

The Study of Textile Production at the End of al-Andalus and the Early Sixteenth Century: A Characterization of the Forms of Production¹

O estudo da produção têxtil no final de al-Andalus e no início do século XVI: uma caracterização das formas de produção

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Data recepção do artigo / Received for publication: 12 October 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34619/t7tv-7bl6>

¹ This contribution is a partial summary of: GARRIDO LÓPEZ, Jorge – *La producción de textil y cuero entre los siglos finales de Al-Andalus y principios de la Modernidad: caracterización y transformación de las fórmulas productivas (siglos XIII-XVI)*. Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2025. PhD Thesis.



1. Introduction

Approaching the study of textile production in any historical social formation should not be reduced to an inventory of technical operations or product catalogues. It requires a broad, critical perspective that understands these productive activities as complex processes, embedded in, shaped by and inseparable from specific economic, social and cultural configurations. In this study, we conceive textile production as a process in which the natural resources of a given environment², the technological level attained by technical procedures and society, through its needs, interact³. The process is driven by the satisfaction of demand, of whatever kind. The particular arrangements a given society chooses and employs to organise production ultimately serve to characterise that society.

In examining textile production within a western Islamic society in the late Middle Ages and at the outset of the marked transformations it underwent in the opening decades of the sixteenth century, we adopt a holistic perspective on the productive process, from its labour cycles to its agents and spaces, with particular attention to relations of production.

There is no doubt that the economic base of Nasrid society, like that of all pre-capitalist social formations, was agrarian. The cultivation of the land employed the majority of the population, and the assessment and taxation of its yields constituted the central authority's principal source of revenue⁴. Nevertheless, although the agrarian dimension has received the most sustained attention from historical scholarship, it was not the only component of the Andalusí economic order. There is a growing consensus regarding the important role played by other productive activities in the social reproduction of Andalusí elites and in the configuration of the broader economic structure⁵.

² MANNONI, Tiziano – “Arqueología, Arqueometría e Historia de la Cultura Material”. In CARTA, Raffaella (ed.) – *Arqueometría y arqueología medieval*. Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2006, pp. 17-36.

³ ANDERSSON, Eva, *et al.* – “Old textiles – new possibilities”. *European Journal of Archaeology* 13 (2010), pp. 149-173.

⁴ CHALMETA, Pedro – *Historia socioeconómica de al-Andalus*. Almería: Fundación Ibn Tufayl Estudios Árabes, 2021.

⁵ MANZANO, Eduardo – “Relaciones sociales precapitalistas: Una crítica al concepto de modo de producción tributario”. *Hispania* 58 (1998), p. 885. Específicamente para el textil andalusí MORENO-

2. Our study

Characterising textile production processes offers a route to understanding the Nasrid economy, a significant part of which remains unknown. This undertaking, of considerable scope, forms part of a broader context, a trend within historical research that is hardly new⁶, yet is undergoing a fundamental renewal⁷. It concerns reflection on the profound socio-economic and productive changes that occurred at the end of the Middle Ages and on the capacity of Islamic social formations to participate in the dynamics of capitalist emergence by developing indigenous forms⁸. This is a debate of such depth and consequence that, as we shall note at the end of this brief synthesis, given the present state of our knowledge we can do no more than pose the question.

A study of this kind must set out a series of theoretical objectives that amount to a conceptual and/or methodological advance. In our case, the principal aim has been to develop an integrated conceptual framework that enables the analysis of productive activities, in this case, textile production, not only from the standpoint of their technical operations, but by addressing the broader, complex productive processes embedded within the economic structures of the social formation in which they unfold. This, in turn, allows us to reflect on, and to draw distinctions between, forms of productive organisation such as artisanal and industrial, as well as to contribute to the classic debate on the transition between different forms of production, specifically with regard to the *protoindustrialisation* model.

These theoretical milestones must be reached through a series of research objectives, which we derive from our principal task: to characterise textile production in the Nasrid kingdom and in the opening phase of the sixteenth century, probing its productive organisation and socio-economic implications and its

NARGANES, José María – “Sobre economía, impuestos y producción: El taller doméstico en al-Andalus: una propuesta desde la arqueología de la producción textil (ss. IX-XI)”. In FÁBREGAS, Adela; GARCÍA, Alberto (eds.) – *Artesanía e industria en al-Andalus: actividades, espacios y organización*. Granada: Comares, 2023, pp. 51-72.

