

# ACTAS DEL III CONGRESO IBERO-AFRICANO DE HISPANISTAS

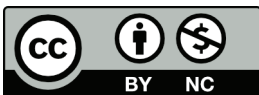
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Noureddine Achiri, Álvaro Baraibar y Felix K. E. Schmelzer (eds.), *Actas del III Congreso Ibero-Africano de Hispanistas*, Pamplona, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 2015. Colección BIADIG (Biblioteca Áurea Digital), 29 / Publicaciones Digitales del GRISO.

EDITA:

Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra.



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ISBN: 978-84-8081-451-5.

CROWNS AND PROSTRATIONS:  
DIFFERING CONCEPTIONS OF SOVEREIGNTY IN  
VISIGOTHIC AND EARLY ISLAMIC SPAIN AND THE  
DOWNFALL OF ‘ABD AL-‘AZĪZ IBN MŪSĀ IBN NUṢAYR

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Muslims expanded rapidly after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad into the eastern Mediterranean and the Iranian Plateau in the first/seventh century. The rapidity of the military conquests was accompanied by a gradual development of political ideas and concepts as well as a measured elaboration of ceremonial at court. These developments went together with a constant tension between, on the one hand, the desire of Muslim sovereigns and high-ranking officials to affirm their power and authority, and, on the other hand, the expectations of the rest of the Muslims who considered themselves as equals to them and who did not want anyone to have control over their lives.

A statement of how Muslims viewed their relationship to those in authority is found in the following two reports placed during the Muslim conquest of Syria in the 630s. It is said that Mu‘ādh ibn Jabal (d. 18/639)<sup>1</sup>, a companion of the Prophet Muḥammad, told a group of Roman commanders:

If your king is Heraclius, our king is God Almighty who has created us, and our *amīr* [commander] is a man among us, whom we confirm over us if he rules us according to the book of our faith and to the tradi-

<sup>1</sup> The first date is the Islamic year, while the second is the equivalent Gregorian year. When only one date is given, it is the Gregorian year.

tion of our prophet. [...] If he does otherwise, we remove him. If he steals, we cut his hand; if he commits adultery, we flog him; if he curses one of us, he curses him back; and if he wounds (one of us), he is punished. He does not withdraw himself from us, is not overbearing over us, does not seize our spoils which God has bestowed upon us, and he is like one of us<sup>2</sup>.

In a similar report, it is related that the Muslim commander Khālīd ibn al-Walīd (d. 21/642) said to the Roman commander Vahan: «Praise be to God [...] who made our *amīr* whom we have appointed over our affairs a man like us, so that if he claims that he is a king over us we remove him, and we do not see him as having greater merit than any Muslim, except that he may be more devout and pious before God»<sup>3</sup>. In other words, the ruler of the Muslims was seen as an individual chosen from their midst who did not have any special prerogatives and was treated like any other Muslim. Furthermore, he did not adopt any special ceremonial that would distinguish him from others or make him seem elevated above others.

This perception of how a Muslim in authority should behave remained an ideal for quite some time. When the *amīr* of Andalusia diverged from this ideal in the second decade of the eighth century by adopting courtly ceremonial that set him apart from and above the notables of the province, the notables reacted by killing him and appointing someone else in his stead.

## 2. THE FALL OF ‘ABD AL-‘AZĪZ IBN MŪSĀ IBN NUṢAYR

The Islamic conquest of the Iberian Peninsula was begun by Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād in 92/711. He was soon joined by his superior commander, Mūsā ibn Nuṣayr, and together they continued the conquest of the peninsula. Shortly thereafter, they were both recalled to Damascus. Before setting out to the eastern Mediterranean in 95/714, Mūsā appointed his son, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, as *amīr* over Andalusia. Now, the position of *amīr* of Andalusia in the first half of the eighth century was quite unstable. Between the years 711 and 756,

<sup>2</sup> Al-Azdī, *Tārīkh Futūḥ al-Shām*, p. 119; Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, vol. 1, p. 182. Partially translated in El Cheikh, 2004, pp. 36–37.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Azdī, *Tārīkh Futūḥ al-Shām*, p. 202; Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, vol. 1, p. 242; Pseudo-Wāqidī, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Shām*, vol. 2, p. 160. Partial translation in El Cheikh, 2004, p. 37.

Andalusia had twenty-one *amīrs*, only three of whom held the position for more than three years. Sixteen ruled for just one or two years<sup>4</sup>. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz himself lasted only until 716: the Muslim notables rose up against him and killed him.

