Alnaciriya: Journal of sociological and Historical Studies
Vol: 17. **Issue** : 01. June 15, 2026
EISSN: 2600-6189/ ISSN: 2170-1822

The Naval Fleet under Umayyad Rule in Al-Andalus: A Study of Infrastructure

Titah Nassira

Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University, Mostaganem, (Algeria),
nassira.titah@univ-mosta.dz

Received: 27/02/2026 Accepted: 29/03/2026 Published: 15/06/2026

Abstract: This study foregrounds the Umayyads' contribution to the emergence of an Andalusi fleet. Umayyad rulers grasped the strategic weight of Al-Andalus's geographical position: its coasts and frontier ports faced the western basin of the Mediterranean, one of the most consequential maritime theatres of the period. In light of changing geopolitical conditions and persistent external threats, the Umayyads devoted sustained attention to naval power (stolos), treating it as a central concern of policy and warfare. They therefore invested in the infrastructure and organization required for an effective navy. They built facilities for ship construction, established naval bases, and equipped the fleet with weaponry and specialized clothing. The Andalusi fleet also operated through a dedicated administrative apparatus marked by strict regulation and orderly coordination, designed to ensure the proper functioning of its vessels. These measures elevated the Andalusi navy to the rank of a major maritime force and shifted the balance of power vis-à-vis medieval Christian fleets in the Mediterranean, especially when it confronted the danger posed by the Byzantines and the Normans (Vikings). Its victories, in turn, affirmed its conspicuous presence alongside the fleets of Islamic maritime jihad, working to uphold the banner of Islam.

Keywords: Fleet; Umayyad State; Al-Andalus; Naval bases; Normans; Vikings.

The Naval Fleet under Umayyad Rule in Al-Andalus: A Study of Infrastructure

Introduction:

Under Umayyad rule in al-Andalus (138–422 AH / 756–1031 CE), the Andalusi fleet operated locally and regionally while also projecting influence across the wider Mediterranean. It became a pivotal component of the cycles of rivalry and warfare among major Christian powers that unfolded along the coasts and frontier ports of the Mediterranean, referred to in Arabic sources as Baḥr al-Rūm (sea of the romans). Through the war fleet, Umayyad rulers secured the survival of their polity in Al-Andalus and fashioned their naval squadrons into a resilient barrier against recurrent Christian efforts to push southward and to raid the shores and maritime marches of the Maghribi littoral. This maritime posture strengthened the force and prestige of Islam and consolidated its presence in the western Mediterranean basin.

From these premises, the study formulates the following research problem. What geopolitical factors and strategic calculations led the Umayyads in Al-Andalus, whether in the Emirate or the Caliphal period, to prioritize naval power and to invest in its consolidation and development? How did their maritime policy conceptualize this military apparatus and determine its functions? How did the fleet's strategic role take shape in confronting the threats posed by the major Christian powers in the Mediterranean's central theatre? And how did it come to rank among the Islamic naval forces that challenged Byzantium, the foremost medieval maritime power, while also meeting the destructive incursions of the Normans (Vikings)?

Accordingly, this research focuses on defining the institutional identity and operational profile of the Andalusi fleet under the Umayyads as an emergent global military force in the Middle Ages. Its objectives are, first, to clarify the contours of Umayyad maritime policy in Al-Andalus and to gauge the extent of its engagement with technological innovation and the maritime civilizational tradition in the design, construction, and equipping of war vessels. Second, it seeks to demonstrate how the Umayyad state in Al-Andalus made the navy a primary instrument of warfare and an emerging power that influenced, and in important respects recalibrated, the maritime balance of power in the medieval Mediterranean.

The significance of the topic lies in the light it sheds on the Umayyads' role in the emergence and development of the Andalusi

fleet, whose vessels contributed to the jihad movement undertaken by Arab fleets in the service of raising the banner of Islam. It also offers a lens through which to trace points of intersection in the history of political relations and conflicts that evolved, as a natural extension, between the Islamic and Christian worlds within the medieval Mediterranean arena.

Methodologically, the study combines a descriptive approach, used to characterize the fleet's vessels and the processes of mobilization and provisioning; an analytical approach, deployed to interpret texts and to follow selected phenomena in order to reach finer-grained historical conclusions; and a comparative approach, complemented by related interpretive frameworks, to examine information relevant to influence and functional deployment in this domain.

I. Origins of Umayyad Interest in the War Fleet

I.1- The Geographical Location of al-Andalus

The Muslim rulers of al-Andalus could not dispense with a maritime policy, nor could they neglect the fleet, because al-Andalus occupied the Iberian Peninsula and directly overlooked the western basin of the Mediterranean. Arabic geographical authorities repeatedly underline this reality. In the *Dictionary of Countries*, Yakout Alhamawi (d. 627 AH/1229 CE), transmitting Ibn Ḥawqal, describes al-Andalus as "a great island …" (Al-Hamawi & Al-Baghdadi, 1984,p.262). Al-Idrīsī develops the point by portraying al-Andalus as triangular in outline and surrounded by water on three sides: to the south the Levantine Sea, that is, the Mediterranean (the "Sea of the Romans" in Arabic usage); to the west the Dark Sea; and to the north the Andalusian Sea (Al-Idrisi, 1983,p.255). A parallel description appears in *The Perfumed Garden on the Description of Regions*, which likewise situates Al-Andalus in the Iberian Peninsula and explains why it was called an "island" by reference to its triangular form and its three maritime frontages. In that account, the south borders the Levantine Sea, the interior side opens onto the Dark Sea, and the north faces the "Sea of the English" as part of the Mediterranean (the Sea of the Romans) (Al-Himyari, 1927,p.37).

