

## Al-Maqqarī's Ziryāb: The Making of a Myth

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### Abstract

This essay compares al-Maqqarī's well-known seventeenth-century biography of the famous singer Ziryāb with its eleventh-century source text, *Kitāb al-Muqtabis*, composed by the Andalusian writer Ibn Ḥayyān. Ibn Ḥayyān's text is a complex work with parallel, sometimes contradictory, quotations from seven different sources, all of which were melded into a single narrative voice in al-Maqqarī's text. Close analysis reveals that al-Maqqarī systematically eliminated all passages that shed unflattering light on Ziryāb, including references to rival singers, the achievements of his own children, off-colour jokes of which Ziryāb was the butt, and anecdotes where he was portrayed in an undignified manner. Al-Maqqarī drew heavily on one of the sources quoted by Ibn Ḥayyān, the anonymous *Kitāb Akhbār Ziryāb*. The essay concludes by offering a theory as to the identity of author of the *Kitāb Akhbār Ziryāb* and the motivations of that author and al-Maqqarī for their 'mythification' of the famous singer.

### Introduction

'Alī ibn Nāfi', better known as Ziryāb, is the single most famous figure in the history of Andalusian music. His arrival at the court of Cordoba in the year 206/822 is frequently cited by both scholars and laypersons as the beginning of an Andalusian musical tradition distinct from the eastern musical traditions of Mecca, Medina, Damascus, and Baghdad, and he is popularly credited with the creation of the *nawba*, or 'suite' form, which is the basic structure of the Andalusian musical traditions of modern North Africa. He is said to have memorized the lyrics and melodies of ten thousand songs and to have composed innumerable songs of his own; his remarkable powers of composition were reputedly the result of night-time communications with Jinn. He is also said to have developed new techniques for teaching the art of singing and to have added a fifth string to the Arab lute. In short, he is frequently attributed with having single-handedly crafted a style and repertory that became the foundation for all Andalusian music from the ninth century to the present. It is not uncommon for modern musicians even today, particularly in North Africa, to claim that their music is descended directly from the music and performance practices of Ziryāb.

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Ziryāb is also reported to have introduced innumerable refinements to the Cordoban court in clothing, hairstyle, personal hygiene, cooking, and table manners. His learning is reported to have known virtually no bounds and he is said to have been well versed in astronomy (and/or astrology), geography, history, and poetry, among other fields, and to have been a gifted conversationalist. Ziryāb—or at least the legendary figure that has come down to us—has thus come to personify all of the characteristics of medieval Muslim courtliness: a figure who was both a ‘boon companion’ (*nadīm*) to the Emir and an ‘elegant person’ (*ẓarīf*) of the Cordoban court, and also a musical genius.

Given his fame throughout the Arab world in modern times, it is surprising that this remarkable personality has come down to us almost entirely via a single account, namely the biography which appears in *Nafḥ al-ṭīb min ghuṣṣn al-Andalus al-raṭīb wa-dhīkr wazīrihā Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb* (The Scented Breeze from the Tender Branch of al-Andalus and Mention of its Vizier Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb) by Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Maqqarī (d.1061/1632). The *Nafḥ al-ṭīb* is divided into two roughly equal parts—the principal section, which contains a lengthy biography of the Andalusian vizier and prolific author Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb (d.776/1374), and an extensive introduction about the history and culture of al-Andalus. Despite its late date, al-Maqqarī’s work remains one of the most important sources for the history of al-Andalus because it quotes extensively from earlier texts, many of which have not survived; indeed, al-Maqqarī notes that he has taken the bulk of his material for the life of Ziryāb from an eleventh-century work, *al-Muqtabis*, by Ibn Ḥayyān (d.469/1076), who himself assembled his text largely by quoting earlier works.<sup>1</sup> Until recently the portion of *al-Muqtabis* containing the biography of Ziryāb was thought to be lost.

A number of other earlier texts mention Ziryāb, but these are almost all strangely at odds with the much more famous and more detailed biographical account found in al-Maqqarī.<sup>2</sup> These other texts do not idealize Ziryāb but portray him, in a rather matter-of-fact way, as a black slave (*‘abd aswad*) who was a gifted musician, but who was also temperamental, a spoiled favourite, a lavish spender, at times publicly mocked because of his skin colour, the butt of crude sexual jokes, and frequently caught up in court rivalries.<sup>3</sup> Some of these accounts also contradict al-Maqqarī on many basic historical points, such as the reason and date for Ziryāb’s departure from Baghdad, the overall chronology of his life, his career in the Aghlabid court of Ifriqiya before reaching al-Andalus, the date of his death, and so forth. Given the glaring disjuncture between this body of earlier texts and al-Maqqarī’s seventeenth-century account, it has until now been a mystery precisely when and how the figure of Ziryāb underwent the remarkable transformation from prominent court musician to the very personification of the Andalusian Golden Age under the Umayyads of Cordoba.

The section of Ibn Ḥayyān’s *al-Muqtabis* containing the biography of Ziryāb was long thought to be lost, but has recently been published in facsimile by Vallvé Bermejo, edited in Arabic by Maḥmūd ‘Alī Makkī, and translated into Spanish by Makkī and Federico Corriente.<sup>4</sup> We are now able to compare al-Maqqarī’s biography of Ziryāb with his source text and analyze the relationship between these two works, observing the methods by which the seventeenth-century author excerpted and redacted the eleventh-century text, and, as a result, come to a much clearer understanding of how and when the legendary figure of Ziryāb came into being.

