**The Cultural Biography of Swords in Early Islam: An object of warfare and Socio-Cultural Artefact**

1. **Introduction**

Material arts are embodied practices, which left explicit traces in documents and objects (Hing Chau, 2023: xiii). The concept of artefact biography provides a theoretical framework to understand the life-history of an artefact. This approach views artefacts not merely as static objects but as dynamic entities that accumulate meaning and significance through their interactions with people and contexts over time. This study uses two key elements of Artefact Biography to analyze the culture of Islamic swords. First, it examens the various owners of the artefact throughout its existence, exploring how ownership impacts the artefact’s social and cultural significance. Second, it investigates their practical and symbolic uses of the artefact, including its employment in daily life, rituals, combat, and how these uses evolve over time.

Artefact biography is an approach derived from anthropology that considers the life history (biography) of an artefact as crucial to its meaning. The cultural biography of artefacts allows researchers to explore and reconstruct their histories and the human experiences they encapsulate, providing a deeper comprehension of past cultural practices and variations in societal values and social structures (Christian Greco, 2019: 7). The concept of cultural biography is essential in revealing how the significance of artefacts evolves over time through their interactions with people and environments. Understanding an artefact's us in daily life, rituals, or combat unveils its practical and symbolic roles, while its ownership history reflects social hierarchies, wealth, and cultural values. Additionally, exchanges of artefacts often indicate broader economic and social networks (Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, 1999: 169-178; Jody Joy, 2009: 540-556; Hans Peter Hahn and Hadas Weiss, 2013: 1-14).

The concept of artefact biography enriches our understanding of swords by tracing their journey through time, revealing how they were crafted, used, valued, and remembered within different cultural and historical contexts. The theoretical background of the research delves into the multifaceted significance of the medieval sword, drawing from various historical, cultural, and anthropological perspectives. Although the primary approach is text-based research, an interdisciplinary approach is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of medieval Islamic swords. This approach integrates existing scholarship on medieval swords in different cultural contexts, focusing on typology, production, distribution, social significance, and the concept of 'living' swords (Robert W. A.Jones, 2023; Susan Elaine Brunning, 2013). This multi-layered methodological framework should ensure a careful synthesis of different types of evidence, facilitating a nuanced exploration of the cultural significance of swords. The notion of 'living' swords, or swords perceived as possessing personalities and agency is instrumental in understanding their cultural significance. Swords often have rich biographies due to their association with significant events, high-status individuals, and cultural rituals. They are frequently named, adorned with inscriptions, and passed down through generations, making them prime subjects for artefact biography studies. Medieval Islamic literature and historical accounts may reveal similar perceptions, where swords are attributed with names, histories, and symbolic meanings.

Swords enjoyed the highest prestige among weapons of war, and pre-Muslim Arabs carried swords. Weapons as tool designed to apply or threaten force, play crucial roles in virtually every culture, and Arabic-Islamic culture is no exception. The use of weapons in Arabic-Islamic culture was often formalized and idealized, reflecting the cultural significance (Ludmila Torlakova, 2008: 129). During the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, Arabs and first Muslims primarily used swords. As symbols, swords represent military power, royal and communal authority, religion, and mysticism. The sword was an object of reverence, aestheticism, status, and embodiment (Mehmet Fahri Furat, 1998: 319-330.).The sword - *Sayf* (Mark Muehlhaeusler and Robert Hoyland, 2012: 39) a multi-faced symbol of military power and authority, with approximately 300 different synonyms in Arabic language, probably more than any other language (Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī, 2010). Alongside with camel and desert, swords remain symbol of Arab culture to this day (Ali Muhamad Mumtaz and Muneer Kuttiyani Muhammed, 2015: 290).

1. **Goals and aims**

This article aims to delve to the multifaceted roles and significance of the sword in medieval Islam, contextualizing it within the cultural and historical of the period. This study examines the sword beyond its functional role as a tool for killing, considering it as a cultural artefact, and the broader meaning and significance it had to its bearer and his community.

