# Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies

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Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute

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- **Dr. Yannis Stivachtis**, Director, Center for European & Mediterranean Affairs and Associate Professor, Jean Monnet Chair & Director of International Studies Program, Virginia Tech –

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- **Dr. Yannis Stivachtis**, Director, Center for European & Mediterranean Affairs and Associate Professor, Jean Monnet Chair & Director of International Studies Program, Virginia Tech – Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, USA.

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# The Correspondence of *Ḥājib* Ibn Tafrājīn with King Peter IV of Aragon: A Collection of Medieval Autographs in the Hafsid Chancery of Tunis[1]

*By Mercè Viladrich[*] & Anass Benmokhtar[±]*

*This study examines the Hafsid ḥājib Ibn Tafrājīn (d. 765/1364) and his relations with the Catalan-Aragonese king Peter IV of Aragon (Pere the Ceremonious), with a focus on his innovative use of a personal autograph in official correspondence. Unlike the traditional formula of ʿalāma used in by the Hafsid sultans, Ibn Tafrājīn personally signed his letters, representing a notable departure from established protocol and thereby signaling his direct access to sovereign authority. A close reading of his correspondence sheds light on the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Tunis and Barcelona, through the arrival of an alleged consul at the Tunis court. The document CA 139 illustrates other topics and motivations, such as the reliance on commercial networks and resident merchants, suggesting Ibn Tafrājīn's efforts to anticipate the normalization of diplomatic ties in the following decade. Moreover, it implicitly reflects both internal challenges to legitimacy and external pressures from the Marinid threat. Finally, the analysis connects CA 139 to a key moment in the attempts to consolidate the power of Ibn Tafrājīn: the appointment of Ibn Khaldūn as ṣāḥib al-ʿalāma at the court of sultan Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm II.*

## Introduction

The Archive of the Crown of Aragon (hereafter ACA) preserves more than two hundred Arabic documents written by the chanceries of Granada, Morocco, Tilimsān, Ifrīqiya, and Egypt during the Late Middle Ages. These documents are letters addressed to the sovereigns of the Catalan-Aragonese dynasty, or to members of their administrative and diplomatic entourage. Referred to collectively as the "Arabic Letters" (*Cartes Àrabs,* hereafter CA),[2] they constitute one of the largest collections of Arabic medieval documents preserved in a Mediterranean archive. Far from being isolated exchanges, these texts document a continuous network of political negotiation and commercial interdependence between the Catalan-Aragonese Crown and the Mediterranean sultanates. While the recent inscription of the corpus on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register serves to highlight its global cultural value, it remains substantially underexplored.[3] Originally edited and translated into

[*]Professor, University of Barcelona, Spain.
[±]Associate Professor, University of Barcelona, Spain.
[1]Study developed within the framework of the project: CAIMMed, *"The Crown of Aragon, Islam, and the Medieval Mediterranean World"*, Generalitat de Catalunya (2017 SGR 1092).
[2]Digital images provided through the Spanish Ministry of Culture (PARES): https://pares.mcu.es/ParesBusquedas20/catalogo/description/120536
[3]UNESCO Memory of the World Register: https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/register2025?hub=1081

Spanish in 1940 by Alarcón and García de Linares, some parts have been the subject of a recent exhaustive study.[4]

Concerning Ifrīqiya,[5] the collection contains approximately 30 documents, spanning between the years 1277 and 1362, and covering a special period of severe political instability within the Hafsid state through five letters, namely CA 139, 141, 142, 143, and 144. These letters are dated between *shawwāl* 751 / December 1350 and *ṣafar* 764 / November 1362, during the caliphate of Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm II (r. 751/1350–771/1369) and were sent to king Peter IV (r. 1336–1387). The five of them share two notable features: they were issued by the *ḥājib* ʿAbd Allāh ibn Aḥmad ibn Tafrājīn (d. 765/ 1364),[6] and they bear the same autograph. One of the central objectives of this study is to examine the use of autograph signatures in these letters. Through this correspondence we can better understand the role of the *ḥājib* as a formal political player and the situation of the Hafsid state. Broadly, CA 139 reveals Ibn Tafrājīn's intention to establish contact with Barcelona to negotiate a peace treaty, which a decade later was finally established in 1360 (CA 140 bis). The clauses of the implementation of the agreement were ratified in CA 141, but concerns were raised in CA 142 over some violations of the peace committed by some merchants, and subsequent claims, were vocalized through CA 143 and CA 144. A further objective of this article is to offer a detailed analysis of document CA 139,[7] the earliest of the series, which hints to an important pre-emptive intent of re-establishing political relations with Peter IV and functioned as a strategic instrument of political legitimation for its issuer, both internally within the Hafsid state and externally in the arena of Mediterranean diplomacy.

The document CA 139 was edited and translated into Spanish by Alarcón without identifying its sender, probably since the validation and authentication sign on it departs significantly from the traditional ones used by the Hafsid Chancery.[8] In

[4]M. de Alarcón and R. García de Linares, *Los documentos árabes diplomáticos del Archivo de la Corona de Aragón* (Madrid, 1940). On the Nasrid sultanate, see A. Labarta, *De la Alhambra a Barcelona. Los documentos nazaríes del Archivo de la Corona de Aragón. Vol. 1. Estudio* (A. Labarta, Ed.). Academia.edu. 2021.

[5]On the Hafsid dynasty, see J. M. Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period* (Cambridge University Press, 1987) 118-134; R. Rouighi, "Ḥafṣids," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE,* ed. K. Fleet et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2020). Ibn Khaldūn, *Histoire des Berbères et des dynasties musulmanes de l'Afrique septentrionale*, trad. W. MacGuckin de Slane, 4 vols. (Alger: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1852–1856), 2: 286-481; 3: 1-124.

[6]On the ethnonym Tafrājīn, see O. Ould-Braham, "Tafrāǧīn: Toponyme ou ethnonyme?" *Études et Documents Berbères* 39–40 (2018): 183–188. For ʿAbd 'Allāh ibn 'Aḥmad Ibn Tafrājīn and his family, see Ibn Khaldūn, *Histoire des Berbéres* 1: 260; 2: 286-481; 3: 9-37; 41-78. Ibn Tafrājīn activities are also refered in the chapter dedicated to de Marinids, in Ibn Khaldūn, *Histoire des Berbéres*, 4: 206-211. Also R. Brunschvig, *La Berbérie orientale sous les Ḥafṣides: Des origines à la fin du XVe siècle*, 2 vols., (Institut d'Études Orientales d'Alger; Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1940–1947), vol. 1: 155-156; 171-172, 174-182, vol. 2: 20, 38-40, 43, 51-60, 172, 181, 301, 339, 386, 410, 426, 432; S. Garnier, "Ibn Tāfrājīn," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); S. Garnier, *Histoires hafsides: Pouvoir et idéologie*. Leiden: Brill, 2022: 301-302.

[7]A. Torra, "Las relaciones diplomáticas entre la Corona de Aragón y los países musulmanes (siglos XIII–XV): Las fuentes documentales del Archivo de la Corona de Aragón." In *El perfume de la amistad: Correspondencia diplomática árabe en archivos españoles*, 13–39. Barcelona: 2009: 13-37.

[8]A re-edition of the Arabic text and Catalan translation has recently been made by M. Viladrich, followed with an study by R. Salicrú, in "Carta de la Cancelleria de Tunis a Pere el Cerimoniós: Les relacions

Section 1 we review the methods of the Hafsid Chancery, with particular attention to its distinctive *mise-en-page*, and the use of the authentication sign or *ʿalāma*. The documents preserved in the ACA illustrate how the Hafsid *ʿalāma* gradually evolved toward a more personalized form, in which the sultan's own name could be used—probably written by a chancery official—. Our second axis (Section 2) deals with the fact that the *ḥājib* Ibn Tafrājīn replaced the use of the traditional *ʿalāma* with a new practice, that of his own personal signature, and made extensive use of it in his correspondence with Peter IV. This provides an exceptional collection of medieval autographs that kept evolving in style over the years. It should be stressed that this substitution was a consequence of Ibn Tafrājīn's assertion of power and appropriation of the authority to validate orders. It was not a routine administrative change but a deliberate symbolic act**,** transforming a ruler's emblem into a personal instrument of political power. This is discussed in Section 3 as we trace the rise of the *ḥājib* Ibn Tafrājīn to the apex of the Hafsid state. In Section 4, we provide an analysis of the contents of CA 139, issued shortly after Ibn Tafrājīn rise (in *jumādā* I 751 / July 1350). While Ibn Tafrājīn and Peter IV have had prior contacts, it nonetheless marks the formal opening of diplomatic relations during Ibn Tafrājīn's tenure. The letter displays carefully crafted rhetoric designed both to consolidate the ruler's internal legitimacy and to secure recognition from the Catalan-Aragonese Crown. Finally, in Section 5 we point out that letter CA 139 was written while the historian Ibn Khaldūn was a member of Hafsid Chancery (in 751/1350), although firm evidence of his involvement on its elaboration cannot be established. Although Ibn Khaldūn may not have been the direct author, his proximity to the document's production suggests possible participation, intellectual consultation, or at least a shared cultural and intellectual framework. This context enriches the reading of CA 139, by situating it within the historian's intellectual milieu.

To frame the present study, it is first necessary to review several key aspects of the relations between the Hafsids and the Catalan-Aragonese Crown in the mid-fourteenth century. Although a substantial body of historiography has been devoted to this period, our attention here is limited to a selection of works, ranging from several classical studies of the last century to more recent publications dealing, specifically, with the relations between Tunis and Barcelona. The most useful works are those of Giménez Soler (1909), Brunschvig (1936, 1940-1947), Charles Dufourcq (1946, 1952, 1966), Udina Martorell (1980), Mutgé (1988a, 1988b), López Pérez (1995, 1997) and the most recent Garnier (2022). However, within this historiographical landscape, the years of Ibn Tafrājīn's diplomatic activity toward the Catalan-Aragonese Crown have received relatively little scholarly attention. Consequently, the letters examined in the present study have themselves remained insufficiently analysed.

For the identification of individuals and specific classical notions, we rely primarily on the standard reference works on Arabic and Islamic civilisation. Regarding the formal features of the letters—such as their layout and calligraphic execution— in recent years there has been a profound renewal of knowledge about the arts of handwriting and manuscript production in North Africa. Within this broader scholarly reassessment, the decisive role of Andalusian influence in the formation and

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diplomàtiques amb el món islàmic." *Els documents cabdals de la història de Catalunya* (Andorra la Vella: Antiqvvm Edicions, in press).

diffusion of the Andalusī-Maghribī tradition of handwriting in Ifrīqiya has been emphasised. Drawing on these contributions, we examine the dynamics of the production of written documentation for political purposes in the Western Mediterranean during the Late Middle Ages, as reflected in the materials under study.[9]

## Documentary Validation and Authentication in the Hafsid Chancery

The document CA 139 complies with the highest requirements of validation and authentication of the Hafsid Chancery. This protocol has long constituted both a practical concern and a stimulus to the creativity of the political powers over time. In the Chanceries of the medieval al-Andalus and Maghrib, from the Almoravid period onward, official letters displayed two particularly striking characteristics: the arrangement of the text on the writing support—generally paper and only rarely parchment[10]—and the *ʿalāma*, an institutional sign or emblem identifying the sender. Together, these elements ensured both the validation (that is, the formal correctness) and the authentication (the origin and authority) of the document. Today, they also testify to the high degree of sophistication attained by the chancery arts in al-Andalus and North Africa. The arrangement of the text on the page contributed to the development of a kind of documentary meta-language and often played a role in facilitating the authentication of a document. The practice of arranging the text in triangular forms was well known, and early references to it appear in the works of the Andalusian secretary Ibn ʿAbd al-Ġafūr (d. after 1148), who mentions it in connection with Almoravid documentation produced in the Iberian Peninsula.[11] The *ʿalāma,* for its part, fulfilled an essential function of authentication. Executed in larger calligraphy with thicker strokes, it was designed to create a striking visual effect on the reader, reflecting the distinct visual culture cultivated by each dynasty. Its use appears early among Andalusian dynasties—such as the Banū Hūd, the Banū Ghāniya, and the Almoravids—as noted by the Nasrid prince Ismāʿīl ibn Yūsuf ibn al-Aḥmar.[12] A proper understanding of the *ʿalāma*

[9]On Andalusī–Maghribī writing arts see Labarta, *De la Alhambra a Barcelona.* Los documentos nazaríes del Archivo de la Corona de Aragón. Vol. 1. Estudio (A. Labarta, Ed.). Academia.edu. 2021; U. Bongianino, *The Manuscript Tradition of the Islamic West: Maghribi Round Scripts and Andalusi Identity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022) and L. Hinrichsen, *The Lost Libraries of Tunis. Book Culture of Ḥafṣid Ifrīqiya and Arabic Manuscripts in Europe after the Sack of Tunis (1535)*, De Gruyter, 2024: 102-114.

[10]Among the materials we study, only CA 140 *bis*, which contains a peace treaty, is written on parchment.

[11]On Ibn ʿAbd al-Ġafūr see B. Soravia, "L'ornement des anges. Perspectives andalouses sur la *kitāba*, V–VI$^{e}$/XI–XII$^{e}$ siècles," in *Documentos y manuscritos árabes del Occidente musulmán medieval*, ed. N. Martínez de Castilla (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2010), 26-31. On exempla of the distribution of script on the page of diplomatic correspondance, see Bongianino, *Manuscript Tradition*: 332-340.

[12]Ibn al-Aḥmar (725/1324-807/1404 or 810/1407) is the author of the *Mustawdiʿ al-ʿalāma wa-mustabdiʿ al-ʿallāma*, a treatise devoted to the office of the secretary of the paraph (*ṣāḥib al-ʿalāma*). See Abū-l-Walīd Ismāʿīl Ibn al-Aḥmar, *Mustawdi' al-'alāma wa-mustabdi' al-'allāma,* ed. al-Turkī, M.; Ibn Tāwīt, M., Tetuan, Institut Moulay El-Hassan, 1964. https://www.eea.csic.es/red/hata/autor.php?idg=2991&pag_o=1); https://www.eea.csic.es/red/hata/obra.php?ido=16975

therefore requires attention not only to its formula but also to its graphic execution. Regarding the particularities of the *ʿalāma* and its execution, practices varied between al-Andalus and North Africa. While among the Nasrids in al-Andalus the practice of autographing is well documented,[13] among the North African sultanates there is no unanimity of customs: each ruler maintained a distinctive *ʿalāma,* frequently employing a pious formula that differentiated dynasties, and occasionally individual sultans within the same dynasty. Some kings delegated the writing of the *ʿalāma* to their chief scribe or shared it with an official in charge of writing it, as the Marinids did.

The designated official, known as the *ṣāḥib al-ʿalāma*, was the head of the chancery, entrusted with this task and exercising delegated authority by affixing the sultan's signature. This official often occupied a position very close to the sultan, and in some cases the office became hereditary within privileged families. In other cases, the sultans themselves intervened, either by adding a stroke or paraph to the calligrapher's work, or by executing the *ʿalāma* with their own hand, as in the case of the Almohads. The most comprehensive description of the Ḥafṣid Chancery remains that provided by Brunschvig, who also questions the presumed division between the execution of the *ʿalāma* and the drafting of documents (*inšāʾ)*.[14] The present analysis focuses on the *ʿalāma*.

The Hafsid use of the *ʿalāma* must be understood within the broader legacy of Almohad chancery practices, since there was administrative and symbolic continuity between the two powers. However, the formula of the Hafsid *ʿalāma* employed the pious expression *al-ḥamdu li-llāh wa shukr li-llāh* ("Praise be to God and thanks be to God"), in contrast to the Almohad formula *al-ḥamdu li-llāh waḥdahu*. Yet, while the institutional formula was preserved, individual initiatives demonstrate the capacity of Hafsid administrative culture to innovate within inherited documentary conventions. From the reign of Hafsid Abū Zakariyyāʾ I (r. 625/1228 – 647/1249) onward, the drawing of the *ʿalāma* by a specialised calligrapher became dissociated from the writing of the text of official documents. Over time, the pious invocation could also be replaced by the title, name, filiation, and *laqab* of the sovereign. During the reign of Muḥammad al-Mustanṣir I (r. 647–75/1249–77), a distinction was established between a major sign (*ʿalāma al-kubrā*) and a minor sign (*ʿalāma al-ṣughrā*). The *ʿalāma al-kubrā* was used for decrees issued by the emir or caliph, whereas the minor sign—bearing the formula *tawakkaltu ʿalā Allāh wa huwa ḥasabī* ("I trust in God, and He is my sufficiency")—was employed in documents issued by viziers and other officials.[15] The extant documentation further suggests that certain Hafsid sultans—or their scribes— made use of more than one formula for the *ʿalāma al-kubrā*, alternating between pious invocations and the sovereign's personal name.[16] Thus, for example, the Hafsid letters preserved in the ACA, nos. CA 130,

[13]A. Labarta, "La ʿalāma nazarí: una galería de autógrafos reales." *Revista del Centro de Estudios Históricos de Granada y su Reino* 30 (2018): 27–49.

[14]On the *ʿalāma* under the Hafsid dynasty: R. Brunschvig, *La Berbérie orientale*, vol. 2: 60-66. Also, B. Jadla, "De l'usage du sceau en terre d'islam: la *ʿalāma* comme symbole du pouvoir dans le Maghreb médiéval," in *Le cérémonial dans les sphères politiques et religieuses à travers les âges*, Tunis: 2017: 151–174.

[15]On the *ʿalāma* under the Hafsid dynasty: R. Brunschvig, *La Berbérie orientale*, vol. 2: 60-66; Jadla, "De l'usage du sceau": 160–174.

[16]Alternatively, no *ʿalāma* was used. At least one known case of a Hafsid letter in the ACA does not bear an *ʿalāma* (CA 128).

131, 132, 133, and 134, issued by the then emir of Qusṭanṭīna and Bijāya, Abū Yaḥyā Abū Bakr b. Abī Zakariyyāʾ (d. 747/1346), display his name prominently at the top of the page, written by a chancery official, whereas document CA 138 employs a pious formula.[17] This diversity in the use of the *ʿalāma* reflects a broader stylistic plurality within Hafsid documentary practice, resulting in a certain lack of visual uniformity. Yet, rather than indicating disorder, this multiplicity of forms of validation and authentication reflects evolving strategies for expressing authority and legitimacy. It is commonly asserted that the Hafsid emirs did not draw the *ʿalāma* with their own hand. The examples presented below suggest a shift in practice, whereby the *ʿalāma al-kubrā* was supplanted by the ruler's autograph signature. This autograph fulfilled the same functions as the *ʿalāma al-kubrā*, serving as a visible manifestation of consolidated authority and typically appearing once a given individual had reached the apex of political power. Over time, the adoption of the *ḥājib*'s autograph as a formal signature was an assertion of his power and consolidated authority within the Hafsid sultanate, as the documents analysed in this study demonstrate.

## Ibn Tafrājīn's Autograph

Before we describe the formal aspects of CA 139, it should be noted that jointly with the other four letters, it is of private and diplomatic nature, meaning it was folded close and wore a distinctive seal. [18] It was sent to Peter IV on *shawwāl* 751 / December 1350, during the initial months of the caliphate of Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm II (r. 751/1350–771/1369). The document consists of a sheet of yellowish paper[19] on which the text, on the *recto*, is arranged in two triangular areas of writing (Fig. 1). On the *verso* appears the name of the recipient, justified between the margins of a fold (Fig. 2).

[17]The correspondence was sent between 1314 and 1333 to King James II (d. 1327) and King Alfonso III (d. 1336).

[18]CA 141 preserves traces of the wax used in sealing it. The sealing of a letter involved bending, perforating and fastening the document with a tie or a cord. Regarding the use of the seal to close letters, particularly in the Hafsid context, see M. Ouerfelli, "Le sceau de la paix: Le traité de 669/1270 entre Philippe III et al-Mustanṣir al-Ḥafṣī," *Annales islamologiques* 52 (2018): 309–352.

[19]CA 139 measures 455 × 305 mm. A paper watermark depicting a griffin is visible along the central vertical fold, attributable to Italian paper production of the fourteenth century; this letter provides the earliest documented evidence of such paper in North Africa, as mentioned by J. Bloom, *Paper before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001: 86 and Hinrichsen, *Lost Libraries*: 124. Also, references to letters from Ifrīqiya, identified by the colour of the paper—such as "la carta groga" ("the yellow letter") or "la carta blanca" ("the white letter")— were common in the Catalan royal Chancery, as mentioned by A. Giménez Soler, "Documentos de Túnez, originales ó traducidos, del Archivo de la Corona de Aragón," *Anuari de l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans* 3 (1909): 254-57.

