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SUBH. The Recipient of the Pyxis.



The Pyxis of Zamora, also known as the Pyxis of Subh or the Pyxis of al-Hakan II, was commissioned by the Umayyad Caliph in 964 as a gift for Subh, his favourite concubine, two years after the birth of his first son, Prince Abd-al-Rahman, who would have been the future heir (Abd-al-Rahman) had he not died prematurely at the age of eight (Martínez Martín, 2015).

Its recipient was thus her - Subh (Aurora in Christian sources).

But who was she?

Her origin is uncertain, although her nisba (al-Baškunsīya), which indicates the family or geographical origin in Arabic onomastics, defines her as a woman from the north of the Iberian Peninsula, probably from Vascona or Navarre (Marín Niño, 1987; Rabasco García, 2024), although it is not known with certainty whether she was born there, whether she was a captive or whether she had been bought as a slave (Marín Niño, 1997). It is estimated that she was born around 944 (Galán & Galindo, 2005).

It seems that Subh had been educated from childhood to become a singing slave, which suggests that she spent a good part of her early years in al-Andalus, probably in Cordoba, receiving training in Arabic music and poetry (Marín Niño, 1997). However, it is not known whether she received this education in the Umayyad citadel as a child, or whether it was acquired from the Caliph once she had completed her training.

The first known record of Subh coincides with the year of the birth of her firstborn son, Abd-al-Rahman, in 962. It is precisely at this time that Subh changed her social status from a slave and concubine of Caliph al-Hakan II to *Umm Walad* (mother of the Caliph's son), *sayyida* or Lady of the Citadel, an honorary title reserved for the mother of the heir (*Museo Arqueológico Nacional*, 2025) and a favourite.

It is estimated that Subh was 17 years old when al-Hakan II attained the Caliphate, becoming the mother of Abd-al-Rahman at the age of 18 and of her second son, Hixam II, at 21 (Galán & Galindo, 2005).

Subh went from absolute anonymity to assuming Caliphate power (Rabasco García, 2024), becoming a female symbol of it (Torreras Palacio, 2024) for a long period at the end of the 10th Century.

In fact, she became one of the most influential women in Umayyad Cordoba due to her participation in the political life of the Caliphate, both in the time of al-Hakan II and of the future heir, her second son Hixam II, after his death in 976, of whom she was regent with the initial support of his tutor and minister, Muhammad ibn Abi Amir, the future Almanzor (Vallvé, 1992; Mosquera & Fernández, 2018). Subh became an instrument used by Almanzor in his rise to power (Marín Niño, 1997), who obtained successive posts and appointments through her intervention.

From the death of al-Hakan II in 976, leaving an 11-year-old boy as his heir, until 996, when Subh definitely broke with Almanzor, Subh's political actions were aimed at preserving her son's inheritance. Subh died in 998, only a year after the events that led to her removal from power when Almanzor forced her son Hixam II renew his oath to delegate his power to the Amirids, thus sealing the end of the Umayyad dynasty (Marín Niño, 1997).

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