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## HI-01 The Loves & Controversies of Wallada bint al-Mustakfi

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# Romance in Al-Andalus: The Loves & Controversies of Wallada bint al-Mustakfi

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### Abstract

Wallada bint al-Mustakfi (1001-1091) is best known as a poet from the early High Middle Ages. Living in Islamic Spain, Wallada was the daughter of Muhammad III, a Cordoban ruler. Her poetry often discussed love in the abstract, as well as her specific relationships. Nine of her poems have been preserved, and eight of those nine are about Ibn Zaydún, who is often seen as the greatest love of her life. As the sole heir to her father and as a prominent female writer, Wallada transgressed some cultural and societal norms in a variety of ways. However, she also fulfilled other norms. This poster will consider both how Wallada bint al-Mustakfi deviated from the norms of Islamic Spain. In doing so this poster will analyze the poems that she wrote, while using secondary sources to further contextualize Wallada’s life in the Middle Ages. In considering the life and career of Wallada bint al-Mustakfi, this study demonstrates that the role of medieval European woman encompassed more variety than is commonly presented.

### Thesis & Wallada’s Beginnings

Wallada bint al-Mustakfi was an Andalusian poet who lived from about 1001, although some sources state her birth as 994, until 1091. Wallada was a captivating woman within the context of medieval Spain. Many view her as one of the most independent women of her era. She was a passionate lover, a prominent writer, and the sole heiress to her father. Within the various realms of her life, Wallada bint al-Mustakfi transgressed some cultural and societal norms. She set herself apart from other women at the time due to her status, education, and independence.

Wallada grew up during a tumultuous time for Cordoba, as over a dozen men ruled throughout her childhood. Muhammad III, her father, became the tenth Caliph of Cordoba. He reigned from 1024 until 1025, when the people revolted against him, and he was forced out of the country. He is most well-known due to his daughter’s notoriety. It is commonly thought that princesses of the Umayyad dynasty would spend their adult lives in marital alliances with other nobles. This practice was very common throughout the medieval world, as it served to unite important families. Despite Wallada’s position within the Umayyad, she was not put into this position. And while most women outside of nobility were relegated to domestic roles, Wallada was not subject to this as a member of the ruling elite within Cordoba.

Muhammad III is thought to have died of poisoning at 50 years old shortly after his exile. As his sole child, Wallada inherited all her father’s wealth and properties. This allowed Wallada to live a fairly leisured life full of opportunity. She was a high status, unmarried woman who now had access to her late father’s resources. Her status in her society already set her apart from others, but it also gave her the freedom and autonomy to stand out in the other two subjects that will be explored within this paper – education and independence.

Although Abd al-Rahman III was not a very well-liked leader, very little is known about his role as a father except for that he supported his daughter’s intellectual pursuits. The education that Wallada received from her father included Arabic literature, history, and philosophy. This education provided Wallada with a foundation to build upon as she learned and grew as an intellectual. She learned how to read and began to write poetry of her own. Wallada soon became one of the most prominent figures in the intellectual circles of Cordoba. She was well educated and knew how to effectively discuss ideas and concepts with others, subjects ranging from art to politics.

Wallada’s work as a poet specifically gained her the respect of her peers. This is notable, as the Arabic literary scene was dominated by men. Whenever Wallada would perform her work, all her competition would be men. Nonetheless, Wallada managed to stand out due to her use of free verse, something that was not common in Arabic poetry at the time. She would also boldly open up a poetry salon in her home, where people could come regardless of gender. In this poetry salon, her work, as well as the work of poets whom she mentored, would be read aloud.

Salons during this era were centered around intellectual pursuits, whether that entails discussing politics or writing poetry. Wallada’s status gave her the ability to pursue creativity and intellectual exercises. She surrounded herself with poets, artists, and scholars who would help her compose her own verse. It is unlikely that a woman of a lower class would have had the ability to cement herself as such a core part of literary and intellectual life in Cordoba, so it is important to note the way her status intersects with her poetry.

