Reassessing the Roles of Women as ‘Makers’ of Medieval Art and Architecture

Volume Two

Edited by
Therese Martin

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CONCUBINES, EUNUCHS, AND PATRONAGE
IN EARLY ISLAMIC CÓRDOBA

Glaire D. Anderson

Introduction

In the art history of early Islamic Iberia, and in Islamic art history generally, the figure of the ruler as patron is paramount. Given this focus, it is often difficult to discern a role for those who, because of gender and/or legal status, have been relegated to the historiographic margins, even when they were members of the ruling class. My article attempts to address this issue as it pertains to the art of early Islamic Iberia by foregrounding the roles of women and eunuchs as patrons of art and architecture in the court of the Umayyad dynasty of al-Andalus (r. 756–1031 CE). The Andalusi Umayyads (or Marwānids), who made their capital in the city of Córdoba, were a branch of the Syrian Umayyad family, the first royal dynasty of the early Islamic empire (ca. 660–750).1 Scholars such as Manuela Marín, D.F. Ruggles, and Sheila Blair have pointed the way toward a discussion of...
women’s patronage in al-Andalus and elsewhere in the medieval Islamic lands, while Mohamed Meouak and others have articulated the importance of eunuchs and other unfree male aristocrats in Umayyad Córdoba. Building on their foundations, I bring these two threads together to discuss the architectural patronage of prominent members of the Córdoban court as part of a broader panorama of patronage and artistic activity that extended beyond the figure of the ruler.

The ninth and tenth centuries emerge as the zenith of patronage by women who were predominantly unfree (i.e., enslaved or freed, explained below) royal concubines. Despite their contemporary absence from the narrative of Islamic art, they were some of the court’s earliest and most active patrons of architecture. Their patronage cannot be understood in isolation, but should be examined in conjunction with that of the prominent court eunuchs who constitute a second major group of unfree court elites, and whose centrality to Andalusi Umayyad administration Meouak has made clear. While art historians have noted the epigraphy naming unfree elites on the famous ivory caskets produced for the Umayyad court, their role in art production has elicited little comment, with the focus remaining on the aims of the royal patrons. I suggest that elite eunuchs

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3 On the terminology of free and enslaved women see Marín, Mujeres en al-Andalus, pp. 41–42. Also see the works of Abdullah Cheikh Moussa, for example “La négation d’Éros ou le ‘îshq d’après deux Épitres d’al-Jāḥiz,” Studia Islamica, 72 (1990), pp. 71–119; David Ayalon, Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships (Jerusalem, 1999).


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merit greater attention in the art historical narrative, as active patrons of architecture in their own right, as well as central figures in commissions undertaken by both male and female royal patrons. Eunuchs and other unfree elites may have been more actively engaged in art and architectural design than has been so far acknowledged. The study of female patronage in medieval Islamic courts might, therefore, be enriched by examining artistic involvement of unfree women and eunuchs in tandem, given the social acceptability of contact between women and eunuchs. Not only would women have had access to the eunuchs who directed and worked in the state art and architecture workshops, there is evidence that collaborations took place, with eunuchs directing architectural projects on behalf of women. Finally, the patronage activities of Andalusi Umayyad women, I conclude, provides an early prototype for the better-known phenomenon of royal female patronage in later medieval and early modern Islamic courts.

Defining the Unfree Elite

A brief definition of the terms employed in this discussion may be helpful, given that the ethnic identities and legal statuses of the men and women in question are overlapping and complex, reflecting the great intricacy of social relations governed by hierarchies of religion, gender, kinship, generation, and the relation of free persons to slaves. Those to whom I refer as “free” were never enslaved, were usually members of prominent families who supported the Andalusi rulers, and were identified primarily with an Arab and/or Berber cultural identity (even in cases in which hybrid Arab/Berber/Iberian identity was acknowledged). The importance of legal status was equal to, if not greater than, ethnic identity in defining the unfree elites of Córdoba as a category distinct from the free aristocracy. My use of the qualifier “enslaved” when referring to unfree elites points to this legal difference, and in no way implies that these women and men were inferior or slavish in any way. Concubines and palace eunuchs were either legally

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enslaved to the Umayyad ruler or were manumitted and thereafter legally recognized as freedmen or freedwomen (mawlā). Whether enslaved or freed, they were distinct in legal terms from a free aristocrat, but still part of the ruling class. By unfree, I mean those women and men who were part of the court circle about whom we can determine the following: their ethnicity is identified in the texts as other than Arab or Berber, and whose legal status defined them as unfree, whether or not they had originally been freeborn. Thus, for the purposes of this article I divide the aristocrats of the Córdoban court broadly into two categories: free or unfree. As Marín has observed, the vocabulary of female slavery is complex and sometimes difficult to define with precision in the medieval texts; in contrast, the single term ḥurra (pl. ḥarāʾir) designated a free woman of high social status, and was thus a label of distinction and honor. Enslaved women of the highest social class were known collectively as ama min al-murtafiʾāt; they constituted a distinct group within the overall category of female slaves. Other terms used to refer to different categories and/or classes of female slaves include mamlūka, jāriya, and khādim or khādima.


9 Marín, Mujeres en al-Andalus, pp. 41–42.

10 On the complexities of the terms khādim/khādima with respect to concubines, see Marín, Mujeres en al-Andalus, pp. 42–44.

11 Marín, Mujeres en al-Andalus, pp. 41–44. The author also points out that the problem may lie in our own concept of “freedom” and how we apply it to a medieval Muslim society. Personal communication.
Given the Roman and late antique history of the central Islamic lands and North Africa, the ethnic qualifiers “Arab,” “Berber,” and “Iberian” also need a word of explanation. Such categories, seemingly straightforward, would have encompassed a variety of different peoples with hybrid genealogies. For instance, rulers of the Syrian Umayyad and ‘Abbāsid dynasties, both of which self-identified as Arab, nevertheless took as concubines or wives Byzantine Greek, Berber, or Persian women. The tenth Syrian Umayyad caliph Hishām (r. 724–743), for example, is said to have written to his governor in North Africa to request Berber concubines, specifically to serve as umm walad, or mothers of sons who could potentially be heirs to the throne.12 In the letter Hishām cites good family background and evidence of a moral character as attributes that were as important in potential concubines as the expected desirable physical traits.13

Despite the emphasis on Arab lineage usually expressed in the Umayyad texts, the Córdoban Umayyads were known in their own time as the progeny of Arab fathers, on the one hand, and of Berber or Iberian concubine mothers, on the other.14 Because Arabic lineage was exclusively patrilineal, the mothers’ ethnicity was of no importance for its transmission. Therefore, while having an Arab mother was a point of pride for medieval Arab Muslims, the Umayyads, like their contemporaries the ‘Abbāsids, were on the whole the sons of non-Arab mothers.15 Likewise, the deceptively monolithic category “Iberian” would also have encompassed a diverse array of peoples and traditions; Basque, Asturian, Galician, and Visigothic populations had distinct identities, historical trajectories, and languages.16 Young boys termed “Slavs” (Arabic Ṣaqāliba) in the Arabic texts were brought to Córdoba by the thousands to serve as palace eunuchs, and they added an additional component to the ethnic mixture in the ranks of the Umayyad

13 Talbi, L’Émirat aghlabide, p. 34.
16 This process can also be discerned in al-Andalus with respect to intermarriage between Arabs and Berbers and inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula at the time of the conquest. See Amira K. Bennison, “The Peoples of the North in the Eyes of the Muslims of Umayyad al-Andalus (711–1031),” Journal of Global History 2/2 (2007), pp. 157–74.
elite.\textsuperscript{17} The Slavs were captured in the territories which today include Poland, northern Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania.