### A Source Text and its Seventeenth-century Adaptation

Ibn Ḥayyān's eleventh-century biography of Ziryāb is embedded in the account of the reign of 'Abd al-Raḥmān II, coming immediately after a description of the women who were the Emir's wives and concubines, several of whom are described as gifted singers. Three in particular are noted for their singing: Fadl, who belonged to a daughter of Hārūn al-Rashīd, was originally trained in Baghdad, was later given further training in singing in Medina, and was eventually purchased there for the Emir 'Abd al-Raḥmān; 'Alam, who was also trained in Medina; and, Qalam, a Basque from northern Iberia, daughter of a noble house, who was captured or sold into slavery, trained in Medina and finally sold to the Cordoban court. Their joint residence within the palace complex came to be known as the 'House of the Medinese Women' (*dār al-madaniyyāt*) since they had all been trained in singing and poetry in that city. Ibn Ḥayyān then gives an account of music (*ghinā'*) in the court of 'Abd al-Raḥmān, within which the biography of Ziryāb occurs, followed by the biographies of the most prominent poets and men of letters of the court. Ziryāb thus appears as one of more than a dozen major figures, male and female, of the court at this time, and several of the rivalries among these figures are alluded to in Ibn Ḥayyān's text.

In contrast, al-Maqqarī includes his biography of Ziryāb in a completely different context. It is one of a series of biographies of famous scholars, poets, and men of science who came to al-Andalus from the East included in the extensive introduction appended to his lengthy biography of Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb. Ziryāb's relations with other members of the Cordoban court are not pertinent to al-Maqqarī's account of these brilliant figures from the East who immigrated to al-Andalus in search of the intellectual and cultural milieu and patronage. Rather than a chronological account of the reigns of a succession of Emirs, al-Maqqarī's overarching theme is the superiority of al-Andalus (*faḍl al-Andalus*), a theme already expounded in a number of earlier medieval works, the most famous of which is perhaps the *Risāla fī faḍl al-Andalus* (Treatise on the Superiority of al-Andalus) by Ismā'īl ibn Muḥammad al-Shaḥūdī (d.628/1231 or 2).

In addition to appearing in different contexts, the style and structure of the two biographical accounts, despite their close relationship, are quite distinct. Ibn Ḥayyān's biography of Ziryāb is a complex text with multiple, and at times contradictory, voices. The author quotes three named sources: 'Īsā ibn Aḥmad al-Rāzī (fl.335/975),<sup>5</sup> Abū l-Walīd 'Abd Allāh Ibn al-Faraḍī (d.403/1013),<sup>6</sup> and Abū Bakr 'Ubāda ibn Mā' al-Samā' (d.419 or 421/1028 or 1030).<sup>7</sup> He also attributes one passage to the teachers of Abū Bakr 'Ubāda, several passages to anonymous sources (introduced with verbs such as *dhakarū*, 'They mentioned' or *qālū*, 'They said'), cites at great length an anonymous work titled *Kitāb Akhbār Ziryāb* (discussed in detail later), and offers an occasional comment of his own. Thus at least seven different voices alternate within the text. For several of the most critical points in Ziryāb's biography Ibn Ḥayyān offers more than one account. Al-Maqqarī, however, suppresses this multivocality and produces a univocal narrative devoid of allusions to earlier authors, creating a seamless narrative with no repetitions or contradictions.

The two authors write in very different styles, but both styles are well attested in Islamic historiography: Ibn Ḥayyān presents not so much a single narrative as a selection of statements and quotations from both oral and written sources, some of which he attributes to specific individuals and some of which are anonymous; the much later al-Maqqarī writes in the voice of a third-person historical narrator in which sources are no longer identified, contradictions eliminated, and a single coherent version of events

emerges. Al-Maqqarī attributes that narrative voice, however, to Ibn Ḥayyān, since he quotes nearly ninety percent of his material from Ibn Ḥayyān's *al-Muqtabis*, though a comparison of the two texts immediately reveals that the two versions are scarcely identical. It is in the gap between these two accounts of Ziryāb's life that we can see the creation of the mythic Ziryāb.

### Opening Passages Compared

A quick comparison of the opening passages to the two texts provides ample evidence for this mythification. Al-Maqqarī's biography of Ziryāb begins as follows:

Among those who came to al-Andalus from the East was the master of singers (*raʿīs al-mughannīm*) Abū l-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Nāfi', nicknamed Ziryāb, a client (*mawlā*) of the Commander of the Faithful al-Mahdī the 'Abbasid. [Ibn Ḥayyān] said in *al-Muqtabis*: Ziryāb was a nickname by which he was known in his homeland because of the blackness of his colour [*sawād laẓnihi*], his eloquent tongue, and the beauty of his features, he was compared to a black bird that sings there. He was a natural poet [*shā'ir maṭbū'*] and his son Aḥmad was a poet as well.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, the following are the opening paragraphs of Ibn Ḥayyān's text corresponding to the passage above from al-Maqqarī (with the exception of the final line above which is taken from later sections of Ibn Ḥayyān's account). In order to highlight the multivocality of the text, the different voices have been identified in bold typeface:<sup>9</sup>

### On Singing: Information about Ziryāb, the greatest singer of the land of al-Andalus

**ʿIsā ibn Aḥmad al-Rāzī said:** The Emir 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Ḥakam was a great admirer of singing. He was enamored of listening to it and placed it above all his other pleasures. He patronized singers who competed in it, and had a predilection for the best of them.<sup>10</sup> He sought out the most skilful among them by inquiring after those of the highest rank [in this craft] and he directed his generosity exclusively to [his singers] with liberal gifts, extensive accommodations, and constant support. He offered them all that his palace and his private orchestra (*sitāra*)<sup>11</sup> contained in the way of skilful female singers (*qiyān*) and excellent singing slave women (*jawān*).<sup>12</sup> He selected the best among them [to send] to the male singers he had taken into his service so that these latter could be their guides in this art, transmitting through them [the female singers] their artistry, in search of ever greater gratification in listening [to music], always guided by the pursuit of excellence. There are entertaining anecdotes about him in this regard.

