no.33).



Fig. 1: Slip- painted dish, The Khalili Collection (Grube, 1994: No. 95).



Fig. 2: Slip- painted dish, Doha, Museum of Islamic Art (Hillenbrand, 2015: Fig. 4.3).

Various interpretations have been proposed by scholars concerning the nature and function of the word Aḥmad. Krachkovskaya (1955: 51) was the first to suggest possible explanations for its function: she proposed that Aḥmad might be either the name of the potter or the name of the patron or owner of the vessel. She notes that Aḥmad was a common personal name at the time and points out that at the end of the third century AH / beginning of the tenth century CE the ruler of Samarqand also bore this name (295–301 AH / 907–914 CE), thereby raising the possibility of a connection with Aḥmad b. Ismāʿīl, the third Samanid amir.

Bolshakov[2] (1966: 58) reports an oral communication from D. Rice,[3] who regarded the word Aḥmad as the potter's name, though Bolshakov himself neither explicitly confirms nor rejects this view. He observes that the placement of the word at the center of the base on many Nishapur ceramics has led to its interpretation as the potter's signature. Yet, as Watson has noted, the word is never accompanied by verbs such as ʿamal (work of), which would indicate "making" (Watson, 2004: 211).

In contrast, Wilkinson firmly argued that the word Aḥmad should not be regarded as the potter's name. Noting its frequency and popularity on Nishapur ceramics, he suggested that it "can almost be regarded as a sign of Nishapur manufacture," much as the word barakah appears as a popular and recurring term on Afrasiyab (Samarqand) ceramics (Wilkinson, 1961: 131; 1973, 94; Wilkinson, 1979: 121). On this basis he initially interpreted the term in the sense of "may he do that which is praiseworthy" (Wilkinson, 1973: 94, 99), but later proposed the meaning "Thanks be" (Wilkinson, 1979: 121). Wilkinson's interpretation, however, lacks lexical precision. The word Aḥmad does not in fact carry the meaning suggested by him; rather, its lexical sense is "more/most praiseworthy". Even with this meaning, however, the reason for its placement at the decorative center of the vessel remains unclear. Unlike words such as barakah (blessing) or yumn (good fortune), Aḥmad does not intrinsically convey benedictory or auspicious connotations, nor does it mean "thanks" or other supplicatory expressions proposed by Wilkinson.[4] In both

grammatical category and semantic field, therefore, the word Aḥmad differs fundamentally from terms such as barakah and yumn.

Ghouchani, who assembled the largest corpus of examples bearing the inscription Aḥmad, identified the word in all fifteen cases as the name of the potter (Ghouchani, 1986: nos. 40, 44, 65, 81, 90, 98, 99, 104, 106, 108, 111, 114, 117, 120, 121). Ettinghausen (1955: 123) likewise showed a tendency to interpret Aḥmad as a signature. Hillenbrand (2015: 62), however, adopting a more cautious position and drawing on the views of earlier scholars, writes:

"It is natural to assume that this is the name of the craftsman, though since this is usually unaccompanied by the standard formula ʿamal or its variants, it may not in fact be a signature at all. It could be interpreted to mean 'most commendable'; and of course in that event it could be a pun with the additional meaning of Aḥmad as the name of the potter."

Ernst J. Grube (1994: 86) likewise suggests that the word might best be understood with reference to the triliteral root ḥā'- mim- dāl, from which numerous words and expressions are derived, such as ḥamīd (praiseworthy, laudable), the best known of which is al ḥamdu li llāh (praise be to God). Accordingly, the inscription Aḥmad on these bowls might allude to this concept or simply mean "more laudable" or "more commendable". Nevertheless, he considers one example in the Khalili Collection to support the interpretation of the word as a signature.

In a different interpretation, Aanavi (1969: 77–78) -referring to the Muslim science of numbers- notes that the words Aḥmad and Aḥad were sometimes used in auspicious word combinations and in numerical magic squares. The difference between the two words lies only in the letter mīm,[5] whose numerical value of forty carried extended mystical connotations. Moreover, while Aḥmad shares a root consonant with the name Muḥammad, the word Aḥad refers to the notion of divine unity ("One" or "Oneness") associated with Allah. On this basis, Aanavi suggests that the appearance of Aḥmad on some Samanid ceramics may have been connected with symbolic or mystical associations. Yet this interpretation relies less on contemporary textual or material evidence than on transhistorical letter and number-based associations, and its historical evaluation within the context of Samanid ceramics therefore remains problematic.

The foregoing survey shows that earlier interpretations of the word Aḥmad largely fall into four broad approaches. The first regards the word as the potter's name and signature, interpreting its placement at the center of vessels as an indication of the maker's individual identity. The second interprets Aḥmad as an elative adjective meaning "more praiseworthy," or a closely related notion, and attributes to it a function akin to blessing or auspiciousness. A third approach proposes the possibility of a dual usage, whereby the word could function simultaneously both as a proper name and as an elative adjective. A fourth interpretation suggests that the word may carry mystical or symbolic associations.

Nevertheless, most of these interpretations rely primarily on lexical analysis, without systematically examining formal evidence, stylistic features of the script, the spatial placement of the inscription, or the content of the encircling epigraphic texts. This lack of structural analysis and systematic comparison of the material evidence has meant that some conclusions remain closer

to conjectural hypotheses than to demonstrable arguments. Any assessment of the function of the word Aḥmad, therefore, cannot rest solely on semantic considerations but must take multiple forms of evidence into account. In the following sections of this study, these hypotheses will be critically evaluated in light of the material evidence provided by Samanid ceramics in order to clarify more precisely the function of the word Aḥmad within the ceramic tradition of the period.

