

FACE VEILING IN MOORISH SPAIN
LADY VIOLANTE DE SANT SEBASTIAN
VIOLANTE@SPANISHPEACOCK.COM

Inside the palanquins
on the camels' backs
I saw their faces beautiful as moons
behind veils of gold cloth.

Beneath the veils
tears crept like scorpions
over the fragrant roses
of their cheeks.

Excerpt from “Leavetaking,” Ibn Jakh, 11th century¹

The evidence for face veiling in Muslim Spain is inconsistent at best. Translations of text sources – poetry, histories, and juridical texts for the most part – do refer to “veils,” but only the context indicates whether the veil under discussion covers the head and hair, or the face. Access to the original Arabic rarely helps, because so many different words existed for different garments for covering oneself. Moreover, the Hispano-Arabic word often described a veil different from what we might expect based on period usage in the Middle East.

Other primary sources shed little more light on the question. Few figural depictions survive from Moorish Spain, in part due to the fundamentalist Berber regimes which invaded in the 11th and 12th centuries, and in part due to the armies of the Reconquista, which destroyed much which they could not loot. Christian miniatures or carvings of Moors survive in greater numbers, and give the impression that face veiling was not, in fact, common in al-Andalus.

In addition to the direct evidence of surviving sources, we can also make educated guesses regarding face veiling in Spain based on clues from Andalusí society as a whole and veiling practices in the rest of the Muslim world. In the medieval Middle East, face veiling was a privilege of the women of the urban upper class, indicating a particular social status rather than a particular religion.²

Umayyads

A number of factors may have caused a hesitant start to the practice of face veiling in al-Andalus. Perhaps the biggest contributor was the comparative lack of women – specifically Arab women – among the armies of the conquest and subsequent immigrations. The bulk of the armies were made up of Berbers not fully converted to Islam; they also formed the majority of the settlers as the Visigothic estates were parceled out. Those few Arab

women who were brought to Spain to join their husbands may or may not have veiled, since the practice was not ubiquitous in the Middle East at this time.

When the last Umayyad prince, Abd ar-Rahman I, fled to Spain from Syria in the 750s, he may have brought notions about veiling from his homeland. However, veiling would have been seen as a privilege of rank, relegated to the upper class Arab women rather than Berbers or native Spaniards. Given the deep racial tensions in the Peninsula at the time, the Berbers and Spaniards probably had no interest in adopting Arab costumes. Thus, in the eighth century, face veiling would have only been practiced in small segments of the population.

In subsequent centuries, the Umayyad court at Cordoba looked to the Abbasids for fashion cues and artistic trends. No doubt, as veiling took firm root in the urban centers of the Middle East, Andalusí women mimicked the fashion where they could. In the ninth and tenth centuries, relative peace helped stabilize society, which in turn may have let costume details cross ethnic boundaries; perhaps by this time, upper class urban women veiled regardless of whether they were Arab, Berber, or Mozarab. Women of the harem, at least, were expected to veil, because ^cAbd al-Rahman II (822-852) gave special permission to a Christian lady to visit his wives and daughters when they were unveiled.³ On the other hand, the ninth century musician Ziryab – whom Andalusí women could thank for such innovations as plucking their eyebrows and using toothpaste – said nothing regarding veiling as he laid out the appropriate fashions for each season.⁴ Was it taken for granted that ladies already veiled, so nothing more need be said?

More evidence for face veiling appears in Ibn Lubaba's tenth century juridical consultations, describing the costume worn by people of different ranks. The one garment clearly identified as a face veil was the *khimar*, described as a "type of gauze kerchief affixed behind the head and hiding the lower part of the face under the eyes."⁵ Also from the tenth century is a poetic reference to face veils by Ibn Faraj: "She came unveiled in the night. / Illuminated by her face, / night put aside its shadowy / veils as well."⁶

