

Original Research Article

Calligraphy in Islamic Funerary Architecture: A Discourse-Analytical Study of Memory, Space, and Legitimacy

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Received: 29/08/2025

Accepted: 26/10/2025

Available online: 01/10/2026

Abstract

Calligraphy in Islamic architecture, beyond its decorative function, operates as a visual language that consolidates cultural memory, reinforces political-religious legitimacy, and organizes meaning within sacred spaces. Focusing on funerary architecture, this study seeks to demonstrate how inscriptions transcend mere aesthetics to become discursive and spatial texts. The central question addressed is how calligraphy in Islamic mausoleums functions as a visual-discursive language in shaping collective memory and symbolic legitimacy. The research adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, employing visual-spatial discourse analysis across three exemplary cases: the Dome of Soltaniyeh (Ilkhanid, 14th century), the Gur-e Amir Mausoleum (Timurid, 15th century), and the Mausoleum of Rumi in Konya (Seljuk-Ottoman, 13th–16th centuries). The theoretical framework draws upon the concepts of cultural memory (Halbwachs, Assmann, Nora), the discourse of space and power (Foucault, Lefebvre), and symbolic capital (Bourdieu). The findings reveal that in Soltaniyeh, calligraphy in Thuluth and Naskh scripts served to affirm the Shi'i identity of the Ilkhanids; in Gur-e Amir, inscriptions redefined Timur's image from a military conqueror to a spiritual memory; and in Rumi's mausoleum, Qur'anic verses and mystical poetry inscribed in Nasta'liq and Ta'liq scripts created an experiential and spiritual atmosphere. The study concludes that funerary calligraphy functions simultaneously at three levels: as cultural memory, as spatial-discursive practice, and as symbolic-social capital. In this way, calligraphy emerges as an effective medium for legitimization, identity formation, and the reproduction of cultural memory in Islamic architecture.

Keywords: *Islamic Calligraphy, Funerary Architecture, Cultural Memory, Spatial Discourse, Symbolic Legitimacy*

Introduction and Problem Statement

Although calligraphy is visually considered a component of architectural ornamentation, its function extends far beyond decoration; it operates at the levels of meaning, memory, and legitimacy. In Islamic architecture—particularly in funerary spaces—calligraphy is not merely an aesthetic embellishment but serves as a visual language of

space, functioning in the consolidation of cultural memory, the organization of meaning, and the production of socio-political legitimacy.

In mausoleums—sites at the intersection of death, spirituality, and collective remembrance—inscriptions transcend ornamental motifs and become “discursive-spatial texts.” Nevertheless, much of the existing scholarship has remained confined either to the history and stylistics of scripts

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or has treated inscriptions independently of their architectural setting and the power/identity relations embedded within it.

As a result, the systematic relationship among inscriptional text, script style, and spatial placement—and their connection to the mechanisms of cultural memory and the production of space/power—has rarely been examined within an interdisciplinary framework. This analytical gap constitutes the central problem of the present research.

Significance of the Study

Interdisciplinary gap: Most studies on funerary inscriptions are formalistic or historiographical and do not address the deep interconnections among text/script/space and cultural memory, power discourse, or collective identity. The present study directly targets this gap.

Absence of a replicable analytical model: Operational models for coding the triadic relationship of text–script–spatial placement and linking it to memory/discursive functions are scarce. This study proposes such a model by employing visual-spatial discourse analysis.

Need for cross-regional comparison: The historical–geographical differences among Soltaniyeh (Ilkhanid), Gur-e Amir in Samarqand (Timurid), and the Mevlana Mausoleum in Konya (Seljuk–Ottoman) provide a unique capacity for identifying continuities and ruptures in identity-making and legitimacy. This comparative potential has rarely been fully utilized.

Practical implications for heritage documentation and **Conservation:** Understanding the discursive function of inscriptions is directly applicable to conservation priorities, epigraphic documentation, museum display strategies, and narrative interpretation, preventing the reduction of inscriptions to “mere decorations.”

Contribution to indigenous theorization:

Formulating the relationship among calligraphy, memory, and power within Islamic architecture contributes to indigenous theoretical knowledge in art-cultural studies and reduces reliance on imported analytical frameworks.

Integration of scattered sources: Persian, Turkish, and Uzbek sources related to the three case studies are dispersed. Their analytical synthesis enriches the existing body of knowledge.

Research Objectives

General aim: To explain how funerary calligraphy is elevated from decorative surface to a social-discursive medium operating across three interconnected levels: mnemonic, spatial-discursive, and symbolic-social.