⁶ RODINSON, Maxime – *Islam y capitalismo*. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Argentina Editores, 1973; KURAN, Timur – *La larga divergencia: cómo las instituciones islámicas frenaron el desarrollo del Medio Oriente*. Madrid: Gadir Editorial, 2012.

⁷ BONDIOLI, Lorenzo – “Islam, Merchants, and Capitalism”. *Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economic* 4:2 (2023), pp. 258-307; BANAJI, Jairus – *A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020; BESSARD, Fanny – *Caliphs and Merchants: Cities and Economies of Power in the Near East (700-950)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020; WICKHAM, Chris – *The donkey & The Boat. Reinterpreting the Mediterranean Economy, 950– 1180*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.

⁸ GRAN, Peter – *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1790-1840*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979.

evolution towards new productive formulas. Accordingly, we identify several aspects that require attention: to reconstruct the production cycles of each fibre; to determine the weight of each sector; to identify patterns of consumption and the downstream transformation and circulation of these products; to assess the participation of specific agents and social groups in production; to examine mechanisms of control; to characterise workplaces; and, finally, to determine the impact of the transition from the Nasrid world to the new Castilian order at the end of the Middle Ages.

Fulfilling the foregoing requires working with a substantial quantity and variety of sources. The paucity of data provided by most of the materials available for our region and period makes it unfeasible to restrict the analysis to a single type of evidence. If our aim is to obtain a view as multi-faceted as possible, diversification in source selection is imperative. Given the constraints of space, we shall not elaborate on the sources used; suffice it to say that we have employed edited and translated Arabic sources of various kinds, alongside both edited and unpublished Castilian archival sources from after the conquest of Granada, not only to illuminate the early sixteenth century, but also as an indirect approach to reconstruct the earlier Nasrid reality. This in turn requires particular caution in handling the information, since in each case we must distinguish those elements “inherited” from the preceding situation. For this reason, we have sought not to extend our consultation of sources beyond the mid-sixteenth century⁹.

We have set this information in relation to the archaeological record, not merely to cross-check it, but to reach aspects on which the textual sources are silent. More broadly, we have worked with the materiality of textile production, both with respect to its production spaces and the tools employed in technical operations, as well as the artefacts resulting from their manufacture. To this end, we have consulted all reports from urban archaeological interventions carried out across the territory of the former Nasrid kingdom.

⁹ Para consultar la selección de fuentes con una explicación detallada véase GARRIDO, Jorge – “La producción de textil y cuero en los siglos finales de al-Andalus (XIII-XVI): una propuesta de investigación”. *Incipit* 11 (2022), pp. 11-31.

3. Towards a characterisation of Nasrid forms of textile production

The analysis of the location and reconstruction of the production cycles of textile fibres has made it possible to discern their socio-economic significance within the emirate. We take one of the key indicators of a fibre's standing within overall production and of the level of development of manufacture, to be the degree of labour organisation associated with it. Leaving silk aside for the moment, flax was the fibre that achieved the greatest prominence in Nasrid textile production. Its progressive expansion from the thirteenth century across much of the territory, including the fertile Vega of Granada, and its specialisation, with a greater division of labour than other fibres already from the earliest stages, attest to this. The explanation lies both in its wide use across all types of cloth, in clothing and household textiles, and in the decline of imports of eastern flax, which had been highly significant in al-Andalus up to the eleventh century¹⁰.

Cotton, cultivated in the region since the twelfth century, does display a certain productive specialisation, evident in the contrast between the eleventh-century information provided by al-Māzarī on cotton cleaning and carding, and that of al-Saqatī in the thirteenth century, where cotton beaters (*alijadores de algodón*) are mentioned as specialised artisans, yet its economic importance was limited. Its extremely scant presence in Nasrid household assemblages, as well as in the Castilian productive sphere after the conquest, points in the same direction.