3. Themes of the Inscriptions

In a preliminary survey of the content of inscriptions on Samanid ceramics, Pancaroğlu classifies these inscriptions into two general categories: first, benedictory inscriptions expressions of good wishes, and second, proverbs. She further subdivides the proverbs, on the basis of their themes, into three principal subgroups -generosity, virtuous conduct, and knowledge- each of which is in turn divided into more specific subcategories (Pancaroğlu, 2002). The distribution of these themes in the inscriptions of the Aḥmad specimens is presented in Table 2.

Although certain criticisms may be directed at her classification, it nevertheless provides a useful and reliable preliminary framework for the present analysis. Examination of the 34 identified examples in which the inscription Aḥmad is placed at the center yields meaningful results. Among the benedictory formulas commonly encountered in the inscriptions of Samanid ceramics, only the structure "barakah wa yumn wa surūr wa saʿādah …" recurs on the Aḥmad wares, while the other diverse forms of benedictory expressions that are abundant on Samanid ceramics are conspicuously absent from this group (Tab. 1, nos. 1–6).

Within the group of proverbs, the highest frequency is associated with themes related to wealth and generosity/greed (17 examples; Tab. 1, nos. 7–23). This is followed, at a considerable distance, by the theme of knowledge (4 examples; Tab. 1, nos. 24–27). In the category of Virtuous Conduct, only one ware pertains to loyalty, one to patience, and one to the qualities of the noble man (Tab. 1, nos. 28–30); the other themes belonging to this group are absent from the Aḥmad ceramics. This is notable given that virtues of moral conduct constitute some of the most frequent inscriptional themes on Samanid ceramics (see: Pancaroğlu, 2002: 61). These observations indicate that the inscriptions on the Aḥmad ceramics are predominantly centered on the theme of generosity and the nature of wealth, and secondarily on Knowledge. The concentration of themes around generosity and Knowledge appears neither accidental nor simply reflective of the broader Samanid pattern; rather, it represents a "distinctive selection" that may reflect the intellectual inclinations and aesthetic preferences of the potter or the workshop supervisor responsible for producing these objects.

Although most of the themes found in the inscriptions of Nishapur ceramics are likewise related to generosity, knowledge, and the avoidance of greed (Ghouchani, 2001: 17), it should be noted that even if, following Wilkinson's suggestion, the Aḥmad ceramics are attributed to workshops in Nishapur[6] (Wilkinson, 1973: 94), the inscriptions of the Aḥmad group - apart from a few exceptions- remain confined within this limited thematic range, while other themes found on Nishapur ceramics in particular, and on Samanid ceramics in general, are almost entirely absent

(Tab. 2. and Chart 1). Moreover, the inscriptions on the Aḥmad ceramics are not only restricted in their thematic scope but also display no diversity in the selection of phrases. In effect, they consist only of the limited and repeated use of a small number of Arabic proverbial and wisdom statements.[7] This "deliberate restriction of statements" appears not to indicate a poverty of themes but rather to be the likely result of the stabilization of a limited set of inscriptional formulas within the framework of a workshop tradition.

4. Script and Composition of the Inscriptions

A study of the types of Kufic script used on these ceramics likewise reveals clear similarities among these wares. In general, only two varieties of Kufic script appear on the Aḥmad ceramics. The first variety (Fig. 1 and Tab. 1, nos. 1-12) is Kufic with triangular terminals and bifurcated alifs (in two forms, Khafī and Jalī) (Masoumzadeh, 2015: 109–110; Jabbari and Masoumzadeh, 2011: 35–36). The Jalī type -whose letters are thicker and whose vertical strokes curve toward the left- appears in the benedictory inscriptions "barakah wa yumn …" (Tab. 1, nos. 1–6). The Khafī type, whose letters have thin bodies and lack curvature, occurs on vessels bearing the text "al rizqu maqsūm wa l ḥirṣu …" (Tab. 1, nos. 7–10) as well as on two vessels decorated with the inscription "man ayqana bi l khalaf jāda bi l ʿaṭiyyah" (Tab. 1, nos. 11–12), making a total of twelve wares. Notably, this type of script, among Samanid ceramics -so far as the author's survey indicates-appears predominantly on pieces bearing the Aḥmad, while examples executed in a similar script but lacking the central word Aḥmad are very limited.[8] In all of these specimens except one vessel[9] (Tab. 1, no. 6), the inscriptions are written in a counterclockwise direction, with the alifs oriented toward the rim of the vessel.

In the second group (Fig. 2; and Tab. 1, nos. 13–34), a more cursive Kufic written with a brush and closer to a manuscript hand is employed in a broadly similar manner (22 examples in total). With the exception of a few cases[10] (Tab. 1, nos. 28–30), the remaining inscriptions are written clockwise, and their alifs are oriented toward the center of the vessel. In this type of script on Samanid ceramics, the stroking is much freer: verticals tend to become diagonal, curving lines appear with greater frequency, and a thick-to-thin graduation takes place within the line (Volov, 1966: 116).

On the basis of the foregoing evidence, the ceramics known as the Aḥmad group not only display thematic convergence in their inscriptions but also employ, in terms of script, almost exclusively two varieties of Kufic. These similarities strengthen the likelihood that they are associated with a single artist or workshop comprising a limited group of craftsmen.

Another important point concerns the marks employed by Samanid potters to guide the reading of inscriptions, which usually indicate the beginning or the end of the text. On Samanid ceramics these marks display a wide range of forms, from simple shapes such as a single dot or an attenuated oval to more complex motifs such as palmettes, triangles whose sloping sides are lobed, or bell like forms (Hillenbrand, 2015: 67).

