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THE MEDIEVAL MUSLIM INTERPRETATION OF A ROMAN MUNICIPIUM: THE VISION OF MĀRIDA (MÉRIDA) IN THE WORK OF AL-IDRĪSĪ AND AL-ḤIMYARĪ

Аннотация. Статья посвящена образу римского прошлого городов Испании, отразившегося в арабских сочинениях, созданных после мусульманского завоевания в VIII в. Познакомившись с римским историко-архитектурным наследием, эти писатели в отсутствие достоверных сведений стремились компенсировать недостаток информации легендами и фантазиями. В данном случае наиболее показательны сочинения объяснительного характера (*al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*). К ним относятся сочинения испано-арабского писателя аль-Идриси (XII в.) и персидского ученого аль-Химьяри (XV в.). Последний, никогда не бывавший в Испании (аль-Андалусе), живо интересовался этой землей и оставил весьма тщательное описание ее городов. Оба писателя отразили образ Мериды, которая являлась важным городом как в римское, так и в вестготское время. Странные интерпретации назначения отдельных зданий Мериды, унаследованных от римского времени (театр, амфитеатр, акведук, форум, триумфальные арки и др.), встречающиеся в сочинении аль-Химьяри, нередко заимствованы из книги аль-Идриси. Предлагаемая аль-Химьяри версия происхождения названия города («резиденция почтенного или благородного человека»: *mashkīn ash-sharīf*) имеет тот же источник. При этом игнорируются гораздо более обоснованные сведения, содержащиеся в сочинении аль-Рази (X в.). Главная причина некорректных интерпретаций — отсутствие у арабоязычных авторов представлений о муниципальной жизни римского времени.

Ключевые слова: римский город, муниципий, арабская географическая литература, Мерида, аль-Идриси, аль-Химьяри, аль-Рази, римское архитектурное наследие, аль-Андалус

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Abstract. The article analyzes the image of the Roman past of Hispanic cities, as reflected in works created after the Moslem conquest of the 8th century. Writers who wrote in Arabic had no reliable information about Roman architectural inheritance and tried to compensate for this fact by using other sources, such as prejudices, myths, legends and fantasies. Works of the descriptive genre (*al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*) demonstrate this tendency most clearly. The books written by the Arab Hispanic author al-Idrīsī (12th century) and the Persian writer al-Ḥimyarī (15th century) belong to this genre. Al-Ḥimyarī had never been to Spain (al-Andalus) but was very interested in this country and left a very detailed description of it. Both writers reflected the image of Merida in their works. This city had great importance in Roman and Visigothic times. Strange interpretations of the functions of some Roman buildings in Merida (theater, amphitheater, aqueduct, forum, triumphal arches and others) found in the work of al-Ḥimyarī were frequently taken from al-Idrīsī. The fantastic interpretation of the origin of the name of Merida ("*residence of an honorable or noble man*": *mashkīn ash-sharīf*) suggested by al-Ḥimyarī had the same source. At the same time, much better grounded information included in the work of al-Rāzī (written in the 10th century) was disregarded. The main cause of these incorrect interpretations was a lack of knowledge of Roman municipal life in the case of Arabic writers.

Keywords: Roman city, *municipium,* Arabic geographical literature, Merida, al-Idrīsī, al-Ḥimyarī, al-Rāzī, Roman architectural heritage, al-Andalus

When the Muslims arrived in the Iberian Peninsula, they found numerous remains of ancient cities, most of them with a Roman past. We see in their texts, that a large part of these remains had already been lost two or three centuries after their arrival in the former *Hispania*. They had been destroyed, reused or simply abandoned. Nevertheless, those remains attracted the attention of the newly arrived Muslims and aroused two types of literary genres — a descriptive and an explicative one, which had clear similitudes to the *periegetic* in Classical times. In that genre, geographers and intellectuals used to depict places based on local history. But frequently, the memory of the character and significance of these towns and places had been lost, so that those monuments were frequently interpreted, either from moral or scientific prejudices, or also from myth, legend, and fantasy[1]. This new descriptive literary genre is known under the generic name of *al-masãlik wa-l-mamãlik*. The name of the genre comes from the title of the book of its first author, 'Abû 'Ubayd al Bakrī (11th century), who named his work *Kitab al-masālik wa-l-mamālik* (*The Book of Roads and Kingdoms*) [Al-Bakrī 1968]. Al-Bakrī was a man of culture and was curious about many things, but he did not pretend to compete with the great scientists and intellectuals of his time, nor with those of antiquity. He was some kind of *Pausanías Periegeta*. But there is a big difference between both authors. Pausanias mostly wrote about places he visited himself and from direct testimonies, whilst al-Bakrī and other authors of this new genre in the Arabic world described many things based on word of mouth and far references.