**Figure 1.**

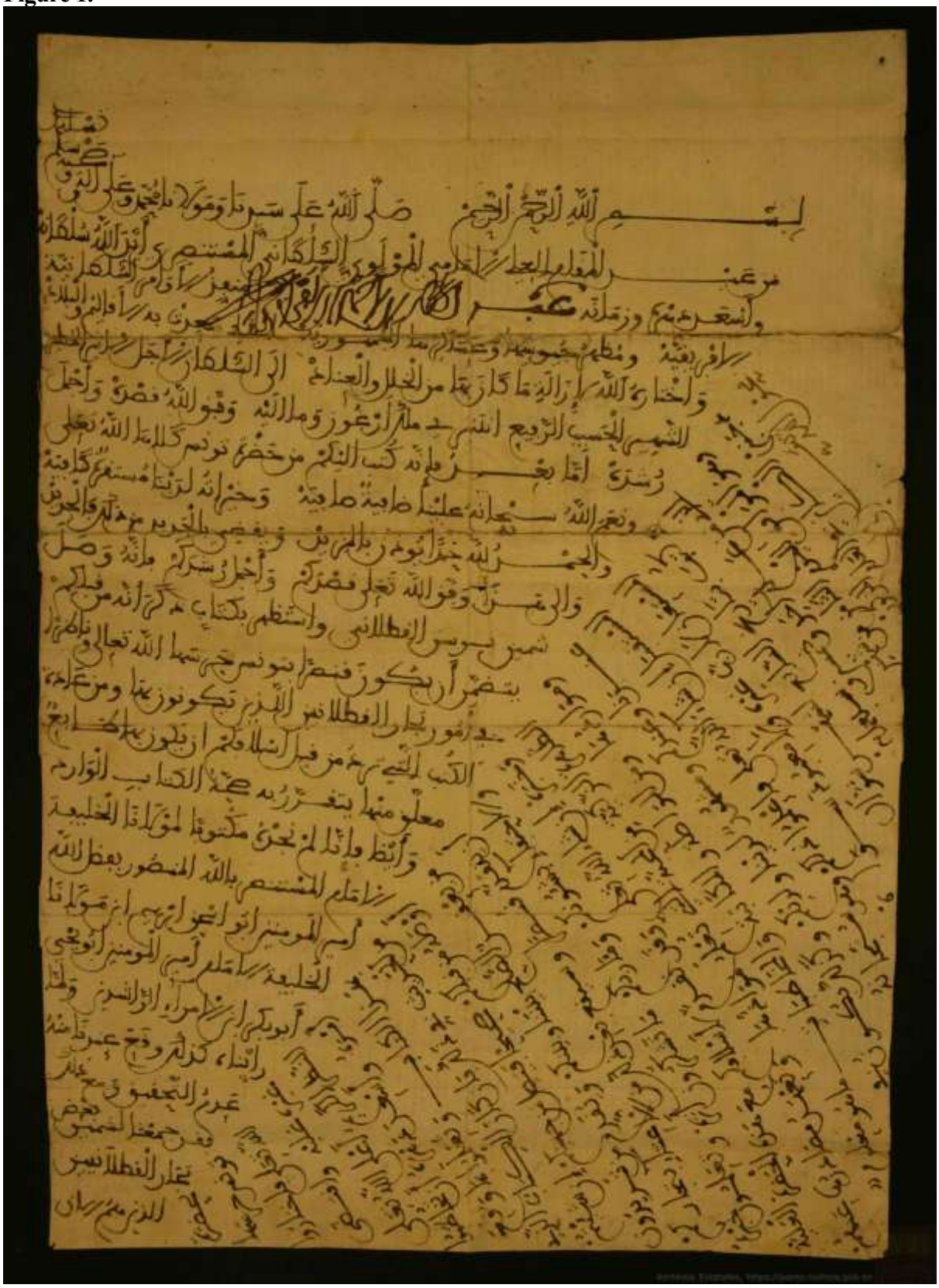

**Figure 2.**

Notaries and secretaries typically wrote in a flowing cursive hand, a style associated with the everyday administrative tasks and temporal concerns of their profession.[20] The document begins with the usual invocation—*basmala* and *taṣliya*.[21] This is followed by the sender's *intitulatio*, in which the chamberlain Ibn Ṭafrājīn refers to himself as *ʿabd al-maqām al-ʿālī*, "the servant of the Most Exalted" Sultan [Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm II] al-Mustanṣir.[22] A pious formula dedicated to Ibrāhīm II follows. Next, in a prominent position, appears the autograph signature of the sender of the missive, occupying a reserved blank space between the *basmala–taṣliya* and the main body of the letter (Fig. 3). Highly stylized, it is difficult to read, so much so that the editors and translators Alarcón and García de Linares considered it illegible, noting that it was written in the form of a signature and therefore refrained from translating it.[23]

**Figure 3.** *ʿAlāma CA 139: ʿAbd Allāh ibn Aḥmad ibn Tafrājīn […]*

By contrast, in 1909 Andrés Giménez Soler published the Arabic text together with an abridged Aragonese translation of CA 139, produced at the time of the reception of the Arabic original (now preserved in the ACA).[24] Giménez Soler correctly attributed the dispatch to Abū Muḥammad ibn Ṭafrājīn, minister of the emir Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm, son of Abū Yaḥyā Abū Bakr. However, his edition of the

[20]The body of the letter is written in a medium-sized Andalusī–Maghribī rounded script or *mudawwar*. See Bongianino, *Manuscript Tradition*: 13-71; 330-348. It is executed with a fine, rounded, pencil-like (non-bevelled) nib, which produces a uniform outline to the letters. The angles are softened into curves, giving the hand a light, and polished movement. The writing features abundant diacritical marks and precise vocalisation signs, as would be appropriate for an official document of this nature and importance. The use of the *shadda* coincides with that described for the Nasrid Chancery letters in Labarta, *De la Alhambra*: 98.

[21]*Basmala: bismi Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm,* "In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate; *Taṣliya: ṣallā Allāh ʿalā sayyidinā wa mawlānā Muḥammad wa-āli-hi wa-ṣaḥbi-hi wa-sallama taslīman,* "May God send blessings and peace upon our master and lord Muḥammad, his family, and his companions."

[22]Garnier, *Histoires hafsides*: 193 documents the caliphal *laqab* of al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh inʿAbū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm II's coins.

[23]However, Alarcón in *Documentos árabes diplomáticos*: 321 refered to "*Macclexech ben-cafraquim*", a name that he probably obtained from Giménez Soler's edition of Catalan version of CA 141.

[24]Giménez Soler, "Documentos de Túnez", Doc. XXX, 253-54. Other documents published by Giménez Soler, mentioning Ibn Tafrājīn are Doc. XXXI, 254-55, containing the Catalan translation of CA 143; Doc. XXXII, 255-57, containing the Catalan translation of CA 141, where the chamberlain is mentioned as ʿAbd Allāh ibn 'Aḥmad Ibn Bakr… and *Macelexech bencafraguin*; Doc. XXXIII, 258-259, Catalan translation of CA 142, letter attributed to *Abu Muhammad ben Tafrachin*; Doc. XXXIV, 259, corresponding to CA144. There are errors in readings and dates by Giménez Soler. In contrast, Stern observed interesting details on the Hafsid ʿalāma and photographs published by Giménez Soler, in S. M. *Stern Fāṭimid Decrees: Original Documents from the Fāṭimid Chancery*. London: 1964.

Arabic text is less complete than that of Alarcón, as it omits several lines from the header—where the sender's name appears. Moreover, the Aragonese version does not mention the name of the chamberlain. It is most likely that Giménez Soler deduced it from the Catalan text of CA 141, which he also published.

The autograph signature in CA 139 corresponds well to the name of the *ḥājib* ʿAbd Allāh ibn Aḥmad ibn Tafrājīn.[25] We also know that his *nisba* is al-Tīnmalī, a well renowned Almohad tribe that was part of the new Hafsid nobility, although its official use has not been recorded. The last element of the signature (which overwrites the word *alladhī* in the text of the letter) appears to have undergone the greatest stylistic transformation, evolving in later examples into an ornamental flourish that becomes almost illegible. What makes this autograph particularly distinctive is its personal character: a fluid, continuous cursive stroke with rounded forms, revealing an expressive and non-formal style that closely resembles a personal signature.

The ruler's autograph introduced a new level of personal graphic identity within Hafsid documentary practice, contrasting with the institutional character of the traditional *ʿalāma.* A decade later, Ibn Tafrājīn maintained a long correspondence with Peter IV, sending him four additional letters (in chronological order CA 141, 142, 144 and 143), issued between *rabīʿ al-awwal* 761/ February 1360 and ṣafar 764/November 1362. Every letter appears to have carried the same signature, and no other forms of validation are attested in this context, which substantiate the authorship. The use of Ibn Tafrājīn's signature on the letters confirms what was mentioned by Ibn Khaldūn: that chamberlains could sign the letters they issued on behalf of the authority they served, equating their autograph to an official signature.[26] The historian also notes that some educated sovereigns wrote their letters entirely in their own hand.[27]

## Cronology of Ibn Tafrājīn 's Diplomatic Documents

| CA | Dates (*Hijrī* / Julian Calendar)[28] |
|---|---|
| 139 | 7 *shawwāl* 751 / 8 Dec 1350 |
| 140 *bis* | 25 *ṣafar* 761 / 16 Jan 1360 |
| 141 | 15 *rabīʿ I* 761 / 4 Feb 1360 |
| 142 | 29 *jumādā* II 761 / 17 May 1360 |
| 144 | 16 *rajab* 763 / 11 May 1362 |
| 143 | 9 *ṣafar* 764 / 28 Nov 1362 |

[25]The spelling appears to correspond to *Tafrakīn*, with *kāf, (*rather than *Tafrajīn)*, which in the Maghrib would be pronounced with a /g/ sound.

[26]Ibn Khaldūn, *Les Prolégomènes d'Ibn Khaldoun (al-Muqaddima)*, trans. W. MacGuckin de Slane, 3 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1862–1868), 2: 26-271 (section on *dīwān al-inshāʾ* and *ʿalāma*). Ibn Khaldūn notes that the secretary affixed the *ʿalāma*, although in later periods the authority to validate documents could shift to higher officials such as the *ḥājib*.

[27]This was the case of Abū Darbā Muḥammad b. Abī Yaḥyā Zakariyyā', who in 1320 addressed document CA 123 to the Catalan king James II of Aragon. The poor state of preservation of this document prevented Alarcón from reading it; however, the contemporary Catalan translation—although incomplete—indicates that it was written by the sovereign's own hand. See Giménez Soler, "Documentos de Túnez," Doc. XXIV, 243-245.

[28]Calendar converter https://www.muqawwim.com/

The letters deal with diplomatic exchanges and disputes arising from piracy or from violations of a peace treaty established between Tunis and Barcelona on ṣafar 761/ January 1360. This treaty is preserved in an additional document held at the Real Academia de la Historia (Madrid), added to the series as CA 140 *bis*.[29] It does not contain any type of ʿ*alāma*, but it includes the autographs of six witnesses as well as that of the notary. In all these documents it is stated that Ibn Tafrājīn exercised delegated authority on behalf of Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm II. All letters display the *facto*-ruler's titles and attributes, reflecting the consolidation of his power, although its most striking expression appears in the peace treaty, where the list of adjectives describing the chamberlain is overwhelming. Ibn Tafrājīn was no longer presented as a servant of the sultanate, but rather as the supreme leader of the state.

Taken together, the documents attest to the long tradition of the Hafsid Chancery, the maturity of its style, the subtlety of the diplomatic language –both semantic and visual– that it employed, and the high political symbolism attached to relations with Barcelona. As can be seen in figs. 4, 5, 6 and 7**,** over the years Ibn Tafrājīn's signature evolved and denotes greater sophistication. The comparison of the calligraphic traces allows us to attribute them to the hand of the *ḥājib*, forming an exceptional[30] collection of medieval autographs produced by a servant of the state.

[29]Alarcón, *Documentos árabes diplomáticos*, 311-320 (ed. and trans. by Federico Galbis of MS 80 Salazar Collection, which also preserves a sixteenth-century Spanish version of the document). The chamberlain is mentioned as: Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh, son of Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Tafarājīn. A Latin version of the treaty was edited by I. De las Cagigas in "Un traité de paix entre le roi Pierre IV d'Aragon et le sultan de Tunis Abū Ishāk II (1360)" *Hesperis* XIX (1934): 65-77. In it, Ibn Tafrājīn was referred as *Bumachamet abdalla* […] *filius domini* […] *Abbulabbes achamet benthefregin*. De las Cagigas did not provide any archival reference for the Latin document he published, merely noting that: "Le traité que je possède est l'acte même dressé en présence des plénipotentiaires." He further stated that it was a signed parchment, which suggests that it originally existed as a loose document. We may further add that we have recently identified the Latin text in the records of the Chancery of Peter IV, Reg. 1389, f. 19r - 21v. For our part, it may be noted that, among the six Tunisian witnesses who subscribed to the 1360 peace agreement with the Catalans, at least two had likewise participated in the signing of the well-known Hafsid treaty with Pisa of May 16th, 1353, published by M. Amari, *I diplomi arabi del R. archivio fiorentino : testo originale con la traduzione letterale e illustrazioni*, Firenze : Le Monnier, 1863, vol I, XXX, 98-111; vol II, XXX, 303-308 and plate (not numbered). These witnesses are named: Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Ibrāhīm al-Yamāmī and Abū Saʿīd ibn Aḥmad ibn Aḥmad al-Maghribī. A more detailed prosopographical identification of witnesses, together with a comparison between the treaties, will be provided in a forthcoming publication.

[30]Comparable examples are found in Nasrid documentation, particularly in the signatures of the minister Riḍwān ibn ʿAbd Allāh (d. 1359) in CA 32, 33, 35 and 46, sent between 1333-1336, and who also had a seal, see Labarta, *De la Alhambra*: 26-27, 103.

**Figure 4.** *'Alāma CA 141*

**Figure 5.** *'Alāma CA 142*

**Figure 6.** *'Alāma CA 144*

**Figure 7.** *ʿAlāma CA 143*

We may conclude this section by comparing Hafsid and Catalan-Aragonese chancery practices. Within the Crown of Catalonia-Aragon, Peter IV appears to have been the first ruler of his dynasty to employ a personal autograph signature in the validation of royal correspondence. His adoption of autograph subscriptions constitutes one of the most significant developments in the documentary culture of the late medieval Aragonese monarchy.[31] Whereas earlier rulers had generally relied upon the traditional *signum regis* and the formal mechanisms of chancery authentication, the Cerimonious increasingly emphasised the symbolic and political value of the sovereign's own handwritten intervention. In this respect, the rise of similar autograph practices in the Hafsid Chancery points to a contemporaneity of individualised modes of sovereign expression on both sides of the medieval Mediterranean. Such autographs authenticate documents in diplomatic terms, projected the sovereign's power and reinforced the growing association between written authority and the ruler within increasingly bureaucratised political structures.

## Ibn Tafrājīn's *cursus honorum*

As mentioned earlier, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Aḥmad ibn Tafrājīn's ancestors belonged to a powerful Almohad family from Tīnmal.[32] One of them, ʿAbd al-Ḥājj ibn Tafrājīn, left the Maghrib to settle in Ifrīqiya in the service of the Hafsid al-Mustanṣir. ʿAbd al-Ḥājj's nephews followed in his footsteps and obtained dignities, wealth, and honours in Ifrīqiya. Later, the eldest of these, called Aḥmad (d. 703/1303–04), governor of Gafsa and al-Mahdiyya, was the father of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Aḥmad ibn Tafrājīn. The

[31]As stated by E. Fenu in "Graphic symbolism in the handwritten signature of the kings of Aragon: notes on the "L Coronada de Valencia"", *Writing, Preserving and Reading History*, edited by A. Pereira Ferreira et al., Publicações do CIDEHUS, 2025.

[32]In 515 / *ca.* 1121-1122, ʿUmar ibn Tafrājīn (m. *ca.* 549 / 1154-55) and other members of the Tinmallal tribe pledged allegiance to Ibn Tūmart in support of his doctrine of divine unity, see Ibn Khaldūn, *Histoire des Berbéres*, 2: 170-171, 190-191, n. 5. Ibn Khaldūn provides a complete account of the family, which we summarize here, see Ibn Khaldūn, *Histoire des Berbéres*, 3: 9-15.

date of his birth is unknown,[33] but he received a courtly education at the palace, among the sons of the magnates, which provided him with knowledge of the administration and affairs of the state. We also know that ʿAbd Allāh made an advantageous marriage with the daughter of Abū Yaʿqūb ibn Izdūtin, minister of Abū l-Baqāʾ Ḫālid an-Nāṣir, the Hafsid emir of Bijāya (r. 709-11/1309-11). The first notable position held by Ibn Tafrājīn was that of vizier, in the service of Sultan Abū Yaḥyā Abū Bakr (r. 718–747/1318–1346). Abū Bakr sent him to Fez (in 730/1330 and 737/1337) to request the help of the Marinids against the Zayyanids and to negotiate family alliances—important and delicate missions. In 742/1341–42 he was appointed "shaykh of the Almohads" and he maintained all his influence in the council of state. In the summer of 1343/ 744, he was named chamberlain of Abū Yaḥyā Abū Bakr. Beyond supervising the palace and the sultan's expenditures, the *ḥājib* assumed major administrative and political functions, particularly as intermediary between the sovereign and the population. The office gradually acquired powers comparable to those of a prime minister, capable of acting in the sultan's absence. Ibn Tafrājīn undoubtedly came to exercise extensive authority within the sultanate.[34]

Then, after the death of Sultan Abū Yaḥyā Abū Bakr (d. 747/1346), the Hafsid clans of Tunis, Bijāya, and Qusṭanṭīna were plunged into a brutal fratricidal struggle for the succession, and Ibn Tafrājīn was compelled to take part. Ibn Tafrājīn orchestrated the initiative of Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar II (r. 747–50/1346–50), son of Abū Bakr, against his brother Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad, the designated heir (who reigned for a week in 747/1346). The plot resulted in the assassination of Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad and two other brothers of the same phratry. While preparations were underway for the ceremony of allegiance (*bayʿa*) to the victorious Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar II, Ibn Tafrājīn learned that his lord intended to eliminate him. The *bayʿa* took place while the funeral of the sultan's father was being prepared. The *qāḍīs*, occupied with the burial arrangements, readily accepted the new ruler once they saw that the population had already acknowledged him, offering little resistance. Ibn Tafrājīn fled to Fez, where he was welcomed at the Marinid court. Later, Ibn Tafrājīn accompanied the Marinid ruler Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī in his intervention in Ifrīqiya (748–750/1347–1349), which had disastrous consequences for Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar II, who was defeated, captured, and executed in 1347. Ibn Tafrājīn unsuccessfully sought control of the kingdom. When his ambitions were thwarted by the Marinids, he fled and forged an alliance with the rebellious Arab tribe of Banū Kaʿb, where he assumed the role of chamberlain to their leader, Aḥmad ibn Abī Dabbūs, and directed his opposition against the Marinid Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī. Then, Ibn Tafrājīn temporarily fled to Alexandria (in *rabīʿ II* 749 / June–July 1348), and visited the holy city of Mecca in late 750 / February 1350. During this time, he was conspiring against the governor of Būna, Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Faḍl (r. 750/1350), another son of Abū Bakr, who had forced the Marinids out of Qayrawān and had taken control of Tunis. In *jumādā I*

[33]No later than 703/1304.

[34]Brunschvig, *La Berbérie orientale,* vol. 1: 155-156. His brother Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad (d. 747/1346) gave him support at the head of the army, until his death, and lost his life doing it, see Ibn Khaldūn, *Histoire des Berbéres,* 3: 18-19.

751 / July 1350, Ibn Tafrājīn managed to enter Tunis and elevate the adolescent Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm II (the last brother of the Bijāya clan), whom he would serve as *ḥājib*.[35]

Under the effective authority of Ibn Tafrājīn, Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm II took the caliphal *laqab* al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh al-Manṣūr. The new regime briefly faced a crisis when the Marinid ruler Abū ʿInān Fāris advanced against Tunis, Bijāya, and Qusṭanṭīna (*ramaḍān* 758/August–September 1357), but Ibn Tafrājīn soon restored the regime of his lord,[36] maintaining the high dignity of *ḥājib* until his death in *rabīʿ* I 766/December 1364. His death, announced by the astrologers, was greatly mourned by the sultan Abū Isḥāq, who held great obsequies. Ibn Tafrājīn was buried in the madrasa he had founded, near Bāb al-Suwayqa, to the north of the medina of Tunis.[37]

Ibn Tafrājīn's *cursus honorum* demonstrates considerable strategic vision. He secured the pacification of the territory through negotiations with Arab tribes, reorganized state finances, and managed relations with foreign powers. His rise to the head of the state enabled institutional reforms and gradual transformations of the palace bureaucracy, projecting an image of strength and legitimacy. Ibn Tafrājīn forced a change in the chancery uses, with his appropriation of the validation and authentication instruments, which ultimately led to the replacement of the official *ʿalāma* by his own signature. Undoubtedly, the fact that the chamberlain validates these missives with his autograph is a clear gesture of usurpation of the function of the caliph, who in 1350 was still a child under his protection. From 1357 onward, Ibn Tafrājīn, occupying an unrivalled position, exercised decisive influence over the state's foreign policy, drawing upon the experience he had accumulated in his earlier roles. It is by no means insignificant that Ibn Tafrājīn used his autograph within the context of Mediterranean diplomacy and vis-à-vis a power of the stature of the Catalan-Aragonese Crown at that time. The presence of a tangible external threat with considerable economic and military capacity—namely the Catalan-Aragonese Crown— further underscored the necessity of legitimizing a strong central authority to safeguard the territory. Furthermore, both personalities were well acquainted as we uncover in the next section.

## Ibn Tafrājīn's Relationship with Peter IV and the Content of CA 139

In the mid-14th century, relations between Barcelona and Tunis were experiencing an intense moment, even though North African politics were quite unstable. Peter IV, eager to secure control over Sicily, wanted to re-establish ties with Ifrīqiya and coveted the imposition of tribute on the Banu Hafs. Since facts have been well described by historians,[38] we will only highlight some aspects concerning the relationships between Ibn Tafrājīn and Peter IV, of interest for the analysis of the content of CA 139.

[35]Ibn Khaldūn, *Histoire des Berbéres*, 3: 23-46.
[36]Garnier, *Histoires hafsides*: 179-182.
[37]Ibn Khaldūn, *Histoire des Berbéres*, 3: 70-72.
[38]On the origins and historical development of the Catalan-Aragonese Crown's tributary claims over the Hafsids, as well as on its impositions on Hafsid customs, see Robert Brunschvig, "Documents inédits sur les relations entre la couronne d'Aragon et la Berbérie orientale au XIV[e] siècle." *Annales de l'Institut d'Études Orientales* (1936): 239-243; Charles-Emmanuel Dufourcq, "La Couronne d'Aragon et les Hafsides au XIII[e] siècle (1229–1301)," *Analecta Sacra Tarraconensia* 25 (1952): 51-113. This work

It is well established that, prior to Ibn Tafrājīn's rise to power, two Catalan embassies were formally received in Ifrīqiya —in 1337 and 1345—with the purpose of negotiating a peace treaty. The correspondence sent from Barcelona to the then-sultan, Abū Yaḥyā Abū Bakr, concerning peace negotiations reveals that Ibn Tafrājīn was already well acquainted with Peter IV as early as 1344. The *ḥājib* is mentioned, among others, in the following documents:

a) The king's instructions for negotiations to the ambassadors Guillem de Clariana and Benet de Blanques, (dated 10/11/1344).[39] The messengers, sent on matters of great importance to the king, would ask *Bente Fragrin*, the "*haagip*", to be present during the discussions. This clearly indicates that Peter IV was aware of the position's authority and the role of Ibn Tafrājīn in the Hafsid administration.

> *"Aprés, los dits missatgers li diran que ells són aquí trameses a ell per alguns affers qui toquen molt los dits reys, et que·ls deurà de oyr-los et que·l pregarien que a la relació de lur missatgeria sia present Bente Fragrin, haagip seu."*

b) Also, a recommendation letter (dated 10/11/1344) in favour of the ambassadors Guillem of Clariana and Benet of Blanques, to be delivered to the beloved *Abdalla Bente Fragrin, haagip of the king of Tunis, our friend*.[40] Peter IV showed his care in guaranteeing the legitimacy of his emissaries and recognized the power of the chamberlain, begging him to heed the message they convey to him:

> *"per què us pregam que als dits missatgers creegats sens dupte de ço que us diran de part nostra, […]et per tal havem acordat de scriure a vós en special, confian de vós e pensan que per vostra mà los dits affers hauran, si a Déu plau, bon acabament".*

However, diplomatic missions did not achieve their objectives over years 1337 to 1345, since King Peter's demands required the payment of very onerous taxes, that were previously paid to the ruler of Sicily before the island fell into the king's

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provides a detailed account of Catalan embassies to Ifrīqiya in the years preceding the period examined here. Also, Charles-Emmanuel Dufourcq, "Les activités politiques et économiques des Catalans en Tunisie et en Algérie orientale de 1262 à 1377", *Boletín de la Real Academia de Buenas Letras* XIX (1946): 5–96; Charles-Emmanuel Dufourcq, *L'Espagne catalane et le Maghrib aux 13e et 14e siècles: De la bataille de Las Navas de Tolosa (1212) à l'avènement du sultan mérinide Abou-l-Hasan (1331)*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1966; A. Masià de Ros, *La Corona de Aragón y los estados del Norte de África : Política de Jaime II y Alfonso IV en Egipto, Ifriquia y Tremecen* (Madrid, 1951) ; Frederic Udina Martorell, "Las relaciones entre Túnez y la Corona de Aragón en el segundo tercio del s. XIV hasta 1360." *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 10 (1980): 331–339; María Dolores López Pérez, "La Couronne d'Aragon et Tunis au XIV$^{e}$ siècle: les relations politiques," in *Tunis: cité de la mer: actes du colloque organisé dans le cadre des manifestations relatives au choix de l'UNESCO de Tunis, capitale culturelle, 1997*, ed. A. Baccar Bournaz (Tunis: L'Or du Temps, 1997), 46–59.

