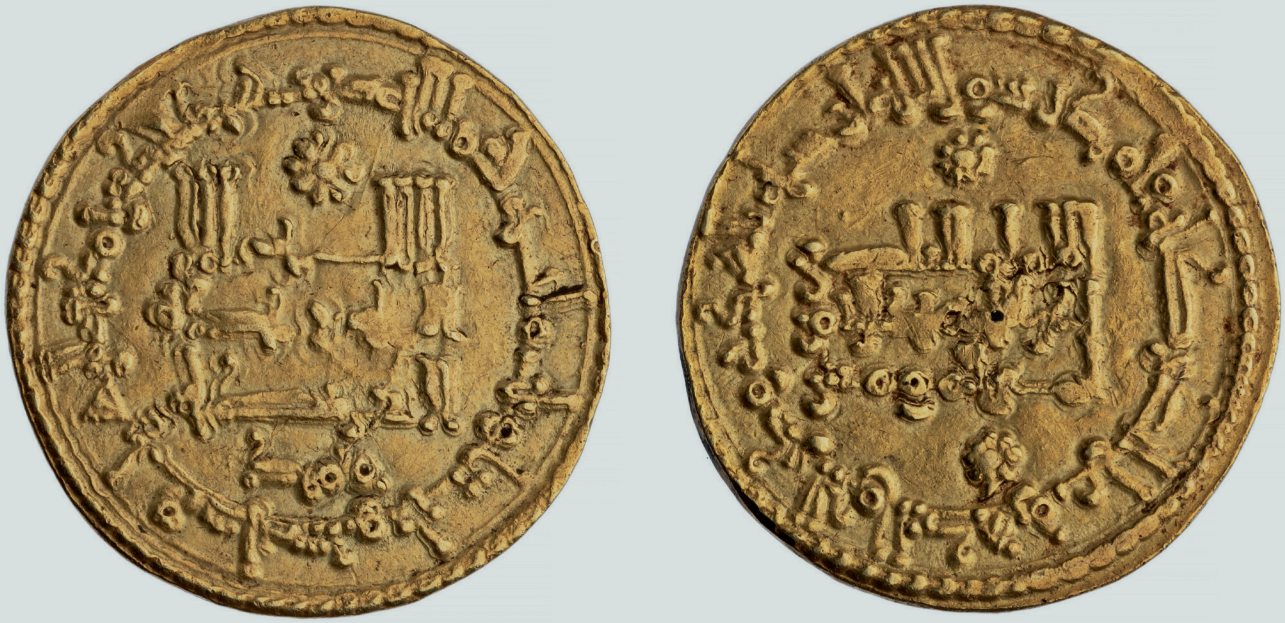
Money Is Power: A Coin Minted at Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ



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INTRODUCTION

As the age-old axiom maintains, “money is power.” As such, it is no surprise that the minting of coins played a pivotal role in projecting the authority and legitimacy of the Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus. Madīnat al-Zahrā’, the majestic palatial city commissioned by ʿAbd al-Raḥman III ca. 936 CE (324 AH) near Córdoba, stands as a testament to the opulence and grandeur that has come to define Islamic al-Andalus. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the architectural richness and cultural significance of this once-flourishing metropolis, its numismatic legacy often remains on the periphery of discussion or is relegated to specific academic spheres, even as coinage stands as one of the richest and most enduring sources of historical information available. While coins—especially Arabic coins—continue to be an excellent source of administrative documentation, they are more than silent witnesses to history. Beyond their economic and political functions, coins serve as tangible artifacts of imperial, political, and artistic expression and cultural identity.

By examining the ornament and inscription featured on the coins of Madīnat al-Zahrā’, particularly a gold issue struck under its founder, we can gain insight into the ideological underpinnings of Umayyad rule and the caliphal aspirations of ʿAbd al-Raḥman III, his predecessors, and his successors through objects that operate and reflect power in a manner different from, and perhaps more subtle than, the resplendence of the new capital.

SPANISH UMAYYAD COINAGE AND THE MINT AT MADĪNAT AL-ZAHRĀ’

