

THE SOCIAL USE OF RINGS AMONG THE MUSLIMS OF AL-ANDALUS

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Background to the Use of Rings in al-Andalus

The eight hundred years of Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula (711–1609), first as the ruling class, later as dominated minority, cannot be studied and described as monolithic, since Islamic communities underwent profound social and political changes. This is true also with regard to the use of rings. To approach the social use of rings in al-Andalus we must start by knowing the rules and regulations regarding the use of rings that affected the whole Muslim community to which al-Andalus belonged and then rely on the medieval Arab sources specific to this area, both written and archaeological.

The term *ḥadīth* is used for Islamic tradition, being an account of what the Prophet said or did; it is considered second in authority to the Quran. According to tradition, when the Prophet Muhammad wanted to write to the Byzantines and other peoples to invite them to convert to Islam, someone warned him that they would not read his letter unless he put a seal on it. For that reason, in the year 628, he had a silver ring made with the inscription *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*. This anecdote shows that the signet-ring—a ring to seal with—was not common in pre-Islamic Arabia and that its use was a foreign cultural import. Muhammad's ring served to keep his letters closed and their contents secret. Its imprint would be stamped (in positive and in relief) on a piece of clay in a similar way to that seen in some papyrus documents

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from the early Islamic period that still retain their seals.¹ After his death, the Prophet's ring remained in the possession of his successors until it fell into a well from the hands of 'Uthmān, and proved impossible to recover.

Muslims adopted the signet-ring following the example of the Prophet, with a clear preference for silver rings set with carnelian gems. The first rulers had rings with different personal mottoes and Arab sources mention the texts inscribed on every Orthodox, Umayyad, and 'Abbasid caliphal ring until 1225.²

The Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406) summarizes what was known about the use of the ring during the first centuries of Islam, which is not much, and always referred to practices in the Middle East; only at the end does he point out that in the Maghreb “the ring worn on the finger is considered as one of the insignia of royalty” and states that such a jewel “made of gold and set with a corundum [*yāqūt*], a turquoise [*fayrūzaj*] or an emerald [*zumurrud*], is worn by the sovereign as a hallmark of his dignity.”³

His contemporary, the Moroccan chronicler Ibn Marzūq, corroborates this statement. In his biography of the Merinid ruler Abū-l-Ḥasan (r. 1331–1351) he relates that this ruler was wearing a gold ring “in the manner of kings [*mulūk*],” but that he changed it for a silver one after having consulted the sages who told him that gold was rejectable.⁴ Such a luxurious Moroccan gold ring of the second half of the fourteenth century whose fashion sought to imitate foreign models, surely did not follow tradition; it had little to do with the one that, centuries earlier, bore a simple inscription and was used to seal diplomatic correspondence.

As every epoch and region had its local customs, we must refrain from applying to the Iberian Peninsula what is documented in 'Abbasid administration in Baghdad, and what European travellers of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries observed about cultural practices in Persia, Turkey, Egypt, or Morocco.⁵ The search for data is not easy and the harvest is not plentiful; therefore, many of the questions we can ask ourselves will be left without a documented answer.

1 Abbott, *The Ḳurrah Papyri*, 27–33.

2 They were assembled by Murr, *Drey Abhandlungen*, 89–91; Hammer-Purgstall, *Abhandlung über die Siegel*, 4–8. Also, from other sources, by al-Naqshabandī and al-Ḥurrī, *Al-Akhtām*, 61–71.

3 Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, bk. 3, ch. 37 “The Ring.”

4 Ibn Marzūq, *Musnad*, 130.

5 This is what is described in Allan and Sourdél, “Khātām, khātim.”



Figure 5.1. A ruler wearing a ring on the fifth finger of his left hand. Leire ivory casket (detail), 1004–1005. Photograph courtesy of Pamplona, Museo de Navarra.

Arabic poetry frequently cites jewels, particularly necklaces, but rings rarely are mentioned; an allusion in Ibn Quzmān (d. 1160) “if your ring falls into the well” indicates nothing other than that they existed and were sometimes lost.⁶ Yet they are not named in notarial forms that list jewellery. The Andalusī works that collect proverbs, stereotyped comparisons and popular sayings rarely mention rings either; I found only two allusions in the compilation of the Cordovan al-Zajjālī (1220–1294); one looks like a joke: “What

⁶ *Todo Ben Quzmān*, 339.

do you need, oh you naked [one]? He answered: a ring and a purse;" the other is somewhat obscure: "although the rings disappeared, the fingers remained."⁷

Arab historical sources provide little information about signet-rings, the sealing of documents, what was written on the seals or their use in the lands of al-Andalus; these topics are mentioned only tangentially. Nevertheless, one can find brief accounts scattered through the chronicles and annals of the caliphs, biographies of judges or sages, and literary prose works; once gathered, they give us some idea of what sources might refer to and represent the use of signet-rings (and to a lesser extent the ring in general) over time. To these written sources, we will add the material provided by archaeology and iconographic evidence (Figure 5.1).

The Umayyad Rulers of al-Andalus and Their Signet-Rings

None of the signet-rings of the Umayyad rulers of al-Andalus, whether worn officially or in private, nor their imprints have been preserved, simply because we do not have any original official documents of that period. Arabic sources merely record the texts that were inscribed on rings, with slight discrepancies.⁸ It seems that initially the most common formula was *bi-llāh yathīq Fulān wa-bi-hi ya'taṣīm* (In God so-and-so trusts and in Him he takes refuge). This is what was written on the rings of the oldest Andalusī rulers 'Abd al-Raḥmān I (r. 756–788), Hishām I (r. 788–796), al-Ḥakam I (r. 796–822), and it was also the inscription on the private ring of Muḥammad I (r. 852–886), though he had a different motto engraved on his official seal.

