

ART, LEGITIMACY AND IDENTITY DURING TAIFA KINGDOMS*

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RESUMO

A descentralização do poder califal de Córdoba no início do século XI provocou a emergência de múltiplos poderes locais que levaram à formação de novos estados independentes com governos de diferentes grupos étnicos. Esta configuração política dos Reinos de Taifas teve importantes consequências na estética arquitetónica, diversificando a linguagem artística da época tendo como base a arte califal.

Através dum sintético estudo comparativo vai ser analisada a motivação de alguns destes reinos para assumirem plenamente a herança anterior e outros, pelo contrário, reformularem a linguagem com soluções inéditas até ao momento na Península. Portanto, o objetivo é compreender o papel desempenhado pela arte durante o século XI no al-Andalus, como geradora de discursos ideológicos, identitários e de legitimação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE SÉCULO XI, PODER, IDEOLOGIA, ARQUITETURA, AL-ANDALUS

ABSTRACT

Decentralization of the Caliphate power early in the 11th century fostered the appearance of multiple local powers on the head of new independent states, which were ruled by different ethnicities. This political configuration of the taifas had remarkable consequences in the architecture aesthetic. Taking the Caliphal art as a base, they diversified the artistic language of that time.

This synthetic and comparative study identifies why some taifa kingdoms fully assumed the ancient heritage and others, conversely, re-formulated this art language with solutions unseen in the Iberian Peninsula. Consequently, our target is to understand the role played by the art during the 11th century in al-Andalus as a generator of not only legitimacy, but also ideological and identity discourses.

KEYWORDS 11TH CENTURY, POWER, IDEOLOGY, ARCHITECTURE, AL-ANDALUS.



I N D E X



E D I T O R I A L



D O S S I E R



P R I N T

Geographic configuration and political ambitions

Fragmentation in al-Andalus from the early 11th century is well-known by all. In the political sphere, this meant a continuous pressure to take up the torch of Caliphal power. As a consequence there was an endless fight among the sovereigns to broaden their territories (González 2006, 409-450). Therefore, we attend to a remarkable development in the geographic configuration in al-Andalus throughout the century. The strongest taifas in terms of politic, army and economy expanded their territories largely and consequently, both their culture and cultural influence (Guichard and Soravia 2006).

It was common that each kingdom was governed by a prominent family that had an important position in the administration of the territory (over which they would rule later on) or that they had been promoted by the *ḥājib* al-Manṣūr¹ (978-1002) until they controlled very important cities and territories. The former responds to Andalusí families that were settled in the Peninsula from the 8th century, as it was the case of Abū al-Qāsim ibn ‘Abbād’s (¿?-1042) ascendants in Seville or ‘Abd al-Raḥman ibn Dhī al-Nūn’s in Toledo. On the other hand, the new dynasties arriving by the end of the 10th century were families already consolidated in the North of Africa. These were seeking to expand their power or even their control in the Peninsula. Examples of this are Zāwī ibn Zīrī (1013-1019) in Granada or ‘Alī ibn Ḥammūd al-Nāṣir (caliph in 1016-1018) in Malaga (Viguera 1992). Nevertheless, in order to fully understand the situation, in which different and varied families, ethnicities and even tribes² competed to consolidate and expand their power in al-Andalus, we must travel backward in time to review the process that made the 11th century bloom (Guichard and Soravia 2006, 41-63).

The *fitna* (the civil war that lasted all over the first third of the century from al-Manṣūr’s death in 1002) confronted all those families and put them in different factions, according to the help offered to one or another side of the Umayyad family or even their support to the new Banū Ḥammūd family that also postulated for the Caliphate. However, an individualist feeling was arising behind this quest for legitimation and

support to the different caliphs. The political instability was increasingly clear and the above-mentioned families saw the possibility of taking advantage of this economic and political incertitude. Moreover, each of the new dynasties had to find the way for their power to be recognized by the other taifas. In other words, they needed the tools to carry out a legitimating process, which would allow them to take over the power left after the fall of Umayyad Caliphate (Fierro 1996). However, these kingdoms did not have a similar political or acquisitive entity as the Caliphate. The decentralization of the political power resulted in a delocalization of the economic power. Therefore, they had to use some other resources to legitimize their position in a new al-Andalus full of borders, some of them being the adoption of a *laqab*, the issuance of their own currency, territorial expansion, culture promotion, etc.³ (Viguera 1994; Guichard and Soravia 2006, 65-81).