Despite their unfree legal status, royal concubines and eunuchs became wealthy and influential members of the Andalusi ruling class, a phenomenon which was widespread among medieval and early modern Islamic societies.\textsuperscript{18} The group on which this article focuses were usually the mothers of Umayyad princes, who attained wealth, power, status, and eventually freedom when they provided the ruler with a son and thus a possible heir, which gave them the right to manumission following the ruler’s death.\textsuperscript{19} A very few transcended their unfree status when their Umayyad masters manumitted and then married them, giving them the status of legitimate wife.\textsuperscript{20} Other enslaved women attained privileged positions not through their role as mothers of royal sons, but as prominent poets or musicians who had received their training from famous masters in major cultural centers such as Baghdad and Medina before their arrival at the Córdoban court.\textsuperscript{21} Eunuchs served the caliph as close personal attendants.


\textsuperscript{20} Marín, Mujeres en al-Andalus, pp. 44.

as members of the military, and as court administrators, attaining even the highest positions available to free aristocrats.\textsuperscript{22}

Concubines and eunuchs amassed great wealth in the form of gifts from the ruler, as several anecdotes in the court chronicles relate. Two concubines about whom I will say more below illustrate one means by which enslaved elites managed to amass their fortunes. The ninth-century concubine Tarūb shut herself up in her palace quarters, during a quarrel with the Umayyad ruler. To entice her to come out again, he is said to have had bags of treasure piled up in front of the door to her quarters, until it was all but barricaded with the rich gifts, promising that all would be hers if she would relent. She did so, the couple was reunited, and Tarūb, the text observes, did indeed keep all of the gifts.\textsuperscript{23} Later, during the reign of the first Andalusi caliph, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III (r. 912–961), we read of how Marjān (fl. 915), the mother of the caliph’s son and heir al-Ḥakam II, trained a starling to fly to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III during a bloodletting session with a physician, and recite the following lines:

\begin{quote}
O bleeder! take care how you treat the Commander of the Faithful
For were you to open one of his arteries, the life of the world might escape through it!\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

The caliph, delighted with the surprise, presented Marjān with some thirty thousand dinars upon learning that she had trained the bird in anticipation of the occasion. By way of comparison, the vizier Abū ʿUmar Aḥmad Ibn Shuhayd, one of the most illustrious and wealthy of the free aristocrats in the same caliph’s court, earned an annual salary of twenty thousand dinars (plus substantial bonuses given on the two annual ‘Īd feasts).\textsuperscript{25}


\textsuperscript{24} Al-Maqārī, \textit{The History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain}, vol. 2, p. 155.

\textsuperscript{25} According to Ibn Khaldūn, a present given by Ibn Shuhayd to the caliph was legendary as one of the richest presents ever given to an Islamic sovereign. Ibn Shuhayd’s salary did not include the hundred thousand dinar gift allotted to him on the ‘Īd feast.
A Gendered Framework

Historians have devoted increasingly greater attention to Islamicate history from a gendered perspective since the 1990s, when broad considerations of the topic, such as Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) and Fatima Mernissi’s *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993), emerged, along with studies focused specifically on medieval Andalusi women by María J. Viguera and Gloria López de la Plaza. A second wave of studies has appeared since 2000, spearheaded by Manuela Marín, which looks anew at commonly-used historical texts, such as prosopographic and juridical sources, and which also expands the scope of investigation of Islamic women’s history to include other types of sources—literary, visual, and anthropological. Art historians have contributed to this discourse, focusing their attention on the issue of female patronage, with particularly rich results for the early modern Šafavid, Mughal, and Ottoman dynasties. In contrast, the period before the eleventh century has received relatively little attention from art historians, giving the impression that women’s patronage was not common during the caliphal days. Giving such bonuses to favored members of the court on the two ‘Īd feasts seems to have been a common practice. Al-Maqqari, *History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*, vol. 2, pp. 150–54.


period (660–1236). The relative prevalence of women as patrons of art and architecture beginning in the eleventh century is attributed to the openness of the newly-ascendant Turkic and Mongol Islamic dynasties to women’s participation in politics and the public sphere. The caliphal Arab dynasties—the Syrian and Andalusi Umayyads, the ‘Abbāsids, and the Fāṭimids—are generally seen as less tolerant of women’s visibility and activity outside the harem.

The exceptions are relatively few. For instance, the ninth-century ‘Abbāsid queen Zubayda (d. 832), granddaughter of the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Manṣūr and wife of Hārūn al-Rashīd, was well known for her patronage of charitable structures along the famous pilgrimage route that bore her name, the Darb Zubayda. In 862 the mother of the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Muntasir, herself a Greek concubine, constructed perhaps the first mausoleum in the history of Islamic architecture, identified with the building known as the Qubbat al-Ṣulaybiyya in the ‘Abbāsid royal city of Samarra. It seems likely that there are other examples to be found in the ‘Abbāsid contexts, among both freeborn and unfree women, though this is a question that will require further research. Likewise, Durzān, a concubine who attained power and prominence as queen-mother in the Fāṭimid court in the last quarter of the tenth century, has recently emerged as another major early female patron, whose projects, though no longer extant, were among the first carried out by the dynasty in their capital of Cairo. Finally, Seljuq women are well-attested as patrons of architecture beginning in the late eleventh century.

