

ARTICLE

Las Huelgas: Arabic inscriptions for Christian liturgy

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Abstract

This article analyses the little-studied thirteenth-century Arabic inscriptions of the monastery of Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas in Burgos, Spain. Despite their creation during an intensifying Christian–Muslim conflict, they were part of a decorative programme that relied on shared religious ideas and iconography. Their incorporation reinforced daily, funerary and commemorative monastic liturgies. While the article explores the Islamic provenance of these inscriptions, it also reveals the overlooked Arabic New Testament as a source. The inscriptions’ provenance, however, was deliberately obscured first and foremost by the nature of their visual display. Examining the relationship of the Latin to the Arabic inscriptions illustrates an unusual symbiosis between the meaning of the inscriptions, the iconography and the monastery’s ritual. This symbiosis was formulated through a highly selective editorial process on the part of the Christian patrons, and predicated on their knowledge of the finer points of Islamic doctrine and cultural practices.

Keywords: Las Huelgas; al-Andalus; medieval Castile; inscriptions; Arabic New Testament; *ad‘iya* (supplications); funerary art

Introduction

The monastery of Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas in Burgos, Spain, has been associated with medieval Christian–Muslim conflict. That association has been underscored by the display in the Museo de Telas Medievales of a large banner, supposedly an Almohad “trophy” retrieved from the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212)¹ – the first Iberian battle to be conceived of as a “crusade”.² A replica of the banner evokes the memory of the crushing defeat of the North African Almohad annually in the grand procession of the Festival of Curpillos through the nearby streets. The battle facilitated the capture of Córdoba (1238) and Seville (1248), when Burgos was the capital of Castile. The few studies that analyse the Arabic inscriptions carved in stucco on the vaults of Las Huelgas have operated within a similar framework that situates Christians and Muslims in a polarizing power struggle. Propositions that the inscriptions were either “Islamic”, sneaked in by Muslim artists for Catholic patrons who were merely interested in their decorative aspects and

¹ Rodrigo Amador de los Ríos, *Trofeos militares de la Reconquista: estudio acerca de las enseñas musulmanas del real Monasterio de las Huelgas (Burgos) y de la catedral de Toledo* (Madrid, 1893). For an analysis of the banner as Marinid, see Miriam Ali-de-Unzaga, “Qur’anic inscriptions on the so-called ‘Pennon of Las Navas de Tolosa’ and three Marinid banners”, in Fahmida Suleman (ed.), *Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur’an and its Creative Expressions* (Oxford, 2007), 239–70.

² Damián J. Smith, “‘Soli Hispani’? Innocent III and Las Navas de Tolosa”, *Hispania Sacra* 51/104, 1999, 487–513 (esp. 510).

ignorant of their meaning, or that the inscriptions were “Almohad”, subverted by the triumphant Catholic patrons of Las Navas, have left unexplored their varied sources and performative role.³

This article argues that the Arabic inscriptions – signs of cultural refinement – were consciously selected to bolster Las Huelgas’s daily liturgy, and, most importantly, its funerary and commemorative ceremonies. As will be shown, the stucco decoration programme relied on shared religious ideas and iconography. Some inscriptions emerged from interfaith debates over conversion, while others came from, or evoked, the language of the Quran and the hadith or were intrinsic to Islamic funerary and mystical practices. Scholars have long overlooked the Arabic version of the New Testament as a source. The provenance of the inscriptions, however, was deliberately obscured, primarily by the nature of their display. Their performance in Christian liturgy ultimately affirmed Christian ideals. Further, in analysing the role of images within the larger monastic setting, as well as the relationship of the Latin to the Arabic inscriptions, this article demonstrates an unusual symbiosis between the meaning of the inscriptions, the iconography and the monastery’s processions and funerary rituals. This symbiosis was formulated, I will maintain, through a highly selective editorial process on the part of the Christian patrons, and predicated on their knowledge of the finer points of Islamic doctrine. I should note that my conclusions are based on the restored parts of the stucco decoration, acknowledging that some were lost and others are still hidden under layers of plaster.⁴ But before I proceed, here is a brief history of the building and its patrons.

In 1187, King Alfonso VIII of Castile (1158–1214) and his wife Leonor Plantagenet (1154–1214) founded Las Huelgas as a Cistercian monastery.⁵ In 1199, they endowed it as a dynastic burial place for the royal family members of Castile.⁶ Devoted to the Virgin Mary, the monastery cultivated female patronage and became the most prominent female Cistercian convent, where royal women would reside if they wished to lead a religious life as nuns. Las Huelgas began as a Romanesque cloister, named Las Claustrillas, situated to the south-east of the present complex (see Figure 1). The monastery was expanded northwards in the early thirteenth century, to include various structures – most importantly, the new gothic church and the Cloister of San Fernando and its related spaces.⁷ The church’s naves received the royal sarcophagi. When the sarcophagi were

³ In analysing other Catholic institutions’ Arabic inscriptions, recent scholarship has shifted away from such a polarizing analytical lens. Rather, more nuanced approaches have been explored, highlighting religious and cultural interactions and focusing on themes such as patronage, artisanship, ritual and monastic topography and readership. No thirteenth-century document reveals the artists’ identity. Later documents clearly indicate active Muslim artisans, especially carpenters and construction workers, living in designated *morerías* (Muslim quarters) who were engaged in royal works in Burgos. The earliest document mentioning Muslims living in Las Huelgas for maintenance work is a 1304 decree, in which King Fernando IV ordered 12 “*moros forros*” (free Muslims) to reside in Las Huelgas and in the Hospital del Rey. Scholars have therefore assumed that Muslims living in Las Huelgas in 1304 was a continuation of an ongoing tradition. José Manuel Lizoain Garrido et al., *Documentación del monasterio de las Huelgas de Burgos (1284–1306)* (Burgos, 1987), 281–2, no. 168.

⁴ I should also note that my consideration of mystical or Sufi literature and ritual is quite limited. Study of the intersection of Christianity and Sufism or the mechanisms by which Islamic mystical knowledge reached Castile remains outside of the scope of this article and deserves separate investigation.

⁵ José Manuel Lizoain Garrido, *Documentación del monasterio de las Huelgas de Burgos (1116–1230)* (Burgos, 1985), 19–23, no. 11.

⁶ Lizoain Garrido, *Documentación (1116–1230)*, 92–4, no. 52.

⁷ See Joaquín Yarza Luaces, “Monasterio y Palacio del Rey”, in Joaquín Yarza Luaces and Matteo Mancini (eds), *Vestiduras ricas: El monasterio de las Huelgas y su época (1170–1340)* (Madrid, 2005), 35–50; James D’Emilio, “The royal convent of Las Huelgas: dynastic politics, religious reform and artistic change in medieval Castile”, in Meredith Parsons Lillich (ed.), *Studies in Cistercian Art and Architecture: Cistercian Nuns and Their World* (Collegeville, 2005), 6, 191–282; Juan Carlos Ruiz Souza and Gema Palomo Fernández, “Nueva hipótesis sobre las Huelgas de Burgos:

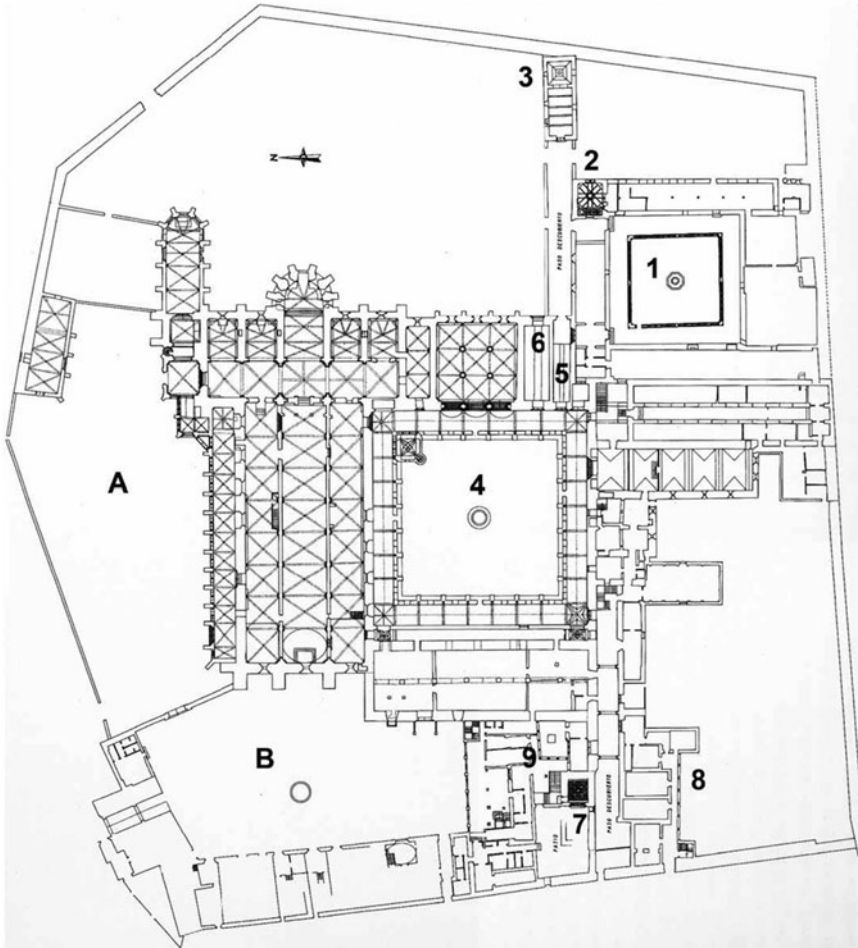


Figure 1. Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, Burgos, ground plan. 1. Claustillas; 2. Capilla de la Asunción; 3. Capilla de Santiago; 4. Claustro de San Fernando; 5. Pasaje (passageway); 6. Locutorio (parlour). (Adapted from Isidro Gonzalo Bango Torviso, *Monjes y monasterios: El Cister en el medioevo de Castilla y León* [Valladolid, 1998], 183.)

studied in 1942, wooden coffins were found lined inside and outside with luxury silk textiles, some of which may have been produced in al-Andalus.⁸ The royal bodies were also shrouded in silk textiles.

For long, and without firm evidence, the area of Las Claustillas has been considered the location of a no longer extant medieval royal palace, and the Capilla de la Asunción, on its north-eastern side, functioning as the temporary royal oratory until construction of the new church was completed. Accounting for the Benedictine and Cistercian traditions, and based on archival documents, architectural precedents

escenografía funeraria de Alfonso X para un proyecto inacabado de Alfonso VIII y Leonor Plantagenêt”, *Goya: Revista de arte* 316–317, 2007, 21–44.

⁸ Although the textiles are mostly attributed to al-Andalus, technical and material analyses have yet to be conducted. See Laura Rodríguez Peinado and Ana Cabrera (eds), *La investigación textil y los nuevos métodos de estudio* (Madrid, 2014).

and the Latin epigraphy, Eduardo Carrero convincingly argues that Las Claustrillas most certainly was the courtyard of the monastery's infirmary and possibly the abbess's palace. Accordingly, the Capilla de la Asunción, dedicated to the Virgin, was possibly the chapel of both institutions, serving the sick nuns who were too frail to attend mass in the church.⁹ This argument does not contradict the proposition that, before 1279, the Capilla de la Asunción may have been a royal funerary chapel.¹⁰ The funerary function was proposed based on the discovery of an arcosolium embedded in the chapel's western wall,¹¹ and a document confirming the transfer of Alfonso VIII's and Leonor's tombs to the church in 1279.¹² The Arabic epigraphy, as will be shown, corroborates the Capilla de la Asunción functioning as an infirmary chapel within a funerary setting.

The stucco decoration of the new architectural expansion, together with that of the Capilla de la Asunción, was most likely commissioned in the third quarter of the thirteenth century (c. 1260–75), during the rule of Fernando's son, Alfonso X (r. 1252–84), when Berenguela (1228–79), Alfonso X's sister, was the “*sennora e mayor del monasterio*”.¹³ We cannot confirm the involvement of both in the decorative scheme; however, an inscription indicating the year 1275, as well as the abovementioned 1279 document, suggest Alfonso X's involvement in the reorganization of the tombs and cemetery. Considering the powerful role that the royal women played in monarchic and monastic activities, it is almost certain that Berenguela was also involved in the process.

