

Costumes of al-Andulus: the Umayyad Caliphate

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Introduction

Historically, the costumes of Moorish Spain have not been well documented due to language barriers and the comparative rarity of primary sources. Despite this, some periods such as the 13th and 15th centuries have already been thoroughly explored. This paper will survey the costumes a less well known era, that of the caliphate of al-Andalus.

Historical context

The Umayyad Caliphate is a tantalizing period in the history of Moorish Spain. In just over a century, al-Andalus reached its height of glory, then self-destructed from political pressure. Abd ar-Rahman III became amir of al-Andalus in 921, and proclaimed himself Caliph in 929 to rival the Fatimid Caliphate established in Tunisia in 909. Using the Abbasid court in Baghdad as his inspiration, Abd ar-Rahman pursued a policy of caliphal splendor, building pleasure palaces as well as public works, patronizing artists of every sort, and overawing visitors with the richness and stateliness of his court. This period marked a high point for sumptuous clothing, since that was one of the most visible ways of advertising the glory of the Umayyad Caliphate. The caliphate came to an abrupt end in 1031, after nearly thirty years of weak or false caliphs and civil war.

The first seventy or so years of the caliphate were marked by relative political stability. This stability allowed the disparate elements of Andalusian society to interact

with each in comparative peace, and clothing became an increasingly important way to sharpen the blurring lines between classes and ethno-religious affiliations. There were Muslims of true Arab descent; of Berber descent; or descended from Christians who converted to Islam. There were the Christians who adopted the Moorish culture, if not the Muslim faith, as well as the monks and ascetics who tried to rescue their coreligionists from the perils of Moorish ways. And of course there were the Jews. Add the different social classes to this ethno-religious milieu, and you have a society marked by divisions, which were often emphasized by differences in clothing.

The Sources

Compared to the sources that exist for later period and/or European costume, the evidence for clothing trends under the caliphate is relatively rare. Moreover, interpreting that evidence can be a challenge. Both pictorial and literary sources survive for Moorish costume during the Umayyad caliphate, but it is often difficult or impossible to correlate the terms mentioned in the texts with the garments shown in contemporary art. The pictorial sources include carvings which decorate ivory boxes of Muslim manufacture, as well as miniatures painted in Christian religious manuscripts. The latter must be interpreted with extra caution, since they often occur in polemical contexts. Literary texts of the period consist primarily of histories in both Latin and Arabic. Unfortunately, histories often lack any context to explain the costuming terms used.

Upper Class Men

The best documented segment of the population was, of course, upper class men such as caliphs, princes, viziers, and courtiers. The costumes – of intricate brocades and

lavish silks - mirrored the glory and sense of awe which Abd al-Rahman III promoted in his court. In fact, the richest garments from Cordoba were also adopted by the courts of the Christian kingdoms to the north, as evidenced by these terms appearing in contemporary Latin documents.

The *jubba* apparently designated a generic tunic or robe. The *durra'a* - described in Latin texts as “a buttoned tunic” - is harder to identify; but was probably a very rich garment of silk or brocade.ⁱ Another robe, the *zihara*, was likewise the garment of nobles and princes.ⁱⁱ

Whatever the name for the tunics, we see two distinct cuts when we investigate the ivories which survive from this period. One garment style is long and flowing with wide sleeves and a loose fit. Bands of decoration called *tiraz* appear at the upper arms. We find courtiers, musicians, princes, and palace servants wearing tunics of this cut. These “robes of honor” (*khil'a*) were often given on special occasions as gifts from the caliph to his favorite courtiers.ⁱⁱⁱ

The other garment worn by figures in the ivories is tighter in the body and sleeves, and has a full skirt which ends at the knees. This tunic may have been more functional, since it is worn by men engaged in activities such as hawking, hunting, and fighting.^{iv}

The most remarkable feature of men's costume in the last years of the 10th century and into the 11th is a neckline which is completely unique to Moorish Spain. The opening is covered by overlapping rectangles of fabric. They could be held closed by a button at one corner, or left open with the corners of the rectangles folded back, which created a v-shape at the opening. Perhaps, then, this was the “buttoned” tunic identified by the term *durra'a*.

Under his rich robes, the Moorish gentleman probably had an equal variety of undergarments, including the *qamis* (usually translated as chemise) and *dirr'* (apparently a shirt). The actual cut of these garments is unknown, and likewise whether they were made of fine linen or cotton (or either). Muslim men also wore pants known as *sarawil*.

Contrary to the stereotype of a good medieval Muslim, the turban (*'imama*) was rare among the fashionable men of al-Andalus. It was the province of jurists and theologians, as well as Berbers. Those turbans which were worn in this period were small, with a long "tail" which hung down the back. Instead, the preferred headwear was a Baghdadi import, a conical hat called the *qalansuwa*. The *qalansuwa* was made of fabric over a reed frame, with the richest ones of silk with jeweled decoration.^v But to judge by the ivories, bare heads were extremely common as well.

