The Burgos Casket: Translations of Secular and Sacred Power in Medieval Iberia

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In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a vigorous exchange existed between Christians and Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula. Interactions between these communities through trade, politics, pilgrimage, and warfare created a visual culture that transcended religious and political boundaries. While this shared vocabulary was not monolithic, it nevertheless enabled images and objects to hold significances and transmit meanings between cultures in Iberia and the larger Mediterranean region. One object whose history developed in this intercultural milieu was the Burgos casket, a carved ivory and enamel box that was created in 1026 at an Islamic ivory workshop in Cuenca for an Islamic royal court (fig. 1).

Such portable luxury objects had been produced in Córdoba since the tenth century, and after the fall of the caliphate in the early eleventh century, many of the Cordobán artisans moved to Cuenca. Carved ivories formed an emblematic part of Islamic court culture.\(^2\) Cordobán ivories were noteworthy for their extravagant use of the raw material, reflecting the power and artistic patronage of the rulers of Al-Andalus,\(^3\) and although objects from Cuenca show a more restrained use of material, production of luxury portable objects nevertheless continued.\(^4\) That

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\(^3\) For example, cylindrical pyxides were often crafted from a single piece of ivory rather than separate pieces joined together, and the Pamplona casket (carved at Córdoba, 1004-5) has walls nearly 40 cm long and several centimeters thick. Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain* (London: V & A Publishing, 2010), 28-30.

the Burgos casket was carved in Cuenca is thus evident in its construction from separate panels of ivory joined together on a wooden frame rather than from a single piece.

By the mid-twelfth century the casket had reached the Benedictine monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos, where two of its ivory panels were replaced with champlevé enamels depicting Christian scenes (fig. 2). No documentation indicates the monks’ motivations in replacing the original panels. The ivory is rather thin, however, and it may have been lost or damaged either before or after the arrival of the casket at Santo Domingo. An inventory from the monastery in 1440 lists the casket as a reliquary.⁵ Although many scholars have discussed the Burgos casket, their analyses do not address its multivalent function in its new context. Neither do they fully consider the ways in which the meanings of this object deepened and changed through its translation from an Islamic court to a Christian monastery.⁶

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Figure 2. Burgos Casket, Enamel End Panel and Top, Image after B. Von Ernst Kuhnel, Die Islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen, 40 d-e, plate XXXIV. (Images in the public domain).

Taking into account this cultural translation, a more nuanced analysis would acknowledge that layers of meaning reflecting both secular and sacred power are embedded in
this tangible object. In an Islamic setting, physical characteristics of the box represented attributes of royalty. The use of ivory signified luxury, and the carved scenes of animals and vegetation symbolized courtly authority. At the same time, this imagery connected the earthly ruler to Allah, inviting contemplation of the divine.

The Burgos casket seems to have been successfully adapted to its new Christian context at Santo Domingo, without losing many of its original Islamic associations. As a reliquary, this box held a source of divine power enshrined in the physical remains of a saint, preserved in the tangible object. The Christian scenes chosen for the new enamel panels emphasized this power of divine corporeality, particularly an image of the Lamb of God, representing Christ as the sacrificial lamb. Just as the original Islamic imagery pointed viewers toward an understanding of the ruler’s secular power and his connection to Allah, the translated understanding of these images, combined with the new enamel scenes, pointed monastic viewers toward an understanding of God’s power as manifested through Christ and the saints. Therefore the ivory construction of the Burgos casket and its combined Islamic and Christian imagery facilitated its physical representation of the intangible interrelationship of power and spirituality as experienced by its monastic users.

The Burgos casket is currently housed at the Museo de Burgos in Burgos, Spain. It is rectangular in shape with a flat-topped pyramidal lid, measuring 19 x 34 x 21 cm, and it is composed of a wooden frame covered with sheets of sculpted ivory, champlevé enamelwork, and both engraving and guilloche on gilded copper.\(^7\) It was created by Muhammad ibn Zayyan in

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\(^7\) To create champlevé enamel, the artisan hollows a design out of the surface of the metal, leaving thin ridges around the resulting depressions. Enamel powder is placed in the hollowed-out regions and subsequently fired. See Marian Campbell, *An Introduction to Medieval Enamels* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1983), 7. *Guilloche* is a form of ornament in which two or more bands of metal are twisted over each other in a series, leaving circular openings. Here, see Nancy Netzer, *Medieval Objects in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: Metalwork* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1991), 178.
1026 in Cuenca, as explained in a fragmentary Kufic inscription on the edge of the lid of the casket (fig. 3).  

