

A Bilingual Lead Seal from the Umayyad Conquest of the Iberian Peninsula

Un precinto bilingüe de plomo de la conquista omeya de la península ibérica

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Abstract

This paper presents a hitherto unknown early Arabic-Latin bilingual lead seal depicting a peace pact (*muṣālaḥa*). The similarities of the Latin signs on one of its faces with those found on a Visigothic monetary issue attributed to the city of Seville, lead us to suggest that this seal could be from the earliest phase of the Umayyad conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, and that it probably alludes to the first peace pact established by Mūsā b. Nuṣayr with that city.

Key words: Umayyad conquest; lead seals; primary sources; numismatics; Visigoths.

Resumen

Se presenta un sello de plomo bilingüe árabe-latino, hasta ahora desconocido, que representa un pacto de paz (*muṣālaḥa*). Las similitudes de los signos latinos de una de sus caras con los encontrados en una emisión monetaria visigoda atribuida a la ciudad de Sevilla nos llevan a sugerir que este sello podría ser de la fase más temprana de la conquista omeya de la península ibérica, y que probablemente alude al primer pacto de paz establecido por Mūsā b. Nuṣayr con dicha ciudad.

Palabras clave: conquista omeya; precintos de plomo; fuentes primarias; numismática; visigodos.

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To Gonzalo Cores Uría,
in memoriam

In the past decades our knowledge of the 711 Umayyad conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, and thereon the rapid dismantling Visigoth kingdom of Toledo, has been enriched by the appearance of a whole series of previously unknown lead seals all bearing early Arabic script.¹ The lead seals, notwithstanding their plain unadorned appearance, have given us a wide spectrum of possible insights as to the administrative complexity and nature of the said conquest. Some give us names of governors,² many of peace or capitulation pacts established with various cities or regions,³ others of poll taxes on the new subjects of specific localities, also those of redistribution of properties and wealth,⁴ of the ‘licit in al-Andalus’⁵ and of booty taking among others, in addition to a significant number of a very diverse group which due to their fragmentary nature still remain to be deciphered.⁶ In essence, the lead seals of this early period indicate, even better than the coins, the imposition of a sophisticated and very energetic tax gathering system as recorded by the anonymous Latin Chronicle of 754, the only source

written in the Iberian Peninsula that is contemporary to the Umayyad conquest and its governors.⁷

Recently we have been able to study a novel type of seal held in a private collection from Seville which is quite different from all those previously known. The uniqueness of the said object is that it is bilingual, Arabic script on one area with a couple of Latin letters on the other. On the Arabic side, written retrograde, is the single word *muṣālaḥa*, مصلحة,⁸ literally, ‘peace pact’, although the term would be better understood as a negotiated capitulation whose actual conditions could vary significantly from one pact to another. On the other side we have in Latin just two separate characters: an inverse S, and a P (Fig.1). The data of the seal is:

I Area: مصلحة
II Area: 2P
16.49 g; 30 (length) x 18.20 (width) x 4 (thickness) mm.

This brief two lettered Latin legend engraved in the second area of the seal is epigraphically very close to the same two characters as found on one typology of the so-called Visigoth coppers,



Fig. 1. Bilingual seal of a retrograde *muṣālaḥa* with SP attributed to Seville.

¹ For the first paper on the subject, see Ibrahim, “Evidencias de precintos”. See “Nuevos documentos”, with previous bibliography. More recently, Sénac and Ibrahim, “Notes sur des sceux de la conquête” and Sénac and Ibrahim, *Los precintos de la conquista*.

² Sénac and Ibrahim, *Los precintos de la conquista*, n° 1-14, see also Ibrahim, “A new lead seal”.

³ Sénac and Ibrahim, *Los precintos de la conquista*, n° 34-41, see also Gaspariño and Ibrahim, “Nuevo ‘precinto de paz’ (*muṣālaḥa*)”.

⁴ Sénac and Ibrahim, *Los precintos de la conquista*, n° 42-55.

⁵ Sénac and Ibrahim, *Los precintos de la conquista*, n° 87-94. On the problematic term *ḡaza* (‘licit’) in the seals, see Ibrahim, “Additions to the lead seals”, p. 128 ff.

