Enclosed in Ivory: The Miseducation of al-Mughira

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"It cannot be too often repeated, that the person who gives up his time to the study of this book, must not be satisfied with the superficial beauties of the images by which it may attract, but must search out the depth and hidden tendency of its fables, extracting from every proverbial expression the truth which it conceals, and giving to every word its moral import... [A] treasure awaits the researches of the person who carries his inquiries deeper than the superficial examination."

(Ibn al-Muqaffa', *Kalila wa Dimna*)

In the general dynamics of the history of al-Andalus, there is nothing particularly eventful about the year 357 / 967-968. The caliph al-Hakam II (r. 961-976), who had remained without an heir until his mid-forties, by then had two little sons: 'Abd al-Rahman, aged six, and Hisham, aged three. Around the time of their birth, the caliph had presented their mother - his favorite concubine (hāzija) named Subh - with several ivory boxes in celebration of her fertility. One of them, now in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional in Madrid, bears an inscription that specifically mentions the heir to the throne (cat. no. 4): "The blessing of Allah upon the Imam, the servant of Allah, al-Hakam 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]."

As mother of the future caliph (umma tu‘lid, umma 'Abd al-Rahman), Subh was a powerful figure at court. She had among her closest allies the vizier Ya‘far ibn Uthman al-Mushafi and a young personal administrator (wakil), Ibn Abi 'Amir, better known to history as al-Mansur, who a year earlier, in 967, had been appointed guardian of 'Abd al-Rahman and director of the mint. Not everyone, however, rejoiced at Subh’s fertility and political influence. During the long period of dynastic uncertainty brought about by al-Hakam II’s inability to produce an heir, a group of high officials seemed to have placed their preferences for the succession on his younger brother, al-Mughira, then aged 18. Even after the birth of 'Abd al-Rahman and Hisham, the supporters of al-Mughira continued to harbor hope that al-Hakam II, who was afflicted with chronic health problems, would die before the coming of age of either of his sons, thus opening the possibility for an insurrection in favor of his brother. At this historical juncture, an ivory pyxis was crafted for al-Mughira at the workshops of Madinat al-Zahra (fig. 74). Around its lid runs the following inscription:

"Blessings from God, goodwill, happiness, and prosperity to al-Mughira, son of the Commander of the Faithful, may God’s mercy be upon him; made in the year three hundred and fifty-seven."

Both for its formal virtuosity and for its conceptual sophistication, this work is one of the most magnificent pieces of ivory carving ever produced. Uneventful as it might have been, the year 357 / 967-968 becomes noteworthy in the history of al-Andalus just because of the creation of the al-Mughira pyxis.

A remarkable document contained in Ibn Hayyan’s Muqaddimah, the *Annals of al-Hakam II* by Isa al-Razi, opens a window into the life of the Andalusian court just three years after the date of the pyxis. Two main political themes emerge from the mass of court events, public ceremonies, diplomatic reports, correspondence, and panegyrics compiled by al-Razi: the question of succession and, in more general terms, the exaltation of the Umayyad Caliphate of al-Andalus above its eastern rivals. By far the greatest concern within palace walls was the ascension of al-Hakam II’s legitimate line of succession, which, after..."
the premature death in 970 of his first-born son, ‘Abd al-Rahman, was solely embodied by Hisham.8 The constant mention and praise of Hisham in the Annals of al-Razi betray the necessity to address an unstable situation — one that was made even more precarious by Hisham’s poor health and the presence of supporters of al-Mughira within the circle of power.9 The rhetoric of court poets was enlisted to strengthen the position of the young heir in verses that were clearly directed at an internal audience of possible dissenters: ‘Intelligence made him transcend childhood when he hadn’t even reached eight years of age, And, before he grew up, he deserved to be called ‘mature.’ Why wouldn’t he be able to become the heir while still a child, if he was bestowed with Divine favors and his father nominated him? Let us honor him who has the imam as his father! Let us honor him who has the imam as his son!’10 The privileged ceremonial context for the performance of these panegyrics was the celebration of the ‘Id festivals, especially the ‘Id al-Fitr (Festival of the Breaking of the Fast). On those occasions, the caliph held sumptuous and elaborate receptions attended —in carefully choreographed order according to rank—by all the members of the royal family, government officials, military commanders, foreign tributaries, and, sometimes, the defeated enemies of the caliphate. The ‘Id ceremonies constituted universal public oaths of allegiance to the caliph in which all the attendants who gathered around him extolled his unique religious status, dynastic heritage, and military might. The panegyrics composed by court poets for these events amplified these themes in beautiful metaphors—veritable works of art, which could be considered, as Sterckx has observed, “part of the lavish decoration and splendid ornament that contributed to the magnificent spectacle of the caliph’s Id and victory celebration...[and] part of the royal insignia and the iconography of power.”11 Among the rituals performed during the ‘Id al-Fitr were the exchanging of gifts among relatives and friends and the presentation of important gifts to the ruler.12 One day in 357 / 667-668, al-Mughira was presented with a precious object that reflected in very many of the themes and imagery he had heard in the verses of poets and had seen around him during the ‘Id ceremonies. Like the figures interwoven in the poetic fabric of panegyrics, the images inscribed on this gift carried a political message—one that combined general themes with others of a more personal nature, and masterfully deployed metaphor and simile to create multiple levels of meaning. This pyxis is a small object meant to be held and attentively perused at close range. The inscription circumscribing the lid directs the eye to wend its way sequentially, from right to left, through the four large medallions carved around its body. Starting from the court above which the inscription probably began in the original position of the lid —images increase in dynamism and narrative specificity, evolving from emblematic and metaphorical modes of signification to narrative and allegorical ones.13 The visual program thus conceived presents the fluid structure and evocative power of a qaṣīda in which standard poetic images, while maintaining their generic meanings, are welded into specific discourses to address a particular audience and event.14

Princes and Lions

“Prince Hisham was sitting in the western hall, known as the hall of the princes, and this was the first time that he held a reception ... This reception was similar to that of his father, the caliph. He had a demeanor of profound gravity and appeared to be relaxed. He looked like his father on the day on which he had held his first public reception at the beginning of the reign of his own father ‘Abd al-Rahman III’ on the Ilid al-Adha.”15

Flanking a musician and sitting on a throne sustained by lions are two characters of identical body type and similarly dressed in the tīne that marks their social rank (fig. 74 and cat. no. 118). Only the objects they carry differentiate them: the one occa-

The caliph formally identified his heir and secured his recognition through the device of a dual reception. ... The ‘Id ceremonies provided a perfect opportunity to establish the next line for the dynastic inheritance of the caliphate since they already serve as a forum for the affirmation of allegiance to the caliph and, by extension, to the dynasty.20 In light of these texts, we can conclude that the court scene in the pyxis is an iconic representation of one of these receptions, inscribed here in ivory as a permanent reminder to al-Mughira of the stability of the dynasty ensured by the caliph’s sons and of the oath of allegiance he had sworn to them on those occasions. Framed by a medallion, ‘Abd al-Rahman and Hisham appear dignified, gazing eye to eye as if to compose a dynastic tandem that conveys visually the unity and endurance of the line of succession. But the political impact of the dual receptions was not only visual, but also aural. Poets intensified the symbolic power of these ceremonies by creating metaphorical glosses that commented on their meaning. A qaṣīda recited by a poet during the aforementioned ‘Id al-Adha of 974 glorifies the scene of Hisham on the throne with a series of metaphorical amplifications. ‘Then, they proceed to visit the heir to the throne ... [the Prince] extended towards them the hand of the lineage of al-Hakam, a hand to which both nobility and glory are subjected, and they hastened to kiss it rejoicing greatly.
like thirsty beasts approaching a pond.
Their submission before such majesty was
Like that of cranes staring at a hawk.14

This double register through which political propaganda is publically articulated – the ceremonial image and the panegyric voice – is embodied by the pyxis. The object offers al-Mughira a visual reminder not only of what he saw, but also of what he heard, that is, not only the political image, which is described by the chronicler, but also the panegyric voice, which was uttered by the poet. The latter is reflected primarily in the motif of the lions. The small lions supporting the throne that appear axially connected to the caliph’s throne link this scene with the emblematic lion-bull combat of the contiguous medallion (cat. no. 11), visually recalling the metaphors employed by poets during the ‘Id ceremonies to refer to the strength of the ruler and his heir:

“He is a caliph who begets brave lions, whom he brings as honorable successors. May sovereignty over the earth ever remain with them!”