The Cloister of San Fernando: eschatological epigraphy and symbolism

With the new expansion of Las Huelgas northwards, the Cloister of San Fernando became the core of monastic activities (see Figure 2). The stucco decoration and inscriptions of its barrel vaults display a spectacular variety of decorative motifs such that no vault is identical to another. The gallery that shares a wall with the church's southern nave has lost its stucco carvings, but the fragments that survive in the other three galleries are enough to indicate the overall composition of the vaults. The cloister not only presents decorative motifs but also Arabic inscriptions. The vaults' decorative programme, as I will endeavour to show, employs themes that emphasize immortality, resurrection and paradise – and are in accordance with the funerary function of the monastery. It responded to the patrons'

⁹ Carrero cites the fourteenth-century codex *Quatro órdenes del áureo número e otros tractados e ceremonias que pertenescen a la orden de Çistel*, Archivo de Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas de Burgos, ms. 6, f. LXXIX v: “the actions to be taken by the infirmarer upon the death of one of the sisters indicate that, from the infirmary, the infirmarer was to notify the other nuns by beating on a board *por la claustra nueva* (by the new cloister)”. Eduardo Carrero, “The creation and use of space in the Abbey of Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, Burgos: architecture, liturgy, and paraliturgy in a female Cistercian monastery”, *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 6/2, 2014, 169–91 (esp. 175, 181).

¹⁰ Rocío Sánchez Ameijeiras, “El ‘*cementerio* real’ de Alfonso VIII en Las Huelgas de Burgos”, *Sémata* 10, 1998, 77–109.

¹¹ Leopoldo Torres Balbás, “Las yeserías descubiertas recientemente en Las Huelgas de Burgos”, *Al-Andalus* VIII, 1943, 54; Manuel Gómez Moreno, *El Panteón Real de Las Huelgas de Burgos* (Madrid, 1946), 14.

¹² José Manuel Lizoain Garrido, *Documentación del monasterio de las Huelgas de Burgos (1263–1283)* (Burgos, 1987), 112–13, no. 596; Rocío Sánchez Ameijeiras, “La memoria de un rey victorioso: Los sepulcros de Alfonso VIII y la fiesta del triunfo de la Santa Cruz”, in Barbara Borngässer et al. (eds), *Grabkunst und Sepulkralkultur in Spanien und Portugal* (Frankfurt, 2006), 289–316.

¹³ José Manuel Lizoain Garrido et al., *Documentación del Monasterio de Las Huelgas de Burgos (1231–1262)* (Burgos, 1985), 298, no. 480. On the stucco decoration, see Torres Balbás, “Las yeserías”, 209–54; María Teresa Pérez Higuera, “El primer mudéjar castellano: Casas y Palacios”, in *Casas y Palacios de al-Andalus* (Barcelona, 1995), 303–14; Rosario Mazuela, “Las huellas musulmanas en Las Huelgas, Burgos”, *Reales Sitios: Revista del Patrimonio Nacional* 92, 1987, 37–44.



Figure 2. Interior view of the Cloister of San Fernando, eastern gallery, Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, Burgos, thirteenth century. (Photograph by author. Patrimonio Nacional. Monasterio de Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas.)

anxiety about the Last Judgement and their hopes for eternal life and the reunion of the soul with the body.¹⁴

Indeed, the compositions of Las Huelgas are unprecedented in their richness, iconography and placement on the vaults. The extant stucco fragments that point out a similar

¹⁴ María Jesús Gómez Bárcena, "El Panteón Real de las Huelgas de Burgos", in *Vestiduras ricas*, 52; Joaquín Yarza Luaces, "Despesas fazen los omnes de muchas guisas en soterrar los muertos", *Fragments* 2, 1984, 4–19.



Figure 3. Stucco decoration with animals and birds (detail), second vault (from the south) of the western gallery, Cloister of San Fernando, Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, Burgos. (Photograph by author. Patrimonio Nacional. Monasterio de Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas.)

richness, including animal and figurative depiction, are those emerging from the twelfth-century palaces of Ibn Mardaniš in Murcia and Játiva, and from the earlier, eleventh-century palace of King al-Ma'mūn in Toledo. The display of birds and animals inhabiting a field of lush vegetation (see Figure 3) shows similarities to medieval ivory pieces that were produced in al-Andalus and extensively circulated in the Burgos area and the northern kingdoms, many of which ended up in royal and church treasuries.¹⁵ These objects' vegetal environment has been interpreted as having referenced paradisiacal vegetation and fertility enhanced by closeness to God.¹⁶ The frequent incorporation of royal scenes, however, mainly evoked an earthly garden of delights, an association that repeats a literary trope. In Andalusi literature, most articulated in the poetry of Ibn Khafāja, the land of al-Andalus itself stood for paradise on earth, mirroring celestial paradise.¹⁷ To represent Christian heavenly paradise, the iconography of the vaults in Las Huelgas, however, downplayed reference to the terrestrial realm by not including depictions of royal and courtly figures, hunting activities or battle scenes, which often symbolized royal sovereignty and legitimacy.

¹⁵ For Andalusi objects commissioned for Christian liturgy, see Glaire Anderson, "Sign of the cross: contexts for the ivory cross of San Millán de la Cogolla", *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 6/1, 2014, 15–41; Noelia Silva Santa-Cruz, "Un ejemplo excepcional de marfil pintado nazarí: la arqueta del rey de Aragón Don Martín el Humano", *Anales de Historia del Arte* 20, 2010, 29–49.

¹⁶ See Francisco Prado-Vilar, "Circular visions of fertility and punishment: caliphal ivory caskets from al-Andalus", *Muqarnas* 14, 1997, 21; Avinoam Shalem, "From royal caskets to relic containers: two ivory caskets from Burgos and Madrid", *Muqarnas* 12, 1995, 28–30.

¹⁷ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "Nature poetry in al-Andalus and the rise of Ibn Khafāja", in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain* (Leiden, 1992), 367–97. For *al-rawḍiyyāt* poetry, see, for example, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Kattānī (d. 1029), *al-Tashbihāt min Ash'ār ahl al-Andalus* (Beirut, 1981); Abū al-Walīd al-Ḥimyarī al-Ishbīlī (d. 1048), *al-Badī' fī Waṣf al-Rabī'* (Jadda, 1987).

Inscribing objects or architectural monuments with supplications (*ad‘iya*) was a widespread practice in the medieval Islamic world. However, their appearance in Las Huelgas, I propose, may not have been a mere by-product of a transmission of motifs across works of art and architecture. They were incorporated, in part, for their compatibility with the funerary realm. Their use mirrored the centrality of supplications in the Islamic funerary epigraphic repertoire, pronounced in Mālikī eschatology.¹⁸ Remarkable among these stucco compositions is the vault featuring rows of large roundels that frame peacocks positioned in frontal and profile views on a foliated ground (see Figure 4). Each roundel is bordered by a band of cursive (*naskh*) script, surrounded by internal and external pearl bands, which contains the supplication: “*al-yumn wa’l-iqbāl*” (prosperity and good fortune), repeated seven or eight times. The external rectangular borders of the overall vault composition feature Kufic inscriptions with the supplications: “*al-baraka min Allāh wa’l-yumn li’llāh*” (blessing from God and prosperity to God) and “*al-naṣr li’llāh al-ḥamd li’llāh*” (victory belongs to God, praise belongs to God). Tombstones taken from Andalusī cemeteries (e.g. in Málaga, Ronda, Córdoba and Granada) include supplications that duplicate those in the cloister and are conspicuous evidence of the role of supplications in funerals.¹⁹ It must not be assumed, however, that supplications are funerary in nature, but it is the entanglement of life and death that they present, as will be discussed, that renders them suited for funerary and non-funerary projects alike. They stand as a reminder of God’s omnipresence; their fulfilment is solely contingent on God’s will.

The vaults’ compositions, as scholars have already noticed, immediately evoke the textiles found in the monastery’s sarcophagi.²⁰ Their iconography was prevalent in al-Andalus and across the Mediterranean, Iran and Central Asia, exhibiting a remarkable circulation of motifs spanning geographies, cultures and artistic media.²¹ Whether the funerary textiles were repurposed or newly commissioned, they nonetheless alert us to the careful selection of Arabic texts (from literary sources or texts found on artworks)

¹⁸ Andalusī funerary rituals followed two Mālikī treatises that underscored *ad‘iya* as central to prayer over the dead. Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 996), *Risāla fī al-Fiqh* (Cairo, 2010), 78–80; Abū al-Qāsim ‘Ubayd Allāh b. al-Jallāb al-Baṣrī (d. 1007), *Kitāb al-Tafrī‘ fī al-Fiqh* (Beirut, 1987), I, 367–74; Ana Echevarría, “Islamic confraternities and funerary practices: hallmarks of Mudéjar identity in the Iberian Peninsula?”, *Al-Masaq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 25/3 (2013), 353–4. For an analysis of the use of Arabic supplications in funerary projects in Christian Castile and al-Andalus, see Razan Francis, “Islamic supplications in the funerary architecture of medieval Castile”, in *Inscriptions of the Medieval Islamic World* (Edinburgh, 2023), 173–206.

¹⁹ Francis, “Islamic supplications”, 200–06. Among the Museo de Málaga’s acquisitions are various tombstones that feature Arabic supplications. See Manuel Acien Almansa and María Antonia Martínez Nuñez, *Catálogo de las inscripciones árabes del museo de Málaga* (Madrid, 1982), 56–9.

²⁰ This resemblance may have been seen in the monastic tradition of covering cloisters’ walls with textiles for important ceremonial processions. Alfonso X may have commissioned the stucco designs to form a theatrical backdrop for the 1279 transfer of the royal sarcophagi to the church. See Ruiz Souza and Palomo Fernández, “Nueva hipótesis”, 36.

²¹ On the funerary textiles, see Concha Herrero Carretero, *Museo de Telas Medievales: Monasterio de Santa María la Real de Huelgas* (Madrid, 1988); Amalia Descalzo Lorenzo, “Les Vêtements Royaux su monastère Santa María la Real de Huelgas”, in Rainer C. Schwinges and Regula Schorta (eds), *Fashion and Clothing in Late Medieval Europe. Mode und Kleidung in Europa des späten Mittelalters* (Riggisberg; Basel, 2010), 97–106; Patricia Blessing, “Weaving on the wall: architecture and textiles in the monastery of Las Huelgas in Burgos”, *Studies in Iconography* 40, 2019, 137–82; Kristin Böse, “Beyond foreign: textiles from the Castilian royal tombs in Santa María de las Huelgas in Burgos”, in Juliane von Fircks and Regula Schorta (eds), *Oriental Silks in Medieval Europe* (Riggisberg, 2016), 213–30; María Barrigón, “La cultura de las ricas telas en época de Alfonso VIII: proyección del lujo, del estatus y de la imagen”, in Marta Poza Yagüe and Diana Olivares Martínez (eds), *Alfonso VIII y Leonor de Inglaterra: confluencias artísticas en el entorno de 1200* (Madrid, 2018), 149–73.



Figure 4. Vault with peacocks inside roundels, sixth vault (from the north) of the eastern gallery, Cloister of San Fernando, Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, Burgos. (Photograph by author. Patrimonio Nacional. Monasterio de Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas.)

edited to fit in with the monastic, including funerary, rituals of Las Huelgas.²² In other words, sharing epigraphic motifs among Muslims and Christians did not flatten or reduce awareness of epigraphy’s meaning. Neither did it render epigraphy subsidiary to the richness of the ornamentation of the textiles. This awareness was manifested in what was included, but equally in what was omitted.

The Kufic inscriptions, both in the circular bands and on the borders of the so-called Almohad cover of the coffin of María de Almenar (c. 1200), contain the exhortation “*al-baqā li’llāh*” (permanence is God’s) (see Figure 5). This phrase, which is (still today) reiterated in funerals – a reminder of God’s permanence and humans’ mortality – could hardly be more appropriate to a funerary context. The most visually similar example from Las Huelgas is a pillow cover (see Figure 6) retrieved from the tomb of Queen Berenguela of Castile (1180–1246), the eldest daughter of Alfonso VIII. Woven in crimson silk, at the centre of the pillow cover, a roundel inscribes two female figures flanking a stylized tree. While the borders on the margins of the pillow cover are decorated with the repeating supplication “*al-baraka al-kāmila*” (complete blessing) in Kufic, the roundel is bordered by a circular cursive inscription that contains only the first part of the *shahāda* (“There is no god but God”). The omission of its second part (“Muhammad is God’s Messenger”) not only indicates a careful redaction of meaning, but is a revision that fosters sentiments that can be embraced by Muslims and Christians alike.