Both before and after becoming Emir, ['Abd al-Raḥmān] gathered round him a number of good male singers, according them his patronage in the form of regular salaries as well as occasional payments. Each man among them received ten dinars in full weight each lunar month and they were given gifts

and clothing [as well]. Among them were the singer Abū Ya'qūb, the two Ḥasans—Ḥasan al-Ḥillī and Ḥasan al-Qarawī—Maṣṣūr the Jew, and others.

**He [Ibn Ḥayyān] said:** I found [the following passage] in the *Book of Literati* (*Kitāb al-udabā'*) by the Qāḍī Abū l-Walīd Ibn al-Faraḍī—**he said:** The singer Abū Maṣṣūr ibn Abī l-Buhlūl [or Bahlūl] was the messenger of Master Ziryāb the singer [*al-ustādh Ziryāb al-mughannī*] to the Emir 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Ḥakam. [It was he] who carried [Ziryāb's] message from al-Jazīra al-Khadrā' [Algeciras], which is where he landed in al-Andalus. [Abū Maṣṣūr] was lampooned by the poet Mu'min ibn Sa'īd in excellent verses, among them:

If Mālik and Abū Ḥanīfa were alive in our time,  
they would [for once] be in agreement in loathing Maṣṣūr.<sup>13</sup>

**[Returning to al-Rāzī]:** These were the most prominent of his singers until Ziryāb the Iraḳī came to him from the northernmost Mashriq (*al-mashriq al-a'tā*)—the master of singing, the wonder of al-Andalus—who became his favourite and conquered his heart. ['Abd al-Raḥmān] elevated him above all others who practiced this profession, male and female. He showered his generosity upon [Ziryāb] and granted him privileges far beyond those given [even] to beloved guests who seek the rank of privileged family members, and the closest, most trusted viziers. People's stories about him in this regard are widespread and traces of his influence on them can still be attested and seen [to this day].

**He [al-Rāzī] said:** Ziryāb was a nickname given to him in his homeland because of his black colour (*suḥmat lawnihi*), his eloquent tongue, and the beauty of his features. They named him for a black songbird found there due to his similarity to it. His real name was 'Alī ibn Nāfi' and he was the client (*maḥlā*) of the Abbasid [caliph] al-Mahdī, Muḥammad ibn Abī Ja'far al-Manṣūr. His *kunya* was Abū l-Ḥasan.

**'Ubāda the poet said:** Ziryāb is a word for 'gold' which was given to that singer as a nickname because his colour was the colour of gold.<sup>14</sup>

**Some have mentioned** (*dhakarū*) that in his homeland an incident happened that was the result of envy towards him, and this drove him to the westernmost Maghrib. He moved about in the land of Ifrīqiya for quite a while and there someone described to him the greatness of the Emir al-Ḥakam ibn Hishām, lord of al-Andalus, the extent of his majesty, and the strength of his rule. So [Ziryāb] set out resolving to meet him and headed towards al-Andalus, but when he had left [Ifrīqiya], news reached him of the death [of al-Ḥakam]. So he stopped and wrote to the Emir 'Abd al-Raḥmān, who ruled after [al-Ḥakam], expressing his condolences and describing to ['Abd al-Raḥmān] his situation and his intention of travelling to him, and the hopes he placed in him after [the death of] his father. 'Abd al-Raḥmān answered him solicitously, saying that he would be pleased to receive him, urging [Ziryāb] to hasten to him, and promising him a good position in his service. So, upon receiving these most auspicious of signs, Ziryāb sped towards him. 'Abd al-Raḥmān was utterly delighted and welcomed his arrival, offering him luxurious lodgings, giving him preference and priority, and making [Ziryāb] his most intimate companion over all others, such that he could scarcely bear to be without his company.

Ziryāb was pleased with his position with ‘Abd al-Raḥmān and made himself at home [lit. ‘left his walking stick in his entryway’]. [‘Abd al-Raḥmān] granted him extensive landholdings and bestowed upon him great wealth. Each month [Ziryāb] received two hundred dinars in full weight and his name appeared in the record book of gifts [given on holidays and other special occasions] immediately after those of the viziers. He awarded [Ziryāb’s] sons, one after the other,<sup>15</sup> desirable gifts, and gave them fixed salaries and splendid landholdings so that they would not deprive their father of even the smallest amount of what he had been granted. Each of the three of them—‘Ubayd Allāh, Ja‘far and Yaḥyā—received twenty dinars in full weight each lunar month plus occasional gifts.

**However I have [also] read in the *Kitāb akhbār Ziryāb* [the following]—[the author of that work] said . . . .<sup>16</sup>**

At this point the two narratives, that of al-Maqqarī and that of Ibn Ḥayyān, converge and both report a series of lengthy passages from the *Kitāb akhbār Ziryāb* (discussed later). Before examining these passages, it is worth returning to the final phrase in al-Maqqarī’s opening passage:

[Ziryāb] was a natural poet [*shā‘ir maṭbū‘*] and his son Aḥmad was a poet as well.<sup>17</sup>

The original two passages in Ibn Ḥayyān, however, are as follows:

**I found in the handwriting of Abū Bakr ‘Ubāda the poet—He said:** ‘Alī ibn Nāfi‘, the singer Ziryāb, was a natural poet [*shā‘ir maṭbū‘*].

