

A COMPANION TO GLOBAL QUEENSHIP

Edited by
**ELENA
WOODACRE**



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AL-DALFA' AND THE POLITICAL ROLE OF THE UMM AL-WALAD IN THE LATE Umayyad Caliphate of al-Andalus

ANA MIRANDA

Introduction

IN EARLY ELEVENTH-CENTURY al-Andalus, al-Dalfa', one of the concubines of the *hajib*¹ and de facto ruler Ibn Abi 'Amir, known as al-Mansur, was involved in the events that led to the civil war—*fitna*—that preceded the downfall of the Umayyad Caliphate in Iberia. As a slave, al-Dalfa' had borne her master a child, 'Abd al-Malik, granting her the status of *umm al-walad*—literally, the “mother of a child”—which legally improved her condition from the common form of concubinage. In 1002 al-Mansur died and 'Abd al-Malik, who would be later known as al-Muzaffar, followed his father's footsteps in the *hijaba*, whereas Caliph Hisham II was left with a merely symbolic role as figurehead of the caliphate. During 'Abd al-Malik's rule al-Dalfa' influenced some of his decisions, and after his death, in controversial circumstances, she plotted to overthrow and kill 'Abd al-Rahman Sanchuelo, al-Muzaffar's half-brother, who had taken 'Abd al-Malik's position, as Sanchuelo was suspected of having orchestrated 'Abd al-Malik's death.²

Thus, al-Dalfa' endorsed the opponents of the Amirids in their endeavours to eradicate Sanchuelo, removing Hisham II, who had proved to be unfit for rule, and reinstalling a

strong caliphate, according to the model of 'Abd al-Rahman [III] al-Nasir, the founder of the Umayyad Caliphate of al-Andalus.³ The uprising was headed by a descendant of al-Nasir, Muhammad b. Hisham, whose father had been put to death a few years beforehand by al-Muzaffar, under al-Dalfa's counsel. After a four-month period in office Sanchuelo was executed and Hisham II was dethroned. Al-Dalfa' had attained her goal. However, the collapse of the Amirid regime and the absence of a strong and consensual leadership led to civil war and, ultimately, to the end of the Umayyad Caliphate, in 1031.

Considering that female interference in public affairs was discouraged in al-Andalus, as well as throughout the Muslim world, al-Dalfa's intervention looks surprising. A *hadith* spread by Aisha's adversaries in Islam's early days states: “A population which had put a woman in charge of its affairs shall not prosper.”⁴ Such distancing between women and politics rested in the concept that the domestic world was assigned to women, while men were in charge of the public dominion.⁵ A woman's life outdoors was framed by a set of rules, such as the prohibition of travelling alone or in the company of anyone other than her husband or a relative she was not permitted to marry.⁶

¹ *Hajib* refers to the person responsible for guarding access to the ruler. However, he often appears as a superintendent of the palace and a participant in government tasks. In al-Andalus, the *hajib* assisted the prince in the tasks of administration and government and controlled the royal residence, the chancery and finance. During the reign of 'Abd al-Rahman III the *hijaba* remained vacant and was filled again by his son al-Hakam II. Sourdel, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. “Hadjib: i – the Caliphate; ii – Spain.”

² Considering the aforementioned particularities of the *hijaba*, the term “queen mother” is used in this chapter only as an analogy with the royal context, and so it will appear within quotation marks.

³ The supporters of the late founder of the caliphate of al-Andalus, 'Abd al-Rahman [III] al-Nasir, and his descendants were called “Nasrids”. They are not to be confused with the last major Muslim dynasty in the Iberian Peninsula, which ruled in Granada from the thirteenth century to the fifteenth.

⁴ Fierro Bello, “La mujer y el trabajo,” 44. A *hadith* is a traditional saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad; Aisha was one of his wives.

⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶ Ibid., 37.

Despite the restrictions, it was possible for a woman to have a public life, especially when unusual situations allowed new precedents to take place. Such was the case with Sitt al-Mulk, daughter of the Fatimid caliph al-'Aziz and half-sister of al-Hakim. Al-Hakim's unexpected death in 1021 cleared the path for Sitt's regency. For two years she held power while her nephew was too young to rule, though she was never installed as caliph. During her regency she counted on the help of servants and eunuchs, starting with the slave woman Tarrakub, "who became her confidante and served her as a spy."⁷ In the competitive milieu of the palace, having a network of intimate and loyal relationships was one of the highest assets a woman could hold—something that al-Dalfa' was aware of too, as will be explained below.

Bearing in mind that most Andalusí sources were produced under the rulers' patronage, such sentiments regarding feminine engagement in politics explain why women are scarcely found in the political arena. Nonetheless, although authors inherited a "hierarchic concept of society, presided by men, in which women, like children and slaves, were considered fragile beings in need of protection and guidance," at the same time they did not perform what Manuela Marín refers to as a "systematic occultation of their presence in society."⁸ In fact Marín argues that "[t]he real veil, physical, which covered many Andalusí women—mostly, the ones from a good family—does not have a metaphorical equivalent in historiography."⁹ Chronicles, for example, allude to female characters in their connection to the men—mostly rulers and high dignitaries—who they are close to, as mothers, wives or daughters.¹⁰

Women at court "were expected to limit themselves to a decorative or strategic role within the entourage of the king or other important person in question, officially accompanying him in wars or celebrations, and doing so in an ostentatious way."¹¹ They were not supposed to meddle in any political activity. Those who dared to do so "were invariably portrayed as ambitious schemers, who used their feminine wiles to feather their own nests or those of their kin."¹² The actions of al-Dalfa' exceeded this expectation of passiveness, and the

fact that she was involved in politics during the inception of a turbulent period in Andalusí history raises some questions regarding her degree of responsibility in it.