In relation to the Islamic Maghrib, al-Andalus was separated from the northern African coast only by the Strait Sea, namely the Strait of Gibraltar. The name became dominant after the Arab-Islamic conquest and was associated with the Andalusi conqueror

Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Walhāṣī al-Nafzī (91 AH/711 CE). The strait extends for roughly eight kilometres, and at its narrowest point it does not exceed fifteen kilometres in width. The area around it was known as "the two shores," meaning the Maghribi shore and the Andalusi shore. This proximity meant that al-Andalus was more immediately oriented toward the Maghrib than toward France and the rest of Europe (Al-Istakhri, 1961, p. 35). It also made the strait a persistent zone of contest between the African and European littorals, since control of this corridor meant control of a strategic passageway. More generally, the geographic situation of Al-Andalus exposed it to recurrent seaborne incursions and to foreign maritime threats that seldom ceased for long (Takoush, 2008, p. 15).

I.2- The Geopolitical Threat Environment

With the fall of the Umayyad polity in 132 AH/750 CE, the amīr ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muʿāwiya I, al-Dākhil, escaped ʿAbbāsid pursuit in the Mashriq and entered Al-Andalus. After subduing his opponents, he received the bayʿa as the first Umayyad amīr on Friday, 10 Dhū al-Ḥijja 138 AH/756 CE, marking the close of the wulāt period and the opening of a new chapter in the history of Islamic Al-Andalus (Mounis, 2002, pp. 284, 642–643). Yet the new emirate did not emerge into a benign strategic setting. Al-Andalus occupied a central position in the western Mediterranean basin, and its coastal approaches were exposed to pressures from east, west, and north, above all from the surrounding Christian polities. In a succinct formulation, the author of *The Perfumed Garden on the Description of Regions* characterizes it as "a land of jihad and a station of (defense) ribāṭ," adding that its eastern and northern frontiers, and parts of its western flank, were encircled by "various kinds of unbelievers." (Al-Himyari, 1927, p. 3)

These constraints were sharpened by the internal conditions inherited from the governorship era (92–138 AH/711–756 CE). That period was marked by recurrent fitan (conflicts) and weak administrative cohesion, which undermined political stability and hindered institutional consolidation. The maritime sector reflected this disorder. The Islamic fleet suffered stagnation rather than development, and the sources do not record for it significant naval campaigns or achievements (Tarwah,2023,p.y).

Within this geopolitical matrix, strategic necessity required al-Dākhil and the Umayyad rulers after him to build a disciplined army

and to establish an Andalusi war fleet capable of countering the major medieval naval powers active in the Mediterranean. The threat horizon included not only Christian fleets, especially those of the Iberian realms and the Franks, but also Islamic rivals whose pressure shaped Andalusi calculations, notably the ʿAbbāsid caliphate, as well as the Fāṭimid caliphate pressing from the south (Tarwah,2023,p.4).Inparallel,thewestern Mediterranean experienced the shock of maritime raids by the Norman seafarers, designated in the Arabic sources as al-Majūs, that is, the Vikings, who sailed from Denmark in the far north of Europe (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969,p.147), a development to be discussed in what follows.

II. Dār al-Ṣināʿa* and the Fleet's Naval Bases

II.1- The Dār al-Ṣināʿa of the Fleet

At the outset, Mūsā b. Nuṣayr (19–97 AH/640–716 CE) could draw only on the shipyard of Tunis (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, p. 147), which provided the numerous craft used to ferry the ajnād employed by the conqueror Ṭāriq b. Ziyād al-Walhāṣī al-Nafzī during the opening of al-Andalus in 91 AH/711 CE. The first Muslim contingents in al-Andalus did not possess established shipbuilding expertise, so in the early phase they relied on Andalusi dūr al-ṣināʿa associated with Córdoba, especially the facilities of Seville and Algeciras. With time, these yards deteriorated and fell out of service (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, p. 167). The accumulation of external threats, however, forced the Umayyad authorities to recognize that maritime security and frontier defense (ribāṭ) required a standing war fleet. That strategic awareness became one of the principal drivers behind the restoration, repair, and expansion of Andalusi dūr al-ṣināʿa. Umayyad rulers understood that naval strength depended on an integrated material infrastructure for vessels and for the fleet's war matériel, and that the dār al-ṣināʿa was the institutional core of this system. Accordingly, multiple shipyards were established in

* Arsenal in European languages (Italian *arsenale/arzenale*, then French/English *arsenal*) is ultimately derived from the Arabic expression *dar al-sinaʿa* (dar as-sinaʿah), meaning "house of manufacture", and by extension a shipyard or naval dockyard where ships and equipment are made and maintained. Harper, D. (n.d.). *arsenal* (n.). Online Etymology Dictionary. Retrieved February 15, 2026, from https://www.etymonline.com/word/arsenal.

accordance with the strategic value of coastal sites and their access to maritime routes. The following cases are offered as examples rather than an exhaustive inventory:

- **The Seville shipyard (Ishbīliya)**

  Seville, an ancient city, lies on the Guadalquivir (al-Wādī al-Kabīr) (Al-Hamawi & Al-Baghdadi, 1984, p.197) and, given its proximity to the sea, developed into one of the most important shipbuilding centers. Its maritime installations extended back to the Visigothic period, that is, to the era immediately preceding the Islamic conquest. Under the Umayyad amīr ʿAbd al-Raḥmān II al-Awsaṭ, in 230 AH/846 CE, the old shipyard of Seville was refurbished and fortified. New structures were added so that production could be revitalized and the yard could turn out substantial numbers of ships (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969,p.161) .