To complete his outfit, the Moorish gentleman had a several options for outerwear, including the *izar*, the *rida*, and the *hulla*. The *izar* was probably a long unsewn rectangle of fabric which could be wrapped in a variety of ways. But it is unclear how the *rida* and *hulla* would have differed from each other: whether by fabric, cut, or place of manufacture.^{vi}

Upper class women

The documentation for women's costume is much harder to find. Figural depictions of women in Moorish art are scarce indeed. In Christian art, on the other hand, a polemical slant may make it difficult to discern any facts about the costume. Histories rarely mention women, much less their clothing, except when their means of dress was cause for scandal. One way to do this was to adopt the accessories appropriate to men's costume, such as wearing a *qalansuwa* and a sword.^{vii} Since the accessories

were singled out and not the garments, it is possible that men's dress and women's were, in fact, fundamentally the same.

Some women veiled their faces, though there is not enough evidence to draw clear lines as to who veiled and when. Based on veiling practices in the rest of the medieval Islamic world, though, veiling was probably the privilege of wealthy, free women.^{viii} In addition to face veils, such as the *litham*, various head scarves (such as the *khimar* and *miqna'a*) and mantles (like the *mi'jar* and *lifafa*) could also be used to cover the face as modesty required.

We do know that women had access to cosmetics in this time period. The best known are henna for the hands, and kohl for the eyes.^{ix} Lip coloring may also have been used. Possible perfumes include ambergris, musk, camphor, and Indian aloe.^x

Lower Classes

The clothing of the lower classes is even harder to document than women's costume, except for one legal treatise from the late 9th or early 10th century. Their clothing was a coarser version of upper class garments, such as the *zihara*. Under the tunic, they wore pants or knickers and a chemise or shirt. For added warmth in the winter, they might add vests or coats of fur, as well as stockings. In the countryside, Moorish peasants wore even simpler clothing, though they still wore a chemise, a tunic, then additional layers as needed for warmth.^{xi}

Berbers

The Berbers were one segment of society which stood apart from the mainstream. Whether due to the longstanding racial conflicts with the "Arabs" in Moorish society, or

due to the continued ties with tribes back in North Africa, Berbers continued to maintain a separate ethnic and cultural identity. Their costume remains difficult to describe because of the relative (though mutual) disdain from the mainstream Moors. The *burnus* – a circle cloak, perhaps hooded – and the turban were two garments which together clearly marked a Berber tribesman. In fact, princes who wore turbans – or forced it upon their courtiers – were seen as courting Berber favor.^{xii} To judge by evidence from the mid-12th century, some Berber men veiled; the Almoravids were without doubt the most famous example, but other tribes may have as well.^{xiii}

Christians and Jews

“Peoples of the Book” is the Muslim term for the other religions which received a divine scripture, namely Christians and Jews. Also known as *dhimmi*, indicating their protected status under Muslim rule, Christians and Jews in caliphal Spain most likely dressed in the same fashion as the Moors of the same social class. With one important distinction: the *ghayat al-hakm*, or “Laws of Differentiation” were sumptuary laws designed to distinguish the *dhimmi* from the Muslims among whom they lived. In al-Andalus in the 10th and early 11th century, Jews and perhaps Christians as well, were forced to wear a particular belt called the *zunnar*.^{xiv} Whether the belt was colored differently for each religion is unknown.

At least one segment of the Christian population had no interest in being confused with the Muslims. In addition to the *zunnar*, the most religious members, such as monks and ascetics, would wear the *misha*, a coarse sack-cloth tunic also worn by slaves and people in mourning.^{xv}

Textiles

While cotton, linen, and wool were all available in Spain in this period, only silks – whether manufactured natively or imported from abroad – were mentioned in chronicles and poetry.^{xvi} A number of these fabrics were highly decorated. Common designs include stripes, checks, and depictions of fantastic creatures as well as every day birds and beasts.^{xvii} There was *washi*, which often had figural images woven into it; *dibaj*, a more generic word for brocade; *qirmizi*, which was dyed brilliant red; *ubaydi*, an unbleached silk used for robes;^{xviii} and a variety of silks named for their city of origin, such as *jurjani*, and *isbahani*. *Attabi* and *siqlatun*, like many silks, were originally imported from Baghdad, and now were manufactured domestically in the city of Almería.^{xix} *Mulham* was a fabric with a silk warp and a weft of a different fiber. *Mushamma'* was an oiled silk used for rain-proof cloaks.^{xx}

In addition to brocade and plain weave, examples also survive of tapestry weaving. The “Veil of al-Hisham” is the best known piece. This textile, which is also the earliest surviving *tiraz* from Spain, ended a long piece of silk gauze, an *almaizar*, which would have been used to wrap a turban. The overall length is unknown, since only the end survives, but the *almaizar* was 43” inches wide.^{xxi}

Silk was not the only luxury fabric known in al-Andalus. The single most expensive fabric available in the caliphal period was “sea wool”, called *abu qalamun*, or *suf al-bahri*. This gold and iridescent fabric was made from fibers harvested from a mollusk, and it took many years to collect enough to create even one tunic, which might cost thousands of dinars.^{xxii}

Compared to sea wool, even cotton was affordable. Spanish cotton cultivation began in the 10th century. Cotton's softness and warmth made it popular among the upper classes.^{xxiii} While linen and wool were also widely cultivated, there is much less evidence for how they were used in garments.^{xxiv} At a guess, they were more common among the middle and lower classes for whom silk and cotton were financially out of reach.