Specific objectives: a) To propose a “visual-spatial discourse analysis” framework for coding text/script/spatial placement; b) To examine correlations among these dimensions and the concepts of cultural memory, spatial/power production, and symbolic capital; c) To compare the three selected monuments and identify shared patterns and distinctive modes of identity-making and legitimization.

Research Questions

- 1) How does calligraphy in Islamic funerary architecture—functioning as a visual-discursive language—contribute to the stabilization of collective memory, the organization of spatial meaning, and the production of legitimacy?
- 2) What relationships exist among textual selection (Qur’anic verses, Hadith, poetry), script style (thuluth, naskh, kufic, ta’liq/nasta’liq), and the spatial positioning of inscriptions?
- 3) How do these relationships manifest distinct modes of identity and legitimacy in the three case studies (Soltaniyeh, Gur-e Amir, and the Mevlana complex)?

Innovation of the Study

Integrating theories of cultural memory, spatial/power production, and symbolic capital into the reading of funerary inscriptions; proposing a replicable analytical model for text/script/placement; and offering a cross-regional comparison (Iran–Transoxiana–Anatolia) to clarify continuities and ruptures.

Literature Review

Research on Islamic calligraphy has thus far been concentrated mainly in two domains: first, historical and aesthetic studies of script development; and second, case-based studies of inscriptions and specific architectural monuments. Despite this, an interdisciplinary approach that analyzes calligraphy as a visual-discursive language connected to cultural memory and social legitimacy remains noticeably absent. The following review outlines the major scholarly tendencies in the existing literature.

• Historical and aesthetic studies

The first category of scholarship focuses on the historical evolution of scripts and their aesthetic analysis. Bloom (2014) and Blair (2006), examines the developmental trajectory and stylistic differences of various scripts. Similarly, Grabar (1983), in *The Mediation of Ornament*, emphasizes the semantic dimensions of Islamic ornamentation and demonstrates that decorative motifs often carry spiritual meanings. Yet he treats calligraphy primarily as an ornamental element and overlooks its social and mnemonic functions. Overall, these studies prioritize form and aesthetics while offering limited analytical engagement with social contexts.

A second group of studies focuses on inscriptions within individual monuments or architectural complexes. For instance (Amirashayeri et al., 2022), In an article about the inscriptions of the Soltaniyeh dome, it is stated that rational geometry, by utilizing codes (numbers) and symbols (shapes), has the greatest expressiveness in the physical-spatial structure of this complex.

Seifi & Abdollahifard (2024) examine calligraphy in the Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili shrine from aesthetic and form of font. Although valuable, such works tend to remain descriptive and symbolic rather than employing a coherent theoretical framework that links inscriptions to cultural memory or power discourse. Their analyses therefore offer only partial insights into the socio-cultural role of calligraphy.

Among foundational works on Islamic calligraphy and epigraphy—such as *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (1984) or *Islamic Inscriptions* (1978)—the historical information and typologies of Islamic scripts are presented in detail. Despite their historiographical and descriptive value, these works predominantly emphasize stylistic and aesthetic aspects and rarely explore the systematic relationship of “text–script–space” in relation to memory or social function.

• Case studies on funerary architecture

Soltaniyeh: Blair (2006)’s article analyzes the formal and textual features of the inscriptions and highlights the centrality of Qur’anic verses and the ruler’s name in articulating Ilkhanid legitimacy. The UNESCO dossier (2005) further documents the repeated appearance of Öljeitü’s name and the construction date (713 AH / 1314 CE).

Gur-e Amir, Samarqand: The classic study by Golombek & Wilber (1988), *Timurid Architecture in Iran and Turan* (1988), underscores the prominence of geometric and epigraphic decoration.

The theoretical foundations relevant to the present research include:

Theories of collective and cultural memory (Halbwachs, 1950; Assmann, 2011; Nora, 1989), which examine how ritual spaces institutionalize remembrance and identity.

Theories of space and power (Foucault, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991), which conceptualize sacred and funerary spaces as heterotopias that produce social meaning.

Theories of symbolic capital and the cultural field (Bourdieu, 1993), which clarify the mechanisms through which art and religion generate legitimacy.

Although these theories provide significant interpretive potential, they have rarely been integrated systematically into the analysis of funerary calligraphy in Islamic contexts.

The review of existing scholarship reveals:

- 1) Historical and aesthetic studies largely confine themselves to formal aspects of calligraphy.
- 2) Case-based studies, despite their value, lack a common analytical framework that enables meaningful comparison.
- 3) Theoretical approaches to memory, space, and symbolic capital offer strong explanatory tools but have seldom been applied in conjunction within Islamic art studies.