The sources and modern scholars have given different explanations for the notables’ action. Some have argued that the killing of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was due to the opposition of several local notables to some of his policies or that Sulaymān ibn ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 96-99/715-717), the Muslim sovereign in Damascus, ordered the killing<sup>5</sup>. Others argue that the murder was a conspiracy by some ambitious and greedy Muslim notables who then spread rumours about the behaviour of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz to legitimize their actions, and exculpate Sulaymān from any involvement in the matter<sup>6</sup>. Some suggest that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz wanted to usurp the caliphate itself<sup>7</sup>, while others yet postulate that he was seeking to rule Andalusia as an independent monarch<sup>8</sup>. The sources, however, also narrate that the Muslim notables grew angry at ‘Abd al-‘Azīz for adopting certain Visigothic courtly customs that they found objectionable<sup>9</sup>.

In one version of the story, it is reported that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz married a Christian woman who was the daughter of Roderick, the last Visigothic king. The wife was surprised by the fact that the subjects of her new husband did not exalt him or prostrate themselves (*yasjudūna*) before him like the subjects of her father did to him. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz became perplexed, and, to please her, he ordered for an entrance to be made in a side of his palace. The entrance was made low so that people entering through it had to lower their heads, thus appearing to bow down before ‘Abd al-‘Azīz. When his wife saw this she told him: «Now your rule has been strengthened.»

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy, 1996, p. 309.

<sup>5</sup> Gendrón, 2003, pp. 242-250.

<sup>6</sup> Mu’nis, 1959, pp. 129-133 and 420-421.

<sup>7</sup> Mu’nis, 1959, p. 606. Elsewhere in the book, Mu’nis states that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was killed because he adopted Visigothic royal practices on the instigation of his wife (p. 502).

<sup>8</sup> Collins, 1994, pp. 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, 1996, p. 19. Kennedy argues that the assumption of royal pretensions by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was seen by Muslim notables as un-Islamic, and they might have feared that he was attempting to keep his position within his family. They might have also disliked his encouragement of new Muslim settlers in Andalusia who would demand a share of the wealth.

When people heard of this, rumours spread that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s wife had converted him to Christianity, and a group of angry Muslims sought him out and killed him in 97/716, taking his head to Sulaymān<sup>10</sup>.

Most other sources, however, agree that the wife of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was not the daughter of Roderick, but rather his widow. The reason given for the uprising against ‘Abd al-‘Azīz is also different. It is said that the wife of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz told him that kings without crowns did not have any sovereignty (*inna al-mulūka idhā lam yatatawwajū fa-lā mulka lahum*). She proposed to make a crown (*tājan*) for him from her own jewels and gold, but he refused saying that that was against his religion. His wife, however, told him that no one of his people would find out about it because he would only wear it in private with his family, and she persisted until he acquiesced to her request. Some time later, when he was sitting with her while wearing the crown, a wife of one of the Muslim notables entered upon them and saw the crown on his head. This woman was herself a Visigothic princess. She returned to her husband and proceeded to suggest that she make a crown for him. But the Muslim notable refused, affirming that wearing crowns was prohibited by his religion. At this point, the woman exclaimed that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was wearing one. News spread to others and eventually to the army which investigated the matter. When it was proven

<sup>10</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ Miṣr wa al-Maghrib*, pp. 284–286. For an English translation of this account, see Melville and Ubaydli, 1992, pp. 14–17 (accompanied by the Arabic text). The story can also be found in Anonymous, *Fatḥ al-Andalus*, pp. 41–43 (people seemed to be bowing [*kal-rāki’i*] while entering through the low door, and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz impressed upon his wife that they were prostrating themselves before him [*sujūdun lahu*]; she exclaimed that now he joined the rank of kings [*al-āna laḥiqta bil-mulūki*]); Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*, vol. 4, p. 81 (when people entered through the low door, they were bowing [*kal-rāki’i*], and this was acceptable to the wife who took it as equivalent to prostration [*kal-sujūdī*] and told her husband: «Now you have joined the kings»); Ibn ‘Idhārī, *Kitāb al-Bayān al-Mughrib*, vol. 2, p. 24; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab*, vol. 24, p. 55; al-Maqqarī, *Naḥḥ al-Ṭīb min Ghušn al-Andalus al-Raṭīb*, vol. 1, p. 281 (the bowing of the people [*yanḥanūna*] to ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was accepted by his wife as equivalent to the prostration given to her previous husband).

to be true, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was said to have become a Christian and was killed<sup>11</sup>.

