

Comments and evaluation of the Phd thesis of Cristina Martínez-Álvarez, *Islamisation in Kūra of Ilbīra (Al Andalus). Comparative Study on Pottery Production and Distribution in the Early Andalusi Period in South-East Iberian Peninsula*

The candidate is a promising young researcher, who has already brilliantly grappled with topics close to those she addressed in her PhD thesis. Therefore, her educational background, also in view of her CV, is outstanding.

Her thesis addresses issues related to the processes of Islamisation in one of the most important (but also archaeologically well-known) territories of Iberia peninsula, namely the Kūra of Ilbīra, in one of the historical key periods (IX-XI) and through a very common archaeological marker, ceramics. The Kūra of Ilbīra is a historically and archaeologically very famous geographical space, both because of previous research in the 19th century, but also because it has returned to be the subject of specific attention in recent decades by the University of Granada (and this work began and grew within that project).

As the author well explains, ceramics is a product that is little or poorly valorised in archaeological-historical studies, despite the fact that its presence is overstated in the archaeological record. Nevertheless, ceramics can be used as a good indicator of economic-commercial relations, and also of social relations. It is mainly in these two directions that this work moves, through the analysis of ceramic groups from different types of settlements. The research employs archaeological and archaeometric methodologies to examine the production, distribution and socio-economic significance of these objects in the context of the process of the formation of Andalusian society. In

the background, there remains the great historiographical theme of the processes of the Islamisation of al-Andalus, between local particularities and general trends.

The key tools in addressing these issues were: typological and technological analysis of the ceramic contexts identified; the identification and study of production and distribution patterns; the evaluation of external influences and cultural interactions in local production components; and the reconstruction of the social network connected with production and distribution.

The first chapter (I) is an up-to-date account of the studies on post-antique ceramics in the Iberian Peninsula since the 18th century. It is a very effective chapter, as it contextualises, with critical depth, the scientific debate on ceramics within the broader framework of studies on the processes of Islamisation of Iberian society, taking into account the profound repercussions on contemporary cultural debate.

A subsequent important chapter (II) is dedicated to the analysis of the concept of Islamisation, applied specifically to al-Andalus, through which the author critically examines and discusses the positions of the various scholars on a concept that is apparently clear, but instead extremely changeable and difficult to focus on correctly. A concept, as the author well points out, that has been variously declined according to the perspectives, both historical and anthropological, that have been used from time to time. The pages devoted to the influence that post-processualism has exerted on these issues are also very interesting. The author takes his inspiration from other European examples through which, using “material culture” or, specifically, ceramics, an attempt has been made to interpret various processes of acculturation, and then correctly attempts to assess what influence these approaches may have had on the debate concerning the ceramics of al-Andalus. In this, she arrived at the agreeable statement that “social Islamisation was not a process of acculturation but one of cultural syncretism” (p. 55).

Chapter III is then dedicated to the analysis of the territory examined, first through an exquisitely historical framework, then to that of the individual contexts under observation, including urban,

fortified and rural and, overall, including the most famous and important archaeological site, that of Madinat Ilbira. There are six contexts taken in examination, and a detailed examination of the archaeological sequence and the various associations in relation to each is offered.

Chapter IV deals with the specific analysis of ceramic typologies. This long chapter reveals the theoretical and methodological grid used by the author in the study and quantification of the finds. With Chapter V, the thesis enters into the heart of a comparative analysis of the ceramic groups examined, discussing production and distributional characteristics in their temporal evolution. The part dedicated to the functional analysis of artefacts is also very interesting and well structured. Chapter V also provides a detailed technological analysis of the various typologies, in their formal and decorative variants, in relation also to their distribution.