[39]Doc ACA, C, reg. 555, ff. 75*v*-77*v*. Published by Brunschvig, "Documents inédits" doc. 10, 255-258. The king also intercedes for a citizen of Tunis at that time in Barcelona, who wants to return to his home.

[40]ACA, C, reg. 555, f. 78*r*, see Brunschvig, "Documents inédits" doc. 12, 259-260.

hands. Contacts on Catalan initiative remained interrupted for years.[41] Then, a few months after coming to power, Ibn Tafrājīn addressed Peter IV through CA 139. Let us now look at its content.

a) Ibn Tafrājīn explained that:

> *"Xmyn Busn, the Catalan, has arrived bearing a letter said to be from you, concerning his appointment as consul in Tunis—may God Almighty protect it—and as procurator for the affairs of the Catalan merchants residing there."*

b) The document, however, did not conform to the practices of Catalan diplomacy, revealing Ibn Tafrājīn suspicions:

> *"It was customary for the writings of your predecessors to bear a hanging seal, which guaranteed the authenticity of the writing's content."*

c) Ibn Tafrājīn also noted that the letter was not addressed to sultan Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm II (just been proclaimed), an omission that would imply either ignorance or discourtesy, something unlikely to be attributed to the Catalan king:

> *"Likewise, this was not addressed to our master, the Caliph, Imām al-Mustanṣir billāh al-Manṣūr by the grace of God, the Prince of the Believers, Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm, son of our master, the Caliph, the Imām, the Prince of the Believers, Abū Yaḥyā Abū Bakr, son of the Rightly Guided Princes."*

d) In response, Ibn Tafrājīn took a decision:

> *"Upon examining it, we deemed it inauthentic. We therefore consulted the Catalan merchants present in Tunis—may God Almighty protect it—and they selected another individual, whom they preferred."*

It is certainly striking that a designated consul would travel without validated credentials. Catalan embassies were known for the meticulousness of their preparation, as demonstrated in years 1337–1345.[42] King Peter's elevated conception of the royal office, reflected in the particular care he devoted to the supervision of the consular institution. Besides, the mission should have been recorded in the Catalan Chancery, as the abundance of documents that were generated in previous occasions seems to indicate. If other records existed, we have not been able to find them.

[41] J. Mutgé, "L'ambaixada a Tunis de Guillem de Clariana i de Benet Blanques (1345),", Miscel·lània de Textos Medievals, (1988a): 163-219; J. Mutgé, "Algunas noticias sobre las relaciones entre la Corona Catalano-Aragonesa y el Reino de Túnez de 1345 a 1360." In *Relaciones de la Península Ibérica con el Magreb*, 1988b: 131–164. Two additional documents refer to Ibn Tafrājīn: Doc. ACA, C, reg. 555, ff. 93r-94v and f. 127r, see Mutgé, "Algunas noticias" :151-156; 163-164.

[42] A letter sent from the Marinid Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī dated 1350 addressed similar questions. In it (CA 99), the sultan declares to sign his letters with his own hand.

It also cannot be ruled out that "Xmyn Busn" was an impostor, acting personally for profit or on behalf of a group of Catalan or Majorcan merchants,[43] independently of the king's interests. This could have involved a betrayal of the monarch or a dispute among the king's subjects in North Africa. If the appointment was indeed falsified, neither *ḥājib* Ibn Tafrājīn nor the Catalan community in Tunis were deceived, as another consul was appointed. Yet if the matter was resolved locally, it is puzzling that Ibn Tafrājīn did not inform Peter IV of the name of the chosen representative. On the other hand, the presence of Catalan merchants in Tunis created a vital channel for communication with the Crown of Aragon. These resident traders—including both Christian and Jewish merchants active in Mediterranean commercial networks—frequently acted as intermediaries between the Hafsid court and Peter IV, facilitating the exchange of letters, intelligence, and diplomatic initiatives.[44]

Or could Ibn Tafrājīn have magnified a local merchants dispute to address to Barcelona? We have not been able to identify "Simon Busn" among the well-known merchants who travelled to Tunis in those years. Alarcón gives his name as "Simón Porcell" in his translation, which he probably read in the Aragonese version of CA 139, published by Giménez Soler. This name does not correspond to the Arabic text, which intends to reflect a transcription of a Catalan name: "xmyn" may correspond to Simó / Simón (cf. Maghribi Šimūn) while "busn" could represent a surname (with a metathesis), like Bons, Buns or even Bust,[45] or an adaptation to Arabic phonology (e.g., p → b). Although a reconstruction such as Simó Ponç/Pons is conceivable, the identification remains uncertain; comparisons with names attested in contemporary Catalan and Mallorcan sources highlight the difficulties of correlating individuals across Arabic and Romance documentary traditions. The confusion could originate in the fact that the well-known patrician named Francesc des Portell, who served as general procurator of the king in Mallorca, took part in diplomatic and commercial contacts involving the Marinid and Nasrid realms. He is mentioned in CA 104, a letter from the Marinid sultan Fāris to Peter IV, dated 7 shawwāl 751 / 8 December 1350, which coincides –exactly– with the date of letter CA 139.[46]

[43]During the reign of James II, the Catalan consulate in Tunis became a matter of dispute, particularly regarding the rights and fiscal obligations associated with its use by Majorcan merchants. A. Masià de Ros, *La Corona de Aragón,* 232-234. On the activity of Catalan consuls in Tunis and Bijāya, Dufourcq, *La Couronne d'Aragon*, 67-70.

[44]A review of the lists of Jews serving the Crown as diplomats up to 1327 reveals no name that could reasonably be identified with, or mistaken for, Simo Busn. See Y. T. Assis, "Diplomàtics jueus de la Corona catalanoaragonesa en terres musulmanes (1213–1327)," *Tamid. Revista Catalana Anual d'Estudis Hebraics* 1 (1997): 7–40.

[45]A patron named Simó de Bons went to Cherchell in 1396—many years later, M. D. López Pérez, María Dolores. *La Corona de Aragón y el Magreb en el siglo XIV (1331–1410).* Barcelona: Institución Milà y Fontanals, 1995, 246. Also, royal emissary named Berenguer Bust is mentioned in an undated letter (CA 156) from a vizier named Muhammad ibn Ibrahim to King James II (m. 1327), which Alarcón (p. 400-401) dates to around 1295 and PARES ca. 1306.

[46]In Catalan writing style of the 14th century, the letters "c" and "t" can be easily confused. The Desportell family maintained a notable presence in international affairs. "One of Portell's sons" is recorded in CA 109, dated in Fez in *ṣafar* 759 / January 1358, as a royal messenger. Other members of the family were active in Mallorca's municipal spheres in the decade of 1340. (https://cronicodemallorca.cat/h1340)

On the other hand, the call of the local Catalan merchants to chose their consul indicates a special concern to guarantee the prosperous functioning of the foreign community. The letter assumes the continuity and normalization of pre-existing relations with Barcelona.

e) Finally, Ibn Tafrājīn urged Peter IV to restore diplomatic ties, perhaps legitimizing the new sultan and his *ḥājib*:

> *"Should you so desire, send us a representative on your behalf to conclude peace between us and to confirm whomever you appoint as consul. Thereafter, we shall attend to your merchants and to your affairs and profits, whose benefits you will come to know by experience, God willing—praise be to Him."*

In doing so, he pressured the Catalan court to safeguard its economic interests along the Tunisian coast and nearby Mediterranean. According to Dufourcq, in November 1351 Peter IV established contact with Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Abī Bakr—a grandson of Sultan Abū Bakr (d. 1346)—then based in Bijāya, with the aim of negotiating fiscal arrangements. Later, in September 1352 Peter sought to renew his contacts with Ifrīqiya.[47] These contacts may reflect King Peter's uncertainty in determining the most legitimate interlocutor for re-establishing diplomatic relations with the Hafsids. But, after all, observing the situation from the perspective of' Ibn Tafrājīn, what greater prestige for the *ḥājib*—future father-in-law of the sultan–[48] than correspondence with the king dominating that strategic region, and what stronger shield against the Marinid threat (or other neighbours) than friendship with the powerful Catalan monarch?[49]

## Was CA 139 written in the presence of Ibn Khaldūn?

In the turmoil of the events surrounding CA 139, a new personage was making his first steps into the world of chanceries. Ibn Khaldūn's intellectual formation and early career trajectory may be seen as having predisposed him to chancery service. Among his ancestors was at least one intellectual with a known written work: his great-grandfather, Abū Bakr Ibn Khaldūn, author of a treatise on *adab al-kātib* (studied by Évariste Lévi-Provençal, in 1955), probably composed during the reign of the Hafsid al-Mustanṣir I—a work unknown to his great-grandson. His

[47]See Charles-Emmanuel Dufourcq, *L'Espagne catalane*, 278–283. These contacts, however, merit a separate study. Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Abī Bakr should not be confused with Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad of Constantine, who had been his father's designated heir, and died in 1338/39. His premature death led instead to the appointment of another son, Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad, who briefly ruled (r. 750–751/1350).

[48]A few weeks before his death, Ibn Tafrājīn married his daughter to Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm II, with the marriage contract drafted by Ibn Marzūq, who had likely arrived in Tunis around *ramadān* 765 / June 1364. F. Provenzali, *El-Bostan ou Jardin des biographies des saints et savants de Tlemcen par Ibn Maryem ech-Cherif el-Melity*, tr. F. Provenzali (Florence, 1910): 508 and n. 789.

[49]Labarta has already drawn attention to the propagandistic functions of the Nasrid *dīwān al-inšāʾ*, describing it as a kind of political propaganda bureau in the context of Granada, Labarta, *De la Alhambra*, 218-220.

grandfather also held a position at the Hafsid court. His father, however, chose another direction in life, dedicating himself entirely to the study of religious sciences. Born in Tunis in 732/1332, Ibn Khaldūn was educated alongside numerous scholars whom he himself would remember in his works. Among his teachers who excelled in the art of writing, Ibn Khaldūn also refers to ʿAbd al-Muhaymin ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥaḍramī (d. 749/ 1348)[50], who served as secretary of the Ceuta court in 712/1312 and later headed the secretariat of the Marinid sultans Abū Saʿīd (d. 731/1331) and Abū-l-Ḥasan ʿAlī during the Tunis stage.[51] The historian also cites his fellow student and friend ʿAbd Allāh ibn Yūsuf b. Riḍwān[52] who oversaw the Marinid correspondence, and his disciple and biographer Ibn al-Aḥmar, the above mentioned author of the *Mustawdiʿ al-ʿalāma.* Ibn al-Aḥmar praised Ibn Khaldūn's skills as *faqīh, ḥājib, kātib* and *ṣāḥib al-qalam al-aʿlā* ("holder of the highest pen"), indicating multiple positions at the service of the sultanate in different courts. The biographer also mentioned Ibn Khaldūn's high ambition for leadership.[53] Surrounded by these intellectuals, Ibn Khaldūn would have been initiated in the chancery arts in Tunis, which would later earn him the appointment of *ṣāḥib al-ʿalāma*, at the head of the chancery office (in his words, *dīwān al-rasā'il wa-l-kitāba*, literally "Bureau of Correspondence and Writing"). The responsibilities attributed to him are reflected in this paragraph:

> *"I held this position [of calligrapher] … which consisted of writing in large letters the formulas at the end of the letters and orders of the Sultan [of Tunis], praise be to God!".*[54]

Even if the historian witnessed the elaboration of CA 139, he was not required to stamp the *ʿalāma* on it, as the minor Caliph Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm II did not issue orders; Ibn Tafrājīn validated and authenticated them with his autograph. Shortly thereafter, Ibn Khaldūn left Tunis for the Marinid court in Fez, later reflecting on the decline in prestige and function of the office of *ṣāḥib al-ʿalāma*, which he had observed firsthand. He specifically attributes this decline to the absolute power of the *ḥājib*, who assumed the emission of orders.

In the chapter *Fī al-ʿalāma wa-annahā min shaʿā'ir al-mulk* of the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldūn stresses that sovereign decrees must bear an indubitable and distinguishable mark. It is tempting to suggest that his formative years exposed him to experiences such as those surrounding CA 139: a decisive moment in which the *ḥājib* Ibn Tafrājīn usurped the sultanic *ʿalāma*, revealing the dissociation between formal sovereignty

[50]https://www.eea.csic.es/red/hata/autor.php?idg=3236&pag_o=1

[51]M. Mahdī, *Ibn Khaldūn's Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science of Culture*, 2018 ed. (London: Routledge, 2018): 27-37. Also, A. J. Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldūn: Life and Times* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011): 41-44. Ibn Khaldūn, *Histoire des Berbéres,* vol. 1: XXX-XXXI. T. Ito, "Writing the Biography of Ibn Khaldūn," in *The Maghrib in the Mashriq: Knowledge, Travel and Identity*, ed. M. Fierro and M. Penelas (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 513–536.

[52]https://www.eea.csic.es/red/hata/autor.php?idg=398&pag_o=1

[53]Ibn al-Aḥmar, *Mustawdi'*: 64-65. The transcription of the attributes ascribed to him by Ibn al-Aḥmar suggest a multiplicity of roles within the sultan's service, whose precise functions remain difficult to determine. As observed by Labarta generalizations may lead to inaccuracies. See, for the Nasrid Chancery, Labarta, *De la Alhambra,* 213-218.

[54]Ibn Khaldūn, *Histoire des Berbéres*, vol. 1: XXXIX; Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldūn*: 60.

and effective authority—an idea he later develops in his chapter on dynasties, royal authority, and the caliphate.

If validation and authentication were uncertain, orders risked being ignored. Ibn Khaldūn's remarks seem to echo Ibn Tafrājīn's distrust of unvalidated documents. Although no direct link can be established between the episode of CA 139 and the historian's insistence on documentary rigor, it illustrates the importance he attached to this issue.

## Conclusion

We have examined a series of Hafsid letters authenticated by the handwritten signature of their author, the *ḥājib* Ibn Tafrājīn. The replacement of the Hafsid *ʿalāma* with the *ḥājib*'s autograph signature not only resulted in the formation of a small but remarkable corpus of medieval autographs—which has few close parallels—but also signals a significant transformation in the mechanisms of authentication and validation within the Hafsid documentary system during Ibn Tafrājīn's reign. Its broader implications remain insufficiently explored and should be considered in relation to possible changes affecting the chancery during his rule, and, more broadly, the configuration of his government. At present, the available evidence does not allow us to reconstruct in detail either the practices of the chancery or the precise functions of the officials under it. The defection of Ibn Khaldūn to Fez may suggest a reluctance to serve as "secretary to the *ḥājib",* whose authority—deprived of the official Hafsid *ʿalāma*—was likely considerably diminished. Ibn Khaldūn himself would later remark upon the degradation of the secretary's office, a development he had observed from a position of proximity over the course of his life.

An additional question that merits attention is the delay in the response of Peter IV to Ibn Tafrājīn's initiative, which seems not to have been answered until several years later. If the relationship between the two rulers was indeed characterized by mutual respect and amicable exchange, the absence of an immediate reply calls for explanation. In this regard, the correspondence maintained by Peter IV of Aragon with the Hafsid political centre of Bijāya in 1351–1352 indicates that diplomatic engagement with Ifrīqiya was not entirely suspended during the succession crisis following the death of Abu Bakr II but was instead reoriented—an issue that warrants further scholarly attention.

In any case, letter CA 139 revealed to be of high diplomatic and symbolic importance: it seems to reflect an early initiative on Ibn Tafrājīn's part to renew relations with the Crown of Aragon, after an interval of interruption, and to prepare both sides for the negotiation and signature of the peace treaty of 1360. The case of the consul highlights the mutual concerns regarding the verification and authentication of documents of both chanceries. Likewise, the letter reflects merchant communities as Mediterranean intermediaries, maintaining communication even in the absence of formal diplomatic relations.

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# Cultural Landscapes and Flora in the Poetry of Sophia de Mello Andresen

*By Isabel Maria Madaleno**

*This paper belongs to a project named Landscapes as described by contemporary geographers and non-geographers, initiated in 2018. The quest about the issue: "Are novels objects of investigation in landscape geography?" was the target of previous publications, about three other Portuguese writers and one Brazilian, that proved this research question where the answer is affirmative. The case study presented here focuses exclusively on the literary production of a Portuguese poet, for the first time. She wrote novels and poems, altogether, describing flora and places in her country and elsewhere in Europe, Africa and Latin America, but Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen's books selected for this contribution were only poetry. Methodology used was twofold: 1) Literature analysis and flora identification in three books of poems, first edited in 1947, 1967 and 1989; 2) Flora and landscape interpretation by the techniques of scientific literature comparison and online consultation of flora taxonomical links, as the places visited and plants named by the author were the object of our previous scientific missions. Thus, the paper presents the image of the world by a non-geographer, as there are such concepts as geographic alphabetisation and the poet analysed was a Classic Literature expert that devoted her life to travelling, writing and to politics. Results show that her rhymes are good sources of information about flora, gardens, and landscape research at the several locations she visited throughout her life.*

**Keywords:** *literature, tranquillity, landscape, garden, sea, geography, Greece, Portugal, Brazil, Prince Island*

## Introduction

Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen enjoyed travelling. In 2019 her son, Miguel Sousa Tavares, also a known Portuguese writer said in an interview that for her "*to travel is to observe*" as announced to him in Rome (Barros 2019). From the father of modern earth science, the German Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) to the contemporary geographers (Frias 2019), observation was usually the first objective of any landscape geographer while studying the Planet, and simultaneously the first step in fieldwork. This brings us to the reason why I've chosen these poems as study objects in my quest for the research question: Are novels (now poems) objects of investigation in landscape geography? Etymologically Geography is the description of the Earth, the planet we inhabit together with a big array of living beings such as plants. Therefore, this quest is being done in several locations around Portugal and the world, usually using novels as case studies, as with

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The most recent essay was presented at a conference, in Italy (2025), analysing not only theatre plays but also poetry, as was the example of Luíz Vaz de Camões, prose and poetry writer from the 16th century. Following this line of research, here is the examination of three of the poetry books published by Sophia during her long life, 85 years from 1919 to 2004. They were written in three decades with about twenty years of spacing between them (1947, 1967, 1989). Sophia has written about several countries, cities and countryside lending another path to the research, as she mixed History and mythology with her wonderings around the world. So, the research question now is: Can poetry books also become objects of research in Geography?

This paper will argue that is the case. Let's read her rhymes about travelling:

"*I've seen rocky countries with rivers*
*Where dark clouds like spiders*
*Ate the violet profile of the mountains*
*Amid cold pink sunsets."*
"*Dia do Mar*" or Day of the Sea (2003, p. 79) – Author's translation.

Sophia's verses are short but full of colour describing literary landscapes. The next pages will focus on the methodology and materials used for this research, on literature review, about flora, as well as on definition of literature landscapes, natural, human and cultural landscapes. Results and discussion will follow Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen's short biography, towards the conclusion. A table and figures are presented to organize and synthesize findings from the research.

## Materials and Methods

Methodology used in this contribution was twofold:

1) Literature analysis and flora identification in three books of poems, first edited in 1947, 1967 and 1989. The editions used in the current case study were published in the beginnings of the 21st century, in 2003 and 2004, selected to update the Portuguese orthography as no English editions were found online;
2) Flora and landscape interpretation has been done through the techniques of scientific literature comparison and flora taxonomical platforms consultation, as the places visited and plants named were the object of our previous scientific missions, in Europe (Madaleno 2021, 2024), Africa (Madaleno 2020) and in South America (Madaleno 1996, 2025). The list of species was classified using taxonomic typologies, following Portela-Pereira et al. (2022) study-case.

Materials used were sheets of paper, laptop computers, and photo comparisons. Regarding flora, a comprehensive table was used to examine the plants mentioned by Sophia de Mello (Rupprecht et al. 2015). The table includes the vernaculars for

species in Portuguese and in English and the botanical identification of gender, species and family, whenever possible. The taxonomy used the Missouri Botanical Garden's (MBG 2026), the Flora.on (Flora 2026), and University of *Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro* (UTAD 2026) site taxonomy, available online at (https://jb.utad.pt/flora, https://flora-on.pt. and www.tropicos.org). The American site was used for tropical species and the Portuguese site for European plants.

Table 1, presented in appendix, gives us one or several excerpts of the text, to contextualise the flora cited and the place where the plant was seen or imagined, as History and mythology are frequently utilised in Sophia's poems. Neither History nor mythology were objects of this paper, though. Thus, the analysis of poetry will focus specifically on the geography of the places mentioned and on flora. Furthermore, no tool using Boolean functions was applied in this research, because Sophia's poems are not viable for blind computer systematic searches, as they are full of symbolic landscape descriptions that need to be examined and interpreted by human eyes.

## Literature Review

Regarding flora, some of the most valuable research comes from students' fieldwork and phytogeographical inventories (Lozano-Valencia et al. 2023). According to Lozano-Valencia et al. "Even though it is not a function of the biogeographic expert to determine the taxonomical classification, it is in their assignment the knowledge of plant species, and their correct identification, using dichotomic keys" (2023, p. 96). It is also necessary to stress that the branch of biogeography that studies plants is called phytogeography. Biogeography research covers therefore both the plants and the animals, their habitat, and the different ecosystems existent on Planet Earth, where we all live (Lacoste and Salanon 1969). These animals and plants have an interrelationship with humankind that has evolved through time (Elhai 1968). Because geographers are not qualified to classify plant species, an expertise of botanists, in this paper we will use the taxa available online in certified sites, as stated (MBG 2026, UTAD 2026). Taxonomic plant typologies were analyzed using Portela-Pereira et al. (2022) study-case, from Portugal.

This paper presents the image of the world by non-geographers, as there is the concept of geographic alphabetization, meaning: "the capacity of understanding and utilising geographic knowledge to understand our environment" (Trigo and Ondoño 2023, p. 121). The usage of Literature books in geographical learning has been done in Spain, as was the case of "Jack and the Magic Beans" and "Thumbelina", in the research of García et al. (2023). In their words: "We have started from a constructivist methodology, with project-based learning." Using the above-mentioned tales, "we have learned geographical concepts, among them: relief, climate, soil, flora, fauna." As to teaching, tales "improved students (…) understanding of the world around them and the relationships between man and the environment" (Trigo and Ondoño 2023, p. 242).

Cultural landscapes are, on the other hand, part of landscape research in geography, traditionally divided into physical and human geography. The "European Landscape Convention, of the Council of Europe, (…) underlines the dual nature of landscape,

both the physical reality as a result of the action and interaction of human and natural factors, and the spatial representation we make of the landscape itself" (Kratochvíl et al. 2023, p. 610). In this paper, cultural landscapes are built-up by the observer, a detailed construction, using written words, photography or drawings. Depending on the quality of the observer, the formation and information of the writer, cultural landscapes can be richer or poorer. Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen had remarkable observation powers and thus her poems are quite good sources of landscape research.

