

ornament and amulet

rings of the islamic lands in the nasser d khalili collection

The unusual and remarkable compilation of over 600 rings in the Nasser D Khalili Collection is unique in its coverage of the whole of the Islamic lands, from Indonesia in the East to the Maghreb in the West, spanning a period from the pre-Islamic era to the 20th century. The breadth and variety of rings represented are invaluable for a study of the stylistic development of the Islamic ring and the various trends that it influenced.



Previous pages: Gold ring in filigree and granulated openwork. Egypt, 11th century AD. Height 29 mm. © The Nour Foundation.

Enamelled gold ring set with a carved emerald and diamonds. Northern India (Jaipur), 19th century AD. Height 27mm. © The Nour Foundation.



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n most societies the ring represents the status of its wearer. Made of a range of materials from iron, glass, silver, gold, precious and semi-precious stones, the ring and the elaborateness of its decoration are an indication of his or her wealth. In Muslim society most men, from a humble merchant to a ruler, wore rings. This tradition goes back to a *Hadith* that mentions a seal ring worn by the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) which was engraved with the legend, 'Mohamed, the Apostle of Allah'. Rings constitute the most personal and identifiable item of jewellery. Most rings in the Nasser D Khalili Collection belonged to men; very little female jewellery survives, as it was traditionally never handed down, but rather melted and refashioned.

Talismanic and apotropaic qualities were also attributed to rings; as amulets they protected the wearer from harm. Functional rings such as seal rings also had a dual purpose; they identified the owner as well as protected him, initially by the choice of metal or stone, and later by an engraved invocation to God.

The dating of Islamic rings or jewellery is problematic as they were often melted down or reshaped. Archaeological records are also practically non-existent as Muslim funerary rites forbade burial with personal possessions. It is therefore mostly through comparisons and stylistic developments that we can form an idea of the chronology of the Islamic ring. This makes the wealth of evidence provided by the Nasser D Khalili Collection an invaluable asset in the study of the subject.

As early as the eighth century, Muslim conquests stretched across a vast territory from Spain to India. The encounter with the various civilisations, Graeco-Roman and Sasanian in particular was to generate a rich and diverse artistic legacy. These pre-Islamic influences played a major role in the shaping

of Islamic jewellery, particularly the ring. For example the use of seal rings, which constitute the majority of functional rings, is a continuation from the Roman and Byzantine periods while carving rings from a single piece of stone is a Sasanian characteristic, which continued across Islamic lands. The diverse styles were absorbed and reformulated to suit Islamic taste while techniques, such as filigree and granulation, were adopted and further developed to complement the new designs. A distinct linear Islamic style that tended to abstract natural forms first appeared in Samarra (Iraq), in the ninth century and spread throughout the Muslim world. Despite the scarcity of archaeological material between the eighth and 10th centuries the Nasser D Khalili Collection has a number of rings dating back to this period. They are mostly cast in one piece or made of a metal sheet shaped over a body of resin and represent the diverse types of rings produced at the time, including the use of granulation and niello in the decoration.

By the 10th and 11th centuries, a new technique appeared involving the soldering of metal sheets onto parts of the ring for reinforcement which eventually developed into a purely decorative style known as *appliqué*. Signet rings continued to be worn by both men and women. They were made of plain gold, silver or bronze, or set with semi-precious stones engraved with Kufic inscriptions. A rich decorative style developed simultaneously in Egypt and Iran. Fatimid Egypt produced the most sophisticated and elaborate decorative style, which was unique. Fatimid rulers were great admirers of jewellery and their treasury was renowned across the Muslim world. Filigree and granulated gold jewellery ornamented with scrolls and floral motifs were produced alongside *cloisonné* enamelling. During the same period, Iran continued to create exaggeratedly shaped plain rings alongside a variety of





heavily ornate rings with filigree, granules, numerous claws and dome-shaped bezels.

Rings of the 12th and 13th centuries represent a variety in artistic achievement; the techniques were elaborate and the decoration on the rings abundant. The rings were set with cabochon, table-cut oval or rectangular stones such as turquoises, rubies and garnets.

