Studies of the early medieval pottery of al-Andalus

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This paper presents a review of the studies of early medieval (Amiral and Caliphal) pottery in al-Andalus. It opens with a discussion of the first archaeological and ceramics surveys, including an assessment of their historical and theoretical contexts and their relevance to the developing discipline. After discussion of the contributions and also shortcomings of current approaches, the article closes by sketching the direction of future research.

Pottery is one of the aspects of Andalusi archaeology on which much work has been done, and it has offered, accordingly, some fundamental perspectives on Islamic society in Iberia. Indeed, from the 1970s the field of ceramic studies has produced some of the most important innovations in Spanish and Portuguese medieval archaeology. However, it is also true that these studies have not always been either well applied or well directed. The current theoretical and practical approaches of most archaeologists working on al-Andalus are based on obsolete principles, and a re-evaluation is urgently needed. There is no institution with a programme of research specifically dedicated to this aspect of material culture, despite the general acknowledgement of its great importance and potential.

The goal of this article is to analyse briefly the history of research on Andalusi pottery, particularly that of the early Middle Ages (eighth to tenth centuries) (Fig. 1). A reflection on the state of current practice will follow, which will explain the main issues at stake and the approaches that

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have been adopted. We will close by considering directions for future research on the material culture of this period.

**Archaeology and Andalusi ceramics**

The Spanish and Portuguese nations, which were founded on the defeat of al-Andalus, have systematically ignored the Islamic contribution to their respective cultures. An intellectual stance originating in the Romantic period treated al-Andalus as a lost civilization, and in many respects viewed the Islamic heritage as nothing more than a quasi-mythical ingredient of Iberian particularism. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but especially after the Spanish Civil War (1936–9), the study of al-Andalus made tremendous progress primarily as the result of the work of foreign (R. Dozy and E. Lévi-Provençal) and Spanish Arabists (J. Simonet and E. García). However, most historians paid little, if any attention to the Muslim world, with the exception of the debate on the

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influence of Islamic culture in the formation of an Iberian (either Spanish or Portuguese) society. Scholars prominent here were A. Castro and C. Sánchez-Albornoz.

The traditional starting point for the study of Islamic pottery (within the discipline of art history) is the publication in 1888 of Gómez-Moreno’s small book. Gómez-Moreno used materials recovered from occasional excavations to shed light on the location of the Islamic city of Ilbira (south-eastern Spain). Many at that time believed it to be on the site of modern Granada, while others favoured a location at the foot of the Sierra Elvira, some fourteen kilometres to the north-west. Gómez-Moreno’s book employed historical and archaeological arguments (including drawings of artefacts, primarily pottery) in support of the second hypothesis. Madinah Ilbira, an Islamic city that existed between the eighth and eleventh centuries, thus marked an early interest in Andalusi ceramics (Fig. 2).

After Gómez-Moreno, many studies on Andalusi pottery appeared, many of them with less concern for historical interpretation than for artistic matters. This was, of course, a consequence of the antiquarian approach to archaeology, in which the aesthetic value of every piece of pottery took precedence over its historical context. As a consequence, pottery remains entering museum collections came with very little information on their archaeological context. This is not to say that there was no value to these early studies: they had, after all, drawn attention to an aspect of medieval Iberia which had until then been completely neglected. Moreover, given that most such studies were based on material documentation, they provided very solid arguments, which however rudimentary, were to be decisive in certain historiographic debates, such as that concerning the location of Ilbira. From the perspective of the early twenty-first century they are, however, very dated pieces of research.

A. Castro, *La realidad histórica de España* (Mexico City, 1954); and C. Sánchez-Albornoz, *España y el Islam* (Buenos Aires, 1943), *España, un enigma histórico* (Buenos Aires, 1956), and *El drama de la formación de España y los españoles: otra nueva aventura polémica* (Barcelona, 1973). Both engaged in a lively debate on the influence of al-Andalus on Spanish culture. Castro was in favour of a strong influence, while Sánchez-Albornoz viewed the culture of al-Andalus as essentially Spanish, with only superficial elements making it appear different, such as Islam and the use of the Arabic language. Sánchez-Albornoz, like most medievalists, believed that those elements did not alter the essential nature of Spanish culture, which remained the same from prehistoric times. In reply, A. Castro argued that neither Spanish culture nor the Spanish nation would have been possible without the participation of the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish heritage of al-Andalus.


of no use in answering the questions raised by current historical and archaeological studies.

Following the demise of Iberian dictatorial regimes, during the late 1970s a radical change took place in the study of al-Andalus, which established medieval archaeology as an academic discipline in Spain and Portugal. Andalusi studies were at the forefront of this change, and for good reasons. This was a time for new ideas, some of which were instrumental in breaking long-established intellectual positions, the reproduction of which over several decades had been possible only because of the lack of freedom. This was also a time of great theoretical advances in medieval studies, which facilitated new approaches to the history of the Iberian Christian kingdoms and of al-Andalus.  

5 Fundamental for the re-evaluation of the Visigothic kingdom and society was Abilio Barbero and Marcelo Vigil, *La formación del feudalismo en la Península Ibérica* (Barcelona, 1978). Equally significant was the publication of S. Amin, *Sobre el desarrollo desigual de las formaciones sociales* (Barcelona, 1974), with a preface by M. Barceló (the book is in fact the translation into Spanish of the first chapter of *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* (New York, 1976)). The first Marxist approach to Islamic Spain is R. Pastor, *Del...*
advances were the result of applying historical materialist approaches to data that had already been gathered. Equally significant was the introduction of concepts and ideas developed by anthropologists. Both were made possible by the close relations between Spanish and French medievalists. The adoption of those new approaches created an immediate interest in the study of material conditions of life and, as a consequence, in the use of archaeological evidence. This coincided with the first noticeable influence of the New Archaeology, which had meanwhile become predominant in English-speaking countries. This influence was particularly important for the development of medieval archaeology generally. Notwithstanding, most Spanish scholars, although more ready than the Portuguese to promote new approaches, were more familiar with the French literature and developments in French archaeology than with those in the Anglo-Saxon world. As a consequence, the new ideas were received through the intermediary of Italian medievalists, who maintained closer and more productive contacts with Anglo-American archaeologists. This specific cultural configuration is primarily responsible for the rise of a new discipline in Iberia, namely medieval archaeology, which was initially expected to answer specific questions formulated by historians of the Middle Ages in their particular field of study. This important aspect is often neglected in considering the history of medieval archaeology in Iberia. Medieval archaeologists are too often believed not to be in a position to ask the questions by themselves; they only need to answer those formulated for them by historians. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in northern Europe, where the relationship between the disciplines is reversed, something which is only now beginning to occur in Iberia.