Literature landscapes are representations of natural or human landscapes, idealised or not by the writer. Natural landscapes are original, untouched environments composed of landforms (mountains, valleys, plains), water bodies (lakes, rivers, seas), and native vegetation. Human landscapes have men and women intervention. In case of flora, exotic species were introduced along time. Thus, the landscapes described (…), the real and the symbolic, are cultural landscapes. This contribution emphasizes the places mentioned in Sophia's verses; some are places she visited and immediately wrote about, (Greek landscapes); other places where she travelled along her life (Brasilia) and that she remembers in her rhymes. Flora is omnipresent and thus it is to flowers and fruits, trees and bushes that we give utmost attention, analysing the context in which they are mentioned, as they are integral parts of cultural landscapes.

## Sophia's Biography

Sophia was born in the northern city of Porto (Figure 1), to an aristocratic family and was sent to study Classic Literature at the University of Lisbon (1936-1939). In an unedited beginning of her life memories, that she never finished, here is an excerpt of her childhood, as published by her daughter, Maria Andresen (2016):

> *"I was born in Porto.*
> *There were the enormous linden trees, the foggy mornings, (…) platanus and cherry trees, camellias. (…)*
> *There was the river, the cascaded houses, the boats floating close to the marginal road, during the winter cold coloured afternoons".*
> *(…) We heard Mahler before the time when Mahler became fashionable. (…).*
> *We read Proust, the medieval Songs of Friendship, Horacio, Goethe, Rilke, Lorca".*
> *Because I was born in Porto, I know the names of the flowers and the trees (…)"*
> *"A Casa Desmedida*" or Organised House (2016, p. 4) – Author's translation.

**Figure 1.** *Riverine Northern Portuguese City of Porto*

*Source:* Portogalist (2025).

In 1944 she published her first poetry book. According to the National Library record, she has published a total of twelve (12) books, all deposited there (BN 2025). Her work has been translated into such languages as Italian, French, English and Mandarin (University of Aveiro 1998). As written by her in 1988, to be recited at Sorbonne University, "before I knew how to read, I heard the ancient Portuguese poem *Nau Catrineta*" (Andresen 1989, p. 76).

> *"There goes the Portuguese ship*
> *That has a lot to tell us*
> *Listen now, gentlemen*
> *Its remarkable story*
>
> *One more year and one day*
> *And it was still navigating*
> *Nothing to eat there is anymore"*
> Almeida Garrett (1851) "*Nau Catrineta*" from "*Romanceiro*" – Author's translation.

So, Sophia first learnt how to recite oral tradition related to the History of Portuguese navigations. She wrote that she thought poems weren't written by people but told tales the world produced by itself. That's again a measure of the importance of geography in her young mind. Earth was a divine entity, placed above all things and people. "I also thought that, if I could sit still and quiet in certain mythical places of the garden, I would be able to listen to those poems" (Andresen 1989, p. 76). The importance of gardens and of silence in literature was enforced with her attraction for travelling, around Greece (Figure 2). "One day at

Epidaurus – making good use of silence left by tourist's lunch break – I placed myself in the centre of the theatre and recited out loud the beginning of a poem" …:

> "*My voice climbs the last steps*
> *And I hear the impersonal word flying*
> *That I recognize being not my own, anymore*"
> (Andresen 1989, "*Ilhas*" or Islands, p. 76) – Author's translation.

It must be emphasized that her youth garden is now the Botanical Garden of the University of Porto (Melo 2014). According to Cortez (2013) the challenges of Sophia's lifetime, marked by dictatorship (1926-1974) and wars (the 2nd world war and Portuguese colonial war) required not only an answer using the aesthetic but also the ethics of social conscience. Having married a lawyer (1946) engaged in defending prisoners of conscience, her life had plenty of experience with people in need of both financial and human rights aid. She was from Danish descent, and she received several national and international prizes, including the prestigious Camões (1999). She was deputy to the Portuguese Parliament, during the period of 1975-76, one of the 19 ladies elected and the only one that presided a commission charged with writing the Constitution, following the Carnation Revolution (1974).

## Results and Discussion

Figure 1 was placed above (Sophia's biography) to illustrate better her words from the unedited memories (Andresen 2016). The river is Douro, a water body where the city of Porto (Portuguese word that means port) was developed through times, on a mountainous slope, thus there are "cascaded houses", a river where "the boats float", and on the margin is "the riverside road" where cars and a tram circulate. Her observations are accurate, as the reader can see for himself on the photo caption. Landscape geography is present in the observation of river movement (water body), the built-up spaces (the houses), whereas the flora is named accurately, "linden trees, (…) platanus and cherry trees, camellias". Sophia explains also that "because I was born in Porto, I know the names of the flowers and the trees". No argument about that given attribute of any person that was born in this northern Portugal city.

Next the poet states: "before I knew how to read, I heard the ancient Portuguese poem Nau Catrineta" (Andresen 1989, p. 76). History as knowledge is not an objective of this research, but here it is clearly written by her, why Sophia's poems are charged with this focus on time, as her upbringing was a construction of both literature and history studies. It gives us good information about her memory skills also, as her memory was trained from a very young age, even before learning to read and write. That attribute was quite important for acquisition of geographical skills related to flora observation and vernacular name cataloguing.

The third message, while interpreting her written words comes from the third quotation from her short biography analysis, the Epidaurus theatre: I "recited aloud the beginning of a poem" and, further on: "My voice climbs the last steps, And I hear the impersonal word flying". Fieldwork in geography, nowadays, recognizes the requirement to observe the landscape as the need to hear all the sounds around

the observer. The Brazilian geographer Frias examines this requirement in his work entitled "Fieldwork in Geography: Fundamental characteristics and an invitation to listen" (Frias 2019). The poet Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, a non-geographer, practiced both abilities when she travelled, the usage of the eyes (observation) and of the ears (listening). Then, again, she told us in her unedited memories: "We heard Mahler before the time when Mahler became fashionable". Sophia's trained ears heard Classical music as much as environmental noises (birds, tourist voices, the sound of silence, and that of her own voice).

Gusmão (2005) has analysed the book of poems "Geography" (1967) where he found that her poems were written images of the world. The clear sky of Mediterranean seas and remarkable places as Greek beaches or monumental theatres (see Figure 2), appears described frequently in her lyrics, mingled with mythological figures, in clear contrast with the Northern European cloudy skies. Among her poems are Epidaurus, as said, a place in history and in geography that repeats itself in the 1967 "Geography" and in her "Islands" book of poems (1989). As Martelo (2005) drew attention to the chaos of the minotaur where she contraposes the order of things in her written words. And order is freedom whereas disorder is anarchy.

Her verses look for order and repel or reject all tendency for injustice, as to be fair to people is to abide with law. A law that is just, not oppressive to the living beings. That's why Sophia was engaged politically during all her existence. Macé (2013) wrote a long thesis about Nature in the Greek classics, from the Homeric Iliad and the Odyssey to Plato and Aristotle, noticing that the skies and earth, the gods and men were subject to order. Martelo (2005) analysed this issue about Sophia's writings on the minotaur tale that she wrote in her rhymes during a voyage to Crete. However, Sophia's attraction for order stems from her classical literature studies and is present in several poems. It must be stressed that her poetry is written according to the canons of literature, in itself a good way to organize words and ideas altogether.

It is under Martelo's (2005) lens that one can understand her poem about Brasilia, that Sophia compares to city and order in Greece:

*"Brasília*
*Drawn by Lúcio Costa, Niemeyer and Pythagoras*
*Logic and lyric*
*Greek and Brazilian*
*Ecumenic*
*Proposing to all men and races*
*The universal essence of just forms*
*Brasilia (…)*
*Clear like Babylon*
*Tall like the trunk of a palm tree …*
"*Geografia*" or Geography (2004, p. 80) – author's translation.

**Figure 2.** *Epidaurus Theatre Located about 130 km of Athens, Greece*

*Source*: https://turistaprofissional.com/teatro-de-epidauro-grecia/.

The last verse has driven us to the recurrent issue in Sophia's poems: the flora. The verses reflect the preferred places to write – her gardens. Used in metaphors and periphrases, a total of 30 different plants is mentioned in the 3 poetry books selected for this essay (see Table 1 in the Appendix). But returning to Brasilia, this city drawn by the urbanist Lúcio Costa, using square and rule to design an orderly third capital of Brazil, favourably impressed Sophia. Located in the inner and dry highlands, Brasilia was designed to meet the needs for shelter of about half a million fonctionnaires that would work for government, the judicial system and for parliament, following the abandonment of the mundane Rio de Janeiro. All residents should inhabit regularly conceived neighbourhood units and modernist apartment blocks. The centre of work drawn by the famous Oscar Niemeyer was the *three powers core* of Brasilia. There, like hands open to the sky, Niemeyer drew the cathedral (see Figure 3).

The spectacular architecture of the Catholic cathedral reminds us of another book of poems written twenty years earlier and another plant, a biblical one (Revelation 8: 3-4), incense:

> *"The hand that places the flower in a jar*
> *The hand that lightens incense*
> *The hand that unrolls the tapestry*
> *The hand that sings and makes music out of harp… "*
> *"Ilhas"* or Islands (2004, p. 14) – author's translation.

About Brazil, Sophia was proud to make a trip from Brasilia (Madaleno 1996) to Rio de Janeiro. Sophia de Mello also wrote about a good Brazilian friend, Helena Lanari:

"*I like to hear Brazilian Portuguese Idiom*
*Where words recuperate their total substance*
*(…) When Helena Lanari said 'the coconut tree'*
*The coconut tree became much more vegetable*"
"*Geografia*" or Geography (1989) – author's translation.

Plants and gardens were recurrent in her verses, as said, and Sophia enjoyed the peace and tranquillity of green spaces to write her poetry, as stated. As Imamkhodjaeva (2026) stressed, the "philosophy of Epicureanism, arguing that its emphasis on ataraxia (tranquillity)" are essential not only for hedonism but also for sustainable venues, as gardens, where one can feel safe and reliable for artistic production. Imamkhodjaeva (2026) wrote that "Epicurus himself cultivated a small, self-sufficient community". What we want to emphasize is that several notable painters preferred flora, water and forests for inspiration. It was the case with impressionists, like Monet, and poets like Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, that often looked for the serenity of blue and green spaces to feel the "angel". The angel is perceived by many Catholics as the inspiration of "divine voices", for clarity and orientation necessary for creativity in general, and writing poems, in particular (Lourenço 2004). This drives us to the next discussion of flora in Sophia's verses.

**Figure 3.** *Cathedral of Brasilia, Located on the Central Axis of the Capital of Brazil*

*Source*: Author's Photo (2008).

**Flora Location in Sophia de Mello's Poems**

The thirty plants identified in Sophia's verses belong to twenty-two different families. The most abundant family is Rosaceae, 13.3%, belonging to four genders: *Malus*, *Prunus*, *Rosa* and *Rubus* (Flora 2026). Poaceae follows, registering 10%, with three genders: *Bambusa*, *Triticum* and *Oryza*. The third group constitutes about 6.7% each, and possesses three separate genders: 1) Arecaceae, the Coconut and *Palmae*; 2) Pinaceae, the *Pinus* and the *Cedar*; 3) Malvaceae presents the genders *Tilia* (European) and *Ceiba* (Africa and America). All the remainder present a unique gender and species, giving the flora named in Sophia's poems a remarkable diversity.

Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen has travelled throughout the world and wrote poems about remote places like the "Prince" island, that before 1975 still belonged to Portugal, as one of the African colonies or overseas territories.

> *"I've arrived later amid the noise of the airplane*
> *On a brusque speed*
> *But I also had the opportunity to bathe on the waves*
> *Of the beautiful beaches of the genesis*
> *And crossed the greenery of the forest*
> *And I've smelled the scent of recently cut ocá*
> "*Ilhas*" or Islands (2004, p. 73) – Author's translation.

Ocá is *Ceiba pentandra*, a known tropical forest tree (Rivers and Mark 2017), that Sophia enjoyed as much as the paradisiac beaches of the Prince Island (see Figure 4). Regarding the flowers, the vernaculars vary from Japanese *camellias* (*Kimono of camellias*) to Portuguese *lilies* (*on a plane where lilies grow*), *magnolias* (*beauty as carnal as magnolia*), *narcissus* (*narcissus undulate*), the childhood *Linden* trees (see Figure 5) and Greek *roses* (*venom from the most ancient June rose*).

As to fruits the array of vernaculars are: apples (*There is a wooden and apple like flavour*); blackberries (*light like blackberry spreads westwards*); cherries (*I left a scissor forgotten within the cherry tree branches*); coconuts, the tree already cited about Brasilia; coffee beans (*coffee has the powder of the Turquish*); figs (city with some fig trees); and *grapes* (*I touch the shadow of a fresh vineyard*). Let's contextualise better her verses in Table 1 (Appendix):

1) Apples that Sophia mentions were seen and tasted in the northern Portuguese city of Amarante (Islands 1989, p. 58). 2) Blackberries were observed in Greece, on the Gulf of Corinth landscapes, whenever she travelled around Greece (Geography 1967, p. 62). 3) Cherries were named in a poem about the Brazilian poet Manuel Bandeira and are an analogy with one scissor forgotten within the tree branches, in her youth garden of Porto (Geography 1967, p. 78). 4) The coconut was a metaphor for Brasilia's buildings, used in the poem she wrote (Geography 1967, pp. 80–81). 5) Coffee is mentioned in a poem about Greece, written on unnamed island (Islands 1989, p. 47). 6) The fig and fig trees appear during a voyage to Greece (Geography 1967, p. 65). 7) Ocá is associated with Prince Island, as said (Islands 1989, p. 73). 8) Linden tree is named in her summer poem about Lagos, Algarve, where Sophia had a house (Geography 1989, p. 95).

**Figure 4.** *Ceiba Pentandra, the Ocá*

*Source:* Author's photo (2013).

**Figure 5.** *Linden Tree from Sophia's Childhood*

*Source:* Author's photo (2013).

Concerning food, Sophia names several staples like wheat (*The clarity of the wheat on her face*) or rice (*Teeth shine as rice grains*). This cereal appears on verses about Spain, Santiago de Compostela (Islands 1989, p. 24). Rice on the contrary is

only used to signal the white smile of a person, whilst no specific oriental location is presented (Islands 1989, p. 13). Wooden trees, such as pines (*Do not forget Thasos nor Egina, the pinewood…),* are named when describing Portuguese and Greek landscapes (Geography 1967, p. 68 and Day of the Sea 2003, p. 10). Regarding poplar (*The face like poplar at moonlight*), no specific location is presented, even though it is a very common tree in Portugal. Sandalwood (*the bed made of sandal*) is the mere observation of an exhibition of oriental artifacts. On the same museum exhibition, Sophia wrote a verse about magnolias, also an exotic tree from Portuguese gardens (*Beauty as carnal as magnolia and its fruit*) that in her poem is related to the Orient (Islands 1989, p. 63).

As to spices Sophia recurrently names oreganos (Figure 6), reminding her of Southern Portuguese Algarve, where she and her family spent summer in a house located in Lagos (Geography 1967, pp. 9–10, 94). Last, but not least, vineyards and wine are named over and again in Mediterranean places (*Resin wine from fresh vines,* on a poem about Athens, from the book Islands 1989, p. 47). It is also mentioned in verses about Pompey, when travelling around Italy (Geography 1989, p. 69). Not to forget Portugal, when dedicating a poem to Cesario Verde, (*He loved vineyards, and wheat fields*), in her book entitled Islands (Andresen 1989, p. 66).

**Figure 6.** *Oregano (Origanum vulgare) from Sophia's Poems*


*Source:* Botanical Garden of Montevideo, Uruguay (Author's Photo 2011).

All these vernaculars drive us to locations, meaning the geographies of her life, where Portugal and Portuguese gardens are detached as locations of tranquillity, where she liked to stroll and sit, having written her poems there. Northern Portugal is also named, Amarante (apples and apple trees), Porto and her youth garden (*boxwood,*

*roses and linden trees*). Mediterranean countries, such as Italy (*I touch the shadow of a fresh vineyard*), Greece (*The silence of grapes and of wheat*) and Cyprus (*the clarity of the wheat on her face*) are recurrent in Sophia's poetry. Spain appears in a poem to Santiago of Compostela (*It has the sweetness of the wheat*), as commented.

The Middle East and the Asian Oriental environments are cited when wondering along museum corridors, whereas observing statues (*Beauty as carnal as magnolia and its fruit*), paintings (*A country of tigers and palm trees*) or (*Roses flowering in Persian gardens*), and Screens (*Kimono of camellias*). This drives us to perfumes, like nard (*Secret flavour of rose and nard*), roses (*venom from the most ancient June rose*), and again oregano (*the perfume of oregano invades happiness*). Let's examine some more poems:

> *"Nambam screens tell us*
> *The merry story of navigation*
> *Stunned people suddenly*
> *Encountered face to face"*
> *"Ilhas"* or Islands (1989, p. 60) - Author's translation.

In fact, history books show that the Portuguese Jesuits were the first to reach Japan, having the aim of converting extreme-orient people. As written in Portuguese Chronicles, by earlier colonization authors, such as de Couto: "From the Islands of Sunda" and from Ceylon the Portuguese brought cinnamon. Regarding the spices islands: "at the door of Ternate fortress is a beautiful tree named catopa (…) that looks like the European chestnut (1778, volumes 4, 5 and 8). By the way, catopa in English is known as Tropical Almond or Indian Almond. So, Portuguese navigators not only discovered the maritime route to India, looking for oriental spices in need to preserve food, but they went Eastwards towards the Chinese seas, because the caravan's route was distraught by the Ottoman Empire expansion (1299-1922). The discovery of Japan by Europeans is dated to 1543 when three Portuguese landed on the island of *Tanega Shima* "During approximately one century (and until the "Edict of Exclusion" of foreigners) the two countries maintained intense commercial relations" (MNE 2025, p. 1).

## Flora Location Along Time in Sophia de Mello's Poems

Portugal, and in particular, northern Portugal, is described in the 1947 book but not absent from the later ones, as in Sophia's letter to Maria do Carvalhal Alvito:

> *Dear Maria – suddenly the thinness*
> *Of this first cold mixed*
> *with the flavour of wood and apples*
> *(…) I come inside your house, and you are my shelter*
> Written in Lisbon, 1986, and published in "Ilhas" or Islands, 1989, p. 58.

The earlier book "Day of the Sea" contains a total of six plant names: roses (3); pine trees (4); lilies (2); narcissus (1); boxwood (1); and cactus (1). The book presents

several poems about Greek mythology, and about paintings such as a Michel Angelo drawing:

"*From human chaos, confuse and hostile,*
*Miraculously appears your profile*"
"*Dia do Mar*" or Day of the Sea, 1947, p. 30 - Author's translation.

This excerpt shows how she did not appreciate anarchy or chaos, preferring instead contemporary ideology, the beauty, harmony and order of her aligned verses. Sophia wrote about the Portuguese poet Camões, another Classic culture admirer, even though in the 16th century poets used Greek culture as part of the canons of Renaissance (Madaleno 2025a), whilst in Sophia it is owed to her Classic literature education (Macé 2013). However, this paper will not explore the Classics in Sophia's poetry as Geography and landscapes are the object of the paper. Several poems are about Lagos, during her trips to Algarve, in southern Portugal as much as, again, about Greeks Kassandra, Medeia, Eurydice and even Roman Catilina, in this beautiful sonnet:

"*I am solitary and never lie*
*I've torn all vanity piece by piece*
*And walk fearlessly and without lies*
*At the crepuscular light of my instinct*"
"Dia do Mar" or Day of the Sea, 1947, p. 44 – Author's translation.

Thus, any mythological or historical figure that could remind her about the sea (Tristan and Isolde) was edited in this Day of the Sea, written after the Second World War:

"*The waves broke one by one*
*I was alone with the sand and the foam*
*Of the sea that sang only for me"*
*"Dia do Mar",* 1947, p. 9 - Author's translation.

The sea, both the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea are, however, mingled with gardens, pines and roses: "*The garden is brilliant and flowery* (…) *It is the acid and multicoloured May* "(p. 17). Pines are particularly praised, as we have noticed:

*"One day dead, wasted, we will return*
*To live freely like animals*
*And even if we are tired, we will flourish*
*Brothers living from the sea and pine trees it finishes with*"
"Dia do Mar" or Day of the Sea, 1947, p. 57 - Author's translation.

Angels and gods are intertwined with landscapes, lost Edens and leaves, light, wind and shadows. It's poetry, rhythmic and colourful.

"*Among countries and landscapes*
*They walk towards images*
*And the earth hugs them warmly*

*Members made of flesh and leaves*"
"Dia do Mar" or Day of the Sea, 1947, p. 32 - Author's translation.

Regarding the 1967 book, called "Geography" (II. In Table 1), it names a total of fourteen (14) plants: lilies (1); oreganos (3); fig trees (2); cypress (3); roses (3); cedars (1); pine trees (1); laurel (1); palm trees (4); coconut trees (2); vineyards (4); wheat (1); blackberries (1); and thistle (1). The poem that mentions more *taxa* is in page 57:

"*There, then, in the ancient world*
*Shadowed by the cypress and the vineyards*
*Looking at the long wavery seas*
*In a silence of moons and of wheat*"

*(…) In a perfume of wine and roses*
*(…) Everything is so close to the seas*
*As it was in the first day of creation*"
"*Geografia*" or Geography (1967, p. 57) – Author's translation.

As to the "Islands" book (1989), Sophia lists the biggest number of flora genders, eighteen *taxa*: rice (1); incense(1); bamboos (1); poplar (1); wheat (2); pine trees (2); sandalwood (1); lilies (1); palm trees (1); *ocá* (1); linden trees (1); roses (1); nard (2); coffee (1); vineyards (2); apples (1); camellias (1); and magnolias (1). By contrast, in this book, the most beautiful rhymes do not mention flowers, but coastal Mediterranean Sea cities:

*"Inside this room or in another one*
*Like a Carpaccio on the streets of Venice*
*Second image is a surprise whisper*
*As are the streets of Venice"*
"*Ilhas*" or Islands, 1989, p. 23 – Authors translation.

*"They went together to Olympia, the place of athletes*
*To where they belonged*
*Their large shoulders and narrow hips*
*Their slender, thick strength swinging*
*And the narrow forefront like veal"*
"Ilhas" or Islands, 1989, p. 38 – Authors translation.

In fact, the light of the southern European historical sites was among Sophia's preferences and thus all poetry books refer to these Italian or Greek locations she admired. Regarding plants, let's appreciate the roses and nards, the biblical perfume with which Maria Madalena anointed Jesus Christ (Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8):

*"Large long, sweet horizons*
*The unfolded light of sunset*
*A scent of beach on the city streets*
*Secret flavour of rose and nard burns"*

"*Ilhas*", 1989, p. 46 – Authors translation.

That reminds us of another species mentioned in the Bible, the *lilies* and another Poetry book Sophia published earlier:

*"My hope inhabits*
*On the wind and mermaids –*
*It is the fantastic blue of dawn*
*And the lily of the sands*"
"*Dia do Mar*" or Day of the Sea, 1947, p. 95.

## Conclusion

The research question was: Can poetry books also become objects of research in Geography? The answer is affirmative. Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen has travelled throughout the world and wrote poems about remote places from Africa, landscapes from Brazil and mostly about Southern European gardens, beaches, theatres. She wrote both about cities and rural areas. Her landscapes were seen in space and imagined through time. The geographies of her life are in these three books of poetry, and one can recognize modern landscapes and flora species in her rhymes. Gardens were the places of the angel, where tranquillity and Greek mythology met her. Inspiration also came from looking at the sea, both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean, in her country, Portugal or in southern Europe, not to forget the tropical Prince Island or Brazil.

