Cultural Interaction between Different Religious Communities in al-Andalus during the Umayyad Period (138-422/756-1031)

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Abstract: *Much of the productive interactions between Muslims, Jews, and Christians happened in al-Andalus, particularly during the Umayyad Caliphate. Al-Andalus provided an environment in which ideas, techniques, and artistic modes could move between the different religious communities. In this paper, we will focus on an image of peaceful coexistence in al-Andalus, how have scholars of al-Andalus approached this issue of transmission? Which monuments and portable arts have been most frequently employed in these interactions, and why? The paper derived important results related to the complex relationship between the three societies, the Jews, Christians and Muslims, of medieval al-Andalus and the episodes of cultural appreciation and cooperation between the different religious communities during the period that lasted from 138/756 to 422/1031.*

Keywords: *Al-Andalus, Interaction, Villa, Ivories, Irrigation, Madinat al-Zahra, Dhimma. Introduction.*

Among all the countries of western Europe, Spain has had its history that was shaped by the Islamic domination of much of the country for four centuries and by an Islamic presence for seven and a half centuries. To be sure, there were Muslim incursions into France, Italy, and Sicily subjected to Muslim rule, but no other western European country experienced such a continuous and extensive contact with the Muslims.[1]

Al-Andalus became part of the Umayyad Caliphate (41-132/661-750) during the years (91-93/710-712). In the second wave of Muslim expansion, a small number of Berber cavalry under Arab command loyal to the Umayyad dynasty crossed over the Straits of Gibraltar from Morocco to assist in the dynastic struggle of the Spanish Visigoths. In 711, Muslim troops crossed from North Africa into the Iberian Peninsula. By 712, most of the Iberian Peninsula was under the Muslim control and it was named al-Andalus except in north-west Galicia where the last Visigothic resistance

was not overcome until 718. During the next decades, the new Umayyad province became ruled from the Umayyad capital in Damascus by a succession of governors sent from there, which is known as the era of governors (95-138/714–755)[2]. As a matter of fact, before the conquest, the entire economy in al-Andalus was significantly degraded and agriculture was ruined as a result of a series of natural disasters beginning in the seventh century. Drought, frequent floods, heavy rains, and destructive dust storms were the most important natural environmental factors that had a direct impact on human and plant in al-Andalus, causing the death of thousands of people and destruction of livestock, trees and crops. The society in al-Andalus was ethnical and stratified with an unstable political structure, a weak rural economy[3].

In 132/750, the Umayyad dynasty was overthrown by the Abbasids, ʿAbd al-

Rahman I al-Dakhil (138-172/756-788) was one of the few Umayyad princes who survived

the slaughter of the ruling family. Abd al-Rahman I was called "the Falcon of Quraysh" by the Abbasid, al-Saffah himself. In 137/755, he decided to go to al-Andalus and establish a new dynasty, the Umayyads of al-Andalus (138-422/ 756-1031). In 138/ 756, he founded a second Umayyad dynasty in Cordoba. Cordoba was the center of government under the Umayyad dynasty. The Umayyads of al-Andalus made Cordoba a center for Arabic culture and learning. It was the wonder of the western world until the caliphate was collapsed in the early eleventh century.[(4)]

The Muslims controlled al-Andalus for eight hundred years until the reconquest of Granada by the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. A large proportion of the Hispano-Roman population had adopted Islam (Castilian muladi, Arabic MuwalludIn). An identically large number who remained Christian (Castilian Mozarabs, Arabic Mustaʿrib) had links to the north, especially Toledo, the ancient Visigothic capital and ecclesiastical capital of al-Andalus.[(5)]

The period that lasted from 138/756 to 422/1031, was characterized by a stable Muslim-Christian relationship, and cultural interpenetrations were shaped by socioeconomic structures. The Jews lived in what some scholars describe it as "Jewish Golden Age" of cultural symbiosis with the Arabic Andalusian culture under the Umayyad Caliphate in al-Andalus, and under the rule of the Party Kings which followed it. The Almoravid and Almohad invasions caused some disruption of the Jewish Golden Age and the relationship of Andalusi Jewish.[(6)]

In fact, patronage during this long period reinforced an artistic environment that produced art and architecture of great beauty and sophistication such as individual buildings, and groups of objects. Moreover, there were clear indications of the cultural exchanges between Muslims, Jews, and Christians in al-Andalus, particularly during the Umayyad Caliphate, as will be shown shortly.