Figure 3, Burgos Casket, Enamel end panel and hinged back ivory panel. (Image by the author)

The extant portion of the inscription reads, “enduring for its owner, may Allah prolong his life. From among that which was made in the city of Cu(enca) in the year 417H. The work of Muhammad ibn Zayyan, his servant; may Allah grant him renown.”  

Inscriptions that include the artisan’s name are not unusual on carved ivory boxes from Cuenca and Córdoba, and based on the inscriptions found on three other ivories from the Zayyan workshop that created the

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10 Beckwith, *Caskets*, 14, 30-32.
Burgos casket, this object was likely intended for a member of the Dhu‘l-Nunid family who ruled Toledo in the early eleventh century.¹¹

Even without a dedication, the imagery and construction of the Burgos casket would suggest an association with royalty and courtly art. One important theme conveying this connection is that of hunting (fig. 4).

Figure 4. Burgos Casket, Ivory Panels, Image after B. Von Ernst Kuhnel, Die Islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen, 40 b and c, plate XXXIV. (Images in the public domain).

¹¹ Shalem, “Royal Caskets,” 25-27. Beckwith, Caskets, 30, notes that the blessing “May Allah preserve his life” in the inscription on the casket is typical of those for reigning monarchs.
A running bowman aiming at a confronted pair of lions inhabits each corner of the front and back panels, and on the center of the bottom register, a mounted warrior using a sword and shield fights a lion. Hunting as a royal activity was usually represented in Islamic Spanish art by a falconer, leading Avinoam Shalem to suggest that the intensity of the scenes on the Burgos casket emphasize more specific qualities such as vigilance and courage.\textsuperscript{12} As if to reiterate these virtues, on the front and rear panels of the box, lions on the backs of bulls bite the bovines’ necks, and the right panel shows lions biting gazelles. This type of depiction of fierce animals, particularly lions, biting the necks of their prey was used throughout Mediterranean societies to illustrate ideas of power and dominance.\textsuperscript{13}

The Dhu’l-Nunids were perhaps in particular need of the vigilance and courage depicted on the casket as a result of their political situation during the period in which this object was made. Iberia had been under Umayyad rule, centered in Córdoba and Madinat al-Zahra, since the initial conquest of the peninsula in the eighth century. A civil war, however, erupted during the reign of caliph Hisham II (r. 976-ca. 1010), after which the lands formerly under Umayyad control fragmented into numerous smaller kingdoms (\textit{taifas}). The Dhu’l-Nunid family ruled one of these \textit{taifas}, which was centered in Toledo.\textsuperscript{14} The \textit{taifas} were almost continuously at war with one another, driving their leaders to begin the practice of purchasing mercenaries and contracts of protection from neighboring Christian kingdoms. Nevertheless, these agreements did not end the threat of attack from Christian kings who recognized the weakened Islamic position, such as Alfonso VI of Castile who captured Toledo itself in 1085.\textsuperscript{15} Because of the political instability

\textsuperscript{12} Shalem, “Royal Caskets,” 29.
\textsuperscript{13} Sheila R. Canby, \textit{Islamic Art in Detail} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 66; and Hoffman, “Pathways,” 29.
\textsuperscript{14} Rosser-Owen, \textit{Islamic Arts}, 19-33.
resulting from the dissolution of the caliphate and increasing threats from Christian kingdoms, the Dhu’l-Nunids faced a situation more akin to the dangerous hunting scenes on the Burgos casket than the courtly pastimes found on earlier ivories.\textsuperscript{16}

In addition to hunting, other invocations of the natural world on the Burgos casket had resonances in Islamic court culture. Each carved ivory panel includes foliate arabesques, creating a vegetal connection between the animal and human figures that also appear. The designs are ornamental, but they nevertheless create the impression of a lush, verdant space.\textsuperscript{17} Luxuriant vegetation was an outward sign of an Islamic ruler’s favor with God. If he governed justly, rain would be sufficient and harvests would be plentiful. Thus, imagery depicting abundant vegetation emphasized the caliph’s blessed status, not only in the prosperity of his earthly kingdom, but also with the suggestion that he would one day attain a place in Paradise.\textsuperscript{18}

A pair of intertwined peacocks on the right side panel of the casket adds to this paradisiacal allusion.\textsuperscript{19} Although the Qur’an does not specifically mention peacocks, in popular Islamic literature they were among the original inhabitants of the garden of Paradise expelled with Adam and Eve.\textsuperscript{20} They were connected with the heavens, as were other types of birds, and

\textsuperscript{16} Avinoam Shalem further discusses the differences in imagery between Cordobán and Cuencan ivories in \textit{Islam Christianized: Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West} (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), 83-86.