This is what a poet said in the late 9th century about the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil on the occasion of the celebration of the circumcision of one of his sons.21 Similes of this kind were also developed by poets at the court of al-Hakam II, where the caliph was often compared to a lion that cannot be “awakened by hyenas” or that “buries its claws into the jugular vein” of its enemies – a poetic image that is beautifully rendered on the pyxis with the deeply carved teeth of the lions tearing energetically through the skin of the bulls (fig. 75).22 Al-Razi reproduces a composition recited during the ‘Id al-Fitr of 974 that brings this imagery to the fore:

“Your Lord gave you the possession of their land,
With all its goods, and riches.
His lions killed their lions,
His cubs killed theirs.”23

In the pyxis, the cubs that support and signify the caliph’s sons become, in the contiguous medallion, mighty lions that bury their claws into their enemies. According to al-Razi, these verses – which constitute a forceful exaltation of the dynastic continuity and military might of al-Hakam II’s lineage – were recited in the presence of al-Mughira. On that particular occasion, they were directed against the enemies of the Andalusian Umayyad Caliphate.24 We might presume that through the pyxis given to al-Mughira a few years earlier, a similar message had been addressed personally to him, carved in ivory.25

The Lion and the Bull

“The caliph al-Hakam was so filled with anticipation ... that, on that day, he came to the hall where the caliph was taking place to contemplate his son receiving instruction. When he saw him there so elegantly seated, with a smile on his face, so attentive and peaceful, he rejoiced greatly.”26

Descriptions of the education of the young prince in the Annals of al-Hakam II offer endearing snapshots of courtly life. Al-Razi reports how the caliph carefully planned the instruction of Hisham, selecting teachers and even overseeing the renovation of the chambers where classes were to be held.27 An avid intellectual in his own right, al-Hakam II had also benefited, alongside his younger brother al-Mughira, from the elite education provided by the prominent scholars assembled at the court of their father, ‘Abd al-Rahman III. Hadith, law, and literature were among the subjects taught to the young princes, mostly with the aid of dictionaries and anthologies written by their precursors.28 The most celebrated anthology produced in Córdoba at the time of ‘Abd al-Rahman III was Ibn ‘Abd Rabibhi’s al-Iṣāb (The Necklace) – a monumental work composed of twenty-five books dealing with a wide variety of subjects such as the qualities and duties of the ruler, “generosity and the bestowing of gifts,” “wisdom contained in proverbs,” and “the psychology of man and his relation to the animal world.”29 Al-Iṣāb (el-farīd, as it came to be known, represented the culmination of the constant flow of Eastern literature to the Andalusian court – a transfer of learning that was actively promoted by the Umayyads in order to place themselves as the rightful inheritors, protectors, and patrons of Islamic culture.30 Fittingly, although most of the literary sources gleaned by Ibn ‘Abd Rabibhi to compose al-Iṣāb (el-farīd) were of eastern origin, he added to them a panegyric history of the Andalusian Umayyads that explicitly transformed the work into a celebration of their patronage. For its encyclopedic character, as a compendium of the wisdom found in Arabic literature, and for its exaltation of Umayyad history, with the famous sujūd dedicated to the military triumphs of ‘Abd al-Rahman III, al-Iṣāb (el-farīd) was likely one of the resources used for the instruction of the caliphs’ sons, namely the future al-Hakam II and al-Mughira. In fact, among the books sought out by Ibn ‘Abd Rabibhi to gather didactic stories for al-Iṣāb (el-farīd) were several “mirrors” for princes, notably Kalila wa Dimna, the most popular book of this kind in the Islamic world.31

Anyone acquainted with the fables of Kalila wa Dimna, as al-Mughira probably was, would find very familiar motifs in the pyxis that was given to him when he turned 18. Seen through the mind of a prince, the apparently random decorative animal imagery of the pyxis can be framed in more specific terms, revealing on its surface several emblematic images commonly associated with the cycle of illustrations in Kalila wa Dimna: the lion and the bull (figs. 75 and 76), the assffd goats (figs. 77 and 78), the parrots and the falconer (cat. no. 11b, upper interstices of central medallion).32 Like the generic illustrations of the tales found in manuscripts and on murals, the images on the pyxis serve as visual tokens to recall specific episodes. These are what Ernst J. Grube, in his study of the early illustrations of Kalila wa Dimna, aptly termed core-images: “We know that the core-images for the stories ... have survived practically unchanged for over a thousand years ... Just as religious doctrine makes use of a precise set of instantly recognizable images, the animal fables use images to communicate clearly and instantly, ‘political’ or ‘didactic’ points. And just as with religious iconography, the substance of the message is clear. If one knows the text of the story, one instantly recognizes a pictorial interpretation of a given story, the image becoming a symbol rather than being a mere illustration.”33

The tales of Kalila wa Dimna teach princes lessons on how to tackle situations of misguided political ambition, intrigue, and deceit at court. Some of the politically delicate scenarios outlined in the stories would have sounded quite familiar to those acquainted with the recent history of the Andalusian Umayyad dynasty, thus making them especially effective from a pedagogical point of view.34 The longest fable in the collection of Ibn al-Muqaffa –
"the story of two friends, whose mutual esteem and unreserved familiarity a false and designing companion succeeded in changing into sentiments of hatred and revenge"—seems to be particularly pertinent in this context. It relates how a lion king and his comrade the bull respected each other and maintained a balanced supremacy over the animal world. But the lion's court advisor, a jackal called Dimna, became jealous of the bull and started to spread rumors about the bull's intentions to kill the lion. These rumors fueled an increasing suspicion between the two former friends that led to a fight and the eventual murder of the bull by the lion (figs. 75 and 76). If al-Mughira had been educated at court listening to the parables of *Katila wa Dimna* and seeing illustrations of it, this episode would probably have come to his mind when he observed the medallion with the lion-bull combat—one of the most ubiquitous core-images associated with *Katila wa Dimna* from the 8th century on. By representing the violent outcome of this fable of ambition and deception, the designer of the pyxis could have intended to show young al-Mughira the tragic consequences of listening to the evil advice of those plotting to have him conspire against his brother's lineage.

Recalling this tale, the caliph's brother could also have pondered the subtle implications of the dangerous political game in which he was enmeshed. Like al-Mughira in 668, the bull presented no immediate danger to the lion, only a latent one, which could eventually escalate through the intervention of conspirators. In the tale, the lion decides to kill the bull, not because of the bull's direct actions, but because of the rumors spread by a counselor who told the lion:

"I conclude, that, if he has not really the project of deposing you by treachery or violence, he is at least preparing the way for mounting the throne at your death; indeed his whole conduct furnishes strong evidence that he has this in view. Now it is an old saying, that a sovereign, who is surrounded by dangerous subjects, if he does not by a bold stroke put an end at once to the conspiracies which are forming against him, will at last fall victim to his own timidity and want of resolution." Prudently, the lion told Dimna that despite this warning, he did not think that the bull would attempt any direct action, to which the counselor responded that "it would be right, if not to take immediate and open precautions against [the bull], at least to be on your guard against that which he will excite others to do." In conclusion, from the perspective of al-Mughira, this tale could have provided a powerful lesson about the necessity to thwart any conspiracy that was gathering, even indirectly, around him.

The figural hierarchy of the decoration of the pyxis—wi th the lion-bull combat as a central motif framed within a medallion, and smaller peripheral animal groups relegated to the interstices—visually recalls the narrative subdivisions of the tales in *Katila wa Dimna*. In fact, the fable of the lion and the bull contains several shorter stories within its narrative frame that are recounted by characters as didactic anecdotes to illustrate specific moral teachings. Among them is the story of the ascetic and the robe, illustrated by the core-image of the two goats fighting (figs. 77 and 78)—a tale that serves to warn of the danger of interfering in quarrels that do not concern one. The story of the parrots and the falconer, which teaches that "falsehood is severely punished as well in this world as in the next," could be recalled by the adjoining parrots and falconers that appear on both sides of the medallion with the court scene (cat. no. 11b).