²² The majority of the textiles may have been made specifically for burial. See Karel Otavsky, “Gewebe aus Ägypten, Persien und Mesopotamien, Spanien und Nordafrika”, in Muḥammad ‘Abbās Muḥammad Salim and Karel Otavsky (eds), *Mittelalterliche Textilien I: Ägypten, Persien und Mesopotamien, Spanien und Nordafrika* (Riggisberg, 2016), 163. On the circulation of Andalusī textiles wrapping around saints’ relics as part of the *paria* (tribute) paid by Ṭāʿifa Muslims to maintain peace with Christians, see Mariam Rosser-Owen, “Islamic objects in Christian contexts: relic translation and modes of transfer in medieval Iberia”, *Art in Translation* 7/1, 2015, 39–64. Andalusī textiles shaped regal Castilian identity and aided the display of sovereignty and legitimacy that paralleled royal Andalusī trends. See Manuela Marín, *Tejer y vestir: de la antigüedad al Islam* (Madrid, 2001), 146; María Judith Feliciano, “Muslim shrouds for Christian kings? A reassessment of Andalusī textiles in thirteenth-century Castilian life and ritual”, in Cynthia Robinson and Leyla Rouhi (eds), *Under the Influence: Questioning the Comparative in Medieval Castile* (Leiden, 2004), 101–32.



Figure 5. Coffin cover of María de Almenar (d. c. 1200), silk, 7 ft 4 5/8 in. x 5 ft 9 in. (225 x 175 cm), Patrimonio Nacional (inv. 00650516). Museo de Telas Medievales, Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, Burgos. (Photograph © Patrimonio Nacional.)

Christian and Islamic art shared much because of a common Roman source. Among these shared symbols, the peacock, dating from Roman funerary iconography, was utilized in both traditions, albeit with a different symbolic meaning. The peacock was prominently staged in Las Huelgas, I argue, to reaffirm its established symbolism in Christian art as the icon most closely identified with the idea of paradise and with eschatological matters more generally. The accompanying Arabic text implies a selection process that looked outside Christianity's symbolism for this shared icon in the literary and visual cultures of al-Andalus. In analysing the peacock's meaning in both Andalusī and pan-Islamic literary genres, I will propose that the Arabic epigraphy was employed to establish the peacock as a symbol of a Christian paradise, while simultaneously departing from the peacock's terrestrial paradisiacal symbolism celebrated in al-Andalus.

Building on its pre-Islamic (*jāhiliyya*) derivations, Andalusī literature and poetry not only celebrated the peacock's seductive beauty, but also conflated its tail's colourful feathers with the beauty of al-Andalus, itself conceived of as the land of earthly paradise of delights and pleasures. The renowned poet Abū Bakr b. ʿIsā al-Dānī (Ibn al-Labbāna d. 1113) of Dénia, for example, addressing the Ṭāʾifa ruler of Majorca, Nāṣer al-Dawla, wrote:²³

A country that the dove granted its necklace ... and that the peacock covered with
its feather garment
And as if its rivers were wine ... and as if its courtyards were cups
You flooded with grace the land of Majorca ... and built what Alexander never built

²³ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Maqqarī al-Tilimsānī, *Nafḥ al-Ṭīb min Ghuṣn al-Andalus al-Raṭīb*, (eds) M. Ṭawil et al. (Beirut, 2011), I, 166.



Figure 6. Pillow of Berenguela, Queen of Castile and León (d. 1246), 2 ft 9 7/8 in. x 1 ft 7 5/8 in. (86 x 50 cm), Patrimonio Nacional (inv. 00650512). Museo de Telas Medievales, Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, Burgos. (Photograph © Patrimonio Nacional.)

The poet Ibn Khātima al-Anṣārī (1333–69) of Almería, in one verse of his *Dīwān* (preserved in his own handwriting),²⁴ also uses the peacock’s tail as a metaphor for the natural beauty of al-Andalus:

The peacock of beauty spread its wing ... on it [al-Andalus] covering its branch and hill.

The striking story narrated by the thirteenth-century Iraqi scholar Ibn Khallikān (1211–82), and reiterated by al-Maqqarī’s *Nafh al-Ṭīb*, recasts these poems and best exemplifies how this conflation – of the paradise, the peacock and al-Andalus – occurred. Citing the Visigothic king Rodrigo, before the advent of the Greeks, al-Andalus was a deserted place. A barren land, it was described as the most disdained part of a bird – its tail – whose head lay in the East (*al-mashriq*) and tail in the West (*al-maghrib*, or al-Andalus). As a consequence of the Greeks’ building enterprise that transformed al-Andalus, the bird story that disparaged the tail (i.e. *al-maghrib*) was also transformed, so that “it was said: The bird, on whose image the Greek urbanizing construction (*al-‘amāra*) was imagined, and whose tail was the *maghrib*, was [actually] a *peacock*, its utmost beauty lying in its tail”.²⁵

²⁴ El Escorial, Royal Library of the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, MS 381.

²⁵ Al-Maqqarī, *Nafh al-Ṭīb*, I, 234–5. In the original story by Ibn Khallikān, this conversation takes place at the *majlis* (congregation) of scholar Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī (b. Isfahan, c. 1062). Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A‘yān*, (ed.) Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beirut, 1977), V, 323.

Ibn Khallikān shows how this “ugly tail story” reached the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad. Upon meeting delegates from *al-maghrib*, Caliph Harūn al-Rashīd, to exhibit his literary knowledge and to needle his audience, announced: “this world (*al-dunyā*) is a bird, its tail is the *maghrib*”. “Promptly and triumphantly defending his country (*quṭr*)” to the point of impressing al-Rashīd, one delegate added, “and that bird is a peacock”.²⁶ It should be noted that in this anecdote, Ibn Khallikān, writing either in Iraq or Syria, used the word “*maghrib*” to specifically designate the land of al-Andalus, not North Africa. As his discussion focuses on the Greeks’ architectural and landscape interventions in al-Andalus, and the choice of Toledo (Ṭulayṭila) as their house of wisdom (*bayt al-ḥikma*), *al-maghrib* here points out a cardinal direction and a region that constitutes one of the two poles in an East–West dichotomy.²⁷ This dichotomy, of course, was informed by the rivalry between eastern and western Islamic lands, which found clear resonance in literary sources. In fact, not only did Ibn Khallikān make no mention of North African locales, but he referred to the region as the “land of the Berber”, “who were only separated from al-Andalus by the sea”, and whom the people of al-Andalus despised because of their “deviant manners”. The Berber, as a response, both “despised and envied the people of al-Andalus [...], nevertheless, they needed the people of al-Andalus more than those needed them [the Berber], because of the abundance of things in al-Andalus and their dearth in the land of the Berber”.²⁸

In eastern Islamic cultures the peacock was prominently connected to paradise, albeit doomed to a constant condition of an exile – one who once lived in paradise and now yearned to return there and gain release from terrestrial confinement. It was a yearning that could never be satisfied. The most celebrated example of this literary trope is the poem from Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s “Conference of the Birds” (*Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*, 1177). The fifth article of the poem, “The Peacock’s Excuse”, recounts the story of the beautiful bird being deceived by the snake, alluding to a link between its seductive beauty, its role in original sin and the downfall of Adam and Eve that ultimately heralded the bird’s mortality and its expulsion from heavenly paradise. In the *Conference*, ‘Aṭṭār expressed his views on paradise and death, much influenced by Sufi eschatology. He described a mystical journey where paradise was a condition of wisdom, rather than a physical destination. The peacock’s greatest weakness was seeking paradise, rather than God.²⁹ In a Sufi logic that almost parallels the story of Job, this experiential spiritual knowledge was a path leading to enlightenment and conjunction with the divine. It is a path full of doubt, pain and suffering, rather than an immediate transportation into a garden of delights. The Andalusī and pan-Islamic literary sources therefore established the link between the peacock and terrestrial paradise in two ways: through mimesis, a superimposition of the peacock’s figure with the map of the Mediterranean basin; and through negative ontology, a paradisiacal evocation that is no longer attainable.

In early Christian art the peacock traditionally symbolized resurrection and immortality, hence its placement on sarcophagi and in hypogea, a funerary association continued from Roman practices. The peacock’s iconography featured among the decorative repertoire of Visigothic and Romanesque ecclesiastical architecture of the Burgos

²⁶ Al-Maqqarī, *Nafh al-Ṭīb*, I, 235; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A’yān*, V, 323.

²⁷ Ibn Sa’īd al-Andalusī (d. 1286), for example, includes a chapter titled ‘*al-maghrib al-awsaṭ min jazīrat al-Andalus*’ (The mid-West of al-Andalus island). See *Rāyāt al-Mubarrizīn wa-Ghāyāt al-Mumayyazīn* (Damascus, 1987), 109. Ibn Sa’īd’s contemporaries in the East (Cairo, Aleppo, Damascus and Baghdad) referred to him as “al-Maghribī” because he was a native of al-Andalus, who was born in Almería and died in Toledo.

²⁸ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A’yān*, V, 324.

²⁹ Katja Föllmer, “Beyond paradise: the mystical path to God and the concept of martyrdom in ‘Aṭṭār’s *Conference of the Birds*”, in Sebastian Günther et al. (eds), in *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam* (Leiden, 2017), II, 579–602.

region.³⁰ Some surviving objects that embrace the peacock's image, such as the Louvre peacock bronze ewer (972), clearly indicate a Christian liturgical use. Its inscribed Christian dating system in Latin characters, the stated Christian religion of the maker ('amal 'Abd al-Malik al-Naṣrānī, the work of 'Abd al-Malik the Christian) and its carved cross all indicate an Andalūsī manufacture for a Christian clientele.³¹

While it is rare to find peacocks displayed frontally, as in Las Huelgas, the one-page frontispiece of the tenth-century Mozarabic Commentary on the Book of Job (*Moralia in Job*), produced in the now-destroyed monastery of Valeránica (945) in what is present-day Burgos province, may have been the source for the cloister's peacocks (see Figure 7). Both birds raise their heads in profile while their necks swell; however, their bodies and fan-like tails are frontally disposed, forming a circle. The details of the eyes, crowns, beaks and the feathers' hatching are virtually identical. Gregory the Great, the author of the *Moralia* (completed in 595), had presented Job as the "type" or "precursor" of Jesus Christ, which may explain the presence of the peacock in the Burgos manuscript frontispiece and confirm this parallel between Job and Jesus: their suffering, persistent faith, death and resurrection. Given the royal status of Las Huelgas and considering that the *Moralia* "was written specifically for monks, so much so that Gregory in fact objected to its being publicly read, insisting that its nature was not appropriate to the general lay public",³² it is very likely that the Burgos *Moralia*, or a manuscript in this family, was among the acquisitions of Las Huelgas.³³ The carving of the stucco with the vine scroll surrounding the peacock may also suggest a lost ivory prototype.³⁴

To return to the intended meaning behind the peacock in Las Huelgas: if resurrection, immortality and Christian heavenly paradise were to be represented on the vaults, what figure could better encapsulate all three than Jesus Christ? Alfonso X was aware of the literary topoi describing Spain as paradise on earth, which he himself had used in his national chronicle, the *Estoria de España* (completed under Sancho IV, also known as the *Primera crónica general*).³⁵ Because of this, and the Islamic literary sources and art production that emphasized the peacock as an earthly paradisiacal bird, it is safe to say that the monastery's patrons established the symbolism of paradise as a Christian paradise by establishing the identity of the peacock as Christ. To do that they resorted to Arabic inscriptions. Moving to the eastern gallery, a vault displays an overall composition that

³⁰ Examples from Burgos include the apse and chancel of the seventh-century Ermita de Santa María at Quintanilla de la Viñas and the portal of the church of San Pedro Miñón de Santibañez (twelfth/thirteenth century).

³¹ "Opus Salomonis era T X", inscribed on the peacock's front, has been interpreted as the year 1010 (or 972 of the Christian era). "Salomonis" could allude to the maker's name or to King Solomon's ability to speak the language of the birds. Alternatively, "'Abd al-Malik" may have substituted for the Latin *Servus Domini* (servant of the Lord). See José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, "Qurtuba's monumentality and artistic significance", in *Reflections on Qurtuba in the 21st Century* (Madrid, 2013), 51. "Opus Salomonis" may have evoked the Temple of Solomon's decoration and working technique. See Allegra Iafrate, "Opus Salomonis: sorting out Solomon's scattered treasure", *Medieval Encounters* 22, 2016, 326–78.