In contrast to this broad variety on Samanid ceramics in general, however, the Aḥmad ceramics

also display visual consistency and a distinct stylistic tendency in their system of marking. In most of these examples—with the exception of those featuring bifurcated alifs, which entirely lack beginning and ending marks—bell like forms (lobed triangles ranging from simple to complex) are the most frequent, followed by oval shapes resembling the unripe fruit of a pomegranate (Tab. 3). This restricted range of marking forms, together with the other inscriptional uniformities observed within this group, may indicate the stabilization of specific patterns within a relatively limited workshop milieu.

5. Strong Evidence for a Potter's Signature

Signatures inscribed on Islamic ceramics that bear the name of the potter or workshop are of particular significance for the study of ceramic production, as they represent nearly the only documented evidence relating to potters and remain essential for reconstructing their careers. In most cases, the signature is placed in the foot ring or on the bottom of a vessel, although in certain instances it appears in a more prominent place (Blair, 1998: 148). In the early Islamic period, the recording of a potter's Raqam (signature) was not unknown, yet it was by no means a widespread practice (Jenkins, 1983: 13). The earliest evidence in this regard dates to the late first and second centuries AH at Jerash in Jordan (Grube, 1994: 11; Watson, 2004: 104, Cat. Aa.14; Blair, 1998: 150). Although signatures remained relatively rare in the third and fourth centuries AH, signed vessels occur comparatively more frequently among Abbasid blue and white ceramics—a phenomenon whose underlying causes have yet to be fully explained (Grube, 1994: 43). By contrast, among the contemporary Samanid slip-painted wares, the potter's name is explicitly recorded on only a small number of vessels. For instance, on a cup-bowl preserved in the Khalili Collection the potter's name appears explicitly together with the word "work of": ʿamal al Ḥusayn ibn ʿAli ibn ʿUmar ibn … (?) Junābīdī. Later in the inscription the phrase ʿamila laka (made for you) is also included. Its phrasing, placement within the interior of the cup, and the form of the inscription—which is more a scribble than calligraphy—all support the interpretation of this text as a signature (Grube, 1994: 86, no. 77).

Although it has been emphasized that the name Aḥmad never appears together with a term denoting "making", two vessels preserved respectively in the al Sabah Collection (Fig. 3) and the Khalili Collection (Fig. 4) provide important indications of a signature and suggest the possible existence of at least one potter named ibn Aḥmad. The first vessel, in the al Sabah Collection (Watson, 2004: 211, cat. Ga.6), is a bowl bearing light inscriptions on a dark ground—the reverse of the color scheme seen on the other vessels. The word Aḥmad, identical in form to that on the other bowls, is written alone at the center of the vessel. At the end of the rim inscription containing the phrase Aḥsin i-ṣabra wa khudhi l-ʿulā, however, the words ʿamal bin ("the work of the son of") probably appear, which may be completed by the word Aḥmad placed in the center of the bowl, yielding the phrase ʿamal bin Aḥmad. The vessel may therefore have been produced by the son of the well-known potter Aḥmad (Tab. 1, no. 35). In this instance, the potter retains the central placement of the name Aḥmad while transferring the remainder of the signature to the rim. This reading is particularly significant given the vessel's close adherence to the established

stylistic and compositional scheme of the Aḥmad group. In this context, the word ʿamal supports the interpretation of Aḥmad as a personal name within a signature formula, while bn further suggests a filial relationship. The vessel may thus represent the next generation within the same workshop tradition; indeed, it is difficult to account for such a precise replication of this distinctive arrangement if the inscription referred to the son of another potter named Aḥmad and no form of direct workshop continuity were assumed.

On another bowl in the Khalili Collection (Grube, 1994: 102, no. 101), the name of this potter appears clearly at the end of the inscription between two decorative finials: ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad. Grube regards this vessel as clear evidence that Aḥmad should be understood as a personal name and that ʿAlī was his son; he therefore suggests the possibility that both Aḥmad and his son ʿAlī were potters (Grube, 1994: 102). The rim inscription on this bowl, which emphasizes the transience of worldly wealth, employs a phrase that also occurs on some other vessels of this group (Tab. 1, no. 36; cf. nos. 17 and 18). This textual correspondence, coupled with a calligraphic style that closely resembles that of the Aḥmad group (with a slightly thinner stroke), further reinforces Grube's interpretation of a direct filial relationship and workshop continuity.

In addition to genealogical evidence, the epigraphy of the bowl in the al-Sabah Collection offers a significant point of comparison (Fig. 3). The ornamental Kufic script employed by bin Aḥmad on this piece clearly differs from the simpler inscriptions attributed to Aḥmad. Here, the script has not only departed from its initial simplicity but has also achieved a level of visual complexity through the extensive use of superimposed ornaments. This aligns with Lisa Volov's analysis (Volov, 1966: 124), which identifies it as characteristic of the "third degree", the most complex variant of plaited Kufic stylization on Samanid ceramics. Indeed, the presence of this advanced decorative style, in comparison with other inscriptions in the Aḥmad group, may indicate a distinct choice made by bin Aḥmad, the next generation of potters in this workshop, whether working contemporaneously with Aḥmad or, possibly, after him.



Fig. 3: Slip- painted dish, al-Sabah collection (Watson, 2004: 211, cat. Ga.6)



Fig. 4: Slip- painted dish, The Khalili Collectio (Grube, 1994: No. 101).

