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Wioleta Jabłońska

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Madīnat al-Zahrā', Spain

Symbolology of Power in the Caliphate of Cordoba: Coins and Palaces. A Monetary Discourse

Research Carried Out between June and December 2021

WIOLETA JABŁOŃSKA

Madrid Department of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI)

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ABSTRACT

The economic and monetary history of Al-Ḥakam II, the second caliph of Cordoba (Spain), is somehow less well known than that of his predecessor, 'Abd al-Raḥmān III, or his successor, Hišām II, however, his reign is very interesting from a numismatic point of view. On the one hand, not only because of the approximations to the volumes of coinage minted, obtained directly from the numismatic hoards, and linked to the possible constructions of al-Ḥakam II, but also because, like 'Abd al-Raḥmān III, his son developed an intense policy of dynastic propaganda to consolidate his power, and guarantee the survival of the dynasty. Therefore, from the palatial architecture as an expression of caliphal power, could there be a dynastic message both in the coins, a key element of expression of the caliphal power, and in the decoration that appeared in the architectural elements?

KEYWORDS

al-Hakam II, caliphate of Córdoba, economy, geometric decoration, Madinat al-Zahra, palatial architecture, symbology of power

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Wirtschafts- und Währungsgeschichte unter al-Ḥakam II., dem zweiten Kalifen von Cordoba (Spanien), ist bisher weniger gut erforscht als die seines Nachfolgers ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II. oder dessen Nachfolgers Hišām II. Für Fragen der Numismatik ist seine Herrschaft mehr als interessant. Wir können uns nicht nur dem Gesamtvolumen der Prägungen annähern, wie sie die Münzhorte und die Verbindungen zu den möglichen Bauprojekten al-Ḥakams II. erschließen lassen. Ein weiterer Gesichtspunkt ist, dass er, wie später auch sein Sohn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III., eine Politik herrschaftlicher Propaganda etablierte, um seine eigene Stellung und das Überleben der Dynastie zu sichern. Daher ist zu fragen, ob in den Münzprägungen, gleichermaßen wie in den Dekorelementen der Palastarchitektur – ihrerseits Ausdruck der Macht des Kalifen –, nicht sogar deutlich eine dynastische Botschaft übermittelt werden sollte.

SCHLAGWÖRTER

al-Ḥakam II, Kalifat von Córdoba, Wirtschaftsgeschichte, geometrische Dekoration, Madinat al-Zahra, Palastarchitektur, Machtsymbolik

1 The metrological and economic studies of the caliphate, as Josep Pellicer i Bru and Alberto Canto García have been able to demonstrate throughout their decades of research in this field, have shown that the caliphate coinage does not respond to pre-established and metrologically stable patterns in the case of the dirham, but undergoes fluctuations throughout the different periods within the Andalusí caliphate. In certain years metrological adjustments can be seen as a result of manipulations in the weight of the coin during the minting of the coin, which almost always coincide with the decrease in the average weight of the coins¹. This intervention in the manufacture of currency, which occurred on different occasions throughout the Umayyad rule, should be understood as specific responses of the caliphate’s economic authorities to fluctuations in the metal market or to the specific needs of the Umayyad state. However, it is not always easy to discern the motivations behind these alterations. Sometimes they do seem to correspond to

