THE BATTLE OF THE DITCH (AL-KHANDAQ) OF THE CORDOBAN CALIPH ‘ABD AL-RAḤMĀN III

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During the academic year 1982–83, I attended a seminar on “Supererogatory Ḥadīth” taught by Michael Cook at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. One of the Ḥadīths we analyzed was an eschatological rendering of the struggle between Ibn al-Zubayr and the Umayyads.¹ Among many other useful things, I learned then that battles and eschatology often go hand in hand. I have chosen to deal with a similar combination in a volume dedicated to the scholar who taught me that no source material is boring per se: it is only we who make it dull when we renounce the fun of inquiring into it and tracing its origins.

1. Recovering the Marches of al-Andalus: ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III and the Frontier Lords²

When ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III, then in his early twenties, came to power in the year 300/912, the Umayyads of Cordoba had a tenuous hold over al-Andalus. In the following years, the new emir exerted much energy in recovering control over those areas where independent lords of different ethnic origins (Arab, Berber, Hispanic) had taken power. He personally led most of the expeditions that resulted in recovery of the

¹ “There will arise a difference after the death of a caliph, and a man of the people of Medina will go forth fleeing to Mecca. Then some of the people of Mecca will come to him and will make him rise in revolt against his will. They will pledge allegiance to him between the Rukn and the Maqām. An expedition will be sent against him from Syria but will be swallowed up at Baydāʾ between Mecca and Medina.” Cook, “Eschatology and the Dating of Traditions,” 32.
² For ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III’s frontier policies, see Manzano, La frontera de al-Andalus en época de los omeyas, with references. I have dealt with these policies in Abd al-Rahman III, the First Cordoban Caliph, 60–68, and “‘Abd al-Raḥmān III frente al califato fatimí y el reino astur-leonés.” The present article builds upon these earlier studies. I wish to thank Oneworld Publishers and the organizers of the seminar where the above-mentioned paper was presented (Xunta de Galicia and Xacobeo) for permission to quote from my previous publications.
lost territories. The strongest challenge came from Ibn Ḥaṣṣūn and his sons, whose fortress of Bobastro finally fell in 315/928. One year later, on 16 January 316/929, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III proclaimed himself caliph, adopted the title al-Nāṣir li-dīn Allāh, and began minting gold coins. Having pacified the peninsula’s internal regions, he could now concentrate on recovering control over the frontier areas. Badajoz in the Lower March came into his hands in 317/930, Toledo in the Middle March fell in 320/932, and in that same year the Umayyad intensified his pressure on the Upper March, with its capital in Saragossa. 

In that region, the power of the Banū Qāṣī, descendants of a local convert to Islam, had grown weak because of, among other things, the support that the Umayyads gave to the Arab Tujībids. These, however, soon exhibited a pattern that was normal among frontier lords, in that at times they maintained their loyalty to the Cordoban rulers, while at other times they rebelled. Thus, when Muḥammad b. Ḥāshim al-Tujibi succeeded his father as lord of Saragossa, the caliph was not pleased that his own right to name a representative in the area had been ignored. 

In 322/934, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III decided to send an expedition against the Christians in the Upper March. It was on that occasion, known as the Osma campaign, that the caliph adopted the flag called ‘the Eagle’ (ʿalam al-ʿuqāb), a name that evoked one of the flags of the Prophet Muhammad and signalled the beginning of a trend that increased in the following years, namely that of suggesting that the caliphal campaigns were reenactments of the Prophet’s maghāzī.

The Tujībid Muḥammad b. Ḥāshim, together with the lords of Huesca and Barbastro, refused to take part in the Osma campaign, while the Tujībid lords of Calatayud and Daroca agreed. Al-Nāṣir first directed his troops against the rebels, and Muḥammad b. Ḥāshim was forced to submit by taking part in the expedition and handing over some of his fortresses to the caliph. The Muslim army

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3 Ibn Ḥayyān, Muqtabis, 5:224, Spanish translation, 250.
5 For example, during the attack launched by the count of Barcelona in 324/935–6, the commander Ibn Ilyās defeated the Christians and sent 1300 severed heads to the caliphal palace at Cordoba. The court poet Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihī (d. 328/940), author of the famous al-ʿIqd al-farīd, then wrote a poem in which he claimed that this battle was similar to Ḥunayn and Badr, see Ibn Ḥayyān, Muqtabis, 5:257.