

Al-Andalus

THE ART OF ISLAMIC SPAIN

EDITED BY JERRILYNN D. DODDS

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Front: Patio de los Leones, the Alhambra

Back: No. 3, *Pyxis of al-Mughīra*

Frontispiece

Detail, No. 119, *Panel from the Mexuar, the Alhambra*

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Islamic Spain, The First Four Centuries

An Introduction

OLEG GRABAR

In 711 (A.H. 92) Arab and Berber forces crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and fairly rapidly established a measure of Muslim control over much of the Iberian Peninsula.¹ Almost four centuries later, in 1085 (A.H. 478), Toledo, the ancient seat of Christian power and culture and the more recent center of scientific and philosophical learning in the Arabic language, fell into the hands of the Christian princes from the north. Several centuries would elapse before Islam and the Arabs disappeared entirely from Spain, centuries that would be dominated by the struggle between Muslims and Christians. However, this struggle did not mark the period between 711 and 1084 (A.H. 477), when Islamic Spain became an area unique in all of Europe and the Mediterranean world. Al-Andalus, or the lands controlled by Islam on the Iberian Peninsula, was unique not only in terms of its tangible accomplishments but also for the ways in which it was perceived when it was a power and later, when it was remembered.

The first four centuries of Muslim presence and rule in Spain belong to a peculiar moment in the history of Europe, North Africa, and western Asia. This was a moment in which Roman and, to an only slightly lesser degree, Iranian imperial culture and political power no longer predominated as they had in the ancient world, and yet the presence of the Roman and Iranian pasts continued to be felt clearly. At another level, these centuries were not times of great clashes between competing and opposing cultures, as would be the case in later years, and yet there was

constant confrontation, peaceful or otherwise, between Christians and Muslims. These were not times of fabulous human, economic, and cultural expansion as would occur in the later Middle Ages of western Christendom and the era of the militant empires of Turco-Mongol Islam; and yet it was a period that radically altered the character of the Iberian Peninsula.

The purpose of this introductory essay is to explain these early centuries, to identify the threads within their fabric that make their art understandable, and also to set this art within the contemporary medieval culture of both the east and the west.

I have divided my remarks into three parts: *events* that set a few chronological guidelines and put what happened on a map; *society and culture*, with an attempt to point out some of the features of the society that was created in al-Andalus—its behavior and the way of life it engendered, as well as the culture that developed; *myth*, centered on examples of imaginary tales associated with early medieval Islamic Spain.

Events

Many stories have been spun around the decision by the Arab commander Mūsā ibn Nuṣayr to move a small army of horsemen—Arabs from the east and Berbers from neighboring Morocco, across The Straits into the Iberian Peninsula. All of these tales belong to the mythology of the Arab presence in Spain, and I shall return to one aspect of them in the third part of this essay. It is most likely that, during the heady decades of the late seventh and early eighth centuries,

highly energized Muslim Arab generals moved into any areas that were experiencing vacuums of centralized power or irreducible internal conflicts. Like North Africa, the bruised and battered Spain of Visigothic kings and of an until recently divided Christianity was such a place. Its political leadership was weak, its population scattered over a huge territory and torn by competing concerns, both ethnic and spiritual, that were at large in a vast land.

A few months after landing in 711, the Muslim armies were in Toledo, in the center of the peninsula. In 714 (A.H. 95) they were in Saragossa to the northeast, and raiding parties had reached almost every center of life in the entire territory of Spain. Other raids moved into southern France—Toulouse, for instance, was attacked in 719 (A.H. 101). The most celebrated of these expeditions led the Arabs all the way into central France, where they were turned back in 732 (A.H. 114) at a battle variously associated with Tours or Poitiers. Little noticed in the Muslim world itself, the battle assumed monumental proportions in Christian European, especially French, history. It was seen as the heroic brake applied to the expansion of an alien world by the west, as a minor skirmish by Arabs. From the very beginning there is thus established a difference in the perception and appreciation of the same events by Muslim and Christian sources. Whether this difference operated in respect to the perception of visual forms at the time they were created and used or, later, when they were studied, is one of the main issues that faces the historian of medieval art in Spain.