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## Appendix

**Table 1.** *Flora Mentioned in Three of Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen Books*

| Vernaculars *(Portuguese)* | Botanical Names | Excerpt Text Books (I, II, III) | Places | Pages |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Apple *(Maçã)* | *Malus domestica* L. ROSACEAE | I. There is a wooden and apple like flavour | Portugal: Amarante city | 58 |
| 2. Bamboo *(Bambu)* | *Bambusa mitis* (Lour.) Poir. POACEAE | I. The colloquium of bamboos went silent | Orient and Middle-East | 14 |
| 3.Blackberry *(Amoras)* | *Rubus ulmifolius* var. *ulmifolius* Shott ROSACEAE | II. A light like blackberry spreads westwards | Greece: Gulf of Corinth | 62 |
| 4. Boxwood *(Buxo)* | *Buxus sempervirens* L. BUXACEAE | III. Boxwood Garden | Portugal | 20 |
| 5. Cactus *(Catos)* | CACTACEAE | III. Twisted Cactus a thousand ways | Portugal | 10 |
| 6. Camellias *(Camélias)* | *Camellia* sp. THEACEAE | I. Kimono of camellias | Japan | 60 |
| 7. Cedar of Lebanon *(Cedro)* | *Cedrus libani* Subspecie *Libani* A. Rich. PINACEAE | II. Swallows the blue cedars and the vines | Portugal | 39 |
| 8. Cherry tree *(Cerejeira)* | *Prunus avium* L. ROSACEAE | II. When I left a scissor forgotten within the cherry tree branches | Brazil (to the poet Manuel Bandeira) | 78 |
| 9. Coconut tree *(Coqueiro)* | *Cocos nucifera* L. ARECACEAE | II. the skyscraper has the delicate thinness of a coconut tree. | Brazil: Brasília | 80 81 |
| 10. Cypress *(Cipreste)* | *Cupressus sempervirens* L. CUPRESSACEAE | II. The cypress contemplated its own silence | Portugal: Algarve | 22 35 57 |
| 11. Incense *(Incenso)* | *Boswelia sacra* Flueck. BURSERACEAE | I. The hand that lightens incense. | Middle-East | 14 |
| 12. Coffee *(Café)* | *Coffea arabica* L. RUBIACEAE | I. "The coffee has the powder of the Turkish" | Greece | 47 |
| 13. Fig tree *(Figueira)* | *Ficus carica* L. MORACEAE | II. The city with some fig trees<br>II. The sweetness of the day opens the fig | Portugal: Algarve<br>Greece Crete | 11<br>65 |
| 14. Kapok *(Ocá)* | *Ceiba pentandra* (L.) Gaertn MALVACEAE | I. I've smelled the scent of recently cut *ocá* | Ilha do Príncipe (Prince) | 73 |
| 15. Laurel *(Loureiro)* | *Laurus nobilis* L. LAURACEAE | II. Phebo no longer possesses the shack nor the prophetic laurel | Greece | 71 |
| 16. Lilies *(Lírios)* | *Lilium longiflorum* Thunb. LILIACEAE | II. So I brough lilies with me<br>III. On a plane where lilies grow | Portugal: Igrina (Algarve) Portugal | 9<br>95 |
| 17. Linden tree | *Tilia tomentosa* Moench | I. The whisper of | | |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| *(Tílias)* | MALVACEAE | Linden trees close to the house of childhood.<br>II. Perfume of linden and oregano. | Portugal<br><br>Algarve: Lagos | 37<br><br>95 |
| 18. Magnolia (*Magnólia*) | *Magnolia* sp. MAGNOLIACEAE | I. Beauty as carnal as magnolia and its fruit (1987) | Orient (Statue of Buda) | 63 |
| 19.Narcissus *(Narciso)* | *Narcissus* sp. AMARYLLIDACEAE | III. Narcissus undulate | Portugal | 20 |
| 20. Nard or spikenard *(Nardo)* | *Nardostachys jatamansi* (D.Don) DC. CAPRIFOLIACEAE | III. Secret flavour of rose and nard | City smell with scent | 46 |
| 21. Oregano *(Orégão)* | *Origanum vulgare* L. LABIACEAE | II. The perfume of oregano invades happiness<br>II. The perfume of oregano inhabits the wall.<br>The perfume of oregano | Portugal<br><br>Algarve<br><br>Lagos | 9<br><br>10<br><br>94 |
| 22. Palm trees *(Palmeiras)* | Palmae sp. ARECACEAE | I. A country of tigers and palm trees<br>II. In a paper noise the wind blows the palm tree<br><br>Tall like the trunk of a palm tree | Orient<br><br>Portugal<br><br>Brazil: Brasília | 72<br><br>53<br>54<br><br>80 |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| 23. Pinus tree *(Pinhal e pinho)* | *Pinus* sp. PINACEAE | I. Do not forget Thasos nor Egina, the pinewood…<br>I. His face looks like pinewoods shades and sorrows<br><br>II. Late in autumn under pine trees from Adriana<br><br>III. Here and there, thin and straight pine trees<br><br>Landscape of Pine trees and hills<br><br>The greenery of pinewoods, the voice of the sea<br>III. Each pine | Ancient world and lack of humanity. Teixeira de Pascoais revisited (Portugal)<br><br>Greece<br><br>Portugal | 16<br><br>25<br><br>68<br><br>10<br><br>48<br><br>57<br><br>75 |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | contained … the explanation for all heroes | | |
| 24. Poplar *(Choupo)* | *Populus alba* L. SALICACEAE | I. The face like poplar at moon light | Portugal | 35 |
| 25. Rice *(Arroz)* | *Oryza sativa* L. POACEAE | I. The teeth shine as rice grains | Orient | 13 |
| 26. Roses *(Rosas)* | *Rosa* sp. L. ROSACEAE | I. Secret flavour of rose and nard | City smell | 46 |
| | | II. the rose bushes' leaves | Portugal | 39 |
| | | II. venom from the most ancient June rose | Greece | 74 |
| | | III. Roses flowering in Persian gardens | Persia | 16 |
| 27. Sandalwood *(Sândalo)* | *Santalum album* L. SANTALACEAE | I. The bed made of sandal | Orient | 13 |
| 28. Thistle *(Cardo)* | *Silybum marianum (L.) Gaertn.* ASTERACEAE | II. The thistle flourishes over day clarity | Greece Creete | 65 |
| 29. Vineyards *(Vinho e Uvas)* | *Vitis vinifera* L. VITACEAE | I. Resin wine from fresh vines. | Greece | 47 |
| | | II. Perfume of wine and roses | Portugal: | 57 |
| | | II. I touch the shadow of a fresh vineyard | Italy: Pompey | 69 |
| 30. Wheat *(Trigo)* | *Triticum* sp. POACEAE | I. It has the sweetness of the wheat | Spain: Santiago of Compostela | 24 |
| | | I. The clarity of the wheat on her face | Cyprus | 28 |
| | | II. The silence of grapes and of wheat | Greece | 57 |

*Source:* I. Ilhas or Islands (1989); II. Geografia or Geography (1967); III. Dia do Mar or Day of the Sea (1947).

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# The Transmutation of Kufic Script in the Mediterranean: Artistic Appropriation and Institutional Identity (10th to 15th Centuries)

*By Seyed Salam Fathi**

*This paper examines the transformation of Arabic Kufic script and its Pseudo-Kufic derivatives in Byzantine and Italian art between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, arguing that this transmutation was not a merely decorative phenomenon but a conscious act of cultural translation and symbolic appropriation. Drawing on frameworks of cultural hybridity and aesthetic appropriation, and employing a comparative iconographic methodology complemented by epigraphic and stylistic analysis, the study examines representative works from Norman Sicilian, Byzantine, and Italian contexts, including the Arabic epigraphic program of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, the decoration of Monreale Cathedral, and Italian paintings depicting Pseudo-Kufic motifs on sacred garments and halos by Giotto, Masaccio, and Mantegna. The analysis identifies luxury textiles and portable objects as the primary vectors through which Kufic forms migrated into Christian artistic media, and demonstrates that the boundary between authentic inscription and ornamental imitation functioned as a variable and deliberately exploited threshold rather than a fixed distinction. Through processes of imitation, stylisation, and reconfiguration, Kufic script became a visual idiom of sanctity and institutional legitimacy. The paper concludes that Pseudo-Kufic ornamentation constituted a deliberate ideological strategy through which medieval institutions negotiated power and identity across the multilingual and multi-confessional societies of the medieval Mediterranean.*

**Keywords:** *Kufic script; Pseudo-Kufic; cultural appropriation; Norman Sicily; Byzantine art*

## Introduction

The ceiling of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, commissioned by the Norman king Roger II in the twelfth century, presents one of the most arresting visual puzzles of the medieval Mediterranean. Painted by Muslim craftsmen and decorated with Arabic inscriptions, the ceiling of this royal Christian chapel does not conceal its Islamic character but rather displays it with evident pride and deliberateness. The Arabic texts that run across its surface proclaim the glory of a Christian king in a script whose authority derived from its intimate association with the Quran and with centuries of Islamic political power. That a Norman ruler, governing a predominantly Christian kingdom, would commission such a program was not an act of confusion or aesthetic indifference but a carefully considered institutional strategy, one whose logic extended far beyond the walls of a single royal chapel.

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The appearance of Kufic and Pseudo-Kufic script across the medieval Christian Mediterranean raises questions of enduring scholarly interest. From the mosaics of Monreale Cathedral to the painted halos in the frescoes of Giotto, Masaccio, and Mantegna, Arabic script forms migrated across artistic media, geographic boundaries, and religious traditions between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. In each of these contexts, the script underwent a process of visual and semantic transformation: from a vehicle of Quranic authority and Islamic political legitimacy to an ornamental idiom associated with sacred antiquity, cultural sophistication, and institutional prestige. Understanding this transformation requires attention not only to the formal properties of the script itself but also to the institutional contexts in which it was deployed and the cultural logics that made its appropriation both possible and desirable.

Existing scholarship has made substantial progress in documenting the presence of Kufic and Pseudo-Kufic forms in Christian art. Scholars working on Norman Sicily, Byzantine visual culture, and Italian painting have each illuminated important dimensions of this phenomenon. Yet the scholarship remains largely compartmentalised, with studies of Norman epigraphic programs, Byzantine ornamental decoration, and Italian painting rarely brought into sustained comparative dialogue. The semiotic and political dimensions of this transformation across these three traditions have not been examined together within a unified analytical framework. This paper addresses that gap by arguing that the transmutation of Kufic script into Pseudo-Kufic ornament was not a merely decorative phenomenon but a conscious act of cultural translation and symbolic appropriation, reflecting a broader and geographically differentiated process of intercultural communication across the medieval Mediterranean.

The argument proceeds in several stages. The paper first establishes the visual and symbolic authority of Kufic script within Islamic artistic tradition, providing the foundation necessary for understanding what was at stake when Christian artists and patrons adopted and transformed these forms. It then examines the Norman Sicilian context in detail, focusing on the Cappella Palatina and the Cathedral of Monreale as sites where the deployment of Arabic epigraphy constituted a deliberate program of institutional legitimation. From there, the analysis moves to Byzantine contexts, where Pseudo-Kufic ornament served different but related functions within ecclesiastical and imperial visual culture. The paper then turns to Italian painting, tracing the later migration of Kufic-derived forms into the work of Giotto, Masaccio, and Mantegna. A dedicated section examines the material vectors through which Kufic forms travelled across the Mediterranean, with particular attention to the role of luxury textiles and portable objects as agents of visual transmission. The concluding discussion draws these strands together to argue that Pseudo-Kufic ornamentation functioned across all of these contexts as a deliberate aesthetic and ideological strategy, one through which medieval institutions asserted sacred antiquity, negotiated cultural boundaries, and projected authority in ways that drew their power from the visual prestige of Islamic script.

## Literature Review

The scholarly study of Arabic script in Christian artistic contexts has a history stretching back to the mid-nineteenth century, though it was only in the latter decades

of the twentieth century that the field began to develop the comparative and theoretical sophistication that the subject demands. The foundational contribution came from Adrien de Longperier, whose article in the Revue Archeologique first drew systematic attention to the widespread appearance of Arabic-looking inscriptions in medieval Western Christian art.[55] Louis Courajod extended this observation, noting the recurrence of pseudo-Arabic forms across a range of European artistic media.[56] The survey by Spittle of Kufic lettering across a range of Christian artistic media extended this early documentation to additional geographic and material contexts, reinforcing the case for a widespread rather than isolated phenomenon.[57] These early studies, while pioneering in their identification of the phenomenon, were limited by the absence of a conceptual framework capable of explaining why Christian artists and patrons would adopt the visual conventions of Islamic script.

The decisive step towards a more analytically rigorous approach was taken by George C. Miles, whose study of Byzantine relations with the Arab world in Crete and the Aegean demonstrated that the presence of Arabic script-like motifs in Byzantine contexts was not a marginal curiosity but a widespread and historically significant phenomenon rooted in the sustained material and diplomatic contacts between the two civilisations.[58] Richard Ettinghausen developed this line of inquiry in his influential essay on what he termed Kufesque ornament in Byzantine Greece, the Latin West, and the Muslim world. Ettinghausen established the foundational analytical distinction between genuine Kufic inscriptions incorporated into Christian objects through trade or diplomatic exchange and imitative Pseudo-Kufic forms independently generated by non-Islamic artists, arguing that these two phenomena required different explanatory frameworks.[59] His work set the agenda for much of the subsequent scholarship and remains an indispensable point of reference.

Studies of Norman Sicily produced some of the most detailed and methodologically sophisticated contributions to the field. Jeremy Johns devoted sustained attention to the Arabic epigraphic program of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, demonstrating that the Arabic inscriptions commissioned by Roger II and his successors were not merely decorative but constituted a coherent and politically charged visual program designed to project royal authority across the multilingual and multi-confessional population of the Norman kingdom.[60] Umberto Bongianino further illuminated the Norman Sicilian context through his detailed analysis of the Arabic opus sectile inscriptions from the palaces of Messina and Palermo, demonstrating strong stylistic affinities with North African epigraphic traditions and showing that Sicilian craftsmen sometimes

[55]De Longperier A (1845) De l'emploi des caracteres Arabes dans l'ornementation chez les peuples chretiens de l'occident. Revue Archeologique 2: 696-707.

[56]Courajod L (1876) Notes sur des inscriptions arabes ou pseudo-arabes. Bulletin de la Societe nationale des antiquaires de France XXXVII: 127-129.

[57]Spittle SD (1954) Cufic Lettering in Christian Art. The Archaeological Journal 111: 138-152.

[58]Miles GC (1964) Byzantium and the Arabs: Relations in Crete and the Aegean Area. Dumbarton Oaks Papers 18: 1-32.

[59]Ettinghausen R (1976) Kufesque in Byzantine Greece, the Latin West, and the Muslim World. In A Colloquium in Memory of George Carpenter Miles (1904-1975). New York: American Numismatic Society, pp. 28-47.

[60]Johns J (2014) Arabic Inscriptions in the Cappella Palatina: Performativity, Audience, Legibility and Illegibility. In Kaye W (ed) The Mediterranean and the World in the Middle Ages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 122-145.

reproduced Arabic letter forms through visual copying rather than scribal competence.[61] The textile dimension of Norman Arabic epigraphy has been examined by Ilse Dolezalek, whose study of Arabic inscriptions on the royal garments of the Norman court showed that inscribed textiles served as markers of dynastic prestige and intercultural authority.[62]

Within Byzantine studies, Silvia Pedone and Valentina Cantone provided the most sustained attempt to address Pseudo-Kufic ornament as a coherent phenomenon within Byzantine art, establishing analytical categories for understanding how these motifs appeared across architecture, manuscript decoration, and applied arts.[63] Nicholas Melvani extended this analysis through his investigation of Late Byzantine sculpture, arguing that Pseudo-Kufic motifs were deliberately positioned at liminal architectural points where their script-like appearance conveyed apotropaic and protective functions.[64] The work of Alicia Walker on a Byzantine bowl in the treasury of San Marco in Venice demonstrated with particular clarity that Byzantine patrons were active and sophisticated consumers of Islamic aesthetic authority, deploying pseudo-Arabic forms as deliberate visual statements rather than as confused imitations of a foreign tradition.[65]

The question of how Kufic forms were transmitted into Christian artistic contexts has received sustained attention from scholars working on material culture and luxury object circulation. Maria Vittoria Fontana argued that many instances of Pseudo-Kufic decoration in Italian and Byzantine wall painting can be traced to the visual conventions of woven textiles bearing Kufic inscriptions.[66] Emanuela Napolitano demonstrated that many forms previously dismissed as meaningless ornament contain recoverable Arabic words and phrases, suggesting that the transmission of Arabic epigraphic content was more semantically aware than earlier scholarship had assumed.[67] Anna Fein reached analogous conclusions through her examination of Kufic epigraphy in Norman Sicily and Ifriqiya, showing that inscriptions long categorised as Pseudo-Kufic are in fact authentic Kufic texts whose apparent illegibility results from the technical conditions of their manufacture.[68]

The theoretical frameworks through which scholars have approached cross-cultural artistic exchange in the medieval Mediterranean have also evolved considerably. The concept of cultural hybridity, introduced into medieval art historical discourse through the work of scholars such as Anthony Cutler and Antony Eastmond, has provided

[61]Bongianino U (2023) Le iscrizioni arabe in opus sectile dei palazzi normanni di Messina e Palermo. In Le iscrizioni in arabo del palazzo di Ruggero II a Messina, pp. 80-101.
[62]Dolezalek I (2017) Arabic Script on Christian Kings: Textile Inscriptions on Royal Garments from Norman Sicily. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
[63]Pedone S and Cantone V (2013) The Pseudo-Kufic Ornament and the Problem of Cross-Cultural Relationships Between Byzantium and Islam. Opuscula Historiae Artium 62 (Supplementum): 120-136.
[64]Melvani N (2018) Apotropeia and Ornament: Late Byzantine Sculpture and the Migration of Pseudo-Arabic Writing. Accademia Roveretana degli Agiati IX(VIII): 159-193.
[65]Walker A (2008) Meaningful Mingling: Classicizing Imagery and Islamicizing Script in a Byzantine Bowl. The Art Bulletin 90(1): 32-53.
[66]Fontana MV (2016) Kufic Ornamental Motifs in the Wall Paintings of Six Churches in Southern Italy. Journal of Humanities and Social Science 21(12): 56-73.
[67]Napolitano EG (2019) Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art. Bamberg: opus.
[68]Fein A (2024) Kufic Epigraphy between Norman Sicily and Ifriqiya. Muqarnas 40.

productive tools for moving beyond the implicit hierarchy of earlier scholarship.[69] Stephen Houston's contribution on pseudo-scripts in comparative perspective situated Byzantine and Italian Pseudo-Kufic within a broader human practice of invoking the authority of writing without making specific linguistic claims.[70] Notwithstanding this substantial body of scholarship, the semiotic and political dimensions of the Kufic-to-Pseudo-Kufic transformation have not been examined together across all three traditions within a unified analytical framework. The present paper addresses this gap by tracing the transmutation of Kufic script across these three interconnected contexts.

## Theoretical Framework

The analysis developed in this paper draws on three interrelated theoretical frameworks, each of which addresses a distinct dimension of the phenomenon under examination. Taken together, these frameworks provide the conceptual tools necessary for understanding how and why Kufic script was appropriated, transformed, and redeployed across such diverse institutional and geographic contexts in the medieval Mediterranean.

The first and most fundamental framework is that of cultural hybridity, as developed within postcolonial theory and subsequently adapted for the study of medieval artistic exchange. Applied to the study of Pseudo-Kufic decoration, this framework draws attention to the ways in which Christian artists and patrons did not passively receive or mechanically imitate Islamic visual forms but actively transformed them, producing something that belonged fully to neither tradition but constituted a distinctive visual language specific to the intercultural contact zones of the medieval Mediterranean. This perspective resists the implicit hierarchy of earlier scholarship, in which the Islamic tradition was treated as the active source of influence and the Christian tradition as its passive and derivative recipient. Instead, it foregrounds the agency of Christian institutional actors, royal courts, ecclesiastical patrons, and workshop traditions alike, as creative participants in a dynamic and multidirectional process of cultural exchange.

The second theoretical framework concerns the semiotics of script and the visual authority of writing. Scholars working at the intersection of art history and visual culture studies have increasingly recognised that inscriptions and script-like forms function not only as texts to be read but as visual objects to be seen, whose meaning and effect depend as much on their formal properties, material qualities, and spatial placement as on their linguistic content. This insight is particularly relevant for the study of Pseudo-Kufic decoration, where visual appearance clearly takes precedence over specific textual meaning. Where legible Kufic inscriptions communicated specific textual content to those who could read them, Pseudo-Kufic forms communicated a more diffuse but no less powerful set of associations with Islamic learning, sacred antiquity, and institutional authority to audiences who could

[69]Eastmond A (2015) Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[70]Houston S (2018) Writing that Is Not: Pseudo-Scripts in Comparative View. L'Homme 227-228: 21-48.

not. Stephen Houston's broader comparative framework for understanding pseudo-scripts across cultures further illuminates this dynamic.[71]

The third framework concerns the relationship between aesthetic appropriation and institutional legitimation. The concept of aesthetic appropriation, understood as the deliberate adoption of visual forms from one cultural tradition by institutional actors belonging to another, provides a more precise analytical tool than the broader concept of influence, since it directs attention to the intentionality and purposefulness of the process and to the specific institutional contexts in which it took place. When Roger II commissioned Arabic inscriptions for the Cappella Palatina, or when Giotto depicted Pseudo-Kufic script on the garments of sacred figures, these were not casual borrowings from an admired tradition but calculated visual strategies through which specific institutional claims were made and specific audiences addressed. These three frameworks, cultural hybridity, the semiotics of visual script, and aesthetic appropriation and institutional legitimation, are complementary and mutually reinforcing, providing a conceptual architecture within which the specific historical and artistic evidence examined in the following sections can be interpreted as a coherent and geographically differentiated process of institutional identity construction.

## Kufic script in Islamic art: origins, development, and visual authority

Any adequate account of the transmutation of Kufic script in Christian artistic contexts must begin with an understanding of what Kufic was, what it meant, and why it commanded the visual authority that made its appropriation so culturally significant. Kufic script, named after the city of Kufa in present-day Iraq, represents one of the earliest and most distinctive forms of Arabic calligraphy, characterised by its angular, rectilinear letterforms and its natural affinity for monumental inscription and decorative elaboration. From the earliest centuries of Islam, Kufic served not merely as a vehicle for written communication but as a powerful visual symbol of divine authority, religious identity, and political legitimacy. Its most prestigious application was the transcription of the Quran, a function that invested the script with a sacred character extending far beyond its linguistic content and that made the very appearance of Kufic letterforms a signal of divine presence and Islamic sanctity.[72]

The ornamental potential of Kufic script was recognised and systematically exploited by Islamic artists from an early period. As Sheila Blair has demonstrated in her landmark study of monumental inscriptions from early Islamic Iran and Transoxiana, the visual structure of Kufic letterforms invited elaboration and abstraction, with individual letters becoming increasingly stylised and interwoven with geometric and vegetal motifs to produce complex decorative programs that operated simultaneously as readable text and as pure visual ornament.[73] This dual function, at once linguistic and aesthetic, is central to understanding why Kufic forms proved so attractive to artists working in non-Islamic contexts. The script offered something that few other visual idioms could provide: a form that carried the weight of religious

[71]Ibid, 57-78.
[72]Ekhtiar MD (2018) How to Read Islamic Calligraphy. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
[73]Blair S (1992) The Monumental Inscriptions from Early Islamic Iran and Transoxiana. Leiden: Brill.

and political authority while simultaneously functioning as a highly adaptable decorative system whose formal properties could be appreciated independently of any knowledge of its linguistic content.

