

LOVE IN THE TIME OF *FITNA*:
'COURTLINESS' AND THE 'PAMPLONA' CASKET

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The creation and propagandistic diffusion of state and ruler identity became vital during the years of *fitna* which followed the collapse of the Umayyad state after the end of the 'Āmirid regime. It was perhaps even more significant than it had been during the years of the caliphate proper, when the state's legitimacy was not seriously or consistently contested. Elsewhere, I have argued that this new ruler persona first emerged at the courts of the Banū 'Āmir, especially in the spheres of literature and court practice,¹ and it would be logical that it also influenced the creation of visual culture. Two ivory objects created during the reign of al-Manṣūr ibn Abī 'Āmir's oldest son and successor, 'Abd al-Malik Sayf al-Dawla al-Muẓaffar (henceforth referred to as Sayf al-Dawla), give us valuable insight into the visual facet of an 'Āmirī programme of legitimization, and of the newly 'courtly' sovereign's place in it.

During the third quarter of the tenth century, Berber clients from Ifrīqiyya sent gifts of unworked ivory to the Córdoba court, from which the group of ivory containers commonly referred to as the 'Córdoba ivories' was manufactured.² The cylindrical container known today as the 'Braga' pyxis, after the cathedral in Portugal in whose collection it

¹ See Cynthia Robinson, *In Praise of Song: the Making of Courtly Culture in al-Andalus and Provence, 1005–1134 A.D.* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

² The Córdoba ivories have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention since the publication of *Al-Andalus* in 1992, and several articles bring to bear close readings and detailed interpretations of the objects against their (complex, often varied) cultural backdrops: see, for example, Francisco Prado-Vilar, "Circular Visions of Fertility and Punishment: Caliphal Ivory Caskets from al-Andalus", *Muqarnas* 14 (1997), pp. 19–41; Mariam Rosser-Owen, "A Córdoba Ivory Pyxis Lid in the Ashmolean Museum", *Muqarnas* 16 (1999), pp. 16–31; and now the double volume of essays dedicated to the subject in the *Journal of the David Collection* 2 (2005). Robinson, *In Praise of Song*, Chapter 5, and "Courtly Courts as Sites of Cultural Interaction: Reconsiderations of the 'Troubadour' Question", in *Culture Politique des Plantagenêt (1154–1224)*, ed. Martin Aurell (Poitiers: Centre d'Études Supérieures de Civilisation Médiévale, 2003), pp. 89–122, includes a new interpretation of the 'Pamplona' casket in a Christian context, and considers the issue of objects of Muslim manufacture in Christian hands and collections.

has been preserved, and the larger and much more spectacular container generally referred to as the ‘Leire’ or ‘Pamplona’ casket (Colour Plate 11), were both produced for Sayf al-Dawla.³ Scholars associate the ivory caskets with the production of luxury goods for the court circles most intimately associated with the royal family. Those who commissioned or received the earliest of these objects were very close (sometimes, dangerously so) to the locus of caliphal power. Notable among these are the ill-fated prince al-Mughīra, younger brother to al-Ḥakam II, whose plans to co-opt the caliphal throne in place of the minor Hishām were neatly foiled by al-Manṣūr. The famous ‘al-Mughīra’ pyxis bears a striking programme of figural imagery that has particularly invited attempts at iconographical interpretations: Holod saw its imagery as specifically constructed in order to address the prince’s ambitions, reading it as a gift, perhaps a mockery; Prado-Vilar argued that it was intended as a specifically coded threat, one whose menaces were later made reality as al-Manṣūr set the stage for his own *prise de pouvoir*.⁴ A logical conclusion might be that al-Manṣūr, or someone close to him, was the commissioner of the object. The figural programme which adorns the pyxis of Zīyād ibn Aflaḥ, chief of police in Córdoba during al-Nāṣir’s reign, is also related to an assertion of political privilege by someone whose rights to it were not firmly established: this same gentleman was, like al-Mughīra, involved some years later in an abortive attempt to remove Hishām from office and replace him with a stronger representative of the Umayyad dynasty.⁵ In this case, the object’s patron claims those privileges for himself, rather than addressing or contesting the claims of someone else.

All objects singled out in recent studies exhibit programmes of imagery which depend heavily on figural representations for their construction of meaning. These objects make use of figure types, postures and combinations that might, in other cases, be intended to bear no particular meaning at all. In these cases, however—once political circumstances have been taken into consideration—the motifs achieve

³ On these objects, see *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, exhibition catalogue, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1992), cat. no. 4, pp. 198–201; cat. no. 5, p. 202; both entries with earlier bibliography.

⁴ For Holod’s reading, see *Al-Andalus*, cat. no. 4, p. 198; for Prado-Vilar’s, see “Circular Visions” and, more recently, “Enclosed in Ivory: The Miseducation of al-Mughīra”, *Journal of the David Collection* 2,1 (2005), pp. 139–163.

⁵ Rosser-Owen, “A Córdoba Ivory Pyxis Lid”, p. 20; she terms the visual programme of Zīyād ibn Aflaḥ’s pyxis “practically propaganda”.