It was particularly in studies of Andalusi pottery that those new developments first became apparent. G. Rosselló’s *Ensayo de sistematización de la cerámica islámica de Mallorca*, which was published in 1978, proposed a new system for the classification of pottery in the collection of the Archaeological Museum in Palma de Mallorca. Rosselló’s classifi-
cation paid attention to the archaeological context and to the origin of the specimens examined in order to establish a relative chronology, thus moving beyond the exclusively aesthetic focus of previous art-historical approaches. This same year, the first Meeting on Medieval Ceramics from the Western Mediterranean took place in Valbonne (France). At that meeting, J. Zozaya introduced a model for the development of Andalusi pottery, which was connected with the main phases of the political history of al-Andalus. Shortly after this A. Bazzana published the pottery from *Sharq al-Andalus*, in eastern Spain. He proposed a model of classification which was in many respects similar to Rosselló’s, but also took into consideration technological aspects of pottery making. These three studies, by Rosselló, Zozaya and Bazzana, are very different in their respective approaches to ceramic analysis. Rosselló, a prehistorian by training, viewed pottery very much through the eyes of an art historian. As a consequence, he was primarily concerned with producing a nomenclature that would be appropriate for every shape of a specific use; he thus developed a morphological and functional system of classification. Zozaya, who had a background in Oriental Studies, was much more concerned with chronology. Bazzana embraced the approach to material culture advocated by French prehistorians, particularly by André Leroi-Gourhan; he thus paid comparatively more attention to technology. Despite their differences, however, all three authors strove to create a framework for the study of Andalusi pottery. This was certainly not an accident, but a reflection of the concerns of archaeological practice at that time. The new interest in material culture had brought to light very large amounts of pottery remains, which needed to be classified before any attempt could be made to use them as evidence for historical reconstruction.

An equally significant development in the history of studies of Andalusi pottery was the reform of the legal system in both Spain and Portugal, following the demise of Franco’s and Salazar’s dictatorial regimes. Heritage, the object of study for archaeologists, was given legal status that allowed modern policies of protection. Archaeological excavations on historical sites that were about to be restored received great attention in the 1980s. This further brought to the fore new standards for salvage archaeology. Such standards were developed by practitioners, who

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8 J. Zozaya, 'Aperçu général sur la céramique espagnole', in *La Céramique Médiévale en Méditerranée Occidentale, Xe–XVe siècles* (Paris, 1982), pp. 265–96. Zozaya’s model, though original, is not very well grounded in the existing evidence, which in turn goes some way to explaining the criticism which it immediately met.

were not affiliated with any research departments or institutions of higher
education, and who were interested in pottery mainly because of its
potential for dating sites. At the same time, archaeologists and scholars
studying ceramics suddenly found themselves responsible for a very large
number of excavation finds. A preoccupation with pottery classification
was therefore very much in line with the practical needs of the archae-
ologists in the field. Rosselló’s *Ensayo de sistematización* was thus almost
universally accepted as a model, despite Rosselló’s warnings that his work
had application only for a specific area (the island of Majorca) and for a
specific period.¹⁰ New systems of classification were proposed, all of
which tried without much success to account for all Andalusi ceramics.
Recently it has become apparent – as will be shown below – that regional
assemblages must be preferred to general models.

Searching for the system¹¹

Given that it is the most abundant and easy to manage object of archaeo-
logical study, for many historians and archaeologists pottery represented
their first contact with the material culture of al-Andalus. It is no wonder
that the works of the pioneers of the late 1970s stirred an unprecedented
interest in the study of this material, under the assumption that good
record-keeping was basically the same as a thorough analysis of Andalusi
society. Many believed al-Andalus to have been a compact block, with a
territory-wide common and homogeneous evolution; the same was
assumed of Andalusi ceramics. The main objective of pottery analysis was
to create (or adapt) a morphological and functional classification, which
could bind together all the elements found on a site. This approach was
criticized by Rosselló himself and by H. Kirchner in the late 1980s, but
their criticism did not prevent the multiplication of such systems of
classification.¹² Despite the fact that a number of archaeologists still
regard this kind of study as the only valid endeavour in their discipline,
others have by now accepted the idea of a certain distance between the
pottery and the political developments of al-Andalus, while regional
variants have become too important to be ignored.

¹⁰ Rosselló, ‘Reflexiones sobre *Un ensayo de sistematización*’, p. 22.
¹¹ This long period of research on Andalusi pottery has been excellently surveyed by V. Salvatierra
and J.C. Castillo, ‘Sistematizaciones y tipologías. Veinte años de investigación’, *Arqueología y
Territorio Medieval* 6 (1999), pp. 29–44.
¹² Rosselló, ‘Reflexiones sobre *Un ensayo de sistematización*’, p. 22; H. Kirchner, ‘Las técnicas y los
conjuntos documentales. 1: La cerámica’, in M. Barceló (ed.), *Arqueología medieval. En las
afueras del ´Medievalismo´* (Barcelona, 1988), pp. 88–104. Kirchner attacked the very idea of a
general system. She pointed out that many studies showed increased regionalism, even if their
authors had chosen to ignore it.

