

A mother's gift? Astrology and the pyxis of al-Mughīra

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ABSTRACT

This article re-examines the most celebrated, and most controversial, of the Cordoban ivories, the al-Mughīra pyxis, from a perspective of gender and kinship relations within the court hierarchy. It proposes an alternative patron for this object, namely al-Mughīra's mother al-Mushtaq, a consort of the Cordoban Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Rahmān III (r. 929–61) in the latter years of his life, and a patron of architecture. The article suggests astronomical and astrological possibilities for interpreting the pyxis' unusual iconography, which arise from considering al-Mushtaq as a potential patron of the al-Mughīra pyxis. Key to the argument is the notion that women in the Cordoban court were 'makers' of art and architecture, in that they could and did exercise authority through artistic patronage.

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Introduction

Preserved in the Musée du Louvre, the pyxis of al-Mughīra is a cylindrical, domed box that has long been hailed as a masterpiece of the ivory carver's art.¹ The pyxis lid bears an Arabic inscription that identifies the recipient of this precious object as a son of the first Cordoban Umayyad caliph, 'Abd al-Rahmān III (r. 912–61).² This object is famous not only for the masterly execution of the carving, but also for its complex cycle of figural decoration, one of the most intriguing, and perplexing, in the whole of Islamic art. The decoration is divided into four major vignettes, framed in lobed cartouches set against a verdant background of carved foliage and surrounded by eight smaller groups of human and animal figures (Figures 2–5). Two of the four main scenes conform to the Early Islamic 'princely' cycle while the other two seem to have no immediate parallels in Early Islamic art. Besides the unusual imagery, the inscription diverges from those found on the other Cordoban ivories in that it does not reference the caliph 'Abd al-Rahmān III by name, but only by title:

Blessings from God, goodwill, happiness and prosperity to al-Mughīra, son of the Commander of the Faithful (*amīr al-mu'minīn*), may God's mercy be upon him; made in the year 357 [968 CE].³

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¹The piece has generated a considerable bibliography, but see Sophie Makariou, *La pyxide d'al-Mughira*. Collection Solo 54 (Paris: Louvre éditions, 2012); Renata Holod, 'Luxury Arts of the Caliphal Period', in *Al-Andalus: the Art of Islamic Spain*, ed. Jerrilynn D. Dodds (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 40–7.

²Maribel Fierro, 'Abd Al-Rahman III: the First Cordoban Caliph (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005).

³Holod, 'Luxury Arts', 195.

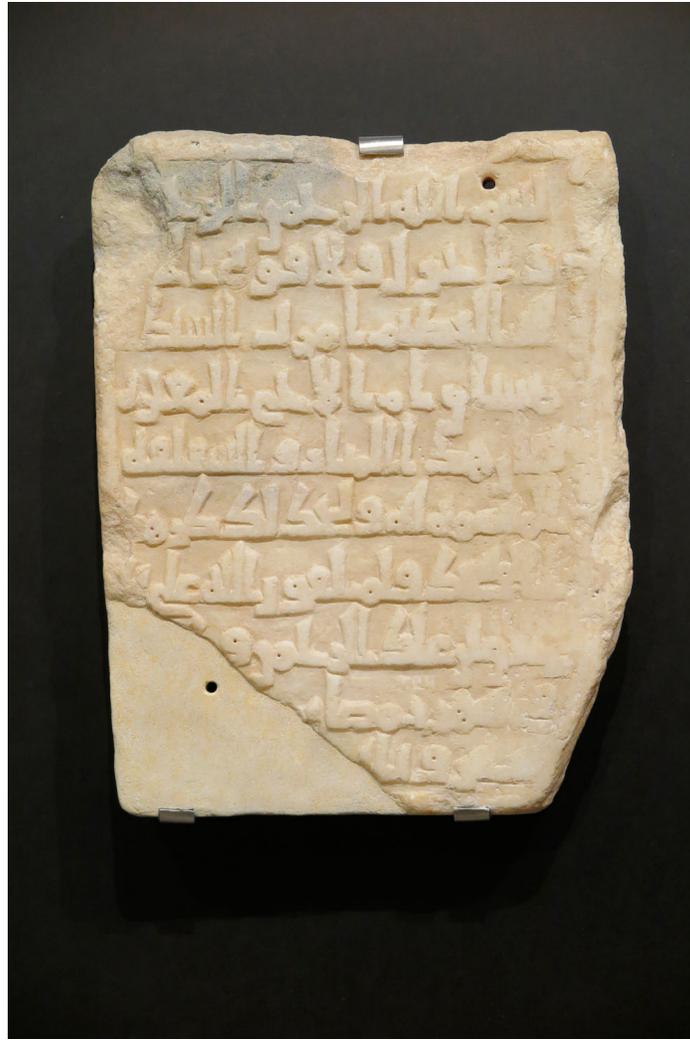


Figure 1. Sayyidah Mushtaq inscription (marble), Cordoba, c.961–9 CE.
 Source: Museo Arqueológico de Córdoba. Photo: Glair D. Anderson

The identity of the pyxis' recipient, al-Mughira, lends additional interest to the object, aside from its unusual iconography.⁴ al-Mughira was a key, and tragic, figure in the drama that ensued some eight years after the date inscribed on the pyxis. This essay article proposes a new interpretation of this object, one which focuses on the concrete historical moment of the pyxis' creation in 968. Further, it offers a re-reading of this ivory from a perspective that includes Cordoban court women as makers of Umayyad visual culture in collaboration with court eunuchs. It argues that al-Mughira's mother, al-Mushtaq (*fl.* 951), a known patron of architecture in the decade during which the pyxis was created, may have commissioned the pyxis as a gift for her son, perhaps to celebrate a personal or social milestone such as a birthday or wedding.⁵ The argument is based on a surviving inscription that identifies al-Mushtaq as a patron in the 960s whose commission

⁴Hugh Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal: a Political History of Al-Andalus* (London: Longman, 1996).

⁵Manuela Marín, *Mujeres en al-Andalus* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000), 343.



Figure 2. Enthronement or music scene, pyxis of al-Mughīra (ivory), probably made at Madīnat al-Zahrā', near Cordoba, 968 CE.

Source: Paris, Musée du Louvre. © RMN-Grand Palais/ (Herve Lewandowski)/ Art Resource, NY

was carried out under the direction of a court eunuch, and which also specifically identifies her as the mother of this ill-fated prince. Although speculative, the argument combines a close reading of the artistic and material evidence with a passage from the Umayyad court



Figure 3. Lion and bull combat, pyxis of al-Mughīra, 968 CE.

Source: Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: © Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY

chronicle of Ibn Hayyān (d. 1076), which represents al-Mushtaq as a woman of great authority in the caliphal household. Proceeding from the hypothesis that the pyxis was a gift from mother to son it proposes a new reading for its unusual imagery, arguing that it was meant to represent seasonal and astronomical imagery current in the caliphal court at the time, which was intended to evoke positive associations, and perhaps to imbue the pyxis with beneficent, even talismanic properties.

Historical context

Assassinated immediately following the death in 976 of his brother, the second Umayyad caliph al-Hakam II (r. 961–76), al-Mughīra was a casualty in the contest over the Cordoban caliphal succession. According to the Umayyad court chronicler Ibn Hayyān (d. 1076), two factions strove to determine who would ascend the throne of al-Andalus as its third caliph: al-Hakam II's son and chosen heir, Hishām, or 'Abd al-Rahmān III's youngest son, al-Mughīra.⁶ The point of contention rested in part on Hishām's youth,

⁶On Ibn Hayyān as a historical source for Cordoban Umayyad history, see Eduardo Manzano Moreno, '¿El fin de la historia? La historiografía árabe en torno al año 1000', in *Hommes et sociétés dans l'Europe de l'an mil*, eds. Pierre Bonnassie and Pierre Toubert (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2004), 407–19.

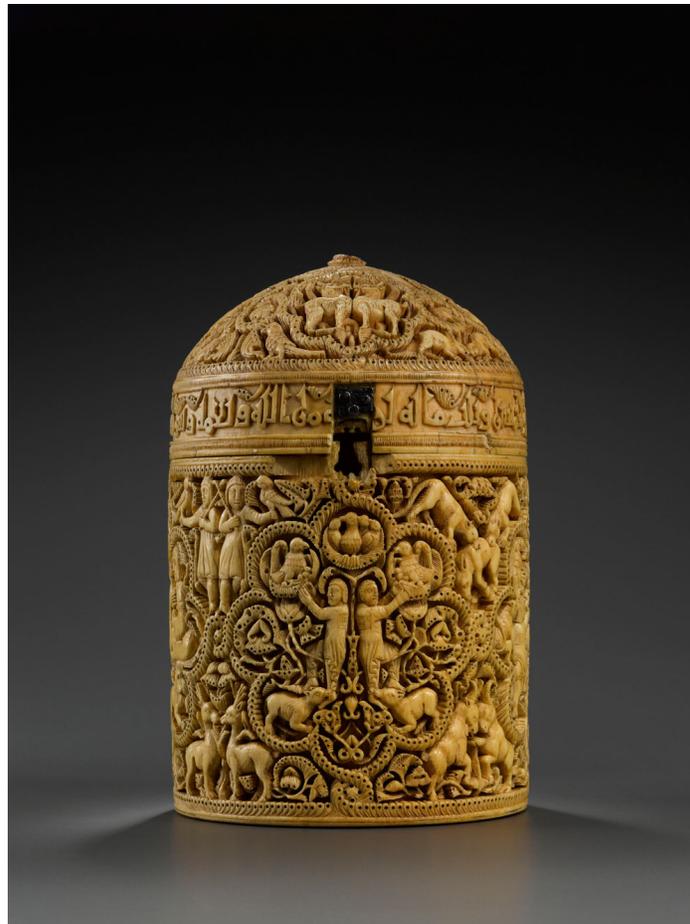


Figure 4. Scene with falcons' nests, pyxis of al-Mughīra, 968 CE.