The combination of dynamic iconography and moralizing imagery derived from *Katila wa Dimna* that appears in the al-Mughira pyxis is not without precedents. We find the same fable of the lion and the bull in a cycle of frescoes from an 8th-century palace in Panjikent, the capital of the Sogdian Empire. As in the case of the al-Mughira pyxis, the rhetoric of the frescoes combines the representation of animal fables from *Katila wa Dimna* with heroic and dynastic events—a programmatic strategy that surely spread later to other courtly commissions, both in monumental painting and in the portable arts.

Furthermore, the input of *Katila wa Dimna* as a model for the visual configuration of the pyxis might
have been, not only thematic and structural, but also hermeneutic. In addition to the idea of using animal imagery to convey a moralizing lesson to a young prince, *Katilla wa Dimna* might have inspired another aspect of the codification of the pyxis. As I have discussed in my earlier work, consideration of the semantic and structural relationship between the different units of the visual discourse of the pyxis is fundamental in order to gain insight into the subtle nuances of meaning within individual scenes and their complex allusions, even if at first sight they appear to be mere decorative stock imagery that can be found on other portable objects. In this respect, the frame of interpretation demanded by the pyxis constitutes a visual parallel to heuristic theories of textual interpretation that were widespread in the Arabic literary world and are clearly expounded by Ibn al-Muqaffa’s in the preface to *Katila wa Dimna*. He advises the reader to search for “the depth and hidden tendency of its fables,” by paying close attention to context and detail:

“The reading of this book, without attending to its scope and aim, which often lying deep do not obtrude themselves on the mind’s eye at first view, is as unproductive as the nut which has not been broken; or as the pains of a young scholar who …

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**The Palm Tree and the Eagle**

“Oh palm, you solitary one, like myself, grow
In a land where you are distant from your kindred:
You weep, while your leaves inactively whisper.
Not being human in species, not able to speak:
Were you endowed with mind, you would weep recalling
Euphrates and the homeland of the palm tree grooves!
But you cannot return, and I was driven away
By the ‘Abbasids’ hatred, from my kindred?”

(‘Abd al-Rahman I al-Dakhli)

With the delicate framing of a single luscious palm tree furnishing the center of the composition, the next medallion offers an evocative visual counterpart to the famous verses that “‘Abd al-Rahman I al-Dakhli (r. 736-788), the founder of the Umayyad dynasty of al-Andalus, erected at the sight of the solitary palm tree growing in the middle of his garden (cat. no. 116).” Transplanted from the East to al-Andalus, the palm tree became a symbol of the destiny of the Umayyads and an emblematic image of the legitimate transfer of caliphal power to the new land where it was to take root.

More than any other composition on the pyxis, this image is directly dependent on the rhetoric of panegyric in its sophisticated use of symbol, history, and legend to form an emblem of the political claims of the Andalusian Umayyads. Historical reevaluations of caliphal history from the perspective of the Andalusian dynasty were actively promoted in Córdoba at the time of ‘Abd al-Rahman III, in order to give historical legitimacy to his bold political move of adopting the caliphal title in 929. One of the chronicles commonly thought to have been composed at that time, known as *Askhar majmua fi sath al-Andalus*, contains the first-person narrative of the fateful moment at which the first Andalusian Umayyad, ‘Abd al-Rahman I, was recognized as the savior of the dynasty and the inheritor of caliphal authority. As the story goes, when ‘Abd al-Rahman was only ten years old, he and his brothers were taken to see their grandfather, the caliph Hisham, at the Syrian palace of al-Rusafa. The siblings were received by Maslama, Hisham’s brother, who upon seeing ‘Abd al-Rahman, ignored the rest of the group and began to kiss him, weeping. Maslama then placed ‘Abd al-Rahman on his saddle and at that moment, the caliph Hisham appeared and asked who the little boy was. “The event draws near, this is he,” Maslama responded prophetically, to which the caliph replied, “Yes, I have observed the distinctive signs on his face and neck.”

This founding legend of Andalusian Umayyad genealogy seems to be visually recreated in this medallion, where al-Hakim II’s offspring, ‘Abd al-Rahman and Hisham, appear lifted on horses, recalling the prophetic moment at which the first ‘Abd al-Rahman of al-Andalus was recognized by the caliph Hisham as the legitimate continuator of caliphal power. The original eastern al-Rusafa, where the prophetic appointment took place, and the new al-Rusafa founded in al-Andalus by ‘Abd al-Rahman I as a sign of the fulfillment of the destiny foreseen by his grandfather, overlap in this scene, where al-Hakim II’s sons, legitimate continuators of the dynastic line, extend their arms to grasp the “fruits of the caliphate.” To be sure, their actions point to a metaphor that gained currency in historical accounts of the disputes over succession that followed the death of the Prophet. Al-Tahari, for instance, puts in the mouth of some of the Companions of the Prophet references to the caliphate as a tree whose fruits needed to be collected at the right time, when they were ripe, and not before. Considering al-Hakim II’s uncertain succession, this analogy was especially fitting in two respects on the one hand, because it involved the image of the palm tree, a symbol of the caliphal power that had been transplanted to al-Andalus by the founder of the dynasty; and, on the other, for its implicit warning against “plucking fruit” before it was ripe, a warning that could be understood as addressing those who might conspire against the caliph’s infant heirs. The *Annals* of al-Razi give testimony to the use of the image of the “tree of the Caliphs” in the context of the panegyrics composed around the issue of succession. On the occasion of the *Id al-Fitr* of 972, the poet Muhammad ibn Hasam al-TubnI recited the following verses in praise of Prince Hisham:

“Everyone wants to confirm him as heir to the throne; but, even if they did not want to do it, swearing allegiance to him would be their utmost duty.
The branch of the Prophesy and that of the Caliphate are his trunk of origin: the shaft grows from these intertwined roots.”

Poets used the image of the tree in connection with the metaphor of the natural growing cycle in order to refer to the figure of the caliph in both its dynastic and its cosmic dimensions. In fact, not only did
the palm tree become part of the legacy of the Andalusian dynasty; so did 'Abd al-Rahman I's wish to nourish it and spread its seeds in order to recreate, in his new homeland, the luxurious eastern gardens he had left behind.95 Following this tradition, the poets of the court of al-Hakam II celebrated the caliph as the source and guarantor of the fertility of the land by invoking images of growth and regeneration. The panegyrics composed on the occasion of the 'Id al-Fitr ceremonies cast the figure of the caliph and his military victories within a cosmic cyclical pattern of decay and renewal, chaos and order. As Sterkveych points out, "The military-political situation ... is aligned with and mystically incorporated into the agricultural (solar) seasonal cycle, so that the transformation of the regime through military conquest is identified with agricultural or vegetable fertility."96

This is the metaphorical context that aids us in understanding the connections between the medallion of the palm tree and the adjacent medallion with the eagles (cat. nos. 11d and 11a). In both, attempts to interrupt the natural cycle of growth are prevented. In the medallion of the palm tree, two quadrupeds are pulling two birds down by biting their tails in order to prevent them from eating the seeds of the tree, that is, from thwarting the growth of fruit. By contrast, the riders picking dates show the beneficial results of protecting the seeds and letting them fully mature into fruit. Correspondingly, in the next medallion, two youths are trying to steal eggs from three eagles' nests as dogs drag them down. The image of the eagle constitutes the heraldic counterpart to the palm tree in the mythology of the Andalusian Umayyads. The founder of the dynasty, 'Abd al-Rahman I al-Dalhawi, was known as Saqr Qurashi (the Eagle of the Qurashi).97 'Abd al-Rahman III, who, as I have shown, appropriated and disseminated the legend of his ancestor to promote his newly adopted caliphal status, took up the eagle as his heraldic symbol. In the Miqabah, Ibn Hayyan credits 'Abd al-Rahman III with the introduction of the figure of the eagle on banners at the time of the Umayyad military campaign in 914:

"In order to increase the virtuosity of the display, he multiplied the types of equipment and introduced a great variety of features on flags and banners, all of them formidable and beautiful. On that occasion, the eagle appeared for the first time on his banners. This was his invention because no sultan had it before. The populace looked at it with curiosity and delight, and it became the subject of unending commentaries."98

Continuing the tradition initiated by his father, al-Hakam II kept the eagle as his preeminent emblem, and had it featured profusely on his military banners and ivory boxes.99

If the medallion of the palm tree puts al-Hakam II's dynastic line in a historical/prophetic context, the medallion with the eagles frames it specifically within the problematic issue of succession that concerned the receiver of the pyxis. As is typical in didactic tales, this scene seems to construct its meaning by involving the reader/viewer (al-Mughira) in the dynamics of representation through the depiction of internal surrogates. Their actions relate to one aspect of al-Mughira's political position in the power struggle of the court, that is, his threatening potential to break the natural line of succession of the reigning caliph and take over the throne. Ka'da wa Dimna again offers an interesting parallel for the understanding both of the didactic construction of this scene and of its political message. Another short story contained within the tale of the lion and the bull deals with a situation similar to the one visualized in this medallion. It relates how "a crow had made his nest in a tree upon a mountain, at no great distance from which was the hole of a serpent; and the serpent, as soon as the crow had hatched her young, came and took them away, and ate them."100 Distressed by the situation, the crow sought the advice of a jackal friend and confided in him her plan to kill the serpent while it was asleep. But the jackal discouraged the crow, warning her that she might endanger her life with this impulsive attempt.

"I will point you to a method," continued the jackal, "by which you may infallibly destroy the serpent, without any danger to yourself." In the pyxis, the crown of the fable becomes the eagle, signifying the caliph, while the rapacious serpent becomes a youth reaching for eggs.101 This story presents a delicate situation that was surely familiar to anyone at the Andalusian court in 968, when the line of succession was being threatened by the stealthy presence of an individual, the brother of the caliph, who could not be eliminated through direct action. Young al-Mughira could, however, be educated concerning the pitfalls of misguided ambition and courteously intrigue, and persuaded into warding off the conspirators around him, by using the most effective didactic tools available for the instruction of princes. In this spirit, he could have been handed an illustrated copy of Ka'da wa Dimna and he could have been presented with this beautiful ivory pyxis.102

But if the pyxis shows the influence of Ka'da wa Dimna in its effective employment of the rhetoric of didactic imagery, in the case of the medallion with the eagles, moralizing persuasion acquires darker tones. As I advanced in my earlier essay, the disposition of the youths, symmetrically stretching their arms to reach the eggs while quadrupeds pull them down, conjures up outlines of an image that would be readily recognizable to any member of the caliphal court — that is, crucifixion surrounded by dogs, the ultimate punishment reserved for traitors in al-Andalus.103

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Taslib + Tashbih

"Elevated in life and in death! You are truly one of (life's) miracles. It is as if the people around you, as they stood, Were seekers of your bounty on the days of free giving. ... You stretched out your hands towards them in welcome, As if you stretched them out in giving."104

Around the time of the creation of the al-Mughira pyxis, far away from Córdoba, in the streets of Baghdad, the poet Ibn al-Andari recited these verses in praise of Ibn Barqiyah, a vizier at the court of 'Izz al-Dawla Bakhtiyar (d. 977). Disconnected from the historical events that inspired it, Ibn al-Andari's poem seems simply to extol the popular adoration motivated posthumously by the vizier's generosity and good government. Yet, despite its ostensibly celebratory character, the poem conceals a grim image at its center — one that is only partially revealed through allusions to figures of "elevation" and "outstretched hands." The event that motivated Ibn al-Andari to compose this elegy was none other than the ghastly sight of the vizier's dead body nailed to a cross. Although never mentioned directly, the visual spectacle of the crucifixion emerges from below the surface of the text as the central image of the poem.

A striking, memorable, and ubiquitous public image of punishment in the medieval Islamic world, the crucifixion (taslib) was often the subject of poets who made it the center of evocative visual associations based on simile (tashbih).105 So common was its presence that one of the most important early theorists of the function of the poetic image in Arabic literature, al-Junjari, specifically used the theme of the crucifixion to illustrate a type of simile based on the resemblance between the general outlines of two images. He mentions the poetic description of a crucified man whose appearance was "like a lover stretching himself, on the day of departure, to bid a departing person farewell, or like someone waking up from sleep, still languid, continuously stretching in laziness." Al-Junjari then proceeds to explain the process that brings about this simile, emphasizing the priority of the general composition over the details in the visual apprehension of the image.

"Because the similarity of this form, being a generality, or as a whole, occurs to anyone who sees a crucified man. The condition [the poet sets] which signifies the continuity and constancy of the state [of the awakening man], turns the similarity into one which does not occur [to the mind] without profound contemplation, a search into the wider realms of the imagination, and alacrity."106

The process described by al-Junjari is not limited to the study of rhetoric but accounts for a psychology of vision. Far from being restricted to the domain of language and literature, the impulse to draw similarities between images and establish metaphorical...
associations based on resemblance runs deep in medieval Arabic civilization. This is particularly true in the context of courtly culture, where people were educated in the metaphorical conceits of panegyrics such as those recorded by al-Razi or of elegies such as Ibn al-Andalusi’s poem of the crucifixion. Yet artistic productions of the court, namely ivory caskets—which shared rhetorical structure, emblematic imagery, and audience with courtly poetry—are hardly allowed the same levels of metaphysical elaboration.

An awareness of those connections led me to observe, in my first approach to the al-Mughira pyxis, a veiled allusion to a crucifixion in the medallion of the eagles. My analysis rehearsed closely the process of abstraction and association that, as al-Jurjani explained in the passage quoted above, was the procedure used by many Arabic poets to create metaphorical links:

“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. 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 make a formal abstraction of the overall disposition in 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 famous punishment reserved for the rebels of the caliphate in Islamic Spain. This was the end that awaited al-Mughira if he decided to participate in any revolt against the legitimate succession.”

An interpretation seemingly so elusive and subjective is an easy target for positivists, always keen on policing thought. Even today, in a discipline such as the history of Islamic art, keeping one’s analysis at a factual level and treading carefully on the path of the commonplace are often rewarded, while venturing into the domains of interpretation, in order to explore ways the imagination was mobilized in times past, is generally met with skepticism. This attitude is not only intellectually shortsighted but also clearly anachronistic in that, in the name of a misplaced and disingenuous “modern” notion of scientific rigor, it denies the objects levels of meaning and allusion that were readily available and even actively sought by viewers in their original context of production.

In fact, an intelligent reading of sources, both textual and iconographic, allows for the reconstruction of a “period eye” with which to view these objects—an eye educated at court in the subtleties of visual rhetoric and political propaganda, filled with the images conjured up by poets and with the pageantry and memorable events unfolding within and around the palace. As I will show, for this ideal viewer—a category to which both the designer of the pyxis and al-Mughira belonged—seeing the resemblance to a crucifixion in the compositional structure of the medallion with the eagles was not only feasible but also probable.

There are no iconographic records of a crucifixion in al-Andalus, but its material configuration, its public function, and the impact it had on contemporary audiences can be retrieved through textual sources. One of the most horrifying multiples public crucifixions took place in 930 under al-Hakam II’s father, Abd al-Rahman III. To make an example of ten soldiers who had fled from the battle of al-Khadaj (Alhendegas), the caliph ordered them crucified on tall crosses, which had been set up before the doors of a citadel in Simancas facing the public square. In the Muqaddasa, Ibn Hayyan inserts the remarkable eye-witness report of a merchant of perfumes who happened to be in town attending the market. This poignant account, transmitted to the historian by the merchant’s own son, Yahya ibn Muhammed ibn Numan al-Attar, deserves a full citation:

“I was carried away by the crowd that was swarming to watch the crucifixions. I could not find my way out of the multitude so I sat on the ground and tried to look away, for I almost lost my mind at the horror that was unfolding before my eyes. I gathered my possessions in a sack, where I put the merchandise I was planning to sell during the ifd festival season. However, the horror engulfing that place and the screams of those being tormented made me fall into a faint, and a thief took advantage of the opportunity to steal my sack. When I recovered and realized that I had been robbed, I could not help meditating on the difference between my heart and the heart of that thief in terms of weakness and strength in the face of horror. That was a terrible day that frightened people for a very long time.”