However, the genre was so successful that even curious intellectuals practiced it. Moreover, it was not only intellectuals and cultivated people who used it, but also men with scientific training and those who tried to be accurate, such as al-Idrīsī writing about Palermo in his famous and transcendental *Kitāb nuzhāt al-mushtāq fī-khatirāq al-'āfaq* (*The Excursion of the One Who Yearns to Penetrate the Horizons*) [Al-Idrīsī 1968], in which he includes passages of a fantastic, legendary and unscientific character. There are many authors who wrote in this genre, making their own interpretation of the Classical town and the world of Hispania. We already mentioned al-Bakrī (11th century) and al-Idrīsī (12th century), but we should also cite al-Rushāṭī, al-Qalqashandi, al-Zuhrī, and the very important, but anonymous, work known as *Dhikr bilād al-Andalus* [Anonymous 1983].

Probably the most complete and systematic of all of all these works would be that of the Persian author al-Ḥimyarī (15th century), who never went to the Iberian Peninsula, but who was very interested in it and compiled notes about the ancient cities of *Hispania*-al-Andalus in his book *Kitāb al-rawd-al-mi'ṭar fī khabar al-aqṭār* (*The Book of the Fragrant Garden*) [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938]. His interpretation of Roman and ancient cities in Spain, as well as their municipal buildings, is particularly curious. In his work it becomes clear that he is was totally ignorant about the ancient Roman cities, about their administration and the function of the buildings in their social life were like: instead, he adapts to the common uses and functions of the medieval Muslim world in which he lives, and because of that offers very surprising explanations, some of them full of a fantasy from *A Thousand and one Nights*.

We have several descriptions and interpretations of Spanish cities and places in his work, all of them to the south of an imaginary line, which would unify Cadiz-Me-

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[1] On this genre, brevely [Roldán Castro 1990: 25–32; Gómez de Caso Zuriaga 2017: 768–769].

rida with Saragossa-Tarragona, passing through Toledo. Over this imaginary line, the Muslim power in the previous *Hispania* was never effective, and the Muslim claim of total control of the Iberian Peninsula an exaggeration and clear propaganda.

Al-Ḥimyarī approaches his work on ancient cities up to and south of that line. Places as important as Leon or Burgos, that had great courts in medieval Spain, were dealt with in a couple of lines because they lay above that line (for example: Pamplona, the capital of an important Spanish kingdom in medieval times, is dispatched in 80 words)[2]. He does pay special attention to Toledo[3], for various reasons. Toledo was the last capital of the previous Gothic kingdom in Spain. Sacred relics from Jerusalem were assembled there, such as the Table of Solomon. And also because the Muslims, and among them al-Idrīsī and al-Ḥimyarī, following Orosius, translated into Arabic in the 10th century, thought that al-Andalus-Spain (the Iberian Peninsula) had a triangular form: that fact gave Toledo a symbolic value, for it was the point in which the bisectrix of the triangle came together, signalling the center and heart of the Iberian Peninsula [Molina 1984: 63–92; García Moreno 2013: 240–252].

But al-Ḥimyarī pays systematic attention to other ancient cities of *Hispania,* such as Cádiz (*Qādis*), Sevilla (*Ishbilīya-Tāliqa*), Valencia (*Balansīya*), Algeciras (*al-Hadra*), Córdoba (*Qūrtuba*), Mérida (*Mārida*), Málaga (*Mālaka*), Murcia (*Mursīya*) and Zaragoza (*Dār al-Baidā*)[4].

Among those cities we will choose Mérida, as described in al-Ḥimyarī's[5] work, in order to study the Muslim vision, interpretation and understanding of a Roman colony or *municipium,* as well as its public buildings and structures. Mérida was a Roman colony founded in year 25 B. C. by M. Vipsanius Agrippa, in the name of Augustus. It was to serve as a place to retire the veterans of the campaign against the *Cantabri* and the *Asturices* in the North of Spain. The colony was enriched by the Flavians and Ulpians, and it finally became the capital of the whole *Dioecesis Hispaniarum* in the 4th century, after Diocletian's reform of the administration in the provinces. Its development as a *municipium* was significant, and it was filled with important public buildings and monuments as well as a double *forum*, a rich theatre, and *amphitheatrum*.