³² Rudolph Conrad, *Violence and Daily Life: Reading, Art, and Polemics in the Cîteaux Moralia in Job* (Princeton, 1997), 5.

³³ On Las Huelgas's impressive library of illuminated manuscripts, see John Williams, *Visions of the End in Medieval Spain: Catalogue of Illustrated Beatus Commentaries on the Apocalypse and Study of the Geneva Beatus* (Amsterdam, 2017), 135.

³⁴ The peacock carved on the al-Mughīra casket stands frontally; its body, however, resembles that of an eagle, similar to the two frontal peacocks from the Berthold Sacramentary. The Morgan Library, New York, MS M.710 fol. 126r, c. 1215–17.

³⁵ Ramón Menéndez Pidal (ed.), *Primera crónica general* (Madrid, 1906), I, §558, 311: "Pues esta Espanna que dezimos tal es como el parayso de Dios". Henri Pérès, *La Poésie andalouse en Arabe classique au 11e siècle: ses aspects généraux et sa valeur documentaire* (Paris, 1937), 117.



Figure 7. Frontispiece, *Moralia in Job*, AD 945, Burgos, 1 ft 7 1/4 in. x 1 ft 1 3/8 in. (49 x 34 cm), fol. 3r. Biblioteca Nacional de España (MSS/80). (Photograph © Biblioteca Nacional de España.)

is almost identical to the previously discussed vault. Pearl bands interlace and create large circles that frame peacocks standing frontally and in profile. Smaller circles contain Arabic inscriptions that affirm the sought-after symbolism (see [Figure 8](#)).

Interfaith polemic and the Arabic New Testament

To my knowledge, this is the earliest instance in Spain where the Arabic inscriptions refer specifically to Jesus Christ.³⁶ This reference unquestionably establishes the eschatological symbolism of the peacock. What survives from these inscriptions includes the phrases: *al-Masiḥ rūḥ Allāh* (the Messiah is the spirit of God), *al-Masiḥ kalimat Allāh* (the Messiah is the word of God), *Allāh al-ḥayy* (the ever-living God), *Yāsū‘ nūrunā* (Jesus is our light), *ḥasbī Allāh* (God is enough for me), *Allāh rabbuna* (God is our Lord), *baraka li’llāh* (blessing to God) and *al-mulk li’llāh* (sovereignty belongs to God). Manuel Ocaña Jiménez, who first

³⁶ The Arabic and aljamiado stucco inscriptions of the Casa de Conde in Toledo, dated to the fifteenth century, underscore the relationship of the Virgin Mary to Jesus Christ; however, contrary to Las Huelgas, the name ‘Īsā, not ‘al-Masiḥ’, is used. See Rodrigo Amador de los Ríos y Villalta, “La casa del Conde Esteban de Toledo”, *Boletín de la Sociedad Española de Excursiones* 35, 1896, 205–12; Rodrigo Amador de los Ríos y Villalta, *Monumentos Arquitectónicos de España. Toledo* (Madrid, 1905), I, 391–5.



Figure 8. Stucco decoration featuring peacocks and Arabic inscriptions, fourth vault (from the east) of the southern gallery, Cloister of San Fernando, Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, Burgos. (Photograph by author. Patrimonio Nacional. Monasterio de Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas.)

studied only four of these inscriptions, contended that some phrases' clear Islamic provenance contradicted Christian orthodoxy. He argues, without evidence, that the artists were hired Muslims, able to "impose [their] authentic personality and knowledge" by sneaking in "indelible and revealing marks" of Islamic dogma that "left no confusion about their Muslim authorship". The "magnificent carving of the peacocks" diverted viewers' attention from the inscriptions, "which hardly anyone notices", so that neither "the Cistercian nuns [nor] their advisors" understood the inscriptions' intended meaning.³⁷ Indeed, at first glance almost all of these phrases appear to originate either from the Quran, hadith or from Almohad rhetoric. However, on a second probing, their apparent adjustment (shortening and editing) expressed an intentional emphasis highlighting points of religious commonality that rendered them fitting for both religions. If we situate the phrases in their thirteenth-century context, we begin to realize that their selection, in the first place, was deliberate.

The inscriptions "*al-Masīḥ rūḥ Allāh*" (the Messiah is the spirit of God) and "*al-Masīḥ kalimat Allāh*" (the Messiah is the word of God) were most certainly incorporated in Las Huelgas because of their centrality in the contemporaneous interfaith polemic that

³⁷ Manuel Ocaña Jiménez, "Panorámica sobre el arte almohade en España", *Cuadernos de la Alhambra* 26, 1990, 91–111. See a similar argument in Julie Marquer, "Epigrafía y poder: el uso de las inscripciones árabes en el proyecto propagandístico de Pedro I de Castilla (1350–1369)", *e-Spania* 13, 2012, paragraph 32.

took place in both Iberia and the Levant.³⁸ In this polemic, Christians and Muslims created opposing discourses on specific shared, albeit contentious, themes. Each camp attempted to prove the truth of its faith. The inscriptions, therefore, testify to the royal engagement with and awareness of interfaith debates. The two phrases are indeed communicated in the Quran, especially in *Sūrat al-Nisā* (Q 4:171). The verse informs Christians of the truth that “the Messiah ‘Īsā the son of Maryam is God’s messenger and word, that He directed to Maryam, and a spirit from Him”. That the stucco inscriptions omitted the name ‘Īsā (not used by Christian Arabs or in the Arabic version of the New Testament), as well as omitting any other part of the verse that conveys its message against the Trinity (“and do not say three”), clearly indicates an intentional revision. Despite their Quranic provenance, both phrases, in fact, had required explanation from contemporary thirteenth-century Muslim theologians in both al-Andalus and the Levant, such as Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī (1256–1344) and Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328). As they analysed the verse, they described a cross-faith setting, where Christians and Muslims debated theological ideas. These settings resembled the actual reality of Christian Iberian kingdoms or, for that matter, the eastern Mediterranean during the Crusaders’ presence. Naturally, the explanation of the two Quranic inscriptions was required because they echo the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John (1:1; 1:14).³⁹ The real challenge, however, emerged from contemporary Christian polemicists, who, according to Abū Ḥayyān, “inferred [from this verse] that the Qur’an testifies to [their] religion”. By twisting (*taḥrīf*) its meaning in the Islamic scripture, Christians interpreted “The Messiah is the spirit of God” to express a “relationship of a part to a whole”, which logically established Jesus as an entity or part of God, and consequently as sharing his divine paternity (as God’s son) and attributes. Rather, the spirit was an “invention” (*ikhtirāʿ*) by “God and his power”. Similarly, “word of God” meant that “God brought into existence an accident (*ḥādīth*) in Mary” that is an attribute (*ṣifa*) or state (*ḥāl*) separate from God’s essence.⁴⁰

The main theological problem arising from the phrase “The Messiah is the word of God” related to the fundamental question of whether the Quran was created or not. This question had been the core of the philosophical dispute among the theologians (*mutakallimūn*) of the various Islamic schools of thought.⁴¹ Mainstream Sunni theologians (e.g. Ash‘arī) argued that the Quran, the word of God, was not created, but rather was coeternal with God. Against this traditionalist view, the Mu‘tazila claimed that the Quran was not eternal, but created by God. The disagreement stemmed from their differing views on the nature of God’s divine attributes and essence in relation to His unity. Ibn Taymiyya had to address this problem when he was approached by a Muslim and a Christian after their “negotiation (*tafāwuḍ*) in the *kalām*” seemed to have reached an

³⁸ John Victor Tolan, *Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian-Muslim Encounter* (Oxford, 2009); John Victor Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York, 2002).

³⁹ These two verses were available in al-Andalus from the tenth century in Arabic translations made from Latin. See fol. 104 of the twelfth-century Gospel of John in MS 4971, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid.

⁴⁰ Abū Ḥayyān refers to Franciscan and Dominican missionaries who relied on Quranic texts to attack Muḥammad. He further contested this “sacrilegious” argument concerning Jesus’s deification by showing how it largely stemmed from a philological confusion: in Arabic, “spirit” meant an “inspiration” (or revelation, *waḥy*) that was “imparted by God to angel Gabriel”, who blew into Mary and brought about her conception. He attacked the Sufis – particularly Ibn ‘Arabī – for adopting Christian views on Jesus’s divinity. Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, *Tafsīr al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, ed. ‘Ādil ‘Abd al-Mawjūd et al. (Beirut, 1993), III, 417, 464–5. For Ibn ‘Arabī’s interpretation of “Jesus is the spirit of God”, Jesus’s divine “image” (*ṣūra ilāhiyya*) and his ability to raise the dead, see Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, (ed.) Abū al-‘Ilā ‘Afīfī (Beirut, 1980), 138–50.

⁴¹ Sophia Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Mu‘tazilite Ethics* (Princeton, 2008), 1–11; Nader Bizri, “God: essence and attributes”, in Tim Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge, 2008), 121–40; Wilferd Madelung, “The origins of the controversy regarding the creation of the Koran”, in *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam* (London, 1985), 504–25.

impasse. The Christian challenged Ibn Taymiyya: “You Muslims in your Book say that ʿĪsā is the word of God, and you also say that the Qurʾān is God’s speech (*kalām*), and that it is not created. Prove to us this statement.” The Christian based his argument concerning the creation of the Quran on the shared belief that Jesus was created. In other words, if both Jesus and the Quran were the words of God, and Jesus, as Muslims believe, was created by God, then logically the Quran was also created by God. Against this argument, Ibn Taymiyya affirmed that God’s speech is not a separate, but an intrinsic divine attribute. The Quran was neither old nor created, but rather “happening by the instantiation of God’s speech upon God’s will and wish, in the same way that God bestowed on the prophet His speech by way of the angel Gabriel”.⁴² The meaning of “word” should not be taken literally, but must be understood to refer to God’s will.⁴³

But why did the Christian polemic share the Muʿtazila stance?⁴⁴ Proof that the Quran was indeed created aided the attack against Islam; its main argument posited that the Quran was written by Muhammad, hence neither revealed nor inspired by God. In other words, Islam came to be viewed as Muhammad’s false (created) religion. Simultaneously, the attack on Muhammad and the portrayal of him as a heresiarch underscored his false prophethood and failed resurrection. These attacks on Muhammad and the Quran were particularly pronounced in Alfonso X’s *Estoria de España* which relied on earlier accounts denigrating Muhammad. These accounts included Lucas de Tuy’s *Chronicon mundi* (1236–1242) (written on the orders of none other than Queen Berenguela of Castile and León), Archbishop Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada’s *De rebus Hispaniae* (1243–1246), the preface to the Latin translation of the Quran by Mark of Toledo (completed in 1210, commissioned by Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada)⁴⁵ and the Mozarabic *Liber denudationis sive ostensionis aut patefaciens* (The Book of Denuding or Exposing, The Discloser, dated between 1085 and 1132). In fact, the anonymous author of the *Liber denudationis*’s tenth chapter – “About That Which Demonstrates That Muḥammad Is Infinitely Inferior To Christ Since Christ Is The Eternal Word of God Incarnate In Mary” – explicitly argues that the verses identifying Jesus as the spirit and word of God (Q 3:45 and Q 4:171) prove that the Quran, more precisely its author, Muhammad, implied Christ’s divinity as the “Son of God”.⁴⁶ It is curious that both “The Messiah is the spirit of God” and “The Messiah is the word of God” do not appear in their exact phrasing either in the Quran or the New Testament, but rather in discourses emerging from or guiding the religious dialogues.

To further discredit Muhammad’s prophetic mission, and precisely for a polemical agenda, Alfonso X sponsored the translation of Muhammad’s “second book” *La escala de Mahoma* (the *Book of Muḥammad’s Ladder*) from Arabic into Castilian in 1264, followed

⁴² Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyya, *Tahqīq al-Qawl fī Masʾalat ʿĪsā Kalmiat Allāh waʾl-Qurʾān Kalām Allāh* (Taṭā, 1992), 23–70; Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ li-man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ* (*The Right Answer to those Substituting the Religion of the Messiah*) (Riyāḍ, 1999), III, 236–57.

⁴³ More than two centuries earlier, Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī made similar claims on the Quran and Jesus. See Muhammad al-Iraqī et al. (eds), *al-Uṣūl waʾl-Furūʿ* (Cairo, 1978), 230–1.

⁴⁴ On shared views among Christians and unorthodox Muslim groups, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, 1965), 304–54.