**[Ibn] Ḥayyān said:** But I have never found anyone else to have said that.<sup>18</sup>

As for [Ziryāb’s sons] Aḥmad and Ḥasan, they very rarely [performed], and I have not heard of anyone who transmits [songs] from them except rarely. Of the two, Aḥmad was the poet; it was his finest quality and he was good at it.

**I read in the handwriting of Abū [Bakr] ‘Ubāda:** Aḥmad ibn Ziryāb was, among his father’s sons, [the best] writer [*adīb*] and a natural poet [*shā‘ir maṭbū‘*]. His siblings sang much of his poetry.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, while Ibn Ḥayyān did indeed report that he had read in the autograph manuscript of Abū Bakr ‘Ubāda that Ziryāb was a natural poet, he immediately refuted this statement with his own comment that he had never found another source that made a similar claim.<sup>20</sup> In al-Maqqarī’s version, however, Ibn Ḥayyān’s objection has been removed, leaving only the unchallenged statement that Ziryāb was ‘a natural poet’. This change is in fact indicative of al-Maqqarī’s overall approach in modifying Ibn Ḥayyān’s text: in general, he removed all anecdotes and references that in any way diminished Ziryāb’s stature and dignity. He systematically eliminated references to other musicians and poets of the court, accounts of Ziryāb’s students and transmitters, and even passages that referred to the accomplishments of Ziryāb’s own children, such as the following:

Ziryāb had eight male offspring, namely: ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, ‘Ubayd Allāh, Yaḥyā, Ja‘far, Muḥammad nicknamed the Rabbit [or the Dove],<sup>21</sup> Qāsim, Aḥmad, and Ḥasan, and he had two daughters: Ḥamdūna and ‘Ulayya. All of them sang and practiced the craft [of singing], though they differed in their level. The best and most skilled of them was ‘Ubayd Allāh. He composed melodies (*kāna lahu ṣinā‘at fi l-alḥān*) and created innovations in technique (*ikhtirā‘at fi l-iqān*) which pleased his father, who praised him for this. He would often imitate/oppose<sup>22</sup> his father and his siblings in some melody they had created (*ba‘d mā yaṣūghūnahu min laḥn*) or some rhythm they had devised (*aw yakhtari‘unahu min naqr*), and make them go off in a different direction (*fi ḡayr tarīqihim*). Whenever his father would reject this, he would ask that [his father] judge [his version] fairly and would turn away from weakening [it] and would correct it, and would sing the song (*ṣawt*) which he had transformed, and [his father] would say: ‘Although you have changed it, you have improved it/done well (*aḥsanta fih*)’.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of the other transformations undertaken by al-Maqqarī, it appears that he chose not to include this passage either because it showed Ziryāb’s son to be as good as, or perhaps better than, his father, or because it portrays the family composing music together, rather than highlighting Ziryāb as a singular genius. In contrast, al-Maqqarī did retain the lengthy, very negative, anecdote immediately following this passage in which the second-best singer among Ziryāb’s children, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, is shown to be so rude and uncouth that no one could truly enjoy his singing.

Additional passages eliminated by al-Maqqarī portray jealousies, rivalries, and general frivolity in the court, along with Ziryāb’s sometimes less than dignified role, such as the following three passages:

The religious scholar ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Ḥabīb expressed his envy of Ziryāb for the generous gifts the Emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān gave him [in recognition of] the praises [Ziryāb] offered him, wishing them instead for himself as recompense for his superior dedication to his craft. [On this theme] he composed his famous verses:

Setting me up properly and that which I desire,  
are paltry matters for the Merciful One [the Emir]  
and well within his power.  
A thousand yellow/red coins<sup>24</sup> would surpass [my] desire,  
which I think few indeed for a scholar,  
Ziryāb receives this amount in a single gift,  
but [surely] my craft, not his, is the nobler.<sup>25</sup>

**The Qaḍī Abū l-Walīd recited** [the following] from the malicious poet Mu‘min ibn Sa‘īd’s verses lampooning Ziryāb—and few escaped his lampoons:

I complained to her of my passion when they departed,  
The complaint of a grieving one, saddened by separation.  
And she replied—the heat of separation causing her tears to flow,

And the fire of love burning between her ribs—  
 ‘Endure the separation or weep as  
 Weeps the silk under the armpits of ‘Alī ibn Nāfi!’<sup>26</sup>

**I have read in the book of al-Qāḍī Ibn al-Faraḍī, the author of *Ṭabaqāt al-udabā’ bi-Qurtuba* (The Generations of Literati in Cordoba)—he said:** ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Shimr ibn Numayr, the poet and astrologer, was a favourite companion [*nadīm*] of the Emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Ḥakam. He was a good conversationalist and a fervent joker; whenever the mood struck him he was unable to resist it. He was crazy about Abū al-Ḥasan Ziryāb (*kāna kathīr al-tawallu’ bi-Abī al-Ḥasan Ziryāb*), the greatest singer in ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s [court] and the most graciously dignified of people in his entourage. [Ibn al-Shimr] would constantly make fun of [Ziryāb] and make jokes about him, until the frequency [of his jokes] angered [Ziryāb] and he complained to the Emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. So [the Emir] ordered that he be thrown in jail to satisfy Ziryāb, and he swore by God that he would not release him until Ziryāb [himself] released him. [Ibn al-Shimr] remained in prison for quite a while until one of the viziers who was concerned about this matter rode to Ziryāb to intercede for him. [The vizier] said to him: “By God, O Abū l-Ḥasan, you know that the happiness of the Emir, our Master, is spoiled by the absence of Ibn al-Shimr from his gathering, for his pleasure is only complete when he is close to him. [Ibn al-Shimr’s] fall from favour is dependent upon you. If you could but see your way to releasing him from this [state], you would be acting sensibly and would gladden all of us. For the punishment that he has received from the Emir for your sake has taught him a lesson, and with this he will not return to bothering you. So Ziryāb accepted the man’s intercession and he rode to the Emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, and interceded for Ibn al-Shimr. [The Emir] released [Ibn al-Shimr] to his residence and restored to him his position in [the Emir’s] gatherings and his good favour.