It is unclear what happened between 715 and 756 (A.H. 96–139). A rapid succession of governors in al-Andalus (during this period of forty-one years there were twenty-two of them, one of whom was at his post for five years) represented the central government of the Umayyad dynasty in Syria and the authority of the caliphs, successors to the Prophet Muḥammad as leader of all Muslims. The early governors' main duties were the collection of taxes and especially the channeling of booty toward the treasuries of the Umayyads in Syria. It is probable that they kept percentages for themselves and for their clients, and for this reason few were maintained for any length of time.

What that booty may have been is partly the subject of myth, which contributed to the perceived image of the peninsula in later times. However, several

exports are known to have come from Spain or to have been acquired through Spain. Among them were rarities like amber, which came from northern Europe, and in particular both male and female slaves, whose beauty and strength are often mentioned in sources.

It is more difficult to know how the land itself and the population were transformed. There probably were not many immigrants, and these consisted of at least as many Berbers as Arabs. In all likelihood the immigrants married indigenous women, since there are almost no records of Arab or Berber women who came to the peninsula. Thus from the very beginning there was created a mixed culture, the nature of which probably contributed much to the unique character of the Arab Muslim civilization that developed in al-Andalus. It is known that the initial influx was primarily made up of soldiers and immigrants directed toward cities, but it is not clear whether the countryside was settled by Muslim Arabs or Berbers as early as the first half of the eighth century. Christians for the most part remained where they had always been and did not at first convert very rapidly to the new faith. Jewish communities in the cities assumed great importance. Persecuted and ill-treated by the Christians, Jews eventually found within Islam a legal system that left them relatively free to profit from the new world order created by the Muslims and to maintain their practices and beliefs. Specifically, they acquired easy access to the great centers of early medieval Judaism located near Baghdad.

Within a generation or two there seems to have been established a loosely organized frontier culture primarily dedicated to supplying the remote centers of the empire with natural resources. This was a culture that adapted itself to local conditions and opportunities. Indeed, the genius of the Arab governors sent from Syria to Spain or, for that matter, to the frontiers of China lay in their ability to foster an equilibrium wherever there were local ethnic, social, religious, or cultural tensions and a Muslim presence that was slowly formulating its own agenda for rule, for collective behavior, and for morality. I shall return in the second section of this essay to some of the features of this equilibrium.

It was in many ways an accident of history that took place far away from Spain that transformed a remote frontier province into a major political and cultural force. In 750 (A.H. 133), after several years

of civil war in Syria and Iraq, the Umayyad dynasty, which had established a vast Muslim empire from the Atlantic to India, was overthrown by religious, political, and social groups that came together to oppose its easygoing but self-serving rule. The caliphate was appropriated by the new dynasty of the 'Abbāsids, and, more important for Spain, the focus of power shifted from Syria and the great Arabian tribes to Iraq, the center of urban Muslim populations, to a bureaucratic complex of administrators who often felt affinities with the culture of the Iranian world, and to a new army that was increasingly Turkic in constitution. The symbol of this change was the founding in 762 (A.H. 145) of the imperial capital Baghdad, officially called Madīnat al-Salām, the City of Peace, and meant to stand for Muslim rule everywhere. But the reality was even more important than the symbol, as Baghdad and other urban centers in Iraq such as Kufa, Basra, and Samarra developed into enormous and vital cities that for nearly three centuries were the major loci of intellectual, literary, and artistic activity for the Eurasian world.

The first 'Abbāsids did their best to kill all the important members of the Umayyad dynasty. However, one of the Umayyads, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Mu'āwiya (eventually called al-Dākhil, the Incomer), escaped 'Abbāsīd assassins and in 755 (A.H. 138) reached al-Andalus, where he immediately found support among the Arab or arabicized immigrants, many of whom had come from Syria. In spite of this support, it took him some years to establish himself fully as the emir, or commander of all the local Muslim chieftains. He and his successors in both the emirate and caliphate ruled from their capital, Córdoba, until about 1030 (A.H. 421).