Merida was also important under the Gothic Kingdom of Toledo up to the 7th century, but with the Muslim invasion in the 8th century, slowly but surely, it lost its previous relevance, due especially to its prolonged resistance to the Muslim domination [Nogales Basarrate, Alvarez Martínez 2014; Cordero Ruiz 2013]. At the time of the arrival of the Muslims, Merida had conserved the constructions left by the Roman administration, its walls, public buildings, monuments, and aqueducts, although many of them had lost their previous function. We know this because archaeologists have found spaces of the city already used for other functions in Late Antiquity. The city was also enriched by the Goths. Al-Idrīsī, in the 12th century, wrote about this Roman city, but ignored the function and meaning of its buildings and monuments, as did also al-Ḥimyarī in the 15th century, who synthesized the information about the Roman city[6]. Some of his information is taken from al-Idrīsī

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[2] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: four lines in Arabic, 54: "Banbalūna", 55–56].
[3] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 122: "Ṭulaiṭula", 130–135].
[4] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: Toponymes, 301].
[5] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 166: "Mārida", 175–177 (210–213)].
[6] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938, 175–177 (210–213)].

himself, but also from al-Bakrī[7] and other descriptions of Spain-al-Andalus, but not from the *Dhikr bilād al-Andalus*[8].

For al-Ḥimyarī the etymology of the name "Mārida" came from the Latin and means "residence of an honorable or noble man": *mashkīn ash-sharīf*[9]. Al-Ḥimyarī also takes into consideration a legend[10]. According to it, Merida was the capital of a queen called Mārida, daughter of king *Harsūs* (E. Lévi-Provençal suggests identifying him with Horus[11]). The mention of Horus, following Lévi-Provençal, might be a *survival* of the importance of the city in the late-Roman world in relationship to mystery cults [Alvar 1981: 309–320]. The relationship of Merida to the mythical queen in al-Ḥimyarī is interesting, since it enables him to explain the most relevant constructions and monuments of the colony: theatre, *amphitheatrum*, *forum*, triumphal arches, etc. as parts of a medieval court, which reveals to us that the general sense and functions of the Roman municipality had been completely lost in Muslim and Arabic culture, even among cultivated people.

The notion of Merida as the capital of a fabulous kingdom might come from the notes on the city given by al-Rāzī. His original work is lost, but we know about it thanks to the anonymous *Dhikr bilād al-Andalus*, where we read that the city was founded by Octavian and progressed to becoming the capital of the whole of Spain[12]. An idea without doubt that shows the importance of Merida in the provincial system of Diocletian-Constantine in the 4th century as the capital of the *Dioecesis Hispaniarum*.

In line with the medieval Muslim idea that the capital of a kingdom needs a palace of residence for the kings (*qsār*), Al-Ḥimyarī interprets the remains of the theatre and the rich and wide *peristilum* behind it as a palace. The complex channels of the *peristilum*, originally made to serve a garden, were not easy to understand if you did not know what you are dealing with. Al-Ḥimyarī interprets them as the remains of a huge kitchen (*Dār aṭ-ṭabīkhi*)[13]. He thought that those channels served the kitchen washing, and that thanks to them the rich crockery of the palace, made of gold and silver, could be cleaned. In such a "kitchen" food would also be prepared. This fantastic explanation of an important and well know type of municipal building in the ancient Roman world is not original to al-Ḥimyarī. He takes it from al-Idrīsī[14] (Dozi-De Goeje: 82ff.), who also saw it as the kitchen of the palace. It is clear that al-Ḥimyarī takes its monumental *skene* as the façade of the palace itself.

The *cavea* of the *amphitheatrum* was taken by them to have been a huge meeting hall[15]. Al-Ḥimyarī also informs us that water would come to the palace and to the city through a huge aqueduct, which he describes carefully. He also tells us that some of the pillars are standing and some not[16]. It seems that he takes this informa-

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[7] [Al-Bakrī 1982: 34 ff.].
[8] [Anonymous 1983 (1): 52–54, (2): 67–69].
[9] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 176 (211)].
[10] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 166: "Mārita", 176 (211)].
[11] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 211].
[12] [Anonimous 1983 (1): 47, (2): 62].
[13] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 211 (commentary)].
[14] [Al-Idrīsī 1968: 182 ff.].
[15] [Al-Idrīsī 1968: 182, lines 8–11].
[16] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 166 (212)].

tion from al-Idrīsī, who also says that the number of arches is 360 (?)[17]. It probably was not true that so many arches were in as good a condition as al-Ḥimyarī describes them in the 15th century, since he takes this information from al-Idrīsī (12th century). Al-Ḥimyarī extensively describes how the arches worked, how the water comes to a water-tower, which delivers that water into the channels. We know for certain that the whole assemblage was ruined many years before, since the *Dhikr bilād al-Andalus* (12th century) informs us that many of the aqueduct´s arcades (arches) had already fallen to the ground[18] by the time of the anonymous author of the *Dhikr,* so that we may be sure that the aqueduct had been abandoned by the Muslims at the very beginning of the Middle Ages, if not in Gothic times.