Other sources report how prisoners were often beheaded, then nailed to a cross and left exposed in public places for months so that the population could insult them. In his Ta’ruf al-hamama (Ring of the Dove), Ibn Hazm recalls the indelible impression of one of these crucifixions left on his mind: “I well remember seeing him hanging on the cross in the meadows fringing the Guadalquivir; he was so ridged with arrows that one would have said he was a hedgehog.”

As we can gather from these testimonies, public crucifixions in al-Andalus had a double function: punishment and deterrence. Punishment had a physical, immediate character: it was performed on the body of the victim through the infliction of excruciating pain (when the body was crucified after death, the event constituted a posthumous humiliation). Deterrence had a mental and prospective dimension: it was actualized in the conscience of the viewers through their confrontation with an image of suffering so powerful as to become irreversibly imprinted on their minds. The success of deterrence resided precisely in the ability of the prosecuting authority to stage a compelling iconic vision that would be unforgettable to those who were exposed to it. Ibn Abd Rabbihi explicitly states this aspect in the famous awraj praising the military victories of Abd al-Rahman III, which he included in a book that, as I mentioned earlier, al-Mughira must have known well, al-tifil al-jarid:

“How many apostates who have passed away, and how many religious hypocrites in the company of that wretch, who have enjoyed high rank, have then suffered a reversal of fortune, being crucified on a pole with their head placed upon its trunk? So how can the lawbreaker not take warning from the fate of one whom Caliphs have pursued? Do you not see him raised up high in abjuration, serving as a warning to whomsoever would see or hear?”

In conclusion, in its function as a punishment, crucifixion was an act (meant to be experienced) while in its function as a deterrent, crucifixion was an image (meant to be viewed). It is this second dimension, that is, crucifixion as an image aimed at deterrence, that we find encoded in al-Mughira’s pyxis.

In order to approximate an idea of what the form of crucifixion described in the sources would look like when translated into a two-dimensional representation, we should turn to the iconographic record. Illustrations of crucifixions are rare in Islamic art but not completely absent. We can find them, for instance, in cycles of illumination associated with the Persian royal epic, the Shah-nama, especially the episode of the death of Zahak chained to Mount Damavand. In a manuscript, now at the Bodleian Library (MS. Ouseley Add. 176), the artist reiates the crucifixion in stylized terms, enclosing Zahak within a medallion-like frame, thus arriving at a formal solution that offers general similarities to the basic structural pattern of the medallion of the al-Mughira pyxis (fig. 79).

The reference to a crucifixion in the medallion is reinforced by the motif of the dogs, which, according to Arabic sources, were employed as part of the public staging of such punishment.25 The use of dogs as props in public forms of torture was not an occurrence exclusive to the Islamic world. It probably originated in ancient times and survived well into the Middle Ages in Christian Europe, in the mode of hanging known as the “Jewish execution,” often reproduced in prints (fig. 80). In both the Chris-
which the scene of the medallion transmutes itself before the viewer's eyes into a crucifixion. Such a process involves perception and memory along the lines expounded by al-Jurjani: "After investigation, recollection and activity of the memory, deep search of the self (nafs) for the images which it has known, and stirring of the imagination to look actively at the display images, and to recall those images which have remained absent." As in the poem quoted at the beginning of this section, the spectral image of the crucifixion infiltrates the whole surface of the medallion as a lurking and menacing reminder of punishment and death. To recall the conclusion of my earlier study, "Through its multilayered articulation, this scene constitutes a masterpiece of pictorial allusion by synthesizing in one image two teleologically related events—the illegal action and its punishment. It presents al-Mughira with the snapshot of his very act of rebellion, through the simile of the youths stealing eggs, and, at the same time, confronts him with its lethal consequences (crucifixion)."

In its complex and subtle rhetoric of allusion, this image is, uncannily, a literal visualization of the idea contained in the final paragraph of the tale of the lion and the bull in *Kitāb wa� Dinnaa*:

"Thus every one who seeks his own advantage by the injury of another, will find the means which he employs for the attainment of his purpose, converted into the instruments of his own destruction."  

**Fatal Strategies: Subjects (in)to Objects**

"Al-Mushaifi then hastened to dispatch Mohammed Ibn Abi Amir with a body of troops to the residence of al-Mughira, with instructions to put him to death. Ibn Abi Amir found al-Mughira in complete ignorance of what had occurred; he told him of his brother's death, and how his nephew, Hisham, had been seated on the vacant throne. At the receipt of this intelligence, al-Mughira was terrified; but soon after recovering, he said, 'I hear and obey the orders [of my master]. Not knowing how to act, Ibn Abi Amir sent a written message to al-Mushaifi ... The answer was, 'Seize him, and put him to death ...' Al-Mughira was accordingly strangled."  

Fearing that Hisham's minority would embolden those supporting al-Mughira to place him on the throne during the vacancy of power that followed al-Hakam II's death in 976, a group of officials favoring the legitimate line of succession, led by the vizier al-Mushaifi, ordered the assassination of the caliph's brother. Eight years after al-Mughira received the gift of the pyxis, the didactic warning carved on its surface had a tragic epilogue.

My interpretation of the pyxis as a hostile warning to al-Mughira, with the consequent implication that it originates in the faction defending al-Hakam II's legitimate line of succession, is not only supported by the peculiar wording of the inscription, as Renata Holod has perceptively observed, and the internal logic of the iconographic program, but also by contextual historical evidence. In fact, every single person that we can relate to the patronage of ivory boxes at the court of al-Hakam II belonged to the political party that opposed al-Mughira and favored one of the caliph's sons.

Ziyad ibn Aflah, to whom a pyxis now in the Victoria and Albert Museum is dedicated, was prefect of police under al-Hakam II. During the caliph's death, he was among those who endorsed the execution of al-Mughira at the request of the vizier al-Mushaifi. Durri al-Saghir, al-Hakam II's treasurer, whose name appears on the pyxis dedicated to Subh that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, also belonged to the faction supporting Hisham (cat. no. 4). This is clearly attested by an episode from the *Annals of al-Hakam II* in which al-Razi reports that, in 973, Durri was accused of malfeasance and was discharged. When Prince Hisham learned about it, he personally intervened, sending a handwritten letter to his father asking for a pardon for Durri, who was automatically restored to his position.

More importantly, a closer look at the two principal characters later involved in al-Mughira's death, the vizier al-Mushaifi and Ibn Abi 'Amir, reveals the essential constituents of the mindset in which a sophisticated object such as this pyxis might have originated. al-Mushaifi, whose father had been one of al-Hakam II's teachers, was a learned poet and shared the caliph's passion for books and intellectual speculation. He was the person who recommended Ibn Abi 'Amir to al-Hakam II for the position of tutor of his sons, first of 'Abd al-Rahman and later of Hisham. To be sure, Ibn Abi 'Amir was highly qualified for this job, on account of the elite education he had received. Among his teachers was the famous scholar from Baghdad 'Ali al-Qali—a character who played a fundamental role in the transference of Eastern learning and literature into Andalus. Not only did al-Qali bring with him the
intimate knowledge of Arabic literature he had acquired in the course of his prominent career as a member of Baghdad’s intellectual circles, but he is also said to have managed to transport most of his library to Córdoba.  

These facts reveal that al-Mushafi and Ibn Abi ‘Amir were two powerful and ambitious figures whose position at court was dependent on the well being of the caliph and his sons. Both were profoundly learned, interested in poetry and in the education of princes, and intimately acquainted with the literary productions of the East, among which Kalila wa Dimna stood out as one of the most renowned best-sellers. In sum, they both meet the profile of the creative force behind the al-Mughira pyxis as it emerges from a conceptual and formal analysis of its iconographic program.