Each of these Umayyad rulers played an important and unique part in forging the new entity of al-Andalus. Hishām I (r. 788–96 [A.H. 172–80]) was an emir who introduced the legal system based on Muslim precedent that would subsequently be used throughout the western Islamic world. 'Abd al-Raḥmān II (r. 822–52 [A.H. 207–38]) was a warrior who dealt with the emerging Christian kingdom in the north, with internal revolts, and even with Viking raiders who penetrated almost as far as Seville. His son and grandsons, who reigned from 852 to 912 (A.H. 238–300), continued to consolidate and hold together the large territory under Muslim control.

The Umayyad dynasty reached the acme of its power in the tenth century under 'Abd al-Raḥmān III (r. 912–61 [A.H. 300–350]). He adopted the title of caliph, which signified that he was the successor to the rule of the Prophet Muḥammad, and thus challenged the pretenses of both Baghdad and the new heterodox Fāṭimid rulers of Tunisia, who would establish themselves in Egypt and found the city of Cairo in 969 (A.H. 359). After the reign of 'Abd al-Raḥmān's son al-Ḥakam II (961–76 [A.H. 350–66]), al-Manṣūr, the main administrator of the court, wielded the royal power until 1002 (A.H. 393), when the regime began to disintegrate.

The two hundred years of Umayyad rule in al-Andalus transformed the southern part of Spain into an actor with a major role in the international relations of the time. There was a war with Charlemagne but also, according to some accounts, an attempt at a matrimonial agreement with the great ruler of the north. Byzantium probably saw in Córdoba a potential ally against the 'Abbāsids in Baghdad and exchanged several embassies with the Umayyads, sending them a stream of gifts and perhaps artists who helped decorate the mihrab of the Great Mosque of Córdoba. Political connections with Iraq and Egypt may have been strained, but cultural and commercial relations were constant. Thanks to the development of revolutionary agricultural techniques and probably to the cultivation of silkworms and new products like rice and vegetables, hitherto unknown in the Mediterranean, al-Andalus became a rich producer of consumer goods that were transported as far as India by merchants of many faiths. Among the records of such merchants, those of the Jews have been preserved best and have provided a picture of wealth and of consumption almost unknown in the Christian north. It was in large measure because 'Abd al-Raḥmān III was aware that the wealth of his lands allowed him to play a major role in the world that he saw fit to assume the title of caliph, which elevated him to the status of the rulers of Constantinople and Baghdad.

The centralized system of government developed by the Umayyad princes did not last. In a sense, the Muslims had been too successful—the lands they had conquered were too vast and rugged to control and govern. In all likelihood there were not enough Muslim soldiers and settlers to hold and populate such large territories. Furthermore, the Arabs had no

long-standing tradition of efficient dynastic or bureaucratic rule. And finally, Christian leaders were reasserting their power at this time.

By the end of the tenth century, local governors took advantage of the weakness in Córdoba and declared their independence in at least fourteen different districts. This was the period, which lasted from about 1031 to 1086 (A.H. 423–79), of the *mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif*, or *Taifa* kingdoms, the so-called party kings who transformed their cities into small capitals, fought with one another as much as with the resurgent Christian kings, and often made alliances with Christian rulers against their enemies, whether Christian or Muslim. Because such clashes often resulted in the ruin of local economies and the loss of land to the Christians, these petty rulers generally have been judged rather harshly by historians. Yet they made a contribution that bore considerable fruit over the following centuries. Under their rule a series of hitherto minor provincial areas like Málaga, Granada, Badajoz, Valencia, Almería, and Saragossa, as well as the old city of Toledo, which had lost some of its luster, acquired identities of their own. They became centers of literature and of culture, and their rulers, ministries, or rich inhabitants sponsored major works of art. Thus, when the Berber dynasties emerged at the end of the eleventh century to clash with the crusading princes of Castile or Aragon and to bring a rigid form of Islam to the warring states, they found an al-Andalus of many cities of distinct character and tradition.