The story of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and his wife is also preserved in non-Islamic Iberian sources. Jiménez de Rada reports that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz «was persuaded by his wife (to take) the customs of the Gothic kings and he set the crown upon himself, whence the Arabs reckoning him a Christian [...] killed (him) while in prayer»<sup>12</sup>. In a translation of the chronicle of Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Rāzī, the episodes of the crown and the prostration have been combined. In this version, the wife of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (Abelancin) criticized her husband for not wearing a crown («ninguno en España fue confirmado en rrey si ante non tobiesse corona en la cabeza»). At first, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz replied that it was not within the custom of his people to wear crowns («nos non abemos de linage nin de costumbre traer corona»), but he eventually gave in to his wife’s arguments. The wife then rebuked him because no one was paying him homage when approaching him («¡Mala costumbre ay en estos moros quando entran ante sus señores que non se homillan nin les facen reuerencia!»). At this point, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz made the low entrance for his court. He was killed when the Muslim notables heard of these matters, as they considered him to have converted to Christianity («dixeron que non auia duda que se tornara christiano»)<sup>13</sup>.

### 3. THE FALL OF ‘ABD AL-‘AZĪZ IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before discussing the episode further, let us look at a later incident involving prostration and another Andalusian notable. It is said that in 225/839-840, the Umayyad ruler of Andalusia ‘Abd al-

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous, *Ajbar machmu‘a*, pp. 20 (Arabic section) and 31-32 (Spanish section). On pp. 215-216 is given a translation of the relevant passage from Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam. This account can also be found in Ibn ‘Idhārī, *Kitāb al-Bayān al-Mughrib*, vol. 2, pp. 23-24. Ibn ‘Idhārī rejects this story and accepts that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was killed on the orders of Sulaymān. Some sources combine the crown and prostration episodes: Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*, vol. 4, p. 81; Anonymous, *Fatḥ al-Andalus*, pp. 42-43; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab*, vol. 24, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> Jiménez de Rada, «Historia Arabum», pp. 100-101 (at the end of chapter 9): «[Abdulaziz] ab uxore suasus more regum Gothorum sibi imposuit diadema, unde et Arabes christianum putantes [...], dum in oratione persisteret, occiderunt.»

<sup>13</sup> Al-Rāzī, *Crónica del moro Rasis*, pp. 360-364 (chapters 144-147).

Raḥmān II (r. 206-238/822-852) sent an embassy to Constantinople in response to an embassy which had arrived in Cordova from the emperor Theophilus (r. 829-842). One of the two Muslim envoys who arrived at the emperor's court was the poet Yaḥyā ibn al-Ḥakam, nicknamed al-Ghazāl. Upon arriving at the capital, a functionary was assigned the task of informing the envoys about court protocol. But al-Ghazāl flatly refused to prostrate himself before the emperor, arguing that a true Muslim would not humiliate himself in such a way except for his Creator. A stratagem was then concocted by court officials: the entrance through which the Muslims had to pass in order to gain admission to the imperial audience hall was walled up except for a part at its bottom. To pass through the open gap, a person had to lower himself and stoop through in a position that could be considered equivalent to prostration. But the trick did not work, and al-Ghazāl outsmarted all. For when he reached the door of the audience hall, he turned around, stooped, and walked backwards, making the lower part of his body face the seated emperor. Once through, al-Ghazāl stood up, turned abruptly, and greeted the emperor with a nod of the head<sup>14</sup>.

A number of scholars who have studied this account have come to the conclusion that it is fictitious<sup>15</sup>. An almost identical description is given of the embassy of the Muslim notable Ibn al-Bāqillānī, who was sent from Baghdad to Constantinople in 370/980-981<sup>16</sup>. A similar anecdote is also told of a companion of the Prophet Muḥammad who entered the court of the Abyssinian Negus backwards through a low entrance<sup>17</sup>. The anecdote of al-Ghazāl's feat is thus considered a literary motif used by Muslim authors for propaganda. Could this mean that the crowning and prostration episodes involving 'Abd al-'Azīz are also literary fictions? First, we should ask: Since 'Abd al-'Azīz was supposed to have followed Visigothic practices, was crowning and prostration part of the ceremonial associated with the court of the Visigothic kings?

According to Isidore of Seville (d. 636) in his *Historia Gothorum*, the Visigoth Leovigild (r. 568-586) was the «first to sit openly in

<sup>14</sup> Lévi-Provençal, 1937, pp. 10-11 [= Lévi-Provençal, 1948, p. 92]. For a summary of the report in English, see El Cheikh, 2004, pp. 159-160.

<sup>15</sup> Codoñer, 2001, pp. 385-388.

<sup>16</sup> Beihammer, 2004, p. 177.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Ṭūlūn, *I'lām al-Sā'ilīn 'an Kutub Sayyid al-Mursalīn*, p. 49.



royal garb upon a throne, [when] before... both costume and seat were the same for people and king alike». It is surmised that this «probably involved wearing a crown; as votive crowns of Visigothic kings survive»<sup>18</sup>. Additionally, it is reported that a rebel against King Wamba (r. 672–680) crowned himself with a votive crown<sup>19</sup>. All this would give the strong impression that Visigothic kings did wear some form of crown.