The other textile fibres for which we have scant information display a more limited division of labour. Hemp, esparto and wool, especially the latter, are not frequently mentioned in the works consulted. This may be due to the long-standing familiarity with these fibres and their limited significance in external trade. What appears to be the case is that consumption needs and hence production, did not undergo substantial change. Nevertheless, with regard to wool, we have been able to confirm the presence of fulling mills (*batanes*) in the Nasrid period. This may point to the existence of a cloth industry of some importance, one that required a standardised finishing process and thus suggests a higher level of demand than might have been assumed, demand that was, in any case, domestic, since we have no evidence that granadan wool was exported in significant quantities.

¹⁰ CONSTABLE, Olivia – *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Technical knowledge of production cycles cannot be separated from the social relations that permeate and determine the development of these activities. It is necessary to set aside the traditional interpretation of women's textile labour as auxiliary and secondary, confined to the domestic sphere and to self-provisioning. The close, long-established association drawn by historiography between women and textile production has led us, throughout this research, to examine the various elements that compose this relationship with the aim of testing their validity, nuancing them or discarding them altogether on the basis of the evidence provided by the sources consulted. These elements are: the purpose of production; the space of production; its significance within the textile sector as a whole; and the social perception of women's work¹¹.

First, while we do not doubt that a large, perhaps even a majority, share of women engaged in textile activities directed their output towards household self-provisioning, we have sufficient evidence to affirm the existence of women who marketed their products and participated in stages of production, especially spinning, of goods destined for sale.

Although the connection between the domestic sphere and self-provisioning has traditionally been asserted and, more recently, specifically for the textile sector, it is now being challenged in its most basic assumptions. We align with this line of inquiry, to which we would highlight the contributions of Martínez de Marigorta¹² and Moreno Narganes¹³, in order to underscore that textile production undertaken in the domestic sphere in Nasrid and Castilian contexts during the early sixteenth century was not directed exclusively towards household consumption. We have shown that the set of operations carried out within the home, whose most basic unit of production was the family nucleus, was integrated into wider systems and dynamics that extended beyond the household.

Returning to the foregoing, women's workplace has traditionally been identified entirely with the domestic sphere. It is true that this has been the predominant

¹¹ We present the conclusions only in part here, since they have already been treated in greater detail in GARRIDO, Jorge – “Del gusano al mercado: El trabajo de las mujeres en la producción sérica nazarí (siglos XIII-XVI)”, *in press*.

¹² LÓPEZ, Eneko – “How al-Andalus wrapped itself in a silk cocoon: the *tiraz* between Umayyad economic policy and Mediterranean trade”. *Mediterranean Historical Review* 38 (2023), pp. 1-22.

¹³ MORENO, José María – “Trama y urdiembre: una aproximación a la producción de hilo y tejido en al-Andalus (ss. IX-XIII)”. *Medievalista* 38 (2025), pp. 365-380.

setting in which women have carried out textile work. We must also bear in mind that the dwelling has, in general, been the preferred locus for textile activities as such, whether or not women were involved. In other words, the textile production cycle finds in the home one of its most habitual sites of production, with the exception of certain specific phases or particular modes of production, for example, the *turuz*. Alongside this, there is abundant evidence of women engaging in textile production outside the domestic sphere, especially in the case of wage-earners. One illustration is a *fatwā* concerning a Granadan woman on whom an attempt was made to levy a tax on the wages she earned as a silk weaver outside her home, a tax she was not liable to pay. Women's participation in agricultural tasks related to the cultivation, harvesting and processing of textile fibres likewise took place beyond the household. In short, we can affirm that the domestic sphere was by no means the only space in which women pursued textile work; and although it was the predominant one, this predominance did not apply solely to women's work, but to textile production in general.

Although not one of the principal objectives of this study, the silk sector is fundamental to understanding the structure of Nasrid textile production. Owing to its distinctly speculative character and the intensity of demand placed upon it, the dynamics of transformation in productive forms that also occur in other spheres are more readily discernible here. While the aim of this doctoral research has been to sketch a broad panorama, deferring, for now, the detailed study that silk production warrants, we cannot overlook the insights it affords.

It is the fibre whose labour is most widely distributed across the territory, with a notable presence in both rural and urban settings. Its production cycle exhibits the highest degree of specialisation. From the earliest stages through to the completion of spinning, these operations were carried out in the rural environment. We have identified specialised workers, such as mulberry-leaf gatherers and silkworm rearers. All this is the case despite the documentation being predominantly urban in character. We account for the high degree of specialisation partly by the technical complexity of the operations, but also by the strong demand exerted by foreign merchants.