The primary objective of this is to investigate the dynamic relationship between human and swords in medieval Muslim societies and to analyze swords' significance. The study seeks to construct and decipher the symbolic and socio-cultural meaning of swords, derived from their multiple functions within medieval Muslim societies. It emphasizes the interplay between the form of the object, and social and cultural significance, illuminating haw each aspect informed and influences the others (Robert W. A.Jones, 2023: 8).

It is important to note that the study will only briefly mention trade networks for raw materials, manufacturing centers and swords makers, if at all. These aspects will be referenced marginally or pointed to as areas for further research, ensuring that the primary focus remains the symbolic and socio-cultural dimensions of the swords themselves.

1. **Sources**

Islamic law as a comprehensive system, encompasses all aspects of human life and existence, providing framework and guidance for believers.[[1]](#footnote-1) Asad asserts that the “*shari’a* is an exemplar of practical programs for the cultivation of moral virtue” (Asad Talal, 2003: 241). Given the reliance of Muslim life on jurisprudence, this corpus of literature aimed to fit the often-abstract legal principals with the practical needs, aspirations, changes, and developments of the community. A basic methodological question arises concerning the nature of these sources: whether they predominantly embody theoretical and hypothetical discussions or are grounded in reality (Ze'ev Maghen, 1999a: 351-354; Ze'ev Maghen, 2005b: 281-283; Vardit Chaim Rispler, 2007: 15; Aziz al-Azmeh, 1988: 251; Schacht, 1986: 886–891). Initially, it is presumed that these sources represent a synthesis of theory and practice, making it challenging to disentangle them from one another. This weave establishes moral boundaries through processes of socialization, allowing a sphere for interpretations and adaptations according to contexts of time and place (Ze’ev Maghen, 2011c: 232-234).

Additionally*, ḥadīth* literature, which comprises collections of traditions on what the Prophet said, did, or tacitly approved, is considered. These traditions, whether authentic, fabricated, or a combination of both, reflect, at least partially, the reality of Muslim urban communities during the first centuries of Islam (J. Robson, 1956-1964: 401-435; G.H.A Juynboll, 2001-2006: 376-396).

Another legal source is *ḥisba* literature, which aimed to guide and instruct the *muḥtasib*, the overseer of markets and public morality (Karen Moukheiber, 2017: 349-372). The *muḥtasib* was involved in all material and spiritual aspects of the city's life, with authority encompassing all daily religious and secular matters, not just within the market confines. The *muḥtasib* was also responsible for enforcing discriminatory laws against *ahl al-dhimma* (including dress codes and weapons). Appointed by the governor or the *Qadi*, the *muḥtasib* was known for his morality and knowledge of law (R. P. Buckley, 1992: 101, 104-106). Most of the available information about *ḥisba* was written by *muḥtasibs* to serve guides for those who would assume the office (Ahmad Ghaben, 2000: 486). This study utilized several *ḥisba* books, such as the works of Ibn Bassam (d. 1174), who is believed to have worked in Egypt, al-Shayzari (d. 1174), who worked in the Syrian region and **ʼ**Ibn al-**ʼ**Ukhuwa (d. 1329), who relied on his Syrian predecessor but adopted his work to the circumstances of his residence in Egypt.

Another source is Muslim historiography, premodern Arabic historical texts that possess multiple layers of meaning, with their Muslim authors actively interpreting the narratives of their societies (Konrad Hirschler, 2006: 2). However, a critical examination of these texts is indispensable, taking into account various factors such as the gap between the occurrence of historical events and their recording, the challenges posed by oral transmission, biases and prejudice, authenticity, and political influences. Muslim historiography is characterized by a mixture of literary and oral historical traditions, contributing to its intricate nature in comprehending motivations, purposes, and interpretations. During the early Abbasid period, Islamic historiography developed into a full literary genre, leading to a broadened scope of interests beyond antiquarianism.