Source: Paris, Musée du Louvre. © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/ (Hughes Dubois)/ Art Resource, NY

as he was only 11 years old at the time of his father's death, while al-Mughīra was around 25 years old and had the proper lineage as a son of the caliph.

Hishām's faction coalesced around three members of the court: Hishām's mother Subh, who had been al-Hakam's consort, the powerful free-born vizier al-Mushafi and Ibn Abī 'Āmir (better known by the honorific he later adopted, al-Mansūr).⁷ al-Mughīra's faction comprised the powerful palace eunuchs (*fityān*) who had been members of both caliphs' inner circles. Fā'iḳ al-Nizami and Jaw'dhar were eunuchs who were present at al-Hakam's death, and who immediately moved to offer al-Mughīra the throne. The episode illustrates the centrality of women and eunuchs to a royal household, which in matters such as the question of succession, had profound political ramifications. In this case, the eunuchs' faction was defeated in their plans to offer al-Mughīra the caliphal throne: the chronicle

⁷Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal*, 112–13. On Subh, see Manuela Marín, 'Una vida de mujer: Subh', in *Biografías y género biográfico en el occidente islámico*, eds. María Luisa Avila and Manuela Marín. Estudios Onomástico-Biográficos de Al-Andalus, 8 (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1997), 425–45; Laura Bariani, 'Fue Subh "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. Maria de Fitero', *Al-Qantara* 26, no. 2 (2005): 299–315.



Figure 5. Date palm scene, pyxis of al-Mughīra, 968 CE.

Source: Paris, Musée du Louvre. © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/ (Hughes Dubois)/ Art Resource, NY

tells us that Ibn Abī ‘Āmir assassinated al-Mughīra in the prince’s own residence, acting on the vizier al-Mushafi’s orders.

Renata Holod suggested that the pyxis was a gift to al-Mughīra, whose inscription and imagery together were intended to convey a message – perhaps meant to be ironic or humorous – of affirmation, encouragement and support to al-Mughīra as a potential successor to the caliphal throne.⁸ Further developing Holod’s proposal, two major arguments as to the identity of the pyxis’ patron and the meanings have subsequently been advanced. Francisco Prado-Vilar argued that either Ibn Abī ‘Āmir, or perhaps al-Mushafi, was most likely to have commissioned the pyxis.⁹ According to his reading, the pyxis imagery encodes a deliberate and hostile warning to al-Mughīra against seeking the caliphal throne. By contrast, Sophie Makariou has argued for a different source behind the commission – the powerful palace eunuchs, who favoured al-Mughīra’s candidacy to the

⁸Holod, *Al-Andalus*, 195–6.

⁹Francisco Prado-Vilar, ‘Circular Visions of Fertility and Punishment: Caliphal Ivory Caskets from Al-Andalus’ *Muqarnas* 14 (1997): 19–41; idem, ‘Enclosed in Ivory: the Miseducation of al-Mughīra, *Journal of the David Collection* 2, no. 1 (2005): 138–63.

throne.¹⁰ Like Holod, Makariou interprets the unusual imagery as visual expression of encouragement and support for al-Mughīra's candidacy, and explains some of the iconography as visual references to some of these prominent Wādī members of the eunuch faction, especially Durri al-Saghīr (d. 976).¹¹ Durri began his career at court working in the royal textile workshop, perhaps as a designer, where his talents were discovered and encouraged. He was also a patron of architecture in his own right. Around 965 he built a luxurious suburban villa situated near the Wādī Rummān (River of the Pomegranate) in the countryside west of Madīnat al-Zahrā' (and hence known in the secondary literature as al-Rummāniyya), whose carved marble decoration combining animal and vegetal imagery echoes the decoration found on the al-Mughīra pyxis.¹² Shortly after the accession of al-Hakam II in 961, Durri attained the directorship of the caliphal ivory workshop at Madīnat al-Zahrā'.

Yet as compelling as these interpretations may be, they rest too firmly on the projection backward in time of our knowledge of events that occurred after 968, the date inscribed on the pyxis. Historians have tended to view Hishām's succession teleologically, as the turning point of Cordoban Umayyad history, the moment heralding the weakening of the Cordoban caliphate, with the transfer of real power to the future dictator al-Mansūr, and the eventual dissolution of the dynasty in the first decades of the eleventh century. However, given that the events surrounding the contested succession would not unfold for several years after the object had been commissioned and created, it seems unlikely that the choice of imagery represented on the pyxis was intended to allude to events and individuals that would only become consequential years after the fact.

Al-Mushtaq as patron

The evidence that establishes al-Mushtaq's identity as al-Mughīra's mother is preserved today in the Museo Arqueológico de Córdoba (Figure 1). This is a white marble panel whose clear Kufic inscription, carved in relief, commemorates her architectural patronage and establishes her identity as a royal woman of authority:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate
 There is no power or strength except in God, the Unique. The Lady (Sayyidah)
 Mushtaq
 Mother of the Brother [of al-Hakam II] al-Mughīra
 Ordered the construction of this minaret and the gallery
 Adjoining it and the renovation of the decoration of this
 Mosque and it was completed with the help of God under the direction
 Of 'Atiq ibn 'Abd al-Rahmān, [his] eunuch servant (*fatā*)

¹⁰Sophie Makariou, 'The Al-Mughīra Pyxis and Spanish Umayyad Ivories: Aims and Tools of Power', in *Umayyad Legacies: Medieval Memories from Syria to Spain*, eds. Antoine Borrut and Paul M. Cobb (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 313–35; eadem, 'Aux origines de la *fitna*, l'affaire Al-Mughīra: la mémoire refoulée d'un assassinat à la cour de Cordoue au Xe siècle', *Médiévales* 1 (2011): 29.

¹¹Mohamed Meouak, *Ṣaḡāliba, eunuques et esclaves à la conquête du pouvoir: géographie et histoire des élites politiques 'marginales' dans l'Espagne Umayyade* (Helsinki: Academia scientiarum Fennica, 2004), 182–3.

¹²On architectural ornament and the ivories, see Glaire Anderson, *The Islamic Villa in Early Medieval Iberia: Architecture and Court Culture in Umayyad Córdoba* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 87–96.

In the month of Ramadān in the year
three [hundred] and sixty-[...].¹³

The inscription clearly establishes al-Mushtaq's elevated position in the royal household through the use of the title Sayyidah ('Lady'). The inscription is datable between 961–9 on the basis of the reference to her son al-Mughīra as 'the brother' (*al-akh*). María Antonia Martínez Núñez has observed that this way of referring to al-Mughīra was an accepted official formula that viewers would have recognised as a clear reference to the reigning caliph, al-Hakam II, who had assumed the throne in 961 following the death of his father 'Abd al-Rahmān III.

Martínez Nuñez also indicated that the wording of the epigraph conforms to other official Umayyad inscriptions, including the use of the verb 'to order' (*amara*)¹⁴ to indicate al-Mushtaq's role as the commissioner of the project. As Sheila Blair has pointed out, *amara* was the key word in the regnal formula used in Cordoban Umayyad inscriptions on ivories as well as architecture, indicating that the project had been ordered by the ruler himself and carried out at the hands of a supervising official.¹⁵ Thus, al-Mushtaq's inscription tells us that the royal ability to 'order' was not limited to the caliph, but in this case was wielded by a high-ranking woman, and that her orders were carried out by 'Atiq, who is identified as a eunuch of the caliph 'Abd al-Rahmān III. In both material and form – white marble with a clear Kufic text executed in relief (rather than incised) – the inscription is consistent with other extant examples of Cordoban Umayyad epigraphy commemorating official court commissions at the Great Mosque of Cordoba and at Madīnat al-Zahrā'. The inscription therefore provides the best evidence that al-Mushtaq was an active court patron during the decade of the 960s in which the al-Mughīra pyxis and other ivories were created for members of the royal household.

