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THE POETIC CRUSADE AND THE IMAGINED ENEMY: CONSTRUCTING LEGITIMACY IN THE NIKEPHORIAN EXCHANGE

Ali Alnahhabi

*Assistant Professor of Arabic & Comparative Literature Department of Literature, Rhetoric and Criticism,
College of Arabic Language, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU), Saudi Arabia*

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Corresponding author: Ali Alnahhabi
(AAAlnahhabi@imamu.edu.sa)

ABSTRACT

This study reexamines the Nikephorian poetic exchange, traditionally read as an episode of Byzantine–Islamic polemic, and situates it within intra-Islamic struggles over legitimacy. Adopting a historically grounded discursive approach, it argues that the Byzantine voice functioned as a rhetorical device through which Muslim authors articulated internal political crises and constructed legitimacy. In the eastern Islamic world, the exchange emerged within the context of Sāmānid–Būyid rivalry, where the Byzantine emperor served as an imagined enemy through which internal conflict was reframed. In al-Andalus, Ibn Ḥazm reactivated this material after the collapse of the caliphate, transforming the external threat into an argument for the necessity of the caliphate as a principle of political unity. The significance of the exchange lies not in its authenticity but in its reuse across political contexts, revealing how polemical literature functioned as a medium through which political authority and communal identity were renegotiated in moments of political crisis.

KEYWORDS: Nikephoros II Phokas; al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī; Ibn Ḥazm; Arabic literary discourse; political legitimacy; imagined enemy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Medieval Arabic sources preserve a striking episode: a Byzantine emperor is said to have launched a “crusade” against the Muslim world not through military invasion, but through an Arabic poem. Known as *al-qaṣīda al-armaniyya al-mal’ūna* (the accursed Armenian poem) and attributed to Nikephoros II Phokas (r. 963–969), the text entered the Islamic tradition within a charged polemical register and circulated alongside responses attributed to al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī (291–356 AH / 904–967 CE) in the eastern Islamic lands and Ibn Ḥazm (384–456 AH / 994–1064 CE) in al-Andalus, linking distinct regional contexts within a single narrative.

Yet the peculiarity of the episode deepens: both medieval sources and much modern scholarship treat it as a historical episode within Islamic–Byzantine polemics, rather than interrogating the conditions under which the narrative took shape. Von Grunebaum (1976), for instance, discusses the “Nikephorian poem” alongside al-Qaffāl’s reply primarily as a historical document, noting that neither linguistic nor factual considerations prevent treating the text as contemporary testimony, while expressing reservations about the reply’s official character.

This interpretive tendency has persisted in later scholarship, particularly in Arabic studies. al-Munajjid (1982) published a critical edition of the poems, framing them within Byzantine–Islamic diplomatic exchange. al-Khaz‘alī (2005) offered a comparative reading of the Nikephoros–Ibn Ḥazm exchange, noting the chronological gap without resolution. Hermes (2009) examined the episode within Byzantine–Islamic hostility discourse, while others examined its stylistic and literary features (Akhuzhiyya & ‘Ayāsh, 2014). Despite their methodological differences, these works treat the poem as a fixed historical episode reflecting imperial antagonism and interpret the Islamic responses as defensive reactions, rarely questioning its production, circulation, or role in intra-Islamic struggles over legitimacy.

Against this prevailing assumption, this article argues that the so-called “Nikephorian poem” should be read not as a document of Byzantine–Islamic conflict, but as a politically charged text through which Muslim authors negotiated internal crises of authority. The Byzantine voice functions not as an external speaker but as a constructed rhetorical position through which internal struggles are articulated by means of an imagined enemy. Read in this way, the exchange reveals that polemical

literature operated as a political instrument for redistributing legitimacy and reimagining the caliphate in moments of political fragmentation.

In the East, the poetic exchange operated within a political field shaped by rivalry between the Sāmānids (819–999) and the Būyids (934–1062), where the Byzantine emperor appears less as a military adversary than as an imagined enemy through whom eastern political conflict is recast in the language of external confrontation. Its western afterlife, however, unfolds differently. In al-Andalus, detached from its eastern conjuncture and received as genuine, the poem is reactivated within the crisis of caliphal collapse during the Cordoban *fitna*. Ibn Ḥazm does not deploy the Byzantine adversary to displace a rival center of power, but to confront fragmentation by reasserting the caliphate as the necessary principle of unity and legitimate rule. The exchange thus shifts from tactical intervention to theological–political reconstruction: the imagined enemy becomes a means of defending not merely Islam against Christianity, but the symbolic necessity of the caliphate at a moment of rupture.

What is at issue, therefore, is not the poem’s authenticity as such, but how politically charged texts acquire authority, circulate across contexts, and are reused to articulate new political realities. The poem is approached here not simply as a historical document, but as a constructed discourse whose political meaning emerges through transmission and reuse, functioning as a form through which crisis, authority, and order are reimagined. Legitimacy is therefore treated here not simply as a political condition but as a discursive construct, produced and negotiated through texts, polemics, and acts of rhetorical performance.

Methodologically, this study adopts a discursive-historical approach, combining analysis of the poems with reconstruction of their political contexts, transmission, and reception. Following Foucault’s (1969/1972) conception of discourse as a historical event shaped by conditions of appearance, circulation, and reuse, the poems are treated not merely as literary texts but as discursive interventions embedded in political contexts. The political field in which these texts circulated is reconstructed through medieval historical sources, including Miskawayh (d. 1030), Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233), al-Subki (d. 1370), and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373). Within this framework, de Certeau (1984) explains the tactical use of discourse by non-dominant actors, Douglas (1966) the classificatory logic through which political conflict is moralized, Lincoln (2014) how discourse produces legitimacy within relations of

power, Austin (1962) its performative force, and Assmann (2011) its place within cultural memory. The poems are thus understood not simply as literary compositions but as discursive acts that classify, legitimize, and perform political authority within a specific field of power.

The study proceeds in three sections: the first reconstructs the political context of Byzantine expansion and Abbasid fragmentation; the second examines the eastern field of the exchange through al-Qaffāl's reply; the third analyzes Ibn Ḥazm's Andalusian reception, followed by a conclusion on polemical discourse and political legitimacy. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Arabic sources are my own. This study does not aim to produce a critical edition of the texts, but to analyze their political and discursive function; only selected passages are discussed, and the poems are cited according to their medieval transmission, with consultation of modern editions where necessary.