Finly, it is worth mentioning al-Kindi's treatise on swords. Al-Kindi (d. 873), known as a philosopher, was interested in most phenomena of everyday life. It is not surprising that the Khalif al-Mu῾tasim (d. 842) chose him to write on swords. His treatise is the most important surviving work devoted to swords in Islam, discussing swordsmiths, raw materials, origins, through these topics will not be discussed in this research (Robert Hyland and Brian Gilmour, 2012).

1. **The Prophet's swords**

The use of swords by the Arabs during the time of Prophet Muḥammad was both practical, in defense and warfare, and symbolic, representing authority and divine mission (Robert Elgood, 1979). Swords were also wielded against evils, corruption, injustice, and wrongdoing (Mumtaz and Muneer, 2015: 293). An indispensable object in the Arbian life, the sword was an inevitable item in the Prophet's life (David Alexander, 2001a: 199; Mālik ʼIbn ʼAnas, 1992: 91). The Prophet Muḥammad owned several swords, each with unique names, features, and historical significance, often carrying a sword as was customary among the Arabs, not necessarily for violence (Mumtaz and Muneer, 2015: 291). The singularization of the Prophet's swords, marked by their distinct names and personified attributes, emphasized their cultural and symbolic significance within Muslim tradition.[[2]](#footnote-2) This process, in which the Prophet’s swords were elevated in status above others, highlights the unique characteristics and spiritual legacy associated with them, distinguishing them from other weapons. This phenomenon reflects the broader cultural practice of imbuing physical objects with profound symbolic meanings, transforming them into tangible representations of the spiritual and ethical virtues embodied by the Prophet Muḥammad.

Among the nine swords owned by the Prophet, *Dhu al-Faqar* was the most prominent. Each sword is described in sources with specific details, such as its name, unique features, historical significance, raw materials and use in battles. The practical use in warfare and symbolic representation of authority and divine mission underscores their importance and recognition. In Mu῾jam al-Buldān ***sayf al-nabi* (the sword of the Prophet)** is mentioned in a poetic context, praising the singular, unique *sayf al-nabi*, who conquers both plains and mountains (Shihāb al-Dīn **ʼ**Abī ῾Abdalla Yaqūt b. al-Hamāwī, 1990: 174).

The swords of Prophet Muḥammad are rich in symbolic and historical significance. Each sword, with its unique name, features, and historical context, reflects the socio-cultural values of the time. The symbolic meanings attached to these swords emphasize their roles in warfare, their representation of divine support, and their importance in early Islamic society. The Following analysis provides a structured overview of the symbolic and historical significance of some of the Prophet's swords:

**Dhu al-Faqar (ذو الفقار) - The most important sword of the Prophet,** obtained as booty from the battle of Badr (Muḥammad b. Yazīd **ʼ**Ibn Māja, 1972: 60; Muḥammad b. ῾Isā al-Tirmīdhī, 1988: 32; ῾Ali B. Ḥasan **ʼ**Ibn ῾Asakir, 1990: 12). Some reports assert that it was a present from Balqis, the Queen of Shaba to Solomon while others claim that it was originated from an iron bar buried in the *ka'ba*. Another version suggests that ῾Ali found it in the idol of al-Fuls and, with various combinations of this information (Francesca Bellino, 2012: 77). *Dhu al-Faqar* is often interpreted as "the possessor of many ridges", referring to narrow channels and holes found on its blade or a long channel in the mid-blade resembling vertebrae. Burton explains that such fullers were designed to lighten the sword's weight while increasing its flexibility and strength (Richard Francis Burton, 1884: 38).