29 A picture now ameliorated by Delia Cortese and Simonetta Calderini, Women and the Fāṭimids in the World of Islam (Edinburgh, 2006).
Umayyad Córdoba

The first Andalusi Umayyad patron was the founder of the dynasty, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān I. In the last decades of the eighth century he began construction on two monuments: the congregational mosque which would become the greatest of the Umayyad dynastic monuments, as well as a suburban estate (no longer extant) known as Ruṣāfa, said to have been built just outside Córdoba’s walled center. There is no further reference to building activities in Córdoba in the court chronicles until the reign of the third Andalusi ruler, al-Ḥakam I (r. 796–822). It is at this time that women emerge as patrons. The Umayyad court chronicler Ibn Ḥayyān devotes a paragraph in his account of al-Ḥakam’s reign to two women in particular, Muʿta and ʿAjab, both royal concubines:

Among [al-Ḥakam I’s] most favored concubines, among those remembered for their merit [when they were] with him, and after [his death], were ʿAjab, mother of his son Abū ʿAbd al-Malik Marwān, for whom the Mosque of ʿAjab in the western suburb of Córdoba was named, as well as the Munya of ʿAjab on the opposite bank of the river, given by her as a pious endowment (ḥubs) for the sick. [The other was] Muʿta, mother of Abū ʿUthmān Saʿīd . . ., for whom another mosque was named, west of Córdoba as well, and the cemetery next to it. She founded both [the mosque and the cemetery] along with many others for pious and charitable purposes, because she was one of the most generous of women.35

Both women cemented their favored positions by providing al-Ḥakam with sons, which entitled them to the important official title of umm walad (“mother of a son”) and the right to manumission after al-Ḥakam’s death. Muʿta was a singer and/or musician, whose high status and ability can be inferred from the reputation of her teacher, the famous Umayyad courtier and Baghdadi emigré Ziryāb.36

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Ibn Ḥayyān gives no details of ‘Ajab’s specific personal history before her arrival in Córdoba. Nor does she appear in the chronicle of the first ten years of al-Ḥakam’s reign. However, she is mentioned several times in the history of the remainder of his rule, indicating that she became a royal concubine sometime between 806 and 821, since by the time of al-Ḥakam’s death in 822 she had given birth to his son, Abū ‘Abd al-Malik Marwān. Ibn Ḥayyān’s remarks about al-Ḥakam’s character and habits concerning concubines allow some speculation about ‘Ajab’s background. For example, al-Ḥakam had a reputation for being particularly discerning about the women he chose as concubines. While physical beauty, intelligence, musical or literary talents, and fertility were qualities generally prized in concubines, al-Ḥakam, like his Syrian ancestor Hishām, was concerned that in addition to fertility, his concubines also be distinguished by noble lineage and virtuous character. Indeed, al-Ḥakam is said to have gone so far as to have researched the family and educational backgrounds of prospective concubines, privileging those from aristocratic families, who had a reputation for virtue. Al-Ḥakam’s children were consequently recognized, Ibn Ḥayyān observes, for their noble lineage. Given her privileged position in al-Ḥakam’s harem, it therefore seems likely that ‘Ajab was a woman of noble birth and upbringing, likely either Berber or Iberian-born.

‘Ajab’s villa (munya), whose exact location is unknown, is notable as one of the first documented instances of aristocratic villa patronage in Córdoba by a patron other than the Umayyad ruler himself. Furthermore, ‘Ajab’s villa, which she endowed to a community of lepers, may also be the first documented pious endowment (hubs, pl. aḥbās) known from al-Andalus. The villa’s suburban setting, somewhat removed from the urban center, on the opposite bank of the Guadalquivir River, would

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have been an appropriate setting for such a function, in keeping with the practice of Byzantine and Islamic rulers elsewhere at the time.\(^3^9\) ‘Ajab’s act can be seen as part of an early medieval continuation of established Late Antique trends, since Early Christian Roman aristocrats, many of them women, often presented villas to the Church as pious or charitable properties.\(^4^0\) One can only speculate whether circumstances from her own life motivated ‘Ajab’s support of this particular charity.

Concubines Ascendant (822–852)

During the thirty-year reign of al-Ḥakam I’s successor, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II (r. 822–852), we see concubines and eunuchs taking on an even more prominent role in architecture. This period marks the point at which Córdoba consciously turned toward ‘Abbāsid Baghdad, reorganizing the administration of the state along ‘Abbāsid lines and embracing ‘Abbāsid court culture.\(^4^1\) While the attachment to the dynasty’s Syrian Umayyad past never faltered, from this point forward the Umayyad Córdoban court became a fertile hybrid of the Umayyad past and the international Islamic court culture of the ‘Abbāsids. The court chronicler al-Rāzī describes a flourishing of female patronage during the reign of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II:

In the days of the emir Abd al-Raḥmān II Friday mosques were constructed in the districts (kūra) of al-Andalus, extending the celebration of Friday prayers and other prayers. His concubines (jawārī) and other women (maqsūrāt) competed together with his wives in constructing excellent mosques in Córdoba, doing much good and competing in making generous gifts to various kinds of charities: around Córdoba and its district well-constructed mosques were completed with their contributions, which were constantly visited by


\(^4^1\) Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal*, pp. 44–48.
worshippers... and by which they are known, such as the Mosque of Tarūb, the Mosque of Fahr, the Mosque of al-Shifā’, the Mosque of Mut’a, and many others like them whose importance cannot be ignored. The constructions (āthār) of these women (huram)... brought glory to the dynasty.42

Written sources reveal that attitudes toward women’s presence at mosques, whether in Córdoba or elsewhere in the medieval Islamic lands, was not consistent among the religious establishment; there is textual evidence for spaces set aside specifically for women in some Andalusi mosques.43 In any case, this passage indicates that court women of different legal categories—free, enslaved, and freed—were founding mosques in Córdoba as well as its surrounding territories, some of which may have even been congregational, or Friday mosques. Congregational mosques tend by definition to be large, important monuments because they are meant to accommodate the entire community of Muslim males for the important Friday prayer, at which a critical public ceremony takes place: the khuṭba, or public affirmation of the community’s fealty to the sovereign. The civic significance of these mosques is therefore implicit, but Ibn Ḥayyān goes further and asserts that the mosques' importance stemmed from the fact of their founding by these court women, and their similarity to other great monuments of the Andalusi Umayyads.

Ibn Ḥayyān’s account of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II’s reign includes a section specifically devoted to prominent court women, including the concubines Tarūb, Majd, al-Shifā’a, and Mut’a.44 Of the concubines Ibn Ḥayyān mentions, Tarūb was reputed to have conquered the ruler’s heart near the end of his life.45 Both Ibn Ḥayyān and the historian Ibn Quṭiyya (d. 977) refer to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II’s passion for her, which inspired him to compose these lines:

When the morning sun comes up/ it recalls Tarūb /a girl of such beauty/ you could think her a wonderful gazelle...46

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42 I have used Marín’s reading of the last sentence, preferring it over Makkī and Corriente’s. Marín, Mujeres en al-Andalus, p. 342; Ibn Ḥayyān, al-Muqtabis II-1, pp. 177–78.


44 Marín distinguishes between a Mut’a linked to al-Ḥakam I and a woman bearing the same name but linked to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II, though one wonders if they are actually one and the same, perhaps maintaining a place at court after the death of al-Ḥakam I.

