

The manufacture of household utensils in Andalusia in the Middle Ages

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Abstract:

This research paper examines the manufacture of household utensils in Andalusia during the Middle Ages. This industry was one of the arts that underwent significant development in the Middle Ages, and included various tools made from different materials, including gold, silver, glass and pottery. These artefacts reflect the life of Andalusian society at that time. The artistic craftsmanship of Andalusian artisans highlights their ability to produce all the necessary tools, as evidenced by several examples of these vessels that are still preserved today in various European museums.

Keywords: Utensils; Andalusia; Gold; Ceramics; Glass.

Introduction

Andalusia was rich in natural resources, making it one of the richest regions in the Arab-Islamic world. These resources, including precious metals, contributed to the advancement of various aspects of life, including industry. The manufacture of household utensils in Andalusia was rich and varied in terms of materials, drawing on Eastern origins and Moroccan artistic techniques. Over time, local craftsmen innovated by introducing unique metalwork with technical and decorative improvements, resulting in a sophisticated Andalusian production that covered all the daily needs of society.

The interest of the Andalusian society in this craft was not limited to the satisfaction of daily needs, but also left its mark on the cultural landscape¹. This led to the creation of

¹- Moreno, Manuel Gómez: Islamic Art in Spain from the Islamic Conquest of Andalusia to the End of the Almoravid Era*, translated by Dr. Lutfi Abd al-Badi and Dr. Sayyid Abdul Aziz Salem, Shabab University Foundation, pp. 370-373.
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exquisitely decorated utensils, leaving numerous examples of medieval Andalusian artefacts that illustrate the precision of their craftsmanship and their intrinsic value.

1. Gold and Silver

Gold is considered one of the precious metals that was abundant in the city of Laredo, where it was found in the form of pure gold dust². Ibn Ghalib also mentioned the presence of rich alluvial gold in the city of Lisbon³. In addition, there is a river in the Bira region that originates from Mount Shlair and collects gold particles⁴. Gold was also discovered along the Tagus River⁵, where pure gold was abundant⁶. The people of Andalusia would travel there in winter to collect alluvial gold, which was washed ashore by the sea during storms onto the gravel of the river valley. This gold was then transported along the river bed to the banks of the Tagus. Al-Idrisi considered this phenomenon to be one of the wonders of the world, having witnessed it himself⁷.

In the city of Granada, gold was extracted from the Colum River⁸, which collected pure gold dust along its course⁹. Gold was also extracted from the Shenil River, famous for its red gold, considered to be the finest of its kind¹⁰.

The multiple locations of gold deposits suggest that its abundance and availability in large quantities led to its multiple uses as a raw material in various industries, especially in the production of Andalusian tools and household utensils, as will be described below.

The main questions that arise from this theme are What were the raw materials used to make Andalusian utensils? And how were they made?

I. Raw materials for Andalusian pottery

²- Al-Bakri, Abu Ubaid: *The Paths and Kingdoms*, edited by Adrian van Leuwen and Andre Verre, Arab Book House, 1992, p. 897; Al-Hamiri, Muhammad ibn Abdul Muna'im: *The Fragrant Garden in the News of the Regions*, edited by Ihsan Abbas, Lebanon Library, 1975, 1st ed., p. 507.

³- Ibn Ghalib, Muhammad ibn Ayyub al-Gharnati: Excerpt from the *Book of Joys of Souls about the Regions and Cities of Andalusia*, edited by Lutfi Abd al-Badi, *Journal of the Arab Manuscripts Institute*, p. 291.

⁴- Ibn Ghalib: *Op. cit.*, p. 283.

⁵- River Tajo: A great river that runs through Toledo, the capital of Andalusia, originating from the lands of the Galicians and flowing into the Roman Sea, noted as one of the rivers of the world; Al-Hamiri: *Op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁶- Al-Zuhri, Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr: *Geography*, edited by Muhammad Haj Sadiq, *Library of Religious Culture*, Port Said, p. 85.

⁷- Al-Idrisi, Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Muhammad: *The Delight of Those Who Long to Traverse the Horizons*, *Library of Religious Culture*, Cairo, 1422 AH (2002 CE), p. 547.

⁸- Qulum: One of the rivers of Granada that divides the city into two parts: one flowing through the lower part and the other through the upper part, running through some of its baths and grinding mills; Al-Hamiri: *Op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁹- Al-Hamiri: *Op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁰- Al-Zuhri: *Op. cit.*, p. 95.