Al-Mushtaq was not anomalous as an elite woman who exercised patronage at an official level; rather, she existed within an established tradition of court women as 'makers' of Cordoban Umayyad art and architecture. The parallel activities and collaborations of court women with eunuchs in the realm of art-making are also evident from the ninth century.¹⁶ In the ninth-century Cordoban court Tarūb and Mut'a are identified by Ibn Hayyān as two women who attained the status of *umm al-walad* (mother of a son), and who subsequently achieved reputations as patrons of architecture, competing with the ruler himself in founding mosques in Cordoba and surrounding territories.¹⁷

Further indicating that al-Mushtaq's activities as a patron would have been appropriate for her time and place, court and aristocratic women were also active patrons and donors

¹³The marble epigraph was discovered in 1844 on Calle Roelas, at the church of San Lorenzo, in Córdoba. María Antonia Martínez Núñez, 'Mujeres y élites sociales en al-Andalus a través de la documentación epigráfica', in *Mujeres y sociedad islámica: una visión plural*, ed. María Isabel Calero Secall (Málaga: Universidad de Málaga, 2006), 294–6; Manuel Ocaña Jiménez, *El cúfico hispano y su evolución*. Cuadernos de historia, economía y derecho hispano-musulmán 1 (Madrid: Instituto hispano-arabe de cultura, 1970), 41–2. These readings correct that of E. Levi-Provençal, who read the name of the eunuch as Ja'far, who directed the state architecture workshops. Evariste Lévi-Provençal, *Inscriptions arabes d'Espagne: avec quarante-quatre planches en phototypie* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1931), 24–6 (number 28, plate VIb).

¹⁴Martínez Núñez, 'Mujeres y élites sociales en al-Andalus', 295.

¹⁵Sheila S. Blair, 'What the Inscriptions Tell Us: Text and Message on the Ivories from Al-Andalus', *Journal of the David Collection* 2, no. 1 (2005): 80.

¹⁶G. Anderson, 'Concubines, Eunuchs, and Patronage in Early Islamic Córdoba', in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. T. Martin. 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 2: 633–69.

¹⁷Marín, *Mujeres en al-Andalus*, 340ff. and 571–5ff.; Anderson, 'Concubines, Eunuchs, and Patronage in Early Islamic Córdoba', 642–6.

in territories adjacent to al-Andalus. For instance, early in the tenth century Fadl, a *mawla* (concubine and/or freedwoman) of one Abū Ayyūb of the Aghlabid dynasty of Tunisia (r. 900–9), donated an early, 30-volume Qurʾan to the library of the Great Mosque of Qayrawan. Her donation is attested by the manuscript's colophon, which was apparently written by Fadl herself.¹⁸

Beyond Fadl, we can also see al-Mushtaq as part of a broader context of court women elsewhere in the Early Islamic empire, whose commissions were visible components of caliphal cities and territories and whose patronage activities are attested in both inscriptions and the chronicles of the period. For instance, in the ninth-century Abbasid court the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd mother, Al-Khayzurān, and his wife Zubayda were both active patrons of architecture known for their charitable public works in both city and countryside.¹⁹ In Mecca Al-Khayzurān founded the Mosque of the Nativity, commemorating the birthplace of the Prophet, as well as a public fountain and water infrastructure in Iraq. Her daughter-in-law Zubayda is justly celebrated even today for her extensive patronage along the pilgrimage, or *hajj*, routes connecting Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. Other Abbasid court women likewise were known for endowing public works such as fountains and water systems, as well as monuments such as mausolea and palaces in Baghdad; they are among the women commemorated in the thirteenth-century compilation of anecdotes on the consorts of the Abbasid caliphs, composed by the Baghdadi scholar Ibn al-Sāʿī (d. 1276).²⁰

Similarly, in Fatimid Cairo Durzan, consort of one Fatimid caliph and mother of another, was a major patron of architecture, as Delia Cortese and Simonetta Calderini have discussed in recent studies.²¹ Durzan, like several of the Cordoban concubines-turned-patrons, first made her name as a musician before she became the consort of the Fatimid caliph, to whom she bore a son who succeeded his father to the caliphal throne. In considering the patronage of royal consorts like al-Mushtaq, and most of the aforementioned women who rose to prominence as queen-mothers in the Abbasid and Fatimid caliphal courts, it seems that their path to patronage followed an established pattern. Initially these women rose to fame as slaves who were highly trained musicians, poets and, in some cases, calligraphers and intellectuals. Subsequently they attained a position of favour with a ruler which brought them the wealth, social standing and perhaps the social expectation to exercise their patronage in the realm of architecture and visual culture.

Mother and son: sources and issues

The relationship between al-Mushtaq and al-Mughīra, made publicly evident in her architectural inscription, is corroborated in perhaps the most important textual source for

¹⁸Alain George, 'Coloured Dots and the Question of Regional Origins in Early Qurʾans (Part II)', *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 17, no. 2 (2015): 75–102.

¹⁹Hugh Kennedy, *The Court of the Caliphs: the Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004); N. Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad: Mother and Wife of Hārūn Al-Rashīd* (London: Al Saqi, 1986), 119–21.

²⁰Ibn al-Sāʿī, *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*, ed. Shawkat M. Toorawa. Library of Arabic Literature (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

²¹Simonetta Calderini and Delia Cortese, 'The Architectural Patronage of the Fāṭimid Queen-Mother Durzān (d. 385/995): an Interdisciplinary Analysis of Literary Sources, Material Evidence and Historical Context', in *Material Evidence and Narrative Sources: Interdisciplinary Studies of the History of the Muslim Middle East*, eds. Daniella Talmon-Heller and Katia Cytryn-Silverman (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 87–112; Simonetta Calderini and Delia Cortese, *Women and the Fatimids in the World of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006). Following her husband's death Durzan ruled as queen regent, and therefore offers a parallel to Subh, mother of the third caliph Hishām II, who gained the Cordoban throne at the age of 11 following the death of al-Hakam II.

Andalusi history, the Cordoban court chronicle compiled by Ibn Ḥayyān (d. 1076). This text refers to al-Mushtaq and al-Mughira in the very first chapter of the chronicle of ‘Abd al-Rahmān III’s reign, a chapter which, significantly, is devoted to the two most important women in ‘Abd al-Rahmān III’s life, his two consorts, Marjān (*fl.* 915) and al-Mushtaq. Both of these women held the high status of *umm al-walad*, Marjān being the mother of al-Hakam II. According to the text, in the latter years of ‘Abd al-Rahmān III’s life:

The favour [of ‘Abd al-Rahmān III] was transferred to [al-Mushtaq] the delegate (*al-m[udab-bira]*) of al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh’s authority, the mother of his youngest son, al-Mughira, [and] who acted *with his authority* (*amri-hi*) at the end of his [the caliph’s] life.²²

As Heghnar Watenpaugh has observed, the challenge for historians grappling with the problem of sparse pre-modern historical sources for women’s roles in shaping Islamic objects and buildings lies in mapping which sources and discourses address issues of gender in a way that is relevant to art and architecture.²³ There is now an extensive body of scholarship on Andalusi women by historians such as María Jesús Viguera, Gloria López de la Plaza, Manuela Marín and others, who have mined not only chronicles but other textual sources, such as biographical dictionaries and legal texts, for what these tell us about women and their social roles in Islamic Iberia.²⁴ While it is not surprising that such evidence bears out that elite women had a wider margin in which to act than other women, what do we make of Ibn Ḥayyān’s text and its apparent statement that al-Mushtaq acted with executive authority within the palace? Reading the inscription and the court chronicle in tandem offers a useful perspective on al-Mushtaq’s identity as a court patron. While the chronicle’s placement of a chapter on these two consorts and their children first in the account of the Cordoban caliph’s reign may be dismissed as convention, it might also be suggestive of the status and authority these two women wielded within the palace walls.²⁵

The text suggests that the Cordoban court chroniclers perceived al-Mushtaq as a woman of influence in the royal household, one to whom the caliph entrusted a certain amount of authority. The term *mudabbira*, which might also be translated as ‘caretaker’, is key to understanding al-Mushtaq’s place in the court.²⁶ This term and its allied

²²Ibn Ḥayyān, *Crónica del Califa ‘Abdarrahmān III An-Nāṣir entre los años 912 y 942 (al-Muqtābis V)*, eds. and trans. M. Jesús Viguera and Federico Corriente (Zaragoza: Anubar, 1981), 13. Author’s emphasis.

²³Heghnar Watenpaugh, ‘Art and Architecture’, in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, ed. Suad Joseph. 6 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2003–7), consulted online at http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-women-and-islamic-cultures/art-and-architecture-EWICCOM_0044 (Accessed 13 July 2015).

²⁴M.J. Viguera Molins, ‘Aşluḥu Li’l-Ma’āli on the Social Status of Andalusi Women’, in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 716–19; M.J. Viguera, ed., *La mujer en al-Andalus: reflejos históricos de su actividad y categorías sociales* (Madrid: Ediciones de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1989); Gloria López de la Plaza, *Al-Andalus: mujeres, sociedad y religión* (Málaga: Universidad de Málaga, 1992); Manuela Marín, ed., *Special Issue on Arab-Islamic Medieval Culture, Medieval Prosopography* 23 (2002); Manuela Marín, ‘Mujeres andalusíes: de la historia al presente’, *Tulaytula: Revista de la Asociación de Amigos del Toledo Islámico* 12 (2005): 61–9; Manuela Marín, *Vidas de mujeres andalusíes* (Málaga: Editorial Sarriá, 2006); Marín, *Mujeres en al-Andalus*; Randi Deguilhem and Manuela Marín, eds. *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); Manuela Marín and others, eds., *Estudios onomástico-biográficos de Al-Andalus* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto de Filología, Departamento de Estudios Arabes, 1988).