\textsuperscript{17} Oleg Grabar discusses the importance and value of vegetal ornament in Islamic art in \textit{The Mediation of Ornament} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 196-225.


\textsuperscript{19} Shalem, “Royal Caskets,” 30. Oleg Grabar, \textit{Mediation}, 204-7, notes that while such images do not unequivocally represent Paradise, they are nonetheless evocative of this potential meaning.

thus were close to Allah. Nobles often kept peafowl in their own gardens, so the representation of these birds on the Burgos casket further reinforced the special connection of royalty to Allah in Paradise.

The construction of the casket also held significance in an Islamic court context. The ivory from which this object is made was regarded as a precious material, emphasizing the power and wealth of its owner. As a natural product, ivory reflects a wide network of political, economic, and artistic connections. Most ivory in medieval Spain came through North Africa, often in the form of tribute payments, and from at least the time of the biblical King Solomon, ivory was considered an appropriate gift for royalty. In Islamic Iberia, the use of ivory was reserved for artisans connected with the court, so its exclusivity reinforced the status of those who owned carved ivory objects.

The tactile and visual pleasure of ivory added to its value. Although objects made in Cuenca do not show the same lavish expenditure of raw material as those from Córdoba, they nevertheless share the sculptural qualities of the earlier items. Regardless of the workshop from which the ivory can be traced, its physical characteristics—the ability to resist decay, natural radiance and gloss, relative rarity and uniqueness, and the necessity of a highly skilled craftsman to carve it—contributed to its status as a luxury material. Ivory was also praised for its similarity to human flesh, a comparison found in Islamic poetry as well as on the inscription of a casket from the late tenth century which states, “The sight I offer is of the fairest, the firm / breast of a delicate maiden. / Beauty has invested me with splendid raiment / that makes a

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22 Blair and Bloom, Images of Paradise, 92.
23 Rosser-Owen, Islamic Arts, 28; Shalem, Oliphant, 18-19, 29-30, 84-88.
24 Shalem, Oliphant, 29.
26 Shalem, Oliphant, 84-88.
display of jewels.” The beauty and exclusivity of ivory made it a symbol of wealth and royalty.

The Burgos casket thus presents a complex network of Islamic courtly meanings. Dynamic hunting scenes combine with depictions of lions dominating weaker animals to emphasize the ideals of victory, power, and dominance. Vegetal imagery suggests divine favor and royal prosperity, while a pair of intertwined peacocks underscores an allusion to Paradise. Finally, the use of ivory embodies luxury and wealth. Through the physical medium of ivory and depictions of tangible figures, the Burgos casket invoked these intangible secular and sacred concepts in its original Islamic court context.

All of these references, however, acquired additional significance when the casket was acquired by the monastery of Santo Domingo. The aforementioned inventory lists the box as a reliquary holding the relics of the 11,000 Virgins (companions to St. Ursula), a use which for several reasons suggests that the Christian monks were aware of the earlier status of the casket as a luxury item. In general, medieval reliquaries were an external symbol of their valuable metaphysical contents and were therefore constructed of precious materials crafted with beauty as a primary consideration. In a manner similar to the Islamic court culture, carved ivory in the western Christian context was a highly valued item, making it particularly well suited for use as a reliquary. The association of ivory with human flesh enhanced this suitability. To further elevate its status, the monks embellished the Burgos casket with champlevé enamelwork. This type of enamel was so precious that the Lateran Council in 1215 specifically mentioned its

28 No record of the circumstances of this acquisition has yet been discovered.
30 Gauthier, Highways, 24-28.
worthiness to hold the consecrated Eucharistic Sacrament.\textsuperscript{31} Thus, the monks retained and emphasized the elite status of the Burgos casket established in the Islamic court while using it in a new sacred context.

Although Islamic ivory containers were often adopted without any modifications for use in a Christian context, particularly in the eleventh century,\textsuperscript{32} the Burgos casket, as mentioned above, was altered after it reached Santo Domingo. The casket originally had ivory sheets on each side, but the panels on the top and left side were lost or removed and replaced in the mid-twelfth century at the monastery with champlevé enamels depicting Christian images. Of these panels, the top of the lid depicts the Mystic Lamb between the Alpha and Omega, and the left side shows the patron of the monastery, St. Domingo of Silos, flanked by two angels. Sections of the Arabic inscription carved around the upper border of the box were also replaced with enamel bands. The rest of the original text remains, however, including its invocation of Allah’s blessing.\textsuperscript{33} The fact that this Arabic inscription was only partially replaced suggests that the monks at Santo Domingo were interested in projecting a Christian identity onto the ivory casket without totally obscuring its Islamic origins.

