



El sintagma árabe «Wali Allah» (el Amigo de Dios) es uno de los epígrafes que aparecen grabados en las monedas de plata acuñadas por los almorávides del Ándalus y el Magreb durante las primeras décadas del siglo vi d.C./xii h. Predicado normalmente del emir 'Ali ibn Yusuf, el mencionado sintagma no plantea problemas en cuanto a su léxico o sintaxis. Sin embargo, la determinación de su valor pragmático en el marco del discurso almorávide de legitimación exige una labor de reconstrucción de los entornos implicados, sobre todo por la ambigüedad de dichas palabras en dicho discurso.

PALABRAS CLAVE: árabe, análisis del discurso, hermenéutica, patrimonio andalusi, legitimación.

Rebuilding the contexts of the Andalusí epigraphic legacy: 'The Friend of God' in the Almoravid numismatic discourse

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The Arabic phrase «Wali Allah» (the Friend of God) is included among the epigraphic legends displayed in the coins issued by the Almoravids (Murabitun) during the first decades of the 12th century AC (6th century AH), in al-Andalus (Islamic Spain) and North Africa. Although the sequence, normally referred to the Almoravid Emir, 'Ali ibn Yusuf, poses no problems of translation in its lexical and syntactic levels, its actual intended meaning within the Almoravid legitimacy discourse reveals itself as a challenge, mostly because of its ambiguity. This paper offers a reconstruction of the different contexts involved in the phrase.

KEYWORDS: arabic, discourse analysis, hermeneutics, Andalusí legacy, legitimacy



O. THE PROBLEM

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During¹ the first decades of the 12th century AC (6th century AH) the Almoravids (Murabitun) struck a large number of silver coins usually known as qirats. Despite their small size, the Almoravid qirats displayed one or more religious and/or political slogans, including the remarkable *wali Allah 'Ali*, which has been normally translated as *the Friend of God is 'Ali*, in English, and *el amigo de Dios es 'Ali*, in Spanish. This Arabic sentence is a simple one, both in its grammatical and lexical levels. Nevertheless, it is not easy at all to grasp its pragmatism and much less its contextual intended meaning. In this paper we try to show that the slogan was part of a legitimacy discourse founded on a personal (as opposed to a social one) and charismatic religious conception, and a prominent instance of the use of some kind of ambiguity in the epigraphic medieval discourse. In this latter respect, our work here illustrates that the only sensible action to be taken by the translator as a response toward such high degrees of (subjective) ambiguity is the explicit explanation of the historical and ideological backgrounds of the original Arabic medieval texts, i.e. what we may metaphorically call the rebuilding of contexts (Peña, 1995), a task particularly necessary in the field of medieval epigraphy (Peña & Vega, 2003).

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I. IMPLICATIONS OF A NUMISMATIC LEGEND

'Ali ibn Yusuf (500-537 AH / 1106-1143 AC) was the Almoravid emir who ruled North Africa and Islamic Spain. He was a very religious man (Bosch, 1956: 245), and issued a large number of silver coins displaying an unusual variety in designs, slogans and textual nuances (Kassis, 1997; Vega & Peña, 2002-03). While his gold coins repeat the same model with slight changes, most of them depending on where and when they were struck, no less than 160 different silver pieces have been already recorded (Vives, 1893; Hazard, 1952; Ibrahim, 1996; Frochoso, 1999; Martínez, 2001; Vega & Peña, 2002). And we can expect that the corpus will keep increasing with more varieties and unregistered pieces in the future. The result is a very rich catalogue of numismatic types, decorations and inscriptions. Let us concentrate in the textual and linguistic elements of Almoravid coins. Form and content of medieval Islamic numismatic slogans have been somehow neglected by most scholars, apart from several prominent exceptions (van Berchem, 1907; Bel, 1933; Marinho, 1985; Wassertein, 1985: 155-60; Daoudi, 1987; Clément, 1994; Gubert, 1996; Fierro, 1999, 2001; Vega, Peña & Fera, 2002; Elhadri, *forthcoming*). Nevertheless, they offer a valuable insight in political and religious history, not to mention their relevance in the history of medieval Islamic Arabic discourses (Vega & Peña, 2001, 2003a).