The textile production of any pre-industrial society has a strong rural component, and the Nasrid case was no different. It was in this sphere that virtually all textile

fibres were produced, and where the initial operations in their production cycles were ordinarily undertaken. One of our concerns is the impact of speculative logics in the Nasrid countryside. We discern indications, at least by the end of the Nasrid period, of the penetration of a productivist logic and of a turn towards speculative crops in certain areas of the emirate. There are numerous examples showing that ownership of mulberry trees was commonplace among peasants in different regions, constituting an important complement to an economy based on agricultural exploitation; yet this never amounted to a shift towards monoculture, nor to an abandonment of the self-provisioning character that underpinned their lands. The brake on this tendency has traditionally been interpreted as the result of clan and family ties within rural communities, which conferred a high degree of autonomy from the state. We do not doubt the existence of these ties, although their strength has been qualified for the final phase of al-Andalus, but we have proposed other aspects that merit consideration in a future, dedicated investigation of this issue.

The turn towards speculative crops was, in most cases, complemented by the development, within the household, of operations associated with those crops' own production cycles. In the case of silk, this meant silkworm rearing and spinning; in others, such as raisins, it involved drying the grapes. We also begin to discern other productive formulas, such as associations for the cultivation and gathering of mulberry leaves, as well as for silkworm rearing and flax retting. The *fatāwā* issued on these matters suggest that such practices were widespread. Along the same lines, we identify spaces for conducting these activities outside the domestic sphere and geared towards extra-familial use. These include the *nigüelas* that appear in the Nasrid countryside, market-garden plots where silk was spun, as well as urban premises dedicated to silk spinning and weaving, or to flax scutching.

Even with gaps still to be addressed, the foregoing, already in the period following the conquest, points to a context closely comparable to the well-known *Kaufsystem*, albeit with nuances. The peasant household constituted the basic unit of production; although other arrangements existed, it was the most widespread. Households supplemented their economy with high value-added productive activities, maintaining an almost complete independence across the production cycle, since they owned the means of production and self-provisioned the necessary raw materials. They possessed the technical knowledge to carry out the operations, and

the territory in which they were situated was sufficiently developed as a commercial space to afford easy access to markets for these semi-finished goods, especially in the case of silk. We have thus identified indications that point to the emergence of modes of production in the rural sphere that transcended both the domestic sphere and the household unit, even if they were not predominant.

Castilian documentation allows us to introduce, as a factor to be considered in these reflections, the productive limit that these peasant communities faced with regard to certain speculative crops. Indeed, it may reveal a certain inability within the peasant milieu to take charge of the early phases of the sericultural production cycle while simultaneously attending to the rest of their agricultural obligations on the portion of their holdings devoted to self-provisioning. Might this be one of the reasons why a greater turn towards speculative crops did not prosper among Nasrid peasants?

New associative forms may have arisen to overcome that productive limit. In the *fatāwā* collections, we observe that virtually all arrangements for mulberry-leaf gathering, silkworm rearing and the like, whenever recourse was had to someone outside the household nucleus, were undertaken as associations. These mitigated entry costs, facilitated the development of the activity, and offered a way to exceed the productive limit; they also encouraged productive specialisation in the early phases of the cycle. Yet in most of their forms they required each participant to contribute labour. This leads us to two fundamental points: all parties to the association possessed the knowledge and skill to carry out the operations, which allows us to affirm that, in seeking to establish an association, their aim was to raise the productive limit they would have faced individually. Given the *mālikī* doctrine governing these relationships, the limit could be stretched, but not excessively, since participants were still required to contribute a certain amount of their own labour. All the legal reflections reject the possibility that these associations might be lawfully formalised with the participation of an individual whose sole contribution is the capital required to carry out production. However, the late fourteenth-century reference by the granadan al-Ḥaffār, that the most common practice was for the owner of the mulberry trees to engage specialised workers to cultivate, gather the leaves, and rear the silkworms he supplied, remunerating them with a share of the silk produced, is emblematic of attempts to surpass that productive limit by

resorting to extra-legal arrangements. The tensions between this legal framework and the emirate's commercial turn, supported by the Nasrid elites, are perceptible, even if the latter did bring about certain changes in the former.