The Umayyads of Syria, the forerunners of the Caliphate of Córdoba, defined the norm of Islamic coins as completely epigraphic. Following the Abbasid Revolution (746–750 CE/128–132 AH), ʿAbd al-Raḥman I (r. 756–788 CE/138–171 AH), a nobleman of the Umayyad clan, escaped to Iberia and established autonomous rule there under the banner of the Emirate of Córdoba, which would later become the Caliphate of Córdoba under the dominion of ʿAbd al-Raḥman III.[1] According to historical sources, the site on which Madīnat al-Zahrā’ would later be built began as a retreat for the caliph rather than as a capital city, with its founding and reorientation into the administrative center as part of a fully realized plan.[2] By 944–945 CE (333 AH), the caliph had already held official audiences at Madīnat al-Zahrā’, maintaining for the same use his other estates, including the old palace in Córdoba and his country estates Munyat ar-Ruṣāfa and Munyat an-Naʿūra.[3] That said, from its inauguration, both the mint (Dār as-Sikka) and state-run workshops (Dār aṣ-Ṣināʿa) relocated from Córdoba to Madīnat al-Zahrā’.[4] From this year onward, coins were produced in the name of the city, rather than just al-Andalus as before, indicating that Madīnat al-Zahrā’, not Córdoba, was now regarded as the capital of the caliphate.[5] By placing numismatic evidence in a larger historical context, we can better understand the multifarious significance of Madīnat al-Zahrā’as a center of political authority, economic wealth, and cultural interaction in the medieval Islamic world.

Considering Islamic coinage broadly, and the search for a uniquely “Islamic” style of currency, the phases of development of Islamic coins, particularly via Syrian Umayyad numismatic negotiation, can be seen in three rapid and successive stages, beginning in the seventh century CE, around a hundred years before the fall of the Umayyads to the Abbasid caliphate in 750 CE (132 AH).[6] The first phase of coinage was the conservative phase, encompassing the early years of the Arab conquest until 691 CE (71 AH). During this time, networks of monetary circulation predating the Arabs were maintained with minimal alterations.[7] This phase was brought to an end by the second *fitna*, or civil war (680–691/692 CE; 60–72 AH), with the Sufyānids defeating al-Zubayr. At this point, though, the Arab armies had yet to conquer the Iberian Peninsula. The next phase was the adaptive phase (ca. 691–696 CE/71–76 AH). Following the Marwānid caliph ʿAbd al-Malik’s victory and accession, a wide range of reforms were undertaken in short bursts of intensive experimentation.[8] It is here that we begin to clearly observe new iterations of Islamic currency that contain both scriptural and formal innovations in regard to the broader oeuvre of Islamic coinage.

The third phase—a markedly Muslim phenomenon, which would endure for five hundred years and see analogues in the establishment of the arabesque ornamental style—was the epigraphic phase, where we witness the abandonment of figural coinage in favor of coins that bore only Arabic inscriptions.[9] The coins of Islamic Spain and Madīnat al-Zahrā’ are part of this epigraphic lineage, catalyzed by the Umayyads of Syria and adopted in al-Andalus after the capture of the Iberian Peninsula in the early eighth century CE.

Between around 710 and the 720s CE (91–100s AH), the Umayyad caliphate conducted the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, leading to the downfall of the Visigothic Kingdom and the formation of the Umayyad *wilayah* (province) of al-Andalus. Coin production commenced almost immediately after the acquisition of this new territory around 711 CE (92 AH). The earliest documented coins from this region were issued in 711–712 CE (93 AH), aligning with the belated arrival of Governor Mūsá bin Nuṣayr from Ifrīqya and the accompanying Arab military *jund* (military division).[10] The Andalusian coins minted thereafter were inscribed in Latin rather than Arabic, which is somewhat unexpected, and a majority feature at the center an eight-pointed star.[11]

A notable change to this coinage came around the year 716–717 CE (98 AH), with the introduction of the term "al-Andalus" on the coins themselves. We can also see the adoption around 720–721 CE (102 AH) of the *kalima* (the first part of the *Shahada*) as standardized by ʿAbd al-Malik's reforms in 696–697 CE (77 AH). During the Emiral period (756–929 CE/138–316 AH), the inclusion of the *surat al-Ikhlāṣ* can be observed, suggesting an assertion of Muslim identity on coinage under the banner of monotheism.[12] While this epigraphy was replaced with dynastic claims in other locales as the Abbasids became a threat to Umayyad power, this model would endure for an additional two centuries in al-Andalus, with only the date being regularly updated. This continuity persisted until the conclusion of the independent emirate and the establishment of the caliphate. Ironically, while the emiral period is remembered historically as one of political instability, the coinage maintained a uniform standard.[13]

It was only with the establishment of the caliphate that changes were made in the typological form of coins, implying a profound renovation of monetary designs. Over the course of ʿAbd al-Raḥman III's reign, many changes can be noted, and each of his successors contributed to this process to the point that new formal evolutions, while sometimes subtle, would begin under each new caliph.