The distinction of the present research lies in its integration of three theoretical domains—cultural memory, spatial/power production, and symbolic capital—and in employing a visual-spatial discourse analysis to examine funerary calligraphy as a “spatial-visual text.” Moreover, this study is the first to comparatively analyze three major monuments (Soltaniyeh, Gur-e Amir, and the Mevlana Mausoleum) across diverse historical-geographical contexts.

Theoretical Framework

• Foundational theoretical bases

This study analyzes Islamic funerary calligraphy through three major theoretical frameworks:

Theory of cultural memory (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1950).

Theories of spatial production and power discourse (Lefebvre, 1991; Foucault, 1984).

Theories of symbolic capital and the cultural field (Bourdieu, 1986).

All three frameworks share a foundational premise: meaning is socially constructed, and cultural forms such as architecture and calligraphy participate actively in the interplay among culture, power, and representation.

• Application of theories in the present study

In this article, funerary calligraphy is examined as a “visual-spatial text.”

From the perspective of cultural memory, inscriptions function as instruments through which collective remembrance is institutionalized.

From the viewpoint of space and power, the funerary monument becomes a discursive space that articulates and reinforces legitimacy.

From the standpoint of symbolic capital, calligraphy operates as a cultural act that connects faith and power, generating socially recognized legitimacy.

• Hypotheses/ Explanatory propositions

Funerary calligraphy is a multilayered medium operating simultaneously at mnemonic, spatial, and social levels.

The triadic relationship of text–script–space produces mechanisms through which collective memory and cultural legitimacy are stabilized.

In the three case studies (Soltaniyeh, Gur-e Amir, and the Mevlana Mausoleum), the discursive structure of calligraphy shifts according to historical and cultural context, while its mnemonic–legitimizing function remains constant. Table 1 summarizes the application of theory.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative–interpretive approach within the interdisciplinary fields of art studies and the sociology of space. The article employs visual–spatial discourse analysis, meaning that funerary calligraphy is examined as a visual and discursive text whose meaning emerges within its spatial and historical context.

Within this framework, the simultaneous analysis of textual components (Qur’anic verses, Hadiths, poetry), visual features (script style, color, composition), and spatial aspects (location and orientation within the architectural structure) makes it possible to reveal the mnemonic, semantic, and legitimizing functions of calligraphy.

Table 1. Conceptual model of the study. Source: Author.

Analytical level	Supporting theory	Observable components	Final function
Mnemonic	Cultural memory (Assmann, 2011; Nora, 1989)	Selection of verses and poetry; repetition within space; ritual spatial placement	Stabilization of collective memory and historical identity
Spatial-discursive	Production of space/ Heterotopia (Lefebvre, 1991; Foucault, 1984)	Spatial positioning of inscriptions; sightlines; spatial organization	Spatial production of meaning and legitimization
Social-symbolic	Symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986)	Script style; color; scale; social context of power	Reproduction of cultural and political legitimacy

This approach is descriptive-analytical, relying on visual documentation, historical texts, and analytical sources in Islamic art to interpret the discursive layers of the monuments.

Data collection methods: Library research using authoritative historical, artistic, and epigraphic sources; Examination of visual documentation and architectural records; Content analysis of inscriptional texts (verses, Hadiths, poetry) with emphasis on script style, spatial placement, and semantic implications.

Data analysis methods: Visual discourse analysis (focusing on form, composition, placement, and legibility of calligraphy); Semiotic reading (interpreting inscriptions as cultural and mnemonic codes); Contextual historical-social analysis (linking textual/scriptural features to the political and cultural circumstances surrounding the construction of each monument).

For comparative analysis, three major examples of Islamic funerary architecture were selected:

1) The Soltaniyeh dome (Ilkhanid Period, 8th century AH), Zanjan, Iran.

Reason for selection: abundance of Qur'anic inscriptions; pivotal role in the formation of Shi'i ideological space.

2) Gur-e Amir Mausoleum (Timurid Period, 9th century AH), Samarqand, Uzbekistan.

Reason for selection: interaction between political authority and monumental visual expression.

3) The Mausoleum of Rumi (Seljuk-Ottoman Period, 6th century AH and later), Konya, Turkey.

Reason for selection: centrality of mysticism and literature in the formation of collective identity.

The criteria for selection included geographical diversity, richness of calligraphy, variety of script styles, ideological significance of the space, and access to reliable documentation. The study focuses on funerary monuments of the Islamic world dating from the 7th to 10th centuries AH. Limitations of the research include restricted on-site access to some monuments, the low quality of certain visual sources, and the scarcity of Persian-language analytical studies on funerary calligraphy in Anatolia.