²⁵Delia Cortese, ‘A Patron of Men: Sitt Al-Mulk and the Military at the Fatimid Court’, *Proceedings of the Institute Français d’Archéologie Orientale (IFAO), Cairo*, forthcoming. My thanks to Delia Cortese for sharing her paper in advance of its publication. In it she discusses the Fatimid princess Sitt al-Mulk (d. 1023) as an example of a court woman’s authority as wielded within the palace and beyond, notably with respect to the military.

²⁶I would like to thank one of the anonymous readers for alerting me to the term, and Maribel Fierro, who suggested considering whether other instances of the term in the chronicle could shed light on the question of al-Mushtaq’s authority.

derivatives are used regularly in Andalusī chronicles to refer to those who exercised power and authority, either because such authority was delegated to them by the sovereign, or because they wrongfully appropriated it.²⁷ The term is used in reference to both unfree and free-born elites who occupied high-ranking positions within the Umayyad administration. For example, the vizier al-Mushafī is also called *mudabbir*, while Ibn Abī ‘Āmir was designated not as a *mudabbir* but as the helper of the *mudabbir*, al-Mushafī.²⁸ Elsewhere in the chronicle Ibn Hayyān uses it in reference to the eunuchs who played a key role in the royal administration. For instance, in the chapter dedicated to the emir Muhammad (r. 852–86) recounting the events of that ruler’s succession, the chronicler refers to the eunuchs who controlled the palace as those who acted with caliphal authority within the palace (*al-mudabbirun li-qasri-hi*).²⁹ Likewise, Ibn Hayyān often uses the form *dabbara* and its derivatives in reference to Nasr, the eunuch who was a member of the ninth-century ruler ‘Abd al-Rahmān II’s inner circle (r. 822–52), and who supervised the first major expansion of the prayer hall at the Great Mosque of Cordoba.³⁰ Ibn Hayyān describes Nasr as ‘he who managed [the caliph’s] domestic affairs’ (*al-mudabbir li-amr dāri-hi*), and further states that Nasr ‘shared with the most illustrious viziers the governance of the kingdom’.³¹ An important parallel with the authority delegated by the caliph to his eunuch functionaries thus seems also to have pertained to al-Mushtaq as his consort in the last years of his reign. The passage indicates that al-Mushtaq acted with potentially executive authority in matters concerning the royal household.

There are, however, some issues with the text that render interpreting this passage somewhat problematic. First, the Arabic text is not conclusive; it is not entirely certain that *mudabbira* was in fact the term that appeared in the original Arabic manuscript, as the word was damaged or missing. Rather, *mudabbira* is an editorial interpolation.³² Compounding the potential issues with this passage, the phrase that states that al-Mushtaq ‘acted with the caliph’s authority (*amri-hi*)’ is not as it appears in the manuscript. Rather, the manuscript has ‘his children’ (*awlādi-hi*), which the editors corrected as ‘his authority’ (*amri-hi*) because of its accordance with the meaning of *mudabbira* in the first part of the phrase. Nevertheless, from the perspective of palaeography a question still remains, as there is little chance of the scribe having confused one word for the other. In that case, the manuscript would suggest the following alternate translation:

... [al-Mushtaq] the mother of his youngest son, al-Mughīra, who took over responsibility for his children (*awlādi-hi*) at the end of his [the caliph’s] life.

In this reading al-Mushtaq acts with authority over the caliph’s children (*awlādi-hi*) at the end of his life, which would also make sense in terms of her own son, al-Mughīra, who would have lived in the palace for some three years after ‘Abd al-Rahmān II’s death,

²⁷I am grateful to Stuart Sears for the original translation of the passage from Arabic, and to Luis Molina for explaining the term’s meaning and significance, as well as for his helpful comments on the translation. His suggestions have informed my amended translations here.

²⁸Al-Makkari, *Analectes sur l’histoire et la littérature des arabes d’Espagne*, eds. R. Dozy and others. 2 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1855–61), 1: 603. My thanks to Luis Molina for this reference and other instances of the term’s use in chronicles.

²⁹Ibn Hayyān, *Al-Muqtabas min anba’ ahl al-Andalus*, ed. M.A. Makki (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabi, 1973), 111 (l.6).

³⁰Meouak, *Ṣaḡāliba, eunuques et esclaves à la conquête du pouvoir*; Anderson, ‘Concubines, Eunuchs, and Patronage in Early Islamic Córdoba’, 633–69.

³¹Ibn Hayyān, *Al-Muqtabas min anba’ ahl al-Andalus*, 111 (l.4).

³²My thanks to Maribel Fierro and Luis Molina for alerting me to the editorial interpolation and the consequent issues raised.

until reaching puberty, which Islamic civilisation normally associated with the age of 13 or so.³³ Besides al-Mughīra, any other minor children born by the other concubines of ‘Abd al-Rahmān III would also have been in residence in the palace and in accord with the alternate translation al-Mushtaq would have had responsibility for these children following the caliph’s death. Both readings reflect the high status of al-Mushtaq at the court in the 960s.

al-Mughīra

Now that we have a sense of al-Mushtaq’s place in the court and in ‘Abd al-Rahmān III’s life, what does Ibn Hayyān’s text tell us about her son? al-Mughīra

was the last one [of the children of ‘Abd al-Rahmān III’s born by Marjān and al-Mushtaq] whom [the caliph] preferred ... and [al-Mughīra] gained ascendancy over him among [other] people until he [the caliph] passed away, may God have mercy on him.³⁴

Ibn Hayyān’s text clearly states that al-Mughīra enjoyed a special place in his father’s affections. ‘Abd al-Rahmān had many sons, numbering around 18 in all. The chronicler goes on to elaborate. The caliph, we are told, loved his youngest son, with the tenderness of heart of an elderly parent, and that al-Mughīra was the last of ‘Abd al-Rahmān III’s sons to live with him in the royal palace, as all of his elder brothers had moved to other residences in Cordoba by 943. Far from being an ‘obscure character’, al-Mughīra and his mother, according to the court chronicle, held prominent places in the Umayyad court because of the particular affection ‘Abd al-Rahmān III had for both of them.³⁵

Notwithstanding the problems that the damaged text raises, the material and historical evidence strongly suggests that al-Mushtaq wielded significant authority within the palace, and that she exercised architectural patronage in concert with one of ‘Abd al-Rahmān III’s own eunuchs. She emerges as a woman who had the authority, the connections, the wealth and the personal connection to al-Mughīra to commission an object like a luxurious ivory pyxis. Al-Mushtaq’s activity as a court patron, the al-Mughīra pyxis itself and the texts all indicate that the high status of both mother and son persisted after the caliph’s death in 961.

How might this knowledge of al-Mushtaq’s status in the court then inform the way we read the pyxis’ intended messages? Furthermore, was al-Mughīra’s status in the line of caliphal succession a factor that may have informed the commission and the object’s peculiar visual programme? The issue of authority becomes particularly important to such questions, and specifically the extent to which a woman’s authority might impact a matter such as succession.³⁶ In fact, the division between the domestic and political spheres was not necessarily a strict one, especially in matters of succession, as this was an issue in which the influential members of the ruler’s household, namely the candidate’s mother and the eunuchs, played a key role in deciding outcomes.³⁷

³³Amalia Zomeño, ‘En los límites de la juventud. Niñez, pubertad y madurez en el derecho islámico medieval’, *Mélanges de La Casa de Velázquez* 34, no. 1 (2004): 85–98, 413, 417, 421.

³⁴Ibn Hayyān, *Crónica del califa ‘Abdarrahmān III An-Nāṣir*, eds. and trans. Viguera and Corriente.

³⁵Prado-Vilar, ‘Circular Visions of Fertility and Punishment’, 25.

³⁶See Therese Martin’s discussion of women and authority in this special issue, ‘The Margin to Act: a Framework of Investigation for Women’s (and Men’s) Medieval Art-Making’.

³⁷Luis Molina, personal communication.