Particularly noteworthy are the coins minted during the period 947–952 CE (336–341 AH), which feature a rich variety of vegetal and floral ornamentation. In contrast, coins from the preceding period of 928–940 CE (316–329 AH) predominantly display simpler geometric motifs. The inaugural caliph's search for a definitive model for his coins evolved over various phases, in which one design succeeded another until a fairly specific model was settled upon. It should be clarified, though, that these modifications were subtle, as the overall design of these coins remained quite stable. The primary alterations involve the names of those overseeing the minting process and the inclusion of certain decorative elements during particular years (FIG. 2).

This period of decorative flourish also coincides nicely with the transfer of the mint from Córdoba to Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ.[14] The coins minted during the years 947–949 CE (336–337 AH) showcase the greatest diversity in decoration, with a gradual decrease in variety observed in subsequent years, particularly toward the end of the reign of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III (FIGS. 3–5). Notably, the vegetal and floral ornamentation of the coinage appears to correspond with the decorative scheme of the Hall of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III, suggesting a close association between these two phenomena despite the construction of the hall occurring later than the changes implemented in coinage (FIGS. 6, 7).[15]

A GOLD COIN MINTED UNDER ʿABD AL-RAḤMAN III

As discussed above, in the early eighth century CE, the initial Arab gold coins in Iberia, distinctive in their own right, were introduced. The design and the inscription style closely resemble those of the Arab dinars from North Africa. These Arab coins were modeled after the half-dinar produced in Damascus in 719 CE (100 AH) and bore the name of the mint in al-Andalus. No gold coins from the era of ʿAbd al-Raḥman I are known, presumably because he continued to circulate previously minted gold while establishing new silver currency (FIG. 8). Indeed, the production of gold coins in al-Andalus ceased well before his reign, with the interruption occurring in 127 AH/744–745 CE. There were no subsequent issuances of gold coins until 317 AH/929–930 CE, when ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III assumed the caliphal title, with the first newly designed Umayyad gold coins emerging around 929 CE (316 AH) (FIG. 3). From then until the conclusion of the Umayyad era in Spain, each caliph inscribed his name and titles on the reverse, along with the mint's name and the year of minting.[16]

We turn now to a dinar produced in Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ, struck in 947 CE (336 AH), the same year that the center of Córdoban currency production moved to the palatial city (FIG. 5). Made of gold, this object reflects the lineage of the Syrian Umayyads, as under their westward expansion the first Islamic gold coins were minted upon their initial

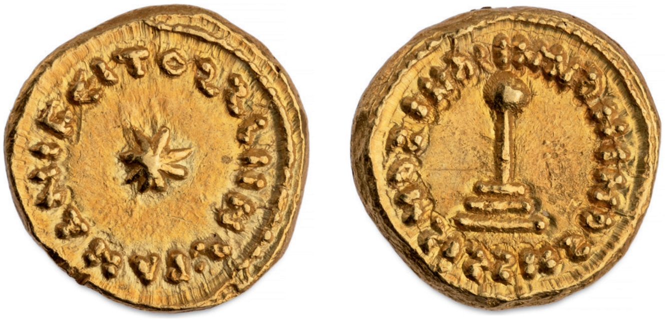


FIG. 1.
Semissis of Anonymous, minted in al-Andalus, 713–714 CE (94–95 AH). Gold. Diam. 1.2 cm. Lender: American Numismatic Society, lender no. 2018.40.9. Checklist no. 15.

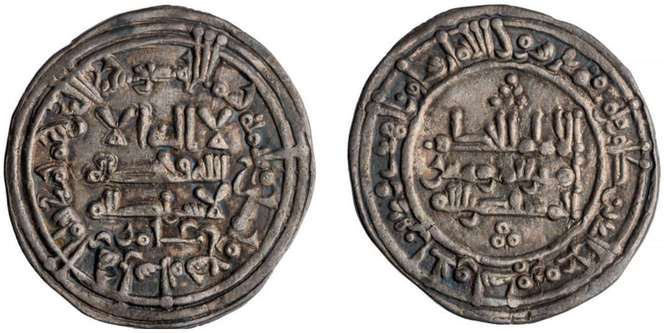
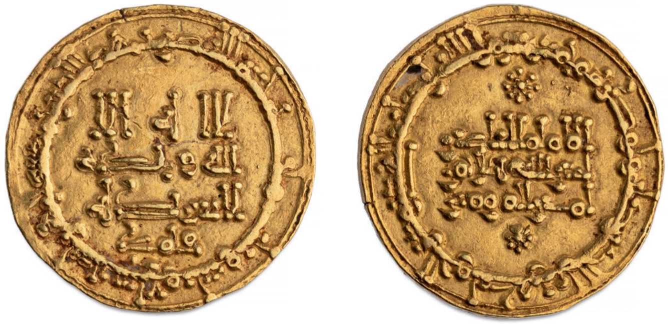


FIG. 2.
Dirham of al-Hakam II al-Mustansir billah/ʿAmir, minted at Madinat al-Zahra', 969–970 CE (358–359 AH). Silver. Diam. 2.4 cm. Lender: American Numismatic Society, lender no. 1917.216.1296. Checklist no. 22.