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Early medieval pottery has played a decisive role in the understanding of al-Andalus. Much like the pottery of late antiquity (fifth to seventh century), the understanding of medieval ceramics has radically changed the views of archaeologists and historians studying the period between the eighth and the tenth centuries. This was a period traditionally known as the ‘Dark Ages’, primarily because it attracted little, if any, attention from archaeologists owing to its relative poverty in material culture terms (with the notable exception of Caliphal Cordoba). This applied also to pottery. When its study began to be of interest to historians (for reasons explained below) any concern with developing all-encompassing systems dissipated, for it became clear that significant differences existed between regions which could not be explained by any single system.\(^{13}\) At first such differences were attributed to the influence of earlier Visigothic traditions maintained by the local, conquered population.\(^{14}\) This idea has been discussed from many points of view, to which we will return later. For the moment, it is important to note only that despite many common elements in respect to both morphology and production, there is so far more evidence for a break in tradition than for a smooth transition between the pottery of the Visigothic period and that of later times.\(^{15}\)

That is in fact where the failure of any generalized classificatory system resides. Despite the undoubtedly significant contributions such methodologies have made, especially in terms of morphology and function, questions of regional and chronological variability remain unanswered. This is particularly – but not exclusively – problematic for turbulent periods, such as the eighth and the twelfth centuries, when important changes occurred in the social and political structure of al-Andalus as a consequence of the Islamic and North African invasions, respectively.\(^{16}\)

\(^{13}\) Differences are sometimes notable even between neighbouring areas, such as Vega and the coast in the region of Granada, which are only forty kilometres apart. See the works mentioned below, nn. 37 and 39.

\(^{14}\) M. Acién, ‘Cerámica a torno lento en Bezmiliana. Cronología, tipos y difusión’, in 1º Congreso de Arqueología Medieval Española 4 (Zaragoza, 1988), pp. 243–67 was one of the first advocates of this kind of continuity on the basis of the modelling technology.

\(^{15}\) Moreover, the pottery of pre-Islamic Iberia is too varied to allow for a definition of any general trend. See E. Serrano, Cerámica común romana: siglos II a.C. al VII d.C. Materiales importados y de producción local en el territorio malacitano (Málaga, 2000) for the pottery of the southern region of the Península; and L. Caballero, ‘Cerámicas de “época visigoda y posvisigoda” de las provincias de Cáceres, Madrid y Segovía’, Boletín de Arqueología Medieval 3 (1989), pp. 71–107, for finds from the central Meseta. In addition, there are major differences between the pottery in use before and after the Islamic conquest in any given region. Any of the works cited in this article will produce a sufficient number of examples in that respect.

\(^{16}\) At the Eighth International Congress of Medieval Ceramics, which took place in 2006 in Ciudad Real, G. Rosselló pointed out the obscurity that still surrounds the transitional centuries of Andalusí history.

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The ‘two societies’ of al-Andalus

One of the major problems with an approach based on the idea of a general system is that it cannot explain transitions. Transitions are indeed the most attractive and, at the same time, difficult aspects in the study of eighth- to tenth-century Andalusi pottery. In order to understand why this is the case, one needs to go back to the years before the 1970s, when al-Andalus was understood in both Spain and Portugal as a basically feudal society with a number of superficial elements distinguishing it from the Christian societies in the Peninsula. At stake in this historiographic (for archaeologists played no role in this at all) debate was what influence, if any, Andalusi society had on the configuration of the later Christian society in Iberia. Some argued that Islamic culture had no major influence. Under a veneer of Arabic language and Muslim faith, the Iberian people retained their Spanish and west European character, which essentially hindered the formation of an Islamic society along the lines of its North African counterparts. By contrast, P. Guichard (whose book on al-Andalus was translated and published in Spanish before it appeared in France, primarily because of support from M. Barceló at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona) argued on the basis of written and archaeological sources, that Andalusi society was not feudal and also that it had much more in common with other Islamic societies of Asia and Africa than had previously been believed. He emphasized the elements of tribalism that would have been spread into Iberia by the arrival of a large number of Arab, and especially Berber, immigrants. Guichard’s book marked a major departure from traditional approaches to the history of al-Andalus. Despite criticism targeted at specific points, Guichard’s underlying idea that the Muslim conquest constituted a major break with the past is still upheld, albeit not completely accepted, by both historians and archaeologists.

Given that the publication of Guichard’s book coincided with the rise of medieval archaeology as an academic discipline, many archaeologists, including Guichard himself, began looking for archaeological arguments to support his discontinuity thesis. Scholars focused on tribal elements as being the most important difference between al-Andalus and Christian society. As regards pottery, this focus is particularly obvious in the work of M. Acién, who in the mid-1980s suggested that a system of ceramic classification should allow the identification of features most typical for the production and use of pottery in each tribe. In the early 1990s,

17 Guichard, Al-Andalus.

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however, Acién published a book significantly entitled *Between Feudalism and Islam*, which was based less on Guichard’s ideas (although not in opposition to them) and more on a Marxist approach, as well as his previous studies in history and archaeology. In this book, Acién focused on the biography of Ibn Hafsun, a *muladi* (renegade Christian converted to Islam) rebel, in order to suggest the existence in al-Andalus of two different, conflicting modes of production: feudalism, the legacy of the Visigothic era, which implied personal ties between primary producers and landlords in the form of rent payments; and the tributary mode of production, which Acién viewed as of paramount importance in the centralized Muslim state ruled from Cordoba by means of tax collection, and which he called the ‘Islamic social formation’. According to Acién, the latter eventually overcame the former during the tenth century. Acién’s is a version of the model first advanced by Chris Wickham, which he adapted to al-Andalus. Like Wickham’s, Acién’s argument was met with heavy criticism. While Wickham’s ideas have been refined by John Haldon, Acién’s model received great support from Spanish scholars, even though it was not completely accepted.

The most important scholar interested in pottery to build upon Acién’s ideas is S. Gutiérrez, whose research focuses on the region around Alicante in eastern Spain. Gutiérrez, who worked primarily on assemblages from museum collections, identified two main technological traditions, one of them characterized by domestic production of pottery (either hand-made or thrown on a slow-turning wheel) with a local distribution, the other by the predominance of wheel-made wares distributed through more evolved markets. Like Acién, Gutiérrez saw in the latter a system of production and distribution introduced by the Islamic conquest, and associated the former with the native society of the Visigothic era and thus with a feudal mode of production.