According to the eleventh-century historian Ibn Ḥayyān,

prince 'Abd al-Raḥmān [II, r. 822–852] was the first who decided to inscribe the main and most renowned seal of the caliphs with the now famous motto 'So-and-so is satisfied with [God's] decree' ... This motto has continued to be used by the descendants who succeeded him because it pleased them, they adopted it and continued to use it after him until his dynasty became extinct. Prince 'Abd al-Raḥmān dropped the ring [*khātim*] that he wore and with which he stamped the seal [*al-ṭābi*] in the margins of the edicts of his kingdom. He was saddened by his loss, searched for it everywhere, sent missives ordering to look for it, but it could not be found. He then ordered a new inscription to be engraved on one of his other rings. He instructed his

7 Ould Mohamed Baba, *Estudio dialectológico*, nos. 91 and 128.

8 See in Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, 89–91 all the texts with their variants and documental references.

intimate, the eunuch Naṣr, to ask the literati and sages who were in Court to think of a brief and appropriate expression to engrave on the ring stone. Naṣr called ‘Abd Allāh Ibn al-Shamir, who was in the palace most of the time and was close to prince ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, informed him of what the prince wanted and commissioned him to draft a new motto to achieve the reward. With his usual inventiveness, he soon composed the following verses: ‘Effective seal of power that shows to people his good judgment / The servant of the Clement [*‘ābid al-raḥmān*] is satisfied with God’s decree.’ Naṣr took the ring and the two verses to the prince and informed him of what had happened with Ibn al-Shamir. The prince was very pleased with the aphorism and he ordered to engrave on the ring: ‘*Abd al-Raḥmān bi-qaḍā’ Allāh rāḍin*’ [‘Abd al-Raḥmān is satisfied with God’s decree]. It was thus fulfilled, and later on all those who succeeded him maintained this inscription and no one changed it.⁹

Indeed, as the Andalusī chronicles confirm, on the official signet-rings of all ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II’s successors the motto *bi-qaḍā’ Allāh rāḍin* was engraved after each of their names. It is documented on those of Muḥammad I (r. 852–886), al-Mundhir (r. 886–888), ‘Abd Allāh (r. 888–912), ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III (r. 912–961), although it is said that he usually wore a ring with the inscription: *bi-llāh yantaṣir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nāṣir* (‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nāṣir wins with the help of God), al-Ḥakam II (r. 961–976) and Hishām II (r. 976–1000, 1010–1013). The inscription on the seal of Muḥammad II (r. 1009) is not known; that of Sulaymān al-Musta‘īn bi-llāh (r. 1009, 1013–1016) showed only his name: Sulaymān Ibn al-Ḥakam.

The ring was one of the objects that were part of the ruler’s visual display of power, for it symbolized the legitimacy of the authority of the one who wore it; that is why the action of giving it to somebody (*ramā bi-khātami-hi ilay-hi*)¹⁰ was tantamount to naming him heir. This gifting is attested several times, for example in relation to the succession of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān I in 788:

It is said that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Mu‘āwiya, seeing himself close to death while Hishām was in Mérida and Sulaymān was in Toledo, told another of his sons, ‘Abd Allāh, called al-Balansī, who was next to him: ‘Give the ring and the power to the one of your two brothers who comes first.’¹¹ Hishām was the first to arrive, and he camped in Ruṣāfa, where ‘Abd Allāh met him. Following their father’s last wishes, ‘Abd Allāh surrendered the power to his brother by handing their father’s ring to him.

⁹ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis II*, fol. 143v, ch. *al-khātam*.

¹⁰ The verb *ramā* has sometimes been edited as *bariya* and *bara’a* from different manuscript sources.

¹¹ Ibn ‘Idhārī, *Bayān II*, 61–62, *fa-rmi ilay-hi bi-l-khātam wa-l-amr*.

This same passing of rings happened when al-Ḥakam I (d. 822) decided to cede the power to his son ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II,¹² and when ‘Abd Allāh (d. 912) gave his ring to his grandson ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III “meaning that he was appointing him as his successor.”¹³

So, whoever placed the seal on official documents was the one who held actual power. This explains the behaviour of the chancellor al-Manṣūr (Almanzor), *hājib* for the weak caliph Hishām II al-Mu’ayyad, who from the year 992 onwards decided to use his own seal instead of that of the caliph to show he was the effective ruler of al-Andalus. This is related by Ibn Abī Zar’, but the edition is missing two words at the end of the passage.¹⁴ Fortunately the quote is complete in another source, taken from a better copy, saying “In that year al-Manṣūr ibn Abī ‘Āmir suppressed the seal of al-Mu’ayyad from the official writings and used only his own. From that time on, al-Mu’ayyad was called ‘the *wāw* of ‘Amr.’”¹⁵ To understand this degrading nickname, equivalent to ‘be useless,’ we must remember that in Arabic the names ‘Amr and ‘Umar would be written alike if it was not for a letter *wāw* added to the end of ‘Amr to distinguish it, a necessary but mute letter.

Ring Owners

In addition to the ruler, other people of high status such as ministers and court dignitaries, military positions, judges, and lawyers held signet-rings. The Andalusī historian Ibn al-Faraḍī says that Abū Zakariyā’ Yaḥyā ibn Malik ibn ‘Ā’idh, from a well-known family of scholars living in Tortosa, told him that his grandfather ‘Ā’idh ibn Kaysān’s ring was engraved with the words *‘Ā’idh bi-llāh ‘ā’idh* (‘Ā’idh seeks refuge in God).¹⁶ In this case, the text played with the owner’s name, although the well-known Quranic expression of seeking refuge in God was seen on other rings as *bi-llāh yu’idh* ‘Abd al-Waḥḥāb ibn Aswad (‘Abd al-Waḥḥāb ibn Aswad seeks refuge in God).¹⁷ According to Ibn Bassām, the famous Cordoban polymath Abū Muḥammad Ibn Ḥazm

12 Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis II*, fol. 139v, *wa-bariya ilay-hi bi-khātami-hi*.