These findings lend support to the hypothesis that Aḥmad functioned as a potter and perhaps the head of a family workshop, particularly in light of the occurrence of the name ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad/ bin Aḥmad on the ceramics discussed above. Within this structure, Aḥmad was not an isolated potter but may have been the focal point of a workshop lineage in which the tradition of epigraphy was reproduced on the basis of a set of fixed and limited formulas. This evidence suggests that the term Aḥmad on Samanid vessels, irrespective of the absence of verbs denoting "making," may have functioned not only as a personal signature but also as a "workshop signature."

However, the fundamental distinction between the signature on Aḥmad's ceramics and that on the single signed vessel attributed to al-Junābīdhi lies in its epigraphic morphology. The inscription on al-Junābīdhi's piece is rendered in a loose and unpretentious manuscript hand (Grube, 1994: 86), whereas the word Aḥmad on the Samanid vessels adheres to a standardized, precise, and reproducible calligraphic practice. This formal contrast—from the placement of the signature in the center of the vessel to the quality of the script's execution—clearly indicates that the "signature" in Aḥmad's works, beyond registering personal identity, also functioned as a mark with consistent visual standards. Some scholars, relying on this central placement, have argued against its function as a signature. However, this view contradicts the prevailing tradition in contemporary Abbasid blue-and-white pottery. In those wares, the potter's name, often accompanied by the verb ʿamal ("work of"), frequently appears in the center of the vessel and is undoubtedly recognized as a signature (cf. Grube, 1994: no. 32; Fehervari, 2000: no. 21; Ghouchani, 1986: nos. 58, 88, 100, 105). Therefore, the central placement of the name Aḥmad on Samanid ceramics not only fails to negate its function as a signature but may also support the significance of this name within the framework of individual or workshop identity.

To better understand the nature of the name Aḥmad, it is necessary to consider the function of the signature (raqam) in Islamic pottery production. In Islamic ceramics, it is not always clear

whether the name inscribed on a vessel belongs to an individual potter or to a workshop (Blair, 1998: 148–149). In this tradition, a signature is not necessarily merely a reflection of the artist's individuality; rather, it may function simultaneously as a personal identity and a workshop mark. In the absence of contemporaneous documentary information on this issue, it is useful to consider the role of signatures in other, better-documented periods of Islamic art as comparative evidence. In this regard, Marilyn Jenkins's studies on Fatimid pottery, particularly her analysis of works attributed to the renowned potter Muslim ibn al-Dahhan, are especially significant (Jenkins, 1968). By examining the stylistic characteristics of twenty signed pieces by Muslim, as well as stylistically related examples, Jenkins concluded that Muslim, as a skilled and prominent potter who was permitted to dedicate a bowl to someone closely associated with the Caliph, also signed works made by other potters. He may therefore have been the supervisor and master of an important workshop (Jenkins, 1968: 364). A similar situation can be observed in Mamluk ceramics, particularly in works signed by Ghaybi, the most renowned Egyptian potter of the fifteenth century. In these cases, the signature functions not only as the potter's personal identifier, but also as an indicator of workshop management and the production process. Examination of ceramics signed by Ghaybi suggests that the diversity of styles and motifs in these works was most likely the product of a workshop with multiple artisans, rather than simply the output of a single artist (Watson, 2004: 418).

However, comparing the position of Aḥmad's workshop with these later models reveals important nuances and distinctions. Unlike the large Fatimid or Mamluk workshops, where stylistic diversity reflects collective and semi-industrial production, the works attributed to Aḥmad display a notable degree of stylistic and thematic consistency. The uniformity of the epigraphic morphology and the repeated use of a limited set of aphoristic statements suggest that, although Aḥmad may also have functioned as a workshop mark, the identity of this workshop remained strongly governed by an individual and systematic standard.

Although Krachkovskaya primarily considers the inscriptions on Samanid pottery to be predominantly secular and non-religious (Krachkovskaya, 1955: 55), the existence of examples with phrases derived from the Qur'an, such as al-Mulk u li-Allah (sovereignty belongs to God) or more fully al-Mulk u li-Allah al-Wāḥid al-Qahhār (sovereignty belongs to God, the one, the almighty) on Samanid ceramics (Tab. 1, nos. 30–32; see also: Ghouchani, 1986: nos. 103, 112, 130, 134; Ventrone, 1974: 225; Grube, 1994: no. 103; Hillenbrand, 2015: Fig. 4.20) as well as scholarly works that have traced the origins of many of these phrases and proverbs to prophetic traditions or the teachings of Imam Ali (Ghouchani, 2001; Ghouchani, 1986: 9; Bolshakov, 1969: 46–47), cast serious doubt on this assessment. Accordingly, given that Aḥmad is one of the names of the Prophet of Islam, the possibility of a form of religious association cannot be entirely ruled out. As Sheila Blair also emphasizes, a certain deliberate and conscious ambiguity is employed in many Islamic inscriptions, allowing for different interpretations (Blair, 1998: 149). In the textual traditions of the Islamic world, a dual reference sometimes forms between a personal name and a sacred name or phrase, thereby intentionally blurring the distinction between them.[11] Within this

Table 1: Corpus of Samanid Ceramics Bearing the Inscription "Aḥmad"