Veiling was expected of at least some women by the reign of ^cAbd ar-Rahman III (912-961). Al-Humaidi described an occasion when the Caliph "had no fear of presenting in his procession, a certain feast day...[a prostitute] named Rasis...on muleback, right between the caliph and the children, her face unveiled, coifed with a *kalanuswa* [a man's hat], with a sword hanging at her belt."⁷ The scandal al-Humaidi described was apparently twofold: not only was this woman a prostitute, appearing in such a prominent place in the Caliph's retinue; but more than that, she was dressed like a man. Would a prostitute normally have been expected to veil? If so, that would

suggest that veiling extended to more than just the upper classes. Or was Rasis expected to veil because of her ties to the Caliph and her position in the procession? Alternatively, was veiling the right (or obligation) of all free women of whatever social status? If so, the practice may have been inconsistently followed, for when Yusuf ibn Harun al-Ramadi (d. 1022) first saw his beloved Khalwa, “she was unveiled, [and] he did not know whether she was slave or free.”⁸

Women still wore the veil in the tumultuous taifa period, between the fall of the caliphate (1030s) and the arrival of the Almoravids (1090s). The style of veil may have changed, however; rather than the *khimar* – identified in 11th century poetry as a head covering – women covered their faces with a new style of veil called the *litham*.⁹ The veil might be very luxurious, for Ibn Jakh describes “faces beautiful as moons / behind veils of gold cloth.”¹⁰ One depiction of a woman does survive from the taifa period; but as it is a nude, we can draw no conclusions from it about veiling in this period.¹¹

Berber Dynasties

Most evidence regarding face veiling in medieval Spain seems to come from the Berber dynasties, first the Almoravids (1090-1147) and then the Almohads (1147-1250ish). The Almoravids, in fact, provide the first evidence regarding veiling for men. Among these people, the men covered their faces with the litham, which we previously saw as a veil for women. In fact, the litham was such a distinguishing feature of their appearance that the Almoravids were also known as *al-mulaththamun*, “those who wear the litham.” In the 12th century, Ibn ʿAbdun wrote that non-Almoravid men should not wear the litham because of the fear it struck among the native Spaniards; rather, other Berbers and men who were mounted soldiers or armed guards should only cover their faces with the *khimar* or the *mi’zar*.¹²

Ibn ʿAbdun’s restriction regarding the litham reveals several points about face veils. First, veiling among men had probably been established well before the Almoravids for certain segments of the population, namely men from certain Berber tribes and particular occupations; while the practice may have sprung up in imitation of the Almoravids, it seems unlikely given the apparent antipathy of the natives for the invaders. Secondly, Ibn ʿAbdun clearly distinguishes between the litham on one hand, and the *khimar* or *mi’zar* on the other, although the difference between them is so obvious to him he does not bother to elaborate. One possibility is that the litham refers explicitly to a garment which could only be a face veil, whereas the *khimar* and *mi’zar* are garments which may or may not have been worn in a such a way as to cover the face. We have already seen confusion as to whether the *khimar* was

a face veil (10th century) or just a head covering (11th century). The mi'zar – or almaizar in Spanish – seems to describe a narrow winding head cloth, used to wrap a small turban. One mi'zar survives from the 10th century, and several contemporary pictures depict turbans which may have been wound from the mi'zar.¹³ The long fringed end, which hangs down the back of the neck, may have been brought around the face and tucked into the turban, thereby covering the nose and mouth. Perhaps, in a similar manner, the khimar normally would have covered only the head, but may also have been draped in such a way as to hide the face.

Almoravid women, by contrast, did not veil their faces, though it remains to be seen whether this impacted native Spanish fashion. Almoravid impact may well have been kept to a minimum, especially for women, since they kept their base of operations in Marrakech, and did not colonize al-Andalus. Hispano-Muslim women still veiled shortly after the arrival of the Almoravids; when al-Mut'amid of Sevilla and his family were forced into exile by Yusuf ibn Tashfin, “Young girls dropped their veils / clawed their faces / and ripped their clothes.”¹⁴ That face veils were removed in times of mourning is supported by another ruling from Ibn 'Abdun, stating that “hawkers should be kept out of cemeteries to prevent their ogling unveiled women.”¹⁵

But perhaps already by this time, face veiling was falling into disfavor. In the 12th century, Ibn 'Abd al-Ra'uf wrote of the “heretical innovation [*bid'a*] among the common people whereby a man allows his wife or fiancée to unveil in front of someone other than an immediate male relative.”¹⁶ To refer to lapse as *bid'a* suggests that veiling could in fact have been a religious issue (at least in Ibn 'Abd al-Ra'uf's mind), since “innovations” went against traditional Islamic practice. This is perhaps understandable, given the strong association in contemporary poetry between unveiling and sexual relations. Also, using the term *bid'a* indicates that this was a relatively new development. It is also interesting to note the apparent role that the husband (or husband-to-be) played in controlling who was allowed to see the woman unveiled.

