

## CIRCULAR VISIONS OF FERTILITY AND PUNISHMENT: CALIPHAL IVORY CASKETS FROM AL-ANDALUS

The souvenir is destined to be forgotten; its tragedy lies in the death of memory, the tragedy of all autobiography and the simultaneous erasure of the autograph.

Susan Stewart, *On Longing*<sup>1</sup>

Love, death, ambition, fear, and betrayal are some of the themes one encounters behind the scenes at the court of the Andalusian caliph al-Hakam II (r. 961–76) in the study of some remarkable pieces of ivory craftsmanship that marked important events in the lives of their original owners. Once part of courtly environments, these luxurious objects have made their way through space and time into contemporary museums and private collections. In their new display and in the midst of diverse audiences they have become historical souvenirs of an apparently irrecoverable past. One of this essay's objectives is to restore their original voice by describing their complex significance and the influence they exerted over those individuals who interacted with them.<sup>2</sup>

For an understanding of the role of these objects one needs to consider a set of essential facts about their creation, function, and fortune. They are products of the court, designed in the royal workshop for members of the ruling family or high officials; they bear inscriptions which identify them clearly with a particular individual by presenting the name of the owner and the date of execution as basic features; their portability, either within the context of the court or beyond the boundaries of al-Andalus, was a condition carefully considered in the design of their external decoration; and, finally, some of them happened to be preserved, unlike similar luxury objects in other Islamic courts, by being reused in Christian churches.

A prosopographical inquiry into caliphal Córdoba during the second half of the tenth century will permit us to single out a few personages who played a decisive role in determining the outcome of the most important political issue of the time: the succession to the throne of the caliphate of al-Andalus. We will see the highly sophisticated political strategies devised by these figures and how they were visually expressed in the then recently adopted figural iconography found on these

ivory boxes. We shall consider how the development of figural iconography on luxury portable objects, which was first applied in the pyxis of al-Mughira, articulated a visual system of political propaganda that could perform, at an internal level, the same function that monumental iconography played in projecting the might of the kingdom and the ruling dynasty. Finally, taking the Braga pyxis as a case in point, we shall consider the way in which this newly created portable political iconography played a role in the diplomatic relations of the caliphate with foreign kingdoms, and how the special conditions under which Christians received some of these objects determined their new function and ultimately their preservation.

When al-Hakam II ascended the throne on 16 October 961 at the age of forty-six, he had no son, and without a heir, the stable and prosperous kingdom put together by his father seemed to be in serious jeopardy, all the more because his own health was delicate.<sup>3</sup> Uncertainty in the line of succession could transform the court into a haven for conspirators undermining the ruling dynasty from within and ultimately the unity of the caliphate as well. Al-Hakam's homosexuality, reported, if euphemistically, by the sources, could only have encouraged the ambitions of the faction gathered around his much younger brother al-Mughira.<sup>4</sup>

The situation changed radically, however, when a new character entered the life of the caliph. A concubine named Subh, a lady of Basque origin, became al-Hakam's favorite for reasons which can be inferred from her custom of dressing in male attire and the caliph's habit of addressing her by the male name Jafar. Because she was the only woman capable of conceiving a child by the caliph, she was the focus of attention for all courtiers supporting al-Hakam's succession, and in fact in 962 she gave birth to a son, who was named Abd al-Rahman; the importance of this event is reported by Ibn Idhari: "As he was his first-born son, he [al-Hakam II] felt such a great joy for the event that poets and litterateurs celebrated it in numerous forms."<sup>5</sup>

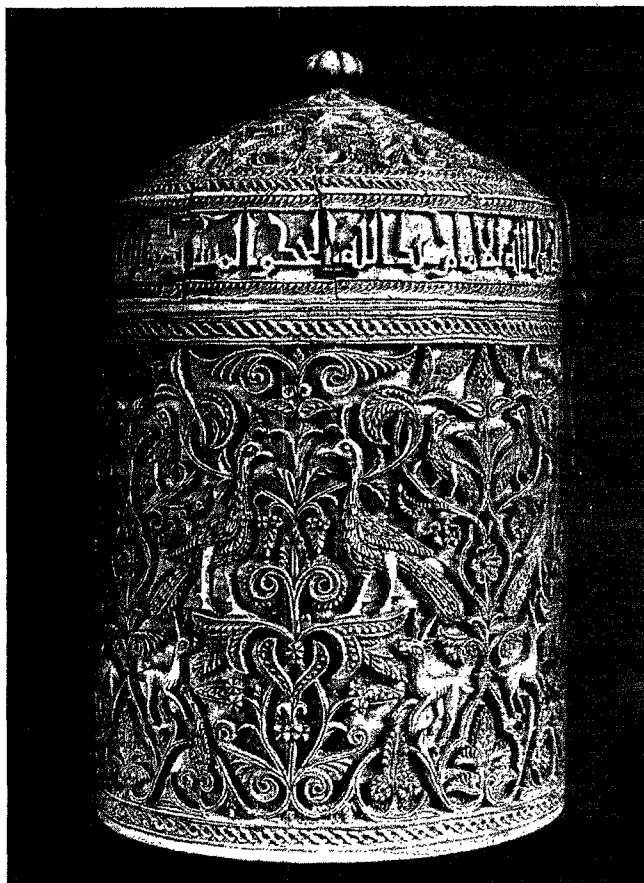


Fig. 1. Ivory pyxis made for the princess Subh in 964, Caliphal period. Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid. (Photo: courtesy of Arxiu Mas, Barcelona)

Subh's fertility was celebrated not only in poetry but also in visual art, in the form of three ivory containers that belonged to her. The first one is a pyxis in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional in Madrid (fig. 1). It has a Kufic inscription around the base of its lid that reads:

The blessing of Allah upon the Imam, the servant of Allah, al-Hakam II al-Mustansir billah, Commander of the Faithful. This is what he ordered to be made for the noble lady, the mother of Abd al-Rahman under the direction of Durri as-Saghir in the year 353 [964].<sup>6</sup>

The reference to Subh as the "mother of" Abd al-Rahman clearly states the reason for the gift which might have been presented to her by the caliph on the occasion of her second pregnancy, from which Hisham was born in 965. Two other rectangular ivory boxes, the first at the church of Fitero in Navarre (fig. 2),<sup>7</sup> and the second at the Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan (fig. 3),<sup>8</sup>

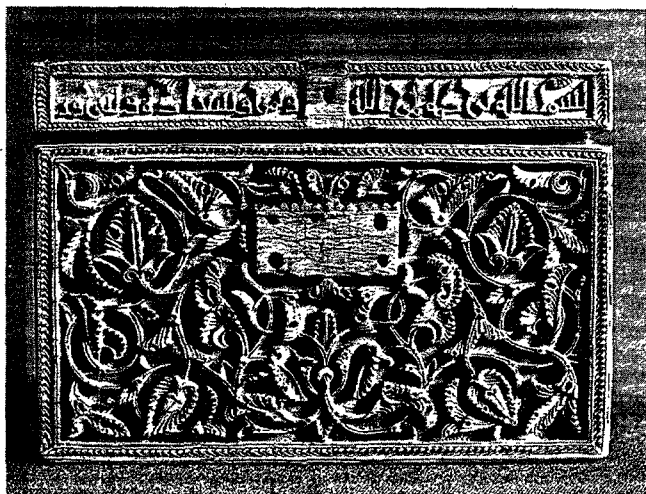


Fig. 2. Ivory casket. 966, Caliphal period. Parochial church of Fitero (Navarre). (Photo: courtesy of Arxiu Mas, Barcelona)

were made in 966 and could also be related to the birth of this second son for, in their respective inscriptions, Subh is called *umm-walad* translated as the "mother of the son" or "most loved of the fertile women."<sup>9</sup>

These objects are decorated with a deeply carved vegetal ornament which sharply separates surface and background and shows a series of twisting residual spaces that set off the individual leaves. The same ornamental vocabulary, characteristic of the first workshop of Madinat al-Zahra, is found in three pieces made around the year 961 for the daughter of Abd al-Rahman III: a cylindrical box in the Museo Arqueológico Provin-

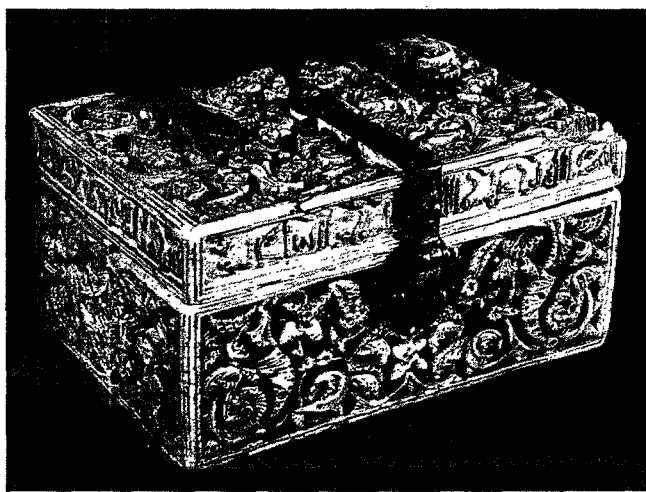


Fig. 3. Ivory casket. 966, Caliphal period. Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid. (Photo: courtesy of Arxiu Mas, Barcelona)

cial of Burgos,<sup>10</sup> and two caskets in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.<sup>11</sup>

Renata Holod has noted the contrast between the strictly vegetal motifs of all these ivories owned by women and the rich imagery displayed on containers commissioned for men. The explanations she offers are that ornamental imagery may have been considered more appropriate for women, and that women did not have direct access to workshops so could not specify their orders as men did.<sup>12</sup> The significance of this decoration may involve more than that, however. Undoubtedly the vegetal arabesque was a widespread decorative device in Islamic art and architecture, and it was sometimes conceived exclusively in aesthetic terms. But its location in particular contexts also suggests other possible interpretations. In religious environments, for instance the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock and the Umayyad Great Mosque of Damascus, vegetal motifs have been interpreted as referring to the flora of paradise, the fertility ever-present in the proximity of God.<sup>13</sup> This identification of vegetation and fertility as blessings from God was especially prominent in the minds of the people of al-Andalus who used this argument to demonstrate the superiority of their country in comparison with the rest of the Islamic world and its status as the chosen land of God.

Literary scholars such as H. Pérès have pointed out the new dimension that stock motifs of Islamic nature poetry were given by the poets of al-Andalus.<sup>14</sup> The theme of al-Andalus as the earthly paradise or the garden of delights was common in compositions praising the native land during the years of the caliphate.<sup>15</sup> This great flowering of nature poetry in al-Andalus, stemming from political and ecological sentiments, parallels the strikingly naturalistic rendering of vegetal decoration in Andalusian relief sculpture like the marble panels lining the mihrab of the Great Mosque of Córdoba and the wall decoration of the Salón Rico of the palace of Madinat al-Zahra, which are stylistically similar to the ivory reliefs.<sup>16</sup> It is possible that the vegetal decoration on boxes owned by women could be an iconographic choice made to mirror and reflect fertility as the principal virtue celebrated in the women of the court, rather than a product of their inability to commission more developed visual programs.

As we will see, figural motifs had a political function that was, at least in theory, alien to the female realm, where ivory caskets enjoyed a smaller and more private audience and were conceived in more practical terms. The meaning I suggest for this vegetal decoration, as

opposed to figural iconography, has to be perceived in terms of allusion rather than of a strictly codified message. In other words, although the vegetal arabesque had a primary aesthetic function offering the viewer a pleasure similar to poetic descriptions of gardens,<sup>17</sup> it brought the idea of fertility along as a consubstantial part of its concept. In specific contexts, notably the caskets studied in this essay, the vegetal arabesque achieved a prominent position due to its association with inscriptions that celebrated the female owner as mother.<sup>18</sup>

Ivory caskets, on account of their shape, material, and function as containers, were obvious metaphors for the maternal dimension of women, as attested in Arab poetry, where they were used as comparisons in descriptions of the womb or the breast of the beloved.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, poetry and visual arts meet again in a beautiful ivory box with vegetal designs made in the workshops of Madinat al-Zahra ca. 968 and now in the collection of the Hispanic Society of America (fig. 4). The inscription on the base of the lid reads:

The sight I offer is of the fairest,  
the firm breast of a delicate maiden.  
Beauty has invested me with  
splendid raiment that makes a display of jewels.  
I am a receptacle for musk, camphor, and ambergris.<sup>20</sup>

The pyxis of al-Mughira in the Louvre (figs. 5, 7, 10 and 12) introduces the question of the significance of figural decoration in caliphal ivory caskets.<sup>21</sup> As Ettinghausen and Grabar have noted, this pyxis provides "the first appearance on a Spanish ivory of a cycle of royal themes."<sup>22</sup> So far most of the studies devoted to these images can be classified as what one might call "etymological iconography," i.e., the history of a visual motif from its earliest recorded occurrence in the artistic tradition where it is found, as it is reconstructed by tracing its transmission from one artistic tradition to another, by analyzing it into its component parts, by identifying its cognates in other artistic traditions, or by tracing it and its cognates to a common ancestral form in an ancestral artistic tradition. Applying this technique to the configuration of a long series of visual parallels for a given iconographic motif has limited utility if it is taken as a goal instead of a starting point, since it only results in increasing the number of links in a chain that leads to the same end — Sasanian princely iconography as it developed and was transformed throughout the Mediterranean basin. The specific visual text displayed before our eyes, however, remains unread.