⁶ Sénac and Ibrahim, *Los precintos de la conquista*, n° 58-73; 74-94; 95-111, respectively.

specifically the SP types attributed to the city of Seville. The contended Visigoth copper has been rather polemically discussed since they were first made known in mid-1990s by Miquel Crusafont.⁹ The initial reticence to accept this new material by a part of Spanish numismatic researchers seems to have been slowly overcome by the numerically growing material evidence.¹⁰ However, this continues to raise various questions, in terms of chronology and

⁷ López Pereira, *Crónica mozárabe de 754*.

⁸ The *mad* in the word *muṣālaḥa* is not put, which is the usual in the early Kufic script of the lead seals.

⁹ Crusafont, *El sistema monetario visigodo*.

¹⁰ Pliego, “The Circulation of Copper Coins”.

its role in Visigoth Hispania, which indicates that we are still at a very early stage of investigation.¹¹

It is possible to draw a certain parallel between the seals of conquest and the Visigoth coppers. In both cases, the crude technique and the poor state of preservation may explain the difficulty in recovering them archaeologically and therefore their near-total absence from the inventories of excavations.¹² Both materials have become known quite recently, and their late incorporation into numismatic research is also explained by their limited attractiveness to collectors, although in both cases the initial interest has originated precisely from the latter. In fact, their interest in the historical data has brought a considerable, and hitherto unknown, repertoire to the surface. Although recently some copper Visigoth coins have been registered in archaeological excavations,¹³ to date, none of the many Arabic lead seals have so been found.¹⁴

The Visigoth bronzes showing the SP legen—as in this Umayyad seal—evidence various peculiarities which distinguish them from the rest of the known typologies. It is the most homogeneous series counting with two denominations ranging the largest between 1.30 and 1.45 g and the smallest weighing about 0.30 g.¹⁵ Likewise, it is this typology that shows the characters SP in both denominations—possibly sometimes SPL in the heaviest—,¹⁶ clearly attributable, in our opinion, to the city of Seville (Fig. 2).

Some authors, however, have suggested that SP would not allude to the city of *Hispalis*

but to *Spania*,¹⁷ the name of the province that the Byzantines gave to the territory of the Iberian Peninsula that they controlled for almost 70 years,¹⁸ implicitly assuming that the coins were issued by official Byzantine authorities. This suggestion finds a first obstacle in its adaptation to the Byzantine coinage since it is not a common or widespread practice among the Byzantine authorities to indicate the mint of their issues.¹⁹ But in addition, it should be assumed that these authorities haven't engraved the name of a mint but the name of a province *Spania*, on these rude and diminutive bronzes without allusion to the authority.²⁰ The findings of the SP type in the limited territory that was occupied by the Byzantine province are negligible, as is evident in Málaga—precisely an area that claims to have numerous findings in archaeological context—the same in Cartagena and the Balearic Islands. In contrast to this dearth, we have an overwhelming frequency of SP type finds in Seville and its immediate surroundings, as has been previously dealt by one of us. The most convincing evidence, however, is the fact that in Leovigild's first tremisses—the gold coins—the name of this city is abbreviated in a similar way (Fig. 3). The very characteristics of this type take us back to the reign of Leovigild (c. 568-586), both in terms of its typology, such as the front bust in the larger denomination as well as the cross on steps in the smaller, which were in-

¹⁷ Vico, Cores Gomendio and Cores Uría, *Corpus Nummorum Visigothorum*, p. 115.

¹⁸ On the byzantine province of *Spania* see Vallejo Givés, *Bizancio y la España tardoantigua* and Vizcaino, *La presencia bizantina en Hispania*. It is generally accepted that the Byzantines minted tremisses in *Spania* between the mandates of Justinian I (527-565) and Heraclius (610-641) (see Grierson, "Una ceca bizantina en España", although this is not supported by the findings. This evidence is made up of about thirty pieces preserved in private collections, some of which are somehow related to Spain, see more recently Bartlett, Oddy and Morrisson, "The Byzantine gold coinage of *Spania*").

