

## **The image of the Andalusian woman in biographical dictionaries: An Analytical Study Through Selected Models**

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### **Abstract:**

This study examines the portrayal of Andalusian women in biographical dictionaries by analysing selected models from various biographical works. It aims to reveal the picture drawn by the compilers of these dictionaries of the Andalusian woman and determine her presence in scientific, cultural and social life. It also analyses the brief expressions and concise descriptions employed to present female figures.

The study reveals that, although women are underrepresented in biographical dictionaries compared to men, they nevertheless present female role models with a clear and discernible scientific and cultural presence. Thus, the jurist-scholar, the hadith transmitter (narrator), the female writer and poet, the author and calligrapher, the charitable woman, and the ascetic appear. Some biographical dictionaries further demonstrate women's ability to participate in scholarly circles, travel in pursuit of knowledge and engage in teaching and narration.

However, despite the fact that women in al-Andalus enjoyed ample freedom and were prominent across various spheres of life, the biographical dictionaries relied upon in this study did not provide detailed accounts of the lives of the women mentioned — owing to reasons that remain largely unknown to us.

**Keywords:** Andalusian woman; biographical dictionaries; Ibn Bashkuwal; narration; female writer; al-Andalus.

### **Introduction:**

Biographical dictionaries are among the most important sources for preserving a substantial part of Andalusian social history. They not only recorded the names and biographies of scholars, jurists, Hadith scholars and men of letters, but also contained accounts and reports that illuminated various aspects of intellectual, social and cultural life in al-Andalus. One of the earliest Andalusian works of this kind is the History of the Scholars of al-Andalus by Ibn al-Faradi (d. 403 AH/1013 CE). Focusing on the biographies of scholars of jurisprudence, Hadith, transmission, and literature, the work subsequently became one of the foundations upon which the Andalusian tradition of biographical writing was established<sup>1</sup>.

'The Continuity' (Al-Sila) by Abu al-Qasim Ibn Bashkuwal (d. 578 AH/1182 CE) is a key text in this field. In this work, the author devotes himself to the history and biographies of

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<sup>1</sup>- Abd Allah ibn Muḥammad ibn Yusuf ibn Nasr (Ibn al-Faradi), History of the Scholars of al-Andalus, 2nd ed., al-Khanji Library, Cairo, 1988.

leading figures, scholars, Hadith scholars, jurists and men of letters from al-Andalus<sup>2</sup>, compiling extensive material on the region's intellectual life. Similarly, The Supplement to the Book of Continuity by Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Fuda'i, also known as Ibn al-Abbar (d. 658 AH/1260 CE), is a significant addition to Andalusian biographical literature. Ibn al-Abbar was a leading Hadith and literature scholar who lived during the Almohad and Hafsid periods. He wrote several other works on biographical literature, including The Beautiful Garment of Biographies (Al-Hulla al-Sira') and The Biographical Dictionary of the Companions of Qadi 'Iyad (Al-Mu'jam fi Ashab al-Qadi 'Iyad), in which he recorded the biographies of numerous scholars. The Supplement to the Book of the Continuity (Al-Takmila li-Kitab al-Sila) was conceived as a continuation and completion of Ibn Bashkuwal's The Continuity (Al-Sila)<sup>3</sup>.

While women are not represented in these works to the same extent as men, the relatively few surviving biographies of women are nevertheless of considerable significance. They provide valuable insights into women's participation in various fields, including scholarship, Hadith, jurisprudence, literature, writing, and other intellectual and cultural activities.

### **Research problem:**

The research problem of this study can be formulated as follows:

Does the image of women portrayed in biographical dictionaries accurately reflect their actual presence and status, or is it a selective representation shaped by the nature of biographical writing and the limited attention given to women?

This central question gives rise to several subsidiary questions:

How did Andalusian biographical dictionaries contribute to shaping the image of Andalusian women in their various roles?

What expressions did these works use to denote and describe these roles?

Are these expressions sufficient to convey the actual extent of women's presence and participation?

In order to address this research issue, the study draws on selected examples of women's biographies, focusing on their intellectual, cultural and social significance, rather than merely presenting accounts of women and listing their names.

### **Objectives of the study:**

To examine the extent to which Andalusian women were involved in their society, both intellectually and socially.

- To identify and analyse the image of Andalusian women as represented in biographical writings.

### **Methodology:**

In light of the research problem, studying this subject requires the use of the historical method and its main techniques: description, analysis, comparison and induction.

### **Structure of the study:**

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<sup>2</sup>- Khalaf ibn Abd al-Malik ibn Bashkuwal, Al-silah: On the History of the Imams of al-Andalus, 2nd ed., al-Khanji Library, Cairo, 1955.