Society and Culture

It is nearly impossible to reconstruct the life and the culture of the Arab Muslim world of al-Andalus in these early medieval centuries and to understand the nature of the people who prayed in the Great Mosque of Córdoba and used the extraordinary carved ivories produced in the workshops of Spain. I will merely attempt to suggest something of what that life and culture must have been by concentrating on two themes: the variety of people and goods that were found in al-Andalus, and the quality as well as originality of its literature, of its ways of life, and of its thought.

Ibn Hawqāl, a tenth-century geographer from Baghdad, visited Spain, in particular Córdoba, during the first half of the tenth century. He was a bit of a

snob in his judgments of places far away from the capital of the Muslim world—he was, for example, very critical of the horsemanship practiced on the peninsula; but he took appreciative notice of the availability of mercury, iron, and lead, and especially of the manufacture of many different kinds of textiles, dyed wools, silks, felts, and linens. These were exported all over the Muslim world, as were slaves from Scandinavia and Slavic areas who had been bought in northern Christian markets, and ivory tusks acquired on the edges of the Sahara desert and crafted in the royal cities of al-Andalus. Before Cairo was founded, only Constantinople and Baghdad challenged Spanish cities in terms of the variety of exotic products and slaves available in their markets.

Muslim geographers usually discuss only Muslim populations. From them we have learned that most of the Muslim inhabitants of the cities and of the countryside in Spain were Arabs from the east and Berbers from North Africa, the majority of whom were totally arabicized. These Muslims, particularly if they could claim descent from immigrants from the east, considered themselves a social elite. Many, in fact, were landowners whose property, which was cultivated by others, had made them wealthy. A large number of Spanish Muslims, however, were *muwalladūn*, Christian natives of Spain whose ancestors had converted to Islam out of religious conviction or to gain higher social status or economic advantages.

Side by side with the Muslims lived large communities of Christians called Mozarabs because they had acquired an Arab culture although they remained strongly attached to their traditions. These attachments sometimes caused conflict—for example, in the middle of the ninth century, a group of Christians in Córdoba sought martyrdom by insulting the faith of the Muslims and provoking cruel retribution. But such cases were relatively rare, and, as has been noted, the Umayyads and their successors maintained a workable equilibrium between Christian and Muslim communities. Another significant group among the mixed population was made up of Jews, who played a particularly important role in the life of al-Andalus because they were among the richest and most successful merchants from Spain.

These disparate groups, no matter what had brought them to al-Andalus, shared a characteristic that is curious and most interesting in terms of its

psychological effect: They had an allegiance to centers or to issues outside of Spain. Christians technically were subject to the Roman hierarchy, which, during this period, admittedly was remote and inaccessible and often at odds with local theological, liturgical, and social aspirations. However, the bishops in the unconquered north of Spain gradually became more powerful and by the latter part of the eleventh century consolidated their control and encouraged the slow growth of the influential sanctuary of Saint James in Compostela. The Jews of Spain consulted the rabbis and learned men of Iraq in matters of faith. Moreover, they were connected through marriage with their coreligionists in North Africa, Sicily, Egypt, and even India. The northern or African slaves who worked on the peninsula or passed through it for lands even more remote from their birthplaces also brought with them traditions and memories of their native cultures, although they left no record of them.

It is fascinating that during the period of Islamic domination of Spain, even the Muslims expressed an affection for a place and time outside of their extraordinarily powerful rule—articulating a nostalgia for a past long gone and for lands and ways of life far away. The early Muslim settlers developed a kind of cult around memories of the Umayyad dynasty in Syria; they compared existence in Spain to a fantasy of what life had been in Syria, and they gave Syrian names to their creations in Spain. Thus *al-Ruṣāfa*, the name of the Umayyad capital in Syria, became the name of a palace in a suburb of Córdoba, and Arabic poetry in *al-Andalus* often sang of the beauties of Syrian landscape. This was a curious nostalgia that voiced no expectation of return, fostered perhaps because these memories helped sustain the struggles of the Spanish Umayyads against the ‘Abbāsids of Baghdad.