- **The Carmona shipyard (Qarmūna)**

  Qarmūna lies east of Seville and ranks among the older towns of al-Andalus. It is described as having a great tower on which siege engines are mounted in wartime, connected to the city wall by a deep moat, and protected by several gates, including the Gate of Córdoba and a western gate toward Seville. Among its installations was a dār al-ṣināʿa built after the year of the Norman raiders, the Majūs. It served as an armory and workshop for manufacturing the weapons needed for the fleet's ships, at a moment when the navy had expanded to include a large number of war vessels exceeding three hundred ships (Al-Himyari, 1927, pp. 158-159).

  A marked phase of growth in shipbuilding facilities also accompanied the reign of Caliph ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III (316–350 AH/929–961 CE). In 333 AH/944 CE he founded the shipyard of Tortosa, as indicated by the commemorative plaque still present there. The city possessed extensive pine forests whose timber was prized for exceptional quality, length, and durability, making it particularly suitable for the construction of large vessels (Levi-Provencal, 1953). In the same northern sector, a shipyard was established at Tarragona because of its position in the north-east of al-Andalus overlooking the Mediterranean littoral; the timber resources of Tortosa supported shipbuilding there as well (Al-Idrisi, 1983,p.279).

  This caliph is also credited with founding the shipyard of Alicante, which would later become one of the major bases of

Andalusi naval deployment. Al-Idrīsī emphasizes its maritime vocation when he notes that it is "a city to which ships sail, and most of them are built there, for it is a place where ships are constructed" (Al-Idrisi, 1983, p. 282). Finally, a dār al-ṣināʿa was attached to the caliphal city of Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ, specializing in the manufacture of war equipment used to provision the fleet (Al-Maqqari, 1968,p.692).

II.2- Types of Fleet Vessels and Their Armament

A. Fleet Vessels

The Andalusi fleet was provisioned with vessels purpose-built for combat, commonly designated in the sources as al-marākib al-ḥarbiyya (warships). These ships were produced in multiple types, and their construction demanded careful precision. Ibn Khaldūn stresses that the manufacture of naval units requires a substantial grounding in engineering across its various branches (bn Khaldun, 1979, pp. 410–411). In their technical profile, Andalusi warships broadly followed Mediterranean naval practice and, in particular, closely paralleled the shipbuilding traditions associated with the Fāṭimid and Byzantine fleets. Among the most prominent vessel types were the following:

- **The shīnī (war galley)**

The shīnī ranked among the fleet's most important units and appears as one of its earliest warship types. It was also known as the *aghriba* or *ghirbān* (sing. *ghurāb*), a designation linked to its pitch coating and white sails, which evoked the appearance of ravens. Structurally, it was a large, elongated craft propelled by one hundred and forty oars, carrying both fighters and oarsmen. It was fitted with towers and fighting platforms used for both defense and assault, and from it white naphtha could be cast against the enemy. Its average complement was about one hundred and fifty men (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, p. 134).

- **The ḥarābī**

The ḥarābī belonged to the broader category of galleys yet was smaller than the shīnī. It was valued for speed and maneuverability, and it formed one of the most significant components of the Andalusi fleet in the Umayyad period. The sources indicate its use in engagements and operations across both the Maghrib and al-Andalus (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, p. 132).

- **The ḥarrāqa (fire-ship)**

The term itself signals its operational function: the burning of enemy ships by means of naphtha. In status it followed the shīnī, and large numbers of such vessels were built. The Aghlabids excelled in its manufacture, and their expertise was later taken up by the Fāṭimids and by the shipbuilders of al-Andalus. The ḥarrāqa was propelled by roughly one hundred oars and carried mangonels (manjanīq) for projecting incendiaries (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, p. 132).

- **The ṭarīda (horse-transport)**

  This was a transport vessel designed specifically for horses. A single ṭarīda could carry about forty mounts, and it was typically opened from the rear to facilitate loading and disembarkation onto the shore.

- **The shalandīya (chalandine)**

  In Latin sources it appears as *chalandine*, while Italian usage renders it as *Sciolande* and French as *chaland*. The term was Arabized as *ṣandal*, and it was later extended to contexts of commercial carriage. The shalandīya was a large, robust, wide-bodied ship used to transport provisions and goods. The type was also known among the Byzantines. One of its defining features was a flat upper deck that allowed raiders and combatants to fight from above, while the oarsmen rowed beneath. Andalusi usage also refers to it as *ajfān al-ghazw* or *al-Ghazwāniyya* (Idhari., 1950).

- **The musattaḥāt (flat-bottomed craft)**

  These were broad, flat vessels used for carrying the fleet's weaponry and equipment (Al-Idrisi, 1983, p. 189).

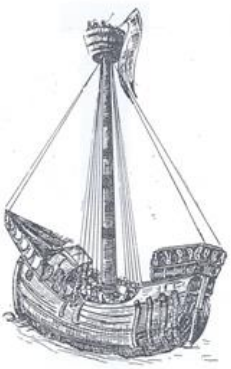
  Related in function was the qarqūra, a long, massive supply ship intended to provision forces at sea. It could be built with three decks and was capable of transporting around eighty horses.