13 Ibn ‘Idhārī, *Bayān II*, 157, *ramā bi-khātami-hi ilay-hi*; *Una crónica anónima*, 29, *bara’a bi-khātami-hi ilay-hi*.

14 Ibn Abī Zar’, *Rawḍ al-qirtās*, 116.

15 *Una descripción anónima*, 1:184; the final words are in n. 86 with a question mark.

16 Ibn al-Faraḍī, *Ta’rīkh ‘ulamā’*, 1:277, biography 996.

17 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, no. 223.

(d. 1064), the author of *Ṭawq al-ḥamāma*, who was a minister at the time of al-Manṣūr, owned a ring with the engraving *yā 'Alī ibn Aḥmad ittaqī Allāh tarshud* (Oh 'Alī ibn Aḥmad, trust God and you will be on the right path).¹⁸ These instances show that the signet-ring was a highly personal object, with the name of its owner linked to a pious expression.

How personal these items were, is evidenced by stories that tell us about people who, after being killed, had their hand or finger cut off in order to remove the ring to show it as proof of their death; a fact that reveals the unique and individual character of each ring. The head and hand of the corpse of Sulaymān (d. 928?)—son of the rebel Ibn Ḥafṣūn—were amputated, and his silver ring was presented to the minister as convincing proof of his death. There are two versions of the event that disagree on the names of the responsible party: “Ibn Muẓāhir had beaten him with the sword, and it was he who cut off his hand and commissioned the officer Muḥammad ibn Yūnus to remove the ring from his finger; he hastened to take it to the minister.”¹⁹ The second version attributes both actions to Sa'īd ibn Ya'lā: “He cut off his head and cut off his finger with the ring, which was made of silver, a precious one.”²⁰ Here, the use of silver is again confirmed as well as its preciousness, references that are missing in the first narration.

That the despoiling of rings was usual is confirmed by several other episodes.²¹ When al-Nāya, who since 1066 was minister of the taifa king of Granada, *ḥājib* Bādīs al-Muẓaffar (r. 1038–1073), travelled to Guadix for an enquiry, he stayed in the house of the governor Wāṣil, a man he trusted completely, who entertained him, got him drunk and finally killed him, as part of a plan hatched to take power in Granada. After al-Nāya was assassinated, somebody was dispatched to Toledo to look for prince Māksan with al-Nāya's ring so that the prince would be sure of al-Nāya's death. The messenger told him: “There is no longer in Granada anyone who opposes you or confronts you.”²²

¹⁸ Ibn Bassām, *Dhakhīra*, 1/1:166.

¹⁹ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabas* (V), 204–5, fol. 132.

²⁰ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabas* (V), 207, fol. 133.

²¹ Almanzor did not believe the announcement of the death of the prestigious general Ghālīb during a military confrontation against him in July 981, until the hand with his ring and then his head were presented to him; see Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *A'māl al-a'lām*, 74. About the killing and taking the ring from the finger of Ismā'il ibn Muḥammad Ibn 'Abbād, brother of the Sevilla taifa king al-Mu'taḍid in 1039 by the Ṣinhāja, see Ibn 'Idhārī, *Bayān III*, 202.

²² 'Abd Allāh Ibn Bulughhīn, *Kitāb al-tibyān*, 65, fol. 27a–b.

In all these narrations, rings served as identifiers because of their inscriptions; yet nothing is said about their appearance, probably because they belonged to the same plain model.

Beware of Where You Wear It

The major schools of Islamic jurisprudence argued without agreement on whether or not Muhammad habitually wore his ring, and on which hand and on which finger he would have worn it.²³ These questions affected what the faithful should do, and this depended on the school followed in each area. According to the Hanafi, Hanbali, and Maliki schools (the last one was the prevailing one in al-Andalus and North Africa) the ring must be worn on the left hand, while according to the school of al-Shāfi'ī, it must be worn on the right hand.

In this respect, we have a unique story with exceptionally interesting implications. Its central character was Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf ibn 'Ābis (d. 910),²⁴ from Huesca, who travelled to Tunisia to attend the teachings of the prestigious Maliki faqīh Yaḥyā b. 'Umar (d. 902).²⁵ One day, Yaḥyā observed that Aḥmad was wearing his ring on his right hand. He took the sacred book away from his hand, pushed him away and spoke an ugly word to him. When one of those who witnessed the incident asked Aḥmad for the reason why Yaḥyā did this to him, what did he reproach him for, Aḥmad showed his ring, on which it was written 'There is no deity but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God' and said: 'I swear by this *shahāda* that my beliefs were never the ones the sheikh suspected of me. What happened was that, when I went to the restroom, I changed the ring from my left hand to my right one, to avoid wearing it while washing after urinating. I then forgot to put it back in place on the left hand.' When Aḥmad's explanation arrived to Yaḥyā, he regretted having treated him harshly, he then treated him kindly, pardoned him, and so all was well again.

To understand this anecdote, we need to remember that the left hand is considered impure and is used for cleaning oneself, and also to bear in mind that Yaḥyā b. 'Umar, in addition to being a Maliki *faqīh* himself, had written a refutation against al-Shāfi'ī. The seemingly slight slip-up on the part

²³ The references to the specific *ḥadīths* can be found in Allan and Sourdel, "Khātam, khātim," 1103.

²⁴ Khushanī, *Akhbār*, 21–22, biography 19.

²⁵ See his biography by Chalmeta, "Ibn 'Umar al-Kinānī, Yaḥyā."

of the disciple in wearing his ring on his right hand was enough to make his teacher suspect that he was an adept of the Shāfiʿī school.

The Uses of the Signet-Ring

The imprint of the signet-ring has been and still is used for different functions in various societies throughout history: to prevent the contents of vessels from being stolen or altered, to avoid uncontrolled access to the interior of a building, to validate documents and to close letters.²⁶ In absence of sealed documents we return once more to chronicles to see which of these functions are attested in al-Andalus.