As I pointed out in my earlier study, the more likely of the two to have commissioned the pyxis was Ibn Abi ‘Amir, who would eventually become “al-Mansur,” the powerful dictator of al-Andalus under Hisham. He had indeed the motives, the power, the opportunity, and the mindset. As a protégé of Subh, and tutor for her two sons, he knew that his political career and livelihood were inextricably linked to the succession of one of them. His appointment as director of the mint a year before the pyxis was commissioned attests to his presence and authority at the workshops of Madinat al-Zahra. Moreover, the following year, the now famous 968, stands out as a milestone in Ibn Abi ‘Amir’s ambitious career because he was appointed treasurer and qadi of Seville and Niebla. Besides his political victories, al-Mansur had also achieved that year effective control over the monetary and practical resources required to order an object such as the al-Mughira pyxis. In fact, chroniclers report that he frequently commissioned luxury objects to gain support at court by distributing presents. It was precisely during his tenure at the mint that he had a palace of silver made for Subh, prompting al-Hakam II’s famous comment, “By Allah! this youth (meaning al-Mansur) has won the hearts and affections of our women with his presents.” I would contend that it was also at this time that he commissioned the pyxis for al-Mughira, perhaps as a gift to present to the caliph’s brother in the context of the exchanges that took place during the ‘Id ceremonies of 968—a memorable year in the career of this ambitious courtier.

In recounting these ceremonies, al-Razi describes the tightly scripted topographical location allotted to each member of the court in the space of the reception hall, in keeping with their official rank and familial relationship to the caliph. Al-Mughira occupied a privileged place, fourth in the spatial hierarchy of the reception hall, right after the caliph and two of his older brothers, Abu ’l-Asbah ’Abd al-Aziz and al-Asbah Abu ’l-Qasim, who sat on each side of the throne (fig. 81). Al-Mughira’s position, next to the caliph and facing the audience, was ceremonially prominent but factually marginal in relation to the structure of power. In these tabulae vivae, he appears as an object caught up in a network of relations and exchanges, just like his pyxis—an object with a name but devoid of subjectivity, a bearer of a symbolic text that has not been authored by him but has been inscribed upon him by others. The program of the pyxis addressed the public role that al-Mughira played in the refined structures of the court, with a double intention: celebration and consolidation. Part of its program was aimed at celebrating his position as a willing participant in the universal oath of allegiance to the caliph and his heirs as it was staged in the dual receptions. The other part was intended to render him inactive and make him accept such a role by displaying a didactic text that would teach him about the political and personal dangers of stepping outside it. The object was ultimately meant to objectify its owner. Paradoxically, in the course of history, the pyxis has effectively come to embody al-Mughira by giving prominence to his name, even though he emerges as a marginal character in the written sources of the history of al-Andalus. However, the identity that the pyxis memorializes is not the one that al-Mughira would have presumably liked to be remembered by, but rather, the one that its iconographic program celebrates, that is, his condition as an idle presence imprisoned in a spectacle of privilege and power. The solemn vis-

rines of the Louvre Museum, where the pyxis is exhibited today, could not reflect more poignantly the conditions that surrounded its original owner in the reception hall of Madinat al-Zahra, where he was displayed in his glory as a passive object of vision.

This discussion of the pyxis invites meditation on the ways in which subjects and objects acquire meaning and exchange positions within the web of socio-symbolic relations. In Fatal Strategies, Baudrillard wages an assault on the privileged status given to the subject in history and argues that, on the contrary, it is the object that constitutes itself as a focus of agency in the world, ultimately holding sway over the fate of the subject. The object seduces, while the subject desires, and it is in its strategy of seduction that the object becomes an agent of history, replacing the subject. In order to explore fully the multiple threads that make up the fabric of this confrontation between subjects and objects, it is necessary to suspend the prejudices that confine the object to a passive status. My analysis of the interface between the pyxis and its owner takes this into consideration and, following Baudrillard, may be summarized by observing: “The object is neither the double nor the repressed of the subject, neither its fantasy nor its hallucination, neither its mirror nor its reflection—it has its own strategy and holds the key to the rules of the game, impenetrable to the subject, not because they are deeply mysterious, but because they are infinitely ironic.”
The Void and the Vessel

“There is perhaps but one fatal strategy and only one: the history. And doubtless the only difference between a banal theory and a fatal theory is that in one strategy the subject still believes himself to be more cunning than the object, whereas in the other the object is considered more cunning, cynical, talented than the subject, for which it lies in wait.”

In the confrontation of subjectivities that emerges from the understanding of the pyxis in the context of the discourse of the gift, there is someone who appears constantly displayed on its surface yet is fundamentally withheld from view: its creator. I have argued that the evasive iconography and complex allusions of the pyxis point to a designer whose mind enjoyed toying with the limits of language and such a person is again the al-Mansur portrayed in the sources. Among the many anecdotes related by al-Maqari regarding al-Mansur’s lively interaction with poets during his majlis, there is one that illustrates this aspect. A famous poet of his court, named Said al-Baghdadi, was accused by his colleagues of plagiarism and a lack of originality. Al-Mansur decided to test Said’s poetic abilities by presenting to him an elaborate object about which he should recite a composition. The object was:

“A large tray, containing compartments ornamented with every variety of elegant designs ... On the roof of the compartments were toys of jasmine made in imitation of females, and under the roof a reservoir of transparent water, the bottom of which was paved with pearls instead of common pebbles; in the water was a snake swimming. [Upon showing this object to the poet, al-Mansur said:] Look at that tray, the like of which, I assert was never placed before any other king but me. If the charge brought against you be false, prove it by describing to me verse both the tray and its contents. [To meet this challenge, Said recited a composition that al-Mansur deemed beautiful but incomplete. He called Said’s attention to a detail he had failed to notice:] a ship, in which was a maiden rowing herself with oars of gold.”

Immediately, Said started reciting new verses on the motif he had previously overlooked and, finally, al-Mansur regarded the poem worthy of the object described. For his ability to render images in poetic words, Said received a gift: one thousand dinars and one hundred robes.

Said’s merit was not only the beauty of his speech but, essentially, his capacity to overcome the twofold deficiency that initially marred his recitation: superficial observation and the limits of language to capture visual experience. To a certain extent, such is the challenge that art history shares with poetic ekphrasis. Said’s anecdote provides therefore a suitable background to reflect on the analytical model I propose for the al-Mughira pyxis and its wider implications for the future study of courteously portable objects. Three main issues emerge from the episode.

First, it reveals a mode of viewing courteously portable objects that privileges close observation and attention to detail. It speaks of an eye that finds pleasure in the discovery of nuances and variations on the commonplace. It is a mode of viewing that values the unique over the generic, or, to be more precise, the unique that is concealed within the generic.

Secondly, the anecdote exemplifies the complex dialectic interface between the visual rhetoric of portable objects and courteously poetic discourse. Each engages the other in an agonistic dynamics of influence that facilitates a complex exchange of imagery, compositional strategies, and meanings.

Finally, this episode brings into view the role of another subject that eventually enters the semantic domain of the object, not as an intruder, but as an expected, and even anticipated participant — the prospective interpreter. Objects such as al-Mansur’s silver tray or the al-Mughira pyxis were created as material tokens to actively engage the viewer in a process of “mutual” interpretation, one that was often private but that acquired, on occasion, a public dimension. When interpretation entered the public stage, its vehicle was poetry because it was understood that the essential challenge posed by the visual was a challenge to the limitations of language itself. Only the poet, the master of language, could attempt to come close to capturing the full significance of the object.

There is no written record of al-Mughira’s interpretative encounter with his pyxis, but there is an interesting document informing us about the experience of his first known modern admirer, the Spanish collector and scholar Juan F. Ríaño.81 Ríaño’s painstaking confrontation with the object in possession is evident in the manuscript draft of The Industrial Arts of Spain.82 Of all the Andalusian ivory boxes he attempted to describe, the al-Mughira pyxis proved to be the most elusive. His notes on the pyxis are marred by corrections, tentative identifications, and misinterpretations (fig. 82). The real presence of the object seems to have been, for Ríaño, more disorienting than reassuring. His dissatisfaction with the task is revealed in the fact that, in the final publication, he discarded most of his notes on the pyxis and simply included a general mention of its “splendid ornamentation of figures and animals,” in addition to transcribing and translating its inscription.