To give an example from the Cordoban court itself of the influential role both consorts and eunuchs played in matters of royal succession, it is instructive to look at the example of the ninth-century concubine known as Tarūb. The consort of the Umayyad emir ‘Abd al-Rahmān II (r. 822–52), she bore that ruler a son whom, according to the Andalusī historian Ibn al-Qutīyāh, she wished to succeed to the throne, despite the ruler’s having already named as his chosen heir a son born to another concubine. Tarūb consequently became a key figure in the contest over the succession. She is said to have convinced ‘Abd al-Rahmān II to name her son his successor to the throne, thereby displacing his previously named heir. In her bid to place her son on the throne, Ibn al-Qutīyāh tells us that Tarūb used ‘the women of the palace, eunuchs (*fityān*) and servants (*khadam*), members of Quraysh and royal freedmen (*mawālī*) to achieve her desired end.³⁸ At the death of ‘Abd al-Rahmān II, the text states, the palace eunuchs debated whom to support, Tarūb’s son or ‘Abd al-Rahmān II’s previously designated heir. It is telling that Ibn al-Qutīyāh has the eunuchs express support for Tarūb’s son, whom they called ‘our lord, the son of our lady and benefactress, and patron’.³⁹

Ibn Qutīyāh’s narrative makes it clear that the faction coalescing around Tarūb’s son was primarily motivated by her generous policies toward them. That the text has the eunuchs collectively identifying Tarūb as their ‘benefactress’ shows us that consorts could and did exercise patronage and authority within the palace and that both consorts and eunuchs were among the major players in matters of succession, which had significant political implications outside the confines of the household. That consorts wielded influence with the court eunuchs who formed a significant branch of royal households and administrations is further underscored in Ibn al-Qutīyāh’s text, which has the senior eunuch state his gratitude ‘for the favour the noble lady has shown towards me’, even as he decides ultimately to act against Tarūb’s wishes.⁴⁰

Given the evidence that court women in Cordoba had access to, and interacted with, the elite eunuchs who supervised the Umayyad workshops, al-Mushtaq could have commissioned her son’s pyxis from the director of the ivory workshop, Durri al-Saghīr.⁴¹ Here it is important to note the evidence for women’s patronage, their collaboration with the eunuchs, and their acceptance of and participation in established male models of patronage and by extension the structures of political and social power.⁴² Makariou’s argument is that the powerful court eunuchs who supported al-Mughīra’s candidacy were likely the creative forces behind the pyxis, and I agree that as the directors of the important royal luxury-goods workshops, they could have carried out al-Mushtaq’s commission and collaborated with her on its iconographic programme. The two present at al-Hakam’s deathbed who immediately wished to offer al-Mughīra the throne were Fā’iq, the director of the luxury-textile workshop (*tirāz*), and Jaw’dhar, who was responsible for the gold- and silversmiths and the royal hawks and falcons (*sāhib al-sāga wa-l-bayāzira*).⁴³ Durri al-Saghīr, the director of the ivory workshop in the 960s, would certainly have been the key figure out of all the eunuchs, and his support for al-Mughīra’s candidacy is implicit

³⁸Ibn al-Qūṭīyah, *Early Islamic Spain: the History of Ibn Al-Qūṭīyah*, ed. David James (London: Routledge, 2009), 112.

³⁹Ibn al-Qūṭīyah, *Early Islamic Spain*, ed. James, 112.

⁴⁰Ibn al-Qūṭīyah, *Early Islamic Spain*, ed. James, 113.

⁴¹Meouak, *Ṣaḡāliba, eunuques et esclaves à la conquête du pouvoir*, 182–3.

⁴²Anderson, ‘Concubines, Eunuchs, and Patronage in Early Islamic Córdoba’, 633–69.

⁴³Meouak, *Ṣaḡāliba, eunuques et esclaves à la conquête du pouvoir*, 184–6.

in the fact that he was likewise assassinated at al-Mushafi's orders in 976 in the wake of al-Mughīra's execution.⁴⁴ Makariou's interpretation of the numerous depictions of biting and of falcons as visual references to Durri al-Saghīr and Jaw'dhar, two of al-Mushtaq's allies, seems very likely.

A mother's gift: re-examining the pyxis

Having established al-Mushtaq as a woman of influence and an active patron in the caliphal court around the time in which the pyxis was made, and who carried out her work in collaboration with palace eunuchs, who were the main supporters of her son's candidacy, it is now necessary to consider the imagery on the pyxis. Does bringing al-Mushtaq into our interpretive framework inflect our interpretation of the object? How can we understand its imagery and functions within the context of court life in caliphal Cordoba in the 960s?

Let us begin with the first puzzle, namely the matter of the pyxis' inscription leaving out 'Abd al-Rahmān III's name. While it is true that the pyxis' inscription diverges in this respect from those of the ivories made in the court up to 968, it nevertheless conforms to the wording of the inscription commemorating al-Mushtaq's patronage, which likewise does not refer to the caliph by name, but only by title. The caliph's identity in both cases is made clear by the kinship connection to al-Mughīra, brother in the case of the marble epigraph, father in the pyxis' inscription. Considering the correspondence with the wording of al-Mushtaq's inscription, and Martínez Núñez' observation that this wording is in keeping with other official state inscriptions, we need not view the absence of 'Abd al-Rahmān III's name from the pyxis as particularly mysterious or requiring explanation. It might be that the carver simply had insufficient room to include the caliph's name, but saw this as ultimately unnecessary because his identity was clear from the other information that was included. In any case, the similarity in the wording between the plaque and the pyxis perhaps lends further support to the possibility of al-Mushtaq's role in the ivory's commission.

Turning to the puzzle encapsulated in the imagery, court pursuits appear in both the main and minor vignettes on the pyxis, with hunting playing an especially prominent role through the depiction of falcons, as Marthe Bernus-Taylor has analysed.⁴⁵ It has been argued as well that the imagery on the pyxis, with its lush vegetation, abundance of animals, and court pastimes such as music and hunting should be understood against the backdrop of aristocratic villa (*munya*) culture, which was closely connected with agriculture, the seasons and the significance of a flourishing landscape to articulate caliphal legitimacy.⁴⁶ In this respect it is significant that the imagery on the pyxis also occurs in the *Calendar of Cordoba* (*Kitāb fī tafṣīl al-zamān wa-maṣāliḥ al-abdān*), composed in Cordoba in the second half of the century.⁴⁷ The calendar combines information

⁴⁴Ibn 'Idhārī, *Histoire de l'Afrique du nord et de l'Espagne musulmane, intitulée Kitāb al-Bayān al-Mughrib*, eds. G.S. Colin and É. Lévi-Provencal. New edn. 2 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1948), 2: 280–1, cited in Makariou, 'Al-Mughīra Pyxis and Spanish Umayyad Ivories', 329–30.

⁴⁵Marthe Bernus-Taylor, 'Al-Mughīra Again', in *Furusiyya*, vol. 1, *The Horse in the Art of the Near East*, ed. D. Alexander (Riyadh: King Abdulaziz Public Library, 1996), 136–41.

⁴⁶Anderson, *Islamic Villa in Early Medieval Iberia*, 90–7 and ff.

⁴⁷Miquel Forcada, 'Calendar of Córdoba', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, eds. Kate Fleet and others (Leiden: Brill, 2012), online at http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/calendar-of-cordoba-COM_24375

from several genres, including agricultural treatises and calendars, astronomy, meteorology, history and religion, and was itself based on ninth-century eastern models.

Composed of a total of 12 scenes, with four main vignettes and eight minor groups, this deliberate and complex arrangement raises the possibility that the pyxis' imagery was meant to evoke astronomical or seasonal imagery. Following antique precedent, medieval Islamic civilisation divided the zodiac (*Mintakat al-Burūdġ*) into 12 sections and constellations. In Umayyad Cordoba the agricultural calendar was closely connected to the natural cycles of flora and fauna, and these in turn were believed to be linked to the movements of the celestial bodies. For their part, the celestial bodies were believed to impact the destinies of all living things, from the macro-scale dynasties, kingdoms and peoples, to the micro-level of individual people, animals and plants. Astrology held that these destinies could be predicted through the careful computation and analysis of the movements of the planets, the sun and the moon through the heavens. In this sense the pyxis and its imagery may offer a visual expression of seasonal, astronomical knowledge that would have given the object astrological significance specific to the identity of the recipient, and which may have been meant to imbue the pyxis with properties beneficial to its owner.

Such imagery and intellectual knowledge were current in the Cordoban court, and even manifested in the display of antique sculpture in the court spaces of Madīnat al-Zahrā'.⁴⁸ Astronomical imagery is a frequent theme in panegyric poetry composed for 'Abd al-Rahmān III and for al-Hakam II, as well as in astronomical and astrological works such as the aforementioned calendar. While representations of the zodiac are relatively rare in Early Islamic art, they are not completely unknown.⁴⁹ Such zodiacal and potentially calendrical imagery notably appears in the eighth-century painted frescos of the Umayyad bath at Qusayr 'Amra in present-day Jordan.⁵⁰ How then might we read the pyxis' decoration with this interpretive framework in mind?

Mariam Rosser-Owen has recently established that the metal mounts that today provide the rationale for reading the images on the al-Mughīra pyxis in relation to the flow of the inscription on the lid were added later, and therefore we cannot say with certainty in which order the scenes were meant to be 'read', if indeed they were meant to be read in any particular order at all.⁵¹

Two scenes are characterised as fitting within the general repertoire of princely images. The enthronement or music scene depicts two seated figures of equal rank flanking a standing musician, all three of whom appear on a platform supported by two lions

(Accessed 30 July 2015); R. Dozy, ed., *Le calendrier de Cordoue*, rev. C. Pellat. Medieval Iberian Peninsula, Texts and Studies 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1961).

⁴⁸Susana Calvo Capilla, 'The Reuse of Classical Antiquity in the Palace of Madīnat al-Zahrā' and Its Role in the Construction of Caliphal Legitimacy', *Muqarnas* 31 (2014): 1–33; eadem, 'Madīnat al-Zahrā' y la observación del tiempo: el renacer de la antigüedad clásica en la Córdoba del siglo X', *Anales de Historia del Arte* 22 (2012): 131–60.