There is a piece, a silver qirat issued by 'Ali ibn Yusuf and long time ago recorded in numismatic *corpora* (Vives, 1893: no. 1772; Hazard, 1952: no. 978), that bears the following inscription, containing the ruler's name and titles, on one of its two sides:

a) *Wali Allah / Amir al-Muslimin / Ali ibn Yusuf*

(The Friend of God / Emir of the Muslims / 'Ali ibn Yusuf)

Almoravid emirs actually ruled a vast empire but did not claim the imamate or caliphate. They never dared to refuse the nominal religious leadership of the Abbasid dynasty. This is why none of them held the titles of *Amir al-Mu'minin* 'Emir of the Faithful' and *Imam* 'Imam', as Umayyads of Cordoba had done previously, and Almohads (Muwahhidun) were to do after them (Fierro, 1986; Vega, 2003). Instead, Almoravid emirs used to call themselves *Amir al-Muslimin wa-Nasir al-Din* 'Emir of the Muslims and Protector of the Religion' (Bosch, 1956: 169). But it is the other title or pseudo-title we would like to focus on: *Wali Allah* (the Friend of God). This one occurs similarly in another 'Ali's coin, a qirat again (Vives, 1893: no. 1701; Hazard, 1952: no. 927) where we can read the following legend:

b) *Wali / Allah / Amir / al-Muslimin / Ali*

(The Friend / of God / Emir / of the Muslims / 'Ali)

Again this is only one of the two sides of the coin, probably the obverse (Vega & Peña: 2001b). And in both pieces the other side displays the two statements of the Islamic creed: *La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad Rasul Allah* (There is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God). But let us now recall that a very similar sentence, *'Ali Wali Allah* ('Ali is the Friend of God), is the statement of allegiance added by Shiite Muslims to the two just mentioned first Islamic principles accepted by all Muslims. For instance, the Fatimids, the Shiite

dynasty of North Africa and Egypt, used to inscribe all the three statements in many of the coins they issued (Farrugia de Candia, 1936-48; Miles, 1951):

tawhid or 'Unicity of God': *La ilaha illa Allah* (There is no god but God);

risala or '(divine) Mission of Muhammad': *Muhammad rasul Allah* (Muhammad is the Messenger of God), and

wilaya, about the role of Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib: *'Ali wali Allah* ('Ali is the Friend of God).

The significance of *wilaya* is threefolded: (1) Imam 'Ali and his successors deserve the love of the Community, (2) they are infalible interpreters of the Word of God, and (3) they are indisputable figures of authority. This is what lies under the Shiite terms of *wali* and *wilaya* (Sadr, 1977; Rizvi, 1999). Certainly the occurrence of the phrase *Wali Allah* (the Friend of God) on the same side of two coins where the name of 'Ali is mentioned is not enough to conclude anything else than a curious coincidence. Still there is the evidence of another coin, unrecorded until recently (Vega & Peña, 2002), that could confirm that we are on the right path. It is a tiny silver half qirat which has a remarkable feature: one of its two sides is completely anepigraphic and lacks any kind of ornaments. But the most important thing is that the other side displays only the short slogan:

c) *Wali Allah / 'Ali*

(The Friend of God / [is] 'Ali)

Nothing else. This legend, even more than the two ones above mentioned, cannot but bring to mind the Shiite allegiance *'Ali Wali*





Allah ('Ali is the Friend of God), being word order the only difference between the two sentences. There is no evidence that the ruler himself or the person responsible for numismatic slogans had in mind the similarity between the two sentences. We cannot conclude that somebody was trying to imply some kind of relationship between the Almoravid emir and 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin, by indirect means, or to establish a link between the legitimacy of the Almoravid emirate or dynasty and the religiously based authority of Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. To prove that the author of such a slogan intended to utter a confusing message is far from our possibilities. Though, we think we have clues enough to maintain that the use of ambiguous (from our perspective indeed) numismatic slogans was once and again favoured by Almoravid rulers, and afterwards by Almohads and other ruling dynasties (Peña & Vega, *forthcoming*; Vega, Peña & Feria, 2003). And enough to enable us to pose the hypothesis that the use of such slogans was a way to reinforce the ruler's religious legitimacy, by implying his authority via religious charism. If we are right, legitimacy was conveyed in an unexplicit discourse built on implications and indirect suggestions.

