VILLA (MUNYA) ARCHITECTURE IN UMAYYAD CÓRDOBA: PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Glaire D. Anderson

INTRODUCTION

Little survives of the sprawling Umayyad metropolis of Córdoba described by medieval authors like Ibn Ḥayyān and Ibn Ḥawqal. However, archaeological excavations conducted in the last few decades offer an increasingly important source of information about the Umayyad capital. Ongoing excavations at the palace-city of Madīnat al-Zahrā’, for example—focusing recently on the city’s residential sectors and infrastructure—offer the most dramatic illustration of the increasing importance of material evidence to the study of this medieval city. At Madīnat al-Zahrā’ today, visitors can examine the remains of houses, baths, roads, walls and waterworks.
In contrast to the gradual process of excavation and reconstruction taking place at the palace-city, other Umayyad sites found in and around Córdoba, and revealed during emergency excavations, have already disappeared beneath new development. These now only survive in the pages of archaeological reports published in outlets such as the Anuario Arqueológico de Andalucía and local academic journals, and in bits and pieces of stone, brick and pottery stored away in the warehouse of the Museo Arqueológico y Etnológico de Córdoba. The prolific local scholarship based upon such material evidence is published mainly within Spanish specialist circles, and as a consequence has yet to be integrated into the broader field of Islamic architecture.

**Munya Remains in Córdoba**

Ibn Ḥayyān and other Andalusi authors tell us that the Umayyad villas were the settings for hunting excursions, drinking parties and court feasts, celebrating occasions such as circumcisions and weddings, but what can they tell us about the architecture of the munya?4 As is typical of medieval Arabic historiography in general, the Andalusi authors provide very little concrete information about the appearance of buildings to which they allude. Furthermore, in the centuries since the disintegration of Umayyad hegemony, the munyas have largely disappeared from the landscape: there is not a single villa still standing in Córdoba. It is this gap in our knowledge which the material evidence, fragmented as it is at present, can begin to address. The ruins of walls, water systems, architectural ornament, and pottery unearthed along the Guadalquivir river, in the new residential suburbs and fields which stretch west of the present-day city, provide a preliminary picture of

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