The seal of validation or subscription ensured the validity and veracity of what the text affirmed in a written document, it replaced the signature and was used by the highest echelons of society as an expression of power and status, and also as a means of identity. The seal was applied on an open public document and remained attached on it. It could be pendent to a parchment or affixed to a paper one. Several references attest to this use of signet rings, showing that in these cases the seal (*tābiʿ*) was the imprint of the ring (*khātām*).

When on one occasion prince al-Ḥakam I (r. 796–822) was obliged to testify in a trial, he called two *faqīhs* of his court, wrote the attestation on a piece of paper in his own handwriting, sealed it with his ring (*bi-khātami-hī*) and gave it to them saying: “This is my attestation, with my handwriting and under my seal (*taḥṭa tābiʿ-ī*). Give it to the judge.”²⁷ The ring that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān II (822–847) lost was the one “he used to stamp the seal (*al-tābiʿ*) in the margins of the edicts of his kingdom.”²⁸ And, as already stated, Almanzor decided to seal the official documents with his own signet instead of that of the caliph, thus demonstrating his own authority.

The chronicler Ibn ʿIdhārī reports that at the beginning of the Fitna, in the year 1008, a certain Ibn al-Qāriḥ was sent by the powerful minister ʿĪsā ibn Saʿīd to meet with the eunuch Naẓīf and convey to him a secret message concerning a plot to overthrow ʿAbd al-Malik al-Muẓaffar, the son of Almanzor. He had with him a letter of credentials authorizing him to speak on behalf of ʿĪsā, with the imprint of his ring on it.²⁹ Unfortunately, there

26 For seals in a global context, see Menéndez Pidal, *Los sellos en nuestra historia*.

27 Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis II*, fol. 124r; Nubāhī, *Marqaba*, 74.

28 Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis II*, fol. 143v.

29 Ibn ʿIdhārī, *Bayān III*, 32.

is no physical record of any official document authenticated with a ring, as there are no records predating the Nasrid era, and by then seal matrices were used.³⁰

Normally, private letters were sealed so that their contents would remain secret, not altered, and read only by the recipient. The Zanāta chief al-Khayr ibn Muḥammad ibn Khazar, a faithful ally of 'Abd al-Raḥmān III, regularly wrote to him to tell 'Abd al-Raḥmān what was happening in Oran and the Algerian coast.³¹ The chronicle narrates that in 940 the caliph made this Zanāta chief an excellent and valuable gift, which included various luxurious garments, precious objects, distinguished military harnesses, and one of his private rings, which was set with an emerald of great value, a magnificent jewel, with his name engraved in it; he ordered him to seal (*al-ṭab'*) with it only the missives which he so often addressed to him.³² We have here a singular example which not only shows one of the uses of the seal ring, but also the importance of gift giving in medieval society. To the luxury objects he usually offered to his allies, the caliph added on this occasion a very special item: one of his own rings, to reaffirm and show the close connection he had established with this North African leader.

Summons stamps were loose imprints of the judge's ring that were sent to the defendants while their summons to trial were transmitted orally; the imprint credited its bearer and validated the message. Some consider it a Germanic custom imported to Iberia by the Visigoths, although others believe it derives from the Roman *tesserae*. Summons stamps' use among the Christian population is attested in the *Fuero Juzgo* and in legal texts of the eleventh and twelfth centuries which regulate its use.³³ Did the Muslims of al-Andalus use the citation seal as well? In the book about the biographies of early Andalusī judges by al-Khushanī we read that:

when Muḥammad ibn Bashīr was appointed judge, he printed ten stamps. When a plaintiff asked him for a stamp, he would give him one and order his secretary to enter the name and address of the defendant in the register, and also the name of the person to whom he gave it, to which he said: 'Beware

30 Labarta, "Sellos en la documentación nazarí."

31 Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabas* (V), 259–60, fols. 171 and 172 with the text of two of his letters.

32 Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabas* (V), 460, fol. 312. Despite the praising opinion of the chronicler, I suspect it was probably a prasiolite or an aventurine.

33 Menéndez Pidal, *Los sellos en nuestra historia*, 113–22.

to use it unfairly' and he made him promise to return it. These seals always came back to his hands and he was able to use them until he died.³⁴

The story goes together with several anecdotes that highlight the unconventional attitudes and the eccentricities of this judge,³⁵ who was frequently mocked; the fact is narrated as something exceptional, although the rarity lies perhaps in the fact that only ten imprints lasted so long.

We are told, too, about the severe behaviour of some of the judges, as was the case of al-Faraj ibn Kināna, a judge from late 813 to July 816, who gave his summons stamps (*tawābi'a-hu*) to anyone, without exceptions.³⁶ The *fatā* Badrūn told prince Muḥammad I about the judge Sulaymān ibn al-Aswad:³⁷

'I treated with disdain a woman who sued me for a house I owned and as soon as I did it, she came to me with the judge's summons stamp.' He excused himself from going, claiming that he had important occupations, but the judge sent somebody who brought him before him and rebuked him: 'You disobeyed me and did not take my seal.'³⁸

From the examples given above, it appears that Muslim judges of al-Andalus used summons stamps at least during the ninth century, but the surviving references do not allow us to answer the question whether they continued to be used in the following centuries and whether they were the imprints of their rings, as I suspect, or those of another type of matrix.

Visual Sources

Archaeology confirms and complements what we know through written sources, adding to it a touch of materiality and preventing our imagination from leading us down wrong paths. At the same time, as we will see below, the rings themselves and their inscriptions open new unsuspected doors onto their meaning in society.