2. DEGREES AND VARIETIES OF AMBIGUITY

We have so far considered three numismatic texts including the phrase *Wali Allah* (The Friend of God) and the name *'Ali* ('Ali). But their potential implied meanings are not equal. Let us mention them again:

a) *Wali Allah / Amir al-Muslimin / 'Ali ibn Yusuf*

(The Friend of God / Emir of the Muslims / 'Ali ibn Yusuf)

b) *Wali / Allah / Amir / al-Muslimin / 'Ali*
(The Friend / of God / Emir / of the Muslims / 'Ali)

c) *Wali Allah / 'Ali*

(The Friend of God / 'Ali)

There is a graduation in the potential implications of the three legends. In the first case the possibilities of explicit confusion between the Almoravid emir and Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib are avoided by the mention of the emir's father (Yusuf). In the second case the implications are not impossible, but still difficult because of the title *Amir al-Muslimin* (Emir of the Muslims). It is in the third instance that we have strong reasons to wonder if the slogan could have brought the Shiite allegiance *'Ali Wali Allah* to the contemporaries' minds. We know that Fatimid coins bearing this legend circulated in Western Islam, because they have been found in hoards, often described in secondary sources, especially in the case of Islamic Spain (Wasserstein, 1994). Fatimids have included the term or title *Wali Allah* 'the Friend of God' in their coins referring not only to Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. For the caliph al-Zahir li-I'zaz Din Allah (AH 411-427/AD 1023-36) held the double title of *'Abd Allah wa-Wali-bi* (the Servant of God and His Friend) in a quarter dinar bearing as well the Shiite allegiance (*'Ali Wali Allah*) and struck in Sicily, AH 428/AC 1036-7 (*sic*) (Miles, 1951: 25). This happened one century before the Almoravid 'Ali ibn Yusuf's coins were issued, but in the case of Fatimids there is nothing to be surprised with, provided that their legitimacy was based in explicit charismatic reasons. Thus, the inscription *Wali Allah 'Ali* in Almoravid coins is an instance of ambiguity in the reference, whether was intended or not. In contrast, a



case of deliberate uncertainty in reference has already been discussed in secondary sources (Wasserstein, 1985). We mean the formula

d) *Al-Imam 'Abd Allah*
(Imam 'Abd Allah)

This had been included by some Taifa party-kings in their coins (Prieto, 1926; Wasserstein, 1985) before Almoravids did the same in their gold issues. It was a means to solve the problem of legitimacy because both Taifa party-kings and Almoravids never claimed the caliphate, as we said above. They accordingly recognized the authority of the 'Abbasids of Baghdad. The phrase has already been considered as an instance of ambiguous political discourse (Codera, 1875; Boneschi, 1923-25; Fierro, 2001). Its ambiguity derives from the fact that *'Abd Allah* may be understood as a proper name ('Abd Allah), or as a title (the Servant of God), or as an epithet (the servant of God). Certainly, there had been an 'Abbasid Caliph called 'Abd Allah al-Qa'im, but he had reigned previously (AD 1031-1075), and, in any case, the first gold coins issued by 'Ali ibn Yusuf were struck in AH 500/AD 1106-7 (Hazard, 1952: no. 152), when the caliphal title was held by Ahmad al-Mustazhir. The same problem, i.e. obscurity in the reference of a title or epithet, arises in another Almoravid piece, an extremely tiny silver fraction, recently recorded (Vega & Peña, 2002), showing an unusual legend on both sides:

e) *Li-[A]llah wali*
(God has a Friend?)

Now the question is: Who is the person referred to? 'Ali ibn Yusuf again? We do not know, since nothing else is mentioned in the

coin. And, further, how to interpret these words? Are they really just an statement (God has a Friend) or should they be taken as a sort of invocation (God's Friend!)? In fact, most of the legends previously considered are somehow pragmatically ambiguous. The omission of the stative verb in Arabic allows this new kind of uncertainty. Our previous translation of *Wali Allah 'Ali* was 'The Friend of God is 'Ali', as if the original intended meaning (Hatim & Mason, 1990) was a political statement of the ruler's religious legitimacy. But we have no evidence to refuse the possibility that the utterance was a religious exclamative slogan or invocation. If this is the case, then the right translation should be 'The Friend of God, Ali!', i.e. lacking any informative content (Peña, 1997). This leads us to another problematic legend. Numismatic catalogues register a number of pieces displaying a single word legend on both sides of every coin (Frochoso, 1999: nos. 17a and 18), or on just one side, being the other one anepigraphic (Vives, 1893: no. 1693):

f) *Ali*
(Ali)