The privileged information that Ríaño could have yielded on his pyxis, but ultimately chose to withhold, stands in poignant contrast to the little value of the notes he has left. His was a discursive approach concerned with the surface of the object. Subtlety, both his own and that of the object, was entirely removed from scholarly consideration. An excessive attachment to the immediate material presence of the object prevented him from attempting to reach its universal meaning — a goal that may be achieved by engaging the poetic dimension of the interpretative process. As Ervin Panofsky has pointed out, “The humanities... are not faced by the task of arresting what otherwise would slip away, but of enlivening what otherwise would remain dead.”83 Only by taking up this challenge to the full extent of its methodological implications, might we begin to engage with objects of Islamic art in substantial ways, both their immediate materiality and their universal significance.

The space between these two poles of thought was famously traversed by Heidegger in his 1950 essay Das Ding, where he meditated on the ontological essence of another circular portable object. In speaking of a Greek vase, Heidegger reminded us of a simple truth: “From start to finish the potter takes hold of the impalpable void and brings it forth as the container in the shape of a containing vessel. The jug’s void determines all the handling in the process of making the vessel. The vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that it holds.”84

Just like that of the potter, the art historian’s creative project should not exclusively focus on mapping variations on the surface of his object, but rather on bringing to light the generative void that constitutes its essence, on creating an epistemological structure that reflects its perceived meaning, and on making it visible by delineating its contours with words. It cannot be too often repeated...
9. Like his brother, Husam suffered from precarious health. The political importance of this issue in the context of the internal power struggles at court is clearly illustrated in the Annals. Al-Razi describes the system and concern of al-Hakam II when Husam was afflicted with smallpox. The recovery from the illness was celebrated by having Husam give an audience for the high officials of the court — a politically strategic display of the heir to the throne, with his health fully restored, for all members of the court to see. Ibn Hayyan 1965, pp. 152-153 (Spanish trans. in Ibn Hayyan 1967, pp. 192-193).


12. Rosenfeld et al. 1971, pp. 142-150, esp. p. 143. Essential to the meaning of the al-Mughira pyxis is its condition as a gift — an object that was exchanged between two individuals within public settings, thus signaling an intentional intervention of the giver in the receiver's world. Generally, the gift constitutes an autographed message whose goal is the establishment of personal and social relations or the celebration of special events. In most cases, the message transcends its primary purpose and acquires an ideological elaboration and shaping, to a certain extent, the receiver's reality and his identity.

The literature on the discourse of the gift is quite extensive; for an introductory collection of critical essays, see Schrift 1997.

13. For a structural analysis of the different units that constitute the visual program of the pyxis, see Prado-Vilar 1997, p. 27. For the relation between the lid, the inscription, and the decoration, see Prado-Vilar 1997, p. 57, n. 15.

14. For the strategies through which stock princely imagery acquires specific meaning in the context of the al-Mughira pyxis, and their similarities to those employed in panegyrics, see Prado-Vilar 1997.

15. My translation from Ibn Hayyan 1965, p. 184 (Spanish trans. in Ibn Hayyan 1967, p. 222). In a later ivory box, the so-called Pamplona casket, the ruler appears represented with the same attributes, but bearded (cat. no. 204); Prado-Vilar 1997, pp. 22-23.

16. Aside from Renata Holod, who aptly noted that the two figures are of similar rank (see New York 1991, cat. no. 3), scholars have traditionally interpreted the character holding the flabellum as a servant. A comparison be-

17. For the date of the death of Abid al-Rahman, see Prado-Vilar 1997, p. 37, n. 28.


25. For an analysis of this qasida and its political context, see Stekrych 2002, pp. 249-256.

26. It is not a coincidence that the beautiful casket in the David Collection exhibits the closest stylistic relation to the al-Mughira pyxis that can be found in the corpus of Andalusian ivory, and at the same time, as Kjell von Folsach points out in his article in the publication from 1998, the ivory dates from a similar period (cat. no. 101-102). On the front of the David Collection's casket, two riders are prominently displayed showing their prowess in hunting — a recurring motif in princely iconography similar in symbolic meaning to the lion imagery, which appears on the opposite side of this box. Had there been enough space on the al-Mughira pyxis, this composition could have been framed by a medallion and placed in the same sequence with the court scene and the lion-bull combat, and immediately before the medallion with the riders picking dates (see the discussion of this scene below). Understood as a whole, this program would cover the different aspects upon which the present status and future power of al-Hakam II's two heirs were founded: majesty, military power, and ridden lion.


28. On the education of Husam, including information about his teachers, see Ibn Hayyan 1965, pp. 76-77 and 133-134 (Spanish trans. in Ibn Hayyan 1967, pp. 99-100 and 168).

29. The main study on the system of education in al-Andalus remains R. J. F. Gardner 1938, with numerous references to the time of al-Hakam II.

30. For Ibn 'Abd al-Rahhah, see Iby 1986, pp. 35-42; Porn Boiges 1898, pp. 51-57; and Rubiera Marta 1992, pp. 177-180.

31. The book on the cultural policy of the Umayyads and their active promotion of the transfer of eastern culture is still essential, see Wiesenburg 1980-1989. This author recalls the famous reaction of the Byad vizier of Baghdad, Ibn 'Abd, who upon reading al-Idq al-fard, complained, "This is our own merchandise being served back to us!" Wasserstein 1990-1991, p. 102.

32. For the specific references to Kallada wa Dinana in al-Idq al-fard, see Werkmeister 1985, pp. 324-325. This Indian
collection of fables was translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ in the middle of the 8th century and soon became a best-seller in court circles as an effective educational tool to provide moral instruction for young princes. “The author of this work,” explains Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ in the preface, “had four objects in view when he composed it. The first was to render it attractive to the young reader, by the ministry of birds and beasts; the second was to engage the attention of princes, by the conduct of the animals in the different circumstances in which they are placed; the third was to promote the amusement and excite the curiosity of every class, and thereby contribute to the lasting preservation of a book, which, fourthly, philosophers would not exclude from the sphere of their speculations.” Knatcbull 1819, p. 64.

33 Few illustrated cycles of Kitāla wa Dinma survive before the 10th century, when manuscript production experienced an unprecedented flourishing. However, literary and iconographic evidence has led scholars such as Julian Raby to conclude that there was a consistent iconographic tradition that continued, almost unchanged, from the 8th to the 9th century. As Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ himself asserts in the preface, he conceived the book to be accompanied by illustrations, probably adopting an existing cycle associated with the text. Such a practice might have been the basis for his Arabic translation (see Raby 1991). The rapid dissemination of illuminated versions of Kitāla wa Dinma in the West is attested by a southern Italian manuscript in the Pierpont Morgan Library (MS. 397) produced between 980 and 1050 and containing a Greek translation with 21 miniatures (see Avery 1941 and Raby 1987-1988, pp. 382-386). The presence of illustrated copies of Kitāla wa Dinma in Al-Andalus, however, cannot be assessed with material evidence due to the unfortunate dispersal and destruction of Al-Hakam II’s famous library. Yet sources are unequivocal about the caliph’s insatiable bibliophilism and his interest in keeping his library permanently updated by sending agents to Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, and Alexandria to purchase books (see al-Maqari 1840-1843, vol. 2, pp. 165-170). Taking into account that Kitāla wa Dinma was known and used as part of anthologies of wisdom literature such as Ibn ‘Abd al-Rabbih’s Al-Iql qar al-faris, it is simply unthinkable that illustrated copies of the book did not reach Al-Andalus under an avid collector such as Al-Hakam II, if not earlier – all the more so if we consider the strong influence of this book on the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages, from its partial use by Peter Alfonso in his Disciplina clericalis in the early 12th century to the several complete translations from the Arabic (including the prologue of al-Muqaffa‘) into Castilian commissioned by Alfonso X in the 13th century, when he was still a prince (for an edition and study of the Alfonso translation, see Cidla e Dinna 1984).