Kufic calligraphy was not a static or uniform tradition. Between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, it underwent significant and regionally differentiated formal development, producing a range of distinct epigraphic traditions whose visual character varied considerably across different parts of the Islamic world. Early angular Kufic gave way to increasingly elaborate variants: foliated Kufic, in which the terminals of letters sprout vegetal ornaments; plaited or interlaced Kufic, in which the vertical strokes of letters are woven into complex geometric patterns; and floriated Kufic, in which the entire inscription is embedded within a dense field of scrolling vegetation. Regional traditions developed their own distinctive characteristics, with Fatimid Egyptian epigraphy, Seljuk Anatolian inscription, North African Maghribi script, and the epigraphic conventions of Norman Sicily each displaying recognisable formal features.[74] This internal diversity has important implications for the study of Pseudo-Kufic decoration in Christian art, since it means that the visual models available to Christian artists were not uniform but varied considerably depending on the geographic location of the borrowing and the specific channels of transmission through which Kufic forms reached them.

The widespread use of Kufic script on Islamic luxury objects, including textiles, ceramics, metalwork, and ivory carvings, ensured that its visual authority extended far beyond specifically religious contexts. Kufic inscriptions on these portable objects frequently conveyed formulaic blessings, good wishes, and invocations of divine favour, phrases such as al-mulk (power or sovereignty), baraka (blessing), and al-yumn (good fortune) that recurred with remarkable consistency across different media and geographic contexts.[75] The circulation of these objects across the Mediterranean through trade, diplomacy, and gift exchange meant that Kufic script became familiar to Christian audiences not primarily through direct encounter with Islamic monumental architecture or manuscript production but through the handling and viewing of luxury goods within church treasuries, royal collections, and aristocratic households.

Zara Salim Kazani has further illuminated the symbolic dimensions of Kufic script through her analysis of geometric script patterns in medieval Islamicate societies, demonstrating that the formal properties of Kufic calligraphy were understood within Islamic culture itself as carriers of meaning that operated independently of legibility.[76] The geometric arrangement of Kufic letterforms was associated with cosmological order, divine harmony, and in some contexts with magical and talismanic functions, associations that were sufficiently widely understood across cultural and religious boundaries to have informed the ways in which Christian artists and patrons perceived and responded to Kufic-derived visual forms. When Pseudo-Kufic ornament appeared in Byzantine churches at liminal architectural points or on the garments of sacred figures in Italian painting, it drew on a reservoir of associations with divine authority, sacred

[74]Bonfante-Warren A, Clark C, Ratliff B, Evans HC and New A (2012) Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 7th-9th Century. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
[75]Ekhtiar MD (2018) How to Read Islamic Calligraphy. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
[76]Kazani ZS (2022) Thinking in Lines and Circles: Geometric Script Patterns and Visualization of Knowledge in Medieval Islamicate Societies (1100-1250 AD). PhD Thesis, University of Victoria.

power, and cosmic order that had been built up through centuries of Islamic artistic practice and that retained their evocative force even when the script had been transformed beyond the point of linguistic legibility.

**Figure 1.** *Quranic Inscription in floriated Kufic Script, Great Mosque of Cordoba, 10th Century*

*Source: by author*

The significance of this background for the argument of the present paper can hardly be overstated. When Christian institutional actors in Norman Sicily, Byzantium, and Italy appropriated Kufic-derived visual forms, they were not borrowing an empty ornamental system but engaging with a visual idiom whose authority was deeply embedded in the religious, political, and aesthetic culture of the Islamic Mediterranean. The transmutation of Kufic into Pseudo-Kufic was therefore never a simple matter of decorative imitation but always involved the selective mobilisation and reorientation of a complex set of cultural associations, a process whose specific character and institutional logic varied considerably across different Christian contexts and will be examined in the sections that follow.

## Norman Sicily: The Cappella Palatina, Monreale, and the Politics of Epigraphic Identity

Among the various contexts in which Kufic and Pseudo-Kufic script appeared in Christian art between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, Norman Sicily occupies a position of exceptional historical and analytical importance. The Norman kingdom of Sicily, established in the eleventh century through the conquest of an island that had been under Arab Muslim rule for over two centuries, was from its inception a

political entity defined by the coexistence and negotiation of multiple religious, linguistic, and cultural traditions. Arabic, Greek, and Latin were all in official use at the Norman court, and Muslim, Byzantine, and Western Christian craftsmen worked side by side in the service of rulers who recognised that the management of cultural diversity was not merely a practical necessity but a potent instrument of political power. It was within this exceptional institutional environment that the deployment of Kufic script in Christian artistic contexts reached its most systematic, deliberate, and politically sophisticated expression.

The Cappella Palatina in Palermo, commissioned by Roger II and consecrated in 1143, remains the most celebrated and analytically productive site for the study of Arabic epigraphy in a Christian institutional context. The chapel brings together Byzantine mosaics, Norman architectural forms, and an elaborately carved muqarnas ceiling painted by Muslim craftsmen with scenes of courtly life and Arabic inscriptions that celebrate the glory of the Norman king. The Arabic epigraphic program of the Cappella Palatina has been examined in detail by Jeremy Johns, whose analysis demonstrated that the inscriptions were not decorative afterthoughts but a coherent and carefully conceived visual program designed to address the multilingual and multi-confessional population of the Norman kingdom simultaneously.[77] The inscriptions proclaim royal authority in terms drawn from Islamic political vocabulary, presenting Roger II as a sovereign whose power extended across religious and cultural boundaries and whose court commanded the artistic and intellectual resources of multiple civilisations.

**Figure 2.** *Muqarnas Ceiling with Arabic Inscriptions, Cappella Palatina, Palermo, 12th Century*

*Source by author*

The relationship between authentic Kufic inscription and Pseudo-Kufic ornament within the Cappella Palatina itself is more complex than a simple binary distinction

[77]Johns J (2014) Arabic Inscriptions in the Cappella Palatina. In Kaye W (ed) The Mediterranean and the World in the Middle Ages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 122-145.

would suggest. While the ceiling inscriptions constitute genuine Arabic texts legible to those with the requisite linguistic competence, other areas of the chapel decoration display script-like forms whose relationship to specific textual content is considerably more ambiguous. This ambiguity was not accidental but reflected the deliberate exploitation of a visual threshold between the readable and the purely ornamental, a threshold whose productive indeterminacy allowed the same decorative program to communicate different things to different audiences. To the Arabic-literate members of the Norman court and the Muslim craftsmen who produced the inscriptions, the ceiling texts conveyed specific statements of royal authority. To Christian audiences without Arabic literacy, the same inscriptions communicated a more diffuse but no less powerful set of associations with Islamic learning, cultural sophistication, and the cosmopolitan ambitions of the Norman kingdom.[78]

The analysis of Kufic epigraphy in Norman Sicily has been further enriched by Umberto Bongianino's study of the Arabic opus sectile inscriptions from the palaces of Messina and Palermo, commissioned by Roger II between 1130 and 1154. Bongianino demonstrated that these inscriptions display strong stylistic affinities with the funerary stelae produced by the Khurasanid dynasty of Tunis during the same period, pointing to a direct channel of epigraphic transmission between the North African court and the Norman royal workshops.[79] Of particular significance for the argument of the present paper is Bongianino's observation that the Sicilian craftsmen who executed these inscriptions were in some cases evidently unfamiliar with the conventions of Arabic orthography, producing errors in diacritical placement and letter formation that reveal a process of visual copying rather than scribal competence. This finding illustrates with particular clarity the mechanisms through which authentic Kufic inscription could begin its transformation into Pseudo-Kufic ornament: not through ignorance or indifference but through the specific technical and institutional conditions of cross-cultural artistic production.

[78]Johns J (2015) Muslim Artists and Christian Models in the Painted Ceilings of the Cappella Palatina. In Romanesque and the Mediterranean. London: British Archaeological Association, pp. 59-89.
[79]Bongianino U (2023) Le iscrizioni arabe in opus sectile dei palazzi normanni di Messina e Palermo. In Le iscrizioni in arabo del palazzo di Ruggero II a Messina, pp. 80-101.

**Figure 3.** *Palermo, Regional Gallery of Sicily "Palazzo Abatellis": Fragmented Slabs with Arabic Inscriptions in Praise of Roger II, originating from the Royal Palace of Palermo; Opus Sectile in Red and Green Porphyry on White Marble: a) 191 × 32 × 6.5 cm; b) 184.5 × 32.7 × 4.8 cm. Source:* (Longo, 2025, p. 272).


The textile dimension of Kufic appropriation in Norman Sicily provides a further dimension of the institutional strategy under examination. Ilse Dolezalek's study of Arabic inscriptions on the royal garments produced in the Norman palace workshops of Palermo demonstrated that the royal mantle of Roger II, with its prominent Kufic inscription proclaiming royal authority in Arabic, was not an isolated curiosity but part of a broader and systematic program of Arabic epigraphic decoration extending across the full range of Norman royal regalia.[80] These inscribed garments served multiple institutional functions simultaneously. They projected authority to the Muslim subjects of the Norman kingdom by demonstrating the king's command over the visual language of Islamic political power. They displayed cultural sophistication to Byzantine and Latin Christian audiences by associating the Norman court with the prestige of Islamic artistic traditions. And they established a visual precedent for the use of Kufic-derived forms in specifically sacred and ceremonial contexts, a precedent whose implications would extend far beyond the specific political circumstances of the Norman kingdom.

The Cathedral of Monreale, constructed under William II between 1174 and 1189, represents a later and in some respects more complex expression of the Norman epigraphic strategy. The cathedral brings together Byzantine mosaic programs of exceptional grandeur with architectural elements that reflect the absorption of Islamic decorative conventions into a distinctively Norman artistic synthesis. The Monreale evidence thus illustrates a stage in the transmutation of Kufic script at which the specifically epigraphic dimension of the appropriation has receded and the ornamental dimension has come to predominate, while the associations with Islamic cultural prestige and sacred authority remain fully operative.[81] The Norman Sicilian evidence as a whole points to three conclusions that will inform the comparative analysis

[80]Dolezalek I (2017) Arabic Script on Christian Kings: Textile Inscriptions on Royal Garments from Norman Sicily. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
[81]Longo R (2025) Lo scrigno di re Ruggero. La Cappella Palatina di Palermo e le sue funzioni. Roma: Edizioni Efesto.

developed in the sections that follow: the deployment of Kufic and Kufic-derived forms was in every case a deliberate institutional strategy; the boundary between authentic inscription and Pseudo-Kufic ornament was a variable and productively exploited threshold; and the Norman court functioned as a crucial point of transmission and transformation in the broader Mediterranean circulation of Kufic-derived forms.

## Byzantine Contexts: Pseudo-Kufic Ornament and Ecclesiastical Identity

The Byzantine engagement with Kufic and Pseudo-Kufic forms presents a picture that is in many respects distinct from the Norman Sicilian case, yet no less deliberate in its institutional logic. Where the Norman deployment of Arabic epigraphy was shaped by the specific political circumstances of a multilingual kingdom whose rulers sought to project authority across religious and cultural boundaries, the Byzantine appropriation of Kufic-derived ornament was embedded within a different set of institutional imperatives, rooted in the theological and aesthetic traditions of the Orthodox Church and in the specific conditions of Byzantine contact with the Islamic world across the broad and geographically diverse frontier zones of the medieval Mediterranean.

The channels through which Byzantine artists encountered Kufic script were varied and geographically differentiated. Trade networks connecting Byzantium with the Islamic world had operated continuously since the early centuries of Islam, creating a sustained circulation of luxury textiles, metalwork, ceramics, and other portable objects bearing Kufic inscriptions that entered Byzantine treasuries and church collections through commercial exchange, diplomatic gift-giving, and military acquisition. Anthony Cutler has argued that the exchange of luxury objects between Byzantine emperors and Islamic rulers was not merely a political gesture but a mechanism for the transmission of artistic knowledge, since the objects exchanged carried with them the visual conventions and technical practices of their places of origin.[82] In Cappadocia, as Muge Kaya has demonstrated, Islamic and Sasanian artistic influences penetrated deep into the Anatolian heartland of the Byzantine Empire through the specific demographic and political conditions of the frontier zone, producing Pseudo-Kufic decorations in rock-cut churches that reflect a very different process of visual transmission from those operative in the Greek heartland or the Italian borderlands.[83]

The work of Silvia Pedone and Valentina Cantone on Pseudo-Kufic ornament in Byzantine art identified a consistent pattern in the formal characteristics and spatial placement of these motifs across a range of media and geographic contexts. Their analysis demonstrated that Pseudo-Kufic forms in Byzantine architecture and decorative arts were typically positioned at visually prominent locations, on facades, on templon screens, on the borders of mosaic programs, and in the decorative bands of manuscript illuminations, where their script-like appearance would have been

[82]Cutler A (2009) Image Making in Byzantium, Sasanian Persia and the Early Muslim World. London: Routledge.
[83]Kaya M (2018) Reflection of the Islamic and Sassanid Art on the Aniconic Decoration of Byzantine Wall Paintings in Cappadocia. Nis and Byzantium 18: 339-346.

immediately legible as a reference to the visual authority of Arabic writing even to viewers who could not have identified specific letters or words.[84] This placement reflects a sophisticated understanding of the communicative potential of script-like ornament, one that exploited the recognisability of Kufic formal conventions without committing to the specific textual content that authentic inscription would have required.

The apotropaic dimension of Pseudo-Kufic deployment in Byzantine contexts has been examined with particular care by Nicholas Melvani, whose study of Late Byzantine sculpture demonstrated that script-like ornamental forms were consistently positioned at liminal architectural points, including doorways, templon barriers, funerary monuments, and on the exterior facades of pilgrimage churches such as Hosios Loukas, where their presence was understood to serve a protective function.[85,86] This apotropaic interpretation draws on a broader understanding of the perceived mystical authority of Arabic writing in the medieval Mediterranean world, an authority derived not merely from the aesthetic prestige of Islamic calligraphy but from the widespread belief that Arabic script possessed inherent spiritual power. The adoption of Kufic-inspired forms in Christian apotropaic contexts can therefore be understood as a form of cultural translation in which the perceived spiritual power of Islamic script was appropriated and redeployed within a different religious framework.

**Figure 4.** *Pseudo-Kufic Decoration on Byzantine Church Facade, Hosios Loukas Monastery, Greece, 11th Century*

*Source: (Spittle, 1954, p. 139)*

[84]Pedone S and Cantone V (2013) The Pseudo-Kufic Ornament and the Problem of Cross-Cultural Relationships Between Byzantium and Islam. Opuscula Historiae Artium 62 (Supplementum): 120-136.
[85]Melvani N (2018) Apotropeia and Ornament: Late Byzantine Sculpture and the Migration of Pseudo-Arabic Writing. Accademia Roveretana degli Agiati IX(VIII): 159-193.
[86]Walker A (2015) Pseudo-Arabic Inscriptions and the Pilgrim Path at Hosios Loukas. In Eastmond A (ed) Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 177-204.

The Byzantine bowl now in the treasury of San Marco in Venice, analysed in detail by Alicia Walker, offers one of the most illuminating individual case studies of how Byzantine patrons and artists engaged with Islamic visual culture. The bowl combines classicising figurative imagery drawn from ancient Greek mythology with pseudo-Arabic inscriptions on its interior rim, a juxtaposition that Walker interprets not as evidence of cultural confusion but as a deliberate and sophisticated act of visual synthesis.[87] Walker's argument that Byzantine patrons were active and informed consumers of Islamic aesthetic ideas, rather than passive recipients of foreign influence, has important implications for the broader argument of the present paper, since it demonstrates that the appropriation of Kufic-derived forms in Byzantine contexts reflected genuine cultural agency rather than accidental borrowing or artistic ignorance.

The Byzantine evidence thus reveals a pattern of deliberate and institutionally grounded aesthetic appropriation that parallels the Norman Sicilian case while differing from it in important respects. Where Norman patrons deployed authentic Kufic inscriptions as explicit statements of political sovereignty within a multilingual institutional environment, Byzantine patrons and artists characteristically favoured Pseudo-Kufic ornament whose script-like character was visually evident but whose specific textual content remained indeterminate. This preference for visual indeterminacy was not a symptom of ignorance but a deliberate aesthetic strategy that allowed the prestige and authority of Islamic script to be invoked without the institutional complications that explicit Arabic inscription would have entailed within an Orthodox Christian ecclesiastical context.

## Italian painting: Giotto, Masaccio, and Mantegna

The appearance of Pseudo-Kufic forms in Italian painting between the late thirteenth and late fifteenth centuries represents the final and in some respects most culturally complex stage in the transmutation of Kufic script examined in this paper. Where the Norman Sicilian deployment of Arabic epigraphy was shaped by the specific political circumstances of a multicultural kingdom and the Byzantine appropriation of Pseudo-Kufic ornament was embedded within the institutional traditions of Orthodox ecclesiastical culture, the Italian painters who incorporated Kufic-derived forms into their work were operating within a very different set of artistic, religious, and commercial contexts. The Italian evidence is distinctive in several respects: the artists involved were working within a Latin Christian tradition that had no organic institutional connection to Arabic script; the Kufic-derived forms they deployed appeared primarily in specifically sacred contexts, on the garments, halos, and book covers of holy figures; and the period in question witnessed a progressive transformation of these forms from relatively close approximations of Arabic script towards increasingly abstract and stylised ornamental patterns.

The earliest and most influential figure in this tradition is Giotto di Bondone, whose frescoes in the Arena Chapel in Padua, completed around 1305, include some of the most discussed examples of Pseudo-Kufic ornament in Italian painting. In several of the

[87]Walker A (2008) Meaningful Mingling: Classicizing Imagery and Islamicizing Script in a Byzantine Bowl. The Art Bulletin 90(1): 32-53.

Paduan frescoes, the borders of the garments worn by sacred figures, including the Virgin Mary and various apostles, are decorated with bands of script-like ornament whose formal properties clearly derive from Kufic calligraphic conventions even as their specific letter forms have been transformed through a process of stylisation that renders them linguistically illegible.[88] The significance of Giotto's deployment of these forms has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate. Some scholars have interpreted the Pseudo-Kufic borders as a straightforward expression of the high commercial value and cultural prestige associated with Islamic textiles in late medieval Italy. Others have argued that the script-like character of these borders was itself deliberately chosen as a marker of sacred antiquity, evoking associations with the Holy Land and the Oriental origins of Christianity.[89]

The analysis of Emanuela Napolitano has added an important methodological dimension to this debate by demonstrating that at least some of the script-like forms in Italian painting that have been categorised as Pseudo-Kufic contain recoverable Arabic words and phrases, including the formulaic blessings and invocations that recurred on Islamic luxury textiles.[90] This finding complicates the simple narrative of progressive abstraction and ornamentalisation, suggesting that even in contexts where Kufic-derived forms appear highly stylised, some degree of semantic awareness may have informed their selection and deployment.

**Figure 5.** *Giotto di Bondone, detail showing Pseudo-Kufic Border on sacred Garment, Arena Chapel, Padua, c. 1305*

*Source: by author*

Masaccio, working in Florence in the early decades of the fifteenth century, represents a more developed stage in the Italian engagement with Pseudo-Kufic forms. In the Pisa Altarpiece of 1426 and in the Brancacci Chapel frescoes in Florence,

[88]Napolitano EG (2019) Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art. Bamberg: opus.
[89]Mack R (2001) Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600. Berkeley: University of California Press.
[90]Napolitano EG (2019) Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art. Bamberg: opus.

Masaccio deployed Kufic-derived ornamental forms with a sophistication that reflects both the accumulation of a well-established artistic tradition and a more self-conscious awareness of the cultural meanings these forms carried.[91] The Pseudo-Kufic borders and decorative bands in Masaccio work are characterised by a greater degree of formal elaboration than those found in Giotto, incorporating interlaced and plaited patterns that draw on the more complex variants of Kufic calligraphy, including the foliated and interlaced forms that had developed within the Islamic tradition between the tenth and thirteenth centuries.

The work of Andrea Mantegna in the latter half of the fifteenth century represents perhaps the most intellectually self-conscious engagement with Pseudo-Kufic forms in the Italian painting tradition. Mantegna, whose career was centred on the humanist court of the Gonzaga family in Mantua, was deeply interested in questions of historical authenticity and in the visual evocation of the ancient and oriental world within which the events of sacred history had taken place. His deployment of Pseudo-Kufic forms on the halos, garments, and book covers of sacred figures reflects this broader antiquarian interest, using script-like ornament as a visual signifier of historical distance and oriental origin.[92] The Italian painting tradition as a whole illuminates the remarkable durability of Kufic-derived forms as a visual idiom of sacred authority and cultural prestige across a period of nearly two centuries, and underlines the central role of luxury textile circulation in the transmission and transformation of Kufic forms into Christian artistic media.

## Vectors of Transmission: Portable Objects, Textiles, and the Migration of Kufic Forms

The preceding sections have repeatedly touched on the question of how Kufic script reached Christian artists and patrons in Norman Sicily, Byzantium, and Italy. The present section addresses this question directly and systematically, arguing that the migration of Kufic forms across the medieval Mediterranean was not the result of random or incidental contact but a structured process shaped by specific material channels and institutional networks whose character varied considerably across different geographic contexts and historical periods.

The most important single vector of Kufic transmission into Christian artistic contexts was the circulation of luxury textiles bearing Arabic inscriptions. Islamic tiraz textiles, produced in state-controlled workshops and bearing inscriptions that identified their place and date of manufacture and frequently included formulaic blessings and invocations of divine favour, occupied a position of exceptional prestige within the material culture of the medieval Mediterranean world. These textiles entered Christian collections through multiple channels: as diplomatic gifts exchanged between Islamic rulers and their Byzantine and Western counterparts, as commercial goods purchased through the extensive trading networks that connected Italy, Sicily, and Byzantium with Egypt, Syria, and the broader Islamic world, and as military

[91]Napolitano EG (2019) Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art. Bamberg: opus.
[92]Mack RE and Zakariya M (2009) The Pseudo-Arabic on Andrea del Verrocchio's David. Artibus et Historiae 30(60): 157-172.

trophies and ecclesiastical donations that found their way into church treasuries across the Christian Mediterranean.[93] Once within Christian institutional contexts, these textiles served as visual models for artists seeking to depict sacred figures in prestigious fabrics or to decorate ecclesiastical spaces with ornamental forms associated with the cultural authority of the Islamic world.

