

# THE QUR'ĀNIC SYMBOL OF FISH ON ḤAMMŪDID COINS: AL-ḤADĪR AND THE HOLY GEOGRAPHY OF THE STRAITS OF GIBRALTAR

Salvador PEÑA MARTÍN\*  
Universidad de Málaga

Miguel VEGA MARTÍN\*  
Archivo Diocesano de Málaga

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**Resumen:** Algunas de las monedas acuñadas por el primer califa hammudí de Málaga llevan grabadas figuras de peces, cuya presencia puede explicarse a partir de las ideas islámicas sobre la autoridad espiritual. El símbolo del pez, como alusión a la figura de cierto misterioso Siervo de Dios y maestro espiritual, implica la ubicación del Estrecho de Gibraltar en el mapa sagrado del islam, al tiempo que recuerda las ideas chiíes sobre el imamato.

**Palabras clave:** Islam. Símbolos coránicos. Estrecho de Gibraltar. Hammudíes. Monedas. Gnosis.

**Abstract:** Some coins struck by the first Hammūdī Caliph of Malaga bear images of fish. The connection between such symbols and Islamic ideas on spiritual leadership are shown. The icon of fish is explained because of the relevance of the Straits of Gibraltar in the holy Islamic map. On the other hand it may be considered as an allusion to a certain mysterious Servant of God, as well as a reminder of the Shī'ī conception of imamate.

**Key words:** Islam. Quranic symbols. Straits of Gibraltar. Hammudids. Coins. Gnosis.

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\* spena@uma.es  
\* obispado@diocesismalaga.es

The silver coins<sup>(1)</sup> struck by the first Ḥammūdīd Caliph ‘Alī al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh in the city of Ceuta (*Madīnat Sabta*), in the year 408 H./1017-8 AD, have been studied several times by numismatists, who have paid particular attention to the pieces bearing images of fishes. This is a relevant feature in the numismatic issues of the Ḥammūdīds<sup>(2)</sup>, successors of the ‘Alid Idrīssids in al-Andalus (Islamic Spain) and North Africa. As far as we know, the first researcher who noticed the existence of small images of fishes on Caliph ‘Alī’s coins was F. Codera<sup>(3)</sup>, who identified them as tuna. A century later, J.J. Rodríguez Lorente and T.H. Ibrahim<sup>(4)</sup> included variants of coins depicting fishes in their corpus of Islamic coins struck in Ceuta, and recalled the importance of tuna fishing in the area of Ceuta since the Phoenicians. Recently A. Ariza<sup>(5)</sup> rejected the idea that these icons had to be associated with the geographical environs of the Straits of Gibraltar, and suggested instead that the icon of the fish had some kind of magical sense, as a protection against evil eye. A. Ariza states incidentally that fishes are mentioned in a few Qur’ānic passages, and it is one of these passages we would like to concentrate on as a means to explore the Ḥammūdīd vision of the world, a system of spiritual ideas with the figure of the Imām as a keystone. Yet we do not need to refer to ‘Alid/Šī‘ī theology or gnosis if we wish to find the grounds for a holy semiotics<sup>(6)</sup> of the world, which is shared by different religious systems of ideas<sup>(7)</sup>. This was clearly stated by L. Réau<sup>(8)</sup> as a starting point for his study on Christian iconography<sup>(9)</sup>:

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  - (2) On Ḥammūdīd dynasty, political history and numismatics, see Codera (1877 and 1903), Guillén (1880), Prieto (1926), Seco de Lucena (1955), Wasserstein (1985), Rodríguez & Ibrahim (1987), Ación (1998), Ariza (2004), Vega & Peña (2003 and 2004).
  - (3) Codera (1887: 431).
  - (4) Rodríguez & Ibrahim (1987: 84).
  - (5) Ariza (2004: 218).
  - (6) Peña (2004).
  - (7) Hani (1992), Lings (2005).
  - (8) Réau (1955-59: I, 61)
  - (9) On Christian iconography and symbols, see as well Vega (2004).