⁴⁹Moya Carey, 'Al-Sūfī and Son: Ibn al-Sūfī Poem on the Stars and Its Prose Parent', *Muqarnas* 26 (2009): 181–204; Moya Catherine Carey, 'Painting the Stars in a Century of Change. A Thirteenth-Century Copy of Al-Sūfī's Treatise on the Fixed Stars: British Library Or. 5323' (Ph.D. diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 2001); Stefano Carboni, *Following the Stars: Images of the Zodiac in Islamic Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997); Eva Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 248–70ff.

⁵⁰A. Beer, 'The Astronomical Significance of the Zodiac of Qusayr 'Amra', in *Early Muslim Architecture: Umayyads, Early 'Abbāsids and Ṭūlūnids*, vol. 1, *Umayyads, A.D. 622–750*, ed. K.A.C. Creswell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 296–303; idem, 'Astronomical Dating of Works of Art', *Vistas in Astronomy* 9 (1967): 177–87.

⁵¹Mariam Rosser-Owen, 'The Metal Mounts on Andalusī Ivories: Initial Observations', in *Metalwork and Material Culture in the Islamic World Art, Craft and Text. Essays Presented to James W.Allan*, eds. Venetia Porter and Mariam Rosser-Owen (London: Tauris, 2012), 303.

(Figure 2). Makariou read the scene as a visual reference to a dispute that took place in the ninth-century court between two Cordoban princes, but I would like to suggest another possibility.⁵² The court or enthronement scene with its standing *‘ūd* player flanked by seated twin figures may represent the planet Venus (*Zuhara*) and the constellation Gemini (*al-djawzā*).⁵³ In medieval Islamic art Venus was normally depicted as a female figure playing an *‘ūd* or other musical instrument, while Gemini was represented as twins, seated cross-legged.⁵⁴ Venus was considered to have a beneficent aspect; it was known in Arabic as ‘the lesser star of good fortune’ (*al-sa‘d al-aṣghar*), and its movements with respect to the other planets, according to Abū Ma‘shar’s influential ninth-century treatise on historical astrology, was believed to bear on marriages and matters related to clothing.⁵⁵ Such areas of import seem appropriate to ornament an object that would have been used in a domestic context to hold precious items such as jewellery, cosmetics and scents that were important to the refined Cordoban courtier’s toilette.⁵⁶

In a second princely scene, paired lions surmount two bulls in a composition with a long history of representing sovereignty and power: the lions sink teeth and claws into the powerful forms of the bulls beneath (Figure 3). The scene of the lion/bull combat would also be appropriate in the context of the caliphal court, as previous studies have discussed.⁵⁷ From an astrological perspective, however, this scene might also be read as the Sun, often associated with lions as well as with images of the enthroned ruler in Islamic zodiac imagery, and the constellation Taurus, or as the two constellations Leo (*al-asad*), the solar symbol of power and strength, and Taurus (*al-thawr*). Interpreted this way, the representations of Venus in Gemini and the Sun in Taurus might refer to the positions of these celestial bodies in the heavens at a specific time that may have been meaningful in relation to al-Mughīra, perhaps from a horoscope, or alternatively may relate to celestial configurations at the time of the pyxis’ creation.

Juxtaposed with these princely scenes are the other two main vignettes on the pyxis for which no obvious parallel exists in Early Islamic art. One shows paired figures reaching toward a trio of nests containing eggs and birds, while two quadrupeds below bite at the figures’ ankles (Figure 4). The second scene depicts two mounted hunters who simultaneously reach out toward the heavily laden fruit of a date-palm tree, as if to harvest the hanging clusters of fruit (Figure 5). Each rider bears a large bird, likely a falcon, which

⁵²Makariou, ‘Al-Mughīra Pyxis and Spanish Umayyad Ivories’, 323–4. Makariou saw an allusion to an anecdote that appeared in Ibn al-Qutīyah’s text, regarding a dispute between two sons of the ninth-century ruler, ‘Abd al-Rahman II, over a famous female musician and interpreted this as a commentary on each brother’s claim to legitimacy.

⁵³W. Hartner and F.J. Ragep, ‘Zuhara’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds. P. Bearman and others. 2nd edn. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2007), online at http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/zuhara-SIM_8195 (Accessed 15 August 2015); W. Hartner and P. Kunitzsch, ‘Mintakat al-Burūdj’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds. Bearman and others. 2nd edn., online at http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/mintakat-al-burudj-COM_0745 (Accessed 15 August 2015).

⁵⁴Stefano Carboni, *Il Kitab al-Bulhan di Oxford* (Turin: Tirrenia, 1988). See page from the *Kitab al-Bulhan* or ‘Book of Wonders’, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. Or. 133, image online at http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet/view_search?QuickSearchA=QuickSearchA&q=MS.+Bodl.+Or.+133&search=Search (Accessed 15 August 2015).

⁵⁵Hartner and Ragep, ‘Zuhara’.

⁵⁶Abū Ma‘shar, *On Historical Astrology: the Book of Religions and Dynasties (on the Great Conjunctions)*, eds. Keiji Yamamoto and Charles Burnett. 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 1: 576–7. On such ivories as the luxurious ‘wrapping’ for precious contents, see Claire Anderson and Mariam Rosser-Owen, ‘Great Ladies and Noble Daughters: Ivories and Women in the Umayyad Court at Córdoba’, in *Pearls on a String: Art in the Age of Great Islamic Empires*, ed. Amy Landau (Baltimore: University of Washington Press, 2015), 40–5; Lawrence Nees, ‘What’s In the Box?: Remarks On Some Early Medieval and Early Islamic Precious Containers’, *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 33, nos. 3–4 (2014): 67–77.

⁵⁷Makariou, ‘Al-Mughīra Pyxis and Spanish Umayyad Ivories’, 324–5. Makariou has proposed that the scene may allude to the Cordoban Umayyad rivalry with the Fatimids.

perches atop the figure's head. Mounted on the horse behind each rider, a hunting cheetah bites at the tail of the bird above.⁵⁸ Birds of prey, both falcons and hawks, occupy a prominent role in these two scenes, as well as in the minor groupings. Makariou has suggested that such references allude to the association of falcons with the founder of the Cordoban Umayyad dynasty, 'Abd al-Rahmān I (r. 756–88), and sees it as having political symbolism in the caliphal court, which seems likely.⁵⁹

Read in a more general way, however, such imagery also appears in several months of the Cordoban calendar, as Bernus-Taylor has pointed out.⁶⁰ Indeed the birds are singled out for mention in four specific months:

- February: 'The month when ... the young birds hatch out'
- March: 'When the female Valencian falcons lay their eggs in their nests on the river islands and brood for 30 days ...'
- April: 'The Valencian falcons hatch out their young ones ...'
- May: 'The young falcons and kites hatch out ...'

The calendar thus parallels the depictions of the birds of prey that appear in one vignette on the pyxis – nesting, laying eggs and hatching out young – all in the spring months.

Likewise, the date palm that forms the central axis of the second of the main vignettes with an agricultural theme also appears in several months in the calendar, including the spring (Figure 5). Here too Makariou has pointed out the political symbolism that tenth-century viewers would have known from contemporary literature, in which the palm served as metaphor for the twin branches of the Umayyad dynasty; she has interpreted this as a visual exhortation to al-Mughīra to seize the fruits of power.⁶¹ While agreeing in general with this reading, it can be pointed out in addition that in the calendar both falcons and date palms occur together in two months, April and August, which therefore lends those months a greater significance. In April 'the palms are artificially pollinated and the palm leaves are cut', while August is the month in which the first dates begin to ripen, and in which falcons moult.

Viewed from the seasonal and astrological perspective through which it is proposed the pyxis should be interpreted, therefore, the two vignettes that represent agricultural scenes with nesting birds and the harvesting of the date palm may have evoked, to Cordoban court eyes, these two months, April and August or their two seasons, spring and summer. The nesting birds recall spring, while the scene with the riders, dates and falcons (whose moulting might be represented by the hunting cats pulling at their tail feathers?) evokes summer.⁶² This seasonal resonance finds an echo in the other main scenes if we view the music/enhronement scene as an evocation of the constellation Gemini and the lion/bull scene as the constellation Taurus. These two positions in the zodiac bridge the spring and summer months, Taurus being associated with the period

⁵⁸On the hunting cheetahs, see Bernus-Taylor, 'Al-Mughīra Again', 138–9.

⁵⁹Makariou, 'Al-Mughīra Pyxis and Spanish Umayyad Ivories', 320–2.

⁶⁰Bernus-Taylor, 'Al-Mughīra Again', 136–41.

⁶¹Makariou, 'Al-Mughīra Pyxis and Spanish Umayyad Ivories', 320–1.

⁶²I have used the English translation provided on The Filaha Texts Project, which also makes available the complete transcription of Dozy's edited Arabic text (for which, see n. 47 above), at http://www.filaha.org/calendar_of_Córdoba_english_translation_revised%20_arib.html (Accessed 15 August 2015).

between mid-May and the third week of June and Gemini commencing immediately after, continuing into July.