Finding and Discussion

• The Soltaniyeh dome (Zanjan, 8th century AH), Mausoleum of Sultan Muhammad Khodabandeh (Öljeitü)

- Architectural and historical-political context

The Soltaniyeh dome—one of the largest and most magnificent monuments of the Ilkhanid era—was constructed between 704 and 713 AH at the order of Sultan Muhammad Khodabandeh (Öljeitü). The mausoleum emerged during a period when the Ilkhanid rulers, seeking to consolidate religious legitimacy, shifted from Sunnism to Twelver Shi'ism. The interior space of Soltaniyeh, structured as a vast octagonal chamber crowned by a monumental dome, is richly adorned with inscriptions in thuluth, naskh, and kufic scripts. Executed in symbolic colors of lapis blue, white, and gold, these inscriptions are positioned strategically throughout the architectural surfaces. The textual content includes Ayat al-Kursī, Sūrat al-Fath, the names of the Twelve Imams, and expressions such as “Muḥammad wa ‘Alī khayr al-bashar.”

- Three-layered theoretical analysis

First layer (cultural memory and sites of memory):

According to Jan Assmann (2011), cultural memory is formed when fundamental meanings are institutionalized through canonical texts and ritual spaces. In Soltaniyeh: Concepts such as *walāya*, eschatology, and divine unity are articulated through selected Qur'anic verses (e.g., Ayat al-Kursī and Sūrat al-Fath); These inscriptions appear in the most elevated areas of the structure (beneath the dome) and are executed in monumental thuluth; Their placement at the visual apex, reinforced by color and light, conveys sacredness and spiritual centrality. Thus, the space becomes not merely funerary but a memory-site of Ilkhanid Shi'i identity (Nora, 1989).

The mausoleum of Öljeitü is therefore a prime example of a *lieu de mémoire* in which newly established Shi'i discourse is anchored in the visual memory of society.

Second layer (space and the discourse of power):

From Foucault (1984)'s perspective, ritual spaces encode power relations. In Soltaniyeh: The golden thuluth script placed high within the dome links divine authority to royal sovereignty; The inscriptions function as sacred political texts; The spatial hierarchy—from lower walls to the dome—creates a discursive progression of meaning, ascending from general invocations to explicit themes of *walāya* and divine unity. In Lefebvre (1991)'s terms, the architectural space materializes the Ilkhanid religious–political discourse, with architecture and writing jointly producing a structured field of meaning.

Thus, Soltaniyeh is not simply a mausoleum; it is a “discursive space” that organizes meaning in alignment with Ilkhanid authority.

Third layer (cultural field and symbolic capital):

According to Bourdieu (1986) calligraphy in Soltaniyeh embodies symbolic capital that legitimizes political rule: The cultural field is shaped by competition among Mongol legitimacy, emerging Shi'ism, and Sunni tradition; Inscriptions such as

“Muḥammad wa ‘Alī khayr al-bashar” transfer political authority into the realm of sacred discourse; Monumental thuluth combined with architectural grandeur produces an affective visual experience that subtly encourages the viewer to internalize legitimacy. This corresponds to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*: the viewer learns, through embodied visual experience, what is sacred and authoritative.

Calligraphy in Soltaniyeh thus functions not only as an expression of faith but also as a mechanism of political legitimation, embedding Ilkhanid authority within sacred visual form.

- Analysis of a selected inscription, Soltaniyeh (Mihrab Inscriptions)

Within the interior of the Soltaniyeh dome, one of the most prominent inscriptions is located on the main mihrab. This inscription features an intricate combination of kufic *banā'ī* and golden thuluth on a lapis-blue field, containing passages from Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ and Sūrat al-Jumu'a. The central verse reads: “Huwa Allāhu alladhī lā ilāha illā huwa.”

Visual dimension: The angular geometry of kufic *banā'ī* conveys stability and tradition, while the flowing lines of thuluth evoke spiritual transcendence. Their juxtaposition—gold on blue—symbolizes the union of earth and heaven, intellect and illumination, authority and mercy.

Spatial dimension: Positioned at the visual focal point of the worshipper, the mihrab inscription anchors both the ritual direction and the collective sacred memory of the community.

Discursive dimension: In the historical moment when the Ilkhanids had recently embraced Shi'ism, the central placement of a verse on divine unity becomes a visual declaration of religious legitimacy.

For the visitor, the inscription is not only read but experienced as an entry threshold into the sacred. It mediates both divine speech and the soft power of religious–political authority.