Therefore, this chapter focuses on the importance of al-Dalfa' during the late period of the Umayyad Caliphate in al-Andalus. We will try to trace her steps from when she was a common Amirid slave in the 970s until she retired from court life, in 1009. The topic question is how her personal agenda intersected with the interests of those who challenged the Amirid regime and longed for the reinstatement of a solid caliphate. Such a theme draws us also to the role of the harem¹³—as the main space in which al-Dalfa' moved—in the outbreak of the *fitna*.

The Slave Woman

Little is known regarding al-Dalfa's background and her life prior to motherhood. Her name, meaning something along the lines of "the one who has a small and thin nose," reveals that she might have been a slave of European origin, considering that, in the opinion of María Rubiera Mata, such a depiction is not consistent with the countenance of an Arab or Berber woman.¹⁴ Like any other slave of Christian origin, she may have been captured in one of the frequent raids perpetrated by the Muslim armies into Christian lands, with the purpose of burning crops, destroying villages, and imprisoning its population. The taking of female prisoners was part of a strategy that comprised "the sexual use of Christian female captives or even freeborn wives" and intended "to destroy solidarity among Christian families and communities, inflicting shame not only on the women themselves, but also on their male coreligionists ... who had failed to protect them."¹⁵

In Christian Iberia, "[i]naccessibility ... was the foundation upon which a woman's honour and reputation rested," as stated by Jarbel Rodríguez.¹⁶ Yet this "inaccessible condition" was ultimately lost, whether these women's destiny was enslavement or a legitimate marriage, bargained away under

⁷ Halm, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Sitt al-Mulk."

⁸ Marín, *Vidas de mujeres andalusíes*, 14.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Viguera Molins, "Asluhu li 'l-Ma'uli," 716–17.

¹¹ Ibid., 718.

¹² Barton, *Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines*, 37.

¹³ The word "harem" refers "to those parts of a house to which access is forbidden, and hence more particularly to the women's quarters," more common among the wealthier classes. There, they "maintained elaborate gynaecea, in which, besides their legal quota of wives, there were establishments of concubines, attendants, eunuchs and guards." *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Harīm."

¹⁴ Rubiera Mata, "El príncipe hastiado," 74.

¹⁵ Barton, *Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines*, 40.

¹⁶ Rodríguez, *Captives and Their Saviors*, 50.

the scope of a peace treaty between Muslim and Christian parties, as in the case of the matrimonies of Ibn Abi 'Amir with 'Abda, daughter of Sancho Garcés II of Navarre, and with Teresa, daughter of Bermudo II of Galicia and León.¹⁷ Besides inflicting trauma on the Christian societies, the systematic capture of females had the purpose of reducing their reproductive capacity. Their displacement towards al-Andalus "was seemingly designed to encourage a process of assimilation which would hinder procreation among the Christians of the North and ensure a shift in cultural and ethnic loyalties in the future."¹⁸

As al-Dalfa' arrived in al-Andalus, her first stop might have been a customs house, "where the local ruler received his share of the booty, human and otherwise, taken during the raids."¹⁹ She might have been carried to some nobleman's house or, perhaps, sold at a slave market. Sources attest that women of uncommon beauty and skills could be found there.²⁰ Afterwards, she may have been trained in a number of arts and skills, making her more desirable to the aristocrats and royalty. The refined education these slaves received gave them access to "a world of male sociability," encompassing banquets and literary sessions, which were prohibited to the legitimate wives.²¹ Such social gatherings served as pretexts for the caliph and important noblemen to display the beautiful and skilled women of their entourage. Therefore, it is assumed that al-Dalfa' was a woman with enough physical and intellectual attributes to have been included in this "elite" and to have entered the service of a nobleman with such a promising career as Ibn Abi 'Amir.

There is no evidence regarding the moment she was introduced to his harem, but, considering that according to al-Nuwayri, she gave birth to 'Abd al-Malik in 973,²² she

probably had been living there for nearly a year, long before Ibn Abi 'Amir's three weddings.²³ Islam granted men the right to have up to four wives and an indefinite number of concubines. In his *Book on the Etiquette of Marriage*, al-Ghazali declares that "[h]aving numerous wives is not [indicative of love] of the world because 'Ali was the most ascetic of the companions of the Prophet and yet he had four wives and seventeen concubines."²⁴ This number is close to the one estimated for the Umayyad caliphs of al-Andalus, which according to Marín, oscillated between ten and twenty concubines for each prince.²⁵