45 On Tarūb see Marín, Mujeres en al-Andalus, pp. 571–75.

Not only beautiful, she was also one of the most influential aristocrats at court. The power which Tarūb attained amongst the ruling class can be inferred from the accounts of her ultimately unsuccessful effort to have her own son designated as ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II’s heir.⁴⁷ According to Ibn Quṭiyya, Tarūb was able to draw upon support from a wide range of men and women of differing legal categories: “women of the palace, enslaved elites, possibly eunuchs (fijityān), servants (khadam), members of the Quraysh, and royal freedmen (mawālī),” the most notable of these being the powerful eunuch Naṣr Abū l-Fatḥ.⁴⁸

Ibn Ḥayyān describes another concubine, al-Shifā’, in superlative terms, and one wonders to what extent his description is accurate, or whether it is better understood as a literary topos. She was, he tells us, eminently intelligent and generous, as well as splendidly beautiful.⁴⁹ Al-Shifā’ was the most perfect of women, Ibn Ḥayyān claims, not only in beauty, but in chastity, intelligence, religion, and virtue. Her conduct was unimpeachable, he notes, and she was the patron of numerous charitable donations to mosques, to the sick, and to the poor. If al-Shifā’ had outlived ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II she would likely have been the most powerful woman at court, as the foster mother of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II’s firstborn son and heir Muḥammad. Although Muḥammad was not Al-Shifā’’s natural son, she had nurtured and comforted Muḥammad from a young age, after the death of his birth mother, privileging him, Ibn Ḥayyān says, even over her own son.⁵⁰

The Mid-Ninth-Century Interim

The following three decades (852–886), the period in which al-Shifā’’s foster son Muḥammad I sat on the throne of al-Andalus, contrast strikingly with the reign of his father ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II. Muḥammad added a maqsūra and inscriptions to the Great Mosque of Córdoba, but there is no evidence for female patronage at this time. Perhaps this reflects a lack of support for court women on Muḥammad’s part, stemming from his disinclination to charity despite (or perhaps due to) the political and economic crisis that troubled the Umayyad state after his accession.

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⁴⁸ James, Early Islamic Spain, p. 112.
⁵⁰ Ibn Ḥayyān, al-Muqtabis II-1, p. 191.
and which lasted until the early tenth century.\textsuperscript{51} As has recently been pointed out, following insufficient harvests in 874, Muḥammad’s refusal to aid the Andalusi population by allowing exemption from payment of the tithe resulted in social instability and hardship for many, and stands in contrast to the general charitable practices of the Andalusi Umayyad sovereigns.\textsuperscript{52}

Nevertheless, the lack of concrete evidence of specific patronage activities should not be taken as proof of a disruption in, or absence of, female patronage during this period. Two pieces of epigraphy from this period do mention royal women. The first inscription, housed in the Museo de Bellas Artes in Córdoba, is made of marble, and names one Khaṭira, giving her the title of \textit{mawlā}, or royal client, indicating that she was a former concubine of either al-Ḥakam I or Muḥammad II, who was manumitted and thereafter maintained a client/patron relationship with the ruler as a freedwoman (Fig. 1).\textsuperscript{53} The second inscription (of an unspecified stone), dateable to the last quarter of the ninth century and housed in a private collection in Málaga, names one Badi‘ as \textit{umm walad}, and specifies that her son Sa‘īd was brother to the ruler.\textsuperscript{54}

\textit{The “Golden Age” of the Umayyad Caliphate (928–976)}

In the opening years of the tenth century, with the accession of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III, the thread of female patronage, perhaps disrupted during the politically unstable second half of the ninth century, emerges strongly.\textsuperscript{55} During ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III’s long and illustrious reign, which lasted from 912 until his death in 961, unfree elites emerge again as active and visible patrons of architecture, part of a revitalized royal building program. After reconsolidating Umayyad control over al-Andalus during the period of his emirate (912–928), ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III made the momentous decision to reclaim the Umayyad right to the caliphate. In 928 he had the oath of loyalty (\textit{khuṭba}) pronounced in his name, rather than that of the ‘Abbāsid


\textsuperscript{52} Carballeira Debasa, “Forms and Functions of Charity in al-Andalus,” pp. 207–208.

\textsuperscript{53} Lévi-Provençal, \textit{Inscriptions arabes d’Espagne}, no. 2 and Plate Ib.

\textsuperscript{54} Lévi-Provençal identifies it as “Lapidario de Villaceballos” in the Museum of the Marquis de Casa-Loring, à la Concepción, near Málaga: Lévi-Provençal, \textit{Inscriptions arabes d’Espagne}, no. 3.

\textsuperscript{55} On ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III and his reign see María Isabel Fierro, \textit{‘Abd al-Raḥmān III: The First Cordoban Caliph} (Oxford, 2005); Kennedy, \textit{Muslim Spain and Portugal}, pp. 82–108.
caliph, ushering in the “golden age” of Umayyad al-Andalus. Just as the political instability of Muḥammad I’s period seems to be mirrored in the dearth of evidence for patronage, the political consolidation of power and authority, the expansion of Umayyad territory, and ascendant wealth that characterized ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III’s reign were distinguished by major official projects such as the minaret at the Great Mosque of Córdoba, and especially the new royal city, Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ, a few miles west of Córdoba’s urban center (begun ca. 936).56 During ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III’s reign,

court women appear once again in the chronicles as active patrons of major building projects in the caliphal capital.

Two women in particular emerge in Ibn Ḥayyān’s court chronicle: by now it is not a surprise to find that Marjān, to whom the text gives the most prominent place as ‘ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III’s favorite, was a concubine. More to the point, Marjān was also mother of his son and heir, the second Andalusi caliph, al-Ḥakam II, which made her the queen-mother, and therefore the most powerful woman at court. The second woman, Fāṭima, is the first of the ruler’s free wives to be identified specifically as a patron. According to Ibn Ḥayyān, “Marjān outperformed Fāṭima with the pious deeds she carried out, unmatched by any of al-Nāṣir’s wives, such as the alms she generously gave and the help she provided, the mosques she had erected, and the pious endowments she set up.”57 Interestingly, this suggests that personal competition between these two women was waged partly on the battleground of civic patronage. Furthermore, it provides additional evidence that both unfree and free women were prominently engaged in charitable works, including founding mosques. Given the normal brevity of the texts on the buildings founded by women, it is worth reproducing in detail Ibn Ḥayyān’s further comments on Marjān:

One of her [Marjān’s] most notable works was the large mosque attributed to “the Lady” (sayyida) in the western suburbs… which was one of the most spacious buildings in Córdoba, [distinguished by] the best workmanship, whose services, ablutions fountains, guards and [amenities for?] the crowds that went there were paid for through the splendid waqf (pious foundation) she had established for this and other mosques [which she founded] in the city, [all of which were] situated in areas of high value, with high rental incomes, in western Córdoba. All these mosques were supported by these ample rents over the years… Her mediation brought the comfort of God to many, perpetuating her memory among the good: may she rest in peace.58

In this passage we get a rare glimpse of the buildings and related services associated with women’s patronage on a high level, and perhaps its reception by a broader public. Ibn Ḥayyān’s attention to Marjān reflects the respect which was accorded to the mother of a caliph, and it shows that in the case of royal women, architectural patronage was an acceptable


58 Ibn Ḥayyān, Muqtabis V, p. 19.

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means for court women to demonstrate virtue, generosity, and piety. These women constructed monuments and endowed pious foundations which were, according to the chronicler, well known, prestigious, and used by the populace in the Umayyad capital, and that as civic patrons these women were lauded by the population outside the sphere of the court.