¹⁹ According to Ph. Grierson "Byzantine mint authorities made only occasional efforts to indicate where and when coins were struck", see Grierson, *Byzantine Coins*, p. 20.

²⁰ The uncommon allusions to the name of province are exceptional and limited to province-islands, as the folles issues in Cyprus with mint-mark KVPR—during Heraclius' reign c. 626-629 (see Hahn, *Moneta Imperii Byzantini*, henceforth MIB, III, p. 198), Sicily—a *decanummi* issue by Maurice Tiberius (582-602) probably in Syracuse with mint-mark SECILIA allusive to Sicily (MIB, I, pp. 136-137). There are also peculiar folles countermarked with the mark of Sicilia (SCLS) from the reign of Heraclius (610-641) (MIB III, p. 104) and Sardinia (S) (c. 690 to c. 720).

¹¹ See recently Pliego, "Rethinking the *minimi*".

¹² Regarding the Visigothic copper, at the time of the publication of Crusafont's work (*El sistema monetario*) it was limited to Valencian finding of L'Illa de Cullera (see Mateu y Llopis, "Hallazgos Monetarios XV" and "Bronces imperiales y vándalos"). In those articles Mateu y Llopis considered those still unknown peninsular series as *minimi* Byzantines.

¹³ Pliego, "Rethinking the *minimi*". The most recent ones have been recovered in València la Vella (Riba-Toja de Túria), a settlement relatively close to L'Illa de Cullera, see Pliego and Caldeés Aquilué, "Nuevos hallazgos".

¹⁴ Even though all the French seals come from Ruscino (see Marichal and Sénac, "Ruscino"), they were recovered by two archaeologists with the use of a metal detector, directly from the many discarded mounds left over from a near century of previous archaeological digs. On this subject see Ibrahim, "Additions to the lead seals", p. 115, n. 2.

¹⁵ Crusafont, *El sistema monetario*, p. 48. See also Fernández Flores, Pliego and Carvajal, "Nuevos hallazgos de bronzes visigodos", pp. 285-286.

¹⁶ Several specimens seem show the L linked to the P.



Fig. 2. The Visigothic series with SP attributed to Seville; PL linked.

troduced as an innovation in the tremissis of this monarch, and in terms of the allusion to the mint, since it was also under Leovigild's rule that the name of the issuing city began to be introduced on the gold coins.



Fig. 3. Reverses of Leovigild's tremisses of *Ispali* with SP and SPL linked. (American Numismatic Society 2016.29.12; Private Collections) (Pliego, 46b.1 and 48 c.1).

The similarity between the Latin characters on this Umayyad seal and those shown on the coins of the Visigothic coins attributed to Seville is evident. It is interesting to note that many of those coins including the retrograde S, while the P, sometimes has a noticeably short stem and a not excessively developed loop, both of which are characteristics of this seal. A vertical line between the letters of the seal appears in the place where the vertical stem of the cross would be in the Visigothic bronze (Fig. 4). This simple stem replacing the cross was first done in some of the earliest gold coins of the Umayyad of Damascus in which the Byzantine solidus with reverse of cross on steps typology were imitated, precisely the typology of the minor Visigothic denomination with SP. The truncated cross is directly related to the Quranic ayas where the crucifixion of Jesus is flatly denied as a factual event and affirmatively recalled as spurious.²¹ The

²¹ Quran, *Sūrat al-Nisā'*, 4,157-158.



Fig. 4. Bilingual seal with SP and stem in between and Visigothic coin with SP and cross.

stem on steps also was used in the bronze coinage²² and is present in the transitional fractional gold coins struck during Mūsā b. Nuṣayr's stay in the Iberian Peninsula²³ (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Reverse of a fractional coin of Mūsā b. Nuṣayr.

The correct transmission of Latin characters SP contrast with the peculiarity of the retrograde writing of the *muṣālahā* formula of the obverse (Fig. 6), an oddity unknown until now among the relatively large repertoire of such seals naming other Iberian cities: the engraver who made the seal adopted the mentioned usual spelling during the Visigoth period,²⁴ but it was perhaps his lack of knowledge of the Arabic language, which lead him to record the message of this word in a retrograde manner.