*“L’idée dominante de la pensée médiévale est que le monde visible, perçu par nos sens, n’a, en effet, d’intérêt qu’en tant que symbole ou préfigure d’un monde invisible. Les objets, les faits ne méritent pas d’être étudiés en eux-mêmes et pour eux-mêmes dans leur essence et dans leurs rapports: ils ne valent pour nous que comme des signes de réalités suprasensibles qu’il s’agit de discerner et d’interpréter”.*

Medieval thinking, both Christian and Islamic, converged on an idea already established in the *Old Testament* (“Psalm” 18: 2-7<sup>(10)</sup>):

*“The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky proclaims its builder’s craft. / One day to the next conveys that message; one night to the next imparts that knowledge. / There is no word or sound; no voice is heard; / yet their report goes forth through all the earth, their message, to the ends of the world. God has pitched there a tent for the sun; / it comes forth like a bridegroom from his chamber, and like an athlete joyfully runs its course. / From one end of the heavens it comes forth; its course runs through to the other; nothing escapes its heat”.*

Coming back to Qur’ān, some of the referred verses (18: 60-65) tell the story of a certain meeting. Let us remember it according to two different English versions (A.Y. Ali’s and A.J. Arberry’s):

*“Behold Moses said / to his attendant, “I will not / give up until I reach, / the junction of the two / seas or (until) I spend / years and years in travel. / But when they reached / the Junction, they forgot / (about) their Fish which took / its course through the sea / (straight) as in a tunnel. / When they had passed on / (some distance), Moses said / to his attendant: “Bring us / our early meal; truly / we have suffered much fatigue / at this (stage of) our journey.” / He replied: “Sawest thou / (what happened) when we / betook ourselves to the rock? / I did indeed forget / (about) the Fish: none but / Satan made me forget / to tell (you) about it: / it took its course through / the sea in a marvellous way!” / Moses said: “That was*

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(10) *New American Bible.*

*what / we were seeking after.” / So they went back / on their footsteps, following / (the path they had come). / So they found one / of Our servants. / On whom We had bestowed / mercy from Ourselves / and whom We had taught / knowledge from Our own presence. (A.Y. Ali)”.*

*“And when Moses said to his page, / ‘I will not give up until I reach / the meeting of the two seas, / though I go on for many years.’ / Then, when they reached their meeting, / they forgot their fish, and it took / its way into the sea, burrowing. / When they had past over, he said / to his page, ‘Bring us our breakfast; / indeed we have encountered / weariness from this our journey.’ / He said, ‘What thinkest thou? When we / took refuge in the rock, then I / forgot the fish –and it was Satan / himself that made me forget it / so that I should not remember it– / and so it took its way into / the sea in a manner marvellous.’ / Said he, ‘This is what we were / seeking!’ And so they returned / upon their tracks, retracing them. / Then they found one of Our servants / unto whom We had given mercy / from Us, and We had taught him / and We had taught him / knowledge proceeding from Us. (A.J. Arberry)”.*

The story is surrounded by a halo of mystery, on the one hand, because of its lack of details concerning the exact reference of the name *Mūsà* (Moses), who has not always been identified with the well-known Prophet by all commentators, as well as the fact that the Servant of God is never called by his name, and, on the other, because of that “junction (or meeting) of the two seas” (*majma‘ al-baḥrayn*) where all happened. In fact the Islamic doctrines on the search for Wisdom assume that the Junction (or Meeting) of the Two Seas was the stage of the encounter between two complementary approaches to religion, namely Law and Spiritual Science or Gnosis, personified by Moses and the Servant of God, whom Ibn ʿAbbās (d. before 68 H./687 AD) already identified<sup>(11)</sup> as al-Ḥaḍīr or al-Ḥīḍr, id est, ‘the Green, the Verdant’, “a prophet of the Sons of Israel”. Some medieval scholars described him vaguely, like Ibn al-Sīd<sup>(12)</sup> (d. 521 H./1127 AD), who does not go further than stating that he was

(11) Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, I, 849.

(12) *Al-Muḥallat*, I, 496.