The Leire or Pamplona ivory Casket kept at the Museum of Navarre (Pamplona), a Cordoban work dated 1004, shows a man sitting on a cushion, wearing a ring on his left little finger. Jorge de Navascués noted the ring and assumed that the man was Hishām II, stating that "the true caliphal insignia

34 Khushanī, *Quḍāt*, 77; Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis II*, fols. 121v–122r. Muḥammad ibn Bashīr was appointed judge by al-Ḥakam I (796–822).

35 Khushanī, *Quḍāt*, 80; Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis II*, fol. 122v.

36 Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis II*, fol. 125r.

37 He was appointed judge by Muḥammad I (852–886).

38 Nubāhī, *Marqaba*, 85.



Figure 5.2a. Silver ring, eleventh century. Córdoba, Museo PRASA Torrecampo, no. 7676. Photograph courtesy of Juan Bautista Carpio.



Figure 5.2b. Silver ring with engraved carnelian cabochon, eleventh century. Córdoba, Museo PRASA Torrecampo, no. 7675. Photograph courtesy of Juan Bautista Carpio.

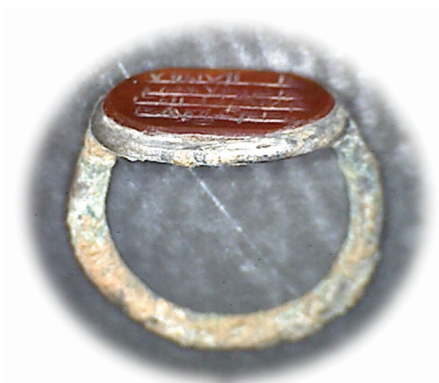


Figure 5.2c. Silver ring with engraved carnelian, eleventh century. Found in Córdoba PP07-M9-T130. Córdoba, Museo Arqueológico de Córdoba. Photograph courtesy of Agustín López.



Figure 5.2d. Gilded silver ring with glass cabochon, ca. 1140. Found in Albalat (Cáceres). Cáceres, Museo de Cáceres. Photograph courtesy of José Miguel González Bornay.

or emblem was the royal seal consisting of a gold ring on which a phrase was engraved as a motto.”³⁹ He was right in his appreciation of the symbolic character of the ring, but Islam dislikes men using gold and, accordingly, the caliph’s ring was most probably made of silver. It is a specimen with a heavy wire shank and quite a high bezel, and it seems to be set with a stone. Among the motifs embroidered with silk on a piece of linen kept at Oña (Burgos), one is a sitting man who has been interpreted as a caliph.⁴⁰ Initially, a ring was perceived on his left little finger. However, the textile was then in poor condition with part of its threads loose or lost. After it has been cleaned and restored, the ring can no longer be seen, and consequently it has become clear that it was a misappraisal due to the threads being out of place.

Most of the rings that have come down to us via excavations and finds are made of silver and are almost always formed by a wire shank in the form of an incomplete circle soldered to the base of a setting (Figures 5.2a–d). There is a chronological evolution: in the earliest stage, rings have their inscription engraved in negative, in the metal of the solid bezel; later, they have the engraved inscription on a carnelian ring stone. Following the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba in 1009, the rings are mostly set with glass cabochons, and they no longer have an inscription. It seems as if, by then, the ring had lost its signatory function in favour of the metal seal matrix, as the chronology of the few bronze seal matrices that have been found correspond to the taifa epoch and later.⁴¹

The texts on the preserved rings have the name of the owner combined with “trusts in God” or an equivalent expression (Figures 5.3a–b). They are inspired by the formula seen on the rings of the eighth century Andalusī rulers, although the full expression is present only in an engraved carnelian of a later date: *ʿAqīl bn Atā bi-llāh yathīq wa-bi-hiya ʿtaṣīm* (‘Aqīl ibn Atā trusts in God and takes refuge in Him).⁴² The most common wordings are: *bi-llāh Fulān yathīq*;⁴³

39 Navascués, “Una joya,” 244 and lám. XII; about Makariou and Robinson identifying him as ‘Abd al-Malik see Rosser-Owen, *Articulating the Ḥijāba*, 282–88, in particular 285n26.

40 For image, discussion, and references see Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, 36–37; Rosser-Owen, *Articulating the Ḥijāba*, 78–79, 302–6; Labarta, “Los epígrafes,” 99, 121.

41 Labarta, “Matrices de sello”; Labarta, “Nuevas matrices.”

42 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, no. 225.

43 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, no. 14 *Muḥammad ibn Yazīd*; no. 89 *ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ishāq*; no. 22 *Muḥarrir* or *Muḥriz*; no. 232 *Talīd ibn ʿAbd al-Akram*.



Figure 5.3a. Imprint kept at Granada, Biblioteca de la Universidad de Granada MS-2-041(2-10). The original seal ring (tenth century) is now lost but was found in Martos (Jaén). Text: *Bi-llāh Talīd b. 'Abd al-Akram yathiq*. Drawing by author.



Figure 5.3b. Imprint kept at Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia, CASE/9/7970/4(3). The original seal ring (tenth to eleventh century), now lost, was found in Écija (Sevilla). Text: *Tājīt b. 'Umar bi-qaḍā' Allāh rāḍin*. Drawing by author.



Figure 5.3c. Silver ring with carnelian seal showing complete *shahada* (profession of faith), eleventh century. Écija, Museo Histórico Municipal de Écija. Photograph courtesy of Antonio Fernández Ugalde (reversed).



Figure 5.3d. Carnelian seal showing complete *shahada*, eleventh century. Córdoba PP07-M9-T132 face A. Córdoba, Museo Arqueológico de Córdoba. Photograph courtesy of Agustín López (reversed).



Figure 5.3e. Carnelian seal expressing the unicity of God, eleventh century. Córdoba PP07-M9-T132 face B. Córdoba, Museo Arqueológico de Córdoba. Photograph courtesy of Agustín López (reversed).