As a *jariya* (slave), al-Dalfa' witnessed her master's early ascension in court, particularly from the moment he was chosen by Subh, al-Hakam's concubine, to manage her belongings, a move that paved the way for his promotion to treasurer and curator of successions, to judge of Seville and Niebla, and to military chief, a field in which he achieved the greatest honours and the title of "al-Mansur" ("the Victorious").²⁶ Given that Ibn Abi 'Amir al-Mansur began systematically leading military campaigns in Iberia from 977 onwards,²⁷ al-Dalfa' might have been acquired by him or offered to him as compensation for his military services, like the mother of his firstborn son, 'Abd Allah.²⁸

From the moment al-Dalfa' gave a child to her master, al-Mansur,²⁹ her life changed in many aspects, as motherhood elevated her to the category of *umm al-walad*. An Arab proverb affirming that "the slave who is pregnant has found her way"³⁰ synthesizes the main idea behind this concept. *Umm al-walad* "denotes in classical Islamic law a slave-girl who has borne her master a child," implying that she became free on the death of her master.³¹ This legal precept is rooted in the seventh century, in a tradition attributed to Caliph

17 Dozy, *Recherches sur l'histoire et la littérature de l'Espagne*, vol. 1, 184–92. 'Abd al-Rahman, the son of 'Abda and al-Mansur, was nicknamed Sanchuelo—Sanjul—as a reference to his grandfather, Sancho Garcés II. Ibn Idhari, *La caída del califato de Córdoba*, 43n221.

18 Barton, *Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines*, 40–41.

19 Rodríguez, *Captives and Their Saviors*, 40.

20 Such is the case with the report known as *La venta de la esclava en el Mercado* (*The Selling of the Slave at the Market*) authored by the thirteenth-century poet Abu al-Baqa' of Ronda, in which he describes profusely "a girl with the colour of gold," who was for sale, with whom he fell in love at first sight. Unfortunately, she was too expensive for his purse. Granja Santamaría, *Estudios de historia de Al-Andalus*, 57–58.

21 Marín, *Vidas de mujeres andalusíes*, 116; Guichard, *Structures sociales*, 78–79.

22 Al-Nuwayri, *Historia de los Musulmanes*, 62.

23 Besides the aforementioned 'Abda and Teresa, al-Mansur had first married Asma', the daughter of a nobleman, Ghalib, with whom he had established a political agreement by the time of his second campaign, in 977. Ibn Idhari, *Al-Bayan al-Mugrib*, 442–43.

24 Al-Ghazali, *Book on the Etiquette of Marriage*, 51.

25 Marín, "Las mujeres de las clases sociales superiores", 120.

26 Ibn Idhari, *Al-Bayan al-Mugrib*, 415–16.

27 Ibid., 439.

28 Ibid., 474.

29 From now on, only the title "al-Mansur" will be used to refer to Ibn Abi 'Amir.

30 Lachiri, "Andalusi Proverbs on Women," 42.

31 Schacht, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s. v. "Umm al-Walad."

Umar: "A woman, who had been sold in the pre-Islamic period by her uncle as a slave, had borne her master a son, and now, on the death of her master, was to be sold again to pay his debts, lamented her sad lot to the Prophet; the latter ordered the administrator of the estate to manumit the woman and gave him a slave in compensation."³² Her child and all children to whom she gave birth after becoming pregnant by her master were free, as well.³³ In the event of having an abortion, the slave woman could also be considered *umm al-walad*.³⁴

Cristina de la Puente alerts us to the similarities between the legal status of the "slave-mother" and that of a wife. For example, her master had to pay compensation in case she wounded anyone, as he would do for his legitimate wife.³⁵ Regarding children, they possessed "absolutely the same rights [as] the children of a free woman and, consequently, while protecting the slave-mother, it is also protected the honour of one's descendants."³⁶ This status put the woman in an intermediate stage between that of a slave and that of a free woman until her master's death. For example, although she was not free, she could not be sold nor given as a guarantee by her master, neither to his creditors. Also, her master was not allowed to rent her services to others without her consent, as long as he lived, which represented an improvement in her general situation.³⁷

Some studies address al-Dalfa' as the "wife" or "widow"³⁸ of al-Mansur. However, there is no evidence in the sources that such a wedding actually had occurred, or even that she had been manumitted during al-Mansur's lifetime. Al-Ghazali

warns that the woman cannot be "totally or partially a slave of the marrier,"³⁹ meaning that the slave's previous emancipation was mandatory. The fact that al-Dalfa' is portrayed in sources as "the mother of the *hajib* 'Abd al-Malik" and "concubine"⁴⁰ suggests that she remained *umm al-walad*, that neither manumission nor marriage were undertaken and that only after al-Mansur's death did she become, as the law predetermined, a free woman.