2. BYZANTINE EXPANSION AND ISLAMIC FRAGMENTATION IN THE TENTH CENTURY

Nikephoros II Phokas was among the most formidable military commanders of the tenth century. Before ascending the imperial throne in 963, he had distinguished himself on the Byzantine eastern frontiers. As Kennedy observes, the rise of Nikephoros and his brother Leo marked a decisive turning point in the balance of power, as "the policy of raids was replaced by one of territorial expansion" (Kennedy, 2016, p. 262). The consequences were immediate. Muslim frontier strongholds, stable for nearly two centuries, now came under systematic assault. Ḥadath was sacked in 957, Sumaysāt fell in 958, and Sayf al-Dawla (r. 945–967) suffered a major defeat in 960, effectively ending his ability to resist the Byzantines on equal terms (Kennedy, 2016). In 962, Byzantine forces attacked Aleppo itself, forcing Sayf al-Dawla to withdraw beyond the Euphrates and marking a decisive shift in the balance of power on the northern frontier.

This military resurgence unfolded within a broader structural transformation. Across the Islamic world, political fragmentation limited coordinated resistance and magnified the psychological and symbolic impact of Byzantine advances (Kennedy, 2016). These developments were accompanied by an important symbolic shift. In 944, the transfer of the Mandylion from Edessa to Constantinople was marked by a solemn imperial reception and the retelling of its legendary history; the translation of so prestigious a relic from Arab rule to the Byzantine capital represented "the epitome of symbolic victory" (Cameron, 2006, p. 38). Warfare was thereby

reframed as sacred restoration, a horizon that later informed the expansionist campaigns associated with Nikephoros II Phokas.

In Byzantine discourse, Nikephoros acquired a powerful aura and was known by the epithet "the white death of the Saracens" (Haldon, 2003, p. 74). Literary texts portrayed him as a divinely strengthened general and defender of Christendom, while liturgical tradition celebrated him as an invincible martyr and champion of the Christian faithful (Sullivan, 2019). Yet these portrayals were far from uniform, ranging "from an 'arch villain' to 'a paragon of the personal and imperial virtues'" (Sullivan, 2019, p. vii), revealing the contested ideological construction of his imperial persona.

The fear he inspired among Muslims is evident in Ibn al-Athīr's retrospective account of his campaigns. The historian describes him as "severe against the Muslims," recalling his capture of Aleppo during the reign of Sayf al-Dawla and his seizure of Tarsus, al-Maṣṣīṣa, Adhana, and other frontier strongholds through sustained campaigns into Islamic territory. He notes that Nikephoros "made it his aim to attack and seize the lands of Islam," exploiting the fact that "the rulers of Islam were preoccupied with one another." He devastated the frontier regions, enslaving and capturing inhabitants. The fear he inspired was such that "the Muslims stood in great awe of him," believing that "there was none to prevent him" from advancing further into the lands of Islam (Ibn al-Athīr, 2012, 7:293–294).

The remark that Muslim rulers were "preoccupied with one another" points to a deeper condition: the political fragmentation that characterized the tenth-century Islamic world. By the reigns of the Abbasid caliphs al-Muttaqī (r. 940–944) and al-Mustakfī (r. 944–946), Baghdad had become a theatre of competing strongmen and shifting alliances, even before Būyid supremacy was firmly established in 945. Across the Islamic world, regional powers—the Ḥamdānids in northern Syria (944–1003), the Ikhshīdids in Egypt (935–969), the Fāṭimids in North Africa (909–1171), and the Sāmānids in the east—contested overlapping spheres of influence. In such a landscape, Byzantine expansion did not merely exploit military weakness; it operated within a fragmented political order in which authority was dispersed across multiple centers. Within this fragmented political landscape, the poem attributed to Nikephoros circulated across competing centers of power and acquired meaning in the process.

3. THE NIKEPHORIAN EXCHANGE: THE POLITICS OF DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION

3.1. The Poem Attributed to Nikephoros: Constructing the Enemy Voice

Political fragmentation in the eastern Islamic world crystallized Sāmānid and Būyid power into rival regional spheres, each advancing claims to authority and symbolic leadership. The implications of this configuration are particularly visible in the episode of the *Ghuzāt Khurāsān* (the Khurāsānian raiders), whose neglect in modern scholarship has obscured the intra-political stakes of the Nikephorian poem and the tactical nature of al-Qaffāl's response.

The Sāmānid–Būyid rivalry structured political life in Khurāsān and along the western Iranian frontier, particularly around the contested city of Rayy, in the mid-tenth century. From the Būyid perspective, the Sāmānids remained their “most dangerous opponents” in the east, their deliberately orthodox Sunni policy – against Būyid Shi‘ism – furnishing an ideological basis for continued westward expansion (Busse, 1975, p. 251). What emerged was a sustained contest rather than episodic warfare. This rivalry is best understood within a broader “struggle for hegemony” (Treadwell, 2003, p. 319). Beyond the battlefield, the contest operated through symbolic claims to sovereignty, including royal titulature such as *shāhānshāh* and competing religious postures that embedded territorial conflict within a wider struggle over authority.

The episode of the Ghuzāt Khurāsān is recorded most fully by Miskawayh (2003, 5:346–349), a contemporary of the events, and later appears in several historical works, including Ibn al-Jawzī (1992, 17:175), Ibn al-Athīr (2012, 7:262–263), and Ibn Kathīr (1998, 15:283). A related but distinct reference appears in al-Subkī's biographical narrative (1992, 3:204–205), which situates the episode within a jihadi context, specifically within *‘ām al-naḥīr* (the year of mobilization).

In *Tajārib al-Umam*, Miskawayh (2003) records, under the year 355/966–967, the details of the episode of the Ghuzāt Khurāsān. He reports the arrival at Rayy of a Khurāsānī force, estimated at twenty thousand men, who “professed to be ghuzāt” (5:346). Their conduct immediately aroused suspicion: the frontier commander observed that their behavior diverged from that of conventional raiders, while the vizier of Rukn al-Dawla (r. 932–976) warned, “I cannot feel secure that these men are not acting in coordination with the ‘man’ of Khurāsān. They are numerous and prepared under the pretext of jihad, while we are neither equipped nor ready” (5:346). Despite these warnings, Rukn al-Dawla admitted them.

Once inside Rayy, the Khurāsānīs issued sweeping

fiscal demands under the banner of jihad, declaring that “We require the revenues of all the lands under your control...” (5: 347). Invoking the Byzantine threat, they framed their demands in explicitly jihadi terms, denouncing the Daylamites – the Shi‘i military base of Būyid authority – as unbelievers and attacking them accordingly. Miskawayh notes that the Khurāsānī contingent included jurists and shaykhs, among them al-Qaffāl, the only individual explicitly named. Violence escalated into organized clashes, and the Khurāsānīs nearly overturned Būyid authority while awaiting reinforcements. After intense fighting, however, Rukn al-Dawla repelled them, and a subsequent Khurāsānī detachment was likewise defeated.