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21 J. Haldon, *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production* (London, 1993). This is not the place to offer a criticism of Acién’s model, but neither of the authors of the present article have embraced it. The most important element emerging from the barrage of criticism with which his book was met is that the social reality is more complicated than the simple dichotomy rent vs. tax, a point duly acknowledged by Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005), p. 36. The journal *Hispania* hosted a debate in its volume 200 (1998), in which Haldon’s and Acién’s positions were compared and contrasted with other models.
It is true that her model departed significantly from the old idea of al-Andalus as a monolithic and static society, and it introduced a dynamic aspect into the explanation of social configuration. In the early 1990s, this was in fact the most sophisticated model of analysis, at least in terms of its explanatory value as applied to Andalusi society. Its particular strength was the emphasis on applying a specific theory to a specific region. However, Gutiérrez’s model was primarily concerned with morphology, and little, if any, consideration was given to technological aspects beyond the primary distinction between wares produced on a fast wheel and those on a tournette. Based as it was on Acién’s ideas, Gutiérrez’s interpretation was too simplistic. She established a direct relationship between modelling technique and mode of production, without an understanding of the context in which those two variables operated. It has to be said that in her more recent writing Gutiérrez has moderated her views on this point.\(^{23}\)

The debate which her initial work sparked has by now moved the discussion in a somewhat different direction, namely that of the nature of the Islamic state of al-Andalus. As it stands, this is no longer a discussion about pottery. Before entering the details of this debate, it is important, however, to review the arguments in support of the idea of Andalusi tribalism.

**Tribalism: segmentary society in al-Andalus**

Among the most effective critics of Acién and Gutiérrez are those inspired by the work of M. Barceló and his disciples at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. In the field of pottery analysis, most prominent among them is H. Kirchner. Barceló, a medievalist who turned to archaeology in the 1980s in search of new approaches, has introduced not only Guichard’s ideas to Spain, but also S. Amin’s concept of the tributary mode of production.\(^{24}\) The most important advocate of Guichard’s thesis of discontinuity, Barceló has gone beyond this in certain aspects of his anthropological approach. He was the first to attack Acién’s model for its inappropriate characterization of a social formation as ‘Islamic’, using, as it were, an ideological and religious attribute in order to define relations of production. Barceló also rejected the rather simplistic explanation of the history of al-Andalus as that of a conflict between the feudal and the

\(^{23}\) S. Gutiérrez Lloret, B. Gamo Paras and V. Amorós Ruiz, ‘Los contextos cerámicos del Tolmo de Minateda y la cerámica altomedieval en el Sudeste de la Península Ibérica’, in L. Caballero Zoreda, P. Mateos Cruz and M. Retuerce Velasco (eds), Cerámicas tardorromanas y altomedievales en la Península Ibérica. Ruptura y continuidad. Actas del II Simposio de Arqueología de Mérida (7–9 de Noviembre de 2001) (Madrid, 2003), pp. 119–68, in which the authors publish an assemblage from a very good context of transition. There is no sign in this article of the distinctions Gutiérrez drew in her earlier work, which were based on assemblages stored in museums.

\(^{24}\) Amin, Sobre el desarrollo.
Islamic modes of production. For him, the defining aspect of Islamic society in al-Andalus was tribalism, even centuries after it had ceased to be purely tribal. Following Amin, Barceló viewed this as an essentially communitarian organization of production and distribution processes at the basic levels of society, with economic complexity restricted to the higher levels of the state. He developed a methodology for the study of irrigation systems (hydraulic archaeology), and used it to show the presence in al-Andalus of Berber tribes with communitarian systems of production.\(^{25}\)

H. Kirchner, the member of Barceló’s team of scholars who was most dedicated to the study of pottery, criticized the obstinate focus on searching for a general system of classification for Andalusi ceramics. She was also a harsh critic of Gutiérrez’s identification of handmade pottery or pottery thrown on a slow-wheel with the remnants of the pre-conquest, Visigothic population, and wheel-made pottery with their Islamic conquerors. To Kirchner, different technological levels were respectively associated with a domestic (on a basic or even industrial scale) and a specialized mode of production (again, with either individual artisans or nucleated workshops), such as described by D. Peacock.\(^{26}\) However, this does not in any way mean that one mode of production is specifically Visigothic, and the other Muslim. Gutiérrez (according to Kirchner) was basically wrong. In Kirchner’s opinion, the domestic mode of production must be associated most (but not necessarily all) of the time with Berber tribal elements, who chose to live at a certain distance from the state centres of al-Andalus. In support of her contention, Kirchner pointed to the pottery associated with the Islamic occupation of Ibiza, in the Balearic Islands, which was mostly made by Berbers in the tenth century, at a time when more complex modes of production were in existence in many urban centres in the Peninsula. Kirchner further developed her ideas about Andalusi ceramics on the basis of material from the area in which her team works, and focused primarily on the technological conditions of production and distribution.\(^{27}\)

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\(^{27}\) H. Kirchner, ‘Las técnicas y los conjuntos documentales’, La cerámica de Yábisa. Catálog i estudi dels fons del Museu Arqueològic d’Eivissa i Formentera (Ibiza, 2002); and ‘Torneta y torno. Formas de producción, distribución y uso de la cerámica andalusí. El caso de Yábisa’, in A. Malpica and...
The major problem with Barceló’s and Kirchner’s ideas is that they never offered a theoretical alternative to Acién’s model, i.e., an alternative interpretation of the history of Andalusi society. However, this was never their aim. While Barceló and Kirchner never attempted to take into consideration the whole social context, in the manner of Acién, they did offer an in-depth analysis of the basic processes of production, something which cannot be found anywhere in Acién’s work. Despite the sometimes complex presentation of their theoretical background, Barceló’s and Kirchner’s works stand out for their remarkable coherence and consistency based on archaeological and written sources, the understanding of which has been gained and structured through many years of thorough research. These studies are currently a most valuable source of suggestions and ideas for anyone attempting to find alternatives to traditional and even not-so traditional models. Their major contribution consists precisely in being a permanent reminder for historians and archaeologists alike to keep on thinking about, and improving, the established interpretation of Andalusi society. It is largely in reaction to that interpretation that a new thesis on the origin of al-Andalus has been recently put forward, reformulating and adapting some of Acién’s ideas.