<sup>3</sup>- Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Abi Bakr (Ibn al-Abbar), Supplement to the Book of Al-silah, edited by 'Abd al-Salam Harrās, Dar al-Fikr for Printing, 1995.

The study is organised as follows:

Introduction

Chapter One: The presence of Andalusian women in the religious sciences

Chapter Two: The Presence of Andalusian Women in Literature and Poetry

Chapter Three: Women's Presence in Calligraphy and Writing

Chapter Four: Women in Asceticism and Sufism

Chapter Five: The Significance of the Image of Women in Biographical Dictionaries

Conclusion:

### **Chapter One: The Presence of Andalusian Women in the Religious Sciences**

Andalusian biographical dictionaries reveal a significant female presence in intellectual life, particularly in Qur'anic studies, jurisprudence, Hadith and transmission. This presence is evident in the terms used by biographers to describe these women, such as 'virtuous', 'learned', 'jurist', 'distinguished', and 'scholar'. However, these women were not given detailed biographical accounts comparable to those devoted to men.

#### **1. The Emergence of Women in Qur'anic Exegesis and Readings**

Andalusian women excelled in the study of Qur'anic readings, memorisation of the Qur'an and its interpretation. They competed with men in these fields, although their scholarly contributions were not as extensive as those of men. Furthermore, accounts of them in biographical dictionaries were not given the attention they deserved, particularly in the earliest biographical works and during the early periods. The following are some illustrative examples:

##### **First example:**

The daughter of Fa'iz<sup>4</sup> of Córdoba and the wife of Abu 'Abd Allah Ibn 'Attab. Biographical dictionaries do not mention her name. She became renowned for her mastery of, and contribution to, knowledge and literature, excelling in both fields. She acquired knowledge of Qur'anic exegesis, language, Arabic and poetry from her father, Fa'iz. She learned jurisprudence and works concerning spiritual refinement and moral edification from her husband, Muhammad ibn 'Attab (d. 462 AH)<sup>5</sup>.

She travelled to Denia to study Qur'anic recitation with Abu 'Amr al-Dani. However, upon finding him ill with an imminent death, she travelled to Valencia, where one of his companions lived. There, she studied the Qur'an according to the seven canonical readings, mastering them in 444 AH. She then undertook the pilgrimage, dying in Egypt en route back to al-Andalus in 446 AH<sup>6</sup>.

The fact that her biographers were unable to mention her name may have been due to their ignorance of it or their reluctance to mention it for one reason or another. Nevertheless, her journey in pursuit of Qur'anic readings — from Córdoba to Denia, then Valencia, and

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<sup>4</sup>- He was a scholar of Qur'anic exegesis, language, and poetry, and his daughter acquired his knowledge from him. See: Ibn 'Abd al-Malik al-Marrakushi, *The Continuation and Supplement to the Two Books al-Mawsul and al-Şilah*, edited by Ihsan 'Abbas, 1st ed., Dar al-Thaqafa, 1965, 2/527.

<sup>5</sup>- Muḥammad ibn Attab ibn mohcen, known by the kunyah Abu 'Abd Allāh, was a jurist and a scholar well-versed in ḥadīth. See his biographical entry: Ibn Bashkuwal, *Al-Şilah*, previously cited source, p. 515.

<sup>6</sup>- Ibn al-Abbar, *Supplement to the Book of Al-Şilah*, previously cited source, 4/251.

subsequently to the Hijaz and Egypt — is evidence of her strong desire to acquire knowledge from scholars.

This biography highlights the importance of scholarly travel in the intellectual development of Andalusian women. It also demonstrates the transmission of knowledge between the Islamic East and al-Andalus, and shows that women could become active participants in these processes. Although her father and husband were her first sources of knowledge, she subsequently sought knowledge from other scholars.

**Second example:**

Tawiyya (also known as Tuna), daughter of ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Musa ibn Tahir ibn Mana‘ and wife of Abu al-Qasim ibn Mudir, the preacher and Qur’anic reciter (d. 495 AH). She was the wife of Abu al-Qasim ibn Mudir, a preacher and Qur’anic reciter who died in 495 AH<sup>7</sup>.

She studied many of the books and writings of Abu Omar ibn Abd al-Barr, a Hadith scholar, and also studied under Abu al-Abbas Ahmad ibn Umar al-Udri al-Dala’i<sup>8</sup>. Before they were married, her husband, Abu al-Qasim al-Muqri’, heard her recite. She was renowned for her fine handwriting, knowledge, piety, and religious devotion<sup>9</sup>. The Supplement adds that her name was Habiba and that she was known as Tawiyya; she had excellent handwriting and was meticulous in preserving her writings.

