The geographer Jean Brunhes wrote that “a town is not an independent unit, but depends on the soil that bears it, the climate it enjoys, and the environment on which it subsists.”¹ His concept of the “Terrestrial Whole” provides a useful framework for understanding relationships between city and country because it positions human agency within a larger ecological model of interdependency in which humans are subject to the natural conditions of the landscape and yet exert their will upon them. Whereas historical models emphasize human decisions, social competition and interactions, and short-term temporal change, the geographical model pays more attention to what Brunhes called the “terrestrial realities” of space, distance, and difference in level.² This is a productive way to think about landscape because it can explain continuities in the human-land relationship that the traditional historical model often fails to recognize. In the essay that follows, I will balance a series of dualistic concepts: architecture and landscape, city and country, autonomy and interdependence, Islam and Rome, and change and continuity. This dualism is as artificial and exaggerated as any structure-based model, but it serves to highlight important aspects of the built environment of the Mediterranean in the period of change from the late Roman to the early Islamic period so that they may be examined and analyzed.

Architecture is built by the hand of a builder and a patron and can be dated to a specific historic moment or series of moments, but a landscape is a continuous ecological process. While it has stone slabs, walls, and fountains, it is also made of water, earth, and living organisms

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that are renewed and recycled seasonally or even daily. The role of historical precedent is important in both the built and the cultivated environment, but it occurs at different levels of human consciousness. In the Mediterranean, al-Andalus offers a good case study for the different ways in which human society has acknowledged or ignored the role of history in the architecture of its cities and the development of the landscape of its countryside. This study will focus primarily on that historic time and place, but it will refer as well to many Islamic countries around the Mediterranean in the same period, eighth through twelfth centuries.

Islam emerged from the Arabian Peninsula, a desert that supported nomadic animal husbandry and trade but little settled agriculture. But as the Umayyad dynasty (661–750) began conquering the eastern and southern coast of the Mediterranean—north and east to Syria, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, and most of Iran, and west to Egypt, Tunisia, and the Maghreb (Morocco and Spain)—the growing population of Muslim converts began to include not only city dwellers and nomadic tribes people, but also agriculturalists who developed the land for their own use as well as future generations. These early Muslims farmed a landscape that had been developed five hundred years earlier by the Romans (and served later societies such as Byzantines and Copts), and they used similar agricultural techniques and planted similar crops.

While the Mediterranean rim itself received seasonal rainfall, the inland areas were thoroughly arid. Agriculture was possible by means of drought-tolerant crops like dates and olives, augmented by other more demanding crops such as fruit and grain that were only grown with regular irrigation by means of collecting, storing, and transporting precious water. Irrigation was costly, but the technology offered economic benefits to landowners and farmers who learned from Roman and Persian precedents. In many areas of the Mediterranean, Muslim communities did not build new irrigation networks as much as they renovated and built upon older hydraulic works. However, despite the clear debt to Roman and Persian irrigation systems, historians of the first centuries of Islam rarely acknowledged the material debt to the earlier empires.

For example, the cities of Anjar (figure 1) and Rusafa (Sergiopolis) were pre-existing Roman and Byzantine sites that were expanded and settled by Islamic communities in the late seventh century. When the handsome gypsum walled city of Sergiopolis was chosen by the caliph Hisham (r. 724–43) for the site of his country estate, renamed Rusafa,