Not long thereafter the Emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān rode forth with his entourage to al-Ruṣāfa and ascended from there to the foot of the mountains intending to hunt magpies. He carried on his arm a sparrow hawk of his that was skilful in hunting them, but he was unable to find any. Try as he might to find one, none were provided for him. Finally he said to his companions, ‘Whoever brings me a bird shall receive whatever he decides [as a reward].’ So Ibn al-Shimr came rushing towards him and said to him, ‘O Emir, don’t wear yourself out searching for a magpie, for there’s one right here next to you.’ He replied, ‘Where do you see it?’ He said, ‘Ziryāb! If one were to daub his ass and his armpits with a bit of white cheese,<sup>27</sup> he’d turn out [black and white like] a magpie, you can’t deny it!’ The Emir was overcome with laughter at his words and he said to Ziryāb, ‘This shows you that buffoonery and shamelessness are part of Ibn al-Shimr’s very nature and neither desire nor fear can rid him of them. What do you think?’ Ziryāb said to him, ‘It is as my lord has said, and I call as witnesses God and all those present with us, that I will not hold him to account ever again—let him say what he wills!’ Later the two of them were reconciled through friendship and good company.<sup>28</sup>



Having excised references to earlier authors, passages that portray Ziryāb among his peers in the Cordoban court, accounts of other musicians and poets, the accomplishments of Ziryāb's children and students, and anecdotes in which Ziryāb is the butt of jokes or in any way portrayed in an undignified manner, al-Maqqarī is left with a much shorter text and one which is almost hagiographic in tone. The majority of the passages he chose to transmit come, in fact, from a single source, the anonymous *Kitāb akhbār Ziryāb*, as quoted by Ibn Ḥayyān.

### **The *Kitāb akhbār Ziryāb***

The best-known account of Ziryāb's departure from Baghdad originates in the *Kitāb akhbār Ziryāb* (hereafter *Akhbār Ziryāb*). Here we find for the first time the story of Ziryāb as a protégé of Iṣḥāq al-Mawṣilī performing before Hārūn al-Rashīd so well that al-Mawṣilī, gripped by uncontrollable jealousy, threatens Ziryāb that if he remains in Baghdad he will surely pay with his life. This leads to Ziryāb's flight from Baghdad to al-Andalus.<sup>29</sup> *Akhbār Ziryāb* is also the source for all of the information regarding Ziryāb's 'aesthetic reforms' of the Cordoban court, including his introduction of a new hairstyle, the use of litharge as a deodorant, the use of glass drinking vessels rather than metal ones, changing the color of clothing with the seasons, the creation of numerous new dishes, and so forth. But even here, the changes that al-Maqqarī has made in the text, though at times relatively minor, dramatically recast Ziryāb's role in the Cordoban court. One such example is the passage in which Ziryāb is credited with introducing a new hairstyle to the court of 'Abd al-Raḥmān II which in al-Maqqarī's version reads as follows:

When Ziryāb arrived in al-Andalus, all who lived there, men and women, used to dress the hair of their head by combing it parted in the middle of the forehead, hanging loose over their temples and eyebrows. But when the people of refinement (*dhawū al-taḥṣīl*) among them saw the coiffure worn by Ziryāb, his sons, and his womenfolk, cut over the forehead straight across the eyebrows, tucked back behind the ears, but flowing at the temples, as is worn today by eunuch servants and singing-girls, their hearts embraced it (*hawāt-hu af'idatu-hum*) and they found it good (*istaḥsanū-hu*).<sup>30</sup>

The same passage from the *Akhbār Ziryāb* occurs nearly verbatim in Ibn Ḥayyān, but concludes with the following statement:

... flowing at the temples, as is worn today by eunuch servants and the finest singing-girls, they embraced it for their slaves (*'abīdi-him*), and they found it good for their male (*fityān*) and female (*imā'*) servants, and switched them [to this style] and had them adopt it. Their coiffure [i.e., that of slaves, servants, singing-girls and eunuchs] has continued to be in this style even today.<sup>31</sup>

Thus in al-Maqqarī's version, Ziryāb is portrayed as having been the measure of good taste for the nobles of the court, 'the people of refinement', whereas the original text shows those same people of refinement adopting Ziryāb's coiffure not for themselves, but rather for their slaves, servants, eunuchs, and singing-girls, in essence, precisely

those social classes who would have been perceived as the peers of a professional court musician by the Arab elite of Cordoba.

In general, however, the passages from the *Akhbār Ziryāb*, quoted first by Ibn Ḥayyān and then modified by al-Maqqarī, are highly laudatory and even hyperbolic in tone. These passages stand out from the remainder of Ibn Ḥayyān's text not only in their high assessment of Ziryāb, but also in the often overwrought use of adjectives and superlatives. Even from the passages that have survived, it is clear that this work was devoted to promoting a dramatically idealized vision of Ziryāb. But who wrote it and when?