As Grabar has pointed out, "A group of stereotyped

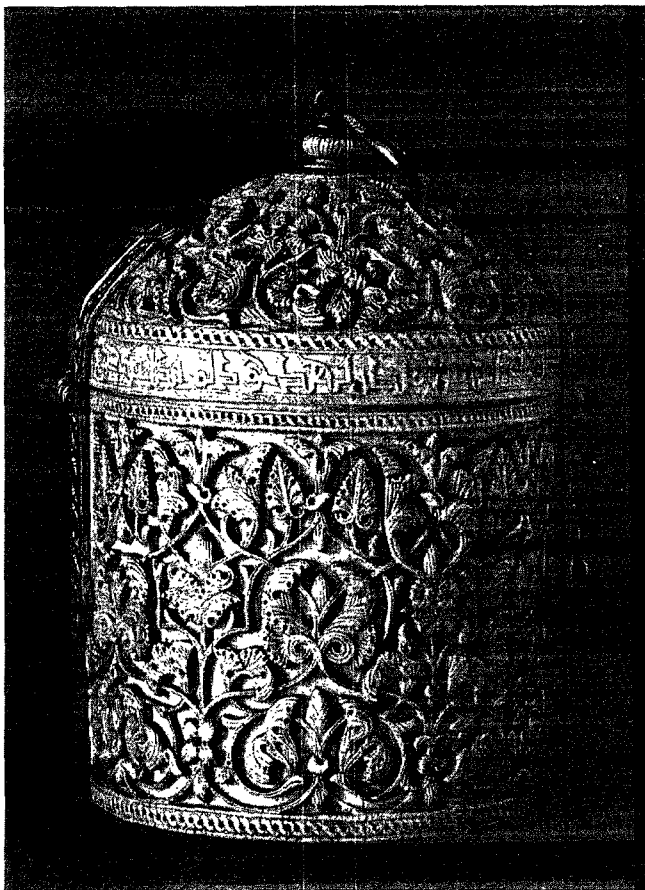


Fig. 4. Ivory pyxis. Ca. 968, Caliphal period. Hispanic Society of America, New York. (Photo: courtesy of the Hispanic Society of America, New York)

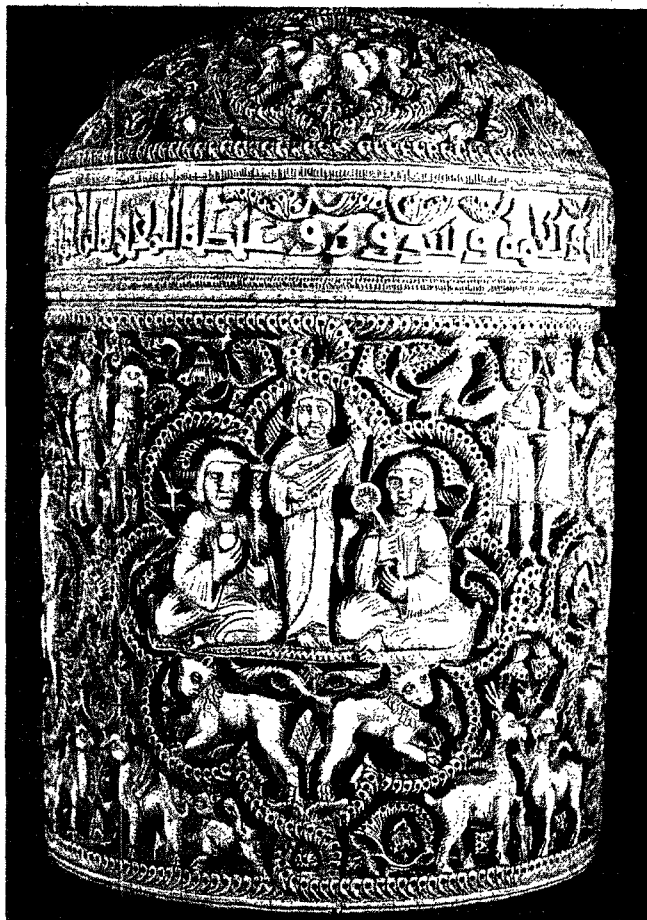


Fig. 5. Pyxis presented to al-Mughira, side featuring a court scene. 968, Caliphal period. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Photo: courtesy Walter Denny, Amherst, Mass.)

images coexist with less understandable ones, for which one could propose some sort of private significance."<sup>23</sup> This is precisely the key to the work's interpretation. The visual program of the pyxis constitutes a political discourse flavored by rhetorical *topoi* of power which acquired visual expression in the form of standard princely images. Their particular content, however, can only be grasped by achieving an understanding of its unique aspects and the way these shape the interpretation of the general ones. The pyxis constitutes a meaningful unit in which inscription and decoration work together to enact a message created by "words" whose semantic nuance is defined by syntax and addressee.

Ettinghausen and Grabar also noted that "this piece provides the first conscious organization of a complex decorative scheme into major and minor scenes within a unified whole."<sup>24</sup> The surface decoration is organized in

four eight-lobed medallions with interwoven borders. Each medallion frames a large figural scene while the interstices are filled with smaller figures inhabiting vegetal environments. The lid is divided into four small medallions, each featuring a pair of animals. This hierarchy of size directs the attention of the viewer to the four large scenes which as a group establish the literary significance of the piece supported by the marginal ones. The four main scenes, in their turn, are displayed to be read from right to left beginning with the court scene, just as the inscription is, and therefore has the additional function of marking the starting point of the visual discourse.<sup>25</sup>

The first medallion shows two individuals of similar rank sitting on a lion throne and flanking a musician (fig. 5). Ettinghausen and Grabar interpreted this scene as a representation of the "prince himself with a goblet

or perfume bottle in his hand who is seated in the company of his fan-bearer and a lutanist."<sup>26</sup> Holod, noticing that the seated figures are two youths of the same rank, identifies it in vaguer terms as "an informal scene rather than a formal presentation of a reigning monarch sharing his throne with his heir."<sup>27</sup> In effect the caliph, who would require the royal motif of the beard, is not represented here, at least explicitly, because this is presumably a portrait of the two sons of al-Hakam II, Abd al-Rahman, the heir-apparent (b. 962), and Hisham (b. 965). Meager references to Abd al-Rahman in the sources mention his birth and premature death, so his image at the court of al-Hakam II is blurred. Reading Ibn Idhari closely, however, we can deduce that Abd al-Rahman died in 970, two years after this pyxis was made.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, this seems to be not an informal scene but an official dynastic portrait executed according to the strictest iconographic norms of royal representation.

In her study of the banquet scene in medieval Islamic iconography, Dorothy G. Shepherd has convincingly traced back several motifs that appear in Sasanian iconography and, later, in Islamic art to the late classical iconography of heroization. Principal features of this iconography are the lion throne, the cup or bottle, and a flowering branch held by the ruler, which all appear in

this scene. The cup and the branch "hark back to the ancient iconography of the New Year's feast as we know it at Sumer and, moving forward in time, they remind us of the Dionysiac *kantharos* and *thyrsos*,"<sup>29</sup> and the lion throne is a symbol of apotheosis appropriated by kings from sacred iconography to symbolize their own celestial journey.

In Sasanian silver vessels these scenes of celestial banquets are accompanied by musicians, like the lutanist of the pyxis. Shepherd relates them to classical celebrations like the banquets that took place on the day of heroization when feasting and drinking were accompanied by music. This royal iconography was also adopted at the Umayyad court of Spain to depict the caliph, for instance the image of a ruler, probably Hisham II, on the front panel of the Pamplona casket, dated 395 (1004–5), where the caliph, with beard, holds a bot-



Fig. 6. Pamplona casket, detail showing a court scene. 1004–5, Caliphal period. Museo de Navarra, Pamplona. (Photo: courtesy of Arxiu Mas, Barcelona)

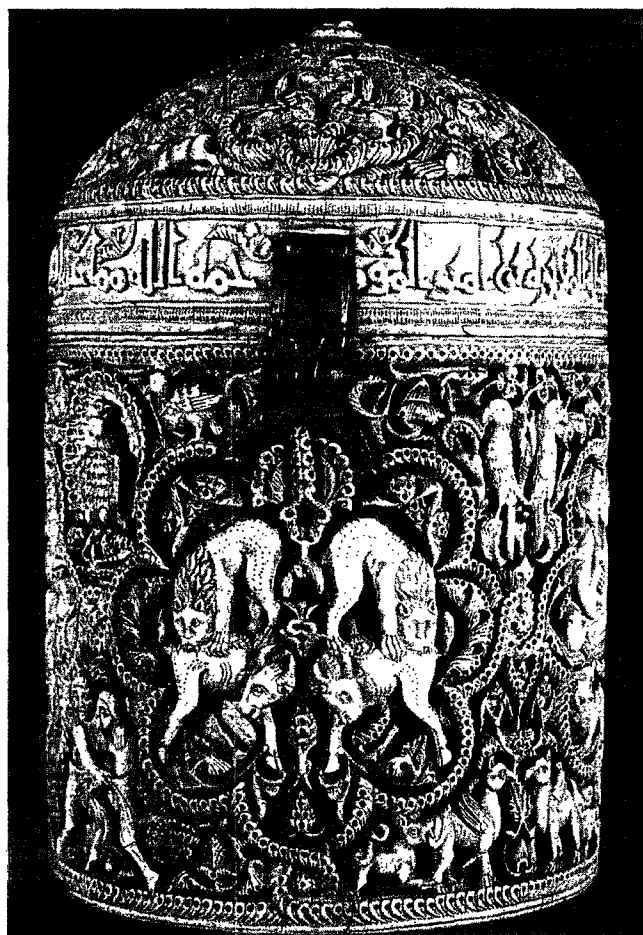


Fig. 7. Pyxis presented to al-Mughira, medallion featuring a lion-bull combat. (Photo: courtesy Walter Denny, Amherst, Mass.)

tle and a branch and sits on a lion throne (fig. 6).<sup>30</sup>

Taking this into account we can see a certain intentional exaggeration in the scene of the pyxis. The figure holding the bottle and branch, which is probably Abd al-Rahman as heir to the throne, receives the iconographic privileges of a ruling caliph despite his youth, revealed only through the absence of beard.<sup>31</sup> This transgression of representational rules was meant to be noticed to stress the security of the succession to the throne. The bold display of al-Hakam's heirs was meant to assert the stability of the dynasty ensured by the caliph's offspring. This concept is complemented and redefined by the second medallion which features the typical motif in royal iconography of strong animals overcoming weaker ones, in this case lions and bulls (fig. 7).

The lion-bull combat is a common motif used for the glorification of royal power; it has a long tradition in political iconography, with well-known occurrences in artistic enterprises related to strong monarchic territorial structures like the Assyrian and the Persian empires.

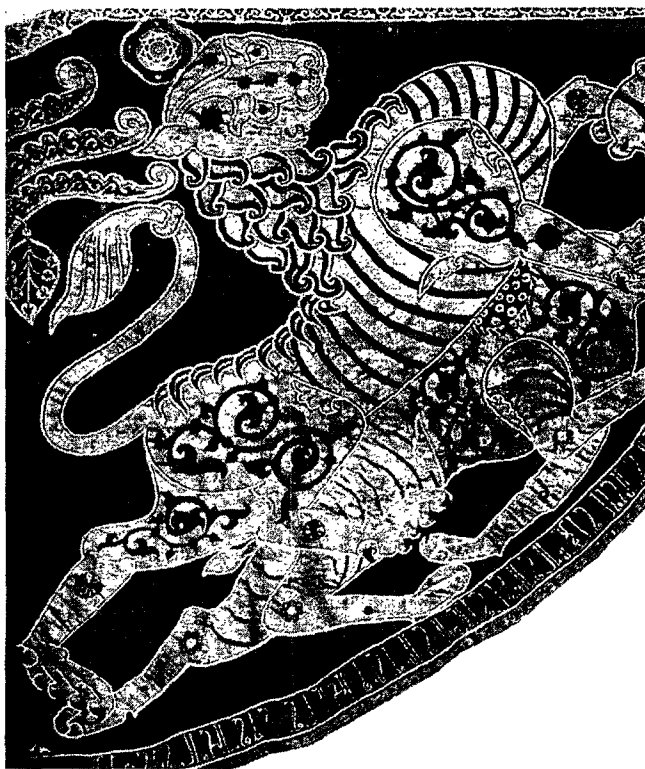


Fig. 8. Mantle of Roger II of Sicily. Side showing a lion attacking a camel. 1133–34. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. (Photo: courtesy Visual Collection, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.)

Ettinghausen, in an article published in 1964, curiously overlooked al-Mughira's pyxis when he surveyed the instances in which a political interpretation could be applied to the emblem of the conquering lion in medieval Islamic art.<sup>32</sup> Two of the examples he discusses, the cloak of Roger II of Sicily (fig. 8) and the main gate of the Great Mosque of Diyarbakir (ancient Amida), both from the twelfth century, can help us define the way in which the motif works in the particular context of al-Mughira's pyxis. The symbol as it appears on the cloak of Roger II of Sicily, dated 548 (1133–34), has a clear political implication as the image of the military power of the Norman ruler and was intended for display at his public appearances. Roger's garment is also an exemplary adaptation of a stock motif to a specific historical context. The choice of camel as the lion's victim seems to represent Roger's conquest of territories formerly under Arab domination.

The lion-bull combat is monumentally displayed twice at the entrance of the Great Mosque of Diyarbakir (fig. 9), where it frames an inscription containing the name of the patron with his caliphal title on both sides of the central arch. In a careful analysis of the inscription and the political history of the dynasties involved in the construction and decoration of the building, van Berchem interpreted the double emblem of the lion slaying a bull as a symbolic representation of the power of the Nisanids, local governors, over the Inalids, their nominal lords whose representative at the time, Amir Mahmud, was kept under the forced guardianship of the Nasanid vizier al-Hasan, the patron of the inscription.<sup>33</sup>

In both examples — Roger's mantle and the Great Mosque of Diyarbakir — the image of the attacking lion expresses the violence on which the execution of political power is founded and, in both cases, the figure of the weaker animal is symbolically charged with a specific identity embedded in a particular historical context.