Towards the South of the city, relates al-Ḥimyarī, there was a ruined tower (*manāra*). It is likely that it belonged to the constructions of the ancient port by the river, since al-Ḥimyarī says that this tower had a huge mirror and imitates the light tower of *al-Iskandariyya* built by *al-Qarnayn* (Alexander)[19]. Thus, we know that the port at the river was also ruined at that time, and probably was abandoned in Muslim times. Since al-Ḥimyarī does not know about the former existence of a port in the Roman Emerita, he writes that this construction was also a palace of queen *Mārida*, who used this tower to style her hair in front of the mirror[20].

But al-Ḥimyarī does not describe an arch (*Qûs*)[21] which is described by al-Idrīsī[22]. It appears that al-Ḥimyarī thought this a part of the aqueduct, since in al-Idrīsī's work it comes immediately after the description of the last one[23]. The arch is built out of mortar and bricks, and it stands in the middle of the town. Al-Idrīsī describes the so-called Arch of Trajan. This arch was part of the *forum* of the ancient Roman city and separated the *municipal forum* from the *provincial forum*. Neither al-Idrīsī, nor any other Muslim commentator seems to recognize the function of the arch and the Roman *fora* in Merida.

In order to complete the fantastic interpretation of the buildings of the city, either Roman or Christian, al-Ḥimyarī, following al-Idrīsī, brings to Merida from *Ilīya* (Troy) marvelous objects which came from the pillage of *Ilīya* by king *Bukht-Nassar*; *Ishbān*, a former king of al-Andalus, also took part in pillaging the ancient city. The tradition among the Muslim authors seems to mix up the taking of Troy (*Ilion*) and the two conquests of Jerusalem[24]. Rodríguez de Escabias (17th century) in the so-called *Manuscript from Copenhagen* writes that those relics came at first to Toledo, and later some of them were moved from Toledo to Merida[25]. The most wondrous object or relic taken to Mérida was the Phosphorescent Stone[26], but the most famous of them, which remained in Toledo, was the Table of King Solomon[27].

[17] [Al-Idrīsī 1968: 182].
[18] [Anonimous 1983 (1): 48].
[19] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 176 (212)]. Notice also taken from al-Idrīsī, as Lévy-Provençal also noticed: [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 212, note 2].
[20] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 176–177 (212)].
[21] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 175–177 (210–213)].
[22] [Al-Idrīsī 1968: 183].
[23] [Al-Idrīsī 1968: 183, lines 2–4].
[24] [Al-Ḥimyarī 1938: 177 (212–213)].
[25] [Crónica del Moro Rasis 1975: 303].
[26] On the Phosphorescent Stone, [Gómez de Caso Zuriaga 2018: 154–157].
[27] On it, also, [Gómez de Caso Zuriaga 2018: 146–151].

Some conclusions

It is very clear that the function and meaning of the public spaces of the Roman city, its way of life and its institutions are completely ignored by the historians and geographers of Muslim culture. It is not in their method to study the previous institutions and society of the cities that they want to describe.

Life in Muslim towns of the Middle Ages has no continuity with municipal life in late antiquity. Muslim writers are not even able to recognize the most common structures of a Roman *municipium,* such as triumphal and commemorative arches, theatres, *peristila*, *amphitheatra*, or *fora.* In the case of Merida, although al-Rāzī (10ᵗʰ century) clearly knew its origin as a Roman colony founded by Augustus, subsequent commentators, even those as important and cultivated as al-Idrīsī and al-Ḥimyarī, forgot this and mixed up the history and meaning of the city with a queen associated with a religious tradition (represented by the mention of *Horus*). This could be the result of a mix-up between the capital of Merida in Diocletian's and Constantine´s time and the high Christian patronage over the city by Saint Eulalia. While there had been a continuity between the Classical, the Christian and the Gothic worlds, there was none at all between those cultural worlds and the Muslim one.

We should also state one more conclusion. In Muslim-Arabic culture in the Middle Ages, the Historical Method, developed by the Ionian Greeks in Classical times, had been quite forgotten. Even such as an important intellectual and geographer as al-Idrīsī, or even al-Ḥimyarī, tried to reconstruct the past without contrasting different sources and without studying the institutions, history and society that they were trying to describe. It had not always been like that in Muslim culture. The notes given by al-Rāzī sometimes seem to come from very different sources, study and method. But the original work of al-Rāzī has been lost and we have only some secondary and unsure versions of it in Castillian and Portuguese languages [Catalán, Soledad de Andrés Castellanos 1975].

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