### Conclusion

Within these different spheres of life, Wallada bint al-Mustakfi shows why she is a woman still worth studying today. She never hesitated to stand out from her contemporaries as she defined religious norms, competed against male poets, was open about her relationships, and fostered intellectual discussions in Cordoba. She challenged the norms that were thrust upon her regarding her limitations as a woman in medieval society.

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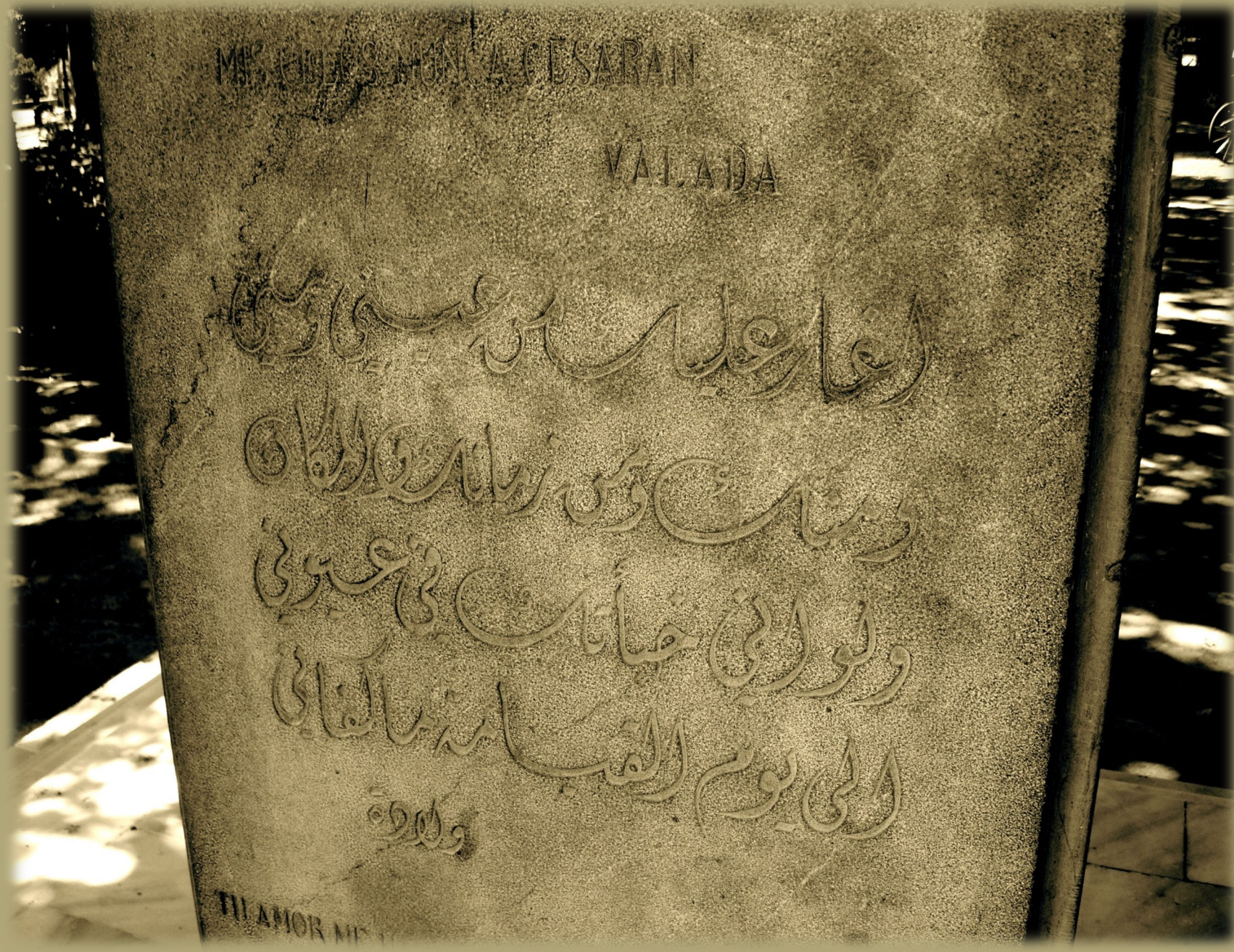
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A modern painting of Wallada by Jose Luis Munoz Luque.