The Spectatress

Caliph al-Hakam II died in 366/976, and Hisham, regardless of being roughly eleven years old, succeeded him in the caliphate.⁴¹ Possibly aware of the perils surrounding her inexperienced son, Subh looked around for allies, and started by promoting the vizier al-Mushafi to *hajib*.⁴² Over the next few years al-Mansur devoted himself to her service and increased his influence, which raised suspicions regarding the nature of their relationship.⁴³ Al-Mansur acted as the single linkage between Subh and the viziers,⁴⁴ so it did not take long for Subh to become ill-affected towards al-Mushafi and to replace him with her new Amirid protégé.⁴⁵

The new chamberlain began by building a citadel for himself on the outskirts of Cordoba, in which he settled viziers, secretaries, servants, and his personal guard, while imprisoning the young caliph in the citadel of Cordoba, where he was permanently escorted by doormen, guards, and spies.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, he undermined caliphal prerogatives, such as by using his own seal on official documents instead of the caliph's seal and by the transfer of the royal treasure to al-Zahira,⁴⁷ leaving Hisham "nothing else rather than the nominal power, the invocation in the mosques and his name

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 A late *fatwa* from Granada states: "A slave woman who affirms that she had an abortion after her master had made her pregnant, argues that her master wants to sell her. He claims that he could not have impregnated her because he always avoided ejaculating inside her. Two midwives testified that this slave woman aborted at his master's house, and a third one that she saw the foetus without having assisted at the abortion." The response to this petition was favourable to her: "She will be considered as slave-mother (*umm al-walad*)."³⁵ Al-Wansarisi, *Histoire et société en Occident musulman*, 424.

35 Puente, "Mujeres cautivas en 'la tierra del Islam,'" 26.

36 Ibid., 29.

37 Santillana, *Istituzioni di diritto musulmano malichita*, 156–57.

38 Rubiera Mata, "El príncipe hastiado," 74; Marín, "Las mujeres de las clases sociales superiores," 117.

39 Al-Ghazali, *Book on the Etiquette of Marriage*, 81.

40 Ibn Idhari, *La caída del califato de Córdoba*, 35, 38, 57, 65; Ibn al-Khatib, *Kitab A'mal al-'Imam*, 229 (with a brief acknowledgment to André Oliveira Leitão, MA, for helping me with the German translation).

41 Ibn Idhari, *Al-Bayan al-Mugrib*, 418–19.

42 *Una descripción anónima de al-Andalus*, 185.

43 Ibn Idhari, *Al-Bayan al-Mugrib*, 417.

44 *Una descripción anónima de al-Andalus*, 189.

45 Ibid., 185.

46 Ibid., 192.

47 Ibid., 195.

inscribed in the products of *tiraz*⁴⁸ and in coins, for al-Mansur was the real owner of the kingdom.”⁴⁹

Moreover, al-Mansur continued with imports of Slavs⁵⁰ from Christian Europe to serve either as soldiers or as bureaucrats, and he brought from North Africa whole tribes of Berbers to serve in his armies. These contingents were tied to him by bonds of personal clientele, “while their loyalty to the caliph and the caliphal institution, such as it was, received expression in a general loyalty to the regime headed by al-Mansur as the caliph’s representative.”⁵¹ His successful military policy, with more than fifty raids undertaken into Christian territory⁵², provided loot twice a year and maintained a cohesive and focused army, under his governance.

In the meanwhile, in the newly built palace of al-Zahira, al-Dalfa’ was raising her son, surrounded by a multitude of people. Considering that, on the death of Caliph al-Nasir, more than 6,000 women, including relatives, concubines, and servants, lived in the aulic compound of Madinat al-Zahra and that, by the end of the tenth century, al-Zahira housed most of the government staff, besides the Amirid family itself, the number of women in the Amirid household may have been, at least, quite similar. Side by side with wives there were the *jawari*, the slave women, most of them *khadim*, domestic servants. According to Ibn Idhari, there were 3,750 slave eunuchs serving in Madinat al-Zahra, in order to guard it and coordinate logistics.⁵³ It is likely that numbers would not have

differed much at al-Zahira. In fact, considering the systematic imports of Slavs and the capture of Christians undertaken by al-Mansur, such numbers may have even increased. Therefore, a vast number of subordinates, who were in charge of vestures or food, were supervised by other slaves, men or women, who answered to the *fata*⁵⁴ al-Mayurqi, who managed al-Mansur’s household and harem.⁵⁵ The functioning of the palace implied that a large number of people commuted between it and the city—a growing tendency as the palatine structure became heavier as a result of the Amirid policy of centralization.

However, despite being surrounded by female competition, al-Dalfa’ and her son benefited from advantageous circumstances. Even though al-Mansur already had a son, ‘Abd Allah, born from a slave woman, he was not certain regarding his paternity, as the *istibra*’,⁵⁶ or period of abstinence that followed the transfer of a female slave, had not been observed. In fact, al-Mansur had always shown more affection towards ‘Abd al-Malik than towards his firstborn, which made ‘Abd Allah a resentful young man and led him to rebel by joining some of his father’s enemies; al-Mansur could not let this attitude go unpunished, and thus he ordered his killing.⁵⁷ Whether al-Mansur’s doubts regarding his parenthood were reasonable or just an excuse in order to absolve him from public judgement, it is impossible to know. Either way, ‘Abd Allah’s demise cleared the path for ‘Abd al-Malik’s ascent and, subsequently, favoured al-Dalfa’s position.