FIG. 3.
Dinar of ʿAbd al-Raḥman III/ Mūhammad, minted in Madinat al-Zahra, 948 CE (337 AH). Gold. Diam. 1.93 cm. Lender: American Numismatic Society, lender no. 1001.57.3383. Checklist no. 6.



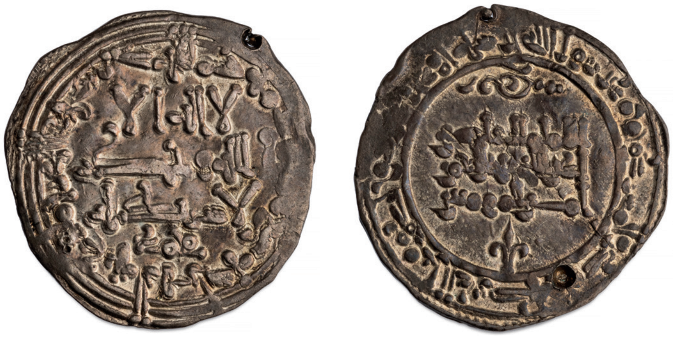
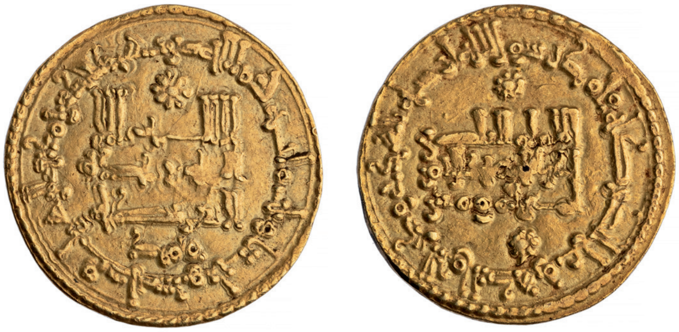


FIG. 4.
Dirham of Abdul Rahman III/ Muhammad, minted at Madinat al-Zahra, 948–949 CE (336–337 AH). Silver. Diam. 2.35 cm. Lender: American Numismatic Society, lender no. 1956.163.151. Checklist no. 26.

FIG. 5.
Dinar of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III/ Mūhammad, minted in Madīnat al-Zahrā', 947 CE (336 AH). Gold. Diam. 1.95 cm. Lender: American Numismatic Society, lender no. 1001.57.3382. Checklist no. 5.