- **The ashīṭī (reconnaissance craft)**

  This type may correspond to the vessels designated in Latin texts as *Seote* or *Saget*. It was a small craft used for scouting and for conveying intelligence reports to the commanders of the *qarāqīr* and the *aghriba*, and it was propelled by approximately eighty oars (Mez, 1986).

Figure 1. Images of selected warships





Fire-ships *(ḥarrāqāt)*



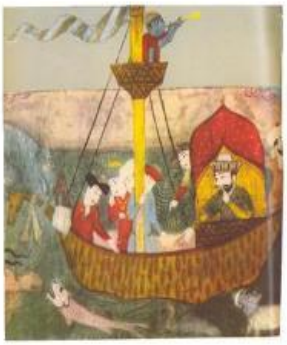
Supply ship *(qarqūr)*



War galley *(shūna)*

Coloured images of selected warships from the manuscript *The Collected Works of Saʿdī* (*Kulliyyāt Saʿdī*).





sources: Dr Mona Senjakdar Shaarani, *Ships in the Islamic Periods*; website: Applied Mechanics, www.expoclic/com

B. Fleet Armament

Naval combatants in the Andalusi fleet made use of a varied arsenal.



- **Bows and crossbows:** These were used to discharge bolts and arrows tipped with trihedral heads. The sources distinguish several types, including the *ziyār* bow made from oak, described as the most powerful and heaviest and usually set up on towers. They also mention the *ʿaqqār* and the *jarakh*, both weaker than the *ziyār* and drawn by a screw mechanism. Another type is tensioned by the feet, and there were bows designed to cast naphtha flasks, reportedly made from pine wood (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969).

Maces (al-dabābīs): Iron clubs with serrated heads in rectangular, circular, or square forms, fitted with a grip and used to crush the enemy's helmets (al-Maqrizi, 1997).

Grappling hooks and Chain Flails (al-kalālīb wa al-bāsīlīkāt): Grappling hooks were iron hooks cast onto enemy ships to seize and draw them in, enabling boarding via wooden planks or rope ladders and fighting the opposing crew. Their effect could be neutralized by cutting them with a steel axe. The *bāsīlīkāt* are described as chains ending in iron knobs, used in fighting on ship decks (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969).

- **Mast-top boxes (al-tawābīt, sing. tābūt):** Warships were fitted with open-topped boxes mounted at the top of the masts. Sailors climbed into them carrying stones, kept ready in a sling hung beside the box, then hurled them at the enemy while taking cover. They also carried naphtha flasks or jars of quicklime and threw them onto enemy craft; the resulting dust could lacerate and bleed the men (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, p. 141).

  In addition, crews sometimes hurled snakes and scorpions, or used soap to make decks slippery. To resist even small amounts of naphtha, ships could be clad externally with monkey skins soaked in vinegar, natron, and alum. For concealment, they lowered blue sails matching the color of the sea so that the ships would not be seen from afar.
- **Sea naphtha (nafṭ al-baḥr):** A specialized incendiary compound for burning ships, prepared from pitch, Sulphur, and other highly combustible materials. Its fire was not extinguished by water. It was

projected using a copper or iron device known as the *naffāṭa*, and naphtha-throwers also launched it by arrows and bolts, and at times by mangonel fire (Zaydan).

- **Mangonels and ʿarrādāt:** These engines cast large, rough stones placed on a cradle, then discharged toward targets by torsion and screw tension. They could also be used to throw naphtha, jars of boiling oil, or *qalqūniyya*[†]. The *ʿarrāda* resembles the mangonel but is smaller and was likewise used for stones, arrows, and pots of naphtha (Zaydan, p. 192).

Beyond weaponry, naval fighters also employed stratagems as a defensive art. They used snakes and scorpions, or soap to destabilize footing; protected hulls with monkey skins soaked in vinegar, natron, and alum to counter naphtha; and relied on blue sails for camouflage so that their vessels would not be detected at a distance (Zaydan, p. 155).

- **Naval Troops' Dress and Protective Equipment**

When sea fighting erupted, sailors equipped themselves with cuirasses and mail coats fitted with veiled coifs, along with padded cuirasses. To protect against enemy arrows and swords they carried large shields (tirās), which varied in form, including round, broadly rounded, and oval types. Shields also differed by material: some were iron, while others were wooden frames covered with leather and treated with oils and pigments (Zaydan, p. 155).

Fleet readiness also depended on provisions sufficient to meet the needs of the mujāhidūn. Ships commonly carried physicians, Qurʾān reciters, and muezzins to serve the crews during operations at sea. The fleet also included one or more cages of carrier pigeons, used for transmitting messages.

II.3- Naval Bases of the Andalusi War Fleet

The Andalusi coastline, with its long reach, numerous anchorages, and dense pattern of inlets, headlands, and frontier ports (thughūr), offered natural settings where the shore bends inward and

[†] It is an Arabic technical term for processed pine resin (*rātinj*), described in medieval sources as the third type of pine resin that becomes solid after being cooked over fire, which corresponds to what is commonly called colophony (rosin) in English. In the present military context, the term denotes a resinous substance deployed as a cast projectile material alongside naphtha and other heated agents.

ships could ride at anchor away from heavy currents. This maritime topography helped shape a network of naval bases that supported movement, staging, and secure mooring in both war and peace. In the sources these installations are often described as *rābiṭāt* (frontier garrison-forts) and mahāris (coastal watchposts) (Zaydan, p. 155).