The purpose of this article is, to consider some significant aspects such as the interaction and interpenetration of Jewish, Christian and Islamic societies in the Iberian Peninsula following the initial Muslim conquest, the history of cultural production in al-Andalus from Muslim and Christian points of view, the development of economic and social life and structures in an effort to discern patterns of interchange and trace the movement of some ideas and techniques.

To begin with, the image of a society devoted to the promotion of cultural and intellectual goals to be realized by the cooperation of people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds is an attractive one. There is a wide debate between scholars of al-Andalus about diverse societies in al-Andalus and their interrelationship. Was al-Andalus a product of the three cultures of the Middle Ages: Muslim, Christian and Jewish? Was al-Andalus the result of Roman and Visigothic influences which preceded the emergence of the Muslims and remained the dominant strain despite the Muslim conquest? At any rate, there are some explanations that indicate an even more complex series of interactions encompassing all of these influences across a long period of time and a variety of institutions as will be seen below:

Villa and garden culture

The social, political and economic practices that grew up around the estates of early medieval period in al-Andalus during the Umayyad dynastic period (138-422/756-1031) can be labelled as a "villa culture" as defined by the standards of the Roman Empire and the

Italian Renaissance. These luxurious residences with spacious gardens were a dominant feature of the landscape of Islamic Cordoba in the tenth century AD, but it began much earlier.[7] Therefore, this kind of culture is worthy of comparison with the better known examples of Roman and Renaissance Italy, which their similarities especially the wide central halls with subsidiary rooms beside them suggest that some villas may have been constructed on the basis of their Roman predecessors, implying that there was continuity in villas and the society they fostered after the end of the Roman Empire. This will, in turn, bring the idea of a villa as a conceptual and ideological concept rather than a mere architectural type. In other words, the social and political functions of villas in Cordoba made them like Roman and Renaissance villas where the villa was not just the place of pleasure and diversion which poets represented, but a significant element in the power of Cordoba rulers. In fact, there is a great importance of villas to the estates and to elite culture in al-Andalus. The Umayyad rulers (138-422/756-1031) played a central role in establishing various estates in al-Andalus as key sites for the display of caliphal power so that they were as a vehicle for the claims to power and legitimacy of the rulers and their elite as were the Great Mosque of Cordoba, or the caliphal city of Madinat-al-Zahra.[8] (Fig. 1).

Also, gardens played a particular role in reinforcing the power of the ruling elite. Gardens were functioned symbolically as well as agriculturally to convey the message that the land was fertile, productive, and under the ruler's control. Creation and ownership villas and gardens reflect the importance of the different groups within that elite.[9] This eventually will inscribe Umayyad political legitimacy on the landscape in architectural form. The role of gardens on the landscape was not only confined

Fig. 1. The Great Mosque of Cordoba. (Akmir, 2015, p. 190).

to the medieval al-Andalus but continued after the year of 422/1031. (Fig. 2).

In addition, we should not overlook the Islamic spiritual dimension of such luxurious horticulture. There are a number of recent studies in which new interpretations on various garden traditions of the Islamic world have been advanced. There is a traditional notion of Islamic gardens as representations of paradise. From the researcher's point of view, the Qur'an and hadiths' descriptions of the paradise with its sensory and spiritual pleasures played a prominent role in the Muslims' emulation of these descriptions in the design and landscaping of Islamic gardens. This notion was adopted by non-Muslims in al-Andalus but with the introduction of tombs and funerary monuments into the gardens to indicate to a spiritual symbolism as a paradise on earth.[10]

Fig. 2. The Qoba Garden at the Palace of Seville. (Baboon Maldonado, 2008, p. 273).