Taken in Cordoba, Spain.

### Poetic Love

Her reputation as a poet is what led to her romance with Ibn Zaydun, a fellow poet who was also highly respected within the literary circles of the time. Ibn Zaydun was widely regarded as “the finest writer of classical Arabic poetry in Andalusia.” The two began their affair in 1031 while Ibn Zaydun was an ambassador for the ruler of Cordoba at the time, Abu al-Hazm. Wallada’s connection to Ibn Zaydun may be one of the major reasons why her life was so well-documented. Due to their romance, and eventual heartbreak, we have poems that the two wrote to one another. Additionally, the poems written by Wallada that have been preserved are part of a back and forth she had with Ibn Zaydun through verse. These works help to immortalize the life of Wallada bint al-Mustakfi.

In Ibn Zaydun’s aptly titled “Poem to Wallada” he describes how “[his] longing thoughts recall thee here.” It is quite apparent through this piece that he felt very passionately towards her. This piece is an interesting one to look at because it seems to document how Ibn Zaydun felt about Wallada even after the two are broken off their romance. Ibn Zaydun goes on to write “Had death come ere we parted, it had been / The best of all days.“ He ends the poem with the line “Thou hast forgotten but I still adore!“ Wallada had an impact so profound on one of the most renowned Arabic poets, that he continued to pine for what they once had.

Meanwhile in Wallada’s own poetry, she seemed to reflect upon the romance quite differently. In one piece, she does seem to express a similar pining for Ibn Zaydun. She writes “Time passes, yet I see no end to your long absence, / Nor does patience free me from the bondage of yearning.” This comes across like Ibn Zayndun’s poetry, in which he obviously still has love for me. This poem in particular is a response to Ibn Zaydun complaining that the two meet too infrequently, and when they do get together it is quite brief.

Another subject that comes up in Wallada’s poems for her former lover mentions her anger at Ibn Zaydun’s interest in her maid. The end of the romance between the two remains contested, as one must piece it together through their poetic correspondence. Historians have suggested class differences, as well as unfaithfulness on the part of both partners as possibilities. Based upon this poem, it is likely that there was infidelity on Ibn Zaydun’s part. Wallada writes ”If you were just in keeping our pact of love, / You would not love my slave-maid.” These lines are rather damning for Ibn Zaydun, and it shows a lot of independence on Wallada’s part to even put this out there to be read. It is also quite possible that this affair did not exist, as it was a common trope in Arabic poetry to mention unfaithfulness and Black lovers.

### Independence

Regardless of why exactly the two split, Wallada shows through her poetry that she does not need a partner to be happy. She also does not hesitate to tear down her former lover, calling him a Sodomite, liar, cuckold, pimp, adulterer, and thief. She leaves Ibn Zaydun and continues on with her life, eventually engaging in another romance with a rival of his. Although Wallada would spend the rest of her life with that partner, she would never be formally married, which may be another reflection of her independence.

It is quite apparent that Wallada’s poetry depicts the way in which she viewed herself in society. She was fiercely independent and took every opportunity to reinforce that. She was known as someone who would not hesitate to criticize the religious and political establishment within her society. Wallada’s poetry often reflected her experience as a woman within a patriarchal society. She used her poetry to speak about her own autonomy and independence. She even mentions her affairs with both men and women within her poetry, which was sure to ruffle the feathers of the establishment.

The most notable and direct case of Wallada using her poetry to reflect her stubborn independence was when she was expected to veil herself. A Cordoba judge called Wallada a harlot due to her way of dress and her lack of a veil. Her response to these attacks was to embroider with robes with poetic verse that read: “Forsooth, I allow my lover to touch my cheek / And bestow my kiss on whim who craves it!” - the other side of her robe read “I am, by God, fit for higher positions / And am going my way, with pride!”