

## LA CIUDAD CALIFAL DE MADĪNAT AL-ZAHRĀ' ARQUEOLOGÍA DE SU EXCAVACIÓN

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Cordoba boasts an array of heritage sites of singular importance, chief among them is the archaeological site dating from the time of the caliphs known as *Madīnat al-Zahrā'*, which was declared a National Historic-Artistic Monument in 1923 and a Site of Cultural Interest in 1996 for its exceptional value. Since 1985 this institution has been fortunate enough to operate under the supervision of Dr. Antonio Vallejo, author of the book reviewed here. A foremost authority on the site's past and present, Dr. Vallejo now offers a book that will help to further understanding of the site's future for all those wishing to discover it.

The large format of *La ciudad califal* may mislead the reader into thinking that it is one of those glossy, now commonly-found tomes filled with full-colour, full-page photographs but with little in the way of information on the real subject at hand, though its texts may sound elaborate and cultured. Nothing could be further from the truth here: this work takes full advantage of its large format to provide the results of a rigorous investigation in the form of a straightforward, easy-to-read yet exquisitely written text, giving a full account of the site, all this despite the inherent complexity of the subject.

Author of numerous archaeological studies on this Caliphal site and honorary member of the German Archaeological Institute, Antonio Vallejo wisely focuses on the wealth offered by the site and knowledgeably combines often antagonistic points of view regarding its peculiarities. This work reflects the excellent path he has set for the Heritage Site: a Special Protection Programme (1998) which includes strategies for its management, integrating the archaeological site within a landscape conservation programme to address the issue of the urban expansion of the city of Cordoba, a programme which also includes the building which now houses the museum and the institution itself. This latter building has also been recognized by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, which was awarded in 2010 for the design of the museum for the *Madīnat al-Zahrā'* Archaeological Site.

The author opens this large tome with a fragment from Jorge Luis Borges' short story entitled *The Parable of the Palace* (1972), in which the author reflects upon the abstraction of spaces. It is a lovely prelude which I feel perfectly embodies the author's thinking in relation to our knowledge on the past and present reality of the site, a subject which I will return to later on. This work is divided into seven chapters and a conclusion. The text is accompanied by high-quality maps and photographs

(which are well-distributed throughout the book), all of which were taken by experts working at the archaeological site. One can safely say that no page of text is without a map or photograph, or both.

The book begins with a brief introduction in which the author justifies the methodology employed in the study, and expresses his gratitude to the many experts who have offered their support and assistance in their respective fields. In the book's first chapter (pp. 19-59), Vallejo offers an extensive historical overview in which he explains the excavations and work carried out on the site by architects Velázquez Bosco, Félix Hernández and Rafael Manzano between 1910 and 1982. The modification of the mountainside upon which the Caliphal city was built, the imprint left behind by prior cultures and the Romans in particular, the use of the site as a source of construction materials for other buildings, and the accompanying infrastructure created to serve the city, ranging from the road network to the water systems, are all examined in the following section (pp. 61-117), offering a comprehensive and complex vision of the territorial scope of the site. In the chapter that follows, the author analyses the project for the city as seen by the Caliph, providing an overview of earlier projects, the aims of said projects, the features of his initial construction programme and the main issues arising from its later changes and reconstruction initiatives (pp. 119-163), indicating some of the lines of argument which will support the analyses offered by the book in the chapters to come.

Chapters IV to VI contain the main crux of the work and it is here where the author fully expounds on the details of the city and the Caliphal palace, by way of an in-depth archaeological study of both areas. He first examines the boundaries of the wall which encloses the grounds, its construction and timeline, its singular interior urban structure, the characteristics of its internal road network and the solutions provided by its builders to address the religious requirements of its inhabitants (pp. 165-219).

The palace, or *alcázar*, which is the excavated portion of the site and the most well-known, deserves a more detailed treatment and that is why three extensive chapters have been devoted to it (pp. 221-464). It starts with a description of its limits, both excavated and hypothetical, which were conditioned by the topography of the land selected by the Caliph for its construction. The author then follows with an analysis of the palace's

water supply and sanitation systems, the layout of the road network and a study of the interior communication systems (pp. 221-293).

The structural features of the palace are explained through a detailed analysis of its various components. The author takes each element, identifying key aspects which link the various building processes and techniques used by the Caliph in this magnificent architectural construction (pp. 295-420). To this end, the author examines in detail the masonry and wall structures, wall covering and paving techniques, as well as the ceiling supports, namely the arches and lintels, to finally broach the thorny topic of the roof structure, a problem previously explored by Félix Hernández in his reconstruction of the system of vaults and ceiling structures.

A brief survey of previous studies on the decorative elements used in the palace (ornamental and epigraphic) and their possible symbolic meaning follows, (pp. 421-464), giving way to the Conclusion (pp. 465-504). In this latter section, aptly subtitled “la espacialidad del poder” (*power and space*), Vallejo introduces the results of the study of the buildings from the first phase of construction and the subsequent transformation of the palace, finally proposing his thesis of the Madīnat al-Zahrā’ as a model city of the Caliphal state; a long-standing thesis also defended by and shared with his mentor Dr. Manuel Acién.

A thorough and diverse bibliography (justifiable given the variety of the topics dealt with by the book) and a series of 59 figures follows in the next section, with full-page maps and photographs that close the book. A must-read and deserving of a permanent spot on any reference bookshelf, this volume is not only for those interested in the archaeology of the Caliphate of al-Andalus, but also for any student of history wishing to learn more about the past.

