

## Book Review

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Ana Labarta (with Carmen Barceló). *Anillos de la Península Ibérica, 711–1611* (Valencia: Editorial Angeles Carrillo Baeza, 2017), 324 pp. ISBN 978-84-9464-375-0. Price: €85.00 (cloth).

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This book collects information on the rings found in or originating from the Iberian Peninsula that are linked to the three religious communities (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) that lived there from 711 to 1611. This was, of course, the period of Islamic presence in the Iberian Peninsula down to the expulsion of the Moriscos.

Following the study (pp. 1–92), the catalog (pp. 93–320)—which features data about where and how the rings were found, their present locations, their material features, their epigraphy (if any), and the relevant academic literature, along with images—is divided into three main sections. These are devoted, respectively, to rings found in Islamic, Jewish, and Christian contexts. The rings listed are made overwhelmingly of silver with a few of gold, which raises a number of questions that the author discusses

(p. 51): Were there no gold rings? Were gold rings reused, and would such reuse explain their disappearance? Did the gold rings preserved belong to women or to Jews, given that Muslim men were forbidden to use them? Rings made of other materials (black jet, glass, ivory, or bone) are dealt with in the following sections. The catalog ends with sections on other circular objects that were not used as rings, anomalous cases, a group of Basque-Navarrese rings that present peculiar features, and cases on which there is incomplete information. One index lists the rings' places of origin and another the places where they are now preserved.

The author is Ana Labarta, professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Valencia and a scholar known for her research on subjects as varied as astrology, magic, chancery letters, seals, Arabic place-names, food,

and clothing. Together with Carmen Barceló (her collaborator in this book), she has also worked on the Arabic poetry written in the Iberian Peninsula during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and on the Arabic texts produced by the Muslim minority in Valencia from 1401 to 1608. The two scholars have produced fascinating books on these topics,<sup>1</sup> all of which were published, like the bulk of Labarta's solo research, in Spanish. This means that the books' circulation has not matched their scholarly importance.

Labarta's interest in rings started in 2013, when she was asked to read the Arabic epigraphy inscribed on eight carnelians, some held in rings, found in graves from caliphal Cordoba. To gain a broader perspective, she looked for previous studies on rings and found that rings have seldom been included in studies devoted to metals. Indeed, the extant bibliography was scarce, scattered, and fragmentary. This monograph, therefore, is a most welcome addition to our knowledge of the material culture of the three religious communities that lived in the Iberian Peninsula.

Labarta begins her study by reviewing what we know about the pre-Islamic situation, paying attention to Roman and Visigothic rings. I learned from this section that there is no evidence for the presence of people who dressed in Visigothic style—and used Visigothic rings—in the southern regions of the Iberian Peninsula (the Betica). The Islamic conquest introduced noticeable formal and other changes

(p. 53). The earliest dated rings are all made of silver and are inscribed with Arabic legends in negative, which indicates their use as seals (p. 54). The Almohad period appears also to have prompted changes (p. 55). The medieval religious, legal, and cultural norms related to the use of rings—whatever such norms there were—are dealt with in an illuminating section that highlights the Mālikī dislike of men's using gold or iron rings; as mentioned, this prohibition is to be related to the almost complete prevalence of silver rings found in Islamic contexts (p. 51). A few rings have even been recovered from Muslim graves. For example, a Muslim woman buried in caliphal Cordoba had two rings with gemstones on her hands and another gem in her mouth, all of them inscribed with the complete Islamic profession of faith. Such cases, as noted by Labarta, are exceptional, and we have to date no explanation for them, given the general Islamic insistence on burying the dead without any grave goods. Especially thought-provoking are rings found in burials that seem to challenge religious boundaries, such as one in which the corpse had a ring with a cross in one hand and in the other a ring with the Arabic inscription "There is no god but God." Equally interesting is the fact that rings associated with Jewish contexts are dated between 1350 and 1492, which suggests that before 1350 the rings used by Jews were indistinguishable from others (p. 32). The inscriptions in Arabic used in the early Islamic period include the Quranic expression *ḥasbī Allāh* ("God is enough

1. Carmen Barceló Torres and Ana Labarta, *Cancionero morisco: Poesía árabe de los siglos XV y XVI* (Valencia: Editorial Angeles Carrillo Baeza, 2016); Carmen Barceló Torres and Ana Labarta, *Archivos moriscos: Textos árabes de la minoría islámica valenciana 1401–1608* (Barcelona: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2009).

for me”), present on rings found in funerary contexts. The same formula reappears later, in Almoravid times, but on coins.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the inscriptions also include names, information that enriches our knowledge of Iberian onomastics; one of the fascinating contributions of Labarta’s study concerns a ring found in Ecija on which a member of the Berber Banū Tājīt—well attested in chronicles—is mentioned (p. 125). Labarta also pays attention to the moulds used for casting the rings, some of which have appeared in archaeological excavations, and to forgeries. A useful appendix on the inscriptions used, according to literary sources, by Andalusī rulers and others on their seals is also included.

Labarta sounds cautionary notes regarding the interpretation of the materials she has collected, such as the (in fact extremely limited) extent to which modern North African jewellery continues Andalusī practices (p. 58). She is also not shy in stating the limits of her knowledge as regards, for example, the reasons for the choice of certain gemstones (p. 61).

Labarta’s study is concise but rich in insights and also in questions for which there are no easy answers. It also includes much more than just her research on rings. When dealing with the issue of how to explain the presence of objects in Muslim graves, she points out that we similarly have no explanation for the presence of corpses buried in non-Islamic bodily positions in Muslim cemeteries (p. 31). One can only hope that this comment is a signal that she may be considering preparing a monograph on Islamic burial practices in the Iberian Peninsula. Al-Andalus is a region of the Islamic world for which we have studies on a considerable variety of topics, but there are still lacunae that need to be filled through the type of rigorous and innovative scholarship at which Labarta excels and that allows for well-grounded and significant advances in our understanding of the religious and cultural landscape of medieval Iberia. When reading any study by Labarta, one can be sure that most of what one encounters is new evidence, something that is often as rare as medieval Iberian gold rings.

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2. Miguel Vega Martín and Salvador Peña Martín, “*Allah hasbi, lema coránico (IX:129) en una moneda meriní hallada en Granada*,” *Miscelánea de Estudios Arabes y Hebraicos: Sección Árabe-Islam* 51 (2002): 327–38.