Eunuch Patronage

While concubines are the most visible court patrons, aside from the ruler, during the emirate and early caliphate, they were not the only unfree elites who were building in Córdoba. In fact, eunuchs emerge early on as patrons in their own right at the same moment as the concubines, that is, during the reign of al-Ḥakam I (r. 796–822). Ibn Ḥayyān wrote that al-Ḥakam I chose to make eunuchs of three freeborn males, presumably adolescent boys, on the basis of their good looks. These three, whose names are given as Ṭarafah ibn Laqiṭ, Surayj, and Naṣr Abū l-Fath, along with an unspecified number of others, we are told, were castrated and brought to Córdoba to serve in the court. The text provides few details, but enough to establish the backgrounds of the named men. All were free residents of the town of Carmona, near Seville. While Ṭarafah and Surayj are credited with founding mosques in Córdoba, no further details beyond the fact of their patronage are provided. Ṭarafah’s father and brother held high administrative posts, and Ibn Ḥayyān identifies him as a descendent of the Luwarī [sic] Berber tribe. Naṣr Abū l-Fath, who became the most prominent of the three, was the son of a dhimmī of Carmona, that is, a member of either the Christian or Jewish community, who had converted to Islam before his son’s castration. Naṣr Abū l-Fath’s religious status as a Muslim should, therefore, have precluded the possibility of his enslavement and castration, and al-Ḥakam I was later strongly criticized for what must have been seen as an unlawful act.

60 Mohamed Meouak suggests Luwati or Hawwari as alternate readings. Personal communication.
Concubines and eunuchs appear together in the Arabic texts, supporting one another out of common interest. For example, Tarūb had an especially strong alliance with the palace functionaries (fītyān, sing. ḥāṭā), to whom Ibn Quṭiyya notes that she was a “benefactress and patron.”63 In fact, her most prominent supporter amongst them was none other than Naṣr Abū l-Faṭḥ, said by that time to have been the second most powerful man in al-Andalus, and who surfaces repeatedly in the texts of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān II’s reign (and not always in a flattering light).64 Naṣr Abū l-Faṭḥ eventually attained the rank of al-fatā al-ḥabīr (Great Servant/Page), the highest rank obtained by unfree male elites.65 He co-directed the most important architectural project of the Umayyad state at the time, the expansion of the prayer hall at the Great Mosque of Córdoba between 848 and 850, with a second high-ranking functionary, the ḥāṭā Masrūr, whose name appears on the portal known today as the Puerta de San Esteban, in an inscription commemorating the expansion.66 Consisting of the extension of the prayer hall by eight bays, for which new columns and capitals were fashioned, this expansion surely would have been the highest-profile building project to have been undertaken in al-Andalus since the mosque’s foundation by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān I some sixty years before. A panegyric poem transmitted by al-Rāzī celebrates Naṣr Abū l-Faṭḥ’s prominent role in this prestigious undertaking, whose successful execution testified to the eunuch’s service to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān II.67 Naṣr Abū l-Faṭḥ’s name presumably also was part of the epigraphy on the Puerta de San Esteban, but was perhaps effaced in the wake of accusations of his conspiracy against the sovereign.68 In addition to overseeing this prestigious and highly public commission on behalf of the ruler, Naṣr Abū l-Faṭḥ was well-known for his private architectural patronage. Along with ʿAjāb, Naṣr Abū l-Faṭḥ is the earliest patron

63 Ibn Quṭiyya places these words in the mouths of the palace eunuchs, whom he says supported Tarūb’s son out of their loyalty to her. James, Early Islamic Spain, p. 113.
65 On the complexities of the term ḥāṭā see Meouak, Ṣaqāliba, pp. 95–107.
of a Córdoban munya (villa) to be identified in the court texts, aside from the Umayyad rulers themselves.69

Eunuch Ascendance under al-Ḥakam II (961–976)

As I have noted, in contrast to the early caliphate and the emirate, during the reign of the second Andalusi caliph, al-Ḥakam II (961–976), the court chronicles are relatively reticent on the topic of court women, either concubines or free, as patrons. Following al-Ḥakam II’s accession to the caliphal throne in 961, the scales clearly tip in favor of the most powerful of the Slav palace eunuchs, who from this point outpace the women in their involvement in private and state-sponsored commissions. Perhaps one explanation for the shift may lie in al-Ḥakam II’s alleged homosexuality; if true, one might assume that royal concubines would be a smaller and less powerful demographic within his court than in the courts of his predecessors.70 The powerful eunuchs, Jaʿfar and Durrī al-Ṣaghīr, two of a handful whom ‘Abd al-Rahmān III had legally adopted as “sons,” dominate art and architecture during the caliphal period and in particular al-Ḥakam II’s reign.

Jaʿfar attained the powerful post of ḥājib (prime minister), and directed the royal ṭirāz (textiles) workshop and later, the architecture workshop (ṣāhib al-ṭirāz and ṣāhib al-abniya).71 Indeed, along with textual evidence for his patronage of a suburban villa as well as a residence at Madīnat al-Zahrā’, Jaʿfar is linked with the major architectural projects of the caliphal state.72 His greatest surviving project is al-Ḥakam II’s 965 addition

72 The portal of an elite residence believed to be that of Jaʿfar has been reconstructed at Madinat al-Zahrā’. See Antonio Vallejo Triano, “Architecture and Urbanism in Umayyad Córdoba Madinat al-Zahrā’: Transformation of a Caliphal City,” in Perspectives on the Material Culture of Islamic Iberia and Beyond, eds. Claire D. Anderson and Mariam Rosser-Owen (Leiden, 2007), pp. 14–19.
to the Great Mosque of Córdoba, where his name and titles appear no less than five times along with that of al-Ḥakam II in the marble and mosaic inscriptions decorating the miḥrāb (Figs. 2, 3).\(^{73}\) The inscriptions follow a standard formula, beginning with a Qur’ānic verse, and then naming al-Ḥakam II, Commander of the Faithful (amīr al-muʾminīn) as the one who ordered the construction of the work by Jaʿfar Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān [III], mawālā (freedman) and ḥājib.