Within this network, the bases differed in weight and function. During the Emirate, Seville came to the fore as a key naval base of the Andalusi fleet, largely because of the measures taken to equip and prepare it, especially under ʿAbd al-Raḥmān II al-Awsaṭ. After the first Norman raid in 229 AH/843 CE, the amīr ordered the mobilization of seamen and raiders for the service of the land in return for fixed stipends. Ibn al-Qūṭiyya captures this policy when he notes that the ruler "built ships, relied on the men of the sea from the coasts of al-Andalus, attached them to service, and expanded their provision" (al-Qutiyya., 1994, p. 109), in anticipation of the second raid in 230 AH/844 CE.

His ministers also urged that Seville be enclosed by a protective wall. The task was assigned to ʿAbd Allāh b. Sinān, one of the Umayyads' clients (mawālī), who undertook its construction. Ibn Ḥayyān reports that ʿAbd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb, a minister, wrote to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān II in the wake of Seville's ordeal, pressing him to fortify the city. The amīr, preoccupied at the time with expansion works at the Great Mosque of Córdoba, received a letter in which ʿAbd al-Malik argued that strengthening Seville should take precedence over the mosque addition; the ruler adopted his advice. The wall was built in stone, and watch-posts were placed along the western seaboard facing the Atlantic, garrisoned with fighters and supplied with engines and naphtha. Seville's defenses were further reinforced through towers, among them the Gold Tower near the Guadalquivir outside the walls (al-Qutiyya., 1994, pp. 110-112). In addition to the principal ramparts, secondary walls were erected as defensive belts, internal and external, intended to prevent attackers from striking the main enclosure directly and to slow any advance by limiting access to potential breaches (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, p. 120) ( ). The city also had a gate known as Bāb al-Qaṭāʾiʿ, named in connection with the ships of the Sevillian fleet (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, p. 121). When the Normans returned in 230 AH/844 CE, they were unable to break through these preparations and fortifications; they sustained heavy losses and withdrew in defeat.

In the Caliphal period, al-Mariyya al-Nāṣiriyya (Almería) emerged as one of the most significant bases of the Andalusi fleet. It lies on a broad, deep gulf that shields it from winds, known to this day as the Bay of Almería and still labelled as such on geographical maps. The harbor was particularly advantageous: mountains encircle it from most directions, except for the southern opening and the eastern plain, and much of the terrain is rocky. Al-Idrīsī remarks on this landscape, describing the anchorage as bounded by piled rocks and jagged, hard stones with little soil, as though its ground had been sifted clean of earth and deliberately set with stone (Al-Idrisi, 1983, p. 190). Caliph al-Nāṣir's choice of the frontier port (thaghr) of Almería as a harbor and base for the Andalusi fleets was therefore well judged, not least because of its fortification through walls and citadels (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, pp. 40-42).

To secure and patrol these maritime bases, the Umayyads installed beacons and lookout structures, including signal towers raised on wooden pillars set in the water, reaching about fifty meters above the surface and topped by a square chamber for the observer. These beacons were lit at night to guide shipping and functioned as an early-warning system against the approach of enemy vessels by sea and against threats moving along the coast (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, pp. 40-42). Over time, Almería became the fleet's central base, the point where Andalusi squadrons assembled when launching attacks or undertaking raiding expeditions (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, p. 35).

III. Administration of the Andalusi War Fleet

Under Umayyad rule, the Andalusi war fleet was administered through a finely graded hierarchy, with clearly demarcated maritime posts and responsibilities distributed among the seamen serving aboard the fleet's war craft (Fahmy, 1948).

III.1- Command Hierarchy

At the summit stood the Amīr al-Baḥr, also rendered as Almirante, that is, the commander of the naval fleet. This was treated as a formal state rank and an established administrative office. Ibn Khaldūn notes that the title circulated particularly in the western Islamic lands, the Maghrib and Ifrīqiya, and their dependencies, where the office exercised authority over ship-owners and, in many cases, over those operating under their command. He adds that in their usage the holder was called al-balmund (with an emphatic lām),

a term transferred from the language of the Franks as their technical designation (bn Khaldun, 1979, p. 252). He further explains that the office became especially associated with Ifrīqiya and the Maghrib because both lie along the southern shore of the Mediterranean, facing on the opposite coast Al-Andalus, the Franks, Sicily, and the Byzantines, while along their own southern hinterland extend the Berber lands (bn Khaldun, 1979, p. 252).

The commander's remit was both administrative and operational. He selected personnel and was expected to adjudicate matters with fairness, showing clemency toward the obedient and firmness toward the recalcitrant (Fahmy, 1948). He also bore responsibility for ensuring that stipends were paid in full and without delay. His supervision extended to ship construction and maintenance, including core materials such as timber, iron, and pitch, yet it did not stop there. He was required to secure the best oars, masts, and sails, and the caliph urged him to conduct continual inspections so that the ships remained serviceable and ready for immediate deployment. Constant vigilance was likewise demanded over equipment and stores, including naphtha, ropes, and related supplies, so that deterioration, in any form, would not set in. He was also charged with safeguarding the vessels while in harbor and ensuring secure winter berthing to protect them from damaging winds (Fahmy, 1948).