34 Grube 1991, p. 36.

35 Thwarted conspiracies involving uncles and brothers of the designated heir had resulted in a series of executions in the recent history of the Andalusian Umayyad dynasty. In fact, al-Mughrīḍ’s situation in relation to his nephews had parallels in Al-Hakam II’s own lifetime. His father, ‘Abd al-Rahman III, had executed one of his uncles for having conspired to take the throne in his place. He later eliminated one of his own sons, ‘Abd Allah al-Zahir, for allegedly having instigated a conspiracy to have him and his heir, al-Hakam, assassinated (see Lévi-Provençal 1950-1953, vol. 2, pp. 316-317).

36 Knatcbull 1819, p. 82.

37 Knatcbull 1819, p. 120.

38 Knatcbull 1819, p. 137.

39 Knatcbull 1819, pp. 104-105; the teaching is enunciated on p. 109.

40 Knatcbull 1819, pp. 107-108; the scene closely resembles the “scene of contempo- raneous sacrificing” between two figures personifying the Western and the Eastern caliphat. However, rather than geopolitical allegory, which is more suitable for public monuments programs, the Pyxis reflects and addresses the internal situation of the court, which is the natural environment where this object was meant to function and circulate within an environment dominated by the issue of succession. Secondly, they infer their interpretation from an anachronistic contextualization of the Pyxis. A conspiratorial intention to Al-Mughrīḍ would, at most, make sense years after the Pyxis was produced, when the caliph was in dire health and had already one remaining heir, but not in 977-978, when Al-Hakam II was in reasonably stable health and had two sons to continue his line of succession. In fact, after the birth of the princes, the attention and hopes of the court had shifted to them and Al-Mughrīḍ had ceased to be “la perle centrale de la dynastie,” as Makartui and Martinez-Gros assert. He had become nothing more than a latent threat – probably perceived as such because of the recent history of the dynasty, which offered several examples of the instability caused by the political ambitions of its siblings. The Pyxis was a way to control, didactically and politically, a teenager who could be potentially manipu- lated by conspirators, by delivering to him a preemptive message in the form of a "political parable.”

45 For this aspect, see Safan 2000, pp. 176-178.

46 For the political circumstances surrounding ‘Abd al-Rahman III’s adoption of the caliphal title, see Fierro 1987.


48 al-Tariq 1990 and al-Tariq 1991. Al-Tariq’s universal history was well known in Al-Andalus, where ‘Arif Ibn Said (d. 980), secretary of al-Hakam II, wrote a summary and continuation (for ‘Arif, see Pellat 1960 and Castilla-Brazales 1992). The use of the metaphor of the ripe and unripe fruit in the presentation of the struggles for the caliphate was widespread. For example, after the delegation of Abu Bakr as the Prophet’s successor, some of the Companions tried to convince ‘Ali, Muhammad’s son-in-law, to dispute the election and claim for himself the leadership of the community. In this context of episode, elaborations of sayings put in the mouth of ‘Ali sentences such as “If I had attempted to pluck the ripe fruit of the Caliphate then by this the orchard would have been desolated and I too would have achieved nothing...” (see the full text in the electronic edition of the Nahj al-Balaghah, sermon 5; http://www-al- islam.org/nahj/index.htm). Poets at court of Al-Hakam II also used the metaphor: Al-Razi includes in his Annals a qudsia recited during the ‘Id al-Fitr of 974 that contains the following line: “The ripe dates are eaten while waiting for the unripe ones to mature in due time” (my translation from Ibn Hayyan 1965, p. 162: Spanish trans. Ibn Hayyan 1967, p. 202). In his study of this qudsia, Steckey offers a different interpretation of this passage and signals the earlier use of the metaphor of the ripening of dates in a classical composition by the renowned 9th-century caliph poet AbuTamamin that might have served as a model for the Andalusian poet (see Steckey 2002, pp. 216-217, esp. 269).


50 For the political dimensions of ecology in Al-Andalus, see Ruggles 2000.


54 For an ivory box dedicated to Al-Hakam II and exclusively decorated with heraldic eagles, see cat. no. 69 and


68. In practice, the punishment of the crucifixion did not always involve the disposition of the criminal with outstretched arms. On occasions, the criminal was simply affixed to a pole and pierced with arrows. However, in the poetic and artistic representation of this punishment, that is, in its conceptualization as an image, its structure was always that of a man nailed to a cross.

70. For references, see Prado-Vilar 1997, p. 39. n. 11.

71. For the Jewish execution, see Gilani 1943, pp. 38-56; Cohen 1989, pp. 407-416; Merbeck 1999, pp. 187-239. This form of torture is documented in Spain in the early 14th century; Cohen 1989, p. 412.

72. Abu Dabb 1979, p. 119. Sons of califs -- and al-Mughira was no exception -- had many opportunities to witness grievously public displays of the mutilated remains of those who dared to challenge caliphal authority. In 971, for instance, a solemn procession exhibiting the heads of decapitated insurgents paraded through the streets of Córdoba, passing in front of all the members of the court, including al-Mughira. For this military celebration and a list of participants, see Ibn Hayyan 1965, pp. 47-53 (Spanish trans. Ibn Hayyan 1967, pp. 64-74).


74. Knatchbull 1819, p. 192.


76. New York 1992, cat. no. 3.

77. For Y diz Ibn Aliah and his relatives, who held important bureaucratic positions at the court of Córdoba, see Mouoa 1889, esp. pp. 107-108. For a brief study of this praxis, see Prado-Vilar 1997, p. 30-31.

78. Ibn Hayvan 1965, p. 103 (Spanish trans. Ibn Hayyan 1967, p. 132). To justify their interpretation of the pyxis as a gift coming from a faction supporting al-Mughira, Makariou and Martinez-Gros have pointed out that the two pyxai (with images of the crucifixion) that were placed in al-Hakam II’s death -- Faqi (chief of staff of the caliph, superintendent of correspondence and chief of the tira workshop), and Yawdar (chief of silversmiths) -- could have been the commissionaires of the pyxai (Martinez-Gros and Makariou 2000). However, the object was produced in 1757-1758 and the political dynamics that the scholars describe corresponds to 1976, eight years later -- the moment when Faqi and Yawdar, facing the sudden crisis of the death of al-Hakam II and the minority of Hisham, opted for backing al-Mughira.
CAT. NO. 4. PYXIS
("THE ZAMORA PYXIS").
Museo Arqueológico
Nacional, Madrid,
inv. no. 2.113.
H: 18; Diam: 10.5 cm.
353 / 964.
Ordered by al-Hakam
II, supervised by
Durri al-Saglin; made
for Subh.
Ferrandis 1935-1940, I,
cat. no. 4; Beckwith
1960, pp. 10-13, pl. 6;
Kühnel 1971, cat.
no. 22.
Illustrations: Cat.
no. 42; fig. 61.
CAT. NO. 5. PYXIS.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London,
inv. no. 217-1865.
H: 7.7; Diam: 10 cm.
C. 966.
Ordered by al-Hakam II, supervised by
Durri al-Saghiri.
Ferrandis 1935-1940, I,
cat. no. 5; Beckwith
1960, p. 14, pls. 7-8;
Kühnel 1971, cat. no.
27.
Illustrations: Cat. no.
5a, b.
Cat. no. 10. CASKET.
The David Collection, Copenhagen, inv. no. 5/2002.
H: 9.9; W: 14.5; D: 9.3 cm.
C. 966-968.
Not in Ferrandis 1933-1940, Beckwith 1960,
or Kühnel 1971.
Illustrations: Cat. no. 10a, b, c, d, e, f;
figs. 65, 66, 68, 70, 71, 72.
CAT. NO. 11. PYXIS ("THE AL-MUGHIRA PYXIS").
Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. AO 4068.
H: 17.6, Diam: 11.5 (top) / 11.2 (bottom) cm.
Weight: 269 g (lid), 876 g (total).
Made for al-Mughira.
Illustrations: Cat. no. 11a, b, c, d, e; figs. 25, 31c, 31d, 74, 75, 77.
CAT. NO. 12. PYXIS.
H: 18.3; Diam: 11.5 cm.
399 / 969-970.

Made for Ziyad ibn Aflah.
Ferrandis 1935-1940, I, cat. no. 14; Beckwith 1960, pp. 20-21, pls. 18-22; Kühnel 1971, cat. no. 32.
Illustrations: Cat. no. 12a, b; figs. 21, 171.