The state in al-Andalus

Acién proposed two different modes of production for early al-Andalus, and pointed to the tenth century as the historical moment in which one of them, the tributary, overcame the feudal mode of production (in which he included the tribal society), thus becoming the basis for the establishment of the Islamic state. In this way, the state was identified with the social formation typical for al-Andalus: had the state never appeared there would not have been any al-Andalus. Even though Acién drew inspiration from Guichard’s ideas, in rejecting tribalism as the key factor in the development of al-Andalus he was definitely moving in a different interpretive direction. In fact, Acién went as far as to suggest that the rebellions at the time of the fitna (the ‘anarchy’ period of the late ninth and early tenth century) were not inter-tribal conflicts, as Guichard had suggested in 1976, but confrontations...
between different Arab groups with interests in a territorial dominion based in ‘feudal’ ties.  

In the 1990s, the old debate between advocates and critics of feudalism turned into a debate about the role of the Islamic state, as opposed to tribalism, in the rise of al-Andalus. At stake in this new debate was the very nature of the Umayyad state. ‘Tribalists’ maintained that this state was the result of a reorganization of tribal relations between Arabs, Berbers and pre-Islamic settlers, which replicated the situation in the east. Critics pointed out that the process had already taken place in the east, and that it therefore did not need to begin in Iberia. Those who conquered the Visigothic kingdom were already members of a ‘post-tribal’ society who were bent on organizing a new state in al-Andalus, either as a dependent branch of the Caliphate or, at some point in the eighth century, as a separate state. A subsidiary, yet equally important debate surrounds the organization of the lands newly conquered in the Peninsula. ‘Tribalists’ hold that this organization was the result of a decentralized network of tribes and native communities; their opponents maintain that it was based on the optimizing and pacifying intervention of the state, which was enhanced in several areas by the inclusion in its apparatus of prominent elements of the Visigothic state. Most historians favour various combinations of these two extremes, with one or the other factor prevailing. Notwithstanding the historiographic significance of this debate, it has until now produced not a single study of pottery in favour of either interpretation. As we will now see, this is primarily because of the reorientation of ceramic studies, especially in reference to the early Middle Ages.

Evolution of pottery studies: the importance of territorial analyses

We have pointed out the reasons for which pottery studies flourished between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. However, given the time and energy spent on devising a general system of classification, the results fell far short of expectations, and in some cases even led to confusion. Equally disappointing were the attempts to demonstrate

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88 Guichard clarified his position on tribalism in al-Andalus in his Les musulmans de Valence et la reconquête (Xie–XIIe siècles) (Damascus, 1990). Acién, Entre el feudalismo y el Islam, pp. 64, 73, and 90–1 explicitly compares groups of different ethnic origin (Christians and Arabs) and presents their similar stratification in a seigneurial sense, as well as their practice of indiscriminate violence towards other groups, irrespective of their ethnicity.

89 Most prominent among the ‘tribalists’ were Barceló and Guichard, while the key figures among the advocates of a prominent role of the state were G. Martínez de Gros, L’idéologie Omeyyade: la construction de la légitimité du Califat de Cordoue (Xe–XIIe siècles) (Madrid, 1992); and E. Manzano, Conquistadores, emires y califas. Los Omeyas y la formación de al-Andalus (Barcelona, 2006).

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general development theories by means of information obtained directly from an examination of pottery, for there is a long conceptual gap between ceramic remains and such levels of abstraction. Therefore, the initial enthusiasm began to cool and hopes for easy solutions had to be invested elsewhere (GIS platforms are currently the prime candidate for that position).

But pottery studies were not altogether abandoned. Instead, their focus shifted to the study of local and regional assemblages. This followed basically the same approach as before, but with a greater awareness of regional variation. As a consequence, scholars interested in pottery continued to confuse the publication of ceramic assemblages with deriving knowledge from pottery analysis. The clearest exponent of this mode of thinking is M. Retuerce, a follower of Zozaya and the author of a very well-documented book on the ceramics from the Meseta.30

However, the new emphasis on regional patterns did spur the development of pottery studies. When publishing an assemblage from a particular region, it was relatively easy for a scholar to link the pottery under examination to the history of that region, and thus to produce more than just a mere presentation of pots. As a matter of fact, most regional studies were not concerned with pottery per se, but instead used ceramics as an object of study to support broader arguments about settlement patterns. In addition, since regional studies often employed representative samples of material, new approaches could be introduced without discarding old methodologies. While abandoning any attempt to devise a general system of pottery classification, most scholars did not abandon the idea of treating the whole of Andalusi pottery as a background for their own studies. Many, in fact, regarded the regionalization of pottery production and distribution as a fundamental feature of the archaeological record of Islamic Iberia.

