

RESEÑAS

BONGIANINO, UMBERTO, *The Manuscript Tradition of the Islamic West. Maghribī Round Script and the Andalusī Identity*, Edinburgh Studies in Islamic Art, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 504 pp.

*Algo se ha hecho, pero poco.*¹ In spite of significant improvements made over the last century, the overall assessment Codera made in 1898 on the state of Arabic paleography still seems valid regarding certain topics. These include, for instance, what are generally known as the Maghribī scripts, which have always received less attention than scripts that developed in the Middle East. As clearly stated in the Introduction, in fact, the rationale behind Bongianino's paper is to address the "inadequacy of modern scholarship on Maghribī manuscripts" (p. 2). More specifically, his main concern is to investigate what he calls the "Andalusī identity", i.e., the socio-cultural identity of the people of al-Andalus, and the northwest Maghreb, as expressed in the distinctive — and easily recognizable — nature of their script. His methodological approach is primarily paleographical. The collected data is contextualized in terms of chronology and geography thanks to a thorough analysis of the most relevant Arabic primary sources. This covers the western part of the Arab-Islamic territory, in a period stretching from the 3rd/9th to the 6th/12th c., which corresponds to the chronological range of the dated manuscripts present in Bongianino's corpus. Based on a paleographical examination of the *testimonia*, he provides his own categorization of Maghribī scripts, corroborated by a brand-new taxonomy (summed up at pp. 358-359), the reliability and applicability of which are left to the judgement of Arabic paleographers ("it is now up to the scholarly community to decide whether this taxonomy should be adopted or reconsidered", p. 359).

¹ Codera, "Paleografía árabe", p. 302.

Chapter One serves as an introduction, setting out the main historical and epistemological categories that will guide the reader throughout the book. Maghribī script, labeled by the author as "Maghribī Round Script" owing to the distinctive roundness of the letterforms, is defined on the basis of its principal geographical and temporal references. At this point, special attention is devoted to distinguishing it from ancient *Ifrīqī* scripts, which developed early on in the dynamic intellectual environment of Kairouan — the latter primarily concerned with the formalization and spread of Mālikī *fiqh*. The chapter ends with a useful overview of modern scholarship on Maghribī script, mentioning all major contributions in the field.

After the introductory remarks provided in Chapter One, Chapter Two begins with a discussion of 3rd/9th-century Umayyad al-Andalus. Literary and material evidence converge in establishing Cordova as the most prominent center of scholarship, so that "the political and cultural capital of the Umayyad caliphate certainly played an essential role in the codification of Maghribī round scripts, as well as in their transmission to provincial centres such as Toledo" (pp. 88-89). However, as Bongianino also stresses, the paucity of manuscripts from this early period requires extreme caution; indeed, the chapter only lists 12 surviving copies from this period. The issue of a Latin-Visigothic substrate influencing the Arabic book culture of early Umayyad al-Andalus is definitely the most fascinating section overall. The author provides a thorough analysis of the issue drawing upon earlier works by van Koningsveld (on codicological aspects), and D'Ottone (on paleographical observations regarding the bilingual fragment

in Vat.lat.12900).² The examination is based on well-considered manuscript evidence — great attention is paid to the *Sigüenza Bifolio* (the Vat. lat.12900) now in the Vatican Library — in order to identify potential elements of Latin influence on Arabic books of al-Andalus in terms of their codicological composition as well as any paleographical interconnections. Eventually, he concludes that “decisive evidence for the direct influence of Visigothic scripts on the origin of Maghribī round scripts has yet to be produced” (p. 116).

Chapter Three focuses on the period of the *tā'ifa* kingdoms (402/1013-487/1094), characterized by the diaspora of Cordovan scholars throughout al-Andalus, which led to the rise of new flourishing centers of scholarship. Even though the capital remained a dynamic environment, it was now almost deprived of the royal patronage that had marked the former period. The chapter is organized so as to provide an overview of the intellectual enterprise of these new cultural centers — Seville, Badajoz, Toledo, Almería, Granada, and Murcia — where new regional scribal variants are said to have originated, as in the case of the *ḥaṭṭ Iṣbīlī* (“Sevillian script”). Unfortunately, the little information in our possession, as well as the extremely limited material evidence available, allows only tentative hypotheses to be made, as in the case of item 46, whose Mašriqī connotations could have multiple explanations (pp. 138-139).