Muḥammad praised *Dhu al-Faqar* as the most famous sword in Islamic military history. David Alexander claims that *Dhu al-Faqar* has become a semi-legendary sword throughout Muslim heritage due to the many miracles attributed to it. (David Alexander, 2001a: 200). The Prophet Muḥammad approved the name "Dhu al-Faqar" after appraising it among the spoils of the battle of Badr, and it became his favorite sword, accompanying him in all his campaigns. Often associated with ῾Ali **ʼ**Ibn **ʼ**Abi Ṭālib, it is surrounded by various myths, including its miraculous powers (Aḥmad B. Yaḥya al-Balāthuri, 1987: 85, 109). For example, The Prophet Muḥammad saw a vision involving *Dhu al-Faqar* before the battle of Uhud, which he interpreted as a sign of impending events (**ʼ**Abū Bakr **ʼ**Aḥmad b. **‘**Ali al-Khatīb al-Baghdādi, 2002: 89). In various illustrated manuscripts of **‘**Ali, the Prophet is described as using it (Ibrahim Elassal, 2018: 1-9). After the Prophet's death, it is unclear who inherited *Dhu al-Faqar*, making it a controversial symbolic matter among the ruling caliphs. **ʼ**Ab**ū** Bakr is reported to have kept the Prophet's sword until his death (Sulimān b. al-**ʼ**Ash**‘ath** al-Sijistānī **ʼAbū** Dā’ud, 1988: 93). Other traditions claim it was passed to Imam **ʼ**Ali following Muḥammad's death, hence, gained unique importance in Shi'a tradition.

Various accounts describe the sword as being made of silver with ornate decorations, including silver rings and a pommel adorned with gold or silver (ʼAḥmad b. Shu῾ayb al-Nasā’ī, 1988: 12; Sulimān b. al- **ʼ**Ash**‘ath** al-Sijistānī **ʼAbū** Dā’ud, 1988: 39; Muḥammad b. ῾Isā al-Tirmīdhī, 1988: 11). *Dhu al-Faqar* is known for its notched or bifurcated blade, giving it a distinctive appearance. This design was not just functional but also carried symbolic significance, often associated with divine intervention and justice. The hilt, decorated with intricate carvings, and possibly inlaid precious metals or stones, could include Quranic verses, invocations, or the names of Allah, intended to invoke divine protection and blessing. The crossguard, separating the blade from the hilt, could feature elaborate designs, potentially incorporating Islamic geometric patterns or floral motifs. The pommel (the end of the hilt) might be adorned with symbols of power or faith, such as crescents or stars. It could also include precious stones or intricate metalwork to signify the sword's importance.

The decorations on *Dhu al-Faqar* are deeply symbolic. The notched blade itself is often interpreted as a sign of divine power and justice, with legends stating it was given to the Prophet by the Archangel Gabriel. Inscriptions on the sword would enhance its spiritual significance, serving as a constant reminder of the divine support and guidance for the wielder. The use of specific designs and decorations reflects the artistic and cultural influences of the time, incorporating traditional Islamic art and symbolism. This includes the use of arabesque patterns, calligraphy, and geometric designs, all of which carry deeper meanings related to infinity, unity, and the divine nature of creation.

Al-ma'thur (المأثور) – This sword was inherited sword from the Prophet's father, owned by the Prophet before the first revelations. **’**Ibn **‘**Asākir mentions that the Prophet entered Madina with his father's sword, emphasizing its personal and familial significance. (**‘**Ali b. Ḥasan **’**Ibn **‘**Asākir, 1990: 214-215).

**Al-Adb (العضب) – This is a sword** noted for its sharpness and strength, representing the power and effectiveness in battle, signifying the Prophet's prowess.

**Al-Mikhdham (المخدم) – This sword is** noted for its craftsmanship, exemplifying superior quality and the importance of skill in sword-making.

**Rasub (رسوب)** – This sword is mentioned in the context of its durability and effectiveness in battle, associated with legends about its invincibility and resilience.

**Al-Qala'i (القلعي) – This sword is** known for its origin and the quality of its metal, highlighting the importance of material quality and the craftsmanship of swords.

**Al-Battar البطار)) – This sword is** inscribed with the names of Prophets, emphasizing its sacred nature and representing the continuity of Prophetic missions and divine favor.