This episode might have remained regional had it not coincided with the crisis triggered by Nikephoros' incursions, and had al-Qaffāl not been the only explicitly named figure in the contingent. This convergence redirects attention to al-Subkī's biographical narrative, which in its account of al-Qaffāl, places these developments within a broader eastern milieu and links them to *‘ām al-naḥīr*. After transmitting a lengthy *isnād*, al-Subkī reports:

‘Abd al-Malik b. Muḥammad al-Shā‘ir informed me that he was among those who went out from Khurāsān and Transoxiana to fight the Byzantines in the year of mobilization, and that among them was Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ismā‘il al-Qaffāl, the Imām of the Muslims. Then a poem addressed to the Muslims arrived from Nikephoros, the great ruler of the Byzantines, laden with reproach, rebuke, threats, and menaces. Among that assembly were numerous *udabā’* (writers), eloquent speakers, and poets from the districts of Khurāsān, Syria, and the cities of Iraq, yet none offered a response except Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Qaffāl. ‘Abd al-Malik further reported that he was later taken captive after the Shaykh's reply had reached them. When he arrived in Constantinople, their scholars gathered around him, asking who the Shaykh was and from which land he came, expressing amazement at his poem and saying, “We did not know that in Islam there was a man like him.” (al-Subkī, 1992, 3:204–205).

He then reproduces both poems in full, embedding the exchange within a Khurāsānī-centered narrative framework before transmitting Ibn Ḥazm's later response. This configuration is already attested in a manuscript predating al-Subkī (ÖNB, MS A.F. 435 [507], Vienna, 8 fols., copied in 1162 AH from an exemplar dated 497 AH).

Regardless of the reported Byzantine admiration for the poem – which von Grunebaum (1976) rightly downplays – and Kennedy (2016)'s treatment of the

Khurāsānī mobilization as a largely depoliticized movement despite Miskawayh's account, both Miskawayh and al-Subkī situate the Nikephorian exchange within a distinctly eastern milieu. Miskawayh—writing from a Būyid-aligned perspective—records the arrival of a Khurāsānī contingent posing as *ghuzāt* and mobilizing jihad rhetoric against the Shi'ī Daylamite forces, among whom he explicitly names al-Qaffāl. Al-Subkī, for his part, preserves a converging memory: during *'ām al-naḥīr*, a Khurāsānī expedition against the Byzantines included al-Qaffāl, when the poem attributed to Nikephoros is said to have arrived and elicited his reply. The overlap of actors, geography, and rhetoric suggests that both reports reflect a shared eastern political configuration within which the Nikephorian exchange must be situated.

The poem attributed to Nikephoros appears in both al-Subkī (1992, 3:205–209) and Ibn Kathīr (1998, 15:290–295), though in different configurations: al-Subkī transmits it alongside the replies of al-Qaffāl and Ibn Ḥazm, whereas Ibn Kathīr reports it only with Ibn Ḥazm's response. More revealing is Ibn Kathīr's reframing of the attribution. After recounting Nikephoros' campaigns, he introduces the poem as one sent to the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Muṭī' li-llāh and attributes it not to the emperor himself but to one of his scribes. He writes:

This accursed one — namely Nikephoros, known as al-Dumustuq — had sent a poem to the caliph al-Muṭī' li-llāh, composed by one of his scribes... In it, the accursed text boasts, reviles Islam and the Muslims, and threatens their lands, claiming that he will soon possess them all — even the Two Holy Mosques (Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:289–290).

Elsewhere in the same passage, prior to reproducing the poem in full, Ibn Kathīr notes that no contemporary Muslim reply was known to him apart from that of Ibn Ḥazm, either because the poem did not circulate widely or because its author was deemed too insignificant to warrant a response. Notably, he appears unaware of al-Qaffāl's reply, further suggesting that the poem—and the responses it elicited—remained confined to a limited sphere of circulation.

Restricted diffusion indicates that the poem did not function as a formal diplomatic intervention at the 'Abbāsīd center but circulated within a more circumscribed milieu. This impression is reinforced by patterns of reception: the author of *Tārīkh Bayhaq* preserves the poem's incipit while foregrounding responses attributed to al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī, Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Bayhaqī, and Abū al-Ḥasan al-Marghinānī—figures associated with

Khurāsān and Transoxiana—thus situating the exchange within a Khurāsānī network of transmission (al-Bayhaqī, 2004, 310–311). Al-Bākhārī (1993, 1:671–672) likewise preserves only eight verses attributed to al-Marghinānī. Taken together, these traces suggest that the poem did not function as imperial correspondence but circulated within a regional political milieu. The decisive evidence, however, lies not only in transmission but in the poem's internal logic.

In Ibn Kathīr's version, the poem comprises seventy-two verses, as al-Subkī omits the final lines containing explicit invective against the Prophet. The poem opens as a formal address, identifying both sender and addressee while infusing the exchange with menace:

A message from the pure Christian king
to the heir of kings from the House of Hāshim
To the king al-Faḍl al-Muṭī', of exalted glory,
to whom the gravest trials turn for relief —
Have your ears not heard what I have done?
They have — yet weakness has undone your resolve.
If you sleep through what you have undertaken,
I have not slept over what concerns me.
Your frontiers — through your feebleness and
frailty —
have become nothing but ruined abodes.
(Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:290–291, vv.1–5).

From this opening, the poem unfolds — up to verse 29 — into a sustained catalogue of successive Byzantine conquests. It names cities such as Malta, Edessa and Samosata; recounts devastation; boasts of reducing Muslim women to captivity; and derides Sayf al-Dawla's flight from Aleppo as emblematic of Muslim weakness. The effect is cumulative: the poem magnifies Nikephorian power while dramatizing Abbasid vulnerability, constructing a scene of humiliation calibrated to provoke response.

In the next movement (vv. 30–65), the poem shifts from past victories to future conquest. This extended passage unfolds as a sustained sequence of threats: after invoking cities across Iraq and Iran, the threat extends to the Hijaz and the sacred core of Islam itself. Military boasting gives way to a programmatic vision in which territorial expansion becomes confessional transformation. The speaker anticipates the capture of Damascus, Egypt, and other Muslim cities, explicitly threatening figures such as Kāfūr (r. 946–968) and the Daylamite-held Baghdad, envisions his enthronement in Jerusalem, and projects a future in which “the land shall be emptied of every Muslim, / left to each pure believer — uncircumcised, to live in ease” (Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:295, v.65). The shift from frontier warfare to sacred space turns geopolitical

rivalry into religious conflict.

In the final seven verses, the poem takes a striking turn. The voice briefly suspends its narrative of expansion to attribute Muslim defeat to internal corruption, recasting Byzantine triumph as the moral consequence of Islamic decay. It then resumes its threat in explicitly theological terms:

We triumphed over you when your governors became unjust

And you openly proclaimed grave transgressions.

Your judges sold justice at the price of their faith,

Like the son of Jacob sold for a paltry sum of coins.

Your trusted witnesses bear false testimony in plain sight,

With lies and bribes at every hearing.