⁴⁵ This Quran was produced in preparation for defeating the Almohads, for polemic and conversion purposes. An earlier Latin translation of the Quran was made by Robert of Ketton (archdeacon of Pamplona and deacon of Tudela), at the request of Peter the Venerable, upon visiting Spain (1142–43). See Tolán, *Saracens*, 183, 155–6; Thomas Burman, “*Tafsīr* and translation: traditional Arabic Qurʾān exegesis and the Latin Qurʾāns of Robert of Ketton and Mark of Toledo”, *Speculum* 73, 1998, 703–32 (esp. 708).

⁴⁶ See translation of the *Liber denudationis* in Thomas Burman, *Religious Polemic and the Intellectual History of the Mozarabs, c. 1050–1200* (Leiden, 1994), 339–63 (esp. 10.8–13).

respectively by Latin and French versions.⁴⁷ Narrated by Muhammad and recounting his night journey and ascent to the seven heavens (*mi'rāj*), the book criticized Muhammad's "errors and unbelievable things".⁴⁸ These include that he saw heaven and hell, that God spoke to and touched him and that Christ was relegated to the lowest rank in heaven.⁴⁹ To Castile's intellectual elite, Muhammad's fabrication of the *mi'rāj* story had helped him to seduce and convert souls to Islam.⁵⁰ Repudiating this apocalyptic text, therefore, not only proved the veracity of Christianity's eschatological views, but could ultimately attract and convert Muslims.⁵¹ Besides affirming Christianity's triumph over Islam, Alfonso X's intellectual translation projects expressed his ideology: proving Muhammad's false prophethood naturally discredited his current followers – the rulers of al-Andalus – and ultimately, as historian John Tolan has suggested, helped Alfonso X to legitimize his subjugation of Muslims in the newly conquered lands.⁵²

The use of Arabic epigraphy in Las Huelgas and in other Christian institutions has led scholars to exclude a Christian source for the carved epigraphy. This exclusion becomes problematic when the phrase "*Allāh al-ḥayy*" (the living God) is considered. Not only does the phrase fit both religions, but there are many examples of its use in the Arabic version of New Testament (*injil*) texts that were produced or circulated in al-Andalus since the ninth century.⁵³ Although God's attribute "*al-ḥayy*" (the living) is one of God's names and is mentioned several times in the Quran and hadith, it is never coupled with

⁴⁷ The Quran and *La escala* were the main sources on Islamic revelation and eschatology. The Latin and French versions of *La escala* manuscripts name a Jewish physician, Abraham, as the translator who was commissioned by Alfonso X. Both the Arabic original and the Castilian version are now lost. For the English translation of the French manuscript at the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Laudensis Misc. 537), see Reginald Hyatte, *The Prophet of Islam in Old French: The Romance of Muhammad (1258) and The Book of Muhammad's Ladder (1264)* (Leiden, 1997). See also Ana Echevarría, "Eschatology or biography? Alfonso X, Muhammad's ladder and a Jewish go-between", in Robinson and Rouhi (eds), *Under the Influence*, 133–52; José Muñoz Sendino, *La escala de Mahoma* (Madrid, 1949); Enrico Cerulli, *Il libro della Scala e la questione delle fonti arabo-spagnole della Divina Comedia* (Roma, 1949); Marie Therèse D'Alverny, "Deux traductions latines du Coran au Moyen Age", *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 16, 1948, 125–7; Burman, *Religious Polemic and the History of the Mozarabs*, 50–5.

⁴⁸ Hyatte, *The Prophet of Islam in Old French*, Preface, 97.

⁴⁹ Hyatte, *The Prophet of Islam in Old French*, chapters 10, 12–19, 20, 36–37 and 49–51.

⁵⁰ Menéndez Pidal (ed.), *Primera crónica general*, I, §488–489, 270–1; Juan Gil de Zamora (1241–1318), *Maremagnum de escrituras. Dictaminis epithalamium. Libro de las personas ilustres. Formación del príncipe*, (trans.) J.-L. Martín (Zamora, 1995), 64. On the Christian polemic against Muhammad's conversion agenda, see Tolan, *Saracens*, 174–93; Echevarría, "Eschatology or biography?", 140, 144.

⁵¹ The commitment to conversion of Muslims gained an unprecedented momentum in the thirteenth century. But the *Siete partidas* (1256–1265), Alfonso X's book of policies, explicitly warned against conversion of Iberian Muslims by force, violence or intimidation. Rather, it recommended resorting to a voluntary conversion that "arises among them [Muslims]" and is accomplished through "kind words and suitable discourses". Robert I. Burns (ed.), *Las siete partidas*, (trans.) Parsons Scott (Philadelphia, 2001), 1438–9 (Part. VII, Tit. XXV, law II. S.); Robert I. Burns, "Christian-Islamic confrontation in the West: the thirteenth-century dream of conversion", *The American Historical Review* 76/5, 1971, 1386–424 (esp. 1397). The goal was to bring all subjects of the kingdom to Christianity, and thus corresponded with his religious duty and self-portrayal as the "king of three religions". See John Victor Tolan, "Alphonse le Sage: Roi des trois religions", in *Toleranz und Intoleranz im Mittelalter / Tolerance et intolerance au Moyen Age* (Greifswald, 1997), 123–36. Alfonso X's cultural project was modelled after the Almohad. Imitating the Almohad caliphate's claims, Alfonso X underscored the primacy of knowledge and philosophy to achieve the image of a "sapientalist" king (*Rey Sabio*): Maribel Fierro, "Alfonso X 'The Wise': the last Almohad Caliph?", *Medieval Encounters* 15, 2009, 175–98.

⁵² Tolan, *Saracens*, 186–9. See also Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford, 1993), 233; Echevarría, "Eschatology or biography?", 143.

⁵³ Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld, "Christian-Arabic manuscripts from the Iberian peninsula and North Africa: a historical interpretation", *Al-Qanṭara* 15/2, 1994, 423–51; Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld, "Christian Arabic literature from medieval Spain: an attempt at periodization", in Samir Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen (eds), *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750–1258)* (Leiden; New York; Köln, 1994), 203–24; Philippe

“*Allāh*”.⁵⁴ This exact phrasing, however, does occur frequently in the New Testament’s Arabic version as part of a longer sentence.⁵⁵ Yet its presence in a two-word shortened form in Las Huelgas further contributed to the masking of its Christian provenance. This shortening, both textually and visually, evokes short supplications inscribed on objects and architectural monuments produced in Islamic realms, akin to those analysed in the previous vault. Similarly, “*Yāsū‘ nūrunā*” (Jesus is our Light) also suggests knowledge of Arabic Christian sources and of how Arabic-speaking Christians refer to “Jesus” in Arabic as “*Yasū‘*”.⁵⁶ It is not a word that is found in the Quran, as the Islamic text refers to Jesus only as “*‘Īsā*” or “*al-Masīḥ*”. “*Yāsū‘ nūrunā*” emerges from “I Am the Light of the World” (“*anā nūr al-‘ālam*”), spoken by Jesus, and evoked in the Gospel of John (8:12 and 9:5).⁵⁷

For Ocaña Jiménez, it is the expression “*ḥasbī Allāh*” (God is enough for me) that constitutes an indisputable proof of the artists’ Muslim identity because it appears in verses against the Trinity.⁵⁸ Indeed, “*ḥasbī Allāh*” emerges from the Quran (e.g. Q 9:129; Q 39:38), immediately recalling the famous Quranic verse “*ḥasbinā Allāh wa ne‘m al-wakīl*” (Q 3:173, God is enough for us; for He is the best disposer of affairs), often loudly iterated at times of deep existential crises. However, neither in the verses nor in their interpretations (*tafsīr*) by Muslim theologians do we find mention of the Trinity or Christianity as the context for the verses. Medieval Muslim theologians contend that God asked Muhammad to address this phrase to non-believers, “worshippers of idols (*aṣṇām*)” “from his people (*qawm*)” – Quraysh.⁵⁹ Not only did the shortened version present no contradiction to Christians, but its message about relegating matters to God and God’s sufficiency is amply articulated in the Old and New Testaments (i.e. Psalm 23:1 “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want”).

It has also been suggested that the phrase *Allāh rabbunā* (God is our Lord) is Almohad in origin, excerpted from the longer Almohad phrase: *Allāh rabbunā / Muḥammad rasūlunā / al-Mahdī imāmunā* (God is our Lord / Muḥammad is our Prophet / The Mahdi is our imam). This phrase certainly reached Castile through its inscription on Almohad square dirhams. However, because in the cloister the sentence was deliberately shortened, excluding reference to both Muhammad and the imamate, the Almohad context was lost. Ocaña Jiménez’s claim that “*Allāh rabbunā*” goes against Christianity because it substitutes God for *Allāh* could be easily refuted, as the Arabic New Testament uses both *Allāh* and *rabb* to refer to God. In fact, the words “*allāh*” and “*rabb*”, denoting God, can be used interchangeably or joined together, following their use in the Arabic New Testament (e.g. *al-rabb ilāhuna*, the Lord our God; Mark 12:29). The phrase was also interpreted in the context of the Christian triumph at Las Navas as a “reaction that in a great measure appropriated the textual and aesthetic ideas of the Almohads in order to subvert their

Roisse, ““Los Evangelios traducidos del latín al árabe por Ishāq b. Balaṣk al-Qurtubī en 946 d.C.”, in Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala et al. (eds), *Estudios Árabes* (Granada, 1999), 147–64.

⁵⁴ See Q 2:255, Q 3:1 and 3:2, Q 20:111, Q 25:58 and Q 4:65. Ocaña Jiménez’s reverse reading of the phrase as “*al-ḥayy li’llāh*” (The living is God’s) is linguistically awkward. It does not appear either in Islamic or Christian scriptures.

⁵⁵ “*Allāh al-ḥayy*” appears in Matthew 16:16 and 26:63, John 6:69, 1 Timothy 6:17, Hebrews 10:31 and 15:7, 2 Corinthians 3:3 and 6:16 and Daniel 6:20.

⁵⁶ There is a redundant “*alif*” after the “*yā*” and a missing “*wāw*” after the “*sīn*”.

⁵⁷ See also John 11:9 (*nūr hadha al-‘ālam*, the light of this world) and John 12:46 (*anā al-nūr*, I have come a light).

⁵⁸ Ocaña Jiménez, “Panorámica”, 110.

⁵⁹ Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, (ed.) ‘Abd Allāh al-Turkī (Cairo, 2001), XII, 100; Ismail b. ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur‘an al-‘Azīm*, (ed.) Sāmī al-Salāma (Cairo, 1999), IV, 241; Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, *Tafsīr al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, V, 122 and VII, 413; Ibn Barraĵān, *Tanbīh al-Afhām*, (ed.) Aḥmad al-Mazyūdī (Beirut, 2013), IV, 551.

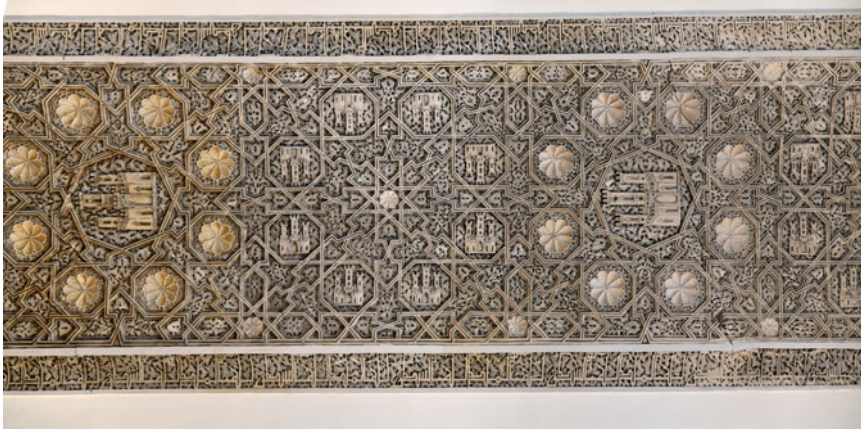


Figure 9. Vault stucco decoration with the phrases, *al-mulk li'llāh; al-shukr li'llāh* (sovereignty belongs to God; thanks be to God), Locutorio, Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, Burgos. (Photograph by author. Patrimonio Nacional. Monasterio de Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas.)

message”.⁶⁰ Clearly, however, rather than postulating a triumphalist approach by the patrons, a careful selection of a shared lexicon was more at stake. Given the setting of Las Huelgas, the inscriptions naturally became commensurate with monastic activities, whether contemplative, discursive and pedagogical or liturgical. As will be demonstrated, the Arabic inscriptions further deepened the meaning of the Latin inscriptions and accommodated their respective liturgy.