Regardless of al-Mansur’s fondness towards ‘Abd al-Malik, there might have been a more pragmatic reason for his choice: if Sanchuelo, who had royal lineage from the side of his mother, ‘Abda,⁵⁸ fulfilled the *hijaba*, the Navarrese could potentially gain influence on him due to his blood ties to their dynasty. Thus, the handing over of public affairs to the son of

48 *Tiraz* is a Persian loan word originally meaning “embroidery” or “decorative work” (*‘alam*) on a garment or piece of fabric. It later came to mean a *khil’a*, a robe of honour, richly adorned with elaborate embroidery, especially in the form of embroidered bands with writing upon them. Rabbat, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. “*Tiraz*,” 534.

49 *Una descripción anónima de al-Andalus*, 191.

50 These were known as *saqaliba*. One of their functions was the guarding of the royal harem. For such purposes, those who were chosen for this employment were castrated as children. Others were educated for administrative duties, while others were trained as an elite caliphal bodyguard. Many of them took surnames with military significance, such as Mujahid (warrior) or Muqatil (fighter), as opposed to the *saqaliba* of the palace administration, who took names meaning amber (Anbar), radiant (Zuhayr), blessing (Khayran), trustworthy (Wathiq) or pearl (Jumn). Scales, *The Fall of the Caliphate of Cordoba*, 134.

51 Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, 42.

52 The *Dikr* informs that al-Mansur headed fifty-six raids: *Una descripción anónima de al-Andalus*, 196.

53 Ibn Idhari, *Al-Bayan al-Mugrib*, 383.

54 While, in the East, *fata* means a man- or maidservant, in al-Andalus, during the caliphate, it referred to a slave or freedman, castrated or not. Among slaves, they occupied the highest position in the palatine hierarchy, and frequently were sent to the provinces as military chiefs or governors. Ibn Idhari, *La caída del califato de Córdoba*, 17n34.

55 Marín, “Las mujeres de las clases sociales superiores,” 123

56 *Istibra*’ refers to “the period of sexual abstinence imposed on an unmarried female slave whenever she changed hands or her master set her free or gave her in marriage”; this normally lasted three months. See Linant de Bellefonds, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. “*Istibra*,” 252.

57 Ibn Idhari, *Al-Bayan al-Mugrib*, 470–75.

58 See note 13.

a former slave woman of unknown origin presented a lesser risk in endangering Andalusī authority.

In 1002 al-Mansur fell ill, and he prepared his succession. One of his tasks was to entrust al-Dalfa' with his son's heritage: "The money that your mother keeps is the sustenance of your power and the ammunition towards any contingency."⁵⁹ 'Abd al-Malik's libertine behaviour and excessive spending in his early life, similar to that of his half-brother Sanchuelo,⁶⁰ might have discouraged his father from giving him his legacy directly. Additionally, with 'Abd al-Malik his appointed beneficiary, it was expected that al-Dalfa', as his mother, would work in his best interests. However, at that moment, al-Mansur could not guess how far she would go in the pursuit of that goal.

The Advisor

During al-Mansur's rule al-Dalfa' seems to have conducted herself discreetly, raising her son behind the walls of al-Zahira. However, that would change after al-Mansur's death in 1002 and her son 'Abd al-Malik's elevation to power. Soon afterwards 'Abd al-Malik, who later took the title of "al-Muzaffar" ("the Victorious"), after his victory in his fifth campaign, in 1006/7, in which he defeated Sancho García of Castile,⁶¹ followed his father in the *hijaba* for six years and four months.⁶² All through this period he carried on al-Mansur's policy according to his instructions:⁶³ "[H]is authority was avowed and no one amid his inhabitants refused to submit him."⁶⁴ Ibn Idhari underlines that the new chamberlain safeguarded his mother's position and held her in the highest esteem.⁶⁵

The first half of al-Muzaffar's tenure was rather stable, but soon some challenges emerged. In 1005/6, while returning from an expedition in the direction of Pamplona, an uprising took place in Cordoba, started by the *'amma*, the common people, "[b]ecause no young captives had been brought, with whom they could delight themselves according to custom"—something that displeased some popular groups, especially

slave traders.⁶⁶ As al-Muzaffar suppressed the turmoil, he raised antipathy towards him and the Amirids. Such events may have encouraged al-Dalfa' to tighten surveillance over her family, now that it was clear that her son's rule was not consensual among the Cordovans.

Around this time we find al-Dalfa' at the core of a plot with the aim of discrediting vizier Isa b. Sa'id Ibn al-Qatta'. According to Ibn Bassam, al-Muzaffar had fallen in love with the daughter of the vizier's gardener. Isa b. Sa'id had helped them in their romance, and the *hajib* ended up marrying her, which enraged al-Dalfa'. It is possible that she had been so fond of her daughter-in-law, Jaylal, who already had borne al-Muzaffar a son, that she took his new marriage as an insult. However, it is more likely that she feared Isa's influence over al-Muzaffar through his new wife.⁶⁷

In fact, Isa b. Sa'id had steadily become a powerful figure at court, gathering support among the army, collecting wealth through underhand ways and taking advantage of the confidence 'Abd al-Malik al-Muzaffar had bestowed in him. In return, the "intimate of 'Abd al-Malik confabulated against Isa and showed him open hostility," disseminating "falsehoods and backbiting in an open and surreptitious way" and "using the harem and the domestic staff"⁶⁸ with such purpose. Isa was already *persona non grata* in the harem "due to the antipathy and few courtesies, for which he had become hateful to a lot of them, especially to al-Dalfa'."⁶⁹ Trapped in a dead end, Isa would join efforts with Hisham b. 'Abd al-Jabbar, grandson of the late caliph al-Nasir, in order to overthrow the Amirids and put this Nasrid descendent in the place of Hisham II, whose frail character was unsuited to ruling.⁷⁰