Fig. 3. Ivory pyxis made for the princess Subh in 964. (Prado-Vilar, 1997, p. 20).

Portable arts

The productive interactions in al-Andalus were not only confined to the Islamic villas, but there were other interactions associated

with the portable arts. For example, the carved ivories during Muslim patronage, which were one of the fanciest and best-known works of early Islamic art, were designed for members of the ruling family or high officials. They contain basic features and clear inscriptions such as the name of the owner and the date of execution. Spanish ivories are often used to glorify the Arab civilization in medieval al-Andalus.[11] (Fig. 3).

It is important to know that during the 11th and 12th centuries, the Islamic caliphate in al-Andalus fell into Christian hands. This, in turn, led to the downfall of most of the objects and became under the Christian control. Many of the ivories passed into Christian treasures[12], implying that some of the pieces have been used to exemplify cross-cultural themes and changing contexts, thus some of the ivories had to be adapted to fit their new role in Christian function.

However, some principal features of ivory iconography hark back to the ancient iconography at Sumer like the cup and the flowering branch and the lion throne. Moreover, the lion-bull combat has been used to glorify the royal power; it has a long tradition in political iconography related to the Assyrian and the Persian empires. Also, we see the eagle used in ivory carvings to express the royal power and the ruling caliph.[13]

Irrigation

After all the foregoing of examples concerning the indications of interaction between the different religious communities, the end of the eighth century was also characterized by a variety of indicators such as a rapid agricultural and urban development. Consequently, some ideas and techniques moved between the different religious communities. The subject of irrigation in al-Andalus was one type of these

interactions. In order to understand the broader economic ramification of irrigation agriculture in Spanish society and to concentrate upon the political dimensions of water control, we need to examine the irrigation communities and their administration, irrigation conflicts, and the role of political powers in irrigation projects. Indeed, there is need for a powerful centralized authority in the construction and widely maintenance of water projects, since only such an authority would possess the necessary capital and power to employ large number of labors. Also, we should draw attention to the autonomy of local irrigation communities, which were controlled by the whole river and canal network. Customary law traditionally maintained that social control lies in the collective will and the irrigators institutions, and the local power structure should be under this opinion. In al-Andalus, there was a dual Islamic cultural diffusion of irrigation technology from Syria and South Arabia. For example, In Valencia, the intensive examination of the evidence of Roman and medieval Christian irrigation techniques and a comparative study of Middle Eastern irrigation systems support the case for the Muslim establishment and perfecting the complete irrigation system of the Valencian kingdom.[14] (Fig. 4).

Madinat al-Zahra

By the tenth century, ʿAbd al-Rahman III reigned for fifty years (300-350/912-961). He was the greatest of the sixteen rulers of the Spanish Umayyad dynasty. He built up the strength of his army with fresh Berber recruits from Africa and with slave troops brought from all parts of Christian Europe (the saqalibah). Between the years of 936-

940 Madinat al-Zahra (the Serene City) was built by Abd al-Rahman III in the suburbs of Cordoba. While Madinat al-Zahra grew out of a
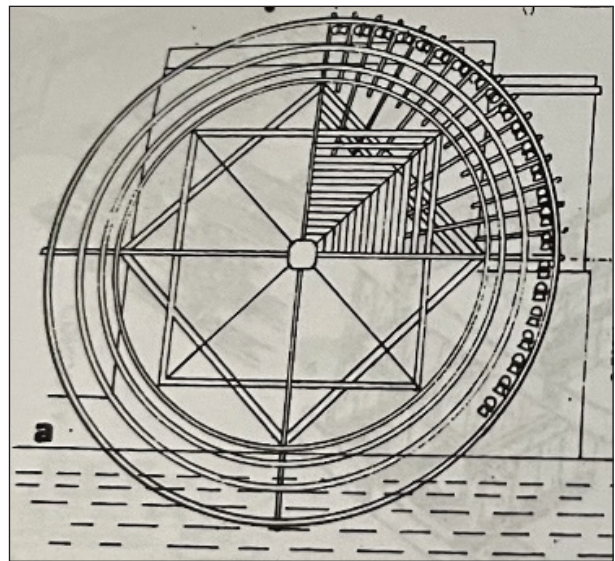