### The Author of the *Kitāb Akhbār Ziryāb*

Although neither Ibn Ḥayyān nor al-Maqqarī name an author for the *Akhbār Ziryāb*, other contemporary writers identified a certain Aslam as the author of a well-known book about Ziryāb and it appears that there was a family connection, either by blood or by marriage, between Aslam and Ziryāb. Both al-Maqqarī and Ibn Ḥayyān report that Ḥamdūna, the daughter of Ziryāb, married the vizier (or chamberlain) Hāshim ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, a favourite of the Emir Muḥammad (r.238–273/852–886), son and successor of 'Abd al-Rahmān II. Here is a report concerning Aslam by Ibn Ḥazm (d.456/1064) from the chapter on 'Death' in his famous treatise on love, *Ṭawq al-ḥamāma* [The Neck-ring of the Dove]:

Our friend Abū al-Sirrī 'Ammār ibn Ziyād reported to me from a trusted source that the secretary (*kātib*) Ibn Quzmān was greatly tormented by his love for Aslam ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, brother of the chamberlain (*ḥājib*) Hāshim ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. Aslam was the pinnacle of beauty, which is what caused [Ibn Quzmān] to fall in love with him and drove him to his death. Aslam knew him well and visited him often, but was unaware that he himself was the cause of [Ibn Quzmān's] malady. [Ibn Quzmān] died of grief after a long illness. The transmitter of this information said: 'I informed Aslam after [Ibn Quzmān's] death of the reason for his decline and demise, and he was seized with regret. He asked, "Why didn't you tell me?" I replied, "Why should I have?" "By God, I would have drawn closer to him and scarcely left his company – it would have done me no harm."' This Aslam was a man of distinguished taste in many fields, well versed in law, and discerning in poetry. He composed good poetry and he had knowledge of songs and their execution. He was the author of a work on the genres/styles (*tarā'iq*) of Ziryāb's singing and information about [his life]—it is a very remarkable anthology (*ḍiḥwān 'ajīb jiddan*). He was the best of people physically and morally, and he was the father of Abū l-Ja'd who used to live in the western part of Cordoba.<sup>32</sup>

If Aslam was the brother of the Chamberlain Hāshim, who married Ḥamdūna, he would have been the brother-in-law of Ziryāb's daughter and would thus have lived in the mid-to late-ninth century. But other sources place him a century or more later and in these accounts his grieving lover is not the secretary Ibn Quzmān (not to be confused with the famous composer of *zajals* who lived two centuries later), but instead the grammarian

Aḥmad ibn Kulayb. Al-Ḥumaydī (d.488/1095), a near contemporary of Ibn Ḥazm, for example, cites Aslam in his *Jadhwat al-muqtabis* as the great-great-grandson of Hāshim, husband of Ḥamdūna, daughter of Ziryāb, that is, six generations removed from Ziryāb himself:

Aslam ibn Aḥmad ibn Saʿīd ibn al-Qāḍī Aslam ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Hāshim Abū l-Ḥasan—he wrote prose and composed poetry and came from a family of knowledge and distinction; he has a well-known book on the songs of Ziryāb. Ziryāb was, among the kings of al-Andalus, like al-Mawṣilī and other famous [singers]. He was prominent in his craft, excelled in it, and earned his living by it. There are genres/styles [*tarāʿiq*] attributed to him. And this Aslam is the one whom we mentioned regarding the story of Aḥmad ibn Kulayb.<sup>33</sup>

The genealogies given for Aslam differ in two main points, both of which are attributable to scribal error. First, the copyist of *Tawq al-ḥamāma*, appears to have skipped several generations by jumping from one occurrence of the name Aslam to the other (*homoioteleuton*), and second, by inserting ‘brother of’ rather than ‘son of’ between the names Hāshim and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz. If Aslam had been only one generation removed from Ziryāb, as he is presented in Ibn Ḥazm’s text, he would have been writing for a public that was familiar with the historical Ziryāb, indeed, there would still have been many individuals alive who had known Ziryāb in person. But the surviving passages from *Akḥbār Ziryāb* are so much at variance with the personality of Ziryāb as presented in other early sources such as those by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih and Ibn al-Qūṭīyya, that a later date seems more probable. Indeed, al-Ḥumaydī’s text presents Aslam not only as six generations removed from Ziryāb, but also as associated with the grammarian Aḥmad ibn Kulayb, who died in 426/1034–1035.<sup>34</sup> If we are to believe the legend transmitted by al-Ḥumaydī, Aḥmad ibn Kulayb died of unrequited love while Aslam was still a handsome youth, thus in the first half of the eleventh century.

In the latter part of the tenth century, power had passed from the Umayyads to the ʿĀmirids, the family of al-Manṣūr (d.392/1002), the chamberlain who first seized power at the beginning of the reign of the caliph Hishām II (r.377–399/976–1009 and 400–403/1010–1013) who had ascended to the throne at the age of ten. In 403/1013, the Berbers sacked Cordoba, and in 422/1030–1031 the Umayyad dynasty collapsed, setting the stage for the splintering of the peninsula into dozens of city-states and the rule of the ‘factional kings’ (*mulūk al-tawāʿif*). It is not hard to imagine, with the disappearance of Umayyad rule and the fragmentation of Muslim dominion in al-Andalus, that the cultural florescence during which Ziryāb had thrived was ripe for revival as a symbol of the Umayyad past. Both Aslam’s family connection to Ziryāb and the historical context of eleventh-century al-Andalus would make the glorifying tone of the *Akḥbār Ziryāb* understandable. In addition, the surviving passages from the *Akḥbār Ziryāb* appear to indicate a substantial historical distance from the lifetime of Ziryāb himself. This tone can be detected to some degree even in the anecdote cited earlier concerning hairstyles where Ziryāb’s arrival is spoken of in terms of a distant past rather than an event within living memory (‘When Ziryāb arrived in al-Andalus, all who lived there, men and women, used to dress their hair . . .’).