In the ninth century a second wave of influences from the east engulfed the Muslim elites of Spain. This wave is epitomized by the Iraqi singer *Abū ‘l-Ḥasan ibn Nāfi‘*, known as *Ziryāb*. It is difficult to identify his contributions precisely, as he is credited not only with the introduction of new and more sophisticated ways of singing poetry but also of refinements in the realm of everyday life and behavior: new techniques for cooking and for makeup, polite manners for dining with silken tablecloths, new fashions in hair and clothes. This revolution in manners was accompanied by an influx, starting in the ninth century,

of luxurious consumer goods from the East, such as the celebrated necklace known as *al-thu‘bān* (the snake), which had belonged to the wife of *Hārūn al-Rashīd*. Whether or not these accounts of elegant life and rich goods were true is not as important as the fact that they were believed. By the tenth century, the most brilliant and creative century of the early period of Islamic rule, the Umayyads thought themselves to be in the cultural succession of the great Baghdad of the eighth and ninth centuries. Nostalgia for a lost cultural past was replaced by a feeling of superiority: The Umayyads considered themselves to be more than the equals of the ‘Abbāsids, having forged a unique Andalusian Arab culture. It should be noted here that Spanish Christians, who held diverse religious views and had mixed feelings about their past as well as about the contemporary scene, created an extremely original culture, which was different from that of the Roman church of the north and often very close to the Arab culture of Muslims or to the Muslim culture of Arabs.

In at least two respects the culture of Córdoba Umayyad Spain reached a pinnacle, elaborating on traditions appropriated from ‘Abbāsīd Iraq. First, Arabic poetic forms were cultivated, as witnessed in the love poetry of *Ibn Ḥazm*, which is suffused with a genuine lyricism that confers upon the verses a combination of amorous concreteness and esoteric imagination. There was also a new emphasis on learning, marked by a fascination with science, with the Arabic language, and with the philosophical discourse on reason and faith that had been a focus of the intellectual life of Iraq in the ninth century. Moreover, during the eleventh century these great accomplishments were transmitted from Córdoba to dozens of smaller centers in *al-Andalus*.

The world created by the Umayyads in Spain was one of striking wealth of many kinds. There was commercial wealth based on goods and slaves from the north and south that passed through *al-Andalus*. There was wealth in terms of consumption, as the caliph’s court, first in Córdoba and then in the new capital city of *Madinat al-Zahrā’*, commissioned and used thousands of objects in gold and ivory, masses of textiles of many different sorts, and whatever else made a life of high luxury. There was a wealth of productivity and of exchange, as artisans learned to make items such as silks and boxes for the pleasure of the rich everywhere,

and as goods changed hands in markets carefully supervised by well-trained officials. There was also a wealth of information, thanks to the libraries of Córdoba, which became celebrated all over the world, far outshining those of the Christian west. There was a wealth of thinking about the meaning of life, about God, and about material things. And there were poets to sing of all the ways of wealth.

Myth

Islamic Spain was present within the mythical memory of the entire Muslim community and most particularly within its Arabic-speaking areas, which had been fed on stories of the conquest. I will relate only four of these myths, as they suffice to provide a sense of the meaning of Umayyad Spain to Muslim culture as a whole.

The first story concerns the conquest itself. According to later historians, the daughter of a Christian governor was kidnapped by the last Visigothic king, Roderic. The governor called on the Arabs installed across the Mediterranean to help him avenge the dishonor done to his family, and they obliged by conquering Spain. Thus, the invasion of Spain was represented as a moral venture pursued to rectify a crime. It is difficult to determine why this rather unusual type of conquest story developed, but a likely guess is that it originally was spun by or for Christians seeking to explain to themselves the appearance of Arab Muslims in their midst as a consequence of their sins.