The oddity of this numismatic legend has not been pointed out as far as we know. The sole presence of a ruler's name inscribed of an Islamic coin, after a long tradition of pieces bearing the names of God and Prophet Muhammad, as well as some Qur'anic quotations, among other texts generally referring to the leaders of the Community (Mitchiner: 1977; Bates: 1982; Broome: 1983), is not to be neglected. We are facing an interesting instance of innovation, firmly rejected by some medieval Islamic scholars under certain conditions (Fierro, 1993), because in some cases novelties could be understood as an instance of



going astray, while acceptable innovations may have been viewed as a licit response against the spreading of corruption (*fasad*) in the Community. This applied not only to religion but to any field of creative activity, such as poetry (Bonebakker, 1981; Ajami, 1984: 13-16) or philology (Peña, 1988). Secondary sources (Prieto, 1915; Hazard, 1952, 67; Bates, 1982, 30; 385; Fierro, 1999: 227) have often drew attention to the significance and impact of Almoḥad numismatic novelties. It is obvious that Almoḥads offered many important changes in forms and contents of numismatic designs (Vega, Peña & Feria, *forthcoming*). But we must not forget these significant previous Almoḥavid steps. On the other hand, the legend is a remarkable instance of pragmatism and ambiguity. The implied meaning could be either a political statement as '(Our ruler is) 'Ali', or an invocation, i.e. '(O) 'Ali!', akin to any personal expression of religious feelings. It is noteworthy here that the first legend expressing explicit individual spirituality ever used in Islamic Spain is probably to be found in an Almoḥavid coin, a silver qirat struck in al-Andalus by 'Ali ibn Yusuf's father –Yusuf ibn Tashfin (480-500 AH/ 1087-1106 AC):

g) *Hasbi [A]llah*

(God is enough for me)

In this case part of the pragmatism and ambiguity derives from the fact that we do not know who is supposed to be the utterer of this Qur'anic (9: 129) quotation, rendered here according to Arberry's translation (1964). On the other hand, the similarity between the sentence and some mystical texts in other non-Islamic traditions is striking. We are thinking of some popular Santa Teresa de Jesus' lines

–“Quien a Dios tiene / Nada le falta / Sólo Dios basta” (*Obras completas*: 514). Yet coming back to the latter numismatic inscription, is it to be understood as an expression of the ruler's religiousness or a pious idea any Muslim must identify with? It we take a look to the broader co-text of numismatic Almoḥavid legends considered so far, we should probably answer that the presumed utterer is the emir himself. For, if he is *the* Friend of God, then he needs nothing else. Yet, as far as we know, 'Ali ibn Yusuf, the third Almoḥavid emir, was the first to use the title or epithet *Wali Allah* (the Friend of God) in coins. One might conclude that his long ruling time would have allowed him to attempt the elaboration of a complicated political discourse of legitimacy. And we think we have already collected evidences strong enough as to pose the hypothesis that the core of this discourse was religious individual charisma. In fact the mechanism which lies under this discourse had been common in Sunni Islamic political-theological thinking from the times of the first 'Abbasids. Cahen (1968) stressed the idea that 'Abbasids' most dangerous challenge were the 'Alid, i.e. Shiite or pseudo-Shiite, claims, and suggested the idea that al-Mansur (136-158 AH / 754-775 AC) gave his son and successor, Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad (158-169 AH / 775-785 AC), the personal denomination of *al-Mahdi* (the Guided [by God]), a term of strong messianic resonances, as a response against Shiite claims. And it is noteworthy that this al-Mahdi was the first Islamic ruler to have his name and personal title inscribed on the coins he issued (Bates, 1982: 21). Similar instances of what we can probably call an appropriation of the basic set of charismatic ideas are to be found once and again in medi-

eval Islamic societies². Emir 'Ali ibn Yusuf's attempts failed anyway. Almoravids were soon defeated by Almohads, who did find the way to a coherent and stable legitimating discourse, expressed by a single set of numismatic slogans, repeated once and again in their coins (Vega, Peña & Fera, 2002). Paradoxically, the Almoravid failure offers a generous stream of the most different and unexpected ideas, as reflected by coins. Another instance is provided by the insight given by numismatic texts on the organization of political power in the highest level among Almoravids, which is the last stage in our route. A Moroccan numismatist, Daoudi (1987: 131), has stressed the idea that the Almoravid regime was «la première dyarchie en Islam», which is probably true, at least for the Western part of the Medieval Islamic World. In fact, one of the implications of some Almoravid slogans is that the title of Emir was held at the same time by the ruler and his successor. This is conveyed in another recently recorded (Vega & Peña, 2001b) silver fraction, struck in the name of 'Ali ibn Yusuf and his heir Sir, that shows an anepigraphic side and the following text on the other one:

b) *Al-amir 'Ali / Al-amir Sir*

(The emir 'Ali / The emir Sir)