Although targeting different audiences, the scenes on the mantle and the gate have a clear public character that relates to the primary intention of the motif to show the superiority of the senders of the message over the intended audience or over someone, a domination that the senders want to be acknowledged. In this light, the scene of lions slaying bulls on the al-Mughira pyxis seems at first glance inappropriate as a gift for the caliph's brother, that is, for a recipient who belongs to the social and familial group from where the message originated. The emblem of the lion is displaced from the public space where it assumes its traditional meaning to



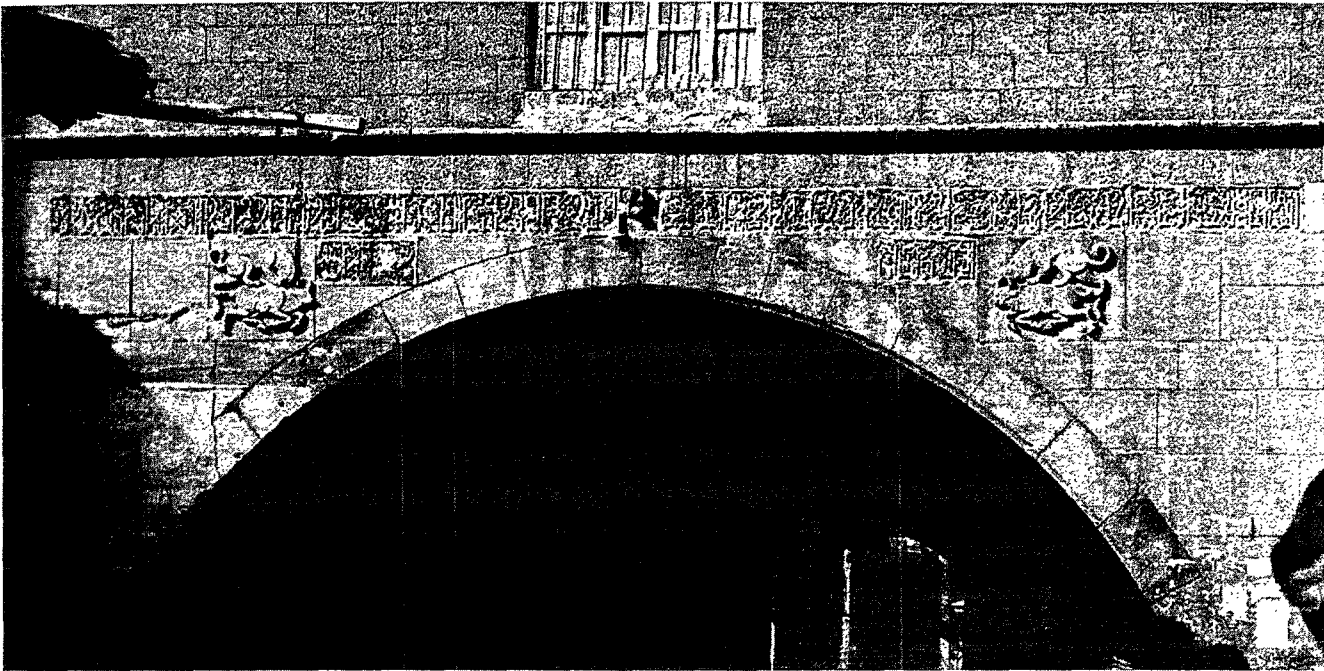


Fig. 9. Diyarbakir. Great Mosque. Inscription on the gate showing lion-bull combat on either side. 12th century. (Photo: from Max van Berchem and J. Strzykowski, *Amida*, p. 67, fig. 24)

the internal environment of the court, thus reenacting in more specific terms its divisive function between the warning sender and the bullied receiver. For this reason the second medallion plays an important function in the semantic definition of the pyxis, giving it a hostile overtone.

As in the two cases above, the general symbolism of the lion-bull combat is realigned in specific terms through its relationship with the rest of the pyxis's program. The symmetrical disposition of the lions establishes a visual parallel with the personages in the adjacent court scene, exploiting the metaphor of the dual function of the ruler in his ceremonial and his military role. The metaphoric connection between lions and princes originates in the internal disposition of the court scene, where each lion in the throne corresponds to each of the caliph's sons.<sup>34</sup>

A further and more subtle implication of the scene lies in the choice of bulls as the lions' victims. Although it was a widely used motif, it is an iconographic choice that can be interpreted in specific terms. In a classification of animals according to their symbolic potential for representing power, a clear division separates lions, eagles, and bulls, as the powerful ones, from animals such as gazelles which are weak.<sup>35</sup> An idea such as "the

stronger the victim the more powerful the victor" might have played a role in the iconographic choice of bulls. However, if we translate the symbolic ranking among strong animals to the political ranking of their respective signifieds, the medallion affirms the hegemony against peers of close status. Considered in the general context of the program of the pyxis we can conclude that this is the intended effect. The first two medallions then form a thematic group that constitutes the first part of the iconographic program.

The next two scenes are the most controversial ones because they do not fit into the general account of royal iconography. Grabar thought they might have "some sort of private significance"<sup>36</sup> and Holod, following this path, mentions the possibility that they could reflect a specific moment in the life of al-Mughira.<sup>37</sup> To be sure, they allude to the caliph's brother, although they do not reflect a particular moment in his real life but in a life that he might have been tempted to live. Moreover, these two scenes do not function apart from the thematic group defined by the first two medallions but in conjunction with them to complete the political program of the pyxis.

Al-Mughira, the younger brother of al-Hakam II, was an obscure character who was supported by some cour-

tiers suspicious of the ability of the caliph to provide an heir capable of assuming the throne. This led Holod to explain the unusual wording of the inscription, where the name of al-Mughira is accompanied by the formula "son of the Commander of the Faithful" — but omits the name of this caliph — "as a gift of affirmation, presented in a humorous, or even ironic, vein" to the ambitious al-Mughira.<sup>38</sup> This insightful idea is not accompanied by a broader examination of the object's images. The imagery of the pyxis, however, is inseparable from the inscription and its understanding is essential to grasp the real dimension of the argument.

This second pair of medallions transmits a single idea enacted in two scenes. For the sake of clarity, let us start with the second (fig. 10). It features three eagles' nests in the upper part. In the center one are four fledglings; in each of the flanking ones is an eagle still hatching eggs. Below, quadrupeds (dogs?) bite two youths to prevent them from stealing the eggs. The eagle is one of the most common emblems of royal power and the ruling caliph. It is especially common in ivory carvings, for example the small box in the Victoria and Albert Museum dedicated to al-Hakam II whose only figural decoration is a group of four heraldic eagles displayed on the lid (fig. 11).<sup>39</sup> This suggests an allegorical scene warning anyone who attempts to break the line of succession.

The adjacent medallion embodies the same idea. It shows two riders picking dates (fig. 12), accompanied by two quadrupeds (wolves?) biting the tails of two birds that apparently are trying to eat the seeds of the palm tree. Birds are a common threat to fruit crops, and several Andalusian agricultural treatises devote special chapters to the techniques available to keep them away.<sup>40</sup> The quadrupeds pulling down the birds here seem to parallel conceptually the quadrupeds in the adjacent medallion, again preventing the destruction of growing seeds. A floral counterpart to the royal symbolism of the eagle would undoubtedly be the palm tree.<sup>41</sup> Besides its symbolic potential as metaphor for royal power and prosperity, the palm tree represents a vegetal analogy for human reproduction which perfectly matches the question of fecundity underlying the program of the pyxis. The date palm is fertilized by cutting off the male flower cluster just before the stamens ripen and then suspending it among the flowers of the female tree.<sup>42</sup>

The circularity of the pyxis causes a self-reproducing message. Once the viewer has contemplated the last medallion, he is led to return to the beginning of the program, this time equipped with the just-acquired



Fig. 10. Pyxis of al-Mughira, scene with two youths stealing eggs. (Photo: courtesy Walter Denny, Amherst, Mass.)

knowledge of the whole that provides the interpretative keys to perceive more accurately the content of its parts. At that very instant the linearity of the message, imposed through the visual preeminence of the medallions, expands in space as the peripheral scenes echo the themes of the main ones setting into motion a conceptual *mise en abîme*. Thus, the pyxis is animated by a constant semantic flux created through the masterful deployment of the combined potentialities of its shape and decoration.

In sum, al-Mughira received a gift that was charged with a sophisticated political message in which a display of power and stability was combined with a warning against any action that would break the royal lineage represented by the two sons of the caliph. Holod's suggestion that this pyxis could be a humorous or even ironic gift has to be explained with more detail. As we will see, irony is in fact essential to revealing al-Mugh-



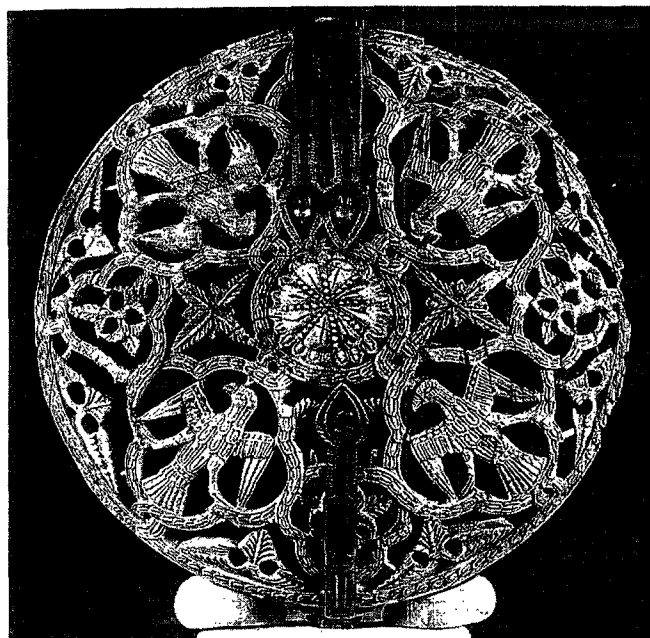


Fig. 11. Ivory box made for al-Hakam II. Ca. 965, Caliphal period. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. (Photo: Victoria and Albert Museum, London/Art Resource, N.Y.)

ira's pyxis in all its semantic complexities. The presence of humor, however, is questionable, especially from the recipient's point of view. The message was actually a serious warning. Years later, when al-Hakam II died, al-Mughira was assassinated by courtiers on the very day of his funeral to preclude any claim to the throne against the young Hisham that al-Mughira might have had.

In stylistic terms, the structuring of the units of the pyxis is comparable to the compositional techniques informing medieval Arabic poetry. We could apply to its analysis the concept of "sectional parallelism" (parallelism between groups of verses), developed in structuralist studies of the medieval *qasida* or panegyric ode.<sup>43</sup> Abu-Deeb has argued that

The units may be related as open, parallel structures, which are fundamentally repetitive — not linguistically, but on the level of the relations they consist of. The open structures, thus, possess the same properties, and the effect is one of intensification and heightening of the vision of the poem.<sup>44</sup>

To see how this statement relates to al-Mughira's pyxis, a structuralist analysis of the literary text behind its imagery is required. The "satiric poem of al-Mughira" is



Fig. 12. Pyxis made for al-Mughira. Medallion featuring a palm tree flanked by two riders. (Photo: courtesy Walter Denny, Amherst, Mass.)

divided into two "gross constituent units" which are in turn each subdivided in two "constituent units."<sup>45</sup> These constituent units relate to each other in a complex symmetric fashion that determines the significance of the other. For instance, the image of the conquering lions establishes a compositional parallelism with the court scene that supports a metaphorical reading of the group. Symmetry also binds the two subdivisions of the second "gross constituent unit." The vegetal and animal allegories show their semantic parallelism through a symmetrical disposition that relates eagle's nests with palm tree and dates, youths stealing eggs with youths picking dates and birds eating seeds, and finally quadrupeds preventing the theft in both scenes.<sup>46</sup>

Al-Mughira's pyxis raises significant issues for the art historian who, unlike the art critic, is compelled to keep

visual interpretations anchored in historical facts. Suspended between the demands of modern aesthetic discourse and the efforts at objectivity demanded by the historical sciences, the art historian has to deal both with the dismissive "gaze" of the representatives of the former and the inquisitorial eye of the latter. If one decides in favor of freedom of vision and theoretical thought, one is at risk of being banished, charged with lack of rigor and leading the field to a nihilistic end. If, on the contrary, one adopts the grave restraints of the hand, the resulting scholarly work will be criticized for being unimaginative, descriptive, and barren. Consequently, with occasional exceptions, medieval art historical scholarship remains cloistered and unable to play a leading role in the current interdisciplinary discourse of the humanities. The unjust restraint of the image to the text, commented upon magisterially by Leo Steinberg in his introductory Norton lecture delivered at Harvard in October 1995, is especially problematic in the case of the Middle Ages where the textual evidence at our disposal is so fragmentary.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, medieval art carries a twofold burden. On the one hand, it is denied analyses undertaken from the recognition of the intrinsic independent potentialities of visual discourse. On the other hand, the scarcity and sometimes mediocrity of the textual evidence to which it is confined provoke naive interpretations.<sup>48</sup>

The al-Mughira pyxis is an exception, both in the sophistication of its visual language and in its well-documented historical context, which allows us to defend its analysis against charges of overinterpretation. The rhetoric of this pyxis creates a tension between concealment and revelation by deploying two principal modes of nonliteral discourse, metaphor and irony.<sup>49</sup> These modes differ in their structure, communicative function, and comprehension demands. In metaphor, similarity rules the relation between what is said and what is meant, while in irony they stand in opposition, "the speaker conveys a negative attitude toward something by professing to have a positive attitude." The primary function of metaphor is to describe or illustrate. The function of irony is "not to describe something in the world, but to *show* something about the speaker . . . to show the speaker's attitude toward something, and that attitude is almost always critical." To understand metaphor one must possess a "theory of matter," i.e., "one must have enough knowledge about the topic and the vehicle domains to discover a similarity between topic and vehicle." What is necessary for irony is a "theory of mind"; it "requires the ability to reason about others'

beliefs and intentions . . . ; mistaking irony for error or deception are the two pitfalls listeners face when confronted with irony."<sup>50</sup>

Al-Mughira's pyxis exploits perfectly the dissimilarity between the demands of metaphor and of irony to convey a serious political warning that would only be understandable to the targeted viewer. While, at the metaphorical level, the ivory box functions as a luxurious gift for the caliph's brother and displays a well-known iconography of courtly life and well-being, at the level of irony, it acquires somber characteristics conveyed by slight variations in the scenes and the inscription. This intended conflation of modes was used not only to stratify audiences but also to create in al-Mughira, the person for whom it was intended, the fictional doubt of his own act of overinterpretation in perceiving the message with an exclusively ironic bias. It is precisely by placing the responsibility of a hostile reading of the pyxis on al-Mughira's subjective perception that the visual warning appears veiled in the rhetoric of political diplomacy, preventing an open reaction on the part of the caliph's brother. With its complex rhetorical elaboration, al-Mughira's pyxis is turned into a secret weapon. It has the power of communicating while at the same time remaining silent about itself.