Fig. 4. One of irrigation technolgies in al-Andalus. (Baboon Maldonado, 2008, p. 313).

local tradition of suburban palaces modeled after Syrian Umayyad prototypes, its architectural and landscape aesthetics, most notably its emphasis on the view and the construction of framed views intended for the ruler's gaze, were profoundly eastern. These elements, employed by the Abbasids as visual devices to evoke symbolically the caliph's sovereignty, were adopted by Abd al Rahman III as a challenge to the supreme authority. At Alhambra, there is an elaborate program of poetic epigraphy, its symbolic associations, brought ideas introduced five hundred years ago. Also, there are royal workshops manufacturing silk cloth and ivory caskets.[15] (Figs. 5, 6).

Undoubtedly, the sumptuous Umayyad caliphate and its most exquisite creation, Madinat al-Zahra, were regarded as the epitome of the Muslim conquest of al-Andalus. The innovations adopted at Madinat al-Zahra reflected the political ambitions and ideology of the palace's founder. Despite the fall of the Umayyad caliphate by the turn of the eleventh century, the elements and devices introduced at Madinat al-Zahra as visual expressions of

Fig. 5. Throne Hall of ʿAbd al-Rahman III in Madinat al-Zahra, Cordoba, 10th century. (Akmir, 2015, p. 191).

Fig. 6. A model of the beauty of botanical decoration in Throne Hall of ʿAbd al-Rahman III. (Akmir, 2015, p. 192).

caliphal ideology survived, such as monumental entrance, a central reception complex, residential quarters, esplanades, several gardens and barracks.

The Institution of the Dhimma

It is one of the most striking features of peaceful coexistence between the different religious communities in al-Andalus. Muslim situation depended on one's tribal affiliation, while Christianity depended on the development of interpersonal rather than intergroup bonds. However, Islamic religion has a new institution called the institution of the dhimma, which appeared from the dawn of Islam and governed relations between the Muslims and their non-Muslim subjects and left them free to practice their own religion. It worked well at that time when dhimma was subject to specific social and political circumstances. Thus, this institution provided an environment in which the Jews, Christians, and Muslims in al-Andalus could live in peace and a harmony relation. There were, certainly, a number of institutions that the Christians earned from the Muslims, but the Christian equivalent showed some modification and was not imitated exactly. For example, the muhtasib, the "master of the market", who had wide jurisdiction. The Christians had the same official, called the almotacen, but he was elected, which is unlike the muhtasib who was appointed.[16]

In conclusion, it is difficult to analyze the complex relationship between the three societies, the Jews, Christians and Muslims, of medieval al-Andalus. Only an historian thoroughly versed in all cultures can hope to untangle the various threads and offer a fuller picture of architecture, art, and social history in al-Andalus.

There were, of course, a lot of cultural appreciation and cooperation between the different religious communities during the period that lasted from 138/756 to 422/1031. Stability was provided in fact by the law, which transcended political boundaries, but after 422/1031, the Umayyad state began to disintegrate. Consequently, these relations began to be shaped by a variety of social conventions, legal norms and governmental institutions. These relations were complicated

by the changing balance of influence and the plenty of Muslim countries where there had previously been only one. The centralized control exercised by the Umayyad caliphs ended during the 11th century as the region was divided into city states whose rulers became known as the Taifa kings, muluk al-tawaʿif. It is significant to note that Islamic villas in al-Andalus functioned as centers of power with its continuity from the Roman period. In addition to that, arts that were described as "minor" in the West were not like that at all in the Islamic countries. Pottery, decorated boxes, and luxurious textiles were important objects of artistic production for Muslims. For example, circular ivory boxes were objects produced exclusively in al-Andalus and were so highly prized by Christians and many of these objects passed from Muslim hands into Christian church treasuries.