Fulān bi-llāh yathiq;⁴⁴ *bi-llāh yathiq Fulān*;⁴⁵ and *thiqat Fulān bi-llāh* (So-and-so trusts in God).⁴⁶ The new motto adopted by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II is seen on a ring found in a tomb in Écija, of which only two imprints made in 1787 survive: *Tājīt ibn ‘Umar bi-qaḍā’ Allāh rāḍin* (Tājīt ibn ‘Umar is satisfied with God’s decree).⁴⁷ Other expressions are documented in unique items. There are very few rings with proper names only.⁴⁸

Rings Forging Religious Connections

All the mottoes engraved in the signet-rings from al-Andalus had a religious flavour and showed the faith and confidence their owners held in God. It is not unusual for Arabic ring carvings to offer their text in the negative even when they show religious phrases without an owner’s name and, consequently, with no value as personal seals. I am referring to those with the Islamic profession of faith or Quranic quotations. To these, we must add those rings with the same texts but in positive, as these too were testimony to their owner’s piety. We know, for example, that the Almohad caliph Abū Yūsuf Ya’qūb al-Manṣūr (r. 1184–1199) had his ring engraved with *‘alā Allāh tawakkaltu* (In God I have delegated).⁴⁹ His successor, Muḥammad al-Nāṣir (r. 1199–1213), wore a ring with the phrase *‘alā Allāh tawakkaltu wa-huwa ḥasbī wa-ni’ma al-wakīl* (In God I have delegated. He suffices me, and what an excellent delegate He is).⁵⁰ Their names did not appear on the bezel, and I wonder if they used them to seal or only to show their piety.

Among the medieval rings found in al-Andalus, some present the complete profession of faith in negative, others in positive; such phrases may be engraved directly into the silver bezel of the ring, or in a carnelian intaglio set into a silver ring.⁵¹ Some of these examples have been found during

44 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, no. 8 ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Mu‘min; no. 20 Qāsim, 24 Sa‘īd.

45 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, no. 54 Sa‘īd.

46 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, no. 2 ‘Abdūn; no. 5 ‘Abd al-‘Alī; no. 6 Ishāq; no. 10 Yahyā; no. 12 ‘Afrā; no. 17 ‘Isā.

47 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, no. 65; Labarta, “Banquero y la impronta,” 93–94 and nn. 63–64.

48 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, no. 7 Ghawth ibn ‘Aṭā’ ibn Ghānim; no. 56 Sharīk ibn Ḥayyūn; no. 215 Ḥakam ibn Muḥammad.

49 Ibn Abī Zar’, *Rawḍ al-qirṭās*, 216.

50 Ibn Abī Zar’, *Rawḍ al-qirṭās*, 231.

51 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, nos. 13, 18, 32, 137, 218; and nos. 29, 219–22.

archaeological excavations in burials, both of women and men, still placed on the deceased's fingers or near the corpses (Figure 5.3c).⁵² We also have rings with the complete profession of faith associated with a name, such as: *Sukayna tashhad an lā ilāha illā Allāh Muḥammad rasūl Allāh* (Sukayna testifies that there is no deity but God; Muhammad is God's envoy) and *ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Mūsā yashhad an lā ilāha illā Allāh wa-anna Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*; or only with its first part: *Shunayf yashhad al-lā ilāha illā Allāh*.⁵³ We may assume they were mostly meant to show the piety of those who wore them, perhaps already in life.

Of great interest are five carnelian stones found in Cordoba in tombs of the caliphal period, with identical pious texts, engraved both on the obverse and reverse despite being set in a ring, which totally precludes the use of the hidden face as a seal (Figure 5.3d–e).⁵⁴ They are not reused gems, as the style of the engraving is the same on both sides, done by the same artisan. It is also surprising that three of them have been found in the tomb of the same woman;⁵⁵ if she had been buried with the jewels she usually wore, a little more variety would have been expected. On the obverse of all five rings we read the first part of the profession of faith, which proclaims the oneness of God combined with verses that complete it: "There is no deity but God. He is the only one [Q XL,84 and LX,4]. He has no associate [Q VI,163]. His is the power, His is the praise. He is powerful above all things [Q LXIV,1]." Among pious Muslims it is believed that one's sins may be forgiven if, after fulfilling the compulsory ritual prayer, one repeats 33 times "Glorified be God," 33 times "Praise be to God," and 33 times "God is the greatest" and then recites the aforesaid combination of Quranic texts.⁵⁶ On the reverse of those same gems, we see the complete profession of faith "I bear witness that there is no deity but God and that Muhammad is God's envoy."⁵⁷

One clear conclusion drawn from the texts inscribed on these stones is that the deceased who wore them were Muslims. While this seems obvious, it is puzzling to notice that among the 1,750 rings, seals, and gems engraved

52 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, nos. 15, 28–32, 129, 216, 218, 219–22.

53 See Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, nos. 15, 216, and 214.

54 Labarta et al., "Anillos y cornalinas"; Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, nos. 29, 219–22.

55 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, nos. 220–22.

56 Quasem, *Salvation*, 111–12.

57 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, nos. 219–22. In no. 29, this cannot be verified as the stone is still set on the ring.

in Arabic kept in the Cabinet des Médailles of the National Library of Paris, the Zucker and the Khalili Collections, and the British Museum, and with most originating from different Islamic lands, only half a dozen ones from the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century make explicit reference to Muhammad.⁵⁸ In an Arabic-speaking society, to affirm the oneness of God in Arabic does not imply being a Muslim, as Jewish and Christian minorities agree with them on that point; it is the second part of the Islamic profession, the one that attests to the prophetic mission of Muhammad, which clearly confirms that the owner of the ring was a Muslim.⁵⁹

The archaeological record does not tell us whether the deceased in whose graves the rings and stones have been found already wore them during their lifetime or if their relatives added them at the time of the burial. Because of their religious inscriptions, these rings seem suitable to accompany the dead in their transit to the afterlife, and to bear witness to the Muslim faith of their wearers before the Angels of Death, much like a small version of an epitaph that they possibly lacked over their tombs. One wonders why in these few cases it was considered so important to highlight the Islamic creed of the deceased as to include a tiny testimony of faith in their graves against the normal practice of not putting any object in tombs. A possible answer is that their piety was in doubt, perhaps because they were recent converts.