Fig. 6. Area I of the bilingual seal with the image rotated horizontally on its axis for a correct reading.

Seville according the various Arabic sources was taken twice during the early conquest period, the first directly by Mūsā b. Nuṣayr in the year 93H after a relatively brief siege.²⁵ But very shortly after, while Mūsā was away besieging Merida, the city of Seville rebelled with the help of detachments from Beja and Niebla resulting in the killing of the small garrison of some 80 soldiers that had been left behind. The city had to be quickly retaken by his son 'Abd al-'Azīz in the same year.²⁶ Seville's rebellion and slaughter of the small garrison could have been within the laws of war of the period sacked and totally reduced to booty taking. Nevertheless, being one of the largest and most prosperous cities of the subjugated Visigoth kingdom, this option was

²² Walker, *Catalogue of the Arab-Byzantine*, pp. 30-42. See 64-67.

²³ E.g. Walker, *Catalogue of the Arab-Byzantine*, pp. 76-78.

²⁴ Monogram which appears not only in the Visigoth bronzes, but also in in other objects of the period. See a ring found in Osuna (Seville) with a remarkably similar monogram in Crusafont, *El sistema monetario*, p. 22.

²⁵ *Aḥbār Mağmū'a*, p. 16; Ibn 'Idārī al-Marrākuṣī, *Al-Bayān*, vol. II, p. 14; Al-Maqqarī, *Naḥḥ*, vol. I, p. 269; Al-Aṭīr, *Al-Kāmil*, n° 224, p.17; Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*, p. 196. References taken from Gaspariño García, *Historia de Al-Andalus*, III, pp. 77-78.

²⁶ *Aḥbār Mağmū'a*, p.18; Ibn 'Idārī al-Marrākuṣī, *Al-Bayān*, vol. II, p. 15; Al-Maqqarī, *Naḥḥ*, vol. I, p. 271; Al-Aṭīr, *Al-Kāmil*, n° 224, p.18; Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*, pp. 196-197. See Gaspariño, *Historia de Al-Andalus*, III, pp. 84-85.

evidently not thought to be the most beneficial in the long term and a second peace pact was seemingly negotiated. The establishment of this metropolis as the first capital of this new Umayyad province till 98H,²⁷ and the material existence of quite a few lead seals of the peace pact of Seville are both testimony to that eventuality.²⁸ The question remains as to which of these two peace pacts the present seals is to be attributed, to the first very brief one of Mūsā b. Nuṣayr or to that of its permanent re-conquest by his son ‘Abd al-‘Azīz?

Before trying to answer that question we must mention the first coins minted in the Iberian Peninsula by the conquerors, the so-called transitional coinage which were adapted from the Byzantine monetary system of the exarchate of Africa. The first dinars were struck exclusively with Latin legend from the year 93H to 95H, coinciding with Mūsā b. Nusayr’s stay in the Peninsula, and they include the mint name *Span(ia)*.²⁹ In the single year 98H the bilingual dinars in Latin and Arabic were minted and the mint appears as *Spania* on the Latin side and al-Andalus on the Arabic one.³⁰ The bilingual dinars are the first dated of Arabic writing on a material evidence and very importantly, the first dated testimony of the geographic—and enigmatic—name of Al-Andalus. A mint name clearly identified with *Spania*, a toponym reinforced by the representation of a central star representing Hesperides.³¹

²⁷ Actually Al-Andalus was for most of the near half century of Damascus Umayyad governorship not a separate entity but a sub province of Ifrīqiya and from which most of its governors were named.

²⁸ Sénac and Ibrahim, *Los precintos de la conquista*, n° 19-27.

²⁹ On the transitional coinage see Balaguer, *Emisiones transicionales*; in particular, on the epigraphic Latin series, see pp. 67-72. Until a few decades ago, there were hardly any findings of transitional dinars (see e.g. Pliego, “El dinar epigráfico latino”). In recent times these issues have aroused renewed interest. The direct consequence has been the proliferation of forgeries, having been registered not only in auctions of commercial firms in some cases of certain prestige, but what is more worrying, some of these forgeries have reached scientific journals (Ibrahim and Gaspariño García, “Dubious coins”).