Maria Vittoria Fontana's study of Kufic ornamental motifs in the wall paintings of southern Italian churches provided compelling evidence for the centrality of textile transmission in the specific Italian context, demonstrating that the Pseudo-Kufic borders and decorative bands found in these paintings reproduce formal conventions most closely associated with woven textile inscriptions rather than with Kufic epigraphy in its monumental or manuscript forms.[94] The physical properties of woven textiles also had important consequences for the formal transformation of Kufic script, since the constraints of weaving technology encouraged the angular and geometric simplification of letterforms in ways that made the transition from legible inscription to purely ornamental pattern a natural and technically motivated process.

Metalwork and ceramic objects bearing Kufic inscriptions constituted a second important vector of transmission, particularly in contexts where Islamic luxury goods entered Christian collections as diplomatic gifts or commercial acquisitions. The Byzantine bowl in the treasury of San Marco, examined in detail by Walker, represents a well-documented example of how an Islamic object bearing script-like ornament could enter a Christian institutional context and serve as a model for subsequent artistic appropriations.[95] The role of diplomatic exchange and royal gift-giving in facilitating the transmission of Kufic-bearing objects deserves particular attention in the Norman Sicilian context, where the Norman court maintained extensive diplomatic contacts with the Islamic courts of North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, and the exchange of luxury goods between these courts was a regular feature of Norman foreign policy whose cultural consequences extended well beyond the immediate diplomatic purposes it served.[96]

The movement of craftsmen and artistic models across political and religious boundaries constitutes a third vector of transmission whose importance has sometimes been underestimated in scholarship focused primarily on the circulation of finished objects. Bongianino demonstration that Sicilian craftsmen working in the Norman royal workshops sometimes reproduced Arabic letter forms through visual copying rather than scribal competence reveals a mode of transmission in which the transformation from authentic inscription to Pseudo-Kufic ornament was embedded within the specific technical conditions of cross-cultural workshop practice.[97] The cumulative picture that emerges from this analysis of transmission vectors is one of

[93]Dolezalek I (2017) Arabic Script on Christian Kings: Textile Inscriptions on Royal Garments from Norman Sicily. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
[94]Fontana MV (2016) Kufic Ornamental Motifs in the Wall Paintings of Six Churches in Southern Italy. Journal of Humanities and Social Science 21(12): 56-73.
[95]Walker A (2008) Meaningful Mingling: Classicizing Imagery and Islamicizing Script in a Byzantine Bowl. The Art Bulletin 90(1): 32-53.
[96]Johns J (2002) Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily: The Royal Diwan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[97]Bongianino U (2017) The King, His Chapel, His Church: Boundaries and Hybridity in the Religious Visual Culture of the Norman Kingdom. Journal of the Transcultural Mediterranean Studies 4(1-2): 3-50.

a Mediterranean-wide material culture in which Kufic-bearing objects circulated continuously through multiple channels, reaching Christian artists and patrons in a wide range of institutional contexts and providing them with visual models of varying degrees of formal complexity and semantic legibility.

## Discussion

The evidence examined in the preceding sections points consistently towards a set of conclusions that cut across the conventional disciplinary boundaries separating the study of Norman Sicilian art, Byzantine visual culture, and Italian painting. Taken together, the Norman, Byzantine, and Italian cases reveal a coherent and geographically differentiated process through which the visual authority of Kufic script was repeatedly mobilised, transformed, and put to work in the service of Christian institutional purposes across five centuries of Mediterranean history. The present section draws out the broader implications of this comparative analysis, addressing three interconnected themes that emerge from the evidence as a whole: the relationship between authenticity and imitation in the transmutation of Kufic script; the institutional logic of aesthetic appropriation; and the semiotic transformation through which Kufic forms acquired new layers of meaning as they migrated across cultural and religious boundaries.

The evidence reviewed in this paper consistently undermines the assumption, implicit in much earlier scholarship, that authentic Kufic inscription and Pseudo-Kufic imitation represent categorically distinct phenomena requiring fundamentally different explanatory frameworks. The findings of Napolitano and Fein demonstrated that many forms previously categorised as meaningless Pseudo-Kufic ornament contain recoverable Arabic textual content, suggesting that the boundary between the readable and the purely ornamental was in practice far more permeable than categorical distinctions imply.[98] Bongianino's analysis of Norman opus sectile inscriptions showed that even within a single artistic program, the same craftsmen could produce forms ranging from relatively faithful reproductions of Arabic letterforms to highly stylised ornamental patterns. And the analysis of the Cappella Palatina program by Johns demonstrated that authentic Arabic inscription and script-like ornamental decoration coexisted within a single visual environment designed to address multiple audiences with different levels of Arabic literacy simultaneously.[99] Across all three cultural contexts, the boundary between authentic inscription and ornamental imitation functioned not as a fixed threshold but as a productive zone of visual ambiguity whose deliberate exploitation was central to the communicative and institutional effectiveness of Kufic-derived decoration.

The comparative analysis developed in this paper reveals that while the appropriation of Kufic script was a widespread and geographically diverse phenomenon, it was never uniform in its institutional logic. In Norman Sicily, the deployment of authentic and

[98]Napolitano EG (2019) Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art. Bamberg: opus; Fein A (2024) Kufic Epigraphy between Norman Sicily and Ifriqiya. Muqarnas 40.
[99]Johns J (2014) Arabic Inscriptions in the Cappella Palatina. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 122-145.

near-authentic Kufic inscription was shaped by the specific political imperatives of a multilingual kingdom whose rulers needed to address simultaneously Muslim, Byzantine, and Latin Christian audiences. In Byzantine contexts, by contrast, the preference for Pseudo-Kufic ornament over authentic inscription reflected the different institutional imperatives of Orthodox ecclesiastical culture, which sought to associate its sacred spaces and objects with the prestige and authority of Islamic visual culture without the institutional complications that explicit Arabic inscription would have entailed. In Italian painting, finally, the incorporation of Kufic-derived forms into the depiction of sacred figures served yet another institutional logic, one rooted in the pictorial conventions of Latin Christian devotional art and in the specific social and commercial environment of late medieval Italian urban culture.

The semiotic transformation through which Kufic forms acquired new layers of meaning as they migrated across cultural and religious boundaries was not a simple process of semantic emptying but a more complex process of semantic redistribution, in which the authority and prestige associated with Kufic script in its original Islamic context were preserved and reoriented within new institutional frameworks.[100] Where legible Kufic inscriptions communicated specific textual content to those with the linguistic competence to read them, Pseudo-Kufic forms communicated a set of more diffuse but no less powerful associations with Islamic learning, sacred antiquity, divine authority, and cultural sophistication to audiences who could recognise the script-like character of the forms without being able to decode their specific content. This redistribution of semantic authority from the textual to the iconic, from the specific to the general, from the linguistically legible to the visually evocative, was not a degradation of the original but a transformation of its mode of operation that made Kufic-derived forms available for a much wider range of institutional and artistic purposes than authentic Arabic inscription could have served.

The comparative perspective developed in this paper also reveals important continuities and connections between the three cultural contexts examined, connections that suggest a degree of mutual awareness and cross-cultural dialogue that the compartmentalisation of existing scholarship has tended to obscure. The Norman Sicilian court, as the most intensive and institutionally organised site of Kufic appropriation in the Christian Mediterranean, played a crucial role not only in producing some of the most sophisticated examples of the phenomenon but also in establishing models and precedents whose influence extended into both Byzantine and Italian artistic traditions. This connectivity does not mean that the Byzantine and Italian appropriations of Kufic script were simply derivative of the Norman Sicilian model, since each tradition developed its own distinctive institutional logic and formal conventions. But it does suggest that the transmutation of Kufic script in Christian art was a genuinely Mediterranean-wide phenomenon whose individual manifestations were shaped by a common fund of material models, artistic conventions, and cultural associations that circulated continuously across the political and religious boundaries of the medieval Mediterranean world.

[100]Kanellopoulos C and Tohme L (2008) A True Kufic Inscription on the Kapnikarea Church in Athens. Al-Masaq 20(2): 133-139.

## Conclusions

The transmutation of Kufic script across the Christian Mediterranean between the tenth and fifteenth centuries was neither a marginal curiosity nor a simple story of artistic borrowing. As the evidence examined in this paper has demonstrated, it was a sustained, geographically differentiated, and institutionally grounded process through which the visual authority of Islamic epigraphy was repeatedly mobilised, transformed, and redeployed in the service of Christian institutional purposes whose specific character varied considerably across Norman Sicilian, Byzantine, and Italian contexts.

Across all three traditions, the appropriation of Kufic script was a purposeful act of cultural translation rather than a product of artistic ignorance or passive imitation. The Norman court of Sicily deployed authentic Arabic inscription as an explicit instrument of royal sovereignty; Byzantine ecclesiastical patrons favoured Pseudo-Kufic ornament as a marker of sacred authority and apotropaic power; and Italian painters incorporated Kufic-derived forms into the depiction of sacred figures as a visual signifier of holy antiquity and oriental origin. In each case, the effectiveness of these appropriations depended on a sufficient degree of cultural awareness to make the association with Islamic visual authority legible to its intended audiences. The boundary between authentic Kufic inscription and Pseudo-Kufic ornament, far from representing a fixed categorical distinction, functioned across all three contexts as a variable and deliberately exploited zone of visual indeterminacy, one whose productive ambiguity allowed the prestige of Arabic script to be invoked without committing to its specific linguistic content. The findings of Napolitano and Fein further confirm that existing scholarship has drawn this boundary too sharply, and that a more adequate analytical framework must treat the spectrum from full linguistic legibility to complete ornamental abstraction as continuous and contextually variable rather than categorical.

The material foundation of this process, rooted in the Mediterranean-wide circulation of luxury textiles, metalwork, and ceramic objects bearing Kufic inscriptions, ensured that Christian appropriations of Arabic script were shaped primarily by its most ornamental and formally elaborated forms, dissociated from their specifically Quranic and political functions and already embedded within a broader aesthetic of luxury and prestige. This material channel of transmission had important consequences not only for the formal character of Christian Pseudo-Kufic but also for the cultural associations it carried, which were primarily those of cosmopolitan sophistication, sacred antiquity, and institutional authority rather than the more specifically religious meanings of Kufic in its original Islamic contexts.

In the halos of Mantegna's sacred figures, the ceiling inscriptions of the Cappella Palatina, and the Pseudo-Kufic borders of Byzantine ecclesiastical decoration, we can read not the story of a dominant tradition imposing itself on a passive recipient but the more complex and more interesting story of how medieval institutions actively constructed their identities through the creative appropriation and transformation of the visual resources of the wider Mediterranean world. These forms stand as testimony to the creative vitality of medieval Mediterranean intercultural exchange and to the capacity of visual authority to migrate across political, religious, and linguistic boundaries in ways that transformed both the forms themselves and the institutional

contexts that received them. Whether comparable processes of deliberate epigraphic appropriation operated in other peripheral zones of Islamic cultural contact, including the Crusader states, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Armenian world, remains a question that invites further comparative investigation and that the evidence assembled here suggests would repay systematic scholarly attention.

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# Working for Citizenship and Inclusion in Secondary School. Practices of Active Learning and Methodological Innovation

*By Carla Podda**

*This contribution aims to investigate how critical pedagogy provides a framework for understanding the contemporary crisis of democracy and supporting transformative practices capable of fostering civic participation in the exercise of public governance. This constitutes the overarching theme of the study, which began by questioning how to counter democratic decline while guaranteeing every citizen's engagement in governance. Civic participation is examined as a radical, emancipatory vehicle for redistribution of sovereignty. Moving from macro-theoretical critiques of institutional imbalances to micro-pedagogical practices, this study explores how active learning methodologies function as a primary catalyst for democratic empowerment. Specifically, it evaluates a cross-border Erasmus+ mobility project conducted between November 2024 and February 2025. The project involved fourteen teachers and twenty students from an Italian High School (located in Decimomannu) and a Polish Special School (located in Rzeszów). Grounded in Participatory Action Research and case study strategy, the initiative operationalized structured seminars, experiential job-shadowing, and collaborative tasks. The study triangulates qualitative and quantitative data collected through institutional document analysis, preparatory online focus groups, and fieldwork observations. The empirical findings substantiate significant growth across the cognitive, affective, and skills-based domains of citizenship, enabling learners, also with Special Educational Needs, to cultivate transformative agency and intercultural dialogue alongside their mainstream peers, while simultaneously expanding the professional inclusive competencies of teachers.*

**Keywords:** *Democracy; Citizenship Education; Participation; Active Methodologies.*

## Introduction

This study explores how pedagogy provides a meaningful framework to rethink and renew citizenship education, thereby supporting a transformation that fosters full civic participation in the exercise of public governance. Such participation encompasses actions undertaken by citizens and organizations to induce policy change. Ultimately, these initiatives aim to influence decision-making processes across multiple levels of governance (De Rivera & Mahoney, 2018). Given the current democratic crisis, this study proposes an ambitious scope. It examines how to ensure active civic engagement amidst systemic democratic decline. Specifically, the research examines how to ensure active civic engagement. It aims to foster citizen responsibility in both local and global governance. The general research question is therefore defined. How can we counter democratic crises while ensuring active citizen engagement in institutional decision-making?

More precisely, this paper examines the intersection of democracy, citizenship education, and human development. It analyzes how a specific Erasmus+ project cultivates participatory skills through active learning approaches.

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Questioning the current state of citizenship education may appear anachronistic or rhetorical. This perception arises when considering the widespread disregard for human rights and deepening social inequalities, furthermore, intensifying violence and devastating conflicts directly impact neighboring regions (Jessop, 2020). This situation raises critical questions regarding the scope of pedagogical intervention. How can educational frameworks counter such forces, when dealing with actors whose stated aim is the destruction of opponents, whom they portray as devoid of humanity? It is essential to engage younger generations in dialogue regarding systematically perpetrated, unprecedented atrocities. This approach openly condemns the silence of the global minority (Fadda, 2009). Ultimately, it promotes participatory processes designed to stop recent humanitarian catastrophes. The research identifies active participation, critical discussion, and dialogue as vital pedagogical instruments. These tools foster personal growth and international solidarity. This approach directly counters the ongoing erosion of human and moral rights. Consequently, it mitigates widespread feelings of dismay and powerlessness.

The contemporary era is characterized by significant societal transformations. These shifts have exacerbated pre-existing structural imbalances. They have also engendered fluid, unstable identity bonds (Latouche, 2005). Consequently, these changes give rise to pervasive and widespread conflicts. Furthermore, globalization has driven a profound decoupling of economic and political dimensions. This shift is accelerated by growing economic and technological interdependence. It is widely acknowledged, as previously analyzed and anticipated by Antonio Gramsci (1975, pp. 1492-1493), that the economic domain operates on a global and supranational scale, no longer aligned with political rationality, which remains rooted in national and local contexts. Over the past two centuries, powerful multinational enterprises have significantly expanded. This growth intensified international economic and commercial exchanges. Simultaneously, it precipitated a rapid proliferation of foreign investments. Remarkably, the expansion of these investments outpaced global economic growth (Latouche, 2005). The consequence of this shift is profound interdependence among national economies across social, cultural, political, technological, and health-related domains. This widening economic disparity between countries coupled with the increasingly unequal distribution of resources, is aptly underscored by Umberto Curi (2016, p. 10) as follows: *"Four-fifths of the world's population possess one-fifth of its resources, while the remaining one-fifth of the global population benefits from four-fifths of the economic, monetary, energy, food, and available resources"*.

Considering these dynamics, it is essential to consider the complex dynamics of global migration flows, which are heavily driven by systemic poverty and structural underdevelopment (Silva, 2015). These dynamics demand immediate intervention, given that such migratory flows are the direct consequences of deliberate political and economic policies enacted by Western governments (Santerini, 2017). As fluid and precarious identity bonds are generated, proximity to others fails to foster acceptance and mutual understanding, instead it gives rise to divergences and conflicts, triggering pervasive outbreaks of violence. These structural asymmetries are not merely unjust; in themselves, they constitute a proclamation of a continuous state of belligerence (Cera, 2019). Furthermore, the legitimacy of governments depends upon their capacity to effectively engage communities and strengthen their ability to meaningfully respond to challenges. Such an endeavor, however, fails in the absence of citizens' trust and constructive critical dialogue on a local and global scale (Osborne, et al., 2021). Indeed, the

diminished levels of public trust in governments foster disillusionment with democratic processes, reducing citizens' willingness to participate in political life.

These phenomena are deeply interconnected. They must be interpreted as components of an organic totality, without falling into reductionist interpretations, since they originate from the same structural imbalances. Moreover, they express the underlying causes of the profound crisis currently undermining democratic systems.

It is perhaps superfluous to underline that civil and political rights are complementary to economic and social rights. Consequently, access to essential goods remains the prerequisite for the substantive, rather than merely formal, realization of citizenship rights. A truly enduring peace necessitates a more equitable distribution of resources, alongside a substantive reduction in the disparity between the opulence of the few and the absolute poverty experienced by the many (Curi, 2016). In this perspective, peace should not be conceived merely as the absence of conflict, but rather as the deliberate and collective construction of a social order grounded in justice and equity (Conforti, 2019).

This complex situation highlights the intensified crisis of democracy, insofar as it undermines the foundational principles of equality. This erosion gives rise to distortions and anomalies that adversely affect opportunities for political and cultural participation. Consequently, specific segments of the population are excluded from economic, social, and political processes. Social transformations, deeply rooted in history, are unfolding at an accelerated rate, prompting renewed theoretical reflections and fostering the implementation of innovative practices in citizenship education (Nuzzaci & Rizzi, 2020; Chierichetti, Mourtos & Zartoshty, 2025).

The phenomena, here briefly outlined, must be understood as components of an organic whole that demand timely intervention. Attention will be focused on the pedagogical dimensions capable of countering the democratic crisis through the promotion of active citizenship education. To address these systemic challenges, this study moves from macro-theoretical critiques to micro-pedagogical practices, examining the role of a specific cross-border Erasmus+ project as a catalyst for processes of social emancipation and civic participation.

## Literature Review

An examination of national and international pedagogical literature on citizenship education highlights the need to broaden its scope (Mortari, 2008; Baldacci, 2020; Sirignano & Maddalena, 2019; Brooks & Holford, 2009). The central role of inclusive pedagogies as prerequisites for fostering civic participation and intercultural dialogue supports this expansion (Santerini, 2017; Pastori, 2022; Alviar-Martin, 2010; Banks, 2007). Together, these studies provide the theoretical and empirical frameworks necessary to address the contemporary democratic crisis. This line of inquiry must be examined in depth and continually cultivated. Indeed, further investigation is essential for a multifaceted phenomenon that presents a genuine educational challenge. Drawing upon the frameworks of critical pedagogy (Granese, 1993; Fadda, 2009), this study engages with the radical significance of citizenship education, developing a deeper understanding of its theoretical and historical roots. It seeks to articulate the connection between individual dimensions and broader systemic dynamics in pursuit of collaborative and participative solutions. Critical pedagogy provides an indispensable framework to analyze education. It fosters emancipatory, radical access

to knowledge while highlighting the transformative power of teaching and learning (Fadda, 2002). Education and civic participation hold an emancipatory role and foster radical access to both knowledge and democratic participation.

Democracy, education, and citizenship are so strictly interconnected that the education of the individual has historically been, and continues to be, identified with the education of the citizen (Cambi, et al., 1999). Both individual development and citizenship require the recognition of legal and political rights. Furthermore, these dimensions entail a shared responsibility to deliberate and build a highly equitable society. As Morin (2012, p. 4401) observes: *"the reform of ways of life is inseparable from an ethical regeneration, itself inseparable from a renewal of civic consciousness, which in turn is inseparable from a democratic regeneration"*. These elements are intrinsically linked to a global process, a human, social, political, and historical transformation, that shapes both the environment and education.

Democracy, before being the most accomplished form of government, is fundamentally a mode of community life. Its present crisis finds a meaningful response in the principles and practices of citizenship education. Moreover, citizenship education provides a clear orientation for active methodologies. It guides individual development within a horizon of belonging and co-participation, which defines the concept of *"citizenship"* (Mortari, 2008). The socio-ethical dimension places these elements into sharper focus across pedagogical and political domains (Secci, 2012). Within a democratic framework, education is not grounded upon a tension between social and individual aims; instead, it directly enhances each citizen. The citizen simultaneously holds both duties and rights, which are established through the norms of coexistence defining individual freedom. Foremost among these duties is the responsible exercise of freedom within the legal framework, through which citizens are entrusted with both the designation and oversight of those who hold power. Citizenship is, thus, oriented toward individual autonomy, rendering citizens aware of their responsibility in monitoring public authority. Furthermore, citizenship cannot be reduced to passive obedience aimed merely at legal compliance and social order, as though these were inherently just (Portera, 2000). Instead, it guides the planning, choices, and decisions involved in community life, directing action toward the pursuit of the common good. In this manner, power becomes the true emanation of free and equal citizens. Ultimately, both citizenship and citizens exist only within democratic contexts, where the equality and dignity of each citizen are fully respected.

Citizenship education is conceived both as a critical reflection upon civic rights and as the cultivation of individual and collective responsibility, binding together citizens and democratic institutions (Sartori, 1993). It promotes an awareness of our mutual interdependence as human beings, illustrating how individual agency entails consequences for the wider community (Valbusa & Mortari, 2017). It involves identifying the spaces and instruments that foster an awareness of social belonging, thereby enabling citizens to comprehend both the community they inhabit and their role in shaping or sustaining it. Furthermore, it cultivates an understanding of personal and collective rights to participate in political and social decision-making, while guiding individuals to assume leadership within deliberative processes (Santerini, 2010). In this regard, participation assumes an emancipatory function. It is inherently radical, because it bridges the chasm between those who govern and those who are governed. It connects decision-makers with those who bear the consequences of their choices. Ultimately, civic participation presupposes a redistribution of power and sovereignty.

Citizenship education possesses both ancient and contemporary origins.

Historically, the concept traces back to the *paideia* of ancient Greece. As Jaeger (2003) articulates, this notion is pivotal for grasping the intrinsic connection between education, individual formation, and citizenship. Hellenic culture conceptualized *paideia* not as a mere accumulation of knowledge, but as a formative educational process. It aimed to model the individual in accordance with a normative ideal, enabling full participation as an active member of the *polis*. Thus, the term *paideia* gradually acquired a rich and nuanced meaning. It suggested the ideal of human development, conceived not as preparation for culture in a technical sense, but as the qualitative and personal cultivation of virtue. *Paideia* encompassed the ethical, cultural, and social development required to shape the child into a citizen, or *polites*. This educational ideal was entrusted with the task of educating the individual to transcend their primary condition, thereby enabling them to embody the highest values of the community.

*Paideia* evolved over time, aiming at the internalization of those universal values that defined the *ethos* of people. The *ethos* encompassed the shared civic space, individual and collective identities, institutional norms, and a profound sense of citizenship. Thus, it distinguished the human being as an agent capable of self-accountability and moral responsibility. Within the public life of the *polis*, decisions were reached through deliberative discourse rather than through force or coercion (Mortari, 2008). Through politics, citizens realized their potential; rather than being subjected to authority. Citizens entirely experienced themselves, engaging with others in freely chosen actions and collective enterprises.

*Paideia* is predicated upon a profound connection between the cultivation of the self, at both intellectual and moral levels, and active engagement in the life of the *polis*. As such, it constitutes the core of Western culture (Jaeger, 2003). It conceptualizes citizenship not as a mere accident of birth, but rather as the outcome of a cultural formation process, which enables the individual to participate in community life.

