

Writing for the Caliphate: *The Unique Necklace* by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih*

ISABEL TORAL-NIEHOFF
Freie Universität Berlin

(itoral@zedat.fu-berlin.de)

Abstract

This study undertakes a political reading of the ‘Iqd al-farīd by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (246/860-328/940). It proposes to identify this adab encyclopaedia, composed in Cordova as a “caliphal” composition, by interpreting its conceptual agenda and compositional structure against the background of (neo-) Umayyad caliphal ideology as reconstructed by Janina Safran and Gabriel Martínez-Gros. It reads the text as “imperialistic” in its claim to represent Umayyad leadership, as unique and universal, against that of its contemporary rivals, the Abbasids and Fatimids. The Umayyads in al-Andalus suffered from a peculiarly precarious legitimacy, since, in contrast to the Abbasids and Fatimids, they could not refer to a kinship link to the Prophet. Their territory was also situated far outside the central lands of Islam and did not dominate the Holy Sites in the Hijāz (required for a caliph), which was a source of embarrassment. Therefore, there was a particularly strong need for a consistent ideology to compensate for this weakness. The study concentrates on three arguments. First, that the ‘Iqd al-Farīd was written by a man of the Umayyad regime under the tutelage of the caliph; second, that the ‘Iqd reflects a cultural program that aimed at educating Cordovan elites according to cultural models set forth by caliphal Baghdad; and third, that, as an encyclopaedia, it reflects an inclusive, globalizing, culturally imperialistic program that matched the contemporaneous caliphal universal aspirations of the Umayyad regime.

In the year 316/929, the Umayyad emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, who had been ruling in al-Andalus since 300/912 as successor to his grandfather ‘Abdallāh (275/888–300/912), ended the long period of the Umayyad emirate in Cordoba that had begun in 136/754.¹ He achieved this through a dramatic course of action: by assuming the title of Commander of the Faithful (*amīr al-mu’minīn*) and then asserting the prerogatives of *khuṭba* and *sikka*. Thus he initiated the short but splendid era of the Second Umayyad caliphate that lasted

* This work was presented in the *II Jornada de Estudios los Califatos del Occidente Islamico* and was worked out in the context of my participation in the research project I+D funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, ref. FFI2013-43172-P.

1. M. Fierro, “Sobre la adopción del título califal por ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III,” *Sharq Al-Andalus* 6 (1989), 33-42.