1. **The multifaceted roles of swords**

Swords epitomize a dual nature, serving both as practical instruments of warfare and profound symbols of various abstract ideas. This duality highlights their complex roles, functioning simultaneously as tools of violence and emblems of intellectual, mystical, historical and social significance. The rich symbolism attached to swords encompasses multiple facets, including metaphorical, gendered, and aesthetic aspects. This multifaced role reflects a balance between practical utilities and symbolic meaning, influenced significantly by the attitudes toward their creators or possessors (Daniil Lobach, 2018: 779).

**A. Symbolic significance**

* Nickname - Swords often serve as metaphors to convey praise and admiration. For instance, Tabari describes the Ansār as the "sword of God" attributing divine favor and martial excellence to them (**ʼ**Abu Ja῾far Muḥammad b. Jarīr,al-Ṭabarī, 1968: 87). According to Muslim it was a nickname given as a compliment of power and piety (ʼAbū al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥājj Muslim, 1990: 69). Similarly, the Prophet referred to Ḥalid b. Walīd as "the sword of god", symbolizing his power and piety (Muwaffiq al-Dīn ʿAbd ʼAlla b. **ʼ**Aḥmad **ʼ**Ibn Qud**ā**ma, 1972: 203).
* Idioms - Swords were used in idiomatic expressions to describe true believers and the Prophet enhancing their defense of faith, strength and courage (Muḥammad b. ῾Isā al-Tirmīdhī, 1988: 91). According to al-Tirmīdhī "the gates of heaven are under the shadow of swords", symbolizing power and victory. A true believer is described as a sword among the swords of God, representing pious devotion (Muḥammad b. ῾Isā al-Tirmīdhī, 1988: 182). **ʼAbū** Dā’ud asserts that internal disputes among Muslims is more severe than a sword, highlighting the fear of disunity within the umma advocating for consolidation (Sulimān b. al- **ʼ**Ash**‘ath** al-Sijistānī **ʼAbū** Dā’ud, 1988: 103).
* **Sharpness of Intellect -** Swords frequently symbolize intellectual sharpness, paralleling the physical sharpness of a sword with the acuity of human mind. This metaphor underscores the sword's representation of keen mental faculties and analytical prowess.
* **Heirlooms** - Swords such as al-Ma'thur, serve as significant cultural artifacts, often passed down through generations as heirlooms (῾Ali B. Ḥasan **ʼ**Ibn ῾Asakir, 1990: 214-215). This practice signifies the continuity of familial heritage and the preservation of historical legacy. Swords, laden with special powers, symbolize unity and the transmission of values across time. Questions about the inheritance of the Prophet's sword reflected its symbolic power and religious significance (Muḥammad b. **ʼ**Ismā῾īl al- Bukhārī, 1985: 55).
* **Warriors and combat -** Swords symbolize conquest, dominance, and victory, representing the bravery and skill of warriors (**ʼ**Abu Ja῾far Muḥammad b. Jarīr,al-Ṭabarī, 1968: 1). They embody martial prowess, and the honor associated with combat. Their dual roles in offense and defense illustrate their multifaceted nature in warfare, serving both as tools of aggression and protection.

**B. Authority and Leadership**

Swords serve as symbols of authority, commitment, spiritual leadership and inspiration. They signify a leader's readiness for action and authority, indicating importance and recognition within the socio-cultural context (Mālik ʼIbn ʼAnas, 1992: 83). The possession of swords also legitimized rulers, as exemplified in the case of Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (**ʼ**Abu Ja῾far Muḥammad b. Jarīr,al-Ṭabarī, 1968: 48).