1 Canto García 2012, 74. See also Pellicer i Bru 1988.

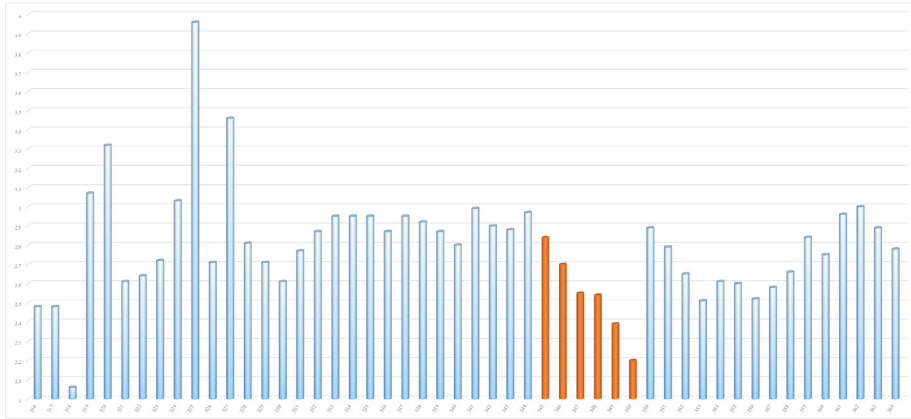


Fig. 1: The middleweights of the reign of 'Abd al-Rahmān III and al-Ḥakam II. In orange, the period treated



Fig. 2: Silver magnitudes of the reign of al-Ḥakam II

the building activities of the caliphs while, in others, to some economic incidences linked to caliphal taxation. Such changes within the metrological pattern, which tends towards the decline and ›worsening‹ of the coins, are usually followed by an improvement, not only by a reform of weights but also with a restoration of the quality of the coin, including the stylistic format of the coin.

2 On the other hand, alongside the metrological and seal studies, there are the written sources, specifically Ibn Hayyān and Ibn Hawkal, both describing the economic situation of the time².

3 As is well known, therefore, based on the written sources and economic studies of the Cordovan caliphate, the last years of the reign of 'Abd al-Rahmān III present data of monetary crisis where the common pattern presented is the drop in the average weight of silver coins (Fig. 1). This drop in average weights is present in all the major silver coin finds, these being the Haza del Carmen find, Parque Cruz Conde, the Solar find of the Archaeological Museum of Córdoba, Fontanar de Cabanos, Museo Casa de la Moneda, Museo Arqueológico Nacional de Madrid, Trujillo find, Marroquíes Bajos, among many other published and unpublished finds totaling, in all, ca. 15,000 dirhams.

4 However, these same findings present his son, al-Ḥakam II, in the process of recovery and renovation of the mint and the minting of more stable coinage. Considering the magnitudes of mintage, it seems clear to determine that there were two different metrological patterns during the time of al-Ḥakam II, with two distinct phases in his reign, although there is an intermediate stage with a »raro experimento de ajuste metroológico en las monedas«³.

5 As is well corroborated by the sources, there are two major works undertaken by al-Ḥakam II that can be directly linked to the silver coinages of this period, the coinage magnitudes being a good example of this (Fig. 2), although it is true that there are other small constructions carried out by this caliph (Fig. 3).

6 It is not our objective, at this point, to go into a summary, much less an explanation of this palace complex. However, we do want to dwell on some

2 Ibn Hayyān (eds. & trans. García Gómez 1967, 142–145); Ibn Hawkal (eds. & trans. Romani Suay 1971, 61).

3 Canto García 1989, 43. See also Canto García et al. 1988.

CONSTRUCTION	
340 / 951	Construction of a new minaret at the Aljama Mosque
349 / 961	Beginning of the Aljama Mosque extension (Ocaña Jiménez 1976, 16)
350 / 962	Completion of the walled city of Ceuta
351 / 962	Beginning of the Aljama Mosque extension (Chalmeta Gendrón 2021, 257)
353 / 964	Renovation of the Alcazar of Cordoba
353 / 964–5	Completion of the fortifications of Almeria
354 / 965–6	Repair of the Andalusian bridges
354-355/ 965	Construction and rebuilding of Gormaz Castle
355 / 966	Completion of the extension of the Aljama Mosque (Ocaña Jiménez 1976, 16)
357 / 967–8	Construction of a <i>burj</i> in Talavera de la Reina (In this case we accept the hypothesis put forward by Alberto Canto García and Isabel Rodríguez Casanova who show that the inscription belongs to the Castle of Talavera de la Reina (Toledo), where the burj concept finds its meaning within this construction, instead of the Castle of Baños de la Encina. Canto García – Rodríguez Casanova 2006, 61. See also Martínez Nuñez 2007, 220)
360 / 971	Completion of the extension of the Aljama Mosque (Ocaña Jiménez 1976, 16)
360 / 971–2	Repair of the Cordoba bridge
361/ 971 onwards	Major works in Madīnat al-Zahrā
361 / 972–3	Installation and extension of ›tents‹ in the old Casa de los Correos
361 / 972–3	Extension of the cemetery of <i>Bab al-Yahud</i>
361 / 972–3	Widening of the main souk and demolition of shops