In the 13th century the Mongol invasion brought a new development to the use and design of seal rings. Previously signet rings were engraved in reverse. The Mongols



introduced a Chinese type of seal with lettering in relief often with an inscription in silver or gold wire to which the ink would stick. Occasionally, the wire inscriptions were not in reverse and such rings therefore fulfilled a purely decorative and most probably talismanic function. The decoration on jewellery from around the Mediterranean and Iran during the 13th and 14th centuries included heraldic designs as well as inscriptions and the rings were cast in a traditional stirrup shape. Silver was suddenly widely mined and available in the 14th century and became popular in both Europe and the



Islamic lands. At the same time another type of ring appeared made out of jade. Jade was very popular among the Mongols as it was thought to have magical properties. Other hololithic rings (cut from a single stone) carved out of semi-precious gems such as agate or carnelian, were also produced in stirrup or tall-bezel shape, thus continuing the fashion in the 14th and 15th centuries for large cast type rings. Zoomorphic designs in both Europe and the East made a fashionable appearance on Islamic rings as early as the 13th century and became popular in the 15th century.



Facing page
 Left: Gold seal ring decorated with cast *appliqués* and nielloed arabesque, and set with a carnelian seal stone inscribed, 'Contentment is wealth'. Eastern Iran. 13th-14th century. Height 23 mm. © The Nour Foundation.
 Right: Silver ring decorated with niello and *appliqués*. The bezel has the name of the owner, Ghazi Muhammad 'Ali Tusi, written in gold against a green-enamelled background. Eastern Iran (Ghaznah). 13th or 14th century. Height 26 mm. © The Nour Foundation.
 Left: Hololithic seal ring of green nephrite jade. The *naskhi* inscription is carved in reverse. Iran or Central Asia. 15th century. Height 30 mm. © The Nour Foundation.
 Right: Gold ring set with a coin. India. 1753-4 (after AH 1167). Height 36 mm. © The Nour Foundation.