The extent to which the formulator of the pyxis' program played with al-Mughira's psychological stock of images can be further pursued by returning for a moment to the medallion with the eagles' nests (fig. 10). Its composition is organized in a strictly symmetrical fashion with a central vertical axis dividing the scene in two almost identical halves, a disposition common in textile decoration from where this iconography was probably taken. The result is a scene where the bodies of two men meet at the level of their respective backbones. If we reduce the overall disposition to its main outlines, we obtain a large human figure with open arms in the shape of a cross flanked by two dogs. The associations of such an image were unmistakable for any person in al-Andalus, especially for members of the court and military officers. Crucifixion flanked by dogs (or a dog and a wild boar) was a well-known punishment reserved for the rebels of the caliphate in Islamic Spain.<sup>51</sup> This was the end that awaited al-Mughira if he decided to participate in any revolt against the legitimate succession.<sup>52</sup>

The scene in the medallion constitutes a masterpiece of visual economy and pictorial allusion by synthesizing in one image the illegal action and its punishment, that is, by presenting al-Mughira with the snapshot of his very act of rebellion, through the simile of the youths steal-

ing the eggs from the nests, and its lethal consequences (crucifixion). Artistic virtuosity embraces communicative efficacy because this visual codification of the political warning was a perfect device to make an impact on the mind of a young adult like al-Mughira, who was approximately nineteen years old when he received this gift.

There is a further dimension of meaning in this scene that unfolds at the very instance in which al-Mughira interprets the image through his personal psychological code. We have seen how the caliph's brother finds himself represented in the pyxis's program through an allegory in which a tragic version of his future is revealed. The temporal and teleological overlapping of the scene implies the existence of an observant authority who not only scrutinizes al-Mughira's action but also judges it by announcing the punishment that would have been called for legally. The indirect depiction of the punishment automatically brings about the presence of a judge that is the same subject that "took the picture" of al-Mughira in his act of rebellion. In deciphering the scene al-Mughira loses his subjectivity as ultimate viewer and becomes an object of vision and therefore subject to power. The real first person of the act of viewing the pyxis is thus its iconographer, the one who sees without being seen. The figural scene, as disclosed by al-Mughira, absorbs his subjectivity into a panoptic field in which he feels the presence of the Other imposing his visibility on him and, consequently, demanding submission.<sup>53</sup> We are witnessing, in Bryson's words, "The reversal of the visual field, its peripeteia."<sup>54</sup>

The decentering of the subject implied in the visual discourse of the pyxis defines a particular scopic regime that stands as an example for the interconnection between Sartre's and Lacan's accounts of the reifying power of the gaze.<sup>55</sup> In "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," Norman Bryson outlines the main differences between those two conceptions of the visual field.<sup>56</sup> For Sartre "the intrusion of the other makes the self a spectacle or object in relation to that other: the self is threatened with annihilation by the irruption of alterity on the subject's horizon."<sup>57</sup> With respect to Lacan's conception of vision, illustrated by the famous anecdote of the sardine can, Bryson points out how the instability of the viewing subject depends, "not on the irruption of another personal viewer but the irruption, in the visual field, of the Signifier."<sup>58</sup> Like the sardine can, al-Mughira's pyxis constitutes an inanimate signifier but, unlike Lacan's example, it decenters the subject by introducing

in the viewer's mind the image of a personal intruder. It is as if the omniscient visitor of Sartre's park undergoes a process of objectification through the unexpected manifestation of a second subject looking out at him from a gigantic screen which was blank when he first scanned the objects furnishing the park.

I have so far argued that al-Mughira's understanding of the scene constituted a critical moment marking an inversion of the way he perceived his role within the social-political context of the court. He slid down from the upper registers of the power structure, where he was the pivotal figure in a secret political game surrounding the caliph's succession, to the condition of usual suspect with a pending death sentence. However, this is not the only way in which al-Mughira was compelled to reinterpret himself through the pyxis's fiction. His fall from power came along with a gender inversion of his role in the male-dominated microcosm of the court. The pyxis imposes a gendered identity onto its intended viewer through the conflation of two fields of meaning associated with this type of object: its typological relation to other ivory boxes created as gifts to be exchanged from male patrons to female recipients, and its iconographic program that imposed on al-Mughira an objectifying "male" gaze.<sup>59</sup> Obliging al-Mughira to reread himself as female was another rhetorical device of the box's imagery to show him the role he ought to play at court. He was supposed to enjoy his comfortable life as a member of the royal family, as noble women did, and leave to others the execution of political power. The pyxis therefore constructs its interpreter by imposing on him not only a mode of viewing but also a mode of being.

The pyxis that is today in the Louvre is an anonymous work, but the same object in al-Mughira's hands was not. We have seen how, when translating its visual program into words, a powerful subject takes center stage displacing al-Mughira to the position of object in the dynamics of viewing the pyxis. A consideration of the date of the box's manufacture is fundamental to answering two further questions: who was the omniscient subject who created this iconographic program, and why was it commissioned in that particular year?

The answer to the first question leads us to the gestation of the political forces that eventually were to rule the caliphate until its fall. The ideology of the pyxis might have originated from a faction of triangular structure with the princess Subh and the chamberlain al-Mushafi at its base, and a newcomer, Ibn Abi Amir, at its

apex. Ibn Abi Amir's rise to power from the lower levels of the bureaucracy to the dictatorship of al-Andalus has been described in detail by historians, who present the future al-Mansur as a master of political strategy. His solid education in law, literature, and rhetoric together with his charming personality and good looks helped him to pursue step by step an ambitious program to gain personal power that seems to have been defined at an early date.<sup>60</sup> With the support of Subh and al-Mushafi he was appointed on 23 February 967 as administrator and guardian of the heir Abd al-Rahman and seven months later as director of the mint.<sup>61</sup> These positions earned him the hostility of the political faction backing al-Mughira and he probably soon realized that his fate was linked to the succession of one of the caliph's sons. His appointment as director of the mint in 967, attested by the presence of his name on coins, could also have provided him with influence over other court workshops of Madinat al-Zahra, including the one in which this pyxis was designed several months later.<sup>62</sup>

Al-Mansur's commissioning of luxury objects to gain support at court by distributing presents is frequently mentioned in the sources. For instance, al-Maqqari relates,

It was also during his occupation of that office [director of the mint] that Al-mansur caused a palace of silver to be wrought, which he presented to Sobha. It was carried to the dwelling of that princess on the heads of several men; and she was so pleased with the present that from that day forward she became his patron, and that she again introduced him to the presence of her lord and master, Al-hakem, who spoke to his courtiers about it, and explained, "By Allah! this youth (meaning Al-mansur) has won the hearts and affections of our women with his presents."<sup>63</sup>

The trio of Subh, al-Mushafi, and al-Mansur fulfilled the menace promised to al-Mughira in the gift of the pyxis. When al-Hakan II died in 976, al-Mushafi sent al-Mansur to al-Mughira's house, where he was assassinated by the vizier. The historian al-Maqqari recounts two different versions of these events as transmitted by his two sources, Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Bassam, but both agree that al-Mansur, with his sophisticated schemes to seize power, played a leading role in the succession of Hisham.<sup>64</sup>

When the eleven-year-old Hisham became caliph, he appointed al-Mushafi as *hajib* and Ibn Amir as vizier, and they were de facto the rulers of al-Andalus. The subsequent schemes devised by al-Mansur to dominate the caliphate by eliminating his former accomplices one by

one is worth mentioning briefly to illustrate the mindset from which the pyxis could have originated. First al-Mansur, in order to seize the post of *hajib*, accused al-Mushafi of malfeasance and had him imprisoned in 978, where he was eventually killed. Hisham II, who was obliged to delegate the power formally to the new prime minister, was confined to the palace of Madinat al-Zahra and the center of the government passed to Madinat al-Zahira, the new residence built by al-Mansur. Subh seems to have realized too late the extent of al-Mansur's unbounded ambition and became the victim of the vizier's tactics of turning Hisham against her. Paralleling these maneuvers behind the scenes at court, al-Mansur continued to deploy the arts to gain political support outside. He commissioned a new expansion of the Great Mosque of Córdoba (987). If we assume that the idea of the pyxis was formed in the Machiavellian mind of al-Mansur, its manufacture in 968 can be explained by the appointment of al-Mansur as the guardian of the heir and to the direction of the mint in or around that year.<sup>65</sup>

Al-Mughira's pyxis is an example of how figurative iconography on luxury portable objects functioned as a subtle instrument of political manipulation. These visual programs constitute a parallel development to courtly poetry, the chief form of publicity. If one classifies caliphal ivory boxes according to their conceptual significance one can see a clear concordance with poetic genres. A poetry for amusement, nature poetry for instance, with its sophisticated descriptions has its reflection in virtuous designs on vegetal boxes. Satirical poems, used as a vehicle for attacks against the poet's or his patron's enemies, find their visual counterpart in al-Mughira's pyxis.<sup>66</sup> Finally courtly panegyric, the most widely developed genre, is paralleled by a similarly large number of ivory caskets decorated with the typical motifs of royal iconography.<sup>67</sup>

A pyxis in the Victoria and Albert Museum made in 969–70 (dated A.H. 359) for Ziyad ibn Aflah, the prefect of police under al-Hakam II, probably belongs to this last genre (fig. 13).<sup>68</sup> The decoration consists of three interlacing multilobed medallions featuring different images of authority taken from Sasanian prototypes. Beckwith suggests that they represent Ziyad himself in three different activities, administering justice, hawking, and traveling in state.<sup>69</sup> If this is so, he would be using the object to promote himself and imbue his image with an aristocratic status to back his aspirations at court.

Ziyad was indeed a rather ambitious character. He was also involved in the courtly intrigues over the succession



Fig. 13. Pyxis made for Ziyad ibn Aflah. 969–70, Caliphal period. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. (Photo: from Ernst Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, pl. XIX, no. 32b)

to the throne, and belonged to the faction led by al-Mushafi and al-Mansur that decided to execute al-Mughira.<sup>70</sup> In 979, after al-Mushafi's death, and with the purpose of eliminating the uncontrolled power of al-Mansur in the caliphate, some of the friends of the former *hajib* joined the remaining members of the party who had plotted to put al-Mughira on the throne and tried to assassinate Hisham II and replace him with another grandson of Abd al-Rahman III, Abd al-Rahman ibn Ubaid Allah. Ziyad was involved in the preparations for this coup and helped the conspirators, but when he heard that the attempt to kill the caliph had failed, he ran to the palace pretending ignorance of the rebellion.

To allay suspicion he eagerly demanded the severest penalty for the rebels. The leaders of the conspiracy were crucified, suffering the torture al-Mughira would have undergone several years earlier, if he had attempted a similar action against Hisham.<sup>71</sup>

In the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries the downfall of the caliphate and growing military pressure from the Christian kingdoms meant that most of these objects fell into Christian hands and underwent a conceptual redefinition. From the political microcosm of the caliphal court they moved to the sacred environment of the church treasuries where they were used as reliquaries. In the absence of its original audience, the relation between imagery's literary and material dimension changed. The specific addressee by and for whom the forms were enacted into discourse was no longer present and the new owners read them according to a very different visual and intellectual experience. Although the formal value of the piece, in both its material and technical excellence, surpassed its semantic aspects in the eyes of the Christians, the loss of the original text behind the images was counteracted by the acquisition of a new one. Visual misinterpretation, one of the most productive aspects of cultural interaction in fostering the adoption and recycling of images through different artistic traditions, played a fundamental role in this process.

Avinoam Shalem writes of two ivory caskets of the Cuenca workshop:

The Islamic objects in the church treasuries of medieval Spain are perhaps best understood as trophies of war. In contrast to the lands beyond the Alps, where Islamic objects enjoyed the aura of exotic vessels from the Holy Lands, though they were sometimes brought by knights who took the cross and fought against the infidels, the lasting wars in Spain and the continuing hope of pushing the Muslim invaders southward created a situation in which almost every looted object was regarded by the Christians as a further symbol of the liberation of the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>72</sup>

The idea that Islamic objects captured by Christians in the course of military campaigns made their way into church treasuries as symbols of the victory over Islam, which Shalem convincingly documents for the examples he studies, needs to be clarified to avoid overlooking the labyrinthine complexities of medieval Spain.