The sources emphasize that this highest level of command was reserved for men with proven experience in seafaring and in maritime jihād. During the Umayyad Emirate, one prominent figure at the head of naval leadership was Ibn Ḥafṣ ʿUmar b. Shuʿayb al-Suyūṭī, among those whom ʿAbd al-Raḥmān II al-Awsaṭ called upon during the Norman, Majūs raid of 229 AH/844 CE; the amīr relied on him and his men in the management of the Umayyad fleet (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, p. 34). Under ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III, command of the Andalusi fleet was held by Muḥammad b. Rumāḥis, who led it during both the emirate and the caliphate phases and came to be regarded as the general commander of the Andalusi fleets. Alongside Ibn Rumāḥis, other commanders are mentioned, including Aḥmad Muḥammad b. al-Ilyās, Yūnus b. Saʿīd, Ghālib b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, and Suhayl b. Usayd. In the reign of Caliph al-Muntaṣir, the supreme command of al-Andalus by land and sea was entrusted to Ghālib b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Nāṣirī; al-Ḥakam al-Mustanṣir drew on him in

formulating war plans to confront the Norman threat, a point that signals his direction of heavy squadrons and his role in organizing their administration under wartime conditions (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, p. 184).

The record also highlights ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Rumāḥis, who inherited from his father Muḥammad b. Rumāḥis the Upper Police (al-shurṭa al-ʿulyā) together with overarching command of the sea in al-Andalus. He played a major role in jihād engagements against the Majūs (Normans) appearing in the northern sea; they turned back when they encountered the extensive preparedness at Seville. This episode is dated to 366 AH/988 CE, and it is explicitly linked to the authority of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Rumāḥis from Seville (Ibn Hayyan, 1973).

Among the heaviest burdens placed upon the fleet commander was confidential service and information control. He was expected to prevent any leakage of maritime intelligence, taking precautions so that an enemy could not obtain weapons, war matériel, or knowledge of naval tactics from Islamic territory. One report states that the most consequential matters for the Umayyad caliphs were not decided without consultation with three figures: the commander of the army at Zaragoza, capital of the Upper March; the qāḍī of Córdoba, seat of the caliphate and centre of scholarship; and the commander of the fleet at Almería, the general base of the Andalusi fleet. In that formulation, the fleet commander shared in sovereignty itself: the caliph was invoked on land, while the commander was invoked at sea (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, pp. 39-40).

In navigation and sailing operations, the commander relied on indispensable instruments, notably the astrolabe (treated here as a navigational compass) and maps. The fleet's personnel further included the rabbān, the ship's master responsible for putting the raiders to sea and issuing orders at departure (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969, pp. 39-40), and the raqīb (sentry), positioned at the prow to observe sea conditions in peacetime and to monitor enemy movement in wartime.

Financially, the Umayyad state in Al-Andalus set aside a substantial budget to pay those employed in ship construction and maintenance, as well as the men of the naval forces. The salaries of fleet commanders reportedly reached twenty dinars per month, a considerable sum by the standards of the time (Diab, 1973). In

accordance with Maghribi practice, the disbursement of expenditures to soldiers and to fleet personnel took place in the caliph's presence.

Finally, the fleet's departure for jihad was accompanied by formal ceremonial and royal protocol, counted among the most significant public occasions in Andalusi political culture. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Nāṣir is said to have attended these ceremonies on many occasions before the fleet left the coast for a raiding expedition; once the celebration and leave-taking concluded, the ships then put out to sea (bn Khaldun, 1979, p. 254).

III.2- The Role of the Andalusi War Fleet under Umayyad Rule

Even while still in its formative phase, the Andalusi fleet demonstrated tangible strategic value during the Umayyad Emirate. It managed to repel Norman incursions, most notably along the maritime approaches of Seville, and it is also credited with a significant contribution to the conquest of Crete (Qurayṭish) in 212 AH/834 CE. One of its most acclaimed interventions came soon after, when it took part in the conquest of Sicily in 214 AH/836 CE. A naval force led by Aṣbagh b. Wakīl al-Huwārī, known as Farghalūsh, entered Sicilian waters with three hundred ships in a campaign framed as maritime jihād, its immediate objective being to lift the Byzantine pressure on the Aghlabid fleet(Idhari., 1950, p. 134). Arriving as reinforcement for their Aghlabid counterparts, the Andalusi squadron played a decisive role in consolidating Aghlabid footholds on Sicily, an island widely regarded as the key to the Mediterranean.

In the same emirate context, the Andalusi fleet assumed a leading role in recovering the eastern islands, the Balearics, from Byzantine control. Their importance derived from their position east of Valencia. Majorca was the largest of the group, while Minorca was the smallest, and the sea distance between them did not exceed fifty miles (Ibn Hayyan, 1973). In 234 AH/848 CE, Amīr ʿAbd al-Raḥmān II al-Awsaṭ launched an expedition against them with a fleet of three hundred vessels and brought their islands under Muslim authority after their inhabitants violated the treaty concluded with the Muslims and harmed shipping that passed through their waters (Ibn Hayyan, 1973). The people of Majorca and Minorca then sought reconciliation. In 235 AH/849 CE they addressed a petition to the

amīr requesting pardon; he granted it and renewed their covenant (Salim & al-Abbadi, 1969).