Another version refers to "a man who aspired to be *alfaqui* [an expert in law]" informing al-Dalfa' about a conspiracy organized by Isa: "[The man] who enjoyed the total confidence of al-Dalfa', mother of 'Abd al-Malik, spoke to her from the other side of a curtain—thus she listened to his sincere opinion concerning the government of his son and [he] brought to her the aspirations of the people regarding his affairs."⁷¹ It would not take long until she "entered [the room] where her son was, convinced him of the truth of the

⁵⁹ Granja Santamaría, *Estudios de historia de Al-Andalus*, 119.

⁶⁰ Ibn Idhari, *La caída del califato de Córdoba*, 11.

⁶¹ Ibid., 21.

⁶² *Una descripción anónima de al-Andalus*, 185–86.

⁶³ Granja Santamaría, *Estudios de historia de Al-Andalus*, 117–20.

⁶⁴ Ibn Idhari, *La caída del califato de Córdoba*, 11.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 11–12.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁷ Rubiera Mata, "El príncipe hastiado," 74.

⁶⁸ Ibn Idhari, *La caída del califato de Córdoba*, 35.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 35–36.

⁷¹ Ibid., 38.

accusation against Isa and urged him to decree his death.”⁷² A third account claims that this *alfaqui* “had a virtuous mother, known as Comadrona [the Midwife], who enjoyed al-Dalfa’s kind esteem,” who was aware of Isa’s alleged intentions in overthrowing al-Muzaffar and prevented her.⁷³ Isa was executed and, a few days later, Hisham b. ‘Abd al-Jabbar was imprisoned and never seen again⁷⁴—and al-Dalfa’ had played a decisive role in sealing the destiny of these two men.

However, as al-Muzaffar was about to leave for a winter campaign in 1008 against Castile, a chest illness from which he had been suffering grew worse, and he died.⁷⁵ It was suggested that his brother, ‘Abd al-Rahman Sanchuelo, had orchestrated his death.⁷⁶ Some chroniclers even describe the method employed: “[P]oisoning him with an apple, cut in two with a knife, infected on one of its surfaces.”⁷⁷ Peter Scales considers this is a possibility, once al-Muzaffar’s promotion (and, subsequently, his mother’s) had downgraded the position of Sanchuelo and ‘Abda. Thus, according to the author, it is possible that there may have been Navarrese initiative—or, at least, interest—in the replacement of ‘Abd al-Malik by Sanchuelo.⁷⁸

Although Sanchuelo’s interference in his brother’s death may be unclear, he rapidly took al-Malik’s position, though he lasted a mere four months in office.⁷⁹ His ineptitude regarding public affairs soon raised controversy. One of the accusations that hung over him was the overly familiar approach he had towards the caliph. While his ancestors had “honoured the caliph’s majesty, keeping themselves away from him, spacing the meetings,” Sanchuelo “hurried himself, in his passion, to the side which one should stay away from, and affirmed his familiarity with Hisham.”⁸⁰ The caliph himself was not free

from criticism. The people “disapproved their caliph’s benevolence towards him [Sanchuelo] and considered it foolishness and insolence.”⁸¹ Simultaneously, Sanchuelo adopted a repressive stance towards his—real or imaginary—opponents. Therefore, he “pursued many men and reached his hand against them, depriving them from their property, assigning them false sayings and doings, in a way that the people was alarmed with it.”⁸² Tension grew once Hisham had consented to the *hajib* being named “presumptive heir of the kingdom of the Muslims,”⁸³ after Sanchuelo had appealed to a vague common kinship bond (their mothers were both Basques, which was enough, in his perspective, to validate his ambitions).⁸⁴

On November 6, 1008, Sanchuelo took the caliphate with the support of the army.⁸⁵ The *hajib* was now caliph. The next morning the new Prince of the Believers received the most important noblemen of al-Andalus, who entered the room in accordance with their rank and pledged him allegiance. During the same ceremony ‘Abd al-Aziz, son of Sanchuelo, was nominated *hajib*. Finally, the Amirids had full control of the institutions of power. Sanchuelo supported his newly attained position by buying the loyalty of the troops, both Berber and Andalusí. At the same time, he forbade the noblemen and everyone who served the caliphate from wearing their traditional hoods. Instead, they would have to wear turbans, like the Berbers, under the threat of punishment,⁸⁶ with the purpose of humiliating the Umayyad supporters. The Nasrids concluded that it was crucial to suppress Sanchuelo and, bearing in mind how Hisham’s frail character had contributed to this outcome, to choose another Umayyad to rule al-Andalus. Tension was rising both inside and outside al-Zahira, and al-Dalfa’ spotted the perfect opportunity to take vengeance for her son’s death.

The Avenger

In the previous decades al-Mansur had persecuted the Nasrids, executing many of them. Al-Muzaffar acted in the same way, in order to uphold his power. Al-Dalfa’ had partaken

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 39.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 40–41.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 42.