Fig. 3: Some constructions in the period of 'Abd al-Raḥmān III and al-Ḥakam II according to the sources

elements of its decoration, which occurred during the reign of the first two Cordovan caliphs, which, for the moment, are the best-identified phases of the complex.

7 This is, therefore, a brief analysis of some of the architectural decorations, linking them directly with those used on the coinage.

8 It is well known that there are two major decorative themes present in the palatine city of 'Abd al-Raḥmān III that is the vegetal decoration that occupies mostly all the spaces and the geometric decoration present in other areas of the palace buildings, as well as the different hypotheses and studies about the caliphal decoration are well known⁴.

9 In view of the above, it seems reasonable to presuppose that a state such as the caliphate would undertake propaganda actions through the exercise of power, and the currency is an essential element of propaganda.

10 Perhaps, it is not possible to speak exactly of the expression of ›propaganda of the caliphal power‹ similar, conceptually, to that applied to the currency of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, in our opinion, it is possible to speak of the existence of actions taken consciously that could endorse the justification of the caliphal power through iconography or certain plastic messages that, above all, appear in the palace complexes and in the great constructions of the time. It is accepted that architecture is at the service of political power at different times. It served, in this way, as propaganda for the established power used »como forma de prestigio y de expresión de su poder y superioridad sobre los demás linajes«⁵. In al-Andalus, from the 10th century onwards, the construction of palace complexes is well known as a way, precisely, of showing the caliphal power and its image to the exterior and, therefore, they constitute a direct expression of it.

11 It is well known that there are two major decorative themes present in the palace city of 'Abd al-Raḥmān III that is the vegetal decoration that occupies, for the most part, all the spaces and the geometric decoration present in other areas of the palace buildings.

4 See Ación Almansa 1995; Kubisch 1995; Vallejo Triano 2010; Vallejo Triano 2004; Ewert 1987; Ewert 2008; Ewert 1995; Hernández Giménez 1985; Pavón Maldonado 1990; Fierro 2011, 129.

5 Juez Juarros 1999, 50.

12 This is, then, the point that will be addressed along the following lines, establishing a direct link with numismatics since it has to be taken into account that the coinage is one of the main economic tools that emanated directly by the state and – as in times of the Roman Empire – constitutes a very important element of state propaganda constituting, one of the prerogatives of the caliphal authority.

13 If this possibility is accepted and it is common sense that not all the population has access to the same monetary species and that certain levels of society, offices, or positions in the administration receive their salary in dinars rather than in dirhams, for example, in a very similar way to how payments were made in the Lower Roman Empire, it is a plausible interpretation that the decorative elements can, in addition to fulfilling a production control function, add a potential component of ›institutional‹ propaganda.

14 If we go back to the time of the conquest of Hispania, several authors have already mentioned the setting star, a star that identifies Hispania first and al-Andalus later⁶.

15 In this last context, it is worth highlighting and proposing the link between the use of a classic motif in the origins of al-Andalus, the Hesperus, the setting star appearing on the bilingual coins of the year 98/716, with other similar ones used later on, and which we are going to try to relate to a possible dynastic message.

16 In numismatic terms, the first action that can be observed on the coins of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III from the date 317/929 to 334/945 as, for example, can be observed in Rafael Frochoso Sánchez⁷ is the constant appearance of this star on silver coinage. Moreover, it is no coincidence that, when Qāsīm carried out his famous reform, in order to reestablish the ›good‹ coinage but, above all, the ideology of this good coinage, he used on all coins such decorative motif⁸. And, again, not surprisingly, during the restoration of the gold coinage of al-Ḥakam II with the ḥāyib Ŷa‘far al-Siqlabī, the exact same motif appears in all the years he issues⁹.