This brief biography is notable for the fact that this woman was the wife of a Qur’anic reciter, yet she also received knowledge directly from ‘Abd al-Barr al-Dani and Abu al-‘Abbas al-‘Udri, who were her husband’s teachers and hers too. It is unclear whether this occurred before or after her marriage, but her husband acknowledged this scholarly transmission and explicitly mentioned it.

**2. The Emergence of Andalusian Women in Jurisprudence**

Andalusian women played a significant role in jurisprudence, to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish between female jurists, Hadith scholars and Qur’anic readers, as women could be proficient in all of these areas. There are numerous examples of this, including the following:

**First example:**

One prominent example is Fatima bint Yahya ibn Yusuf al-Maghami (d. 319 AH), the sister of the jurist Yusuf ibn Yahya al-Maghami (d. 288 AH)<sup>10</sup>. She lived in Córdoba and was buried in al-Rabad. Ibn Bashkuwal describes her as ‘virtuous, distinguished, learned, and a jurist’, adding that the funeral procession for no other woman had ever been witnessed with the same level of honour as hers<sup>11</sup>.

The significance of this biography lies not merely in describing Fatima as learned and knowledgeable in jurisprudence. It can be assumed that she acquired her knowledge from scholars, teachers and jurists; perhaps her brother was among her teachers. However, this

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<sup>7</sup>- See his biographical entry: Ibn Bashkuwal, *Al-Ṣilah*, previously cited source, p. 170.

<sup>8</sup>- *Ibid.*, p. 658.

<sup>9</sup>- Ibn al-Abbar, *The Supplement*, previously cited source, 4/253.

<sup>10</sup>- See his biographical entry: Ibn al-Farāḍi, *History of the Scholars of al-Andalus*, previously cited source, 2/200.

<sup>11</sup>- Ibn Bashkuwal, *Al-Ṣilah: On the History of the Imams of al-Andalus*, previously cited source, p. 653.

source is limited to this brief biographical account and general description, failing to mention her good deeds, teachers, or students. Notably, her brother was a renowned scholar who had mastered various branches of knowledge and was well versed in jurisprudence, a position of considerable distinction. He was also a hadith scholar and had numerous teachers. Furthermore, he undertook an extensive scholarly journey to the eastern lands, where he attained a distinguished position<sup>12</sup>.

**Second example:**

Radiya, the client of ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir

Another woman who emerges in this context is Radiya, who was also a client of ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir (d. 353 AH). Unlike other women in this context, she did not come from a renowned Andalusian scholarly family. Nevertheless, she was able to establish herself in the field of knowledge. She was associated with learning and education, performed the pilgrimage with her husband and, during her travels to the east, met several scholars. Abu Muhammad ibn Khuzraj studied under her and mentioned some of her books<sup>13</sup>.

Despite the biographer mentioning that she had authored books and that Abu Muhammad ibn Khuzraj transmitted knowledge from her, her biographical entry does not exceed two lines. According to his biography, he acquired knowledge from an estimated 265 men and two women in al-Andalus. It is likely that he studied under Radiya, one of these two women, as her biography suggests, although he does not explicitly identify either of them by name in this passage.

‘Abd Allah ibn Isma‘il ibn Muhammad ibn Khuzraj was an eminent jurist who served in the judicial consultative function (shura al-ahkam)<sup>14</sup>. He was also interested in recording, collecting and transmitting knowledge. Consequently, he was familiar with her books and other scholarly works she had left behind.

These examples demonstrate that the portrayal of women scholars in biographical dictionaries was not uniform. There were female jurists who belonged to scholarly families, as well as women who gained access to knowledge through scholarly travel, association with scholars, and transmission. This suggests that the Andalusian scholarly sphere was not entirely closed to women. However, women’s access to knowledge was usually facilitated through their fathers, brothers or husbands, particularly if they came from scholarly families. This reveals two important aspects:

First: Despite the limited number of words used by the biographer, a woman who grew up in a scholarly family and subsequently distinguished herself intellectually was recognised by her family, who educated her and provided her with opportunities to learn and later teach. In other words, she was permitted to transmit knowledge to others, although biographical dictionaries often failed to provide details about the specific fields in which she specialised.

Secondly, even when a woman distinguished herself intellectually, possessed books, and undertook scholarly journeys, these were not mentioned in the same detail as those of men. This is evident in the case of Radiya: her student acquired knowledge from her, as well as

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<sup>12</sup>- Ibn al-Faradi, previously cited source, 2/200.

<sup>13</sup>- Ibn Bashkuwal, Al-Silah, p. 655.