I shall open God's land, east and west,

And spread the religion of the Cross by my sword.

For Jesus—whose throne is raised above the heavens—

He prevails who stands with him on the Day of Reckoning.

Your companion has been cast into the dust;

The earth consumed him, and he became bones among ruins.

After his death, you turned upon his companions—

With insult, slander, and violation of sanctities.

(Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:295, vv.66–72).

At this point, domination becomes doctrine. Political victory is recast as theological vindication, and the threat shifts from territory to truth. By contrasting Christ's exaltation with the mortality of the Prophet and invoking discord after his death, the poem escalates into a confessional challenge directed not merely at land, but at religious legitimacy itself.

After surveying the poem's major movements, a distinction becomes necessary. There is nothing implausible in the idea that a Byzantine court poet—emboldened by military victories—might compose a poem boasting of conquest and attacking Islam. What is more difficult to explain, however, is the internal logic of the poem's closing movements. Rather than attributing victory to Christian truth or divine favor, the poem explains Muslim defeat through internal corruption, reproaching Muslims in terms more intelligible within intra-Islamic polemics than Byzantine triumphalism.

This is particularly striking given that Byzantine literary invective typically relied on overt demonization. In *De Creta Capta*, for example, Theodosios the Deacon, a contemporary of Nikephoros II Phokas, depicts Muslims as "an insignificant tribe, an evil people, hostile, bloodthirsty," and elsewhere as "worthless children of sin... eager to drink the hot blood of the Romans"

(Sullivan, 2019, pp. 177–179), reflecting a well-established repertoire of religious vilification. The Nikephorian poem, by contrast, devotes little space to theological denunciation and instead concentrates on diagnosing Muslim corruption, delegitimizing Daylamite rule, and articulating grievances embedded in intra-Islamic political debate.

As Sahas (2022) has shown, both Byzantine and Islamic authors at times interpreted military defeat as divine punishment for moral and doctrinal failure. The issue here, however, is not the idea itself, but the position from which it is articulated. The argument presupposes a shared theological horizon and addresses Muslims as a community that has failed its own order. One rebukes one's own society for failing its covenant; one does not ordinarily admonish an enemy by invoking that enemy's God. Placed in the mouth of a Byzantine emperor, such rhetoric becomes unstable, assuming an insider's theological vantage point.

The dissonance is especially marked in the verses directed at Egypt and Baghdad:

Egypt I shall seize by force with my sword,
driving off its spoils as fodder for my beasts.

I shall repay Kāfūr what he deserves—

With comb, scissors, and the cutting of cupping-knives.

(Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:293, vv.32–33).

And regarding Baghdad:

Roll up your sleeves, O people of Baghdad—woe to you,

for you are all weak and lacking resolve.

You have accepted the Daylamite as your caliph,

and so become slaves to slaves—Daylamites.

(Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:293, vv.39–40).

These verses are difficult to reconcile with the poem's ostensible purpose. Why invoke Kāfūr's servile origins and cupping imagery—a trope embedded in intra-Islamic political rhetoric to delegitimize his rule—within a supposed Byzantine proclamation? Why denounce the Daylamites and cast Muslim submission to them as slavery to slaves? What strategic advantage would Nikephoros gain in rehearsing specifically Sunni grievances against Būyid authority and its perceived Rāfiḍī [i.e., Shi'i] orientation—especially if we follow al-Munajjid's version (1982, p.18, v.41), which reads: "You have accepted the rule of the Daylamite and his Rāfiḍī doctrine"?

Such rhetoric is far more intelligible within intra-Islamic political debate than within Byzantine imperial propaganda. The alignment is therefore unlikely to be coincidental. Though framed as imperial aggression, the poem directs its energy not

toward refuting Islamic doctrine but toward humiliating Baghdad and destabilizing Daylamite authority. Its polemical logic aligns with Sāmānid–Būyid tensions, mapping eastern political fractures onto a dramatized imperial voice. The “Byzantine” voice thus appears less as imperial authorship than as a constructed vantage point through which intra-Islamic contestation is articulated under the guise of external threat. At this juncture, al-Qaffāl’s intervention becomes intelligible, and the geography of response begins to mirror the same eastern pattern observed in the poem’s transmission.

3.2. *Al-Qaffāl and the Reversal of the Discursive Horizon*

The crucial question is not only who responded, but from where the response was articulated. No reply is recorded from Baghdad, whereas the most substantial response emerges from Khurāsān—a disparity unlikely to be accidental. The exchange thus appears to have unfolded not at the Abbasid center, but in an eastern environment where the crisis of authority was more acute. Within this context, al-Qaffāl emerges as a pivotal figure.

A leading Shāfi‘ī scholar from al-Shāsh in Khurāsān, Abū Bakr al-Qaffāl was firmly rooted in the Sunni juridical tradition, despite reports of earlier Mu‘tazilī leanings (al-Subkī, 1992, 3:200–222). His importance lies not only in his scholarly standing, but also in his participation in the Khurāsānī mobilization and his poetic intervention. As transmitted by al-Subkī (1992, 3:204–213), his poem is embedded in a distinctly Khurāsānī narrative framework, placing the exchange in the same milieu as the mobilization described above. Read against this backdrop, al-Qaffāl’s reply appears not simply as a rebuttal to a Byzantine provocation, but as an intervention that shifts the exchange from a confrontation with Byzantium into the internal political and doctrinal debates of the Islamic world. The poem’s thematic structure reveals how this shift is accomplished.

Al-Subkī (1992, 3:209–213) transmits al-Qaffāl’s poem in seventy-four verses, composed in the same meter and rhyme as the poem attributed to the emperor. This correspondence places the reply within the classical Arabic tradition of *naqā’id*, “flytings or poetic duels renowned for their *hijā’* (invective, satire)” (Stetkevych, 2002, p. 83), in which a poet adopts the prosodic structure of a prior poem to overturn its claims; formal mirroring here is not mere imitation but symbolic combat in a struggle over authority and legitimacy.

The poem opens by announcing the arrival of a written message from an opponent whom he immediately discredits as ignorant of proper

methods of disputation and deluded in his titles, claims, and threats. It then turns to a direct theological and moral attack on the emperor’s claim to purity, asserting that his conduct disqualifies him even as a Christian king:

He calls himself “the Pure,” yet he is the most impure polytheists,

his garments stained with defilement.

He says, “I am a Christian,” yet he is not such;

a man of cruelty, whose conduct no merciful man would follow.

Nor is he a Christian—for he is an ignorant Trinitarian,

who exalts Jesus above the rank of Adam.

He says, “I am a Christian” —yet no Christian king

is treacherous, wicked, or a pillar of injustice.

(al-Subkī, 1992, 3:209, vv. 4–7).