Moreover, there was a wide diffusion of Islamic ideas and technology in al-Andalus, which moved from the Eastern world and some Arabic lands and were effectively received by the Jews, and Christians. Islamic artistic objects were an integral part of the daily environment in Christian al-Andalus. This shows the influence of Islamic motifs on al-Andalus's arts. In fact, the Andalusian Umayyads left a legacy which is of value to both Spanish and Islamic cultural history.

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ملخّص: حدثت الكثير من التفاعلات الثقافية المثمرة بين المسلمين، واليهود، والمسيحيين في الأندلس، وبخاصة في فترة الخلافة الأموية. وقد قدمت الأندلس بيئة يمكن فيها للأفكار والتقنيات والأنماط الفنية أن تنتقل بين المجتمعات الدينية المختلفة. ستركز هذه الورقة على صورة التعايش السلمي في الأندلس، وكيف تعامل العلماء مع هذا التفاعل الثقافي؟ وما هي الآثار والأفكار والفنون المنقولة التي استخدمت بشكل متكرر في هذه التفاعلات، ولماذا تم استخدامها؟ استخلصت الورقة نتائج مهمة تتعلق بالعلاقة المعقدة بين المجتمعات الثلاثة؛ اليهود، والمسيحيين، والمسلمين، في الأندلس خلال العصور الوسطى، إضافة إلى نتائج متعلقة بفهم حلقات التقدير الثقافي والتعاون بين المجتمعات الدينية المختلفة خلال الفترة التي استمرت من ١٣٨هـ/٧٥٦م إلى ٤٢٢هـ/١٠٣١م.

Notes:

(1) Marín, Manuela, The Formation of al-Andalus. (Aldershot, Brookfield: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 51– 60.

(2) Jayyusi, S. ed., The Legacy of Muslim Spain. (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 112-135.

(3) For more information, see "Al-Masudi, Abbas Fadl, Al-Kawarth al-Tabi'iya wa Atharuha fi al-Andalus mn al-Fath hata Nhayt Asr al-Khlafa al-Amawiya (92-422/711-1223)", Lark 13, 2018, pp. 1-26.

(4) Ibn al-Athir, Ali bin Mohammad, Al-Kaml fi Al-Tarikh. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1987), pp. 63-8; Latham, J.Derek,"The rise of the Umayyad dynasty in Spain". The Unesco Courier. 44, p. 24,1991.

(5) Jayyusi, The Legacy of Muslim Spain, pp. 149-170.

(6) Jayyusi, The Legacy of Muslim Spain, pp. 195-197.

(7) Anderson, Glaire, The Islamic Villa in Early Medieval Iberia: Architecture and Court Culture in Umayyad Córdoba. (Burlington: Ashgate: 2013), p.2.

(8) Anderson, The Islamic Villa, pp. 3, 15-46.

(9) Anderson, The Islamic Villa, pp. 105-35.

(10) Ruggles, D. Fairchild, Gardens, landscape, and vision in the palaces of Islamic Spain. (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), pp. 131-137.

(11) Prado-Vilar, Francisco, "Circular visions of fertility and punishment: caliphal ivory caskets from al-Andalu", Muqarnas 14 (1997), pp. 19 -20.

(12) Blair, Sheila, "Ivories and Inscriptions From Islamic Spain". Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino: Oriente Moderno, 23 (84), pp. 375-377.

(13) Prado-Vilar, "Circular visions of fertility and punishment", pp. 23-24, 26.

(14) Glick, Thomas F. Irrigation and Society in Medieval Valencia. (Cambridge MA, 1970), pp. 230- 233.

(15) Ruggles, D. Fairchild, "Madinat al-Zahra' and the Ummayyad Palace". The Literature of al-Andalus: Cambridge UP, pp. 25-30.

(16) Al- Dhahabi, Edward Ghali. The treatment of non-Muslims in the Islamic community. (Egypt: Ghareeb library, 1993), pp. 113- 119.

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