<sup>14</sup>- Ibid., p. 275.

from 265 male and two female scholars. The biographer could have mentioned the names of these two women, but chose not to identify either Radiya or the other woman by name.

### **3. The Emergence of Andalusian Women in Hadith and Transmission**

Hadith transmission occupied an important position in Islamic culture. Consequently, women were not excluded from this intellectual activity. Biographical dictionaries reveal their participation in scholarly auditions and transmissions, their acquisition of scholarly authorisations, and their passing on of knowledge to others. Only a few examples are mentioned here, limited to the previously identified biographical dictionaries.

First example:

There is a biographical entry for Fatima bint Muhammad ibn ‘Ali ibn Shari‘a al-Lakhmi<sup>15</sup>, the sister of Abu Muhammad al-Baji al-Ishbili<sup>16</sup>.

The biographer merely states that she ‘participated with her brother Abu Muhammad in some of his teachers’. The biographer also mentions an ijaza granted by Muhammad ibn Futays al-Ilbiri for both her and her brother. This document covers all the transmissions they had received and is written in the biographer’s own handwriting in some of their books. May God have mercy upon them and forgive them.

From the biography of this woman, it appears that she possessed an ijaza in Hadith or another branch of knowledge. However, according to his biographers, her brother, ‘Abd Allah ibn Muhammad ibn ‘Ali ibn Shari‘a al-Lakhmi<sup>17</sup>, was highly proficient in the accurate transmission and preservation of Hadith, and was a memoriser of Hadith and knowledgeable about its meanings. He studied under Muhammad ibn Futays al-Ilbiri (d. 319 AH)<sup>18</sup> and travelled to Ilbira to study with him, hearing a considerable amount of Hadith from him in the process, as stated in his biography<sup>19</sup>.

Al-Baji resided in Seville, from where he began his scholarly travels. Although the account concerning his sister does not mention this explicitly, she also possessed an ijaza from Muhammad ibn Futays. Did she also travel with her brother to Ilbira? And how did she obtain the ijaza from Muhammad ibn Futays?

#### **Second example:**

Another example demonstrating the prominence of women in Hadith is Khadija bint Ja‘far al-Tamimi, the wife of the Cordoba jurist ‘Abd Allah ibn Asad. She transcribed her husband’s Muwatta’ of al-Qa’nabi from memory and recorded it in her own handwriting<sup>20</sup>.

This reference reveals two important levels of women’s scholarly participation. The first was the direct reception of scholarly texts, while the second was the documentation of the audition through writing. It is also said that she gave a large number of books to her daughter<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup>- Ibn Bashkuwal, Al-Ṣilah.

<sup>16</sup>- See his biographical entry: Ibn al-Faraḍi, History of the Scholars of al-Andalus, 1/281.

<sup>17</sup>- Biographical entry of ‘Abd Allah ibn Muhammad: Ibn al-Faraḍi, History of the Scholars of al-Andalus, 1/281.

<sup>18</sup>- See: the biographical entry of Muhammad ibn Fuṭbus, *ibid.*, 2/43.

<sup>19</sup>- *Ibid.*, 1/281.

<sup>20</sup>- Ibn Bashkuwal, Al-Ṣilah, p. 654.

<sup>21</sup>- *Ibid.*

**Third example:**

Khadija bint Abi Muhammad ‘Abd Allah ibn Said al-Shantajiyali

She studied alongside her father under the scholar Abu Dharr ‘Abd ibn Ahmad al-Harawi, from whom she learnt the Sahih al-Bukhari and other works. She also accompanied her father to receive knowledge from his teachers in Mecca. The biographer found evidence of her attendance recorded in her father’s original manuscripts in his own handwriting. She returned with him to al-Andalus, where she died. May God have mercy upon her.

Writing does not appear to have been merely a technical skill here; rather, it was an integral part of the scholarly process. The fact that a woman recorded scholarly audition in her own handwriting is evidence of her participation in preserving and accurately transmitting scholarly texts.

Furthermore, some biographical accounts reveal that women established connections with scholars beyond their immediate family. This challenges the assumption that women’s education was confined entirely to the home or restricted to the family sphere. Studies examining women in al-Sila have also confirmed the existence of female figures who participated in jurisprudence, hadith and transmission.

Accordingly, these biographical accounts do not present women as the “educated woman” in a passive sense. Rather, it is of a woman who participated in a network of knowledge transmission based on audition, reading, scholarly authorisation (ijaza) and transmission.

**4. Andalusian Women and Theology (‘Ilm al-Kalam).**

Zaynab bint the Caliph Abu Ya‘qub Yusuf ibn ‘Abd al-Mu’min

As for Islamic theology (‘ilm al-kalam), only one woman is mentioned by name in some of the biographical dictionaries used in this study. Perhaps theological studies had not yet become widespread among men during the early periods, let alone among women. Consequently, according to these sources, there are few women who distinguished themselves in this field.