The gradual drift of the Nasrid countryside towards speculative positions, and the development of productive arrangements such as those described above, occurred with the interest and support of the central authorities. We know that the Nasrid emirs participated in international trade, and that the Nasrid oligarchy was involved in certain activities linked to textile production. The state's interest in this sector was not limited to fiscal gain: we find members of the oligarchy concentrating such crops in their own hands. In any case, the greatest impact on the future of these activities and their prosperity stemmed from the incentives created by the various legal provisions laid down by *mālikī* jurists in their favour.

The measures adopted around the concept of calamity/*ḡā'iḥa* provide a good example. The right to full or partial rescission of an agricultural contract is recognised when an adverse situation affects the harvest. The mulberry is included among the crops protected by these provisions. This thus operated as a mechanism to encourage investment in such speculative cultivation by offering farmers a secure framework.

Attention to the materiality of sericultural work has allowed us to document elements indicating the presence of silk-twisting frames, such as glass components that functioned as bearings, preventing friction between the spindles and the wooden structure of the frame. Their discovery in spaces associated with Nasrid power, such as the Alhambra and the Cuarto Real de Santo Domingo, is decisive. Beyond confirming the existence of specific spaces related to silk production in these palatine contexts, they offer further evidence of elite involvement in, and control over, the fibre's production cycle.

We have concluded that elite involvement in the textile productive structure was not confined to the classic triad of speculative crops, namely silk (mulberry trees), dried fruits, and sugar, but appears to have extended further, encompassing ownership of certain installations such as fulling mills and water installations (*albercas*) used for processing of hemp, esparto and flax. This invites a reconsideration of elite interest in the production of fibres not usually viewed in these terms, especially flax. The monitoring of potential and anticipated

modifications in this productive landscape, in order to determine whether developments align with, or diverge from, known formulas such as *protoindustrialisation*, is clearly reshaped by the major transformations introduced by the Castilian conquest into the speculative and productivist dynamics then under way. We are therefore left with the possibility of analysing the condition of the productive structure in the moments immediately following the conquest, seeking to identify the most evident elements of change.

One of the most immediate agricultural consequences of the Castilian conquest was the displacement of part of the indigenous population from certain rural areas, not only from cities, and the redistribution of land to new settlers. This reorganisation was driven by a productivist logic, evident in the settlers' practices, in the commercial sphere newly direct access to production, and in the Castilian administration encouraged improvements to increase output.

We refer to the well-known legal case that arose from the large-scale planting of mulberry trees across the former Nasrid territory after the Castilian conquest¹⁴. The turn, drawing on prior experience in Sicily and Valencia, to adopt this new feed for *Bombyx mori* was guided by the belief that mulberry leaves increased silk yields.

The foregoing should be set in relation to at least two issues: the increase in productive specialisation and the development of more complex productive arrangements. In the first case, the silk cycle maintained the highest degree of specialisation among all the fibres. Notably, references to the occupations with which we are concerned, spinning and the preceding phases, do not feature prominently in the sources, with the exception of the ordinances. This suggests that these phases were still being carried out primarily in the rural sphere.

Another possibility, in the case of silk, is that we are witnessing a paradigm shift, with the production of silk cloth being prioritised over the earlier export of skeins. However, this is something we have not yet been able to determine: in the absence of a detailed study, the export of silk in skein form appears to persist.

With regard to the development of productive arrangements, we identify cases in which production, specifically silk, was organised around a merchant or

¹⁴ LÓPEZ DE COCA, Enrique – “*Morus nigra* vs *Morus alba* en la sericultura mediterránea: el caso del reino de Granada (siglos XV y XVI)”. In AIRALDI, Gabriella (ed.) – *La vie del Mediterraneo. (secoli XI-XVI)*. Genova: Istituto di Storia del Medioevo e della Espansione Europea, 1997, pp. 183-199.

