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THE PYXIS OF ZAMORA FAMILY



The Caliphate ivory workshop at Medina Azahara achieved great prestige and produced exquisite pieces, some of which are kept in the world's leading museums (Castejón & Martínez de Arizala, 1976).

The extraordinary collection of Andalusian ivories, to which the Pyxis of Zamora belongs, was primarily produced in two workshops: one in Medina Azahara during the Caliphate period and another in the ivory workshop in Cuenca in the 11th century, during the development of the so-called Taifa kingdoms.

Although we could include numerous ivory caskets, also carved in these workshops, in the Pyxis of Zamora family, we will focus exclusively on other ivory caskets or pyxides made from elephant tusks and usually containing perfumes or jewellery. For example, the pyxis dedicated to al-Mughira (968 AD), on display in the Louvre Museum in Paris, is considered to be one of the masterpieces of this period (Pancaroglu, 2017).

This pyxis was a gift to Prince al-Mughira, son of Abderramán III. Its decoration is noteworthy for its four linked, lobed medallions that are fully ornamented and include figurative scenes, featuring both human and animal figures. The pyxis features a total of 69 zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures, along with leafy decoration.

The central medallion shows three figures on a dais supported by two lions. One of these figures is a musician playing a lute. Another medallion shows a hunting scene with two lions attacking two oxen. A further medallion depicts two falconer knights facing each other, separated by a palm tree representing the “tree of life”. The last medallion depicts a new falconry scene, with two falconers seizing eggs in two nests.

Another notable pyxis is the Hispanic Society of America's ivory pyxis, produced for the Umayyad court in the workshop at Medina Azahara (966 AD).

The Hispanic Society of America pyxis is similar in nature to the Zamora and al-Mughira pyxides, made of elephant tusk ivory, with a lid that features an inscription in Arabic incorporating the artist's name, Khalaf. The inscription reveals that the vessel was intended to contain perfumes (musk, camphor and ambergris) (*The Hispanic Museum Library*, 2024). It is decorated in the *ataurique* style, with animal figures (turkeys, gazelles and birds).

The pyxis in the Victoria and Albert Museum in Kensington (United Kingdom) is another of the jewels from the Caliphate workshop at Medina Azahara that are found outside Spain. This ivory pyxis was carved between 969 and 970 AD for the prefect of the forces of order in Cordoba under the Caliph Al-Hakam II.

The object is similar to the previous ones, with a lid inscribed in *Kufic* script and finely decorated with *ataurique* workmanship. The main element of the decoration is the three large medallions visible on the body of the jar, each of which depicts a man of high rank. The first depicts a man seated on a dais, flanked by two attendants. The second shows a falconer on horseback, and the third depicts a man sitting cross-legged on a palanquin mounted on an elephant (*Victoria and Albert Museum*, 2003).

The ivory pyxis in Braga Cathedral, Portugal, is an example of the pyxides developed in the ivory workshops of Cuenca during the period of the Taifa kingdoms. This pyxis, housed in the Cathedral's treasury, is small, measuring 20 cm in height and 10 cm in diameter, and dates to between 1004 and 1008 AD. The piece was commissioned by 'Abd al-Malik, son of Almanzor. The entire surface of the pyxis is finely carved in bas-relief and includes a figurative composition with leafage and animal elements (birds and gazelles) (*Museum With No Frontiers*, 2025).

The Pyxis of Narbonne is another example from the Cuenca workshops (1026-1031 AD). Used as a reliquary in Narbonne Cathedral (France). Carved by Muhammad Ibn Zayyan for Ismail al-Zafir, king of the Taifa kingdom of Toledo. On the lower edge of the lid is an inscription in *Kufic* characters, with *ataurique* decoration (*Ministère de la Culture*).

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