The reception of these objects has to be examined within the broader context of the role of Islamic culture in Christian Spain and specifically the presence of

Islamic art beyond the boundaries of al-Andalus. As María Rosa Menocal writes:

Warfare, actual or figurative, does not exist equally at all levels of culture, and ideological and political warfare is in many cases accompanied by a very different, more adaptive relationship in intellectual and other cultural arenas . . . ideological, political, or military conflict necessarily precludes important interaction at other levels . . . the acceptance of such material benefits or art forms may well proceed in the face of even quite hostile political and ideological differences.<sup>73</sup>

The cultural and economic superiority of al-Andalus was commonly acknowledged, and its material products were coveted. The artistic vocabulary of the enemy was adopted almost without resistance and the most ambitious architectural enterprises undertaken in Christian Spain in the tenth and first half of the eleventh centuries bear evident traces of this interchange.<sup>74</sup> Christian sacred environments were ornamented with Islamic objects, whether made specifically for Christians or acquired by other means. An instance of the first case is the parochial cross of San Millán de la Cogolla, lavishly decorated with a deeply cut inhabited rinceaux carved in all probability by Muslim artists (fig. 14).<sup>75</sup> Islamic textiles were used to line the interior of reliquaries containing the remains of some of the principal saints of Christian Spain, including Saint Pelagius,<sup>76</sup> Saint Isidore in León,<sup>77</sup> and San Millán de la Cogolla.<sup>78</sup> As these examples demonstrate, a recurrent pattern in the reception of Islamic objects in Christian Spain, whether acquired by peaceful means or from warfare, was their use as relic containers, both because they were obviously suited for the purpose and because their recognized material and aesthetic value was unmatched by any local production.

After the fall of the caliphate, Christian Spain was inundated by Islamic luxury products taken as tribute from the Taifa kingdoms or as gifts when peace treaties were contracted between Christians and Muslims.<sup>79</sup> Were these objects considered symbols of the liberation of the peninsula? And if not, was the presence in a church of an ivory casket acquired through peaceful means perceived differently from one taken as booty in a military campaign? In some cases their presence was more a result of admiration than appropriation. They could be prestigious products without being symbols of triumph over the Islamic enemy. It is precisely because Islamic artistic forms were part of the daily environment in Christian Spain that newly arrived Muslim objects did not absorb any specific ideological implication and were assimilated into an already familiar stock of images.

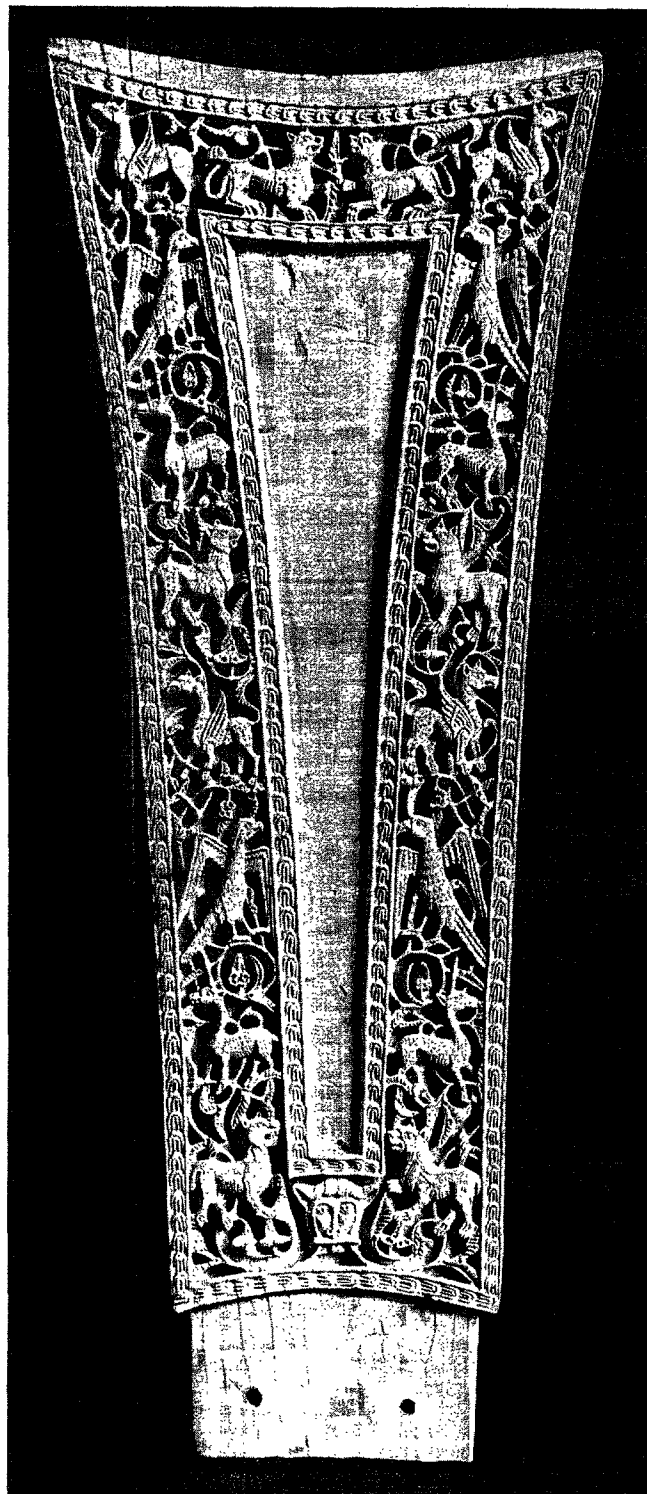


Fig. 14. Arm of the processional cross of San Millán de la Cogolla. Late 10th century. Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid. (Photo: courtesy of Arxiu Mas, Barcelona)



For an Islamic object to be considered a symbol of victory over Islam required two conditions that were present in almost all of Christendom except early medieval Spain: a simplistic perception of Muslim civilization as a wicked monolithic entity, and the vision of Islamic art as an alien form. Those places where Islamic art was exclusively associated with Islamic religion and therefore pregnant with ideological implications — that is, regions where contact with Muslims was mainly in the context of a crusade — would be more likely to regard objects of booty as hostages than as guests.<sup>80</sup> Therefore the meaning attached to Islamic objects in Christian kingdoms can only be studied thoroughly on an individual basis, because neither Christian Spain nor al-Andalus after the fall of the caliphate was homogeneous in structure, and many kinds of interactions were at work between them.<sup>81</sup>

The pyxis of Sayf al-Dawla in the treasury of the cathedral of Braga is a case in point and a remarkable metaphor for medieval Spain.<sup>82</sup> It contains, and probably has since the Middle Ages, a chalice and paten which is strictly contemporary (fig. 15). The inscription around the lid of the pyxis reads:

In the name of God. Blessings from God, prosperity and happiness to the hajib Sayf al-Dawla, may God increase his glory. From among what was ordered to be made under the supervision of the chief page [Zuhayr ibn Muhammad] al-Amiri.<sup>83</sup>

Holod concluded from this inscription that the pyxis is "datable to the period between 1004, when the hajib Abd al-Malik received the title Sayf al-Dawla, and 1007 . . . when he received the additional title al-Muzaffar, or 1008 . . . when he died in battle."<sup>84</sup> The base of the chalice bears another inscription mentioning as donors the Portuguese count Mendo Gonçalves and his wife Toda which permits us to date the piece before 1008, the year Don Mendo died.<sup>85</sup> Barbara Drake and Charles T. Little, observing the perfect correspondence between the small size of the chalice and paten and the interior space of the pyxis, have suggested that the ivory could have been obtained by Don Mendo during a campaign against the Muslims and then donated to the church of Braga together with the chalice and paten that were made to fit inside.<sup>86</sup> Although according to some late sources Don Mendo's father, Count Gonçalo Mendes, died fighting against al-Mansur's raid of Santiago de Compostela, ca. 997, and, therefore, hostility between his son and al-Mansur's son Abd al-Malik could be likely, other more reliable sources present Count Gonçalo as a



Fig. 15. Pyxis of Sayf al-Dawla with chalice and paten. Ca. 1004–8, Caliphal period. Treasury of Braga Cathedral.

traitor who helped the Muslims in exchange for territorial power.<sup>87</sup> In any case, the ambiguous relationship between Count Gonçalo and the Muslims was continued by his son in terms that are important for defining the role of the Braga casket. A close look at the historical encounters between the personages whose names appear on these objects furnish convincing reasons to think that the pyxis reached Christian hands as the result of peaceful diplomatic relations in commemoration of a particular historical event.<sup>88</sup>

The political career of Mendo Gonçalves in the Leonese kingdom started when he was nominated *alferez* of King Vermudo II (r. 981–99), who also entrusted him with the education of his son and heir Alfonso. When Vermudo II died in 999, Count Mendo played a decisive role in the coronation of Alfonso V, who was only five years old at the time he was crowned. As his regent Mendo became the virtual ruler, a position not unlike that held in Córdoba by Abd al-Malik when he replaced his father al-Mansur as *hajib* of the caliph Hisham II in 1002. From that time on, several circumstances prompted political relations between the two leaders. Mendo signed a treaty of alliance with Abd al-Malik that provided Leonese and Castilian participation in a campaign against Catalonia in 1003.<sup>89</sup> A year later Abd al-Malik returned the favor when the count of Castile Sancho García requested his rights over the tutelage of the young Alfonso V of León, his nephew. Abd al-Malik was nominated arbiter and sent the qadi of the Mozarabs of Córdoba, Asbag b. Abd Allah b. Nabil, to

León to resolve the case in favor of Don Mendo.<sup>90</sup>

This is the particular historical juncture in which Serafin Moralejo sees the possibility of an interchange of gifts of which the ivory pyxis could well have been one. Writes Moralejo:

Thus I am tempted to imagine the qadi of the Cordoban mozarabs, Asbag b. Nabil, presenting Mendo Gonçalves with the ivory box, on behalf of Abd al-Malik. Assumed as a good-will gift, it was a bitter one indeed and a warning too, since the title of Sayf al-Dawla carved on its lid commemorated the raid the *hajib* had launched on León one year earlier. Actually, León was to experience a further Muslim attack in the following year.<sup>91</sup>

As Holod noted, the imagery on the pyxis is peaceful: an arcade of six horseshoe-shaped arches inhabited by paired animals, birds, and humans feasting and harvesting, and she concludes that "it could have been made for a specific personal celebration, such as a marriage, or an occasion of a calendrical observance such as a summer or fall harvest festival."<sup>92</sup> That could in fact have been the primary function of the pyxis in its Cordoban environment, but this iconography of peace and well being also fits perfectly with the idea of the box as a diplomatic gift. Although, in this case, intentionality is difficult to define, one could even say that the decoration of the pyxis is the perfect imagery a Mozarab of Córdoba like Asbag b. Nabil could have ordered in the court workshops with his fellow Christian of the north in mind. Most of the scenes filling the space under the horseshoe-shaped arches consist of pairs of birds eating fruit, a widespread Christian motif with eucharistic connotations constantly reproduced from paleochristian times and especially common in Visigothic art (fig. 16).

In any case, in Christian hands the visual program of the pyxis acquired new life. The new function of the ivory box and the idea of making the chalice and paten could have been suggested by its Muslim iconography interpreted in Christian terms as a perfect decorative envelope for liturgical objects involved in the ritual of the Eucharist. It seems that even the craftsman responsible for the chalice sought a certain degree of ornamental affinity between his work and its intended container by choosing those motifs available in his visual idiom that were also present on the ivory box. The birds and quadrupeds holding sprays that inhabit the small roundels located above the arches in the pyxis become the main decorative feature on the chalice expressed in Visigothic style.

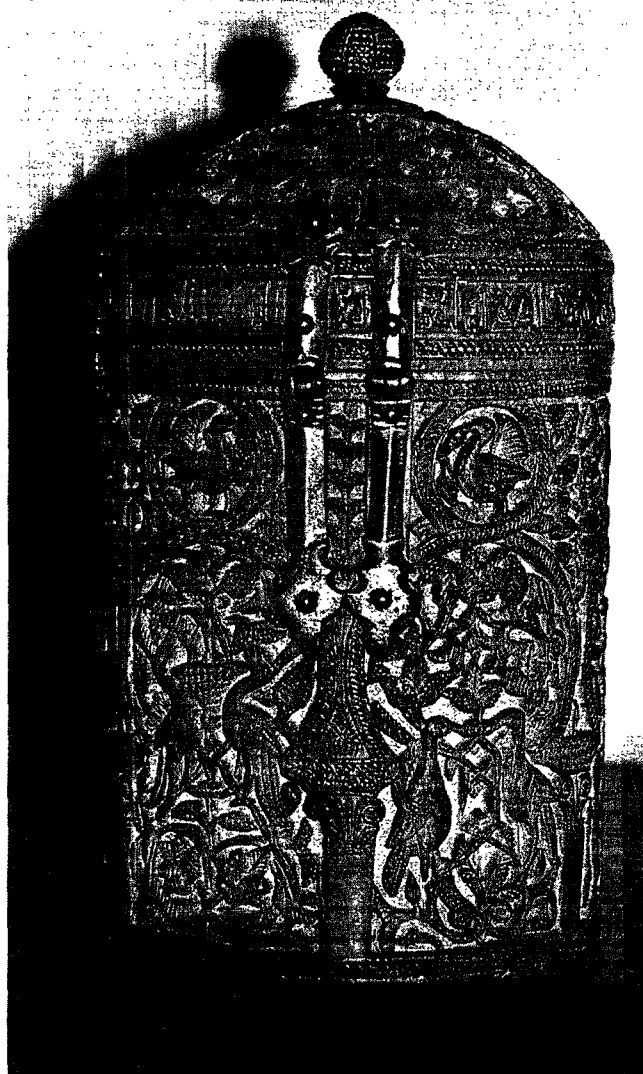


Fig. 16. Pyxis of Sayf al-Dawla, side showing birds eating.