The uncertainty of the attribution of the same title to two different individuals apparent-

² By the time these Almoravid coins were issued, the Eastern theologian Abu l-Qasim al-Zamakhshari (dead AH 538/AD 1144) wrote, in his well-known Qur'anic commentary (*Al-Kashshaf*: I, 428), that the significant term *amr* 'order, affair, process', as it appears in the revealed sentence (*Qur'an* 3,154) *al-amr kullu-hu li-[Allah]*, i.e. 'the affair belongs to God entirely', must be understood as belonging not only to God but to His *awliya* (plural of *wali*: friends).

ly on a basis of equality is combined in another coin (Vives, 1893: no. 1770; Hazard, 1952: no. 988) displaying what we can call textual or graphical ambiguity, because of the breaking of the lineal sequence characteristic of language. A three word text appears on the only epigraphic side of the piece:

i) *'Ali / Al-Amir / Sir*

(Ali / The Emir / Sir)

3. OUR HYPOTHESIS

Summig up, we have approached several numismatic slogans as instances of uncertain discourse. Ambiguity is certainly a central issue in translation (Ballard, 1990), as it is in every activity involving hermeneutics. The importance of ambiguity in Islamic culture has been many times stressed by contemporary historians. As for medieval Muslim scholars, we have to remember Ibn al-Sid al-Batalyawsi (dead in 521 AH / 1127 AC), the Andalusí *savant*, who lived and wrote during the same period while the above mentioned coins were issued. He was a jurist (*faqih*), a linguist, a philosopher and a literary critic. And the author of a book (*Tanbih*) on the «causes of the dissensions among Muslims in their opinions, policies and believes» (Peña & Vega, 2004; Serrano, 2005). According to him, ambiguity (*ishtirak*) was among the most important reasons of the dissensions within Islamic Community. We have tried to find out what lies behind the pervasive emergence of ambiguity in numismatic slogans. We maintain that the different varieties of ambiguity above explored may have derived from the attempt to reinforce political power with religious authority. In fact, authority has been pointed out as a pivotal difference



between Sunni and Shiite Islam (Kohlberg, 1979). We are by no means implying that Almoravids were filo-Shiite. Rather, what we maintain is that charismatic legitimacy of political power, particularly well developed by 'Alids, could have been an effective model for Sunni dynasties in their legitimacy discourses. If we are right, the inscriptions on the pieces issued by 'Abd al-Rahman III al-Nasir li-Din Allah (Frochoso, 1996), the first Western Umayyad caliph, were a response to the political and religious discourse underlying Fatimid coins (Fierro, 2004a, b). And this is just one instance of what we may consider as a reaction to the Shiite challenge, an idea more than once maintained in secondary sources (Epalza, 1983). An explicit critical response against Shiite beliefs is contained in Ibn al-Sid al-Batalyawsi's works (Peña, 1990, 150-1), written in Almoravid Spain. On the other hand, and beside the above mentioned Fatimid coins, the model of Hammudids, the Caliphs of Malaga during the first half of eleventh century (Seco de Lucena, 1955; Wasserstein, 1985; Ación, 1988; Vega & Peña, 2003b, 2004), could have been a link between the 'Alid ideas of charismatic legitimacy and the discourse underlying Almoravid slogans. Hammudid legitimacy was built on the fact that their ancestors, the Idrissids of Fas (García-Arenal & Manzano, 1995), were descendants of Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (Ación, 1988). The charismatic contents of Idrissid coins is almost reduced to the mention of 'Ali's name in all their pieces, and to an inscription about him and about his role after Prophet Muhammad (Eustache, 1970-71). On the other hand, Hammudids expressed their legitimacy in coins (Prieto, 1926) by means of the probably charismatic titles they held. Their charismatic claims are much more obvious in

courtly poetry dedicated to the Caliph as a descendant of Prophet Muhammad (Contenente, 1981). In fact, the turning point of the 10th century AC (4th century AH) brought about many and important changes in the Islamic World. One of them was the development of some renewed legitimacy discourses, where we find elements traceable back to the time of the first 'Abbasid caliphs. In Western Islam, Almoravids condensed their legitimacy discourse in a fascinating set of numismatic slogans, apparently ambiguous. Nevertheless, and at least in some instances, ambiguity is not a feature of the original translated text itself, but rather a receptor's response. Before presuming the ambiguity of a particular text, we should wonder whether we are rather referring to something on the interpreter's mind.

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