Regional studies on early medieval assemblages have been carried out in many parts of the Peninsula, with only a few of them being components of broader projects.31 Because of the importance of the site – producing assemblages of more significance than anywhere else in Iberia – the studies of the pottery from Cordoba deserve special attention, despite their rather weak theoretical grounding and excessive preoccupa-

30 M. Retuerce, La cerámica andalusí de la meseta (Madrid, 1998).
tion with morphology and decoration.\textsuperscript{32} Special mention must also be made of the regional analyses carried out in south-eastern Spain since the early 1990s. We have already mentioned Gutiérrez’s work in the Alicante area in relation to her application of Acién’s model. R. Azuar and P. Reynolds also worked within this area, the latter producing an exemplary study of the fifth- to tenth-century pottery in the Vinalopó valley.\textsuperscript{33} The region of Jaén has been the object of new and exciting studies by V. Salvatierra and his team at the local university, some of them with quite innovative approaches.\textsuperscript{34} However, the University of Granada remains one of the most productive centres of research on the early medieval pottery of al-Andalus. The leading scholars involved in this work are members of a research group created in 1989, called Toponymy, History and Archaeology of the Kingdom of Granada (THARG). Initially led by A. Díaz, nowadays by A. Malpica, its main object of study is the region of Granada, particularly the territory of the thirteenth- to fifteenth-century Nasrid kingdom. While initially focusing on the late medieval and early modern period, THARG soon turned to questions regarding the development of Andalusi society. Fundamental for that change of emphasis was the publication in 1993 of a collection of studies on the early medieval pottery of the south of al-Andalus, which had been previously presented in 1990 at a conference in Salobreña (Granada). Participants in that conference included the field’s leading scholars – among them Acién, Barceló, Kirchner and Gutiérrez – who shared some of their main ideas and the results of their regional studies.\textsuperscript{35} The year of the


Most of the works dedicated to Cordoban Islamic pottery (and archaeology in general) can be found in the publications of the research group Sísifo of the University of Cordoba: \textit{Anales de Arqueología Cordobesa} and \textit{Anales de Arqueología Cordobesa}.


\textsuperscript{34} J.C. Castillo, \textit{La campiña de Jaén en época emiral (s. VIII–X)} (Jaén, 1998); S. Pérez, \textit{Las cerámicas omeyas de Marroquíes Bajos} (Jaén): un indicador arqueológico del proceso de islamización (Jaén, 2003).

\textsuperscript{35} A. Malpica (ed.), \textit{La cerámica almohade en el Sureste de al-Andalus} (Granada, 1993). A number of key regional studies have been published in this book, such as Gutiérrez, ‘La cerámica paleoandalusí del sureste peninsular (Tudmir): producción y distribución (siglos VII al X)’;
Salobreña conference also witnessed the publication of E. Motos’s detailed study of an early medieval assemblage in the region of the Vega of Granada. Pottery studies dedicated to specific regions or sites mushroomed during the subsequent years. Particularly important for the early Middle Ages are A. Gómez’s (on the coast of Granada) and M. Jiménez’s (on the land of Loja). Of all those projects, the most ambitious, however, is that dedicated to the systematic excavation of Madinah Ilbirah.

Excavations in Madinah Ilbirah: a new approach to early medieval pottery

At the official request of the Delegación de Cultura de la Junta de Andalucía (the regional heritage department), in 2001 THARG conducted a rescue excavation in the Cerro (Hill) del Sombrerete (Atarfe). Shortly after beginning the excavation, it became clear that archaeologists had stumbled upon a large eighth- to eleventh-century Islamic city. This was identified as Madinah Ilbirah, a city abandoned in the eleventh century. The site immediately attracted the interest of the entire research group, if only because it had not been disturbed by any major interventions in the entire period following its abandonment. This was a unique opportunity to study one of the first Islamic cities in al-Andalus and THARG director, A. Malpica, decided to use it to launch a major research project. Following two field surveys (2003 and 2004), which showed that the total area covered by the early medieval city must have been some 300 ha, in a discontinuous pattern, excavations began in earnest in 2005. Three campaigns have been carried out so far (2005, 2007 and 2009), in addition to another rescue excavation in 2006, which was also the first year of material study. A key element


E. Motos, El poblado medieval de «El Castillón» (Montefrío, Granada) (Granada, 1990).


Under regional Andalusian law, every campaign of archaeological excavation must be followed by a year of studying the materials found. The excavation seasons of 2005, 2007 and 2009 were therefore followed by three years of material study, 2006, 2008 and 2010.
of the results obtained so far is pottery, for it has been heavily used to
date the structures unearthed in three different areas of the city. The
excavation has revealed on one hand the ninth- and early tenth-century
phase of occupation, while the late tenth- and early eleventh-century
phase appears to have witnessed a remarkable growth of the city. The
two occupation phases identified so far show a transition from a pri-
marily rural society, in which the production and distribution of
pottery was organized around small individual workshops established in
non-urban settlements, to a society in which the production of pottery
was centralized in specialized, complex workshops with a high degree of
organization, which were most likely located in Ilbirah or in the neigh-
bouring cities.

Pottery has therefore been the main element employed to characterize
the phases of the site. However, the study of pottery discovered in
Ilbirah represents a major departure from previous approaches to
Andalusi ceramics. The two pottery specialists in the team, who are also
the authors of this article, were among the first in Spain to have system-
atically employed the British and American literature on pottery analysis
in order to deal with assemblages of Andalusi pottery. Equally signifi-
cant has been the influence of another member of THARG, E. Fernán-
dez, with important contributions on Andalusi ceramic technology. The
end result of these multiple influences has been the development of a new
methodology, which lays more emphasis on the quantification of tech-
ological and morphological features, while drawing inspiration from
Peacock’s concept of modes of production.

39 A. Malpica, M. Jiménez and J.C. Carvajal, ‘Estudio de la cerámica de la Alcazaba de Madinat
Ilbira (Cerro del Sombrerete, Atarfe)’, in Anuario Arqueológico de Andalucía 2006 (Granada)
Pago de los Tejoletes, 2006 (Madinat Ilbira, Atarfe, Granada)’, in Arqueología medieval,
available online at http://www.arqueologiamedieval.com/articulos/articulos.asp?ref=100>,
cerámica de Madinat Ilbira. El Pago de la Mezquita (campaña de 2007)’, in II Taller de la
cerámica. Cerámica medieval y historia económico-social. Problemas de método y casos de estudio
(forthcoming). For the 2001 campaign, see J.C. Carvajal, ‘La cerámica islámica del Sombre-
rete (Madinat Ilbira, Granada). Primera aproximación’, Arqueología y territorio medieval 12.1
(2001), pp. 133–73; J.C. Carvajal, ‘Nuevas aportaciones al estudio de la cerámica islámica del
Cerro del Sombrerete (Madinat Ilbira, Atarfe, Granada)’, in A. Malpica and J.C. Carvajal
(eds), Estudios de cerámica tardo-romana y altomedieval (Granada, 2008), pp. 405–65; J.C.
Carvajal, La cerámica de Madinat Ilbira (Atarfe) y el poblamiento altomedieval de la Vega de
Granada (Granada, 2008).