In Soltaniyeh, calligraphy therefore operates: At the mnemonic level, stabilizing newly formed Shi'i

memory; At the spatial–discursive level, shaping the architecture into a space of legitimacy; At the socio-symbolic level, generating symbolic capital for Ilkhanid rule. Table 2 summarizes space position of cornice.

Soltaniyeh becomes a funerary monument that institutionalizes devotional memory and a new religious order through visual inscriptions.

• **The Gur-e Amir Mausoleum (Samarqand, 9th century AH), funerary monument of Timur (Tamerlane), founder of the Timurid Empire**

- Architectural and historical–political context

The Gur-e Amir Mausoleum—located in Samarqand and constructed during the final years of Timur’s life—served as the imperial burial site of a ruler who lacked genealogical legitimacy through either Qurayshi descent or caliphal lineage. As a result, Timur sought religious and cultural legitimization for his sovereignty. In the absence of hereditary capital, he turned to the visual and ritual power of space and sacred writing to generate symbolic capital.

The monument consists of two principal components:

1) The domed chamber (the main sanctuary): a double-shelled dome symbolizing the ascent of the soul.

2) Side chambers and an iwan-fronted space: dedicated to prayer, meditation, and ritual practice.

The calligraphic program includes Qur’anic verses, invocations, supplications, and the names of the Prophet’s family, executed in thuluth, kufic, and

naskh scripts. The palette of gold, lapis blue, and turquoise imparts a combined spiritual and royal atmosphere to the space.

- Three-layered theoretical analysis

First layer (cultural memory and sites of memory):

Drawing on Assmann (2011) and Nora (1989) cultural memory is sustained through symbols, inscriptions, and ritual spaces. In the Gur-e Amir complex: Verses such as “Kullu man ‘alayhā fān...” (“All that is on earth shall perish...”) or “Allāh bāqī” (“God is eternal”) appear on the dome’s band and the mihrab; These inscriptions are situated in elevated, dimly lit spaces toward which the visitor’s gaze is naturally directed; The memory of Timur is reconstructed not as that of a conquering warrior but as that of a humble servant before God.

Through calligraphy, Timur redefines his royal memory within a spiritual–ethical framework, enacting what Nora describes as the institutionalization of collective memory through place.

Second layer (space and the discourse of power):

According to Foucault (1984), ritual spaces encode and reproduce power relations. In the Gur-e Amir: Inscriptions placed above the mihrab and on the dome articulate themes of divine justice and authority within a royal space; The spatial movement—from the light-filled entrance to the darker sanctuary—combined with inscriptions of supplication, constructs a sensory progression toward humility, mortality, and transcendence; The space is designed not only as a

Table 2. Spatial distribution of inscriptions in the Soltaniyeh dome. Source: Author.

Symbolic function	Content of inscription	Script type	Spatial location
Divine unity and protection of space	Ayat al-Kursī (Sūrat al-Baqara)	White thuluth on lapis background	Drum of the main dome
Affirmation of Shi’i discourse and religious identity	Names of the Twelve Imams; sacred invocations	Thuluth and naskh	Eight iwans
Emphasis on divine victory and ruler’s legitimacy	Sūrat al-Fath	Golden thuluth	Above the main entrance
Purification of space; link to Prophetic tradition	Subhān Allāh, Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh	Kufic banā’ī and decorative kufic	Walls and niches
Explicit declaration of ‘Alid walāya	Muḥammad wa ‘Alī khayr al-bashar...	Thuluth	Inner iwan of the first floor
Evocation of divine sovereignty and cosmic worldview	Verses from Sūrat al-Mulk and Sūrat al-Anbiyā’	Muqallī thuluth	Exterior dome band

burial place but also as a pedagogical environment for internalizing the ethics of kingship.

Thus, in Lefebvre's terms, the Gur-e Amir is a conceptualized space, where architecture, movement, and text collectively construct a moral discourse of authority.

Third layer (cultural field and symbolic capital, Pierre Bourdieu): Within the Timurid cultural–political field: Timur lacked genealogical legitimacy and therefore produced religious symbolic capital through visual language; Inscribed prayers such as “Allāhumma ighfir lahu warḥamhu” and the names of the Prophet's family in golden script portray Timur as a devout ruler; Monumental thuluth combined with strategic illumination creates a visual experience that naturalizes and sanctifies political authority.

In this sense, calligraphy functions as symbolic capital, enabling the transformation of Timur's rule into a morally and religiously legitimized memory. This mechanism parallels what Bourdieu terms habitualized visual–spiritual embodiment, through which the viewer internalizes meaning without explicit instruction.