Arabic and Latin in monastic ritual

In addition to the interplay between text and image in the Cloister of San Fernando, the Arabic and Latin inscriptions in the different rooms create a network of meaning that not only parallels the progression from one space to another, but their continuity (in reading) suggests an effortless philological transition (from one language to the other). Daily and ceremonial liturgical processions, including funerals and death anniversaries, connected the church and Cloister of San Fernando with Las Claustrellas and the Capilla de Santiago either through the Locutorio (see Figure 9) or the Pasaje (passage of Santiago).⁶¹ Depending on the liturgy, these processions included stops or stations along their path. The Pasaje and Locutorio may have constituted such stations. Their inscriptions echoed the liturgy’s words, hence the proximity of the text to the viewer facilitated its reading.⁶² Both spaces have a similar elongated rectangular plan, a barrel-vaulted ceiling and a frieze bearing a Latin inscription on the four walls. In both, the vault’s central rectangular zone features a complex geometricized vegetal design of star shapes and castles (emblem of Castile). This central zone is bordered by a band of Kufic inscription with the repeating phrases: *al-mulk li'llāh; al-shukr li'llāh*.

In the Locutorio, the extant Latin inscription combines excerpts from two Psalms (25, 142), the first of which is chanted in the introit of the first Sunday of Advent and is closely tied to the figure of the Virgin. Calling for God’s help against enemies, the worshipper

⁶⁰ Miguel Vega Martín et al., *El mensaje de las monedas almohades* (Cuenca, 2002), 209.

⁶¹ Eduardo Carrero, “Epigrafía y liturgia estacional entre el locutorio y el pasaje a la enfermería de la abadía de Santa María la Real de las Huelgas, en Burgos”, *Territorio, Sociedad y Poder* 9, 2014, 115–32 (esp. 124–7).

⁶² Carrero, “Epigrafía y liturgia estacional”, 124–31.

expresses his trust in God leading him along the right path. The inscription also indicates the year 1275 (1313 Hispanic era), which may have been the time when the stuccowork was made. It reads as follows:

Ad te levavi animam meam. Deus meus, in Te confido, non erubescam neque irrideant me inimici mei et enim universi qui Te expectant non confundentur vias tuas. Domine, demonstra michi et semitas tuas edoce me.

Libera me, Domine, a persequentibus me quia confortati sunt super me. Educ de custodia animam meam ad confitendum nomini tuo. Me expectant iusti don retribuas michi Era MILL CCC XIII annos

Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in thee; let me not be ashamed, let not mine enemies triumph over me. Yea, let none that wait on thee be ashamed; let them be ashamed who transgress without cause. Show me thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths [Psalm 25:1–4].

Deliver me from my persecutors; for they are stronger than I. Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name. The righteous shall compass me about; for thou shalt deal bountifully with me [Psalm 142:6–7] Era 1313.

The year 1275 was particularly burdensome for Alfonso X because of two events: his defeat in the Battle of Écija against the Nasrids and their Marinid allies and the death of his son Fernando de la Cerda (the heir to the crown). As Ruiz Souza and Palomo Fernández have suggested, it may be that the psalms referred to the Nasrids and Marinids.⁶³ These psalms may have also been sung, as in Franciscan monasteries, in the liturgy of the visit of the sick, aligning with the Capilla de la Asunción's function as an infirmary chapel.⁶⁴ Besides their liturgical relevance, Tom Nickson argues, Latin inscriptions of holy texts or names, often juxtaposed with Arabic and Castilian, imbued objects and architectural surfaces with apotropaic potency. Repetition, emulating oral practices, amplified inscriptions' ritual effect and was not always indicative of "artistic economy".⁶⁵ The repetition of Arabic supplications in the two passageways, therefore, might not merely stem from the artists' use of templates, but may also simulate the actual oral repetitions of these supplications in prayers.

In addition to their aforementioned significance in Andalusī funerary rituals, the repetition of supplications in mystical prayers is well-documented, almost institutionalized, in the literary Sufi sources. The phrase "*al-mulk li'llāh*" (sovereignty belongs to God) combined with "*al-shukr li'llāh*" (thanks be to God) in a repeating manner recalls, for example, Sufi prayers that enjoin worshippers to repeat these supplications up to a hundred times at the end of the prayer.⁶⁶ Generally speaking, supplications that comprise two words, one of which is "*li'llāh*" (to God or God's), proliferated in Sufi *aḥzāb* and *awrād*, as evidenced in *Ḥizb al-Baḥr* (The Sea Litany) of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (1196–1258).⁶⁷ For al-Ghazālī,

⁶³ See Ruiz Souza and Palomo Fernández, "Nueva hipótesis", 36.

⁶⁴ Antonio Arbiol, *Visita de enfermos y ejercicio santo de ayudar a bien morir con las instrucciones más importantes para tan sagrado ministerio* (Madrid, 1786), 163, cited in Carrero, "Epigrafía y liturgia estacional", 128.

⁶⁵ Tom Nickson, "Sovereignty belongs to God: text, ornament and magic in Islamic and Christian Seville", *Art History* 38/5, 2015, 838–61; Tom Nickson, "Texts and talismans in medieval Castile", *Art in Translation* 7/1, 2015, 9–38.

⁶⁶ Muḥammad al-Temsamānī, *Adhkār al-Darqāwiyya al-Shādhiliyya* (Beirut, 2017), 73.

⁶⁷ 'Abd Allāh Kannūn, *al-Nubūgh al-Maghribī fī al-Adab al-'Arabī* (Beirut, 2014), 336. Shādhilī litanies often added to the Prophet's morning prayer a series of two-word supplications that contain the word "*li'llāh*": "*Aṣbahnā wa-aṣbaḥa al-mulk li'llāh, wa'l-'azama li'llāh, wa'l-'izza li'llāh, wa'l-kibriyā' li'llāh, [...]*". 'Aṣem al-Kayyālī (ed.), *Majmū'at al-Aḥzāb al-Shādhiliyya* (Beirut, 2013), 213.

repetition of God's name erases the tongue's trace; the word's letters and shapes are forgotten, only the presence of the word's pure meaning endures in the worshipper's heart.⁶⁸

The Almohad extensive use of "*al-mulk li'llāh*" (sovereignty belongs to God) on architectural monuments and objects of different mediums is sometimes interpreted as indicative of the phrase being the Almohad motto.⁶⁹ But this dynastic connection has overlooked the phrase's original source: the hadith. More specifically, "*al-mulk li'llāh*" is extrapolated from the morning and evening prayers, attributed to Prophet Muhammad, as recounted in Imām Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, reported by 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd: "*amsaynā wa-amsā al-mulk li'llāh*" (the evening has been reached and the sovereignty belongs to God). The morning prayer is identical, only replacing the verb "*amsā*" with "*aṣbaḥa*" (came to be/woke up): "*aṣbaḥnā wa-aṣbaḥa al-mulk li'llāh*". The fact that "awakening" after a night's sleep is contingent on God's will immediately establishes a metaphorical parallel with resurrection (*ba'th*) after death. Indeed, the myriad interpretations of this hadith adopt such a parallel.⁷⁰ The iteration of "*al-mulk li'llāh*" therefore celebrates awakening after sleep – the passage from death to life. The phrase's explicit association with death and God's permanence is provided in al-Qurṭubī's eschatological work *al-Tadhkira fī Aḥwāl al-Mawtā wa-Umūr al-Ākhira* (Memoir of the Conditions of the Dead and the Last Things), in a chapter entitled "*yafnā al-'ibād wa-yabqā al-mulk li'llāh waḥdahu*" (Mankind Perish and Only God's Sovereignty Remains).⁷¹ "*Al-mulk li'llāh*" is of course not alien to Christianity; it is also used in a similar possessive form, addressing God "*laka al-mulk*" (sovereignty belongs to you) at the ending sentence of the Arabic version of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:13): *li'anna laka al-mulk wa'l-quwwa wa'l-majd ilā al-abad* (For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever). The Arabic inscriptions, therefore, may have enforced monastic liturgies that included the Lord's prayer.

The surviving fragments of the Pasaje's Latin inscriptions emerge from the Compline liturgy and the *Salve Regina*, often sung after Compline. They also express a plea, accompanied by sincere weeping, for God's protection against enemies. This epigraphic interconnectedness between the liturgy's words and the carved inscriptions, as Eduardo Carrero has argued, clearly highlights the inscriptions' role in the processions. The *Salve* is sung during processions and feasts devoted to the Virgin; as other Marian antiphons, it is intimately linked with the Office for the Dead. Monastic processions like the Assumption and Compline often ended in the Capilla de la Asunción.⁷² The inscriptions read as follows:

Visita, quaesumus, Domine, habitationem istam, et omnes insidias inimici ab ea longe repelle angeli tui [...] [Ad te] clamamus exules filii Eve ad suspiramus gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum val de Eva ergo advocata nostra [...]

Visit, we beseech thee, O Lord, this Habitation, and remove far from it all the Snares of the Enemy; let thy holy Angels [...] [To thee] we cry, the banished children of Eve;

⁶⁸ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), *Mizān al-'amal* (Beirut, 2018), 40–1.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Pedro Cano Ávila and Aly Tawfik Mohamed Essawi, "Estudio epigráfico-histórico de las inscripciones árabes de los portalones y ventanas del Patio de las Doncellas del Palacio de Pedro I en el Real Alcázar de Sevilla", *Apuntes del Alcázar de Sevilla* 5, 2004, 52–79; Serge Gubert, "Pouvoir, sacré et pensée mystique", *Al-Qanṭara* 17/2, 1996, 391–427; Manuel Ación Almansa, "Cerámica y Propaganda en época almohade", *Arqueología medieval* 4, 1996, 183–92.

⁷⁰ See Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makiyya*, (ed.) Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn (Beirut, 1999), VIII, 386; Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī bi-Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, (ed.) 'Abd al-Qādir al-Ḥamad (Riyāḍ, 2001), XI, 117–8.

⁷¹ Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Qurṭubī (1273), *al-Tadhkira fī Aḥwāl al-Mawtā wa-Umūr al-Ākhira*, (ed.) Al-Sādiq Ibrāhīm (Riyāḍ, 2004), I, 464.

⁷² Carrero, "The creation and use of space", 182–3.

To thee we sigh, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Therefore, O our Advocate [...]

That “mourning and weeping” featured in the *Salve Regina* faithfully articulated the funerary activities of Las Huelgas. As a site for royal burial, funerary rituals prominently staged various expressions of mourning and grief, particularly weeping. Visually, some tombs’ iconography, depicting intense forms of mourning, emulated actual rituals performed by royal figures, especially women (e.g. weeping, tearing at one’s cheeks or hair and scattering ashes over the head).⁷³ In contemporary chronicles, royal sorrow was projected onto the entire kingdom. As the *De rebus Hispanie* (1243) reports, after the death of Alfonso VIII “all Spain, indeed the world, was soaked with tears”.⁷⁴ In *Las Huelgas Codex* – the monastery’s liturgical musical repository – the lament of Sancho’s death underscored universal grief: “Mourn, poor Castile / Mourn for King Sancho / Whom, earth, sea, and sky / Mourn with anguished weeping”.⁷⁵ Many of these musical laments from the *Codex* were *conducus*, sung during processions.⁷⁶ The visual and textual recordings of emotions may have facilitated re-enactment during death anniversaries. Public participation was encouraged after Pope Innocent IV, following Alfonso X’s wish, issued an indulgence in 1253 prompting pilgrimage to Las Huelgas on royal memorials.⁷⁷ The inclusion of the *Salve Regina* in the monastery’s epigraphic programme, therefore, strongly supported both the monastery’s ongoing daily liturgy and funerary vocation.

Baḥr al-Dumū’ and the Capilla de Santiago

With the words “mourning and weeping in this valley of tears” in mind, we move to the Capilla de Santiago. Situated to the north-east, further from Las Claustrillas, the chapel’s rectangular plan is divided into two spaces by a horseshoe arched portal: a single-nave church with a wooden flat roof and a domed presbytery. Rather than the long-held assumption that the chapel hosted royal investiture, and given the many burial spaces found in its vicinity, the Capilla de Santiago most certainly served as a funerary chapel to an adjacent cemetery and was therefore the end point of funerary processions.⁷⁸ The Arabic inscriptions corroborate this argument.