Andalusia was famous for its high-quality metal industry, especially in the manufacture of utensils. This was one of the cultural achievements of the Middle Ages. The production of these tools reached a level of sophistication and excellence that allowed artisans to create a wide variety of utensils to meet the needs and desires of the population. Examples include pots, jars, bowls, jugs, cups, plates, bowls and bottles. The raw materials for these utensils were varied and included:

2. Silver

Silver is one of the most famous metals in Andalusia, mined in numerous mines, the most important being the Elbira mine¹¹, from which silver was exported all over the world¹². This metal is also found in various regions of Andalusia, especially in the city of Cordoba. Al-Bakri confirmed this by saying: “In the region of Kertish, which is part of Cordoba, there is a remarkable silver mine¹³”. Al-Qazwini also mentioned, “Silver is found in the mountains of Córdoba¹⁴”. There are also silver deposits in the area of Al-Marj, near the town of Franjulish¹⁵, and in the mountains of Hama in Gana¹⁶. Silver is also abundant in the Tadmur region¹⁷ and has been found in significant quantities near Murcia¹⁸.

3. Glass Stone

Glass stone is one of the softer stones, with some types being sandy. It comes in many colours, including white, which is a type of crystal and is considered the finest type of glass, as well as red, green and yellow. Its characteristic is that it can take any dye or colour that is applied to it. It also dissolves quickly in fire and can quickly return to a solid state when exposed to cold air. Crystal is also classified as a type of glass¹⁹. The raw material for making glass can be found in several Andalusian towns, such as

¹¹- Ibn Ghalib: Op. cit., p. 283.

¹²- Al-Qazwini, Zakariya ibn Muhammad ibn Mahmud: The Remains of the Lands and the News of the People, Dar Sader, Beirut, p. 502.

¹³- Al-Bakri: Op. cit. p. 898.

¹⁴- Al-Qazwini: Op. cit., p. 552.

¹⁵- Al-Idrisi: The Delight of Those Who Long to Traverse the Horizons, Vol. 2, p. 574; Al-Hamiri: Op. cit., p. 143.

¹⁶- Al-Bakri: Op. cit., p. 898; Al-Maqri, Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Tlemceni: The Fragrance of the Good from the Branch of the Moist Andalusia, Dar Sader, Beirut, Vol. 1, p. 143.

¹⁷- Al-Bakri: The Paths and Kingdoms, p. 898; Ibn Ghalib: Op. cit., p. 285.

¹⁸- Al-Hamiri: Op. cit., p. 539.

¹⁹- Ibn al-Bitar, Dia al-Din Abu Muhammad Abdullah ibn Ahmad al-Andalusi al-Malaqi: The Comprehensive Book of Medicinal and Food Substances, Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., Vol. 2, pp. 460-461.

Tortosa²⁰. Crystal stone was also abundant in Andalusia, particularly in the Shajiran Mountains, east of Qabra²¹, and in the Lorqa region, part of Tadmur²².

4. Pottery

Pottery refers to any object made from clay and fired in a kiln. It predates ceramics²³, which are also made from clay but are glazed with a layer of molten glass. With the discovery of glazing, pottery and ceramics evolved together in the same realm²⁴.

II. The production and forms of Andalusian utensils

The Andalusians paid a great deal of attention to the manufacture and design of their utensils, which represented aspects of their civilisation and showed the taste of the artist and the characteristics of the time. They were aware of both the social and economic dimensions of their lives, and they excelled in the production of household utensils, which took the following forms

1. Gold and silver utensils

Despite the previous references to the presence of precious metals in various regions, historical accounts provide little information on the methods of making gold and silver utensils. Most references are scarce, but they confirm that gold and silver vessels were used extensively in the daily life of Andalusian society.

In the 3rd century AD (9th century CE), Ziryab, who arrived in Andalusia, was the first to advise the natives to use utensils made of fine glass instead of gold and silver²⁵. This suggests that these utensils included a variety of household items for drinking and eating, represented by cups, plates, jugs and more.

Poets highlighted the extravagance of certain luxury items, such as silver plates. For example, Ibn Ammar describes a plate in his house by saying:²⁶

> “And a heaven of wealth has poured out

²⁰- Al-Idrisi: Op. cit.. Vol. 2, pp. 576-577.