What about prostration? The *Historia Wambae regis* provides a number of examples of obeisance: Wamba had to kneel before a bishop in order to be anointed as king; the notables flung themselves at the feet of Wamba pressing him to accept his election as their king; those who rebelled against Wamba crouched in the dust before him beseeching his mercy; and, while Wamba was sitting on his throne, one of the rebels offered his neck to his feet<sup>20</sup>. It seems, therefore, that Visigothic kings wore crowns, while prostration, or some form of obeisance, to high-ranking individuals was customary in their realm.

What now of crowning and prostration at the courts of Muslim rulers? It is not clear whether the Umayyads, the ruling Islamic dynasty up to 750, had any ceremonial attire, but they do not seem to have worn a crown. They did, however, wear turbans<sup>21</sup>. This was a notion rooted in pre-Islamic Arabian concepts of authority and is encapsulated in the statement attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad: «The turbans are the crowns of the Arabians»<sup>22</sup>. In this respect, wearing crowns seems to have been deemed an un-Islamic practice in this period and something that was only associated with non-Muslim rulers.

As for prostration, both prostration (*sujūd*) and bowing (*rukūʿ*) are prescribed elements in the daily ritual prayer of Muslims. Additionally, prostration is required when listening to the recitation of certain Qurʾānic verses and Muslims can also fall prostrate thanking God for some blessing<sup>23</sup>. However, all these are examples of religious prostration where the prostration is performed to praise God.

<sup>18</sup> Wormald, 2005, p. 600.

<sup>19</sup> Julian of Toledo, *The Story of Wamba*, p. 215.

<sup>20</sup> Julian of Toledo, *The Story of Wamba*, pp. 183, 180, 209, 213, and 215.

<sup>21</sup> Grabar, 1977, pp. 54–55.

<sup>22</sup> Kister, 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Tottoli, 2001.

Muslims, on the other hand, were completely opposed to secular prostration. It is reported in Islamic sources that the Prophet Muḥammad forbade his followers from falling down prostrate before other men. Other reports from the early Islamic period describe the Muslims' abhorrence of secular prostration. Secular prostration was connected to Jewish and especially Christian practice, which involved prostration to kings, bishops, the cross, the altar, and images. These practices were considered idolatrous and unacceptable by Muslims<sup>24</sup>.

There is evidence of Muslims' avoidance of secular prostration in non-Islamic sources as well. According to Chinese sources, a Muslim delegation at the T'ang court in 713 refused to bow down to the Emperor Hsüan-tsung (r. 712-756). Chinese court officials were about to punish them, because foreign representatives were expected to kowtow, or prostrate themselves, before the emperor. The Grand Secretary, however, intervened on their behalf and they were pardoned. When the Muslim envoys returned to the court again, they apologized and said that their people only bow to God and do not bow down before their own kings. This time, though, the Chinese officials rebuked them, and they eventually bowed down<sup>25</sup>.

Christian authors were aware of Muslims' criticisms of secular prostration and defended Christian practices. John of Damascus (d. 749) made a distinction between religious prostration due to God and secular prostration which can be addressed to individuals, and declared the latter licit and permissible<sup>26</sup>.

In light of this, it is more readily understood why the Muslim notables accused 'Abd al-'Azīz of having become a Christian. Their objections to him wearing a crown and to Muslims bowing down to him were in line with the general Muslim attitude of the time towards these practices.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In later time periods, ceremonial at Islamic courts became more elaborate as did the symbols and insignia of power. At the Fāṭimid

<sup>24</sup> Tottoli, 1999, pp. 100-103.

<sup>25</sup> Leslie, 1986, p. 24; Behbehani, 1989, pp. 95-96.

<sup>26</sup> Tottoli, 1999, p. 107.

court in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, for example, court protocol included prostration and kissing the ground before the ruler, though these were customs that had to be defended by supporters of the dynasty<sup>27</sup>. The Fāṭimid sovereigns are also said by some sources to have worn a crown (*tāf*), but this seems to have been more of a turban (*imāma*) wound in a particular way<sup>28</sup>. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, however, these practices had not been adopted by Muslims yet. Thus, the account of what happened to ‘Abd al-‘Azīz remains plausible. At least, the Muslim historians and chroniclers who included the account in their works believed it to be realistic and deemed the response of the notables to be appropriate with regards to the actions attributed to ‘Abd al-‘Azīz.

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<sup>27</sup> Sanders, 1994, pp. 14, 17–18, and 142–143.

<sup>28</sup> Sanders, 1994, p. 25.

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