B. The Andalusi War Fleet under the Umayyad Caliphate in al-Andalus

Under Caliph ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh, the Andalusi fleet evolved into a central strategic institution, indispensable to the security and stability of the Umayyad polity. This elevation was sharpened by a mounting geopolitical threat landscape shaped by competing interests among the major naval powers of the Mediterranean, including the Byzantines, the Carolingians, the Normans, and the Fatimids (Archibald, 1951) The Fatimid Caliphate represented the most acute danger. Its project, as presented here, aimed at invading al-Andalus, overturning the Umayyad caliphate, and bringing the Islamic Maghrib under Fatimid control on a Shiʿi doctrinal basis. Al-Nāṣir moved to deny the Fatimids any opening for such an operation (Levi-Provencal, 1953), and for that purpose he reinforced the Andalusi war fleet until its units reached two hundred vessels (bn Khaldun, 1979). With this strengthened fleet, he struck at Fatimid holdings across the strait (al-ʿudwa) and along the coasts of Ifrīqiya, and he seized Ceuta in 318 AH/939 CE. In the closing years of his reign, he also repelled renewed Norman raids, particularly from 345 AH/956 CE to 350 AH/961 CE, inflicting heavy losses upon them (bn Khaldun, 1979).

Al-Ḥakam al-Mustanṣir (350–366 AH/961–976 CE) maintained this policy of sustained investment in the fleet to meet the Norman threat. When the Normans resumed their raids against al-Andalus in 355 AH/966 CE, he succeeded in frustrating their attempt (bn Khaldun, 1979, p. 411).

Finally, among the fleet's notable roles in the years preceding the fall of the Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus was the enterprise of Mujāhid al-ʿĀmirī, lord of Dāniya and the eastern islands. In 406 AH/1015 CE he captured Sardinia, founded a city there, and relocated to it with his family. He also adopted the island as a naval base and a centre for his movements toward north-western Italy (Ibn al-Khatib, p. 219).

Conclusion

Based on this study of the Andalusi war fleet under Umayyad rule in Al-Andalus, a set of closely related conclusions emerges:

- From its earliest phase, the Umayyad polity in Al-Andalus was effectively compelled to assume a maritime profile. Geography imposed this orientation, and its relative separation from other Islamic heartlands reinforced it. Within this framework, Almería can be identified as one of the most consequential strategic bases of the Andalusi general fleets. Its position enabled sustained surveillance and protection of the south-eastern seaboard against both Norman pressure and Fatimid threat, which explains why it retained its strategic value throughout the period of Umayyad predominance in Al-Andalus.
- The sustained investment that Umayyad rulers made in the Andalusi war fleet should not be read as an ornamental marker of prosperity, refinement, or prestige. It functioned instead as a defensive strategy central to regime survival and to confronting the external geopolitical dangers that repeatedly pressed upon the Andalusi thughūr.
- The fleet's infrastructural foundations took shape in the Emirate period, in the third century AH/ninth century CE, at the dawn of an identifiable Andalusi naval force. Under the Caliphate it reached its apex in the fourth century AH/tenth century CE, particularly in the reign of Caliph ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Nāṣir, when the fleet became a primary emblem of Umayyad authority and coercive capacity. The most visible signs of this horizontal and vertical expansion were the proliferation of shipyards and arsenals (dūr al-ṣināʿa), the diversification of combat vessels in step with contemporary maritime technology, and the establishment of naval bases able to contain, service, and deploy these units. This naval build-up also coincided with advances in the manufacture and deployment of naval weaponry, the most dangerous of which was sea naphtha, commonly associated in later discourse with "Greek fire."
- During the Emirate, Seville functioned as a genuinely strategic base of the Andalusi fleet, tasked with defending the western coastline facing the Atlantic and with preparing for external aggression, above all the Norman, Viking raids.
- In the Caliphal period, Almería stood out among the strategic bases of the Andalusi general fleets, not only because it guarded the south-eastern coast against Norman incursions and Fatimid pressure, but also because its harbor configuration strengthened its operational utility. Surrounded by mountains on most sides, it provided an

excellent anchorage and became the central base of the fleet, where squadrons assembled for attack and for raiding operations.

- The Andalusi war fleet ultimately became one of the principal institutions of state power. It therefore received close attention in administrative organization, which was marked by precision and by a differentiated distribution of duties within a hierarchical command structure. At its apex stood the Admiral (Amīr al-Baḥr, Almirante), an office that carried high ceremonial distinction as well as authority over decisions of war and peace. The fleet's success in naval engagements is best explained by the elevation of its administration to an operational standard adequate for both defense and offense, achieved through a disciplined and tightly organized command apparatus with clear strategic functions.
- As a Mediterranean actor, the Andalusi fleet matured into a competitive force. It asserted naval dominance over the Balearic Islands, which served as a forward defensive depth for Al-Andalus, and it checked the expansion of the Majūs. One consequence was to compel the Normans, in the days of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and al-Ḥakam al-Mustanṣir, to favor land routes over seaborne raiding in their attacks on Al-Andalus.
- Through its jihad-oriented maritime activity alongside other Islamic fleets, especially the Aghlabid navy, the Andalusi fleet contributed to the conquest of Mediterranean islands and aided in wresting Sicily from Byzantine control.
- Finally, the Andalusi war fleet under Umayyad rule demonstrated a capacity that allowed it to rival major Mediterranean navies, including the Fatimid fleet and leading Christian maritime powers such as the Byzantine and Carolingian forces. In doing so, it strengthened Islamic naval power in the medieval Mediterranean basin, becoming both a source of prestige and a strategic asset that supported the consolidation and expansion of Islamic authority by land and by sea.