The other myths come from a rather extraordinary book compiled by al-Zubayr in the latter part of the eleventh century. One describes all sorts of gifts given or received by Muslim rulers. Among these was an exceptional object alleged to have been discovered in an old church of Saragossa by a treasure hunter (today he would be called an antique dealer). This was a cylindrical bronze pyxis that contained a glass pyxis; inside the glass pyxis was a black ring stone with an image of a sexually aroused monkey. It was said that a man who held the ring stone in his hand or mouth would have an erection; when the object was set aside, the erection subsided. The Arab grandee from Sicily who obtained the pyxis gave it to one of his eunuchs as a meanspirited joke. The eunuch broke the ring stone, and it became ineffective. In this tale an object from Spain brings eroticism and magic to another

Muslim land. The character of al-Andalus as a rich and remote frontier where license, wealth, and a strong, strange Christian culture mingled made it a mythic place for those who lived in other corners of the Islamic world. Significantly, works of art, as signs of wealth and cultivation, were at the center of the creation of such stories.

That these legends were conceived as a means to understand the identity of this remote and exotic appendage of the Islamic world is clear in two other stories, in which the mythical imagery is more political in nature. The first concerns a table of gold and silver with inlays of precious stones. Once the property of Solomon, the son of David, it had been carried from Jerusalem to Spain by a mythical king. According to legend, it was found during the Muslim conquest of a fortress near Toledo, and it eventually was brought to the Umayyad caliph in Syria. In the other story Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād, the conqueror of Spain, found a house with twenty-four locks. He was told that every king of Spain had put a lock on this house, but none save Roderic, the last Spanish king, dared enter because they did not wish to see what was inside. Within, Roderic saw pictures of armed and turbaned Arab horsemen and the inscription *If this house is entered, these people will enter this country.*

Stories such as these, which provide associations with Solomon or David or imply that the rule of the Iberian Peninsula was an Arab Muslim destiny, are not unique. They typify the kinds of myths that any culture uses to establish its links with the past of a land and thus its legitimate right to rule. These particular myths testify to the depth of the Arab Muslim involvement with al-Andalus and add an imaginative dimension to the reality of the complicated political, economic, and cultural history of the first four centuries of the brilliant Arab Islamic presence in Spain.

The Muslim Spain of the eighth to the eleventh century was unique within pre-Romanesque Europe and the newly created Islamic world culture. From the point of view of the rough and cold Christian north, it was a haven of warmth, sophistication, and refinement in every aspect of life—from the clothes that were worn to the buildings that were built to the ideas that were created and the knowledge that was pursued. From the point of view of the Iraqi centers of Islamic culture, it was an upstart province that had succeeded

in creating a literature and systems of thought that competed with the finest Arabic poetry and philosophical discourse of the past or present. From the point of view of the Byzantine Empire, it was a strange province that remained useful as a pawn in the struggle for control of the Mediterranean, even though it had been lost to heretics. For Africa or the northern Vikings, it was a place to sell one's wealth of raw materials. For the Iberian Peninsula itself, it was an astounding achievement: a land in which a totally new language and religion first overwhelmed and then interacted with a native tradition to produce a complex and original mixed culture that was to enrich the nature of Spanish civilization throughout its subsequent history.

1. By far the best introduction to the first centuries of Muslim rule in Spain is Lévi-Provençal 1950. Many wonderful insights are also found in Lévi-Provençal 1951 and in Torres Balbás [1971]. Important more recent histories are Wasserstein 1985 and Glick 1979. For the Jewish experience in all of its Muslim contexts, see Goitein 1967, 1971, 1978, 1983, 1988. The source for the stories in this essay's section on myth is Ibn al-Zubayr 1958 (see translation with commentary by Qaddumi [1990]).