No.	Illustration	Inscription	Inscription Theme	Location / Venu Illustration Source
1		برکه و یمن وسرور و سعاده و سلـ[امه؟] احمد	Good Wishes	The Al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait National Museum Watson, 2004: 213, Cat. Ga.9
2		برکه و یمن و ...؟ و سرور احمد	Good Wishes	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. No. 1996.269 URL.1
3		برکه و یمن و سرور و سعاده احمد	Good Wishes	The Khalili Collection Ghouchani, 1986: No. 106
4		[بر]که و یمن و سرور و ... و سعا[ده] احمد	Good Wishes	National Museum of Iran, Inv. No. 3972 Ghouchani, 1986: No. 90
5		برکه و یمن و سرور و احمد	Good Wishes	Bonhams, London, Lot 105 URL.2
6		برکه و یمن وسرور و سعاده و سلا[مه] احمد	Good Wishes	Christie's, London, Lot 94 URL.3
7		الرزق مقسوم و الحرص ...؟ احمد	Sustenance and Greed	Hetjens Museum, Düsseldorf Ghouchani, 1986: No. 44
8		الرزق مقسوم و الحرص ...؟ احمد	Sustenance and Greed	Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, Inv. No. 15589 Najafi, 1989: No. 284
9		[ال]زق مقسو[م و] الحرص ... احمد	Sustenance and Greed	British Museum, Inv. No. 1948,1009.1 URL.4
10		[ال]زق مقسو[م و] الحرص...؟ احمد	Sustenance and Greed	Tareq Rajab Museum, Kuwait, Inv. No. CER68TSR6 Fehervari, 2000: 54, No. 47

11		من ایقن بالخلف جاد بالعطیه . برکه احمد	Generosity	The Khalili Collection, Inv. No. POT762 Grube, 1994: No. 95
12		من ایقن بالخلف جاد بالعطیه بر[که] احمد	Generosity	Christie's, Live Auction 21892, Lot 30 URL.5
13		لا الجود یُفنی الـ[مال قبل فنائه. ولا البخل فی مال ا]لشحیح یزید احمد	Generosity vs. Greed	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. No. 39.40.16 URL.6
14		لا الـ[جـ]ـود یفنی المال قـ[ـبل فنـ] ـائه و لا الـ[ـبخل فی مال الشحیح یزید] احمد	Generosity vs. Greed	Current location unknown Ghouchani, 1986: No. 99
15		یری البخیل سبیل الـمـال واحـده ...ان الجواد یـری فی ماله سبلا احمد	The Generous Man vs. the Miser	Bonhams, London, Lot 57 URL.7
16		یری البخیل جد[یـ]ـل المال واحده ان الجواد یری فی ماله سبلا، بالیمن احمد	The Generous Man vs. the Miser	Current location unknown Ghouchani, 1986: No. 104
17		الحمد یبقا ذخره للفتی و المال لا یبقا لارباب احمد	The Nature of Wealth	Current location unknown Ghouchani, 1986: No. 114
18		الحمد یبقا ذخره للفتی و المال لا یبقا لارباب احمد	The Nature of Wealth	The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Inv. No . 73.51.220 URL.8
19		اذا کان مال لا محاله ذاهب فاضله ما اورث الحمد صاحبه احمد	The Nature of Wealth	National Museum of Iran, Inv. No. 3076 Ghouchani, 1986: No. 120
20		اذا کان مال لا محاله ذاهب فاضله ما اورث الحمد صاحبه احمد	The Nature of Wealth	Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (MKG) Hamburg, Inv. No. 1959.96 URL.9

21		و ليس الفتى المعطى على اليسر وحد [ه] و لكنه المعطى على العسر و اليسر احمد	Generosity	Private collection, Belgium Ghouchani, 1986: No. 40
22		و ليس الفتى المعطى على اليسر وحده و لكنه المعطى على العسر و اليسر، باليمن احمد	Generosity	National Museum of Oriental Art, Rome, Inv. No. 1006 Ghouchani, 1986: No. 117
23		ليس جود الجواد من فضل مال انما الجود للمقل المواسى احمد	Generosity	Current location unknown Ghouchani, 1986: No. 65
24		العلم اشرف الاحساب و المروه اشبک الانساب احمد	Knowledge	Harvard Art Museums, Inv. No .2002.50.83 URL.10
25		العلم اشرف الاحساب و المروه اشبک الانساب باليمن احمد	Knowledge	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. No.1975.168 URL.11
26		العلم اشرف الاحساب و الـ[مر]وه اشـ[بک] [الانسـ]اب احمد	Knowledge	Bonhams, London, Lot 96 URL.12
27		العلم اشرف الحساب /انما الجود للمقل المواسى احمد	Knowledge/ Generosity	Boisgirard-Antonini, Paris, Lot 164 URL.13
28		الحيله ابلغ من القدر ؟ والحر لايخلف، باليمن احمد	The Noble Man	Boisgirard-Antonini, Paris, Lot 170 URL.14
29		اعلم ان الحلم و القرار ... شرف العبيد و الاحرار احمد	Patience/ The Noble Man	Doha, Museum of Islamic Art, Inv. No. P0.1031.2009 Hillenbrand, 2015: Fig. 4.3
30		المُلک لله الواحد القهار الوفا عزاز احمد	Loyalty/ The Names of God	The Khalili Collection, Inv. No. POT808 Grube, 1994: No. 103
31		... ملک؟ الواحد القهار احمد	The Names of God	San Antonio Museum of Art, Inv. No. 2006.6.5 URL.15

32		المُلک لله الواحد ... الواحد؟ احمد	The Names of God	Hegmataneh Museum Photograph by the Author, 2025
33		احمد	؟	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, .Inv. No. 48.101.294 URL.16
34		احمد	-	National Museum of Oriental Art, Rome, Inv. No. 5743 Ventrone, 1974: Fig. 2
Potteries Inscribed with *bin Aḥmad* / *ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad*				
35		احسن اصبر و خذ العلا. عمل بن احمد	Patience	The Al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait National Museum Watson, 2004: 213, Cat. Ga.6
36		الحمد یبقا [ذخره] للفتی و المال لا یبقا لارباب. علی بن احمد	The Nature of Wealth	The Khalili Collection, Inv. No. POT806 Grube, 1994: No. 101

Table 2: Statistical Data on Inscription Themes (based on Pancaroğlu classification (2002) and data from the present study).