“one of the prophets” (*nabī min al-anbiyā'*), while Ibn Ḡuzayy al-Kalbī<sup>(13)</sup> (eighth/fourteenth century) stated that God gave him the traits of an angel, just to mention two Andalusī *savants*<sup>(14)</sup>. Al-Ḥaḍīr has been well known by Western contemporary scholars, at least since A. de Biberstein Kazimirski<sup>(15)</sup> defined him as a

*“personnage mythique, immortel, et dont l'âme selon les musulmans, passait du corps d'un prophète dans celui d'un autre. On le croit le même que Pinchas<sup>(16)</sup>, ou Élie, ou saint Georges”.*

The link between al-Ḥaḍīr and some beliefs unaccepted by exoteric and Sunnī trends can be traced to the Andalusī contemporaries of the Ḥammūdids, such as Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456 H./1064 AD), who, in his *Kitāb al-Fiṣal*, in his examination of the “Šī'ī deviations”<sup>(17)</sup>, strongly rejected transmigration of souls and the idea that al-Ḥaḍīr could be invoked in different places of the world at the same time, as can be seen in Asín's Spanish translation of the passage:

*“Todos estos herejes han venido, pues, a caminar por la misma senda de los judíos que dicen que el sacerdote Melquisedec, o el siervo enviado por Abraham a pedir en matrimonio a Rebeca para su hijo Isaac, o el profeta Elías, o Fineés, el nieto de Aarón, viven todavía en el día de hoy. El mismo camino siguen todavía los aturcidos sufíes, que pretenden que el profeta Elías y el profeta Jádīr viven hoy todavía. Y algunos pretenden que a Elías se le encuentra en los lugares yermos y a Jádīr en los jardines y praderas, y que, además, éste se presenta cuando alguien lo invoca, aunque se le llame a la vez en el oriente, en el occidente, en el sur y en el norte de la tierra y en mil lugares distintos, al mismo minuto, sea como sea”.*

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(13) *Kitāb al-Ḥayl*, 208-209.

(14) The Islamic controversies on al-Ḥaḍīr were compiled by Ibn Kaṭīr, *Al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, I, 325-337.

(15) Kazimirski (1860: I, 586).

(16) On Pinchas or Phineas in the *Bible*, see Gerard and Nordon-Gerard (1990: s.v.).

(17) Asín (1927-32: V, 55).

Thus al-Ḥaḍīr is emblematic for all those who maintained the gnosis and the existence of human recipients of it, both part of the Šīʿī doctrines on spiritual leadership (*imāma*) and intimacy with God (*wilāya*). Al-Ḥaḍīr's identity has been a fruitful matter of speculation for medieval and contemporary scholars, as Kazimirski's quotation showed. It has been claimed that al-Ḥaḍīr was or had been or was to be Elias, Enoc, Idrīs, after whom the eponymous founder of the Idrīssid dynasty was called, as well as Hermes, Osiris, Saint George or the Flying Jew<sup>(18)</sup>. L. Massignon<sup>(19)</sup> considered al-Ḥaḍīr just an epithet of Elias and the prototype of Islamic saints, while A. Schimmel stressed his condition of supreme spiritual guide<sup>(20)</sup>, and M. Fierro<sup>(21)</sup> referred to the Andalusī polemics on al-Ḥaḍīr's immortality. On the other hand Qur'ānic exegesis gives plenty of evidence of al-Ḥaḍīr's religious significance. According to the mu'tazilite Ḡār Allāh al-Zamaḥṣarī<sup>(22)</sup>, the Junction of the Two Seas may be located in different places: some people believe it is between the Sea of Fars and the Sea of Rūm, while some others locate it in Ifrīqiya or in Tangiers, although an allegoric interpretation is also possible, according to which the Junction is nothing but a allusion to Moses and al-Ḥaḍīr who were "two seas of Science". The reason of Moses' journey was that God had charged him with the search for al-Ḥaḍīr, recipient of a knowledge unfamiliar to Moses. When the latter asked God when and how he would meet al-Ḥaḍīr, God answered: "on the Coast of the Rock", and gave the prophet an actual instruction: "put a fish in a basket, and where you lose it, everything will happen". Moses and his page or attendant, Joshua ibn Nun (Yūṣa' ibn Nūn), departed and lost the fish, carried by Joshua with some bread in a basket. At night both arrived at "the coast, near a fountain called the Fountain of Life (*'ayn al-ḥayāt*<sup>(23)</sup>)", from which a drop of water sprinkled the fish, which came back to life "when the cold and the spirit of water touched it", and made its way in the sea. After this miracle the meeting

(18) See Asín (1927-32: V, 55), Bausani (1978: 588), Corbin (1958), García-Arenal (2002), Omar (1993).