The art as a tangible way of prestige

Focusing on the cultural aspect, it is impossible to understand the context of the taifas ignoring the essential exchanges with the neighbouring territories, specifically with other Mediterranean peoples (Valdés 1991; Constable 1994; Calvo 2017). Some artefacts nowadays preserved in Spanish institutions are proof of this, as they arrived to al-Andalus throughout this period. The caskets and rock crystal Fatimid⁴ items and also the small fragment of Song dynasty pottery, found in an archaeological dig in the Aljafería of Zaragoza are examples of this (Cabañero 2012, 231-234). Nevertheless, Andalusí pieces were subject to export to other areas in the Mediterranean. So were the well-known *bacini* in Tuscany churches (Berti and Tongiorgi 1981), more specifically those located in some churches in Pisa. This little highlight on sumptuary arts is the most remarkable

¹ This paper has followed the ALA-LC Romanization transliteration system for words unrecognized in Oxford Dictionaries.

² It is important to point out that both among Andalusí and new dynasties, there were divisions and conflicts from long. For instance, among Andalusí people there were Arab families, as in Seville or Zaragoza, but also arabized Berbers, as in Toledo or the Banū al-Aḥtas in Badajoz. We also find North-African Berbers, both in Malaga and in Granada, as well as taifas under Slavic governments, being the case of Almeria.

³ Most specialists consider the 11th century nowadays as a period of scientific and literary bloom thank to the utterly important culture patronage held by many of the sovereigns. Surprisingly, traditional historiography saw the Taifas Kingdoms as a time of scarce artistic shine. This possibly being for two main reasons: the limited preservation of material remains and its eclipse by the Cordoba Caliphate and its monumental works. Thanks to the latest discoveries and them being valued in the last decades, we are achieving a deeper understanding of this singular period, which allows a better appreciating of the importance of this century.

⁴ The prominent amount of pieces does not allow us to mention all of them, but the most remarkable ones are preserved in Museo Arqueológico Nacional (Madrid), the Treasure of the Saint Isidore of Leon collegiate church, Museu de Lleida, the Treasure of the Cathedral of Orense and the Treasure of the Cathedral of Astorga.

example of how forms, ideas and techniques moved fluently through any geographic, political or religious context (Azuar 1998). Moreover, it should not be forgotten that, while objects travelled around, so did pilgrims, scholars or artists (Schmidt and Wolf 2010; Calvo 2017). In this sense, we could underline the Andalusí apprenticeship of western techniques and the consequent local creation, as it is the case of lusterware. Numerous samples of the latter are preserved, mainly in the Seville taifa at the time, but also in northern kingdoms of the Peninsula, which brings again the idea of the wide diffusion of the techniques (Barceló and Heidenreich 2014). We only get to fully understand that art and architecture were received and transmitted in the same way by acknowledging this early stage of «Mediterranean globalization». Undoubtedly, this conditioned the development of ornamental shapes and artistic languages.

A fact to be highlighted is that at the same time that ideas were produced and exchanged, new materials such as plaster⁵ were included in the ornamental repertory. This material offered great benefits and more adequate solutions to the sovereigns' needs too⁶: a larger availability⁷, the procedures of removal, transportation and manufacture were less expensive and a quicker ornamental process (Cabañero 2012). In spite of many of the plaster fragments that have arrived to the present day without any colouring, we do preserve some vividly coloured samples (Cabañero 2010). Even gold and lapis lazuli⁸ pigments had been used, particularly in Toledo (González 2014), as we will see. Therefore, we understand that art was considered a highly effective vehicle of political power legitimation among these rivalries (Calvo 2014).

Starting point, evolution and Andalusí aesthetic transformation

In order to start the journey through the 11th century, we must go backwards to that Andalusí Umayyads' official art language, as the taifa kingdoms were the heirs of the Emirate and Caliphate artistic language. They all had a profound visual culture consumed for centuries. Andalusí art has its roots in

the 8th century, when the mosque of Cordoba was beginning to be constructed. Ever since, many of the monumental buildings that have been preserved stick to this tendency of homogenizing the ornamental language seeking to make an identity feature of their dynasty⁹. So was the case that this tendency had been repeated for almost three centuries more, as it can be seen at Gormaz fortress (Almagro 2008), or in the following extensions in the mosque of Cordoba and also with the construction of Madinat al-Zahra' (Calvo 2014). In the latter, all the official buildings (even private ones) had a certain uniform ornamental aesthetic¹⁰ (fig. 1). From then on, the Cordoba creating centre spread its influence all through al-Andalus seeking new patrons. That explains why each taifa re-interpreted that Umayyad art language with their own specific characteristics and surely different in each kingdom (Marinetti 1990¹¹). This is how they shifted from an «official» Umayyad aesthetic to a variety of shapes that responded to a traditional ornamental language¹², turning the 11th century into a period of finest aesthetic richness (Calvo 2011).