Although the motivations for adding the two enamel panels are not documented, the monks seem to have deliberately designed the enamels to complement the original ivories rather than to contradict or neutralize them. In fact, Walter L. Hildburgh argues that the Lamb of God panel provides some direct evidence of the close intersections between Islamic and Christian spheres at Silos when the enamels were manufactured.\textsuperscript{34} The symbols for the Alpha and Omega

\textsuperscript{33} O’Neill, ed., Art of Medieval Spain, 273-76.
\textsuperscript{34} Hildburgh, Medieval Spanish Enamels, 56.
appear reversed from their usual order; here the Alpha is on the right and the Omega on the left. This inversion may be related to the fact that Arabic script is read from right to left instead of left to right.\textsuperscript{35} The makers of the enamel panels for the Burgos casket are unknown, but in the mid-twelfth century the flourishing enamel workshop at Silos included artisans who were conversant in both Islamic and Christian visual culture.\textsuperscript{36}

Although the enamels do not share the imagery of the Islamic ivories, their themes seem closely related. These enamel panels further develop the association of the original ivory carvings with victory, kingship, prosperity, and Paradise. The left side panel depicting St. Domingo flanked by two angels suggests his triumphant place in heaven. The top panel showing the Lamb of God with the Alpha and Omega is an image taken from the book of Revelation illustrating the final triumph of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{37} The metaphor of Jesus depicted as the Lamb of God emphasized his physical sacrifice: through the power of God, his earthly death became a heavenly victory.\textsuperscript{38} Thus, the enamels continue to focus on physical depictions of intangible concepts, which is evident in the bodily image of St. Domingo in heaven and particularly in the figure of the Mystic Lamb.

In addition to the design of its enamel panels, the use of the Burgos casket as a reliquary seems to have drawn on the representations of power found in its original courtly imagery.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Sacrificing a lamb was a central element in the Jewish Passover ritual (Exodus 12:1-13, \textit{New American Bible}, 69), and the image of this animal as the chosen sacrifice for God appears in other Old Testament literature (for example Isaiah 53:7, \textit{New American Bible}, 879). In the New Testament, the metaphor is applied specifically to Jesus (for example John 1:29, \textit{New American Bible}, 146; and 1 Corinthians 5:7, \textit{New American Bible}, 248-49).
though now translated to its new sacred context. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, most Christians understood relics to be an immediate source of divine power manifested through the physical presence of the saint’s remains.\(^{39}\) Close contact with relics enabled people to participate in that manifestation of holiness and receive blessings such as healing, protection, or exorcism.\(^{40}\) In addition to these spiritual benefits, the possession of relics increased the prestige and influence of a monastery, leading to a rise in pilgrimages to the site; an increase in pilgrims could create economic profit.\(^{41}\) The monastery of Santo Domingo was at the height of its prosperity in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a status that is both evident in and a reflection of the possession of a valuable reliquary such as the Burgos casket.\(^{42}\) Rather than emphasizing the power of an Islamic ruler, the reliquary now attested to the power of God and his saints as well as the prominence of Santo Domingo itself.

Interrelationships between the Islamic and Christian understandings of this object are also evident in the perceptions of its spiritual meanings and functions, as illuminated through the use of the arabesque.\(^{43}\) The arabesque is one of the most distinctive features of Islamic art, and the prevalence of this type of ornament reflects the belief that although art should have a spiritual purpose, a true depiction of Allah is impossible.\(^{44}\) Allah is beyond anything that human faculties


\(^{43}\) Several scholars have discussed the meaning and importance of the arabesque in Islamic art. See for example Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, *Islamic Arts* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 138, 283; Canby, *Islamic Art*, 26-31; and Grabar, *Meditation*, 196-225.

can comprehend; He transcends all things and yet is present in all of creation.\(^{45}\) This tenet of faith grows from the concept of Unity (al-tawhid), an important metaphysical principle in Islam.\(^{46}\) Although the word itself does not appear in the Qur’an, it is implicit in the statement of faith that “there is no god but God” and in the strong emphasis on Allah’s uniqueness and divine oneness.\(^{47}\)

The arabesque, with its seeming endlessness, embodies tawhid.\(^{48}\) Within interlaced extending and repeating forms, both the shape itself and the negative space around it are important, drawing attention to the presence of Allah through the contrast between the tangible object and its absence. This interaction of positive and negative space within the pattern frees the viewer’s eye and mind from being fixed on one particular element and facilitates contemplation of the divine.\(^{49}\) It provides a more powerful experience of Allah because the negative space with its absence of “things” as they exist in tangible creation actually reveals His transcendent presence. Seyyed Hossein Nasr calls this place of nothingness “the void.”\(^{50}\) The connection of the arabesque with the void is particularly evident on carved ivory because of the relief of the carving, creating a true contrast between the form and the space around it. Within an Islamic context—both the sacred and the secular court—the physical properties of the Burgos casket would have drawn viewers to experience a deeper level of meaning.