After dismantling the emperor’s moral and theological authority, the poem turns to his claims of conquest, recasting them as opportunistic gains born of stratagem, betrayal, and Muslim division, and therefore incapable of conferring legitimacy. These claims are then absorbed into a longer history of Muslim ascendancy that reduces present success to a temporary reversal and shifts the contest from military success to moral rank, as even the emperor’s boast about captive Muslim women is reversed: Muslims, al-Qaffāl insists, held more Byzantine captives yet showed prophetic mercy in victory, whereas Byzantine conduct revealed moral baseness.

An extended theological reversal follows (vv. 33–51). Al-Qaffāl turns the argument of defeat on its head: divine chastisement presupposes a true covenant, since God disciplines His own community when it strays, so that temporary loss becomes correction within a divinely governed order rather than proof of false belief. Imperial claims to sacred sanction are therefore rejected, since dominion cannot authenticate doctrinal truth. Addressing the emperor’s religious claims directly, al-Qaffāl writes:

You counted lands you wish to conquer —

Such hopes are but a dreamer’s fantasy.

Whoever seeks to conquer East and West

To spread the religion of the Cross strives in error.

Whoever seeks guidance through the Cross

Is but a beast, branded upon the snout.

Nor is a Trinitarian a true friend of Christ

Whom the emperor might invoke to erase his sins.

Jesus is the Messenger of God, son of Mary,

Nourished as we are nourished.

As for Him whose Throne is above the heavens —

He is the Creator of Jesus and the Reviver of bones.

(al-Subkī, 1992, 3:211, vv. 33–38).

Christian doctrine is recast as theological error

rather than revelation, and imperial expansion stripped of sacred legitimacy. The polemic proceeds through familiar motifs of Christian-Muslim controversy—Jesus' prophecy of Muḥammad and doubts about the Mandylion—before closing with a final reversal: if suffering proves falsehood, then the suffering of Jesus would equally discredit Christianity.

In the final section, theology gives way to politics. Al-Qaffāl moves from doctrinal refutation to explicit geopolitical warning, calling for his reply to be conveyed directly to the emperor and thus transforming the poetic exchange into a declaration of eastern resolve. The imperial narrative of Muslim decline is immediately reframed. Even if, he concedes, some among the Arabs faltered or turned back, this does not signify Islam's weakening, for the faith continues to expand in the East:

India and Sind, in the East, have embraced Islam,
As have China and the Turks—those non-Arab peoples—

Through the leadership of Maṣṣūr b. Nūḥ, his armies,
And his shaykhs—men of resolve and determination.
(al-Subkī, 1992, 3:212, vv. 54–55).

Here Maṣṣūr b. Nūḥ—the Sāmānid ruler (r. 961–976) and rival of the Būyids—emerges as an alternative locus of authority, shifting the axis of legitimacy away from Baghdad, after which the poet finally acknowledges the wound at the Abbasid core:

And if Baghdad has been afflicted in its rule
And became slaves to slaves—Daylamites,
Truth has its supporters, and God has His chosen men
Who defend it with the sword's edge.

[...]

May God reward Sayf al-Dawla with lasting good
And honor him with noble virtues.
And may He grant Maṣṣūr b. Nūḥ enduring safety,
So long as he lives.

They are the two who have protected Islam from every aggressor
And guarded the edifice of religion from every destroyer.

(al-Subkī, 1992, 3:212, vv. 56–57, 60–62).

This passage makes explicit the poem's political geography of legitimacy. While acknowledging Būyid domination of the Abbasid center, al-Qaffāl symbolically bypasses Baghdad by naming and blessing eastern and frontier rulers as the true guardians of Islam, thereby displacing legitimate authority from the Abbasid capital. Without proclaiming an alternative caliphate, the poem instead sketches a symbolic counter-caliphate in which sovereignty and protection are redistributed

across the eastern Islamic sphere, turning the crisis of Baghdad into a local problem and relocating legitimacy elsewhere. The poem thus unfolds in three stages: first delegitimizing the emperor morally and theologically, then absorbing his victories into a longer Islamic history, and finally relocating political authority to the eastern Islamic world, culminating in an explicit military warning.

In the closing movement of the final section, the poem gathers its theological and political strands into an explicit military warning. Al-Qaffāl no longer argues; he summons. The emperor is warned that the eastern horizon he has underestimated is already in motion:

Khurāsān has come to you, dragging its horses—
Branded and surging like swarming locusts—
Grey-haired men and youths alike, fierce protectors,
Auspicious in battle, never ill-omened;
Ghuzāt who have sold their lives to Lord
For His gardens—God is the truest of bargainers.

(al-Subkī, 1992, 3:212, vv. 64–66).

Khurāsān appears not as a province but as a mobilized sacred force. Its fighters are described as Ghuzāt who have "sold their lives to God for His gardens," invoking the Qur'ānic language of the divine bargain. The term Ghuzāt is significant, as it situates the poem within the Khurāsānī mobilization described earlier, grounding the ultimatum that follows in an existing frontier movement rather than mere rhetoric. The choice is stated plainly:

Come, let us submit our case to judgment—
For the sword is the most just of judges.

[...]

But if you choose peace, there is safety in peace—
And the most pleasant life is that of one who yields.
(al-Subkī, 1992, 3:212–213, vv. 68, 74).

The structure is stark: judgment by the sword or safety through submission. What begins as poetic rebuttal ends as geopolitical declaration—a performative assertion of eastern power in which Khurāsān emerges as both shield and avenger. The following section reconstructs the eastern conjuncture and examines the discursive mechanisms through which the exchange operated within an intra-Islamic struggle over legitimacy.

3.3. Reconstructing the Eastern Conjuncture

As the preceding analysis has shown, the convergence of eastern chronicle evidence and the internal polemical logic of the poems points to a distinctly Khurāsānī conjuncture shaping the Nikephorian exchange. The Ghuzāt Khurāsān episode and al-Subkī's placement of al-Qaffāl within *'ām al-naḥīr* situate the poem's circulation within a moment of eastern mobilization against both

Byzantine and Būyid power. The Khurāsān mobilized under Manṣūr b. Nūḥ in Miskawayh's chronicle is the same Khurāsān that appears in al-Qaffāl's poem as a redemptive military force, where rhetorical and historical Khurāsān converge. What appears as a transregional assault on Islam thus reads instead as a text calibrated for intra-Islamic contestation, where the language of external war frames an internal struggle over legitimacy.