One of the most prominent women mentioned in this regard is Zaynab bint Yusuf ibn ‘Abd al-Mu’min ibn ‘Ali, who was Andalusian by birth and upbringing. She studied theology under Abu ‘Abd Allah ibn Ibrahim. The source merely describes her as follows: ‘She was a learned woman, sound in judgement, and renowned for surpassing the women of her time in excellence.’

**Chapter Two: The Presence of Andalusian Women in Literature and Poetry**

While religious studies are one of the most prominent fields in which women have been active intellectually, Arabic language, literature and poetry are another field in which Andalusian women have been particularly prominent. The following are vivid examples of this:

**First example:**

‘A’isha bint Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Qadim (d. 400 AH) of Córdoba: The biographer reports that Ibn Hayyan described her as follows: ‘There was no woman in the regions of al-Andalus in her time who could equal her in understanding, knowledge, literature, poetry, eloquence, chastity, sound judgement and intellectual discernment.’

She praised the rulers of her time and addressed them regarding whatever needs she encountered. Through her eloquence, she attained a level that many of the men of letters of her time could not reach, and her intercession was never rejected. She had beautiful handwriting, copied Qur'anic manuscripts and notebooks, collected books and devoted herself to scholarship. She possessed a large, well-organised scholarly library, as well as sufficient wealth and resources to support her endeavours.

The biography mentions many of this woman's qualities and the understanding and knowledge with which God had endowed her. However, it does not provide further details about her activities. It merely indicates that, through her poetry and writings, she was able to attain a prominent position that many male men of letters could not reach, while her wealth enabled her to live independently without having to ask others for assistance.

This provides further evidence that the commodity that enjoyed considerable prominence during that period was the written and spoken word, particularly poetry.

### **Second Example**

Wallada bint al-Mustakfi Billah Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Ubayd Allah (d. 480 AH):

Wallada bint al-Mustakfi is a prime example of a woman who defied the traditional role of women in society. Ibn Bashkuwal described her as 'a cultured woman and poet, eloquent in expression and excellent in poetry', and noted that she socialised with other poets and participated in literary exchanges with scholars<sup>22</sup>.

This statement suggests more than just poetic talent. It indicates her direct interaction with the literary milieu, as well as her ability to participate in literary debates and poetic exchanges with men. Furthermore, describing her as eloquent and forceful in expression reflects the biographer's acknowledgement of her literary status.

Wallada's significance is further enhanced by references to her literary salon in Córdoba, which Ibn Bashkuwal described as a gathering place for literary figures, frequented by poets and writers. This image appears in *The Continuity (Al-Sila')*, while later sources provide a more detailed account of it.

This biography should not merely be read as a literary story associated with Wallada's relationship with Ibn Zaydun. Rather, attention should be given to its cultural dimension. The existence of a literary salon associated with a woman from Córdoba demonstrates that women could occupy a space of cultural and social significance, even though such a presence was exceptional and cannot be generalised to all women.

Biographical dictionaries therefore present two interrelated images of the female literary figure: one as a woman with knowledge and literary talent, and the other as an active figure within the literary milieu.

In fact, most women who wrote poetry were prominent figures in society with a voice that was heard. Through their poetry, they were able to effect change in certain circumstances. There is perhaps an interesting story about one of these women that serves as an example of a woman's ability to respond through words and poetry. It is said that the wife of a judge in

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<sup>22</sup>- Ibn Bashkuwal, *Al-Silah*, previously cited source, p. 657.

Loja<sup>23</sup> surpassed scholars in her knowledge of legal rulings and unprecedented legal cases, although her name is not mentioned. Whenever a case arose in her husband's court, he would turn to her for advice on the ruling he should issue.

The following verses were written to him:

“In Loja there is a judge who has a wife,  
whose judgements are enforced among the people.  
Would that he had never been a judge,  
And would that she had been the judge instead.”

When the judge read these verses, he showed them to his wife. She responded with the following:

‘He is a despicable old man, scorned and disgraced, whose grey hairs are disobedient.  
No! If he does not desist,  
we shall surely seize him by the forelock’<sup>24</sup>.

This example demonstrates that there were Andalusian women who surpassed men in knowledge yet did not receive due recognition in biographical books. Indeed, these books were so sparse in their accounts that they did not even mention her name.

### **Third example:**

The Female Literary Figure of Shilb

This woman is not identified by name in the sources, but is instead attributed to her hometown of Shilb<sup>25</sup>. She is described as a woman of letters and became renowned for her poetry. Through some of whose verses, she was able to bring about the dismissal of several officials responsible for administering her town due to their injustices.