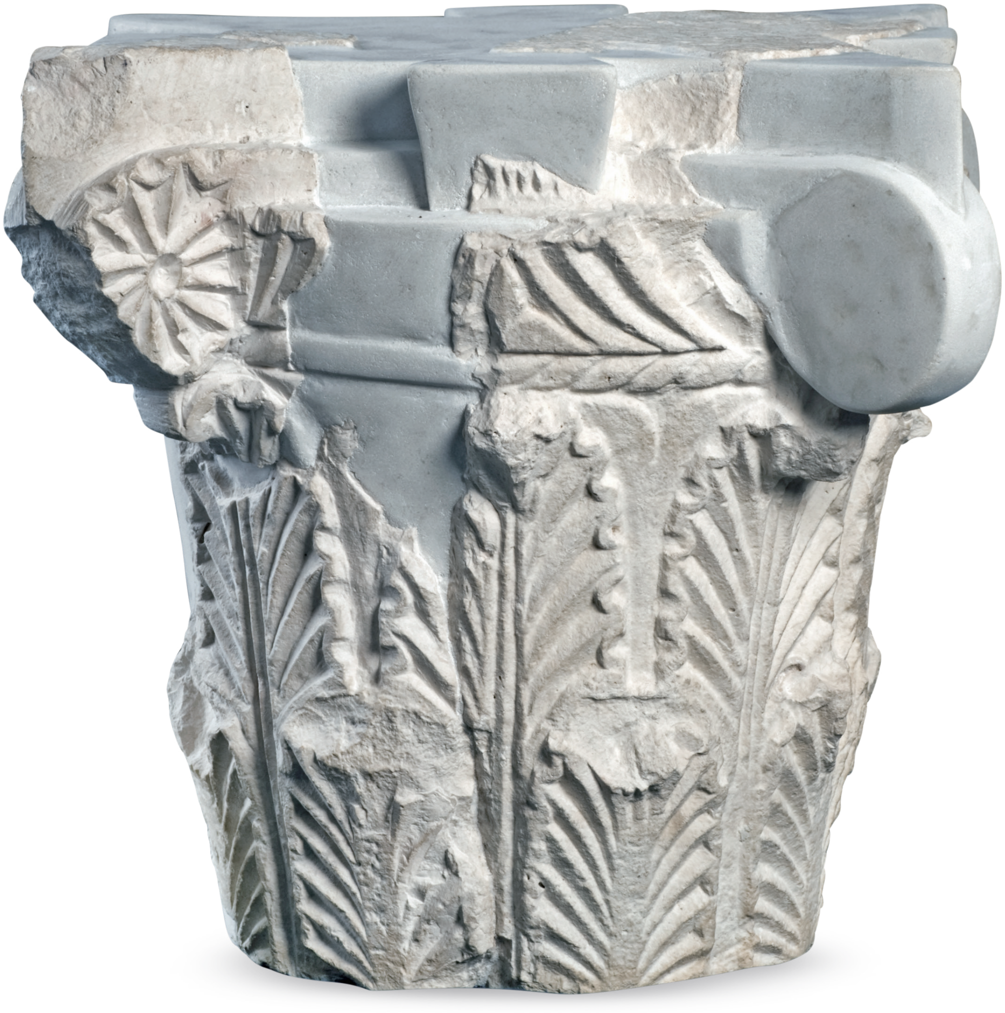


FIG. 6.
Small Capital, 10th century CE. White Limestone. H. 25.3 cm; W. 24.5 cm; D. 24.5 cm. MMaZ: 24114. Checklist no. 39.

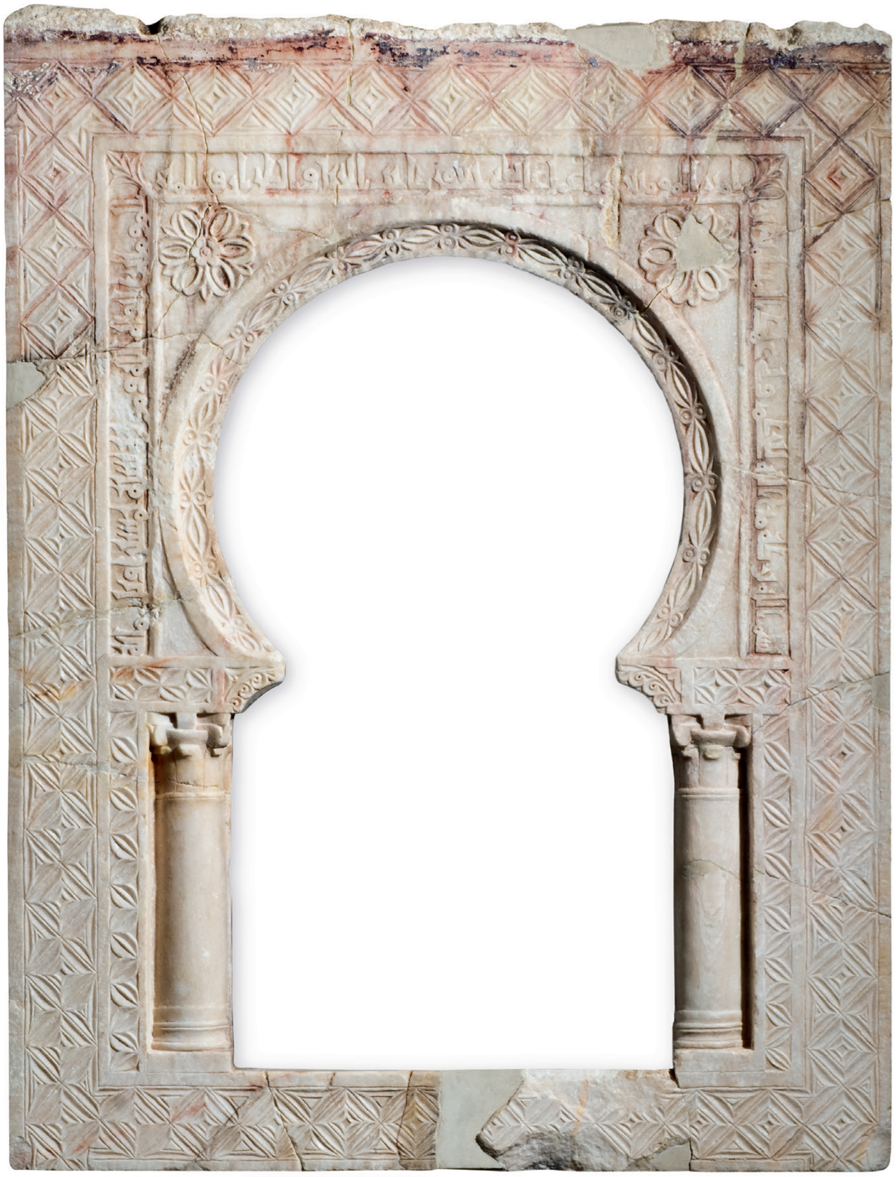
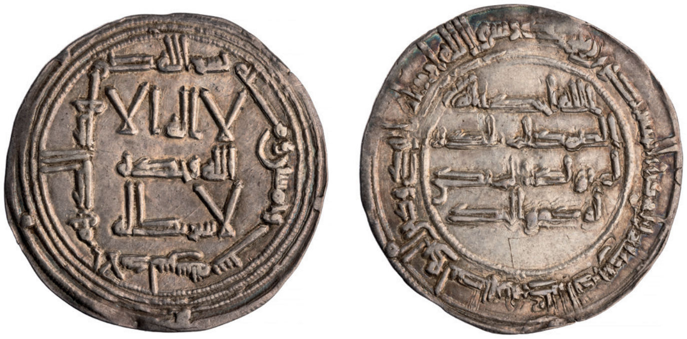