A stucco frieze situated between the bottom of the wooden dome and the wall consists of a series of squares framing alternating castles and eight-pointed stars (see [Figure 10](#)). It

⁷³ Alicia Miguélez Cavero, “Texto, imagen, y música: el dolor ante la muerte del Infante Don Sancho en el Panteón Real de Las Huelgas”, in María Encarnación Martín López and Vicente García Lobo (eds), *Las inscripciones góticas* (Leon, 2010), 377–90; Raquel Alonso Álvarez, “Los enterramientos de los reyes de Leon y Castilla hasta Sancho IV: Continuidad dinástica y memoria regia”, *e-Spania* 3, 2007, 1–15.

⁷⁴ Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, *Historia de rebus Hispaniae*, (ed.) Juan Fernandez Valverde (Turnhout, 1987), VIII, xv, 280; Miriam Shadis, *Berenguela of Castile (1180–1246) and Political Women in the High Middle Ages* (New York, 2009), 152. Emily Henry, “Plange, Castella misera: meaning and mourning at the Royal Abbey of Las Huelgas de Burgos in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries”, *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 12/1, 2019, 28–43.

⁷⁵ “Plange, Castella misera, plange pro rege Sancio, quem terra, pontus, ethera ploratu plangent anxio”. Gordon A. Anderson (ed.), *The Las Huelgas Manuscript, Burgos* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart, 1982), II, 119–20.

⁷⁶ Susan Boynton, “Emblems of lament in Latin and vernacular song”, in Dorothea Kullmann (ed.), *The Church and Vernacular Literature in Medieval France* (Toronto, 2009), 222–48 (esp. 228); Raquel Alonso Álvarez, “La memoria de Alfonso VIII de Castilla en Las Huelgas de Burgos: arquitectura y liturgia funeraria”, in Esther López Ojeda (ed.), *1212, un año, un reinado, un tiempo de despegue* (Logroño, 2013), 349–76; Henry, “Plange, Castella misera”, 9.

⁷⁷ Liozoain Garrido, *Documentación (1263–1283)* (Burgos, 1987), 233–4, no. 438; Alonso Álvarez, “La memoria de Alfonso VIII”, 368.

⁷⁸ On the chapel’s funerary function, see Carrero “Epigrafía y liturgia estacional”, 131. The garden near the chapel’s apse has been named the “cemetery garden”. For the surrounding burial grounds, see Amancio Rodríguez López, *El Real Monasterio de las Huelgas de Burgos y el Hospital del Rey* (Burgos, 1907), II, 273.



Figure 10. Stucco frieze with Arabic poetry (detail), Capilla de Santiago, Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, Burgos. (Photograph by author. Patrimonio Nacional. Monasterio de Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas.)

is bordered above and below by narrower cursive inscription bands that repeat the poem: *yā thiqaṭī yā amalī, anta al-rajā anta al-walī, ikhtum bi-khayri al-‘amalī* [sic] (My Trust, my Hope, You are the Aspiration, You are the Benefactor, Let my good deeds prevail at the end).⁷⁹ The poem clearly echoes the Latin inscriptions in the Locutorio and the Pasaje. While pleading for God’s help and emphasizing trust in God, it addresses the end of life and imminent death. The material evidence emerging from Andalusī cemeteries again indicates the funerary context for which the poem was first intended. Fragments of glazed ceramic tombstones that were excavated from Málaga, for example, dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, employ this poem in blue letters on a white background (see Figure 11).⁸⁰ Numerous later fourteenth-century structures in al-Andalus, Fes and Tlemcen, many of which had no direct funerary function, display this poem.⁸¹ In non-funerary contexts, the poem is a constant reminder of death. In linking the patron’s deeds in this world with the hereafter, the poem embedded a sincere plea for God’s acceptance and reward of these deeds after death.⁸²

Eschatological literature highlighted the importance of the individual’s *‘amal* (work or deeds) to the hereafter as the criterion by which the deceased is questioned, judged and granted or denied eternal paradise. Sunni and Andalusī Mālikī eschatological sources even personified good work: “A man with a beautiful face, fine clothes, and pleasant scent” would appear to the deceased in his grave and say, “Rejoice, God had granted you dignity

⁷⁹ I thank Suleiman Mourad for this nuanced translation of the verses. A literal translation would be “seal my deeds with goodness”.

⁸⁰ Acien Almansa and Martínez Nuñez, *Catálogo de las inscripciones árabes*, 57.

⁸¹ Rodrigo Amador de los Ríos, *Inscripciones árabes de Sevilla* (Sevilla, 1998), 135; José Miguel Puerta Vílchez et al., *Leer la Alhambra* (Granada, 2010), 42, 82.

⁸² In the Patio de las Doncellas (Seville’s Alcázar), the poem frames a central stucco inscription that refers to Pedro I, “‘izz li-mawlānā al-sultān don bidru ayyadahu Allāh” (Glory to our lord, sultan don Pedro, God support him).

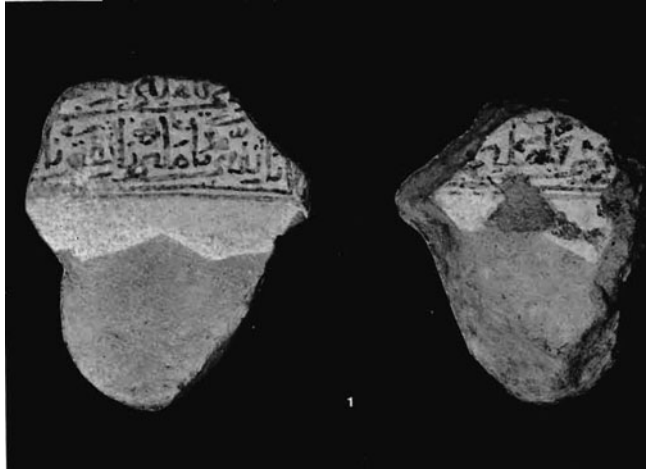


Figure 11. Tombstone fragments. Alcazaba Málaga, mid-thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. Glazed ceramic. Museo de Málaga. (Photo © Museo de Málaga.)

(*karāma*”), identifying himself as “I am your good work (*‘amaluka al-ṣāliḥ*).”⁸³ Because the dead one is cut off from his work after death, the living could perform work on his behalf and increase his *ḥasanāt* (good deeds).⁸⁴ Supplications said for the dead are favourable among these works.

The poem’s early appearance in Las Huelgas has been overlooked. Despite its designation as an anonymous popular poem, it is first found in the book of the Iraqi theologian and acclaimed preacher Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201), titled *Baḥr al-Dumūʿ* (The Sea of Tears).⁸⁵ It is part of an episode narrated by the renowned Iraqi mystic al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728). Al-Ḥasan’s mystical or Sufi ties are not historically authenticated; nevertheless, those following the mystical path across the Islamic world have considered him one of their founding fathers, and medieval sources celebrate his spirituality (piety, asceticism and mystical reflection) and theology. They trace their tradition all the way back to al-Ḥasan, then ‘Ali and Muhammad, by recourse to the authority of mystical *silsilas* and *isnād al-khirqa* (the cloak investiture chain of transmission).⁸⁶ Such Sufi veneration of al-Ḥasan is most in evidence in Ibn Khaldūn’s account of Messianism in Islamic traditions. Ibn Khaldūn argues that the Shi‘i views and practices were greatly adopted by the Sufis, including those pertinent to Mahdism, so that “they based their practice of using a [Sufi] cloak (*khirqqa*) on the (alleged) fact that ‘Ali clothed al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī in such a cloak and caused him to agree solemnly that he would adhere to the mystic path”.⁸⁷ The connection between Sufism and Shi‘ism is corroborated by a phrase that evokes the Capilla de Santiago’s poem and

⁸³ Of strong relevance to the Capilla’s poem is the hadith “*innamā al-‘māl bi’l-khawātīm*” in al-‘Asqalānī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, XI, 81–2, manifesting the strong connection between one’s works and judgement after death, and confirming that “the (results of) deeds done, depend upon the last actions (*innamā al-‘māl bi-khawātīmḥā*)”. See al-Ishbīlī, *al-‘Āqiba*, 246.

⁸⁴ Al-Qurtubī, *al-Tadhkira*, 274–93.

⁸⁵ Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī, *Baḥr al-Dumūʿ*, fol. 17, MS 25225, Rabat, al-Khazāna al-‘Āmma.

⁸⁶ For Shādhilī *isnād*, see ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Fāsi, *Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Barr al-Maʿrūf bi’l-Ḥizb al-Kabīr li’l-Imām al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī* (Beirut, 2011), 109–10. In al-Andalus, for example, Ibn al-Khaṭīb reports that the Granadine mystic Ibn al-Maḥrūq (b. 709/1309) wrote: “I wore the *khirqqa* from the hands of the Shaykh [...] Abī ‘Ali ‘Umar b. ‘Ali al-Hāshimī al-Qurashī [...]. And I was told about it by the ascetic Shaykh al-Khallasī from [...], from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, from ‘Ali b. Abī Ṭālib.” Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Iḥāṭa fī Akhbār Gharnāṭa*, (ed.) Yusef ‘Ali Ṭawīl (Beirut, 2003), IV, 170.

⁸⁷ Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, (trans.) Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, 1980), II, 187; Ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh Ibn Khaldūn*, (eds) Khalīl Shihāda and S. Zakkār (Beirut, 2001), I, 403.

simultaneously emphasizes the theme of death and the reward of the hereafter. The al-Washshā's tenth-century *Kitāb al-muwashshā* (The Book of the Brocade) mentions an inscription that Sufis often carved on their rings, which reads “*Khatama Allāh bi-khayr ‘amālī wa-tawaffānī ‘alā ḥub ‘Alī*” (God sealed my actions with goodness and made me die through the love of ‘Alī).⁸⁸

Devotional weeping, central to Las Huelgas's rituals, was strongly pronounced in Ibn al-Jawzī's sermons and writings, particularly those on al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. In an apologia of homiletic storytellers and exhortatory preachers (*Kitāb al-quṣṣās wa'l-mudhkirīn*), Ibn al-Jawzī cites homilies by al-Ḥasan, among other ascetic preachers. But most importantly, he devoted an entire treatise to *The Manners of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, His Asceticism, and His Sermons* (*Ādāb al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī wa-zuhduhu wa-mawā'izuhu*), emphasizing both al-Ḥasan's eloquent preaching and his reputation as an ascetic weeper (*al-bakkā*), constantly overwhelmed by sorrow (*ḥuzn*).⁸⁹ Islamic ascetic literature strongly relied on descriptions of *majālīs al-‘ilm wa'l-wa‘z* (exhortatory preaching and knowledge assemblies), describing how preachers' sermons had a transformative impact on their audience. In fact, Ibn al-Jawzī himself had such a reputation as a preacher who aroused intense emotional responses, like weeping, frenzied rapture (*walah*), delirium (*dhuḥūl*) and mystical ecstasy (*wajd*) in his audience.⁹⁰ On three different occasions, the Andalusī traveller Ibn Jubayr witnessed Ibn al-Jawzī preach in Baghdad's caliphal palace, and recorded such overwhelming devotional weeping in response to his eloquent sermons. In fact, given that *Baḥr al-Dumū‘* was one of Ibn al-Jawzī's four most important books on *wa‘z*, it is not implausible to speculate that it reached al-Andalus through Ibn Jubayr.⁹¹ Up until today, the book's litanies are chanted over the dead in North Africa, as an alternative to other, more violent forms of mourning.⁹² The inclusion of this poem in Las Huelgas is, therefore, in accord with the expressions of grief that were performed in the thirteenth century in Las Huelgas.

Since its earliest mention in al-Jawzī's *Baḥr al-Dumū‘*, the poem has appeared exclusively in Sufi and mystical works.⁹³ The words that the poem includes – *thiqa* (trust), *amal* (hope), *raḡā‘* (aspiration), *wilāya* (guardianship, protection) – are saturated with Sufi resonances.⁹⁴ Despite Ibn al-Jawzī's reputation as a Sunni Hanafī theologian, he recited Sufi

⁸⁸ Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Washshā, *al-Zarf wa-z-Zurafā‘*, (ed.) Fahmy Sa‘d (Beirut, 1986), 309.

⁸⁹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ādāb al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī wa-Zuhduhu wa-Mawā'izuhu*, (ed.) Suleiman al-Hursh (Beirut, 2008), esp. 24, 25, 33, 97, 119, 125, 133; Suleiman Ali Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History: Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110H/728CE) and the Formation of His Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship* (Leiden, 2006), 65–6.