(19) Massignon (1955: 158).

(20) Schimmel (1975).

(21) Fierro (1992: 239).

(22) *Al-Kaššāf*, II, 731-4.

(23) Compare with Ibn Gabirol's "Spring of Life" (*Fons Vitae*), as the symbol of the One and Unifying God (Cano: 2004).

with al-Ḥaḍir took place, and the Servant of God taught Moses about the unknown (*al-ġayb*). This story was told by other Qur'ānic commentators, such as the Andalusī Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745 H/1344 AD)<sup>(24)</sup>, who specified that the Junction of the Two Seas was near Tangiers, and added that the village that refused “to welcome both of them” was *al-Ġazīra al-Ḥaḍrā'*, id est, present-day Algeciras (Cadiz, Spain), near the Straits of Gibraltar, confirming this way what had already been said much earlier by the *faqīh* Ibn Waḍḍāḥ (d. 287/900), who mentioned<sup>(25)</sup> explicitly Moses and al-Ḥaḍir, as the unwelcomed visitors.

The story is full of symbolic elements. The involved people are mentioned both in *Qur'ān* and the *Old Testament*, and there are some striking convergences with Christian symbology, such as the water, the fountain, the bread and the fish<sup>(26)</sup>. In fact, the fish is a symbol shared by other mythological or religious traditions, like Greek or Hindu<sup>(27)</sup>, far beyond its actual magical or talismanic uses. As for Qur'ānic symbology, the link between the fish and the Junction of the Two Seas is evident. This holy and mysterious place was studied by H. Corbin<sup>(28)</sup>, for instance within the system of ideas of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638 H/1240 AD), for whom the Junction represented the confluence between the intelligible pure ideas and the perceptible objects. On the other hand we have textual evidence that Andalusis did believe that the Junction of the Two Seas was located in the Straits of Gibraltar; or at least one of such holy places, since the phenomenological coexistence of more than one manifestation of a single entity does not conflict with a holy approach to reality. Secondary medieval sources<sup>(29)</sup> inform us that Ibn al-Nazzām, an obscure *savant* from Cordoba quoted by the Andalusī historian Ibn Ḥayyān (d. 469/1076), claimed that the Meeting (or Junction) of the Two Seas was near “the Idol of Cadis”. And the very same Ibn Ḥayyān recognised al-Ḥaḍir's involvement in as it were the legendary history of al-Andalus when the latter spurred on Hispan (the mythical founder of Spain). But the most significant text we know is provided by Abū

(24) *Al-Nahr al-mādd* II, 356-360.

(25) *Kitāb al-Bida'*, 36 (Spanish translation).

(26) Massignon (1955: 155) recalls, in this context, the symbol “Piscis assus, Christus passus” due to Saint Augustine of Hippo.

(27) See Guénon (1962: 121-124, Spanish translation).

(28) Corbin (1980).

(29) See al-Maqqarī, *Nafh al-ītib*, I, 132.

Ḥāmid al-Ġarnāṭī (d. 565/1169), who wrote a compilation of earthly wonders to offer a testimony of God's signs, according to his own words<sup>(30)</sup>. One of those wonders was a fish he was informed about by the people of Ceuta who believed that their city was precisely on the Junction of the Two Seas, near the Rock of Moses (*Ġabal Mūsà*). Abū Ḥāmid adds that the fish still lives in the sea waters and that people believe it is propitious. Here follows Bejarano's translation of his report<sup>(31)</sup>:

*“Esto es lo que nos ha contado la gente de ese lugar que está en la Confluencia de los dos mares y que es una ciudad a la que llaman Ceuta. En ella está la roca a la que llegó Moisés, y donde Josué olvidó el pez asado del que se comieron la mitad y cuya otra mitad restante hizo revivir Dios, ensalzando sea, y se fue por el mar teniendo descendencia hasta hoy. Es un pez cuya longitud de más de un codo y cuyo ancho es de un solo palmo. Una mitad tiene escamas, espinas y una piel muy fina sobre sus entrañas, y media cabeza con un solo ojo, y da asco, es como si estuviese muerta, como si hubiera sido comida. Su otra mitad está bien, tal y como es un pez. La gente lo tiene por buen agüero y se le regala a las personas respetables. Los judíos y los cristianos lo compran, lo cortan en tiras y lo salan para transportarlo a países lejanos. Debajo de la ciudad de Ceuta hay otra ciudad que se conoce por Tánger, situada en la Confluencia de los dos mares”.*