Theme of the Inscription	Subgroups	Number of Vessels with the Inscription *Aḥmad*		Number of Vessels with the Inscription *bin Aḥmad / ali ibn Aḥmad*
		Count within the subgroup	Total count within the theme	
Expressions of Good Wishes	-	-	6	-
Generosity / Wealth	The Qualities of Generosity vs. Those of Greed	12	18	-
	The Nature of Wealth	4		1
	The Generous Man vs. the Miser	2		-
Virtuous Conduct	Modesty	-	3*	-
	Patience and Deliberation	1		1
	Speech and Silence	-		-
	The Noble Man	2		-
	Loyalty and Devotion	1		-
Knowledge	-	-	4	-
The Names of God	-	-	3	-

*** The total number of vessels in the "Virtuous Conduct" category is 3. However, one vessel contains two distinct thematic subgroups (Patience and The Noble Man), resulting in 4 subgroup occurrences.**

Table 3: Typology of Epigraphic Markers for Beginning and Ending: (1) Small Circle; (2) Annular Ellipses; (3a–d) Scalloped/ Bell-shaped Triangles, from simple to complex (Author. 2025).

Types of Epigraphic Markers					
1	2	3			
		a	b	c	d
					

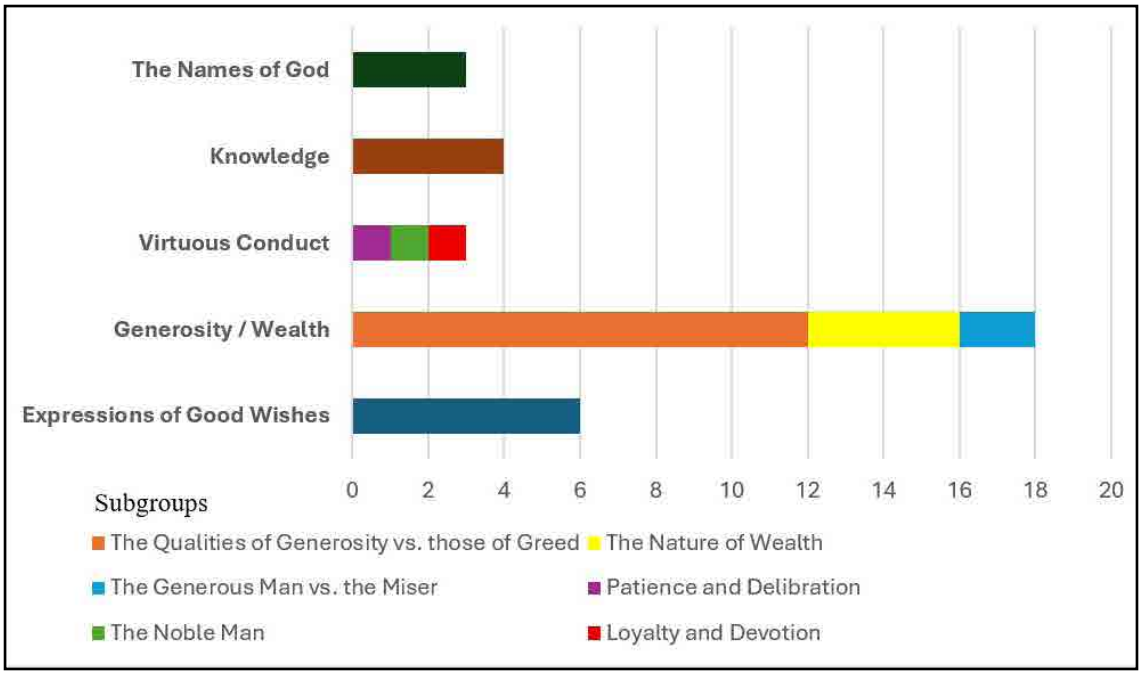


Chart 1: Statistical distribution of inscription themes across the studied sample (categorized according to Pancaroğlu's typology and data collected in the present study).

framework, the mention of the name Aḥmad on these ceramics could, in addition to denoting the maker's identity and workshop mark, also activate a layer of associated spiritual connotations. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the word Aḥmad, as a polysemous sign, could have evoked the maker's name, the workshop's identity, and perhaps the spiritual or ethical values attributed to this name in the mind of the contemporary viewer.

6. Conclusion

An examination of the corpus of slip-painted ceramics bearing the inscription Aḥmad shows that this term cannot be explained solely through lexical semantics or by means of semantic analogy. Its precise interpretation requires simultaneous attention to the broader context and internal structure of the inscriptions, the placement of the writing within the vessel's overall composition, the type of script employed, and the tradition of signing (Raqam) in Islamic pottery. The evidence suggests that Aḥmad in this group of ceramics was not used merely as a devotional or benedictory expression. Rather, it appears to function as a deliberate, recurrent, and structurally integrated sign; a polysemous sign that is typically positioned at the center of the vessel and that follows relatively consistent patterns in both calligraphic execution and visual arrangement.