Coin-Rings and Political Connections

An easy and quick way to construct a religious ring was to take a silver coin and solder it to an open hoop, with the ends flattened and bent inwards, placing it so that the visible face is that with the profession of faith (Figure 5.4a–b). The silver coins minted by the Almohad Caliphate (1121–1269) had a characteristic square shape; several examples are preserved in which one such dirham was used as a bezel. In the 2006 archaeological excavations of the Camí La Bola in Xàtiva (Valencia), one such ring was found which reads *Lā ilāha illā / Allāh Muḥammad / rasūl Allāh* (There is no deity but God. Muhammad is God's envoy). Another one was found during the 2007 campaign, still placed on the finger of the skeleton of an elderly woman (Figure 5.5); on the top face we read *Allāh rabbu-nā / Muḥammad rasūlu-nā / al-Mahdī imāmu-nā* (God is our Lord, Muhammad is our envoy;

58 For rings in these collections, see Kalus, *Catalogue des cachets*; Content, *Islamic Rings and Gems*; Wenzel, *Ornament and Amulet*; Porter, *Arabic and Persian Seals*.

59 Labarta et al., "Anillos y cornalinas," 275; Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, 70.



Figure 5.4a. Silver ring made with a square Almohad coin, twelfth–thirteenth century. Found in Manises. Valencia, Museo de Manises. Photograph by author.



Figure 5.4b. Silver ring made with an Ibn Hūd coin, 1228–1237. Madrid, Instituto Valencia de Don Juan. Photograph courtesy of Margarita Pérez Grande.



Figure 5.5. Silver ring made with an Almohad dirham still placed on the finger of the skeleton. Camí la Bola archaeological excavation, Xàtiva, Valencia. Photograph courtesy of Juan Salazar.

the Mahdi is our guide).⁶⁰ This last coin adds to the profession of faith a reference to Ibn Tūmart, the spiritual and first military leader of the Almohad puritanical reform movement who was recognized (1121) by his followers as the Mahdi, the expected divinely guided justicer.

After being defeated at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212), the Almohads lost much of the territories of al-Andalus, but continued to rule in Africa until 1269. In 1228, Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf ibn Hūd started a rebellion in al-Andalus, quickly winning popular support and beating the Almohad governors of Murcia and Valencia. He controlled much of al-Andalus from 1228 to 1237. Seeking to legitimize his rule, he pledged allegiance to the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad and took the titles of al-Mutawwakil 'alā Allāh and Prince of the Muslims. To visually distinguish himself from the Almohads, the silver coins he minted were round. On one face they say *Lā ilāha illā Allāh / Muḥammad rasūl Allāh / al-'abbāsī imām / al-umma* (There is no deity but God. Muhammad is God's envoy. The 'Abbāsī is the guide of the community). On the other side they read *al-Mutawakkil / 'alā Allāh amīr al-muslimīn / Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf / ibn Hūd* (Al-Mutawakkil 'alā Allāh, the prince of Muslims Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf Ibn Hūd).

In 1981, a hoard of dirhams was discovered in the Castle of Quípar (Cehegín, Murcia), which is preserved in the Santa Clara Museum of Murcia.⁶¹ It contained 198 Almohad silver square coins, and two circular ones with the name of al-Mutawakkil Ibn Hūd. These latter two, which are those that date the hoard after 1228, had been used as ring bezels, as attested by the remains of the tabs soldered on their backs where once the hoops were attached that are now lost. On the visible face, we read *Lā ilāha illā Allāh / Muḥammad rasūl Allāh / al-'abbāsī imām / al-umma*; the hidden side indicates that they were issued by Ibn Hūd. The Instituto Valencia de Don Juan (Madrid) preserves a complete ring made with a similar silver coin of al-Mutawakkil Ibn Hūd of Murcia.⁶² The Cabinet of Antiquities of the Royal Academy of History (RAH) in Madrid keeps another two of such dirhams with the remains of the tabs of the rings to which they were attached.⁶³ In all cases, the visible face is the same. A somewhat smaller coin of al-Mutawakkil

60 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, nos. 130, 129. Another such ring was found in Manises during the excavations of 2000–2001, see Blanes, *Museu de Ceràmica*, 208–9.

61 Labarta, "Joyas medievales," 93.

62 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, no. 131.

63 RAH cat. nos. 3430 and 3432; Canto et al., *Monedas*, 299 and 32 fig. 19.

shows on the visible face *al-ḥamd li-llāh / rabb / al-'ālamīn* (Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds) while it preserves the remnants of two tabs on the face that reads *al-Mutawakkil / 'alā Allāh Muḥammad ibn / Yūsuf ibn Hūd*.⁶⁴

It is worth asking ourselves whether those coin-rings were used only because they show the profession of faith, or if the phrase they exhibit following it might be an additional reason for their use. A group of coins, the square ones, express their support for the *Mahdi* Ibn Tūmart as head of the community, and are consequently pro-Almohad. The round coins issued by Ibn Hūd are anti-Almohad because they declare their obedience to the Eastern 'Abbasid authority and thereby externalize the belief in the political and religious unity of the entire Islamic community. If my suggestion is correct, we would thus have evidence that, in addition to the purely religious ones, there also was a group of rings that revealed political allegiances that were communicated through their shape and inscription.⁶⁵

Decorative Rings

The surviving rings discussed so far, as well as the chroniclers writing about these artifacts, confirm their religious, political and judicial importance. We would almost forget that rings are also decorative items that adorn the hand, are part of bodily movements and gestures, and therefore also suitable to forge more intimate connections.