Arabesques are evident on each carved side of the casket, but they are most striking on the lid panels where figural images are less prominent. Whether the owner of the casket was

\(^{49}\) Nasr, *Islamic Art*, 186-87.
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 185-86.
holding the object or gazing at it from a distance, the lid would be in the line of sight, inviting contemplation of the arabesques. Reiterating this experience, opening the lid would reveal the empty space within the box. Nasr notes that this type of negative space would have been a defining characteristic of Islamic architecture, exemplified in the experience of stepping from a busy street into the quiet courtyard of a mosque or private home and feeling the dichotomy between a sense of expansion that inspires spiritual joy and the notion of protected containment.51 This concept was transferred to the structural characteristics of the Burgos casket in that the act of opening the casket to reveal an inner space would have signaled the same relationship of expansion and protection, thus facilitating a metaphorical apprehension of the essence of Allah.52

When the casket arrived at the monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos, the monks would probably not have viewed its carved arabesques as a means of entry into the divine void. Nevertheless, although the association of vegetal imagery with holiness was not exactly the same in the western Christian tradition as in Islamic spirituality, vegetation was strongly associated with the person of Jesus and the presence of God. In the gospel of John, Jesus refers to himself as the vine and his disciples as the branches.53 Old Testament literature frequently uses the image of a vine or vineyard as a metaphor for God’s chosen people,54 and the Garden of Eden as described in the book of Genesis reflected God’s generosity toward Adam and Eve through plentiful water, plants, and trees.55 The foliate arabesques on the Burgos casket would likely have called such biblical imagery to mind for the monks using the box as a reliquary.

51 Ibid., 188-90.
52 Ibid.
55 Genesis 1:1-2:4 and 2:4-20, New American Bible, 4-5. give two accounts of the creation of Eden, both of which mention the abundant water and vegetation.
Moreover, these vegetal designs could bring the monks to prayerful contemplation of the sacred by invoking the familiar image of a cloister prayer garden.\(^{56}\) At Benedictine institutions such as Santo Domingo, the cloister garden would have been particularly important because of the high value that the order placed on contemplative devotion.\(^{57}\) The dry climate of the region in which the monastery is located would also have heightened the monks’ appreciation for a garden space and imagery, perhaps suggesting associations with Paradise as was the case for the earlier Islamic viewers of the Burgos casket.\(^{58}\) The architectural sculpture found in the cloister at Silos, with both figural and ornamental images, created an enclosed space for a garden which itself would have been carefully ordered, presenting a structured means of entry into the prayerfulness that the Burgos casket presented in microcosm.

In addition to the spiritual awareness gained from contemplating the imagery and structural qualities of the casket, the monks’ use of objects such as this was intended to facilitate access to the divine.\(^{59}\) Through the relics of the saints, Christians could obtain intercession with God and receive blessings.\(^{60}\) Meditating on the lives of the saints, particularly as made visible through images and relics, offered a point of entry to a more direct experience of holiness.\(^{61}\) Thus the Burgos casket, long after leaving its Islamic court origins, continued to provide a focus for spiritual contemplation in its new Christian environment.


\(^{57}\) Rutchick, “Sculpture Programs,” 175-77.


\(^{61}\) Gauthier, Highways, 106-9.
In both its ivory construction and the combination of its Islamic and Christian imagery, the Burgos casket physically represents the intangible interrelationship of power and spirituality as experienced by its successive users in medieval Spain. Scholars such as Shalem have described this object in terms of a deliberate juxtaposition of different materials, images, and styles. In fact, however, its meanings and use at Silos build upon its original significances. Islamic court imagery representing power, dominance, and victory finds further expression in the enamel panels depicting Christian triumph. The use of the casket as a reliquary reveals an awareness of its original associations with royalty and power. For both its Muslim and Christian users, the casket provided a tangible means of entry for experiencing the divine. The dynamic history of the Burgos casket embodies the complex political, artistic, and spiritual milieu of the Iberian Peninsula in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, revealing the significance of such objects within the larger discourse of visual meaning and use during this period.

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Works Cited