An examination of the inscriptions themselves further reveals that, in contrast to the thematic diversity of Samanid pottery more broadly, these works gravitate toward a limited set of recurring themes, primarily centered on concepts such as the nature of wealth, generosity/greed, and knowledge. Beyond the restricted semantic field, the inscriptions themselves are also strikingly repetitive in their phrasing. Such thematic uniformity and structural repetition are difficult to attribute to isolated or independent choices and instead point to the potential existence of a consistent production logic underlying these works; one that appears to have regulated both the selection of textual content and the manner of its execution.

Palaeographic analysis further reinforces this conclusion. The almost exclusive and repeated use of two variants of Kufic script, together with the consistent calligraphic ductus and the overall structure of the inscriptions, suggests that these objects emerged within a relatively uniform production tradition. This degree of formal consistency, combined with the thematic similarities, strengthens the likelihood that these ceramics were produced within a single workshop or among a small, closely connected group of potters.

Even more significant are the pieces bearing the inscriptions bin Aḥmad and ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad. These examples suggest that Aḥmad was most likely the name of an actual individual rather than a merely benedictory formula or an adjectival epithet. At the same time, the manner in which this name appears differs from the typical signatures of potters. Whereas conventional signatures are usually placed in marginal positions and rendered in relatively simple form, Aḥmad consistently appears in a central position and in a carefully executed and repetitive calligraphic form. This suggests that the name may not only have functioned as a signature but also gradually came to operate as a kind of workshop identifier.

Nevertheless, the probable structure of such a workshop cannot be fully equated with the larger and more complex workshops of the later Fatimid and Mamluk periods. In those later contexts, stylistic and decorative diversity often reflects the participation of multiple artisans working within a shared production environment. By contrast, the works associated with Aḥmad display a remarkable degree of formal and thematic coherence. If the workshop hypothesis is accepted, this coherence points rather to a relatively small and concentrated production unit, bound together by a single epigraphic tradition and strongly associated with a particular individual or central nucleus.

Taken together, the available evidence suggests that Aḥmad on Samanid ceramics should not be understood merely as a decorative or semantic element. Rather, the name appears to have operated on several levels simultaneously: it likely referred to a specific individual, while also potentially functioning as a visual and identificatory marker that conveyed workshop prestige and evoked broader layers of cultural meaning and association.

Acknowledgments

This research was financed by a research grant from the University of Mazandaran. The author is grateful to Dr. Morteza Khanipour and Ms. Maryam Mahdavi Manesh for their assistance in obtaining a copy of a Russian-language article used in this research, and thanks the staff of the Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Columbia University for providing access to a digital copy of the Aanavi dissertation. This article is dedicated to the memory of the late Abdollah Ghouchani, whose pioneering scholarship on Islamic epigraphy remains a lasting inspiration.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Endnotes

1. The reverse of this combination -namely, light motifs and inscriptions on a colored background- was also employed on Samanid slip-painted ceramics (see: Ataie *et al.,* 2012: 77-78).

2. Bolshakov's series of articles in the journal Epigrafika Vostoka (Эпиграфика Востока) are considered among pioneering classical studies in the field of Samanid ceramic inscriptions (Bolshakov, 1958, 1963a, 1963b, 1966, 1969). In these articles, he provided analyses of Arabic inscriptions on Central Asian ceramics, including classification of themes, script style, and syntactic structure. These works remain a foundational reference point for the study of Samanid inscriptions and the identification of their thematic and epigraphic characteristics.

3. David Storm Rice

4. Unlike barakah or yumn, which are abstract and benedictory concepts, the word Aḥmad is directly connected to a specific agent or referent; it is precisely this element of personal specificity that calls Wilkinson's purely benedictory interpretation into question.

5. For examples of such mystical interpretations concerning the relationship between Aḥad, Aḥmad, and the letter mīm, see Shabistarī in the preface to Golshan-e Rāz:

«احد در میم احمد گشت ظاهر / در این دور اوّل آمد عین آخر»

"Aḥad became manifest in the mīm of Aḥmad; in this cycle, the first appeared as the very last" (Shabistarī, 1989: 67); and Shāh Niʿmatullāh Walī in his Dīvān:

«از احد احمد آشکارا شد / هم به احمد احد هویدا شد/ در شهادت احد کمر بربست / میم احمد ز غیب پیدا شد»

"From Aḥad, Aḥmad became manifest; through Aḥmad, Aḥad was revealed; In the station of testimony, Aḥad girded the waist; the mīm of Aḥmad emerged from the unseen" (Shāh Niʿmatullāh Walī, 1964: 258). These examples indicate that, as Aanavi has noted, the symbolic association between Aḥad and Aḥmad attracted attention in certain Islamic mystical and ḥurūfī traditions, although it cannot be directly applied to the context of Samanid ceramics.

6. In most other sources as well, the Aḥmad ceramics have been attributed to Nishapur; only a single ware was assigned to Samarqand by Arthur Lane, without the presentation of supporting evidence (Lane, 1947: Fig. 15A). Notably, that same example is attributed to Nishapur in the online catalogue of the British Museum (see: URL.4).

7. A statistical examination of the themes of the inscriptions on the Aḥmad ceramics indicates that only ten recurring statements are employed to express their most frequently occurring concepts, such as generosity/wealth and knowledge (see Tab. 1). This stands in contrast to ceramics attributed to Nishapur and to other Samanid wares, where the diversity of statements is considerably greater. Ghouchani has identified more than fifty distinct expressions and sentences on these ceramics (see: Ghouchani, 1986: 9–10; Ghouchani, 2001; see also: Pancaroğlu, 2002: 69–72; Ventrone, 1974).