From a discursive perspective, the decisive issue is not provenance but political grammar. The so-called "Byzantine voice" is best read not as transparent imperial authorship but as a constructed vantage point through which eastern political tensions are reorganized, its logic intelligible less in Constantinople than in the contested landscape of Rayy. The problem thus shifts from origin to operation. As de Certeau observes, "the presence and circulation of a representation... tells us nothing about what it is for its users" (1984, p. xiii). Meaning lies not in origin but in use: representations acquire political force through practices that appropriate and redeploy them within specific relations of power. In de Certeau's terms, this process unfolds within the asymmetrical relation between strategy and tactic: "a strategy... assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper," whereas "a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus" (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 36–37). In the fourth/tenth-century Islamic world, the Būyids—controlling Baghdad—occupied such a strategic place, while the Sāmānids operated from a powerful yet decentered eastern sphere. Under such conditions, discourse becomes tactical terrain, for "the space of a tactic is the space of the other," and tactical action operates not through control of place but through the ability to seize opportunities in time, reinterpreting events and redirecting their meaning within an asymmetrical field of power (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). Tactical discourse emerges in moments of crisis, when actors lacking institutional control appropriate events rather than command them.

Al-Qaffāl's reply completes this reorientation by foregrounding Manṣūr b. Nūḥ, isolating Baghdad as compromised, and culminating in the vision of a Khurāsānī army advancing as a disciplined sacred force, thereby relocating the axis of legitimacy eastward. The exchange therefore reflects not merely a confrontation between Byzantium and Islam, but a Sāmānid recasting of crisis in which the Byzantine threat is rhetorically absorbed and redeployed to authorize an eastern re-centering of sovereignty. At this point, authorship becomes secondary to function. As de Certeau (1984) notes elsewhere, users "make

innumerable and infinitesimal transformations" of received cultural forms to adapt them to their own interests (p. xii). The Byzantine threat thus functioned less as a military reality than as a political language through which the struggle for Rayy was made meaningful.

If de Certeau clarifies how discourse can be tactically redeployed within asymmetrical fields of power, Douglas helps explain how such discourse secures symbolic authority. In *Purity and Danger*, she famously defines dirt as "matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966, p. 37), showing that impurity emerges wherever an element appears to violate an established order. This framework clarifies the Nikephorian exchange. The emperor styles himself "the pure Christian king" (Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:290, v. 1), and al-Qaffāl answers with a rhetorical inversion: "You call yourself pure, yet you are the most impure polytheist" (al-Subkī, 1992, 3:209, v. 4). Purity here is not descriptive theology but a claim to rightful order. Though directed at the Byzantine adversary, the rhetoric of impurity is extended to explain political disorder within the Islamic world itself, where Baghdad is rebuked for having "been content with the rule of the Daylamite and his Rāfiḍī doctrine," and thus for having "become slaves to slave-Daylamites" (al-Munajjid, 1982, p. 18, v. 41). Political humiliation is thereby moralized: "We wronged, and so we were tried by a wrongdoer" (al-Subkī, 1992, 3:211, v. 32), recoding defeat as ethical consequence and Daylamite rule as the visible symptom of internal deviation.

In Douglas's terms, the Daylamites can be read as occupying the position of "matter out of place": a heterodox military elite ruling at the symbolic center of a Sunni caliphal order to which they did not properly belong. The poem does not explicitly label the Daylamites as impure; rather, impurity language is directed at the Byzantine adversary, but its moral logic is extended inward to account for the disorder of Baghdad. Their presence signifies classificatory disorder, and their displacement implies purification. As Douglas (1966) argues, pollution beliefs intensify where classificatory boundaries are fragile. In a moment of Abbasid weakness and contest over Rayy, impurity discourse therefore functions as political boundary-work: it delegitimizes Baghdad under Būyid control and authorizes the symbolic re-centering of sovereignty in Khurāsān. The rhetoric of impurity does not merely describe moral failure; it reorganizes the political field by marking certain actors as illegitimate occupants of authority.

The political implications of this classificatory logic become clearer in light of Lincoln's theory of

discourse. As he argues, discourse and force are “the chief means whereby social borders, hierarchies, and institutional formations are both maintained and modified” (Lincoln, 2014, p. 1). Discourse, moreover, does not merely describe reality; it helps produce it by transforming power into “legitimate” authority and organizing systems of classification and hierarchy (Lincoln, 2014, pp. 3–5). The Nikephorian exchange operates at this intersection of discourse and force: poetry functions as discourse, while the Khurāsānī mobilization represents force. The Byzantine poem does not simply threaten militarily; it explains defeat and assigns responsibility, constructing a narrative in which political subordination appears justified. Al-Qaffāl redirects this framework by shifting responsibility for defeat from Islam itself to its present custodians—the Daylamites—whose rule is portrayed as deviation from proper order. Simultaneously, the poem symbolically elevates the Sāmānids as the true defenders of Islam. The exchange thus unfolds as a struggle over legitimacy, as each poem seeks to control the interpretation of defeat and thus the definition of legitimate rule.

The Nikephorian exchange, however, operates not only at the level of discourse and legitimacy but also as performative action. In Austin’s terms, the utterances in these poems function as illocutionary acts that intervene in political reality (Austin, 1962), a possibility extended to literary discourse by Pratt (1977), who argues that literary texts can operate as socially recognized speech acts. When the poem attributed to Nikephoros declares, “We triumphed over you when your governors turned unjust” (Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:295, v. 66), it does more than report victory: it recasts defeat as the juridical consequence of corruption, turning political loss into moral causation, while the declaration that the Muslims “became slaves to slave-Daylamites” (Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:293, v. 40) enacts degradation through naming. Political subordination is not merely described; it is performed. Legitimacy is not argued but allocated through language.

Al-Qaffāl responds with counter-performatives that redirect this moral logic. By affirming that Baghdad became enslaved to slave-Daylamites, he accepts the diagnosis but redirects its implications, while the proclamation that “Truth has its supporters” (al-Subkī, 1992, 3:212, v. 57) and his blessings upon Manṣūr b. Nūḥ and praise of Sayf al-Dawla function as symbolic acts of investiture, reinstalling guardianship of Islam in eastern and frontier spheres. Through accusation, rebuke, blessing, and invocation, the poems withdraw

legitimacy from one center and confer it on another.

The preceding analysis suggests that the Byzantine voice functioned as a discursive instrument within the Sāmānid–Būyid struggle, transforming political conflict into a moral narrative and redistributing legitimacy through performative speech. Yet the text did not remain confined to its eastern conjuncture; some seventy years later, it reappears in al-Andalus. The problem therefore shifts from origin to reactivation: not how the text emerged, but how a text formed in one political field comes to operate in another. This second movement—its Andalusian reinscription—frames the next section on Ibn Ḥazm.

4. FROM TACTIC TO BELIEF: IBN ḤAZM AND ANDALUSIAN RECEPTION

In al-Andalus, the Nikephorian exchange entered a political field marked by fragmentation and contested authority. In Khurāsān, the poem redistributed legitimacy in space; in al-Andalus, Ibn Ḥazm transforms it into a theory of legitimacy. What had functioned in the East as tactical discourse within a struggle over sovereignty was received here within a horizon of caliphal collapse. This section argues that, in this new context, the exchange becomes a reflection on political legitimacy in which the caliphate appears as the necessary solution to fragmentation. The question, therefore, is not simply how the text reached al-Andalus, but how it functioned within a field shaped by collapse and the search for political unity.