**C. warfare and conflict**

Swords carried by warriors symbolized their readiness for action and their commitment to defending the faith and participating actively in religious warfare. The possession and display of swords were signs of warriors' victories and social status, symbolizing human power and respect (Muḥammad b. Yazīd **ʼ**Ibn Māja, 1972: 93; ʼAbū al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥājj Muslim, 1990: 54; Sulimān b. al- **ʼ**Ash**‘ath** al-Sijistānī **ʼAbū** Dā’ud, 1988: 205; Muḥammad b. **ʼ**Ismā῾īl al- Bukhārī, 1985: 69; ʼAbu Ḥasan ῾Ali b. ῾Ali al-Mas῾ūdī, 1997: 80). They marked honor and prestige, underscoring their military success, conquest and esteem (Thomas Sizgorich, 2007: 993-1015). Warriors going out for jihad with their swords symbolized their active participation in religious war (**ʼ**Abu Ja῾far Muḥammad b. Jarīr,al-Ṭabarī, 1968: 27). Swords also played roles in internal conflicts among Muslims, reflecting power dynamics and the potential strife within the community (Sulimān b. al- **ʼ**Ash**‘ath** al-Sijistānī **ʼAbū** Dā’ud, 1988: 13; Muḥammad b. **ʼ**Ismā῾īl al- Bukhārī, 1985: 30; ʼAbū al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥājj Muslim, 1990: 12). They served as visual testimonies to the sacrifices of martyrs (*shuhada*) with the flash of their swords symbolizing ultimate devotion and ensuring they would not be quested in their graves (Muḥammad b. ῾Isā al-Tirmīdhī, 1988: 159).

Hanging up swords on olive trees symbolized surrender noted in historical contexts (Sulimān b. al- **ʼ**Ash**‘ath** al-Sijistānī **ʼAbū** Dā’ud, 1988: 91). When the Prophet sought to enter the Ka'ba, before its concurred, the people pf Mecca allowed believers to enter only with their swords sheathed (ʼAbū al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥājj Muslim, 1990: 81). Tribes coming to the Prophet with their swords hanging on their necks symbolized their submission and surrender to his authority (Sulimān b. al- **ʼ**Ash**‘ath** al-Sijistānī **ʼAbū** Dā’ud, 1988: 79).

**D. piety, justice and judgement**

Swords were instruments of divine justice and judgment, used to punish those deemed guilty (Muḥammad b. Yazīd **ʼ**Ibn Māja, 1972: 80; **ʼ**Abu Ja῾far Muḥammad b. Jarīr,al-Ṭabarī, 1968: 139). They symbolized resistance against tyranny and quests for freedom (**ʼ**Abu Ja῾far Muḥammad b. Jarīr,al-Ṭabarī, 1968: 213). Incidents such as the Prophet's sword being stolen and his decision not to punish the thief underscored the belief in God's protection and power (ʼAbū al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥājj Muslim, 1990: 67; Muḥammad b. **ʼ**Ismā῾īl al- Bukhārī, 1985: 25). Swords appeared in Prophetic dreams, with a broken sword symbolizing defeat and a restored swords symbolizing future victories granted by God (Muḥammad b. **ʼ**Ismā῾īl al- Bukhārī, 1985: 40).

**E. socio-economic status**

swords were part of the personal appearance of noble men, signifying the wealthy elite who could afford high quality craftsmanship, artistry and materials (**ʼ**Abu Ja῾far Muḥammad b. Jarīr,al-Ṭabarī, 1968: 167; Muḥammad b. Yazīd **ʼ**Ibn Māja, 1972: 89). A slave, for example, due to his socio-economic and symbolic status, received a sword from war spoils (Muḥammad b. Yazīd **ʼ**Ibn Māja, 1972: 73). Swords had significant economic value, often part of war spoils or inherited items, and their reuse underscored their material worth (Muḥammad b. Yazīd **ʼ**Ibn Māja, 1972: 78). Al-Mālik mentions the option to exchange or sell silver sword, based on its economic value (Mālik ʼIbn ʼAnas, 1992: 78).

**F. education and norms**

The use of swords in educational contexts emphasized peaceful problem-solving over confrontation (ʼAbū al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥājj Muslim, 1990: 200; ʼAḥmad b. Shu῾ayb al-Nasā’ī, 1988: 92). Raising swords among Muslims was condemned, promoting unity and peaceful and resolution of disputes (Muḥammad b. **ʼ**Ismā῾īl al- Bukhārī, 1985: 91). Furthermore, If Muslims confront each other with their swords, both are doomed to Hell (ʼAbū al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥājj Muslim, 1990: 45).