## Conclusion

Andalusian and North African texts from the ninth to eleventh centuries present Ziryāb as a brilliant musician, but of low social origins, black-skinned, and probably the son of a convert to Islam (he is never given a genealogy other than ‘son of Nāfi’, a name associated with a number of early converts to Islam). Various anecdotes portray him at times as temperamental, even vengeful, but also as a figure who managed to establish himself as a central personality in the Cordoban court among others of more fortunate pedigree. It is clear that two distinct historical acts of ‘mythification’ eventually led to the creation of the legendary version of Ziryāb. The *Akhhbār Ziryāb* was probably written in the first half of the eleventh century by Aslam ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, who may well have been a descendent of Ziryāb through his daughter Ḥamdūna. The *Akhhbār Ziryāb* lifted Ziryāb above the ranks of other singers, and transformed him into the epitome of medieval Muslim courtliness. Later, in the seventeenth century, al-Maqqarī excerpted Ibn Ḥayyān’s *al-Muqtabis*, relying heavily on the passages quoted from the *Akhhbār Ziryāb*, to produce an even more glorious account of Ziryāb’s role in the shaping of Andalusian culture, attributing to him a social status and level of cultural influence never before or since accorded to a professional musician in Arab-Islamic culture.

Al-Maqqarī selected and suppressed materials from Ibn Ḥayyān in such a systematic way that it is difficult not to see his redaction as a purposeful and conscious effort to transform Ziryāb into a figure of mythic proportions. Al-Maqqarī, born in Tlemcen (Algeria), wrote the *Nafḥ al-ṭīb* while in Cairo, and may well have been personally motivated to produce works that promulgated a sense of nostalgia for a lost ‘golden age’ of al-Andalus. It is not known, however, whether Ziryāb’s fame was also transmitted through oral tradition in those intervening centuries. Did al-Maqqarī make a decisive intervention that led to Ziryāb’s later fame, or had Ziryāb’s role already been magnified in oral tradition, in which case al-Maqqarī could well have imagined that he was ‘correcting’ the early texts by eliminating passages that did not accord with the reputation Ziryāb had achieved by the seventeenth century? The rediscovery of Ibn Ḥayyān’s biography of Ziryāb tempers some of al-Maqqarī’s more hyperbolic claims for Ziryāb’s contributions to Andalusian culture, but the portrait of Ziryāb that emerges from Ibn Ḥayyān’s text and those of other ninth- and eleventh-century Andalusian authors, while perhaps less compelling, is far more realistic and believable, and therefore all the more interesting to scholars of Andalusian history and culture.

## Notes

1. *al-Muqtabis* literally means “plucking [a brand] from the fire” and by extension “the book of one who copies from the work of others” (A. Huici-Miranda, *EI2*, s.v. Ibn Ḥayyān), a concept perhaps better translated as “The Quoter”, that is, one who quotes from the works of others. The title has been cited by modern scholars both as *al-Muqtabis* and *al-Muqtabas*, see for example Corriente and Makki below.
2. A detailed account and analysis of these earlier texts will appear in *The Musical Heritage of al-Andalus* (forthcoming).
3. At his request, for example, the Emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II is said to have thrown one poet in prison for satirizing Ziryāb and for similar reasons to have exiled another from al-Andalus for several years.
4. *Al-Muqtabis al-thānī*, facsimile edition by Joaquín Vallvé Bermejo (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1999); *Al-Sifr al-thānī min kitāb al-muqtabas li-Ibn Ḥayyān al-Qurṭubī*, ed. Maḥmūd ‘Alī Makki (Riyadh: Markaz al-Malik Fayṣal li-l-Buḥūth wa-l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya, 2003); *Crónica de los*

*emires Alḥakam I y 'Abderrahmān II entre los años 796 y 847 [Almuqtabis II-1]*, Maḥmūd 'Alī Makkī and Federico Corriente (Zaragoza: Instituto de Estudios Islámicos y del Oriente Próximo, 2001).