To try to understand this issue, it is proposed a comparative and synthetic analysis of some archaeological remains from the best preserved palaces¹³. The study target are the arcades of the palaces of the main *alcázares*. These are mainly public architectural elements, as they were the entrance to the main reception halls, which held the role of the power representation. This characteristic makes them a very adequate example to establish analogies among the different kingdoms.¹⁴ Some of the taifas will display a fully inherited Caliphal ornamentation, others will begin to introduce certain shapes assumed from the

⁵ Possibly under the influence of other Mediterranean kingdoms, such as the Fatimid Egypt which developed a remarkable ornamental display with this material.

⁶ New studies have been presented recently: Picazo Millán, Jesús Vicente et al. 2017. "Nueva artesanía andalusí en el valle del Ebro: el taller de vasos de alabastro de Rodén" in II Congreso CAPA (Arqueología Patrimonio Aragonés). Zaragoza, 9-10 November, 2017. [URL reviewed 15/07/2018: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322224208_Nueva_artesanía_andalusí_en_el_valle_del_Ebro_El_taller_de_vasos_de_alabastro_de_Rodén].

⁷ The alabaster quarries of Aragon are still ones of the most productive nowadays.

⁸ This fact proves a fully conscious use of these materials as their high cost (both economic and of the process of obtaining), positioning the taifa palace in Toledo at the highest level in terms of luxury and sumptuous display.

⁹ The logic historic progression shows this identity language would evolve, adapting to each period but without losing its characteristic essence as a symbol of the power of the government.

¹⁰ The starting point should be placed in the unique arch with alternating voussoirs, as it is the most recognizable element of the Umayyad dynasty in al-Andalus.

¹¹ On this paper the formal diversification of the artistic language on the capitals and the reinterpretation of them in each taifa will be studied.

¹² The term traditional must be understood here as the art that had been developed for centuries under Umayyad control and, therefore, had become the usual art for the 11th century society.

¹³ Until now, there are not conserved remains from all the most important *alcázares* of the 11th century. This study only refers to the most relevant remains from buildings made in that century. For instance, the Malaga *alcáza* is not included as there is no unanimity on its construction date.

¹⁴ This space must be understood as the façade of the most representative building in the kingdom being the place where the sovereign is: the materialization of power. Nevertheless, this is the base to tackle for this study in depth. Thus, it should be increased to cover also other material remains such as ceramics, wall paintings, capitals, etc. However, because of the space limitation of the paper it is not possible to deal with it.

Mediterranean context (Cabañero 2012¹⁵) and a third variety will show radically different and unseen solutions compared to the Andalusí tradition (Robinson 1992, 49-61; Rabasco 2018¹⁶). The greater or lesser correlation with respect to the Umayyad artistic language resulted of the governors' political position. In other words, it was the prevailing ideology which determined the ornamental language chosen (Rabasco 2018, 327-330). Therefore, all through this paper it will be possible to understand the reasons behind that aesthetic dissemination that led to a remarkable enrichment of the artistic environment of that time. Thus, the different artistic aspects existing from the Banū 'Abbād from Seville until Banū Dhī al-Nūn from Toledo, through of Banū Hūd from Zaragoza and Balaguer, are presented below.

As mentioned above, Seville was one of the most stable and prosperous kingdoms of the 11th century, ruled by an Andalusí dynasty of Arab origins. Its position towards the *fitna* and intentions towards the Caliphate were clear: total support to the Umayyads and a strong opposition to the Banū Ḥammūd¹⁷ Berbers' aspirations (Viguera 1992, 135-136). At the same time and possibly due to the geographic proximity between the two cities, they managed to shift the centralised power in Cordoba towards Seville. Consequently, Banū 'Abbād themselves showed as guarantee of the Umayyad tradition in al-Andalus facing the outsider threat, assuming the heritage of the Caliphate without having to take the ancient Umayyad capital.¹⁸ This can be seen in the remains of what seems to be an *alcázar* of the taifa, located in the Casa Toro-Buiza in Patio de Banderas (Tabales and Vargas 2014). The remains happen to be two paired arcades (fig. 2) placed at both sides of a large longitudinal hall (probably a power representation salon, given its remarkable measures). They would probably grant access to respective chambers. The decoration found fully responds to an inherited Caliphate artistic language: simulation of alternatively decorated voissors through wall painting. Therefore, the memories and apparent wish for Umayyad constructions such as Madīnat al-Zahrā' were undeniable, which proves a search of visual continuity in the Umayyad tradition (Ewert 1977). All this could be understood



as an attempt to legitimate their positions regarding other kingdoms through a stylistic continuity and, hence, proclaim themselves heirs of the Caliphate power as Andalusí Arabs indeed.

