In tenth-century Spain, an unparalleled group of ivory carvings emerged in the Islamic world, carved for wealthy patrons within the restricted circles of the Umayyad court, with this ivory production reaching its peak under the reign of 'Abd al-Rāh[m]ān III al-Nāṣir (912–61) and al-Ḥakam (961–76). These objects provide a window into the private world of the Umayyad elites of al-Andalus.

The mention of the workshop for these objects is the very first hint of their intimate nature, as the workshop was that of Madīnat al-Zahrā’, the residential and administrative city founded by caliph 'Abd al-Rāh[m]ān III in 936.1 The second clue is the name of the owners of these items.2 The first datable ivories were carved for a daughter of 'Abd al-Rāh[m]ān. Her name is not mentioned, but the existence of a female descendant of al-Nāṣir is independently confirmed in the literary sources and not merely inferred from the inscriptions on

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1 Madīnat al-Zahrā’ is mentioned on a casket kept in the Instituto Valencia de Don Juan in Madrid, and on another one in the parish church of Fitero in Navarra: E. Kühnel, Die Islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft, 1971), 34, n° 23 and pl. XI; 34, n° 24 and pl. X. See also J. Ferrandis, Marfiles Árabes de Occidente, vol. I (Madrid: E. Mæstre, 1935–1940), n° 7 and n° 8.

2 They are: a daughter of the caliph 'Abd al-Rāh[m]ān III; a son of the caliph 'Abd al-Rāh[m]ān III; the favourite of the caliph al-Ḥakam II; al-Ḥakam himself; and finally the Sāhib al-Shurṭa, Ziyād ibn Aflah, a high-ranking official who is cited in historical sources and who acted as the main political agent of the caliph.
objects. None of the objects made for the daughter(s) of the caliph bears the name of a patron or a donor. Together with the indication of the workshop and the owner we sometimes find the name of the patron, the year it was made, the carver’s name, a statement of good wishes and, in one case, a poem. Among the tenth-century objects only two diverge from this classical format for inscriptions: the casket in the Arts Décoratifs Museum (Paris) dated 966 and a similar object in the Bargello Museum (Florence).

In the inscription of a pyxis dated 964 three characters appear: the mother of the heir apparent (and the owner of the pyxis); Durri al-Ṣaghīr; and the caliph al-Ḥakam (pl. 1). On the Fitero and Instituto Valencia de Don Juan caskets, Ṣubḥ, mother of the heir apparent, is identified as wallāda. She is identified thanks to an important event: the birth of a male child. Wallāda is formed from the second form of the Arabic root W-L-D; it can be translated ‘the one who gives birth’ but not ‘the one who has given birth’ (which would be wālīda). The use of the Arabic second form here insists on this specific role. The choice of this form, rather than the more common classical phrase umm walad is more easily understood if we keep in

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3 Renata Holod neglects this fact, see R. Holod, “Ivories,” in J. Dodds, ed. Al-Andalus, The art of Islamic Spain (Granada/New York: Abrams, 1992), 190–206, cat. 1 and 2. For the female progeny of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III see Ibn Hayyān, Al-Muqtabis min anbāʿ ahl al-Andalus, vol. V. Translated by Maria Jesus Viguera and Federico Corriente as Al-Muqtabis V: Crónica del califa ʿAbdarraḥmān III An-Nāṣir entre los años 912 y 942. Zaragoza: Instituto Hispano-Árabe de Cultura, 1981 (cited hereafter as Al-Muqtabis V trans.), 24. Four daughters of al-Nāṣir are also mentioned in an anonymous chronicle dating from his reign: Hind, Saniyya, Salama and Wallāda, daughters of Maryam, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān’s favourite, and sisters of the future caliph al-Ḥakam. The inscription on a “manqalla game’ indicates that it was carved while al-Nāṣir was still alive, that is, before 961. Two more boxes were made for a female descendant of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Nāṣir: Kühnel, pl. VIII, n° 19; pl. VIII, n° 20; pl. IX, n° 21 , p.; Ferrandis, n° 1, pl. I, n° 2, pl. II, n° 3, pl. II.

4 Both bear an anonymous inscription. Ferrandis n° 7, pl. VII-IX and n° 8 pl. IX–XI; the same conclusion could be drawn from the Amirid ivories but the small number of items makes it unreliable. One box dated 394 AH/1003 AD bearing an anonymous inscription was acquired by the Islamic Art Museum in Doha (Qatar). See M. Rosser-Owen, Ivory, 8th to 17th centuries Treasures from the Museum of Islamic Art, Qatar (Doha: National Council for Culture, Arts and Heritage, 2004), 50, n° 10.

5 Madrid, Museo arqueologico nacional 2113, Ferrandis n° 4, pl. IV. The pyxis once belonged to the Zamora cathedral treasury.

6 See note 1. They are both dated 355 AH/966 AD.

7 Wallāda was also understood, at the Umayyad court, as a reference to the eighth-century Umayyad princess and poetess of the same name.