The western afterlife of the Nikephorian exchange was not accidental. The poem reappears in Andalusian transmission roughly seven decades after its eastern circulation. It is preserved in the biographical narrative of al-Subkī (1992, 3:214–222) and cited by Ibn Kathīr, who reports that Ibn Ḥazm “composed [his reply] extemporaneously when this accursed one reached him, in anger for the sake of God and His Messenger—as reported by those who witnessed him” (Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:296). ‘Abbās (1969, p. 374), followed by al-Munajjid (1982, p.39), suggested that the poem was composed in the court of the last Umayyad caliph of Córdoba, Hishām III al-Mu‘tadd bi-llāh (r. 1027–1031); however, the source on which ‘Abbās based this claim is mistaken, as noted by al-Khaz‘alī (2005). Western circulation is further suggested by the report of another Andalusian poem replying to Nikephoros, of which only the opening verse survives (Ibn Khayr al-Ishbīlī, 2009, p. 503). The exchange therefore entered a new Andalusian context, where it was reactivated in a new political and discursive field.

Foucault (1972) suggests that discourse should be

analyzed not primarily in terms of meaning or authorial intention, but in terms of its conditions of appearance and historical function. A statement, in this sense, is not simply a text but an event—“open to repetition, transformation, and reactivation” (p. 28). The task of analysis, therefore, is not to interpret the text as an isolated object, but to ask a different question: “why did this particular statement appear, and why this one rather than another?” (p. 27). From this perspective, the Nikephorian poem is not merely a transmitted text, but a discourse reactivated within a new political environment. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether Ibn Ḥazm believed the poem to be authentic but why accepting it as authentic was politically meaningful within his argument about the necessity of the caliphate.

The Foucauldian question, however, must be answered historically. If we ask why this discourse is reactivated in al-Andalus, and why Ibn Ḥazm in particular responds to it, the answer lies in the political crisis of Córdoba. By the early fifth/eleventh century, the Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus had collapsed amid factional strife, Berber ascendancy, Ḥammūdīd claims to the caliphate, and competing Arab and regional elites (‘Abbās, 1969). Ibn Ḥazm was deeply entangled in this upheaval. Born into an elite Umayyad-aligned family, he served as a minister under two Umayyad caliphs and remained a committed defender of Umayyad legitimacy (al-Ḥamawī, 1993, 4:1650–1659; ‘Abbās, 1969, pp. 303–322). His preoccupation with creed (*‘aqīda*) and doctrinal precision cannot be separated from this rupture; in his thought, theology was inseparable from sovereignty, and his attachment to the caliphate was not abstract: he linked the fall of the Umayyads to the collapse of Andalusian order, writing that “with its destruction, al-Andalus itself was destroyed,” and recounting his imprisonment under the Ḥammūdīds on suspicion of seeking to revive the Umayyad cause (Ibn Ḥazm, 1987, 1:261; 2:146). This concern with caliphal legitimacy is further reflected in his *Naqt al-‘Arūs*, where he lists caliphal titles no longer used by later rulers, preserving the symbolic language of the caliphate itself (Ibn Ḥazm, 1987, 2:99). These testimonies place his response within a lived political crisis rather than abstract theology.

In a fragmented Andalusian world, the figure of an external Christian enemy acquires a unifying function. Rivalries between Umayyads, Berber factions, and competing Arab and regional elites cannot easily be overcome through lineage or regional loyalties; yet the image of a Byzantine aggressor provides a symbolic adversary through which these divided groups can imagine themselves

as a single community. Ibn Ḥazm’s text, therefore, does not merely respond to an external attack; it appropriates the Byzantine voice and repositions it as a common enemy shared by all factions—Arabs, Berbers, and rival claimants alike—transforming external polemic into an internal political argument: fragmentation produces weakness, and unity requires the restoration of the caliphate as a universal authority. In this context, whether Ibn Ḥazm regarded the poem as historically authentic becomes less important than the role it played in his argument. Treating the Byzantine threat as real allowed him to use the exchange as evidence for a broader political claim: that fragmentation leads to subjugation, and that only the caliphate can restore unity and authority. As Lincoln (1989) observes, “Ultimately, that which either holds society together or takes it apart is sentiment, and the chief instrument with which such sentiment may be aroused, manipulated, and rendered dormant is discourse” (p. 9). Ibn Ḥazm’s reply can therefore be read as a discursive intervention that mobilizes collective sentiment in a moment of fragmentation by constructing a common enemy and presenting the caliphate as the symbolic center of unity.

Ibn Ḥazm’s poem, comprising 137 verses, takes the form of a formal address to Nikephoros, whom he describes as “one who speaks falsehood in ignorance and error ... the slanderer among the foreigners.” He rebukes him for sending his message to a caliph “who holds in his hands nothing of his forefathers’ authority but fading traces and worn inscriptions” (Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:296, vv. 4–5), implying that such a message would have been answered differently in the days of a powerful caliphate. The passage ends with a prayer that God restore the strength of the true religion, transforming political weakness into a temporary condition awaiting renewal.

In the verses that follow (vv. 10–40), Ibn Ḥazm mirrors the earlier eastern diagnosis: defeat is attributed not to religious failure but to political fragmentation and unjust rule. This diagnosis is made explicit when he attributes Muslim defeat to internal division and political disorder: When we fell into dispute over our affairs in weakness, the rule of the ignorant came to prevail in tyranny. A strife occupied our caliphs, stirred by their servants—the Turks and the Daylamites. (Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:297, vv.15–16).

Yet Ibn Ḥazm immediately resists any reading of defeat as civilizational decline. He invokes earlier Muslim victories and continued Muslim possession

of Christianity's sacred geography—Jerusalem and Bethlehem—as evidence of enduring Muslim sovereignty. Present weakness, therefore, is not a sign of permanent decline but a temporary political crisis.

He then warns Nikephoros not to mistake temporary weakness for decline, presenting the caliphate as a political order subject to eclipse and renewal:

Slowly, the light of the caliphate moves toward renewal,
wiping the dust from darkened faces.
Then you shall learn how you will flee
beneath the charge of horses in battle,
as in former nights when you were counted among
the spoils

(Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:298-299, vv.39-41).

The caliphate appears here not as a political reality but as a structure of legitimacy that survives decline, which is acknowledged but narratively contained. Read in the context of the Cordoban crisis, the caliphate is invoked less as an existing political order than as a political solution. By placing the present crisis within a recurring pattern of decline and restoration, Ibn Ḥazm converts rupture into interval and defeat into a problem of order rather than of religion, so that the caliphate emerges as the mechanism through which unity could be restored.