40 Most important was Peacock, Pottery, in addition to D. Peacock (ed), Pottery and Early
Commerce. Characterization and Trade in Roman and Later Ceramics (London, 1977); H.
Howard and E.L. Morris (eds), Production and Distribution: A Ceramic Viewpoint (Oxford,
1981); and S.E. van der Leeuw and A. Pritchard (eds), The Many Dimensions of Pottery
(Amsterdam, 1984).

41 Fernandez’s 2003 Ph.D. dissertation, which was known to most members of THARG, was
published as Tradición tecnológica de la cerámica de cocina almohade-nazarí (Granada, 2008).

42 Peacock, Pottery.
also invited comparison with early medieval pottery from other sites, which can now be dated on a firmer basis. In this way the ceramic remains from Ilbirah have begun to shed new light on several other sites of the Vega de Granada (the region in which Ilbirah is located): Cerro de la Solana de la Verdeja (fifth to ninth century), Cerro del Molino del Tercio (fifth to ninth century), Cerro de la Mora (seventh to tenth century), and Albaycín, the old residential quarter of Granada (from the ninth century to the present day).\textsuperscript{43} Moreover, research on Ilbirah has given impetus to investigating the links between early medieval and pre-Islamic ceramics, as instanced by the first workshop on late Roman and early medieval pottery organized in Granada in 2005. Further studies of early medieval Andalusi pottery have recently employed assemblages from such sites as Cerro del Castillejo de Nívar and the Madraza of Granada.\textsuperscript{44}

All these studies have refined to a considerable degree our understanding of the production and distribution of pottery in the region of the Vega de Granada from the arrival of the Muslims to the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate. Four different phases may be distinguished. The eighth- to ninth-century pottery of the first phase may be divided into two main groups, one of a clearly late antique technological tradition, the other characterized by a number of morphological and technological innovations with no analogies in previous centuries. This is however a far cry from identifying the handmade pottery or the pottery thrown on a tournette as of late antique tradition: on the one hand, there is plenty of wheel-made pottery in ceramic assemblages dating before the Muslim conquest; on the other, the domestic mode of production, which is commonly associated with pottery not thrown on a fast-turning wheel, is also attested in post-conquest assemblages attributed to newly arrived groups of immigrants (Fig. 3). During the second phase (ninth to tenth century) wheel-made pottery appears to have been predominant, while at the same time adopting several morphological and decorative (but not technological) elements of late antique tradition. This is not to say that there was anything like an integrated and unique tradition. Instead, a great variety of technological solutions

\textsuperscript{43} Carvajal, \textit{La cerámica de Madinat Ilbira}.

\textsuperscript{44} Excavations in the Madraza of Granada and in Cerro del Castillejo in Nívar took place in 2006–7 and 2007 respectively. Their results have not yet been published, but the situation promises to improve. For Nívar, see now M. Jiménez and J.C. Carvajal, ‘La cerámica del Castillejo de Nívar (siglos VI–XII)’, in \textit{II Taller de la cerámica. Cerámica medieval y historia económico-social. Problemas de método y casos de estudio} (forthcoming). The assemblages discovered in the Madraza have been dated to the tenth century, those from Nívar to the sixth and seventh centuries. This information has been kindly made available by the directors of excavation, A. Malpica and M. Jiménez. The proceedings of the 2005 workshop have been published in Malpica and Carvajal (eds), \textit{Estudios de cerámica tardorromana y almohedieval}.
were employed to produce similar vessels, an indication of a wide distribution of potters, each one of them producing for a neighbouring, local market – a phenomenon which may explain the localized production and distribution. At this point cities had not yet developed in the Vega de Granada, so urban markets were not attractive for master potters. A major innovation for this period is the (initially timid) appearance of glazed wares. While it is not currently possible to establish whether at least some of these wares were made in the Vega, glazed pottery is certainly a sign of long- or medium-distance trade (Fig. 4).

During the tenth century – the third phase in the development of Andalusi pottery – considerable changes were taking place in the Islamic society of the Vega. The production and distribution of pottery was now based in towns, specifically in Ilbírah, and the organization of labour involved higher levels of complexity, with nucleated pottery workshops of a larger scale of production. This phase witnessed the generalization of glazed ware, with frequent trade contacts between cities, which were apparently supported by the state. Cordoba and Bajjana, the ancient Almería, were the key components of this trade network (Fig. 5). The fall of the Umayyad Caliphate in the early eleventh century was a major political breakdown, which marks the beginning of the fourth phase. However, on close examination this political crisis does not seem to have had the major impact on social organization which might have been expected. In the Vega, the crisis of the
Caliphate translated into the rapid decline of Ilbirah. However, the alliance established with the North African Sinhaja tribe of the Zirids and the creation of a new capital in Granada contributed to the continuity of social organization, including the system of production and distribution of goods.
distribution of pottery, which had been established since the tenth century (Fig. 6).45

This four-phase chronology of social development may be extrapolated to other regions of al-Andalus, although not necessarily with the same chronological details. However, as a whole, this scenario nicely dovetails with the idea of a ‘tribalist’ origin of Andalusi society.46 In other words, this model supports the idea of a society in transition from a quasi-tribal form of organization to one of superior centralization by state authorities based in towns. That transition may also be regarded as an expansion and consolidation of the state at the expense of tribal society. It is remarkable that, in sharp contrast to the society of late antiquity, Andalusi towns (mudun) appear to have outlived not only political and military turmoil, but also the very structures responsible for their creation. Within and without al-Andalus, most towns created after the Muslim conquest survived the historical collapse of the Caliphate and have lasted to the present day.