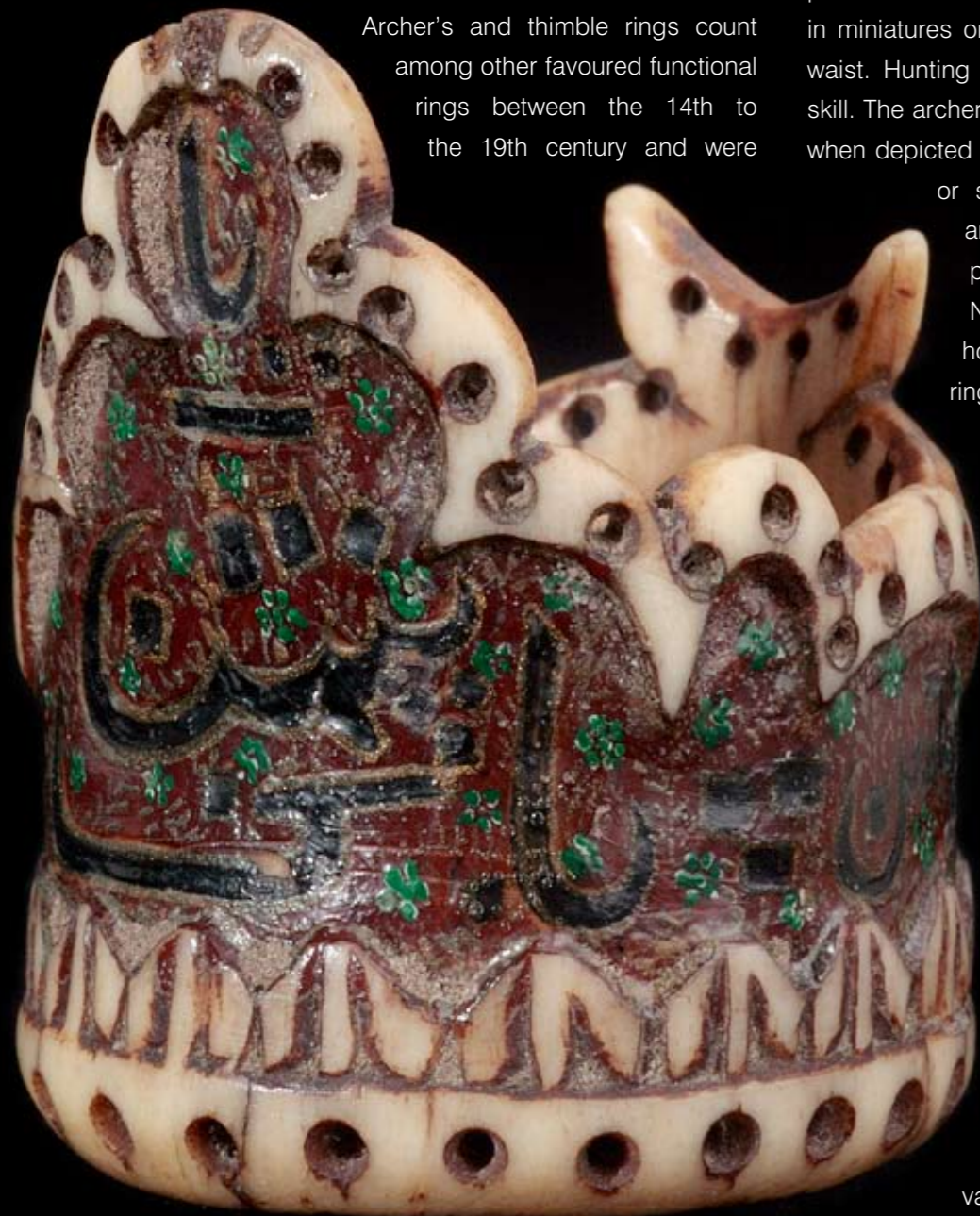


Below: Carved, pierced and painted bone ring. The inscription is an invocation to Ali and Hasan. India (Deccan). 17th century. Height 29 mm. © The Nour Foundation.

Facing page: Hololithic ring of rock crystal with a Pahlavi inscription and two lions attacking a ram. Iraq or Iran. 4th-6th centuries. Height 31 mm. © The Nour Foundation.

Dragons and serpents' heads were used as supports between the hoop and the bezel and were eventually abstracted to form an exaggerated buttress. Another type of ring with an unusual teardrop-shaped setting appeared at this time. The influence comes from Central Asia where a seal belonging to Shah Rukh's wife (15th century) was designed in this form. This shape later became a favourite among Persian and Mughal rulers.

Archer's and thimble rings count among other favoured functional rings between the 14th to the 19th century and were



designed specifically to aid the use of a bow and arrow. A Mamluk manual on archery dated circa 1368 mentions circular rings worn by Turkoman as archer's rings. However most of the archer's rings that survive are pointed at one end. They were generally cast, asymmetrical metal rings; with an inside opening that was much smaller than the splayed and pointed exterior. They were worn on the thumb with the pointed end facing outwards, and were invariably depicted in miniatures on the thumb of rulers or hanging from their waist. Hunting was a royal pursuit and archery a precise skill. The archer's ring indicated status and accomplishment when depicted as a bejewelled ornament made out of gold or semi-precious stones. A curiously shaped archer's ring attributed to the Deccan (the plateau in Southern India between the Narbada and Krishna rivers) is made out of horn or painted bone. These highly stylised rings were generally for display as they were totally impractical. Thimble rings are also represented in the collection. Made of cast bronze they are decorated with punched stippling and originate from Anatolia.

Extensive trade and exchange of gifts between Europe and the Islamic world brought a new development to the manufacture and design of rings. European goldsmiths and lapidaries were now employed in the various Muslim courts bringing in Western fashions. Bejewelled objects and weapons were also produced. Dish bezel rings, which were popular in Renaissance Europe, became predominant from the late 16th century in the East. They consisted of a sheet bezel attached to a shank of round wire. Old styles continued to be produced alongside the new, creating a rich and varied decorative vocabulary. Enamelling, niello

work, imported gemstones and floral ornaments suggesting Western influences are among some of the contributions made by European trends. European influences continued throughout the following centuries. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, a revival trend occurred with the inclusion of seals within a new shape. A monumental style developed which reached a climax with the influence of the 'cocktail' ring in the 20th century, so epitomised by the architectural and ridged rings of the 1930s and 40s.

More than any other item of jewellery, the ring has played a major role in Muslim society, particularly with its menfolk. The scope and variety of the material in the Nasser D Khalili Collection and the wealth of evidence it provides, allow a comprehensive view of the development of the ring in Islamic lands until recent times - a unique factor in the study of Islamic jewellery. □

The rings in the Nasser D Khalili Collection have been published in 'Ornament and Amulet: Rings of the Islamic Lands' by Marian Wenzel (The Nasser D Khalili Collection of Islamic Art: Volume XVI, London, 1993). For further information on the collection and on the forthcoming exhibition 'Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Collection of Nasser D. Khalili', opening at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia on 22 June, visit www.khalili.org and www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au