Toward the end of the Almoravid reign, they succumbed to luxuries such as the wearing of silk and gold by men. But to judge from the polemic attacks on them by the Almohads, the Almoravid men continued to veil, while the women did not. In 1146, the Almoravid dynasty in Spain was supplanted by the Almohads, who had a very different approach to face coverings. Among the Almohads veiling was very clearly a religious issue - not just because a pious Muslim woman should cover her face, but also because men and women should not dress alike. The fact that women did not veil (problem number one) was aggravated by the fact that Almoravid men did (problem number two). Also, we think of it now as a religious issue to veil because – if the opinions of Ibn Tumart

can be taken as representative – the Almohads were equally scandalized by women’s exposed faces, whether they were ladies of rank or hawkers in the market place.¹⁷ Thus, veiling (at least in the Almohad mind) is not an issue about social privilege.

That native women did not stop wearing the veil during the tumultuous 12th century – despite what the Berber dynasties did – is suggested by the following lines from Abu l-Qasim ibn as-Saqqat: “Delicious faces were / uncovered for us: / white moons / amid the night of black braids.”¹⁸ On the other hand, Ibn as-Saqqat may have been using “unveiling” as a euphemism for removing other articles of clothing.

In the 13th century, a sudden change occurs in the nature of the primary sources regarding costuming among in al-Andalus in general, and face veiling in particular. Poetry, histories, and other texts suddenly disappear; instead, miniatures – usually drawn by Christians – become our major source of information. This change in source material may have been caused by the dramatic progress of the Reconquista in the 1230s and 1240s, when Cordoba, Valencia and Sevilla all fell to Christian armies. As the Almohads’ power declined, Islamic literary culture seems to have fled to Granada or North Africa.

By the time the Almohads fell out of power, face veiling seems to have fallen out of fashion for women of all classes. In *Hadith Bayad wa Riyad*, an illuminated manuscript from the first half of the 13th century, the lady of the palace and her ladies-in-waiting are never shown with their faces covered, even in Bayad’s presence.¹⁹

The Libro de Ajedrez, Dados y Tablas

Towards the end of the 13th century, we at last find one picture of Moorish women wearing face veils. Alfonso X of Castile and Leon, called “The Wise,” commissioned many intellectual works in his 30+ year reign, and most are illuminated with miniatures of people from all walks of life. The *Libro de Ajedrez, Dados y Tablas*, was a translation from an Arabic treatise on board games, and was finished in 1282. The treatise is remarkable for its plethora of miniatures showing people – men and women, Christians, Moors and Jews – playing chess, dice, and backgammon, as well as more other board games like Nine Man Morris. While in most of the illuminations, it is clear from costume details who are the Christians and who are Jews or Muslims, there is often no clear way to be sure of the social status of these Muslims or whether they are North African, Granadan, or Mudejar. But whether they are playing chess against another woman, or a man – or even in one miniature, two women play as King Alfonso himself watches – the female Muslims generally do not wear veils. One picture stands out for depicting two Muslim women whose faces are covered below the eyes by white fabric. The face veil comes up the side of the

face and ends beneath a pointed hat which is entwined with a long strip of fabric. Their hair, like the tips of their noses, mouths, chins, and neck, is completely hidden from view.²⁰ While it is possible the Christian artists of these miniatures simply chose not to draw in the face veils on the other Moorish women, it seems unlikely. The painters were sensitive to other aspects of Moorish costume and material culture. Also, there is no apparent reason why they should have singled out one miniature to show two women veiled, unless this did indeed reflect the fashion trend. There is no way to tell who these women are, although they are usually classified as being from devoutly religious families. Whoever they were, it seems as though veiling by this time was the exception and not the rule.