⁷⁶ “The chronicler said: the people, from the beginning of ‘Abd al-Malik’s death, because it befell suddenly and so rapidly, was sure to tell that a poisonous potion had been cunningly acquired and surreptitiously administered to him on behalf of his brother ‘Abd al-Rahman, by the hand of one of the servants of ‘Abd al-Malik al-Muzaffar, on the consequence of which he died; though there are discrepancies regarding on how it was given to drink. God knows.” Ibn Idhari, *La caída del califato de Córdoba*, 43.

⁷⁷ Ibn al-Athir, *Annales du Maghreb et de l’Espagne*, 384.

⁷⁸ Scales, *The Fall of the Caliphate of Cordoba*, 40.

⁷⁹ *Una descripción anónima de al-Andalus*, 186.

⁸⁰ Ibn Idhari, *La caída del califato de Córdoba*, 45.

⁸¹ Ibid., 47.

⁸² Ibid., 44.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 51–52.

in the death sentence inflicted upon two alleged plotters, the aforementioned Isa b. Sa'id and Hisham b. 'Abd al-Jabbar. 'Abd al-Rahman Sanchuelo's behaviour, simultaneously licentious and violent, ignited what was already a precarious situation.

The Nasrid faction found a committed aspirant to the caliphate in Muhammad b. Hisham b. 'Abd al-Jabbar, whose father had been incarcerated and sentenced to death by al-Muzaffar. An unlikely ally would be al-Dalfa', due to the "deadly hatred"⁸⁷ she held against Sanchuelo. For this reason, she "looked for his ruin, though 'Abd al-Rahman treated her fairly, increased her position and left her the son of his brother, 'Abd al-Malik, his son; as well as her harem and property, without failing her in whatever was suitable to her condition."⁸⁸ Nevertheless, these benefits did not appease her thirst for revenge. Al-Dalfa' therefore aligned with her former enemies, the Nasrids, and encouraged them to rebel against Sanchuelo.

She started by reaching out to Bushra, an Amirid slave who had belonged to the Banu Marwan,⁸⁹ and to whom he was still loyal.⁹⁰ Through him, she invited the Marwanids to rebel, while promising financial aid. In the words of Ibn al-Khatib: "The Marwanids forwarded him [Bushra] towards a wrathful representative of their house [Muhammad], to a gang of daredevils and adventurers, rebels, imprudent and turbulent, of thieves and bandits, Muhammad of his name, later known as al-Mahdi [the Well-Guided]."⁹¹ Muhammad embraced al-Dalfa's initiative and gathered the support of the masses in Cordoba. His partisans spread rumours about an upcoming rebellion being prepared and emphasized the Amirids' flaws in such a way that the Cordovans' loathing towards the *hajib* and his relatives was impossible to restrain.⁹² The moment had arrived to dethrone Sanchuelo. Accordingly, Ibn Idhari talks about Muhammad al-Mahdi as "the door to sedition [*fitna*] and the cause of division and duplicity."⁹³

While Sanchuelo was absent, heading north on a military campaign, revolution erupted in Cordoba. Sanchuelo was near Toledo when he received reports about the destruction

of al-Zahira came. He tried to keep the military under his influence by handing over benefits to them in profusion, "to the point that there was a complete lack of parchment and several types of skin were used instead of sheets."⁹⁴ However, this was a worthless tactic, as the pillage of al-Zahira left his soldiers with no hope of being paid, and soon they left him.⁹⁵ He was found and executed by the new *hajib*, Ibn Dura, freedman of al-Hakam II, sent by the new Prince of the Believers to kill him.⁹⁶

In Cordoba, while the mob rejoiced while displaying Sanchuelo's corpse, there were those who became apprehensive over the latest events, which were perceived as an inversion of everything that had constituted the known order up till then.

The city of Cordoba had been taken and the city of al-Zahira destroyed; a caliph with a long-term rule, who was Hisham b. al-Hakam, was deposed and proclaimed a caliph who had no previous right and unelected, who was Muhammad b. Hisham b. 'Abd al-Jabbar; the family of 'Amir disappeared and the Banu Umayyad returned to power; the creation of popular troops, joined to replace the stiff and trained ones of the sovereign and at last the fall of the great viziers and the elevation of their contraries, the ones the eyes despised due to their lowness and villainy. And all this happened by the hand of about ten of the vilest men of the people: bleeders, shoemakers, breeders and scavengers who dared to do so. Fate has guaranteed its accomplishment and has been materialised, something that the human reason could not have foreseen.⁹⁷

As for al-Dalfa', while pursuing her vindictive goal, she put herself at the epicentre of the outbreak of civil and military turmoil. The new caliph protected her and her grandson, allowing her to move into her own house, in which "she remained surrounded by her possessions, in liberty to dispose of her own property," for the reason that, before the turmoil, she had—wisely—removed her possessions from al-Zahira and put them in a secure place.⁹⁸ Her grandson, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Malik, collected his family treasure, and

⁸⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ The branch of the Umayyad family who ruled al-Andalus.

⁹⁰ Ibn Idhari, *La caída del califato de Córdoba*, 57.