On the other hand, both the Zaragoza *kūra* as others of the Upper March had constant divergences with the Cordoba government even before Abd al-Rahman's arrival (756). To this, we must add the difficulty of controlling the territory, far from the Andalusí power, permitting a reactionary feeling towards the Umayyads' settlement (González 2006,

FIG. 1 East portico of Casa de la Alberca. Marble decoration. Córdoba, Conjunto Arqueológico de Madīnat al-Zahrā. Photo: Víctor Rabasco

¹⁵ This variety contributed even to the appearance of new artistic resources to the walls decoration assumed from the Mediterranean Sea like, for example, the mixtilinear arch.

¹⁶ New aesthetic developments like the case of Toledo, which it will explain later.

¹⁷ Banū 'Abbād probably saw the Banū Ḥammūd as foreigners trying to get the Andalusí Caliphate power, not being legitimized for it.

¹⁸ Owning Cordoba became an ambition for several kingdoms (such as Seville and Toledo) since the second



380). In this context, the Banū Hūd from Lérida (an Andalusí family with Arab origins) obtained the power of the Zaragoza taifa by 1038 in detriment of the Banū Tujīb (Viguera 1992, 59). This family built the palace of the Aljafería, the better preserved of the 11th century (in spite of the reconstructions). Consequently, it has been the most studied monument of the mentioned period (Beltrán 2008), even from the point on which this paper starts. The architectural and decorative base (fig. 3) was inherited from the Caliphate art (Ewert 1977), although with more elaborate decorations (Robinson 2002). They decided to simultaneously open their creative abilities to the Mediterranean influences (fig. 4), assimilating certain ornamental foreign shapes and solutions¹⁹ (Cabañero and Lasa 2003; Cabañero 2012). As it is a broadly studied matter,

we will simply add that the Aljafería should be considered as a transition and great originality building between the Umayyad tradition and the already indicated new decorative shapes adopted from the North-African context. Therefore, it can be understood as liberation from the Caliphate «official» artistic language, since the Zaragoza detach from the 8th century. Also, a new taste shown in the assimilation of foreign patterns might be fostered by the prominent distancing from Cordoba.

Responding to a similar context we find the case of the Castell Formós de Balaguer palace, settled inside the territories of the Lérida taifa and, consequently, strongly linked



FIG. 2 East chamber of Seville palace. Wall painting decoration. Sevilla, Casa Toro-Buiza (Patio de Banderas, Reales Alcázares de Sevilla). Photo: Víctor Rabasco

FIG. 3 North portico of Aljafería. Plaster decoration. Zaragoza, Aljafería palace (Cortes de Aragón). Photo: Víctor Rabasco

half of the 11th century (when kingdoms are stabilized and consolidated) as they did not forget that it had been the capital of the Caliphate. Therefore, control over Cordoba would have meant being the heir of the most important western Mediterranean politic system since the Roman Empire.

¹⁹ As an example, we can highlight the original apparition of the mixtilinear arch in the Northern portico, developing at its finest in the palace oratory.



to the Zaragoza one (Viguera 1992, 62-64). The palace was raised under the Banū Hūd government. It reproduces some of the building and decorative schemes already seen in the Aljafería (fig. 5). It has even been thought that its construction is owed to the same workshop (Ewert 1979). If we start on material remains preserved, Zaragoza might be considered the metropolis of the kingdom for disseminating an ornamental language shared by the territories, exactly as Umayyads did before. In this sense, the pairing of Zaragoza and Balaguers' palaces would be a good example of how an artistic language contributes to consolidate both an identity and political legitimation.

Finally, 'Abd al-Raḥman ibn Dhī al-Nūn, who belonged to an arabized Andalusī family but with Berber origins, gained Sulaimān al-Musta'īn (1009 and 1013-1016) favour when supporting his aspirations to the Caliphate. In return, the former got the control of vast territories of the Middle March. The government of the city of Toledo was delegated to his son, the future Ismā'īl al-Ẓāfir (1032-1043) (Viguera 1992, 53-54).



