

THE DWELLINGS OF MADĪNAT AL-ZAHRĀ': A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

The second half of the tenth century, during the reigns of 'Abd al-Raḥmān III and al-Ḥakam II, was a time of fervent construction. The new court city of Madīnat al-Zahrā' provided a unique set of circumstances for these activities, which brought about intense development in the design of new architectural forms, as well as in the definition of architectural programmes and functional types. Because of this innovation, the new capital city became a veritable laboratory for experimentation and for the development of architectural forms.¹ Many of these were the fruit of long evolutionary processes, beginning with the first construction at the Great Mosque of Córdoba, which is the earliest extant example of Andalusī architectural culture. Other new forms were undoubtedly created during the course of this massive project, which clearly required abundant contributions of material and human resources, not only for the city's construction, but also for its conception and design.

The scarcity of information available today on Andalusī architecture before the year 936 compels us to consider Madīnat al-Zahrā' as the point of origin of much of the architecture of subsequent periods, as there is no evidence to prove otherwise.² Although many forms and

* A simpler version of this article, without computer reconstructions, was published as Antonio Almagro Gorbea, "Análisis tipológico de la arquitectura residencial de Madīnat al-Zahrā'", in *Al-Andalus und Europa: Zwischen Orient und Okzident* ed. Martina Müller-Wiener et al. (Düsseldorf: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2004), pp. 117–124. The introduction was translated by Margaret Hander, and the catalogue by Glair D. Anderson.

¹ Antonio Almagro, "La arquitectura en al-Andalus en torno al año 1000: Madīnat al-Zahrā'", in *La Península Ibérica en torno al año 1000. VII Congreso de Estudios Medievales* (León, 2001), pp. 165–191.

² Until recently, the only structures believed to date from the eighth or ninth centuries were military. Now, the increasing number of examples allows us to understand this period as a more creative one than had previously been thought. The recent discoveries in the Morerías area of Mérida, for example, indicate the existence of residential buildings that were well organized, and based on compositional principles that have not yet been analyzed contextually or comparatively. See Pedro Mateos Cruz and Miguel

types probably had influences earlier than their first appearance in the palatine city near Córdoba, their employment there undoubtedly played a role in defining their very nature and subsequent development. In fact, it is important to note that the full range of architectural types found in al-Andalus during the following five centuries was already present at Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ.

It must be clarified that the term ‘architectural type’ may be understood as a manner of spatial organization that follows a particular set of criteria, and tends to correlate with the functional aim of the structure in question. However, in Islamic architecture in general, and in al-Andalus in particular, this relationship is not always evident. Andalusī residential structures or dwellings show different characteristic architectural types, all of which are present at Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ. In addition, there is evidence for other architectural types that seem to have been born and died there, as they were never seen again in later houses or palaces that otherwise adhered to the same models. In Islamic architecture generally, and especially in al-Andalus, architectural types are frequently applied to several uses, often impeding the definitive identification of the true functions of a structure. The building forms themselves did not dictate a particular function, rather this was determined by the activities carried out within each architectural space.

As a result, it is impossible to assert that all the buildings analyzed in this study were unequivocally used as residences. While it is comparatively easy to identify which structures were designated for the ceremonies and functions of the royal court, because of the grandness of their layout and the sumptuousness of their décor, it is not known which architectural forms hosted the palace’s various administrative functions. It is therefore possible that some of the structures analyzed here as dwellings were actually destined for more service uses. Furthermore, some of the plans presented here contradict earlier restorations, which could have been carried out without sufficient information.

Alba Calzado, “De Emerita Augusta a Marida”, in *Visigodos y Omeyas. Un debate entre la Antigüedad Tardía y la Alta Edad Media*, ed. Luis Caballero and Pedro Mateos, *Anejos de Archivo Español de Arqueología* 23 (Madrid: Instituto de Historia, 2000), pp. 143–168, especially pp. 156–163.