**F. religious differentiation**

Swords delineated religious boundaries, with Jews and Christians forbidden from carrying them according to *ḥisba* manuals. This prohibition reinforced the distinct identity and privileges of the Muslim community over their protégée (Muḥammad b. **ʼ**Aḥmad al-Qurayshī ʼIbn al-**ʼ**Ukh**ū**wa, 1939: 95; ***‘***Abd al-Raḥmān. b. Naṣir al-Shayzari, 1969: 207).

1. **Decorative techniques and artistic significance**

Islamic swords transcended their utilitarian function as weapons, embodying intricate artistry that elevated them to the status of fine jewelry. Through the application of sophisticated decorative techniques, these swords became symbols of authority, wealth, and religious devotion. The meticulous use of various materials and patterns not only enhanced their aesthetic appeal but also embedded them with profound cultural and symbolic meanings, reflecting the excellence of Islamic art and craftsmanship (Ḥasan Maḥmūd Mūsa al-Numayrī, 2018: 70-79). The design and presentation of swords often conformed to the aesthetic and symbolic ideals of their time and place, mirroring broader cultural and artistic values. The most common decorative parts were the hilt and the blade. On some ceremonial items, the decoration achieved such sumptuous and impressive effects that the final appearance of the object bore more resemblance to a piece of jewelry than to a weapon (Abeer Gharib, H. Mohamed and N. Abdel Ghany, 2018: 15). The finest swords were crafted by master craftsmen collaborating with leading designers, goldsmiths and jewelers, whose work transformed military equipment into piece of art (David Alexander, 2015b: 10-11).

**Common decorative techniques**

**Engraving, a prevalent technique,** involved detailed etchings on the sword’s surface, creating intricate and elaborate designs. **Inlay, the** technique of embedding precious materials such as gold or silver into the blade or hilt, significantly enhanced the sword’s visual appeal. **Gilding**, the application of a thin layer of gold to parts of the sword, added a luxurious finish, reflecting wealth and status. **Brass and Silver Encrusting** aimed to produce elaborate and ornate designs, elevating the sword's aesthetic appeal. Additionally, calligraphic texts, often comprising Quranic verses or poetic phrases, were meticulously inscribed on the swords, adding layers religious and cultural significance (ʼAbu Ḥasan ῾Ali b. ῾Ali al-Mas῾ūdī, 1997: 366).

**Materials used** **for decoration**

Precious stones such as rubies, emeralds, and sapphires, were set into the hilt or scabbard, serving both decorative and symbolic purposes (‘Ali b. ’Ismāa‘īl *’*Ibn Sida, *al-Mukha*ṣ*a*ṣ, 1898-1903: 72). Decorative enamel coatings added vibrant color and intricate detail to the swords. **Gold and Silver** were utilized not only for their structural properties but also for their decorative potential, highlighting the owner’s wealth and status (῾Ali b. ’Ismāa‘īl *’*Ibn Sida, *al-Mukha*ṣ*a*ṣ, 1898-1903: 201; Muḥammad b. **ʼ**Ismā῾īl al- Bukhārī, 1985: 78). The sources note that the Prophet's hilt was adorned with both silver and gold Hilt (Muwaffiq al-Din **‘**Abd **’**Alla b. **’**Ahmad **’**Ibn Qudāma, 1976: 45, 176). **Iron and Steel** were chosen for their strength and durability, providing the necessary hardness and flexibility after forging. Wood, bone, or ivory were **often** **crafted to create handles and hilts**, sometimes wrapped in leather to improve grip and comfort**.**