Durrī b. al-Ḥakam al-Mustanṣir, Abū Uthmān (d. 976, also known as Durri al-ʿAṣghar or Durri al-Ṣaghīr) stands out as the second most prominent of the enslaved elites of the Marwānid caliphate. His career trajectory in the court of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III and then al-Ḥakam II parallels that of his contemporary, Jaʿfar.\(^{74}\) Durrī was first asked to participate in court ceremonial as a young man near the end of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III’s reign by the provost of the tailors (ʿarīf al-Khayyāṭīn) and the qāḍī Muḥammad b. Yūsuf, who led the Ramaḍān oration and prayers as Imam in 971.\(^{75}\) We can therefore speculate that, like his contemporary Jaʿfar, Durrī began his career at court working in the royal textile workshop, perhaps as a designer, where his talents were discovered and encouraged. Durrī was also a patron of architecture, both in his own right and on behalf of the caliph. Around 965 he was the patron of a luxurious suburban villa (Fig. 4) situated near the Wādī Rummān (River of the Pomegranate) in the countryside west of Madinat al-Zahrāʾ (and hence known in the secondary literature as al-Rummāniyya); an inscription datable between 962 and 976 also identifies Durrī as the patron of a minaret in Baeza, a town located in the province of Jaen south of Córdoba.\(^{76}\)

Shortly after the accession of al-Ḥakam II in 961, Durrī attained the directorship of the caliphal ivory workshop at Madinat al-Zahrāʾ. Two caskets, characterized by a combination of figural and vegetal ornament, whose epigraphy states that they were made under his supervision (ʿalā yaday) are preserved today in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Museo Arqueológico Nacional in Madrid (Figs. 5, 6). Created in 964, they were made as a pair for al-Ḥakam II and his favorite concubine Ṣubḥ who, as the mother of al-Ḥakam’s firstborn son and heir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, would

\(^{73}\) Lévi-Provençal, *Inscriptions araby d’Espagne*, nos. 10–14.


\(^{75}\) Meouak, Ṣaqāliba, pp. 182–83. Tailors and other skilled textile workers were employed in caliphal textile workshops. See the entry “Khayyāṭ,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam.*

\(^{76}\) Meouak, Ṣaqāliba, pp. 182–83.
Figure 2  Mihrāb, Great Mosque of Córdoba, 961–965 CE (Photo: G.D. Anderson).
have been the most powerful woman at court. The caskets may have been commissioned to celebrate the long-awaited heir to the caliphal throne, Ṣubḥ’s son ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, who had been born two years before. The epigraphy on the Madrid ivory (also known as the Zamora Casket) made for Ṣubḥ reads:

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77 Marín has suggested the extent of her power at court may be gauged by the bias discernible in both the medieval Arabic texts and in modern historiography: Marín, “Una vida de mujer: Ṣubb,” pp. 425–45. Also see Laura Bariani, “Fue Ṣubḥ ‘La plus chère des femmes fécondes?’ Consideraciones sobre la dedicatoria de las arquillas califales del Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan y de la Iglesia de S. María de Fitero,” Al-Qantara, 26/2 (2005), pp. 299–315.

78 Prado-Vilar has argued for a connection between Ṣubḥ’s role as ʻumm walad and the visual language of the pyxis in “Circular Visions of Fertility and Punishment,” pp. 19–41.
The blessing of Allāh upon the Imām, the servant of God, al-Ḥakam al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh, Commander of the Faithful. This is what he ordered to be made for the noble lady [Sayyida], the mother of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, under the direction of [ʿalā yaday] Durrī al-Ṣaghīr in the year 353 [964].

In contrast to Durrī ’s and Ja'far’s prominent official and private patronage at this time, female patronage was limited during the reign of al-Ḥakam II, and is attested only in epigraphy. A marble inscription plaque that can be dated between 961 and 976 states that the aforementioned Ja'far directed a commission on behalf of a royal woman, Sayyida Mushtaq (Fig. 7). It reads:

Power and strength belong to Allāh the Magnificent! The Noble Lady (sayyida) Mushtaq, mother of the brother (of the prince, i.e., al-Ḥakam II) Al-Mughīra, ordered the minaret and the contiguous gallery (ḥadatha al-manār wa-l-saqīfa) and nine of the lateral portals (turar) of the mosque. And it was completed with the help of Allāh, under the direction of the fatā Jaʿfar Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, in the month of Ramaḍān (this year 8080).

The inscription indicates that Sayyida Mushtaq had been a concubine of the first caliph, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III, to whom she bore a son, al-Mughīra. The latter’s name is well known to historians of Islamic art, thanks to the epigraphy naming him as the recipient of the ivory pyxis, known as the Pyxis of al-Mughīra and now in the Musée du Louvre, completed in the same year as Sayyida Mushtaq’s mosque addition (Fig. 8).81 As an adult

80 Lévi-Provençal, Inscriptions arabs d’Espagne, no. 18. Remains of a 10th-century minaret in the parish church of San Lorenzo offer some evidence of mosques from the period.


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Figure 6  “Zamora” ivory pyxis, ordered by al-Ḥakam II for the Lady (Sayyida) Ṣubḥ, under the direction of Durrī al-Ṣaghīr. Probably made at Madinat al-Zahrā’, near Córdoba, 964 CE (Photo: G.D. Anderson/Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid).
Figure 7 Sayyida Mushtaq inscription (marble), Córdoba, 968 CE (Photo: Lévi-Provençal, Inscriptions arabes d’Espagne, plate 6b/ Museo Arqueológico de Córdoba).
Figure 8  Ivory pyxis made for Prince al-Mughîra, probably at Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ, near Córdoba, 968 CE (Photo: Erich Lessing, Art Resource, NY/Musée du Louvre, Paris).
son of ‘Abd al-Rahmān II, al-Mughīra was a reasonable candidate to succeed al-Ḥakam II at the time. The caliph’s chosen heir, Hishām, was still a young boy, and al-Mughīra was the favored candidate of the powerful faction made up of the palace eunuchs. The reference to her son in the mosque inscription would, therefore, have underscored Sayyida Mushtaq’s elevated status in the court. The inclusion in architectural inscriptions of the names of men—husbands, fathers, or sons—through whom female patrons claimed the authority to build is also a feature of later female patronage elsewhere in Islamic lands, and was likely a practice with pre-Islamic roots, a point to which I will return below.

The last female patron for which there is some material evidence during al-Ḥakam II’s reign is Ṣubḥ, his favorite concubine and the mother of his young heir Hishām, who ascended the throne as a boy in 976. A white marble inscription plaque, dateable to 977, names Ṣubḥ as the patron of a water fountain (saqāya) constructed in the town of Écija, an important commercial center located on the main road between Córdoba and Seville. Lévi-Provençal translates the inscription:

...the queen-mother of the Commander of the Faithful (sayyida al-walada umm amir al-mu’mīnīn) al-Mu’ayyad bi’llāh Hishām, son of al-Ḥakam—may God preserve him!—in hopes of God’s favor and reward, ordered the construction of this fountain. It was completed with the aid and assistance of God, under the direction of his follower, the prefect of police and the qāḍī of the district of Ecija, Carmona, and its territories, Ahmad, son of ‘Abd Allāh, son of Mūsā, and finished in the month of Rabī’ II in the year 367 (16 November–14 December 977).
The plaque survives today embedded on a façade of the bell tower of the church of Santa Cruz in Écija. The date of the project—one year after al-Ḥakam II’s death—provides the context for the inscription, which designates Ṣubḥ as queen-mother and regent of the young caliph. Ṣubḥ was an Iberian-born woman, said to have been captured in the northern Basque territories.