If we visualize this essay as an imaginary pyxis at which one looks by turning it around and reading successively its surface decoration, each scene answering an aspect announced in the introductory remarks and reaching at the end a comprehensive picture that links them all, the Braga casket would be its last medallion. With it we have completed a program to illustrate the basic idea of the singularity of portable objects, a characteristic they acquire, if not in all cases at the moment of their creation, at least by their reception and by how they function in a particular place and at a particular time.

The organization of ivory boxes along classificatory

lines drawn from literary genres and the reading of their iconographic programs in semiological terms appear natural in the case of Islamic culture where verbal communication was the main vehicle for the articulation of thought. The language of power, both celebratory and military, rhetorically developed by the poets under the caliph's patronage, also informed the creation of a visual language that combined the iconographic vocabulary received from the East in a new way. The typology of portable ivory caskets, which had an important presence in diplomatic relations with foreign countries or inside the court, underwent in the central years of the caliphate a conceptual redefinition that involved a conscious exploitation of their potential as bearers of political messages. These objects played an active role in the characterization of the visual field within which personal and political relations between members of the court were determined. As tokens of vision, they participated in the reflection and refraction of the lines of sight that defined power and gender relations among the courtly elite.

This development coincided with a moment of artistic flowering exemplified by large-scale projects like the palace at Madinat al-Zahra and the expansion of the Great Mosque of Córdoba. The workshops founded around these architectural enterprises fostered the development of craftsmen and made possible the adaptation of imported forms to the stylistic preferences and functional needs of the Cordoban aristocracy. This special artistic environment determined stylistically the character of ivory boxes at different levels according to a clear functional separation along gender lines. When intended for female owners the ornament of the ivory containers consisted almost exclusively of vegetal motifs whose connotation of fertility was appropriate for the events in which those objects played their role — marriage and childbirth.<sup>93</sup> Figural iconography was reserved for the configuration of political messages either for public display or as a subtle means to further political affairs among the ruling elites. The construction of an individual message out of conventional iconographic motifs was attained by deploying devices such as minimal but significant variations in a given motif, the use of inscription, or the grouping of scenes that provide an interpretative key for the other. At a formal level the special carving technique of pieces like the al-Mughira pyxis reflects the influences of antique models, readily available where the craftsmen were working; for example, a considerable number of Roman sculptures, mainly sarcophagi featuring stone relief decoration,

were used for the embellishment of the gardens of Madinat al-Zahra.<sup>94</sup>

This conclusion, by definition and although necessary, reduces the ivory caskets to a closed interpretation which they defy. Their interpretation, by contrast, is open and continues to expand — a result of their circular narratives as well as of their portability and changing contexts. Reading as a perpetual process has been most eloquently put in words by Paul de Man:

... the temporal factor, so persistently forgotten, should remind us that the form is never anything but a process on the way to its completion. The completed form never exists as a concrete aspect of the work that could coincide with the sensorial or semantic dimension of the language. It is constituted in the mind of the interpreter as the work discloses itself in response to his questioning. But this dialogue between work and interpreter is endless. The hermeneutic understanding is always, by its very nature, lagging behind: to understand something is to realize that one had always known it, but, at the same time, to face the mystery of its hidden knowledge.<sup>95</sup>

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## NOTES

*Author's note:* This article is a revised version of a paper presented in a proseminar on early Islamic painting and the portable arts (690–1250), taught by Professor Eva R. Hoffman in the fall of 1995 at Harvard University. I acknowledge with gratitude Professor Hoffman's encouragement and support. I would also like to thank professors Gülru Necipoğlu, Irene J. Winter, and David Roxburgh for reading early drafts and offering valuable suggestions. I have also profited from conversations with fellow graduate students, especially Christine Mehring and David Drogin. I also owe thanks to the canons of the cathedral of Braga for permission to study and photograph the ivory pyxis preserved in the museum. I am especially grateful to Professor Serafin Moralejo for providing essential information and support.

1. Susan Stewart, *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, paperback ed. (Durham and London, 1993), p.151.
2. Oleg Grabar first took a fresh look at the almost stagnant subject of these caskets from al-Andalus in his essay "Two Paradoxes in the Islamic Art of the Spanish Peninsula," in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Leiden, 1992), pp.583–91. In this essay he points to "two peculiarities of these ivories which cannot be explained, at least within our present scholarship capabilities, in terms of a wider Muslim culture." The first one is the strong three-dimensional effect of the deeply carved relief decoration of some caskets like the al-Mughira pyxis, about which Grabar concludes, "it is likely in fact that some antique model influenced the patron or arti-

- sans of these objects, but it is difficult to imagine how and why such an impression would have been sought." The second peculiarity, "even more unsettling" for the scholar, refers to the iconography and leads him to infer that "it is . . . remarkable that these scenes using personages in a narrative context occur in Spain nearly a century and a half before they become common in Egypt and the rest of the Islamic world. But even more remarkable is the fact that, while some of the representations would eventually become fairly common in Islamic art, most of them are unique. We are thus faced with the strange paradox of being unable to explain images which are easy to describe." By calling attention to the defining characteristics of the Spanish ivories, Grabar neatly sets them against the background of Islamic courtly portable art and shows a more secure way to approach their study. Here I will address some of the questions posed by him and provide an epistemological model of interpretation, building on Grabar's statement that these ivories constitute "a rather unique group of objects reflecting some uniquely local phenomena" (ibid., pp. 586–87).
3. On al-Hakam's reign, see R. Dozy, *Histoire des musulmans d'Espagne jusqu'à la conquête de l'Andalousie par les Almoravides (711–1110)*, rev. ed., E. Lévi-Provençal, 3 vols. (Leiden, 1932), 2: 176–99; E. Lévi-Provençal, *De la conquête à la chute du califat de Cordoue (710–1031 J.C.)*. *Histoire de l'Espagne musulmane*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1944), pp. 391–409, esp. 391, n.1, for a list of Arabic sources; Ibn Idhari al-Marrakushi, *Histoire de l'Afrique et de l'Espagne intitulée Al-Bayano'l-Mogrib*, trans. and annot. E. Fagnan, 2 vols. (Algiers, 1904), 2: 384–418, 427–29; Shihab al-Din Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Maqqari, *The History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*, extracted from the *Nafh al-tib min ghusn al-Andalus al-ratib* and trans. Pascual de Gayangos, 2 vols. (London, 1840–43), vol. 2 (1843), pp. 156–98.
  4. On al-Hakam's homosexuality, see E. Lévi Provençal, *De la conquête à la chute du califat de Cordoue*, p. 395, n. 2. Lévi Provençal mentions the reference in al-Maqqari about al-Hakam's preference for boys in the years preceding his accession to the throne. Only after becoming caliph did the need for a heir prompt heterosexual relations. The fact that early Islamic society accepted male homoeroticism without precluding parallel heterosexual relationships makes significant the allusion in the sources to al-Hakam's sexual inclinations, because it meant that they exceeded common homoerotic practices. For a survey of the role of male homoeroticism in Hispano-Muslim society and its pervasive reflection in love poetry, see the often revised but still indispensable study by John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago and London, 1980), pp. 194–200.
  5. Ibn Idhari, *Histoire de l'Afrique*, p. 389. See also H. Pérès, *La poésie andalouse en arabe classique au XI<sup>ème</sup> siècle: ses aspects généraux et sa valeur documentaire* (Paris, 1937), pp. 293–94. The scholar refers to the celebration of childbirth in poetic compositions of good wishes which also performed a protective function against bad influences, a function comparable to the amulets bestowed on the newborn child.
  6. For this casket, see Ernst Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen, VII–XIII. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1971), cat. no. 22, with an Arabic transcription of the inscription; John Beckwith, *Caskets from Cordoba* (London, 1960), pp. 10–13, from where the translation of the inscription has been quoted.
  7. See Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, cat. no. 23.
  8. Ibid., cat. no. 24.
  9. For a discussion of the term, see E. Lévi-Provençal, *Inscriptions arabes d'Espagne* (Paris and Leiden, 1931), pp. 186–87, no. 196.
  10. See Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, cat. no. 19.
  11. Ibid., cat. nos. 20, 21. For a discussion of the problem of the identification of this daughter (or these daughters) of Abd al-Rahman, attested only through the inscription on these ivory containers, see Renata Holod's commentary in *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Jerrilynn D. Dodds (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), cat. no. 1.
  12. Ibid.
  13. For instance, see Erica Cruikshank Dodd, "The Image of the Word: Notes on the Religious Iconography of Islam," *Berytus* 18 (1969): 35–79, esp. 48–61.
  14. Pérès, *La poésie andalouse*, pp. 115–219. Pérès, however, exaggerates the degree to which Andalusian nature poetry differs from that written in the rest of the Islamic world. For a study of the different semantic fields within which nature is invoked in the poetry of al-Andalus, see Werner Schmidt, *Die Natur in der Dichtung der Andalus-Araber* (Kiel, 1971).
  15. Pérès, *La poésie andalouse*, pp. 113–19. Pérès also points out that the attribute of Spain as the earthly paradise had its origins in earlier popular traditions and was taken up later by Christian kings like Alfonso the Learned, who includes the motif in his *Primera Cronica General de España*, see ibid., esp. 117, n. 2.
  16. The naturalistic depiction of floral and vegetal motifs in Spanish caliphal art, in contrast with the clear tendency towards abstraction in the rest of the Islamic world, probably has a conscious political connotation. The Umayyad dynasty of Spain regarded itself as the legitimate heir of the founders of the Islamic empire who were swept away by the Abbasids. Although Abbasid bureaucratic, cultural, and architectural models were emulated in an attempt to elevate the Andalusian rulers to a status comparable to those of Baghdad, the re-creation of the lost Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus was also conveyed visually. Aside from architectural forms, a distinctive aspect of Umayyad art are the wall decorations with naturalistic vegetal motifs of Hellenistic origin which mirror similar developments in Christian art of the iconoclastic period, such as the Byzantine mosaics of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem (see Dodd, "The Image of the Word," p. 50). A better understanding of the ideological content of the visual vocabulary informing the main artistic and architectonic commissions of the caliphs of al-Andalus has to take into account a conflation of the artistic idea of "paradise lost" with the physical reality of "paradise regained." In most of the eastern Umayyad palaces vegetal decoration acquired its political and religious meaning by exploiting the dramatic contrast between the artistic garden surrounding the caliph and the otherwise dry natural environment. Art and nature poetry extolled the joy of re-creating the scarce and therefore highly valued gifts of fertility of the land, deriving its forms, in the case of wall decoration, from widespread artistic models in the Middle East such as Hellenistic, late Roman, or Sasanian vegetal imagery. The reception of these models in al-Andalus had two important consequences: first, the consideration of the luscious nature of the new land as the material realization of the ideal conception of paradise, observed only through artistic re-creations in the eastern world (hence the early tradition of the application of this image for Spain), and second, the new life that artistic