References

Al-Hamawi, Y., & Al-Baghdadi, S. a.-D. (1984). *Dictionary of countries.* Beirut: Dar Sadir.

Al-Himyari, M. i.-M. (1927). *Description of the island of al-Andalus: Extracted from The perfumed garden on the account of regions.* E. Levi-Provencal,.

Al-Idrisi, A. A.-S. (1983). *The delight of the one who longs to traverse the horizons: Africa and the island of al-Andalus.* (I. al-Arabi, Ed.) Algeirs: Diwan al-Matbuat al-Jamiiyya.

Al-Istakhri, A. I.-F. (1961). *Routes and realms.* Cairo: United Arab Republic.

Al-Maqqari, A. i.-T. (1968). *The fragrance of perfume: From the branch of al-Andalus.* (I. Abbas, Ed.) Dar Sadir.

al-Maqrizi, T. a.-D. (1997). *Admonitions and reflections on the plans and monuments.* Cairo: Dar Amin.

al-Qutiyya., I. (1994). *The history of the conquest of al-Andalus* . Muʾassasat al-Maʿarif.

Archibald, L. (1951). *Naval and commercial powers in the Mediterranean basin.* Muassasat Franklin lil-Tibaa wa al-Nashr.

bn Khaldun, A. a.-R. (1979). *The Muqaddimah (Vol. 1, in Kitab al-'Ibar wa Diwan al-Mubtada' wa al-Khabar fi Ayyam al-'Arab wa al-'Ajam wa al-Barbar wa man 'asarahum min dhawi al-sultan al-akbar.* Beirut: Muassasat Jamal lil-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr.

Diab, S. (1973). *The policy of Islamic states in the Mediterranean basin.* Cairo: Alam al-Kutub.

Fahmy, A. M. (1948). *Islamic naval organization in the eastern Mediterranean (7th–10th centuries CE).* Dar al-Dawha; Maktabat al-Muhtadin al-Islamiyyin.

Ibn al-Khatib, L. a.-D.-S. (n.d.). *Deeds of the eminent concerning those pledged allegiance before the occupation.*

Ibn Hayyan, I. K.-Q. (1973). *Al-Muqtabas: Reports on the affairs of the people of al-Andalus.* Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi.

Idhari., I. (1950). *The wondrous exposition on the histories of al-Andalus and the Maghrib.* . Dar al-Maarif.

Levi-Provencal, E. (1953). *History of Muslim Spain: The century of the Caliphate of Cordoba.* Maisonneuve.

Mez, A. (1986). *History of Arab civilization during the fourth century AH.* Tunis: al-Muassasa al-Tunisiyya lil-Nashr.

Mounis, H. (2002). *The dawn of al-Andalus: A study of the history of al-Andalus from the Islamic conquest to the establishment of the Umayyad state (711–756 CE).* Beirut: Dar al-Asr al-Hadith; Dar al-Manahil.

Salim, A. a.-A., & al-Abbadi, A. M. (1969). *History of Islamic naval power in the Maghrib and al-Andalus* . Beirut: Dar al-Nahda al-Arabiyya.

Salim, A. a.-A., & al-Abbadi, A. M. (1969). *History of Islamic naval power in the Maghrib and al-Andalus* . Beirut: Dar al-Nahda al-Arabiyya.

Takoush, M. S. (2008). *History of Muslims in al-Andalus, 710–1492 CE (91–897 AH).* Beirut: Dar al-Nafais.

Tarwah, R. N. (2023). *Islamic naval power in al-Andalus from the establishment of the emirate to the end of the caliphate.* Palestine.: Hebron University, .

Zaydan, J. (n.d.). *History of Islamic civilization.* Alhayat Publishing.

Appendices

Figure 2. Sea naphtha weapon, known as Greek fire (Greek Fire).



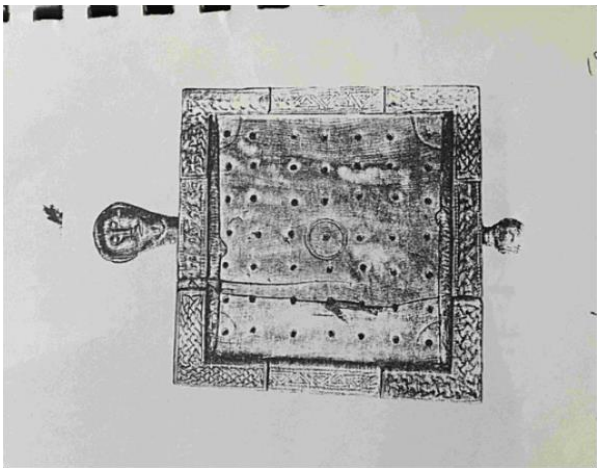
Source: Mark Cartwright, "Greek Fire: The Byzantines' Secret Weapon," published 14 November 2017.

Figure 3. Norman (Viking) warship, image taken from the museum of the Norwegian capital, Oslo (OSLO).
Caption: The Oseberg ship on display at the Viking Ship Museum, Oslo, 30 August 2007.



Source: Wikimedia Commons (own work).
Author: Grzegorz Wisocki.

Figure 5. Camouflage techniques used against the enemy (4th AH/10th century CE).



Source: Magnus Magnasson, "Who Were the Vikings?", UNESCO Courier, no. 12, December 1983.