Alfonso X also show pictures of Moorish women in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, a collection of songs celebrating the miracles of the Virgin Mary. The songs are accompanied by pictures illustrating the stories in six panels. Only a few show Moors, and of those which do, none of the women have covered faces. Because of the context from the songs, it is possible to figure out details about the women in question – most seem to be lower class, and married – but no matter who they are, they do not have any covering over their faces.²¹

Despite the comparative rarity of the litham by the late 13th century, the practice of face veiling seems to have impacted Castillian fashion. The pleated tall hats, *tocas*, worn by upper class Castillian women, began to make an appearance in the 12th century. In the late 13th century, these *tocas* sometimes included pieces that crossed the woman's face underneath her nose, effectively hiding her mouth. The effect is much like the litham worn by the Moorish women in the *Libro de Ajedrez*, and the fashion may have been based on Andalusí face veils.²² It does seem odd that Castillian women should start this at a time when the litham was apparently a rarity in Moorish Spain. Given that Moorish women veiled for religious reasons (at least in the Almohad period), why would Castillian noblewomen have adopted a similarly restrictive and confining fashion?

Mudejars

There's no way to know for sure whether or not Mudejars – those Muslims who chose to live under Christian rule as the Reconquista swept south – wore face veils. In fact, sources for what the Mudejars wore are slim, and come exclusively from Christian sources. Sumptuary laws were enacted forcing them to clothing in colors or fashions that announced their status as second class citizens in the Christian kingdoms.²³ But these restrictions say nothing about face veils, which cannot be construed as evidence either for or against the wearing of veils among Mudejar women. Given the apparent decline in veiling in the 13th century though, it seems reasonable to suppose that Mudejars probably did not cover their faces.

Nasrids

It is not clear what happened to the practice of face veiling in Muslim Spain after the Almohads. Given the evidence of the *Libro de Ajedrez*, it seems likely that the veil had permanently fallen out of favor, at least among the majority of the population. Very little is said about the practice in Nasrid Granada. In the 14th century, "in summertime [Granadans] affect garments of the most expensive striped Persian linen, silk, cotton, or mohair, African jellabas, and Tunisian chiffon so fine that veils made of it must be worn doubled."²⁴ The context suggests that these were face veils of some sort; the original Arabic used is the plural of *mi'zar*, which we saw in use in the 12th century.²⁵ Unfortunately, there is no indication as to how common it was for this sort of veil (if indeed it is a face veil) to be worn. By the end of the 15th century, face veils as a separate garment appear to have vanished entirely. In 1494, a traveler to Granada described how the women cover themselves with white fabric held in front of the face with one hand.²⁶ A wood carving from the beginning of the 16th century shows Moorish women at a mass-baptism with their faces hidden behind the folds of their long head scarves, draped over their hands.²⁷

Moriscos

The practice of wearing a separate face veil apparently enjoyed no revival after the fall of Granada. The pictures in the *Trachtenbuch* of Christoph Weiditz (1529) depict Morisco women wearing long scarves over their heads, without a separate face veil. Likewise, neither of two Moriscan girls nor a married Granadan woman wear face veils in the 16th century engravings by D. Ghisi.²⁸ While the Pragmatica of Felipe II in 1568 stipulated that Moriscas should not cover their faces, this does not necessarily mean they wore separate face veils.²⁹ One of Weiditz's figures shows a Granadan woman in 'street clothing', with one side of her head scarf pulled across her face below the eyes, and travelers to Granada remarked on how the women covered themselves with a large white piece of fabric of linen, silk, or cotton, in such a way that 'no one knew who they were', or so that 'only one eye showed'.³⁰ Face veils may still have been worn for dramatic effect, however, as in the case of a Morisca from Purchena who danced and sang wearing "a veil so delicate that it did not hide the charms beneath."³¹

Conclusions

Based on the erratic evidence that survives from medieval Islamic Spain, women veiled their faces, probably with a veil called the *litham*, in the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries. Veiling may have been a religious obligation or an indicator of social status, or both, depending on who was in power in al-Andalus. Men also might also cover their faces, depending on their tribal affiliation or occupation. For some as yet unidentified reason, the

practice of wearing a face veil disappeared almost completely in the 13th century. From the 14th century through to the expulsion of the Moriscos in 1610, covering one's face was no longer accomplished by a separate piece of fabric dedicated to that purpose; rather, a larger piece of fabric was used which covered the head and most of the body, as well as the face.

Bibliography

<http://witch.drak.net/lilinah/2ArabWomen.html> (folio 38V)

<http://games.rengeekcentral.com/prblms/F54V.html> (folio 54V) - this picture isn't the best, but you can see how the lady in waiting's face is obscured by strips of fabric which are affixed behind her toca.