²¹- Al-Bakri: Op. cit., p. 897; Al-Maqri: Op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 142.

²²- Ibn Ghalib Op. cit.p. 308.

²³- Al-Azdi, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Durayd: The Collection of Language, edited by Ramzi Munir Baalbaki, Dar al-Ilm lil-Malayin, Beirut, 1987, 1st ed., Vol. 1, p. 595.

²⁴- Marzouk, Abdul Aziz: Islamic Decorative Arts in Morocco and Andalusia, Dar al-Thaqafa, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 100.

²⁵- Al-Maqri: Op. cit., Vol. 3, p. 128.

²⁶- Ibn Ammar al-Andalusi, Muhammad: The Diwan of Muhammad ibn Ammar*, edited by Salah Khalis, Al-Huda Press, Baghdad, 1957, unnumbered edition, p. 229.

- > Gold into a bowl of silver,
- > Around which eyes are captivated
- > By the beauty of the flowers from the hands”.

He speaks of a vessel made of gold, with a silver base, resembling a flower held in the hand to be presented to all who see it, making it an eye-catcher and forcing the observer to admire its exquisite craftsmanship.

Meanwhile, the palaces built by the Banu Dhi Nun in Toledo (400-478 AH / 1009-1085 CE) further illustrate this attention to luxurious design and craftsmanship²⁷.

Archaeological studies have revealed some Andalusian artefacts from the year 394 AH, including several silver utensils, the most notable of which is a silver vial used to store liquid perfumes. The vial has a lid with a short chain attached to a ring attached to the body of the vial. The neck of the vial is decorated with prominent ornaments, intricate arches, a wavy band and leaf motifs. It was discovered in the city of Córdoba and is kept in the Archaeological Museum of Córdoba²⁸. This is its shape²⁹:



2. Glassware

The production of glassware was one of the industries introduced to Andalusia by the Moors, and was greatly promoted by Abbas ibn Firnas, who was the first to develop glassmaking techniques using stone and rock crystal³⁰. As a result, glass production spread to various Andalusian towns, especially after Ziryab advised the locals to use

²⁷- Ibn Abd Allah Anan, Muhammad: *The Islamic State in Andalusia*, 4th edition, Al-Khanji Library, Cairo, 1417 AH (1997 CE), vol. 2, p. 94.

²⁸- Moreno, Manuel: *op. cit.*, p. 402.

²⁹- Abdul Aziz Salem: *Córdoba, Capital of the Caliphate*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 160.

³⁰- Ibn Said al-Maghribi: *Morocco in the Decoration of Morocco*, edited by Shawqi Dayf, Dar al-Ma'arif, Cairo, 4th ed., vol. 1, p. 333.

glass vessels instead of gold and silver ones³¹. This advice contributed to the growth and development of this industry.

Al-Saqti³² discussed some of the stages involved in the production of glass before it reached its final form, mentioning the existence of cooling ovens where glass had to be left for a whole day and night. He warned against the careless practices of some glassmakers who removed the glass from the annealing oven before the required time, causing it to crack³².

The glass industry flourished and craftsmen excelled in the production of glass utensils and decorative items. Examples include jars, bowls, vials, jugs and bottles, which were particularly famous in Cordoba³³. The artisans of Almería also specialised in the production of glass vessels³⁴, while both Málaga and Murcia became famous for their glass-making traditions³⁵.

This industry was supervised by the muhtasib (market inspector), who forbade glassmakers to place firewood near the furnace to prevent accidental fires that could harm people and nearby houses³⁶.

Some examples of this industry are still preserved in various Spanish museums, dating back to the time of the Caliphate and demonstrating a variety of decorative styles and manufacturing techniques. In Elbira there are spherical glass bottles, and in Zahra there are pear-shaped and cylindrical ones. One of the vials from Elbira is characterised by its wheat colour, while the long neck of one of the vials from the city of Zahra is decorated with circles in the upper part and various circular patterns in groups made using moulds³⁷.

In addition, a collection of glass utensils made using moulds was found in the town of Zahra. These include uncoloured bowls, although in rare cases they can be found in a wheat or blue colour with geometric decorations made by moulding³⁸. Excavations at

³¹- Al-Maqri: Op. cit., vol. 3, p. 128.