If the caliphate is to function as the remedy for political fragmentation, Ibn Ḥazm insists that not every ruler can embody it. Political power alone does not constitute legitimate authority. In his view, rulers such as Kāfūr in Egypt and the Banū Ḥamdān in northern Syria were not legitimate imams, and their defeat at Byzantine hands therefore proved nothing about Islam itself, because they never embodied legitimacy. The standard is clarified immediately:

Leave every base man who claims descent—
do not count him an imam nor among firm pillars.
(Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15: 299, v.52).

The issue, then, is not faction but criterion: not every ruler is an imam, and defeat follows when authority rests in unworthy hands. Before turning to the figure of the rightful caliph, Ibn Ḥazm briefly invokes Baghdad, al-Shām, al-Ḥijāz, Khurāsān, and other lands, insisting that they are not abandoned territories, but regions still guarded by defenders of the faith. The horizon then widens through the anticipation of a rightful caliph, whose rule would restore order and transform the political landscape of the Islamic world:

A rightful caliph whose rule upholds the faith,
who does not, for God's sake, fear the blame of any
blamer;
one whose lineage traces back to the sons of al-'Abbās

in a noble and far-reaching line—or to the illustrious clan of 'Abd Shams.

Kings whose star of fortune has long run with victory—

welcome to those who have passed among them and
to those yet to come.

Their seat shall be in the Mosque of Jerusalem
or in the noble precincts of Baghdad.

And if he be from the noble lines of 'Adī or Taym,
or from Asad, people of virtue and ancient honor,
then welcome and blessing and greeting

to them, among the best of those past and those to
come.

(Ibn Kathīr, 1998, 15:302, vv.87-92).

Ibn Ḥazm here entertains the possibility of an 'Abbāsīd caliph—or even a ruler from other noble Qurashī lineages. This is not a surrender of Umayyad memory but a form of structural realism. In a world where Córdoba had lost its caliphate, what mattered was not which dynasty ruled, but that legitimate caliphal authority continued somewhere in the Islamic world. The caliphate thus shifts from dynastic possession to normative principle: less a house to which one belongs than an office that must exist for order to endure. Al-Khaz'ālī (2005), interprets this gesture toward the 'Abbāsīds as evidence that earlier Umayyad-'Abbāsīd antagonisms had faded. Yet this underestimates the depth of the Andalusian crisis. Ibn Ḥazm's move is not reconciliation but urgency: the preservation of a viable caliphal center—any legitimate center—had become a political and civilizational necessity, for without the caliphate the symbolic unity of the community itself was at risk. The rightful caliph is imagined not merely as a legitimate ruler but as a world-restoring figure under whose rule fragmentation would end, the balance of power would be reversed, and even Constantinople would fall into Muslim hands.

Just as Nikephoros attacks Islam and al-Qaffāl responds by redirecting polemic against Christianity, Ibn Ḥazm adopts a similar structural strategy. A formidable theologian, he launches into sustained doctrinal critique—most notably a refutation of the Trinity—before closing with an extended exaltation of Islam in the final thirty-seven verses. González Palencia (1945/2011) observed that this section reads less as a rebuttal of Christianity than as a celebration of Islam, and this assessment is persuasive. The Christian adversary thus functions primarily as a rhetorical device: polemic becomes a means of restoring symbolic order, preparing the ground for Ibn Ḥazm's central political claim that only a legitimate caliphate can overcome fragmentation and restore unity. The Byzantine voice, therefore, is not

merely an external opponent but a discursive instrument through which the problem of authority within the Islamic world is articulated.

This argument is reinforced not only through polemic but through the strategic invocation of the past. By recalling earlier Muslim victories and invoking the renewal of the caliphate, Ibn Ḥazm places the present crisis within a familiar pattern of decline and restoration. In this sense, the poem operates through what Assmann (2011) terms cultural memory: not simply the recollection of the past, but the reactivation of shared models that preserve communal unity in times of fragmentation. The caliphate thus appears not merely as a political institution, but as a remembered structure of unity invoked to overcome division and restore order. Memory here functions not as recollection but as political argument: restoration is framed as return, and unity as recovery.

The western reinscription therefore differs fundamentally from the eastern conjuncture. In Khurāsān, the poem participated in Sāmānid-Būyid rivalry; in al-Andalus, it becomes a meditation on collapse and symbolic endurance. The question is no longer who governs Baghdad, but whether Islam can endure without a caliphal center. The poem thus shifts from polemic to political thought: no longer merely a response to an external enemy, but a reflection on civilizational survival. In Ibn Ḥazm's hands, the Nikephorian exchange reaches its most systematic articulation—not as factional invective, but as theological-political reconstruction. The Byzantine voice becomes the occasion for rethinking authority, legitimacy, and unity in a fragmented Islamic world, and the text survives not because of its historical origin but because of its structural function: it provides a language through which crisis can be explained and contained. Each time the text reappears, it performs the same work: turning rupture into narrative and narrative into legitimacy. The Byzantine emperor, in this discursive tradition, becomes an imagined enemy through whom the crisis of authority is articulated and the restoration of the caliphate imagined as the only solution to fragmentation.

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5. CONCLUSION

The Nikephorian exchange has long been read as an episode of Byzantine-Islamic hostility—a poetic skirmish across confessional frontiers. This study has argued otherwise. The poem attributed to Nikephoros II Phokas emerges not as an external declaration of war, but as a discourse directed inward, whose denunciation of Muslim corruption, humiliation of Daylamite authority, and moral framing of defeat align more closely with intra-Islamic struggles over legitimacy than with Byzantine triumphalism. In its eastern conjuncture, the “Byzantine voice” functioned less as an imperial utterance than as a strategic vantage point through which Sāmānid-Būyid rivalry was staged and legitimacy symbolically redistributed.

The Andalusian afterlife of the poem shows that its significance lies not in its origin but in its reactivation. In Ibn Ḥazm's hands, the exchange becomes a meditation on caliphal collapse and the conditions of political restoration. The caliphate ceases to be merely a dynastic institution and becomes a civilizational principle—a structure of legitimacy necessary for the symbolic coherence of the community. The external enemy—whether Nikephoros or Christianity more broadly—serves primarily to consolidate the internal field. Polemic becomes reconstruction; memory becomes political argument; history becomes a program for restoring order.

The Nikephorian exchange therefore invites a broader reconsideration of medieval polemical texts. Rather than asking whether such texts are authentic or fabricated, we should ask how they function: how they circulate, how they are appropriated, and how they authorize legitimacy in moments of crisis. Read in this way, the “poetic crusade” was never merely about Byzantium, but about the problem of authority in a fragmented political world. The imagined enemy emerges as a discursive instrument through which legitimacy is constructed, contested, and restored. Medieval polemical literature thus emerges as a central arena in which political theology, historical memory, and symbolic authority were negotiated.

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