- Analysis of a Selected Inscription — Gur-e Amir (Main Iwan Entrance)

At the entrance iwan of the Gur-e Amir complex, a striking inscription in golden thuluth on a turquoise field displays the Qur'anic verse: “Kullu nafsin dhā'iqatu al-mawt” (“Every soul shall taste death” — Āl 'Imrān 3:185).

Visual dimension: The balanced composition, elongated strokes, and contrast of gold against turquoise create a majestic yet contemplative aura. The aesthetic effect merges worldly splendor with eschatological reflection.

Spatial dimension: Located at the threshold of the mausoleum, the inscription forms an initiatory moment, preparing the visitor to enter a sacred interior where death is framed as the gateway to eternal kingship.

Discursive dimension: The choice of this verse

functions as a dual message: the temporality of worldly life and the eternal remembrance of Timur. It integrates political authority with sacred text, visually fusing sovereignty and divine decree.

For the viewer, the inscription marks the boundary between the secular world and the sacred domain of memory. Passing beneath it, the visitor transitions into a realm where visual inscription mediates spiritual reflection, authority, and remembrance.

Thus, in the Gur-e Amir: At the mnemonic level, calligraphy shapes a spiritualized memory of Timurid rulership; At the spatial–discursive level, it transforms the interior into a space of humility, mortality, and sacred kingship; At the socio-symbolic level, it legitimizes power through sacred language and symbolic capital. **Table 3** summarizes space position of cornice in Gur-e Amir.

The Gur-e Amir is therefore not merely a burial site but a visual–spatial stage for enacting pious rulership, where calligraphy constructs the ethical–spiritual memory of a king.

• Central shrine of the Mevlevi order and the discourse of Islamic mysticism in Anatolia

- Architectural and cultural–mystical context

The Mausoleum of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī forms the spiritual core of a large ritual–monastic complex in Konya. Developed gradually from the 7th century AH onward, under the Seljuk rulers of Rum and later the Ottomans, the site evolved into the principal center for the preservation of mystical knowledge, the training of disciples, and the stabilization of Mevlevi cultural memory.

In this setting, calligraphy is not merely decorative; it is integral to the architecture's semantic structure—a visual language that articulates themes of spiritual journey, annihilation (fanā'), and divine union (wuṣūl).

- Spatial structure and calligraphic features

The complex comprises multiple components: the Green dome (Qubbat al-Khaḍrā') housing Rumi's tomb, surrounding porticos, the samā'-khāna (ritual dance hall), the recitation chamber, and

Table 3. Spatial distribution of inscriptions in the Gur-e Amir Mausoleum. Source: Author.

Spatial location	Script type	Inscription content	Symbolic function
Dome band	White kufic banāʿī	“Allāh Bāqī” with geometric ornament	Emphasizing human mortality vs. divine eternity; expressing Timur’s humility before God
Main entrance iwan	Golden thuluth	Ayat al-Kursī, Sūrat al-Fath	Asserting Timur’s religious authority; legitimizing rule through sacred text
Inner side arches	Naskh	Sūrat al-Ikhlās, Sūrat al-Naṣr, invocations; names of the Prophet and ‘Alī	Softening interior ambience; stressing divine attributes and Shi‘i identity in a semi-private devotional space
Wall beneath the dome	Thuluth–naskh combination	“Allāhumma ighfir lahu wal-rḥamhu”; Muḥammad wa «Alī khayr al-bashar...”	Formal declaration of Shi‘i affiliation; supplication for Timur; evoking divine justice and ethical kingship
Niches and window surrounds	Simple naskh	Short verses: Qul huwa Allāhu aḥad; Inna Allāha ma‘a al-ṣābirīn; Fa-bi-ayyi ālā‘i rabbikumā tukadhibān	Stabilizing memory at accessible eye level; inviting contemplation
Entrance arch supports	Kufic combined with thuluth	Blessings upon the Prophet and the Ahl al-Bayt	Affirming religious legitimacy and ‘Alid devotion

the prayer hall. The inscriptions include Qur’anic verses, supplications, and poems from the *Masnavī*, executed in thuluth, naskh, ta‘līq, and nasta‘līq. Their placement corresponds precisely to the function and meaning of each architectural zone. Verses such as “Bāz ā, bāz ā...” (“Come back, come back...”) or the opening of the *Masnavī*, “Listen to the ney...,” written in nasta‘līq, evoke inwardness and spiritual invitation at the threshold.