See Guichard’s works cited above in nn. 5 and 28; Barceló’s, in n. 25; and Kirchner’s in n. 27.

See also A. Malpica: ‘La formación de una ciudad islámica: Madinat Ilbira’, in A. Malpica (ed.), *Ciudad y arqueología medieval* (Granada, 2006), pp. 65–85 and Carvajal’s works cited in n. 45.


46 See Guichard’s works cited above in nn. 5 and 28; Barceló’s, in n. 25; and Kirchner’s in n. 27.

See also A. Malpica: ‘La formación de una ciudad islámica: Madinat Ilbira’, in A. Malpica (ed.), *Ciudad y arqueología medieval* (Granada, 2006), pp. 65–85 and Carvajal’s works cited in n. 45.
present day. An advanced study of the pottery from Madinah Ilbirah and of other sites will undoubtedly clarify and refine the details of these conclusions.

Conclusion: the future of early medieval Andalusi studies

This article has presented the history of research on Andalusi pottery over the last thirty years or so. It has by now become apparent that the amount of data from new finds has increased exponentially. The same, however, is not true of the approaches research has taken into understanding these finds, particularly after the innovative work of the late 1970s and early 1980s undertaken in the context of a revival of interest in medieval archaeology. In that context, pottery was regarded as one of the most suitable categories of archaeological evidence for answering new questions about the organization of production and distribution in al-Andalus. However, with the gradual accumulation of data from both excavations and museum collections, it became clear that the information was too context-bound to provide meaningful solutions for questions of such a high level of abstraction. The usefulness of pottery assemblages for the formulation and testing of general theories of historical evolution appeared to be quite limited. Eventually the idea of a general system of classification for Andalusi pottery, similar to that devised for Roman pottery, had to be abandoned. Disappointment about the failure to accomplish such lofty goals may have been responsible for the diminishing popularity of pottery studies during subsequent decades. Nonetheless, there has been tremendous progress in the understanding of pottery production and distribution: indeed, Andalusi pottery is perhaps the best studied in the entire Islamic world. Although no unique system of classification was ever created, the effort to do so indirectly contributed to a better understanding of Andalusi ceramics. The works of such scholars as Rosselló, Zozaya and Bazzana have transformed this subfield of study into a point of reference for all archaeologists working on the early Middle Ages in Iberia.

Another important aspect of pottery studies during this period has been the increasing focus on regionalism. Current studies set the lens at the micro-regional or even site level, and use ceramics to approach local history. Irrespective of the positions or conclusions reached by various authors, this has so far been one of the most productive areas of current research. The result has been a multiplicity of sequences of change proposed for different regions, which are often neither coincidental nor parallel. This has enormously enriched the background of historical studies of Andalusi society. Knowledge of early medieval pottery has thus become a sine qua non for such studies.

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At this moment, and given the history of research presented above, a number of lines of future development can be distinguished. First, new approaches and methods are much needed for the medieval archaeology of the Iberian Peninsula (and not just for pottery studies). Methods that have been proved to work in other contexts need to be tested here as well, and their innovative potential revealed. Medieval archaeology is not an auxiliary discipline of medieval history, for it can by now formulate its own questions and answers, which are independent from those formulated by historians. This is especially evident for the early Middle Ages, a period of known scarcity of written sources, for the research of which the only hope is in the archaeological record.

Second, Andalusi pottery needs to be studied in its immediate context, with the aim of understanding its appearance and development. This context can now be framed in three distinct ways: the Iberian Peninsula (relations between al-Andalus and the Christian kingdoms); the Islamic world (relations between al-Andalus and the rest of Islam); and the Mediterranean region (the relations of al-Andalus to the systems and traditions connected to the fundamental axis of the Mediterranean region during the Middle Ages). This is a desideratum that goes well beyond the study of pottery and must be contemplated for the general discipline of Andalusi history and archaeology.

Finally, pottery is by now a fundamental ingredient in any approach to Andalusi society and economy, even if it has proved to be inappropriate for answering questions of a high degree of abstraction. It is therefore of crucial importance to use research on pottery to broaden the knowledge gained from other fields. Here again, it is significant that the analysis of early medieval materials has played a key role in challenging the traditional interpretation of Andalusi history. The problems associated with the study of Andalusi ceramics therefore run much deeper than simple methodological issues. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to presume that progress in the study of Andalusi pottery may very well stimulate research in medieval archaeology and history, particularly for the period of the so-called ‘Dark Ages’, much as it did thirty years ago.

Current practice, especially in Spain, allows for moderate optimism. One cannot miss the introduction of new approaches and the rise of young scholars, many of whom are striving to open up the field to new ideas in order to fill in the gaps left by traditional interpretations. At the same time, public administrative bodies responsible for heritage preservation and protection, as well as research institutions (mainly universities), still have little use for medieval archaeology, a discipline still associated more with art history and the preservation of historical monuments. As a consequence, scholars interested in the early Middle Ages have seen their research budgets reduced and the recognition of the
importance of their work diminished. One way out of this sad situation is to open up the discipline of Andalusi archaeology to the international community. Al-Andalus has always been treated as a marginal field in the Islamic world, more interesting to Iberian researchers than to scholars of medieval Islam in general. However, the enormous amount of information currently accumulated, the thorough organization of the existent data, and their relative accessibility for study (especially when compared to Islamic countries), make Iberia a very suitable place to do research on medieval Islam. With the exception of French scholars, few foreign researchers have taken notice of this state of affairs. The participation of Spain and Portugal in international missions of archaeological research could provide mutual enrichment to Iberian and foreign researchers. It is perhaps no accident that research on the early Middle Ages has shown the way for this kind of international cooperation. As scholars such as Guichard, Barceló and Acién have applied to al-Andalus methods and approaches from other parts of the world, they have not only contributed to the general knowledge of Islamic society (inside and outside al-Andalus), but have also made it more accessible to other researchers.47

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47 An exemplary application of this kind of comparative work is Chris Wickham’s monumental Framing the Early Middle Ages.