With the Almoravids (second half of the 5th/11th-first half of the 6th/12th c.) and, more importantly, the Almohads (second half of the 6th/12th-second half of the 7th/13th c.), who are discussed in Chapter Four, the script is invested, according to Bongianino, with marked ideological connotations. Indeed, he goes as far as to speak of the “ideological deployment of Maghribī round scripts” (p. 361). In this period, the binomial script-identity appears inextricable; the author talks of a “stylistic *koiné*” used from al-Andalus to the northwest Maghreb, emphasizing the strong link between the Mağribī script — as a vehicle of identity — and its political exploitation. As a matter of fact, almost all the manuscripts mentioned are linked to high-ranking personalities (often the ruler himself) and they had a marked

propagandist purpose. In his description of the Almohads’ manuscript production in the Conclusion, the author states that “royal illuminated manuscripts and chancery documents represented, and indeed proclaimed, the complete assimilation of Andalusī calligraphic styles and scribal practices, as a way of making the Almohad doctrine palatable to the Andalusī elites and portraying the new rulers less as Berbers fanatics and barbarians and more as cultivated revivers of religious belief, an aim that the Almoravids before them never quite managed to achieve” (p. 361).

In Chapter Five, the last before the Conclusion, Bongianino discusses Qur’ānic and chancery scripts. As far as the former are concerned, considering the nature of the manuscripts involved, his observations mainly concern calligraphical and decorative notes. While drawing extensively on previous studies, especially with regard to earlier manuscripts — such as the two exemplars from the *Qubbat al-ḥazna* now kept at the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul (Q1, Q2) —, the author laments the absence of comparative studies devoted to the Qur’āns in Mağribī script that he considers part of a continuum (pp. 310-311). As regards chancery scripts, given the few extant documents — the corpus numbers just eight documents from the 6th/12th c. —, the author focuses on individual topics, in particular on the issue of the sign-manual (Ar. *a lāma*) in Almohad documents, and the use of *Mağribī tuluṭ* scripts therein.

Bongianino thoroughly explores the identity-via-script issue, which is the *trait d’union* linking different epochs and territories within the book. In particular, among the most interesting developments is how he manages to explore the social dimension of the phenomenon; throughout the work he is able to reconstruct an important element of the cultural identity of the Mağribī book, i.e., the social element. This is done by focusing on the main individuals involved in the process of creating a manuscript, appropriately contextualized within a specific time and place. In this context, the definition of the book as “a book about people” (p. 363) seems consistent with its setup and its contents — cf. Appendix III, devoted to “Copyists and Illuminators of Dated Manuscripts” (pp. 385-392). Another strength to be lauded is the author’s use of Arabic primary sources; indeed, apart from

² D’Ottone, “Al-ḥaṭṭ al-mağribī”; van Koningsveld, “Christian-Arabic Manuscripts”.

being satisfactory in terms of quantity, they are also appropriately linked to the content of the chapter in which they are quoted. The bibliography is largely complete, covering a significant number of primary sources and a solid amount of secondary literature, including references to numerous and important printed catalogues.