In this epistemological framework, the structured seminars and collaborative tasks implemented within the cross-border Erasmus+ project between Italy and Poland represent a contemporary, workshop-based reconfiguration of the ancient *polis's* deliberative discourse, translating classical philosophical ideals into active, inclusive pedagogical practices.

In recent history, the emergence of citizenship education can be traced back to the establishment of UNESCO in 1945 and the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948. Within this document, education is framed as a vehicle for fostering full development of human personality. It aims at promoting understanding, tolerance, and friendship among nations. In 1974, UNESCO's *Recommendation on Education for International Understanding* articulated the notion of 'global citizenship', cultivating individuals' communicative capacities, their engagement with community issues, and propensity for mutual respect. By 2014, the formation of global citizens was explicitly recognized by the organization as a pivotal educational objective. More recently, UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (2021) and the revised *Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development* (2023) influenced educational policy. Both documents foreground global citizenship education as a transformative, cross-cutting paradigm aligned with the broader framework of the *2030 Agenda*.

Historically, citizenship has been defined in connection with a specific national territory. While this belonging was traditionally anchored within individual nation-states, a contemporary and pronounced shift is now broadening this framework

geographically, socially, and culturally. Citizenship is increasingly conceived as a prerequisite for active participation in global community life. In this regard, Edgar Morin extends the notion to what he defines as *"planetary citizenship"* (Morin, 2000). As Morin (2000, p. 50) observes*: "We must learn to 'be present' on this planet. To learn to be present means to learn how to live, to share, to communicate, and to be in communion; this is what was once learned only within and through a particular culture"*. From this perspective, citizenship education must be oriented towards cultivating a global consciousness and planetary responsibility. This approach is grounded in a reconfigured mode of political belonging to the planet and the wider human community. Within the practice of citizenship, cultural and cosmopolitan dimensions take precedence over strictly juridical considerations. As argued by Secci (2012, p. 145) *"it is not one's 'documents in order' that make a citizen, but rather the disposition to contribute, as a worker, parent, or volunteer, to the functioning of the place or community in which one lives"*.

The broadening of citizenship also entails considerations regarding its qualitative content. Consequently, no aspect of social life can be regarded as extraneous to citizenship education. Citizenship, therefore, is concerned with belonging and encompasses all dimensions of communal life. In this sense, it develops not only within the individual sphere but extends its scope to other domains, such as the family and institutional frameworks. These environments in turn shape the life of the wider community, including matters of sustainability and responsible environmental stewardship. Indeed, while citizens hold membership at the local level within their city and nation-state, they simultaneously function as planetary citizens who require attentiveness and active engagement with the wider world.

In citizenship education, reflection and action are intrinsically interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Theory and practice enrich one another; indeed, within this field, theory constitutes a dimension of action and vice versa (Chistolini, 2006). The active engagement of citizens in public debate and collective planning is of fundamental importance. Citizenship education, therefore, forges a crucial link with practical realities. It cultivates awareness of others, lived experiences, and the surrounding environment. It effectively bridges the divide between theory and practice, local and global perspectives, and economic and political spheres. Citizenship education is highly adaptable to diverse contexts. It remains indispensable not only for formal schooling, but also for the holistic development of individuals across all communal life dimensions.

## Citizenship Education at School

Owing to its strong adaptability across diverse contexts, citizenship education remains essential within school systems. Schools function as formative institutions. They contribute not only to teaching and learning processes, but also to cultivating ethical attitudes and internalizing democratic values. Dewey (1916/1992) conceives the school as a democratic community, in which decisions are made through dialogue, mutual respect, and active participation.

Contemporary schools face a profound crisis. In isolation, they can hardly meet the educational needs of new generations. Nevertheless, they remain central to fostering community development (Özgenel, Yağan, & Baydar, 2026). Strengthening students' understanding of democratic processes is insufficient. It is equally imperative to engage them with a wide range of issues in a problem-oriented manner. This

approach encourages learning through the intrinsic value of inquiry and discovery. Such active engagement enhances students' ability to plan collectively. Accordingly, it improves their ability to respond to challenges both as individuals and as community participants. For this reason, citizenship education is embedded across the entire curriculum, functioning as a transversal framework that permeates all school disciplines.

There are three primary dimensions of citizenship that can be cultivated within the school context:

- The *cognitive dimension*: citizenship education fosters a deep understanding of democracy, encouraging its application within the framework of the norms that govern communal life.
- The *affective dimension*: it involves the cultivation of independent thinking, active listening, participation, and dialogue, whilst promoting awareness and responsibility.
- The *skills-based dimension*: citizenship education cultivates the capacity to critically examine the world, solve problems, and assess the most suitable courses of action. It encompasses the ability to reflect upon and revise decisions and behaviors. Furthermore, it encourages effective collaboration to pursue intercultural and collective goals. This dimension is intrinsically linked to conflict resolution through dialogue, negotiation, and mediation. Ultimately, it embraces active listening, responsibility, and the promotion of equality.

To implement these three domains, it is essential to prioritize a planetary perspective within education. This approach serves as a vehicle to support students in recognizing and embracing the *ethos* of planetary citizenship.

Citizenship education, therefore, assumes a transversal role. It provides individuals with a renewed framework to understand and engage with the world. Indeed, it enhances citizens' awareness of global challenges, fosters a sense of collective responsibility, and nurtures a commitment to equality and social justice (Santerini, 2001). From this perspective, citizenship education promotes active participation, and it redefines intercultural practices to foster meaningful cross-cultural dialogue (Nigris, 2015).

At both theoretical and practical levels, linking citizenship and interculturality raises critical questions regarding how to create participatory opportunities. It also requires examining the conditions to foster meaningful encounters and dialogue, through active methodologies. In this regard, Pinto Minerva (2002) conceptualizes intercultural practices as a multiplicity of pedagogical and relational experiences, which lead to the understanding of, and engagement with, other cultures. This approach directs knowledge toward constructing genuine citizenship, intercultural dialogue, and cooperation through the continuous discovery of similarities and differences (Pinto Minerva, 2002). In this manner, reciprocal enrichment is fostered, grounded upon the initial recognition and comprehension of otherness. Several studies conducted in Europe (Llurda et al., 2016; Mitchell, 2015) have demonstrated a correlation between transnational mobility, citizenship education, and intercultural engagement. It is noteworthy that transnational mobility contributes to a sense of belonging that transcends national borders (Recchi, 2015; Ercan, 2017). The global perspective is fundamental to citizenship education. It requires a deep understanding of international human rights norms and active engagement with local and global socio-political issues. Within the school environment, an emphasis on youth participation and deliberation enhances the

democratic process. This approach empowers all community members while fostering democratic principles. Consequently, there is a clear need for exchange and mobility initiatives. These projects must be designed to cultivate authentic interaction and dialogical communication within heterogeneous educational contexts.

Over the last decade, the literature on citizenship education has increasingly evolved to address global crises, such as systemic inequities, forced migration, and democratic backsliding, by transitioning from abstract civic notions toward a critical framework of planetary interdependence and resilience. This paradigm shift directly operationalizes the epistemological insights of Morin (2012), who advocates for a *'planetary consciousness'* rooted in the shared human condition, and Fadda (2009), who positions education as a dialogical space for relational ethics and democratic responsibility. Within this framework, active, cooperative, and task-based methodologies of Erasmus+ initiatives are experimentally effective for including students with special educational needs because they dismantle traditional cognitive and linguistic barriers. By anchoring abstract global concepts into localized, structured, and collaborative tasks, these student-centered practices maximize peer-to-peer mediation and experiential learning, thereby transforming inclusion from an ideal into an active, democratic practice.

## Methodology and Materials

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the role of education in shaping citizenship and participation. It seeks to achieve an in-depth understanding of these processes within the school context. Specifically, the research investigates how involvement in an international exchange project promotes responsible and participatory citizenship skills through active methodologies.

Framed within critical pedagogy, the methodology adopts Participatory Action Research (Orefice, 2006), with a case study strategy, identified in line with Luigina Mortari (2007). The research is grounded in a qualitative approach that combines document analysis, focus groups, and a case study. In this regard, the present article examines one phase of a broader Erasmus+ project (2023-1-IT02-KA121-SCH-000123536). Although the project extended over the period 2023–2025, the present study focuses on the phase conducted between November 2024 and February 2025 (2024-1-IT02-KA121-SCH-000225588). The project aimed at promoting interculturality, inclusion and citizenship among students from two schools. The first is the Meucci-Mattei High School, located in Decimomannu (Sardinia, Italy). The second is the Zespół Szkół Specjalnych im. UNICEF w Rzeszowie Special School, located in Rzeszów, Poland. The Erasmus+ project encompassed several mobility initiatives, connecting teachers and students from both schools.

This section analyzed three key areas:

- The *document analysis:* this phase examined the institutional development plans, application forms, and evaluation questionnaires developed by both participating schools. The overarching goal of the initiative was to rethink citizenship education. Simultaneously, it promoted intercultural dialogue and inclusion among diverse students, including those with special educational needs. Furthermore, the initiative promoted active teaching methodologies to enhance students' citizenship skills. Content analysis was employed as the primary method of data interpretation. This process involved systematic

coding and categorization of textual data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and meanings. The evaluation questionnaire gathered quantitative data and qualitative feedback from the participants involved in the mobility experience. The instrument comprised sixteen items, each rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 *"never/not at all"* to 4 *"always/completely"*. For each question, participants had the opportunity to provide additional comments.

- The *focus groups:* these sessions explored the forms of institutional support and alignment between teaching and learning methodologies to promote student engagement. Specific attention was dedicated to developing and enriching professional competencies, within broader cultural and social frameworks. These sessions also investigated strategies for promoting intercultural dialogue, inclusion, and citizenship education. Conducted on November 22, 2024, via the Microsoft Teams platform, the preparatory sessions engaged fourteen participating teachers from both institutions. Two mixed focus groups were conducted with the participants, each group consisting of seven teachers (four Italian and three Polish educators per group), to guarantee a balanced cross-national perspective.
- The *case study:* this approach focused on identifying the key success factors for the recognition and sustainability of active teaching and learning practices. The investigation involved fourteen teachers and twenty students from the two secondary schools. The educational pathway could not evolve in isolation. It aimed at strengthening intercultural and citizenship competencies across the cognitive, affective, and skills-based domains. Its effective implementation relied on appropriate educational practices embedded within the school environment. Consequently, these practices fostered broader processes of cultural transformation. The learning experience was conducted utilizing equity-oriented design, active methodologies, and structured collaboration. These elements functioned not simply as teaching techniques, but as educational environments that cultivated reflexivity, dialogue, participation, agency, and responsibility (Kitsantas, 2004).

  The case study, which was conducted over a one-week period from December 9 to 15, 2024, involved both teachers and students. During this period, learning extended beyond the classroom. The activities promoted inclusive engagement and fostered transformative agency grounded in comparative, participatory, and intercultural perspectives.

The detailed schedule of the activities carried out and analyzed for the case study is outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Table of the Activities*

| | Focus | Key Activities | Target |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Day 1** | *Intercultural dialogue Inclusion* | Institutional Welcome: *School Presentation* | All participants |
| | | Debate meeting: *Fostering Inclusion within the Italian Educational System* | Teachers |
| | | Ice-breaking sessions: *The Integration Cake* | Students |
| **Day 2** | *Intercultural dialogue* | Guided School tour / *Vocational Training* | All participants |
| | *Inclusion* | Discussion: *Picasso Method* | Students |
| | *Citizenship education* | Workshop: *Citizenship education* | All participants |
| | *Discussion, professional competencies* | Session *Inclusion of SEN learners and active teaching methods* | Teachers |
| **Day 3** | *Participation and collaborative learning* | Workshop - Reflective writing: *Writing a letter to…* | Students |
| | *Discussion on focus groups' outcomes of November sessions* | Session: *Implementation of Active Methodologies (based on November preparatory focus groups) Discussion on Citizenship Education.* | Teachers |
| **Day 4** | *Cultural Engagement* | *Educational Excursion to Cagliari* | All participants |
| **Day 5** | *Responsibility Participation* | Workshop: *Comparative analysis of Italian and Polish school regulations* | Teachers |
| | *Inclusion Participation* | Workshop *Music and dance as Instruments of Inclusion* | All participants |
| | *Reflection Evaluation* | Evaluation questionnaire | All participants |

Source: ERASMUS+ KA121- 2024-1-IT02-KA121-SCH-000225588

Citizenship education was presented as an essential dimension of student preparation, which encouraged a shared sense of responsibility for promoting community development.

## Results of the Study

The *document analysis* focused on the institutional development plans, application forms, and evaluation questionnaires produced by the two schools within the framework of the Erasmus+ project. The overarching aim of the project was to reconceptualize citizenship education, fostering participation, intercultural understanding, dialogue, and inclusion among students. The documents centered on designing and implementing strategies aimed at promoting engagement with citizenship and inclusion-related issues, thereby offering valuable insights into this complex relationship. The positive organizational framework established by the institutions emerged as one of the most significant aspects of the content analysis.

The effectiveness of the schools' European Projects Commission in coordinating the mobility project through careful planning, administrative support, and clear communication was widely recognized by 61.8% of participants. The analysis highlighted how procedural requirements, agreements, and preparatory meetings effectively contributed to enhancing teaching competencies. Specifically, the mobility initiatives combined formal training courses (71.4% of teachers) with job-shadowing experiences (involving 28.6% of teachers). These approaches fostered the development of students' competencies. This growth included Polish learners with special educational needs who accompanied their teachers during the mobility school visits.

The evaluation questionnaires provided significant insights into the educational, organizational, linguistic, and intercultural dimensions of the mobility project. The management of the experience was described by 85.7% of the participants as well-structured, efficient, and supportive, thereby demonstrating a strong institutional commitment to its success. These findings underscored the critical relevance of meticulous pedagogical planning in international mobility frameworks, especially when promoting meaningful participation and engagement. Furthermore, the assessment demonstrated the pedagogical value of mobility in fostering professional development (75.6% of respondents), intercultural awareness (85.7% of participants), collaborative learning (84.9% of respondents), and active participation within learning communities (76.4% of participants). At the same time, teachers' feedback emphasized the relevance of active methodologies (92.8%) and student-centered educational approaches grounded in international cooperation (77,9%). According to all respondents, mobility practice significantly encouraged socially oriented engagement. This approach fostered participation, inclusion, and citizenship education.

The *focus groups* aimed to explore institutional support and the alignment of teaching and learning methodologies with the institutional strategy for promoting intercultural understanding, inclusion, and citizenship education. This early-stage qualitative inquiry allowed teachers to associate pedagogical objectives prior to the physical mobility phase. For the subsequent empirical analysis, the study specifically centers on the operationalization of these strategies, conducted in November 2024, ahead of the mobility experience at the Italian host school in December 2024. Two distinct focus groups were conducted with the participating teachers, each consisting of seven individuals, to ensure a balanced cross-national dialogue.

The main findings underscored how mobility experiences can significantly contribute to achieving citizenship-related goals within the classroom. Participants emphasized that citizenship education can be revitalized through the introduction of active teaching methods. Furthermore, teachers stressed the need to implement activities that align student participation with social justice-oriented educational outcomes, and professional competencies. This approach broadens horizons across ethical, cultural, social, and inclusive dimensions, while demanding that teachers adopt a critical global perspective to foster an inclusive ethos among learners. According to the respondents, transnational experiences enhance *"open-mindedness and tolerance toward diversity, relevant values in a democratic society, because they promote mutual respect and recognition of others as human beings"* (Participant Communication, 2024).

The pivotal role of inclusion was strongly emphasized. This dimension can be fostered by developing an understanding of, and respect for, all cultures and perspectives. Ultimately, this process contributes to a more equitable society where differences are recognized, valued, and respected. This sentiment was echoed by the participants: *"Immersion in an international environment created multiple opportunities*

*for authentic inclusion and recognition"* (Participant Communication, 2024). From the teachers' perspective, inclusive education models recognize diversity, ensuring equal access to learning opportunities for all students. A clear need emerged to innovate educational methods, with particular attention to individual differences and collaborative work between teachers and students. Teachers emphasized the need to explore new strategies and actively experiment with forms of collaboration. This process involved developing approaches that *"integrated different perspectives into a transversal vision of citizenship, while still valuing single disciplines"* (Participant Communication, 2024).

The *case study* which constitutes the primary focus of this analysis, was conducted at the Meucci-Mattei High School in Decimomannu, Italy, with the participation of visiting teachers and students from Rzeszów, Poland. Framed within the two-year Erasmus+ project, the initiative engaged fourteen teachers and twenty students across both schools and took place from December 9 to 15, 2024. The initiative sought to identify the key success factors associated with citizenship education and active teaching and learning practices (Table 1).

Designed to enhance intercultural and citizenship competencies, this educational pathway did not develop in isolation. Instead, its successful implementation depended upon meticulously planned educational activities anchored in the school environment. This progression effectively drove broader transformation. Reflecting on the mobility project at the Meucci-Mattei School, observations of learning activities underscored the necessity of intentionally embedding intercultural and citizenship competencies within core learning objectives.

In line with the scientific literature (Chierichetti, Mourtos, & Zartoshty, 2025), citizenship education increasingly incorporated planetary perspectives, emphasizing the importance of encouraging students to consider different dimensions of their work. Rather than conceiving global citizenship as a supplementary curricular component, the learning experience advanced a comprehensive institutional framework. Within this structure, responsibility, participation, agency, and opportunities for intercultural dialogue were intrinsically embedded within pedagogical practices, co-curricular design, and learning outcomes.

The case study extended learning beyond the classroom. This approach promoted inclusive encounters and transformative leadership development grounded in cooperative, participatory, and intercultural perspectives. The learning experience was conducted through active methodologies, collaborative practices, and equity-oriented design. These elements were considered not merely as teaching methods, but as educational environments that fostered reflexivity, dialogue, agency, and responsibility.

Citizenship education was framed as an essential asset for both students and teachers. This framework fostered a shared sense of responsibility to promote intercultural dialogue and inclusion as catalysts for development within the school community.

The activities observed and implemented during the mobility phase were structured across three distinct levels:

1. *Teacher-oriented experiences.* These experiences aimed to discuss frameworks, ideas, and attitudes within diverse school contexts, enhancing the teaching practices of educators from both institutions. Notably, the visiting teachers highly appreciated the dialogical approach designed to illustrate citizenship education and inclusive practices within Italian schools. This framework

successfully involved sharing objectives and learning among all participants.

2. *Student-oriented experiences.* The implementation of knowledge-building and dialogical experiences between students was framed within a structured, project-based, and transdisciplinary perspective. The proposed activities were carried out both inside the classroom and in external educational settings. Students were encouraged to recognize one another's competencies, participate and collaborate on co-constructing shared projects. Significantly, the Polish cohort, entirely composed of learners with special educational needs, successfully showcased their abilities. This group demonstrated high engagement in cooperating with a heterogeneous Italian group, which comprised both learners with and without special needs.
3. *Shared teacher-and-student experiences.* Designed for all participants, the educational visits sought deepening knowledge of the local context. Simultaneously, these initiatives facilitated critical reflection on learning and citizenship education. As professionals engaged in lifelong learning, teachers and students acted as agents of change, addressing complex challenges through diverse citizenship and intercultural practices. These practices demanded robust decision-making capacity, alongside well-developed theoretical and operational competencies.

The pedagogical intervention successfully achieved its primary objective: Both participating teachers and students —including Polish learners with Special Educational Needs— demonstrated a robust development of participation and engagement in intercultural and global citizenship competencies. This target was not reached through abstract or top-down instruction, but rather through the strategic implementation of experiential and active methodologies. The case study can thus be regarded as a transferable framework. This model facilitates the transition from rhetorical commitments to the effective operationalization of intercultural and citizenship education.

The operationalization of these competencies within the project can be analyzed through three dimensions.

*1. Student Agency and Cross-National Inclusion*

Rather than treating global citizenship as a supplementary, passive curricular component, the one-week immersive case study established what can be theoretically defined as an equity-oriented educational system. The active, project-based design proved highly effective for the Polish cohort. By engaging in collaborative, transdisciplinary tasks (such as the comparative analysis of school procedures and non-verbal workshops like *Music and Dance as Instruments of Inclusion*), these students demonstrated high levels of engagement and transformative agency. The peer-to-peer interaction with Italian students catalyzed a shift from mere rhetorical commitments to authentic, localized practices of social justice. The data gathered from the evaluation questionnaires confirmed that this socially oriented engagement directly enhanced students' mutual respect, open-mindedness, and recognition of diversity as a fundamental democratic asset.

*2. Professional and Pedagogical Competencies for Educators*

For the fourteen participating teachers, mobility combined formal training with job-shadowing, shifting their roles from traditional instructors to agents of educational transformation. The two focus groups revealed that immersion in an

international environment provided educators with actionable frameworks to revitalize citizenship education within their own classrooms. Teachers reported a heightened capacity to integrate diverse cultural perspectives into a transversal, cross-curricular vision of citizenship, successfully bridging the gap between single disciplinary boundaries and holistic inclusive models.

*3. Institutional Synergy as a Catalyst*

A crucial success factor highlighted in the study's results is the alignment between institutional infrastructure and active teaching practices. The efficiency of the European Projects Commission at the Meucci-Mattei High School provided a supportive administrative and organizational framework. This structural backing ensured that active methodologies could function effectively as environments of reflexivity, dialogue, and shared community responsibility.

## Conclusions

The initial hypothesis sought to reflect on citizenship education and analyze how international exchange projects could promote participatory processes. Ultimately, the study revealed a more complex and analytically nuanced perspective on how citizenship education could be practiced at school. The results demonstrated that the intercultural exchange project promoted active engagement and citizenship education. Consequently, the initiative fostered dialogue and a deep sense of responsibility toward diverse political, social, and cultural belongings at both local and global levels.

The experience enhanced teachers' and students' participation while cultivating a broader sense of belonging to a planetary community. This success was achieved through developing a holistic and intentional approach capable of combining curriculum design, inclusive pedagogy, and experiential learning opportunities.

While the research offers valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. A primary constraint of the study concerns its context-dependent nature, as the findings are closely linked to the specific characteristics, practices, and organizational dynamics of the participating institutions. Consequently, caution should be exercised when generalizing the results to other educational contexts.

The qualitative focus was compounded by a relatively small sample size concentrated on a specific group of participants across two schools. Therefore, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to broader educational contexts but are instead regarded as transferable frameworks. Moreover, the data collected via questionnaires relied on self-reported measures. This approach might introduce a degree of social desirability bias, as participants potentially overemphasized positive outcomes due to their personal investment in the Erasmus+ project.

Finally, a notable limitation of this case study concerns the brief duration of the fieldwork. Both participating teachers and students indicated that a mobility period extending beyond a single week would have been preferred to further consolidate learning and intercultural exchange.

To address these limitations, future research should adopt longitudinal designs to evaluate the long-term competencies acquired through international mobility. It would also be highly beneficial to expand the sample size by including a wider network of schools. This expansion will enable comparative analyses across different geographical and socioeconomic contexts. Furthermore, integrating mixed-

methods approaches can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the field. Combining self-reported questionnaires with structured observations will clarify how inclusive pedagogy and global citizenship education are concretely operationalized in educational practice

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