- Three-layered theoretical analysis

First layer (cultural memory and sites of mystical memory): According to Assmann (2011) and Nora (1989) the Rumi mausoleum is a prime example of a site of mystical memory—a place where the memory of a spiritual tradition is reproduced not through historical narrative alone but through ritual, poetry, and space: Qur’anic verses and lines from the *Masnavī* are inscribed throughout the complex; Their visual repetition in ritual and sacred areas stabilizes the collective memory of the Mevlevi order; Here, memory belongs not solely to the historical Rumi but to an entire epistemology of spiritual practice. Calligraphy ensures the continuity of mystical remembrance, transmitted over generations through sight, sound, and pilgrimage experience.

Second layer (space and the discourse of meaning):

In Foucault (1984)’s view, discourses are spatially encoded. In Rumi’s mausoleum: The spatial journey—from the entrance to the Green dome—is designed to guide the visitor from the outer world toward inner contemplation; Sequential placement of inscriptions maps the mystical path: from the call to return (baz ā), to the notion of annihilation, to the reminder of divine union; Unlike royal spaces of power, this architecture articulates spiritual authority, characterized by calmness, symmetry, and invitation.

The mausoleum thus represents a spiritual heterotopia where meaning, memory, and ritual converge. Calligraphy encodes and reflects this mystical discourse.

Third layer (cultural field, symbolic capital, and mystical habitus, bourdieu):

Within the mystical cultural field of Konya: Inscribed Qur’anic verses and poems serve as symbolic capital that stabilizes the legitimacy of the Mevlevi order; Visitors encounter concepts such as love, surrender, and divine mercy not through doctrinal exposition but through embodied visual–emotional experience; The fluid, circular qualities of nasta‘līq create a contemplative aesthetic that renders spiritual transformation natural and internal. Calligraphy functions as a mystical habitus, guiding

the viewer toward inner refinement and the existential journey that Bourdieu describes as the internalization of meaning within the cultural field.

Thus, in the Rumi mausoleum: At the mnemonic level, calligraphy preserves an enduring tradition of mystical and literary memory; At the spatial–semantic level, it transforms architecture into an experiential path of contemplation and repentance; At the social–symbolic level, it reinforces the cultural legitimacy of the Mevlevi order.

- Analysis of a selected inscription — rumi mausoleum (entrance to a ritual cell)

One of the most striking inscriptions is located above the entrance to a small ritual cell near the tomb. Written in ta'liq, it features Rumi's celebrated line: "Bāz ā, bāz ā, har ānche hasfī bāz ā"

("Come back, come back—whatever you are, return.")

Visual dimension: The fluidity and organic movement of the ta'liq script convey lightness, release, and spiritual motion. The softly curved strokes harmonize perfectly with the poem's theme of invitation and inner journey. The turquoise ground with white or gold lettering symbolizes tranquility, mercy, and spiritual elevation.

Spatial dimension: Positioned at the entrance of a space dedicated to seclusion and dhikr, the inscription marks a threshold into an inner, contemplative domain.

Discursive dimension: The use of Rumi's poetry—rather than canonical scripture—signals the centrality of poetic language and spiritual practice in Mevlevi epistemology. Calligraphy here acts as an invitation to inward transformation rather than an assertion of external authority. Table 4 summarizes space position of cornice in Rumi Mausoleum.

For the visitor, passing beneath the inscription is akin to entering a personal and profound sacred interior. Meaning is awakened directly through form and poetry, generating a shared memory of mystical experience.

Comparative analysis of the three case studies: A comparative reading of the three mausoleums—Soltaniyeh, Gur-e Amir, and the Rumi complex—demonstrates that funerary calligraphy in the Islamic world possesses a shared yet contextually diverse set of functions. In Soltaniyeh, calligraphy operates as a mechanism for consolidating a newly established Shi'i political–religious ideology. In Gur-e Amir, calligraphy becomes a medium for redefining royal memory, transforming Timur's image from a military conqueror into a morally and spiritually grounded sovereign. In the Rumi Mausoleum, calligraphy structures a mystical memory-world, shaping the spiritual legitimacy and cultural identity of the Mevlevi order.

From a theoretical standpoint, funerary calligraphy functions on three interrelated levels:

- 1) Mnemonic: institutionalizing collective memory—Shi'i, royal–ethical, or mystical.
- 2) Spatial–Discursive: organizing meaning within the architectural body.
- 3) Symbolic Capital: reproducing legitimacy across religious and cultural fields.

Thus, funerary calligraphy exemplifies the intrinsic interconnection of art, text, and power in Islamic civilization—a phenomenon whose significance extends far beyond aesthetic ornamentation and into the social, cultural, and historical spheres.