- and poetic motifs of eastern origin achieved in al-Andalus by the inspiration derived from the direct experience of nature. The ideological compound of these artistic developments in the case of courtly poetry had its parallel in architectural decoration. The vegetal reliefs lining the main rooms of Madinat al-Zahra reminded every visitor from the east of the main asset legitimizing the newly achieved caliphal status of the Cordoban rulers, that is, their direct relation with the first Umayyads and the divine sanction of the transfer of the caliphal see to al-Andalus, by presenting the land as the fulfillment of the promised delights of paradise referred to in the Qur'an. For a study of the theological and political implications of naturalism versus abstraction in medieval Islamic architectural decoration, see Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (Santa Monica, Calif., 1995), pp. 91–109, esp. 101–2 for references to the Spanish Umayyads.
17. For the characteristics of Andalusian nature poetry and the aesthetic conception of poetic descriptions in Arabic literature, see Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "Nature Poetry in al-Andalus and the Rise of Ibn Khafaja," in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, pp. 367–97. The author mentions how the *nawriyyat* (poems describing flowers), *rawdiyyat* (poems describing gardens and lovely scenery) and *al-rabiyyat* (poems describing the spring season) constituted an important genre in al-Andalus where it enjoyed official patronage. Her analysis of the etiology of this poetry and its reception can be applied in several respects to the vegetal relief decoration in the art of al-Andalus. The stylized literary description of vegetal environments targeting the reader's visual imagination seems to fulfill the same range of aesthetic needs that encourages the development of highly elaborate vegetal relief decoration. Literary scholars like Jayyusi often refer to this poetry as a process of chiseling images, acknowledging its visual dimension. An indispensable source for the study of portable objects and the complex implications of the discourse of gift-giving in medieval Islamic civilization is "The Book of Gifts and Rarities" (*Kitāb al-Hādāya wa al-Tuhaf*) preserved in a fifteenth-century compilation that includes material from an eleventh-century manuscript. One of its stories informs us of several gifts presented by the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61) to his wife Qabihah when she gave birth to a girl. On this occasion, the caliph is reported to have said, "If it escaped me to convey my love for you at Abu Abd-Allah's [al-Mutazz] birth, I shall not fail to do so at the birth of Umm Abd-Allah" (Ghada al-Hijawi al-Qaddumi, trans., *Book of Gifts and Rarities (Kitāb al-Hādāya wa al-Tuhaf)* [Cambridge, Mass., 1996], p. 79).
  18. The production of luxury objects as presents for women on special occasions seems to have a parallel celebratory significance to poetic composition accompanying the main events in the life of the women of the court such as marriage or childbirth. Both media, visual and literary, merged in several instances in which ivory boxes bore inscriptions of love poems. This is the case of several ivory caskets from Sicily dated to the twelfth century, for instance a rectangular box in the Musée de Cluny in Paris which has an Arabic inscription around the rim of the cover reading, "Associate with him whom thou lovest and disregard the words of the jealous, for the jealous is never a help in the case of love / The Merciful has never created a better scene than that of two lovers upon a single bed" (P.B. Cott, *Siculo-Arabic Ivories* [Princeton, 1939], pp. 25, 36, cat. no. 37). Because of the numerous inscriptions where love poems alternate with wishes for happiness and well-being, Cott concludes that many of these pieces were intended to serve as bridal chests (ibid., p. 2, no. 6). For this aspect, see also R. Pinder-Wilson, "Adj," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 1: 200–203, esp. 201.
  19. See Pérès, *La poésie andalouse*, pp. 324, n. 4, and 328, where the scholar also translates a verse by the Andalusian poet Ibn Baquī comparing a woman to an ivory statue.
  20. W. Caskel, *Arabic Inscriptions in the Collection of the Hispanic Society of America* (New York, 1936), pp. 35–36. Quoted in Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 650–1250* (New Haven and London, 1987; rpt. 1994), p. 151. On this pyxis, see Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, cat. no. 28.
  21. On this casket, see mainly Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, cat. no. 31; and *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, cat. no. 3.
  22. Ettinghausen and Grabar, *Art and Architecture of Islam*, p. 151.
  23. Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven and London, 1987), p. 166.
  24. Ettinghausen and Grabar, *Art and Architecture of Islam*, p. 151.
  25. According to the present position of the lid, the beginning of the inscription corresponds to the medallion with the eagles' nests on the body of the pyxis. However, this is not the original arrangement because the hinge and clasp that cover part of the inscription are later additions. The way the inscription runs does not allow room for a hinge. I suggest that the beginning of the inscription was originally located above the medallion with the court scene. With this arrangement the formal and iconographic correspondences between the medallions on the lid and those on the body of the pyxis are better explained. The court scene would be axially related to the medallion with confronted gazelles on the lid; the lions killing bulls are echoed by the medallion with addorsed lions on the lid; the scene of riders picking dates, where birds are involved in the action, corresponds to the medallion with addorsed peacocks on the lid; and, finally, the scene with youths stealing eggs from the eagles' nest, which is thematically related to hunting activities, establishes a vertical axis with the mounted falconer on the lid.
  26. Ettinghausen and Grabar, *Art and Architecture of Islam*, p. 151.
  27. *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, cat. no. 3.
  28. "Then, when God called Abd al-Rahman, he [al-Mansur] was nominated guardian of Hisham on Wednesday 4th of Ramadan 359 (July 11th 970)" (Ibn Idhari, *Histoire de l'Afrique*, 2: 415).
  29. Dorothy G. Shepherd, "Banquet and Hunt in Medieval Islamic Iconography," in *Gatherings in Honor of Dorothy E. Miner*, ed. Ursula E. McCracken, Lilian M.C. Randall, and Richard H. Randall, Jr. (Baltimore, 1974), pp. 79–92, esp. 82.
  30. See Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, cat. no. 35; *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, cat. no. 4. See also, Jorge de Navascués y de Palacio, "Una joya del arte hispano-musulmán en el Camino de Santiago" *Príncipe de Viana* 96–97 (1964): 239–46. Navascués identifies the figure in this medallion as the caliph Hisham II. On the other side of the front panel is another medallion featuring a court scene in which two youths flanking a tree are seated on a lion throne; one of them holds a bottle and a branch and the other holds a bottle and a fly whisk. Although a clear identification of these figures is difficult, they are undoubtedly important characters at court, judg-

- ing by the attributes mentioned above. On this account Navas-cués has proposed that the individual on the right could be Abd al-Malik, the son of al-Mansur, who succeeded his father in the dictatorship of al-Andalus and to whom this casket was dedicated.
31. In the context of this pyxis, where all human figures in the remaining medallions are depicted with beards, the absence of beards on the two personages in the court scene seems to be an intentional feature used to represent children. The identification of the figure on the right with Abd al-Rahman, based on his attributes, is also implied by his position. For the use of the qualitative metaphor right and left in Islamic culture, see Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago and London, 1988), pp. 13–14.
  32. Richard Ettinghausen and Willy Hartner, "The Conquering Lion: The Life Cycle of a Symbol," *Oriens* 17 (1964): 161–71. A useful survey of the symbolic tradition of the lion in Islamic culture can be found in H. Kindermann, "al-Asad," *EI*, 2nd ed., 1: 681–83.
  33. Max van Berchem and J. Strzygowski, *Amida* (Heidelberg, 1910), pp. 66–69; cited by Ettinghausen, "Conquering Lion," pp. 165–66.
  34. Equating princes with lions seems to have been a widespread poetic figure in panegyrics dedicated to the caliph's offspring in special events. The *Kitāb al-Hādāya wa al-Tuhaf* includes a poetic composition recited by Marwan b. Abi al-Samt on the occasion of the circumcision celebrations for prince al-Mutazz. The poet said, "He [al-Mutawakkil] is a caliph who begets brave lions, whom he brings as honorable successors. May sovereignty over the earth ever remain with them!" (Qaddumi, *Books of Gifts and Rarities*, p. 138. This dualistic function of the ruler was also intended in the program of Roger's mantle, where a military scene of the conquering lion was complemented by the ceremonial presence of the king wearing the garment in his public appearances. The viewer's association of Roger II with the mighty lion depicted on his rich garment seems obvious. On the cultural diversity of the Kingdom of Sicily under Roger II, see William Tronzo, *The Cultures of His Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo* (Princeton, 1997), esp. pp. 142–43 for references and bibliography on the mantle.
  35. For instance, deer are the victims of felines in one of the main medallions of the Pamplona casket.
  36. Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, p. 166.
  37. *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, cat. no. 3.
  38. *Ibid.*
  39. See Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, cat. no. 27. The association of the motif of the eagle in Spain with the figure of the ruler seems to have been adopted at the same time as the caliphal title. The first mention is in the chronicle of Abd al-Rahman III, where the exhibition of a banner with the heraldis symbol of the eagle is described with the remark that at the Osman campaign (934) the eagle standard was unfurled for the first time; see P. Chalmers, "Mawakib," *EI*, 2nd ed., 6: 851–52.
  40. See, for instance, Ibn al-Awwām, *Libro de agricultura* [*Kitāb al-filāḥa*], trans. and annot. Josef Antonio Banqueri, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1802; rpt., 1988) 2: 340–41. For an introductory study of agriculture in al-Andalus with brief references to the principal Hispano-Arabic treatises, see J. Vallve, "La agricultura en Al-Andalus," *Al-Qantara* 3 (1982): 261–97.
  41. For a survey of the literary tradition of the date palm as symbol, see J.M. Díez de Bustamante, "Onerata Resurgit. Notas a la tradición simbólica y emblemática de la palmera," *Helmantica* 31 (1980): 27–88. See also Penelope C. Mayo, "The Crusaders under the Palm: Allegorical Plants and the Cosmic Kingship in the *Liber Floridus*," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 27 (1973): 31–67. A palm tree was the symbol evoked by the first Umayyad amir of al-Andalus, Abd al-Rahman I (731–88), to express his nostalgia for his lost homeland, "Oh palm, you solitary one, like myself, grow / in a land where you are distant from your kindred: / you weep, while your leaves inarticulately whisper . . ." (translated by A.R. Nykl, *Hispano-Arabic Poetry and Its Relations with the Old Provençal Troubadours* [Baltimore, 1946], p. 18).
  42. Ibn al-Awwām, *Libro de Agricultura*, 1: 576–77.
  43. See, for instance, Stefan Sperl, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry: A Structural Analysis of Selected Texts (3rd Century A.H./9th Century A.D.–5th Century A.H./11th Century A.D.)* (Cambridge, 1989). The concept of "sectional parallelism" is reviewed in *ibid.*, pp. 5–7. The brief discussion that follows is intended only as a sample of the application of analytical models developed in literary criticism to the text behind the iconographic programs of portable objects. This is a task that should be carried on in the future by specialists in the field of Islamic art to take full advantage of the interesting results achieved by literary historians in the study of medieval Islamic literature. In recent scholarship, efforts in this direction have been made for the understanding of the meaning and reception of architectural decoration, vegetal and geometric. This is the case, for instance, of the interesting dissertation by Cynthia Robinson, "Palace Architecture and Ornament in the 'Courtly' Discourse of the Muluk al-Tawa'if: Metaphor and Utopia," University of Pennsylvania, 1995. In it she studies the interrelation of literary and visual aesthetics in the courtly art of the Taifa kingdoms during the latter part of the eleventh century. Robinson analyzes the ways in which Taifa panegyric literature fostered the creation of a specific type of architecture and how it determined the perception and usage of those buildings by the intended audience whose comprehension of spaces and architectural ornament was based on the skills to manage concepts of metaphor and similarity acquired through the reading of courtly panegyric. Robinson includes in her dissertation an allegorical analysis of the imagery of the Palencia casket, 1049–50 (dated A.H. 441), of the Cuenca workshop (see *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, cat. no. 7) linking its program with the political ambitions of the Banu Dhu'l-Nun, a dynasty who ruled the Taifa Kingdom of Toledo.
  44. K. Abu-Deeb, "Towards a Structural Analysis of Pre-Islamic Poetry," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (1975): 148–84, esp. 167; quoted by Sperl, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*, p. 5.
  45. Abu-Deeb borrowed the concept of "gross constituent unit" from Lévi-Strauss and applied it to his analysis of pre-Islamic poetry; see Abu-Deeb, "Towards a Structural Analysis of Pre-Islamic Poetry," p. 167.
  46. In the palm-tree scene, a further metaphorical parallel is established by the axial disposition of the birds and the youths performing basically the same action in two different chronological sequences, the birds preventing the production of fruit and the youths cutting off clusters of dates.
  47. Leo Steinberg, "Introductory: Words that Prevent Perception



- tion," Harvard University Norton Lectures 1995–96, delivered on 11 October 1995.
48. Certainly my study is subject to the constraints I have just outlined, but it shows how, paradoxically, in exceptional cases, like the medieval Islamic world which offers an abundance and high quality of textual evidence, we find similar sophistication in artistic products such as the al-Mughira pyxis. In most other medieval cultures the situation is different; the blind attachment to texts prevents full analysis of art forms in all their expressive possibilities. In the following paragraphs I develop several analyses of the al-Mughira pyxis using diverse methodological approaches. The deployment of critical concepts originally formulated in the study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western art for the interpretation of medieval Islamic portable objects may seem anachronistic. However, they have proved to be extremely valuable in my attempt to phrase some aspects of the al-Mughira pyxis which the study of the object demands. Although constraints of space and time have prevented me from elaborating on those ideas, I think they are worth including, not as a sample of the belated products of deconstruction or as a strategy for name-dropping, but as testament to the capacity of the object under discussion to produce coexisting meanings.
  49. My discussion is based on Ellen Winner and Howard Gardner, "Metaphor and Irony: Two Levels of Understanding," in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 425–43. For an excellent study of concepts of irony in medieval literature and thought, see Dilwyn Knox, *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony* (Leiden, 1989).
  50. Winner and Gardner, "Metaphor and Irony: Two Levels of Understanding," pp. 428–30.
  51. See Pérès, *La poésie andalouse*, p. 237, n. 2 with references to Arabic sources. Two instances of the application of this punishment are related by Dozy, *Histoire des musulmans d'Espagne*, 1: 159 and 164, and Ibn Idhari, *Histoire de l'Afrique*, 2: 46. On the legal punishments applied during the caliphate, see E. Lévi-Provençal, *Le siècle du Califat du Cordoue: Histoire de l'Espagne musulmane*, vol. 3 (Paris and Leiden, 1953), pp. 159–62.
  52. Some years later, the leaders of a group of courtiers who conspired against the caliph Hisham II and were caught were also crucified.
  53. These critical concepts related to the "objectifying force of the Look" are discussed by Stephen Melville, "Division of the Gaze, or, Remarks on the Color and Tenor of Contemporary 'Theory'," in *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, ed. Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay (New York, 1996), pp. 101–16, esp. 103–5. For the relationship between visibility and the exercise of disciplinary power, see Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1979), pp. 195–228. The capacity of juxtaposed images to generate meanings is remarkable. When formulating my reading of the eagles' scene in which, from al-Mughira's point of view, knowledge destroys freedom, I was reminded of the passage in Genesis 2.15–3.17 relating the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were told by God, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Genesis 2.17). Of course, they did eat and "then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves" (Genesis 3.7). Similarly, when viewing the eagles' scene, al-Mughira, who was scheming to "steal the eggs," opened his eyes, and he knew that he was being seen and judged (the concept of shame underlies this moment as well as the Biblical legend). Curiously enough, this scene is juxtaposed in the ivory box with a scene strictly parallel in meaning and form, the one in which al-Mughira's allegorical surrogates are two youths stealing fruit from a tree.
  54. Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend and Seattle, 1988), pp. 87–108, esp. 91.
  55. For Sartre's concept of 'Look', see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness. A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1956), pp. 254–302. For the Lacanian theory of vision, see Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London, 1981), pp. 67–119.
  56. Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," pp. 87–108.
  57. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
  58. *Ibid.*, p. 91. The anecdote of the sardine can is recounted in J. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 95.
  59. The seminal study on gender, power, and the gaze is Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York, 1988), pp. 57–68.
  60. On the career of al-Mansur and his rise to power, see Ibn Idhari, *Histoire de l'Afrique*, 2: 414–18 and 424–98; Dozy, *Histoire des musulmans d'Espagne*, 2: 186–275; Lévi-Provençal, *De la conquête à la chute du califat de Cordoue*, pp. 409–26; al-Maqqari, *History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*, 2: 175–98. A good summary of these studies with a useful list of primary sources can be found in P. Chalmers, "al-Mansur," *EI*, 2nd ed., 6: 430–32.
  61. On the relationship between al-Mansur and Subh, see al-Maqqari, *History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*, 2: 178–81.
  62. See G.C. Miles, *The Coinage of the Umayyads of Spain* (New York, 1950), pp. 67–69.
  63. Al-Maqqari, *History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*, 2: 179. On this aspect, see also Dozy, *Histoire des musulmans d'Espagne*, 2: 192; Lévi-Provençal, *De la conquête à la chute du califat de Cordoue*, p. 401.
  64. Al-Maqqari's account runs as follows: "According to Ibnu Khaldūn, Mohammed Ibn Abi A'mir rose in favour with Al-hakem. When the Khalif died and was succeeded by his youthful son Hishām, it was Mohammed who accepted and fulfilled the commission of putting to death Al-mugheyrāh, the brother of Al-hakem, who aspired to the throne. This Al-mugheyrāh, who was the son of the Khalif An-nāsir, was at the head of a considerable party in Cordova, who preferred him to his nephew Hishām on account of his more mature age and greater experience in affairs of government; but with the assistance of Ja'far Ibn Othmān Al-Mus'hafī, who had been Al-hakem's Hājib (chamberlain), of Ghālīb, the governor of Medinaceli, and of the Slavonian eunuchs of the palace, whose chiefs at the time were Fāyik and Jūdhar, Mohammed Ibn Abi A'mir surprised Al-mugheyrāh in his dwelling and put him to death two days after the death of Al-hakem, when Hishām was proclaimed without opposition. This being done, Ibn Ibī A'mir formed the design of seizing the person of Hishām and usurping his authority. To this end he began to plot against the great officers of the state, and to raise dissensions among