Chapter VI appropriately contextualises the pottery analysed in its dimension as a social indicator, in its relations with other contemporary productions also present outside the area under examination. It is in this chapter that the author succeeds in appropriately bringing the local ceramic datum (whether represented by imported or locally produced ceramics) into dialogue with the more general processes of ceramic evolution in al-Andalus. It is in this chapter, moreover, that the reader is also given an up-to-date picture of the new technologies appearing in the Islamised Iberian peninsula, such as ceramics covered with slip (a technique, however, not to be confused with that employing kaolin or white earth, in use in the Byzantine world and, later, in the Middle East) and, above all, the glaze-based and later tin glazed coating techniques. In this chapter, then, the author takes the occasion to analyse the social use of ceramics. This is, perhaps, the most interesting chapter and above all the one that, more than others, tends to align itself with the theoretical coordinates of post-processualism. The results are on the whole new (or partially new), pushing in a direction that develops more nuances than categorical certainties, in which society is finally seen (and attempted to be understood) in its variegated complexity. Thus, the process of Islamisation is also seen as a non-linear process, the understanding

of which can only be revealed and understood when the artefacts are contextualised in their social categorisation.

Finally, the last chapter (VII) summarises all the arguments previously analysed and thus succeeds in identifying the critical points of the scientific debate and the most certain results achieved. In an overall reconstruction of the transformation processes in ceramic production and consumption, the author in fact recovers and partly clarifies what studies on these topics have highlighted in recent decades. First, the transition from late antique society to the emerging Andalusian society is characterised by a process of regionalisation. This is a phenomenon that this territory shares with much of the contemporary Mediterranean areas, despite the obvious differences. The mechanisms of ceramic distribution and consumption become more localised, reflecting trends moving towards a kind of self-sufficiency. New domestic productions appear in this period, but the entire set of domestic artefacts is characterised by a more limited number of shapes and simplified production techniques. The transition point in this process is indicated around the 10th century, both in rural and urban areas. On a technological level it is represented by the increasingly widespread use of the high-speed wheel; in addition, it is also during this period that the first glazed productions appear. These last techniques are used for new forms, particularly connected with tableware, in a change that is both technological and cultural (i.e. related to table behaviour).

The PhD thesis is well-organised, well-structured and well-written. The author shows a fairly thorough knowledge of the debate on the subject, both that which has developed in the Iberian peninsula in recent decades and that which has matured outside that area. In this way, the author succeeds in bringing together a very local competence with the best that the international debate has produced on the subject, opening up highly innovative perspectives in terms of interpretative aspects. The attempts to explain the processes not only through the technological side, but also the economic and social side, are also very interesting. And these are perhaps the most promising parts of the thesis, because although in a vein already traced (and from which the author does not stray, as in the case of

the general trends to which we have already referred) she always manages to characterise and specify them better. The drawings and the photos are also excellent. Overall, the thesis is a mature step forward in the study of these phenomena.

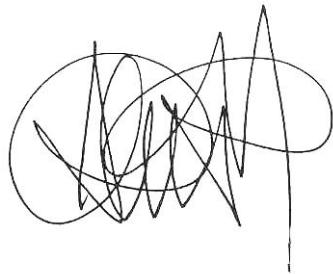
As for the weaker points of the thesis, or which perhaps deserve to be better investigated, I would like to point out one of them.

This is the part on the introduction of the glazing technique in al-Andalus. The author is well up-to-date on the current debate, but remains rather vague when it comes to acknowledging technical precedents in the Islamic world. These technological relationships remain generic. For the glazing technique, the hypothesis of a relationship with the technological area of glass is adhered to, at least in part. While this is an acceptable hypothesis, the origin and technological medium of the tin glazing technique remains more indefinite.

Perhaps the author could endeavour to delve more deeply into this topic by seeking, where possible, technological parallels (minus the formal and decorative ones) with other parts of the Islamic Mediterranean area (from where it is very plausible that this technique arrived). An in-depth study that should be done, even though we are fully aware of the different quality, also on the archaeometric side, of research on the ceramics of many of the areas that can be pointed to as possible technological mediators.

As for the aspect that refers to a social reading of the processes, one can only add that, in the future, approaches that compare not only sites (and types of sites) with each other, but also different contexts within the same site, could be very promising. Some attempts in this direction, such as the one tackled at the Madinat Ilbīra site, have shown their potential (although such an approach seems easier in more socially complex sites such as urban ones, and Madinat Ilbīra is among them).

As a result of all these considerations and evaluations, we can only recommend that the thesis continue in its next steps and, at the same time, in view of its quality, it is proposed as of now that it be awarded the doctoral prize.



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