She composed several verses and recited them in the prayer hall of the Almohad Caliph Al-Mansur Abu Yusuf on a Friday. Following an investigation, the governor, the judge and the tax official were dismissed, while she was honoured.

Among her verses were:

‘It is now time for noble eyes to weep,  
And indeed I see even the stones weeping.  
O you who journey to the city of hope,  
If the Merciful wills it, He can remove what is hateful.  
Call upon the ruler when you stand at his door,  
O shepherd, the flock is perishing;  
You have sent it forth neglected, without pasture,  
and left it prey to ravenous beasts.”

Shilb — what has become of Shilb? It was once a paradise,

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<sup>23</sup>- Lushah: with fathāh on the first letter, followed by a sukun, and a dotted shin. It is a city in al-Andalus, west of al-Bīrah, somewhat before Córdoba. It is a pleasant city situated on the Sanjal River, the river of Granada. It lies twenty farsakhs from Córdoba and ten farsakhs from Granada. See: al-hamawī, *Dictionary of Countries*, Dār Ṣādir, Beirut, Lebanon, 1995, 5/26.

<sup>24</sup>- Ibn al-Abbar, *The Supplement*, previously cited source, 4/293–295.

<sup>25</sup>- Shalab: its first letter may be pronounced with kasrah or fathāh, while the second carries a sukun. It is a city in western al-Andalus, three days' journey from Baja. It lies west of Córdoba and is ten days' journey from Córdoba for a swift horseman. See: al-Ḥamawī, *Dictionary of Countries*, previously cited source, 3/357.

But tyrants have turned it into a blazing fire.

They feared nothing and did not fear the punishment of their Lord.

God is not unaware of anything<sup>26</sup>.”

However, what is remarkable is that, despite this woman's active role and her refusal to remain silent in the face of injustice, the author of her biographical entry was also unaware of her name. In many biographical dictionaries, women are identified through their husbands, brothers or places of origin. Perhaps the biographers were unable to ascertain their names for one reason or another, despite Andalusian society being more open-minded than many others.

### **Chapter Three: The Presence of Andalusian Women in Calligraphy and Writing**

The image of the educated woman in biographical dictionaries is not limited to jurisprudence, Hadith and literature, but also extends to writing, calligraphy and arithmetic. Andalusian women excelled in calligraphy from an early age, whether they were female slaves, free women, or princesses. They were particularly diligent in preserving books, fearing their loss. This suggests that they had a strong sense of, and awareness of the value of, their intellectual heritage. Their proficiency in calligraphy and writing also enabled them to play an important role in the courts of rulers and in political affairs. Only a few examples will be mentioned here.

#### **First example:**

One notable example mentioned by Ibn Bashkuwal is Lobna (d. 374 AH), who was described as highly proficient in writing, grammar, poetry and arithmetic. She was also said to be knowledgeable and well-versed in various fields of study, and was a scholar of Arabic prosody and a skilled calligrapher.

This biography reveals the breadth of intellectual culture among some Andalusian women. Women were not confined to a single field of knowledge, but could combine writing, grammar, poetry, arithmetic, prosody and calligraphy.

#### **Second example:**

The sources also mention Muzna, the scribe of Caliph al-Nasir li-Din Allah. They describe her as being highly proficient in calligraphy.<sup>13</sup> This reference suggests that women may have had access to the sphere of scribal work associated with political institutions, which was of great social and cultural importance.

The presence of a woman performing a scribal function within the royal court adds another dimension to the portrayal of Andalusian women. She is not only portrayed as a seeker of knowledge or a woman of letters, but also as someone who possesses a practical professional skill.

#### **Third example:**

Sayyida bint ‘Abd al-Ghani ibn ‘Ali ibn ‘Uthman al-‘Abdari, known by the kunya Umm al-‘Ala’, was from Granada and grew up in Murcia, where she learnt the Qur’an<sup>27</sup>.

She excelled in the study of calligraphy and had excellent handwriting. Throughout her life, she taught in the residences of kings. She met Abu Zakariyya al-Dimashqi<sup>28</sup> in Granada,

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<sup>26</sup>- Ibn al-Abbar, *The Supplement*, 4/260.

<sup>27</sup>- *Ibid.*, 4/265.

where she taught the Qur'an. She then moved to Fez, before returning to Granada and subsequently going to Tunis, where she also taught in the royal palace. She copied *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din)* by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali in her own handwriting.