FIG. 7.
Arch with inscription, 10th century CE. Marble. H. 118 cm; W. 88 cm; D. 9 cm. Mmaz: 25428. Checklist no. 40.

FIG. 8.
Dirham of Abd al-Rahman I, minted in al-Andalus, 772–773 CE (155–156 AH). Silver. Diam. 2.9 cm. Lender: American Numismatic Society, Lender no. 1971.316.250. Checklist no. 30.



entry into al-Andalus.[17] Gold dinars might be considered elite issues of Córdoban currency, however, as the Umayyad Emirate of Córdoba created a monetary system that was based almost entirely on the silver dirham. The system, which was in place for almost 150 years, faithfully reflected the fiscal and monetary policies of the Andalusi Umayyad state while upholding the formal parameters of its eastern numismatic model.

Considering the embellishment of this coin specifically, not only might the eight-petaled flower—interpreted by Spanish numismatists as a rose—correspond to the lush decorative program of the palace as previously suggested, but it might also be assessed in terms of competitions of power. As such, it feels appropriate to postulate that motifs and inscriptions featured on currency, as an effective form of state communication, would serve as a tool to legitimize claims to the caliphate. It stands to reason that, as coins showcase the authority, wealth, and influence of rulers and states through their imagery, inscriptions, and circulation, the addition of ornament may have been more than a purely aesthetic choice. There are two elements regarding the specific ornamentation of this coin that deserve focus here: the incorporation of the rose and its representation with eight petals.

Apart from the manifest attribution of the naming of the city bestowed in honor of the wife of the caliph, "al-Zahrāʾ," which translates as "flower," allusions to roses are significant within Islamic tradition broadly, symbolizing beauty, divine presence, and spiritual wisdom.[18] In religious texts such as the Qur'an and *ḥadīth*, roses are deployed as symbols of the allure of paradise and the creative magnificence of Allah.[19]

It has also been suggested that frequent mention of vegetation, often associated with paradise, might convey a political significance regarding the organization of horticultural areas including gardens.[20] That said, there is an absence of direct evidence linking the gardens of al-Andalus to paradise, so this suggestion remains plausible yet a bit uncertain. It is true, though, that the cultivation of roses thrived across the Iberian Peninsula, making this motif one that may have also been self-referential in multiple ways. Roses, especially in poetry, do seem to be associated with the city, even after its decline in the early eleventh century CE. Ibn Zaydun, a poet who returned to Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ following its decline after his self-imposed period of exile, writes of the site as a place where "white lilies and red roses bloom."[21]

Beyond Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ, the symbolism of the rose remains an integral element in Islamic artistic expression. In various literary traditions across different languages within Islam, Muhammad's physical features and sweet fragrance have often been likened to that of a rose.[22] Indeed in the Islamic world, and especially related to the Prophet Muhammad, floral metaphors were both sustained and pervasive. As just one literary example, in his *Shamāʾil al-nabī* (Characteristics of the Prophet), renowned *ḥadīth* collector Muhammad b.ʿIsa Tirmidhi (d. 892 CE /278 AH) mentions that Muhammad's skin tone was described as rosy.[23] Additionally, and of interest to this current discussion given the popular translation of Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ as "the Radiant City," the Prophet, often through floral metaphor, was likened to radiant light, divine wisdom, and enigmatic transcendence.[24]