The connection between the Qur'ānic Junction of the Two Seas and the Straits of Gibraltar was recently explored by H. Ferhat<sup>(32)</sup>, who pointed out how some medieval sources even spoke of a town named *Mā' al-Ḥayāt* (the Water of Life) near Ceuta, and considered the story of the meeting between al-Ḥaḍīr and Moses as the starting point of important manifestations of popular religiosity in Morocco<sup>(33)</sup>, in particular the mystical order of al-Ḥaḍīriyya,

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(30) See Ducène (2003: 39).

(31) *Al-Mu'rib*, 71 (Arabic text), and 139-140 (Spanish translation).

(32) Ferhat (1993: 43).

(33) On sufism and popular religiosity in Morocco, see Rodríguez Mediano (2000) and Sánchez Sandoval (2004), as well as their references.

founded in Fes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century AC<sup>(34)</sup>. Thus Abū Ḥāmid located the Straits of Gibraltar in the holy map of medieval Islam and pointed to a particular fish, difficult to identify zoologically<sup>(35)</sup>, as the symbol of the whole spiritual affair. He did mention that his contemporaries considered the fish augured well, probably implying magical uses of it, but this is only a secondary, marginal aspect of the transcendental significance of the fish that lead Moses to al-Ḥāḍir. The fish may consequently have represented the Junction of the Two Sciences, as well as the exoteric and esoteric aspects of spiritual leadership (*imāma*), on the Ḥammūdīd coins. This made the fish a symbol particularly convenient for a member of the Ḥammūdīd dynasty like the Caliph 'Alī al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh, who, as a charismatic leader (*imām*), ruled an Islamic realm located on the lands that form the Junction of the Two Seas. On the other hand, the symbol of fish has an additional value in the 'Alid or Šī'ī set of beliefs, because of its involvement in the story of *imām* 'Alī, who was honoured by a group of speaking fishes living in river Eufate, near Kufa (Iraq)<sup>(36)</sup>.

We are confronted with the logic of harmonious reflections characteristic to medieval thinking, as we saw above through Réau's words, that is the system of correspondences between the different levels of reality, thoroughly exposed by Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'<sup>(37)</sup>. There are three degrees of existence: (1) God, (2) the world created by God, and (3) the human works. The latter must symbolize the world, that is itself a symbol of God. This double movement of reflections has been pointed out as well in medieval Christian literature<sup>(38)</sup>, where the vision of the world as a book written by God is pervasive<sup>(39)</sup>. The same patterns were shared by Muslims, based on explicit texts provided by the Qur'ān<sup>(40)</sup>, and then incorporated into the theory of sign<sup>(41)</sup> developed by Abū 'Uṭmān al-Ġāḥiẓ (d. 255/868), who considered a category of signs, called *niṣba* 'trace, token', that

(34) Ferhat (1993: 50).

(35) On ictionomy, specially from a terminological perspective, see Torres (1995) and her references.

(36) Waines (2002<sup>2</sup>: 191, Spanish translation).

(37) *Rasā'il, passim*.

(38) See, for instance, Cañas (1988: 48-49).

(39) See Curtius (1948).

(40) See 2: 99, 12: 105, 41: 53 and 57: 17.