As mentioned, when 'Abd al-Raḥmān II lost his signet-ring, he had a new motto engraved on another personal ring; similarly, 'Abd al-Raḥmān III gave away one of his rings (*khātam min khawātimi-hi*). It shows that these caliphs owned several rings, but we do not know what they looked like nor when they wore them. The same goes with 'Abd Allāh ibn Bulughghīn, the last Zīrid king of Granada who was dethroned by the Almoravids (1090). He narrates in his memoirs:

I had brought out with me from Granada a golden casket containing ten necklaces of the most precious pearls as well as gold amounting to 16.000 Almoravid dinars and some rings. [Gharūr] took the casket, with all the pearls and rings it contained ... On my arrival at Meknes, Gharūr wrote to me saying: 'Tell me about the ring which you took out with you'. I had taken it off my finger and sold it for ten dinars. In reply, I let him know that I needed the money I got for it.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ RAH cat. no. 3424, 14 mm; Canto et al., *Monedas*, 299.

⁶⁵ Labarta, "Joyas medievales," 92–94, paragraph 6.

⁶⁶ 'Abd Allāh Ibn Bulughghīn, *Kitāb al-tibyān*, 156, 157, 161.

While the marriage commitment was sealed with the delivery of a ring in the Christian and Jewish environments of the late thirteenth century and during the fourteenth century, it does not appear that Muslims used engagement or wedding rings; or at least it is not attested in the sources. According to the marriage contracts that are preserved—most of them from the area around Granada and dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—we learn that the jewels given to the bride by her family are one or two necklaces made of gold and small pearls, while the groom contributes two gold bracelets and two gold temple-ornaments.⁶⁷ Finger-rings are not cited.

This coincides with the profusely illustrated works ordered by King Alfonso X. In his *Libro de axedrez, dados e tablas* (Book of chess, dice, and tables, ca. 1283), several Muslim women are seen wearing bracelets, necklaces, and earrings; their fingers are dyed with henna, but none of them wears a ring.⁶⁸ Neither do men nor any of the characters depicted in the *Cantigas de Santa María*, although we find people of all ranks and social groups in the scenes: kings, apothecaries, sages, members of military orders, Christians, Muslims and Jews, Iberian and foreign. Only two *cantigas* involve rings, but both stray from our requirements: one regards that of the Christian king Fernando III;⁶⁹ the second one belonged to a German young man who handed it to an image of Virgin Mary for safekeeping while he was playing ball, which she interpreted as a love vow to her.⁷⁰

We have eight pages of an Arabic notebook with some twenty short love poems or songs, whose references to the Alhambra and its geographical surroundings suggest that they were composed in a Granada environment at the end of the fifteenth century.⁷¹ The author expresses the harmful passion that burns within him, complains of betrayals, changes of mind and rejections, or expresses his happiness after a healing intimate encounter. Several poems allude to the practice of the lover giving a ring to his beloved after having had such an encounter on the sly. The wearing of the ring revealed then the relationship, while being at the same time a symbol of fidelity.⁷² As somebody sang: “I’ve got a ring that helps me against what you know. / Who

⁶⁷ Martínez Ruiz, *Inventarios*, 213–93.

⁶⁸ Alfonso X, *Libro de axedrez, dados e tablas*, Escorial, T-I-6, fols. 18r, 40v, 48r, 54r.

⁶⁹ BNCF, Banco Rari 20, 28, <https://archive.org/details/b.-r.-20/page/n28/mode/1up?view=theater>.

⁷⁰ Alfonso X, *Cantigas de Santa María*, Escorial, Códice rico, fol. 61v.

⁷¹ *Cancionero morisco*, 30–31 (BHUV 966,9) and 429–44, poems 78–101.

⁷² *Cancionero morisco*, 442, poem 98 (An emerald ring is his talisman in my hand); 443, poem 100 (A ring has been given to me as a signal).

will be the one to stop me from joining my full moon?"⁷³ "My precious emerald ring / ... On my finger you put fame / To belittle the one who barred me to join [with you]."⁷⁴

In accordance with the context, we may assume that in the following verses the lover's final proposal was equivalent to an invitation to be seduced and to consent to the union of both:

A fire of lasting love was lit inside of me / Put it out by joining with me!
How much I crave you! How much I humble / While you're making fun of me.
Heal my heart / Let me give you a little ring with a turquoise.⁷⁵

Conclusion

As we have seen, during the first centuries of Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula (711–1030), the sovereigns and the elite wore and used a silver seal-ring as an expression of identity and as a display of high rank and effective power. Chroniclers and reality suggest that it was mostly—though not exclusively—a masculine jewel, and its inscription was almost always a combination of the personal name and a pious uttering. Made of silver, not gold, consisting of simple constructions and with affordable stones that were varieties of quartz, not expensive exotic gems, the purpose of those rings was not to show off one's wealth; instead, piety and political affiliations were communicated. Rings, not employed as seals, but purely as religious rings, seem to have been common to men and women between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, possibly longer, as some have been found in burials.

There are small groups of rings found along with coins and feminine jewellery in hoards hidden around 1010 and later.⁷⁶ While many of them have lost their stones, others are still set with pale ochre, green or deep blue glass cabochons; a few are set with a carnelian or rock crystal. None of these are engraved and are thus silent about possible wearers or owners. A few are gold or gilded silver and beautifully decorated with filigree, although their construction is similar to that of the silver ones. They were probably used by women, perhaps during wedding ceremonies; but it remains unclear whether those women were Muslim or not.

⁷³ *Cancionero morisco*, 441, poem 97.

⁷⁴ *Cancionero morisco*, 441, poem 96.

⁷⁵ *Cancionero morisco*, 433, poem 83.

⁷⁶ Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, 106–7, 112–13, 114–18, 118–19, 143–44, 147–48, 148–50.

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