While not rooted in any previous scholarship, it could perhaps also be suggested that the representation of the rose motif specifically with eight petals, as on this coin, might further connect to the imperial and artistic lineage of Islamic Iberia. It is interesting to ponder whether the eight-pointed star appearing on the earliest Spanish Umayyad coinage and the eight-petaled rose might share an oblique relationship, given the importance of the octagram in Islamic ornamentation. The eight-pointed star featured on early coins from the Iberian Peninsula has been postulated by Spanish numismatist Antonio Delgado as representing Hesperia, the ancient Greek term for the region, suggesting that the ornament on Andalusian coins stands as representation beyond the decorative (FIG. 1).[25] It seems reasonable to consider that this could be echoed in the choice of administrators to include an eight-petaled rose on the coins of Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ. The incorporation of the rose, or any vegetal or floral decoration, might establish a connection between the expression of the city and the messaging of the coinage.

It is plausible, then, that the choice of rendering the rose with eight petals might also relate to the imperial religion itself. In Islam more broadly, the eight-pointed star represents both the earliest supporters of Islam and embodies qualities associated with the Prophet.[26] The eight-pointed star is visible in both Islamic architecture and ornament, but would also come to appear in the Qur'an as a page marker to help guide and facilitate recitation. In no way is this suggestion meant to claim that the eight-petaled rose is an adaptation of the seal of the Prophet or the eight-pointed star, but rather to open a conversation about the multiple possibilities that this motif might hold given its multivalent significance embodied in early Islamic arts.

Considering the epigraphic elements of Córdoban coins, moving the mint from Córdoba to Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ brought about multiple shifts in convention, including refashioning the arrangement of the legend on the reverse side of coinage. Instead of the four-line pattern used in the previous period (933–947 CE/321–336 AH), the legend was now organized into three lines, a pattern that persisted until 961 CE (350 AH) (FIG. 8).[27]

The inscription on this particular coin follows a popular and, at this point, established formula common to Islamic currency: the inclusion of the *shahada,* or profession of faith.[28] This declaration began appearing on coins during the early Islamic period, around the late seventh to early eighth centuries CE. Its inclusion reflected the integration of religious symbols and beliefs into various aspects of Islamic society, including currency.[29] The inscription also features an invocation to Allah, the mint name, and the year. On the reverse, in the center, the inscription reads "the Imam al-Nasir Li-Din Allah ʿAbd al-Raḥman, Commander of the Faithful," and in the field around it: "Muhammad is the messenger of God. He sent him with guidance and the true religion to reveal it to all religions even if the polytheists abhor it." Again, it is important to underscore that, with the establishment of the caliphate, its coinage began to incorporate the dynastic message. ʿAbd al-Raḥman III was the first ruler in al-Andalus to include his name, honorific title, and religious designation on coins. This transition can be observed in 929 CE (317 AH). Initially, he appeared simply as Amir al-Muʾminin/ʿAbd al-Raḥman, but soon after, he adopted the title Al-Imam al-Nasir li-din Allah/Amir al-Muʾminin ʿAbd al-Raḥman.[30]

The significance of ʿAbd al-Raḥman III's use of the title "imam" in al-Andalus lies in its innovative nature. It symbolized, albeit theoretically, his authority over the entire Muslim community—that is, the entirety of the Islamic world—suggesting a revival of the Umayyad caliphate lost by his predecessors.[31] After all, according to Islam, there is only one caliph, but the Umayyads of Spain were competing for power with the Egyptian Fatimids (909–1171 CE/296–566 AH) and the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258 CE/132–655 AH) in the far east—each claiming caliphal authority.[32]

CONCLUSION

The study of Spanish Umayyad coinage reveals not only the evolution of numismatic artistry but also provides insight into the broader sociopolitical and religious contexts of Islamic Spain. Through the phases of coinage production, from the conservative to the epigraphic, we witness not just economic transactions but the assertion of power and cultural identity. The coins minted at Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ, particularly during the reign of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III, exemplify this multifaceted legacy, displaying intricate designs that reflect both the cosmopolitan nature of Andalusi society and the caliphal aspirations of its rulers. Furthermore, the presence of religious inscriptions underscores the integration of Islamic faith into the fabric of everyday life, reinforcing the spiritual and temporal authority of the caliphate. Thus, the study of Spanish Umayyad coinage not only enriches our understanding of medieval Islamic art and history but also highlights the enduring significance of numismatic objects as tangible artifacts of power, culture, and faith that interact with their surroundings.

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1 As a political domain, it successively constituted a province of the Umayyad caliphate, initiated by the caliph al-Walid I (711–750); the Emirate of Córdoba (ca. 750–929); and the Caliphate of Córdoba (929–1031).