A wide variety of colors were possible with contemporary dyes. Reds were created through lac and *qirmiz*, among others; blues through indigo and woad. Saffron was the primary dye for yellow, though madder and tumeric were also used.^{xxv} Browns, blacks, and greens were also possible, to judge by the colors in surviving textiles.^{xxvi} White may have been the color of mourning, but it was also the color of the Spanish Umayyad dynasty (to distinguish them from the house of the Abbasids, whose color was black).

Like textiles, furs could be either of domestic or foreign origin. Fashionable furs included marten and sable,^{xxvii} as well as squirrel. Rabbit and shearling were also common, probably among commoners as well as the wealthy.^{xxviii} However, garments made only of furs were apparently only appropriate for the lower classes, prompting ridicule when worn by others.^{xxix}

Shoes

Shoes are the single hardest aspect of the costume to document, since shoes did not merit the attention of historians in this period. In all likelihood, footwear options would have included a variety of sandals, slippers, ankle boots, and taller riding boots. The finest boots and shoes would have been made of the leather which made Cordoba

famous even before the arrival of the Muslims.^{xxx} *Qurtubi*, in bright white or red, was made of tanned goat hide, while *guademeci* was equally fine leather of cow.

Conclusion

We have briefly surveyed the different fashions in al-Andalus under the Umayyad Caliphate. The richness of the caliphal court was reflected in the clothing of the wealthiest citizens. But each segment of the population had its own distinct costume, and new sources and further research will reveal even more details about the specifics for each demographic in the future..

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Notes

- ⁱ Manuel Gómez-Moreno, *Iglesias mozárabes : arte español de los siglos IX a XI* (Granada : Patronato de La Alhambra, 1975), 127; Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, *Estampas de la vida en León durante el siglo x* (Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, s. a., 1934), 173.
- ⁱⁱ R. B. Serjeant, *Islamic Textiles: Material for a History up to the Mongol Conquest*. (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1972), 168.
- ⁱⁱⁱ E. Levi-Provençal, *Histoire de l'Espagne Musulmane* (Paris, G. P. Maisonneuve, 1950), III, 45.
- ^{iv} Jerrilynn D. Dodds, ed., *al-Andalus: the art of Islamic Spain* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), p. 40, and nos. 3, 4.
- ^v Levi-Provençal, III, 427; Yedida Stillman, *Arab dress : a short history : from the dawn of Islam to modern times* (Boston: Brill, 2000), 35.
- ^{vi} Serjeant, 165 – 176, passim.
- ^{vii} Levi-Provençal, III, 446 n. 2
- ^{viii} See Stillman, Chapter 7 (138ff).
- ^{ix} Henri Pérès, *La poésie andalouse en arabe classique au XIe siècle* (Paris, Adrien- Maisonneuve, 1953), 310; Levi-Provençal, III, 432.
- ^x Olivia Remie Constable, *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain: The commercial realignment of the Iberian peninsula, 900-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 156.
- ^{xi} Levi-Provençal, III, 423.
- ^{xii} Pérès, 319.
- ^{xiii} Reinhart Dozy, *Dictionnaire détaillé de noms de vêtements chez les Arabes*. (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1843), 400; Stillman, 94.
- ^{xiv} Pérès, 282; Levi-Provençal, III, 224.
- ^{xv} Pérès, 279. On the other uses of the misha, see Dozy, 406-7.
- ^{xvi} The best source for textiles in al-Andalus remains Serjeant, 165 – 176, passim.
- ^{xvii} Serjeant, 169.
- ^{xviii} Levi-Provençal, III, 404.
- ^{xix} Serjeant, 169.
- ^{xx} Serjeant, 173.
- ^{xxi} Dodds, no. 21.
- ^{xxii} Serjeant, 196-7.
- ^{xxiii} Lucie Bolens, “The Use of Plants for Dyeing and Clothing: Cotton and Woad in al-Andalus,” in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain* (Leiden, 1992), 1007.
- ^{xxiv} On linen, see Bolens, 1007ff.
- ^{xxv} Constable, 156-7.
- ^{xxvi} Dodds, nos. 20, 21.
- ^{xxvii} Serjeant, 168.
- ^{xxviii} Levi-Provençal, III, 312.
- ^{xxix} Pérès, 68.
- ^{xxx} Constable, 191ff.