³⁰ See Balaguer, *Emisiones transicionales*, pp. 69-75. See the recent work of Ariza, “Los dinares bilingües”, even though we do not share some of the speculative opinions put forward there.

³¹ We share the reasonable opinion of Delgado (*Estudios de numismática*, p. 56) on the identification of the star at the centre of the first area of the Latin dinars as an allusion to Iberia-Hesperides. See Ariza, “Los dinares bilingües”, for a dissenting opinion.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that it was in 98H—the date of the first bilingual dinars—when both innovations first took place as sometimes has been assumed. In fact, it is quite probable that many of the undated lead seals could be prior to the bilingual dinars, as one of us has already proposed.³² Furthermore, we can assume that many of the numerous undated fals were minted before 98H. This is clearly the case of the dated 92H Arabic fals readily found in the Iberian Peninsula as Codera³³ and Walker³⁴ listed, and the dates 93H and 95H of the same series,³⁵ dates that would perfectly cover Mūsā’s stay in the Iberian Peninsula.

The exclusive use of Latin script in all the transitional coinage struck during Mūsā’s stay in the Iberian Peninsula could perhaps point to the likelihood that this seal could have been the early work of any one of the non-Arab mint masters.³⁶ A mint master who was familiar with the Byzantine tradition of the old mint of Ifrīqiya that the Arab conquerors had inherited. Mūsā could have brought them along from Ifrīqiya to monetize the expected booty to be taken in the same coinage as his army, the Arab *ḡund*, had long been acquainted with since 85H (704-705).³⁷ Furthermore, the fact that the Arabic word for peace treaty *muṣālaḥa*, مصلحة, was written retrograde on the present seal could indicate, as stated above, that the engraver was not intimately knowledgeable in the Arabic script of his overlords.³⁸

All this and the singular use of the Latin letters SP could very well suggest, on the one side, that the seal could be of the very first brief taking of Seville by Mūsā in 93H. On the other hand, it cannot be ruled out that the Visigoth bronzes

³² See Ibrahim, “Nuevos documentos”, p. 149, fig. 3.

³³ Codera, *Tratado de numismática*, pl. II, 8.

³⁴ Walker, *Catalogue of the Arab-Byzantine*, n° 944-949. Note that this author gives five die varieties for this coin, an indication of its commonness.

³⁵ Walker, *Catalogue of the Arab-Byzantine*, n° 950 and B. 60.

³⁶ The previous gold solidus of Mūsā’s governorship of Ifrīqiya was also all done in abbreviated Latin, see Walker, *Catalogue of the Arab-Byzantine*, pp. 64-73.

³⁷ Walker, *Catalogue of the Arab-Byzantine*, p. 64, n° 168.

³⁸ A new lead seal of Talavera—probably of the same period as the one here analyzed—evidences a retrograde form of an Arabic word (Gaspariño and Ibrahim, “Importante adición”). In addition, there is another Narbonne seal with a retrograde legend, although in this case, it may have been accidental, resulting from the manufacturing process of the seal (Sénac and Ibrahim, *Los precintos de la conquista*, n° 64).

were still in circulation at the time of the Arab conquest and that is from where the SP legend was probably copied from. The obvious fact that this seal is in relation to a ‘peace pact’ with the specific city should confirm the association between the abbreviation SP in relation to Hispalis as opposed to other, more intricate and difficult to prove opinions not backed by any acceptable evidence.³⁹ Also, needless to say, SP for Hispalis on the seal is to be fully differentiated from the abbreviation SPN standing for a geographic name *Spania* as it appears on the transitional Latin coinage of Mūsā.⁴⁰ Evidently a peace treaty, a *muṣālaḥa*, could be done with an administrative entity, like a city, and not possible with an abstraction as would be a geographic area.

The seal presented is to date a single example, but undoubtedly future finds may open up further insights. In fact, despite being tiny, badly struck, worn out and corroded both, Visigoth copper and Umayyad seals, are a valuable material evidence that may help us rethink the transition from Late Antiquity to the Iberian Medieval Period.

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³⁹ See notes 17 and 21.

⁴⁰ Balaguer, *Emisiones transicionales*, pp. 125-141, n^o 1-37.

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