In contrast to the apparent distinction that scholars have perceived between the ‘princely’ images and the agricultural ones, viewing the images as representative of seasonal, astronomical references reveals a visual rhythm across the body of the pyxis, in which alternating representations of spring and summer appear in the four main scenes as follows:

Music/enthronment scene = summer

Lion/bull = spring

Date palm harvest = summer

Nesting falcons = spring

Several of the minor groupings that frame the main vignettes likewise are related to animals that appear in the summer months in the calendar of Cordoba. Take, for example, the confronted antlered deer, which appear at the bottom left of the spring nesting scene (Figure 4), the confronted goats that appear at bottom left of the summer date-palm harvest scene (Figure 5), and the peacock flanked by what may be two peahens, situated at the top left of the springtime lion and bull scene (Figure 3), all of which appear in the calendar. June was the month ‘when written orders are given for the collection of deer antlers and the horns of wild goats used for the making of bows’, while peacocks are mentioned in August, which the calendar describes as: ‘the mating season of the peacocks [when] one can hear the loud call of the males from afar’. Such animals might also stand in for zodiac signs: a thirteenth-century Khurasanian penbox in the British Museum uses a peacock to represent Virgo, the final zodiacal sign of summer.⁶³

The earliest surviving depictions of astronomical imagery are eleventh-century works: the Bodleian Library manuscript of al-Sūfi’s *Treatise on the Fixed Stars* possibly made in Shiraz, and two celestial globes made in Valencia.⁶⁴ It is difficult to say, given the lack of comparanda for the tenth century, whether the representations of other animals and creatures such as griffons in the minor groupings on the pyxis were meant to evoke specific celestial bodies themselves or to provide variations of the astronomical subjects of the main vignettes. What is clear is that, slightly later in medieval Islamic art, such visual strategies become common – though with distinct regional variations – and that in general they continue ancient concepts of astral kingship.⁶⁵ As Eva Baer has noted, these secular expressions were meant to celebrate the superiority of the ruler, as ‘expressions of praise and honor in a visual language, comparable to the literary panegyrics’.⁶⁶ By the twelfth century representations of the zodiac unambiguously appear in metalwork and carved into stone. Such depictions in later surviving objects also combine princely scenes with astrological imagery, the celestial bodies and signs of the zodiac both in

⁶³Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art*, 257.

⁶⁴The Valencian globes are preserved in Florence, Istituto e Museo di Storia della Scienza, Inv. 2712, and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, GeA325. Carey argues for a distinctly Maghrebi iconographic tradition. See Carey, ‘Painting the Stars in a Century of Change’, 158–60.

⁶⁵Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art*, 267–74.

⁶⁶Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art*, 274.

combination and singly, and show them in a variety of guises and combinations. While such later examples should not be taken to mean that there was a fixed and static system for evoking such cosmic imagery, their astrological themes nonetheless combine figures of humans, animals and mythological beasts in ways similar to al-Mughīra's pyxis. What is clear is that, in the case of the pyxis, the figures in the minor groupings fit comfortably with the seasonal/astronomical configurations that are presented in the main scenes, according to the ways they appear in the literature that was known in the Umayyad court during the caliphal period, and in some cases even composed for it.

Contextualising the gift

Makariou proposed that the pyxis was commissioned as a coming-of-age gift for al-Mughīra, yet that particular milestone in Islamic society is usually associated with the thirteenth or fourteenth birthday, not the eighteenth, which would have been al-Mughīra age around the time the ivory container was created.⁶⁷ Gift-giving was a major aspect of medieval Islamic court society, and was considered a normal activity between equals, an appropriate expression of friendship.⁶⁸ Gifts were exchanged at joyous events that functioned as social milestones, such as betrothals, weddings, births and circumcisions, as well as on festive occasions such as the new year, the birthday of the Prophet (*mawlid*) and 'Id holidays. According to religious authorities, gifts between friends and family members aided personal and communal relations. Indeed, high status came with the expectation that one would give gifts in keeping with one's wealth and social position. S. D. Goitein observed, however, that in medieval Islamic societies festivities celebrating individuals' birthdays (with the exception of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) are conspicuous by their absence.⁶⁹

Cordoban women, like women in other caliphal courts, certainly had the wealth and disposable property to make rich gifts.⁷⁰ *The Book of Gifts and Rarities*, a tenth-century text on gifts and giving written for the Fatimid court, includes passages about objects owned by Abbasid court women that provide a vivid picture of the wealth such women could accumulate and dispose of at will.⁷¹ For example, the celebrated Abbasid consort Al-Khayzurān's revenue was said to be 260 million dinars annually, while Shaghab, a former slave who became the mother of the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir, had in her possession boxes containing jewellery of gold and silver, pieces of cloth, furnishings and scents valued at 130,000 dinars.⁷²

⁶⁷Makariou, 'Al-Mughīra Pyxis and Spanish Umayyad Ivories', 317. I am grateful to Delia Cortese for this observation. See Zomeño, 'En los límites de la juventud', 85–98, 413, 417, 421; S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: the Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*. 6 vols. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967–93), 3: 236–7.

⁶⁸F. Rosenthal and others, 'Hiba', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds. P. Bearman and others. 2nd edn., online at http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/hiba-COM_0282 (Accessed 15 July 2015). For an overview of the literature on medieval gifts and giving and art history, see Cecily J. Hilsdale, 'Gift'. *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): 171–82.

⁶⁹Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 5: 27.

⁷⁰Marín, *Mujeres en al-Andalus*, 313ff.

⁷¹Ibn al-Zubayr, *Book of Gifts and Rarities = Kitāb Al-Hadāya Wa Al-Tuḥaf: Selections Compiled in the Fifteenth Century from an Eleventh-Century Manuscript on Gifts and Treasures*, trans. Ghādah Ḥijjāwī Qaddūmi (Cambridge, MA: Distributed for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University by Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁷²Ibn al-Zubayr, *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, 219–24.

A gift such as this pyxis would have been used within the luxurious residences of Umayyad Cordoba, in which the architectural ornament and other decor would have presented similar themes of music with human and animal figures to please the eye of the beholders as they sat within reception halls for convivial occasions, viewing and handling such objects.⁷³ The sensory effects that such expensive objects must have exercised highlight the power of the display of material culture as a strategy for establishing or underscoring elite status. The function of carved ivory boxes as containers for fragrances, simultaneously advertising status while creating a particular atmosphere and mood, points also to how the use of such objects during court gatherings was part of the conspicuous consumption of rare commodities.

The occasions on which gifts might be given varied and need not have been limited to regular social milestones but could also be given in connection with incidents in an individual's life. For example, Al-Khayzurān, mother of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, is said to have given him a precious cup inscribed with poetry of her own composition, as a gift to celebrate his recovery from some illness or indisposition.⁷⁴ Makariou has observed that al-Mughīra may have been considered to enter his *political* maturity at age 18, which could provide a rationale for the astronomical references on the pyxis' body.⁷⁵

If the images were indeed meant to represent specific astronomical configurations, these may have been related to a horoscope cast in connection with al-Mughīra's birthday, or some other occasion in connection with which the object was meant to be a celebratory gift. Astronomers held it important to cast horoscopes on each birthday of their client in order to advise them on what actions to pursue or avoid in response to what would occur in the coming year.⁷⁶ Astronomy and astrology are difficult to separate in the Early Islamic period, and astronomers who were important figures in caliphal court circles were simultaneously astrologers who cast horoscopes for elite clients.⁷⁷ Astrologers played an important role in the Cordoban court, and accounts of the Umayyad rulers requesting their advice are attested from the eighth century, as is the use of astronomical tables by astrologers such as Ibn al-Shamir in al-Andalus from the ninth century.⁷⁸ The horoscope was the basic tool of astrology, which could be used to interpret the influences of the heavens on individuals. Horoscopes were normally cast at birth, or even while a child was still in the womb, and for specific milestones such as weddings and anniversaries of the individual's birth, or in anticipation of an important undertaking.⁷⁹ The branch of historical astrology much used in Cordoba and other caliphal courts was genethliology, which differed from general historical astrology in that it was used to determine the lifespan of the individual and the times of important events during his or her life; it was applied to

⁷³Glaire Anderson, 'Aristocratic Residences and the Majlis in Umayyad Córdoba', in *Music, Sound, and Architecture in Islam*, eds. Michael Frishkopf and Federico Spinetti (University of Texas Press, forthcoming 2016).

⁷⁴Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 41–2.

⁷⁵Makariou, 'Al-Mughīra Pyxis and Spanish Umayyad Ivories', 313–35.

⁷⁶Charles Burnett, 'Astrology', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, eds. Fleet and others, online at http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/astrology-COM_0162 (Accessed 14 August 2015).

⁷⁷David King, *Astronomy in the Service of Islam* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993); David A. King, 'Astronomy', in *Religion, Learning and Science in the 'Abbasid Period*, eds. M.J.L. Young, J.D. Latham and R.B. Serjeant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 274–89.

⁷⁸Julio Samsó, 'The Early Development of Astrology in Al-Andalus', *Journal of the History of Arab Science* 3 (1979): 228–43; Elías Terés, 'Umayyad Amīr of Córdoba 'Abd al-Rahmān II, and Abū Muḥammad Ibn al-Shamir. 'Ibn Al-Šamir, poeta-astrólogo en la corte de 'Abd Al-Rahmān II', *Al-Andalus* 24 (1959): 449–63.