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Study based on the miniatures in the Cántigas de Santa María. Includes facsimile plates, but they are small and in black and white. Also features Guerrero Lovillo's own line drawings based on the miniatures.

Levi-Provençal, E. *Histoire de l'Espagne Muslumane*. 3 vols. Paris, G. P. Maisonneuve, 1950. Say, rather, history of Muslim Spain to the 11th century. Volume 3 has all the good stuff.

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Some pix, and an excerpt discussing costumes from *The Shining Rays of the Full Moon: On the History of the Nasrid Dynasty* (circa 1360) by Lisan al-Din ibn al-Khatib (d. 1374),

Stillman, Yedida Kalfon. *Arab dress : a short history : from the dawn of Islam to modern times*. Ed. Norman A. Stillman. Boston: Brill, 2000. Themes in Islamic studies, v. 2

A great introduction to period Islamic costume using literary and pictorial sources. The chapter on Spain is very disorganized and misses a lot, because she doesn't use Christian sources.

NOTES:

¹ Franzen

² Stillman, Ch. 7 passim.

³ Arabs in Spain.

⁴ Levi-Provençal,

⁵ Levi-Provençal, tome III, p. 424

⁶ Franzen

⁷ Levi-Provençal, tome III, p. 446, note 2. Ibn Hazm, `Alī ibn Ahmad (994-1064). *Naqt al-`ar-us*. Traducción por Luis Seco de Lucena ; texto árabe por C. F. Seybold ; índices por M.a Milagros Cárcel Ortí. (Textos medievales ; 39) Valencia : [s.n.], 1974.

⁸ Stillman, 92. This comes from Ibn Hazm (994-1063), *Tawq al-Hamama*, ed. Hasan Kamil al-Sayrafi (Cairo n.d.), pp. 22-23. This is in fact The Ring of the Dove, which exists in translation (New York : AMS Press, [1981]; there is also a reprint of A J Arberry's translation (1953)). On this page Stillman includes another reference supporting a lack of veiling in medieval Spain, in poetry about a Berber woman, engaged in an affair, "wearing only a diadem or fillet (taj) on her head" – without more context, though, I don't feel comfortable taking that as proof one way or another.

⁹ Peres, p. 318.

¹⁰ Franzen

¹¹ Al-Andalus, no. 49.

¹² Stillman, 94.

¹³ As late as the 16th century, Covarrubias identifies the almaizar as a 'long narrow striped cloth with fringes at the end.' (Citation by way of Anderson). Apparently, in the plural (mayazir), it could also have described a loincloth. See Peres, p. 318, n. 6. Need figures (worm killer & tiny Berber), and some of Dodds' background about the "Veil of Hisham"

¹⁴ Ibn al-Labbanah, in Franzen

¹⁵ Stillman, 93.

¹⁶ Stillman, 92.

¹⁷ Stillman, 95. While these particular examples are from Morocco, the Almohads would have been equally scandalized by such habits in Spain.

¹⁸ Franzen.

¹⁹ Need a couple of pictures from Bayad wa Riyad...

²⁰ Folio 38V. A similar style of veil was still worn in early modern Morocco. "In Morocco, [the regional style of face veil] was the litham, a long white rectangular cloth (in the Andalusian towns of the norther part of the country, it was triangular) that tied behind the head and hung from just below the eyes down to the chest." Stillman, p. 148. Of course, I would have to see what her plate 58 & 59 are to be sure.

²¹ Guerro-Lovillo, pp. 213-4, and plates 22 and 99. Interestingly enough, this is also the period of time when tiraz suddenly fall out of use. We see them only periodically in the Alfonsine corpus.

²² Anderson

²³ Fletcher citation; we could also use Boswell

²⁴ Citation from Alhambra

²⁵ Arié, Nasrids. At this point, I'm guessing that ma'azir is actually the plural form of mi'zar.

²⁶ Or something to that effect; Arie, Nasrids.

²⁷ A picture from the forced baptism

²⁸ Figures. De Ghisi is only found in Algeroise, that I know of.

²⁹ Internet citation: Diego Hurtado de Mendoza. *Historia de la guerra de Granada, 157?*

(<http://www.terra.es/personal7/alhaqem/1568A.htm>) Still tracking down a book citation...

³⁰ Arie, Moriscos.

³¹ Cited in Ribera, Music in Ancient Arabia and Spain, pp. 146-7.