³²- Al-Saqti, Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad: *On the Ethics of the Market Inspector*, edited by Hassan al-Zain, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 83.

³³- Moreno: Op. cit., pp. 409-411.

³⁴- Samia Mustafa Mas'ad: *Economic and Social Life in the Granada Region during the Eras of the Almoravids and Almohads*, Library of Religious Culture, Cairo, 1423 AH (2003 CE), 1st edition, p. 137.

³⁵- Al-Maqri: Op. Cit. vol. 1, p. 201; Izz al-Din Musa: *Economic Activity in Islamic Morocco during the 6th Century AH**, Dar al-Shorouk, Beirut, Cairo, 1403 AH (1983 CE), 1st edition, p. 254.

³⁶- Ibn Abd al-Ra'uf, Ahmad ibn Abdullah: *On the Ethics of the Market Inspector*, published as part of three Andalusian treatises, edited by Levi-Provençal, Scientific Institute of French Oriental Archaeology, Cairo, 1955 CE, p. 112.

³⁷- Moreno: Op. Cit. p. 410.

³⁸- Moreno: Op. Cit. p. 410.

Zahra yielded examples of glass utensils, including a vessel decorated with designs similar to the triangular style of Samarra, as shown in Figure 1³⁹.



And two glass vessels, each decorated with circular motifs, as shown in figure 2⁴⁰.



3. Earthenware and ceramics

Some Andalusian cities excelled in the production of pottery, and in the city of Madrid pottery was one of the most important industries, where the earth was used to make pots for cooking⁴¹. The quality of these pots was such that they could withstand prolonged exposure to fire without breaking. The town of Andarash, in Elvira, was famous for the quality of its earthenware⁴². Córdoba also became famous for its production of metal artefacts such as pots, basins, cups and jugs⁴³.

The pottery industry flourished, resulting in the creation of various artefacts. Artisans succeeded in developing a type of pottery glazed with gold, and Malaga became

³⁹- Marzouk, Abdul Aziz: Op. Cit. p. 192.

⁴⁰- Marzouk, Abdul Aziz: Op. Cit. p. 192.

⁴¹- Al-Hamiri: Op. cit. p. 523.

⁴²- Al-Bakr, Khalid ibn Abdul Karim: Economic Activity in Andalusia during the Emirate Period. King Abdulaziz Public Library, Riyadh, 1414 AH (1993 CE), 1st edition, p. 212.

⁴³- Samia Mustafa: Op. Cit. p. 138.

famous for this production, which was exported abroad. They also produced plates made of ceramic with a metallic sheen, decorated with various plant motifs⁴⁴. The artisans of the city of Qala'at Ayyub demonstrated their skills by using gilded earthenware to make household objects, which were also exported⁴⁵. Granada was an important centre for this industry, where a pottery workshop known as the “Ribd of the Potters” was established⁴⁶.

These ceramic utensils were renowned for their variety of shapes and decorative techniques. The larger vessels, known as “habb” or “aziyar”, were decorated with striking moulds. Ceramic remains from the sites of Zahra, Elbira and Córdoba indicate the existence of three types of ceramics during the Caliphate period: popular, glazed and gilded ceramics⁴⁷.

The popular pottery, widely used by the general public, can be divided into two types: the first is simple and without decoration, while the second has simple decorations painted directly on the surface of the vessels in various colours, often depicting geometric designs such as circles and diamonds. As for the glazed pottery, large quantities of different shapes and colours have been found, including conical jars, pots with four decorative handles, pitchers of various shapes, jugs, bowls and conical cups painted in yellow and green. There are also jars and plates with white decoration on a red background, with designs of circles⁴⁸, diamonds, dots and plant stems, as well as plates and bowls decorated with animal and human figures and beautifully stylised Kufic inscriptions. It was common for glazed plates to be decorated in yellow with black designs⁴⁹.

III. Uses of Andalusian utensils

1. Domestic use

Unlike modern societies, which typically use pottery for decoration and rarely for everyday use, the people of Andalusia produced pottery for various domestic purposes, such as storing food and liquids, cooking, and more. Ibn Razin al-Tujibi, in his book “Fadālat al-Khwan” (The Delicacies of Food and Colours), which focuses on the culinary arts, discussed the earthenware, glass and gold utensils used in

⁴⁴- Al-Hamiri: Op. cit. p. 469.

⁴⁵- Samia Mustafa: Op. cit. p. 138.