(41) See Peña (2004) on the theory of signs in Arabic linguistic thinking.

included heavens and earth as signs of God's Majesty<sup>(42)</sup>. The universe is ordered in proportionalities: the Qur'ānic geography has an image in natural geography, and the symbolic fish has its physical descendants in the fishes swimming in the Straits of Gibraltar, as well as an iconographic representation on coins. Furthermore the Ḥammūdid Caliph, holder of the Two Sciences, namely Law and Wisdom, may be viewed as a reflection (a spiritual reincarnation) of Moses and al-Ḥaḍīr. In fact we already know that Islamic leaders in the Middle Ages intended to be identified with Qur'ānic characters, especially prophets, as M. Fierro<sup>(43)</sup> has pointed out about Mu'minid Almohads, who tried to appear as images of Moses. And similar processes of correspondences or proportionalities between the prominent *dramatis personae* of the Holy History are easy to find in Arabic poetry. Let us remember two relevant poets, Ibn Hānī<sup>(44)</sup> (d. 372/972) and al-Ma'arrī<sup>(45)</sup> (d. 449/1057), who expressed ideas not alien to the Šī'ī system of perceptions in the panegyric poems they dedicated to leaders engaged in charismatic processes of legitimacy.

Arabic medieval poetry and its social context are indeed a copious source for such conceptions. We know<sup>(46)</sup>, for instance, that the poet Abū Zayd ibn Muqānā presented himself to the Ḥammūdid Caliph Idrīs ibn Yaḥyā al-'Ālī bi-[A]llāh to recite a poem on the Caliph's charismas. The latter listened to the poem concealed behind a veil (*ḥāḡib*), but he ordered it to be withdrawn and let the poet see his face after Ibn Muqānā recited the last line: "Look how we take from thy light, / that comes from the Lord of the Worlds". According to Arab medieval historians<sup>(47)</sup> this courtly ceremony had been imported from the 'Abbāsīd Baghdad. Yet we must not exclude that it was part of a charismatic liturgy —the Imām, who represents God on Earth, shows himself hidden by a veil just like God's Veil that conceals Him from His servants. The same hallowing devices are likely to be found in the field of Arabic language, that was the most prominent field of representation in Islamic medieval societies. The logic of the holy seems to be working in proper names, as *Idrīs*, full of

(42) *Al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, I, 81.

(43) Fierro (2003).

(44) *Dīwān*.

(45) *Šurūḥ Siqṭ al-zand*.

(46) See Pérès (1953), Continente (1981), and Vega & Peña (2004).

(47) Al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥ al-tīb*, I, 434.

Qur'ānic and Šī'ī reminiscences, reinvoked not only by the Caliph mentioned above, but by other members of the dynasty, among them one of 'Alī ibn Ḥammūd's sons. According to Ibn Ḥazm, this Idrīs, governor of Algeiras, was ephemerally proclaimed Caliph in Ceuta. This other connexion between the two cities on the Junction of the Seas leads us to wonder whether the Arabic name of Algeiras i.e. *al-Ġazīra al-Ḥaḍrā'*, literally 'the Green Island', was interpreted as meaning 'al-Ḥaḍīr's Island', thus referring to the Prophet of God, instead of or apart from an allusion to actual vegetation, which is not contradictory with the fact that al-Ḥaḍīr was supposed to cause botanical fertility and take care of water<sup>(48)</sup>. If this hypothesis is right, then we have the location of Algeiras in the holy map of Islamic West. When Ibn Sa'īd described<sup>(49)</sup> the Straits of Gibraltar he spoke about an area between Tangiers and the south of al-Andalus, that was called *al-Ḥaḍrā'* 'the Green, the Verdant', and was located in the Junction of the Two Seas, the natural end of the Mediterranean Sea, where, Ibn Sa'īd adds, there are twenty eight islands. Note that this is the number of the days in a lunar month as well as the letters of the Arabic alphabet, a new clue for the continuous need of consideration of a holy science of signs when considering some medieval Islamic manifestations. The striking similarity between such ideas and the Duodeciman Šī'ī symbology, where it is claimed that the Twelfth Imām lives hidden in "the Green Island"<sup>(50)</sup>, seems to be a firm ground for the reconstruction of Ḥammūdīd views and conceptions. On the other hand, the holy symbolism derived from the *Qur'ān* proves to be a solid ground on which to base an approach to Islamic medieval iconography, as M. Fierro<sup>(51)</sup> has recently shown in her study about vegetal decorations on Umayyad Andalusī coins.

*Málaga, February 12<sup>th</sup> 2006*

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(48) Massignon (1955).

(49) Al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥ al-ṭīb* I, 145-146.

(50) Corbin (1958: 73, Spanish translation).

(51) Fierro (2004).

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