- them, setting them against each other, and employing one to kill the other" (al-Maqqari, *History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*, 2: 175–76). The main difference in the version of the other source for al-Maqqari, Ibn Bassam, is the role of the two Slavonian eunuchs, Faik and Gaudar, who right after the death of al-Hakam II seem to have plotted to put al-Mughira on the throne displacing Hisham (see Dozy, *Histoire des musulmans d'Espagne*, 2: 200–4). Al-Mushafi, with the support of al-Mansur, managed to gain support and eliminate al-Mughira before the party backing him could take action (al-Maqqari, *History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*, 2: 177–78).
65. It is also possible that some other event at court at that time made this affirmation of dynastic legitimacy against al-Mughira necessary, but this is still open to further research. The heir Abd al-Rahman died two years after the manufacture of the pyxis. The fact that his death is only mentioned in passing by Ibn Idhari in a sentence referring to the appointment of al-Mansur as Hisham's guardian leads one to the conclusion that it was not an unexpected event but rather the end of a long illness that could have started or been aggravated around the time the pyxis was made, thus inspiring a display of the power and security of the legitimate line of succession through the depiction of the two sons of the caliph. There could have been a relationship between the hypothetical poor health of the caliph's first son and the fact that the court physician, poet, and historian Arib ibn Sad al-Katib al-Kurtubi dedicated to al-Hakam II his medical treatise on obstetrics, where he deals with several subjects concerning birth and the childhood years until puberty, including the treatment of illnesses in children. See Lucien Leclerc, *Histoire de la médecine arabe* (Paris, 1876) 1: 432–36. The uncertain date of this treatise leaves room for speculation; it could also have been composed in the wider context of the problematic of al-Hakam II's lack of heir preceding his accession to the throne, for the first chapters of the treatise tackle questions of procreation and fertility. See also P. Pons Boigues, *Ensayo bio-bibliográfico sobre los historiadores y geógrafos árabe-españoles, 800–1450 A.D.* (Madrid, 1898; rpt., Amsterdam, 1972), pp. 88–89; and Ch. Pellat, "Arib b. Sad al-Kurtubi," *EI*, 2nd ed., 1: 628 with bibliography. This scholar mentions that Arib lived in the entourage of al-Mushafi and Ibn Abi Amir (al-Mansur) and held the post of secretary of al-Hakam II.
  66. Satire was considered not only useful for political propaganda but also as having a magical power. Bernard Lewis points out that the Arabic term for satire, *hija*, is a cognate of the Hebrew *hagah* which means "weaving a spell against someone" (see Lewis, *Political Language of Islam*, p. 10). On this and other aspects of the concept of satire in Islamic culture, see Ch. Pellat, "Hidja," *EI*, 2nd ed., 3: 352–55. For an introduction to satirical poetry in Islamic literature, see Régis Blanchère, *Histoire de la littérature arabe*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1952–66) 3: 380ff., 417ff., 572ff., 686ff. The importance of the force of satire can be illustrated with the story of Ibn Faraj al-Jayyani, a poet at the court of al-Hakam II, who composed the famous anthology of Andalusian poetry entitled *Kitab al-Hadaik* (the Gardens). He is said to have composed a bitter satire of the caliph who, in retaliation, put the poet in prison for the rest of his life (see H. Monés, "Ibn Faraj al-Jayyani," *EI*, 2nd ed., 3: 762–63).
  67. On panegyrics in Arabic poetry, see Blanchère, *Histoire de la littérature arabe*, 3: 434ff., 544ff., 580ff., 599ff., 686ff.; and Salma Kadra Jayyusi, "Umayyad Poetry," in *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, vol. 1, ed. A.F.L. Beeston, T.M. Johnstone, R.B. Sergeant, and G.R. Smith (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 396–401. See especially Stefan Sperl, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*, pp. 9–27. For the Cordoban caliphate, see Emilio García Gómez, "La poésie politique sous le califat de Cordoue," *Revue des études islamiques*, 1949: 5–11.
  68. See Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, cat. no. 32; *The Art of Medieval Spain A.D. 500–1200*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), cat. no. 39.
  69. Beckwith, *Caskets from Cordoba*, pp. 20–21.
  70. See Dozy, *Histoire des Musulmans d'Espagne*, 2: 202.
  71. On this conspiracy, see Dozy, *Histoire des Musulmans d'Espagne*, 2: 222–25, and Lévi-Provençal, *De la conquête à la chute du califat de Cordoue*, p. 422. For a study of the ceremonial oath of allegiance (*bay'a*) to Hisham II and the legal problems surrounding his proclamation as caliph due to his minority, see María Luisa Ávila Navarro, "La proclamación (*bay'a*) de Hisam II. Año 976 d.c." *Al-Qantara* 1: (1980): 79–114.
  72. Avinoam Shalem, "From Royal Caskets to Relic Containers: Two Ivory Caskets from Burgos and Madrid," *Mugarnas* 12 (1995): 24–38, esp. 24.
  73. María Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (Philadelphia, 1987), pp. 27–69. This aspect is also stressed by Jerrilynn D. Dodds in her essay "Islam, Christianity, and the Problem of Religious Art," *Art of Medieval Spain*, pp. 27–37, where she states that "although religious difference was often galvanized by political difference in the Middle Ages, religious ideology did not control all aspects of cultural interaction, attitude, and production in Spain."
  74. For Mozarabic art, see Jacques Fontaine, *L'Art préroman hispanique* (Yonne, 1973). He exaggerates, however, the effect of Islamic borrowings in Christian Spain; for a revision of this aspect see Werckmeister's review of Fontaine's book in *Speculum* 57, 3 (1982): 604–7. See also Jerrilynn D. Dodds, *Architecture and Ideology in Early Medieval Spain* (University Park, Pa, and London, 1990) where questions of artistic interaction are treated at length. The issue of the influence of Islamic forms on the art of Christian Spain is reviewed by John Williams, *The Illustrated Beatus*, vol. 1 (London, 1994), pp. 143–57.
  75. *Art of Medieval Spain*, cat. no. 74.
  76. *Ibid.*, cat. no. 109.
  77. *Ibid.*, cat. no. 110.
  78. *Ibid.*, cat. no. 125a.
  79. For the permeability of the frontiers *de facto* in contrast with the ideological bias of chronicles, see Eduardo Manzano Moreno, "Christian-Muslim Frontier in Al-Andalus: Idea and Reality," in *The Arab Influence in Medieval Europe*, ed. Dionisius A. Agius and Richard Hitchcock (Reading, U.K., 1994), pp. 83–99.
  80. For the ideological dimension of the fight against Islam, see A.R. Fletcher, "Reconquest and Crusade in Spain c. 1050–1150," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 37 (1987): 31–47. Fletcher argues that the idea of the global battle of Christianity against Islam as manifested in notions of Reconquest and Crusade has a late definition in the Spanish Christian kingdoms, and was closely related to the appearance of Europeans on the Spanish scene, including the Cluniac monks and the Franks attracted by the spirit of the crusade promoted from Rome. The insertion of a religious-political idea of Reconquest of foreign origin at the end of the eleventh and beginning of the

twelfth century is directly connected to the acquisition by Islamic portable objects of political connotations. That explains the special reception of the caskets analyzed by Avinoam Shalem.

81. In this respect I agree with the ideas espoused by Julie A. Harris, "Muslim Ivories in Christian Hands: The Leire Casket in Context," *Art History* 18, 2 (1995): 213–21. Harris studies the particular circumstances of reception of the Pamplona casket and, although she decides for an interpretation in which the box appears involved in ideological implications of triumph and reconquest, she cautiously concludes: "On the one hand, the receptiveness of early medieval society to art of other cultures, the high quality and the high material value of Islamic goods fail to satisfy those who would prefer to discuss the movement of Islamic motifs or Islamic objects into Christian settings on ideological grounds. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to find consistent meanings for Islamic motifs in Christian art or to prove that all imported objects were displayed in their northern setting with triumphalist intent." A further step in pursuing questions of reception of these objects should be taken by considering the social, political, and ideological differences among their Christian beholders, i.e., dignitaries of the Spanish church of European origin, local inhabitants, aristocrats driven by sentiments of crusade, merchants profiting from commercial interchange with Muslims, etc. Although for each of these groups Muslim objects reflected a very different reality, only some of them had means to articulate their ideological discourse through chronicles and romances providing the historians with a monolithic account of an otherwise multifarious reality.
82. Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, cat. no. 36; *Art of Medieval Spain*, cat. no. 73.
83. *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, cat. no. 5, with an Arabic transcription.
84. *Ibid.*, p. 202. This argument for the dating was first made by Beckwith, *Caskets from Cordoba*, p. 29.
85. The inscription reads, "IN N(omi)NE D(omi)NI MENENDUS GUNDISALVI ET TUDAD(o)MNA SUM." *Nos confins da Idade Média: arte portuguesa, séculos XII–XV*, exhibition catalogue (Lisbon: Museu Nacional Soares dos Reis, 1993), cat. no. 5.
86. *Art of Medieval Spain*, cat. no. 73.
87. For the historical framework of the donors of the chalice and paten, see José Mattoso, *A Nobreza medieval portuguesa: a família e o poder* (Lisbon, 1981), pp. 143–47. See also the study by Mário Jorge Barroca in *Nos confins da Idade Média*, cat. no. 5.
88. For the discussion that follows I am indebted to Serafín Moralejo who generously shared with me his interesting paper on this box, together with the chalice and the paten associated with it, which he has developed as part of a study on several pieces in the treasury of Braga Cathedral.
89. For the career of Abd al-Malik and his relations with the Christian kingdoms, see Lévi Provençal, *De la conquête à la chute du califat de Cordoue*, pp. 457–68, with a list of Arabic sources; see also Ibn 'Idhārī, *La caída del califato de Córdoba y los Reyes de Taifas: al-Bayān al-Mughrib*, trans. and annot. Felipe Maíllo Salgado (Salamanca, 1993), pp. 11–43.
90. For this event, see Ibn 'Idhārī, *La caída del califato de Córdoba y los Reyes de Taifas*, p. 18; Lévi Provençal, *De la conquête à la chute du califat de Cordoue*, pp. 465–66; R. Dozy, *Recherches sur l'histoire et la littérature de l'Espagne pendant le Moyen-Âge*, 2 vols., 3rd ed. (Paris and Leiden, 1881), 1: 102.
91. Moralejo also points out that "the absence of an addressee in the box's epigraph either suggests that it was not made ex professo for the occasion or that its very message consisted of the menacing title with which the *hajib* is alluded to in it." Personal communication, April 1995.
92. *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, cat. no. 5.
93. There is an undeniable political implication in the celebration of fertility in the women of the court that has been indirectly addressed in different parts of the paper when referring to the magical function of caskets and poetic compositions praising dynastic procreation. This important political function of female fertility in courtly life might be at the origin, not only of artistic enterprises like the ivory boxes I have just analyzed, but also of the development of complex decorative circles on Umayyad palaces such as the royal bathhouse of Qusayr Amra where the representation of women in various activities dominates the iconographic program displayed on its walls. Oleg Grabar has proposed several ways to look at these images; among other interpretations he argues that they could reflect "the world of women whose power, both political and cultural, was, in early Islamic times, considerable" (Oleg Grabar, "Umayyad Palaces Reconsidered," *Ars Orientalis* 23 [1993]: 93–108, esp. 96–98). In her commentary on Grabar's article Gülru Necipoğlu frames the subject by posing new questions, "Could this bath have been built for the household of a royal consort and her son, the mother of the 'amir' or prince to whom good wishes are offered in an inscription? Was the amir, possibly the young child bathed by naked women in several paintings, an heir to the caliph represented enthroned on the central throne apse of the bath hall? (Gülru Necipoğlu, "An Outline of Shifting Paradigms in the Palatial Architecture of the Pre-Modern Islamic World," *Ars Orientalis* 23 [1993]: 3–34, esp. 8). Necipoğlu defines the possible function of the pictorial cycle of Qusayr Amra as a monumental political celebration of dynastic fertility similar to that played on a more private level by the Andalusian ivory boxes.
94. For these Roman pieces, see José Beltrán Fortes, "La colección arqueológica de época romana en Madinat al-Zahra (Córdoba)," *Cuadernos de Madinat al-Zahra* 2 (1988–90): 109–26.
95. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 31–32.