5. Son of the famous historian, Aḥmad al-Rāzī who died in 344/955.
6. Abū l-Walīd 'Abd Allāh Ibn al-Faraḍī (d. 403/1013), author of *Ta'riḫh 'ulamā' al-Andalus* (History of the Religious Scholars of al-Andalus), was born in Cordoba; in 992 he went eastwards on pilgrimage and studied in Cairo, Mecca and Medina. After returning to Spain he was appointed *qādī* (judge) in Valencia, and was killed in his house on April 20, 1013 when the Berbers sacked Cordoba.
7. Poet and composer of *muwashshahāt*, as well as the compiler of an anthology of Andalusian poetry.
8. al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥ al-ṭīb min ghuṣn al-Andalus al-raṭīb wa-dhikr wazīrihā Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), vol. 1, 122.
9. My thanks to Everett Rowson for his comments on the translations from Ibn Ḥayyān; a complete English translation of Ibn Ḥayyān's biography of Ziryāb will appear in *The Musical Heritage of al-Andalus* (forthcoming).
10. Reading *mujawwidn* as "good" or "best" rather than "los de mejor dicción" (those with the best diction): Corriente, *Crónica*, 193.
11. Lit., "curtain": a musical term for a private orchestra composed entirely or predominantly of women; not "los velados" (the veiled ones): Corriente, *Crónica*, 193.
12. The two terms *qiyān* and *jawārī* are used interchangeably by Ibn Ḥayyān and his sources; at one point, for example, in the discussion of Ziryāb's two singers Ghizlān and Hunayda, the women are referred to alternately as *qiyān* and *jawārī* within the same passage.
13. Mālik ibn Anas and Abū Ḥanīfa, the eponyms of two schools of Islamic law often espousing different views. See this same poet's lampoon against Ziryāb below, which is prefaced with the statement "few escaped his lampoons".
14. Some have tried to derive the name Ziryāb from the Persian words *zare* "gold" and *āb* "water", but this etymology is almost certainly a back formation. One of the few constants in the historical record about Ziryāb is that he is referred to as black (*aswad*), not just dark-skinned (*asmar*), often modified with an additional adjective meaning "pure", "dark" or "jet" black. It seems unlikely therefore that a term for "gold" would have been given to him as a nickname. Indeed, given the constant reference to Ziryāb's skin colour, it is surprising that no scholar seems to have called attention to the obvious implication that he was probably of African origin or descent.
15. Word undecipherable in the manuscript due to a wormhole, but reconstructed as *talāḥaqū* by Makkī perhaps in the sense of "as they grew up" or "as they were born" one after another; see Makkī, *al-Sifr*, 309, n. 2; cf. Vallvé Bermejo, *al-Muqtabis*, 148 r°.
16. Makkī, *al-Sifr*, 307–09; Corriente, *Crónica*, 193–95.
17. al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥ al-ṭīb*, 122.
18. Makkī, *al-Sifr*, 317; Corriente, *Crónica*, 201.
19. Makkī, *al-Sifr*, 327–28; Corriente, *Crónica*, 209.
20. Only four verses of poetry attributed to Ziryāb have come down to us. These are cited in al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥ al-ṭīb*, 130, immediately after the material he transmits from Ibn Ḥayyān:

Ibn Sa'īd said: "My father recited (*anshada*) in his anthology (*mu'jamihi*) [the following verses by Ziryāb]:

I became attached to her, a sprig of sweet basil, / Slender,  
 fragrant, [and] blossoming.  
 Neither plump nor thin, / Neither tall nor short.  
 What glorious days we had, / Spent at Dayr al-Maṭīra  
 Their only lack for the lovelorn one / Was that they were too few!

21. Makkī emends *al - q - n - l - y - t* which al-Maqqarī explains elsewhere is a type of rabbit, *conelio*, modern Spanish *conejo* (see Makkī, *al-Sifr*, 325, n. 4); Corriente, however, reads "alqulumbuh" (= el palomo). The grapheme in the manuscript, Vallvé Bermejo 152 r°, appears to be the former, but could be a scribal error.
22. Ar. *'araḍa*, which carries both the sense of "to oppose" and, in poetry "to compose a contrafactum", that is, a poem with the same rhyme, metre, and theme as a previous poem. What seems to be happening here however, rather than a contrafactum composition, is that 'Ubayd Allāh would alter

- compositions by his father and siblings in melody or melodic mode (*lahn*) or rhythm (*naqr*), to which they would at first object, but later accept his version as being as good or better than the original. The point of the passage is to demonstrate ‘Ubayd Allāh’s talent as a singer-composer.
23. Makkī, *al-Sifr*, 325–26; Corriente, *Crónica*, 208.
  24. This anecdote is repeated with variations in *Ḥadhwat al-muqtabis* by Ibn al-Ḥumaydī (d. 488/1095) and other sources, where the coins, here referred to as “yellow” (meaning dirhams), are instead referred to as “red” (meaning gold dinars).
  25. Makkī, *al-Sifr*, 315; Corriente, *Crónica*, 200.
  26. Makkī, *al-Sifr*, 334; Corriente, *Crónica*, 215. The first two verses are stereotypical verses of Arabic love poetry with the lovers complaining of the pain of separation. The final verse, however, takes a sudden comic turn by comparing the lover’s tears to the sweat stains under Ziryāb’s arms.
  27. The word that appears in the manuscript is *sharār* (sparks), which makes no sense in this context (see Vallvé Bermejo, 154 r<sup>o</sup>). Corriente has proposed that this is a scribal error for *sharārīz*, one of the plural forms of *shūrāz*, a type of white cheese or dried curd, attested in other Andalusian sources. See Corriente, *Crónica*, 211, n. 445, and Makkī, *al-Sifr*, 333, n. 1.
  28. Makkī, *al-Sifr*, 332–33; Corriente, *Crónica*, 213–14. Ibn Ḥayyān juxtaposes this account with a passage from al-Rāzī who contradicts Ibn al-Faraḍī and claims that Ziryāb and Ibn Shīmr were close companions and that their constant exchange of insults and jokes was an indication of their strong friendship.
  29. Earlier accounts of Ziryāb’s life found in the *‘Iqd al-farīd* of Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi (d. 940) and *Ta’rīkh iftūḥ al-Andalus* by Ibn al-Qūṭiyya (d. 367/977) give entirely different versions of his arrival in al-Andalus.
  30. Al-Maqqarī, *Nafh al-ḥib*, 127.
  31. Makkī, *al-Sifr*, 319–20; Corriente, *Crónica*, 203.
  32. Ibn Ḥazm, *Ṭawq al-ḥamāma fi l-ulfa wa-l-ullāf*, ed. Fārūq Sa’d. (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, 1986), 258–59.
  33. Ibn al-Ḥumaydī, *Ḥadhwat al-muqtabis fi dhikr wulāt al-Andalus* (Cairo: Dār al-Misriyya li-l-Ta’lif wa-l-Tarjama, 1966), 172. The story of Aḥmad’s love for Aslam is recounted in great detail in the Aḥmad ibn Kulayb entry earlier in the volume.
  34. Khalīl ibn Ayybak al-Ṣafadī, *Kiṭāb al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2000), vol. 7, 197.