Decorative Patterns[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Geometric Patterns** were frequently used for their aesthetic and symmetrical appeal. **Floral and Plant Motifs** symbolized growth, beauty, and life, contributing to the swords' visual richness. Complex patterns and designs, including arabesques, scrollwork and floral decorations, added visual and symbolic depth to the swords, showcasing the artists' creativity and technical skills. Representations of animals such as birds, lions, and horses conveyed strength, courage, and nobility. **Calligraphic Inscriptions,** including Quranic verses, names, and poetic phrases were intricately inscribed, reflecting both religious devotion and artistic expression. **These inscriptions not only enhanced the sword's beauty but also imbued it with profound spiritual and cultural significance.**

1. **Conclusions**

The study of swords in early Islam has illuminated their multifaceted roles as both weapons and socio-cultural artifacts, providing insights into the values, practices, and historical contexts of their time. This research demonstrated how swords were not merely static objects but dynamic entities that accumulated meaning through their interactions with people and contexts. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, combined with the framework of artifact biography, the research uncovered the intricate ways in which swords functioned as carriers of both material utility and rich symbolic meaning, leading to the following conclusions:

ראש הטופס

תחתית הטופס

1. The importance of the Prophets' swords

The Prophet Muḥammad's swords hold profound significance in Islamic history, militarily, socially and culturally. They were not merely relics of the past but symbolized the strength, leadership, and spiritual authority of the Prophet, providing a window into the social hierarchies and cultural values of early Muslim societies. The intricate descriptions and decorations of these swords further emphasized their importance as cultural artifacts and the names and inscriptions, their personalized singularized nature, reflecting their high esteem. The Prophet's swords were personified and singularized through their association with his life and deeds, embodying his virtues and leadership qualities and serving as symbols of divine guidance and protection. The significance of the Prophet's swords has evolved over time, adapting to changing social and cultural contexts. Initially valued for their practical use in combat, they have become cherished historical artefacts, representing the continuity and resilience of Islamic tradition. Their evolving meaning underscores the dynamic nature of cultural symbols and their ability to resonate across generations.

1. A taxonomy of swords' significance and versatility

**Combat – A Central Military Equipment, Authority, and Restraint**

swords were central to military endeavors, symbolizing conquest, dominance, victory, authority and the capability to lead, attack and protect. They represented not just bravery and physical strength but also the moral and ethical restraint exercised in religious warfare and the righteous use of force to defend the faith of Islam.

**Daily Life – Objects of Craftsmanship and Prestige**

Beyond their military use, swords were objects of exquisite craftsmanship, reflecting the high level of skill and artistry of the swordsmiths. They were prestigious items, signifying status and honor. Owning swords was a mark of distinction, indicating esteemed position within the community. The artistic significance of swords, through decorative techniques and craftsmanship, highlighted their status as objects of luxury and cultural pride. The integration of art and utility in sword design reflected the broader aesthetic and symbolic ideals of the time.

**Socio-Cultural Symbolism**

The passage of swords through generations as heirlooms reflected broader social networks and the prestige associated with these objects, and particularly the Prophet's swords. Swords carried deep socio-cultural symbolism, embodying values and principles of Islam, familial heritage and preservation of historical legacy. They represented bravery, leadership, and the pursuit of justice. These artefacts served as tangible connections to the Prophet's legacy, inspiring Muslims to uphold the ethical and moral standards exemplified by him. Furthermore, the symbolic significance of swords was extended to various abstract ideas, including intellectual sharpness, justice, authority, and piety.

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1. For more about the compatibility and obstacles which confront research on a topic in Islamic law see: Ze’ev Maghen, “Close Encounters: Some Preliminary Observations on the Transmission of Impurity in Early Sunni Jurisprudence”, *Islamic Law and Society*, 6(1999): 351-354; Ahmed Mahjabeen, "Cultural Safety in Muslim Aged Care: Taking the Bull by the Horns*", Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Ageing*, 30(2018): 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Foe more about singularization see: Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process”, in Argun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986): 73–76; Argun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value”, in Argun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986): 3, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to **ʼ**Ibn Sida Decorative elements invoked a sense of sacredness and offered protection.For more see **’**Ibn Sida, *al-Mukha*ṣ*a*ṣ, Vol. 6, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)