enterprising artisan who concentrated several operations within the same production cycle, owning the means of production and supplying raw materials to the workers, from whom he received the finished product in exchange for a wage. It is difficult not to associate this mode of working with the commissioning of individual producers by merchants, and hence to recognise the importance of merchant capital within the productive sphere. As regards merchant capital, one of the dynamics we identify that explains recourse to this financial resource is the sale and leasing by genoese merchants to granadan silk weavers and spinners of looms and silk spinning wheels, an unmistakable intervention in the production cycle that we had not previously been able to document. This mercantile intervention went further, imposing specific techniques so as to align production with the demands of the international market. One example is the use of the *marca genovesa* in the loom comb, that is, of a specific width. Already at this early stage, these mercantile bodies appear to have been performing at least two additional roles: first, as suppliers of certain goods (for example, genoese provision of silk skeins to weavers, or woad to granadan dyers); second, as guarantors for textile artisans, mainly velvet weavers, in exchange for payments in skeins and/or silk cloth.

In parallel, we begin to identify workplaces, possibly shared, that extend beyond the domestic and familial sphere. In some of these spaces, different operations were even undertaken within the same premises, as in the *tarbea* where silk was spun and *xarga* woven, recorded in the city of Granada in 1506. Gonzalo de las Casas, in his treatise on silk production, states that, to make best use of space, silk spinning wheels were arranged in a circle around a fire so that heat reached all stations and the cocoons could be reeled. We can thus begin to speak of integrated textile production platforms that constituted a complex productive space.

The productive landscape of Granada after 1492 diverges from the earlier one in three fundamental respects. First, the importance of merchant capital within production is evident. Second, the productivist logic and speculative orientation of the crops favoured by rural communities are more pronounced. Third, productive arrangements developed towards more complex and coordinated forms.

If we compare what has been said about sericultural production with the productive formulas identified for the other textile fibres, the differences are clear. The former displays dynamics more readily assimilable to industrial ones. High output volumes;

growing associational organisation and the emergence of firm-like arrangements; the progressive intervention of merchant capital; and the articulation of production with extra-regional markets all point in this direction. By contrast, the other fibres exhibit a character more readily associated with artisanal production. Their manufacture is more closely tied to the domestic sphere, even when it exceeds the bounds of self-provisioning. We do not identify a pursuit of the productive limit or ways to extend it along the lines of what we observe in silk. Among the remaining fibres, flax most closely follows the sericultural pattern, since we have evidence of associations formed to carry out flax retting, as well as indications of Nasrid elite interest in participating in its production.

By setting the tendencies we observe in these fibres against those of silk, we identify a paradigm shift after the Castilian conquest. We refer to the decisive and specialised promotion of work in silk as against other fibres and materials, perhaps the outcome of an economic strategy centred on supporting Granada as a specialised center.

4. Final remarks

This research has allowed us to show, albeit tangentially, the importance of studying productive activities and their processes for a proper understanding of the economy, in this case applied to the Nasrid context; it has likewise highlighted the privileged analytical framework offered by the textile sphere in this regard. This allows us to conclude that:

The characterisation of textile production processes in the Nasrid emirate and the early sixteenth century has enabled us to reconstruct the technical processes of work and their spaces, to identify their agents and to determine the degree and type of control exercised, first by Nasrid power and subsequently by the Castilian authorities, over these activities. All this has been set within a broader context: reflection on the profound socio-economic and thus also productive changes taking place at the end of the Middle Ages in the last territories of al-Andalus, with the development of new, market-stimulated formulas of production that begin to display pre-capitalist features.

However, this is not the end of the road but the beginning of a larger and more demanding journey in which, taking the relations of production that organise the

productive processes studied as a category of structural analysis, we should aim to identify the junctures at which transformations in the organisation of production arise, the forces that propel them and the relations of interdependence among the different forms of production identified throughout this text, which can only be fully understood by examining them in relation to one another. Beyond the necessary theoretical reflection, the study of textile materiality must be operationally integrated into this endeavour, for its potential in this regard is decisive.

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COMO CITAR ESTE ARTIGO | HOW TO QUOTE THIS ARTICLE:

GARRIDO LÓPEZ, Jorge – “The Study of Textile Production at the End of al-Andalus and the Early Sixteenth Century: A Characterization of the Forms of Production”. *Medievalista* 39 (Janeiro – Junho 2026), pp. 325-340. Disponível em <https://medievalista.iem.fcsh.unl.pt>.



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