⁹⁰ Ibn Jubayr, *Riḥlat Ibn Jubayr* (Beirut, 1964), 199. See Linda G. Jones, “Prophetic performances: reproducing the charisma of the Prophet in medieval Islamic preaching”, in Katherine L. Jansen and Miri Rubin (eds), *Charisma and Religious Authority: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Preaching, 1200–1500* (Belgium, 2010), 19–47 (esp. 44); Linda G. Jones, “‘He cried and made others cry’: crying as a sign of pietistic authenticity or deception in medieval Islamic preaching”, in Elina Gertsman (ed.), *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History* (London, 2013), 102–35.

⁹¹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fi Tarīkh al-Mulūk wa'l-Umam*, (eds) Muḥammad and Muṣṭafā ‘Aṭā (Beirut, 1995), I, 18; al-Tinnārtī, *al-Fawā'id al-Jamma fi Isnād ‘Ulūm al-Umma*, (ed.) Al-Yazīd al-Raḡī (Beirut, 2007), 90.

⁹² Al-Jilānī al-Ghurābī, *Dirāsāt fi al-Thaqāfa al-‘Arabiyya* (Beirut, 2013), 42.

⁹³ See Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Sikandarī (d. 1309), *Zīnat al-Nawāzīr wa-Tuḥfat al-Khawāṭir*, (ed.) Yūsef Aḥmad (Beirut, 2011), 518; Muḥammad b. Ibrahim al-Tatāwī (d. 1535), *Khuṭaṭ al-Sadād wa'l-Rushd*, (ed.) Aḥmad al-Taḥṭāwī (Beirut, 2016), 530. In the surviving *Khuṭaṭ* manuscripts, the poem is iterated either by al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī or the Sufi mystic Ibn Zayyāt al-Tādilī (d. 1229).

⁹⁴ In al-Shādhilī's *Ḥizb al-Shakwā* (Complaint/Grievance Litany), for example, the weeping devotee (“God have mercy on my pouring down tears”) addresses God: “*yā rabb yā mawlāy yā thiqaṭī wa-raḡā‘ī?*”. See Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb, *al-Ifāda al-Kubrā: Majmū‘ al-Awrād al-Khāssa wa'l-‘Āmma* (Beirut, 2012), 253–61 (esp. 254, 259). Al-Shādhiliyya's clear influence by Shi'ite prayers is evidenced in al-Ṭusī, *Miṣbāḥ al-Mutahajjid*, (ed.) ‘Alī al-A‘lamī (Beirut, 1998), 30.

love poetry in his sermons.⁹⁵ The climax of such recitation, again witnessed by Ibn Jubayr, was when Ibn al-Jawzī, profoundly moved to tears by his recited poem, “rose up astonished, he hastily descended the preaching pulpit, leaving an anticipating crowd, bidding farewell with their red tear ducts, some through profuse weeping, others by rolling themselves in the soil”.⁹⁶

The 32 chapters of *Baḥr al-Dumūʿ* are a series of sermons on preparing for Judgement Day. Salvation required the performance of good works, the purification of the soul from earthly sins and desires and attaining penitence (*tawba*) through weeping, prayer and supplication (*duʿāʾ*). The book alerted the reader to the imminence of death and underscored the act of crying a sea of tears for the fear of and yearning for God. Ibn al-Jawzī’s book is not merely compatible with Christian theology. Its title *The Sea of Tears* almost seems to be a reformulation of the Christian concept of the “Valley of Tears” from the *Salve Regina*.

In the episode, al-Ḥasan reports how he entered the chamber of his “honourable neighbour” – a “magus” on his deathbed – and advised him to convert to Islam before dying. Eager to convert, the dying neighbour was awaiting a signal from God. In the meantime, al-Ḥasan cried for God’s help, after which the magus finally said the *shahāda* as his “spirit left him”. With the fulfilment of the conversion, the mourners in the magus’s room recited: “My Trust, my Hope ...”. The remainder of the poem, which is not inscribed in Las Huelgas, reads: *wa-ḥaqqeq al-tawba lī qabla ḥulūl ajalī wa-kun ya rab walī / God, fulfil my redemption before the advent of my death, and be, God, my protector!* The episode, narrating sickness and repentance before death, draws a strong parallel between the sick magus and the sick nuns who prayed at the Capilla de la Asunción (the infirmary chapel). More strikingly, given the funerary function of the Capilla de Santiago, just as the poem was recited in the magus’s chamber, it could equally be chanted by those present in the Capilla de Santiago for those whose bodies were laid out for prayer before their final burial at the adjacent cemetery. As its reintroduction in Las Huelgas conceals the identity of the dying subject, religion and place, it is almost as if the poem gently underwent a process of conversion.

Al-Ḥasan had been known in al-Andalus since the tenth century.⁹⁷ What is striking, however, is that it was widely believed, as Suleiman Mourad has demonstrated, that “al-Ḥasan and Jesus were similar in looks and words [and] what is said by one can be easily transferred to the other”.⁹⁸ So many sayings by Jesus were reattributed to al-Ḥasan that it could almost be argued that “al-Ḥasan was involved in the transmission of Jesus’s teachings”.⁹⁹ In fact, such reattribution can also be traced in *Baḥr al-Dumūʿ*.¹⁰⁰ This similarity in physiognomy was particularly articulated in Sufi writings and in the important book *al-Kāmil* by the Abbasid philologist Muhammad b. Yazīd al-Mubarrad (d. 900), of which a manuscript from 512/1118 survives in El Escorial.¹⁰¹ The presence, and hence knowledge, of al-Mubarrad’s book in al-Andalus is further corroborated by the

⁹⁵ Jones, “He cried and made others cry”, 115.

⁹⁶ Ibn Jubayr, *Riḥlat Ibn Jubayr*, 199.

⁹⁷ See the multi-volume work of Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih al-Andalusī (860–940), *al-ʿIqd al-Farīd*.

⁹⁸ Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History*, 77–83.

⁹⁹ Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History*, 82.

¹⁰⁰ In *Baḥr al-Dumūʿ*, a saying by Jesus (addressed as “*yā rūḥ Allāh*”) is directly followed by an almost identical one by al-Ḥasan: “When Jesus [...] encountered the disciples, traces of dust on them, and light on their faces, he said: O sons of the hereafter (*al-ākhirā*), the blessed would not have been blessed without your blessing. And al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī [...] was asked: why of all people do those who forsake sleep to pray at night (*al-mutahajjidīn*) have the best faces? He said: they retreated to God so He clothed them in light from His light.” These two sayings are followed by a lengthy description of a weeping Sufi worshipper. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Baḥr al-Dumūʿ*, fol. 68.

¹⁰¹ El Escorial, MS 221.

fact that the earliest surviving commentaries in the Islamic world on *al-Kāmil* were written in al-Andalus by two Muslim scholars, Abū al-Walīd al-Waqqashī (d. 1095) of Hucas, Toledo, and Ibn as-Sīd al-Baṭalyūsī (d. 1127) of Badajoz.¹⁰²

Because it is certain that the works of al-Waqqashī were known to members of Alfonso X's scriptorium, it might be suggested that the resemblance between al-Ḥasan and Jesus was also known to them. Strikingly, the *Estoria de España* devotes a chapter on how al-Waqqashī (or Alhuacaxi), the renowned *faqīh* (alfaqui) and *qādī* (alcayde), "*aquel que fiziera los viersos en razon de la çibdat de Valencia*" (the one who made the verses with regard to the city of Valencia), presented himself at the court of el-Cid to express to him his desire to convert to Christianity.¹⁰³ Although the verses of al-Waqqashī's elegy, lamenting the painful loss of Valencia to the Christians, did not survive the Arabic sources, both their Arabic transliteration and Castilian translation are preserved in the *Estoria*.¹⁰⁴ In this conversion episode, al-Waqqashī renounces the religion of "*Mahomat, el falso engannador*" (Mohammad, the false deceiver), concluding "[e]s por esto, sennor, conuiertome a la fe de Jhesu Cristo et quiero seer Cristiano et seer en su ley" (This is why, my lord, I convert to the faith of Jesus Christ and want to be a Christian and to be in his law).¹⁰⁵

Several Muslim scholars, including Ibn al-Jawzī, recount how Christian monks either approached "a man whose appearance is that of the Messiah (*simatuhu min simat al-Masīh*)" or travelled from Syria to Baṣra with the intent of meeting al-Ḥasan due to his comparable reputation to Jesus.¹⁰⁶ Consider a more powerful story by Abū Bakr al-Dīnawarī (d. 944) of the Nestorian Catholicos of Baṣra (bishop of the Nestorian church) in which he likened al-Ḥasan to the disciples of Jesus: "The Catholicos looked at al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and prostrated before him. The Christians asked him: 'Why did you prostrate before him?' He replied: 'By God, only in him do I see the disciples (*ḥawārī*) of Jesus son of Mary'."¹⁰⁷ For our purposes, here is another element of religious entanglement that Las Huelgas provides. The author of the Capilla de Santiago's inscribed words was a figure that was emblematic of the "shared" among Islam and Christianity; not only were sayings by Christ attributed to him, but he himself physically resembled Jesus Christ.

The choice of such a poem, with subject matter so much entwined with Las Huelgas – repentance and death – could not be coincidental. In the same manner, the inscriptions that echo or complement one another in their praise, blessing and supplication to God cannot reflect a random choice. The masking of provenance, including the Christian, highlighted the potential religious overlap. The editorial effort that omitted reference to Islam

¹⁰² These two works survive in *Kitāb al-Qurṭ ‘alā al-Kāmil* by Ibn Sa‘d al-Khayr al-Balansī of Valencia (d. 1175).

¹⁰³ Menéndez Pidal (ed.), *Primera crónica general*, I, §951, 632. Al-Waqqashī, who at a later stage of his life served as the *qādī* of Valencia, is described as "*tan ladino que semeiaba cristiano*", which could be interpreted, following Julián Ribera's proposed translation, as "so versed in Romance that he [al-Waqqashī] seemed a Christian". Julián Ribera y Tarragó, *Discurso leído ante de la academia de la historia* (Madrid, 1915), 19. It was also proposed that "*ladino*" could also be understood to have meant "astute". See Norman Roth, *Jews, Visigoths, and Muslims in Medieval Spain: Cooperation and Conflict* (Leiden, 1994), 54.

¹⁰⁴ Menéndez Pidal (ed.), *Primera crónica general*, I, §909, 576–7. For the Arabic transliteration and Castilian translation of the four verses of this elegy that also survived the Arabic sources (e.g. in Ibn Bashkuwāl's *al-Sīla*), see Menéndez Pidal (ed.), *Primera crónica general*, I, §912, 582; Khyar al-Dīn al-Zirikli, *al-A‘lām* (Beirut, 2002), VIII, 84.

¹⁰⁵ Menéndez Pidal (ed.), *Primera crónica general*, I, §951, 632. The Arabic sources do not mention this conversion episode. Rather, scholars such as Ibn al-Abbār indicate al-Waqqashī's burial in the cemetery near the old mosque of Dénia. See Shakīb Arslān, *al-Ḥulal al-Sundusiyya fī al-Akḥbār wa'l-Āthār al-Andalusīyya* (Beirut, 1939), III, 254.

¹⁰⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ādāb al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī*, 24–5; Muḥammad b. Yazīd al-Mubarrad, *The Kāmil of el-Mubarrad*, (trans.) William Wright (Leipzig, 1874), 57; ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf al-Munāwī (1545–1621), *al-Kawākib al-Durriyya fī Tarājim al-Sāda al-Ṣūfiyya*, (ed.) Muḥammad al-Jādir (Beirut, 2010), I, 255.

¹⁰⁷ Abū Bakr al-Dīnawarī, *Kitāb al-Mujālasa wa-Jawāhir al-‘Ilm* (Beirut, 1998), VI, 329 (no. 2719).

and shortened and obscured the inscriptions' origins demonstrates, if anything, a deep knowledge by Alfonso X, Berenguela or the royal workshop's intellectuals of Islam and its literary sources, exegesis, polemics and perhaps even funerary practices – a knowledge that ultimately facilitated the embracing of shared images and ideas in order to unambiguously affirm the symbolism of Christian eschatology. The Arabic inscriptions reinforced the monastery as a site for daily ritual and for commemoration by its royal patrons, nuns and clergy. The decoration of Las Huelgas is not merely the product of a centuries-long shared visual culture, it is a monument to the complexity of interfaith interaction.

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