The inscription is unprecedented in its assertion of power by an Umayyad royal woman, but as a female regent, Ṣubḥ herself was unprecedented in Umayyad Córdoba. As well as having significant pre-Islamic associations, the title sayyida is in keeping with that of other queen-mothers in the tenth century and afterward. Expanding our perspective outside al-Andalus, the 970s were an interesting moment in the larger history of Islamic women. Around the time that Ṣubḥ became the regent in Córdoba, Durzān, the aforementioned queen-mother of al-ʿAzīz, heir to the Fāṭimid caliphal throne, was building major monuments in Cairo. Thus Durzān’s patronage provides a foil for that of Ṣubḥ. In 976, one year before the completion of Ṣubḥ’s fountain in the province of Seville, Durzān founded the second great Fāṭimid mosque of Cairo, a congregational mosque (no longer extant) located in the Qarafa. Ṣubḥ’s work was intended for public benefit, but it suffers in comparison with the costly and celebrated pious foundations established by her predecessors in Córdoba and her contemporary in Cairo. Though the elevated title with which Ṣubḥ is identified conveys a message of authority, the small scale of the project and its provincial location belie the intended statement. Unlike the Sayyida Mushtaq project, whose director was none other than the eunuch Jaʿfar himself, one of the most prominent of the Slav eunuchs and the one most visibly associated with the architectural commissions of the dynasty, the director of Ṣubḥ’s project was not a eunuch but (from his name) presumably a free provincial administrator: Ahmad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Mūsā, identified in the inscription as prefect of police (ṣāḥib al-shurṭa) and qāḍī of the
district of Écija, Carmona, and their dependencies. He is identified as one of Šubh’s protegés, but unlike her other protegé Ibn Abī ‘Āmir, known as al-Manṣūr (or Almanzor), he is otherwise unknown.⁸⁹

In a departure from the established precedent, the court texts do not speak of Šubh as a patron, despite her status as queen-mother of the young caliph Hishām and all indications that she was a formidable ruler in her own right. One would expect her to have followed in the footsteps of her predecessors and to have been an active, prominent, and lauded patron, but if so, in contrast to the relatively numerous references to her predecessors, the texts do not speak of this. Might the silence of the texts suggest that, despite Šubh’s attempt to claim a position of power and authority as the reigning queen-mother of al-Andalus, circumstances prevented her from exercising patronage at the level established by her predecessors? If so, perhaps this was a consequence of Ibn Abī ‘Āmir’s consolidation of power at court during her regency, though we cannot be sure solely based on the absence of evidence. Ibn Abī ‘Āmir began his celebrated ascent to power thanks to the patronage of the freeborn aristocrat al-Muṣḥafī, and his first appointment was as steward to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, the firstborn son of al-Ḥakam and Šubh.⁹⁰ Ibn Abī ‘Āmir’s access to state workshops during his tenure as director of the Umayyad mint is clear from the spectacular gift which he presented to Šubh: a palace wrought from silver, so large that it had to be carried to her on the heads of several men.⁹¹ While Ibn Abī ‘Āmir rose to prominence under her patronage, eventually relations between him and Šubh became strained following an incident involving the caliphal treasury. According to one anecdote with a decidedly anti-‘Āmirid slant, after learning that women of the harem were taking treasure from the caliphal store, Ibn Abī ‘Āmir forced Šubh to return some eighty thousand dinars which she was accused of secretly taking from the caliphal palace to a location outside Córdoba.⁹² In order to then “safeguard” the caliphal treasury, Ibn Abī ‘Āmir removed it in its entirety to his own Córdoban estate. As Rosser-Owen has discussed, Šubh intended to use the money to fund an uprising against al-Manṣūr, making

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this one of the most significant political events of the time, and the point at which the infamous parting of ways between these two powerful figures began.\textsuperscript{93} The material evidence for female patronage during this time, or rather its dearth, coupled with a similar absence of textual evidence for such patronage, suggests that in the last decades of the tenth century royal women may not have been as active as under previous rulers, though we must be cautious about drawing this conclusion based solely on the lack of evidence. Following the transfer of the caliphal treasury to his own control, it may be that al-Manṣūr hampered court women’s access to the financial resources necessary to fund patronage. However, this is not in keeping with the marked continuities with Umayyad practice that characterize his period of rule, nor with the impression of a regent genuinely concerned with good government and the welfare of the broader population.\textsuperscript{94} Certainly, high-ranking eunuchs continue to appear in the context of patronage and production during al-Manṣūr’s reign: ‘Āmirid luxury objects bear epigraphy with the names of two elite eunuchs, Khalaf al-‘Āmirī (on al-Manṣūr’s marble basin), and Zuhayr al-‘Āmirī (on the Braga and Pamplona ivories).\textsuperscript{95} More likely, al-Manṣūr’s action against Ṣubḥ was a single politically-motivated event, rather than a trend throughout his regency.

\textit{Conclusions}

We can draw several conclusions from this overview of patronage in Umayyad Córdoba. Perhaps the most important is that female patronage was mainly the prerogative of royal concubines. Those whose sons took the Umayyad throne are the particular focus of the court chronicles, for obvious reasons. However, allusions to patronage as a field of competition among the ruler’s free wives and other enslaved women attest to broader participation in building among the women of the court. Furthermore, female patronage in the Andalusi court cannot be viewed in isolation, but

\textsuperscript{93} Rosser-Owen, “Articulating the Ḥijāba,” p. 35.
\textsuperscript{94} Rosser-Owen, “Articulating the Ḥijāba,” pp. 16–50.
was part of a larger picture of patronage amongst unfree elites, in which
palace eunuchs and other unfree males were active. This is partly a reflec-
tion of the great wealth which favored concubines and which eunuchs
also enjoyed, thanks to their relationships to the Umayyad rulers. In gen-
eral the buildings founded by concubines and eunuchs were charitable
foundations; mosques and cemeteries are mentioned specifically and con-
sistently over time, and support for other types of pious foundations is
implied in the texts. Because concubines and eunuchs became wealthy
through gifts from the ruler, rather than through inheritance, it may be
that by endowing charitable foundations they also provided themselves
or their children with a stable means of income, as was the case in later
Mamlûk societies. 96 ‘Abd al-Raḥmân II’s creation of a pious endowment
to benefit his two young daughters by Tarûb (a concubine whom he had
freed and married), and similar endowments formed for the benefit of
the sons of three of his other wives or concubines (al-Shifāʾ, Iḥtizāz, and
Muʿammara), suggest that this was the case, at least some of the time. 97
However, as Marín has observed, a desire to keep women who were not
related to the Umayyad family by blood out of lines of inheritance is
discernible in ensuing legal judgments that deliberately excluded ‘Abd
al-Raḥmân II’s wives and concubines from benefits to be gained from the
endowments. One might wonder whether gifts were specifically given to
concubines so that patronage could be conducted, especially given the
insistence on patronage as a sign of piety. However, it is difficult if not
impossible to say whether this was the case, at least based on the sources
discussed here.