FIG. 4 Oratory of Aljafería. Plaster decoration. Zaragoza, Aljafería palace (Cortes de Aragón). Photo: Víctor Rabasco

FIG. 5 Arch fragment of Castell Formós palace. Polychrome plaster on brick arch. Balaguer, Museu de la Noguera. Photo: Víctor Rabasco

This city was a very reactionary spot towards the Cordoban power even back in the Emirate times and so it continued all through the *fitna* (Delgado 1987, 30-34). Moreover, the palace on which the taifa kings settled had been built by the caliph 'Abd al-Raḥman III (929-961) seeking to have a safe zone from where he could control the city. This was a direct consequence of the extinguished revolt in 932 (Monzón 2011). When comprehending the historic facts and the governing family attitude, we understand the deep detach of the Toledo taifa with any Umayyad identity sign, represented by the Banū Dhī al-Nūn.

Excavations in the Santa Fe convent of Toledo during 2006 (Monzón 2011) brought up exceptionally singular remains: a triple arcade with two faces ornamented differently (fig. 6): on one side, it displays an iconography of court representations²⁰ and, on the other side, a bestiary belonging to the eastern tradition²¹ (Monzón 2011, 257-265). Despite being a decoration in plaster, it does not follow a moulding technique but modelling and carving by hand²². These polychrome sides were coated

²⁰ The iconography shown directly points to a courtesan context as the most highlighted figures belong to the hunter world: horse-riding falconers, birds of prey capturing gazelles, etc.

²¹ This conclusion is based on the appearance of both fantastic and real beast those are not common in Western cultures. However, the determining fact is the halos over some figures' heads. This iconography was possibly assumed from the Fatimid world.

²² The use of moulds for plaster decoration allows for a potential decrease in time for the decoration as it reduces the process of design and carving. That is why it is thought to be an exceptional piece, as handmade decoration grants a more careful and artisanal process.



by materials such as lapis lazuli and gold, revealing a sumptuous artwork (González 2014), as the whole palace must have been, also according to what chroniclers such as Ibn Ḥayyān al-Qurṭubī (987-1075) related (Ibn Bassām 1978-1979). The only remaining items preserved in all the Mediterranean with which we may compare our arcade are the ones found in the Tunisian city of al-Manṣūriyya²³ (Barrucand and Rammah 2009). If we add to this some other minor archaeological findings in Toledo and also the literary references depicting exchanges with western cities (Delgado 1987, 247-250), as a result we get to prove that the Banū Dhī al-Nūn kept a certain contact with some cities in the Mediterranean Levant²⁴. Perhaps was Cairo, the door to Asia and one of the biggest commercial ports in this time.

Therefore, the archaeological remains of the Toledan *alcázar* speaks a language that consciously sought to distinguish itself from the Caliphate tradition, through foreign architectural solutions.²⁵ In this sense, we must not forget the governing family's ideology, as they supported the Berber side during the *fitna* and consequently positioned themselves against Seville. We may consider though that the Banū Dhī al-Nūn accomplished an «anti-Umayyad» politic, which was materialized through an ornamental programme based on distinguishing themselves from the tradition. The clear purpose was to create a new identity of their own, which would legitimise them as independent governors of the Middle March.

Hypothesis and first conclusions

Unfortunately, due to the scarce and fragmented remains that have survived we cannot withdraw absolute conclusions for the moment, waiting for a more extensive and detailed study. But, what we can conclude is that architectural ornament (among other arts which could not be addressed in this study²⁶) does play a vital role in identifying configuration in the taifa kingdoms. As seen, the evolution of the Andalusí artistic language not only responds to the aesthetic taste, but it is conditioned by a deep political message with legitimating intentions. It is this factor that determines whether a dynasty develops one or another language. At the same time, it makes it original and different from the others. In this way, we are able to understand through the art the political ideology, supporting or against the Umayyads, and the links and relations among the taifas or even with the Mediterranean and beyond. Thus, ornament becomes a visual identity symbol of a legitimating message.²⁷

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FIG. 6 Bestiary side of taifa arch. Polychrome and carving plaster on brick arch. Toledo, Museo de Santa Cruz. Photo: Víctor Rabasco

²³ This city was one of the biggest Fatimid capitals in the 10th century, before the court was settled in Egypt. The very scarce material remaining of the Cairo Fatimid palaces do not allow us to set analogies seeking for formal or material similitudes.

²⁴ Possibly in an indirect way, through trade with other coastal taifas.

²⁵ This probably being because they lacked of another Andalusí decorating tradition they could integrate into.

²⁶ This paper should be understood as work in progress. It is the starting point of an extensive research that approaches the different kinds of arts development during the 11th century in al-Andalus. Because of that, it cannot extract definitive conclusions.

²⁷ I am extremely grateful to my colleague Alejandra Alonso Tak for her help with the translation of this article.

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