Conclusion

The present study began with a central question: How does calligraphy in Islamic funerary architecture function as a visual–discursive language that stabilizes collective memory, produces symbolic legitimacy, and shapes cultural identity?

The analysis of the three major case studies—Soltaniyeh, Gur-e Amir, and the Rumi Mausoleum—confirms the article's hypothesis regarding the multilayered role of calligraphy in ritual architecture. The findings reveal that funerary calligraphy is far more than decoration; it acts as a social and cultural

Table 4. Spatial distribution of inscriptions in the Rumi Mausoleum. Source: Author.

Architectural/ spatial zone	Script style	Inscription content	Symbolic function
Green dome	White thuluth	Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm; Ayat al-Kursī	Divine unity; divine protection; celestial axis of mysticism
Tomb of RUMI	Naskh tā'ī / nasta'īq	Sūrat al-Fajr; verses from the Masnavī	Mystical union; spiritual death and return to the Beloved
Curtain panel	Nasta'īq / naskh	Prophetic supplication: Allāhumma ighfir lī wa-ḥamnī wa-askinī al-janna	Supplication; humility; devotional submission
South wall	Nasta'īq	“Bāz ā... har ānche hastī bāz ā...”	Invitation to repentance; mystical openness; spiritual hospitality
Main entrance	Ta'īq	“This place is the Ka'ba of lovers... Whoever enters incomplete, leaves complete.”	Invitation to transformation; creation of mystical memory at the threshold
West wall arch	Naskh	Kullu man 'alayhā fān (Sūrat al-Raḥmān)	Reminder of mortality; contrast between human finitude and divine permanence
Recitation chamber	Thuluth / naskh	Al-Raḥmān, 'Allama al-Qur'ān, Khalaqa al-Insān	Linking knowledge, humanity, and divine mercy; contemplative memory
Side walls	Nasta'īq	“Listen to the ney, how it tells its tale...”	Constructing a narrative memory of Sufi tradition
Samā'-hall	Thuluth / naskh	Verses from Sūrat al-Nūr and Sūrat al-'Aṣr	Embodying mystical remembrance through combined auditory–visual experience

medium. In Soltaniyeh, inscriptions stabilized Ilkhanid Shi'i memory and served as instruments of political legitimacy. In Gur-e Amir, calligraphy reinterpreted Timur's royal memory through ethical and mystical discourse, compensating for his lack of genealogical authority. In the Rumi Mausoleum, Qur'anic verses and poetic inscriptions reproduced the mystical memory of the Mevlevi order, reinforcing its spiritual and cultural legitimacy.

Accordingly, funerary calligraphy operates at three levels: Mnemonic: preserving collective memory through sacred or mystical texts; Spatial–Discursive: transforming architecture into a language of power or spiritual meaning; Symbolic Capital: enabling religious, political, or mystical legitimacy.

Together, these levels elevate calligraphy from a visual art to a social institution, one that shapes memory, experience, and authority.

The comparative analysis shows that although inscriptional content varies across historical and regional contexts, the underlying mechanism of funerary calligraphy in identity formation and legitimization remains remarkably consistent.

Thus, funerary calligraphy must be understood as an active agent in socio-cultural processes—one that

preserves collective memory, structures discursive space, and reproduces power relations.

In all three studied monuments: In Soltaniyeh, calligraphy articulates the official language of Ilkhanid political legitimacy; In Gur-e Amir, it becomes a tool for crafting the ethical–mystical memory of kingship; In the Rumi complex, it acts as a medium for transmitting spiritual experience, mystical narrative, and inner transformation.

This tri-layered framework—mnemonic, spatial–discursive, and socio-symbolic—demonstrates that writing in Islamic art operates simultaneously as aesthetic experience and as a mechanism for the reproduction of meaning.

Such a framework provides a robust theoretical basis for analyzing other ritual spaces across the Islamic world.

Future research may expand the scope to include inscriptions in congregational mosques, madrasas, and Sufi lodges, or investigate the intersections of calligraphy, devotional music, and embodied ritual experience.

Such studies would illuminate further the social history of calligraphy and its unexamined cultural functions within Islamic art.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests in conducting this research.

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Ataei Ashtiani, Z. (2026). Calligraphy in Islamic Funerary Architecture: A Discourse-Analytical Study of Memory, Space, and Legitimacy. *Journal of Art & Civilization of the Orient*, 14(53), 6-17.

DOI: [10.22034/jaco.2025.544053.1495](https://doi.org/10.22034/jaco.2025.544053.1495)

URL: https://www.jaco-sj.com/article_235361.html?lang=en