⁹¹ Ibn al-Khatib, *Kitab A'mal al-A'lam*, 229.

⁹² Ibn Idhari, *La caída del califato de Córdoba*, 58.

⁹³ Ibid., 56.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 70–71.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 72–73.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 66.

later, as an adult, he would get involved in the *fitna*, as sovereign of Orihuela and Murcia.⁹⁹

Conclusion: Assessing al-Dalfa's Agency

From alleged Christian descent, al-Dalfa' might have integrated into the selective group of beautiful and educated slave women who were destined to serve in the harems. Some were chosen by their masters to share their chambers. Such was the case with al-Dalfa', who, in 973, gave birth to 'Abd al-Malik al-Muzaffar, al-Mansur's successor in the *hijaba*. Her pregnancy granted her the status of *umm al-walad*, a position that allowed her to become a free woman on the death of her master. Following al-Mansur's demise her political role would become visible, as mother of the de facto ruler of al-Andalus—in practice, the equivalent of a “queen mother”.

Al-Dalfa' was present at al-Muzaffar's most controversial decision, namely the execution of the so-called traitors Sa'id b. Qatta' and Hisham b. 'Abd al-Jabbar. Moreover, she was among the main instigators of a coup that overthrew Sanchuelo and ignited a civil war that would last more than twenty years, after which the Umayyad Caliphate of al-Andalus collapsed. Considering the physical confinement and seclusion from public affairs under which Muslim women lived, especially those from the upper socio-economic groups, al-Dalfa' manoeuvres were beyond what was expected and possible to foresee.

Although plotting in the harem in order to gain the favour of the royal spouse had always taken place in Andalusí history, such intrigues “consisted in some mother questing for sovereign succession for a child of her own.”¹⁰⁰ During the Amirid period such a pattern seems to have given rise to a more assertive female role in Andalusí politics. At the end of the tenth century Subh tried to regain control of the state for her son, Caliph Hisham II, with the help of her brother, the *fata* Ra'iq, but she did not succeed in doing so.¹⁰¹ Being a contemporary of Subh, is likely that al-Dalfa' saw in her a role model on how a “queen mother” should act in order to defend the interests of her offspring. However, there were some circumstances during the Amirid administration that

permitted al-Dalfa's actions to have a range of consequences that transcended the walls of al-Zahira.

Al-Mansur, needing to establish new foundations for his authority, intensified the recruitment of exogenous elements of Berber, Christian, and Slavic origin for both army and administration. He ascribed positions to them at the palace and put in place a loyal clientele. The Amirid party was thus reinforced against those officials and servants who stood by the Nasrids and still dreamt of restoring the caliphate to the image of the glorious days of al-Nasir. The palace was the platform where these different sensitivities interacted, the friction they created echoed through the walls of the harem, and al-Dalfa' sensed it.

Furthermore, outside information reached her through her acquaintances, people she was allowed to receive as guests, such as the midwife who allegedly warned her about a conspiracy targeting her son. Later, al-Dalfa' engaged herself in a conspiracy with the same faction that had previously wanted to overthrow her son and that she had unmasked. For that purpose, she sought the cooperation of Bushra, the slave, in order to reach those who could depose her son's alleged murderer. In both situations, she used a network of people with enough freedom to move between the palace and the city, establishing a connection between her and the world beyond the curtain that she was not allowed to transgress.

By the time al-Dalfa' reached the status of *umm al-walad* she had already dealt with courtly life long enough to understand the milieu and how to survive in it. Analyzing her acuity while she planned the aftermath of the uprising, we may ask ourselves whether her involvement aimed, above all, to ensure her preservation from the devastating effects of an insurrection that was likely to happen. Al-Dalfa' was aware of the different political sensitivities both in the harem and outside the walls of al-Zahira. Therefore, her survival instinct might have led her to change to the side of the rebels, because, from the moment Muhammad al-Mahdi and his militias stepped into al-Zahira, it was unlikely that she and her grandson would survive.

Her share of the responsibility in the collapse of the Amirids is assessed in the financial support she bestowed upon a faction that, apparently, did not have the resources to do so, once most of the wealth had been transferred to al-Zahira during al-Mansur's governance. Other attempts to remove the Amirids had germinated before within the palace, and one had even been detected by her. A change in the regime was possible only if it started from the inside.

⁹⁹ More details regarding his life can be found in Rubiera Mata, “El príncipe hastiado”.

¹⁰⁰ Viguera Molins, “Reflejos cronísticos de mujeres andalusíes y magrebíes,” 837.

¹⁰¹ Scales, *The Fall of the Caliphate of Cordoba*, 40–41.

Ultimately, it was al-Mansur's money kept by al-Dalfa' that financed the end of his dynasty.

The harem, whose *raison d'être* had been to extol its master's resources and to provide him his most intimate circle in which to seek refuge, was, during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, the ground in which disruptive forces grew. Al-Dalfa' and her actions were the product of

al-Mansur's political choices, as he handed over public affairs to a hierarchically organized battery of slaves and mercenaries, held together through a mixture of loyalty, fear, and money. Al-Mansur did not predict that blood bonds, personal inclinations, and a mother's fierce desire for revenge could use the structure and resources of a regime he had created with the purpose of putting an end to it.



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