Over the last century, the excavation effort on this site has focused on the central area of the Caliphal palace, work which has only uncovered one tenth of the total 112 hectares which make up the grounds, mainly owing to specific issues related to its excavation and the scarcity of resources during some of its phases. Vallejo describes two main phases of construction, and it is his archaeological analysis of these phases which doubtless represents one of his most significant contributions. The first phase of construction corresponds to the decade of the 940s (329 H.), and is the period which he claims as being foundational; the second phase occurred in the 950s (338 H.), and was motivated by a need to modify the initial construction project, and would ultimately affect the entire palace grounds at every level, from the urban layout and water supply and sanitation systems to the architecture and ornamental programme. The author alerts to the discrepancies that arise from these conclusions, which are based on his analysis of remaining structures, and those deduced from text sources, which describe a city erected in a single operation on virgin ground and a palace built in successive phases

by the two first Caliphs and subsequently modified by minor renovations.

In addition to recognizing the complexity of written Arabic sources of the period, the author alerts in his introduction that the prior criticism of these same source remains out of his field of expertise and aim; this book offers instead a complex and comprehensive archaeological analysis with an aim to resolve some of the issues concerning the history and historiography of the al-Andalus Umayyad Caliphate. Despite the author’s expressed modesty, throughout the volume he demonstrates his mastery of all the sources; he also provides deft transcriptions of relevant Arabic terms and proper names, employing a level of accuracy uncommon in Spanish studies on medieval archaeology of al-Andalus.

On this last point, the author’s inclusion of Borge’s abstraction of space takes on greater significance, for, despite the work of the author, there still seems to be some issues concerning the exact itineraries followed by receptions (either for solemn ceremonies or the reception of dignitaries from other states) as described by the Arabic sources. This mystery remains a difficult one to solve, due to the multifunctional nature of many of the site’s buildings; in particular the basilica and front transept, which were suited for these activities and represent the first observed use in al-Andalus of these types of structures from the Abbasid world, as stated by the author.

With regard to the ceremonial itineraries and the names given to the buildings, I recommend, for readers who are not familiar with the site, an initial quick reading of the book to familiarize themselves with the excavated grounds, for the names and numbers given to the buildings and the spaces that make up each of the areas of the site are complex. While some are plainly descriptive (house with pond, upper garden, columned courtyard, etc.), others are merely identified using map reference numbers (building 28, dwelling 57, etc.); some combine numbers and names (No. 20, room with double columns); and a few have also been given names referring to historic figures, such as “*Dār al-Mulk*”, “House of ʿĪsā”, or “Hall of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III”, the name of the Caliph which is found in the epigraphic inscriptions that remain *in situ*, which replaces previous names.

The reader will find ample justification for the use of all of these names, along with a coherent explanation of the functions given to the palace and each of its component parts: buildings, wall-walks, streets, open spaces and gardens. This is one of the book’s main contributions. The functional and chronological identification of the urban layout of structures allows the reader to familiarize him/herself with the initial palace area, made up of an assemblage of buildings arranged in an ordered manner on the terraced land around the Caliphate’s residence; archaeological studies have identified the various areas that were in charge of organization, maintenance and provision of the palace and its workers. These buildings, characterized by very

specific architectural styles, building materials and ornamentation, correspond to the first phase of the palace construction and use during which, according to the author's interpretation, emphasis was placed on the actual and direct control of the administrative apparatus on the part of the Caliph.

Archaeological studies have identified a significant effort in subsequent years to renovate the extensive terraced area gained from the mountainside, which saw the addition of the buildings now known as "Hall of 'Abd al-Raḥmān III" and the "Central Pavilion". This renovation represents the tip of the iceberg in terms of work undertaken during the second phase identified earlier, occurring during the 950s. During this decade, extensive residential areas of the Caliph were rebuilt, as were others attributed to figures close to al-Ḥakam II; other new buildings were added as well. According to the author, this profound transformation, associated to a major reform occurring in the Caliphate state administration, was designed and executed by the same Caliph who built the palace, 'Abd al-Raḥmān III, and completed by his son al-Ḥakam II, to which three stages of construction can be attributed, as mentioned in the epigraphic inscriptions and archaeological studies of the palace, namely the first few years of his mandate; the year 964; and the period between 972 and 973.

In summary, Vallejo offers us an integrated and archaeologically-oriented vision of the group of structures known as the Madīnat al-Zahrā', based on an analysis of the architectural components of the site, work which explains the book's subtitle: *Arqueología de su arquitec-*

*tura* (Archaeology of its Architecture), which, due to an unforgivable error by the publisher, only appears as such on the front cover - inside the book the subtitle appears as "Arqueología de su excavación" (Archaeology of its Excavation).

In keeping with recent archaeological studies such as G. D. Keevill's *Medieval Palaces* (Tempus, 2000), the author has successfully made use of various elements, employing historical sources, artistic analyses and evidence provided by existing buildings, combining all this data with information offered by the archaeological and cartographic fields in the broadest sense.

This has allowed Dr. Vallejo to clearly connect the founding and transformation of the palace with the development of the Caliphate as an institution, which was neither static nor immutable. The renovations of the palace are explained by the changing context of the Caliphate, at the same time they help to clarify the process by which it was formed, situating the Caliphate's full consolidation in mid 10th century.

I would like to congratulate the author and the Almuzara publishing company for successfully fulfilling their objective in producing an exceptional book. I am sure that the author's personal dedication and commitment to both Madīnat al-Zahrā' and the archaeological knowledge of al-Andalus will continue to provide us with new and important findings.

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