8. A sherd discovered in the excavations at Nishapur (Wilkinson, 1973: 121, no. 40) is also written in the same script. Owing to the

fragmentary condition of the piece, however, it is not clear whether it originally bore the name Aḥmad. Yet, judging from the surviving letters, the inscription most likely read barakah wa yumn wa surūr wa saʿādah … (Wilkinson, 1973: 99, 102), a formula that is very common on the Aḥmad wares; it is therefore probable that this fragment likewise originally contained the word Aḥmad at its center.

Another bowl, executed in a similar script but without Aḥmad and bearing only the phrase barakah li ṣā[ḥibihi] is preserved in the National Museum of Iran (Ghouchani, 1986: no. 86). A further bowl with the inscription "man ayqana bi l khalaf …," executed in an identical script and style, is held in the Khalili Collection (Ghouchani, 1986: no. 102). Other comparable examples listed by Grube (1994: 98, no. 95, footnote 1) generally share only the triangular terminals of the letters, while displaying a more complex script and more elaborate decoration.

9. In this piece, which appeared at auction, the rendering of the letters in the word Aḥmad also lacks stylistic consistency. Whereas the alif is executed in a triangular bifurcated form, the dāl is written in a manner that corresponds to examples from the second group of the Aḥmad wares. This inconsistency in the execution of the letters, together with certain other details in the principal inscription of the vessel, raises doubts about the authenticity of the piece.

10. The composition, the position of the baseline, and, to some extent, the movement of the stroke in these wares differ from those of other specimens in the second group.

11. Examples of wordplay and the interweaving of a seal owner's personal name with religious phrases or sacred names are attested on Sasanian seals (Bivar, 1969: 63), as well as on later Islamic seals (see: Mousavi, 2022: 69–85; for the invocation yā Aḥmad on Qajar seals see also pp. 74, 365, 401, 411).

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مـطالعات باسـتان‌شـنـاسی

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

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واکاوی واژهٔ «احمـد»: معنـا و کارکـرد یـک کتیبـهٔ تکرارشـونده بـر سـفال‌های منقـوش گلابـه‌ای سـامانی

مرتضی عطائی[۱]

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چکیده

سفال‌های منقوشِ گلابه‌ای دورهٔ سامانی، یکی از روشن‌ترین مصادیق درهم‌تنیدگی شئ و نوشتار در هنر اسلامی به‌شمار می‌آیند؛ آثاری که در آن‌ها کتیبه‌های عربی با مضامین عمدتاً اخلاقی و حکمی، نَه صرفاً عنصری تزئینی، بلکه جزئی از ساختار معنایی ظرف هستند. باوجود پژوهش‌های متعدد دربارهٔ کتیبه‌های این سفال‌ها، تکرار واژهٔ «احمد» در مرکز گروهی از این آثار همچنان محل اختلاف تفسیری است. پژوهش‌های پیشین، بدون دستیابی به اجماع، این واژه را گاه نام شخصی، گاه امضای سفالگر و گاه عبارتی دعایی یا تبرکی دانسته‌اند، بی‌آن‌که تحلیلی نظام‌مند و هم‌زمان از جایگاه، مضامین کتیبه‌های پیرامونی و ویژگی‌های صوری آن‌ها ارائه دهند. این پژوهش با تمرکز بر مجموعه‌ای از نمونه‌های دارای کتیبهٔ «احمد» و با بهره‌گیری از تحلیل معناشناختیِ کتیبه‌های پیرامونی، بررسی پالئوگرافیکِ خط و مقایسه با سنت رقم‌گذاری در سفالگری اسلامی، به بازخوانی ماهیت و کارکرد این واژه بر این سفال‌ها می‌پردازد. نتایج این پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که این آثار از نظر مضامین به مجموعه‌ای محدود و تکرارشونده گرایش دارند و از حیث صوری نیز تقریباً به دو گونهٔ مشخص از خط کوفی محدود می‌شوند. این همسانی‌های ساختاری، همراه با شواهدی تکمیلی از رقم‌های مشتمل‌بر نسب در نمونه‌های مشابه، احتمال وابستگی این گروه به یک کارگاه کوچک یا شبکه‌ای از تولید خانوادگی مرتبط با فردی به‌نام «احمد» را تقویت می‌کند. بدین‌سان، «احمد» را می‌توان نشانه‌ای هویتی دانست که در پیوندی ظریف میان فردیت سازنده و هویت کارگاهی شکل‌گرفته و هم‌زمان می‌توانسته است لایه‌ای از تداعی‌های معنوی یا اخلاقیِ پیوسته به این‌نام را در ذهن مخاطب هم‌عصر زنده سازد.

تاریخچه مقاله

صص: ۲۲۳-۲۰۱

نوع مقاله: پژوهشی

تاریخ دریافت:
۱۴۰۵/۰۳/۲۹

تاریخ بازنگری:
۱۴۰۵/۰۴/۲۶

تاریخ پذیرش:
۱۴۰۵/۰۴/۳۰

تاریخ انتشار:
۱۴۰۵/۰۸/۰۱

کلیدواژگان:
سفال سامانی، کتیبهٔ کوفی، احمد، امضای سفالگر، نیشابور، کتیبه‌نگاری اسلامی.

ارجاع به مقاله: عطائی، مرتضی، (۱۴۰۵). واکاوی واژهٔ «احمد»: معنا و کارکرد یک کتیبهٔ تکرارشونده بر سفال‌های منقوش گلابه‌ای سامانی. مطالعات باستان‌شناسی، ۱۸(۲)، ۲۰۱-۲۲۳. https://doi.org/10.22059/jarcs.2026.416868.143425

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صفحهٔ اصلی مقاله در سامانهٔ نشریه: https://jarcs.ut.ac.ir/article_108016.html