As far as the paleographical content is concerned, Bongianino's considerations do not always appear consistent. To interpret the distinctive graphic form of the particle *fī*, for instance, already found in manuscripts of the 3rd/9th c., as a case of *yā' rāġi'a* (p. 101) does not seem appropriate if one considers manuscripts that, while showing *fī* written in that particular form, do not present *yā' rāġi'a* anywhere. The same applies to later Maġribī manuscripts. Other graphic peculiarities are loosely associated with Maġribī script. The case of the "rise of a word's baseline when ending with *yā' rāġi'a*, to better accommodate its tail" (p. 104) does not seem consistent enough to be considered a peculiarity of the script, even in the manuscript *testimonia* that the author himself presents (cf. Fig. 2.11). Again, the "initial *lām-mīm* in the shape of an *alif* forming a small loop near the baseline, to the right of the shaft" (p. 104) is a graphic trait that is also so widespread in Eastern manuscripts that it makes little sense to list it among the specific traits of Maġribī script. Regarding taxonomy, major doubts emerge with at least two of the labels: the definition of "semi-Maġribī script" (p. 188), arguably influenced by the chancery script, appears forced and (in the present state) unsupported by material evidence; item 63, mentioned as the only evidence of this, can hardly justify reference to it as a scribal variant *per se*. Likewise, the categorization of a "fine Maġribī bookhand" (pp. 242-243) seems to be more related to subjective, artistic considerations about the script rather than paleographical observation.

Bongianino brings together a total of 252 manuscripts, stretching from 270/883 to 600/1204, a corpus described as "comprehensive, without significant lacunae" (p. 8). Some considerations need to be made in this regard. If we do not take into account Qur'āns, documents, *fiqh*, and *ḥadīth* manuscripts, the corpus narrows down to 96 manuscripts. Of these, 46 manuscripts belong to fields — lexicography, philology, grammar, linguistics and phonetics — extremely close to those previously mentioned, since

they were preparatory books in the formation/ curriculum of *fuqahā'* and *muḥadditūn* (as the author himself affirms at p. 78). Hence, if we also consider that a great many of them are high-quality products (such as item 76, a copy of al-Zubaydī's *Muḥtaṣar al-'ayn*), they can be rightly considered indicative of the same scholarly circles and the same scribal practices. Science, on the contrary, is the least represented subject in the corpus, with a total of 19 manuscripts — 16 belonging to the field of medicine alone. This is rather regrettable if we consider the high levels achieved by Andalusian scientists in their endeavors, especially during the period of 'Abd al-Raḥmān III (r. 316/929-350/961) and al-Ḥakam II (r. 350/961-366/976), and throughout the whole 5th/11th c., which is generally considered the "Golden Age" of Andalusian science. All in all, while acknowledging that the extant material mostly consists of *ḥadīth* compilations and Mālikī *fiqh* (as pointed out at p. 362), Bongianino's corpus can be defined as "comprehensive". However, it does not seem reasonable to consider it "without significant lacunae" given such limited extension. More importantly, these observations on the corpus also impact on the identity-via-script issue, that is, the overall framework of the study. As remarked above, the topic is generally well outlined and developed, but my impression is that the cultural identity issue could have been contextualized to a greater degree, and thus investigated according to the circumstances of specific periods and the respective extant material evidence and literary references. Manuscript production in the Almohad age provides a fitting example: almost all the manuscripts analyzed are lavish and well-executed products, mostly related to royal or high-ranking patrons, executed by master calligraphers or well-versed and particularly skillful copyists, that are often linked to the political sphere. The most telling examples here regard the works of Ibn Tūmart, "most of them lavishly illuminated and ascribable to royal scriptoria" (p. 205). As a matter of fact, the whole 6th/12th c. is generally defined by the author as "the age of the master calligraphers in al-Andalus and Northwest Africa" (p. 237). How can such material evidence be considered representative of a socio-cultural identity in all its complexity? Perhaps, instead of attempting to define an "Andalusī identity", the author might have shifted his focus towards specific

centers and/or environments according to the type of evidence we have for each historical period. Leaving all-encompassing claims aside and limiting the analyses to specific contexts might well have guaranteed a better grasp of the *milieux* under discussion and, consequently, a more precise definition of them. Indeed, it is Bongianino himself who indicates the great deal of work that lies ahead of Arabic paleographers regarding the identification, study, and cataloguing of Magribī manuscripts, many of which still await proper investigation; this must be undertaken by adopting a methodology, which, as Bongianino wisely suggests, also takes codicology into account (p. 362). All in all, although 125 years have passed, Codera's assessment still appears to be quite fitting. *Algo se ha hecho, pero poco.*

Bibliography

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