She continued to devote herself to Qur'anic recitation and the observance of supplications and devotional litanies. She strove to perform good deeds and engage in acts of righteousness, giving generously of her possessions. She also worked to free captives from bondage. She continued in this manner until she fell ill and became incapacitated. She died in this state on Tuesday afternoon, 5th Muharram, 647 AH.

Like her, this woman combined scholarship, piety and numerous charitable activities. She studied under Abu Zakariyya al-Dimashqi, who, according to his biographer, was a Shafi'i jurist, a scholar of legal theory and Sufism, as well as an ascetic and devout man. A student is often said to be a reflection of their teacher, and sometimes a student's scholarly and spiritual qualities can surpass those of their teacher. Perhaps this woman surpassed many of her contemporaries because of her attachment to the knowledge contained in *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, a work that she transcribed by hand. This demonstrates her ability to write, as well as her patience and perseverance in undertaking such a demanding task.

This woman's biographical entry may provide more detail than those of many other women.

#### **Chapter Four: The Presence of Andalusian Women in Asceticism and Sufism**

Biographical dictionaries that include female entries generally describe the women as pious, ascetic, Sufi and charitable. Such women were very numerous. In some cases, certain aspects of their deeds are mentioned; in others, the entry merely describes them as such. Some women combined religious scholarship, writing, poetry, asceticism, piety and charitable works. They were numerous, and I will mention some examples here.

##### **First example:**

Umm al-Hasan, daughter of Abi Liwa' Sulayman ibn Asbagh ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Wansus ibn Yarbu' al-Miknasi, who was a client of Sulayman ibn 'Abd al-Malik, received teachings from Baqi ibn Makhlad (d. 276 AH)<sup>29</sup>. She heard from him, accompanied him and recited *The Book of Ages (Kitab al-Duhur)* in his presence. Her companion, Abu al-Qasim Ahmad ibn Baqi, held the shaykh's original copy of the book for her during the session. She also undertook a scholarly journey, performing the pilgrimage during which.

Umm al-Hasan was a pious, ascetic and intelligent woman of virtue. She is mentioned in *The Virtues of Baqi ibn Makhlad (Fada'il Baqi ibn Makhlad)*. Al-Razi also wrote about her, stating that she had performed the pilgrimage and had studied jurisprudence and Hadith. Baqi ibn Makhlad himself learnt from her. She then undertook the pilgrimage a second time and died in Mecca, where she was buried.

Al-Razi stated that the women of the Banu Wansus were distinguished by their righteousness, virtue, piety and devotion. Six of these women performed the pilgrimage: Wakiila, the wife

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<sup>28</sup>- See the biographical entry of the Damascene Yahya ibn 'Abd al-Rahman, Abū Zakariyya': Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Maqqarī, *The Fragrant Breeze from the Tender Branch of al-Andalus*, edited by Ihsan 'Abbas, Dar sadir, Beirut, 1997, 3/68.

<sup>29</sup>- For the biographical entry of Baqi ibn Makhlad, see: Ibn Bashkuwāl, previously cited source, p. 118.

of Asbagh ibn ‘Abd Allah ibn Wansus; Amat al-Rahman and Amat al-Rahim, Asbagh’s two daughters; Ruqayya, Muhammad ibn Asbagh’s daughter; and ‘A’isha, Umar ibn Muhammad ibn Asbagh’s daughter.

Her biography indicates that she read *The Book of Ages* before Baqi ibn Makhlad. This work dealt with history, years, and the ages of time, although there was disagreement concerning its attribution to Baqi ibn Makhlad. She was therefore not merely a listener to the Hadith scholar and ascetic Baqi ibn Makhlad; she herself read the book in her own recitation in his presence while his son held the original copy.

Her relationship with her shaykh reveals her presence in scholarly circles among people known for piety and the Hadith. This example thus demonstrates the intersection of piety and asceticism with women’s scholarly participation in al-Andalus. Nevertheless, neither her personal name nor the year of her death is mentioned. However, the biographical account of Baqi ibn Makhlad tells us that she lived in al-Andalus during the Umayyad period.

### **Second Example**

The Sister of Qadi Mundhir ibn Sa‘id al-Baluti

The sister of Qadi Mundhir ibn Sa‘id al-Kazni al-Baluti (d. 355 AH):<sup>30</sup>

The biographer was unable to ascertain her name. She lived in Fahs al-Ballut, their homeland, and was one of the virtuous women of the region. She was devout and devoted herself to worship in a mosque adjacent to her home. Elderly women from her neighborhood and pious women among their community would visit her for remembrance of God, gaining knowledge of religious matters, and studying the biographies of devout worshippers. She therefore held a prominent position in her locality. Ibn Hayyan mentioned this<sup>31</sup>.