6 Delgado y Hernández 2001, 56; Barceló 1997, 3.

7 Canto García et al. 2020, 169–185; Frochoso Sánchez 1996, 119–127.

8 See Canto García 1986, 407.

9 See Jabłońska 2021; although more motifs also appear in other issues from the same years, the constant presence of the star/sun does not seem to be a mere coincidence.

17 Now, could it be a dynastic motif? Together with the arguments presented by multiple authors on the linking of the vegetal decoration with ideology and dynastic symbolism that, in addition, appears throughout the whole palatial city and that coincides with what is presented in the monetary types of the year 336/947 but also in the coinage of the beginning of al-Ḥakam II, it would not be surprising to be able to link the six or eight-pointed star with a dynastic symbolism that, in turn, would complete the vegetal arguments, as it appears in the decorative iconographic program of the palatial architecture of Medina¹⁰.

18 It is not a question, therefore, of trying to quantify in how many years al-Nāṣir or al-Ḥakam II mints with the decorative motif of the star, in gold or silver, but rather, to highlight the systematic appearance of this motif at specific moments of the caliphate, such as may be the great reform of Qāsīm and its restitution of confidence in the coinage, just when the works of [Madīnat al-Zahrā](#) begin, the transfer of the mint to Madīnat al-Zahrā in 336/947 or the great resurgence of gold in the time of al-Ḥakam II with Ŷa‘far. It would be logical, therefore, to think that at certain determined moments on gold coins, used above all by the elites of society, an important dynastic ideological message appears repeatedly represented as could be the six- or eight-pointed star.

Conclusions

19 After this brief overview of the caliphal monetary economy during the period of al-Ḥakam II, as well as its link with a possible dynastic message, several conclusions can be suggested.

20 On the other hand, it is surprising that, throughout the abundant monetary production of these Cordoban caliphs, decoration appeared on the coins in vegetal or geometric form, a phenomenon almost totally unknown and unusual in other contemporary Islamic coinage, as has already been mentioned, Tulunid, Buyid, Fatimid or Abbasid. It is true that these motifs have been related to elements

10 See Kubisch 1995.

of production control, however, rarely has a possible interpretation of the reason for these motifs been sought.

21 Bearing in mind that currency is one of the direct expressions of caliphal power, a function that, on occasion, is also fulfilled by architecture, it would not be surprising that the motif, the object of study in this article, the six- or eight-pointed star, represented on coins since the conquest with a greater geographical linkage and significance has been used, from the proclamation of the caliphate of Cordoba as a dynastic sign. Both with 'Abd al-Raḥmān III and with his son, al-Ḥakam II, it appears in punctual moments of great production, as it can be with Qāsim, Muhammad in the time of 'Abd al-Raḥmān III, or Ŷa'far and Amir with al-Ḥakam II and that, gradually, is much less frequent in the issues of Hisam II. Thus, this could be understood as a further sign of the subtle policy of isolation that al-Mansur exercised over the caliph for the benefit of his own dynastic aspirations.

22 With all this, a motif so reflected throughout the caliphal decoration, not only in the coinage but also in the palace architecture and in the perhaps most important complex, such as the Rich Hall of Madīnat al-Zahra, must fulfill some symbolic function beyond a mere plastic presence on the coins and in the architecture, taking into account, moreover, that in the case of coins, above all, the dinars, were the usual form of payment of the great elites in al-Andalus – whether administrative or military – as well as payments to the leaders of the North African tribes' supporters of the Umayyads.

23 Thus, it could be considered that the decorative discourse emanating from power, in different media and forms, can be used to send a specific ›dynastic message‹ to certain strata of Andalusian society.

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Fig. 2: Wioleta Jabłońska

Fig. 3: Chalmeta Gendrón 2021 and Ocaña Jiménez 1976; elaboration by Wioleta Jabłońska

CONTACT

Wioleta Jabłońska, M.A.

awioletaj@gmail.com

ORCID-ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5581-2773>

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