It is likewise important to note that Ibn Ḥayyān, who wrote not long
after the construction of the Umayyads’ most celebrated monuments,
puts the patronage of some of the women on par with the greatest build-
ing projects of the dynasty. While we might ask whether Ibn Ḥayyān and
other court authors were deliberately presenting royal concubines (and
the Umayyad rulers) in the most favorable light to appease a disapproving
populace, the high level at which such commissions could be carried out
can be inferred from the involvement of the eunuch Jaʿfar, director of the
most prestigious works of al-Ḥakam II’s reign, in the project commissioned

96 Howayda al-Harithy, "Female Patronage of Mamlûk Architecture in Cairo," in Beyond
the Exotic: Women’s Histories in Islamic Societies, ed. Amira el-Azhary Sonbol (Syracuse,
2005), p. 335; Carl F. Petry, "Waqf as an Instrument of Investment," in Slave Elites in the
97 Marín, Mujeres en al-Andalus, pp. 362–63.
by Sayyida Mushtaq, mother of al-Ḥakam II’s brother al-Mughīra. Art historians have discussed women of the Córdoban court as recipients of the celebrated ivory caskets made in the workshop at Madīnat al-Zahrā’ during the reign of al-Ḥakam II, but this collaboration between Sayyida Mushtaq and Jaʿfar clearly points to women’s ability to access Umayyad royal workshops.98 As their partnership indicates, there was no hindrance to communication and collaboration between court women and those who directed and carried out the greatest artistic commissions of the state: eunuchs such as Naṣr Abū l-Fath, Jaʿfar, and Durri al-Ṣaghīr. Indeed, Ṣubḥ’s brother, Raʿīq, apparently a eunuch in one of the state workshops, would have provided her with a family connection to the ateliers.99 Again, women’s patronage in the early modern Islamic lands may be relevant to understanding that of the caliphate. David Ayalon’s observation that in the early modern Mamlūk courts women and eunuchs were frequent and powerful allies—indeed, that as groups each formed a side of the triangular power structure whose third side was the ruler himself—is instructive.100 The evidence that palace eunuchs directed the court workshops and also worked in them as artisans and designers makes it probable that court women had direct access to the royal architects and designers, and could have participated in design decisions.

It is also notable that the portrayal of patronage as a meritorious act in the Arabic court texts contrasts with the evidence for expectations of women outside the realm of the court, perhaps underscoring a division in this respect between the court and the broader populace.101 Whereas court concubines achieved visibility, prestige, and acclaim as pious women through their patronage, Cristina de la Puente has argued that women of the urban middle classes were expected to demonstrate their respectability and piety through their invisibility.102 However, one might point to

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100 Ayalon, Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans, pp. 195–99.


the ninth-century Qarawiyyīn and Andalusiyyīn mosques of Fes, whose founding is attributed to Fāṭima and Maryam, daughters of a wealthy Tunisian immigrant, as evidence that patronage among women of the court was in fact paralleled in the middle classes. In any case, genuine piety and expectations about the responsibilities of the aristocracy were certainly motivating factors behind the construction of mosques and other pious foundations, but we can speculate about other reasons concubines and eunuchs would have built. While female patronage highlights the class divisions which existed between the court and the urban classes, the emphasis on building and endowing pious foundations on the part of both women and eunuchs might be explained in part as an attempt to strengthen ties between the ruling aristocracy and the ‘ulamā’, who were influential among the broader urban population. In Qayrawān, for instance, the Aghlabid rulers may have sought to create such connections with the ‘ulamā’ and the urban populace through mosque patronage, during a time of tension between the aristocracy and the population, stemming in part from the aristocracy’s adherence to a different religious school. Perhaps by endowing charitable foundations such as mosques and their appurtenances, these ethnically diverse men and women of the Umayyad court also found a means of integrating themselves into a Muslim community to which some of them had come as outsiders. If so, the patronage of the Umayyad concubines and eunuchs is a precursor to the practices of the later dynasties, such as the Kurdish Ayyūbids and Turkic Mamlûks, who sought to bridge the difference between themselves and their majority Arab populations by founding charitable institutions such as soup kitchens, schools, mosques, and so forth. On the other hand, as Marín points out, it may be that unfree women and eunuchs “are only outsiders from our own perspective; in the Islamic medieval courts they were an essential part of kinship and power networks.”

Sources, p. 99; Ruggles, ed., Women, Patronage, and Self-representation in Islamic Societies, pp. 3–6.


105 Personal communication, April 2010.
likely that they did not need the support of the ‘ulamā’, given the authority and influence they wielded in court society.

But if patronage was in part a means by which “outsiders” integrated into Umayyad society, female and eunuch patronage speaks to the processes of acculturation and transculturation at work in medieval and early modern Islamic courts.106 Iberia’s long history of settlement and acculturation provides a logical case study for examining such issues and may illuminate similar processes elsewhere, given that conquest, settlement, and acculturation are characteristic of the history of most any region of the pre-modern Islamic lands. After all, there were few places in the Dār al-Islām which were not contact zones. Qalam, one of the “Medinese” women mentioned at the beginning of this study, for example, is an intriguing embodiment of these processes in al-Andalus. She was said to have been a noblewoman from northern Iberia, whose capture and enslavement resulted in her transfer to Medina, where she trained in music before returning to Iberia as a slave of the Umayyad sovereign.107 Certainly those who were brought to the Umayyad court from outside the Dār al-Islām overcame formidable obstacles when they were taken from their native lands and cultures and brought to the Umayyad capital.108 Nevertheless they became prominent and powerful actors in Umayyad Córdoba, and their patronage bears witness to the high status and active participation of concubines and eunuchs in this medieval court society. Yet there is a contrast between the prominence and visibility these women and men attained as patrons, and their near invisibility in the narrative of Andalusi Umayyad art. This is mainly a problem of the survival of evidence, but it may also stem in part from our assumptions about the place of women

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and castrated men in medieval Islamic societies. Perhaps we deny agency and power to concubines and eunuchs, projecting predominantly sexualized, servile, or passive identities to those categorized as such. The evidence for female and eunuch patronage outlined in this article indicates that such assumptions are mistaken.