⁷⁹David Pingree, 'Astrology', in *Religion, Learning and Science in the 'Abbasid Period*, eds. Young, Latham and Serjeant, 290–300.

matters such as the accession of a new ruler, and matters relating to the ruler's body and career, the length of his lifespan, and circumstances involving his family members, including women.⁸⁰

We can reasonably assume that topics such as these would have been of keen interest to al-Mushtaq at the moment in which her son was moving into his political majority, especially if at the time of the object's facture there was any uncertainty over the matter of the caliphal succession. The influential mother of a prince who was a reasonable candidate for the caliphal throne might very well have been interested in having a horoscope cast for the anniversary of his birth, which would have been meant to illuminate topics such as the beginnings and ends of dynasties, and the career, health and lifespan of the individual.⁸¹ Considering the pyxis as a visual expression of astronomical information keyed specifically to al-Mughira might help explain the otherwise puzzling juxtaposition between easily recognisable motifs associated with royalty and courts on the one hand, and the unusual agricultural scenes on the other.

Astronomical and meteorological imagery was frequently employed in the panegyric poetry of 'Abd al-Rahmān III's court, occurring repeatedly in fragments of verse that Ibn Hayyān transmits in his account of the poets active during that ruler's reign. For example, Ibn 'Abd Rabbih began a poem, composed for 'Abd al-Rahmān III in 913, with these lines:

Is it a sun that appears behind the veil of the kingdom or a moon,
Or the flash of a dark cloud that blinds the eye?⁸²

Likewise, a *qasida* composed for the same ruler by 'Ubayd Allāh b. Yahyā b. Idrīs begins with these lines:

Is he a white cloud that descends between flashes, or a rising star that shines among the squadrons, or the halo of the bright moon, surrounded by sparkling stars ... ?⁸³

In these fragments the caliph's persona is repeatedly couched in astronomical terms; he is compared to a bright star or the full moon, while those in his entourage are compared to small stars that appear diminished relative to his splendour. Likewise, poets referred to astrological predictions associated with the reign of al-Hakam's son and heir Hishām.⁸⁴

Might the pyxis then be a visual statement by al-Mushtaq to emphasise her son's privileged place within the court's social hierarchy and specifically in the line of caliphal succession? The historical context of the 960s provides the all-important framework within which this visual declaration was made. Between Subh's giving birth to a male child in 962 and the commissioning of the al-Mughira pyxis in 968, changing political tides within the court seem to have been coalescing around two factions. One centred on al-Mushtaq and al-Mughira, included the prominent eunuch freedmen who were the adopted 'sons' of the caliphs, and the other centred around Subh, her young sons, and her supporters, notably the two prominent free-born courtiers, al-Mushafī and Ibn Abī 'Āmir, to whom historiography gives the leading roles in the drama that later unfolded around the contested

⁸⁰Burnett, 'Astrology'; Abū Ma'shar, *On Historical Astrology*, 1: 576–7.

⁸¹Abū Ma'shar, *On Historical Astrology*, 1: 576–7.

⁸²Ibn Hayyān, *Crónica del califa 'Abdarrahmān III An-Nāṣir*, eds. and trans. Viguera and Corriente, 44.

⁸³Ibn Hayyān, *Crónica del califa 'Abdarrahmān III An-Nāṣir*, eds. and trans. Viguera and Corriente, 48.

⁸⁴Janina M. Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate: the Articulation of Caliphal Legitimacy in al-Andalus* (Cambridge, MA: Distributed for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University by Harvard University Press, 2000), 49.

succession. My reading, in which two influential women were prominent heads of the factions that supported their sons, accords well with what we know of the power struggles between the elite slaves and freedmen within the administration and the freeborn aristocrats such as al-Mushafī and Ibn Abī ‘Āmir, as it does with the political contexts of the key players, for which Prado-Vilar and Makariou have argued so compellingly. If we are to read meaning into the pyxis in terms of the succession question, perhaps we can consider it as the material expression of al-Mushtaq’s assertion of her son’s rightful status as a potential heir to the caliphal throne. Was this a moment when it was becoming clear that al-Mughīra’s place in the line of succession was threatened? The first poetic reference to Hishām as the official heir-apparent does not occur until 971, so in 968 when the pyxis was created al-Mughīra may well have been seen as a legitimate candidate.⁸⁵ Such a gift would have been a potent means of articulating social relationships and the expectations that came with them – not simply a generous expression of affection from mother to son, but one that carried with it a statement about his status and the support he enjoyed with a very influential and powerful group of individuals in the court.⁸⁶ If the matter of succession was uppermost in al-Mushtaq’s mind when she conceived of the pyxis, it was more likely intended as a luxury gift to underline his right to rule, not to warn him off.

By conceiving of al-Mushtaq as the patron of the pyxis, we might also recognise that a gift of this calibre was meant to convey positive, beneficent associations to al-Mughīra and others at court who may have seen the object. Each sign of the zodiac was related to a different part of the human body and therefore believed to affect specific aspects of an individual’s life, including appearance, marriage, profession, career, health and even issues pertaining to family members.⁸⁷

Objects were sometimes created with such specific astronomical positions in mind, with the intention of imbuing desirable qualities in objects made for personal use. The earliest surviving example that unambiguously attests to such a function in a work of Islamic art is a bronze mirror made in 1153 in Anatolia or Iran that bears an inscription:

This blessed mirror ... will serve for curing the paralysis of the mouth, alleviate the pains of childbirth and also other pains and sufferings ... It was made ... as the Sun passed the sign of Aries.⁸⁸

The imagery decorating the al-Mughīra pyxis, which scholars have long characterised as unusual, and thus personal, unofficial and anecdotal, may rather reflect the specificity of the astronomical or astrological information or properties that this iconography was intended to represent.

Conclusion

This essay has speculated that al-Mushtaq, consort of ‘Abd al-Rahmān III, would have been the most likely person to commission the pyxis of al-Mughīra as a gift for her son. The reading accords with the status of both al-Mushtaq as patron and al-Mughīra as recipient, as they are represented in both textual and material documentation that

⁸⁵Alejandro García Sanjuán, ‘Legalidad islámica y legitimidad política en el califato de Córdoba: la proclamación de Hisam II (360–366/971–976)’, *Al-Qantara (Madrid)* 29, no. 1 (2008): 45–77.

⁸⁶Hilsdale, ‘Gift’, 171.

⁸⁷Pingree, ‘Astrology’, 290–300.

⁸⁸Carboni, *Following the Stars*, 6; Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art*, 249–50.

attests to their mother–son bond and to her role as a court patron. The epigraphic evidence for her patronage during the 960s is corroborated in the Umayyad court chronicle, which represents her as a woman of authority in the royal household, an impression confirmed by the inscription that indicates her architectural commission was supervised by one of ‘Abd al-Rahmān III’s royal eunuchs. This, in turn, tells us that al-Mushtaq had direct access to the Umayyad ateliers. The reading agrees with previous interpretations that have interpreted the pyxis as an object meant to convey positive sentiments toward its recipient. By contrast, interpretations of the pyxis as either a hostile warning or even an encouragement to power may rest too firmly on a teleological view of Cordoban Umayyad history in which the contest over al-Hakam’s succession, al-Mansūr’s rise in the court hierarchy, the establishment of his regency government and the eventual dissolution of the Cordoban caliphate are projected backwards in time to hinge on this moment. In 968, when the pyxis was completed and given to al-Mughīra, events that today seem so important to the object’s interpretation, chief among them al-Hakam II’s death, had not yet occurred and could not have been taken into account when the imagery was devised.

It is proposed that we interpret the pyxis’ imagery as multi-layered evocations of seasonal imagery linked to specific astronomical configurations or moments, which we cannot fully apprehend today, but which would have been meaningful for al-Mushtaq and al-Mughīra, and perhaps other viewers in the court. Such imagery would certainly have evoked the literary representations of good governance and caliphal legitimacy as they were articulated in Cordoban court literature of the period. These layered associations, as well as certain literary allusions that Prado-Vilar proposed for the choice of imagery, could have been recognised and appreciated by al-Mughīra within the courtly setting.

Nevertheless the seemingly unusual combination of court pastimes and agricultural scenes that distinguishes the pyxis’ imagery fits well with the astronomical and astrological literature of the caliphal period, including specific works known and recited for Cordoban court audiences. With this in mind it is proposed that the seasonal references in the imagery may have had astrological import that may have been meant to imbue the pyxis with beneficent, possibly talismanic, properties. All of these associations point to the pyxis as an object that acted as a powerful mediating agent in the social dynamics of the court between mother and son, and between al-Mushtaq and her powerful eunuch allies in the court, and between al-Mughīra and the faction that wished him to assert his claim to the throne. This interpretation is necessarily speculative in the absence of unequivocal evidence naming any individual behind the pyxis. Nevertheless, this reading situates the object within the specific historical moment of its creation in 968 by foregrounding al-Mughīra’s mother as a woman of influence who shaped Cordoban Umayyad visual culture in her own time, yet who has nevertheless been largely invisible in contemporary art-historical narratives. By proposing that we consider al-Mushtaq as a ‘maker’ of this celebrated object, we can demonstrate how acknowledging women’s participation in art-making potentially alters our interpretation of this intriguing object in a modest but significant new direction.

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