2 F. Arnold, "The Evolution of Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ as Capital City of the Umayyad Caliphate," *Madrider Mitteilungen* 60 (2019): 317.

3 Arnold, 332.

4 Arnold, 317.

5 Arnold, 330.

6 S. Heidemann, "The Evolving Representation of the Early Islamic Empire and Its Religion on Coin Imagery," in *The Qurʾān in Context*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai, and M. Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 149–50.

7 L. Treadwell, "The Formation of Religious and Caliphal Identity in the Umayyad Period: The Evidence of the Coinage," in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, ed. F. B. Flood and G. Necipoğlu (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 94.

8 Treadwell, 97–99.

9 Treadwell, 102–103.

10 Ibid.

11 T. Ibrahim and R. Pliego, “The Coins of al-Andalus: Ideological Evolution and Historical Context,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Muslim Iberia*, ed. M. Fierro (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 172.

12 Al-Ikhlāṣ, known as both the declaration of God’s Unity and al-Tawhid, constitutes the 112th chapter (sūrah) of the Qur’an. Esteemed in Muslim faith, it is deemed to possess a value equivalent to one-third of the entire Qur’an as related by Imam Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Naysaburi in his Sahih Muslim– a collection of *ḥadīth* (accounts of the Prophet Muhammad) compiled in the 11th century which is among the *Kutub al-Sittah*, or the six authentic, canonized ḥadīth collections. This equivalency appears in Sahih Muslim 811a., which reads in translation: “Is any one of you unable to recite one-third of the Qur’ān in one night? They said: How could anyone read one-third of the Qur’ān (in one night)? He said: Qul huwa Allāhu aḥad (Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ) is equivalent to one-third of the Qurʾān.” Sunnah.com. (n.d.). *The virtues of the Qurʾan* (Hadith 76). Retrieved October 14, 2024, https://sunnah.com/virtues:76

13 Ibrahim and Pliego, “Coins of al-Andalus,” 176.

14 M. Fierro, “Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ, Paradise and the Fatimids,” in *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, ed. R. Günther and T. Lawson (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1:999.

15 Fierro, 999–1000.

16 W. Ali, “Islamic Coins during the Umayyad, Abbasid, Andalusian and Fatimid Dynasties,” Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilisation, 2004, 7. https://www.muslimheritage.com/uploads/Islamic%20Coins.pdf

17 Ali, 7.

18 R. W. Khalaf, “A Challenge to Contextualize an Architectural Intervention in an Historic City: Case Study; Madinat al-Zahra (PhD diss., Carleton University, 2009), 10.

19 C. Gruber, “The Rose of the Prophet: Floral Metaphors in Late Ottoman Devotional Art,” in *Envisioning Islamic Art and Architecture* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 223.

20 D. F. Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000), 216.

21 D. F. Ruggles, “Arabic Poetry and Architectural Memory in al-Andalus,”*Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993): 172.

22 Gruber, “Rose of the Prophet,” 224.

23 H. Hosein, “A Translation of Ash-Shamaʾil of Tirmizi,” *Islamic Culture* 8 (April 1934): 283.

24 Gruber, “Rose of the Prophet,” 224.

25 A. Delgado, *Estudios de numismática arábigo-hispana: Considerada como comprobante histórico de la dominación islámica de la península* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 2001), 56.

26 The eight qualities of the Prophet Muhammad are: wisdom, justice, kindness, generosity, peace, patience, trustworthiness, and humility.

27 Fierro, “Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ,” 999.

28 The *shahada* is considered the most fundamental expression of Islamic belief and is recited by Muslims as part of their daily prayers and during important religious rituals. It serves as the foundation of Islam’s monotheistic creed and spiritual identity.

29 J. L. Bacharach, “Signs of Sovereignty: The Shahada, Qur’anic Verses, and the Coinage of ʿAbd al–Malik,” *Muqarnas* 27 (2010): 16–19.

30 Ibrahim and Pliego, “Coins of al-Andalus,” 178.

31 Ibrahim and Pliego, 179. This seemingly ambitious assertion served as a defensive and propagandistic response to the assertive policies of the Fatimid caliphs in Ifrīqya, who had previously claimed the title for themselves. Despite relocating their capital from Mahdiyya to Misr (Egypt), the Fatimids remained a potential threat to al-Andalus, as evidenced by later incursions into the Maghrib.

32 Early Muslims believed there could only be one caliph because the caliphate was seen as a unified leadership representing both temporal and spiritual authority derived from the Prophet Muhammad. This singular leadership ensured the cohesion and unity of the Muslim community (*umma*) under a central authority responsible for upholding Islamic law (*sharia*), safeguarding the community’s welfare, and defending the faith against external threats.

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