This woman came from a family of scholars. Her brother was the jurist and theologian Mundhir al-Baluti. However, as was often the case with women, her name has remained unknown.

### **Third example:**

Fatimah bint Abi ‘Ali Husayn ibn Muhammad al-Sadafi

She was from Murcia and was a pious, ascetic woman. She had memorised the Qur’an and devoted herself to its recitation and study. She also frequently transmitted hadiths concerning supplications and other matters. She had beautiful handwriting and loved reading books. She died after 590 AH, having reached the age of eighty<sup>32</sup>.

This is a brief biographical entry for an Andalusian woman. Her biographer, Ibn al-Abbar, provided only a brief account of her life, no more than three lines long. He stated that she was pious and ascetic, and that she had memorised the Qur’an. It seems that she regularly practised the transmitted supplications. He also mentioned that her father had fought in the cause of God, perhaps during the Almoravid period when she was still a child. This suggests that she came from a virtuous family. She also married the prayer leader of Murcia and had children with him.

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<sup>30</sup>- For the biographical entry of al-Baluti, see: Ibn al-Farāḍi, *History of the Scholars of al-Andalus*, previously cited source, 2/143.

<sup>31</sup>- Ibn al-Abbar, *The Supplement*, 4/245.

<sup>32</sup>- *Ibid.*, 4/263.

### **Chapter Five: The Significance of the Image of Women in Biographical Dictionaries**

The preceding examples reveal that the portrayal of Andalusian women in biographical dictionaries is multifaceted. However, it is also a selective portrayal that should be approached with caution.

Firstly, the number of biographical entries devoted to women is small compared to those devoted to men. This does not necessarily mean that women's participation in intellectual and cultural life was limited. It may instead be a result of the nature of biographical writing, which primarily focuses on scholars, jurists and transmitters, subsequently including women only if the author deems them worthy of mention.

The study observed that female biographical entries in several Andalusian biographical dictionaries were scarce, and that women were underrepresented or marginalised in some sources. This means that reading these sources requires combining the information they provide with what they omit.

Conversely, the language used in the biographical entries themselves carries important implications. For example, when Ibn Bashkuwal describes Fatima al-Maghami as a 'learned woman and jurist', or Wallada as a 'woman of letters and poet', he is not merely recording information, but also assigning these women a position within the cultural sphere to which he himself belonged.

Conversely, some female biographical entries contain judgements relating to behaviour, morality and social appearance. This suggests that the biographer viewed women not only in terms of their scholarly achievements, but also in relation to their moral and social image. Through descriptions such as 'pious', 'virtuous', 'committed to righteousness and selflessness', and 'freeing captives', among other social acts, the sources construct an ethical image of the Andalusian woman.

This is particularly evident in the biography of Wallada, where Ibn Bashkuwal combines his appreciation of her literary ability with a critical observation of her social conduct. Consequently, the image of women in biographical dictionaries is not entirely neutral, but rather one in which scholarly, moral and social criteria intersect.

### **Conclusion:**

The study reached several conclusions, the most important of which are as follows:

- Andalusian biographical dictionaries are an important source for studying the history of women, although they contain fewer biographical entries about women than men.
- The selected biographical entries reveal Andalusian women's presence in various fields, particularly jurisprudence, Hadith transmission, literature, poetry, writing, calligraphy and charity.
- The biography of Fatima bint Yahya al-Maghami is an example of a learned woman and jurist who combined scholarship with writing, arithmetic, Arabic prosody and calligraphy, demonstrating the range of subjects studied by some Andalusian women.
- Radiya, al-Nasir's client, is an example of a woman involved in scholarly travel, audition and transmission. This confirms that some women participated in networks of knowledge transmission between al-Andalus and the East.

- Wallada bint al-Mustakfi is an example of a woman of letters and a poet who participated in literary life. She held a literary salon attended by other writers, which reveals the presence of women within the broader cultural sphere.
- The biographies of some female writers and calligraphers demonstrate their involvement in writing, arithmetic and calligraphy, as well as their connection to royal or political institutions.
- However, these examples should not be treated as a complete representation of Andalusian women, but rather as selected examples preserved in biographical dictionaries from the third to the seventh century AH. They therefore provide a partial and selective image that must be understood in the context of biographical writing.
- Women in biographical dictionaries did not receive the detailed treatment necessary to accurately reflect their status and role. This may be attributed to several reasons, the most important of which is that historical narratives did not devote sufficient attention to the details of women's lives. Although women enjoyed a degree of freedom in al-Andalus during this period, within Muslim society they were often identified primarily in relation to male figures, such as the daughter of a scholar, the wife of a judge, or the sister of a jurist or Qur'anic reciter, as demonstrated by the above examples.

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