⁴⁶- Marzouk, Abdul Aziz: Op. cit., p. 100.

⁴⁷- Moreno: op. cit., pp. 370-372, 382.

⁴⁸- Abdul Aziz Salem: Cordoba, Capital of the Caliphate, vol. 2, p. 150.

⁴⁹- Moreno: Op. cit., pp. 371-372.

Andalusian cuisine. For example, he favoured the use of silverware for frying certain foods. The glazed tagine was used to roast meat and to prepare some of the famous Andalusian dishes called “sanhaji”. Large fish such as shuli, shabl and manani were best cooked in glazed earthenware tagines, which were best suited to them. Cheese was preferably cooked in earthenware and glass vessels⁵⁰.

The Andalusian community also used special containers to preserve their food, the material of which varied according to the type of food to be stored. Cheese and dairy products were kept in earthenware jars, while pickles were kept in glass jars⁵¹.

2. Use in preserving beauty and perfume products

The Andalusian population placed great importance on personal adornment and were concerned with maintaining their appearance. They used various types of cosmetic and perfumery products, with a wide range of beauty products available in medieval Andalusia, including perfumed oils, some in liquid form and others as incense. One well-known perfume was a type of oil called “al-ghaliya”, which was used exclusively by the wealthy classes of society, such as rulers, caliphs and princes. This perfume was made and stored in vessels of pure gold⁵².

Various fragrant oils, such as rose and violet oils, were kept in special glass bottles with short, wide mouths⁵³. In addition, several aromatic waters, including rose water, sandalwood, camphor and clove water, were commonly used by the Andalusians. These were sprayed on clothing, bedding, bodies, faces and hair and were used by both men and women. Given their need for such perfumes, they were careful to preserve their fragrance, and required that these liquids be kept in tightly sealed glass containers, which effectively preserved them and prevented spoilage⁵⁴.

The discovery of several containers for perfumes and beauty products reflects this interest. The availability of metals and raw materials, such as gold, silver, glass and pottery, gave the Andalusian community the opportunity to demonstrate their expertise

⁵⁰- Ibn Ruzain al-Tajibi, Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr: *The Delights of the Table in Delicious Foods and Colours*, Institute for Historical Studies of Bezhaki, Tehran, Iran, 1388 AH (1967 AD), pp. 31, 193, 197, 212.

⁵¹- Al-Tajibi: *op. cit.*, pp. 218-261.

⁵²- al-Nuwairi, Shihab al-Din Ahmad: *The End of the Journey in the Arts of Literature*, edited by Dr Mufid Qumayha, Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, Beirut, Lebanon, 1424 AH (2004 AD), 1st edition, vol. 12, p. 29.

⁵³- Al-Jinabi, Kazim Qais: *Perfume among the Arabs: A Historical and Intellectual Study*, Al-Intishar Al-Arabi, Beirut, Lebanon, 2015 AD, 1st ed., p. 135.

⁵⁴- Al-Tughni, Abu Ubaid Allah Muhammad ibn Malik: *The Flower of the Garden and the Amusement of the Minds*, edited by Muhammad Mawlood Khalaf al-Mashhadani, Revival of the Scientific Arab Heritage, Damascus, Syria, 1422 AH (2001 AD), 2nd edition, p. 182.

and craftsmanship in making bottles, incense burners, boxes and carving these aromatic containers. One of the most remarkable artefacts is a silver bottle used to store liquid perfumes. It has a lid with a short chain attached to a ring attached to the body of the bottle. It was discovered in Cordoba along with silver coins dating from 394 AH (1003 CE) and is kept in the Archaeological Museum of Cordoba⁵⁵.

Conclusion

At the end of this research we have reached the following conclusions:

The abundant availability of metals in Andalusia contributed significantly to artisanal creativity, allowing craftsmen to skilfully exploit these metals to produce a wide range of utensils that had a significant impact on daily life.

The Andalusians excelled in the production of many household items, including pots, jars, cups and plates. This unique industry was characterised by precision and durability, and some of its pieces are still preserved in various European museums.

Andalusian utensils were used for a wide variety of purposes, including cooking and food storage, each with its own specific type of vessel. They were also used to preserve medicines and ointments, and each type of medicine required a specific vessel to preserve it.

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⁵⁵- Moreno, Manuel: op. cit., p. 402.

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